

Hardening porousness

Borderization and abandonment among the borderland ruins of Abkhazia

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When driving through the Abkhazian borderland region of Gal(i), one cannot help but notice the numerous ruined buildings that lay scattered throughout the green hilly landscape. Few people live in this stretch of land, as many of the former residents – ethnic Mingrelians, an ethnic Georgian subgroup – fled during the last part of the war due to the fear of repercussions by Abkhazians and fighters from the Northern Caucasus. These buildings serve as tangible reminders of the violent episodes that occurred during the 1990's, starting with the Abkhazian-Georgian war of 1992-1993, after which Abkhazia declared its independence from Georgia, which was then left in a state of limbo and isolation as no other member of the international community recognized Abkhazia as a sovereign state. It was not until August 2008, just after the Russian-Georgian war, that the Russian Federation, together with Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru and since 2018 Syria, recognized the Republic of Abkhazia, while the rest of the world still sees Abkhazia as an integral part of the Republic of Georgia.



The Abkhazian border checkpoint as seen from the Inguri Bridge (Photo by Mikel Venhovens, 2018).

Since then, the contrast between the Gal(i) landscape and the surrounding borderlands has been increasingly noticeable. It seems as if time stood still in the Gal(i) district, while the Western part of Abkhazia has seen considerable improvements in regard to infrastructure and renovation of buildings, mainly thanks to the financial aid provided by the Russian Federation after 2008. However, the most eastern part of the Gal(i) district, namely the stretch of land bordering the Inguri river, which acts like the natural division between Georgia proper and Abkhazia, has seen significant changes over the last ten years. Since then, a borderization process has been underway, which has upgraded the border in both bureaucratic and material ways. Before 2008, the border regime was notably more fluid, as cross border movement of persons and goods was made possible through several formal and more informal procedures. Today the installation of barbed wire, guard posts, and the Russian Federation taking control of the borderline, have hardened the border substantially.

The contrast between the ruined hinterlands and the 'upgraded' borderline is striking. It illustrates the nation-state building efforts of the Abkhazian Republic, now strengthened by the support provided by the Russian Federation since 2008, while the Gal(i) district populated by the Georgian minority is being left behind and virtually untouched, leaving them in an abandoned and disenfranchised position. The ruined untouched landscape of the Gal(i) region together with the hardened border are

(re)constructed structures that are situated in a highly politicized landscape where the past meets both the present and future.

In the case of the Abkhazian borderlands, the Georgian minority living in the borderlands are often seen as outcasts, the losing remnants of the War of 1992-93. The Abkhaz were the victors, and the disjointed power relations that were installed after the war between the two groups continue to live on both in a social and spatial way.

Reading conflict through space: the politics of materiality and mobility

The people in the Gal(i) region live their everyday life among ruins. The burned-out buildings that scatter the landscape, the roads that have not been maintained since 1991 and other neglected infrastructures are the physical reminders of the war, but maybe even more, of the current situation in which they find themselves. When moving 10 kilometers to the east, the infrastructure changes. The road that starts at the Abkhazian-Russian border and ultimately leads all the way to the Inguri river border crossing, was renovated in 2016 and could now be considered to be one of the best roads in the region (speeding on this renovated road is considered one of the main reasons for the significant increase in traffic accidents in Abkhazia, as drivers do not have to watch out for potholes anymore). Alongside this road, which was paid for by financial aid provided

by the Russian Federation, the only well-maintained building that can be seen when driving towards the Inguri river is the newly built Russian military base. The road abruptly ends at the Abkhazian checkpoint, where numerous taxis and buses stand waiting for people coming from the other side.

The Abkhazian checkpoint/border has seen a tremendous change over the last 10 years. From being a heavy militarized checkpoint and frontline, including gun emplacements and concrete barricades, it has now been transformed into a 'proper' border. Pillboxes and turrets have been replaced by sterile metal containers from which passport control is carried out by the Russian Federation. Waiting lines have been installed and the overall feeling at the checkpoint is more 'clean' and 'official' than before 2008.

