Abkhazia: U.S. Media and Policy in a Post-Soviet Frozen Conflict Zone

In 2016, Abkhazia hosted the CONIFA World Football Cup, a soccer tournament for unrecognized states and territories.[[1]](#footnote-0) The sheer number of participating teams demonstrates the prevalence of independence movements. Yet, these movements rarely succeed. Since WWII, only four secession movements achieved international recognition -- Bangladesh, Eritrea, East-Timor, and South Sudan -- and one achieved near full recognition -- Kosovo. The ambiguity around recognition for autonomous regions like Abkhazia stems from a fundamental contradiction in the U.N.’s mission. The international organization -- and the United States as a member -- promises to both honor each nation’s territorial integrity and promote the right to self-determination. The balance between upholding these goals is precarious. In the absence of clear international guidelines, the United States and its allies have generally relied on convenient examples for precedent-setting but have not defined clear qualifying parameters for groups seeking independence.

In 2008, the Russo-Georgian War elevated the debate over Abkhazia’s status to the international stage. It is notable that this conflict came just months after the U.S. recognition of Kosovo’s independence from Serbia and only a few years before the Russian annexation of Crimea. In general, the U.S. government has characterized Abkhazia as a case between two extremes; it is neither a totally organic movement for self-determination nor exclusively a Russian powerplay. Despite Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s insistence that “Kosovo cannot be seen as precedent for any other situation in the world today,” Russian leaders have explicitly cited Kosovo as a precedent for Abkhazia and for the annexation of Crimea.[[2]](#footnote-1),[[3]](#footnote-2) Thus, examining perceptions of Abkhazia and its role in shaping international rhetoric around secession movements is crucial for understanding the precedent that the U.S. position in Abkhazia will inevitably set.

Abkhazia is an autonomous region in northwestern Georgia. Although Abkhazia was briefly an independent Soviet republic, it was integrated into the Georgian SSR by Stalin in the 1930s. Rising ethnic tensions in the region culminated in the Abkhazian War in 1992, which in turn led to massive displacement of ethnic Georgians. Violence returned to the region during the Russo-Georgian war in the summer of 2008. Since the war, Abkhazia has remained a mostly unrecognized *de facto* state within Georgian territory. Currently, Abkhazia is only recognized by Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru, Syria, and the other post-Soviet “frozen-conflict” zones, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and the Republic of Artsakh.

The existing literature in this area focuses primarily on international law, political relationships with Russia, military history, and state-building in unrecognized but sovereign territories. Many of these sources also collapse South Ossetia and Abkhazia into a single narrative of Russian influence in the Republic of Georgia. However, a study and survey conducted by Kristin Bakke, Andrew Linke, John O'Loughlin, and Gerard Toal find that feelings toward Russian imperialism are markedly different in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The study finds that a majority of South Ossetians favor integration with Russia while a majority of Abkhazians favor independence.[[4]](#footnote-3) This makes Abkhazia a particularly interesting case study for secession and Russian influence.

Given that international and U.S. domestic perceptions play a pivotal role in the U.S. and the international community's ultimate decision to support or condemn an independence movement, it is particularly useful to examine the American media’s portrayal of the Abkhazian independence movement. Very few secondary sources deal with American media portrayals of Abkhazia. Jason Dittmer and David Parr compare the media’s portrayal of Kosovo and South Ossetia in their article “Mediating sovereignty: a comparative latent semantic analysis of US newspapers and conflicts in Kosovo and South Ossetia.”[[5]](#footnote-4) I hope to use a similar latitudinal and cross-sectional approach to investigate the ways that U.S. media coverage of the Abkhazian independence movement colors and is colored by official U.S. policy in the region.

I hope to focus on several guiding questions. To what extent is the Abkhazian separtist movement portrayed in American media as an organic, nationalist movement? How is Russian interference framed by the U.S. government and by the American media? How does Abkhazia fit into a larger U.S. narrative of criteria for support for secession movements? What distinguishes media coverage of Abkhazia from Kosovo (2008), South Sudan (2011), and Crimea (2014)? What is the role of the multi-ethnic demographics of Abkhazia?

In answering these questions, I will examine U.S. government documents publicly available in the CIA and State Department online archives. I will also examine speeches and statements made by U.S., Georgian, and Russian politicians alongside statements from international organizations like the U.N. and NATO. I hope to use these documents in conversation with newspaper articles written immediately before, during, and after the Russo-Georgian War in 2008.

In previous history courses, I have written about separtist movements in Kosovo, East Timor, the Republic of Katanga, and Kurdistan. I am fascinated by the often arbitrary criteria that separate successful secessions from unsuccessful movements. My previous projects have left me convinced that the international perception of a movement is often the key to its eventual outcome. By focusing on a relatively unknown region in the Caucasus, I hope that I can leverage public rhetoric around Abkhazia to better understand the American narrative around support or condemnation of separtist movements. Further, I hope to uncover the important relationship between U.S. public opinion and U.S. international action, especially in the post-Soviet space.

**Working Bibliography**

**Secondary Sources**

Comparative Sources on Nationalism/Secession Movements

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* London: Verso, 1983.

