Field Report:

The Abkhaz in Turkey: Navigating Identity, Unity, and Belonging

Elçin BAŞOL*

1. Introduction:

Abkhazs residing in Turkey share a profound historical connection with their homeland, Abkhazia. This report explores the multifaceted challenges faced by the Abkhaz community in Turkey, emphasizing their historical ties with Abkhazia, aspirations for unrestricted visitation, and the quest for recognition of Abkhazia as an independent state by the Turkish Republic. For this purpose, the most densely populated cities in Abkhazia, Turkey—Düzce, Sakarya, and Eskişehir—were chosen for field research.

1.1 Background

The historical narrative of the Abkhazian diaspora in Turkey is deeply rooted in centuries-old migration patterns, where their ancestors sought refuge in the Anatolian region. Across urban centers like Düzce, Adapazarı, and Eskişehir, Abkhazians have seamlessly integrated into Turkish society, contributing to its cultural mosaic by preserving and transmitting their unique traditions, language, and customs. As guardians of a diverse cultural heritage, Abkhazians have steadfastly upheld their ancestral legacies, demonstrating resilience and adaptability across successive generations. However, beneath this surface of cultural amalgamation lies a profound attachment to their homeland, Abkhazia, nestled amidst the picturesque landscapes of the Caucasus. This enduring bond transcends mere sentimentality, fostering robust familial, social, and cultural connections that span geographical distances. Despite their enduring presence in Turkish society, Abkhazians grapple with multifaceted challenges, including questions of identity, language retention, and socio-political recognition. The aspiration for unimpeded access to Abkhazia and the fervent advocacy for the Turkish Republic's acknowledgment of Abkhazia's sovereignty underscore the community's pursuit cultural self-determination. Against the backdrop of historical resonance and contemporary imperatives, an academic inquiry into minority rights and recognition among Abkhazians in Turkey emerges as a pertinent endeavor, elucidating the complexities of identity construction, belonging, and empowerment within an evolving global landscape.

* PhD Candidate, Kadir Has University, International Relations Department.
1.2 Objectives of the Report

The aims of this report are multifaceted and the main objectives of the report can be listed as follows.

1. *To Explore the Historical Context*: The report aims to understand the historical background of the Abkhazian diaspora in Turkey, tracing their migration patterns, settlement, and cultural integration, while highlighting their enduring ties to their homeland of Abkhazia.

2. *To Examine Cultural Preservation Efforts*: It seeks to investigate the preservation of Abkhazian cultural identity, traditions, language, and customs within the Turkish context, identifying challenges and initiatives undertaken by the community to safeguard their heritage.

3. *To Assess Integration Challenges*: The report endeavors to analyze the challenges faced by Abkhazians in Turkey regarding integration into Turkish society, including issues related to employment opportunities, recognition of qualifications, and awareness of their cultural identity among the broader population.

4. *To Investigate the Concerns About Rights to Travel*: It aims to explore the desire of Abkhazians in Turkey for unrestricted travelling to Abkhazia and the aspiration for the Turkish Republic to recognize Abkhazia as an independent state, examining the historical ties and contemporary perspectives driving these aspirations.

5. *To Provide Recommendations for Action*: Based on the findings, the report intends to propose actionable recommendations to address the identified challenges and support the preservation of Abkhazian cultural identity, integration into Turkish society, and the realization of aspirations related to visitation rights and recognition of Abkhazia's sovereignty.

6. *To Raise Awareness and Promote Dialogue*: Lastly, the report seeks to raise awareness about the experiences and aspirations of the Abkhazian community in Turkey regarding minority rights and recognition, fostering dialogue and understanding among policymakers, stakeholders, and the broader public.

These objectives collectively aim to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the issues facing the Abkhazian community in Turkey and to advocate for their rights and recognition within the broader societal context.
1.3 Methodology

This report adopts a qualitative research approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. A total of twenty interviews with representatives from the Abkhazian community residing in Düzce, Adapazarı, and Eskişehir has been conducted.

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who could provide rich insights into the experiences and perspectives of the Abkhazian community regarding minority rights and recognition. Efforts were made to ensure diversity in terms of age, gender, socioeconomic background, and level of involvement within the community.

Ten of the Interviews were conducted face-to-face with participants in locations convenient to them, such as community centers or public spaces. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. However, due to the political and social sensitivities of most of the participants, audio and video recordings were not taken. Focus group interviews with 5 participants were conducted online. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing for flexibility in exploring relevant themes while ensuring consistency across discussions.
The interview questions were designed to elicit responses related to various aspects of the Abkhazian community's experiences, challenges, and aspirations, including:

1. Cultural preservation efforts and challenges.
2. Integration challenges within Turkish society.
3. Perspectives on visitation rights to Abkhazia.
4. Aspirations for the recognition of Abkhazia's independence.
5. Suggestions for addressing community needs and enhancing minority rights.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview data. Interview notes were reorganised and coded to identify recurring themes, patterns and important insights. Iterative analyses of the coded data were conducted to develop a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perspectives shared by the participants.

It is essential to acknowledge certain limitations inherent in the methodology. The sample size, although diverse, may not fully represent the entire spectrum of experiences within the Abkhazian community. Additionally, the researcher's role as an outsider may have influenced participant responses, despite efforts to establish rapport and maintain neutrality. However, these limitations were mitigated to the best extent possible through transparent and reflexive research practices.

