

Public Discourse About Autonomous Regions and De Facto States

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Public discourse about autonomous regions and de facto --- or unrecognized --- states can influence the policies that parent states adopt to respond to these entities. I theorize that public discourse about autonomous regions will underscore commonalities with the parent state. Public discourse about de facto states will treat the state as a separate entity. I employ newspaper data as a measure of public discourse about Adjara and Abkhazia, Georgia. Using sentiment analysis and topic models, I show that public discourse about autonomous regions discusses domestic politics whereas discourse about de facto states emphasizes international relations. This analysis of public discourse offers insight into the ways in which people in parent states discuss separatist entities and how leaders may wish to steer public discourse about these regions in the future.

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Both de facto states and autonomous regions have established local institutions that operate separately from the central government of the country to which they belong. However, the central government --- also known as the parent state --- accepts local institutions in autonomous regions and actively works to support them while it regards de facto states as trying to secede. The ways in which people residing in the parent state view these entities can dramatically impact how the parent state treats them. Country leaders and legislators wish to maintain public approval and to win re-election, so public attitudes about highly salient issues like separatism and autonomy influence government policy. Thus, understanding how different types of separatist entities are discussed in parent state public discourse can help explain some of the tensions that exist between separatist entities and the parent state.

Public discourse refers to the big ideas that people collectively talk about in the public sphere. We can think of public discourse as the ‘topic of the moment’ both in terms of what topics are being discussed and how these topics are portrayed. Public discourse reflects peoples’ cultural values, personal beliefs, and life experiences. Such discourse is highly salient and powerful; it can unite people in solidarity, protest, and even war (Agnew 1995). How does public discourse about autonomous regions differ from that about de facto states?

Previous research has primarily studied autonomous regions and de facto states separately (Broers 2013). In general, public approval about the existence of these entities has been the focus, not public discourse (O’Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal 2014). However, the way that separatist entities are discussed is particularly important since overall approval for a separatist entity changes little over time (Tokluoglu 2011). Further, comparing public discourse about autonomous regions and de facto states is critical to understanding the role that this discourse may have in pushing separatist entities to either separate further or to reintegrate with

the parent state. This work reflects an overall body of literature on rhetoric about separatism that emphasizes separatist demands and parent state responses. Separatist movements utilize a wide variety of different organizational structures and strategies to maximize the likelihood that their demands are heard (Griffiths 2021; Knotter 2021) at the same time that governments establish administrative structures that influence separatist success (Griffiths 2015; Herrera 2005; Huszka 2014; Matsuzato 2023; Osipov 2019). Such an interplay leads separatist groups to adopt rhetorical arguments that at least partly match on-the-ground conditions (Ferreira 2024; Griffiths and Waters 2023). Legal arguments (Berg 2009) may be overshadowed by rhetoric (Cerny 2023; Ferrazzi 2000) and state-like international relationships (Huddleston 2023; Visoka 2018) that seize on the idea of sovereignty more than the letter of the law.²

I theorize that because autonomous regions have been given additional governing responsibilities compared to regional governments, public discourse will revolve around topics discussing the relationship between the autonomous region and the rest of the parent state. Autonomous regions operate a balancing act. The parent state may be perfectly fine with maintaining the region's autonomous status, but they also are interested in preventing it from separating further. Thus, the parent state's objective is to try to slowly create additional linkages between the autonomous region and the parent state. On the other hand, integrationist public discourse will never be enough to reintegrate de facto states. These states are operating their political institutions as if they were independent nations, and public discourse will treat them as such.

² Kyris (2020) would warn against the international community forming these relationships as engagement without recognition; such relationships are important for successful secession.

I evaluate the differences in public discourse between autonomous regions and de facto states by examining the autonomous region of Adjara and the de facto state of Abkhazia in Georgia. These entities make for an ideal comparison of public discourse because they share the same parent state and many institutional features. Much excellent work has examined separatism in Georgia including comparing policies toward different Georgian separatist entities (Cornell 2002; George 2009) and how separatist entities engage with stakeholders like the Georgian government (Holland, Dahlman, and Browne 2020) and other states (Dembińska 2023; Kereselidze 2015). Prior work has also considered Georgian separatist rhetoric, including arguments for separatism (Berg and Mölder 2012; Blakkisrud and Kemoklidze 2023) and corresponding governmental rhetoric (Zurabashvili 2023). Dzutsati (2021) identifies non-separatist people's attitudes toward secession as missing from this discussion; this article aggregates these individual public opinions to study public discourse.

To measure public discourse, I collect newspaper articles from 2001 through August 2017 from Civil Georgia, a popular online non-profit newspaper. Much prior work has found that newspaper articles are a good proxy for public discourse (for example Hopkins, Kim, and Kim 2017). Additionally, issues of agenda setting and framing --- which are typically concerns when employing newspaper data --- are reduced because of the non-profit online structure of this newspaper. I decompose public discourse into the attention paid to the separatist entities, the tone of the discourse, and the topics discussed. I then use quantitative tools including word count, sentiment analysis, and topic models to examine how public discourse differs between autonomous regions and de facto states.

I find that public discourse is more focused on integration when discussing the relationship between Adjara as an autonomous region and the parent state of Georgia. Abkhazia

is treated as a separate nation with which to negotiate instead of a region with opportunities for integration. The results suggest that public discourse differs depending on the degree of separation between a region and the parent state.

Public discourse alone does not drive separatism or reintegration. However, examining public discourse through newspaper articles provides a more comprehensive and continuous measure of the major topics of separatist-related discussion, especially when compared to irregularly conducted public opinion surveys. While existing work on separatism focuses on rhetoric from either political elites or from the separatists themselves, this study innovates by recognizing that public discourse can interact with these forms of rhetoric to influence decision making. Further, a key contribution of this study is analyzing public discourse in both autonomous and de facto states. Most work on public discourse treats these entities separately, whereas this study describes public discourse in both autonomous and separatist entities.

