

Securitization of Georgia under the Saakashvili Rule

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Abstract

Following the collapse of Communist regimes across Eurasia, securitization became a pressing problem for newly emerging democracies as ruling elites in many post-Soviet states used securitization as a shield for retaining power. This study is based on case study analyses and has two objectives: to highlight the dynamics of Georgia's securitization process, and to show how this process corresponds to existing theoretical and empirical experience. It is evident that the formulation of threat perceptions and the decision making process in Georgia have been constructed and dominated by the elite of the United National Movement (UNM). Georgia's move under Saakashvili's regime on securitization has been fairly controversial – it has been responsible for both the rise and then the fall of his regime. During the last decade, Georgia under Saakashvili's rule has represented a bright illustration of the beginning of a successful and then failed securitization process. Research shows that securitization can be successful in the short run and is particularly likely to succeed in post-communist and Eurocentric countries, ruled by authoritarian or "competitive authoritarian regimes". However, in the long run, securitization leads to the curbing of basic freedoms and the introduction of far-reaching extraordinary measures in the name of security cannot sustain itself and inevitably fails.

Keywords: democracy, Georgia, securitization, "speech act", threat

Introduction

After the end of the Cold War, the issue of rethinking the security concept became very topical. Numerous scientific works were devoted to the broadening of a conception of security through the notions of securitization and desecuritization. This very issue came to a fore with the collapse of the communist regimes after the end of the Cold War. With a lack of experience in democratic development, many of these regimes used securitization as a shield for retaining power in lieu of democratic principles. This research aims to analyze the policies of the government of Georgia under the president Mikheil Saakashvili (2004-2012) in building up a concept of security that sought to influence the population and with the objective of keeping and consolidating power. The work tries to demonstrate how authorities – through the act of securitization – were constructing images of the enemy, both military and non-military, depicting threats and strategies of the regime as ultimately culminating in a challenge of democratic principles, European values and the well-being of the population. The rise and fall of the Saakashvili regime in Georgia is an illuminating example of a successful process of securitization, when a political elite has succeeded in convincing its target audience, and failure, when rule of law, universal values and human rights are ignored – leading to a rejection of that regime by a disillusioned population.

This paper aims to study the securitization process and respond to the question: how did the government use securitization and what impact did this have on democratic processes in the case of Georgia between 2004 and 2012 under Saakashvili's rule?

The theoretical framework of the study is based primarily on the Copenhagen School concept of security and a model of securitization which can be seen as a more extreme form of politicization that envisages both state security and non-traditional security issues (Buzan, Weaver, & Wilde, 1998). Nowadays this concept represents the best theory on how imposed emergency measures are proportional and correlate with an existential threat and how undemocratic political systems can abuse well-established civil liberties and human rights under the pretext of security. Furthermore, this research proved particularly relevant in trying to understand if the securitization model could potentially fit the EU Eastern partner countries aiming at integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures.

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Theoretical Framework: Securitization as a Challenge to Young Democracy, Supremacy of Law and Basic Freedoms

For the post-Soviet countries, the issue of securitization became quite significant, particularly for governments aiming to retain power and build up support from the political elite within an often corrupt autocratic system. Such a political system is maintained by exercising influence over a population and convincing the audience of the necessity for extraordinary and emergency actions in response to an existential or imagined threat. In undemocratic states, the speech act has become increasingly important to pursue goals designed by the political elite, but in the case of democratic societies the electorate has the right to reject the imposed will – the offered issue as an existential threat (Buzan, Weaver, & Wilde, 1998).

According to Buzan et al., security is a socially constructed concept and existential threats are regarded as a subjective matter (Buzan, Weaver, & Wilde, 1998). For that reason, a successful build up of the securitization phenomenon depends on a shared understanding of sources of security threats. In this case, political elites “need to speak the language of security” and request adoption of emergency measures. It means that the society should accept specific issues as an existential threat to a referent object. Thus, a security act depends on many ways on successful speech acts aiming at persuasion of a relevant audience of the existential nature of the threat (Collins, 2010, pp. 136-151).

