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Rethinking historiographical disparities and pathways to reconciliation in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict

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This paper critically examines the historiographical disparities that have shaped Georgian and Abkhazian perspectives on their shared and often contested past, a division further exacerbated by Soviet-era influences and modern nationalist narratives. The primary aim is to illuminate how these divergent interpretations of history contribute to enduring misunderstandings and conflict, highlighting the need for a historiographical re-evaluation as a step toward reconciliation. Additionally, this study explores the tension between militaristic and peace-oriented approaches to conflict resolution, with a firm advocacy for peace-building measures. By presenting a comprehensive analysis of historical narratives and projecting a vision for a shared future, this discourse aims to foster a constructive dialogue that transcends historical grievances and promotes cooperative action. Ultimately, the paper aspires to contribute to a holistic understanding of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict and to outline pathways toward a sustainable and mutually beneficial coexistence.

KEYWORDS

Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, conflict resolution, peace advocacy, compromise, dialogue, historiographical consensus

Introduction

The lengthy discourse encompassing the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict unveils a complex, multi-dimensional narrative with historical, socio-political, and emotional facets. The conflict is deeply rooted not only in territorial disputes but also in the differing historiographical interpretations and ethnic identities that have evolved over centuries. The entanglement with Russian involvement adds yet another layer of complexity, further complicating resolution endeavors. It is imperative to foreground the critical aspect of Russian occupation, which implies two primary elements: military occupation and effective control. This dimension of Russian influence, pivotal in the context of Georgian-Abkhaz dynamics, cannot be overlooked. It is essential to emphasize this factor from the outset, particularly at the commencement of the relevant section, to adequately frame the discussion within its broader geopolitical context. The research topic aims to discuss the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict through the lens Historiographical Disparities. The discord between Georgian and Abkhazian historiographies, epitomized by differing narratives surrounding the ancient and medieval periods, illustrates a fundamental challenge. These disparities, encapsulated in nationalistic interpretations of history, are further exacerbated by Soviet-era narratives. Such historiographical discord sows seeds of mistrust and misunderstanding, hindering reconciliation efforts. Additionally, paper discusses multidimensional facets regarding Georgian—Abkhazian relations, such as militaristic versus peace approaches, Abkhazian identity concerns, international law, and civil

society initiatives which play a role in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, this paper will briefly touch upon these aspects, with the primary focus remaining on the critical issue of historiographical disparities and their impact on the conflict's intractability.

Understanding the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict requires distinguishing between armed clashes and longstanding socio-political tensions. While the war began in 1991, disagreements trace back much earlier, exacerbated by Russian propaganda (Kikalishvili, 2023). After Georgia's 1991 independence declaration, Abkhazia revised its constitution, disproportionately allocating seats to Abkhazians despite their minority status (Aleksidze, 2012). In 1992, the Abkhaz separatists reinstated the 1925 constitution to exit Georgia's jurisdiction, though this lacked legal grounding (Diasamidze, 2002). Separatists justified their claims by referencing historical events, though key assertions remain unverified (Avidzba and Ajinjal, 2022).

The conflict formally erupted on August 14, 1992, lasting until September 1993. Abkhaz leader Vladislav Ardzinba sought Russian support, and direct military intervention, including airstrikes, significantly altered the war's course (Gamakharia, 2015). Despite ceasefire attempts, Sokhumi fell on September 27, 1993, followed by mass displacement of ethnic Georgians (Human Rights Watch Arms Project, 1995). In 1994, Abkhazia declared independence, unrecognized internationally (Gamakharia, 2015). The 1996 CIS resolution condemned separatism, though Russian backing persisted. In 1999, Abkhazians held a referendum reaffirming independence, isolating them diplomatically (Abkhazia, n.d.). Following the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, Moscow officially recognized Abkhazia, further cementing its control. "Passportization" granted Russian citizenship to Abkhazians, reinforcing integration with Russia (De Waal, 2018). Georgia's engagement strategies, including neutral identification documents, have been rejected by Sokhumi, aligning with Russian influence (Government of Georgia, 2010).

Since 2008, Geneva talks remain the primary negotiation forum, yet conflict resolution remains elusive. While some view the Abkhazian movement as self-determination, international law upholds Georgia's territorial integrity. The conflict endures, deepening divisions and complicating reconciliation efforts.

The Georgian-Abkhazian conflict demands a nuanced, empathetic, and pragmatic approach grounded in mutual respect, understanding, and a willingness to compromise. The moral and legal high ground occupied by Georgians, coupled with a genuine commitment to peaceful dialogue and reconciliation, could pave the way toward a harmonious resolution. This resolution, however, requires transcending nationalistic historiographies, disavowing militaristic inclinations, and fostering a conducive environment for meaningful dialogue and cooperative action. Through such a holistic approach, the aspiration for a peaceful, mutually beneficial co-existence could potentially be realized, heralding a new epoch of Georgian-Abkhazian relations.

In addition to the historiographical disparities, which are deeply entrenched and extend beyond the events of the past 30 years, the following article examines various dimensions of the conflict. Recognizing the contemporary diversity of sentiment within Georgian society, this study aims to formulate a theoretical framework for a potential pathway to reconciliation.

Various narratives regarding the Abkhazian conflict circulate within Georgian discourse, reflecting a range of perspectives. Some of the key points of contention include:

- 1 The displacement of ethnic Georgians from Abkhazia and the characterization of these events as ethnic cleansing have been acknowledged by multiple international bodies.
- 2 The role of Russian military and logistical support for Abkhazian separatist forces has been widely discussed as a significant factor influencing the outcome of the conflict.
- 3 Some analyses suggest that, in the absence of Russian involvement, Georgia might have had a different military outcome in the conflict.
- 4 The historical relationship between Georgians and Abkhazians is subject to varying interpretations, with some perspectives downplaying past tensions, while others emphasize longstanding disputes.
- 5 While Russian involvement remains a critical factor, attributing the entirety of the conflict's resolution to the withdrawal of Russian forces may overlook broader political, social, and historical complexities.
- 6 Reports of human rights violations and instances of violence during the conflict have been attributed to various actors, including Abkhazian, Russian, and North Caucasian forces. However, a comprehensive understanding requires nuanced analysis, as narratives may differ based on sources and perspectives.
- 7 Some perspectives frame the conflict solely as a result of Russian occupation, whereas others emphasize the Georgian-Abkhazian dimension, highlighting the need to consider both geopolitical and historical factors.

It is imperative to acknowledge that viewing this conflict solely through the prism of Russian occupation constitutes a profound misjudgment. While Russia undeniably plays a significant, detrimental, and ruthless role, it does not singularly define the problem. A tangible discord exists between Georgians and Abkhazians, a topic that warrants comprehensive exploration, both in terms of historical antecedents and present-day ramifications.

Contrary to the acknowledgment of Russian occupation, many Abkhazians perceive themselves not as residents of occupied territories, a stance which is misinformed. However, their identification as a party to the conflict is a more accurate appraisal of the situation. Through a nuanced examination of these narratives and the underlying realities, a more sophisticated understanding of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict may be achieved, transcending the monolithic attribution to Russian involvement.

The conflation of recognizing Abkhazians as a party to the conflict with the acknowledgment of Abkhazia's independence presents a significant analytical misstep. These assertions are not synonymous and should be discerned with precision. The acknowledgment of Abkhazia as a participant in the conflict from an international legal perspective presents specific challenges and casts doubt on the unequivocal reality of the Russian occupation. While Abkhazians are indisputably a party to the conflict in a historical context, the international legal recognition of their status is complicated due to the implications of Russian occupation. Nonetheless, it is imperative to include Abkhazians as essential stakeholders in any negotiation process. Their participation is crucial for achieving a comprehensive and sustainable resolution to the conflict. In a similar vein, nations such as Moldova and the Republic of Cyprus have not framed their respective conflicts under this

dichotomy, demonstrating a nuanced understanding that has arguably propelled the transformation of these conflicts further along.

Asserting that Abkhazia is not a party to the conflict from a historical perspective inadvertently negates its existence, reducing it to a mere instrument of Russian influence. Such a perspective is not conducive to constructive dialogue, as it alienates Abkhazians, rendering meaningful negotiation elusive.

