Conflicting Narratives in Abkhazia and Georgia

Different Visions of the Same History and the Quest for Objectivity

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Introduction

This analysis will discuss conflicting narratives of Abkhazians and Georgians concerning the same historical facts. Abkhazia, an autonomous republic within Georgia, became an arena of war between Georgians and Abkhazians. The former fought for the territorial integrity of Georgia. The latter strove to secede, to win independence from Georgia. Both Georgians and Abkhazians look to history for justification of their respective causes. Both regard the land of Abkhazia their natural homeland. At the same time, radical politicians in Georgia and Abkhazia, as well as historians supporting them, deny each other’s claims of being autochthons. Both sides see historical justification as crucial for gaining a moral-ideological superiority during the war. “The attempt [of Abkhazian scholars] to find the most ancient layer of the Abkhazian toponyms [in eastern Abkhazia] is groundless. It goes against the historical evidence and, therefore, is doomed to failure,”[1] writes a Georgian scholar. The implication is that, therefore, the Abkhazian separatist movement is also doomed to failure. As if in response, an Abkhazian journalist asks, “How can it be that one nation has its own truth and other nation its own [different truth]? Do not there exist objective criteria of historical truth?!” The journalist goes on to claim that the unbiased study of history substantiates the full right of Abkhazians to separate from Georgia, noting, “In the moral sense Georgia has lost this war…long before it lost the war on the battlefield.”[2]

The following discussion will show that both Georgian and Abkhazian radicals have twisted the historical evidence to serve their political goals. Moreover, it will be argued that an objective vision of history can provide a ground for rapprochement between Georgians and Abkhazians. This analysis will suggest that history needs to be rewritten for secondary school curricula, as an indispensable element of building a spirit of commonality and mutual respect between Georgians and Abkhazians, as well as between other ethnic groups in Georgia. By way of background, a concise account of the recent war between Georgians and Abkhazians and its historical context follows.

The Recent War (1992-93) and its Aftermath

After the demise of the Soviet Union, latent ethnic tensions surfaced in different parts of its vast territory. Georgia was one of the most vulnerable ex-Soviet republics in this respect. Georgia included within its frontiers three autonomous republics, of which two, Abkhazian and South Ossetian Autonomous Republics were give this status on an ethnic basis in Soviet times. The first President of the newly independent Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, came to power in April 1991 with a strongly nationalist position. This nationalism implied, on the one hand, granting to the Georgian ethnicity a priority status in the country and, on the other hand, strong opposition to Russia. This nationalist position of the government by the government of the independent Georgia created unrest among ethnically non-Georgian citizens. Many, wary of the new regime, left the country.[3] Abkhazians and Ossetians, ethnically different from Georgians, responded to this aggressive nationalism by creating their own nationalist parties. The parties “Aidiglara” (Abkhazia) and “Adamon Nichas” (South Ossetia), had overt links to and the support of Russia, who wanted to constrain Georgia’s independence through the dissenting Abkhazians and Ossetians. Russia’s wish was to safeguard its former grip in the region. The ever increasing tension developed into a full-fledged war in South Ossetia, when the President Gamsakhurdia coerced the Georgian Parliament into abolishing South Ossetian Autonomy and renaming South Ossetia the “District of Samachablo” – the Georgian name of the land. The war lasted a few months with devastating consequences for both sides. The Osetian case was a signal to Abkhazians to mobilize their powers even more against the Georgian enemy.
The Abkhazian parliament, divided into two factions including Abkhazians, who held 28 seats and Georgians who held 26. Unanimous decisions of the Abkhazian faction for secession from Georgia were unanimously rejected by the Georgian faction.[4] Gamsakhurdia’s dictatorial government was ousted by a “democratic coup”[5] in January 1992. Soon after, Edward Shevardnadze, who did not participate in the coup, was summoned from Moscow to become the new President of Georgia. However, the chief actors in the coup, the military leaders Tengiz Kitovani and Jaba Ioseliani, held the real power. Soon afterwards, on August 14, 1992, Georgian troops led by Tengiz Kitovani, entered the territory of the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic on the pretext of protecting the railway from frequent looting. Another pretext was to liberate a parliamentarian Sandro Kavsadze kidnapped by the ex-President Gamsakhurdia’s supporters and allegedly detained in Abkhazia. Without notifying President Shevardnadze,[6] Kitovani entered Sukhumi, the capital of Abkhazia, and occupied the Abkhazian Parliament. He announced the fall of the “pro-Communist Abkhazian government.” A war followed that continued till October 1993 taking thousands of lives from both sides. Abkhazians, benefiting from the support of the North Caucasian militarists – particularly Chechens – and, more importantly, of Russia, were victorious. About 250,000 Georgians living in Abkhazia, who made the Autonomous Republic’s majority (57% compared to 17% of Abkhazians), fled to Georgia, fearing the Abkhazians’ vengeance. Abkhazians proclaimed independence, which, however, was not recognized by the UN.