Convincing the audience to adopt this framework of threat perceptions thus becomes a priority for authorities. A successful act of securitization in many instances depends on the use of exceptional means—“extraordinary measures” which can be applied by the relevant government mean adoption and implementation of measures that go beyond ordinarily accepted rules and practices. According to Buzan et al. extraordinary measures are expected to respond to a specific issue that is posing an existential threat to a referent object. This process involves classification of some issues including the construction of an enemy that needs to be implemented during the inception of this process. Specification of extraordinary measures depends on the circumstances and specificity of the threat nature: whether it is the territorial integrity of a country, organized crime, a sector of the economy, accepted values or a state ideology, all of which require different and appropriate emergency responses (Buzan, Weaver, & Wilde, 1998).

At the same time, it is important to underline the danger of securitization especially in post-soviet states; the political elites of these republics are characterized by enduring totalitarian instincts and an overwhelming desire to keep power, often with disregard of laws and democratic principles. The policy of securitization can be abused in order to legitimize and empower the role of military, police, and special security forces in civilian activities (Emmers, 2010, pp. 136-151). This point proves to be particularly relevant in emerging democracies and in countries where the civilian control of armed and special forces is weak: power is concentrated and the media and civil society are inhibited by the ruling elite. In the name of security and the necessity of taking extraordinary measures to defend the country, the act

of securitization can lead to the curbing of fundamental liberties, impose the policy of total surveillance over political opponents and detention without proper investigation and trial under the pretext of “suspected terrorists and spies”. Building the enemy image and the demonization of opponents is yet another tool necessary in the exploitation of securitization by the political elite. The Copenhagen School does not consider an act of securitization as a positive process. It warns about the negative consequences associated with the act of securitization and recommends operating within the realm of normal politics, where issues can be discussed and addressed within the standard boundaries of politicization (Emmers, 2010, pp. 138-142).

While the Copenhagen School provides a framework to understand how or by whom a specific political issue can become securitized, there are some issues that are insufficiently understood empirically. Particularly, why some forms of securitization succeed in convincing an audience while others fail to do so? It is also important to determine empirically whether acts of securitization contribute to an effective solution of emerged challenges (Emmers, 2010, pp. 136-151).

We believe that the present work and case study can highlight some shortcomings existing in practice in the securitization model. Below, we will tackle securitization practices and actions undertaken by the Georgian Government during the Saakashvili presidency and the types of extraordinary measures, introduced by the Georgian authorities and the ultimate outcome of those policies.

Two stages of Securitization in Georgia

Stage 1 (2004-2006)

In 2003, the new Georgian government inherited what was arguably a failed state with three breakaway regions. Saakashvili and his administration outlined already politicized issues as existential threats to the state: aggressive separatism, Russian claims for regaining influence over Georgia, organized crime, rampant corruption etc. From the early days of the Rose Revolution, the ruling elite had received a cart blanche in all decision-making and went on to consolidate power. Special powers were given to the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Justice as well as to the other law enforcement agencies; these institutions received additional human, budgetary and extra budgetary resources and started building a repressive machine originally directed against criminal gangs and aggressive separatism (Kuparadze, 2012). The new government—as a securitizing agent—had a significant advantage in getting influence over the electorate and population as a whole. In the short term, Saakashvili regained control over Adjara, successfully battled corruption and organized crime, conducted initial economic reforms, successfully reformed law enforcement structures and developed the infrastructure and tourism sector in the country. In his first presidential terms, Saakashvili led Georgia on a path towards democracy, economic liberalization and Euro-Atlantic integration (Coffey, 2012). Georgia between 2004 and 2006 was recognized as “a beacon of democracy” in the region (Bush, 2005). During

these years, there was a shared understanding of what constituted a danger to the country's security and confidence towards the regime was remarkably solid.

Stage 2 (2007-2012)

However, in November 2007, the Georgian government faced the worst crisis since it seized power in 2003. A series of widespread anti-government demonstrations sparked a storm of protest around the country. The government's decision to use excessive police force against peaceful protesters and the opposition "Imedi" TV station—which was subsequently closed down—aggravated the situation. The declaration of a state of emergency by the president and restrictions imposed on the media led to a disregard of fundamental freedoms in Georgia. Notwithstanding that, in 2008 president Saakashvili waged a war against Russia that ended with catastrophic consequences for Georgia. According to Human Rights Watch, Georgia's human rights record remained very alarming from 2010 to 2012 (Human Rights Watch. World Report: Georgia, 2012). Harassment and intimidation of opposition party activists and other violations marred the pre-election environment in 2012. In September 2012, sexual abuse and ill-treatment of prison inmates were revealed, exposing underlying problems within the system. Rampant abuse of power showed the lengths by which the Saakashvili administration attempted to consolidate its stranglehold of the political apparatus (De Waal, 2013). As a result, in October 2012, the wider population rejected the speech act and considered all measures taken by the government as illegitimate, choosing instead to support the Georgian Dream Coalition during the parliamentary elections.

