

In Search of Ethnic Roots: Instrumentalisation of the History and Politics of Exclusion in Georgia's Breakaway Region of Abkhazia

by Malkhaz Toria

The Georgian-Abkhazian armed conflict (1992-1993) forced most of the Georgian population to leave their homes in the breakaway region of Abkhazia. Those who remained or returned unofficially (about 45-65 000 returnees), namely to the Gali district, have been posing an existential challenge for the Abkhazian national project that claims ethnic ownership of Abkhazia. Abkhaz historians claim that Abkhazia never was a part of Georgia and portray the Georgian-Abkhazian relationship as a history of permanent clashes. The issue whether residents in predominantly Georgian-populated Gali should be fully incorporated into the "state" or be treated as a potential fifth column always ready to combat the "independence" of Abkhazia has been a Sword of Damocles hanging over the heads of the de-facto authorities for almost three decades. Gali Georgians' political, civil and property rights, as well as the freedom of movement across the dividing line, depends on their citizenship status in this unrecognised state. The Law on Foreign Citizens categorises Gali residents as foreign citizens with a residency permit. While "legally" allowing long-term stay, the law strips the Gali population of the right to vote, to work in local administration, and to purchase property. Moreover, Abkhaz "identity engineers" and the de-facto government launched a campaign of granting citizenship to those Gali residents who agree to return to their Abkhazian ethnic roots. This new turn in the eastern policy is not only an indicator of the conflict legacy and an expression of security concerns for having nationals of 'enemy state' within the real or imagined boundaries but also an attempt to realize historical imaginations about an Abkhazian ethnic space.

Keywords: Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict, Gali District, Instrumentalisation of History, Contested Historical Narratives, Politics of Exclusion, Ethnic Homogenisation.

Introduction: Living in Limbo

The Georgian-Abkhazian armed conflict (1992-1993) forced the majority of the Georgian population to leave their homes in the breakaway region of Abkhazia. Those who remained or returned unofficially, about 45-65 thousand residents,¹ namely to the Gali district, have been posing an existential challenge for the Abkhazian national project that claims ethnic ownership of Abkhazia. The issue whether residents in predominantly Georgian-populated Gali should be fully incorporated into the state or be treated as a potential fifth column always ready to combat the 'independence' of Abkhazia has been a Sword of Damocles hanging over the heads of the de-facto authorities for almost three decades.

Gali Georgians have been living in limbo with a complicated and undefined status in their home district, where they were born and raised.

In the first years of Abkhaz administration, the Gali Georgians underwent harsh discrimination, often facing physical threat and human right abuses from Abkhaz militia, security services or criminals (both Abkhaz and Georgian). In 1998, the re-escalation of the conflict resulted in a second phase of ethnic cleansing in the lower zone of the Gali district.

In addition, according to Oltramonti,² Abkhazia's internal developments have been characterized by economic violence and insecurity against Gali residents, putting them in a situation of isolation and disenfranchisement.³ Their life under the more than two-decades-long Abkhaz administration has been undergoing peculiar economic exploitation both by Abkhaz authorities and criminals through the exploitation of agricultural labour and monopolising trading activity along the ceasefire line (CFL) by granting security and charging for crossing the de-facto border. Another component of this economic exploitation was the racketeering and kidnapping of people, which reinforced the feeling of insecurity among Gali residents. In fact, the already low capacity of the Abkhazian de-facto law enforcement authorities – “[...]who, in the best of cases, did little to restrict these rackets and, in the worst, co-operated with criminal networks,[...]” – was impeded further “[...] by a generalised disregard for the security of the Georgian/ Mingrelian population, justified in terms of them posing a security threat, a potential fifth column in case of renewed war with Georgia”.⁴

The deliberate economic violence and stagnation was accompanied by a tactic of isolating the district and its population from other parts of Abkhazia, especially before 2008. The Gali district was detached from the central and western parts of the de-facto state because of poor infrastructural connections, violence, and insecurity in the district.⁵ In addition, the boundaries of the Gali district were redrawn and as a result some of its territories were incorporated into the neighbouring Ochanchire and Tkvarcheli districts.⁶ “By creating a boundary between Abkhazia and Gali, and keeping the Georgians/Mingrelians in a ‘ghetto’, it was easier to discriminate against and take advantage of them”.⁷

