

**Becoming a ‘Minority’: Questions of Belonging for Ethnic Georgians in
Abkhazia’s Gali District**

By

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*For Irma, Nini, Máté, and
my dad, Vakho, who have never left me alone*

Abstract

The collapse of the Soviet Union precipitated the eruption of a number of ethnic conflicts on the periphery of the former empire that remained unsolved to this day. The Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, often referred to as ‘frozen’ conflict, is among the bloodiest. Before the 1992-1993 war, Georgians were the biggest ethnic group in Abkhazia; today, only the Gali district, found in the southern corner of the de facto Republic of Abkhazia across the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL), has such a majority. For close to three decades, Gali’s Georgians have lived an unusual reality, continuing their lives in this unrecognized state. The existing literature on the conflict has explored the human rights violations suffered by this minority, yet a gaping hole has been left regarding how almost three decades of conflict, frozen or otherwise, has affected the identity and sense of belonging of the Georgians of the Gali district. Coupling semi-structured interviews with locals in the context of an extensive historical overview, this research explores Gali’s Georgians sense of belonging and attachment towards their district and community – if and how belonging develops and affects conflict-affected societies residing near the ‘border.’

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Introduction

Following the 1992-1993 Abkhaz-Georgian war, the ethnic Georgian population of the Gali district in Abkhazia has been exposed to the choice of appertaining themselves into two groups, following Abkhazia's concurrent declaration of independence. On the one hand, the nation-state they had been associating themselves with — Georgia — has been left across the 'border,' preventing them from being full members of the community of Georgia-proper; their post-1993 alienation only exacerbated by a lack of cohesive policies from successive Georgian Governments. On the other hand, the last twenty-seven years has not allowed Gali's ethnic Georgians to properly assimilate themselves into the *de facto* Abkhazian state either, as a result of the latter continuing to see them as a potential threat to their political claims of self-determination. This almost three-decade-long status quo of the Abkhaz-Georgian frozen conflict has left the ethnic Georgians of the Gali District between two 'worlds,' pushing them towards allocating themselves in an undefined space.

“Movement of borders across people, rather than that of people across borders” is how Rogers Brubaker, in his essay, “Ethnicity in Post-Cold War Europe, East and West,” characterizes the mobilization of ethnic groups in central and eastern Europe.¹ The changing of borders across the Eurasian continent following the fall of the USSR created different reapportions of ethnic groups in this newly formed part of the world.

Ethnic conflicts, especially in this part of the world, are discussed and analyzed through the prism of International Relations, political science, and sociology disciplines. In an article for the *Caucasus Survey*, the Caucasus and Central Asia expert Dr. Laurence Broers compares internal and external politics toward the unrecognized states in the South Caucasus and argues

¹ Rogers Brubaker, „Ethnicity in Post-Cold War Europe, East and West,“ in *Ethnic Europe: Mobility, Identity, and Conflict in a Globalized World*, ed. Roland Hsu (Stanford University Press: 2010), 45.

how an over-dependence on the support of the international community influenced these ‘state’ authorities’ policymaking.² Broers’ framing of the issue is a popular one in the scholarship of the region amongst different authors. When discussing conflicts in Georgia, the influence and consequences of Russia and its politics on the ethnic conflicts of the former are often emphasized, with the argument being that the Kremlin and international organizations hold the keys to any chance of conflict resolution. Such an observation of the Georgian conflicts has become the dominant paradigm in academia. A significant amount of research looks at the conflict from the zoomed-out perspective, where, for the most part, it is but the main political actors and their actions that are analyzed.

A lot of the time, unrecognized states are seen as a temporary phenomenon,³ leading to scientists and policymakers being more oriented towards conflict resolution theories and developing solutions to that end.⁴ While it is true that researchers also provide different approaches to be taken into consideration when talking about conflict resolution, emphasizing, for example, the importance of understanding the particular ethnic groups involved in the conflict,⁵ it is something that is absent from the study of the ethnic conflicts in Georgia. Unsolved and frozen for almost thirty years, the Georgian conflicts and their intergenerational evolution and socio-political changes to the relevant actors remain hidden and unaddressed

² Laurence Broers, “Recognising politics in unrecognised states: 20 years of enquiry into the de facto states of the South Caucasus,” *Caucasus Survey* 1, no. 1 (2013):70-71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2013.11417283>

³ Sergey Markedonov, “The Unrecognized States of Eurasia as a Phenomenon of the USSR’s Dissolution,” *Demokratizatsiya* 20, no. 2 (2012):191-192. <https://bit.ly/2B8n4ZM>

⁴ Marc Howard Ross lists six theoretical approaches to conflict resolution – “community relations, principled negotiation; human needs; psychoanalytically rooted identity; intercultural miscommunications and conflict transformation,” and emphasizes the importance of intergroup communication the unit here is main hostile groups. Marc Howard Ross, “Creating the conditions for peacemaking: theories of practice in ethnic conflict resolution.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23, no. 6 (2000): 1004. <https://doi.org/10.1080/014198700750018397>.

⁵ Isajiw W Wsevolod, “Approaches to ethnic conflict resolution: paradigms and principles.” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 24, no. 1 (2000): 105. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767\(99\)00025-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767(99)00025-5).

from an analytical perspective. This is a deficit in the literature — and consequential policy-making — that this thesis seeks to atone for.

What I found through these readings and personal experience is that the existing literature on the conflict in Georgia and in particular about people in the Gali district mostly addresses their political participation, rights, and the economic factors that the group is dealing with.^{6 7 8} Therefore, these research papers and policy recommendations are conducted from the existing perspective of Gali inhabitants being ethnic Georgians. While their ethnicity is indeed a genealogical fact, changes in the group's sense of and belonging throughout this 'post-war' period of the frozen conflict remain neglected.

The scope of this study is to research the topic of belonging and answer the question of how the change of Gali's ethnic Georgian population's political status — from being the dominant ethnicity in Abkhazia to becoming a minority — influenced their identity and why it transformed their sense of belonging despite them never having changed their place of residence.

Even though ethnic Georgians live on the territory of the so-called “Republic of Abkhazia,” they have minimal access to political and civil rights. For example: they are prohibited from studying in the Georgian language;⁹ they cannot participate in local *de facto* elections due to only being allotted residence permits instead of passports; and their ability to cross the Enguri river — the bridge being the only official checkpoint for Gali inhabitants to cross the

⁶ Giulia Prelz Oltramonti, “Trajectories of illegality and informality in conflict protraction: the Abkhaz-Georgian case,” *Caucasus Survey* 5, no. 1 (2017): 85-101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2017.1290313>.

⁷ Zurabashvili, Tornike. Restricting Education In Native Language In Gali District: In *Search Of Solutions*. Georgia's Reforms Associates, 2016. <https://grass.org.ge/uploads/other/2019-06-06/469.pdf>.

⁸ Gogia, Giorgi. *Living in limbo: the rights of ethnic Georgian returnees to the Gali District of Abkhazia*. Human Rights Watch, 2011. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/07/15/living-limbo/rights-ethnic-georgians-returnees-gali-district-abkhazia>.

⁹ “Georgian no longer language of instruction in Gali, Abkhazia,” Democracy & Freedom Watch. (2016), accessed January 17, 2020. <https://dfwatch.net/georgian-no-longer-teaching-language-in-gali-abkhazia-41844>.

Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) into Georgia-proper — is entirely dependent on Abkhazian/Russian authorities and therefore creates multiple social and economic difficulties for them.¹⁰

On the one hand, for Abkhazians, Gali's residents are an ethnic minority of a hostile group: Georgia. Yet Georgians, on the other hand, despite considering the Gali folk as part of their own ethnic group, simultaneously perceive them as being somehow inherently 'different' too —a separation that has contributed to the alienation between them.

Therefore, my suggested hypothesis is that the context the Georgians of Gali are living in has shifted their primary sense of belonging towards the particular territory and group they are living in/with – i.e., the Gali district - rather than the wider ethnic group that they are a part due to:

H1: The de facto Abkhazian government's policies towards the Gali district residents that have pushed the latter to focus primarily on their local community.

H2: The inability of Georgia-proper to provide all the necessary policies towards the ethnic Georgians in Gali due to the political situation.

For Georgia-proper, Gali inhabitants have, without question, always been a member of Georgian society. However, after almost thirty years of living in a different community, their sense of belonging remains under-researched. This lack of understanding has been the point of departure in every political or social decision made regarding the Gali residents, meaning that policies were developed not specifically for Gali residents but for the whole of Abkhazia's population. Given that the study of this topic has never been conducted before, I believe my

¹⁰ "Amid Checkpoint Closure, Aspiring Students from Abkhazia Left out of University Exams," Civil.ge. (2019), accessed January 28, 2020. <https://civil.ge/archives/311582>.

research and its conclusions will fill a significant gap in the field of conflict studies in the post-Soviet space and Georgia in particular.

Since the ethnic Georgians of Gali have had more every-day interactions with their own community than all of Georgia-proper, it is essential to study how their reality has influenced their sense of belonging. Their case is similar to what Brubaker called ‘borders’ moving between two groups in Central and Eastern Europe¹¹— with the ‘kin’ nation (Georgians) left on the other side of this ‘border.’

For this research, interviews have been conducted with Gali inhabitants between the ages of thirty and seventy. The research method used is that of a semi-structured in-depth interview. Alan Bryman, in his book on research methods, emphasizes the importance of in-depth interviews in getting more detailed information from the respondent and how this method allows the researchers to clarify their questions further and the answers they receive for them.¹² Moreover, the everyday communication language in Gali is Mingrelian, a regional dialect spoken mostly in Western Georgia. My fluency in Mingrelian, as well as Russian and Georgian, allowed me to understand and interpret the interviews without any complications or important nuances being lost in translation. The semi-structured in-depth interview was more beneficial for the topic of my research because as Kvale suggests an interview is “a conversation, whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the [life-world] of the interviewee” which gives us the possibility of interpretation of the meanings of the “described phenomena.”¹³ To achieve the goal mentioned above, two analytical levels are included: 1) Social and psychological factors

¹¹ Brubaker, „Ethnicity in Post-Cold War Europe, East and West,“ 45.

¹² Alan Bryman, *Social research methods*. Oxford university press, 2016, 442.

¹³ Kvale, Steinar. *InterViews: an introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Sage, 1996, 147.

on an individual level; 2) The broader social-political context, which resulted in the current position of Gali inhabitants.

The structure of the thesis is as follows – the theoretical framework explores the notion of developing a sense of belonging and the concept of the place, followed by the reviews of the existing researches and empirical work conducted around the research topic, consequently drawing attention to the current gap in the literature. The second chapter provides the theoretical framework explaining why the particular method has been used. The section on the historical background introduces the context of the chosen topic for a better understanding of the research scope. *Chapter 4* analyzes the sense of belonging of residents in the Gali district, summarizing the main findings of the research.

Chapter 1. Theoretical framework and Literature Review

I belong therefore I am: the Theory of Belonging and the concept of place

A concept of home is essential and, at the same time, very familiar to humankind. Home can be associated with feelings such as safety, loyalty, and familiarity; home also emphasizes a sense of belonging. As Ulf Hedetoft and Mette Hjort note in the book, *The Postnational Self: Belonging and Identity*, “[h]ome is where we belong, territorially, existentially, and culturally, where our own community is [...]”¹⁴ However, the place where we find ourselves and where we feel we belong are not always the same, nor do they necessarily coincide either. The reasons for the aforementioned can be multiple — from migration to border disputes and demarcation, to the division of society by conflict. In my research, I focus my attention on the latter: societies divided by conflict. Through the lenses of the theories of belonging, I explore what can happen to societies when they become ‘new minorities’ in a recently established ‘state’ and, consequently, to which group this minority may feel like they belong to.

In today’s world, the growing interconnectedness of individuals and groups also broadens our understanding of belonging, with the distribution of values and cultures across ethnic groups contributing to the increase of “social solidarity,”¹⁵ which in turn makes it difficult to define the sense of belonging in general. Craig Calhoun, criticizing liberal cosmopolitanism, emphasizes the core function of belongingness and its essential and fundamental status for a human being:

“[i]t is impossible not to belong to social groups, relations, or culture. [...] real people [...] are necessarily situated in particular webs of belonging, with access to particular others but not to humanity in general. [...] Moreover, when the limits of belonging to

¹⁴ Ulf Hedetoft, and Mette Hjort, “introduction,” in *The postnational self: Belonging and identity*, eds. Mette Hedetoft, Ulf, and Mette Hjort, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), vii.

¹⁵ Christine Halse, “Theories and Theorising of Belonging,” in *Interrogating Belonging for Young People in Schools*, ed. Christine Halse (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 3.

specific webs of relationships are transcended, this is not into freedom from relationships but into a different organization of relationships.”¹⁶

In this research, I explore theories of belonging and the existing debates therein by answering the question of how essential is the idea of place in defining our sense of belonging for conflict-affected societies in particular?