Overall, this methodology facilitated an in-depth exploration of the experiences and perspectives of the Abkhazian community in Turkey, contributing valuable insights to the broader discourse on minority rights and recognition. Consideration was given to city and age distribution when selecting the participants. The participant profiles are detailed in the table below. At the request of the majority of participants, their names were omitted. Similarly, in an effort to ensure participant comfort, voice recordings were not conducted, and detailed notes were maintained throughout the interviews.
## Participant Profile

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<th>Profession</th>
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<td>Sakarya</td>
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<td>Düzce/Istanbul</td>
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2. **Abkhazians in Turkey: A Historical Overview**

The Abkhazian diaspora in Turkey is characterized not only by migration and settlement but also by deep historical ties to Abkhazia. This section delves into the historical narrative, tracing the migration patterns, and highlighting the significant contributions of Abkhazians to Turkey's cultural diversity.

### 2.1 Migration and Settlement Patterns

The history of Abkhazians in Turkey is a testament to centuries of migration, cultural exchange, and integration within the Anatolian landscape. While specific records detailing the earliest arrivals are scarce, historical accounts suggest that Abkhazians began migrating to present-day Turkey, then part of the Ottoman Empire, during the 16th and 17th centuries.¹

One of the primary reasons for this migration was the Ottoman Empire's policy of recruiting soldiers from various ethnic groups to bolster its military forces. Abkhazians, known for their martial skills and valor, were among the many ethnic groups recruited into the Ottoman army. As a result, significant numbers of Abkhazians settled in various regions of the empire, including present-day Turkey.

Over time, these early Abkhazian settlers assimilated into Ottoman society while preserving aspects of their cultural identity, such as language, customs, and traditions. They established communities in different parts of Turkey, particularly in regions with favorable agricultural conditions or strategic significance.

After the first settlers, the number of Abkhaz in Anatolia increased with the Abkhaz who had to come to the Ottoman lands after the Circassian Exile. The Circassian exile, also known as the Circassian genocide or the Caucasian War, refers to a series of events that unfolded in the 19th century, primarily between 1763 and 1864, in the Caucasus region.² It was a tragic chapter marked by violence, displacement, and forced migration, primarily affecting the Circassian and Abkhazian peoples, among others.

The Circassians, an ethnic group indigenous to the North Caucasus, inhabited the regions of Circassia, which encompassed parts of present-day Russia, Georgia, and Turkey. They maintained a distinct cultural identity, with a rich oral tradition, vibrant folklore, and strong clan-based social structure. The word Circassian is an external name given to the peoples living in the Caucasus, such as Adyghe, Kabardian, Abkhaz, Ubykh, Ossetian. Early Ottoman sources referred to all these peoples as "Circassians". The Arabs, on the other hand, used the word "Sharakeen", which is similar to Circassian,

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¹ Timur Achugba, 2022, Ethnic History of Abkhazians, Apra, pg.84-96.
to refer to the same peoples. The word "Circassian" used in a narrow sense refers to the Adyghe community. In the following sections of the report, based on the interviews with the interviewees, the issue of the adoption of the Circassian identity by the Abkhaz will be discussed in detail.

The catalyst for the Circassian exile was the expansionist policies of the Russian Empire, which sought to assert control over the Caucasus region. The Russian military launched a series of brutal campaigns, collectively known as the Caucasian War, aimed at subjugating the Circassian and Abkhazian populations and annexing their territories.

The war was characterized by widespread violence, atrocities, and massacres perpetrated against civilian populations. Russian forces employed scorched-earth tactics, burning villages, destroying crops, and displacing entire communities in their quest for dominance. The Circassians and Abkhazians fiercely resisted Russian incursions, engaging in guerrilla warfare and mounting spirited defenses of their homelands.

However, despite their valiant efforts, the Circassians and Abkhazians ultimately faced overwhelming military force. In 1864, the Russian Empire declared victory in the Caucasian War, effectively annexing Circassia and Abkhazia into its territories. In the aftermath of the conflict, the Russian authorities implemented a policy of forced expulsion, aiming to cleanse the newly annexed territories of indigenous populations deemed hostile to Russian rule. The Circassian exile resulted in a mass displacement of Circassians and Abkhazians from their ancestral lands. Faced with the threat of persecution, violence, and starvation, hundreds of thousands of Circassians and Abkhazians embarked on perilous journeys to seek refuge in neighboring territories, including the Ottoman Empire.3

The Ottoman Empire, recognizing the plight of the Circassian and Abkhazian refugees, extended sanctuary to them, allowing them to settle in various regions of the empire, including present-day Turkey. The Circassian and Abkhazian exiles brought with them their cultural heritage, traditions, and skills, contributing to the diverse tapestry of Ottoman society.

The Circassian exile remains a significant and poignant chapter in the history of the Circassian and Abkhazian peoples, shaping their collective memory, identity, and struggle for recognition. It serves as a reminder of the enduring resilience, strength, and endurance of these communities in the face of adversity, while also highlighting the ongoing challenges of displacement, cultural preservation, and historical justice.

During the late Ottoman period and the early years of the Republic of Turkey, Abkhazians continued to contribute to various aspects of Turkish society, including agriculture, trade, and the

3 Timur Achugba, 2022, Ethnic History of Abkhazians, Apra, pg.84-96.
military. They maintained their distinct cultural identity, often gathering in tight-knit communities where they could preserve their language and customs.

The 20th century saw significant geopolitical changes that affected the Abkhazian community in Turkey. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey led to the formation of modern nation-states in the Caucasus region, including Georgia, where Abkhazia is located nearby. This shift in borders resulted in a separation between the Abkhazian diaspora in Turkey and their ancestral homeland.

Despite these changes, the Abkhazian community in Turkey has remained resilient, adapting to new realities while maintaining connections to their cultural heritage and ancestral roots. Today, Abkhazians in Turkey continue to contribute to the country's cultural diversity and social fabric, while also preserving and celebrating their unique identity as part of the broader Turkish society.