Public Discourse About Autonomous Regions

I argue that public discourse about autonomous regions will focus on integrating the region into the broader parent state. The parent state maintains the status quo relationship with the autonomous region and reduces the threat of secessionism when it is able to keep the region politically integrated (Brancati 2008). In particular, public discourse that ‘does not reinforce regional identities’ and ‘makes people living in a whole country feel united in a common fate’ serves to reduce the threat of secession among autonomous regions (Brancati 2008, 659).

Because the public in the parent state is at a minimum motivated to maintain the autonomous region’s status without additional separatism, my expectation is that public discourse should discuss the autonomous region as part of the broader parent state instead of as a separatist entity.

What, precisely, is integrationist public discourse? In the integrationist approach, public discourse will minimize the amount of time spent discussing autonomy in order not to reinforce regional identities. Second, public discourse will focus on topics not related to autonomy in order to compartmentalize autonomy topics into a small segment of the discourse. Positive connections between the autonomous region and the parent state should be emphasized. Thus, public discourse about autonomous regions should only infrequently make explicit mention of the region's autonomous status, instead choosing to discuss the autonomous region in the context of ongoing political issues in the parent state.

Hypothesis 1: Public discourse about autonomous regions will focus on the role of the autonomous region within the parent state.

Public Discourse About De Facto States

Hypothesis 1 presents a default expectation: both autonomous regions and de facto states are still part of their parent states, so public discourse about the region within the parent state is hardly surprising. I argue that public discourse about de facto states is more likely to treat the de facto state as a separatist entity. After a region has become a de facto state, people in the parent state cannot expect to successfully entice the de facto state to reintegrate simply by using integrationist public discourse. De facto states often build their own political institutions including departments for foreign policy and international relations that they operate independently and against the wishes of the parent state (Blakkisrud and Kolsto 2012). These institutions are part of the de facto state's process of acting like a fully independent and recognized nation (Broers 2013). Parent states have few options to manage de facto states.

Kolsto (2006) notes that reintegration usually requires international negotiation, military threats, and hard line economic sanctions. These moves treat the de facto state as a separate entity that must be re-acquired by the parent state, generally by threatening the use of force.

I expect that public discourse in the parent state will follow this line of reasoning by treating the de facto state as a separate entity with which to establish relations. In particular, the vast majority of parent state public discourse about the de facto state will discuss separatism. Separatist public discourse will be pervasive precisely because people no longer share political institutions with the de facto state. Topics related to domestic policy do not make much sense in this context. Instead, people will discuss foreign relations, negotiation, and possible military involvement in the de facto state. Such topics are common in international relations discourse.

Hypothesis 2: Public discourse about de facto states will treat them as separate entities where separatism is a pervasive topic of discussion.

As the degree to which autonomous regions and de facto states hold autonomy can change over time, I also conduct an exploratory analysis tracing critical events in the history of autonomous regions and de facto states and public discourse around these critical events.³

Case Selection

I compare public discourse about two separatist entities in Georgia: Abkhazia and Adjara.

Abkhazia is a de facto state in northwest Georgia with about 250,000 residents whose ethnicity is distinct from other Georgians. The region gained self-recognized independence after the 1993

³ See the Supplemental Information (SI) 1 for additional details.

Georgian Civil War and maintained an uneasy relationship with the Georgian central government until the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. After this war, Georgia classified Abkhazia as occupied by the Russians, while Abkhazia considers itself to be an independent country. Adjara, in southwest Georgia, is significantly smaller in area and has a population of 350,000. Until 2004, the region was controlled by strongman Aslan Abashidze. This prevented the Georgian central government from exercising control over the region. In 2004, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili ousted Abashidze and negotiated an agreement with the Adjara leadership to re-classify Adjara as an Autonomous Republic (see Marten 2015). Adjarians are ethnic Georgians; they are not members of a distinct ethnic group. The region was established as an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1921 after a dispute between Georgia and Turkey. Adjara's primary goal has been to retain some level of regional control, particularly over economic affairs (Toft 2001). The Adjara-Abkhazia comparison is ideal because differences between central governments, time periods, and parent state cultures remain constant, meaning that we can more clearly examine different types of separatist regions and public discourse.

I choose to compare Georgian public discourse about these two regions for several reasons. Since this study focuses on public discourse in the parent state, it is important to keep the parent state constant when examining different separatist entities. Georgia is the most prominent example of a state where two different types separatist entities exist. Georgian separatist issues are also contemporaneous, which is advantageous for the measures of public discourse described below.

The autonomous region of Adjara could also be compared to South Ossetia, another de facto state in Georgia, instead of to Abkhazia. However, Abkhazia and Adjara are more comparable on numerous dimensions. First, Abkhazia has similar provisions of democracy

compared to Georgia, while South Ossetia is much less democratic (Blakkisrud and Kolsto 2012; Caspersen 2011). Public discourse in Georgia could certainly be influenced by the level of democracy in separatist entities, so this should be held constant, if possible. Second, both Abkhazia and Adjara were autonomous republics in the USSR, while South Ossetia was an autonomous region. These dynamics left South Ossetia with a different institutional history than either Abkhazia or Adjara.

There are some challenges with comparing Adjara and Abkhazia. While Abkhazia is historically more similar to Adjara than South Ossetia, Abkhazia gained de facto statehood as a result of war. Adjara's autonomous status was recognized in 2004, but it has operated with relatively limited autonomous power, particularly after Saakashvili became Georgia's president (George 2008; Holland, Dahlman, and Browne 2020). Adjara has benefitted from tourism to Batumi and the surrounding region and sustained tourism-related investment (Author). Abkhazia has developed and maintained strong ties to Russia; Russia recognizes Abkhazia's status as an independent state (Marten 2015). These features are not wholly unique when comparing de facto states and autonomous regions, with de facto states especially likely to rely on another state for support. Still, it is important to recognize that this study compares public discourse about two cases, so contextual and historical details about these cases are relevant and important.

