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Acting like a state: Armed violence in post-war Abkhazia

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the complex local dynamics of armed violence in post-war Abkhazia. Drawing on in-depth interviews with the Abkhaz participants and non-participants in this violence and a range of secondary materials, it adapts the conceptual and analytical tools developed in civil war studies to capture the irregular and regular aspects of this violence and its location in the contested areas of Abkhazia after the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992–1993. This analysis highlights continuities of the war in the post-war period. Bridging this literature with studies of violence after war and grounding the analysis in the Abkhaz perspectives point to the changes in the actors involved as Abkhaz forces acted like a state in post-war violence and the shift to the localized nature of the Abkhaz struggle as the contested areas within Abkhazia became central to the defense of Abkhazia's military victory in the war and its statehood after the war.

1. Introduction

It is now widely established that multiple, overlapping forms of violence frequently develop after civil wars. This violence ranges from criminal to political, from expressive to strategic, from small-scale to large-scale, with the intersections between these manifestations making neat categorizations analytically challenging. It also ranges in the extent and nature of connection to the preceding war and the persistence of wartime actors and issues. Different forms of violence after war, including the recurrence of full-fledged fighting, affect post-war societies in a myriad of ways. These political, economic, and social effects are particularly pronounced in new states, which arise from the wars that pave the way to their often *de facto* statehood. Varying in the degree of their external legitimacy, commonly equated with international recognition, these states rely on internal legitimacy, or popular support, as a key pillar of their limited statehood (Caspersen, 2015). Especially in unrecognized states emerging from war, ensuring security—a basic state-building function—can be central to these *de facto* states' internal legitimacy (O'Loughlin et al., 2011). Pervasive post-war violence and the threat of a renewed war in the absence of peace agreements can undermine trust in these states' ability to protect their populations and by extension their survival (Bakke et al., 2014). A breakaway territory of Georgia in the South Caucasus, Abkhazia is among the post-Soviet *de facto* states born of war where violence continued after the war (Bakke et al., 2018). Recent studies based mainly on public opinion surveys

conducted after its recognition as an independent state by Russia in 2008 have increased our understanding of how this *de facto* state's ability to provide security and other state-building functions has impacted its internal legitimacy. But we still know relatively little about how violence developed after the war in Abkhazia and was perceived by its participants on the Abkhaz side.

This article addresses these questions by examining the complex local dynamics of armed violence in Abkhazia between the end of the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992–1993 and Russia's recognition of Abkhazia as a state in 2008 when violence subsided. This analysis is based on primary and secondary materials that I collected in the area between 2010 and 2013 and focuses particularly on organized violence "perpetrated by a group or the state after an armed conflict" (van Baalen and Höglund, 2019: 1168). I find that different forms of violence emerged in post-war Abkhazia. While typically described as sporadic, some of these forms became systematic in the post-war period. These forms did not reflect a break with wartime violence but extended the features of the war. Yet the actors involved in the violence changed and the struggle shifted in scale. Georgian armed groups, which grew out of Georgian forces that participated in the war, organized low-scale guerrilla violence from beyond the territory of Abkhazia. This form of violence unfolded along the ceasefire line established after the war in the Gal/i[1] district. Segments of the Abkhaz forces that mobilized on the Abkhaz side in the war and transformed into an army-like structure during the war organized counterinsurgency-like operations to *root out*

Georgian guerrillas that challenged what the Abkhaz saw as their military victory in the war. A *small war* between Georgian and Abkhaz patrols stationed on the two sides of the ceasefire line as well unfolded in the area. Fighting recurred in 1998 in the Gal/i district and in 2008 in the Kodor/i Valley, which the Abkhaz *defended* as areas within Abkhazia's borders. The Abkhaz side claimed to have *freed* all territory of Abkhazia, paving the way for the recognition of Abkhazia as a state by Russia and a handful of other states. Violence after the war in Abkhazia was, thus, perceived as part of the Abkhaz struggle against Georgia that became localized in nature and Abkhaz forces acted like a state in their operations that resembled counterinsurgency and state border defense. But the outcome of the struggle was in fact dependence on Russia, which deepened over time, placing Abkhazia in "long-term limbo" between victory and statehood that is likely to endure (de Waal, 2018: 76).

The article makes four contributions. First, it builds on different strands of the literature on violence in the aftermath of civil war to outline a micro-dynamic approach that looks at continuities and changes in the actors, conditions, and dynamics of violence with a focus on local variation in its form, intensity, timing, and location. This approach can help develop a more nuanced understanding of the intersections and evolution of violence after war in any given context.

Second, applying this approach to post-war Abkhazia, the article unpacks the complex local dynamics of violence in this understudied case whose understanding has been shaped by narratives related to geopolitics, especially Russia's involvement in the post-Soviet conflicts, rather than perspectives of the local actors involved. Attention to these conflicts is largely paid when spectacular violence, such as the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, erupts in the region, leaving protracted violence under the radar. Recent efforts to understand this violence from the perspective of the local actors in Abkhazia have challenged the focus on its external drivers in the literature but have in general highlighted experiences of the groups uniquely affected by this violence, particularly Georgians displaced from Abkhazia as a result of the war, with the Abkhaz views on the violence rarely at the centre of analysis. This article draws on extensive fieldwork with the Abkhaz participants and non-participants in the violence combined with secondary sources to show that violence after the war in Abkhazia varied across space and changed over time.

The third contribution of this article is to put in conversation the literature on civil war and violence after war. Whereas strategic violence has been central in the latter, this category is too broad to account for the varied forms, intensity, timing, and location of violence in post-war Abkhazia. I adapt the conceptual and analytical tools developed in civil war studies to disaggregate the category. Specifically, I introduce the distinction between irregular and regular violence characterizing major types of warfare to the post-war period. This distinction helps make sense of Georgian guerrilla activities and Abkhaz counterinsurgency-like operations that took place in the Gal/i district, specifically its lower part, as examples of irregular violence and low-scale cross-fire and recurrence of fighting in this district and the upper Kodor/i Valley as examples of regular violence. While such irregular and regular forms of violence are typically associated with wartime insurgents and incumbents, respectively, the post-war period challenges this association when actors opposing the state establish control over territory, for example, through military victory in the war. I, therefore, apply the notion of territorial control, and particularly contested control, in civil war to identify specific areas where post-war violence occurs. These tools help complicate the often undifferentiated views of post-war violence in Abkhazia and can be used to analyse other post-war contexts where wartime insurgents build state-like institutions and engage in post-war violence like states.

The conceptual and analytical tools from the civil war literature add to our grasp of the war's legacies for the form and location of post-war violence beyond an emphasis on the persistence of wartime actors and issues common in existing scholarship. Yet discontinuities also emerge through the analysis of the Abkhaz case. This relates to not only the changes in the actors involved in the violence but also the shift in the struggle from the broader territory of Abkhazia during the war to its localized nature thereafter. For the Abkhaz participants and non-participants in post-war violence, the contested areas within Abkhazia became salient for the maintenance of the Abkhaz side's military victory in the war and the establishment of Abkhazia's statehood. Participation in this violence was seen through the lens of statehood, with those involved acting on behalf of the Abkhaz state, even before Abkhazia's partial recognition as a state in 2008. This rarely accessed perspective on the state-like activities of Abkhaz forces after the war from those directly involved is the final contribution of the study.

The rest of the article situates this study in the literature on civil war and violence in its aftermath, briefly describes the methodological approach of this study, and delves into the case of Abkhazia, drawing implications from this case for other post-war contexts.

2. A micro-dynamic approach to violence in the aftermath of civil war

The last decades have seen a proliferation of research on violence in the aftermath of civil war, which has culminated in calls for an integrated research agenda "encompass[ing] all forms of physical violence committed after a civil war has been terminated by a negotiated settlement, military victory, or through low intensity" (Bara et al., 2021: 915). On the one hand, scholars have demonstrated that most civil wars have taken place in countries with a history of armed conflict (Walter, 2015). This is what Collier et al. (2003: x) have termed the "conflict trap," arguing that "the chief legacy of a civil war is another war." On the other hand, violence short of war has been widespread in post-war societies, including those that have not seen civil war recurrence (Suhrke and Berdal, 2012). Studies have shown that post-war violence varies in form in these contexts, differentiating expressive, instrumental, and strategic violence driven by loss and suffering, criminal and personal gain, and struggles for power and resources, respectively (Boyle, 2014: 8). It also varies in intensity, whether small-scale or large-scale, and temporally, whether episodic or extended over long periods of time (Barron, 2019: 6).

