

Historical memory and conflicts of the present, Georgian-Abkhaz case.

Elena Natenadze, PhD candidate, University of Bern.

Email: elena.natenadze@hist.unibe.ch

Paper Presented at the 2021 ASN World Convention, 5-8 May 2021

Do No Cite Without the Permission of the Author.

Abstract

Contested historical theories and studies demonstrate that one of the key elements of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict is the interpretation of the past or, more specifically, the differences in interpreting the past (Auch, 2004, Jishkariani, 2015). Georgian and Abkhaz historical narratives contradict each other and are based on a mutual exclusion. The 'selective blindness' and an exclusion which both conflicting parties use in their national narratives and public discourses, keep the societies in captivity of conflict supporting narratives and limit the space for discussion, dialogue and reconciliation.

According to Daniel Bar-Tal (2014) 'conflict supporting narratives' help members of the society to adapt to the hardships of the conflict. They justify the violence and destructive actions, which group members have committed. Such narratives mobilize the society and prepare it for future hardships. They also stimulate the formation of a positive self-image, collective and individual identity and support the society in presenting itself as a victim. When the window of opportunity for the dialogue opens, such narratives become a barrier which hinder the peaceful transformation of the conflict.

The research analyses the role of memory and narratives in today's context and at the example of Georgian-Abkhaz case reflects on how historical memory works as a basis for dialogue.

The analysis of Georgian and Abkhaz biographical interviews recorded between 2013-2020 on both sides of the conflict, and the analysis of focus group discussions with different target groups in Georgia, demonstrate that apart from dominant historical narratives there are counter memories that challenge dominant conflict supporting narratives and serve as a basis for dialogue.

By analyzing memory narratives the study contributes to the research field of memory and conflict in general and in the special case it addresses the question of overcoming distinctive images of the past and chances of dialogue. The research is connected to the fields of cultural studies, social sciences, peacebuilding and also is the contribution to the study of history and present of the Caucasus.

Key words: Historical memory; Georgian-Abkhaz conflict; Narratives; Dialogue; Contested history; Biographical Interviews; Narrative analyses.

Introduction

Recently a video interview with a young Abkhaz woman was released and became available for the Georgian and Abkhaz audience. The woman was born in Tamishi/Tamysh four months after the end of the Georgian-Abkhaz war in February 1994. She was affected by the tough post-war reality with all the difficulties related to it. Her interview gave rise to the controversial public discussions in Sokhumi/Sukhum, because she was one of the first who publicly challenged the dominant narrative about the conflict over the last years. Here is the quote from her interview.

„...I wanted to look at the war not from the point of view of the fact that I am Abkhaz, I wanted to understand what could have happened. I wanted to look at the people from the other side - not as specifically Georgians, but as people in general. And discover the answers. And I found them. And it really became easier for me, much easier. I let go of this evil child who hated everything and everyone throughout her childhood. And this is very difficult, when you live, grow up with a great hatred, you hate what you did not participate in yourself, and you hate those you do not know and have never seen. It is difficult, very difficult... .. Sometimes you need to give the person a second chance. And, probably, you need to give a chance to everyone, absolutely everyone. And I will probably be the first to sit down at the negotiating table. Because I do not want my children, next generation, the future generation of Abkhazia to endure what I endured as a child. To live and grow up in the post-war world is difficult. At such times, very strong people can grow up, very purposeful people, or evil, alienated people. Unfortunately, representatives of my generation, here we are - the post-war generation - I have lot of friends who could not succeed. They stayed there, in this difficult post-war time. They live with an incredible feeling of anger, hostility. And because of this, they do not have a sense of happiness, freedom. They stayed in that time when everything was bad and when there was nothing enough. And we lived in a state of expectation that a war could start. And I don't want to live any longer in a state that maybe tomorrow a war will start. I do not want to raise my children in such a society. ... And for me the most important message is to see in every person first a person, a human being and only then a nation, position, age. All the rest comes later. First you need to see a person, a human being. This is the most important, in my opinion this is what will save us all“.

Soon after the release of the Abkhazian interview, an interview with a Georgian IDP woman was published. The woman was born in Abkhazia in 1986, six years before the start of the Georgian-Abkhaz war and had to leave Abkhazia during the war under difficult circumstances. Currently she lives as a

refugee in Tbilisi. Like the Abkhaz respondent, the Georgian woman also challenges the popular dominant Georgian narrative and says the following:

„Throughout my childhood and the following years, I was taught that the Georgians had no problem with the Abkhaz and that only Russia stood between us that had occupied Abkhazia. After listening to the Abkhaz, I discovered that it turns out that they also have something to say, they also have wishes. Moreover, they get annoyed when we focus only on Russia. It is wrong when the society does not know the truth I want Georgians and Abkhaz to be able to communicate easily with each other and that these vague fears and mistrust no longer exist between us. I want to be able to visit freely each other. It is up to the Abkhaz to decide whether Abkhazia should be part of Georgia or not. They themselves shall want to be with us. We can only do our best, so that this becomes wishful for them. I believe that nothing will come out by force ...“.

What are the changes in the discourses about the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, why was there a significant change and what are the implications for further analysis? In other words, how historical memory can work as a basis for dialogue?

Problematic narration of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

Tracing back to the origins of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, authors suggest different starting points of the conflict. Some of the authors focus on the deep historical roots of the conflict (see: Siddi, 2012; Lakoba 1999, Suny, 1994), while the others count the history of the conflict from the Soviet and post-Soviet times (see: Demmer & Speyer 2015, Zuge 2015). It is not an easy task for the authors to narrate about the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, because the terms, naming, timeline of the conflict, and the actors involved are often disputed issues. Most often, to make the essence of the conflict clearer, the authors try to narrate about the conflict by using a dichotomic framing of Georgian and Abkhaz positions. They (see: Auch, Nodia, Toria, Zuge, Justus) juxtapose Georgian and Abkhaz perspectives. On the one hand, avoiding dominant narratives about the conflict is a very difficult endeavour, on the other hand such manner of the narration creates a deadlock for the author, and the reader as well.

