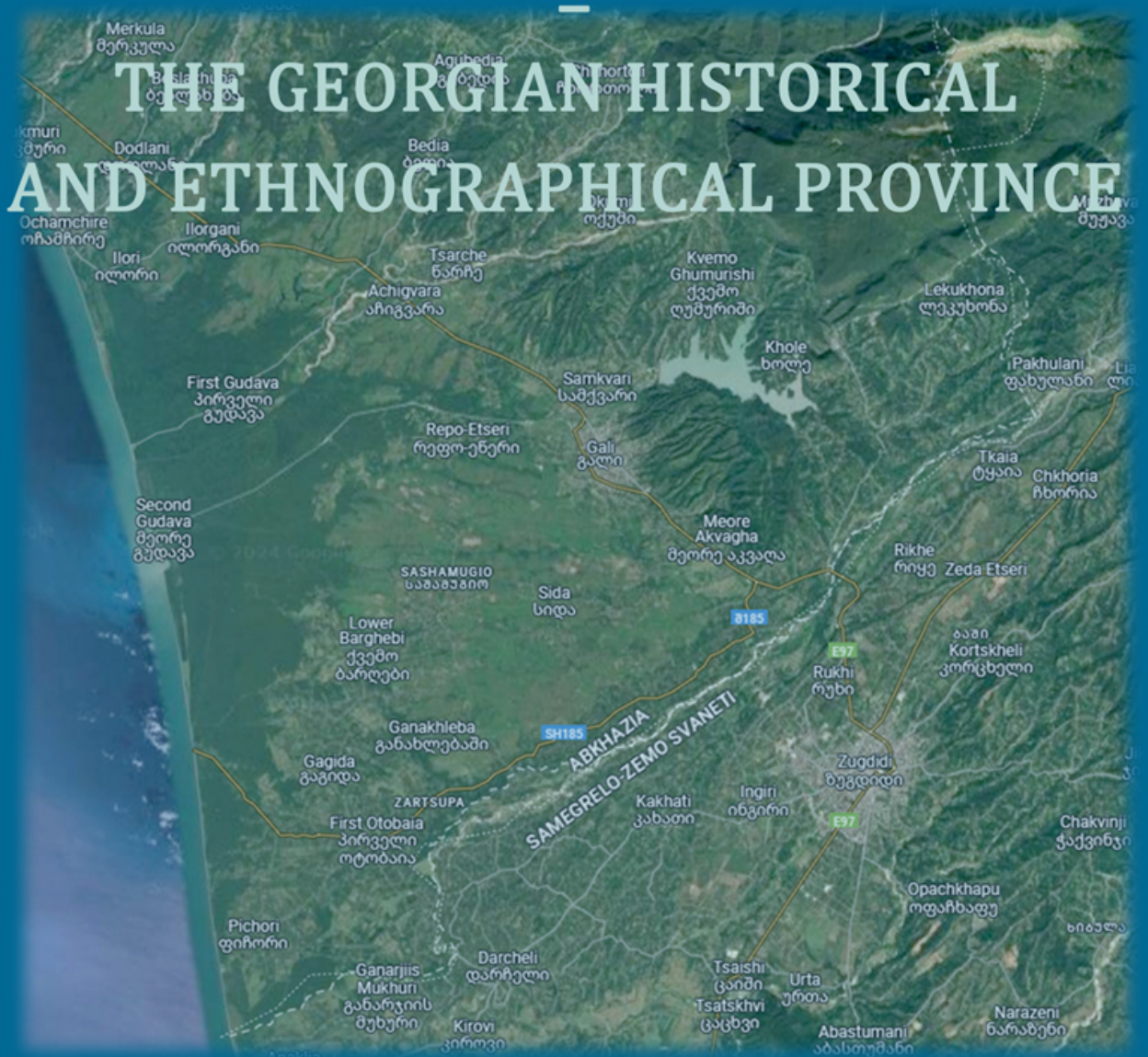
Kakha Kvashilava, Zurab Khonelidze, Lia Akhaladze,
Salome Bakhia-Okruashvili, David Chikovani

SAMURZAKANO

THE GEORGIAN HISTORICAL AND ETHNOGRAPHICAL PROVINCE



Sokhumi State University

Kakha Kvashilava, Zurab Khonelidze, Lia Akhaladze,

Salome Okruashvili, David Chikovani

Samurzakano

–

the Georgian Historical and Ethnographical Province.

The Past and the Present

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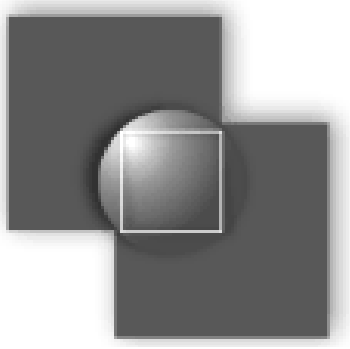
The presented collective monograph summarizes the results of the research of Georgian historians over the past few years. It objectively and impartially analyzes the main stages of the historical development of the historical and ethnographical province of Georgia – Samurzakano. Special attention is paid to the so-called "controversial issues", around which pseudoscientific speculations are constantly being risen by our opponents, and based on exhaustive, relevant historical sources and archival (including newly discovered) documents, a scientifically substantiated response is given to the separatists' attempts to declare Samurzakano an Apsua ethnological and cultural space at any cost.

The book is intended for specialists and a wide circle of readers interested in the history of Abkhazia/Georgia.



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Grant project implementers:

Kakha Kvashilava, *Project leader, editor, researcher; Doctor of History, Sokhumi State University*;

Zurab Khonelidze, *Project coordinator, researcher; Doctor of Political Sciences, Sokhumi State University*;

Lia Akhaladze, *Researcher, Doctor of History; Sokhumi State University*;

Salome Bakhia-Okruashvili, *Researcher; Doctor of Historical Sciences, Ivane Javakhishvili Institute of History and Ethnology*;

David Chikovani, *Researcher; PhD student, Sokhumi State University*.

Translator:

Ivane Menteshashvili, *Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor*.

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PREFACE

"Samurzakano is the bulwark of Abkhazia, its backbone. Abkhazia can not exist without Samurzakano… Samurzakano is the bridge between Abkhazia and Georgia. Russian rule could not break it". This was said by the significant Georgian politician of the 1st half of 20th century, the first Foreign Minister of Democratic Republic of Georgia, native of Abkhazia, particularly of Samurzakano Akaki Chkhenkeli (1874-1959)[1] (**Tchumburidze, 2018:** 75).

The many centuries standing co-habitation of Georgians and Abkhazs in Abkhazia, this primordial area of Georgia, faced the serious test in late 20th century. Abkhaz separatists supported by Russian Federation succeeded in almost half a century struggle of separation of Abkhazia from the rest of Georgia and temporarily deprived this ancient Georgian area from its mother-country.

After the end of conflict in Abkhazia, in 1992-1993 this area almost completely was cleansed from Georgian population. Abkhazian Georgians in actually absolute majority were represented in Gali district. Here in keeping with the data of all-Union census 74,712 (93.8 %) were Georgians, while Abkhazs – only 627 (0.8%) (**Achugba, 2006**).

Gali district mostly covers the territory of historical Samurzakano. Well, that is it Samurzakano, being separate feudal lordship led by the offshoot of the princes' of Abkhazia created on the verge of 17th-18th centuries. This name was given to the historical-ethnographic province in south-east Abkhazia. In 1840s the historical frontiers of Samurzakano to a certain extent decreased. This took place because some villages were handed over to Abkhazian (Ilori, Okhurei, Reka, Agubedia)[2] and others (Pakhulani, Ganarjias Mukhuri) to Megrelian principalities.[3]

Since 1993 the Abkhaz separatist authorities increased Ochamchire and Tkvarcheli districts territories. But this was carried out at the expense of decrease of Gali municipality territory[4]. Particularly, Shesheleti village, the parts of Repi and Gindzeetseri villages were handed over to Ochamchire. Tkvarcheli received populated areas of the north-western parts of Gali district.

The decrease of Gali district was the goal of purposeful policy of Abkhaz separatists. It targeted following goal, to decrease the amount of IDPs and the artificial reduction of Georgian "enclave" respectively. In 2007, at the meeting in İstanbul the Abkhaz scientist and politician Viacheslav Chirikba pointed out the threat to separatist authorities proceed from the Georgians who will return to Gali municipality. This threat is possible because they are supporters of Georgian state (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 10). The evaluation of the emissary of separatists

[1] Well-known Georgian politician and diplomat, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Democratic Republic of Georgia, Member of National Council and Deliberative Assembly, Ambassador of Georgia to France.

[2] Now is within the Ochamchire municipality.

[3] Now are within the Zugdidi and Tsalenjikha municipalities.

[4] The Tkvarcheli district is the administrative-territorial unit, created by Abkhaz separatists. In Soviet times Tkvarcheli was the city of republican subordination.

is exaggerated at least because that argument of Abkhaz party that in this municipality 60,000 Georgians have been returned already (**Ardzinba, 2000:** 22), is absolutely groundless. This is proved by International organizations (**Kvashilava, 2011(b)**10). Clarification of the "autochthons" character of Gali district population is "vitally" important for separatist authorities. As Abkhaz historian T. Achugba points out, this problem is of *"artificial origin"* (**Achugba, 2006**). Yes, it is true, but regrettably it has unilaterally determined answer in favour of Abkhazs what is forcible falsification of history of Georgian-Abkhaz relations.

It must be mentioned, that this tragedy, to which the many centuries standing relations between our nations were brought was determined by the group of historians, who were in service of ideology of Abkhaz separatism. With enormous zeal they continued to walk by the "road" paved by some Voronov, who back to 1907 published well-known brochure «Абхазія – не Грузія» (*Abkhazia is not Georgia*). The trend of this "research" is clearly promulgated in its title (concerning the critique of Abkhaz separatist historiography vide (**Papaskiri, 2021(a):** 5-17). The well-known Georgian ethnologist S. Bakhia-Okrushvili rightly points out that the issue raised by T. Achugba was driven by the fear of the separatist government of Abkhazia and its protector, Russia – fear that the Georgians might annex Abkhazia, as T. Achugba wrote, *"this important economic and military-strategic region"* (**Bakhia-Okrushvili, 2008:** 56; **Bakhia-Okrushvili, 2010:** 294). After the well-known events of September 1993, the population of the Gali municipality repeatedly became the target of eviction and expulsion from their homes, which was an attempt by the Abkhaz separatist to cleanse the region of its Georgian inhabitants. The recognition of the so-called "independence" of Abkhazia by the Russian Federation on August 26, 2008, in gross violation of international law, and the subsequent placement of Russian regular army units in the municipality to prevent "possible aggression" from Georgia and ensure the "state border" on the Enguri river, as well as the forced requirement for local Georgians to acquire "Abkhaz citizenship," undoubtedly meant the complete denationalization of the Georgian population in the region. This posed a serious threat to the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity. All of this once again underscores the necessity of an objective study of the history of this region, which is the goal of the presented work.

From 1993 to 2008, the Gali municipality, which during this period was still predominantly populated by Georgians, to some extent became the target of separatist "encroachments." It is true that here, Georgians were continuously oppressed, had their property confiscated, were arrested, and suffered violations of their basic human rights.

The separatists still tried to maintain control over this region, which played a crucial role in the agricultural economy of occupied Abkhazia. It was through the Enguri River that the people of Gali brought agricultural products and other goods from the inner regions of Georgia into Abkhazia. This process continued even after 2008.

The de facto regime feels the threat posed by the increase in the Georgian ethnic population in Gali. It is clear that in the long term, this would clearly hinder the implementation of Russian policies. Therefore, the people of Gali were not given so-called "citizenship," which limited their participation in local political processes. Despite the absence of "citizenship," local Georgian conscripts were still called up to serve in the separatist "armed forces."

The Georgians of Gali form an important and significant force, which, in reality, is still perceived as a serious challenge.

The well-known Georgian ethnologist S. Bakhia-Okrushvili rightly points out that the issue raised by T. Achugba was driven by the fear of the separatist government of Abkhazia and its protector, Russia – fear that the Georgians might annex Abkhazia, as T. Achugba wrote, *"this important economic and military-strategic region"* (**Bakhia-Okrushvili, 2008:** 56; **Bakhia-Okrushvili, 2010:** 294).

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The Georgians of Gali are an important and significant force, which can realistically initiate certain anti-separatist and anti-occupation processes. Natu-

rally, this presented a major problem for the occupiers in 2013, when the local political establishment, particularly Alexander Ankvab, needed the support of the Gali population (***Sokhumi Suspends..*, 2013**). At the same time, artificial barriers were being created to prevent the involvement of Gali's Georgian population in the internal political activities of separatist Abkhazia.

The separatists, who have failed to bend the will of the Georgian population in Gali, even with their apartheid policy, have other plans. These include: reducing the hours of Georgian language teaching and banning Georgian language teaching in secondary schools; and the return to the "historical Abkhaz roots."

In 2013, the Megrelian "Mother Tongue" was specifically created as an attempt to implement this "manual" at schools, but it was entirely unsuccessful. One of the components of this goal was the Abkhaz-Russian-Megrelian-language newspaper "Gal." The aim of this publication is to stimulate so-called "Megrelian separatism" among the people of Gali, many of whom are Megrelians, with the intention of spreading it to Samegrelo in the future. The local television station "Gal TV" also serves this purpose.

The chronological framework of our research spans the period from the formation of the feudal domain of Samurzakano (the verge of 17th-18th centuries) to the present day.

We have specifically studied the historical, political and social situation of Samurzakano in our monographies (**Kvashilava, 2009; Kvashilava, 2011(b)**). Our work is based on various written sources, toponymic, folklore, and ethnographic materials, as well as the historiographical heritage concerning this issue. Although in 2004, ethnologist I. Kvashilava defended his candidate dissertation on Samurzakano (**Kvashilava I.,** 2004), his work was limited chronologically to the 19th and 20th centuries, the researcher was limited to ethnographic studies of the region. Therefore he did not claim to make a comprehensive study of the history of Samurzakano.

Documentary materials reflecting the history of Samurzakano are rather scanty, especially regarding 17th-18th centuries. The situation is relatively better in 19th century. Many interesting documents are preserved in the *"Acts of the Caucasian Archaeological Commission"* (***ACAC***: 1866, 1868, 1869, 1870, 1873, 1874, 1875, 1878, 1881, 1884, 1885, 1888, 1904). The materials gathered in Georgia's archives have been partly published in various collections (**Takaishvili, 1899; Takaishvili, 1913-1914; Takaishvili, 2017; Kakabadze, 2021(a); Kakabadze, 2021(b); *Historical Bulletin*, 1925**; **Burjanadze, 1953; Burjanadze, 1958; Burjanadze, 1959; *MGL,* 1970; *MGL,* 1985; *MGL,* 2023**). Some of the archive materials that are of interest to be used are in the works of B. Khorava, T. Kadaria, N. Takalanadze, J. Gamakharia, and B. Gogia (vide: ***Bibliography***).The archives of the Zugdidi State Ethnographic Museum, the Historical Archive of the National Archives of Georgia, and the National Centre of Manuscripts of Georgia contain valuable information for the study of this important issue (***ZSHEM*: №2172, №7312, №7486, №7487; *HANAG*: 311, 345, 357; *GNCM*: Ad-1508, Ad-2229,**

Ad-2232, Hd-10595, Hd-10597, Q-587).

The scarcity of archive documents on the studied issue is partly supplemented by the writings of travelers and eyewitnesses from the relevant period, including the memoirs of officers of the Russian colonial army. Among these, the memories of Jean Chardin, Jacques François Gamba, Frédéric Dubois de Montpéreux, Eduard Eichwald, F. Tornau, and others are particularly interesting (vide: ***Bibliography***).

For the study of the history of Samurzakano, the works and diaries of the well-known political figure and scholar Niko Dadiani are of crucial importance (**Dadiani, 1962; Dadiani, 2022**). The significance of this source is undoubtedly enhanced by the fact that the author was a contemporary of the described events and, in some cases, a participant.

No researcher studying the history of Samurzakano can overlook the historical materials collected by Teimuraz Tchitchinadze (**Tchitchinadze, 1897(a); Tchitchinadze, 1897(b)**).

For the study of land ownership and social relations in Samurzakano, significant materials are found in the publications of P. Tcharaia (**Tcharaia, 1897**) and S. Esadze (**Esadze, 1907**). P. Tcharaia's conclusions are particularly interesting, noting that the people of Samurzakano are ethnically Megrelians, although they had an agricultural system similar to that of the Abkhazs.

In historiography, the issues of the history of Samurzakano are mainly discussed in the context of the relations between Odishi and Abkhazia or the history of Abkhazia and Western Georgia during the relevant period.

M. Dumbadze's candidate dissertation (**Dumbadze, 1942**), which studies the history of Samegrelo in the first half of 19th century, also considers the life of Samurzakano during this period. This is presented in the Chapter VI of the work, covering about five pages (74-79). Later, the researcher revisits the topic, but the conclusions drawn in the dissertation remained unchanged (**Dumbadze, 1957**). The analysis of the social situation of Samurzakano in the first half of 19th century is also presented there.

The history of Samurzakano is also partly covered in Z. Anchabadze's candidate dissertation (**Anchabadze, 1947**), particularly focusing on the period of Kvapu Sharvashidze's rule. The author rightly notes that the opposition of Odishians and Imeretians prevented Kvapu's attempts to expand on the left bank of the Enguri river. Z. Anchabadze also addresses the history of Samurzakano in other works (**Anchabadze, 1959; Anchabadze, 1964; Anchabadze, 2010; Anchabadze, 2011**).

For the study of Manuchar Sharvashidze's activities, interesting information and opinions are presented by I. Antelava (**Antelava, 1951**).

The life of Samurzakano in the first half of the 19th century has been studied relatively extensively and with interesting archival documents by N. Takalandze (**Takalandze, 1999(a); Takalandze, 1999(b)**) and T. Kadaria (**Kadaria, 2003**). They approach this issue more through the prism of the history of rela-

tions between Abkhazia and the Odishi principality.

Remarkable observations on various issues of the history of Samurzakano-Abkhazia during the studied period are provided by well-known scholars such as T. Beradze (**Beradze, 1973; Beradze, 1999, Beradze, 2005; Beradze, 2018**), B. Khorava (**Khorava, 1996; Khorava, 2000(a,b); Khorava, 2001; Khorava, 2011; Khorava, 2014; Khorava, 2021(a,b,c,d); Khorava, 2022(a)**), Z. Papaskiri (**Papaskiri, 1998; Papaskiri**, **1999; Papaskiri, 2000; Papaskiri, 2004; Papaskiri, 2007; Papaskiri, 2009; Papaskiri, 2010; Papaskiri, 2015; Papaskiri, 2021 (a,b,c,d,e)**; **Papaskiri, 2022**), and J. Gamakharia (**Gamakharia, 1990; Gamakharia, 1991; Gamakharia, 2005; Gamakharia, 2007; Gamakharia, 2009; Gamakharia, 2018(a,b); Gamakharia, 2021(a,b,c)**).

Recent results of the study the ethnography, anthroponymy, onomastics, and toponymy of Samurzakano-Abkhazia are presented in the works of S. Bakhia-Okrushvili (**Bakhia-Okrushvili, 1986; Bakhia-Okrushvili, 1999; Bakhia-Okrushvili, 2004; Bakhia-Okrushvili, 2005; Bakhia-Okrushvili, 2008; Bakhia-Okrushvili, 2009; Bakhia-Okrushvili, 2010; Bakhia-Okrushvili, 2022**)[1], P. Tskhadaia (**Tskhadaia, 1999; Tskhadaia, 2000; Tskhadaia, 2001; Tskhadaia, 2004**), T. Gvantseladze (**Gvantseladze, 1989; Gvantseladze, 1998; Gvantseladze, 1999; Gvantseladze, 2003; Gvantseladze, 2004; Gvantseladze, 2008; Gvantseladze, 2009; Gvantseladze, 2011; Gvantseladze, 2017; Gvantseladze, 2022**), K. Okujava (**Okujava, 2002; Okujava, 2007**), N. Abakelia (**Abakelia, 1999**), and I. Kvashilava (**Kvashilava I., 2000; Kvashilava I., 2003; Kvashilava I., 2004**).

The joint research by M. Natchkebia and M. Tabidze confirmed that local toponymy and onomastics are primarily of Georgian origin (**Natchkebia, Tabidze, 2010:** 3-34). In the study of the toponymy of Samurzakano, the observations of T. Mibchuani (**Mibchuani, 1989**) and N. Shonia (**Shonia N., 2015; Shonia N., 2019**) are also noteworthy.

The epigraphic monuments and issues of the history of culture of Enguri-Ghalidzga interfluve have been properly studied in the research of L. Akhaladze (**Akhaladze, 1998; Akhaladze, 1999 (a,b); Akhaladze, 2000; Akhaladze, 2005; Akhaladze, 2006; Akhaladze, 2011; Akhaladze, 2018; Akhaladze, 2021(a,b); Akhaladze, 2022**).

V. Zukhbaia has published works and articles on the toponymic and ethnographic characteristics of the Gal district and consequently, Samurzakano (**Zukhbaia, 1988; Zukhbaia, 2000; Zukhbaia, 2001; Zukhbaia, 2002**).

From the mid 19th century, when Russia imposed direct rule over Samurzakano, the colonial government artificially raised the issue of the ethnic affiliation of the local population, as the ruler of Samegrelo still refused to relinquish the area. The "research" aimed to "prove" the non-Georgian origin of the people of this region. The first "product" of this "state order" was M. Seleznev, who

[1] Especially the books of well-known Georgian expert on Abkhaz studies and ethnology S. Bakhia-Okruashvili irrefutably prove that Enguri-Ghalidzga interfluve indigenous population is only of Georgian origin (**Bakhia, 1986; Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2010**).

declared the people of Samurzakano as Abkhazians (**Seleznev, 1847(b)**). Similar ideas were promoted by A. Bergé (**Bergé, 1857**), S. Dukhovsky (**Dukhovsky, 1864**), N. Dubrovin (**Dubrovin, 1871:** 2), G. Philipson (**Philipson, 1885**), and N. Albov (**Albov, 1893**). However, unlike these authors, the "Geographical-Statistical Dictionary of the Russian Empire" avowed the "Georgian origin" of the people of Samurzakano in its 4th volume, although the authors stated that they more resembled Abkhazians (***G-SD of RE***, 1873: 423).

The track of the Tsarist apologists was also taken by the Georgian renegade K. Machavariani, who in 1899-1900 spread his "views" in the Black Hundred newspaper *"Chernomorski Vestnik"* (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 24).

In 1892, the research of the Russian I. Pantyukhov was published, whose anthropological "studies" allegedly found significant differences between the people of Samurzakano and Megrelians (**Pantyukhov, 1892**).

A different opinion on the origin of the people of Samurzakano was expressed in an extensive article published in the newspaper "Kavkaz", which, although mentioning the Samurzakano people as a separate tribe, argued that they originated from Megrelians (***Main Information..*, 1868**). In the same publication, in 1860, D. Bakradze stated that the Samurzakano people represent a mix of Megrelians and Abkhazians (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 24).

Regarding the ethnography of Samurzakano, some investigations have been conducted by contemporary Russian researcher L. Solovyeva, whose correct observation is that the native population of the Enguri-Ghalidzga region is exclusively Georgian. Notably, the monographs of the well-known Georgian expert on Abkhaz studies,-ethnologist S. Bakhia-Okrushvili (**Bakhia, 1986; Bakhia-Okrushvili, 2010**) unequivocally confirm that the indigenous population of Enguri-Ghalidzga is solely Georgian.

In the region, Abkhazians appeared in the late Middle Ages. However, subsequent conclusions allowed for the formation of a new ethnic subject – the "Samurzakanoan" (**Solovyeva, 1985; Solovyeva, 1990**).

In the 19th century, the "conclusions" of Russian historiography regarding the "Abkhazness" of the Samurzakano people were opposed by Georgian scholars and representatives of Georgian intellectuals. Among them was the prominent Georgian public figure and founder of Georgian pedagogy, Yakob Gogebashvili, who unequivocally avowed the population of this region as Georgian (**Gogebashvili, 1882:** 316).

Gogebashvili reviews the geographical location of Samurzakano, talks about customs, habits and past of the Samurzakano people. His historical outline is mostly correct, as he justifiably links the formation of this region with the disintegration of the unified Georgian state and the strengthening of the Abkhazians with the support of the Ottoman Empire and the highland Caucasians, who seized the north-western part of Odishi.

Reviewing the religious situation of Samurzakano people, Gogebashvili notes that the local population was initially Christian, but due to historical tur-

bulences, this religion weakened. However, Islam never established itself because there are no mosques in Samurzakano. The author also mentions that certain elements of paganism appeared in the beliefs of the Samurzakano people, which are associated with the cult of smithy (**Gogebashvili, 1882:** 318-319).

Naturally, the historical past of Samurzakano did not escape the attention of Abkhaz historians. After the Bolshevik revolution, the "study" of the ethnic origin of the Samurzakano people was renewed with new strength. A researcher from that period, S. Basaria, did not even consider the possibility of their Megrelian origin (**Basaria, 1923**).

In the early 1950s, Kh. Bgazhba attempted to determine the ethnic identity of the Samurzakano people using toponymy. According to the scientist, the toponymy of the Gali district assigns an "Abkhaz" layer to a place dominated by Megrelian elements (**Bgazhba, 1956; Bgazhba, 1974**).

As P. Tskhadaia correctly points out, Kh. Bgazhba simply concealed the primacy of the Georgian toponymic layer in the region (**Tskhadaia, 2001:** 203-205).

An attempt to "study" the anthroponymy and toponymy of Samurzakano was made by the Russian ethnographer of Abkhaz origin, Doctor of historical sciences, M. Tkhaitsukhov. His research in this direction clearly represents an attempt to falsify the Georgian origin of the relevant material in the region. M. Tkhaitsukhov tried to "prove" the Abkhaz, or even more broadly, the Abkhazian origin of the clearly Georgian anthroponymy and toponymy recorded in Samurzakano (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 26).

Individual aspects of the socio-political history of Samurzakano were covered by the Abkhaz historian, Corresponding Member of the Georgian Academy of Sciences, Prof. G. Dzidzaria (**Dzidzaria, 2014; Dzidzaria, 2015; Dzidzaria, 2016; Dzidzaria, 2017**).

The well-known Abkhaz ethnographer and historian Sh. Inal-ipa initially absolutely correctly stated that the Abkhazians, amid the feuds with Megrelians, occupied the Kodori-Enguri interfluve (**Inal-ipa, 1965**). Later, he radically changed his view and considered the autochthonous population of Samurzakano to be only Abkhazs (**Inal-ipa, 1971; Inal-ipa, 1976**).

The separatist historiography became particularly active from the mid-1980s and especially in the 1990s, preparing ideological ground for both ensuring a secessionist process from Georgia and building an "independent state" (**Papaskiri, 2021(a)**).

In this context, separatists naturally paid special attention to determining the ethnic identity and historical past of the population of the Gal region, which, in fact, represented a complete and flagrant falsification of these issues.

In this matter, T. Achugba particularly stood out, dedicating a special work to the problems of the "national self-consciousness" of the historical inhabitants of Samurzakano (**Achugba, 2006; Achugba, 2010**). In his work, the author tries in every possible way to prove the Abkhazian origin of the Samurzakano people.

The issues of the history of Samurzakano are entirely reversed in the "*Text-*

book of the History of Abkhazia" by O. Bgazhba and S. Lakoba, where Samurzakano is considered only as a territory of residence of the Abkhazians (**Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007**). However, there is no trace of the Abkhaz settlement in this region until 18th century, and the first sites populated by the Abkhazs appeared only after the Sharvashidzes took the area from the rulers of Odishi in the late 17th century. On July 9, 1805, during the ceremony of confirming Levan V Dadiani as the ruler of Samegrelo in the village of Bandza, representatives of the ruling family of Samurzakano, Levan and Manuchar Sharvashidze, also participated. They officially confirmed that they had been always subjects of the "self-ruling noble Dadiani of Samegrelo" and swore loyalty to the Russian Emperor as well (***ACAC*, 1868**: 527 – №1031). This signified Samurzakano, entering under the sovereignty of the Russian Empire as part of Samegrelo.