Mikheil Saakashvili – a Main Architect of Securitization in Georgia

The Rose Revolution of November 2003 was succeeded by parliamentary elections characterized by widespread fraud, bringing into power a coalition of three opposition leaders—Mikheil Saakashvili (president), Zurab Zhvania – (prime-minister) and Nino Burjanadze – (speaker of the parliament). Saakashvili's party – the United National Movement (UNM) won an overwhelming majority in the parliament (Welt, 2006). The ruling party would inherit almost absolute decision-making power and the new government—as a securitizing agent, had a significant advantage in that it was now centrally placed to sway the electorate and the population as a whole.

In the meantime, the political elite was demanding special rights and extraordinary means to achieve tangible results in quickly restructuring of the country. In January 2004, Saakashvili requested constitutional reforms to build up new state institutions and a strong executive power, radically reform the country's economy and pursue European and Euro-Atlantic integration as the future direction of the nation. This was the essence of Mikhail Saakashvili's approach to governance (Freizer, 2004).

The ruling party was also beginning to consolidate pow-

er for itself. The UNM redrew the constitution and passed new laws. All the while, Saakashvili's administration rushed to turn a failed state into a functioning, modernized European country. The government injected urgency into the reforms, leading to a sustained mobilization of political support and deployment of resources. However, there was growing skepticism and a raising question amongst the populace: "to what extent had the authorities respected rule of law, protected human rights and how far were they willing to adhere to the democratic principles they espouse?" (Rimple, 2012).

Centralization of power

From the early days of his presidency Saakashvili started building strong vertical structures of power. Through constitutional amendments Saakashvili gained immense power and his leadership and influence on Georgian politics became unchallengeable (De Waal, 2013). "Saakashvili and his regime had an aura of political invincibility, the widely spread perception in the ruling regime and the Georgian public alike after Saakashvili's regime survived the Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008 as well as the mass public protests in 2007–2008 and 2009. Many were sure that Saakashvili—a ruthless, energetic and skilled political operator—would not give up power easily even if retaining it involved using violence" (Rukhadze, 2013). His power hinged on support from two key members of the cabinet: Vano Merabishvili – the Minister of Interior (executor of president's requests) and Zurab Adeishvili – the Minister of Justice (organizer of politically motivated trials and tailoring laws upon the regime's request). The UNM political elite had gained a tremendous foothold in Georgian politics by convincing the population for the need of emergency and extraordinary measures in response to a constructed existential threat.

Regaining Control over Media

In the early days of Saakashvili's control, he paid great attention to the issue of media (Media House Georgia, 2012). After the Rose Revolution, the main TV companies (Rustavi 2, Imedi, and Public Broadcaster – Channel 1) moved into the hands of members of the government or their associates. Information control was a crucial aspect of his policies and he paid great attention particularly to TV broadcasting. According to the Caucasus Research Resource Center, in 2011, the main source of news to 89% of the population was the TV station providing news on a national level (Rustavi 2, "Imedi", and Public Broadcaster – Channel 1) (Rimple, 2012). These particular TV companies became an integral part of the government-controlled propaganda machine (Rimple, 2012). Giorgi Bokeria – the Secretary of the National Security Council received powers to "coordinate" press and media work. He became the main propaganda chief. All news and information deemed unacceptable for the regime were declared or labelled as the work of Kremlin agents, Russian spies or the 5th Column.

Granting to the Internal Special Forces of Emergency Powers

In 2004, the Ministry of State Security was merged with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which also incorporated the Department of Emergency Situations, the Pipeline Protection Department and the Border Guard services. Vano Merabishvili was appointed minister of the united Ministry of Internal Affairs and acquired unlimited powers. He was granted a *carte blanche* to conduct police reforms and orchestrate a crackdown on organized crime. Soon, Merabishvili had become one of the most influential figures in Georgia. The Interior Ministry enlarged its responsibilities, taking control even over the distribution of international assistance for Georgian IDPs and refugees and the construction of refugee camps. He created a well functioning machine of total surveillance and persecution within the country (De Waal, 2013).