Researcher Eva Youkhana refers to the subject of belonging as “still a rather new theoretical term.”¹⁷ However, questions connected to the sense of belonging and its politics can be some of the most complicated and challenging issues that we as humans deal with on a day-to-day basis.¹⁸ Christine Halse, in her essay “Theories and Theorising of Belonging,” provides an explanation of how scholars use the term belonging. Depending on the context, the usage of the concept can vary subject to the given grammatical form. Consequently, if we use it as a verb, it can mean “to belong or to possess or own something.”¹⁹ The term can also be used as a noun in the form of ‘belongingness,’ meaning that “one belongs to and is a member of a particular social group, solidarity, collectivity or organization.”²⁰ This second definition of the term is the one used in this research, in the form of Gali community members’ sense of belonging to one or another ethnic group — Abkhazian, Georgian, or someone primarily from Gali.²¹

Halse, meanwhile, further highlights that the rational component of belonging comes from the argument that we experience a sense of belonging through our social contacts, which in turn is

¹⁶ Craig Calhoun, “Belonging in the cosmopolitan imaginary.” *Ethnicities* 3, no. 4 (2003):536–537. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1468796803003004005>.

¹⁷Eva Youkhana, “A Conceptual Shift in Studies of Belonging and the Politics of Belonging,” *Social Inclusion* 3, no. 4 (2015):12. <https://www.cogitatiopress.com/socialinclusion/article/view/150/150>.

¹⁸ Nira Yuval-Davis, *The politics of belonging: Intersectional contestations* (Sage Publications, 2011),1.

¹⁹ Halse, “Theories and Theorising of Belonging,” 3.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ My hypothesis does not deny that they are ethnic Georgians, rather the point is to see if they themselves identify primarily more with their *territory* and their *local community*.

the result of our connectedness and interaction with other individuals, groups, or institutions.²²

Sarah Wright defines the aforementioned concept as a connection of the self and the group that “define[s] and configure[s] what it means to belong (and not belong).”²³

In his research, David B. Knight highlights Shafer’s argument regarding the disappearance of the sense of belonging of a province, due to “a rising consciousness of national unity.”²⁴ However, Knight challenges Shafer’s notion on the basis that because of the rise of nationalism, “the idea of loyalty to the whole nation penetrates and sets aside loyalties to particularist entities within the national state.”²⁵

Within the literature of the politics of belonging, one of the most active debates appears between liberal multiculturalists and cosmopolitans. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the cosmopolitan view became more widespread since the challenges the societies were facing — issues connected to climate change, poverty, security, feminism — required a united and global approach.²⁶ The cosmopolitan understanding is based on the view that in a globalized world where cultures/identities are overlapping, people become ‘world citizens,’ and the sense of belonging to just one particular society somewhat disappears.²⁷

Multicultural theory, on the other hand, views the world through a different prism. It attests that even though cultures overlap in today’s world, individuals’ sense of belongingness is

²² Ibid.

²³ Sarah Wright, “More-than-human, emergent belongings: A weak theory approach.” *Progress in Human Geography* 39, no. 4 (2015): 393, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0309132514537132>.

²⁴ Boyd C. Shafer, *Nationalism: myth and reality* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955), 105, **quoted in** David B Knight, “Identity and territory: geographical perspectives on nationalism and regionalism.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 72, no. 4 (1982):519, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2563201>.

²⁵ David B. Knight, “Identity and territory: geographical perspectives on nationalism and regionalism.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 72, no. 4 (1982):523, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2563201>.

²⁶ Nick Stevenson, “Cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism and citizenship.” *Sociological Research Online* 7, no. 1 (2002): 173, <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.672>.

²⁷ Ibid.

separated among different cultures/groups.²⁸ Notably, Will Kymlicka argued that for members of the society, despite having options to choose/leave a particular cultural/ethnic group, their decision depends on the meaningfulness of these options, and these options become accessible when they are embodied in our lives:

“The works of other cultures may become available to us through translation, or through the influx of immigrants who bring certain cultural narratives with them as they integrate. That we learn in this way from other cultures, or that we borrow words from other languages, does not mean that we do not still belong to separate societal cultures or speak different languages.”²⁹

In this research, my focus is on the explanation of belonging provided by the multiculturalist approach. Hence, I believe that particular cultures have their specific borders, and that is how our primary sense of belonging to one or several groups is defined. Nonetheless, despite the globalization and interconnectedness of today’s world, we as humans remain more attached to one culture despite the possibility of us all ‘wearing the same pair of jeans.’

As mentioned above, in many cases, people can identify themselves with a particular place or territory, which may differ from the one they currently occupy. This, according to Rogers Brubaker, can be the result of a voluntary or enforced movement. An example of the aforementioned phenomenon is the Uzbeks in Tajikistan or the Turkish diaspora in Germany.³⁰

French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu explains that “sense of place” defines our attachment; it emphasizes the meaning of place and relationship among an individual’s and others, who also belong to that place.³¹ Researches in the field of human geography and environmental

²⁸ Sarah Song, "Multiculturalism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* edited by Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2017 Edition). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/multiculturalism/>.

²⁹ Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural citizenship: A liberal theory of minority rights* (Oxford:Clarendon Press, 1995), 103.

³⁰ Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism reframed: Nationhood and the national question in the new Europe* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1996), 55-56.

³¹ Pierre Bourdieu, "Social space and symbolic power." *Sociological theory* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1989):17, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/202060>.

psychology, such as Maria Lewicka,³² Chia-Chin Lin, and Michael Lockwood,³³ differentiate between physical and social attachments and “place identity and place dependence.”³⁴ As Williams and Vaske note in their research, “The measurement of place attachment: Validity and generalizability of a psychometric approach,” place identity defines:

“the symbolic importance of a place as a repository for emotions and relationships that give meanings and purpose to life,” while ‘Place dependence,’ explains ‘the importance of a place at providing features and conditions that support specific goals and desired activities.’”³⁵

In conflict-affected societies, the issue of belonging and the concept of place holds a significant role. The reality they face — involuntarily leaving their place of residence and hence the ‘place where they belong’ — is even expressed by the language used to characterize the people who have fled the conflict.³⁶ As reflected by the researcher Minna Lundgren, a refugee who crossed the border of a state is someone who escaped from their “natural” and “original” home.³⁷ At the same time, an Internally Displaced Person (IDP) is described as someone who resides inside the state borders but is being ‘displaced’ and is therefore “out of the ‘natural place’”;³⁸ so these people, despite being in the same country, may not belong to the particular place they are displaced to since they do not have a habitual attachment to it.³⁹ Professor of Geography at the University of Sussex Authors Richard Black emphasizes that territorial belonging is

³² Maria Lewicka, "Place attachment: How far have we come in the last 40 years?," *Journal of environmental psychology* 31, no. 3 (2011): 209-210, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2010.10.001>.

³³ Chia-Chin Lin, and Michael Lockwood. "Assessing sense of place in natural settings: a mixed-method approach." *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management* 57, no. 10 (2014): 1442, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09640568.2013.811401>.

³⁴ Olga Zeveleva , and Anastasia Bludova. "Borders moving across people: Narratives of belonging among Crimean youth after 2014." *Current Sociology* 67, no. 7 (2019):1058, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392119846929>.

³⁵ Daniel R. Williams, and Jerry J. Vaske. "The measurement of place attachment: Validity and generalizability of a psychometric approach." *Forest science* 49, no. 6 (2003): 831, <https://bit.ly/2LXomst>.

³⁶ Minna Lundgren, "Boundaries of displacement: belonging and return among forcibly displaced young Georgians from Abkhazia." (PhD diss., Mittuniversitetet, 2016), 19. <https://miun.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:957174/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Cathrine Brun, "Local citizens or internally displaced persons? Dilemmas of long term displacement in Sri Lanka." *Journal of refugee studies* 16, no. 4 (2003):377, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/16.4.376>.

³⁹ Lundgren, "Boundaries of displacement: belonging and return among forcibly displaced young Georgians from Abkhazia," 19.

quintessential for humankind, and forced displacement can be seen as a deviation, an anomaly from the status quo.⁴⁰ In this regard, the concept of place becomes very interesting when it comes to the conflict-affected societies and the formation/changing of their identities, since, in any case, as refugees or IDPs, they find themselves in the ‘wrong’ place, where they do not belong. Especially with regards to IDPs — given that they technically still live in their own country — who simultaneously “both belong and do not belong; they are simultaneously “insiders” and “outsiders.”⁴¹ Moreover, national governments differentiate IDPs from the rest of their citizens by providing them with much-needed benefits of affirmative action, for example.

Furthermore, as Steven Vertovec notes in his article “Transnationalism and Identity,” the essential part of belonging to a particular place or group is self-perception.⁴² This can be connected to the dimension of “ecological participation,” which, according to Gabriele Pollini, is the mutual relationship of the individual with the others who live on the same territory.⁴³ Belonging understood even deeper also includes the intertwined relationship between concepts like an individual’s identity, citizenship, and the emotional attachment to a place.⁴⁴ Moreover, because territorial identities cannot always be seen as national identities per se., researchers bring the concept of ‘hierarchical belonging’ based on the “geographical scale.”⁴⁵ This notion

⁴⁰ Richard Black, "Conceptions of 'home' and the political geography of refugee repatriation: between assumption and contested reality in Bosnia-Herzegovina." *Applied geography* 22, no. 2 (2002): 124-126, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0143-6228\(02\)00003-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0143-6228(02)00003-6).

⁴¹ Lundgren, "Boundaries of displacement: belonging and return among forcibly displaced young Georgians from Abkhazia," 19.

⁴² Steven Vertovec, "Transnationalism and identity." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration studies* 27, no. 4 (2001): 579, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830120090386>.

⁴³ Gabriele Pollini, "Elements of a theory of place attachment and socio-territorial belonging." *International Review of Sociology—Revue Internationale de Sociologie* 15, no. 3 (2005): 498, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906700500272483>.

⁴⁴ Nira Yuval-Davis, Kalpana Kannabiran, and Ulrike M. Vieten, "Introduction: Situating Contemporary Politics of Belonging." In *The Situated Politics of Belonging*, eds. Yuval-Davis, Nira, Kannabiran, Kalpana & Vieten, Ulrike M. (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 1.

⁴⁵ Lundgren, "Boundaries of displacement: belonging and return among forcibly displaced young Georgians from Abkhazia," 20.

can be clearly seen when we look at IDPs, as mentioned above — despite the fact that they remain in the same country, their primary sense of belonging is with another part of the nation's territory; hence their sense of belonging is hierarchical in nature. As Gary S. Elbow writes in the book *Nested identities: Nationalism, territory, and scale*, the source of belonging can be connected to local and regional affiliations and does not necessarily require the attachment towards a nation-state,⁴⁶ but at the same time it does not exclude the possibility of 'multiple belongings.'⁴⁷

However, an individual's sense of belonging is not a constant phenomenon — it can be changed or modified due to multiple factors and situations. Yuval-Davis proposes that the politics of belonging can be positioned in three different ways: "temporally, spatially and intersectionally" and are influenced by historical, economic, and political processes, which in turn affects different societies and places differently.⁴⁸ It is especially pertinent when we talk about conflict-affected societies since they "are not considered truly 'at home' and actually belong 'elsewhere' while in exile."⁴⁹

The concept of belonging, which can be defined as an attachment and affiliation to a 'place' can be essential when analyzing and researching displacement and forced migration among rival groups. But its utility is not limited therein as belonging is tightly connected to identity formation and calls attention to "social and territorial interaction irrespective of existing

⁴⁶Gary S Elbow, "Scale and regional identity in the Caribbean," in *Nested identities: Nationalism, territory, and scale*, eds. Guntram H. Herb and David H. Kaplan (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 96.

⁴⁷ David H. Kaplan, "Territorial identities and geographic scale," in *Nested identities: Nationalism, territory, and scale*, eds. Guntram H. Herb and David H. Kaplan (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 43.

⁴⁸ Nira Yuval-Davis, Kalpana Kannabiran, and Ulrike M. Vieten, "Introduction: Situating Contemporary Politics of Belonging," In *The Situated Politics of Belonging*, eds. Yuval-Davis, Nira, Kannabiran, Kalpana & Vieten, Ulrike M. (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 7-8.

⁴⁹ Lundgren, "Boundaries of displacement: belonging and return among forcibly displaced young Georgians from Abkhazia," 21-22.

borders”⁵⁰ because “constructing boundaries and borders that differentiate between those who belong, and those who do not, determines and colors the meaning of the particular belonging.”⁵¹

Theorizing the sense of belonging is important to discuss “the formal and informal ways” on how people are categorized and labeled whether or not they belong to specific societies or countries.⁵² Citizenship can be identified as one of the formal determinants of belonging — classification of people by citizenship, at a minimum level, legally builds up their belongingness to a particular state or nation.⁵³ Despite globalization and its accompanying developments, the most significant part citizenship plays while contributing to the process of developing the sense of attachment is ensuring the establishment of particular political, civil, social, and economic, cultural, and security-related rights which can be specific from state to state.⁵⁴

In this regard, the situation in the Gali district is particularly critical and interesting. According to the Law on Citizenship of the *de facto* regime, residents of Abkhazia hold Abkhaz passports — issued by the “Republic of Abkhazia” — that identify them as an Abkhaz citizen.⁵⁵ Moreover, the law prohibits one from being a dual citizen — unless that dual citizenship is Abkhazian-Russian.⁵⁶ The majority of the Georgian population of Gali hold Georgian citizenship. Before 2008, on the territory of Abkhazia, Soviet passports could serve

⁵⁰ Antía Mato Bouzas, "(B) Ordering and the politics of Belonging." *St Antony's International Review* 12, no. 2 (2017): 131, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26229176>.