Despite attempts of authors to use the conflict-sensitive language, it is still a very difficult task, because it means that the author needs to define as to which conflicting side is the chosen language sensitive to. Clearly, authors make an effort to stay withdrawn and they aim to show Georgian and Abkhaz perspectives from a distance. When discussing the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, authors set forth and/or explain the essence of the conflict by juxtaposing Georgian and Abkhaz perspectives to make their narration easy to grasp, they attempt to show the reasons of the confrontation and the differences in them. Such juxtapositions often create the feeling as if Georgian and Abkhaz societies are homogenous entities, and that members of each society have the same position about the conflict. At the same time, juxtaposed perspectives are seen as the only truths about the conflict. For instance, Ghia Nodia (1997) explains Georgian-Abkhaz conflict with the problem of incompatibility of the Georgian and Abkhaz national projects. Also, Grazvydas Jasutis in his 2018 report “Georgia-Abkhazia: the predominance of irreconcilable positions” describes the different views both Georgians and Abkhaz have on their history and the history of the conflict. Same can be said about Malkhaz Toria (2020), who uses historical juxtaposition to describe the conflicting perspectives over the conflict.

Although it might seem as a natural development of narration of the conflict it leaves the reader with the feeling that those two perspectives are irreconcilable and Georgian-Abkhaz conflict is very difficult to approach beyond a biased lens.

To better describe the existing differences between the conflicting parties, authors chose radically opposed narratives. But, do these radical positions represent Georgian and Abkhaz societies and their members? Do they describe the views about the conflict that Georgians and Abkhaz have? Maybe, the abstract term „society“ is equally problematic and does not fully demonstrate the diversity which exists inside Georgian and Abkhaz societies? As there must someone define who the society is and who speaks for it.

To resist dominant narratives which serve nationalist historiography, Foucault (1977) suggests the concept of counter-memory that is different from dominant narrative and challenges it. Besides studying counter memory, to understand the essence of Georgian-Abkhaz conflict it is not less important to make the diversity of groups and their perspectives within the society visible. Juxtaposing the national narratives not only narrows down the perspective and limits the chances of dialogue between narratives, but also does not describe the complete picture of the topic. For instance, can Georgians who refused to participate in the armed conflict and Georgians, who fought against the Abkhaz be included in the same group? Or the Abkhaz who gave a shelter to Georgians during the war and Abkhaz who were looking for

Georgians door by door to shoot them, represent the same group? Why the ethnicity did not appear the unifying force for consolidation for everybody and why did it fail to make everybody take the weapon and use it against their neighbors, relatives and fellow citizens?

If we define society as a group of people living together in a more or less ordered community, it is important to deconstruct it (i.e. society) into more representative groups. To do so, the research focuses on different groups of people who might be interesting to understand the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. First of all, it is important to describe the diversity of the groups, their narratives and to position the groups within the society.

To follow this purpose, this article presents and discusses two main arguments.

1. A discussion of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict only through the lens of hegemonic narratives limits the understanding of the problem and narrows the space for a dialogue. It shows the topic in such a light, as if without the concessions made by at least one conflicting party, building the consensus, or reaching an agreement is not possible.
2. To study the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict substantially, when there is a discussion about Georgian-Abkhaz conflicting parties and their narratives about the conflict, it is necessary to divide Georgian and Abkhaz societies into more representative groups beyond the level of the society as such. For example, People who were directly affected by the conflict (eyewitnesses of the conflict) and those who were not; people who were fighting during the armed conflict and those who refused to participate; parents and family members of the war casualties; family members of missing persons; IDPs; youth who were born in the post-war period; doctors who served during bloody contradictions; decision makers; soldiers and members of unofficial armed groups.

To show the diversity of memories and narratives, Georgian and Abkhaz biographical interviews conducted on both sides of the conflict during the period of 2013-2020 were analysed. The target group of the interviews were people who were directly affected by the conflict (eyewitnesses of the conflict) and those who were not; people who were fighting during the armed conflict and those who refused to participate; parents and family members of the war casualties; family members of missing persons; IDPs; youth who were born in the post-war period; doctors who served during bloody contradictions; decision makers; soldiers and members of unofficial armed groups, for example Mkhedrioni and others.

Additionally, the research involves analysis of eight focus group discussions held with different groups of the Georgian society. These groups are as follows: representatives of civil society who work in the field of

conflict analysis and resolution, young historians, students (both, IDPs and those who have no direct links to the conflict), decision makers who served during the period of Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, IDPs and two non-targeted mixed groups.

Templates of conflict supporting and Peace supporting narratives based on the analyses of focus group discussions

To show the diversity of memories and narratives about Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, eight focus group discussions were held with different groups of the Georgian society. The target groups were representatives of civil society who work in the field of conflict analysis and resolution, young historians, students of different Universities (both, IDPs and those who have no direct links to the conflict), decision makers who served during the period of Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, IDPs and two non-targeted mixed (age, gender, occupation) groups.

The analysis revealed ten different narrative templates about Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. If Bar Tal's theoretical framework is applied, these narratives can be divided into two categories, namely: conflict-supporting and peace-supporting narratives. According to Bar Tal (2007) conflict-supportive narratives help the post-conflict societies to adapt to the hardships caused by the conflict and make the justification of the violence committed by their own group possible. Conflict-supporting narratives serve a complex task of maintaining a positive self-image of the in-group by allowing the group to reject the responsibilities of its past wrongdoings. Hence, to some extent conflict supporting narratives help the conflicting parties to believe in their own guilt-free history, and serve as a powerful tool for avoiding responsibility for a positive change.

On the contrary, peace supporting narratives present the enemy in a personalizing, legitimizing and humanizing way, and as a victim that also suffered from the conflict. (Bar Tal & Teichman 2005). Besides, the members of the own group are presented responsible for wrongdoings during the conflict, and exaggeration of in-group achievements and deeds are not encouraged. According to Bar Tal this process happens on an individual and collective level. The final aims and result of the process on both levels involves the rejection of master dominant narrative, and building alternative, peace-supporting narrative. On a later stage, institutionalization of a new, peace-supportive narratives can be achieved (Bar Tal, Oren, Nets-Zehngut, 2014, p 670).

Focus-group participants discussed certain narrative templates, out of which some are conflict-supporting and the other peace-supporting narratives. The article presents examples of these narrative templates. Participants of focus-group discussions talked about the negative effects of conflict-supporting narratives. In their opinion, certain popular narratives shall be discarded because they hinder and lock the dialogue process.

