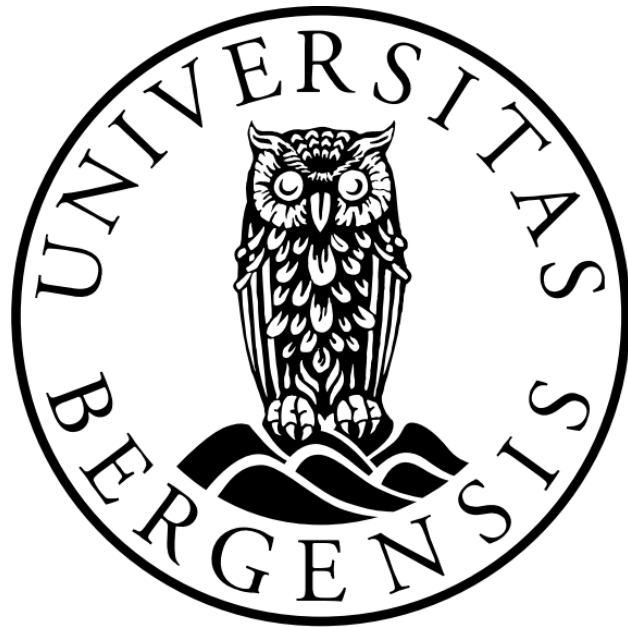


# **BELONGING, HOPE, AND THE FUTURE IN SOUTH CAUCASUS**

**A STUDY OF THE FIRST POST-WAR GENERATION OF ABKHAZIA**



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# TOPONYMS AND TERMINOLOGY

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## TOPONYMS

In contrast to most articles written about Abkhazia, I have chosen to consequently write ‘Sukhum’ instead of the more common, and often considered more politically neutral, *Sukhumi* or *Sukhum(i)*. By using toponyms and terminology used by the non-Georgian speaking population in Abkhazia, I do not mean to imply a position on the political status of Abkhazia – it is simply a consequence of where, and among who, I did my fieldwork. As this thesis is written based on ethnography collected among people in Abkhazia, who do not speak Georgian, through regular meetings and conversations over time, who consequently used ‘Sukhum’ it would be strange to change the way they spoke about and called their own hometown. During my fieldwork, I only met a handful of people who pronounced it *Sukhumi*. I met all of these people in *Gal(i)* which is the main town in one of the border regions to Georgia, where the majority of the population are Georgian or Mingrelian speaking.

## TERMINOLOGY

I have chosen to not use terms such as ‘de facto’, ‘unrecognized’, or ‘partially recognized’ when discussing and writing about political positions and institutions within Abkhazia throughout this thesis. By this, I mean that I do not write ‘de facto government’, ‘de facto citizens’, ‘de facto passport’, ‘de facto state’ etc., but instead ‘government’, ‘citizens’, ‘passport’ and ‘state’. This is solely done for the ease of reading and the flow of the text, and this does not, just as with the toponyms used, imply any stance on the political status of Abkhazia.

Georgia and Abkhazia also disagree on the terminology used for the conflict divide. Whereas the Georgian government uses the term “administrative boundary”, the Abkhazian government use “border” as in an international border. I have chosen to use the word “border” throughout this thesis based on the same reasoning as above: solely for the ease of reading and the flow of the text.



# CHAPTER ONE:

## INTRODUCTION

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### ARRIVING IN SUKHUM

*“This is Abkhazia, not Georgia. We are two different countries, with different languages, different people and different cultures”, Bagrat, my host, told me as I entered my new home, a small flat on the seventh floor in a typical Soviet neighbourhood located on the outskirts of Sukhum. The lift I had just taken to the seventh floor looked like it had been there since the building was built in the 70s, and I prayed it would work for at least a few more minutes. My hosts, Bagrat, a middle-aged Abkhaz man, and his Russian wife, Anastasia, who was born and grew up in Abkhazia, welcomed me to their flat and showed me my room-to-be for the next five months. The floor was covered in a wall-to-wall carpet with an intricate design in beige, purple and grey, while the walls were wallpapered in a baby blue tapestry with a lighter part that had a pattern of pavilions and trees. A set of white lace curtains were drawn, while a second, different curtain in a dark grey colour was pulled and nicely tied to the side. The bed was covered in a bright red, yellow and orange bedcover which covered some even more colourful bedsheets. Through the window, I saw countless other buildings like the one I had just entered. In the middle of all the buildings, there was an opening, with two larger burnt-out constructions. While Anastasia was busy making lunch, Bagrat showed me the rest of the apartment. The tour ended through a narrow door from the kitchen that led to the balcony, which had a breathtaking view of the Caucasus Mountains, the Black Sea and the neighbouring city, Noviy Afon. The building was located on the western edge of the city, close to where the frontline had been during the war. This had left scars in the landscape that were impossible to miss. Bombed and burned-out buildings and endless bullets and grenade-marks were present wherever you looked. Several floors of the neighbouring buildings had been wiped out and left gaping holes, while other buildings were completely looted and only the structure remained. The stark contrast between the breathtaking beauty of the natural landscape and the warscape of abandoned, bombed and burnt-out buildings were striking.*

From October 2019 to March 2020, I conducted my first anthropological fieldwork in Sukhum, the capital of Abkhazia. My original plan was to begin my fieldwork in the beginning of August,

but due to political unrest between Abkhazia and Georgia which resulted in the border being closed for several months, I was not able to do so. This led to me spending more time in Georgia, specifically Tbilisi and Zugdidi, than first anticipated. Although this was not part of my initial plan, I am thankful for the time as it gave me insight and a better understanding of how peoples' lives on the Georgian side of the border are affected by the ongoing conflict. It also gave me a first-hand experience of the instability and unpredictability of the region, and how this must be dealt with on a day-to-day basis by citizens on both sides of the border. Although my few months in Tbilisi and Zugdidi are not comparable to those who live, struggle, and engage with the border every day, I got a "taste" of the stress, unpredictability, challenges, and tension that the current situation put on people.

After almost two and a half months filled with frustration and demotivation that things were not moving forward how I wanted, I was close to accepting that my fieldwork was not going to be either where or how I had planned. This suddenly changed when I finally got an e-mail from the Consular Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Abkhazia confirming that the border station at the Ingur-river finally had opened and that I had been granted a visa<sup>1</sup>. On 11<sup>th</sup> October 2019, I was finally able to cross the Ingur-river from Georgia to Abkhazia. It felt completely surreal, exciting, and terrifying all at the same time. Before I had arrived in Georgia in August, and not knowing that the border would stay closed for months, I had been in touch with several people and organizations in Abkhazia, with the expectation of meeting them within a few weeks. However, as the months passed while I was stuck in Georgia, these conversations stopped and when I finally was able to cross the border and reached out again, I did not get a single response. Never have I felt as lost, confused and on my own, as when I reached Sukhum and wondered how on earth I was going to meet potential interlocutors and where I was supposed to begin.

My initial plan was to look at how 'belonging' is understood and expressed in relation to the landscape and other material and spatial surroundings in Abkhazia, with a focus on the urban landscape in Sukhum. I chose this topic for several reasons. Most importantly, I found it a highly interesting and relevant topic that I wanted to explore further. Inspired by how Yael Navaro-Yashin, in *The Make-Believe Space* (2012), explores how the materiality of Northern

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<sup>1</sup> For those who wish to enter Abkhazia, an entry-permit issued by the Abkhazian government is necessary. This document is not possible for Georgian passport-holders to obtain such a visa.



Cyprus express and represent the past, the present and the future of one of the longest living *de-facto* states in the world, I thought a similar topic would be fitting for my chosen field site. I found her ethnography both fascinating and relevant for how we think and use our surroundings to make sense of the world we experience and live in. For a state like Abkhazia, where the spatial landscape has changed drastically over the past three decades, I imagined this to be highly relevant. Additionally, while preparing for my fieldwork, most articles I read about Abkhazia focused on the conflict with Georgia or Russia's role in the conflict, rather than Abkhazia itself. This often led to Abkhazia being portrayed as a "puppet" or piece in Russia's power play. Due to this, Abkhazia and the people who live there were rarely given a voice in the articles I read, and if they were, the articles were very biased, more often leaning towards the Georgian public discourse. In my research, I wanted to shift my focus from the conflict to the people living there by focusing on how people expressed 'belonging' and relation to their spatial surroundings. My limited knowledge of the Russian language was also a contributing reason to why I initially chose my original topic of belonging. Before starting my fieldwork, I spent five months studying Russian language at Kuban State University in Krasnodar. As my knowledge of Russian before I began the language course was limited to *spasibo*, *da* and *nyet*, I did not expect my Russian to be good enough to understand important nuances that are essential when concerning highly political topics such as nationalism and ethnicity. Therefore, it did not feel ethically correct or fair towards my coming interlocutors for me to try to tackle such topics. By studying the spatial landscape, I also hoped "mobile fieldwork" (see Ingold 2006; Mills 2010; Richardson 2000) would be a methodological tool I could utilise to help me understand things that normally would be lost in translation. Based on these reasons, I initially wanted to understand and explore how 'belonging' was understood and expressed in relation to the landscape and other spatial surroundings, specifically in Sukhum.

After a month or so after arriving in Sukhum, I realised that my interlocutors talked about belonging related to the landscape, but not as much as I anticipated. However, expressions of belonging became apparent when they talked about several other topics, such as documents, hope, and traditions *in addition* to the landscape. Hence, I decided to reorient my research questions towards questions where I explored various forms of expressions of belonging among young adults in Sukhum. The reorientation of my focus was thus not about the topic itself (belonging), but rather

in which was it was expressed which led to the following research questions that I explore by using the state, documents, traditions, and the landscape as different analytical intakes:

- In which ways are feelings of belonging expressed and discussed among young adults living in a politically disputed state?
- In which ways does living in a politically disputed state influence one's sense of belonging, and how is this expressed among the young adults living there?

The aim of this thesis is to help fill what I believe is a gap in the anthropological writings from the region. While Georgia has been well studied (see e.g., Pelkmans 2006; Mühlfried 2018; Siphshvili 2014; Khutsishvili 2016) very little has been written about the population in Abkhazia who do not identify as Georgian or feel any attachment to Georgia (see Costello 2015, 2011; Hewitt 2013 for exceptions) and close to nothing can be found about the young generations who grew up during and after the war with Georgia in 1992-93 (see Sabirova 2008 for exception). Through the ethnography I present in this thesis, I hope to give this group of young adults a voice that can contribute to a greater understanding of what it means to be a young in a politically disputed state.

## **ABKHAZIA**

Abkhazia, or *Apsny* – ‘the country of the soul’ – as it is called by the Abkhaz, is a small area of land, situated between Georgia and Russia where the south-western parts of the Caucasus Mountains meet the north-eastern shore of the Black Sea. In western Abkhazia, the snow-capped mountains dramatically plunge into the Black Sea, whereas the further east you go, the distance between the sea and the mountains increases and gives room to a fertile plain. Countless rivers and streams flow down from the Caucasus mountains, over the plains and wash out in the Black Sea, providing the land with plentiful irrigation. Due to the diverse landscape in Abkhazia, the climate ranges widely, from subtropical climate in the coastal areas to a tempered climate in the mountainous area. The combination of natural irrigation and the temperature makes Abkhazia ideal for agriculture, and the area is famous for a variety of citrus fruits, especially mandarins, and for hazelnuts, and wine. Around 80 plants are supposedly endemic to the country (Bærug 2020), meaning they can only be found there, and the deepest cave in the world, the Veryovkina Cave, with its 2212 meters, is located in the western parts of Abkhazia. Although a rather small land area, Abkhazia is nonetheless incredibly diverse – not only with regards to the nature, but also concerning the people who live there.



*Picture 1: the lush foothills meet the Black Sea in the view from Anacopia fortress. The Noviy Afon Monastery is seen in the middle of the picture, and Sukhum is located far away in the very back.*

The demographic composition of Abkhazia has been reshaped by the violent turmoil that large parts of the Caucasus experienced over the past 30 years and is largely why the political conflict between Abkhazia and Georgia remains unsolved. Below, I present some numbers and statistics to show how the ethnic composition of Abkhazia changed as a result of the 1992-93 war. Before using such numbers, one should be aware that figures like these often are used in separate ways by both the Georgian government and Abkhazian side to advocate their perspectives. In Georgia, demographic statistics are often used to illustrate the clear majority of Georgians in Abkhazia before the war, whereas in Abkhazia, such statistics are used to “show how Soviet policies brought in Georgian migrants that significantly tipped the demographic balance and rendered Abkhazians a minority in their own territory” (Kabachnik 2012: 401). Irrespective of their political use, they illustrate the drastic changes in the ethnic compositions of the demography of Abkhazia over the past three decades, and thus also indicate key issues of contention in the ongoing conflict.

In 1989, before the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent war of secession with Georgia, the population in the then Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia (part of the Soviet Socialist Union Republic of Georgia) consisted of about 525,000 inhabitants where Georgians made up 46% of the population in the region and the Abkhaz population made up 18%. Even though the Abkhaz accounted for less than 20% of the population, they still benefitted from certain privileges as the titular nation in the republic in the late Soviet period (see De Waal 2018). Other groups included Russians, Armenians, Estonians, and Greeks. Twenty years later, the 2019 census shows that the population of Abkhazia had dropped significantly, to about 245,000 inhabitants – less than half of the pre-war population. There was also a striking difference in the composition of the different groups – the Abkhaz population had increased to over 50% of the total population, whereas the Georgian population had dropped to less than 20%. The remaining 30% consisted of the other groups mentioned earlier as well as new groups, e.g., Arabs who have immigrated based on their ancestral ties to Abkhazia through the *muhajirs*<sup>2</sup>. These include a group of Syrian refugees (Aedy 2017), but also other descendants of the *muhajirs*, who fled during the Circassian genocide, from other Arab countries such as Jordan. The only regions of Abkhazia where the Georgian population exceed 10 percent are in the two border regions to Georgia: Gal(i) and Tkvarchel(i) (Khutsishvili 2016: 109-112). The Abkhaz population speak Abkhazian, a Northwest Caucasian language, but because the population of Abkhazia is so diverse, Russian serves as the *lingua franca* (Pender 2017). Around 60% of the population belong to the Orthodox Church and 16% are Muslims. There are also a small number of Lutheran and Catholic followers, as well as a synagogue. The traditional religion of Abkhazia is important for the Abkhaz population, and is often practiced side by side with other religious belief systems.

## SUKHUM

Sukhum was the main field site for the duration of my fieldwork. It is the capital of Abkhazia and was founded more than 2500 years ago by Greek colonists under the name Dioskurias. From then until the Soviet period, the city was conquered by a number of different empires, including the Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman and Russian empire. Remains of this can be seen, among other places, by the embankment of Sukhum where the ruins of *Sukhumskaya krepost'* (Sukhum Fortress) dating back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD can be found. Today, they city has around 60.000 inhabitants, but just

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<sup>2</sup> *Muhajirs* is the term used for those who fled or were forcefully displaced to the Ottoman Empire by the Russian Empire during the Circassian Genocide. This will be further explained in the section on the history of Abkhazia.

as the rest of the region, the demographics of Sukhum has changed dramatically over the past decades. The majority of the inhabitants, close to 70%, are Abkhaz, whereas Russians make up almost 15%, Armenians 10% and the rest consists of a mix of the earlier mentioned groups of people (Bærug 2021). During the Soviet era, Sukhum was a favoured place for travel among the elite of the Soviet Union. The city was badly damaged during the war, and material evidence of this is visible all over the city; from memorial monuments to destroyed buildings filled with bullet holes. There are two sports stadiums in the city, a large open-air market, a former research facility<sup>3</sup>, many cafés and restaurants, parks and green areas, beaches and a pedestrian embankment that stretches three kilometres along the coast of the city. The parliament and government buildings are also located in Sukhum.



*Picture 2: Parts of the city center of Sukhum seen from a viewpoint at Sukhumskaya gora (Sukhum mountain).*

## **THE POLITICAL STATUS OF ABKHAZIA**

The political status of Abkhazia is disputed. Most of the UN member nations consider Abkhazia to be *de jure* a part of Georgia which essentially means that they consider Abkhazia to be legally

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<sup>3</sup> Parts of the ‘Research Institute of Experimental Pathology and Therapy’ is still in use. Before the war there were around 2000 monkeys here, but today there are only around 350 left. The institute was used for medical research as well as training monkeys to go to space. Several monkeys trained in the facilities in Sukhum were sent to space by the USSR. Today, the institute is a tourist attraction as well as a research facility.

a part of Georgia. The Abkhazian government however, backed by most of the population and five UN nations, claim sovereignty. However, most of the international community of nation states consider Abkhazia to be a *de facto* state. This means that practically speaking, although not recognized by international law, Abkhazia exist and functions as an independent state. At the same time, most of This will be further discussed in the next chapter.

## **THE HISTORY OF ABKHAZIA**

To understand the socio-political situation in present day Abkhazia, historical context is needed. The history of Abkhazia is a lengthy one, and I will only present a brief outline of important events that have shaped Abkhazia to what it is today for the purpose of this thesis. It should be noted that the history of Abkhazia itself is disputed, with both the Georgian and Abkhazian governments presenting their own versions of it, emphasising certain events, and leaving out or altering others. I have tried my best to navigate between the different versions to present an as neutral summary of the history as possible.

Abkhazia has a long and rich history, dating back thousands of years. Around 2500 years ago, the first Greek colonisers settled and formed colonies along the coast of Abkhazia – one of these was Dioskurias, today known as the capital Sukhum. Despite its small size, the geographical location of Abkhazia made it a strategically important land<sup>4</sup>, and over the following centuries, Abkhazia was both conquered and attempted conquered several times. From the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman Empire controlled Abkhazia and during this time, a substantial part of the Abkhaz population was converted to Islam. The Russian Empire began their colonisation of the Caucasus in the 1800s, and in 1810, Sukhum was conquered. Nevertheless, because of strong resistance and opposition among the population, it was not until 1864 that the Russians controlled all of Abkhazia. Due to the resilience in the population, the Russian empire which was built on Orthodox values, punished tens of thousands of Circassian and Abkhaz Muslims in what is known as the Circassian genocide, by either killing them or forcibly displacing them to the Ottoman Empire. The estimated number of people killed and expelled throughout the genocide varies but is thought to be between 400,000-1,500,000. From the Ottoman Empire they spread to Syria and other Arabic countries where they could practice their religion

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<sup>4</sup> The Caucasus mountains works as a natural barrier, and the location of Abkhazia was a way to get past the Caucasus mountains without having to cross them.

freely. The displaced population are today known as *muhajirs* in Abkhazia, and their descendants make up a large part of the Abkhaz diaspora, mainly in the Middle East and Turkey. As an additional punishment for the difficulties brought upon the Russian Empire, the Abkhaz and Circassian populations were prohibited from settling along the coast of Abkhazia until the end of the Russian empire. The empty villages they left behind were repopulated by other groups such as Armenians, Mingrelians and Russians, which, in combination with those who were killed or expelled during the genocide, led to a decline of the Abkhaz population in relative terms.

After the Bolshevik coup in October 1917, the whole of Caucasus experienced fragile structures and civil unrest. Abkhazia briefly joined the Union of United Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, which in 1918 reformed as the Mountainous Republic of the Northern Caucasus<sup>5</sup> (Kabachnik 2012: 400), and remained a part of this until it became a part of the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1921. At first Abkhazia briefly enjoyed the status of the Abkhazian Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) which had the status of a union republic related with, but not subordinate to, the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (GSSR). However, in 1930, under Josef Stalin, Abkhazia's status was reduced from being a Soviet Socialist Republic to becoming an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the GSSR, meaning that Abkhazia lost parts of its autonomy to Georgia. Over the following decades, under the brutal rule of Josef Stalin and Lavrentiy Beria (head of the NKVD, the ministry of internal affairs), Abkhazia was subjected to massive Georgianization, both culturally and demographically (Kolstø 2020: 142). Stalin was Georgian, making him highly unpopular among the Abkhaz population, but Beria was even more unpopular. He was from a Mingrelian family and had grown up in Abkhazia which led to a much stronger resentment against Beria for what the Abkhaz experienced as unforgivable wrongdoings against them. As an Abkhaz woman told me, "Stalin was bad for Abkhazia, but Beria was disastrous". Beria initiated a mass immigration of Armenians, Georgians, and Russians to Abkhazia, and at the same time, measures were taken to limit the Abkhazian language and culture. The Abkhazian language would no longer be written in Latin letters, but in Georgian, and up until Stalin's death in 1953, it was forbidden to teach Abkhazian in schools. Place names were also changed to Georgian or more Georgian-sounding ones, by adding the letter "i" at the end of place names, i.e., changing Sukhum to Sukhumi, or by

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<sup>5</sup> The Mountainous Republic of the Northern Caucasus was a short-lived republic situated in Northern Caucasus. It included the territories which today form Abkhazia and the Russian republics Chechnya, Ingushetia, North Ossetia-Alania, Kabardino-Balkaria, Dagestan and parts of Stavropol Krai.



changing street names to Georgian ones, i.e., the embankment along the Black Sea coast in Sukhum was first named *Naberezhnoy ulitsey Lenina* which then was changed to *Naberezhnaya Rustaveli* after the Georgian poet Shota Rustaveli<sup>6</sup>. It was not until Mikhail Gorbachev became the Secretary General of the Communist Party in 1985 and launched the new policy of openness, *glasnost*, that the Abkhaz could speak openly about the state directed mass immigration of non-Abkhaz and the Abkhaz language oppression. By 1989 the Abkhaz population had dropped to 17% of the total population of Abkhazia from the 55,3% it had been in 1897<sup>7</sup>.

