

**From Home-Making to State-Making: The Case of Georgian IDPs from  
Abkhazia**

by

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## Abstract

The research delves into the case of internal displacement that occurred as a result of the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict in 1992-1993. Almost 30 years after the forced displacement of Georgians from Abkhazia, the Georgian IDPs still cannot return to their homes. Paradoxically, the quantity of people with the IDP status has been increasing throughout this period as the new generations, who were born years after the conflict and displacement, can also be granted the status of IDP by the Georgian government. The first focal point of the thesis is to understand how and why the social category of IDP continues to be reproduced within generations to this day and what is the role of Georgian IDPs in the Georgian nation-building project. Secondly, the research explores how the memories of Abkhazia and the hope of going back home are being sustained within the generations and create the condition of IDP. For these objectives, I conducted 20 interviews with different generations of Georgian IDPs and one interview with a representative of the Government of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia working on the issues of IDPs from Abkhazia. The research puts special emphasis on the status of IDP and its socio-economic, mnemonic and political functions. I argue that the IDP status granted by the government gives legitimacy to the hope of going back to Abkhazia in the future. At the same time, the status has inscribed temporal and spatial framework in it, positioning the IDPs and the upcoming generations into a specific category different from other Georgian citizens. The thesis demonstrates that the homemaking process of Georgian IDPs is interrelated with the Georgian state-making process – as long as the Georgian IDPs cannot return to their homes in Abkhazia, the Georgian nation-building project will be unrealized. The research contributes to the studies of protracted displacement, memory studies and the anthropology of state.

**Keywords:** Forced Displacement; IDP Status; Memory; Hope; State-Making.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

The history of forced displacement of Georgians from Abkhazia takes root in 1992-1993 when the tension between the Georgian and Abkhaz sides escalated into a war. Ethnically Georgians living in Abkhazia could no longer stay within Abkhaz territory and had to immediately leave their homes. More than 200,000 Georgians (UNHCR Global Report 2000, 357) had to abandon everything without knowing when they would be able to return home. Yet, no one would imagine that after almost 30 years from the war, Georgians still would not have the right to go back to Abkhazia. It is crucial to note that the displacement of Georgians was acknowledged as “internal” since the borders between Abkhazia and Georgia are not internationally recognized to this day. Granting the “Internally Displaced Person” status to the forcibly displaced Georgians had its political implications: firstly, it meant that the Georgian government was made responsible for their protection and well-being; secondly, it marked the fact that Abkhazia was part of Georgia and thus, Georgians were displaced within the frontiers of one nation-state.

Years after the events, a new generation of IDPs was born. Interestingly, the newborns were also eligible to bear the status of IDP, despite being born years after the war and displacement. Nowadays, even the third generation can be granted the status of IDP as long as at least one parent has the active status. Paradoxically, the number of individuals with IDP status has been increasing over time, as the status has been continuously reproduced and multiplied within the generations. The research examines the mechanisms of status reproduction and its consequences on an individual and political level. What are the functions of the status in different generations of IDPs? How do IDPs themselves explain the status? What does it mean to be an IDP after all this time? What does it mean to be born as an IDP? These questions are central to the research. Nevertheless,

it is difficult to talk about the condition of IDP without the memories and hope of going back home which connects the different generations to Abkhazia. In this regard, the research also explores the intergenerational transmission of memories, trauma and hope. Namely, how are the memories and stories of Abkhazia maintained within the generations of IDPs? How do different generations of IDPs engage with the possible futures? The memories and nostalgia of the past, which is tightly intertwined with the imagined future of both – the IDPs and the Georgian state, becomes one of the core components of the research.

### **The Context of Internal Displacement**

While the research concentrates on the internal displacement and different generations of IDPs, it is impossible to ignore the historical and political context which still holds high significance in modern-day Georgia. This very context involves the chronology of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, Georgian-Russian relations, Georgian state agenda and the dominant discourses in the Georgian public. One of the main reasons behind the geopolitical conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia was intensified ethnonationalism of both sides, which was largely triggered by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1988-1991 (Davitashvili 2003, 394-400). During this period, the independence movement in Georgia, led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia (the first president of Georgia elected in 1991), strongly advocated the idea of unified and independent Georgia, free from the USSR. The Georgian national project also entailed Abkhazia as part of independent Georgia. Nevertheless, Abkhazia wished for independence from Georgia, as they objected to Georgian influence and policies regarding the official languages, mass media production and higher education in Abkhazia (Bursualia 2020, 4). In other words, Abkhazia formed its own national project, separately from Georgia.

While Abkhazia was regarded as an autonomous region of Georgia, the Abkhaz separatist movement, backed by Russia, was perceived as a violation of the Georgian territorial sovereignty by the Georgian state. The tension between the two sides escalated into a war in 1992-1993. Abkhazia's demand for independence was not fulfilled, as, to this day, only Russia, Syria, Venezuela Nicaragua and Nauru recognize Abkhazia as an independent state (ibid). Since the war, the border between Abkhazia and Georgia has been controlled by Russian and Abkhaz militaries. Eventually, the Georgian government has recognized Abkhazia as occupied by the Russian Federation and the majority of Georgian political parties have started to incorporate the goal of 'restoring historical borders of Georgia' into their political programs (Davitashvili 2003, 400). Meantime, Georgia's standpoint regarding Abkhazia's occupation by Russia has been supported by international law and institutions (Bursulaia 2020). Anti-Occupational discourses in Georgia became more intense after a recent war in August 2008, referred to as the Russo-Georgian war because of Russia's high political and military involvement in South Ossetia. The conflict resulted in the creation of another de facto state – South Ossetia, in the Caucasus region and one more wave of forced displacement of Georgians. 12 years after the war, the European Court of Human Rights recently released a statement about the 2008 war between Georgia and the Russian Federation, concluding that Russia exercised effective control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia and violated several provisions of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR 2021). The celebratory news for Georgia was actively shared on social media as it once again highlighted the international support towards the Georgian state.

Although the cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are considered frozen conflicts, these events haven't lost their importance for the Georgian state and public. To this day, the governmental program initially outlines the following: "Boosting efforts toward ensuring the safe and honorable return of IDPs and refugees from Georgia's occupied territories will be one of the

key priority lines of action” (Government Program 2021-2024, 6). Currently, there are two Georgian ministries that take the responsibility for the issue of occupation and its consequences:

1. Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from Occupied Territories, which takes charge of the protection, housing, resettlement and integration of Georgian IDPs; and
2. Ministry of Reconciliation and Civic Equality, which manages the process of peace-keeping with Abkhazia and South Ossetia and dignified return of IDPs to their homes.

Moreover, the issue of internal displacement from Abkhazia is primarily administered by the government of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia – the only government of Abkhazia that is recognized by the Georgian state and is within the jurisdiction of the Georgian government. The political entity manages different educational and social programs for the IDPs, but most importantly, determines the legal address of the IDPs in Abkhazia and correspondingly grants the IDP status.

People with IDP status receive certain benefits from the Georgian state, including 40 GEL monthly stipend (only if one’s monthly income is less than 1000 GEL), support for housing and other social benefits. Although a part of Georgian IDPs managed to adapt to the new environment – got a job, bought a house and became financially independent, many of them still struggle with isolation and poor conditions of life in compact IDP settlements.

In parallel, the territorial integrity of Georgia has been one of the salient topics of public discourse during the past years. National sentiments towards lost territories have been reflected in a cycle of public protests and social campaigns, many of which contain anti-occupational and anti-Russian messages. Interestingly enough, the main messages of the social protests always focus on restoring the territorial integrity of the country, rather than on the other issues caused by wars. For instance, not much attention is given to the protection and well-being of internally displaced Georgians from the de facto states. Throughout the recent years, a new wave of social campaigns has dominated Georgian society with the main slogan “20% of my country is occupied by Russia.”



While the phrase is actively used in social media, it has also been one of the main slogans of social protests in front of the Georgian Parliament building in Tbilisi. The main goal of the public demonstrations is to protest the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, object Vladimir Putin's politics and raise awareness that the two de facto states are part of Georgia.