The discourse surrounding the use of force by Georgia as a viable solution continues to pervade the agenda, albeit not as a primary recourse. While the restoration of territorial integrity may be achieved through force in a particular context, it is a myopic resolution that does not address the core of the conflict. The notion that Abkhazians would vacate Abkhazia en masse similar to the exodus of Armenians from Karabakh is unfounded. Regardless of the governing jurisdiction, the presence of Abkhazians in Abkhazia is a constant, necessitating dialogue as an imperative for conflict resolution. The absence of this recognition not only undermines the prospects of resolution but also risks the miscomprehension of the conflict's dynamics by external actors, including the West—beacon of hope in navigating these turbulent waters.

This analysis underscores the imperative of a nuanced, informed approach toward the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, eschewing oversimplified narratives in favor of a more complex, accurate understanding that might foster constructive dialogue and potential reconciliation.

Methodological approach and literature review

To undertake a holistic examination of the issue, methodologies encompassing comparative, multifaceted, and recapitulative analyses are deployed. In the engagement with primary and secondary materials, a rigorous methodology is adopted, inclusive of the recognition, selection, verification of facts, and cross-validation via varied sources. Moreover, this scholarly endeavor incorporates prevalent methodologies within the domain of political science, especially pertinent to the analysis of contemporary epochs, encompassing content and intent analysis, and event analysis. By harnessing these stringent and well-established methodological paradigms, the research aspires to furnish a meticulous and precise elucidation of the matter under investigation.

Intent Analysis within the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict involved a comprehensive examination of various factors to uncover the motivations behind actions and policies from both sides. A crucial aspect of this analysis was the contextual examination of the conflict's historical, political, and social backdrop, which provided insights into how decisions were shaped by past grievances and territorial aspirations. Of particular importance was the assessment of Georgian governmental initiatives, such as the [Government of Georgia \(2010\)](#), the [Action Plan for Engagement \(2010\)](#), [Regulation of the Government of Georgia \(2010\)](#), and [Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality \(2018\)](#). These initiatives, aimed at regulating relationships with the Abkhaz people, stood in stark contrast to the policies enacted by the de facto Abkhaz government, specifically the passportization process coordinated by Russia, which highlighted their alignment with Russian geopolitical objectives.

Furthermore, language and tone in official statements, media discourse, and diplomatic exchanges were critically analyzed to reveal the underlying goals of both sides. This included examining peace meetings during the conflict, interviews with key stakeholders such as V. Ardzinba, A. Ardzinba, and V. Putin, as well as written scholarly and journalistic works. Such discourse analysis highlighted the Abkhazian de facto government's close alignment with Russia, while Georgia consistently appealed to international law to legitimize its position.

The study also examined patterns of behavior, particularly Georgia's unilateral legislative actions and the absence of reciprocal measures from the Abkhaz side, which underscored entrenched positions and a reluctance to engage in reconciliation efforts. Ultimately, the expected outcomes, such as the continuing occupation and Abkhazia's growing dependency on Russia, further clarified the strategic intents behind both Abkhazian and Georgian actions, offering a more nuanced understanding of the objectives that have shaped the conflict over time.

The selection of sources for this study was guided by a critical approach aimed at ensuring a balanced and comprehensive analysis of historiographical narratives. Archival data was meticulously chosen to verify historical events across various epochs, providing a foundation for examining the divergence in historical interpretations. To illustrate the contrasting ways in which history is written in Georgia and Abkhazia, the authors selected scholars from both sides, ensuring that each perspective was appropriately represented. A comparative analysis of these scholarly works revealed significant disparities in the portrayal of historical events. On the one hand, Georgian historiography demonstrated an effort to objectify history by grounding interpretations in primary sources. On the other hand, the Abkhazian historiographical narrative frequently displayed misinterpretation or manipulation of the same events, reflecting a broader tendency to align historical accounts with political and ideological objectives. For instance, [Avidzba \(2012\)](#) misrepresents 1886 census data by combining populations of Abkhazians and Samurzakano residents. The actual figures report 28,323 ethnic Abkhazians, separate from the 30,640 Samurzakano inhabitants ([Shamba and Lakoba, n.d.](#)). [Gulia \(1925\)](#) argued that 'Kolkhy,' recognized internationally as referring to the ancestors of Georgians, originates from the Abkhaz language. He based this claim on the surname 'Kol-baya,' a theory lacking linguistic validation. Abkhazian scholars' claim that Georgia occupied Abkhazia in 1918 lacks historical basis. At the time, the newly independent Georgian government sought to negotiate Abkhazia's status rather than annex it. On February 9, 1918, the Georgian National Council met with Abkhaz and Samurzakano representatives, agreeing to Abkhazia's autonomous status within Georgia ([Gamakharia and Gogia, 1997](#)). This methodological approach, grounded in compare-and-contrast analysis, underscores the detrimental differences in how historical truth is constructed and perceived between the two sides.

The article adopts an event analysis framework, through which we systematically examine the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict by describing the key events, their broader context, the motivations of the actors involved, and the sequence of developments. This approach enables a thorough understanding of the conflict's outcomes, interrelationships, and significance within a broader geopolitical and historical framework. Consequently, the inclusion of event analysis in the methodology was both a logical and

essential choice, given that the article centers on an ethnic conflict that has been significantly shaped by external influence, particularly from a third country. Through this analytical lens, we aim to provide a comprehensive and nuanced account of the conflict's dynamics.

The research endeavor seeks to conduct a comparative examination of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict by delving into its historical evolution and pinpointing the political and geopolitical catalysts of change. It aims to unravel the interlinked historiographical narratives that shape Georgian and Abkhazian viewpoints, exacerbated by Soviet-era boundaries and modern nationalist inclinations. By comparing Georgian and Abkhazian historiography and scholarly contributions, this study intends to underscore the necessity for adopting more inclusive linguistic choices even in publication titles. Furthermore, the paper proposes a nuanced, empathetic approach, fostering mutual respect, and advocating a forward-looking vision to transcend past grievances, thereby fostering a conducive milieu for constructive dialogue and joint endeavors, aiming at a harmonious resolution and mutually advantageous co-existence.

The post-Soviet and contemporary political milieu is of paramount relevance to the posed research query. However, to counter attempts at historical narrative falsification, ancient sources are intermittently employed. This methodology seeks to furnish a comprehensive understanding of the matter, blending both modern and historical vantage points. These ancient sources include Arcangelo Lamberti's (Arcangelo, 1938), Procopius Caesarensis's (Kaukhchishvili, 1965), and Flavius Arrianus' (Kechakmadze, 1961).

The compilations of documents curated by Diasamidze (2002) under the aegis of the Regional Research Center, stand as invaluable repositories for scholars delving into the study of the conflict. These assemblages proffer exhaustive comprehensions into the historical trajectory and evolution of the discord in Abkhazia, thereby serving as quintessential sources for any profound scholarly scrutiny of the matter (Diasamidze, 2002).

Zurab Papaskiri's seminal publications titled "Essays from the Historical Past of Modern Abkhazia" (Papaskiri, 2003; Papaskiri, 2007) represent a significant scholarly augmentation to the annals studying Abkhazia's history. This opus furnishes a comprehensive exploration of pivotal issues encapsulated in Abkhazia's historical narrative, elucidating contentious domains within contemporary Georgian and Abkhazian separatist historiography.

The recent publication, "Why Abkhazia Is Georgia: A True History" (Papaskiri, 2021) under the leadership of Prof. Papaskiri, emerges as a significant text offering a detailed and objective historical narration. This work also provides insight into publications by Abkhazian scholars. Remarkably, while many such works exhibit attempts at falsifying or misinterpreting historical facts, this particular publication stands out for its meticulous analysis of Abkhazian scholarly contributions.

Furthermore, the publication Gamakharia and Gogia (1997) emerges as a noteworthy scholarly contribution, encapsulating a plethora of documentary evidence delineating the historical lineage of Abkhazians as an essential facet of Georgia. Exhaustive methodology with prolific utilization of primary sources underscores its significance as a scholarly reservoir for readers intrigued by the subject matter, essentially instrumental for individuals endeavoring to unravel the historical intricacies embodying Georgia's interrelation with Abkhazia.