After the August war in 2008, Russian troops took charge of de-facto border control. As a result of these changes, the general security situation was improved in the Gali district, because the sealed CFL became impermeable for criminal groups from both sides. However, traditional economic activities of the local population along the CFL were significantly reoriented toward the western part of Abkhazia and the Russian Federation, which also brought an improvement of the roads between Sukhumi and Gali.⁸ For a brief period, the pressure decreased. De-facto president V. Ardzinba's (1994-2005) successor S. Bagapsh (2005-2011) even considered integration as an option and supported issuing Abkhaz passports for Gali residents.

Given the reality that Gali returnees constitute a considerable number of Abkhazia's population, they significantly affected a couple of election results.⁹ Eventually, "[...]about 13'000 passports, up from 3'000 in 2010, have been issued to Gali Georgians".¹⁰ Thus, it seems that shifting towards the integration of Gali residents would be a logical continuation of the de-facto government's Eastern policy.

However, this policy did not last for a long time. First, Sukhumi suspended the granting of citizenship to Gali Georgians in 2013¹¹ and then, after the presidential elections in 2014, the de-facto authorities invalidated thousands of Abkhaz passports, already issued to Georgians.¹² It should be noted that having no Abkhaz documents – regardless of the fact that these documents are illegal in the eyes of Tbilisi and the rest of the world – affects the Gali Georgians' life directly. Local residents' political, civil and property rights, as well as the freedom of movement across the dividing line, depends on their citizenship status in this unrecognised legal space.¹³

"Increased border controls furthermore affect the movements of the population in the area. Since many Georgians lack adequate documents they depend on illegal border crossings, which in effect turns the border region into a riskscape—a landscape characterized by risk and uncertainty".¹⁴ Gali Georgians usually go to the neighbouring, Georgian-controlled Zugdidi district at least once a month to sell farmed goods, to buy food and medicine, to collect Georgian allowances and pensions, etc.

What is also important, "[...]one group that commutes fairly often is university students who study in Zugdidi [or in Tbilisi and other cities of Georgia – M.T.] and whose families reside in Gal[i]".¹⁵ During the university admission process, the de-facto administration usually closes the checkpoints and does not allow young Gali Georgians to attend enrolment exams in Zugdidi.¹⁶ Therefore, they often choose unauthorised routes to cross the CFL. Their journey to Zugdidi is always risky and uncertain, as Russian guards can easily catch them.¹⁷ As a result, there can be consequences including financial fines and other administrative penalties. Or sometimes these detours also entail more direct, physical risks; for instance, during the 2019 admission period, one young Gali Georgian injured his hand on a barbed wire fence while trying to cross the administrative boundary line.¹⁸

The recent so-called "Law on Foreign Citizens" categorises Gali residents as foreign citizens with a residence permit. While "legally" allowing long-term stay, the law strips the Gali population of the right to vote, to work in the local administration, and, what is most important, to purchase property.¹⁹ This move of the de-facto government, in fact, legitimises the "guest" status of Gali Georgians in Abkhazia.

However, as it appeared, the law is not the last option from the repertoire of the de-facto government. It seems Abkhaz "identity engineers" found new answers to the everlasting political dilemma of how to deal with the Gali population. In particular, the de-facto government launched a campaign of granting citizenship to those Gali residents who agree to return to their "Abkhazian ethnic roots".²⁰

This new turn in the eastern policy is not only an indicator of the conflict legacy and an expression of security concerns for having nationals of the “enemy state” within the real or imagined boundaries, but also an attempt to homogenise the ethnolinguistically and culturally always heterogeneous Abkhazia in accordance with historical imaginations about an Abkhazian ethnic space.

Contested Historical Narratives and Mapping Abkhazia

Georgian and Abkhazian historiographies radically differ in narrating the history of the Abkhazia region. In the framework of Georgian-Abkhazian historical debates, the issue of the ethnically homogeneous Gali district of Abkhazia, where Georgians still constitute most of the population, acquires particular importance.