Capussela, Andrea Lorenzo. *State-Building in Kosovo: Democracy, Corruption, and the EU in the Balkans.* London: I.B. Taurus, 2015.

Keating, Josh. *Invisible Countries: Journeys to the Edge of Nationhood.* New Haven: Yale UP, 2018.

Megoran, Nick. *Nationalism in Central Asia: A Biography of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Boundary.* Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017.

Slezkine, Yuri. "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism." *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 414-52. Accessed June 6, 2020. doi:10.2307/2501300.

Quadros, N. Micheli. "Secession: The Contradicting Provisions of the United Nations Charter - A Direct Threat to the Current World Order." *Santa Clara Journal of International Law* 14, no. 2 (May 2016).

Literature specific to post-Soviet Frozen Conflict Zones

Books

Bebler, Anton, ed. *“Frozen Conflicts” in Europe.* Opladen; Berlin; Toronto: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2015.

Francis, Céline., and Antwerpen. Stipontwerpt. *Conflict Resolution and Status: The Case of Georgia and Abkhazia, 1989-2008.* Brussels, Belgium: VUBPress, 2011.

Gahrton, Per. *Georgia: Pawn in the New Great Game.* London: Pluto Press, 2010.

Hewitt, B. G. *Discordant Neighbours: A Reassessment of the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South-Ossetian Conflicts.* Eurasian Studies Library, Volume 3. Leiden: Brill, 2013.

International Alert. *Georgia-Abkhazia on the Road to 2020.* 2013.

Toal, Gerard. *Near Abroad : Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Articles/Reports

Bakke, Kristin M., Andrew Linke, John O'Loughlin, and Gerard Toal. “Dynamics of State-Building after War : External-internal Relations in Eurasian *De Facto* States.” *Political Geography* 63, no. 1 (2018): 129-173. Accessed June 8, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.06.011.

Bakke, Kristin M., John O'Loughlin, Gerard Toal, and Michael D. Ward. "Convincing State-Builders? Disaggregating Internal Legitimacy in Abkhazia." *International Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2014): 591-607. Accessed June 8, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/24014618.

Dittmer, Jason, and David A Parr. "Mediating Sovereignty: A Comparative Latent Semantic Analysis of US Newspapers and Conflicts in Kosovo and South Ossetia." *Media, War & Conflict* 4, no. 2 (2011): 124-41. Accessed June 8, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/26000170.

Donnacha Ó Beacháin. "Cheque-Mates? Abkhazia’s Quest for International Recognition." *Studies of Transition States and Societies* 11, no. 1 (2019): 55-76.

Egorova, Elizaveta, and Ivan Babin. "Eurasian Economic Union and the Difficulties of Integration: The Case of South Ossetia and Abkhazia." *Connections* 14, no. 2 (2015): 87-98. Accessed June 8, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/26326400.

Kolstø, Pål. "Biting the Hand That Feeds Them? Abkhazia-Russia Client-patron Relations." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 36, no. 2 (2020): 140-58.

Kunze, Thomas, and Henri Bohnet. Report. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2007. Accessed June 8, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/resrep10019.

Nikoleishvili, Shorena. "Waiting for Abkhazia: Secession and Borders as International Legal Instruments in Contested Sovereignty." *Nordic Journal of International Law* 89, no. 1 (2020): 1-37.

Noutcheva, Gergana. "Contested Statehood and EU Actorness in Kosovo, Abkhazia and Western Sahara." *Geopolitics: The EU and Contested Statehood in Its Near Abroad* 25, no. 2 (2020): 449-71.

Oltramonti, Giulia Prelz. "Borders, De Facto Borders and Mobility Policies in Conflict Transformation: The Cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia."In *Borders and Border Regions in Europe: Changes, Challenges and Chances,* edited by Lechevalier Arnaud and Wielgohs Jan, 237-54. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2013. Accessed June 8, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1fxhcq.15.

Phillips, David L. Post-Conflict Georgia. Report. Atlantic Council, 2008. 3-4. Accessed June 8, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/resrep03543.7.

Saparov, Arsène. "From Conflict to Autonomy: The Making of the South Ossetian Autonomous Region 1918-1922." *Europe-Asia Studies* 62, no. 1 (2010): 99-123. Accessed June 8, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/27752421.

Sotiriou, Stylianos A. "The Irreversibility of History: The Conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia." *Problems of Post-Communism* 66, no. 3 (2019): 172-85.

Welt, Cory. "The Thawing of a Frozen Conflict: The Internal Security Dilemma and the 2004 Prelude to the Russo-Georgian War." *Europe-Asia Studies* 62, no. 1 (2010): 63-97. Accessed June 8, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/27752420.

**Primary Sources**

Newspaper Articles

Various, including:

“Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Differences Matter.” *New York Times,* August 12, 2008.

“Abkhazia Critical of EU Monitors.” *New York Times,* October 26, 2008.

Ascherson, Neal. “Abkhazia : In the Caucasus, another crisis threatens.” *New York Times,* September 6, 2014. Op-ed.

