

# MYTHS AND CONFLICT IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

## VOLUME 2

Instrumentalisation of Conflict  
in Political Discourse

elites interests media nations  
**caucasus** occupation  
manipulation aspirations rhetoric  
elections image **conflicts**  
identity independence threat state  
**myths** propaganda  
trauma ideology enemy populism  
opposition **stereotypes**  
ethnic power territory democracy



## About International Alert

International Alert is a 27-year-old independent peacebuilding organisation. We work with people who are directly affected by violent conflict to improve their prospects of peace. And we seek to influence the policies and ways of working of governments, international organisations like the UN and multinational companies, to reduce conflict risk and increase the prospects of peace.

We work in Africa, several parts of Asia, the South Caucasus, the Middle East and Latin America, and have recently started work in the UK. Our policy work focuses on several key themes that influence prospects for peace and security – the economy, climate change, gender, the role of international institutions, the impact of development aid, and the effect of good and bad governance.

We are one of the world's leading peacebuilding NGOs with more than 200 staff based in London and 14 field offices. To learn more about how and where we work, visit [www.international-alert.org](http://www.international-alert.org).

This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of International Alert and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.

© International Alert 2013

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without full attribution.

Layout by D. R. ink, [www.d-r-ink.com](http://www.d-r-ink.com)

## CHAPTER 4

---

# Remembrance Day: Contemporary Discourse on the Georgian- Abkhaz Conflict in the Georgian Media

---

Ketevan Khapava

Ekaterina Paverman

George Gotua

## Introduction

The media's influence on the development of conflict is a relatively little-studied topic.<sup>1</sup> However, as media researchers have shown,<sup>2</sup> notions generated by the media are a factor in the emergence, escalation and resolution of conflict. The routes through which the media reproduce specific discourses around conflict are particularly interesting. Such discourses not only influence perceptions of the past but also implicitly shape future policy. A change in discourse frequently indicates a shift in policy by groups or institutions (such as the state), with their own particular version of how the conflict should be settled. The resulting new discourse is designed to change public attitudes towards the conflict in order to legitimise the new policy.

In Georgia's recent history there have been instances of the state changing its discourse on the restoration of territorial integrity.<sup>3</sup> The discourse formed in the 1990s during the rule of Eduard Shevardnadze<sup>4</sup> was constructed on a classic security paradigm, which was centred on the international balance of power (in this case between Georgia, Russia and the US). This discourse was discredited once it became clear that it was incapable of leading to any real change, *inter alia*, the problem of Abkhazia. The need facing subsequent administrations in Georgia<sup>5</sup> was to build an effective strategy for re-incorporating the breakaway territories within Georgia whilst simultaneously combining this policy with one of building a new, democratic civil nation which would unite the members of its various ethnic groups.

August 2008 was a turning point in relations between Russia, Georgia and Abkhazia. The war established a new balance of power,<sup>6</sup> which required a new strategy. In 2008-2010 two documents were drawn up setting out the priorities for state policy on this issue: the 2008 Law on Occupied Territories,<sup>7</sup> and the 2010 State Strategy on Occupied Territories.<sup>8</sup>

This article will show how the pro-government<sup>9</sup> media (at the time of this study between 2009 and 2011) legitimised state policy on Abkhazia.

---

1 E. Gilboa [2009]. 'Media and Conflict Resolution: Framework for Analysis', *Marquette Law Review*, Vol. 93, Issue 1.

2 *Ibid.*

3 A.Y. Sir [2010]. 'The Emergence and Evolution of Georgian Security Discourse: Failures and Implications'. Available at [http://www.academia.edu/351107/The\\_Emergence\\_and\\_Evolution\\_of\\_Georgian\\_National\\_Security\\_Discourse](http://www.academia.edu/351107/The_Emergence_and_Evolution_of_Georgian_National_Security_Discourse).

4 President of Georgia 1995-2003; Head of State 1992-95.

5 Following the Rose Revolution of 2003, the National Movement Party of President Saakashvili.

6 F. Coene [2009]. *The Caucasus: Introduction*. London: Taylor & Francis.

7 Government of the Republic of Georgia [2008]. *The Law on Occupied Territories*. Tbilisi. Available in Georgian at <http://www.smr.gov.ge/docs/doc215.pdf>.

8 Government of the Republic of Georgia [2010]. *State Strategy on Occupied Territories*. Tbilisi. Available at <http://www.smr.gov.ge/docs/doc204.pdf>.

9 Here and after, when referring to the "current government", this paper refers to the Presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili and the rule of the "United National Movement" during the period of this study.

