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**Working Paper**

## Between victory and statehood: Armed violence in post-war Abkhazia

WIDER Working Paper, No. 2022/137

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

United Nations University (UNU), World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER)

*Suggested Citation:* Shesterinina, Anastasia (2022) : Between victory and statehood: Armed violence in post-war Abkhazia, WIDER Working Paper, No. 2022/137, ISBN 978-92-9267-270-6, The United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER), Helsinki,  
<https://doi.org/10.35188/UNU-WIDER/2022/270-6>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/273936>

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WIDER Working Paper 2022/137

## **Between victory and statehood**

Armed violence in post-war Abkhazia

Anastasia Shesterinina\*

November 2022

**Abstract:** What accounts for armed violence in the aftermath of civil war? Efforts to develop a comprehensive framework to understand this phenomenon have been made in the literature. Yet existing studies have in general looked at distinct pre-war, wartime, and post-war sources of violence in the aftermath of war. This paper focuses on organized political violence after war and argues that such violence is shaped by a combination of pre-war, wartime, and post-war dynamics. Post-war contexts, however, vary in the form, location, and timing of violence and the combination of drivers will differ from case to case. Drawing on the case of Abkhazia after the Georgian–Abkhaz war of 1992–93, the paper shows that Abkhaz participants understood irregular and regular violence that emerged after the war in Abkhazia as part of the overall Abkhaz struggle that started before the war. Collective identities that formed before the war and transformed in its course underpinned participation in violence. But wartime and post-war developments, particularly efforts of the sides to defend and challenge war outcomes and external influence, affected where and when violence took place. This violence further transformed armed actors and their activities. It culminated with the perceived ‘liberation’ of the territory of Abkhazia and its recognition as an independent state by Russia and a few other states. Despite the Abkhaz hopes of sovereign statehood, deepening dependence on Russia positioned Abkhazia in a grey area between victory and statehood. This paper demonstrates the importance of case-specific analysis for our understanding of armed violence in the aftermath of civil war.

**Key words:** violence in the aftermath of civil war, form, location, timing, Abkhazia

**Acknowledgements:** Support for research and writing is acknowledged from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and UK Research and Innovation Future Leaders Fellowship Understanding Civil War from Pre- to Post-War Stages: A Comparative Approach. This paper was presented at the UNU-WIDER workshop ‘Institutional Legacies of Violent Conflict’, 12–13 May 2022, Helsinki, and at the 54th Association for Slavic, East European, & Eurasian Studies Annual Convention (virtual), 13–14 October 2022. The author thanks participants of the above-mentioned panels for helpful feedback.

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This study has been prepared within the UNU-WIDER project [Institutional legacies of violent conflict](#).

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ISSN 1798-7237 ISBN 978-92-9267-270-6

<https://doi.org/10.35188/UNU-WIDER/2022/270-6>

Typescript prepared by Ayesha Chari.

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## 1 Introduction

We freed all the borders of Abkhazia. As a result, we restored the Abkhaz statehood. – Abkhaz fighter, Gagra, 2011

What accounts for armed violence in the aftermath of civil war? Efforts to develop a comprehensive framework to understand this phenomenon have been made in the literature. However, existing studies have looked at distinct pre-war, wartime, and post-war sources of violence. This paper focuses on organized political violence after war and argues that such violence is shaped by a combination of path-dependent and endogenous dynamics that take place across the pre-war, wartime, and post-war periods of conflict. Collective identities that form before the war and transform in the course of conflict can underlie participation in violence after war. Yet this violence is rarely uniform across the territory where the war was fought and time periods after its end. Wartime and post-war specific dynamics, such as the efforts of the warring sides to defend and challenge territorial control achieved as a result of the war and external influence, can shape the location and timing of violence after war. This violence can further transform armed actors and their activities, which suggests an iterative relationship between the dynamics of conflict and the evolution of actors participating in it.

This argument is developed in the case of Abkhazia after the Georgian–Abkhaz war of 1992–93 drawing on primary and secondary materials that I collected in the area between 2011 and 2013. Different forms of violence emerged in Abkhazia after the war. These forms did not reflect a break with wartime violence but were extensions of the irregular and regular features of the war. Georgian armed groups, which grew out of irregular 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<sup>1</sup> district where the Abkhaz side achieved prevalent but contested control as a result of the war. Abkhaz irregular and regular 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 perceived as their military victory in the war. A *small war* between Georgian and Abkhaz patrols stationed on either side of the ceasefire line also unfolded in the area. This violence intensified in the so-called Six-Day War of 1998 that involved both irregular and regular actors outlined above.

