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## THE MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF GEORGIAN CRIME IN POLAND: A DISCOURSE AND CONTENT STUDY

**Abstract:** *The article presents an in-depth analysis of the media discourse surrounding the phenomenon referred to as “Georgian criminality” in Poland between 2023 and 2025. The aim of the study was to identify the mechanisms that led to the emergence of moral panic around this issue and to understand how the media and political actors construct the image of immigrants as a threat to public order. A triangulated methodology was applied, combining quantitative data analysis (statistics on crimes committed by foreigners) with qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA). Drawing on the theories of moral panic (Cohen; Goode & Ben-Yehuda), framing (Entman), and CDA (Fairclough; van Dijk), the study demonstrates that the media representations of crimes committed by Georgian nationals were characterized by selectivity, sensationalism, and ethnic generalization. The media highlighted isolated cases of violent crime while omitting broader statistical and social contexts, which resulted in the creation of a discourse marked by fear and hostility toward foreigners. The analysis revealed a close interdependence between media messages and political narratives, which mutually reinforced each other, leading to an escalation of emotions and social pressure on authorities. The study confirms that this phenomenon meets all the classical criteria of moral panic: public concern, hostility toward a group, apparent consensus, disproportionate reaction, and volatility. In conclusion, the article emphasizes the need for greater media responsibility, the rationalization of migration policy, and enhanced social education aimed at strengthening resilience to alarmist narratives. This study contributes to the fields of media studies, disinformation research, and social security, showing*

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*how contemporary media can shape moral climates and real social attitudes toward immigrants.*

**Keywords:** *moral panic, media framing, critical discourse analysis, foreign crime, Georgians in Poland, migration.*

## Introduction

In recent years, Poland has witnessed an intensification of migration from Georgia, a phenomenon largely attributable to the liberalization of the visa regime with the European Union in 2017. The introduction of visa-free travel for up to 90 days opened new opportunities for Georgian citizens – most of whom arrive for employment or educational purposes<sup>2</sup>. According to data from Polish institutions, approximately 25,000 to 30,000 Georgian nationals are currently residing legally in the country, although the actual number may be higher due to temporary migration and the presence of undocumented individuals<sup>3</sup>. While Georgian migrants still constitute a relatively small segment of the total foreign population in Poland (for comparison, over 1.5 million Ukrainians reside in the country), their presence has become increasingly visible in the public sphere<sup>4</sup>. The outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022 also indirectly affected migration flows – some Georgians relocated from conflict-affected areas in Ukraine to EU member states, including Poland<sup>5</sup>.

This migration displays a distinctive demographic profile: the majority are of working age and typically employed in sectors such as construction and services, along with students and small-scale entrepreneurs. A visible Georgian community has emerged in major cities such as Warsaw, Wrocław, and Poznań, where Caucasian grocery stores and restaurants operated by migrants have been established. Until recently, the overall image of Georgians in Poland had not attracted significant media attention. The dominant narrative was neutral or positive, often associating Georgians with industriousness or cultural exoticism. However, around 2023, a shift in narrative became evident. As the number of arrivals increased, the media began reporting incidents of criminal activity involving Georgian nationals, which rapidly escalated into a salient topic in public debate. This discursive shift underscored how migration-related

<sup>2</sup> S. Budzisz, *Pięciu worów w zakonie. Bandyty z Gruzji mają Polskę za kraj frajerów*, „OKO.press”, 21.02.2025, <<https://oko.press/pieciu-worow-w-zakonie-bandyty-z-gruzji-maja-polske-za-kraj-frajerow>> (20.08.2025).

<sup>3</sup> A. Sucharska, *Co dziesiąty Gruzin w Polsce zatrzymany przez policję? Sprawdzamy*, „prawda.org.pl”, 31.10.2024, <<https://prawda.org.pl/co-dziesiaty-gruzin-w-polsce-zatrzymany-przez-policje>> (20.08.2025).

<sup>4</sup> *Socjolog: skala wyzwań związanych z imigracją w Polsce jest raczej wyolbrzymiona*, Polska Agencja Prasowa, 03.08.2025, <<https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/socjolog-skala-wyzwan-zwiazanych-z-imigracja-w-polsce-jest-raczej-wyolbrzymiona-0>> (20.08.2025).

<sup>5</sup> S. Budzisz, *op. cit.*

issues may be subsumed under the broader discourse of security and public order.

A major catalyst for the nationwide debate was a series of events occurring at the turn of 2024 and 2025. In early February 2025, a popular daily newspaper published an alarmist article concerning “imported organized crime”, identifying Georgian gangs as a dominant new threat. Media outlets reported on spectacular criminal cases attributed to Georgians, including burglaries involving torture of victims, high-value thefts using the so-called “spike method” (puncturing a car tire and stealing valuables – such as diamonds worth €110,000), brazen thefts in shopping malls, and assaults on cash transport personnel. These incidents were widely publicized as examples of the activities of organized Georgian criminal networks, portrayed as increasingly brazen and effective – implying that Polish law enforcement was allegedly unable to cope. Statements from government officials quickly validated the gravity of the problem. The mayor of the country’s largest city called for a firm response, likening the situation to the crackdown on domestic gangs in the 1990s, while the sitting Prime Minister announced “decisive action” against crime within immigrant communities, including pledges to deport any foreigner who breaks the law. These top-level signals were followed by police and administrative operations targeting foreign criminal groups<sup>6</sup>.

Almost immediately, opposition parties with nationalist leanings seized on the issue, using it to criticize the government’s migration policy and to stoke anti-immigrant sentiment. Right-wing media and politicians began referring to an “epidemic” of ethnic criminality, focusing particularly on Georgians and Ukrainians – citing police statistics concerning crimes committed by foreigners. A public image of the Georgian community as an emergent criminal threat began to crystallize in public discourse.

The discursive shift outlined above raises questions regarding the credibility and consequences of such media representations. Press reports suggesting the existence of a “Georgian mafia” in Poland and a systemic threat stemming from it have become increasingly frequent. Headlines such as “This Is How the Georgians Operated in Warsaw. Swift Police Action”<sup>7</sup> emphasize the nationality of the perpetrators and dramatize descriptions of their methods. As a result, readers may be led to believe that an entire ethnic group is inherently predisposed to criminality and that Poland is facing a growing wave of violence perpetrated by Georgians. At the same time, these media narratives often lack broader contextualization – references to the overall scale of crime in Poland or to the demographic structure of immigrant populations are rarely provided. Consequently, concerns arise that the media may be fostering the stereotype of the “Georgian = criminal”, potentially leading to stigmatization of the entire community and the emergence of moral panic within society.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> K. Bogdańska, *Tak działali Gruzini w Warszawie. Błyskawiczna akcja policji*, „Wiadomości WP”, 25.02.2025, <<https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/gruzinska-szajka-zatrzymana-w-warszawie-ujawniono-jak-dzialali-7128952297110304a>> (20.08.2025).

The purpose of this article is to examine how Polish media represent the phenomenon of crime committed by Georgian nationals, and to identify the narratives and discursive practices employed in this process. The study adopts a critical orientation: it seeks to verify media claims and imagery by confronting them with empirical evidence – primarily official statistics on crimes committed by foreigners. The main objective is to compare the media-constructed image of “Georgian criminality” with actual crime data, as well as with assessments provided by experts in migration and security studies. Such a multidimensional perspective allows for the identification of discursive mechanisms underlying the current narrative – specifically, whether the problem is being intentionally framed in a particular way; to what extent it corresponds to a classic case of moral panic; what stereotypes and simplifications are embedded in the media’s language; and what social or political interests may lie behind the perpetuation of such representations. In other words, this study aims to answer the following questions: is the media portrayal of Georgian criminality objective or sensationalized; what are its social consequences; and how is this discourse constructed?