⁵¹ Nira Yuval-Davis, "Borders, boundaries, and the politics of belonging." In *Ethnicity, nationalism, and minority rights*, eds. Stephen May, Tariq Modood, and Judith Squires (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 216. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511489235>.

⁵² Nira Yuval-Davis, . *The politics of belonging: Intersectional contestations*. (Sage Publications, 2011), 76

⁵³ Yuval-Davis, *The politics of belonging: Intersectional contestations*, 46.

⁵⁴ Yuval-Davis, *The politics of belonging: Intersectional contestations*, 49.

⁵⁵ “Abkhazia: Citizenship and Political Rights. 2013,” OSCE Odihr, accessed May 1, 2020, p.1. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/106907?download=true>.

⁵⁶ Law of Abkhazia on Citizenship of the Republic of Abkhazia [ЗАКОН РЕСПУБЛИКИ АБХАЗИЯ О гражданстве Республики Абхазия], 2005. http://presidentofabkhazia.org/vize_president/dejatelnost/zacon_ra.pdf.

as identity documents, but after Russia's recognition of Abkhazia as an independent state, having Abkhazian identity documents became obligatory. Consequently, Georgians were issued a special Form No 9 (identifying them as residents)⁵⁷, giving them the status of residents and the ability to cross the administrative boundary line (ABL) with Georgia proper.⁵⁸

In 2005, the *de facto* Abkhazian government adopted Law on Citizenship, according to which every ethnic Abkhaz could automatically get citizenship (Article 5a), as well as members of every other nationality if they could prove that they have been on the territory of Abkhazia for at least five years before Abkhazia's declaration of independence on October 12, 1999 (Article 5b).⁵⁹ The above-mentioned article automatically excluded most of the Georgians in the Gali district who had to flee from the region due to the 1992-1993 war, only returning to their homes after October 1994.⁶⁰

In 2009, amendments were made to the law according to which Gali returnees could qualify as "citizens of Abkhazia."⁶¹ However, these changes were then suspended due to the objection from the opposition.⁶²

However, from 2010, procedures for the Gali population to get Abkhazian passports were renewed.⁶³ Thus, it required local Georgians to renounce their Georgian citizenship in writing.

⁵⁷ Nino Gogua, "Georgians in Gali — foreigners in their own land," OC Media, accessed May 7, 2020, <https://oc-media.org/features/georgians-in-gali-foreigners-in-their-own-land/>.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Law of Abkhazia on Citizenship of the Republic of Abkhazia [ЗАКОН РЕСПУБЛИКИ АБХАЗИЯ О гражданстве Республики Абхазия], 2005. http://presidentofabkhazia.org/vize_president/dejatelnost/zacon_ra.pdf.

⁶⁰ Giorgi Gogia, *Living in limbo: the rights of ethnic Georgian returnees to the Gali District of Abkhazia*. (Human Rights Watch, 2011), 32. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/07/15/living-limbo/rights-ethnic-georgians-returnees-gali-district-abkhazia>.

⁶¹ "Abkhaz Parliament Adopted Amendments to the Law on Citizenship, Opposition Disagrees", Caucasian Knot, August 1, 2009, [in Russian], <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/157361/>. Accessed on May 2, 2020.

⁶² "Parliament of Abkhazia Cancelled Amendments to the Law on Citizenship", Caucasian Knot, August 6, 2009, [in Russian], <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/157569/>. Accessed on May 2, 2020.

⁶³ Gogia, *Living in limbo: the rights of ethnic Georgian returnees to the Gali District of Abkhazia*, 33.

However, doing so was just a formality because, given the lack of relations between the *de facto* Abkhazia and Georgia-proper, it was nearly impossible for the Abkhaz regime to verify the authenticity of the act.⁶⁴

In 2014, the breakaway region was hit with protests against the *de facto* president Alexander Ankvab — that resulted in his resignation — and the issuing of passports became one of the significant issues of the ongoing crisis. The opposition set up a parliamentary commission for the investigation of the passport issuing process as they deemed it an illegal one.⁶⁵ Consequently, the Abkhazian passports of Gali residents have been annulled.⁶⁶

In 2016, the *de facto* parliament adopted the “Law on the Legal Status of Foreign Citizens in the Republic of Abkhazia,” according to which ethnic Georgians in Gali were able to obtain residence permits that were valid for five years (Article 10.2).⁶⁷ According to a report by Human Rights Watch, Abkhaz passports grant their owners civic and political rights, such as working in the public sector, or participation in the local elections within the territory.⁶⁸ The majority of Gali residents, to this day, hold the above-mentioned residence permits and are therefore excluded from the possibility to exercise the rights provided by the possession of the passport of the breakaway region.

Analyzing citizenship issues in the Gali district offers a clear picture when discussing the intricacies of the sense of belonging. As a result of the status quo, citizenship, in this case, cannot be considered as the contributory factor to the development of belonging to a particular

⁶⁴ "Will Local Georgians Get New Abkhaz Passports?". 2016. *English Jamnews*. <https://jam-news.net/will-local-georgians-get-new-abkhaz-passports/>. Accessed May 2, 2020.

⁶⁵ Olesya, Vartanyan, "The Political Crisis In Abkhazia – Expectations In Tbilisi". *International Alert*, 2014. <https://www.international-alert.org/blogs/political-crisis-abkhazia-expectations-tbilisi>. Accessed May 2, 2020.

⁶⁶ "Will Local Georgians Get New Abkhaz Passports?". 2016. *English Jamnews*. <https://jam-news.net/will-local-georgians-get-new-abkhaz-passports/>. Accessed May 2, 2020.

⁶⁷ Law on the Legal Status of Foreign Citizens in the Republic of Abkhazia, [ЗАКОН РЕСПУБЛИКИ АБХАЗИЯ О гражданстве Республики Абхазия], 2016. <https://bit.ly/2xPI Dy7>.

⁶⁸ Gogia, *Living in limbo: the rights of ethnic Georgian returnees to the Gali District of Abkhazia*, 31.

place or society. On the one hand, since Georgian jurisdiction does not apply on the territory, and on the other hand, most ethnic Georgians in Gali are considered only residents of breakaway Abkhazia. They thus cannot fully make use of the rights offered by either the *de facto* regime or Georgia-proper.

According to Nira Yuval-Davis, despite citizenship having salient importance, it might play a “secondary role” in one’s sense of belonging given that:

“People can be born in a particular state, be educated there, be its formal citizens, and yet not be constructed as ‘really’ belonging. For that to occur, they would have to be not just citizens but also members of ‘the nation.’”⁶⁹

For ethnic Georgians in the Gali district, the sense of nation may not be well defined – they are Georgians who are both not fully integrated into Georgian society and living as a minority in a breakaway region where their rights are oppressed.

Yuval Davis defines belonging as an emotional bond connected to the understanding of being “at home”; therefore, the aforementioned includes being safe but does not always guarantee it — being “home” cannot necessarily be attached to “positive and warm” emotions.⁷⁰ From the emotional, individual level, belonging becomes “politicized” and “structured” when some kind of threat occurs to it; hence, the “politics of belonging” incorporates a simple sense of belonging in different “political projects” within particular boundaries.⁷¹

It can be argued that concerning ethnic Georgians in Gali, both belonging and politics of belonging are combined due to the political developments that occurred because of the 1992-1993 war. On the one hand, the existing ‘border’ between them and Georgia-proper influenced their emotional attachment, and, on the other hand, political decisions made by the *de facto*

⁶⁹ Yuval-Davis, *The politics of belonging: Intersectional contestations*, 80.

⁷⁰ Yuval-Davis, *The politics of belonging: Intersectional contestations*, 10.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

government of the breakaway region contributed to the construction of a sense of belonging to a specific group within certain territorial and ethnic boundaries.

Cultural anthropologist Nadia Lovell points out the connection between place and the sense of belonging — the desire to be in a real or imagined place induces sentiments towards that territory.⁷² The combination of locality and belonging contributes to the creation of the feeling of unity and connection:

“Even in displacement, the memory of a collective identity may crystallise around a notion of place. In such circumstances, the debate on hybridity and the location of culture in places in between (often associated with violence and diaspora) can be seen in a new light, as an emphasis on the transience of belonging to locality as identifiable place may coexist with highly localised memorised places.”⁷³

Swedish anthropologist Kaj Arhem in his research “Powers of place Landscape, territory and local belonging in Northwest Amazonia” describing Pirá-Paraná society and the notions of territory and belonging, notes that belonging to a place envisages the combination of locality and ancestry; people with entirely different economic and social backgrounds develop a sense of “unity” while connecting their identity to the unifying territory and creating their “local environment.”⁷⁴

Researchers, like Yuval-Davis, differentiate three different analytical aspects where belonging can be constructed: social locations; emotional attachment and identity issues; political value systems where the self, as well as the others’ belonging are being evaluated.⁷⁵ Social locations refer to factors such as gender, race, nation, kinship group, class, et cetera. For example, Marxists prioritize class while feminists put gender first in terms of the factors that can affect

⁷² Nadia Lovell, “Introduction. Belonging in need of emplacement?,” in *Locality and belonging*, ed. Nadia Lovell (London: Routledge, 1998), 1.

⁷³ Lovell, “Introduction. Belonging in need of emplacement?,” 4.

⁷⁴ Kaj Arhem, “Powers of place Landscape, territory and local belonging in Northwest Amazonia” in *Locality and belonging*, ed. Nadia Lovell (London: Routledge, 1998), 93-95.

⁷⁵ Yuval-Davis, *The politics of belonging: Intersectional contestations*, 12.

the sense of belonging.⁷⁶ While discussing identity narratives, one should take into consideration how their development affects an individual's attachment to a specific place. For example, these narratives can be the product of generational history and influence the perspective of the future.⁷⁷ However, the above-mentioned attachment can be changed due to a particular context that affects the sense of belonging.⁷⁸

Anne-Marie Fortier, in her book *Migrant Belongings*, focuses on the Italian diaspora in Britain in the context of their belonging and creation of identity narratives. According to the author, historical and cultural belongings are constructed by identity “that mark out terrains of commonality” which, in turn, can be actual spaces, territories.⁷⁹

African anthropology researcher Peter Geschiere, in his book *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe*, where he explores the concept of autochthony, emphasizes the importance of belonging to certain communities despite how the concept of belonging is portrayed in the globalized world. The author notes that locality — “born from the soil” — has a mobilizing effect and highlights the importance of emotional factors.⁸⁰

Autochthony — the belief that someone has always been living in the same place⁸¹ — has been a central bone of contention between Abkhazians and Georgians throughout history, with it assuming a deadly role in the early 1990s. The search for the answer to the question of ‘who is the owner of this soil?’ has affected many, became a political issue even at the highest echelons

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Yuval-Davis, *The politics of belonging: Intersectional contestations*, 14.

⁷⁸ Yuval-Davis, *The politics of belonging: Intersectional contestations*, 15.

⁷⁹ Anne-Marie Fortier. *Migrant belongings: memory, space, identity*. (Oxford:Berg, 2000), 2.

⁸⁰ Peter Geschiere. *The perils of belonging: Autochthony, citizenship, and exclusion in Africa and Europe*. (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 2009), 2.

⁸¹ Vincent J. Rosivach, "Autochthony and the Athenians," *The Classical Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (1987): 297, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/638830>.

of power as both groups regularly fall back on the pages of history to prove their claims of ownership over the territory.

Providing the anthropological perspective, Angèle Smith brings up the notions of space and identity and their interconnectedness by studying 19th-century maps of Ireland.⁸² The author combines the above-mentioned with the experiences and historical memories shared by the particular community when place gains a sacred connotation, and landscape envisages emotional, as well as social and political importance.⁸³

While discussing identity and belonging matters, Elspeth Probyn defines that the latter:

“captures more accurately the desire for some sort of attachment, be it to other people, places, or modes of being, and the ways in which individuals and groups are caught within wanting to belong, wanting to become, a process that is fueled by yearning rather than the positing of identity as a stable state.”⁸⁴

With regards to the political value systems, belonging is also connected with the ways of how the above-mentioned social locations and emotional attachments are valued, which, in turn, can be addressed differently by the people who have different social locations but, at the same time, categorize themselves as the ones who belong to the same community/group.⁸⁵

However, one of the most essential parts that one should consider while discussing belonging is the different levels of emotional attachment. While people might belong to several places and groups at once, some can be prioritized over others, depending on the specific situation or the time period:

⁸² Angèle Smith. "Landscape representation: Place and identity in nineteenth-century ordnance survey maps of Ireland," in *Landscape, Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern (London, Pluto press 2003), 71-88.