The history of the Abkhazians in Turkey is intertwined with the broader historical context of the Circassian exile, also known as the Circassian genocide or the Caucasian War. In the mid-19th century, the Russian Empire launched a series of military campaigns against the Circassian and Abkhazian peoples in the Caucasus region, aiming to expand its territory and assert control over the region.

2.2 Historical Ties and Abkhazian War

The deportation policy of the Russian Empire failed to entirely purge Abkhazia of its Abkhaz population. While many families, predominantly supportive of the Ottoman Empire during the Ottoman-Russian Wars, were deported, a portion of the Abkhaz populace remained within the territory. This resulted in the fragmentation of numerous families, the dispersal of relatives to various countries, and the severing of familial bonds. Compounded by the limited communication avenues of the era and the integration of the Republic of Abkhazia into the Soviet Union, the once strong family ties of Abkhazians across different regions were effectively dismantled.

During the periods of perestroika and glasnost, efforts by Abkhazians residing in both Abkhazia and Turkey to reconnect with their relatives began. Particularly after 1985, facilitated by reciprocal visits and Turkish youths pursuing higher education in Abkhazia, the ties between the Diaspora and their homeland started to mend.

However, despite the challenges posed by the Soviet regime, in 1975, a significant event occurred as a group of 11 Abkhazians from Turkey journeyed to visit Abkhazia. Led by Ashamba Orhan Cakar, the group purported to be a tourist party, yet undertook considerable risks amid Turkey's political turmoil (the right-left conflict) to reach Abkhazia, then under Soviet jurisdiction.
Orhan Chakar, who met his compatriots in Abkhazia after many years, is crying. Next to him sits Irfan Atan from the group they travelled with.

Following the visit in 1975, in 1977, a group of 23 men and women undertook a similar excursion to Abkhazia under the guise of a tourist trip, aiming to reconnect with their compatriots and locate their relatives in the region.

Photo #2: 1977 visit.

Photo #3: 1977 visit.¹

¹ Photographs taken from the Ashamba family archive.
The outbreak of the war of independence in Abkhazia following the dissolution of the Soviet Union sparked a heightened interest among Abkhazians from Turkey in their homeland. The Abkhaz-Georgian conflict served as a pivotal moment for the Abkhaz Diaspora, which had become fully assimilated and integrated into Turkish society. Concerned for their brethren enduring the ravages of war in their lands of exile, Abkhazians from Turkey sought to galvanize public opinion through various protests and relief efforts.⁵

For the first time since their displacement, Abkhazians from Turkey mobilized collectively, appealing to the Republic of Turkey for assistance. Other Caucasian communities in Turkey joined in this call to action and coordinated efforts. Notably, Caucasian associations and initiatives actively lobbied Turkish political leaders for a ceasefire and aid to Abkhazia.

The initial organized response, not only from the Abkhaz community but also from the North Caucasian Diaspora in Turkey, emerged during the Abkhazian conflict. On August 23, 1992, the "Caucasian-Abkhazia Solidarity Committee" was formed in Istanbul, comprising representatives from 42 Caucasian Cultural Associations. Its aims were multifaceted: to extend economic and humanitarian aid to Abkhazia, to galvanize support for Abkhazia within Turkish and global public spheres, and to pursue political and diplomatic avenues. The rallies staged in Istanbul and Sakarya in September 1992 left a profound mark on Turkish public sentiment. A noteworthy event occurred on September 27-28, 1992, with a car procession from Istanbul to Ankara.⁶

![Photo #4: 29 December 1992. Loading of humanitarian aid from the port of Samsun to Abkhazia. (Fatih Atan)](image)

These visible demonstrations garnered widespread attention, prompting then-President Suleyman Demirel to engage in dialogue with Abkhaz representatives. Consequently, on October 13, 1992, a session concerning the Caucasus and Abkhazia convened in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. Turkish parliamentarians also engaged with representatives from the Parliamentary Assembly of the European Commission. Furthermore, reports were dispatched to international bodies such as the United Nations and the OSCE. Notably, Committee representatives were involved in ceasefire discussions in Moscow on September 3, 1992.\(^7\) This marked the inaugural and most impactful collective response from both the Abkhaz and Caucasian communities residing within Turkey's borders.

Participant #5 vividly recalls this period, stating, "I learned about the outbreak of the war during a meeting at the association in Istanbul. Our thoughts were consumed with aiding our brethren there. People were even prepared to join the fight. Three young women ventured to Abkhazia to join the battle, inspiring others to follow suit. Funds and aid poured in. We reached out to the prime minister, the president, and all relevant authorities. While the response was mixed, our efforts were resolute."

The strong bonds forged between Abkhazia and Abkhazians from Turkey during the conflict endured beyond the war's conclusion. Following the victory of the Abkhazians and the establishment of the Republic of Abkhazia, Abkhazians in Turkey exhibited heightened interest in their homeland. The descendants of Abkhaz and Ubykhs exiled from Abkhazia after the Ottoman-Russian War sought to return, spurred by initiatives dubbed the "Return." Granting citizenship to these "returnees" bolstered migration between Turkey and Abkhazia, facilitated by state-sponsored opportunities such as housing assistance, land grants, and maternity benefits.\(^8\)

While the number of Abkhazians returning to their homeland in Abkhazia remains relatively small compared to the Abkhaz population residing in Turkey, the communication and bonds between Turkey and Abkhazia are steadily strengthening. Notably, a considerable number of Abkhazians from Turkey choose to spend their holidays in Abkhazia, particularly during the spring and summer months, where they reconnect with relatives and partake in excursions. This trend underscores the significant spiritual value attached to the rekindling of familial ties spanning "centuries" for the Abkhazian community.