The following narratives were revealed and discussed during focus group discussions: blaming political elites, common suffering, Georgian victim narrative, blaming Russia, unpreparedness for a new reality, Georgian-Abkhaz brotherhood narrative, common cultural ties narrative, apology and forgiveness, narrative about deep historical roots of the conflict, and occupation narrative.

Table of narrative templates.

#1

Common suffering

The Georgian-Abkhazian conflict has caused great damage and pain to both societies. Thousands of people on both sides of the conflict died, lost their homes and property, or had to leave their homes. People on both sides of the conflict have lost relatives, children and other family members.

Usually, this narrative is considered as a peace-oriented and peace-supporting narrative because unlike the victim narrative, it recognizes human suffering and loss on both sides of the conflict, not just on one side. This narrative puts the human dimension of the conflict forward. While recognizing the sufferings, this narrative focuses on a peaceful future. For the illustration, see the quote from the comment by the IDP from Abkhazia, who participated in a focus group discussion:

"In my opinion, all generations on Georgian and Abkhaz side of the conflict are defeated. Not only generations of our fathers and grandfathers who fought, but also our generation – generation of their children - is defeated. they received serious trauma, and of course from all that happened, they got such an emotion.. something very bad happened between us. " FG2, p. 36.

According to this narrative, conflict parties acknowledge each other's pain, loss and sympathize each other due to the traumas and losses caused by the conflict.

#2

Occupied Territories

As a result of the 1992-1993 conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia lost the territory of Abkhazia. Currently, Abkhazia is under Russian influence and the puppet regime imposed by Russia rules the unrecognized republic of Abkhazia. Georgia must regain the lost territories and return IDPs from Abkhazia to their places of residence.

Unlike the narrative of the common suffering, the narrative of the occupied territories focuses exclusively on the lost territory and not the people living in it. This is the main critique against this narrative. See a quote by the student from the focus group discussion:

"At schools, we are still given nationalist narratives. When talking about the possible ways of the conflict resolution, we shall move our nationalist narratives a bit aside and be more pragmatic. We shall understand them [Abkhaz] as well, because, when we discuss the ways how to return territories, we do not mean by this a territory without people. We have to bring people together with us, right?". FG2, p.5.

See a quote from a young IDP participant comment:

"Often these conflicts are equated with the loss of territory, which is lost by one state and annexed by the other. But this territory is nothing without those people". FG4, p. 15.

#3

Cultural similarities

Georgians and Abkhazians have a lot in common. Family ties, traditions, cuisine, and daily life. Both peoples have many common characteristics that distinguish them from other peoples. Before the conflict, many Abkhazians and Georgians were getting married.

The narrative of common cultural ties suggests that because of a number of common cultural similarities exist, Georgians and Abkhaz lived together peacefully. There were Georgian-Abkhaz families and many similar traditions. According to this narrative, Abkhaz is not an enemy of Georgians and has never been. This narrative often comes in conjunction with the narrative of "blaming Russia." According to this model,

there is only Russia which has to be blamed for the conflict. At the same, Russia creates obstacles that hinder the restoration of relations between Georgians and Abkhaz. According to this narrative, in order to resolve Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, it is necessary that Russia, as a barrier between Georgians and Abkhaz, disappeared. To illustrate this, see the quote from a focus group participant IDP:

„There were mixed families, they were classmates, neighbours, they were tied with so many ties. Indeed, there were some weak points, but without Russia and its military support, this conflict could never begun,,. FG2, p. 19.

The narrative of common cultural ties in the Georgian-Abkhaz context is criticized by part of the focus group participants and considered obsolete for several reasons. First, the Abkhaz side tries to establish its national identity on the opposition to Georgia to show that it is totally different from Georgians. Second, this narrative ignores the differences and controversial issues that exist between Georgians and Abkhaz. Most importantly it ignores the disputed history, and in doing so, contradicts the dominant Abkhaz narrative. Accordingly, the re-production of this narrative is considered counter-productive for the reconciliation process. See a quote from a comment by a civil society representative who participated in the focus group discussion:

“We were brothers and we knew how to make a wonderful feast, we knew traditions of hospitality and other things. But these notions do not work anymore! It became a primitive understanding”.
FG7, p. 29

#4

Blaming Russia

Many people believe that the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict has started and has not been resolved yet, because Russia is interested in having protracted conflicts in the Caucasus and supports their existence.

According to this narrative, Russia is represented as one of the parties in the conflict and is responsible for this conflict. This narrative supports the idea that mild tensions and problems related to integration could not have led armed conflict, if Russia was not interested in escalating and supporting these processes. According to the “blaming Russia” narrative, escalation and the aggravation of the conflict is caused by the Russian interest. The narrative claims that the conflict that happened in Abkhazia is not Georgian-Abkhaz, rather it is Georgian-Russian. Hence, it is Russia who shall sit at the negotiating table and not Abkhazia. Problems related to the integration between Georgians and Abkhaz is explained with

the economic problems present at that time in Georgia. To illustrate this, see the quote from the IDP participant:

“The main problem was Russia. Our state was too weak to take care about the problem of integration. People were dying of starvation. There was no electricity, absolutely nothing. We were unable to independently work on the problems related to integration. We were unable to support integration of that society [Abkhaz] into the unified Georgian space. Russia was the one who benefited from this situation... ..Russia enflamed conflict in this region, and therefore showing as if this conflict is only between Georgians and Abkhaz and that they started to fight between each other, is not correct”. FG2, p. 49

#5

Apology and forgiveness

Some people grieve and feel ashamed because of the atrocities committed during the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, the existing casualties and the loss. One feels personal responsibility and worries that the conflict was not avoided. Talks about mistakes which were made. Considers it to apologize to the victims of the conflict and apologizes on behalf of its own people.

According to this narrative, Georgia shall talk about its wrongdoings and admit mistakes which it made. Georgia shall take the initiative, apologize to Abkhaz and by this encourage the Abkhaz so that they admit their mistakes as well. To encourage forgiveness and the peaceful coexistence of the Georgian and Abkhaz peoples. To illustrate this idea, see the quote from the comment by the ethnic Georgian IDP, who was the decision-maker in Abkhazia during the 90s:

“when our military guard, Mkhedrioni, broke into Abkhazia and Sukhumi, I instantly disliked our Georgian military! i. e. part of their group instantly started to pillage. I saved so many families, but how many times I myself was under attack. We shall speak truth about ourselves, Abkhaz also have to speak truth about themselves, and we shall build trust between each other.” FG2, p. 12.