⁸³ Angèle Smith. "Landscape representation: Place and identity in nineteenth-century ordnance survey maps of Ireland," 73-74.

⁸⁴ Elspeth Probyn, *Outside belongings*. Psychology (Press, 1996):19, quoted in Anne-Marie Fortier. *Migrant belongings: memory, space, identity*. (Oxford:Berg,2000).

⁸⁵ Yuval-Davis, *The politics of belonging: Intersectional contestations*, 18.

“As a rule, the emotional components of people’s constructions of themselves and their identities become more central the more threatened and less secure they become. [...] After a terrorist attack, or after a declaration of war, people will often seek to return to a place of less ‘objective’ safety, as long as it means they can be close to their nearest and dearest, and share their fate.”⁸⁶

For the Gali population, war can be considered as such a turning point, which was then contributed to by the consequences of the Abkhaz-Georgian confrontation and the policies implemented that primarily affected the Georgian population in the region.

Boundaries have become the scope of interest for Joel S. Migdal, an International Studies researcher who, in the book *Boundaries and Belonging*, brings to the reader’s attention not only physical but also imagined margins.⁸⁷ The author separates two elements – “checkpoints” and “mental maps.” The former refers to practical manifestations of borders, such as passport checking or racial profiling, while the latter is connected to the imagined perception of inclusivity and exclusivity into and from the group.⁸⁸

During the conflict, the sense of belonging may also be affected by security factors. In his research, I Wayan Suyadnya studies securitization and belonging using the example of Bali. He highlights that the local government’s actions vis-à-vis a group affect both the former’s socio-economic as well as cultural security.⁸⁹ However, at the same time, the author explores causal factors of feeling secured and with whom an individual feels this way, as this process is closely connected to the identification and setting of the borders of belonging.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Yuval-Davis, *The politics of belonging: Intersectional contestations*, 15.

⁸⁷ Joel S. Migdal, “Mental Maps and Virtual Checkpoints: Struggles to Construct and Maintain State and Social Boundaries,” in *Boundaries and belonging: States and societies in the struggle to shape identities and local practices*, ed. Joel S. Migdal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 3-23.

⁸⁸ Joel S. Migdal, “Mental Maps and Virtual Checkpoints: Struggles to Construct and Maintain State and Social Boundaries,” 6.

⁸⁹ I Wayan Suyadnya, “Securitization, Belonging and Politics of Belonging in Bali.” *Jurnal Kajian Bali (Journal of Bali Studies)* 1, no. 1 (June 2011): 84, <https://ojs.unud.ac.id/index.php/kajianbali/article/view/15599>.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

The situation in Gali does not provide the necessary conditions for security. Residents are not given the possibility to exercise their political rights vis-à-vis the *de facto* regime. With regard to the cultural aspect, they are mostly forbidden from getting an education in Georgian, and the presence of the Russian military on the ABL adds to the general feeling of insecurity. At the same time, the status quo, an inability to have a proper relationship with Georgia-proper, contributes to their sense of insecurity around themselves and, therefore, determines the boundaries of belonging.

Unexplored: Why discuss Gali Georgians?

The majority of the literature concerning the situation in Abkhazia primarily focuses on the security issues, human rights, reconciliation, and peacebuilding among Abkhazians and Georgians. The respective authors tend to deal with the subjects of history, and the prerequisites and causes of the war.

The late academic Alexandros Petersen, in a 2008 article for the *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, labeled the 1992-93 conflict as a “forgotten war” to underline the fact that unlike the former Yugoslavia wars, the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict has received much less attention from the West, from both the general public and academic circles.⁹¹ Therefore, only limited analysis/research can be found on the matter, especially in the English language; moreover, in lots of cases, the work produced by each party of the conflict is not wholly exempt from being prone to some kind of bias.⁹²

In his book, *The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus*, Christoph Zürcher examines wars in the former Soviet Union. He lists the reasons

⁹¹ Alexandros Petersen, "The 1992-93 Georgia-Abkhazia War: A Forgotten Conflict." *Caucasian Review of International Affairs* 2, no. 4 (2008):188.

⁹² Ibid.

behind the military conflicts, particularly those that took place in the Caucasus, as the consequent drive of nationalist elites to fill the power vacuum left by the Soviet collapse, the legacy of Soviet ethnofederalism policies, and the overall weakness of the newly established states.⁹³

Thomas De Waal is a senior fellow at Carnegie Europe, specializing in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus region. In his research, he concentrates on unrecognized states and emphasizes that in *de facto* states a “patron” — Russia, in the case of Abkhazia — plays a crucial role in all parts of public or political life; but, at the same time, even if Russia’s influence decreases, it is unlikely that the breakaway region will cease their claims of independence.⁹⁴ The above-mentioned therefore highlights the importance of studying inter-ethnic relations in the region given the endurance of the status quo remains and the fact that it is predicted to stay unchanged.

Addressing *de facto* states, author Dov Lynch reckons that the idea of the situation staying unaffected as these unrecognized territories establish some kind of statehood and “internal sovereignty,” is likely and that they are willing to continue so even if they have to pay the price of further isolation – quoting *de facto* defense minister of Abkhazia in 2000, that they [Abkhaz] will wait for recognition.⁹⁵

In his 2010 book *The Caucasus: an Introduction*, De Waal primarily concentrated on the historical developments leading to the war, along with analyzing the current political situation. De Waal refers to the postwar period as extremely difficult for both those individuals who had to flee and those who stayed in the region.⁹⁶ Especially IDPs, feeling as “double strangers”

⁹³ Christoph Zurcher, *The post-Soviet wars: Rebellion, ethnic conflict, and nationhood in the Caucasus*. (New-York: NYU Press, 2007).

⁹⁴ Thomas De Waal. *Uncertain Ground: Engaging with Europe's de Facto States and Breakaway Territories*. (Carnegie Europe, 2018), 6.

⁹⁵ Dov Lynch, Separatist states and post-Soviet conflicts, *International affairs* 78, no. 4 (2002):848, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3095759>.

⁹⁶ Thomas De Waal. *The Caucasus: an introduction*. (New York:Oxford University Press, 2018),165.

after they were forced to leave their homes, and simultaneously feel alienated from the rest of society in Georgia-proper.⁹⁷

In his research, David Matsaberidze explores actions that have been taken for conflict resolution among the Abkhazian and Georgian sides. The study scrutinizes the Georgian and Abkhazian conflict resolution projects implemented during the early 1990s and 2000s.⁹⁸ The study brings attention to the three main factors behind the widening of the gap between the parties: institutional, including the hierarchical nature of the Soviet bodies, economic, and cultural (meaning educational and identity policies).⁹⁹

Political analyst and researcher Ghia Nodia also emphasizes the reasons for and possible solutions to the ongoing conflict.¹⁰⁰ For the author, the above-mentioned ethnic conflict can be defined as a “struggle about the nation-state and the status of particular groups that call themselves nations in the modern world of nation-states.”¹⁰¹ Interestingly, Nodia highlights that in the case of Abkhazia, a majority-minority explanation of the conflict is not relevant because the issue was not the Abkhaz minority not liking the policies implemented by a titular nation (Georgian political elite), but the fact that they did not want to have a minority status at all as it was not foreseen in their national project.¹⁰² Therefore, they became a titular group of a newly created *de facto* republic, where among other changes, their rivals — Georgians — were converted into minorities.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ David Matsaberidze. *The Conflict Over Abkhazia (1989-2010): The Interaction Of Georgian-Abkhazian Nationalisms And The Role Of Institutions In The Post-Soviet Developments*. (LAP - Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011).

⁹⁹ Matsaberidze, *The Conflict Over Abkhazia (1989-2010): The Interaction Of Georgian-Abkhazian Nationalisms And The Role Of Institutions In The Post-Soviet Developments*, 6-7

¹⁰⁰ Ghia Nodia. "Causes and visions of conflict in Abkhazia," *Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Working Paper Series* (1997).

¹⁰¹ Nodia, "Causes and visions of conflict in Abkhazia," 10.

¹⁰² Nodia, "Causes and visions of conflict in Abkhazia," 14

Thomas de Waal and Nikolaus von Twickel conceptualize the possible future scenarios of the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict.¹⁰³ The authors assume that unlike South Ossetia, Abkhazia's *de facto* political elite is not willing to give up their independence by joining Russia, with Gali's ethnic Georgians being among the strongest opponents of such a scenario.¹⁰⁴ However, the authors also recognize that ethnic Georgians in Gali do not have the necessary political influence for maneuver required to make their opposition count. "Abkhazia's politics are competitive but within a mono-ethnic framework in which other communities do not have a role," which in turn, makes Gali's Georgian population "second-class citizens in Abkhazia."¹⁰⁵

The body of published research on Gali residents mostly concentrates on human rights violations and their socio-economic situations. Among them is a paper by Giorgio Cornai and Bernardo Venturi from Dublin City University that focuses on language and education laws in Abkhazia and Transnistria.¹⁰⁶ The authors consider the character of current language policies implemented in the breakaway region to be a logical response to the regime's nation-building project — keeping unity internally and eliminating any possibilities for Georgian influence on the region.¹⁰⁷ The status quo created by the language law put ethnic Georgians in a discriminated position; therefore, we can talk about the consequences it created for Gali residents' and their identity building process.

Another author who also concentrates on the language policies and its effects specifically on Gali residents is researcher Tornike Zurabashvili. In a 2016 paper, the author argues that even

¹⁰³ Thomas De Waal, and Nikolaus von Twickel, *Beyond Frozen Conflict Scenarios for the Separatist Disputes of Eastern Europe*. Ed. Michael Emerson (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2020).

¹⁰⁴ Thomas De Waal, and Nikolaus von Twickel, "Scenarios for the future of eastern Europe's unresolved conflicts," in *Beyond Frozen Conflict Scenarios for the Separatist Disputes of Eastern Europe*, ed. Michael Emerson (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2020), 42.

¹⁰⁵ de Waal, "Abkhazia Today," 180.

¹⁰⁶ Giorgio Comai, and Bernardo Venturi, "Language and education laws in multi-ethnic de facto states: the cases of Abkhazia and Transnistria." *Nationalities Papers* 43, no. 6 (2015): 886-905. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2015.1082996>.

¹⁰⁷ Giorgio Comai, and Bernardo Venturi, "Language and education laws in multi-ethnic de facto states: the cases of Abkhazia and Transnistria," 899.

compared to the other minority groups in the region, Georgians are discriminated against the most. For example, when it comes to education, Armenians in Abkhazia — whose numbers are almost similar to Georgians — have access to nearly three times as many Armenian schools.¹⁰⁸ Regarding sociopolitical issues, including education, Zurabashvili highlights that even though the government of Georgia cannot use its jurisdiction on the territory of Abkhazia, the policies that they are nonetheless formulating still lack complexity.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, the absence of a comprehensive approach from the Georgian government could have affected the orientation of Georgians of Gali to concentrate on their own local community more than on anything else.

The research conducted by the organization Truth Hounds deals with the human rights violations on the territory of Abkhazia. Among other problems, the issue of freedom of movement is highlighted. The fact that the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) is controlled primarily by Russian forces complicates and hardens the ability of Gali Georgians to cross it, and therefore violates the above-mentioned right.¹¹⁰

In his work, researcher of post-Soviet politics Donnacha Ó Beacháin highlights the nation-building process in Abkhazia through the prism of elections that, despite not being conducted in a free and fair matter, are still playing an important role to legitimize the regime — at least internally.¹¹¹ The author also notes that in the above-mentioned process, ethnic Georgians, in general, are approached as a “necessary blight, but are governed in a semi-colonial fashion.”¹¹² He places emphasis on the fact of how, as Georgians, they are not considered as full-fledged

¹⁰⁸ Tornike Zurabashvili, *Restricting Education In Native Language In Gali District: In Search Of Solutions*. (Georgia’s Reforms Associates, 2016),14. <https://grass.org.ge/uploads/other/2019-06-06/469.pdf>.

¹⁰⁹ Zurabashvili, *Restricting Education In Native Language In Gali District: In Search Of Solutions*, 4.

¹¹⁰ Truth Hounds, *No Future Land: Violation of Children’s Rights in Gali District*, (2018): 19. <https://truth-hounds.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Gali-report-en.pdf>.

¹¹¹ Donnacha Ó Beacháin, "Elections and Nation-Building in Abkhazia," in *Nation-Building and Identity in the Post-Soviet Space*, ed. by Rico Isaacs, and Abel Polese, (Routledge, 2016),206. <https://bit.ly/36qS0zL>.

