



December, 2023

## Project: “Rebuilding Trust between Georgians and Abkhaz”

Nino Kalandarishvili

### Understanding How Abkhaz Society Perceives Georgia and Georgians in Light of Recent Events in Ukraine and Developments in the Karabakh Region<sup>1</sup>

Following the conclusion of the active phase of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, the divide between societies on either side of the dividing line has only deepened over the past thirty years. In societies occupying opposing information spaces, with distinct value systems, a major geopolitical or regional tragic event is often perceived differently, typically leading to mutually exclusive viewpoints. This, in turn, exacerbates existing traditional fears and traumas, while also lending a new color to the “enemy image” constructed by the opposing side in the conflict.

This document aims to analyze both traditional and emerging sources of the “enemy image” construct in Abkhazia directed towards Georgia and Georgians. It also seeks to identify realistic strategies to reduce these perceptions using the tools at our disposal. Consequently, this document places less emphasis on the statements and actions of Georgians during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

#### Is the “enemy image” perceived as an existential threat to Georgia?

The construction of the “enemy image”<sup>2</sup> regarding Georgia, and particularly the portrayal of Georgians as adversaries, should not be solely attributed to the peak of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict or its aftermath, as its origins delve deeper into historical and societal factors. Undoubtedly, though, the

conflict did heighten these sentiments, pushing them into a new dimension. For Abkhazian

society, these factors are viewed as significant challenges to their identity and independence.

The Abkhazian national project, as outlined in the period preceding the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, initially prioritized the establishment

<sup>1</sup> The paper was prepared within the frame of the project “Rebuilding Trust between Georgians and Abkhaz” implemented by the Levan Mikeladze Foundation. The arguments and opinions expressed in the article belong to the author and may not coincide with the position of the Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> The formation of the “enemy image” materialized following Georgia's acquisition of sovereignty as an independent nation.



of an independent Abkhazian state, with the dominance of the Abkhazian ethnic group on its territory. This emphasis did not encompass the equal involvement of all ethnic groups residing in Abkhazia, even in quasi-state institutional development. The statements made by Abkhazian leaders at the time, which incited a governance crisis<sup>3</sup> based on ethnic differences, serve as clear evidence of this development. It is important to acknowledge the role of the Georgian leaders of that era, among them Zviad Gamsakhurdia, whose anti-Abkhazian<sup>4</sup> rhetoric was notable, as were the efforts to transform Pavle Ingorokva's hypothesis into an indisputable truth, though it was expressed initially as a hypothesis. In reality, leaders of both the Georgian and Abkhazian national projects took steps that escalated and intensified the crisis rather than defusing it. In such a charged atmosphere, the Abkhazians' fears of losing their identity became even more pronounced, leading to several changes in the Abkhazian perception:

- The demographic situation: As per the final census of the USSR, Abkhazians comprised up to 40% of the population in the Abkhazian SSR;

- Leveling of the Abkhazian ethno-cultural identity and historical-geographic distribution in the Georgian SSR;
- During the final years of the USSR, ethnic Abkhazians faced challenges gaining unconditional access to the levers of social, political, and economic governance in the Abkhazian ASSR;
- There was a prevailing fear among Abkhazians, especially concerning potential assimilation with Georgians, particularly the Magrelians, a group sharing similarities with the Abkhazians.

This list illustrates that actions detrimental to the Abkhazians, orchestrated by the central USSR authorities in Moscow but executed through Tbilisi, were perceived by the Abkhazians as attempts by the Georgians to assimilate and eradicate the Abkhazian identity and presence. The Soviet Union's national policy, which sought to establish a unified nation with a common language and identity, bears a resemblance to the concept of Georgianness promoted by figures such as Stalin and Beria.

Constructing an “enemy” for consolidation and opposition is not a novel or untested strategy.

<sup>3</sup><https://www.allgeo.org/index.php/ru/819-postanovlenie-prezidiuma-vs-abkhazskoj-ssr>, including the determination of ethnic divisions in the elections of the Supreme Council of Abkhazia. So called 28/26/11 principle.  
<https://ka.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E1%83%90%E1%83%A4%E1%83%AF%E1%83%90%E1%83%96%E1%83%94%E1%83%97%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1%E1%83%90%E1%83%A1%E1%83%A1%E1%83%A0%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1%E1%83%9B%E1%83%9D%E1%83%AC%E1%83%95%E1%83%94%E1%83%95%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1%E1%83%A3%E1%83%96%E1%83%94%E1%83%9C%E1%83%90%E1%83%94%E1%83%A1%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1%E1%83%90%E1%83%91%E1%83%AD%E1%83%9D>

<sup>4</sup>[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pe4QP3\\_u3WY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pe4QP3_u3WY)



Regrettably, the Georgian state did not adequately address the implications of this reinforcement or the evolving persistence of the “enemy image” used to label Georgians, and later the Georgian state itself. This oversight affected both Georgian-Abkhazian relations and the internal dynamics within Abkhazian society.

