

UNIVERSITY OF TARTU

Faculty of Social Sciences

Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies

A. Özlem Marşan

THE STIGMATIZATION OF ABKHAZIA:
GEORGIA'S DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF CONFLICT AND SELF

MA thesis

Supervisor: Prof. Eiki Berg

Tartu 2026

Authorship Declaration

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

Word count of the thesis: 25412

A. Özlem Marşan, 06.01.2026

Abstract

This thesis examines how the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict has been discursively constructed in the Georgian official diplomatic discourse and how stigmatization sustains asymmetric power relations in a protracted conflict. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis of speeches delivered by Georgian representatives at the United Nations General Assembly between 1992 and 2022, it analyzes how Georgia represents Abkhazia, the conflict, and its own identity before international audiences.

The analysis shows that in an international system that privileges territorial integrity and state sovereignty, Abkhazia is positioned as a deviant actor in international politics. Through the practices of labeling, stereotyping, separation, and discrimination, Georgia systemically stigmatizes Abkhazia and consistently denies its political agency, while it positions itself as a peace-seeking, law-abiding, and democratic state. Following the 2008 war, the reframing of the conflict as Russian occupation further entrenched Abkhazia's marginalization within a broader geopolitical narrative.

The analysis further demonstrates that Georgia's stigmatization of Abkhazia is inseparable from its own state-building project and efforts at self-positioning within the international hierarchy. Georgian discourse reflects efforts to manage its own ambivalent status in the international system while externalizing responsibility for the unresolved conflict and reinforcing a self-serving attribution pattern.

Acknowledgments

I dedicate this work to my mother, whose support and influence continue to guide me, even though she could not see its completion.

Table of contents

Introduction	6
Chapter 1. Stigmatization and the Deviant Status of De Facto States	8
1. Stigma Theory	9
1.1. Stigma	9
1.2. Mechanisms of Stigmatization	10
1.3. Stigma Management	11
2. Stigma and Norm in International Relations	12
2.1. Fuzzy Legal Grounds	15
3. De Facto States as Deviant Actors	17
Chapter 2. Research Design and Methodology	20
1. Critical Discourse Analysis Framework	21
2. Data and Case Selection	22
3. Contributions and Limitations	22
Chapter 3. Conflict Background	25
Chapter 4. Georgia at the UNGA	29
1. The Shevardnadze Era (1992-2003)	29
1.1. The Portrayal of the Conflict	30
1.2. The Discursive Representations of Abkhazia and Georgia	34
1.2.1. Abkhazia	34
1.2.2. Georgia	36
1.3. Conflict Resolution Narratives	37
1.4. Georgia-Russia Relations	40
2. The Saakashvili Era (2004-2013)	41
2.1. The Portrayal of the Conflict	43
2.1.1. Pre-2008	43
2.1.2. Post-2008	44
2.2. The Discursive Representations of Abkhazia and Georgia	47
2.2.1. Abkhazia	47
2.2.1.1. Pre-2008	47
2.2.1.2. Post-2008	48
2.2.2. Georgia	50
2.2.2.1. Pre-2008	50

2.2.2.2. Post-2008.....	51
2.3. Conflict Resolution Narratives	53
2.3.1. Pre-2008	53
2.3.2. Post-2008.....	54
2.4. Georgia-Russia Relations.....	56
2.4.1. Pre-2008	56
2.4.2. Post-2008.....	57
3. The Georgian Dream Era (2014-2022)	58
3.1. The Portrayal of the Conflict	59
3.2. The Discursive Representations of Abkhazia and Georgia	60
3.2.1. Abkhazia.....	60
3.2.2. Georgia	61
3.3. Conflict Resolution Narratives	63
3.4. Georgia-Russia Relations.....	64
Chapter 5. Discussion.....	65
1. Making of a Conflict: Abkhazia.....	65
2. Making of a State: Georgia	68
3. Shaping International Perceptions and Narrative Transformation.....	72
Conclusion.....	76
List of References	78
Appendices	86

Introduction

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, the international system has expanded to include numerous newly independent states. While many secured international recognition and established themselves as sovereign equals, others came to be treated as illegitimate or unlawful. Notably, many internationally recognized sovereign states are considered *failed* or *weak states*, lacking effective territorial control or the capacity to provide basic services. Yet, despite these shortcomings, they retain their status in the international system, whereas unrecognized entities remain in political limbo. As Ó Beacháin et al. (2016, p. 455) observe, “state failure is easier to forgive than secession.”

The South Caucasus is among the regions where contested political entities emerged following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The late 1980s and early 1990s were marked by instability across the region, as newly independent states – Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan – experienced violent conflicts and large-scale displacements. After years of war, many of these conflicts became *frozen* rather than fully resolved, with only a few contested entities ceasing to exist. Abkhazia, the focus of this research, remains one of the enduring cases.

All post-Soviet states, whether recognized or unrecognized, continue to bear the legacy of the Soviet administrative system. The status of today’s de facto states is largely shaped by their final position within this hierarchy. While the so-called *titular nations* of the Soviet Union’s then union republics (such as Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) gained full independence, other entities were left in a state of uncertainty. Abkhazia represents one such case. Despite achieving de facto statehood following the 1992-1993 war, Abkhazia remains internationally unrecognized, with only a few states, including Russia after 2008, recognizing its independence. As a result, Abkhazia continues to exist in political limbo, while Georgia persistently asserts its territorial claims, framing Abkhazia as an integral part of the Georgian state.

Against this backdrop, this study examines how Georgia has represented the Abkhaz conflict, Abkhazia, and its own state identity over time through Critical Discourse Analysis combined with stigma theory. It analyzes the speeches delivered by Georgian state representatives at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) between 1992 and 2022. The exclusive focus on Georgian discourse reflects the fundamentally asymmetrical structure of the international system: while Georgia enjoys full diplomatic representation as a

recognized state, Abkhazia, as a de facto state, is denied access to international forums and the ability to articulate its own position on equal terms.

The central premise of this study is that de facto states are inherently stigmatized actors in international politics. It argues that a process of double stigmatization is at work: structurally, by the international system, and individually, by the state from which separation is sought. These processes are mutually reinforcing. However, the primary analytical focus of the research is on the latter, namely Georgia's stigmatization of Abkhazia.

Although the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict has been widely studied from the perspectives of geopolitics, security, and international law, far less attention has been paid to the narratives through which the conflict is articulated, how identities are constructed, and how these discourses shift across different political periods. This study addresses that gap by shifting the focus away from dominant geopolitical and ethnopolitical explanations. Rather than examining the origins of the conflict, it analyzes how the conflict is continuously made and maintained through Georgia's discursive and normative power as a sovereign, internationally recognized state. In doing so, the study aims to contribute to scholarship on de facto states and protracted conflicts by demonstrating how conflict is discursively reproduced, legitimized, and sustained over time.

The thesis proceeds as follows. Chapter 1 outlines the theoretical framework based on stigma theory and the literature on norms and de facto states. Chapter 2 presents the methodological approach. Chapter 3 provides a brief overview of the conflict, and Chapter 4 analyzes the Georgian UNGA discourse across different political periods. Chapter 5 discusses the implications of these findings for conflict persistence and resolution.

Chapter 1: Stigmatization and the deviant status of de facto states

This study begins from the assumption that de facto states are *stigmatized* within the international system, and that Abkhazia, the focus of this research, is no exception. The concept of *stigma*, originating from the Greek term for bodily marks inflicted by cutting or burning, historically signified a visible marker of moral inferiority. These marks identified their bearer as a slave, criminal, or traitor, someone socially tainted and to be shunned in public (Goffman, 1963, p. 1). In international relations, this notion can be applied to *de facto states*¹. Like individuals, they carry a symbolic mark, that is, the identity of being a de facto state, which signals deviance from the accepted norms of sovereignty and territorial integrity. As a result, they occupy a marginalized and delegitimized position within the international system.

This chapter develops a theoretical framework that conceptualizes stigmatization as a relational and power-laden process through which de facto states are constituted and disciplined within international society. Drawing on stigma theory and the critique of International Relations (IR)² scholarship on norms, it argues that stigmatization operates as a mechanism of normative enforcement and social hierarchy. Accordingly, the stigmatization of de facto states is conceptualized at two levels: the *structural level*, where the international system enforces norms of sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the *individual level*, where a base state³ uses mechanisms of stigmatization in its official practices to enforce its own version of norm compliance.

This chapter establishes the conceptual foundations of stigmatization by tracing its sociological origins and its subsequent adaptation in IR. It examines how stigma operates

¹ This study adopts the term *de facto state*, following Pegg (1998), who introduced the term in his analysis of Tamil Eelam, Northern Cyprus, Eritrea, and Somaliland. For the purposes of this study, Abkhazia is defined as a de facto state, meeting the following criteria adapted from Caspersen (2012) and Ó Beacháin et al. (2016):

- 1) Achieving de facto independence, covering at least two-thirds of the territory with main cities and key regions,
- 2) Achieving internal sovereignty with a degree of internal legitimacy,
- 3) Declaring formal independence through an independence referendum,
- 4) Limited formal recognition at the international level,
- 5) Existing for at least two years.

² In this study, 'IR' refers to the academic discipline, while 'international relations' refers to the interactions between states.

³ Byman and King (2012) use this term, which I also prefer to use, if necessary, as a more neutral and accurate term than 'parent state' – the term frequently used to describe the state from which a de facto state secedes. In addition, 'patron state' is the term describing the sponsor state of a de facto state. In the case of Abkhazia, for instance, the former is Georgia, whereas the latter is Russia.

through norms and situates de facto states as stigmatized actors. The chapter introduces Abkhazia as a case of double stigmatization and briefly discusses how the norms embedded in international law produce structural stigma that constrains Abkhazia's political status.

1. Stigma theory

1.1. Stigma

In his seminal book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Erving Goffman explores the notion of stigma through his sociological study of individuals deemed “deviant” in society, such as mental patients, homosexuals, alcoholics, drug addicts, people with disabilities, prisoners, political activists, etc. Stigma is not merely an attribute but “an attribute that is deeply discrediting,” that reduces the individual “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). Stigma is understood and communicated through symbols (Goffman, 1963, p. 43).

Stigma creates a fundamental distinction between those who carry it and those who do not, whom Goffman refers to as “the normals” (Goffman, 1963, p. 5).⁴ Consequently, the stigmatized individual is subjected to discrimination, dehumanization, and public shaming by the normals. This process is typically legitimized through “an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents” (Goffman, 1963, p. 5).

Overall, stigma is “a language of relationships” rather than inherent qualities (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). An individual may be both normal and stigmatized as “the normal and the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives” (Goffman, 1963, p. 138). In the end, “stigma involves not so much a set of concrete individuals who can be separated into two piles” as the stigmatized and the normal, but “every individual participates in both roles” at some point in their lives (Goffman, 1963, p. 137).

⁴ When referring to group rather than individual identity, Goffman describes the stigmatized as the *in-group* and the normals as the *out-group* (Goffman, 1963, pp. 112-123).

1.2. Mechanisms of stigmatization

Building on Goffman, Link and Phelan (2001) identify four mechanisms of stigmatization: *labeling, stereotyping, separation, and status loss combined with discrimination.*

Stigmatization begins with the identification of differences and *labeling* them as such, i.e., skin color, gender, or physical ability. This may appear to be natural or just an observation at first (Goffman, 1963, p. 3), but labeling in fact indicates cataloguing individuals according to particular attributes. Crucially, labeling is a process that is shaped by social, economic, and cultural factors so that “some human differences are singled out and deemed salient by human groups while others are ignored” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 367).

The second stage involves connecting specific labels to *stereotypes*, whereby the assigned label associates an individual with a set of undesirable or discrediting characteristics that constitute the stereotype (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 368).

The third step marks the emergence of an *us-versus-them* dichotomy, where the stigmatized individual or group is *separated* from those considered normal. This separation is justified through the discrediting attributes attached in the previous step, as the negative and undesirable traits associated with the stereotype make it easier for the dominant group to distinguish and distance themselves from the stigmatized individual (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 370).

The fourth step involves the stigmatized individual’s experience of *status loss and discrimination*, which can occur both on an individual level, such as one’s losing employment, and a structural level, as seen in forms of institutional racism (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 372). Once negative labeling and stereotyping take hold, the individual is relegated to a lower position within the social hierarchy. This demotion is not merely symbolic; it operates as a structural mechanism that legitimizes and perpetuates further discrimination. In this way, reduced social status becomes both a consequence of stigmatization and a means through which further discrimination is sustained (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 375).

Rebecca Adler-Nissen (2014) extends Goffman’s concept of stigma to IR. Stigmatization in international relations occurs through the same steps, and it is most clearly visible in the case of de facto states. They are typically labeled as “unrecognized,” stereotyped as “rogue” or “pariah,” excluded from international organizations and global markets, and subjected to status loss through non-recognition and sanctions. Stigmatization, however, does more than

mark the deviant; it simultaneously constructs the normal, as “stigmatizing the norm-breaker reinforces the notion of normality” (Adler-Nissen, 2014, p. 149).

Importantly, stigma is not immutable. It can be transformed through a multifaceted approach that addresses the mechanisms producing disadvantages at both individual and structural levels. Effective change requires targeting the root causes of stigma either by altering the deeply ingrained attitudes and beliefs of dominant groups that drive the mechanisms of stigmatization or by reshaping circumstances to limit these groups’ ability to impose their perspectives as dominant (Link & Phelan, 2001, pp. 380-381).

1.3. Stigma management

Just as stigma is imposed, it is also managed. “Stigma management is a general feature of society,” as Goffman (1963, p. 130) argues, “a process occurring wherever there are identity norms.” Similarly, states are active agents that are “able to cope strategically with the shame they are subjected to” (Adler-Nissen, 2014, p. 144). Managing stigma arises from confronting one’s own stigmatized status, and there are various ways to cope with stigma. In international relations, Adler-Nissen (2014) offers three types of stigma management strategies⁵:

1. *stigma recognition*: where an actor aligns with the audience of normals and wider society, *apologizing* for their transgressive behavior or attribute and internalizing the value judgments of the normals (p. 153),

2. *stigma rejection*: where the stigmatized accepts the existence of deviant categories but *denies* being different from norm-abiding actors (p. 154),

3. *counter-stigmatization*: where the stigmatized actor *embraces* the stigma and transforms it into a *symbol of pride*, identifying with the group of stigmatized (p. 153).

Rogstad (2022b, p. 3) introduces a fourth type:

4. *stigma evasion*: where an actor acknowledges the existence of deviant categories but *seeks to challenge* prevailing interpretations of the stigma or to *downplay* the perceived offensiveness of their actions.

⁵ Goffman (1963) identifies two primary forms of stigma management: stigma recognition (or “out-group alignment”) and counter-stigmatization (or “in-group alignment”).

Building on these, Kim (2024) identifies a fifth form of stigma management strategy:

5. *stigma shifting*: a dual strategy in which an actor seeks to reaffirm its place in the international hierarchy by simultaneously *engaging in upward and downward comparisons*, aligning itself with *higher-status states* while distancing itself from those perceived as *lower-status* (p. 669). Consequently, such an actor occupies a dual position as *both stigmatized and stigmatizing* and seeks approval from the audience of normals through *overcompensation* for its perceived deficiencies, while using lower-status or similarly stigmatized actors as reference points to demonstrate its own superiority. Unlike counter-stigmatization, stigma shifting lacks solidarity or identification among stigmatized actors. Instead, while recognizing its own stigma, the actor *differentiates* itself by stigmatizing others, aiming to improve its position in the eyes of the audience of normals, or higher-status states. This effort to overcome stigma-induced inferiority extends beyond mere compliance, but often it is a form of overcompensation (Kim, 2024, p. 675).

Stigma management strategies exist on a continuum: they may shift over time, and multiple strategies can operate simultaneously (Adler-Nissen, 2014, p. 154). The effectiveness of stigma management ultimately shapes whether imposed stigma diminishes or persists. For instance, international pressure successfully stigmatized apartheid South Africa, contributing to its eventual transformation (Hatuel-Radoshitzky & Jamal, 2022). However, a seemingly successful stigma imposition might fail, as in the case of Russia after the 2014 annexation of Crimea, which did not bring about the expected normative changes in Russian foreign policy (Rogstad, 2022a).

The following section explores the relationship between stigma and norms to illustrate how the international system, through its normative frameworks, structurally stigmatizes Abkhazia and thereby shapes the conditions under which Georgia's discursive stigmatization operates.

2. Stigma and norm in international relations

Stigmatization arises from the operation of norms that define what is considered acceptable behavior. In sociological terms, stigma emerges when an individual is perceived as deviating from what Stafford and Scott (1986, as cited in Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 364) describe as “a shared belief that a person ought to behave in a certain way at a certain time.” Norms establish these expectations, and stigma is produced when conduct is judged to fall outside

them. International society functions in a similar way: it is structured around shared norms and ongoing processes of stigmatization (Adler-Nissen, 2014, p. 151; Zarakol, 2014, p. 312). What connects the stigmatized actor to the stigmatizing actor is precisely the existence of these norms and the expectations they authorize. In international relations, stigmatization clarifies acceptable conduct, rewards actors who conform, and punishes those who deviate; therefore, it illuminates the boundaries between *normal* and *transgressive* states and between *compliance* and *non-compliance* (Adler-Nissen, 2014, p. 149).

“Stigma is entirely dependent on social, economic, and political power,” as Link and Phelan (2001, p. 375) emphasize, “it takes power to stigmatize.” This power is held by the “audience of normals,” who possess the authority to impose stigma on norm-breakers and discipline their behavior (Adler-Nissen, 2014, p. 152). Norms, therefore, do more than regulate behavior; they also reproduce social hierarchies (Towns & Rumelili, 2017). Stigmatization performs an important ordering function by clarifying which forms of behavior are acceptable and by sanctioning those that violate shared expectations: it helps “hold international society together” (Adler-Nissen, 2014, p. 144). In this sense, stigmatization maintains the boundary between “us,” the community of normal, rule-abiding states, and “them,” the actors marked as deviant or transgressive (Adler-Nissen, 2014, pp. 149-150). Norms and stigmatization are therefore mutually reinforcing. Norms define what counts as deviance, while stigmatization enforces those definitions through punishment.

Two major schools in IR literature, namely the English School and Constructivism, emphasize the role of norms in sustaining the international order, yet often overlook this relationship between norm and stigmatization. Constructivists emphasize that norms constitute *identities* and shape standards of appropriate behavior (Shamai, 2015, p. 108). Similarly, the English School understands *international society* as a “club of states” bound by shared values and institutions that regulate interactions in the international system. Admission into this club requires conformity to established codes of conduct (Hatuel-Radoshitzky & Jamal, 2022, p. 218). In both literatures, norms are the mechanism through which order is produced and maintained; states that fail or refuse to conform risk stigmatization as deviant actors. What these perspectives often give insufficient attention to, however, are the hierarchical power relations through which norms are produced, enforced, and used to categorize actors as normal or deviant.

Constructivists Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) argue that norms evolve and diffuse in three stages: norm emergence, norm acceptance, and internalization. Even when states comply

because they are *persuaded* by the values norms embody, as constructivists argue, rather than out of fear or material incentives (Zarakol, 2014, p. 315), this framework⁶ still inherently equates compliance with progress (Zarakol, 2014, p. 316). Because norm diffusion rests on teleological assumptions that change necessarily constitutes progress and that norms themselves are inherently good (Epstein, 2012). Consequently, non-compliance becomes unintelligible or irrational. It becomes difficult to theorize the “rebellious and celebratory acts of noncompliance” (Evers, 2017, p. 791) through which norm violation can be *constitutive* rather than merely deviant. States may, in fact, construct their identities precisely by publicly transgressing accepted standards of behavior (Evers, 2017, p. 787). In stigma management strategies, this tactic is specifically exemplified by counter-stigmatization.

In a norm-based international system, states are expected to *internalize* shared norms through *socialization*. Socialization involves a hierarchical relationship between *socializer* and *socializee*, in which the former holds the authority to define appropriate conduct, and the latter is expected to adopt these norms. As Epstein (2012) argues, this dynamic often *infantilizes* the socializee, treating it as a passive recipient of “good” norms. In practice, norm diffusion deprives the socializee of *agency* but holds it accountable for the so-called deviant behavior and puts the burden on it to prove its worth (Zarakol, 2014, p. 324). Epstein (2012, pp. 136-144) argues that socialization in this sense generates a form of “silencing or epistemological erasure” that allows policymakers to dismiss the historical experiences of socializees and recast them as blank slates onto which “good” norms can be inscribed.

