

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Wha's like us? The desecuritisation of migration as ontological security-seeking in Scotland

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Abstract

Over the last decade, the Scottish Government have pursued a positive, highly visible immigration politics, despite Scotland lacking formal immigration powers and being enveloped within a United Kingdom that has simultaneously pursued an increasingly securitised approach. With securitisation intensifying globally, coupled with a rise in, and political success of, anti-immigration parties and actors, this article investigates the question of *why* the Scottish Government has pursued a desecuritisating approach – a neglected strand of (de)securitisation studies that principally focuses on the *how*. We draw on insights from ontological security studies to investigate the Scottish Government's desecuritisation activity between 2014 and 2024, demonstrating that, whilst there are rationalist-materialist explanations, desecuritisation was not inevitable. Instead, by exploring the relationship between immigration and the construction of the Scottish self at the ontological level we can more fully understand the drivers behind desecuritisation. Pursuing a desecuritisated immigration politics is shown, first, to support the Scottish Government's core autobiographical narrative about who 'Scotland' is (open, welcoming, and internationalist), and second, through nurturing a Lacanian fantasy, to be affectively rewarding. Last, the article contributes to the (re)conceptualisation of linearity and temporality in (de)securitisation studies, showcasing contemporary-orientated desecuritisation moves dovetailing with moves aimed at an institutional 'future-proofing' of desecuritisated immigration governance.

Keywords: desecuritisation; immigration; Lacan; ontological security; Scotland; securitisation

Introduction

Here's tae us. Wha's like us? Gey few and there a'deed!

Here's to us. Who's like us? Very few and they're all dead! (translation)¹

Over the last decade, the Scottish Government, despite not possessing formal powers over immigration, has invested significant political capital in immigration politics, pursuing a highly visible politics of positivity on the issues of immigration, asylum, and refuge. Despite limited policy control, and Scotland being enveloped within a United Kingdom (UK) that has simultaneously pursued an intense securitisation of migration,² this desecuritisation has been shown to produce tangible impacts on migrant welfare, albeit with limited scope, driving greater access to

¹A historic Scots drinking toast, oft imbued with a moderate to heavy irony, yet associating Scottishness with rarity and excellence.

²Frances Webber, 'On the creation of the UK's "hostile environment"', *Race & Class*, 60:4 (2018), pp. 76–87; Thom Tyerman and Travis van Isacker, "Here there be monsters": Confronting the (post)coloniality of Britain's borders, *Review of International Studies*, 51:3 (2025), pp. 409–429.

basic human rights across housing, health, education, and political equality,³ alongside supporting higher levels of well-being.⁴ In a context where the securitisation of immigration has intensified across the globe in recent decades,⁵ and there has been an increasing rise in and political success of populist, anti-immigration parties and actors, the question of *why* the Scottish Government has pursued a contrasting approach is intriguing and, as yet, underexplored.

The literature on substates in international politics suggests that political explanations offer a partial explanation. In short, pursuing desecuritisation offers the Scottish National Party (SNP) – as a secessionist-orientated party in Scotland that has governed in the Scottish Parliament since 2007 – a valuable opportunity to differentiate itself from the rest of the UK.⁶ Moreover, in connecting with fundamental markers of statehood, sovereignty, and legitimacy, immigration governance provides an especially useful totem for state building. Aligned with the politics of state-building, rationalist economic explanations provide another partial explanation.⁷ In a context of acute demographic pressures rising from ageing populations and unbalanced working-age population ratios, significant challenges are arising to the economic prosperity and sustainability of many states across the EU and beyond.⁸

However, these pressures are not unique to Scotland, and these explanations do not get at the fundamental motivations for such an enthusiastic desecuritisation. Other decisions could have been made to attain political goals, whilst, as Brexit, or indeed the securitisation of immigration pursued by states facing demographic challenges demonstrates, economic interests are not wholly reliable drivers of state behaviour. To understand Scotland's overtly positive immigration position, we argue, it is necessary to better understand the 'Scottish' self at the ontological level. For that, we turn to ontological security studies (OSS).⁹ In brief, ontological security concerns the phenomenological security of the self, which 'requires a stable and positive self-perception which is maintained through autobiographical narratives' to help accommodate the contingency that underpins life and navigate our social relations.¹⁰

Two points are of note. First, as the empirical analysis demonstrates, pursuing a desecuritized, positive immigration politics supports *the* core autobiographical narrative of the Scottish

³Ian Paterson and Gareth Mulvey, 'Simultaneous success and failure: The curious case of the (failed) securitisation of asylum seekers and refugees in the United Kingdom and Scotland', *European Security*, 32:4 (2023), pp. 656–75.

⁴Rare survey research disaggregating the UK nations has demonstrated that Syrian refugees settled in Scotland, compared with those in England, reported significantly more positive evaluations of 'key institutions/actors' (including a 90 per cent vs. 61 per cent evaluation of the general populations of Scotland and England) dovetailing with higher levels of reported happiness (49 per cent vs. 30 per cent). See Gareth Mulvey, Dimitris Skleparis, and Brian Boyle, 'Territorial variance in the UK's refugee politics and its consequences: Young Syrian refugees in England and Scotland', *Environment and Planning: Politics and Space*, 41:5 (2023), pp. 958–75.

⁵Jef Huysmans, *The Politics of Insecurity: Fear, Migration and Asylum in the EU* (Routledge, 2006); Philippe Bourbeau, *The Securitization of Migration: A Study of Movement and Order* (Routledge, 2011); Valeria Bello, 'The spiralling of the securitisation of migration in the EU: From the management of a "crisis" to a governance of human mobility?', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48:6 (2020), pp. 1327–44.

⁶Daniel Béland and André Lecours, 'The politics of territorial solidarity', *Comparative Political Studies*, 38:6 (2005), pp. 676–703; Bernhard Reinsberg and Sebastian Dellepiane, 'The domestic sources of substate foreign policymaking: Determinants of subnational development cooperation across European regions', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30:5 (2023), pp. 922–47.

⁷Francisco Aldecoa and Michael Keating, *Paradiplomacy in Action: The Foreign Relations of Subnational Governments* (Frank Cass & Co., 1999).

⁸United Nations, 'World Social Report 2023: Leaving No One Behind in an Ageing World' (2023), available at: <https://desapublications.un.org/publications/world-social-report-2023-leaving-no-one-behind-ageing-world>].

⁹R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (Penguin Books, 1990 [1960]); Caterina Kinnvall, 'Globalization and religious nationalism: Self, identity, and the search for ontological security', *Political Psychology*, 25:5 (2004), pp. 741–67; Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), pp. 341–70.

¹⁰C. Nicolai L. Gellwitzki, Anne-Marie Houde, Lauren Rogers, and Ben Roshier, 'Keep calm and carry on? Fissure, perception, and narrative contestation following the demise of the crown', *International Political Sociology*, 18:4 (2024), pp. 1–18.)

Government about who Scotland and its people are: open, welcoming, internationalist, and, at times implicitly or explicitly, morally and ethically superior to British nationalist identities asserted – in discourse and policy – from governing parties at Westminster. These identity narratives and related ontological security dynamics thus facilitate desecuritisation to be the central framing architecture for how immigration should be understood and approached, as only a pro-immigration politics – and one more so than that of the UK central government – is fully congruent with core autobiographical narratives and thus supportive of Scotland's ontological security-seeking. Second, the pursuit of a desecuritized immigration politics is, from a Lacanian perspective, affectively appealing. In Lacanian approaches to OSS, the subject is thrown into a world not of its making and is therefore always constituted by a lack that it is forever seeking to fill in order to attain ontological security.¹¹ The Scottish self, from a nationalist perspective, is constituted by a lack of statehood. As control over immigration policy is a central pillar of statehood, attempting to discursively and politically define a distinctly *Scottish* immigration outlook is an attempt, however futile, to fill this lack and attain a sense of ontological security and the realisation of a complete and whole Scottish self. Through insights from Lacanian OSS, this article contributes to (de)securitisation studies, helping to move beyond analyses of *how* desecuritisation can or does occur to *why* desecuritisation of specific issues and in specific contexts may be pursued and be affectively rewarding.

In addition, the article makes a further contribution to the refinement of (de)securitisation theory on the axes of temporality and linearity.¹² The Scottish Government's discourse, policy, and practice is both simultaneously a desecuritisation move with implications in the present *and* represents a novel example of future-orientated desecuritisation, with an extensive pre-emptive policy architecture being created to ground the approach to any future immigration governance in Scotland. Instructive for understanding substate actors of every shape more broadly (federal states, regions, cities etc.), this article in turn generates important insights for understanding contemporary Scottish immigration politics and the stability, or otherwise, of the Scottish Government's immigration policy platform in the future. A task even more pressing in a context where the UK-level securitisation of immigration is entrenched and a second vote on Scottish independence in the medium term remains a possibility.

We begin with our theoretical framework, elucidating pertinent elements of securitisation, desecuritisation, and ontological security studies. The methodology and analytical framework follow. We then offer a three-step development of our argument. First, we show how the Scottish Government has worked to desecuritize immigration, discursively and practically. Second, departing from insights on paradiplomacy we outline the rationalist and political perspectives that offer *some* explanation as to why Scotland has pursued this desecuritisng strategy but that fall short of providing a compelling reason as to why such preferences are cultivated in the first instance. Third, we demonstrate how exploring the desecuritisation of immigration through a Lacanian ontological security lens allows us to understand how and why the preference for desecuritisation is formed, and how it becomes sustainable through its affective appeal. We end by arguing that, whilst Lacanian fantasies are destined to remain unfulfilled, chasing fantasies can nevertheless encourage an egalitarian and emancipatory politics.

