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SPECIAL FEATURES OF THE CHANGES IN THE ETHNODEMOGRAPHIC SITUATION IN ABKHAZIA IN THE POST-SOVIET PERIOD

A b s t r a c t

This article conducts an analysis of the dynamics of the ethnodemographic composition of the Abkhazian population in the post-Soviet period based on the data of the 1989 and 2003 population

censuses, scientific publications on the ethnodemography and ethnogeography of contemporary Abkhazia, and the author's field studies during expeditions in 2003-2006.

I n t r o d u c t i o n

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, which reached its official conclusion on 26 December, 1991, the polyethnic population of Abkhazia¹ underwent truly dramatic changes—it, according to the estimates available, has shrunk by more than half and the ethnic composition and dispersal of this republic's residents have significantly changed. This work is devoted to defining the scope of these changes. In so doing, the emphasis is placed on an attempt to evaluate the reliability of the assessment of the ethnic composition and dispersal of the population of Abkhazia as of 2003 and on identification of the nature and reasons for the possible inaccuracies.²

Before going on, I would like to briefly remind you of the tragic events the Abkhazian people have endured during the past 20 years and the factors that have had the greatest influence on the dynamics of the size and migration of the republic's population.

¹ For more on the ethnic composition of the population of all the Soviet republics, see, for example: A.N. Yamskov, "The 'New Minorities' in Post-Soviet States: Linguistic Orientations and Political Conflict," *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, No. 2-3, Vol. 18, 1994, pp. 58-61.

² Field studies in the form of collective expeditions lasting around one month each were carried out together with the D.I. Gulia Abkhazian Institute of Humanitarian Studies, Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Abkhazia (Sukhum). N. Dubova and A. Yamskov's trip in 2003 was financed from the budget of the RAS Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, the expedition of researchers from the RAS Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology and the Abkhazian Institute of Humanitarian Studies in 2004 was financed under project No. 04-01-1833e of the Russian Humanitarian Scientific Fund (RHSF) called "Rural Abkhazia Today: Sociocultural and Medical-Demographic Problems" headed by N.A. Dubova, and the expeditions in 2005 and 2006 under RHSF project No. 05-01-01069a called "Medical-Anthropological and Demographic Consequences of the Sociocultural Changes at the End of the 1980s-Beginning of the 2000s in Rural Abkhazia" headed by A.N. Yamskov.

Reasons for the Radical Transformation in the Size and Ethnic Composition of the Abkhazian Population in the 1990s

The worsening ideological crisis and aggravated political struggle in the upper echelons of the Soviet political leadership from the second half to the end of the 1980s created a growing power vacuum in the Union Center. This resulted in an abrupt rise in the real significance and relative independence of the power structures of the Union republics. But many of them, particularly the Baltic and South Caucasian republics, also experienced a tempestuous redistribution of power within the party and Soviet leadership, whose members were oriented toward different political and ideological trends in the Union Center. In so doing, many local leaders also began to rely on the mass sociopolitical movements that appeared at the same time, which were either ethnic in nature or rapidly became so.³

The Georgian S.S.R. was no exception in this respect. At the end of the 1980s, the Abkhaz A.S.S.R, which belonged to the latter, began to show the first signs of political contradictions and tension in the polyethnic party and Soviet leadership and elite strata of the intelligentsia during perestroika, which ultimately escalated into the Abkhazian-Georgian ethnic conflict and disassociation of the autonomy's population.

The first major blood in the Abkhazian-Georgian conflict spilled on 15-16 July, 1989, when 11 Georgians, 5 Abkhazians, and one Greek were killed and many more injured⁴ in clashes near the city of Ochamchira. Escalation of the conflict between the Abkhazians and the local Georgians, which was only temporarily frozen after the above-mentioned tragic event following the entry of troops from the Soviet federal center, continued to embrace the entire population of the autonomous republic.⁵ On 14 August, 1992, the government of independent Georgia sent its troops to Abkhazia. A full-scale war began that ended on 30 September, 1993 with Abkhazia's total victory.

Only the upper part of the Kodori Gorge, or Abkhazian Svaneti, where the Svans have lived since the end of the 19th century, remained beyond the republic's control. The Svans are a sub-ethnic group that consider themselves Georgians and have close linguistic and cultural affinity. After the war, in which the Svans actively participated on the Georgian side, the local Svan leaders only de jure recognized themselves as part of Georgia, whereas de facto they retained their independence from both Sukhum and Tbilisi. It was not until 25 July, 2006, after armed clashes between the army and police units sent from Georgia and supporters of the local Svan leader, that Tbilisi established its direct rule in the Kodori Gorge.