Participant #1 eloquently describes his family's historical journey and the profound connection he maintains with his relatives in Abkhazia, encapsulating the sentiment shared by many within the diaspora:

"One day my father received a phone call in Düzce. He told someone who had previously travelled to the Caucasus that if you find my relatives there, give my number and address. The phone


\(^8\) Anıt Baba, 2013, Legal guide for returnees to Abkhazia.
call came from Turkey, but the person on the other end of the line was his distant cousin from Abkhazia. The year is 1990 or so. He says he is in Trabzon, they talk. Before he could say the hotel, the phone was switched off. My father travelled to Trabzon and searched for hotels in the city, but could not find any. After that, it was already war.”

While Abkhazians maintain their steadfast allegiance to the Turkish state, they are equally committed to preserving their connections with Abkhazia. The enduring ties and reunions with their ancestral relatives hold profound spiritual significance for Abkhazians residing in Turkey. Participant #3 eloquently articulates this sentiment with the following words:

"I see Turkey as my homeland and I love it very much. I also see myself as a Turk. Turkishness is not about blood. If you are a Turkish citizen, you are a Turk. This does not prevent me from being Abkhaz. But when you think about it, of course, you feel closer to your compatriots in Abkhazia. I don't know, I have never been to Abkhazia, but if I did, it would probably be a very deep, very emotional situation for me. If a person forgets where he came from and who he is, can he be called a human being?"

The significance of ties with Abkhazia extends beyond moral considerations to include commercial implications. Despite being only partially recognized, Abkhazia maintains its most substantial trade partnership with Turkey, second only to the Russian Federation. Remarkably, this trade volume is predominantly fueled by Abkhazians residing in Turkey, despite Turkey's non-recognition of Abkhazia. In fact, for numerous industries, Abkhazia's foreign trade volume surpasses that of the Russian Federation.

Moreover, Abkhazians in Turkey aspire to influence not just cultural and commercial affairs but also the internal politics of Abkhazia. In a notable instance during the 2014 presidential elections in Abkhazia, a polling station was established at the Abkhaz representative office in Istanbul. However, due to a complaint lodged by Georgia, Turkish authorities intervened, preventing the voting process. Engin Özkoç, a CHP (Turkish Opposition Party) MP of Abkhaz descent, attempted to thwart the police from confiscating the ballot box. Although this incident sparked collective outrage among the Abkhaz community, it failed to resonate widely in the public sphere. Consequently, Abkhazia did not attempt to establish another polling station in Turkey thereafter.⁹

Photo #5: Engin Özkoç resists to hand over the ballot box to the police.

The echoes of the Abkhaz war between Abkhazia and Georgia resonate deeply within the Abkhaz community in Turkey, firmly etched into their collective memory. This conflict and the subsequent triumph of the Abkhazians have significantly influenced the cultural positioning and identity reformation of Abkhazians in Turkey. The annual commemoration of Abkhazia's victory over Georgia serves as a poignant reminder of this pivotal moment in history, celebrated fervently in Sakarya and among Caucasian associations. In a significant milestone, the Victory Day of Abkhazia (Ayaayra) was first officially observed in 2011 in the village of Akbalık in Sakarya, marking a tradition that continues to this day with grand festivities.

2.3 Contributions to Turkey’s Cultural Diversity

The dynamics of interaction between Abkhazians and Turks, as well as other ethnic groups in Turkey, vary significantly depending on the geographic location of their settlement. Abkhazians residing in the vicinity of Düzce and Sakarya predominantly engage in interactions with Turks, Laz, Georgians, and Adygs—the latter being a related community with whom they were exiled from the Caucasus. Within this region, intermarriages between Abkhazians and Adyghes are most prevalent, yet mixed marriages with Turks, Laz, and Georgians have notably increased, particularly since the 1970s, and persist to this day. However, the ethnic perceptions of Abkhazians in Düzce and Sakarya may yield some surprising observations.
One interviewee, noting that there is a village of "Turks" in a neighbourhood quite close to their village, describes this situation as follows:

"There is a neighbourhood near Guma (an Abkhaz village in Düzce, Turkish name: Derdin). The elders always called them Wurdılıkua, they did not consider their social behaviour correct and polite. When they did something wrong, they would say, "Don't behave like a Wırdılı, don't sit like a Wırdılı, don't speak like a Wırdılı. When I asked what a Wırdılı was, I was told that they were Turks. When I grew up, I learnt that the people they called Wırdılı were people from different ethnic groups who migrated to Düzcé from the Black Sea, especially from Ordu. Our elders learnt that most of them came from Ordu and called them Wırdılı, likening it to their own language. And regardless of which ethnic group they belong to, they are all Turks. I still don't know whether the Wırdılı people in our neighbourhood are Laz, Georgian or Armenian. But even I still say to my child, "Are you from Wırdılı?" (Laughs)."

The Abkhaz perception of all other ethnic groups in Turkey is nearly uniform. Regardless of whether they are Laz, Georgian, or belong to any other ethnic group, they are all generally referred to as "Turks". The extent to which the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey or the notion of a "Turkish super-identity" influences this perspective is subject to debate. Nonetheless, Abkhazians also often label themselves as "Turks" beyond their cultural confines, particularly in political contexts. One interviewee articulated this sentiment as follows:

"Of course, we are Abkhaz first. No one can deny this. Everywhere I say that I am Circassian, Abkhaz, I am proud. I am proud. But if they ask me if I am a Turk, I say yes. Of course we are Turks. If we carry this identity (he shows his wallet), of course we are Turks. Being a Turk has nothing to do with blood. It has to do with mentality, citizenship and heart." As in this example, Circassian, Abkhaz and Turkish identities are intertwined among Abkhazians.