¹¹Ty Solomon, "'I wasn't angry, because I couldn't believe it was happening': Affect and discourse in responses to 9/11", *Review of International Studies*, 38:4 (2012), pp. 907–28.

¹²Mark B. Salter and Can E. Mutlu, 'Securitisation and Diego Garcia', *Review of International Studies*, 39:4 (2013), pp. 815–34; Philippe Bourbeau and Juha A. Vuori, 'Security, resilience and desecuritization: Multidirectional moves and dynamics', *Critical Studies on Security*, 3:3 (2015), pp. 253–68; Jonathan Luke Austin and Philippe Beaulieu-Brossard, '(De)securitisation dilemmas: Theorising the simultaneous enactment of securitisation and desecuritisation', *Review of International Studies*, 44:2 (2018), pp. 301–23.

Theoretical framework

Securitisation and desecuritisation

The concept of 'securitisation', as originally developed by the 'Copenhagen School' (CS), captures the socially constructed, intersubjective elevation of certain issues into the realm of 'security'.¹³ Concerns over 'security' tending towards a Schmittian, adversarial logic and a politics that circumvents regular democratic processes (slow deliberation, oversight, evidence-based decision-making etc.) led the CS to advocate that 'security should be seen as a negative, as a failure to deal with issues as normal politics'.¹⁴ Thus, 'in the abstract desecuritization is the ideal'.¹⁵

Initially, desecuritisation was loosely conceptualised as the reverse of securitisation, the demotion of issues from the security realm to one of 'normal politics' or to the evaporation of the issue from the political sphere entirely. Yet, as insights from the Paris School approach to securitisation underline, securitisation is comprised of an extensive, sedimented bricolage of security instruments that will not simply vanish because of a contemporary shift in how the issue is approached.¹⁶ Thus, for desecuritisation to have truly occurred there must be a 'termination of institutional facts'¹⁷ related to a securitisation. This conceptualisation of desecuritisation helps disentangle desecuritisation as a process of activities that move towards desecuritisation and desecuritisation as an outcome.

A vital strand of scholarship, therefore, sought to conceptualise how the *process* of desecuritisation occurred.¹⁸ From these pioneering efforts, Balzacq¹⁹ initiated a productive shift to study different approaches to *contesting* securitisation, not all of which aim at desecuritisation as an outcome, with some aiming instead at maintaining an alternative security politics. This shift to contestation dovetails with broader problematisations of linearity and temporality in securitisation processes. In demonstrating securitisation to operate as an iterative process comprised of moves and counter-moves, as opposed to a single, decisive, transformative act, the possibility is created for desecuritisation moves and processes to occur simultaneously with securitisation,²⁰ or even for a politics of desecuritisation to be pre-emptively launched in advance of securitisation.²¹ From an initial proposition of 'silencing' as a means to forestall securitisation,²² Bourbeau and Vuori²³ emphasise a more 'active' political process, where 'desecuritization moves – both in terms of discourse and practice – can be used in a pre-emptive manner before the threshold of securitization is reached'. Thus, whilst the above underlines desecuritisation as an outcome as a termination of the

¹³Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Lynne Rienner Publishing, 1998). For the latest review of securitisation theory, see Georgios Karyotis, Ian Paterson, and Andrew Judge, 'Understanding securitization success: A new analytical framework', *International Studies Review*, 27:1 (2025), pp. 1–28.

¹⁴Buzan et al., *Security*, p. 29.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Didier Bigo, 'Security and immigration: Toward a critique of the governmentality of unease', *Alternatives*, 27 (2002), pp. 63–92; Jef Huysmans, 'What's in an act? On security speech acts and little security nothings', *Security Dialogue*, 42:4–5 (2011), pp. 371–83.

¹⁷Juha A. Vuori, 'Religion bites: Fulungong, securitization/desecuritization in the People's Republic of China', in Thierry Balzacq (ed.), *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve* (Routledge, 2011), p. 191.

¹⁸Jef Huysmans, 'Migrants as a security problem: Dangers of "securitizing" societal issues', in Robert Miles and Dietrich Thranhardt (eds), *Migration and European Integration: The Dynamics of Inclusion and Exclusion* (Pinter Publishers, 1995), pp. 53–72; Lene Hansen, 'Reconstructing desecuritisation: The normative-political in the Copenhagen School and directions for how to apply it', *Review of International Studies*, 38:3 (2012), pp. 525–46.

¹⁹Thierry Balzacq (ed.), *Contesting Security: Strategies and Logics* (Routledge, 2015).

²⁰Austin and Beaulieu-Brossard, '(De)securitisation dilemmas'; Ian Paterson, 'Contesting security: Multiple modalities, NGOs, and the security-migration nexus in Scotland', *European Journal of International Security*, 8:2 (2023), pp. 172–91; Paterson and Mulvey, 'Simultaneous success and failure'.

²¹Bourbeau and Vuori, 'Security, resilience and desecuritization'.

²²Ole Wæver, 'The EU as a security actor: Reflections from a pessimistic constructivist on post-sovereign security orders', in Morten Kelstrup and Michael C. Williams, *International Relations Theory and the Politics of European Integration: Power Security and Community* (Routledge, 2002), pp. 250–94 (p. 254).

²³Bourbeau and Vuori, 'Security, resilience and desecuritization', p. 259.

‘institutional facts’, it can also be understood as moves that effectively prevent ‘the construction, or solidification’ of the institutional facts of a securitisation arising in the first place.²⁴ As detailed below, this article demonstrates that these two visions of desecuritisation can occur in tandem.

Yet, despite significant advances in our understanding of *how* desecuritisation can occur, the theoretical and conceptual tools developed to date are ill-equipped to generate a robust understanding of *why* desecuritisation is pursued. With securitisation theory being designed to help understand *how* security is created, this is perhaps unsurprising. Equally, certain specific strategies of desecuritisation carry justificatory foundations (e.g., in Huysmans’ Objectivist strategy, if X is not objectively a threat, we ought to desecuritize it; or in Hansen’s replacement strategy, if Y is a bigger threat than X, we must focus on Y, etc.). Most importantly, however, as outlined above, why desecuritisation would be sought can be located in political preferences articulated by the CS and other pioneers²⁵ theorising desecuritisation, that is, a wariness towards emergency security politics that reliably undermines core principles of liberal democratic politics. However, limited insight is provided into the deeper foundations of *why* these strategies and overarching approaches are adopted by actors in the first place, *why* they are perceived as desirable, and *why* they are then permissible and facilitated. For this we must understand the ontological motivations of the self. That is, who the self is, or who does the self wish to be(come). Once this is understood, the actions taken by the self to manifest this idealised version can be better situated and understood. For this we turn to the field of ontological security studies (OSS).²⁶

Ontological security

Ontological security concerns the security of the *self* – the confidence we have in the stability and continuity of our *self as being*. Specifically, ontological security ‘requires a stable and positive self-perception which is maintained through autobiographical narratives’²⁷ in order to keep existential anxieties at bay.

Browning and Joenniemi²⁸ have made explicit the tendency in ontological security studies (OSS) towards securitisation as a way of securing identity and critiqued the ‘problematic association whereby securitization...is seen to enhance identity-related stability and therefore also ontological security, whereas desecuritization processes promoting change are viewed as fundamentally destabilizing.’ This securitisation of subjectivity leads to the conservative bias in OSS; that change is something to be avoided as it is necessarily predicated on uncertainty and therefore leads to ontological anxiety. Following Rossdale’s²⁹ critique of the tendency towards maintaining the status

²⁴Ibid., p. 260.

²⁵Huysmans, ‘Migrants as a security problem’.

²⁶The role of emotions in securitisation, whilst central – with fear, anxiety, and unease being core components of threat construction and management in foundational theorisations from Copenhagen and Paris – initially lacked extensive attention. See Eric Van Rythoven, ‘Learning to feel, learning to fear? Emotions, imaginaries, and limits in the politics of securitization’, *Security Dialogue*, 46:5 (2015), pp. 458–75; Aurora Ganz, ‘Emotions and securitisation: A new materialist discourse analysis’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 30:2 (2024), pp. 280–305. More recent interventions that have disentangled physical and ontological security (see Bahar Rumelili [ed.], *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties* [Routledge, 2015]) and fear and anxiety (see Bahar Rumelili, ‘Integrating anxiety into international relations theory: Hobbes, existentialism, and ontological security’, *International Theory*, 12:2 [2020], pp. 257–72) have generated key insights into the process of how securitisation occurs and why it is difficult to undo. In spotlighting why desecuritisation may be ontologically desirable, we aim to bolster these fruitful efforts to connect securitisation with insights from the ‘emotional turn’ in IR.

²⁷Gellwitski et al., ‘Keep calm and carry on?’, p. 3.

²⁸Chris S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, ‘Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 31–47.