The Government's "Zero Tolerance" Policing Strategy

In November 2004, the newly elected president Saakashvili offered a new strategy for fighting organized crime: a "zero tolerance" policy (Kuparadze, 2012). The new tough measures *de facto* gave the police additional powers. Through intensive, proactive street policing implemented through intensive stop and search operations, surveillance and extensive police patrolling, the number of crimes and offences in Georgia were significantly reduced. However, the strategy increased complaints against the police: further highlighting the disrespect for principles of rule of law, rampant brutality, and dramatically increased prison populations.

The "special police checks" became common within this strategy. Law enforcement agencies frequently used excessive and brutal force, violated laws and TV-broadcasting became a tool to demonstrate how police could "skilfully act to protect the public order". Offenders were described as enemy forces that needed to be tackled urgently. A 19-year-old Buta Robakidze was killed on November 24, 2004 during a police operation in the Didube district of Tbilisi. Official records stated that he resisted police alongside his armed four friends and that the police was forced to open fire. Following the reopening of the investigation in 2012, it was revealed that the police fabricated evidence, planted weapons and ammunition in the car and an innocent person was deliberately killed by the police officer (georgiatimes.info, 2013).

In yet another notorious case: Zurab Vazagashvili and Alexander Khubulov were killed and the third passenger wounded by the police while driving a car in central Tbilisi on May 2, 2006. The official version of the investigation at that time was that the three youngsters in the car were on their way to a robbery, which was prevented by the police operation. After reopening the investigation, on February 2, 2015 the persecutor's office stated that the original version of the investigation over robbery was fabricated just to justify "the operation" which was an affirmation of police control. Eleven high-ranking former and current police officers were subsequently arrested for allegedly premeditating killing of the aforementioned persons (agenda.ge, 2015).

Legitimization of Violence

The most scandalous case occurred in January 2006, when young banker Sandro Girgvliani was taken to the outskirts of Tbilisi to a nearby Okrokana cemetery and was beaten to death by high-ranking officers of the Constitutional Security Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In several other incidents, suspects were shot in the process of their arrest. While the government tried to justify these actions as "collateral damage" and an unavoidable result of dangerous criminals resisting arrest, some human rights groups branded these actions as premeditated extrajudicial killings (Freedom House Report, 2007).

On 18 September 2012, video footage showing the systematic torture of inmates in a Tbilisi prison was broadcast on television, shocking the public and putting an international spotlight on the faults within Georgia's criminal justice system. For years, government authorities failed to address repeated reports of widespread torture and mistreatment of prisoners. These problems affected a growing section of the population as Saakashvili's "zero-tolerance" policy, even for petty crime, had quadrupled the number of prison inmates by the end of Saakashvili's rule (Freedom House Report, 2013).

With the concept of building a strong, European-type state resting on several priorities including fighting corruption and organized crime, these latter issues were particularly politicised and securitized. More extraordinary powers were given to the police and the prosecutor's office and at the same time, police misconduct rose. Prison populations increased and breaches of human rights became a regular occurrence, including the mistreatment of detainees and prison inmates, and the excessive use of force all of which were seemingly tolerated; anti-crime policies were frequently based on double standards: the political elite and associates were allowed liberties while the rest of the population was kept under constant pressure and surveillance (Kuparadze, 2012).

Vano Merabishvili: "I need two dead bodies"

The Copenhagen School highlights the danger of securitization: the process can be abused by empowered special security forces in political and civil activities, or more worryingly – civil liberties are curbed in the name of security of the nation. This is a risk that is especially relevant in weak and emerging democracies (Emmers, 2010, pp. 136-151). Here we should make references to the so-called mutiny of May 5, 2009, when the Mukrovani tank battalion "disobeyed orders" after the government announcement it had uncovered a 'Russian-backed plot' to destabilize Georgia and overthrow President Saakashvili's regime. In January 2014, the largest Georgian TV broadcasting companies released video footage that showed details of a special operation led by Minister of Internal Affairs Vano Merabishvili during the Mukhrovani rebellion. Merabishvili, while giving orders to his subordinates, was demanding "two dead bodies" and for the successful mission they would be well rewarded. Later that month, Colonel Koba Otanadze and Major Levan Amiridze were heavily wounded and survived but General Giorgi Krialashvili was killed by the police while trying to escape. In

2012, when political coalition “the Georgian Dream” came to power, both Otanadze and Amiridze were granted the status of political prisoners and were freed. By requesting “two corpses”, Merabishvili and his entourage wanted to convince the population of the existential nature of threat, which required an immediate response to tackle the life-and-death struggle with Kremlin’s puppet political forces in Georgia (agenda.ge, 2014). The rebellion would be linked with government plans to use troops to end mass opposition protests paralysing Tbilisi on the eve of the National Day celebrations and a planned military parade on Rustaveli Avenue.

