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United States
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Hellenic Open University, Greece

*CORRESPONDENCE
Johannes Muntschick
muntschick@uni-mainz.de

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The securitization of inter-regional energy cooperation between the EU and Southern Africa

Johannes Muntschick*

Department of Political Science, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, Mainz, Germany

The European Union's (EU) green hydrogen policy has evolved significantly over recent years as a central component of its commitment to achieving climate neutrality by 2050. It includes a strategic focus on external partnerships with third countries outside Europe to meet its ambitious import targets and promote global hydrogen production. In Africa, South Africa with its renewable energy potential and strategic position as regional (energy) powerhouse in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), is a key partner in the EU's ambitious plans. Norm- and value-based voices emphasize, this partnership is not only mutually beneficial but supports sustainable development in Africa. Against the background of a perceived polycrisis in the international system and growing energy security concerns in Europe, however, geopolitical notions in the context of strengthening EU energy security and facilitating resilient energy supply chains have become prominent. The article turns to European geopolitics and investigates the nature and perception of inter-regional energy cooperation between the EU and Southern Africa, with a focused analysis on (green) hydrogen. Building on theoretical concepts of (collective) securitization, the article conducts a qualitative content analysis of both European and Southern African newspaper articles to identify narratives and explain whether and how inter-regional (green) hydrogen energy cooperation between the EU and South Africa is subject of securitization. It claims that European actors (collectively) securitize EU-South Africa green hydrogen cooperation as essential for energy resilience after the Russian invasion of Ukraine while South African actors primarily frame it in developmental and economic terms, occasionally contesting European narratives as neo-colonial.

KEYWORDS
energy, European Union (EU), green hydrogen, hydrogen, inter-regional cooperation, securitization, South Africa

1 Introduction

Inter-regional cooperation in energy policy has emerged as a critical dimension in global governance, particularly in the context of mounting ecological, economic, and geopolitical crises. The European Union's (EU) ambition to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 is a driving force behind its evolving strategy toward sustainable energy, with (green)

hydrogen occupying a central role.[1] Given limitations in domestic renewable generation, the EU has prioritized external partnerships to secure the supply and diversification of energy resources. Southern Africa, particularly South Africa as economic and energy hub of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), has been identified as an indispensable partner due to its vast renewable potential and its role as regional hegemon.[2]

Hydrogen links the EU's decarbonisation and import needs with South Africa's ambition to leverage world-class renewable resources and reindustrialise its coal-dependent economy through export-oriented green hydrogen value chains. This connection reflects in various EU-South Africa partnership frameworks that combine regulatory alignment, infrastructure finance and joint value-chain development for green hydrogen and its derivatives. Key actors and policy entrepreneurs include EU institutions, South African government agencies, development banks, big energy and mining firms, and transnational epistemic communities dealing with energy/hydrogen standards, infrastructure planning and the environment (Ravi Kumar Bhagwat and Olczak, 2020).

Recent years have seen the deepening of mutual commitments, including the International Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP)[3] and the Clean Trade and Investment Partnership (CTIP),[4] through which the EU extends financial and technical support for South Africa's energy transition. The EU-South Africa partnership is positioned as exemplary within a broader Africa-Europe agenda, not only as a measure supporting sustainable development but also reflecting mutual strategic interests in climate action, the economy and not least energy security. However, these positive narratives are accompanied by new pressures arising from international challenges, conflict threats and a context that some refer to as "polycrisis"—a term that captures the simultaneous and intersecting challenges of geopolitical, economic, and ecological instability (Lawrence et al., 2024; Mark et al., 2025). While "polycrisis" is possibly not an entirely new phenomenon in international relations, yet crises are possibly more far-reaching and unfolding more impact in a highly interdependent, globalized world.

Apparently rather unexpected by most state leaders was Russia's full invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This sparked not only a major conflict in Europe but also a serious political crisis on global level, not to mention the subsequent gas supply crisis in central parts of Europe. It was, however, at this point that issues such as energy supply, energy dependence and energy security rapidly turned from a hot potato to topics of key strategic importance for the EU and its member states (Jerzyniak, 2024). Within this context, energy policy is increasingly framed as a security issue. The threat of supply disruptions, geopolitical rivalries, and the imperative of resilient supply chains have all contributed to the elevation of energy policy on security agendas. These developments, while advancing decarbonization and global cooperation rhetorically, risk being accompanied by new exclusionary practices, securitizing discourses, and shifts in the logic of inter-regional partnerships.[5]

Policy-oriented and academic research on EU-Africa relations, energy transition/cooperation, and global (green) hydrogen markets is substantial and growing over the past decade. Analytical reports by the Africa-EU Energy Partnership (AEEP) stress the imperative of aligning green hydrogen cooperation with sustainable development, industrial policy, and inclusive governance mechanisms that benefit both continents [Africa-EU Energy Partnership (AEEP), 2021]. European Parliament briefings have outlined the continent's energy poverty and mapped challenges regarding the design and efficacy of EU programmes (Sánchez Jacob et al., 2023). Sector-specific analyses have illustrated promising advances but also key risks and tensions regarding so-called "just transitions" and the extractivist dynamics that persist (Bouacida et al., 2022; Dagnachew et al., 2025). Some scholars critically assessed the externalization of European green hydrogen demand and the development opportunities in African exporting countries (Sadik-Zada et al., 2025), while other studies evaluated the complex political ecology of green hydrogen, warning against a new wave of developmentalism that might reinforce energy dependencies (Dagnachew et al., 2025). Issue-specific research has been complemented by studies that analyzed the EU as a securitizing actor in a broader context (Sperling and Webber, 2019a). This includes empirical studies that show how energy, migration, and even digital technologies have been collectively securitized in Europe, reshaping inter-regional cooperation and internal policy agendas (Bigo, 2000; Boin and Rhinard, 2023; Stivas, 2024; ter Horst, 2021; Vériter, 2025).

While all of these are very welcome research contributions, there is still a need for systematic political science analyses including African perspectives and agency to avoid Eurocentrism and to capture the variegated perceptions and responses to EU energy security and hydrogen initiatives from the global South (Bouacida et al., 2022; Sadik-Zada et al., 2025). Against this background, the key research question of this paper is: Whether and how has the EU's external green hydrogen policy with South Africa as member of the SADC been subject to securitization? In what ways does the South African perspective correspond to that of the EU?

The article attempts to respond to the two key research gaps: first, the lack of nuanced analysis regarding how geopolitical and security narratives shape the EU's external green hydrogen strategy; and second, the limited integration of Southern African perspectives in understanding the logic, risks, and opportunities of these inter-regional energy partnerships. This inquiry and analysis are essential not only for mapping narratives and explaining policies but also for understanding the broader implications of the securitization process, making this article a timely and innovative contribution.

1 https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/climate-strategies-targets/2050-long-term-strategy_en (12/09/2025).

2 https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/international-cooperation/key-partner-countries-and-regions/africa_en (12/09/2025).

3 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_5768 (12/09/2025).

4 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/769576/EPRS_BRI(2025)769576_EN.pdf (12/09/2025).

5 Speech by President von der Leyen at the Summit on the Future of Energy Security (London, 24 April 2025). https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/speech_25_1100/SPEECH_25_1100_EN.pdf (12/09/2025).

The analytical approach grounds in the Copenhagen School tradition of securitization theory. Securitization is understood as a discursive process through which political actors position certain issues as existential threats, thereby creating the conditions for exceptional policies and urgent action (Guzzini, 2011). The study builds on advances in securitization theory wherein security logics are (re-)produced not solely by states but through international institutions that collectively act together to define and legitimize threats and orchestrate security policy action (Sperling and Webber, 2019b). This approach is especially relevant in times where regional organizations (ROs) have become increasingly important international actors both in terms of numbers and capacity to act (Panke and Stapel, 2023). The methodology is qualitative, drawing on a qualitative content analysis of relevant media sources, especially newspaper articles, from both European and Southern African sources. This dual-source approach is explicitly intended to include African perspectives and avoid Eurocentrism.