To achieve these objectives, a research design combining qualitative analysis of media content with quantitative examination of crime statistics, as well as expert contextualization, was applied. This triangulated approach provides a multifaceted perspective on the subject – juxtaposing words (media narratives) with numbers (empirical data) and professional opinions, thereby enhancing the objectivity and credibility of the findings.

The subsequent sections of this article present, first, the theoretical foundations and analytical concepts that serve as the interpretative framework. The following part outlines the applied research methodology. The next chapters present the results of the analysis: first, statistical data on crimes committed by Georgians in Poland, followed by a media discourse analysis identifying key narrative motifs, linguistic strategies, and political contexts. Additionally, expert commentaries and official government statements are discussed to complete the analytical picture. The article concludes with a discussion of findings in light of relevant theoretical approaches – particularly the concepts of moral panic and framing – and with conclusions summarizing the most important insights and indicating implications for social policy and media practice.

### **Theoretical Framework of the Analysis**

To fully understand the mechanisms underlying the media representation of this phenomenon, it is necessary to refer to appropriate theoretical frameworks. In this study, three complementary perspectives prove particularly relevant: the theory of moral panic, framing theory, and critical discourse analysis. Each of these approaches highlights a distinct dimension of how media and public dis-

course socially construct a given problem. The following subsections discuss these perspectives, providing a conceptual foundation for interpreting the collected data.

The concept of moral panic was introduced into the social sciences by Stanley Cohen in his classical study of public reactions to youth subcultures in the 1960s<sup>8</sup>. The term describes a situation in which a group or phenomenon is portrayed as a threat to social values and public order, provoking a strong emotional response in society – one that is disproportionate to the actual level of danger. During a moral panic, widespread fear and anxiety arise over a perceived threat to the social order, yet this fear is exaggerated or unfounded, since the danger is either largely imaginary or its scale and severity are grossly overstated<sup>9</sup>.

A characteristic feature of such processes is the construction of a clear dichotomy between the “good” and the “evil”. The stigmatized group becomes labeled as folk devils – moral outcasts or villains to whom negative moral attributes are ascribed and who are blamed for society’s ills. This is accompanied by the activity of moral entrepreneurs – influential individuals or institutions (such as politicians, opinion leaders, or media organizations) who amplify the perceived threat, call for intensified control and punishment, and often derive symbolic or political capital from their role as defenders of moral order<sup>10</sup>.

Classic works – for instance, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) – identify five defining features of moral panic:

1. Concern – a high level of public anxiety about a given phenomenon;
2. Hostility – negative emotions and blame directed toward a specific group;
3. Consensus – a broad public belief that the threat is real and serious;
4. Disproportionality – a societal or governmental reaction that exceeds the actual magnitude of the problem;
5. Volatility – the panic’s transient nature: it erupts suddenly and may fade quickly, though it often leaves behind lasting legal or social consequences.

In this process, the media play a catalytic role – by selecting sensational stories and using emotionally charged language, they legitimize the sense of danger and fuel the spiral of fear. Under the pressure of public opinion, authorities frequently respond with drastic measures – tightening laws, increasing surveillance, or enhancing police control – actions that are often disproportionate to the real

<sup>8</sup> M. Pisarski, *Antyimigracyjna panika moralna na polsko-niemieckiej granicy*, Instytut Misesa, 16.07.2025, <<https://mises.pl/artykul/pisarski-antyimigracyjna-panika-moralna-na-polsko-niemieckiej-granicy>> (20.08.2025).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> E. Goode, N. Ben-Yehuda, *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance*, Blackwell, Oxford 1994, pp. 33–36.

scale of the phenomenon but tend to remain embedded in legal and institutional practice. Historical examples include the so-called “wars on drugs” or post-9/11 anti-terrorist regulations, both of which emerged as responses to moral panics.

Within the context of migration and crime, moral panic arises when immigrants are collectively constructed as a threat to public safety or societal values, despite the lack of empirical evidence to support such claims<sup>11</sup>. The recent surge of media and political attention toward so-called “Georgian criminality” in Poland exhibits many characteristics of a moral panic. In subsequent sections, this article will assess to what extent this case meets the aforementioned criteria – concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality, and volatility – and how the media and political actors have functioned as moral entrepreneurs in shaping this phenomenon.

The second theoretical perspective of analytical utility in this study is framing theory. It pertains to the way in which the media select and highlight specific aspects of reality, attributing particular meanings to them while downplaying or omitting others. As Robert Entman famously articulated, framing involves “selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation”. In other words, media create an interpretive frame through which a given issue is presented and understood<sup>12</sup>.

In journalistic practice, this implies that two accounts of the same event may generate entirely different public perceptions depending on what is emphasized, which metaphors or descriptors are employed, whose voices are invited for commentary, and which elements are left unspoken. Media frames serve to simplify a complex reality by giving it an intelligible form, but in doing so, they also impose a particular interpretive schema. Framing theory draws attention to the fact that the media are not neutral conveyors of information; rather, through their choice of language, context, and emphasis, they actively shape audience perceptions – often subconsciously.

For instance, describing a group of immigrants as “refugees fleeing war” versus “illegal intruders storming the border” produces vastly different emotional and cognitive responses in the audience, despite potentially referring to the same set of individuals.

In the context of this study, it is crucial to investigate the specific frames employed by Polish media in reporting on crimes involving Georgian nationals. Does the dominant frame construct these incidents as a threat to public security posed by foreigners, as a problem of transnational organized crime, or perhaps from yet another interpretive angle? Equally important is the frequency with

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<sup>11</sup> M. Pisarski, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> R. Entman, *Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm*, „Journal of Communication”, 1993, nr 43(4), pp. 51–58.

which the perpetrators' nationality is emphasized as a causal factor – implying essentialist reasoning (“they are dangerous because they are Georgian”) – as opposed to alternative framings that might consider economic factors, social marginalization, or institutional failures.

Framing analysis allows us to examine how the narrative of “Georgian criminality” is constructed in the media – what elements are foregrounded (e.g., the brutality of incidents, exoticized associations with mafia networks), and what elements are omitted (e.g., the statistical rarity of such crimes, successful cases of Georgian integration). This analysis is crucial, as entrenched media frames significantly shape public responses – ranging from fear and calls for harsher penalties to the entrenchment of social prejudice and xenophobic attitudes.

The third approach employed in this study is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which serves as our principal interpretive methodology. CDA is not a single unified theory, but rather a research tradition situated at the intersection of linguistics and the social sciences, focusing on how language used in public discourse reflects and reproduces power relations, ideologies, and social inequalities.

In line with the foundational work of Norman Fairclough and Teun van Dijk, discourse – that is, the ways of speaking and writing about reality – is considered a key component in the construction of social life, endowed with real performative power. It can influence human behavior, policy development, social norms, and collective prejudices. CDA situates the texts under analysis within broader social, cultural, and historical contexts in order to uncover their implicit meanings and underlying assumptions<sup>13</sup>.

CDA is particularly concerned with language that refers to marginalized groups, ethnically “othered” populations, and minorities. Thus, it engages with topics such as nationalism, racism, xenophobia, ethnic stereotypes, and the political or media rhetoric that surrounds these themes. In this study, CDA is applied to expose how the media discourse on “Georgian criminality” may reproduce specific cognitive and ideological schemas – such as the stereotypical figure of the “immigrant as criminal” – and to identify the linguistic strategies through which this occurs. This includes analyzing the ideological assumptions behind word choices and narrative structures.