Since then until the present, a volatile status quo, in Edward Walker’s wording, of “no peace, no war”[7] exists between Georgia and Abkhazia. The sides continue to hold radically opposite positions. Georgia demands return of all refugees to their former habitat and a restoration of Abkhazia to its status as an autonomous region, with “the highest level of autonomy.”[8] Abkhazins are unwilling to accept the full-scale return of the refugees, lest they themselves become a minority in the Republic once more, and lest they are victimized by the avenging Georgians.[9] Moreover, considering themselves victorious, Abkhazians claim independence from Georgia. Their ultimate compromise around the issue of independence would be a confederation with equal status.[10]

Russia, the chief moderating power between Georgia and Abkhazia, is in an ambivalent situation. On the one hand, it does not want a strong and a unitary pro-Western Georgia, in order not to lose its previous influence in Caucasus. On the other hand, the secession of Abkhazia from Georgia is not desirable for Russia, since this will establish a precedent of successful separatism to Chechens and other minorities who strive for independence from the Russian Federation. Therefore, the present official position of Russia is the outright support of Georgia’s territorial integrity.

The hostility of Abkhazians towards Georgia did not start with the collapse of the Soviet Union. There is a history of hostilities that goes back at least two centuries. It is impossible to understand the essence of the conflict unless we consider the historical roots of Abkhazian animosity.

The History of the Conflict

Ancient and Medieval History

Abkhazians see themselves as the autochthonous people of the territory of modern Abkhazia. In antiquity, this territory belonged to the Kingdom of Colchis (6th – 1st centuries BC). Later it was either adjacent to or incorporated into the Western Georgian kingdom of Lazika (Egrisi).[11] The Roman and later the Christian Roman (Byzantine) Empire spread its influence there. In the 6th century, the land became a subject of rivalry between Byzantium and Persia. Christianity spread in Abkhazia mainly from Byzantium. Already in the early 4th century there existed a bishopric of Pitiunt created specifically for the people exiled from Byzantium. The Emperor Justinian played a major role in planting Christianity in Abkhazia, facilitating the establishment of the archbishoprics in Pitiunt and Anakopia.[12] In the 8th century, after the weakening of Byzantine power, the Abkhazian Kingdom originated. It soon embraced the whole territory of today’s Western Georgia. The last king of this dynasty died in the 9th century and the kingdom moved to the Bagrationi dynasty, which became the ruler of a strong unitary kingdom
including both Abkhazia and Georgia. The title of the Bagrationi kings was “The King of Abkhazians and Georgians.” The kingdom enjoyed its acme from the beginning of 12th to the beginning of 14th century and then declined after the Mongol invasion.

The former unitary kingdom broke up into small principalities, continuously rivaling each other. The territory of Abkhazia became a domain of the Abkhazian ruler Sharvashidze (Chachba), who became rival of Dadiani, the ruler of the neighboring principality of Megrelia. The North Caucasian tribes ethnically related to Abkhazians participated in these battles, settling in Abkhazia. With the decline of the unitary state since the 14th century, Abkhazia saw a decline of Christian faith, which previously constituted an integral part of its statehood.[13] This process became accelerated by the spread of Islam after the territory fell under the Ottoman Turks’ influence.