Research Design

Measuring public discourse is challenging. At its most basic level, public discourse refers to the topics of conversation that individuals are having and how these discussions are framed. Public discourse is distinct from public opinion in that the focus of public discourse covers topics of conversation among the public, not necessarily their approval of issues arising from these topics.

Surveys and interviews certainly help us understand public opinion, but they are less helpful at understanding the overarching themes of public discourse. Additionally, such data is rarely available over the long-time span during which public discourse changes.

I rely on newspaper data to measure Georgian public discourse about Abkhazia and Adjara. This method allows me to examine discourse change over time, which is important for the exploratory analysis regarding defining events and public discourse. As I discuss below, newspaper data is a popular source used to measure public discourse. Using newspaper data also allows me to capture a large body of text from a single source over a long period of time (Santa Ana 1999). In adopting this long time-series technique, I reduce the likelihood that any one article or set of articles is particularly influential in the analysis (Montgomery 2005).

Measuring Public Discourse

Newspaper data is clearly a proxy measure for actual public discourse, and newspapers are but one way to measure public discourse. How well does newspaper coverage reflect public discourse? There are three ways in which newspaper coverage can relate to public discourse. A conventional view is that newspapers operate as agenda setters: newspaper editorial boards select news topics that they wish to cover and, in doing so, they set the topic of public discourse (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Along with agenda setting, newspapers can frame issues so that certain perspectives are portrayed in a particular light (Entman 1993; Goffman 1986; Pan and Kosicki 1993). Newspapers that engage in extensive agenda setting and framing, therefore, will shape public discourse instead of accurately reporting it.

More recent scholarship has questioned both whether newspapers influence public discourse and whether newspapers engage in agenda setting and framing. Muntz and Soss (1997)

find that newspapers that attempt to set the agenda on certain issues have an extremely limited ability to influence public concern about that topic. Additionally, a meta-analysis considering quantitative studies measuring the amount of agenda setting and degree of framing (among other types of media bias) finds no evidence that newspapers provide favorable coverage to certain issues or beliefs (D'Alessio and Allen 2000).

Instead of newspapers driving public discourse, recent work has found that public discourse may actually drive newspaper coverage (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010) or that the two occur essentially simultaneously (Soroka, Stecula, and Wlezien 2015). In a particularly expansive study, Hopkins, Kim, and Kim (2017) find that public economic evaluations typically drive ensuing media coverage. The reverse is not the case: newspaper coverage does not cause changes in public perceptions of the economy. This suggests that newspapers typically act in concert with or in reaction to public discourse regardless of their attempts to set the agenda or to frame particular issues.

If it is the case that public discourse either causes or contemporaneously is reflected in newspaper coverage, using newspaper data as a proxy for public discourse is not particularly problematic. Despite evidence suggesting limited agenda setting and framing power of newspapers, I carefully select a newspaper for this analysis that minimizes agenda setting, framing, and newspaper bias in general. I define three main sources of bias that can cause a newspaper to distort public discourse: ownership and editorial control, individual journalistic bias, and audience bias. After introducing the selected newspaper, I review how each of these biases is mitigated. The Supplemental Information (SI.2) contains additional details on the potential biases and discusses challenges in measuring public discourse using other data sources like social media.

I use news reports from the newspaper Civil Georgia (or Civil.ge) to assess Georgian public discourse about Abkhazia and Adjara. Civil Georgia is the most widely circulated newspaper in Georgia, but its online presence is what makes it particularly strong and comprehensive. The United Nations Association of Georgia (UNAG) launched the Civil Georgia online newspaper in 2001, and international organizations provide its funding. The United Nations and its subsidiaries are well known promoters of press freedom (UN 2018). Thus, there is comparatively low pressure from the newspaper's owners to publish certain articles with pre-determined perspectives. The UN requires that the programs it funds meet their goals: in this case increasing press coverage in Georgia, not selling a certain number of papers or taking any specific editorial stance. Ownership bias occurs when those who own a newspaper seek to influence how the content of the paper is written (Bovitz, Druckman, and Lupia 2002). Since the UN does not exert such control, Civil Georgia reporters are not asked to selectively report on stories simply because the newspaper's owners want them to.

Civil Georgia's appeal is its reputation for unbiased reporting. Individual journalists working for the paper are less likely to reflect their personal opinions in stories compared to other outlets. In its analysis of media reports during the 2013 Georgian Presidential Election, a project by the European Union and UNDP found that Civil Georgia 'was covering the ongoing political events objectively and impartially. There was no positive or negative [perspective] observed to any political power. The journalism standards and ethical norms were very highly observed' (Mgeladze, Beridze, and Jologua 2014).

Finally, the newspaper's audience consists of professionals from Georgia and around the world who read the newspaper for coverage throughout Georgia. Website traffic statistics suggest that about half of the newspaper's readers are from Georgia, while the other half are

international, indicating the role Civil Georgia plays in disseminating accurate information about Georgia to the world. Indeed, the newspaper is the standard and often the only source of reporting about Georgia cited by many well-regarded organizations including Radio Europe, the BBC, Freedom House, the Jamestown Foundation, and Chatham House.⁴ The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe uses Civil Georgia reports on elections, the United Nations cites their reporting on violence and inter-ethnic conflict, and Transparency International cites Civil Georgia in its reports on bias in other types of media in Georgia. Further, Civil Georgia is cited by pro- and anti-Russian websites, lending it editorial credibility. Civil Georgia is recognized as the authoritative source on Georgia politics. This is not to say that Civil Georgia is an outlet devoid of bias, rather, that among potential media sources in Georgia, Civil Georgia has the best chance of reflecting public discourse.

Given scholarly evidence suggesting that newspapers are likely reflective of public discourse and the reputation of Civil Georgia, Civil Georgia provides a good proxy measure of Georgian public discourse.