In the late 1980s, just before the fall of the Soviet Union, a separatist movement arose in Abkhazia and called for independence from Georgia. At the same time, demonstrations and clashes between the Georgians and the Abkhaz occurred and destabilized the region (Project 2004). When the collapse of the Soviet Union was a fact, the separatist movement used the instability in their favour and tried to break away from the former GSSR in order to form their own independent state. This happened with several other autonomous republics and autonomous regions (*oblast*) in Caucasus, i.e., Nagorno Karabakh and South Ossetia, that wanted independence from the republics they were located within (Bringa and Toje 2016: 10-11). In February 1992, the Georgian authorities reinstated the 1921 pre-Soviet Constitution, which helped the separatist movement's momentum as it "was perceived as an attack on Abkhazia's autonomous status" (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008: 486). On 23 July 1992, the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet declares independence from Georgia and calls for full Union Republic status of the region as it had briefly had in 1921. The former GSSR refused to accept the Abkhazian declaration of independence and after a year of unrest, Georgia used military power to gain control over the Abkhazian territory. The reasons for why Georgia commanded their forces to Abkhazia are disputed. The Georgian official narrative claims it was to strike down on rebels who sabotaged the trains going through Abkhazia towards Tbilisi, Baku, and Yerevan in order to regain stability and control. However, by most Abkhaz this is not accepted as the "real" reason as they believe they were attacked to hinder them from becoming independent from Georgia after the dissolution of the USSR. The military efforts of the Georgian government were not welcomed in Abkhazia and the war was a fact. At first, the Abkhaz forces were pushed back, but soon, the Abkhaz forces were strengthened by numerous volunteers from Russia, in

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<sup>6</sup> After the war in 1993, the name of embankment was yet again changed to *Naberezhnuyu Makhadzhirov* to commemorate the *Muhajirs* who fought for Abkhazia's freedom when the Russian Empire tried to conquer.

<sup>7</sup> This number is due to a combination of both the Circassian genocide and the mass immigration initiated by Stalin and Beria.



particular from Chechnya and other North-Caucasian states that sympathized with Abkhazia's fight for independence. The war ravaged the country for more than a year, until the Abkhaz forces managed to recapture Sukhum on the 27 September in 1993. The war resulted in thousands of deaths on both sides, massive material damage and more than 200,000 Georgians and Mingrelians who were forcefully<sup>8</sup> displaced from the region (O'Loughlin, Kolossov, and Gerardtoal 2011: 7). The Georgian forces had to withdraw and although Abkhazia won the war militarily, it was left in ruins, still without having gained international recognition.



*Picture 3: inside the abandoned Sanatorium Gruziya in Gagra. Picture 4: Georgian writing is covered at the train station in Gagra – a common sight at other train stations as well.*

In the first year after the war, “many economic and infrastructural connections remained open” (De Waal 2018: 23). Soon, nonetheless, policies of isolation were initiated, by both Georgia and

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<sup>8</sup> This is another term which is disputed. The international narrative claim they were forcefully displaced, whereas the Abkhazian narrative claim they “went home” to Georgia.

the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS; the former Soviet Union Republics minus the Baltic states), and from 1994 until 1999, Abkhazia was subjected to sanctions and a *de facto* blockade by CIS (Kvarchelia 2008). The border crossing between Abkhazia and Russia was closed for men between the ages of 16 and 65<sup>9</sup>, the import and export of any goods practically stopped, the seaports and airports were shut down, and Russia supported the territorial integrity of Georgia. However, in September 1999, Vladimir Putin gradually started to restore the economic and transportation links with Abkhazia across the border despite CIS' decision. This action, as well as providing Russian passports to a large number of Abkhazian citizens, increasing economic aid, and offering pensions to former USSR citizens has made Putin extremely popular among Abkhazia's population. Today, Abkhazia's borders are controlled by Abkhazian forces in cooperation with Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB).

The people displaced from the region are one of the main reasons the conflict remains unresolved today. The Georgian government define them as "internally displaced persons" (IDPs), whereas the Abkhazian government do not recognize them as having any claim to living in Abkhazia at all. People I met in Abkhazia would claim that "the Georgians left themselves", "they went back to their motherland" or "they turned against us when times were hard", and therefore did not believe they should be allowed to return. The Georgian government are not willing to sign the peace-treaty until Abkhazia agree to let the IDPs return to their homes in Abkhazia, but the Abkhazian government refuse to let them do this. In 1997-1998, Georgia and Abkhazia were close to agreeing on a peace deal which had been negotiated by Yevgeny Primakov, the Russian foreign minister at the time. However, it was rejected by the Georgian side, and Sergei Shamba, the Abkhazian foreign minister at the time said "the Abkhaz side agreed to a status deal that fell short of independence" (De Waal 2018: 21). In 1999, Abkhazia declared independence after a referendum where the population who were still living in or had returned to Abkhazia, voted. However, the international community, including Russia, did not approve of the referendum or the result as most of the Georgian and Mingrelian populations that fled during or after the war had not been able to partake in the vote.

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<sup>9</sup> Several people I met throughout my fieldwork said that this changed the gender roles for a period of time. Women had to travel with heavy bags and produce back and forth over the border, doing the jobs that men normally would do.

In 1999, after Vladimir Putin was elected prime minister of the Russian Federation, things began to change. The policies of isolation were lifted from the Russian side, and in 2002, the Russian government gave citizens of Abkhazia holding a Soviet passport<sup>10</sup> “permission to receive Russian passports in the city of Sochi, and an estimated 150,000 took the opportunity” (De Waal 2018: 23). It was not until six years later, in 2008, that Abkhazia changed status from being an “unrecognized state” to becoming a “partially recognized state”. This means a state recognized by one or more nation states, but not by the international community of the UN. This happened after the war between Russia and Georgia over South-Ossetia in 2008, when Russia and Nicaragua recognized Abkhazia as an independent state. In 2009, Venezuela and Nauru followed suit and in 2018, Syria did as well.

## **MY INTERLOCUTORS**

My interlocutors were mainly young women in their 20s and 30s who had already graduated from university and were either looking for a job or already had one. Most of them grew up in Abkhazia and had lived there their whole lives. Some had studied abroad, mostly in Russia. They had different ethnic backgrounds, ranging from Armenian, Russian and Abkhaz, to Arab and Circassian, and hence spoke different languages. All of them spoke Russian to some extent, and many of them spoke, or understood, English to a certain extent. Our main language for communication were English and Russian. Most of my interlocutors lived at home with their parents and siblings, either in Sukhum or in villages close by. Many told me that they wished to live by themselves, but that they could not afford it or were not allowed to do so by their families, and therefore decided not to do so. Most of my interlocutors were unmarried and did not have children, but often told me about direct and indirect pressure from family and friends to find someone to start a family with. During my fieldwork, I participated in countless hangouts in parks, cafes, and restaurants, walks along the *naberezhnoy* (the embankment) by the sea, dinners at my interlocutors’ homes, trips outside Sukhum, celebrations, movie nights, and lectures. By partaking and joining my interlocutors whenever it was possible, I slowly but surely understood more of the life they lived in Abkhazia and in which ways living in a politically disputed state affect their lives.

In addition to my main group of interlocutors of female young adults, I had a selection of other interlocutors. I regularly spoke to both men and women who grew up while Abkhazia was still a

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<sup>10</sup> The Soviet passports were to lose validity on 1 July the same year.

part of the Soviet Union and hence lived through the war. This provided me with useful insight into aspects, and comparisons of life before, during and after the war. These conversations varied in length and depth – from short chats with the taxi drivers or the sellers at the market, to lengthy discussions with my hosts or others who found it interesting to have a conversation with a “foreign girl” with plenty of questions poorly formulated in Russian. In contrast to the young adults, the older generations had experienced Abkhazia in what appeared as its “heydays”, and this affected their perception of today’s Abkhazia, which contributed to a greater understanding of the complexity and differences between the different generations.

## **METHOD**

Throughout my fieldwork, my main method of data collecting was participant observation (cf., Bernard 1994a), a method which allowed me to participate in my interlocutors’ daily lives, both physically and socially. By spending a longer period of time in the same place, anthropologists, try to gain access to both the explicit, expressed knowledge as well as the tacit knowledge (cf., Zahle 2012). In order to do this, I utilized “deep hanging out” (Geertz 1998) and “mobile fieldwork” (Ingold 2006; Mills 2010; Richardson 2000). By making use of these methods, I strived to partake and do whatever my interlocutors were doing in their daily lives, to understand and «...grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world» (Malinowski 1992 [1922]: 25). A lot of the time I spent with my interlocutors was spent walking around Sukhum, going to restaurants and cafés, exploring abandoned buildings, drinking coffee, playing board games, shopping at the local market, making dinner together or relaxing at each other’s homes or the many parks and green areas within the city. I also explored the local museums, travelled around Abkhazia, helped harvest fruit in my hosts’ village, went to public talks, and tried to learn a few phrases in Abkhazian.

I mainly made use of informal interviews and conversations, and only conducted two semi-structured interviews (cf., Bernard 1994b) throughout my fieldwork: one in Tbilisi while waiting to enter Abkhazia, and one in Sukhum. In both of the semi-structured interviews, I got help with translation from native speaker who master English well. I had also planned on collecting life histories towards the end of my fieldwork (cf., Du Boulay and Williams 1984), but due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I had to abruptly leave the field a few weeks earlier than planned and was consequently not able to do so. Collecting life histories would have allowed me to connect the

stories and events my interlocutors told me about throughout my fieldwork, providing me with a deeper understanding of their past and their current situation. It would also have given me a chance to clarify any misunderstandings or questions I might have had. However, although I was not able to collect their life histories as such, I believe the data I collected throughout my fieldwork has been sufficient, and a benefit of doing research in a world where digital devices and social medias are available is that it is possible to stay in touch through apps such as WhatsApp, Messenger, and Instagram. This has provided me with a means of getting in touch with my friends and interlocutors if I needed clarification concerning my notes or had questions that I did not ask during my research.

When I first arrived in Sukhum, I quickly decided that I wanted to welcome any opportunities given, meaning I had to be spontaneous and flexible. I was invited for meetings, lunches, and dinners, and through this I was introduced to various people who could introduce me to more new people. Hence the “snowball-method” became my most used method of obtaining interlocutors (cf., Bernard 1994a). Although I did not continue to regularly meet all of those I met in the beginning, they helped to make me feel more comfortable and “in-place” in the field. Not only did they provide me with different perspectives and insight about Abkhazia which helped me to understand the complexity of the place, but by being recognized and greeted on the streets by people I had met in different settings, I did not feel as much of a stranger, but more as a part of the city, which helped making me feel welcome and more comfortable as well as boost my confidence as a novice researcher in a new place.

In order to understand how my interlocutors lived and related to each other and to their spatial surroundings, “mobile fieldwork” (see Ingold 2006; Mills 2010; Richardson 2000) proved especially fruitful. It allowed me to meet people in their everyday surroundings while letting them walk around and physically show me the parks, houses, ruins, monuments and so on that they were talking about. Through “mobile fieldwork”, I experienced that my interlocutors and I obtained a sort of common ground where we could discuss, show, and explore the landscape together. This is supported by Ingold and Lee (2006) who claims that “walking affords an experience of embodiment to the extent that is grounded in an inherently sociable engagement between the self and the environment” (2006: 68). Tanya Richardson (2000) nicely summarizes the usefulness of understanding a place by utilizing “mobile fieldwork”:

When “My Odessa” members walk Odessa’s streets, they sense and make their city as place. How the cityscape unfolds for the walkers, enabling them to sense Odessa as place, may be understood [...] by viewing the landscape as a cultural process created through the articulation of movements between poles of foreground and background, place and space, inside and outside, and image and representation. (Richardson 2000: 140)

Through “mobile fieldwork”, conversations taking place while walking allowed me to understand how my interlocutors perceived and understood certain places or streets in relation to the past, present and future. Walking around was also perceived as very casual, making the conversations flow easier and with less of an “interview”-setting.

Before I arrived in Abkhazia, I had been told by others who had done research in Caucasus or other parts of the former USSR that people would likely be skeptical towards me, especially in the beginning. It has not been common for young women to travel in Abkhazia alone, and I prepared myself for situations where I could be regarded as a ‘Georgian spy’ or similar scenarios. However, I found that when I was honest about my work and explained that I had chosen to do research in Abkhazia myself, and that the University of Bergen supported this, most people became flattered and appreciative of me for wanting to learn more about them and Abkhazia, and to bring their story to the outside world.

Living with a local Abkhaz family also turned out to be a great door-opener for me when striving to build trust among the local population, and my host father, in particular, worked as a “gatekeeper” (cf., Zahle 2017) for me. As Abkhazia is a fairly small place, most people had heard about or knew my hosts or at least knew their surname, and as my hosts ‘vouched for me’ by letting me stay with them, I seemed to gain respect and trust more easily from other people. People also seemed thrilled that I wanted to get a “true” experience of life in Abkhazia by not only staying there for a longer time, but by living with a local, Abkhaz family. Living with a host family also helped me with understanding the way of life in Abkhazia as well as improving my Russian skills. Drawing on Stephanie Scwandner-Sievers’ (2009) experience of being “outsider woman”, I quickly realized that people were, most of the time, genuinely interested in helping me and taking care of me. Within the first week after entering Abkhazia, I went to the neighbouring city Noviy Afon to some sightseeing. The last stop on my list was a tour exploring the Noviy Afon caves. My hosts had told me where to get the bus back to Sukhum, but by the time the tour finished it was

already getting dark outside. After I waited 30 minutes at the bus stop and still no bus had passed, I started to get worried. A short while later, a minivan arrived, and the only other person at the stop asked if I was going to Sukhum. I nodded and she told me to get in. After a few minutes I realized that it was not an actual bus, but a woman who picked up people who needed a lift along the road on her way back home. When we got to Sukhum, she dropped me off and made sure I knew how to get home.

Another element that was particularly well received among my interlocutors and others I spoke to, was the length of my fieldwork. I quickly realized that researchers who come to Abkhazia often spend far more time in Georgia than they do in Abkhazia, so when people understood I was staying in Sukhum for close to six months, they were delighted. One of my interlocutors and her colleagues told me about a European researcher they had met who was writing a comparative analysis about Georgia and Abkhazia. She had spent several months in Georgia and just a few days in Abkhazia. They complained to me:

She probably saw some ruins, and the Russian military with their Kalashnikovs at the border, then went home to write about how Abkhazia is just a war-ridden country. It would've been better if she didn't come at all. You can't understand Abkhazia in three-four days, especially not when you have spent so much time in Georgia.

In sum, people seemed to appreciate that I wanted to be there for a long time, and that this, in combination with living with a local family and also having chosen the field site myself, contributed to people being less skeptical towards me and my motives to be there.

When it came to taking notes, I rarely did so in front of my interlocutors. I found that if I did, either my interlocutors did not speak as freely, or I would not be able to pay as much attention to the conversation at the same time. If I felt something needed to be written down immediately, I would run to the bathroom or take notes on my phone which seemed to be more accepted. I usually jotted down shorter notes and bullet points throughout the day, which led to me having to elaborate on them later in the evening. Most of my fieldnotes were written in Norwegian on my computer after I returned to the flat – i.e., after the events had occurred. I believe this benefited me as it gave me a relevant distance to what had happened which again gave me time to reflect better on what both my interlocutors and I had said and done. I only used my tape recorder during the two semi-structured interviews, but I also used it to record myself talk about the day if I was in a rush or

simply too tired to write down plans or notes in the evening. Additionally, I would occasionally use the tape recorder or the recorder on my phone to record ideas, reflections, or questions I had.

As for any anthropological fieldwork, the security and anonymity of my interlocutors has been an utmost priority from the first to the last part of the work with my thesis. In accordance with NSD's (Norwegian center for research data) ethical research guidelines, my informants were informed of what my research project was about, stated (oral) informed consent and have been reserved the right to withdraw their consent at any stage of the project. To me, it has been very important to keep my informants' anonymity not just in terms of their names, but in relation to what they say, mean, and do. I regard this as particularly important in a place like Abkhazia, where the political future is characterized by uncertainty and unpredictability. In her book *Youth Politics in Russia*, Julie Hemment (2015) takes great care in the way she talks about her Russian informants and colleagues precisely because of this. Inspired by her, I have tried my utmost to be conscious of both the current and possible future political situation in the region. Based on this, I have done my best to ensure that my interlocutors' participation in my project does not adversely affect their future. Therefore, anonymisation (cf., Zahle 2017) has been a main focus of mine both during my fieldwork and throughout the writing process afterwards. From the beginning of my fieldwork, I used pseudonyms for all of my interlocutors in my fieldnotes, which were also written in Norwegian, and the notes were safely secured in a password protected document on my computer. To shield my interlocutors' identity, I have also changed occupation, civil status, age etc. when required. In certain cases when these measures were not sufficient, I have created "collages" where people, places, and events have been mixed (cf., Hopkins 1993; Besteman 2016) without it affecting my empirical data in any way that will have consequences for the analysis.

Concerning communication, the main languages I used throughout my fieldwork were English and Russian. As mentioned, I spent one semester studying Russian at Kuban State University, and the language skills I gained there were invaluable for my fieldwork. Although I made plenty of grammar mistakes and my vocabulary was imperfect, the basic knowledge enabled me to get in touch with people and talk with them – both with my hosts, interlocutors, sellers on the markets, shop-owners and so on. Another direct consequence of me speaking some Russian was that people seemed more positive and friendly towards me. They appreciated that I had made an effort to be able to communicate with them in a language they mastered and felt comfortable speaking.



Knowing some Russian also enabled me to attend lectures and discussion, have conversations with my interlocutors' family member who did not speak English, talk with the local taxi-drivers, and navigate more easily within the city. When it came to using English, I discovered that although the knowledge of English was limited among the older generations, I found that among the younger generations, quite a few people had a certain command of the language. With most of my interlocutors, I communicated with a combination of Russian and English, and as my Russian got better throughout my fieldwork, more of the conversations slowly shifted to more and more Russian. English was mostly used for my benefit, but several of my interlocutors also saw it as an opportunity to improve their English. My Abkhaz interlocutors often spoke Abkhazian with their families and other people who mastered it – the same went for those who spoke Arabic and other languages. However, Abkhaz peoples' knowledge of Abkhazian varied greatly depending on whether it was their mother tongue or not, and among friends my interlocutors often spoke Russian when I was present as not to exclude me from the conversation.

## **ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND CHAPTER OUTLINE**

Throughout the thesis, I delve into different ways of understanding and expressing a sense of belonging by using the state, documents, traditions, and the landscape as different analytical intakes. Using these seemingly different intakes have allowed me to explore how a 'sense of belonging' is experienced and negotiated in various ways. Instead of using a set definition of what a 'sense of belonging' means, I propose to use it as a heuristic for my analysis, meaning that I use it as an aid to my analysis. As Marco Antonsich (2010) explores, 'belonging' can be used as an analytical framework in many different ways, among others to study citizenship, identity, locality and so on. He argues that 'belonging'

should be analyzed both as a personal, intimate, feeling of being 'at home' in a place (place-belongingness) and as a discursive resource that constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion (politics of belonging). The risk of focusing only on one of these two dimensions is to fall in the trap of either a socially de-contextualized individualism or an all-encompassing social(izing) discourse. The open question is whether the increasing cultural and ethnic diversification of contemporary societies can lead to the formation of communities of belonging beyond communities of identity. (Antonsich 2010: 644)

A sense of belonging can be often understood as belonging to a specific geographic area or a specific group. Although I do argue that there is a common sense of belonging among the population of Abkhazia regardless of their nationality, which is directly related to the Abkhazian nation, I also use ‘a sense of belonging’ to describe intimate feelings and connectedness through different aspects of ones’ surroundings: the state, landscape, documents, and traditions. By exploring how my interlocutors’ sense of belonging is contested and affected by different elements in their everyday lives, I wish to shed light, not only on different understandings of belonging, but also how one’s idea of belonging is affected by ones’ surroundings.

In this chapter I have provided historical context for Abkhazia and introduced the reader to the field, my interlocutors, and the methods I have used to collect my empirical data for the purpose of this thesis. In chapter two, I discuss how the lack of international recognition has direct consequences on the everyday life of people in Abkhazia, and especially the younger generations with regards to the economy, stability, hopes, and possibilities for the future. I will also shed light on what this means for their sense of belonging and identity. In chapter three, I shed light on how documents are used to negotiate a sense of belonging and identity. I further suggest the way young adults talk about and interact with their identification papers is a useful vantage point for discussing their sense of belonging, hopes and future. In chapter five I explore different ways people in Abkhazia experience a sense of belonging in relation to the landscape. I will also explore some of the ways in which the residents of Sukhum express how hope, or the lack of it, and belonging is embedded and manifested in the spatial landscape. By drawing on how time and temporality is rooted in the landscape, I will shed light on how my interlocutors discuss how the past, present and the future is embedded in and understood differently through the landscape. In the final concluding thoughts, I sum up my main arguments and findings.