The article unfolds as follows: following the introduction, there is a conceptual and theory-informed chapter on securitization. From there, a chapter on methodology introduces the research design and categories for the context analysis. The latter is at the center of the following empirical analysis. It provides insights on whether and how inter-regional (green) hydrogen energy cooperation between the EU and South Africa is subject to securitization and claims that the debate in both regions sets different emphases: European actors (collectively) securitize EU-South Africa green hydrogen cooperation as essential for energy resilience after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. South African actors primarily frame it in developmental and economic terms, occasionally contesting European narratives as neo-colonial—revealing asymmetric securitization processes that must be reconciled for equitable, sustainable partnership.

2 Theory and concepts: collective securitization

Securitization theory, as developed by the Copenhagen School, represents a significant post-Cold War innovation in security studies as it goes beyond mainstream theories such as neorealism (Waltz, 1979) and liberalism (Czempiel and Rosenau, 1989). Instead of treating states as unitary actors with a fixed hierarchy of preferences and security as the prevalence and management of objective threats, the Copenhagen School regards security as a socially constructed status—a dynamic, designed and contested outcome arising from the intentions and behavior of political actors and the acceptance of their claims by relevant addressees. Thus, it systematically unpacks how, why, and with what effects certain issues are transformed from ordinary political questions into matters of security (Adler and Barnett, 1998; Buzan et al., 1998). The origins of this approach lie in a mix of critical engagement with both (neo)realist and liberal traditions and the adoption of constructivist methodologies that emphasize intersubjectivity and discursive processes (Wæver, 1995).

The central proposition of securitization theory is that an issue becomes a security issue not because of its features, but because it is successfully presented as a threat that justifies the use of exceptional measures. Building on philosophical works (Austin, 1962), Wæver (1995) argued that "security" is primarily constituted by linguistic performances. This implies that by speaking about security in certain ways, an actor can change the rules of the game (Wæver, 1995; Huysmans, 2002). According to the Copenhagen School, the process of securitization involves a "securitizing actor" making a "securitizing move" to frame something as a grave threat to a "referent object" (Buzan et al., 1998). The theory's analytical strength derives from its integration of three conceptual tools which shall be presented in more detail in the following:

The cornerstone of this framework is the speech act. It is the performative moment when a securitizing actor (such as e.g., a state leader, politician, government official, or authoritative institution) publicly declares something as a grave or existential threat to a specified "referent object" (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 21; Wæver, 1995). Such a declaration shifts the issue from "normal" politics into the realm of security. The process is inherently political, opening space for contestation both by alternative actors and within the audience itself (McDonald, 2008), which is why "securitization can thus be seen as a more extreme version of politicization" (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 23). For an issue to be securitized, the threat must be of grave nature. It must be significant enough to challenge the object's integrity or even its very existence (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 21).

In the political sector "existential threats are traditionally defined in terms of the constituting principle, sovereignty but sometimes also ideology of the state" (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 22). In the context of a more comprehensive and less state-centric understanding of security, however, "referent objects other than the state had to be allowed into the picture" (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 8). Against the background of a broader concept of "human security" (King and Murray, 2001), accordingly, also societal identities, economies, the environment and energy are potential referent objects that deserve protection. This widening and deepening of security implies that new actors—e.g., non-governmental organizations (NGOs), business actors, warlords, and communities such as epistemic networks—are also capable of both advancing and contesting securitization moves (Emmers, 2011; Huysmans, 2002).

A securitising move always relies heavily on public discourse and speech acts. This is because security is closely linked to language, as Waever notes: "I discuss security as a speech act" (Wæver, 1995, p. 46). The process entails constructing a narrative that presents an issue as a grave threat, thereby persuading the audience of the necessity of its securitisation. To achieve this, accordingly a particular language or wording may be used in speech acts and discourse. The success of a securitising move, however, depends on addressees' perception and approval as an "issue is securitised only if and when the audience accepts it as such" (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 25). A successful securitising move implies that the targeted audience not only assesses but also acknowledges and endorses the security claims (Balzacq, 2005, 2011; Balzacq et al., 2015; Stritzel, 2007), thus granting legitimacy for extraordinary actions (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995).

Besides empirically grounded, good arguments, persuasion is therefore of key importance, as without audience consent the securitising actor cannot legitimately employ the desired

(extraordinary) policy measures and actions. The aim of securitisation is always to enable the actor to claim exceptional authority or to justify measures beyond normal political practice, which may—in an extreme case—even include the use of force or military means (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 23). However, the nature of these measures is assumed to vary according to the type of threat. Environmental or energy related problems, for instance, cannot be sufficiently addressed with the military. Ultimately, the success of securitisation remains therefore dependent on the persuasive force of the narrative. This intersubjective dynamic distinguishes securitization theory from approaches that view security as purely objective.

Collective securitization. As international relations have grown more densely institutionalized, it became clear that the original securitization theory with its focus on national actors was too narrow to describe and explain contemporary security politics. The concept of "collective securitization" was developed as a response to these complexities, acknowledging that not only states but also international and regional organizations can act as coherent and collective securitizing actors (Lucarelli et al., 2020; Sperling and Webber, 2019a; Vériter, 2025). These bodies possess sometimes significant administrative capacity and legal authority for policymaking and action, e.g., the EU, African Union (AU), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), or, to lesser degrees, also the SADC. International or regional organizations with a sufficient degree of agency are then able to generate, frame, and propagate security narratives; not necessarily with consent of all member states (Sperling and Webber, 2019a,b).

Collective securitization is therefore often constituted by dynamic, multi-level processes: organizational leadership or specialized organs (e.g., the European Commission or the SADC Secretariat) identify and advance threat claims, which are then debated, promoted, or resisted by member states, national parliaments, and other affected actors. Against this background, the audience of a securitizing move is multifaceted as well. It may include national governments and parliaments, publics, media, transnational networks, and even external actors (Vériter, 2025; ter Horst, 2021).

Moreover, collective securitization can operate along a spectrum. So-called "thin" collective securitization occurs when one or a few states advance their security concerns within an international organization, prompting collective endorsement and policy action without granting it genuine autonomy. In this form, an international organization primarily functions as a spokesperson or vehicle for its members' pre-existing threat perceptions. By contrast, "thick" collective securitization endows the international organization with independent agency, allowing it to initiate and develop its own security agendas, thereby occasionally influencing member states' positions (Sperling and Webber, 2019b, p. 236–237; ter Horst, 2021).

Thus, collective securitization theory addresses the contemporary complexities of multilayered agency, policymaking and governance in the issue area of security. This is particularly salient for understanding security politics of the EU (Baker-Beall, 2019; Judge and Maltby, 2017), where threats and crises related to energy, migration, currency, and environment often demand collective rather than national responses.

3 Methodology

The empirical analysis puts a focus on the EU and on South Africa as regional hegemon and key member of the SADC. Both represent crucial cases (Eckstein, 1975) insofar as they are the most important and powerful actors in their regions. This is where one would expect—and actually does observe—a prominent and promising example of inter-regional relations and institutionalized cooperation between actors from the Global North and South.[6] The investigation period of the empirical analysis is limited to 01/2022 until 06/2025. This is because 2022 marks Russia's full invasion of Ukraine and the beginning of a gas supply crisis and looming energy shortages in large parts of the EU (Kuzemko et al., 2022).

This study employs qualitative content analysis, a methodology centered on interpreting and understanding materials within a defined context (Mayring, 2015; p. 50). The approach is distinguished by three key characteristics: first, qualitative content analysis facilitates the reduction of extensive datasets to relevant elements through the establishment of a systematic coding frame. Second, this technique follows a theory-driven and structured procedure, drawing upon prior knowledge of the subject matter, thereby enabling transparent analysis that can be understood and verified by others. Third, it incorporates sufficient flexibility to accommodate a profound analysis and interpretation of qualitative material (Schreier, 2014; p. 2–5).