The Georgian national narrative represents Abkhazia as an inseparable part of the Georgian cultural realm and statehood. Georgian historians have no doubt that the indigenosity of Georgians in Abkhazia is well-documented.²¹ Furthermore, according to one quite widespread hypothesis, those presumably Abkhaz ethnic groups, mentioned in ancient Greek, Roman and medieval Georgian or other sources, were regional sub-groups of *Kartvelian*, which is of Georgian origin.²² In the second half of the 17th century, as a result of ethnic changes, the “real”, Georgian-speaking Abkhaz were replaced by the Caucasian mountaineers that were ancestors of modern Abkhazians. “The previous, original population of this region partially moved to inner Egrisi,²³ others were mixed with migrated Caucasian highlanders”.²⁴

A more moderate theory about the original population of Abkhazia claims that Georgians and Abkhaz might both have lived in Abkhazia from ancient time, though Georgians constituted the earliest strata of the autochthonous population. Or Abkhaz might have arrived in these territories since the 16-17th century, however, even these north-Caucasian Abkhaz were integrated into the Georgian cultural-historical realm.²⁵ Overall, in Georgian historiography, the Abkhaz are depicted as culturally close to Georgians or even as people of Georgian origin. Their alienation started during the period of the Russian empire and the Soviet Union when the Russification of the Abkhaz became an important aspect of the imperial agenda particularly in the late 19th century. For instance, the authors of the *Essays from the History of Georgia: Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present Day* (2012) who happen to be displaced historians from Abkhazia, state that the “separatists” [Abkhaz historians – M. T.] are wrong when trying to depict Georgians as having an “imperial mind”.

*Unfortunately, they are forgetting that Georgia itself was in grips of the colonial regime, which was oppressing its language and was ignoring its national traditions. In such conditions, the Georgian population was not and was not able to be the carrier of the Imperial mind.*²⁶

However, despite stressing Abkhazia's historical integrity as a part of Georgia, in certain cases, when it comes to the issue of boundaries between areas which were in the past settled and controlled by presumably Kartvelian and Abkhaz groups, a contested and exclusive representation of dividing ethnic lines is clearly visible. The 17th century is used as a sort of benchmark heralding the highlanders' invasion of Abkhazia that was an integral part of the Georgian realm, particularly the Samegrelo-Odishi principality. While describing how and why Abkhaz settlers arrived in lands freed from the original Georgian population, readers might feel the contemporary overtones. One of the acknowledged assumptions implies that a backward economic activity – extensive farming – that characterised socially underdeveloped highlanders made the north Caucasian Abkhazians search for and settle in new lands in the 17th century. This might be the reason that caused the shift from developed feudal economy to extensive farming, from advanced feudal culture to the highlanders' way of life in historical Odishi.²⁷

As Georgian historians explain, the present ethnic homogeneity in the Gali district reflects the historical reality that proves it was always a predominantly Megrelian-populated area.²⁸ Therefore, claiming the district as historically Abkhaz territory is nonsense. Actually, until the 18th century, there is no trace of Abkhaz in contemporary Gali. The territory belonged to the Samegrelo principality ruled by the Dadiani dynasty.²⁹ According to a typical description by a Georgian historian, we can trace the revision of the Georgian-Abkhaz ethnic border only since the beginning of the 17th century, when, backed by North-Caucasian highlanders and by the Ottoman Empire, the Abkhaz principality took advantage of the chaos in the adjacent Georgian regions and began a “permanent and successful expansion to the South-East, to the inner part of the Samegrelo-Odishi principality”.³⁰ Thus, after “migrated” North Caucasian Abkhaz had “grabbed” the eastern bank of the Enguri river, they began to settle in this land and eventually managed to take hold of it.³¹ Later, under the rule of Murzakan Shervashidze at the beginning of the 18th century, it was transformed into a separate fief. The territory was named after him as Samurzakano. However, Samurzakano remained a mostly Georgian-populated region. Moreover, representatives of the Dadiani dynasty never gave up on this land, but constantly and successfully competed with the Shervashidze family that ruled the Abkhaz principality.