Under the Russian Empire

The Abkhazian principality joined the Russian Empire in 1810. Before that, Russia annexed the Kakhetian and the Imeretian kingdoms, as well as the principality of Megrelia – all that remained from the unitary kingdom of the 11th-14th centuries. Abkhazians rebelled on a few occasions against the oppressive economic policy of the Russian Empire. All rebellions failed. However, through them Abkhazians obtained the fame of an infidel people, literally the “guilty population,” in the eyes of Russia. During the Russian-Turkish war in 1878-79, Abkhazians rebelled once again, which propelled the Russian administration to initiate a massive exile of these people to Turkey.[14] The majority of the Abkhazians, about thirty thousand people, were exiled.[15] Leaders of the Georgian national movement at that time, revealing compassion to the Abkhaz people, ardently criticized the Tzarist policy.[16] The Russian Empire consciously started settling Russian populations, as well as people of other nationalities, in vacant places. At the same time they created difficulties for the settlement of Georgians and Abkhazians.[17] However, many Georgian peasants in search of better conditions moved to Abkhazia notwithstanding the prohibition.[18] Thus the ethnic balance in the region shifted. The Russian imperialist policy entailed sowing seeds of hatred between Abkhazians and Georgians, as well as between other ethnic groups of Caucasus.

Abkhazia as an Autonomy of the Independent Georgia in 1918-1921

Soon after the February Revolution of 1917, which ended the existence of the Russian Empire, Georgia proclaimed independence (1918). In the same year, the Georgian army entered Abkhazia to overthrow the Bolshevik rule there. Today’s Abkhazians interpreted this as occupation of Abkhazia. By this time, Georgians made up 42% of the population of Abkhazia while Abkhazians comprised 21.4 %. The Socialist government of the independent Georgia affirmed the full autonomy of Abkhazia within the borders of Georgia. However, the rights of autonomy were violated by the actions of a Georgian general G. Mazniashvili. He paid no heed to the chief organ of the Autonomous Republic – the Abkazian National Council – and, moreover, oppressed the population of Abkhazia.[19] Against that, a faction of the ANC organized a conspiracy and entered into negotiations with the Russian Menshevik Army, the “Army of Volunteers,” to attempt to oust the Georgian army from Abkhazia.

The commander of the Army, General M. S. Alexeev, was eager to listen to the demands of the Abkhazian conspirators, since in belief of the Russians Abkhazia was a “purely Russian land,”[20] organically belonging to the Great Russia. The conspiracy was revealed and the Georgian Government dissolved the ANC. Democratic elections were then organized in Abkhazia, after which the new ANC was elected in 1919. The new ANC in its very first session on March 18-19 announced Abkhazia as a part of the Georgian Democratic Republic with rights of autonomy.

Soviet Times

The independent Georgian Republic was short lived, being occupied by the Bolshevik Russia in 1921. The constitution of 1921, adopted just before the Soviet occupation, confirmed the rights of Abkhazian
autonomy within Georgia. The Soviet Republic of Abkhazia, formed in 1921, was united with the Soviet Republic of Georgia on the ambiguous basis of a “treaty” in 1922. Stalin in 1931 reformulated Abkhazia’s status as the Soviet Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia within the Soviet Republic of Georgia.[21] Abkhazians maintain that Stalin, himself of a Georgian origin, did so in the national interest of Georgians.

However, Abkhazians direct a far greater hostility to another Georgian, Lavrenty Beria, the KGB head of the Soviet Union under Stalin. Beria carried out conscious politics of demographic change in Abkhazia. Repressions in Abkhazia took the lives of virtually all the Abkhazian intelligentsia. Factories built in Abkhazia drew personnel mostly from Georgia, which had huge consequences on the demographic balance.[22] At the same time, the Abkhazian language was suppressed in schools and use of the Georgian language was required instead. Abkhazians saw in all this a forced “Georgianization.”

After the death of Stalin and the execution of Beria, Abkhazians periodically attempted to negotiate with the Kremlin on the issue of separation from Georgia. Through many efforts Abkhazians attained the right to establish their national university (1978). A daily hour-and-a-half “talking-head” television broadcast in Abkhazian also came about. On a personal level, there were friendships as well as intermarriages of Abkhazians and Georgians. However, Abkhazians viewed the very idea of Georgian statehood as entailing their relegation to the status of secondary citizens and, moreover, threatening their survival as a nation.[23] Their political vision already had long rejected the idea of unity with Georgia. A new vision, new historiography has been created, according to which Abkhazians are the only historical autochthons of their territory, with the Georgians as later intruders. On the contrary, some Georgian scholars promulgated the idea that the Abkhazians were later migrants into this territory from the Northern Caucasus. This idea was especially popularized by the ultra-nationalist first post-Soviet independent Georgian President, Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