In contrast, conventional violence took place in the upper Kodor/i Valley where the Georgian side maintained prevalent but contested control after the war. The Abkhaz viewed this last area under Georgian control as part of the territory of Abkhazia and continued their attempts to regain this area after the war. Abkhaz forces captured the nearby village of Lata in the early post-war period. However, a large-scale operation in the upper Kodor/i Valley became possible much later thanks to the changing external environment. The opportunity created by the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and the support Russia offered in the context of this war enabled Abkhazia to regain the area at that time. As the opening quote of this paper shows, the Abkhaz side claimed to have ‘freed’ all territory of Abkhazia, which paved the way for the recognition of Abkhazia as an independent state by Russia and a few other states.

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<sup>1</sup> The spelling of proper nouns differs in Georgia (e.g., ‘Gali’) and Abkhazia (e.g., ‘Gal’). I use the combined spelling common in academic research (e.g., ‘Gal/i’).

Violence after the war in Abkhazia was thus understood as part of the overall Abkhaz struggle for independence that extended from the pre-war to post-war periods of conflict. Yet the outcome of the struggle was in fact dependence on Russia, which deepened over time, putting Abkhazia in a grey area between victory and statehood that is likely to endure. The next sections, first, situate Abkhazia as a case where some forms of violence after war can be seen as a legacy of war and outline pre-war to post-war sources of this violence. I then briefly discuss materials used in the analysis. The substantive part of the paper traces the forms of violence that emerged after the war in Abkhazia and grounds the proposed sources of this violence in Abkhaz perspectives. I conclude with theoretical and empirical implications of this analysis.

## 2 Violence as a legacy of war in Abkhazia

Most contemporary civil wars have taken place in countries with a history of armed conflict (Walter 2015). This is what Collier et al. (2003: x) term the ‘conflict trap’, which suggests that ‘the chief legacy of a civil war is another war’. Yet multiple overlapping forms of violence short of war have also characterized post-war countries, including those that have not fallen back into full-fledged war (Suhrke and Berdal 2012). These countries can be placed on a ‘peace continuum’ that incorporates contexts with and without a history of civil war and a range of violent experiences short of war (Davenport et al. 2018: 7). Similarly to civil war recurrence, post-war violence can be ‘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). But some forms of post-war violence, for example, certain forms of crime, might not be directly related to civil war and instead have different underlying mechanisms, including those specific to the post-war period (Gartner and Kennedy 2018).

A relevant question for scholars of post-war contexts, therefore, is whether and how violence after civil war is related to prior armed conflict and what new sources of violence emerge in the aftermath of fighting. When studying violence *as a legacy* of war, scholars should identify those forms of violence that directly relate to the war and seek to understand their different sources. In the case of Abkhazia, criminal violence that emerged after the war—most notably, racketeering of farmers growing and trading in tangerines and hazelnuts, the two main crops produced in Abkhazia, particularly in the Gal/i district—did not involve the actors or the specific conditions created by the war (ICG 2013). The war created the general conditions for this violence, including porous borders, availability of weapons, and poverty. But this violence was not related to the political goals of the conflict. Even though criminal and political violence is often intertwined (Deglow 2016), the goal of the armed actors who were involved in this violence was to accumulate profit and these groups had the extralegal dimension that differentiated them from the actors involved in organized political violence (Cheng 2018). The latter, on the other hand, was directly related to the war. The actors that perpetrated it, specifically Georgian guerrilla groups and Georgian and Abkhaz border guards and regular armies, grew out of the armed actors involved in the war. The specific conditions of contested territorial control of the areas where it took place resulted from the war. So did its political goals of defending and challenging this control and the war’s overall outcomes.

This violence included the recurrence of fighting and low-scale incidents, pointing to the multi-layered nature of violence that is a legacy of war. Until recently, studies of violence after war treated civil war recurrence and post-war violence short of war separately. Bara et al. (2021) have called for an integrated research agenda rooted in the value of understanding similarities and differences in the drivers of these forms of violence. This paper contributes to this agenda by combining the analysis of the two and advances it by further disaggregating the specific manifestations of these

forms in the case of Abkhazia. Civil war research helps this disaggregation. In particular, Kalyvas and Balcells (2010) differentiate between irregular and conventional warfare. In the former ‘technology of rebellion’, armed actors challenging the state adopt indirect guerrilla tactics against militarily stronger opponents (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010: 415). Valentino et al. (2004: 387–88) define these tactics by the reliance on irregular forces and local population, avoidance of decisive battles, and operation in territories that opponents control. In conventional warfare, in turn, the parties directly confront each other using heavy weaponry.

Both irregular and conventional warfare characterized the war in Abkhazia. Violence that grew out of the war resembled these features. Irregular and regular armed actors involved in the war continued their activities. Violence immediately after the war was perpetrated by the former warring parties with the use of heavy weaponry. Yet these actors transformed in the post-war period. The regular forces that fought on both sides and formed the basis of the Georgian and Abkhaz armies could not maintain their presence in the border area between Georgia proper and Abkhazia after the signing of a ceasefire agreement but participated in violence after the war at different times. The Abkhaz were no longer the actor engaged in irregular violence due to the Abkhaz control of most of Abkhazia. Instead, Georgian armed groups carried out guerrilla activities in the border area. Although a new actor with a new name, they incorporated fighters of the irregular force that fought on the Georgian side in the war.

