

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Identification and physical disconnect in Russian foreign policy: Georgia as a Western proxy once again?

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Abstract

Evolving official Russian identifications of Georgia amount to a dangerous securitisation of this small neighbour – achieved through a focus not on Georgia itself but on Western engagement in the region. With the long absence of face-to-face diplomatic encounters and contact, the Russian idea of Georgia as a ‘Western proxy’ has become entrenched. This article advances a social explanation of Russian foreign policy that speaks to geopolitical explanations in foregrounding great power interaction and security by drawing on insights from a discourse-theoretical reading of securitisation theory. It adds value to social explanations by showing how the identification of another political entity can be changed into that of a ‘proxy’ through its integration into a larger ‘radically different other’, and how this expansion occurs in interplay with interpretations of physical manifestations of the larger ‘radically different other’ in the ‘proxy’. Finally, it draws attention to the impact of physical encounters on foreign policy in these times of COVID-19, war, and growing isolationism in world affairs.

Keywords: Russia; Foreign Policy; Securitisation; West; Georgia

Introduction

Several scholars hold that Russia has been committed to the Westphalian order principles of state sovereignty and non-intervention inside Russia as well as outside the former Soviet Union (as in Syria), but invokes the moral obligation to intervene to protect civilians and popular sovereignty within the former Soviet space.¹ The latter rhetorical frame was voiced in a particularly cynical fashion immediately before the invasion of Ukraine on the 24 February 2022. Putin claimed that ‘The purpose of this operation is to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kyiv regime.’² The Kremlin’s dual approach to international principles reflects Russia’s struggle to form its own international subjecthood, recently steering towards a great power identity with a special role in its ‘near abroad’.³ It also

¹Roy Allison, ‘The Russian case for military intervention in Georgia: international law, norms and political calculation’, *European Security*, 18:2 (2009), pp. 173–200; Julie Wilhelmsen, ‘Russland og folkeretten: Selektiv prinsippfasthet’, *Internasjonal Politikk*, 72:1 (2014), pp. 135–47; Ruth Deyermond, ‘The uses of sovereignty in twenty-first century Russian foreign policy’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68:6 (2016), pp. 957–84.

²Cited in: <https://theconversation.com/putins-claims-that-ukraine-is-committing-genocide-are-baseless-but-not-unprecedented-177511>.

³Andrei P. Tsygankov, ‘Vladimir Putin’s vision of Russia as a normal great power’, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 21:2 (2005), pp. 132–58; Ted Hopf, ‘“Crimea is ours”: A discursive history’, *International Relations*, 30:2 (2016), pp. 227–55; David Svarin, ‘The construction of “geopolitical spaces” in Russian foreign policy discourse before and after the Ukraine crisis’, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 7:2 (2016), pp. 129–40; Maria Raquel Freire, ‘The quest for status: How the interplay of

reflects growing antagonism with the West, a relationship that is held to have had a formative impact on Russian policies towards Ukraine.⁴ Following the Russian annexation of Crimea and the intervention in Ukraine in 2014, questions have been raised as to Russia's approach to Georgia – a country that has repeatedly expressed its intention to integrate with Western institutions and where Russia invoked its 'responsibility to protect' and the right of popular sovereignty in South Ossetia and Abkhazia during and after the brief Russo-Georgian war in 2008.⁵

This article investigates Russia's changing approach to Georgia in the years 2014 to 2020. Is Georgia still a dangerous 'Western proxy' in the eyes of Moscow? If so, how does this come about and to what effect? The locus of analysis is how Russia's approach is shaped by changing official representations of self and of Georgia, by the level of Western engagement with Georgia and by the level of face-to-face encounters between Russian and Georgian representatives. By enquiring into Russia's changing self–other identifications 2014–20, I identify not only the current Russian view of Georgia, but also how Moscow's interpretation of Western engagement with Georgia enters the picture. In explaining Russian policies in the post-Soviet space I draw on social constructionist accounts that give primacy to changing Russian identifications,⁶ but also speak to geopolitical/realist accounts that highlight the growing competition and fear of Western/US/NATO/EU advances in the region.⁷

Here I offer several contributions beyond an empirical update of Russia's approach to Georgia. First, I accommodate social explanations of Russian foreign policy that focus on changing official self/other identifications with geopolitical explanations by drawing on insights from a discourse-theoretical reading of Copenhagen School securitisation theory.⁸ In this reading securitisation is a contingent, discursive process, produced through multiple utterances that represent something or someone as an existential threat. A political entity that has been highly securitised, such as Georgia during the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, will not automatically continue to have this

power, ideas, and regime security shapes Russia's policy in the post-Soviet space', *International Politics*, 56:1 (2019), pp. 795–809; Matthew Frear and Honorata Mazepus, 'Security, civilisation and modernisation: Continuity and change in Russian foreign policy discourse', *Europe-Asia Studies*, published online (25 November 2020), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2020.1843601>.

⁴See John J. Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault', *Foreign Affairs* (20 August 2014), pp. 1–12; Andrei P. Tsygankov, 'Vladimir Putin's last stand: The sources of Russia's Ukraine policy', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 31:4 (2015), pp. 279–303; Samuel Charap and Timothy Colton, *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2017).

⁵Levan Kakhishvili, 'Towards a two-dimensional analytical framework for understanding Georgian foreign policy: How party competition informs foreign policy analysis', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 37:2 (2021), pp. 174–97; Salome Minesashvili, 'Europe in Georgia's identity discourse: Contestation and the impact of external developments', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 54:1–2 (2021), pp. 128–55.

⁶Ted Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities and Foreign Policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Hopf, "'Crimea is ours": A discursive history'; Iver B. Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe: A Study in Identity and International Relations* (2nd edn, London, UK: Routledge, 2017); Anne L. Clunan, 'Historical aspirations and the domestic politics of Russia's pursuit of international status', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 47:3–4 (2014), pp. 281–90; Deborah Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, 'Russia says no: Power, status, and emotions in foreign policy', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 47:3–4 (2014), pp. 269–79; Tsygankov, 'Vladimir Putin's last stand'; Andrei P. Tsygankov, 'Crafting the state-civilization: Vladimir Putin's turn to distinct values', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 63:3 (2016), pp. 146–58; Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁷Dmitri Trenin, *The Ukraine Crises and the Resumption of Great Power Rivalry* (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 2014); Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault'; Charap and Colton, *Everyone Loses*; Andrew Monaghan, *Dealing with the Russians* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019).

⁸Jonas Hagmann, *(In-) Security and the Production of International Relations: The Politics of Securitization in Europe* (London, UK: Routledge, 2015); Julie Wilhelmsen, *Russia's Securitization of Chechnya* (London, UK: Routledge, 2017), building on Ole Wæver, 'Securitization and desecuritization', in Ronnie D. Lipschutz (ed.), *On Security* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 46–86; Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1988).

status – securitisation demands continuous rearticulation.⁹ Second, I engage more deeply in social explanations by showing how the representation of another political entity can be changed into that of a threatening ‘proxy’ through its integration into a larger ‘radically different other’. This expansion occurs in interplay with representations of concrete physical manifestations of the larger ‘radically different other’ in the ‘proxy’. Finally, I draw new attention to the impact of *face-to-face diplomacy*, or the lack thereof, on Russian foreign policy. Throughout the period under study, Switzerland has represented the interests of Russia in Georgia and Georgia in Russia, under intergovernmental agreements that entered into force on 4 March 2009.

I begin by outlining the theoretical assumptions that undergird this study, situating the methodology within recent scholarship on Russian foreign policy, and presenting the data and method employed to analyse the empirical material. Next, I present a background to Russia’s approach to Georgia in the years 2003 (the Rose Revolution) to 2014, focusing on the trilateral identifications of ‘Russia’, ‘Georgia’, and ‘the West’, and linking them to Russian policies on Georgia. Third, I offer insights into recent developments in Russian official discourse on Georgia. I present the changing pattern of these trilateral identifications as given in official texts in the years 2014 to 2020 and ascertain *how* the securitisation of Georgia as dangerous to Russia is (re)produced. I also indicate how the Kremlin’s representation of Western policy moves in Georgia play into these evolving identifications. Then, examining physical encounters between Russian and Georgian representatives in this period, I briefly discuss their impact on relations. The concluding section offers a summary and indicates the trajectory of Russia’s approach to Georgia.

Theory, research questions, data, and method

Identity constructions and realist threat

This article treats Russia and Georgia as social subjects in the making – constituted through changing representations of self and other¹⁰ – and as interacting with other significant social actors in world politics. Several key assumptions should be borne in mind here. First, Russia’s approach to Georgia will be shaped by Russia’s changing identification of self and its own role *vis-à-vis* Georgia and by its identification of its close neighbour, the Georgian other. This ties in with the strand of scholarship that sees Russian identity as pivotal in explaining Russian foreign policy.¹¹ Second, although changing identifications do not provide a *causal* explanation of policies, they are seen as specifying broad policy paths that Russia is likely to follow.¹² Together with the specific policy actions which they make possible, they form the Russian foreign policy approach. Third, political entities can be identified with different levels of danger. Representations that construe the other as *highly* threatening, make policies of disengagement

⁹Julie Wilhelmsen, ‘How does war become a legitimate undertaking? Re-engaging the post-structuralist underpinnings of securitization theory’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:2 (2016), pp. 166–83.

