



NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF ABKHAZ COMMUNITY IN ADJARA

Needs Assessment of Abkhaz Community in Adjara

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Research Methodology

Research Goals and Objectives

The goal of this study is to examine the needs of the Abkhaz community residing in the Adjara region. The present study focused on investigating the following issues within its research framework:

- Primary needs of the Abkhaz community in Adjara
- Civil integration and political participation of the Abkhaz community in Adjara
- The influence of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict of 1992-1993 on the local community
- Ties between the local community and Abkhazia residents
- Long-term visions of peaceful conflict resolution in the community

Research Methods and Geographical Scope

The present study employs a qualitative research approach, specifically utilizing the method of in-depth interviews. A total of **seven in-depth individual interviews and four group interviews** were carried out in the scope of the research study. A total of 16 participants, representing various age groups and genders, were interviewed for this study. Please refer to Table 1 for more details regarding the respondents. The study was carried out among individuals who were representatives of Abkhazian and mixed (Georgian-Abkhazian) families residing in Feria village of Khelvachauri municipality and the city of Batumi. The study categorized the respondents into three distinct age groups: Youth 18-35, middle-aged 36-55, and seniors 56 and above. This study utilized an interview guide with open-ended questions as its instrument of inquiry.

Table 1

Age Groups	Gender	
	Woman	Man
18-35	2	2
36-55	2	2
56+	6	2

Field Work

The selection process for participants was conducted with great care, ensuring that only persons who self-identify as descendants of Abkhazian Muhajirs were included in the interviews. The major objective of audio-recording the interviews was to collect all pertinent information necessary for the analytical report of the study. The assurance of respondent confidentiality is provided. The analytical report omits the personal identifying details of the respondents, such as their names and surnames.

Data analysis: The analysis of the data acquired through **comprehensive interviews** was conducted through a series of processes. Initially, the audio recordings were decoded and afterward transcribed. The subsequent phase entailed the coding and categorization of the data. During the concluding phase of the study, the incorporation of localized and comprehensive integration of structured content knowledge occurred. This served as the foundation for the development of the initial draft of the report, which was subsequently refined into the final version.

Introduction

The Arabic term "Muhajiroba" refers to exile or immigration, and it is closely associated with the forced mass migration of Muslims from the Russian Empire to the Ottoman Empire. The primary factor behind the flight of the Abkhazians may be attributed to the geopolitical objectives pursued by the Russian Empire in the Caucasus region. This was evident in their intention to depopulate the newly acquired lands by eradicating unreliable and resistant ethnic groups such as the Abkhazians, Ubykhs, and Jikhs. The policies of the Russian Empire was heavily influenced by the religious affiliations of ethnic groups and peoples. The population residing in Abkhazia, including the Abkhazians and several other ethnic groups, adhered to the Islamic faith, which was perceived as a potential threat to the Russian Empire. The Ottoman Empire's interests were viewed as a major contributor to the phenomenon known as "Muhajiroba," which manifested as the use of North Caucasians (such as Abkhazians and other related ethnic groups) for military purposes. Abkhazian emigration has been observed in three waves, beginning in 1864, continuing in 1866, and concluding in 1877. According to multiple accounts, an estimated 40,000 to 50,000 individuals of Abkhazian descent relocated from their residences in the region of Abkhazia during a period of migration. It is worth mentioning that the population of Abkhazia during that period was approximately 80,000. Hence, the observed magnitude of emigration and its demographic consequences in Abkhazia are evident¹.

Following the suppression of Abkhazian resistance by the Russian Empire in 1866 and 1867, a significant influx of Abkhazians moved to Adjara. This event transpired in the village of Likhni on July 26, 1866. Subsequently, the Russian Empire issued a directive requiring Abkhazians and other ethnic groups to migrate to the Ottoman Empire from the central and northwestern regions of Abkhazia². In 1877, shortly after the outbreak of the Russo-Ottoman War, the Muhajirs, a group of people who had emigrated from their original homeland, resettled in the Adjara region for a second time. A portion of the Abkhaz immigrants chose to reside in Adjara, which was an Ottoman Empire-controlled region at the time. This decision was influenced by several factors: first, the shared religious affiliation of Islam between the Abkhaz and the inhabitants of Adjara; second, Adjara's geographical proximity to Abkhazia; and third, Adjara's climatic conditions, which were comparable to those of Abkhazia. Compact Abkhazian communities emerged in the villages adjacent to Batumi, namely: a) Feiz, now known as Feria, b) Silibauri, now known as Salibauri, and c) Ankis, now known as Angisa, which is within Batumi's territorial boundaries. According to multiple sources, the contemporary Abkhaz population in Adjara is estimated to number between 1,600 and 2,000 people.³

The Abkhaz immigrants who settled in Adjara carried specific cultural elements (rituals, customs, cooking, etc.) with them, while simultaneously adopting the traditions and customs of the local Adjarian population. It should be noted that, owing to the shared social and cultural characteristics of the Adjars and Abkhazs, the Abkhazians were able to resettle in Adjara without any complications.