Overlooking the power-laden production of norms is both ahistorical and misleading as oftentimes norm diffusion is “really a global story of coercion and stigmatization into a narrative of doing good” (Zarakol, 2014, p. 328). Although norms evolve over time, most “good” norms are associated with the Western core, whereas the non-Western or periphery states are often linked to “bad” behavior (Zarakol, 2014, p. 313). Historical examples illustrate this pattern, such as the so-called 19th-century Standard of Civilization, a fictitious international law norm through which Western powers hierarchically classified peoples as “civilized,” “semi-civilized,” or “savage” and treated them accordingly (Zarakol, 2014, p. 326).

Those who advocate norm diffusion assume that all states are willing to adopt norms as a form of progress and view non-compliance as an anomaly (Evers, 2017). However, some

⁶ For simplicity, I will refer to this process as “norm diffusion” throughout the rest of the text.

states deliberately “orient their behavior to violate a norm in pursuit of domestic or international goals” (Evers, 2017, p. 788). For instance, Lovec et al. (2021, p. 891) examine how Central European (CE) European Union (EU) member states have shifted from being the “star pupils” of norm adoption to the “problematic children of Europe.” The authors argue that this shift is not merely a result of non-compliance with EU norms but reflects deeper issues related to the socialization process and the EU’s approach to integrating these countries and conclude that “the EU used rule compliance to reinforce its identity and CE countries used non-compliance to assert their identity” (Lovec et al., 2021, p. 892).

Norm violation is not simply deviance; under certain conditions, states may actively construct alternative identities through transgression, particularly when alternative audiences exist to validate these behaviors. As Rogstad (2022b) argues, the existence of an alternative audience of the normals strengthens the idea of an alternative normality for transgressive states, as illustrated by Russia and the growing number of illiberal governments in Central Europe and elsewhere. Similarly, the expanding community of illiberal actors provides mutual validation and collective strength, enabling them to assert their own conception of normality against a (real or perceived) dominant liberal normal (Rogstad, 2022b, pp. 8-9).

2.1. Fuzzy legal grounds

This study argues that de facto states experience double stigmatization: structurally, through the international system, and individually, through the practices of the base state. The following subsection briefly examines this structural dimension, which arises from the inherent ambiguities of international law. The norm de facto states are deemed to violate is the “essential and fundamental” principle of territorial integrity (Ker-Lindsay, 2018, p. 362). However, as Pacher (2019, p. 9) contends, stigmatization occurs not because norms are clearly defined but because their meaning is often *vague*. In this sense, stigmatization and the successful exclusion of de facto states serve to ensure “the felt safety among the stigmatizing ‘audience of normal’” (Pacher, 2019, p. 9).

The Montevideo Convention defines the classical legal criteria of statehood: a permanent population, a defined territory, an effective government, and the capacity to engage in international relations (Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, 1933). These criteria establish the definition of what it means for an entity to be considered a state under international law. However, the application of these standards to de facto states reveals their

inherent ambiguities: What population size is sufficient for statehood? How much territory must be controlled? How many diplomatic relations are necessary to demonstrate capacity for international engagement? Who exactly constitutes the population: a nation, an ethnic group, or some other community? These uncertainties expose the gap between legal theory and different practices of statehood.

In practice, the criteria of Montevideo are still not enough; recognition by other states is equally crucial, and United Nations (UN) membership functions as a key marker of political recognition and acceptance into the international system. However, UN membership is not automatically granted to entities that meet Montevideo's legal standards. And for *de facto* states, this distinction is critical: an entity may fulfill the legal criteria for statehood defined in the Montevideo Convention but remain excluded from the UN. Yet, recognition is a *contingent* practice that is not strictly defined: "to be considered 'recognized,' a state must be recognized by a state that, in its turn, is recognized by a recognized state... International law does not tell us how long this chain needs to be, or how many states need to recognize an entity in order that it can qualify as a recognized state" (Iskandaryan, 2015, p. 210). Furthermore, geopolitics play a decisive role in states' recognition and non-recognition policies. Consequently, not all *de facto* states are equal and much depends on "geopolitical luck" (Caspersen, 2015, p. 5) and therefore, there are numerous *de facto* states worldwide, each enjoying different levels of acceptance within the international community (Berg & Toomla 2009, p. 44). For example, Kosovo and Taiwan hold more favorable international positions compared to Abkhazia or South Ossetia.

These ambiguities are the reflection of the two core principles of international law: *sovereignty* and *self-determination*, which often come into tension. While the UN Charter affirms the right of peoples to self-determination, it simultaneously upholds the territorial integrity of states.⁷ Resolution 1514 (XV) of the 1960 Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples enshrines both principles, declaring that "all peoples have the right to self-determination" while warning that "any attempt aimed at the

⁷ The *Charter of the United Nations* (1945) states in Article 1(2) that one of the Purposes of the UN is "[t]o develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace" (Art. 1, para. 2). Article 2(4) provides that "[a]ll Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations" (Art. 2, para. 4).

partial or total disruption of the national unity and the territorial integrity of a country is incompatible with the purposes and principles of the Charter” (UNGA, 1960).

In practice, the international system has consistently privileged state sovereignty and territorial integrity over the right to self-determination. This is codified in the doctrine of *uti possidetis juris* – the principle that existing borders are to be preserved. Applied during decolonization, *uti possidetis* ensured that new states inherited colonial boundaries, thereby preventing the proliferation of secessionist claims (Barnsley & Bleiker, 2008). The same logic was subsequently extended to the post-Soviet space, where the borders of the former Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR) were recognized as legitimate borders. This effectively restricted self-determination claims in entities such as Abkhazia. At the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Abkhazia held the status of an autonomous republic within the Georgian SSR, rather than that of a full union republic. Within the Soviet administrative hierarchy, only SSRs, or union republics, possessed the constitutional right to secede. Consequently, when the Soviet Union disintegrated, all former SSRs, such as Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia, were granted recognition and statehood, while autonomous republics such as Abkhazia were denied this right and rendered unrecognized and illegal under international law.

3. De facto states as deviant actors

International responses to de facto states are shaped through the lens of territorial integrity and state sovereignty. Self-determination claims advanced by such entities are typically rejected on the grounds of *uti possidetis*, and de facto states are consequently treated as norm violators within the international system. From the outset, their political claims are framed as deviations from an established international order.

Within this framework, stigmatization operates through familiar mechanisms of labeling, stereotyping, separation, and status loss combined with discrimination. De facto states are described as “pseudo-states” (Kolossoff & O’Loughlin, 1998), “unrecognized states” (King, 2001), “pariahs” (Bartmann, 2004), “states within states” (Kingston & Spears, 2004), “statelets” (Kolstø, 2006), “phantom states” (Byman & King, 2012), or “informal states” (Isachenko, 2012). These labels portray them as inherently deficient, abnormal, or incomplete and frequently associate them with ethnic nationalism, violence, and threats to democratic order (Etzioni, 1992). As a result, de facto states are symbolically separated from the category of “normal” states and positioned as illegitimate.

This separation has concrete consequences. De facto states are marginalized, denied recognition, excluded from the UN, and subjected to various forms of discrimination in international politics (Ker-Lindsay, 2018, pp. 362-363). Unlike sovereign states, they face systematic barriers to diplomatic engagement, access to international finance, trade, and development assistance. Engagement, where it occurs, is typically confined to peace negotiations conducted under international auspices, while recognized states avoid interactions that might imply legitimacy (Caspersen, 2008, pp. 69-70).

In this context, reliance on a patron state often becomes the only viable survival strategy. Patron states motivated by ethnic ties or geopolitical interests may provide diplomatic, economic, and military assistance (Caspersen, 2012, p. 55). However, such relationships produce dependency and further weaken claims to independent statehood, reinforcing portrayals of de facto states as “puppet states.” As Caspersen (2012, p. 56) notes, “the more isolated the entity, the more important the patron state becomes.” Patron states can exert significant influence through the selective provision or withdrawal of resources, thereby constraining the de facto state’s room for maneuver (Caspersen, 2012, p. 57)⁸. While some entities, such as Somaliland, lack a formal patron state, they nonetheless rely on alternative external support provided by diaspora communities, through the form of licit and illicit trade and international aid (Caspersen, 2012, p. 59).

More broadly, international actors’ reluctance to engage with de facto states out of concern for violating the base state’s territorial integrity effectively reduces policy options to a binary choice between recognition and non-recognition. As Caspersen (2008, p. 81) notes, this dynamic entrenches the zero-sum nature of conflicts involving de facto states rather than facilitating their resolution. Attempts to mitigate these dynamics have produced mixed results. In 2009, the EU introduced its Non-Recognition and Engagement Policy toward Abkhazia and South Ossetia, aiming to reduce their dependency on Russia through limited engagement while maintaining a firm commitment to Georgia’s territorial integrity (Fischer, 2010). In practice, the policy achieved limited results. From the Abkhaz perspective, the EU was widely viewed as aligned with Georgia due to its close cooperation with Tbilisi and its consistent emphasis on Georgian territorial integrity (Fischer, 2010). The absence of a coherent and unified EU approach further constrained the scope of engagement (Coppieters, 2018).

⁸ For example, in 2024, a proposed “property agreement” with Russia triggered mass protests in Abkhazia. After the Abkhaz authorities blocked the agreement from being enacted, Russia responded by cutting electricity supplies, which led to a severe energy crisis (Avdaliani, 2025).

Additional factors further shape states' engagement practices. For instance, the existence of UN Security Council Resolutions explicitly calling for collective non-recognition, as in the case of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, further stigmatizes the de facto state in question. In the absence of such resolutions, states' engagement decisions are shaped by their geopolitical alignments: Kosovo, backed by the United States (US) and the EU, enjoys significantly more engagement than Abkhazia or South Ossetia, which are supported by Russia (Ker-Lindsay, 2018, pp. 364-365). Domestic considerations also matter; states facing secessionist challenges of their own often avoid engagement with de facto states, as illustrated by Spain's refusal to recognize Kosovo due to concerns over Catalonia (Ker-Lindsay, 2018, p. 367). Similarly, relations with the base state can constrain recognition, as in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where opposition from Republika Srpska has prevented recognition of Kosovo (Ker-Lindsay, 2018, p. 367).

Despite these structural constraints, many de facto states persist. There are number of de facto states around the world in addition to the Republic of Abkhazia (1993), such as the Republic of South Ossetia (1992), the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic/Transnistria (1991), the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (1974), Taiwan (1971), the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic/Western Sahara (1975), Somaliland (1991), and the Republic of Kosovo (2008). The continued existence of these entities⁹, despite their contested status, challenges the normative foundations of sovereignty and statehood and renders them subjects of stigmatization within the international order. As Ker-Lindsay (2018, p. 363) notes, stigmatization is inseparable from the very identity of a de facto state.

⁹ Some cases ended up either in full international recognition, such as Eritrea (1993), East Timor (2002) and South Sudan (2011), or in reintegration into the base state, such as Chechnya (Russia, 1996-99), Gagauzia (Moldova, 1991-4), Republika Srpska Krajina (Croatia, 1991-95), Bougainville (Papua New Guinea, 1975-97), Tamil Eelam (Sri Lanka, 1986-2009), Katanga (DR Congo, 1960-1963) and Biafra (Nigeria, 1967-1970).

Chapter 2: Research design and methodology

This is a single-case study that employs a critical, interpretive approach with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the primary methodological framework. The interpretive perspective emphasizes *practice over theory*, or, as George and Campbell (1990, p. 287) describe, “theory as practice.” It is grounded in the understanding that the world is not objectively given or based on *a priori* truths but rather constituted through human actions and interactions.

The identity of a de facto state is not self-defined but rather externally imposed. Stigmatization is a practice that produces this identity. Following Laclau and Mouffe’s argument that “every object is constituted as an object of discourse” (2001, p. 107), this study treats Abkhazia as a discursively produced object by Georgia. Accordingly, it examines how Georgian political discourse constructs the identity of Abkhazia in relation to Georgia itself and how this discourse is strategically mobilized for political ends.

The study seeks to illuminate how Georgia’s representations of Abkhazia, itself, and the conflict serve its broader foreign policy objectives, how these representations evolve over time, and how they may influence international perceptions of the conflict. Through a systematic discourse analysis, the study demonstrates how Georgian discourse operates as a mechanism of power in sustaining and legitimizing a protracted conflict.

The research covers the period between 1992 and 2022 and is divided into three administrations¹⁰:

1. Eduard Shevardnadze era (1992-2003)
2. Mikheil Saakashvili era (2004-2013)
3. Georgian Dream era (2014-2022)

This three-decade span captures several critical historical junctures that shaped Georgia’s domestic and foreign policy trajectories.

The central research question is: How does the official Georgian political discourse construct and represent Abkhazia in narratives directed toward Western audiences? Building

¹⁰ For the full list of the speakers with the dates, see Appendices.

on this, the analysis investigates how Georgia constructs its national identity by stigmatizing Abkhazia, and how Georgia, as a post-Soviet state, navigates its own stigma(s) through stigma-management strategies.

1. Critical discourse analysis framework

Fairclough (1995, p. 97) defines discourse, or “any specific instance of discursive practice,” as “(i) a language text, spoken or written, (ii) discourse practice (text production and text interpretation), (iii) sociocultural practice.” CDA is a relational and transdisciplinary method that examines the dialectical relationships between discourse and the social world, as well as the internal structures of discourse itself (Fairclough, 2010, p. 4). It seeks to *understand* how discourse both shapes and is shaped by the complex social processes through which meaning is produced and contested (Fairclough, 2010, p. 3).

Furthermore, Fairclough (1995, p. 97) identifies three dimensions of CDA: “linguistic *description* of the language text, *interpretation* of the relationship between the (productive and interpretative) discursive processes and the text, and the explanation of the relationship between the discursive processes and the societal processes.”

The central focus of CDA is on the relationship between discourse, power, and inequality. It investigates how discursive practices contribute to the construction and maintenance of social hierarchies and the legitimization of particular actions, policies, and institutions (Fairclough, 2010, p. 8). It examines

- how events, actions, agents, and institutions are framed;
- how past and present are narrated and linked to visions of the future;
- how actions and policies are justified and legitimized; and
- how new discourses emerge through the articulation of existing ones

(Fairclough, 2010, p. 19).

Applying this framework, the study identifies recurring themes in Georgian discourse, situates them within broader geopolitical and normative contexts, and links linguistic patterns to power relations and stigmatization processes affecting *de facto* states. It assumes that Georgia’s post-Soviet identity as a historically stigmatized actor shapes its foreign policy behavior, and therefore, the conflict is not merely territorial but also a struggle over power and identity.

2. Data and case selection

The dataset consists of speeches delivered by senior Georgian officials at the UNGA from 1992 to 2022. These speeches provide a consistent and publicly accessible record of how Georgia has presented itself and Abkhazia to international audiences over three decades. Since joining the UN on July 31, 1992, Georgia has participated in every annual UNGA session (except in 1993), making this venue particularly well suited for tracing long-term discursive patterns.

The Geneva International Discussions might appear to offer an alternative source as it constitutes a rare diplomatic forum that brings together all parties to the conflict under international auspices. However, it lacks comprehensive public documentation and thus does not support systematic discourse analysis. For this reason, it is excluded from this study.

Abkhazia is often analyzed alongside South Ossetia under the label of Georgia's 'breakaway regions.' However, this research treats Abkhazia as a separate case due to its different historical and geopolitical context. South Ossetia is landlocked and ethnically tied to North Ossetia in Russia, and it remains strictly isolated from the wider world and heavily dependent on Russia. Abkhazia, by contrast, maintains a coastline along the Black Sea, has a multiethnic population, a functioning civil society, and relatively well-developed state institutions that are capable of holding competitive elections. These characteristics distinguish Abkhazia from South Ossetia and contribute to its strong emphasis on preserving its *de facto* independence. Although relations with Russia remain complex and occasionally contentious, further integration appears less likely in Abkhazia's case than in South Ossetia. Consequently, Abkhazia's unresolved status is expected to persist as a significant issue for Georgia's domestic and foreign policy in the foreseeable future.

3. Contributions and limitations

The concept of stigma has garnered attention in recent IR literature. Several studies have employed the framework of stigmatization to explain how norms shape state behavior in specific issue areas, such as nuclear weapons (Shamai, 2015) or weapons of mass destruction (Sauer & Reveraert, 2018). To date, however, only a small number of studies, notably Ker-Lindsay (2018) and Pacher (2019), have examined *de facto* states through the lens of stigma.

Abkhazia has existed for decades as an unrecognized and largely isolated entity, yet there remains a notable absence of research examining how Georgian discourse on the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict has evolved over time. The conflict itself, as well as the normative concepts underpinning it, such as territorial integrity and sovereignty, have often been taken for granted, while Georgian narratives remain comparatively understudied. More recently, Ó Beacháin (2025) has critically analyzed Georgian narratives that portray the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict primarily as a confrontation with Russia rather than with the Abkhaz themselves. This gap in the literature underscores the need for the present study, which examines how the conflict is discursively produced by Georgia through the normative power it exercises as a sovereign, internationally recognized state.

Furthermore, the application of stigma theory, borrowed from sociology into the field of IR, is still limited. This study contributes to this by illustrating how stigmatization operates in international politics. Through the case of a de facto state, it shows how states construct deviant identities and how language functions as an instrument for influencing international perceptions and the prospects of conflict resolution.

In addition, the study introduces an original theoretical contribution through the concept of *double stigmatization*. It argues that de facto states are stigmatized on two mutually reinforcing levels: at a structural level, through the norms of territorial integrity and sovereignty within international law; and at an individual level, through the base state’s delegitimizing practices.

It should be noted that while stigma can be both imposed and managed, this study focuses exclusively on the imposition of stigma. Accordingly, Abkhazia’s stigma management strategies fall outside the scope of the analysis. Similarly, while the study argues that Abkhazia is being subjected to stigmatization from both the international system and Georgia, the primary focus is on the discursive stigmatization by Georgia. Structural stigmatization is therefore recognized but not examined in detail.

Two key limitations must be acknowledged. First, UNGA speeches constitute elite-level, formal discourse crafted for an international audience; as such, they may not necessarily capture variation in domestic public opinion or the full spectrum of political narratives. Second, the analysis is one-sided by design, focusing exclusively on Georgian discourse. This asymmetry reflects a structural reality: Abkhazia lacks representation in the UNGA or

comparable venues. This absence is not a methodological flaw but part of the exclusion and stigmatization the study seeks to analyze.

Chapter 3: Conflict background

The conflict between Georgians and Abkhazians has a long and complex history shaped by political, ethnic, and social factors. This chapter provides a concise overview of key developments relevant to the analysis that follows.

The Abkhaz are an indigenous people of the Caucasus and constitute a distinct ethnic group from the Georgians. Likewise, the Abkhaz and Georgian languages belong to different language families. Prior to Soviet rule, Abkhazia existed as a separate principality, under Ottoman or Russian influence, and was not governed by an independent Georgian state except during the brief period of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921), when Georgian forces entered Abkhazia and established military control (Ó Beacháin, 2025, p. 181; Mihalkanin, 2004, p. 145). In 1921, the Abkhazian SSR was established with full union republic status, codified in the 1925 Abkhaz constitution. Between 1922 and 1936, Nestor Lakoba, an ethnic Abkhaz, governed the republic. After Lakoba's murder in 1936, however, Joseph Stalin and Lavrentiy Beria, both Georgians, initiated purges within the Abkhaz political elite and implemented policies aimed at *Georgianization* (Clogg, 1995). The period from the end of World War II until Stalin's and Beria's deaths in 1953 was particularly repressive; as Mihalkanin (2004, p. 145) notes, Beria pursued policies that appeared to be intended to eradicate the distinct identity of the Abkhaz.

In 1936, Abkhazia's union republic status was revoked, and it was incorporated into the Georgian SSR as an autonomous republic. Between 1937 and 1953, large-scale resettlement of Georgians, Armenians, and Russians into Abkhazia significantly changed its demographic composition.¹¹ As a result, the share of ethnic Abkhaz in the population declined from 28 percent in 1926 to approximately 13 percent by 1955 (Mihalkanin, 2004, p. 145). Georgian was introduced as the mandatory language of instruction in schools, Abkhaz-language publications and radio broadcasts were suspended, and access to higher education was increasingly favored for ethnic Georgians. Fertile land was redistributed to newly resettled

¹¹ Abkhazia's demographic composition has long been a central concern for the Abkhaz population. Following the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, an estimated 120,000 to 200,000 Abkhazians were forced to leave Abkhazia for the Ottoman Empire, driven by Russian expulsions and fears of reprisals (Mihalkanin, 2004, p. 144). Today, slightly over 100,000 ethnic Abkhazians reside in Abkhazia, and the number of native Abkhaz speakers has steadily declined over the past century due to Russification (Ó Beacháin, 2025, p. 181).

Georgians, and plans were reportedly developed in the late 1940s to deport the entire Abkhaz population to Central Asia or Siberia (Mihalkanin, 2004, p. 145).

