

From “Countering” To “Constructing” Russian Threats in Mikheil Saakashvili’s Georgia

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the securitization process that took place during M. Saakashvili’s time as President of Georgia. It argues that, in order to overshadow political misdeeds and non-democratic state-policy as a whole, M. Saakashvili and his political allies used “constructed” Russian threats to discredit and marginalize opponents. Furthermore, M Saakashvili’s regime tended to restrict freedom of speech, civil liberties and other democratic rights by referring to non-existent constructed threats from the Moscow. Through security dimension, Russia poses a menace to Georgia’s territorial integrity, sovereignty and Western aspirations. But at the time of M. Saakashvili’s presidency it has been turned into a political tool to be used against opponents. This paper offers a scholarly debate on the issue. Finally, it gives a case-by-case analysis of the most crucial happenings that explain “how” and “why” Russia has been securitized.

KEYWORDS

Securitization, Georgia, Russia, pro-Russian Forces, security

Introduction

The Western-oriented global political disposition that appeared after the Cold War is rapidly falling apart before our very eyes. The inability of the West, and the United States in particular, to maintain dominance over the Russian Federation and China has led to the formation of a new world order. In the course of the global political reshuffle, increasing efforts are being made to fight the “liberal” propaganda (according to the Russian narrative) on the one hand, and the Kremlin disinformation campaign (according to the Western narrative) on the other. The fierce “war on disinformation” is especially true in the Eastern European states, where “countering the Kremlin” has become the most important mission. Georgia is probably the most well-documented case in this respect. It is here where carious actors in the security and political space have long since switched from “countering” Russian threats to “constructing” them. The securitization of the West is, along with other issues, considered a generally accepted phenomenon for the Kremlin. However, the opposite is also true, although scholars often overlook this because of the renewed full-scale rivalry between the collective West and the East.

Russia and Georgia have a long history of interdependence. The geopolitical importance of Tbilisi for the Kremlin makes it incredibly valuable in its global political dominance agenda. Thus, Moscow is both a most troubling neighbour and a political force that is directly and indirectly involved in everyday life in Georgia. This is reflected in Russia's support for, and recognition of, the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Tskhinvali region) as independent states, as well as in its active work in various spheres to “normalize” relations with Georgia on terms that are “strongly acceptable” for Moscow. At the same time, the Kremlin is also grudgingly involved, albeit indirectly, in Georgia's political life. In particular, various security and functional actors securitize the Kremlin for mercantilist reasons. According to Georgian politicians, Russia does pose a real threat to its neighbours' sovereignty, territorial integrity, security and NATO/EU aspirations, but it has also been actively securitized for a long time. Russia has transformed from an objective to a subjective threat, a phantom menace that is extensively used to libel, discredit and delegitimize opponents; justify the restriction of freedoms and liberties for the sake of existential security threats; and cover up the populist nature of Georgia's political culture as a whole.

Securitization theory, closely attached to the so-called Copenhagen School, sees “security” as a construction built and promoted by security actors for a particular reason and mission. Usually, non-democratic regimes rely on securitization to justify the restriction of freedoms and liberties for the sake of security and to counter existential threats; essentially, to wage war on opponents and keep a hold on power. The strongest controlled wave of securitization in Georgia started with the Kodori Gorge special operation and continued during popular political protests in early November 2007, when the people came together to battle what they believed to be abuse of power, governmental misconduct and corruption among the elites. The post-revolutionary regime, headed by President M. Saakashvili and representatives of United National Movement party, launched a full-fledged political and media campaign to persuade the country's strategic partners, as well as Georgian society as a whole, that these movements were financed and controlled by the Russian intelligence services and their

local collaborators, traitors. These common, yet empirically groundless allegations formed the foundation for unlawful persecution, the brutal dispersal of peaceful protesters, and the illegal seizure of the leading private opposition broadcaster Imedi. These cases, mainly overlooked by local society and strategic partners abroad, led to a chain of pivotal events. The Georgian government was eager to present the “Russian threat” as a Sword of Damocles, a phantom menace against which society must come together, rallying around the existing political power. The proclivity to “scare” Georgian society by continuously constructing threats from the northern neighbour grew over the years due to increasing cases of governmental misconduct and grave political misdeeds. Consequently, by the time the post-revolutionary regime had exhausted its stay in power, the Kremlin had become an inherent part of Georgia’s political life. Specifically, it had become the most effective mechanism of political struggle for defaming, discrediting and marginalizing the “enemy”; a well-established political method easily picked up by the majority of Georgian voters, as well as by the country’s strategic partners, including the United States.

This paper focuses on the securitization process in Georgia during M. Saakashvili’s term in office. Specifically, it attempts to explain “how” and “why” local security and functional actors launched the process. It is based on content analysis – an assessment and comparative analysis of speeches, statements and other published works by those involved. It briefly examines the main postulates of securitization theory, looks at the existing debates regarding the securitization of Russia in Georgia, analyses the reasoning for securitization, and offers a case-by-case study of the process in general. This is an attempt to fill the gap in the literature on securitization, which is mainly dominated by Russian-led “information warfare” topics nowadays.

Securitization Theory and the Debate

The classical perception of the security dilemma relies heavily on a “narrow” definition of the term (adherents of this school are frequently called narrowers), where international relations scholars are solely occupied with an analysis of the security of the state. This approach is mainly focused on military capabilities, and on balance and political stability between key actors of the international order, for example, United States and the Soviet Union. Narrowers emphasize universal and objective nature of security and argue that it is conditioned by objective reality. So far, security is not constructed by political or other forces, but is rather given by default – threats are threats by their very nature. The traditional framework of the security analysis was questioned by various scholars after the end of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the recognition of new threats made it clear that the classical understanding of security cannot answer challenges that post-Cold War international order presented. The term “security” became a generally contested concept.¹ Thus, scholars started looking for a more sophisticated or, as it is usually called, “wider” framework. And such a framework has been offered by prominent Western analysts B. Buzan, O. Wæver, and J. de Wilde in their work *Security: A new Framework for Analysis*.²

1 Fierke 2015, 35.

2 Buzan et al. 1998.

B. Buzan and his colleagues countered the classical theoretical approach by arguing that the definition of security should be “widened” by focusing on more actors than just the state and looking beyond the military dimension. Furthermore, “threats” are not simply out there, but are rather constructed and actualized by particular interest groups. As C. Eroukhmanoff argues “national security policy is not a natural given, but carefully designated by politicians and decision-makers. According to securitisation theory, political issues are constituted as extreme security issues to be dealt with urgently when they have been labelled as “dangerous,” “menacing,” “threatening”...”¹

Securitization theorists mention five sectors: economy, society, military, politics, and environment. Each reflects a concrete actualized threat. This division shows that threats are not objective, but are instead attached to the various parameters of each referent objective.