Methods

I collect all Civil Georgia articles about Abkhazia and Adjara from 2001 to August 2017. To do so, I conducted a simple keyword search for articles containing the word ‘Adjara’ and those containing ‘Abkhazia’ in August 2017.⁵ This resulted in 5,610 articles mentioning Abkhazia and

⁴ This, of course, can pose its own challenges, as the outlet may write stories to appeal more directly to an international audience. See SI.1.

⁵ Myriad other spellings of these words were also checked, but the newspaper is consistent in preferring these spellings. Data was collected in August 2017. This time period covers when the Civil Georgia website had a consistent layout and style (from 2001 to 2018). Articles were selected based on whether they mentioned Adjara or Abkhazia at least once (see SI.2).

1,440 mentioning Adjara. I split articles from Abkhazia and Adjara into one of two categories based on whether an article mentions words related to autonomy. From word frequency lists for each region, I find that articles that discuss autonomy use the words ‘autonomy,’ ‘separatism,’ ‘separatist,’ or ‘breakaway’ in either the title or the main text (Simon and Jerit 2007).⁶ Therefore, I subset articles containing at least one of these words into a group, which I will refer to as articles discussing autonomy. This large corpus of articles lends itself to an analysis using quantitative analysis techniques (see Hopkins 2017). I rely on three quantitative methods: word count, sentiment, and topic models. Additionally, I supplement the quantitative analysis by a close qualitative reading of a subset of articles.

The number of words written about a separatist entity is a simple way to reflect the amount of public attention devoted to that entity. I rely on a count of the yearly number of words devoted to Adjara and Abkhazia. This is a useful measure because newspaper articles vary in length and frequency, both of which are part of public attention to a topic. A yearly word count incorporates length and frequency of articles. Word counts can be split between articles mentioning autonomy and articles not mentioning autonomy.

Sentiment refers to the tone of discourse. I theorize that public sentiment will be more positive toward Adjara since the Georgian public seeks to prevent Adjara from separating by forging positive relations with Adjara. To measure sentiment, I use a standard method of categorizing and defining positive and negative words (Hu and Liu 2004; Tausczik and Pennebaker 2010). The method generates a sentiment score for each article based on the number of positive words minus the number of negative words.

⁶ See SI.3 for discussion about this choice.

Topic models are an automated and replicable method that classifies the subjects (or topics) addressed in a collection (or corpus) of text (Blei 2012). After completing the modelling procedure, I examine the words associated with each topic and create a name for the topic based on these words. Each article then contains a proportion of words belonging to each of the topics. I interpret this result by saying that a particular article discusses percentages of each of the named topics.

An example should help clarify the basic concepts of topic modelling. Consider an article titled ‘President Delivers Annual Parliamentary Address’ that appeared in Civil Georgia on 7 April 2017. Unsurprisingly, this article is mostly devoted to discussing Presidential accomplishments, and the topic model identifies that 53% of words in the article are about the President. The situation in Adjara, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia is also mentioned, and the topic model identifies that 17% of the article is on the topic of local government. We would not expect reporting on this topic to spend much time discussing separatism, since a Presidential speech focuses on accomplishments while in office. Indeed, the topic model identifies only 2% of words in the article are associated with this topic.

Though topic models can provide interesting information about individual articles, their strength is in classifying the broad topics used in a large corpus of text. This, of course, is our goal in describing public discourse. Because Adjara and Abkhazia are different types of separatist entities, I use individual topic models for each region. This is an appropriate choice because the texts written about Adjara and Abkhazia represent two distinct corpora. It is important to note that an implication of this choice is that similarly named topics are not directly

comparable across the Adjara and Abkhazia articles.⁷ Therefore, the results will discuss comparisons between autonomy and non-autonomy articles in Adjara and the equivalent comparison in Abkhazia. When comparing discourse between Adjara and Abkhazia, I will focus on overall patterns instead of specific topic proportions. More details about this procedure and the way I select the number of topics is in SI.3.

Discourse in Adjara and Abkhazia

An Integrationist Approach to Adjara

I argue that Georgian public discourse about Adjara will not be completely subsumed by autonomy topics and that discourse will seek to integrate Adjara into the rest of Georgia. To provide evidence for this hypothesis, I first examine the amount of public discourse devoted to autonomy topics in Adjara. Table 1, column 1 shows the number of words devoted to autonomy and non-autonomy topics per year in Adjara. The *t*-test reveals that a significantly higher number of words are dedicated to non-autonomy topics, indicating that public discourse is focused on non-autonomy issues. The word count results are consistent with the expectation that, in order to normalize relations between Adjara and the rest of Georgia, Georgians are much more likely to talk about Adjara without mentioning autonomy. Table 2, Column 1 shows the sentiment of autonomy and non-autonomy discourse about Adjara. Autonomy discourse is clearly more negative in its tone. Taken together with the amount of public discourse about Adjara and autonomy, this suggests that the Georgian public emphasizes non-autonomy issues because these

⁷ A number of computer scientists including Crossno et al. (2011) and Zhao et al. (2011) have developed sophisticated methods to compare two corpora, but these methods have only been used in their specific computer science applications.

issues are more positive and discussing positive relationships between Adjara and Georgia is less likely to provoke Adjarians into trying to separate further.

Our main interest is in how the Georgian public talks about Adjara, which I measure using the topics employed in public discourse. Table 3 shows the proportion of public discourse about Adjara devoted to certain topics as identified by the topic modeling procedure mentioned earlier. I split articles based on whether they directly mention autonomy or not. In doing so, I examine the proportion of public discourse related to autonomy topics based on whether articles mentioned autonomy or not. This technique addresses some articles that may mention the word autonomy or separatism without devoting a large proportion of that article to a topic related to autonomy.