O. Bgazhba and S. Lakoba disregard all this and try to present the facts in such a way that Samurzakano independently received Russia's "protection," and the ruler of Samegrelo only played the role of a mediator. Abkhaz historians are simply lying when they state that the transformation of Samurzakano into a Russian administrative unit (Sabokaulo) in 1840 is proof of Mikhail Shervashidze's rights over the region (**Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 245). This claim is groundless. The Russians made such a decision not to satisfy the pretensions of the ruler of Abkhazia, but in order to strengthen their colonial-occupational regime on the northeastern coast of the Black Sea, which, in the long run, aimed to eliminate the autonomous existence of both Abkhazia and Samegrelo. This is confirmed by the fact that until 1840, the Russian local authorities categorically considered Samurzakano to be the possession of Samegrelo.

Thus, as this brief historiographical overview shows, it can be firmly stated that the historical past of Samurzakano has not been properly studied in its entirety. This is particularly notable against the backdrop of separatists who spare no effort in trying to present the ethnocultural and political-state history of this indigenous Georgian region in a distorted form and to sever it from the common historical process of Georgia, just as they aim to do with the rest of present-day Abkhazia.

Thus, in this most recent historical research, based on the analysis of archive and other historical sources, a collective monograph has studied the historical past and present of Samurzakano – as a Georgian historical-ethnographic province. It has demonstrated that the region fully belongs to the Georgian historical, cultural, and political space; using appropriate ethnological and historical examples, it has been confirmed that the Samurzakano people belong to the Georgian nation, which automatically invalidates their attempts to state these people the Apsuas, what is so vigorously pursued by the occupying regime.

However, the historical and cultural development of Samurzakano, and its active participation in the formation of the region as a bulwark of Georgian spirit and Georgian-Abkhaz relations, involved the ethnic Abkhazs as well. They were also promoters of the idea of a united Georgia. Worth mentioning are the names of such men as Murzakan, Khutunia, and Manuchar Sharvashidze are worthy

to be mentioned. as well as the active participants in the 1924 August uprising. These individuals contributed to the strong unity of Georgians and Abkhazs, which formed the basis of our common homeland – Georgia.

Gali municipality is located in the southeastern part of the autonomous republic of Abkhazia. The administrative centre is the city of Gali. From the north it borders with Ochamchire (Abkhazian AR), from the east – Tslalenjikha, from the south – Zugdidi municipalities. The territory of this area is 1,003 square km. Its historical references go back as far as the medieval period, when the village of Gogieli was located there. This name is given on the Italian maps of the mid 17th century. On the Samegrelo map of 1861 the village of Gali is pointed out. In 1886 Samurzakano district consisted of Gali community with villages: Gali I and Gali II (**Khorava, 2022(a):** 442). On 29th of March 1903 the *"Iveria"* newspaper also points out the village Gali, what in Megrelian means "River". Similarily the old name of the Turkish river Kızılırmak is "Halis", what in Tchan language also means "River" (**Eremeev, 1971:** 50).

The name "Gali" is believed to be derived from the Georgian word "ghali" (meaning "river" or "stream"), and it is noted that the Russian version of the name is derived from the Georgian version, as the Russian language doesn't have the specific "gh" sound.

The northeastern part of the municipality is mountainous, while the southwest is a plain-lowland area. In the northern part, there are the medium-altitude, intensively karstic Okhachkhues and Oisires ridges, as well as the Akibis ridge. To the south of these, there is a hilly zone. To the southeast of the city of Gali, there is the Sari-Satanjo mountain (506 m), and further south, stretching up to the Enguri River, is the Samurzakano plain-lowland, which rises to a height of 20-30 meters.

Among the natural resources, the plaster (Okumi) deposit is notable. The municipality has a humid subtropical climate with a maritime influence. The Samurzakano plain and the hilly foothills experience mild winters and hot summers. The maximum rainfall occurs in the summer and autumn. The region also experiences monsoon winds. In the mountainous zone, winters are moderately cold, and summers are long and warm.

The river network is quite dense. The largest and most water-rich river is the Okumi river, which originates from the southern slope of the Akibis ridge. Its left tributary is the Erisqali river, and on the right are the rivers Okhoja and Tchkhortoli. On the coastal plain, there are smaller rivers such as Anaria, Gagida, and others, which have their sources in the hilly zones. The rivers are primarily fed by rainfall, although the Okumi river is also partially nourished by snowmelt. The rivers in the lowland are characterized by water flow throughout the year.

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This passage gives an overview of the geography, climate, and river systems in the Gali municipality and Samurzakano region. In the plains, the mountain rivers experience spring floods. On the right side of the Okumi River, in the

plain-lowland area, at an altitude of 15-20 meters above sea level, there is the Bebesiris lake group. Small karst lakes are found in the Okhachkhue karst massif.

In the coastal strip of the Samurzakano plain, between the rivers Enguri and Gagida, swampy, marshy soil is widespread. Further north, up to the confluence of the Eristskali river, the wetland soil of floodplains is found. About 3-4 kilometers from the sea (in the middle of the Enguri and Okumi rivers), there is swampy-torf soil. In the hilly zone, red soil, yellow soil, and subtropical soil are developed, while on the limestone areas (Okhachkhue, Satanjo), there is humus-carbonate soil. On the Akibi and Okhachkue ridges, typical and arid forest soils are found (***GSE-2*, 1977:** 642).

With the current administrative division, the historical Samurzakano mainly covers the municipalities of Gali and partially Ochamchire, Tsalenjikha, and Zugdidi.

From the historically inhabited settlements of Samurzakano, today the following villages belong to Ochamchire: Ilori, Okhurei, Reka, and Agubedia; to Zugdidi: Ganarjia and Mukhuri; and to Tsalenjikha: the villages of Pakhulani and Chale. Apart from the Gali municipality of Abkhazia, it includes 1 urban settlement (the city of Gali) and 25 rural communities with 90 villages.

Fragment from the map "Carte de la partie septentrionale de l'Empire Otoman (1774)" of the cartographer Giovanni Antonio Rizzi Zanoni
(*Source: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b59628013.r/*).

CHAPTER I. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CREATION OF SAMURZAKANO

§1. The Expansion of Abkhazs toward Enguri in the Late Quarter of 17th Century. *Concerning the Issue of Restoration of so-Called "Historical Frontier" of Abkhazia.*

In the last quarter of the 17th century, the situation in the principality of Odishi became particularly complicated. Levan III (Shamadavle) Dadiani, referred to in Georgian historical sources with the title *"Ruler and Holder of All of Odishi and Abkhazia"* (***ADP*, 1993:** 9), failed to become a worthy successor to his famous uncle, Levan II the Great (1611-1657), whose name he adopted immediately as soon as he took the office.

In September 1672, the Pasha of Akhaltsikhe summoned him to Kutaisi. It is presumed that the Ottomans wanted to crown Levan II Dadiani's grandson, who had been brought up at the Akhaltsikhe Pasha's court, instead of Levan III (**Khorava, 1996:** 108). The ruler of Odishi, Dadiani, understood the real intention of this "invitation" and prepared to resist. He called upon the Abkhazs for help. Soon, on 19th of September, Sustar Sharvashidze entered Odishi with his forces (***Voyages du Chardin*, 1711(b):** 6). However, instead of reinforcements, Dadiani encountered one of his devastators. It is believed this might had been Saustar (Bagrat) Sharvashidze, who is referred to as *"Sustar Sarazia"*[1] in the letters of Catholic missionaries (**Tamarashvili, 1902(2011):** 208; **Khorava, 1996:** 108). The Abkhazs raided almost the entire region of Samegrelo (**Papaskiri, 1998:** 47). They devastated Odishi for quite some time (almost until 13th of October), during which they captured 1,200 people, a lot of cattle, and a great deal of booty; they also plundered a Theatine's house where they took three captives (***Voyages du Chardin*, 1711(b):** 18). During Saustan's time, the Abkhaz inroads to Samegrelo[2] became especially frequent, and the Abkhazs started to settle permanently in the Kodori-Ghalidzga interfluve, which was the northern part of Samegrelo principality (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 845; **Anchabadze, 2010:** 513).

Although Abkhazs started to repudiate Christianity much earlier. In a doc-

[1] The common form of the surname *"Sharvashidze"* in Samegrelo is *"Sharashia."* Interestingly, this variation is mostly encountered with Latin missionaries (**Lamberti, 1991:** 23; **Castelli, 1976:** 177-178). Additionally, Castelli transmits the Latinized form of *"Sharashia"* as *"Charasino"* and *"Chiruasia"* (**Castelli, 1976:** 177-178, 395). This detail was first pointed out by B. Lominadze (**Lominadze, 1966:** 193, note 43). According to the observations of experts on Abkhaz linguistics, *"Sharashia"* led to *"Chachba"* (**Gvantseladze, 2008:** 92-93). Apparently, the Sharvashidzes introduced themselves to the missionaries as *"Sharashias"*. Therefore, their everyday, spoken language at home was Megrelian, while the official court language – Georgian.

[2] The Abkhaz raiding army also reached the approaches of Gonio-Lazeti. It is well-known that in summer 1571, the Ottoman Grand Vizier issued commands (dated from 23rd and 25th of June and 3rd and 23rd of August) to the Beglerbegs of Erzurum and Trebizond, ordering to curb Abkhazs, who were wandering in some villages of Gonio and Arhavi (***In the Archives of Türkiye.., I-1*, 2022:** 72-74; **Yıldıztaş, 2021:** 73).

ument compiled between 1639 and 1657, which was signed by Levan II Dadiani and Catholicos Maxime I Machutadze, it is stated (***Description of Manuscripts,* 1954:** 136 – №1122). This heavy text unilaterally shows that on the territory of Abkhazia where an important ecclesiastical centre, the cathedral of Bichvinta was initially located, in this principality which repudiated Christianity now some significant phenomenon takes place which changed the traditional situation. The migration of people from the North Caucasus, naturally, brought the establishment of their traditional beliefs in this area.

It is interesting, that in one historical document (*"The document regarding the transfer of the Kiachi's icon's lock to Shergelaia"*), Saustan is also shown to be under some form of subjection to the authorities of Odishi. Specifically, Katsia Chikvani, the de facto ruler of Samegrelo, adjudicates concerning a dispute in 1680 between the two Kiachi[1] families (***Historical Bulletin,* 1925:** 248). It seems that the official Zugdidi invited Saustan as the de facto ruler of the area.

From the second half of the 17th century, the advance of the Abkhaz-Apsua tribes to the southeast became active.[2] It was a difficult and bloody task for them. This is clearly shown in an Abkhaz folk poem, where attention is drawn to the fact that an only son Satbei is taken to Ochamchire (***FPC*, 2008:** 204-205). Based on the context, it must be understood that he was taken to combat to the extremly dangerous region of Ochamchire, as neither Satbei, nor his mother conceal this. Additionally, it can be observed that the military conflict in the Ochamchire region takes place permanently. At the end, we learn that the son *"sacrificed himself for the people of the Jgerda community,"* and the battle took place in that area (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 33). In this regard, ethnologist N. Jalabadze offers a particularly noteworthy perspective. He critically studied the famous legend of Abrskil and convincingly demonstrated that it reflects late medieval events and aggressive actions taken by the Abkhazs against Samegrelo. Consequently, this saga was also created during this period (**Jalabadze, 2021:** 195-210).

This aggressive action was encouraged and supported by the Ottomans, who aimed to strengthen their influence in Western Georgia and at the same time, create a favorable ground for the slave trade. Catholic missionary Don Giuseppe Giudice wrote in one of his reports that the Megrelians suffered from inroads of the neighboring pagans (the Abkhazs are implied – ***K.K.***), as a result of which the

[1] *Kiachi* – a historical village, now known as Jgerda-Akhutsa (Ochamchire municipality), located in the southern foothills of the Kodori range, beyond the Dghamshi river. The remains of the Kiachi church from the 7th -8th centuries and a developed medieval fortress, which was part of the "Kelasuri Wall" system, are still preserved here. The name 'Kiachi' is of Georgian origin and in Meglenitic means cross, or horse-shoe. After the settlement of the Abkhaz in the late 17th century, the Kiachi church was renamed *'Kiachaba'* (Abkh. Kiachi fortress, tower), and the village was renamed Akhutsa. In Abkhaz, Akhutsa means 'mountain ridge.' In 1949, it was part of the Jgerda Soviet village council. By the end of the 1980s it was named Jgerda-Akhutsa (**Tskhadaia, Khorava, 2016:** 132-133).

[2] The sporadic influx of Apsua began in the 1st half of the 15th century. They were significantly behind the local Georgian population in terms of social and economic conditions (**Papaskiri, 2021(c):** 80-83). This factor, which gave the local population relief from feudal pressure, led to support the newcomers and repudiation of main religion and a shift toward paganism, because in this case Christianity represented the ideology of the dominant class.

Abkhazs captured men and children to sell them in the Ottoman Empire (**Giudice, 1964:** 39). The main centre of the slave trade is named by the Catholic monk Emidio D'Ascoli as Abkhazia, populated by Circassians (**D'Ascoli, 1902:** 100).

The slave trade became an economic activity among the Adyghe tribes. By means of this "business," which continued even in 19th century, they supplied their families (**Topchishvili, 2018:** 167). At the beginning of the 17th century, the influence of the Ottoman Empire strengthened in Abkhazia, just as it happened in other political entities in Western Georgia. The Turks, especially in Sokhumi, attempted to have a strong foot there. The conversion of Abkhaz nobility to Islam began, which, in turn, signified the recognition of the political course of İstanbul. Already by 1630s, in various sources (Giovanni da Lucca) is pointed out one of the Sharvashidzes family member, who clearly had a first name of Turkish origin – Karabei (**De Luc, 1879:** 492). Abkhazia became a vassal of the Ottoman Empire (**Anchabadze, 2010:** 516). Being prince, during his reign Levan II Dadiani, succeeded in maintaining the integrity of the north-western borders of the principality, and thus his efforts to stop the Abkhaz invasions were relatively successful, although only temporarily".

His successors were less capable of maintaining the north-western borders of Odishi. In 1661, Solomon Sharvashidze refused to assist Vamekh III Dadiani's wife, Elene Gurieli, in fighting against King Vakhtang V Shahnavaz of Kartli (**Khorava, 1996:** 103). After Vamekh's defeat, Shahnavaz traveled to Zugdidi and bestowed the Dadiani title upon Shamadavle (the aforementioned Levan III), the son of Ioseb and granted the title to Solomon Sharvashidze as well, who visited him in Zugdidi to swear allegiance to the new ruler of Odishi (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 849-850; **Papaskiri, 2004:** 100-101). Soon after, the Abkhaz resumed their raiding attacks on Samegrelo (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 842). They attacked the Tsaishi temple (**Takaishvili, 1913-1914:** 188) and Tsalenjikha monastery (**Brosset, Rapp. IX, 1851:** 10), what is also confirmed by Patriarch Dositeos II of Jerusalem (**Seleznev, 1847(a):** 46; **Khorava, 2021(a):** 95).

At that time, Levan III was the only titular ruler of Abkhazia. According to D. Muskhelishvili, this title indicates that, even during the reign of Levan III Dadiani, Abkhazia was considered part of the *'Georgian political-cultural world'* (**Muskhelishvili, 1999:** 140). According to A. Tughushi, this *'weak ruler of Odishi'* failed to curb the Abkhaz occupation (**Tughushi, 2001(a):** 16).

Ultimately, the Sharvashidzes were able to free themselves from the nominal obligations of vassalage, perhaps during the internal unrest in Odishi following the death of Levan III. A fierce struggle broke out for the throne of Odishi. The sole heir to the throne, Manuchar, was killed by Giorgi III Gurieli (1664-1684), who wanted to seize the throne for himself (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 844). The ruler of Guria managed to take control of Samegrelo, as evidenced by the two ecclesiastic documents of 1682, where he is referred to as the ruler of both Odishi and Imereti (**Beradze, 2018:** 407).

This turmoil was used by the aforementioned Saustan Sharvashidze's son,

Sorekh (Savarekh)[1], who in 1681 invaded Odishi and declared himself the ruler (**Tamarshvili, 1902(2011):** 208). Sorekh attempted several times to cross the Enguri river and arrive to its west bank, but his attempts were unsuccessful (**Jamburia, 1973(b):** 354).

He settled down on the western bank of the Enguri river (the future Samurzakano territory), as Giorgi Gurieli controlled the opposite side. Sorekh was quite a strong and influential figure, not only among the Abkhazs and Odishians, but also among the Alans living in the North Caucasus. As Catholic missionary Raspone reported in a letter sent to Rome, Sorekh was accompanied by a large retinue, and he was received with great honour by the Alanian prince Buslak (**Anchabadze, 2010:** 513). It is supposed that Sorekh's mother was from the house of the Odishi rulers, which gave him legitimate grounds to claim the throne of Samegrelo (**Khorava, 1996:** 114). However, his rule was unacceptable to the Odishians. Ultimately, Sorekh managed to establish his authority only on the right bank of the Enguri River. However, he did not annex his new territory to Abkhazia, and it remained under the jurisdiction of Odishi. Furthermore, he defied the ruler of Abkhazia, making him a target for forays of his relatives (**Khorava, 2021(a):** 96).

Naturally, the powerful nobles of Western Georgia, including Giorgi Lipartiani, would not have accepted the further strengthening of Giorgi Gurieli, who succeeded in gaining control over both – Odishi and Imereti. Soon, a powerful coalition was formed against him, including Giorgi Abashidze, Giorgi Mikeladze, the Eristavi (*Head*) of Racha, Shoshita, and Giorgi Lipartiani. On their initiative, and with the support of the Ottoman Sultan, the title of Dadiani of Odishi was taken by Levan IV, the illegitimate son of Levan III Dadiani, in 1682 (**Beradze, 2018:** 408). As it turned out, Sorekh Sharvashidze was unable to hold this territory for long time and finally it was taken by Zegnak Sharvashidze (**Khorava, 1996:** 114).

Despite Levan IV's enthronement, the real power holder and de facto ruler was Giorgi Lipartiani, whose father, Katsia Chikvani, through his brother, Bishop Gabriel of Tchkondidi, gained significant influence at the court of Levan III. Dadiani granted him the titles of vizier and Salipartiano estate holder. In 1689, Archil, the son of Shahnavaz, visited him at his residence in Zuphu (Likhni) for a certain period of time, while attempting once again to ascend to the throne of Imereti. *"He was received by Sharvashidze, who honoured him as a King"* (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 851). Apparently, the head of Abkhazia, on the one hand, was already avowed player on the political "chessboard" of Georgia and on the other hand, acknowledged the supremacy of the king of Imereti (**Okujava, 2007:** 159). Sources no longer mention his vassal relationship with Dadiani, meaning that Archil did not ordered him out to obey the head of Odishi.

Why the complete enthronement of the Sharvashidzes was not possible by the end of the 17th century? The reason lies in the socio-ethnic changes which took

[1] In the reports of Latin missionaries, he is mentioned as Sarrech Sarrasia (**Tamarashvili, 1902(2011):** 208); Besides this Saustan and Sorekh Sharvashidze are noted in a margin of the *"Gospel of Bichvinta"* (***Description of Manuscripts*, 1949:** 74 – #2120).

place in the late medieval period on the territory of modern Abkhazia, when the incoming peoples from the Caucasus brought with them their social and economic situation, which led to the degradation and decline of the previously developed socio-economic relations in the area (**Berdzenishvili, 1990:** 614-616). As a result, Sharvashidze can be considered as first among equals (Primus inter pares), particularly in relation to the: Marshanis, Anchabadzes, and Emkhvaris (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 36-38).[1]

Now, let's turn to the events of the late 17th century, when the border between Abkhazia and Odishi was established along the Enguri river, actually legalizing the modern boundaries of Abkhazia.[2] The population of the Kodori-Enguri interfluve region found themselves in a very difficult situation. *"A significant portion of population was exterminated – they died, fled, or were sold into slavery. The abandoned territory began to be settled by the Abkhazs, who came from the opposite bank of Kodori river.. As for the more southern areas, between Ghalidzga*[3] *and Enguri, the history of the territory unfolded as follows: it was seized by the Abkhazs"* (**Anchabadze G., 2006:** 226). G. Anchabadze properly assesses the situation when he notes that this territory was seized by the Abkhazs. In this case, he repeats and agrees with the similar assessment by Z. Anchabadze: *"Abkhaz feudal lords... at the beginning of 1680s invaded the territory of the principality of Samegrelo and seized its northern regions up to Enguri river"* (**Anchabadze, 2010:** 513).

However, one cannot ignore a questionable conclusion by Professor Z. Anchabadze, which G. Anchabadze also repeats **Anchabadze G., 2006:** 226). In particular, that the Sharvashidzes family always tried to regain control over southern Abkhazia (**Anchabadze, 2010:** 513). This conclusion by Z. Anchabadze was based on a source from the anonymous historian of Queen Tamar. The list of nobles mentioned there along with *"Otagho Sharvashidze was in Tskhumi, Amanelisdze*[4] *in Kartli, Bediani in Odishi"* (***The History and Eulogy of Monarchs*, 1959:** 33-34; ***The History and Eulogy of Monarchs*, 2014:** 242). Nothing is said about his territorial rule. K. Kekelidze held that the noble's domain should have been in Argveti (***The History and Eulogy of Monarchs*, 1941:** 79), a view later shared by S. Kaukhchishvili (***The History and Eulogy of Monarchs*, 1959:** 34). Proceed-

[1] It is interesting, this formulation by Castelli closely echoes one of Vakhtushti's references describing the events following the battle of Chikhori (1462), where the chronicler says: *"The Dadiani took Odishi, the Gurieli took Guria, and Sharvashidze got the Abkhazs* (not Abkhazia – ***K.K.***) *and the Jiks and Gelovani got Svaneti"* (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 851).

[2] Of course, in the following periods, the boundary of the principality of Abkhazia never lay along Enguri river until the 1920s. However, here we mean that in the 17th century, the Sharvashidzes family had seized these lands up to the Enguri river from the Dadianis. From this period, the settlement of Abkhaz ethnic groups started on these territories, and the region between Ghalidzga and Enguri became a domain of an offshoot of the Sharvashidzes . This is an indisputable fact. However, we cannot agree with G. Anchabadze's assertion that Samurzaikhano was part of the principality of Abkhazia and that this region exercised an "autonomy of a high level" there (**Anchabadze G., 2009:** 207). The middle region between Enguri and Ghalidzga never belonged to the principality of Abkhazia during its existence.

[3] An old Georgian chronicle reference to Egristskali (**Muskhelishvili, 1977:** 112; **Muskhelishvili,** 2023: 128-129; **Arakhamia, 2009:** 101-117; **Anchabadze, 2010:** 237).

[4] According to G. Arakhamia, the correct form should be *"Amunelisdze"* and *"Amunaskiri"* (**Arakhamia, 2009:** 32).

ing from above mentioned, Z. Anchabadze assumed that in Tamar's time, there should have been changes in the territorial-administrative division of the country, which led to the unification of the territories of Abkhazia and Tskhumi within the frame of Tskhumi principality. This change, it seems, was caused by ethnic factors, specifically the fact that both regions were inhabited by ethnically similar Abkhaz (Apsua) tribes (**Anchabadze, 2010:** 413-414).

As a result of the further textual study of the chronicle of Tamar's historian (**Tskitishvili, 1966:** 222-227) the thoroughly justified correction has been inserted long time ago in K. Kekelidze-S. Kaukhchishvili's reading of the fragment from *"The History and Eulogy of Monarchs"*, that interests us (relevant reasoning and historiographical analysis can be found in: ***Kvashilava*, 2011(b):** 46). From this it follows, that the supposition of unification of the Tskhumi and Abkhazian Saeristavos (*territories led by Eristavi-Head*) under the rule of the Sharvashidzes must be excluded (**Gogoladze D, 1995:** 12-14; **Bakhtadze, 2003:** 245-247; **Papaskiri, 1999:** 179).[1]

In discussing this issue, attention is drawn to the version of the list of nobles in Vakhtushi Batonishvili's (Prince) work: *"Daghato Sharvashidze of the Abkhazs; Amunelisdze of Tskhomi; Bediani of Odishi"* (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 172). It is likely that he had access to the manuscript of *"The History and Eulogy of Monarchs"* undistorted by the transcribers, where the territory of Amanelisdze would had been clearly mentioned. The omission of his name in the sources can only be explained by the mistake of transcribers. Furthermore, other sources exclude the possibility of the unification of Tskhumi and Abkhazia. Particularly, the historian writes that Lasha-Giorgi "*hunted in Tskhumi and Abkhazia, and settled affairs there*" (***Jamtaagmtsereli*, 1959:** 156; ***Jamtaagmtsereli*, 2014:** 317). According to scientists, this is direct evidence that such a unification of the principalities never occurred (**Papaskiri, 1999:** 185).

Administrative-territorial changes in this region must have occurred only after the death of King David Narini (the Junior) Rusudan's son (1247-1293), when his heir, Constantine's brother, Michael, rebelled. The nobility took advantage of this and *"Dadiani Giorgi...*[2] *seized the principality of Tskhumi and conquered the entire Odishi up to Anakopia. Similarly, Sharvashidze conquered Abkhazia"* (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 258). A few years later, Giorgi V the Brilliant practically recognized the new situation: *"He gave the principality of Tskhumi to that one from Bedia as the first one was of Tskhumi"* (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 258). Based on this, Professor Z. Papaskiri concludes that the Sharvashidze's domain did not include Tskhumi (**Papaskiri, 1999:** 186-187).

Although in 13th-14th centuries there were no ethnic or demographic changes in the southeastern part of modern Abkhazia, Z. Anchabadze held that during that period *"the Megrelian feudal lords"* took the middle region between the Enguri and Kodori rivers from the Abkhazs and *"ethnically mastered it"* (**Anchabadze, 2010:** 84).

[1] As Z. Papaskiri says, the opinion of Georgian historians that Amanelis dze was not Argveti, but Tskhumi Eristavi in these latter days was shared by the Abkhaz researcher O. Maan. He "went so far" that tries to prove helplessly that Amanelis dze proceeds from "Maan" (**Papaskiri, 2021 (c):** 65; **Maan, 2021:** 60).

[2] Mandaturtukhutsesi (*Minister of the Interior*) Giorgi Dadiani (1345-1384).

It is from this provision that O. Bghazba and S. Lakoba develop their own views in their generalizing book published on history of Abkhazia, in which they highlight a subparagraph with the revealing title: **"The Border by the River Ingur."** They declare that: *"As a result of all these events, the ethnic border between the Abkhazs and the Georgians, which by the beginning of the 2nd millennium AD passed through the Enguri river, was restored. It simultaneously got political status of state, that has been maintained for more than 300 years"* (**Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 168).

Z. Anchabadze's aforementioned thesis has been fully adopted by O. Maan as well (**Maan, 2021:** 424).

The renowned Abkhazian expert in local history V. Pachulia claimed that the territory of the modern Gali region has been a part of Abkhazia's historical territory *"since the time out of mind"* (*«с незапямятных времен»*) (**Pachuliya, 1991:** 301).To clarify what truly happened – whether it was the conquest of territories or the recovering of the "ethnic border" between the Abkhazs and the Georgians – it seems appropriate to consider briefly the ethnic situation on the territory of modern Abkhazia in the beginning of the 2nd millennium AD and the state of the Georgian-Abkhazian ethnic border.

The leaders of contemporary "Abkhazian historiography" view the territory of interest solely as the home of the Abkhaz ethnic group. One of the active propagandists of this "doctrine" of Abkhazian separatism was the famous archaeologist I. Voronov, who in 1980s and 1990s gained fame for enormous violation of the historical past of Georgia-Abkhazia (**Voronov, 1992; Voronov..,1993**). According to Abkhaz historians, the entire territory of present-day western Georgia, including Abkhazia, was supposedly settled only by the ancestors of the Abkhazs (among whom the authors name Heniochs, Koraks and others) and Greek colonists (**Guliya, 1925:** 71; **Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 61). In this regard M. Inadze correctly points out that Abkhaz historians, without any solid foundation or proper source-based analysis of the available data, attribute the tribes mentioned by Greek, Roman, and Byzantine authors on Abkhazia's territory to the Abkhazian-Adyghe world (**Inadze, 1999:** 67). The written and archaeological sources available in historiography present a rather complex ethnic picture for this period, which, as it is believed, should date back to the Bronze Age, when the disintegration of the Paleocaucasian ethno-cultural unity occurred (**Japaridze, 1999:** 13).