As with civil war recurrence, post-war violence short of war has been viewed as "*a legacy of the war*, meaning that either the actors that perpetrate or the conditions that foster the violence were created by the civil war" (Bara et al., 2021: 916, emphasis in original). Local variations in such violence have been increasingly at the center of analysis, pointing to localized legacies of the war for post-war criminal and political violence (Deglow, 2016; van Baalen and Höglund, 2019). Complex intersections between these categories in terms of both actors and their activities have been recognized, with these intersections characterized as "an outgrowth of the war itself," at least to an extent (Boyle, 2014: 40; Steenkamp, 2011). Recent studies have advanced this line of research highlighting not only wartime continuities but also transformation of old and emergence of new actors and activities (Campbell et al., 2017). For example, old, transformed, and new non-state armed groups have competed for control over the territories that the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army (FARC-EP) left after the 2016 peace agreement with the Colombian government, including through a new wave of assassinations of social leaders who have stood in their way (Albarracín et al., 2023).

What this literature demonstrates is that violence in the aftermath of civil war is highly heterogeneous and contextual (Muggah and Krause, 2009). It varies in form and intensity as well as over time and space across and within post-war settings. Some aspects of this variation can be related to the war, whereas others are specific to the conditions that develop after (Gartner and Kennedy, 2018). As Elfversson et al. (2019: 83) argue, violence after war involves "both remnants from the preceding war (e.g. violence perpetrated by former warring parties or across conflict lines) and new forms of violence that rise in the aftermath of war due to poor rule of law, political vacuums, and unemployed

former soldiers." Boyle's (2014) direct and indirect pathways of strategic violence offer a stylized illustration of this distinction. In the former, existing actors driven by wartime goals use strategic violence to spoil the peace; in the latter, new splinters and faultlines are created by the peace process. How civil wars end and what kinds of provisions are introduced in terms of power-sharing and international guarantees shape "violent peace" in different ways (Salazar et al., 2019). Bara (2020) finds, for example, that while peacekeepers constrain the warring parties after peace agreements, these effects do not extend to new actors and activities outside of their mandates.

In general, however, "distinguishing between civil war and post-conflict violence is notoriously difficult since the two often coexist" (Albarracín et al., 2023: 241). Furthermore, wartime, post-war, and even pre-war conditions are likely to interact in various aspects of violence after war since this violence and those who are involved in it are not isolated from the history of the conflict (Shesterinina, 2021). The effects of social ties formed at different points in the conflict on post-war violent mobilization exemplify this interaction. As Daly (2016) shows, where armed groups recruit locally before the war, such networks remain central to their ability to organize violence after. Ties between combatants forged during the war and their persistence after further facilitate recruitment (Themnér, 2011). But these networks transform during and after the war, with implications for how violence is perceived and mobilized at the local level (Wood, 2008). The analysis of violence in the aftermath of civil war in any given context, therefore, can be enriched by paying attention to the continuities and changes in complex post-war environments, including who is involved in the violence and with what understandings, what conditions foster it, and how local dynamics of violence unfold as a result. These elements underlie the micro-dynamic approach that has emerged in the literature on violence in the aftermath of civil war.

I apply this micro-dynamic approach to an understudied but important case of post-war violence and add two relevant conceptual and analytical tools from civil war studies to grasp the continuities and discontinuities from the war to the post-war period in this case. Through this analysis, I identify wide variation in armed violence that could be missed by focusing solely on macro-structural factors, such as mountainous terrain, or developments, such as geopolitical changes. I further nuance the analysis with perspectives of participants and non-participants in this violence, which highlight its dynamic evolution.

3. Local dynamics of violence in post-war Abkhazia

The micro-dynamic approach to violence after war outlined above has generated critical findings in research contexts that are widely studied, from Colombia (Nussio and Howe, 2016) to South Africa (van Baalen and Höglund, 2019). Yet it can be said to be even more valuable in settings that are less accessible, where dominant political narratives influence knowledge of post-war dynamics and this knowledge is often limited to large-scale episodes as protracted violence goes unnoticed (Kabachnik et al., 2012). Abkhazia is such a case. While existing studies have focused on either single categories, such as criminal violence (Kukhianidze et al., 2007), or episodes, such as the recurrence of fighting in 1998 (Johnson, 2015), this case is characterized by wide variation in the form, intensity, timing, and locations of violence after the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992–1993. However, this violence has been commonly seen an outcome of external factors. In this view, Russia's manipulations (Lynch, 2004) and Georgia's state weakness (Darchiashvili and Nodia, 2003) are among the factors that result in a "frozen" conflict where "there is no final settlement, and a precarious peace is occasionally interrupted by episodes of low-key violence" (Nodia and Scholtbach, 2006: 12). Other post-Soviet cases where violence followed the wars that broke out with the collapse of the Soviet Union have been similarly described as "frozen" despite attempts at a dynamic reconceptualization of the term (Smetana and Ludvík, 2019) and its criticisms in individual cases, such as Nagorno-Karabakh (Broers,

2019), and groups of cases, such as incomplete secessions (Albulescu, 2022). External factors, nonetheless, cannot get at variation in violence at any given time in post-war Abkhazia and the lens of "frozen" conflict overlooks the protracted nature of some of this violence.

At the same time, shifting attention to the local dynamics of violence reveals crucial continuities and changes in post-war Abkhazia that are not readily captured by the forms of violence distinguished in the literature on violence in the aftermath of war. Expressive and instrumental violence was evident in, for example, revenge killings of Georgians and looting of Georgian homes immediately after the war (S/26795, annex, 1993: paras. 19, 23). But these forms did not systematically persist as such and were later intertwined with what has been called *strategic violence*. Perceived Georgian collaborators were targeted as part of Abkhaz operations to halt Georgian intrusions into Abkhazia. Most actors contesting the Abkhaz military victory in the war participated in organized crime in one way or another to resource their activities and benefit from post-war conditions that enabled it (Kukhianidze et al., 2007).[2] Furthermore, there was variation within the broad form of strategic violence. It involved guerrilla attacks and low-scale cross-fire, which intensified as fighting recurred at certain points in the post-war period, and was concentrated in specific areas of Abkhazia. Understanding this variation requires disaggregating strategic violence. This article does so by adapting relevant insights from research on civil war to the post-war period.

Because "forms of organized violence after war are often strategic and closely linked to the faultlines and purposes of the preceding war—occasionally resembling a continuation of war by other means," I build on the concept of "technology of rebellion" developed in civil war studies to capture the forms of strategic violence after war that resemble its continuation (Bara, 2020: 980; Kalyvas and Balcells, 2010). Analyzing civil wars as contests between states and rebels, Kalyvas and Balcells (2010: 418) identify irregular, conventional, and symmetric non-conventional "joint military technologies of states and rebels." Of interest in this study are different forms of violence related to these technologies. In irregular warfare, rebels cannot face their militarily stronger opponents frontally and adopt indirect guerrilla tactics of "hiding and relying on harassment and surprise, stealth, and raiding… [but] are frequently able to establish territorial control in peripheral areas" (Kalyvas and Balcells, 2010: 419). Counterinsurgent strategies in these areas target not only rebels but also their bases of support. In conventional warfare, in turn, the parties directly confront each other across frontlines and clashes often involve heavy weaponry, whereas light weapons are used in sporadic exchanges by weak, poorly organized parties in symmetric non-conventional wars. I distil these insights into two basic forms of violence that help pinpoint continuities of wartime violence in the post-war period. I distinguish between *irregular violence* to capture post-war activities that resemble insurgent and counterinsurgent dynamics of civil war and *regular violence* to capture post-war exchanges and clashes by relatively matched parties involving light and heavy weaponry, merging conventional and symmetric non-conventional aspects of warfare in the latter. I show that these forms can co-exist in the post-war period and add that changes in territorial control as a result of the war can reverse state and rebel activities. In wars that end with rebel victory, guerrilla activities can be carried out by actors that participated in the war on the state side, with wartime insurgents engaging in state-like counterinsurgency and border defense to secure territory they won in the war. This distinction helps get at the forms and intensity of post-war violence in Abkhazia and can be useful for identifying variation within the category of strategic violence in similar post-war contexts.