# CHAPTER TWO:

## DE-FACTO STATEHOOD

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### INTRODUCTION

*As my parents' visit to Abkhazia was coming closer, I asked what Madina thought about the travel route I had planned while showing her on the map on my phone. "Oh, in your map it says Abkhazia is its own country!" Madina suddenly exclaimed happily, pointing to the map on my phone which indeed had a clear, full line drawn between Abkhazia and Georgia, indicating a territory separate from Georgia. I was using the Russian cartographic service Yandex.Maps, as it proved to be more up to date in Abkhazia compared to other map services such as Google Maps. "It's because Yandex is a Russian company, and Russia recognizes Abkhazia, so I guess it makes sense", I replied before opening the Google Maps app to see what it looked like there. There the place names were written in Georgian and English, not Russian or Abkhazian, and the border was marked with a dotted line, not the full line that Google Maps used elsewhere to indicate a recognized border between two countries. Madina looked at the map on my phone before she looked at me. "That makes me so fucking angry", she replied, visibly upset and frustrated, referring to Google Maps' map.*

Throughout my fieldwork, it became increasingly clear to me how the *de facto* statehood was not only a matter of macro politics between different states, but also a matter deeply affecting the lives of those who lived in Abkhazia, their sense of belonging and future possibilities. Growing up and living in a politically disputed state affected more or less all aspects of life, and dotted lines were just one of many ways how my interlocutors and friends were continuously reminded of this political status and the struggles that followed. Other ways were through social media and comment sections, international press's coverage of Abkhazia, the invalidity of what one considers to be one's own citizenship, or the absence of the Abkhazian national teams in international sports competitions such as the Olympic Games.

In this chapter, I will shed light on how the lack of state recognition has everyday consequences for young adults in Abkhazia and how it shapes their sense of belonging and identity to the Abkhazian nation.

## THE POLITICAL STATUS OF ABKHAZIA

The political status of Abkhazia, including the conflict concerning the IDPs in Georgia, is currently and has, for the last three decades, been one of the main reasons for conflict, dispute, and war between Georgia and Abkhazia. In 1999, Abkhazia formally declared independence from Georgia, a move that was, and still is, contested and considered illegal by Georgia and most of the international community of nation states. Abkhazia remained an unrecognized state until 26 August 2008 after the Georgian-Russian war the same year led to Russia and Nicaragua recognizing Abkhazia as an independent state, and thus changing the political status from an unrecognized state to a partially recognized state. Later, a handful of states followed Russia and Nicaragua's lead; Venezuela and Nauru recognized Abkhazia in 2009, and Syria did so in 2018. Today, Abkhazia is a *de facto* state. This means that, despite not being recognized by most of the United Nation's member states, for all practical purposes Abkhazia exists and functions as an independent state. Within the international community of independent states, Abkhazia is considered *de jure* a part of Georgia which essentially means that they consider Abkhazia to legally be a part of Georgia. Regardless of this, the Abkhazian government does not recognize the jurisdiction of Georgia over its territory. In short, the distinction between *de facto* and *de jure* is used to describe situations where there is a significant difference between the purely formal situation (*de jure*) and how it is in practice (*de facto*). Guzel Sabirova summarizes this well by describing life in a *de facto* state:

Despite the fact that *de jure* the state of Abkhazia does not exist, *de facto* people not only survive there but manage to organise their daily lives, forge social bonds and attempt to construct a state infrastructure for the unrecognized Republic of Apsny [the Abkhazian name for Abkhazia]. (Sabirova 2008: 51)<sup>11</sup>

Many of the elements that make up a nation state are found in Abkhazia. They have an elected government, a police force, military forces, a healthcare and educational system, they provide essential documents for its citizens<sup>12</sup>, and they have their own national bank, *Apra*. Nevertheless, the documents provided by the Abkhazian authorities such as passports are, by the international

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<sup>11</sup> This article was published before Russia recognised Abkhazia and the political status went from unrecognised to partially recognised.

<sup>12</sup> Passports, residence permits and so on. However, these documents are not valid in most other international states. This will be further discussed in the next chapter.

community, considered invalid. The same goes for the elections, which are not deemed legitimate by other countries than the ones that recognize Abkhazia. Degrees that students in Abkhazia have used years to complete at the local university hold no validity outside Abkhazia or Russia, and local produce such as hazelnuts, citrus fruit, and wine is to a very small extent exported to the rest of the world other than Russia and partially Georgia.

When discussing a politically disputed state like Abkhazia, there are two terms which are significant to understand, in addition to the aforementioned terms *de facto* and *de jure*: namely *parent* state and *patron* state. The *parent* state is the state which they have separated from – in Abkhazia’s case: Georgia, which is, as mentioned earlier, the *de jure* legal owner of the Abkhazian land, according to most of the international community. A *patron* state, on the other hand, is the “the state that sustains a *de facto* one financially and gives it military security” (Kolstø 2020: 149). In Abkhazia’s case that is Russia, which not only assists with military personnel patrolling the border, but also contributes to close to half of the state budget of Abkhazia and pays out pensions to thousands of Abkhazian citizens. However, as Pål Kolstø (2020) points out, the Abkhazian government have an unusually strong unwillingness to defer to their patron state’s wishes in contrast to several other *de facto* states such as South Ossetia (whose *patron* state is also Russia) and Nagorno Karabakh (whose *patron* state is Armenia). Kolstø argues that this springs out from two possible conditions: memories of wrongdoings by the Russian state in the past (e.g., the Circassian Genocide) and the consequence of being a small state where the “local powerholders must constantly remain attentive to the wishes of the “parliament of the street.”” (Kolstø 2020: 141). This is well illustrated by the fact that two presidents have been forced to resign following riots due to the dissatisfaction of the public (Alexander Ankvab in 2014 and Raul Khajimba in 2020). Although Abkhazia is dependent on Russia for economic support, this does not mean that they automatically do what their *patron* state government wants them to do. Among other things, the Abkhazian government refuse to let Russian citizens who do not hold an Abkhazian passport buy property in Abkhazia (more on this in chapter three) and at presidential elections, they do not necessarily elect the presidential candidates that the Kremlin has expressed support for. As my interlocutor Amra, a woman in her late 20s, stated it: “we maybe let other people [the Russian government] think that they control things, but they don’t actually control us. Never”. The resilience and resistance towards political forces outside of Abkhazia became clear throughout my

fieldwork, and it was not limited only to Abkhazia's *parent* state Georgia, but also towards its *patron* state Russia.

## THE STORMING OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ADMINISTRATION BUILDING

The political situation in Abkhazia is fragile and turbulent, and since 2011 there have been four presidential elections which is quite a lot considering the fact that the president is elected for five years at a time. I experienced this turbulence myself while I conducted my fieldwork. As mentioned earlier, I had to wait for two-and-a-half-months to enter Abkhazia and begin my fieldwork in 2019. This was, among other reasons, due to the presidential elections taking place in August and September that year<sup>13</sup>. However, on 9 January 2020, the presidential administration building in Sukhum was stormed, and the president-at-the-time, Raul Khajimba, resigned four days later, on 13 January. The reason for the massive protests and demonstrations were accusations of election fraud at the presidential election that had taken place in September. The opposition argued that the outcome of the elections was unlawful following the suspected poisoning of the main political opponent Aslan Bzhania, making him unable to run for elections in August 2019. At first, it had started as a protest outside the presidential administration building, but it soon developed into an angry and aggressive crowd, before armed protesters eventually broke into the building and took control over it. Khajimba was first asked to step down voluntarily but refused to do so. On 10 January, the results from the September-election were annulled by Abkhazia's top court and Khajimba eventually resigned three days later, on 13 January. The day the protests broke out, I was in the city with some friends, unaware of what was happening a few hundred meters down the street. As I got home in the evening, I saw the news on the TV and discussed the events with my host family. Batal, my host father, was afraid that it would get bloody if one side fired shots, and I asked him whether there was an ethnic background to the conflict, but he answered that this time it was not an ethnic conflict, but a clan-related resulting in the Abkhaz fighting against each other. The day after the demonstrations, I had made plans with some friends to go to a music-event at a place in the city we often hung out at. Due to the situation, my host family wanted me to wait and see if anything happened – they believed that if shots were fired the city would be unsafe for a while. My friends and I chatted throughout the day and an hour or so before the event began, we decided that it probably would be okay to go as the concert took place a few

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<sup>13</sup> The first round of elections took place 25 August 2019, but because no candidate got more than 50% of the votes, a new round of elections was held 8 September between the two candidates that got most votes in the first round.

blocks away from the parliament. My hosts agreed that and told me to call them in case anything happened, and I went to take the *marshrutka* (minivans used for public transport) to the city centre. When I got there, the streets were unusually quiet and empty, but inside the venue, on the other hand, it was crammed with people. Of course, people talked about the events from the last few days. When I spoke to Yulia, an Abkhaz woman in her 30s I often met there, she told me that “usually it [shootings etc.] happens during the first day. That was yesterday, and nothing [else] happened, so probably not much will happen now apart from demonstrations”. And rightly so, no shots were fired, and the situation soon calmed down again once Khajimba stepped down. I believe this event well illustrates how people in Abkhazia must deal with a lack of permanency that permeates all different aspects of life and scales in society on an everyday basis. Although such incidents were not commonplace, people’s reaction indicated that they were used to unrest and uncertainty about what was to come, and Yulia’s comment illustrated this well: she knew that if something had not already happened, it would not happen at all – indicating that similar incidents had happened before.

## RUSSIAN RECOGNITION

When Russia recognized Abkhazia in 2008, it was warmly welcomed and celebrated by many. Finally, they were no longer unrecognized and the belief in further recognition grew in accordance with stronger connections to Russia. However, it did not bring the ‘change’ people perhaps had anticipated, waited, and hoped for. In fact, on the contrary, it might have contributed to further isolating and disconnecting Abkhazia from the rest of the world than before. Political geographer Peter Kabachnik writes that

Paradoxically, Russian recognition may serve to isolate Abkhazia further, as this causes a greater dependence on Russia, from the growth of Russian military presence in the area to the subsequent removal of all international monitors from Abkhazia such as the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG), which ultimately threatens civil society. (Kabachnik 2012: 401)

This was also something my interlocutors seemed painfully aware of and several mentioned that although they were happy that Russia had recognized them, it also made them realize that due to international politics, many countries would not recognize them anytime soon due their strained political ties with Russia. Also, at the same time as the relationship between Russia and the EU

has become increasingly fraught following, among other events, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Georgia's ties to the EU have strengthened meaning that the chances of Abkhazia getting recognition from European countries and their allies seem even further away today than they did thirteen years ago when it had the status as an unrecognized state. As the economic, political, and military ties with Russia are strengthened, the influence of Russia is also reflected in the increasing dominance of the Russian language and the many Abkhazian youths who travel to Russia for university and then settle there permanently. The influence of Russia was a topic of concern among several of my interlocutors, and although most of the older people I spoke to were happy with the relationship with Russia and Putin, several of my younger interlocutors worried about the relationship with their *patron* state. They felt especially worried regarding the developments in Russia, with particular focus on human rights violations, talks of closer control of the Internet, and the decreasing freedom of speech. In the project of state building, people realized that what at first had seemed like a victory (being recognized), now was the thing that made it difficult to get recognition from other states thus making the dream of becoming a fully recognized state seem even further away.

### LONG-TERM LIMINALITY

Many of my interlocutors expressed a feeling of belonging to Abkhazia and the Abkhazian state: either by expressing that this was their homeland or by sympathising with the Abkhazian government. By having been continuously contested and challenged politically from the outside world for the last three decades, there seemed to be a matter that most people had in common: the wish for Abkhazia to be a recognized and sovereign state. Although, as I will explore in the other chapters, people expressed belonging in many ways, there was a general expression of belonging and support to the Abkhazian state. Anthropologist Rebecca Bryant has spent more than two decades studying the world's oldest *de facto* state: the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). She argues that *de facto* states find themselves in a state of what she refers to as 'long-term liminality':

If sovereignty may be conceived of as "a general ticket of admission to the international arena," then unrecognized states are the ones standing outside, looking for an alternative way into the international system. However, contrary to this metaphor of exclusion from a closed sovereignty game, what *de facto* states experience is not being locked out but being



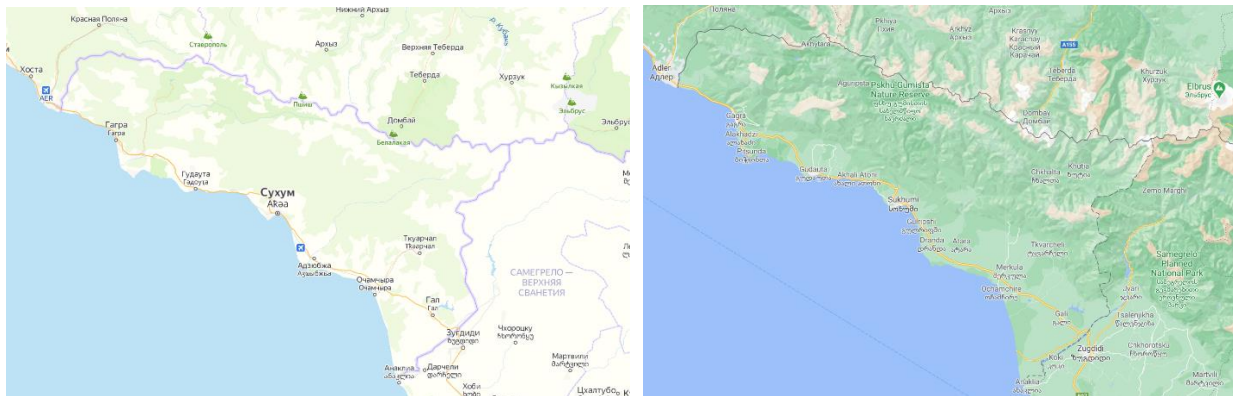
locked in [...]. The metaphor of waiting on a doorstep points us to another feature of *de facto* states: their long-term liminality. (Bryant 2014b: 126)

Liminality itself conveys an idea of lingering in-between two states of existence. In the case of both the TRNC and Abkhazia, the *de facto* state is not a state, but not *not* a state either. Rather it is caught in the middle of a change that is yet to be concluded. In Northern Cyprus' case, the country has "an "unfinished" history [...] that is liminal, caught in the unresolved (historical) conflict" (Bryant 2014a: 684) which is very much transferable to Abkhazia which has been "stuck" in a similar situation for close to three decades. I want to argue that this unresolvedness of the conflict has helped the Abkhazian state to create, and maintain, a national identity and feeling of belonging because they (the population of Abkhazia excluding most of the Georgian-speaking population) want and hope for the same thing: recognition. By sympathising with the political struggle of the state, and connecting it to one's own personal struggle, people identify themselves with it. The uncertainty of what was going to happen connected the past chaos of the war and the uncertainty of the future together, and the feeling of being united in this experience helped the nationalist movement create a common sense of belonging across the population. There are several internal conflicts within Abkhazia, ranging from disagreements on people's nationality (as will be explore in the next chapter) to discussions of which languages to teach at schools, but despite these disagreements, the shared experiences from the past in combinations with the element of a "common enemy" (Georgia), a common sense of belonging was established as an important step in the process of state-building.

## MAPS IN THE PROCESS OF STATE-BUILDING

In a process of state-building, several other aspects are also important, but perhaps "the most fundamental aspect [...] involves establishing physical control over the territory of the state-to-be" (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008: 488). Thus, among the many symbols of nationhood, cartographic representations (maps) are highly significant. Maps become "an integral part of building national identity and legitimacy" (Kabachnik 2012: 403) and "helps to "normalize and reproduce [...] a nationalist message" (Kabachnik 2012: 404) by giving the inhabitants of the state something tangible they can relate to and identify with. When a geographical area is outlined with solid lines on international maps, it is a clear indicator that not only is it considered a state by the inhabitants themselves, but it is also recognized by the UN and its member states. (2012: 404).

In both Abkhazia and Georgia, maps are used actively to claim territory that they each believe they hold the rights to. Throughout the time I spent in Georgia, maps were frequently used to underline the shape of Georgia. Often both Abkhazia and South Ossetia were shaded in a different colour, indicating these regions' altered status as “occupied”. I noticed maps like these on poster, flyers, painted on walls, and a girl I met in Tbilisi even said she had seen a man having a tattoo of it on his arm. A more recent example of how the flag can be used politically was during the final of the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) in May 2021. During the distribution of the jury votes, the Georgian representative wore a white t-shirt with a large, green print of the shape of Georgia which, of course, included both Abkhazia and South-Ossetia. As ESC is viewed by more than 200 million people around the world, this was doubtfully an unconscious choice. When I arrived in Abkhazia, the map of Abkhazia was just as frequently used to legitimize and promote national identity. I found maps outlining the shape of Abkhazia on anything from souvenirs, stamps (despite not having a functioning postal system), t-shirts, billboards, and books to name a few. Maps of Abkhazia were also frequently used on memorial posters of the war or for the fallen soldiers and heroes<sup>14</sup>.



*The line is differently presented in both screenshots, as are the languages used for place names.*

*Illustration 1: screenshot from Yandex.Maps<sup>15</sup>. Illustration 2: screenshot from Google Maps<sup>16</sup>.*

As the ethnographic vignette of this chapter illustrated, people in Abkhazia are exposed to and reminded of the political status of Abkhazia in places those of us who live in recognized states,

<sup>14</sup> The term “hero” (*geroy*) is often used for those who fought and died for Abkhazia during the war. Words such as martyr etc., are not prevalent.

<sup>15</sup> [[https://yandex.ru/maps/?ll=41.668429%2C43.037085&utm\\_source=main\\_stripe\\_big&z=8.78](https://yandex.ru/maps/?ll=41.668429%2C43.037085&utm_source=main_stripe_big&z=8.78)] Screenshot taken 19.04.2021

<sup>16</sup> Screenshot taken 19.04.2021 [<https://www.google.no/maps/@43.0630518,41.3319555,9z>].

would not think about, such as through cartographic services. My interlocutors encountered such representations in arenas that were particularly important to young people, namely social media. As Abkhazia is, by most of the international community, considered to be *de jure* a part of Georgia, the advertisements in internationally owned apps were in Georgian. While scrolling through Instagram, ads advertising for Georgian products popped up, and the same happened when using Snapchat or Facebook. If I wanted to add a geo-tag when posting something to my social medias, chances were that the first placenames suggested were in the Georgian script, and if any articles, pictures, or videos were posted on Abkhazian public accounts social media, the comment section would more or less always include at least one or two comments from Georgians saying that Abkhazia belongs to them or something similar. This was also noticed by my interlocutors, and as Amra, an Abkhaz woman in her late 20s said:

When there are articles about Abkhazia on Facebook etc., there will always be Georgians who comment ‘Russia has occupied our land’, ‘Abkhazia belongs to Georgia’ or something like that. But you never see Abkhaz comment in the same way on other posts. We don’t care about Georgians and Georgia – we just want our independence, but they care so much about us. They can’t let go even if it’s been more than 25 years.

When I first arrived in Tbilisi, there were daily protests in front of the Georgian Parliament, and although I did not understand what they said, it was evident that it was about Abkhazia and South-Ossetia, the two *de facto* republics in Georgia. Huge banners, reading “20% of Georgia is occupEYEd by Russia” and “Apkhazeti and Samachablo are Georgia”<sup>17</sup>, hung on fences outside the Georgian Parliament Building on Shota Rustaveli Avenue, the main street in Tbilisi, making them difficult to miss for passersby. Guranda Bursulaia, a PhD candidate at the Free University of Tbilisi points this out in an article posted at OC Media’s website<sup>18</sup> by asking; “‘I am from Georgia and 20% of my country is occupied by Russia’ is a ubiquitous form of the Georgian narrative, but is it useful?” (2020). In the public discourse in Georgia, especially after 2008, Abkhazia is often talked about as “occupied” or “annexed” by Russia, indicating that the conflict is between Russia and Georgia, not Abkhazia and Georgia. By doing this, Abkhazia and the people who live there, are by and large left out of the discussion. This was something several of my interlocutors felt

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<sup>17</sup> The toponyms used for Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgian.

<sup>18</sup> OC Media stands for Open Caucasus Media which is a Tbilisi-based website that publishes articles and news from both North and South Caucasus in Russian and English.

frustrated about. They felt as if they did not exist in the eyes of Georgia, and that they were stripped of agency and ability to speak for themselves. In a heated discussion with a group of friends, Adgur, an Abkhaz man in his 30s told me that “they [the Georgians] only talk about Russia and Georgia, but never Abkhazia. We don’t exist according to them. Yes, Armenians, Mingrelians, Georgians and Russians exist, but not Abkhazians. They never talk about us or ask us what we think”, while the rest of the group nodded conformingly. Anna, a young Abkhaz woman I also spoke to told me that “what hurts the most is that they forget about us – the people who live in Abkhazia. They only focus on Russia and Georgia – it is as if we don’t exist”. Adgur and Anna’s expressions of what comes across as hurt was widespread among people I met in Abkhazia – not only among the Abkhaz, but also among Armenians, Russians, and other nationalities<sup>19</sup>. They felt excluded in the discussion about themselves, as if they had no right to express their opinions. If they did, they felt they would quickly be stamped as “puppets” of Russia and stripped of agency or ability to make up their own opinions.

Using words like “occupation” and “occupied” both attributes and waives responsibility and blame for the situation in question onto somebody else, in this case Russia, which lies outside the physical borders of the area the conflict revolves around. As mentioned, use of terms like “occupied” and “occupation” has increased in the Georgian discourse – implying that Abkhazia up until 2008 was not only *de jure* a part of Georgia, but also *de facto*. However, as Peter Kabachnik points out, this was not the case.