¹⁰David Campbell, *Writing Security* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, ‘Relations before states: Substance, process and the study of world politics’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 5:3 (1999), pp. 291–332; Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, *Civilizing the Enemy: German Reconstruction and the Invention of the West* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006); Charlotte Epstein, ‘Who speaks? Discourse, the subject and the study of identity in international politics’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 17:2 (2010), pp. 327–50; Taesuh Cha, ‘The formation of American exceptional identities: A three-tier model of the “standard of civilization” in US foreign policy’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 21:4 (2015), pp. 743–67; Frank A. Stengel, ‘Securitization as discursive (re)articulation: Explaining the relative effectiveness of threat construction’, *New Political Science*, 41:2 (2019), pp. 294–312.

¹¹Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics*; Anne L. Clunan, *The Social Construction of Russian Resurgence: Aspirations, Identity and Security Interests* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe*; Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity* (4th edn, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

¹²Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006); Kevin C. Dunn and Iver B. Neumann, *Undertaking Discourse Analysis for Social Research* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

and confrontation appear logical and legitimate – particularly if they accumulate, layer upon layer, bringing an urgent security situation into being.¹³

By marrying the social approach to Russian foreign policy with these insights from the discourse-theoretical version of securitisation theory, I offer an explanation of Russian foreign policy that speaks to geopolitical/realist explanations. Fundamental weight is attached to security and great power considerations – but, unlike current geopolitical/realist explanations, I emphasise security, threat, and great powerness not as given or material facts but as contingent social facts. By adopting this social constructivist stance and bringing the enquiry back to what realist accounts would call threat *perceptions*, sensitivity to the specific case at hand is recovered. This enables us to understand why the West (and, by extension, the Georgian proxy) is taken to constitute an urgent threat to Russia in the post-Soviet space today but not in the 1990s, as called for by Elias Götz.¹⁴

Although the points of agreement between realist and constructivist theories of collective identity formation seem to be lost in the current debate on Russian foreign policy, they have long been acknowledged in IR scholarship.¹⁵ On the most basic level constructivists and realists share the same ontological starting point of human beings as a social species.¹⁶ Further, as argued by Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon the postmodern version of constructivism, which is employed in this article, is the most suited candidate for addressing realist insights because of the shared understanding that power cannot be transcended.¹⁷ In a more specific intervention, Michael Williams has suggested that analysis of identity formation could provide a potential common ground of engagement between realism and constructivism because classical realists acknowledged the importance of conceptual constructions in political action and the power of dichotomous renditions of them.¹⁸ This article interrogates specific, evolving identity constructions focusing on representations of threat. It lays bare how such constructions produce relations of power through self/other juxtaposition and how political action is made reasonable through their changing patterns.¹⁹

Bounded, yet flexible identifications

Whereas official representations are not stale, objective depictions of given, ‘real’ actors, actions and relations – indeed, they may come to live their own lives in a dangerous way, as we will see – they are not unrelated to what other actors say or do. Russia’s approach to Georgia is also shaped by the way in which Georgia relates to Russia – and, even more importantly today, how Georgia relates to the West and how Western political entities act and relate to Russia when engaging in Georgia. The West (in different versions such as NATO, the US, the EU or individual European countries) is crucial for Russia: historically, and after the 2014 Ukraine crisis in particular.²⁰

¹³See Hagmann, (*In*-)Security, pp. 21–2; Wilhelmsen, *Russia’s Securitization*, pp. 21–4.

¹⁴Elias Götz, ‘Putin, the state, and war: The causes of Russia’s Near Abroad assertion revisited’, *International Studies Review*, 19:2 (2017), pp. 228–53 (p. 240); see also Elias Götz and Neil MacFarlane, ‘Russia’s role in world politics: Power, ideas, and domestic influences’, *International Politics*, 56 (2019), pp. 713–25; Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin: Honor in International Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 18.

¹⁵Robert Jervis, ‘Realism in the study of world politics’, *International Organization*, 52:4 (1998), pp. 871–91; Michael Williams, ‘Why ideas matter in international relations: Hans Morgenthau, classical realism, and the moral construction of power politics’, *International Organization*, 58:4 (2004), pp. 633–65; Patrick Thaddeus Jackson (ed.), ‘Bridging the gap: Toward a realist-constructivist dialogue’, *International Studies Review*, 6:2 (2004), pp. 337–52.

¹⁶Jennifer Sterling-Folker, ‘Realist-constructivism and morality’, *International Studies Review*, 6:2 (2004), pp. 341–3.

¹⁷Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, ‘Constructivist realism or realist-constructivism?’, *International Studies Review*, 6:2 (2004), pp. 337–41 (p. 340).

¹⁸Williams, ‘Why ideas matter in international relations’.

¹⁹The compatibility of these perspectives on the understanding of conflict is further evident in Jervis’s claim that ‘realism points to the reciprocal relationship between identities and conflict, arguing that conflict both grows out of and stimulates the perception of group differences.’ See Jervis, ‘Realism in the study of world politics’, pp. 988–9.

²⁰Viatcheslav Morozov, *Russia’s Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Tsygankov, ‘Vladimir Putin’s last stand’; Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe*.

Russia no longer construes the West as a potential lead star or partner. This is evident in recent Russian representations more generally and across issue areas, indicating a *multifaceted* securitisation.²¹ This identification of the West as different and dangerous in every arena of encounter has already affected Moscow's foreign policy approach in such diverse places as Syria and Norway,²² and in Russia's 'near abroad' – as evidenced in the reinvigorated war on Ukraine. This hostile identification of the West concerns NATO in particular. Although NATO has always been represented as a threat to Russia, since around 2004 it has been construed as representing an even greater danger. Any talk of cooperation with this Western entity vanished after the 2014 war in Ukraine.²³

Further, historical securitisations have formative power on foreign relations: they condition and shape contemporary securitisations.²⁴ The moves of the West in the 'near abroad' are easy to securitise because of the Cold War legacy. Similarly, Russia's firm securitisation of Saakashvili's Georgia, which peaked in 2008, facilitates an easy (re)securitisation of Georgia today. Thus, in order to explain Russia's approach to Georgia in recent years this study pays special attention to policy moves by Western entities in Georgia, how Russia represents them, and how they inform Russia's evolving identification of Georgia. However, with political relations theorised as being continuously in the making, identifications of Georgian enmity can be projected along with those of amity. Any representations of friendly Russia-Georgia relations will be of interest, as will any historical resonance they might have.

Identification without physical encounter

While there have been several recent attempts at building comprehensive explanations of Russian foreign policy, none consider the role of *physical encounters*.²⁵ Arguably, the combination of a waning 'spirit of globalisation' evident in a return to boundaries and domestic affairs in world politics, a more self-sufficient, isolated Russia since 2014, plus the COVID-19 pandemic, all resulting in fewer direct human contacts between representatives of the Russian state and those of other states, are likely to impact Russia's external relations. In this study, I move beyond official speech and identifications, and review the extent of physical encounters between Russian and Georgian officialdom in the years under study. As Erik Ringmar has noted,²⁶ the 'carnal' (that is, bodily) knowledge that actors acquire when interacting during physical encounters will add a dimension beyond the interpreted, verbalised aspect of international relations. The absence of face-to-face encounters will make the rationalised, categorised, and detached bureaucratic language of official texts prime in policy-making. Verbal identifications can become undisturbed instructions for policies, and, if highly securitising in content, can create conditions for policies of force against the other. Conversely, face-to-face diplomacy enable political leaders not only to transmit information, but also to empathise with each other, reducing uncertainty, even when distrust is high.²⁷ Without such direct human

²¹Julie Wilhelmsen, 'Spiraling toward a New Cold War in the North? The effect of mutual and multifaceted securitization', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 6:3 (2021), available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogaa044>}.

²²Julie Wilhelmsen and Kristian Lundby Gjerde, 'Norway and Russia in the Arctic: New Cold War contamination?', *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, 9 (2018), pp. 382–407, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.23865/arctic.v9.1334>}.

²³Frear and Mazepus, 'Security, civilisation and modernisation'; Julie Wilhelmsen and Anni Roth Hjermann, 'Russian certainty of NAOT hostility: Repercussions in the Arctic', *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, 13 (2022), pp. 114–42, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.23865/arctic.v13.3378>}.

