



# Anti-migrant Rhetoric in Georgia: Do Far-right Groups Threaten Georgia's Pro-European Discourse?

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Last month's anti-migrant march in Tbilisi, [baptized as](#) the "national liberation movement", marked an uptick in visible far-right sentiment in Georgia. [The rally](#) gathered around 2,000 people demanding the deportation of illegal immigrants and an overall toughening of the country's immigration laws. This may be a one-off, as Georgia's history is seemingly devoid of any substantive precedents of xenophobic discourse. Considering that the Georgian language itself denotes the term "foreign" with a positive connotation, the sudden spike in far-right sentiment should either be perceived as misplaced or transformative. Indeed, the anti-migrant march posits an intriguing case for Georgia's contemporary stance on civil and political affairs. It is thus worth assessing whether the recent anti-migrant discourse will negatively impact Georgia's foreign policy goals, especially European integration.

In light of what recently occurred in Georgia, it is worth examining the traction and growing popularity European far-right groups have gained against the backdrop of the ongoing migrant and refugee crisis. Are the far-rights utilizing the same discourse and tools on the topic of immigration to provoke anti-migrant sentiments in Georgia? To what extent are Georgian extreme right movements capable of impeding Georgia's pro-

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European political agenda? These are some of the key questions that demand attention from policymakers and civil society actors that affect political decision-making in Georgia.

The issue at hand is not the so-called “new liberalization movement” exercising its members’ democratic and legitimate right to march in Aghmashenebeli avenue in Tbilisi, mimicking the far-right marches noted in various European capitals. Rather, it is the negative impact of such a public march on the country’s image—a country which is ardently striving to promote itself as inclusive, diverse, and pluralistic. While the country’s aspirations include embracing a Western European, liberal-democratic model, Georgia today remains a state with fragile democratic institutions. Located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, Georgia is nestled within one of the world’s most ethnically-diverse region, therefore from this perspective, the normalizing of xenophobic rhetoric could have devastating consequences. While “one march,” may not offset Georgia’s long-term plans for closer European alignment, the harsh reality is that Georgia’s modern history has a track record of ethnic-based conflict and civil unrest since the country’s independence.

This commentary employs the theory of securitization to address the above questions, with the objective of leading to more sound conclusions with respect to the emergence of far-right sentiments in Georgia and the pre-emptive measures that can be taken against further nationalization and securitization of the topic.

## **Far-rights challenging the European project**

The European Union (EU) was founded [on the values of](#) “respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.” However, it is not immune from imminent threats and challenges. Most recently, the European migration and refugee crisis of 2015 led to a significant revitalization and increase in support of European far-right political parties and sentiments, a surge for the far-right unprecedented since the onset of the Second World War. While this may not be disconcerting in and of itself, the threat of these parties became concrete and impactful following the outcome of the Brexit Referendum on June 23, 2016; a blatant challenge to the “European Idea.”

In the past few decades, no crisis has threatened the survival of the European Union quite like the migration crisis. The arrival to Europe of more than one million migrants and refugees in 2015 sparked panic, backlash, anger, and growing fears that the development was merely the [“tip of a very large iceberg.”](#) Indeed, the plight of the migrants led to a resurgence of nationalism across the EU and witnessed European parties that normally

advocate center-right stances finding themselves defending principles of tolerance, openness, and diversity in the face of challenges from the far-right. For the EU, the migrant crisis inadvertently led to an identity and values crisis. France, a prominent EU member, observed French municipalities banning Muslim women from wearing “burkinis” while swimming or lounging at certain beaches. [The Danish parliament](#) approved a controversial “jewelry law” in January permitting government officials to confiscate valuables from arriving asylum seekers that depend on these items to finance their accommodation upon arrival.

In the case of the UK, the country’s far-right party succeeded in pushing forward a referendum on the question of whether the UK should remain in the EU. The vote was preceded by a long process of anti-EU campaigning. Capitalizing on the migrant crisis and exacerbation of anti-EU sentiments, [the referendum](#) resulted in approximately 52 percent of voters ticking the box to leave the European Union. The success of Brexit is inherently tied to the migrant crisis, and the far-right engineering a securitization angle with which to exploit UK citizens’ fears of hypothetical consequences if the UK maintained its ties with the EU.

