

Study of Issues in the Ethnic History of the Abkhazians in the Context of the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict

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**Аспекты грузино-абхазского конфликта
*Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict***

Volume II – August 1999, pp. 20-40
UCI – University of California, Irvine (2000)

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Изучение вопросов этнической истории абхазов на фоне грузино-абхазского конфликта

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Ethnic conflicts often involve historical narratives as a crucial component. The opposing parties frequently seek to justify the legitimacy of their claims by invoking history, addressing both the origins and evolution of ethno-political opposition, as well as issues only distantly related to the conflict.

Every conflict has a long prehistory, sometimes spanning decades or even centuries, during which tensions accumulate between peoples or between a people and a state with a different ethnic foundation, leading to clashes that foster enduring inter-ethnic hostility. The facts of this opposition, viewed from starkly contrasting perspectives, serve as key resources in the information battle. In such contexts, the flexible use of history and the free interpretation of historical facts are quite common. It is also noteworthy that some historians, involved in this information warfare, attempt to deepen the conflict by searching for its roots and manifestations in distant historical periods where, objectively, there were no real conditions for the development of ethnic opposition.

Another subject that stirs intense debate is the issue of the ethnic identity of the ancient inhabitants of disputed territories. The parties in conflict aim to use this to assert their exclusive rights to contested lands, even though it is well-known that representatives of international organisations, to whom this information is primarily directed (once the conflict gains the attention of bodies like the UN and OSCE), tend to have little interest in such distant historical matters. This type of "historicism" seems particularly characteristic of post-

socialist societies (the former USSR, Yugoslavia, and others), where, until recently, all public activity was tightly controlled ideologically, and only in matters of ancient and mediaeval history (i.e., before the Marxist era) was there some degree of intellectual freedom. In these circumstances, national-patriotic ideas were most often expressed in historiography, as well as in artistic and literary works on historical subjects. The intellectual elites of the Soviet Union, having been denied their own statehood and the opportunity to openly discuss and address national issues, turned to history in their search for the "national spirit," inevitably leading to some degree of mythologisation. This phenomenon is especially evident in the Caucasus, where peoples have traversed a long historical journey, and where attachment to the homeland is expressed in all facets of spiritual life. Thus, in the Caucasus, public opinion often regards the most compelling argument in territorial disputes not as the legal ownership of disputed lands or the current composition of their population, but rather the answer to the question: which ethnic group originally inhabited this land?

The historical dimension of ethnic conflicts is typically a key element in the information warfare that takes place during the early stages of inter-ethnic tension, while the conflict itself remains in a latent state. Even when the confrontation escalates into open military and political conflict, this historical element retains its significance.

In this context, the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict can be considered a textbook example. Its historical aspect stands out so prominently that to a casual observer, it might appear to be the principal cause of the conflict. This impression is further strengthened by the fact that, in the 1950s-1970s, historical issues in Abkhazia acted as catalysts for inter-ethnic crises on an unprecedented scale within the USSR. Today, however, following the military and political developments, the historical theme has understandably taken a backseat. It no longer plays the central role in shaping the socio-political climate that it did 10-12 years ago. This shift is partly due to the de facto separation of Abkhazia from Georgia, which has effectively ended the broad flow of information between the two regions. One could say that today, the people of Abkhazia are largely unaware of what is being discussed in Tbilisi, and the reverse is also true. Nevertheless, there remains a strong interest in the polemical issues surrounding the history of Abkhazia. The primary focus of this politicised academic debate continues to be the ethnic identity of the ancient inhabitants of Abkhazia. Furthermore, scholars are also engaged in debates about the ethno-political nature of the Abkhaz kingdom, a feudal state in (today's –Ed) Western Georgia during the 8th-10th centuries. The perspectives of Georgian and Abkhaz scholars on these matters are increasingly at odds, and it seems unlikely that their positions will converge while the conflict between Georgians and Abkhazians remains unresolved. Yet, when Georgian-Abkhaz relations were less strained, historical disputes did not provoke such intense reactions. The conclusions of Georgian and Abkhaz scholars frequently coincided, with Georgian experts making considerable contributions to the study of the Abkhaz language and history.

We now present a brief historiographical review, exploring the main theories found in the academic literature regarding the ethnic composition of ancient Abkhazia and the origins of the Abkhaz people. The scope and nature of this article do not allow for detailed commentary on each theory, although the author reserves the right to express their own views in certain instances.

The question of the origin of peoples is one of the most challenging issues in historical science. To address it, data from various academic disciplines must be employed, including history, archaeology, ethnography, linguistics, anthropology, and folklore studies.

A crucial factor when considering the origins of the Abkhazians is their genetic affiliation with the Caucasian ("Paleo-Caucasian") ethnic family, which is divided into three main branches: the western, or Abkhaz-Adyghe branch (Abkhazians, Abazins, Adyghe, Cherkess, Kabardians, Ubykhs); the eastern, or Nakh-Dagestani branch (Chechens, Ingush, Avars, Laks, Dargins, Lezgins, etc.); and the southern, or Kartvelian branch, which includes the Georgians, Mingrelians, Laz and Svans.