History’s Role in Modern Political Rhetoric

Historiographers, linguists and ethnographers from both sides have been engaging in virtual battle over the way the history in this region is understood. The scientific edge has a crucial importance. History serves as a foundation of modern rhetoric. If Abkhazians are the only true autochthons of this territory, if the aforementioned Kingdom of Abkhazia, which existed from the 8th to the 9th centuries, was created on ethnic grounds, so that the ethnic Abkhazians can claim 1200 years of statehood, then their fight for secession from Georgia would have in Abkhaz eyes a historical, objective justification. However, if the radical Georgian vision were right, according to which Abkhazians are later, 17th century arrivals then, the fight for Georgia’s territorial integrity would find a lawful ground. And, moreover, Georgians, in theory, could claim that the very autonomy of Abkhazia should be abolished and Abkhazia joined to Georgia full-scale, as was done with South Osetia during Gamsakhurdia.

Having provided a historical context, this analysis now turns to a critique of the Georgian and Abkhazian radical positions.

Critique of the Radical Positions of Georgians and Abkhazians

There is evidence that Abkhazians are indeed autochthons of the territory of Abkhazia and not late-comers. According to the radical popular Georgian position, Abkhazian language does not have proper words for the sea and the boat, but has borrowed from other languages, which must prove that they indeed did not live at the seashore, but came down from the Caucasus mountains. However, this is blatant misinformation since Abkhazian has the proper words for both.[24] Toponyms also apparently attest that Abkhazians must have been the autochthonous inhabitants of this territory.[25] The Greek historical annals seem to bear witness that Abkhazians inhabited roughly the same territory as the modern Abkhazia, and that they are a proper ethnic group.[26] That Abkhazians are not newcomers in Abkhazia is evidenced by the fact that the King of the united Abkhazian-Georgian kingdom in 14th century bears two names: George and Lasha. The second name, “Lasha,” as the contemporaneous
Georgian annals assert, is the “Apsarian” word meaning “light” or “enlightener,” and, indeed, this is the modern Abkhazian word also. Thus, the King adopted a name of one of the peoples living in the territory under his sway. By this logic, to assert that Abkhazians, attested to live in this territory already by the ancient sources, have nothing to do with the modern Abkhazians does not seem to be a tenable idea.

However, the Abkhazian position, that the territory originally belonged exclusively to their ethnicity, also does not seem to be a defensible idea. Even in the antiquity the territory was a part of the kingdom of Lazika (the Lazs are people of Georgian ethnicity). Moreover, in the 3rd century BC the king of Lazika, Kudji, submitted his kingdom voluntarily to the king of the Eastern Georgia, Parnavaz, to form a stronger political unit. We do not know what ethnic group Kudji belonged to, and we do know that the King Parnavaz, as his name reveals, ethnically was Persian. Thus, the unified kingdom cannot be said to have an ethnic basis. It was a political union. Nevertheless, this shows, that already in antiquity people living on the territory of the modern Georgia were willing to form a common state and culture, in order to face common enemies together.

As for the Abkhazian kingdom that appeared in the 8th century AD, it does not seem to have had a purely ethnic basis either. First of all, we do not see any trace of hostility either of the King towards Georgians or of Georgians towards the King as the Abkhazian kingdom expanded as to encompass the whole of Western Georgia. Rather, we find, that Georgians willingly accepted the King of Abkhazia as their own king. In fact, the majority of the kingdom of Abkhazia apparently consisted of ethnic Georgians.

Moreover, what did it mean to be a Christian Kingdom in the Middle Ages? It meant that the King formed a unity with the Church. In the Byzantine model, adopted by the Eastern Christian kingdoms, the King was an extension of the Church in the civil realm. Now, the Church implies a language of liturgy, as well as a language of the religious texts – the Bible, the lives of saints, hymnology – that were read for the people’s edification and therefore must have been known by them. Since the 6th century, the language of Christianity in Abkhazia was Greek, because the land was under the Byzantine dominion. However, soon after the establishment of the Abkhazian kingdom, in the 9th century, the Abkahzian Church voluntarily moved from the Byzantine authority to the authority of the Bishop of Mtskheta – the ancient capital of the Eastern Georgia. It adopted Georgian as the language of Christianity. Numerous Georgian inscriptions in the ancient Churches of Abkhazia bear witness to this fact. That there was not any coercion from the side of Georgia is evidenced by the fact that at that time Eastern Georgia could not exert any power, since it had groaned under the Arab occupation since the 7th century. Rather, the voluntary adoption of the Mtkhetan Bishop’s authority and of the Georgian language indicates that Abkhazians felt it more natural and convenient and that the Georgian language was largely known and spoken there. Besides the ecclesiastical language, Georgian was also the language of the state administration. An Abkhazian alphabet did not exist until the end of the 19th century. All surviving textual documents from this land are in Georgian, and later, with the spread of the Ottoman dominion, in Turkish languages.