Since the principal objective is to extract material relevant to the research question, this investigation utilizes a structural qualitative content analysis. Categories (and sub-categories) serve as tools to capture text-specific content, and there is a methodological distinction between the modes of category development: categories may be constructed inductively from the source material or deductively, informed by theoretical background or the current state of scholarship (Mayring, 2015, p. 51). In this study, the primary categories are defined deductively; however, the integration of new categories developed through inductive means remains possible throughout the analytic process. The computer-assisted software MAXQDA was used to conduct content analysis.

The following categories have been developed deductively from theory and operationalised as depicted below. They shall capture most of the relevant content to answer the research question regarding securitization (see C1), while opportunity for alternative (see C2–C4) and new, inductively developed categories remains (Figure 1).

In order to operationalise securitization, the coding scheme applied discursive markers associated with security framing and existential threat. Security frames were understood as formulations that linked (green) hydrogen and inter-regional energy cooperation to vulnerability, crisis, or survival in ways that moved beyond routine cost–benefit language. Typical markers included references to e.g., "risk," "crisis," "dependence," "vulnerability" or "resilience" in the context of energy supply

6 Institutionalised cooperation between the EU and South Africa roots in the Trade, Development and Cooperation Agreement (TDCA), signed in 1999. The TDCA established the formal framework for political dialogue, trade relations, and development cooperation between the two partners (Gladwin and Otto, 2010).

- C1: Securitization of inter-regional energy cooperation
  - C1.1: Securitizing actor
    - Government institutions and officials (e.g. EU Commission, president, ministers)
    - Private companies and business representatives (e.g. energy providers)
    - Non-governmental institutions and officials (e.g. environmental groups and activists)
  - C1.2: Securitizing move
    - Security framing (e.g. hydrogen as strategic resource)
    - References to existential threat (e.g. energy dependence)
  - C1.3: Referent object
    - State security and political stability (e.g. critical infrastructure)
    - Energy supply and security (e.g. uninterrupted energy supply)
    - Socio-economic well-being (e.g. affordable energy supply for the economy and citizens)
    - Climate and environment (e.g. carbon neutral energy)
- C2: Economic emphasis of inter-regional energy cooperation
- C3: Developmental emphasis of inter-regional energy cooperation
- C4: Environmental emphasis of inter-regional energy cooperation

FIGURE 1
Categories and coding.

or political/economic stability. Existential-threat references were coded where actors portrayed possible supply interruptions, geopolitical shocks, or developmental failures as jeopardizing the continuity or basic functioning of crucial referent objects (e.g., "Europe will not get through winter…"). Metaphors and tropes such as e.g., "oil of the future" or "energy imperialism" were coded when they contributed to framing inter-regional energy relations. These markers and metaphors reflect common discursive devices identified in the securitization literature (Thomson and Baele, 2022).

Regarding data selection, the study puts a focus on the analysis of relevant media in Europe and Southern Africa, namely newspaper articles, in the period 01/2022–06/2025. While official press releases and government reports as primary sources certainly do exist, they are usually of a more formulaic nature and often provide less context information. Assuming, that the general public is the key audience, newspaper articles are the preferred choice for this content analysis as they are assumed to be widely read. In both cases, highest circulation newspapers published in English were considered. The restriction to Anglophone media is justified by the fact that English is the lingua franca in both Europe and Southern Africa, including South Africa, and newspapers published in English certainly a key arena for the debate.

The author used LexisNexis to get access to the newspaper articles for data collection. To condense and identify the relevant material, a pre-selection was conducted. In general, this included only articles containing the keywords "hydrogen" OR "green hydrogen," "Europe" OR "EU," and "SADC" OR "South Africa."

For the European sample, the LexisNexis search produced $n = 168$ relevant articles from a range of more than 10 national and regional outlets, including broadsheets and business media in Germany (e.g., Die Welt or Handelsblatt), the United Kingdom (e.g., Financial Times, or The Guardian), and pan-European outlets (e.g., Politico Europe or Euractiv). It seems that the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 fuelled the debate on energy and (green) hydrogen cooperation between Europe and Southern Africa because the number of relevant newspaper articles sharply increased during the same year and reached a peak by the beginning of 2023. This corresponds to the (perception of a) looming energy and gas supply crisis in many European countries during Winter 2022/23 (Jaeger-Erben et al., 2025). Thereafter and most significantly since mid-2024, the number of relevant newspaper articles decreased sharply by about 80%. It seems to reflect the feeling in many European governments and peoples that the actual crisis was over—and therefore the topic lost media attention.

For Southern Africa, the search resulted in $n = 322$ relevant articles in more than 20 national dailies and regional titles (e.g., Business Day, Mail & Guardian or Cape Argus), including specialized economic or energy outlets. It is remarkable that this number is twice as much as in the case of Europe, which must not least be read against the background of the smaller set of outlets. The higher publication frequency indicates that the topic of inter-regional energy and (green) hydrogen cooperation, in general, attracted more newspaper media attention in Southern Africa compared to Europe. In addition, and in contrast to the latter, the number of relevant newspaper articles in Southern Africa was already on a high level by the beginning of 2022. It continued to be, and the frequency of relevant publications only started to slowly decrease in February/March 2023 until it reached about 50% of its baseline at the end of the observation period in June 2025.

The relatively strong and lasting publication frequency reflects the importance of the topic in politics as well as in the public debate. In contrast to Europe, where the energy crisis after the Russian invasion of Ukraine obviously sparked media coverage and fuelled

the public/political discourse in a context of securitization, the topic of (green) hydrogen and inter-regional energy cooperation became already prominent in South African media around 2021. An announcement in November 2021 at COP26, where major international funding was secured to support South Africa's green economy transition with a focus on hydrogen, in combination with statements and policy actions by government officials as early as April and June 2021 further elevated the topic (Stamm et al., 2023).

To capture collective securitization, the analysis looked for instances where representatives and institutions from Europe and Southern Africa (e.g., EU Commission or SADC Summit) framed (green) hydrogen and inter-regional cooperation as security issues on behalf of their region and/or regional organization. Empirically, this was operationalised as repeated security framings by actors across different newspaper outlets, including narratives in key member states such as South Africa, and circulation of key formulations and metaphors across articles.

4 Inter-regional energy cooperation between the EU and Southern Africa

While the LexisNexis database produced a multitude of newspaper articles that include the relevant keywords, coding took only those into account that explicitly referred to (green) hydrogen in an international relations context of inter-regional (energy) cooperation between Europe and Southern Africa. In most of such relevant cases, the key actors appeared to be governmental and business actors from the EU and South Africa. On several occasions, the focus was on individual member states of the EU and SADC, notably Germany and Namibia, respectively. Such articles became part of the coding scheme and empirical analysis if it was clear that bilateral interaction was embedded in a broader inter-regional energy cooperation context.

4.1 Securitization in Europe: energy supply crisis fuels cooperation with Africa

The EU has a highly decarbonising power sector in which renewables reached roughly 47% of electricity generation in 2024, while fossil fuels supplied about 29% and nuclear around 23%–24%. Strategically, the EU aims to produce 10 million tons of renewable hydrogen domestically and import an additional 10 million tons by 2030, with hydrogen expected to cover about 10% of final energy demand by 2050. So far, however, most announced projects remain at concept or feasibility stage.[7]

Against the background of the categories outlined above in Figure 1, the coding results of the "European perspective on inter-regional energy cooperation" are as follows:

As Figure 2 shows, codes related to securitizing actors and moves account for roughly one third of all coded passages in the European sample, whereas purely economic or developmental emphases appear much less frequently. This evidence suggests that security logics were an important element in the European discourse on inter-regional (green) hydrogen cooperation in the time period under observation. Only part of the newspaper articles identified as relevant by the software, however, turned out to be relevant for the research topic of this study in the end. This is because in many newspaper articles, the set of selected key words appears in different contexts and does not relate to inter-regional energy cooperation in (green) hydrogen at all. Therefore, only $n = 84$ text passages were coded in total.