### **The “Enemy Image” as a Tool of Power**

Following the most intense phase of the conflict, and the significant displacement of Georgians, Abkhazia's population decreased sharply compared to the pre-conflict era, resulting in a more ethnically homogeneous demographic <sup>5</sup>. Consequently, one of the primary objectives of the Abkhazian national project, which sought the demographic, social, and political dominance of ethnic Abkhazians in Abkhazia, appeared to have been abruptly realized.

The war's devastating impact – human, infrastructural, economic, and moral – heavily burdened Abkhazia's population. Further, political and economic isolation compounded the difficulty of improving the situation internally. The combination of all problems and the political and social manipulation of these problems formed the status of the Abkhazians as “victims” and, as a result, added new colors and life to the main, only, but constantly aggressive and strong, “enemy image” of Georgians in this situation<sup>6</sup>.

The victim status and the “enemy image” of Georgians emerged as factor of consolidation within the Abkhazian nation. The portrayal of an “enemy”, representing a physical threat and necessitating constant vigilance, has become a proven method to justify governance failings and socio-economic challenges. The perpetuation of this image aligned with the common interests and political strategies of various leaders in Abkhazia's government and opposition groups.

Several factors contribute to the viability of the “enemy image” of Georgians and Georgia as created by the Abkhazians, whose interpretation significantly differs between the Abkhazians and the Georgians:

- Signing a non-use of force agreement is seen as a potential threat of renewed conflict and a threat to the physical security of the Abkhaz nation;
- Recognizing Abkhazia as a conflict party is viewed as acknowledging Abkhazians as an independent and self-sufficient entity;
- The issue of the return of internally displaced persons and the recognition of their return and presence in the Gali region represent a demographic, property, and now socio-economic threat to the situation of Abkhazian ethnic dominance;
- The Non-Recognition Policy and Its Impacts: The policy of not recognizing

<sup>5</sup><https://www.abkhazia.gov.ge/public/page/demografia>

<sup>6</sup>[http://apsnyteka.org/file/Abkhazia\\_genotsid\\_abkhazskogo\\_naroda\\_1992-1993\\_2019.pdf](http://apsnyteka.org/file/Abkhazia_genotsid_abkhazskogo_naroda_1992-1993_2019.pdf)



Abkhazia limits freedom of movement, economic and cultural ties, and access to Western education for Abkhazian passport holders, posing barriers to the Abkhazian identity and modern development.

All aspects of the pre-conflict fear of the Abkhazians have been transformed in modern realities, gaining renewed significance and new life.

To sustain and perpetuate the presence of the “enemy image” in the public-political agenda, continuous internal and external discussions on these topics served to unite Abkhazian society against external threats. This strategy, effectively employed by both the ruling elite and the Abkhazian opposition spectrum, has relegated internal issues to a secondary position. Persistently maintaining the political narrative of the “enemy image” of Georgia and Georgians, and utilizing it as a tool of mutual antagonism, has been mutually detrimental and has oversimplified interactions with Abkhazian society. Limiting discussions to this narrow perspective is tantamount to diminishing one's own accountability and oversimplifying the range of issues that need to be addressed to merely one or two key topics.

Abkhazia's civil sector, appearing influential<sup>7</sup> and robust, and established with the support of international organizations, primarily concentrated on advocating for Abkhazia's recognition as an independent state

internationally and on bolstering its internal governance. The acknowledgment of the aforementioned issues and the commitment to addressing them formed the foundation of their existence as a public entity. Consequently, deconstructing the cultivated “enemy image” of Georgia and Georgians likely did not align with their pragmatic interests. Ordinary ethnic Abkhazians are likely to be more susceptible to the “enemy image” crafted out of Georgians, especially when this portrayal is deliberately and consistently utilized at both the public and political levels.