In the 10th century, when the Abkhazian Kingdom shifted to the Bagrationi, the royal dynasty of Georgia that lasted until the 19th century, this also happened without any hostility from ethnic Abkhazians. The term “Abkhazia” by that time had expanded in its meaning. From an ethnonym it became a common name for Western Georgia. The name acquired geographical-political significance. For instance, an 11th century Georgian Monk, Gorgi the Athonite, in defense of the apostolicity of the Georgian Church, said to the Patriarch of Antioch that “one of the Apostles, Symon the Cananite, is buried in our land, Abkhazia, the place called Nicopsis.” Gorgi was not a Georgian nationalist, and he did not say these words in defiance of ethnic Abkhazians. No tension whatsoever existed then! He simply admitted the historical reality, that Georgians and Abkhazians formed one political unit, regarding this land as their common possession.
A Russian historiographer, Jurij Voronov, with the obvious aim of kindling hostility between Georgians and Abkhazians, created a fantastic narrative claiming that the Abkhazian Kingdom joined the Georgian kingdom in 11th century on the right of autonomy.[32] This is nonsense, but is largely embraced by Abkhazian radicals. The King of the unitary Abkhazia and Georgia was the only sovereign both in the Western (Abkhazia) and the Eastern (Kartli[33]) parts of his dominion. The Kingdom, in turn, was not founded on an ethnic principle, but on political and ideological grounds. It was preeminently a Christian Monarchy. The Monarchs belonging to the Bagrationi family did not assert that they were either Georgian or Abkhazian, but that they, in fact, were originally Hebrew – blood relatives of the Biblical kings David and Solomon.[34] The language of culture, religion and state administration of this Kingdom was Georgian, which does not mean that the Georgian ethnicity held a privileged status.[35] During two centuries, in which this powerful unitary kingdom reached its acme, culture blossomed. Artifacts from all spheres including literature, philosophy, architecture, painting and goldsmithery from this period testify to its status as one of the most precious Medieval Christian cultures. The language of this culture was Georgian, and all people living there participated in this culture through this language.

The author of this article has been working for several years on a Georgian Neoplatonist philosopher of the 12th century Ioane Petritsi. Petritsi wrote his significant philosophical speculations in Georgian and, actually, created the Georgian philosophic language. It is quite possible, that he was ethnically Abkhazian, since in Greek sources he is referred to as an “Abazg (i.e. Abkhazian) grammarian.”[36] Yet, he could have been called Abkhazian even while not being ethnically that, since at that time the term already meant the whole Western part of the united Georgian-Abkhazian kingdom. Sometimes “Abkhazia” stood for the entire Kingdom, just as “Georgian” (“Kartveli”) stood for all Orthodox subjects of the Kingdom. The modern Abkhazian historiographers, who deny the existence of the strong unitary Medieval kingdom (without any ethnic autonomy), in which Georgians, Abkhazians, as well as other ethnic groups created a common culture and fought common enemies, deprive themselves of this great cultural heritage, which likely belongs to Abkhazians and Georgians.

Even after the weakening and disintegration of the Kingdom into a multitude of the separate principalities, which resulted after the Mongol invasion, the Abkhazian principality retained Georgian as the language of Church and administration.[37] In order to prove the inherent hostility of Abkhazians with Georgians, Jurii Voronov points to frequent fighting between the ruler of the Abkhazian principality, Anchabadze, and the ruler of the Megrelian[38] principality, Dadiani. This, however, is an intentional misinterpretation, since these battles and tensions were widespread feudal hostilities that existed not only between Megrelian and Abkhazian principalities but between all principalities of the disintegrated Georgia. Voronov simply wants to create a narrative that will match the hostile attitudes of the modern Abkhazians and fuel their ethnic animosity. As their narrative goes, “Lo! we always fought against Georgians, who throughout history wanted to deprive us our freedom.” The same is true of the Abkhazian journalist Vitali Sharia, who asserts that even then the mountainous people of the North Caucasus, ethnically related to Abkhazians, helped in them in repelling the Megrelian (Georgian) intruders.[39] The truth, however, is that the mountainous people, reputed as good fighters, were hired both by the Abkhazian ruler and the Megrelian ruler during their feudal clashes.[40] They were mercenaries, and not volunteers defending their ethnic relatives.