Referring to this, firstly, there is clear evidence of a securitization of inter-regional energy cooperation between the EU and Southern Africa when it comes to (green) hydrogen. In the majority of relevant media coverage ($n = 18$), newspapers referred to securitizing actors making securitizing moves in the context of this topic. Government institutions and official representatives ($n = 9$), notably the EU commission and leaders from Europe (particularly from Germany) and South Africa, were the most prominent securitizing actors. Private companies and business representatives ($n = 5$), such as e.g., the Southern African-German Chamber of Commerce or the South African chemicals and energy company Sasol, played only a minor role in this regard. The same applies for non-governmental institutions and their representatives ($n = 4$), such as e.g., the Carbon Tracker Initiative or the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom from Germany.

The actors' securitizing moves resembled in most cases to rather subtle security framing of the issue rather than direct references to existential threats. Some articles point to the general observation and fact that "Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February, the price of gas [...] has soared by more than 70% on the international markets, triggering an energy crisis and pushing lawmakers worldwide to urgently source alternative sources of fuel."[8] Others are clearer about the securitizing actors, highlighting that the "European Commission has said there is a 'double urgency', of decarbonisation and curbing reliance on Russian gas"[9] and describing "Europe's anxious search for new energy sources as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine."[10] Taken together, these statements reproduce a recognizable securitizing grammar. Anxiety of an imminent energy crisis find also expression in statements referring to the haste and drive for rapid solutions as Europe and Germany "are rushing to secure alternative sources of energy from across the globe."[11] Securitization in terms of fear and threat is also prominent in statements of European leaders. The German Economics Minister Robert Habeck, who traveled to South Africa and Namibia in early December 2022, is cited with an almost imploring statement that "one can only hope for a substantial contribution from African production to the European energy supply in a few

7 https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/eus-energy-system/hydrogen_en (15/12/2025).

8 IntelliNews: "bneGREEN: Ukraine war boosts green hydrogen to the tune of $73bn," 28th October 2022.

9 The Press and Journal: "Namibian hydrogen has eyes on European role," 6th June 2022.

10 NewsBase (Africa Power Monitor Today): "Sasol to sharpen focus on green hydrogen export plans as Europe looks for green energy," 22nd April 2022.

11 NewsBase (Africa Power Monitor Today): "Germany reportedly considering €10bn investment into Namibia green hydrogen project," 6th December 2022.

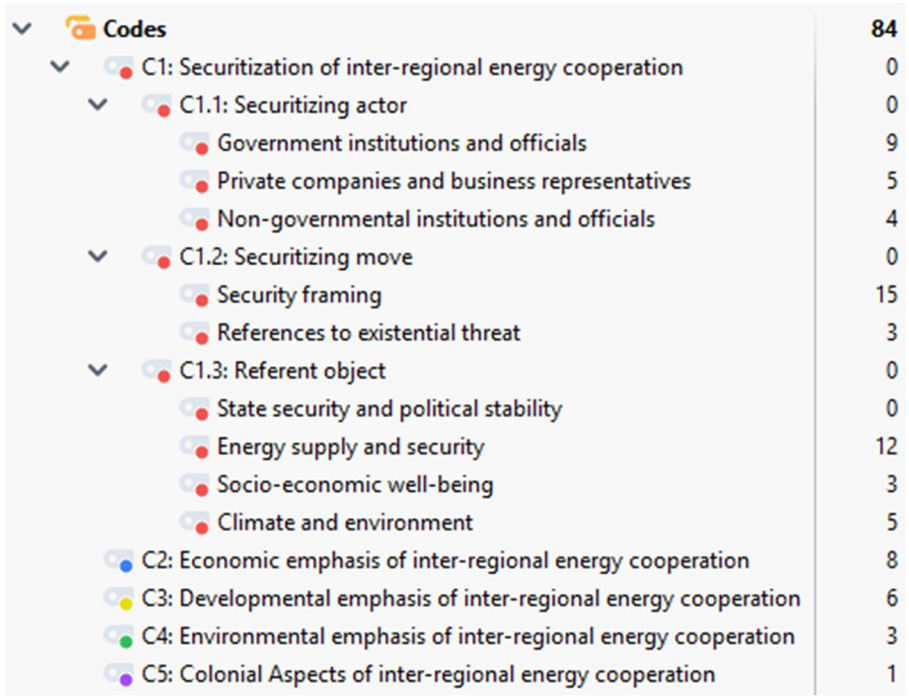

FIGURE 2
Code system "European perspective."

years."[12] Such European moves of desperation were anticipated, echoed and possibly reinforced by the African counterparts and business entrepreneurs like Marco Raffinetti, CEO of the Hyphen Hydrogen Energy Ltd. in Namibia, readily stated that "The world needs as much hydrogen as it can get as fast as possible" (see text footnote 9).

Corresponding to the content and communication in most securitizing moves, empirical evidence suggests that the key referent object in the securitization process is framed in the context of energy supply and security. In general, debate among European actors was all about losing this supply, namely the "shortfall of Russian pipeline gas following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in late February" (see text footnote 11). On EU level, energy security was in addition identified as a problem of asymmetric energy supply relations, leading to insightful statements that "the European Commission wants to end dependence on Russian energy"[13] and that "Europe needed to become independent of Russia and therefore diversify its energy sources."[14] Similar observation on state level, where "European leaders, particularly in Germany and the Netherlands, are hopeful that [...] investments in green hydrogen production on the continent [i.e., Africa, the author] are indicative of Europe's intent to diversify its energy sources."[15] British PM Boris Johnson, referring to the Russian invasion of Ukraine a few days before, was more outspoken and demanded that the UK and other European countries needed to "wean ourselves off dependence on Putin's oil and gas"[16]—and substitute petrol and Diesel for car engines with (green) hydrogen. According to Siggi Huegemann, Secretary General of the African Hydrogen Partnership (AHP), the demand for hydrogen in Europe not only skyrocketed in the course of "recent developments, most particularly increasingly strong gas prices and Russia's invasion of Ukraine" (see text footnote 9) but also because "there's no way around hydrogen. Either we use it, or we all get cooked."[17]

Coding never detected state security and political stability as referent object and, in contrast to energy supply (security), sectors such as socio-economic wellbeing or climate and environment were much less frequently identified (and coded) as referent objects in the securitization process. For example, it was reported that German Economics Minister "Habeck had numerous German managers in tow [...] especially in the area of green energy supply" (see text footnote 12) on his state visits in Southern Africa. The

12 Die Welt: "Habeck's plan for energy transition in Africa; The German economy minister only wants investment in green energy sources on the continent. The reality is far more complicated," 9th December 2022.

13 Die Welt: "Africa calls Europe's energy policy hypocritical; sudden call for more coal exports," 23rd September 2022.

14 Die Welt, "Sustainable Energy; Africa's green hydrogen; The continent could supply the world with climate-friendly energy - and thus also make Germany independent of fossil gas," 27th April 2023.

15 NewsBase (Africa Power Monitor): "Africa's inaugural Climate Summit calls for biggest investment into renewable energy projects," 6th September 2023.

16 The Times: "Graham Ruddick Hydrogen can help to drive a green revolution without needing Russia," 28th February 2022.

17 ibid.

United Kingdom's (UK) trade envoy for South Africa and Mauritius highlighted that

> "Britain is seeking to expand its renewable energy footprint in South Africa [as] the country's energy crisis is driving a significant UK commercial and industrial (C&I) investment into renewables, making Britain the biggest foreign investor in renewable energy in South Africa."[18]

This gives evidence that the energy crisis in Europe also initiated and/or boosted inter-regional economic cooperation. Occasionally, the strands of argument became intertwined. South African President Cyril Ramaphosa said "that he believed that green hydrogen was the oil of the future" (see text footnote 10) and, somehow in a securitizing move, "warned that if South Africa did not embrace green energy, and did not respond to the climate change process that is under way and developing in the world, then the country and its economy would get left behind" (see text footnote 17).