¹¹² Beacháin, "Elections and Nation-Building in Abkhazia," in *Nation-Building and Identity in the Post-Soviet Space*, 221.

citizens, and therefore do not entirely belong to Abkhaz society as a whole. It is a point that is echoed in the book *Under Siege: Inter-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia* by Tom Trier et al.:

“a hierarchical order elevates the concerns of the Abkhaz population first and then in descending order the Armenians, Russians, other small minorities and finally the Georgians at the bottom of the system.”¹¹³

Among few comprehensive pieces of research about Gali Georgians is Giorgi Gogia’s Human Rights Watch report, where the author thoroughly investigates the right of returnees in the Gali district, including citizenship and identity documents, freedom of movement and right of education among others.¹¹⁴ Despite not being recognized internationally, Abkhazia still has an obligation to respect the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international human rights treaties; therefore, the violation of basic human rights against Gali returnees should be discussed in that regard.¹¹⁵ Taking into consideration all of the above, the author concludes that the situation leaves ethnic Georgians living in “limbo.”¹¹⁶

On one side, for Georgians in the Gali district, the territory they are residing on is their ancestral home, a place they do not want to leave. However, at the same time, they are experiencing on a daily basis their exclusion from being full-fledged members of the *de facto* Republic of Abkhazia, leaving them in a state of vagueness, behind a ‘wall of political discussions.’

International organization Reconciliation Resources, who concentrate their work on conflict and peacebuilding issues, has written a report that is one of the very few researches with a primary focus on the rights *and* identity issues of Gali residents. Among other topics, the report highlights the fact of ethnic Georgians being stuck between two worlds, often accused of participating in the war on the side of the ‘enemy’; at the same time, in cases where they have

¹¹³ Tom Trier, Hedvig Lohm, and David Szakonyi, *Under Siege: Inter-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia*. (Columbia: Hurst, 2010):16, **quoted in** Beacháin, Donnacha Ó. "Elections and Nation-Building in Abkhazia." In *Nation-Building and Identity in the Post-Soviet Space*, (Routledge, 2016).

¹¹⁴ Gogia, *Living in limbo: the rights of ethnic Georgian returnees to the Gali District of Abkhazia*.

¹¹⁵ Gogia, *Living in limbo: the rights of ethnic Georgian returnees to the Gali District of Abkhazia*, 4.

¹¹⁶ Gogia, *Living in limbo: the rights of ethnic Georgian returnees to the Gali District of Abkhazia*, 1.

taken office in the *de facto* government, their actions have often been met with backlash from Tbilisi, et cetera.¹¹⁷

Almost thirty years after the war, the situation of Gali returnees in Abkhazia remains precarious, arguably worsening day by day. As mentioned above, the status quo does not give them the ability to feel attached to either of the two communities they are a part of. And, as we have seen, the vast majority of research and scholarly literature remains fully focused on human rights issues. While such studies are undoubtedly incredibly important, a significant area of research has been left unexplored. Namely: how the residents of the Gali district feel and how they identify and come to terms with their sense of belonging.

¹¹⁷ Reconciliation Resources. *The Realm of the Possible. Finding ways forward in the Georgian-Abkhaz context: People in the Gal/i region*,” (2015):12, <http://c-r.org/resource/realm-possible-gali>.

Chapter 2. Research Method: Interviews

While writing about the research topic, I considered several research methods to be used for this project, including life history and/or structured interviews.

Using interviews as a research method is very widely spread in the field of social sciences. Steinar Kvale, in his book *Interviews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*, points out the importance of the interview as a tool for generating data. In his words, "the interview is an inter-subjective enterprise of two persons talking about common themes of interest."¹¹⁸

For this thesis, I have decided to use the semi-structured interview method as I believe it is the most optimal for my project. American sociologist Kenneth D. Bailey, discussing the usage of semi-structured interviews to collect data in his book *Methods Of Social Research*, lists several advantages of this method including high response rate, flexibility, possibility to control the environment, change the order of the questions based on the process as well as the opportunity to include non-verbal signs which can be very contributory to the study itself.¹¹⁹ Moreover, this type of interview provides a way to construct the process aiming at a particular subject of the researchers' interest and, at the same time, accommodating space for the respondents to offer different connotations to the main focus of the research.¹²⁰

This method has given me the ability to connect with the respondent on a deeper emotional level, enabling them to better their attitudes towards the subject of my research. However, reaching the interviewees and agreeing to get them to talk was one of the most challenging parts due to the reasons that will be explained below.

¹¹⁸ Steinar Kvale, *InterViews: an introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. (Sage, 1996), 183.

¹¹⁹ Kenneth D. Bailey, *Methods Of Social Research*. 4th ed. (New York: Free Press. A Division of Macmillan, Inc. 1994), 457

¹²⁰ Anne Galletta, *Mastering the semi-structured interview and beyond: From research design to analysis and publication*. (New York: NYU press, 2013), 24.

The preparation stage for the interviews included working on the interview guide as well as reaching out to the interviewees. Researchers have addressed the difficulties encountered while recruiting participants when it comes to discussing sensitive topics; Professor Ronald Paul Hill, in his 1995 Research, emphasizes the problems primarily related to the research concerning vulnerable populations.¹²¹ The demographic of my interviewees, being from a vulnerable population themselves, posed some challenges.

After the war, Gali inhabitants have been exposed to many dangers, including economic, social, and security threats. Therefore, the main concern while recruiting the participants was to ensure that they could talk about very sensitive topics in a safe and comfortable environment. As it is noted by Sieber and Stanley, "socially sensitive research refers to studies in which there are potential social consequences or implications, either directly for the participants in the research or the class of individuals represented by the research."¹²² The aforementioned risks that my respondents could be exposed to as a result of agreeing to take part in the interviews include threats to their jobs and/or physical security due to them living in a *de facto* state in which they are a persecuted minority. Consequently, every potential interviewee was given a guarantee that the interviews would be recorded and used without disclosing their identities, i.e., their name, and surname.

During the research process, Gali inhabitants between the ages of thirty and seventy were interviewed — those that fall into the age group of being old enough to have experienced the political change and the creation of a 'border' between their mother nation and themselves.

¹²¹ Ronald Paul Hill. "Researching Sensitive Topics in Marketing: The Special Case of Vulnerable Populations." *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* 14, no. 1 (March 1995): 143–148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/074391569501400113>.

¹²² Sieber, Joan E., and Barbara Stanley. "Ethical and professional dimensions of socially sensitive research." *American psychologist* 43, no. 1 (1988): 49 in Ronald Paul Hill. "Researching sensitive topics in marketing: The special case of vulnerable populations." *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* 14, no. 1 (1995): 143.

Furthermore, this age range was considered appropriate due to the reason that it offers the possibility to detect the change of attitudes among respondents that run in parallel with the changes in their socio-political environment that they have experienced over their lifetimes.

Participants have been reached and identified through my contacts in the region, using web platforms such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp. Social media was used as the contact medium because the use of these platforms ranks as the number one activity on the internet in Georgia; according to the 2015 Caucasus Research Resource Centers research, 75% use social networks.¹²³

There are multiple research methods which require data to be analyzed and, therefore, there is the need to select samples representative of a general population. Given that there is no possibility to evaluate the data from the entire population, the usage of sampling moderates the number of research participants so researchers can extrapolate conclusions from a sample to the bigger data.¹²⁴ There are two general sampling techniques: probability or random sampling and non-probability or non-random sampling.¹²⁵ Since the difficulties of reaching the research participants — first and foremost because they reside in a *de facto* state and there is no free access to the population, and secondly because the aforementioned status quo has been worsened by the challenges caused by the novel COVID-19 virus — a non-probability method of sampling is used in this research.¹²⁶ Hence, there is a lack of generalizability of the findings and the ability to calculate a margin of error.¹²⁷

¹²³ "Internet And Social Media Usage In Georgia". 2015. Caucasus Research Resource Centers.Crrc-Caucasus.Blogspot.Com. <http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2015/08/internet-and-social-media-usage-in.html>.

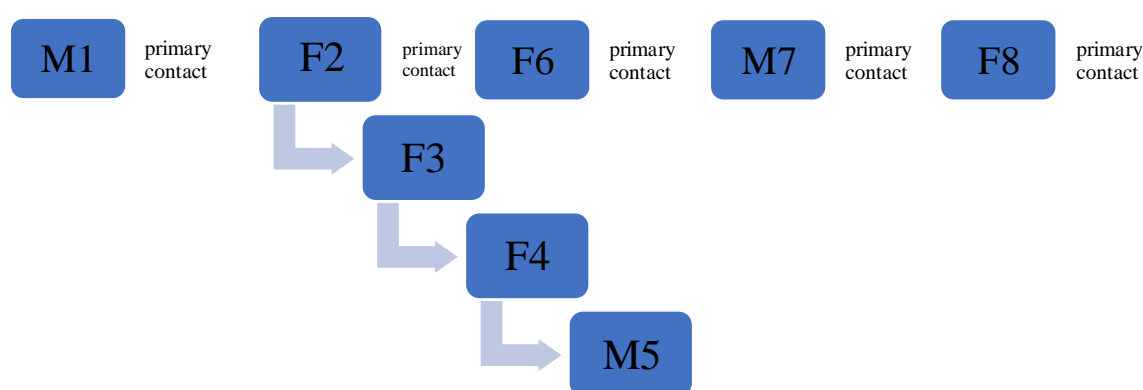
¹²⁴ Hamed Taherdoost. "Sampling methods in research methodology; how to choose a sampling technique for research." *International Journal of Academic Research in Management* Vol. 5, no. 2, (2016): 18. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3205035>.

¹²⁵ Taherdoost, 20

¹²⁶ Naderifar, Mahin, Hamideh Goli, and Fereshteh Ghaljaie. "Snowball sampling: A purposeful method of sampling in qualitative research." *Strides in Development of Medical Education* 14, no. 3 (2017):2

¹²⁷ *ibid*

A non-probability sampling includes convenience, a purposeful, quota, and Snowball sampling methods.¹²⁸ For this research, the Snowball method has been chosen because it is used when there are difficulties to trace members of the selected population.¹²⁹ Firstly, I had contacted the residents of Gali I had personally known before starting this research and later asked the respondents to provide the contact information of potential interviewees. The chart below showcases how each of the respondents has been contacted:



A set of questions have been put together to develop a research guide and the subjects that could lead to the answers to the proposed research question.¹³⁰ Moreover, the statistical data and facts produced in the early stages of this research have been used for creating the context "for exploring participants' understanding of the phenomenon under study."¹³¹ Attention has primarily been drawn to the experiences lived by the participants as well as to the variables (sense of belonging, territory, political situation, et cetera) of the research interest.¹³²

Before the interview, each participant received information explaining the purpose and aim of them being interviewed. It was explained to them that the interview would be conducted in the

¹²⁸ Nayeem Showkat, & Huma Parveen, "Non-Probability and Probability Sampling." Communication Research paper. Media and Communications Studies. ePG Pathshala (UGC & MHRD), 2017. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319066480_NonProbability_and_Probability_Sampling.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Kathryn Roulston, and Choi Myungweon. "Qualitative interviews." *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data collection* (2018): 237. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781526416070.n15>.

¹³¹ Galletta, 24

¹³² Ibid.

framework of research concerning ethnic Georgians residing in the Gali district. The anonymity of participants was guaranteed given their fears of their identity being exposed and any consequent repercussions they may face due to the precarious situation they are living in.

Researchers Kathryn Roulston and Choi Myungweon suggestion that interviews should start with a broader general question were incorporated at the start of each interview to get the interviewees comfortable before moving to the specific questions, the answers of which are crucial to my research. The interviews began by inquiring about the participant's life before and after the war, namely: "tell me about your experiences before and after the change of the political status quo."¹³³

In total, eight interviews have been conducted through Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp calls that were recorded using a voice recorder app on a smartphone. The files were converted to the Mp3 format and stored on a personal drive to guarantee their safety and avoid losing the data.

The most important parts of the interview are transcribed along with the coding of participants — M and F stand for male and female, and the numbers attached to these letters consequently reflect the order the interviews were conducted in. The interviews lasted for an average of twenty-six to forty-seven minutes.

The interviews have been conducted mostly in the Georgian language. However, as the Gali district's everyday communication language is Mingrelian, with Russian used by governmental institutions and in official settings,¹³⁴ during the interviewing process, participants have been

¹³³ Kathryn Roulston, and Choi Myungweon. "Qualitative interviews." *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data collection* (2018): 237.

¹³⁴ Law on State Language of Abkhazia* 2007. *Zakon o gosudarstvennom yazike Respubliki Abkhazia* [ЗАКОН о Государственном языке Республики Абхазия]. Available at: <http://presidentofabkhazia.org/upload/iblock/bf5/O-Gosudarstvennom-yazyke-Respubliki-Abkhaziya.pdf>

* All place names and terminology used are the words countries and/or territories refer to themselves with and do not necessarily reflect my views; moreover, as the other source of statistical data is not accessible in this research the data used is the one provided by de facto Abkhazian Authorities.

switching between these languages as well to disambiguate their thoughts. The interview transcripts were then translated into English.