The tribes recorded in ancient Greek sources during the Hellenistic period – Heniochs, Colchians, Kolis, Koraks, Moskhs – are representatives of the Georgian world, as confirmed by appropriate archaeological, written, toponymic and linguistic data and studies (**Ingorokva, 1954:** 135; **Inadze, 1999:** 62-67; **Inadze, 2009:** 397-411; **Melikishvili, 1965:** 63-68; **Melikishvili, 1989:** 183; **Gigineishvili, 1975:** 115-124; **Mibchuani, 1989:** 56-64; **Gasviani, 1991:** 212; **Orbeli, 1911:** 200, 208; **Marr, 1913:** 327; **Muskhelishvili, 1999:** 115).[1]

[1] Z. Anchabadze and Sh. Inal-Ipa searched for Abkhaz roots among the Heniochs (**Anchabadze, 2010:** 127-128; **Inal-ipa, 1976:** 188; **Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 61-67; **Kvarchia, 2015:** 224-230). However, S. Bghazba and L. Lakoba were not as categorical in their 1991 publication of the History

The above-mentioned ethnic picture of the territory of modern Abkhazia is changed in the 1st century AD. After the disappearance of the kingdoms of Colchis and Pontus,[1] the weakening of neighboring Iberia, the "Mithridates Wars," and coming of the Roman Empire, the complex military-political cataclysms in the region opened the door for successful forays of neighboring mountain tribes into the plain areas (**Melikishvili, 1999:** 219). This process was so devastating that sources (Strabo, Pliny the Elder), among other things, inform us of the plundering of Bichvinta and the desertion of Dioscuria. As a result, ancient sources (Pliny the Elder and Flavius Arrian) now refer to new tribes, such as the Sanigs, Apsils, and Abazgs,[2] in addition to the ancient tribes already settled there (**Melikishvili,** 1970: 538; **Kaukhchishvili T., 1987:** 46, 160).[3] Abkhaz historians unambiguously consider these tribes of Abkhazian origin and think that the land of modern Abkhazia was never part of Georgia (**Gumba M. M., 2000:** 89).

In general, it is accepted in Georgian historiography that the appearance of the abovementioned tribes on the territory of modern Abkhazia is recorded in the 1st-2nd centuries AD. The settlement area of these tribes is considered to be the central region between the Ghalidzga and Kelasuri rivers. Specifically, according to Flavius Arrian: the Sanigs were spread from Dioscuria-Sebastopolis up to the areas of modern Sochi-Tuapse, to the south of them the Abazgs lived and further south of them – the Apsils (**Melikishvili,** 1970: 540; **Lomouri, 1999:** 95). There is some disagreement in Georgian historiography regarding the exact locations of these settlements: S. Janashia, G. Melikishvili, and N. Lomouri believe that Apsils and Abazgs were settled along the coastline (for more details quod vide ***Muskhelishvili*, 1999:** 122). P. Ingorokva thought that the Apsils lived in the upper reaches

of Abkhazia (***History of Abkhazia*, 1991:** 31-46). The Kolkhian (Georgian) origin of the Koraks is also unacceptable to our Abkhaz colleagues (**Anchabadze, 2010:** 129-130, 165-167; ; **Inal-ipa, 1976:** 181; **Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 61; **Kvarchia, 2015:** 219-223). However, it was still Academician Iv. Javakhishvili who, using linguistic analysis, convincingly substantiated the Kolkhian roots of these tribes (**Javakhishvili, 1951:** 396-397). Pseudo-Scylax, in his Periplus, also mentions the Melanchlenes, placing them between the Kols and Colchians. The ethnic identification of this tribe is still not fully resolved in historiography (**Muskhelishvili, 1999:** 115). M. Inadze thinks that the mentioning of Melanchlenes on the territory of western Georgia is an error of the author himself (**Inadze, 1999:** 65), but he also considers G. Kavtaradze's opinion from 1985 as noteworthy. This view is associated with the issue of the similarity of the Melanchlenes and Moskh/Meskh tribes (**Kavtaradze, 1985:** 82-84). For the critique of the presenting this issue in Abkhaz historiography vide: ***Papaskiri*, 2021 (b):** 31-38.

[1] Professor Z. Papaskiri presented an interesting observation about the Kingdom of Colchis in his recent article (**Papaskiri, 2022:** 203-217).

[2] According to R. Topchishvili, the Apsils should have been formed as a result of the merging of the Svano-Zano-Proto-Adyghean groups, but in this case, the Georgian group prevailed. In his opinion the same tribes participated in the ethnogenesis of the Abazgs, living to the northwest of the Apsils. The only difference was that the Proto-Adygheans succeeded in this process (**Topchishvili, 2018:** 202).

[3] According to S. Bakhia-Okruashvili, the migration of the Abkhazs and related to them peoples of north-Caucasian-origin to the territory of modern Abkhazia, both at the beginning of AD period and in the late Middle Ages, is clearly indicated by Abkhaz and Abaz folklore. In the Abkhaz national epic, in ethnogenetic legends, and in stories about the origin of ancient Abkhaz geneses, it is mentioned that their initial settlement was in the northwestern Caucasus, specifically in the Kuban river lowland (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 1999:** 331; **Bakhia-Okruashvili, 1999:** 9-30).

of the Kelasuri river (**Ingorokva, 1954:** 135-136). M. Inadze excludes the possibility of them living along the Black Sea coastline and believes that the Apsils and Abazgs resided in the foothills and mountainous areas of northern Colchis (**Inadze, 1999:** 73, 79). Z. Anchabadze considered the eastern border of the Apsils to be the Ghalidzga river (Egrisi river) (**Anchabadze, 2010:** 237). G. Gasviani shares this view (**Gasviani, 1998:** 143). O. Bghazhba and S. Lakoba extend the settlement area of the Apsils even further: from Phasis to Sebastopolis (**Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 82).[1] G. Anchabadze also holds that the far eastern border of the Apsils/Apkhils should be sought in the area of the Khobi or Inguri rivers (**Anchabadze G., 2022:** 67).

D. Mushkelishvili, agrees with S. Janashia, G. Melikishvili, and N. Lomouri, also tries to clarify the settlement area of these tribes. According to scientists, the Apsils lived in the central area of the Kelasuri-Gumista region, while the Abazgs resided between the Gumista and Psou rivers, i.e., in the regions where they are found in the 5th and 6th centuries (**Muskhelishvili, 1999:** 123). The basis for this claim comes from the apparent discrepancy in the works of Plinius the Elder and Flavius Arrian regarding the ownership of Sebastopolis. According to D. Mushkelishvili, Plinius first mentions the tribe and then the settlement within their territory. From this, the researcher concludes that Sebastopolis should be located in the territory of the Apsils (**Muskhelishvili, 1999:** 121). However, Arrian clearly states that Sebastopolis is situated on the land of the Sanigs (**Arrian, 1961:** 43). D. Mushkelishvili, observing this, argues that in Arrian's case, it could either be a mistake committed by the Roman official or an error by later scribes (**Muskhelishvili, 1999:** 123). Nevertheless, even Plinius places Sebastopolis between the Apsils and the Sanigs (**Muskhelishvili, 1999:** 121). The debate on the ethnic identity of the Sanigs and Apsils/Apkhils-Abazgs is continued in scientific literature. Let us briefly touch upon this issue as well.

In Georgian historiography (I. Orbeli, N. Marr, S. Janashia, I. Javakhishvili, P. Ingorokva, G. Melikishvili, B. Gigineishvili, M. Inadze, N. Lomouri, T. Mibchuani, G. Gasviani, E. Khoshtaria-Brosset, Z. Papaskiri, T. Gvantseladze, and others), the opinion is widely accepted that the Sanigs are representatives of the Georgian ethnic world (**Ingorokva, 1954:** 135; **Inadze, 1999:** 69-70; **Inadze, 2009:** 412-414; **Janashia, 1959:** 11-15; **Melikishvili, 1965:** 67; **Melikishvili, 1989:** 183; **Mibchuani, 1989:** 84-89; **Gasviani, 1991:** 200; **Lomouri, 1998:** 30-34; **Gvantseladze, 2008:** 43; **Papaskiri, 2021(b):** 33-34; **Obeli, 1911:** 200-208; **Marr, 1913:** 327; **Khoshtaria-Brosset, 1996:** 49; **Muskhelishvili, 1999:** 115).

At the same time, some scientists consider Sanigs to be a Svan tribe, while others lean toward their Megrelian-Chan (Zan) origin. In this regard, N. Lomouri's viewpoint is particularly noteworthy (**Lomouri, 1998:** 33; **Lomouri, 1999:**

[1] This view lacks for sure any concrete evidence from historical sources. However, as it is evident from the rest of their "work," it seems that even this is not particularly important to them. In regard of settlement area of the Abazgs in the 1st-2nd centuries, they actually can nor set forth any definite provision. Therefore they directly skip to the 6th century and declare that they lived between the rivers Gumista and the ancient river Abaskos (which is identified with Khashups or Bzipi) (**Bgazhba O., lakoba S., 2007:** 82).

95), as he thinks the name clearly highlights the "San//Zan" root. There is a different view in Abkhaz and Russian historiography (Z. Anchabadze, Sh. Inal-ipa, O. Bgazhgba and S. Lakoba, E. Endoltseva and others), where Sanigs are regarded as the ancestral predecessors of the Sadzs, the people of Abkhaz-Adyghean origin (**Anchabadze, 2011:** 45-46; **Inal-ipa, 1965:** 90; **Shamba, 2005:** 92, 104, 129; **Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 91-93; **Endoltseva, 2008:** 50).

However, this view has a serious flaw, as rightly pointed out by M. Inadze. The proponents of interpretation of the ethnonym "Sanigs" in this manner ignore that very fact that according to historical sources Sadzs appeared on that territory just only since 17th century (**Inadze, 1999:** 69-71).

As for the problem of identifying the Apsils/Apkhils-Abazgs, historiography has long accepted out of suspicion the conclusion that the Apsils-Apsils and Abazgs-Abkhazs are the ancestors of the modern Abkhaz people (**Papaskiri, 2021(b):** 34-36). Ethnologist R. Topchishvili states that the ancient and modern Abkhaz are distinct, unrelated peoples (**Topchishvili, 2018:** 187). The researcher completely rejects the Caucasian origin of the Apsil-Adyghean tribes, naming the Eurasian steppes, including the Taman peninsula, as the area of Proto-Adyghean ethnogenesis (**Topchishvili, 2015:** 69-70).

In the 1950s, the well-known philologist P. Ingorokva expressed the opinion in his work *"Giorgi Merchule"* that these tribes were of Georgian origin (**Ingorokva, 1954:** 118-189).[1]

[1] A superficial analysis of Georgian and Apsuar folklore is sufficient in order to see, that in Apsuar oral tradition, there is not even a mention of the name of any Georgian king from the time when Georgia was still a united kingdom. Instead, there are legends, tales, or short poems only about the local feudal families, such as the "Achbas" (Anchabadze) an the "Chachbas" (Sharvashidze) clans. This indicates that their settlement occurred precisely during the period of Georgia's feudal fragmentation. It is also noteworthy that Apsuar (Apsil) folklore features many migration myths (**Zukhba, 1988:** 205-207; **Zukhba, 2014:** 360-377). The famous Abkhaz folklorist Shota Salakaya, in an article published in 1965, discusses one of the legends about the "Apsha," which says that the Abkhazs migrated from the North Caucasus, and for them, the sea was located to the south. They even thought that the sea was a "great river." Thus, for this people the sea was unknown and they thought it was "big river" (**Salakaya, 1965:** 153-154). It is also interesting that the flora of "Abrskil" legend is different from the characteristic plant life of the Abkhazian territory (**Jalabadze, 2021**). In the late Middle Ages, the migration of the Apsua tribes to the present-day territory of Abkhazia is irrefutably confirmed by the Nart epic. S. Bakhia-Okrushvili writes: "It is also noteworthy that after the spread of Christianity, religious tales began to appear in the Ossetian and Alan Nart epic. If this epic was widespread among the early ancestors of the Abkhazs, and if the Abkhazs always lived here, then it is unclear why Christian thematic would not been included these sagas. The versions of the Nart epic in Abkhaz only contain distinctly heroic-epic elements. Therefore, it is clear that the people brought these heroic cycles, ethnogenetic and genealogical tales, fairy tales, and archaic stories only from the 15th-16th centuries. It is also worth to note that in the Abkhaz "Nart epic," the Narts' habitat and territory are located in the Kuban river valley. In general, the mythologized Kuban river is the centre of the sacred space in the Abkhaz version of the epic. Nart society is socially homogeneous. The main character, the younger brother of the Narts, Sosrikva, lives in a fortified house near the Kuban river and spends his life there. During heroic deeds and campaigns, the Abkhaz Narts become interested in the "giants" from the neighboring country to the south. They are fascinated by the "giants' "land," calling it a "warm region" with fertile soil and good pastures for livestock. The vegetation there is different, and most importantly, the "vine grows." The Narts oppose the peaceful giants with aggression and violence and acquire a part of the territory. Since that time they took to

N. Berdzenishvili named this book a noteworthy research (**Berdzenishvili, 1966:** 277).[1]

It is interesting, that Academician Ivane Javakhishilivi in his research *"History of Georgian Nation"*, published in 1913 considered the Apshil-Abazgs as Georgians. Although in 1928 edition this proof is absent (**Khoshtaria-Brosset, 2000:** 5). Academician N. Berdzenishvili developed following idea concerning this issue (here is broad citation): *"It is still the case that science lacks the evidence to prove that the tribes living in Abkhazia were much more distant from the Iberian-Laz people rather than, the Svans, Meskhs, or Heres. It is noteworthy that, according to Georgian tradition, the country from the Likhi mountains up to the Kuban river - and thus the medieval "Principality of Abkhazia" too - was from ancient times the share of the Egros (Colchis) and that the city of Bedia (in Apsilia) was founded by the same Megrelian eponymous figure, Egros… Even this is also sufficient to mention that the 'Kingdom of Abkhazia' (i.e. western Georgia) had its own Chair of Catholicos in Abkhazia (in Bichvinta)... The issue is that the historical and cultural unity of "Abkhazia" gradually weakened over centuries due to the negative course of historical events, especially during the difficult times of feudal Georgia. The Ottoman Empire significantly contributed to this process. To break the unity of Georgia, the Ottomans made Jiketi-Abkhazia a strategic stronghold, as well as Samtskhe-Saatabago and Lower Guria. Since then, the plans of Georgia's downfall and dissolution were organized in places like Sokhumi, Akhaltsikhe, and Batumi. The Pashas of Akhaltsikhe and Sokhumi began to claim parts of Georgia. The Pashas of Akhaltsikhe and Sokhumi and the mutasarrıfs of Batumi were the standard bearers of the Ottoman aggression… However, nor the 19th century was kind to Georgia in this regard. The agents-colonizers of the Tsarist regime did not favour or desire the formation of the Georgian nation, as the national unification of Georgia was*

wandering way of life. They moved between the land of the giants and the Kuban river valley. The mother of the Narts, Satanaei-Gvasha, often bathes in the lake Ritsa during her travels between the North and South Caucasus but always returns to her homeland in the Kuban valley. Nart Sosrikva being in the dungeon asks the eagle to bring him back to 'his Abkhazia,' but his primary place of residence (the Kuban river valley) is not changed. Ultimately, he dies in his homeland, in the Kuban valley. One of the Narts settles on the Great Mountain of Didripsh (in the village of Achandara, Gudauta district), but cannot take it without battle. When he settles on this mountain, he causes thunder, thus announcing to the world that he is conquering a new territory with his people (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2022:** 38). However, we fully agree that the formation of modern Abkhazian identity, as an ethnicity, occurred on the territory of Georgia – in Abkhazia (Abkhaz people have no other homeland). At the same time, it represents a kind of mixture of the Adyghe-Circassian Abkhaz and Georgian (mainly Megrelian-Zan) ethnic segments (**Muskhelishvili,1989**; **Gvantseladze, 2008:** 119; **Papaskiri, 2021(b):** 36). This is why today's Abkhazs (alongside Georgians) are unconditionally considered the indigenous population of Georgia/Abkhazia. This viewpoint is firm and is officially recognized by the Georgian state, as evidenced by the relevant record in Georgian Constitution, according to which the Abkhaz language, as one of Georgia's indigenous peoples' mother tongue, being a subject of common Georgian history, has been granted the status of a state language (alongside the Georgian language) on the territory of Abkhazia" (**Papaskiri, 2021(b):** 36).

[1] Abkhaz scientists harshly criticized this' work (**Anchabadze, 1956:** 261-278; **Bgazhba, 1956:** 279-303). The core principles of P. Ingorokva, regarding the ancient Abkhazs were fully adopted by G. Akhvledani, S. Kaukhchishvili and D. Kobidze (**Akhvlediani G., 1957**; **Kaukhchishvili S., 1957**; **Kobidze, 1957**). For other opinions vide: ***Gasviani*, 2003**.

contrary to the goals of the conquerors and the Tsar's regime spared no effort in dismantling the forces that had united Georgia on the path to recovery and reunification. Tsarist agents-colonizers declared the Abkhazs, Lower Gurians (Kobuletians), Meskhs, Klarjetians, Shavshs, Adjarians, Eastern Khevians (Ingiloans), Megrelians, and Svans to be non-Georgians... ...As a result of these injustices, today we even need to assert the Georgian identity of the Abkhazs, Meskhs (Shav-Klarjet-Tao groups), Lazs, Adjarians, Kobuletians, and Ingiloans..." (**Berdzenishvili, 1966:** 278-281).

Academician M. Lortkipanidze, in her 2012 monograph, clearly asserts the Georgian tribal identity of the Apsils-Abazgs (**Lortkipanidze, 2012:** 15). However, in her 1990 publication, she supported their Abkhazian (Apsuan) identity (**Lortkipanidze, 1990:** 10). Academician T. Gamkrelidze considers the Abazgs to be a Georgian tribe, but views the Apshils as ancestors of the Abkhaz (**Gamkrelidze, 2009:** 320-326). Regarding the ethnonym "Apsua," according to the scholar, it should not come from "Apshil," but rather from "Abaz" (**Gamkrelidze, 2009:** 327).

The well-known Georgian expert on Turkish studies, Mrs. Ts. Abuladze, offers an interesting observation based on the analysis of Ottoman chronicles and documents. According to the researcher, from the second half of the 16th century, the Turkish language began to use the ethnonym "Abaza" instead of "Abkhaz" (***Foreign and Georgian Terminology..,* 1993:** 274). Although a later source (dated to 1780s) mentions that those referred to as "Abaz" were previously named "Abkhaz" (***Foreign and Georgian Terminology..,* 1993:** 274), but this is not particularly significant here, since what matters is that "Abkhaz" suddenly disappears, and "Abaza" appears. From that time, the Turks use only the ethnonym "Abaza."

The well-known Russian archaeologist, ethnographer, and historian, expert on Caucasian studies Alexander Diachkov-Tarasov (1867-1943) wrote: *"The Abkhaz did not always live where they currently reside: their traditions, numerous historical data, and customs show that they came from the north and pushed the Georgian tribes until they settled near the Enguri River. Here began the mixing of two originally alien tribes – Megrelians and Abkhazs – giving rise to a mixed tribe of Samurzaikhanoans, who lived from the Enguri to nearly the Kodori"* (**Dyachkov-Tarasov, 1905:** 65).

Thus, on the edge of BC and AD periods, only Georgian tribes mainly inhabited the northwestern part of Georgia (**Papaskiri, 2021(b):** 37-38).

According to historical sources, it becomes clear that the Georgian-Abkhaz ethnic boundary, which did not always imply a political or state frontier, primarily "moved" in the interfluve the Ghalidzga-Kelasuri rivers. For example, according to Leonti Mroveli, the territory of the kingdom of Pharnavaz extended to Egrisi river (**Leonti Mroveli, 1955:** 24; **Leonti Mroveli, 2014:** 24). This situation remained unchanged until the time of Vakhtang Gorgasali.

In the 3rd century AD, the kingdom of Lazica-Egrisi became stronger in western Georgia, and by the end of the 4th century, it annexed Apsilia, Abkhazia, and Sanigia. In the second half of the 5th century, an agreement was reached between Vakhtang Gorgasali and the Byzantine Emperor, and the border between

Byzantium and Kartli was established along the Kelasuri river (**Juansher, 1955:** 177, 203-205, 235, 242; **Juansher, 2014:** 93, 105-106).

According to the researchers (P. Ingorokva, D. Muskhelishvili), the *"middle country"* mentioned in this excerpt, which refers to the Ghalidzga-Kelasuri region, is the same as the toponym "Abzhua" that emerged in the 17th century (**Dadiani, 1962:** 209), which means *"middle village"* in Georgian (**Ingorokva, 1954:** 128; **Muskhelishvili, 1977:** 112). According to D. Muskhelishvili's hypothesis, the creation of this toponym should have occurred during the time of Vakhtang Gorgasali, and the fact that the source uses "country" instead of "village" is explained by the later editor's or copyist's correction (**Muskhelishvili, 1977:**113).

In the 7th century, the border shifted again to the Egristskali river (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 795). On this issue, a slightly different account is found in the work of an anonymous Armenian geographer (P. Patkanov suggests that it was created at the turn of the 7th-8th centuries): *"Between the Bulgars* (Balkarian people – ***K.K.***) *and the Pontic sea live the nations: Garshi, Kuti, and Svans,*[1] *up to the city of Pitiunta (Pitius) on the seaside of the Abasgi (Abkhazia) country, where the Apshils and Abkhazs live until their seaside city of Sevastopolis (Dioscurias) and further, up the river Drakon, which separates Abkhazia from the country of Eger* (Egrisi – ***K.K.***)*"* (**Patkanov, 1883:** 29).

Z. Anchabadze matched the river *"Drakon"* with the Kodori river. Apparently, this conclusion was based on the phonetic similarity of the mentioned hydronym (**Anchabadze, 2010:** 298). This opinion is also supported by D. Muskhelishvili, who cites the fortress *"Skotor"* mentioned in the work of Theodosius of Gangra, which was supposed to be located somewhere in the Kodori[2] river basin (**Muskhelishvili, 1977:**98-99, 119-121; **Muskhelishvili, 2023:** 154, 325). We think this opinion should be strengthened by the use of *"Kotori"* instead of *"Skotor"* in the Georgian translation of Theodosius of Gangra (**Theodosius of Gangra, 1940:** 43, note 4).

The similarity of Drakoni with Kodori is also shared by Z. Papaskiri (**Papaskiri, 2009:** 430-431) and S. Bakhia-Okruashvili (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2010:** 193). If we match *Drakon* with Kodori and accept the information from the anonymous Armenian source, then it will obviously contradict Vakhushti. This nuance was pointed out by D. Letodiani, who, therefore, tried to reconcile these two pieces of information. According to the researcher, the river *Drakon* should be identified with the Egrisi river (**Letodiani, 1991:** 15-16, 19, 182).

In contrast, the Abkhaz scientist V. Butba proposed a radically different view, matching the mentioned hydronym with the river Tskhenistskali, which would extend the boundary of the "Avas" country very far to the southwest (**Butba, 2001:** 104). Of course, this opinion is absolutely groundless.

Although the geography of the anonymous Armenian source has come to us in a very distorted condition, we think it should still represent the fixation of

[1] Z. Anchabadze, D. Muskhelishvili, D. Letodiani match Svans to Sanigs (**Anchabadze, 2010:** 297; **Muskhelishvili, 1977:** 98-99; **Muskhelishvili, 2023:** 119-120; **Letodiani, 1991:** 82).

[2] The name of this hydronym is obviously of Georgian origin (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2010:** 194-195).

the Georgian-Abkhaz ethnic boundary between the period of Vakhushti's records and the information of Juansher. Particularly, while describing the campaign of the famous Arab commander Marwan ibn Muhammad ibn Marwan (*Murvan the Deaf* in the Georgian historical sources; later *the Caliph Marwan II* (744-750)) in Western Georgia, he writes: *"As the Deaf passed K'lisura, which was the border between Greece and Georgia, he destroyed the town of Apshileti – Tskhumi, and approached the fortress of Anak'opia, where there is an icon of the Mother of God, not man-made but sent by God"* (**Juansher, 2014:** 111).

The event recorded in Vakhushti's account is dated to the first half of the 7th century (according to the chronology of the reign of Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (610-641)), while Juansher's account places it in the 2nd half of the 730s (during the campaign of Murvan the Deaf in Georgia). It looks like that between approximately 641 and 730, there was a certain shift of the border further to the northwest, from Egrisi to the direction of Kodori. However, this fact is not reflected in the Georgian chronicles. We think that the logical framework for the shift of the border from Egrisi in Vakhushti's account to the Klisura of Juansher aligns with our hypothesis. Nevertheless, to fully confirm this assumption, further research is necessary to clarify the text of the anonymous Armenian geographer. In the following centuries (during the Principality of Abkhazia, the Kingdom of "Abkhazs", and the united kingdom of Georgia), the border is again fixed at Egrisi (the border between the Tskumi and Bedia holdings) (**Vakhusti, 1973:** 796). This situation remains intact till the 13th century.

The new revision of the border takes place in early 17th century. By the first quarter of that century, the principality of Abkhazia supported by the Ottoman Empire and by the tribes from North Caucasus, the principality of Abkhazia, having its eastern border near Anakopia (modern-day New Athos – ***K.K.***) (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 776, 783), took advantage of the internal conflicts in Odishi and began a permanent and successful expansion to the southeast – deep into the principality of Samegrelo-Odishi (**Khorava, 2021(a):** 92). Initially, the reason for this aggression was the acquisition of slaves and resources, but soon they also began to seize the lands which had been ravaged by their inroads (**Tughushi, 2001(a):** 15). In the 1930s, the Abkhaz historian S. Basaria recorded the words of an elderly Abkhaz man, Mazhagv Adleiba, who remarked about the settlement of the Aphtsua: *"Our ancestors settled here when they heard that the population of Abkhazia had fled and the land became deserted"* (**Basariya, 1934:** 108).[1]

[1] According to English knight John Mandeville's account (1375), the Kingdom of Georgia "begins at the high mountain named Abson. There live strange people. They are named Alon" (**Tvaradze, 2004:** 169). In the reference Tvaradze points out that by the opinion of publishers the "Abson" mountain would be the mountain Yalbuz, though T. Gvantseladze provides an interesting observation. In his view, "Abson" could be the Abkhaz name for "Absne" (**Gvantseladze, 2004:** 62-63). Later sources unequivocally place the settlements of the Abkhazs near the Circassians and Alans in the north Caucasus (**Chikobava Ak., 2009:** 343). On 1636 map of the Ottoman Empire, published in Frankfurt by Swiss artist and publisher Matthäus Merian (the Elder), it is clearly shown that the settlement "Acua", the name by which the Abkhaz refer to the city of Sokhumi, is located in the north Caucasus. Sukhumi itself is marked with its ancient Latin name, Savastopol (**Merian, 1636**). While the Apsuas

Despite the individual military and political successes of the Odishians (**Lamberti, 1991:** 23), it becomes practically impossible to halt this process. The situation was not saved even by the so-called "Kelasuri Wall," built by Levan II Dadiani for to "curb the intrusions of the Abkhaz" (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 782).[1] This fortification structure failed to stop the advancing forces. The purpose of this fortification to defend Samegrelo from the Abkhaz incursions is confirmed by foreign authors as well: Arch. Lamberti (**Lamberti, 1991:** 152), Jean Chardin (***Voyages du Chardin*, 1711(a):** 121).

Based on various sources, primarily of foreign authors, it becomes possible to get a general picture of the political and ethnic situation in the region.