While some commentators imply that the Georgian loss of Abkhazia occurred as a result of Russian annexation during the August 2008 war, in reality Abkhazia has been free from Tbilisi’s control since 30 September 1993, when they [...] successfully drove Georgian military forces out of Abkhazia. (Kabachnik 2012: 397)

Despite stubbornly refusing that Abkhazia was occupied by Russia, my interlocutors were nonetheless painfully aware that Abkhazia in many ways was *dependent* on Russia by saying things like “Yes, we might be dependent on Russia, but we’re not occupied”. The difference between being occupied and dependent is significant. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, when a place is occupied, it “is being controlled by an army or group of people that has moved

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<sup>19</sup> Understood as “territorialized belonging”. This is explained in the next chapter.

into it”<sup>20</sup>, whereas dependent is defined as “relying on someone or something to be able to continue to exist or make progress”<sup>21</sup>. Abkhazia’s dependence on Russian money is difficult to question, regardless of whether one is from Abkhazia or Georgia, but whether Abkhazia is occupied or not depends on who sees it.

I have now shed light on how the political status of Abkhazia has implications on everyday life for young interlocutors in Abkhazia, and how a shared experience of ‘long-term liminality’ has created a strong sense of belonging to the Abkhazian state. In the following section I will explore some of the ways in which the economic situation in the state is affected by the political status of Abkhazia.

## **ECONOMY AND TRADE**

Abkhazia’s economy is largely dependent on financial support from the *patron* state Russia, which accounts for around 50% of the state budget. The rest of the economy consists mainly of money brought in through taxes, tourism, and export of goods such as wine, spirits, nuts, and citrus fruits. Most of the export/import trade from/to Abkhazia takes place with Russia across the Psou border-crossing<sup>22</sup>. However, in the last years, informal trade has increased between Abkhazia, Georgia and other countries in and outside the region (International Crisis Group 2018), and despite restrictions and limitations on what you can bring across the Georgian/Abkhazian borders,

goods have trickled over the conflict divides between Georgia-controlled territory and the breakaway regions [for years]. But as Russia’s economy weakens and its financial aid to Abkhazia and South Ossetia dwindles, such trickles appear to have become a steadier flow. (International Crisis Group 2018: 3)

The informal trade has increased in the last years after Russia was imposed heavy sanctions by the EU after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 which led to a decrease in the financial support Abkhazia received (International Crisis Group 2018), and people have seemingly realized that it is risky to rely only on the financial help from Russia and now seeks new ways to have a steady income. However, the political situation makes it difficult to find a more permanent solution for

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<sup>20</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/occupied> [accessed 05.07.2021]

<sup>21</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/dependant> [accessed 05.07.2021]

<sup>22</sup> The Psou-crossing is the only border crossing between Abkhazia and Russia, located in the western part of Abkhazia, close to the Russian city Adler. By most of the international community, crossing the border here is considered an illegal violation of Georgia’s borders. However, many people in Abkhazia cross it regularly. It is open 24/7 and private vehicles are allowed to cross, in contrast to the border crossing by the Ingur-river which is open between 08-19 and restricts private vehicles to cross.

this. In 2008, after the Russian-Georgian war, the Georgian government introduced the ‘Law on Occupied Territories’. This law “lays out strict penalties for any unauthorized economic engagement with Abkhazia or South-Ossetia and imposes restrictions on visits to these region” (International Crisis Group 2018: 2), and also stipulates that foreign organizations that wish to do trade in Abkhazia must get a permit from the Georgian government. The Abkhazian government is also restrictive and accepts or validates very few goods brought from Georgia to Abkhazia. In 2007, the export of hazelnuts was banned by the Abkhazian government, but informal trade still existed (see Khutsishvili 2016). However, the ban was lifted in 2015 (Zavodskaya 2016), making hazelnuts the only good that is allowed to be traded between the two states. Hazelnuts are one of the main exports of Abkhazia, and around 10% of the hazelnuts exported from Georgia are assumed to have origin in Abkhazia (The Economist 2017). Another notable aspect of the informal trade in Abkhazia is that with Turkey. At the central market and shops around Sukhum there is an abundance of Turkish goods such as food, clothes, shoes, and building material, and according to the International Crisis Group, it is the Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey that enables this trade by receiving and sending unlabelled cargo through Turkish ports to Abkhazia (2018: 10).

An initiative that has been proposed is to let Abkhazian businesses get access to the advantages Georgian businesses have due to their inclusion in the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area<sup>23</sup> (DCTFA) which as of now do not include Abkhazia or South-Ossetia. At the time being, this has not materialized as no agreement has been reached on how the produce from Abkhazia will be quality-checked according to the EU-standards. A key sticking point is how the place of origin will be stated on the products; will it be ‘produced’ in Georgia or Abkhazia? (International Crisis Group 2018: 17-18). Recently, talks have also started “to discuss the reopening of the railway link connecting Russia to Georgia, Armenia, and Turkey through Abkhazia” (Kotova 2021). This would allow for more contact and trade throughout the whole region, but the unresolved political situation and different opinions regarding the naming of this corridor have this far lead to a halt in the discussions.

In addition to the abovementioned restrictions, people in Abkhazia feel reluctant to go against, or make a move without the authorization from the Abkhazian government (International Crisis

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<sup>23</sup> This is a free trade area established between the EU and Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine as a part of their EU Association Agreements.

Group 2018: ii, 11, 26). Several also fear the consequences it will have on the relationship with Russia if the relationship between Abkhazia and Georgia is strengthened. As a woman expressed to me: “we are scared of how Russia will react if we start conversations with Georgia, because they benefit from the situation as it is now”. Scepticism towards Russia and the intentions they have for keeping Abkhazia as an ally was present, and a friend in her late 20s told me that “they [Russia] don’t want us to move forward. They want us to stay poor so that we can’t do anything against them”. Many people I spoke to also thought that if Abkhazia was recognised, the economic status of the country would be different. As the import and export of goods is restricted and there is an unwillingness among foreign investors (apart from some Russian ones) to invest money in Abkhazia due to the political status, much of Abkhazia's potential to become more economically stable and independent has not been explored. There are plenty of natural resources in Abkhazia that are not being exploited, the fertile plains can be used for food cultivation in a much larger extent, and the tourism sector could have been developed further. For example, an improvement of the infrastructure, including rebuilding and opening the Sukhum Babushara Airport, could bring open up for more export of goods as well as bring new tourists to the region which could boost the economy. The only thing stopping them from doing this, apart from not having the financial means, is that no commercial airlines would probably dare to land there at this would be seen as a violation of the Georgian airspace which most likely would lead to fines and other consequences. The political situation thus puts constraints on the possibilities of economic growth in an international context.

## **SUMMARY**

In this chapter I have discussed how the lack of international recognition has several direct consequences on the everyday life of people in Abkhazia, especially for young adults with regards to the stability, economy, hopes, and possibilities for the future. By drawing on Rebecca Bryant’s concept “long-term liminality” to describe the situation Abkhazia is in, and has been for nearly three decades, I argue that through this shared experience of being ‘locked in’ that permeates all people regardless of background, the lack of recognition has also been a contributing factor in uniting people around a common cause which is the political project of the Abkhazian government where the ultimate goal is to be recognised as a UN-member state.





# CHAPTER THREE:

## DOCUMENTS, BELONGING AND THE FUTURE

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### INTRODUCTION

*Autumn had announced its arrival in Abkhazia as Amra and I walked along what had used to be white and beautiful, but now a worn-down embankment that meandered along the seaside of Sukhum. The rain-filled clouds hung low over the Black Sea, making it look darker than usual, and small gusts of wind hit us from the sea, filling the air with a salty smell. Our hands held tightly around each of our small cups of warm and fresh Turkish coffee that Amra had bought us. As every other time we had met, I had not been successful in paying despite my best efforts at persuading her to let me. “Are you crazy? I will never allow you to pay” she kept repeating. Amra was an Abkhaz woman in her late 20s. Her family came from the Eastern region of Abkhazia and had moved to Sukhum after the war as their house had been burnt down during the battles between the Georgian and Abkhazian forces. At the moment she worked for a private company in Sukhum. The last time we had met, she had excitedly told me about an upcoming internship she had applied for in a European city and told me that she really hoped she would be accepted. Her education and work were relevant for the internship, and she felt that her interview had been successful. While we walked along the seaside, she finally told me that earlier the same day she had received a call where she had been told that she was unfortunately not accepted for the internship, but that they recommended her to apply again next time. She was clearly disappointed, but she told me that it was not the first time this had happened. “I just hope it wasn’t because I’m from Abkhazia”, she told me in a sorrowful voice. Amra had both an Abkhazian and a Russian passport but despite her wish to use her Abkhazian passport, she was forced to apply with her Russian one as that was the only one accepted in Europe<sup>24</sup>. Applying with a Russian passport was, however, not straightforward either. She told me that when she had previously applied for another internship*

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<sup>24</sup> As Abkhazia under international law is a part of Georgia they are, in theory, citizens of Georgia which entitle them to a Georgian passport. However, very few hold a Georgian passport, for different reasons. This will be discussed below.

with her Russian passport, she had written that her address was in Abkhazia, not Georgia. The officers administering the internship had asked her why she used a Russian passport when her address was registered in Georgia<sup>25</sup> – why did she not use a Georgian passport if she lived and resided in Georgia anyways? Exasperated she exclaimed:

*I don't know why it is important where my address is, the passport I used was a Russian passport. I wanted to apply with my Abkhazian passport, but I can't [because it is not a valid document for crossing the border to the EU]. Some places don't like Russians, so that's also a problem. Maybe next time I apply to something like this I will write that my address is in Georgia instead of Abkhazia. I don't really care anymore. We used to be one country, that's true. Not anymore, but before. It's not that important to me what it says in my papers. I'm tired of all the politics.*

The example above illustrates how Amra's sense of belonging and identity is questioned through the use of documents. First, she could apply with her Abkhazian passport, but had to use her Russian passport instead. Having a Russian passport was for Amra, as for most of my interlocutors (something I will return to). Purely for practical reasons, and although she had accepted this, it was, in her opinion, “not right” as an Abkhaz woman to not be able to be represented by her own country's passport. Second, her belonging was questioned yet again by the administration of the internship by being asked why she did not use a Georgian passport as her address was in Georgia. These two incidents contributed to a feeling of double alienation where Amra had to accept not being able to apply with what she considered to be her “real” passport (the Abkhazian), but when she did this it was yet again questioned why she did not have a Georgian passport – she felt as if she had been able to use her Abkhazian passport, none of these questions would have emerged. Consequently, through the process of applying for an internship, she experienced that her belonging, identity and nationality was questioned and problematized by people from the “outside”.

In this chapter, I will shed light on how young adults, like Amra, utilise documents to negotiate their sense of belonging and identity. I will focus on passports and how people living in a *de facto* state have their sense of belonging and identity questioned and problematized through their

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<sup>25</sup> When looking up addresses in Abkhazia on search engines such as Google, they appear as within Georgia as they consider Abkhazia to be *de jure* a part of Georgia. This conflicts with the Abkhazian idea of self and belonging.

documents, and as I will show this not only happens by the international community of nation states, but also within Abkhazia itself. I suggest that the way young adults talk about and interact with their identification papers is a useful vantage point for discussing their sense of belonging, hopes and future in a *de facto* state.

## **THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF IDENTITY PAPERS AND DOCUMENTS**

In the contemporary world, the idea of territorial sovereignty is one of the main concepts of how we perceive and understand international law. By dividing the world into separate, geographic entities, states are able to control and manage the bodies living inside these spaces. The state then is not just an abstract idea, but also a highly materially manifested concept represented through border-posts, fences, buildings, and flags to name a few. Besides these highly visible elements, the state “materializes and substantiates itself in people’s everyday lives through simple materialization of bureaucratic mechanisms and their tools, namely documents” (Hull 2012, quoted in Troscenko 2020: 236). While the most prestigious document, both practically and symbolically, is the passport, it is not limited to this. Documents also consist of birth certificates, marriage certificates, drivers’ licenses, diplomas, identity cards and so on. By categorizing and classifying bodies as citizens or not, and by issuing passports or other identification documents, or not the state is able to control and regulate its own citizens. As anthropologist Elina Troscenko puts it:

It is precisely through documents that the state enters the private and the mundane lives of people – through the simple acts of identifying and categorizing individuals, surveilling them with the help of various registers, and controlling their actions. (Troscenko 2020: 237)

In the international context, papers and officially written documents indicate stability and durability. They represent authenticity and are, amongst other, the material culture of modern states and legal systems (Navaro-Yashin 2012: 114). Citizens of different states organize and arrange their lives around and according to documents, here understood, as Troscenko suggests, as: “paperwork people engage with in relation to the state” (Troscenko 2020: 238). Identification documents, such as passports, define where one “belongs” in the form of citizenship: it identifies bodies as citizens of a specific geographic area. Yet and at the same time, as Stef Jansen points out, the main function of a passport “[... ] is to allow the bodies they identify – often conditional

on other documents, such as visas – to leave their state of citizenship” (Jansen 2009: 815). Hence, identification papers not only provide its holder with rights within a set geographical area, but it also determines its holder’s mobility – both within (see Hojaqizi 2008; Toje 2016) and across state borders (see Troschenko 2020). It provides you with the right to both leave one country and enter another.

Certain passports leave its holder with more freedom concerning their mobility, whereas other passports put severe constraints on a person’s possibilities for movement. A Singaporean passport offers visa-free or visa-on-arrival access to more than 190 destinations, whereas the Afghanistani passport offers the same to just 26 destinations (O’Hare 2020). For citizens of unrecognized or partially recognized states, such as Abkhazia, their passports offer even less than that. The documents issued by their *de facto* governments, around which they organize their daily lives, are considered “fake” and “non-valid” outside of the *de facto* state’s borders. They are, as Yael Navaro-Yashin suggests, make-believe papers (cf., Navaro-Yashin 2007). Diplomas received by citizens of Abkhazia when graduating from the Abkhazian State University (AGU), or documents defining which property they own are deemed non-valid by the international community of nation states<sup>26</sup>, and their passport is only recognized by a few other states<sup>27</sup>. Citizens of *de facto* states hence face great “difficulties in international mobility due to the unrecognized status of their passports” (Navaro-Yashin 2007: 90). Despite this, documents of unrecognized states have, as Navaro-Yashin argues, a certain validity and realness for those who have to use and deal with them on an everyday basis (see Navaro-Yashin 2007, 2012). For those who live and organize their lives in *de facto* states, the documents produced there are most certainly experienced as real as they produce and limit one’s opportunities by preventing you from or allows you to enter certain areas despite being unrecognized by the international community. Despite Abkhazia remaining only partially recognized, the documents produced by the state’s authorities affect people in their everyday life and offer some order and stability in an otherwise unpredictable political and social environment. The need for a state to produce such documents also springs from a desire to establish itself as a serious state:

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<sup>26</sup>Apart from the countries that recognize Abkhazia.

<sup>27</sup> Recognized by Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Syria and Nauru, as well as a few other *de facto* states; South Ossetia, Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Documents are among the primary paraphernalia of modern states and legal systems: they are its material culture. A wannabe ‘state’ would have to produce documents too, in order to look and act like a state. (Navaro-Yashin 2007: 84)

So, not only does documents allow or restrict you from doing certain things, but it also carries representations and strong symbolism. Passports, in particular, hold a critical practical and symbolic value as it not only allows you to travel across international borders, but it allows the person holding it to be protected under international law. Having a passport is the ultimate proof of statehood and to not recognize a passport is then to not recognize statehood, and by extension denying ones belonging and identification with a particular state and its national community. I have now provided a short summary of how documents are understood from an anthropological point of view. I will continue by exploring what it means for people living in Abkhazia to have an Abkhazian passport and how this affects their opportunities and future.

## **THE ABKHAZIAN PASSPORT WITHIN AND ACROSS STATE BORDERS**

For people living Abkhazia, obtaining citizenship, and moreover an Abkhazian passport, is extremely important. Having an Abkhazian passport not only determines that you are a citizen of Abkhazia – it also determines your right to own property, work in governmental jobs, study at the local university or vote in the presidential elections, to name a few<sup>28</sup>. In other words, it makes you an eligible citizen within the state and gives you the basic rights that follow. Unlike other nation states where the passport is often connected to mobility outside its borders and therefore non-essential unless you want to cross those borders, the Abkhazian passport not only functions as a document for international travel, but also as a domestic ID document – making it necessary in order to exercise your rights as a citizen as they do not provide other identification documents. Throughout my fieldwork, my interlocutors often used the words for passport (*passport*) and citizenship (*grazhdanstvo*) interchangeably, which further suggests that these two terms are closely intertwined and practically used for the same issue. Without citizenship people are not able to get an Abkhazian passport, and without a passport you are not able to exercise your rights within Abkhazia, as presented above. Consequently, those who live in Abkhazia but do not hold an

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<sup>28</sup> This use of the passport not only as a document used for mobility across state borders, but also as a document providing certain rights within the state may partly be a legacy of the use of the *propiska* (residence registration) in the Soviet era that was linked to housing, employment, and mobility within the Soviet Union (see for instance Toje 2016; Troscenko 2020).

Abkhazian passport are not seen as “proper” citizens. Natalia, one of my interlocutors was a Russian woman in her 20s who had attended school and lived in Abkhazia for close to 15 years. Despite this, she had not been granted Abkhazian citizenship, and thus not received an Abkhazian passport which created problems for her. She frustratedly exclaimed:

It is a big problem for me that I don't have an Abkhazian passport – I can't work in schools, in the government, in the hospitals or any other state institutions. I can't buy a car, a house or a flat. And I have to register twice a year at the immigration office. But if Abkhazian people want a Russian passport, they only need to apply and they will get it, but it doesn't work the same way the other way around. Why did you do this Putin?

She wanted to get Abkhazian citizenship, as it is allowed to have both Russian and Abkhazian citizenship at the same time<sup>29</sup>, but she did not meet the requirements needed. Neither did she have any ancestral ties to Abkhazia, nor had she lived there in the years following the war (this requirement is discussed below). Without a passport, Natalia's future in Abkhazia was unpredictable, and although there were usually no problems related to her renewing her residence permit, the *possibility* that an unforeseen problem would arise was always there. She expressed a great deal of frustration, emphasising the fact that it was impossible for her to buy a flat in Sukhum as she only possessed Russian citizenship, thus making it difficult to settle down or plan ahead. This feeling of unpredictability, instability, and lack of capability to plan ahead was something that was regularly brought up in conversations with my friends and interlocutors who had not received Abkhazian citizenship.

Natalia's reference to Putin, despite being said in a jokingly manner, reveals frustration over a situation where Abkhazian citizens have fairly easy access to Russian citizenship, but not the other way around. It also reflects the different motivation and reasons states have for providing citizenship. Abkhazia hands out citizenship in order to build a nation state with a controlled population, whereas Russia has geopolitical interests which makes them pursue different policies. By providing large parts of the population in Abkhazia with Russian citizenships and thus passports which enables them to travel etc., it reflects how the Russian state work to influence and establish control by forming a strong sense of loyalty between themselves and people. This way of distributing citizenship through naturalization, defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as “the act

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<sup>29</sup> According to the Abkhazian authorities.

of making someone a legal citizen of a country that they were not born in”<sup>30</sup>, has also been introduced by other nation states such as Hungary. By letting those who speak the language or can prove Hungarian origin apply for citizenship, thousands of citizens of mostly Ukraine and Serbia have received Hungarian citizenship and through this gained access to the EU with a Hungarian passport (Szymanowska 2011). This is a classic political move that strengthens Hungary’s political power and position in the region by building strong ties of loyalty and gratitude to ‘new’ citizens.

Another lady, Anastasia, was a Russian lady in her late 40s who also struggled to obtain an Abkhazian passport. She grew up in Abkhazia, but when the war broke out, she moved with her family to Russia and stayed there for over ten years. When she decided to move back to Abkhazia, she struggled to get citizenship and thus a passport that would allow her to properly establish herself there by buying a flat or having access to more jobs. She did not have a problem getting a residence permit, but the process of getting a passport took her more than five years. She later married an Abkhaz man, and told me that if she had done that earlier, the process of getting a passport would have been much faster. With her newly acquired citizenship and passport, she was finally able to look for an apartment she could invest her money in, and perhaps rent out.

Despite the lack of international recognition of Abkhazian citizenship, the passport was an important document for my interlocutors as it provided some stability and predictability in an everyday life where it was otherwise challenging to plan ahead. Because of this, it was a desirable item for those living there. Apart from gaining basic rights within Abkhazia when receiving an Abkhazian passport, it also allows you to enter Russia visa-free – making it easy to study or travel there for work. However, if they want to go further than Russia, the Abkhazian passport is of little help. Passports of *de facto* states mean “little once one leaves [...] as they, like the state which manufactures them, are not recognized” (Navaro-Yashin 2007: 80). As illustrated in the vignette in the beginning of this chapter, although Amra had an Abkhazian passport, it did not provide her with any rights outside Abkhazia or Russia, and she was not able to use it when applying for a visa to nation states in the European Union.