The preservation of national identity is a pertinent concern in modern times for many ethnic communities. Consequently, it is imperative to take into account not only the historical and cultural aspects but also the socio-cultural backdrop. This assertion holds particular significance for minority ethnic communities that are endeavoring to develop approaches for their own survival within a swiftly evolving global context.

¹ Archival and memory studies - http://historyproject.ge/ge/archivememoryresearch/article/470/?cat_id=40

² The historical transformation of identity of the Abkhazian Muhajirs, living in Adjara <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/236388618.pdf>

³ It should be noted that on the Geostat website, according to the 2014 general census "Population distribution by regions and nationalities/ethnic groups", Abkhazians are not separated into a separate groups due to their small size. This may be explained by the fact that some Abkhazians self-identify as Georgians - <https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/739/demografiuli-da-sotsialuri-makhasiateblebi> Thus, the quantity given in the text is named in the information sources (articles).

Given these considerations, it is important to examine the cultural legacy of the Abkhaz population residing in Adjara and the multifaceted requirements that encompass legal matters, social dynamics, and their involvement in political life. Furthermore, it is imperative to take into account the repercussions of the 1992-1993 conflicts on the Abkhazian population residing in the region of Adjara. Hence, there is a compelling need to examine the experiences of the Abkhazians residing in Adjara during the era of conflict and get insight into their perspectives regarding the peaceful end of the aforementioned conflict.

Legacy of Abkhaz Muhajirs

Based on the evaluation of the participants involved in the study, it can be observed that the heritage of Abkhaz Muhajirs mostly exhibits social and cultural attributes. Today, the cultural legacy of the Muhajir community is evident in the following aspects: 1) **The preservation of the Islamic faith** is a significant concern among the Abkhazian population. It has been observed that adherence to Islam is mostly upheld by middle-aged and elderly people, but a noticeable trend of conversion to Christianity is observed among the younger generation. Irrespective of religious adherence, Muslim customs are observed within families. For instance, the preparation of Abkhazian halva is undertaken as a tribute to the departed, even if they belong to the Christian faith (female representative of 18-35 age group). 2) Another aspect of Muhajir legacy is the **perpetuation of a hierarchical structure within family dynamics**. This is evident through the particular reverence shown towards elder males, as they are given priority in terms of being listened to and their opinions being considered. "However, the adherence to respecting elders is not just limited to the Abkhazian Muhajir community but is also a shared value within Adjarian community". (Male, age group 18-35) 3) **Honoring the memory of Muhajir ancestors**.

"The Abkhaz Muhajirs migrated from the Abkhazia region using feluccas, a traditional Lazik watercraft. Those who refused to enlist as Askers (serving the army) or who were regarded physically incapable of serving in the Ottoman army were prohibited from entering Ottoman coastal territory. A significant number of individuals were left at the sea, where they perished and became fish food. Specifically, the initial surge resulted in the deaths of about 1,000 people, including men, women, and children. We honor their memory." (male; age group 55+).

"The folk melody known as "Shish Nani" is significant in the culture of Abkhazia, especially in the context of emigration. A mother aboard an emigrant ship would sing this song repeatedly to a deceased infant in order to prevent the infant from being discarded at sea and to ensure an appropriate burial."(Abkhaz emigrant female; age group 36-55).

4) A portion of the Abkhazian population continues to **abstain from consuming fish** as a means of commemorating the Abkhaz prisoners, including children and elderly individuals, who were forcibly submerged into the Black Sea by the Ottoman Empire. 5) **The culinary customs** of the Abkhaz people are widely regarded as being exceptionally well-preserved, as indicated by the statements of the respondents. The culinary tradition of Abkhazia is distinguished by the prominent use of smoked ingredients, particularly cheese and meat. Consequently, households residing in rural regions have established designated spaces for smoking food. The preparation process of Abkhazian halva is significant, in the preparation process, it is customary for women to don a headscarf on their heads. Halva is typically made during the days dedicated to the commemoration of the deceased. Nevertheless, it can also be served as a dessert, with its primary ingredients being wheat, butter, sugar, and water. Moreover, there is a specific focus on "Abstna," a dish that bears resemblance to both Meguri Ghomi and "Achamukka" (Meguri Elarji). The dish known as "Akut-Atsuxala" is prepared with a combination of beans and meat. Adjika is an essential component of Abkhaz cuisine, comprising a blend of pepper, garlic, coriander, and numerous spices. 6) Additionally, the **compact communities of Abkhazian Muhajirs in Batumi** and its surrounding villages

serve as a tangible testament to the enduring legacy of the Muhajirs. Nevertheless, the study respondents observe that the compact village-like settlements, namely Angisa, Adlia, and the "Brewery settlement," are gradually diminishing in presence. The social cohesion of the community is being disrupted as a result of the rapid urbanization process. In certain regions of Batumi, it is anticipated that the compact settlement inhabited by the descendants of Abkhazian Muhajirs would cease to exist within a few years. The participants of the study observe that, in contrast to rural areas, urban environments pose challenges to the preservation of individual identity due to the rapid occurrence of assimilation into the prevailing culture. This assimilation process is particularly accelerated in the absence of any procedures designed to impede it.