The Italian missionary Giovanni da Luca recorded the border between Abkhazia and Samegrelo in 1630 at the river Abse [2] (**Tamarashvili, 1902(2011):** 144). This settlement is equated with the city of Sukhumi by I. Tabaghua (**Tabaghua, 1984:** 157). B. Khorava also supports this hypothesis (**Khorava, 2021(a):** 91). However, according to P. Ingorokva, this should refer to Anakopia, a suggestion which N. Berdzenishvili considered questionable (**Ingorokva, 1954:** 134; **Berdzenishvili, 1990:** 618).

Half a century later, at the beginning of the 18th century, the Russian envoy to İstanbul, Pyotr Tolstoy (1701-1714), wrote that Sevastopol (the old name of Sokhumi) was the "capital" of Samegrelo (**Tolstoy, 2006:** 104). Of course, by thas time, this was no longer the case, and Sokhumi was not the capital of Odishi, but the Russian diplomat had fairly recent and reliable information about Sokhumi. It is interesting that a similar account is found in the work of the Dutch scientist and politician Nicolaas Witsen (1641-1711) published in 1705, titled *"Noord en Oost Tartarye"* (**Witsen, 2014:** 662).

According to Giovanni da Luca, the church of Dranda was part of Odishi (**Tamarashvili, 1902(2011):** 149). However, it was already known to him before he arrived to Samegrelo that there was heightened tension between these peoples (**Tamarashvili, 1902 (2011):** 145). The Dominican missionary names the first settlement of Samegrelo as Skurcha (Scourcia, Scorua), which is located near the river Kodori (**Tamarashvili, 1902(2011):**145). The Odishians were moving further southeast due to the repeated Abkhaz invasions. However, we must assume that a certain number of Megrelian inhabitants lived in the settlement of Dranda, as a local monastery still functions there, which is also the cathedral of the Archbishop of Dranda (Driandelli) (**Tamarashvili, 1902(2011):** 146).

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settled on the territory of the Principality of Abkhazia, but they had not yet promulgated their own settlement's name. In Georgian chronicles, the form "Aqva" at the first time appears in with Niko Dadiani's data (**Dadiani, 1962:** 180). Vakhushti does not know *"Aqva/Aku."* In Georgian historical sources, this toponym is mentioned on the map of Timothe Gabashvili: *"The fortress of Sokhumi. In Georgian it is called Aku"* (**Tskhadaia, Khorava, 2016:** 21). In Russian documents, *"Aku"* is found in the report card *"Записка о Мингрелiи"* dated 1770 by Captain Yazykov (**Tsagareli, 1891:** 261).

[1] T. Beradze thought that by 1611-1615, the border between the Odishi and Abkhaz principalities already passed along the river Kelasuri (**Beradze, 1999:** 208; **Beradze, 2018:** 76).

[2] According to B. Khorava, the river should be Besleti, not Kodori as I. Tabaghua said (**Khorava, 2021(a):** 91; **Tabaghua, 1984:** 160).

Over the next 20 years, the border between Abkhazia and Samegrelo shifted even further southeast: on February 6, 1640, Russian envoys F. Elchin and P. Zakharyev visited the Dranda Monastery (***Embassy of Echin & Zakharyev*, 2005:** 269). However, on the map of an Ottoman author of that period, Kâtip Çelebi, the border is recorded as being at the river Kelasuri (**Kâtip Çelebi, 2013**: 49).[1]

Few years later, the border between the two principalities changed again. And it shifted to the river Kodori (**Lamberti, 1991:** 11-12). By the early 1650s, the situation that had developed seemed relatively stable (until the end of the century). Although Abkhazian constant raids on Samegrelo continued (***Voyages du Chardin*, 1711(b):** 6, 17-18), this did not lead to any changes of the border.

The Apsua intrusions were devastating. In a 1674 report it is written: *"... Samegrelo no longer exists, as it has fallen into the extreme misery due to wars, destroyed and ravaged. No one has livestock, and everyone lacks sustenance... Now, no one can live fearlessly, always in fear of the permanent Abkhaz invasion"* (**Tamarashvili, 1902(2011):** 204). It is interesting to note that at this time, the target of the Abkhaz raids was not only Samegrelo: Giorgi Gurieli (who ruled from 1669) wrote about *"Abkhaz brigands, who raided Guria many times"* (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 840).

However, Georgian population also lived on the territory of the Abkhazian saeristavo(huge holding held by eristavi, Head) and principality as well . In Bitchvinta, during 1640s-1650s, when the border between Abkhazia and Odishi was already at the river Kodori, Georgians still lived there, not Abkhazs (**Kvashilava, 2006:** 164). Some researchers (B. Lominadze, K. Okujava, Z. Papaskiri) think, that in the mid-17th century, Megrelians and Abkhazs still cohabitated between Bichvinta and Kodori (**Lominadze, 1966:** 222, 224-225; **Okujava, 2002:** 54; **Papaskiri, 2004:** 104-105). Apparently, during this period, there was no active occupation of Odishian lands by the Abkhazs/Apsuas.

Their settlement on the territory of Samegrelo, which had been seized, did not happen all at once. Chardin also attests that the Abkhazian invasions had more of a raiding nature: the Abkhaz *"plunder and burn everything, capture people and livestock"* (***Voyages du Chardin*, 1711(b):** 6, 17-18). The expulsion of the Megrels from the Gumista and Enguri interfluve happened precisely under these circumstances. The Odishi principality, already engaged in internal conflicts, wars with neighboring kingdoms and principalities, and repulsing Ottoman attacks, no longer had the strength to protect its own population (**Kvashilava, 2006:** 165).

Thus, taking into account all the abovementioned, we hold that it is quite clear that there is no foundation to consider the middle Enguri region as the historical dwelling place of the Abkhaz ethnic group (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 71). Therefore, the use of the word "conquest" by Z. Anchabadze in relation to the occupation of the part of the territory of the Odishi principality – later Samurzakha-

[1] As G. Alasanya notes, the "*Cihannümâ*" was likely compiled between 1657-1680. The researcher observes a discrepancy between Kâtip Çelebi's work and the map data regarding the border of Abkhazia and Odishi. According to the map, the border is along the river Kelasuri, while in the text, it is already mentioned along the river Kodori (**Kâtip Çelebi, 2013:** 56, 122). A. Lamberti, who visited Samegrelo in the mid-17th century, also records the border at the river Kodori (**Lamberti, 1991:** 11-12).

no – by the Sharvashidze family is entirely correct (**Kvashilava, 2013-2015**: 154).

One of the apologists of the existence of the "historical border" between Abkhazia and Georgia along the Enguri river was the Abkhaz historian T. Achugba. He also tried as much as it was possible to "prove" that, according to written sources of the past centuries, the "ethnic border" passed through the southeastern part of Abkhazia along the Enguri river (Achugba a, 2010: 48). However, the most "ancient" source that the researcher presented to support this thesis is dated to 1788 (***Lexicon*, 1788:** 3). The historical territory of Samurzakano being part of the Dadiani domain is confirmed by a micro toponym found in the village of Otobaya: *"Dadianish nokhori"* ("Dadiani's settlement") (**Shonia N., 2019:** 42).

In short, despite these and other similar attempts, it can be confidently asserted that until the 17th century, the farthest eastern border of the settlement of the Abkhaz (Apsua) tribes did not extend beyond the river Ghalidzga. To say the least, local hydronyms should directly point to this; specifically, "Ghalidzga," which in Megrelian-Kavkaz language means "the river of the edge" (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 71). Ghalidzga might had been, at least for a period, the so-called "ethnic border" between the Abkhazs and the Megrels. Moreover, the region of our study – the Ghalidzga-Enguri midlands (not to mention the rest of modern-day Abkhazia) – according to the researchers, is rich in Georgian epigraphic monuments, the chronology of which spans 10th-17th centuries (**Akhaladze, 2005:** 75).

As we can see, the declaring by Abkhaz historians the Enguri river as the "historical border between Georgia and Abkhazia" is scientifically completely groundless and, accordingly, cannot withstand elementary critique. It only serves a propagandistic purpose, aimed creating and justifying historical and ideological grounds for the separatist acts. After the conquest of part of the Odishi principality (the right bank of the Enguri river) by Sorekh Sharvashidze, the process of intensive settlement of the area by the Abkhaz intensified. At this stage, the Kodori-Ghalidzga midlands were in a particularly difficult situation, as this region, due to its geographical location, effectively represented the frontline of the Odishi-Abkhaz conflict. As a result, the main strike fell on it. Z. Anchabadze considered the overpopulation in Abkhazia's main areas as the main reason for this process during the mid-17th century (**Anchabadze, 1947:** 143).

The author did not specify what factor caused the overpopulation in the area, but rightly pointed out that the low level of production should have forced the Abkhazs to settle in new lands. Extensive farming is typical for mountain population in conditions of low social development. In this regard, we must agree with the observation of Academician N. Berdzenishvili: *"It is entirely impossible for intensive feudal agriculture to have been replaced by extensive mountain farming, nor could an advanced feudal culture have been replaced by mountain way of life"* (**Berdzenishvili, 1990:** 615). The scientist named the arrival of a new wave of population from north Caucasus as the reason for this change **Berdzenishvili, 1990:** 616).

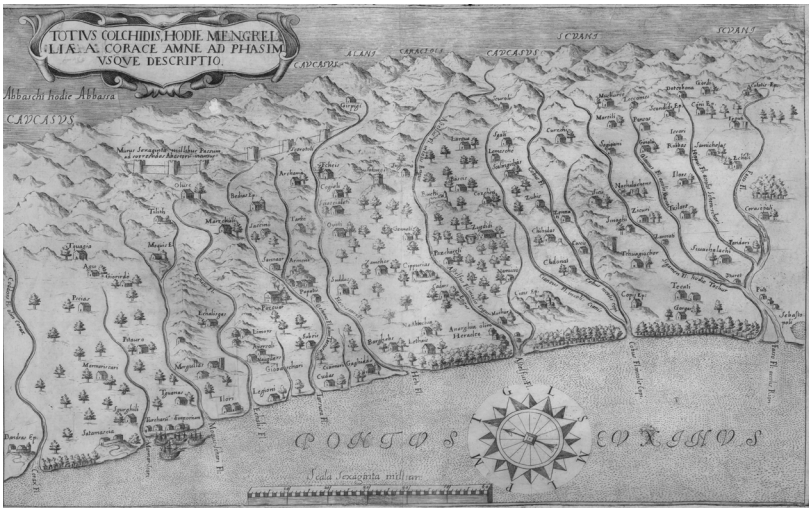
There is an opinion that the conflict between Abkhazia and Odishi differed from other internal conflicts between the political units of western Georgia, be-

cause the expansion of the Abkhazian nobility was directed to the conquest of the territory between Kodori and Enguri. In essence, it was a fight against "Georgianism" and Georgian social and political system (**Kvashilava I., 2000:** 24).

It is entirely correct to note that the confrontation between Abkhazia and Odishi somewhat differed from other internal conflicts in western Georgia. However, territorial acquisitions were a feature of other internal conflicts as well, and the collapse of the Georgian socio-political system was **the result** of this struggle, not its goal. This outcome occurred due to the arrival of new settlers in the area previously inhabited by the displaced Georgians of the Kodori-Enguri interfluve, as noted earlier by T. Beradze. It was precisely the arrival of this new population, which was in a lower socio-economic condition, and the expulsion of the local Georgian population, that was characteristic of these battles.

As a result of these processes, according to T. Beradze, only 10-20% of the original Georgian population remained in the Kelasuri-Ghalidzga section, and this population gradually assimilated with the newly arrived Abkhazs, with the modern Megrelian clans of Gulripshi, Ochamchire, and Tkvarcheli being their descendants (**Beradze, 2005:** 242).

The Abkhaz advance did not stop here. They took full advantage of the internal conflicts in Odishi and began moving toward the Ghalidzga-Enguri interfluve. As we saw earlier, until the end of the 17th century, the settlement of Abkhaz tribes on the left bank of the Enguri River cannot be supposed. Just from this time that the Abkhaz ethnic group began to emerge in the Ghalidzga-Enguri interfluve. S. Makalatia, without providing any solid evidence, dates this event to the midst of 1710s and relates it to the unrest that began between Giorgi Lipartiani and his sons (**Makalatia, 1992:** 209-210). However, this dating lacks firm justification. Even from the description of the 1702 campaign of the Imereti-Odishi troops to Abkhazia, it is clear that by this time, the Ghalidzga-Enguri interfluve was already held by the Abkhazs.



"Map of Colchis (Samegrelo)" by Don Cristoforo de Castelli

§2. Kvapu Sharvashidze and His Principality

The possession of the Ghalidzga-Enguri interfluve by the Abkhazs, particularly the expansion during the time of Sharvashidze's son – Kvapu (Quappo Sarrasia (**Tamarashvili, 1902(2011):** 209)) – was especially intense. According to a document obtained by T. Tchitchinadze, the territories of Zegnakh Sharvashidze were divided among his children: the eldest, Rostom, received the northern part – the area between the Bzipi and Kodori rivers;[1] the hearty son, Jikeshia, inherited the interfluve of the Kodori-Ghalidzga, which was called "Abzhua"; while the youngest son, Kvapu, was given the land of Ghalidzga–Enguri's middle region (**Tchitchinadze, 1897(a):** 394). Rostom's share was a princely domain, while the others two were principalities ruled by the heirs (**Anchabadze G.,** 2006: 226). Interestingly, it is the territory of the senior branch that is referred to as "Abkhazia," while the populations of Abzhua and Samurzakano call it "Saapkhazo" (Georg.: *of the Apkhazs*) (**Topchishvili, 2022:** 270).

The version of the information contained in the document discovered by T. Tchitchinadze differs from that of K. Matchavariani: *"The first Abkhaz ruler from the Sharvashidze family was Kvapu Sharvashidze, who did not stand out for anything in particular, except for his calm and mild temperament. He had three sons: Rostom, Levan, and Murzakan. After Kvapu's death, the ownership of Abkhazia passed to his eldest son, Rostom, who, after becoming the ruler of the Abkhaz people, divided the estates among his brothers: Levan received the Abzhua district, while Murzakan received Samurzakano, which is why this area came to be known as "Samurzakano." However, since there was a very small population in Samurzakano at that time, in order to increase its population, one or two families of nobles and gentry with their subjects were relocated from the Bzipi district, from what is now the Gudauta region, to Samurzakano, and they still live there today. Rostom, the ruler of Abkhazia, had a permanent residence in Souk-Su, the present-day village of Likhni, near Gudauta. His summer residence was in Ochamchire. Levan Sharvashidze, the ruler of the Abzhua district, soon died childless, and after his death, the owner Rostom was left with seven sons: Khutunia, Elkan, Torkan, Jikeshia, Shervan-Bey, Suleiman-Bey, and Zurab."* (**Matchavariani, 1913:** 244).

It seems that K. Matchavariani relied on some folk tradition when describing these events, where events from different times are obviously mixed up. This "history" was also briefly repeated by S. Basaria (**Basaria, 1923:** 98). Furthermore, historical sources do not support the claim about Kvapu Sharvashidze's "mild character," and his son Avtandil, whose existence is documented, is not mentioned here (**Kakabadze, 1921(a):** 88). Therefore, the preference is naturally given to the document by T. Tchitchinadze, which was compiled at the Samurzakano Sharvashidze court.

[1] In 17th century in this area the new fiefdom appeared – Guma, which covered the Gumista-Kodori interfluve the western part of this territory in the early feudal period was populated by the Sanigs, the tribe of Kartvelian (Georgian) origin (**Anchabadze, 2011:** 89; **Papaskiri, 2021(a):** 33).

There is a different version about Samurzakano preserved in a legend, according to which Murzakan was not from the Sharvashidze family but from the Achba family. This clan "took" his lands in Abkhazia, and the old owner fled across the Enguri river, where the Achbas did not dare to follow him (**Inal-ipa, 1971:** 229; **Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2010:** 36). Interestingly, according to these tales, the Achbas are said to have come from North Caucasus and took over new lands on the Black sea coast by force (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2010:**36).

Kvapu's territory, due to the disturbances, was significantly depopulated. It seems that, due to the Abkhaz aggression, the local Georgian population was forced to leave their homes and sought refuge on the right bank of the Enguri River. Both foreign and Georgian) sources indicate the brutality of the Abkhaz towards the locals (***Voyages du Chardin*, 1711(b):** 18; **Vakhushti, 1973:** 845). Although these data mostly refer to the interfluve of the Kodori-Ghalidzga, it is fully justified to extend this to the Ghalidzga-Enguri region as well. The local Georgian population experienced both forced displacement and being sold as slaves to the Ottomans.[1]

The Turkish aggression greatly fueled the slave trade (**Agrba, 2007:** 52; **Kilasonia, 2018:** 44). The centre for the export of slaves abroad was Isgauri (Skurcha) (**Bronevskiy, 1823:** 346). During this period, other cities also acquired a similar "status": Akhaltsikhe, Batumi, Sokhumi, and Kutaisi as well (**Berdzenishvili,1973:** 274). In the 17th century, the slave trade became calamity for western Georgia: every year, a significant portion of the population was sold to the Ottomans (**Berdzenishvili,1973:** 274).

The Ottoman Empire procured slaves through two main methods: through tribute and in exchange for basic necessities (salt, iron) (**Dumbadze, 1957:** 25). The trade in slaves was not only carried out by rulers and nobility but also by pirates who had risen from the peasant class (**Berdzenishvili,1973:** 274). According to J. Chardin's account, men aged 25-40 were worth 15 écu, those older than 40 were valued at 8-10, young virgins aged 13-18 were valued at 20 écu, women at 12, and children at 3-4 écu (***Voyages du Chardin,* 1711(b):** 13).

The slave trade became so widespread in Abkhazia that the Catholicos of Abkhazia intervened in an effort to stop it. It is clear that the spiritual leader of western Georgia was concerned. Notably, the Church strongly opposed the slave traders and threatened them with excommunication (**Kilasonia, 2018:** 70-78). However, in the lands that also included the Catholicos's villages (Najanevi/Najanuli, Khoiri/Okhurei), the displacement or destruction of the population, or their sale as slaves, harmed the Church itself and its economic situation. For instance, in the village of Najanavi, only *"six male inhabitants"* were left because *"seventy men"* were *"taken by the Abkhaz"* (***MGL*, 1970:** 647-648, 670 – №195,

[1] The spread of slave trade among Abkhazs is confirmed by Lamberti as well. Although this problem was topical in early 19th century. Particularly Captain Ensgolm wrote in 1819: *"The distinguished element of these peoples is the love of money. The primitive condition of industry and trade, which could to a certain extent satisfy them, frequently force them to take to foul tool…this passion still force them to sell to Ottomans not only captives, but their closest neighbours and even kinsmen. This terrible trade still occurs in Abkhazia*" (**Antelava, 1951:** 53).

204). This indicates that the village was depopulated by about 90%.

Catholicos David Nemsadze categorically demanded Kvapu Sharvashidze and his family to protect the remained population. Moreover, he may have planned to move the survivors to the interior areas of Samegrelo. At one point, he succeeded in rescuing Bibia Bolkvadze and her family from captivity, later settling them in Nojikhevi (***MGL*, 1970:** 677 – №205).

The demand from the spiritual leader of western Georgia was quite principled and categorical, as evidenced by the fact that the Sharvashidzes did not simply give him a promise, but a sworn oath (**Takaishvili, 1899:** 38, 39 – №11). The Catholicos apparently accepted the oath given by the Sharvashidzes (***MGL*, 1970:** 670 – №204).

It seems that Kvapu Sharvashidze was a "culturally and politically Georgian", participating in Georgia's political life, a member of the Georgian Church, speaking and writing in Georgian. However, in this case, his interests and those of the "invading Abkhaz" coincided the Georgian population in the northwestern part of the Dadiani's principality. Therefore, Kvapu was a continuer and leader of the Abkhaz aggressive policiy against the Georgian population.

Kvapu Sharvashidze never considered fully fulfilling the terms of his oath, but in the context of the extremely tense relations with the neighboring Odishi, he somewhat owed respect to the *"Catholicos of Abkhazia,"* whose jurisdiction extended over all of western Georgia. Therefore, he had some influence at local royal and princely courts. Naturally, severing ties with him was not really in Sharvashidze's best interest. Lambert also confirms the significant influence of the Catholicos of Abkhazia, the *"Patriarch of Odishi,"* at the Dadiani court (**Lamberti, 1991:** 105). Ultimately, Catholicos Davit Nemsadze was unable to achieve anything with Kvapu Sharvashidze.

Attempts by the subsequent Catholicos Grigol Lortkipanidze to deal with this ruler also proved unsuccessful (***MGL*, 1970:** 647, 648 – №195). Despite this, Kvapu had given a sworn oath to this Catholicos as well (**Kakabadze, 1921(a):** 88).

Kvapu does not appear to have been a devout and religious Christian. On the contrary, as can be seen from the accounts of Italian missionaries, he was accused of stealing a silver statue of Saint Stephen decorated with precious stones, for which he had more than 100 Orthodox priests executed (**Tamarashvili, 1902(2011):** 209). Of course, this account is clearly biased and exaggerated, but it still somewhat reflects Kvapu's cruel and irreligious nature. It is clear from the documents that Kvapu and other members of the Sharvashidze family of that period were not steadfast Christians. It seems that the level of Christian education in the family of the Prince of Abkhazia was weakening during this time. Some members of the Sharvashidze family even converted to Islam.

Apparently, they no longer cared much about doctrinal differences between the two Christian denominations. For example, Sorekh Sharvashidze attended Masses held by Latin missionaries every day (**Tamarashvili, 1902(2011):** 209). The *"Great Prince of Abkhazia"* Besalus Ciarasino transferred the abandoned

Church of the Virgin Mary in Bichvinta to the Latin missionaries and asked for new missionaries to be sent (**Castelli, 1976:** 177, 395). Due to the missionary activities of the Abkhaz tribes, the "Catholicos of Abkhazia" was forced to leave the Abkhazian principality.

Besalus's decision to send missionaries was less about strengthening Christianity within the principality. As Castelli reports, he was "more Muslim than any of other faith" with his entire family (**Castelli, 1976:** 171). Therefore, Besalus had a more geopolitical motive: at that time, Catholic missionaries were viewed not only as religious figures but also as representatives of Europe, particularly the Pope. A similar attitude towards Catholic missionaries was evident in other Georgian kingdoms and principalities (**Kvashilava, 2020(a):** 35-36).

However, the contemporary Abkhaz were not firm followers of Islam either. According to Evliya Çelebi, the Abazas, when called *"kafirs,"* would kill a person, but if called Muslims, they would be pleased. "They do not know the Koran and have no religion. They do not like kafirs but would gladly give their souls to a Muslim" (**Evliya Çelebi, 1971**: 106). As Arcangelo Lamberti noted, the Abkhazs were only Christian in name (**Lamberti, 1991:** 12). Giovanni Guidiccioni Da Lucca agrees with this (**Tabaghua, 1987:** 170). Patriarch Dositheos II Notara of Jerusalem, visited Georgia twice (1658-1659 and 1681), wrote that *"the religion of the Abkhazs is like that of the Alans and Ziks"* (i.e., the Jiks – ***K.K.***) (**Mamistvalishvili, 2008:** 181). Similar information is found in Patriarch Macarius's writings (**Al-Jawzi, 1905:** 43; **Macarius of Antioch, 1982:** 110-111), as well as from Paul of Aleppo (**Asatiani, 1973:** 75) and N. Witsen (**Witsen, 2014:** 664).

Father Jean Richard clearly indicated at the beginning of the 18th century that Abkhazia was already a pagan province at that time (**Tamarashvili, 1902(2011):** 313).

The situation remained unchanged even half a century later, as confirmed by Jean Chardin's words, stating that the Abkhazs "have no understanding of the essence of religion, its rules, and do not obey any law" (***Voyages du Chardin,*1711(a):** 250).

Frederic de Montpéreux, a French-born Swiss traveler, ethnographer, and archaeologist, who traveled to the Caucasus in 1834, wrote: *"… the domain of the Dadiani of Samegrelo stretched to the Jiketi region, but it was constantly harassed by enemy's attacks – on the one hand, the constant raids and bloody hands of the Cherkess* (meaning the Abkhazs – ***K.K.***)*, and on the other hand, the Turks... Two centuries ago, the Dadiani princes were forced to move the border as far as Anakopia, but now they have retreated to Ghalidzga, and Abkhazia, this unfortunate country, has become as wild as the forests of America: everything was in ruins, every church destroyed, all traces of civilization wiped out; there was not a single bishop left by the Enguri"* (**Dubois, 1839:** 315; **Dubois, 2002:** 248).

An Ottoman document dated from July 1730 mentions that *"kafirs Abkhaz"* live near the Sukhum-Kale area (***Ottoman Documentary Sources..*, 2012:** 148 – №53). Even by the middle of the 18th century, the Islamization of Abkhazs was minimal. Just portion of Abkhazs became Muslims, particularly the nobility

in the service of the Ottomans, while the population still mostly adhered to traditional paganism. However, it is possible that Islam was only formally adopted for certain benefits (such as reduced taxes, Ottoman protection, or avoiding being sold into slavery).

These accounts are somewhat corroborated by Vakhushti and Evliya (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 786; **Evliya Çelebi, 1971**: 104). However, as Vakhushti confirms, the Abkhazs still retained some connection to Christianity (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 786).

This situation remained unchanged even in the later period. For example, in a Russian document from the 1860s, it is stated: *"The Abkhaz people, who occupy the best part of the Caucasus, have fallen into extreme poverty and barbarism; half have embraced Islam, while the other half have completely lost any understanding of religion"* (**Injgia, 2022:** 259).

As we can see, during this period, both the Abkhaz society and the prince's family showed signs of estrangement from Christianity, but there was still a certain degree of reverence. In J. Gamakharia's fair observation, the explanation for this divided religious state can be understood through historical realities – on the one hand, deep traditional ties to the Christian world, through genetic memory; on the other hand, the influence of the mountains and, partly, of the Ottomans, which weakened but did not completely erase Christianity (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 205).

Sorekh and Kvapu Sharvashidze actively contributed to the depopulation of the Ghalidzga-Midland region of the Georgian population. During this period, Prince Merab Jaiani, who had owned the village of Tchala (modern-day *Tchlou*), was exiled to Jikhtubani (**Kakabadze, 1921(a):** 149). It is noteworthy that there is still a district called "Najayane" in Tchlou today (**Zukhbaia, 2000:** 11). Instead of them, Kvapu removed *"several noblemen and aristocrats"* from the domain of his senior brother and settled them there. Particularly these were the Inalishvili, Anchabadze, Emukhvari, Inalishvili,[1] Marghania,[2] Lakirbaya, Zvanbaya,[3] Akirtava (**Tchitchinadze, 1897(a):** 394). Russian sources also contain information that the settlement of the Abkhaz in the Ghalidzga–Enguri region occurred not only in family groups but also in entire communities (***Confirmation of Russian Dominion..*, 1901(b):** 417).

The source does not discuss the ethnic origin of these families. However, since they were from the dominant domain of the Sharvashidzes, it is likely that some of them had already been assimilated with the Abkhazs (i.e., they were ethnically Georgians but had integrated into the Abkhaz society). In any case, the Georgian origin of the Anchabadze, Emukhvari, and Akirtava families is undisputed among researchers.[4] However, through Pskhu, large groups of North Cau-

[1] Abkhaz form – *Inal-ipa* is held Abkhaz surname by well-known Georgian philologist and expert on Abkhazian studies Professor T. Gvantseladze. Although there is *"Inaldipa"* in Georgian sources too (**Gvantseladze, 2008:** 91; ***"Paris Chronicle"*, 1980:** 42).

[2] In Abkhaz language it is well-known as *Maan*. It is interesting that in early 19th century Ottoman documents (firmans and letters) there is *"Maanidze"* too (***ACAC*, 1868:** 872, №1795, 1796).

[3] V. Zukhbaia connects *Zvanbaia-Zvanba-Zhvanva* to Megrelian surname *Zhvania* (**Zukhbaia, 2001:** 7). It is interesting that K. Chernyshev also writes: *"Zvanbai or Zhuanbei"* (**Chernyshev, 1854:** 353; ***Materials of "Kavkaz"***, 2012: 167). T. Gvantseladze considers it an Abkhazian surname (**Gvantseladze, 2008:** 91).