I also draw on civil war studies to grasp where irregular and regular

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[2] Some of "these networks started as wartime informal trade" and criminal activities, from petroleum smuggling to hazelnut rackets to kidnapping, changed over time (Nilsson, 2014: 111).

violence occurred in post-war Abkhazia. Broad categories from civil war studies, such as mountainous terrain, do not specify locations of post-war violence within largely mountainous territories, such as Abkhazia.[3] Because in Abkhazia this violence "aimed at establishing control over a contested territory," I apply Kalyvas' (2006) notion of wartime contested control to the post-war period (Bakke, 2011: 96).[4] Kalyvas (2006: 89) argues that irregular wars segment and fragment space: in the former scenario, the parties "exercise full sovereignty over distinct parts of the territory of the state"; in the latter, "limited sovereignty over the same part." This distinction translates into zones of incumbent or insurgent control and those in which control is contested, that is, primarily or equally controlled by the incumbents and the insurgents. Wartime violence that involves deliberate targeting in this analysis concentrates in the areas that are predominantly but not fully controlled by the opponents. In line with this logic, in wars that end with such fragmented control, different forms of strategic violence should continue in the areas that are not monopolistically controlled by either warring party. Violence in post-war Abkhazia took place in these areas—the Gal/i district predominantly but not fully controlled by the Abkhaz side, especially in the lower part, and the upper Kodor/i Valley predominantly but not fully controlled by the Georgian side. The end of the war, therefore, did not entail a break with the fighting, yet its location shifted from the broader territory of Abkhazia to these specific areas. In other words, the struggle over Abkhazia became localized in the post-war period. By moving attention away from macro-structural categories and using tools for analyzing dynamics of wartime violence at the micro level, this article illustrates how insights from research on civil war and violence in the aftermath of war can be integrated productively to better understand war-to-post-war continuities.

Critical aspects of this violence, however, do not simply reflect continuities in irregular and regular forms of violence and contestation of territorial control that characterize civil wars but relate to the conditions of the post-war period. In Abkhazia, existing actors on both sides of the conflict transformed and new ones emerged in the context of restrictions on regular violence imposed by a fragile ceasefire agreement and international presence that it stipulated in the absence of a negotiated settlement. Armed forces were no longer permitted in the border area, but armed actors adapted to these restrictions and guerrilla groups were formed to contest the new status quo. Peacekeepers mitigated some forms of violence by these actors but were implicated in others.[5] Porous borders, availability of weapons, and poverty that deepened with post-war economic sanctions made organized crime accessible to this and other actors, for example.[6] The intersection of criminal and political violence generated new forms of insecurity for residents of the contested areas, particularly displaced returnees to the Gal/i district (Prelz Oltramonti, 2016). The post-war period, furthermore, presented opportunities for violence at specific points in time, as illustrated by the Abkhaz Kodor/i offensive that became possible in 2008 due to the Russo-Georgian War.

Whereas for the outside observer this violence can be considered an episodic interruption of the "frozen" conflict, for its Abkhaz participants and non-participants it was protracted and carried a complex set of meanings. This local perspective on violence is rare in research on post-war Abkhazia (Peinhopf, 2021: 711). Garb (2009: 236) finds that the framing of the Abkhaz as Russia's pawns has prevented serious engagement with the Abkhaz position, especially in the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian War. She shows that the Abkhaz saw the 2008 violence in South Ossetia not simply as an opportunity but "as though it was occurring on their own territory," reflecting the traumas of wartime violence and of living under the threat of attack from Georgia (Garb, 2009: 235). This analysis contextualizes the Abkhaz Kodor/i offensive, but it focuses on one, even if crucial, episode among many and does not tap into perceptions of the participants in this violence. Shesterinina (2021) corroborates that the Abkhaz lived in constant fear of Georgia's renewed attack between the end of the war in 1993 and Russia's recognition of Abkhazia as a state and joint border fortification in 2008, but centers on the evolving perceptions of threat in the context of ongoing Abkhaz mobilization. Merlin (2021) advances this strand of research, arguing that the role of former Abkhaz combatants has since 2008 been that of symbolic legitimation of Abkhazia's *de facto* state, but does not detail how they participated in post-war violence before 2008 or how participation shaped their understanding of this violence.

I draw on in-depth interviews with the Abkhaz participants and non-participants in this violence to demonstrate that those involved understood this violence through the lens of statehood. This supports the finding of state-like activities among actors challenging the state in the literature on wartime rebel governance (see, e.g., Arjona et al., 2015) and post-war unrecognized states (see, e.g., King, 2001) and adds a perspective of those directly involved in these state-like activities in the particularly understudied area of Abkhaz post-war defense. As Shesterinina (2021: 177) shows, the Abkhaz participants in post-war violence saw their role as defenders of their victory in the war. Yet this defense was directed not to the entire territory of Abkhazia, as during the war, but rather to the contested areas that the Abkhaz did not secure in the war. Since Abkhazia could come under attack from these areas, these areas came to be understood as particularly salient among the Abkhaz, shifting the scale of their struggle. During the war, Georgia (the state) and the Abkhaz (ethnic minority) viewed the entirety of Abkhazia (the disputed territory) as key to their survival and, thus, indivisible (Toft, 2003). Thereafter, from the Abkhaz perspective, it was not Abkhazia's entire territory, which they won in the war, but its specific areas, which they could not secure, that were a matter of dispute. The Abkhaz defense of the contested areas was perceived as central to the survival of Abkhazia, particularly as a potential state, and those involved in it acted as part of what they saw as Abkhazia's state structures, carrying out official duties. This localized perception of the post-war struggle and the ways in which the Abkhaz participants in post-war violence acted like a state are important additions to the literature on this case.

4. A note on methods

The analysis in this article is based on field research carried out over eight months in 2010–2013 in Abkhazia, Georgia proper, and Russia. I conducted 150 life history interviews with 142 participants and non-participants on the Abkhaz side in the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992–1993 across four research sites (Gagra, Pitsunda, Gudauta, and Sukhum/i) that differed in structural conditions and territorial control during the war. I also held 30 interviews and one focus group with 37 displaced Georgians, government officials, and experts in Tbilisi and Moscow, and collected a range of archival, news, and secondary materials. Since armed violence concentrated on the Abkhaz side of the ceasefire line established after the war, I examine this geographical area, specifically the Gal/i district and the Kodor/i Valley where such violence was prevalent. I focus on the years of 1994–1995 when the patterns of irregular and regular post-war violence, which persisted thereafter,

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[3] For a geographically nuanced investigation of mountainous terrain and conflict dynamics in the post-Soviet Caucasus, including in Abkhazia between 1992 and 2012, see Linke et al. (2017). See Souleimanov (2013) on the relevance of mountainous terrain during the war of 1992–1993.

[4] Previous studies have applied Kalyvas' (2006) framework to post-war Abkhazia to understand collaboration of Georgians in the Gal/i district as a result of increasing Abkhaz control (Johnson, 2015: 29, 41). Here I focus on Kalyvas' notion of contested control to analyze the development of patterns of violence in post-war Abkhazia.

[5] Peacekeepers' involvement in post-war violence is beyond the scope of this study (see, e.g., Lynch, 2004).

[6] Actors engaged in crime that were peripheral to territorial contestation are not part of this study (ICG, 2013). In the Gal/i district, Prelz Oltramonti (2016: 249), for example, distinguishes retaliations of Abkhaz forces and Georgian guerrillas, which this study looks at, from rackets, kidnappings, and murders by competing criminal groups, which it does not.

emerged and 1998 and 2008 when changes in territorial control took place. The analysis concludes in 2008 when violence subsided with Russia's recognition of Abkhazia as a state and joint border fortification.