²⁴See Faye Donnelly and Brent J. Steele, 'Critical security history: (De)securitisation, ontological security, and insecure memories', *European Journal of International Security*, 4:2 (2019), p. 10; Ronald R. Krebs and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, 'Twisting tongues and twisting arms: The power of political rhetoric', *European Journal of International Relations*, 13 (2007), pp. 35–66, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066107074284>}.

²⁵For an overview, see Götz and MacFarlane, 'Russia's role in world politics'.

²⁶Erik Ringmar, 'Constructivism and first encounters', *E-International Relations* (2020), available at: {<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/08/30/constructivism-and-first-encounters-a-critique/>}.

²⁷Marcus Holmes, *Face-to-face Diplomacy: Social Neuroscience and International Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

encounters, there are few possibilities of ‘awakening’ the human bond that could exist between representatives of political entities and, in the Russian case, disrupt the inimical and threatening picture that official speech often has created of Georgia.

Overall, the theoretical approach employed in this article has the advantages of drawing on one single epistemological position, the social constructionist, while also addressing new as well as seasoned insights from other established explanations of Russian foreign policy. While leaving aside the domestic impulses behind this policy and the interaction of the Russian leadership with domestic constituencies,²⁸ it highlights the broader external interactive aspects driven by a discursive focus on security and great powerness (as foregrounded in realist explanations) and draws new attention to the role of physical encounters in Russian foreign policy, offering a *thick* explanation. This approach has clear limitations, however. It does not treat political speech as indicating something beyond itself but sees the explicit identifications in such speech as the enablers of Russian foreign policies. Nor does it aim to establish what Russia’s *motives* are. These are deemed to be inaccessible to the researcher.

Following on from these perspectives on how Russia’s foreign policies are formed, key research questions for the analysis of Russian official texts on Georgia since 2014 have been: How does Russia construe itself in relation to Georgia and to the breakaway republics (South Ossetia and Abkhazia)? How is ‘Georgia’ represented – are there different Georgias? are any of them securitised? Does Moscow still view Tbilisi through the prism of the latter’s broader ties with the ‘West’? If so, what effect does it have on the securitisation of ‘Georgia’ in Russian official discourse?

Data and methods

The body of texts consists of transcripts and statements from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and transcripts from the public appearances of the Russian President from 2014 to 2020. The texts have been ‘scraped’ – downloaded in full – from www.mid.ru and www.kremlin.ru. Using the open source ‘corporaexplorer’ software,²⁹ we extracted a clearly defined subset of this large document collection: all documents where Georgia was mentioned four times or more were retrieved. The final text collection contains 95 texts from January 2014 to February 2020. These were subjected to discourse analysis in the tradition of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.³⁰ Thus, the texts have been read to ascertain what the official Russian identifications of self, Georgia, the breakaway republics, and the West (in various versions) amount to – not as a *stale* template, but as an *evolving* narration of relations, chronologically with an eye to continuity, contestation, and change in identifications. This approach of studying a large collection of official utterances over time is well suited for capturing securitisation as a discursive *process*.³¹ The emerging accumulation of nouns, verbs, and adjectives that help to constitute Georgia as ‘different’ and ‘dangerous’ to Russia – which would indicate a high securitisation of this political entity – has been in focus, including whether this occurs through associating Georgia with a threatening ‘West’, ‘NATO’, etc. In tracing these patterns of Russian identifications in the body of texts, careful attention was also paid to the kinds of policy events in Georgia that were registered in Russian statements, and how they were framed or reacted upon. In some cases, these events

²⁸See, for example, Michael McFaul, ‘Putin, Putinism and the domestic determinants of Russian foreign policy’, *International Security*, 45:2 (2020), pp. 95–139.

²⁹Kristian Lundby Gjerde, ‘corporaexplorer: An R package for dynamic exploration of text collections’, *Journal of Open Source Software*, 4:38 (2019), p. 1342.

³⁰Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London, UK: Verso, 1985).

³¹Felix Ciuta, ‘Security and the problem of context: A hermeneutical critique of securitisation theory’, *Review of International Studies*, 35:2 (2009), pp. 301–26; Julie Wilhelmsen, ‘How War Becomes Acceptable: Russian Re-phrasing of Chechnya’ (PhD thesis, University of Oslo, 2014), pp. 58–64; Stengel, ‘Securitization as discursive (re) articulation’.

were studied in greater depth by consulting sources other than official Russian statements, in order to grasp more of the interactive dynamics between Russia's approach to Georgia and Western engagement in Georgia. Any systematic listing of specific policies made possible by Russia's changing identifications in the years 2014 to 2020 is beyond the scope of this article, but they are noted in some places, with reference to Russian official sources or media reports. This type of triangulation, plus a few interviews, has been used in studying face-to-face encounters between Georgian and Russian state representatives, to shed light on the possible role of such diplomacy in Russia's external relations, those with Georgia in particular.

Background: Russia's approach to Georgia (2003–14)

The coming to power of the 'pro-Western' Mikheil Saakashvili in Georgia in 2003 was not immediately construed as a negative development for Russia. The Kremlin had viewed the Shevardnadze government's willingness to provide a 'safe haven for terrorists' from Chechnya in the preceding years with great scepticism, even undertaking cross-border military action to counter the alleged threat.³² Official Russian representations of Georgia under Saakashvili changed gradually, but eventually dramatically in a negative direction.³³ According to Andrei P. Tsygankov and Matthew Tarver-Wahlquist,³⁴ policies moved from *nascent cooperation* in 2003/2004, through *passive containment* from 2004 to 2006 following Saakashvili's announcement in April 2004 that Georgia wished to join the EU and work for closer ties with NATO and a tough Georgian response to the crises in South Ossetia in August 2004, and finally into *active containment* from 2006 to 2008, following the arrest of Russian intelligence officers in Georgia, with more vigorous efforts towards Georgian NATO membership and Kosovo's declaration of independence in February 2008. After this latter event, and before the 2008 war, Russia lifted its sanctions on the Georgian republic of Abkhazia, reinforced peacekeeping forces there and established direct relations with both of Georgia's breakaway republics. Still, according to March, 'Moscow's official rhetoric upheld the virtues of international law and Georgian territorial integrity.'³⁵

The figure of Saakashvili and the emerging Russian allegation that he was concentrating power in his own hands and becoming an unreliable and aggressive partner that would thwart Russian interests in Georgia surely motivated the shifts in Russia's approach to Georgia.³⁶ However, the Kremlin's securitisation of 'colour revolutions', as something potentially destabilising and dangerous, a subversive tool in the hands of Western powers, which emerged following the 2003 Rose Revolution and the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, also contributed to shaping Russian policies on Georgia before the 2008 war.³⁷ Although there always was a second image of Georgia, and in particular of the Georgian people, emphasising cultural closeness, fraternity, and common history, representations of Georgia as potentially 'hostile' grew through a combination of a reframing of the Saakashvili government and of US/Western intentions in Russia's near abroad.³⁸

³²Julie Wilhelmsen and Geir Flikke, 'Evidence of Russia's Bush doctrine in the CIS', *European Security*, 14:3 (2005), pp. 387–417.

³³Luke March, 'Is nationalism rising in Russian foreign policy? The case of Georgia', *Demokratizatsiya, The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 19:3 (2011), pp. 187–208 (p. 194).

³⁴Andrei P. Tsygankov and Matthew Tarver-Wahlquist, 'Duelling honors: Power, identity and the Russia–Georgia divide', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 5 (2009), pp. 307–32.

³⁵March, 'Is nationalism rising...?', p. 196.

³⁶Andrey Makarychev, 'Russia, NATO, and the "Colour Revolutions"', *Russian Politics & Law*, 47:5 (2009), pp. 40–51 (p. 44).

³⁷Yulia Nikitina, 'The "Color Revolutions" and "Arab Spring" in Russian official discourse', *Connections*, 14:1 (2014), pp. 87–104; Makarychev, 'Russia, NATO, and the "Colour Revolutions".'

³⁸March, 'Is nationalism rising...?', p. 196.