On July 9, 1805 in the village of Bandza, Levan V. Dadiani was appointed as the prince of Samegrelo by the will of the Russian emperor. The lords of Samurzakano Levan and Manuchar Shervashidze participated in this ceremony confirming that they ‘always belonged to the Dadiani, the lords of Samegrelo’. They also took an oath of loyalty to the emperor of Russia. That meant, Samurzakano became the subject of Russian empire, together with Samegrelo.³²

In addition, Georgian historians argue that Abkhaz authors deliberately distort “statistical accounts” about the population of Samurzakano by rendering locals as

Abkhazian and thus “artificially” increasing the number of ethnic Abkhazian when describing the demographic situation in this area. As Papaskiri (2016) states, interesting results were revealed in 1926, when, as it appeared, the number of ethnic Abkhazian suddenly increased from 36816 to 55918 in just three years, which could not happen in a natural way, as there were no conditions for such drastic demographic changes (emigration, repression, epidemics, etc.).³³

On the contrary, Abkhaz historians usually trace the uninterrupted existence of ethnic Abkhaz, and/or broadly speaking Abkhaz-Adyghean ethnicities and cultures³⁴ in the territory of modern Western Georgia, including Abkhazia, back to the V-III millennia BC.³⁵ However, the migration of the Kartvelians in contemporary Western Georgia heralded and set the ground for a long process of shrinking boundaries of the Abkhazo-Adyghean ethnic space. A significant part of the native population was either pushed away from its territories or assimilated by Georgians, specifically by Megrelians, a regional group of Georgian nationality. However, the Enguri river still served as a natural border between Georgian and Abkhazian ethnicities up to the 19th century. The situation changed after 1864 when the Tsarist regime concluded the long process of incorporating the whole Caucasus region into the empire and began the colonisation of the conquered territories. After mass deportations of Abkhaz to Turkey in 1867 and 1877 in response to rebellions against the empire, the deserted lands were absorbed by colonists from different parts of the empire including Russians, Germans, Estonians, Moldovans, and Armenians. However, along with the imperial project of Russification of the local residents, the Georgians also made use of the situation and designed a plan to settle Georgians in Abkhazia. This intention was largely fulfilled since the Russian empire proceeded with the absorption of Abkhazia through Georgian “lobbyists” at the Viceroy of the Caucasus in Tbilisi.³⁶ “The demographic absorption of Abkhazia by Georgians continued in the Soviet time, particularly in the 1930-50s”.³⁷ Eventually, in the 20th century, Georgians managed to occupy “inner” Abkhazia, as well, which led to a demographic catastrophe. Precisely, the Abkhaz, i.e. the indigenous population became a minority in their homeland.³⁸

The Gali district, the historical Samurzakan region, represents the most vivid example of the Georgian assimilationist policy toward the native population. Ethnic Abkhaz made up most of the population in the Samurzakan region before the 19th century. Later, alien people from various parts of Georgia, particularly from the Samegrelo region, totally absorbed this Abkhazian ethnic space.

Abkhaz authors frequently ground their argument on descriptive accounts of travellers, and of Russian administrators and officers in the 19th century. These accounts can help to reconstruct certain moments, confined in space and time, in the history of Samurzakano, but they cannot be relevant to analyse the problem of indigenoussness of the population of the Gali district. These sources simply refer to the contemporary reality in which the authors live, and reflect their personal

impressions. However, they are valuable for Abkhaz historians and politicians who eagerly stick to details that might indicate notes, for instance, about the Enguri River as an “ethnic border” between Georgians and Abkhazians. These strategies include misinterpretations or, to be more precise, biased interpretations of this sort of account. One might encounter completely irrational and extreme, even racial arguments that intend to document an immanent and natural, almost genetic, difference between the Abkhaz and Georgian/Megrelian people. One such argument states that “[...]both Abkhazian and *Samurzakanians* consider trade activity very negatively unlike Megrelians who were always skilled merchants”.³⁹ Other arguments imply that because of the demographic expansion from Samegrelo, the population gradually became bilingual. Megrelians advanced to key positions on the local level. This also encouraged Abkhazian to become fluent in Megrelian, which is “more flexible and easier” to learn. “Generally, Abkhazians are talented in learning languages”.⁴⁰ Megrelians, on the other hand, were struggling to learn the more difficult Abkhazian language, which was eventually absorbed by the Megrelian language.⁴¹

Such opinions were common not only in the 19th or at the beginning of the 20th centuries, but are used also in the contemporary historical argumentation to stress the drastic difference between the Abkhaz and the Georgian people.