First, we can observe that articles about Adjara mentioning autonomy words tend to only devote half of the article to discussing autonomy topics. Articles mentioning autonomy spend 15.6% of the time discussing the war with Russia, a topic clearly related to autonomy, but they also spend a similar amount of time discussing Georgia as a whole. This suggests that public discourse mentioning Adjaran autonomy is actually discussing both autonomy and integration with the rest of Georgia. This integrationist approach is further supported by the finding that only 17.7% of articles not mentioning autonomy about Adjara indirectly discuss separatism. Most of these articles discuss issues of national importance like the Georgian President, elections, and domestic policy. Thus, two findings emerge. Public discourse about Adjaran autonomy represents a small segment of total discourse about Adjara. Further, public discourse emphasizes topics of importance throughout Georgia, which normalizes the relationship between Adjara and the rest of Georgia.

Two interesting examples readily illustrate this point. First, in reporting on a speech Georgian President Saakashvili gave in 2009, Civil Georgia emphasized the connection that Adjara had to the rest of Georgia. This is particularly relevant given the timing of this address being right after the Russo-Georgian War over Abkhazia. The article highlights Adjara in stating that ‘2008 was a test for young Georgian democracy with two early parliamentary and presidential and local elections in Adjara...today the Georgian democracy is stronger...today the level of cooperation between opposition and the authorities is higher’ (CivilGe 2009). During a particularly tense situation in 2013 when the Adjara police chief was involved in a traffic accident and possible assault, Civil Georgia reported this event as if any police chief from any region was involved. The Interior minister was the one interviewed about the Adjara police chief, not Adjara authorities. Responding to questions about a drug test for the police chief the Interior minister stated, ‘I do not know why they want a drug test for *my employee*’ (CivilGe 2013a). The Interior minister is also quoted at length trying to justify the actions of the Adjara police chief; such statements make little sense if Adjara is seen as a separate, self-governing entity.

Abkhazia as a Rhetorically De Facto State

Public discourse about Abkhazia focuses on autonomy as a major topic and emphasizes the divisions between Abkhazia and Georgia. Table 1, column 2 shows that significantly more public discourse was devoted to autonomy in Abkhazia than to non-autonomy topics. While more words overall were written about Abkhazia, it is clear that the disparity with Adjara in terms of autonomy coverage is much larger than that of non-autonomy articles. This finding indicates that public discourse emphasizes autonomy in Abkhazia to a degree not present in

discourse about Adjara. Again, I find that autonomy articles are more negative than non-autonomy articles (Table 2, column 2). Since so much public discourse is devoted to autonomy in Abkhazia, the fact that this discourse is particularly negative supports the theory that Georgians treat Abkhazia as a region distinct from the rest of Georgia and employ negative sentiment to make this distinction clear.

Public discourse regarding Abkhazian autonomy is so pervasive that it is the focus of articles both directly mentioning autonomy and those articles not mentioning autonomy. That is, regardless of the specific words used, the vast majority of public discourse about Abkhazia discusses autonomy topics (Table 3). Topics in public discourse are not integrationist. Instead, non-autonomy discourse emphasizes relations between countries. Foreign relations with Abkhazia are the subject of 14.4% of non-autonomy public discourse. In addition, topics like negotiation, peace, and the military are distinct from discourse about the 2008 War with Russia. This indicates that these topics were discussed outside of the war context and, therefore, implies that the Georgian public treated Abkhazia as a region distinct from Georgia where formal negotiations were necessary in order to communicate.

Qualitative evidence supports the pervasive use of public discourse negatively portraying Abkhazia as a separate entity. Public discourse on the frequently discussed topic of foreign relations tends to emphasize the finality of Abkhazian separation, stating that the only way to regain control of Abkhazia is to ‘change Russia itself’ (CivilGe 2012). One article went so far as to quote an appendix of a Georgian government document that called the Abkhaz government a ‘puppet regime, established and supported by the occupying power’ (CivilGe 2010).

The Impact of Defining Events

I now engage in an exploratory analysis focused on how public discourse shifts after defining events related to separatism. I select the 2004 ouster of Aslan Abashidze in Adjara and the 2008 war with Russia in Abkhazia as key moments that altered the relationship between the entity and the parent state. SI.1 describes event selection in more detail.

Table 4 examines Georgian sentiment regarding these defining events in Adjara and Abkhazia in the year in which they took place. This provides some evidence regarding how the Georgian public reacted to the shift in separatism as it occurred. Here we see that autonomy articles were much more negative in this particular year than in other years (compare to Table 2). However, public sentiment about Adjara is still differentiated by whether discourse is about autonomy or not. Adjaran autonomy discourse is negative and reflects the negative view Georgians had toward Adjara being granted special administrative powers. Discourse not about autonomy was still positive, indicating a continued desire to engage on non-autonomy issues with the hope of further integrating Adjara into broader Georgian discourse. Unlike the overall public sentiment about Abkhazia, sentiment in 2008 was universally negative. The Russo-Georgian War and Abkhazia's formal recognition by Russia contributed to overall negative public discourse about the region.

The shift in autonomy in Abkhazia seems to have provoked a more negative reaction from the Georgian public. This makes sense considering that Abkhazia was now seen as 'lost' territory that could not be recovered or governed by the Georgian central government. Figure 1, panel A shows the proportion of autonomy articles about Abkhazia on the topic of peace compared to the military topic. Both of these topics reflect treating Abkhazia as a separate entity instead of a part of Georgia. Importantly, the military topic decreases in prevalence from

constituting 30% of autonomy articles to just 10% of articles. At the same time, the proportion of articles discussing peace increases sharply after the 2008 War. The combination of these two trends suggests that Georgians substantially decreased their expectations that Abkhazia could be taken back militarily after the 2008 War. Instead, discourse emphasized how there was peace between Abkhazia and Georgia and portrayed Georgia's fight to regain control of Abkhazia as finished. Prior to the 2008 War, public discourse generally talked about Abkhazia as a 'breakaway' region whereas after the War the terminology shifted such that the goal was to 'create the perspective for restoration of [the] Georgian state's jurisdiction over Abkhazia' (CivilGe 2013b).