7) Maintaining contact with the descendants of Abkhazian Muhajirs residing in foreign countries. In Turkey, there exists a notable affinity among the descendants of Muhajirs, particularly in the case of Abkhaz emigrants from Adjara. -"Individuals with the same surname as mine have familial ties to multiple households residing in Batumi. Approximately 300 families are located in Izmir, Turkey. There exists a reciprocal relationship wherein we are extended invitations by them and they also engage in visits to our location" (Male; age group 55+). It should be noted that during the Soviet Union, from the 1930s until the opening of borders, ties with relatives living abroad were severed.

Some of the traditions and customs of the Muhajirs did not stand the test of time. Traditions lost to time include: a) the rule of seeing off a guest in Abkhazian families - "seeing off the guest before the stop." The whole family followed until the guest got into the car and left"; b) betrothals in the crib, which was very common among Abkhaz Muhajirs; c) In families, the so-called tradition of silence, when the daughter-in-law did not have the right to speak to the father-in-law and mother-in-law, etc.

Certain customs in the region have become impracticable as a result of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. Like, for example, hosting relatives from Abkhazia - "twice a year, sometimes they and sometimes we traveled by Ikarus, a large bus, to visit each other." Once a year, each clan celebrated the clan festival by roasting bulls on a large stake. Ghomi, "Absta," was prepared in the cauldrons (Male; age group 55+).

The respondents are saddened by the fact that Abkhazian folklore is disappearing with time- "Without popularisation, it will not be possible to preserve folklore. Elderly people, of course, performed Abkhazian songs and we remember their stories. But today it is already fading in the memories of our youth" (female; age group 36-55).

Descendants of Abkhazian Muhajirs residing in Adjara maintain contact with one another, primarily gathering to commemorate cultural, educational, or historically significant events or dates.

"On occasion, I partake in a cultural-artistic gathering associated with the celebration of Muhajir Day. I make an effort to attend regularly as it is primarily attended by those from the Abkhazian community. I get interesting information through them" (female; age group 18-35).

Based on the accounts provided by the participants, it is evident **that the majority of attendees at these events consist of individuals belonging to an older demographic. Therefore, it is imperative to arise the curiosity of the younger generation.**

Respondents emphasize the necessity of establishing an **Abkhaz cultural space in Batumi to safeguard the heritage of Abkhaz Muhajirs**⁴. This cultural space would serve as a platform for showcasing the historical and cultural aspects of Abkhaz Muhajirs, including their traditions, customs, oral histories, folklore, and other relevant elements. "Let Abkhazian feel that this is his homeland, his environment" (Male; age group

⁴ During the interview, the respondents referred to the Abkhazian space in different ways - a hub, a house, a center, a hut, a museum.

55+). In addition, the space will be used to hold various events (cultural, cognitive, educational, etc.). Furthermore, the allocated space will serve as a venue for a diverse range of events, encompassing cultural, informative, educational, and other related activities. **One of the participants involved in the research considers the concept of an Abkhazian cultural center within the framework of Abkhazian-Georgian relations and observes that such a facility has the potential to serve as a gathering space for visitors from Abkhazia as well as the local community.**

Notably, one of the participants in the study **appealed to the Adjara government with the idea of establishing an Abkhaz home, but to no avail** - "all Abkhazians here are aware of this refusal and will develop a skeptical attitude. However, it should be in the government's political interest to interest Abkhazians" (male; age group 55+).

The establishment of a **commemorative monument in Batumi to perpetuate the memory of the Abkhaz Muhajirs** was cited by the participants as a further need.

"We identify ourselves as Muhajirs, a term commonly used to refer to our community. However, we now lack a commemorative site where we can annually assemble on May 21st to pay tribute to our forefathers who tragically lost their lives in large numbers in the Black Sea." (Female; age group 36-55)

Respondents express regret that young people are unaware of the Abkhazian Muhajirs - "Last time, on May 21, when I attended the release of a bouquet into the sea, there were only a few of us, youth present, and I felt sad" (woman representing the age group 18-35). **According to the respondents, a photo album depicting the 160-year history of emigrants should be compiled in order to disseminate the history of the Abkhaz Muhajirs. In addition, it is preferable to compile a directory containing information about the origins of Abkhazian surnames.**

Respondents participating in the study know the descendants of Muhajirs in Adjara who, despite having an Abkhazian surname, do not consider themselves Abkhazians. The research findings indicate that mixed Georgian-Abkhazian families tend to experience less distress over the loss of Abkhazian culture. This is attributed to their dual ethnic identity, as expressed by a male participant from the 55+ age group - "If I don't know Abkhazian, it's not tragic for me, because I have a Georgian mother and I identify with both languages" (Male; age group 55+).