Following the 8 August 2008 Georgian attack on Tskhinvali to re-establish control over the secessionist South Ossetian, Russia intervened with overwhelming force and imposed areas of security control throughout Georgia. Russia also formally recognised the independence of the two Georgian breakaway republics, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The Russian narrative on the intervention construed Saakashvili's Georgia as an 'aggressor', a 'criminal', and described the loss of Ossetian lives as 'genocide'.³⁹ There was also a clear and increasing tendency to construe Georgia as potentially part of a threatening West, while simultaneously emulating the Western legitimization of the Kosovo intervention as a template that Russia could follow with regard to policies towards Georgia and the breakaway republics.⁴⁰ Scholars have held that 2008 represented the most difficult moment in Russia's post-Cold War relations with the West up until that point, and that the situation which unfolded in Georgia in August presented 'an opportunity to demonstrate discontent towards developments in the South Caucasian Republic, as well as more broadly, regarding what was perceived as unequal treatment of Russia by the West'.⁴¹ For Russian nationalists, 'Washington had suffered a strategic defeat through Russia's response in Georgia'.⁴² Concerning Russian official identifications of self in this period, the 2008 Russo-Georgian war marked a deviation in the pattern of promoting 'a pragmatic, conservative "statist nationalism"' in foreign policy, with spill over into representations in foreign policy from the domestically promoted 'civilizational nationalism'.⁴³

However, during the 2008 crises Russia and the US maintained dialogue, and the West still figured as a 'partner' for Russia in certain geographical spaces and issue areas. Moreover, there was a 'normalisation' of Russia's relations with NATO and the EU following the period of high tension in connection with the war.⁴⁴ The Obama administration introduced a reset with Russia – followed by collaboration in Afghanistan, the signing of the New Start Treaty, as well as US pledges to modify NATO ballistic missile defence (BMD) in Eastern Europe. Simultaneously, the importance of the region for Russia was growing, as demonstrated when Putin during his inauguration for a third term as president claimed that Russia's future depended on becoming 'a leader and center of gravity for the whole of Eurasia'.⁴⁵ The new Georgian Dream coalition government that came to power in Georgia in 2012 presented itself and was widely understood as more pragmatic or 'pro-Russian', and thus suited Putin's rephrasing of Russian patronage in the region. Indeed, the first two years of rule under the Georgian Dream government elicited fewer official Russian representations of Tbilisi as being dangerous to Russia.

Russian identifications of self and other(s) (2014–20)

Before delving into the analysis of Russian representations of trilateral relations in Georgia following the conflict in Ukraine, a few general observations on the entire body of texts are in order. First, it is noteworthy how *rarely* Georgia as such is mentioned by the Russian leadership and how often it is spoken about with reference to 'Saakashvili', 'Ukraine', and 'NATO'. While the Russian MFA accords more attention to Georgia than the President does the evolving

³⁹Ibid., p. 198; Maria Raquel Freire, 'Russian foreign policy in the making: The linkage between internal dynamics and external context', *International Politics*, 49:4 (2012), pp. 466–81; Pål Kolstø and Aleksander Rusetskii, 'Power differentials and identity formations: Images of self and others on the Russian–Georgian boundary', *National Identities*, 14:2 (2012), pp. 139–55 (pp. 142–4).

⁴⁰Erna Burai, 'Parody as norm contestation: Russian normative justifications in Georgia and Ukraine and their implications for global norms', *Global Society*, 30:1 (2016).

⁴¹Freire, 'Russian foreign policy in the making', p. 475; Andrey Makarychev and Viatcheslav Morozov, 'Multilateralism, multipolarity, and beyond: A menu of Russia's policy strategies', *Global Governance*, 17 (2011), p. 356.

⁴²March, 'Is nationalism rising...?', p. 199.

⁴³March, 'Is nationalism rising...?'.

⁴⁴Freire, 'Russian foreign policy in the making', p. 475.

⁴⁵Vladimir V. Putin, 'Annual Address to the Federal Assembly 2012', available at: {<http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/4739>}.

identification of Georgia in President Putin's annual press conferences is striking: in 2016, in response to a question, Putin repeats that it was not Russia that started the military operations in South Ossetia in 2008. Then, in 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020, relations with Georgia are not a theme at all, whereas the breakaway republics are sometimes mentioned in these conferences, but in replies to questions on domestic development issues such as tourism and infrastructure.

The second observation concerns the repetitive and insistent nature of official statements – which speaks clearly of the coordinated, top-down, and propagandistic information approach of the Putinist state. Such repetitive one-dimensional linguistic practices arguably consolidate the identification of self and other(s) in its highly self-righteous form for the Russian side itself.

The third observation concerns the style or *attitude* towards Georgia conveyed throughout the texts when read as an evolving narrative on relations. It can best be described as patronising and condescending – with Georgia behaving like a naughty child and Russia as the patient, responsible parent. We note that the broken relations, a central theme throughout, are blamed solely on the Georgian side. Russia (Abkhazia or South Ossetia) is never presented as having done anything wrong or illegal. These general observations on Russia's attention, information approach and attitude must be borne in mind if we are to understand what the Russian narrative of self in relation to the Georgian and Western other(s) has become.

The presentation below, which is the result of the in-depth discourse analysis of the texts, begins with the identification of Russia as the true patron of South Ossetia and Abkhazia *and* of the 'Georgian people', a Georgia that is said to be increasingly marginalised. It then moves on to present the other, more dominant, and much more dangerous Georgia, that of 'Saaskashvili' and the 'West'. Finally, it shows how this latter Georgia is portrayed as more and more threatening as Western engagement in the country grows and as the Georgian Dream government allegedly embraces the foreign policy path of 'Saaskashvili'.

Russia as the true patron

In Russian official texts⁴⁶ concerning Georgia 2014–20, Russia itself is represented as a responsible law abiding international actor that has the 'facts',⁴⁷ acts calmly and in an unconflictual way. In the Geneva Discussions on security and stability in the Transcaucasus, for example, 'the Russian delegation is traveling to Switzerland with an attitude conducive to calm and productive discussion of pressing issues of security and stability in the Transcaucasus.'⁴⁸ Russia is allegedly always willing to be generous – if only 'the Georgian partners will show due constructiveness'.⁴⁹ The South Caucasus no longer needs other patrons or international actors: Russia ensures the security of the breakaway republics South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the stability of the region as such. And especially from 2018 onward, Russia is increasingly represented in sharp contrast to the US, which is alleged not to respect humanitarian concerns, the sovereignty of independent states or international law; it breaks agreements with partners and punishes with sanctions as it pleases, these are recurrent claims.⁵⁰ Further, although Russia is ascribed the role of the good patron in contrast to the US, the ways of the West (collaboration with NGOs, rule-based international governance, engaging all parties in a conflict) are mirrored in the practices that Russia says it follows – but in the *true* way. For example, while 'everything that the West is doing in the post-Soviet space is preparing revolutions', Russia works with all 'political forces', also the 'systemic oppositionists' – but not with the 'non-systemic and underground' oppositionists, which would lead to revolution.⁵¹

⁴⁶All Russian official texts consulted are listed in the Appendix (supplementary material) and are referenced in the footnotes as T + number. Speaker and date as well as the full transcript of the statements are available through the URLs.

⁴⁷T 74.

⁴⁸T 56.

⁴⁹Direct quote in T 54. See also T 53.

⁵⁰T 8, 10, 20, 23, 27, 32, 35, 71, 76, 88.

⁵¹T 82, 89, direct quote in T 81.

Whereas Georgia, as we shall see below, is increasingly securitised as a dangerous and unreliable actor in texts that concern the breakaway republics, these two political entities are said to be victims of Georgian mistreatment, even historically, before and after the collapse of the Russian Empire.⁵² Russia's actions in Abkhazia or South Ossetia (violating Georgian airspace, setting up barbed wire along the border, building up Russian bases and border troops, providing large-scale financial assistance, etc.) is, according to the Russian official script, fully in line with international law: allegedly efforts to strengthen the state borders of Abkhazia or South Ossetia, facilitate peaceful border crossings, etc.⁵³ Russia openly and repeatedly contests Georgian sovereignty over these republics, which are consistently referred to as fully independent and sovereign states. The agreements signed by Russia with the breakaway republics in 2015 are simply the 'essence of building full-fledged interstate relations with independent subjects of international law'.⁵⁴ There is no opening for changing this view of their status – it is an 'irreversible fact'.⁵⁵

Also here, the subtext in the narration is clearly the new path pursued by the West in international affairs. The analogy to Kosovo remains strong throughout.⁵⁶ Other manifestations include references to the independence of the Georgian breakaway republics as a the 'new' or 'modern' 'reality', which only Georgia has failed to recognise.⁵⁷ Russia presents itself as serving as a true patron of this region, acting on its duty to protect, as when Putin in July 2019, after musing about how Ossetia and Abkhazia became part of the Russian Empire before Georgia even existed and criticising Saakashvili's initiation of 'fratricidal war' in 2008, says that 'Russia was simply forced to recognize the independence of these republics and protect the people of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia'.⁵⁸ By the end of 2019 the framing of the 2008 intervention as an R2P operation is perfected, but the narrative incorporates new identifications of Russia as a 'peace builder' (pushing for dialogue, negotiation, and the signing of declarations of the non-use of force), taking cues from Russia's new role in Syria.⁵⁹ To sum up, in the evolving official identification of self in this region, 'Russia' is projected as a patron practising its policies in line with the modern way introduced by the West. The West set the standards but has since betrayed them and become a 'destabilising' force in South Caucasus. Now it is Russia that is the sole, true patron of the region. As expressed by the spokeswoman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Maria Sakharova in 2019:

Our Western, especially American, colleagues continue with enviable persistence to put forward unfounded accusations against Russia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. At the same time, instead of helping to ensure peace and security in Transcaucasia, they themselves are doing everything to, on the contrary, destabilize the situation in the region ... we see how Georgia is being pumped up with weapons, drawn into military blocs, while Washington and Brussels motivate this by reasoning about some kind of 'stability' of this state and the region as a whole. All the time they talk about the Russian occupation and so on ... The realities are as follows: Abkhazia and South Ossetia, relying on allied assistance from Russia, which guarantees their security, strengthen their statehood ... successfully develop their economy, social sphere, foreign trade and international relations.⁶⁰

⁵²T 86.