According to this narrative, precondition for the process of restoring trust and reconciliation between Georgians and Abkhaz is acknowledging and apologizing for the wrongdoings. Main criticism against this narrative comes to the identification when an apology shall be made and by whom. At the same time, important is to know to what extent is the society ready to apologize and, as well as when is the recipient

society ready to accept the apology. How much public and state support does the apology initiative have. See the quote from the comment by the focus group participant historian:

“I remember the apology campaign under the administration of Ucha Nanuashvili. Human Rights Initiative. Of course, it was unsuccessful, because the society was not prepared for this. This is the process which shall not be initiated by the state, because the state is not ready to take such a responsibility for self-criticism and self-reflection..” FG5, p. 20.

#6

Victim Narrative

Georgians were the most affected by the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, as many people were killed in the 1992-1993 struggle against the separatists and many left their home. During the hot phase of the conflict, they passed Svaneti road, where many children died of cold and starvation, and civilians were forced to live in harsh living conditions while in exile. Also the ethnic Georgian population remaining in Gali is still oppressed by Abkhazians.

According to this narrative, Georgia is a victim of various external circumstances: unstable political situation, incitement by Russia against Abkhazia, Abkhazian separatism and other. According to the narrative, in this conflict Georgia suffered the most, it lost territories, and at the same time Georgian population who resided in Abkhazia in pre-war period had to flee their homes. Stories narrated by the focus group participants reveal victims' competition, according to which wrongdoings made by Abkhaz are much more than what Georgians did. According to some participants of focus group discussion, Georgians suffered from the conflict more than Abkhaz. Apart from the hard conditions which IDPs faced and still face, victimization of Georgians is intensified by the problems that ethnic Georgians living in Gali district face, and the discriminatory attitude Abkhaz have against them.

Victim narrative was criticized by focus group participants, especially by student's group. They argue that this narrative does not depict the loss and suffering of Abkhaz people. According to them the narrative encourages the revenge, animosity and leaves people in the continuous competition and mourning.

#7

The narrative of brotherhood

Georgians and Abkhaz have been brothers since time immemorial. Georgians have always been like elder brothers to Abkhazians, until Russia intervened between the brothers, encouraged them against each other, confronted them and separated them.

According to the narrative of brotherhood, Georgians and Abkhaz are brother and have brotherly relations with each other. They either have no problem with each other, or the problems which they had were not so strong to cause bloody contradictions. Hence, while discussing problems, the focus is on the external circumstances. It is the external enemy, third power, which is responsible for the conflict.

Main argument that supports “narrative of brotherhood” is that it does not present the enemy image of Abkhaz in the Georgian society. However, the same narrative is criticized as it neglects problems that are present between Georgians and Abkhaz and redirects the responsibility outside. According to the extreme view of this narrative, dialogue with Abkhaz is not necessary, because the cause of the conflict and the main problem is Russia. On the contrary, the critiques of the narrative ask the following question: hypothetically, if Russia is to disappear from the stage, will the conflict resolve or not? For the illustration, see the quote from the comment given by the ethnic Georgian man, who was involved in the processes in Abkhazia for the last years and is still participating in the process of peaceful resolution of the conflict. However, unlike the previous respondent, he criticizes the narrative of brotherhood and explains the different attitudes the Georgians and Abkhaz have toward the narrative:

“In the consciousness of Georgians, Abkhaz is not an enemy... however, when some of the leaders use the following words during their speeches, like “our brothers and sisters Abkhaz and Ossetians”.. I can not imagine any famous Abkhaz who would say “my Georgian brothers”. The reason for this is that one who says this can be killed instantly, judged severely. One even would not be able to leave the place... ...Ok, Russia is disappeared, it does not exist any more, and we are left in front of Abkhaz. The conflict will not be resolved, it is clear”. FG8, p. 43.

#8

Blaming political elites

The political elites played a crucial role in the escalation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in 1992-1993 because of their own irrational statements, nationalist discourse and the failure to notice signs of

escalation of the conflict. Politicians and decision-makers have failed to de-escalate the conflict and prevent it.

According to this narrative, the political leaders and the decision-makers in the 90s are responsible for the escalation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. According to this narrative, to achieve Georgian-Abkhaz conflict transformation, the development of the democracy, raising the political culture of decision makers and establishing of strong state institutions is necessary.

#9

The historical roots of the conflict

The Georgian-Abkhaz armed conflict of 1992-1993 has deep historical roots. Disagreements and conflicts between Georgians and Abkhazians have always existed and did not begin after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The armed conflict that began in 1992 is the culmination and result of years of animosity and lack of consensus.

For the illustration of the narrative, see the quote by the former decision maker who was involved in the discussions in Parliament.

“The problem has always existed there... ..it gives a possibility for further reflection, it shows how it was planned, conflict origins come from far away. It did not start in 1992, not even in the 80s and 70s. There are more reasons to look for, and it can be studied well, but in case of Georgia this is a bit early...” FG3, p. 9.

The same narrative is shared by the representative of civil society. Please, see the quote:

“The history of Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts is not represented in the school textbooks. These conflicts have deep historical roots, i.e. everything has begun in the Russian history, this is the palimpsest. Then there were very tense relations during the Soviet times. It has always been empire – Russia - who solved these problems. Afterwards, Soviet system had its formula how to resolve such cases. When the Soviet Union collapsed, all the problems came out on the surface. Both Georgians and Abkhaz were unprepared and unable to solve this problem...”. FG7, p.8

#10

Unpreparedness for a new reality

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, both Georgians and Abkhaz found themselves unprepared for a new reality. Against the background of 70 years of Soviet rule, Georgia had no experience of building and governing an independent state. The Georgian people and its political leaders were unprepared for the new reality and challenges.

In this process, both Georgians and Abkhaz made huge mistakes. Against the background of enhanced nationalism, they started fighting with each other. Energy was diverted in the wrong direction, causing both Georgians and Abkhaz to suffer the greatest losses as a result of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict.

According to this narrative, context gives the explanation for this conflict. The context was totally new for the conflicting parties and therefore its management was difficult. Because of this, conflict parties made numerous mistakes.