A particularly important aspect involves the analysis of evaluative vocabulary—for example, terms like “gang”, “mafia”, or “ring” used to describe perpetrators of a specific nationality. We also examine metaphorical language – such as whether metaphors of “flood”, “wave”, or “plague” appear – and the representation of agency and voice within the text. Who is granted the right to speak in the media discourse? Is it primarily police officers, politicians, and government experts? Are the voices of Georgians themselves or independent specialists included?

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<sup>13</sup> N. Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*, Polity Press Cambridge 1992, pp. 36-42.

CDA emphasizes that discourse always serves particular interests. Hence, we ask the fundamental question: *cui bono?* – who benefits from portraying Georgians in this specific manner? Media language often naturalizes certain viewpoints – for example, that “foreigners are dangerous” – to the extent that they become perceived as “common sense” and difficult to challenge. Our critical lens allows us to uncover potential manipulations, simplifications, or prejudices embedded within the analyzed discourse.

As will be shown, the narrative of Georgian criminality is not merely a neutral reporting of facts; rather, it forms part of a broader discourse on immigration and security – one that is often politically motivated and laden with implicit assumptions. Critical analysis will help us bring these hidden ideologies to light and assess the broader social consequences of such discursive practices<sup>14</sup>.

In summary, the three theoretical perspectives discussed above – moral panic, media framing, and critical discourse analysis – together constitute the meta-interpretive framework for this study. In the subsequent sections, when presenting our findings, we will refer back to these concepts in order to identify manifestations of moral panic within the Polish public debate, specific narrative frames employed by the media, and the linguistic mechanisms shaping the image of “Georgian criminality”.

To situate these analytical tools within wider reflections on immigration, it is also useful to draw on broader perspectives from migration and security studies. In contemporary risk-oriented societies, migration-related phenomena are often interpreted through anticipatory perceptions of threat, in which isolated incidents acquire symbolic significance disproportionate to their empirical scale. Media play a crucial role in this process by acting as primary risk communicators, selectively amplifying certain dangers while marginalizing statistical context.

From the perspective of securitization theory, migration may be discursively transformed from a social or economic issue into a matter of public security. Through repeated references to “gangs,” “imported crime,” or “uncontrolled inflow,” political and media actors can legitimize extraordinary responses such as intensified policing, surveillance, or deportation. Such speech acts shift the issue from the sphere of ordinary political debate into one of emergency governance, where proportionality becomes secondary to symbolic reassurance.

Finally, research on immigrant integration and stigmatization emphasizes that media narratives significantly influence social inclusion. When crime is persistently ethnicized, collective stigma emerges, undermining trust and reinforcing exclusionary attitudes toward entire communities. Agenda-setting and framing mechanisms connect these processes by elevating selected narratives to public prominence and channeling interpretation toward security-centered explanations.

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<sup>14</sup> T. van Dijk, *Racism and the Press*, London 1991.

## Methodology

Given the nature of the research questions posed, the study is grounded in a qualitative approach, enriched with quantitative elements to provide contextual grounding. A triangulation of data sources was employed to capture the phenomenon from multiple perspectives and to ensure the validity of the conclusions. Within this triangulated framework, three main sources of information were utilized:

- a. crime statistics concerning foreign nationals (with particular focus on Georgian citizens) in Poland,
- b. a corpus of media reports on crimes involving Georgians,
- c. expert commentary and official government statements addressing the issue.

Statistical data were drawn from official reports issued by the National Police Headquarters and the Border Guard, supplemented with data from the Central Statistical Office (GUS) and the Ministry of the Interior and Administration (MSWiA) on the presence of foreign nationals in Poland<sup>15</sup>. Specifically, datasets were obtained concerning the number of suspected or detained foreigners, disaggregated by nationality and category of offence, for the years 2023–2025. These data were used to calculate per capita crime rates for selected national groups (i.e., the number of suspects per 100,000 representatives of a given nationality residing in Poland), and to allow for comparison with analogous indicators for the Polish population. Additionally, the analysis included information on temporal dynamics (i.e., whether the number of crimes involving Georgians was increasing, decreasing, or remaining stable over time), as well as the structure of these offences (i.e., which categories of crimes were most prevalent).

The media material for analysis consisted of press articles and news reports from 2023 to 2025 that addressed criminal acts committed by Georgian nationals in Poland. The sampling strategy was purposive: major Polish-language news portals (including *Wiadomości WP.pl*, *TVN24.pl*, *PolsatNews.pl*, *RMF24*, *Onet*, *Gazeta.pl*), national dailies (*Rzeczpospolita*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Polish Press Agency services), and selected regional and specialized media outlets were searched for publications related to such keywords as “Georgian criminals”, “Georgian gangs”, etc. The sample also included content from media representing a broad political spectrum – from liberal to conservative-nationalist – in order to capture potential variations in narrative framing. A total of approximately 40 articles and news items were subjected to analysis<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> *Pelny katalog przestępstw – podejrzani cudzoziemcy (garnizon stołeczny)*, Komenda Stołeczna Policji, Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej, <<https://ksp.bip.policja.gov.pl/ksp/statystyki/45497,Pelny-katalog-przestepstw-podejrzani-cudzoziemcy.html>> (21.08.2025).

<sup>16</sup> A. Sucharska, *op. cit.*

In addition, public discourse on social media platforms (Twitter/X, Facebook) was monitored in search of particularly influential posts or viral content (a notable example being a tweet from October 2024 alleging that “every tenth Georgian in Poland has been detained by the police”, which spread widely online). The media corpus encompassed not only the textual layer (headlines, leads, main body) but also visual elements – such as photographs of police operations or infographics – since visual materials also form part of the communicative act and contribute to audience framing.

Expert commentary and official statements were collected to enrich the analytical depth of the study. These included press interviews with sociologists, criminologists, and institutional representatives (e.g., PAP interviews with Prof. Krzysztof Podemski<sup>17</sup> and Dr. Paweł Moczydłowski<sup>18</sup>), as well as statements from politicians and public officials delivered at press conferences or via media outlets (such as the aforementioned positions of the Prime Minister, Minister of the Interior, and opposition MPs). Some of these statements appeared as direct quotations within the articles themselves, while others were taken from transcripts of public addresses.

## Results of the Analysis

Official police data first allow the issue to be situated within an appropriate empirical scale. In 2024, foreign nationals accounted for approximately 5% of all criminal offenders in Poland<sup>19</sup> – in other words, 95% of criminal acts were committed by Polish citizens. The share of crimes attributed to foreigners thus remains low at the national level and – importantly – available analyses show no dramatic upward trend in recent years. On the contrary, the number of offences committed by foreign nationals has exhibited a downward trajectory<sup>20</sup>, despite a growing immigrant population. These statistics contradict the notion of an alleged “explosion” of criminal threats posed by foreigners – this is the first indication of a potential mismatch between the facts and the narrative promoted by media coverage.

Against this backdrop, the data concerning Georgian citizens warrant closer scrutiny. In 2023, Polish police detained (or identified as suspects) approximately 1,948 Georgian nationals in connection with criminal activity. In 2024, the figures were similar – estimates indicate around 1,780 detentions of Georgians. In absolute terms, Georgians accounted for approximately 15% of all detained foreign nationals in Poland. It is important to note, however, that the highest number of criminal offences in absolute terms involved Ukrainian cit-

<sup>17</sup> *Socjolog: skala ...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>18</sup> K. Bogdańska, *op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> S. Budzisz, *op. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> M. Pisarski, *op. cit.*

izens (e.g., over 7,000 Ukrainians were detained in 2023, and 9,753 in 2024. This is understandable given that Ukrainians constitute the largest immigrant group in the country<sup>21</sup>.