Throughout the project, I was asked multiple times why I was focusing my research specifically on the Georgian IDPs from Abkhazia and not including Georgian IDPs from South Ossetia in the study. The answer is simple: while the two regions and conflicts are frequently mentioned side by side in media, political speeches, public debates and everyday talks, I would restrain myself from putting the two conflicts into one case. After all, although the cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia might have much in common, I still insist that they have their own unique historical, political and geographical contexts. Other than that, the forced displacements from the respective regions have occurred under different times and circumstances, which makes the IDPs' personal experiences from the two regions dissimilar. I do recognize that the state agenda regarding the internal displacement of Georgians from Abkhazia also applies to the IDPs from South Ossetia, but I believe the latter is the subject of another research.

### **Internal Migration Governance in Georgia**

The first step of the Georgian government in managing the migration from Abkhazia was to place the forcibly displaced Georgians into temporary shelters. Due to the social and economic crisis in Georgia after the fall of the Soviet Union, the government could only offer housings in specific spaces, such as schools, kindergartens, hotels, student dormitories and collective centers. IDPs' integration was, indeed, not an easy process. Despite them being ethnically Georgian, they still struggled with adapting to the new environment and community as many of them were placed

in spatially isolated shelters in different cities and villages by the government (Mitchneck, Mayorova and Regulska 2009, 1028). Moreover, until 2003, according to the “Law on Internally Displaced Persons” the forcibly displaced Georgians did not have the right to own a property, otherwise, they would lose their status of IDP and the right to claim a property in Abkhazia.

It is apparent that the Georgian authorities restrained themselves from giving permanent housings to the IDPs. Essentially, if the IDPs successfully integrated into the new society and forgot about their past belongings, an important part of national interests would be under the threat. By national interests, I imply the government project of restoring the state sovereignty and resolving the conflict with Abkhazia, in which, the IDPs are positioned as important agents. It is crucial to mention the role of international humanitarian non-profit organizations, which played important role in the process of IDP integration, both in terms of housing and advocating changes in the legal documents. For instance, due to the bad living conditions in the collective centers, the Norwegian Refugee Council implemented a project to build small block houses for IDPs in Western Georgia in 2002 and 2003. The NRC’s housing project supposed to be a durable solution for the IDPs’ everyday problems experienced in the collective centers, and the Georgian authorities reluctantly agreed on the project. Nevertheless, both – collective centers and block houses were still regarded as temporary housings (Brun 2015, 44). Furthermore, in the document produced by the UNHCR regarding the gap analysis of IDP protection in Georgia, big emphasis was put on the issue of the Georgian government’s policy which essentially focused on the IDPs’ return to their homes and neglected their existing needs (UNHCR 2009, 7).

One would ask, where is the agency of the IDPs? The IDPs definitely tried to protests the nomadic way of life they were put in. One of such recent protests happened in 2019 when around 200 IDP families occupied the new residential complex in Tbilisi with the aim of demanding stable housing (OC Media 2019). The building was bought by the Ministry of IDPs in the framework of

the IDP resettlement programme, and the IDPs who were not granted the house could be able to apply for it next year. Yet, the IDPs were demanding housing right away, as, according to them, they did not have anywhere to go. One of the protesters stated the following: “We have come here to claim the houses we deserve. We demand nothing else but what we deserve” (ibid).

### **From Lost Home to Future Home: Theoretical Framework**

The interest in the story of IDPs from Abkhazia grew over time as it gradually transformed into a case of protracted displacement. The prolonged displacement was on many occasions referred to as a state of limbo and liminality (Brun and Fábos 2015, Dunn 2014, Human Rights Watch 2011). This conceptual frame positioned the IDPs into an uncertain condition, being stuck between the past and the future. Dunn (2014) stresses that the war not only injures the buildings and bodies but also the life before the war. The pre-war practices, meanings, social networks, routines and everything that formed the individual worlds are now demolished (ibid, 290). Dunn conceptualizes *nothingness* as a social phenomenon attributed to the post-war state of the IDPs and addresses the ontological questions: how do people rebuild their worlds after the war? How do people navigate themselves in a new set of reality full of various power structures, meanings and actors? How do people inhabit new places in the condition of liminality? (ibid, 306).

Throughout these questions, the idea of home comes in front since for many people home can symbolize the center of their worlds. In other words, rebuilding one’s world should, first of all, start with remaking one’s home. But before discussing the IDPs’ homemaking process after the war, it is important to define what does the concept of *home* mean. Brun and Fábos (2015) propose three definitions of home which touch upon different aspects of what home can represent. Firstly, *home* can be understood as a set of daily practices, routines and social interactions that are

connecting people to a specific place. Secondly, *home* can imply the values, memories and personal feelings for a concrete place. In this regard, *home* can become an idealized place the displaced people dream of (ibid, 12). Conceptualization of this kind enables us to see the link between the lost home left in the past and the hopes for an idealized home envisioned in the future. Thirdly, Brun and Fábos refer to a political and historical understanding of *home* which is not only experienced by individuals but is also rooted in the idea of homeland and geopolitics of the nation. This way, the authors accentuate the politics of *home* that is clearly reflected in the Georgian policy-making process regarding the ‘durable solutions’ for Georgian IDPs (ibid, 13). The three conceptualization of *home* highlights the multidimensionality of the term and opens up new topics of discussion. One of the issues that I want to take a closer look at is the link between the past and the future which happens to be brought together by the memories and nostalgia which remain within the IDPs to this day.

*Nostalgia* can be defined as a yearning for a home that no longer exists or has never existed (Boym 2001). Apart from other types of memory, nostalgia entails sentiments of loss and idealization of the past (ibid). Nevertheless, the nostalgic homesickness does not only reflect one’s engagement with the past but also with the future. In her book dedicated to the Bulgaristanlı migrants residing in Turkey, Ayşe Parla (2019) explores the role of nostalgia in the cultivation of hope. After all, “memory inevitably filters the past through the lens of the present” (ibid, 146). To go back to the idea of home-making, Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck (2010) conceptualize home as both – a place of origin and a point of destination. Like Parla, the authors stress the role of memories in constructing the imaginary and alternative futures. Furthermore, the article refers to Al-Rashid’s (1994) concept of ‘double nostalgia’ which demonstrates the displaced people’s focus on the past and the future. The article showcases that the understanding of home is constructed in the past and in the future, which leaves the present in a temporal framework

(Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck, 3). In other words, the desired future and the hope of going back home is located in the idealized past (ibid).

While the anthropology of *hope* still remains as a novel subfield, the interest in this analytical concept has been lately emerging in different researches, including in political economy and migration studies. In the former case, the analysis of *hope* involves the issues of unequal distribution of intensities of hoping and the various forms hoping can take in different categories of people (Jansen 2021, 1). Nevertheless, hoping for a better life does not necessarily imply material well-being, but it can also represent a longing for a particular location, which is usually the case of displaced people (ibid, 3). By studying the case of the IDPs from Abkhazia, Brun (2015) theorized the ‘agency-in-waiting’ to locate agency in a time perspective and understand the hopes of returning back during the protracted displacement. The article portrays how individuals “live with a status that is not supposed to last” (ibid, 33) and show that hope can be used for coping with uncertain futures. Brun also highlights the political interests behind maintaining the hope for the future which takes away the agency of people to move on from the past to the future by positioning them in a certain social category. Complementary to this, by referring to Muehleback and Shoshan’s (2012) work on post-Fordist Affect, Ayşe Parla (2019) explores the role of “frustrated promises” in the manifestation of hope in ethnic Turkish migrants from Bulgaria. I believe the ‘frustrated promises’ can be an equally useful term for defining the prolonged displacement of Georgians from Abkhazia. And although the political promises of Georgian IDPs’ repatriation to Abkhazia have not been fulfilled to this day, the frustrated promises “nevertheless maintain a strong hold over the present” (Muehleback and Shoshan 2012, 324).

Furthermore, it is important to stress the role of the family in the way individuals construct the past. According to Halbwachs (1992), *les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (social frameworks of memory), signifying the social milieu of an individual, primarily involves the people around us.

Zerubavel (1996), who also paid attention to the role of the family in the process of memory construction, coined the concept *mnemonic community* deriving from the mnemonic socialization process. Zarubavel argued that our recollected memories are the reinterpretations of the originally experienced and remembered life events within our family. Halbwachs and Zarubavel both focus on the intersection between the individual and collective memory and describe how a person can inherit the memories collectively experienced by a group.