[4] Anchabadze and Shavrashidze are considered by the part of the researchers as Georgian sur-

casians were also settling in the region (**Topchishvili, 2022:** 272).[1]

It is likely that somewhat later, representatives of one of the influential noble families of the Abkhazian principality, the Dzhapsh-Iphats, also settled in Samurzakano. Here, they became known as the Dzapshishvili (**Chernyshev,** 1854: 353; ***Materials of "Kavkaz"***, 2012: 167).[2]

As for the settlement of the Anchabadze family, part of this family or branch already lived in the Ghalidzga-Enguri interfluve. Sources have preserved the name of Ioane Anchabadze, who, as part of a strategic marriage, was sent by Levan II Dadiani with his sister Mariam, whom he married to the King of Kartli, Rostom. It seems that he would have been a vassal of the Dadiani (**Javakhishvili N., 2010:** 141).[3] A document dated to 1680 mentions the name of Murzakhan Anchabadze, who participated in a dispute settlement alongside Katsia Chikvani (***ADP*, 1991:** 160).

Of course, one of the goals of Kvapu Sharvashidze's resettlement of newcomers was, naturally, to strengthen the positions of the Sharvashidze family representatives, as the newcomers encountered an unreliable environment. The descendants of those resettled by Kvapu did not forget that they were newcomers (**Tskhadaia, 2001:** 211).

Naturally, the aforementioned Abkhaz noble families would have also brought their peasants with them. As P. Tskhadaia notes, the Kakalia family, living in Khitush Mukhuri, still "remembers" that they are descendants of those who had been resettled.

Their ancestors were said to have come from Karachai (a reference to a place or tribe); from the direction of Bziphi, the following families settled: Ezug-

names, and they view their connection to the Abkhaz ethnic group (respectively, *Achba, Chachba*) as a phenomenon of the late Middle Ages (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2010:** 264). It seems justifiable to agree with T. Gvantseladze's observation, which considers the Georgian forms *"Shavrashidze"* and *"Anchabadze"* as primary, while the forms *"Chachba"* and *"Achba"* are secondary, Abkhazized forms: *Shavrashidze → Sharashia → Chachifa → Chachba*, while *"Anchabadze"* originates from the male name *Anchaf* (**Gvantseladze, 2008:** 92-93; **Gvantseladze, 2011:** 139; **Gvantseladze, 2022(a):** 16-19). Regarding Shavrashidze, S. Janashia thought that the later and earliest bearers of this surname should not be related to each other (**Janashia, 1988:** 28). The Georgian surname *"Emkhvar,"* which is only found in Samurzakano, has been adapted into the Abkhaz form *"Emkhaa."* The term *"Emkhvari"* itself originates from the official term *"Amirakhori"* (**Gvantseladze, 2011:**175). The Akirtavas initially must have been Georgians, as the root of this surname, *"Akirt,"* draws our attention. The word *"Akirtua"* in Abkhaz means "Georgian" (**Gvantseladze, 2011:** 154). In *"Akhirtua,"* its Meglenitic root – *"Khortu"* (meaning "Georgian") – is clearly visible. Therefore, *"Akhirtava"* is analogous to *"Khortua"* or Georgian – *"Kartvelishvili"* (**Khorava, 2000(a):** 46). This may be similar to another case found in Samurzakano related to another surname – *Kirtbaia* (**Tskhadaia, 2001:** 211). It is possible that *"Kirtbaia"* and *"Akhirtava"* are variations of the same surname (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 88). Also an important observation made by the German scholar and traveler August Haxthausen (who visited Georgia in 1843) is interesting: *"... sometimes we would see the Abkhazs; this is a people living southwest of the Circassians. They are small in stature, thin, with black hair, but blue eyes; they have eagle-like noses and dark facial features. Their nobility (aristocrats) and lords (chieftains) seem to be of different origin, as they have large, strong, and majestic (aristocratic) forms*" (**Haxthausen, 2011:** 37).

[1] Modern Abkhazs are result of fusion of Ancient Abkhazs, North Caucasians and Georgians (Megrelians) (**Topchishvili, 2022:** 272).

[2] In one of the documents the Dziapsh-Ipas are noteds *"Zabshikhadze"*, livin beside the Bedia fortress, in the village Kopiti (***ACAC*, 1868:** 872-873, №№1795, 1796).

[3] Giorgi, the son of Ioane Anchabadze founded the dynasty of Kakheti princes – *the Apkhazishvilis*.

baias, Nakopias, Ketsbaias, Kvatsbas (with Ketsba being the ancestor), Kolbaias, Gvagvalias, Akishbaias, Khutkubias, Dochias, Butbaias, Abukhbaias, Gerzmavas, Konjarias, Zvambaias, Tsobekhias (the ancestor being Tsveiba); from Pskhu the families were: Tarbas, Gvaramias, Arshbas, Kishmarias, Tanias, Pachulias, Khashbas, Jinjolias; from Likhni: Mikhelbaia, Kirtbaia, Sharia, Eshba (**Tskhadaia, 2001:** 211-214). V. Zukhbaia lists the families of the Abkhaz who settled in Samurzakano: Zukhbaia, Kakubava, Kolbaia, Akishbaia, Butbaia, Ketsbaia, Ezugbai, Tsaraghbaia, Tsunbaia, Tsutskhubaia, Tarbaia, Ivambaia, Khintbaia, Kvatsabaia, Kirtbaia (**Zukhbaia, 2002:** 73).

Of course, not all these surnames are Abkhaz (either Abkhaz-Apsua or Georgianized Abkhaz), and among them, there are several Megrelian ones (Kakalia, Gvagwalia, Konjaria, Dochia, Tsobekhia, Gvaramia, Sharia, Mikelbaia, Pachulia, Jinjolia, etc.). For instance, the list of the expenses and income ofthe Abkhaz Catholocos Offce (from 1621) notes a peasant named *"Guaguala Sharina"* from the village of Tility (***MGL*, 1970:** 430).[1] As we can see, this name refers to an ethnic Georgian.

In the book of donations by Levan Dadiani dated 1628 numerous Georgian surnames are listed, indicating that they were residents of contemporary Abkhazia at that time: Alexandra Paraskia and her man (Ghalidzga), Kozma Khakhutai (Reka), Elijari Changelia (Tility), Gurmikhili Kubetsia (Karmuleti), Gurmikhili Esebia (Martskheuli), Gaid[u]rti Gabra (Tkhalari), Mutagighun Khubilava (Zegani), Sikandara Gogua, Skvamishia Nadaraia, Gamidzula Tsatsulua (Ilori), Kochilai Chodia (Anaklia), and Patsulai Tsatsulua (Anaklia) (***MGL*, 2023:** 84).

G. Anchabadze suggests that surnames ending in *"-baia"* (such as Zukhbaia, Ezugbai, Ketsbaia, Tarbaia, etc.) are of Abkhaz origin, where the Abkhaz suffix "-ba" (= Georgian "dze" for son) is combined with the Megrelian suffix "-ia" (**Anchabadze G., 2006:** 230). Some researchers reject the Abkhaz origin of these surnames (Zukhbaia, Ketsbaia, Lakirbaia[2] and others) and hold that their formed structure reflects a transition from Zan to general Georgian, as in Chan-Zan and later Megrelian, where six main surname suffixes are identified: -squiri, -ua, -shi, -turi, -ia, and -ba (va), with the latter meaning "son" in Chan, and in this dialect, "b" always refers to a male (**Gamsakhurdia, 1991:** 16; **Kvashilava I., 2003:** 124; **Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2010:** 272). Additionally, surnames of Georgian origin have a much longer and more traditional developmental history than those of North-West Caucasian and contemporary Abkhaz surnames, most of which were formed in the 18th-19th centuries (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2010:** 274). Indeed, as T. Gvantseladze's research shows, the formation of Abkhaz surnames (with suffixes such as -ifa, -iba, -ba, -ra, -aa) took place between the 17th and 19th centuries after their settlement in present-day Abkhazia, and some Abaz surnames received the *"-ba"* suffix in the 1920s-30s (**Gvantseladze, 2011:** 148-149).

With the growing number of supporters and settlers, Kvapu Sharvashidze

[1] It was placed beside Okumi rever.

[2] According to S. Bakhia-Okruashvili this surname is explained only in Georgian. 'La"- Megrelian prefix. Megrelian "kirbi"/"krbi" – means *lamb* (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2010:** 272-273).

strengthened his position in the principality. This was a highly important issue for him, as the owner of Odishi would naturally seek to regain lost territories. He also sought to exploit the political situation in Samegrelo, where turmoil prevailed at the time, and he considered to go to the left bank of the Enguri river. Naturally, there was also a demographic factor, as this was directly related to the improvement of the economic situation, which had vital for the feudal lord Kvapu Sharvashidze.

At that time, the situation on the left bank of the Enguri river was indeed quite difficult. The region was governed by Giorgi Lipartiani, and the Dadiani rule over Levan IV was only nominal.

He decided to seek assistance from the Turks and traveled to İstanbul, but his efforts in this regard proved fruitless (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 856). It seems that Lipartiani's intrigues were involved here as well, as he himself desired to ascend throne of the Dadiani family, but in the existing situation, this was completely impossible for him (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 93). The significant "vacancy" in the Dadiani rule did not remain open for long: the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire granted the Dadiani title to Mamia III Gurieli (1689-1711). However, he also failed to take control over Samegrelo (**Kakabadze, 1921(a):** 101).

At the beginning of the 18th century, the battles for the throne of Imereti ended with the victory of one of Western Georgia's most powerful and influential nobles, Giorgi Abashidze (**Otkhmezuri, 2012:** 317). Giorgi Lipartiani was the son-in-law of the new ruler of Imereti. His connection to Abashidze further strengthened Lipartiani's power in Samegrelo. In 1701, sources confirm his new title: the ruler of Odishi and Salipartiano, Dadian- Lipartiani (**Kakabadze, 1921(a):** 86).

With the help of his father-in-law, Dadiani-Lipartiani, Giorgi decided to drive the Abkhazs out of the right bank of the Enguri river. The battle between the *"Abazas and Lipartiani's kafirs"* was so intense that even the Ottomans avoided sailing in that area (***Mühimme Defters..*, 2019:** 261). As revealed by an Ottoman source, he also received support from the Ottomans: *"In order to settle the Georgian side, during the time when Halil Pasha of Erzerum was appointed, the Dadiani ruler Lipartiani was allowed to remain in power if he handed over the fortresses of Rukhi and Hatis,*[1] *paid the annual tribute promptly, and* ***liberated the lands of Dadiani taken by the Abkhaz bandits. He was also tasked with protecting the region from the Abkhaz robbers"*** (Yıldıztaş, 2021: 143; emphasis added – ***K.K.***).

Thus, in the winter of 1702, Lipartiani appealed to Abashidze for help in dealing with the Abkhaz in the upper regions, as they had taken control of Odishi through deception and lies (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 862-863). Attention should be drawn to the phrase *"to take control of the Abkhazs up to Egrisi river,"* indicating that by this point, Giorgi Lipartiani no longer had claims on the territory beyond the Egris river.

[1] In modern Turkish text is written *"Hat"*, because modern Turkish does not have *"Kh"*, what Ottoman Turkish had. Therefore it must be in the Khamiskuri village, Khobi municipality, the Kheta (Jikha) fortress, which is stressed by Vakhushti as the significant Odishi fortification (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 778).

The forces of Odishi-Imereti launched a campaign into Abkhazia. They succeeded at this stage. Sharvashidze did not dare to resist (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 863). The actual principality of Abkhazia, which at the time also included Kvapu's domain, was not a unified, consolidated state formation. The Bziphi region, which was the principality's domain, nominally subordinated the other two principalities, and there were frequent feudal internal conflicts.

Giorgi Abashidze and Lipartiani captured Kvapu's domain (**Dadiani, 1962:** 169). However, the victors were still forced to leave Kvapu Sharvashidze in power there, although he acknowledged Lipartiani's supremacy (**Dadiani, 1962:** 169). Kvapu Sharvashidze's word was not trusted by his son-in-law, so Giorgi Abashidze took hostages from him and *"took large spoils"* (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 863).

Soon, Kvapu, taking advantage of another Ottoman invasion toWestern Georgia in August 1703, broke his word to Abashidze and Lipartiani and attacked Odishi again. However, this would be his last and very brief victory in that direction. The 1702 military campaign by the Odish-Imeretian forces ended the Abkhaz expansion towards Odishi, but they were able to firmly establish themselves in the Kodori-Enguri sector (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 95).

Soon, by the end of 1704, he passed away in Rukhi. *"...His son, Murzakan, inherited and expanded his domain with the support of local residents and named it Samurzakano, which became known under the name of Murzakan"* (**Tchitchinadze, 1897(a):** 394). As it is seen, he was very successful ruler who established peace in his principality, which led to the prosperity and reconstruction of the region.

As shown in the oath book given by Kvapu Sharvashidze to the Catholicos, Kvapu swore the oath together with his son, Avtandil (Atandel). It is likely that Avtandil was Kvapu's main heir, as he is mentioned in the oath book, thereby taking responsibility and obligations before the Catholicos. After this, Avtandil is no longer mentioned in historical sources. It seems something heppened within the Sharvashidze family that resulted in Murzakan taking precedence: it is likely that Avtandil died before his father.

Based on existing sources, it is difficult to determine the exact date of Murzakan Sharvashidze's rule, though it can be roughly approximated. Naturally, the beginning of his reign would be around 1704, and its end would be sometime after that. The next Sharvashidze from Samurzakano mentioned in the sources is Khutunia, who participated in the battle of Kheresili in 1757 (**Dadiani, 1962:** 178). The toponym "Samurzakano" is unknown to Vakhushti, who completed his work "Description of the Kingdom of Georgia" on October 20, 1745. However, Vakhushti lived in Georgia until the mid-1720s, meaning, according to T. Beradze's opinion, the term "Samurzakano" must have appeared after the 1750s (**Beradze, 1973:** 3).

We think that the name "Samurzakano" must have been created during the final period of Murzakan's rule, as it is natural that during his reign, the local population, pleased with his governance, would have referred to the area as *"Samurzakano."* S. Bakhia-Okrushvili also tends to support this idea, suggesting the toponym was created in the 1940s (**Bakhia-Okrushvili, 2010:** 63), while Z.

Anchabadze mentions the first half of the 18th century (**Anchabadze, 2011:** 85). Therefore, it is assumed that the term *"Samurzakano"* applied to the interfluve of the Enguri and Ghalidzga rivers from the late 1720s or slightly later. Based on this, we conclude that Murzakan Sharvashidze's reign lasted roughly until the first third of the 18th century.

The toponym *"Samurzakano"* is first encountered in the works of N. Dadiani (**Dadiani, 1962:** 180). In Russian sources and specialized literature, several versions of this toponym with small differences are found: *Самурзакано, Самурзакань* (**Pantyukhov, 1892**), *Самурзахань* (***G-SD of RE*, 1863:** 228; ***G-SD of RE*, 1873:** 422), *Самурзакан.* These versions are used by O. Bgazhba and S. Lakoba, though they avoid explaining the toponym's etymology (**Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 176-177). Similarly, S. Basaria did not clarify this in his time, stating that the people of Samurzakano were unambiguously Abkhazian (**Basaria, 1923:** 98-99). It is clear that they find it difficult to present a "reasonable" and "firm" argument for what is evidently a toponym of Georgian origin. The variant *Самурзакан* is also recorded in a document dated April 26, 1839, found in the manuscript collection of the Dadiani Museum (***ZSHEM*, 2172:** f. 17). The Abkhaz researcher D. Gopia joined the etymological debate and suggested that this region was once called "Mirzakani" (**Gopia, 2022:** 99). Unfortunately, he does not provide any sources to support this claim, what is understandable since no such document exists. However, the researcher had to admit that "Samurzakano" is of Georgian origin (**Gopia, 2022:** 100).

It is noteworthy that in the oath text given by the Sharvashidzes of Samurzakano to the Russian Emperor on July 9, 1805, a similar version, "Samirzakano," is used (***ACAC*, 1868:** 526, 527 – №1031). This is the first recorded official mention of this toponym in documents.

It is clear that the variations in Russian are derived from the Georgian language. As for the Abkhaz variant, it is also clearly influenced by Georgian. It appears that the language of communication among the inhabitants of Samurzakano was Georgian, as the toponym is composed in that language.

The Sharvashidzes of Samurzakano had several residences: in Bedia, Pakhulani, Barbalo (Koki), Saberio, and Nabakevi (**Tchitchinadze, 1897(a):** 394). The main residence and, accordingly, the center of Samurzakano until 1840 was the village of Bedia.

The natural boundaries of the region were determined by the rivers – Ghalidzga and Enguri. As native Samurzakano people recalled (in 1975), their region *"is located between the Enguri and Ghalidzga rivers. On the other side of the Enguri is Samargalo, and beyond Ghalidzga is Abzhu"* (**Tskhadaia, 2001:** 144-145).

Samurzakano gradually acquired significant importance for both Odishi and Abkhazia. According to Mustafa Butbai, in Abkhazia, when a guest behaved as though expecting special treatment from the host, it was said: *"Samurzakan'dan gelmiş gibi ne kuruluyorsun?"* ("Why are you acting as if you came from Samurzakano?") (**Butbay M., 1990:** 105).

Thus, at the turn of the 17th-18th centuries, in the interfluve of Ghalidzga-Enguri rivers, a principality was established, formed by lands captured from Odishi, within the framework of the principality of Abkhazia, with a side branch of the Sharvashidze family at its helm. As the research shows, the claims of separatist-minded historians (I. Voronov, O. Bgazhba, S. Lakoba, T. Achugba, and others) that the "historical" borders of Abkhazia were restored at the end of the 17th century are absolutely groundless. There is no historical document confirming the presence of the ancestors of the Abkhaz people in the Ghalidzga-Enguri area before the second half of the 17th century. It is precisely from this time that their settlement in this region began, as confirmed by both historical sources and oral traditions circulating among the population of Samurzakano, which mention the arrival of some population from the Abkhaz region of Bzyphi as well as from North Caucasus, specifically from Circassia.

At the same time, it should be specially noted that Sorekh and Kvapu Sharvashidze were an integral part of the Georgian cultural-political world. One of Kvapu Sharvashidze's sons was named Avtandil. This shows that the main literary treasure of the Sharvashidze family was Shota Rustaveli's immortal poem "The Knight in the Panther's Skin," and they did not show a desire to abandon this world (**Papaskiri, 2004:** 109). However, they did exhibit some aggressive tendencies toward the Georgian-speaking population of the Ghalidzga-Enguri sector. The purpose of this aggression was to drive out the local population and resettle the excess population from Abkhazia (specifically, from its northwestern part) in the newly freed lands. This, naturally, somewhat changed the ethno-demographic character of the region (**Papaskiri, 2004:** 104). Nevertheless, this aggression was generally part of the nature of feudal internal conflicts and aimed at expanding one's territorial domain by capturing a portion of a neighboring feudal lord's, such as the Dadiani domain.

Inscription of Grigol Galatoztukhutsi
(Village Dikhazurga, 11th century)

CHAPTER II. SAMURZAKANO IN 18TH CENTURY

§1. The Policy of Russia Towards the Caucasus in the 1st Half of 18th Century and Georgian Political World. *Activity of Murzakan Sharvashidze*

The early 18th century in Transcaucasia was marked by significant changes. This novelty was triggered by Russia, revived by the vigorous king Peter I the Great (1672-1725). The young king pursued ambitious goal: to turn Russia into a high-ranking power in then time world. Peter was going to "clarify relations" not only with Sweden, but with Persia and Ottoman Empire as well.

Peter needed allies across the Caucasus. The responsibility to provide this alliance was taken by the fugitive king Archil of Imereti kingdom, but in order to have his support first of all it was necessary to bring him throne back. The Russian king promised assistance to the fugitive Georgian counterpart (**Rekhviashvili, 1989:** 148). Of course, Persia and Ottoman Empire did not like Russia's interest towards the Caucasus. They themselves had claims towards the Caucasus and by the Amasya peace treaty divided it between themselves. If appearance of Russia in the Caucasus alarmed Ottomans and Persians, for the local Christian population, especially for Georgians it was and impetus for hope. The attitude of Georgian political world towards Russia, the trust that this great norther state was the way of saving from the Muslim surrounding still was intact even on the verge of 17th-18th centuries. Although Moscow was not ready yet to solve this issue, but it also did not want to lose the Caucasian ally, because Russia wanted to have strong foot in this region and this was one of the most important political trends of the Russian state. Therefore, in order to retain the benevolence and hopes of Georgians, Moscow was rather lavish in its promises.

At the same time Russia rather skillfully masked its Caucasian policy and its genuine. As the well-known Russian historian S. Solovyev wrote: *"Russia, to which the Christian population appealed for help, could not permit Muslim, especially Turkish influence to strengthen here"* (**Solovyev, 1989:** 696). As it seen form this citation, the author tried to explain Russia's expansion to the south form the religious and ideological point of view. But Peter I pursued much more far reaching and ambitious goals, very important to his country, rather than care of same-faith Georgians. For sure, it was penetration to the East (Mackie, 1856: 12). If Europe connected to Asia via sea and rather distant routes, Russia could take to this region directly via land route and Caspian Sea. This route was much more secure and cheap, rather than sea routes. It must be taken into account, that this possibility, which was at the disposal of Russia was reveal by the English in the second half of 16th century (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 108). Therefore, Peter I set forth the goal to turn Russia into the transit way for the East-West trade-economic relations. In 16th-17th centuries Iran and India with their divers products and goods, imported from China became very attractive market for then time leading Euro-

pean nations (**Zedginidze, 1996:** 209).

There is no doubt that Russia's such a favorable geographical location would increase both: its political weight and contribute to the economic strengthening of the country. However, this was only a part of Peter the Great's plan. For Russia, the Caucasus was supposed to play an important role in gaining influence over the Black Sea and in subjugating the Crimean Khanate, which had been a constant "headache" for Russia. Since the end of the 15th century, Crimean Tatars had been carrying out permanent raids on Russian lands, causing great damage. Furthermore, Russia needed the Black Sea in order to enter the rich Mediterranean market through the straits. Therefore, as long as the Black Sea and Crimea were under Ottoman control, Russia's ambitions towards the south would be meaningless. Consequently, the Caucasus played a significant role as a strategic platform in Russia's geopolitical strategy.

The situation of the "Sublime Port" at this time did not seem so brilliant and favorable: the defeat suffered in 1699 against the "Holy League" seriously shook its international position. The Ottoman government was preparing for revenge, but after the defeat by the "Holy League," there was an economic crisis in the country, and they could not pay the janissaries, who expressed their discontent with constant uprisings (**Svanidze, 2007:** 224-225). In this situation, in western Georgia, it was thought that it was possible to rise against Türkiye. In 1703, Giorgi Abashidze stopped paying tribute to İstanbul (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 863), which marked their exit from Turkish vassalage (**Chkhataraishvili, 1973(a):** 472).

Giorgi Abashidze's démarche was supported by Giorgi Lipartiani-Dadiani and Mamia III Gurieli (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 863). The Abkhazians also broke from Ottoman control, robbing Turkish merchants. For the defeated sultan, this disobedience of the Georgians was a real challenge, requiring immediate response measures. The Turks deemed it necessary to punish the rebellious Georgians and strengthen Ottoman control in western Georgia, so that Russia could not find a foothold there (**Chkhataraishvili, 1973(a):** 457).

It seems that the capabilities of the Ottoman garrisons stationed in Kutaisi and Sokhumi were not sufficient to punish the rebels, and Mustafa II led a large army to the west of Georgia under the command of the Beylerbey of Erzurum, Haji Khalil Pasha. In the summer of 1703, the Turks entered Imereti with a large army (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 863; ***In the Archives of Türkiye.., I-1*, 2022:** 208-209, 212, 213). The enemy entered the country from three sides: the serasker, Khalil Pasha, crossed the Tchorokhi River and took Batumi, while his deputy (*Kâhya*), the Pasha of Akhalkalaki, Ishak, entered Imereti; the third part entered Samegrelo by sea (**Chkhataraishvili, 1973(a):** 458), where they took the fortress of Rukhi (**Dadiani, 1962:** 169), leaving an armed detachment inside and constructing a new fortress in Anaklia (**Dadiani, 1962:** 169). It is noteworthy that Kvapu Sharvashidze participated in the capture of Rukhi. It is likely that this is what is referred to in one historical source that *"Tserosani was taken by Abkhazs took at then time"* (**Bakradze, 1987:** 176). During this widespread military-political crisis for the Georgian world,

the Abkhazians even plundered a church located far from the region, in the modern-day village of Khutsubani in Kobuleti district (**Surmanidze, 2007:** 130).

As mentioned above, Kvapu took advantage of the Ottoman expedition and, after the defeat suffered in 1702, decided to take revenge on Dadiani. He met with the Turks who had entered Samegrelo and offered them assistance (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 114).

In June 1703, a janissary uprising Bezhan in İstanbul due to their demand for owed pay (**Svanidze, 2007:** 225; **Quataert, 2005:** 43). It is noteworthy that the leaders of this uprising were from the military units that the Padishah Mustafa had sent as reinforcements to Western Georgia (**Rekhviashvili, 1989:** 151). The rebellion was so large-scale that the Sultan required additional support. Therefore, he called upon Khalil Pasha, the Beylerbey of Erzurum, for help (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 864). The situation in İstanbul was so unexpected for the Turkish leadership that they urgently retreated and quickly left western Georgia. However, armed Ottoman forces remained in some key fortresses (Poti, Anaklia, Rukhi) (**Chkhataraishvili, 1973(a):** 459).

Before retreating, by Khalil Pasha's orders, Kâhya was sent to Giorgi Abashidze, for whom this peace proposal was the best way out of the situation, especially since he had quickly lost one of his allies as soon as the Ottomans arrived. Specifically, Mamia III Gurieli switched sides to the enemy (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 865). However, Kâhya's "friendship" with G. Abashidze did not last long, and it quickly became known to the Georgians why the Ottomans had retreated. Encouraged by this, G. Abashidze ordered the destruction of the Turks (**Vakhtushti, 1973:** 865). The Ottomans barely managed to escape to safety. This military victory had such a great resonance that it was discussed in Russia as well (***Letters & Papers..*, 1889:** 576).

After this, Kvapu assumed that the ruler of Odishi would still not stop him. Additionally, the military success against the Ottomans further strengthened the power of Giorgi Lipartiani-Dadiani. Kvapu decided to intervene before events developed in an undesirable direction for him, and he was the first to take action by offering assistance to Dadiani against the Turks. Apparently, the ruler of Odishi did not refuse this proposal. In the summer of 1704, the Odishians and the Abkhazians attacked the Turkish garrison in Rukhi and soon liberated the fortress (**Shengelia, 1982:** 21 – №1). In late 1704, Kvapu passed away (***MGL*, 1970:** 670 – №204).

The Turks, along with Rukhi, also lost Anaklia (**Shengelia, 1982:** 21 – №1). As the above Ottoman source reveals, the attack on the fortress occurred from two directions: Dadiani's forces came by land, while the Abkhazians launched their assault from the sea (**Shengelia, 1982:** 21 – №1).[1] The identity of the Abkhazians is not specified here, but it is likely that these were again the people of Kvapu Sharvashidze, as both military campaigns occurred in the same period (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 117).

As revealed by newly discovered documents, by the beginning of 1709, Dadiani settled relations with the Ottoman Empire, for which he received official

[1] However, by 1706, the Ottoman Empire had managed to reclaim these fortresses (**Khorava, 1996:** 124).

support from İstanbul. Specifically, Sultan Ahmed III ordered on April 1, 1709, for Khalil Pasha, the Beylerbey of Erzurum, to send troops to the ruler of Samegrelo to prevent Abkhazian raids. Additionally, he was instructed to build a brick fortress in Anaklia, replacing the existing wooden structure (***In the Archives of Türkiye.., I-1*, 2022:** 427).