On the other hand, the process of institutionalizing Adjara autonomy did not lead to a shift in public sentiment about Adjara. This could be in part because formalizing the relationship between Adjara and the Georgian central government acknowledges that Adjara should receive some special treatment compared to other regions of Georgia while this agreement also meant the end of instability under Abashidze. In fact, among all the indicators of public discourse employed in this analysis, only the tendency to mention the word 'separatism' changed significantly after Abashidze's 2004 ouster (Figure 1, panel B). Themes of integration of Adjara with the rest of Georgia were omnipresent both during and after Abashidze's rule, but discourse about separatism decreased sharply after 2004.

Discussion and Conclusion

People have significant power to shape the relationship between a parent state and a separatist entity. Studying public discourse provides insights into how the parent state public may treat individuals from separatist entities, gives potential indicators of public policies and candidates

that people might support, and establishes topics of importance to which governments may respond. The language, topics, and tone of public discourse establish boundaries of acceptable government responses to separatist entities. I analyze public discourse about an autonomous region and a de facto state to evaluate how this discourse is constructed. I find that public discourse about Adjara ties the region to the rest of Georgia in an apparent attempt to both prevent further separatism and encourage integration. Abkhazia, on the other hand, is treated as a separate entity with which to establish relations. I also examine variation in these patterns over time, emphasizing an important shift in public discourse about Abkhazia after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War.

I use Civil Georgia newspaper articles as a measure of the public discourse of Georgians about Adjara and Abkhazia. There are good reasons to link public discourse to newspaper articles. However, this technique does assume that there is one uniformly accepted Georgian public discourse and, further, that the Civil Georgia newspaper is able to capture this discourse. This discourse is then directed at the Adjaran and Abkhazian entities and, perhaps, individual people within Adjara and Abkhazia. It is important to acknowledge that public discourse is an inherently aggregate measure and generally does not reflect opinions that do not conform to the modal person. Further, I objectify Adjara and Abkhazia as groups when, in fact, they are comprised of individuals (Brubaker 2004). I do this because the aggregate nature of public discourse means that the tone and topics of said discourse are directed at broad themes, not specific individuals. One way to think about public discourse in this context is that this discourse comes from people supporting the Georgian central government and is directed toward the Adjaran and Abkhaz governments. Civil Georgia is but one newspaper source in Georgia. While Civil Georgia is well suited for this analysis, measuring public discourse using one newspaper

source is a clear limitation of this article. A fruitful area of future research would investigate other methods of measuring public discourse --- like social media posts, additional newspaper sources, and other media sources --- to confirm the results presented here.

Public discourse is often linked with individual public opinion and individual relationships between residents of the parent state and separatist entities. Although territorial boundaries are constructed, the perceived importance of them means that most individuals will treat residents of separatist entities somewhat different than residents of the parent state. Further investigation is needed to more closely examine these interpersonal relationships. A particularly fruitful area of future research would examine shifts in the degree of separatism in an entity and the perceptions of non-separatists living in that entity. Such work would isolate the effect of living in a particular area that is deemed to be separatist from the effect of belonging to a different ethno-cultural group. I imagine that public discourse plays a role in stigmatizing separatist regions so that even those living in these regions who do not identify as either Adjara or Abkhaz would be viewed differently than a prototypical Georgian. Further investigation of the dynamics that ethnicity plays in public discourse would also be fruitful; qualitative interviews may be the best way to distinguish conceptions of ethnicity compared to nationalistic divisions.

Second, the cases of Adjara, Abkhazia, and Georgia are certainly unique. I argue that similarities between Adjara and Abkhazia make for an apt comparison between public discourse about these entities. However, it is true that these entities have differences, most notably their respective relationships with Turkey and Russia. Though Turkey and Russia both lay claim to parts of Georgia, Abkhazia has a close relationship with Russia not present in Adjara. Most de facto states have patron states that support them whereas autonomous regions typically lack this

outside support (Kolsto 2006). Thus, while the presence of Russia in Abkhazia is unique to Georgia, patron states are often what enables separatist entities to declare de facto statehood.

Public discourse should be explored in other contexts and evaluated using other methods. Surveys and interviews may be helpful tools to provide a more nuanced understanding about the ways in which discourse about separatist entities differs. Such evidence could then be linked to the ways in which political leaders try to steer public discourse to encourage public support for policies and initiatives that they wish to enact. I provide a building block for this research by theorizing about how public discourse links to different types of separatism and identifying key topics and shifts in discourse to study further using qualitative methods.

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Table 1: Civil Georgia Words Per Year

	Adjara	Abkhazia	
Autonomy	9,063	67,956	$t=-6.605$ ($p=0.000$)
Not	22,718	44,449	$t=-2.771$ ($p=0.009$)
	$t=-2.235$ ($p=0.033$)	$t=2.310$ ($p=0.028$)	

Count of the number of words per year in articles mentioning autonomy and articles not mentioning autonomy. *T*-tests are shown corresponding to the appropriate columns and rows.

Table 2: Mean Article Sentiment Score

	Adjara	Abkhazia	
Autonomy	-1.039	-1.147	$t=0.158$ ($p=0.877$)
Not	0.468	0.326	$t=0.367$ ($p=0.713$)
	$t=-2.035$ ($p=0.042$)	$t=-5.128$ ($p=0.000$)	

Mean article sentiment scores for articles mentioning autonomy and not mentioning autonomy. *T*-tests are shown corresponding to the appropriate columns and rows.

Table 3: Mean Topic Distribution by Article Type

Topic	Adjara		Abkhazia	
	Autonomy	Not	Autonomy	Not
Local Gov't	0.139	0.142		
Georgia	0.134			
President	0.121	0.145		
Elections	0.112	0.135	0.129	0.125
Russian War	0.156		0.148	0.165
Separatism	0.214	0.177	0.149	
Central Gov't	0.125		0.141	
Opposition Party		0.109		
Security/Police		0.148		
Energy		0.144		
Negotiate			0.147	
Military			0.148	0.143
Peace			0.139	
Russia				0.148
Foreign Rel.				0.144
Politics				0.142
Ethnicity				0.125
Prop. Autonomy	0.495	0.177	0.872	0.725

‘Proportion Autonomy’ refers to the proportion of articles discussing topics related to autonomy. Those topics are: Russian War, separatism, central government, negotiate, military, peace, Russia, foreign relations, and ethnicity.