These war-to-post-war continuities in some actors and features of violence, however, do not mean that violence after the war in Abkhazia had only wartime sources. Studies have linked such violence to distinct pre-war, wartime, and post-war dynamics. I argue that these drivers co-exist and help account for different aspects of violence in post-war Abkhazia. The participation trajectories of individuals involved in this violence did not start in the post-war period but extended into the period before the war (Shesterinina 2021). This implies that the ways in which people understood the broader conflict that the war stemmed from and their roles in it, or their ‘collective conflict identities’, and how they acted on these understandings before the war, remained relevant after the war (Shesterinina 2021: 2). This is because the war did not bring the broader conflict to a conclusion but rather intensified some of its aspects. This also suggests that social connections of participants in violence after war may have included important pre-war networks. As Daly (2016) shows, where armed groups recruit locally such networks remain critical for their ability to organize violence after war. This was the case in Abkhazia where mobilization of local networks characterized the war’s onset (Shesterinina 2016).

However, these networks—and the nature of actors—transform during the war (Wood 2008). Indeed, small groups of relatives and friends that mobilized at the war’s onset did not always stay in the same units as the war progressed in Abkhazia and the disparate Abkhaz force that resulted from local mobilization transformed into an army during the fighting. Furthermore, new actors and forms of violence emerge in the post-war period (Boyle 2014; Campbell et al. 2017). Georgian guerrilla activities noted earlier are a prominent example. Hence, wartime and post-war dynamics should be considered in the analysis of violence in post-war Abkhazia. Themnér (2011), for example, emphasizes the importance for post-war violence of ties that combatants form during the war and persistence of combatant networks after. I highlight two further dynamics: territorial control at the end of the war that extends into the post-war period and intervention of external actors in post-war contexts. These dynamics affected the location and timing of violence in post-war Abkhazia.

Kalyvas (2006) finds that during civil war selective violence, which involves deliberate targeting, concentrates in the areas that are predominantly but not fully controlled by the opponents. In civil wars that end with such fragmented control, we should therefore expect selective violence to continue in the areas that are not monopolistically controlled by either warring party. Violence in

post-war Abkhazia was located in such areas—the Gal/i district predominantly but not fully controlled by the Abkhaz side and the upper Kodori Valley predominantly but not fully controlled by the Georgian side. This suggests that the end of civil war does not entail a neat break with the fighting. Instead, ‘forms of organized violence after war are often strategic and closely linked to the fault lines and purposes of the preceding war—occasionally resembling a continuation of war by other means’ (Bara 2020: 980).

Despite the continuity in the political goals of violence, Bara (2020) stresses that manifestations of violence can shift in the post-war period and finds that external actors, especially peacekeepers, can mitigate some manifestations (cf. Fortna 2008; Hultman et al. 2016). While peacekeepers in post-war Abkhazia indeed appeared to have mitigated some violence, for example, the use of regular forces after a ceasefire agreement, they were also targets of violence. Furthermore, post-war contexts are influenced by a broad range of third parties beyond peacekeepers (Faulkner 2019), which can not only mitigate but also facilitate violence in the aftermath of war, thereby affecting when it occurs. The timing of violence in Abkhazia was affected by external actors, particularly Russia and its war in Georgia in 2008.

### 3 A note on methods

The analysis in this paper is based on field research carried out over 8 months in 2010–13 in Abkhazia, Georgia proper, and Russia. I collected 150 life history interviews with 142 participants and non-participants on the Abkhaz side in the Georgian–Abkhaz war of 1992–93 that covered pre-war to post-war periods, 30 interviews and one focus group with 37 displaced Georgians, government officials, and experts in Tbilisi and Moscow, and a range of archival, news, and secondary materials. These materials help establish a record and better understand the actors’ perceptions of the different patterns of post-war violence over time. As organized political 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 Kodori Valley where such violence was prevalent. I focus on the years of 1994 when the patterns of irregular and regular post-war violence emerged and 1998 and 2008 when significant changes in territorial control took place. I explore the meanings that the Abkhaz actors involved attributed to post-war violence and intertwine Georgian accounts to contextualize these meanings.

The reconstruction of events 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 but include only those instances that also appear in the coverage of Liz Fuller who was the RFE/RL Caucasus analyst during the analysed period and UN materials that I gathered for this analysis.<sup>2</sup> The RFE/RL coverage on the conflict mainly relied on reports of Russian and western, including independent, news agencies, such as Interfax and

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<sup>2</sup> For RFE/RL sources used, see Fuller (1994a–1994g, 1998a–1998e, 2001, 2005, 2006, 2008a–2008c, 2009, 2011). For UN reports and documents analysed, see UNSC (1993, 1994a–1994e, 1995a–1995b, 1998, 1999, 2006, 2008). Note that RFE/RL sources dated before 2000 and accessed at the time of writing are no longer available online and are in the author’s archives.