In a similar vein in Hungary, support for the far-right compounded during the height of the migration crisis. The abrupt mass wave of migrants flowing into Hungary fueled Hungary’s far-right political discourse, exacerbated anti-European feelings, and accordingly dampened Hungary’s support for EU solidarity – a core value of the European project. Unlike its European neighbors, [Hungary](#) built a 100-mile-long razor-wire border fence to deter migrants along its southern borders, jeopardizing its relations with Serbia and Croatia. Furthermore, Hungary employed the strongly-criticized practice of sending refugees who enter the country illegally to prison. Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban is the prominent leader of Hungary’s right-wing Fidesz party and is known for making outlandish anti-immigrant claims. In the wake of the Paris terror attacks in November in 2015, [Orban provoked](#) outrage by claiming that it was an “obvious fact” that “all terrorists are basically migrants.”

In an effort to avoid adhering to an EU-wide stance on migration, Orban prompted a [referendum](#) on October 2, 2016. The referendum served as a bureaucratic move in response to the EU’s mandatory quota system for resettling migrants in host countries. Orban’s government posed the referendum [question](#) as such: “Do you want the European Union to prescribe mandatory settlement of non-Hungarian citizens in Hungary without the consent of parliament?” Accusatory in nature, close to 98 percent of Hungarian citizens who voted in the referendum supported the government’s call to reject the EU plan.

In spite of its many flaws, the EU has demonstrated a successful and peaceful track record of constructive and positive relations among its members and surrounding neighbors since the end of WWII. Nevertheless, challenges such as the rise of populism, nationalist rhetoric, and support for the far-right across the continent have presented real threats to EU ideals and values over the past two years, as seen in the case of Hungary and the UK. In respective referendums in both countries, EU policies were refuted and anti-EU sentiment reached all-time highs, dramatically undermining the narrative of the European Union as a success story.

### **Anti-migrant rhetoric in parallel with pro-European discourse in Georgia**

The anti-migrant march in Tbilisi which took place on July 14, 2017 has been labelled xenophobic and ethno-nationalist rally by civil society activists of Georgia. Of note is that, following the “March of Georgians” aimed against “illegal immigrants,” the Georgian government [launched negotiations](#) with several countries for the purpose of readmission of foreign citizens illegally living in the country. This attempt to form an “agreement on readmission” places Georgian government in an awkward situation, as large numbers of Georgian citizens have been illegally residing in EU member states for over two decades. Moreover, since the enactment of the visa-free regime with the EU on March 28, 55,000 Georgians have travelled to Europe and already 3,000 have [failed to return](#). As such, the Georgian government should pay closer heed to the stipulations of its visa-free regime with the EU before signing any dotted lines with respect to readmission policies. Moreover, the government’s eagerness regarding readmission inadvertently sends the wrong signals to the country’s far-right groups. [Recent slogans](#) have included messages such as: “Georgia for Georgians”; “Go back to where you belong”; “We’ll clear our streets of foreign criminals”; and “What is Georgian is for Georgia alone.” Against this backdrop, readmission of foreign nationals will be received as a triumph for the far-right.

The “March of Georgians” has become a platform for Georgia’s far-rights (and even ultra-rights). Avid followers found themselves marching alongside representatives of the Georgian parliament and other well-known political figures supporting the Georgian Dream coalition.

Moreover, it is not a coincidence that the organizers of Georgia’s far-right movement intentionally selected Tbilisi’s Aghmashenebli Avenue as the site of their demonstration. This particular avenue attracts many individuals of different nationalities, especially Turks and Arabs. As Georgia seeks to make progress on European integration, this type of “[xenophobic and Islamophobic](#)” demonstration poses a challenge for the country’s

still-fragile democratic institutions. The very rhetoric employed by the demonstrators is damaging. For example, [the slogan](#), “I am not scared of the dark,” sported on a t-shirt by one of the rally participants is beyond distasteful; it is discriminatory. Considering Georgia’s lofty foreign policy goals, it is advisable for the country to avoid popularizing any kind of rhetoric that slanders or belittles the EU’s core values. These are the same values that Georgia aspires to and innately cherishes.