“Due to the 70 years of [Soviet] occupation, people had no experience how to govern the state. State had no idea about decentralization and elections. These processes unfolded not only in Tbilisi and Sukhumi, but encompassed much greater areas and were affected by them. Not only Georgia, but whole post-Soviet system, all post-Soviet states were governed from the same centre, and they had no idea what the independent government looks like. I think this was the same even for the management of everyday products - the decisions were taken and management was done in the centre. Because of this, when circumstances have suddenly changed, it was totally new situation, totally new reality.” FG8, p.18.

The narrative mentioned above assumes that it is important to acknowledge mistakes and apologize for them, because the main problem to blame is the context. Hence, the strategy for overcoming the problem is the context change. According to this narrative, conflicting parties shall attempt to avoid making the same mistakes. Supporters of this narrative see the development of strong democracy in these societies as the most important preventive force, which will defend parties from making the same mistakes. According to this narrative, third party shall not be blamed for anything. Emphasis is done on the context formed by various circumstances. Considering this, all parties involved in the conflict are victims.

According to the mentioned narrative, the most important factor which positively affects the resolution of the conflict is the context change and the politics focused on the peaceful future. See the quote from comment from the participant of the focus group discussion:

“Of course, context is significant. Any person can decide according to the specific context, and this decision might vary under different circumstances. Multiple factors affect the process. When I speak about the past, the most important question is what results do we achieved, in a sum - what has happened, what do we possess currently? And coming from this, how do we behave in the future. What has happened in the past is a catastrophe for the country, for people - there are private tragedies. Now we have difficult situation in which no one is the winner, because everyone is defeated. It could have been much better if the things that happened in the past did not happened at all. I cannot imagine a person positively assessing events that happened in those times. But this is our reality, these are the facts. No matter what you do, you cannot change the past. Therefore, essentially important is what you are doing for the future, how you do it. I think this is the most important - what kind of reality do you have today, considering everything what has happened in the past”. FG8, p.19.

The narratives discussed during the focus group meetings can be divided in three groups: 1. Narratives which are shared by the discussion participants, 2. Narratives which are partially shared, partially criticized, and 3. Narratives which are criticized or not supported.

Student group, more than any other group, criticizes political elites of the 1990s. At the same time, they criticize the view which sees Georgian-Abkhaz conflict only in the light of occupation, or through blaming Russia. This group puts responsibility mostly on the Georgian side. In students opinion, for the peaceful transformation of the conflict, it is necessary that Georgia abandons victim narrative. Students think that setting peaceful goals and putting human dimension of the conflict forward is important.

Like students, members of the **IDP** focus group mostly discussed the negative role which political elites played in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. IDPs think that the reason which gave rise to the 1992-1993 armed conflict was the difficult reality posed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Georgians, who had no past experience of governing the state independently had to encounter complex tasks. IDPs criticize seeing the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict through the lens of occupation narrative. They argue that both Georgian and Abkhaz side suffered from the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

Similar to the student and IDP groups, group of **historians** also criticizes the role played by political elites active during the 1990s. They emphasize negative activities of the political elites especially in regard with the escalation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and the missed chances for conflict resolution. Historians who participated in the discussion argue that the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict has deep historical roots. They think that for the discussions about the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and the beginning of reconciliation process, the deep historical roots of the conflict shall be considered. At the same time, historians emphasize that for the process of reflection on the past and peaceful transformation of the conflict it is significant to put the human dimension of the conflict forward.

Representatives of **civil society**, like historians, place an emphasis on the importance of discussing deep historical roots of the conflict. Civil society representatives mentioned the significance of this narrative for the process of perception and understanding of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Members of this group argue that the escalation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict was mostly caused by the events that emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the political instability and the unpreparedness to govern the state independently. They think that under the Soviet rule any disagreement between different ethnic groups had been solved by the Soviet system, and when the Soviet Union collapsed, Georgian and Abkhaz parties were left face to face with the challenges and had to solve the problems. Members of the civil society focus- group argue that against the backdrop of deep historical roots of the conflict, the reproduction of the Georgian-Abkhaz brotherhood narrative and its dissemination among the members of the society is counterproductive for the process of building the relations and trust with Abkhaz people.

Two non-targeted mixed focus groups mostly involved young people born after the conflict, the representatives of the Abkhazian Supreme Council-in-Exile and **ex-decision makers**, IDPs and people who have no direct link to the conflict. A mix of opposed narratives was represented during the focus group discussion sessions.

The most shared narratives during the focus group discussions are as follows: blaming political elites (5), unpreparedness for a new reality (4), deep historical roots of the conflict (4), and common suffering (4). Also, apology and forgiveness narrative (3), and brotherhood narrative (1).

Narratives which are partly shared among the members of different focus group discussions are the following: occupation narrative (2), blaming Russia (2), and victim narrative (1).

Focus-group discussion participants criticize or do not agree with the following narrative templates: brotherhood narrative (2), occupation narrative (2), blaming Russia (1), and victim narrative (1).

Bar Tal's analytical lens and results of the focus group discussions suggest that out of ten narrative templates presented above, five can be referred as conflict supporting and five as – peace supporting narratives. Focus group discussions revealed that participants mostly share peace-supporting narratives, and they criticize or do not share conflict supporting narratives. Based on the Bar Tal's definition and definitions of focus group participants the following narratives are more peace oriented and peace supporting than the others: common suffering, apology and forgiveness, deep historical roots of the conflict, blaming political elites and unpreparedness for the new reality. Conflict supporting narratives are victim narrative, blaming Russia, occupation narrative, brotherhood narrative and narrative of cultural similarities.

Two important points has been revealed: 1. Peace-supporting narratives already exist in different groups (civil society, historians, students, IDPs, former decision-makers, mixed groups). 2. The focus group participants mostly share peace-supporting narratives, while criticize or do not share conflict-supporting narratives.

Focus group discussions show that although narratives about brotherhood and cultural similarities may seem as peace oriented, part of the focus group members explain that both of these narratives have negative effect on the Georgian-Abkhaz relations. This is because brotherhood narrative implies the attitude according to which Georgians are big brothers for Abkhaz and thus Abkhaz are subordinated.