Georgian IDPs as a mnemonic community (Toría 2015) share certain memories – both sweet (connected to their pre-war life in Abkhazia) and traumatic (of war and displacement). At the same time, in his article, Toría (2015) emphasizes the heterogeneity of the IDP community and the way they remember their homeland. By applying the theoretical framework of communicative and cultural memory (concepts initially coined by Egyptologist Jan Assmann) Toría tries to understand how IDPs' personal memories (communicative memory) are defined by the institutionalized national narrative (cultural memory) and how the recollection of events by the IDPs and historians differ or resemble one another. According to Toría, while it is hard to detect the dividing line between the individual viewpoint and the internalized national narratives, there are still some clear indicators (e.g. IDPs' active reference to Russia's postcolonial power and its intention to break Abkhazia apart from Georgia) that reflect how national templates determine what and how to remember (ibid 65). Toría argues that these very national narrative templates are embedded in an institutionalized form, such as school curricula and media (ibid, 49). Here, I would add that the national memory project is also embedded in the official IDP status and by passing on the status from a parent to a child, the national templates continue to be reproduced within the generations.

Looking at the IDP category as a social structure enables us to trace its social genesis and most importantly, its symbolic power in relation to the Georgian state. It is indispensable to discuss the role of the state in creating the IDP category as “through the framing it imposes upon practices,

the state establishes and inculcates common forms and categories of perception and appreciation, social frameworks of perceptions, of understanding or of memory, in short *state forms of classification*” (Bourdieu 1994, 13). According to Bourdieu, social agents form the social world through cognitive structures which are maintained by instruments and institutions produced and reproduced by the state. The family or the school system, which contribute to the individual mental discipline, can exemplify such state institutions. In the presented case, the IDP status can be identified as the state instrument, which is essentially reproduced through the family institution. Furthermore, Bourdieu argues that the mean-making process mediated by the state, which constitutes of *orchestration of habituses*, becomes the source of national commonsense (ibid). Interestingly, the cognitive structures inscribed in bodies are not only the product of collective and individual history, but also of the objective structures of the world “to which these cognitive structures are applied” (ibid, 14).

The interaction between the social agents and the state is comprehensibly analyzed in Akhil Gupta’s (1995) ethnography of the state in contemporary India. Like Bourdieu, he also draws attention to the symbolic power relations between the state and its citizens. Namely, Gupta focuses on the cultural practices and institutions that come in contact with the individuals. According to him, the first encounter with the state happens on the local level, with government bureaucracies, local courts and police stations. In case of Georgian IDPs, the entry point of the interaction with the state is again connected to the IDP status. This very status requires people to engage with the bureaucratic system and become part of a certain social category. It is noteworthy that Gupta emphasizes the interconnectedness of the state and the social space by stating that “the very same processes that enable one to construct the state also help one to imagine these other social groupings” (ibid, 393).

While the rich literature on the IDPs addresses different aspects of the protracted displacement, including the nostalgia, the hope of going back home, the home-making process and the political intentions behind it, not much attention is given to the process of reproducing these categories. Namely, the questions of ‘how many more years is it going to last’ or what are the mechanisms of the reproduction, still remain unanswered. For this reason, intergenerational research about IDPs becomes significant for understanding the continuity of the internal displacement to this day. By reproduction, I imply not only the memories and the hope of returning back, which is principal to the current state of IDPs but also the official status of IDP and the political narratives, which, hinted by previous studies, are interconnected with the former categories. Thus, the research contributes and brings a novel intergenerational perspective to the already existing research on protracted displacement. Simultaneously, it adds to the literature on the anthropology of state, memory and migration studies. It is important to mention that while the project entirely focuses on the case of Georgian IDPs, which is directly linked to one of the ongoing conflicts in the South Caucasus, the research can also be relevant to any other occurrence of protracted displacement in the world.

## **Research Methodology**

The research is based on the qualitative methodology of semi-constructed in-depth interviews. I conducted 20 interviews with Georgian citizens with IDP status from Abkhazia. The interviewees’ age varied from 24 to 75. This age range made it possible to grasp various experiences of different generations. It is crucial to note that the division between generational categories is conditional – by the first generation of IDPs, I imply individuals who lived at least some part of their life in Abkhazia and experienced the forced displacement. Among my interviewees, some people were physically living in Abkhazia but were too young to remember



anything. I include these people in the second generation, along with the individuals who were born after the displacement and who know about Abkhazia and war from their parents and relatives. The interview questions focused on their past and current experience of being an IDP, their understanding of the status, their memories, connection and the imagined return to Abkhazia.

For reaching out to the interviewees, I used snowball sampling and asked my acquaintances to connect me with people with IDP status coming from Abkhazia. Getting in touch with them and organizing the interviews was not a hard task as IDPs from Abkhazia have close ties with each other. Moreover, this enabled me to interview different people in the same household. All interviews were carried on individually. In one case only, I interviewed a mother and a daughter together. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all conversations proceeded online, via Zoom, WhatsApp and Messenger. The online regime made it possible to reach out to people living not only in Tbilisi but in different regions in Georgia. While most of the previous studies conducted on the same case are based on the interviews with the Georgian IDPs living in compact IDP settlements, I decided to shift the focus and interview IDPs living outside these settlements (yet, many of them have experienced living in the temporary shelters in the first years of displacement). This decision was based on the goal to understand the category of IDP in a broader sense, not limiting it with the experiences from compact settlements. In other words, I intended to explore the perspective of the people who live outside the IDP settlements but still bear the IDP status and maintain memories and hope connected to Abkhazia.

Furthermore, I had one interview with the representative of the government of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia working on the issues of internal displacement from Abkhazia. The conversation focused on the main political and legal discussions around the internal migration management, government's action plan and strategy regarding IDPs repatriation and the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict resolution.

It is crucial to consider the role of ethics in the research as it involves asking people about their traumatic memories and personally sensitive stories. Conducting interviews was especially hard with the first generation of IDPs for whom remembering the painful events was very emotional and heart-breaking. For these reasons, the interviews were carried on only after the full consent of the interviewee and taking into account the fact that they could reject answering any question that made them feel uncomfortable. For the same ethical reasons, all interviewee's names have been changed.

While being Georgian and speaking the same language, I still have an outsider's position in relation to the IDP community, as I do not have any relation to Abkhazia nor share any experience of forced migration. I was reminded many times during the interviews that nobody can fully understand the trauma caused by war and forced displacement without having a personal experience of the events. Throughout the planning, interviewing, research and writing process I also endeavored to remain aware of my positionality towards the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in an effort to mitigate biases that might be due to my upbringing through the Georgian national narratives. Simultaneously, this shared national narrative might have affected IDPs' responses to questions posed by another Georgian. For minimizing the bias regarding my subjective outlook on the conflict, for the past two months, I have been participating in the project "History Dialogue in Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict" organized by a German NGO – Berghof Foundation in the Caucasus, which essentially aims to share different voices and perspectives of the conflict and initiate novel discussions around the topic through public diplomacy. While I do not include my experience of being involved in the discussions of the workshops in my research, I believe these meetings largely contributed to enriching my perspective on the conflict from both – Abkhaz and Georgian sides.

## Chapter 2

### Geographies of the Forced Displacement

The affective capacity of memory does not only lead us to a certain time but also to a certain place (Drozdowski, De Nardi, Waterton 2016). In this section, I outline the main geographical sites and trajectories which were central to the Georgians' displacement from Abkhazia. These locations and routes matter as they build up a geographical context to the case and most importantly, highlight the complexity of the displacement. The case of forced displacement involves a diverse set of experiences, stories, tragedies and memories due to the different ways Georgians had to leave Abkhazia.



