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Abkhazia: Experiences of Fieldwork, from Professional to Personal

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Abkhazia: Experiences of Fieldwork, from Professional to Personal.

I take this opportunity to reflect on the research-process that I undertook years ago (starting in 2009) and that led me all the way to Sukhum/i, a small city of which much of the world has never heard but which became one of the critical centres of my mental map. When pondering this process, I find myself navigating between two different sets of experiences, a professional one and a personal one. Of course, these experiences often overlap, but often the former overshadows the latter, at least more publicly. A lot of the research that is carried out on Abkhazia focuses on trends and common behaviour of large groups of people, but the field-research experience is made up of individual stories and individual perspectives. Here, I want briefly to explore this dynamic and focus on the personal and human dimension of working in and on Abkhazia.

As social science researchers, we try to understand determinants of, *inter alia*, historical events, political allegiances, institutional mechanisms, common identities, and systems of power and exploitation. We look for the commonalities among people's behaviour, observing smaller or larger groups. I, for one, went to Abkhazia in 2012 to study the political economy that characterised it before the Russo-Georgian War. In 2015, the research-project that financed my trip centred on the perceptions of the EU in Abkhazia.

As part of our work, we (social scientists) focus on the social and cultural aspects of human behaviour but very rarely on the downright human aspect, and even more rarely on the individual aspect – unless the individual is a notable figure, or a key or representative respondent. But Abkhazia has a fraught history that has engendered such different emotions by so many different people; it has determined personal trajectories in such dramatic fashion that there is no understanding of the currents of thought and behaviour without grasping the intensity of the individual stories.

I – and many others – would have had no access to Abkhazia, its history and its present, if not for the individuals (both in various parts of Abkhazia and outside of it) who shared with me/us their stories, their experiences, their 'personal' Abkhazia. I am convinced that our work does not (cannot?) properly convey the extensive and complex path of discovery that eventually leads to the more tangible output of our research – publications, reports, etc... I write 'we' and 'our' having shared some of these considerations with colleagues and friends, but I shall now zoom in on what this means for me.

My experience of field-research in and on Abkhazia has acquired a personal significance that goes far beyond what transpires from the resulting publications. I have met exceptional people thanks to the work that I carried out on Abkhazia; I lived through some unforgettable experiences (mostly positive, but not exclusively), which led to enduring memories; and, most importantly, I laid the foundations of many long-lasting friendships that make my life richer in so many ways.

These encounters and experiences have constructively challenged what I understand as resilience and how I relate to memory. Resilience is a cornerstone of living with, or relating to, Abkhazia. This is the result of Abkhazia finding itself on a geopolitical fault-line, but also of navigating a scenario for which the international system does not really make space. As for memory, every trip to Abkhazia entails an incursion into the past. It is a difficult and complex past and, at the same time, a very present one. As everyone remembers and interprets such a past in widely different ways, I have had to reflect at length about how memories are created, by whom, and their influence.

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I was guided through these voyages of discovery by interviewees, friends, colleagues, and random acquaintances and, thanks to them, working in and on Abkhazia has been such a defining feature of both my professional life and my personal life. I am not listing names, but many of those people will recognise themselves in this short text; as for the others, I hope that our encounters left them with something positive as they did for me. These are all people who have a strong attachment to Abkhazia; I am grateful to them for sharing it with me.

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Portrait
Gal(i) district
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