As illustrated above, the benefits of having an Abkhazian passport and the value it brings is high for those who live in Abkhazia. It is also a highly desired item for, particularly Russian, investors

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<sup>30</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/naturalization> [read 16.07.2021].

who wish to buy and develop property in Abkhazia. Throughout my fieldwork, people often asked me about my opinions on various political matters in Abkhazia. A recurring theme was whether I thought they should open the Abkhazian real estate market to foreigners, particularly Russians who did not live there, so they could buy property in Abkhazia. Many feared that wealthy Russian investors would buy up the entire coast and build large, costly resorts that Russian tourists could travel to – like what has been done along the Russian Black Sea coast. A feared consequence of this was that Russians would slowly but surely move to Abkhazia ‘under the radar’, and consequently own more and more of the land, and in this way, Abkhazia would slowly but surely lose control and subsequently be subordinated into Russia. Although not expressed as vividly as the concern about Russians owning land in Abkhazia, it was also mentioned a few times that this could also mean that Georgian citizens holding a Russian passport would be able to buy property and use this as a way of “taking back” the land (see Kolstø 2020). However, many of the people I spoke to acknowledged that the investments and capital wealthy foreigners, in particular wealthy Russians, could bring would help to further develop and rebuild Abkhazia. Therefore, on one hand, they feared losing autonomy over the land if foreign investors were allowed to buy land, but on the other hand they acknowledged the need for financial means to improve infrastructure and the public services, such as health and education.

As illustrated earlier, getting Abkhazian citizenship is not a straight-forward process, much because the Abkhazian government also sees it as an opportunity to regulate and control the ethnic composition of the population by providing passports to those who “fit into” the political discourse of the state. The discourse is mainly based on an idea that ‘Abkhazia is the land of the Abkhaz, and they are the rightful people and owners of the land’. After the war with Georgia the size of the population was reduced by half, and the Abkhazian government has since made efforts to increase the population – but with great detail to *who* obtains citizenship. One of the most telling examples of how politicized and important *who* holds the Abkhazian passport goes back to 2014. The president at the time, Alexander Ankvab, was accused by the opposition led by Raul Khajimba of giving the Georgian speaking population in Abkhazia Abkhazian passports as a “purely political ploy by Mr Ankvab to expand his electoral base” (Cecire 2014). By this, Khajimba indicated that by granting citizenship and passports to the Georgian-speaking population, Ankvab wanted to secure their votes in upcoming elections. Within a few days of the opposition leader’s accusations, President Ankvab resigned. The issuing of Abkhazian passports to the Georgian population of



Abkhazia was initiated in 2009 by Sergei Bagapsh (the president at the time) and continued by Ankvab after he was elected president subsequent to Bagapsh's sudden death in 2011. Both had advocated for a fuller integration of the Georgian population into the Abkhaz society by granting them Abkhazian citizenship and passports, hence also the possibility to vote and buy property. This was not well received and "slammed by opposition groups as a threat to Abkhaz sovereignty" (Agenda.ge 2014), before it eventually was ruled illegal by the newly formed Abkhazian government, led by Khajimba. In 2016, the Abkhazian government decided that all passports were to be reissued, and a new rule in the citizenship law stated that in order to replace their old passports with the new ones, they had to provide proof that they had lived in Abkhazia between 1994 and 1999 (Adleyba 2019). For most of the Georgian speaking minority of Abkhazia, this meant that they would not be able to renew their passports as those who were driven out or left Abkhazia during the war were not allowed to return until 1999 or later. At the same time, it was reported by OC Media<sup>31</sup> that the law did "not appear to have been applied to ethnic Abkhaz, who have no restrictions in obtaining Abkhazian citizenship" (Adleyba 2019). OC Media further reported that they had been "unable to find a single ethnic Abkhaz person who had been asked to bring additional documents or been subject to additional verification processes" (Adleyba 2019), whereas those of Armenian, Russian and other descent were requested to provide the required documentation. My friend Aida, a Russian woman in her late 30s, told me she had met difficulties with these new requirements when she went to update her passport. Between 1994 and 1999, she had spent several years studying in Russia, and although she was born and had lived most of her life in Abkhazia, she had struggled to get her new passport because of the time she had studied abroad. She had to go back and forth to the office dealing with her passport, argue and present plenty of documents stating when she had studied in Russia and when she had not. This stood in stark contrast to another man I talked with at a café in the city center. He came from the US, but his parents were of Circassian and Abkhaz descent (both descendants from the *muhajirs*), and he therefore had ancestral ties to Abkhazia. Because of this, he had applied for and received an Abkhazian passport. However, contrary to the 2016 Citizenship Law, not only had he not lived in Abkhazia during the war and somehow been exempt from this rule, but he was also allowed to hold both an American and an Abkhazian passport. "I am from Syria. I am from the US. I am from

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<sup>31</sup> OC Media stands for Open Caucasus Media which is a Tbilisi-based website that publishes articles and news from both North and South Caucasus in Russian and English

Abkhazia. Which do you prefer?” he laughed hoarsely, “no, but really. I am Abkhaz. I moved here when I retired. This is my homeland, so I came here”. I believe this illustrates some of the ways the Abkhazian government control and alter *who* receives citizenship. By making it difficult for those who have a different nationality than Abkhaz and at the same time simplifying the process for the Abkhaz, the government are able to control the ethnic composition of the state. The 2016 Citizenship Law thus reflects a government policy of deciding *who* in terms of nationality as “territorialized belonging” are considered legitimate citizens of the nation, and who are not. In other words, who they want as settled citizens and included in the Abkhazian nation, and who they want to exclude.

Other methods have also been introduced to increase the Abkhaz population. When the war broke out in Syria in 2011, the Abkhazian government decided to let certain Syrian people repatriate to Abkhazia. The repatriates were descendants from the *muhajirs* who fled from the Russian Empire to the Ottoman Empire in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and thus had ancestral ties to the territory. By ‘inviting’ these refugees to live in Abkhazia and giving them passports where the fifth line read Abkhaz or Circassian<sup>32</sup>, the Abkhaz percentage of the total population increased. By many of the Syrian repatriates I spoke to, this felt like a strategical and political move rather than a humanitarian one. Several of the Syrian refugees I spoke to said they had felt welcomed when they arrived – they were after all returning to their ancestral homeland in an effort initiated by the Abkhazia government. However, many of them struggled to adjust to life there: as Muslims, their religious practices were different, the locals had troubles accepting the more widespread use of the veil (*hijab*) among the female refugees and struggled to learn the language<sup>33</sup> which they felt the government did little to help them with. Although they were offered free housing and received monthly stipends of 10.000 rubles (Rimple 2014), which was a more than ten times what local pensioners got, they did not feel that the government cared much about integrating them into the local community. Instead, they felt as if they were just brought there as a strategic political move by the government. As I have illustrated, having an Abkhazian passport provides you with rights

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<sup>32</sup> The Abkhaz and the Circassians are often talked about closely related groups, especially outside the Caucasus (Shami 1998: 624). Proximity in language, a shared history of the Circassian genocide and intermarriage that blurs the distinction between the two are of the reasons why Circassians sometimes are classified as Abkhaz depending on the situation.

<sup>33</sup> Several communities of the descendants from the *muhajirs* in Turkey and the Middle East have preserved the Abkhazian language and traditions but struggled to learn Russian which serves as the *lingua franca* in Abkhazia.

within Abkhazia. However, in terms of mobility across state borders, it does not provide much help. In the following section I will provide information young adults in Abkhazia's access to Russian and Georgian passports.

## **DISTRIBUTION OF PASSPORTS TO ABKHAZIA**

### **RUSSIA**

Russia began providing Russian citizenships, and thus passports, to people in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the early 2000s (Mühlfried 2010: 9), but it was not until 2004 when Adjara was reintegrated into Georgia<sup>34</sup> that the Russian passportisation sped up (Artman 2013: 690). By passportisation I am referring to “the act by one country (chiefly Russia) of inducing residents of another country to take up the citizenship of (and possess a passport from) the first country”<sup>35</sup>. This has been done in Abkhazia, South-Ossetia and Transnistria (see for instance Artman 2013; Nagashima 2019), as well as in Ukraine (Grigas 2016) to name some. By 2008, when Russia recognized both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, most of the population in both areas had already received Russian citizenship and also a Russian passport. Receiving a Russian passport has several practical advantages; access to jobs in Russia, greater freedom to travel both internationally and within Russia, and a claim to pensions much higher than the Abkhazian pension<sup>36</sup>. Citizens of Abkhazia are also allowed dual citizenship, but only with Russia. This means that they only can hold passports from Abkhazia and Russia at the same time. The Russian citizenship then is a “powerful discursive marker of political inclusion in a polity that was not Georgia” (Artman 2013: 693) and at the same time provides practical advantages.

Holding a Russian passport was, by most of my interlocutors, seen as a necessity to increase one's mobility and opportunities, and “without a Russian passport we can't go anywhere” was a common statement. However, throughout the years, the policies for obtaining a Russian passport have changed and become stricter<sup>37</sup>, meaning that for those who did not take advantage of the

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<sup>34</sup> In the years after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 until 2004, Ajara was ruled by Aslan Abashidze. In this period, the region achieved a high degree of autonomy, but unlike Abkhazia and South Ossetia, they never actually announced or proclaimed political independence from Georgia. In 2004 it was integrated as an autonomous republic in Georgia, and the self-government became more restricted and regulated.

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.wordsense.eu/passportization/> [read 16.07.2021]

<sup>36</sup> My hosts received a monthly pension worth 500 rubles (approximately 6.5 USD) from the Abkhazian government and a monthly pension of 12.000 rubles (approximately 155 USD) from the Russian government.

<sup>37</sup> Claiming a Russian passport has become more difficult in the last few years compared to when the passportisation began, especially if you fit within certain demographics like a particular range of age etc.

opportunity to obtain a Russian passport in the past, the situation is now more complicated. A friend of mine, Adgur, was an Abkhaz man in his early 30s. He was married, had children and a fulltime job which gave him a steady income. At the time when others had applied and received their Russian passports, he had not done so himself. He said that he had considered himself Abkhaz, not Russian, and that it had felt wrong to get a Russian passport at the time. Today, he regretfully spoke about the decision which he sarcastically referred to it as “the biggest mistake of my life”. Unlike most of his fellow friends, family, and colleagues who had received the Russian passport, he now only had an Abkhazian passport which made it next to impossible to travel internationally which was something he dreamed of doing, for both holidays and in connection to his job. Because of this, he was now, according to himself, stuck in Abkhazia and Russia for “the rest of his life”. The identity document (the Abkhazian passport) he had to navigate and organize his life around had little value in other places. Another of my interlocutors, Batal, had also decided not to apply for the Russian passport when he had the chance. He was an Abkhaz man in his 50s with a wife and grown-up children. At the time when he could have applied for a Russian passport, he had strongly believed that Abkhazia was on the verge of full international recognition. Because of this, he had not seen the need for obtaining a Russian passport. His predictions unfortunately did not materialize, and now he worried about how his life would turn out when he was going to be a pensioner. Would he be able to pay for his children’s university education? How would his daily needs be met? With an average monthly pension of 500 rubles from the Abkhazian government, the monthly pension of around 12.000 rubles from Russia would make a world of a difference. However, as he was not a citizen of Russia, he was thus not eligible for the Russian required to access this relative much higher pension that many of his friends enjoyed.

Although having a Russian passport makes life easier for many people in Abkhazia, it is far from an ideal solution. Having a Russian passport also meant that they had to keep in mind the political position of Russia in the world, especially regarding mobility and visa applications. As Amra expressed in the vignette of this chapter: “some places don’t like Russians, so that’s also a problem”. After the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 and Russia recognized Abkhazia as an independent state, a Russian embassy was opened in Sukhum where people in Abkhazia could apply for a Russian passport. A consequence of this is that although it became easier for people in Abkhazia to apply for and get in touch with Russian authorities, passports issued from this embassy are not valid outside Abkhazia and Russia as most of the international community does not

recognize the Russian Embassy in Sukhum as a legitimate embassy. Hence citizens of Abkhazia who wish to travel outside Russia – and receiving a Georgian passport is not a real option (see below) – have to travel to a Russian city, for example Sochi or Krasnodar, from where they can get a passport issued from a recognized passport office. Both Sochi and Krasnodar are in close geographical proximity to Sukhum<sup>38</sup> and easily accessible with buses, *marshrutkas* (minivans used for public transport), taxis, car, and trains leaving daily or more often. Several of my interlocutors took advantage of this when getting a Russian passport to ensure they were able to travel abroad without extra difficulties.

## GEORGIA

For my interlocutors, applying for and receiving a Georgian passport simply did not arise as a real option. First of all, there was a strong social and political stigma tied to it. As most of my interlocutors had close family who had fought in the war, it was seen as disloyal and unpatriotic to obtain a passport from “the enemy”. This was an idea that was deeply rooted in the society. My hosts had a friend who had been critically ill for a while. The hospitals in Abkhazia were not able to provide the required treatment, and he could not afford it in Russia, despite his friends and family’s efforts to collect money for the treatment. Georgia provides free medical care for citizens of Abkhazia – as they are considered Georgian nationals<sup>39</sup> – and his friends and family had tried to persuade him to go there to get help, but he refused. As a former soldier of the war, he had no interest in getting help from Georgia even if his life depended on it. Sadly, the lack of treatment resulted in him passing away at a relatively young age. The feelings of being “betrayed by our own brothers and neighbors”<sup>40</sup>, as an old lady I spoke to phrased it, still run so deep that travelling for medical aid, even when life is at risk, let alone applying for a Georgian passport is utterly unthinkable for many, despite the advantages it brings.

Second, according to Abkhazian laws, dual citizenship is only allowed in the combination of an Abkhazian and a Russian citizenship. If the Abkhazian government discover you hold a Georgian passport as well as an Abkhazian one, you are at risk of losing the Abkhazian passport and

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<sup>38</sup> Sochi is about 3 hours by car from Sukhum, whereas Krasnodar is about 9-10-hours away by car.

<sup>39</sup> People from Abkhazia only need to “present any identification document, including an Abkhaz passport” (De Waal 2018).

<sup>40</sup> Many older people spoke about shock when the war broke out. The ways they talked about each other, such as “brothers”, “sisters” and “neighbours”, indicate closeness and intimacy and were often used to describe their relationship before the war, which seemed to have made it even more shocking when the war began.

consequently lose the rights it gives you, which practically forces you to move. From 28 March 2017, Georgian citizens holding biometric passports have been able to travel to the Schengen zone for up to 90 days without applying for a visa<sup>41</sup> – making it easier for them to visit parts of Europe my interlocutors frequently spoke of and dreamt to visit. Despite many people in Abkhazia’s wishes to travel to Europe and the US, my interlocutors neither seemed interested in a getting a Georgian passport, or even knew about the visa-free travel it provided. This is in stark contrast to what happened in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), another *de facto* state, in the early 2000s when it was decided that its parent state Cyprus were to soon become a member state of the EU. Rebecca Bryant, who had done extensive fieldwork in TRNC, points out that “after the 2003 easing of movement restrictions, almost 100,000 Turkish Cypriots crossed to the south to claim their soon-to-be-EU passports” (2021: 66). Although Georgia is not a member of the EU and more time has passed since the war on Cyprus compared to Abkhazia, and the situation in Abkhazia thus is not fully comparable with Cyprus, I believe it gives a clear indicator of how resentful and deep-seated Abkhazians’ feelings towards Georgia are, including among the young adults I met.

Third, crossing at the Ingur-river is not straightforward for neither Georgians nor citizens of Abkhazia, and as the Georgian state is not present in Abkhazia, this makes it very difficult for Abkhazian citizens to obtain a Georgian passport even if they would want to. If people from Abkhazia wish to cross the border, they need to get permission from the authorities, unless they have documentation that allows them to cross regularly<sup>42</sup>. One of my informants’ aunts had worked as a translator in one of the departments of the Abkhazian government. A client of hers had wanted to go to Georgia for medical treatment and asked if she could come along to help with translation. To be able do this, she had to apply for permission from the government which she ultimately was rejected, and she consequently was not able to travel with her client across the border. Despite having an Abkhazian passport, which Georgia accepts as an identification paper, the Abkhazian government still refused her to cross the border. This unwillingness by the Abkhazian authorities to let their citizens cross the border to the *parent* state stands in stark contrast to TRNC where the authorities have allowed the citizens to cross back and forth to Cyprus since 2003 (Bryant 2021).

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<sup>41</sup> <https://www.schengenvisa.info.com/news/georgian-citizens-can-travel-to-the-schengen-zone-without-a-visa/> [read 03.05.2021]

<sup>42</sup> This is mostly provided to those who live in the regions next to Georgia where people who cross the border regularly live.

The need for the Abkhazian government to mark themselves so strongly against Georgia can be seen as an effort to maintain the idea of Georgia as the enemy and “the other”. In the following section I will look closer at how the Abkhazian government use a feature in the Abkhazian passport as a mean to control *who* receives the passport which enables them to monitor the population.

## **TERRITORIALISED BELONGING**

Documents, especially passports, are not only important on the individual level, but they are also highly political in Abkhazia. As mentioned earlier, an Abkhazian passport not only determines that you are a citizen of Abkhazia and allows you to cross the state borders – it also provides you with certain rights within the borders. One of the most important rights the Abkhazian passport provides its holder with is that you are eligible to cast a vote (if you are old enough) in the presidential elections; therefore, it also matters *who* holds the passport. Whether a person is considered to be Abkhaz, Georgian or Armenian becomes critical (see below) – and is stated in your passport. In Soviet passports, ‘the famous fifth line’ stated your nationality as 50territorialized belonging. For the remaining part of this thesis, the term “nationality” will be understood as the ‘territorialised belonging’ prescribed in one’s passport.

As a rule, nationality was attributed to an ethnic group with a titular claim to the territory of a Soviet republic, autonomous republic or oblast’ (region). Each Soviet citizen had to define his or her territorial belonging in reference to nationality. (Mühlfried 2010: 12)

For most countries established on the territory of the former Soviet Union, this feature has been removed from the passports, but it is still present in the Abkhazian one. The “territorialized belonging” described in your passport is based on your patrilineal lineage – i.e., the nationality of you father. Although one’s surname itself often gives this away, it is still stated whether you are Abkhaz, Armenian, Russian, Georgian, Mingrelian, Arab and so on. Because of this, what is considered to be one’s nationality, or ‘belonging’, is determined, and prescribed in your passport by the Abkhazian state. Throughout my fieldwork, I discussed ‘the fifth line’ with most of my interlocutors, and their opinions varied greatly, based on their own nationality and experiences, on whether it should be removed from or included in the passport. Most of my Abkhaz interlocutors favored the inclusion of nationality in the passport. They justified it by telling me that they they feared that without it, the Georgian government could say that the Abkhaz ethnic group did not exist. They referred to the georgianization that the Abkhaz population experienced between the

1930s and the 1950s and saw this very line in the passport as an expression of independence and distinctiveness from Georgians. Without it they felt they would lose their recognition as a distinct ethnic group and what they believed made them distinct from the Georgians, both in culture, mentality (*mentalitet*), and language. In the ways Abkhaz people explained this to me, they argued to keep it based on an external factor. As Georgia also approved the use of the Abkhazian passport as an identification document, where “Abkhaz” was stated as an independent group, the Abkhaz felt as if their identity and belonging became visible to the Georgian government and yet again reinforced an idea of distinctiveness.

However, most of my non-Abkhaz interlocutors experienced the inclusion of their so-called nationality as conflicting because they felt like Abkhazia was their homeland, but their state-issued passports suggested otherwise. Several felt discriminated against and that their future opportunities were limited by their state ascribed nationality. An example that was brought up regularly was related to jobs, and the difficulties of getting one. While applying for jobs, non-Abkhaz people often felt that Abkhaz people were favoured based on their nationality or their close family and clan ties. It was so bad, some argued, that they did not even bother applying for certain jobs because they knew they would not get it anyways and they felt that the inclusion of ‘nationality’ in the passport reinforced this. One evening I was hanging out with group of young Syrian repatriates when I asked them how they found Abkhazia. “Shit”, one girl laughed before continuing in a more serious manner. “No really, the country is beautiful, but nothing works here. If I had known it was like this before I came, I would’ve stayed in Syria. I had a good job there”. They continued by talking about their experiences when applying for jobs in Abkhazia. “I have experience from several international organisations in Syria”, a woman in her 30s said, “but we are not able to get jobs for projects here that we already have experience from. They rather hire family or friends that they know even if we are better qualified”. She explained me that her she had good testimonials from the places she had worked, and that she had worked for organisations that were present in Abkhazia as well. Another of my interlocutors, Maria, expressed similar frustration and hopelessness over the situation. She was an Armenian woman in her mid-twenties who still lived at home with her parents and siblings. After she had recently graduated from the Abkhazian State University (AGU) she struggled to find a relevant job.

Everything is based on contacts here! If you own a business and you want to hire a new employee, you should start the process with applications and interviews. Then your nephew



or neighbor's son or someone else you know apply. Will you be able to choose someone else than him? If you do, you may be shamed by your own family. "Why didn't you choose him? We are family, no? You don't care?". And if they end up hiring this person, but he or she does a horrible job, you can't fire him or her! It's all based on contacts here! Like me, my family is not from Sukhum, and we are not Abkhaz, so I don't have any contacts! What can I do?