Changes can also very much be observed along the Inguri river as the material demarcation of the Abkhazian state border has increasingly changed the landscape. The riverbanks have been populated by various forms of state materiality, such as barbed wire, guard posts and radio towers that are installed with cameras in order to keep an eye on the borderlands. Furthermore, Russian military patrols along the Inguri River are frequent in order to stop people from crossing the river, which is considered illegal by the Abkhazian government.

An interesting paradox is the fact that it is the Russian Federation and not the Abkhazian government itself that has taken the responsibility for the border control; they

are providing the manpower, bureaucracy, technology and materials. The function of this 'hardening' of the border is first of all, a practical one, as it gives control to the joint Abkhazian-Russian authorities over the border. The movement of persons and goods is regulated by funneling them through the main crossing point at the Inguri bridge crossing. The main aim, besides preventing smuggling, has been the regulation of the movement of persons. The return of Georgian Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) to Abkhazia has been a pressing issue since the end of the war. While the actual numbers of returning IDPs have been quite limited, the issue has been used very frequently in political discourse. Many Abkhazian politicians have warned against the 'Georgianization' of Abkhazia, as this might result in "losing sovereignty and territorial integrity" that eventually would result in Abkhazia 'exploding' from within.² This stance and rhetoric have also been a significant focus of the current President of Abkhazia, Raul Khajimba, during whose term the Abkhazian passports of most ethnic Georgians of the Gal(i) region were revoked as they were deemed to have illegally been handed out.

In addition to the IDPs, the enhanced borderization process also structurally limits the mobility of the current Gal(i) residents who still have very strong social/communal links with the Zugdidi district on the other side of the river. The elderly have to get their pension on Tbilisi controlled territory, several children living in the Gal(i) district take their education in the Zugdidi district, the marketplace in Zugdidi is both a considerable source of income as well as for buying products, and even family members are separated because they live either side of the border.

In the case of the Inguri border, it severs the Georgian Mingrelians living in the Gal(i) district from Georgia proper. By dissecting the Gal(i) community from the other side of the Inguri River, they are placed in a state of isolation and abandonment. Spatially isolated from Georgia, socially dissociated from the rest of Abkhazia. This state of isolation and abandonment will have significant repercussions for the near and long future; for example, the youths who take their university degrees in either Zugdidi or Tbilisi are often not open to returning to Gal(i), as the opportunities to build a life there are decreasing significantly.

Besides this practical function, the strengthening of a border both in a bureaucratic and spatial way, is also a performative act that demonstrates certain political claims. In the case of Abkhazia it portrays the sovereignty claim of the Abkhazian Republic and the end of the war that resulted in the independence of the Abkhazian state. This is further reinforced



One of the many ruined houses in the border town of Gal(i) that were abandoned after the war (Photo by Mikel Venhovens, 2018).

through the officialization and normalization of the Inguri River checkpoint by referring to it as the 'State border'.

This is in sheer contrast to the discourse of the Georgian authorities in Tbilisi. They refer to the border as the Administrative Border Line (ABL) as they still see Abkhazia as part of Georgia. They still refer to the conflict as a 'frozen conflict', indicating that conflict and war is ongoing. This is why the Georgian side of the river is heavily militarized with pillboxes, a checkpoint and a small military outpost manned by forces of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia. This side of the river is kept as informal as possible. At the police checkpoint, there is only a passport check for foreigners while Georgian citizens can freely pass through to the Abkhazian side of the river. This is due to the fact that for the Georgian authorities, when crossing the Inguri River you are not leaving Georgian territory. Issues arise when people enter or leave Abkhazia to/from the Russian Federation, as you will have then entered/left Georgia illegally.