In contrast to categories of securitization, coding detected less frequently passages referring to plain economic, developmental or environmental emphasis of inter-regional energy cooperation. Passages on economic emphasis usually reflect statements and debates on the market potential and estimated economic benefits of inter-regional energy cooperation in (green) hydrogen for both partners. One article concludes: "Sales of the new energy source [i.e., hydrogen, the author] are assured for African countries for a long time to come. The EU expects nearly a quarter of the world's energy needs to be met by green hydrogen by 2050."[19] Others remark that Southern Africa is in a perfect position to become an export center for green hydrogen production to Europe and the world and thus a green hydrogen export hub (see text footnote 10).[20]

Passages on developmental emphasis typically highlight the importance and quantity of donor funding for inter-regional energy cooperation. Frequently, a $8.5bn grant within the framework of the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP), jointly financed by European partners (plus Cananda), is mentioned.[21] Correspondingly, "EU energy commissioner Kadri Simson [...] indicated that the bloc [...] is seeking to assist countries such as South Africa to build capacity for green hydrogen."[22] Passages on environmental emphasis added that inter-regional energy cooperation implies not only significant foreign direct investments but "comes as part of a move by Europe to tap into Africa's renewable resources in order to meet net-zero targets for 2050."[23]

From an overall perspective, the dominant securitizing actors were European government institutions who framed inter-regional (green) hydrogen cooperation as strategically vital for energy security, with energy supply and security functioning as the main referent objects. Evidence suggests that the European discourse exhibits a collective pattern centered on EU institutions and leading member states: the European "double urgency" language and calls for diversification are taken up and echoed by national leaders and business actors across different outlets, creating a shared narrative that positions inter-regional (green) hydrogen cooperation as a collective response to a common energy threat. Throughout, Europe—namely the EU—appears to be a securitizing actor with agency and policy ambitions in its own rights, which gives evidence of the "thick" version of collective securitization (Sperling and Webber, 2019b, p. 237). Brussels' common energy policies and inter-regional cooperation initiatives, however, were not least encouraged and flanked by those member states that faced and feared an acute energy crisis most directly—and demanded (green) hydrogen supply most urgently (Goldthau and Youngs, 2023). With these important "thin" elements within, the EU and its energy policies show presumably a hybrid pattern of collective securitisation.

While most statements stop short of spelling out drastic emergency measures, even in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, they justify accelerated regulatory change, fast-tracking of projects, and large-scale public financing as necessary departures from "business as usual." The predominance of notions of dependence and security of energy (supply) framing over explicit existential-threat declarations suggests a subtle form of securitization in which inter-regional energy cooperation is normalized as an indispensable resilience measure rather than dramatized as warlike emergency. Economic and developmental rationales, while present, played comparatively minor roles in the European press.

The findings further indicate that although the energy partnership is overwhelmingly promoted in positive terms, critiques are scarce. Notably, actors from both Southern Africa and Europe contributed statements on the economic prospects of green hydrogen in European newspapers, reinforcing its perception as a panacea for Europe's energy crisis. The absence of SADC as an articulated actor in European media, however, suggests that this collective is imagined as a primarily European one, with Southern African partners cast more as providers of solutions.

4.2 Economization in Southern Africa: a wonderfu(e)l future?

South Africa is the regional hegemon and economic hub in Southern Africa and the SADC. Pretoria's energy landscape

18 NewsBase (Africa Power Monitor Today): "South Africa's energy crisis is powering foreign investment in renewables," 18th October 2023.

19 Die Welt: "Commit to Africa, don't moralize," 23rd June 2023.

20 NewsBase (Africa Power Monitor Today): "Southern Africa well-placed to become green hydrogen production, export centre – Kearney," 4th October 2022.

21 Brentwood Gazette: "Why I'm backing Truss in contest," 20th July 2022. NewsBase (Africa Power Monitor): "South Africa: €10mn grant from German development bank KfW to cover wind energy training projects," 8th December 2022; NewsBase: "South Africa's energy crisis is powering foreign investment in renewables," 18th October 2023.

22 NewsBase (Africa Power Monitor): "South Africa's rail, ports utility Transnet gets $8mn EU grant to help meet internal green energy commitments," 11th September 2024.

23 NewsBase (Downstream ME & Africa Monitor Today): "South Africa, Germany sign green hydrogen deal," 3rd July 2023.

is still dominated by coal and green hydrogen is framed as a key instrument for a just transition and export-oriented reindustrialisation. Policy documents and expert assessments indicate targets of around 10 Giga Watt (GW) of electrolysis capacity by 2030, enabling roughly 500,000 tons of green hydrogen production annually by 2030, with significant job-creation estimates.[24]

Based on the categories outlined in Figure 1, the coding results of the "Southern African perspective on inter-regional energy cooperation" are as follows:

Figure 3 illustrates, in contrast to the European perspective, that developmental and economic codes dominate the South(ern) African discourse, with securitization codes appearing only at the margins, underscoring the predominantly economizing rather than securitising framing. As in the previous case study, not all newspaper articles detected by the software turned out to be relevant for the research topic. Therefore, only $n = 179$ text passages became part of the code system.

The results of the content analysis are surprising insofar as the discourse in Southern Africa seems to be quite different compared to what has been observed in the European newspaper articles. In contrast to the latter, securitization of inter-regional energy cooperation was only a marginal phenomenon in Southern Africa. Coding detected about a dozen occurrences where securitizing actors, in the majority government institutions and officials, employed securitizing framing.

Surprisingly, this referred only in a single instance to South Africa's own chronic energy supply crisis (Wentink, 2023), which requires the country "supported by green hydrogen, to extend the reach of renewables and also to stabilize the power system."[25] In all other cases in this context, securitizing actors from Southern Africa or Europe pictured situations of uncertainty and threat on the international system level and called for action. At the EU-South Africa summit in Cape Town, for example, President Cyril Ramaphosa referred to a gloomy time of "global uncertainty…characterized by rising unilateralism, economic nationalism."[26] In terms of inter-regional energy cooperation, this demands to "intensify the EU's partnership with South Africa, which is a strategic partner for the EU in a challenging context of rising populism and geopolitical instability."[27] A similar situation assessment reflected in the European position, with one EU official noting that with multilateralism under fire "We consider South Africa an important global partner and in today's world it is even more important that we have a strengthened

24 https://gh2.org/countries/south-africa (15/12/2025).

25 Business Day: "ON THE SPOT - SA will need low-cost financing to kick-start green hydrogen economy," 14th October 2022.