The research encompasses reports generated by the International Crisis Group, established in 1995 as an NGO, an independent, non-profit entity committed to averting, alleviating, and solving lethal conflicts. The insightful material furnished within these reports facilitates a thorough evaluation of the current landscape in Abkhazia. The endeavors of the Georgian government to ameliorate circumstances or foster enhanced communication with the Abkhazians are discernible through an examination of various official documents (Government of Georgia, 2010; Action Plan for Engagement, 2010; Regulation of the Government of Georgia, 2010; Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, 2018).

This article engages with the works of Abkhazian historians such as Ashkhatsava (1925), Gulia (1925), Inal-ipa (1965), Inal-Ipa (1976), Lakoba (1999), Bghazhba and Lakoba (2015), Avidzba (2008), Avidzba (2012), Avidzba (2013a), Avidzba (2013b), Avidzba and Ajinjal (2022), Khagba (2013), and Maryhuba (1994), and Marykhuba (2016), providing a lens into Abkhazian historical perspectives vis-a-vis Georgia. Noteworthy is the compendium edited by British scholar G. Hewitt, "The Abkhazians. A Handbook" (Hewitt, 1999), albeit it manifests a pronounced anti-Georgian stance, portraying the discord between two people from a distinctly separatist vantage point. While these resources may harbor biases, they are indispensable for scholars striving for an encompassing grasp of the Abkhazian conflict intricacies. Yet, a judicious appraisal of these works in tandem with other sources is vital for a nuanced comprehension of the underlying issues.

Historical discourse of the conflict

Before commencing the exploration of the mentioned foundation in our article, it is imperative to provide a historical exposition of the conflict in question. Absent a comprehension of the event chronology and its evolution, the audience may find it challenging to grasp the intricacies inherent to the situation. It is necessary to distinguish between the armed conflict and the broader socio-political disagreements within the Abkhaz community. These are separate dimensions, and while the armed conflict began in 1991, the underlying disagreements date back much earlier. Both post-communist and communist Georgia experienced tensions with Abkhaz groups, many of which were exacerbated by Russian propaganda Kikalishvili (2023).

In April 1991, following a national referendum, Georgia declared independence (Act of Restoration of State Independence of Georgia, 1991), which Abkhazs did not partake in. The Georgian governance sought to retain control over the Abkhazian region. On July 9, 1991, the ASSR of Abkhazia revised its constitution, allocating Supreme Council seats according to ethnicity: Abkhazians were granted 28 seats, Georgians 26, and other ethnicities 11, despite Georgians comprising 46% of the population, and Abkhazians 17% (Aleksidze, 2012, p. 11). Separatist proponents, like Aslan Avidzba, claim that this allocation acknowledged the Abkhazians as the ancient inhabitants of these regions (Avidzba, n.d.), though no action was taken by the Georgian government regarding this imbalance. Amid conflicts, Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia was ousted, transferring power to the Military Council run by Tengiz Kitovani, the defense minister and "Mkhedrioni" Commander Jaba Ioseliani. Concurrently,

numerous armed factions opposed the central government, affecting the nation's future.

On March 7, 1992, the Military Council invited Eduard Shevardnadze to lead the State Council of Georgia and become its First President. Abkhazian separatists, on July 23, 1992, reverted to the 1925 constitution aiming to exit Georgia's jurisdiction but lacked legal power (Diasamidze, 2002, pp. 74–75). In the words of Aslan Avidzba decision to declare Independence ended the Georgian annexation of Abkhazia that started in 1918 (Avidzba and Ajinjal, 2022, p. 1). Notably, it is unclear what is meant by the annexation of 1918, when the newly established Independent Georgia led by Noe Zhordania, sought to alleviate tensions in Abkhazia via negotiations regarding the status.¹ Throughout this period, Abkhazia was integrated into the Transcaucasian region. To address and delineate the relationship with Abkhazia, the Georgian National Council convened a session with delegates from the People's Council of Abkhazia and Samurzakano in Tbilisi on February 9, 1918. During this meeting, both parties concurred on a proposal that designated Abkhazia as an autonomous entity within the Georgian state (Gamakharia and Gogia, 1997: 402, 744–745). In a notable interview in 2019, Vladimir Putin referenced the stance of Avidzba, asserting that after the disintegration of the Russian Empire in 1918, Georgia, with assistance from the German military, occupied Abkhazia. This statement is indicative of the broader pattern of Russian propaganda, which often distorts and misrepresents historical events EADaily (2019).

Amid escalating regional instability and criminality, a state of emergency was declared on August 10, 1992 (Diasamidze, 2002, p. 79). Despite an initial agreement, hostilities erupted on August 14, marking the Abkhazian conflict's commencement, continuing till September 1993 (Papaskiri, 2010a). During that period, Vladislav Ardzinba, serving as the initial de facto President of Abkhazia, unequivocally communicated his goals by stating: "We will use any means to force Georgians to open fire against Abkhazians" (Gvaramia, 2007).

In his scholarly discourse concerning Georgian-Abkhazian relations and the conflict's nuances, Aslan Avidzba references that the Georgian leadership developed an operation for the lightning capture of Abkhazia, codenamed "Sword," attributed to Eduard Shevardnadze and orchestrated with General Sufyan Bepaev of the Transcaucasian Military District of the Soviet Army, aimed at the expeditious subjugation of Abkhazia (Avidzba, 2008, p.p. 102–103; Avidzba, 2012, p. 380; Avidzba, 2013a, p.p. 471, 476, 478, 479, 567; Avidzba, 2013b, p.p. 453, 455, 468, 581; Avidzba and Ajinjal, 2022, p. 2). It is conspicuous that Avidzba omits the provision of source references for the information, with only two instances of citation. One of these

citations directs to Lili Khagba's work, where the author recounts the memories of an individual, Adam Khuade, yet fails to furnish verifiable evidence (Khagba, 2013, p. 341). In another instance, the scholarly work of Stanislav Lakoba, a renowned scholar from Abkhazia, references the operation "SWORD" yet omits the provision of validating citations for the mentioned operation (Lakoba, 2001, p. 38). Remarkably, Georgian historiography lacks any record or recollection of such a military operation. The absence of cited sources from both Lakoba and Avidzba concerning this information notably casts a shadow of doubt, potentially indicating a disingenuous approach toward historical recounting.

Ardzinba garnered support from external allies including ethnic Abkhazians abroad and notably Russians, with many joining the conflict against Georgia despite having no prior residence in Abkhazia (Gamakharia, 2015 pp. 58–59). The military involvement, sanctioned by the Kremlin, even saw Su-25 bombers deployed, as witnessed by journalist Thomas Goltz in Sokhumi (Gamakharia, 2015 pp. 60–61). A joint Russian-Abkhazian operation on July 2, 1993, though minimally equipped, significantly impacted Georgian positions (Gamakharia et al., 2011, p. 476). On September 3, 1992, Boris Yeltsin and Eduard Shevardnadze signed the "Moscow Agreement" mandating Georgian territorial unity and a ceasefire from September 5th, with Russian troops deployed as neutral forces (Diasamidze, 2002, pp. 80–81). Despite this, the violent conquest of Gagra ensued in late October, involving severe atrocities against the Georgian populace (Gamakharia, 2015 pp. 63–64). A ceasefire on March 14, 1993, was only honored by Georgia, hinting at weakening Georgia's stance (Gamakharia et al., 2011, p. 475). The final ceasefire on July 27, 1993, saw both sides disarm, but Russians and Abkhazians intensified military power, leading to Sokhumi's fall on September 27, 1993 (Diasamidze, 2002, pp. 89–90).

According to 1989 data, Abkhazia had 93,267 ethnic Abkhazians and 239,872 ethnic Georgians. Post-war, "roughly estimated at 230,000 to 250,000" Georgians were displaced (Human Rights Watch Arms Project, 1995, p. 43). On October 8, 1993, Georgia became a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States. A ceasefire agreement on May 14, 1994, mandated Georgian military withdrawal from Abkhazia, with CIS peacekeepers ensuring compliance (Diasamidze, 2002, pp. 108–110).