Reuters, respectively, and key UN materials drew on reports of the UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG).

This triangulation strategy allows me to get at distinct aspects 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', whereas *RFE/RL* uses 'Georgian guerrillas' and UN sources adopt a more neutral description of '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.

To better understand how post-war violence was perceived in Abkhazia, I rely on recollections of the Abkhaz army regulars and reservists and policemen who took part in Abkhaz activities in the Gal/i district and the Kodori 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. Accounts of displaced Georgians help contextualize Abkhaz narratives.

#### 4 From conflict to war to post-war violence

The Georgian–Abkhaz conflict has a host of historical,<sup>3</sup> political,<sup>4</sup> economic,<sup>5</sup> social,<sup>6</sup> and external<sup>7</sup> roots. The contemporary period can be traced to the depopulation of Abkhazia by the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century and the repopulation of the territory, which over time produced a near Georgian majority.<sup>8</sup> The conflict unfolded 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,

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<sup>3</sup> 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) and Hewitt (2013).

<sup>4</sup> For an overview, see Coppieters et al. (1998). On the institutional roots, see Beissinger (2002), Cornell (2000), and Matsaberidze (2011). On high-level decision-making, see George (2009).

<sup>5</sup> See Zürcher et al. (2005).

<sup>6</sup> See Shesterinina (2021).

<sup>7</sup> On Russia's influence in particular, see Lynch (2004).

<sup>8</sup> 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).



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 towards 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 centre 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 1992–93 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 2007). 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 (UNSC 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. It was internationalized by the engagement of foreign fighters and Russia and combined irregular and regular features.<sup>9</sup> 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 modelled on the so-called Eighth Regiment of the Soviet army. The Abkhaz built an army structure in the heat 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 in a number of preceding failed battles where the Abkhaz side incurred major losses. Furthermore, guerrilla

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<sup>9</sup> On different 'technologies of rebellion', see Kalyvas and Balcells (2010).

warfare took place 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. 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 and large-scale fighting in two contested zones—the district of Gal/i and the Kodori Valley—were systematic in the post-war period until the recognition of Abkhazia 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 primarily Abkhaz-controlled Gal/i. Georgian and Abkhaz armed forces engaged in cross-fire and clashes in Gal/i and the Kodori Valley, which Georgia primarily controlled after the war. The fighting recurred in the Six-Day War of May 1998 in Gal/i and the Battle of the Kodori Valley of August 2008. The following sections focus on these forms of organized political violence.