Members of the Caucasian ethno-linguistic family are among the most ancient inhabitants of the Caucasus (hence the term "Paleo-Caucasian"). However, it should be noted that today most linguists dispute the genetic relationship between the Kartvelian languages and the Abkhaz-Adyghe and Nakh-Dagestani groups, instead grouping the latter two into a unified North Caucasian family. According to these scholars, the Caucasus is home to two indigenous, but unrelated, language families — the Kartvelian and North Caucasian families [1]. This view is particularly advocated in the 1993 textbook *History of Abkhazia*. However, I believe it is too early to fully discard the theory of the ethnic kinship of all Paleo-Caucasian peoples. Academician I. Dzhavakhishvili argued that this kinship is supported not only by linguistic evidence but also by a wide range of historical sources.

The issue of the early ethnogenesis of the Abkhaz people has been addressed many times in specialised literature of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. One of the more widely accepted theories in the past was the so-called Ethiopian-Egyptian theory (hypothesis –Ed), which proposed that the ancient Colchians, along with the ancestors of the Abkhazians, migrated to the Caucasus from Northeast Africa (B. Niebuhr, P. Uslar, D. Gulia, and others). [*In the 5th century BCE, the Greek historian Herodotus described the Colchians as black-skinned Egyptians, though their origins remain uncertain. Dmitri Gulia initially supported this view, suggesting that Abkhazians had migrated from Egypt and Abyssinia, linking them to the Colchians. However, he later expressed doubt about his theory, stating, "I don't insist on this theory now, but I am sure that the book contains many useful materials on the history and ethnography of Abkhazia" (written 23 years later) –Ed.*]

Another theory suggested that the Abkhazians originated from the North Caucasus. Some authors believed this migration took place in antiquity (M. Kissling, A. Svanidze, and others), while others argued that it occurred only in the late Middle Ages (A. Dyachkov-Tarasov).

A third migration theory posits that the ancestors of the Abkhazians came from Asia Minor and the neighbouring areas of southwestern Transcaucasia (A. Gleye, N. Marr, and others). As we shall see later, the idea of ancient ties between the Abkhaz-Adyghe peoples and Asia Minor is not without scientific merit.

Finally, there is a hypothesis suggesting that the Abkhaz-Adyghe tribes, in the distant past, originated from Asia Minor and migrated to Western Transcaucasia. From there, they moved to the North Caucasus, and it was only in the first centuries AD that the ancestors of the Abkhazians returned to Transcaucasia and settled in the area of present-day Abkhazia (I. Dzhavakhishvili)[2]. Opposing these migration theories, several scholars have advocated the view that the ancestors of the Abkhazian people were indigenous to the region (A. Fadeev,

B. Kuftin, and others).

Since the 1920s, the study of Abkhazian history has become more systematic. The first work worth mentioning is the book by D. Gulia, the founder of Abkhazian literature and a scholar, entitled *The History of Abkhazia* (1925). This work marks the first attempt at a comprehensive study of Abkhazian history from ancient times up to the 10th century AD. The contributions of academician N. Marr to Abkhaz studies are also well known. However, the truly solid scholarly foundation for the study of Abkhazian history and ethnogenesis was established by the Georgian historians I. Dzhavakhishvili and, notably, S. Dzhnanashia, in their fundamental works.

As early as the 19th century, P. Uslar, along with other scholars such as A. Gleye and A. Gren, observed that certain toponyms in the southeastern Black Sea region could be explained by the Abkhaz-Adyghe languages. Later research into the ancient and modern toponymy of Western Georgia, the western Kartvelian languages (Mingrelian and Svan), and other historical and philological sources led scholars to conclude that at one time, a significant part of the territory of Western Georgia and adjacent areas of Asia Minor were inhabited by Abkhaz-Adyghe tribes (I. Dzhavakhishvili, N. Marr, S. Dzhnanashia, A. Chikobava, A. Ushakov, and others). This theory remained prominent in Soviet and Georgian historiography until the late 1980s (I. Diakonov, O. Dzhaparidze, and others).

Of course, this does not mean that the ethnic composition of the southeastern and eastern Black Sea regions remained static in ancient times. Kartvelian tribes lived in close proximity to the Abkhaz-Adyghe peoples. According to S. Dzhnanashia, Kartvelians, specifically Mingrelian-Laz ethnic groups, at some point also inhabited Abkhazia, and traces of this are preserved in Abkhaz folklore through the myth of the *ats'ans*, or dwarfs — ancient dwellers of mountainous Abkhazia. As previously mentioned, I. Dzhavakhishvili also believed that the ancestors of the Abkhazians spent some time concentrated in the North Caucasus before returning to the region around the start of the Common Era.

The views of these scholars remained confined to the academic realm until the mid-20th century, even as underlying tensions in Georgian-Abkhazian relations quietly accumulated. Unfortunately, a significant turning point occurred in the mid-20th century when the history of Abkhazia became rapidly politicised. It became a subject of public debate, rallying cries, and informal discussions. This shift is closely associated with the Georgian scholar P. Ingoroqva.

P. Ingoroqva, a literary scholar by profession, published a substantial work in the early 1950s titled *Giorgi Merchule — Georgian Writer of the 10th Century*, in which he introduced a new theory regarding the origins of the Abkhazians, essentially contradicting almost everything previously written on the subject. The core of this theory is the claim that the historical Abkhazians, well-known from Greek-Roman, Byzantine, Georgian, Armenian, and other sources, were ethnically Georgian, while the modern Abkhazians are descendants of Adyghe tribes who, in the second half of the 17th century, occupied the north-western part of Georgia — Abkhazia. The newcomers are said to have displaced or assimilated the indigenous inhabitants of the region — the Georgians — but adopted their name[3].