On November 26, 1994, Abkhazia's Supreme Council illegitimately declared independence (Gamakharia, 2015, pp. 57–58). Contrastingly, Georgia's Constitution, embraced on August 24, 1995, affirmed its territorial integrity including Abkhazia (Constitution of Georgia, 1995). The Budapest Summit Declaration on December 6, 1994, denounced the separatist constitution, recognizing the Georgian Ethnic Cleansing (CSCE, 1994, pp. 18–19; Lisbon Document, 1996, p. 8). Despite a UN-initiated agreement for the IDP return, separatists breached it, causing riots and arson.

On March 22, 1995, Georgian and Russian Defense Ministers signed a 25-year agreement for Russian peacekeeping in Georgia (Dvali, 1996). The CIS, on January 19, 1996, aimed to resolve the conflict by disavowing separatist associations (Diasamidze, 2002, pp. 132–133). A significant visit by the Abkhazian separatist leader to Tbilisi occurred on August 14, 1997, underscoring Russia's positive role. However, Belarus and Turkmenistan did not sign the CIS document condemning separatism (Diasamidze, 2002, p. 159). Separatist historians held a negative view of Ardzinba's Tbilisi visit. According to Avidzba, international isolation left Ardzinba with no

1 The Georgian Declaration of Independence includes various measures designed to protect the interests of the country's ethnic minority groups: "1. The Georgian Democratic Republic shall ensure within its borders civil and political rights to all of its citizens equally, irrespective of their ethnicity, faith, social station, and gender. 2. The Georgian Democratic Republic shall provide a wide field of free development to all nationalities that inhabit it. 3. Until the convocation of the Constituent Assembly, the governance of Georgia shall be conferred to the National Council, with additional representation of the national minorities, and the Provisional Government responsible to the National Council" (Civil.ge, 1918).

alternatives but to visit. His safety during the visit was assured by Russian Foreign Affairs Minister, Yevgeny Primakov (Avidzba, 2013c). Abkhazia's 1999 referendum, affirming the 1994 Constitution, garnered 97% approval, reinforcing their "Act of State Independence" despite international isolation (Abkhazia, n.d.).

The Istanbul Summit endorsed Georgian territorial unity, urging Russia to remove military bases from Georgia. As per the accord, the Gudauta and Vaziani bases were to be vacated by Jan 1, 2001, with the Akhalkalaki and Batumi bases' timelines to be set in 2000 (Istanbul Document, 1999, p. 49). Russia vacated the Vaziani base by 2001 but falsely asserted a complete withdrawal from Gudauta, which, in reality, did not transpire (Kavtaradze, 2018). Discussions and negotiations concerning the withdrawal of Russian military bases from Batumi and Akhalkalaki were notably protracted, beginning as early as 2005 and only reaching a conclusion in the latter part of Liklikadze (2007).

The Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, initiated nearly three decades ago, continues to remain unresolved despite numerous interventions, adversely affecting Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Abkhazians significantly. The growing estrangement between the erstwhile neighbors is exacerbated by Sokhumi's escalating affiliation with the Russian Federation. Historically, Russia's "Silent Annexation" of Abkhazia (Manutscharjan, 2008, p. 1) evolved intensely after its occupation of Georgia in 2008. The post-NATO Bucharest Summit scenario in April 2008 saw Russia amplifying its deterrent policies, culminating in an assault on Georgian grounds on August 7, 2008. By August's end, Russia acknowledged the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, altering the geopolitical dynamics significantly (De Waal, 2018, p. 23; Manutscharjan, 2008, p. 2).

The involvement of international NGOs has escalated tensions, resulting in the termination of several of their missions. This is partially attributed to the NGOs' alignment with the European Union's stance on Georgia's territorial integrity, setting political contours for engagements with Abkhazia (Fischer, 2010, p. 3). Additionally, the "Law of Georgia on Occupied Territories," impeding free mobility, contributes to the dwindling international missions (Law of Georgia on Occupied Territories, 2008). In a recent interaction with NGOs, the de facto Foreign Affairs head of Abkhazia, Inal Ardzinba, labeled several projects unacceptable (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Republic Abkhazia, 2023).

The process of passportization emerged as a pivotal concern for the Abkhaz populace. Amidst an ambiguous milieu Russia's President Vladimir Putin, in 2002, commenced the issuance of Russian passports to Abkhaz inhabitants, coinciding with the impending expiration of Soviet passports, and catering to the anticipations of approximately 150,000 Abkhaz citizens (De Waal, 2018, p. 23). This maneuver, signifying a de facto integration with Russia, met with Georgian opposition. Post the 2008 Russian-Georgian conflict, enforced passportization transpired in Abkhazia's Gali region, impacting nearly 50,000 ethnic Georgians (International Crisis Group, 2013c).

While the sanctity of internationally recognized borders remains a steadfast principle for Georgia, concerted attempts have been mobilized to reestablish ties with the Abkhazian populace via alternative documentation. The State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement Through Cooperation envisions a mechanism to facilitate cross-border mobility (Government of Georgia, 2010, p. 2). Concurrently, the "Action Plan for Engagement" introduces a "Neutral Identification Card and Travel Document," aimed at granting residents

of Abkhazia utilization to social services and unhindered movement (Action Plan for Engagement, 2010, p. 4). Under the aegis of N. Gilauri, Prime Minister, a directive delineated as "Modalities for Conducting Activities in the Occupied Territories of Georgia" has been instituted, permitting individuals in occupied regions to travel utilizing a Georgian foreign passport or a "Neutral Travel Document," as articulated in 7th Article (Regulation of the Government of Georgia, 2010, p. 5). A fresh identification instrument for inhabitants of Abkhazia featuring a personal number and streamlined procedures was suggested in the 2018 governmental charter "A Step to a Better Future" (Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, 2018, p. 5). Tbilisi extends to Abkhazia a strategy for forging relations beyond their region through NGO-s, contingent upon the willingness of Abkhazian individuals to partake in joint programs or delegations alongside Georgian IDPs² (Cooley and Mitchell, 2010, p. 79). However, the de facto government in Sokhumi rebuffed all overtures made by the Georgian government, displaying a marked preference for Russian passports instead. This predilection was further accentuated following the occupation of Ukraine by Russia in 2022, prompting the European Union to proscribe the use of Russian passports issued in the occupied Georgian territories (Gabritchidze, 2022), thereby rendering the Russian Federation the sole conduit for the Abkhaz populace out of Sokhumi.

Dialogues between Abkhazia and Georgia have predominantly transpired via the Geneva International Discussions from 2008. These dialogues hold significance, albeit a dynamic methodology toward conflict resolution or IDP repatriation remains elusive (International Crisis Group, 2013d, p. 2). Abkhazians exhibit apprehension toward such endeavors, illustrated when they endeavored to reject the Geneva dialogs in 2012 December, advocating for formal representation for the Abkhaz side, though they retracted their stance subsequently without elucidation (International Crisis Group, 2013b, p. 14).

Some might suggest that the Abkhazians were simply asserting the self-determination rights, comprising both the internal form, allowing minority identities legal protection within a country, and the external form, leading to secession or state formation. Post-UN, external self-determination rights, especially for colonies, are acknowledged without restriction. Yet, state sovereignty bars any minority from seceding unilaterally. Abkhazian separatists, contradicting self-determination's principle of political exclusion, were well-represented and even held a majority in their Supreme Council. Additionally, the Abkhazian language wasn't suppressed; from 1973 to 1990, numerous educational and cultural institutions thrived, teaching and preserving the Abkhaz culture and language (Aleksidze, 2012, pp. 10–11).

A pivotal concern recently surfacing pertains to land and property ownership in Abkhazia. Post-2008, with escalating Russian involvement, Abkhazians have barred Russians from property acquisition, fearing market saturation with Russian capital, potentially detrimental (International Crisis Group, 2013a, p. 8). Recent tendencies hint at a shift toward Russian dominance, exemplified by the Bichvinta (Pitsunda) resort's transfer to Russia on January 19, under an agreement between the de facto Abkhaz government and Russia, disclosed in July for ratification by Abkhazia's de facto parliament (Eurasianet, 2022). Noteworthy is the disapproval among

² Internally Displaced Persons.

some Abkhazians, albeit protests, primarily by the youth, yielded no resolution. The de facto government is set to facilitate this contentious territory's peaceful transfer to Russia.