Comparisons between national groups therefore require normalization by population size. To that end, the number of suspects per 100,000 residents of each nationality living in Poland was calculated. The resulting figures offer a different perspective: for Ukrainian citizens, the crime rate in 2024 was approximately 653 per 100,000 (equivalent to 0.65% of the Ukrainian population in Poland); for Belarusians, approximately 367 per 100,000 (0.37%); whereas for Georgians, the figure reached an estimated 7,120 per 100,000. In other words, approximately 6-7% of all Georgian nationals residing in Poland were in conflict with the law in that year, compared to well below 1% for Ukrainians<sup>22</sup>.

The crime rate for Georgians was also several times higher than that for Polish nationals. According to approximate estimates, in 2024 around 1.6% of Polish citizens committed a criminal offence – equivalent to roughly 1,600 suspects per 100,000 residents. This significant disparity (7,120 vs. 1,600) indicates that, statistically, a Georgian national in Poland was approximately 4.5 times more likely to be recorded as an offender than the average Polish citizen. This fact underlies many of the sensationalist media headlines – but it warrants a more cautious and nuanced interpretation.

Firstly, the high crime rate is affected by the relatively small size of the Georgian population in Poland – each additional hundred arrests considerably raises the per capita figure. Secondly, police statistics likely include undocumented migrants listed as “Georgian” but not captured in the official estimate of 25,000–27,000 legally residing individuals. Therefore, the estimated rate of ~7% should be treated as an upper boundary. The police themselves acknowledge that a portion of detained foreign nationals may have lacked valid residence permits. In other words, the actual denominator – the total Georgian population in Poland – is likely higher than 25,000, meaning the true proportion of community members in legal conflict may be slightly lower than the suggested 6–7%<sup>23</sup>.

Nevertheless, even with these caveats, it remains a fact that Georgian nationals exhibit the highest crime rate among the major immigrant groups in Poland, according to police records. This statistical distinction likely became the starting point for political and media narratives – though often presented out of context. Before turning to the media discourse analysis, it is useful to examine the nature of the offences involved.

According to data from the National Police Headquarters, the crime profile of Georgian offenders diverges somewhat from the stereotypical image of “ma-

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<sup>21</sup> *Pełny katalog ..., op. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> S. Budzisz, *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem.*

fia activity”. The most common offences committed by Georgians are relatively mundane: primarily theft and driving under the influence of alcohol. In 2024, out of 1,780 Georgian detentions, 472 involved theft (including shoplifting and pick-pocketing), and 334 involved drunk driving. Another major category was drug possession (approximately 200 cases). These types of offences also dominate the statistics for other foreign groups – for instance, among Ukrainians, drunk driving is particularly prevalent, with nearly 3,000 such cases in 2024.

More serious crimes – such as robbery, assault, burglary, or especially organized criminal activity – constitute a marginal portion of the overall offences committed by foreigners. In other words, the statistical profile of the “Georgian criminal” more often reflects a petty thief or intoxicated driver than a member of a transnational criminal syndicate. This finding is crucial, as it reveals a significant dissonance between statistical reality and media-driven public perception: the media tend to emphasize spectacular incidents (robberies, heists, violent altercations), while everyday criminality is more prosaic.

It is worth emphasizing that in 2024, nearly 14,000 foreign nationals committed some form of criminal offence in Poland. In the vast majority of cases, these were not crimes against life or health but rather the aforementioned infractions – traffic violations, petty thefts, fraud, or possession of prohibited substances. Georgians comprised 1,780 individuals within this total – less than 13% of all foreign offenders. Yet even such a relatively small number, when appropriately amplified, was sufficient to generate considerable public resonance.

Another noteworthy statistic: at the end of January 2025, 305 Georgian citizens were incarcerated in Polish prisons, making them the second-largest group of foreign inmates, after Ukrainians (1,313 individuals). Here, too, Georgians are overrepresented relative to their population size – confirming that while the issue is niche at the national level, it does indeed exist. Authorities, however, emphasize that foreign nationals are responsible for only a fraction of all crimes and that the situation is under control. According to statements by the Minister of the Interior, the government has succeeded in halting the rise of immigrant crime through close cooperation with the police<sup>24</sup>.

In conclusion, the statistical analysis revealed two concurrent truths: on the one hand, the share of foreigners (including Georgians) in overall crime remains low – and proportionally even smaller than their share in the population; on the other hand, the per capita crime rate for Georgians is distinctly higher than for most other groups, constituting an anomaly that raises questions about its causes (possibly related to specific migration subgroups or legal loopholes exploited by organized networks).

This ambivalence renders the topic highly susceptible to competing narratives: it can be portrayed either as a “marginal issue blown out of proportion” or as an

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<sup>24</sup> S. Budzisz, *op. cit.*

“alarming signal demanding firm action”. Which of these images has dominated public perception? The answer will be explored in the next section through the analysis of media discourses.

At this stage, a brief comparative reference to other major post-Soviet immigrant communities in Poland—particularly Ukrainians and Belarusians—helps contextualize the public resonance of the Georgian case. Ukrainians, despite constituting the largest immigrant group and accounting for the highest absolute number of offences, have predominantly been framed in Polish media through humanitarian and labour-market narratives, especially following the outbreak of war in 2022. This framing tends to individualize incidents and dilute generalized attributions of criminality.

Belarusians, by contrast, remain relatively low in media visibility and are most often discussed in connection with political repression in Belarus, professional migration, or border-related geopolitics rather than as a distinct crime-related category. In neither case has nationality become a dominant explanatory frame for criminal behaviour.

The Georgian case differs in that media discourse converged more readily on a security-oriented frame, where nationality was consistently foregrounded and linked to imagery of organized crime. This comparison suggests that the intensity of public reaction cannot be explained by crime statistics alone, but rather by differential framing and agenda-setting processes that determine whether a migrant community is perceived primarily as workers and neighbours, or as criminal outsiders. This observation provides an important contextual bridge to the following analysis of media discourse.

Media coverage from the years 2023-2025 concerning crimes committed by Georgian nationals is characterized by a noticeable degree of sensationalism and selectivity. The analysis identified several dominant narratives (themes) and journalistic practices that collectively construct a vivid image of “Georgian criminality” as a novel threat. Below, we present the main findings, illustrated with examples drawn directly from media sources.

Mainstream media consistently directed audience attention toward the most publicized, spectacular cases involving Georgian offenders, while ignoring the broader statistical backdrop. Instead of reporting on typical, common offences (such as petty theft or drunk driving, as previously discussed), the majority of media focus was placed on incidents categorized as organized crime or marked by exceptional brutality<sup>25</sup>.

For example, news outlets covered stories involving a group of Georgians breaking into homes and allegedly torturing residents, the theft of diamonds using the “punctured tire” method, or a brazen cash convoy robbery. Although such cases are, in reality, sporadic, they were presented as evidence of the operations

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

of “brazen gangs,” and implicitly generalized to represent the entire Caucasian migrant community. A typical online article would open with a sensationalist headline such as: “Georgian Gang Arrested in Warsaw – How They Operated Revealed”. The very use of terms like “gang” or “ring” constructs an interpretive frame that implies a structured and recurrent criminal pattern. The body of the article often described police actions in cinematic terms – chases, dynamic arrests, connections to previous cases – evoking the aesthetics of a crime thriller. This type of presentation is unmistakably intended to elicit emotion – both excitement and anxiety – in the reader.

What is often lacking, however, is any clarification that such stories represent isolated incidents. Frequently, there is no mention of how many such events occurred in a given year – whether dozens or merely a handful. The result is a distortion effect on perception: an audience periodically exposed to news of yet another “Georgian gang” may form the impression of a continuous series or wave of crime, when in fact these may be isolated episodes within the national context. This journalistic tendency can be described as selective framing – a preferential focus on extremes rather than statistical norms.