⁵³T 8, 10, 20, 22, 23, 26, 27, 31, 35, 64, 68.

⁵⁴T 1, 10, 20, 28, 68, 92; direct quote from T 22. The February 2015 agreement 'on alliance and strategic partnership' between Russia and Abkhazia, available at: {<https://www.ft.com/content/24239f90-73e8-11e4-82a6-00144feabdc0>}. On the March 2015 treaty between Russia and South Ossetia, see Freire, 'The quest for status'.

⁵⁵T 8, 10, 12, 20, 21, 22, 23, 26, 29, 32, 38, 44, 46, 61, 89.

⁵⁶T 32, 35.

⁵⁷Direct quotes in T 22.

⁵⁸T 86.

⁵⁹T 89.

⁶⁰T 91.

However, as we shall see below, Russia sees itself increasingly threatened by a reviving and dangerous alliance between Georgia and the West.

The Georgian people

Georgia has various faces according to Russian official texts and the positive identification of Georgia as the ‘Georgian people’ remains throughout. The Georgian people are construed as inherently good, linked to Russia through centuries-old ties. There is a sense in the texts that these ties to the *true* Georgia should be rebuilt – and will be. As put by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, ‘we all love this country since we lived together in one state. I am sure that we will solve all these problems.’⁶¹ Sakharova details this official representation when she says that ‘We proceed from the premise that the energy and love that are inherent in the relations between the peoples of Russia and Georgia will make it possible to overcome political differences and enter a new stage.’⁶² Thus, ‘despite the fact that diplomatic relations were severed at the initiative of Tbilisi, we have always said that while it is not impossible to destroy relations between the two peoples, it will never happen.’⁶³

This identification includes those Georgian actors who seek to ‘normalise’ relations with Russia – importantly, the Georgian Dream coalition government, in power from 2012,⁶⁴ and some Georgian parliamentarians.⁶⁵ Towards this Georgia, Russia holds that it strictly practises the principle of non-interference in internal affairs, and welcomes any initiatives that serve to strengthen bilateral Russia-Georgia relations.⁶⁶ Despite the overall strain in relations, these can be mended by promoting people-to-people contact, as during the 2014 Olympic games in Sochi.⁶⁷ The Karasin-Abashidze format established in 2012 is repeatedly mentioned as a promising and pragmatic bilateral channel for solving specific issues in Russia-Georgia relations, like trade and tourism.⁶⁸ Gradual normalisation can be achieved ... *if* Georgia takes the initiative. Russia will then reward Georgia, by simplifying the visa regime for example.⁶⁹ The steady growth in trade relations between Georgia and Russia, with Russia becoming Georgia’s biggest trade partner in 2018 and increasing air traffic and contact between Georgians and Russians, is represented as the logical evolution of Russia’s relations with the Georgian people, despite certain misguided Georgian leaders.⁷⁰

This ‘true’ Georgia of the people is represented as increasingly threatened by pro-Western forces in Georgia fighting ‘normalisation’ (see below). The rhetorical appeal to the Georgian people is rather desperately invoked after anti-Russian riots erupted in Tbilisi in summer 2019, triggered when the Russian Duma deputy Sergei Gavrilov spoke from the seat of the Georgian Parliament Speaker during the Convention of the Interparliamentary Assembly of Orthodoxy. While the Russian Parliament favoured imposing sanctions on Georgia after the riots, Putin rejected that suggestion, with reference to respect for the Georgian people. Russia, unlike the US, allegedly does not dictate to the Georgian people or meddle in their internal affairs.⁷¹ Breaking off relations is unthinkable according to Putin: it could result in ‘losing them’.⁷² In

⁶¹Direct quote in T 43, also T 41, 79, 81, 86, 87.

⁶²T 39.

⁶³T 42.

⁶⁴T 2, 7, 9, 23, 24, 27, 34, 35, 52, 67, 68.

⁶⁵T 61.

⁶⁶T 41, 68, 77.

⁶⁷T 3.

⁶⁸T 5, 7, 23, 35, 42, 47, 52, 80.

⁶⁹T 52, 53, 55.

⁷⁰T 81.

⁷¹T 88, 90, 92, 93.

⁷²T 81, direct quote in RT 94.

February 2020, the ‘crisis’ in Georgia in summer 2019 is construed by the Russian MFA press department as a result of Tbilisi siding with the wrong forces instead of ‘overcoming existing differences and continuing the normalization process’, which ‘is in the fundamental interests of the Russian and Georgian people’.⁷³

While the evolving official narrative of Russia as the true patron of the marginalised but *good* Georgian people is a contemporary articulation of the Russo-Georgian relation, it clearly plays to and is empowered by historical identifications in the rhetorical repertoire of Soviet ‘people’s diplomacy’.⁷⁴ Likewise, the identification of Russia as the *genuine* incarnation of a Europe/West gone false is a recurrent theme in historical Russian discourse.⁷⁵

Saakashvili-Georgia and the West

Despite the continuous presence in Russian official discourse of the ‘good neighbour’ in the form of the Georgian people, the strongest identification of official Georgia is still (and increasingly) as a potentially dangerous neighbour. To a large extent, this identification is construed through associations with Mikhail Saakashvili. The 2008 war, where Georgia allegedly alone was responsible for unleashing a ‘bloody conflict’, stands as the fundamental act in the Russian narrative of Georgian animosity – and this Georgia is always linked to the ‘criminal’ Saakashvili.⁷⁶ Georgia is repeatedly projected as guilty of having caused the break in Georgian–Russian diplomatic relations in 2008, in expressions such as ‘the atmosphere of hostility and suspicion (was) imposed by the regime of M. Saakashvili.’⁷⁷ But, although ‘Mr Saakashvili’ started the war in 2008, he was allegedly encouraged by NATO. As suggested by Sergei Lavrov in 2018:

In 2008, at the NATO summit in Bucharest, it was loudly announced that Ukraine and Georgia will be in NATO. They were not given a formal invitation, which is mandatory for starting negotiations on practical accession to NATO, but the political message was unambiguous—Ukraine and Georgia will join NATO. A few months later, M. N. Saakashvili imagined that now he could do anything and attacked his citizens, peacekeepers in South Ossetia. You can remember the rest of it.⁷⁸

Thus, Saakashvili-Georgia is never dangerous on its own: it is the alliance with the West that constitutes the potentially existential threat to Russia.

Further in the documentation: As the conflict in Ukraine peaks and then drags on, with Saakashvili appearing on the political stage of Ukraine as the governor of Odessa, ‘Saakashvili-Georgia’ becomes a main actor in the core Russian drama – the fight with NATO/the US, which are represented as persistently breaking the principle agreed upon after the end of the Cold War: ‘equal and indivisible security’⁷⁹ and ceaselessly seeking to enrol the former Soviet states and cut them off from cooperation with Russia.⁸⁰ According to Lavrov, Georgia and Ukraine have become twin cases, both with leaderships that have been led astray by NATO: ‘The fact that NATO’s inflammatory phrase “Georgia will be in NATO” played a role in this, I have no doubts. Just as there is no doubt that the promise “Ukraine will also join NATO” addressed to Ukraine has sunk into the heads of not very responsible

⁷³T 95.

⁷⁴See, for example, Anna. A. Velikaya, ‘Soviet public diplomacy’, *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* (2020), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-020-00193-0>.

⁷⁵Morozov, *Russia’s Postcolonial Identity*; Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe*.

⁷⁶T 8, 9, 12, 20, 22, 23, 26, 27, 28, 31, 43, 44, 45, 48, 49, 61, 68, 75, 79.

⁷⁷T 4.

⁷⁸T 70.

⁷⁹T 1, 4, 9, 13, 25, 27, 29, 32, 43, 45, 48, 91.