This manifestation of discursive and spatial discourses is not only performed at the border but also on road signs throughout Georgia. When travelling towards the west of Georgia, Sukhumi (the capital of Abkhazia) shows up on highway signs as if it is simply a city further down the road. A city that is easily accessible. This while most Georgians will never be allowed to actually travel there. What becomes evident here is how a variety of spatialities is

co-implicated in complex ways. The example of the Inguri crossing point and the road signs illustrates these complexities, as authorities deploy imaginaries and practices that, while centered on place-making ('Sukhumi is home'), at the same time (re)works mobility ('Sukhumi is accessible') and scale ('Sukhumi is part of the state of Georgia'). By creating an atmosphere in which nothing has changed and by deploying a spatial politics of 'wholeness' and 'accessibility', these road signs reinforce the discourse of an Abkhazia that is still under Georgian authority.³ Materialities, such as road signs, walls, barbed wire and checkpoints are the physical facts created on the ground that convey either the narrative of partition or the wholeness of a territory. In reality, the Georgian authorities have no formal control over Abkhazia at all, and the ethnic Georgians left in the Gal(i) border region are caught between a rock and a hard place.

The physical neglect of the Gal(i) district illustrates the post-conflict power relations amidst a 'victor' and a 'losing' party.

Abandonment among ruins

The sheer scale of human displacement and dispossession during and after the war of 1991-92 radically transformed the landscape of Abkhazia. In the western regions, the Georgian population fled during an immense ethnic cleansing campaign, during which an estimated 20,000-30,000 civilians were killed and between 200,000 and 232,000 fled across either the Caucasus mountains or the Inguri river to uncontested Georgian territory. Of these, only roughly 40,000 ethnic Georgians have found their way back to their homes in Abkhazia, primarily in the Gal(i) region.

The physical neglect of the Gal(i) district illustrates the post-conflict power relations amidst a 'victor' and a 'losing' party. Especially with the backing of the Russian Federation, which ensures the safety and sovereignty of the semi-recognized Abkhazian state, the Abkhazian authorities have been increasingly more confident in imposing limitations on the political rights and movement of the Gal(i) population. Before 2008, the Abkhazian authorities lacked a firm control over the Gal(i) district, due to lack of knowhow and manpower, but also due to the presence of several Georgian

paramilitary guerilla troops that contested the Abkhazian authorities.⁴ These often-criminal groups controlled the district firmly through violence and intimidation of not only Abkhaz residents, but also the Georgian

population. Killings and kidnappings were frequent occurrences during the 1990s and early 2000s. This unstable situation came to an end after 2008, when Georgian troops left the Kodori Gorge, north of the Gal(i) district, and the Russian Federation took full control over the Inguri border. Since then the Abkhazian government has tightened control over the Gal(i) district, without necessarily improving the living conditions of the local population. The ethnic Georgian population is not allowed to possess an Abkhazian passport. Since 2018, a process has started in which foreign nationals who reside in Abkhazia for more than one year can apply for a residence permit. This permit gives them the right to reside in Abkhazia and to move in and out of the country freely, but does not allow them to vote, buy or sell property or participate in elections on any level, including local elections.

From a material perspective, there are ruins scattered across the district, left behind by ethnic Georgians who fled the numerous violent episodes during the 1990s and 2000s. The ruins that can be found both in the urban and rural areas of Gal(i) are striking to foreign visitors, as they have heard and/or read about the war and the violent events that occurred. The 20-year-old war becomes tangible as the aftermath can be clearly seen through the ruined and abandoned buildings.

The normalization of the situation and material state of the district has had 20 years to settle in, so now most of the locals merely shrug when asked about the state in which many buildings appear. They refer to the people who used to live in the once typical Georgian two-story buildings. Their friendly neighbors, the tomatoes and cucumbers that they used to grow in the back garden, or the kids who used to play on the street. After the joyful memories comes a heavy sigh, which is almost always followed by a sentence along the lines of: "But the war made them go. They had to leave it behind. Now they live in Tbilisi/Zugdidi and we are still here". Some people who fled the Gal(i) district have been able to temporarily return to visit their former homes, mostly on a 'tourist visa' through invitation by family members that still live in Abkhazia. The normalization of the material dereliction is striking. The local population has become used to it, has occasionally even added to the deterioration by stripping houses of certain materials, and now only the stories and the memories are left behind.