The reconstruction of events in these areas and time periods is based on triangulation between the news archive of *Apsnypress* that the *de facto* state press agency of Abkhazia provided access to, the archive of *Newsline* and *Caucasus Report* entries on the conflict of United States government-funded *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (*RFE/RL*) that I compiled, and relevant United Nations (UN) Secretary-General reports and documents. I used the *Apsnypress* archive as a baseline to trace all instances of irregular and regular post-war violence reported in Abkhazia during the analyzed period but include only those instances that also appear in the coverage of Liz Fuller who was the *RFE/RL* Caucasus analyst and/or UN materials that I gathered for this analysis. The *RFE/RL* coverage on the conflict mainly relied on reports of Russian and western, including independent, news agencies, such as *Interfax* and *Reuteurs*, respectively, and key UN materials drew on reports of the UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG). Hence, I avoided reliance on a single source, such as *Apsnypress*, which was particularly important in the highly politicized environment of Abkhazia where information could be deployed in ways that justify and legitimize the *de facto* state, and integrated sources at least to an extent independent of Abkhaz reporting as well as comparing how information on post-war violence was presented in these sources with reference to existing research and my interviews, which grounds my findings in diverse strands of knowledge production and lived experience in this case.

This triangulation strategy allows me to get at distinct aspects and patterns of post-war violence that different information providers highlight (Davenport and Ball, 2002) while paying attention to actors' incentives and capabilities underlying the data generation process (Herrera and Kapur, 2007). For example, in its coverage, *Apsnypress* focuses on the activities of Georgian armed groups in post-war Abkhazia and reports a higher number of instances of violence than the *RFE/RL* and UN coverage, which typically emphasize larger events, such as those with greater numbers of individuals killed. Major differences, moreover, exist in the language used. *Apsnypress*, for example, commonly refers to the above mentioned Georgian armed groups as *Georgian diversionist groups* or *Georgian terrorist formations* to contrast the Abkhaz view of these groups with their characterization as *partisans* in Georgia, whereas *RFE/RL* uses *Georgian guerrillas* and UN sources adopt a more neutral description *Georgian armed groups*. Finally, the treatment of highly sensitive issues, above all, the return of the Georgian population displaced as a result of the war to Abkhazia, diverges in these sources. *Apsnypress* stresses manipulation of this issue by Georgian authorities to influence the international community on the political status of Abkhazia, the process of registration of returnees, referred to as *refugees* to imply that these individuals fled an international rather than internal border, in Abkhazia, and links between the retuning Georgian population and Georgian armed groups active in Abkhazia. In contrast, *RFE/RL* and UN sources use both terms *refugees* and *displaced persons* and draw attention to the obstacles to return, violence by Abkhaz forces against Georgian returnees, and their resulting repeated displacement. These emphases capture the core post-war incompatibility of the Georgian and Abkhaz sides over Abkhazia's political status and the return of displaced Georgians (Khutsishvili et al., 2006).

To better understand how post-war violence was perceived in Abkhazia in this context, I explore the meanings the Abkhaz actors involved attribute to post-war violence and intertwine Georgian accounts to contextualize these meanings. I rely on recollections of the Abkhaz army regulars and reservists (44 interviews) and policemen (15 interviews) who took part in Abkhaz activities in the Gal/i district and the Kodor/i Valley as border guards manning Abkhaz posts and participants in Abkhaz counterinsurgency-like and larger-scale military operations as well as ordinary Abkhaz who did not directly participate in but observed the events (83 interviews). These interviews were held in the research participants' homes, offices, and public areas as

appropriate to ensure privacy and the researcher's and the research participants' safety. I conducted the interviews in Russian, a language widely spoken in this setting, with a few exceptions, and translated these materials into English preserving and clarifying original terminology where needed (for example, the use of the term *opolchenie* to refer to the people's guard in Abkhazia).

The interviews followed a thorough informed consent procedure whereby potential research participants could reject participating in the interview, refuse to answer any question and answer any question in part or in full, terminate the interview at any time, and withdraw their participation altogether.[7] Our conversations then covered the pre- to post-war periods that centered the research participants' experiences of the conflict. For the purposes of this study, I coded chronologically and thematically the post-war part of the interviews to establish a record of participation in and better understand the actors' perceptions of the dynamics of post-war violence that unfolded over time. I compared these responses to those of the Georgian research participants to grasp how post-war violence in Abkhazia was perceived in different ways but draw on these accounts to the extent that they help situate the Abkhaz perspectives.

The result is a more complex picture of violence after the war in Abkhazia than that presented in the existing literature on the case. No other study to date has provided as fine-grained an account of post-war violence in Abkhazia or drawn on as systematic a collection of different sources, including perspectives of the very individuals involved in this violence.

5. From conflict to war to violence in post-war Abkhazia

The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict has a host of historical,[8] political,[9] economic,[10] social,[11] and external[12] roots. The contemporary period can be traced to the depopulation of Abkhazia by the Russian Empire in the 19th century and the repopulation of the territory, which over time produced a near Georgian majority.[13] The conflict developed in the Soviet period when the political status of Abkhazia changed from a Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in special treaty relations with Georgia established in 1921 to an autonomous republic of the Georgian SSR in 1931. Assimilation policies, such as the adoption of the Georgian alphabet for the Abkhazian language and the closing of Abkhaz schools, in the following decades were associated with the change in the political status and created a sense of Georgianization among the Abkhaz (Nodia, 1998). Some of these concerns were addressed after Stalin's and Beria's deaths in 1953. For example, a new Cyrillic-based alphabet was introduced for the Abkhazian language and Abkhaz schools were reopened. Furthermore, quotas were implemented in education and employment as well as the government of Abkhazia, setting a path toward

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[8] Accounts of Georgian (e.g. Papaskiri, 2010) and Abkhaz (e.g. Lakoba, 2004) scholars diverge. On the construction of history, see Coppieters (2002). See also Derluguian (2005); Hewitt (2013).

[9] See Coppieters et al. (1998) for an overview. On the institutional roots, see Cornell (2000); Beissinger (2002); Matsaberidze (2011). On high-level decision-making, see George (2009).

[10] See Zürcher et al. (2005).

[11] See Shesterinina (2021).

[12] On Russia's influence in particular, see Lynch (2004).

[13] According to the All-Union Census of 1989, in Abkhazia's population of 525,061, Georgians and Mingrelians, a Georgian subgroup, constituted 239,872 (45.7 %); the Abkhaz, 93,267 (17.8 %); Armenians, 76,541 (14.6 %); Russians, 74,914 (14.3 %); Greeks, 14,664 (2.8 %); and others, 15,959 (4.8 %). For a discussion, see Trier et al. (2010).

Abkhazianization (Kemoklidze, 2016). Yet the conflict continued. Regular Georgians and Abkhaz confronted each other on issues of identity and belonging, the Abkhaz elite and public wrote letters to the Soviet center in Moscow and mobilized to oppose what was seen as ongoing Georgianization, facing Georgian counter-mobilization, especially after the opening in the Soviet system in the 1980s, when Abkhazia saw the first violent clashes, and respective leaders struggled over the political status of Abkhazia as the Soviet Union disintegrated (Shesterinina, 2021).

The Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992–1993 took place in this context. It began with the advance of Georgian forces into Abkhazia from the administrative border with Georgia along the Ingur/i River in the east and from the Black Sea by the border with Russia in the west in August 1992 (Baev, 2003; Zürcher et al., 2005). These forces quickly established control over most of the territory, including the capital Sukhum/i, besieging a part of eastern Abkhazia around the mining town of Tqvarchal/Tqvarcheli. Only central Abkhazia around the town of Gudauta where a former Soviet military base was located remained under Abkhaz control. However, the picture of territorial control changed in October 1992, when Abkhaz forces took the area near the border with Russia with external support. Participants on the Abkhaz side in the war who had been recruited into the Special Regiment of the Internal Forces of Abkhazia, or the Abkhaz Guard, before the war and those who mobilized spontaneously across Abkhazia as well as foreign fighters who arrived in the course of the war were directed from the west and east fronts established as a result, with General Headquarters in Gudauta (Pachulija, 2010). After a year of fighting on both fronts, the war ended in the Abkhaz capture of Sukhum/i in the context of a ceasefire agreement and the withdrawal of Georgian troops in September 1993. Most Georgians were displaced from Abkhazia as a result (S/26795, 1993: para. 34–35).