⁸⁰Vladimir V. Putin, Meeting of the Security Council (22 June 2014), available at: <http://kremlin.ru/news/46305>. T 91.

politicians. Now it has broken through, they are appealing to NATO.⁸¹ Indeed, Putin even indicates that Saakashvili was sent by the US as a step in undermining the independence of these countries.⁸² In a sense, 2008 marks the beginning of the 2014 conflict with Ukraine. Ukraine and Saakashvili-Georgia become partners in getting the US involved in the region: they are repeatedly presented as merged into one and the same social actor. Particularly noteworthy is the allegedly deliberate demonstration of ‘solidarity’ with Georgia contained in the statements by the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry and President P. Poroshenko. This is no coincidence, according to the Kremlin: Kiev and Tbilisi seem to be helping each other to ‘fit into the image’ of ‘victims of Russian aggression’. Instead, they should ‘reconsider their own very unsightly policies’ and how they are being used by the West.⁸³ Thus, the resecuritisation of Georgia in official Russian discourse is spurred by the conflict with Ukraine. However, it takes place through the reinvention and boosting of formerly established securitisations – of Saakashvili and of the West in the form of NATO or the US.

Western engagement in Georgia

Official Russian representations of Western engagement in the world were radicalised after the conflict with Ukraine in 2014.⁸⁴ This initially shaped Moscow’s representations of both the EU and NATO/US in Georgia, making Tbilisi’s continued efforts at linking up with these institutions appear even more threatening than before. In the texts under study, the EU was initially projected as one with NATO in pushing for zero-sum influence in Georgia at the expense of Russia – even as deceitfully disguising this push as a win-win for Russia.⁸⁵ Such representations did not continue, however. Russia warned of the consequences for Georgian-Russian economic ties of the June 2014 signing of the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) between Georgia and the EU – while also stressing Georgia’s right to choose for itself in such matters. Russia declared that it did not want to punish Georgia for withdrawing from partial membership in the CIS Free Trade Agreement, but would seek pragmatic solutions. This approach would serve Russian interests, such as developing the steadily growing trade relations with Georgia.⁸⁶ Moreover, apart from during the period of active war in Ukraine, EU sometimes figures as a reasonable and potential partner for Moscow, who appeals to the ‘sober-minded people in Europe’ and ‘continues to believe that the phased construction of a single economic and humanitarian space from Lisbon to Vladivostok with reliance on an architecture of equal and indivisible security should be such a natural goal’.⁸⁷

Russia’s identification of NATO and the US in Georgia has not followed the same trajectory as with the EU. Official statements indicate a mounting securitisation of the NATO/US presence and influence in Georgia (that is, they attach an increasingly higher level of danger and difference to these social actors) – a pattern that also must be judged in light of how little Russia speaks about Georgia beyond the context of great power interaction and security. Moreover, the pattern of Russian securitisation fluctuates with NATO/US engagement in Georgia, testifying to how Russian foreign policy is formed also in reaction to the actions of other political entities that Russia is preoccupied by and constitutes as significant for itself (see also geopolitical explanations of Russian foreign policy).

We see, for example, that steps to deploy NATO infrastructure on Georgian territory, confirmed in September 2014, immediately make the headlines in Russian official statements,

⁸¹T43.

⁸²T 34.

⁸³Direct quote in T 44, 48, 70.

⁸⁴Putin, Meeting of the Security Council.

⁸⁵T 11, 13, 17, 45.

⁸⁶T 13, 15, 80.

⁸⁷Direct quotes in T 19, see also T 11, 26, 28, 45.

construed as a threat to the stability of the region and a breach of the agreements on the non-use of force.⁸⁸ The prospects of parts of a missile defence system being installed in Georgia discussed that year elicit a similar response: ‘The new Georgian leadership is striving to build relations with Russia on a more pragmatic basis’, but ‘mysterious NATO training centres appear on the territory of Georgia, broadcast statements are made about the necessity of accelerating the country’s movement into NATO structures.’⁸⁹ After a NATO training centre was opened in Georgia 2015: ‘We [Russia] consider this step as a continuation of the provocative policy of the alliance aimed at expanding its geopolitical influence’ and of ‘those who continue to drag Georgia into NATO’.⁹⁰ Such statements are retuned with each new NATO/US-Georgia military exercise from 2015 onward, in line with the growing scale of these exercises.⁹¹ Whereas only two hundred US troops took part in the first Noble Partner exercise in 2015, 1,170 participated in the August 2018 exercise. Further, the 2019 NATO-Georgia exercise brought together participants from 24 NATO and partner countries and was overseen by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. While in Georgia, Stoltenberg stated: ‘Georgia is a unique partner for NATO. Last summer in Brussels all NATO leaders reconfirmed the Bucharest decision from 2008 that Georgia will become a member of NATO ... And the NATO-Georgia exercise this week demonstrates that we are stepping up our cooperation.’⁹² Such manifestations of Western engagement in Georgia must be taken into consideration if we want to explain Russian securitisation of Georgia. Noteworthy in the official Russian texts in this period are the growing numbers of complaints about the emergence of US/NATO military installations in Georgia – including allegations that a deep-water port is being constructed in Anaklia, as well as laboratories near Tbilisi, for producing biological weapons. Parallels are explicitly drawn to US activity during the Cold War.⁹³ In 2018 there are no Russian official statements on Georgia beyond those securitising Western military engagement in the country. In August 2019 Russia concludes that Georgia ‘is being pumped up with weapons and drawn into military blocks’.⁹⁴ Looking more closely into how the image of a threatening West/US is built in this body of texts, it is not only through references to a dangerous military build-up in Georgia. A more comprehensive securitisation emerges that constitutes the US as an ominous and growing threat, shaped as an inverted image of the *true* Russian patron described above. Not only is the US allegedly pushing NATO closer to Russia’s borders, seeking to include Ukraine and Georgia, it is also referred to as an unreliable and dangerous patron, a breaker of international law that cynically promotes one norm in Kosovo and another elsewhere, constantly misusing humanitarian concerns as a smokescreen for instigating colour revolutions with destructive and dangerous results – in the Former Soviet space and beyond.⁹⁵ Thus, we find a resecuritisation of Georgia in Russian official discourse that takes place through growing attention to security threat and great power interaction with the US/NATO in the wake of the

⁸⁸T 19.

⁸⁹T 27.

⁹⁰T 32.

⁹¹After the Georgia-NATO military exercise in 2016 Russia declares: ‘We regard such a consistent “development” of Georgian territory by the NATO military as a provocative step aimed at deliberately swaying the military-political situation in the Transcaucasian region. To a large extent, this is facilitated by the open indulgence by Washington and its allies of Tbilisi’s revanchist aspirations’ (T37). Russia notes that NATO activity and exercises are growing from year to year, with three exercises in 2016, and that it views this as a ‘serious threat’ to the stability and peace of the region (T46, 49). Concerning Noble Partner 2018, Russia says: ‘The North Atlantic Alliance continues its provocative and destabilizing efforts in the Black Sea region. The multinational exercise “Noble Partner 2018”, which started on 1 August, is being held in Georgia for the fourth time’ (T69).

⁹²See: {https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_164822.htm} accessed 6 January 2021. Russia’s response to this exercise came in August 2019 (90). ‘Georgia-NATO Ties Could Hamper Relations With Moscow’, Russian Deputy FM, Sputnik International {<https://sputniknews.com/europe/201902281072817058-georgia-russia-nato-relations/>}.

⁹³T 71, 74, 78, 81, 28.

⁹⁴T 91.

⁹⁵T 70, 71, 81, 84.

conflict in Ukraine. This narrative is a logical extension of the pattern of representations inherent in current Russian foreign policy discourse more generally, but two points should be recalled here. First, the securitisation of Georgia post-2014 feeds on and is empowered by historical securitisations of ‘Saakashvili’ of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war and the ‘US’ of the Cold War. Likewise, recent projections of ‘Russia’ as the benign patron of the ‘Georgian people’ find resonance in historical representations, dating back to at least Soviet times. These discoveries speak clearly of the flexible yet bounded nature of collective identity formation. Second, the escalating Russian securitisation follows and matches NATO/US engagement in Georgia, in one sense a reaction to external pressures as the geopolitical explanations will have it. But the Russian ‘reaction’ is not understood here as emerging from ‘facts’ on the ground. Rather, it is conditioned by Moscow’s own projection of the hostile intent of the Western entities in engaging Georgia, whereas ‘Russia’ remains the true and threatened patron in this region. How, then, does this overarching securitisation of the West in Georgia shape Russia’s identification of Tbilisi?

A proxy yet again?