The authors of this article analysed official discourse on Georgian-Abkhaz relations based on materials from the news broadcasts of the three largest pro-government channels: Rustavi 2, Imedi and the Public Broadcaster. These broadcasts exemplify the discourse intended for a Georgian audience, which aims to explain and legitimise existing policy. We analysed news items relating to 27th September 2009 and the same day in 2011. 27th September marks (on a semi-official level) the anniversary of the fall of Sukhumi.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, this day in particular provides plenty of items relating to the topic of this article.

The material gathered enabled us to analyse the historical narrative, the way in which the media presents contemporary policy on relations with Abkhazia, and potential for conflict resolution or the development of Georgian-Abkhaz relations. Particular attention was focused on the moral assessments of the conflict parties, ways in which blame is apportioned, and the rhetorical techniques used in this regard.

The main conclusions of our analysis can be briefly summarised as follows: materials from pro-government media at that time release Abkhaz society from responsibility for the conflict and its consequences; the main “culprits” are considered “Russian imperialism” and “separatist leaders” responsible for misleading Abkhaz society, which now, given the deplorable results of the Russian occupation, is starting to realise this “mistake”. Reconciliation between the two fraternal peoples (the Georgians and Abkhaz) is inevitable, although how and when this will happen is not specified. The ground would thus appear to be prepared for a variety of peace initiatives. However, Russia has the final word in this process and Abkhaz society’s possibilities in this regard are extremely limited. Thus, on the one hand, a positive image is constructed of the Abkhaz as a fraternal people, whilst, on the other hand, the role of Abkhaz society is reduced to that of a secondary party to the conflict. In the authors’ view, this notion of Abkhaz society as a “younger brother” presents a significant barrier to the development of bilateral relations. It is not only an obstacle to a fully-fledged dialogue between the parties; it also prevents an accurate assessment of the potential role of Abkhaz society in resolving the conflict.

This discourse appears to have been constructed based on three needs of Georgia’s political leaders during the period of this study: 1) the need to create/sustain an image of being “national” leaders; 2) the need to distance themselves from the failures and crimes of the previous Georgian authorities; 3) the need to justify their passive role in establishing Georgian-Abkhaz relations.

---

<sup>10</sup> Although 27th September is not officially celebrated, the principal organisers behind events held on this day are government agencies.

## Analytical methodology

The researchers based their analysis on an ethnomethodological approach in sociology/social psychology.<sup>11</sup> In particular, the Membership Categorisation Analysis method proposed by Harvey Sacks was used (with some modifications and simplifications).

We analysed the categories used in television broadcasts to determine the Georgian, Russian and Abkhaz sides (for example, “gangs of separatists”), the collectives to which these categories belong (“gangs of separatists” belong to the collective of “those engaged in military action”), and the actions routinely ascribed to that category (“gangs”, apart from engaging in military action, also engage in violent looting). Categorisations were tested against two rules of application proposed by Harvey Sacks: the consistency rule (where two or more categories are assigned to the same collective) and the economy rule (where each individual is assigned to a single category).<sup>12</sup>

## The conflict context

The roots of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict go back to the 19th century. From the late 1980s onwards the conflict moved into an active phase, culminating in the start of open hostilities on 14th August 1992, when units of the Georgian National Guard entered the district of Gali. The official reason given for this was to protect the railway line from the attack by the supporters of ousted president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia.<sup>13</sup> The National Guard encountered resistance from Abkhaz units, and this day marked the start of military action in Abkhazia. The armed conflict lasted just over a year and ended with the defeat of the supporters of the central authorities of Georgia and the establishment of control by the secessionists over most of the territory of the former Abkhaz SSR.

The capture of Sukhumi by separatist forces on 27th September 1993 determined the subsequent course of the war. In the following week Georgian units vacated the entire territory of Abkhazia apart from the Kodori gorge. For the Georgian public, the fall of Sukhumi came to symbolise their defeat in the war. This event is also associated with traumatic memories of atrocities committed by secessionist militants, as well as the subsequent mass exile of the Georgian population from Abkhazia. Newsreels showing the difficult journey made by internally displaced people (IDPs) across the snow-covered mountain gorge are repeated regularly on Georgian television channels on Remembrance Day.

11 As a guide to this, Silverman’s approach was used [D. Silverman (1993). *Interpreting Qualitative Data*. London: Sage Publications].