During the Abkhazian-Georgian war of 1992-1993, the Abkhazian side alone lost at least 2,000 people,⁶ mainly ethnic Abkhazians (servicemen and civilians). According to other sources, approximately 2,700 Abkhazian servicemen perished in this war, a figure which reached 12,000 when volun-

³ For more detail, see: A. N. Yamskov, "Trevozhnoe budushchee 'respublik svobodnykh,'" *Obshchestvennye nauki i sovremennost*, No. 4, 1991, pp. 89-100.

⁴ See: V. Pachulia, T. Achugba, "Abkhaziia na rubezhe XX-XXI vekov," in: *Abkhazy*, ed. by Yu.D. Anchabadze, Yu.G. Argun, Nauka Publishers, Moscow, 2007, pp. 97-98.

⁵ For more on the author's views of the main reasons for the ethnic conflicts in this region, see: A.N. Yamskov, "Ethnic Conflict in the Transcaucasus: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh," *Theory and Society*, No. 5, Vol. 20, 1991, pp. 631-660.

⁶ See: T. Achugba, A. Khashba, "Etnodemograficheskaia kharakteristika i geografiia rasseleniia," in: *Abkhazy*, p. 54.

teers from other regions of the former Soviet Union were added.⁷ Abkhazians formed the backbone of the Abkhazian armed formations, but a large number of local Armenians and many Russians, as well as volunteers from among the mountain peoples of the Northern Caucasus, Cossacks, and Russians from the southern regions of Russia, also participated in the war against Georgia. According to the data of experts from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the total losses during this war amounted to approximately 12,000,⁸ while according to the data of the Abkhazian and Georgian authorities, 1,510 servicemen and “several hundred civilians” from the Abkhazian side (mainly Abkhazians) and 3,365 servicemen and “approximately 7,000 civilians” from the Georgian side were killed,⁹ that is, mainly Georgians.

In the Gal district and the territories contiguous to it, armed campaigns were periodically launched right up until 2008 by local and small Georgian diversion units that penetrated from Georgia, which resulted in quite a large Abkhazian death toll.

Finally, on 9-12 August, 2008, during the war between Georgia and Russia in South Ossetia, Abkhazian army units seized the Kodori Gorge, essentially without losses, ousting the Svans (earlier their numbers, along with the Georgian military, were estimated at approximately 3,000 people).¹⁰ On 26 September, 2008, the Russian Federation recognized the state sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Abkhazia and began establishing diplomatic relations and drawing up agreements on defense cooperation with it.

The aggravation of the Abkhazian-Georgian conflict in the 1980s-1990s and the postwar economic collapse along with the increasingly flagrant criminalization led to the mass exodus of a large number of Abkhazians to Russia (members of all ethnic groups, including Georgians) or to Georgia (only Georgians). The economic blockade imposed by the Russian Federation on Abkhazia between the middle and end of the 1990s also played a negative role, which essentially impeded its revival from the postwar socioeconomic chaos for decades and gave rise to mass unemployment.

It was not until the first years of the 21st century that this blockade began to outlive its usefulness and gradually became a formality, but Russia did not officially lift it until 6 March, 2008. Abkhazia's economy failed to revive until 2003-2004 when trade turnover between Russian and Abkhazian enterprises was established and mass Russian tourism increased during the summer season creating, in turn, demand for agricultural products and giving a boost to the repair and construction of housing and roads, development of the coastal towns and settlements, improvement of transportation, and so on. At that time, Russia permitted the residents of Abkhazia to acquire Russian citizenship and by mid-2005 the absolute majority (more than 80%) of its permanent residents had taken advantage of this.¹¹

All of these twists and turns could not help but have a very serious effect on the absolute size of the population, its relative share in the total population, and the dispersal of the main nationalities of Abkhazia—Abkhazians, Georgians, Armenians, Russians, Ukrainians, and Greeks.

⁷ See: “Tsenoiu zhizni otstoiav Otchiznu,” *Respublika Abkhaziia*, No. 90, 12-13 August, 2006, pp. 1-2.

⁸ See: V.I. Mukomel, “Vooruzhennyye mezhnatsionalnye i regionalnye konflikty: liudskie poteri, ekonomicheskii ushcherb i sotsialnye posledstviia,” in: *Identichnost i konflikt v postsovetskikh gosudarstvakh*, ed. by M. Olcott, V. Tishkov, A. Malashenko, Carnegie Moscow Center, Moscow, 1997, p. 301.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

¹⁰ See: A. Vashchenko, “Gruziia gotovitsia k pryzhku,” *Ekho Abkhazii*, No. 33, 16 August, 2005, p. 2.