Although some of these policies were reversed after Stalin's death, including the revival of Abkhaz-language publications and institutions, Abkhazia's downgraded constitutional status remained unchanged until the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Between 1955 and 1972, Georgians occupied 97.2% of nomenklatura positions in the Georgian SSR, indicating an exceptional overrepresentation of a titular nation even by Soviet standards (Coppieters, 2002, p. 101). Tensions persisted throughout the late Soviet period, with recurring Abkhaz demands for secession.¹² In 1990, the election of Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the rising Georgian nationalist rhetoric encapsulated in the slogan "Georgia for the Georgians" further alienated non-Georgian populations. Abkhazians boycotted the Georgian independence referendum in March 1991, and the Georgian Supreme Soviet declared independence on 9 April 1991 (Mihalkanin, 2004, pp. 145-147). In January 1992, Gamsakhurdia was overthrown in a coup, and by April, Eduard Shevardnadze, former Georgian Communist Party leader and Soviet Foreign Minister, had assumed the country's leadership.

The conflict escalated into a full-scale war on 14 August 1992, when Georgian forces entered Abkhazia and took control of the capital, Sukhum(i).¹³ The Abkhaz government regrouped in another town, Gudauta, and issued a full-scale mobilization order. In October 1992, Georgian forces vandalized and set fire to the Abkhazian Scientific-Research Institute of Language, Literature and History and the State Archive of Abkhazia, destroying a unique collection of books, historical records, and ethnographic materials. By 27 September 1993, Abkhaz forces had retaken the capital, and the war effectively ended by December 1993 (Clogg, 1995; Mihalkanin, 2004, pp. 147-149).¹⁴ Afterward, international mediation was carried out under the UN auspices and through the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) peacekeeping framework. The thirteen-month war caused significant human losses and displacement, with an estimated 10,000-15,000 deaths and the displacement of over 200,000 people, most of them ethnic Georgians.¹⁵

¹² These demands roughly once every decade emerged in Abkhazia since 1957 (Coppieters, 2002, p. 97).

¹³ The name of the capital city is another contested subject between Abkhazians and Georgians. While Sukhum refers to the Abkhaz version, Sukhumi is the Georgian version. The original name of the city in the Abkhaz language, however, is Aqwa. In this study, I prefer to use the name as Sukhum(i).

¹⁴ September 27 is remembered in Georgia as "the Day of the Fall of Sukhumi," while the Abkhaz celebrate it as "the Day of the Liberation of Sukhum."

¹⁵ Estimates vary across sources and are subject to politicization, particularly with regard to the number of displaced persons. Early figures, based on pre-war Georgian population data, placed the number at

During the war, the Abkhaz side received support from a range of external actors. The Abkhaz nationalist movement attracted between 640 and 2,133 volunteers from across the North Caucasus and the Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey and Syria (Kvakhadze, 2021, p. 165). Russia, while officially remaining neutral, provided indirect assistance to the Abkhaz forces, including logistics, intelligence, and weapons (Kvakhadze, 2021, p. 170).

Following the war, Georgia adopted a policy aimed at isolating Abkhazia, premised on the belief that sustained economic and political pressure would undermine its *de facto* independence (Gegeshidze, 2008, p. 68). This strategy was formalized through CIS sanctions imposed in 1996, which remained in effect until Russia formally withdrew from them in March 2008. Before the 1992-1993 war, Abkhazia was among the most prosperous Soviet regions, benefiting from its subtropical climate, extensive agricultural production, and a thriving tourism sector, with per capita income around \$800 in the 1980s, declining sharply to \$120 by 1994 (Mihalkanin, 2004, pp. 154-155).

The economic damage caused by the war was exacerbated by the sanctions. The CIS sanctions severely limited Abkhazia's external economic and social ties: air traffic was suspended, railways operated only within Abkhazia, seaports were closed to passenger traffic, and maritime trade, particularly with Turkey, was heavily restricted. The movement of people, goods, and essential supplies such as medicines was further restricted due to the additional regulations along the Abkhaz-Russian border. Abkhaz passports were no longer recognized as valid international travel documents, and appeals by Abkhaz officials to the UN for temporary travel documents were rejected. In response, many Abkhaz residents adopted Russian citizenship for mobility and access to social benefits (Kvarchelia, 2008, pp. 71-72).

After Russia's recognition of Abkhazia in 2008, only a small number of states – Syria, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Nauru – have followed suit. In 2009, Abkhazia and Russia signed a military cooperation treaty granting Moscow the right to build, use, and upgrade military infrastructure and bases in Abkhazia. Russia also plays a central role in Abkhazia's economy: it finances a substantial share of its budget, including pension payments to residents holding Russian citizenship, and remains by far Abkhazia's largest trading partner (International Crisis Group, 2010).

approximately 200,000; over time, this figure has been inflated upward in some accounts to 300,000 or even 500,000 (Ó Beacháin, 2025, p. 187). Nevertheless, according to the coordination mechanism established under the auspices of the International Committee of the Red Cross in 2010, 1,753 individuals are still officially listed as missing today (ICRC, 2025).

In the following section, the speeches by Georgian representatives at the UNGA between 1992 and 2022 are analyzed.

Chapter 4: Georgia at the UNGA

1. The Shevardnadze era (1992-2003)

Between 1992 and 2003, eleven speeches delivered by Georgian representatives in the plenary meetings of the UNGA were analyzed, along with one special session (1998) and three First Committee meetings. These speeches reflect Georgia's early attempts to position itself within the international community after independence, revealing both the challenges of post-Soviet state-building and the evolving geopolitical dynamics of the 1990s. The subsections below outline the main discursive patterns that emerge across this period.

Throughout this period, references to Abkhazia overwhelmingly dominated Georgian diplomatic discourse, while mentions of the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia remained comparatively marginal. Georgian foreign policy emphasized multilateralism, international cooperation, and the authority of the UN in conflict resolution. Early speeches expressed high expectations for UN involvement, but over time, this rhetorical optimism gave way to frustration as the UN failed to produce meaningful progress in the Abkhaz conflict.

Georgia's stigma as a *post-Soviet state in transition* is visible in the speeches of this period. Speakers routinely requested external assistance for the country's efforts to join the global market, adopt liberal democratic norms, and rebuild institutions grounded in the rule of law and human rights. The UN and the broader international community functioned as the *audience of normals*, serving as the authority capable of validating Georgia's transformation. In this period, Georgia's stigma management strategy combined *stigma recognition* with elements of *stigma shifting*: it openly acknowledged its fragile, post-Soviet status and its efforts to break with its Soviet past (stigma recognition), while presenting itself as a responsible, peace-seeking actor in contrast to the delegitimized "separatist" Abkhaz side (stigma shifting).

Eduard Shevardnadze delivered Georgia's first UNGA speech on October 2, 1992. At the time, Shevardnadze was the Chairman of the Council of State of Georgia and had previously served as the final Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union. Although delivered before the outbreak of full-scale war in Abkhazia, the speech is notable for providing a comprehensive analysis of the Soviet Union's collapse and the ensuing conflicts, articulated from the vantage point of a former high-level Soviet official turned nationalist state leader.

In his speech, Shevardnadze argued that under Soviet rule, “time bombs were planted for our futures.” These “bombs,” temporarily contained by ideology and coercion, had detonated following the collapse of the Soviet Union, producing “a blast front of enormous power [that] is destroying whole States” (Shevardnadze, 1992). Conflicts “from Bosnia to Tajikistan, including the Caucasus,” he argued, shared structural similarities: “an ethnic patchwork; a variety of religions and denominations; socio-economic inequality; and a troubled historical and political past” (Shevardnadze, 1992). The newly independent states of the Caucasus, weakened politically, economically, and militarily, were unable to fill the power vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet Union, and consequently this vacuum was being filled by “external forces apart, various internal groupings [...] under the cover of nationalistic, pseudopatriotic, separatist, and even religious guises with their own, self-serving political agendas” (Shevardnadze, 1992). Already in this first speech, Shevardnadze constructed a narrative in which Georgia was a victim of historically imposed conditions: the source of the problems was the Soviet Union, rather than Georgia’s own political shortcomings.

Shevardnadze also warned against what he viewed as the arbitrary application of self-determination, arguing that without clear and codified criteria, “separatism and extremism” could “bend the rules so far they are turning them into caricatures” (Shevardnadze, 1992). Such “arbitrary, wild-cat declarations of sovereignty,” he maintained, violated territorial integrity and transformed majority populations into “second-class citizens,” provoking “bloody conflicts” (Shevardnadze, 1992). This early statement foreshadowed the persistent Georgian emphasis on demographic majority and territorial integrity as core arguments against Abkhaz claims to self-determination. Shevardnadze’s 1992 speech thus laid the conceptual foundation for a broader discursive framework that externalized the roots of the conflict, affirmed Georgia’s commitment to international norms, and delegitimized secessionist aspirations within its internationally recognized borders.

1.1. The portrayal of the conflict

Throughout this period, Georgian representatives consistently referred to the territory as “the Abkhazia region of Georgia” and framed the situation as “the Abkhazian conflict” involving “Abkhazian separatists.” Georgia’s portrayal of the conflict consisted of four interrelated discursive themes: aggressive separatism, ethnic cleansing, displacement, and international law.

“Aggressive separatism”

From 1994 onward, “aggressive separatism” became the dominant frame through which Georgian officials explained the origins and nature of the conflict. After 2001, this terminology was abandoned and replaced by “separatism,” and, reflecting the post-9/11 security paradigm, increasingly by “terrorism” (Menagarishvili, 2003) and “international terrorism” (Chkheidze, 2001; Menagarishvili, 2002).

In the Georgian narrative, aggressive separatism was “at the heart of the Abkhazian conflict,” aiming “to wrench a piece of territory away from a sovereign State and to create, in that part of Georgia, a provincial dictatorship based on *ethnic hatred, intolerance and discrimination*” (Chikvaidze, 1994, emphasis added). It was presented as a phenomenon that “emerged on the ruins of the communist system” (Chikvaidze, 1995), that employed “ethnic cleansing as the main tool of vengeance against other nations and ethnic groups” (Menagarishvili, 1996) and that pursued “*dark schemes* with little regard for law, international public opinion, or elementary norms of *human decency*” (Chikvaidze, 1995, emphasis added).

Aggressive separatism was positioned as the principal barrier to Georgia’s democratic transition and as a threat not only to Georgia but to international peace and security. Consequently, it required “containment” through establishing a legal basis in international law, imposing economic sanctions and arms embargoes, and prosecuting “those who have committed these crimes against humanity” in international tribunals (Chikvaidze, 1994; Menagarishvili, 1996). Through this framing, Georgia attempted to universalize the conflict by presenting it as part of a broader problem that must be addressed collectively by the international community, particularly if Georgia were to participate as an equal member within it.

In 1999, Shevardnadze explicitly expressed support for NATO’s intervention in Kosovo, emphasizing that it “must not be interpreted by anyone as even indirect support of aggressive separatism,” as it was “aimed at putting an end to ethnic cleansing” and represented “the *long-awaited* manifestation of a firm stand against *evil*” (Shevardnadze, 1999, emphasis added). This position suggests that a comparable international intervention in Abkhazia would have been welcomed by Georgia and illustrates how self-determination and separatism can be

selectively interpreted depending on the political context, even by actors facing comparable situations.

“Ethnic cleansing”

Across this period, Georgian representatives consistently characterized the Abkhaz side as perpetrators of “ethnic cleansing” and at times “ethnic cleansing and genocide” (Chikvaidze, 1995; Menagarishvili, 1996; Shevardnadze, 1999). The term was used to refer to a deliberate policy of the removal of an “undesirable” segment of the population and a “demographic engineering” (Shevardnadze, 1999). In Abkhazia, “the Abkhaz separatists,” with external military support, sought to alter the demographic composition of Abkhazia by forcibly displacing its Georgian population (Shevardnadze, 1999).

Crucially, “ethnic cleansing” was more than a descriptive label but a performative discursive tool: it framed Georgia as the victim of an atrocity and sought to mobilize normative and political support. In this respect, it is noteworthy that Georgian representatives were among the most frequent users of this term in the rounds of UNGA discussions where they participated. For instance, in the 1999 debate (A/54/PV.4), the term appeared six times, five of which were used by the Georgian speaker. Only a handful of other states in that period used comparable terminology in reference to Bosnia, Cyprus, Kosovo, Somalia, or Rwanda.

Georgia also repeatedly urged international organizations to adopt this terminology, arguing that the time had long passed “to call a spade a spade” (Chikvaidze, 1995). Their efforts achieved limited but symbolically important success: the CSCE (later OSCE) incorporated the term into its official language, expressing “deep concern” in the 1994 Budapest Summit (OSCE, 1994) and “condemning” the “ethnic cleansing resulting in mass destruction and forcible expulsion of the predominantly Georgian population in Abkhazia” in the 1996 Lisbon Summit (OSCE, 1996). However, the continued absence of this terminology in the UN documents became a persistent source of resentment and criticism toward the UN (Chikvaidze, 1995; Menagarishvili, 2000).

“Displaced persons/refugees”

The theme of displaced persons constituted one of Georgia’s most powerful rhetorical resources. Although the terms “displaced persons,” “internally displaced persons,” and

“refugees” were used interchangeably, the number was fixed in this period: “300,000.” Georgian officials frequently cited the displacement of “300,000 people” as proof of “ethnic cleansing” and as a fundamental moral and political issue at the core of the conflict.

Georgian speakers emphasized that “300,000 peaceful Georgian citizens” had been “expelled from the territory of Abkhazia” (Menagarishvili, 1996). They were described as having been “subjected to inhuman brutalities” (Shevardnadze, 1999) and having “escaped physical extermination” (Chikvaidze, 1994), while “thousands more” were “shot, burned, hanged or tortured to death” (Menagarishvili, 1996). Yet, “these *severely traumatized* people,” “these *innocent victims*” remained living in “*extreme deprivation*” (Shevardnadze, 1999, emphasis added), and “losing hope for a peaceful settlement of the conflict” (Menagarishvili, 1997). Their displacement also constituted “another major factor in Georgia's inability to engage fully in the process of consolidating, rebuilding and moving the nation forward” (Chikvaidze, 1995).

The proposed solution was not about humanitarian aid but “their inalienable rights”: to enable them “to return to their homes and holding those who have violated their rights responsible, if only by giving an appropriate assessment of the acts of the perpetrators of ethnic cleansing” (Shevardnadze, 1999). This narrative reached its emotional peak in Shevardnadze’s 1999 address, which was arguably the most personal and least diplomatic speech of this period:

Although expressing personal feelings is perhaps not appropriate from this podium, I find it difficult to repress my emotions when talking of *completely innocent people* expelled from their homes by *brutal force fuelled by simple hatred*. *My heart is heavy* (Shevardnadze, 1999, emphasis added).

He directly accused the international community of “indifference” to the suffering of the displaced people and argued that, unlike the conflicts in the Balkans, the Abkhaz conflict received “no exposure on world television screens” (Shevardnadze, 1999).

Through this victimization narrative, displaced persons became a symbol of collective national suffering and, increasingly, the standard by which Georgia evaluated and criticized international mediation efforts.

“International law”

International law constituted another central pillar of Georgian discourse. The principle of territorial integrity was presented as an inviolable and foundational norm of the international system, as well as a non-negotiable component of any settlement to the Abkhaz conflict. Georgian representatives consistently reaffirmed Georgia's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the inviolability of its borders.

Although acknowledging the importance of self-determination as “one of the most important basic principles of international law” (Menagarishvili, 1996), Georgian officials argued that it was being “exploited by *national minorities* or small nations that have *historically constituted a single society with other nations*, within the framework of sovereign States that today are Members of the United Nations” (Menagarishvili, 1996, emphasis added). The Abkhaz case exemplified such misuse. Abkhaz claims to self-determination were portrayed as distortions of international norms: “terrorism under the banner of ‘the self-determination of suppressed people’” (Menagarishvili, 1996) or “erroneous interpretation by ethnic minorities of the principle of self-determination” (Shevardnadze, 1999). In this view, legitimate self-determination could only occur within sovereign states:

In democratic States, with Governments equally representing the interests of all its citizens, self determination must be regarded as the right to express oneself in a very broad sense, but only within the boundaries of a State which, on its part, respects these rights. There should be no talk of separation by the use of force and violation of territorial integrity (Shevardnadze, 1999).

Through this legalistic framing, Georgian representatives sought to anchor their territorial claims in international law and portray the Abkhaz claims to self-determination as both illegal and illegitimate. Georgia was positioned as a guardian of international law and normative order, whereas the Abkhaz side as a violator of norms undermining not only Georgia's sovereignty but also the moral and legal foundations of the international community and the stability of the broader international system.

1.2. The discursive representations of Abkhazia and Georgia

1.2.1. Abkhazia

From the very first Georgian address to the UNGA, the Georgian representatives employed discursive strategies aimed at delegitimizing the Abkhaz political leadership and framing

Abkhazia as an unstable, unlawful, and securitized space. While the language was relatively restrained in the early years, it gradually intensified. For example, early references to the “authorities in Sukhumi” (Menagarishvili, 1996) gradually shifted toward more explicit stigmatization, including labels such as the “so-called Abkhaz authorities,” a “non-legitimate, pseudo-Abkhaz regime based on hostility and ethnic cleansing” (Menagarishvili, 2002), or a “rogue and an unstable regime” (Chitaia, First Committee, 2003).

By the early 2000s, in line with post-9/11 global security discourse, Abkhazia was described as an “ethnocratic and terrorist enclave,” an “orderless, lawless, unpredictable separatist region” involved in “arms and drugs trafficking” and potentially the “smuggling of radioactive materials” (Adamia, First Committee, 2002). Unsurprisingly, the most extreme language appeared in 2003, at the very end of this period, when Abkhazia was depicted as “a breeding ground for terrorism” and “a safe haven for criminals, traffickers in drugs and human beings, illegal arms dealers and terrorist groups,” even invoking figures such as Shamil Basayev to index Abkhazia to transnational terrorism (Menagarishvili, 2003). This linguistic escalation reflects two parallel processes: the accumulation of frustration over stalled negotiations and the worsening of Georgia-Russia relations. As a result, the Abkhaz side was not merely presented as a local adversary but as part of a wider problem of instability and extremism.

From the outset, Georgian officials framed the Abkhaz as a *minority*. Within this narrative, the conflict was thus portrayed not as a legitimate struggle for self-determination but as an instance of *separatism* “where the minority has managed to impose its will on the majority” (Shevardnadze, 1992). In this framing, the Abkhaz leadership was described as an “apartheid and ethnic dictatorship” (Shevardnadze, 1992), repeatedly associated with *ethnic cleansing, genocide, violence, hatred, and intolerance*.

Occasionally, Georgian representatives attempted to distinguish between the Abkhaz regime and the Abkhaz people, referring to the former as “Abkhaz separatists” and the latter as “our Abkhaz brothers” (Shevardnadze, 1999) or “the unique Abkhaz people” (Chkheidze, 2001). Yet, in practice, the boundary between the identities of “separatists” and “people” remained blurry. The dominant Georgian narrative surrounding the rights of displaced persons constructed an image of a territory emptied of non-Georgians and belonging primarily to the Georgian population expelled by the Abkhaz. Only once did Shevardnadze explicitly acknowledge Abkhazia’s multiethnic demographic composition, noting that the Abkhaz “originally constituted only 17 per cent of the population” and expelled “the majority just

because they were not Abkhaz, but Georgians, Armenians, Jews, Russians, Greeks or other ethnicities” (Shevardnadze, 1999). Even here, the Abkhaz were still portrayed as a minority responsible for ethnic cleansing.

Overall, the discursive construction of Abkhazia casts it as an illegitimate, unstable, and securitized space associated with extremism, criminality, and chaos. This representation served as a foil for Georgia’s own self-presentation as a lawful and responsible state.

1.2.2. Georgia

Throughout this period, Georgian representatives consistently constructed Georgia as a *small, newly independent state* navigating the challenges of *post-Soviet transition* while simultaneously drawing on a deep, centuries-long *historical legacy* of statehood (Shevardnadze, 1992, 1999; Chkheidze, 2001). This identity was reinforced by repeated references to Georgia as a historically “tolerant” country toward diverse groups (Shevardnadze, 1992; Chikvaidze, 1995).

Backdropped by the “conditions of post-communist chaos, ongoing ethnopolitical conflicts and a precipitous decline in the economy” (Menagarishvili, 1996), Georgian discourse portrayed the state as a “post-Communist country with its economy in transition” (Menagarishvili, 1998). It was both vulnerable and reform-oriented; a stigmatized, post-Soviet state struggling with political and economic instability while striving to demonstrate its commitment to liberal democratic norms. In line with this, Georgian officials highlighted progress achieved “through democratic change and economic reforms,” describing Georgia as having moved “from *chaos* to *stability* and from *total economic collapse* to *development*” (Menagarishvili, 1998, emphasis added), thereby comparing what they left behind in the past in the Soviet Union with what the future holds as an equal member of the new liberal world order.