The Georgian authorities had opted for the “zero tolerance” strategy with a clear aim: to mobilize popular support for the fight against organized crime and corruption and allocate more resources to the sector, which became a security-centric issue. However, in many cases the authorities used methods of intimidation, persecution and punishment “for the sake of European integration and building a modern and wealthy state”. The “speech act” suggested that all criminals should be imprisoned and that there was no room in Georgia for “thieves-in-law”. The leading media channels extensively covered police operations and the detention of culprits and corrupt bureaucrats, supposedly demonstrating their toughness and efficiency but managing to mobilize popular support for the conducted policies (Kuparadze, 2012).

The “Speech Act”

The Copenhagen School offers a two stage process of securitization to explain how certain issues are portrayed as threats to referent objects and the most crucial stage of securitization is a process of convincing a relevant audience (public opinion, political circles, or other elites) that a referent object is existentially threatened. If an actor has succeeded in gaining the public support, only then can extraordinary measures be imposed. The “Speech Act” is defined as the “discursive representation of a certain issue as an existential threat to security” and is considered as the starting point of the securitization (Emmers, 2010, p. 139)

The “Speech Act” has been considered by the Saakashvili regime as its main tool in the securitization model. After the Rose Revolution, he started consolidating the security concept and constructing existential threats to state security that would capture the public’s imagination. In 2004, Saakashvili promoted a concept of building a dynamic European country: “Switzerland with elements of Singapore” – with EU and NATO membership as a final point. He wanted to uproot everything connected to a Soviet past and this very issue was extremely politicised. His desire was to transform the “Homo Sovieticus” into a “Homo Georgicus”. Overnight, the reformers abolished the corrupt 15,000-strong traffic police, reshuffled entire ministries and fired 30,000 bureaucrats. Georgia was ruled by a young, pragmatic generation that had thrown off its Soviet-era legacy. In 2010, the government removed the statue of former dictator Stalin from the square in his birthplace town Gori, and in 2011, the UNM-dominated parliament passed the law “the Freedom Chart”. Within two decades of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the “desovietization” process gained a new momentum with no sign of post communism revival in Georgia. Georgia’s

modernization in many instances was aggressive and even brutal. But Saakashvili’s ambitions for Georgia’s transformation were tied to his efforts to radically transform the mindset of the Georgian people. Nearly every day, he was addressing Georgians through the TV screens: he labeled the intelligentsia as “sewage”, representatives of the Shevardnadze government – “criminals”, the population above 50 – “waste material” etc. However the “mental revolution” he designed would eventually backfire. In March 2010 the “Imedi” television channel controlled by a member of the president’s team aired a “modeled documentary” depicting yet another Russian invasion scenario. The film, supposedly made with Saakashvili’s approval, aimed at rallying the population against a Russian threat but actually infuriated Georgian society, signaling a visible thaw of relations between the leadership and the populace (The Economist, 2010).

Convincing the Population about Existential Threats to Security

Saakashvili and his associates were adept and skillful politicians capable of orchestrating strategies to convince the audience and manage PR plans both nationally and internationally with a well-built international networking system. The president’s administration hired prominent lobbying firms to portray Saakashvili’s government as a democratic and western reform-minded model for the region. Constructing luxury hotels, resorts and “Potemkin Villages”, governmental and police buildings were put forward while climbing rates of unemployment, lack of social welfare, widespread poverty and loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia were neglected (Kavadze T., 2013). In the meantime, the state propaganda machine continually reminded the population of “the mortal danger” coming from the big northern neighbor. Two particular examples highlight how the Georgian authorities actively tried to convince the audience of the danger of the threat as well as shifting public opinion from existing domestic problems and showing “a real danger coming from the main enemy - Russia” (Corso, 2011).

The bus incident near the Abkhaz administrative border: On May 21, 2008, a mysterious armed incident occurred near the border with the breakaway region of Abkhazia just as it was electing a new parliament of Georgia. Rocket-propelled grenades struck two buses in a Georgian-controlled village on the Inguri River. Two women from Khurcha village were wounded in the attack. The Norwegian Helsinki Committee and the Human Rights Centre of Georgia carried out an investigation on the attack that was revealed to have been staged by the Georgian side (Rimple, 2008).