¹¹ For example, Abkhazian President Sergei Bagapsh estimated the number of the republic's residents with a Russian passport at 80%-82% of the entire adult population, and another 7-8,000 people were in the process of applying for Russian citizenship in the summer of 2005 (see: “Interview of Abkhazian President Sergei Bagapsh with *Interfax*,” *Forum*, 22 August, 2005, p. 3).

Changes in the Size of the Main Nationalities of Abkhazia in the 1990s

When assessing the reliability of the statistics obtained during the population census, one should understand that it cannot be absolute in principle. The doubts voiced below about the reliability of the results obtained from the population census conducted in Abkhazia in 2003 should in no way be perceived as criticism of the authorities or of the experts who carried out this census.

In addition to the data of the 2003 population census of Abkhazia, which will be discussed below, there are also expert evaluations that present a significantly different ethnodemographic picture.¹² According to A. Ankvab, who held the post of prime minister in 2004, there were a total of approximately 225,000 people living in Abkhazia, including approximately 65,000 Abkhazians and about 60,000 Georgians in the Gal district alone, while the postwar economic collapse and unemployment forced about another 40,000 Abkhazians to leave the republic for Russia.¹³ However Russian statistics determined the number of Abkhazians in the Russian Federation at the time the population census was conducted as follows: 1989—7,239 people¹⁴ and 2002—11,366.¹⁵ So from the official viewpoint the number of Abkhazians in Russia in the 1990s increased by approximately 4,000 people, although in reality this figure is probably much higher (possibly even several-fold), since many of the new arrivals remained illegal migrants for quite a long time.

All the same it is difficult to believe that the real increase could amount to almost 40,000 people, as should follow from A. Ankvab's statement. Evidently he slightly underestimated the number of Abkhazians in Abkhazia, while the scope of their exodus to Russia is clearly overestimated, since the opposition actively accused the authorities at that time of the ongoing extremely difficult socioeconomic situation provoked by the mass exodus of the republic's residents to Russia in search of work.

Moreover, a statement by Alexei Vashchenko, who is well-known for his support of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and is an assistant of Viktor Alksnis, who was a deputy of the Russian Federation State Duma at that time, appeared in the Abkhazian press in the summer of 2005. According to him, the comments supplied by the Duma contain enough justified data to believe that approximately 64,000 Abkhazians, approximately 20,000 Russians, and 75,000 Georgians live in Abkhazia (including three thousand in Abkhazian Svaneti), while the number of Abkhazians in the Russian Federation amounts to around 30,000 people.¹⁶ Evidently in this case too, the Russian experts chose not to take a very critical view of the estimates made by the Abkhazian oppositionists in the heat of the acute political struggle of 2004 and, following suit, artificially lowered the number of Abkhazians.

Finally, a well-known Russian expert on the Caucasus said that at the very end of the 1990s, Vladislav Ardzinba, president of Abkhazia, determined the size of the Georgian population in the Gal district at 60,000 people, while Eduard Shevardnadze, president of Georgia, put the number at

¹² They were presented and analyzed by the author of this article in a joint publication (see: N.A. Dubova, A.N. Yamskov, "Sotsialno-demograficheskie osobennosti abkhazskikh populiatsii v dolgozhitelskikh seleniakh," in: *Sovremennaia selskaia Abkhaziia: sotsialno-etnograficheskie i antropologicheskie issledovaniia*, ed. by N.A. Dubova, V.I. Kozlov, A.N. Yamskov, IEA RAN, Moscow, 2006, pp. 40-41.

¹³ See: V. Shariia, "Aleksandr Ankvab vystupaet na avanstsenu. Zametki s IV S'ezda OPD 'Aitaira' (Vozrozhdenie)," *Ekho Abkhazii*, 10 August, 2004, p. 7.

¹⁴ See: "Etnoiazykovaia situatsiia u narodov Rossiiskoi Federatsii (po dannym perepisi naseleniia 1989)" (*table*), in: *Narody Rossii: Entsiklopediia*, ed.-in-chief V.A. Tishkov, Bolshaia Rossiiskaia Entsiklopediia, Moscow, 1994, p. 441.

¹⁵ See: *Vserossiiskaia perepis naseleniia 2002 goda*, Vol. 4. "Natsionalnyi sostav i vladenie yazykami, grazhdanstvo," Part 1. "Natsionalnyi sostav naseleniia," available at [www.perepis2002.ru/ct/html/TOM_04_01.htm].