This framing illustrates a classic *stigma recognition* strategy: Georgia openly acknowledges its fragile, post-Soviet identity while simultaneously demonstrating that it seeks to shed this stigma and be validated by the “audience of normals,” represented by the international community, the UN, and other international organizations. Consequently, milestones such as joining the Council of Europe in 1999 were presented as an indicator of

“progress in building a democratic society based on the rule of law and respect for human rights” (Shevardnadze, 1999).

In the mid-1990s, Georgian representatives signaled their intention to overcome this stigma by portraying Georgia as a “small but democratic” state willing to assume its place in international affairs; “not a *passive observer* of international events,” but a country ready to “carry its fair share of the *responsibilities* of the international community” (Chikvaidze, 1994, emphasis added). By 1999, Shevardnadze was asserting that Georgia was “becoming a *partner* to others rather than *merely a recipient of international aid*,” a status enabled by the “new function” Georgia had crafted for itself (Shevardnadze, 1999, emphasis added).

At the same time, Georgia positioned itself as a *victim* of the hardships of transition, having “undergone every possible trial in the transition from the old and obsolete to the new and progressive,” a process that was “very painful, demanding many sacrifices” (Menagarishvili, 1996). Yet, despite these challenges, Georgia was said to have emerged “with dignity” (Menagarishvili, 1997), supported by the international community and especially by the UN, which provided not only “moral support” but also “specific and timely financial and technical assistance” (Menagarishvili, 1997).

Georgia’s identity narrative also adapted to shifting international dynamics. As a “strong proponent of a value-based, universal global order” (Menagarishvili, 2000), Georgia emphasized its own experiences with “terrorism” and presented itself as an “active participant in the campaign against terror” (Chkheidze, 2001). After the 9/11 attacks in 2001, Georgian officials framed the event not merely as an attack on the US but as an assault on “the *entire civilized world* that the *United Nations symbolizes*” (Menagarishvili, 2002, emphasis added), further aligning Georgia with the global community of “civilized” states and reaffirming its membership within the international normative order.

1.3. Conflict resolution narratives

Throughout this period, Georgian officials consistently articulated a commitment to a peaceful, negotiated resolution of the conflict (Chikvaidze, 1994, 1995; Menagarishvili, 1996, 1997, 2000, 2003; Chkheidze, 2001). However, there were two non-negotiables: the unconditional return of displaced Georgians to Abkhazia and the preservation of Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. Within these boundaries, Georgia offered autonomy to

Abkhazia (Menagarishvili, 1996), described as “the widest form of autonomy practiced around the world” (Chkheidze, 2001). In other words, Georgia was willing to give “wide political, economic and cultural rights” as long as the Abkhaz were recognized as a “national minority” within Georgia (Chikvaidze, 1994).

From the beginning, Georgia made clear that no political settlement could involve territorial compromise:

Georgia will *never* accept the loss of any part of its territory. Not only because its territory is not large, but also because what it has is *incontestably* its own – every square inch of it. The leaders of the Abkhazian separatists *have to* realize this. They too have to find the political courage and will, the flexibility and the foresight, to negotiate in good faith and come to a settlement that would be fair and lasting so that future generations of Georgians and Abkhazians could *forget* this one dark page in their fathers' lives and *pick up in friendship and peace where their grandfathers left off* (Chikvaidze, 1994, emphasis added).

This statement captures the essential components of an ideal conflict resolution process: political courage and will, flexibility, foresight, and good-faith negotiations by all parties. Yet, oftentimes, these are exactly what is missing from the negotiation tables. Here, too, it might be read as what was missing in the Abkhaz side from the Georgian perspective. Still, it also reveals the underlying Georgian assumptions about the nature of the Abkhaz conflict: an already *existing* peace between Georgians and Abkhaz, only to be disrupted by the ill-willed decisions of some short-sighted political elite in Abkhazia. Such framing treats the conflict as an aberration rather than an expression of the accumulation of historical and political grievances. The invitation to “pick up... where grandfathers left off” thus functions as a rhetorical device that both delegitimizes Abkhaz claims and positions Georgia as the inherently reasonable, peace-seeking actor.

This self-representation required an antagonistic counterpart. Georgian officials regularly depicted the Abkhaz side as untrustworthy and morally compromised:

Despite *the bitter experience of repeated treachery*, the Georgian Government has *never* attempted, or threatened to resort to military force in order to solve this problem. We have *always been committed* to the peaceful and negotiated resolution of the conflict. It is *extremely difficult*, however, to carry on peaceful negotiations with a party that resorts to blatant “ethnic cleansing” and genocide as a means of consolidating its *ill-gotten gains* (Chikvaidze, 1995, emphasis added).

The discourse of peace was therefore entwined with a discourse of *blame*. Even statements framed as gestures toward reconciliation were embedded within moral hierarchies in which the human tragedy of the conflict was portrayed solely through Georgian suffering:

We do not thirst for the blood of our Abkhaz brothers, nor do we seek vengeance. No, I am sure that in time Georgians and Abkhaz will dwell together *in their historic homeland: Georgia*. But in order to speed up the process of the Georgian-Abkhaz reconciliation, the tragedy must be given its fair legal assessment (Shevardnadze, 1999, emphasis added).

Here, reconciliation becomes conditional on the legal recognition of “ethnic cleansing,” reinforcing Georgia’s claim to victimhood and moral authority.

Simultaneously, while expressing readiness to negotiate, Georgia repeatedly called for punitive measures such as economic sanctions and arms embargoes on “the territories under the control of criminals” (Chikvaidze, 1995). The population of these territories should receive only strictly monitored humanitarian aid (Chikvaidze, 1995). For Georgia, peaceful negotiation and punitive measures were therefore not *contradictory* but *complementary* tools of conflict resolution.

Georgia did not view the Abkhaz as an *equal* negotiating partner, despite its rhetorical emphasis on dialogue. Instead, Georgian representatives aligned themselves with the international community through an implicit us-versus-them narrative: “we” are the defenders of international order and legality responding to separatism, while “they” are obstructing peace. This framing became explicit in 2002, when Georgia described itself as “a full-fledged member of the international community, whose internationally recognized territory is being violated,” in contrast to a “non-legitimate, pseudo-Abkhaz regime based on hostility and ethnic cleansing” (Menagarishvili, 2002). The representative insisted that “no positive results can be achieved” *if the two sides were treated equally*, criticizing the “softness” of UN resolutions for implicitly doing so (Menagarishvili, 2002).

Georgia’s perception of the UN’s role in the conflict also shifted dramatically over time. Initially, Georgian representatives expressed strong confidence in a settlement “under the auspices of the United Nations” and insisted that Georgia had negotiated “in good faith” (Chikvaidze, 1994). Over time, however, this confidence eroded. Georgian officials soon expressed frustration with the UN’s reluctance “to call an aggressor an aggressor, a criminal a criminal and a victim a victim” (Menagarishvili, 1996). By the late 1990s, frustration centered on the UN’s refusal to adopt Georgian terminology of “ethnic cleansing.” As Shevardnadze

argued, “it is impossible to *fight evil* if one does not call it by *its proper name*” (Shevardnadze, 1999, emphasis added). A decade into the UN involvement, the Georgian representative concluded that “we have not come even a single step closer to a settlement” (Menagarishvili, 2002).

Taken together, these narratives reveal a broader pattern in Georgia’s conflict resolution discourse during this period: peace is framed as the restoration of a moral and territorial order in which Georgia’s authority is unquestioned, and the Abkhaz are reincorporated as a minority population. The language of reconciliation is therefore intertwined with the delegitimization of Abkhaz political agency, the assertion of Georgian victimhood, and calls for international pressure rather than mutual compromise. By constructing itself as the sole rational and peace-seeking actor, Georgia undermines the intentions and the image of the Abkhaz in front of an international audience. Moreover, this discursive configuration leaves little room for acknowledging Abkhaz grievances or imagining a process of reconciliation in which the two sides engage as political equals.

1.4. Georgia-Russia relations

During this period, Georgian official discourse underwent a significant transformation in its representation of Russia from a great power capable of contributing constructively to conflict resolution (Chikvaidze, 1994, 1995; Menagarishvili, 1996, 1997; Shevardnadze, 1999) to an actor actively enabling the Abkhaz side. By the early 2000s, Russia was no longer framed as a *mediator* but as “a protector of the separatists and supplier of arms for them” (Adamia, First Committee, 2002). A similar shift occurred in the discourse surrounding the CIS peacekeeping force. Initially welcomed with optimism (Chikvaidze, 1994), its deployment was later described as a decision taken because Georgia “had no other choice” at the time (Menagarishvili, 2002).

In the early years, Russia was represented as a facilitator of negotiations between Tbilisi and the Abkhaz under UN auspices. Georgian officials depicted Moscow as a state that genuinely wished “to see a strong, stable, sovereign, united and friendly Georgia on its southern border” (Chikvaidze, 1994). Up to the early 2000s, Georgia continued to express a desire for relations that were “cordial and equitable,” emphasizing “cultural and friendly ties that are centuries old” and respect for Russia’s role as “regional leader,” “permanent member of the Security Council,” and “facilitator of the peace process in Abkhazia” (Chkheidze,

2001). This language projected an image of pragmatic engagement and respect for Russia's geopolitical role, even as tensions simmered beneath the surface.

The tone and the discursive construction of Russia shifted sharply with the outbreak of the Second Chechen War in 1999. The conflict transformed the regional security landscape and brought Georgia increasingly into confrontation with Moscow. Russian accusations that Georgia harbored Chechen fighters in the Pankisi Gorge were countered by Georgian claims of Russian airspace violations and cross-border strikes masked as counterterrorism operations. By 2002, Russia was no longer presented as a neutral mediator but as an active destabilizing force in the region. Georgian officials accused Moscow of nurturing anti-Georgian sentiments domestically, undermining Georgian sovereignty, and reinforcing "an artificial border between the territory controlled by the separatists and the rest of Georgia" through CIS peacekeepers (Menagarishvili, 2002).

The practice of distributing Russian passports to residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was framed as further evidence of a direct threat to territorial integrity (Menagarishvili, 2003). The presence of the Russian military base in Gudauta, Abkhazia, became another important point of contestation. Although Russia claimed to have fulfilled its OSCE commitments by closing the base, Georgian officials insisted that the withdrawal was incomplete and that Russian forces continued to operate there (Menagarishvili, 2003).

Overall, the trajectory of Georgia-Russia relations during this period reflects a shift from reliance on Russian mediation to growing distrust and openly blaming Moscow for the protraction of the Abkhaz conflict.

2. The Saakashvili era (2004-2013)

Between 2004 and 2013, ten speeches delivered by Georgian representatives in the plenary meetings of the UNGA and ten statements made in the First Committee were analyzed. This period marks the highest level of participation in UNGA meetings. Following the Rose Revolution, Eduard Shevardnadze was replaced by Mikheil Saakashvili, and of the ten plenary speeches in this period, nine were delivered by President Saakashvili himself. Unlike the previous speeches, all speeches in this period were made in English, and Saakashvili delivered significantly longer and more thematically expansive speeches. A key distinction of this era is that the Rose Revolution became a constant point of reference: Saakashvili

routinely contrasted pre-revolution Georgia with what he framed as the democratic, modern Georgia that emerged afterward.

The significant marker in Saakashvili's speeches is that he uses the word "we" very often, such as in "we are a nation that believes in the sanctity of rule of law and a strong judicial system" (Saakashvili, 2004) or "we are a responsible democracy" (Saakashvili, 2006). In other words, he speaks *on behalf* of the people of Georgia, thus posing not only the face of the Revolution but the true representative of the people. Accordingly, the theme of "corrupt political elite" emerged in Saakashvili's discourse in relation to both Georgia and Abkhazia. While he represents the will of the people, the previous administration that the Revolution chased away was portrayed as the corrupt political elite. A similar stance was taken in regard to Abkhazia, especially in pre-2008 rhetoric, where the local population was posited as held hostage by the local Abkhaz corrupt political elite. In this sense, he attempted to pose himself and the Revolution as the *rescuer* of the local population, just like he did in Georgia proper.

A defining feature of Saakashvili's discourse is his sustained effort to construct a particular image of Georgia and his repetitive use of this image throughout this period. His speeches consistently foreground how he wants Georgia to be seen: modern, democratic, and European. And only then, he situates events and actors *in relation to this self-image*. This marks a clear shift in Georgia's stigma management strategy. Unlike the previous period, Georgia is no longer framed as a fragile, post-Soviet state striving toward democracy, but as an *already transformed democratic state*, proven by the Rose Revolution. Saakashvili repeatedly contrasts this "new" Georgia with the "old," pre-revolutionary one, thereby distancing Georgia from the very stigma that shaped earlier discourse.

This transformation reflects a move from stigma recognition to *stigma shifting*. Saakashvili regularly appeals to Western, high-status states as Georgia's natural partners that share Georgia's democratic values and principles. In this setting, the Abkhaz conflict is no longer treated as an isolated issue but is woven into the larger story of Georgia's self-reinvention. Abkhazia, and later Russia, especially after 2008, became the low-status actors against which Georgia's modern, democratic identity is asserted and elevated.

Within this period, the 2008 August War constitutes a clear discursive rupture that reshaped how the conflict, Russia, and Georgia were articulated. To maintain comparability with the previous chapter, the following sections apply the same four analytical dimensions, conflict

framing, identity construction, conflict resolution narratives, and Georgia-Russia relations, while tracing how each evolved before and after 2008.

2.1. The portrayal of the conflict

Unlike the previous period, in which Abkhazia dominated the conflict narrative, this era is characterized by Georgia's consistent pairing of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In other words, the Abkhaz conflict became discursively merged with the South Ossetian one, with both framed as Georgian territories that needed to be reintegrated.

1) Pre-2008

The conflict in this period was framed through themes largely consistent with the previous administration: "separatism," "ethnic cleansing," "displaced persons/refugees," and "international law." Both the Abkhaz and South Ossetian cases, referred to as "frozen conflicts" (Saakashvili, 2004; Zourabichvili, 2005), were presented as security threats not only to Georgia but to the wider Caucasus region and even Europe (Saakashvili, 2004). The principle of territorial integrity and sovereignty was emphasized as "the foundation of modern peace and security in Europe" and "the cornerstone of the contemporary international order" (Saakashvili, 2006).

Within this framing, "separatist conflicts" were held responsible for "the forced exodus and ethnic cleansing of 300,000 Georgians" (Saakashvili, 2004). The figures presented by Saakashvili were not always consistent: at another point, he referred to Abkhazia as the site of "one of the mo[st] abhorrent, horrible and yet forgotten ethnic cleansings of the twentieth century," claiming that "up to 500,000 men, women, and children were forced to flee in the 1990s" (Saakashvili, 2007).

"People vs. Regime"

A notable discursive shift in this period is Georgia's explicit acknowledgment of the *isolation* and *deprivation* of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgian representatives emphasized that the populations of these territories were being deprived of democratic development and economic opportunities as a direct consequence of the conflicts (Saakashvili, 2004; Zourabichvili, 2005). However, the underlying causes of this deprivation

were again attributed to “separatism,” with responsibility placed on the “separatist” political elites:

These disputes are no longer about ethnic grievances; they are about the manipulation of *greed* by a tiny minority of activists, militants, militias and their foreign backers, *at the expense of the local population* (Saakashvili, 2007, emphasis added).

Within this framing, the conflicts became integrated into Georgia’s broader “democratic project” following the Rose Revolution. The people living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were portrayed as *victims* who had been denied the chance “to reap the benefits of the Rose Revolution” (Saakashvili, 2007). Saakashvili frequently illustrated this deprivation in emotive terms:

Just imagine for a moment, that *children* who find themselves *victims of those savage events* are denied the right to learn or speak their native language; that the *elderly* are not allowed access to adequate health care; that young people cannot receive a proper education and that hundreds of thousands of people cannot return safely to their homes where they belong, from which they were systematically ethnically cleansed and which in many cases have been illegally sold or destroyed (Saakashvili, 2006, emphasis added).

In this narrative, the inhabitants of these territories became hostages of illegitimate and self-interested leaders rather than participants in a legitimate political struggle: they were “prisoners of the morally repugnant politics of ethnic cleansing, division, violence and indifference” (Saakashvili, 2006).

This discursive move affirmed Georgia’s *benevolence* toward the populations of these territories while simultaneously legitimizing Georgia’s territorial claims and delegitimizing the *political agency* of the de facto authorities. By drawing a sharp distinction between “the people” and “the regime,” Georgian discourse constructed the conflicts as moral and political aberrations perpetrated by a corrupt elite and rectifiable only through Georgia’s reintegration project.

2) Post-2008

“Invasion/Occupation”

The discursive framing of the conflict undergoes a marked transformation after 2008. While earlier themes such as “ethnic cleansing,” “displaced persons/refugees,” and “international law” remain central, the terminology of a “separatist conflict” disappears almost entirely. It is replaced by a lexicon of *interstate* violence: “armed aggression,” “occupation,” “invasion,” and “annexation.” The conflict was no longer framed as an internal struggle involving separatist actors but as a direct military confrontation initiated by an external state.

In this narrative, Georgia was explicitly described as having been “attacked” (Saakashvili, 2008) and “invaded” (Saakashvili, 2009). Saakashvili routinely employed emotive and vivid imagery to underscore Georgia’s victimization:

Tanks, warplanes, warships, bombs and State-directed cyber hackers descended upon our towns, villages, cities, infrastructure and economy. *Hundreds of our people were killed within days and thousands were wounded. Tens of thousands of innocent civilians were forced to flee in the face of ethnic cleansing* (Saakashvili, 2009, emphasis added).

In 2008, *thousands and thousands* of tanks, armoured vehicles, artillery platforms, troops and militias crossed the Caucasian mountains, *bringing destruction, death and hatred* (Saakashvili, 2010, emphasis added).

A recurring theme is that Georgia was targeted not because of its weakness but precisely because of its strength, that is, its *democratic transformation*. According to Saakashvili, Georgia “suffered *Europe’s first invasion* in the post-Cold War era” (Saakashvili, 2009, emphasis added) because it represented “a successful democracy” (Saakashvili, 2008). His argument hinges on the notion that Georgia’s reforms threatened the authoritarian status quo in the post-Soviet space:

That is why they want Georgia off the map. [...] if Georgia survives and if Georgia continues, it sets a bad example for all the others, including the Russian people themselves, from the point of view of the present Russian Government (Saakashvili, 2012).

Russia’s actions were further embedded within a historical genealogy of Soviet and Russian aggression, likened to invasions of Poland (1939), Finland (1940), Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), Afghanistan (1979), and the Chechen wars of the 1990s, which he described as attempts “to destroy and exterminate the proud Chechen nation” (Saakashvili,

2009). Through these analogies, Saakashvili positioned the 2008 War as the *continuation* of a broader historical pattern of imperial domination.

This narrative was further reinforced through symbolic imagery. Saakashvili described a “new Berlin Wall” and a “new Iron Curtain” cutting through Georgia (Saakashvili, 2009, 2010), asserting that the “wall across Europe is not a matter of concern to Georgia alone” but a challenge to “our shared values” and to the foundational principles of the UN (Saakashvili, 2008, 2009). Through this framing, the conflict is elevated from a regional issue to a confrontation over the future of European security and liberal democratic norms.

The portrayal of internally displaced persons and refugees continued with the figure of “500,000 internally displaced persons and refugees” (Saakashvili, 2010, 2011), as their continued displacement is attributed directly to Russia:

They cannot go back because, in Moscow, a foreign leader has decided that their home is no longer their home (Saakashvili, 2011).

In Saakashvili’s post-2008 discourse, the Abkhaz (and South Ossetians) almost entirely disappear as actors. The conflict is no longer described as Georgian-Abkhaz (or Georgian-South Ossetian) but as a bilateral confrontation between Russia and Georgia. The entire agency of the Abkhaz is removed; the conflict becomes a struggle between a small democratic state and a large authoritarian aggressor state. In this narrative, Russia attacked Georgia and “*failed* to destroy Georgian democracy in 2008” (Saakashvili, 2012, emphasis added), but “the annexation of Georgian lands by Russian troops continues” (Saakashvili, 2013).

Accordingly, the 2008 war is framed as an assault not only on Georgia’s territorial integrity but on the achievements of the Rose Revolution and the democratic identity Saakashvili claims it inaugurated:

The Georgian experience of successful reforms and the creation of a functioning State was therefore considered to be a virus — one that could and would contaminate the whole post-Soviet region [...] that should be eliminated by every means possible (Saakashvili, 2013).

By situating Georgia as the embodiment of Western democratic values and Russia as its antithesis, Saakashvili constructs the conflict as part of a broader geopolitical and ideological struggle shared with the West, particularly the EU and the US.