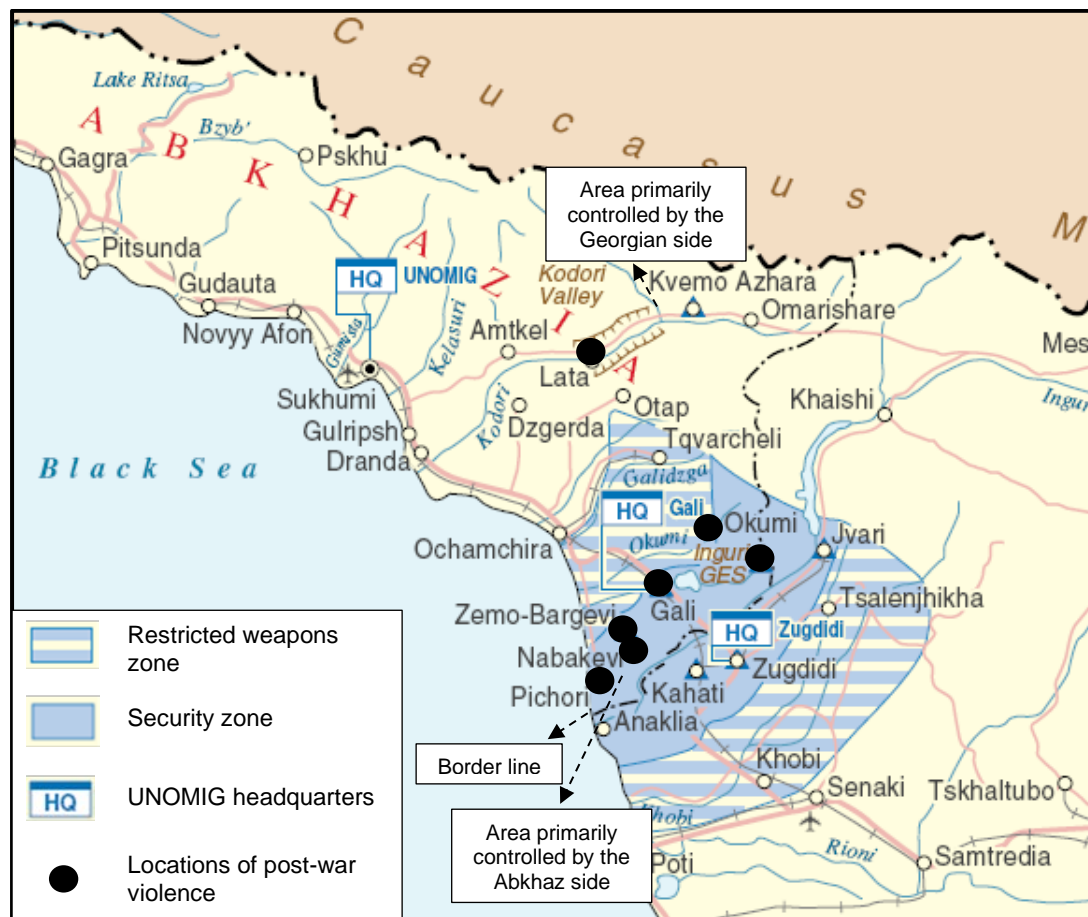
## 5 Irregular post-war violence

The Ingur 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 epicentre of irregular violence in Abkhazia (see Figure 1). 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-kilometre security zone where no armed forces or heavy weaponry was permitted to each side of the line, with a restricted weapons zone stretching beyond this area (UNSC 1994c: para. 2). It replaced Abkhaz and Georgian armed forces stationed on the two sides of the Ingur River 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 Kodori 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 (UNSC 1994a: para. 20) persisted long into the post-war period. This ‘technology of rebellion’ is defined by ‘lightly armed bands . . . [seeking to] challenge and harass the state’ (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010: 418). But in the case of Abkhazia, which was an autonomous part of Georgia and could not be considered a state of its own, Georgian armed groups using guerrilla tactics formed to oppose the control over the territory that the Abkhaz side established as a result of the war. These groups were often referred to as *partisan* in Georgia proper and grew out of irregular forces, such as the paramilitary organization Mkhedrioni, that fought on the Georgian side in the war. They involved Georgians who participated in the war and those who were displaced thereafter in a number of direct and indirect ways, for example, as local guides necessary to safely cross the Ingur River (Shesterinina 2015). Hence, a former Mkhedrioni fighter Dato Shengelia who later became Minister of Internal Affairs of Abkhazia in exile was reported to have armed local Georgians to carry out guerrilla activities

(Darchiashvili 2003). 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 region both in the upper area and lower by the sea. These were scattered small groups, five to six people in each, which nonetheless maintained contact with one another’ (Interview 44, 4 November 2011).

Figure 1: Post-war violence in Abkhazia (1993–2008)



Note: author’s notes and figure legend added based on a review of the *Apsnypress* archives.

Source: based on the UN map of Georgia (see Geospatial Information Section 2009).

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., UNSC 1994e: para. 7). They freely operated in the lower part of the Gal/i district where dense forests, poor infrastructure, especially roads, and far distances between villages prevented patrolling. Villages in this area were largely empty after the war and it was easy to hide in abandoned houses. Moreover, the border line is located beyond the Ingur/i River in the area (see Figure 2). This meant that its crossing, which was difficult particularly where patrols were placed near the river, was less challenging here. The lower Gal/i district was therefore a hub of guerrilla operations. ‘The situation that characterized the lower zone was not the same in the rest of the Gal district’, according to an Abkhaz official of the Gal/i administration who contrasted 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 (Yamskov 2009: 168).

Figure 2: The border line in the lower Gal/i district



Note: author’s notes added based on a review of the author’s interview materials.

Source: based on the UN map of Georgia (see Geospatial Information Section 2009).

In response to these activities, the Abkhaz side organized counterinsurgency-like operations, which are referred to as *cleaning* or *counter-terrorist* 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 shared. ‘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 clarified and added, ‘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 mentioned earlier (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; UNSC 1994b: 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).

## 6 Regular post-war violence

Whereas Georgian guerrilla warfare and Abkhaz counterinsurgency-like operations in the security zone, especially in 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 conventional 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 Kodori/i Valley. It initially involved Georgian and Abkhaz armed forces that fought during the war and later, after the signing of the 1994 Agreement, both permitted and non-permitted security personnel.

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 area, and Georgia retained control in the Kodori/i Valley after the war (see Figure 1). Thus, these areas were the entry points for continued post-war 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 armoured vehicles crossed through the Kodori [Valley] into Gulripsh [district], and a second contingent of 100 Georgians crossed the frontier near the village of Otobaya [in the Gal/i district]’ (Fuller 1994b). Abkhaz forces captured the village of Lata in the Gulripsh/i district and temporarily ‘occup[ie]d two villages in Svaneti, outside Abkhazia’, but ultimately left the upper Kodori/i Valley under Georgian control; they also drove Georgian troops out of the Gal/i district, ‘shelling Georgian villages’ there (Fuller 1994c).