12 Silverman (1993), *Op. Cit.*

13 The first president of independent Georgia in 1991-92.

One of the issues around which the conflict developed was the shift in the proportions of the Abkhaz and Georgian populations on the territory during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Soviet state policy aimed to shift the political balance back and forth between the different communities at various periods.<sup>14</sup>

Each of the conflicting sides interprets the historical background to the conflict differently. Abkhazia's past is the subject of embittered disputes, in which members of the intellectual and the political elites on both sides are embroiled.<sup>15</sup>

## Analysis of materials

### “Remember Abkhazia”<sup>16</sup>

The principal message behind the programmes studied is the need for the peaceful reunification of Abkhazia with Georgia, which is widely demonstrated by an impressively diverse range of groups among the population, including ex-combatants and war victims.

#### Closer relations through common tragedy

Particular significance is assigned to supporting a peaceful alternative by mothers of fallen combatants. News items show them, despite an implied “right to vengeance”, calling for reconciliation and mutual forgiveness. They regularly figure in news items devoted to the Day of the Fall of Sukhumi. The memorial to fallen combatants on Heroes Square in Tbilisi is a place mothers can go to mourn the loss of their sons and daughters. In brief interviews they give their interpretations (mostly from a patriotic perspective) of the tragedy experienced by their families: ‘Two of my sons perished in that war. They were defending their country, their home.’ A sense of shared maternal tragedy provokes sympathy and solidarity with the mothers of the fallen combatants on the opposing side: ‘I express sympathy to all mothers of whatever nationality, Abkhaz, Russian or Armenian.’ These mothers construct a new image of another party to the conflict – the composite “Image of the Mother”.

#### Abkhaz society – readiness for reunification

The media studied largely reproduces a discourse of civic nationalism which corresponds to Georgia's state policy; this involves constructing a “civic community”, consisting

14 G. Derlugyan (2000). *The Forgotten Abkhazia: Anatomy of Post-Socialist Ethnic War*. Evanston: Northwestern University. Available at [http://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/ponars/pm\\_0163.pdf](http://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/ponars/pm_0163.pdf).

15 See, for example, V. A. Shnirel'man (2003). *Voiny pamiati. mify, identichnost' i politika na Zakavkaze* [Memory wars. Myths, identity and politics in the Transcaucasus]. Moscow: Akademkniga.

16 A slogan widely used in the discourses of the Georgian authorities.

of the entire population residing on Georgian territory (including Abkhazia).<sup>17</sup> The ideology of civic nationalism is reproduced by identifying Georgian society with the Georgian authorities, and also by presenting the majority of the residents of Abkhazia as supporting the idea of reunification. Presenting the residents of Abkhazia as loyal citizens of Georgia, allows the policy of peaceful restoration to be legitimised as the only way to prevent the conflict in Abkhazia from turning into a “fratricidal” conflict.

Some news items overtly identify the authorities with the country: ‘Our country is doing everything it can for the de-occupation of its territories’ (referring to diplomatic actions).

### **Georgian society: consensus on conflict**

The Day of the Fall of Sukhumi is used as an opportunity to present Georgian society as united in its vision of the problems, tasks and challenges it faces. Politicians’ speeches presented in news items regularly use the pronoun “we”, which glosses over political differences between individual members of society.

Members of the opposition are often seen on screen attending events to commemorate the fall of Sukhumi. Their attendance and utterances at these events are intended to symbolise the unity of the nation in the face of an external threat.

Attendance by representatives of other groups of Georgian society at these events is also meant to symbolise consensus. Society is represented by veterans, young people and the mothers of fallen soldiers. Particular emphasis is placed on continuity between generations; young people and youth organisations regularly attend these events.

The goal of Georgian society (both the older and younger generations) is declared to be the restoration of the country’s territorial integrity. ‘Our duty...is to finish the job for which these people fought, to achieve the goal...a united Georgia’, said a representative of the Georgian government.

These news items entertain only one possible option for resolving the problem: Abkhazia’s re-unification with Georgia. It is emphasised that this must inevitably be the final outcome and that the “Abkhaz nation” must be “saved”.

### **Traitor politicians and hero warriors**

Events of 18 years ago continue to pose questions which demand answers from the media. The responsibility of the country’s leaders for starting the war and the defeat is a particularly topical subject due to the continuing conflict between supporters

---

<sup>17</sup> Civic nationalism became state ideology following the “Rose Revolution”. An analysis of the development of Georgian nationalism is provided in: S. Khinchagashvili (2008). *Post-Soviet Georgian Nationalism in the Context of Social Memory and Collective Trauma Theories*. MA thesis submitted to University of Edinburgh. Available at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/95671817/33700000-Post-Soviet-Georgian-Nationalism-Social-Memory-Cultural-Trauma#download>.



and opponents of the deposed president Zviad Gamsakhurdia. By recognising this responsibility, the media at the same time absolve ordinary combatants from responsibility, presenting their motives as far removed from the vested interests of the politicians. At the same time, the heroic image of the Georgian ex-combatant serves as a distraction from the looting and violence in which the Georgian side was also involved.