²⁹Chris Rossdale, ‘Enclosing Critique: The Limits of Ontological Security’, *International Political Sociology*, 9:4 (2015), pp. 369–386.

quo in OSS, recent scholarship has endeavoured to address this conservative bias and make space for the productive potential of anxiety and change, and the ethical potential of anxiety.³⁰

Browning and Joenniemi³¹ argue that, by returning to the philosophical foundations of OSS, it is possible to sketch a route to move beyond this conservative straightjacket and identify a reflexive ontological security-seeking that is capable of accommodating or even actively seeking change.³² Invoking Heidegger, they argue that ‘everyday being – merely going on – is not enough. In general, actors do not just want to go on (to survive), they want their going on to be meaningful and fulfilling.’ In this vein, the ‘psychoanalytic turn’ in OSS, drawing on the work of Jacques Lacan, conceives of ontological security as the ‘security of becoming’, rather than the Giddensian focus on ‘security of being’.³³ This article contributes to this growing body of research, making clear how the active pursuit of change is central to ‘Scotland’s’ ontological security-seeking practices. For our purposes, then, Rogers³⁴ definition of ontological security as ‘less about stability and more about coherence, bracketing out everyday anxieties by narrating oneself into being’ is most useful as it allows space to explore how the Scottish self seeks ontological security through change.

It is worth noting here that the ‘self’ in state-level ontological security generally takes one of two constructions.³⁵ One is that the state can be conceived of as a person in its own right that acts as a coherent whole. The second is that elites act to make the state appear *as if* a coherent whole. We adopt the second approach. Therefore, phrases such as ‘Scottish identity’ or the ‘Scottish self’ do not aim to suggest there is a real, immutable ‘Scottish’ identity or ‘self’ or that conceptions of such will be universally shared. Rather, they are shorthand for the identities that, over the analytical period, the nationalist, secession-seeking Scottish Government has promoted as ‘Scottish’ and central to what ‘Scotland’ and its people, as an imagined self, is/are or should be.

Psychoanalytical approaches in OSS help us understand this will to change in order to achieve ontological security. In this paper we follow Brassett and Browning³⁶ in using ‘Lacanian conceptions of the inherently incomplete subject driven by inevitably unfulfilled desires for fulfilment while drawing on the “toolkit” of ontological security-seeking mechanisms identified with more Giddensian readings’ on the basis that both Giddensian and Lacanian OSS are predicated on the impossibility of a pre-social self and centre the relationality of the subject within a broader social/symbolic order.³⁷ Furthermore, in order to understand Scotland’s desecuritisation of immigration we need to understand both the internalised Scottish self and how that manifests in relation to its most significant salient other, England, and its aspirational salient others in Europe.

³⁰Browning and Joenniemi, ‘Ontological security’; Xander Kirke and Brent J. Steele, ‘Ontological security, myth, and existentialism’, *Review of International Studies*, 49:5 (2017), pp. 905–23; Nina C. Krickel-Choi, ‘The concept of anxiety in ontological security studies’, *International Studies Review*, 24:3, (2022), pp. 1–21; Ian Paterson, ‘Business as usual like never before! Continuity, rupture and anxiety management in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum campaign’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 59:4 (2024), pp. 510–29; Brent J. Steele, ‘Ethical anxiety in global politics’, in Simon Koschut and Andrew A. G. Ross (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Emotions in International Relations* (2024), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197698532.013.6>.

³¹Browning and Joenniemi, ‘Ontological security’, p. 43.

³²C. Nicolai L. Gellwitzki, ‘The positions of ontological (in)security in international relations: Object relations, unconscious phantasies, and anxiety management’, *International Theory*, 17:1 (2025), pp. 118–50.

³³Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, ‘Anxiety, fear, and ontological security in world politics: Thinking with and beyond Giddens’, *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 240–56.

³⁴Lauren Rogers, ‘It’s not EU, it’s we: Ontological stress and French narration of the uprisings in Tunisia’, *European Security*, 34:2 (2025), pp. 191–209, p. 193.

³⁵K. Gustafsson and N. C. Krickel-Choi, ‘Returning to the roots of ontological security: Insights from the existentialist anxiety literature’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 26:3 (2020), pp. 875–95.

³⁶James Brassett and Christopher S. Browning, ‘Russian warship, go fuck yourself’: Humour and the (geo) political limits of vicarious war’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 59:3 (2024), pp. 311–36.

³⁷This chimes with scholarship that, recognising the complexity and inconsistency of Lacan’s ideas over time (Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* [Princeton University Press, 1995]), utilises key Lacanian concepts as a ‘good short cut’ to facilitate Lacanian insights in one’s analysis (see Jakub Eberle, ‘Narrative, desire, ontological security, transgression: Fantasy as a factor in international politics’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 22 [2019], pp. 243–68 [p. 254]).

Lacanian approaches to OSS begin from the position that the subject is never complete but is thrown into a world not of its making and is therefore always constituted by a lack that it is forever seeking to fill in order to attain ontological security. Much of Lacanian OSS is grounded in Epstein's³⁸ treatment, where she identifies that the Lacanian subject is always split between desire and language – the subject has a foundational desire but is immediately thrown into a social world (symbolic order) where it must narrate itself into being using an alien language that is unable to express its foundational desire. This bind makes the self's foundational desire unattainable because it cannot adequately communicate said desire. As Epstein³⁹ says, 'the mediation of desire, the passage from one realm [desire] to the other [discourse/symbolic], is what makes individual identity possible in the first place. It is also what causes its loss, and thus the fundamental lack characteristic of identity.' She goes on, 'This loss or fundamental alienation is precisely the lack that lies at the heart of identity. It is also what defeats the possibility of a closed, cohesive self.'⁴⁰ In our case, the Scottish self yearns for statehood but is denied this by the symbolic order that defines the international system. In an attempt to manifest this desire it uses the language of desecuritisation to differentiate itself from its wider state and make a claim for statehood – '[t]he making of the self is a perpetual attempt to make up for an original lack.'⁴¹ It is the encountering of this lack that generates anxiety.⁴² Through our analysis in this paper we demonstrate that, to avoid this fate, Scotland engages in fantasies that are anchored, in part, by its desecuritisation of migration.

In developing the Lacanian subject in OSS, many scholars draw on the concept of fantasy, identifying how states engage in self-myth-making in an attempt to fill this lack and provide them with a sense of completeness and ontological security. As Browning⁴³ notes, Lacanian approaches are able to explain 'why subjects become attached to particular identities in the first place' – the question that sits at the heart of this paper. Eberle⁴⁴ claims that 'Fantasies connect subjects to social orders by arousing desire and channelling it to socially constructed "objects" like ideological goals'. In other words, fantasies help to orient the desire of a subject towards attaining ontological security. Importantly, fantasies are not *unreal*; rather, they are *aspirational*. Moreover, they are *essential*. If we accept the Lacanian position that the subject is forever and unavoidably constituted by a lack, then the pursuit of fantasies are essential in order to 'go on'. As Browning⁴⁵ says, fantasies 'direct the subject's sense of ontological lack towards an imaginary element or object that is seen to hold the promise of fulfilment'. Crucially, '[f]antasies work best, when they appeal to signifiers that have to some extent become internalized and embedded in subjects' biographical narratives of self-identity, thereby exerting the most affective pull on them...these are more likely to be emotionally mobilizing, since ultimately they harness signifiers subjects enjoy identifying with'. Fundamental to fantasies, however, is that they are always just out of reach.⁴⁶ Indeed, if a fantasy is to be maintained it can never be realised and there must always be another obstacle to overcome. Here it is worth quoting Eberle⁴⁷ at length:

Fantasy is thus a story in which the ontological lack is rationalised as the absence of a particular empirical 'object' and which pictures a course of action towards the recapturing of this 'object', promising the achievement of a whole identity. But since no empirical 'object' can ultimately

³⁸ Charlotte Epstein, 'Who speaks? Discourse, the subject and the study of identity in international politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 17:2 (2010), pp. 327–50.

³⁹ Epstein, 'Who speaks?', p. 335.

⁴⁰ Epstein, 'Who speaks?', p. 336.

⁴¹ Epstein, 'Who speaks?', p. 337.

⁴² Eberle, 'Narrative, desire, ontological security'.

⁴³ Christopher S. Browning, 'Brexit populism and fantasies of fulfilment', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 222–44 (p. 223).

⁴⁴ Eberle, 'Narrative, desire, ontological security', p. 245.

⁴⁵ Browning, 'Brexit populism and fantasies', p. 230.

⁴⁶ Browning, 'Brexit populism and fantasies', p. 231.

⁴⁷ Eberle, 'Narrative, desire, ontological security', p. 247.

resolve the ontological lack and make us complete again, our desire is ultimately bound to be unfulfilled.

As a contemporary example, we can see these tensions in the Brexit project – Brexit was supposed to return ‘control’ to the UK.⁴⁸ However, Brexit has not been realised as was promised⁴⁹ and so a new obstacle to the UK’s ability to take back control – particularly with regard to migration and security – has been found in the form of the European Court of Human Rights.⁵⁰ Following this, our investigation explores how, through the narrative and political desecuritisation of immigration, the Scottish self is attempting to fill its constitutive lack, and considers the hope that can be found in chasing fantasies.

Research design and methodology

UK–Scottish devolution and overlapping immigration governance

The abolition of the Scottish Parliament and subsequent creation of the United Kingdom of England and Scotland in 1707 formally ended Scotland’s centuries-long existence as an independent kingdom.⁵¹ Despite the Union, however, core pillars of Scottish civil society remained largely untouched, ‘including the famous trinity of law, education, and church’,⁵² facilitating the continued (re)production of a distinct, *Scottish* national identity. After almost three centuries, the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood was re-established in 1999 following a 1997 referendum. This devolutionary process radically transformed the previously centralised UK state, creating a complex system of multi-level governance. Immigration policy and the rules governing entry and exit are excepted to the UK Government at Westminster, constraining Scottish economic strategy, especially as tied to population and demographic management. That said, many policy areas that impact immigrants once they have arrived, including but not limited to health, education, social services, housing, and law and order, are devolved to Holyrood.⁵³ The transversal nature of immigration, asylum, and refugee policy combined with the resultant crossovers in policy competence between Westminster and Holyrood on this issue have created fruitful conditions to permit substate policy variance. This is not to mention that, in establishing a substate government, devolution has created an alternative, oft competing, source of elite discourse. Whilst not a formal policy tool, in setting the affective tone and discursive parameters for the national conversation, elite discourse is an instrument that can impact the ontological security of the citizenry and cultivate a propitious environment for heightened perceptions of welcome or resentment, inclusion or exclusion.