To fully grasp the profound blow this theory dealt to the national consciousness of the Abkhazians, one must understand the moral-political climate in the autonomous republic at the time.

In the 1940s and early 1950s (up until Stalin's death), Abkhazia was subjected to an aggressive policy of enforced Georgianisation, implemented by administrative means. In 1946, Abkhazian schools were closed, and all subjects began to be taught in Georgian, leaving many Abkhaz children without access to education, as they did not know the language. Due to a combination of deliberate resettlement policies and the spontaneous influx of people from other parts of Georgia and the Soviet Union, the proportion of Abkhazians in the republic's population dropped to 15 percent by the 1950s (whereas in 1926, Abkhazians still made up 27.8 percent of the population). Georgianisation efforts extended to the renaming of Abkhazian place names, and Abkhazians were systematically excluded from leadership positions. There were even unfounded attempts to classify the Abkhaz language as one of the Kartvelian languages. D. Gulia was coerced into renouncing his book *The History of Abkhazia*, and a pamphlet was published in his name, promoting the idea that "Abkhazians are, essentially, Georgians".

Of course, these unlawful actions cannot be attributed to the Georgian people, most of whom had no knowledge of what was occurring in Abkhazia at the time (and even today, many remain unaware of these events). Similarly, attempts to draw a direct connection between the actions of Beria's agents, who operated in Abkhazia in the late 1930s and early 1950s, and the figures of the Georgian national movement at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries, such as Y. Gogebashvili and others who encouraged Georgians to resettle in Abkhazia after the depopulation caused by the 1870s muhadzhir movement, are equally unfounded, as sometimes suggested in Abkhazian informational materials.

The policies imposed in Abkhazia were formulated in Moscow. During the 1930s and 1940s, many smaller ethnic groups in the USSR faced harsh ethnic discrimination, including deportations from their historical homelands or forced integration into larger ethnic groups. Perhaps the "Father of the Nations" saw this as the first step towards a future in which the entire Soviet population would merge into a unified Soviet nation. However, it is important to remember that the repression of the Abkhazians' rights was carried out by Georgian party officials and under the banner of Georgianisation. An open and emphatic acknowledgment of this fact would help the Georgian side further distance itself morally from the agents of Kremlin policy and offer a better understanding of the causes behind some of the events that followed.

Ingoroqva's book (with sections published starting in 1949 and the full volume released in 1954) effectively stripped the Abkhazians of their historical past. It delivered a kind of "historiographical" blow to a people already enduring one of the most critical moments in their history — made all the more painful by the fact that there was virtually nothing to counter it. Although some research had been done on the ancient and mediaeval history of Abkhazia, there were no monographic studies or comprehensive works at a modern scientific level devoted to these key periods of Abkhazia's history.

It seems likely that, had Ingoroqva's book been published at a more peaceful time, it would have remained a subject of academic debate, and today it would be largely forgotten —

much like his biography of Shota Rustaveli or his attempt to interpret ancient Hittite inscriptions using the Georgian language. However, during that ill-fated period, the publication of this book became the final straw for the Abkhazians, and their outrage took on disproportionate forms. Ingoroqva's theory became a focal point for escalating tensions.

The Georgian scholarly and creative intelligentsia were also deeply concerned with this issue. Reactions to Ingoroqva's work were divided. By this time, both I. Dzhavakhishvili and S. Dzhnashia, who might have had the authority to restore balance, were no longer alive. Other historians, such as N. Berdzenishvili and V. Dondua, although they attempted to influence Ingoroqva, were ultimately unsuccessful. Most experts on the Caucasus — historians, ethnographers, and linguists — recognised that the new theory was fundamentally flawed and that it could have harmful repercussions for Georgian-Abkhaz relations. Despite this, Ingoroqva's theory was embraced with enthusiasm by another group of the intelligentsia, which included prominent scholars who were not specialists in Abkhaz studies, as well as many writers (!?). To them, P. Ingoroqva was seen as a true national figure.

Their views were not swayed even by the appearance of negative reviews of *Giorgi Merchule*, written by experts — both Georgian and Abkhazian — such as N. Berdzenishvili, K. Lomtadze, Z. Anchabadze, and Kh. Bghazhba, who provided thorough and comprehensive critiques of Ingoroqva's main assertions regarding the history of Abkhazia. On the contrary, in the eyes of his supporters, Ingoroqva was transformed into a martyr, punished for his patriotic views. These critics accused Georgian historians of failing to support Ingoroqva's new theory, alleging they were pressured by the authorities. However, Professor N. Lomouri was correct when he wrote in his book *Simon Qaukhchishvili*: "Georgian historians did not support Pavle Ingoroqva, not because they were under any pressure, but because it was impossible to support him from the perspective of scholarly objectivity."

Although Georgian historiography had essentially dismissed Ingoroqva's theory by the 1950s, the history of Abkhazia, particularly the question of the ethnic composition of its ancient population, continued to fuel tensions in Georgian-Abkhaz relations. It is no coincidence that during the mass demonstrations by Abkhazians in 1967 and 1978, the "historiographical" theme was a prominent factor.