Many of the news items outline a clear distinction between the Georgian leaders and ordinary combatants. The fratricidal conflict is blamed on the leaders at that time (along with Russia and the separatists). Ordinary combatants, on the other hand, are exonerated and presented as victims of the perfidy of Abkhaz, Russian and Georgian politicians: ‘...*These people fought for their country, not for the leaders.*’

The authorities are attempting to distance themselves from the Georgia of that period and the politics of its leaders. Both Shevardnadze’s supporters and the supporters of the deposed president Gamsakhurdia have been assigned equal legitimacy: ‘The leaders [Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze] sentenced each other [to death], which led to suffering for our country and thousands of its sons.’

There is a tendency towards portraying ordinary members on the Georgian side of the conflict as victims, with the armed forces and the civilian population alike presented as victims of a far superior opposing force. Narratives of the fall of Sukhumi play an important role in this. According to the Georgian version of events, when the decisive attack was launched on Sukhumi, the Georgians had no heavy weaponry – it had been withdrawn under the Sochi Treaty of 27th July 1993,<sup>18</sup> following the truce mediated by Russia between the two sides.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, in the Georgian narrative, the Russian and Abkhaz military units were opposed by only partially armed Georgian combatants. This view releases them from responsibility for the defeat and attempts to evoke heroism. Both ordinary combatants and certain leaders are presented as heroes. It is interesting how the news items refer to the Georgian armed forces. The term normally used is the “armed forces” – the most convenient term, given the diverse nature of the groups involved in military action (the National Guard, the police, the *Mkhedrioni*,<sup>20</sup> and other semi-official groups). This term also makes it easy to gloss over the fact that the reputation of some of the groups involved in military action (including the *Mkhedrioni*) was tarnished considerably during the armed conflicts at the time, as well as later during the armed struggle for power. These relatively neutral terms (not revealing negative associations) are used to cover up the suppression of war crimes.<sup>21</sup>

18 N. Gvazava (2006). *Negotiations with the Russian Federation*. Tbilisi. Available at <http://georgiaupdate.gov.ge/ka/tagliavini/7536cf05239fc063b22334239603eb8e/3bb284154c27cd76e8dbac26517addbd/48d6b2cc6e8177364899fe5d1e6c0826>.

19 V. Guruli & M. Vachnadze (eds) (2003). *The History of Georgia – XX Century*. Tbilisi: Tbilisi State University Press.

20 The *Mkhedrioni* was a paramilitary group and political organisation in Georgia. It was outlawed in 1995 but has been subsequently reconstituted as the “Union of Patriots” political party.

21 For a detailed discussion of the war crimes committed by both sides in the conflict see Human Rights Watch (HRW) (1995). *Georgia/Abkhazia: Violations of the Laws of War and Russia’s Role in the Conflict*. New York. Available at <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1995/Georgia2.htm>.

The heroes – ordinary Georgian participants in the conflict – are presented using the image of veterans. Veterans are people whose authority can be used to support various versions of the history of the conflict. The narrative which presents the fall of Sukhumi and the loss of Abkhazia as a result of betrayal is interesting here. This narrative is encountered in some accounts given by direct participants in the events: *‘The war was sold out. They sold us, the soldiers, like sheep, they left us to rot.’* The analogy with sheep is used to emphasise the helplessness of the ordinary fighters. On the whole, the account of betrayal opens up an interesting perspective on the events of 1993 – there is open reference to traitors but it is not clearly specified who these were (the leaders of the country, the supporters of President Gamsakhurdia, or someone else).

The hero image is complemented by a morally negative image of the opposing side, the anti-heroes (Russia/the separatists). One item on the death of the leaders of the pro-Georgian government of Abkhazia – Zhiuli Shartava and other members of the government – reflects this view and is perhaps best demonstrated by the following quotation: *‘Shartava had the chance to escape but he refused. In revenge for his heroism the separatists shot him and other members of the government on the square in front of the Council of Ministers building.’*

## The Abkhaz are “more than brothers”

Attitudes towards the Abkhaz in the context of armed conflict are ambiguous. The media presents the Abkhaz not as a fully-fledged party to the conflict, but rather as a pawn in the conflict between Georgia and Russia, duped and exploited by Russia in order to harm Georgia. This attitude generates an image of the Abkhaz as Georgia’s friend. Restoring Georgian jurisdiction over Abkhazia is presented as a solution to the conflict favourable for both sides. A peaceful approach to conflict resolution is emphasised. However, no specific definition of how this might be achieved is provided.