The impartial attitude of the Abkhaz towards other ethnic groups extends to the Kurds as well. However, when discussing Kurds, Abkhazians do not necessarily perceive them within the "Turkish" identity. Due to the prevalent association of Kurds with terrorism, they tend to keep their distance from the Kurdish identity. This perception is also influenced by the geographical distribution of Abkhaz settlements in Turkey. They often reside in areas where interaction with Kurds is minimal. However, a segment of the population who have migrated to metropolitan areas may have limited interactions with Kurds. Consequently, their perception of Kurds is largely shaped by what they glean from mass media. One interviewee articulates this stance as follows:

"There are Kurds in Düzcé now. I am from Eskisehir. There are Kurds there too. They migrated. They are good people, I have never seen anything bad from them, but they don't have much in common with us. There are no marriages with Kurds that I know of. And not all Kurds are PKK members, of
course. Because of the terrorist incidents we see in the news, our people are a bit shy. There have been martyrs from our side in the past years. It is very painful."

The scenario for Abkhazians residing in Eskisehir\textsuperscript{10} presents a somewhat distinct dynamic. They navigate within a diverse ethnic milieu compared to their counterparts in Sakarya and Düzce. Turkish individuals and other ethnic groups, predominantly Muhajirs from the Balkans, Tatars, Yörük Turks, and local Turks known as Manav, constitute the primary groups with whom Abkhazians in Eskisehir interact. Mixed marriages across various ethnicities are common in this region, and there is extensive interaction with neighboring villages. Participant #9 offers the following insights regarding interactions with other cultures:

"There are the foundations of Apsuara (Abkhaz ethical teaching). These are the foundations of Abkhaz culture. We do not separate anyone, my dear; everyone is equal. It doesn't matter whether he is a Turk or Abaza. We have brides and grooms of all nationalities. Some of our ancestors were Christians before they came here, but they became Muslims here. Religion is not important, it is important to be human. For example, I can understand Georgian if spoken. We heard it from our neighbours in our childhood in the village."

Abkhazians have significantly enriched cultural diversity, particularly in the urban areas they inhabit. This influence extends beyond their immediate locales to encompass metropolises as well. The younger generation, actively engaged in university studies and community associations within cities, demonstrates remarkable adeptness in cross-cultural interaction.

3. Culture, Identity and Life Practices

The preservation of cultural identity stands as a paramount concern for the Abkhazian community. This section underscores the importance of safeguarding traditional customs, celebrations, and the Abkhazian language to maintain the richness of their heritage.

\textit{Abkhaz Language}

While Abkhazians residing in Turkey hold steadfast to the preservation of their cultural heritage, a prominent cultural challenge arises from the fact that many young individuals either lack proficiency in their native language or choose not to utilize it in communication.

E.K., one of the interviewees, expresses this situation in the following sentences: "Since primary school, my whole education process has been in Turkish and English. The elders in my family, including

\textsuperscript{10} In this study, the Bozüyük district, despite being administratively part of Bilecik province, was included within the Eskişehir region due to its proximity to Eskişehir in terms of social structure and transportation facilities. This definition was adopted by the majority of participants.
my parents, always spoke Abkhaz. But they encouraged us to speak proper Turkish. Therefore, although I understand Abkhaz, I cannot speak it."

A significant portion of Abkhaz individuals from Turkey report an inability to comprehend or converse in Abkhaz, particularly within the 45-30 age bracket. Among those under 30, proficiency in spoken or written Abkhaz is notably scarce. Nearly all children are entirely unfamiliar with the language.

Another interviewee (36) describes his experience on mother tongue as follows: "Now I look at the efforts of associations on the mother tongue. Why shouldn't Abkhaz language be taught in schools, why shouldn't our children learn it? Language is the reason for the existence of a society. But when I look at myself, that is, when I look at my family, they are the reason why I cannot speak Abkhaz today. Abkhaz has always remained a secret language among the elders. We were encouraged to speak the best and most beautiful Turkish."

The matter of mother tongue and culture has grown increasingly intricate due to the migration of Abkhazians from rural regions to urban centers and metropolises. On one hand, Abkhazians, who conduct their daily affairs and earn their livelhood in Turkish, find themselves immersed in a predominantly Turkish social milieu. Additionally, the prevalence of mixed marriages has further influenced this dynamic.

Another interviewee about the mother tongue and culture noted that the Abkhaz language is not actively used by the Abkhaz population in metropolises: "My childhood and youth were spent in the village, in Düzce Hendek Adapazarı. In our youth, we always spoke in Abkhaz, whether it was in societies or tasamharas. But when I came to the metropolis to study law, it decreased a little. There is no one around you who speaks. And when my wife became a Turk, I didn't speak at all. My children don't know it either. I wish they knew, of course. Let my wife learn too. But things don't work like that. Still, Abazism is always in us. That's how I raised my children. They know our dances, our food, our respect."

3.1. Urbanisation, Associations and Mixed Marriages

Among the Abkhaz community, there's a prevailing belief that aside from the challenge of preserving the "mother tongue," they generally succeed in passing down their cultural heritage to newer generations. They attribute the continuity of their culture to the efforts of associations or similar organizations, particularly in locales with sizable Abkhaz populations, be it villages or cities. The consensus holds that the failure in cultural transmission isn't a result of social or governmental policies, but rather lies within the responsibility of families.