The language and rhetorical structure used by decision-makers (security actors) while framing a challenge is essential for securitization theory. It is not enough just to raise an issue. A practicable and well-built language framework needs to be offered – a speech act that will persuade listeners to elevate the issue above politics.² Generally speaking, security actors actualize “threats” through particular “message boxes” and argue that drastic measures should be taken to avoid existential threats, usually meaning military or other types of security operations. If most of listeners are convinced, then the topic has been successfully securitized; if not, then this attempt represents a securitizing move.³ It should be noted here that politicians are not the only security actors, as other groups involved in the field of security – the police, immigration services, military, intelligence services, and so on – are too. They all play a crucial role in shaping the background of the security landscape. Apart from this, we may also include the so-called functional actors, such as the media, experts, scholars, non-governmental agencies, families, etc. These actors frame general storylines that are accessible to the wider public.⁴ Thus, securitization theory scholars are more focused on the question of “how” security actors manage to securitize a topic, rather than “why” they do so. An alternative phenomenon to securitization is offered by O. Wæver,⁵ who argues that we need to go back to normal politics or, as he framed it, “desecuritization.” The most securitized topics at present include terrorism, counterterrorism, Islamic radicalization and immigration.⁶

There is a dearth of academic literature on the issue of the securitization of Russia in Georgia. Particularly, both Georgian and Western scholars focus on topics that are securitized by Moscow in its relations with Tbilisi and the latter’s aspirations to NATO/EU membership.⁷ Additionally, there are sensitive topics that are discussed by various Russian media outlets and clearly exaggerated threats – for example, the supposed

1 Eroukhmanoff 2017, 104.

2 Buzan et al. 1998, 26; Emerson 2019.

3 Williams 2003; Stritzel 2007; Kapur et al. 2018.

4 Bigo et al. 2010.

5 Wæver 2015.

6 Balzacq 2005; Balzacq et al. 2015.

7 Makarychev 2008; Matsaberidze 2015; Sirbiladze 2016; Fernandes et al. 2018.

terrorism in Pankisi Gorge¹ and the non-existent Lugar Research Center case.² On the other hand, wide-ranging analyses of Russian scholars are mainly focused on Georgian nationalism, separatism, Georgia–Russia relations and the NATO/EU topic. Usually, Tbilisi is discussed in the wider South Caucasian framework. M. Kirchanov is among those who mention securitization processes.³ He argues that Russia is widely used as a symbol of the enemy, an aggressor that has, from the moment the relations were established between the two countries, tried hard to assimilate the Georgian people. It is thus extremely important for Georgian nationalists to portray Russia in this light through the media. So far, there is little that Georgian, Russian and Western scholars and think-tanks can offer in the way of understanding reverse securitization – that is, Tbilisi's securitization of Moscow.

Still, there are a few papers that raise general concerns about “countering Russia” and directly touch upon the topic of Russian securitization in Georgia. In his article “The Trap of ‘Countering Russia,’”⁴ Junes argues that self-declared pro-Western governments, especially in Eastern Europe, tend to use this agenda for mercantilist objectives. Of course, the Russian threat does exist, but “it would thus be advisable to not exaggerate [it] more than necessary. Instead of ‘countering Russia,’ the west should be more concerned with promoting the values it supposedly stands for both domestically and in the eastern European periphery.”

L. Mitchell, former associate research scholar at Columbia University's Harriman Institute who worked as an adviser for the Georgian Dream party, was probably the first Western analyst who openly and directly spoke about securitization processes in Georgia. In his blog article, “Who Is Really Doing Russia's Bidding in Tbilisi,”⁵ he argues that M Saakashvili tried hard to present himself as a fiercely anti-Russian politician fighting for the state's bright future and NATO membership. Additionally, the leader of the so-called Rose Revolution movement was doing his best to present his country as a democratic stronghold deterring the ill-disposed intentions of the Kremlin. But, at the same time, it was M. Saakashvili who fell into the Russian trap in 2008 and gave Moscow a carte-blanc to recognize Georgia's separatist regions as independent states and further tighten its grip over them. Furthermore, his government's tendency to abuse its power, its constant violations of human rights and freedoms, and its assault on free media and the judicial system, all effectively worked in Russia's favour. L. Mitchell concludes by arguing that, while M. Saakashvili's political team was using the Russian threat to libel and criticize its opponents at home and abroad, the Kremlin got everything that it could have envisioned from Tbilisi.

L. Mitchell later reiterated these views in a 2015 interview, where he noted that “if you're a scholar, and academic, and analyst and you haven't been called pro-Russian it is because you're not trying hard enough to do real work. It's a product of

1 Vatchagaev 2016. Сергей Лавров: «ИГ» использует Панкисское ущелье в Грузии // Настоящее Время. 27 января 2016. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/27514522.html>. (дата обращения: 30.05.2022).

2 “Georgian Health Official Says Russia's Allegations about Lugar Lab in Tbilisi are False,” *Agenda.Ge*, October 5, 2018, accessed May 20, 2022, <http://agenda.ge/en/news/2018/2072>.

3 Kirchanov 2011.

4 Tom Junes, “The Trap of ‘Countering Russia,’” *OpenDemocracy*, June 23, 2016, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/trap-of-countering-russia/>.

5 Mitchell 2012.

the political climate.”¹ According to the American scholar, the West had a tendency to believe the accusations levelled by M. Saakashvili and his political team that his political opponents were pro-Russian, but this narrative is already irrelevant and outdated. Finally, L. Mitchell commented the latest pre-election campaign arguing that ‘pro-Russian’ narrative became an inherent part of Georgian political culture and political opposition is especially obsessed by it, directly harming the state and limiting its democratic development.

Similar points have been made by Georgian scholar L. Markozashvili, who claims that political opponents as well as representatives of other groups were usually libelled, detained and discredited by M. Saakashvili’s government, arguably in response to existential (nationhood) and security (sovereignty, safety of democratic institutions) threats.² He continues by saying that the post-revolutionary government has postulated itself as the only agent of westernization and democratization. According to this narrative, everyone who opposes M. Saakashvili and his political team is against Georgia’s pro-Western course and democratic reforms. In this sense, they could be directly called pro-Russian. L. Markozashvili concludes by saying that the Georgian case of limiting democratic freedoms and liberties for the sake of existential and security dilemmas fits the theory of securitization perfectly. Mikheil Saakashvili’s government created the perfect political “bogeyman,” which helped him to easily justify the authoritarian nature of his government and punitive operations against rivals.³ The securitization baton was passed to the Georgian Dream government that is trying to overshadow ongoing political failures by actualizing the “Russian threat” concept once again.