According to discussion participants the narrative of cultural similarities, in its extreme form, does not recognize the uniqueness of Abkhaz as an ethnic community. At some degree, it emphasizes both – similarity and difference, but on Georgian side the focus is more about the unity of Georgians and Abkhaz, and their similarity. According to the discussion participants Abkhazians consider this as the example of Georgian imperialism and rejection of Abkhaz identity by Georgians.

According to the Focus-group participants, the narrative of blaming Russia might seem more peace-supporting because the third party is responsible and guilty for the conflict, not Georgians and Abkhaz. However, they explain that exactly this understanding is conflict supporting. This understanding totally eliminates the responsibility of conflicting sides. Participants of focus group discussions mention Russian interest in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict; however, they criticize the attempt to consider Russia as the sole party responsible for the conflict. At the same time, participants of focus group discussions do not support the withdrawal of Abkhaz from the negotiating table.

The role of historical memory in the dialogue process.

“Memory has a complex relationship with inter-group conflict and reconciliation. On the one hand, shared memories and representations about the group’s past can play a crucial role in inciting ethnic or ethno-political conflicts”(Garagozov, 2012, p. 116). On the other hand memories of the conflict can become building blocks for post-conflict reconciliation. According to Sturken (2008) as memories are part of the larger cultural negotiation process, they are defined as narratives that are “fluid and mediated cultural and personal traces of the past” (Bosch, 2016, p. 3). Thus, post-conflict reconciliation at some level depends on the change of old conflict-supporting towards more peace-oriented narratives, that contain internally coherent vision of the past, present and future (Steiner-Khamsi, 1994).

According to Daniel Bar-Tal (2014) conflict affected groups produce narratives to cope with post conflict setting and conflict traumas. He calls them ‘conflict supporting narratives’. Such narratives help members of the society to adapt to the hardships of the conflict. They justify the violence and destructive actions, which in-group members have committed. Such narratives mobilize the society and prepare it for future hardships. They also stimulate the formation of a positive self-image, collective and individual identity and support the society in presenting itself as a victim. He argues that when the window of opportunity for the dialogue opens, such narratives become a barrier which hinder the peaceful transformation of the conflict. Some authors claim that construction of new peace-supporting narratives which are shared by majority of society members promotes conflict transformation, reconciliation and sustainable peace (Staub, 2011). According to Bar-On (1996) only a dialogue between the narratives can lead to new understanding of the own narrative, legitimization of the other group, and development of empathy.

Daniel Bar Tal (2014) discusses two ways to change old conflict supportive narratives. One is through the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRC) which focuses on a joint communal activities for individuals from all sides of the former conflict who participate in a joint communal activity of telling and listening to stories of one another. Through such a process the stories of individuals are challenged, transformed and changed into a new national narratives. Second way which Bar-Tal discusses is the establishment of a shared history book, to address the clash between conflict supportive narratives as a part of a reconciliation process.

When discussing conflicts in the South Caucasus, Garagozov suggests another approach to narrative intervention which he calls ‘the method of progressive narrative transformations’. “The idea is to identify

and construct a narrative that could bring the competing narratives towards their convergence into a common narrative” (Garagozov, 2012, p. 104). Garagozov hopes that European experience ‘reconstruction of history in the service of peace’ can work in the South Caucasus, too. To achieve this, he argues, post-Soviet states need to abandon the principles of primordialism and positivist view of history as containing only the one “historical truth”. According to some scholars, significant step forward to the narrative change would be using a multiperspectivity approach as the basic framework. Stradling (2003) argues that with this approach, history textbooks should be modified so that they contain not one “historical truth” but multiple versions of historical events to allow individuals to look at “historical truth” from multiple perspectives.

According to Garagozov (2012, p.104) although the creation of new peace-supporting narrative is not an easy task for historians, to “sell” this new narrative to the societies is even more difficult. He argues that even if we imagine that we have found the “right” narratives, there is no guarantee that the idea of writing a new history will find sympathy in conflict societies. More likely, it will meet strong opposition from the supporters of the “war party” (2012, p.104).

Clearly, although the abandonment of primordialism and nationalist historiography is helpful for post-conflict reconciliation, unprepared societies can easily reject new narrative and become even more resistant to it. Especially when the conflict supporting narratives are deeply rooted in different groups of the society and are significant markers of a group identity in the South Caucasus, particularly in Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Obviously, “selling” the new narrative as Garagozov puts it, is difficult if not impossible attempt, especially in Georgian-Abkhaz setting.

Evidently, the new version of history and narrative which would oppose the old and supported narrative, will not be easily shared by conflict parties. Moreover, such suggestion raises new questions, for example, who has the right to produce new narrative? Who shall be engaged in the process of constructing new narrative, and etc. In this discussion, the most significant element of the process are people, who shall share new narrative. It is equally important that formation of a new narrative is not done artificially, and no one attempts to “sell” this narrative to as many people as possible. On the contrary, it is crucial that people engage in the narrative reflection process. It is worthwhile that the process is open to the public, involves elements of the reconstruction of the past, and as many people are involved in it, as possible. At the same time, it is crucial that people from both conflicting sides are engaged in the process mono-communally and on a later stage together. It is important to create such a space/process, where people have the chance to reorganize narratives. The most significant is not construction of a new narrative which

can be delivered to the people afterwards, but that the people are involved in the narrative reorganization process. The study of Georgian and Abkhaz interviews clearly shows that construction of a new narrative is not needed, such narratives already exist. Some people reorganised their narratives. It is important to support the processes, which itself guarantee the space for further discussion and reflection, which challenges the existence of single homogenous narrative that eliminates all other narratives from the discourse.