In the analyzed texts, almost no information appeared that would relativize or contextualize the threat. For instance, none of the major news portals emphasized (at least prior to later fact-checking corrections) that Georgians represent only a fraction of all criminal offenders in Poland, or that the vast majority of this community abides by the law. On the contrary, the dominant message was implicit: “This is a new and serious trend”. Several rhetorical strategies supported this narrative framing.

One such strategy is the halo effect – early, dramatic cases set the tone of the narrative, and subsequent (less serious) events were interpreted through this initial lens. For example, news articles or TV segments often began by recalling previous high-profile cases (“Further reports of Georgian criminal groups”), thereby framing even relatively minor incidents as part of an escalating series<sup>26</sup>.

Another strategy involved the use of generalized formulations: expressions such as “Georgian thugs are feeling increasingly comfortable in Poland”, “Eastern newcomers have replaced local gangsters”, or “Georgian mafia is wreaking havoc in Poland” appeared repeatedly in media discourse – particularly in sensationalist or right-wing outlets<sup>27</sup>. Such generalizations blur the line between individual responsibility and collective attribution, suggesting that an entire ethnic group bears inherently negative traits. This is a classic element of the hostility present in moral panics: the construction of the “other” as a collective threat.

One of the most striking aspects of the analyzed media coverage is the disproportionately strong emphasis placed on the nationality of the perpetrators

<sup>26</sup> K. Bogdańska, *op. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> G. Zawadka, *Gangi ze Wschodu uderzają w Polsce. „Będziemy mieli ogromny problem”*, „Rzeczpospolita”, 31 stycznia 2025, <<https://www.rp.pl/plus-minus/art41747691-brutalne-gangi-wrocily-do-polski-wymiar-aktow-terroru>> (21.08.2025).

across all elements of the message. In article headlines, the term “Georgian” or “Georgians” almost invariably appears – regardless of whether the offence involved only foreign nationals or a mixed group. For instance, even if an incident involved both Poles and Georgians, the headline was often framed to highlight the latter (e.g., “Pole and Georgian Arrested for Robbery – Foreign Gang Dismantled”, hypothetically). This practice reinforces an immediate associative link in the audience’s mind: criminal = Georgian. Over time, within the examined period, the adjective “Georgian” itself began to accrue negative connotations in a criminal context.

This is a classic framing strategy involving the ethnicization of crime – rather than discussing crime as such (which would imply the importance of offence type or motive), it is presented through the prism of the perpetrators’ ethnic origin. In doing so, the issue of immigration becomes conflated with security: criminality is portrayed as an attribute of a specific national group.

Content analysis also revealed a rich array of loaded descriptors attached to Georgian perpetrators. Beyond the neutral designation “citizen of Georgia” (typically used in police statements), media outlets preferred more evocative labels such as “Georgian gang”, “Georgian mafia”, or more figurative terms like *vory v zakone* (literally “thieves in law”) – a title associated with crime bosses from the post-Soviet underworld, often explained for readers unfamiliar with the term<sup>28</sup>.

Articles even quoted experts emphasizing the “above-average professionalization” of Georgian criminals – e.g., the claim that Polish gangsters “weren’t even in the same sandbox as our (Georgian) thugs”, suggesting that Georgian perpetrators are substantially more dangerous than local ones<sup>29</sup>. Such statements, although opinion-based, gain epistemic authority when attributed to “experts”, and thus take on the status of facts. They construct the image of Georgians as a kind of “super-criminals” – rooted in the tradition of the post-Soviet mafia, with hierarchical structures, international connections, and levels of operational sophistication allegedly beyond the reach of standard policing methods.

In one television program, a former officer of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBŚ) even stated: “I think the shootout festival is just about to begin” – a metaphorical and alarmist forecast of escalating violence perpetrated by these cross-border gangs<sup>30</sup>. This imagery of an impending “shootout festival” exemplifies the extremely alarmist tone that deeply influences the social imagination.

The consequence of such discourse is stigmatization – the implicit suggestion that any Georgian may be inherently dangerous. No examples were found in mainstream media of efforts to balance this image – for example, by highlighting stories of law-abiding Georgian immigrants or providing a platform for diaspora

<sup>28</sup> S. Budzisz, *op. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>30</sup> *Gruzińskie gangi w Polsce. Były oficer CBŚ: „Festiwal strzelecki dopiero się zacznie”*, Polsat News, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvKE4rQ7TDY>> (22.08.2025).

representatives to disassociate themselves from criminal actors. The entire ethnic collective was cast as a backdrop for the actions of a few criminal subgroups.

This discursive practice fits into the mechanism of othering: the “foreign” is assigned to the category of the dangerous and deviant, while the majority population is positioned as the victim or potential target. It fosters social hostility (as will be further illustrated in subsequent sections). From the standpoint of framing theory, this constitutes a cultural-identity frame: the perceived threat is anchored in a specific national and cultural identity, which carries a far greater emotional charge than a purely pragmatic frame (e.g., “a spike in car thefts”).

In the Polish historical context, Eastern foreigners have been perceived variably – often positively, especially in the case of Georgians, traditionally associated with a friendly and culturally sympathetic nation. The reversal of this narrative – from Georgian as friend to Georgian as gangster – therefore represents a discursive shift that is likely to resonate particularly strongly within public consciousness.

The analyzed media portrayals reveal a clear intersection between journalistic discourse and political discourse. Media outlets readily quoted or referenced statements by political actors concerning crime among foreign nationals, thereby lending the issue a sense of state-level gravity and urgency. On one hand, the governing coalition (centrist-liberal at the time, 2024-2025) acknowledged the existence of the problem and announced countermeasures – which, paradoxically, may have reinforced the public perception that the threat was real and escalating. On the other hand, nationalist opposition parties (notably *Konfederacja*, as well as politicians from the previously ruling party) actively inflamed the atmosphere of threat, accusing the government of “uncontrolled immigration” and allegedly endangering public safety.

Media coverage featured statements such as MP Witold Tumanowicz’s assertion: “Poland is turning into a training ground for criminals due to mass and uncontrolled immigration”<sup>31</sup>. This is a notably forceful message – the metaphor of a “training ground for criminals” suggests that the country has become a lawless zone where foreign offenders operate with impunity. Moreover, the politician explicitly assigns blame to immigration policy – thus indirectly to the government. When media outlets quoted such remarks, they often became part of the ongoing political conflict, yet the informational effect was that a narrative of security crisis linked to immigration became increasingly entrenched in the public sphere<sup>32</sup>.

It is worth noting that even politicians attempting to de-escalate public sentiment were compelled to frame their statements in reference to the dominant narrative. For instance, the Mayor of Warsaw drew analogies with Polish gangs from the 1990s – thus acknowledging the severity of the problem, even if pre-

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<sup>31</sup> A. Sucharska, *op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> M. Pisarski, *op. cit.*

senting it as solvable; similarly, the Prime Minister promised firm action, implying that extraordinary measures were necessary. In their pursuit of sensationalism, media outlets often omitted follow-up clarifications or retractions – for example, the fact that the same Prime Minister, just days later, stated that the rise in immigrant crime had been successfully contained and the situation was under control, did not resonate nearly as strongly as his initial emotionally charged declaration about mass deportations. This illustrates a well-documented aspect of media logic: bad news travels farther than calming facts<sup>33</sup>.