¹⁶ See: A. Vashchenko, op. cit., p. 2.

55,000 people. Evidently the matter concerned the territory within the old borders of this region, for after creation of the Tkuarchal district in postwar Abkhazia and transfer of some of the villages to the Ochamchira district, just 37% of the Gal district's prewar area remained.¹⁷

The data of the official 2003 Population Census provide a very different picture (see Table 1 below). But there is every reason to believe that in this case too, again for political reasons, the assessment of the number of Abkhazians in the republic is, on the contrary, overestimated and the number of Georgians clearly underestimated. At the same time, objective circumstances, which make their census or current record difficult, play a very significant role, as will be shown below, in the overestimation of the number of Abkhazians.

Table 1

**Changes in the Ethnic Composition and
Size of the Abkhazian Population
in 1989-2003**

| Ethnic group | 1989 ¹⁸ | | 2003 ¹⁹ | |
|--------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| | Number of people | Share of the population | Number of people | Share of the population |
| Entire population | 525,061 | 100% | 214,016 | 100% |
| Including: | | | | |
| Abkhazians | 93,267 | 17.8% | 94,597 | 44.1% |
| Georgians | 239,872 | 45.7% | 44,041²⁰ | 20.6% |
| Armenians | 76,541 | 14.6% | 44,869 | 21.0% |
| Russians | 74,914 | 14.3% | 23,420 | 11.0% |
| Ukrainians | 11,655 | 2.2% | 1,797 | 0.8% |
| Greeks | 14,664 | 2.8% | 1,486 | 0.7% |

In this case, the size of the Georgian population in 2003 seems dubious, since if these data are taken as the truth, there are only about 40,000 Georgians living in the Gal district and the areas of the Ochamchira and Tkuarchal districts contiguous to it. Although all the estimates made above are much

¹⁷ S. Markedonov, "Nepriznannuiu Abkhaziiu priznaiut," *Chegemaskaia pravda*, No. 30, 9 August, 2005, p. 6.

¹⁸ See: "Raspredelenie naseleniia Abkhazskoi ASSR po naibolee mnogochislennym natsionalnostiam i yazyku," in: *Natsionalnyi sostav naseleniia SSSR po dannym Vsesoiuznoi perepisi naseleniia 1989 g.*, Finansy i Statistika, Moscow, 1991, pp. 116-117.

¹⁹ See: "Natsionalnyi sostav nalichnogo naseleniia po dannym ucheta naseleniia 2003 goda," in: *Abkhazia v tsifrah*, State Statistics Board of the Republic of Abkhazia, Sukhum, 2005, p. 15.

²⁰ These statistics included 40,443 "Georgians" and 3,598 "Mingrels," but the author joined these figures in the table. In reality, most of the Georgian population of Abkhazia are Mingrelians and the entire Gal district, for example, is currently populated by them, but only a small number deems it necessary to call themselves Mingrelians in particular, rather than Georgians. Like the Svans, the Mingrelians are a sub-ethnic group of Georgians who have a close linguistic and cultural affinity with them, but in so doing their language is not understood by the Georgians themselves. In 1926, when a population census was carried out with special emphasis on ethnic and linguistic affiliation, and among the primarily peasant population of Abkhazia the ideas of Georgian unity were not as popular as they are today, the number of Mingrelians in Abkhazia was four-fold higher than the number of those who called themselves Georgian at that time, while all of them, along with their kindred Svans, were calculated at 67,500 people, or 31.8% of the republic's population (see: T. Achugba, A. Khashba, op. cit., p. 53).

higher—55-60,000 people and more, right up to 65-70,000. On the other hand, the data on the Georgian population of Sukhum and the Gagra, Gudauta, Sukhum, and Gulripsh districts can be considered quite precise, and they totaled approximately 4,700 people in 2003.²¹

So, taking account of the expert estimates presented above, it can be presumed that approximately 65,000 Georgians of the almost 240,000 actually remain in Abkhazia, most of whom live in the Gal district, accounting for almost 99% of the population there, as well as in the villages that belonged to this region during Soviet times of the contiguous parts of the Ochamchira and Tkuarchal districts. Evidently underestimating the number of Georgians living in Abkhazia is prompted by political considerations. Many of its residents have secretly obtained Georgian citizenship and until the fall of 2008 were frequently traveling there for commercial reasons. Quite large groups of Georgians, mainly women and elderly people, continue to live in the cities of Sukhum and Gagra too. There are also a number of Georgians living in Abkhazian families in most Abkhazian villages as the result of the formerly widespread practice of mixed marriages during the Soviet period.