A new phase in the study of the ancient and mediaeval history of Abkhazia began in the late 1950s. In 1959, Z. Anchabadze published the monograph *From the History of Mediaeval Abkhazia (6th–17th centuries)*, which became the first comprehensive work to demonstrate the autochthony of the Abkhaz people. It addressed the formation of the Abkhaz feudal nation and explored the ethnic composition of the Abkhaz people during the Middle Ages. A few years later, Anchabadze authored another book, *The History and Culture of Ancient Abkhazia*, which was the first in historiography to consolidate "materials from various sources and the achievements of related historical disciplines on the history and culture of Abkhazia from ancient times to the 5th century AD. This work focuses particularly on the origins of the ancient Abkhaz tribes, substantiating the deep antiquity of the Abkhaz ethnos in the territory of historical Abkhazia" (A. Kuprava). Another significant contribution to the development of Abkhaz studies was Sh. Inal-IPA's book *The Abkhazians (Historical-Ethnographic Essays)*, first published in 1960. National scholars such as M. Trapsh, K.

Shakryl, Kh. Bghazhba, and others worked diligently in archaeology, linguistics, and other related fields, studying the origins of the Abkhaz people, as well as their ancient and mediaeval history.

In Georgian historiography, between the late 1950s and the second half of the 1980s, the history of Abkhazia received less attention in specialised studies. Instead, issues related to the history of the autonomous republic were discussed in broader works on the history of Georgia.

Georgian and Abkhazian scholars generally agreed that Abkhaz-Adyghe and Kartvelian tribes had inhabited the western Caucasus and adjacent regions of Asia Minor since ancient times. This did not rule out the movement of individual tribes, both from south to north and vice versa, during different periods (Z. Anchabadze, O. Dzhaparidze, G. Melikishvili, Sh. Inal-ipa, R. Gordeziani, G. Giorgadze, and others). Academic disputes mainly concerned the ethnic characteristics of specific tribal groups and the timing and conditions under which the Abkhaz nation was formed.

In the second half of the 1st millennium BC, the territory of modern-day Abkhazia was part of a large politico-geographical region known in ancient sources as “Colchis”. The entire population was referred to as “Colchians”, after the leading ethnic group. However, it is important to note that ancient authors used the term in two senses. In the narrow (ethnic) sense, “Colchians” referred to a particular ethnic group, while in the broader sense, they were identified as “Laz”. The Laz were primarily located in the Colchian lowlands, with their centre in the Rioni Valley. In the broader sense, Colchis was considered a vast territory that stretched along the coast from Pityus (Pitsunda) to Trebizond, and inland as far as the Main Caucasian Ridge. This Colchis was understood as a geographical unit that included several tribes, among which were not only the Colchians but also other Kartvelian groups, as well as, in all likelihood, non-Kartvelian tribes, including Abkhaz-Adyghe tribes (G. Melikishvili, N. Lomouri, and others). Therefore, when determining the ethnic identity of a “Colchian” tribe, one must be mindful of the dual meaning of the term “Colchians” and avoid the assumption that every ethnic group referred to as a “Colchian tribe” by an ancient writer belonged strictly to the Colchians (Z. Anchabadze).

In the last centuries BC, ancient sources refer to several ethno-tribal groups living in the territory of Abkhazia and the surrounding regions. However, the information about these groups is so scant and vague that it is impossible to make any definitive statements about their linguistic affiliation. Therefore, those who attempt to categorise all these groups as either Kartvelian (Georgian) or Abkhazian are mistaken.

In the first centuries AD, new ethnic names began to appear along the coast of historical Colchis — the Laz, Apsils, Abazgs, and Sanigs, who formed early state unions dependent on the Roman Empire. According to Arrian (2nd century AD), the Laz were located along the banks of the Phasis (Rioni River), extending north to the Ingur/i River; beyond that, to the northwest, lived the *Apsils*; then the *Abazgs*, whose territory stretched to the city of Sebastopolis (Sukhum/i), already within the lands of the Sanigs; the Sanigs' domain extended as far as the River Acheunt (Shakhe?).

The borders of these ethno-political entities were not fixed. In the 3rd-4th centuries, as the Laz grew in strength, the Apsils lost the territory that now includes both the Gal and part of

Ochamchira regions, but in turn, along with the Abazgs, they pushed the Sanigs north of the Bzyb River.

Thus, by the middle of the 1st millennium AD, within the modern borders of Abkhazia, the following "territorial tribes" or early feudal ethnic groups lived from south to north: part of the Laz (roughly up to the Galidzga River), the Apsils (from the Galidzga to the Gumista River), the Abazgs (from the Gumista River to Gagra), and further north, the Sanigs. In the 6th century, there are also reports of a mountain tribe, the Missimians, whom most researchers place in the upper part of the Kodori Gorge, above the Apsils.

Regarding the Laz, there is consensus among scholars that they were part of the Mingrelian-Laz/Chan branch of the Kartvelian family and were the direct ancestors of the modern Mingrelians.

As for the Apsils and Abazgs, there was initially no disagreement. N. Marr, I. Dzhavakhishvili, S. Dzhanelashvili, and other scholars of the early 20th century unanimously recognised them as tribes of Abkhaz-Adyghe ethnic origin. The only debate was whether they had always lived along the Abkhaz coast or had descended from the mountains in the 1st-2nd centuries AD. In the early 1950s, P. Ingoroqva attempted to categorise them as Kartvelians, but his view was not supported by Abkhaz specialists or by most Georgians. Moreover, throughout Georgian historiography until the early 1990s, there were no serious attempts to challenge this position. Indeed, as subsequent history has shown, the Apsils and Abazgs were directly connected to the Abkhaz people. The terms "Apsil" and "Abazg" are the origins of the self-designations used by modern Abkhazians and Abazins — "Apsua" and "Abaza," which are phonetic variants of the same ethnonym, sharing the common root "ps" or "bz".