Later, the Centre for Cultural Relations – Caucasian House in Georgia published a report entitled “Georgia and Russia: Bilateral View on the Quarter Century Relations.” E. Baghaturia, a researcher at the institute, used some concepts from securitization theory to explain post-revolutionary government’s tendency to make unsubstantiated accusations, including Russian special agencies closely cooperating with the political opposition, and plans to assassinate M. Saakashvili and overthrow Georgia’s democratic, pro-Western government.⁴ In March 2016, Caucasian House held an international conference devoted to 25 years of Georgia–Russia relations. The preliminary findings of the research report were presented at the opening of the event, which was attended by prominent Georgian and international analysts and scholars. E. Baghaturia’s short speech sparked what is perhaps the only direct open debate between the researcher and Professor D. Darchiashvili, a politician and member of the former ruling party, United National Movement, who teaches history at Ilia State University in Tbilisi. D. Darchiashvili questioned the impartiality of the research and called on E. Baghaturia to delve deeper into the issue. According to him, the relevance of the Russia issue was a logical result of the Kremlin’s foreign policy – a policy that threatened Georgia’s sovereignty, security and led to the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008. While E. Baghaturia agreed with this objection, he stated that there are still plenty of cases when M. Saakashvili’s government used Russia as an excuse to take

1 Mitchell 2015.

2 Markozashvili 2014, 190.

3 Sikharulidze 2016.

4 Koiava et al. 2017.

highly questionable political steps, which often led to the restriction of civil rights and liberties, the oppression of political opponents and an assault on free media. These incidents cannot be simply labelled as a “side effect” of Moscow’s foreign policy.¹

Securitization of Russia in Georgia

As we mentioned above, there is no doubt that Russia has been actively securitized by Georgian actors for mercantilist goals. To be sure, Moscow presents certain objective fundamental dangers, but Georgian decision-makers, politicians, and other functional actors have long since switched from “countering” Russian threats to “constructing” them. This is even more obvious following the latest admissions of former high-ranking officials who, hoping to restore public trust through self-lustration, directly recognized grave misdeeds such as unlawful detentions, persecutions, defamation, fabrication and falsification of criminal cases, media control, and so on. Thus, there are already well-documented cases of security actors successfully securitizing particular topics related to Russia and convincing the people of Russia’s ill intentions, only to openly acknowledge this later on, or to have this fact uncovered by judgements of European Court of Human Rights.²

The Table 1 below shows a timeline of significant political events in the country that are necessary for understanding general environment, narratives and storylines, as well as particular cases of security speeches, successful securitization and securitization moves that took place during M. Saakashvili’s term in power.

Table 1.

SECURITIZATION TIMELINE
СРОКИ СЕКЬЮРИТИЗАЦИИ

Event	Date	Importance
Rose Revolution	3/11/2003–23/11/2003	Global Politics
Adjara Region deal	23/11/2002–06/05/2003	Domestic Affairs
Georgian–Russian “reset”	25/01/2004–31/07/2004	Foreign Affairs
August 2004 military crisis	August 2004	Security and War
The end of the “reset”	post-August 2004	Foreign Affairs
Growing crisis in Georgia	from 25/01/2004	Domestic Affairs
Anti-Russian motives	from early 2006	Security Speech Act
Russian spies case	27/09/2006–06/10/2006	Foreign & Domestic Affairs
Kodori Gorge operation	26/7/2006–30/07/2006	Securitization
The November events	02/11/2007–07/11/2007	Securitization
From November to November	11/12/2007	Security Speech Act
The fifth column	Aftermath of the November events	Security Speech Act
2008 Russo–Georgian War	07/08/2008–16/08/2008	War
The “Simulated Chronicle”	13/03/2010	Securitization
Independence Day protest	25/05/2011–26/05/2011	Securitization
The “photographers case”	Aftermath of the dispersal	Securitization move

Source: compiled by the author.

1 “25 Years of Confrontation and Cooperation: Georgian-Russian and Other Models of Relations,” Regional Dialogue, 2017, accessed May 15, 2022, <http://regional-dialogue.com/en/international-conference-25-years-of-confrontation-and-cooperation-georgian-russian-and-other-models-of-relations/>.
2 “Application no. 8284/07 of the European Court of Human Rights,” Stradalex, 2019, accessed May 20, 2022, https://www.stradalex.com/en/sl_src_publ_jur_int/document/echr_8284-07; “Application no. 16812/17 of the European Court of Human Rights,” Stradalex, 2019, accessed May 20, 2022, https://www.stradalex.com/en/sl_src_publ_jur_int/document/echr_16812-17.

Of course, the table does not reflect all existing data on security speech acts and securitization motives, but it is an apt illustration of the process over the years. Furthermore, it offers case-by-case examples for the most important research questions of securitization theory – “how” and “why” actors in Georgia securitized Russia and “what” topics connected with Russia were securitized.¹

From “Countering” to “Constructing” Russian Threats in Georgia

Shevardnadze–Saakashvili Switch

On November 23, 2003, protestors took to the streets, with the backing of the international community, to demand the resignation of President E. Shevardnadze in an event that would later be called the Rose Revolution. A young pro-Western reformist trio of politicians took control over a decrepit Georgia – N. Burjanadze, Z. Zhvania and M. Saakashvili. Soon after, interim president N. Burjanadze ensured the international community that Georgia’s new political establishment would push for democratic reforms and closer ties with the West. Meanwhile, A. Abashidze, the “landlord” of the country’s Adjara Region announced his discontent with the new regime. The new government was on the edge of an internal military conflict, which was avoided thanks to direct intervention from high-ranking Russian officials.²

In 2004, M. Saakashvili won the presidential elections and re-assured United States and the European Union that the fairly elected government would pursue a pro-Western course. In turn, Georgia’s strategic partners acknowledged the peaceful transition as a breakthrough and expressed their readiness to back positive changes.³ Later on, the United National Movement (UNM) won parliamentary elections and received a constitutional majority.⁴ Both legislative and executive pillars were in the hands of a post-revolutionary government, which received a *carte blanche*. By the time E. Shevardnadze resigned, the Georgian state was at rock bottom. The political environment was unstable and bloody, two civil wars had taken place in the early 1990s, in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali.^{5,6} As a result, the country lost a significant number of territories and was flooded with refugees. E. Shevardnadze’s government found infamy thanks to its high levels of bribery, corruption and its low human development index score. In the wake of such impoverishment, Georgia lost 30% of its total population, as people emigrated to various countries. Thus, the newly elected government of M. Saakashvili and United National Movement decided to carry out a complete reform of the state by implementing comprehensive changes at every level of the statehood, including the normalization of relations with Russia.⁷

1 Blank 2008.

2 “Timeline – 2004,” Civil Georgia, January 3, 2005, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20051118223334/http://207.218.249.154/eng/detail.php?id=8712>.

3 Mitchell 2009, 1.

4 “Georgia: History of Elections 1990–2010,” Information Center on NATO and EU for Effective Communication, accessed May 15, 2022, pp. 15–16, http://infocenter.gov.ge/elections2017/history_en.pdf.

5 König 2005.

6 “The Abkhazia Conflict,” U.S. Department of State, July 28, 2005, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/fs/53745.htm>.