Preservation of Abkhazian Language

When discussing the heritage of Abkhaz Muhajirs, the participants **express a sense of sorrow for their inability to preserve the Abkhazian language.** They anticipate a gradual decline in the number of Abkhazians proficient in the Abkhazian language over time. The prevalence of individuals with conversational proficiency in the Abkhazian language is limited. The participants in the study observe that **the decline of the Abkhazian language is influenced by the limited number of individuals proficient in Abkhazian and the absence of community-wide incentives to acquire proficiency in the language.** The respondents argue that the Constitution of Georgia supports their claim, highlighting that the Abkhazian language, alongside Georgian, holds the status of a state language. Consequently, the state bears the responsibility to actively encourage the advancement and education of the Abkhazian language.

The idea of establishing Abkhaz language courses in the region of Adjara has been discussed since the 1960s and 70s. However, it was not until 2005 that the first Abkhaz language Sunday school was established. It is important to acknowledge that the Abkhazian language is currently not being taught at the 14th public school in Batumi. This is due to the resignation of the teacher, who left their position due to personal reasons related to their family. Unfortunately, finding a suitable replacement for the vacant teaching position has proven to be challenging. The Abkhazian language is taught to pupils in grades six through ten

at Feri Village Public School. The class size varies between 14 and 20 pupils. The primary objective of acquiring proficiency in the Abkhazian language is to attain conversational fluency. The underlying motivation for this pursuit lies in the preservation of the Abkhazian identity, as well as the desire to establish meaningful communication with peers residing in Abkhazia who share familial ties. **The primary need that has persisted from the inception of Sunday school to the present day is the presence of proficient instructors in the Abkhazian language, possessing the necessary expertise to effectively teach the language. Furthermore, the participants highlight the limited availability of textbooks in the Abkhaz language.**

To preserve Abkhazian identity, the elder generation attempted to promote the formation of Abkhazian families through arranged marriages in which the female spouse was Abkhaz and the male spouse was a descendant of the local Muhajir Abkhazian family.

"The Muhajirs residing within the confined community of Adjara began to contemplate the extent to which they would be permitted to engage in matrimonial unions amongst themselves. Consequently, the gradual erosion of the Abkhazian language would occur. Thus, throughout the 1970s, the institution of arranged marriages had already become firmly entrenched. The approach was initiated during the 1950s and 1960s." (female; age group 36-55).

"We have 2 new families, our daughters-in-law are from Abkhazia, who married Georgians, Adjarians."

The clarification that the Abkhazians established familial relationships with the Adjarians holds significance due to the survey respondents' assertion that there exists a greater level of acceptance towards the Adjarians in Abkhazia compared to Tbilisi, which serves as a political center. "It is an interesting phenomenon, while marrying within Adjara is deemed acceptable, the situation differs significantly when it comes to Tbilisi" (female descendant of Abkhaz emigrants; age group 36-55). One aspect highlighted by the participants was the Abkhazian community's positive reception of Adjara and its inhabitants. This can be attributed to the longstanding presence of the Abkhazian community in Adjara, which has fostered a sense of trust and familiarity. Consequently, Adjara is perceived as a secure and welcoming environment for Abkhazians - "they view it as a place where their own people reside. The community plays its role in that regard. They know that they are going to be safe here" (female; age group 36-55). The phenomenon of encouraging the establishment of Abkhazian families is gradually diminishing. The most recent instance of an arranged marriage involving an Adjarian man and an Abkhaz wife occurred in 2013. Respondents attribute this phenomenon to the prevailing inclination of young generation to eschew the practice of arranged marriages as a means of establishing familial unions. "today's young people have other visions. They won't start a family with someone just because their parents want them to. It's a different generation" (female; 36-55 age group).

The respondents observed that the Abkhazian language exhibits a higher degree of preservation within households where the older generation is present. Additionally, the participants observe that the proficiency in the Abkhazian language varies according on the maternal nationality within a mixed family. In cases where the mother is of Georgian descent, it is seen that the children possess little or negligible proficiency in the Abkhaz language. Conversely, when the mother is of Abkhaz origin, the children exhibit conversational proficiency in the Abkhaz language.

The participants discussed the pragmatic significance of acquiring proficiency in the Abkhazian language and highlighted that, **apart from preserving their own cultural heritage, the Abkhazian language may potentially serve as a means of communication between the younger generations of Adjara and Abkhazia.** The limited proficiency of Russian among the local youth has led to a growing problem of language barriers.

"Meetings between Abkhazians and Georgians are sometimes held under the auspices of international organizations, where the working language is mainly Russian. The fact is that less and less young people know the Russian language in our country" (female representative of the age group 18-35).

According to the respondents, a change in the state policy is needed so that the descendants of the Muhajirs be enabled to speak loudly about the needs of the community.