Photo 1. Political Map of Georgia, 2015; Source: The United Nations

Throughout my interviews with IDPs, I realized that different cities and locations remained strongly in their memories. Some of them, mostly inhabiting near the Black Sea coast when the war started, had to leave Abkhazia by a ship which took them to Batumi, Adjara (a region on the Black Sea coast bordering Turkey). This is where they had to spend their post-war period – in different hotels and sanatoriums, without knowing that it was not a short-term displacement. Nevertheless, many Georgians living in Sokhumi – the capital of Abkhazia, had to abandon Abkhaz territory through the highlands of Svaneti – a mountainous region in Georgia bordering Abkhazia. One more route taken by Georgians was the river Enguri– a natural border between Georgia and Abkhazia. By crossing the river, Georgians ended up in Samegrelo – another region bordering Abkhazia. According to the IDPs I had conversations with, each trajectory had numerous victims and a lot of Georgians lost and got separated from their family members. As stated by the recent statistical data, the biggest number of IDPs currently reside in Tbilisi and Samegrelo and Upper Svaneti region (IDFI Georgia 2018).

It is important to mention Gali as a particular case, which happens to be one of the districts of Abkhazia and 96% of which is represented by ethnic Georgians (Human Rights Watch 2011). The Gali district is located at the de facto border between Abkhazia and Georgia. George was 7 years old and a first-year school student when one night he and his whole neighborhood had to leave Gali:

*“It was 2 or 3 o’clock at night and suddenly the sirens woke us up. It took us 24 hours to go from Gali to Zugdidi [administrative center of Samegrelo and Upper Svaneti]. If you check the map, it is only a 30-minutes-road by car. But the movement of people was so chaotic and unorganized that it took us almost one day and night to get to the safe side. After few months, we had to move to Batumi as they gave us a room in Hotel Medea. Part of my family had to stay in Gali because of their health. Also, my brother worked in Enguri Dam, which was a*

*strategic place and Abkhaz people allowed Eguri Dam employees to stay on their side... Enguri bridge has quite bad memories for me. After Georgians crossed the Enguri river, the Abkhaz side blew up the bridge. It took a lot of time to fix the bridge... ”*

Georgian IDPs from Gali are still able to travel to their homes and visit their family members, nevertheless, as claimed by George and my other interviewees from Gali, it is not an easy task. Georgian IDPs need to prepare documents, most importantly the proof of invitation from Gali, to safely cross the border. George shared with me his experience of visiting his family:

*“Going back to my family in Gali is a very complex process: there are levels of bureaucracy; sometimes they even close the border without any reason... seeing Russian militaries there is also very hard for me. I don’t go outside my neighborhood when I am in Gali that much because it is not safe. It is very dangerous to encounter the Abkhaz militsiya (police) – GAI [State Automobile Inspection] which also used to function in Georgia during the Soviet Union, but it is more like a criminal gang. If they see me being in Abkhazia as a guest, I will be under danger.”*

Despite the Gali district being largely populated by ethnic Georgians, it is still precarious to publicly talk in the Georgian language. In 1994, UNHCR facilitated the safe return of several hundreds of Georgian IDPs back to the Gali district. Nevertheless, the reintegration process was rigid as the returned ethnic Georgians had to obtain Abkhaz passports to enjoy certain civil rights in Abkhazia. The passport acquisition could only be possible through naturalization and renouncement of Georgian citizenship. Other than that, the process involved multiple layers of bureaucracy (Human Rights Watch 2018, 2). Furthermore, access to Georgian-language education in the Gali district became restricted after the 1992-93 war. Starting from 1995, the Abkhaz authorities introduced Russian as the main language of instruction which resulted in the

disappearance of Georgian-language schools in Gali and largely affected Georgian's access to education living in this district (ibid, 3).

### **Inherited Displacement**

It is not surprising that more than two decades later, individuals who had to flee from their homes still have intense bittersweet memories of Abkhazia. After all, many of them have spent more than half of their lives there. These memories and feelings, simultaneously filled with joy and sadness, didn't just simply fade away by time. On the contrary – during my interviews, I was amazed to hear that the frequency of remembering and talking about Abkhazia has been increasing during these years. 25-year old Mariam told me that the storytelling about Abkhazia has become more frequent in her family:

*“My mom and dad might sit all evening and talk about how beautiful Abkhazia was and how they were walking on the coast... they are very frequently talking about this, in details: which café did they go to, what were they eating... especially if they are having a conversation with someone who also lived in Sokhumi. Recently they have started watching some videos of Abkhazia on YouTube (posted by either Georgians or Russians). Sometimes we [she and her brother] watch them together with our parents and they are showing us the house they used to live in and explain how the streets of Sokhumi used to look like... As I get older, I have a bigger desire to see what Abkhazia is really like... Also, I think as my parents get older their sense of nostalgia becomes more intense. For example, my father left Abkhazia just before the war started and he couldn't take anything with him. And every time someone finds a photo of a relative taken in Abkhazia, they try to give it back because it is very important to them.”*

Similarly, 37-year old Ano, who was just 11 years when her family had to leave Abkhazia, told me that she gets more emotional about her displacement as years pass by:

*“When I realize that my mother was my age now when everything happened and she had to leave everything behind... I can’t imagine how I would handle it if I was her... to just stand up one day and run to save your and your family’s life. I was still a child and it wasn’t that traumatic for me as it was for the older generation – for my parents and grandparents.”*

While in the case of Mariam photos and videos can easily activate the memories and become the source of the storytelling, 65-year old Elena shared with me the pain she experiences every time she sees her house in the news:

*“It is personally very tragic for me when they are showing the Enguri Bridge in the news and the first house is mine. Imagine the pain I experience every time I see my house on the other side... Of course, I tell my grandchildren about my home and they already have big love for Abkhazia. For example, recently they had to write a homework at school and answer some questions: where are you from? Where are your ancestors from? And they were asking me to tell them. They were very interested. Even in the news, they can recognize the house I lived in and always ask me “grandma, isn’t that your house, with the red roof?!” My heart breaks on the fact that I have six grandchildren and none of them have been to my house.”*

During the interview, Elena told me that she used to write everything in her diary and she would never imagine that someone like me would show up one day and be interested in her story. She was noting everything that was happening around her during the war and displacement – about all the victims and sorrows she has witnessed. She was planning to take the notes with her but later decided to burn them as it caused too much pain for her – a decision she now regrets. It turned out that Tina, who was just 5 years old when she left Abkhazia, was also writing about her and her

parents' memories. What's more, she is planning to write a partially auto-biographic book about her and her family's experience:

*"I started gathering and writing about my memories because I noticed that they started to fade away as time goes by. I realized that some memories became more like a fantasy. When I am fact-checking something with older generations, it turns out that I have imagined some stuff... It is very important to me to maintain these memories, to such an extent that I even want to publish a book. I am intentionally writing in English because I want it to be read by an international audience. The reason is that I think not a lot of people know about it... In the IDP community, we always have this feeling that our voices and stories aren't heard."*

Throughout my interviews with the second generation, I realized that many of them were well informed about Abkhazia and their parent's life there. Most importantly, their interest in Abkhazia and the need to know what happened became stronger over time. In my conversation with 25-year old Natia, she mentioned that she doesn't want these stories to be forgotten and as she grows older, she becomes more interested in them. She talks more frequently about Abkhazia with her parents and asks them about the weather, lifestyle and environment in Abkhazia. My talk with 27-year old Sandro was relatively different, as he told me that they almost never talk about Abkhazia in his family. He does not even remember the time when any of his family members sat down with him and told stories about Abkhazia to him. Everything he knows about the war and Abkhazia he knows from the society. Nevertheless, he remembers some stories that happened to him which made him realize what it means to be an internally displaced person:

*" I remember me and my mother were sitting in the back seat of a bus. I was little and the bus was crowded. Suddenly, my mother heard someone's voice and she immediately wanted to move in front. She perceived it as a familiar voice. I remember we got off the bus at the*



*next station and it turned out that my mother saw her close neighbor from Sokhumi. She recognized her by voice. And I remember, we stood in the street for a long time, I was looking at them and I couldn't understand what was happening. This story made me realize what it means to be an IDP – people got separated from each other without even knowing each other's addresses.”*

That being said, it is important to acknowledge the power of storytelling and the way people are raising their children. How are they telling the stories to the next generation? Are they telling the whole story? What do they want or do not want their children to know? 37-year old Ano told me that her children know everything about Abkhazia, nevertheless, she tries not to tell them much about the war and traumatic memories. Anamaria was only a few years old to remember the displacement, nevertheless, she knows everything about the war and life in Abkhazia from her parents:

*“It is a very traumatic story for our family and we always remember it. My father was a war veteran and he died for Abkhazia... The other day my children found a photo of my father and they started asking me – “mom, did we have a grandfather?!” And I told them everything about their grandfather, Abkhazia and their ancestors. As my father was saying, if I won't be able to go back to Abkhazia, I want my children to have the chance to go back.”*

During my interviews, I realized that decades later, the events of forced displacement and the memories of Abkhazia are still actively present in IDPs' lives. What's more, the family storytelling becomes more frequent as the children of IDPs get older and they also become the bearers of the IDP status. What I also noticed is that, even if the external reminders (e.g. media, school homework about the family tree), had never intervened in people's everyday lives, the stories, sentiments and trauma stemming from Abkhazia will still be intimately interwoven in IDPs' lives. While a child

might not necessarily be interested in the stories of Abkhazia, one automatically learns about the past events from hearing the personal stories of their parents and grandparents whose lives were affected by the war and displacement.