Heavy weaponry was withdrawn from the Gal/i district in accordance with the 1994 Agreement (UNSC 1994e: para. 15), but low-scale violence continued with the involvement 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 *militsija* [(police)] was allowed there,’ one man illustrates, ‘but I changed into *militsija* uniform and went with [them]’ (Interview 87, 17 November 2011). Abkhaz posts were regularly fired upon from beyond the Ingur/i, with clashes and casualties reported as a result (e.g., Fuller 1994g). The Abkhaz reportedly laid landmines and obstructed passage along the river, which undermined the return of displaced Georgians to the area (UNSC 1994e: para. 6).

Georgian troops and equipment were also withdrawn from the upper Kodori/i Valley, but the Abkhaz side maintained a post in the lower part near Lata (UNSC 1995a: 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 1994e, 1994f; UNSC 1994e: para. 20). Parts of this population did not submit to Georgia and formed a militia, challenging state control over the area and prompting a joint army and police operation in July 2006, to restore control (Fuller 2006; UNSC 2006: para. 6). Cross-fire and skirmishes between the Georgian and Abkhaz sides were reported after the war (e.g., Fuller 1994d; UNSC 1994d: para. 21) but this area saw fewer clashes than the Gal/i district (e.g., UNSC 1995b: 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 and clashes were more frequent. For example, the next key episode of fighting in the Kodori/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).

## 7 Recurrence of large-scale violence

The irregular and regular features combined in the recurrence of large-scale violence. Neither the so-called Six-Day War of 1998 in Gal/i nor the Battle of the Kodori/i Valley of 2008 are coded as recurrent civil wars in major datasets due to the relatively low battle-death numbers (UCDP 2022). 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.

Georgian guerrilla activities in the Gal/i district were reported in the lead-up to the events of 20–26 May 1998. For example, 8 Abkhaz personnel were killed on 29 April and 17 were killed 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' (UNSC 1998: para. 2). Indeed, fighting broke out on 20 May. On 25 May, the Protocol on a Ceasefire and Withdrawal of Armed Formations was signed at Gagra, to take effect the following day (UNSC 1998: para. 4). Both sides violated the ceasefire and Abkhaz forces declared a state of emergency in the Gal/i district on 27 May (UNSC 1998: para. 5). They claimed to have established full control over the district that day (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 (UNSC 1998: 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 the involvement of Georgia 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., UNSC 1999: para. 22–23). The upper Kodori/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., UNSC 2006: para. 7). The relocation of Abkhazia's government in exile to the area also signalled extension of the political control of Georgia in the upper Kodori/i Valley (UNSC 2006: para. 8). Abkhaz forces could not approach the area due to trenches, weapons emplacements, and minefields as well as air and anti-tank defence systems reported there (Pachulija 2010: 398). But the situation changed in the context of the Russo-Georgian War of 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 Kodori/i Valley (UNSC 2008: para. 5).

On 8 August, as hostilities escalated in South Ossetia, the Abkhaz side moved troops and heavy weapons towards Kodori/i. The offensive began on 9 August with Russian aerial attacks in western Georgia, including around Zugdidi, and later bombardments in the upper Kodori/i Valley (UNSC 2008: 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;

UNSC 2008: 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 confirmed (Interview 44, 4 November 2011). As a result of the operation, the Abkhaz side established control over the area and no Georgian-controlled pockets were left in Abkhazia (UNSC 2008: para. 9).

## 8 Pre-war, wartime, and post-war sources of violence

For Abkhaz participants and observers, the outcome of the Battle of the Kodori Valley was the ‘liberation’ of the territory of Abkhazia from domination by Georgia that started long before the Georgian–Abkhaz war of 1992–93 and that most Abkhaz were directly and indirectly affected by. The Abkhaz thus trace the source of this violence to the pre-war period and perceive their participation in it as part of their ‘liberation struggle’. In particular, the Abkhaz understandings of the self in relation to the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict stretch back to experiences of Georgianization in the Soviet decades that the Abkhaz resisted in spontaneous and organized ways (Shesterinina 2021). An Abkhaz activist who became a war correspondent and continued her activities thereafter captured this link: ‘since childhood we lived in a society where the Abkhaz were humiliated, eradicated. Our language, last names were changed to Georgian . . . [and so] we had to struggle’ (Interview 114, 28 November 2011).