"It would be a fivefold burden if I were to speak publicly about the Abkhaz community. I can't handle this. The state should take this function on itself" (female; age group 36-55).

A view was expressed that putting Abkhazia-related issues on the public-political agenda and promoting them could contribute to the escalation of polarization - "discussing Abkhazia-related issues can be excessive and irritating to some."

Civic Integration and Political Participation

The survey results indicate that the Abkhazian community in Adjara is actively engaged in the public, social, economic, and cultural life of the region - "I don't know an Abkhazian who is isolated from society" (female; age group 36-55). This is notably true of the younger generation, who have "blurred border between Abkhazian and Georgian." For some middle-aged and older respondents, the high degree of integration of Abkhazian youth is both pleasant and painful - "I am happy when I see that young people feel comfortable, but it is disappointing to see the disappearance of Abkhazian identity - language, traditions, etc." (Female, age group 36-55).

During the interview, one of the respondents identified specific Abkhaz individuals who hold executive positions in the public sector. However, as evidenced by the results of in-depth interviews, **descendants of Abkhaz Muhajirs have never held prominent political positions at the national, regional, or local levels, nor do they do so now.**

"Directors of schools and hospitals were representatives of Abkhaz Muhajir community, but I don't remember political officials" (Abkhaz Muhajir Female; age group 36-55).

There may be several reasons for this: a) **lack of motivation in the community** itself, which is caused by the critical attitude of some members of society towards Abkhazians - "someone might say, 'What's your business?' or 'It's none of your business'" (Female; age group 55+) b) **A limited number of Abkhaz Muhajir descendants**, and c) a **lack of interest from political parties**. One respondent suggests that Abkhazian representation in politics may not be a political priority.

"Statistically, 1 out of 2,000 people may have the motivation, if even that. The political elite is recruiting and does not see any interest in the selection of Abkhazian Muhajirs in the process" (female; age group 36-55).

Abkhazia is particularly interested in the issue of Abkhaz Muhajirs' participation in Georgia's political life.

"When I go to Sukhumi, they often tell me that you are on the ground there and you are not represented in the political elite, that's how we see it from here" (female; age group 36-55).

Furthermore, there exists a keen interest in Abkhazia regarding the involvement of the state of Georgia in the preservation of the cultural and traditional heritage of Abkhazian emigrants. Additionally, there is a need to ascertain the extent to which the rights and safety of the descendants of the Abkhazian Muhajirs are

safeguarded. One of the participants included in the study recounted a story concerning the visit of a friend from Abkhazia: "He was interested in everything - the infrastructure, the economy - he observed everything closely. He desired to view everything in a single day. Before he left, he told me that his opinion of the place had changed slightly" (Female, age group 18-35).

The respondents cannot recall experiencing discrimination due to their Abkhazian heritage - "I never felt it in any of my interactions with others or even during my school years" (Female; age group 18-35). "The differentiation of Abkhazians and Georgians is so difficult that I have never experienced alienation or, worse, harassment" (Female; age group 18-35).

During the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, respondents recall that some people believed they were internally displaced persons - "when I had an Abkhazian surname, they believed I was a refugee. I didn't even know what a refugee was back then, but I said I was born an Abkhazian who was born here" (Female; age group 18-35). An elderly participant in the survey recounts his service in the Georgian army: "Because my surname is similar to Megrelian, they did not believe me when I said I am Abkhazian. I had to explain the origin of my surname multiple times. As an Abkhazian, I did not experience any hostility in the military. Nonetheless, they were intrigued by my perspective on Georgian-Abkhazian relations" (Male; age group 18-35).

The impact of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflicts of 1992-93

Respondents of middle age and older recalled the period following the dissolution of the Soviet Union when ethno-nationalist issues were at the forefront of Georgia's public and political life. These occurrences are related to the formation of negative attitudes towards Abkhazians among a portion of the population. As one respondent recalls, **people from Abkhazia at the time invited the descendants of Abkhaz Muhajirs to relocate to Abkhazia in order to guarantee their safety.** One of the respondents recalls the following events from that time period:

"They came to my father from Abkhazia in the late 1980s. They told him that it is time to think about returning. National movements are starting now, we know what excessive nationalism brings and we do not want you, our Abkhazians, to be in danger. My father categorically refused to move because we could not bear the fourth Muhajiroba. Here are the graves of our ancestors, here are the graves of my father, grandfather and great grandfather. For 6 generations we are here" (Female; age group 36-55).

The unfolding events in Abkhazia and the outbreak of armed conflict in South Ossetia's Autonomous Region had a negative influence on the relationship between Abkhazians and Georgians coexisting in Batumi as well.

"Batumi has always been recognized for its multiculturalism. During Soviet times, on weekends when no one was working, men would gather in the neighborhood in the mornings, and no one was concerned with ethnicity. However, during and after the war, our Georgian neighbors began gathering separately" (Female; age group 36-55).