7 “Saakashvili Outlines Priorities,” Civil Georgia, January 5, 2004, accessed May 22, 2022, <https://civil.ge/archives/104983#>.

M. Saakashvili's decisiveness and the support he received from the international community helped him to achieve significant results at home. He introduced the post of Prime Minister, carried out a re-shuffle of cabinet of ministers, appointing young reformists that were loyal to the President, handled issues of subordination and took various measures to make the governance system more flexible while building a strong power vertical. M. Saakashvili's "war on corruption" started with the reform of Georgia's infamous traffic police agency. He went further by conducting a full-fledged clean-up of almost all ministries, agencies and/or any other institutions that were in one way or another affiliated with the state. His political team put forward the idea of university entrance exams to deal with irregularities in the higher education system. Finally, M. Saakashvili announced a "war on crime," implementing a "zero tolerance" policy to crime, pushing for hard punishments for everyone who broke the law.

The post-revolutionary government was extremely successful in modernizing the state, but this process was accompanied with highly questionable methods.¹ Aspirations to build the state with a "blitzkrieg" policy had significant drawbacks, particularly, increasing cases of police abuse, human rights violations and personal property.² Moreover, the newly reformed police and the Ministry of Internal Affairs were blamed for illegal special operations which involved the torture and killing of civilians. Respective judgements were issued by the European Court of Human Rights.³ Prominent Georgian lawyer and former member of the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association A. Dolidze argued that the so-called "zero tolerance" policy led to a dramatic abuse of power by government representatives, especially the police and other security forces who were gravely violating human rights on a regular basis.⁴ These misdeeds led to increased dissatisfaction among part of Georgian society that felt M. Saakashvili and his allies were building a modern authoritarian regime rather than the democracy they had promised.⁵

Meanwhile, M. Saakashvili's announced "reset" policy with Russia failed. Despite his first successful visit to Moscow, relations with Russia were actively deteriorating and in August 2004, the Georgian Defense forces engaged in combat with military units in the separatist territory of South Ossetia.⁶ The region was on the verge of a full-scale war that was only narrowly avoided. Moscow's reaction was harsh. President of Russia V. Putin blamed the new government for trying to solve domestic problems by force. Furthermore, M. Saakashvili was labelled untrustworthy.⁷ Anti-Russian and anti-

1 "Fighting Corruption in Public Services: Chronicling Georgia's Reforms," World Bank, 2012, accessed May 15, 2022, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/518301468256183463/pdf/664490PUB0EPI0065774B09780821394755.pdf>.

2 "World Report – Georgia 2006," Human Rights Watch, 2012, accessed May 12, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/europe/central-asia/georgia>; "Freedom in the World – Georgia 2006," Freedom House, 2012, accessed May 12, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia>; "Freedom of the Press – Georgia," Freedom House, 2011, accessed May 12, 2022, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2011/georgia#UvQrqPQW1yU>.

3 "Application no. 25091/07 of the European Court of Human Rights," Stradalex, 2011, accessed May 20, 2022, https://www.stradalex.com/en/sl_src_publ_jur_int/document/echr_25091-07; "Application no. 50375/07 of the European Court of Human Rights," Stradalex, 2019, accessed May 20, 2022, https://www.stradalex.com/en/sl_src_publ_jur_int/document/echr_50375-07.

4 Ana Dolidze, "Zero Tolerance to Police Mayhem," Georgian Young Lawyers' Association, May 21, 2006, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://gyla.ge/index.php/ge/post/nulovani-tolerantoba-policiis-tvitnebobas-56#sthash.dyyiAavn.dpbs>.

5 MacFarlane 2011; Ana Dolidze, "Georgia's Path to Authoritarianism," The National Interest, August 24, 2007, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/inside-track-georgias-path-to-authoritarianism-1748>.

6 Sergei Blagov, "Fresh Crisis Threatens Peace in South Ossetia," EurasiaNet, July 8, 2014, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://eurasia-net.org/fresh-crisis-threatens-peace-in-south-ossetia>; Jean-Christophe Peuch, "Georgia: Russia Weighs In As Fighting Worsens In South Ossetia," Radio Free Europe, August 19, 2004, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1054397.html>.

7 "Georgia: Avoiding War in South Ossetia," International Crisis Group, 2004, accessed May 12, 2022, <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/UNTC/UNPAN019224.pdf>.

Georgian sentiments were thrown around by both sides. Tbilisi realized that Moscow had completely different views on its neighbour's future, as well as on the future of the South Caucasus region in general. This pushed the government to speed up its aspirations for Georgia to become a member of NATO.

From November to November

M. Saakashvili's autocratic methods, as well as external turbulences, further contributed to internal escalation and led to massive political protests in the capital city in November 2007.¹ As L. Mitchell argues, it was at this time that M. Saakashvili realized his popularity had melted away, that he was not universally loved and that he could be ousted at any moment.² Following the events of November 2007, the only on the Georgian president's mind was how to retain power. Five days of protests were repressed by Georgian riot police, a curfew was introduced, the only oppositional channel *Imedi TV* was shut down, and interim presidential elections were announced.³ As mentioned, the people who had gathered in central Tbilisi in November 2007 came out against authoritarianism, abuse of rights and corruption. M. Saakashvili was in need of a new political campaign that could have consolidated Georgian society around him and legitimize his actions. He found it in Russia. Prominent figures from UNM were actively calling the popular protests a "pro-Russian rally" that aimed to dismantle Georgia, its sovereignty and overthrow the democratically elected pro-western government. M. Saakashvili told local news agencies, "high-ranking officials in the Russian special services are behind this." Commenting on this case, then-Defense and Security Committee Chairman G. Targamadze stated: "You real scum! Your rematch will not be successful! Russian flags will not fly over Rustaveli [the central avenue in Tbilisi where parliament is located – author]! We will defend Rustaveli, the city and the whole country! We will worry you to death!"⁴ This was the first case that high-ranking Georgian officials had publicly and directly accused a foreign country of attempting to overthrow the government.

Later, Georgian Public Broadcasting released a film entitled *From November to November* that was effectively the state's version of what had transpired in the country following the Rose Revolution up to the events of November 2007. The movie outlines the poor condition of Georgian statehood in the early 2000s and the main events that led to the peaceful protests, the so-called Rose Revolution,

1 Liz Fuller, "Ombudsman Slams 'Authoritarian Rule' In Georgia, Founds New Movement," Radio Free Europe, January 1, 2008, accessed May 20, 2022, https://www.rferl.org/a/Human_Rights_Ombudsman_Slams_Authoritarian_Rule/1293020.html; Liz Fuller, "One Year After Reelection, Georgian President Faces Multiple Challenges," Radio Free Europe, January 4, 2009, accessed May 20, 2022, https://www.rferl.org/a/Georgian_President_Faces_Multiple_Challenges/1366270.html; Christopher Chivers, "Thousands Rally in Capital Against Georgia Presiden," The New York Times Magazine, November 3, 2007, accessed May 22, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/03/world/europe/03tbilisi.html>; "11 Years Since the Worst Political Crisis in Georgia which Nearly Ended UNM Leadership", Agenda.Ge, November 7, 2018, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2018/2333>.

