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The Georgian Population of Occupied Abkhazia and Peace Initiatives

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Peace initiatives and strategies contribute to the cessation of conflict, the reduction of tension, the establishment of peace, and the initiation of dialogue between opposing parties. These initiatives can take various forms, including: Negotiations and dialogue between the conflicting sides; Mediation, in which a third party (such as an international organization, a foreign country, or a special representative) facilitates communication and agreement between the parties; Reintegration and reconciliation programs, aimed at unifying society after conflict and supporting affected groups through targeted projects; Humanitarian initiatives, including the protection of civilians, the provision of humanitarian aid, and the creation of a stable environment; Educational and cultural programs, which promote a culture of peace, teach tolerance, and help reduce hostility between opposing communities. *The objective of this research* is to explore the attitudes of the Georgian population living in occupied Abkhazia toward peace initiatives implemented by international organizations, the Georgian government, and third-party states. Naturally, this issue is closely tied to political and socio-economic factors, which are evident both among those displaced from Abkhazia and those still residing under occupation. Gathering the perspectives of the Georgian population living under occupation was challenging but meaningful. Through personal connections and support, we were able to engage with participants. The research focused particularly on which peace initiatives they trust most and which they feel have had a tangible impact on their lives under occupation. *Findings* indicate that despite various efforts, peacebuilding in the Abkhazian region remains fraught with challenges. Conflict transformation requires more than dialogue and trust-building – it demands socio-economic initiatives that promote equality, security, and sustainable peace for all stakeholders. In this context, peace education and the promotion of a culture of peace are essential, and this process cannot succeed without the active engagement and support of international organizations.

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Key words: Occupied Abkhazia, Population, Peace Initiatives, Peace Culture, Peace Education.

Ардашелія Омар. Грузинське населення окупованої Абхазії та мирні ініціативи. Мирні ініціативи та стратегії сприяють припиненню конфлікту, зниженню напруженості, установленню миру й початку діалогу між протидіючими сторонами. Ці ініціативи можуть мати різні форми, як-от: переговори та діалог між конфліктуючими сторонами; медіація, під час якої третя сторона (наприклад міжнародна організація, іноземна держава чи спеціальний представник) сприяє спілкуванню й досягненню згоди між сторонами; програми реінтеграції та примирення, спрямовані на об'єднання суспільства після конфлікту, і підтримку постраждалих груп через цільові проекти; гуманітарні ініціативи, уключаючи захист цивільного населення, надання гумані-

тарної допомоги та створення стабільного середовища; освітні й культурні програми, які пропагують культуру миру, навчають толерантності та допомагають зменшити ворожнечу між протилежними громадами. Метою цього дослідження є вивчення ставлення грузинського населення, яке проживає в окупованій Абхазії, до мирних ініціатив, які здійснюють міжнародні організації, уряд Грузії й треті країни. Природно, що це питання тісно пов'язане з політичними та соціально-економічними факторами, які є очевидними як серед переміщених осіб з Абхазії, так і серед тих, хто досі проживає в окупації. Зібрати погляди грузинського населення, що живе в умовах окупації, було складно, але важливо. Завдяки особистим зв'язкам і підтримці ми змогли взаємодіяти з учасниками. Дослідження зосереджене на тому, яким мирним ініціативам вони найбільше довіряють і які, на їхню думку, мали відчутний вплив на їхнє життя під окупацією. Висновки свідчать, що, незважаючи на різноманітні зусилля, розбудова миру в абхазькому регіоні залишається повною проблемою. Трансформація конфлікту потребує не тільки діалогу й зміцнення довіри – їй необхідні соціально-економічні ініціативи, які сприяють рівності, безпеці та стійкому миру для всіх зацікавлених сторін. У цьому контексті освіта миру й сприяння культурі миру є важливими, і такий процес не може бути успішним без активної участі та підтримки міжнародних організацій.

Ключові слова: окупована Абхазія, населення, миротворчі ініціативи, культура миру, освіта миру.