Indeed, within the context of the ongoing armed conflict in Abkhazia, there existed a varied and diverse attitude towards the Abkhazians residing in Adjara. This was evident in the efforts made by the Abkhazians themselves to distance themselves from their own identity and refrain from promoting or acknowledging it. However, the respondents were unable to recall instances of verbal or physical confrontations based on ethnic grounds. This lack of conflict can be attributed to two main factors: **firstly, the presence of strong social bonds, such as kinship and friendship, between the Abkhazians and Georgians; and secondly, the**

influence of the political climate prevailing in the region. The regional political governance distanced itself from the policies and acts of the central government.

Notwithstanding the absence of verbal or physical altercations, the elderly participants involved in the study retain recollections of distressing story from the war times. One of the respondents recalls:

"When Soviet troops left our region in 1991, our Georgian unit moved in to take their place. The war had already ended; it was 1995, if I'm not mistaken, and the soldiers once yelled during training, "Our enemies are the Abkhazians" in areas densely populated by Abkhazians. It sounded so terrible, it hurt so much... The Abkhazians did not speak and continued to avoid provocations. 2-3 of our Georgian neighbors went to inform them that Abkhazians resided in the area and to refrain from shouting. The same thing did not happen a second time" (Female; age group 36-55).

At the time, negative information about Abkhazians was disseminated via mass media, primarily television - "The information heard on television failed to contribute to the maintenance of normal relations. I believe that our parents were wise people. They endured hardship and stayed in Adjara." During the conflict, one of the respondents noted avoiding the travel to Tbilisi out of fear for their safety due to their ethnic background. One of the respondents recalled a time when, while working for a newspaper, he omitted his Abkhaz name and surname from essential documents he prepared so as not to irritate the readers. A small number of Abkhazians fled Adjara during both the conflict and the post-conflict period, according to the respondents. There were several cases when young Abkhazian men went to fight on the side of the Abkhazians in the war, although this information is denied by the second part of the respondents participating in the

In modern day, the dissemination of negative content and viewpoints pertaining to the Abkhazian population predominantly occurs via social media platforms, hence creating apprehension among Abkhazian muhajirs.

"On the one hand, it is good that we receive information about Abkhazians and Abkhazia. On the other hand, if you look at the comments, it is a disaster. If a person writes in the comments, "God forbid Abkhazians appear in Adjara, there can be no further discussion or dialogue" (Female; age group 36-55).

When discussing the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, a certain group of respondents highlights the traumatic experiences endured by the population living in Abkhazia. - "Even today there is no family in Abkhazia, whose house does not have portraits of his father, brother, uncle." It's a big pain for them" (female; age group 36-55). **Based on the respondent's perspective, it may be inferred that the general populace of Georgia possesses limited or negligible knowledge of the events and circumstances surrounding the Abkhazian war.**

Based on the information provided by a subset of the survey participants, it was observed that certain percentage of the Abkhaz Muhajirs' offspring relocated to Abkhazia during the post-conflict period. Following the proclamation of independence, the State Repatriation Committee was founded in Abkhazia with the objective of promoting the repatriation of the diaspora residing in various nations worldwide back to Abkhazia. One of the participants in the survey said that their family relocated to Abkhazia subsequent to the conflict. The primary catalyst for the move was a combination of social and economic factors, with the overarching objective of improving ones housing conditions.

"Due to their financial circumstances, my relatives encountered significant difficulties in their current location, necessitating their relocation. Because we knew that those who went back to Abkhazia were given housing" (Female; age group 18-35).

The respondents discussed the function of "Soroptimist International" in the context of Georgian-Abkhazian relations. "Soroptimist International" was founded in Batumi on September 19, 1992, and has been engaged in humanitarian efforts since the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. Today, on the initiative of the organization, a variety of educational and cultural events are held, at which prominent individuals are invited to speak about Georgian-Abkhaz issues - "Mr. Guram Odisharia frequently visits, and we host book presentations for his works. He is the leading champion for Georgian-Abkhazian relations" (Female; age group 55+). With the initiative and activity of the organization, among other things: a) the central street of Batumi was renamed after Juli Shartava; b) the House-museum of Professor Feride Atsamba was established; c) the Sunday school of Abkhazian language was established in the Feria public school; etc.

Contacts with Abkhazia

Based on the findings of the survey, it can be observed that **there exists a strong bond between the descendants of Abkhazian Muhajirs and their surviving relatives residing in Abkhazia. Nevertheless, they exhibit a hesitancy to publicly disclose their relationship.** For example, individuals refrain from sharing photographs of themselves in one other's company on various social media platforms. In the context of remote communication, individuals demonstrate prudence by exercising caution and refraining from engaging in discussions pertaining to contemporary political matters, such as the armed war in Ukraine, among other sensitive themes. The main purpose of practicing caution is to mitigate the development of tension within interpersonal relationships.