The upcoming generations of IDPs can be considered as *postgeneration*, a concept Hirsch (2012) explains as a group sharing common qualities and symptoms inherited from their parents. The term 'postmemory' can be an important tool for grasping the complexity of intergenerational transmission, specifically, ideas, memories and traumas linked to one's home. To follow Hirsch's definition, "Postmemory describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before... As I see it, rather, as a structure of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience" (Ibid, 5-6). Interestingly, memories of lost home and land of one generation can become postmemory of the following one. Nevertheless, postmemory cannot be a pure duplicate of the initial memory and can be revealed in different forms.

### **Abkhazia in Dreams and Nightmares**

Swiss anatomist Dr. Albert von Haller claimed that one of the earliest symptoms of nostalgia was to see one's family again in dreams (Boym 2001). While it has been long since the concept of nostalgia has moved away from the field of medicine, the interest in the appearance of memories in everyday life has been ongoing. By focusing on the social memory formation in the Tuscan community affected by the Nazi massacres during the Second World War, Cappelletto emphasizes the role of visual imagery which happens to be the most powerful dimension of oral narratives and a crucial element of the memorization process (2003, 252). These visual pictures can insistently invade everyday life and might even show up in traumatic dreams (ibid, 250).

Incidentally, dreaming of Abkhazia was one of the topics that kept repeating in my interviews with IDPs. By dreams I imply both – the dreams people see at night and dreams people have for their future. Medea and Elena, both aged between 65-70, told me that they were seeing dreams about Abkhazia at night. *“When I go to sleep, my thoughts go to Abkhazia. The graves of my loved ones are completely forsaken there.”* – said Medea, who lost her parents and brother during the displacement. Similarly, Elena shared with me that *“During the day I am here, with my family and grandchildren. At night, I am there. Despite the time, it doesn’t go away.”* While both of them painfully remember Abkhazia, it also represents the place they are longing for.

Surprisingly, the first generation of IDPs is not the only one seeing Abkhazia in dreams. I was having a conversation with 24-year-old Giga, who was born after his parents had to leave Sokhumi. He has never been to Abkhazia and he knows everything about the events from his family members. Nevertheless, he was also dreaming of Abkhazia at night. When I asked him how could he visualize a place he has never been to, he answered:

*“I have blind love for Abkhazia... I visualize it through the stories told by my parents. I have also seen Abkhazia in my parents’ photos and I think I haven’t missed any video about Abkhazia on YouTube. I want to know as much as I can about it because I want to be ready for going back. I have the hope of going there in the future... I try to have my personal relationship with Abkhazia and I feel like I have my own little Sokhumi in my heart. Sometimes I see the war in my dreams and imagine how I would act if I had witnessed it. For some period, I felt fear and I didn’t want to see these dreams, I wanted to wake up...”*

I was quite touched by hearing Giga speak about Abkhazia in a very sincere and full-hearted way. He told me that he is going to do his best to tell his future children about Abkhazia, the same way his parents were telling him. It might not be the same, he said, but even if he won’t have the

chance to see Abkhazia throughout his lifespan, he wants his children to go there. Giga's case transparently portrays the power of postmemory and illustrates how the second generation of IDPs, who has never been to Abkhazia, can vicariously re-live through the stories of their parents consciously and subconsciously. At the same time, Giga's, Medea's and Elena's stories entail both – traumatic dreams and nostalgic longing for Abkhazia. Intriguingly, the bittersweet memories of Abkhazia come alive in dreams and nightmares across generations. Corresponding to the previous section, this also demonstrates the strong presence of past events in IDPs' present lives.

### **Those Who Managed to “Go Back”**

Georgians, especially the ones having the IDP status, can't easily travel to Abkhazia. Most of the Georgian IDPs didn't have the chance to go back at all. Luckily, I had interviews with a couple of people who managed to “sneak in” Abkhazia on several occasions. During my conversation with Medea, she suddenly told me that she secretly went back to Abkhazia after some time:

*“My brother died in the mountains of Svaneti when we were leaving Abkhazia. My father died a few days later. I somehow survived and decided to secretly go back to Abkhazia four years after the war. I said I have to go back; I don't care if they kill me. I told about my plans to my oldest daughter and warned her not to tell anybody. I entered Gali and, of course, there were no direct buses. Suddenly, a bus arrived and the driver asked me why was I so nervous (in Russian). I answered that I was going to Sokhumi but there was no transport. He told me not to worry and proposed to drive me to Ochamchire; Plenty of buses were going to Sokhumi from there. I went with him. Then I took a taxi to Sokhumi and arrived at my house. I opened the house gates and suddenly my aunt, who was*

*ethnically Abkhaz, shouted not to enter the yard otherwise the dog would bite me [the aunt couldn't see who entered the yard]. But I was already inside the yard and the dog was very happy to see me. By that, my cousin understood that a close relative came to visit them and when he saw me, he came and started kissing me. The dog hasn't seen me for four years but he still recognized me. My cousin warned me not to go to my parents' grave, the situation was too unpredictable. What could I do, so I left Abkhazia 3 days later."*

Naturally, Medea's family was shocked to hear that she quietly went back to Sokhumi. She told me that she has many Abkhaz relatives and it was the politics that messed everything up. Years after, she went to Sokhumi again:

*"The neighbors found out that I was there and started to cry when they saw me. One of our neighbors, an Armenian family called all of our close friends and started to celebrate my visit to Abkhazia. We all used to live like one big family..."*

Despite Medea's brave act to secretly go back to her home, it was not a long return. Throughout her short journey, she had to hide her ethnicity from strangers. To this day, she is waiting for the conflict to be resolved and the day when Georgians will be able to safely go back to Abkhazia. Even if she won't be able to return, she is certain that her children and grandchildren will go back.

Nia was 7 years when she left Abkhazia. Her case is unique as by having a non-Georgian surname, she and her family were not forced to leave their home. Despite having the choice to stay, her family decided to leave anyway, since most of their relatives and loved ones were forced to flee. Because of her non-Georgian surname, she was able to go back to Abkhazia several times, but, according to her, it was not the same as it used to be in the past:

*“It is a very unpleasant feeling when you are trying not to let Georgian words slip your tongue around others. It is not about being a coward, but about protecting my family members who still live in Abkhazia... In the past, everybody would gather in the yard and have big sufras. It is not the same for me nowadays. When I join the supra now, I am somebody else; I cannot say who am I or where I come from. It is a terrible feeling. I remember one incident. I was 15 years old and there was an Abkhaz girl, 11 or 12 years old. We were standing with other girls and suddenly she started telling us how terrible Georgians were. At her age, it would be impossible for her to encounter any Georgian in her life. It turned out that her father died in the war and probably her mother was saying bad things about Georgians. She was so young but already full of hatred. It was a horrible moment for me. I was shocked to hear her insulting Georgians. Of course, because of my appearance and surname, she would have never guessed that I was Georgian and I was offended. And I could not say anything back, because I would put my family living in Abkhazia in danger.”*

Nia strongly misses her previous home and she sometimes even regrets going back to Abkhazia as it intensified her nostalgia for the past. She told me that having seen everything again with her own eyes was especially painful for her. In other young IDPs’ cases, who know the most from their parents, the sense of belonging to Abkhazia is still strong; but Nia thinks that being able to actually go back for some time and realize that she cannot stay there for a long period is exceptionally hard for her. When talking of the future repatriation, Nia only sees it as a safe and peaceful return. Nevertheless, this conflict-free return is hard to imagine in the nearest future, as both sides still bear a certain level of hatred for one another. She feels hopeful for the young generation, who have the capacity to overcome the tension and hostility caused by war.