As mentioned above, the most challenging part of the interview process can be identified as a general fear among participants that their identity would be exposed as a result of talking with me. Their insecurities stem from the current socio-political situation that they face. The data in this research is being handled and analyzed in a very sensitive manner, duly taking into account the aforementioned risks faced by the interviewees.

Chapter 3. Historical Overview

The Georgian-Abkhaz war

After the fall of the Soviet Union, multiple ethnic conflicts broke out on the periphery of the Soviet empire, which remain unsolved to this day. With the establishment of quasi-states grew the question of the identity of the people living in these unrecognized territories. On the one hand, newly created 'countries' established some kind of understanding of statehood, which in turn contributed to the shift in the perception of the self and created new identities for the newly established titular groups. However, the identity and sense of belonging of other ethnic groups, namely Georgians living on the territories of the *de facto* states established on Georgian territory (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), remain weakly researched.

The 1992-1993 Georgian-Abkhazian war was one of the bloodiest of those to have exploded on the former territories of the Soviet Union; it also led to the displacement of almost the whole Georgian population of Abkhazia.

"According to a Human Rights Watch report, [...] 4,000 Georgian individuals [were] killed, 10,000 wounded and 1,000 reported missing. On the Abkhaz side, 4,040 were killed (2,220 combatants and 1,820 civilians), approximately 8,000 were wounded and 122 were marked as missing in action."¹³⁵

Furthermore, according to the 2009 statistical information of the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees of Georgia,

¹³⁵ Grazvydas Jasutis, "The Armed Conflict Between Georgia and Russia in Abkhazia: The Predominance of Irreconcilable Positions," in *The War Report: armed conflicts in 2018*, ed. Annysa Bellal (Geneva: The Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, 2019), 58. <http://www.rulac.org/news/the-war-report-armed-conflicts-in-2018>.

251,000 people became internally displaced persons (IDPs) as a result of the conflicts in the Tskhinvali region and Abkhazia.¹³⁶

In western academia, the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict has not been researched and analyzed to the extent as the others that broke out during the same period, such as the ones in Yugoslavia, for example. The Abkhaz-Georgian rift has been described as a "forgotten conflict," the cause of which is argued to be the little influence that the conflict has had on the general international order as well as its categorization as a local one.¹³⁷ As historian Ronald Grigor Suny noted: "From afar the ethnic and civil warfare in Georgia often looks to casual observers like the latest eruption of "ancient tribal conflicts" or irradicable primordial hatreds."¹³⁸

In order to understand the complexity of this thesis, it is essential to look at the background of the conflict, especially when considering the intricacies of the situation vis-à-vis the ethnic Georgians in the Gali region. According to the 1989 all-Union census of the USSR, ethnic Georgians made up 70.1% of the population of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), whereas ethnic Abkhazians a mere 1.8%.¹³⁹ Although ethnic Abkhazians made up 17.8% of the population in the Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR), Georgians were still the region's main ethnic group, accounting for 45.7% of the population.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ "IDP Issues - General Information," Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees of Georgia, accessed April 14, 2020. <http://mra.gov.ge/eng/static/47>.

¹³⁷ Alexandros Petersen, "The 1992-93 Georgia-Abkhazia War: A Forgotten Conflict," *Caucasian Review of International Affairs* 2, no. 4 (2008):188. <http://mra.gov.ge/eng/static/47>.

¹³⁸ Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 334.

¹³⁹ All-Union Census of 1989. The national composition of the population in the republics of the USSR. [Всесоюзная перепись населения 1989 года. Национальный состав населения по республикам СССР], 1989. <http://mra.gov.ge/eng/static/47>.

¹⁴⁰ Christoph Zurcher, "Georgia's Time of Troubles, 1989-1993", in *Statehood and Security: Georgia after the Rose Revolution*, [in Georgian] eds. Bruno Coppieters and Robert Legvold (London: The MIT Press, 2005), 132. Translated by the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development in 2006. https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/academy/multimedia/pdfs/publications/books/Georgia_final.pdf.

Tensions among the ethnically different Georgian and Abkhazian groups were accompanied by rival claims of the autochthony of the land and did not start in the 1990s. According to Abkhaz historians, the Abkhazian kingdom already existed in the 9th and 10th centuries; Georgian historians take a different view, arguing that during this period, Abkhazia was a territory of the Georgian kingdom, where the Georgian language and cultural influence dominated.¹⁴¹ This disagreement among historians is unresolved to this day and remains one of the main topics of discussion on the subject of self-determination and its lawfulness.

On 31 March 1921, Abkhazia was declared an independent Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) of Abkhazia, but it was a status that only lasted only for a few short months. Indeed, Abkhazia kept that status until December 1921 when their SSR joined the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia by a Treaty of Union.¹⁴² A decade later, in 1931, Abkhazia was downgraded to an autonomous republic within the Georgian SSR. This change in Abkhazia's unsurprisingly resulted in widespread dissatisfaction among the Abkhaz community.¹⁴³ ¹⁴⁴ Political scientist Christoph Zurcher suggests that the politics of the central government of the Soviet Union contributed to the development of separatist attitudes in the autonomous territories of the union republics, and was sometimes used to balance out the nationalistic feelings of these republics.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ Alexei Zverev, "Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994," in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, ed. Bruno Coppieters, (Brussels: Vubpress, 1996). <http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/ContBorders/eng/ch0101.htm>.

¹⁴² Alexei Zverev, "Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994," in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, ed. Bruno Coppieters, (Brussels: Vubpress, 1996). <http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/ContBorders/eng/ch0101.htm>.

¹⁴³ Sufian Zhemukhov, "Recognition without Independence: Abkhazia's International Context," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* 245 (2012): 2. http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/pepm_245_Zhemukhov_Sept2012.pdf.

¹⁴⁴ The fact that both Joseph Stalin and the head of his secret police, Lavrenti Beria, were both ethnic Georgians did little to ease the perception among some Abkhaz that this downgrading was not part of a wider Georgian plot to take their land. See: Sotiriou, Stylianos A. "The Irreversibility of History: The Conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia." *Problems of Post-Communism* 66, no. 3 (2017): 173. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2017.1406310>.

¹⁴⁵ Zverev, "Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994," 134.

The 1992-93 Georgian-Abkhaz war can be seen in the broader context as a product of the chaos that followed in the wake of the Soviet collapse and Georgia's push towards independence. Georgia's search for sovereignty successfully concluded in 1991, with the restoration of independence based on the referendum conducted earlier that year.¹⁴⁶ However, Abkhazia itself participated in the Georgian-boycotted New Union Treaty referendum voting in favor of staying in the Soviet Union.¹⁴⁷ The two different paths taken by each party of the conflict portrays the general sense of uncertainty and volatility that characterized the newly independent lands of the former Soviet Union. *The Guardian's* former Russia correspondent Shaun Walker perfectly captures the sentiment felt by many 'new citizens':

"But even for those who despised Communism, the collapse of the country along with the system was a jarring moment. ...Suddenly, the ground beneath their feet gave way. All that had constituted the fabric of everyday life—accolades and punishments, status and rank, linguistic and behavioral codes—was suddenly rendered meaningless. The established order had dissolved, and in its place was a new world that was difficult to navigate and full of pitfalls."¹⁴⁸

Following the political destabilization and chaos in the country, the Parliament of Georgia voted in favor of the restoration of the country's borders in line with the 1921 Constitution that defined the status of Abkhazia as an autonomous republic. Consequently, this decision was met with considerable resistance from Sokhumi, the Abkhaz capital, and the Georgian-Abkhaz war began in the summer of 1992.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶*Act of Restoration of State Independence of Georgia*, 1991. The Legislative Herald of Georgia, [სსიპ "საქართველოს საკანონმდებლო მაცნე"]. <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/32362?publication=0>.

¹⁴⁷ Jasutis, "The Armed Conflict Between Georgia and Russia in Abkhazia: The Predominance of Irreconcilable Positions," 57.

¹⁴⁸ Shaun Walker, *The long hangover: Putin's new Russia and the ghosts of the past*. (Oxford University Press, 2018), 8.

¹⁴⁹ International Crisis Group (ICG), "Abkhazia Today" *Europe Report* no 176, (2006), 1.

As a result of the war, tens of thousands of people, most of them Georgians, had to leave Abkhazia; many of them remain internationally displaced persons (IDPs) to this day. The only place in Abkhazia in which the IDPs could return to their homes, with the help of the international community and the United Nations, was the Gali district that borders Georgia proper in the southeast.¹⁵⁰ In 1994, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was the agency that contributed to the negotiations of the IDPs' resettlement to the Gali district.¹⁵¹ Of the families who returned, the majority were ethnic Georgians.¹⁵²

Gali: Between two worlds

Gali is located in the southern part of the *de facto* Republic of Abkhazia. A territory of around 1,000 square kilometers, with its administrative center the namesake town of Gali, the district was the largest part of Abkhazia before the war.¹⁵³

According to the figures of the statistical agency of the *de facto* Republic of Abkhazia, as of 2013 the number of Georgians living on the territory is 46,596 (19%), the majority of whom reside in the Gali district.¹⁵⁴ It is vital to mention that the *de facto* Abkhazian government differentiates among Georgians (43,363 people) and Mingrelians (3,344 people) ethnic groups.

<https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/176-abkhazia-today.pdf>.

¹⁵⁰ Maxim Tabachnik, *Citizenship, territoriality, and post-soviet nationhood: the politics of birthright citizenship in Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova*. (Springer, 2019): 252.

¹⁵¹ Giorgi Gogia, *Living in limbo: the rights of ethnic Georgian returnees to the Gali District of Abkhazia*. (Human Rights Watch, 2011):2 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/07/15/living-limbo/rights-ethnic-georgians-returnees-gali-district-abkhazia>.

¹⁵² "Georgians in Gali," Human Rights Watch (2011), accessed December 8, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/02/18/georgians-gali>.

¹⁵³ Reconciliation Resources. *The Realm of the Possible. Finding ways forward in the Georgian-Abkhaz context: People in the Gal'i region*, (2015):3, <http://c-r.org/resource/realm-possible-gali>.

¹⁵⁴ *Abkhazia in Figures 2013* [Абхазия в цифрах за 2013 год], State Committee of the Republic of Abkhazia,* (2013),30. http://rustrademission.ru/ekonomika-abkhazii/Abkhazia_in_figures_2013.pdf.

* All place names and terminology used are the words countries and/or territories refer to themselves with and do not necessarily reflect my views; moreover, as the other source of statistical data is not accessible in this research the data used is the one provided by *de facto* Abkhazian Authorities.

The modern Georgian nation is established on the basis of three main ethnic subgroups – Karts (Eastern Georgia), the Svans, and the Megrelo-Chans.¹⁵⁵ Mingrelia (Samegrelo) is the western region of Georgia that borders Abkhazia. People from there are known as Mingrelians (Megrelebi), a subgroup of Georgians. Apart from Georgian, residents mostly use Mingrelian in their everyday communication; the Mingrelian language, though part of the Georgian language group, is distinct from Georgian, the state language. The noteworthy differences between these two languages make it very difficult for other Georgians to understand Mingrelian, while Mingrelians are bilingual.¹⁵⁶ Moreover, it is not a literary language, so it is only used in oral communication. In any case, despite having their own language, most Mingrelians nonetheless identify as Georgians.¹⁵⁷

In the Gali district, the vast majority of the population is also Mingrelian and speak the language on a daily basis. After a number of people returned to Gali, the *de facto* Abkhaz regime had to decide their status and determine the policies they would apply to them. It became quite challenging for the breakaway region to develop a consistent strategy – consider them as Georgians or as a completely separate nationality?¹⁵⁸ The political reasoning behind differentiating between Mingrelians and Georgians can be clearly seen in the quote of former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the so-called “Republic of Abkhazia” Sergei Shamba during an interview with the political scientist Kimitaka Matsuzato in 2006:

“Mingrelians are different from Georgians. We fought with the latter, not the former. At least after the nineteenth century, Mingrelians have been a native population in southeast Abkhazia, while the Georgians, who began to settle in other counties to the west of Gali (such

¹⁵⁵ Ronald Grigor Suny, *The making of the Georgian nation*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994, 2nd.ed), 4.

¹⁵⁶ Kimitaka Matsuzato, "Transnational minorities challenging the interstate system: Mingrelians, Armenians, and Muslims in and around Abkhazia," *Nationalities Papers* 39, no. 5 (2011): 815. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2011.599376>.

¹⁵⁷ "Mingrelians | Encyclopedia.Com". *Encyclopedia.Com*. Accessed December 8, 2019. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/commonwealth-independent-states-and-baltic-nations/cis-and-baltic-physical-geography/mingrelians>.