From a point of marginality until the 1960s, political nationalism in Scotland has grown substantially, with a particular acceleration following the reestablishment of the Scottish Parliament.⁵⁴ The SNP have occupied the government at Holyrood since 2007 and, after unprecedented electoral success in the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary elections, introduced a constitutional referendum on secession from the UK that was held in 2014. Despite a 45–55 per cent defeat for ‘Yes’, support

⁴⁸Browning, ‘Brexit populism and fantasies’, p. 231; Ben Roshier, ‘And now we’re facing that reality too’: Brexit, ontological security, and intergenerational anxiety in the Irish border region, *European Security*, 31:1 (2022), pp. 21–38.

⁴⁹UK in a Changing Europe, ‘Exploring “Bregret”: Public Attitudes to Brexit Seven Years On’ (2023), available at: <https://media.ukandeu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/UKICE-Exploring-Bregret.pdf>.

⁵⁰Zoë Jay, ‘A tale of two Europes: How conflating the European Court of Human Rights with the European Union exacerbates Euroscepticism’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 24:4 (2022), pp. 563–81.

⁵¹Christopher A. Whatley, *The Scots and the Union: Then and Now* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

⁵²Michael Keating and Nicola McEwan, ‘The Scottish independence debate’, in Michael Keating (ed.), *Debating Scotland: Issues of Independence and Union in the 2014 Referendum* (Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 1–26 (p. 5).

⁵³Garth Mulvey, ‘Social citizenship, social policy and refugee integration: a case of policy divergence in Scotland’, *Journal of Social Policy*, 47:1 (2018), pp. 161–178.

⁵⁴Ben Jackson, *The Case for Scottish Independence: A History of Nationalist Political Thought in Modern Scotland* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

for independence remains robust, with polling⁵⁵ having narrowed further in the decade following the referendum. The SNP remain in government to date, and until the July 2024 UK poll, have dominated electorally in both Scottish and UK-wide elections.

Substate ‘paradiplomacy’ and immigration politics

To provide a starting framework to support an exploration of the Scottish Government’s immigration politics, it is fruitful to engage the extensive literature on ‘paradiplomacy’, that is, the internationally orientated activities of actors below the level of the state, including substates and regions.⁵⁶ Simplifying, the literature organises around two principal explanations for sub-state paradiplomacy: economic and political. The former reflects dominant activities of the first generation of paradiplomatic activity, where commercial diplomacy (branding and bureaucratic infrastructure to promote and facilitate international trade and investment) was tied to economic foundations.⁵⁷ The latter speaks more directly to a second generation of paradiplomatic activity, where a diverse array of policy domains that lack a clear materialist grounding (climate change, human rights, international development) have emerged as major foci for paradiplomatic activity.⁵⁸ Political motivations, centring on nation-building, are offered as a core driver of engagement in this wider policy arena.⁵⁹ Indeed, the presence of strong nationalist movements in a region is noted as *the* most important variable when explaining extensive paradiplomatic activity.⁶⁰ In the case of the Scottish Government’s engagement in international development since the inception of the Scottish Parliament, for example, whilst compassion and a desire to play a supportive role are identified as motivating factors, state-building ambitions are predominant, something that intensified after 2007 under the direction of the nationalist SNP government.⁶¹

Paradiplomacy thus offers opportunities for state-building and the consolidation and strengthening of legitimacy and authority among international and domestic audiences. Immigration is one policy area, albeit a comparatively uncommon one, that substates have engaged. Quebec⁶² and South Australia,⁶³ for example, possess some formal immigration powers, whilst Scotland⁶⁴ and Catalunya⁶⁵ have utilised devolved competencies (health, education, voting rights, etc.) to cultivate more inclusive approaches to integration and social citizenship for immigrants, including asylum seekers and refugees.

⁵⁵ ‘What Scotland Thinks, ‘How Would You Vote in a Scottish Independence Referendum If Held Now? (Asked After the EU Referendum)’ (2025), available at [<https://www.whatscotlandthinks.org/questions/how-would-you-vote-in-the-in-a-scottish-independence-referendum-if-held-now-ask/>], accessed 23 April 2025.

⁵⁶ Aldecoa and Keating, *Paradiplomacy in Action*; Alexander Kuznetsov, *Theory and Practice of Paradiplomacy: Subnational Governments in International Affairs*. (2014). London: Routledge.

⁵⁷ Aldecoa and Keating, *Paradiplomacy in Action*; Sebastian Dellepiane and Bernhard Reinsberg, ‘Paradiplomacy as nation-building: The politics of Scotland’s international development policy (1999–2022)’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 26:3 (2024), pp. 886–903.

⁵⁸ Colin Alexander, ‘Sub-state public diplomacy in Africa: The case of the Scottish Government’s engagement with Malawi’, *Place Brand Public Diplomacy* 10 (2014), pp. 70–86; Reinsberg and Dellepiane, ‘The domestic sources of sub-state foreign policymaking’.

⁵⁹ Stéphane Paquin, ‘Identity paradiplomacy in Quebec’, *Quebec Studies*, 66 (2018), pp. 3–26; Reinsberg and Dellepiane, ‘The domestic sources of sub-state foreign policymaking’.

⁶⁰ Paquin, ‘Identity paradiplomacy’.

⁶¹ Alexander, ‘Sub-state public diplomacy’.

⁶² Fiona Barker, ‘Learning to be a majority: Negotiating immigration, integration and national membership in Quebec’, *Political Science*, 62:1 (2010), pp. 11–36.

⁶³ Susanne Schech, ‘Seeing like a region: Parliamentary discourses on asylum seekers and refugees in Scotland and South Australia’, *Population, Space and Place*, 18 (2012), pp. 58–73.

⁶⁴ Paterson and Mulvey, ‘Simultaneous success and failure’.

⁶⁵ David McCrone and Frank Bechhofer, *Understanding National Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Scaffolding the empirical analysis

Despite clear and significant legal distinctions between immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, as a blunt tool, securitisation often collapses these distinctions. This fact is one reason for focusing on the Scottish Government's approach to immigration of all categories. The second is empirical, both in permitting a more holistic analysis and because the Scottish Government's approach to all immigrants draws upon the same overarching biographical narratives.

The analytical period spans 2014–24. As the year of the referendum on Scottish Independence and the launch of the Scottish Government's first 'New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy', 2014 marked an enhanced degree of attention, clarity, and action on a distinctly 'Scottish' immigration politics. As Scottish politics is inextricably related to wider UK politics, the timeframe accounts for the major political moments that have (re)defined 'UK' and Scottish immigration politics, including: the intensification of the UK Government's 'hostile environment' towards 'illegal immigration' through the 2014 and 2016 Immigration Acts and Nationality and Borders Act (2023); the 'refugee crises', peaking in 2015, and the subsequent Syrian refugee resettlement process; the 2016 vote for 'Brexit' and the prolonged, messy process of withdrawal; Ukrainian refugee resettlement following the Russian invasion in 2022; and the so-called small boats crisis that has become a focal point for both Conservative and Labour governments at Westminster.

The Scottish Government's website and the online Scottish Parliament archive were utilised to accrue data. Using key words ('migration', 'asylum', 'refugee', 'Syria', 'Ukraine'), thirty-one relevant Scottish Parliamentary debates on these topics were identified. The agenda-setting opening statements provided to introduce each debate by the relevant government minister or the first minister were the central focus. In addition, we pinpoint twenty-seven Scottish Government strategic publications (on immigration and Scotland's wider international engagement). Also identified were fifteen public interventions (speeches, open letters) by first ministers⁶⁶ and ministers responsible for migration or external affairs portfolios. Additionally, the annual 'Programme for Government' document and SNP manifestos for Scottish Parliamentary elections (2016, 2021) and UK Parliamentary elections (2015, 2017, 2019) were also included. Totalling ninety documents, this collection provides a comprehensive cache of the Scottish Government's engagement with immigration politics.

In the following empirical analysis we provide a three-step illustration of our argument. We begin by considering *how* the Scottish Government has worked to desecuritise immigration. To do so, we follow the CS's⁶⁷ instruction to deploy a discourse analysis – the 'obvious method' to analyse securitisation – that eschews 'sophisticated linguistic or quantitative techniques' with 'the technique [instead being] simple: Read, looking for arguments that take the rhetorical and logical form defined here as Security.' We follow others⁶⁸ who adapt this pragmatic approach to study *desecuritisation*, where we look for arguments embedded in discourses and policy projects that eschew securitising logics related to immigration (threat-based, exclusionary, rights-denying) and are instead grounded in alternative logics (non-threat-based, inclusive, rights-enabling).

In the second stage, we engage with the rationalist and political perspectives prioritised in the literature on paradiplomacy that offer partial explanations as to why Scotland has pursued desecuritisation, but show that they are unable to offer insights as to why such preferences initially develop. From here, we demonstrate how interrogating the desecuritisation of immigration through a Lacanian ontological security lens allows us to understand how and why the preference for desecuritisation is built, and how it becomes sustainable through its affective appeal.