INTRODUCTION

Peace initiatives in conflict and adjacent regions aim to transform conflict, rebuild trust between opposing communities, and implement mechanisms that promote peaceful coexistence. Across the world, both local and international organizations actively participate in these processes.

In Georgia's two regions currently occupied by Russia – Abkhazia and South Ossetia (historically known as Shida Kartli) – the presence of Russian military forces persists. The ethnic Georgian population residing within these conflict zones faces dual oppression and pressure. This paper argues that the separatist authorities' aggressive anti-Georgian policies operate in direct coordination with Russian occupation forces. As a result, faith in peace initiatives has significantly diminished among the population of both regions. This tendency is particularly pronounced among displaced persons from Abkhazia, currently residing in Tbilisi and other parts of Georgia.

The aim of the study

The present study was prompted by the need to explore displaced persons' attitudes towards peace initiatives. Its primary objective is to examine how Georgians residing in occupied Abkhazia perceive peace efforts undertaken by international organisations and the Georgian government.

1. METHODOLOGY

Given the ongoing occupation, direct access to this territory for research purposes remains impossible. The region is defined as a conflict zone, which significantly complicates communication and data collection. Nevertheless, using carefully selected methodologies, we were able to conduct a comprehensive investigation of the issue. The next section presents the analytical framework and structure of this study.

Research Objective: To explore how the ethnic Georgian population residing in occupied Abkhazia perceives peace initiatives proposed by the Georgian government and international actors.

Research Methodology: To examine the restoration of trust in peace initiatives among Georgians in Abkhazia, a mixed-methods approach was deemed appropriate, as trust is deeply connected to social, emotional, and identity-related dimensions. Qualitative methods included interviews, focus groups, and the Delphi method. In some cases, quantitative methods were also applied to develop a comprehensive picture.

Target Group: The study focused on ethnic Georgians from Abkhazia who are able to cross the Enguri River—the de facto boundary between occupied Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia. Participants were primarily from the Gali Municipality (123), Sokhumi (16), Ochamchire (32), and Tkvarcheli (6), totaling 177 respondents residing in the occupied territory.

This scientific work is based on previous research and memoirs about the Abkhaz conflict and the population displaced from Abkhazia (Diasamidze, 2002, 2005; Shevardnadze, 2005; Toria, 2015; Shevardnadze, 2018; Gamakharia, & Topuridze, 2021; Ardashelia, 2022; Ardashelia, 2024). Attitudes towards peace initiatives among the population living in the occupied territory of Abkhazia were conducted by us for the first time. Naturally, surveying the population in the occupied territory is a difficult issue, but based on personal contacts, we collected a sufficient number of respondents for the creation and analysis of the database.

2. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Abkhaz conflict, between the Georgian government and Abkhaz separatists, is one of the most tragic episodes in Georgia's recent history. Abkhazia was previously an autonomous republic within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. According to the current constitution of Georgia, Abkhazia is a region with autonomous status. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, ethnic and political tensions escalated in an attempt to preserve the integrity of the empire. Initially, Abkhaz separatists sought to accede to Russia, but subsequently opted to establish an independent Abkhazian state, without consulting the local indigenous population regarding their desire to secede from Georgia and attain independence. This process served to exacerbate the prevailing circumstances on the ground, resulting in the obstruction of the central railway line, thereby engendering a disruption in the transit of freight and passenger trains operating within the Moscow-Tbilisi, Moscow-Yerevan, and Moscow-Baku directions. Rail traffic posed a particularly existential threat to the Armenian economy, which had no other connecting route to the Russian economic space except for the narrow-gauge Tbilisi-Larsi road. This route was often closed due to difficult terrain and heavy snowfall. It is evident that the obstruction of the Abkhazian segment of the Transcaucasian Railway was not conducive to the economic interests of Georgia. The newly elected Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, Vladislav Ardzinba, asserted that he and his supporters were not complicit in the blocking of the central railway line, attributing this process instead to the supporters of the exiled President of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia. In such a case, the Georgian government, taking into account its own and neighbouring states' economic interests, decided to eliminate the circumstances hindering movement on the central line of the Transcaucasian Railway with the support of the Georgian militia. In his memoirs, Eduard Shevardnadze, who was then the head of state of Georgia, recalls that this decision was made following telephone conversations between the Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, and Vladislav Ardzinba (Shevardnadze, 2005; Shevardnadze, 2018).