¹⁵⁸ Matsuzato, "Transnational minorities challenging the interstate system: Mingrelians, Armenians, and Muslims in and around Abkhazia", 815.

as Ochamchyra, Sukhum, and Gagra) after 1937, were artificial immigrants mobilized from inner and mountainous Georgia for the purpose of Georgianizing Abkhazia. While Mingrelians in the Gali County maintained neutrality during the Georgian-Abkhazian War, Georgian villages in the neighboring districts had practically become Georgian military bases, which Abkhazian troops had no other choice but to destroy. Mingrelians have a legitimate right to return, but the repatriation of other Georgians should depend on the progress of mutual Georgian-Abkhazian trust.”¹⁵⁹

While the statistics of the *de facto* regime differentiate between the above-mentioned two groups, how they do so in practice while compiling their data in the field is rather vague given that the majority of Gali residents also identify themselves as Mingrelians. Thus, the current politics toward them affects ‘both’ groups the same way. As their identity can be defined as ambivalent, the Georgian population in the Gali district continued to be more and more isolated, not mixing with other groups, for security reasons, among others.¹⁶⁰

As of today, the only official checkpoint for Gali Georgians to reach Georgia-proper is the Enguri bridge, which is fully controlled by the Russian-Abkhaz military from one side and Georgian troops on the other.¹⁶¹ While most Georgians cannot enter Abkhazia, people residing in the Gali district who hold the residence permit document of the breakaway region can and frequently do cross the bridge when the opportunity presents itself to do so.¹⁶² However, the regular closure of borders, especially in recent years, affects the life of ethnic Georgians, and anyone else wanting or needing to cross into Georgia for, say, medical reasons. The closure of the Administrative Boundary line (ABL) depends solely on the decisions of the *de facto* Government and is affected by the political relations between the Georgian and Abkhaz sides¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Sergei Shamba (2006), interview by Kimitaka Matsuzato, **quoted in** Kimitaka Matsuzato, "Transnational minorities challenging the interstate system: Mingrelians, Armenians, and Muslims in and around Abkhazia," *Nationalities Papers* 39, no. 5 (2011): 815.

¹⁶⁰ Rachel Clogg, "The politics of identity in post-Soviet Abkhazia: managing diversity and unresolved conflict," *Nationalities Papers* 36, no. 2 (2008):310 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905990801934371>.

¹⁶¹ Ketevan Khutsishvili, "Across the Enguri Border: Lives Connected and Separated by the Borderland Between Georgia and Abkhazia," in *Eurasian Borderlands: Spatializing Borders in the Aftermath of State Collapse*, eds. Tone Bringa, and Hege Toje (Palgrave Macmillan:New York, 2016), 111.

¹⁶² Khutsishvili, "Across the Enguri Border: Lives Connected and Separated by the Borderland Between Georgia and Abkhazia,"115.

¹⁶³ Khutsishvili, "Across the Enguri Border: Lives Connected and Separated by the Borderland Between Georgia and Abkhazia,"111.

and can sometimes last for several months.¹⁶⁴ This action prohibits Gali residents from being fully integrated into the society of Georgia-proper and can, therefore, influence them mostly identifying with their local community.

Apart from the restrictions on the freedom of movement, one of the vital issues that can affect the identity formation of Gali residents is the language and education matters that concern them. Before the military confrontations, fifty-eight schools had been operating in the Gali district (fifty-six Georgian and two Russian), out of which only thirty-one continued to function after the war.¹⁶⁵ In 1994, the Gali district was divided with some parts assigned to different administrative entities and the rest of Gali (the current territory) divided into two, “Upper” and “Lower Zones”; in accordance to these changes, as of today, nine schools are functioning in upper and eleven in lower parts.¹⁶⁶

From 1995, due to a new curriculum, Georgian was gradually replaced by Russian as the language of instruction. Since 2005, schools in the Upper Zone are operating fully in Russian, while those in the Lower Zone maintained their teaching in Georgian until the 2015-2016 school year when new rules have been introduced.¹⁶⁷ According to the new regulations, the first four grades moved to Russian, with every other grade to follow suit so that by 2022 there will be no Georgian school in the Gali district and Abkhazia in general.¹⁶⁸ Moreover, according to the International Crisis Group Report, ethnic Georgian schoolchildren are sometimes refused

¹⁶⁴ Beka Alexishvili, “The Enguri Bridge Opens After 3 Months of Closure,” *Georgia Today*, October 3, 2019, <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/17570/The-Enguri-Bridge-Opens-After-3-Months-of-Closure>. [accessed May 15, 2020].

¹⁶⁵ A special Report of the Public Defender of Georgia, “*The Right to Education in the Gali District: New Developments and Challenges in the Academic Year of 2015-2016*,” (Tbilisi, 2015), 19. <http://www.ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2019041311454240454.pdf>.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Tornike Zurabashvili, *Restricting Education In Native Language In Gali District: In Search Of Solutions*. (Georgia’s Reforms Associates, 2016), 7. <https://grass.org.ge/uploads/other/2019-06-06/469.pdf>.

permission to cross the ABL, preventing them from attending schools on Georgian-controlled territory.¹⁶⁹

As for higher education, half of the pupils either attend Abkhaz State University in Sokhumi/Sukhum or do not continue their studies at all. The rest apply to Georgian universities, whose diploma is not recognized by the *de facto* authorities, adding another roadblock in their efforts to find employment in Abkhazia.¹⁷⁰

The policy of replacing the Georgian language with Russian can affect the population's sense of belonging as a marker of identity since apart from its communicative function, language can serve as an instrument to emphasize identity and uniqueness.¹⁷¹ Gali residents mostly use Mingrelian in their everyday communication among themselves, and Russian during public engagements. Temur Nadaraia, the former *de facto* head of the Gali Administration noted that education in Georgian does not have a practical use in Abkhazia;¹⁷² Dimitri Gvaramia, *de facto* deputy minister of education, added that Georgian textbooks are not only ideologically biased, but also harmful to the society of Abkhazia.¹⁷³

Living in Gali for ethnic Georgians is extremely challenging. From one side, they are the victims of ethnic-based discrimination, from the other side, the inability of the Georgian Government to make a tangible change due to the political situation prohibits the Gali residents to exercise their rights fully or define their belongingness.

¹⁶⁹ International Crisis Group (ICG), "Abkhazia: The Long Road to Reconciliation," *Crisis Group Europe Report*, No. 224 (2013), 20. <https://bit.ly/2A9HXDa>.

¹⁷⁰ Zurabashvili, *Restricting Education In Native Language In Gali District: In Search Of Solutions*, 16.

¹⁷¹ Rusi Jaspal, "Language and social identity: A psychosocial approach," *PsychTalk* no 64. (2009):17. <https://bit.ly/2TCrkqy>.

¹⁷² "In all the schools of the Gali district education will be provided under the standards of the Abkhaz Ministry of Education," [Во всех школах Галского района обучение будет вестись по стандартам Минобразования Абхазии], Apsnypress, March 26, 2015, accessed May 15, 2020. <https://bit.ly/36FGa5j>.

¹⁷³ "Gali Schools will Move to Abkhaz Curricula," [Школы Галского района перейдут на абхазскую программу обучения], March 26, 2015, Sputnik Abkhazia, accessed May 15, 2020. <https://sputnik-abkhazia.ru/Abkhazia/20150605/1014853569.html>.

The “State Strategy and the Action Plan on Occupied Territories Engagement Through Cooperation” adopted by the government in 2010, defines Georgia’s policy toward the occupied territories. These documents envisage the benefits and priorities concerning people living in the breakaway regions, including economic cooperation, education, culture, healthcare, et cetera.¹⁷⁴ However, the above-mentioned strategy covers the whole population of the territory and is not specifically tailored to the specific needs of just the ethnic Georgians residing in Abkhazia.

After the war, the political situation resulted in the territory’s ethnic Georgians finding themselves living in some kind of limbo — they became a minority group of a newly established *de facto* state with no international recognition. As a result, their unique state of affairs makes it both interesting and necessary to research how their sense of identity has been affected, something that has hitherto been neglected.

Over the last decades, the Gali district has been a subject of conversation between Georgian and Abkhaz communities. Issues such as their legal status, rights, security, and questions of identity have remained on the negotiation table since the war. Due to the nonconsecutive policies from both sides, according to the Danish Refugee Council, “the dynamics of a frozen conflict still shape life there” and leave them in the midpoint.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ *State Strategy On Occupied Territories. Engagement Through Cooperation*. 2010. Government of Georgia. http://gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=225.

¹⁷⁵ Francisco Martinez, "Life In Gali". *Osservatorio Balcani E Caucaso*, 2013, accessed May 15, 2020. <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Abkhazia/Life-in-Gali-133720>.

Chapter 4. Analysis

In order to discuss the sense of belonging of the Gali district's ethnic Georgians, the interviews conducted specifically for this research will be analyzed and dissected in this chapter. This will be done through the main thematic topics that were marked out as essential for developing the attachment to a particular place/community in the theoretical overview of this research.

The allotted themes are as follows: the importance of the place; attachment to the community; and “We-feeling;”¹⁷⁶ frustration and inability to change the status quo; and vague representation of the future.

The Place of Importance

Sociologist Gabriele Polini distinguishes territorial location as one of the dimensions of human interaction – territory can be seen as a specific space where life takes place in general.¹⁷⁷ Gali can be looked at as that kind of area: where the targeted research group has been living for a particular period of time, developing some sort of emotional bond towards the place. Adding to this, the fact that there is a possibility of the territory being ‘locked down’ (i.e., the closure of the ABL) contributes to residents having only this particular area to live and interact in. This much was expressed by the interviewee M1:

“The main problem of Gali is in contact with the outside world. Because there are situations when the place is simply locked. [...] How can I say – like Ushguli [a mountainous location in Georgia, considered the highest inhabited place in Europe¹⁷⁸] in winter. They close the ‘border,’ and it is isolated from the outside world. [...] Not having contact with the rest of the world.”

¹⁷⁶ Gabriele Pollini, “Social belonging,” in Encyclopedia of Sociology, eds E. F. Borgatta & R. J. V. Montgomery, (Macmillan: New York), 2632.

¹⁷⁷ Gabriele Pollini, “Elements of a theory of place attachment and socio-territorial belonging,” *International Review of Sociology—Revue Internationale de Sociologie* 15, no. 3. (2005): 497.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03906700500272483>.

¹⁷⁸ “Ushguli – Highest Inhabited Place in Europe,” Documentary Tube, accessed May 17, 2020
<https://www.documentarytube.com/articles/ushguli-the-highest-inhabited-place-in-europe#:~:text=At%202200m%20high%2C%20Ushguli%20in,in%20the%20world%20and%20Europe.>

Despite considering Gali as part of Georgia, differentiating this place from the rest of the country is characteristic of the interviewees. As respondent F2 explained, *“I love every single rock from there [Gali]. This really is the best place. It is paradise, so to speak.”*

Localism is considered a significant characteristic of socio-territorial belonging, the characteristics of which can depend on the specificity of the realm – it does not require that it coincide with the administratively established borders; instead, it can be originated from the combination of “neighbourhoodism” (sense of attachment to the neighborhood, and “provincialism” or “regionalism.”¹⁷⁹ At the same time, localism does not contradict one’s national belonging.¹⁸⁰ On the contrary, national identity and local identity coexist together, forming “socio-territorial belonging.”¹⁸¹ In other words, this means that the Gali district’s ethnic Georgians do not eliminate their national belonging as Georgians. Rather, their belonging to the ‘locality’ does not detract from, but instead compliments the national one:

“I was born in Gali. It is not only home for me; it is everything. [...] My place of Belonging is Gali [...]. Even if I have to move somewhere else, I will always belong to Abkhazia. I am ‘Galian’ Georgian,” explained interviewee F7.

The notion of having to live and make do with their particular, stuck-in-the-middle-of-a-frozen-conflict circumstances have been expressed several times during the interview process. Nonetheless, a strong and special emotional attachment with the District still exists for residents. As one of the respondents noted: *“I have never felt like a foreigner [in Georgia proper]. It is still a native [homeland]; however, there is a process of getting used to [living with the current status quo]. We are even used to the local life rhythm. [...] My heart anyways wants to be here [in Gali].”* (F6)

¹⁷⁹ Gabriele Pollini, “Elements of a theory of place attachment and socio-territorial belonging,” 505-506.

¹⁸⁰ Gabriele Pollini, “Elements of a theory of place attachment and socio-territorial belonging,” 510.

¹⁸¹ Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social theory and global culture*. Vol. 16. Sage, 1992, **quoted in** Gabriele Pollini, “Elements of a theory of place attachment and socio-territorial belonging,” 510.

Attachment to the Community and “We-feeling”

Max Weber, in his work *Social and Economic Organization*, lists the types of social relationships based on solidarity in the community and describes the feeling of ‘togetherness’ as: “a subjective feeling of the parties, whether effectual or traditional, that they belong together.”¹⁸² The notion of insiders and outsiders can be an essential definitive subject of belonging to a particular group in a specific place that coincides with a sense of devotion to it. As interviewee F2 explained:

“Here [in Gali] even people are different. People from here and people from there – across the Enguri River. I sometimes visit Zugdidi,¹⁸³ my maiden house, it is my house, right? However, I am still a guest there. Over there [Georgia-proper], I feel like a stranger. [...] I love everything over here. I always make comparisons. People over here are really different; they stand shoulder to shoulder with each other.”

