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Thesis Proposal

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

In 2016, the Republic of 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 both the prevalence of independence movements and their relatively low recognition rate. Since WWII, only four secession movements have achieved full U.N. recognition: Bangladesh, Eritrea, East-Timor, and South Sudan. One additional successession movement has achieved nearly full recognition: Kosovo. Countless other regions unsuccessfully appealed for independence. Abkhazia is one of these unsuccessful regions. The ambiguity around recognition for autonomous regions like Abkhazia stems from a fundamental contradiction in the mission of the United Nations. The U.N. and the United States alike have promised to honor each nation’s territorial integrity and simultaneously promote the right to self-determination. In the absence of clear U.N. guidelines, the United States has not defined its own qualifying parameters for groups seeking independence. This made the Abkhazian independence movement a particularly interesting historical phenomenon in 2008.

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

The 2008 Russo-Georgian War drew attention to Abkhazia’s status in the United States. This conflict came just months after the U.S. recognized Kosovo’s independence from Serbia and only a few years before Russia annexed Crimea. At the time, the U.S. government often characterized the Abkhazian independence movement as a case between these two extremes: as neither an organic, grassroots movement for self-determination nor exclusively a Russian powerplay. Despite former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s insistence in 2008 that “Kosovo cannot be seen as precedent for any other situation in the world today,” Russian leaders explicitly cited Kosovo as a precedent for Russian recognition of Abkhazia and for the Russian annexation of Crimea.[[2]](#footnote-1),[[3]](#footnote-2) Abkhazia has also unavoidably set a precedent for future secession movements. Thus, it is worthwhile to examine past American perceptions of Abkhazia and the rhetoric surrounding its efforts for independence. I propose a comparative analysis of U.S. media portrayal of the Abkhazian independence movement from 2007 to 2011. I will compare American popular rhetoric in the months before 2008, during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, and after the conclusion of the war and U.S. recognition of Kosovo.

The existing literature about post-Soviet frozen conflict zones in this timeframe focuses primarily on international law, political relationships with Russia, military history, and state-building. Many of these sources also collapse South Ossetia and Abkhazia into a single narrative of Russian influence in the Republic of Georgia. However, a survey conducted by Kristin Bakke, Andrew Linke, John O'Loughlin, and Gerard Toal in 2010 found that feelings toward Russian imperialism were markedly different in Abkhazia than in South Ossetia. A majority of South Ossetians favored integration with Russia while a majority of Abkhazians favored independence.[[4]](#footnote-3)

U.S. perceptions and American media portrayal of independence movements often play a pivotal role in their eventual outcome. Yet, few secondary sources deal with American media portrayals of Abkhazia around 2008. 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 comparative approach to investigate the ways that U.S. media outlets' coverage of the Abkhazian independence movement influenced and was influenced by official U.S. policy in the region from 2007 to 2011.

As I narrow my scope, I will frame my research around several guiding questions. How was the Abkhazian independence movement portrayed in American media from 2007 to 2011? Was it portrayed as an organic, grassroots movement? How did media outlets portray Russia’s role in Abkhazia? Did the rhetoric change significantly over time, especially after the U.S. recognition of Kosovo? If the rhetoric changed over time, what influenced these changes? What, if anything, distinguished media coverage of Abkhazia from that of similar movements in Kosovo and South Ossetia? Was there a relationship between American public perceptions of Abkhazia and public perceptions of Georgia and Russia?

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 the U.N. and NATO. I hope to use these documents in conversation with newspaper and magazine articles from 2007 to 2011.

In previous 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 left me convinced that American public perceptions of a separtist movement is often the key to the U.S.’s eventual recognition or nonrecognition. I have also taken Professor Skorobogatov’s seminar on the collapse of the Soviet Union, which will provide relevant post-Soviet context. By focusing on a relatively unknown region in the Caucasus, I hope that I can leverage American public rhetoric around Abkhazia to better understand why the United States sometimes supports while at other times condemns seemingly similar separatist movements. More broadly, I hope that a careful study of Abkhazia will shed light on the relationship between U.S. public opinion and U.S. action in the post-Soviet space.

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