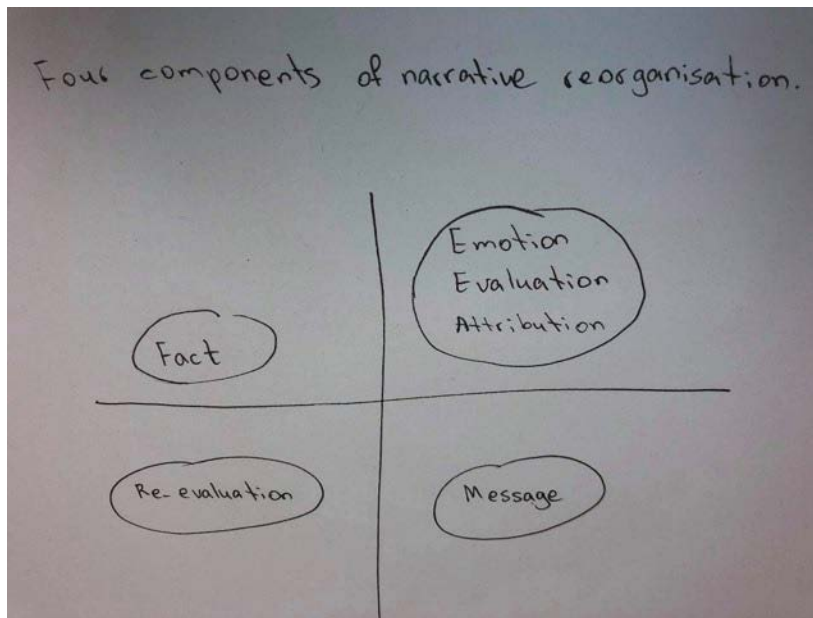
First, it is important to define what is the difference between “buying” and “reorganizing” the narrative. In case of “buying” the narrative, the recipient is passive and not involved in the creation process. “Buying” is the single act, while “reorganizing” is the process which needs inclusion, participation, and creation.

Personal experiences of those directly involved in the conflict has the key importance in the process of reorganization of the narrative about the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Equally important is listening and the analysis to/of narrative biographical interviews recorded on both sides of the conflict. To understand the process **four-components of narrative reorganization** will help (p.21).

During the period of 2013-2020, narrative-biographical interviews were recorded on Georgian and Abkhaz sides by me and by other interviewers of Berghof foundation’s Caucasus programme. Interviews were recorded by using the single question: *please, tell your story from the beginning up until today.*

The target group of the interviews were people who were directly affected by the conflict (eyewitnesses of the conflict) and those who were not; people who were fighting during the armed conflict and those who refused to participate; parents and family members of the war casualties; family members of missing persons; IDPs; youth who were born in the post-war period; doctors who served during bloody contradictions; decision makers; soldiers and members of unofficial armed groups.

These interviews show that respondents use more or less the same pattern in their narration (Natenadze, 2017). First, respondents recall facts, afterwards they start to reflect on them, then they evaluate past events, also emotionally, and explain to whom or to what specific event is attributed. In case they have already re-evaluated past events, they share it, and then respondents formulate a message. The picture below shows four components of the narrative structure. The four-component structure describes not only interview-structure, but it also serves as an analytical lens which helps to analyse the conflict and reorganize the narrative.



By recalling **facts**, conflicting groups attempt to share the information about the facts that are important for them, and that often feed their victim narrative. Often, conflicting parties know a very little or nothing about the facts which are significant for the rival group and that serve as a building block in their narrative construction. Likewise, another group involved in the conflict also has similar facts. By sharing them groups create the potential to change perceptions, perspective, and attitude. As a result, the rival group better understands why another conflicting party thinks the way it does. This process plays a positive role in a wider process of narrative re-evaluation and reorganization. It is crucial that these facts are discussed not only on the other side of the conflict, but also among in-group members. For example very important facts about Georgian-Abkhaz conflict are the schism of University in Sokhumi/Sukhum at the end of the 1980s and related tensions; Lata tragedy on December 14, 1992; Babushera tragedy on September 22, 1993; Chuberi tragedy from September 28, 1993 and etc.

Emotional part of the interview is significant aspect for the meaning-making process, because it gives an information about what is important for the group. It also informs about how specific facts are interpreted among group members, the emotional load which certain events have for the group, and what emotions do they trigger in group members. This part gives the possibility to see the conflict not only through the lens of statistics, territory, or geopolitics, but it also makes the human dimension of the conflict visible. It allows the listener to see the conflict effects and its lasting impacts on human lives.

Especially important is to observe the **re-evaluation** component of the interview, wherewith people try to show that their perspectives have changed over time and that they have changed the way they think.

This part helps members of conflicting groups to see that the viewpoints of specific conflict party does change. It is possible that a person, due to certain reasons, supported the conflict in the past, but after years of experience, the re-evaluation of the past has happened. It shows that a person was able to reorganize its narrative, for example, the narrative has changed from the conflict-supporting to the peace-supporting. This part shows that every Georgian, as well as Abkhaz do not think in a same way and the same people change over time.

With the **message** part, the respondent indirectly communicates with both in-group and out-group members, because the respondent is informed that interviews are listened on both sides of the conflict. A message helps in formulation of the most important parts of the story, conclusion and the narrative which is shared by the respondent. At the same time, it is message that can challenge the listener and open the space for new thoughts.

Each of the components described above play equally important role in the process of reflection on the past and narrative reorganization. Those four components apply not only to the interviews or biographical stories, but also all type of information which serve as a building block for the narrative construction about the conflict. It is noteworthy that the process itself does not imply offering already prepared narrative, and it also does not focus on the juxtaposition of positions or emphasis on the differences. Narrative reorganization process aims at gradually delivering information about those facts that are important for the construction of narratives, are crucial for groups and about which they might not know. Oral histories of in-group and our-group, as well as the chance to get to know with people on the other side of the conflict enables to humanize them, to abandon abstract labels such as “Georgians”, “Abkhaz”, “Enemy”, “Oppressor”, “Betrayer”, and gives the possibility to see personality beyond the rival who also has the pain, emotional burden and who also suffered from the conflict.

To understand how the participants change their narratives about the conflict, in-depth interviews have been conducted with them, in the period of February 10 – March 31, 2021. Respondents are representatives of ethnically Georgian youth, who were engaged in the history dialogue process from 2016.

To explain how the historical memory works as a basis for dialogue, in-depth interviews were recorded with the dialogue participants. Respondents had the possibility to talk about their own “journey”, at some degree even their personal transformation process in detail. Interview participants were given narrative table with the descriptions and they were told to assess and evaluate each narrative template on a scale

of 1 to 5 where 1 meant “totally disagree” and 5 meant “totally agree”. At the same time, they had the possibility to explain the ways they were interpreting each narrative template and discuss it. If Bar Tal’s analytic framework is used for the interpretation, interviews showed that the narratives of the respondents have changed from conflict-supporting to more peace-supporting after participants’ involvement in the history dialogue process. For instance, before their engagement in the process, participants shared the victim narrative, while after their participation in the dialogue process they were more prone to the common suffering narrative, according to which both sides of the conflict suffered during the war. Similarly, if before the history dialogue process, participants saw Russia to be fully responsible for the conflict, after engagement in the dialogue process they better comprehend complexities of the past, also mentioned responsibility of the then-political elites who were in charge, and the complex political environment which emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Likewise, if before the engagement in the history dialogue process participants analysed the conflict only through the lens of territorial losses, afterwards they better see the human dimension of the conflict and are more open and better equipped for the dialogue with the Abkhaz.