In Georgian written sources, the term "Apsil" is synonymous with "Abshil," while "Abazg" corresponds to "Abkhaz". By the 8th century, the strengthened principality of the Abazgs (Abkhazians) had assimilated neighbouring smaller ethnic groups — the Sanigs, Apsils, and Missimians — extending its name to them. From that point on, the unified country is referred to in historical sources as Abkhazia, and its population as Abkhazians, due to the leading political role of the Abazgs (Abkhazians). However, it appears that the Apsil dialect formed the basis of the unified language of the Abkhaz people. This assumption is supported by the fact that the name "Apsils" became the self-designation of the Abkhaz people — "Apsua".

The ethnic identification of the Sanigs and Missimians, who disappeared from the historical record quite early, is more complex. Written sources offer practically no information that would help resolve this issue with certainty, so scholars mostly rely on phonetic analysis of the ethnonyms and some other indirect evidence. [*It is strongly recommended that readers consult Prof. George Hewitt's analysis of Agathias' Greek text where he discusses the ethno-linguistic associations of the Missimians, namely: ["The Valid and Non-valid Application of Etymology/Philology to History"](#), in: SOAS Working Papers in Linguistics, 2 (1991-92, 5-24) OR Revue des Etudes Géorgiennes et Caucasiennes 6-7, (REGC), 1993, 247-264.— Ed.]*

For instance, some researchers have identified the Sanigs as Svans (N. Marr, I. Orbeli, S. Qaukhchishvili, D. Gulia, G. Melikishvili, D. Muskhelishvili, and others), or as Mingrelo-Laz/Chans (S. Dzhanelashvili, P. Ingoroqva, N. Lomouri, and others), while others have associated them with the Abkhazian Sadz tribe, who lived in the territory of ancient Sanigia

until 1864 (A. Dyachkov-Tarasov, Z. Anchabadze, Sh. Inal-ipa, M. Gunba, and others). As we can see, Georgian researchers tend to view the Sanigs as a Kartvelian tribe (either Svan or Mingrelo-Laz/Chan), while the Abazgs (with the exception of D. Gulia) are regarded as Abkhaz.

The weak point in the position of those who argue for the Kartvelian origin of the Sanigs lies in their lack of consensus regarding the tribal affiliation of the Sanigs — were they Svans or Mingrelo-Laz/Chans? Without resolving this issue definitively, it is difficult to assert the Kartvelian affiliation of the Sanigs with confidence.

In recent years, M. Inadze, in an attempt to reconcile this contradiction, suggested that Svan tribes lived in the eastern part of the Sanig principality, while Mingrelo-Chan tribes lived in the western part. Although this view has gained support among Georgian historians (N. Lomouri), we find it insufficiently substantiated.

Furthermore, M. Inadze, disputing the identification of the Sanigs with the Sadz, points out that proponents of this view “overlook the fact that in specialised literature and sources, the Sadz are only mentioned in the aforementioned territory from the late Middle Ages — the 17th century onwards.”

The following can be said in response:

1. The absence of mentions in historical sources of a particular ethnic group does not necessarily mean that it did not exist in the given territory, especially in areas like the Gagra-Sochi sector — the region inhabited by the Sadz, which was relatively infrequently covered by ancient and mediaeval authors.
2. Nevertheless, we believe that the Sadz were recorded under this name along the Black Sea coast much earlier than the 17th century. Specifically, the "Sadz, a tribe (living) along the Pontus" mentioned by Stephanus of Byzantium (6th century) were likely the later Sadz, who probably belonged to the union of the Sanigs.
3. In Georgian chronicles, the Sadz, along with other western Abkhazian tribes, appear under the collective name "Dzhiki" in descriptions of events from the 13th to the 18th centuries. Consequently, under the influence of this Georgian term, the Russian documents of the 19th century refer to the Sadz as "Dzhiketi."

The question of the ethnic affiliation of the Missimians is also debatable. Georgian historians generally argue that the Missimians were one of the Svan tribes (S. Qaukhchishvili and others), while Abkhaz scholars (Sh. Inal-ipa and others) tend to see the Missimians as a tribe of Abkhaz ethnic origin, particularly closely related to the Apsils.

Without delving into the details of the arguments on either side, it should be noted that this issue cannot be considered definitively resolved. However, the presence of Svan ethnic elements in the southeastern mountainous part of Abkhazia during the 1st millennium AD seems quite plausible. As for the later ethnic fate of the Missimians, they became part of the consolidation process of the Abkhaz feudal nation and were the direct ancestors of the Tsabal-Dal branch of the Abkhazians, who inhabited the historical lands of Missimiania until the second half of the 19th century (Z. Anchabadze).