⁶⁶ Sturgeon served as first minister from November 2014 until March 2023, followed by Humza Yousaf (March 2023–May 2024) and John Swinney (May 2024–present).

⁶⁷ Buzan et al., *Security*, pp. 176–7.

⁶⁸ Paterson and Mulvey, 'Simultaneous success and failure'; Karyotis et al., 'Understanding securitization success'.

To do so, following narrative approaches in OSS,⁶⁹ we conduct a narrative analysis of the documents to capture the way in which the desecuritisation of immigration is crafted and developed over time as a way to define the Scottish self, allowing us to develop the longitudinal dimension of desecuritisation as a political project. Here we spotlight ontological security-seeking devices, that is, the deployment of autobiographical narratives and Lacanian notions of desire and fantasy.

Empirical analysis

The Scottish Government's approach to immigration, 2014–24: Welcoming 'New Scots'

Using illustrative examples, this section provides an analytical overview of the Scottish Government's approach to immigration politics between 2014 and 2024, demonstrating a consistent pursuit of desecuritisation. Whilst in no way exhaustive, this overview scaffolds the ontological security-focused analysis that follows and, crucially, showcases a novel illustration of active moves to 'future-proof' desecuritisation. Four key areas of immigration activity are pertinent.

The first centres the Scottish Government's policy approach to asylum seekers and refugees. Whilst UK Government policy departs from a logic of threat and has explicitly discouraged 'integration' of asylum seekers, denying them access to social goods until refugee status has been granted, the Scottish Government's policy rests on a logic of inclusion, aiming at integration for refugees and asylum seekers 'from day one', including through access to social goods controlled by the Scottish Government. This more inclusive approach is best illustrated in the 'New Scots' Refugee Integration Strategies (2014–17, 2018–21, 2024–).⁷⁰ Designed and delivered in partnership with the third sector and refugee support NGOs, the purpose is to provide a 'clear framework and governance structure for all those working towards refugee integration and aims to support an effective implementation of the rights and entitlements of New Scots within Scotland's devolved powers'. Recognised by the UNHCR as an example of best practice,⁷¹ the overarching policy has spurred outsized contributions from Scotland to the UK refugee resettlement schemes related to Syria and Ukraine.⁷² A series of Ukrainian-refugee-centric integration programmes to support successful short- and long-term settlement (e.g., 'A Warm Scots Welcome', 'A Warm Scots Future') have since been implemented by the Scottish Government.⁷³

The approach to refuge and asylum is enmeshed in the second area of activity we identify, the Scottish Government's wider discursive criticism of the UK Government's 'hostile environment', with desecuritisng logics being central. Rhetoric from the Scottish Government has been sustained and emphatic with regard to, first, the positive impacts of immigration for Scotland and, second, direct criticism of the UK Government's securitisng approach. Introducing a parliamentary debate

⁶⁹Gellwitzki et al., 'Keep calm and carry on?'; Rogers, 'It's not EU, it's we'; M. Nicolson, 'Racial microaggressions and ontological security: Exploring the narratives of young adult migrants in Glasgow, UK', *Social Inclusion*, 11:2 (2023), pp. 37–47.

⁷⁰For the context foregrounding this policy, including past UK asylum dispersal to Scotland, see Schech, 'Seeing like a region'.

⁷¹Scottish Government, *New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy 2024* (2024), available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/new-scots-refugee-integration-strategy-2024/documents/>.

⁷²Despite making up approximately 8.5 per cent of the UK population, Scotland settled 16 per cent of Syrian refugees through the 'Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme' (Hannah Biggs, Sarah Minty, Asiya Hamid, Sarah Morton, Grace Robertson and Andy MacGregor., *Evaluation of the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy 2018–2022* (2023), available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/evaluation-new-scots-refugee-integration-strategy-2018-2022/documents/>). Likewise with the Ukrainian scheme, with the Scottish Government acting as a 'Super Sponsor' to bypass the UK Government's requirement for Ukrainian nationals to have obtained a UK-based sponsor prior to being issued a visa to travel.

⁷³Scottish Government, *Ukraine – A Warm Scots Future: Policy Position* (2023), available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/warm-scots-future-policy-position-paper/>.

on ‘International Migrants to Scotland’, Alasdair Allan,⁷⁴ Minister for International Development and Europe, provides an illustrative example that captures both elements:

[The] message of welcome extends to everyone who comes to Scotland from other countries, whether they are seeking asylum and refuge, choosing to work or study here, or joining family... We must remember that all those people are individuals, with their own stories and their own sets of circumstances. I want to mark international migrants day by highlighting the valuable contribution that migrants make to Scotland’s economy and the vibrancy that they bring to our society and culture. Following the European Union referendum, it is more important than ever that we stand up against negative rhetoric surrounding immigration and strive to provide a welcoming and tolerant society for migrants in Scotland... Contrary to that rhetoric, migrants are not a drain on society and can contribute significantly if they are given the same rights and opportunities as other citizens.

Significantly, positive impacts are framed as uniform across both forced and unforced migration.⁷⁵ The criticism is enveloped in the Scottish Government’s deliberate ‘work to break down misconceptions on migration in Scotland’,⁷⁶ in a context where ‘too few politicians have the courage to make the positive case for immigration’⁷⁷ and where the UK Government approach to immigration is presented variably as ‘shameful’,⁷⁸ ‘deplorable’,⁷⁹ and ‘cruel’.⁸⁰

The third area of activity centres on EU nationals in the context of Brexit, where Scotland returned a 62 per cent majority for remain. From the time of the referendum result through the withdrawal period, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon wrote four open letters to EU nationals. The themes and language utilised in these letters, emphasising welcome and extolling the contributions of EU immigrants to Scottish society, were at the core of the Scottish Government’s discourse during this period:

Scotland is your home, you are welcome here, and you are valued. You play a crucial role in Scotland’s economy and public services. You are a vital part of Scotland not just for the skills and talent you bring to our country but also the diversity and richness you bring to our culture and communities... As the First Minister of Scotland I want to thank you for the contribution you make to Scotland. I am proud to say that this is your home, you are welcome here and we want you to stay.⁸¹

More succinctly, demonstrating the centrality of a logic of inclusion, frames made clear that ‘[EU nationals] are part of Scotland, and we are Scotland together’.⁸²

These discursive moves were buttressed by a second component, a Paris School-style assemblage of what we dub, to paraphrase Huysmans,⁸³ ‘everyday little desecuritising nothings’. Central to these

⁷⁴ Alasdair Allan, ‘International migrants to Scotland’, Scottish Parliament (13 December 2016), available at: <https://www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/official-report/search-what-was-said-in-parliament/meeting-of-parliament-13-12-2016?meeting=10687>.

⁷⁵ See also, for example, Scottish Government, *Ukraine – A Warm Scots Future*; Scottish Government, *Building a New Scotland: Migration to Scotland after independence* (2023), available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/building-new-scotland-migration-scotland-independence/>.

⁷⁶ Scottish Government, *Programme for Government 2018–19* (2018), available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/delivering-today-investing-tomorrow-governments-programme-scotland-2018-19/>.

⁷⁷ Nicola Sturgeon, ‘First Minister’s Speech at Georgetown University’, USA, 4 February 2019, available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/first-ministers-speech-at-georgetown-university/>.

⁷⁸ SNP, *Manifesto: Stronger for Scotland* (2017). Edinburgh.

⁷⁹ SNP, *Manifesto: Stronger for Scotland* (2019). Edinburgh.

⁸⁰ Scottish Government, *Building a New Scotland: Migration*.

⁸¹ Nicola Sturgeon, ‘Stay in Scotland Campaign – Open Letter from the First Minister of Scotland’, 5 April 2019, available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/first-ministers-letter-to-eu-citizens-in-scotland/>.

⁸² Ben MacPherson, ‘European Union Citizens’ Rights’, Scottish Parliament, 12 November 2019.

⁸³ Huysmans, ‘What’s in an act?’

efforts was the Scottish Government's 'Stay in Scotland' campaign. Underpinned by over £1,000,000 of funding, the campaign supported the provision of practical advice and support for EU nationals navigating the bureaucracy of applying for 'Settled Status' in the UK.⁸⁴ Scotland's Migration Service, launched in March 2024, builds on this model, aiming to provide practical information and support, with the explicit intention of facilitating more immigration in a context where the UK Government have introduced more barriers to movement.

The fourth area of activity, entangled with the three prongs above, is efforts by the Scottish Government to attain immigration powers. Two methods were advanced. The first is the proposal of devolution of immigration powers to the Scottish Parliament. Accelerated following the vote for Brexit, the Scottish Government have consistently advocated for this devolution in their annual 'Programme for Government', whilst a series of proposals have been designed to permit a pathway to 'tailored' immigration policy for Scotland. This has ranged from extensive efforts to obtain a disaggregated Brexit settlement, where Scotland would remain in the Single Market with free movement continuing,⁸⁵ to the design of bespoke immigration routes to Scotland, such as a post-study work visa,⁸⁶ a 'Rural Migration Pilot', and a 'Scottish Visa' scheme.⁸⁷ All efforts at devolution have, however, been dismissed by governments at Westminster.⁸⁸

The second method advanced to attain jurisdiction over immigration is through independence. There have been two major efforts to set out the policy architecture for an independent Scotland: the Scottish Government's 2013 White Paper ('Scotland's Future: Your Guide to an Independent Scotland'), launched in advance of the 2014 referendum, and the 'Building a new Scotland' paper series. The latter aims to outline a prospectus for an independent Scotland, with several papers focusing on immigration.⁸⁹ Unwaveringly, the proposed approach to immigration is desecuritising, where the aim is to 'comprehensively reject Westminster's hostile environment', and instead ground the approach on a politics of 'dignity, fairness and respect'.⁹⁰ Accompanying this desecuritized approach are concrete policy positions that aim to facilitate increased immigration and access to rights for migrants, such as rejoining the EU, providing asylum seekers with access to social security and the right to work (currently denied by Westminster), and making the granting of refugee status equate with an indefinite right to settle in Scotland.⁹¹ For over a decade, therefore, in tandem with a positive framing of the historic, contemporary, and future impacts of immigration, the Scottish Government's major strategic policy documents for an independent Scotland have been consistent: attaining immigration powers is about cementing a desecuritized approach to immigration.