On 14 August 1992, the Georgian militia (a unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs) in coordination with the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia (part of the Georgian militia) advanced across the Enguri River and proceeded along the Transcaucasian railway line towards Sokhumi. The present study examines the role of separatist Abkhazian and Chechen-Caucasian informal armed formations in relation to the Georgian militia during the armed conflict (Shevardnadze, 2018; Diasamidze, 2002). The analysis focuses on the incident that occurred near the village of Okhurei, Ochamchir municipality, where these armed formations opened fire. This event marked the commencement of the fratricidal war in Abkhazia, wherein groups of North Caucasians¹ had mobilised in advance in support of the Abkhazians, the so-called «Confederates». These included Cossacks, the Armenian «Bagramian's Battalion», and units of the regular Russian army. With the exception of Ukrainian volunteers, no individuals from the Georgian side were involved (Ardashelia, 2022; Ardashelia, 2024).

During the war, and especially in the aftermath of the fall of Sokhumi in September 1993, large-scale ethnic cleansing was perpetrated against Georgians in Abkhazia. According to the United Nations, approximately 250,000 Georgians and non-Georgians, including Abkhazians who expressed support for the unity of Georgia, departed Abkhazia (Diasamidze, 2002). It is estimated that thousands of civilians lost their lives, suffered torture, or were forcibly disappeared without leaving a trace. In the aftermath of the war, the Georgian army suffered a decisive defeat, leading to the attainment of «de facto» independence by Abkhazia. However, from a legal standpoint, the region remains an integral part of Georgia. It is unfortunate that Russian peacekeepers entered the region. Although they were initially granted a peacekeeping mandate, after 2008 they effectively became an occupying force. Negotiations on the Abkhaz issue have remained futile and deadlocked to this day.

Current status quo:

- Following the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, the Russian Federation formally acknowledged the “independence” of Abkhazia, a move subsequently emulated by several other states. Currently, Abkhazia is recognized by 5 countries of the United Nations: the Russian Federation (August 26,

¹ It is noteworthy that none of the Ingush from the North Caucasus population participated in the war against Georgia. In response, the then President of Chechnya, Dzhokhar Dudayev, made a call to Chechens to establish themselves outside of Chechnya if they were to participate in the war against Georgia. Nevertheless, it is evident that several groups of Chechens participated in this war.

2008), Nicaragua (September 5, 2008), Venezuela (September 10, 2008), Nauru (December 15, 2008), Syria (May 29, 2018); its independence is also recognized by some other partially recognized or unrecognized countries.

- The prevailing opinion among the majority of the international community is that Abkhazia constitutes an integral part of Georgia.
- Abkhazia is a territory that is currently under the de facto control of the Abkhazian government, which is supported and effectively ruled by the Russian government.
- The return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to the region remains prohibited.
- The resolution of the ongoing political discord is being protracted.

Therefore, the Abkhazian conflict represents a complex knot of ethnic, political, and geopolitical factors. Despite the considerable time that has passed and the significant international efforts undertaken, there has been no substantive progress. The return of thousands of displaced persons, the territorial integrity of Georgia, and regional stability remain major challenges. Under such circumstances, initiating peace initiatives assumes paramount importance for restoring trust between the parties and facilitating communication between societies. The implementation of these initiatives is a shared responsibility of both international and local organisations

The role of international and local organisations:

UNDP¹ and the European Union: Within the framework of the EU4 Dialogue programme, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and EuroCaf are implementing projects with the objective of improving the socio-economic situation of communities affected by conflict. For instance, in 2024, outpatient clinics in two villages within the Zugdidi municipality, Orsantia and Rike, underwent renovations, thereby extending healthcare services to a population of over 5,500 individuals, comprising Abkhazians, Georgians, and other nationalities residing in Abkhazia. The scope of the project encompassed the adaptation of medical facilities to accommodate individuals with disabilities.