26 Sunday Tribune: "SA, EU leaders vow deeper ties amid US threats," 16th March 2025.

27 The Mercury: "EU pledges R93.5bn investment package to support SA in strategic investments," 14th March 2025.

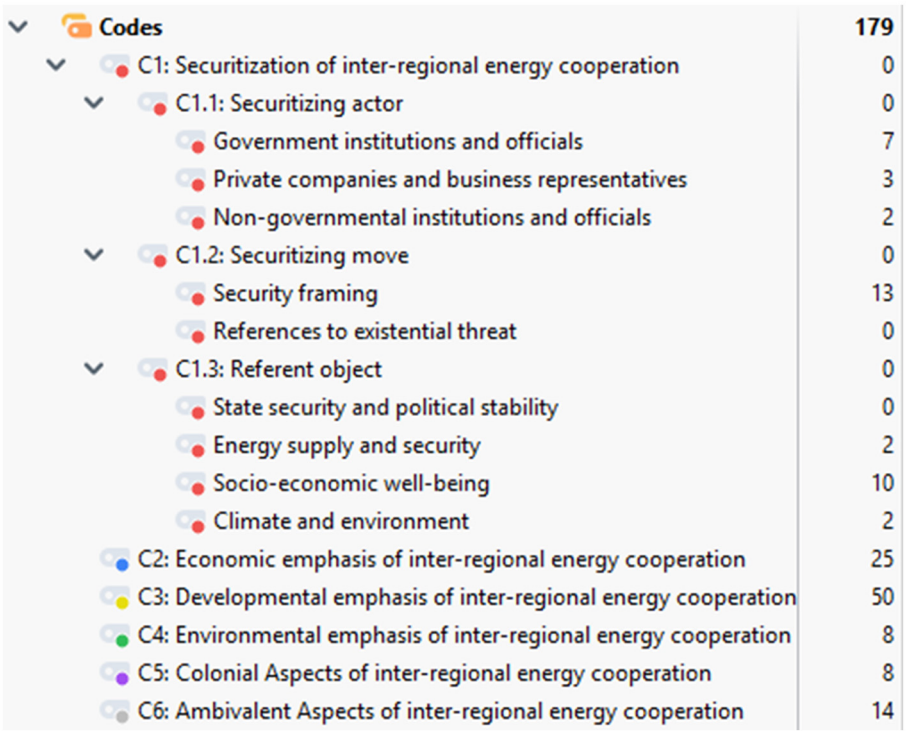

FIGURE 3
Code system "Southern African perspective."

cooperation."[28] Shortly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there was obviously a "growing awareness of how important it is to have energy sources which can stabilize global power systems" (see text footnote 31) in Southern Africa, which let the Executive Chairman of the African Energy Chamber conclude—already in March 2022—that:

> "All forms of hydrogen will help Africa achieve energy resilience and even help other regions such as Europe - currently facing soaring energy prices due to inadequate gas reserves - meet reliability goals. But what Africa needs is adequate funding and the right policy frameworks in place."[29]

The referent objects in the securitization moves and processes related, with very few exceptions, always to the category of "socio-economic wellbeing" ($n = 10$). Against the background of the EU-South Africa summit in Cape Town, President Ramaphosa remarked, that inter-regional cooperation is "vital for the growth of our economies and the achievement of South Africa's development goals"[30] and that the country "prioritized the transition to green energy, ensuring that this process is just and inclusive and safeguards the livelihoods of those most affected by the transition"(see text footnote 17). The EU adopted a similar position and Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, noted: "The geopolitical landscape is shifting, making strong partnerships more important than ever. I'm going to Cape Town with one goal: to strengthen our unique relationship with South Africa [...] taking our cooperation on [...] clean energy to the next level" (see text footnote 34).

While the securitization was certainly a noticeable but not dominant topic in South Africa's newspaper media discourse, coding detected significantly more passages identifying a developmental ($n = 50$) or economic ($n = 25$) emphasis of inter-regional energy cooperation in (green) hydrogen. The environmental context ($n = 8$), in contrast, was comparably insignificant.

Passages with a distinct developmental emphasis usually highlight the type and amount of development cooperation projects and funds, including expectations and potential benefits for socio-economic development. In this regard, the newspaper debate makes reference to major cooperation agreements between South Africa and Europe focussing on energy and green hydrogen over the past 5 years. Unsurprisingly, the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) with its particularly big funding amount was mentioned numerous times: the EU, France, Germany, UK and the US[31] signed this $8.5 billion partnership with South Africa to support a just energy transition, focusing on renewable energy and hydrogen sector development (see text footnote 31).[32] With regard to its priority sectors, grants allocations amounted to "R711.4 billion for the electricity sector, R128.1 billion for the new energy vehicle sector, R319 billion for green hydrogen."[33] The JETP was hailed because

> "The most exciting "lifeline" news for South Africa is that the strategic vision of truly massive production of green hydrogen (hydrogen produced with solar energy) for export [...] It contains huge promises of job creation, balance of payment relief, and the reduction of the rich to poor divide in South Africa."[34]

The German Chancellor was also keen to emphasize the JETP's developmental focus and highlighted in an address to German business entrepreneurs during his May 2024 "blitz visit" in South Africa "that Social and economic welfare considerations were central"(see text footnote 17). Obviously, this statement is only part of the truth. It neglects the geopolitical and economic imperatives that made Scholz rushing to South Africa less than 6 months after taking office. It is in light of such events and observations that critical newspaper articles occasionally speculate whether political actors in South Africa reinterpret external security pressures from energy-intensive Europe into developmental and sovereignty-oriented narratives. Or, as one journalist remarked:

> "African countries are expected to supply these materials under conditions dictated by European industrial needs, not African development priorities as in the case of Namibia's green hydrogen projects. This reinforces an externalization of ecological and social costs - where Africa provides the inputs for a green transition it is largely excluded from shaping or benefiting from."[35]

Less prominent in the press was the tripartite Memorandum of Understanding between South Africa and the EU-members Netherlands and Denmark, concluded in June 2023, which formalized cooperation in green hydrogen technology as part of broader renewable energy collaboration (South Africa, 2023). When mentioned, newspapers underscored the agreement's developmental component for South Africa because the country cannot tap the potential of renewable energies on its own due to limited resources and manufacturing/technical capacity. Pretoria expected that the tripartite deal will "raise $1bn to kickstart the

28 Daily Maverick: "FOREIGN AFFAIRS: SA and EU to embrace at summit after both suffer Trump abuse," 12th March 2025.

29 Intellinews – South Africa Today: "African Energy Chamber to launch Hydrogen Summit at African Energy Week 2022," 5th May 2022.

30 Cape Times: "EU pledges R93.5bn investment package to support SA in strategic investments," 14th March 2025.

31 The United States formally withdrew from the JETP agreement in March 2025, following executive orders by President Trump. Washington's withdrawal reduced the total international JETP pledges to the country by $56 million in grant funds and $1 billion in potential commercial investments. https://justenergytransition.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/20250306_SouthAfricasJustEnergyTransitionProjectManagementUnitAcknowledgestheUnitesStatesWithdrawalfromtheJustEnergyTransitionPartnership.pdf (12/09/2025).

32 Business Day: "MINING - Tharisa delivers bumper profit, eyes hydrogen economy," 6th December 2022.

33 Mail & Guardian: "SA's coal fired power stations here to stay until 2050," 21st November 2024.

34 Insider Sunday: "German chancellor's African tour SA and Germany realigned in energy transformation," 29th May 2022.

35 Mail & Guardian: "Decolonise the mind to power a green future," 25th April 2025.

country's green hydrogen sector, which will be heavily reliant on renewable power."[36]

The EU grants for South Africa's Green Hydrogen Agenda to finance strategic infrastructure, research, and demonstration projects in South Africa's hydrogen value chain demonstrate the development emphasis in the political actors and newspaper debate par excellence. Allocating a total grant sum of 32 million Euro, the European Commissioner for Energy Kadri Simson noted that "Our cooperation in support of South Africas green hydrogen agenda aims to accelerate the green transition, drive sustainable development, create new economic opportunities, and build a more sustainable future for the region."[37] Presenting itself as a cooperative actor in international relations, the EU emphasized that it is fully behind South Africa's green hydrogen agenda and remarked that "international cooperation is one of the five pillars of the European Union's Green Hydrogen (2020) strategy."[38] The government in Pretoria welcomed this support in private and public sector finance across the hydrogen value chain, covering production, transportation, storage and downstream industries and confirmed that it "is in line with South Africa's plans to expand the green hydrogen sector [...] to help accelerate its development" (see text footnote 47). This included a significant grant allocation for Transnet, the main South African transport and logistics company (government owned). Reflecting the developmental emphasis, one notion highlights that supporting the "development of a green hydrogen ecosystem in South Africa and the entity, as an integrated transportation and logistics company, is expected to play a critical role across the hydrogen value chain."[39]