Periodically, Abkhaz de facto leaders urge Georgia to commit to a non-use of force agreement, a discourse reignited by Inal Ardzinba amidst the failed Russian incursion into Ukraine (Interpressnews, 2022). Such demands, considered unfounded, face the Georgian government's persistent affirmation of pursuing peaceful, diplomatic relations with Abkhazia, underscoring its dedication to a harmonious resolution. Yet, the Abkhaz leadership's reluctance to embrace Georgian overtures hinders progress toward amicable conflict resolution, despite Georgia's sustained efforts. Amid the backdrop of Russia's intervention and unsuccessful occupation of Ukraine, apprehension has escalated within Abkhazian ranks, notably around the notion of a second front haunting the leadership and scholarly community (Avidzba, 2023, 489–492). Intriguingly, this discourse coincides with Abkhazia's authorization for a Russian military naval base establishment in Ochamchire (BBC News, 2023), positioned within the operational ambit of Ukrainian drones. This development posits a potential avenue for Abkhazia to foster a second front, albeit against a distinct nation.

Historiographical disparities

The schism between Georgians and Abkhazians can be significantly attributed to disparate understandings or, in certain instances, ignorance of their historical tapestry. The interpretive discord concerning numerous historical issues is stark, with both Georgian and Abkhazian historiographical paradigms ensnared in the throes of narrow nationalism. Within these paradigms, intellectual initiative is often met with punitive measures, stifling the potential for a more nuanced and collaborative historical discourse.

The entrenched nationalistic stances espoused by both Georgian and Abkhaz entities exacerbate the historical discord between them. A significant contributor to this discord is Pavle Ingoroqva's theory, which posits a rather categorical narrative concerning Abkhazia's historical identity. Ingoroqva's case is particularly interesting, Georgian scholar Pavle Ingorokva, in his tome, proffered the hypothesis that the forebears of contemporary Abkhazians embarked on a migratory trajectory from the northern Caucasus during the 17th century (Coppieters, 2002, p. 93; Ingoroqva, 1954). His assumptions were not accepted by Georgian historiography at that time and were criticized by N. Berdzenishvili, K. Lomtadze, Z. Anchabadze, etc. Today the same estimations are reassessed by scholars. In this instance, Prof. Papaskiri's latest publication must be mentioned (Papaskiri, 2021). This theory, by its essence, pushes Georgian historiography on Abkhazia into a cul-de-sac of rigid nationalistic narrative that proves to be an obstacle to mutual understanding and dialogue. The rhetoric stemming from this theory, which conflates medieval Abkhazians with Georgians while relegating contemporary Abkhazians to a late-coming, alien identity—termed as Apsu—inevitably renders dialogue and mutual understanding elusive. The narrative, which obliquely negates the existence of a distinct Abkhazian identity and heritage, epitomizes the quandary of nationalistic historiography.

However, extricating Georgian historiographical discourse from the grasp of Ingoroqva's theory should not precipitate a descent into another extreme narrative. While demographic and migratory shifts

in Abkhazia are an undeniable historical reality acknowledged by both sides, the interpretation of these shifts through rigid ethnic lenses carries the risk of deepening historical misinterpretations and exacerbating tensions. Delving into the intricate processes through which various demographic elements interacted and assimilated within the Abkhazian social and cultural milieu could unveil nuanced understandings that transcend simplistic narratives.

In the Georgian context, this historiographical quagmire emanates from the enduring inertia of Soviet-era historiography, the entrenched theories of Ingoroqva, and an apprehension toward novel interpretations. These factors have, at times, hindered efforts to adopt a more balanced and inclusive historical narrative, reinforcing divisions rather than fostering dialogue. Acknowledging these historiographical challenges while promoting a more nuanced and scholarly approach to the past remains crucial in advancing reconciliation efforts. Conversely, the historiographical dilemma confronting Abkhazians is arguably more grievous. The milieu in which Abkhazian historians operate is one that one can find confounding and are ill-equipped to fully grasp. The pressure bearing down on Abkhazian historians aspiring to craft a more objective historical narrative seems to be immeasurable. The lack of participation by Abkhaz historians in contemporary forums of intellectual exchange, even via social media, exemplifies this predicament.

The discord between Georgian and Abkhazian historiographies, epitomized by differing narratives surrounding the ancient and medieval periods, illustrates a fundamental challenge. These disparities, encapsulated in nationalistic interpretations of history, are further exacerbated by Soviet-era narratives. Such historiographical discord propagates seeds of mistrust and misunderstanding, hindering reconciliation efforts.

There exists a cadre of well-established researchers delving into the subject matter pertaining to Abkhazia, among whom Prof. Zurab Papaskiri (Papaskiri, 1998, 2003, 2007, 2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2021) is particularly eminent. The breadth and magnitude of the scholarly endeavors undertaken by this individual stand as monumental contributions to Georgian historiography at large. Across a multitude of his academic outputs, Papaskiri endeavors to counter the postulates and assertions propounded by Abkhazian interlocutors, fortifying his argumentation through the meticulous harnessing of robust historical sources and narrative exposition.

Beyond the historiographical significance, which is of paramount importance, certain facets of such scholarly endeavors warrant meticulous scrutiny. For example, the titles of the published works, encompassing both books and articles, necessitate a more expansive analytical elucidation.

In 2021, a significant stride was made in unraveling the historical ties between Abkhazia and Georgia with the publication of the historical collection titled “Why Abkhazia is Georgia: A True History.” This work was published under the support of Sukhumi State University and reinforced by the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation. Spearheaded by Professor Zurab Papaskiri, a cadre of authors joined their scholarly explorations to compile this edition.

The collection stands as a laudable endeavor—a wellspring of objective discourse that embodies the quintessence of academic rigor and professionalism, transcending personal biases, notably from contributors who endured exile from Abkhazia. It presents a diverse array of analytical threads, including, as mentioned above, a critical

examination of Pavle Ingoroqva's theory, thereby broadening the historical narrative's spectrum.

However, a salient point of contention emerges with the collection's title—"Why Abkhazia is Georgia: A True History." While the title encapsulates a historical assertion, its overtly declarative nature could ostensibly complicate the collection's scholarly essence, morphing it into a slogan rather than a channel for academic exploration. This nomenclature, albeit accurate from a Georgian standpoint, potentially stifles the collection's ingress into the broader scholarly dialogue, especially within Abkhazian academic circles. The title's assertive stance may inadvertently eclipse the collection's academic merit, rendering it a muted voice in the discourse it seeks to enrich.

The publication, notwithstanding its title, harbors the potential to spawn a rich dialogue, underscored by the intellectual contributions from both Georgian and Abkhazian scholars. It beckons a re-evaluation of naming conventions in academic works, advocating for a nomenclature that fosters inclusivity and engenders robust scholarly engagement across divisive historical and geopolitical landscapes. This contemplation is not merely a semantic exercise but a call for enhancing the permeability of academic discourses, ensuring they transcend geographical and political schisms to foster a more nuanced understanding of the complex realities encapsulated in the Georgian-Abkhazian narrative.

Within the realm of historiographical investigation, the endeavor of Prof. Papaskiri is markedly noticeable, with publications bearing closely related titles manifested in 1998 and 2020. Similarly, the scholarly venture undertaken by researchers Jemal Gamakharia and Badri Gogia, culminating in the book "Abkhazia—Historical Part of Georgia," resonates within this academic dialogue. These works collectively contribute to the intricate tapestry of Georgian-Abkhazian historiographical narrative and represent justified criticism of the attempt of Abkhazian counterparts to misinterpret or falsify historical narration.

However, the articulation of titles and the thematic essence of such scholarly works demand a meticulous examination to foster a nuanced understanding and to engender a more encompassing, objective, and constructive dialogue amidst the complex historiographical and geopolitical terrain that defines the Georgian-Abkhazian interaction. This discourse beckons a deeper analytical engagement, extending beyond the superficiality of titles to delve into the substantive content and the historiographical methodologies employed therein, thereby enriching the academic dialogue surrounding the Abkhazian-Georgian narrative.

