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**MAY 7 PANEL K5**

**War Veterans of Post-Soviet conflicts from a micro perspective: memory, affects, identities**

**Making sense of engagement in war.  
Georgian/Abkhaz former combatants in mirror**

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## **Introduction**

By presenting a cross analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with former combatants from Georgia and Abkhazia respectively between 2015 and 2018, our paper aims at understanding what are the main components of meaning for them and to what extent this helps us understand the rationale and the outcomes of the conflict. Our interviews with combatants from both sides show how identities forged before the war have, to a certain extent, shaped the meaning given to the conflict. In both cases, in Abkhazia and Georgia, the war impacted state and nation building. However, our interviews show that it did not do so in the same way and in the same temporality in both places. The paper also aims at assessing the value of retrospective qualitative research and of a micro-level approach in the study of post-soviet conflicts by considering the voice of former combatants and their personal experience. It's fully a "work in progress" attempt to mirror narratives of a Post-Soviet conflict which deserves, after almost thirty years, to be understood from various perspectives.

## **Background**

The conflict in Abkhazia (1992-1993) is one of the ethno-territorial conflicts that broke out against the backdrop of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. It is explained as much by the legacy of the Soviet policy of nationalities, which had assigned territories and differentiated status to "ethnic groups", as by the struggles for the appropriation of resources provided by membership in a decaying Soviet state apparatus.

As the Soviet regime was gradually liberalized by the perestroika in the late 1980's, mobilisations in favour of greater autonomy gained momentum among both the Georgian and Abkhaz populations (Cheterian, 2008; Shesterinina, 2020). In Abkhazia, which was an "autonomous Republic" (ASSR) within the Georgian Union Soviet Republic (SSRG), separatism mirrored the Georgian "National Movement", both phenomena feeding each other until the first scuffles in the summer of 1989. It must therefore be analysed within the dynamics of the construction of the new independent Georgian state.

August 14, 1992 marked the beginning of the armed conflict - several months after the dissolution of the USSR and the formal recognition of the newly independent states, including

Georgia, when fighters of the Georgian National Guard and *Mkhedrioni* entered Abkhazia, under the pretence of freeing hostages that had been kidnapped by rebel groups who backed the former Georgian president Gamsakhurdia, and of re-establishing control over rail communications in Western Georgia.

A war of attrition and trenches then began. It was fuelled on the Georgian side by the mobilization of Georgians from Abkhazia - in 1989 there were 245 000 of them, 45.7% of the entire population of Abkhazia, and only 17.8% of Abkhaz - and the more intermittent mobilization of men from the rest of Georgian territory. On the Abkhaz side, the feeling of being attacked led to a "Mass Abkhaz mobilisation" (Shesterinina, 2020), labelled as an *opolcenie* - people in arms - against the backdrop of a strong patriotic mobilization and the participation of fighters from the North Caucasus. The Armenians, the third "ethnic group" in Abkhazia, also formed their own battalion on the Abkhaz side. Abkhazia was also supported intermittently by Russian forces - particularly the air force and anti-aircraft defence - even if, diplomatically, the Russian Federation continued, officially, to support Georgia's territorial integrity.

The hostilities lasted until 27 September 1993, when the Georgian forces had to abandon Sukhum/i in the hands of the Abkhaz. This led to the forced massive departure of approximately 240,000 Georgians from Abkhazia. The conflict resulted in the death of approximately 8,000 people, (HRW, 1995; ICG, 2006), the emergence of a self-proclaimed Abkhaz *de facto* state, which meant that Tbilisi lost control over the territories of the former Abkhaz autonomous republic<sup>1</sup>. As other post-soviet ethno-territorial conflicts (South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh), this one opposes two principles of international law: the right to self-determination and the principle of territorial integrity of recognized states. Whereas Abkhaz politicians and society saw this political result of the war as final, Georgian authorities claim that Abkhazia - and South Ossetia- still belong to Georgia. The lack of progress in the negotiation process on the status of these territories means that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are being built as *de facto* states (Blakkisrud & Kolsto, 2008). The ceasefire signed in September 1993 has been breached regularly, despite the presence of peacekeeping forces made up of Russian troops under the initial supervision of a small UN mission. Following the Russian-Georgian "five-day" war of August 2008, Abkhazia - as well as South Ossetia - was recognized as an independent state by the Russian Federation.

Much has been published on the war in Abkhazia, especially from the perspective of international law (Czapliński & Kleczkowska 2019), national mobilisations (Beissinger, 2002 Nodia, 1997, 2002), state formation (Darchiachvili, 2005), security (Jaksa, 2017), geopolitics (Blakkisrud & Kolsto, 2008), or conflict resolution (Francis, 2011). On the micro and meso levels, Anastasia Shesterinina carried out an in-depth study of the mobilization on the Abkhaz side (Shesterinina 2015, 2016, 2020). Yet, as far as we know, there is no comparative research on a micro level spanning both warring parties, at the notable but specific exception of the work of civil society experts such as the one of Conciliation resources (Conciliation Resources, 1999).

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<sup>1</sup> A first secessionist conflict inside Georgia sparked out in South Ossetia in January 1991, before the collapse of the Soviet Union. See Cheterian 2008, Fischer 2016. As a result of this war (1991-1992), South Ossetia too proclaimed its *de facto* state.

### **Sources and methodology**

This paper is based on individual and retrospective testimonies of the actors of these conflicts, their experience of mobilization, war and military disengagement. It is the joint result of researches undertaken within the framework of a FP7 project, within a project on the veterans of post-soviet conflicts at EHESS (Paris) and then within the framework of a Belgium FNRS-sponsored MIS<sup>2</sup>.

On the Georgian side, Anne Le Huérou and Silvia Serrano conducted interviews in November-December 2016 and February 2018, with Georgian former combatants from Tbilisi and Abkhazia, who fought the war in the Georgian National Guard and the *Mkhedrioni*, or in other armed groups (the question of whether these groups are regular or irregular troupes will not be addressed here). Some of them were rank and file soldiers while others were officers and/or warlords.

On the Abkhaz side, Aude Merlin collected twenty-one semi-directive interviews in Abkhazia in 2015, 2017, and 2018, with former combatants who had enlisted in 1992-1993, with a variety of profiles: police officers, career military personnel, political activists, nurses, doctors, social activists, heads of NGOs or associations providing assistance to the disabled, teachers, monks, cooks, pensioners, ministers, former ministers, painters, taxi drivers. All enlisted on the Abkhaz side, but not all of them self-define as Abkhaz: among the people interviewed there were Armenians and one Kabard.

The method combined the "snowball" technique and parallel approaches to diversify access. This panel is thus composed of 'authorised' words, pronounced by people with social capital (Dorronsoro & Grojean, 2013, p. 13), but also by more 'anonymous' people. The research focuses on the actors' narratives, in an inductive approach.

### **Aim of the article and structure**

This work in progress paper aims at exploring how individuals, who took part in the war respectively on both sides, remember and interpret their involvement. It tries to identify to what extent symbolic resources, - among which ethnicity - play a role. It sheds light on two topics:

- First, what is the role of ethnicity in the meaning given by former combatants to their engagement in the war, and how does the "passage of time" impact this meaning?
- Second, how does the victory *versus* defeat position impact social status, emotions, and narratives?