The unification of Georgians and Georgia around the concept of the “enemy image”, and its exploitation as a political instrument, does not encompass the ethnically Georgian population residing in Abkhazia. This is particularly relevant in the Gali region, where there is a dense concentration of Georgian residents. It is plausible that the curtailment of political and civil rights for the Georgian population in the Gali district, as imposed by legislation, is a consequence of the reinforcement of the “enemy image,” serving as an Abkhazian “excuse”.

### **Is victim syndrome, trauma, and retraumatization the root of ethnocracy?**

The conflict unfolded within Abkhazia, and despite substantial human, economic, infrastructural, and social losses, the Abkhazian side succeeded in achieving its objective:

---

<sup>7</sup>Despite public protests, the transfer of Bichvinta's country houses and surrounding territory to Russia raises questions about the extent and effectiveness of their influence.



distancing itself from the rest of Georgia and initiating the establishment of independent institutions. Despite enduring a political and economic blockade, facing numerous hardships, and the deployment of international peacekeeping forces, Abkhazian society views itself as victorious, having borne the brunt of the war's sacrifices. The distinct identity as the conflict's victim, along with the ongoing emphasis on trauma, remain central themes in the public and media discourse of Abkhazia, both in the immediate aftermath of the war and in contemporary times. Claiming the status as either the sole or primary victim of the war effectively denies the victimhood of other groups. For instance, the Georgian population of Abkhazia is not acknowledged as a victim of the conflict; their suffering is seldom recognized, even in informal or existential discussions. The victim, particularly when perceived as the victor, often feels exempt from the need to justify their violent actions, particularly to those who are depersonalized or labeled as enemies <sup>8</sup>. Consequently, the combination of being the sole victim, fueled by endured trauma, and the glorification and romanticization of such traumas as sacrifices for national salvation, along with the political exploitation of the war veterans' status, can contribute to the systematic retraumatization

of society as a whole. As a consequence, the sacrifices and unhealed wounds of the Abkhazians, coupled with the lack of acknowledgment and honor from the rest of the world, particularly the West not embracing their truth, further reinforce the already unshakable “enemy image” of Georgia and Georgians.

The victorious victim, on one hand, and the defeated, yet constant threat, in the form of Georgians and Georgia, on the other, creates fertile ground for the ethno-political domination of the Abkhazians.

The prevailing dominance within society could be perceived as a well-deserved and enduring reward for the significant sacrifices made. With the core aim of the Abkhazian national project being the establishment of an independent state, the development and operation of contemporary state institutions exhibit characteristics of Abkhazian ethnocratic <sup>9</sup> governance. In this style of governance, the cultivation and preservation of both internal and external perceptions of an “enemy image” hold greater significance in the post-conflict era than during the immediate aftermath, when the wounds and traumas are still raw and acute.

### **The Russian factor, security and development**

<sup>8</sup>For instance, the local history textbook merely acknowledges the coexistence of Georgians with other ethnic groups in passing. Moreover, it refers to the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict as the 'Patriotic War of the Abkhazian People against the Georgian Invaders,' as seen in the 'History of Abkhazia' textbook for the 10th grade

<sup>9</sup>Oleg Damenia, during his TV speech in May 2023, at 20:30 (in Abkhaz language), stated: "Following the war of 1992-1993, we portrayed ourselves as the sole nation engaged in state-building. However, Abkhazians constitute only 50% of Abkhazia's population. Shouldn't the remaining 50% also be considered part of Abkhazia's population?" [Reference: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ea-PRmgvqc>]



Throughout the evolution of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, Russia significantly influenced both the escalation and the maintenance of the status quo by leveraging its power. The peak of these dynamics occurred during the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, leading to the occupation of Georgian territory by Russia. Notably, the war itself did not directly extend into Abkhazian territory. However, the brief period of hostilities indirectly rekindled the fears and traumas experienced by Abkhazian society during the conflict in the late 20th century.

Since the 2008 war, with Russia's recognition of Abkhazia's independence and the establishment of Russian military bases in the region, Russia has become the main guarantor of Abkhazia's security and the principal advocate for its international recognition. Both of these facts are crucial for the Abkhazians in preserving their identity and achieving the primary goal of their national project. At the same time, Russia's influence and involvement in all internal Abkhazian processes has increased, which, in turn, overshadowed the ethnic component of the conflict<sup>10</sup>.

The existence of Russian military bases in Abkhazia should naturally diminish over time the narratives fueled by the fear of military escalation from Georgia and Georgians. However, the perpetuation of these narratives

through manipulation has prolonged their endurance.