The synergistic dynamic between media and politics was particularly visible at critical junctures – such as after the aforementioned article in the Plus Minus weekly (January 2025), which triggered several days of high-profile statements, policy proposals (e.g., stricter border controls, tougher deportation laws), and heated debate. Media outlets covered these developments as top news stories. As a result, a crisis-like perception may have emerged in society. As one commentator put it, the Polish debate began to exhibit the characteristics of a classical moral panic: a real but limited phenomenon was amplified and politicized to such a degree that public emotion detached from the actual scale of the problem<sup>34</sup>.

A crucial result of the discourse analysis lies not only in what is said, but in what is omitted. During the peak of the panic, leading news media largely excluded information that might have tempered the sensationalist framing. For example, none of the popular news outlets (during the initial wave of publications) explicitly reported the number of legally residing Georgian nationals in Poland and compared it to the number of those detained. Instead, they relied on catchy, alarmist slogans such as “one in ten Georgians...” – a claim which, as shown earlier, was inaccurate (the actual figure was closer to ~7%, and even this referred only to the legally registered population). It was only fact-checkers such as the platform *pravda.org.pl* that corrected this misrepresentation, revealing the inflation of the reported percentage.

However, these corrections and balanced analyses (e.g., an OKO.press article presenting actual data and the context of cooperation between Polish and Georgian authorities<sup>35</sup>) reached a significantly smaller audience than the original sensational claims. Mainstream discourse failed to deliver a clear message such as: “The share of foreign nationals in overall crime is low” or “Immigrants commit crimes at a lower rate than Polish citizens on a per capita basis”. Despite being critical to an accurate assessment of the situation, such facts were systematically omitted.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) reveals here the mechanism of manipulation through omission – a form of discursive strategy where media do not explicitly lie,

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<sup>33</sup> S. Budzisz, *op. cit.*

<sup>34</sup> M. Pisarski, *op. cit.*

<sup>35</sup> S. Budzisz, *op. cit.*

but rather suppress or ignore key facts, resulting in a distorted image of threat<sup>36</sup>.

In addition, little attention was given to the structural causes behind the reported incidents. Occasional mentions – such as the observation that law enforcement faces challenges in prosecuting Georgian offenders due to language barriers and a shortage of certified interpreters, leading to the dismissal of minor cases – received scant attention. Such insights would indicate that some instances of so-called “impunity” are due more to systemic inefficiencies than to the omnipotence of the Georgian mafia. However, these explanations were rarely emphasized – being insufficiently dramatic and incongruent with the dominant narrative of “powerless police vs. transnational gangs”.

Likewise, migration context – e.g., the fact that many Georgians arrived in Poland from third countries after the outbreak of war in Ukraine, often without stable employment or legal support, which may have increased their vulnerability to illegal activity – was largely absent from the media discourse. Coverage focused on outcomes (crime) rather than causes. This depoliticization and decontextualization of the problem is common in media-induced moral panics: the emphasis on immediate visuals (“gang caught”, “police raid”) distracts from systemic questions – such as whether immigration or integration policies have failed, or whether there are deficiencies in prevention and social support.

In summary, the media discourse at the peak of the debate surrounding Georgian criminality constructed a one-sided and exaggerated image. Its core elements included: sensationalism, ethnic categorization, negative generalization, selective reliance on expert voices or decontextualized statistics, and a political narrative centered on fear and public order. This portrayal bore all the hallmarks of a practical moral panic: hostility toward an “alien” group intensified, social anxiety escalated (evidenced, for instance, by spontaneous anti-immigrant demonstrations following several violent incidents), and media messaging reinforced public perceptions of crisis<sup>37</sup>.

At this point, it is instructive to quote the sociologist Professor Krzysztof Podemski: “Right-wing political forces in Poland often project onto our reality images borrowed from the West, playing on public fears. In sociology, this is known as generating a moral panic—they present Poland as a ‘haven of safety,’ while simultaneously propagating the myth of an ethnic crime wave, a claim not supported by MSWiA statistics”<sup>38</sup>.

The findings fully corroborate this diagnosis: official data did not justify the imagery of a “plague” of immigrant crime, and yet the myth of threat was both sown and cultivated by the media.

A valuable complement to the broader discursive picture is offered by the

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<sup>36</sup> *Pełny katalog ...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>37</sup> M. Pisarski, *op. cit.*

<sup>38</sup> *Socjolog: skala ...*, *op. cit.*

statements of individuals possessing specialized knowledge or holding key public offices. In contrast to the prevailing media narrative, several experts attempted to temper public sentiment and reintroduce empirical facts into the debate. As previously mentioned, Professor Krzysztof Podemski emphasized that the scale of migration-related challenges in Poland is significantly exaggerated, and that the proportion of immigrants remains relatively low. He warned against the normalization of grassroots militias and the fear-mongering directed at migrants, explicitly describing this phenomenon as a moral panic artificially incited by political actors. He further highlighted the positive economic contributions of immigrants (e.g., Ukrainians) and stressed that narratives imported from Western Europe are often inappropriately transposed onto the Polish context.

However, these more moderate voices typically appeared in specialist outlets (e.g., the Polish Press Agency or opinion weeklies), and their reach was markedly limited compared to the viral spread of sensationalist news stories.

Conversely, there were also expert voices acknowledging the existence of a real phenomenon – albeit in a measured and qualified manner. For example, Dr. Paweł Moczydłowski, a criminologist and former head of the prison service, noted in an interview with PAP that “organized crime among foreign nationals does not increase linearly; at some point it surpasses a critical threshold, spreads, and becomes significantly more dangerous”. This observation implies that if the number of criminally involved immigrants increases, there may be a tipping point beyond which problems escalate rapidly – thus justifying vigilance. However, it is likely that Moczydłowski intended this as a hypothetical scenario rather than a diagnosis of an existing condition. Nonetheless, his remarks were quoted in close proximity to statistics regarding the number of foreign nationals incarcerated in Poland, potentially amplifying the alarmist tone of the surrounding narrative.

Official statements from government agencies also played a key role. The spokesperson for the coordinator of the intelligence and security services released specific figures: in 2024, Polish police arrested 1,895 Georgian nationals; 136 were placed in pre-trial detention; 322 were held in prisons; and 2,589 Georgian citizens were expelled from Poland (including through administrative deportations). Although the spokesperson clarified that not all deportees had committed serious crimes – some were expelled for illegal residence or unauthorized work – these figures, especially when issued by a high-ranking security official, had a considerable impact on public perception. The presence of concrete numbers in official communications reinforced the impression that a significant issue was at hand.

Importantly, the police and the Ministry of the Interior and Administration (MS-WiA) also emphasized that foreign nationals are responsible for only around 5% of all recorded crimes in Poland; however, this portion of the message received substantially less media attention. Meanwhile, the government’s official position

centered on assuring the public that remedial measures were being implemented. These included intensified international cooperation and the dismantling of organized criminal networks (with the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBSP) breaking up 159 such groups in 2024, including several with international reach).

While such information could suggest that the state retains control over the situation, in the climate of a moral panic, it was more often interpreted as evidence that extraordinary measures were necessary in response to a severe and escalating threat.

Foreign experts, including individuals from Georgia itself, also appeared within the analyzed discourse. Lieutenant Colonel Laszha Bregvadze, cited by OKO.press, confirmed the presence in Poland of several so-called “vory v zakone” – high-ranking bosses of the Georgian mafia who relocated to Europe following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine<sup>39</sup>. He provided historical context for the Georgian criminal underworld and the anti-mafia reforms implemented under President Saakashvili, explaining the origins of these criminal “emigrants”. His insights lend credibility to the thesis that certain segments of organized crime have indeed transferred their activities to EU territory, in part facilitated by visa-free travel arrangements. While Bregvadze stressed that the majority of Georgian migrants relocate for peaceful purposes (employment, education), he also noted: “we must not forget that the doors have also opened for our criminal world”.