The research yielded interesting findings regarding the nature of the relationship. Specifically, what are the subjects of discussion amongst the individuals involved and are there any areas that remain unaddressed during their interpersonal communications? According to the findings of the survey, the predominant subjects of discussion primarily revolve on personal matters, **whereas the matters pertaining to the status of Abkhazia and the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict (referred to as the Patriotic War in Abkhazia) are notably avoided in conversations.** The primary accomplishment of the conflict, as perceived by Abkhaz inhabitants, is the attainment of independence. Consequently, any inquiry or doubt regarding this matter is regarded as highly delicate. **They do not avoid the conversation, but they are very worried about the issue of security, because there is a constant expectation of a renewal of the war in Abkhazia.**

One of the respondents recalled his trip to Sukhumi and discussed his observations of the city. According to the respondent, **they refrained from speaking Georgian in Sukhumi because Abkhazians find it offensive to hear Georgian;** "from birth there, they propagate that Georgians are Abkhazians' enemies" (Female; age group 18-35). The respondent observed that the **Abkhazian language is rarely used in public spaces in Sukhumi** - "Russian is the predominant language everywhere - at the university, in restaurants, etc." Abkhazian is only spoken within households" (Female; age group 18-35). Abkhazia pays special attention to ethnicity - "They asked me, why isn't my mother Abkhazian?" they prefer for both parents to be of Abkhazian decent" (Female; age group 18-35). The respondent has received repeated invitations to relocate to Abkhazia: "Come here to live, they will give you a house, it's better here, marry an Abkhazian" (age group 18-to-35). **They are dissatisfied in Abkhazia because descendants of Muhajirs do not migrate from Adjara to Abkhazia.**

"In a critical tone, they say, 'we have finally gained independence, so why don't you return?'" (Female, age group 18- 35).

"They ask me, if you all don't return, how will we develop?" My answer is - I buried my husband here (in Adjara). I have my children's families here. The representatives of the Abkhaz royal family did not return as well" (Female, age group 55+).

A young participant in the Abkhazian peace dialogue project maintains relationships with his peers to this day. It is significant that after the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine, young people's relationships temporarily deteriorated due to differing perspectives on the causes of the conflict.

"During the war, there were often pro-Russian "stories" on Facebook, which annoyed me, I had a discussion about this subject. However, we agreed that our goal is to rebuild the relationship and not, on the contrary, to aggravate them" (female; 18-35 age group).

Future Peace Prospects

Several study participants are actively immersed in the Abkhazian-Georgian dialogue format, in which Abkhazian and Georgian youth living in Abkhazia also partake. The purpose of the meetings is to reduce existing alienation by introducing young people to one another and encouraging them to share their experiences. According to one of the respondents involved in the initiative, Georgian youth are virtually ignorant of the causes and effects of the Abkhazia-Georgia conflicts. There is a constant argument in Georgia that Abkhazia is Georgia, but no one talks about the interests of the Abkhazian population. The level of awareness of Abkhazian youth in Abkhazia differs because, as previously mentioned, war-related issues are constantly relevant - "When I was there, news of the war was broadcast on the news program on repeat, despite the fact that nothing exceptional was happening at the time" (Female; age group 18-35).

It is worth acknowledging that subsequent to the commencement of the conflict in Ukraine, no peace discussion meetings have been convened. During the COVID-19 pandemic and later times, meetings conducted under the framework of the Abkhazian-Georgian dialogue transitioned to remote formats. Prior to this, these meetings were typically held in Armenia or Turkey.

When discussing the peaceful resolution of the conflict, respondents emphasize the significance of cultural, educational, and trade relations.

"First and foremost, it is necessary to bring people together; working together and establishing trade relations is the only way for these two divided communities to coexist peacefully." (Abkhaz Muhajir female; age group 36-55).

The respondents express a favorable assessment of the state's initiative to offer free medical care to the citizens of Abkhazia. The involvement of civil society organizations, such as the "Peaceful and Business Caucasus Association⁵" (APC), in this process, encompasses the resolution of administrative matters, such as documents and accommodation, on behalf of patients. The significance of Abkhaz Muhajirs residing in Adjara extends to their valuable contribution in providing assistance to Abkhaz patients.

"Recently, the family hosted a cancer-stricken 21-year-old female. It was her first time in Georgia, and she was all alone. Our club member hosted her for a week at her residence. After the surgery, we contacted the cousin of one of our club member who owns a hotel-styled establishment, and he allowed the girl to reside in his hotel for free for two months" (Female; age group 55+).

Based on the feedback received, a significant portion of the Abkhaz community maintains a neutral stance regarding the medical treatment of Abkhazians in Georgia. This perspective is mostly attributed to the absence of suitable medical infrastructure and equipment in the region, hence hindering the provision of sufficient medical services.