As previously mentioned, Georgian historiography of the late 1950s and early 1960s largely rejected Ingoroqva's theory regarding the ethnic change in feudal Abkhazia, but the thesis of the migration of Abkhaz-Adyghe peoples from the North Caucasus persisted. The situation is presented as though the "ancient" Abkhazians were not much different linguistically from the "modern" ones, but culturally and politically, they were an integral part of feudal Georgia. The author of this concept, academician N. Berdzenishvili, convincingly articulated his thoughts on the place and role of mediaeval Abkhazians in the Georgian feudal world, particularly emphasising that the role of the Abkhazians in the construction of the Georgian state can be compared to the role of only a few Georgian tribes. According to N. Berdzenishvili, as a result of the chronic decline that began in Georgia during the Mongol rule (13th century), and especially after the collapse of the unified Georgian Kingdom (15th century), conditions emerged for the resettlement of mountain tribes from Trans-Kubania (north of the Kuban River) into Abkhazia. He believed that this resettlement occurred in waves from the 13th to the 17th-18th centuries. Since the migrating tribes were not significantly different ethnically from the local population, their integration and consolidation with the Abkhazians happened easily. The introduction of the highlanders' underdeveloped socio-political institutions (early feudalism with strong remnants of communal and tribal relations), economic practices (livestock farming), and religious beliefs (paganism) contributed to the cultural decline of Abkhazia and its partial separation from the more advanced Georgian feudal-Christian culture.

While we agree with N. Berdzenishvili's views on the nature of Georgian-Abkhaz relations during the feudal period, we find it difficult to accept the second part of his concept, where he attributes the condition of late mediaeval Abkhazia to the mass immigration of highlanders. In our view, there are several unproven and contentious points here. The scholar frequently draws analogies from other parts of Georgia, whereas in Abkhazia, the situation was different. The thesis of frequent migrations from the North Caucasus is not supported by written sources. Migrations from north to south and vice versa did occur, as in other parts of Georgia and the Caucasus, but in Abkhazia from the 13th to the 18th centuries, the predominant process was the outflow of the population from south to north — that is, from Abkhazia to the North Caucasus. This process is reflected in various historical sources, including written ones (reports by 17th-18th century authors such as Evlia Çelebi, Glavani, Peyssonnel, Güldenstädt, Reineggs, and Pallas). This migration led to the establishment of representatives of the Abkhaz ethnic community on the northern slopes of the Caucasus Mountains, which later developed into an independent Abkhaz people.

It is also difficult to agree with the view that in the 17th century, the Abkhazians primarily engaged in extensive livestock farming rather than agriculture, supposedly indicating their recent migration from the mountains. As established in specialised literature, in the 17th-18th centuries, the main occupations of the population of Abkhazia were agriculture, livestock farming, hunting, beekeeping, and various forms of craftsmanship (N. Antelava). It is noteworthy that the term "ankhaj'y," which referred to the main category of peasants in feudal Abkhazia, translates as "farmer" (G. Dzidzaria).

Regarding the archaic religious beliefs and ethnographic traditions observed in Abkhazia from the 17th to the 19th centuries, certain parallels can be found in historical Colchis and ancient Asia Minor. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that these traditions were originally preserved in Abkhazia rather than being introduced from outside in the relatively recent past.

Incidentally, N. Berdzenishvili considered one of the main reasons for the weakness of Christianity in Abkhazia to be the local population's lack of knowledge of the languages in which church services were conducted (Greek, and later Georgian). As a result, the scholar believed that the people interpreted Christianity in their own, "pagan" way. This explains the persistence of traditional Abkhaz beliefs and why, after the collapse of the unified Georgian state, when Orthodox cultural impulses from its centre practically ceased, Christianity, which had not taken deep root in Abkhazia, quickly gave way to revived traditional cults and, later, to Islam.

Thus, it can be asserted that the socio-economic and cultural decline of Abkhazia, which occurred after the 13th century, was caused by the same well-known factors (with some local specificities) that led to the decline of feudal Georgia. Therefore, there is no reason to seek an explanation for the developments in Abkhazia in terms of large-scale immigration of related elements from the North Caucasus.

Since 1989, the ethno-political conflict in Abkhazia has flared up with unprecedented intensity. In the ensuing information battle, ideologists on both sides frequently invoked history and historical rights. In line with the political climate, many "amateurs" writing on historical topics emerged. A number of professional historians also joined the fray, including some who had not previously focused on Abkhazia. In Georgia, for instance, more people were involved in the field of Abkhaz studies during the 1990s than at any other time. This has resulted in significant diversity of opinion and radicalism regarding contentious historical issues.

The main information strike by the Abkhazians focused on the events of the late 19th to mid-20th centuries, when the conditions leading to the conflict in Georgian-Abkhaz relations were formed. This era was marked by a significant increase in the Georgian population of Abkhazia (presented as though Georgians had never been there before) and the communist repressions of the 1920s-1940s.

Georgians also wrote about these topics, but their response primarily took the form of revisiting established views on the ethnic composition of ancient and mediaeval Abkhazia, often accompanied by a revival of Ingoroqva's theory.

At this stage, two main lines of thought have emerged in Georgian historiography regarding the ethnic history of the Abkhazians. The first is entirely based on the (pseudo-)intellectual legacy of Ingoroqva, which denies the presence of the Abkhaz-Adyghe ethnic group in Abkhazia until recent times. This view is held by the overwhelming majority of non-professionals who have taken up historical issues, as well as by some historians and linguists. These authors' positions are largely similar, viewing the Abkhazians as a community that formed in the North Caucasus 200-300 years ago and migrated to the territory of Georgia. Therefore, according to supporters of this concept, the descendants of these migrants cannot be considered an indigenous ethnic group in the region. Due to its clear and accessible nature, this view is now widespread among the Georgian population.