It is true that, with the disintegration of the kingdom, the Abkhazian principality and the Abkhazian people got alienated from the rest of Georgia. The spread of Islam, as well as settlement of the Northern Caucasian tribes, ethnically related to Abkhazians, in the 16th -17th centuries furthured the process of alienation. Those tribes had no common historical memory or sense of unity with Georgians. Many Georgians living in Abkhazia at that time, in order to be saved from the oppression of the newcomers, assimilated themselves, adopting their customs and pagan religious practices. This is the reason that a considerable portion of the modern Abkhazians are blood descendants of Georgians and still bear Georgian family names.[41]
The Abkhazian nobility still spoke Georgian throughout the centuries that followed the fragmentation of the unitary Georgian Kingdom. As late as the 18th century, the language of the Abkhazian chancery was still Georgian. However, those in lower Abkhazian social classes were largely ignorant of this language. By and large only the ethnic Georgians retained a feeling of cultural continuity with the strong Medieval kingdom. Others were alienated from these medieval roots. The Russian Empire used this alienation to sow seeds of hostility between peoples of Caucasus in general, and between Georgians and Abkhazians in particular. Russians created a new historiography for Abkhazians, to make them feel further removed from Georgians.[42] Besides, the Tzarist Empire aspired also to present the Megrelians and the Svans as separate from Georgians, since both had (and have) their own languages, although related to Georgian, yet not intelligible to a Georgian speaker without studying them as separate languages. However, this plan failed. Both Megrelians and Svans kept their historical memory of one nation and of their homogeneity with the rest of the Georgians. Abkhazians, by large, have lost the same sense of homogeneity. The Georgian side is largely responsible for this loss.

To accentuate the role of Russia in the alienation and the present hostility of Abkhazians is not to expiate Georgians. There was a neglect of Abkhazian interests on the part of the Georgian intelligentsia in 19th-20th centuries. Jacob Gogebashvili, the father of Georgian pedagogy, apparently wrote against a chauvinist fraction of the Georgian intelligentsia in 1907, defending Abkhazians’ right to have the church service and theological literature in their own language. Gogebashvili wrote:

“We, Georgians, who earnestly desire to develop and enrich both our theological language and our native literature, are obliged to wish the same for other ethnic groups, among them also for Abkhazians. No Georgian should resemble a savage, who being asked ‘what is good and what is evil?’ answered: ‘It is good if I take by force my neighbor’s wife, bad if my neighbor does the same to me.’ Such attitude is entirely against Georgian historical traditions.”[43]

During the period of the Soviet Union, the Georgian intelligentsia again displayed nationalist-chauvinist tendencies. Georgians overall did not make any effort to come to know the Abkhazian language and culture. The newly independent government of Georgia in 1991-92 brought nationalism to its utmost by propagating a slogan “Georgia for Georgians!” This proved a hurtful saying in a traditionally multiethnic country. It was not by chance that, fearing this government’s chauvinistic drive, the overwhelming majority of the non-Georgian population of Abkhazia, in the Gorbachevian referendum of March 17, 1991, voted in support of the USSR, rather than joining Georgia in its aspiration for independence.[44]

Teaching History Differently

The educational system of Georgia has been designed to present the achievements of the Medieval Georgian culture as the legacy only of the ethnic Georgians. This is a distorted picture of reality, which has gradually marginalized the other ethnic groups of Georgia. Such an ethnocentric interpretation of history has its roots largely in the 19th century Georgian historiography. The reason for this is understandable: the Russian Empire threatened the very annihilation of the Georgian ethnic identity. Thus, it was natural to accentuate the continuity of specifically Georgian ethnicity with the glorious past. Moreover, as remarked above, by and large, only the ethnically Georgians preserved a feeling of continuity with the unified medieval Georgian Kingdom. Thus, the 21st century poses a novel task to education.

Insofar as the medieval culture still plays a vivid role in forming self-identity and socialization of the Georgians, then exclusion of other ethnic groups from this culture means their relegation to the secondary status of guests in the region. However, if the language of the Medieval culture was Georgian, this does not mean that it was created by and belonged only to the ethnically Georgians.