Table 4: Sentiment in 2004 and 2008

	Adjara	Abkhazia	
Autonomy	-1.676	-1.644	$t=-0.054$ (p=0.957)
Not	0.510	-1.465	$t=-2.892$ (p=0.004)
	$t=-3.314$ (p=0.001)	$t=-0.293$ (p=0.770)	

Article sentiment scores in 2004 for Adjara and 2008 in Abkhazia. *T*-tests are shown corresponding to the appropriate columns and rows.

Figure 1: Proportion of Topics Over Time



Panel A shows public discourse regarding the ‘peace’ and ‘military’ topics in Abkhazia over time. Panel B shows public discourse about the ‘separatism’ topic in Adjara split between articles mentioning and not mentioning autonomy.

Supplemental Information: Public Discourse About Autonomous Regions and De Facto States

The Supplemental Information contains a section describing potential theoretical background for the exploratory analysis (SI.2), how newspaper bias occurs in order to support the conditions for unbiased newspapers outlined in the main text (SI.2), and an overview of topic models and shows how the number of topics was calculated (SI.3).

SI.1: Defining Events

The relationship between a separatist region and its parent state is not stagnant. In particular, certain defining events serve to make the separatist region's future more or less certain. For a de facto state, international recognition is a significant event that provides legitimacy to the de facto state's existence. For autonomous regions, changes in or clarifications to the local powers of the region may similarly add legitimacy to the autonomous local government. I conceptualize these events as punctuated equilibria. During defining events, there is significant instability in the relationship between the parent state and the separatist region. After the event, the relationship between the parent state and separatist region has been significantly altered (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996).

Why should public discourse shift at all in response to these defining events? One of the reasons that the public shifts its discourse after an event is the attention paid to the event as it occurs (Boin, McConnell, and 't Hart 2008; Coombs and Holladay 2012). The key mechanism by which the public updates opinions about separatist entities is through the media, so a high

level of media attention about a defining event will make the public aware that the relationship between the separatist entity and parent state has changed.

Such an awareness can cause the public to update the topics of its discourse to reflect the new status quo between the parent state and the separatist entity (Bligh, Kohles, and Meindl 2004). This new information means that some topics in public discourse no longer make sense. For example, an autonomous region who cedes additional control to the parent state cannot be as easily criticized as being unwilling to share power once people become aware of this agreement than before this information is known. In particular, public discourse should emphasize integration of the separatist region with the parent state if the event brings the two entities closer together. If the event furthers the region's separatism, public discourse should shift to treat the region even more like a separate entity.

It is difficult to precisely estimate how public discourse reacts to such events because there may be both anticipatory changes in discourse before events or a lag in discourse change after events occur. To account for this, I analyze the year during which defining events in Adjara and Abkhazia took place.

First, I establish one event in each of Adjara and Abkhazia that significantly impacted these entities' relationships with Georgia. The 2004 ouster of Aslan Abashidze allowed Georgian President Saakashvili to exercise more control over Adjara. Previously, the Georgian central government was prohibited from entering Adjara and was unable to maintain relations with the Adjaran government. This meant that Adjara was operating as a separate entity even though it did not and had no intention of declaring independence. With Abashidze gone, Saakashvili was able to formally negotiate a power-sharing agreement with the Adjaran government that

generated tax revenue for the central government. Saakashvili also spent significant time campaigning in Adjara in an attempt to make Adjara competitive in national elections (Author).

The 2008 war with Russia was clearly a defining event for Abkhazia. Besides the broader implications of Russian forces establishing a military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Russo-Georgian war concluded with Russia recognizing of the sovereignty of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. International recognition of these entities gave them legitimacy and justification for operating like independent states (Caspersen 2008; O’Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal 2014). Studying Abkhazia in particular, Abkhaz leaders believed that they had ‘defeated’ Georgia and won independence after receiving Russian recognition (O’Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal 2014, 17). Thus, we expect that Georgian public discourse will become more negative and resigned to the fact that Abkhazia cannot be brought back into Georgia even militarily.

SI.2: Sources of Newspaper Bias

The main text identifies three sources of newspaper bias: ownership bias, individual journalistic bias, and target audience bias. Each is described fully here.

Ownership bias occurs when a newspaper is owned by an individual or corporation that exerts some influence on how the content of the paper is written, either directly or by controlling editorial staff (Bovitz, Druckman, and Lupia 2002). Control can be overt: the company may make their political positions known to the news staff and expect them to change their news reporting to accommodate these positions. Within overt control, the owners can be explicit, requiring ‘must-run’ stories that encompass their biases (Battaglio and Pearce 2018), or implicit, funding political parties or campaigns (Bedingfield 2012; Gilens and Hertzman 2000). Covert control occurs in almost all newsrooms wherein the owners are interested in the company being

profitable, so editors and journalists may think twice before publishing content that would damage the financial well-being of the company (Hankins 1988; Picard 2004).

Individual journalistic bias exists in all reporters (Gershon 2012; Patterson and Donsbach 1996). Journalists often bias stories to compete with others in their newspaper for recognition (Baron 2006) or to portray their own point of view on an issue (Watson 2012). Journalist biases may also be cognitive and implicit, making them even more difficult to detect (Stocking and Gross 1989). Controlling these biases is possible by restricting journalist discretion, perhaps via a managing editor (Baron 2006). The editor's job is to prevent individual biases from becoming systematic (Fico and Freedman 2004). Systematic bias occurs when articles are not reviewed to determine if they meet high journalistic standards. This is often a problem in newsrooms where editors have little journalistic training and journalists can submit their stories straight to publication instead of undergoing an extensive quality control process (Auman 1995).