### Survival of the Abkhaz nation through “inevitable return”

As the media frequently emphasise, the inevitable restoration of Georgian jurisdiction over Abkhazia will not only restore “historical justice”; it is also the only chance for saving and preserving the Abkhaz nation. In the version promulgated by the media, the Georgian perception of Abkhazia is identical across all social and political levels – Abkhazia is a territorial unit seen as an inalienable, lawful, historical part of an indivisible Georgia: *‘...Occupied Abkhazia is our historical land.’*

Rhetoric on Abkhazia smacks of benevolent patronage, with Abkhazia on the brink of annihilation: *‘...Every day there are violations of fundamental human rights, there are no security guarantees, there are no development processes.’*

Georgia wants to and is indeed obliged to “save” Abkhazia from the destruction of its culture and from total occupation. The main message behind the appeal addressed by Gia Baramia (Chairman of the Government of the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic in exile) to the Abkhaz is the fear that ‘eventually there will be no Abkhaz left in Abkhazia’. In his words, ‘the Abkhaz are currently facing redoubled oppression...’. The only chance for Abkhazia is therefore the restoration of Georgian jurisdiction; the only possible outcome is, then, the reunification of Abkhazia with Georgia.

Restoration of historical justice and irrevocable reunification are processes which are voluntary rather than coercive in nature. Some news items try to prove that Abkhaz youth (Abkhazia’s future) is aware of Russia’s policy of occupation and is looking to Georgia to save it: ‘They [Abkhaz youth] request asylum from the Georgian government and [request the] revelation of truth about the Russian regime of occupation.’ The return of Abkhazia is inevitable: no other scenarios are entertained. By presenting Georgia as Abkhazia’s saviour, the media emphasise the attractiveness of Georgia as a flourishing democratic and liberal state.

#### **Abkhaz government and Abkhaz society are different**

The Georgian media’s depiction of the Abkhaz differentiates between a number of social and political groups, depending on the context. It consists of separatist combatants and the illegitimate *de facto* government; and civilian Abkhaz society. Nevertheless, a logical pattern can be traced behind this understanding and portrayal of the Abkhaz. The Abkhaz combatants who were involved in military action in 1992-93 are described as separatists: informal armed units acting unlawfully and fighting in alliance with the official army of a foreign/other state. Their aggressive military action led to casualties not just among their Georgian enemies but also among the Abkhaz civilian population. As a result the citizens of Sukhumi (*Sukhumchane*)<sup>22</sup> suffered, regardless of their ethnic background.

The launch of military action is blamed firmly on the Abkhaz Guard: ‘The Abkhaz side rebelled against the National Guard of Georgia in Ochamchira and Gulripsh districts and in the city of Sukhumi, which led to the start of military action in Abkhazia.’ This creates an unambiguously negative image of Abkhaz combatants engaged in the armed conflict. However, this image is distinct from the general image of the Abkhaz, as these combatants harmed civilians on both sides, both Georgians and Abkhaz.

In parallel with this historical negative image of the Abkhaz combatant, the media have produced a new image of ex-combatants who regret what they have done and realise the importance of restoring Georgia’s jurisdiction over Abkhazia. Considerable airtime is devoted to a news item on a meeting between two veterans (a Georgian and an Abkhaz)

---

22 A term covering both Georgian and Abkhaz residents of Sukhum/i.

who are now living on different sides of the de facto border: ‘Two sides of the same war: a meeting between Abkhaz and Georgian combatants who stood on opposite sides of the barricades 18 years ago...’ (states the trailer for the news item). The main message of this news item is the Abkhaz veteran’s revised view of the conflict: ‘I regret it, I did not realise then what I was doing, I very much regret that we made this mistake then.’

A clear distinction is made between the Abkhaz public on the one hand and the Abkhaz political leaders on the other. The Georgian government’s appeals through the media for peace, brotherhood and a shared bright future are not directed at the authorities, but the population of Abkhazia. The discrepancy between the policy of the Abkhaz authorities, which is clearly not aimed at reincorporating Abkhazia into Georgia, and the positive presentation of the Abkhaz people is explained in terms of the illegitimate nature of the current authorities. The current Abkhaz authorities are portrayed as mere “puppets” of the Russian occupying regime. They are manipulated by external forces and serve their interests rather than the interests of the Abkhaz people.