2 Mitchell 2012.

3 Vladimir Socor, "Imedi Television Reopens amid Georgia's Presidential Election Campaign," The Jamestown Foundation, December 13, 2007, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/imedi-television-reopens-amid-georgias-presidential-election-campaign/>; Qartlos Sharashenidze, "Sozar Subari: 'Many Acts of Violence Were Organized and Committed by or with the Support of the Ministry of Interior,'" Human Rights, April 29, 2009, accessed May 15, 2022, <http://www.humanrights.ge/index.php?a=main&pid=7618&lang=eng>; "Saakashvili May be Interrogated for 2008 War and Imedi TV Seizure, Prosecutor Says," Democracy & Freedom Watch, April 1, 2013, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://dfwatch.net/saakashvili-may-be-interrogated-for-2008-war-and-imedi-tv-seizure-prosecutor-says-18039-19068>; "Former PM Recalls Details of Crackdown on Imedi TV," First Channel, February 14, 2018, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://1tv.ge/en/news/former-pm-recalls-details-crackdown-imedi-tv/>.

4 "Givi Targamadze: We Will Worry You to death You, You Scum!" YouTube: Tbilisi, Georgia: Imedi TV, 2007, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kuTnBRIbMGY>.

including the coming to power of pro-Western forces in Georgia. The film also argues that, in autumn 2003, Russian special services hired killers to assassinate opposition leader M. Saakashvili. It was imperative to liquidate M. Saakashvili in order to prevent him and the United National Movement party from coming to power and leading the country to Western institutions. Fortunately, the assassination attempt failed. The Kremlin, still seeing Georgia as a country of strategic importance, was doing its best to stop the country's pro-Western aspirations. Thus, it used the "fifth column" strategy in the person of A. Abashidze to rise up against the centre and dismantle the country from the inside. A. Abashidze had the support of his close ally, politician and journalist, G. Targamadze. Thanks to resoluteness of Tbilisi, A. Abashidze's regime fell and he was personally escorted by then-Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia, I. Ivanov, to Moscow. Georgia continued its integration into Western institutions and started to "knock" on NATO's doors.

Furthermore, the new government pushed forward with its reforms – the shock therapy approach – which ensured rapid development. The possibility of Georgia building independent statehood, and of NATO's expansion, were perceived by the Kremlin as a direct threat to its strategic agenda in the South Caucasus, and a security and military challenge. Moscow was determined to overthrow the pro-Western government by all means. It supported the former Georgian military commander, E. Kvitsiani, in Kodori Gorge. E. Kvitsiani was famous for leading successful military operations during the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict, with his biggest achievement being keeping Kodori Gorge under Georgian jurisdiction.

The movie included an audio recording of a telephone conversation between E. Kvitsiani and his close friend, politician and public activist I. Batiashvili, where they discuss the situation in Kodori Gorge. E. Kvitsiani states in the recording that he agreed to help from Abkhaz separatists to counter Georgian military forces. By the end of July 2006, he was finally forced to leave the country and flee to the North Caucasus. He, his sister N. Kvitsiani and I. Batiashvili were later charged and sentenced with treason and conspiracy. The movie emphasizes that, according to the Russian plan, E. Kvitsiani was supposed to have had the support of a part of the Georgian opposition, in this case, the Georgian Labour Party, which started permanent protests in the capital city. Additionally, a Russian spy network was collaborating with leaders of the Georgian opposition, for example L. Berdzenishvili, a member of the Republican Party at the time, to gather inside information on internal processes and foreign aspirations. The Kremlin was looking to take advantage of the dissatisfaction among part of Georgian society to provoke mass protests, in collaboration with local political leaders.

According to the Georgian side, it used former KGB agent I. Giorgadze, an ethnic Georgian, to plan and conduct a military coup d'état, which ultimately failed thanks to the speed with which the country's intelligence services responded to the attempted rebellion and the special operation it launched. Additionally, local security forces launched another special operation to destroy Moscow's military intelligence network, the "Russian spies" case. Four Russian officers and ten local citizens were detained as a result. One of the correspondents, N. Rurua, at the time the Deputy Chairman of the Defence and Security Committee of the Parliament of Georgia, argues that the Georgian government had received information from its Western strategic partners about Russia's further plans for overthrowing the pro-Western government.

In particular, Russia decided to employ Georgian tycoon B. Patarkatsishvili, who was dissatisfied with M. Saakashvili's regime, and use his financial resources to undermine the government, including by establishing the private opposition TV broadcaster *Imedi*. It should be noted that A. Abashidze's former ally G. Targamadze was appointed Public – Political Director of the company. The channel was doing its best to provoke mass protests and break the system from inside.

B. Patarkatsishvili, who was to personally orchestrate the operation, was looking for support from M. Saakashvili's government members. And he found what he was looking for in I. Okruashvili, the former Minister of Defence and a close friend of the Georgian President. According the movie, together, with logistical maintenance from Russian intelligence services, they came up with a plot to overthrow the pro-Western government and appoint forces that were friendly to Russia. *Imedi TV* was to spread false allegations against the regime to significantly increase dissatisfaction among the Georgian people. Ideally, this dissatisfaction would have been reflected in mass protests. In parallel, military units devoted to I. Okruashvili were supposed to attack servants loyal to the government, while Russian troops were to conduct military operations on the administrative borders with Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions. A simultaneous attack would have made it impossible to counter, and the Kremlin's long-lasting aspiration to stop Georgia's integration into Western institutions would finally have been achieved.

Traitors managed to drag some leaders of political opposition into this operation, including the Chairman of the Georgian Labour Party Sh. Natelashvili, former State Minister on Conflict Resolution Issues (2004–2006) G. Khaindrava, T. Khidasheli, D. Berdzenishvili, G. Sanikidze, K. Gamsakhurdia and K. Davitashvili, as well as prominent Georgian journalist N. Lezhava and other *Imedi TV* staff. The mission was set in November 2007. I. Okruashvili and his political allies were detained during the special operation. The protests that started on November 2, 2007 did not bring about the immediate overthrow of M. Saakashvili's pro-Western regime. So they decided to pitch tents on Rustaveli Avenue opposite the parliament building and a create deadlock in the centre of Tbilisi. At the same time, *Imedi TV* was looking for any opportunity to further escalate the situation. To impose order, on November 7, Georgian police officers were able to disperse a small number of protestors in a non-violent manner. Despite this very careful approach, the opposition leader still tried to provoke disturbances and the government was forced to disperse the protest. State officials called on opposition leaders to enter into a dialogue, but the latter refused, hoping to finally overthrow the M. Saakashvili regime. B. Patarkatsishvili and others urged Georgian society to push the government resign. Well-trained riot police managed to prevent a coup d'état. *Imedi TV* was closed, M. Saakashvili introduced a curfew and announced snap presidential elections. As M. Saakashvili stated during his address to the nation, Georgia had survived an attempted regime change orchestrated by the Kremlin.