One of the most important and prominent questions in Abkhazian historiography about the Georgian Abkhazian relationships is connected to the question of residence and discourse on the ethno-political emergence of the region in ancient times. Abkhazian historians and scholars are developing several ideas that were and are used as fuel to expand separatism and anti-Georgian aspirations of the Abkhaz people. Consequently, Abkhazian historiography has manifested a manipulative conduct predicated on misinterpretations of factual elements. The ensuing illustration concerning territorial belonging or even the ancient nomenclature of the region efficaciously exemplifies the aforementioned assertion.

The discord surrounding the historical narrative extends to foundational issues such as the character of the Abkhaz Kingdom. Abkhazians largely hold the belief that the kingdom was distinctly

Abkhazian—with an Abkhazian elite and populace. This contention is hotly debated, especially when compared to the mainstream Georgian narrative that posits the kingdom as a predominantly Georgian entity. The dissonance permeates even the discourse on the genesis of the unified feudal monarchy of Georgia, with disparate factions attributing its origin to either Abkhazia or Kartli.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, a transformative shift can be observed that forged the Abkhazian mentality toward separatism and narrow-nationalistic ideologies. In 1907, L. Voronov disseminated a booklet named "Abkhazia is not Georgia," where he posited that the Georgian territorial, political, or religious domains never encompassed Abkhazia (Voronov, 1907, pp. 12–13). Subsequently, in 1925, the eminent Abkhazian academic S. Ashkhatsava unveiled the seminal piece "Ways of Development of Abkhaz History," marking the inception of what is now termed Abkhazian historiography, embodying a separatist ideology (Ashkhatsava, 1925). It appears that commencing from the early 20th century, the Abkhazian elite had been laying the foundational groundwork to propagate their separatist ideology.

Constructing contentious narratives predicated on erroneous interpretation or omission of historical sources continues further. Abkhazian scholar, D. Gulia, postulated in his 1925 publication that the toponym 'Kolkhy,' which is universally recognized by the international community as denoting Georgian progenitors, derives from the Abkhazian language. Gulia cites the prevalence of the surname 'Kol-baya' within the region as evidence (Gulia, 1925, p. 81). It warrants mention that this surname also enjoys popularity within Georgian circles, thus rendering the supposition that 'Kolkhy' is of Abkhazian origin devoid of substantial grounding.

Since the 1950s, there has been a shift in stances concerning the aforementioned case. Notable proponents of the notion that solely Abkhazian individuals or their forebears inhabited the land in antiquity include Sh. Inal-Ipa, a distinguished ethnic Abkhazian scholar. His extensive publication of 1976 concludes with, at the very least, a highly contentious assertion that: "The Abkhazian populace did not share their autochthony with any others" (Прошлое Абхазов - коренных жителей Абхазии, обитающих здесь с отдаленных эпох, не разделяя ни с кем свою аборигенность)" (Inal-Ipa, 1976, p. 437). In defending Inal-Ipa, it merits mention that within one of his publications from 1964, he acknowledges the presence of a multitude of disparate tribes inhabiting the territory of Abkhazia during ancient times. Simultaneously, he perpetuates the discourse regarding Gulia's proposition concerning the toponymic derivation of the term 'Kolkhy,' cautiously aligning with a similar conceptualization (Inal-Ipa, 1965, p. 7).

The primary hinge in refuting such a statement lies in the existence of numerous ancient textual sources delineating the ethno-geographical trajectories within the region. Upon scrutinizing various sources, encompassing Procopius Caesarensis, Arrianos Phlabilios, and Arcangelo Lamberti among others, it can be ascertained that historically, Abkhazia has always been a crucial part of Georgia, both geographically and politically. The recorded history of western Georgia begins with the Colchis Tribes, as detailed in ancient Greek texts. From the 6th to the 1st century BC, the area now known as Abkhazia fell under the Colchis kingdom's rule. Noted authors like Scylax of Caryanda and Hekateos of Miletetus documented the ethnic groups in the region, including the Korax and Koli tribes near the southern Caucasus (Gamakharia and Gogia, 1997, p. 161; Papaskiri,

2003, p. 24). By the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, sources like Pliny and Arrian mention the Apsils and Abazgs (Kechakmadze, 1961, pp. 11–18). Between the 2nd and 6th centuries AD, the Abkhazian region came under the Egrisi (Lazika) kingdom, Colchis' successor (Kaukhchishvili, 1965, p. 47). While the Abazg rulers nominally recognized Egrisi's sovereignty, they maintained a degree of autonomy. The Apsils were more directly controlled, with leaders appointed by Egrisi's kings (Papaskiri, 2003, p. 34).

The inquiry that would naturally emanate from any logically oriented individual is — what precipitated Inal-ipa's transformation and contradiction of own assertion? In our tempered estimation, the publication in question seemed to be orchestrated to catalyze the separatist aspirations of the Abkhazian populace during the late 70s. This is the period when Georgia embarks on the mission to change the socio-political dynamics and gain linguistic rights. Significant protests started in Georgia against constitutional amendments concerning language statuses—Georgian and other languages would get official language status. Following this, counter-protests from the Abkhazian community and their subsequent appeals to the USSR for protection against perceived “Georgian imperialistic policies” (Songhulashvili, 2007, p. 148). It was the right time to develop and spread such notion that Abkhazians were the only people living on these lands.

The aforementioned compositions by Gulia and Ashkhatsava interestingly fit together with a notable timeline in Georgian history. Both were disseminated in 1925, subsequent to the subjugation of independent Georgia by the Red Russian Army. It is suggested that the Abkhazian populace, constituting a minority as per statistical data, ethnic Georgians constituted the majority during this epoch, encapsulating 33.6% of the populace, in contrast to the ethnic Abkhazians, who were navigating the avenues of independence, embodying 27.8% (All-Union Population Census, 1929), perceived an avenue for disengagement from Georgia, notwithstanding an endeavor in 1921 to establish the Abkhazian Socialist Republic, though, not recognized by Russia (Gamakharia and Gogia, 1997, pp. 470–472). A faction of Abkhazians, on February 26, 1925, orchestrated a novel document, which numerous adherents of separatism regard as “the Constitution of the Abkhazian Socialist Republic” (Bghazhba and Lakoba, 2015, pp. 356–357; Gamakharia and Gogia, 1997, p. 118). The said document was divulged in 1960, yet never transpired into effect (Gamakharia et al., 2011, p. 425). Such was the contentious nature of this document that even the inaugural Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars of the ASSR of Abkhazia, Nestor Lakoba, castigated it, articulating that the document was crafted imprudently (Gamakharia and Gogia, 1997, pp. 489–491). The transpiring political tableau in Tbilisi—ephemeral democracy, followed by occupation—was appraised as a fertile juncture for nurturing separatist inclinations. Additionally, it ostensibly provided a scaffold for fabricating a contrived historiography concerning the Abkhazian people.

Contemporary writings from occupied territory also display similar biases. For instance, Avidzba's work often overlooks historical details, misinterprets them, or presents inaccurate descriptions. A salient critique directed at Avidzba's work speculates an excessive reliance on Abkhaz oral traditions and sources. Although oral traditions can furnish a rich repository of information, their veracity can occasionally stand on shaky ground. Detractors of Avidzba's methodology contend that he has, at times,

accorded a level of credence to Abkhaz oral traditions that verges on the factual, even in instances where they are belied by written sources. A further critique levied upon Avidzba's scholarly endeavors posits a pronounced emphasis on the Abkhaz narrative, with a consequential marginalization of the Georgian viewpoint. This partiality has precipitated an array of historical inaccuracies and misinterpretations within his work. In his 2012 publication, Avidzba presents statistical figures from 1886, claiming the Abkhazian populace numbered nearly 69,000, with Georgians at 3,558 (Avidzba, 2012, pp. 7–8). However, this representation conflicts with the source he cites, which indicates 58,963 Abkhazians and 4,166 Georgians (Shamba and Lakoba, n.d.). Further scrutiny reveals an aggregation of the populations of Abkhazians and the inhabitants of Samurzhakhano to arrive at the aforementioned total. In reality, the number of ethnic Abkhazians is recorded as 28,323, separate from the 30,640 residents of Samurzhakhano, who were inappropriately categorized as Abkhazians without an empirical basis (Narod.ru, n.d.). This misrepresentation and the lack of transparency in demographic amalgamation raise questions about the accuracy of Avidzba's data. In several scholarly contributions, Z. Papaskiri elucidates this critical historical dimension, offering further insight into the demographic intricacies of the period in question (Papaskiri, 2003, p. 219; Papaskiri, 2021, p. 185). Avidzba articulates that the Abkhaz populace was never wholly subjugated by the Georgians, preserving their distinct political and cultural institutions across centuries. Nonetheless, this assertion finds itself at odds with multiple documented sources, some of which we have provided above, which elucidate a substantive Georgian dominion over Abkhazia through substantial junctures of its historical continuum.