Furthermore, Abkhazians assert their ability to uphold their identity through collective endeavors such as associations, ceremonial occasions, weddings, funerals, clan assemblies, and festivities. They emphasize that the state doesn't exert pressure or impose obstacles in these matters.
Concurrently, the activities of associations significantly contribute to Abkhaz cultural vitality. Since 1975, Abkhazians have been actively involved in associations across various cities under the umbrella of the Federation of Caucasian Associations (KAFFED). KAFFED, which encompasses diverse commissions like the "Abkhazia Working Group," plays a pivotal role in fostering connections between Abkhazians and their homeland.

However, with the inception of the Federation of Abkhaz Associations in 2010\(^1\), some disagreements began to surface regarding the organization of Abkhaz associations. ABHAZFED was founded on 16 January 2010 as an umbrella organization comprising 5 founding associations. Among these founding associations are the Istanbul Abkhaz Cultural Association established on 1 January 1967, the İnegöl Abkhaz Cultural Association founded on 15 May 1976, the Düzce Abkhaz Cultural Association founded on 17 June 1992, the Bolu Abkhaz Cultural Association founded on 20 May 2008, and the Ankara Abkhaz Association founded on 2 March 2009. Subsequent to the establishment of the Federation of Abkhaz Associations, many member associations of KAFFED altered their names. Instead of the "Caucasian Cultural Association," encompassing Abkhaz, Adyghe, or other Caucasian ethnic groups, the name was modified to "Adyghe Association or Circassian Association." Nevertheless, Abkhazians remain active in numerous associations affiliated with both ABHAZFED and KAFFED.

Currently, there are 21 associations under the umbrella of ABHAZFED, varying in size and situated in both urban centers and rural villages. The list of Abkhaz associations is as follows:

1. Ankara Abkhaz Association
2. Antalya Abkhaz Association
3. Bilecik Abkhaz Association
4. Bolu Abkhaz Association
5. Bursa Abkhaz Cultural Association
6. Daryyeri-Hasanbey Village Abkhaz Cultural Association
7. Düzce Abkhaz Cultural Association
8. Eskişehir Abkhaz Cultural Association
9. Fındıçak Abkhaz Association

10. Inegol Abkhaz Cultural Association
11. Istanbul Abkhaz Cultural Association
12. Karaelmas Abkhaz Cultural Association
13. Kayalar Abkhaz Cultural Association
14. Kocaeli Abkhaz Association
15. Osmaniye Abkhaz Cultural Association
16. Sakarya Abkhaz Association
17. Samsun Abkhaz Cultural Association
18. Sinop Abkhaz Cultural Association
19. Tufanbeyli Abaza Culture Association
20. Yelbudak Abkhaz Cultural Association
21. Izmir Abkhaz Association

Among these associations affiliated with ABHAZFED, the Sakarya Abkhaz Association boasts the largest membership. With approximately 3000 members, the association is notably active and has erected a substantial building, poised to become the cultural hub for Abkhazians. The construction of this building, covering about 6 acres of land and offering a usable area of 1000 square meters, was made possible through member donations and support from local authorities. Architect Rada Canberk Kobash, an Abkhaz, meticulously designed the association's building, ensuring it resonates with the cultural ethos. The association's building is scheduled to be fully operational by 2024.  

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12 Phone conversation with Zerrin Kobash, member of the Board of Directors of the Sakarya Abkhaz Association, Language, History, Art Coordinator.
Photo #6: The building of the Sakarya Abkhaz Association, which is planned to be actively used in 2024.

Photo #7: The design of the building of the Sakarya Abkhaz Association also includes the emblem of the Presidency of Abkhazia and the symbols of the flag.
Associations also play a pivotal role in ensuring the continuity of culture. Apart from offering courses in the native language, they provide instruction in dance, music, traditional Abkhaz instruments, and handicrafts. In this regard, efforts are made to revive cultural aspects that have faded into obscurity or been overlooked in urban settings. Dance and music classes primarily attract children and young individuals. Presently, the traditional Abkhaz arts course is exclusively available through the Sakarya Abkhaz Association. Additionally, various workshops cater to children's diverse interests.

Photo #8: An Abkhaz child painting a Caucasian figure.

3.2. Circassian identity

In addition to their Turkish identity, the Abkhaz community in Turkey has also embraced the broader identity of "Circassians," a term used to refer to all North Caucasian peoples residing in Anatolia. The close ties forged between the Abkhaz and other North Caucasian ethnic groups, such as Ubykh, Adyghe, and Kabardians, owing to shared experiences of exile and familial connections, have contributed to the widespread acceptance of the "Circassian" super-identity. Consequently, many Abkhazians often identify themselves as "Circassian" when communicating with individuals outside their community, although regional variations exist.

One participant elucidated the concept of Circassianism as a super-identity, remarking, "In Anatolia, all North Caucasians are collectively referred to as Circassians, even extending to the inclusion of Chechens by some. This recognition as Circassian has endured for centuries. While I personally identify as Abkhaz among those who understand, I predominantly employ the term 'Circassian.' Circassianism doesn't encapsulate the entirety of Adygs or Kabardians, except in historical or archival contexts. Hence, it's natural for Abkhazians to embrace the Circassian label."
Another participant reflected on their adoption of the Circassian identity, highlighting its situational nature: "In mixed settings, Caucasians are universally labeled as Circassians, irrespective of their specific ethnic backgrounds. However, within Caucasian circles, distinctions based on ethnicity are maintained. The conflation of Circassianism solely with Adyghe ethnicity is concerning, disregarding the diverse historical sources where Circassian serves as a meta-identity. Ultimately, an individual reserves the right to define their own identity, whether it be as a Turk, Circassian, or Abkhaz."

3.3. Abkhaz Cuisine

As the Abkhaz community endeavors to uphold its cultural heritage through language, dance, art, and more, it also seeks to safeguard its culinary traditions. Abkhaz cuisine holds a significant place, often gracing the tables during special occasions like weddings and funerals. In daily life, while elderly individuals typically lean towards traditional Abkhaz dishes, younger generations tend to opt for more convenient and readily available meal options.