Conclusion

Dichotomic framing and narration of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict creates deadlock in the dialogue process. Presenting Georgian and Abkhaz irreconcilable positions leaves the impression that if one of the conflicting party does not step back, reaching the consensus between conflicting groups is impossible. Additionally, such narration represents the society as homogenous, which does not reflect the complexity of the diverse groups and narratives within the society. To show the diversity of groups and narratives in Georgian and Abkhaz society, the research deconstructs the abstract term “society” and divides it into more representative groups. Representing the diversity of groups within the society makes the narrative diversity visible, shows that dominant narrative is not the sole perspective shared by the whole society, and demonstrates the space for the dialogue. Analysis of focus group discussions shows that different groups in Georgia critically reflect on the recent history of Georgia and Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, they share different narratives about the conflict and challenge the dominant conflict supporting narrative. The research demonstrates that four component of the narrative reorganization helps to understand complexity of the conflict and narratives about the conflict and helps to explain how historical memory works for the dialogue. In-depth interviews were conducted to understand how the participants change their narratives about the conflict during history dialogue process. On the micro-level the analysis

demonstrates the change of narratives from conflict-supporting to peace-supporting which drifted on the surface of the Georgian and Abkhaz media.

References

Auch, E.M. (2004). *The Abkhazia Conflict in Historical Perspective*. In: IFSH (ed.). OSCE Yearbook 2004, Baden-Baden 2005. 221-235.

Bar-On, D. (1996a). *Ethical issues in biographical interviews and analysis*. In: Josselson, R. (Ed.). *Ethics and Process in the Narrative Study of Lives*, (pp. 9-21). Thousand Oaks. CA: Sage.

Bar-On, D. (2008b). *The others within us: Constructing Jewish identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bar-Tal, D. & Staub, E. (Eds.). (1997). *Patriotism in the lives of individuals and nations*. Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall.

Bar-Tal, D. (2013). *Intractable Conflicts: Socio-psychological foundations and dynamics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bar-Tal, D., Oren, N. & Nets-Zehngut, R. (2014). Socio-psychological analysis of conflict-supporting narratives: A general framework. *Journal of Peace Research*, 51, 662-675.

Berghof Foundation Caucasus. 10.03.2021. #9. Reverse. Ruslana Gergedava. [Video]. www.youtube.com.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ecYHRJBeHw>

Demmer, J. & Speyer, J. (2015). WARID: *Georgia (Abkhazia) 1992-1993*. Retrieved from:
https://www.hsfk.de/fileadmin/HSFK/hsfk_publicationen/Georgia-Abkhazia-1992-1993.pdf

Foucault, M. (1977). *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Transl. DF Bouchard, Simon S. Ithaca. NY: Cornell University Press.

Garagozov, R. (2012b). Narratives in conflict: A perspective, dynamics of asymmetric conflict: Pathways toward terrorism and genocide, 5:2, 101-106. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17467586.2012.742955>

Garagozov, R. (2013a). Implicit measures of attitude change via narrative intervention in the Karabakh conflict, Dynamics of asymmetric conflict: Pathways toward terrorism and genocide. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17467586.2013.861919>

Garagozov, R., & Kadyrova, R. (2011). Memory, emotions and behavior of the masses in an ethno-political conflict: Nagorno-Karabakh. *The Caucasus & Globalization*, 5(3-4), 77-88.

Jishkariani, D. (2015). *Abkhaz Nationalism and Historical Narratives*. Public lecture URL <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f87ZLYLDick>. Access on 22.04.2021.

Justus, G. (2018). *Georgia Abkhazia: Predominance of Irreconcilable Positions*. Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights.

Kansteiner, W. (2002). *Finding meaning in memory: A methodological critique of collective memory studies*. In: *History and Theory*. (41). Wiley, Hoboken 2002, ISSN 0018-2656, 179-197.

Kakhishvili, N. (02.04.2021). "It is up to Abkhaz to decide whether they want to be with us or not" – Refugee who meets Abkhaz via ZOOM. Source: netgazeti.ge. URL <https://netgazeti.ge/news/531807/>. Access on 22.04.2021.

Lakoba, S. (1999). *History: 18th Century – 1917*, Chapter 5 in: Hewitt, G., (ed.). (1999). *The Abkhazians*. Richmond. 68-83.

Natenadze, E. (2017) *Georgian and Abkhaz Discourses about the 1992-1993 Armed Conflict: narrative analyses of interviews of eyewitnesses*. MA thesis. Ilia State University.

Nodia, G. (1997). *Causes and Visions of Conflict in Abkhazia*. University of California. Berkeley.

Seiddi, M. (2012). *A short history of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict from its origins to the 2008 war*. Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

Steiner-Khamsi, G. (1994). *History, democratic values and tolerance in Europe: The experience of countries in democratic transition*. Sofia: Council of Europe Symposium.

Stradling, R. (2003). *Multiperspectivity in history teaching: A guide for teachers*. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/1680493c9e> (Accessed at July 30, 2020).

Sturken, M. (2008). Memory, consumerism and media: Reflections on the emergence of the field, *Memory Studies*, Sage Journals. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698007083890> .

Suny, R.G. (1994). *The Making of the Georgian Nation*. Bloomington. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Toria, M. (2020). In Search of Ethnic Roots: Instrumentalisation of the History and Politics of Exclusion in Georgia's Breakaway Region of Abkhazia. *Euxeinos*. Vol. 10. No.29.

Zemskov-Züge, A. (2015). *Dealing with the Past in the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict: The Power of Narratives, Spaces and Rituals*. Comment on a contribution by Hamber, Brandon, 2015. Dealing with Painful Memories and Violent Pasts. Towards a Framework for Contextual Understanding, in: Beatrix Austin and Martina Fischer (eds). *Transforming War-related Identities*. Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series No. 11. Berlin: Berghof Foundation.