We strongly follow the notion that it is wholly fallacious to assert that the territory exclusively belongs to either the Georgian or the Abkhazian populace. Historical discourse and narrative encompass a broad spectrum of divergent viewpoints. Georgian historiography, in general, adheres to the rationale that both ethnic groups possess substantial entitlement to the land, and the ongoing conflict, which remains unresolved, necessitates a resolution grounded solely upon this premise.

As declared above, the presented manuscript should not be perceived as a historical recounting of the interrelations between the two populations. Our stipulated objective is to underscore the significance of objective historiography and the ramifications of distortion pertaining to the relationship of the two. A paramount recommendation to cultivate the exchange of ideas and publications entails selecting titles that embody a more interpretive stance and garner acceptance across both factions. This would potentially facilitate greater accessibility for the Abkhazian academia and populace at large to works penned in Georgian, thereby possibly engendering a positive impact. In defending Georgian historiography, it merits mention that there's a pronounced flexibility and receptivity toward such publications. In numerous instances, Georgian authors exhibit no hesitancy in employing titles such as “Abkhazia is not Georgia” or “Problems of the Military-Political History of the Patriotic War in Abkhazia.” Granted, such works often come under scrutiny for substantial falsification and fabrication of facts, serving predominantly to propagate a particular narrative to post-war generations and to recast history into a favorable narrative. However, this very act avails a conduit for Abkhazian works to be presented to Georgians, thereby

addressing the existing informational void. Regrettably, a reciprocal openness is conspicuously absent among the counterparts.

The stalemate between Georgians and Abkhazians transcends mere historical dissonance; it mirrors a broader disconnect forged through years of distinct national experiences and narratives. To bridge this chasm, a concerted effort toward fostering a shared understanding of history, unshackled from the confines of nationalist historiography, is essential. Such an endeavor necessitates an environment conducive to intellectual freedom and collaborative dialogue, wherein historians and intellectuals from both sides can engage in a constructive exchange of ideas, unfettered by the fear of reprisal or the specter of nationalist dogma. Through such discourse, the potential for cultivating a shared historical understanding, and by extension, a foundation for reconciliation and peaceful coexistence, may be realized.

The narrative of national identity and historical lineage among Abkhazians and Georgians traverses a complex and contentious landscape, often exacerbated by a myriad of sociopolitical factors. A pronounced manifestation of this complexity is observed in the 'small state syndrome' that considerably afflicts the Abkhazian psyche, perhaps more intensely than it does the Georgians. For many Abkhazians, their worldview extends predominantly northward, a vista that offers limited insight into the rich historical tapestry of Abkhazia. The northern gaze also accords limited access to archival materials delineating their recent history, with Russian narratives potentially overshadowing indigenous Abkhazian historical narratives. This scenario is further compounded by the influence of a local separatist regime, the overarching Russian occupation, and the intricacies of a clan-based societal structure. The prevalent atmosphere in Abkhazia is often characterized by a palpable self-preservation instinct, where news, often perceived as a harbinger of threat, is met with reticence.

This intricate web of historical, political, and social factors underscores a profound need for an open, scholarly engagement that transcends nationalist historiography. A dialogue undergirded by rigorous academic inquiry, mutual respect, and a willingness to navigate the murky waters of historical contention may herald a new epoch of understanding and reconciliation. Such scholarly discourse could potentially elucidate the multifaceted nature of the Georgian-Abkhazian relationship, fostering a climate conducive to collaborative historical investigation and mutual understanding.

Navigating beyond this nationalistic historiographical impasse necessitates a concerted effort to foster a more open, collaborative, and less antagonistic discourse. This endeavor, arguably less encumbered for Georgians than for Abkhazians, requires an examination of historical narratives that is both rigorous and empathetic. Bridging the chasm between Georgians and Abkhazians mandates an interrogation of entrenched historical narratives, a willingness to venture beyond the constricting bounds of nationalistic historiography, and an earnest endeavor to forge a shared narrative that acknowledges the complex, intertwined history that shapes the Georgian-Abkhazian dynamic.

The multifaceted dynamics between Georgians and Abkhazians during the Soviet era encapsulate a spectrum of socio-political and interpersonal interactions that were far from ideal, despite instances of camaraderie among individuals. The narrative propagated during the period of national movement, which negated the historical existence of the Abkhaz nation and posited

a conditional acceptance of Abkhaz self-determination within historical territories, further exacerbated the schism. This narrative, emanating from prominent figures, did little to foster mutual understanding or reconciliation.

Delving into the harrowing chapters of armed conflict further delineates the complex and turbulent narrative, although a detailed examination would extend beyond the scope of this discussion.

The reflections presented herein underscore a tapestry of historical, political, and social factors that have cumulatively shaped the Georgian-Abkhazian discourse. As we traverse through these intricacies, the necessity for a nuanced, empathetic, and open dialogue emerges as a pivotal step toward fostering a more harmonious and understanding relationship between Georgians and Abkhazians. Through such discourse, the potential for dismantling entrenched narratives and cultivating a shared vision for a peaceful coexistence may be envisaged.

Conclusion—where are we, where are we going and where will we go?

In the discourse surrounding the current status and the prospective resolution of the Abkhazia conflict, the role of historical narratives, while not paramount, carries a potential for either improvement or Intensification of the prevailing tensions. The retrospective examination of how historical interpretations might have fanned the flames of discord underscores the delicate interplay between past narratives and present realities.

Advocating for a peace-centric approach emerges as a reasoned stance amid a milieu where the allure of military resolution might entice, especially in hypothetical scenarios of heightened national demands. The assertion that the past three decades have witnessed an absence of a genuine peace policy, as opposed to a purported failure of such a policy, invites a reevaluation of the strategies hitherto employed.

The notion of a military resolution, while seemingly marginalized, enjoys a level of endorsement in Georgian society that cannot be overlooked. Hence, emphasizing the indispensability of a peaceful engagement strategy becomes imperative to counterbalance the militaristic inclinations. The argument positing the ineffectiveness of non-militaristic strategies in resolving territorial disputes elsewhere is dismissed as inconsequential, indicating a preference for a uniquely peaceful approach tailored to the Georgian-Abkhazian context over a generic militaristic solution. Although the Georgian government has announced a halt to the country's EU accession talks until 2028, the strong aspirations of the Georgian people toward European integration remain evident. This is reflected in the ongoing peaceful protests involving thousands of citizens and further substantiated by Georgia's recent attainment of EU candidate status. This milestone nurtures the hope for the initiation of accession negotiations. Such a European orientation inherently precludes military approaches to conflict resolution. Consequently, Georgia's EU aspirations should be deemed critically important to the Abkhazian populace. In the event of Georgia's accession to the EU, Abkhazia would be afforded a comprehensive status, complete with extensive guarantees for the preservation and protection of its unique cultural and national identity.

The recent developments in Abkhazia signify a notable shift from a tacit to an overt occupation by the Russian Federation. This transformation is exemplified by several recent incidents. Firstly, the annexation of the village of Aibgha in the Gagra district, now governed by an official accountable to Russia, has been widely condemned, including by the Delegation of the European Union to the Council of Europe (European External Action Service, 2021). Public opposition to this annexation is evident, with 80% of the participants, as per a Telegram poll, opposing the handover of Aibgha (Radio Free Europe, 2022; Telegram Poll, 2022). Additionally, the acquisition of the Bitchvinta dachas by Moscow met with protests from Abkhazian youth, underscoring the local dissent against such actions (OC Media, 2022). The most recent indicator of Russia's expanding influence is the establishment of a military naval base in the Ochamchire region (Eurasianet, 2022). Typically, public protests against decisions made by the de facto leadership, especially those aligned with Moscow, are rare in Abkhazia. However, the increasing frequency of these incidents is a clear indicator to the Abkhazian people of the potential threat to their autonomy. Consequently, despite facing oppression, some citizens are finding the courage to express their dissent through protests.