2.2. The discursive representations of Abkhazia and Georgia

The pre-2008 rhetoric on Abkhazia largely continued the patterns of the previous administration. However, unlike under Shevardnadze, South Ossetia gained greater prominence in official discourse, and the two cases were increasingly bundled together as “separatist, frozen conflicts in Georgia.” After 2008, this changed dramatically: direct references to either territory largely disappeared from Georgian rhetoric, replaced by the slogan introduced in 2010 that “20 per cent of Georgia is under occupation.”

Georgia’s self-representation also drew heavily on the symbolic legacy of the Rose Revolution. Pre-2008, this served primarily as a contrast to the Shevardnadze period; post-2008, the same narrative was intensified and reframed through the lens of Russian aggression. The following subsections trace these evolving representations.

2.2.1. Abkhazia

1) Pre-2008

During this period, Georgian official discourse continued to frame Abkhazia as an integral part of the Georgian state, explicitly emphasizing that these territories were not “for sale or exchange” (Saakashvili, 2006). Echoing the previous administration, Abkhazia and South Ossetia were securitized and depicted as “black holes” or “uncontrolled territories” associated with organized crime, arms trafficking, and terrorism (Saakashvili, 2004; Zourabichvili, 2005). Their de facto authorities were portrayed as “mini-dictatorships, tightly controlled by elite groups that seek to profit from the criminal status quo” (Saakashvili, 2004), supported by external patrons (Saakashvili, 2007).

Simultaneously, Georgian officials stressed the underdevelopment and isolation of these territories. The populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia were described as deprived of democratic governance, economic opportunity, and the benefits of Georgia’s post-Revolution reforms (Saakashvili, 2004; Zourabichvili, 2005). Such framing created a discursive separation between the “corrupt, criminal elites” and the ordinary population, who were depicted as victims awaiting rescue and reintegration.

Saakashvili frequently employed emotive language and vivid imagery to underscore the moral dimension of Georgia’s claims. For example:

It causes me pain to say that, [...] *children grow up with guns in their hands instead of books*. Their heads are filled with *hatred and intolerance*, [...] We must put an end to this *cycle of destruction* (Saakashvili, 2004, emphasis added).

Abkhazia, in particular, was persistently tied to the narrative of “ethnic cleansing.” Saakashvili described it as once “an area with very fertile land, beautiful beaches, lovely resort areas and wonderful landscapes” turned into “a depopulated and criminalized wasteland” created by “the brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing uprooted ethnic Georgians, Armenians, Estonians, Greeks, Jews, Russians and others who had lived peacefully in that land for centuries” (Saakashvili, 2006).

A key strategy during this period was Georgia’s appeal to high-status Western voices, that is, an “audience of normals” essential for stigma management. For example, by invoking the Estonian president’s comparison between Darfur and Abkhazia, Saakashvili sought to internationalize Georgia’s narrative and validate its claims through respected Western actors:

President Ilves of Estonia spoke today of *the parallels between Darfur and Abkhazia*. Of course, we should remember Darfur, but *we should not forget Abkhazia*. President Ilves *knows of what he speaks* because tens of thousands of ethnic Estonians were also deported and their houses confiscated. In 1992, the Estonian Government had to evacuate some of these people by air under the fire of the people that were attacking this peaceful middle-class population in Abkhazia (Saakashvili, 2007, emphasis added).

This rhetorical move served to internationalize the Georgian narrative by situating Abkhazia within a broader moral and geopolitical framework that is familiar to Western audiences. This strategy not only reinforced Georgia’s claims regarding ethnic cleansing and victimization but also positioned Georgia as aligned with and validated by recognized democratic states.

2) Post-2008

After the 2008 August War, Georgian discourse shifted sharply. Abkhazia and South Ossetia were redefined not as “separatist conflicts” but as “occupied territories,” reframing the situation in terms of Russian military aggression rather than local separatism. The slogan “20 per cent of our territory is occupied” (Saakashvili, 2010) became the dominant discursive marker. Themes such as ethnic cleansing and displacement persisted but were now attributed explicitly to Russian occupation.

This shift is particularly evident in Saakashvili's 2010 speech, which directly echoed his 2004 address. In 2004, the "lawless territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia" were depicted to be "safe havens for mini-dictatorships, tightly controlled by elite groups that seek to profit from the criminal status quo" (Saakashvili, 2004). In 2010, the source of lawlessness had been fully displaced onto Russia:

I am speaking of the lawlessness bred by the Russian occupation. Our two occupied regions exist in a black hole of governance. Today, in those lands, criminals act with impunity. The most elemental human rights are abused. Drugs and weapons are smuggled. People are trafficked. And potential weapons of mass destruction are moved in and out of the territories, posing a threat to us all (Saakashvili, 2010).

Thus, the limited agency previously attributed to Abkhazia, though it was through "ethnic cleansing," was effectively erased, replaced by the construction of Russia as the *sole perpetrator and primary antagonist*. In the post-2008 period, Saakashvili's references to Abkhazia were almost entirely mediated through references to Russia, with the Abkhaz themselves nearly disappearing from the narrative.

The 2008 War posed a clean slate for Georgian official discourse to rewrite the history so much so that, in 2009, Saakashvili was describing Abkhazia as follows:

Abkhazia is the *birthplace of Georgian civilization*. Since the days of the ancient kingdom of Colchida — which was the birthplace of *one of the most interesting and ancient European cultures*, beginning with Jason and the Argonauts — it has been a valuable and vibrant part of our journey through history. *Just a few years ago*, it remained *a very vibrant part of Georgia*. And that most vibrant and successful part of Georgia has now been emptied of more than three quarters of its population. Gardens, hotels, theatres and restaurants have been replaced by military bases, minefields and graveyards. It will take time, but I am sure that *Abkhazia will once again be what it was — the most wonderful part of Georgia — and that the occupation will be merely a part of history* (Saakashvili, 2009, emphasis added).

In this narrative, the "separatist conflict" of the 1990s effectively disappears, replaced by a story in which Abkhazia was a territory that was harmonious and fully integrated into Georgia until the Russian invasion in 2008.

The earlier "people versus regime" dichotomy persisted. Local populations previously portrayed as victims of "separatist elites" before became now of the Russian occupation. For instance, Saakashvili claimed that "most of the refugees from South Ossetia" were "ethnic Ossetians" who "fled from so-called liberators or were forced out" (Saakashvili, 2009). The

discourse also continued to *infantilize* local populations. In 2010, Saakashvili addressed “ethnic Abkhaz and Ossetians, who live behind the new Iron Curtain,” inviting them to “rejoin” Georgia:

Your differences enrich our proud national tapestry. Rather than see *you succumb to annexation by the emerging Russian empire*, we invite you to build together with us a multicultural and multi-ethnic society [...] (Saakashvili, 2010, emphasis added).

Notably, Georgian discourse never acknowledged the possibility that these populations might prefer self-determination or incorporation into Russia rather than integration with the Georgian state. Instead, they were cast as passive subjects, deprived of agency, manipulated by external forces, and awaiting “return” to Georgia.

2.2.2. Georgia

1) Pre-2008

During this period, Saakashvili constructed a new national self-image for Georgia, grounded in the symbolic rupture of the Rose Revolution. This new identity was defined in explicit contrast to the previous Shevardnadze administration and centered on several recurring motifs: Georgia as a small but high-performing state, that is democratic, European, responsible, and peace-oriented.

The “old Georgia” was depicted as “a failed state” mired in “corrupt officials,” “decay,” and “crisis” (Saakashvili, 2004). In contrast, the post-Revolution Georgia was portrayed as governed by the rule of law, democratic norms, and transparent institutions. It was framed as an active and responsible member of the international community, whose foreign policy rested on cooperation and adherence to international law (Saakashvili, 2004, 2006, 2007). To substantiate this self-presentation, Saakashvili repeatedly highlighted Georgia’s participation in international missions in Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan, describing Georgian troops as joining “the civilized nations of the world” in the “global war on terrorism” (Saakashvili, 2004).

This construction reflects a significant shift in Georgia’s stigma management strategy. Unlike the earlier period, when Georgia emphasized smallness and vulnerability as a post-Soviet state, Saakashvili’s discourse reframed Georgia as a confident democracy that had “*chosen to join* the standard-bearers of civilized democracy” (Saakashvili, 2006, emphasis

added). Georgia was no longer positioned on the periphery of Europe but within “the international community of democratic nations” (Saakashvili, 2007). Europeanness, in particular, served as the central benchmark for belonging to this high-status “audience of normals” that Georgia sought to impress. In Saakashvili’s formulation, “We *are* a European nation [...] we would be denying our history if [...] we acted otherwise” (Saakashvili, 2006, emphasis added). The Revolution thus became rhetorically encoded as “a *return* to our European home and our European vocation, *so deeply enshrined in our national identity and history*” (Saakashvili, 2007, emphasis added).

Democratic progress, therefore, functioned not only as a domestic achievement but as a performative demonstration of Georgia’s Europeanness. Assessments by international organizations became key sources of external validation. Saakashvili frequently cited these evaluations to affirm Georgia’s place among democratic and economically successful states. After the 2004 elections, Saakashvili argued that Georgia had “proven the depth and breadth of our commitment to democracy” with elections recognized “by all observers as free and fair expressions of the public will” (Saakashvili, 2004). By 2006, Georgia was presented as “the number one reformer in the world, one of the least corrupt States in Europe, an outstanding place to do business and a role model for other countries of the region” (Saakashvili, 2006). In 2007, he celebrated rankings that placed Georgia alongside “some of the most developed economies in the world like Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Singapore and Hong Kong, Iceland” (Saakashvili, 2007). These rankings were based on the assessments by the World Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the International Financial Corporation.

2) Post-2008

The self-image that Saakashvili constructed before 2008 was further intensified in the aftermath of the war. The Russian “invasion” was discursively positioned as a direct assault on this identity: an attempt to destroy the democratic state that Georgia had become following the Rose Revolution.

A key feature of this period is the strategic deployment of Georgia’s smallness and post-Soviet background. Importantly, this was no longer articulated as a stigma that Georgia recognized and sought to overcome, as in the previous period. Under Shevardnadze, Georgia’s identity as a small, post-Soviet state was treated as an actual stigma, something that

differentiated Georgia from the “audience of normals” and that had to be overcome in order to gain acceptance within the Western, democratic community of states.

In contrast, under Saakashvili, these same identity markers became instrumental and selectively deployed rhetorical tools. Saakashvili consistently asserted that Georgia had already “broken free” from its Soviet past and had fully joined the community of democratic nations; yet he simultaneously invoked Georgia’s smallness and vulnerability when such references served strategic purposes. In stigma theory terms, this shift represents a move from stigma recognition to stigma shifting: here, Georgia did not internalize its smallness or post-Soviet identity as stigmatizing anymore. Instead, Georgia was clearly positioned among the high-status states – e.g., “I am proud that Georgia has become a *provider*, not just a *consumer*, of international security” (Saakashvili, 2011, emphasis added). Yet, at the same time, Saakashvili mobilized such rhetorical tools selectively to draw sympathy and political support from these high-status states, while simultaneously projecting stigma onto lower-status actors, most notably, Russia.

In the pre-2008 period, when Georgia’s smallness was mentioned, it appeared in narratives emphasizing extraordinary achievement despite its size – e.g., “[...] why such a small country [...] is so out in front in its international commitments to fighting terrorism and in contributing to that global cause” (Saakashvili, 2004). After 2008, however, smallness was reframed primarily as a marker of vulnerability. Georgia became a “small, faraway place,” “a small country of less than 5 million people” was “invaded” by “a neighbor 300 times its size” (Saakashvili, 2008); it was “a *massive* scale invasion by Russia, the successor to the Soviet Union” while Georgia is just “a country of *just* 4.7 million people — *less than* 5 million people — and that country is *100 times larger*, and well armed” (Saakashvili, 2012, emphasis added). Yet, Georgia “stood up to a force of Russian invaders *one hundred times the size of our contingent*, and gave us and the world time to mobilize and to protect and save our independence — something that, with all due respect, *many much bigger and more powerful nations could not do* in the twentieth century” (Saakashvili, 2013, emphasis added).

Consequently, the post-2008 discourse transformed into a heroic tale of a small democracy resisting imperial authoritarianism. The Soviet invasions of Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), and Afghanistan (1979) were invoked as historical analogies, in comparison to Georgia, which was “*even smaller* than any of those countries” (Saakashvili, 2012, emphasis added) as the latest victim of Russian aggression. Georgia, as protagonist, was elevated from a state to a moral idea: it “is *not only a country*; [...] It is *an idea of freedom and independence*

[...]” (Saakashvili, 2009, emphasis added). It was cast as a noble warrior, wise and resilient: “Despite all the turmoil, my country has *endured*. [...] *we will fight* [...] with the most potent weapon in our arsenal, namely, *our commitment to ever-expanding freedoms* within our own borders” (Saakashvili, 2008, emphasis added), despite “the barrels of hostile tanks point at us just 40 kilometers away from our capital” (Saakashvili, 2011, emphasis added). This struggle against Russia was framed as the “Second Rose Revolution”: its outcome would determine not only Georgia’s fate but also the well-being of the international order (Saakashvili, 2008). Through such rhetoric, Georgia’s struggle became internationalized: the defense of Georgia was discursively reframed as the defense of democracy itself.

This heroic framing was systematically paired with appeals to the “audience of normals.” Saakashvili repeatedly insisted that Georgia should not be left alone, that “as a community of responsible nations,” others had a responsibility to support Georgia and uphold international law (Saakashvili, 2009). Saakashvili drew on a symbolic roster of allies, such as Václav Havel, Anna Politkovskaya, US President Obama, and Vice President Biden, constructing a moral community in which Georgia belonged, and Russia did not.

Overall, post-2008 discourse showcases a sophisticated narrative strategy in which Georgia reconfigures its identity. Its smallness and post-Soviet past were mobilized not as inherent flaws but as narrative devices to dramatize victimhood, foster solidarity from the high-status states, and further stigmatize Russia as a low-status state. Through this framework, Georgia positioned itself as a moral and democratic actor under threat, appealing for Western support, and reordering the conflict narratives around Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

2.3. Conflict resolution narratives

1) Pre-2008

In the pre-2008 period, Georgia’s official discourse on conflict resolution largely reproduced the core narratives of the Shevardnadze era but reframed them through the lens of the Rose Revolution. Conflict resolution was no longer discussed as an isolated issue; rather, it was subordinated to the broader story of Georgia’s democratic transformation. Abkhazia and South Ossetia were presented as territories that had been left behind as Georgia progressed.

Saakashvili consistently emphasized that Georgia was committed to a “peaceful resolution” of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Saakashvili, 2004, 2006, 2007). Yet, “peace” in this discourse was consistently equated with “peaceful reunification” of these territories within Georgia’s internationally recognized borders. Nevertheless, in the peaceful settlements of the conflicts, Georgia now explicitly acknowledged the failure of the UN, as “it has not succeeded in making Georgia whole again, despite its unwavering recognition of Georgian sovereignty” and consequently, “welcome a robust role for the European Union and a greater role for its engagement on the ground” (Saakashvili, 2007). Only once, the direct dialogue between Georgia and the de facto authorities was mentioned in this period (Saakashvili, 2006).

The offer of autonomy remained present in this narrative. Saakashvili reiterated that Georgia was prepared to grant “a level of autonomy grounded in the very same principles that have guided the rest of Europe in promoting peace and prosperity throughout its multi-ethnic tapestry” (Saakashvili, 2007). This formulation embedded Georgia’s proposal within a European normative framework, reinforcing Georgia’s desired self-presentation as a democratic, European state and positioning its conflict-resolution plan as aligned with “European standards” of minority governance.

Saakashvili also claimed that “Georgia will not and cannot use violence to solve these conflicts, because *no democracy can go to war against its own people*” (Saakashvili, 2004, emphasis added). Through this rhetoric, Saakashvili reaffirmed both the democratic identity of Georgia and the territorial boundaries of Georgia that included Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In short, conflict resolution was discursively re-packaged as an extension of the Rose Revolution: a democratic Georgia peacefully *rehabilitating* territories portrayed as victims of criminal elites and external manipulation.

2) Post-2008

The 2008 August War fundamentally reconfigured Georgia’s conflict-resolution narrative. The conflicts were no longer framed as disputes with “separatist regions” but as the result of Russian military occupation. This shift removed Abkhazia and South Ossetia from the category of negotiating partners and positioned Russia as the sole obstacle to settlement. Reintegration now depended on one precondition: “de-occupation.” Saakashvili declared that once “Moscow withdraws from Tskhinvali and Sukhumi,” Georgia must “welcome back our

Ossetian and Abkhaz fellow citizens as brothers and sisters” (Saakashvili, 2013).

Furthermore, Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 pushed Georgia toward an active international non-recognition strategy. Saakashvili consistently appealed to UN member states not to recognize the two territories and to treat Russia’s actions as violations of international law.

Saakashvili’s post-2008 discourse presented the populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as passive hostages of Russian power, awaiting their eventual “return” to Georgia: “Together with all of Georgia’s diverse ethnic groups and religions, *we will prevail over the illegal occupation* and reverse the results of ethnic cleansing” (Saakashvili, 2009, emphasis added). This reframing erased what little political agency Abkhazia and South Ossetia held in earlier narratives. In Saakashvili’s speeches, their subjecthood was replaced entirely by the figure of Russia.

A central feature of the post-2008 discourse is the sharp moral dichotomy between Georgia and Russia. Georgia was portrayed as the peaceful, reasonable, norm-abiding party in the conflict, while Russia was the aggressor:

How did Georgia respond to those violations of international law and human rights? *We answered with patience and calm. [...] we behave in a civilized and patient way, even when our enemy uses barbaric methods* or implements an impulsive and irrational policy (Saakashvili, 2010, emphasis added).

The moral dichotomy of civilized Georgia versus barbaric Russia served two strategic purposes. First, it reinforced Georgia’s claim to belonging within the “community of responsible nations,” aligning its identity with democratic, European states. Second, it reinforced the stigma imposed on Russia as an authoritarian, norm-violating actor. In support of this narrative, Saakashvili highlighted endorsements from Western institutions, referring, for example, to the EU Monitoring Mission’s praise of Georgia’s “constructive unilateralism” (Saakashvili, 2010).

Finally, Saakashvili explicitly declared that Georgia had renounced the use of force as *a matter of principle*: “Georgia would never use force to liberate those of its regions currently occupied by the Russian Federation. *Even though the United Nations Charter gives us the authority to do so*, as we well know, we definitively renounced military means to restore our territorial integrity” (Saakashvili, 2011, emphasis added).

As “Georgia renounced the use of force” (Saakashvili, 2011), the burden of peace was placed on Russia. Despite the transformation in Georgian discourse from “separatist regions” to “occupied territories,” and from internal conflict to interstate war, the underlying resolution model remained constant: the ultimate objective continued to be the reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Georgia. The only addition was the prerequisite of “de-occupation,” which became the new conceptual precondition for any progress toward settlement.

2.4. Georgia-Russia relations

1) Pre-2008

Georgia’s initial foreign policy approach was based on regional cooperation, “that leads us away from the outdated politics of domination” (Saakashvili, 2004). While the closure of Russian military bases, the distribution of Russian passports, and the perceived ineffectiveness of Russian peacekeepers remained thorny issues, Saakashvili was willing to cooperate with Russia to an extent that he offered to set up a bilateral body to discuss “the protection of the rights of Russian citizens now living in Georgia so that no inhabitant of Georgia ever feels forgotten or unprotected” (Saakashvili, 2004).

A central device in this early discourse was the identification of terrorism as a *shared threat*. Saakashvili presented terrorist violence, including the 2004 Beslan school attack in Russia, as a “common enemy” of Russia and Georgia (Saakashvili, 2004). He drew explicit parallels between Beslan and “Abkhaz separatism 10 or 11 years ago,” arguing that “the terrorists that seized the school are common enemies of Russia and Georgia alike” and that “all forms of violent separatism – whether in Tskhinvali, Grozny or Sukhumi – represent destabilizing factors for Russia and Georgia alike” (Saakashvili, 2004).

During the pre-2008 period, relations with Russia constituted what Saakashvili repeatedly termed Georgia’s “most challenging relationship” (Saakashvili, 2007). Nevertheless, Georgia’s official discourse still framed Russia as a potential partner, at least rhetorically, within a broader regional and international security framework.

2) Post-2008

The 2008 war marked a decisive rupture in Georgia's discursive construction of Russia. Russia was no longer framed as a reluctant or complicated partner but as an occupying power and primary aggressor. Accordingly, Georgia's stigmatization of Russia intensified and became systematically embedded within two interlocking discursive strategies: (1) the invocation of Soviet historical continuity, and (2) the distinction between the Russian people and the Russian regime.