The message promoted by the media can therefore be interpreted as follows: the Abkhaz authorities do not represent the interests of Abkhaz society and are not part of it. Although Abkhaz combatants bear responsibility for starting the armed conflict and for acting against the interests of the Georgian government, today they regret this; if even this most radical section of the Abkhaz side is ready for peaceful co-existence with Georgians, the Abkhaz must be seen not as enemies but as friends.

### **Georgia – older brother; Abkhazia – younger brother**

Contemporary Abkhaz and Georgian societies are seen in the same context: they have a common history, a common tragedy, common interests, a common enemy and a common goal – to save Abkhazia (from Russian occupation).

There are also signs of an attempt to create a common civic identity through statements that the Abkhaz and Georgians share one land – not just Abkhazia but the rest of Georgia too. This Georgian-Abkhaz identity is subsumed in the epithet “*Sukhumchane*” (residents of Sukhumi). Emphasis on shared citizenship not only creates a common basis for unification but also localises the conflict and rules out any possible justification for intervention by external forces.

The policy of peaceful reunification resonates with the image of fraternal relations between the Abkhaz and Georgian nations, which is given significant coverage in a television broadcast entitled “Even More [than Brothers]”. This metaphor is used to present the two nations as linked by kinship and again emphasises the “domestic” nature of the conflict: ‘This day has provided us with a hard lesson in what opposition between brothers can lead to’ (stated by a representative of the Georgian opposition party).

Nevertheless, “fraternal relations” in combination with the “saviour” position creates the clichéd “older brother-younger brother” image, which reflects discriminatory discourse inherited from the Soviet era – a mirror image of the Soviet cliché of “Russia as the older brother to the other Socialist peoples”.<sup>23</sup> The forgiveness of mistakes, accepting responsibility for the fate of the younger brother, the start of a new life and spiritual kinship are all features of one news item devoted to ‘the baptism of Abkhaz adolescents by representatives of the legitimate government [the government in exile] of Abkhazia’. The news item shows members of the pro-Georgian government of Abkhazia [in exile] acting as godparents to Abkhaz adolescents.

This image of a prodigal “younger brother” who now needs help from its “older brother” (Georgia) absolves the Abkhaz side from much of the responsibility for the course of events, making it not a party to the conflict but merely a participant.

### Russia – the real enemy

The Georgian media studied cultivate an unambiguously negative attitude towards Russia, creating an enemy image in relation to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

Russia is described solely in terms of “the occupier”, “Russian occupiers” and “Russian occupation”. “Occupation” is the official lexical form used to define Russia’s actions in relation to Georgia and is used at all levels, from politicians’ speeches to journalists’ narratives.<sup>24</sup> Since an occupier cannot logically be an indirect participant of conflict, Russia is then an actively involved party which Georgia is/has been forced to resist.

The Georgia/Russia dichotomy can have a number of meanings: conflict with “little Abkhazia” is replaced by the unequal struggle against “huge Russia”, an internal conflict redefined as an international conflict, in which the only logical outcome of the conflict was defeat. As this is a painful issue for the defeated side, the evasion of responsibility is a defence mechanism to justify the loss/defeat and to allow Georgia to maintain a positive image of itself (as a just and self-sufficient state). Shifting the blame onto Russia exonerates Abkhazia, expunging the “guilt” of Abkhaz society (the defence mechanism) and preparing the ground for later development of Georgian-Abkhaz relations.

The media provide many details on the history of the conflict to affirm Russia’s “guilt” in the fall of Sukhumi. Details such as the citing of specific military units increase levels of confidence in the information provided and serve as verification of Russia’s undisputed involvement in the conflict. For example: ‘On 27th September 1993 a decisive battle occurred involving ground forces and, even more importantly, the units of the 345th Air

23 To read further about the nationalism policy of Russia and the Soviet Union, see R. G. Suny (1993). *Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

24 In 2010 the Georgian parliament passed a law “On the Occupied Territories” intended to define the status of the territories occupied following military aggression by the Russian Federation. For more information, see <http://www.smr.gov.ge/docs/doc216.pdf>.

Assault Division deployed in Gudauta district,<sup>25</sup> which carried out an attack on disarmed Georgian positions, leading to the fall of Sukhumi.’ The alleged amoral and inhumane actions of Russian troops are backed up by direct accusations that they caused the deaths of Georgian citizens:<sup>26</sup> ‘For 13 months and 13 days the separatist units, together with the Russian army, fought to take Sukhumi. On 27th September thousands of Sukhumi residents were subjected to torture.’<sup>27</sup> There were over 5,000 civilian casualties from the bombing and concentrated fire.<sup>28</sup> This quotation makes it clear that Russia’s involvement is not restricted to the decisive battle for Sukhumi. Russia is seen as being actively involved throughout the military engagement and the reference to “the Russian army” emphasises its political and official status.