In conclusion, we summarize and try to sketch a swift synthesis on the way nation-building and state-building are processed, and how war veterans do contribute - or not - to these dynamics.

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<sup>2</sup> Research articles on the conflict in Abkhazia conducted by Aude Merlin (Abkhaz Veterans) and Silvia Serrano and Anne Le Huérou (Georgians veterans) are to be published in French in *Revue d'Etudes Comparatives Est Ouest* (forthcoming issue 1 (2?), 2021).

## **1. Making sense of war and of engagement in war: fighting - voluntarily- for freedom versus defending - ambivalently - a fragile and new independent state**

Beyond the common place framing of this conflict, as well as of other Post-Soviet conflicts, as an “ethnic” one, we would like to take the issue of ethnicity seriously and to explore how it is used by combatants from both side as an explanatory factor - or not - of the conflict, and of their involvement in it. How does the effects of time impact how the issue of ethnicity is addressed 25 years after the war?

What has emerged from our respective field research materials is the obvious gap between perceptions on each side, be it of the pre-war dynamics or the very nature of the war. War veterans from both sides also assess their role, their war experience, positioning and responsibility differently. What is already an asymmetry at the very onset of the war becomes blatant as we analyze retrospective consideration: the gap in the feelings which were at stake in 1992-1993 is amplified, and the asymmetry anchored in the very dynamics of pre-war and war periods is still effective in the long-term aftermath of the conflict.

### **1. 1. Ethnicity as a resource and as a mobilized category in the pre-war period and at the onset of the war**

The mobilization for the conflict takes place in the specific circumstances of the Soviet Union collapse at the end of 1991, after a wave of national mobilisations (Suny, 1993) and a parade of “sovereignties”.

On the macro level, narratives from each side were very different from each other from the very beginning of the conflict. In Tbilisi, it was portrayed as an issue of territorial integrity for a multi-ethnic, newly independent Georgian state. However, the Georgian narrative was marked by an ambivalence: to put it briefly, Georgia is at a crossroads when it comes to identity. Would Georgia build itself as the nation of Georgians, or of all those who live in Georgia, within the territory and borders that follow the Soviet crafted territory of the Republic of Georgia? (Suny, 1989; Serrano, 2007). The new Georgian state was at the time just liberated from the Soviet empire but it could also be seen as a remaining “mini empire” as stated by A. Sakharov in his address to the Supreme Soviet in 1989<sup>3</sup>, from which small peoples could be eager to emancipate themselves. This issue challenges the political and symbolic representations of the Georgian nation and of Georgian statehood.

In other words, even if there was a conflict of two nationalisms, - the Georgian one having been exacerbated during Z. Gamsakhurdia’s rule, the Abkhaz one having raised for decades

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<sup>3</sup> *“А начинать надо, повторяю, с полного демонтажа имперской структуры. Только так можно решить национальную проблему в малых империях, которыми, по существу, являются союзные республики - например, Грузия, включающая в свой состав Абхазию, Осетию и другие национальные образования.”* (Огонек, 1989, № 31) . See :

[https://yandex.ru/video/preview/?text=%D1%81%D0%B0%D1%85%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%20%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B4%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B9%20%D0%B3%D1%80%D1%83%D0%B7%D0%B8%D1%8F%20%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%81%201989%20%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%8F%20%D0%B8%D0%BC%D0%BF%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F&path=wizard&parent-reqid=1619732134603338-20010692891564325700207-production-app-host-man-web-yp-295&wiz\\_type=vital&filmId=13068280900829852760](https://yandex.ru/video/preview/?text=%D1%81%D0%B0%D1%85%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%20%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B4%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B9%20%D0%B3%D1%80%D1%83%D0%B7%D0%B8%D1%8F%20%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%81%201989%20%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%8F%20%D0%B8%D0%BC%D0%BF%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F&path=wizard&parent-reqid=1619732134603338-20010692891564325700207-production-app-host-man-web-yp-295&wiz_type=vital&filmId=13068280900829852760)

especially when confronted to the “georgianisation” of Abkhazia from the 1940’s upon-, the asymmetry was obvious: on the one hand, an internationally recognized state – Georgia -, on the other, a separatist movement struggling to become a state *per se*, outside of Georgia. Thus, in Sukhum/i, the Abkhaz authorities and promoters of the national Abkhaz idea were brandishing the defence of Abkhaz land against what was perceived as a Georgian aggression.

From the Georgian point of view, although as a whole we can speak of a national « Georgian » narrative of the conflict, things seem to be more complex and ambivalent. After the Gamsakhurdia mobilisation of ethnicity -“ Georgia for Georgians” (Cheterian 2008, pp. 166-180), the return of Shevardnadze to power in Tbilisi marks the willingness to emphasize statehood in the first place, thus placing territorial integrity as the main element to be defended. In this sense, the official discourse reflects rather a wish to de-ethnicize the conflicts with South Ossetia and Abkhazia. By framing them as separatist conflicts and avoiding labelling them as identity /ethnic ones, the official Georgian discourse emphasizes the geopolitical factor, in other words the “hand of Moscow”, a recurrent and effective antiphon of Georgian politics.

In Abkhazia, the reference to Sakharov’s speech comes up frequently in the interviews:

« So... premonition of war. You understand. It is as if Abkhazia had been fighting for its whole life. Not as much against Georgia, as against the injustice which small people are suffering from. Do you remember, the Academician Sakharov, who used to say that Russia was an Empire, and that in this Empire, there were little Empires. And precisely he spoke about Georgia. Whereas Georgians were accusing Russia, the Soviet Union, they also were bearing some responsibility. Georgia had privileges ” (Timur, war veteran, Sukhum/i, April 2018).

By developing this narrative, Abkhaz “identity entrepreneurs” mobilized a long-lasting history, referring to the vulnerability of Abkhazia throughout time: the Russian conquest and “*mukhadzhirstvo*” (massive exile of Cherkess into the Ottoman Empire); the georgianisation of the Abkhaz territories in the 1940’s; a weakening of the Abkhaz language; the demographic imbalance at the expense of the Abkhaz (Shesterinina, 2020). The inclusion of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia into the Union Republic of Georgia in 1931 was perceived as a historical injustice - all the more so as Abkhazia had been linked with Georgia by a union treaty between 1921 and 1931, before being downgraded to a status of Autonomous Republic status<sup>4</sup>. (Cheterian, 2008, pp. 69-70; Saparov 2015; ICG 2006, p. 4).

Thus, we have “competing narratives” combining historical interpretations, war, and politics (ICG 2006, pp. 3-4). These narratives emphasize ethnicity as the main driver, whereas the former ideological communist asset is becoming an outdated mobilisation card, being replaced by ethnic nationalism. Yet, ethnicity is tackled in increasingly diverging ways on both sides as time goes on. From the Abkhaz point of view, it is quite clear: Abkhaz are few, they feel threatened as a people, they mobilize ethnicity which is the elementary identity driver they are given. Ethnicity becomes the cornerstone of a narrative that is largely shared among Abkhaz: that of a “just cause”, which requires first the emphasis on “Abkhazness”, the struggle to allow the Abkhaz to own their country – with a University; a large representation in

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<sup>4</sup> Competing narratives and interpretations of the status of the Republic of Abkhazia between 1921 and 1931 would be in itself a matter of research, regarding opposite views on the “rightness” of the Abkhaz cause.