This differentiation between groups across the Administrative Border Line (ABL) is also contributed to by their respective lifestyles. Since they cannot fully exercise their civic rights in their place of residence and at the same time do not fully engage in the Georgia-proper, Gali’s Georgian’s:

“How to say it? Live a different life. For example, everyone knows about the problem with the passports. [...] No one needs Gali. We help each other. [...] The Gali district is in between the sky and land.¹⁸⁴ We are neither here nor there. We have our own life, our own everything.” (F7)

Even though they consider themselves as ethnic Georgians, the community they are living in is different from the rest of Georgia, and therefore creates the sense of attachment to this particular group they call “Galian Georgians,” emphasizing the fact of distinctness:

¹⁸² Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. Talcott Parsons and A.M. Henderson (Glencoe, Illinois: Falcon's Wing Press, 1947), 136.

¹⁸³ City in the Western Georgia, bordering the ABL.

¹⁸⁴ This is a Georgian saying to express that something does not belong either in heaven or on land, meaning that it is lost in a kind of purgatory.

“[we are even] different from the people who are from Gali but do not live here; they are totally different people. They have a totally different psychology because they are living a different life.” (F6)

The feeling of not fully belonging to either the Georgian or Abkhazian community, as well as the current status quo, creates a feeling of uniqueness. As Nira Yuval-Davis points out, belonging can be defined not only by the “social locations” and the ways how individual or collective identities are constructed, but it is also important how these identities and attachments are “valued and judged.”¹⁸⁵ As one of the respondents noted:

“Gali and ‘Galiens’ are somehow separate. We did not get much attention as Internally Displaced People (IDP). Yes, we have IDP pensions [from the Georgian Government]; however, we are not considered as IDP’s. Because, they say, we are living in our houses.” (F6)

American sociologist Robert J. Merton, while explaining the definitional criteria of a group, mentions the importance of out-group members’ consideration of where one belongs. Meaning that others – insiders or outsiders – can also define whether or not one is a member, which, in turn, can be expressed with behavior rather than words.¹⁸⁶ In the case of Gali residents, it is equally important how they are seen by their fellow Georgians across the ABL:

“When I cross the ABL, for example, I do not have a typical Georgian face, and when I go to the Bazar, everyone is saying – look, a Russian came. After, when they figure out, I am not Russian, they mention like – ah, she is from Gali. So, this “Ah, you are from Gali [narrative]” always exists.” (F7)

The fact that ethnic Georgians in Gali are not considered IDPs by the general public, as mentioned above, because they have not left their houses as a result of war, coupled with the perception of Gali as something different, distinct from Georgia-proper, contributes to the sense of attachment towards their place of residence for Gali inhabitants. Hence, as a result, the idea of community and common fate elevates the feeling of locality and solidarity. As

¹⁸⁵ Nira Yuval-Davis, *Belonging and the politics of belonging*, *Patterns of prejudice* 40, no. 3 (2006): 203.

¹⁸⁶ Robert King Merton, *Social theory and social structure*, (New York: The Free Press, 1968), 340.

Pollini mentions, belonging is constructed by the combination of attachment, solidarity, affinity, and loyalty.¹⁸⁷

Frustration and Inability to Change the Status quo

The current situation ethnic Georgians are living in the Gali district is one that is challenging on a daily basis, as discussed above. From the problems related to the passports to crossing the ABL and restrictions on getting an education in their native language grows frustration among the residents:

“All rights of Georgians are restricted here. For example, we cannot take part in the so-called “elections.” If they [Abkhazians and Russians] tell you to do something, you should do it. People are used to these situations, as they do not have a solution for it.” (F6)

However, the situation during the past decades after the war has not always been the same. For almost thirty years, the conditions and regulations people in Gali had to deal with have been evolving, therefore making it more difficult to plan ahead for the future. One thing staying constant has been the place of residence:

“About fifteen years ago, the attitude towards Georgians [in Abkhazia] was more aggressive. However, gradually, the process of adaptation started. They [Abkhazians and Georgians] got used to each other. Now Georgians here feel freer than ten years ago. [...] You do not have the influence to change something globally; one thing you can do is to give a helping hand to your friend or relative, to help each other out.” (F6)

The inability for Gali Georgians to change the status quo and the fact that it can be changed anytime by the decisions made at the political level pushes the Gali residents towards positioning themselves toward their local community since this is the place where they can depend on each other and where small changes can occur: *“You cannot make predictions here.*

¹⁸⁷ Gabriele Pollini, “Elements of a theory of place attachment and socio-territorial belonging,” 500-501.

You know, how God said to live with a present-day, and he would show tomorrow—we are like this as well,” (F7). As it was pointed out by one respondent F2:

“People from Gali are in a complicated situation. [...] We make each other stronger; everyone is taking each other’s side. [...] Once we broke car on the road [In the Gali district] and got help immediately, they fixed it; if this had happened in Zugdidi, people would have passed by. No one cares if you are struggling or not. I see it this way.”

As Nira Yuval-Davis points out in her article “Belonging and the politics of belonging,” when we discuss the topic of belonging, certain historical events and the relationship with a particular group of people can be defined as the special contributory mean for an individual to position him or herself as a member of a community “in constructing individuals’ specific positionings, there are some social divisions such as gender, stage in the life cycle, ethnicity and class that tend to shape most people’s lives in most social locations.”¹⁸⁸

A Vague Representation of the Future

The way the respondents present the future is not very optimistic. Instead, it is vague and undefined, which, in turn, creates a bigger gap between Gali residents and the rest of Georgia. Even though the respondents expressed the desire for the unification of Georgia, the current situation is not giving them much to hope for, especially when Russia is a ‘mediator,’ as mentioned by one of the interviewees:

“Now, when we sit down together, older and younger, to talk, we think that somehow we can go back and belong to Georgia. We have hope, but also, we see Russia. We are not here, nor there. We hope we can be a neighboring free zone. I see it this way. [...] Today, Gali is everything for us. Since the border is closed, we are now chained to it. [...] Now, for me, it is unimaginable if I could live somewhere else. [...] It is everything for me. [...] Like our house, our nest.” (F4)

The narrative mentioned above creates the feeling of self-dependence, simultaneously growing the sense of attachment to the place and the community. The position they are in pushes them

¹⁸⁸ Nira Yuval-Davis, Belonging and the politics of belonging, *Patterns of prejudice* 40, no. 3 (2006): 201.

to be oriented more on present considerations than future ones and get used to their reality. As one of the respondents pointed out: *“political [pressure] or something cannot be felt now. They [Abkhaz] and we [Georgians] also forget the bad period. [...] I see it this way somehow.”* (F4)

One of the interviewees pointed out that adjusting to and accepting their situation is sometimes used as a means to improve their daily life:

“There is now a situation that some adapted. [...] In the Ochamchire district, there are some [Georgians] who say they are Abkhazians, but they have Georgian surnames. In the 90s, they declared that they are Abkhazians.” (M1)

The politics of belonging, apart from the establishing boundaries within which one belongs and excluding outsiders, also uses “political powers” who create political projects aiming for the “construction of their collectivity and its boundaries.”¹⁸⁹ The position and actions of the *de facto* Abkhaz government can be discussed from this perspective. On the one hand, they restrict the political rights of Gali Georgians, and, on the other hand, because they are perceived as a threat to their national project, political decisions are made to incorporate the Georgians in Gali into the Abkhazian society, albeit without their ‘Georgian heritage.’ As one of the respondents pointed out:

“Especially in the last five years, they [the de facto Abkhaz administration] have tried to exclude these people [Gali Georgians] and win them over to the Abkhazian space. At this moment, these people are at a crossroads. Before, they knew their place. [...] On some people, they use an ideological perspective that they are not representatives of the Georgian ethnos, that they have a different ethnicity – that they are Mingrelians. They have been told that they are not Abkhaz but a part of multiethnic Abkhazia.” (M1)

The ambiguous future and the policies introduced by the *de facto* authorities, combined with the inability of the Georgian government to provide the necessary assistance due to the political situation pushes the residents of Gali to think that in the future their identity, and therefore attachment to a particular ethnic group, might even change:

¹⁸⁹ Nira Yuval-Davis, Belonging and the politics of belonging, *Patterns of prejudice* 40, no. 3 (2006): 205

“Identity throughout time will change. The new generation is coming, and time is passing; children are studying in the Russian language. [...] When I observe my children, their mindset is Russian. I try [to change it], but there are families who cannot teach [their children] and depend primarily on school. They hear everything in Russian, Russian authors, Russian literature, their mentality, judgment changes, and that is it. Years will pass, two-three generations and some might not even know that they are Georgians. I cannot even say who they will become.” (F6)

The politics and narratives mentioned above lead to the feeling of attachment to a certain place within a certain community: *“We are Georgians living in Gali. I see it this way. [...] We are the same circle here. Everyone is each other’s relative and fellow.” (F4)*

There are people in Gali who do not obtain a residence permit, and therefore they cannot even cross the ABL if they wanted to/if there was such a possibility. Therefore, their life is fully occupied with the Gali district, contributing to their sense of attachment to the territory. Moreover, despite the fact that, according to the respondents, the everyday relationship among Georgians and Abkhaz is relatively normalized, they still feel that they are not part of that community either: *“for example, when the road inspectors stop the vehicle, they stop Mingrelians, and not the representatives of other ethnic groups.” (F8)*

Construction of identity can depend on a particular time and context, which, in turn, can be changed without the will of a certain community. Thus, belonging becomes a crucial part of “people’s social locations and positionings, and the relationships between locations and identifications can become empirically more closely intertwined.”¹⁹⁰ Gali remains a sacred place of importance people identify themselves with, despite the difficulties they might face on an everyday basis:

“On one meeting, a foreigner asked me where I am from, and I paused for a moment to think. I thought if I say Abkhazia, he might not know where it is, so I said Georgia. [...] When I am asked where I am from, and I answer Georgia, I feel like my identity is being lost somehow.” (M7)

¹⁹⁰ Nira Yuval-Davis, Belonging and the politics of belonging, *Patterns of prejudice* 40, no. 3 (2006): 203.

Conclusion

This thesis analyzed the development and the shift of social-territorial belonging in the community affected by the conflict. Physical and psychological borders which appeared after the war in Abkhazia affected the ethnic Georgian community that remained on the other side of the ABL. Conflict, which by itself is associated with trauma, resulted in this group of people finding themselves at a crossroads. On the one hand, they are Georgians who cannot fully exercise their social-political rights in their place of the residence due to the political situation as the jurisdiction of the Georgian government is restricted on the territory of Abkhazia. On the other hand, as ethnic Georgians living in the *de facto* Republic of Abkhazia, they are unable to have the same political and social rights as the other rights as other ethnic groups living on the territory – education in their native language, voting rights, and the ability to obtain a passport rather than a mere residence.

The above-mentioned situation became the main research interest of mine regarding how it affected the sense of belonging of the ethnic Georgians in Gali. While this research is not trying to claim that their ethnicity has changed, it explores the degree of attachment that the target group developed toward the specific place due to the status quo they are living in.

The 1992-93 Georgian-Abkhaz war is mainly explored by the researchers from the perspective of international relations, conflict studies, and relationships between two rival groups. However, the focus on Gali Georgians is primarily explored through the prism of human rights violations. While this thesis does not aim to be generalized onto the whole population of the Gali district, it reflects on the identity and the changes accrued during the post-war period among its residents.

The suggested hypotheses were that the context the Georgians of Gali are living in has shifted their primary sense of belonging towards the particular territory and group they are living

in/with and that the main reasons for this were on the one hand, the *de facto* Abkhazian government's policies towards the Gali district residents, and, on the other hand, the inability of Georgia-proper to provide them with all the necessary policies due to the political situation.

For the testing of the hypotheses, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted. Through the interviews, it was confirmed that since Gali residents are restricted in their ability to exercise political and social rights in the *de facto* republic and the fact that ABL is being closed in accordance with decisions made by Russian/Abkhaz forces pushes them to be focused mostly on their community and the territory of the Gali district. The second hypothesis, regarding the role of the Georgian government, was not fully confirmed as the respondents mentioned that they receive help and support from them. During the interview process other factors, such as the importance of the place, “We-feeling,” frustration and inability to change the status quo, and vague representation of the future have been marked out as primary reasons for the development of the sense of belonging toward the specific community and territory.

The main challenges of the research have been the finding of respondents willing to express their thoughts freely, as they feared the exposure of their identity; the difficulties caused by the developments of COVID-19 also hardened the process of contacting the respondents.

A suggestion for future research on this topic is a focus on the younger generation of Gali residents, given that their move to the Russian educational system, coupled with an analysis of their sense of attachment, can give us a complete picture of the situation in Gali – one that involves the younger generations.

This thesis and its results can be beneficial for researchers and students interested in conflict studies, nationalism, and identity politics, as well as government officials who can use it as auxiliary material while planning specific policies towards the communities affected by conflicts.

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