The Lopota incident: On 28 August 2012, Georgian Special Forces were engaged against an unidentified paramilitary group of about 20 people which had allegedly taken several teenagers hostage in a village near the Dagestan section of the Georgian-Russian state border (Civil Georgia, 2012). President Saakashvili immediately accused Russia of staging a provocation (Naroushvili, 2012). Public Defender of Georgia Ucha Nanuashvili declared that his investigation revealed circumstances contradicting the official version of events that was offered by the government. Close to the date of the parliamentary elections, the Georgian authorities

used this paramilitary group to stage a “provocation” at the Russian border and the group was liquidated by Georgian military units (Civil Georgia, 2013).

Both of these incidents show how the Georgian population reacted differently to acts of securitization, demonstrating the evolution in the effectiveness of securitization. In the case of the Khurcha bus incident, the audience accepted the formal assessment of the attack by “subversive gangs and separatist criminals” on the buses transporting local Georgians to the polling stations. Pumping this type of news on a daily basis helped the ruling party – the UNM—to win the elections with a large majority and to retain power. In the second scenario, the government failed to convince the electorate as to the material nature of the threat coming from Russia. The two incidents occurred in different time-frames: the first – in May 2008, before the August 2008 war with Russia, and second one – in August 2012, 4 years later. On 1 October 2012, the UNM lost the Parliamentary elections. It was a clear indication of the failure of securitization in the long term: by enabling excesses and abuses of power, it ultimately had heavy consequences for the ruling elite.

Building the Enemy Image

Since 2003, the Georgian ruling party has tried to present Russia as the main source of impending threat and the root of all Georgia’s troubles. According to the parlance of Saakashvili regime “we, Georgians” are trustworthy, civilized, peace-loving, western oriented, modern society, “they, Russians” are cruel, retarded, evil forces: *“Today one of the leaders of the Russian Duma advised Georgia to kneel. Even though most of Georgia is in blackout, I want them to know that Georgia will never kneel. These people will never see a kneeling Georgian nation. ... Let’s not make these evil forces happy. Evil is fighting against good”* (Saakashvili, 2006).

The Russian theme always prevailed in Saakashvili’s speeches. The construction of the enemy image became a central pillar of his public speeches and televised interviews: *“The very moment we slow down our European and Euro-Atlantic integration, our independence and our sovereignty will be hungrily swallowed by a former Empire that has an unmistakable tendency to misunderstand the concept of borders. I know as well what it has cost us to affirm our independence and our sovereignty in the face of a vengeful and revisionist Empire”* (Saakashvili, 2013).

Saakashvili never made any effort to defuse the tension between the two countries: relaxation of tension, overcoming the enemy image and hostile attitude and establishing trust between countries did not represent a top priority of his foreign policy and were unreachable tasks for him. *“Saakashvili, for some strange reason, thought that the best way to separate Georgia from the enormous, irascible, and nuclear-armed country to its north was to do everything he could to infuriate the famously short-tempered and vindictive Vladimir Putin... It’s not hard to see why that “plan” ended in disaster”* (Adomanis, 2013).

Opposition leaders and journalists expressing different opinions from the official positions were labeled as Russian spies; many of them were even arrested and sentenced.

On July 7, 2011, three journalists – Giorgi Abdaladze, Irakli Gedenidze and Zurab Kurtsikidze were arrested and accused of passing “secret” information regarding the president’s movements to Russian intelligence. In November 2007, during mass protest rallies against the Saakashvili regime, the President put blame on the Georgian opposition party leaders, “who acted in accordance with Kremlin instructions” (Saakashvili, 2007). During election campaigns Mikheil Saakashvili frequently blackmailed political rivals and constantly depicted the main opposition forces as the Kremlin’s puppets (Saakashvili, 2012). It was later revealed that photographers had been framed as revenge for pictures they took on 26 May 2011, when police used tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannons to end five days of opposition protests and to make way for a military parade. All “spies” were released from the prison in 2013 after a thorough investigation and the parliament of Georgia found them to be not guilty, recognising them as political prisoners of Saakashvili’s regime (Dzhindzhikhashvili, 2013).