Peace Development Center (PDC): the organisation was founded in 2014 with the objective of fostering peaceful dialogue between Georgian and Abkhazian youth. In 2016 and 2017, the organisation implemented projects such as the “Peacebuilding Discussion Platform”, which provided opportunities for young people to learn about conflicts and discuss ways to build mutual understanding.

Democracy Research Institute (DRI): the “Civil Platform for Peace”, a project initiated by the DRI, has been established with the objective of providing support for the implementation of Georgia's peace policy. Furthermore, this initiative seeks to enhance the humanitarian and legal situation of the conflict-affected population, whilst also facilitating an expansion in dialogue with Abkhazian and South Ossetian communities.

Social Justice Center (SJC): the SJC's primary objective is to enhance human rights, humanitarian, and social conditions in Abkhazia and the self-proclaimed South Ossetia. The organisation is actively involved in the enhancement of Georgia's peace policy, the creation of opportunities for EU engagement, and the development of platforms for conflict transformation.

Engagement of youth in the domain of peace initiatives:

World Vision Youth Initiatives: the youth camps operated by World Vision in Abkhazia have been demonstrated to have a positive impact on the development of understanding and trust among young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds. For instance, 120 young people aged between 14 and 18 participated in a camp where they learned peacebuilding and conflict resolution strategies. Furthermore, the camp participants engaged in Model UN sessions, which provided an opportunity to learn about the work of international organisations.

In the context of the *peace initiatives pursued by the Georgian government*, the Georgian Health and Social Protection Programmes have garnered notable popularity among the population of Abkhazia. These programmes encompass a wide range of health and social services, including the rehabilitation of children and adults, instrumental and endoscopic examinations, clinical and laboratory studies, dentistry for children and adults, reproductive health promotion, multidisciplinary screening of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Abkhazia, medical care for cancer patients, children's rehabilitation, and numerous other services².

¹ UNDP – The United Nations Development Programme.

² For details, see: Website of the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs of Abkhazia: <https://www.abkhazia.gov.ge/public/saministro/MINISTRY-OF-HEALTH-AND-SOCIAL-AFFAIRS/page/Programs>

Furthermore, the Georgian government is implementing a special programme for the development of small businesses in Abkhazia.

Within the breakaway region of Abkhazia, the *Public Chamber of Abkhazia* has been established. The Public Chamber of Abkhazia is an advisory body to the President of Abkhazia, with the purpose of promoting public participation in politics, conducting consultations and making recommendations on draft laws. The Chamber also serves as a public oversight body, overseeing the activities of the executive branch. It is noteworthy that this body rarely cooperates with the Georgian population of Abkhazia.

Our survey aims to clarify the attitudes of the Georgian population of Abkhazia towards the peace initiatives launched by the above-mentioned organisations. And, based on the analysis of the data obtained using the research tool we developed - a questionnaire, a general picture emerged.

It is noteworthy that the Georgian population residing in Abkhazia continues to harbour a degree of optimism regarding the prospects of peace initiatives and the restoration of peaceful coexistence. For instance, which institutions are most worthy of trust when it comes to the restoration of peaceful coexistence in Abkhazia? The respondents' answers were distributed across a five-point scale as follows:

- International organisations – 5;
- the Georgian government – 4;
- the Abkhaz people – 3;
- Russia – 2;
- Legitimate government of Abkhazia in Tbilisi – 1;
- de facto (separatist) government of Abkhazia – 0.

Which peace initiatives are most effective in restoring trust between conflicting societies? The following were the most frequently mentioned by respondents: economic support programs; social, including healthcare, support programs (these programs are implemented by the Georgian government); sports, cultural and scientific events; peace education and peace culture training; humanitarian assistance; programs supporting women's rights, and others.