The movie *From November to November* is extremely important for the following reasons:

1. It is the first and probably the only such case of government-sponsored, government-staged, structured propaganda movie publicly unveiling a Russian spy network among the Georgian political opposition.

2. It is a unique case of a well-developed security speech act and language-framed securitization.

3. The movie introduced to Georgian political environment the concepts of patriots – the post-revolutionary government of M. Saakashvili, the United National Movement party and their followers; traitors – “Moscow’s men,” “Kremlin agents,” pro-Russian forces, the fifth column, enablers (opposition); and pro-Russian (associated with treason, backwardness – an “axis of evil”) and pro-Western (development, civilization – an “axis of good”) forces. Generally, it split Georgian society into “desirable” and “undesirable” groups/elements.¹

4. It introduced labelling, defamation, discreditation and marginalization as effective tools for political struggle and rivalry.

Currently, we may argue that this storyline had nothing to do with objective reality. Firstly, former high-ranking officials (persecutors) recognized, as they termed the incident, their mistake, while former “agents of the Kremlin” like L. Berdzenishvili, G. Sanikidze, I. Okruashvili and others (victims) forgave them. Moreover, former enemies now teamed up against the “pro-Russian” government of Georgian Dream.² Secondly, the European Court of Human Rights issued a judgement³ reiterating that the detention of I. Batiashvili was legal, but the government of M. Saakashvili had fabricated the audio recording of the conversation and given it to private *Rustavi 2 TV*. By doing so, it had created the assumption in Georgian society that Kodori Gorge was directly controlled by Moscow and I. Batiashvili was covering up and supporting the Russian plan. Using *Rustavi 2* as an influential functional actor, the government managed to connect the Kodori Gorge incident to the Kremlin, easily persuading the local population it was necessary to detain I. Batiashvili in order to counter the existential security threat.

Thus, the European Court of Human Rights found the country guilty of violating the right to a fair and public hearing. Commenting on the judgement, former Secretary of the National Security Council of Georgia and current member of the Movement for Liberty – European Georgia, acknowledged that the evidence had been fabricated.⁴ The government managed to discredit I. Batiashvili and get rid of the vocal critic by sending him to jail for a while. Generally, this case illustrates that the regime was eager to use the “Russian threat” concept even if it meant fabricating evidence. The I. Batiashvili case is the earliest documented precedent of the securitization of Russia by a post-revolutionary government. Third, criminal cases opened against some opposition leaders led to nowhere. The event was simply forgotten and the biggest ever coup

1 Archil Sikharulidze, “Who Do I Call if I Want to Speak to ‘Pro-Russian Forces’ in Georgia?” OpenDemocracy, August 31, 2016, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/who-do-i-call-if-i-want-to-speak-to-pro-russian-forces-in-georgia/>.

2 “Levan Berdzenishvili: The Georgian People Forgave Saakashvili for the Events of November 7,” First Channel, November 7, 2018, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://1tv.ge/news/levan-berdzenishvili-qartvelma-khalkhma-mikheil-saakashvils-7-noemberi-apatia/>; “Irakli Okruashvili Hosts Grigol Vashadze at Home: ‘I Always Put Personal Grievances Aside When it Concerns the Country,’” Ambebi.ge, November 3, 2018, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://www.ambebi.ge/article/228967-irakli-okruashvilma-grigol-vashadze-saxlshi-umaspinzla-rodasac-sakme-exeba-kveqanas-piraduls-qovelvis-vivicqebdi/>; “Opposition Leader Plans to Meet with Mikheil Saakashvili in Kiev,” InterPressNews, October 25, 2019, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://www.interpressnews.ge/en/article/104292-opposition-leader-plans-to-meet-with-mikheil-saakashvili-in-kiev/>.

3 “Application no. 8284/07 of the European Court of Human Rights,” Stradalex, 2019, accessed May 20, 2022, https://www.stradalex.com/en/sl_src_publ_jur_int/document/echr_8284-07.

4 “Giga Bokeria Comments on Decision of Strasbourg Court on Batiashvili Case – This is a Lesson for All Governments,” InterPressNews, October 11, 2019, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/567754-giga-bokeria-batiashvilis-sakmeze-strasburgis-gadacqvetilebis-shesaxe-es-aris-gakvetili-qvela-xelisuplebistvis>.

d'état plan orchestrated by the Kremlin went unpunished.¹ As L. Markozashvili (2014) argues, the narrative was constructed to "privatize" the pro-Western agenda by M. Saakashvili and claim that everyone who opposed his government was, by default, anti-Western or "pro-Russian."² This securitization was successful enough to bring down political protest, undermine and persecute members of the opposition, and close the only privately owned TV channel, *Imedi*. The post-revolutionary government persuaded the majority of the Georgian electorate, as well as the country's strategic partners, in particular the George W. Bush administration, that agents of the Kremlin were trying overthrow the pro-Western government, and that M. Saakashvili was still the best option.³

"Chronicles of a Terrible Future"

The movie was followed by another concocted short clip called "Simulated Chronicle" or "Chronicles of a Terrible Future," which was aired by the now pro-government *Imedi TV* during the show Special Reportage to the Georgian nation on March 13, 2010. According to the show's host, E. Tsamalashvili, *Imedi TV* staff wanted to show how the situation in Georgia could play out if the people did not unite against and fight Moscow's plans. The clip was presented as if were a real breaking news story, that it had not been staged or simulated.

According to the story, Russian military units located in Akhalkalaki had mobilized and may try to capture Tbilisi. People living nearby were in panic and fleeing. Infrastructure had ground to a halt. A few days earlier, the Georgian opposition had not recognized the election results and demanded the government's resignation. During one of the meetings, unknown individuals opened fire on protesters, killing four and injuring nine civilians. M. Saakashvili called this a move against the country's statehood. Opposition leaders called on Georgian society to rise up against and overthrow the "bloody government." Mass protests continued to destabilize the country. The opposition had declared the existing regime illegitimate, established an interim people's government and was urging the international community to help free the country from tyranny. New faces joined the political opposition: former President of the Georgian Parliament (2001–2008) N. Burjanadze; former Ambassador to the United Nations (2006–2008) I. Alasania; and former Prime Minister of Georgia (2005–2007) Z. Noghaideli. Russia blamed Georgia for the unsuccessful assassination attempt of E. Kokoity, then president of South Ossetia (2001–2011). The allegations were supported by part of the Georgian opposition. The presidential administration published a statement arguing that the latest events had been orchestrated by the Kremlin to create a legitimate basis for annexing the country and removing the pro-Western government.