There is no doubt that Russia posed a serious threat to Georgian statehood: during the last two decades Russia could not tolerate Georgia’s independence, its aspirations to join NATO and EU, and its strategic partnership with the US. They wanted to regain control over the South Caucasus where Georgia had always played a significant role. The scenario was also very similar to the current crisis in Ukraine, where the Kremlin annexed Crimea in 2014 and is arguably waging a proxy war in South-East Ukraine. However, Saakashvili’s government relationship with Russia was rarely adequate, characterized by rhetoric close to insulting the Russian leadership. On several occasions, Saakashvili even mocked Putin as “Lilli-Putin,” a reference to his height (Levy, 2009). The UNM-affiliated youth organization “Kmara” also organized protest actions in front of the Russian embassy in Tbilisi with the slogan “Gas-Putin”, a scornful play on gas delivery manipulations and Rasputin (Chivers, 2006).

Saakashvili used every possible opportunity to offend Vladimir Putin. In early 2009, Georgia proposed a song “We Don’t Wanna Put In” by Stephane & 3G, which was to be the Georgian entry to the Eurovision Song Contest being held in Moscow. The song caused scandal for its unambiguous political references to Putin. The European Broadcasting Union ruled that the song lyrics did not comply with Eurovision requirements and offered to rewrite the song or choose another entry. Despite the heavy pressure from international and domestic political circles to make alterations to the lyrics, Tbilisi took the decision that the song would not be amended thus on 11 March 2009, Georgia withdrew from the competition (Marcus, 2009).

Very often, provocative and defiant actions of Saakashvili played into the hands of the Russian leadership. It gave the Kremlin free reign to act and fulfill a longstanding desire to put Georgia under the Russian fold or pushing forward its expansionist plans. In August 2008, Saakashvili provoked Russia with invasion and a full scale war. Putin struggled to hide his extremely negative attitude towards Saakashvili, once threatened the Georgian leader that he would like Mr. Saakashvili hung by his private parts (Levy, 2009). “The Russian deal was very clear: the Russians want me either killed or arrested, that’s what Putin said,” Saakashvili recently told

Bloomberg (Bedwel, Meyer, & Tromm, 2013). The two leaders' mutual personal dislike defined the current state of play between Russia and Georgia and exacerbated the nature of the threat posed by Russia to Georgian statehood.

The Desecuritization of Georgia and Saakashvili's "know-how" Exported to Ukraine

Despite the well-developed and coercive administrative and party structures, the "competitive authoritarian regime" of Saakashvili did not survive: the unification of opposition political forces under the wing of billionaire Ivanishvili represented the first real and eventually successful challenge to UNM (Levitsky & Way, 2010). As a result of heavy external and internal pressure exerted on the ruling political elite, Saakashvili was forced to relinquish power.

As soon as the Georgian Dream coalition led by Bidzina Ivanishvili came into power in October 2012, it started the desecuritization process. The new government rejected the practice of politicizing issues prioritized by Saakashvili and the list of existential threats to the security of the country was reconsidered. The Russian threat which had once played a central and overarching role in Saakashvili's securitization model was removed from the daily parlance of the ruling class. Instead Ivanishvili proposed a "do no harm" principle and promised to settle existing problems with Russia through dialog and goodwill. The new government offered more diplomatic language and a balanced foreign policy to Russia, the most significant manifestation of which was its decision not to join sanctions against Russia over Ukraine and opening new channels of political communication (the Abashidze-Karasin talks) devoted mainly to boosting bilateral commercial and humanitarian ties. Nonetheless, while trade-economic relations have improved and tensions have subsided significantly, political rapprochement between the two countries has not yet occurred. Between 2012 and 2014, Russia continued building barbed-wire fences establishing a *de facto* border between Georgia and occupied Georgian provinces – Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In 2014 and 2015 the new agreements on allied relations and strategic partnership were concluded between Moscow and the occupied Georgian provinces with aiming at the *de facto* annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. On top of that in July 2015 Russia's expansion deep into Georgian territory in Kartli region covered sections of the strategic Baku-Tbilisi-Supsa oil-pipeline reaching such an alarming point in many western capitals. These developments suggest that Ivanishvili's foreign policy of appeasing the Kremlin and improving relations with Moscow has not yielded any significant results and actually failed (Kavadze & Kavadze, 2014).