However, most contemporary Georgian historians adhere to a concept popularly known as the "double-autochthony theory." This theory recognises two indigenous ethnic groups in

Abkhazia — Georgian and Abkhazian. In general, this concept echoes the main points formulated by N. Berdzenishvili, but its proponents today focus more on highlighting the predominance of Kartvelian ethnic elements in Abkhazia since ancient times and seek new data to demonstrate the large-scale migrations from the North Caucasus. The particular role of the Abkhazians in the construction of the mediaeval Georgian state, which N. Berdzenishvili once wrote about, is now rarely mentioned (although no one has refuted it), nor is their active participation in the cultural circulation of feudal Georgia (S. Dzhnashia). The only Georgian author who currently writes about this is the historian G. Gulia, who is based in Moscow.

Supporters of the "double-autochthony" theory do not question the presence of Kartvelian tribes in the territory of Abkhazia since ancient times. As for the Abkhaz-Adyghe elements, they allow for this possibility only hypothetically (M. Lordkipanidze, N. Lomouri, M. Baramidze, and others). However, some authors have reintroduced the thesis about the kinship of the Abkhaz-Adyghe peoples with the ancient Hattic people, which implicitly suggests that the tribes of the western Caucasian ethnic group spread southward, even reaching northern Anatolia by the end of the Stone Age and the beginning of the Bronze Age (O. Dzhaparidze, G. Gordzadze).

Some historians claim that there were no Abkhaz-speaking tribes in the territory of Abkhazia in the first millennium BC (D. Muskhelishvili and others), but most leading Georgian specialists classify the Apsils and Abazgs, known from written sources dating back to the 1st-2nd centuries AD, as part of the Abkhaz-Adyghe ethnic branch, albeit with some reservations. N. Lomouri is more categorical on this matter, writing: "Even Iv. Dzhavakhishvili and S. Dzhnashia had no doubts that the Apsils and Abazgs were the ancestors of both mediaeval and modern Abkhazians, and today this cannot be doubted — it is the only scholarly viewpoint."

There is also an opinion that only the Apsils are genetically linked to the "modern" Abkhazians, while the Abazgs (Abkhazians) were originally a western Kartvelian tribe (T. Gamqrelidze).

The other "tribes" of Abkhazia in the first millennium AD — the Sanigs and Missimians — are undoubtedly considered Kartvelian by Georgian historiography. Only M. Inadze suggests that the Missimians might have been a Svan-Apsil union (with the Svan component playing the dominant role), formed at the intersection of the two ethnic groups.

The "double-autochthony" theory is sharply criticised by modern followers of Ingoroqva, who, as mentioned, consider the Abkhazians a non-indigenous people. This theory is also rejected by Abkhaz scholars, who take diametrically opposite positions. In modern Abkhaz historiography, it is believed that the ethnic boundary between the Abkhazians and Kartvelians up until the beginning of the 2nd millennium AD was along the Ingur/i River, after which it shifted northward with the Tsikhumi (Sukhum'i) region coming under the control of the Mingrelian princes Dadiani. However, "significant Abkhaz-speaking peasant communities" remained in the south "for several centuries" (how is this known? — G.A.). By the end of the 17th century, the Abkhazians had regained the lands up to the Ingur/i River, and the ethnic boundary along this river was restored, "simultaneously acquiring a state-political status" (*History of Abkhazia*, 1993).

Most contemporary Georgian authors, when writing about ancient and mediaeval Abkhazia, discuss mass-migrations of Abkhaz-Adyghe tribes from the North Caucasus. While followers of Ingoroqva believe these migrations occurred between the 16th and 19th centuries, supporters of the second line of thought refer to migrations in the 1st millennium BC and the first half of the 1st millennium AD, followed by continuous migrations from the 13th to the 18th centuries. According to these authors, modern Abkhazians are considered direct descendants of these migrants, who mixed with the local Georgian and Georgianised population. Initially, most migrants were believed to be representatives of Adyghe tribes, but recent works increasingly highlight the Abazins as ethnically closer to the Abkhazians. (It is thought that the proto-Abkhaz-Adyghe community dissolved at the end of the 3rd or first half of the 2nd millennium BC, meaning the Abkhazians cannot be descendants of the mediaeval Adyghe).

As noted earlier, the prevailing trend in the 13th-18th centuries was the outflow of the population from Abkhazia to the North Caucasus. Ancient sources do not mention any significant migrations from the north in the late 1st millennium BC or the early centuries AD. If there had been a large-scale invasion over the Caucasus mountains in the late mediaeval period, profoundly altering Abkhazia's historical development, ethnic composition, social and cultural structure, and economic model, it would not have escaped the attention of numerous Georgian written sources or foreign authors documenting the country during that period.

As for the Abazins, starting from the 18th-century European travellers, it has been widely accepted in Caucasian studies that they originated from Abkhazia and the adjacent northwest Black Sea coastal lands, which were historically also part of Abkhazia (K. Glavani, M. Peyssonnel, I. Güldenstädt, J. Pototski, P. Butkov, S. Bronevsky, F. Tornau, J. Ljulle, A. Berge, N. Kamenev, B. Weidenbaum, E. Felitsyn, G. Mertzkhvaker, N. Bartold, P. Kovalevsky, F. Krasilnikov, S. Basaria, N. Jakovlev, L. Lavrov, K. Lomtadze, A. Genko, E. Alekseeva, E. Danilova, and others). This view is supported by historical written sources, which explicitly state that the Abazins originated from Abkhazia; by clear linguistic and toponymic evidence indicating the same; and by Abkhaz legends that name specific areas of historical Abkhazia as the original homeland of certain Abkhaz groups.