The policy of the Sharvashidzes family towards the Dadianis, i.e., gaining independence from the principality of Odishi, cannot be viewed as a general attempt at political separatism from the broader Georgian world, as it is the case in our modern times. Z. Papaskiri rightly observes: "Their main goal (just like that of the Odishi Dadianis and the Gurieli princes of Guria) was to advance in the internal Georgian political arena and take leading positions in all Georgian state-political space" (**Papaskiri, 2004:** 109). This is why the Sharvashidze family never attempted to separate from the Georgian Church (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 278).

Kvapu's place was taken by his son, Murzakan, who managed to establish a relatively peaceful and ordered situation and "revived the region" – that is, the area between the Ghalidzga and Enguri rivers (**Tchitchinadze, 1897(a):** 394). He prohibited slave trade, a practice his father had been notorious for. Murzakan well understood that Kvapu's political course needed certain changes: the strained relations with Odishi and the encouragement of slave trade were only bringing disaster to his country. Therefore, by prohibiting the slave trade and maintaining a peaceful relationship with the Dadianis, Murzakan encouraged the resettlement of the population in Samurzakano. It is likely that this process was particularly active during Murzakan's rule.

According to T. Beradze, the indigenous population of the region between the Ghalidzga and Enguri rivers during Kvapu's rule mostly remained in place (**Beradze, 2005:** 243). However, some villages were significantly depopulated. Naturally, after the upheavals and the expulsion, enslavement, or sale of locals as slaves, a number of Abkhaz who settled in the Ghalidzga-Enguri region was unlikely to be sufficient for Murzakan to avoid necessity to attract additional population to stabilize the local economy and way of life. The Georgians/Megrelians were the leading force in the local economy, that is why the Abkhaz nobility in Samurzakano actively encouraged the settlement of peasants from Samegrelo. For them, the word "agrua" –"margali" (Megrelian) – meant "land worker". It is noteworthy that later, the term "margali" was also used as a synonym for peasant even in Samegrelo itself (**Jamburia, 1973(a):** 200).

The Megrelian population mainly represented the lower social strata and ecclesiastical hierarchy of Samurzakano. Naturally, this situation contributed to the further strengthening of the Georgian language and, especially, the Megrelian dialect in Samurzakano, alongside the Abkhaz. Indeed, according to Vakhtushti, the Abkhaz had "their own language", but they also knew the "noble Georgian" (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 786), as Georgian played the role of the language of culture and worship for them (**Anchabadze, 1947:** 145). As Simon Janashia stated, in the principality of Abkhazia, "Georgian is the main language of culture" (**Janashia, 1988:** 33). At the Sharvashidzes court, Georgian was also the official language for

documentation (**Janashia, 1988:** 34). This is further confirmed by a seal discovered by A. Tughushi in the Zugdidi Museum (**Tughushi, 1996:** 5).

The inscription on this seal, after decoding the symbols, is read: *"Slave of God, Sharvashidze Levan"* (**Tughushi, 1996:** 5). This document clearly and without any doubt confirms that the Sharvashidzes clan held themselves "politically and culturally" Georgians. The so-called *"Charter"* discovered by T. Tchitchinadze was written in Georgian using the medieval script (**Tchitchinadze, 1897(a):** 393). As the expert on historical sources L. Akhaladze notes, "while drafting documents, the Sharvashidze family adhered meticulously to the centuries-standing tradition of Georgian historical document preparation–recognizing and using the established rules and norms of old Georgian diplomacy, distinguishing between various Georgian diplomatic terms, and giving them affirmative forms, etc. From the perspective of cultural identity, these documents are part of the history of Georgian historical documents" (**Akhaladze, 2022:** 44). This was also confirmed by Russian travelers and officials of the 19th century (**Akhaladze, 2022:** 47, 50).

Even after the arrival of the Abkhaz to contemporary Abkhazia, Georgian remained the main communication language (state affairs, church, relations with foreign missionaries). However, its use gradually decreased in proportion to the spread of the Abkhaz language in society. It is during this period (18th century) that we encounter a famous commentary in the work of Tamar's historian (**Lortkipanidze, 2012:** 46): *"...Lasha, Lasha, which means "luminary of the universe," [in the Abkhaz language]"* (***The History and Eulogy of Monarchs,* 1959:** 58; ***The History and Eulogy of Monarchs,* 2014:** 252). This addition reflects the ethnic changes taking place in the region. However, it was known at that time that the Abkhaz was the part of the Georgian political-cultural space, as Sulkhan-Saba writes: *"I saw Georgians – some Abkhaz, some Imeretians, Gurians, Megrelians"* (**Sulkhan-Saba, 1989:** 272). But our author also knows that ethnic changes occurred in the principality of Abkhazia and that there would not speak Georgian.

While the number of Georgians in Abkhazia was gradually disappearing, the opposite thing occurred in Samurzakano, despite the hardships faced by the Georgians living in the Ghalidzga-Enguri region in the second half of the 16th century. This situation should have predetermined that the toponym *"Samurzakano"* is of Georgian (Megrelian), not Abkhaz, origin, as it is mentioned earlier. If we take into account the prevalence of Megrelian origin inhabitants in this region, it is likely that they were much more Megrelian, as far as they, like the literary language, are tend to create toponyms with the "*sa-o*" prefix-suffix formation (**Kiria, Ezugbaia, Memishishi, Chukhua, 2015:** 192-193). For example, in Samegrelo, we encounter similar toponyms: *sa-chikoba-o, sa-ghvaza-o, sa-khochola-o, sa-guguna-o*, etc. (**Apridonidze, Makalatia, 1980:** 145-149, 154); in Abkhazia (Gali

district),[1] there are toponyms like: *sa-butbai-o, sa-melai-o, sa-khachubi-o, sa-shamugi-o, sa-beri-o, sa-buliskeri-o, sa-markhval-o, salkhin-o* (**Apridonidze, Makalatia, 1980:**148-150, 154).

Murzakan Sharvashidze's political activity aimed at ensuring peaceful coexistence between the Sharvashidzes and the Dadianis. This led to a situation where this side, being fully in a vassal relationship with the principality of Odishi and within its political borders, did not experience a change in leadership, and the governance of that region remained under the junior branch of the Sharvashidze family, which seems to have been forced to recognize the supremacy of the Dadianis rule in return. However, at the same time, the Sharvashidzes family in Abkhazia had to maintain some influence over the principality of Abkhazia, since both branches of the Sharvashidzes family were part of the same family.

The fact that the Sharvashidzes of Samurzakano were vassals of the Dadianis in the 18th century is supported by several facts. Specifically, this is evident after the departure of the Turks in 1703, when Kvapu Sharvashidze turned back to the Dadianis again, freeing along with them the fortresses of Anaklia and Rukhi from the Ottomans, as discussed above; in the battle of Khresili on December 14, 1757, the young king of Imereti, Solomon I (1752-1784), fought alongside his brother-in-law, Katsia (future ruler of Samegrelo, Katsia II), who was the son of Otia Dadiani and participated in the battle. According to Nikoloz Dadiani, the Abkhazs were led by Khutunia Sharvashidze, the ruler of Samurzakano, who heroically gave his life in the battle. Apparently, the joint army of the Odishians, Lechkhumians and Abkhaz was led by a member of the Dadiani family, what means that Samurzakano troops did not participate as a separate unit and was subordinated to Khutunia Sharvashidze.

The title of the Dadiani family during this period should reflect the situation: in the additional writing of the Tsaishi miscellany of ecclesiastic books from 1709 in the Gelati manuscript, it is mentioned that it was *"written and done... under the patronage of Dadiani Katsia and his spouse... of the ruler of Odishi, Svaneti, and Abkhazia, son of the Lord Dadiani, and newly proclaimed son of the Dadiani of Odishi, by the command of Lady Queen Mariam, daughter of Dadiani"* (**Burjanadze, 1958:** 154 – №159). In a document signed by Otia Dadiani (1728-1758), specifically in the book of donations to the church, a similar title is mentioned: *"the great ruler of Odishi, and the holder of the Svan-Takveri"* (July 11, 1748) (**Burjanadze, 1958:**154). Apparently, with the phrase *"Great Odishi,"* the Dadianis expressed a claim to restore the old Odishi, the principality that had once controlled the area on the right bank of the Enguri River. This is why the term "great" was added to Odishi. We can also recall Vakhtushi's formulation of *"All of Odishi,"* by means of which he defines the Dadiani domain, which extended as far as Anakopia: *"Dadiani Giorgi (Giorgi I Dadiani) seized the kingdom of Tskhomi and con-*

[1] The toponym Gali is of Georgian (Megrelian) origin. *"Ghali"* in Megrelian means *river* (**Eremeev, 1971:** 50). Similar is "Halis", the old name of the river Kızılırmak in Türkiye, what in Tchan means river again (**Eremeev, 1971:** 50).

quered the entire Odishi as far as Anakopia" (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 801). Apparently, the *"Great Odishi"* in Otia Dadiani's title should be regarded as a synonym of Vakhtushi's *"All Odishi."*

Meanwhile, the rulers of Imereti, Guria, and Odishi were once again embroiled in fratricidal wars. Anarchy prevailed in the country. The kings and nobles would "gift" the Imereti throne to their preferred candidates or divide the kingdom among themselves. The reign of Giorgi VI, who had been left as king of Imereti by the Ottomans, proved to be unsteady. As soon as the Turks departed, he locked himself in the fortress of Kutaisi (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 866).

For four years, Giorgi Abashidze remained the ruler of the country, establishing some semblance of "order" (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 867; **Rekhviashvili, 1989:** 153). However, his days of governance were numbered. Dissatisfied nobles, supported by the Kartli king Vakhtang VI (father-in-law of Giorgi VI), reinforced their position and, in 1707, ascended on the throne Giorgi VI (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 867). But by 1711, some of the feudal lords handed the throne of Imereti to Mamia III Gurieli (**Rekhviashvili, 1989:** 154). For a period, his successor, Giorgi IV Gurieli, ruled Imereti. However, there were periods in the early 18th century when the influential nobles of western Georgia, such as Zurab Abashidze, Bezhan Dadiani, and Shoshita, the prince of Ratcha, did not even require a fictitious king and divided Imereti among themselves in 1716 and 1720 (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 877, 880).

In Odishi, too, there was disorder within the princely family. In 1704, Giorgi IV Dadiani's brother, Iese, the ruler of Lechkhumi, rebelled against him. He allied with the king of Imereti, Giorgi, to whom he was related (his wife was Giorgi's mother, Mariam) (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 866). Giorgi's rule over Odishi was not well accepted by the people of Odishi, and he apparently transferred the title to his senior son, Katsia (**Soselia, 1973:** 317), who married Mariam, a member of the ancient Dadiani family (**Khorava, 1996:** 126). Lechkhumi was entrusted to his middle son, Bezhan, while Giorgi retained only the title of "Lipartiani" (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 866). However, these "staff changes" were nominal, and Giorgi IV Dadiani, who was still called "Lipartiani," remained the de facto ruler of Odishi (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 866).

On this political chessboard, the seven children of Giorgi Dadiani, who were considered "pawns," soon made "corrections" to their father's calculated moves, and like their uncle, they found themselves in the camp of Giorgi VI. The children of Lipartiani could not forgive their father the divorce from their mother (the daughter of Mikeladze) and marrage to Giorgi Abashidze's daughter (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 869). After the defeat of Giorgi Lipartiani and the Prince of Ratcha, allies of Giorgi Abashidze, at the battle near Partskhanakanebi in December 1709, Giorgi VI invaded Odishi. Lipartiani sought refuge in Abkhazia (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 870).

Sharvashidze resisted the king of Imereti. The king was forced to retreat, signed peace and the title of Dadiani was handed over to Katsia (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 870). The sources do not clarify which Sharvashidze is meant here, but as the analysis of Vakhtushi's text suggests, it would have been the Abkhazia beyond the river

Ghalidzga, as our chronicler considered the region between Ghalidzga and the Enguri river to be part of Odishi's territory (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 863). N. Dadiani does not dispute this information and probably refers to the Abkhazia across the Ghalidzga river (**Dadiani, 1962:** 170).

Apparently, during this period, there were very warm relations between the ruler of Abkhazia and Giorgi IV Dadiani, as the exiled ruler of Odishi found refuge with him.

Soon, the political situation in the Principality of Samegrelo changed, as Katsia I rule over the Dadiani was short-lived. In 1710, he passed away. Giorgi IV Dadiani took advantage of the situation, moved from Abkhazia, and managed to return to power (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 870). Bezhan, the lord of Lechkhumi, was forced to reconcile with his father, but his desire for avenge the divorce from his mother remained strong. However, he was only able to achieve this goal in 1714 (**Beradze, 2018:** 481), when he finally succeeded in removing Giorgi IV Dadiani from power and *"captured Odishi and declared himself Dadiani"* (**Vakhushti, 1973:**870).

At the beginning of the 1720s, significant military-political shifts occurred in the South Caucasus, with the active involvement of the Russian Emperor Peter I. Due to the ongoing civil wars in Persia, a struggle for the "inheritance of Isfahan" Bezhan in the region: both İstanbul and Saint Petersburg directed military forces towards the Caspian Sea coast (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 130). By this period, Peter I had successfully resolved the issue of access to the Baltic Sea through his long war with Sweden ("The Great Northern War" 1700-1721). Therefore, he decided to "unite" the Caspian Sea with the Baltic (**Pirtskhalaishvili, 2000:** 40).

It is noteworthy that in Peter's hastily prepared military campaign, complications quickly arose: due to natural disasters; the Russian army was left without food supplies (**Berdzenishvili, 1973:** 305). However, this was not a sufficiently significant problem to force the Russian Emperor to abandon his Georgian allies. At that stage St. Petersburg court needed Persia not as a market for its products, but just as a and trade intermediary (**Javakhishvili, 2012:** 66). Russia was primarily interested in transit functions. Therefore, Russia was not interested in serious complications with this Eastern state (**Javakhishvili, 2012:** 66). The second major issue was the Ottoman factor, as it was unacceptable for Russia to approach its frontiers. Although Peter intended to enter Kartli (**Samsonadze, 2012:** 309), fearing war with Türkiye, he was forced to abandon this plan (**Berdzenishvili, 1973:** 305).

On June 12, 1724, with the signing of the agreement in İstanbul, the Ottoman Empire recognized the annexation of the Caspian region (from Derbent to Astrabad) to Russia. In turn, Peter I acknowledged Türkiye's conquest of Eastern Georgia, Eastern Armenia, and the northwestern part of Iran (**Javakhishvili, 2012:** 67; **Berdzenishvili, 1973:** 306; **Paitchadze, 1973:** 421).

Before the military campaign in Eastern Georgia, the Ottoman Empire took certain "preventive measures" in its western parts, aiming to strengthen its positions in that region. Despite its deep internal crisis, the Ottoman Empire still managed to consolidate its rule over western Georgia during that period

(**Dumbadze, 1957:** 26). At this time, the king of Imereti was Alexander V, brought up by Vakhtang V, who, in order to preserve his throne, was forced to maintain "friendly" relations with the Ottomans, who had helped him rise to power. Moreover, following his guardian's foreign policy course, he also established contacts with Russia (**Rekhviashvili, 1989:** 157). Specifically, in 1724, Alexander V asked Saint Petersburg for assistance against the Ottomans and rebellious feudal lords, seeking to secure Imereti's protection under Russia (**Rekhviashvili, 1989:** 173-174). The King of Imereti requested financial aid from the Russian Emperor and deemed it necessary for Peter I to come to Georgia (**Gabashvili, 1956:** 80). However, according to the fair evaluation by K. Chkhataraishvili, this idea of the Imeretian king was unrealistic, since, as mentioned above, based on the İstanbul agreement, Russia had recognized Georgia as part of the Ottoman sphere of influence (**Chkhataraishvili, 1973(a):** 474).

A few years later, during the next Russo-Ottoman war (1735-1739), Alexander again tried to establish contact with Russia, seeking specific military and political aid (Timote Gabashvili's diplomacy). However, the outcome of this war for Russia was the Treaty of Belgrade in 1739, which prohibited Russia from maintaining a fleet on the Black Sea (**Nekrasov, 1998:** 85). As a result, Alexander's attempts to receive help were again unsuccessful. He was informed by the Russian Imperial Court that, due to the terms of the peace agreement with Türkiye, they were unable to provide assistance at that time (**Rekhviashvili, 1989:** 175; **Kuprashvili, 2019:** 19).

The worsening of the political situation in western Georgia was further aggravated by King Vakhtang's departure to Russia. He had kindred ties with the rulers of Guria and Imereti and, as an educated and capable ruler, enjoyed great authority throughout Georgia. At Vakhtang VI's court, representatives of almost all the major feudal families of Georgia gathered. He was a leading figure of the progressive fighting elements of the Georgian nobility in the early 18th century, amid feudal fragmentation. Therefore, his departure from Georgia deprived these forces of both ideological and practical leadership (**Chkhataraishvili, 1973(a):** 463).

The ruler of Samegrelo, Bezhan Dadiani, who, when needed, did not shy away from seeking the help of the Ottomans in battles against rival feudal lords or the king of Imereti, tried to prevent the Turks from feeling "comfortable" in his principality (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 882). The Odishians had to spend considerable amounts to support the Ottoman garrisons. In 1714, the Megrelians and Abkhazians Bezhan harassing the Ottoman garrisons in Anaklia and Rukhi. The Turks found themselves effectively blockaded by land and sea. The situation became so dire that the Ottomans feared even leaving their fortresses. Eventually, 182 Janissaries completely left the Rukhi fortress. Local Turkish merchants also faced difficulties, as they no longer felt safe either on the sea or on land (**Shengelia, 1982:** 90-93 – №51-54). There was danger for anyone coming from Ottoman territories. For example, in May 1715, Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani, returning to his homeland from Europe, was refused pass through Guria: *"The Abkhazs are turbulent, we*

fear" (**Sulkhan-Saba, 1989:** 287).

The Ottomans were able to resolve the problem only by 1719, when they stationed a garrison of 65 soldiers in Rukhi, which was three times smaller than the previous one (**Shengelia, 1982:** 97 – №59). It seems that Bezhan Dadiani still did not have the strength to expel the Ottomans who were stationed near the capital of Samegrelo, but the fact that the enemy's garrison was reduced threefold seemed to be acceptable for the ruler of Samegrelo.

In 1721, the Ottomans assigned Bezhan the guardianship of Alexander V (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 882), which essentially meant the governance of the country (**Chkhataraishvili, 1973(a):** 461-462). Bezhan's influence over the king grew even stronger when he married his daughter, Mariam, to Alexander. "Although Alexander was the king, Bezhan Dadiani was the real ruler," notes Prince Vakhtushi, adding that Dadiani obtained this position in exchange for a 12 purses of gold bribe from the Pasha of Akhaltsikhe (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 881-882). K. Chkhataraishvili holds that Bezhan's promotion by the Turks was a diplomatic move (**Chkhataraishvili, 1973(a):** 462). I think that in this case, the Pasha simply greedily took the money and left Dadiani as the guardian of the king. Bezhan had to pursue a double policy: on the one hand, he "remained loyal" to the Turks, while on the other hand, he tried to establish connections with anti-Turkish forces.

The Ottomans made special efforts to firmly control western Georgia during Peter I Caucasian expedition, when İstanbul felt a real threat from the region. According to a document dated August 12, 1723: *"...the Abkhaz and Megrelian Kafirs, along with other Georgian tribes, have united and are planning to harm and bring misery to the fortresses of Gonio, Batumi, and Anaklia, as well as to the surrounding villages and regions..."* (***Ottoman Documentary Sources..,*** **2012:** 90 – №17). Therefore, in 1723, the Ottomans strengthened their fortresses on the Black Sea coast: Tsikhisdziri, Kobuleti, Sefi, Grigoleti, Anaklia, Batomi, Chakvi, Bitchvinta, Anakofia, and Poti, where they stationed a dual pike Pasha and entrusted him with the administration of the western Georgian coastline (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 883; **Berdzenishvili, 1973:** 345; **Chkhataraishvili, 1973(a):** 461-462).

During the same period, the Ottomans also took defensive measures in Abkhazia. In 1724, they built a bastion-type fortress, which they called *"Sokhum-Kale"*[1] (Sokhumi fotress) (**Shamba, 2005:** 95). There (***Lexikon,*** **1788:** 3; **Burjana-**

[1] In Abkhazian historiography, this name's etymology is considered dubious by scholars (O. Bgazhba and S. Lakoba). They suggest that the Ottomans understood the name as *"Su"* meaning water, *"khum"* meaning sand, and *"kala"* meaning fortress or city (**Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 175). However, it must be said that this etymology is unfounded and aims to obscure the origin of the toponym "Sukhumi" from the medieval Georgian name "Tkhumi" (**Janashia, 1988:** 218). Since there is no "Ts" sound in Arabic or Turkish, and these languages cannot have two consonants at the beginning of words, *"Tskhumi"* transformed into *"Sukhumi"* and spread in European languages, and later into Georgian as well. However, the exact reading of *"Tskhumi"* as *"Sukhumi"* is not entirely correct. Until 1928, the Turkish script was based on the consonantal Arabic alphabet, which mainly contained consonant signs. Therefore, the name *"Tskhumi"* was written with the Arabic sign for *"wāw"* (و), which had various pronunciations in Ottoman Turkish, such as *v, o, ô, ö, u, û, ü*. Accordingly, "Tskhumi" in Turkish could be written and pronounced either *"Sukhumi"* or *"Sokhumi."* Interestingly, some sources

dze, 1959: 182; **Chkhataraishvili, 1973(a):** 462). His responsibility was to oversee the fortress of Anaklia. However, the Ottoman military and construction activities were certainly not taking place in a peaceful environment.

In 1725, an anti-Ottoman uprising broke out in Sokhumi (**Antelava, 1951:** 74). According to Turkish sources, the Abkhaz attacked the Ottomans both from the land and from the sea. The invaders were only able to suppress this rebellion with considerable effort (**Shengelia, 1974:** 110). Similarly, another anti-Turkish rebellion by the Abkhaz in 1728 ended unsuccessfully (**Antelava, 1951:** 74). It is thought, that the 1725 Abkhaz uprising was linked to a joint anti-Ottoman movement involving Bezhan Dadiani, the ruler of Ratcha, and Zurab Abashidze, which was supposed to happen in the same year but did not take place (**Khorava, 1996:** 128). The situation became so difficult for the Ottomans that the head of the artillery in the Rukhi fortress, Ali, fled and took the soldiers' wages with him (***In the Archives of Türkiye.., I-1*, 2022:** 354).

In 1725, the Ottomans destroyed the Rukhi fortress and used its stones to "better" build "better" Anaklia, which they named Redut-Kale (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 883). It seems that this fortress, located quite far from the sea, lost its importance for them. Moreover, while attacking the Ottomans, Bezhan Dadiani exactly assaulted Rukhi. Besides through destruction of this fortress, the Ottomans deprived the Odishians of the possibility to capture and strengthen in their own favour.

In the following year, 1726, the Ottomans again faced serious problems in Samegrelo and Abkhazia. The mastermind behind these disturbances was once again Bezhan Dadiani (**Khorava, 1996:** 128). At the Sultan's court, it was believed that the local population was being incited to anti-Ottoman uprisings by Russia, specifically by King Vakhtang VI (**Paitchadze, 1977:** 79). In response, the Ottoman representatives in İstanbul even lodged a protest (**Chkhataraishvili, 1973(a):** 475).

Interestingly, a significant Ottoman document from 1726 (2-11 June; The Hijrah – 1138, 1-10 Shawwal) dates a letter concerning the suppression of *"bandit Mirzakhan and his people,"* who were troubling Sokhumi and its surrounding lands, and *"due to their fear, no ships have entered Sokhumi's port for 4 months"* (**Yıldıztaş, 2021:** 179). Unfortunately, the source does not name the surname of Mirzakhani, making identification difficult. However, it is clear from the document that Mirzakhani commanded a strong army, as 100 soldiers from Poti were sent to assist Sukhumi. Since *"Mirzakhan"* is the same as *"Mirzakani"*/ *"Murzakani,"* and there are indications of his power, he was not a leader of a risen forces. It is quite likely that the Ottoman source's *"Mirzakhani"* refers to Murzakan Sharvashidze, the ruler of Samurzakano. He was probably carrying out a military

from the 18th-19th centuries refer to the fortress as *"Sokum-Kala"* (***Lexikon*, 1788:** 3) and *"Sogum-Kala"* (**Bronevskiy, 1923:** 294). The etymology of the toponym "Tskhumi" is explained in the Georgian linguistic world, particularly in Svan language, as derived from *"Rtskhila"* (*Hornbeam* in English) (**Mibchuani, 1989:** 264; **Gasviani, 1991:** 206; **Tchantouria, Gvantseladze, 1999:** 2-3). A different view is presented by Z. Papaskiri, who does not exclude that "Tskhumi" could have been referred from Megrelian *"Tkhumu"* (*Aldertree* in English) (**Papaskiri, 2004:** 27). Thus, so called etymology, spread in Abkhaz historiography historically and linguistically as well is absolutely groundless.

task given by Bezhan Dadiani, aiming to expel the Ottomans from these territories with the help of Abkhaz rulers, through a land and sea siege of the Sokhumi fortress. It seems that this event is related to another document from 1727 (July 10), which discusses the strengthening of the Ottoman garrison at Sokhumi and their supply with provisions (***Ottoman Documentary Sources..*, 2012:** 74 – №2).

For anti-Ottoman actions, the "Sublime Porte" decided to get rid of the ruler of Samegrelo. They also planned to remove him and accomplished this in 1728. He was betrayed and killed in Geguti by Yusuf, the son of the Pasha of Akhaltsikhe – Ishak (**Vakhushti, 1973:**884). According to S. Makalatia's assumption, the one interested in Bezhan's death was the king of Imereti, who sought to subdue the rebellious feudal lords. The new ruler of Samegrelo became Bezhan's son, Otia. Two years later, in the spring of 1730, western Georgia once again became the target of Turkish aggression.[1] In İstanbul, it was decided to finally conquer the Black Sea eastern shore and, at the same time, subdue the mountain tribes, particularly the Jiks, who lived between Abkhazia and the Azov fortress (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 886; **Chkhataraishvili, 1973(a):** 465). Of course, the goal of this operation was to secure strategic positions in the region in light of the existing conflict between the Ottoman Empire, Russia, and Persia, in order to prevent Russia from gaining access to the Black Sea and integrating into the control of East-West trade routes. The increase in Saint Petersburg's influence in this region, as mentioned earlier, was not welcomed by European powers. England and France made everything to instigate the Ottoman Empire into war with Russia, but İstanbul was still cautious and abstained from war with Russia. At that time, it was negotiating relations with Persia, which was experiencing internal turmoil (during this period, two wars took place: 1723-1727 and 1730-1736), where Russia supported the Isfahan's side (**Milov.., 2006:** 205-206).

Some Georgian politicians immediately understood the goals of the Turks, and when the leader of this military campaign, the Pasha of Poti, invited King Alexander V of Imereti to join the military campaign, Otia Dadiani advised him not to take this step, as losing access to the sea would not be beneficial for the country. Moreover, the Turkish victory in this military campaign would strengthen their rule over Georgia and further complicate the situation (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 886). However, in this context, the King of Imereti had a different opinion and hoped to subdue the rebellious nobles with the help of the Ottoman forces (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 886; **Rekhviashvili, 1989:** 159). In particular, he sought to punish the ruler of Odishi (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 886; **Rekhviashvili, 1989:** 159). According to Marie Brosset, Alexander joined the Ottoman campaign due to his enmity with Dadiani (**Brosset, 1900:** 162-163). From the start, Otia had a tense relationship with the King of Imereti and sought revenge for his father's murder (**Rekhviashvili, 1989:**

[1] Vakhushti dates this event from 1733 (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 886-887). This date is supported by N. Berdzenishvili, O. Bgazhba, S. Lakoba (**Berdzenishvili, 1973:** 345; **Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 175). Although modern Georgian historiography is based on one document, discovered by S. Kakabadze, who dates this campaign from 1729 (**Chkhataraishvili, 1973(a):** 465; **Rekhviashvili, 1989:** 159; **Khorava, 1996:** 129; **Papaskiri, 2004:** 112).