The Abkhaz who participated in everyday confrontation, political contention, and violent opposition with Georgians before the war view their participation trajectories in the context of what became the ‘national liberation movement’. While the movement’s goals changed over time, from seeking to redress particular wrongs against the Abkhaz people to calling for greater autonomy within Georgia and even for joining Russia, it ultimately strove towards Abkhazia’s independence. Hence, the recognition of Abkhazia as an independent state by Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and some others that followed the events of 2008 is seen as the culmination of the decades of conflict, including violence during and after the war. A scholar who ran a local branch of Aidgylara, the movement’s main organization, and recorded the history of the struggle during and after the war explained: ‘I was part of the national liberation movement . . . We defended the interests of my people . . . [and] achieved what we wanted’ (Interview 71, 11 November 2011). Thus, people’s participation in violence after the war in Abkhazia cannot be understood without drawing on their experiences of conflict before it.

Indeed, the ties that people forged before the war typically underpinned their wartime and post-war mobilization. A fighter confirmed: ‘We met three years before the war. We then stayed together in the trenches, in the unit, in the battalion . . . Battalions were not disbanded . . . [after the war and w]e often went out to [guard] the border’ (Interview 48, 4 November 2011). However, the war changed the meaning of violence and transformed these networks and how participants understood their activities. The Abkhaz force that mobilized for war included individuals previously engaged in organized violence as part of the Abkhaz Guard built on the basis of the Soviet army unit stationed in Abkhazia and recruited by the Abkhaz part of Abkhazia’s government with the help of Aidgylara. But most Abkhaz mobilization for war was spontaneous, by ordinary people without this experience. The war not only stressed the existential nature of threat to the Abkhaz group that the Georgian advance into Abkhazia presented but also legitimized Abkhaz resistance that was now turned into an army with a formal structure and status. A defence volunteer recalled, ‘Everything was arranged spontaneously . . . I thought they would kick us out. We had too few weapons. We prepared to live in the mountains, lead partisan war’ (Interview 72,

11 November 2011). 'But when Gagra was freed, a serious preparation for war began. An army was created, with subdivisions, garrisons, battalions,' an activist-turned-commander outlined the transition to an army (Interview 78, 11 November 2011). This underlined the change in fighters' self-perception from an *opolchenie*, or a 'people's liberation army', to a 'regular army' (Interview 41, 4 November 2011). While many participants' networks transformed due to unit restructuring and losses in the army, this structure persisted after the war, with army regulars and reservists participating in violence.

The Abkhaz understand the outcome of the war as the victory of the Abkhaz side that their army achieved even though this would not be possible without the support of Russia and foreign fighters, mainly from the North Caucasus. One fighter captured this shared understanding: 'We fought for every scrap of our land. My two sons fought, all fought: women, the elders, the young. The whole population fought and won' (Interview 46, 4 November 2011). But this perceived victory did not end the conflict. The Georgian forces were largely driven beyond Abkhazia, removing the direct threat to the Abkhaz group from within the territory. So was the entire pre-war Georgian population of Abkhazia. However, the threat of a future Georgian attack remained. 'We were under the constant pressure and feeling of a direct threat of aggression by Georgia. This is not so much of violence, which was ongoing, but the threat of aggression,' a leading Abkhaz intellectual explained (Interview 137, 7 December 2011). Moreover, Abkhazia endured an economic blockade and the Abkhaz side was excluded from the negotiations table. 'Georgia was in all the negotiations with Russia and the UN. They did not let us in,' according to a man who fought in the war and mobilized to defend the border area after (Interview 50, 4 November 2011). Finally, the Abkhaz side did not fully control the formerly Georgian-dominated Gal/i district and the upper Kodori/i Valley that the Abkhaz believed to be part of their territory. The Abkhaz thus participated in violence after the war, despite the persistent loss of life, to defend the territory that they now controlled from the ongoing threat from Georgia and challenge the remaining Georgian control in Abkhazia. 'This is our territory . . . We know our state borders' is how a commander explained the need for defence along the Ingur/i and the attack on Kodori/i (Interview 127, 1 December 2011). 'Our function was to guard our territory,' participants in the events corroborated (Interview 24, 2 November 2011). The concentration of violence in these areas is directly related to the state of territorial control that resulted from the war and the objectives of the Abkhaz and Georgian sides in these areas.

However, some of the Abkhaz objectives, namely, the challenge to Georgia's control of the upper Kodori/i Valley, could not be implemented but for a particular constellation of external conditions shaped by Russia. The CIS (read Russian) peacekeepers played a role in the withdrawal of regular forces from the two contested areas early in the post-war period in compliance with the 1994 Agreement. They also sought to prevent the reintroduction of these forces during post-war tensions, particularly around the events of 1998 in the Gal/i district.<sup>10</sup> Yet a different kind of intervention by Russia was decisive for the timing of the 2008 Kodori/i operation. The Abkhaz saw Russia's war in Georgia and its support to the Abkhaz side as an opportunity to carry out their objective, especially in the context where the threat from Georgia was looming for over a decade. According to the commander who explained the need for defence along the Ingur/i, 'If [Georgia] had a situation with Russians in South Ossetia, how could we not use it to push them out from the Kodori Valley? . . . One must be a fool to not use such a situation' (Interview 127, 1 December 2011). The situation in South Ossetia 'strengthened the Abkhaz side's perception of being a likely target. That perception was reinforced after the reported seizure in the upper Kodori Valley of a

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<sup>10</sup> For further details, see Lynch (2004).



number of heavy artillery pieces that had been barred under the 1994 Moscow Agreement,' the UN Secretary-General contextualized the events (UNSC 2008: para. 10).