Following the agreements<sup>11</sup> signed between Russia and Abkhazia in 2014, Russia assumed full control over two critical pillars for societal development in Abkhazia: security and economic growth. The reliance solely on Russian financial tranches and underdeveloped local resources, coupled with pervasive elite and mid-level corruption, underscores the urgency of addressing social issues. Addressing social concerns and challenges should naturally diminish the perceived significance of any immediate threat from Georgia on internal dynamics, and the manipulation of such threats.

The "enemy image" construct was significantly influenced by the adoption of peace and reconciliation-oriented policies by the Georgian government elected in 2012, representing a clear departure from the strategies of its predecessors.

Georgia's European integration process had minimal impact on the perception of the "enemy image," as, unlike the process of NATO integration, this pathway is viewed more as an opportunity for prosperity rather than a means of military strengthening or a direct challenge to Russia's aggression.

Russia's overwhelming influence, compounded by severe social and political issues—such as

<sup>10</sup> Medea Turashvili, "The Cost of Conflicts in Georgia and Obstacles on the Road to Development". Collection "The Cost of Conflict: Georgian-Southern Dimension", George Mason University, 2016, p. 27-36;

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/4783>



the energy crisis, restricted access for international organizations to Abkhazia, the unwavering compliance with directives from Russia, including the legalization<sup>12</sup> of alienating of Abkhazian land sacred to Abkhazians, and the ruling elite's uncritical allegiance to Russia—adversely affects Russia's reputation as a benefactor of security and economic support in Abkhazia. However, this will not lead to a positive transformation of the image of Georgians and Georgia, which is of paramount importance.

The "enemy image" perpetuated of Georgia and Georgians continues to be shaped by similar factors as in the past, albeit perhaps with less intensity. However, the dynamics of this portrayal are now amplified by the widespread use of modern online communication platforms, which often operate without sufficient oversight.

### **War in Karabakh, and the Russian aggression in Ukraine**

The war in Karabakh, and Azerbaijan's assertive efforts to restore territorial integrity, naturally heightened Abkhazia's fears of Georgia and the West. In the Abkhaz perspective, alliances between Azerbaijan-Turkey and Georgia-the West are viewed as potential threats. However, Russia's perceived abandonment of the Armenian and Karabakh

populations to disproportionate danger, coupled with concerns about the inadequacy of the Russian military equipment supplied to Armenia, have raised doubts about Russia's reliability and effectiveness as a partner.

It is important to note that the Abkhazians did not view Abkhazia and Karabakh as analogous entities, largely because Karabakh has not been recognized as independent by Russia or even Armenia, and due to the shared ethnicity of Karabakh's population with Armenia. Abkhazians have no homeland other than Abkhazia, while people from Karabakh have relatives in Armenia and share the same ethnic origins. This perspective underlines the uniqueness of the Abkhazian case and precludes drawing parallels with other cases on the international stage.

Russia's aggression in Ukraine found justification among the majority of Abkhazia's ruling elite and society. Only a few voices, mainly from the civil sector, expressed opposition to war as a means of conflict resolution<sup>13</sup>. The Abkhazian information space is closely linked to Russia's, and key narratives justifying the Ukrainian war and extolling the prowess of the Russian military resonate strongly in Abkhazia. It is worth noting that the heightened confrontation between the Western world and Russia, along with Russia's

<sup>12</sup>For instance, the situation concerning the Bichvinta cottages.

<sup>13</sup>[https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/31723719.html?fbclid=IwAR3tEryKRH7P5Kg6LOfba-59DvjNave0ws5jW1gwm\\_QZVXNFsD1m-vTwsoc](https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/31723719.html?fbclid=IwAR3tEryKRH7P5Kg6LOfba-59DvjNave0ws5jW1gwm_QZVXNFsD1m-vTwsoc)



imposition of sanctions, further fuels the anti-Western sentiments which were already prevalent. This sentiment is exacerbated by the West's staunch support for Georgia's territorial<sup>14</sup> to participate in the war in Ukraine, and the sacrifices made by these soldiers are viewed on par with those who defend national interests, despite being seen as a significant loss to the collective gene pool of the Abkhazian people.

Despite the circumstances mentioned earlier, there has been a slight transformation of attitudes towards the war in Ukraine, and even more so towards Russia, as the initiator of this conflict. Several factors contributing to this change in perspective can be identified:

- Against the backdrop of Russia's isolation and sanctions, the decrease, and at times suspension, of financial aid to Abkhazia has intensified a critical stance towards internal issues stemming from corruption, ineffective governance, and nepotism. These challenges are less attributed to Georgia and Georgians and are less exploited as part of the "enemy image."
- The recognition by Russia of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions as independent states could dilute the perceived uniqueness of Abkhazia's independence. Consequently, such actions by Russia are met with mixed

integrity and its policy of non-recognition toward Abkhazia.