Assemblies; the free use of the Abkhaz language; and transforming this struggle into statehood. Consequently, switching from national civic activism (within the national Abkhaz movement 'Aidgylara') to armed engagement (within the Abkhaz National Guard or *polki* - regiments and groups of combatants) is perceived as "natural". The continuum between a political claim and its transformation into a military development fits within a linear narrative, in which ethnicity is the core issue, and which many Abkhaz consider to be their duty:

*« I see my then-involvement as my duty as a citizen, as my duty of responsibility. In the name of my Fatherland, in the name of my people, in the name of our future, in the name of the future of my children. My motto was: who, if not me? »* (Mzia Beia, director of the Museum to the glory of combatants V. Ardzinba, April 2018, Sukhum/i. Many also refer to a traditional warrior *ethos* of the Abkhaz man:

*« So, what was our starting point? A popular uprising (*opolchenie*), an upheaval of partisans (*partizanshchina*)*

*-How do you say « popular uprising » in the Abkhaz language? »*

*-No such word exists in Abkhaz: we don't need it, since, in the Ancient time, every Abkhaz used to be a warrior, he had to. Otherwise, no woman would marry him. (..) So, why would we need the word "popular uprising » in Abkhaz? Europeans like distinguishing and singling out: He is an insurgent; he is a professional soldier. In our people, all had to be warriors »* (Zaur, April 2018, Sukhum)

How do Georgian ex-combatants perceive their personal experience of involvement retrospectively and how do they give it meaning – or not - through the notion of ethnicity? The ambivalence we evoked in Georgian official discourse about ethnicity is reflected in the tensions that have emerged from the interviews. Some interviewees testify to an adequacy between the official discourse and the emphasis on Moscow's role: *"You should not speak of an Abkhaz-Georgian conflict, it is a Russian-Georgian conflict. It's Russian propaganda that has made it an ethnic conflict ('etnoconflikt'). It's an occupation".* (Thornike, former combatant, Tbilisi, March 2018).

Undoubtedly, we witness more variations in narratives on the Georgian side. The account given by Georgian veterans is a *Georgian* account of the war. This differs from the Abkhaz account in terms of chronology, the most tragic key dates (the fall of Gagra, with the fall of Sukhumi appearing to be the major traumatic event), and the choice of events mentioned – e.g., the cease-fire of July 1992, but not the ones of 18 August and 24 September 1992, not respected by the Georgians (HRW 1995). The suffering of the Abkhaz population, although not denied, is relegated to the background. Thus, no interview mentions the tragic siege of Tkvarcheli (from December 1992 to summer 1993), nor the Latta tragedy, which is constantly mentioned by Abkhaz war veterans. The fate of Abkhaz civilians in the Georgian-controlled zones, starting with Sukhumi, is described euphemistically, minimizing both the confrontation and Georgian responsibility: they '*left*', they '*withdrew*', as remembers one participant, engaged in peace building activities after the war:

*"Even after the New Year, until March of the following year, they stayed, and then they left....They left, they were told massively that they had to leave, beyond Gumista, that the Georgian side did not control (...)", "and then when the serious things started, they left, left..."*, (Levan, Tbilisi, November 2016)

## **1.2. How time impacts narratives and perceptions?**

If the effect of the passage of time on the ethnic dimension of the conflict is felt in both Georgian and Abkhaz narratives, its impact is slightly stronger for the Georgian former combatants we interviewed. Obviously the 25 years have diluted the strength of their recollection of the very outset of the war.

### ***Comparing causes of involvement and memorials***

The discrepancy between what is described as a romantic and noble commitment to the land, the homeland, the language - on the Abkhaz side - and the doxa, perceived as disembodied and sad, of the territorial integrity of a state - on the Georgian side - recurs several times. From the perspective of Abkhaz war veterans, perceptions of the enemy are forged through the words exchanged with prisoners, which lead to an observation: fighting for territorial integrity cannot be a mobilizing factor when collective survival is not at stake.

Here below is the way Roman, an Abkhaz war veteran, highlights this asymmetry:

*'At one point I was talking to a Georgian man and I ask him, "What is inscribed on your graves or monuments to the memory of those who died in the war?" He replies: "Died for the territorial integrity of Georgia". I tell him, "In our country, it says: 'Died in the name of freedom and the fatherland'. It looks different, doesn't it? Can you see the difference? In the name of territorial integrity! All because you had conquered this territory, so you wanted to fight not to lose it?' (Roman, 2018)*

As for Vazha, also an Abkhaz, he points to the opposition between forced participation on the Georgian side and voluntary commitment on the Abkhaz side. One stands up for the nation, while one is forcibly mobilised by and for the state.

*"I ask them 'why did you come here? They answer me: 'I was forced. I swear, I didn't want to, I was forced. It was always the same answer.'" (Vazha, 2018)*

Retrospective interviews with Georgian combatants illustrate quite the same narratives and let emerge a bitter irony, shared mostly by Georgians living outside Abkhazia before the war. While there is very little reference to patriotism, the interviews show rather the intertwining of the official discourse of the time, of the account of their personal mobilization as well as their retrospective assessment.

*: "they called upon all the people and I had to join in these military actions... (Koba, November 2016)*

*...It was difficult to refuse because you could have problems at work...(Tamaz, Tbilisi March 2018)*

*"...how would it turn out that you do not want to defend your homeland..... we went to protect the "integrity" of Georgia... (ironic smile) - Ilia, Tbilisi, nov. 2016.*

On the Georgian side, as time has gone by, the accounts of war veterans are characterized by a tension between the contradictory demands of being true to oneself and the re-composition of identities. According to the interviews, engaging into combat as an ethnic Georgian, at an individual level, seemed to be self-evident at the time of the conflict and made sense at a time

of political change and re-composition. At the time of the interview, more than twenty years after the ceasefire of 1993, ethnicity seems to be no longer a discriminating factor, as the Georgian institutions have become increasingly monoethnic. Having to redefine their social identity after the defeat and through the deep changes independent Georgia went through, the Georgian veterans we met "navigate" between the mobilization of various narratives from the moment of their engagement and their rereading in light of the resources that could be mobilized in the aftermath. They juxtapose different temporalities: that of mobilization and that of disenchantment linked to the defeat and to political and social changes, all factors that encourage introspection. Georgian former combatants who accepted to be interviewed, assume their participation in the conflict while also taking an extremely critical look at their involvement, some even bitterly regretting it. This revision of past events is reflected in the elaboration of narratives that differ slightly from the fervour of ethno-national mobilization.