The media also present items claiming that the rights of Georgian citizens are violated by Russian border guards during their everyday activities. For example, news programmes actively report instances in which civilian residents in Gali district (ethnic Georgians) are detained: ‘Despite the bilateral talks, our people are once again being taken hostage in Gali. We have discovered that a bus was stopped in the village of Ganakhleba in Gali district and Georgian residents, children and older people taken hostage by the Russian occupiers.’ The situation is thus portrayed as the continuation of the long-standing conflict.

The media’s citing of atrocities and violations of international legal standards by Russia corresponds with the official position of the Georgian government, which classifies Russia’s actions as ethnic cleansing.

The media frequently claim that the Georgian government has evidence of ethnic cleansing: ‘On the occasion of the 18th anniversary of the fall of the city of Sukhumi the Temporary Commission on the Restoration of Georgia’s Territorial Integrity will re-examine the question of the Russian occupation. The members of the Commission will continue to work on documents regarding ethnic cleansing in Tskhinvali and Abkhazia’. Referring to the Tskhinvali conflict and ethnic cleansing in one breath helps to conflate the two conflicts and stress that Russia is pursuing a consistent policy of aggression in relation to Georgia as a whole: its aggression is not restricted solely to one region of Georgia (Abkhazia) but, as the 2008 Georgia-Russia war shows, it can flare up at any time.

Representatives of official Georgian agencies speaking on news programmes (such as Shota Malashkhia, Chair of the Temporary Committee on the Restoration of Georgia’s Territorial Integrity) dismiss Russia’s policy as “fascism” and the legacy of its communist past.

---

25 This refers to Russian combat units.

26 According to Human Rights Watch, the Russian side is responsible for mass violations of human rights, as well as the Georgian and Abkhaz sides (HRW (1995). *Op. Cit.*).

27 The Human Rights Watch 1995 report confirmed instances of torture of civilians (*Ibid.*).

28 Those who perished are not distinguished by ethnic background – they are designated generally as *Sukhumchane* (Sukhumi residents). According to data from the Abkhaz government in exile, 4,994 civilian residents died and 423 residents went missing. Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia (2010). ‘Dead and Missing Data’. Available in Georgian at <http://scara.gov.ge/ka/2010-03-17-12-49-14/2010-03-17-13-54-43/81-2010-07-29-10-58-11.html>.

According to the Georgian media, a negative image of Russia is slowly building up in Abkhazia, with its role being transformed from that of an ally to that of a conqueror; there is a growing feeling of oppression which will favour re-unification of Georgian and Abkhaz society.

Citing Murman Chkhotua, the Public Defender (Ombudsman) of the Abkhaz government in exile, one news item states: ‘The Abkhaz opposition parties are secretly gathering signatures for the withdrawal of Russian troops from Abkhaz territory; the Abkhaz have already realised that Russia only wants Abkhaz territory.’ In Chkhotua’s words, Russia has conquered Abkhazia and its behaviour on this territory is not subject to any control’.

In terms of the rhetoric of Georgian television broadcasts, the media do appear to be trying to cultivate expectations that a more optimistic scenario will develop in relation to the Abkhaz side (which is ‘changing its mind, coming to its senses’); with regard to Russia it makes no such forecasts and the outlook on relations between Georgia and Russia remains unwaveringly bleak.

## The conflict in Abkhazia as a social trauma – the media’s perspective

Our examination of television programmes allowed us to not only track official state rhetoric on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, but also to identify the stage Georgian society has reached in dealing with the problem and its needs during the period studied. Following its defeat and territorial losses, Georgian society is suffering the effects of severe societal trauma,<sup>29</sup> the results of which are manifested in the attitudes and behaviour of the entire society. One feature of unresolved societal trauma (in this case a frozen conflict) is the tendency to become stuck at the grieving stage, preventing transition to the next stage of dealing with the trauma. Some of the most frequently used words in news items are ‘we grieve for...’, ‘we mourn’, etc., the aim of which is to show that pain remains despite the passing of 18 years (‘Abkhazia is our pain’). Year in, year out, television channels repeat almost identical news items showing shootings and the harrowing escape through the Kodori pass, preventing people from forgetting past events and “reviving” the trauma of defeat.<sup>30</sup> The marking of 27th September, the “Day of the Fall of Sukhumi”, with its already established rituals (visits to the memorial to the fallen and mothers in mourning), also serves to memorialise this traumatic experience.