Such a statement – despite its balanced tone – supplies the media with a compelling narrative: an external confirmation that the “Georgian mafia” is a recognized transnational phenomenon, with similar challenges reported in countries such as Italy, Spain, Greece, and the Czech Republic. For Polish audiences, this can function as a kind of panic legitimization: if Western Europe is also struggling with the Georgian mafia, then Polish concerns appear all the more justified.

In contrast, some experts and investigative journalists attempted to advocate for rational policy responses and to distance themselves from ethnically charged alarmism. In selected analytical pieces (e.g., the aforementioned OKO.press article), emphasis was placed on the necessity of strengthening cross-border police cooperation, improving language skills among law enforcement officers, and investing in certified interpreters – instead of scapegoating an entire nationality group. However, such substantive proposals rarely cut through the noise of emotionally charged media coverage.

In summary, the expert and official voices were fragmented. Some reinforced the atmosphere of fear – deliberately or inadvertently – by citing incomplete data or offering emotionally framed commentary. Others challenged the dominant narrative, explicitly identifying the mechanisms of moral panic. Unfortunately, within the spiraling media dynamics, these moderating voices were often drowned out. The expert discourse in mainstream media was selectively filtered:

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<sup>39</sup> S. Budzisz, *op. cit.*

content that reinforced the pre-constructed frame (e.g., mafia warnings) was highlighted, while tempering elements (e.g., “statistics do not confirm a crime wave”) were sidelined. As a result, even reputable commentators were drawn into the prevailing narrative architecture.

This pattern reflects broader post-truth discursive practices: facts and opinions become entangled, while emotional appeal and political expediency shape public perception. The findings presented above outline a complex dynamic: on one hand, empirical data points to a degree of elevated criminal activity within a narrow subset of Georgian immigrants; on the other hand, this information was processed and amplified through a media-political discourse that constructed a new folk devil in the form of the “Georgian gangster”. To fully interpret these findings, it is necessary to revisit them through the lens of theoretical frameworks and reflect on their broader implications for media ethics, immigration policy, and societal cohesion.

## Discussion

The confrontation of quantitative findings with the qualitative discourse analysis reveals a fundamental discrepancy: the actual scale of the phenomenon is small, whereas the scale of the social and media reaction has been immense. This situation constitutes a textbook example of the disproportionality described in moral panic theory. As demonstrated, the share of foreign nationals (including Georgians) in overall criminality remains marginal; nevertheless, so-called “Georgian criminality” became one of the central topics of Polish public debate at the turn of 2024 and 2025. Public emotions – fear, outrage, demands for harsh countermeasures – were disproportionately intense relative to the actual level of threat. This is a classic manifestation of moral panic, where, as Cohen famously observed, “an alleged threat to social order arouses widespread concern, although it is objectively exaggerated and unfounded”.

This discrepancy becomes even more intelligible when interpreted within broader debates on immigration and security. In a climate shaped by risk sensitivity and securitized narratives, selected migrant groups may be discursively constructed as threats requiring exceptional control. Importantly, this process is not applied uniformly: other post-Soviet immigrant communities in Poland—especially Ukrainians and Belarusians—have been framed through markedly different dominant narratives, which helps explain why comparable references to “foreign crime” did not generate similarly intense moral panic dynamics. The Georgian case thus illustrates how framing and agenda-setting mechanisms interact with security-oriented interpretations of migration to amplify fear beyond what aggregate crime shares would empirically justify.

To further elucidate this case, it may be analyzed through the lens of the five

canonical criteria of moral panic:

1. Public Concern (concern): There is no doubt that a strong sense of social anxiety was aroused. Media reported spontaneous protests against immigrants in several cities following high-profile criminal incidents. The Internet became inflamed – comment sections and social media were filled with posts expressing fear of “Georgian bandits” and calling for tighter migration policies. The topic permeated everyday conversations and became the “story of the day”. From an ethnographic perspective, one can clearly observe an atmosphere of heightened collective anxiety surrounding the issue.
2. Hostility toward the Group (hostility): This dimension was particularly evident. Media discourse effectively stigmatized the entire Georgian community as potentially dangerous. The language of public debate included sweeping generalizations such as “Georgian = thief/mafioso,” and far-right politicians openly called for halting immigration from Georgia. The category of the “foreign criminal” was thus imbued with unambiguously negative connotations, which likely translated into increased distrust or even aversion toward Georgians encountered in everyday life. Anecdotal signals emerged, for instance, of landlords refusing to rent apartments to Georgian tenants – something not previously observed. The element of hostility characteristic of moral panic was therefore clearly present.
3. Apparent Consensus (consensus): In today’s pluralistic media environment, full unanimity is rare; nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the principal political and media forces concurred on the existence of a problem. Differences concerned primarily the attribution of blame (government vs. opposition) rather than the existence of the phenomenon itself. Even liberal media did not deny the presence of Georgian gangs; rather, they cautioned against extending blame to the entire community. Ultimately, however, the prevailing message – “something must be done” – became universal. One can thus speak of a reactive consensus: virtually no one in the public sphere claimed, “this is fiction, there is no threat”; on the contrary, the dominant view was that immigrant crime constituted a real issue requiring intervention. This consensus extended to the public: opinion polls – had they been conducted – would likely have shown a high percentage of respondents supporting stricter controls on Georgian immigration due to media reports of crime. The discourse thereby constructed a new social norm of perception: “Georgian immigrants pose a threat”.
4. Disproportionality (disproportionality): This, as discussed, lies at the heart of the phenomenon. Political, media, and social reactions were

disproportionately intense compared to empirical evidence. Proposed countermeasures – such as reinstating border controls, mass deportations, or even restrictions within the Schengen area – represent extreme and economically costly steps that are difficult to justify on the basis of a few isolated crimes committed by foreign nationals. History demonstrates that moral panics frequently result in repressive measures that persist long after the initial emotional surge subsides. In this case, even the temporary reintroduction of border checks with Germany and Lithuania in July 2025 (officially justified as a response to “migrant smuggling”) reflected the lingering panic atmosphere. Disproportionality also manifests in the narrative structure itself: minor events on a national scale were elevated to the status of top national news stories.

5. Volatility (volatility): Moral panics are episodic by nature – they erupt suddenly and dissipate just as quickly. By August 2025, clear signs of topic fatigue had emerged: media attention shifted to other issues, and the election campaign refocused public discourse elsewhere. The proposed referendum on immigration (initiated by the opposition) never materialized, and restrictive bills stalled in parliamentary procedures. One might say the moral panic had fulfilled its political and media function and began to fade once new sensational topics entered the public agenda. Some residual effects remained – such as permanently harsher rhetoric and heightened police vigilance toward immigrants – but the issue itself ceased to dominate headlines once the next “crisis” emerged.

The dominance of particular frames has had a profound impact on social perception: most Poles most likely overestimated the scale of the threat. As research on crime perception indicates, people tend to believe that crime is rising – even when statistics are falling – if the media discuss it extensively. A similar cognitive shortcut likely emerged here: “Georgian = crime”, resulting in disproportionate fear (for example, someone might hesitate to hire a Georgian employee, although the statistical likelihood of that person committing a crime is extremely low). This demonstrates the power of the media in shaping social reality.