The initially positive view of the Georgian Dream government acquires a shadow with the continued engagement with NATO/the US.⁹⁶ As noted by Macej Falcowski,⁹⁷ Georgian Dream’s foreign policy priorities did not change, despite accusations by Georgian opposition forces that this government was pro-Russian. Euro-Atlantic integration remained their main goal. From 2015, NATO and the US re-emerge, as in earlier Russian representations of the Saakashvili government, as the key forces behind Tbilisi, working to destabilise and disrupt peace in the region, as part of their strategy of containing Russia.⁹⁸ Initially, certain Georgian parliamentarians are identified and said to ally with this Western threat. After the Georgia-NATO military exercise in 2016, for example, Russia regards the ‘development’ of Georgian territory by the NATO military as ‘facilitated by the open indulgence by Washington and its allies of Tbilisi’s revanchist aspirations’, and then singles out chairman of the Georgian parliament, D. Usupashvili, as an active proxy, referring to his statements.⁹⁹ Next, the government itself is identified as being part of this re-emerging alliance, although Russia continues to warn Tbilisi, occasionally framed as similar victim of US power as Ukraine, that it will be misused and lose its independence.¹⁰⁰ Over the years, the government in Tbilisi is increasingly represented as an active agent, supported by its ‘Western patrons’, in an allegedly global anti-Russian offensive, ‘producing political and propaganda blanks on international platforms’ such as the CoE,¹⁰¹ ICC,¹⁰² UNHCR,¹⁰³ the 73rd UN General Assembly,¹⁰⁴ and WTO.¹⁰⁵ By participating in NATO’s policy of ‘containment’ of Russia and inviting NATO to gain a ‘firm foothold in the South Caucasus’, the Georgian government is eventually declared ‘no different from the Saakashvili regime’.¹⁰⁶ Zurabishvili, elected as president in November 2018, is represented as the inversion of the Georgian people, someone who is whipping up anti-Russian attitudes in society and making Georgian policies ‘openly

⁹⁶T 27.

⁹⁷Macej Falcowski, *Georgian Drift: The Crises of Georgia’s Way Westward* (Warsaw: OSW Center for Eastern Studies, 2016).

⁹⁸T 32, 37, 49.

⁹⁹Usupashvili allegedly spoke of ‘occupation’ of parts of the country’s territory, ‘the mission of the Georgian armed forces as remaining unfulfilled’, and ‘the guarantee of this missions implementation’ being not only the ‘heroism of Georgian soldiers and officers’, but also ‘the help of partners – NATO member states’. (T 37)

¹⁰⁰T 71, 81, 82.

¹⁰¹T 57.

¹⁰²T 54.

¹⁰³T 56, 69.

¹⁰⁴T 73.

¹⁰⁵T 84.

¹⁰⁶Direct quotes by Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs G. B. Karasin in T 59. See also T 60, 68, 79.

anti-Russian'. It is indicated that she is a US proxy.¹⁰⁷ In the Russian statements, more and more new Georgian constituencies are identified as different and dangerous to Russia and tied to the Western threat. The Georgian media sphere is said to be turning anti-Russia: anti-Russian statements are seen as part of the 2018 election campaigns.¹⁰⁸ Such representations culminate in the 'attacks' on the Russian 'free press' during the 'riots' in Tbilisi in June 2019.¹⁰⁹ By February 2020 Moscow alleges that Tbilisi is at the forefront of the propaganda war against Russia: 'Attention is drawn to the synchronization of the propaganda action organized by Washington, London, Tbilisi and others.'¹¹⁰ Such securitisation is particularly stark in official Russian representations of how Tbilisi operates in relation to the breakaway republics. According to Putin, both Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been subjected to 'genocide' and 'fratricidal war' by Georgia – before, during, and after the Soviet period.¹¹¹ In the evolving Russian statements on relations with the breakaway republics 2014–20, Tbilisi 'provokes', 'lies', 'is irrational', 'confrontational', 'politicised', 'hostile', 'anti-Russian', and 'hysterical-confrontational'; it 'sabotages' and 'operates with baseless accusation' and 'hostility'; has a 'militaristic mindset' and aims 'to create negative international resonance'; it is deliberately obstructing the Geneva discussions on the breakaway republics (the sole legitimate format, according to the Russian leadership), and is not able honour agreements or to compromise or take the 'rights of people' or humanitarian concerns into account.¹¹² Any Georgian step in relation to the breakaways is portrayed negatively: the 2018 White Paper 'A step towards a better future' is dismissed as disrespectful towards the Abkhaz. The 2008 'Law on Occupied Territories' is repeatedly scorned, and Georgian actions taken in line with this law are labelled 'repressive'.¹¹³ As the number of references to texts in the notes and the predicates listed above indicate, the securitisation of Tbilisi's approach to the breakaway republics and Russia is constructed through a thick grid of implicit and explicit representations. The following commentary by the Russian Foreign Ministry in connection with the Geneva Discussions on security and stability in the Transcaucasus in March 2017 illustrates what this type of official securitising narrative looks like in a more comprehensive form:

The last days have been marked by a real 'fireworks' of provocative statements and actions by Tbilisi. At the 34th session of the UN Human Rights Council, Georgia introduced an openly politicized draft resolution directed against Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Russia. New 'pilgrimages' of foreign visitors to the state border with South Ossetia, which Georgia continues to call the 'administrative dividing line', took place. And Georgian officials are competing with each other to express more and more protests. Everything becomes a reason for the propaganda hype: both the legitimate decision of Abkhazia to optimize the number of checkpoints on its border with Georgia, and the bilateral agreement allowing the citizens of South Ossetia to serve under individual contracts in the Russian army, ... Tbilisi is going to continue sabotaging the dialogue on the Geneva platform. Thus, an appropriate confrontational-hysterical atmosphere is being formed in advance.¹¹⁴

In the massive securitisation of Georgia implicit in Russian texts on the breakaway republics, NATO/the West is constituted as the fundamental threat, the social entity that Russia is interacting with. This emerges from the way in which Georgian actions are framed as creating a humanitarian crisis/R2P situation that calls for the 'modern' response urged by the West (independence),

¹⁰⁷Direct quote in T 84. See also T 79, 80.

¹⁰⁸T 28, 77.

¹⁰⁹T 68, 90.

¹¹⁰T 95.

¹¹¹Direct quote in T 86. See also T 22, 88.

¹¹²T 8, 10, 12, 20, 21, 23, 26, 27, 29, 31, 32, 34, 35, 38, 40, 44, 46, 48, 56, 58, 59, 61, 64, 66, 68, 69, 72, 73.

¹¹³T 68, 73.

¹¹⁴T 56.

but which must be carried out by the ‘true’ patron of the region, because the West has failed in its mission (as noted above). Moreover, it is indicated that Tbilisi’s behaviour in relation to the breakaway republics is propelled by the desire to draw Georgia closer to NATO: ‘Tbilisi continues to speak of the “occupation” by Russia. This absurd thesis is used as an argument in favour of further rapprochement with NATO. Sadly, on this issue, the position of the current Georgian authorities is no different from that of the Saakashvili regime.’¹¹⁵ Russia’s own initiatives on the breakaway republics (such as the call to complete an agreement on the non-use of force between Georgia and these republics) become urgent because of NATO’s increasing activity in Georgia.¹¹⁶ What we see, then, is that Tbilisi itself is resecured by representations of single politicians and later the Georgian Dream government as different and dangerous to Russia. The ‘Georgian people’ to whom Russia can relate constructively seem to disappear from the top level of the Georgian state. In the end, the entire Georgian society is construed as anti-Russian. In this Russian script, present-day Georgia is difficult to distinguish from ‘Saakashvili-Georgia’, although invoking Saakashvili always works as a way of keeping the level of securitisation high – as evidenced when the riots erupted in Tbilisi in the summer 2019 and Lavrov blamed Saakashvili for stirring up the ‘Russophobe’ ‘opposition’.¹¹⁷ However, the fundamental driver behind Tbilisi’s rising status as a threat is, according to Moscow’s own texts, the growing NATO/US engagement with Georgia, encouraged by Tbilisi. ‘Georgia’ and its ‘Western partners’ have again become a routine expression.¹¹⁸

Face-to-face diplomacy

Given Russia’s limited attention to Georgia – beyond addressing the controversies over the breakaway republics and Western engagement in the country – this final section reviews the extent of face-to-face diplomacy between Russian and Georgia in the period under study. The rationale behind this complementary focus is the effect that physical encounters might have in disrupting the ingrained verbal identifications of self and other(s) that official speech produces – here, a highly juxtaposed relation between a righteous Russia and a threatening Georgia/West – both for the top political representatives themselves and for the societies to which they constantly appeal. Detached verbal identifications can become undisturbed enablers of policy. When politicians are forced out of their self-made linguistic bubbles through face-to-face encounters, both the identifications and the policies they make possible may be adjusted.¹¹⁹

The intense resecured implicit in Russian official statements on Georgia since 2014 is matched by the very limited number of physical encounters between Georgian and Russian officialdom. Throughout the period under study, Switzerland has represented the interests of Russia in Georgia and Georgia in Russia. According to the Russian government, all pressing consular and humanitarian problems of Russians in Georgia and the sizable Georgian diaspora in Russia have been resolved in contacts with Switzerland, which has also provided organisational support for holding the Geneva Discussions on stability and security in the Transcaucasus.¹²⁰

From 2012 to August 2019 there were *no* face-to-face meetings between Russian and Georgian top-level representatives, despite the new, allegedly pro-Russian government. Eventually a short meeting was held between Foreign Ministers Zalkaliani and Lavrov on the sidelines of the 74th session of the UN General Assembly in New York on 26 September 2019. Judging by the few official Russian statements on the encounter, however, this seems to have represented an opportunity to reiterate the familiar identifications found in previous official texts on Georgia, rather

¹¹⁵T 59.