The data of the Abkhazian population census are just as debatable with respect to the number of Abkhazians living in the republic in 2003. Against the background of the noticeable losses in population during the war years,²² acute drop in fertility,²³ and exodus of some Abkhazians to Russia, the data indicating that supposedly there has been a slight increase in the size of the republic's Abkhazian population do not hold much water. So its real size can only be assessed very provisionally for that year at approximately 70-75,000, considering that another approximately 15-20,000 Abkhazians now live in Russia, about 8-12,000 of whom came from Abkhazia during the period under review.

Changes in the Dispersal of the Main Nationalities of Abkhazia in the 1990s-Beginning of the 2000s

Dispersal of the population in Abkhazia has undergone significant changes, since the more than two-fold drop in its size was accompanied by an even greater decrease in the total number of urban residents (see Table 2), whereby at the expense of Georgians, Russians, Ukrainians, Greeks, and the representatives of some other ethnic groups alone. In Tkuarchal alone, an industrial center situated in the mountains, there was a significant, almost two-fold, drop in the number of its Abkhazian residents as well.

Serious changes also occurred in the rural population—due to the departure of Georgians, many villages beyond the territory of the former Gal district were ultimately abandoned. The littoral belt to

²¹ Here and hereafter data for 2003 are taken from "Natsionalnyi sostav nalichnogo naseleniia po dannym ucheta naseleniia 2003 goda," pp. 14-15.

²² For example, in the Abkhazian villages of Jgerda and Chlou of the Ochamchira district and Duripsh of the Gudauta district, my colleague N.A. Dubova determined the losses of able-bodied men during the 1992-1993 war and during the subsequent hostilities at approximately 10%-15% of this age group (for more detail, see: N.A. Dubova, A.N. Yamskov, op. cit., p. 45).

²³ As a well-known demographer figuratively said about the Abkhazians, "falling far behind developed countries in our level of socioeconomic development ... we were quick to borrow the peculiarities of population reproduction from them," that is, low fertility and, in the case of some villages, depopulation (see: R.P. Shamba, "Osobennosti dinamiki i polovozrastnoi struktury selskogo naseleniia Gudautskogo raiona," in: *Kavkaz: istoriia, kultura, traditsii, iazyk*, according to the documents from an international scientific conference dedicated to the 75th anniversary of the D.I. Gulia Abkhazian Institute of Humanitarian Studies, Abkhazian Academy of Sciences, 28-31 May, 2001, ed. by V.Sh. Avidzba, AbIGI, Sukhum, 2003, p. 354).

Table 2

**Dynamics of the Size of
the Population of Abkhazian Cities
in 1991-2003**

| City | Size of the population in 1991 ²⁴ | Size of the population in 2003 ²⁵ |
|------------|---|---|
| Sukhum | 120,000 | 43,700 |
| Gagra | 26,900 | 10,700 |
| Tkuarchal | 22,000 | 4,800 |
| Ochamchira | 20,600 | 4,700 |
| Gal | 15,700 | 7,200 |
| Gudauta | 15,300 | 7,700 |

the south of Sukhum, particularly the area stretching from the mouth of the Kodori River to Ochamchira, which before the war was an essentially entirely built-up area along the railroad and highway and in which some villages bordered directly on each other, is now essentially deserted.

So *the dispersal of Abkhazians* has significantly changed for many reasons, such as mass resettlement in the cities of Sukhum, Gagra, and partially Gudauta; resettlement in some of the coastal town-type settlements and villages of the Gagra, Gudauta, and Gulripsh districts; and departure of the population from the most remote, peripheral parts of the mountain villages.²⁶

Urbanization of the Abkhazians, which progressed at an accelerated rate in the mid-1990s, led to an increase in their numbers in 1989-2003 in Sukhum by 65% and in Gagra and the coastal town-type settlements, in which 2/3 of this region's population reside, by 44%. On the other hand, as a result of this process, the number of Abkhazians has noticeably decreased in the mainly rural population of the Gudauta (by 10%) and, particularly, of the Ochamchira (by 32%) districts. The noted resettlement in the coastal villages and town-type settlements has also led to an increase in the Abkhazian population in the Gulripsh district by a total of 277%,²⁷ since only isolated Abkhazian families or members of polyethnic families used to live there. Abkhazian experts also note that "along with moving to the cities, the outflow of residents from mountain and piedmont Abkhazian villages to coastal villages and settlements has also become more active (for example, from the village of Arasadzykh to the villages of Uarcha and Dranda and the town-type settlement of Agudzera), where there used to be very few Abkhazians."²⁸