First, by linking contemporary Russian actions to the Soviet past, Saakashvili portrayed Russia as an imperial successor state whose behavior reproduced patterns of domination characteristic of the USSR. In contrast, Georgia was cast as having decisively transcended its Soviet legacy that was associated with "corruption, coercion, intimidation, oppression, cynicism and despair" (Saakashvili, 2012). "Sovietism and post-Sovietism is not a fate," Saakashvili (2012) declared, and Georgia became a state that had embraced democracy, transparency, and European identity after the Rose Revolution: "Georgia today is the very idea that democracy can thrive in our part of the world" (Saakashvili, 2012). Within this narrative, Russian aggression was interpreted as a punitive reaction to Georgia's democratization: Georgia "is regularly threatened with destruction and annihilation" because it chose "the path of freedom, the path of transparency and accountability, the path of meritocracy and an open society" (Saakashvili, 2012).

Second, Saakashvili extended to Russia the same "people versus regime" dichotomy he had previously applied to Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Russians were "welcome in Georgia, as tourists, as students, as businessmen, as journalists or simply as friends, but never as occupation forces" (Saakashvili, 2010). Furthermore, Georgia's democratic transformation was portrayed as an example for Russia, and a threat to the Russian leadership as "many Russians were asking, if the once-corrupt Georgia, a criminal country, a mafia-ridden country, considered to be a failed country, could succeed, *why is it that Russia cannot succeed?*" (Saakashvili, 2013, emphasis added).

Saakashvili's final UN speech in 2013 was the most explicit and confrontational one. He depicted Vladimir Putin as "the dictatorial leader of one of the last empires left," who was intent on building "a new Russian empire," and stated: "It makes me sick when KGB officer Vladimir Putin lectures the world about freedom, values and democracy" (Saakashvili, 2013).

This framing positioned Russia not only as an aggressor but as a fundamentally anti-democratic outlier within the international community.

Taken together, the post-2008 discourse reconfigured Russia from a difficult neighbor into a stigmatized, norm-violating adversary in the international system. This shift also served to consolidate Georgia's own identity as a small but principled democratic state aligned with the "audience of normals."

3. The Georgian Dream era (2014-2022)

Between 2014 and 2022, the analysis covers nine speeches delivered by Georgian representatives in the UNGA plenary sessions and eleven statements presented in the First Committee. This period follows Georgia's first peaceful transition, marked by the Georgian Dream Party's rise to power in 2012 and the subsequent departure of President Saakashvili in 2014.

A defining feature of this era is the way Georgian Dream officials positioned their electoral victory as a correction to the previous government's perceived failures, framing it as a restoration and deepening of democratic governance after the Saakashvili period. In contrast to Saakashvili's more confrontational and emotionally charged rhetoric, speakers from this period adopted a noticeably more diplomatic, technocratic tone.¹⁶ Strikingly, however, they adopted a narrative that included how their "government" improved the situation in Georgia after their election in 2012. In this sense, they used a consistent rhetoric that compared their achievements to the prior Saakashvili period, despite the fact that they employed the same point of references as Saakashvili did, such as Georgia's European identity, its contribution to international security frameworks, and its democratic progress within the country through the benchmarks of education, healthcare, etc.

Their primary narrative goal remained the same as before: the construction of Georgia's international self-image. However, the stigma management strategy changed. Rather than

¹⁶ In First Committee meetings, Georgian representatives, in contrast to UNGA plenary sessions, adopted a more assertive tone that broadly mirrored the earlier period. There were several recurring themes: Georgia's victimization under "occupation," the linkage between Russia's actions in Georgia and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, both framed as threats to European security (Agladze, 2018; Imnadze, 2014, 2015, 2020); and allegations of Russia's "ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands of Georgians" (Dvali, 2021; Imnadze, 2015, 2018).

continuing Saakashvili's stigma shifting strategy, that is, overcompensating toward Western states while heavily stigmatizing Russia and the de facto authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgian Dream shifted back toward stigma recognition. Accordingly, explicit overperformance toward Western audiences declined, and the frequency of delegitimizing or accusatory language directed at Russia and the contested territories decreased. Accordingly, Georgian officials worked to portray Georgia as steadily more democratic, stable, and aligned with Euro-Atlantic structures, thereby seeking validation from the "audience of normals" through demonstrations of compliance and credibility. Despite these tonal shifts, several discursive themes from the Saakashvili era persisted: most notably, the consistent reference to "20 percent of Georgia under occupation." While the conflict continued to be framed primarily as one of "Russian occupation," the major innovation in this period was the direct and repeated rhetorical address to the populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Unlike in previous periods, the diplomatic language used by Georgian officials in this period contributed to a less stigmatizing effect in their speeches.

3.1. The portrayal of the conflict

During this period, the conflict continued to be framed primarily as a Russia-Georgia conflict (Kvirikashvili, 2017). Abkhazia and South Ossetia were consistently depicted as territories under Russian occupation and undergoing a gradual process of annexation. Compared to the preceding eras, however, references to the conflict were more restrained and notably less stigmatizing. Georgian representatives increasingly situated their arguments within the framework of international law, emphasizing Russia's violations of the principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty. Occasionally, they portrayed the situation as Russia's attempt to rewrite history and divide peoples (Garibashvili, 2015).

The return of displaced Georgians was addressed in a markedly diplomatic manner. Rather than invoking the large and emotionally charged numbers that characterized earlier periods (e.g., 300,000 or 500,000), Georgian representatives linked the issue of return through the relevant UN resolutions. They underscored that, despite such many resolutions, the situation on the ground had not meaningfully improved. Numerical references to displacement were almost entirely absent, with only one exception: a single speech noting that "as a result of ethnic cleansing, 10 percent of our population is still forcefully displaced" (Bakhtadze, 2018).

A notable exception to this pattern appeared in the 2018 address, which subtly reframed the historical timeline of the conflict. The speaker referred to the war in Abkhazia in 1992-1993 as the beginning of an “occupation”: “twenty-five years ago today, the occupation of a historical part of Georgia started.” He then continued: “ten years ago, the Russian Federation launched *yet another* large-scale military aggression against my country” (Bakhtadze, 2018, emphasis added). Although the first reference left the identity of the original “occupier” ambiguous, the second statement implicitly linked both episodes into a single continuum of Russian occupation.

3.2. The discursive representations of Abkhazia and Georgia

3.2.1. Abkhazia

During this period, Abkhazia and South Ossetia continued to be grouped together as “two historic and integral regions” (Bakhtadze, 2018) of Georgia under the label of the occupied territories. In line with the post-2008 rhetoric, the “20 per cent of our country” under Russian occupation narrative remained (Kvirikashvili, 2016; Zourabichvili, 2019; Gakharia, 2020; Garibashvili, 2021, 2022). Unlike the previous term, however, the local authorities were referred to as “de facto authorities” (Garibashvili, 2015; Kvirikashvili, 2017).

A notable shift in this period is the consistent discursive outreach to the populations residing in these territories. Georgian representatives repeatedly addressed them *directly* as “my brothers and sisters in Abkhazia and South Ossetia” (Garibashvili, 2014, 2015, 2021, 2022) and as “our Abkhaz and Ossetian compatriots” with whom Georgians “share a common historical past” (Bakhtadze, 2018). The populations were depicted as communities unjustly deprived of Georgia’s progress, echoing the early Saakashvili period. Accordingly, Georgian officials emphasized that “Georgia is willing and able to share all this with you” (Gakharia, 2020) as “Georgia’s every success is their success” (Bakhtadze, 2018).

This narrative also resembles Saakashvili’s earlier distinction between “the people” and “the regime,” but the tone and function differ. Whereas Saakashvili often used the image of local populations to further stigmatize the de facto authorities, or Russia, Georgian Dream officials refrained from constructing an explicit dichotomy between “the people” and “the regime.” Instead, their discourse aimed at attracting the sympathy of the local populations

because “we have a common history and are part of a *common homeland, Sakartvelo*” (Garibashvili, 2021, emphasis added).

This outreach culminated in the 2019 speech by President Zourabichvili, which stands out as an unusual and significant intervention in the official discourse. She expressed explicit concern over the potential disappearance not only of the Georgian but also the Abkhaz language and identity:

I have to speak out and warn the world — in occupied Abkhazia not only the Georgian language but also the Abkhaz language, which the Georgian Constitution recognizes and I must defend as the President of Georgia, as well as the Abkhaz identity, are on the verge of disappearance. Abkhazian people are suffering a drastic demographic reduction. I must warn the Assembly: *a world without the Abkhazian language, identity and traditions will be a much poorer place. We must all unite to protect and save that rich cultural diversity, which led the Arabs to refer to the Caucasus as the mountain of languages* (Zourabichvili, 2019, emphasis added).

This is the only instance across the speeches of three decades where a Georgian official directly raises the issue of the endangerment of the Abkhaz language and identity, marking a rare moment of empathetic discursive engagement with the Abkhaz people and their cultural survival.

3.2.2. Georgia

Georgian officials in this period focused on creating a *better image* of Georgia compared to the previous terms because “Georgia of today is another world compared to that of two decades ago, or even just two years ago” (Garibashvili, 2014). This self-representation rested on the reaffirmation of key identities and commitments: Georgia as a European, democratic state firmly oriented toward Euro-Atlantic integration in the form of NATO and EU memberships. In this sense, this era marks the most explicit and assertive articulation of Georgia’s “commitment to aligning more closely with the United States and Europe” (Garibashvili, 2014). Accordingly, there was a stronger focus on Georgia’s European identity, framed again as a “return” to “the family of European nations, with whom *we share a history, a culture and, most important, common values*” (Garibashvili, 2014, 2022, emphasis added). This is “a civilizational choice” (Bakhtadze, 2018; Garibashvili, 2021) and “Georgia *deserves* EU member candidate status” (Garibashvili, 2022, emphasis added).

In terms of stigma management, this period marks a clear shift from stigma shifting to stigma recognition. Rather than overcompensating through hyperbolic celebration of the Western identity and values and aggressive othering of Russia at the same time, Georgian officials first and foremost focused on Georgia's own compliance with the rules of the international order. Through this strategy, Georgia sought validation not by deflecting stigma onto others but by demonstrating membership in the community of "civilized," democratic states. This was accomplished through repeated references to Georgia's democratic reforms, the consolidation of the rule of law, and commitments to the protection of human rights.

A crucial component of this identity performance involved emphasizing Georgia's role as a security provider. Echoing earlier discourses but with less theatricality, officials reiterated that Georgia was "a *supplier* of security, not just a *consumer*" (Garibashvili, 2014, emphasis added) and as an "*important player* in ensuring global security" (Gakharia, 2020, emphasis added). Georgia's status as "the largest non-NATO contributor" to ISAF in Afghanistan, its deployments under EU-led missions in the Central African Republic and Mali, and its membership in the anti-ISIS Global Coalition were all cited as evidence that Georgia "carries its share of international responsibilities" (Kvirikashvili, 2017) and contributes "to global peace and the rules-based international order" (Garibashvili, 2022).

This narrative was embedded within a broader story of transformation: Georgia's evolution from an isolated, civil war-torn state into a modern, democratic, and European member of the international community (Garibashvili, 2015; Kvirikashvili, 2016). Georgia was portrayed as a *small, young democracy*, yet it has achieved more than its size would suggest (Garibashvili, 2014, 2015, 2021; Zourabichvili, 2019). At the same time, it was *ancient* (Kvirikashvili, 2016; Bakhtadze, 2019; Gakharia, 2020; Garibashvili, 2021, 2022), "a model for religious, ethnic and cultural tolerance and openness" (Zourabichvili, 2019) and "part of European civilization" (Gakharia, 2020): "With its rich culture and ancient history, *Georgia has always stood* with the world's *civilized nations* and contributed to the development of *European and global civilizations*" (Bakhtadze, 2018, emphasis added). In line with this, Georgians were depicted as "strong, proud, and freedom-loving" (Gakharia, 2020; Garibashvili, 2022), "committed to Western values" (Garibashvili, 2015; Gakharia, 2020). Such essentialist descriptions served to *naturalize* Georgia's European identity, framing it not as a strategic preference but as a deeply rooted civilizational belonging, an organic extension of Georgian identity.

Overall, the discursive representation of Georgia in this period reflects a coherent effort to position itself within Western normative frameworks, legitimize its geopolitical orientation, and manage the stigma associated with unresolved conflicts and the lack of territorial control by re-centering identity around democracy and Europeanness.

3.3. Conflict resolution narratives

Throughout this period, Georgian officials consistently reaffirmed their commitment to achieving a peaceful settlement of the conflict. This vision centered on “*reconciliation with our brothers and sisters in Abkhazia and South Ossetia*” (Garibashvili, 2014, emphasis added) while upholding Georgia’s territorial integrity and sovereignty. A notable development was the increased use of *direct appeals* to the populations living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, particularly young people (Bakhtadze, 2018). Georgian representatives framed peacebuilding in terms of practical benefits and opportunities, emphasizing that residents of these territories should be able to access “all the benefits of our European agenda,” including expanded possibilities for trade, healthcare, and education (Kvirikashvili, 2016, 2017). These ideas were institutionalized through the initiative called *A Step to a Better Future*.

While Georgian officials continued to mention the right of return of displaced persons and the issue of Georgian-language education, the overall tone of victimhood was comparatively more subdued than in earlier periods. Still, “the situation in the occupied territories is a humanitarian disaster of the worst kind” (Bakhtadze, 2018). Nevertheless, instead of foregrounding victimhood or emphasizing Georgia’s suffering, speakers drew on a repertoire of *conciliatory* and *future-oriented* discursive strategies.

Another recurring theme was the reference to the Geneva International Discussions as the primary platform for engagement with Russia and for demonstrating Georgia’s active commitment to peace. Officials repeatedly emphasized that Georgia approached these talks constructively, whereas Russia obstructed the progress. At the same time, as Georgia began to address residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia more openly, Russia was framed as a potential obstacle, thereby warning Moscow “not to undermine or compromise our peace initiatives and to make it possible for the citizens in the occupied territories to lead a decent life” (Bakhtadze, 2018).

3.4. Georgia-Russia relations

Consistent with the framing of the conflict as a Russia-Georgia dispute, Russia continued to be depicted as the occupying power and principal aggressor throughout this period. However, the intensity and confrontational tone of this portrayal softened compared to the Saakashvili era. Georgian officials repeatedly emphasized a desire for constructive relations, while simultaneously asserting non-negotiable principles: “Georgians want a good relationship with Russia, but *never at the expense of our sovereignty and independence*, which we fought so hard to achieve” (Garibashvili, 2014, emphasis added). In 2022, Georgia explicitly expressed its support for Ukraine after the full-scale Russian invasion and stressed that it acted “fully in accordance with the financial sanctions imposed by the United States and others on the Russian Federation” (Garibashvili, 2022).

Russia was still described as posing “an existential threat” to Georgia (Kvirikashvili, 2016) and as “actively seeking to undermine our aspirations to join the European and Euro-Atlantic family” (Garibashvili, 2021). At the same time, the rhetoric became more measured and legalistic, with the “occupation” presented as a *fact* grounded in international law. This reflects a broader discursive shift: Georgian representatives avoided direct appeals to Russia or overtly accusatory language, instead situating Russia’s actions within a narrative of violations of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the wider rules-based international order. Therefore, while Russia remained central to Georgia’s conflict narrative, the tone of Georgian diplomacy in this period was notably more restrained, consistent with the government’s broader strategy of moderation and its emphasis on European and Euro-Atlantic alignment.

Chapter 5: Discussion

1. Making of a conflict: Abkhazia

UNGA speeches reveal a persistent and systematic pattern of stigmatization in the Georgian official discourse toward Abkhazia for three decades. Despite shifts in tone and emphasis across different political administrations, the core narrative remains remarkably stable: the conflict is framed as a form of separatism, and Abkhazia (and South Ossetia) are portrayed as historically and inherently Georgian territories. Within this framework, any expression of Abkhaz political agency or self-determination is rendered as inherently illegal, illegitimate, and unacceptable from the outset. Furthermore, from the beginning, Georgia has attempted to securitize and internationalize the conflict by portraying Abkhazia as a threat to international order, security, and peace.

The mechanisms of stigmatization – labeling, stereotyping, separation, and status loss coupled with discrimination – are clearly visible in the UNGA speeches of Georgian officials. Abkhazia is repeatedly described as “terrorists,” “separatists,” and “criminals.” These labels are consistently associated with lawlessness, intolerance, hatred, violence, and ethnic cleansing. Repetition plays a crucial discursive role: through the persistent recycling of such labels, Georgian officials construct a stable cognitive framework in which Abkhazia appears both dangerous and illegitimate.

A recurring stereotype within this discourse is the civilized versus barbaric dichotomy: Georgia is presented as the bearer of civilization, drawing on narratives of ancient statehood, multiculturalism, and democratic potential, whereas Abkhazia is positioned as its opposite, that is, a space of immorality, illegality, and criminality. Therefore, Abkhazia is fundamentally separated from and opposed to the legitimate, law-abiding Georgian state and the values it claims to embody. Within this discursive framework, Abkhazia is rendered not as a proper political actor but as a deviant entity that must be condemned and excluded. This is reflected in Abkhazia’s exclusion from international organizations and its lack of membership in the international community as a recognized state. The CIS sanctions on Abkhazia in the 1990s were an important example of the discrimination that Abkhazia faced as part of this stigmatization process.

A core element of Georgia's official discourse in its portrayal of Abkhazia is the emphasis on ethnic cleansing. Although ethnic cleansing and displacement do not necessarily entail each other, Georgian officials strategically paired the two in their narratives to strengthen their own rhetoric about Georgia's victimhood and to delegitimize Abkhazia's political claims.

The return of displaced Georgians constitutes another recurring theme in Georgian official discourse. Especially after the Rose Revolution, it is increasingly presented as an integral part of Georgia's democratic consolidation. In this framing, Georgia's democratization is depicted as incomplete so long as displaced people are unable to return to Abkhazia. As a result, the issue is reframed beyond conflict resolution and presented to Western audiences as an obstacle to Georgia's democratic development. This framing implicitly shifts responsibility for any shortcomings in Georgia's democratic trajectory onto the Abkhaz side, which is depicted as obstructing both the return of the displaced and democratization of Georgia. In other words, Georgian discourse externalizes responsibility for its own democratization, thereby adding another layer to its victimization narrative.

A comparable discursive pattern can be observed in Georgia's representations of conflict resolution. For decades, Georgian representatives at the UNGA have emphasized their commitment to a "peaceful resolution of the conflict." It portrays itself as a peace-seeking, democratic, rational actor, all the while delegitimizing and criminalizing the Abkhaz leadership. This discourse is structured around a self-serving attribution pattern and moral asymmetry: Georgia claims ownership over peace while the responsibility of the unresolved conflict is consistently displaced onto the stigmatized other. In this sense, Georgia's peace discourse primarily functions to sustain a desired international image of itself vis-à-vis Abkhazia.

UNGA speeches of Georgian officials further reveal a consistent denial of Abkhaz political agency. Abkhazia is recognized only as a territory within Georgia, while narratives of ethnic cleansing and displacement construct an image of an emptied space, implicitly erasing the presence of a politically meaningful local population. Abkhaz grievances are not acknowledged, and the Abkhaz people themselves appear only sporadically in Georgian discourse, most often framed as "brothers and sisters" under strict conditions.¹⁷ This

¹⁷ By contrast, Abkhaz narratives continue to recall wartime statements by Georgian officials that are interpreted as evidence of an existential threat. One example is a televised address by General Giorgi Karkarashvili, then commander of Georgian forces in Abkhazia, in which he declared a willingness to sacrifice 100,000 Georgians in order to eliminate the entire Abkhaz population of 97,000 (Ó Beachain, 2025, p. 186; Fawn & Cummings, 2001, p. 98).

recognition is granted solely on Georgian terms: the Abkhaz are portrayed as a minority population in need of “rescue” from illegitimate local elites or, in later periods, from Russia. The possibility that Abkhaz authorities might reflect the will of the local population in Abkhazia, or that Abkhaz political preferences might fundamentally diverge from being a part of the Georgian state, is never entertained.¹⁸ By framing the conflict exclusively as an illegitimate secession attempt, Georgian discourse erases both the Abkhaz agency and Georgia’s own responsibility in the persistence of the conflict.

Across all periods, the stigmatized identity of Abkhazia is strongly anchored in the power of international law. Because international law privileges the principles of territorial integrity and state sovereignty, Georgian officials strategically mobilize these norms to legitimize their own position while delegitimizing Abkhazia’s political claims. As Rumelili (2012, pp. 499-500) notes, norms do not merely regulate behavior but also differentiate and rank states by constructing “classes” of actors: norm abiders and violators, responsible and rogue, democratic and non-democratic, civilized and barbaric. Within this normative hierarchy, Abkhazia is consistently positioned as a norm-violating, rogue, non-democratic, and uncivilized entity. This exemplifies the condition of double stigmatization faced by *de facto* states mentioned earlier. Abkhazia is structurally marginalized by an international system that denies recognition to entities outside the framework of sovereign statehood, while simultaneously being subjected to delegitimizing discourse produced by the base state, Georgia. Georgian discourse capitalizes this structural asymmetry by repeatedly invoking international law as both a moral and legal resource.