In addition, Abkhaz historians state that Georgian officials manipulated statistical information at various times. According to one of these claims “during the Mensheviks’ occupation of Abkhazia (1918-1921),⁴² more than 30’000 bilingual Abkhazians, who could speak both Abkhazian and Megrelian, were categorised as Georgians without their notice”.⁴³ Moreover, the eventually Georgianised Gali district became a main “bridgehead” for the expansion of Georgians further to other parts of Abkhazia in the 19th century.

Abkhaz historians generally tend to stress the Abkhaz’ difference from and almost endemic conflict with Georgians but prefer to keep silence about the centuries of common history and the long experience of living together. If they have to mention Georgian and Abkhazian “unity” such as the Medieval Kingdom created by the Georgian Bagrationi dynasty (10-15th century), it is covered by just two pages of the textbook of the history of Abkhazia.⁴⁴ However, they eagerly and in detail describe the typical feudal rivalry between the neighbouring principalities of Abkhazia and Samegrelo almost as Georgian-Abkhazian ethnic conflicts. While describing how the Georgian intelligentsiya expressed its support to the Abkhaz people on newspapers during the tragedy of *Muhajirs*⁴⁵ in the 19th century, the historian T. Achugba states that “of course, Abkhazians had reasons not to trust Georgians, because of the historically tense relationship with them, particularly with the Megrelian principality before and after the incorporation of Abkhazia into the Russian Empire”.⁴⁶

Accordingly, the forced displacement of ethnic Georgians in the wake of the Georgian-Abkhazian armed conflict (1992-1993) is seen as the expulsion of migrated colonisers to their “historical homeland” – beyond the Enguri river that is represented as a natural segregation border of the rival Abkhazian and Georgian ethnicities.⁴⁷ What is more, contemporary Abkhaz historians eagerly propagate the idea that there are still traces of Abkhazian identity in the current Gali population and the Abkhazian government must facilitate the restoration of their historical memory and, hence, their “true” identity.

Both sides blame each other for distortion, stealing, and misappropriation of the historical past. Abkhazian historians assess the hypotheses and arguments of their Georgian counterparts as constructions designed only to meet orders of a Georgian revanchist government and society. For their part, Georgian historians state that the Abkhaz colleagues deliberately falsify history to follow their delusional impressions and/or orders of their true master, the Russian imperialist government.

Such fundamental discrepancies influence how Georgian and Abkhaz historians judge, discuss and present specific moments in the history of the Abkhazia region. It is obvious how one-sided and categorical interpretations of historical events ignore the complex and dynamic nature of the past and contemporary inter-ethnic relations defined by various factors (actors, institutions, states, internal or external ways of ethnic categorisation, etc.) that includes not only conflicts but also the positive experience of living together.

It seems the political agenda and the conflict legacy remain the main narrators of the past. In many cases, a politically motivated and predisposed interpretation not only leads to poor research results but also keeps conflicting narratives alive. Accordingly, Georgian and Abkhazian historical debates go beyond academic discussions and enter real-political contestations.

Instrumentalisation of history and politics of ethnic homogenisation

R. Brubaker suggests that ethnicity and nationhood as subjective perceptions, interpretations, representations, categorisations, and identifications “[...] are not things in the world, but perspectives on the world. These include ethnicised ways of seeing (and ignoring), of construing (and misconstruing), of inferring (and misinferring), of remembering (and forgetting)”.⁴⁸ The policy of the Abkhaz de-facto government toward the Gali district is a projection of the dominant ethnocentric historical narrative aiming at homogenising the territory in demographic and cultural terms. Accordingly, struggles with citizenship and property rights, freedom of movement, education and language policy are expressively justified by historical and cultural arguments.