It is no wonder that academician S. Dzhnashia, a remarkable expert on the Northwest Caucasus, referred to the Abazins as “Abkhazians from beyond the mountains.”

In the Georgian national movement, coinciding with the sharp escalation of the situation in Abkhazia in 1989, a notion emerged suggesting that citizens identifying as Abkhazians were divided into native “Abkhazians” (i.e., Georgians) and “Apsuas” (derived from “Apsua,” the self-designation of the Abkhazians), who were considered newcomers. It is unnecessary to prove that this is entirely incorrect. Nevertheless, the idea that “Abkhaz” and “Apsua” are not identical concepts has made its way into the Georgian press and even into academic literature. Today, some authors consciously avoid using the term “Abkhaz,” replacing it with “Apsua.” In doing so, “Apsuas” are effectively severed from the historical Abkhazians.[4] This new phenomenon is a direct result of the confusion surrounding fundamental issues in Abkhazian history that currently dominates the information space in Georgia.

In this regard, it is important to note that there is no evidence to suggest that, at any time in the past, the terms “Abkhaz” and “Apsua” were opposed to one another in Georgia, or that

the Abkhazians were considered newcomers. There is not even a hint of this in Georgian chronicles. The educated segment of Georgian society in the 19th and early 20th centuries was well aware that “Abkhaz” and “Apsua” were synonymous terms. Several examples can be cited. Let us refer, for instance, to the well-known historian and linguist, one of the founders of modern Georgian ethnography, I. Dzhanelashvili, who wrote at the beginning of the 20th century: “The Abkhazians call themselves ‘Abs’, and their country ‘Absne’ (Abkh. ‘Apsny’ — G.A.)” During this period, Georgians regarded the Abkhazians as a distinct, though related, people. It was commonly accepted that the Abkhazians had lived in their land since time immemorial. The words of the distinguished poet, public figure, and statesman Grigol Orbeliani (1804–1883) are particularly noteworthy. Defending the interests of the Abkhaz people during the colonisation of Abkhazia by the Russian government, he wrote: “The Treasury has deprived the land of the people who have lived here since the time of Noah.” This brief yet profound remark perfectly reflects the view of one of the leaders of the Georgian aristocratic intelligentsia of the 19th century on the matter at hand.

Given that historical issues are a “sensitive” topic in ethnic conflicts, there is often a desire to avoid them altogether during informal diplomacy efforts. However, it is impossible to completely avoid this topic, as mythologised history plays a significant role in such conflicts, sparking intense interest among broad segments of the population. Persistent silence on conflict-generating issues does not contribute to their resolution. Naturally, historical debates should be avoided, but when necessary, participants in the people-to-people diplomatic process must be prepared to offer a strong, informed perspective. Therefore, they need a clear understanding of the key points of history. This can be achieved by familiarising themselves with authoritative literature and comprehensive works by respected scholars. In addition, lectures and discussions on contentious historical topics can be held. Armed with knowledge, it becomes easier to resolve difficult situations. For instance, many people influenced by Ingoroqva’s theory are often surprised to learn that renowned Georgian historians held different views about the origins of the Abkhaz people. The name of I. Dzhanelashvili, in particular, carries great authority among Georgians. Citing his views can significantly change the situation; it may even come as a surprise to many Abkhazians that the opinions of leading Georgian historians largely align with those of well-known Abkhaz scholars.

At the same time, it is important to emphasise that historical data cannot serve as the sole criterion for determining the political status of territories today. Additionally, all citizens, regardless of whether they belong to an indigenous ethnic group or are more recent arrivals, are equal before the law and possess the same civil rights.

Notes:

1. In the Caucasus, alongside indigenous Caucasian languages, Indo-European and Turkic languages have long been widespread.
2. Until the 1930s, migration theories were prevalent in historical scholarship, so contradictory views about the movements of Abkhazian tribes are by no means an exceptional phenomenon. For example, historians once believed the homeland of the Georgians to be in the south, in the Near East. I. Dzhanelashvili initially adhered to this concept but later changed his view, allowing for the possibility that Kartvelian

tribes arrived in modern Georgia from the opposite direction. “Did they not come to Transcaucasia from the north, just as the Abkhazian tribes seem to have entered Transcaucasia by the same route?” the scholar wrote.

3. Interestingly, P. Ingoroqva did not always hold his later views on the historical past of the Abkhaz people. In 1918, he wrote: “The Abkhazians have been connected to the Georgians by centuries of cultural commonality. The Abkhazians were part of the Georgian state unit from the very beginning, and despite their small numbers, the Abkhazian tribe has made significant contributions to the history of Georgia. The revival of the Georgian state began in Abkhazia (reflected in the title of Georgian kings, which began with ‘King of the Abkhazians and Kartvelians’). Even the Georgian dynasty was half-Abkhazian, and the Abkhazians produced not just one or two prominent figures (Byzantine sources mention the Georgian philosopher Ioanne, an Abkhaz by tribe). In short, the two-thousand-year history of Georgia is simultaneously the history of Abkhazia.”

The phrase “even the Georgian dynasty was half-Abkhazian” clearly indicates that Ingoroqva did not consider the historical Abkhazians to be Georgians at that time.

4. Among Georgian historians, N. Lomouri actively opposes this trend.

**Editorial Title in Square Brackets.*

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