By contrasting a defensive (Abkhaz) nationalism, driven by a survival instinct and a moral duty, from a (Georgian) nationalism or patriotism described as offensive and deprived of values (Shesterinina, 2016, p. 210), Abkhaz war veterans try to elaborate a just cause narrative. Many interviews refer to contentious statements by Qarkarashvili's, to allege a genocidal character of the Georgian offensive (Merlin, 2021) whereas the former Commander in chief of the Georgian troops in Abkhazia claims to have instead warned against bloodshed (Le Huérou, Serrano 2020, 2021). Retrospective Abkhaz outlooks exacerbate this. The cause of the defence of the state - attributed to the Georgians - appears less legitimate for the Abkhaz than the national cause. The labelling of the 1992-1993 war as the 'patriotic war of the Abkhaz people' - *otečestvennââ vojna abhazskogo naroda* - which refers in particular to the Soviet Union's Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany in 1941-1945, is very present in the Abkhaz public arena. It confirms the springboard of the commitment as it is perceived: resisting an external aggression.

### ***Georgian interviewees: resisting the ethnic narrative by resorting to alternative belongings?***

Cécile Jouhanneau, in her cornerstone work on memories in post-war Bosnia Herzegovina, argues that « Anthropologists' works have suggested other "memory environments" than the supposed ethno-national communities" (Jouhanneau, 2016). Indeed, our interviews with Georgian war veterans demonstrate that the perceptions of the conflict are very diverse and that personal accounts often challenge the narrative of an "ethno-territorial conflict". An illustration of the distance from an ethnic perspective is that smaller social groups than the national community are put forward when defining who "we" were. This is linked to the condition of mobilization: often the involvement in the civil unrests in Tbilisi prior to the fall of Gamsakhurdia in December 1991 led to participating in the war in Abkhazia. Yet, some of the interviews suggest that the group identity formed during the "Tbilisi war" remained relevant throughout the war in Abkhazia, and were more relevant than the national community: these groups referred as "we" may be military units or battalions, military corps ("our" National Guard), or groups of friends or neighbours. All of them are –and claim to be– "Georgians", but the ethnic or national qualification is not the relevant delimitation of the group. Hence, the "other" should not be ethnicized, all the more so because another narrative comes in a juxtaposition, which seems to have been particularly reinforced after the 2008 'five-day war': as written above, the 1992-1993 conflict is increasingly retrospectively referred to as an inter-state one, opposing Russia and Georgia. Furthermore, it is not circumscribed to



a very strict time (August 1992-September 1993). Rather, it is described as a long-lasting geopolitical argument. Against the backdrop of this narrative, the Abkhaz people are deprived of any agency, and the Abkhaz national struggle is not taken seriously. Indeed, the new independent, democratic, and multinational Georgian state is seen as better capable of guaranteeing equal rights for minorities and autonomy than was the Soviet Union. In most of the Georgian interviews, Moscow or “the Russians” are designated as the main warring opponent. Moscow is also pointed out as responsible for framing the conflict as an ethnic one: speaking about an incident which happened in March 2018 - the murder of a young Georgian in South Ossetia the day before the interview-, one Georgian war veteran says: "Today it's happening again, and again the Russians are going to say that it's an ethnic conflict". This is in line with official policies, which deny independence to the Abkhazians and therefore consider them citizens destined to return to Georgia one day.

Our hypothesis is that the way Abkhaz are depicted in the interviews is constrained by the public discourse and shaped by official Georgian policy toward Abkhazia: if Abkhazia is to remain a part of Georgia, the Abkhaz are supposed to be full-fledged citizens of Georgia. Depicting them as an enemy is not an available option since it would lead to their exclusion. Hence, our hypothesis is that public discourses are somehow interiorized in the individual memories of the Georgian former combatants and that time deepens this. In any case the variety of Georgian narratives 25 years after the ceasefire challenges the simplifying ethnic narrative of the conflict, whereas the Abkhaz “ethnically oriented” narrative seems to be strengthened as time goes by.

Accounts are thus shaped by the tension between the importance of the ethnic factor during the mobilization and its tabling, or even its stigmatization in post-conflict Georgian society.

## **2 -Reassessing the victory /defeat divide as an explanatory driver**

Research on veterans (Crotty, Diamant, Edele, 2020; Campbell, 2003) has shown that victory and defeat are not variables as crucial as one would think in understanding how and why veterans obtain [or not] rights and recognition after the conflict. These assessments invite us to re-explore the issue of winners and losers in post-Soviet conflicts. Nevertheless, in the Georgian-Abkhaz case, the military outcome has a strong impact, on several levels.

From a methodological point of view, carrying out interviews with war veterans in a victorious context seems easier than in a defeated one because of its impact on the wish to speak freely about their experience. According to our fieldwork, Abkhaz gladly agree to speak out, as they are full of self-confidence, proud and aligned with the official and public discourse. By doing this, they reassess the legitimacy of their past deeds, and actualise the adequacy between their deeds and the political result. The Abkhaz state, be it *de facto*, exists: their comrades did not die in vain. Conversely, in their accounts the Georgians seem to have little to be proud of. Thus, they are often reluctant to speak and almost always uncomfortable to express feelings, emotions, or demands.

## **2.1. Victory /defeat as policy drivers**

When interviewed, in general, Abkhaz war veterans are not uncomfortable regarding the meaning of war. Neither do they find themselves at odds with the authorities, even if there may be some voices of dissent. Despite these, the overarching narrative fits those of individuals. Reversely, the context of defeat does not facilitate fluent expression on the Georgian side. Interestingly enough, it is not related to the political regime, but pertains to some kind of self-inhibition, much more related to the context, which exacerbates the feeling of uselessness and of having fought in a meaningless war. Second, the military outcome determines the status of war veterans in Abkhazia and Georgia. Even if there are remaining grievances regarding social conditions, the overall feeling of being together, against a common enemy, dominates. On the contrary, the Georgian war veterans feel abandoned by the state. This outcome impacts the ability of war veterans to mobilise collectively in order to obtain social benefits and symbolic recognition; last but not least, it orientates the perception, and the way narratives are built retrospectively.

Regarding reintegration into civilian life after the war, in Abkhazia a fighter past seems to be a resource to access positions in the *de facto* state built after the war. It is illustrated by many profiles of interviewees<sup>5</sup> In this respect, the Abkhaz case seems to meet many of the criteria proposed by Crotty, Diamant, and Edele in their recent book to understand the factors which allow veterans to achieve recognition from the state and society : not only the military victory, not only the recognition by the state (vertical dimension) and by society (horizontal dimension), but more specifically a collective identity seen as “a collection of people with a shared belief that they are distinctively deserving members of the community, independent of the extent to which these sentiments are reciprocated within their social and political environment” (Crotty, Diamant, Edele, 2020: 162).

By contrast, on the Georgian side, having fought in the war is not a resource: it doesn't give access to positions, nor does it help to mobilize as a social group to demand both material and symbolic policies. As bitterly put by Dato, “*who loves the losers after the defeat??*” (interview, Tbilisi, nov 2016). If defeat appears in the present case to be an important factor in the discrediting of veterans, counterexamples prevent us from establishing a direct causality between military defeat and the marginalization of veterans in post-conflict state reconfigurations. Oblivion and lack of consideration can also be explained by the absence of, or even the refusal to set up a public policy of collective memory for veterans. Actually, the great heterogeneity of the initial social profiles of Georgian war combatants has not been subsumed into a social group able to transform into a political force or interest group.