Crucially, these are not only contemporary-orientated moves but also future-facing, with the Scottish Government pre-emptively creating an extensive policy architecture to guide any future immigration governance under the jurisdiction of the Scottish Parliament. In other words, and instructive for the conceptualisation of linearity and temporality in our understanding of (de)securitisation processes, beyond aims to desecuritize in the present, we can detect *active* moves to create

⁸⁴ Scottish Government, *Steadfastly European, Scotland's Past, Present and Future* (2021), available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/steadfastly-european-scotlands-past-present-future/pages/2/>.

⁸⁵ Scottish Government, *Scotland's Place in Europe: Our Way Forward* (2018), available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-place-europe-way-forward/>.

⁸⁶ SNP, *Manifesto: Stronger for Scotland* (2015). Edinburgh.

⁸⁷ Scottish Government, *Migration Helping Scotland Prosper* (2020), available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/migration-helping-scotland-prosper/>.

⁸⁸ Jamie Hepburn, 'Migration to Scotland: Scottish Government Proposals', Scottish Parliament, 14 November 2023.

⁸⁹ Principally, Scottish Government, *Building a New Scotland: Migration*; Scottish Government, *Building a New Scotland: An Independent Scotland in the EU* (2023), available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/building-new-scotland-independent-scotland-eu/>; Scottish Government, *Building a New Scotland: Citizenship in an Independent Scotland* (2023), available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/building-new-scotland-citizenship-independent-scotland/>; Scottish Government, *Building a New Scotland: An Independent Scotland's Place in the World* (2024), available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/building-new-scotland-independent-scotlands-place-world/>.

⁹⁰ Scottish Government, *Building a New Scotland: Migration*.

⁹¹ Scottish Government, *Building a New Scotland: Migration*.

path dependencies for a desecuritisised approach to hold in the future and an *ethical* ontological security-seeking strategy.⁹²

An ‘existential threat to our future prosperity’: Rationalist explanations of desecuritisation

The next stage of the empirical analysis shifts focus towards the ‘why’ of desecuritisation. Departing from the insights from the literature on paradiplomacy that substate activity can be driven by economic and political interests, this section explores these rationalist-materialist pillars of the Scottish Government’s immigration politics.

Scotland faces an acute population challenge following Brexit, the crystallisation of the terms of exit (departure from the Single Market, no differentiated settlement for Scotland), and the UK Government’s wider, restrictive approach to ‘low wage’ immigration.⁹³ After steady growth throughout the twenty-first century, Scotland’s population is expected to begin declining in the 2030s as immigration was the main, and since 2016 only, driver of population growth.⁹⁴ Coupled with an ageing population and a depopulation of culturally significant rural areas, principally the highlands and islands, population growth has emerged as a pivotal policy item for the Scottish Government following Brexit, culminating in a 2021 ‘Population Strategy’.⁹⁵ As the 2020–21 Programme for Government states,

Scotland, along with most Western countries has clear demographic challenges: an ageing population; declining birth rate; and rural depopulation. The impacts of Brexit and the end of freedom of movement of people could have a devastating impact on our population and demography, with localised challenges felt most strongly in rural and remote communities. Attracting the necessary level and skills of migrants to Scotland is crucial to our economic prospects and demographic sustainability.⁹⁶

The fundamental importance of Scotland’s population strategy, the demographic threats faced, and the central role immigration can play in responding to these threats all inform the Scottish Government’s immigration policy. As such, the message from the Programme for Government above is ubiquitous, with a version featuring in all relevant major strategy documents, including those related to Brexit,⁹⁷ the Scottish Government’s wider internationally orientated activity,⁹⁸ and independence planning.⁹⁹ Notably, asylum seekers and refugees are likewise recognised as valuable in tackling Scotland’s population challenges and the resultant problems, as outlined in the inaugural ‘New Scots’ strategy¹⁰⁰ and consistently reinforced since, most recently in the ‘Warm Scots Future’ strategy¹⁰¹ targeted at long-term settlement of Ukrainian refugees.

⁹² Steele, ‘Ethical anxiety in global politics’.

⁹³ Scottish Government, *A Scotland for the Future: Opportunities and Challenges of Scotland’s Changing Population* (2021), available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotland-future-opportunities-challenges-scotlands-changing-population/documents/>.

⁹⁴ Scottish Government, *A Scotland for the Future*.

⁹⁵ Scottish Government, *A Scotland for the Future*.

⁹⁶ Scottish Government, *Programme for Government 2020–21* (2020), available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/protecting-scotland-renewing-scotland-governments-programme-scotland-2020-2021/>.

⁹⁷ For example, Scottish Government, *Scotland’s Place in Europe: People, Jobs and Investment* (2018), available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-place-europe-people-jobs-investment/>.

⁹⁸ For example, Scottish Government, *Migration: Helping Scotland Prosper* (2020), available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/migration-helping-scotland-prosper/>; Scottish Government, *Scotland: A Good Global Citizen – A Scottish Perspective on Climate, Defence, Security and External Affairs* (2021), available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotland-good-global-citizen-scottish-perspective-climate-defence-security-external-affairs/documents/>.

⁹⁹ For example, the ‘Building a New Scotland’ paper series 2022–4, particularly, Scottish Government, *Building a New Scotland: Migration*; Scottish Government, *Building a New Scotland: An Independent Scotland in the EU*.

¹⁰⁰ Scottish Government, *New Scots: Integrating Refugees in Scotland’s Communities 2014–2017*. (2013), available at: <https://webarchive.nrscotland.gov.uk/20180109063407/http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2013/12/4581/downloads>.

¹⁰¹ Scottish Government, *Ukraine – A Warm Scots Future*.

In contrast to global trends, therefore, it is not immigration that is framed as the threat to 'our' prosperity. Instead, '[i]n Scotland, we know and understand that the Westminster approach to migration, as well as being deeply inhumane, poses an almost existential threat to our future prosperity'.¹⁰² A counter-securitisation,¹⁰³ it is the UK Government's securitisation of immigration and its consequences that are presented as 'dangerous'¹⁰⁴ and an existential threat.

Turning to the 'political' drivers of the Scottish Government's immigration posture, the project of nation-building can be understood to rest on two pillars. One, 'the creation of governance capacities to underpin the pathways towards "stateness"', and two, 'the construction of a distinctive national narrative'¹⁰⁵ to consolidate and strengthen an Andersonian 'imagined community'. As such, the attempted acquisition of immigration powers and the articulation of an architecture for immigration governance, and a distinctive one at that, supports these two nodes of nation-building. Furthermore, as a party whose *raison d'être* is secession from UK, policy differentiation from the UK Government is strategically useful, as is the presentation of UK governmental control over immigration policy as a threat to Scottish prosperity. This is not to say that immigration is being used in a purely instrumental or cynical fashion. As others have shown on the issue of international development as an arm of Scotland's paradiplomacy, humanitarian and ethical principles are key drivers of policy-making, even if political motivations remain central.¹⁰⁶

From the above, rationalist economic motivations are clearly articulated and central to the Scottish Government's approach to immigration, whilst political incentives can also be induced. Yet, although these rationalist factors could facilitate desecuritisation, why these motivations win out, and why a desecuritized approach is emphatically adopted, remains unclear. Again, rational interests are not wholly reliable predictors of (sub)state behaviour, whilst alternative policy approaches are possible (be that incentivising increased birth rates of the 'native' population, to differentiating by adopting a more intense securitisation platform). To unlock these deeper drivers of desecuritisation – why this particular preference was initially formed and legitimised – it is necessary to examine ontological security dynamics and the narration of the Scottish self.

'A welcoming, outward-looking and inclusive nation'.¹⁰⁷ Desecuritisation as ontological security-seeking

The Scottish Government's immigration politics and autobiographical constructions of the Scottish self are inextricably and deliberately linked to extensive change. The changes that would permit control over immigration policy (whether through independence or devolution), the changes that immigration brings to society, and the impacts immigration has in supporting a change in the very nature of the Scottish self are all framed as desirable. It is this will to change as an attempt to actualise the self that sits at the heart of Lacanian OSS and offers empirical weight to Browning and Joenniemi's¹⁰⁸ argument that change 'may actually be welcomed as offering chances for renewal and the pursuit of a more authentic and (potentially ethically) fulfilling life'.

To begin, it is essential to recognise that the absence of statehood and sovereignty is the ontological lack from which the nationalist, secession-orientated SNP Scottish Government operates. Indeed, the fundamental transition in Scottish external relations following the 2007 electoral success of the SNP, where interregional cooperation was supplanted by action to better frame Scotland

¹⁰² Nicola Sturgeon, 'Brexit and Scotland's Future', Scottish Parliament, 24 April 2019.

¹⁰³ Ian Paterson and Georgios Karyotis, "'We are, by nature, a tolerant people": Securitisation and counter-securitisation in UK migration politics', *International Relations*, 36:1 (2022), pp. 104–26.