Erofeyev, Victor. “Abkhazia with a Human Face.” *New York Times*, July 22, 2011. Op-ed.

Grove, Thomas. “In the Soccer World Cup for Not-Quite Countries, Get Ready for Northern Cyprus vs. Somaliland.” *Wall Street Journal,* March 18, 2016.

Khidasheli, Tina. “Georgia is Waiting for a Signal from the West.” *Wall Street Journal,* November 3, 2015. Op-ed.

Marten, Kimberly. “4 Reasons Why Crimea is not Abkhazia.” *Washington Post,* March 1, 2014.

Razumovskaya, Olga. “Pact Brings South Ossetia Closer to Russia.” *Wall Street Journal,* March 18, 2015.

“Russia Acted Reasonably in Georgia.” *Wall Street Journal,* December 12, 2008. Letter to the Editor.

Saakashvili, Mikheil. “Georgia Acted in Self-Defense.” *Wall Street Journal,* December 2, 2008. Op-ed.

Schwirtz, Michael. “For Abkhazia, Recognition is Coming Piece by Piece.” *New York Times,* September 9, 2011.

Schwirtz, Michael. “In Russia’s Shadow, Abkhazia Elects President.” *New York Times,* August 27, 2011.

Shaffer, Brenda. “‘Freezing’ Lawless Regions Invites Hot Conflict.” *Wall Street Journal,* August 3, 2014.

Shishkin, Philip. “Georgia Dials Down Conflict with Russia.” *Wall Street Journal,* July 31, 2015.

Toal, Gerard and John O’Loughlin. “How People in South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Transnistria feel about Annexation by Russia.” *Washington Post,* March 20, 2014.

CIA documents

Various documents

US government/ State Department documents

Bush, George W. President Bush Discusses Situation in Georgia. Speech. August 8, 2008. Washington, DC.

Bush, George W. President Bush Discusses Situation in Georgia. Speech. August 16, 2008. Crawford, Texas.

Obama, Barack. “Statement of Senator Obama on Tensions in the Caucasus Region Between Georgia and Russia.” *The American Presidency Project,* July 23, 2008. https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-senator-obama-tensions-the-caucasus-region-between-georgia-and-russia.

Rice, Condoleezza. Remarks en route to Brussels, Belgium. Transcript. August 18, 2008. https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/08/108552.htm.

Rice, Condoleezza. Interview on CBS’s Face the Nation with Bob Schieffer. Transcript. August 17, 2008. https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/08/108302.htm.

Rice, Condoleezza. Russia Move into Georgia. Statement. August 8, 2008. https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/08/108083.htm.

"U.S. Statements Responding to Russia's Intervention into Georgia and Recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia." The American Journal of International Law 103, no. 1 (2009): 138-40. Accessed June 8, 2020. doi:10.2307/20456731.

Multinational Organizations

Glière, Catherine, ed. EU Security and Defence: Core Documents 2008. Report. European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2009. 211-13. Accessed June 8, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06971.45.

U.N. Resolution 1808 (2008)

U.N. Resolution 1839 (2008)

U.N. Resolution 1866 (2009)

Russian and Georgian Government Documents/Speeches

Various, including:

Medvedev, Dimitri. “Medvedev’s Statement on South Ossetia and Abkhazia.” *New York Times,* August 28, 2008. Translated from Russian.

Putin, Vladimir. “Address by President of the Russian Federation.” *The Kremlin,* March 18, 2014. Transcript. Translated from Russian.

Saakashvili, Mikheil. “Transcript: Georgia’s Saakashvili.” *Wall Street Journal,* October 14, 2008. Interview transcript.

Garibashvili, H.E. Iraldi. “Statement by H.E. Iraldi Garibashvili Prime Minister of Georgia At the General Debate of the 69th Session of the United Nations General Assembly.” *United Nations* (New York), 26 September 2014.

Various letters from the Permanent Representative of Georgia to the United Nations to the President of the United Nations Security Council.

Survey Data

Found in “Supplementary Data” in Bakke, Kristin M., Andrew Linke, John O'Loughlin, and Gerard Toal. “Dynamics of State-Building after War : External-internal Relations in Eurasian *De Facto* States.” *Political Geography* 63, no. 1 (2018): 129-173. Accessed June 8, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.06.011.

1. Grove, Thomas. “In the Soccer World Cup for Not-Quite Countries, Get Ready for Northern Cyprus vs. Somaliland.” *Wall Street Journal,* March 18, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Condoleezza Rice, "U.S. Recognizes Kosovo as Independent State," News release, February 18, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Putin, Vladimir. “Address by President of the Russian Federation.” March 18, 2014. Transcript. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Bakke, Kristin M., Andrew Linke, John O'Loughlin, and Gerard Toal. “Dynamics of State-Building after War : External-internal Relations in Eurasian *De Facto* States.” *Political Geography.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Dittmer, Jason, and David A Parr. "Mediating Sovereignty: A Comparative Latent Semantic Analysis of US Newspapers and Conflicts in Kosovo and South Ossetia." *Media, War & Conflict*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)