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<sup>5</sup> Raul Lolua, former head of the anti-terrorist centre, former Minister of the Interior, deputy in the Abkhazian Parliament; Rizmag Adzhindzhal, secretary of the Aruaa political party; Mzia Beia, director of the Sukhum/i Museum of Combatant Glory; Merab Kishmaria, Minister of Defence; Galuste Trapizonian, Anzor Guov, former Abkhazian Ministers of Education and Health respectively. Alkhas Kvitsinia, President of the Amsakhara party; Zaur Zantaria, Director of the Association of Invalids of the "Patriotic War of the Abkhaz People of 1992-1993": all have a fighter past.

***Exhausted heroes seeking state support in vain: Georgian former combatants forgotten in the post war context***

In Georgia, the issue of veterans' social rights is a major one, especially because of the sharp economic difficulties faced by the population throughout the 1990s and after (World Bank 2009). The "Law on War and Armed Forces Veterans," passed in 1995 and amended several times since then, provides veterans with a number of benefits, according to their categories and status. Still, the amounts are extremely modest<sup>6</sup>. In addition, the interviews reveal great difficulties in asserting one's rights due to the lack of information, the complexity of the status, and the inadequacy of administrative procedures. Even though the drastic decrease in the number of beneficiaries after the 2008 war was officially motivated by abuses (Lomsadze, 2011), a large proportion of the interviewees explain that they have given up their rights, that the material benefits seem too minimal to take the necessary steps or that material or economic obstacles (bribes, travel to the capital, etc.) have dissuaded them. The difficulties in understanding the status and in obtaining the meagre material benefits associated with it make the lack of recognition of the veterans' sacrifice tangible.

But it is also the initial conditions of mobilization, marked by uncertainty and institutional vagueness, that influence the status of combatants and their misunderstanding 25 years later. The difference with the fate reserved to the veterans of the 2008 war, which was also a defeat, is undeniable: recognition, commemorations, material benefits, are in sharp contrast with the side-lining of the veterans in the 1990s, then their outright rejection during the presidency of Mr. Saakashvili.

**2. 2. Winners and losers; Heroes and anti-Heroes: (re)assessing deeds and reflecting on feelings**

Laetitia Bucaille (2006) argues that after-war narrations are highly structured by the preceding conflict and thus have a strong influence on post-conflict re-composition. On the Georgian side, shifting the attention to the narrations of the war 25 years after the events, we argue that these are highly structured by the transformation of Georgian society since 1993.

Whereas victory "is taken for granted", defeat calls for an introspective quest for explanation: *why did we lose, what did we do wrong?* In this respect the comparison with the discourse of the former Abkhaz combatants is insightful.

It is difficult to know if Abkhaz armed forces were "objectively" better organized than the Georgian forces. However, our hypothesis is that defeat impacts the way Georgian war veterans analyse the process that led to it. Thus, disorder and lack of discipline and arms shortages are viewed to some extent as a direct cause of the defeat (see by contrast the post-August 2008 discourse), and are presented as salient features of the daily life of ex-combatants while at war in almost all interviews, including those with high-ranking officers.

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<sup>6</sup> For example, in 2011, "simple" veterans received 22 laris monthly (barely 8 euros), victims of disabling injuries could receive monthly compensation of 129 laris (45 euros), widows of those killed in action 44 laris (15 euros) (Lomsadze, 2011).

To some extent, developing this kind of discourse removes their individual responsibility for the defeat. Most Georgian interviewees have interiorized the stigma: they were the soldiers of chaotic and undisciplined armed groups. This echoes their social and professional trajectories. War has not provided resources (or few, and to few people) and has not been an opportunity to accumulate experience and know-how.

The literature on post-conflict, after having presented veterans as active or potential spoilers of post-conflict state (re)constructions, now provides relevant frameworks for considering veterans as co-constructors of the state and institutions (Duclos, 2018; Mc Mullin 2013). However, there are at least two reasons why this analysis cannot be applied directly to the Georgian case: on the one hand, unlike most cases outside of Post-Soviet space, studied in the literature, this is not an externally imported policy within the framework of so-called DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration) programs, and there is therefore no third party on which ex-combatants could rely or which they could lobby. On the other hand, post-conflict Georgia is characterized by an ambiguous and variable "policy of forgetting," in the sense that institutions rely on one category against another, depending on the political orientations of the state and the discourse authorities want to promote with regard to past or present conflicts.

On the Abkhaz side, war veterans insist on their determination, solidarity, and unity in the face of the common enemy. Though they all stress the lack of armament and ammunition when the war began, and the necessity to get weapons, they all emphasize the importance of determination. The victorious outcome retrospectively strengthens the heroic discourse: the stress is put on the capacity of winning a war without qualitative and quantitative equipment. Testimonies converge on the DIY approach. Digging up WW2 weapons, using hunting rifles, making DIY weapons, buying weapons in Russia or anywhere possible - "these were the 1990's", says one Abkhaz veteran- and, last but not least, taking weapons from the Georgian enemy: all this improvisation is not referred to as a decisive obstacle. On the contrary, Abkhaz war veterans stress the ability to improvise and to cope with the difficulties:

"At the very beginning there was a huge lack of weapons. A couple of people we were in the Guard, we had guns, most didn't. We adapted. Some made DIY weapons, some made special ones out of gas cylinders like mines. (...) There turned out to be a lot of skilled craftsmen who were making all sorts of things. (...) Well, we didn't have aviation. They had helicopters, and we had to shoot them down from below. We had to find somewhere to do that. Then on the second... Well, that's how we were armed. Then..." (Timur, April 2018, Sukhum/i)

They also stress the fact that the Abkhaz Army was created by warfare, in the very middle of fire, which is confirmed by the academic literature (Shesterinina 2020) and testimonies (Paculiâ 2002). Ardzinba is praised as the number 1 hero, whereas public space in Abkhazia is completely full of references to heroes, as shown by our observations:

"The freedom of Apsny is the meaning of my whole life": these words legend a gigantic photo of A. Ardzinba at the entrance to Sukhum/i. Faces, busts of famous warlords are disseminated all over the territory of Abkhazia. At the same time, anonymous former combatants are also heroized. On the seafront promenade, a fresco combines tourist images, the faces of combatants, and drawings of medieval warriors, cartridge belts bulging on their chests. The announcement of a variety concert - "songs of victory" - competes with a picture that pays tribute to women in military uniforms: "glory to our heroines!" A wall calendar promoting the

mobile phone company Aquaphone shows faces of blood and sweat, while dozens of names of fallen students and professors engraved on a stele welcome the visitor to the Abkhazian State University. On the northern exit of Sukhum/i in the direction of Gudauta, the portraits engraved in the wall are surmounted by a huge inscription in Russian and Abkhazian: "Eternal glory to the heroes of Abkhazia!" Deeds of veterans are recalled at every step, their memory honoured. After the opening of the museum dedicated to the fighting glory in Sukhum/i, another museum of fighting glory has opened in Novy-Afon. The public space is saturated with this living memory.