The results of this discourse study carry important broader implications. First, they illustrate how dangerous it can be to stigmatize an immigrant group on the basis of the actions of a few of its members. Once entrenched, such stereotypes are extremely difficult to eradicate. The Georgian community in Poland may struggle for years with the label of “those from the mafia”, which could hinder its members from finding employment, housing, or the trust of local communities. This is an example of how discourse can generate tangible social consequences – exclusion, discrimination, and intergroup tension. We thus observe the moral dimension of media responsibility: the pursuit of sensation produces concrete

victims – innocent people affected by collective blame.

Second, the analysis revealed that moral panic can be used instrumentally for political purposes. In this case, it served as a tool for garnering support among certain constituencies (for example, the slogan “Stop immigration” became one of the key rallying points in the Konfederacja party’s election campaign). The government also adopted a hardline rhetoric to appear protective of public safety. Unfortunately, policymaking under the pressure of moral panic is rarely rational. It risks producing excessively repressive laws that may violate human rights (for example, arbitrary deportations) or lead to ethnic profiling in police operations. It can already be assumed that, following this episode, police officers are more likely to stop and scrutinize people speaking Georgian or having a Caucasian appearance – a disturbing practice reminiscent of racial profiling.

Third, this study makes a significant contribution to understanding the role of the media in creating moral climates within society. It shows how easily, in the absence of in-depth and responsible journalism, the temptation to pursue clickability at the expense of accuracy can prevail. In the era of fast-paced online media and social networks, moral panics can spread faster than ever before. A single viral post containing manipulated statistics (as in the case of the infamous “1 in 10” figure) may send an irreversible message into the public sphere. Our study confirms that fact-checking and voices of reason emerge later – and do not always reach the mass consciousness. This constitutes a warning sign regarding the health of the information ecosystem and underscores the need to strengthen verification initiatives and journalistic ethics.

From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), it can be stated that the discourse on “Georgian criminality” served a specific ideological function. Indirectly, it reinforced nationalist and anti-immigration narratives, aligning with a broader trend observed in many countries – portraying immigrants as a threat to social order (whether economic, cultural, or, in this case, criminal). The language used – such as militarized metaphors (“shooting festival”) or medicalized expressions like “plague of ethnic crime” – helped naturalize the notion that immigration equals danger. In this way, the discourse played a role in the struggle for hegemonic narrative power concerning migration in Poland. Unfortunately, it appears that in this episode the xenophobic narrative prevailed – potentially leading to a “fortress” migration policy (tougher regulations, less openness). This demonstrates how language shapes political reality: the words and imagery of the media paved the way for concrete decisions and attitudes.

CDA also reveals that within this discourse, the interests of power – broadly understood as both political power and the symbolic power of the media – were protected at the expense of a group unable to defend itself. Georgian immigrants do not possess comparable media capital; few publications included their perspectives (for instance, interviews with law-abiding Georgians condemning

criminals or describing their own struggles with rising public distrust). Their silence in the discourse is symptomatic: they became the subject of discussion but not its participant. This is a typical inequality in discourses about the “Other”: people are spoken about, rarely with. CDA seeks to expose such discursive asymmetries, emphasizing the need to give voice to the stigmatized side.

Despite its broad scope, this study has certain limitations. It focused on media and official communications, without directly examining how these messages affected society (for example, through surveys or interviews with audiences). Conclusions about public perception are therefore inferred indirectly, based on theory and observations of manifestations and online reactions. Direct research into public opinion could confirm – or challenge – these findings. Furthermore, social media and grassroots communication (beyond a few key examples) were not examined in detail, even though in today’s information environment they play a major role in amplifying panic. This constitutes a potential field for further research – for example, how rumors and memes about “Georgian thieves” circulated online and shaped popular imaginations.

Another valuable avenue would be a comparative perspective: to investigate whether similar discourses emerged in other countries of the region (e.g., the Czech Republic or the Baltic states, which also recorded cases of Georgian criminal groups). Did moral panics develop there as well, or did other reactions prevail? Such comparison could help identify factors specific to the Polish context.

### **Recommendations**

Although this article is primarily diagnostic and analytical in nature, it is worth outlining certain recommendations arising from the findings.

First, for the media: there is a need for greater responsibility in reporting crimes involving minorities. Rather than fueling sensationalism, journalists should provide context – for example, always referencing overall crime statistics, avoiding generalizations of guilt to entire ethnic groups, and clearly distinguishing politicians’ opinions from factual reporting. Newsrooms should consider creating ethical guidelines for covering sensitive topics (such as immigrant crime), analogous to existing standards for reporting on suicides or sexual minorities.

Second, for policymakers: migration and criminal policy must be data-driven rather than emotion-driven. Instead of yielding to panic-induced pressure, authorities should invest in research and evidence-based analyses – for instance, determining whether legal loopholes exploited by foreign gangs truly exist and how they can be closed without harming law-abiding migrants. Combating organized crime requires international cooperation and operational action, not collective penalization of entire diasporas. Decisions made ad hoc under emotional strain often prove ineffective or even counterproductive (for example, mass de-

portations may temporarily remove the problem but fail to solve it systemically, while also damaging diplomatic relations).

Third, for civil society: there is a need to build social resilience against moral panics. Media education should teach audiences to recognize signs of exaggerated narratives and to verify information independently (for example, consulting publicly available statistics instead of trusting sensationalized headlines). Non-governmental organizations working on migrant rights could respond more rapidly to false narratives by providing counter-facts and highlighting the other side – stories of honest immigrants and their contributions to society.

## Conclusion

Using the example of the media representation of the so-called “Georgian criminality” in Poland, this study analyzed the mechanisms that lead to the formation of a discourse marked by moral panic and hostile stereotypes. The research revealed a clear discrepancy between reality – measured by objective data – and its image constructed in the public sphere. While the facts showed that crimes committed by Georgian citizens constituted only a marginal fraction of overall criminal activity and mainly involved petty offenses, the media and political narratives produced a vision of a major security crisis allegedly caused by the influx of dangerous foreign gangs. As a result, a collective moral panic emerged, in which the “Georgian” became a folk devil – the object of collective fear and aversion.

The conducted analyses made it possible to identify specific narrative practices: the sensationalized emphasis on rare incidents, the ethnic categorization of offenders, the use of exaggerated statistics and quotes reinforcing the “threat” frame, while simultaneously omitting mitigating context. Statements by some experts and politicians further legitimized this narrative, lending it a veneer of objectivity. Consequently, this discourse did not merely describe reality – it actively produced it, influencing both social attitudes and political decisions.

This article contributes to the body of literature on media, migration, and moral panic, offering a detailed case study rooted in the Polish context of 2023-2025. It demonstrates that even in a country with relatively low levels of immigration, strong anti-immigration narratives can emerge whenever conducive conditions arise – in this case, a few sensational criminal incidents. This supports the universal thesis that the media play a pivotal role in defining what society perceives as a threat. The applied theoretical frameworks – moral panic theory, framing theory, and critical discourse analysis (CDA) – proved useful and complementary in capturing the multiple dimensions of this phenomenon: emotional, cognitive, and structural-linguistic.

In conclusion, the moral panic surrounding “Georgian criminality” in Poland

was largely a media-discursive construct, built upon a kernel of truth (the existence of certain active criminal groups composed of Georgians) but overgrown with layers of myth, simplification, and prejudice. The course of events illustrated the fundamental importance of linguistic and communicative responsibility – both on the part of journalists and public figures. The absence of such responsibility leads to the sowing of social fear and the deepening of divisions.

It is hoped that the findings of this analysis will serve in the future as both a warning and an encouragement – a warning against the consequences of unreflective sensationalism, and an encouragement to pursue a more balanced, fact-based, and context-aware public discourse on complex social issues such as migration and security. Only by grounding debate in evidence and nuance – rather than in sensationalism and prejudice – can societies avoid collective hysteria and find genuinely effective solutions to real problems.

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