Unfortunately, there is still a lack of an understanding of “Georgian” as a supra-ethnic category.[45] For the full socialization and integration of different ethnic groups in Georgia, it is vital to rewrite the
history. The present version of the Georgian historiography implicitly reduces other ethnic groups to the status of guests. Since the memory of the past political and cultural glory is so vivid for Georgians, then objective presentation of this culture, as being a product of the joint efforts of different ethnic groups of the unitary kingdom, will help to warrant a full sense of citizenship and civil dignity for all ethnic groups in Georgia. A more objective historiography will, thus, help to strengthen the sense of modern Georgian statehood.

The present-day Georgian constitution indeed gives these warrants. However, constitutions are a product of human reason, written by lawyers in a relatively short time. It is more important and far more difficult to create new psychological dispositions and motivations in the ethnic Georgians for seeing other ethnic groups in Georgia as their full co-citizens and compatriots.

To achieve this, it is vitally important to introduce modified, more objective, history curricula in the Georgian classrooms.

However, a crucial question becomes: Will it be objective historiography or inclusive historiography?[46] What is the force of distinction? To answer this question, it is worth noting that history and historiography are not physical or mathematical realities, which at least can aspire to be completely objective. Rather they are constantly being created by conscious efforts of historical subjects. In order that modern multiethnic Georgia may have healthy polity, it is expedient to create a new vision of a unitary nation. Full dignity of citizenship should be appreciated by all ethnic groups of Georgia. As just said, the glory of the medieval Georgian Kingdom is crucial for the identity of modern Georgians and provides a symbolic basis for even the new-born Georgian statehood. Thus, to ethnically Georgians, their citizenship of the modern independent Georgia is a part of an unbroken continuity of the Medieval tradition. Provided that other ethnic groups are not regarded as an integral part of this tradition, they will automatically be considered as ‘lesser citizens’ and marginalized. But should we, therefore, create an inclusive fiction for political expediency? Such political mythmaking does not seem to be efficient in the long run.[47]

However, in the case of Georgia there is no necessity for the ‘benign lies.’ Even if in reality non-Georgians in Georgia are no more related to the cherished Medieval tradition, an unbiased scrutiny reveals that this tradition stands on shoulders not of Georgians alone, but on those of Abkhazians, Armenians, Jews, Osetians, Persians, Kurds, Syrians etc. Nowadays, the Georgian historical tradition is the exclusive legacy of ethnic Georgians alone. However, the basic argument of this discussion is that there are objective historical grounds for reinterpreting the very same tradition in inclusive terms.[48] This is a strategic task for the modern Georgian statehood and nation-building.

Perhaps the introduction of a novel history curriculum would also help Abkhazians start doubting the Voronov-type historiography, as the theoretical basis for separation from Georgia. This may sound utopian in the present condition of utter hostility, but in the long run striving for objectivity from both Georgians and Abkhazians will lead not to shooting but rather to a handshake.

**Conclusion**

This inquiry described the recent Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, aspirations of both sides and the historical roots of hostilities. It dwelled upon the misinterpretations of historical events by both radical Georgian and Abkhazian sides. Particular attention was given to the question of the modern interpretation of the history of medieval Georgian-Abkhazian statehood, which is one of the crucial points of mutual dissent. Since medieval history is most vivid in the minds of both Georgians and Abkhazians, its unbiased interpretation can serve a major peacemaking role for the future relationships of the two autochthonous people of the region. History taught at the secondary schools should be presented in a more objective light, which will create in different ethnic groups a feeling of commonality and citizenship in Georgia, a traditionally multiethnic country.
Endnotes


[5] Actually, it was a democratic coup, since it brought a democratic government in Georgia. Yet, the means were not democratic, moreover that Gamsakhurdia was democratically elected. The civil war was disastrous for the country and created a breach in Georgian society.

[6] Vakhtang Goguadze, who by the beginning of the war was the Parliament speaker, made later the first official announcement that Shevardnadze did not know about Kitovani’s plan of occupying Sukhumi. Shevardnadze later confirmed this on several occasions, including a TV interview with Russia’s major journalist Andrey Karaulov on a program entitled “The Moment of Truth.”