Heroization is not only a top-down policy crafted by a state-led formatted discourse in Abkhazia. It also pertains to personal dynamics which overlaps with official policy, as Arzadin testifies, when we walk together in the city garden in the very centre of Sukhum/i where graves of fallen combatants are aligned on both sides of a memory monument:

I come here almost every night to talk to the guys. I feel calmer after that. It reminds me of the price we paid for victory. I come to put down a cigarette. (...) The only thing we can give them is the memory. (Arzadin, 2018)

This former sports teacher, who became a therapist to help war invalids recover their abilities, comes to talk to his deceased friends. In the premises of the soldiers' mothers' association, we can read the tribute of one of them, Guli Kichba: 'Our sons fell not to make us sink into mourning, but for the joy of Apsny's eternal freedom'. One of the soldier's mothers seeing us looking at a calendar with a photo of the first Abkhaz president, says: "An Ardzinba, there's one like that every thousand years! "

The discursive and visual consensus is an unshakeable foundation: there are no cracks in this national narrative that takes up the whole space, while the fighter capital constitutes a resource to build a carrier in Abkhazia, as exemplified by profiles of Ministers, chairs of veterans' organisations and political parties, all symbolical and authoritative functions (see *footnote 5*).

### **Reconverting a fighter capital into the civilian life: challenges and stalemates**

Conversely, not only Georgian former combatants are not heroised, neither they manage to integrate into the new built Georgian military or police structures: "*the authorities looked at the military without affinity, they posed a problem for them,*" recalls Rezo, while Irakli, originally from Abkhazia, explains how his participation in the unsuccessful recapture of the Gal/i district in May 1998 marked the end of a career in the security forces: "*After 1998, we were made to understand to stop: if we were caught by the Abkhaz, we would be let go; if we were caught by the Georgians, we would be punished*".

The only successful trajectory among our Georgian interviewees is that of Dato, who made a career in the Georgian Internal Forces before being "dismissed" after M. Saakashvili came to power in 2004. Even he finds it impossible to sustain the positions he acquired during the war and confides his bitterness and disillusionment both at the time of the war and after: "*we ended up understanding that we were cannon fodder and in the period that followed, they tried to put us in prison, under the pretence of fighting criminal elements*" (Dato, Tbilisi, Nov 2016).

Finally, Georgian veterans are in the situation pointed out by L. Bucaille in the aftermath of some conflicts when there is a «weakening of heroic voices" (Bucaille, 2007, 462), which refers to the veterans' lack of self-esteem which leads them to look for and adopt other postures and categories. Their participation in combat as a symbolic capital could not be valued after the war.

### **Ethics, affects and relation to violence**

Some of Georgian interviewees have then built a kind of "pacifist" - and somehow conventional posture, marked in a way by the Soviet motto *"лишь бы не было войны"* (*everything but war*) : *"a person with a machine gun in his hands is very dangerous, he is capable of things he would not dare do in peacetime"* (Levan, Tbilisi, november 2016). This attitude draws the outlines of anti-hero figures, as a way of making the absurdity of this particular war, and even of war in general, thinkable. This is evidenced by the equivalence of the behaviour of the belligerents of the opposite camps and the impossibility of claiming a moral superiority over the opponent. A conflict with identified sides and objectives was replaced by senseless violence, where "brothers shot at each other" and "absurd" or "tragicomic events" are described.

The Georgian veterans, including the officers, far from glorifying the army and their past actions, draw a contrast between the idealized image of the war as conveyed in official accounts and the actual reality, marked by disorder and the lack of discipline. The fact that this stance has the advantage of exonerating one's individual responsibility for the military defeat, in case of a potential legal accountability for violations in humanitarian law should not be underestimated<sup>7</sup>. The veterans are careful to clear themselves of any exaction committed personally and outline what could be a drawing of a "war ethic". When the painter Merab specifies that he "did nothing wrong", he means that he did not get rich, he did not take money. Like him, who assures us that "he is not a Rambo", (Merab, Tbilisi, nov. 2016), the vast majority nevertheless insists that they are not heroes. Most of them have not told their relatives about the war, as Tamaz, who was in the Georgian Parliament at the time of the war, but whose career path stopped after the conflict. His account, delivered with restraint, lets slip more intimate touches, when he confides 25 years later that he "did not talk to many people" about the war, because *"when you talk about it, you want to be looked at as a hero, and that was not the case"* (Tamaz, Tbilisi March 2018).

On the Abkhaz side, the issue of the war crimes committed by the Abkhaz are not necessarily denied. Instead, they fit into a general narrative. War veterans recognize their existence, using some readymade formula like *"Война войной"*. *"Всё бывает"*. Or when a group of war veterans point out crimes committed by Georgian combatants, and the interviewer asks the reciprocal question, they admit: *"Это тоже было"*. (Roman, Zaur, Sukhum/i, 2018). All in all, it sounds as if this kind of deeds are unavoidable to reach the goal of the war.

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<sup>7</sup> Actually, it is remarkable that the question of accountability in terms of fundamental rights has never emerged in interviews with Georgian former combatants, let it be for "their" side or for the Abkhaz side. The recalls of repression against some of the Georgian participants after the war is seen as exclusively related to domestic georgian political issues and not in any case the result of a post war transitional justice process. Probably here, the absence of any kind of domestic or international DDR program is tangible.

A lot of research has now been undertaken on the emotional dimension of war narratives and how it impacts life in post-conflict situations especially in the case of wars opposing people having lived together for a long time. Our own research has only slightly touched on this issue, which is to be analysed in other projects on Post-Soviet conflicts like Anita Khatchaturova's PhD which focuses on the role affects and emotions play in the experience of war and in memory.

In the case of the war in Abkhazia, respective positions of winners or losers have had a strong impact on the perceptions and on the narratives about violences, whether suffered or committed, and thus on moral position about the war.

Some interlocutors adopt a reflexive position, like Mzia Beia about hatred:

*You know, I can't hate for long, I'm made that way. I don't know if it's good or bad. I don't suffer from acute hatred. Any conflict makes me suffer, and conflict is always present in life, I am very emotional, but I can't hate. I pray for the people who offended me. There have been some people, among the enemies, for whom I have felt hatred, but otherwise, to hate a whole people, it is such a psychological burden... you could not get rid of it. But I also don't want to appear or describe myself as being super humanistic, loving everyone. But I realised that if I hated everything and everyone, my mental health would suffer. (Mzia Beia, Sukhum/i, 2018)*

Euphemizing the account of atrocities is one striking feature of Georgian former combatants, not only, and not so much the atrocities done by the Georgians, but also those done by the Abkhazians. This can seem surprising since the atrocities of the "other" are generally emphasized as part of the mobilization discourse, and were indeed instrumental in the mobilization in the case of Abkhazia. Somehow, as the agency in the war of the Abkhaz themselves is minimized, they are presented in the rather neutral terms of *абхазская сторона* (*Abkhaz side*), thus avoiding any reference to an essentialized ethnic enemy. Levan, who worked during the war to evacuate and protect civilians from both sides and then participated in initiatives of dialogue with Abkhaz veterans, chooses his words carefully, euphemizing what is commonly defined as a war crime with the mere evocation of the "mistakes of the Abkhaz side allowing the killing of civilians" (Levan, Tbilisi, Nov 2016).