Which peace initiatives would you like to see implemented or continued to improve the situation of the population living in occupied Abkhazia? The respondents' answers were distributed as follows: healthcare programs; projects supporting entrepreneurship; support for access to education; learning foreign languages (this project is implemented online from Tbilisi by the Government of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia); creation of objective and balanced information resources; youth leadership programs, etc.

These survey results confirm that the Georgian population living in occupied Abkhazia, who has been deprived of their electoral rights, the right to speak and study in Georgian, the right to openly declare their origin, etc., despite their disappointment, still has high trust in international organisations and the Georgian government.

Data analysis has shown us:

- How many people are interested in the unity of Georgia? It should be noted that the percentage of the idea of the unity of Georgia is very high among Georgians living in occupied Abkhazia. It is noteworthy that this idea is experiencing a sad devaluation in the rest of Georgian society.
- How much do they believe in peaceful coexistence?
- Who do they trust (the Georgian state, international organisations, Abkhazian society, separatist authorities, etc.)
- What do Georgians living in Abkhazia fear most?

Based on data analysis and discussion of various expert forecasts and recommendations studied using the Delphi method, the results of the study of the attitudes of the Georgian population of Abkhazia towards peace initiatives look like this: The majority of the population believes that patience and time will gradually help restore trust. The population of Gali municipality in particular is open to peace initiatives. These include daily interactions with Abkhazians, such as trade and social contacts. For example, in the Gali market, Georgians provide Abkhazians with local agricultural products, which helps to strengthen trust and cooperation, although there are frequent cases of Abkhazians seizing products. Nevertheless, trade relations contribute to the development of dialogue within society.

The results of the survey conducted revealed that the Georgian population of Abkhazia is vulnerable to further restrictions on their security and rights. The results of our survey showed, and previous studies have

also openly shown, that the Georgian population of Abkhazia is vulnerable and there is a fear of further restrictions on their security and rights. Despite the fact that the Georgian population is ready to participate in the peace processes, their fear of violations of their rights and security issues is well-founded. Fear is especially felt in the responses of Georgians living in the Gali municipality, who note that they do not feel protected by the Abkhazian authorities and think that their rights are extremely violated (electoral rights, education, labor, healthcare, etc.).

A large part of the surveyed population believes that external factors have a significant influence on the policy of the separatist government. For example, Russia's policy in Abkhazia has a notable impact on the local population. Some researchers argue that the draft investment law initiated by Russia in 2024, which would have allowed Russian businessmen to purchase real estate in Abkhazia, triggered mass protests and ultimately led to the bill's cancellation. These events demonstrated that the Abkhaz population is not ready to fully accept Russian influence in the region. In reality, this reflected the fear among separatist Abkhazians that Georgian businessmen living in Russia might invest in Abkhazia and return to their ancestral homes.

The responses revealed a degree of optimism about the future, particularly among the population of the Gali municipality. Despite current challenges, the Georgian population of Abkhazia remains hopeful for the success of the peace process and believes that Georgia will one day be reunified, with Georgians and Abkhazians restoring their historical ties. For example, both our survey and the 2020 survey indicated that a large portion of the Georgian population believes that the Georgian government should strengthen relations with the Abkhaz community.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the numerous initiatives that have been implemented, the peacebuilding process in the Abkhazian region continues to face considerable challenges. Conflict transformation is based on the premise that dialogue and trust must be strengthened, and that structural changes are needed to ensure equality and security for all parties involved. The active involvement and support of both local and international organisations remain essential to this process.

The attitude of the Georgian population residing in Abkhazia towards peace initiatives is generally positive. However, there is a degree of caution and concern regarding security and violations of fundamental human rights – issues that require an immediate and coordinated response from both the Georgian government and international organisations. It is vital that peace processes focus on rebuilding trust, safeguarding the rights of the local population, and reducing the influence of external actors, particularly Russia.

Sensitive issues for the Georgian population living under occupation include the aspiration for Georgian national unity, access to education in the Georgian language, the establishment of Georgian song and dance ensembles, the transfer of Georgian books to Abkhazia, the publication of a Georgian-language newspaper, the creation of Georgian-language radio broadcasts, and similar initiatives.

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