At the EU-South Africa Summit in March 2025 in Cape Town, leaders from both sides launched negotiations on the Clean Trade and Investment Partnership (CTIP) aimed at deepening inter-regional cooperation on clean energy, local value chains, and key raw materials including green hydrogen. The summit was accompanied by the EU's Global Gateway Investment Package worth €4.7 billion, of which €303 million are grants. A significant portion of these grants specifically supports green hydrogen infrastructure.[40] In this context, the EU did not deny its interest to strengthen and diversify energy supply chains. However, the EU Commission President von der Leyen emphasized vis-à-vis her South African counterpart:

> "We want to do it in co-operation with you. Some countries are interested in just extracting materials from the ground and exporting profits elsewhere. That is not our model. We want to support local jobs, local added value, and high environmental and labor standards." (see text footnote 32)

It may be doubted whether the EU truly pursues foreign policy as altruistically as it claimed. Be that as it may, South Africa expected economic benefits and President Ramaphosa argued that "This will support the development of cleaner value chains for raw materials and local beneficiation, renewable and low carbon energy, and clean technology" (see text footnote 37). Given the fact that the CTIP and the EU's complementing Global Gateway investment package include also capacity-building in health, science and education, Ramaphosa added that "We have prioritized the transition to green energy, ensuring that this process is just and inclusive and safeguards the livelihoods of those most affected by the transition" (see text footnote 37). Considering all of this, newspaper articles give evidence that South Africa responded positively to the EU's various agreements and funding initiatives because Brussels' strategic interests in inter-regional energy cooperation and reliable supply chains was flanked and fuelled by significant funding envelopes that went beyond mere support for (green) hydrogen. This was "the icing on the cake."[41]

Passages with a distinct economic emphasis are frequent and occasionally overlap with categories with a developmental emphasis in terms of content. Usually, they highlight the potential economic benefits of inter-regional energy cooperation on domestic level, which often includes references to specific industries and companies, but do not focus on grants or donor funded projects. Statements by President Ramaphoza reflect the optimism and economic expectations associated with green hydrogen for the South African economy, especially in relation to Europe's anticipated demand:

> "A successful green hydrogen drive could make significant contributions to the country's economy by way of revenue and job creation. [...] It has been estimated that the hydrogen economy has the potential to add 3.6% to our GDP by 2050 and approximately 370,000 jobs." (see text footnote 48)

Arguing that green hydrogen is not only very attractive as energy carrier but also cheaper than gas at mid-2022 prices (see text footnote 31), President Ramaphosa "believed that green hydrogen was the oil of the future and that green infrastructure would power the country's economy going forward."[42] Statement like these almost sound like a touch of gold rush fever. They substantiate the great optimism toward (green) hydrogen production and export opportunities in South Africa, notably at the peak of the European energy supply crisis in mid/late 2022.

The Cape Republic anticipated the "world's steadily growing demand for hydrogen, making now an ideal time to invest"[43] and

36 The Star: "Why South Africa is in need of trade partners to be able to scale green energy," 28th August 2024.

37 Mail & Guardian: "EU's R628m deal to boost South Africa's green hydrogen programme," 10th September 2024.

38 Mail & Guardian: "EU backs South Africa's move to green hydrogen," 17th September 2024.

39 Intellinews – South Africa Today: "South Africa's rail, ports utility Transnet gets $8mn EU grant to help meet internal green energy commitments," 11th September 2024.

40 Mail & Guardian: "EU announces 4.7 billion euro investment pact with South Africa," 13th March 2025.

41 The Mercury: "The impact of Trump's unfinished business with GNU," 31st March 2025.

42 Intellinews – South Africa Today: "Sasol to sharpen focus on green hydrogen export plans as Europe looks for green energy," 27th April 2022.

experts concluded early on that locations like Saldanha Bay were "well placed for the export of power fuels to Northwest Europe and the Far East, at costs competitive with other renewable-rich countries."[44] South African newspapers reflect the EU's position as affirmative, highlighting business opportunities and e.g., quoting Ursula von der Leyen: "And you have a rising industry to produce clean hydrogen and strong export ambitions. European companies are interested in investing here."[45] By late 2024 and in the context of the CTIP, Sasol, the South African chemicals and energy giant, gained increasing media attention. Given its decades-long experience of coal liquefaction using the Fischer–Tropsch synthesis,[46] Sasol was "confident that it can start producing significant quantities of hydrogen-based SAF [i.e., Sustainable Aviation Fuel, the author] for the global market 'quite quickly'."[47] Pretoria expected the company to become a supplier of green hydrogen to both Anglo American and BMW.[48] Newspaper articles do also reflect that the South African government actively pushed for recognition of Sasol's green energy production under the CTIP and access to the European market without delay: "This partnership is expected [. . .] to deliver short and long term solutions to enable Sasol to export sustainable fuel, especially aviation fuel, to the European Union" (see text footnote 37).

With developmental and economic emphasis dominating the newspaper discourse in Southern Africa, explicit and solely environmental or climate-related arguments and concerns were comparably rare. If made, they usually referred to South Africa's decarbonization efforts and its transition away from coal as the country's key energy carrier (see text footnote 64).[49] Highlighting the importance of green hydrogen in the global efforts for decarbonisation, one article notes that "South Africa has a transformative opportunity to emerge as a global leader in clean energy production through the green hydrogen (GH2) economy."[50]

In contrast to the case study on Europe, where the inter-regional energy partnership is overwhelmingly promoted in positive terms and critiques are scarce, there is evidence that the debate in Southern Africa was more ambivalent and controversial. This is the background against which two inductively developed categories emerged that could not be ignored: firstly, "Colonial aspects of inter-regional energy cooperation" ($n = 8$) with statements reminiscent of neo-colonialism and European dominance over African countries. Secondly, "Ambivalent aspects of inter-regional energy cooperation" ($n = 14$) which includes more nuanced, non-polemical criticism on the subject.

Against the background of the EU's various inter-regional funding and investment projects in (green) hydrogen, press noted that "South Africa must assert its interests to avoid replicating exploitative patterns reminiscent of colonial resource extraction. Ensuring that value-added processes occur within South Africa is crucial for sustainable economic development and job creation."[51] Others argued that "South Africa must broaden its global partnerships beyond the traditional Western and Eastern spheres and reduce its overdependence on Europe. Thus, South Africa could develop more resilient value chains and prioritize African-centered development."[52] Harsher critique in the context of the JETP and CTIP came from the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) spokesman Sinawo Thambo who said that "The so-called 'just energy transition' is nothing but a plot to undermine South African sovereignty and enable profiteering at the expense of our people."[53] An opinion that was shared by Gwede Mantashe, the South African Minister of Mineral Resources and Energy, who "described the plan as a 'foreign concept' originating from developed nations, asserting that it does not apply to South Africa" (see text footnote 17).

In case of Namibia, newspaper voiced critique that "African countries are expected to supply these materials under conditions dictated by European industrial needs, not African development priorities as in the case of Namibia's green hydrogen projects. This reinforces an externalization of ecological and social costs" (see text footnote 45). This, despite German minister Robert Habeck having announced at his state visit in Windhoek that "the last thing we can accept is a kind of new energy imperialism."[54] More generally, one expert from overseas concluded that "The push for green hydrogen is the new Desertec, it's the same colonial vision again," arguing that "there's no real benefit for South Africans, no community buy-in, and communities are not asked for their free, prior and informed consent. People are being left behind again, just as in the past 300–400 years."[55]

More nuanced critique referred to job losses in South Africa's mining and coal industries. Nazier Paulsen, EEF member of Parliament, remarked on the JETP that while it looked nice on paper there remains the question "how many workers in the coal industry would be affected by the closure of coal-fired power stations and whether developed donor countries helping to drive

43 Intellinews – South Africa Today: "Southern Africa well-placed to become green hydrogen production, export centre – Kearney," 4th October 2022.

44 Cape Argus: "Saldanha Bay poised to become 'green' centre," 21st April 2022.

45 Daily Maverick: "COOPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT: EU and SA announce R94bn package for new investments in clean energy, vaccine manufacturing," 13th March 2025.