When it comes to the memories of living together before the war, there is a paradox in the Abkhaz veterans' interviews. Though they remember with some nostalgia the "multiethnic Sukhum/i" and the cohabitation with Georgian inhabitants - not to mention the widespread intermarriages -, at the same time they don't seem to regret the expulsion of Georgians. This issue remains to some extent a taboo, which the physical reality recalling it at every step: on the road from Inguri to Sukhum/i houses which used to belong to Georgians are still destroyed. The ethnic cleansing is visible in the public space. When it comes to this very sensitive issue, only one woman expresses that "one cannot build a nation on the theft of someone else's property"; "People are completely different. They are mercantile. Today, people kill each other for a piece of bread, for a place, for a house. The acquisition of other people's property has greatly perverted the Abkhaz. It is really horrible". (Gunda, 2017).

The retrospective emotional flow from the Abkhaz side, combines some euphoria when remembering the adrenaline and the patriotic upheaval - "During war, we were alive, it was the true life", says Marina-, as well as mourning the dead / the sacrificed heroes.

On the Georgian side, interviews provide few emotional statements or attitudes, at the exception of 1 or 2 interviews. We try to explain this with three hypotheses: the first is about the existence of a specific Soviet memory culture. Indeed, the testimonies are collected in different contexts and influenced by various memory cultures. Nathan Beyrak argues that in Post-Soviet societies, the intimate dimension is negated while recalling one's own experience and « testifying is perceived as a formal, ritual, a « proper » occasion, where it is not the one thing to draw attention to anything personal » (Beyrak 1995, Byford 2014). Secondly, trauma is not an issue in the Georgian post-soviet society. Interestingly, for example, the only Georgian interview where trauma was mentioned was one of a man who was engaged in dialogue with Abkhaz ex-combatants, working for an international NGO. His case recalls that of the Abkhaz doctor mobilized on the front, Gunda, who also relies on morality when scrutinizing how war transformed the Abkhaz. Finally, the main rupture for the Georgian ex-combatants may not be the war but the disruption of the existing social frame embedded in the Soviet experience.

## **Conclusion**

In 2005, 12 years after the cease fire, journalists from the independent media project Caucasus Talk Circle succeeded in connecting by video satellite two former colleagues - researchers at an Institute in Sukhum/i- Kote and V. Paculiâ (Berylava, Caucasus Talk Circle, 2005). One is Abkhaz, the other Georgian. When the war began, they both took part in it on opposite sides. This invaluable experience of setting up a face-to-face dialogue highlighted the asymmetry of the post-war situation, which recalls the asymmetry of the conflict in general but in reverse. Both former colleagues took part in combat on opposite sides of the battlefield. The expelled is the Georgian IDP, Kote, who longs for Abkhazia and has not accepted his exile, all the more so because his professional perspectives in "proper Georgia" are not as flourishing as the professional status he enjoyed in the soviet autonomous Republic of Abkhazia. Through this double portrait, profiles of winners and losers are salient. Whereas Paculiâ finds himself in a position of self-confidence position, Kote can only resort to irony in order to dissimulate the pain, the nostalgia, and the bitterness of being a downgraded second-class citizen, without any perspective of returning to Abkhazia, and with little hope of finding his way and building a future in Georgia equivalent in social status and integration to the one he had in Sukhum/i before the war.

What does this face-à-face tell us about the question we asked at the very beginning of the article? It shows the main aspects and results we tried to put forth in this article: first of all, the asymmetry of the conflict leads to competing narratives reflected in the Kote-Paculiâ conversation. There is a kind of distorted mirror / reverse mirror, which shows how ethnicity as a resource has gradually backslided on the Georgian side, while it remains a key variable and resource in Abkhazia, even more so now that Abkhazia is perceived by Abkhaz elites as the State of the ethnic Abkhaz after the expulsion of 240 000 ethnic Georgians. We also see in this face-to-face conversation the effect of the passage of time on narratives. Time has consolidated the self-confidence of Abkhaz as the victorious warriors, having won their state



(although a *de facto* one). This narrative is all the more consolidated by the fact that, to some extent, the Abkhaz State is a symbolic achievement and the main outcome of the war. At the same time, time has weakened the analysis of events through the prism of ethnicity on the Georgian side. Though Georgian combatants were referring to themselves as ethnic Georgians at the outset of the war which coincided with the beginnings of the post-soviet independent Georgia, there has been a gradual loss of prominence of this resource as Georgian institutions have become increasingly monoethnic. Thus, at the time of the interview, more than twenty years after the ceasefire of 1993, ethnicity no longer seems to be a discriminating factor. Having to redefine their social identity in other ways after their defeat and through the deep changes undergone by an independent Georgia, Georgian veterans "navigate" between the mobilization of different narratives from the moment of their engagement and their rereading of the facts in the light of resources that could be mobilized in the aftermath. In contrast, there is also an interesting finding. Indeed, Abkhaz still ethnicize Georgians, more than twenty-five years after the cease fire, while Georgians de-ethnicise Abkhaz. In other words, since Abkhaz ethnicize the war and their engagement, they ethnicise the enemy as well. Conversely, since Georgians de-ethnicize the war and their engagement, especially in retrospect, they also de-ethnicize Abkhaz that they call the "abkhaz part", all the more so because they must be citizens of the Georgian state. This deep dissensus prevents any resolution of the conflict and is also reflected in timid attempts to move societies closer to each other. When the Georgian state, through the Ministry of Health, invites Abkhaz people as full-fledged citizens of Georgia, in the framework of special programs, to get healthcare in Georgian hospitals, rather than going to cities in the South of Russia, the Abkhaz who take advantage of this opportunity hide their and remain afraid when in Georgia. The enmity between these parties still impacts behaviors. There is, in front of the Rizza Hotel, a stele on which it is strikingly visible that Georgian script has been removed from a Soviet-era stele (then in 3 languages: abkhaz, Georgian, Russian). When entering Gudauta, the banner welcoming travellers also lacks the inscriptions in Georgian, again in a very exhibitional and visible manner. This image of the Other is also reflected in the interviews. Georgian war veterans (in most of our interviews) feel uncomfortable and even guilty when remembering crimes perpetrated against Abkhaz, while Abkhaz fit these crimes, committed against Georgian fighters, into a wary and political rationale. While Georgians depoliticize and consider these acts from a moral perspective, Abkhaz - most of them, although there are dissenting voices - do not.

The inverted mirror is also a relevant metaphor to analyse nation-building and state-building. In this aspect, the asymmetry of processes is also enlightening. To sum up, one can say, when looking at past events and their narratives, that the Georgian state was built without the participation of Georgian War veterans. Admittedly, it was crafted through war but in fact without Georgian war veterans, even despite them. The Georgian state abandoned them, they lost the fight, they cannot be heroised and they are neither of interest or benefit to the new state. Moreover, they are a reminder of defeat. The state-building process in Georgia is presented differently than in Abkhazia. Georgian elites and authorities had to cope with the

challenge of state-building while admitting the loss of territories. The Georgian state was built without solving the issue of nation-building, which remains in flux. What is the Georgian Nation? Is it the whole civic nation including Ossetians and Abkhaz, who reluctantly refuse to be citizens? Or is it an amputee, a severed territory which still suffers from its ghost member, refuses to resign itself to abandoning its lost limbs and to think the core of the nation differently? In both cases, ethnicity can only be understood between the lines.