While the term *civil war* is not used in Abkhazia, the war unfolded in an autonomous part of Georgia between armed forces from Georgia proper and Abkhazia that included the local population of Abkhazia, the defining elements of a civil war (Shesterinina, 2021: 19–20). It was internationalized by foreign fighters' and Russia's engagement and combined irregular and regular features. The Georgian side was militarily superior at the outset of hostilities. The Georgian population of Georgia proper and Abkhazia significantly outnumbered the Abkhaz and Georgia inherited a large share of Soviet weapons in the South Caucasus. This military asymmetry was evident in the capture of most of the territory of Abkhazia during the first days of the war. But Georgia did not have a regular army at the time. The National Guard and the Mkhedrioni that fought on the Georgian side were "a bunch of self-ruled 'battalions'" (Nodia, 1998: 34). Nor was the Abkhaz Guard a regular force, even if it was modeled on the so-called Eighth Regiment of the Soviet army. The Abkhaz built an army structure in the course of fighting and engaged in conventional battles with frontlines and the use of heavy weaponry, including the battle for Sukhum/i, which concluded the war. However, this structure lacked military professionalism and combat capacities, as demonstrated by a number of preceding failed battles where the Abkhaz side incurred major losses. The Abkhaz also engaged in guerrilla warfare alongside conventional battles in eastern Abkhazia, particularly around besieged Tqvarchal/Tqvarcheli.

The map of armed violence changed after the war, but its irregular and regular features persisted, although in a modified way. The displacement of most Georgians depopulated Abkhazia, leaving some districts, such as Georgian-inhabited Gal/i, nearly deserted. Infrastructure and homes were demolished, especially along the east and west frontlines. The imposition of sanctions on Abkhazia by the Russia-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 1996 deepened economic despair. Combined with trauma from wartime loss and participation in violence, these conditions lay behind rampant crime in the aftermath of the war, which shifted over time and which I do not consider here. In turn, low-scale irregular and regular violence in the two contested areas, the Gal/i district and the Kodor/i Valley, which

developed into large-scale episodes, was systematic in the post-war period until the recognition of Abkhazia as a state by Russia in 2008 and their joint fortification of the Georgian-Abkhaz border area thereafter. Georgian guerrilla groups carried out irregular violence that Abkhaz counterinsurgency-like operations sought to deter in the primarily Abkhaz-controlled Gal/i district. Georgian and Abkhaz armed actors engaged in regular violence, namely, cross-fire and clashes in Gal/i and the Kodor/i Valley, which Georgia primarily controlled after the war. The fighting recurred in the so-called Six-Day War of May 1998 in Gal/i and the Battle of the Kodor/i Valley of August 2008, combining the irregular and regular features. The following sections focus on these forms of violence.

6. Irregular violence in post-war Abkhazia

The Ingur/i River, a natural line separating Georgia proper from Abkhazia from the Black Sea to the edge of the Gal/i district, was part of the administrative border between the Georgian SSR and its autonomous Abkhazia in the Soviet Union. After the war, a section of the Gal/i district adjacent to the river became the epicenter of irregular violence in Abkhazia. With the signing of the Agreement on a Cease-Fire and Separation of Forces in Moscow on 14 May 1994, this "cease fire line has turned into a de-facto border" (Weiss, 2012: 216). The Agreement established a 12 km security zone where no armed forces or heavy weaponry were permitted to each side of the line, with a restricted weapons zone stretching beyond this area (S/1994/583: para. 2). It replaced Abkhaz and Georgian armed forces stationed on the two sides of the Ingur/i with the police. A CIS peacekeeping force was deployed to monitor compliance with the Agreement. UNOMIG verified its implementation and observed activities of the CIS force, with Headquarters in the security zone located in Gal/i and Zugdidi, the main towns on the Abkhaz and Georgian sides, respectively. The Kodor/i Valley was not part of the security zone but had CIS and UNOMIG patrols as well.

Despite the presence of Abkhaz and international personnel in the security zone, guerrilla warfare that started almost immediately after the war in this area (S/1994/80: para. 20) persisted long into the post-war period. But in post-war Abkhazia this "technology of rebellion" was used not against the state, as in civil war, but against wartime insurgents controlling part of the state's territory after war. In this autonomous part of Georgia that became a *de facto* state, Georgian armed groups using guerrilla tactics formed to oppose control over the territory that the Abkhaz side established as a result of the war. These groups were related to irregular forces that fought on the Georgian side in the war, such as the paramilitary group Mkhedrioni, and involved Georgians who participated in the war and those who were displaced thereafter in direct and indirect ways (UCDP, 2023a). Hence, a former member of the Mkhedrioni Dato Shengelia was reported to have recruited ex-Mkhedrioni and Georgians displaced from the Gal/i district to carry out guerrilla activities (Darchiashvili, 2003: 21). His Forest Brothers were one of the main groups believed to be responsible for these activities from as early as 1994 in Abkhazia (Fuller, 2011). However, it is likely that this and other groups that were reported in the media, particularly the White Legion (e.g. Fuller, 2005), were only some of the many groups that were involved. As an Abkhaz policeman who served in the border area explains, "there were a number of groups active across the Gal [district] both in the upper area and lower by the sea. These were scattered small groups, five-six people in each, which nonetheless maintained contact with one another" (Interview 44, 4 November 2011).

These groups consistently crossed the Ingur/i River to the Gal/i district to ambush and kidnap Abkhaz and international personnel, the Abkhaz not involved in security provisions, and local Georgians perceived to be collaborating with Abkhaz authorities, lay landmines where security personnel would pass, and damage infrastructure, including communications systems (e.g. S/1994/1160: para. 7). They freely operated in the lower part of the Gal/i district where dense forests,

poor infrastructure, especially roads, and distances between villages prevented patrolling. Villages in this area were largely depopulated after the war and it was possible to hide in abandoned houses. Moreover, the border line is located beyond the Ingur/i River in the area. This meant that its crossing, which was difficult in upper Gal/i where the Ingur/i "flows heavily" and Abkhaz patrols were placed near the river, was less challenging here (Johnson, 2021: 99). The lower Gal/i district was, therefore, a hub of guerrilla operations.[14] "The situation that characterized the lower zone was not the same in the rest of the Gal district," a local official contrasts this area with the rest of the district, "The rest of the district was relatively calm in comparison" (Interview 148, 14 December 2011). Nevertheless, guerrilla activities "took a considerable amount of human lives" across the district until Russia's recognition of Abkhazia as a state in 2008 (Yamskov, 2009: 168).

In response to these activities, the Abkhaz side organized counterinsurgency-like operations, which are referred to as *cleaning* or *counterterrorist* in Abkhazia, to drive out Georgian guerrillas. Although Abkhaz armed forces were not permitted in the security zone where these operations took place, army regulars, reservists, and policemen participated in them. The operations typically involved what participants describe as *combing* through an area to *locate* and *neutralize diversionists* by forcing them to flee beyond the border line, killing, or capturing them. "We had maps marking where they could dig in. According to military strategy, the front group led, the side watch was at the sides, and the main group followed behind them. This is how we *combed* through the area," an Abkhaz reservist tells, "We gave them corridors to leave—to maintain some peace and not to harm our own boys… If someone appeared, we shot them. Avoiding combat, we moved further" (Interview 70, 11 November 2011). Most often, Georgian guerrillas were able to escape or hide and continue their activities. As a result, the Abkhaz adapted their strategy and "moved to local measures, tracing particular individuals," an Abkhaz commander clarifies and adds, "When we changed the tactics, we had much greater success" (Interview 127, 1 December 2011).

These operations did not drive out Georgian guerrillas, whose activities went on even after 2008 (e.g. Fuller, 2009), but deteriorated the acute security situation in the area, putting a toll on returning displaced Georgians. The first *cleaning* operation in the lower Gal/i district in February 1994, for example, did not succeed in "tak[ing Georgian guerrillas] by surprise," according to the Abkhaz commander noted above (Interview 127, 1 December 2011). Yet it produced a new wave of displacement as Georgians were reported "to flee Abkhazia's Gali [district] to escape ethnic cleansing" (Fuller, 1994a; S/1994/253: para. 24). Displaced former residents of Gal/i who witnessed the events confirm in Tbilisi: "Seven people were killed on 5 February 1994. My father was there and died, but the Abkhaz said they only killed partisans… I escaped to Zugdidi and watched our houses burn" (Focus group, 2 May 2013).