⁵ Web page of the organization - <http://apbc.ge/index.php/ka/>

Based on the evaluation of a subset of participants, the inclusion of young individuals is deemed imperative in the attempt to restore relations between Georgia and Abkhazia. This is attributed to the notion that the younger generation bears a lesser burden of the war's traumatic experiences, thereby exhibiting a greater willingness to compromise and reach mutually beneficial resolutions. Based on the perspectives shared by the second group of participants, it is seen that the absence of interest among Georgian youth towards Abkhazia, coupled with the disinformation among Abkhazian young, does not serve as a strong foundation for harboring peaceful and cooperative relations.

Conclusion

The preservation of the identity of Abkhaz Muhajir descendants, including their language, memory, and traditions, is most effectively achieved within households that consist of Abkhazian spouses and include the elder generation (such as grandparents). In comparison, the preservation of their identity is somewhat less pronounced in mixed families. Currently, the heritage of Abkhaz Muhajirs exhibits diverse social and cultural attributes, which are evident through the continuation of Islamic practices, reverence for the ancestral lineage of Muhajirs, the maintenance of connections with the diaspora of Abkhaz Muhajirs residing in different nations, and the safeguarding of Abkhazian culinary customs, among other aspects. Several traditions of the Muhajir community, such as folklore and hospitality, have been lost as a result of diverse factors. The participants expressed the necessity of establishing an Abkhaz culture center in Batumi, which would serve as a platform for showcasing the historical, cultural, and traditional aspects of Abkhaz emigration. Furthermore, the allocated area will serve as a venue for hosting a diverse range of events encompassing cultural, informative, educational, and other related themes. These events will actively engage young individuals, encouraging their participation and involvement. The dearth of knowledge regarding Muhajiroba is a significant obstacle for the youth in Abkhazia, given the genuine risk of eroding the collective memory associated with Muhajiroba. The Abkhaz Culture Center is emerging as a venue for facilitating the Georgian-Abkhaz discourse. The study unveiled additional cultural and educational requirements of the descendants of Abkhaz Muhajirs. These include the proposal for the construction of a commemorative monument in Batumi to perpetuate the legacy of Abkhaz emigrants. Furthermore, there is a suggestion to compile a photo album documenting the 160-year history of emigration, as well as the development of a reference book containing comprehensive information on the historical background of Abkhazian surnames.

One of the most important needs concerns the preservation of the Abkhazian language. It is true that, there is an opportunity to study Abkhazian in public schools in Feria, but it is insufficient. The Georgian Constitution guarantees the right to learn Abkhazian; therefore, it is the state's responsibility to promote the Abkhazian language. Particularly necessary are the training of Abkhazian teachers and the creation of Abkhazian language textbooks.

Abkhazians actively participate in the public, social, economic, and cultural life of the Adjara region. Additionally, they are represented in state-run services. However, descendants of the Abkhaz Muhajirs have never held political positions. The absence of motivation in the community, the small number of descendants of Abkhaz Muhajirs, and the political parties' lack of interest in Abkhaz Muhajirs were cited as reasons for the predicament. It should be emphasized that the issue of Abkhazian Muhajirs' participation in the political life of Georgia in Abkhazia is of particular interest. Additionally, Abkhazia is interested in Georgia's role in preserving Abkhazian culture and protecting the rights and safety of Abkhazians.

The political events of the late 1980s and early 1990s had a negative impact on the descendants of Abkhazian Muhajirs residing in Adjara, which manifested as alienation from Georgians and the need to conceal their own identity. Although they or their relatives did not experience verbal and physical confrontations based on ethnicity, the respondents recall the negative experiences of that time period.

The Abkhazian Muhajirs managed to maintain close ties with their relatives residing in Abkhazia. However, they highlight that the political status of Abkhazia and the Georgian-Abkhazian conflicts are topics they avoid discussing. The respondents have a favorable opinion of the state's initiative to provide Abkhazian citizens with access to free medical care. Consideration is given to cultural, educational, and trade relations as a means for the peaceful resolution of the conflict. In the process of restoring Georgian-Abkhazian relations, the participation of young people is crucial, as they are less burdened by the traumatic experiences of the conflict and, consequently, are more susceptible to compromise.

Recommendations to state institutions and local governments

- Establishment of Abkhaz culture space, where the history and culture of Abkhaz Muhajirs will be displayed. Concurrently, the space will be utilized for a variety of events (cultural, informative, educational, etc.);
- There is a need for enhanced efforts in promoting the teaching of the Abkhaz language, which includes initiatives such as training a larger number of Abkhaz language instructors and the creation of comprehensive Abkhaz language textbooks, among other measures.
- Setting up a memorial to immortalize the memory of Abkhaz Muhajirs in Batumi;
- It is imperative for the state to recognize the significance and role of the Abkhazian population residing in Adjara within the framework of trust-building and reconciliation policies. The state should actively work towards enhancing their visibility and facilitating their active participation in relevant processes.
- The promotion of political representation and involvement of the Abkhazian minority in Adjara should be actively encouraged by the state. Additionally, it is important to include this community in consultative procedures with civil society, among other measures.