Abkhazians have volunteered

- reactions within Abkhazia, challenging its own status of exclusivity.
- In light of Russia's failure to achieve "lightning success" in the initial phase of the war in Ukraine, and amid discussions about annexing South Ossetia to Russia—which implies the annexation of both conflict regions—the fear of losing the already fragile signs of independence has intensified. However, this concern has shifted away from Georgia, targeting a distinctly different entity.
- In the Karabakh War, Russia "abandoned" Karabakh and Armenia to Azerbaijan and Turkey as a punishment for Armenia activating its western vector, seeing the population of Karabakh and Armenia thus used as a tool.

The peace initiatives promoted by Georgia, along with anti-war sentiments in Abkhazia, slightly but still weaken the construct of the "enemy image" towards Georgia as a state and its government. This change is highlighted by two notable events in Abkhazia: the formation of the "Kharakhpitsunda" movement by young activists, which emerged to oppose the

---

<sup>14</sup>Abkhazia remains outside the Russian military framework, and its youth are not obligated to undergo mandatory military conscription.



transfer of the Bichvinti cottages to Russia, and the public response to a fire in an art gallery. In neither case were accusations directed to the Georgian side portraying them as aggressors, or as entities wishing to obliterate Abkhazian identity, memory, or culture—a stark contrast to past allegations, such as the 1992 claims that Georgians had set fire to the National Archives of Abkhazia.

In contrast to the evolving attitude towards the Georgian state, the shift is less pronounced concerning individual Georgians. This discrepancy may be attributed to several factors, including aggressive campaigns and statements, unwavering personal endorsements of certain Ukrainian politicians' remarks at the onset of the war, and calls for Georgian volunteers to join the conflict in Ukraine. Additionally, the persistence of traditional aggressive and offensive Facebook posts by specific groups of citizens, as well as similar activities on other online platforms, further contribute to this enduring perception.

The portrayal of Georgians with the "enemy image," ingrained in the Abkhazian consciousness, perpetuates the physical, social, and ideological distancing between the two societies. This foundation of mutual alienation, cultivated over time, accelerates the process of estrangement. However, this very alienation also contributes to the gradual diminishment of the "enemy image." Were it not for ongoing

security concerns, the repetitive invocation of an enemy—whose identity becomes increasingly blurred and intangible to the middle and newer generations—leads to a desensitization towards this narrative. Consequently, this tactic becomes less effective at diverting attention from internal social issues than it was in the past.

Amid these evolving dynamics, the notion of the "enemy image" in Abkhazia is taking on a new hue, reflecting growing skepticism about the willingness and capability of Russian military bases to offer protection. The fresh impetus for the "enemy image" associated with Georgia and Georgians is no longer perceived as a direct threat from Georgia itself, but rather stems from a deepening distrust towards Russia.

### Recommendations

Considering the trends discussed, a few recommendations can be proposed:

1. Strengthening the capacity of peace policies and rhetoric at the state level, while taking into account existing practices, the needs of the opposing side, and the gaps identified in current instruments.
2. Preventing the manipulation of the peace topic by actors in political and public discourse, who may use it as a tool for political polarization, and ensuring the creation of conditions for its practical implementation.



**National Endowment  
for Democracy**  
*Supporting freedom around the world*



ლევან მიქელაძის სახელობის ფონდი  
THE LEVAN MIKELADZE FOUNDATION

3. Develop a strategic communication framework based on principles of peace. This framework should aim to promote peaceful narratives and methodologies across all media spaces, ensuring consistency in their application. Integral to this strategy should be the establishment of a Russian-language Georgian media outlet dedicated to disseminating reliable and verified information.
4. Activating internal public engagement in relation to the Georgian-Abkhazian

conflict, with an emphasis on peacebuilding tools and the outlining of modern mechanisms for future relations.

5. Concentrating the efforts of international partners on elevating the visibility of Georgian-Abkhazian civil processes in Abkhazia, ensuring at least a basic level of public awareness. This aims to enable societies to recognize and understand each other's contemporary realities, thereby reducing the impacts of alienation and mythologized “images.”

#### *About the author*

Nino Kalandarishvili is a chair of the board at the Institute for the Study of Nationalism and Conflicts (ISNC.)