It is not surprising then that following the 'liberation' of Kodori/i and the subsequent recognition of Abkhazia's independence by Russia and their joint fortification of the border area, the Abkhaz not only felt that they would no longer live under the threat from Georgia but also that their national liberation struggle came to a logical conclusion. 'On August 26, we were recognized. Every day before that, we were provoked. After that, Russia sent its subdivisions to the border. A peaceful time began,' noted a former teacher who participated in the war and post-war violence (Interview 61, 9 November 2011). Russia both enabled and facilitated these post-war outcomes. Nonetheless, its continued influence on the society, not least through the passportization of the Abkhaz, and on political, economic, and military affairs put Abkhazia in a grey area between victory and statehood (de Waal 2018; ICG 2010). 'How can we speak of sovereignty when Russia is given such liberties here?', asks a disabled veteran of the war of 1992–93. It also puts in perspective the tremendous loss, injury, and trauma on both sides in the war, including the protracted displacement of most Georgians from Abkhazia.

## 9 Implications

What does the case of Abkhazia tell us about armed violence in the aftermath of war? Theoretically, the analysis in this paper cautions against unidimensional explanations of post-war violence. Both path-dependent and endogenous dynamics play a role in such violence but do so in different ways (Shesterinina 2022). Collective identities that form before the war through participation in and observation of conflict and develop during the war through first-hand experience of violence can underlie participation in post-war violence. Abkhaz border guards are clear that the identities they developed as members of the Abkhaz group, which was being dissolved in the Georgian mass before the war, were central to their continued participation in what they saw as post-war defence of Abkhazia. The war intensified these identities, and the underlying belonging to Abkhazia that the ordinary Abkhaz felt. But the identities of participants in the war transformed in the course of the fighting as the Abkhaz force came to be understood as the Abkhaz 'liberation' force and evolved into an army. This formalized the legitimacy of participation in Abkhazia's defence both during and after the war. Participation of not only policemen who were allowed in the security zone established as a result of the 1994 Agreement but also army regulars and reservists who were not permitted in the area but felt that they had to defend their territory and were right to do so exemplifies the effect of the wartime transformation of the Abkhaz force. We cannot understand people's participation in post-war violence without considering their broader trajectories through conflict.

While the combined effects of pre-war and wartime dynamics help better understand participation in post-war violence, the form, location, and timing of this violence stem from the wartime and post-war developments. The nature of actors and their tactics that develop during the war and the outcomes of the war influence how and where post-war violence takes place. The case of Abkhazia illustrates the continuity from wartime to post-war irregular and regular features of actors and tactics. Georgian irregular forces active in the war formed the basis of Georgian armed groups that carried out guerrilla activities in post-war Abkhazia. Clashes between regular components of Georgian and Abkhaz forces also continued after the war. These irregular and regular forms of post-war violence concentrated in the areas where actors established predominant but contested control (the Gal/i district for the Abkhaz side and the upper Kodori/i Valley for the Georgian side) as a result of the war. Post-war violence reflected these actors' efforts to defend and challenge this territorial control and the overall outcome of the war. However, the timing of some of the

violence could not be explained without reference to post-war dynamics, particularly the changes in the external environment after the war that affected the situation in Abkhazia. The Battle of the Kodori Valley would not have taken place in 2008 had Russian forces not weakened Georgia militarily during the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and had Russia not provided support for the Abkhaz operation.

The analysis in this paper thus demonstrates that future studies should pay attention to pre-war, wartime, and post-war dynamics when explaining violence in the aftermath of war and identify how these dynamics combine to shape different aspects of violence in specific cases whose contexts vary. One insight that will apply across contexts is the importance of transformation of actors through these dynamics. The Abkhaz and Georgian ‘sides’ were not unitary or static in the course of conflict. Instead, they changed over time. The Abkhaz force at the war’s onset, for example, included ordinary people who mobilized spontaneously and those recruited into the Abkhaz Guard before the war through the Abkhaz national movement mobilization. This disparate force evolved into an army that solidified after the war but added a new element, the police, in the defence of Abkhazia due to restrictions on army personnel in the border area. Empirically, this warns against fixed notions of actors in the analysis of post-war violence. Actors not only change but they are also composed of different subgroups with distinct functions. Understanding this changing composition can help grasp the organization of actors which underlies the patterns of violence that emerge in the aftermath of war.

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