### **Securitization theory: the best way for far-rights to mobilize the masses**

How the far-right has managed to gain such popularity across Europe is worth careful consideration. One way to explain their success is via [the securitization theory](#). It was the Copenhagen School that spawned what came to be understood as securitization theory, significantly contributing to discourses on the meaning and definition of “security.”

The Copenhagen School advanced the argument that security is ultimately an outcome of a special social process or “speech act” rather than an objective condition. According to [Waever](#), a prominent scholar of securitization, “nothing is a security issue by itself, rather it is an issue that only becomes a security issue if someone labels it as such.” [The Copenhagen School](#) further [argues that](#) the “meaning of security in contemporary global politics is ultimately constructed through the speeches and representations made by relevant political actors.”

In a climate of fear and uncertainty people want to feel safe. Accordingly, a leader who can promise security and protection is deemed desirable and likely to gain popular support. In the European Union, the Copenhagen School’s theory of securitization forms the bridge between the migrant crisis and the rise of and need for nationalist discourses. Here, the theory serves as a formula whose sum derives from political undercurrents that appeal to national values, national identity, national borders, and national interests. Various European leaders have succumbed to the image of refugees as a “security threat” rather than recognizing them as victims. Viktor Orban built a wall against refugees, triggering an assault on Balkan borders; Miro Cerar of Slovenia proclaimed that his country would only accept Christian refugees while expressing doomsday rhetoric about Europe’s future; and Norbert Hofer, the far-right leader in Austria, promised to protect Austrian borders from refugees. The palpable enemy is clear: [the refugee](#).

The success of the European far-right in “securitizing” the migrant crisis lends itself directly to its supporters seeking to diminish the “threat” by any means necessary. Both developments depend on one another. American writer Eric [Hoffer validates](#) this interlocking phenomenon: “hate is a unifying factor in all mass movements. It is the common denominator capable of putting together the most different of people.” This

well-known tool for unifying the masses against the migrants has resulted in Europeans losing patience with the European project.

Georgia's recent demonstration against illegal immigrants initiated a well-deserved debate on the link between the so-called "Georgian March" and xenophobic and Islamophobic discourse. It is not yet clear whether securitization of the "migrant" as has occurred in other European societies gains comparable traction and popularity in Georgia. [Placards proclaiming](#), "We'll clear our streets of foreign criminals" echo the sentiments expressed in European capitals faced with intense migration flows in 2015. This is also a clear example of stigmatization, securitizing the "migrant as a criminal." The discourse framing such mantras involves [sensational promises](#) that the expelling of illegal migrants will guarantee that the "political and social problems faced by Georgia could be easily solved" and that the departure of foreign immigrants would "open up new jobs." Blaming scarcity and lack of employment on migrants has become a well-versed political appeal for far-rights. It is also likely to gain currency in Georgia where unemployment remains a serious, unresolved problem. However, securitization of the "migrant" will be most damaging to the progress in strengthening civil society that Georgia has achieved to date.

In the last five years, the rise of far-right movements and ideas have deeply impacted citizens of EU member states. Far-right sentiments have threatened the European Project in many parts of Europe and have even weakened and jeopardized its core principles. While the spirit of democracy allows for freedom of association, it is undeniable that the far-rights have negatively impacted the European Union. Georgia may still be far from the EU membership perspective table, but the rise of anti-migration, xenophobic and Islamophobic rhetoric may still negatively color the country's pro-European pathway, causing it to wait even longer for a seat. It is thus of paramount importance to prevent any securitization of the topic by the far-right. Failure to do so has the potential to further impede Georgia's prospects of joining the European family.

## GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS (GIP)

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