The most significant shift in the history of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict occurred after the 2008 War. At this point, the conflict is escalated to an interstate level and becomes a Georgian-Russian conflict. The terminology of “separatism” disappeared along with the “Abkhaz conflict.” Abkhazia and South Ossetia are bundled together as “occupied territories,”

¹⁸ A number of ethnographic studies incorporating Abkhaz perspectives through direct engagement provide insight into such views. Garb (2009), for example, interrogates why Abkhazians respond so negatively to proposals for reintegration into a Georgian state that Western audiences often portray as a “beacon of liberty” (p. 238). Abkhaz respondents themselves pose a parallel question, asking why “nobody [is] interested in why we don’t think it’s safe for us to live in a Georgian state” (Garb, 2009, p. 239), and point to perceptions of “genocidal intent” rooted in Soviet-era policies and the 1992–1993 war (Garb, 2009, p. 238). More recent work by Peinhopf (2022) documents a widespread sense of emotional attachment to the Abkhaz state among her Abkhaz respondents, despite their dissatisfaction with its limited capacity to provide basic services such as healthcare. Similarly, Shesterinina’s (2023) interviews highlight narratives centered on a “long-term struggle against Georgia” (p. 10) and reveal ambivalent assessments of Russia’s post-2008 role as a security guarantor. While acknowledging the practical necessity of Russian support, respondents also articulate concerns about dependency, noting that “full independence does not exist here,” and recalling the profound isolation experienced during the period of CIS-imposed sanctions (Shesterinina, 2023, p. 10).

and local dynamics are subsumed under a broader geopolitical narrative. This shift reflects what Kabachnik et al. (2012) describe as the *rescaling of conflict*: a shift from local scale to a broader geopolitical confrontation between Georgia and Russia that reinforces Georgia's victimhood and moral authority while stripping away its responsibility in the conflict. Saakashvili's slogan of "20 percent of my country under Russian occupation" crystallized this narrative and has persisted to this day.

Ultimately, Georgian discourse at the UNGA demonstrates a consistent pattern of self-serving attribution: positive developments are framed as the result of Georgia's own actions, while negative outcomes are externalized and attributed to weaker or stigmatized actors. Moral authority is monopolized by the Georgian state and responsibility is displaced onto Abkhazia and later onto Russia. As Broers (2013, p. 11) observes, entities such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia are often "understood in terms of what they symbolize, rather than what they are." Reduced to symbols of illegality or instruments of Russian expansionism, they are stripped of agency and historical complexity (Broers, 2013, p. 3). This perception largely reflects the uncritical incorporation of Soviet-era administrative borders into the post-Cold War international order (Ó Beacháin, 2025, p. 183). As a result, the construction of Abkhazia's stigmatized identity tells us less about Abkhazia itself than about Georgia's efforts to shape international understandings of the conflict.

2. Making of a state: Georgia

During the three decades examined in this study, Georgia underwent repeated domestic political transformations, and each administration pursued its own state-building project. These domestic shifts left clear traces in the UNGA speeches. Representatives from each administration juxtaposed their own "achievements" with the perceived failures of their predecessors. The Georgian state has been said to transform "from chaos to stability and from total economic collapse to development" (Menagarishvili, 1998) in the Shevardnadze period, "from a failed State to a market democracy" (Saakashvili, 2013) in the Saakashvili period, and finally "a much stronger nation than we were just two years ago" (Garibashvili, 2014). Within this framework, the conflict, and later the "occupation," functioned as a flexible rhetorical tool through which Georgia could assert its statehood and national identity.

From the very beginning, territorial integrity constituted a vital component of these state-building efforts, and the "unification" of Georgia remained at the core of Georgia's unfinished

state-building project for every government, which was especially salient during the Saakashvili era (Mitchell, 2009, p. 177). The fragility of Georgian statehood is reflected in the speakers' constant references to the "ancient" Georgian statehood, such as the claim that "the history of Georgian statehood stretches back more than three millennia" (Shevardnadze, 1999).

In the early 1990s, however, the post-Soviet, newly independent Georgia was in great domestic turmoil, including bloody coups, power struggles between paramilitary groups, a civil war, the war in Abkhazia, and economic collapse. These conditions shaped Georgia's stigma management strategies during the Shevardnadze period. Georgia largely adopted a strategy of *stigma recognition*, acknowledging its post-Soviet identity and the associated perceptions of vulnerability and disorder as a liability to be overcome. Rather than contesting this stigma, Georgian officials framed it as a transitional situation and emphasized their intention to become "normal" by aligning with the international community. In this period, Georgia consistently portrayed itself as an aspiring, reform-oriented state committed to liberal democratic norms and international cooperation, actively seeking validation from international organizations as its primary "audience of normals."

Inside Georgia, however, the Shevardnadze period was characterized by pervasive corruption, electoral fraud, and weak state institutions (Sartania, 2021). Against this backdrop, the Rose Revolution unfolded in 2003, paving the way for Saakashvili's ambitious state-building project. His government launched sweeping reforms that included anti-corruption measures, judicial reforms, economic liberalization, and the creation of an attractive investment climate. Defense spending emerged as a particularly symbolic component of this agenda as the military had been severely weakened during the Shevardnadze period. Between 2003 and 2007, defense spending surged from \$30 million to \$940 million, rising from 0.7% to 8% of GDP (Mitchell, 2009, p. 178). The reintegration of Adjara in 2004 provided the Saakashvili government with an early symbolic victory and was seen as a promise for the future "reintegration" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹⁹

Saakashvili's reform strategy, however, relied heavily on rapid, top-down decision-making. This helped accelerate institutional reforms but also produced a significant democratic deficit.

¹⁹ Adjara, ruled since the mid-1990s by Aslan Abashidze, an authoritarian leader and Shevardnadze ally, had exercised significant autonomy. Following a military standoff and mass pro-democracy protests in Batumi, Abashidze fled, and Tbilisi reasserted control. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, unlike Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Adjars were ethnically Georgian and did not see the Georgian state as a threat, whereas "the Abkhaz and Ossetians feared a Georgian nationalizing state" (Toft, 2001, p. 125).

In other words, state-building and democracy-building did not proceed in tandem (Mitchell, 2009). Combined with Saakashvili's tendency to overpromise and underdeliver, public dissatisfaction grew despite the government's early successes. By 2008, Saakashvili was facing a declining domestic support, which encouraged him to pursue quick, visible achievements (Mitchell, 2009). With the example of Adjara in mind, the unresolved issue of territorial integrity appeared to offer precisely such an opportunity, and against this backdrop, the 2008 War unfolded.

The Saakashvili era was characterized by an assertive nationalist rhetoric grounded in the unification of Georgia (Mitchell, 2009, p. 180). This rhetoric is also visible in his UNGA speeches, where he used a very stigmatizing language toward Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and after 2008, toward Russia. However, in the Saakashvili era, Georgia was no longer presented as a post-Soviet, newly independent state. Saakashvili constructed a new image for Georgia from a post-Soviet, transitioning state into a European democratic state, and after 2008, a European democracy "under attack." This period exemplifies a strategy of *stigma shifting*: Georgia functioned simultaneously as a stigmatized and stigmatizing actor, engaging upward and downward comparisons with the high-status and low-status actors to navigate its position in the international hierarchy. The "audience of normals" for Georgia in this period was primarily Western states, whose liberal-democratic norms it seeks to emulate and align with. This was most visible in its aspirations for membership in the EU and NATO. Conversely, Georgia sought to distance itself from lower-status actors, particularly Russia and anything associated with the Russian sphere of influence. Within this dynamic, Abkhazia functioned as a discursive site through which Georgia performed stigmatization: Abkhazia's association with Russia both delegitimized Abkhazia and affirmed Georgia's normative position in the eyes of the Western states.

Saakashvili's failures, first and foremost, the 2008 War, drove the Georgian Dream government to adopt a more moderate tone and approach toward Abkhazia and South Ossetia.²⁰ During this period, Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations became especially

²⁰ In 2018, the Georgian Dream government unveiled a new peace initiative called "A Step to a Better Future," which sought to engage directly with the local populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia through a range of economic and social incentives. The initiative proposed measures such as access to education in Georgia and abroad, the assignment of personal identification numbers without citizenship designation, the use of neutral labeling for products originating in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the establishment of mechanisms intended to facilitate access to certain EU-related benefits available to Georgian citizens, including visa-free travel to the Schengen Area and participation in free trade arrangements (JAMNews, 2018). Nevertheless, the initiative was met with skepticism, particularly regarding its practical feasibility and political implications (JAMNews, 2018).

prominent in the UNGA speeches. At the same time, public opinion surveys indicate that territorial integrity remains a higher priority than Euro-Atlantic integration. In a 2020 survey, more than 75 percent of respondents, both rural and urban populations, reported that regaining control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia was more important than membership in NATO or the EU (Chankvetadze & Murusidze, 2021). This finding emphasizes the persistent importance of the reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgian politics.

This narrative has been reinforced by political elites and media for decades in a context where societies on opposing sides of the conflict have had virtually no direct interaction (Chankvetadze & Murusidze, 2021). As a result, conflict resolution has become highly politicized, and the introduction of alternative narratives has proven difficult. One example is a state institution: in January 2008, the “State Ministry for Conflict Resolution Issues” was renamed as the “State Ministry for Reintegration,” which was criticized by the de facto authorities, who rejected engagement framed explicitly in terms of “reintegration” (Civil.ge, 2013). In 2013, the ministry was again renamed, this time as the “State Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality,” under Paata Zakareishvili who served as the Minister between 2012-2016. Coming from a civil society background, Zakareishvili publicly advocated a critical reassessment of the past,²¹ which provoked substantial domestic criticism and ultimately contributed to his departure from office (Bursulaia, 2020, p. 289).

Despite changes in political leadership, Georgian domestic politics have remained embedded in binary geopolitical frameworks shaped by realpolitik, particularly a West-Russia axis. Within this framework, democratic transformation is often articulated through externally defined standards rather than becoming a localized political practice. As a result, democracy functions less as a deeply embedded domestic process and more as a performative reference point in Georgia’s international self-presentation. A central element of this performance is the construction of Georgia’s Europeanness. This dynamic reached its peak during the Saakashvili era, when European identity was explicitly integrated into the state-building project. This included the adoption of new national symbols; a new anthem, a new coat of arms, and a new

²¹ In his words: “There was also no support from the press and NGOs for reassessing the past in order to re-evaluate the events of the 1990s. I looked for and expected the most support from the civil sector, though, it mostly played a role of an observer and truth-holder. This sector acted as if the truth was kept with it and I had to be relevant to that truth. [...] When we encountered opposition in the Parliament while working on an amendment to the Law on the Occupied Territories, the civil sector was usually passive and silent. It never offered me collaboration, on the contrary, it perceived me not as a partner, but as the person who is accountable. [...] With rare exceptions, they were only interested in the implementation of their small projects, which did not comply with the interests of our agency with their scale” (Zakareishvili, 2020, pp. 42-43).

flag, alongside the prominent display of the EU flag at major government institutions (Ó Beacháin & Coene, 2014, p. 930).

Nevertheless, closer alignment with Europe does not, in itself, translate into a peaceful resolution of the conflicts. Nor does European orientation necessarily imply a substantive sense of belonging to Europe or a deep internalization of its normative values (Lejava, 2021). Rather, it reflects a historically rooted strategy of seeking external protection, shaped by Georgia's geopolitical vulnerability as a small state with a history of repeated invasions by larger powers and empires (Ó Beacháin & Coene, 2014, p. 933; Lejava, 2021).

Across different political periods, and notwithstanding shifts in tone or emphasis, Georgia's official self-representation vis-à-vis Abkhazia has displayed a high degree of continuity. Georgia consistently portrays itself as a peace-oriented, law-abiding, and morally responsible actor confronted first by unlawful separatism and later by occupation. At the same time, Georgia's unfinished state-building project and its persistent democratic deficits have constituted an important background condition shaping the protracted nature of the conflict. Within official discourse, responsibility for the persistence of the conflict is consistently externalized, while Georgia's culpability remains largely unexamined. The reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia continues to constitute a central state objective, and while coercive reintegration is not an explicit policy, it cannot be entirely excluded as a future possibility so long as Abkhazia remains a key symbolic site through which Georgia performs its identity, statehood, and alignment with the Western "audience of normals."

3. Shaping international perceptions and narrative transformation

In 1999, President Shevardnadze expressed his frustration that the conflict in Abkhazia received virtually no meaningful international attention. Less than a decade later, that situation had completely changed. By 2008, President Saakashvili had become one of the most internationally visible leaders from the post-Soviet region. Although he did not quite make Time Magazine's Person of the Year, he was listed among its "People Who Mattered," described as the leader who "poked the Russian bear, and his tiny nation got mauled" (TIME Magazine, 2008).

Following the 2008 war, Saakashvili appeared constantly in international media, giving interviews and becoming the subject of major profiles in Western media outlets. He managed

to captivate Western audiences “in a way that has not come naturally to former Soviet leaders” (Steavenson, 2008). His energetic, ambitious, media-savvy style drew global attention, which was something Georgia had long sought but never achieved.

By portraying himself as a nation-builder in the mold of Atatürk, Ben-Gurion, or de Gaulle (Steavenson, 2008), Saakashvili effectively reshaped both Georgia’s domestic transformation and the trajectory of its conflicts. Under his leadership, Georgia turned into a country watched, discussed, and debated far beyond its borders. In this sense, Saakashvili’s visibility did not simply place Georgia on the global stage; it reshaped the interpretive lens through which the conflict in Abkhazia was understood abroad.

Crucially, Saakashvili transformed the conflict narrative itself. After 2008, the Abkhaz question was no longer discursively constructed as a separatist conflict but as a case of Russian military occupation. This reframing resonated strongly with Western audiences because it aligned with broader concerns about Russian revisionism. As a result, issues that had previously been considered regional or peripheral were now interpreted as part of a larger geopolitical struggle between democracy and authoritarianism.

The question of who initiated the 2008 war has remained highly contested. Saakashvili insisted that “there should be an exhaustive independent investigation of the origins and causes of this war,” adding that his government was prepared to fully cooperate with such an inquiry (Saakashvili, 2008). In 2009, the EU-commissioned Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia – widely known as the Tagliavini Report – released what remains the most comprehensive examination of the five-day war. In more than one thousand pages of analysis, the Report rejected the Georgian government’s claim that its artillery assault was a response to an ongoing Russian invasion. Instead, it concluded that “there was no ongoing armed attack by Russia before the start of the Georgian operation... It could also not be verified that Russia was on the verge of such a major attack” and that “the shelling of Tskhinvali by the Georgian armed forces during the night of 7 to 8 August 2008 marked the beginning of the large-scale armed conflict in Georgia” (Traynor, 2009). The report found that both Russia and Georgia committed violations of international humanitarian law. While it explicitly condemned Russia’s actions, including its military build-up and passportization campaign in South Ossetia, it also held that the Georgian offensive against Tskhinvali was not justified under international law, being neither necessary nor proportionate (Traynor, 2009).

Nevertheless, after 2008, Georgia succeeded in inserting its version of the events into the dominant international discourse despite having lost the war militarily. Even after Saakashvili's political decline, the narrative he shaped persisted. The findings of the Tagliavini Report, which concluded that Georgia fired the first shot in 2008, have gradually disappeared from public consciousness.²² Instead, 2008 has been widely remembered as the moment when Russia "invaded Georgia." Georgian responsibility for the outbreak of the war has largely faded from public memory.

This selective remembrance was further strengthened after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and later its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As de Waal (2015) argues, the findings of the Tagliavini Report have been largely "buried" under the weight of new geopolitical realities, with "many people busy rewriting the history of 2008 in the light of Ukraine" (de Waal, 2015). This includes Saakashvili's successor, Georgian Dream, and Moscow, who have referred to the Report's findings to support their own political agendas when it is convenient, thereby further politicizing an already contested issue (Civil.ge, 2024). Consequently, the dominant storyline of Georgia as a victim of Russian aggression has become a political slogan: that is, one against Russian revisionism after Ukraine, especially in the West, and one for anti-Georgian Dream rhetoric in Georgia.²³

As Bianchi (2016, p. 295) reminds us, "narratives are value-laden: they tell one story to the detriment of others by silencing voices, setting characters aside, and — most importantly — by providing the authority of what is natural, what goes without saying. Over time, narratives are internalized, and their authority and explanatory force are taken for granted." As early as 2000, Shevardnadze himself claimed that Georgia had prevailed in the information war by securing international support for its territorial integrity (Fawn & Cummings, 2001, p. 103). Accordingly, the agency and grievances of the Abkhaz and South Ossetians have faded even further from view. In this sense, the transformation of the conflict narrative after 2008 and the

²² Interestingly, during a First Committee meeting, the Georgian representative invoked the Report in response to the Russian delegation's claims as follows: "With regard to Russia, let me note the following. First, with respect to the representative of Russia's references to the so-called crimes committed by Georgia, which allegedly engaged in an act of aggression by bombing its own citizens, resulting in the deaths of peacekeepers, may I recall that the Tagliavini report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia *clearly states the contrary of what the Russian delegation said. Also, it was the Russian Federation that invaded Georgia*" (Imnadze, 2018, emphasis added).

²³ The nearly 470-page report issued by the Georgian Dream-led parliamentary investigative commission accuses Saakashvili of "provoking" Russia into occupying Georgian territories and refers to the Rose Revolution as a "coup d'état." Critics argue that the report primarily serves to delegitimize the country's main opposition forces and consolidate the ruling party's authority (Bardouka, 2025; Machaidze, 2025).

endurance of the post-2008 narrative demonstrate the long-term influence of discourse on shaping public perceptions, extending well beyond the historical realities of a conflict.

Conclusion

This study has examined a conflict between two deeply unequal actors: a partially recognized de facto state, Abkhazia, and a sovereign state, Georgia, which derives its political and discursive authority from its position within the international system. It analyzed how the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict is articulated by one of the conflict parties, namely Georgia, and how Georgian discourse contributes to defining the meaning, legitimacy, and boundaries of the conflict in the international arena. This asymmetrical focus reflects the structural inequality embedded in the international system, where Abkhazia is denied representation and voice. In this respect, the study aligns with Inayatullah's (1996, p. 77) call to challenge "barriers to understanding injustice felt by states and individuals, constructing conversation, and creating a more just and dignified world."

From a critical discourse perspective, the stigmatization of Abkhazia cannot be analyzed independently of the practices and positionality of the stigmatizing actor, namely Georgia. Georgia's discourse is shaped by its own precarious status in the international system, where it occupies an ambivalent position rather than that of a fully "normal" state. Since independence, Georgia has carried its own stigmas as a post-Soviet state marked by incomplete state-building, unresolved territorial disputes, and democratic deficits. Within this context, the construction of Abkhazia as a stigmatized "other" functions as a constitutive element of Georgia's self-identity on the international stage. Its discursive commitments to peaceful resolution and the renunciation of force thus function as performative claims that reinforce Georgia's moral and legal standing.

From the outset, Abkhazia and Georgia did not agree on the nature of the conflict or the meaning of peace. For Georgia, the Abkhaz were framed as a minority that had imposed its will on the majority, and the conflict was primarily understood as a violation of territorial integrity and sovereignty. Therefore, any solution to the conflict became a question of minority governance and "reintegration." Georgia communicated these perceptions to the international audience at the UNGA for decades. Since there was no representation of Abkhazia at the UNGA, how the Abkhaz perceived the conflict remained absent in these discussions. This allowed Georgia to shape the narratives around the conflict and the opposing party.

Accordingly, Georgian discourse at the UNGA framed the war in Abkhazia primarily through highly stigmatizing portrayals of the opposing side: the Abkhaz were depicted as

terrorists backed by external forces, separatists driven by hatred and intolerance, and perpetrators of ethnic cleansing against Georgians and, at times, other minorities residing in Abkhazia. These representations, however, obscured significant dimensions of the conflict.

The outbreak of war in 1992 and the subsequent de facto independence of Abkhazia cannot be understood without reference to the legacy of demographic marginalization, political subordination, and historical trauma shaping Georgian-Abkhaz relations. Yet, Georgian officials never publicly acknowledged responsibility in these processes. Instead, as their UNGA speeches reveal, they occasionally invoked an imagined past in which Georgians and Abkhazians lived together peacefully under a unified Georgian state. However, this nostalgic narrative stands in sharp contrast to the Abkhaz collective memory. For Abkhazians, history is not a story of shared harmony but rather a record of domination, loss, trauma, and existential struggle. As a result, the Georgian narrative of a lost unity overlooks the depth of Abkhaz grievances and how unrealistic it is to expect them to be erased without genuine reconciliation.