From what both the Syrian repatriates and Maria describe, these 'favours' seemed to be particularly strong within the family, suggesting that it was a form of nepotism, defined as "the act of using your power or influence to get good jobs or unfair advantages for members of your own family"<sup>43</sup>. However, in the post-Soviet space in anthropological literature, these kinds of connections are usually referred to as the "economy of favours" (Humphrey 2012; Ledeneva 1998), which is understood as the "use of personalised connections in order to get access to goods, services, and information" (Henig and Makovicky 2017: 35). Unlike nepotism, the economy of favours does not require family-ties. Caroline Humphrey draws on this idea, and argues that is it important to keep in mind that "of course favors are very often done among people who are either kin or friends, but a favor is only a favor if it is for *some* kin and *some* friends" (Humphrey 2012: 23), meaning that the person doing the favour does not necessarily do it to *all* friends and but rather utilize it as "a vital initiating spark that changes the status of the recipient, turning them into kin or friends" (Humphrey 2012: 23). From this, I understand the economy of favours to be about establishing reciprocal relationships (cf., Mauss 1995) where the person helping does not expect anything in return immediately (as in various form of corruption where money or other goods change hands before the transaction), but where it creates a relationship between the giver and the recipient of the service that can be utilized in the long run. This resonates well with *apsuara*<sup>44</sup> which is the Abkhaz's unwritten moral and ethical code, defining how an ideal person should be stressing values such as honour, conscience, modesty, courage, hospitality, and respect for the elders and, not least, the clan. The fact that neither Maria nor the Syrian repatriates are Abkhaz combined with the nature of *apsuara* makes them less desired "allies" to form a relationship to be included in the economy of favours. What they could bring to the table, in terms of connections and possible favours they could bring in return, did not seem to be valuable enough to be included. Had Maria

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<sup>43</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/nepotism> [read 29.07.2021].

<sup>44</sup> The concept of *apsuara* will be further discussed in chapter four.

been from a family with high social, economic or cultural capital (cf., Bourdieu 1995), the situation could have been different. This is not implying that she *would* get the job if so, but her chances would perhaps be higher.

In addition to having their opportunities affected by their nationality or belonging, some of my interlocutors also expressed that their so-called prescribed belonging and identity categories did not match their own idea of who they were or to where they belonged. They felt as if their state-ascribed “nationality” stated in their passport alienated them from the place where they had been born and lived their whole lives. This brings in a whole new element as your passport in the end is not only a matter of practicality a bureaucratic document, it is also filled with affect (cf., Navaro-Yashin 2007). As mentioned earlier, it is often fairly easy to guess from where a person come from based on their surname. Based on different endings, you can often tell whether it is an Armenian (-ian/-yan), Abkhazian (-ipa) or for example Georgian (-shvili) name. Because of this, the fifth line was, by some, experienced as a way to emphasize that they did not *ancestrally* come from Abkhazia and thus did not ‘truly belong’ there – making them feel as if they were second rate citizens – so although they felt belonging to Abkhazia and saw it as their homeland, their passport stated otherwise. My interlocutor Valeria expressed frustration over this particular part of her passport and experienced it as conflicting with her own feeling of identity and sense of belonging. Valeria was a woman in her mid-twenties who had a bachelor’s degree from AGU. She volunteered with several organizations, had been at several peace-conferences aiming to get youth from Abkhazia and Georgia to form bonds and was generally very active in the local community. She told me that more than 100 years ago, her great-grandparents had fled the Armenian genocide and ended up in Abkhazia resulting in that both her grandparents, parents and herself were born and raised in Abkhazia. She spoke some Armenian<sup>45</sup> and understood quite a bit of Abkhazian but felt more comfortable speaking Russian. I met her and another friend of hers in a restaurant in the city centre of Sukhum when she told me a story, where are few years back, she had the opportunity of going to Europe, and in the visa-application, her own understanding of belonging and nationality was contested:

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<sup>45</sup> Most of the Armenian population in Abkhazia are descendants from those who fled the Armenian genocide in 1917. They fled from a western province of what used to be Armenia, but is now located in Turkey. Because of this, the Armenian dialect that Armenians in Abkhazia speak, Homshetsi, is different from the Armenian they speak in today’s Armenia.

In the application [for the visa], I had to write my nationality, but I didn't know what to write, because I have both a Russian and an Abkhazian passport, and according to my Abkhazian passport I'm Armenian. But I applied with my Russian passport even though I'm not Russian, and I don't identify as just Armenian – I feel Abkhaz as well. I come from Abkhazia, not Armenia... In Abkhazia, I'm not Abkhaz enough, but when I'm in Armenia, I'm not Armenian enough! You know, if I'm outside Abkhazia, I will say I'm from Abkhazia. But when I'm here, I will say I'm Armenian. If I meet local people and I don't say anything they will never know I'm Armenian. I don't look like I'm from Armenia, and I don't act in a very Armenian way. If they know my last name they will know, but if not, they won't know. I feel like I'm Armenian, but also Abkhaz... I think and act like the Abkhaz, but my blood is Armenian. So finally, I decided to write Abkhaz first, then Armenian and finally Russian.

Valeria's experience with the application form shows how she had to negotiate her own feelings of belonging when dealing with official documents. Unlike what Natalia and Anastasia experienced, her problem did not concern whether she could get an Abkhazian passport or not, but that her belonging was prescribed by the Abkhazian authorities – without her having a say in it. It stated that she was Armenian, but as she said herself, she felt Abkhaz. The lack of international recognition of Abkhazia added another element as she was forced to use a Russian passport<sup>46</sup>, which made her have to negotiate her belonging yet again. The example with Valeria illustrates several scales regarding different feelings and expectations related to belonging. First, at the national level where although she feels Abkhazian herself, she is considered Armenian by the authorities and society. Second, at the regional level where in Armenia she is not considered Armenian enough – conflicting with the nationality prescribed by the Abkhazian authorities. And third, at the international level where she is forced to use her Russian passport and consequently is neither considered Abkhazian or Armenian, but Russian. Valeria's thoughts about belonging did not stem from her documents, but it was especially in processes where she had to use her documents and questions of belonging crystallized and created situations where she had to reflect over it and make a choice, that she brought it up in conversations.

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<sup>46</sup> Obtaining a Georgian passport was out of the picture as illustrated above.

## SUMMARY

In her book, *Make-Believe Space*, Yael Navaro-Yashin discusses how state-issued documents in *de facto* states produce clear “affective relations between documents and people” (Navaro-Yashin 2007: 118). As I have shown throughout this chapter, these affective relations vary greatly in how strongly and in which context they are expressed. For Amra and Valeria, having an Abkhazian passport represents and symbolizes belonging to what they experience as their homeland, despite whatever nationality their passport prescribes. Although they have different sentiments towards their Abkhazian passports, they both expressed pride in feeling a sense of belonging to Abkhazia. For other people living in Abkhazia, like Natalia and Anastasia, getting an Abkhazian passport was not as important for affectionate reasons, but for practical ones. Without it they were unable to buy property and get a stable and predictable future in Abkhazia.

Today’s young adults in Abkhazia can be said to be the first generation of post-war Abkhazia, and a strong sense of belonging and belief that one day Abkhazia will achieve full international recognition outperforms their personal desires for easier access to the outside world. They would, like Amra and Valeria, rather go through difficult and time-consuming visa processes where they experience their own sense of belonging and identity being questioned, than accepting Georgian citizenship. Most of my interlocutors wanted more and better opportunities for their future which their passports could not provide, but to achieve this, they were only willing to compromise their sense of belonging and identity to a certain extent. To receive a Georgian passport was therefore not a thing they even considered to apply for, even though this passport would open many doors in terms of mobility and opportunities. Their sense of belonging and loyalty to Abkhazia took precedence over their desire for greater mobility.

# CHAPTER FOUR:

## NEGOTIATING TRADITIONS

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### INTRODUCTION

*The room was filled with anticipation as Alina's older brother went to the cabinet to get the hunting rifle. A few moments later, he came back with the rifle in one hand and a few bullets in the other. He went outside in the backyard and loaded it before he lifted it up towards the sky and placed the recoil pad to his shoulder. Suddenly two loud bangs filled the air, joining the loud roars of other rifles and guns being fired in the neighbourhood. The traditional Abkhaz holiday Azhirnykhva had finally started.*

*After the shots had been fired, everyone helped to get the last bits ready so the rituals could begin. The large kitchen table was full of different foods they had prepared throughout the day. Roosters had been sacrificed by the men in the family for every person in the house<sup>47</sup> earlier that day, except Alina's father for whom they previously had sacrificed a bull. The heart and liver of the bull was carefully threaded on a y-shaped walnut stick, whereas the hearts and livers of the roosters were threaded on a simple walnut-stick<sup>48</sup>. Alina's mother had baked akuakuar (small pieces of dough filled with cheese) which they only made once a year and were forbidden to eat until the rituals were performed. She had also baked achashv (a big, flat piece of dough filled with cheese<sup>49</sup>) the same day. Mamaliga (a thick corn porridge) was placed on plates, a walnut-based sauce and salt put into two different bowls, and homemade red wine was poured into a large jug. Homemade candles made from pure beeswax were also distributed to everyone. More or less everything was produced on their own land – the cheese was made by Alina's mother from the milk of their own cows, the roosters were bred in their backyard, beeswax was harvested from Alina's aunt's beehives, fruits and vegetables grown in the garden and the wine was made from their own grapes. A big aluminium bowl was brought to the table, and the large walnut-stick with the bull's heart*

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<sup>47</sup> As a gesture they had also sacrificed a rooster for me.

<sup>48</sup> For me they did not thread the liver and the heart of the rooster on a walnut stick as I do not belong to the traditional Abkhazian religion. Instead, they were placed on the plate beside the rest of my food.

<sup>49</sup> Similar to *khachapuri*, a Georgian cheese-filled bread.

*and liver, three small walnut sticks with heart and livers from the roosters, a jug of wine, juice, some baked goods, salt, sauce, mamaliga and candles were put into it.*

*Alina and her father, brother and nephew got ready to go outside to the family's holy place, anykha, in the garden. They washed their faces and hands, making sure to be clean, before picking up the large aluminium bowl with the carefully chosen food, drinks and candles in it. They went out the door and disappeared in the dark, only visible by the light of their torch until that also disappeared in the pitch-dark evening. Alina had earlier explained to me that they were only allowed to go to this specific holy place once a year, on Azhirnykhva, and that it was located in a part of the garden one usually would not go to at other times. When they had disappeared into the dark, her mother, sister-in-law and I also washed our faces and hands before we placed the food and candles on three different plates, unlike the one shared bowl. Alina's sister-in-law took her plate with food and candles and went into the living room while her mother and I stayed in the kitchen with our plates. At first, we lit our candles, leaving a sweet smell of beeswax in the room, and prayed, Alina's mum mumbled softly in Abkhazian and I in Norwegian. After the prayer was over, the candles were "squeezed" onto the door frame, and as they were made of pure beeswax, they were soft and stuck to the frame easily. When the candles were stuck, Alina's mother indicated that it was time to first take a bite of the heart and the liver followed by the whole glass of wine that had been poured for me. To finish off we tasted the freshly baked goods that had been made earlier the same day. I felt happy and moved that Alina's family had opened the doors to their home to let me celebrate this special holiday with them.*

*Shortly afterwards, Alina and the rest of the family came back inside, and we all went into the living room where the table had already been set with beautifully plated dishes, homemade cheese, chacha<sup>50</sup>, wine, fruits, feijoa<sup>51</sup> juice and even a dessert. I was seated at the end of the table, at the seat of honor on the right side of Alina's father, as he lifted a glass of wine and made the usual first toast to Antsva<sup>52</sup>. He drank the whole glass before the rest of us joined in, and the feast could finally start.*

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<sup>50</sup> A strong grape brandy made in South Caucasus. It is usually made from the grape residue that is left after making wine, but it can also be made from other types of fruits. In Abkhazia it is commonly made at home.

<sup>51</sup> Feijoa is a fruit belonging to the Myrtaceae-family. It is native to South America but grows in large numbers in Abkhazia.

<sup>52</sup> The creator of both nature and people and the sovereign and almighty of the universe in the Abkhaz traditional religion.



*Picture 5: The aluminium bowl ready to be brought out to the holy place. Picture 6: Three plates for Alina's mother, sister-in-law and myself. Notice how the heart and liver served for me are not threaded on a walnut-stick. Picture 7: The table is set for the feast to begin.*

The ethnography above describes how the Abkhaz holiday *Azhirnykhva* unfolded at Alina's family's home in a village outside Sukhum and reveals several important socio-cultural aspects of how life and tradition are practised and upheld among the Abkhaz – from intimate kinship structures, hospitality and the family hierarchy to rituals, belief systems and symbolic value. The

sum of these elements forms what it means to be a ‘good’ Abkhaz which I will elaborate more on below.

Throughout my time in Abkhazia, Alina and I spoke about religion on several occasions, and she explained to me that she did not consider herself particularly religious and that she rarely, if ever, went to church. This was common among most of my interlocutors, regardless of their nationality<sup>53</sup>. Nevertheless, like most of the Abkhaz I met, it fell her naturally to participate in celebrations related to the Abkhazian traditional religion and to make toasts to *Antsva* whenever we ate food or drank alcohol. I want to argue that such actions are not necessarily seen as an expression of religiosity among the young adults I interacted with throughout my fieldwork, but rather as a way of expressing belonging and identity to the Abkhaz nationality through *apsuara* – the unwritten Abkhazian traditional culture and customs (which literally translates as Abkhazness<sup>54</sup>).

Throughout this chapter, I want to show in what ways a sense of belonging is expressed among the Abkhaz in relation to the traditional Abkhazian religion and the practice of *apsuara*. I will continue to draw on this, by exemplifying how the Abkhazian authorities actively use elements of the Abkhaz identity markers to establish a strong national identity. I also argue that these elements, including the traditional Abkhazian religion are particularly important for the Abkhaz’s sense of belonging as it is an important identification marker that distinguishes them from both Georgia and Russia.

## **RELIGION IN ABKHAZIA**

In Abkhazia, people mostly consider themselves to be somewhat religious, and while a majority adheres to Orthodox Christianity and a minority adhere Islam, institutionalized religion does not have a particularly strong political position or popular appeal compared to, for example, in Georgia or Russia. About 60% of the population are Christians (Bærug 2020), where the vast majority are Orthodox, although both Catholic and Lutheran churches are found. Most of my interlocutors, both older and younger, only went to church for special occasions such as Christmas and did not fast for lent which is common among other Orthodox Christians. I also observed that few people crossed themselves when passing a church, unlike what I had noticed in Tbilisi and Zugdidi where

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<sup>53</sup> Understood as ‘territorialized belonging’ as explained in chapter three.

<sup>54</sup> Originating from the word *Apsua* which is the Abkhazian demonym for the Abkhaz people.



people often crossed themselves not only once or twice, but three times, symbolizing the Trinity. Around 16% of the population are Muslims (Bærug 2020), but unlike in some of the more conservative republics in North Caucasus such as Chechnya and Dagestan, the Muslims in Abkhazia were mostly secular. However, there was a visible difference in how Islam was practiced among the Abkhazian Muslim population and how it was practised among the generally more religiously observant descendants of the *muhajirs* that had repatriated to Abkhazia from Syria and other Arabic countries. For example, they usually did not drink alcohol, and women often wore *abayas* (a traditional long cloak) and covered their hair with a *hijab* (veil).

Less than 10% of the population consider themselves to belong to the traditional Abkhazian religion (Bærug 2020), but there may be several reasons for this. An important explanation might be that people in Abkhazia often considered themselves both Orthodox or Muslim while they, at the same time, practised the traditional Abkhazian religion. Its most central belief is the belief in a single creator, *Antsva*, who is considered to be the creator of both nature and people and is the sovereign and almighty of the universe (Sputnik Abkhazia 2015). Below *Antsva* there are numerous sacred deities, such as *Khait* (the deity of the sea), *Amra* (the deity of the sun) and *Aitar* (the deity of cattle and domestic animals), which are worshipped and prayed to when needed or at specific holidays, such as during *Azhirnykhva*. When I arrived in Sukhum, I quickly noticed how my host Bagrat always uttered a toast in Abkhazian before drinking, and before he finished, he would always say “*Antsva anykha*” (God bless you) while at the same time crossing himself. This only happened when we drank alcohol, either *chacha* or homemade wine, and he would always rise to his feet and look up towards the ceiling. Throughout my fieldwork, I understood that this was not something unique to my host family. At more or less every dinner I attended, where alcohol was served, a toast to *Antsva* was made<sup>55</sup>, and usually the person making the toast would cross himself or herself. This very well illustrates the non-doctrinal and non-denominational relationship many Abkhaz have to religion. By addressing *Antsva* in Abkhazian while at the same time crossing oneself, a strong indicator of Christianity, both religions were addressed at the same time. Another reason why many people may not have stated that they belong to the traditional Abkhazian religion, might be because it was not considered to be a religion as such, but rather an

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<sup>55</sup> The Abkhaz have an extensive plan of toasts and the first one will always be to *Antsva*. When at dinners with non-Abkhaz, we would always toast as it is an important part in large parts of Caucasus, but it was only when I was with Abkhaz that we toasted to *Antsva*.

integrated part of *apsuara*. Like Alina, people would not necessarily say that they ‘belonged to’ or ‘believed’ in the traditional Abkhazian religion – it was rather regarded as an enacted or integrated part of being Abkhaz. Thus, *apsuara* seemed to be something you showed belonging to through actions rather than by stating it.

In everyday conversations, my interlocutors never used the word *Anstva* in the same way as *Bog* (Russian for God). Whereas expressions including *Bog* was used in everyday expressions such as *Slava Bogu* (thank God), *day Bog* (God forbid) or *Bozhe moy* (oh my God), the Abkhazian word *Antsva* was never used in this way. The only times I heard the use of the word *Antsva* were during toasts or when they told me about the traditional religion, and only by Abkhaz people. Whereas the Russian *Bog* seemed to be more formal and institutionalized, there was an element of intimacy related to the Abkhazian *Antsva*. This intimacy was also expressed through the fact that many Abkhaz families have personal shrines in their gardens or backyards that provides them with a direct link between *Antsva* and the family. This further implies a high level of intimacy between the family, their traditions, and *Anstva*. In fact, this intimacy and closeness between the Abkhaz and their shrines meant that during the Soviet Union, they were still able to practise their religion fairly freely as opposed to the more public institutionalized religions like Christianity where the church would be repurposed. However, as Bruce Grant well illustrates, people of the institutionalized religions (here: Islam) also found their own ways to continue practicing their religion, but under the cover that they were “praying for the dead” (Grant 2011: 661, 663), to which the police did not dare say no to.

The Abkhazian traditional religion has gone through a revitalization after the war, as it has been used to in order to create a feeling of belonging to the Abkhazian state. Establishing a distinctive Abkhaz identity has an important part for the Abkhaz in order to establish themselves as a distinct group from especially the Georgians and the Russians, at through a revitalisation of the religion, this identity has been strengthened. Because of this, the element of the traditional Abkhazian religion remains particularly important as it is so distinctive for the Abkhaz: neither the Georgians, Russians, Armenians, or other groups have this, making the Abkhaz unique in that case.

Just as the traditional Abkhazian religion can be understood as a way of expressing belonging to the Abkhaz identity, the local customs and moral codes are also key components in this understanding of belonging. In the next section I will present the Abkhazian *apsuara* system, that

includes customs, family structure and a traditional juridical system, and how the Abkhazian state has appropriated and actively used elements of both the traditional Abkhazian religion and the *apsuara* system to build a sense of belonging to the state.

## TRADITIONS IN CHANGE

Abkhazia, like most of the Caucasus, is characterized by a strong patriarchal tradition, where society is heavily male-dominated and important decisions are made by men. For the Abkhaz, this is an integrated part of what is called *apsuara*, or ‘Abkhazness’<sup>56</sup> – the unwritten Abkhazian traditional culture and customs. The Abkhazian ethical and moral codes consist of three closely intertwined and related terms: *alamys*, *apsua tsas* and *apsuara*. *Alamys* and *apsua tsas* represent two different aspects which the Abkhaz themselves often include in the broader term *apsuara*. According to the Abkhaz ethnologist Shalva Inal-ipa, *apsuara* can be summarized as:

the historically formed manifestation of national self-awareness and assertion of the Abkhaz; the unwritten code of popular knowledge and values, encompassing the system of customs and concepts of a person’s spiritual and moral existence, the violation of which is ‘equivalent to death’. (Inal-ipa [1996] cited in Costello 2015: 10)

*Apsuara* is thus an unwritten, Abkhazian moral and ethical code, defining how an ideal person should be and act, stressing values such as honour, conscience, modesty, courage, hospitality, and respect for the elders. These are all values that are expressed through actions and thus performative. The event of *Azhirmykhva* in the vignette of this chapter well illustrated how Alina and her family acted out different elements of being a ‘good’ Abkhaz: they celebrated the holiday, they sacrificed the roosters and even a bull, they baked specific food that is only made for this one day, they connected to *Antsva* while drinking and they observed the rules of the clan by separating those with the same patrilineal decent and those without it before they went to the shrine and so on. All of these examples show how a sense of belonging among the Abkhaz is about actions. In addition to defining how an ideal person should be and act, *apsuara* also includes unwritten rules for punishment if one should do something that does not correspond with the codes of conduct. Michael Costello builds on Inal-ipa’s definition of *apsuara* and exemplifies important aspects of it. He writes that, among other, *apsuara*

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<sup>56</sup> Originating from the word *Apsua* which the Abkhaz use to describe themselves.