The pain of going back for a limited time was also experienced by Natalia, who was 21 years old when she participated in a training session organized by an international NGO and she was able to go to Sokhumi on an excursion for a day. Going on a trip as a guest in the city she was born in and seeing the house she was raised in was immensely heartbreaking for her:

*“Before going there again, my every childhood memory of Sokhumi was like a dream. When I finally approached my house in Sokhumi, this image in my head became real. And I realized, this is the place I would always want to come back to... I think it would be much harder for the older generation to go back. It would be more painful for them to accept being in the role of a guest there... After coming back from Sokhumi, I became more emotional about what happened. Before this trip, all my memories were like a dream, now the images became real.”*

It is quite difficult for Natalia to imagine a full return to Abkhazia. She has no hope of going back. Yet, if this day ever comes, she wants to be sure that there will be no conflict and she and her family will be completely safe.

Interestingly, all three of them managed to go back to Abkhazia in different ways. In Natalia’s case, the short return was mediated by an international NGO; Nia was able to go back thanks to her non-Georgian surname. As for Medea, she insistently and proactively decided to take action in her own hands and see her parents’ grave in Abkhazia. Being on the other side of the border made all of them more nostalgic and emotional about Abkhazia. While for many of the IDPs the memories of Abkhazia slowly turn into a dream or a desired fantasy, for Nia, Natalia and Medea the loss became a firm reality. Asking them about their hopes for full return was very crucial to me, seeing that all three of them have engaged with this possible future at some level. The alternative future they are hoping for is not something they have witnessed in Abkhazia. All

of them prioritize safe and conflict-free return, as, based on their personal engagements, the existing tension still does not guarantee their safety at least in the nearest future.

## Chapter 3

### What IDP Status Do

The Georgian IDPs went through a series of stressful and tragic circumstances. These events do not end with the displacement but take another route once they officially became IDPs and had to adapt to the new mode of life. Aside from the everyday struggles linked to the housing and financial issues, the IDPs also had to cohabit with other Georgians, for whom, people with the IDP status represented a completely novel category in society. In many of my interviews, IDPs were sharing with me the unpleasant memories and sensations regarding the status and the existing attitudes around it from other Georgians. Nia shared with me her experience when she first arrived in Tbilisi:

*“We had to live in an IDP settlement. It was supposed to be an old kindergarten, it was not functioning anymore. Of course, it was unpleasant, especially the negative attitudes from our neighbors towards us as if we were occupying the building which should have been a kindergarten. But the kindergarten was not even functioning before we came... I remember the procedures of getting the IDP status (the documents, taking photos). Constantly hearing the word “IDP” was also quite frustrating.”*

Salome, who was nine years old when she had to flee Abkhazia, also remembers the prejudices other Georgians had towards her and the whole IDP community: *“I even had an incident at university. I remember I got a higher grade than others and one of them told me “why the hell*



*did you even come here?!*” Salome also recalled being addressed as “you don’t look like an IDP!”, seemingly that she should necessarily have an accent or wear torn clothes to be an IDP. 40-year-old Taia talked about the dominant perceptions about IDPs in Georgian society as well. Namely, she told me a story of how a bride with an IDP status was seen as a homeless person by the groom’s family, as if she has never known what home is. Taia also shared with me her personal experience during the first years of her displacement:

*“I remember the first time I went to a new school. The teacher took me and my cousin in front of the whole class and introduced us as refugees. Imagine the feeling... As if we were displayed in a zoo... It was like an imprint on me. I was not perceived as being forcibly displaced in my own state... I felt like I arrived from another country.”*

Aside from the unwelcoming and unpleasant memories, the IDPs also highlighted how these experiences made them stronger. Tina shared with me her mother’s words – *“you have to get out of here. We didn’t always live like this. You were born for something else”* – which largely motivated her to be a proactive student with high academic performance. She owes her personal achievements and inner strengths to her family upbringing rather than to the Georgian state. Her proactiveness was some kind of compensation to the fear of being bullied or feeling misfortunate in life. *“I felt double responsibility; it was a bit heavy, but I felt like I had to prove something and restore dignity [laughing] of my family.”* – she explained. 25 years old Natia also told me that her status and her family’s history make her stronger. It constantly reminds her not to be weak and to be proud of being part of this community.

Being an IDP entails a spectrum of feelings and experiences, from embarrassment and discomfort to pride and determination. Interestingly, the negative attitudes towards the IDP status slowly changed in the Georgian public. According to some of my interlocutors, the harsh social

and economic reality in 90s' Georgia was hard to cope with for everyone, not only for IDPs. Consequently, seeing someone else get social benefits from the state, made the negative attitudes towards IDPs more intense. Nevertheless, this tension eased over time. Many of my interviewees told me that such tendencies are not present anymore, especially after the 2008 war.

### **IDP as a Socio-Economic and Legal Status**

When been asked about the first memory of the IDP status acquisition, the older generation usually shared with me the stories about the bureaucratic processes they had to go through to be granted the status. The idea of this bureaucracy was to prove that an individual definitely used to live in Abkhazia. 25-year old Mariam, who has had the IDP status all her conscious life, shared with me her memories of the time she first realized that she became the bearer of this status. She was 14-15 years old when the Georgian government started re-accounting and re-granting IDP statuses over again. She was not personally involved in the process, but she remembers her father having an interview with the authorities about where he used to live and work back in Abkhazia. Aside from the financial help from the state (45 GEL in case one's monthly income is less than 1000 GEL), IDPs also have benefits in different exchange and educational programs:

*“For example, if there are two equal candidates, the committee might choose the one with the IDP status. The idea is that, as you were once misfortunate and oppressed, now you can be given some benefits.”*

Despite the social and financial help, for Mariam, the primary function of the status is its legal power for recognizing the property ownership in Abkhazia. When the time comes and Georgians will be finally able to go back to Abkhazia, this very status will be the proof for demanding the lost houses back. According to Mariam, the status reproduction within generations

is based on the same legality: by inheriting the IDP status, a child also inherits the proof to claim the property in Abkhazia. Even if some people from her generation might not want to go back to Abkhazia, they still become heirs of their parents' house in Abkhazia.

One of the first memories regarding the IDP status was always connected to its everyday-use functions. Taia remembered the first time she realized she was an IDP:

*“I was twelve when I first went through the bureaucratic procedures and it was very memorable for me. I remember they gave us a paper card with our black and white photo on it, which signified that I was an IDP. We could use this card for different social benefits, for example, in a metro. I am 40 years old now but I still remember the unpleasant and a bit embarrassing feeling when I had to show this card with my face on it in the metro, so that I could use the transport for free. Sometimes they would stop you and check if it is really you in the photo or maybe you are using other's card... I remember when this piece of paper was replaced with plastic cards and I was very happy.”*

Aside from the discounts on the transport, the monthly stipend or other financial support, IDP status also opened new opportunities for the young generation. Tina remembers participating in an NGO project which provided different educational courses (English, Spanish and other subjects) for free. The project's target group happened to be internally displaced children. Interestingly, while Tina felt differentiated from others at school because of her status, she felt privileged throughout the aforementioned project as it included many other children with the same status.

The socio-economic help offered by the state also included the resettlement project and granting houses to the IDPs. While this project provided permanent housings for many IDP families, it also entailed a degree of injustice. Several of my interviewees highlighted the flaws of

the system by mentioning how the IDP statuses were granted to those who were not forcibly displaced. Faking the forced displacement to get social benefits from the government was viewed as a shameless and disrespectful act by my interviewees. Yet, it is not the only flaw of the system: the degree of nepotism was also involved in the bureaucratic procedures, since in some cases, the people who had close relations with the authorities were prioritized to get the new houses.