Education and language policy

The de-facto leadership aims to promote the “[...] Abkhaz language and culture without disenfranchising ethnic Armenian and Russian residents while preventing or discouraging the return of ethnic Georgians. As a result, new language policies in part reaffirm and in part subvert preexisting Soviet practices, recognizing to some extent the multi-ethnic composition of the territory”.⁴⁹ Thus, Abkhaz legislation formally allows other minorities to receive education in their native languages, but, in practice, the Georgian language is deprived of this right. In this regard, the de-facto authorities follow a principle that could be described as “if you want to change the identity, you must stop the language”. Given this political agenda, the Georgian language has been one of the main targets addressed by the Abkhaz administration in the Gali district. In 1994, Russian was formally introduced as a primary language of instruction in public schools. However, informally, local teachers, especially in less controlled villages of the lower Gali zone, continued using the Georgian language, because the children struggled with studying in Russian. Also, the majority of Georgian teachers were not fluent in Russian and preferred the language of instruction that they had used to teach before. Since September 2015, the de-facto authorities obliged all schools in the Gali district to totally shift to the Republican Standard Educational Programme. Consequently, the changes became effective in the primary classes (I-IV classes) in all of the 11 Georgian schools of the “lower zone” of the Gali district. Russian became the main language of instruction while the weekly hours of Georgian language were reduced. “According to the same plan, every next grade will continue studying in Russian and if the situation does not change, [the] nearly two-century-old history of the existence of Georgian schools on the territory of Abkhazia will end in 2022”.⁵⁰

As a result of these changes, the curricula and textbooks published in the Russian Federation are required to be used as main teaching sources. This does not include textbooks about the history of Abkhazia, which are completely designed by Abkhaz authors. Sukhumi has always been worried about using Georgian textbooks in the teaching process, which did not correspond to the Abkhazian version of history.⁵¹ With this final stage of standardising the teaching process, this issue would be resolved in all schools of the Gali district. However, as is reflected in various reports by international observers, this process has been accompanied by multiple cases of discrimination and violations of human rights against Georgian teachers and students. For instance, representatives of the Gali administration and even the law enforcement prosecutor’s office visited schools to check whether the order regarding Russian language instruction was followed or not. Teachers recalled that children have felt intimidated during these unexpected checks, seeing how their school bags were searched for Georgian textbooks.⁵²

Another mechanism to influence the identity of the Gali population is to play the role of a protector of the Megrelian language. The population of the Gali district, as well as the majority of displaced Georgians from Abkhazia, belongs to the Megrelian sub-group of the Georgian ethnicity. The Megrelian unwritten language constitutes the Kartvelian linguistic family, together with Laz, Svan, and Georgian. Megrelian as a local/regional language is used for speaking at home and in everyday communication within this “vernacular speech community”.⁵³ On a national level, Megrelians are and consider themselves as a key part of the wider Georgian ethnic and cultural realm based on the Georgian literary language.

Soon after the end of the armed conflict in 1993, the Abkhaz administration in Gali started printing the trilingual (Russian, Abkhazian, Megrelian) newspaper *Gal* that was a first attempt to sponsor the promotion of the Megrelian language. Currently, *Gal TV* delivers a weekly news digest in Russian. The journalist adds some Megrelian touch to the program by saluting people in Megrelian. Last, there was an announcement in 2015 to introduce Megrelian-language textbooks to the Gali public schools. Fermenting a distinct Megrelian identity and undermining the sense of Georgianness of the Gali population⁵⁴ would form a kind of cultural buffer zone between Georgia and Abkhazia.

Reminding Ethnic Roots and Restoring Abkhazian Identity

The current policy of searching ethnic roots and restoring Abkhazian ethnic identity among Gali residents is a vivid example of how a ethnocratic de-facto state tries to (re-) invent a sub-ethnic category of Abkhaz Samurzakanians, which in reality did not exist. As I mentioned, this category initially referred to the subjects of prince Murzakhan Shervashidze who held the area which is now the Gali district. However, Abkhaz ideologists widely instrumentalise and intend to impose the Samurzakanians on the Gali population whose ancestors might have been Abkhaz in the past. Blurring or switching ethnic identities between neighbouring ethnicities, which have a long experience of coexistence, is not a unique occurrence. This is true also in the case of the Georgian-Abkhazian relationship. There are ethnic Abkhaz with Georgian names but their Abkhaz identity was never questioned by local historians. However, when it comes to the Gali district, the political instrumentalisation of history is very much in action. We can observe this process from the perspective of the Gramscian notion of cultural hegemony, when subordinates are required to accept and eventually internalise a hegemonic discourse that is fundamentally informed by a *primordial* historical narrative. It claims that ethnic membership is acquired through birth, and, therefore, as a given characteristic, remains stable through different contexts and periods. Accordingly, the target population must “consent to the cultural models developed by elites, including categories of ethnic or national belonging, thus stabilizing the underlying system of political and