Photo #11: Hot peppers and corn are still dried in the villages for Pyrpylzhika and Abyshhta, which form the basis of Abkhaz cuisine.
To gain a deeper insight into Abkhaz culinary customs, the perspectives of the participants carry significant weight. Participant #6 (38) highlighted the labor-intensive nature of Abkhazian cuisine, expressing difficulty in preparing it regularly at home, reserving it mainly for special occasions: "Given my demanding schedule, I often opt for practical Turkish dishes. If there's a special event or my mother visits to cook, that's when Abkhazian dishes grace our table."

Conversely, older respondents unanimously conveyed their commitment to preparing Abkhazian dishes on a daily basis, not restricting their enjoyment to specific events. Nevertheless, the looming threat of Abkhaz food culture fading away remains a concern.

Photo #12: Daily Abkhaz table.

4. Education and Language

In Turkey, there are no educational institutions where Abkhazians receive instruction in their native language. There are numerous legal barriers contributing to this, but perhaps more significantly, Abkhazians, particularly during childhood, often lack sufficient proficiency in their native language to undergo education in it. Many children either do not speak their native language or only use it within a very limited social circle. This holds true for young adults as well. Consequently, there is little practical demand for native language education among Abkhazians in Turkey. The feasibility of mother tongue education for Abkhazians is hindered by their small population, scattered across geographically dispersed areas with limited density.
Nevertheless, Abkhaz and Caucasian associations have long been striving for native language education. Historically, Caucasian associations, and presently Abkhaz associations, have organized Abkhaz language courses. These courses are predominantly taught by instructors who migrated to Turkey from Abkhazia through marriage and settled there. Until 2023, Turkish universities did not offer a department dedicated to Abkhaz language. However, in 2023, the Department of Abkhaz Language and Literature was established at Düzce University. Although the department has yet to admit students, it is slated to enroll its inaugural class in 2024, with the first graduates expected in 2028. Despite the absence of an Abkhaz language department, Gunda Ankvab teaches Abkhaz as an elective in the Linguistics Department at Boğaziçi University.

Associations offering Abkhaz language courses include the Inegol Abkhaz Association, Sakarya Abkhaz Association, Istanbul Abkhaz Association, and Düzce Abkhaz Association. Previously, Abkhaz language courses were held in Abkhaz villages such as Hendek, Harmantepe, Balballı, and Kayalar, but they either could not be sustained or continued with minimal enrollment. Before the establishment of the Federation of Abkhaz Associations, Abkhaz language courses were conducted in Caucasian associations, but again, various factors led to their discontinuation.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Photo #9: Not only children, but also adults who do not speak their mother tongue or have forgotten it participate in mother tongue courses.}

\textsuperscript{13} Information obtained from Participant #16.
In the 2012-2013 academic year, the Turkish Ministry of National Education implemented a program granting students in grades 5 through 8 two hours of instruction per week in their mother tongue through the "Living Languages and Dialects" course. However, this provision was contingent upon a minimum of 12 students opting for the course. Notably, in 2014, a significant milestone was achieved with the inauguration of the inaugural Abkhaz elective class in the Abkhaz village of Nüfren in Sakarya, spearheaded by educator Irfan Okuyucu.

Presently, Abkhaz classes are absent from the curriculum of the Ministry of Education. This shift can be attributed to the preference of Abkhaz parents who steer their children towards alternative elective courses, prioritizing the acquisition of global languages such as English.

![Abkhaz Alphabet](image)

*Photo #10: Abkhaz Alphabet*

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16 Phone conversation with Zerrin Kobash, member of the Board of Directors of the Sakarya Abkhaz Association, Language, History, Art Coordinator.
Apart from the challenges concerning education in the mother tongue, the issue of Abkhaz access to higher education holds particular significance. Presently, the majority of Abkhazians reside in urban centers, including villages in Düzce, Sakarya, İzmit, İnegöl, Bilecik, Eskişehir, and some in Samsun and Zonguldak. However, accessing higher education, particularly for Abkhazians aged over 50, remains exceedingly limited. This disparity arises from the historical settlement patterns of Abkhazians in rural areas and villages post-exile, despite their current residence in urban hubs.

At this point, a participant shared his own experience as follows: "In our time, if there was a high school close to your village, there was one, otherwise you could not go to university. Families are already afraid of foreigners. It was always a dream for us that we would go to university, go to the city, board and so on. Still, of course, those who studied did so. Children stayed with relatives in the cities."

5. Integration Challenges and Problems

Abkhazians residing in Turkey have seamlessly integrated into Turkish social structures and culture, posing little challenge in terms of assimilation. Despite migration and exile deeply etched in their collective memory, they perceive themselves as an integral component of Turkey. Participant #8’s reflections shed light on the nuanced concept of homeland among Abkhazians: "Abkhazia, our Apsny, is our homeland. I visited for the first time last year, feeling both peace and sorrow. Yet, if Abkhazia is our homeland, then Turkey is equally so. We belong here now. Nonetheless, I yearn to visit Abkhazia more frequently, reunifying with relatives who are my brothers and sisters."

This sentiment resonates widely among Abkhazians in Turkey. While many regard Abkhazia as their ancestral homeland and seek to maintain ties with relatives, they maintain a deep-seated attachment to the Turkish state. The historical contributions of Abkhazians to the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, alongside shared memories, foster this allegiance. Throughout both the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey, Abkhazians actively participated in law enforcement and intelligence, earning recognition as "trustworthy individuals" by the state.