[...] includes the growth of social standing with age, what is considered worthy conduct and what unworthy, often associated with the conduct that is described in the Abkhaz epic tales of ancient Heroes, the Narts [...] rules for gender relations and the general ideas of collectivity alongside individual responsibilities. It includes notions of honour (*alamys*), any challenge to which must be rebutted and punished with retribution. (Costello 2015: 15)

Consequently, the conscience and honour of a person is what makes up *alamys* (Costello 2015: 42, 100) and is thought to be one of the most important aspects of *apsuara*. If one is to do something that does not correspond with *alamys*, it should, as stated in the above quote, be punished. In particularly serious offences, the (rare) practice of blood feuds or honour killings may be initiated<sup>57</sup>. The last term, *apsua tsas*, covers the Abkhazian “customary institutions for socially regulating conduct” (Costello 2015: 15), by which the fate of a person who broke *alamys* will be determined. In other words, *apsua tsas* can be said to be the normative rules within society by one which a person can be judged if one does something that does not correspond with the overlying ideas of *apsuara*. As I discovered throughout my fieldwork, and as Costello also points out, the Abkhaz themselves usually use the term *apsuara* to cover all three terms; *apsuara* (the moral and ethical codes), *alamys* (the conscience and honour of a person) and *apsua tsas* (the normative rules within society) (2015: 10). In accordance with this, I will for brevity continue to use *apsuara* to cover all three terms included in Abkhaz custom, unless a necessary distinction is necessary.

In addition to *apsuara*, the Abkhaz society is based on kinship units of patrilineal clans and affiliations, formally known as *azhvlas*. These units are characterised by “a supposed or real single origin, exogamy, a recognised common territory, some economic interests and religious life, [...] the rules of clan revenge, hospitality, and mutual aid” (Inal-ipa [1965] cited in Costello 2015: 10). To this day, the *azhvla* is highly important and defines certain aspects concerning family structures. The Abkhaz strictly practise exogamy, and are forbidden from marrying anyone who can be traced back seven generations through the patriliney or the matriliney (Costello 2015: 16). I was told several times that this was partially important because Abkhazia is a small country with few people, and that they have to take strict precautions in order to avoid inbreeding. One of my interlocutors told me how she at the age of 19 had fallen in love with a boy, but they shared the same, unusual surname. Although their families did not manage to find out how they were related, they were

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<sup>57</sup> The practice of blood feuds and honour killings has been widespread all over the Caucasus region, not only in Abkhazia.

prohibited from being together romantically, and they both obeyed the rules. Had they not done so, they would have both disrespected the elders' wish and crossed the rules of *apsuara*, but more importantly the rules of *alamys* (honour and conscience) and the order of *apsua tsas* (customary laws) could have been applied. As shown in the vignette introducing this chapter, only Alina and her relatives who shared the same patrilineal descent went to the family's holy place, whereas her mother, sister-in-law and I were not allowed to join them and stayed in the house. Another important aspect of the clans is how actions taken by individuals do not only affect him- or herself, but the whole kinship unit one belongs to. If you do something dishonourable that breaks the codes of *apsuara*, you also bring dishonour to the rest of the clan. The Russian academic Fatima Kamkiia writes that the

[...] studies of Abkhaz customary law confirm the difference between an act that would be shameful [...] and behaviour that entails retribution, recompense, necessitating punishment and/or deprivation of rights (property or non-property), social position, honour, dignity, and respect, that is, the consequences of behaviour judged to be *itsasym* – contrary to custom. (Kamkiia 2008: 41)

Depending on how serious the wrongdoing is, various measures should be taken. Respected men, often the elders, of the *azhvlas* involved, will come together to try to define the problem and solve it. They often mediate between the culprit and the victim's family, in an attempt to avoid involvement of the police or the state to protect the intimacy of the clans. In most cases, the mediation process leads to a solution and the issue is deemed solved, but in a few serious cases, blood revenge can be used to restore order and protect the name of the clan.

Traditionally, the Abkhaz's own juridical systems have enabled them to settle disagreements and disputes between the clans without the involvement from the 'outside' by involving government agencies. This intimacy of the family indicates that the Abkhaz have a strong sense of belonging to their local clan-affiliations. The Abkhazian language is also effective as a divider in the Abkhaz population, indicating that there has not always been a united feeling of 'Abkhazness' in Abkhazia. In the Abkhazian language, there are two main dialects: the *Abzhua* dialect which is spoken in Eastern Abkhazia and the *Bzyp* dialect which is spoken in Western Abkhazia. The Abkhaz from Western Abkhazia were often spoken about as the "real" Abkhaz, whereas the Abkhaz from Eastern Abkhazia were sometimes spoken of as "less" Abkhaz. This distinction was mostly made

based on the fact that the Eastern Abkhazians supposedly share more cultural traits with Mingrelians and Georgians than the Western Abkhazians. What I want to draw from these observations is to highlight the way the Abkhaz have always connected a sense of belonging to the local and intimate space within the family, and the clan, not to the state. However, this is now changing.

After the war, the Abkhazian state have tried to appropriate this intimacy by trying to take ownership of. From defining an Abkhaz' sense of belonging springing out of the family, village and clan, the government has tried to lift it out from these private spheres into the public sphere and thus making it about belonging to the state rather than the clan. An example for how this intimacy has been used publicly was just after the war. In 1993, Vladislav Ardzinba, the president at the time and national hero<sup>58</sup>, went as a representative of the government to one of the seven holy shrines for the Abkhaz and sacrificed a bull for the "victorious conclusion of the war" (Costello 2015: 33), and a few years later he returned to the same shrine to seek help with security matters in Abkhazia. Several of my interlocutors told me about these events, and they appreciated that he had taken the time and shown his belonging to the traditional Abkhazian religion in such a public way as it helped them experience a distinctiveness from the neighbouring countries. Costello writes that

On questions of national importance the country's government will visit a shrine, in what has been described by one scholar as the state "promoting its authority by exploiting the more or less widespread belief in the sacred places" (Solovieva, L. 2007: 5). (Costello 2015: 33)

In the process of becoming a state, the Abkhazian government has exploited and appropriated certain aspects and elements of *apsuara* and the Abkhazian traditional religion. By drawing on what has traditionally been clan and family related events, such as sacrificing animals, the state enters a sphere of intimacy and moves away from the idea of it as something separate from the Abkhazian society.

## **SUMMARY**

In this chapter I have aimed at exploring how the Abkhaz express their sense of belonging through the practice of *apsuara*, and not simply by stating that they belong to the Abkhaz group. I have

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<sup>58</sup> By some he is even referred to as the 'second God' (*vtoroy bog*). Vladislav Ardzinba led the Abkhaz forces during the war with Georgia.

presented how certain aspects of the *apsuara* system, which includes customs, family structure and a traditional juridical system, have worked in Abkhazia. I have focused on how different practices of *apsuara* and the traditional Abkhazian religion indicate a high level of intimacy within the family and the clan, and how the Abkhazian state has used elements from this in an attempt to create a national sense of identity across nationality and clan affiliations. When belonging becomes performative, i.e., dependent on a set of rules and customs for how to act in order to be a ‘good’ Abkhaz, these elements can be transferred and used by other institutions outside the family and the clan, such as the state. As a part of the nationalistic discourse, the Abkhazian authorities have picked up and used elements of the traditional religion as well as *apsuara* to initiate and encourage a more intimate bond. By drawing on the intimacy between the clan and the individuals, the state has actively picked and chosen elements of the Abkhaz traditions that may be used to create a more intimate bond to the state as well.

# CHAPTER FIVE:

## HOPE AND NOSTALGIA

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### INTRODUCTION

*I had finally become accustomed to leaning over the, in my opinion, overly low railing on the balcony that prevented me from plunging down the seven floors to the ground below, in order to reach the clotheslines that were attached on the outside of the balcony to hang up my laundry. The sun hung low and would soon set in the Black Sea. While struggling to hang up my clothes to dry, I was yet again taken aback by the spectacular view I had from the balcony. The snow-capped mountains in the background gradually changed into a lush and green landscape that stretch down to the Black Sea that glittered in the evening sun. Far away in the distance, I could glimpse Anacopia, an ancient fortress on top of a hill overlooking the neighbouring city of New Athos, reminding me of the long and rich history of the Caucasus. The temperature was warm, but the refreshing breeze from the sea made it comfortable and pleasant. The salty smell from the Black Sea mixed with the sweet aroma of the lush vegetation and the unmistakable smell of meat and vegetables shashliks being grilled around the neighbourhood. And as I awkwardly hung up the last pieces of my laundry, I saw a few kids running around on the playground below the balcony while a couple of stray dogs relaxed on the grass. It seemed as peaceful and idyllic as I imagined an October evening in Sukhum could be, and it was difficult to understand or imagine that in those very same fields and hills I now overlooked, there had been fights over life and death only a few decades earlier in where the front line during the war with Georgia had been. People's lives had been taken away, bombs had been dropped and the neighbourhood that was now lively and peaceful had been in the midst of a war zone.*

*When looking closer at the view, remains of the past scattered the seemingly idyllic view as visible and physical reminders that it had not always been like this. Although the lush nature almost covered the innumerable ruins and traces of the past, they were still there. The blocks in the area were filled with bullet holes and grenade marks. The school across the nearby Gumista river had been almost completely destroyed during the war – only parts of the construction were left. An empty factory in the distance, and an abandoned sports complex stood out in the otherwise*



*undisturbed horizon, reminding the viewer of what had been before. Ruins of villages and houses were hidden under the lush natural surroundings, soon only visible to those who knew where to look. Burnt out and bombed houses, schools and buildings peppered the landscape, connecting the past to the present and the future. What at first had seemed like a calm and peaceful view revealed a history that also included violence, struggle, pain, and grief.*



*Picture 8: the view from the balcony, taken in the middle of October 2019.*

When I arrived in Sukhum, I was surprised by the beauty of the city. In the preparations before I left for Abkhazia, I had read several articles and googled pictures of the city and I was not surprised to see the impactful marks and ruins from the war with Georgia, but I quickly realized that the rest of my assumptions of Sukhum did not match reality. What I had expected to be a fairly ‘grey’ and lifeless city proved to be quite the opposite. I was taken aback by the number of green areas, parks, the vibrant life, number of cafés and restaurants, the number of beautiful and well-kept buildings, and the promenade that meandered along the coast often full of people. Sukhum took me by surprise and exuded a charm and beauty that I have rarely experienced other places. However, despite being pleasantly surprised by the city, it was nonetheless packed with ruins, scars and

remains of war and conflict. Thus, as the recollection of the view from my balcony illustrates, the seemingly idyllic landscape is also a place of memory, struggle, suffering and strong sentiments. My hosts often stood with me on the balcony, explaining me what happened at this or that place, how it used to be during the Soviet Union or where the heaviest fighting had taken place during the war. They told me about how the flat was taken over by Georgian troops, and how, when they had returned after the war, the furniture, inventory, and floors had been destroyed and used to make a fireplace inside the living room. At the same time, they also talked about the unity of the neighbourhood during the Soviet era – how everybody knew everybody in the apartment block and how they helped and looked out for each other regardless of their nationality or background. Thus, the landscape was not only a constant reminder of the war, but it also brought back nostalgia, memories, and sentiments of happier days – how it *used* to be before the war and moreover what *could* have been today. At the one and the same time, the landscape expressed pain, despair, and destruction just as well as hope, longing, and optimism.

Throughout this chapter I will explore some of the ways how the residents of Sukhum express ways hope, or the lack of it, and belonging is embedded and manifested in the spatial landscape. I will look at how time and temporality is rooted in the landscape, and how my interlocutors engage with this. By looking at the differences in how the landscape is perceived by the young adults who grew up in a society bearing strong marks from the war versus those who grew up in Abkhazia's "hey days" before the war, I will discuss how the past, present and the future is embedded in and understood differently through the landscape. In which ways does the spatial surroundings reveal feelings of nostalgia, hope and belonging in relation to time and space? And how does this affect my interlocutors' visions of the future? In the case of Abkhazia, the war with Georgia is not only a part of peoples' past – it is also highly present in peoples' everyday lives – either through the memories of loved ones they lost, stories from the past that are being re-told or, as I will explore in this chapter, through the landscape they are surrounded by every day.

## **THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF LANDSCAPE**

When thinking about 'landscape', people often think in purely physical terms; we think about the natural environment we are surrounded by, such as mountains, seas, flower meadows, rivers, and islands. By limiting our perception of landscape to this, 'landscape' has been constructed as something we live *in*, and not through – something separated from human beings and social life.

However, in social and cultural anthropology and other social science disciplines such as human geography, this is only small part of what landscape is considered to be. Concerned with not only the natural landscape, but how humans relate and engage with our environment and surroundings, 'landscape' in anthropology has led to various theories and concepts, from seeing it as a 'cultural process' (see O'Hanlon and Hirsch 1995) to being able to read ones ancestral past in it (see Hanlon 2011; Morphy 1995) to understanding it as a place and space of 'dwelling' (Ingold 1993). Despite the many different vantage points from where to understand 'landscape' through an anthropological lens, most agree that "'landscape' is something constructed by humans in the course of their daily lives and interactions, both physically and also symbolically, by being invested with meaning, memory, and value" (Filippucci 2016: 2). For example, among the Zafimaniry of Madagascar, houses are filled with social and symbolical meaning and value. Although a physical construction, a lot of the social life in the village can be read and understood by simply looking at the houses as they not only are a place for living, but a materially manifested symbol of the marriage: the "harder" the house is, the "stronger" the marriage is (cf., Bloch 1995a, 1995b). In other words, it is our way of identifying and making sense of our surroundings. We connect places to events and events to places, and by doing this we navigate and make our own understating of the world. Through this, the landscape become constructed not only physically and symbolically, but also reciprocally (Filippucci 2016: 8), and through memories, hope, and nostalgia it becomes embedded with meaning, significance, and importance. We further relate and recognise ourselves in the landscape we surround ourselves with, and it contributes to forming and expressing individual and collective identities and relationships as well as making and unmaking relationships and identities (see Filippucci 2010, 2016). Landscape then is experienced and understood differently as it evokes various emotions in people. In the ensuing discussion I will focus specifically on how people engage and relate to a landscape characterised by ruins and ruination and how their sense of belonging and time is expressed through this interaction.

One of the most striking features of the landscape in Abkhazia, apart from the breath-taking nature, is, as mentioned earlier, the visible signs of ruination that followed the war. There is a vast number of ruins and abandoned buildings which not only consists of houses and flats, but also factories, sport complexes, parks, airports as well as enormous and immensely beautiful buildings, such as the *Sanatorium Gruzuya* located in Gagra, which are now left to slowly crumble. In societies like Abkhazia that have experience drastic changes due to for example war, ruins become an important

and integral part of the landscape. Yael Navaro-Yashin argues that ruination is not only experienced through the “material remains or artefacts of destruction and violation, but also to the subjectivities and residual affects that linger, like a hangover, in the aftermath of war or violence” (2009: 5). When Filippucci writes that landscape is constructed physically, but also by being invested with meaning, memory, and value, this is a clear example of how ruins work in a post-war landscape – almost like visible and physically manifested memories. Specific places connect people and time, carry meaning and significance, store memories and project feelings of belonging, hope, and nostalgia. The ruins are not simply artifacts that are “there” – they are manifested and revitalised throughout time by the way people relate and engage with them. This means that ruins are also parts of political processes around the world (see i.e. Hanlon 2011; Stoler 2008; Pelkmans 2017). In Abkhazia, I argue that the ruins that scatter the landscape uphold and endorse the political discourse of Georgia as ‘the enemy’. Paradoxically ruins can work both as a reminder of what happened in the past while at the same time they are altered to dissociate from the past. Former train stations in Abkhazia had names written in Russian, Georgian and Abkhazian, but at many places the Georgian writing is often chiselled away. Interestingly, the writing is often only chiselled away on the side facing the road, i.e., the visible side. The train station serves as a reminder of the sociality and mobility people had before, but at the same time, the fact that the Georgian writing has been physically and deliberately chiselled away indicates that the ones who did it want to ‘hide’ the past by removing visible memories. In some cases, ruins are, as illustrated below with the former Council of the Ministries in Sukhum, deliberately left in its ruined state as a monument to help us remember, while other places, like many of the former sanatoriums in Abkhazia, are left in ruins because the economic means to repair them are not available.

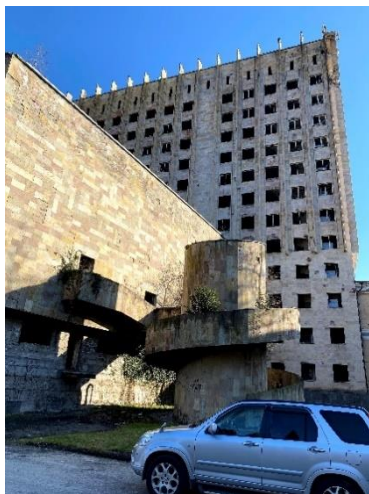


*Picture 9 and 10: the front- and backside of a train station outside Sukhum. The Georgian writing in the middle has been chiselled away in the front but kept on the backside of the building.*

A ruin works as “a 'trace' of a historical event, it is remembered, it is kept, lamented, and cherished in the memory of those who left it behind, it is sited and noticed by those who uncannily live in it or in its vicinity, it leaves marks in the unconscious” (Navaro-Yashin 2009: 14). Anthropologist Mathijs Pelkmans draws on Walter Benjamin’s notion of ‘cultural ruination’ when discussing ruins as temporal, by arguing that it draws the attention to how ruins, by both being social and material remains, continue to project themselves into the present and the future: “The ruins linger as reminders of the past, they highlight dangers looming in the present, and they channel and direct hopes for the future” (2013: 18). In the city centre of Sukhum, one of the most famous buildings in the state stands out as an example of just this. The former Council of the Ministries is a fourteen-story building located in the middle of the city centre and was one of the last buildings that the Georgian troops lost control over before they withdrew at the end of the war, but before they left, the building was set on fire. Some claim it was by the Abkhaz to rat out the Georgians while others claim it was the Georgian troops who did it to destroy important documents and records.



Regardless of who did it, it has become a landmark in Abkhazia, and the *Ploshchad' Svobody* (Freedom Square) in front of it is used for the annual New Year market, and other festivities and celebrations. A small part of the building has been restored and now houses several ministries, whereas the rest remains in the same condition as it has been since 1993. There have been discussions as of what to do with it, but nothing has been decided yet and for the time being it stands as a monument of the war. Throughout the whole period of my fieldwork, the main building was covered by a huge banner with “25 Aiaaira” written on it, and the sides were decorated with “1993” and “2018”. *Aiaaira* is the Abkhazian word for victory, and the banner was put up in 2018 in connection with the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of when they won the war.



*Picture 11, 12 and 13: the former Council of Ministries in Sukhum.*

Visible from all over Sukhum, the burnt-out building makes sure that nobody forgets what happened in 1992-93 and those who fought and died for Abkhazia. The building thus lingers as a reminder of a violent past. However, the building is also a reminder of the Soviet past: a past where Abkhazia's future was prosperous and full of opportunities. Like Ak-Tiuz, the mining town Pelkmans describes, Sukhum (and Abkhazia in general) was an important place during the Soviet

era with access to consumer goods and facilities that people travelled from afar to get access to. Today, however, the city has lost a lot of this relevance and many of the things that attracted travellers there earlier, like the sanatoriums and access to consumer goods, no longer exists in the same way. Just as Pelkmans described ruins, it lingers as a strong reminder of the past – both the Soviet past and the war. At the same time, the fact that the building has been neglected and remains in the same condition as close to 30 years ago makes it a continuous reminder of the current political and economic situation of Abkhazia. By having been left in its current state, it “highlights dangers looming in the present” (Pelkmans 2013: 18). It invokes affects such as a sense of being stuck in a long-term liminal phase and poverty due to the lack of financial means to repair it. Finally, despite being a continuous reminder of the war, the ruined building also symbolises and implies resilience, resistance, and strength, and through this, the building channels and directs hopes for a better future. It is a reminder of a past that they hope and strive to achieve in the future, or as Pelkmans writes; the ruins work as “reminders of a different and better past, of the pain of recent rupture, but also of the process of healing” (Pelkmans 2013: 16).

I will continue to discuss different ways of understanding how belonging, hope, and nostalgia in relation to the landscape and ruins were experienced and expressed by my interlocutors. By doing this I will show how the landscape is invested with meaning, memory, and value. I will present a few ethnographic examples from my fieldwork which represent different ways of engaging with the landscape. The different examples are used to illustrate a variety of perceptions and understandings of the landscape as well as show how people relate to it differently. What may seem like just another ruin to some trigger and conveys strong emotions for others. The first ethnographic example I want to look at shows how ruins work as remnants of social and material lives, and how one of my interlocutors, Batal, connected ruins and nostalgia to the past and the future. In the second ethnographic example, I explore how a demonstration initiated by young adults to preserve an important social and cultural arena provided them with a common cause that strengthened their sense of belonging to the city. In the last and final ethnographic example, I will shed light on how the meaning and significance of the landscape can change over time.