[9] Abkhaz fear the full-scale return of the Georgian refugees, since, “this would lead either to “ethnic cleansing” by the Georgians, or to more subtle forms of discrimination or cultural pressure that would force them to emigrate, a prospect that is all the more horrifying because, unlike Karabakh Armenians or the Russians who have fled Chechnya, the Abkhaz have no titular state to escape to should they be driven from Abkhazia.” Ibid. p. 24.


[15] Muslim religion was one of the signs of possible perfidy during this period. The grandfather of the grandmother of the author of this article was an Orthodox priest in one of the Abkhazian villages during the Russian-Turkish war. In order to save the Abkhazians from being exiled, he baptized the whole Abkhazian population in a river – as Christians they would not be exiled by the Russian authorities.


[17] Ibid. p. 50.
Ibid. p. 48. Pursuing the policy of colonization, Russia forbade settlement of both Georgians and Abkhazians on the vacant territory. One of the Russian officials wrote: “It is desirable to preserve as much as possible the area of vacant land [in Abkhazia] for settlement of exclusively Russian people.” Cf. Chervonnaya, op. cit. p. 38.

Chervonnaya, op. cit. p. 42.

Ibid. p. 43.

Ibid. p. 45.


Liana Kvarchelia notes that during the war the Abkhazian State Archives and the Institute of History, Language and Literature, with irreplaceable documents and manuscripts, were intentionally burnt to ashes. Abkhazians point to this as an evil symbol of Georgia’s desire to eliminate the very identity of the Abkhaz people. Kvarchelia, op. cit. p. 27.

Kvarchelia, op. cit. 38.

There is an ongoing linguistic debate between Georgian and Abkhazian scholars about this issue.

Cf. Chervonnaya, op. cit. p. 29.

This is probably a linguistic variation of “Apkhazian.” However, in personal communication a Georgian scholar, Sandro Tvaradze, asserted that since the same annals use also the term “Abkhazian” as different from “Apsarian,” then the two must be related to different ethnic groups: the first to ethnically Georgian tribes, the second to ethnically Abkhazian tribes. I do not have an opportunity to make a competent research of this question.


Unfortunately, I do not have an opportunity to make a more detailed research now with regard of this question.

Chervonnaya, op.cit. p. 31.


Meaning Georgia.

Most probably, this was a myth created for safeguarding the dynastic right. However, this proves my thesis that the kings did not build the kingdom on an ethnic basis.

As Jakob Gogebashvili wrote at the turn of the 20th century about this phenomenon, “respect towards rights of different ethnicities in our kingdom was such, that even the most powerful of our kings, the saintly David the Restorer (12th century) often attended religious ceremonies in the Armenian Church and Muslim Mosque, listening to religious services in Armenian and Turkish. Indeed, since there were no second-rate subjects in the Georgian kingdom, all defended the borders of their homeland with selflessness of natural children. This accounts for marvelous longevity of the small kingdom of Georgians in this most hazardous place of the world.” The Issue of Apkhazia, “Zakavkazi” (a newspaper), No.236, 1907.

It is not, though, clear whether the “Abazg grammarian” is indeed Petritsi. Cf. Chelidze, Edisher. Life and Literary Activities of Ioane Petritsi. Religia 3-5, 1994; and 1-3, 1995.

Bejan Khorava, op. cit. p. 32.
Megrelians, as well as Svan belong ethnically to Georgians.

“During the 30 years war (i.e. between Apkhazian and the Megrelian principalities L.G.)in the second quarter of the 17th century with the help of the North Caucasian brothers (also then!) was restored the ancient border of the Abkhazian state on Inguri river.” Vitalii Sharia, op. cit. p. 110.

Bejan Khorava, op. cit. pp. 48-49.

Ibid.


Gogebashvili, op. cit.


If one asks, for instance, an ethnically Osetian who is a citizen of Georgia “what is your nationality?” he will not say “Georgian” but “Osetian.” Yet, in the 13th century, the husband of the most powerful of the Georgian monarchs, the Queen Tamara, was Osetian. No ethnic Georgian would consider him merely a guest. The modern Kurds who are citizens of Georgia will also never say that they are Georgians. Yet, two greatest generals under the same Queen Tamara – John and Zachary Mkhargrdzeli – were Kurds, and none of the Medieval sources play them down on an ethnic basis. How much more is the same with the Abkhazians, who shared with Georgians a common life from times immemorial.

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