According to the 2003 population census, it can be presumed that a little more than half of Abkhazians now live in cities,²⁹ while in 1970 the level of their urbanization amounted to only 11.4%³⁰ and increased quite slowly right up until 1989. Several indirect signs indicate the way the

²⁴ According to the data of corresponding reference articles, see: *Bolshoi entsiklopedicheski slovar*, 2nd ed., revised and supplemented, ed.-in-chief A.M. Prokhorov, Bolshaia Rossiiskaia Entsiklopediia, Moscow, 1997, pp. 241, 246, 318, 864, 1167, 1206.

²⁵ The data in this table rounded off by the author are taken from: "Chislennost nalichnogo naseleniia po g. Sukhum i raionam po dannym ucheta naseleniia 2003 goda," in: *Abkhazii v tsifrakh...*, p. 14.

²⁶ See, section prepared by the author in the following work: N.A. Dubova, A.N. Yamskov, op. cit., p. 47.

²⁷ The author's calculations from data presented in the following work: T. Achugba, A. Khashba, op. cit., p. 54.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²⁹ The author's conclusion based on a comparison of the data from the tables (see: "Chislennost nalichnogo naseleniia...", p. 14; "Natsionalnyi sostav nalichnogo naseleniia...", p. 15).

³⁰ See: T. Achugba, A. Khashba, op. cit., p. 53.

urbanization of the Abkhazians has increased: the percentage of those living in Sukhum, Abkhazia's absolutely dominating city center,³¹ amounted to 10% in 1970, to 13% in 1979, to 16% in 1989, and to 26% in 2003.³² In the same way, the share of Abkhazians living in the Gagra district, which is urbanized by Abkhazian standards, increased in 1989-2003 from 7% to 11%, while other Abkhazian city-dwellers are residents of Gudauta, Tkuarchal, and the coastal town-type settlements of the Gudauta and Gulripsh districts.

Another, but also indirect, argument in favor of the conclusion that there are more urban than rural residents among the Abkhazians is provided by the data of the 2003 population census that city-dwellers constitute 44.9% of the population of Abkhazia.³³ For according to this same source, the Georgian population of Abkhazia constitutes about 20% of the republic's residents, however 89% of them live in the Gal, Tkuarchal, and Ochamchira districts, the level of urbanization of which amounts to 24%, 32%, and 19%, respectively, and just the town of Gal is populated by Georgians. So the clear majority of Abkhazia's Georgian population are rural residents at present and it is this what defines the prevailing superiority of the rural population over the urban in the republic.

But we should not forget that all of these estimates for 2003 are provisional due to the very likely overestimation of the number of Abkhazians and underestimation of the number of Georgians in the data of the population census, as mentioned above.

So in the middle and second half of the 1990s, urbanization of the Abkhazians was truly explosive. However, even after becoming urban residents, they remained very closely tied to their native villages.³⁴ There were many reasons for the accelerated urbanization. It was partially prompted by the possibility of seizing the houses and apartments abandoned in the cities by the Georgians and city-dwellers of other non-titular ethnic groups who fled during and immediately after the Abkhazian-Georgian war, as well as by the desire of young and middle-aged Abkhazians to settle in the centers of socioeconomic life, where there was a chance of finding a job or at least making some kind of a living in the very economically difficult period from the middle to the end of the 1990s. Even the disappearance in the aftermath of the 1992-1993 war of the strict restrictions on registration in cities and acute competition with Georgians and the members of the other main ethnic groups of the population of Soviet Abkhazia for the right to urban registration that prevailed in the late Soviet period also became a kind of stimulus for postwar urbanization. In addition, many of the Abkhazians who moved to such cities and coastal town-type settlements as Gagra, Pitsunda, Novyi Afon (New Athos), Tsandripsh (former Gantiadi), Sukhum, Gudauta, and so on after the war also very justifiably hoped that sooner or later mass Russian tourism would be revived in the republic and then city houses and apartments would again become an important source of income during the resort season, which did in fact happen less than ten years after their resettlement.