Notwithstanding that, Ivanishvili and his soon-to-be successor Irakli Garibashvili declared the restoration of justice in Georgia as the nation's top priority, which after thorough deliberation was transformed into a top political question. Following the 2012 October elections, many high ranking officials of Saakashvili government were arrested under various charges: former Prime-Minister and Minister of Interior Vano Merabishvili, former Defence and Interior Minister Bachana Akhalaia, former Mayor of Tbilisi Gigi Ugulava, and other key members of UNM. Former minister of Justice

Zurab Adeishvili is wanted by Georgia and authorities have sent a request to Interpol to list him as a wanted suspect in the Red Notice database. In 2014, the Georgian Prosecutor's Office filed charges against Saakashvili relating to abuses of power and embezzlement. The ex-president escaped the arrest and resided in the US. Many EU and US leaders have however expressed their concern regarding the arrests of former key political figures. As stressed by the Council of Europe, the new political elite should not use the justice system to settle political scores with the UNM leadership (Antidze, 2015).

In the meantime, Saakashvili has offered his "know-how" to president Poroshenko: the former was warmly received by the new Ukrainian authorities and his entourage was granted a safe haven by Kiev. Former Georgian officials have taken senior governmental posts in Ukraine: Alexander Kvitashvili was appointed Minister of Healthcare, Eka Zguldze – deputy Minister of Interior; Gia Getsadze – first deputy Minister of Justice and David Sakvarelidze – first deputy Prosecutor General. Fugitive from Justice Zurab Adeishvili became a freelance adviser to the Ukrainian government and Saakashvili himself at the beginning was appointed chairman of the International Advisory Council on Reforms of Ukraine, and then governor of Odessa region. Since the charges were filed against Mikheil Saakashvili and Zurab Adeishvili by the Georgian Prosecutor's office, the latter has requested legal assistance and extradition of the aforementioned persons. Ukraine has refused to extradite them, which puts it at odds in its bilateral relations of previously "good neighbours and strategic partners". Saakashvili, now considered a friend of Ukraine at the highest levels, is beginning the process of reforms and much-needed positive changes in strategic Odessa region, as well as the construction of a new model of securitization, likely to only increase in magnitude (Buzan & Wæver, 2009, pp. 253-276), (The Guardian, 2015).

Hopefully, Ukraine has learnt lessons from the Georgian experience and will avoid the same mistakes Georgia made in the recent past.

Conclusion

The Saakashvili regime's move on securitization in general was and continues to be controversial, contributing first to his rise and then the fall of his regime. Since the early days of the Rose Revolution, President Saakashvili won immense popularity amongst the electorates, with audiences accepting his speech act, his internal and international policies achieving their goals. It is evident that the formulation of threat perceptions and the decision making process in Georgia was constructed and dominated by the UNM elite. The government articulated certain priority issues as existential threats to national sovereignty as well as the Georgian society, and adopted extraordinary measures to tackle these problems. Saakashvili transformed the state bureaucratic system, succeeded in fighting corruption, organized crime and holding on to the province of Adjara while mobilizing state institutions for further integration with European and Euro-Atlantic structures. But from 2007 onwards, the Saakashvili regime started abusing their power and used securitization to effectively preserve the

ailing regime: the ruling class ignored democratic principles and values, persecuted political rivals, gained control over media, subordinated core businesses in the country while the justice system became a private system of punishment and manipulation. In August 2008, Saakashvili provoked Russia into invasion and a full scale war with catastrophic consequences for Georgia. As a result, the majority of the Georgian population rejected his “speech act”, resulting in an overwhelming defeat at the October 2012 parliamentary elections. Since 2007, the priorities of Saakashvili’s government have shifted: regime survival became a key referent object of his securitization. He actively used security language to boost his popularity and enhance prospects of reelection. As a securitization agent - Saakashvili compromised fundamental democratic principles which had been fiercely defended during the Rose Revolution – and, as a consequence, failed in his bid to remain in power. Georgia during the last decade represents a startling illustration of how securitization can be a key to consolidating power while ultimately sowing the seeds of its own political destruction. This process came full circle over a decade of Saakashvili’s rule. The research therefore shows that securitization can be applicable and in the short term is likely to succeed in post-communist and Eurocentric countries ruled by authoritarian or “competitive authoritarian” regimes. However, in the long run, securitization, by leading to the curbing of basic freedoms and the introduction of far-reaching extraordinary measures in the name of security, cannot sustain itself and will inevitably fail.

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