7. Regular violence in post-war Abkhazia

Whereas Georgian guerrilla activities and Abkhaz counterinsurgency-like operations in the security zone, especially the lower Gal/i district, characterized the irregular feature of post-war violence in Abkhazia, intermittent low-scale armed clashes and cross-fire between Georgian and Abkhaz personnel positioned across the Ingur/i River became an extension of regular wartime fighting. These forms of post-war violence amounted to a *small war* in the Gal/i district. As an Abkhaz policeman who had border guard duties in the area recalls, "After 1993, the war was still ongoing in the Gal district. Until recently, Gal was explosive" (Interview 24, 2 November 2011). Regular violence

as well went on in the Kodor/i Valley. It initially involved Georgian and Abkhaz armed forces that fought during the war and both permitted and non-permitted security personnel after the signing of the Agreement of 1994.

The Georgian side contested Abkhaz control of the entire territory of Abkhazia given that Abkhazia was part of newly independent sovereign Georgia, which was established as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and whose territorial integrity was compromised by the outcome of the war (George, 2009). However, the Abkhaz did not fully control the Gal/i district, as demonstrated by widespread guerrilla activities in the lower part of the district, and Georgia retained control in the Kodor/i Valley after the war. Thus, these areas were the entry points for continued but localized fighting that restarted early in the post-war period. For example, in March 1994, "[t]wo battalions of Georgian troops supported by a tank and two armored vehicles crossed through the Kodori [Valley] into [the] Gulripsh [district], and a second contingent of 100 Georgians crossed the frontier near the village of Otobaya [in lower Gal/i]" (Fuller, 1994b). Abkhaz forces captured the village of Lata in the Gulripsh/i district and temporarily "occup[ied] two villages in Svaneti, outside Abkhazia," but ultimately left the upper Kodor/i Valley under Georgian control; they also drove Georgian troops out of the Gal/i district, "shelling Georgian villages" there (Fuller, 1994c). This violence involving light and heavy weaponry was frontal and, therefore, differed in nature from guerrilla warfare.

Heavy weaponry was withdrawn from the Gal/i district in accordance with the 1994 Agreement (S/1994/1160: para. 15), but low-scale exchanges with light and heavy weaponry continued with participation of armed forces. Abkhaz policemen allowed in the area took border guard duties in shifts, but army regulars and reservists took part as well. "As a reservist, I was not allowed there often. The police was allowed there," one participant illustrates, "but I changed into police uniform and went with [them]" (Interview 87, 17 November 2011). Abkhaz posts were regularly fired upon from beyond the Ingur/i, resulting in clashes and casualties (e.g. Fuller, 1994g). The Abkhaz were also reported to lay landmines and obstruct passage along the river, which undermined the return of displaced Georgians to the area (S/1994/1160: para. 6).

Georgian troops and equipment were also withdrawn from the upper Kodor/i Valley, but the Abkhaz side maintained a post in the lower part near Lata (S/1995/10: para. 30, 32). Local Svans opposed the withdrawal as it "would leave them vulnerable to an Abkhaz attack" and viewed the small peacekeeping force in the area as "insufficient to protect them" (Fuller, 1994f, 1994e; S/1994/1160: para. 20). Part of this population did not submit to Georgia and formed a militia, challenging Georgia's control over the area and prompting a joint army and police operation in July 2006, to restore control (Fuller, 2006; S/2006/771: para. 6). Cross-fire and skirmishes between the Georgian and Abkhaz sides were reported after the war (e.g. Fuller, 1994d; S/1994/818: para. 21), but this area saw fewer clashes than the Gal/i district (e.g. S/1995/342: para. 25) due to mountainous terrain that restricted fighting and the Lata tunnel that separated the sides. In the Gal/i district, the Ingur/i River separated the sides and was difficult to cross in some areas, but the sides were more proximate than in the Kodor/i Valley. Hence, whereas clashes were frequent in the Gal/i district, the next key episode of fighting in the Kodor/i Valley after the events of March 1994, was in October 2001, when a Georgian-Chechen contingent crossed into the lower, Abkhaz-controlled part, ostensibly "to capture the strategic bridge across the Kodori River that effectively divides Abkhazia into two parts," but was turned back (Fuller, 2001).

8. Recurrence of fighting

The irregular and regular features combined in the recurrence of large-scale violence, pointing to the links between small-scale violence that emerged soon after the war and persisted thereafter and episodes of fighting. Neither the Six-Day War of 1998 in Gal/i nor the Battle of the

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[14] Johnson (2021: 96) finds that Georgian fighters did not view their activities in this area as crossing into the Abkhaz territory but rather as defending the territory from the Abkhaz.

Kodor/i Valley of 2008 are coded as recurrent civil wars in major datasets due to the relatively low battle-death numbers (UCDP, 2023b). Yet both involved armed forces and heavy weaponry and were seen as new episodes of war by local actors. They also changed the state of territorial control in post-war Abkhazia and broke hopes of a formal conflict settlement while paving the way to Abkhazia's *de facto* statehood.

Georgian guerrilla activities in the Gal/i district were reported in the lead up to the events of 20–26 May 1998. For example, eight Abkhaz personnel were killed on 29 April and 17 on 18 May in surprise attacks (Fuller, 1998a, 1998d). In the meantime, the Abkhaz side "placed its armed forces on combat alert after some 300 fighters from the… White Legion crossed into Abkhaz territory" (Fuller, 1998b). A Georgian parliamentary deputy, thus, asserted that the Gal/i district was "under the control of the Georgian informal paramilitaries" and that "the district's Georgian population [was] on the verge of revolt" (Fuller, 1998c). The UN Secretary-General confirmed that "there was general apprehension in the population that a resumption of hostilities was imminent" (S/1998/497: para. 2). Indeed, fighting broke out on 20 May. On 25 May, A Protocol on a Ceasefire and Withdrawal of Armed Formations was signed at Gagra, to take effect the following day (S/1998/497: para. 4). Both sides violated the ceasefire, even though "the Georgian army and Georgian heavy military equipment were never deployed, [which] arguably led to Georgia's quick defeat" (Johnson, 2021: 92). The Abkhaz authorities declared a state of emergency in the Gal/i district on 27 May and claimed to have established full control over the district that day (S/1998/497: para. 5; Fuller, 1998e). As a result of large-scale violence, dozens of armed and unarmed Georgians and Abkhaz were killed, over 30,000 Georgian returnees again displaced from the district, and some villages destroyed (S/1998/497: para. 6). Abkhaz forces, including the army, were reported to have used heavy artillery and Georgian guerrillas' alleged links to Abkhazia's parliament in exile raised questions about Georgia's involvement in the event (Fuller, 1998e).

The Abkhaz side solidified control over the Gal/i district as a result of this fighting, with no further large-scale and only low-scale irregular and regular violence continuing there (e.g. S/1999/60: para. 22–23). The upper Kodor/i Valley remained the only area of Abkhazia outside Abkhaz control (Fuller, 2008a). Georgian military build-up in this strategic area above the capital Sukhum/i was reported before the Russo-Abkhaz operation of 9–12 August 2008 (e.g. S/2006/771: para. 7). The relocation of Abkhazia's government in exile to the area also signaled extension of Georgia's political control in the upper Kodor/i Valley (S/2006/771: para. 8). Abkhaz forces could not approach the area due to trenches, weapons emplacements, and mine fields as well as air and anti-tank defense systems reported there (Pachulija, 2010: 398). But the situation changed in the context of the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 when Russia weakened Georgia militarily in South Ossetia, which created an opportunity for the Abkhaz to "open a second front" and capture the upper Kodor/i Valley (S/2008/631: para. 5). This indicates the importance of post-war circumstances for the evolution of violence.