An assessment of the Georgian peace efforts is beyond the scope of this study. It is nevertheless evident that the rigid positions of both parties have contributed to the persistence of the conflict. In Georgia's case, this rigidity is closely tied to the non-negotiability of territorial integrity and sovereignty. Material and social incentives that have been offered to the Abkhaz side have not substantially altered prevailing attitudes within Abkhazia, where a pro-independence stance remains strong and perceptions of Georgia as the main enemy persist.

Meaningful reconciliation requires both sides to recognize one another's experiences and acknowledge the validity of each other's suffering. From the outset, this condition has not been met. The very definition of the conflict, its causes, and even the meaning of peace have remained fundamentally incompatible between the two sides. For Georgia, history offered a template for unity; for Abkhazia, it was a reminder of survival. These incompatible understandings continue to shape their divergent paths and remain a central reason why the conflict persists as unresolved to this day.

List of references

- Adler-Nissen, R. (2014). Stigma management in international relations: Transgressive identities, norms, and order in international society. *International Organization*, 68(1), 143–176. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818313000337>
- Avdaliani, E. (2025, March 25). Russia's plans for Abkhazia are expanding. *Jamestown Foundation*. <https://jamestown.org/russias-plans-for-abkhazia-are-expanding/>
- Bardouka, Y. (2025, September 3). Georgian Dream publishes 470-page report accusing Saakashvili of crimes and instigating 2008 war. *OC Media*. <https://oc-media.org/georgian-dream-publishes-470-page-anti-opposition-report/>
- Barnsley, I., & Bleiker, R. (2008). Self-determination: From decolonization to deterritorialization. *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 20(2), 121–136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781150802079797>
- Bartmann, B. (2004). Political realities and legal anomalies: Revisiting the politics of international recognition. In T. Bahcheli, B. Bartmann, & H. Srebrnik (Eds.), *De facto states: The quest for sovereignty* (pp. 12–31). Routledge.
- Berg, E., & Toomla, R. (2009). Forms of normalisation in the quest for de facto statehood. *The International Spectator*, 44(4), 27–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932720903351104>
- Bianchi, A. (2016). Law and literature. In A. Bianchi, *International law theories: An inquiry into different ways of thinking* (pp. 287–310). Oxford University Press.
- Broers, L. (2013). Recognising politics in unrecognised states: 20 years of enquiry into the de facto states of the South Caucasus. *Caucasus Survey*, 1(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23761202.2013.810005>
- Bursulaia, G. (2020). The voices of silence: The case of Georgian history textbooks. *Caucasus Survey*, 8(2), 132–148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2019.1709784>
- Byman, D., & King, C. (2012). The mystery of phantom states. *The Washington Quarterly*, 35(3), 43–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2012.703580>

- Caspersen, N. (2008). From Kosovo to Karabakh: International responses to de facto states. *Comparative Southeast European Studies*, 56(1), 58–83. <https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2008-560105>
- Caspersen, N. (2012). *Unrecognized states: The struggle for sovereignty in the modern international system*. Polity Press.
- Caspersen, N. (2015). Degrees of legitimacy: Ensuring internal and external support in the absence of recognition. *Geoforum*, 66, 184–192. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.10.003>
- Chankvetadze, N., & Murusidze, K. (2021). Re-examining the radicalizing narratives of Georgia’s conflicts. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/05/re-examining-the-radicalizing-narratives-of-georgias-conflicts?lang=en>
- Charter of the United Nations*. (1945). United Nations. <https://www.refworld.org/legal/constinstr/un/1945/en/27654>
- Civil.ge. (2013, November 29). State Ministry for Reintegration to be renamed. <https://civil.ge/archives/123365>
- Civil.ge. (2024, August 13). Instrumentalizing Tagliavini Report, GD blames UNM for 2008 war, calls for trial. <https://civil.ge/archives/620207>
- Clogg, R. (1995). Documents from the KGB archive in Sukhum: Abkhazia in the Stalin years. *Central Asian Survey*, 14(1), 155–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634939508400896>
- Convention on the Rights and Duties of States. (1933, December 26). *Seventh International Conference of American States*. United Nations Treaty Collection. <https://treaties.un.org/pages/showdetails.aspx?objid=0800000280166aef>
- Coppieters, B. (2002). In defence of the homeland: Intellectuals and the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. In B. Coppieters & M. Huysseune (Eds.), *Secession, history and the social sciences* (pp. 89–116). VUB Press.
- Coppieters, B. (2018). ‘Statehood’, ‘de facto authorities’ and ‘occupation’: Contested concepts and the EU’s engagement in its European neighbourhood. *Ethnopolitics*, 17(4), 343–361. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2018.1495361>

- de Waal, T. (2015, September 30). The still topical Tagliavini Report. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2015/09/the-still-topical-tagliavini-report?lang=en>
- Etzioni, A. (1992). The evils of self-determination. *Foreign Policy*, 89, 21–35. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1149071>
- Epstein, C. (2012). Stop telling us how to behave: Socialization or infantilization? *International Studies Perspectives*, 13(2), 135–145. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1528-3585.2012.00458.x>
- Evers, M. M. (2017). On transgression. *International Studies Quarterly*, 61(4), 786–794. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx065>
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: Papers in the critical study of language*. Longman.
- Fawn, R., & Cummings, S. N. (2001). Interests over norms in western policy towards the Caucasus: How Abkhazia is no one's Kosovo. *European Security*, 10(3), 84–108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662830108407507>
- Finnemore, M., & Sikkink, K. (1998). International norm dynamics and political change. *International Organization*, 52(4), 887–917. <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081898550789>
- Fischer, S. (2010). *The EU's non-recognition and engagement policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia*. European Union Institute for Security Studies. https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/NREP_report.pdf
- Garb, P. (2009). The view from Abkhazia of South Ossetia ablaze. *Central Asian Survey*, 28(2), 235–246. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930903034856>
- Gegeshidze, A. (2008). The isolation of Abkhazia: A failed policy or an opportunity? In *Incentives, sanctions and conditionality* (Accord Issue 19). Conciliation Resources. <https://www.c-r.org/accord/incentives-sanctions-and-conditionality/isolation-abkhazia-failed-policy-or-opportunity>
- George, J., & Campbell, D. (1990). Patterns of dissent and the celebration of difference: Critical social theory and international relations. *International Studies Quarterly*, 34(3), 269–293. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2600570>

- Goffman, E. (1986). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Touchstone.
- Hatuel-Radoshitzky, M., & Jamal, A. (2021). Theorizing state stigmatization: A comparative perspective on South Africa and Israel. *International Relations*, 36(2), 214–236.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178211028976>
- International Committee of the Red Cross. (2025, December 4). *Searching for persons missing in connection with the 1992–1993 armed conflict in Abkhazia continues*.
<https://www.icrc.org/en/article/searching-persons-missing-connection-1992-1993-armed-conflict-abkhazia-continues>
- International Crisis Group. (2010, February 26). *Abkhazia: Deepening dependence* (Europe Report No. 202). <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/georgia/abkhazia-deepening-dependence>
- Inayatullah, N. (1996). Beyond the sovereignty dilemma: Quasi-states as social construct. In T. J. Biersteker & C. Weber (Eds.), *State sovereignty as social construct* (pp. 50–80). Cambridge University Press.
- Isachenko, D. (2012). *The making of informal states: Statebuilding in Northern Cyprus and Transdnistria*. Springer.
- Iskandaryan, A. (2015). In quest of the state in unrecognized states. *Caucasus Survey*, 3(3), 207–218. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2015.1086564>
- JAMNews. (2018, April 6). What do Abkhaz and Ossetians make of Georgia’s “A Step Towards a Better Future” proposal? <https://jam-news.net/what-do-abkhazians-and-ossetians-make-of-georgias-a-step-towards-a-better-future-proposal/>
- Kabachnik, P., Regulska, J., & Mitchneck, B. (2012). Displacing blame: Georgian internally displaced person perspectives of the Georgia–Abkhazia conflict. *Ethnopolitics*, 11(2), 123–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2012.675210>
- Ker-Lindsay, J. (2018). The stigmatisation of de facto states: Disapproval and “engagement without recognition.” *Ethnopolitics*, 17(4), 362–372.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2018.1495363>
- Kim, C. J. (2024). Status hierarchies and stigma shifting in international relations. *International Organization*, 78(4), 668–700. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020818324000316>

- King, C. (2001). The benefits of ethnic war: Understanding Eurasia's unrecognized states. *World Politics*, 53(4), 524–552. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0043887100019146>
- Kingston, P., & Spears, I. (2004). *States-within-states: Incipient political entities in the post-Cold War era*. Springer.
- Kolossov, V., & O'Loughlin, J. (1998). Pseudo-states as harbingers of a new geopolitics: The example of the Transdniester Moldovan Republic (TMR). *Geopolitics*, 3(1), 151–176. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650049808407612>
- Kolstø, P. (2006). The sustainability and future of unrecognized quasi-states. *Journal of Peace Research*, 43(6), 723–740. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343306068102>
- Kvakhadze, A. (2021). Transnational coalition building: The case of volunteers in the conflict in Abkhazia. *Caucasus Survey*, 9(2), 159–179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2021.1897765>
- Kvarchelia, L. (2008). Sanctions and the path away from peace. In *Incentives, sanctions and conditionality* (Accord Issue 19). Conciliation Resources. <https://www.c-r.org/accord/incentives-sanctions-and-conditionality/sanctions-and-path-away-peace>
- Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (2014). *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*. Verso Books.
- Lejava, N. (2021). Georgia's unfinished search for its place in Europe. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/04/georgias-unfinished-search-for-its-place-in-europe?lang=en>
- Link, B. G., & Phelan, J. C. (2001). Conceptualizing stigma. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27(1), 363–385. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.363>
- Lovec, M., Kočí, K., & Šabič, Z. (2021). The stigmatisation of Central Europe via (failed) socialisation narrative. *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24(4), 890–909. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-021-00229-9>
- Machaidze, I. (2025, September 4). Georgian Dream pushes alternate history to justify crackdown. *Eurasianet*. <https://eurasianet.org/georgian-dream-pushes-alternate-history-to-justify-crackdown>

- Mihalkanin, E. S. (2004). The Abkhazians: A national minority in their own homeland. In T. Bahcheli, B. Bartmann, & H. Srebrnik (Eds.), *De facto states: The quest for sovereignty* (Chapter 7). Routledge.
- Mitchell, L. A. (2009). Compromising democracy: State building in Saakashvili's Georgia. *Central Asian Survey*, 28(2), 171–183. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930903034864>
- Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. (1994). *Document of the Budapest meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE*. OSCE.
- Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. (1996). *Lisbon document 1996: The challenges of change*. OSCE.
- Ó Beacháin, D. (2025). Courting Europe: Diplomatic battlegrounds and the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict. *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 36(2), 178–218. <https://doi.org/10.1353/isia.2025.a962916>
- Ó Beacháin, D., & Coene, F. (2014). Go West: Georgia's European identity and its role in domestic politics and foreign policy objectives. *Nationalities Papers*, 42(6), 923–941. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2014.953466>
- Ó Beacháin, D., Comai, G., & Tsurtsunia-Zurabashvili, A. (2016). The secret lives of unrecognised states: Internal dynamics, external relations, and counter-recognition strategies. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 27(3), 440–466. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2016.1151654>
- Pacher, A. (2019). The diplomacy of post-Soviet de facto states: Ontological security under stigma. *International Relations*, 33(4), 563–585. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117819856397>
- Peinhopf, A. (2022). Crossing the conflict divide: De facto borders, state belonging, and the changing dynamics of enemy relations in Abkhazia. *Ethnopolitics*, 22(3), 253–270. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2022.2028385>
- Rogstad, A. (2022a). When stigmatization fails: Russia and aggression in Ukraine. *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 7(4). <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogac025>
- Rogstad, A. (2022b). Stigma dynamics: Russia and the crisis of liberal ordering. *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2(3). <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksac027>

- Rumelili, B. (2012). Liminal identities and processes of domestication and subversion in international relations. *Review of International Studies*, 38(2), 495–508.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0260210511000830>
- Sartania, K. (2021). Struggle and sacrifice: Narratives of Georgia’s modern history. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/04/struggle-and-sacrifice-narratives-of-georgias-modern-history?lang=en>
- Sauer, T., & Reveraert, M. (2018). The potential stigmatizing effect of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. *The Nonproliferation Review*, 25(5–6), 437–455.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2018.1548097>
- Shamai, P. (2015). Name and shame: Unravelling the stigmatization of weapons of mass destruction. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 36(1), 104–122.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2015.1012352>
- Shesterinina, A. (2023). Acting like a state: Armed violence in post-war Abkhazia. *Geoforum*, 146, 103850. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2023.103850>
- Steavenson, W. (2008, December 8). Marching through Georgia. *The New Yorker*.
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/12/15/marching-through-georgia>
- TIME Magazine. (n.d.). Person of the year 2008. Retrieved December 16, 2025, from
https://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1861543_1865283_1866538,00.html
- Toft, M. D. (2001). Multinationality, regions and state-building: The failed transition in Georgia. *Regional & Federal Studies*, 11(3), 123–142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/714004709>
- Towns, A. E., & Rumelili, B. (2017). Taking the pressure: Unpacking the relation between norms, social hierarchies, and social pressures on states. *European Journal of International Relations*, 23(4), 756–779. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066116682070>
- Traynor, I. (2009, September 30). Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili blamed for starting Russian war. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/sep/30/georgia-attacks-unjustifiable-eu>

United Nations General Assembly. (1960, December 14). *Declaration on the granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples*, GA Res. 1514 (XV). United Nations.
<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/206145?v=pdf>

Zakareishvili, P. (2020). *Vision – Conflicts in Georgia 2012–2016*. Tbilisi: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/georgien/17501.pdf>

Zarakol, A. (2014). What made the modern world hang together: Socialisation or stigmatisation? *International Theory*, 6(2), 311–332.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s1752971914000141>

Appendices

Appendix 1: List of speakers at the United Nations General Assembly plenary meetings

	Date	Speaker	Title	Meeting Record	Source
1	25.09.1992	Eduard Shevardnadze	Chairman of the Council of State of the Republic of Georgia	A/47/PV.12	Link
2	04.10.1994	Alexander Chikvaidze	Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Georgia	A/49/PV.16	Link
3	27.09.1995	Alexander Chikvaidze	Minister for Foreign Affairs of Georgia	A/50/PV.9	Link
4	23.09.1996	Irakli Menagarishvili	Minister for Foreign Affairs of Georgia	A/51/PV.4	Link
5	22.09.1997	Irakli Menagarishvili	Minister for Foreign Affairs of Georgia	A/52/PV.6	Link
6	02.10.1998	Irakli Menagarishvili	Minister for Foreign Affairs of Georgia	A/53/PV.26	Link
7	20.09.1999	Eduard Shevardnadze	President of Georgia	A/54/PV.4	Link
8	21.09.2000	Irakli Menagarishvili	Minister for Foreign Affairs of Georgia	A/55/PV.26	Link
9	16.11.2001	Peter Chkheidze	Chairman of the delegation of Georgia (Ambassador, Permanent Representative)	A/56/PV.57	Link
10	19.09.2002	Irakli Menagarishvili	Minister for Foreign Affairs of Georgia	A/57/PV.17	Link
11	02.10.2003	Irakli Menagarishvili	Minister for Foreign Affairs of Georgia	A/58/PV.22	Link
12	21.09.2004	Mikheil Saakashvili	President of Georgia	A/59/PV.4	Link
13	20.09.2005	Salome Zourabichvili	Minister for Foreign Affairs of Georgia	A/60/PV.16	Link
14	22.09.2006	Mikheil Saakashvili	President of Georgia	A/61/PV.16	Link

15	26.09.2007	Mikheil Saakashvili	President of Georgia	A/62/PV.7	Link
16	23.09.2008	Mikheil Saakashvili	President of Georgia	A/63/PV.6	Link
17	24.09.2009	Mikheil Saakashvili	President of Georgia	A/64/PV.6	Link
18	23.09.2010	Mikheil Saakashvili	President of Georgia	A/65/PV.12	Link
19	22.09.2011	Mikheil Saakashvili	President of Georgia	A/66/PV.16	Link
20	25.09.2012	Mikheil Saakashvili	President of Georgia	A/67/PV.6	Link
21	25.09.2013	Mikheil Saakashvili	President of Georgia	A/68/PV.9	Link
22	26.09.2014	Irakli Garibashvili	Prime Minister of Georgia	A/69/PV.14	Link
23	01.10.2015	Irakli Garibashvili	Prime Minister of Georgia	A/70/PV.22	Link
24	21.09.2016	Giorgi Kvirikashvili	Prime Minister of Georgia	A/71/PV.13	Link
25	21.09.2017	Giorgi Kvirikashvili	Prime Minister of Georgia	A/72/PV.14	Link
26	27.09.2018	Mamuka Bakhtadze	Prime Minister of Georgia	A/73/PV.10	Link
27	25.09.2019	Salome Zourabichvili	President of Georgia	A/74/PV.5	Link
28	25.09.2020	Giorgi Gakharia	Prime Minister of Georgia	A/75/PV.10	Link
29	24.09.2021	Irakli Garibashvili	Prime Minister of Georgia	A/76/PV.13	Link
30	22.09.2022	Irakli Garibashvili	Prime Minister of Georgia	A/77/PV.8	Link

Appendix 2: List of speakers at the United Nations General Assembly special session and First Committee meetings

	Date	Speaker	Venue	Meeting Record	Source
1	09.06.1998	Malkhaz Kakabadze	Twentieth Special Session	A/S-20/PV.4	Link
2	12.10.2000	Peter Chkheidze	First Committee	A/C.1/55/PV.12	Link
3	10.10.2002	Revaz Adamia	First Committee	A/C.1/57/PV.10	Link
4	15.10.2003	Kaha Chitaia	First Committee	A/C.1/58/PV.9	Link
5	07.10.2005	Revaz Adamia	First Committee	A/C.1/60/PV.7	Link
6	09.10.2006	Irakli Alasania	First Committee	A/C.1/61/PV.7	Link
7	15.10.2007	Shalva Tsiskarashvili	First Committee	A/C.1/62/PV.6	Link
8	07.10.2008	Shalva Tsiskarashvili	First Committee	A/C.1/63/PV.3	Link
9	14.10.2008	Shalva Tsiskarashvili	First Committee	A/C.1/63/PV.8	Link
10	09.10.2009	Alexander Lomaia	First Committee	A/C.1/64/PV.6	Link
11	12.10.2010	Archil Gheghechkori	First Committee	A/C.1/65/PV.8	Link
12	11.10.2011	Alexander Lomaia	First Committee	A/C.1/66/PV.9	Link
13	16.10.2012	Vakhtang Makharoblishvili	First Committee	A/C.1/67/PV.8	Link
14	10.10.2013	Kaha Imnadze	First Committee	A/C.1/68/PV.6	Link
15	09.10.2014	Kaha Imnadze	First Committee	A/C.1/69/PV.4	Link
16	12.10.2015	Kaha Imnadze	First Committee	A/C.1/70/PV.4	Link
17	06.10.2016	Kaha Imnadze	First Committee	A/C.1/71/PV.5	Link
18	06.10.2017	Kaha Imnadze	First Committee	A/C.1/72/PV.6	Link
19	12.10.2018	Elene Agladze	First Committee	A/C.1/73/PV.6	Link
20	15.10.2018	Kaha Imnadze	First Committee	A/C.1/73/PV.7	Link
21	15.10.2019	Kaha Imnadze	First Committee	A/C.1/74/PV.7	Link

22	15.10.2020	Kaha Imnadze	First Committee	A/C.1/75/PV.7	Link
23	04.10.2021	Kaha Imnadze	First Committee	A/C.1/76/PV.2	Link
24	05.10.2021	Akaki Dvali	First Committee	A/C.1/76/PV.3	Link
25	10.10.2022	David Bakradze	First Committee	A/C.1/77/PV.6	Link

Non-exclusive license to reproduce thesis and make thesis public

I, Ayşe Özlem Marşan herewith grant the University of Tartu a free permit (non-exclusive license) to the work created by me “The Stigmatization of Abkhazia: Georgia’s Discursive Construction of Conflict and Self,” supervisor Eiki Berg,

- reproduce, for the purpose of preservation, including for adding to the DSpace digital archives until the expiry of the term of copyright;
- to make the work specified in p. 1 available to the public via the web environment of the University of Tartu, including via the DSpace digital archives until the expiry of the term of copyright;
- I am aware of the fact that the author retains the rights specified in p. 1;
- I certify that granting the non-exclusive license does not infringe other persons’ intellectual property rights or rights arising from the personal data protection legislation.