economic domination".⁵⁵

The so-called Council of Abkhazians of Samurzakan provided a performative event in July 2017 where its members approved the resolution in which they call on all residents of eastern Abkhazia— whose names, as they put it, were changed during the Stalin period – to return to their historical roots. The resolution also appeals to the Abkhaz government to facilitate this process. The de-facto president R. Khadjimba sent a written message to these gatherings where he mentioned that, in fact, people of Gali are Abkhazians who were forcibly transformed into Georgians. However, he noted that the historical memory is alive and the restoration of the forgotten Abkhazian national identity is an ongoing and irreversible process in the Gali district. One of these meetings was distinguished by granting Abkhazian citizenship to those 31 Gali residents who expressed their willingness to restore their original names and, accordingly, their Abkhaz nationality.⁵⁶ Again in 2018 and 2019, the Council organised similar events and granted restored Abkhaz names to hundreds of Gali residents. Apart from this, there is a plan to establish Abkhaz boarding schools in Gali where the priority would be teaching Abkhazian language and literature and the history of Abkhazia.⁵⁷

Conclusion: between inclusion and exclusion

Gali returnees continue to live under pressure of ethnic discrimination, which is revealed in a range of political and social restrictions. The de-facto government of Abkhazia does not want Georgians to be equal citizens since they could alter the Abkhaz ethnocentric vision of the state in this traditionally multi-ethnic region. It is not surprising, since the main strategies of state-building in quasi-states, as Kolstø calls Abkhazia⁵⁸ and other unrecognised de-facto states, rest on three main pillars, which include: the memory of the civil war that resulted in the establishment of a quasi-state; the cultivation of the image of a common external enemy which, in the case of Abkhazia, is Georgia; and the homogenisation of the population through ethnic cleansing.⁵⁹ The forced displacement of the majority of Abkhazia's Georgian population also fits this model. This situation defines, for instance, "the tension within Abkhazia between an ethnic and a civic understanding of the nation. The constitution, on the one hand, states that

*the sovereignty bearer and sole source of authority in the Republic of Abkhazia shall be its people, the citizens of the Republic of Abkhazia' (Article 2)—but on the other hand, the president is required to be an ethnic Abkhaz (Article 49).*⁶⁰

Accordingly, ethnic processes in Abkhazia reveal how the Abkhazian ethnic identity is constructed, made, remade, granted, and chosen depending on certain circumstances.⁶¹ The Law on Foreign Citizens appears as a significant mechanism to formally categorise Gali residents as foreign nationals in their home.

Accordingly, the law legitimises the semi-explicit measures designed immediately after the Abkhaz administration took control over the region in the 1990s. Before Russia's recognition of the independence of Abkhazia in 2008, the de-facto government was forced to consider recommendations of the international community regarding the rights of the remaining Georgian population in the region. However, after securing the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict divide across the Enguri river by Russian military support, the Abkhaz authorities began to realise their assimilationist plans toward the Gali Georgians. The obstacles regarding citizenship status, education, and language policy go in accordance with the Abkhazian historical narrative and imaginaries. The last initiatives of awakening the Gali population from a national slumber and restore their "true identity" imply a clear message toward the Gali residents that the status and civil rights issues are directly connected to ethnic belonging. Either they switch to Abkhazian nationality and get citizenship or maintain their Georgian identity and can apply for the residency permits as foreign citizens. These ethnocentric criteria to value people depending on ethnic belonging is a clear manifestation of how history is instrumentalised to deal with an unwelcome part of society.

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