¹⁰⁴ MacPherson, 'European Union Citizens' Rights'.

¹⁰⁵ Dellepiane and Reinsberg, 'Paradiplomacy as nation-building', pp. 888–9.

¹⁰⁶ Alexander, 'Sub-state public diplomacy in Africa'; Dellepiane and Reinsberg, 'Paradiplomacy as nation-building'.

¹⁰⁷ SNP, *Manifesto: Scotland's Future* (2021). Edinburgh.

¹⁰⁸ Browning and Joenniemi, 'Ontological security', 45.

as a state in waiting, offers a practical demonstration.¹⁰⁹ In the terms of our Lacanian framework, the Scottish self desires to have and be recognised as having full statehood, but the symbolic order of the international system prohibits the realisation of this very desire. With secessionist politics viewed as innately threatening to the contemporary cohort of states,¹¹⁰ the anxiety about a lack of statehood and sovereignty is twinned with an anxiety from the Scottish Government regarding their intended pathway (secession) to be perceived as threatening by the cohort they wish to join, particularly the aspiration for an independent Scotland to join the EU, thus undermining their ontological security and preventing the realisation of a coherent self.

It is in this context that the identities of openness as well as being outward-looking and welcoming (alongside a variety of related terms such as being inclusive, internationalist, progressive, etc.) emerge in the analysis as core to the portrayal of *the* Scottish self. Desecuritisation, therefore, reinforces key autobiographical identities that are considered as foundational to the Scottish self, thus supporting a 'stable and positive self-perception'.¹¹¹ The statement that 'Scotland is an open, welcoming nation, internationalist in outlook'¹¹² provides a typical example, with versions of this message ubiquitous and consistent throughout the Scottish Government's narration of the Scottish self. With 'welcome' (and its associated notion of hospitality) widely understood as an ethical practice throughout much of human civilisation, a *positive* self-perception is readily facilitated.

Consistent over time, these identities are activated across the full spectrum of the Scottish Government's international-facing activity, including all aspects of immigration politics, where the overarching project is of presenting Scotland as a 'Good Global Citizen'¹¹³ – a project embroiled in the two foundational anxieties noted above. Significantly, the congruence between this overarching project and its relationship to facilitating immigration to Scotland is explicit:

We place a great deal of importance on Scotland being a good global citizen... Our vision of Scotland remains outward looking: a nation committed to good global citizenship, with a strong, respected voice in the world.¹¹⁴

Scotland's commitment to being a good global citizen is part of its attraction as a destination for inward migration.¹¹⁵

These identities facilitate and actively *encourage* a desecuritisation of migration as this course of action can be used to reinforce the core autobiographical narratives that Scotland is innately outward-looking, open, and welcoming – a 'good global citizen'. At times there is a direct acknowledgement that a desecuritized immigration politics offers the opportunity to support these core identities at the heart of the autobiographical narrative. For instance, in setting out the Scottish Government's strategic approach to future engagement with the EU in 2021, recapping the Scottish

¹⁰⁹ Charlie Jeffery, 'Scotland's European and international policy', in Ferran Requejo (ed.), *Foreign Policy of Constituent Units at the Beginning of the 21st Century* (Institut d'Estudis Autònoms, 2010), pp. 103–120.

¹¹⁰ Andreas Pachter, 'The diplomacy of post-Soviet de facto states: Ontological security under stigma', *International Relations*, 33:4 (2019), pp. 563–85.

¹¹¹ Gellwitzki et al., 'Keep calm and carry on?', p. 3.

¹¹² Scottish Government, *Scotland: A Good Global Citizen*.

¹¹³ The Scottish Government's approach to being a good global citizen 'centres on a Human Rights Based Approach, which is defined by the UN as a conceptual framework for the process of human development that is normatively based on international human rights standards and operationally directed to promoting and protecting human rights. It seeks to analyse inequalities which lie at the heart of development problems and redress discriminatory practices and unjust distributions of power that impede development progress and often result in groups of people being left behind.' Kurt Mills and Andrea Birdsall, 'Human rights in Scottish foreign policy: Constructing Scotland as a good global citizen', *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 16:3 (2024), p. 918. See also Michael Keating, 'Scotland and the World: Para-diplomacy and Proto-diplomacy', in Duncan McTavish (ed.), *Politics in Scotland* (Routledge, 2016), pp. 180–94.

¹¹⁴ Scottish Government, *Taking a Feminist Approach to International Relations: Position Paper* (2023), available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/taking-feminist-approach-international-relations/pages/1/>.

¹¹⁵ Scottish Government, *Programme for Government 2020–21*.

Government's efforts to mitigate the impacts of Brexit and support EU nationals through the 'Stay in Scotland' campaign (the everyday little desecuritising nothings), it is stated:

This work underlines the Scottish Government's commitment to Scotland continuing to be a vibrant, diverse country that faces outwards and is a confident and responsible global citizen. That means welcoming people from the EU and the wider world *because it reflects the welcoming place Scotland wants to be* (our emphasis).¹¹⁶

The value of a desecuritized immigration politics for the narration of the Scottish self is not restricted to EU nationals, however. All three 'New Scots' refugee strategies denote their grounding in a vision for a 'welcoming Scotland'. In addition to framing refugees as both economic and cultural assets, it is stated that 'as they rebuild their lives here, they help to make Scotland stronger, more compassionate and successful as a nation'.¹¹⁷ Thus, the practice of hosting refugees, and immigrants more broadly, is recognised as helping to *reinforce* but also actually support in the *creation* of an idealised Scottish self.

In this context, immigration, so often embroiled with the emotions of fear and worry, tied to discourses of immigrants exploiting 'our' country, can instead readily connect to positive emotions and facilitate ethical ontological security-seeking practices. Notable here is the emotion of 'pride', which emerged as a recurrent theme in immigration narratives articulated by the Scottish Government. For instance, there is an explicitly projected pride in Scotland's approach to refugees, from the outsized contributions to the Syrian and Ukrainian resettlement schemes, to the New Scots frameworks that proceed from foundations that reject securitisation:

We are proud of Scotland's response to the refugee crisis and the work of local authorities, organisations and communities to provide support and welcome.¹¹⁸

I am proud that Scotland has become home to people from all over the world seeking safety. Scottish Ministers have always been clear that people who seek asylum in Scotland should be welcomed and supported to integrate into our communities from day one.¹¹⁹

The branding of the Ukrainian resettlement schemes as a 'Warm Scots Welcome' and a 'Warm Scots Future' further demonstrate pride in the practice of welcome, alongside the constitutive role practices (in this instance, of welcome) play in efforts to realise an idealised self. Pride in Scotland's immigration politics is not limited to refugees and humanitarianism, however. Following Brexit, in the protracted, fractious negotiation period, EU nationals were enmeshed in securitized discourses by the UK Government, that is, immigrants as a burden, rather than asset. In contrast, the Scottish Government continually emphasised that European immigrants 'honour' Scotland in choosing this place as their home.¹²⁰ In sum, immigrants settling can conjure positive rather than negative emotions, as it is framed as evidencing Scotland's identity as open and welcoming and that Scotland is a good, desirable place to be.

Crucially, a temporal discourse in the Scottish Government's articulation of autobiographical narratives is highly pertinent. Sometimes core identities are asserted as true of Scotland: 'Scotland is an open, welcoming nation, internationalist in outlook' (our emphasis).¹²¹ Equally, however, these identities are presented as the 'vision' for Scotland, as identities to which Scotland aspires and to which immigration policy is aiming to cultivate: 'Our desire for a more humane [asylum] system reflects our vision of a society and a country that we very much aspire to: an open, welcoming

¹¹⁶ Scottish Government, *Steadfastly European*.

¹¹⁷ Angela Constance, 'Foreword', in *New Scots: Refugee Integration Strategy 2018 to 2022*, Scottish Government (10 January 2018), available at: {<https://www.gov.scot/publications/new-scots-refugee-integration-strategy-2018-2022/>}.

¹¹⁸ Scottish Government, *Programme for Government 2017–18* (2017), available at: {<https://www.gov.scot/publications/nation-ambition-governments-programme-scotland-2017-18/>}.

¹¹⁹ Constance, 'Foreword'.

¹²⁰ Scottish Government, *Programme for Government 2018–19*.

¹²¹ Scottish Government, *Scotland: A Good Global Citizen*.

and tolerant nation.’¹²² This mixture is illuminating. The framing of Scotland as *already* welcoming and an aspirational vision of a welcoming future are not in tension with each other. Rather, we posit, this ‘protentional gaze’, linking the present to an anticipated future,¹²³ helps unlock additional insights into why these identifications are ontologically rewarding and possess sufficient power to stick.