The ruination of the Gal(i) district and its material remains serve as 'phantomic' reminders of the people that fled to Georgia proper and were not able to return after the violence ended.⁵ Most of the IDPs now live in Georgia proper and are unable to move back; but those who did return to Gal(i) or who stayed in the first place, are now left behind with just the memories, not knowing what became of their neighbors, in a way trapped in the past. Pieris puts it well in her research on ruins of the Sri Lankan Civil War: "The ruination of home and its residual materialities signify a state of exile of a community alienated through violent dispossession from spaces in which they have deep ontological roots".⁶

Conclusion

The exterior territorial membrane of a national entity, its border, is being hardened through the establishment of multiple forms of material and bureaucratic division in order to create facts on the ground and therefore legitimize its existence in a material way. This is the case with internationally recognized

states, especially during certain episodes of crisis, but even more so with entities that are not internationally recognized, as creating facts on the ground is an existential need in order to legitimize its existence. The focal point for the strengthening, renovating and improvement of Abkhazian statehood therefore focuses on that border, while in the hinterland lie the ruins, the aftermath and the continuous porousness of the Abkhazian state. The situation for the Gal(i) residents seems to be at a standstill, they are in limbo because their presence in the borderlands is deemed to be the existential threat to Abkhazian nationhood. Ruins scattered throughout the landscape are 'phantomic' reminders of both the violent past, as well as the exclusivity of the Gal(i) region in the present.

Underlying this approach is an understanding of power not as something that is 'owned' by certain actors but as 'relational': as a strategic complex relation they are in. Enforced by historical narratives that are being reified through socio-spatial processes, the post-violent conflict situation in the Gal(i) borderlands is being cemented through the strengthening of a semi-recognized border and the dereliction and abandonment of the hinterlands.

This article shows how certain 'stories' and narratives materialize in concrete and tangible entities with spatial properties, which in turn have an impact on the population living in a peculiar post-conflict environment. I am interested particularly in the story of contested statehood, and an understanding of the state as an imagined entity that exists only by virtue of it being performed (statehood as practice) and spatialized (statehood as materiality) and how the established power relations can then be read throughout the hinterlands of the Abkhazian borderlands.

The memory of violent episodes is not just embedded in narratives and testimonies, but also inscribed onto space in a variety of settings. Barbed wire, checkpoints, potholes in the road and ruined homes. Through strengthening and crumbling, these forms of spatiality scattered through the landscape act both as scars, reminders of past events and the establishment of a new status quo. Yet, underneath these socio-spatial material power relations are the stories of lost friends and families of whom they are reminded every time they leave their house and walk among those ruins.

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Notes

- 1 In this article, I will use the term 'border' to address the division between Abkhazia and Georgia proper. This in order to be as neutral as possible, as the usage of 'state border' or 'Administrative Border Line' are too biased towards certain parties. By using the term 'border' I therefore refer to material division that separates the semi-recognized state of Abkhazia from the territory fully under control by the Republic of Georgia. This article does therefore not take any stance in regard to the status of Abkhazia.
- 2 Vartanyan, O. 2014. 'Thousands of Georgians in Abkhazia Facing Being Struck Off Voters List', *Civil Georgia*; <https://tinyurl.com/cgAbkhazia>
- 3 Demmers, J. & Venhovens, M. 2016. 'Bluffing the State: Spatialities of Contested Statehood in the Abkhazian-Georgian Conflict', in Björkdahl, A. & S. Buckley-Zistel (eds) 2016. *Spatializing Peace and Conflict*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.159-177.
- 4 Oltramonti, G. P. 2016. 'Securing disenfranchisement through violence and isolation: the case of Georgians/Mingrelians in the district of Gali', *Conflict, Security & Development* 16(3):245-262.
- 5 Navaro-Yashin, Y. 2012. *The make-believe space: affective geography in a postwar polity*. Duke University Press.
- 6 Pieris, A. 2017. 'Dwelling in ruins: affective materialities of the Sri Lankan civil war', *Journal of Architecture*, 22(6):1002-1020, p.1002.