162-163). While the attempt to tame the rebellious feudal lords and unite the country was not a bad idea, the king could not foresee the danger that Otia Dadiani saw. The Turks ravaged Samegrelo because Otia Dadiani did not join them. They burned down the famous St. George's Church in Ilori and invaded Abkhazia. The Abkhazians put up resistance to the Ottomans in the Ilori-Kodori region, but were defeated and had to submit to the enemy. This was reflected in the fact that the head of Abkhazia, Levan Sharvashidze, was converted to Islam, along with all those with him. He was named Hamid (**Chikovani, 2007:** 37).

As recently revealed by new documents, the Ottomans had decided to convert the Ilori Church into a mosque and send Muslim clergy there to assist in the Islamization of the local population (***In the Archives of Türkiye.., I-1*, 2022:** 402).

Ultimately, this Ottoman military campaign ended tragically for its organizers: the Pasha of Poti fled from Abkhazia with the King of Imereti, who was demanded to launch a campaign against the Jiks and Azov (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 887). According to Niko Dadiani, *"this demand was a heavy burden for the king"* (**Dadiani, 1962:** 175). He realized that the Ottoman victory in this campaign would result in the further oppression of his people (**Rekhviashvili, 1989:** 159). This reality became even clearer to him when he saw what happened to the defeated Sharvashidze and his people at the hands of the Ottomans (**Berdzenishvili, 1973:** 347). Soon after, the Ottoman-aligned, forcibly converted Sharvashidze rebelled. The rebellious Abkhazians defeated the enemy, and a small number of Ottomans managed to escape captivity or death (**Berdzenishvili, 1973:** 345-346).

Despite the failure of this Ottoman military campaign, Otia Dadiani (1728-1757) continued to pursue diplomatic agreements with official İstanbul. As a result, on January 15, 1733, Türkiye obliged to stop Abkhazian incursions into Odishi. However, in return, the army of Samegrelo was to assist the Ottoman garrisons in Poti, Anaklia, and Rukhi if they were attacked by the Abkhazians (***In the Archives of Türkiye.., I-1*, 2022:** 427).

After this, *"the Abkhazians were conquered by their own religion"* (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 887). K. Chkhataraishvili notes that the Abkhazians returned to Christianity (**Chkhataraishvili, 1973(a):** 470), while J. Gamakharia attempts to clarify this further, suggesting that "this refers not to the newly settled pagan Apsua from Dranda and Mokva, but rather to the Christian Georgian Abkhazians who remained in the middle villages, particularly in Abzhua" (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 296-297).[1]

Vakhushti notes that the adoption of Islam by the Abkhazians was a forced and imposed act by the enemy (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 887). He does not clarify what he meant by "religion" in the context of the Abkhazians. It is also worth recalling his observations about the Abkhazians' faith, which he describes as a form of dualism (Christianity and paganism) (**Vakhushti, 1973:**786). Additionally, the Turks had forced the conversion of Sharvashidze, the "master of Zuphu," a region characterized by a high portion of settlers from eastern Transcaucasia (i.e., Sharvashidze's army

[1] Abkhaz scientists try to explain this toponym based on Abkhaz language, although it can be explained only by means of Georgiana language (**Gvantseladze, 2017:** 97-98).

would not consist solely of Abzhua's population, but it included a significant number of north Caucasians). Therefore, it is possible that even the pagans rejected the forced religion. However, it is clear that the main point is that they adhered to Christianity. It is noteworthy that the reconversion and proclamation of the forcibly converted Zurab Sharvashidze as Prince took place in the Ilori Church by the Abkhazians (**Matchavariani, 1913:** 361-362). It seems that adherence to Christianity was still a necessary precondition for receiving the leadership of Abkhazia.

Despite this failure, the Ottomans were able to subdue Abkhazia and Jiketi in a short time. Abkhazia was the only part of western Georgia where the Turks managed to fully dominate the local government and exert some control over the political situation (**Dumbadze, 1957:** 26). They increasingly intervened in the internal affairs of the principality and supported forces opposing the local central authority (**Khorava, 1996:** 131). One such influential and powerful family was the Dzapsh-Iphat clan. The Ottomans managed to incite them to rebel against the Prince of Abkhazia, Manuchar Sharvashidze (**Antelava, 1951:** 75-76; **Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 176). It seems that the Dzapsh-Iphats received a promise from İstanbul to seize control of Abkhazia. They quickly created favorable conditions for this, as the Ottomans brought the leaders of the rebellious Sharvashidze family – Manuchar and his brothers (Shervan and Zurab) – to Türkiye, where they were forced to convert to Islam in order to regain power (***Establishment of the Russian Domination..,* 1901(a):** 539-540; **Esadze, 1907:** 97-98). The governance of Abkhazia was handed over to Aslan-bey Gech, the Jik, who was appointed as the commandant of Sokhumi, and the Dzapsh-Iphat family, rivals of the Sharvashidzes (**Chkhataraishvili, 1973(a):** 469).

They took control of the areas surrounding Sokhumi and forced the population to pay taxes to them instead of the principality's authorities (***Establishment of the Russian Domination..,* 1904:** 540). Apparently, the strengthening of the Dzapsh-Iphat clan led to dissatisfaction among other Abkhaz nobility, and İstanbul Bezhan to face difficulties in maintaining political stability in the region. The Abkhazians demanded the return of the Sharvashidze family from the Sultan, *"so that the principality's rights retain by the Sharvashidze clan*" (***Establishment of the Russian Domination..,* 1904:** 540). As a result, the Ottomans were forced to make concessions, and the Sharvashidzes soon reached an agreement with them. However, they did not allow Manuchar Sharvashidze, who had been renamed Suleiman Pasha (**Chikovani, 2007:** 37), to return to Abkhazia and instead appointed him as the bey of Batumi,[1] while Shervan, with the title of Pasha, governed the fortress of Rioni (Poti)

[1] This branch of Abkhaz princes led the local administrative-territorial unit – Batumi Beylerbeyship (**Surmanidze, 1998:** 3). The Sharvashidzes, living in Adjara still remember that piece of information, that their ancestors had come from Abkhazia (**Surmanidze, 1998:**13). One group of the Sharvashidze, who live in the Tsablana village of Shuakhevi district pursue different information and hold their historical homeland other district of Georgia – Tao-Klarjeti (**Surmanidze, 1998:** 6). The author supports this supposition and holds that the Adjaran Sharvashidze came from southern Georgia in 15th-16th centuries (**Surmanidze, 1998:** 13). It must be mentioned that unlike the Adjarian *Sharvashidzes* only the residents of that Tsablana village wear that surname in the form of

and Chania, as well as the area of Rize (**Chkhataraishvili, 1973(a):** 469).

The exile of Manuchar and his brothers to the Ottoman Empire is dated by I. Antelava to the years following the Khreresili battle and is thought to be their punishment for not preventing their relative, Khutunia Sharvashidze, the ruler of Samurzakano, from supporting King Solomon I of Imereti in that battle (**Antelava, 1951:** 75-76). B. Khorava and Z. Papaskiri associate these events with the strengthening of Ottoman influence in Abkhazia in 1730s (**Khorava, 1996:** 131; **Papaskiri, 2004:** 112).

Zurab was the only one able to return to Abkhazia and took over the position of the bey of Sokhumi (***Establishment of the Russian Domination..,* 1904:** 540). He effectively became the ruler of Abkhazia when he was baptized in the Ilori Church, dedicated to Saint George, and was recognized as the Prince by the local population (**Khorava, 1996:** 131). It seems the Ottomans did not oppose their vassal's return to Christianity. Furthermore, his baptism in Ilori, which was located in the territory of Samurzakano, seems to have suited İstanbul, as it would strengthen their vassal's authority in the Christian Enguri-Ghalidzga area, potentially serving Ottoman interests in the region and laying the groundwork for future aggression towards Odishi. However, Zurab had no intention of playing the role of a submissive vassal.

He was hoping to create a favorable military-political situation for a new anti-Ottoman uprising. The fact that the Sharvashidzes were appointed as rulers of Georgian lands (Batumi, Poti) was due to the Ottomans' desire to send officials who knew the local population and their language. Additionally, the brothers themselves were likely motivated to return to their homeland, even if it would be done in this way. It seems that, compared to Shervani and Zurab, Manuchar was a more influential and powerful figure, and İstanbul feared him more. Therefore, they gave him Batumi instead of Poti, where from he could set up active contacts with the anti-Ottoman forces in western Georgia. Moreover, as the elder brother, he was granted the title of bey, while the younger Shervan was made a pasha. The Ottomans attempted to sow discord between the brothers.

Despite the fact that this branch of the Sharvashidze family had entered Ottoman service, they still had no intention of submitting fully to the Ottomans. They established close ties with the King of Imereti and the rulers of Samegrelo and Guria. A family alliance was formed, which had political significance. The daughters of the Sharvashidzes family were married to King Solomon I of Imereti, Katsia II Dadiani, and the nobleman Giorgi Tavdgiridze of Guria. Unfortunately, this did not result in any significant outcomes. The expulsion of the Ottomans from Abkhazia was not achieved (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 297). Similarly, as in the case of Georgia's lost southern territories (Samtskhe, Tao-Klarjeti, Adjara), the process of Ottomanization was underway there as well (**Dumbadze, 1957:** 26).

Shervashidze (**Surmanidze, 1998:** 4).

In the conditions of feudal fragmentation in Abkhazia, Ottoman oppression led to the region's decline (**Antelava, 1951:** 41). The Ottomans Bezhan focusing on the establishment of Islam in the area. Although Islam did not take root in Abkhazia during the first half of the 18th century, Christianity weakened, and under these circumstances, the old pagan beliefs found fertile ground for revival (**Antelava, 1951:** 65). This situation caused concern in ecclesiastical circles. The Catholicos of estern Georgia, or "the Abkhaz" Catholicos, Grigol II Lortkipanidze (1712-1742), asked the Catholic monk Jean Richard, who was traveling to Europe with Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani, to send missionaries *"because he wanted to establish them in Samegrelo, Imereti, and Abkhazia, in the pagan provinces"* (**Tamarashvili, 1995:** 649-651; **Tabaghua, 1975:** 128, 149, 150, 184, 304, 305 – №17, 21, 30, 56). It is important to note that Christianity was in its most difficult position in Abkhazia which was already referred to as a pagan region. It would seem less convincing to claim that there was a dire shortage of clergy in the "Abkhaz" Catholicosate, as its leader was requesting "additional forces" for missionary activities.

I believe this issue should be looked at from a different perspective. As already mentioned, Catholic missionaries were, to some extent, seen as representatives and ambassadors of European states and the Pope. It seems that Catholicos Grigol II, by recruiting Catholic missionaries, was trying to attract the attention of the Pope and the influential European states (especially France) towards western Georgia. O. Bgazhba and S. Lakoba consider the Christian faith of the Abzhua Abkhazs to be dubious (**Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 178). However, the fact of Zurab Sharvashidze's baptism in the Church of Saint George in Ilori raises doubts about this conclusion from Abkhaz historians. With the establishment of Ottoman rule and the factual expulsion of Christianity, Abkhazia's cultural life also Bezhan to decline, just as it did in the southern and southwestern regions of Georgia, which directly came under the Ottoman Empire. In Abkhazia, urban life also diminished, leading to the increased significance of the relatively backward mountainous regions (**Chkhataraishvili, 1973(a):** 470).

This unfortunate situation was somewhat alleviated in Samurzakano, where, after the military-political upheavals of the last quarter of the 17th century had tranquilized and thanks to the rebuilding efforts of Murzakhan Sharvashidze, life was gradually returning to normal conditions. His relative advancement compared to the other parts of Abkhazia was due to the political influence of the principality of Samegrelo over Samurzakano. Moreover, because of its geographical location, it was somewhat removed from the internal wars between Odishi, other principalities, and the Kingdom of Imereti. As for the political processes developing in Abkhazia, Samurzakano was somewhat separated from these events due to its subjection to the influence of Odishi. For this reason, the ruler of Abkhazia, in 1730, resisted Ottoman aggression in the Ilori-Kodori region, specifically on the Abzhua territory.

A new stage in the history of Western Georgia Bezhan in the second half of the 18th century, connected to the ascension of Solomon I, the 17-year-old eldest

son of Alexander V, to the throne of Imereti. He was a determined, strong-willed, and courageous young monarch, continuing his father's political course. Solomon Bezhan his reign by fighting against the spread of Islam and the sale of captives (**Berdzenishvili, 1973:** 409-410). These were the significant issues troubling the Kingdom of Imereti. All of this provided a basis for the people to rally around the king. In this way, the king found a solid foundation for his political actions: he fought for the Georgians in the west (**Berdzenishvili, 1973:** 410), just as King Erekle II did in eastern Georgia.

Solomon prohibited the sale of captives to the Ottomans under threat of heavy fines and even death (**Rekhviashvili, 1989:** 181). Despite this, the slave trade continued, and in December 1759, Solomon once again made his subjects swear an oath to stop this "activity." Among those who signed the oath were Katsia Dadiani, Mamia Gurieli, Royal Prince Giorgi, Royal Prince Teimuraz, Rustom Eristavi, the offshoot of Dadiani: Manuchar, Nikoloz, Giorgi, Giorgi Gurieli, Tsulukidze, Tsereteli, Mikeladze, Abashidze, Nizharadze, Iashvili, Lortkipanidze, Mkheidze, Ghoghaberidze, Matchavariani, Meskhia, Avaliani-Ioseliani, Chichua Giorgi, Chikhuani, Phaghava, Akhvlediani, Asatiani, Apakidze, Chkheidze, Dgebuadze, Chijavadze, Jaian-Kochakidze, Mikadze, Jolia, Shelia, Kartvelis-shvili, Sajaya, Gurul-Eristavi Matchutadze, Nakashidze, Shalikashvili, Zhordania, Gugunava, and Tatis-shvili (***ACAC*, 1866:** 56, 57 – №7).

It is noteworthy that the owners of Samurzakano are not mentioned in this rather extensive list. While no other representatives of the Sharvashidze family or noble families of the Abkhazian principality are mentioned here, the absence of the Sharvashidzes from Samurzakano stands out, as they were under the control of Odishi. Based on their social status, it is unimaginable that they were included in the general formula *"together with Odishians, both large and small."* It appears that the descendants of Murzakan (his son Khutunia, and grandson Levan) were worthy continuers of their ancestor's cause and were distanced from this "activity."

With such active moves, it was natural that the young king gained enemies, both among the Ottomans and among the Georgian feudal lords involved in the slave trade. On December 14, 1757, in Okriba, on Khresili field, Solomon and his allied progressive forces faced an alliance of Ottomans and Georgian traitor nobles. The battle ended in a brilliant victory for the king. This war revealed the remarkable military talent of the 22-year-old Solomon (**Dadiani, 1962:** 178; **Berdzenishvili, 1973:** 412-413). The King of Imereti Bezhan a great struggle against the Ottomans to liberate his country (**Berdzenishvili, 1973:** 413).

In the Battle of Khresili (1757), the heroic Khutunia Sharvashidze, the owner of Samurzakano, heroically gave his life, *"who... cut sixteen Ottomans with a sward"* (**Dadiani, 1962:** 178). The distinguished hero of Samurzakano was buried in the courtyard of the Bedia Monastery (**Shonia J., 2000**).

§2. Samurzakano During the Rule of Levan Sharvashidze

Khutunia had 2 sons: Levan (Leon) and Solomon[1] (**Tchitchinadze, 1897(a):** 394). After the death of their father, Levan, the elder son, took the leadership of Samurzakano, becoming a highly active political figure in history.

Khutunia Sharvashidze's heirs experienced some disagreements among themselves regarding the possession of the national estates (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 159). However, this dispute was eventually resolved without complications: the village of Bedia was defined to Levan and his heirs, while the village of Barbalo (Koki) to Solomon and his descendants.

A third village, Pakhulani, was not directly owned by either of them. The brothers agreed that it would be the summer residence of the ruler of Samurzakano (**Tchitchinadze, 1897(a):** 394). Since Levan was the ruler at that time, he also held Pakhulani as a summer residence (**Tchitchinadze, 1897(a):** 394). However, it seems that this agreement was not fully followed through, and the village of Pakhulani retained to Levan and his heirs, as indicated in a document from 1846 (**Tughushi, 1996:** 5). Yet, the same source confirms the "seal" mentioning that Pakhulani was transferred to Levan due to his leadership in Samurzakano – "for supremacy" (**Tughushi, 1996:** 5).

Solomon had 6 sons, of which only three are named in T. Tchichinadze's document: Manuchar – *"the last owner of Samurzakano,"* Bezhan, and Sorekh (**Tchitchinadze, 1897(a):** 394). The names of the rest three, who are not mentioned in this source, are preserved in other historical documents: these are Batu (Eristo) and Levan (**Tsintsadze, 1989:** 100; **Chikovani, 2007:** 75, Table №17). As for the sixth son, his name remains unknown. I. Chikovani, in the genealogical table created by Solomon Sharvashidze, names only five heirs (**Tsintsadze, 1989:** 100; ***ACAC*, 1866:** 537 – №1047-1049; **Chikovani, 2007:** 71, Table №15).

Levan actively participated in the political processes of western Georgia. Like his father, the new ruler of Samurzakano stood alongside the leaders of western Georgia with an anti-Ottoman orientation and, in 1771, fought alongside the Odishars to free the city of Poti from the Ottomans (**Khorava, 1996:** 131; **Papaskiri, 2004:** 113). The leaders of western Georgia took advantage of the presence of the Russian military corps in Georgia and with their help, attempted to expel the Turks from this fortress. However, if the Georgians wanted to free Poti, the Russians, on the contrary, wanted to take it for themselves.

Before being dispatched to Georgia, General A. Sukhotin, the commander of the Russian corps, was explained in St. Petersburg that this fortress was of great significance to Russia (**Tsagareli, 1891:** 469 – №217). Additionally, he was instructed that his main task was to organize sabotages against the Turks using Georgian forces and to avoid regular military operations. The general was also informed that Russia was not yet interested in directly annexing Georgian lands

[1] The direct descendants of Lean are the Shrvashidzes from Bedia and the progeny of Solomon – the Sharvashidzes from Nabakevi (***Essay on the Structure of Social and Political Life*.., 1870:** 23).

(**Paitchadze, Chkhataraishvili, 1973:** 656). Ultimately, the operation to liberate Poti ended unsuccessfully.

It is likely that after the events of the 1730s in Abkhazia, when three members of the Sharvashidze family were taken to the Ottoman Empire, the rulers of Samurzakano tried to take advantage of this situation. It is possible that they could get rid of the influence the Abkhazian principality. Thus, they became the Sharvashidzes senior branch equal by status and influence. Levan already could not be satisfied by the tranquil course of his father and grandfather. To a certain extent he started to carry out vigorous policy in Abkhazia itself which became internally weak during the rule of Zurab Sharvashidze (**Antelava, 1951:** 80). The owner of Samuzakano tried to make most of this situation and got more influence in Abkhazian principality. Supposedly, Levan even succeeded, because the historical documents mention him and the prince of Abkhazia Zurab as brothers (**Reineggs, 2002:** 109). Although, to tell the truth, they had not been brothers. For Levan Zurab was the grandson of the brother of his great grandfather (**Chikovani, 2007:** 10, *Table* №2).

Favorable conditions for Levan to increase his political influence in Abkhazia soon emerged. On April 20, 1770, under the leadership of Erekle II, the Georgians routed the Ottoman forces in Aspindza. Encouraged by this victory, the ruler of Abkhazia, Zurab Sharvashidze, rebelled against the Ottomans in 1771. During this fighting he sought support from Levan of Samurzakano, who mobilized his forces and headed to Abkhazia, toward the central Ottoman fortress. The rebelled Sharvashidzes were able to jointly capture the Sokhum-Kale (**Antelava, 1951:** 79).

After this victory, Levan was alarmed by the growing power of Zurab, who sought to strengthen his influence over Samurzakano. As historical documents show, in 1767, the Abkhazs attacked Samegrelo. It is likely that they also attacked Samurzakano. As mentioned in a letter of gratitude from Solomon I wife, Mariam Japaridze, in 1767, *"the Dadiani had trouble with the Abkhazs"* (**Burjanadze, 1958:** 113-114, №124). At the request of Katsia II Dadiani, the King of Imereti had helped militarily, and together they had also invaded Abkhazia (**Kvashilava, 2008:** 147).

To prevent the potential increase of Zurab's political influence in Samurzakano, it seems Levan demanded the Sukhumi fortress as compensation for his military support (**Reineggs, 2002:** 110). However, Zurab, who could not accept the situation – clearly harmful to his political image as the ruler of Abkhazia – demanded Levan to return him the fortress. Levan, realizing that he could not retain the Sokhumi fortress by his own forces for durable period, had three options to strengthen his position: 1) an alliance with the Russian army stationed in Georgia at the time, 2) an alliance with Odishi, or 3) alignment with the Ottoman Empire, for which Sokhumi was a strategically important fortress.

The first option was ruled out due to Levan's failed pro-Russian orientation. Specifically, in an attempt to weaken the influence of Odishi and eventually liberate it, Levan tried to pursue an independent foreign policy. At the time, Solomon I was actively cooperating with the Russian army stationed in Imereti, hoping to

resolve internal and external political issues in Imereti using their military force, which involved subduing the rebellious feudal lords, uniting the country, and expelling the Ottomans (**Makalatia, 2006:** 213).

Katsa II Dadiani did not slip out of Solomon's efforts and carefully observed the Russian presence in Imereti (**Makalatia, 2006:** 213). At the same time, he also sought to build closer ties with the Russians in order to limit Solomon I power and ensure his own political security. The ruler of Samegrelo, as justly remarks S. Makalatia, began to seek Russian protection through the fear of Solomon I (**Makalatia, 2006:** 213).

Levan tried to convince St. Petersburg that the principality of Samegrelo, in terms of military and strategic importance, would be a more valuable partner for the Russian Empire in the context of the Russo-Ottoman rivalry than the Kingdom of Imereti, as Odishi, unlike the western Georgian monarchy (Imereti), had access to the Black Sea (**Tsagareli, 1891:** 66-68, 300; **Makalatia, 2006:** 213-214, 217).

Levan did not delay in utilizing this opportunity. In 1770, he contacted General Count Gottlob Kurt Heinrich von Tottleben, the predecessor of A. Sukhotin, and began negotiations with him regarding obtaining a Russian protectorate for Samurzakano (**Bronevskiy, 1823:** 346; **Evetskiy, 1835:** 170; **Antelava, 1951:** 79; **Inal-ipa, 1965:** 144). However, this attempt was unsuccessful because the Abkhazs realized that they were dealing with someone as greedy and imperialistic as the Ottoman Pasha (**Anchabadze G., 2006:** 12). Apparently dissatisfied with his dealings with Tottleben, Levan ordered his troops to steal Russian hussars' and carabiniers' horses, what was carried out indeed (**Balamberg, 2010:** 86). S. Bronevsky refers to the horse theft by the Abkhazs as the reason for negotiations failure (**Bronevskiy, 1823:** 346). However, Levan did not acknowledge this accusation (**Tsagareli, 1891:** 279 – №120). Undoubtedly, even if this incident had not occurred, Levan would not have been able to obtain the Russian protectorate, since it was not yet in the interests of the St. Petersburg court (**Paitchadze, Chkhataraishvili, 1973:** 656).

Levan rejected an alliance with Dadiani, as he sought to distance himself from the influence of the ruler of Samegrelo. Therefore, the only remaining option was the Ottoman Empire, which had the power to make such an agreement. If Levan had aligned himself with the Ottomans, he might have managed to strengthen his position in Abkhazia. It seems that Levan was also influenced by the energetic and intelligent personality of Manuchar (Süleyman Pasha), the eldest son of Zurab, who had been brought from Batumi and declared the heir to the throne of Abkhazia. As a devout Muslim, he had good relations with the "Sublime Porte." Given this situation, Levan's only option was to negotiate with the Ottomans, which he successfully did. He returned the Sukhumi fortress to the enemy in exchange for a ransom of 20 Ottoman Kese (6 000 Manats) (**Dubois, 1839:** 250; **Dubois, 2002:** 216).

Levan entered the service of the Ottomans: *"Levan Sharvashidze reached an agreement with the Ottomans and handed over the Sokhumi fortress to the janissaries for an annual fee of 20 Kese so that they would take better care of the fortress"*

(**Reineggs, 2002:** 110). This sum was likely his annual salary, as he was given a specific amount (20 Kese annually). In the 18th century, one Kese (*Kîse-i dîvânî*) equaled 50,000 kuruş (**Çakır, 2019; Taşkın, 2005:** 157-158; **Sertoğlu, 1986:** 182). Proceeding from this, the Ottomans paid Levan 1 000 000 Kuruş for the Sokhumi fortress. This was a substantial amount, as the annual revenue from the royal estates exceeded 100,000 kuruş. Although there were signs of inflation in the Ottoman Empire during this period (**Svanidze, 2007:** 224; **Taşkın, 2005:** 158), the grand vizier's annual income was 1,200,000 Akçes (**Svanidze, 2007:** 74). This shows how significant Sokhumi and Abkhazia were to İstanbul, as they served as a gateway not only for controlling Northern Caucasus but also for western Georgia's internal regions. Additionally, the area was rich in timber, which the Ottomans used for shipbuilding (**Kvaşilava, 2020(b):** 505-512). On November 27, 1772, İstanbul sent additional forces to secure control over Abkhazia (***In the Archives of Türkiye.., I-2*, 2022:** 374).

According to S. Bronevsky, Levan converted to Islam, and the Ottomans appointed him as the head of the Sukhumi fortress (**Bronevskiy, 1823:** 346-347). This was an office of Sokhumi Beylerbey, which later was given to Kelesh-bey. Levan's conversion to Islam, from the perspective of the ruler of Samurzakano, was likely a political maneuver aimed at gaining the trust of the Ottomans. As S. Bronevskiy notes, both sides were satisfied with this act: the Ottomans would no longer need to worry about the Sokhum-Kale garrison and the related material costs, while Levan, in turn, strengthened his influence in Abkhazia (**Bronevskiy, 1823:** 347). S. Bronevskiy continues, stating that all of this was necessary for Levan to eventually free his domain from Ottoman rule (**Bronevskiy, 1823:** 346-347). Here, the author refers to the principality of Abkhazia, although Levan was not its ruler. It seems that Levan's conversion to Islam was intended as a way to deceive the Ottomans.

Among the descendants of Khutunia Sharvashidze, Levan was the only one who converted to Islam. His brother remained an Orthodox Christian. This is evidenced by the letters of General Pavel Tsitsianov (Tsitsishvili, 1802-1806) to the children of King Solomon, Levan and Bezhan, where the author states that Levan and Bezhan were born into the Orthodox Christian faith (i.e., into a Christian family) and were still followers of that religion at the time (i.e., in 1805) (***ACAC*, 1868:** 537 – №1048, 1049).

After this, Levan quickly left Sokhumi, as the Abkhazs could not accept the return of the enemy and continued to launch permanent attacks, with the leadership of these attacks still in the hands of Zurab Sharvashidze. Levan sought refuge in the Anaklia fortress, where a Turkish garrison had been stationed since 1772. By giving Sukhumi to the Ottomans and converting to Islam, he acquired two enemies: Zurab Sharvashidze in the west and Katsia Dadiani in the east. Nevertheless, for reasons that the sources do not clarify, neither of them attempted to bring in a new candidate for the ruler of Samurzakano. Apparently, the Ottoman protection over Levan was a sufficient deterrent for both of the rulers.

By giving away Sukhumi, Levan acted in the same way as some of the feudal lords of western Georgia, who, due to rivalries with other nobles or kings, would hand over various fortresses or cities to the Ottomans. This was the case with Kutaisi, fortresses Tsutkhvati, and Shorapani (**Berdzenishvili, 1973:** 345). The ruler of Samurzakano placed his own feudal ambitions above the interests of his people.

Levan's conversion to Islam had a negative impact on the spiritual life of Samurzakano. Moreover, the presence of Turks increased in the region. This is confirmed by certain micro toponims which have survived to this day in the modern Gali region: in the village of Tchuburkhinji – *"Naturku,"* and in the villages of Khumushkuri and Mziuri – "*Turkish Nasvena*" (**Shonia N., 2019:** 48, 66).