Newspapers do not have resources to cover all news stories throughout the world, so they choose a target audience and try to deliver content relevant to that audience. Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010) show that newspapers effectively optimize their content to appeal to their readership. In the United States, target audiences are usually geographically defined: most cities have only one daily newspaper, so the target audience of the newspaper consists of all residents living near the city. Reading a newspaper with a geographically defined audience means that coverage is more comprehensive within the geographic boundaries of the paper; this is a form of bias. Newspapers are explicit about geographic biases by devoting sections to local news or reporting upcoming events by town and city. Non-geographically defined target audiences may serve ethnic minority communities, political parties, business interests, or anti-government groups, but they only sometimes identify their constituencies. Bias exists when the researcher

uses a newspaper source to attempt to learn about an audience different from the target audience (see Martindale 1990 for an example).

With these potential biases in mind, it is important to consider alternative measures of public discourse other than using newspaper articles. I identify two alternative measures: survey data and social media data. Surveying members of the public would effectively capture public discourse, as survey questions could include items that specifically ask people which issues they are discussing and how these issues relate to the Adjara and Abkhazia cases. The challenge with employing survey data in this study is that a panel study is needed to provide the time-series coverage possible with newspaper data. Social media data provides information on how members of the public speak over time. However, the challenge with social media data is representativeness. Whereas the biases of newspaper data can be at least partially determined, the motivations for someone to post on social media are unobservable. Therefore, using social media data assumes that it is representative of all public discourse that occurs off of social media. This is highly unlikely because not all people use social media, and people choose to discuss topics on social media that are popular with others. As such, social media data is likely to inflate the prevalence of some topics as more people reply or respond to initial posts. Future research would do well to investigate survey data and social media data as measures of public discourse.

The main text describes how Civil Georgia is the newspaper outlet that has a strong reputation for unbiased reporting. One feature mentioned in the main text that distinguishes Civil Georgia from most news outlets in Georgia is its international audience. About half of the web traffic to Civil.ge is from international sources. This poses a tension in Civil Georgia's potential reporting motivations. On one hand, the outlet is relied upon by many international non-governmental organizations, as it was started as a venture for non-profit free press in Georgia.

On the other hand, because of this, the outlet might be more devoted to reporting stories with an international dimension or that deal with political affairs. This study primarily compares the volume of autonomy and non-autonomy coverage in Adjara and Abkhazia. Thus, if Civil Georgia made a strategic decision to focus more or less on separatism, that decision should impact the coverage of both Adjara and Abkhazia relatively similarly. It is certainly possible that a focus on international affairs would prompt Civil Georgia to discuss Abkhazian separatism more than another outlet because separatism is more internationally relevant than is regional autonomy. The extent to which this is the case is currently not measurable and is one reason for suggesting future research on this topic that includes other measures of public discourse.

SI.3: Topic Models

Topic models have become increasingly popular in political science. See, for example, Grimmer (2010) and Lucas et al. (2015). Topic models do have problems, see Grimmer and Stewart (2013), though I address the major one, selecting the optimal number of topics, below.

The advantage of topic models is that the researcher does not have to identify the topics present in public discourse before starting the research. Instead, the procedure only requires that the researcher select the number of topics, not define the content of a topic. After selecting the number of topics, all filler words are removed. These words, like prepositions and salutations, do not contribute our understanding of the topics present in any given article. Next, an algorithm randomly assigns each word in an article to a topic. This represents a starting allocation of words to topics that the algorithm then systematically improves by changing the topic assignment of each word and seeing whether the resulting distribution of words to topics ‘fits better’ than the previous distribution. The degree to which words fit into topics is based on the likelihood that

words assigned to a topic will appear in the same article. The algorithm continues moving words around from the initial allocation of words to topics until the point at which moving any one word to a different topic does little to improve the classification of words into topics.

I first determine the optimal number of topics. There is no agreed upon method to select this number, but several groups of scholars have proposed solutions. I choose three of them (Arun et al. 2010; Cao et al. 2009; Deveaud, SanJuan, and Bellot 2014). Each test goes through successive numbers of topics and calculates a score where the best score (either maximum or minimum) indicates the optimal number of topics. Using this procedure, I select seven topics across all models.

In the main text, I describe a topic model analysis where I run separate topic models for Adjara and Abkhazia. This makes sense because it allows for public discourse about each entity to differ. However, because the topic models are separate, they are not inherently comparable. I name topics in Adjara and Abkhazia based on the words used to constitute the topics. When topics share names, this means that similar words are used in the topics. There is likely some variation between topics of the same name in Adjara and Abkhazia. This means that overall patterns and trends can be compared, but direct comparisons between two topics with the same names should be avoided.

Another choice made related to the topic modelling procedure was to split articles into autonomy and non-autonomy groups based on whether they mention autonomy at least once. This means that some articles in the autonomy group may mention autonomy in passing or in another context, without emphasizing it. This biases against finding the results presented in the analysis; that is, any articles that incidentally mention autonomy without focusing on it dilute the differences shown between autonomy and non-autonomy articles.

I chose this approach because it can be unambiguously implemented. Other approaches could involve defining a threshold for the number or percentage of words related to autonomy. Alternatively, researchers could manually code articles as related to autonomy using a coding procedure. Both of these methods require researcher choice that reduces the replicability of the study. In the first case, any threshold is somewhat arbitrary. In the second case, using a manual coding procedure would work well if aligned with qualitative textual analysis techniques. Completing a comprehensive qualitative textual analysis with these data is a valuable potential contribution and an opportunity for future research.

Articles that mention both Adjara and Abkhazia and autonomy are present in both autonomy datasets. Similarly, the number of times Adjara or Abkhazia are mentioned is not taken into account --- the measure is whether Adjara or Abkhazia is mentioned. A strength of qualitative coding is that researchers can differentiate between articles that focus on a particular region and those that only mention the region briefly. Developing a consistent and universal coding rule to make this distinction in quantitative text analysis is difficult because regions can be mentioned in different ways.

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