Conversely, the Abkhaz nation has been built with ethnicity as a core variable - despite the tricky question regarding the proportion of Abkhaz in Abkhazia itself, Armenians being, according to certain evaluations, almost neck and neck with Abkhazians. Besides, there are the ghosts of Georgian expellees, whose reality is paradoxically omnipresent through their absence - as illustrated by the stele we mentioned earlier. Parallely, the Abkhaz war veterans contributed to victory, alongside North Caucasian fighters and with Russian support. Even if they do not directly provide the main components of sovereignty - the geopolitical security of the Abkhaz state and the Hobbesian pact are ensured by the security patron, namely the Russian Federation - they contribute to Abkhaz state-building, through two channels. Symbolically, Abkhaz war veterans are the actors, the heroes who made this accession to sovereignty and independence possible. Politically, they are granted social and symbolic capital, which gives them the ability and the legitimacy to take part in domestic politics and, also, in the domestic order.

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## List of Interviews

### In Georgia

Interviews were conducted in Tbilisi for the largest part, in Tskhaltubo, and Saguramo (Tbilisi region) in November 2016 and March 2018. At the exception of the interview with Gia Qarkarashvili, all were anonymised.

#### in Tbilisi

- Rezo, Filmmaker 23 Nov 2016
- Merab, Painter 24 Nov 2016
- Gogui, War journalist 26 Nov 2016
- Levan, President of a veterans' association engaged in dialogue with Abkhazian veterans 27 Nov 2016
- Koba, Levan's employee 28 Nov 2016
- Ilia, former war correspondent during the conflict in Abkhazia 29 Nov 2016
- Dato, one of the founders of the National Guard, career in the Internal Forces, now member of the Coalition of Police Veterans and Patriots 29 Nov 2016
- Gia Qarkarashvili, former Commander-in-Chief in Abkhazia and Minister of Defence 30 Nov 2016
- Otar Coalition of Police Veterans and Patriots 1 Dec 2016

- Tamaz, Entrepreneur, serving in the Georgian Parliament at the time of the war 28 Feb 2018.
- Temourn, Former minister, involved during the conflict in prisoner exchanges. Worked with the NGO Conciliation Resources and built-up archives 28 Feb 2018
- Malkhaz, Afganets, law enforcement veteran, member of the political movement Veterans of Force Structures and Patriots of Georgia 1 Mar 2018
- Kakha AC, resident of Sukhumi before the war, geology professor at the university 1 March 2018
- Thornike AC, Writer 1 March 2018

Veterans' service (attached to the Prime Minister) 1 Dec 2016

- Tengviz , O., L., (Head of Service).

Veterans' Union in their office and then in the office of the director of an herbal medicine company that supports the association

- Zurab : Head of the Veterans' Union, Afganets, (served under R. Auchev)
- other Members of the Veterans' Union 2 and 5 Dec 2016, 1 March 2018.

Collective interview in Tskhaltubo (Kutaisi region) 2 March 2018: Interview at the association's premises + visit to several former sanatoriums converted into housing for IDPs. All are former combatants from Abkhazia, displaced to Tskhaltoubo after the war. Interview with 7 people including:

- Mamuka, representative of Abkhazia Georgians Originally from Ochamchire
- Nodar, Former policeman from Gagra (Abkhazia)
- Irakli Sports trainer (shooting) before the conflict
- Nino
- Viktor

Sagouramo 3 March 2018

- Nino, Refugee woman from Sukhumi,
- Her husband Viktor
- Zviad, a friend of her husband

### **In Abkhazia:**

All interviews were conducted in Sukhum/i. Family names are kept when they are known personalities whose words reflect a position in the public space. Others are anonymised.

- Mzia Beia: former combatant, director of the museum of patriotic glory named after V. Ardzinba, Sukhum/i, January 2015, April 2018
- Adgur, veteran, painter, January 2015
- Alkhas Tkhasushev, veteran, invalid, founder of AiS (Ассоциация Инва-Содействие), January 2015, April 2018
- Marina Gumba, veteran nurse, spokesperson for Amsakhara ("sources of fire"), veterans' organisation turned political party, January 2017
- Zaur and Chichiko, former company and battalion commanders turned road officers, January 2017
- Raul Lolua, former combatant turned interior minister and then head of the anti-terrorist centre, candidate in the 2017 legislative elections, January 2017
- Rizmag Adzhindzal, veteran, member of the Abkhazian war veterans' association, Aruaa (the warriors), which became a political party, January 2017
- Leon Adzhindzal, (his brother), monk, former combatant, April 2018
- Sergei Shamba, born 1951, historian, MP between 1991 and 1996; Chairman of the Abkhaz national movement "Aidylara" in 1990-1992; Chief Commissar of the Armed Forces of Abkhazia between January and October 1993; reserve colonel after the war; member of the

UN-sponsored Geneva negotiations; Chairman of the "United Abkhazia" party; Minister of Foreign Affairs twice, Prime Minister.

- Batal Kobakhia, former combatant (leader of a medical battalion), Minister of Culture under Khadjimba, member of the Centre for Humanitarian Programmes (TsGP), Sukhumi, January 2017
- Merab, beneficiary of the Sukhumi veterans' charity, January 2017
- Roman, Timur, Zaur: 3 friends, former combatants
- Alexei Gogua, writer, former combatant, Member of the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia from 1991 upon, chairman of the parliamentary committee on defence and security from January 1993; interview conducted in January 2017
- Arzadine, veteran, physical education teacher, trainer and physiotherapist at the association for the support of invalids "AiS
- Larisa, female veteran doctor
- Madina, female veteran, who became a cook for the Abkhaz Army after the war
- Anzor Guov (Kabard), veteran, Kabard volunteer, became Minister of Health of Abkhazia, lives in Abkhazia
- Galuste Trapizonian (Abkhazia's Armenian), Hero of Abkhazia, born in 1958; former company commander, seriously wounded; Deputy Minister of Education between 1994 and 1996; President of the Armenian community of Abkhazia; President of the Pension Fund of Abkhazia, then Deputy
- Sergei Matosian (Abkhazia's Armenian), Colonel, hero of Abkhazia, born 1952. Battalion commander who took part in the fighting at Gagra, on the Gumista front and in the final offensive on Sukhumi (wounded in combat); appointed in 1994 commander of the Armenian 'Bagramian' battalion in the Kodori valley; head of the border service of the Republic of Abkhazia after 1995; Member of the Parliament between 1996 and 2001; head of the service at the Ministry of the Interior from 2000; brother of Vitali Matossian, head of the battalion's medical service
- Timur Zantaria, veteran, born in 1961, director of the Association of Invalids of the Patriotic War in Abkhazia from 1992 to 1993, co-founder of the association for the support of invalids AIS, brother of a missing combatant
- Zurab Khvartskia, former combatant, born in 1950, former active member of the Abkhaz national movement Aydguylara, former leader of the Union of Defenders of Abkhazia after the war, currently head of the Abkhazia's transport network. Brother of Mushni Khvartsia, Abkhaz military commander killed during the war, hero of Abkhazia.
- Vazha, Sergei: Former combatant, member of the "United Abkhazia" party
- Nadezda Venediktova, journalist, Sukhum/i, 2013