At the same time, President of Russia D. Medvedev called on the international community to free Georgian society from M. Saakashvili's terrorist regime. Meanwhile, the Abkhaz side suggested the federal model as a way to solve territorial disputes.

1 "Chronicle of the Coups Foretold," Civil Georgia, July 6, 2019, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://civil.ge/archives/312119>.

2 Markozashvili 2014.

3 Mitchell 2015; "Georgia: History of Elections 1990–2010," Information Center on NATO and EU for Effective Communication, accessed May 15, 2022, pp. 17–18, http://infocenter.gov.ge/elections2017/history_en.pdf.

This new Russian architecture is supported by Georgian opposition and it signs document declaring the establishment of a Georgian-Abkhaz-Ossetian confederation and granting Georgia the status of a “neutral state,” thus putting an end to NATO integration. Finally, Russia is proclaimed a key foreign strategic partner. Georgian experts and analysts call it treason by agents of the Kremlin. D. Medvedev launches an intervention operation. The government in Tbilisi mobilizes its armed forces, but some refuse to fight but part of it disobeys, refusing to defend M. Saakashvili’s criminal regime, and expresses loyalty to the interim People’s Government. Representatives of the interim government supported by Moscow follow Russian military units. Georgia’s strategic partners express support for the pro-Western government of M. Saakashvili and urge the Kremlin to stop its operation. Georgian traitors, in collaboration with Russian special forces, assassinate M. Saakashvili. It should be noted that the clip presented N. Burjanadze, a former high-ranking official, as a key architect of the coup. This will be crucial to understanding the successful securitization of the brutal dispersal of protesters on Independence Day in May 2011.

Once again, the political opposition is proclaimed “pro-Russian,” while the government of M. Saakashvili is the only pro-Western power around which the Georgian electorate must unite in order to avoid the annexation of the country. This securitization was so successful that some people left their homes in various regions of Georgia, including the capital city looking shelter in the forests. Moreover, there were lines at gas stations and grocery stores, while the emergency services started working on high alert due to the high number of emergency calls. The “Simulated Chronicle” has been criticized by everyone as unacceptable, highly disturbing and provoking unrest – in other words, “information terror.”¹ Allegations that it was intentionally broadcast to terrify society and undermine the opposition were further strengthened by a leaked audio recording in which G. Arveladze, the head of the Georgian Imedi Production Group and a close ally of the government, talks with the host of the show.² According to the recording, M. Saakashvili not only knew about the clip, but was also demanded that it be as realistic as possible.

The clip is also important in the sense that it offers key assumptions that should help to differentiate between the pro-Western M. Saakashvili and the Georgia’s fifth column. In particular, these are notions that only traitors can:

1. call for a direct dialogue between Tbilisi and Moscow, Tbilisi and Sokhumi, and Tbilisi and Tskhinvali;
2. consider federalization or confederalization of the state as a way out of the territorial dispute;
3. engage in debates about Georgia’s military “neutrality”; and
4. question or even be sceptical to NATO integration.

The “Simulated Chronicle” is attached to another successful example of securitization that took place on Georgia’s Independence Day. On May 25, 2011, the People’s Assembly

1 Gela Mtvlishvili, “Sorry – For Information Terror,” Human Rights, March 16, 2010, accessed May 20, 2022, <http://www.human-rights.ge/index.php?a=main&pid=8127&lang=eng>; “Georgia’s Communications Commission Compels ‘Imedi’ to Apologize for ‘Special Report.’” Caucasian Knot, March 16, 2010, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/12820/>; Georgy Kalatozishvili, “Who Owns Imedi? – An Interview with Irakli Moseshvili,” Vestnik Kavkaza, March 23, 2010, accessed May 22, 2022, <http://vestnikkavkaza.net/amp/375#top>.

2 “Giorgi Arveladze and Eka Tsamalashvili,” YouTube, 2010, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4zch71yVJE>.

organized a protest in front of the parliament building in Tbilisi that was subsequently dispersed by security forces after midnight. The violent confrontation, leading to dozens of arrests, four deaths and almost 100 injured, was highly criticized both inside and outside Georgia.¹ Some argued that it was a “punitive operation” against opponents in order to teach them a lesson.² Soon after the protestors were dispersed, police unveiled new audio recordings in which the leader of the People’s Assembly N. Burjanadze, who was the key architect of the country’s annexation in the “Simulated Chronicle,” had direct ties with the Kremlin. Representatives of the government immediately called the protest movement “pro-Russian,” orchestrated by Moscow.³ Additionally, M. Saakashvili called protesters the fifth column and reiterated that “agents of the Kremlin” were trying to overthrow the pro-Western government, as they had tried to do during the events of November 2007.⁴ Like before, despite allegations by high-ranking officials, the main “traitors” of the state were not detained, and the state prosecutor did not have any evidence of the attempted coup.⁵ And still, this was an extremely successful case of securitization due to the following:

1. The fear of being labelled defenders of “pro-Russian forces.” Only a few representatives of civil society publicly went to the street to protest the most brutal dispersal of a meeting in Georgian history.

2. As Mitchell argues, strategic partners in the United States still trusted the “pro-Russian forces” narrative offered by M. Saakashvili, turning a blind eye to allegations of abuse of power, etc.⁶ It should be noted that J. Bass, who was US Ambassador to Georgia at the time, made some comments that led to public outcry, including the assumption that no one has right to prevent a country from celebrating its Independence Day. Former Public Defender of Georgia S. Subari saw J. Bass’s statements as a “green light” for the government to legitimize its unlawful actions.⁷

3. At the end of the day, using the concepts of fifth column, agents of the Kremlin and pro-Russian forces, the M Saakashvili regime managed to finally suppress the protests. Furthermore, it was also able to undermine trust in and fragment the political opposition.⁸

1 “Release May 26 prisoners, says Burjanadze,” Democracy & Freedom Watch, October 10, 2012, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://dfwatch.net/release-may-26-prisoners-says-burjanadze-91310-13613>; “Amnesty: Georgia is not Investigating Police Brutality,” Democracy & Freedom Watch, May 24, 2012, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://dfwatch.net/amnesty-georgia-is-not-investigating-police-brutality-48093-9157>; Mari Nikuradze, “EU Criticizes Police Brutality in Georgia,” Democracy & Freedom Watch, May 17, 2012, accessed May 15, 2022, <https://dfwatch.net/eu-criticizes-police-brutality-in-georgia-91994-8948>.

