



Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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Georgia (Abkhazia) 1992–94

Executive Summary

Conflict within Georgia began in the late 1980s as Georgians began to push for independence from the Soviet Union. The Abkhazians within the country of Georgia wished to remain under Soviet control. Abkhazia was placed under Georgia's rule by the USSR during the Soviet era, but their autonomy was debated throughout. Abkhazia is Georgia's westernmost region bordering the Black Sea and Russia. In 1991, Georgia held a referendum and declared its independence from the Soviet Union. The call for independence would lead to two wars of secession, one from Abkhazia and one from South Ossetia (a region in central Georgia that borders Russia) and a civil war within Georgia over who should rule the new national government.¹ In protest of actions by the Supreme Council on July 23, 1992, the Abkhazian region reinstated its 1923 Constitution from the Soviet era that stated Abkhazia had equal status with Georgia as an autonomous state. The international community refused to acknowledge Abkhazia's status, admitting Georgia (which included the Abkhazian region) into the United Nations following the fall of the Soviet Union.² On August 14, 1992, the Georgian armed forces attacked Abkhazia after government officials were taken hostage. The fighting continued until September 30, 1993, when the Georgian troops were forced out of Abkhazia. Large numbers of local Georgians, who fought with Tbilisi forces, fled Abkhazia for fear of retribution for the atrocities perpetrated throughout the conflict. The UN fact-finding mission found that the Georgians and Abkhazians were involved in human rights abuses and atrocities.³ Throughout the conflict, Russia supplied arms to the Georgians and Abkhazians. An estimated 20,000 civilians died in Abkhazia.⁴

Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a “nation”?

Yes. In a 1991 negotiation for governmental structure, seats in the council were allocated to all the different ethnic groups within Georgia, including Abkhazians, hoping to avoid further conflicts. The different regions agreed upon the government, and it remained functional until the beginning of the conflict.⁵

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

Yes. Even within the secessionist zones of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, ethnic Georgians remained who viewed the Georgian government as legitimate. The two zones made up 15 percent of Georgia's population in 1992.⁶

3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

Yes. Outside of the two secessionist zones, the Georgian government maintained control and could secure its population. The secessionist groups did not operate outside of the zones of Abkhazia and South Ossetia or conduct attacks on the Georgian population outside of the zones. The 85 percent of the Georgian population living in the remainder of the country were secure from contact with the guerilla forces.

4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

No. While Russia did involve itself in the conflict because of its proximity throughout the conflict, they officially remained neutral. Both sides received arms from Russia. The Abkhazians did not cross into Russian territory or receive sanctuary in significant numbers.⁷

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

Yes. Georgia had multiple militias and a national guard that were trained and organized during previous conflicts, the civil war, and the conflict with South Ossetia.⁸

Outcome

Government loss. Georgian troops were forced to leave Abkhazia after 14 months of fighting and intervention from outside peacekeeping forces. A peace treaty signed in Moscow in May 1994 called for a ceasefire and separation of forces and secured Abkhazia's autonomy from Georgia.⁹ Russia, used as a peacekeeping force after the agreement was formalized, supported the separation of the two countries and manipulated both governments for its gain. While the UN does not recognize Abkhazia as separate from Georgian rule, Abkhazia functions autonomously. Several countries do recognize Abkhazia's independence. This conflict provides an example of a government having all five factors in its favor and still losing the conflict. This case study supports the Five Factors model.

GEORGIA (ABKHAZIA) 1992–94	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	YES
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	YES
POPULATION SECURITY	YES
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	NO
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

Endnotes

1. Spyros Demetriou, “The Tragedy of Georgian Independence,” in *Politics from the Barrel of a Gun: Small Arms Proliferation and Conflict in the Republic of Georgia* (1989–2001), Occasional Paper No. 6 (Small Arms Survey, November 2002), 4, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep10758.9>.
2. George Hewitt, “Abkhazia and Georgia: Time for a Reassessment,” *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 15, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2009): 189, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24590851>.
3. Liana Kvarchelia, “Georgia-Abkhazia Conflict: View from Abkhazia,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 6, no. 1 (1998): 17–27, https://abkhazworld.com/aw/Pdf/Georgia_Abkhazia_Conflict_View_from_Abkhazia.pdf.
4. Alexander Krylov, “The Georgia-Abkhazian Conflict,” in *The Security of the Caspian Sea Region*, ed. Gennady Chufrin (Oxford University Press, 1999), 286.
5. Kvarchelia, “Georgia-Abkhazia Conflict,” 19.
6. Demetriou, “Georgian Independence,” 5–6.
7. *Georgia/Abkhazia: Violations of the Laws of War and Russia’s Role in the Conflict* (Human Rights Watch, 1995), 8.
8. Demetriou, “Georgian Independence,” 7.
9. Stylianos A. Sotiriou, “The Irreversibility of History: The Conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 66, no. 3 (2019): 177.



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