Nonetheless, this doesn't imply that Abkhazians in Turkey lack aspirations. While they have largely assimilated into society and abide by its laws, they advocate for the recognition of Abkhazia by the Republic of Turkey, the initiation of direct transportation to Abkhazia, and the acknowledgment of life, death, and educational documents obtained in Abkhazia by Turkey. These demands stem from their heightened interest in their homeland, particularly following the Abkhaz-Georgian War. Unlike other ethnic groups in Turkey, Abkhazians refrain from pressing for mother tongue and cultural rights but have consistently petitioned various administrations concerning matters pertaining to Abkhazia.

5.1. Right to transportation to Abkhazia

On the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, a stern warning is issued stating, "If our citizens traveling to Georgia have a stamp or seal in their passports indicating that
they have traveled to Abkhazia and South Ossetia by sea and/or through other countries, they may be subject to imprisonment and/or fines upon entry into Georgia."\(^{17}\) Despite this cautionary note, every year hundreds of citizens of Abkhaz origin from the Republic of Turkey travel to Abkhazia through the Russian Federation, which recognizes Abkhazia.

In 1991, ferries between the Turkish city of Trabzon and Sukhum were inaugurated, only to be suspended in 1993 due to the war. After the conflict subsided, ferry services resumed, only to be halted again in 1995 due to the embargo imposed on Abkhazia. In 2008, Abkhazians launched a petition urging the removal of obstacles to direct access to Abkhazia, addressed to the Presidency, Parliament, and the Prime Ministry. "We demand the reopening of Trabzon-Sohum sea transport and the provision of Istanbul-Sohum air transport to facilitate our travels to and from the Republic of Abkhazia, with which we have kinship, friendship, and business relations," reads the petition. Despite being a collective expression of the demand of Abkhazians from Turkey, this initiative remained inconclusive.\(^{18}\) Subsequently, Abkhazians continued to voice their demands on the issue of transportation through various platforms and lobbying activities.

Participant #12 describes the process of collecting signatures for the launch of ship services to Abkhazia: "I was a university student at that time, and everyone was enthusiastically collecting signatures. I collected signatures not only from Abkhazians but also from everyone in my department, even from my professors. There was a stand on the street in Kadıköy. There, too, we asked people for signatures. We tried to explain our problem to others. On campuses, on the streets, we told everyone, 'Look, this is an injustice.' We urged everyone to support us. But there was an excitement at that time. Now there is no excitement either."

Similarly, in addition to the right to transport, Abkhazians also demand recognition of Abkhazia by Turkey. Participant #15 expressed his sentiments regarding the recognition of Abkhazia: "I am young. I have never been to Abkhazia. But I feel that I belong there. It is unacceptable to me that Turkey does not recognize Abkhazia. We have both historical and cultural ties with Abkhazia."

Another participant insisted that Turkey should recognize Abkhazia: "Abkhazia is recognized by the member states of the United Nations. We know the persecution our Abkhaz brothers and sisters have endured there. Regardless of Georgia's claims, we are witnesses. It is very hurtful for us that Turkey, which we call our homeland and love so dearly, does not recognize Abkhazia."

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The current demands of Abkhazians in Turkey and the issues they perceive as problematic are rooted in this ongoing political dispute. Consequently, their demands differ from those of other Caucasian peoples and ethnic groups in Turkey.

6. Conclusion: Recommendations for Action

Summarizing the key findings and recommendations, the conclusion underscores the importance of acknowledging and addressing the concerns raised by the Abkhazian community in Turkey. It emphasizes a call to action for a more inclusive and supportive environment. Building upon the insights gathered, this section offers actionable recommendations. From cultural programs to language education support, integration strategies, and advocacy for recognition, these recommendations aim to address the identified challenges.

However, it's crucial to acknowledge that Abkhazians in Turkey do not seek to encounter issues with the Turkish state; on the contrary, they possess a profound emotional bond with it. To this day, they have no requests from Turkey apart from considerations for their historical relatives in the Caucasus and Abkhazia, as well as their homeland. Except for matters related to Abkhazia, the Abkhaz community has not been prominently featured on the public agenda. With these social sensitivities in mind, the following recommendations are proposed to prevent the erosion of their culture and language.

In this regard, suggestions for states, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations concerning Abkhazians residing in Turkey can be outlined as follows:

1. Encourage families to embrace and study their native language to safeguard the Abkhaz language for future generations.

2. Provide incentives and resources to facilitate the establishment of Abkhaz departments within universities.

3. Extend incentives and support to the Department of Abkhaz Language and Literature at Düzce University.

4. Advocate for and support lobbying efforts aimed at promoting the widespread adoption of Abkhaz language education.

5. Implement scholarship and grant initiatives to facilitate access to higher education for Abkhaz youth.

6. Organize training programs in densely populated areas to ensure active participation of the Abkhaz community in governance.

7. Introduce economic support programs to stimulate production and agriculture in Abkhaz villages, fostering cultural preservation and continuity.
8. Initiate projects to document Abkhaz crafts, culture, and oral history for posterity.

9. Collect information on Abkhaz cuisine and provide assistance for related projects.

10. Compile Abkhaz history and documents, and support oral history initiatives.

11. Establish facilities to facilitate reunions between Abkhaz individuals and their relatives in their ancestral homeland, from which they were once exiled.

12. Reinstate ferry services between Trabzon and Sukhum to enhance connectivity.

13. Formalize Turkey's existing trade relations with Abkhazia.

14. Recognize documents obtained by Abkhazians from Abkhazia, including those related to life events, education, and death.

15. Offer support to the Abkhaz community in international advocacy efforts to ensure their voices and demands regarding Abkhazia are heard and respected.
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