46 Daily Maverick: "CLEAN TRADE & INVESTMENT: Green ambitions: SA targets EU market with clean aviation fuel and electric vehicle exports," 20th March 2025.

47 Daily Maverick: "WONDERFU(E)L FUTURE ANALYSIS: South Africa's 'green hydrogen' dream - hype or hope?", 3rd November 2024.

48 Mail & Guardian: "Green hydrogen can boost economy create jobs, says Ramaphosa," 16th October 2023.

49 Intellinews – South Africa Today: "South Africa approves $8.5bn decarbonisation plan," 24th Octoberr 2022; Intellinews – South Africa Today: "South Africa seeks EIB loan to spruce up its logistics infrastructure," 19th February 2024.

50 The Mercury: "Powering SA's future through green hydrogen revolution," 20th November 2024.

51 Cape Times: "Outcomes of the EU-South Africa Summit," 18th March 2025.

52 Mail & Guardian: "The global race for critical minerals is on. Where is South Africa?", 28th May 2025.

53 Mail & Guardian: "Unions unhappy as cabinet gives nod to energy transition plan," 28th November 2023.

54 Business Day: "FUELLING THE FUTURE - EU ups investment in the Africa Green Hydrogen Alliance," 22nd June 2023.

55 Mail & Guardian: "Green hydrogen trade from Africa to Europe is 'the same colonial vision again'," 25th January 2025.

the Jet [sic] were continuing to buy South Africa's coal reserves that could last up to 500 years" (see text footnote 42). Substantiated concerns and critiques referring to domestic industries, job market and social cohesion seem to have fallen on more fertile ground—at least occasionally and on the surface. President Ramaphosa is quoted saying that "We must take into account the existential situation of various communities, particularly workers who work in fossil fuel establishments. [...] Whatever is done should not leave anyone behind."[56] A joint statement by European Commissioner for Energy Kadri Simson, South Africa's Minister of Electricity Kgosientsho Ramokgopa, and Minister of Trade, Industry and Competition Parks Tau illustrates the ambivalence with stunning clarity:

> "The topic of green hydrogen is polarizing, with proponents arguing that it is a cleaner energy alternative and can play a significant role in reducing carbon emissions. It can be used in electricity production, fuel, powering vehicles, and manufacturing sectors like steel. Detractors say green hydrogen is problematic because it requires a lot of land and energy to produce. And, unless the energy is renewable, green hydrogen will not be a clean source." (see text footnote 47)

Considering the overall picture, the media discourse in Southern Africa casts inter-regional energy cooperation primarily in developmental and economic terms, with securitization appearing only at the margins and largely tied to socio-economic wellbeing rather than acute threats. Key securitizing actors include President Ramaphosa of South Africa, government officials, business leaders (e.g., the CEO of Hyphen Hydrogen Energy), as well as regional epistemic communities (e.g., the African Hydrogen Partnership). The central referent object in the debate is not "national security" in a narrow sense but South Africa's and the region's economic future and developmental trajectory, notably regarding re-industrialization and securing export markets. The main audience are the domestic publics and investors, notably external partners in Europe. At the same time, ambivalence persists: while substantial funding and industrial prospects generate optimism, critiques warn against neo-colonial dynamics and stress the need for local value addition.

However, the analysis finds little evidence of collective securitization emanating from Southern African regional institutions: SADC and the SAPP are virtually invisible in the newspaper coverage, and securitizing moves are predominantly national (South African) rather than regional. Discourse in Southern Africa collectivizes developmental expectations and sovereignty concerns but mostly without articulating them through regional organizational frames. Accordingly, there is not even substantive evidence for a "thin" variant of collective securitization in Southern Africa.

56 Cape Times: "SA needs R2trln to further just transition, says Ramaphosa," 23rd June 2023.

5 Conclusion

This article examined whether and how inter-regional energy cooperation between the EU and South Africa in (green) hydrogen has been subject to securitization. Building on securitization theory, the analysis employed a qualitative content analysis of European and South African newspaper coverage between early 2022 and mid-2025, a period spanning the post-invasion energy crisis in Europe and the intensification of inter-regional energy cooperation. The results of the empirical case study analyses indicate a clear asymmetry:

The European media discourse since early 2022 exhibits a pattern of "thick" collective securitization with "thin" elements around inter-regional energy cooperation between the EU and South Africa. At its center is the looming energy/gas crisis in many European countries after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with green hydrogen positioned as strategically vital to supply diversification and energy system resilience. Government institutions and officials emerge as the primary securitizing actors, and the dominant speech acts rely more on subtle security framings than on explicit existential-threat claims; the principal referent object is energy supply and security, while state security, socio-economic wellbeing, and climate/environment feature less prominently in securitizing passages. Beyond security framings, newspaper articles in Europe contain secondary economic and developmental rationales, but these remain comparatively limited vs. security-oriented narratives. Overall, the European actors and press widely promote EU-South African partnerships in positive terms, with relatively scarce criticism, and often credit inter-regional green hydrogen cooperation as an almost universal remedy for Europe's energy predicament. The SADC, one of the most promising regionalisms in Africa whose regional integration projects and institutional capacity the EU had supported over decades (Muntschick, 2018), was apparently not even factored in by European actors.

The Southern African media discourse is mainly a South African discourse at its heart. There is no evidence of "thick" or at least "thin" collective securitization. The discourse is more expansive in volume and more enduring in salience across the same time period, yet securitization appears only at the margins and is largely tied to socio-economic wellbeing rather than acute domestic state or regime threats. Developmental and economic emphases dominate the discourse by a wide margin, far outstripping purely environmental framings. Major cooperation frameworks—notably the JETP, CTIP, and Global Gateway—are usually referenced as vehicles for development and industrial policy, with particular attention to grants allocated for green hydrogen initiatives and projects. Besides government officials and other actors from South Africa, who mainly share this position, also political actors from Europe—particularly the President of the EU Commission—get a voice in South African newspaper outlets. They usually point to development aspects and emphasize mutual benefits and sustainability while rarely mentioning their strategic and geopolitical interests in secure energy supply and (cheap) green hydrogen. At the same time, the discourse in South Africa is more ambivalent than in Europe: while optimism and positive rhetoric grew around developmental prospects, export opportunities, and foreign funding and investment interest, critical

strands warn against neo-colonial dynamics, job loss in coal-dependent industries, externalization of ecological costs, and insufficient representation and involvement of local communities. The latter remarks, however, are rarely voiced by government officials but rather by interest group representatives and journalists.

In this sense, parts of the South African media do not merely resist European securitizing moves but engage in a contestation and counter-securitization of certain inter-regional cooperation models, casting them as risks to domestic socio-economic security and political autonomy. This raises questions about media outlets and journalists becoming and being securitizing actors themselves (Mortensgaard, 2020). Bringing these South(ern) African narratives to the fore demonstrates that African actors are not passive recipients of European security logics but actively reinterpret and contest them, which nuance the often Eurocentric portrayals of (green) hydrogen partnerships as unambiguously benign. Surprisingly, again, the SADC was merely mentioned in the newspapers and did not play a role in inter-regional energy cooperation—despite its efforts regarding regional electricity cooperation (Muntschick, 2018, chapter 8).

In sum, European discourse securitizes inter-regional energy cooperation as a resilience imperative, whereas the Southern African discourse also articulates its own security concerns, albeit in a different register, but mainly economizes it. This divergence is not simply rhetorical; it generates expectations and expectation gaps. Durable cooperation and fruitful partnership outcomes, therefore, hinge on institutionalizing African-centered industrial capture and project ownership while aligning EU regulatory pathways and easing market-access frictions. If these operational linkages are built, inter-regional cooperation can reconcile European energy resilience with Southern African development priorities, which specifically need to materialize on the community level; if not, Europe's securitized ambitions risk colliding with South African perceptions of extractivism and fears of a "new energy imperialism" which makes mutually beneficial cooperation impossible and, apparently, also contributed to causing the failure of the Desertec project 10 years ago.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

JM: Writing – original draft.

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