Paradoxically, the IDP status creates a novel dimension within Georgian citizenship. The IDP status cannot be granted by the state unless the individual has Georgian citizenship. Besides being a regular citizen, the socio-economic and legal functions of the IDP status add up their own features to the individual experiences. On one hand, the IDP status can be perceived as a source of privilege and advantage on other citizens in terms of social benefits granted by the state. Simultaneously, the legality behind the IDP status positions them in a certain temporal and spatial framework. This frame implies the legitimized link between the IDPs and their property left in Abkhazia. Not being able to be granted the IDP status without Georgian citizenship explicitly signifies that one cannot claim the property in Abkhazia without being a citizen of Georgia. Apart from its other functions, the IDP status symbolizes Georgian sovereignty, the claim that Georgians were displaced within the border of one nation and consequently, the statement that Abkhazia is part of Georgia. Thus, the existence of this category within society is crucial to maintain this meaning-making process.

### **IDP as a Mnemonic Status**

At the beginning of the first chapter, I argued that despite the external reminders, the IDPs would still remember Abkhazia and pass on their memories to the next generation within the scope of the family story-telling. Yet, in this section, I want to highlight how the status of IDP can also

serve as a reminder of past events. During the interviews, my interlocutors frequently mentioned how the word 'IDP' became imprinted in their minds as this was something they have been continuously overhearing inside and outside the IDP community. Being an IDP after all these years does not let the thoughts about Abkhazia fade away. What's more, they get reminded about their belonging to the IDP community by the monthly stipend and other social benefits received from the Georgian state.

The frequency of talking about Abkhazia has not changed over time for 30-year-old Anamaria, as, to this day, she is still considered as an internally displaced person:

*"after all, even if we don't remember Abkhazia daily, we still have to talk about it every day in our family as we bear the status of IDP and receive the monthly support from the government. I constantly hear this word [IDP]; It became part of our daily life. This pain did not stay in the past."*

Interestingly enough, the IDP status also functions as a memory device, which activates the memories connected to it and initiates further talks and discussions around the issue of Abkhazia, displacement and occupation. This mnemonic device does not only function in relation to IDPs but also for the rest of Georgian society. By being aware that the temporary IDP category still exists in the public space, individuals recognize that the story of the displacement is not over yet. This sense of incompleteness also stems from the fact that the conflict between Abkhazia and Georgia is still ongoing.

### **IDP as a Political Status**

After all, why does a newborn inherit the IDP status? And for how many more generations is it going to last? These were the questions I was eager to ask someone who is a part of the

governmental system. The government of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia is the only government of Abkhazia that is legally recognized by the Georgian state. While the autonomous government should be governing the Abkhaz territory, it was also forced out of Abkhazia and is now headquartered in Tbilisi. Nowadays, the government-in-exile is responsible for the Georgian IDPs from Abkhazia, including the legal, social and cultural projects involving them. The governmental structure consists of several ministries, including the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Education and Culture, and the Ministry of Internally Displaced People from Abkhazia. I was able to organize an interview with D. working for the latter ministry on the issues of IDPs. This governmental unit is directly responsible for granting the IDP status to individuals and administering the legal documents connected to it. According to the current law regarding the IDPs in Georgia, the IDP status can be granted to an individual if at least one parent has an active status. In the past, the IDP status could even be granted to the non-IDP spouse:

*“If an IDP would marry a non-IDP, the spouse would also have the right to be granted the status. Nevertheless, this law stopped functioning and nowadays the IDP status can only be transferred to a child. There were many discussions about whether the child should also inherit the status and the social benefits that come with it. Theoretically, under this law, the existence of the IDP status can go on for many more generations, this cycle will have no end.”*

D. explained that this law also functions for political aims. The legal discussions involved the issue of granting the IDP status only to those who actually experienced the displacement, more specifically, to those who were born until 1993. This would also mean that the number of people with the IDP status would decrease over time, which would be politically unfavorable for the Georgian state. By this D. meant that if potentially Georgia regains control over Abkhazia,

there should be individuals with the active IDP status to claim their properties back in Abkhazia. After all, the IDP status is directly linked to the individual's lost property in Abkhazia:

*“Of course, it might also be legally possible to inherit this property without the transmission of the IDP status across generations. In other words, a child can claim the property without having the active IDP status. So, these kinds of options were discussed as well. But there was a political decision to make – should the number of IDP statuses decrease or increase? The government decided the latter.”*

D. mentioned that despite the continuous existence of the IDP status, some limits were also imposed by the government. Not being able to receive 45 GEL monthly support in case one's income is 1000 GEL or more, was one of such limits. In this case, the IDP status loses its socio-economic function and purely becomes a political status. D. stressed that having people with active IDP status is crucial for the state to resolve the conflict with Abkhazia. Intriguingly, there were cases when the IDPs were appealing to the Georgian state that they cannot go back to Abkhazia:

*“For example, I had this case in 2005 when an IDP was suing the Georgian state for not being able to return to Abkhazia. In her complaint, it was written that either we have to manage her return or we have to compensate it financially. But the state is not legally guilty to start with. The state, along with its IDPs, is the victim. Therefore, it was an incorrect way of suing. But Georgia, in the name of its IDPs, can take this case in the international court and sue Russia. In the end, it is Georgia's political standpoint that the war was against Russia. How could Georgia possibly fight against its own citizens?”*

It is important to note that the law on the IDP status is essentially contradictory to itself: officially, the status should be granted to the one who became a victim of the war and displacement. Nevertheless, a newborn child, who has never experienced any physical or psychological burden

of being forcibly displaced, can also inherit the status. According to D., this inconsistency can be explained by taking the political agenda into account.

In my interview with Salome, she mentioned how the number of IDPs from Abkhazia can become a basis for political statements. Namely, the fact that Georgia has so many IDPs to this day who have to return to their homes turns into an important element of political negotiations on an international level. Complementary to that, 25-year-old Ketii also talked about the increasing number of IDPs which becomes the source of desirable international funds and aids.

## Chapter 4

### “Let This Stay Only Between Us”

Two years ago, my three colleagues and I were returning from work at the end of the day when we spontaneously started talking about Georgian politics. Not surprisingly, we touched upon the issues of occupation, Georgian-Russian relations and the de-facto states. “Let this stay only between us, but why don’t we just recognize Abkhazia’s independence?” – said one of them after a small pause. I was rather surprised by hearing this opinion – something one can rarely encounter in modern-day Georgia. But I believe the phrase “*let this stay only between us*” carried a larger meaning. The taboo imposed on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, which continues to exist to this day, has been filtering opinions contradictory to the dominant national narrative in Georgia to extent that one could not boldly express her controversial opinion publicly. This national narrative, which is very well coded in the state agenda, policies, media, school curricula and even in the private sector, does not enable the existence of different understandings of the conflict. Yet, one cannot simply say that the dominant discourses are the result of the top-down process.



Paradoxically, the political authorities might pay a big price for the willingness to propose an alternative evaluation of the past events. One of such examples happens to be involving Georgia's current president – Salome Zourabichvili, who, during the presidential elections in 2018, claimed that the 2008 war was initiated by the then-Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili (Bursulaia 2020, 12). This political statement resulted in Georgian citizens' strong reaction and protests on Facebook and possibly, caused the presidential elections to move to the second round. Paata Zakareishvili – the Minister of Reconciliation and Civic Equality (in 2012-2016) had to pay a larger price, as, after publicly stressing the importance of self-evaluation and acceptance of one's own mistakes, he was largely criticized in society and caused him to resign from office (ibid).

Looking at the Georgian government's political agenda to unite the country, also at the public debates and protests both – on social media and in the streets, it is interesting to observe how national sentiments towards occupied territories have been embedded in daily nationhood in Georgia. As mentioned in the introduction, the slogan "20% of my country is occupied by Russia", along with other messages such as "Abkhazia and Samachablo (South Ossetia) are Georgia", has been widely used in the Georgian public. During the past few years, a new trend emerged in the Georgian consumer products industry, as the issue of occupation and territorial integrity of the state has started to appear on different Georgian products, clothes and accessories. By commodifying national feelings and sentiments towards lost territories, the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia became a good marketing strategy for various Georgian brands. It is noteworthy that some Georgian brands have been established based on this very concept. One of the good examples of this trend is a Georgian clothing brand "Lacoaj" (signifying grape variety cultivated in Abkhazia), which has been based on the idea to create clothes with the message "Abkhazia is Georgia" and contribute to putting this issue on the agenda. Interestingly, the "Lacoaj" does not limit its audience to Georgians and aims to spread the message and raise awareness about the

occupation outside the country. T-shirts and various accessories presented on the brand's website have prints of different historical themes and Abkhazian cities.