On 8 August, as hostilities escalated in South Ossetia, the Abkhaz side moved troops and heavy weapons toward Kodor/i. The offensive began on 9 August with Russian aerial attacks in western Georgia, including around Zugdidi, and later bombardments in the upper Kodor/i Valley (S/2008/631: para. 8). The Abkhaz side announced full mobilization and "a 10-day 'state of war'" (Fuller, 2008b). Artillery fire began on 11 August in preparation for the ground attack and the next day Abkhaz forces entered the area "with artillery, aviation, and infantry reinforcements" (Fuller, 2008c; S/2008/631: para. 9). Foot soldiers explained that a number of "men were selected to pass through the mountains. As we went up, the goal was to follow the aviation, artillery, [and] special forces" (Interview 61, 9 November 2011). Almost all locals and Georgian forces left before the arrival of Abkhaz troops and no casualties were reported. "We did not meet resistance anywhere," Abkhaz participants maintain (Interview 44, 4 November 2011). As a result of

the operation, the Abkhaz side secured control over the Kodor/i Valley and no Georgian-controlled pockets were left in Abkhazia (S/2008/631: para. 9). Russia's recognition of Abkhazia as a state and reinforcement of the border area between Georgia and Abkhazia with Russian troops followed (ICG, 2010: 3).[15] Violence in the border area diminished and the associated "omnipresent" and "acute" fears of further attacks from Georgia were removed (Kolossov and O'Loughlin, 2011: 632; Merlin, 2021: 84; Shesterinina, 2021).

9. Abkhaz perspectives on violence: territory and statehood

From the perspective of the Abkhaz participants and non-participants who lived through the events, violence after the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992–1993 represented a continuation of the Abkhaz "national liberation struggle" against Georgia's domination of Abkhazia that started long before the war (Shesterinina, 2021: 200). The Georgian advance into Abkhazia in August 1992, was interpreted as an existential threat in this context and the fighters' self-perception changed from an *opolchenie*, or the people's guard that mobilized at the war's onset, to a regular army with a formal structure and status that legitimized Abkhaz defense against Georgia's aggression in the course of the war (Shesterinina, 2016). Despite Georgian displacement and significant Abkhaz losses from post-war violence, the Abkhaz military victory in the war was perceived as a just outcome that the Abkhaz continued to defend from the ongoing threat of attack in order to develop independently from Georgia. The Abkhaz participation in post-war violence was in general seen as a way to achieve this goal. "The war ended, but a horrible, prolonged period started to *hold the victory*," a war correspondent captures the Abkhaz view (Interview 120, 29 November 2011).

However, because the Abkhaz established control over most of Abkhazia, including by preventing the return of the Georgian population to Abkhazia,[16] *holding the victory* meant consolidating control over the Gal/i district and the Kodor/i Valley that the Abkhaz considered to be within their territory but did not fully secure in the war. "There was no [armed violence] on the territory of Abkhazia, *only at the border*," an official corroborates in Sukhum/i (Interview 77, 15 November 2011). "[Georgians] understood they *could not take Abkhazia* anymore and were trying to *capture Gal*," a mothers' organization member clarifies of the Gal/i district (Interview 102, 23 November 2011). "They had very strong *fortification [in Kodor]*," a commander describes the situation there (Interview 74, 12 November 2011). Hence, the Abkhaz struggle became localized, with the contested areas being particularly salient for the Abkhaz as the entry points for further Georgian attacks. "They wanted to first *detach* the Gal district," a participant in the 1998 Gal/i fighting exemplifies, "If they had gotten to the town of Gal and occupied it, they would certainly *move on* to the Ochamchira district… We knew that it *would not stop there*" (Interview 148, 14 December 2011). Participants also stress that Georgia's fortification of the Kodor/i Valley exposed the capital to an attack: "From there you can even *bomb Sukhum*" (Interview 76, 11 November 2011).

The distinction between what I refer to as irregular and regular violence was clear in this context for the Abkhaz. "What an army cannot do *two people can*," a reservist explains the small size of irregular armed groups and the *diversionist* nature of their activities, "an army cannot be going through [Abkhazia] and laying mines now; putting a mine on the road to blow up a car is a *diversionist* act" (Interview 148, 14 December 2011). "There were many abandoned houses. It was easy to *hide*. Then

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[15] Russia and Abkhazia signed the Agreement on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance on September 17, 2008, as well as agreements on joint border defense and military cooperation in 2009 and a Russian military base in Abkhazia in 2010.

[16] Returnees could act as Georgia's "fifth column" if hostilities were to resume (Toal and Frichova Grono, 2011: 658).

they would quickly leave to cross the river back" (Interview 48, 4 November 2011), respondents emphasize the secrecy and support base that are central for irregular violence, "they *knew someone* and used that, hid in the warm houses, then ran" (Interview 25, 2 November 2011). "You cannot make trenches *in secret*," a journalist contrasts guerrilla warfare with frontal regular violence that took place in the Gal/i district (Interview 110, 26 November 2011). Consistent use of such terms as *infiltration*, *ambush*, and *kidnapping* to describe Georgian irregular armed groups' activities, their characterization as *diversionist* or *terrorist*, and questioning their links to Georgia's regular army further highlight this distinction in the Abkhaz view. "The *Georgian army* was restructured, but these groups were maintained to carry out *terrorist*, *diversionist* acts in Abkhazia," a commander claims, illustrating the distinction (Interview 127, 1 December 2011).

While in general the Abkhaz view on their role in this violence was defensive, their response to irregular and regular Georgian activities was distinct. The Abkhaz participants understood their role as *guards* of Abkhazia's *border*. "We took shifts to go *guard the border,* went for ten days, [and] changed zones to cover the most vulnerable places," one reservist explains this role (Interview 36, 3 November 2011). Georgian guerrilla activities often took the Abkhaz guards traveling to the border area by surprise and they reacted situationally: "a typical scenario [was] our group left for the border. They *waited by the road to ambush our car*, then fired, threw grenades, and used machine guns. We *fought back*" (Interview 33, 3 November 2011). Hence, border guards recognize that "[i]t was very *dangerous* to go to the border" (Interview 34, 3 November 2011); "No less were killed after the war than in the war. We *expected death* on every corner" (Interview 81, 15 November 2011).[17] The Abkhaz also devised activities in response to irregular violence. "When they infiltrated, we carried out operations to *push them out*," participants explain (Interview 70, 11 November 2011). "Under the pretence of anti-partisan operations, they *killed everyone*," Georgians displaced from the Gal/i district show how these operations targeted Georgian armed groups' alleged bases of support, "If partisans stayed somewhere and it was found out, not only this house, but the *whole street was burned*" (Focus group, 2 May 2013). This counterinsurgency-like response differed from the Abkhaz involvement in regular violence. "There is no such phrase *cleaning of the territory* in the army," a commander illustrates with the 1998 Gal/i fighting, "when the army is involved, it is *theater of war*. The second war, but localized" (Interview 60, 9 November 2011). "It was *not a raid*, it was an operation to capture the Gal district planned by Georgian commanders" (Interview 98, 19 November 2011), reservists confirm, "our reserve group was sent to Gal, not just like that, but with *specific tasks*" that resembled wartime offensives (Interview 91, 18 November 2011).

After the war, Abkhaz forces, thus, engaged in activities typically associated with state defense and participants interpreted their situational and counterinsurgency-like responses to Georgian guerrillas and military actions in the Gal/i district and the Kodor/i Valley through the lens of their official duties to defend the Abkhaz state, even before Abkhazia became partially recognized as a state.[18] Some of these activities were "under the umbrella of the *Ministry of Defense*" (Interview 27, 2 November 2011), they explain the official nature of their activities through the lens of Abkhazia's state structures, "The *army* was not supposed to get involved… [but] because the *police* was there, we [reservists] were sent there as well" (Interview 64, 9 November 2011).[19]

Deaths during these activities are consistently referred to as *on duty*, with those killed seen as acting in their official capacity. "We even wrote about that—that *employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs* were killed *on duty*," a journalist exemplifies (Interview 110, 26 November 2011). "Many *police staff* died" (Interview 33, 3 November 2011), participants and non-participants use official language when reconstructing specific events, "one was *state security official*" (Interview 132, 6 December 2011). Furthermore, participants intuitively refer to *the government* and *the president* of Abkhazia when recounting post-war violence: "We had operational information and reported [it] to *our government*" (Interview 126, 1 December 2011); "*the president* announced general mobilization and sent the army to the front zone" (Interview 24, 2 November 2011).[20]

From their perspective, therefore, the Abkhaz participants acted in defense of not only Abkhazia's territory but also the state, with the two intertwined in their accounts. "We stayed at our *state border*" (Interview 70, 11 November 2011), they underscore the state status of what they understand as Abkhazia's historical boundary and support this by arguing that they "did not have any military actions *beyond* Abkhazia. This territory was Georgian" (Interview 127, 1 December 2011). The Abkhaz forces in fact crossed into Georgia. For example, in March 1994, they occupied Georgian villages past the Ingur/i River during a *cleaning* operation. They also approached Georgia as the last Georgian forces withdrew from the Kodor/i Valley in August 2008. These areas did not remain under the Abkhaz control, however, since the aim of the Abkhaz was not territorial advance but state defense. "When we took Kodor we *could cross* the Ingur, but we said we *could not accept that*," a journalist corroborates (Interview 110, 26 November 2011). The raising of the Abkhaz flag after post-war operations was not simply symbolic but also defensive from this perspective. As one commander states, "the main aspect of the *state* is the *flag*. Try putting a Russian flag here, *no one will cross*. Same with the Abkhaz" (Interview 60, 9 November 2011).