2 Tamta Mikeladze, “Did the Police Action on May 26 Comply with International Standards?” Democracy & Freedom Watch, December 27, 2011, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://dfwatch.net/did-the-police-action-on-may-26-comply-with-international-standards-98798-3072>; “State Prosecution: Punitive Operation Held on May 26,” Tabula, February 3, 2014, accessed May 20, 2022, <http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/79760-prokuratura-26-maiss-chatarda-sadamsjelo-operacia>; “Chugoshvili on May 26, 2011: There is no right to Pogrom, it Was a Crime,” Tabula, September 21, 2016, accessed May 20, 2022, <http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/112195-chugoshvili-2011-tslis-26-maisze-darbevis-ufleba-ar-arsebobs-es-iko-kriminali>; Ana Dumbadze, “Giorgi Gakharia: May 26 Was Punitive Act, June 20 – Self-Defense,” Georgia Today, July 12, 2019, accessed May 20, 2022, <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/16497/Giorgi-Gakharia%3A-May-26-was-Punitive-Act%2C-June-20---Self-defense->.

3 Saakashvili: “Fifth Column Operates Openly in Georgia,” Civil Georgia, May 27, 2011, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://civil.ge/archives/185924>.

4 “Saakashvili: Recent Protest Scenario Written in Russia,” Civil Georgia, May 26, 2011, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23530>; “The Georgian Political Landscape After May 26,” Radio Free Europe, June 8, 2011, accessed May 20, 2022, https://www.rferl.org/a/caucasus_report_georgia_political_landscape_after_may_26/24228715.html.

5 “Chronicle of the Coups Foretold,” Civil Georgia, July 6, 2019, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://civil.ge/archives/312119>.

6 “Lincoln Mitchell on Saakashvili and the breakup of the United National Movement,” Agenda.ge, January 18, 2017, accessed May 15, 2022, <https://agenda.ge/en/article/2017/5>.

7 Archil Sikharulidze, “Goodbye, Mr. Bass,” Georgia Today, July 12, 2012, accessed May 20, 2022, http://old.georgiatoday.ge/article_details.php?id=10281&cat=Politics&version=621.

8 Archil Sikharulidze, “Veni Vidi Vici!” Georgia Today, November 8, 2012, accessed May 20, 2022, http://old.georgiatoday.ge/article_details.php?id=10558&cat=Politics&version=636.

The “Photographers Case”

The last important attempt to securitize Russia during the M. Saakashvili regime was the so-called “photographers case.” In July 2011, police officers working on a counterespionage campaign arrested a group of photographers that included G. Abdaladze, Z. Kurtsikidze, I. Gedenidze and his wife N. Gedenidze.¹ They were subsequently prosecuted for alleged spy charges. The first three were quick to confess to being agents of the Kremlin. They signed plea agreements and were released from prison, but were warned never to talk publicly about the affair. There is a generally shared view that the photographers were freed due to massive local and international outcry and criticism, some arguing that the M. Saakashvili government decided to launch a punitive operation against the last representatives of the free media.² Moreover, there were rumours that the operation had been initiated by the president in response to the photos they had published depicting the peaceful dispersal of the rally in central Tbilisi on May 26, 2011. After the regime change, the journalists confessed that they had been subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment in prison and threatened by representatives of the security forces to confess to the espionage charges. They were subsequently found not guilty in 2018, with the state prosecutor arguing that they had been “forced to learn by heart the text of the confession that had been written in advance” for their public confession in front of a camera the next day.³ The photographers case is a security move because the government had failed to persuade the Georgian people and the international community that the prominent Georgian journalists were Russian spies. The incident ended up causing more harm to the regime than good.

Conclusion

Georgian security and functional actors have long since switched from “countering” Russian threats to “constructing” them. During M. Saakashvili’s term in office, the state experienced the strongest wave of securitization. The post-revolutionary government that successfully modernized the country failed to secure democratic freedoms and liberties, including independent judiciary and media. This deviation from democratization in combination with the objective Russian challenges led the M. Saakashvili regime to a pronounced domestic political crisis. Realizing that the protests could actually end in their removal from power, the President of Georgia and his political team in the United National Movement decided to undermine their opponents by introducing Russia as an object of securitization into Georgian political culture. The government was keen to attach the “Russian menace” label to every single happening that threatened its power. The concepts of pro-Russian forces, the fifth column, agents of the Kremlin and other “trademarks” were introduced to defame, discredit and marginalize opponents, and provide grounds for punitive and oppressive actions to legitimize them through the need to deal with existential security threats.

1 Mzia Kupunia, “Georgia, Looking for Spies, Arrests Photographers,” The New York Times Magazine, July 7, 2011, accessed May 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/08/world/europe/08georgia.html>.

2 Zaza Tsuladze, “The Photographers Case: ‘I Am a Journalist Therefore I Am a Spy,’” Voice of America, July 20, 2011, accessed May 22, 2022, <https://www.amerikiskhma.com/a/article-----125889663/535869.html>.

3 “Court Says Photographers Accused of Spying by Previous Government Were Innocent,” Agenda.Ge, November 22, 2018, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2018/2461>.

The Kodori Gorge operation, the staged movie *From November to November*, the so-called "Simulated Chronicle," the Independence Day incident and the "photographers case" show that Georgian decision-makers (security actors) actively securitize Russia through well-structured language frameworks strengthened by narratives and storylines of functional actors, especially the pro-government media. At the end of the day, bold, coherent and coordinated rhetoric by high-ranking officials with significant back-up from state-controlled TV broadcasters led to positive outcomes. In particular, the political opposition has been marginalized and fragmented, while strategic partners in the West, especially the United States, were convinced that M. Saakashvili was the only pro-Western power in the country who had been continuously attacked by the agents of the Kremlin planning to dismantle Georgian statehood. The M. Saakashvili regime was ready to overcome what they saw as existential security threats coming from the "agents of the Kremlin" by all possible means, including the falsification and fabrication of evidence.

By and large, the Georgian case reflects the dangers that can be in place when local political elites, striving to overshadow authoritarian tendencies, decide to use the concept of the "Russian threat" for mercantilist objectives. Furthermore, in the wake of the war on Russian propaganda, it sheds a light on the reverse case, meaning that securitization is usually a bilateral phenomenon.

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От «противодействия» к «конструированию» российских угроз в Грузии при Михаиле Саакашвили

АННОТАЦИЯ

В данной статье рассматривается процесс секьюритизации «российской угрозы» во время пребывания М. Саакашвили на посту президента Грузии. Основной тезис статьи заключается в том, что М. Саакашвили и его политические союзники использовали «сконструированные» российские угрозы для дискредитации и маргинализации оппонентов, чтобы обосновать недемократическую государственную политику в целом. Так, тенденция ограничения свободы слова, гражданских свобод и других демократических прав опиралась на сконструированные экзистенциальные угрозы со стороны Москвы. С точки зрения классической безопасности, Россия представляет угрозу территориальной целостности, суверенитету и устремлениям западной интеграции Грузии, но во время президентства М. Саакашвили эта тема была политизирована и использовалась как политический инструмент против оппонентов. Эта статья рассматривает научную дискуссию по этому вопросу. В заключении приводится анализ наиболее важных событий, которые объясняют механизмы и причины секьюритизации России в Грузии.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

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