A further feature of societal trauma is the transmission of the traumatic experience from generation to generation; the news items also show evidence of this. One of the most

29 V. D. Volkan (2007). *After Wars: Psychoanalytic Observations On Societal Traumas*. Melbourne. Available at [http://www.freudconference.com/online\\_papers/After\\_Wars.pdf](http://www.freudconference.com/online_papers/After_Wars.pdf).

30 Interestingly, the main slogan on the billboards was “Remember Abkhazia!”



common news subjects on television is of young people, emphasising that they are the successors to the “adult generation”, acknowledging their responsibility for the course of the conflict and their duty to resolve it. The declared approach for conflict resolution is peaceful, which holds out hope that these young people, who will be responsible for future decisions, will develop corresponding policies. However, the new generation continues to be influenced by trans-generational trauma and is likely to remain biased in its judgements.

In the context of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, a traumatised society, in this case Georgia, identifies Russia as the main culprit. In accordance with the theory of societal trauma, the opponent is de-humanised:<sup>31</sup> Russia is presented using the classic enemy image. The worsening of Georgian-Russian relations has also revived historical trauma associated with the annexation of the Georgian kingdom by the Russian empire in the 18th century. The phenomenon of “chosen trauma”<sup>32</sup> helps to extend historical negativism to new events, whereby Russia’s actions can be explained by “Russia’s inherent imperialist ambitions”. Such a perception of Russia rules out any possibility of negotiations and leads to stalemate, whilst at the same time, it creates a platform for rapprochement with the Abkhaz, based on the assumption that, although Abkhazia may not yet be aware, it will soon realise the true intentions of “Russia the occupier” and unite with Georgia to fight against Russia for self-preservation.

Russia’s looming presence as a “mighty” enemy helps to remove any guilt attached to the “small Abkhaz nation” and now, 20 years after the traumatising events of the war, allows Abkhazia to be perceived through the ties of kinship. Its small size is also reflected in the view of Abkhazia as a “younger brother” led astray (by Russia); it is portrayed not as a fully-fledged party to the conflict, but merely as a bystander in the real conflict between Russia and Georgia.

This study proposes that Georgian society continues to focus on the reliving of traumatic experiences, which prevents it from developing specific courses of action (for example, news items regularly take the view that “we must resolve the conflict” without providing any specific details). Possibly, news items which revive traumatic memories help to keep this issue relevant.

Although the articulation of an unambiguously peaceful approach is important, future developments will depend on how quickly society can make the transition to the next level of responding to trauma.

---

31 V. D. Volkan (2007). *Op. Cit.*

32 A “chosen trauma” refers to ‘the shared mental representation of the historical traumatic event...[which] becomes a significant marker for the large-group identity’ (V. D. Volkan (2004). *Chosen Trauma. The Political Ideology Of Entitlement And Violence*. Berlin. Available at <http://www.vamikvolkan.com/Chosen-Trauma,-the-Political-Ideology-of-Entitlement-and-Violence.php>).



## Conclusion

The Georgian (pro-government) media analysed underline the unanimity of Georgian society in its support for the restoration of Georgian jurisdiction over Abkhazia, which they see as the only possible option.

The basis for returning Abkhazia is provided in terms of civic nationalism, the official ideology of the Georgian government since the “Rose Revolution” in 2004: the emphasis is on the same civic values for both Georgian and Abkhaz societies.

The Abkhaz side is viewed in terms of a friend, more precisely a younger brother, hoodwinked (by Russia) and not a fully-fledged, equal party to the conflict; instead it is shown as a bystander drawn into the real conflict between Russia and Georgia. This attitude removes responsibility from Abkhaz society both for past events and also for further conflict resolution. Responsibility is instead shifted to Russia, the “aggressor” and “occupier” which is portrayed as waging a struggle against Georgia. Russia is assigned the role of a common enemy to both the Georgians and Abkhaz.

The reference to a strong enemy allows the Georgian government (during the period of this study) to evade responsibility for resolving the conflict. The discourse presented is in line with the objectives of the Georgian authorities of that period: to create an image of political leaders as the guardians of the country’s “national interests”, primarily its territorial integrity.

In general, the pro-governmental media transmitted a desire for a peaceful settlement of the conflict, yet without proposing any specific way to achieve this. Our analysis suggests that the position is in fact one of stalemate, since, in the situation put forward by Georgian media, dialogue is impossible between both parties to the conflict: Russia is the aggressor and so cannot be negotiated with and Abkhazia lacks the authority for decision making. Assigning the image of a younger brother to the Abkhaz side could be considered a discriminatory discourse inherited from its Soviet past, incompatible with the concept of civic nationalism. Therefore, Georgia’s approach to transforming the conflict through civic nationalism is inconsistent.