But this accelerated and partially somewhat artificial urbanization of the 1990s gave rise to another phenomenon that was probably unique for contemporary Abkhazia. Evidently, in this respect, we can even talk about a certain special "semi-urbanization" of the Abkhazians, whereby the boundary between city and village residents is extremely vague and provisional since many people who mainly live in the city invest a large or very large part of their income in farming on the landed plots of close relatives and receive a corresponding part of their income there. In Jgerda of the Ochamchira district and Khuap of the Gudauta district, such people constitute 12% and 9%, respectively, of the

³¹ For more on the unique position of Sukhum in the system of Abkhazian cities, see: L. Bartsyts, *Natsionalnaia geografiia Abkhazii. Sovremennoe sostoianie, problemy i perspektivy ee razvitiia*, Sukhum, 2004, p. 103.

³² The author's calculations based on data presented in the following work: T. Achugba, A. Khashba, op. cit., p. 54.

³³ "Chislennost nalichnogo naseleniia..." (table), p. 13.

³⁴ For more about this, see: D.A. Kandelaki, A. Sh. Khashba, "Transformatsiia polovozrastnoi struktury selskikh abkhazov v postsovetsskii period," in: *Sovremennaiia selskaia Abkhazia: sotsialno-etnograficheskie i antropologicheskie issledovaniia*, pp. 78-79.

entire official size of the able-bodied population of these villages,³⁵ without, of course, being included in their number. It should be emphasized that this does not simply concern the relatives of rural residents who periodically visit their villages from the cities and help with the farm work. In Jgerda or Khuap, as in any other Abkhazian village, the latter are much greater in number since essentially all urban Abkhazians are very closely tied to their native villages and the relatives who still live there. But in this case the people mentioned above who are engaged in farm work on a permanent basis and in so doing acquire a significant or most of their personal income from it live with their village relatives for most of the year, although they are officially counted as city-dwellers registered in Sukhum, Gudauta, or Ochamchira.

On the other hand, as in other regions of ongoing urbanization, the majority of Abkhazia's rural residents essentially spend most of their time in the city where they have their main job and main or significant source of income, while they engage in farm work at their landed plots primarily to produce food for their family. Such people, who constitute 8% of the able-bodied population in Jgerda and 7% in Khuap, actually work and live most of the time in the city and do not maintain their land plots as a source of income. In so doing, however, they are registered in their villages.

As a result, during population censuses such people, both in the first (officially city-dwellers who live for the most part in villages with their relatives and work on their land plots) and in the second case (officially villagers who work and mainly live in the city), may be counted twice—in terms of their place of official registration and in terms of their actual place of residence, that is, they are counted both as urban and rural residents. This is precisely what gives rise to the artificially high number of Abkhazians in Abkhazia. It is possible that something similar could also occur with the residents of some Armenian settlements, but to a much lesser extent. On the other hand, this phenomenon has in no way affected the Russians and Georgians of Abkhazia—since the war of 1992-1993 almost none of the first remain among the rural population, and rural Georgians can no longer compete with the Abkhazians when it comes to taking possession of the abandoned housing or vying for jobs in the conditions of acute unemployment in the cities and coastal settlements.

Finally, in very recent years, thanks to the development of Russian tourism and the high seasonal demand for work hands in Abkhazia's coastal resort zone (from Gagra to Sukhum), most people, particularly from remote mountain villages, become temporary labor migrants. For example, approximately 10% of the able-bodied population from the above-mentioned village of Khuap regularly travels to the coast to earn a living. The same goes for approximately 8% of the population of Kaldakhuara. These people live and work far from home during the entire resort season (at least three months, that is, from July to September, and sometimes longer, from mid-June to the beginning of October) in the coastal cities and villages, only seldom visiting their relatives. Many of them ultimately settle in the cities for good.

There was quite a massive outflow of residents from the Abkhazian villages to the cities after the 1992-1993 war, which is also confirmed by the data in Table 3.

When analyzing the data of Table 3, it should be kept in mind that they naturally do not include data about those Georgian (mainly Mingrelian) farms from which people fled during the war. But some Georgians, mainly elderly, remained in these (and many other) villages and so their farms, like the small number of farms of Turks (in Jgerda), individual farms of Armenians or Russians (in Duripsh and Kaldakhuara), were also included in the corresponding column of Table 3. Of course, this column also includes a rather noticeable number of ethnically mixed farms (primarily Abkhazian-Georgian, as well as Abkhazian-Turkish, Abkhazian-Armenian, Abkhazian-Russian, and others).

But not only has an accelerated outflow of the Abkhazian population to the cities been noticed in recent years. Concentration of the residents of certain villages in their central or other parts that

³⁵ For more detail, see: A.N. Yamskov, "Ekonomicheskoe polozhenie i sotsialno-demograficheskie osobennosti selskikh abkhazov," in: *Etnicheskaiia ekologiia: narody i ikh kul'tury*, ed. by N.A. Dubova, L.T. Solovieva, IEA RAN, Moscow, 2008, p. 151.