Simultaneously, the advocacy for a robust defense capability for Georgia, albeit not solely or primarily directed toward Abkhazia, underscores a pragmatic recognition of the broader geopolitical dynamics. A militarily fortified Georgia could, under specific circumstances, catalyze peace negotiations, embodying a deterrent while extending an olive branch of dialogue.

In synthesis, navigating the intricacies of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict demands a nuanced, peace-oriented approach that transcends historical grievances while preparing for a spectrum of future contingencies. The emphasis on peaceful engagement, buttressed by a fortified defense posture, encapsulates a balanced, forward-looking strategy aimed at fostering a climate conducive to constructive dialogue and eventual reconciliation.

The nuanced landscape of conflicts, each with its distinct characteristics yet possessing certain commonalities, presents a complex tableau for analysis and resolution. The Abkhazian conflict, nestled within this tableau, exemplifies a scenario where conventional solutions may falter, and unorthodox strategies (Track Tree Diplomacy or Cosmopolitan Communication Method) might bear fruit. The elusive nature of a definitive resolution stems from a paucity of concerted efforts to engender meaningful progress from both sides.

The narrative of the Abkhazian conflict transcends the simplistic binaries of territorial integrity and Russian occupation, delving into a more profound historical and socio-cultural stratum. The militaristic avenue, while potentially addressing the territorial aspect, falls significantly short of addressing the crux of the discord.

A poignant reality underscores the discourse: Abkhazia embodies the sole homeland for the Abkhazians. The stark implications of this reality accentuate the unacceptability of military solutions that envisage either the annihilation or subjugation of the Abkhazian populace. These draconian alternatives not only deviate from the norms of civilized state conduct but also invite unequivocal international condemnation. The specter of genocide and ethnic cleansing, coupled with the

ensuing apartheid conditions, starkly contravenes international humanitarian norms, and would indubitably tarnish Georgia's standing in the global arena (CSCE, 1994, pp. 18–19).

The comparison of the Karabakh conflict, often invoked as a comparative scenario, unveils a weak analogy given the disparate geopolitical and demographic contexts. The Azerbaijani stance toward the integration of Karabakh's Armenian populace starkly contrasts with the existential dilemma facing the Abkhazians. The proposition for Karabakh Armenians to migrate to the Republic of Armenia lacks a parallel solution for Abkhazians, whose attachment to Abkhazia is inseparable.

The path toward resolving the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict necessitates a radical departure from militaristic inclinations, embracing instead a nuanced, empathetic, and collaborative approach. Acknowledging the unique historical and socio-cultural dimensions of the conflict, coupled with a steadfast commitment to peaceful dialogue and mutual respect, may pave the way for a sustainable resolution that honors the dignity, rights, and aspirations of all parties involved.

Navigating the labyrinthine path of conflict resolution often entails a protracted and arduous journey, as illustrated by the enduring Cyprus conflict. The experience from Cyprus emanates a potent lesson on the impediments engendered by unilateral obstructions to resolution efforts. The aspiration for a more expeditious resolution in the Georgian-Abkhazian context hinges on the establishment of free traffic, symbolizing a conduit for interaction and mutual understanding.

An examination of the prevailing peace initiatives reveals a nascent peace community, whose efforts, though well-intentioned, have yet to yield substantial results. The narrative space is often occupied by ostensibly immature and ineffective campaigns emanating from various civil societies and political circles. These campaigns, encapsulated by phrases like “ბოდიში” (Sorry in Georgian), “Mshibzia” (Hello in Abkhazian), and “There was Abkhazia before Bucha,” inadvertently stoke militaristic fervor by fostering a replica of peace policy. Such narrow perspectives not only misrepresent the complexity of the conflict but also engender a retaliatory ethos, further alienating the stakeholders. When such campaigns falter in delivering tangible outcomes, they inadvertently boost the allure of forceful methods, thus undermining the essence of a genuine peace policy.

The discourse on apologies appears to be a futile endeavor, diverting focus from the quintessential objective of forging a shared future. Apologies, whether from Georgians or Abkhazians, may not significantly advance the reconciliation process. The focal point should rather be on crafting a collaborative roadmap toward a common future, a goal that resonates with existential imperatives for both communities. The preservation of Abkhazian identity is intertwined with a harmonious relationship with Georgia, underscoring a mutual dependence that transcends historical grievances.

The synthesis of a new narrative, untethered from the shackles of past animosities and centered on a shared vision for a harmonious co-existence, emerges as a pivotal endeavor. Such a narrative would not only reflect a mature understanding of the multifaceted nature of the conflict but also herald a new epoch of constructive engagement, propelling both Georgians and Abkhazians toward a sustainable resolution and a shared destiny.

The narrative of conflict resolution is invariably marked by a requisite for compromise, as underscored by Levon Ter Petrosian's reflections on the Karabakh conflict. His experience, though embedded in a distinct geopolitical context, evokes a principle of compromise as an indispensable avenue toward conflict resolution (Ter-Petrosyan, 1997). The fate that befell Ter Petrosian, orchestrated by nationalist and militaristic factions resistant to compromise, and the subsequent ramifications borne by Armenia after two decades, encapsulates a poignant lesson on the cost of intransigence.

In the contemporary discourse surrounding Abkhazia, Georgians occupy a vantage point of moral and legal ascendancy, fortified by the endorsement of international law and the international community. This endorsement, however, should not engender complacency but should catalyze a proactive and judicious engagement aimed at fostering a conducive environment for reconciliation.

The moral and legal high ground does not obviate the necessity for compromise, nor does it guarantee a favorable resolution. The onus, therefore, lies on both Georgians and Abkhazians to transcend the historical animosities and entrenched narratives, and to navigate toward a mutually acceptable compromise. The alternative, a perpetuation of the status quo or a descent into forceful confrontation, portends a grim future fraught with unending strife.

The efficacy of the actions undertaken in this endeavor will significantly influence the trajectory of the conflict resolution process. Acting with prudence, empathy, and a genuine commitment to peaceful dialogue could harness the moral and legal advantages, translating them into tangible progress toward a sustainable resolution. Conversely, a misjudgment or a recalcitrant stance could squander these advantages, perpetuating the cycle of conflict and eluding the elusive peace.

The Russian Federation's involvement is a critical element that must be rigorously assessed, given its subsuming of Abkhazian interests within its geopolitical agenda, as recent events have starkly illustrated. A crucial step toward achieving peace between Georgians and Abkhazians involves significantly reducing if not eliminating, Russia's role in this conflict—a task that appears daunting. Georgia is acutely aware of how Russia has leveraged the situation to its advantage. Russia's role in the Abkhazian conflict extended beyond active military support to include diplomatic maneuvers against Georgia. Through a series of agreements dated September 3, 1992, May 14, 1993, and July 27, 1993, Russia effectively orchestrated the disarmament of Georgian forces. This strategy paved the way for the triumph of Abkhazian separatists, backed implicitly by the Kremlin's strategic interests. The presence of Russian military forces on occupied territory presents a formidable obstacle to dialogue with Abkhazia and the attainment of the necessary compromises for resolution.

The evolving geopolitical dynamics in the Abkhazian region necessitate a strategic reassessment within Abkhazian society. It is becoming increasingly evident that the most viable path to survive assimilation by Russia may be through alignment with the European Union via Georgia. This perspective holds for Georgia as well; EU membership emerges as a critical bulwark against Russian geopolitical ambitions in the region. The prospect of EU integration, growing ever more tangible, offers a potential avenue for both Abkhazia and Georgia to safeguard their sovereignty and political autonomy in the face of external pressures (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023).

The path toward a harmonious resolution in Abkhazia necessitates a delicate balance of upholding moral and legal principles while embracing the pragmatism inherent in compromise. It is within this dialectic of principles and pragmatism that the seeds of a lasting peace could be sown, fostering a new chapter of Georgian-Abkhazian relations marked by mutual respect, understanding, and a shared aspiration for peaceful coexistence.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent from the participants or participants legal guardian/next of kin was not required to participate in this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

SK: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. DB: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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In memoriam

In memory of Zurab Bragvadze.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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