As a result, what the Abkhaz achieved with their Gal/i and especially Kodor/i operations was not merely territorial control over the areas that they could not secure at the end of the war but the restoration of what they perceive as their *legitimate rule* on the historical Abkhaz territory. The Abkhaz see the establishment of control over the whole of Abkhazia as an essential part of statehood. The violence before it, in turn, is viewed as a way to deny the Abkhaz this statehood. "This was done for Abkhazia *not to be recognized*. How can you recognize a state that cannot *control its territory fully*?," a border guard reflects on prior Georgian intrusions into Abkhazia (Interview 40, 4 November 2011). Hence, the restoration of territorial control and "the Abkhaz as the only *legitimate power*" in Abkhazia go hand in hand for the Abkhaz (Interview 119, 29 November 2011). "We freed all the *borders of Abkhazia*. As a result, we restored the *Abkhaz statehood*," a participant in the Kodor/i operation captures this relationship.

This outcome, however, would not have been possible without Russia's military assistance and recognition of Abkhazia as a state in August 2008, and hangs on Russia's security guarantees. "It *calmed down* once we were recognized and became an independent Abkhaz state" (Interview 64, 9 November 2011), reservists who participated in post-war violence confirm, "I was going to the border *until 2008*" (Interview 36, 3 November 2011); "*After 2008* I did not take part anymore" (Interview 49, 4 November 2011). "With *Russians at the border*, the border is being strengthened" (Interview 84, 16 November 2011), both participants and non-participants attribute the change in irregular and regular violence to Russia, "As *Russia is here now*, [diversionists] will not be able to continue" (Interview 88, 17 November 2011); "*Russia is the primary force* restraining [Georgian army's] attacks" (Interview 85, 16 November 2011).

While this means that violence cannot continue as it did in the previous decades, deepening dependence on Russia places Abkhazia in a "gray zone" between victory and statehood (Whitmore, 2009; ICG,

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[17] Ambushes and landmines were reported to be particularly dangerous.

[18] Abkhazia declared independence in 1999 but has been *de facto* independent since 1993 (Caspersen, 2012: 9).

[19] A full account of Abkhazia's *de facto* state structures is beyond the scope of this article (see, e.g., Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2008). The structures relevant here are the ministries of defense, including a few thousand strong standing army and a 15,000–25,000 reservist contingent, and of interior (ICG, 2006: 14; Gvindzhiya, 2003).

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[20] On Abkhazia's political structures, see, e.g., Ó Beacháin (2012).

2010). "Russia recognized us, put their guards at the border. But this means *full independence does not exist here*," a social leader acknowledges, "Everything here *depends on the behaviour of Russia*" (Interview 76, 13 November 2011). "Russia is our only partner, a strategic partner, our source of life. What is most important for us? *Security*," an activist emphasizes the role of Russia's security guarantees in Abkhazia's development, "There is security today. Nothing threatens us. No rockets face us. Only now we are *starting to develop*" (Interview 118, 29 November 2011). "But what is Russia? The *main partner today*, the *blockade yesterday*" (Interview 127, 1 December 2011), participants and non-participants in post-war violence ask critically and reflect on Russia's earlier strategies of isolating Abkhazia economically through CIS-imposed sanctions and otherwise, "Russia, too, made drastic mistakes… attempting to *push Abkhazia into the structure of Georgia*" (Interview 77, 15 November 2011). This dependence, and Abkhazia's complicated history with Russia, put in perspective the tremendous loss, injury, and trauma on both sides in the war, including the protracted displacement of most Georgians from Abkhazia.

10. Conclusion

Drawing on intensive field research in the area, this article developed a granular account of violence in post-war Abkhazia and explored how the Abkhaz participants perceived this violence. It demonstrated that irregular and regular violence persisted systematically in post-war Abkhazia and concentrated in the contested areas that the Abkhaz did not fully control as a result of the war. Georgian guerrilla activities and Abkhaz counterinsurgency-like operations took place in the primarily Abkhaz-controlled Gal/i district and low-scale regular clashes and cross-fire intensified as fighting recurred at certain points in the post-war period in this district and the Kodor/i Valley, which Georgia primarily controlled after the war. The Abkhaz participants in general viewed this protracted violence as part of their long-term struggle against Georgia but their perspective was more nuanced as they understood their participation through the lens of defense of their victory in the war, with the contested areas being their primary concern as the potential entry points for a renewed attack from Georgia. In their view, the Abkhaz struggle became localized in the post-war period and establishing control over these areas was central not only to protecting the territory of Abkhazia but also its statehood. They saw participation in post-war violence through the lens of their official duties as part of the Abkhaz state. In other words, they perceived Abkhazia as a state to be defended even before its partial recognition. This recognition in 2008 concluded their struggle, though it would not have been possible without Russia's military assistance and Abkhazia's dependence on Russia deepened over time.

This study has implications for our understanding of violence after war in the post-Soviet conflicts and other contexts of partial and full recognition of disputed territories as independent states. The case of Abkhazia suggests that the recognition of statehood rarely brings underlying conflicts to an end. Instead, partially and fully recognized states established on the back of internal wars can be mired in multiple, overlapping forms of violence as these conflicts persist into the post-war period and the former warring parties transform and new actors emerge to contest the outcome of the war and the post-war arrangements at the local level. For example, decades after the Kosovo War of 1998–1999, the border area between Kosovo and Serbia saw clashes that were sparked by Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008 and tensions in the border area persisted in this partially yet widely recognised state. Likewise, after Sudan's long-lasting consecutive civil wars that go back to the 1950s, South Sudan gained independence in 2011 but soon found itself in an interstate war over the border. The South Sudanese regime was challenged by armed groups inside South Sudan and internal violence has plagued the new state ever since, despite its full recognition. Most recently, as Russia's recognition of the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk in 2022 amid its brutal war in Ukraine

has *de facto* redrawn Ukraine's borders, these territories are set for protracted violence and, as the Abkhaz case shows, will grow deeply dependent on Russia.

Persistent characterization of these conflicts as "frozen" in the academic literature and policy discussions does not capture the evolution of violence after wars in these complex post-war contexts and reliance on macro-structural factors in understanding these contexts strips our knowledge of their local dynamics. Rather than reducing this violence to intermittent occurrences, on the one hand, or focusing on large-scale episodes that draw international attention, on the other, future studies should look at systematic forms of protracted violence that arise in these contexts and seriously engage with the perspectives of the local participants in this violence while being mindful of how their histories through the conflict shape their recollections. In this effort, adopting a micro-dynamic approach that this article outlines and bridging insights from the research on civil war and violence in the aftermath of war in ways that this article illustrates can help grasp continuities in violence from the war to the post-war period. But the complexity of these contexts also indicates that such linkages may be limited in accounting for the full range of variation in where, when, and how violence develops. A detailed analysis of the actors involved in this violence and the meanings they attribute to it and the interaction of wartime, post-war, and even pre-war conditions that foster its different aspects can generate a fine-grained appreciation of local dynamics of violence after war in these contexts.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Anastasia Shesterinina: Conceptualization, Data curation, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Due to the nature of this research, the data that support the findings of this study is not available.

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