Table 3

**Number and Share of
Abkhazian Farms Abandoned in the Villages after
the 1992-1993 War**

| Village | Year | Official number of farms in the villages (including those abandoned by their Abkhazian owners) | Number of Abkhazian farms abandoned after 1993 | Percentage of abandoned Abkhazian farms in the villages |
|-------------|------|--|--|---|
| Chlou | 2003 | 498 | 10 | 2% |
| Jgerda | 2003 | 259 | 11 | 4% |
| Duripsh | 2003 | 572 | 38 | 7% |
| Khuap | 2006 | 147 | 20 | 14% |
| Kaldakhuara | 2006 | 251 | 9 ³⁶ | 4% |

better equipped with roads and transportation services has also been going on at the same time. On the whole, it is typical for Abkhazians to be very scattered over a vast territory that is now considered officially to be one settlement. Some of the houses or groups of houses of relatives are separated by mountain streams and rivers, ravines overgrown by trees, sections of fields, orchards, or plantations. Sometimes a traditional Abkhazian village with a population of several hundred people can stretch for tens of kilometers. Such is Jgerda, for example, which extends over low foothills and a piedmont valley, connected with the coastal Sukhum-Ochamchira highway by an asphalt road 15-20 km.

Unfortunately, we cannot give a detailed description of the changes in dispersal of other ethnic groups of the Abkhazian population at present for two reasons.

- First, there are no corresponding published data, and
- second, we only studied rural Abkhazians during our expeditions.

So only a few very general conclusions can be drawn.

As for the Georgians, as mentioned above, their numbers have dramatically decreased in the largest cities (Sukhum and Gagra), while only isolated people remain mostly in rural regions in the north and the center of the republic among the ethnically mixed families or rare families of elderly people. However, the south of Abkhazia is an exception—the Gal district and the areas that belong to the Ochamchira and Tkuarchal districts where a predominantly Georgian (usually Mingrelian) population currently lives in essentially mono-ethnic villages and the city of Gal.

The Armenian and Russian population was forced to entirely leave most of the littoral belt in the environs of Sukhum and particularly to the south of it due to the intense destruction of these settlements during the war, but it has largely remained in the Gagra district and in Gudauta and its environs. Under Abkhazian conditions, Ukrainians essentially do not distinguish themselves from Russians, and their dispersal has changed in the same way. Most Russians and many Armenians have left Su-

³⁶ This is the minimum estimate, since a total of 16 households were abandoned in Kaldakhuara. It was impossible to establish the precise percentage of Abkhazian farms among them. But in 9 of them the head of the household had a genuinely Abkhazian name. Incidentally, since many Abkhazian names now sound the same as those of Mingrelians, the total number of Abkhazian farms abandoned in Kaldakhuara is most likely much higher than 9.

khum for Russia, but some rural Armenians resettled in this city after the war. Like the Abkhazians, the Armenians left many remote mountain villages, moving closer to the Russian border to the villages of the Gagra district or to Sukhum and its suburban villages. For example, most residents of the village of Atara Armianskaia from the Ochamchira district also moved to the Gagra district near the Russian border along the Psou river.

The Greek population has almost entirely left Abkhazia, including the rural regions to the north of Sukhum and the city of Sukhum itself, while only members of ethnically mixed families have remained in the republic, in the village of Kaldakhuara, for example.

C o n c l u s i o n

There is every reason to believe that a full-fledged population census will be conducted in Abkhazia in 2010. The future census will no doubt provide much more precise data about the ethnic composition and dispersal of this country's population. But even if political considerations do not influence the specialists carrying out the census and processing its information, they will continue to encounter an extremely difficult scientific and practical problem—how to correctly determine the size of the urban and rural population of Abkhazia under conditions when many Abkhazians essentially live in the village and city at the same time. Evidently in the future too it will not be possible to completely avoid a certain amount of overestimation of the number of Abkhazians in Abkhazia for this objective reason caused by the incomplete urbanization of the Abkhazian part of the republic's population.

The question of the ethnodemographic structure of the republic's population and of the absolute and relative size of the main ethnic groups has become extremely politicized in contemporary Abkhazia. Until recently Abkhazians predominated in the power structures, but truly volatile questions prevail in Abkhazia today—how long will the Abkhazians be able to hold onto complete political power in conditions of democratic elections and the absence of a direct military threat, when and to what extent will representatives of other ethnic groups (and which ones) be able to share this power with them, and what might this development of events hold in store for the republic?