## **NOSTALGIA AND TIME: THE CENTRAL OLYMPIC BASE**

*Batal had just taken off from the main road and was navigating his car down the bumpy and dusty road leading to the remains of the formal Central Olympic Base of the USSR in Eshera, a village*

*on the western outskirts of Sukhum. The sky was crystal clear and crispy without a single cloud in sight. “People from all over the Soviet Union used to come here to train”, Batal explained excitedly, “the climate was ideal for all kinds of summer sports – football, swimming, wrestling, and many, many more. All of them came to train here”. The sports complex covered a huge area and as we drove further down the road, Batal pointed left and right, showing me where several canteens (stolovaya), swimming pools, tennis courts, wrestling halls, football fields, volleyball courts and numerous other buildings and fields had been. Some were completely overgrown and no longer visible, whereas others stood out, like scars, in the landscape. A few minutes later, Batal stopped the car in front of a nine-story building. As we got out of the car, he lit a cigarette and took a big puff from it, letting out a big sigh. Apart from our shoes crunching against the gravel on the road, the only sounds we heard were the birds chirping and the waves from the Black Sea crashing against the nearby beach. “This was one of the buildings the athletes lived in while they stayed here”, he told me, “But look at it now...”. He did not finish the sentence, but simply looked at it with a sad smile. The only thing left of the building was the construction itself, but this too bore marks of the war and having been left to decay. The windows and doors were gone, leaving gaping holes in the wall and the balconies were missing large parts of their railings. From the holes where the balcony doors had previously been, tall grass now grew wild and testified that time had stood still for a long time. Connected to the housing building was one of the canteens of the base. The building was peppered with bullet wounds and marks of exploded grenades. Batal went on and explained to me that the base had been in the middle of the front line between the Abkhazian and the Georgian forces during the war<sup>59</sup>. This had resulted in a greater degree of destruction and also made the damages here worse, and more visible, than in most places. We stood there, in silence, watching the buildings as Batal finished his cigarette before we walked back to the car.*

*In what cannot have been more than 30 seconds later, we stopped and again got out of the car, this time by the beach. Despite some glass bottles and garbage littering the beach, it was beautiful. Unlike the beaches in the city, this one was quiet and empty, and only a few stray dogs strolled along the beach minding their own business. The Caucasus Mountains towered, as always, like a beautiful backdrop with snow-capped peaks gleaming in the sun, reminding me once again of the*

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<sup>59</sup> The complex is located close river Gumista, and all the areas around – such as Echera and Noviy Raion all bore highly visible marks from having been in the front line.



*enormous contrasts that were always present everywhere you looked in Abkhazia. As Batal and I stood there, looking out over the Black Sea, I asked if there had been any plans to remake it into a new sports complex or something else. “There have been talks, but you know how it is... Nothing has happened yet. And who will pay for it?” he replied rhetorically and took a deep breath before he slowly let it out. “But who knows, maybe it will happen one day”.*



*Photo 14 and 15: one of the former accommodation buildings at the Central Olympic Base outside Sukhum.*

For Batal, who himself had been a football player in the USSR and had travelled with his former team all around the Soviet Union, the Olympic base had been an important place. It was not only a place for sports, but also an arena for social interaction where new friendships were made and kept as well as a place that not only represented his youth and sports achievements, but also connected him to a larger world full of opportunities outside of Abkhazia. He fondly told me about how easy and joyful life had been at that time (*v to vremya*) – how all the possibilities in the world had seemed to have been right in front of him. The fact that the Olympic Base had been built in Abkhazia also stated a certain importance and value of the area and reminded him of a time when Sukhum was an important and desired region in the USSR. These days Batal rarely went there, and if he did it was only now and then to relax on the beach or to take a stroll. With two jobs and a family to tend to, he did not have much free time. Although he was not able to visit it often, he was reminded of it on a daily basis. The remaining constructions of the Olympic base were visible from the balcony connected to his flat, meaning that every time he went to smoke a cigarette or

hang up the laundry, it was right there in front of him conveying all the feelings, memories and sentiments that included. The scars in the landscape thus triggered nostalgic feelings and became a constant reminder of what *used* to be.

Memories of the Soviet past usually go back to happier times and places, and they often invoke the availability of jobs, the vibrant social life, and the high wages paid to workers. Residents are reminded of this better past on a daily basis: when they receive their insufficient pensions that barely keep them alive, when they step out of their front door and see the former restaurant, the former house of culture, the former hospital, and the numerous flat blocks that are now reduced to rubble or which, like the stadium, are populated by sheep and cattle. (Pelkmans 2013: 18)

People like Batal who were in their forties or older, i.e., my younger interlocutors' parent generation, had experienced life in Abkhazia during the Soviet Union, before the war with Georgia. This period appeared as Abkhazia's "heydays", and this affected their perception of today's situation and life in Abkhazia. Throughout conversations and talks with people from this, and older, generations, whether it was a short chat with a taxi driver or a lengthy discussions with my host family, the war, not the fall of the USSR, was used as a critical temporal marker; a divide between 'before' and 'after', where 'before' often was followed by positive connotations whereas 'after' suggested difficulties, struggle, and a lack of stability and opportunities. They frequently referred to how it was 'before the war' (*do voyny*): "before the war, this building was very beautiful and well kept!", "before the war, there were jobs for everyone" or "before the war, the sea was clean and full of fish and seafood". It could seem that 'before the war', everything had been so much better. The memories of the Soviet era were associated with the idea that Sukhum had been a valuable and important place with great prospects for the future. During the Soviet era, Sukhum was a much-desired destination to visit, and people travelled there from all over the USSR. Now it was mostly visited by Russians who could not afford to travel to the new and more fancy destinations such as Dubai, Thailand, or Turkey or those who were fascinated by the many destroyed buildings abandoned villages (more on this below) and wanted to explore. Pelkmans argues that such nostalgic sentiments should not be seen as a wish to return to the past, but rather as a "creative re-rendering of the past" (2013: 20). By remembering and expressing how much better things *used* to be, he argues that people are not necessarily "nostalgic [not] for the past the way it was, but for the past the way it could have been. It is this past perfect that one strives to

realize in the future” (Boym 2011, quoted in Pelkmans 2013: 20). I found this to be very accurate among my interlocutors as well. They frequently spoke about the past in ‘glorious’ terms, highlighting easy life had been compared to now, and how many possibilities they had. At the same time they also talked about the difficulties and struggles they or their families had suffered throughout the Soviet era: frequent riots, the Great Terror under Stalin and, in Transcaucasia, Lavrentiy Beria, and the lack of sovereignty were frequently brought up. I argue that these ambiguous feelings about the past illustrates how nostalgia for the past is not about the wish to return to how it was, but rather the wish to bring certain elements to the future – it as a motivation for how it can become again. In a place like Ak-Tiuz and Abkhazia, that has lost so much of its relevance and importance within the last few decades, I argue a lot of the hope for the future comes from the past: the belief that life can change and become prosperous and thriving again. The hope for the future among many of my interlocutors rested heavily on what *had* been before the war. The way Batal talked about the discussions of restoring the Olympic Base were telling for how nostalgia projects itself as hope for a better future. Although nothing had changed over the past three decades, and that funding for reconstruction was currently unavailable, he had still not given up that one day it would open for youth and young adults again. For Batal, it seemed like the Olympic Base, having been such an important place in his own youth, was a symbol of both the past, present and the future – all at the same time. The past as glorious and prosperous, the present as dangerous and withering but also an undisclosed future where everything was possible. It was not about whether he wanted the Olympic Base to return to exactly how it had been in the past, but rather how his memories and nostalgia for the base in the past were used and utilizes to imagine and envision a better future.

As illustrated through Batal’s recollection of the Olympic Base, ruins and nostalgia are not only connected to the past, but also to the future as it affects people and give them hopes and dreams of what might come. The ruins continue to leave traces in social and material relations and the scars in the landscape thus create a connection between the different time horizons – the past, the present and the future. The nostalgic sentiments exist in relation to the ruins and landscape, but one can also find hope and believe in a better future there, or as Pelkmans brilliantly puts it; “nostalgia for hope in a better future” (2013: 20). The story about Batal’s reflections on the Olympic Base illustrates one of the ways in which nostalgia and hope is understood and expressed through the landscape. In the next ethnographic case, I will demonstrate how young people in Sukhum’s

involvement in the future appearance of the city can also be understood as an articulation of belonging.

## **BELONGING AND THE FUTURE: BREKHALOVKA**

*Amra and I sat on a bench close to Brehalovka, a small café on the embankment in Sukhum serving freshly brewed Turkish coffee. Brehalovka was located towards the eastern end of the embankment, close to the centre of the city, making it a natural meeting-point. This part of the embankment was especially beautiful, surrounded by several old, well-preserved, historical buildings such as the Abkhazian Drama Theater and Hotel Ritza on one side, and the Black Sea on the other. To enter the square in front of the café, you pass under a tall and beautifully restored white colonnade under which local artists exhibit their art and patiently wait for potential customers to pass by. Brehalovka was, by most people I met, considered to be an important part of the social cityscape and a contribution to the urban culture of Sukhum. Here, in the area around the café, people from all parts of society could meet to drink coffee, have intense discussions, or to play domino and chess. Politicians and those who worked in the nearby parliament would often get coffee here in their breaks side-by-side the rest of the people of the city. As Amra and I drank our coffee and chit-chatted, I noticed how people used the area. People slowly made their way down the embankment, stopping by the hopeful artists, buying coffee or to listen to some of the street musicians. Old men sat bent over small tables scattered around the square, playing domino or chess while a number of street dogs carelessly basked in the sun on nearby patches of grass.*

*As I observed the bustling crowds, Amra turned to me and asked. “You know the old men that always sit over there, playing domino on the small tables?” while she nodded towards a part of the square where domino and chess tables were scattered around. “A few months ago, the old men wanted to set up a steel-construction shaped like a mushroom over the tables so that they could play domino regardless of the weather”. Amra rolled her eyes as to express frustration and continued. “They didn’t inform anyone about it and didn’t even apply for permission from the city council – they just thought they had the right to do it because they are older! So, they bought the construction material and started to remove the tiles from the embankment to begin the construction work”. The roof of the construction was supposed to be made of a green plastic material which, according to Amra, “would destroy the atmosphere” of the area. Amra pointed out that a similar construction had already been erected above the seating area by Brehalovka,*

*and it did indeed stand out from the rest of the classical architecture it was surrounded by. She went on and explained to me that these actions had created furore, especially among many of the young adults of the city who believed that a large and, in Amra's words, "awful" (uzhasnaya) steel-construction would destroy this picturesque and historic area. "But you know what? We organized demonstrations and journalists wrote about it. We refused to let them build it – and we won! The city administration finally commanded the construction work to be stopped!" she exclaimed proudly and happy.*

Amra and the other young people's participation in the demonstrations displayed a desire to be able to affect the future of the city as well as a deep appreciation for the historical sites in Sukhum. By investing their time, emotions, work, and effort by actively participating to influence the landscape they lived with and through, Amra and the other young adults inscribed individual ownership to the landscape which strengthened their sense of belonging to the city. Sukhum has in many ways has been shaped and formed by past events that the young adults did not experience themselves nor have a say in, and few new buildings have been constructed, so by being able to influence certain developments of the city, and "leave their mark on it", the protestors were able to build a stronger sense of identity and belonging in relation to the landscape.

Paola Filippucci writes that "landscape deeply matters to people" (2016). I want to argue that this does not only apply to the landscape that has already been formed and constructed, nor only the landscape that we surround ourselves with in the present, but just as much the landscape we envision to surround ourselves with in the future. How the younger population in Sukhum protested for the future of Sukhum also reveals how *they* want to see their future themselves. As Filippucci argues (2010, 2016), we recognise ourselves in the landscape we surround ourselves with which contributes to the forming of both individual and collective identities in relation to the surroundings. When standing up against the planned construction, Amra manifested herself as an active and able citizen of Sukhum, and by partaking in discussions and expressing what she deemed right and wrong, she showed a desire to affect the development, and thus the future of the place, which reveal a strong belief in the future itself. Compared to Batal, who seemed more nostalgic for the past in a better future, Amra was not affected by the past in the same way as she had never experience anything else than post-war Abkhazia. I believe this strongly conveys a sense of belonging to Sukhum and Abkhazia, as she deeply cared about the place and was even willing

to speak up against the older generations to ensure the future prospects of the city, which is considered contrary to the practice of *apsuara*.

In the wake of the events on the embankment, a group called *Hara Hakalak* (Abkhazian for “Our Town”) was formed<sup>60</sup>. The group consists of architects, designers, artists, engineers, and journalists who want to make sure that the city-planning and development is done in a proper manner where both the unique historical areas and architectural appearance are preserved and maintained while at the same time giving room and space for new and modern buildings. *Hara Hakalak* pointed to the same issues as many of my interlocutors and friends did – that the city had practically not developed since the war, and that countless numbers of buildings had been left to fall apart. However, the group commented that it was a good thing that the development of the city had been that slow after the war as it now enabled them to avoid what *Hara Hakalak* saw as negative and irreversible changes in the landscape by preventing the construction of buildings that did not fit in with the already existing, or what was envisioned for the future cityscape. The demonstration that Amra participated in was initiated because the landscape *mattered* to people (cf., Filippucci 2016). The demonstrations not only led to the construction work being stopped, but it was also what set the wheels in motion leading to the creation of *Hara Hakalak* which gave people a place to gather and discuss how they wanted the city to become. As a result of the protests, for Amra, the square outside Brehalovka was now invested with new meaning, hope and optimism for the future.

I have now looked at how a demonstration initiated by young adults to preserve an important social and cultural arena provided them with a common cause that strengthened their sense of belonging to the city. In the last and final ethnographic example, I will shed light on how the meaning and understanding of a landscape can change over time.

## **HOPE MANIFESTED IN THE LANDSCAPE**

*The October sun was shining on the clear sky like it had done for the past week. Maria, Abeer and I were walking down one of the main streets in the city centre of Sukhum. Trolleybuses, cars and marshrutkas (minivans used for public transport) drove past trying to avoid the biggest holes in the road and the occasional stray dog running into the road for seemingly no other reason than to*

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<sup>60</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/harahakalak/photos/gm.680746462707142/105580301203150/> [accessed: 23.06.2021]

*challenge faith. On both sides of the street, newly constructed buildings and abandoned ones stood side by side, while people were hustling by from the nearby Central Market carried bags filled to the brim with cheese, vegetables, and other produce. As we walked past one particularly destroyed building, I took an extra look, and Maria must have noticed. “Did you expect to see all the ruins and the destroyed buildings around the city?” she asked me as I observed the ruined building. I turned to her and Abeer. “Actually, yes, because that’s what I’ve mostly seen when I’ve googled pictures of Abkhazia or read about it. However, I didn’t expect how beautiful it is here”. Despite the burnt out, abandoned, and destroyed buildings, I thought Sukhum was a very beautiful city. The closeness to the sea, the fresh air from the mountains, the greenery and many parks, the old, stunning buildings and the long, spectacular, albeit worn down, promenade along the coast made it easy to understand why Abkhazia had once been one of the most popular destinations for relaxation in the Soviet Union. “You know, everything looked the same 15-20 years ago. Almost nothing has changed since I was a child”, Maria replied matter-of-factly before continuing, “Only a few new shops and cafés, and that’s basically it. And after 20 years I think nothing will have changed either... There are no jobs here and no future”. Abeer seemingly had a different view from Maria. “You know, when I first arrived here [from Syria], I felt depressed for a long time. I travelled from war and arrived here where it looks like the war just finished. I felt very depressed in the beginning when I walked around in the city, but now it’s much better. I don’t think about the destroyed buildings in the same way anymore – I’ve gotten used to it. I also actually started to explore the abandoned buildings and I see them in a different way now. Now I think they are very beautiful in their own way - despite being ruined. I want to live in Abkhazia when I get older, this is my home now”.*

When it comes to ruins in the city centre of Sukhum, they are scattered wherever you look, making them impossible to miss. For Maria, who grew up surrounded by them, she associated them with stagnation and a lack of progress: a feeling that time had stood still for many years and that she was not going anywhere. The lack of change in the landscape emphasised the experience of being stuck without any possibility to get out. Abeer, who had fled the war in Syria, had also experienced the same range of emotions when she first arrived in Abkhazia. The gloomy and destroyed buildings had made her feel depressed and continuously reminded her of the war that had taken place many years before she had arrived. However, after a while, she had started to explore the abandoned buildings, and her perspective and associations with the surrounding cityscape

completely changed. It seemed as if the plants that forced their way through the thick brick walls not only became a symbol of new life, but it also conveyed an expression of resilience and hope. Amra, another of my interlocutors, told me a similar experience as Abeer: “You know, when I walked around the city before, I felt very depressed. But now I think it's beautiful in its own way! How the trees come through everywhere and create new life and beauty in the ruins. How nature always wins”. Both Abeer and Amra had had an almost identical development in how they saw, related and experienced the ruins around them: before they had been filled with depressive and gloomy connotations whereas now, they both expressed what can be understood as a fascination and a new-found love for the beauty and the fragility of the ruins. This particular conversation exemplified and showed me how the same landscape produced very different sentiments and emotions in people. Where some people see beauty, other people see despair and vice versa.

## **SUMMARY**

In this chapter, I have explored different ways people in Abkhazia experience and explore a sense of belonging in relation to the landscape. By looking at how landscape has been constructed and formed in the anthropological literature, it has become evident that the landscape we surround ourselves with is put into discourse and that we “[...] symbolize them, interpret them, politicize them, understand them, project their subjective conflicts onto them, remember them, try to forget them, historicize them, and so on” (Navaro-Yashin 2009: 14-15). By analysing three different experience of the landscape, I have discussed how different ways of understanding how belonging, hope, and nostalgia were expressed by my interlocutors. The first ethnographic example I presented illustrated how, through Batal’s recollection of the Olympic Base, ruins and nostalgia are not only connected to the past, but also to the future as it affects people and give them hopes and dreams of what might come. I showed how the ruins continue to leave traces in social and material relations and that the scars in the landscape thus create a connection between the different time horizons and understanding how nostalgia can be understood as “nostalgia for hope in a better future” (2013: 20). I then looked at how a demonstration initiated by young adults to preserve an important social and cultural arena in Sukhum provided them with a common cause that strengthened their sense of belonging to the city. Finally, I examined how the same landscape produce very different sentiments and emotions in people. Where some people see beauty, other people see despair, and where some people see sadness, other people see opportunities. The past,



present and the future is embedded in and understood differently through the landscape, and all of these ethnographic examples illustrate how the landscape is dynamic, temporal and in change.

# CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

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In this thesis, I have explored how young adults living in a politically disputed state experience and negotiate their sense of belonging on an everyday basis when having to deal with the state, documents, traditions, and the landscape. More specifically, I have aimed to shed light on how feelings of belonging are expressed and discussed among young adults living in a politically disputed state, as well as in which ways living in a politically disputed state influence one's sense of belonging, and how this is expressed among the young adults living there.

In chapter one, I introduced the reader to the field site and provided some historical background information to understand the socio-political situation in present day Abkhazia as the history of Abkhazia creates an important backdrop for the rest of this thesis. I also discussed the methodological and ethical concerns when conducting an anthropological fieldwork.

In chapter two, I discussed how the lack of international recognition has several consequences on the everyday life of people in Abkhazia, especially for young adults, with regards to the stability, economy, hopes, and possibilities for the future. By drawing on Rebecca Bryant's concept of "long-term liminality" to describe the situation Abkhazia is currently in, and has been for nearly three decades, I argued that the shared experience of being 'locked in' that permeates all people regardless of background, is a contributing factor in uniting people in Abkhazia.

In chapter three, I showed how state-issued documents in *de facto* states produce clear "affective relations between documents and people" (Navaro-Yashin 2007: 118). These affective relations vary greatly in how strongly and in which context they are expressed. For some the passport represented and symbolized belonging to what they believed to be their homeland, despite whatever nationality their passport prescribed, whereas for others the passport was not experienced as a symbol of great affective value, but rather a document providing them with rights within Abkhazia. I also explored how young adults, despite expressing frustration over their restricted possibility of mobility, were not interested in getting a Georgian passport although this would provide them with many benefits regarding mobility. Their sense of belonging and loyalty to Abkhazia simply took precedence over their desire for greater mobility.

In chapter four, I explored how the Abkhaz express a sense of belonging through actions reflecting *apsuara*. Although you are born into a group based on your patrilineal descent, being a ‘good’ Abkhaz depends on how you act and behave. A sense of belonging is therefore understood through actions and participation. The event of *Azhirnykhva* well illustrated how Alina and her family acted out different elements of being a ‘good’ Abkhaz: they celebrated the holiday, they sacrificed roosters for everyone, they baked specific food that is only made for this one day, they connected to *Antsva* while drinking, they observed the rules of the clan by separating those with the same patrilineal decent and those without it before they went to the shrine and so on. All of these examples show how a sense of belonging for the Abkhaz is about actions. I further illustrated how, as a part of the nationalistic discourse, the Abkhazian authorities have picked up and used elements of the traditional religion as well as *apsuara* to initiate and encourage a more intimate bond between the state and its citizens. By drawing on the intimacy between the clan and the individuals, the state has actively chosen elements from the Abkhaz traditions that may be used to create a more intimate bond to the state as well, such as sacrificing animals in the name of the state.

In the final chapter, chapter five, I explored different ways people in Abkhazia experience and explore a sense of belonging in relation to the landscape. By looking at how landscape has been constructed and formed in the anthropological literature, it has become evident that the landscape we surround ourselves with is put into discourse and that we “[...] symbolize them, interpret them, politicize them, understand them, project their subjective conflicts onto them, remember them, try to forget them, historicize them, and so on” (Navaro-Yashin 2009: 14-15). By analysing three different experience of the landscape, discussed how different ways of understanding how belonging, hope, and nostalgia were expressed by my interlocutors. The past, the present and the future is embedded in and understood differently through the landscape, and the ethnographic examples illustrate how the landscape is used to express a range of feelings, including belonging, nostalgia, hope and despair.

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