Here, Lacanian concepts of fantasy and desire are revealing. The goal of ‘doing immigration differently’ is pervasive in the Scottish Government’s discourse. Attaining this capacity is partly sought through the devolution of immigration powers but, more emphatically, through independence, where the Scottish Government would control all levers of immigration policy and, more fundamentally, be able to fulfil its constitutive lack of full statehood. The central barrier to the Scottish Government pursuing their desired immigration politics is thus framed as the devolutionary settlement of the UK, in the abstract, and the UK Government(s) and their prevailing policy direction – increasingly securitising, alongside Brexit – in particular. Attaining control, it is therefore argued, would permit the implementation of a fully desecuritisised immigration policy, one that will rest on a politics of welcome and compassion and the realisation of the desired Scottish self. Control will, in this framing, help alleviate concerns over Scotland’s reputation, which is repeatedly presented as vulnerable to damage through association with an ‘inhumane’ UK Government policy and Brexit. Introducing the parliamentary debate on the ‘Migration to Scotland after independence’ paper, the Minister for Independence, Jamie Hepburn,¹²⁴ illustrates these sentiments:

Migration matters to Scotland. That is why it is essential to continue to stress that Scotland is a welcoming and attractive country for those seeking to make a contribution here. However, Scotland’s migration policy is decided not in this Parliament but at Westminster. Both the Tories and the Labour Party want to keep it that way. That means that we are at the mercy of right-wing UK Government Home Secretaries who are seemingly determined to adopt ever more extreme language and policy positions. Indeed, it is hard to imagine anything more damaging to Scotland’s interests than the disgraceful, shameful rhetoric warning of a ‘hurricane’ of migrants coming our way... The Scottish Government takes a very different position...it is only with independence that we can create a migration system that truly matches Scotland’s needs.

This narrative has been consistent over time, with the Scottish Government’s white paper on independence stating that ‘one of the major gains of independence will be responsibility for our own immigration policy’.¹²⁵ This is tied to rationalist-material justifications about having a more liberal system to support Scotland’s economic and demographic needs. Yet, especially pertinent with regard to prospective asylum and refugee policy, independence will support the autobiographical project:

[Independence will] allow Scotland to adopt a new humane approach to asylum seekers and refugees in line with our values and commitment to upholding internationally recognised human rights. The new powers Scotland will gain at independence...will be important in supporting Scotland’s ambition to be a progressive, welcoming and inclusive state.¹²⁶

Yet, these powers are withheld, and the frequent requests for their devolution have been denied at Westminster. This denial keeps the Lacanian fantasy alive as the idealised self remains visible but just out of reach and immigration powers provide an affectively desirable object by which to continue pursuing the idealised independent Scottish self. The promise that, once these powers are

¹²² Humza Yousaf, ‘Asylum Seekers and Refugees’, Scottish Parliament, 17 June 2014.

¹²³ Roshier, ‘And now we’re facing that reality too’; David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Indiana University Press, 1986).

¹²⁴ Hepburn, ‘Migration to Scotland’.

¹²⁵ Scottish Government, *Scotland’s Future: Your Guide to an Independent Scotland* (2013). Edinburgh.

¹²⁶ Scottish Government, *Scotland’s Future*.

held, Scotland will be one step closer to realising its true self by fully implementing a policy that will reflect it, is enticing. Moreover, in articulating how things would be done differently (more humanely, more progressively, absent fear about facing outward and experiencing change), there is the opportunity to reinforce a positive self-perception, dovetailing with the positive emotional impacts outlined above (i.e., pride). Importantly, this positive self-perception is built in relation to the UK and its policy platform: '[w]e would devise a humane, dignified and principled migration system and comprehensively reject Westminster's "hostile environment"'.¹²⁷ As such, there is an embedded superiority in shaming of the UK for what is posited to be a comparatively inhumane, regressive, and fearful approach. This, through a Lacanian lens, is affectively satisfying and helps us to understand how the desecuritisation of immigration has and continues to retain its emotional appeal as nationalists pursue the realisation of a complete and 'true' Scottish self.

Conclusion

This article has explored the Scottish Government's intriguing divergence from global trends and embrace of an overtly positive immigration politics. Overall, the empirical analysis demonstrates that there is a symbiosis of the rationalist and ontological security-seeking drivers. The fundamental importance of Scotland's population strategy, the demographic-economic threats faced, and the central role immigration can play in responding to these threats are foundational to the Scottish Government's positive embrace of immigration. Moreover, political incentives tied to state-building can be deduced. Yet, as Brexit showcases most plainly, states can implement policies that are damaging to strategic and economic interests, whilst the presence of political incentives does not explain the nature of how and why an issue is chosen and approached in one way instead of another. Thus, crucial is the entwinement of ontological security-based drivers that have found shape in a positive embrace of immigration to (re)affirm the core identities of being open, outward-looking, and welcoming that are foundational to the Scottish Government's projection of the Scottish self. From this, the article makes several theoretical contributions.

An extensive scholarship has conceptualised and refined our appreciation of *how* desecuritisation can or does occur. To develop the *why* of desecuritisation, we integrated Lacanian-inspired ontological security theory with desecuritisation studies, demonstrating why desecuritisation of specific issues and in specific contexts may be pursued and be affectively rewarding. In doing so, we also sharpen the critique of the 'conservative bias' in OSS, illustrating the pursuit of extensive change as congruent with ontological security-seeking.

Additionally, our study adds to the problematisation of neat linearity in (de)securitisation studies. Moves by the Scottish Government aimed at undoing the contemporary securitisation of immigration being pursued by the UK Government have been supplemented by future-facing moves. The Scottish Government have generated an extensive strategic policy architecture to guide any future immigration governance under the jurisdiction of the Scottish Parliament, an attempted institutional 'future-proofing' of desecuritisation, with increased immigration and a positive embrace of welcome being framed as the necessary and only pathway to meet Scotland's economic, population, and demographic challenges and for Scotland to act congruently with who Scotland 'is'.

The article is also instructive for understanding the broader viability of desecuritisng migration, which in turn carries several normative implications. First, the article supports arguments that simply deconstructing identities and/or making rationalist-material arguments is insufficient. *Building* an identity is a key component of any desecuritisation. Here, an identity is constructed where the spirit of welcome and an embrace of a level of difference and change are key pillars that define a collective 'us', making immigration – something that is often both needed and also unavoidable – *conducive* to ontological security-seeking by reinforcing core biographical narratives. In turn, securitising immigration is made to fit uncomfortably with dominant ontological

¹²⁷ Scottish Government, *Building a New Scotland: Migration*.

security-seeking biographical narratives. Normatively speaking, this suggests that political and societal leaders *should* endeavour to build national identities, rather than leaving this project to those who desire to use the available discursive cultural resources to articulate unduly exclusionary and unflexible national identity narratives. In short, not all collective identity projects are ethically the same.

This insight has knock-on implications for understanding the future of Scottish immigration politics. In one respect, for policymakers seeking to have a more liberal immigration policy accepted widely, ensuring that Scottish national identity remains uncompromisingly articulated in terms of an ongoing project of welcome and openness means that deviations from this ideal will be unsatisfying in terms of ontologically security-seeking, whilst enacting these ideals will be rewarding. Yet, should Scottish Government requests be granted and immigration powers be devolved, or indeed independence occur and full responsibility for immigration and border control become reality, delicate ontological security dynamics will arise. First, the possession of meaningful powers will inevitably generate greater politicisation and salience. Historic and contemporary cross-party support for pro-immigration discourses and policy platforms may be tested, with a vacant niche for a populist, anti-immigration, and nativist political force. Despite far-right populism holding limited success in Scotland compared to England and Wales thus far, Scotland is far from immune to anti-immigration attitudes and prejudice¹²⁸ or support for far-right populism.¹²⁹ Second, as the Scottish Government acknowledge in their policy proposals, exclusionary practices are inevitable when engaging in border management, for example via handling failed asylum cases. This may cause tension in core narratives.

Third, if part of the affective appeal of desecuritisation of immigration was tied to fantasy about controlling immigration policy – to its denial and lack of fulfilment – in light of powers actually being held, the affective appeal may be undermined. The fantasy can of course be rewritten – new end points, new barriers – yet, the managing of this, and ensuring it supports a continued desecuritized immigration politics without being built upon normatively problematic Othering, is a pressing task. We argue, therefore, there is a need to present the Scottish approach to immigration and related autobiographical narratives as a continual process of striving to be ‘who we are’ and ‘who we want to be’. Leaders must ensure that fantasies related to openness and welcome are explicitly pitched as an ongoing, never-ending project. This would support ‘progress’ and the maintenance of a self-critical posture. Instead of ‘we are welcoming’, which satisfies the ontological desire and thus ends the political project – not to mention fostering a complacent ‘wha’s like us’ talk without the walk and a pressure to bury one’s head in the sand when faced with any incongruence between autobiographical narrative and reality¹³⁰ – we arrive at ‘we are even more welcoming, great! But we can be even more welcoming still. Let’s get to work!’ In short, the Lacanian self can never be realised, but there is nothing to say that striving to satisfy Lacanian fantasies cannot be both affectively positive and ethically desirable. This normative position allows for desire to be maintained and bolsters the political project to *better the self*, not just *better the Other*, whilst guarding against complacency and a brittleness of autobiographical narratives and identities in the face of critical appraisal.

Video abstract. To view the online video abstract, please visit: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210525101393>

¹²⁸ Neil Davidson, Minna Liinpää, Maureen McBride, and Satnam Virdee (eds), *No Problem Here: Understanding Racism in Scotland* (Luath Press, 2018).

¹²⁹ In the 2024 Westminster election, the vote for right-wing populist ‘Reform UK’ in Scotland was approximately 7 per cent compared with 15.3 per cent in England and 16.9 per cent in Wales. This matches sustained patterns of electoral behaviour regarding voting right of centre. The combined Conservative/Reform vote in England and Wales was 41.2 per cent and 35.1 per cent respectively, and just 19.7 per cent in Scotland.

¹³⁰ Evidence suggests elite narratives of Scottish exceptionalism are being internalised by citizens even when some daily experiences are incongruent with this vision. Anna Gawlewicz, “Scotland’s different”: Narratives of Scotland’s distinctiveness in the post-Brexit-vote era, *Scottish Affairs*, 29:3 (2018), pp. 321–35.

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