*Photo 2. Clothes from 'Lacoaj'; Source: 'Lacoaj' website*

The process of embedding national sentiments into consumer goods is a clear example of banal nationalism. On the one hand, implementing political messages about the occupation in different everyday products is a good marketing strategy, which attracts consumers' attention and gains popularity very quickly. On the other hand, this method is a good way to maintain patriotic emotions and national identity on daily basis (Billig 2010, 45). Production and consumption of products presented above is a way of remembering the past and preventing traumatic collective memory of occupation and war from fading away. The products representing sentiments of a nation's history serve as symbols that are turned into routine habits, thus the past becomes *enhabited* in the present (Ibid, 42). Simultaneously, aside from collective remembering, banal nationalism also serves as collective forgetting, specifically of the part of history that is less acceptable by society.

Interestingly, while the Georgian history textbooks should narrate the recent history of the state, which went through drastic changes of the regime (from communist to capitalist system), ethnopolitical wars, civil war and a revolution, the contemporary history books do not seem to include many of the historical facts. For instance, the Georgian school textbooks (2014 and 2015)

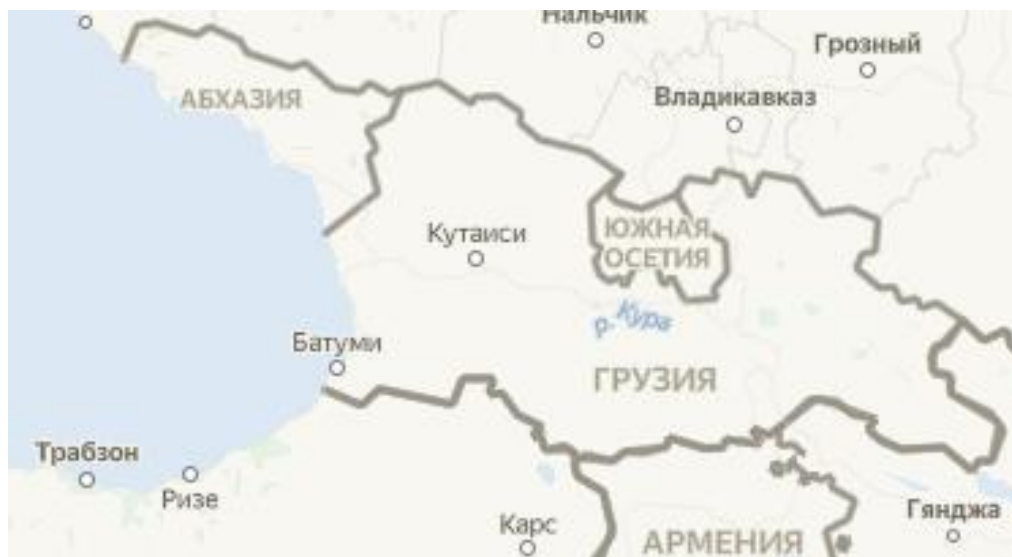
only contain two pages about the Georgian-Abkhaz war (Bursulaia, 2020, 9). Most importantly, the conflict is narrated and formulated in a specific way, which does not take the Abkhazian agency into account by perceiving the war only between Russia and Georgia and positions Georgia in the role of a victim. Furthermore, the Georgian history textbooks just recently started to include some important historical details of the conflict, including the “Lykhny Letter”, which was sent by the Abkhaz leaders to the central Soviet Government in 1989, stating that they wanted to be independent of Georgia (ibid, 10). Ironically, I first learned about the existence of this letter while working on this research project. It is important to stress that the narrative of victimizing oneself becomes a fuel for the nation-building process (ibid). In this regard, the state ideas, which continue to be reproduced within the school system and in a larger public, become the basis of legitimizing the state agenda regarding the IDPs from Abkhazia.

The unwillingness of my friend to share his opinion in a wider public is not accidental. The public silence over the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict did not occur by chance either. In this regard, the language of silence can be more comfortable since “the trauma narratives from the war in Abkhazia are still open wounds, and there is limited readiness to open the Pandora’s Box of the wars in the 1990s” (Bursulaia 2020, 12). In her article, Bursulaia clearly formulates how the language of silence can contribute to the Georgian nation-building process and correspond to the impulses of public sentiments.

### **The Cartographic Anxiety**

Evidently, the “open wounds” play a crucial role in national discourse formation and the Georgian nation-building process. In his article, Kabachnik (2012) argues how the national scars of Georgian society regarding the lost territories are felt as amputation. The fear of the country’s

loss of territory and the yearning for the nation’s territorial integrity can be seen as *cartographic anxiety* (ibid). This national anxiety is clearly reflected in the slogan “20% of my country is occupied by Russia” and the social movement against the occupation. Georgia’s cartographic anxiety was also expressed in the public reaction towards the Russian taxi company *Yandex*, as its map illustrated Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. The Russian taxi brand was launched in Georgia in 2016 and shortly experienced scandals regarding its map. What’s more, the Georgian law firm “Mgaloblishvili, Kipiani, Dzidziguri” refused to provide legal help to Yandex Taxi and addressed other Georgian law firms not to give any service to it as the company did not respect Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity (Tabula.ge 2017).



*Photo 3. Screenshot of Yandex Taxi Map. Source: Yandex Taxi website*

Georgia’s cartographic anxiety becomes the reality in which political decisions are made regarding the IDPs. Precisely, the determination to reproduce the category of IDP is the direct result of the nation-building process and the dominant national narratives in Georgia. In a sense, IDPs also become the symbol of cartographic anxiety as Georgians, who used to live in Abkhazia,

are still not able to return to their homes. In this regard, IDPs' hope to go back home becomes the hope of the nation to regain territorial integrity.

## **Conclusion**

The promised return that never happened continues to manifest hope not only in IDPs but also within the Georgian public. The IDPs' longing for their home in Abkhazia occurs in parallel to Georgians' yearning for the lost territories. To put it in other words, the frustrated promises regarding the IDPs' return are reflected in the cartographic anxiety of the nation. With that being said, the reproduction of the IDP category within generation contributes to maintaining the cartographic anxiety and thus, not letting the national wounds related to the war with Abkhazia heal.

The IDP status which performs different functions becomes an inherent part of the Georgian state-making project. This project, which sets the unification and restoration of the state sovereignty as its primary goal, avoids the disappearance of the IDP status as it comes to be the basis of political rhetoric on a local and international level. Namely, the number of IDPs becomes a crucial statement to claim Abkhazia back. Meantime, the mechanism of the status reproduction happens to be embedded in the family institution, which is accompanied by personal story-telling and remembrance of lost family members throughout generations. Along with the family story-telling process, the memories of Abkhazia are also activated by the IDP status itself, which reminds the individuals that they belong to a certain structural category. Going back to Bourdieu's analysis, the cognitive structures become the basis of how we construct and classify the social reality, which is initially mediated by the state institutions. Through this mechanism, IDPs' past inhabits their present life and create the image of desired future.

Furthermore, the formation and reproduction of the IDP category within the Georgian social field do not only point to the IDP-state relationship but also to the involvement of different national and international actors, agencies and institutions in this process. It is important to recognize the crucial role of international organizations in mediating this very link between the IDPs and the Georgian state, IDPs' homemaking and Georgian state-making processes. Here, I am not only referring to the interposition of the international NGOs (e.g. UNHCR, NRC) in the issues of housing and policies regarding the IDPs, but also to the legitimacy of international organizations vis-à-vis assessment of political circumstances in South Caucasus. The influence of the transnational actors on the boundaries of nation-state is subject to further research as "the claim to sovereignty from states and those aspiring to statehood entails a larger problematic of how power is articulated and imagined today in a global world where democracy has become the form and discourse of political legitimation" (Aretxaga, 2003, 405). In this regard, the social structures and groupings reproduced within the state do not only correspond to the mean-making process of the state, but to the larger transnational processes.

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