¹¹⁶T 46, 84, 89.

¹¹⁷T 92.

¹¹⁸T 90.

¹¹⁹Holmes, *Face-to-face Diplomacy*.

¹²⁰R 83.

than for listening to and openly engaging the Georgian partner.¹²¹ Also the few media reports that exist on the meeting give the impression that the encounter was used by both sides to direct well-established accusations and demands on the opposing party.¹²² Zalkaliani encountered such heavy criticism at home for even having met with Lavrov that the meeting itself eventually became more of an encounter with the home audience than his Russian counterpart, eliciting from Zalkaliani what seemed like an even stronger commitment to stay the course of diplomatic disengagement.¹²³

The Russia-Georgia economic dialogue meetings established in 2012, where the Russian representative Karasin met with the special representative of the Prime Minister of Georgia for relations with Russia, Abashidze, continued in the period under study. These discussions, limited to questions concerning trade, transport, and humanitarian contacts, took place approximately twenty times between 2012 and June 2019. Despite a positive Russian appraisal of the ‘constructive efforts on both sides’ and the achievement of ‘positive results in the trade, economic, transport and humanitarian spheres’, the direct physical encounters of government officials would seem to have been very limited.¹²⁴ Moreover, the influence of the representatives that meet within their own governments are disputed, and the issue areas they are authorised to engage in have not seemed to influence the broader foreign policy approach of their state towards the other. Since 2014, that format is said to have exhausted itself, due to Georgia’s one-sided preoccupation with Russia’s bonds to the breakaway republics and Russia’s one-sided preoccupation with Georgia’s bonds to the West.¹²⁵

In all, the physical encounters between Russia and Georgia – beyond those of ordinary people spending their holidays or making money in the other country, athletics or professionals taking part in international sport or cultural events, or lower-ranking officials – seem extremely limited. The disastrous outcome (that is, the eruption of anti-Russian riots in Tbilisi) of Russian MP Gavrilov’s physical presence in the Georgian parliament in connection with the Interparliamentary Assembly of Orthodoxy in summer 2019 vividly illustrated how toxic face-to-face encounters have become, even at the parliamentary level. On the top governmental level, Russia-Georgia relations since 2014 must be seen as a *non-case* in terms of physical encounters.

When diplomatic contacts dry up in this way, the mending effect that face-to-face encounters could offer is lost. Such encounters could have been particularly valuable in relations between Russia and Georgia, broken by war since 2008. The resecuritisation of Georgia post-2014 couched within the broader rhetorical complex of confrontation with the West, the repetitive pattern of these official Russian representations (as noted in the previous section) and the dearth of meetings with Georgian leaders – all this adds up to a potentially dangerous combination. The result could be that Russia’s own verbal identifications become *the* truth about its neighbour, making the assertive policies that follow in their wake appear logical.

¹²¹T 92, 93.

¹²²FM Zalkaliani Comments on the Meeting with Lavrov’, available at: {<https://www.agenda.ge/en/news/2019/2594>}; Sergey Lavrov, ‘Meeting with Georgian Foreign Minister in New York Took Place at the Initiative of Georgian Side’, available at: {<https://1tv.ge/en/news/sergey-lavrov-meeting-with-georgian-foreign-minister-in-new-york-took-place-at-the-initiative-of-georgian-side/>}; Lavrov, ‘There Was A Meeting with the Georgian Minister, Which He Asked’, available at: {<http://www.frontnews.eu/news/en/55607>}; ‘Lavrov Says Zalkaliani Requested Meeting’, available at: {<https://civil.ge/archives/322192>}.

¹²³Georgian FM to MPs: Meeting with Russian FM was “needed, important”, Held at the “Right Time”, available at: {<https://www.agenda.ge/en/news/2019/2791>}.

¹²⁴Direct quotes in T 59.

¹²⁵Author’s interview (via email) with Shota Utiashvili (GFSIS) and Professor Kornely Kakacha on Abashidze’s position in Georgia and the Russia-Georgia dialogue meetings, January 2021.

Conclusions

This study has proposed a social explanation of Russian foreign policy that foregrounds security concerns and great power interaction while still treating the evolution of official self/other identifications as the core enabler of foreign policies. Further, it has sought to make such explanations more sensitive to the broad relational and physical context in which such discursive formations evolve. That focus has been justified with reference to previous findings and scholarship and then applied in an empirical study of Russia's evolving trilateral identifications on Georgia from 2014 to 2020.

Although Russia projects itself as a patron and friend of 'the Georgian people', I have shown how Georgia, after the 2014 conflict in Ukraine, again is becoming merged into the image of the threatening and dangerous 'Saakashvili-Georgia', increasingly aligned with the 'West' – most acutely in the form of NATO and the US. The centrality of 'Saakashvili' in current Russian discourse is significant, as a general review of Russian military texts in recent years has shown that 'Saakashvili' is represented as the prime agent for Colour Revolutions in the former Soviet space, allegedly trained and financed by the West in its subversive war against Russia.¹²⁶ Also, Russia's identifications of the breakaway republics – which, according to the Russian narrative, have irrevocably parted from 'Saakashvili Georgia' – are shaped by the growing idea of an existential competition with the West, the US in particular. Russia continuously and insistently refers to the Western script on Kosovo to say that Georgia lost the right to rule these lands because of the lack of respect for norms originating in the West. While it would be erroneous to read a *global* Russian ambition out of this official discourse, Russia certainly projects itself as the true patron of this region, one whose mission is to withstand an allegedly deceitful, destabilising, and dangerous Western patron. In light of the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine it is worth underlining how Georgia and Ukraine have been represented as *twin cases* since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. This happens regardless of Georgian Dream's turn towards a more pro-Russian policy compared to Ukraine during these years.

In sum, the evolving official Russian narrative on Georgia amounts to a strong resecuritisation of this small neighbour – achieved through a preoccupation not primarily with Georgia itself but with Western engagement in the region. Careful examination and pairing of Russian official statements on Georgia with NATO/US actions and initiatives on the ground in Georgia have shown that Russian attention to Georgia fluctuates with such actions. However, the theoretical claim concerning this security-oriented great power interaction is that Western engagement in Georgia becomes dangerous to Russia because of the way the Kremlin construes the West at this particular time. Therefore, NATO's continued high-profile engagement with Georgia, involving explicit references to Russia as an aggressive, unreliable rulebreaker as grounds for tighter political and practical partnership with Georgia, seems set to contribute to further narrowing and radicalising official Russia's gaze on Georgia.¹²⁷ Further, the repetitive pattern of Russian official identifications uncovered in this case study indicates that Russia has created an echo-chamber for itself. The long dearth of face-to-face diplomatic encounter and contact between Russian and Georgian officials has served to make the walls of this echo-chamber solid. The human contact that could have disturbed the clean dichotomy of a dangerous and guilty Georgia/West vs Russia is absent – the potential effect being that the idea of Georgia as a Western proxy becomes the 'reality' for Russian officials themselves. Moreover, and even more distressing, these identifications now serve as undisturbed enablers of Russian policies towards Georgia. Again, the (re) launching of the war against Ukraine in 2022, which seems to result in a disastrous and 'irrational' outcome for Russia itself, should remind us that states pursue tangible policies in line with how they construe the relations between self and others. Although the explanation of that war will

¹²⁶Oscar Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019), p. 146.

¹²⁷See: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_180793.htm?selectedLocale=en.

have to be complex, the way in which the leadership in the Kremlin have become hostage to their own propagandistic narratives will have to be considered.

Enumerating all the concrete policy actions that are made ‘reasonable’ through the resecuritisation of Georgia as a Western proxy is beyond the scope of this article, but such policy actions are clearly evident. For example, Russia has boosted its economic subsidies, legal commitment to citizenry and military presence, and commitment to the breakaway republics – amounting to full security guarantees – with reference to the threat of Georgia seeking to change the status quo.¹²⁸ Further, the Russian military exercise Kavkaz 2020 was expanded well beyond its anti-terrorist theme. With its focus on combating cruise missiles and electronic warfare, it reflected Moscow’s preoccupation with a sudden attack from a high-technology actor like the US.¹²⁹ Russia’s approach to Georgia is and will remain subject to change, but it is currently hardwired to a set of identifications that make assertive policies appear reasonable. Continued diplomatic drought, combined with closer engagement of Tbilisi under the Biden administration as read through the Kremlin’s paranoid lens, is bound to solidify that approach.

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¹²⁸Freire, ‘The quest for status’.

¹²⁹Roger McDermott, ‘Russia’s armed forces test UAV swarm tactics in Kavkaz 2020’, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 17 (2020), p. 136.