It seems that the ruler's rejection of Christianity (even if just symbolically) heightened the threat of Islamization in the region. By this time, the positions of Christianity in Samurzakano had likely weakened, opening the way for the pagan customs brought by the settling Abkhaz to become entrenched in the local population. One document, dated April 1770, mentions a place called Bedia as a seat, where the Bishop did not sit: *"...which does not have a Bishop's seat: Bedia Metropolitan, Mokhveli Bishop, Drandeli Bishop, Anakhopia Bishop, these are of Abkhazia..."* (**Matcharadze, 1988:** 553 – №248; **Kalandia, 2000:** 502). This is also confirmed by the German scholar J. Güldenstädt, who visited Georgia in 1771-1772. He referred to Bedia as the former Bishopry centre (***Güldenstädt's Travel*, 1962:** 171).[1]

As a result of all this, by the early 1850s, a significant portion of the population of Samurzakano had converted to Islam (***From the Travel of the Bishop of Imereti..*, 1869(a):** 3). According to one statistical source from the same period, Samurzakano had 5,900 Christians and 4,200 Muslims (**Romanovski, 2004:** 258). A similar report can be found in the instructions of the Viceroy of the Caucasus M. S. Vorontsov to Cavalry General Nikolai Andreevich Read (**Weidenbaum, 2021:** 625), noting that the majority of the population of Samurzakano was Christian (***ACAC*, 1885:** 94 – №71).

Nevertheless, in general, Christianity remained the primary religion in Samurzakano, which was undoubtedly influenced by the political dominance of Odishi and the fact that the majority of the local population were Georgians (Megrelians).

It is noteworthy that the last bishop of Bedia Diocese, Metropolitan Maxime (Iashvili), led this cathedral in the 1750s and 1760s (**Kalandia, 1995:** 36; **Khorava, 2000(b):** 41). Metropolitan Maxime was a patriotic spiritual leader who actively participated in the affairs of the Kingdom of Imereti and was among King Solomon I loyal supporters. Specifically, Maxime of Bedia took part in the Ecclesiastic Council of western Georgia convened by Solomon I in December 1759, which aimed to regulate church affairs and prohibit the sale of church lands. In 1761,

[1] One of the manuscripts of Niko Dadiani's "The Life of Georgians" has a following postscript: *"in 1836 it was 155 years since in Abkhazia there was not neither top cleric nor clergy"* (***Description of Manuscripts*, 1963:** 170 – #1738).

Metropolitan Maxime attended another church council that decided to restore the diocese of Khoni (***ACAC*, 1866:** 56-58 – №7; ***MGL*, 1970:** 845 – №316). Unfortunately, the diminishing ecclesiastical status of Bedia[1] resulted in the cessation of religious services there (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 331). This is confirmed by a letter from Father Ioane Ioseliani, the chaplain of the Dadiani court, written to General Alexander Tormasov on December 23, 1809 (***ACAC*, 1870:** 416 – №557).

Sokhumi was not in Levan's possession for long. The Sultan's court did not fully trust this suddenly converted anti-Ottoman politician and granted operational freedom in Abkhazia to his reliable ally, Kelesh-bey, who took the fortress in 1774 (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 170). Kelesh-bey began active efforts to strengthen his influence in Abkhazia.

For the Ottomans, however, the situation was not simple. Despite Levan's conversion to Islam, the Ottomans were cautious about his sudden political shift. Sokhumi's handover to Levan may have been seen as an opportunity to gain influence in the region, but his new Turkish affiliation didn't fully win over local populations or strengthen his political position as might have been expected.

The Russo-Turkish War of 1768-1774 ended in a Russian victory, with the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca granting Russia free navigation in the Black Sea (**Bazhova, 1998:** 124). This was a significant achievement for St. Petersburg, as it addressed an important strategic goal. According to the peace agreement signed in Belgrade on September 18, 1739, Russia was prohibited from having both a commercial and military fleet in the Black Sea (**Sanin, 1999:** 49). Therefore, it becomes understandable that Russia provided intermediary support to western Georgia, which was strategically used to achieve its own objectives. As noted by Z. Avalishvili and I. Javakhishvili, the Imperial court's objective was to use the Georgian kingdoms and principalities in the west to occupy part of the Ottoman military forces on the Caucasian front (**Avalov, 1901:** 100-101; **Javakhishvili, 2012:** 72).

Article XXIII of this treaty addressed Georgian matters. According to the terms of the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, Imereti and Odishi were recognized by Russia as Ottoman vassal territories, and Russia agreed to allow the Ottomans to

[1] The Bedia Cathedral and the episcopate are associated with the name of the first king of united Georgia, Bagrat III (978–1014), who later was buried there (***Matiane Kartlisa*, 1955:** 281; ***Mat'iane Kartlisa*, 2014:** 151). This action of Bagrat was part of a process that took place in the 9th-10th centuries, aiming at the final separation of the western Georgian Church from the influence of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. The "Kings of Abkhazs" kings established Georgian episcopates alongside the Greek ones, replacing them, and thus, without violating canonical foundations, finally rooted out Greek Church from the western Georgia (**Khorava, 2000(b):** 22). The choice made by the first king of the "Abkhazs and Georgians" in favour of Bedia leads Z. Papaskiri to suggest that Bagrat symbolically pointed to the priority of the inheritance of the Egrisi-Lower Kartli kingdom through the kingship of the "Abkhazs and Georgians" he symbolically pointed to priority of progeny of Kuji-Egros (**Papaskiri, 2000:** 3). Contemporary Abkhaz authors declare Bedia, Ilori, Mokvi, and other churches as monuments of Abkhaz culture and architecture, widely promoting these false conclusions. Someone named Nino Dziapsh-Ipa, with the financial support of the separatist government, published the "work" saturated with such "messages" in Moscow in 2006 with a circulation of 2,000 copies (**Dziapsh-ipa, 2006**).

seize the fortresses of Kutaisi, Shorapani, and Baghdati. In return, the "Sublime Porte" pledged not to punish Imereti and Odishi for their participation in the war against the Ottomans, to cease persecution of Christians, and to stop collecting taxes in kind, as well as taxes in the form of women and children (***Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca*, 1955:** 356). This treaty had significant international and legal implications for Georgia, as it represented Russia's public recognition of its interests in Georgia (**Kilasonia, 2018:** 110).

As noted earlier, since 1702, the rulers of Abkhazia had consistently sought the "restoration of the territorial integrity" of their principality, what meant the expulsion of Odishi from Samurzakano and the definitive incorporation of this region into Abkhazia.

A new phase in resolving this issue began after the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca. According to an Ottoman document from the end of 1776, the "Abkhaz brigands" launched a raid and attempted to seize the Anaklia fortress. However, they failed to capture spoils, as Dadiani swiftly counterattacked and expelled them from his borders (***Mühimme Defters..*, 2019:** 366-367).

However, the situation soon changed when İstanbul decided to launch a major offensive against the principality of Samegrelo. The results of the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-1774 were still catastrophic for the Ottomans, signaling the eventual expulsion of the Ottomans from western Georgia. According to S. Makalatia, the recognition of these territories as part of the Ottoman sphere indirectly gave the Porte carte blanche to punish the Odishians, and the scholar justly considers this as the cause of the Russo-Ottoman War (**Makalatia, 2006:** 218). This hypothesis is confirmed by one historical document stating that "the Abkhazs and the Turks agreed on mutual cooperation" (**Chkhataraishvili, 1973(b):** 665). According to M. Rekhviashvili, the purpose of the war was to sever Samegrelo from Imereti (**Rekhviashvili, 1989:** 267-268). At first glance, the tense relations between King Solomon and Katsi'a II Dadiani created favourable conditions for a campaign against the Dadianis. According to N. Dadiani, "there was great enmity between the king and the Dadiani" (**Dadiani, 1962:** 180).

In historiography, there is ongoing debate regarding the identity of the direct leader of the military campaign. According to one Ottoman document, the initiator of the attack on Samegrelo appears to be Bezhan Oglu Ali Pasha, the governor of the fortress of Batumi, who allegedly "linked his nephews, Keleish Ahmed Bey and Bekir Bey, with Levan Bey (referring to the ruler of Samurzakano – ***K.K.***)" (***Ottoman Documentary Sources..*, 2012:** 203, 204 – №82). It is important to note that this document was created in 1783, shortly after the Battle of Rukh. The document's creator likely had firsthand knowledge of the events. Therefore, we believe this source should be given precedence over later sources, particularly those from the 19th century.

I. Antelava suggests that the armed forces were led by the Prince of Abkhazia, Zurab Sharvashidze (**Antelava, 1951:** 80-81). The issue is somewhat unclear in the narration of N. Dadiani: *"At this time, Abkhazia was ruled by the Sharvashid-*

ze family, with Zurab, Kelesh Ahmed bey, and Bekir bey... they led an expedition against Dadiani" (**Dadiani, 1962:** 180). N. Dadiani then tells how the insurgents were supported by the Samurzakano people: *"They renounced Dadiani's rule over their land, Abkhazia, Samurzakano, and joined them*" (**Dadiani, 1962:** 180). This implies that Levan Sharvashidze joined them. Unlike Niko Dadiani, the popular singer and conductor I. Gegetchkori (Gr. Dadiani) identifies all four Sharvashidzes as the ringleaders: *"The four brothers o Sharvashidze, full of envy, Keleish-bey, Zurab, Bekir-bey, and one is called Levan*" (**Gegetchkori, 1895:** 5-6).

The famous Georgian poet and public figure Besik Gabashvili (1750-1791), who participated in these events and dedicated the poem *The Battle of Rukhi* to this war, names Keleish-bey and Levan from Samurzakano as the leaders of the Abkhaz military campaign: "Kelesh-bey incites Bekir-bey, and Levan instigates Zurab" (**Besiki, 1962:** 123). A noteworthy detail in these excerpts is the prominence of the name of the ruler of Samurzakano alongside others. After the re-entry of the Ottomans into the fortress of Sokhumi, Levan's weight among the people of Abkhazia drasticly declined. According to I. Reinegs, he was hated by the Abkhaz people (**Reineggs, 2002:** 110). It appears that the Ottomans needed the alliance of two strong rulers, especially since invasions of Abkhazia into Samegrelo had always ended in the former's defeat since the early 18th century. This step also seems to have reconciled Levan with the Sharvashidzes. Under Ottoman influence, Keleish-bey and Levan reconciled, and Bekir-Bey and Zurab joined them.

Here it is significant that Keleish-Bey acts in order to gain the support of Bekir-bey, while Levan takes charge over Zurab. It seems that the younger ones (Keleish-Bey and Bekir-Bey) were assigned roles by seniority (Levan and Zurab). Gr. Dadiani further clarifies the leader's identity: *"The leader of the army, by agreement, was Keleish-Ahmed-Bey"* (**Molashkhia, 2002:** 11). Some scientists, who have paid attention to Zurab Shervashidze's somewhat passive position in these events, believe that Keleish-Bey was the true leader of the campaign (**Khorava, 1996:** 162; **Papaskiri, 2004:** 114). This interpretation is supported by the events that unfolded after the Battle of Rukhi. Specifically, during the confrontation between Kelesh-bey and Zurab, Dadiani sided with the Abkhaz ruler. He sent his brother, Giorgi, to aid Zurab with an army from Odishi (**Dadiani, 1962:** 179-180). Apparently, prince Katsi'a II sought to avenge the Ottoman attack on his principality in 1780 in this way.

To attack Samegrelo, the Sharvashidzes brought mercenaries from North Caucasia (Dadiani, 1962: 180). This information is corroborated by documentary evidence: *"The entire Abkhazia, under the rule of the Sharvashidzes, assembled troops from the Jiks, Alans, Circassians, and other foreign armies... cavalry and infantry, armed with guns, cannons, and muskets"* (**Chkhataraishvili, 1973(b):** 665). Besiki also notes the presence of Crimean Tatars in the army (**Besiki, 1962:** 124).

For the confrontation with the tens of thousands of warriors from the Abkhaz and North Caucasian forces (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 174, fig. 3), prince Katsia II requested assistance from King Solomon, reminding him of his support during

the battle of Khresili (**Dadiani, 1962:** 180).

On March 1780, the coalition of Solomon and Dadiani defeated the attackers near the Rukhi region: *"The Abkhaz could not resist, and they were routed. They were defeated honorably by the king and Dadiani"* (**Dadiani, 1962:** 180). This is described even more expressively by I. Gegetchkori (**Gegetchkori, 1895:** 14). A similar account is found in the aforementioned Ottoman document: *"They engaged in battle at the banks of the Enguri river. The Abkhaz tribe was defeated and destroyed. Many people perished, and they were captured... The Abaza beys, united, with all their strength, attempted to try their best, but in vein. These soldiers, when they sought refuge, were slaughtered in vast numbers, and a certain number were taken prisoner. Kelesh Ahmed bey, along with Ali bey, nearly became prisoners"* (***Ottoman Documentary Sources..*, 2012:** 204 – №82).

Despite his crushing defeat at Rukh, Kelesh-bey showed no signs of surrender and continued his attempts to seize Samurzakano, which he considered his domain (**Matchavariani, 1913:** 248). Nevertheless, the battle of Rukh is considered a turning point in the relations between Samegrelo and Abkhazia. In 1780, the Abkhaz attempts to capture the left bank of the Enguri river were finally broke down.

Based on the information from N. Dadiani, according to which *"they separated from Dadiani's domain, called Abkhazia, known as Samurzaikano, and joined them"* (**Dadiani, 1962:** 180), there is a viewpoint in historiography that from the late 1770s, before the battle of Rukhi, Samegrelo lost control over Samurzakano and, for about half a century afterward, this region effectively represented an independent principality (vide: **Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 176). We consider this assessment to be exaggerated. N. Dadiani's statement should only reflect the situation just before the battle of Rukhi. However, it is clear that from this period, the influence of Samegrelo over Samurzakano started to weaken.

Levan Sharvashidze, as we saw, fled after being defeated in this war. His attempt to free himself from both Dadiani's and the ruler of Abkhazia's influence ended in a second defeat. Therefore, the owner of Samurzakano needed reconciliation with Dadiani. Although Solomon and Katsia did not intrude Samurzakano up to Ghalidzga river (at least, nothing in the sources mentions this), it seems that it was not necessary. Samurzakano still remained under Dadiani's influence. Therefore, it was relevant for Levan to improve his relationship with Katsia. The military campaign in Sokhumi against Kelesh-bey, which we have already touched upon, pointed to a reconciliation between Dadiani and Zurab. *"Zurab Sharvashidze came and Katsia joined Dadiani"* (**Dadiani, 1962:** 180).

After this, N. Dadiani informs us about Giorgi Dadiani's military campaign in Sokhumi and then writes that the rulers of Samegrelo and Abkhazia reconciled: Katsia's son, Manuchar, who at the time was probably 12 or 13 years old, married Zurab's daughter (**Dadiani, 1962:** 181).[1] Here the chronicler clearly makes a mis-

[1] His senior brother Grigol being 18, in 1788 became the Prince of Samegrelo. Manuchar at least

take. As mentioned earlier, his older brother, Grigol, became the ruler of Samegrelo at the age of 18 in 1788. Therefore, Manuchar would have been at least one year younger than him.

As noted above, Zurab did not have a son. However, it is also known that Manuchar was the son-in-law of Levan from Samurzakano (**Soselia, 1990:** 93). Naturally, it is strange how such a mistake could have happened to N. Dadiani when describing the family status of his closest relative.[1] The chronicler was not an eyewitness to these events. He was probably a 4–5-year-old child at the time. He would have learned about Manuchar Dadiani's marriage to Elisabed,[2] Levan's daughter, from oral traditions within his family. Therefore, we believe that this is a case of a mix-up of events, and it is likely that connecting this marriage to Zurab Sharvashidze's name was not accidental. It is probable that the ruler of Abkhazia, who first reestablished relations with Dadiani after the battle of Rukhi, played the role of intermediary and reconciled Levan from Samurzaikano with Katsia, what was further solidified by the aforementioned marriage. This would have happened between 1781-1783, as after that, N. Dadiani talks about the battle of Chakvi (**Dadiani, 1962:** 181), which took place on March 9, 1784 (**Rekhviashvili, 1989:** 278). According to B. Khorava's assessment, with this step, Katsia sought to solidify Samurzakano under Dadiani's control (**Khorava, 1996:** 165). Later, it became noticeable that Levan Sharvashidze was distancing himself from Keleş-bey's alliance, while in Samegrelo, it seemed that they felt the struggle for Samurzakano was not yet over. Therefore, based on the abovementioned, we think that this was a mutual desire.

In the late 1780s, significant events took place on the western and eastern borders of Samurzakano, which had an impact on this region as well. After Russia's annexation of the Crimean Khanate on April 8, 1783, and the signing of the Treaty of Georgievsk on July 24, 1783, which placed the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti under Russian protectorate, the Ottoman Empire began to pay much attention to the Caucasus (**Tsurtsumia, 2012:** 65). Especially since St. Petersburg had gained a legal possibility for action in the Black Sea and Eastern Caucasus.

The appearance of the Russian military fleet in the Black Sea threatened the security of the Ottoman Empire. At the court of Catherine II, serious thoughts were being given to plans for the destruction of the Ottoman state and the restoration of the Byzantine Empire (the so-called *"Greek Project"*) (**Korshunova, 2003:** 62-68). Under these circumstances, it became of vital importance for Türkiye to strengthen its position in western Georgia and firmly establish control over the Black Sea coast (**Rekhviashvili, 1989:** 270). During this period, the Ottoman Empire was also building a fortress in Anapa (**Tsurtsumia, 2012:** 65). Naturally, the fortress in Sokhumi also did not go unnoticed, which was of strategic importance to the Sultan's court, and they even had a shipyard there (**Tsurtsumia, 2012:** 66).

would be 1year younger than him.

[1] The Prince of Samegrelo, Katsia II Dadiani was native uncle of N. Dadiani (the brother of his father Giorgi). Hence, Manuchar was his cousin (**Dadiani, 1962:** 10).

[2] N. Dadiani names her Rusudan (**Dadiani, 1962:** 181).

The reconciliation between Zurab Sharvashidze and Katsia II Dadiani, along with the defeat of Keleş-bey by the Odishars, caused concern in the Ottoman Empire. The development of events in such a scenario was certainly unfavourable to İstanbul, especially since a new war with Russia was looming. One Ottoman document from this time indicates that İstanbul needed strong positions in Abkhazia and was trying to minimize internal conflicts for this purpose (***The History of Adygs..*****, 2009:** 19 – №5).

Keleş-bey's defeat would lead to a weakening of Ottoman influence in Abkhazia. Countermeasures were necessary. In 1785, Kelesh-bey was in İstanbul (**Rekhviashvili, 1989:** 297), and it appears he was under preparation to become the ruler of Abkhazia. By 1786, he was already in Abkhazia **(Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 179). However, Zurab was still the ruler, and *"in the Aku fortress, Kelesh-Ahmed-beg was there, keeping the nearby ones under his control"* (**Dadiani, 1962:** 183-184).

In August 1787, the new Russo-Turkish war (1787-1791) began. On August 21, the Ottomans achieved their first success. It seems that only after this could Kelesh-bey fulfill the "assignment" from Sultan Selim III (1761-1808). Kelesh-bey's rise to power in Abkhazia, replacing the recently re-Christianized Zurab, was intended to strengthen Türkiye's political interests, especially considering the anti-Ottoman uprisings that marked his tenure (**Berdzenishvili, 1965:** 402). By the time Solomon II ascended the throne in Imereti (July 12, 1789), Kelesh-bey had already become the ruler of Abkhazia: *"Solomon, son of Archil, became the king of Imereti... and at that time, Kelesh-Ahmed-beg Sharvashidze ruled over Abkhazs"* (**Dadiani, 1962:** 185).

Therefore, Kelesh-bey's organized coup in Abkhazia would have taken place in early autumn of 1787, as during this period, a favorable external political climate for the consolidation of pro-Turkish forces in Abkhazia had been created.

As already mentioned, significant events were also taking place east of Samurzakano during this period. On April 23, 1784, during the feast of St. George, King Solomon I tragically died. Two candidates laid claim to the throne: two Davids, representing the late 18th century's own *"Ulu"* and *"Narin"* conflict: David, the son of Giorgi and cousin of Solomon, aged 29, and David, the 12-year-old son of Archil and nephew of Solomon, who, through his mother, was the grandson of Erekle II. The latter had been recognized by Solomon as the heir to the throne during his lifetime (**Rekhviashvili, 1989:** 280). The dissatisfied nobles and princes, unhappy with Solomon I politicy, seized this opportunity. The situation was favorable for them because David, son of Giorgi, was Katsia Dadiani's cousin (**Dadiani, 1962:** 181). With the support of the ruler of Samegrelo and two influential Imeretian nobles, Papuna Tsereteli and Bera Tsulukidze, David became the king.

On December 6, 1788, Katsia passed away, and his 18-year-old son Grigol became the ruler of Odishi (**Dadiani, 1962:** 184). Katsia, apparently, did not fully trust David, whom he had supported in gaining the throne. Therefore, on December 3, he made the king swear an oath to *"assist his sons"* (**Dadiani, 1962:** 184).

Taking advantage of the situation in Samegrelo, the ruler of Samurzakano,

Levan, also sought to assert his influence. Despite the reconciliation with Katsia, his aim was still to weaken the influence of Odishi. A "Manuchar faction" emerged in Zugdidi and Bedia, with the goal of elevating Kacia II's younger son to the throne. Manuchar himself was not opposed to illegally taking the Dadiani throne. It seems that the members of this faction were influential Odishians and Samurzakano nobles. It is possible that Keleşh-bey's involvement was also in play, as he too had his eyes on Samurzakano.

In a letter dated June 14, 1789, from King David to the envoy of Imereti, Besarion Gabashvili, it is mentioned that a large delegation of Abkhaz nobles had arrived in Kutaisi: *"The Sharvashidzes, rulers of all of Abkhazia, along with all their nobles and dignitaries"* (**Matcharadze, 1968:** 277). Levan Sharvashidze, the "ruler of Upper Abkhazia," requested that the kingdom of Samegrelo be given to his son-in-law, Manuchar (**Matcharadze, 1968:** 277-278). In return, the ruler of Samurzakano would recognize the supreme authority of the King of Imereti (**Matcharadze, 1968:** 277-278).

The issue was that David was born out of wedlock, and according to the law, he could not become king (**Rekhviashvili, 1989:** 280). However, Solomon had made him regent for the underage heir, David Archil's son. It seems that Levan knew about King David's precarious position, and following the principle of "helping hands," he sought assistance in implementing his plan. This proposal seemed reasonable to David. If he were to endorse the idea of Levan Sharvashidze's rule over Samurzakano, he would gain a strong ally and be able to control Samegrelo. David was aware that the principality of Odishi represented the "Achilles' heel" for the kings of Imereti, and only by subduing it would the Imeretian monarch's power and position be strengthened. Moreover, Manuchar promised loyal service (**Makalatia, 2006:** 218-219).

Levan, in turn, promised to assist the King of Imereti in establishing contact with Keleş-bey. Following this, the Catholicos of Imereti, Maxime II, wrote to the Imeretian despot, B. Gabashvili, stating that *"Sharvashidze, the ruler of Abkhazia, has tried to ally with our king through his persuasion"* (**Matcharadze, 1968:** 281).

Levan and Manuchar, supported from Kutaisi, continued their active efforts to consolidate their positions. By February 1789, *"and after two months of Katsia Dadiani's death"* (**Dadiani, 1962:** 184), the situation ripened, and the Imereti prince did not delay and attacked Samegrelo. Grigol and his supporters put up insigniifcant resistance. The king won over influential Odishian nobles and installed Manuchar on the throne. According to letter from King David, Levan Sharvashidze's visit to Imereti is dated from May 1789, and in the letter written on June 14, there is still no mention of Manuchar. On the contrary, the king states that the request from the Abkhaz for the removal of Grigol from Dadiani's throne *"I have asked to be delayed until the Supreme Assembly of Russia permits this matter"* (**Matcharadze, 1968:** 278).

Of course, the decision regarding the confirmation or removal of the ruler of Samegrelo had not yet been decided by St. Petersburg. It is clear that N. Dadi-

ani's message about Grigol's removal and King David's letter contradict each other. The king concealed that he had assisted Manuchar in unfairly seizing his brother's throne. Apparently, in Kutaisi, where they were striving for an alliance with Russia, it was considered best not to reveal this fact for a while, so that Imereti and its king would appear to Russia as a serious political force that resolved all matters with justice, as indicated by the appeal to Russian authority. Therefore, at the court of Imereti, it was believed that the unjust removal of Grigol from Dadiani's throne, especially at the request of a specific "faction," would make their government appear unserious, and Empress Catherine II's court would refrain from allying with such a partner.

The deposed Grigol Dadiani fled to Lechkhumi (**Dadiani, 1962:** 184). According to B. Khorava, this was a fateful mistake for the King of Imereti (**Khorava, 1996:** 166). The exiled ruler took full advantage of the unfavorable internal and external situation for King David, and in July 1789, Solomon II, son of David Archil, appeared in Imereti as king. Thus, Grigol played a significant role in placing David Archil's son on the Imeretian throne (***GNCM*, Ad-1508**). As a result, Grigol regained the throne and consolidated his authority (**Burjanadze, 1953:** 13-14). However, to solidify his position, he made enemies of both the Bagrationi princes. Grigol married the granddaughter of Erekle, the daughter of Giorgi Batonishvili (later King Giorgi XII of Kartli-Kakheti), and also married his daughter, Mariam, to Solomon (**Dadiani, 1962:** 185).

It seems that Grigol, having returned to Odishi, did not ignore the issue of Samurzakano. His brother's ambitious father-in-law was not a reliable ruler for Dadiani. From this period, Samurzakano had a new ruler: Levan's nephew, Manuchar, who was a loyal ally of Grigol Dadiani and later became his son-in-law (Manuchar married Grigol's daughter Ketevan) (***ACAC*, 1868:** 401 – №794). In the period between 1790-1792, Grigol was titled the ruler of Odishi, Abkhazia, Svaneti, and Takveri (***ACAC*, 1875:** 814 – №33).

B. Khorava's observation that "Abkhazia" here refers to Samurzakano is quite accurate (**Khorava, 1996:** 166). However, T. Kadaria suggests that Manuchar came to power in Samurzakano only in 1810 (**Kadaria, 2003:** 107). J. Gamakharia also defines Levan Sharvashidze's rule as being from 1757 to 1810 (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 294). I. Antelava, however, dates Manuchar's rule in Samurzakano to the 1780s (**Antelava, 1951:** 23), although this dating contradicts sources.

In 1792, Grigol Dadiani once again lost the throne. Solomon II was focused on securing and strengthening the kingdom and tried to subdue the nobles. Grigol, however, did not approve of his son-in-law's idea and held himself an independent ruler (**Khorava, 1996:** 167). The exiled Grigol sought refuge in Samurzakano (**Dadiani, 1962:** 186).

It seems that Grigol Dadiani's position in Samurzakano had become quite strong, as the Samurzakano nobles supported him rather than Levan Sharvashidze's son-in-law, who had once been displaced (**Dadiani, 1962:** 186-187). Grigol supported the position of Khutunia Sharvashidze's younger heirs, strengthening

their stance against their uncle Levan, whose political influence was limited to his own estate.

With the support of the Samurzakano forces, Grigol invaded Imereti in 1794, at a time when Solomon faced difficulties due to the invasion by Davit, Giorgi's son (**Dadiani, 1962:** 186-187; ***ACAC*, 1866:** 553 – №695). The power struggle brought the former king and the Dadiani family into an alliance (**Burjanadze, 1953:** 122). However, Grigol, stationed at Marsili(near Bandza), failed to achieve anything with this campaign. He was quickly defeated and retreated back to Samurzakano (**Dadiani, 1962:** 187). The Samurzakano forces ("Abkhazians") were defeated by several units of Imeretian cavalry in a surprise nighttime attack (**Dadiani, 1962:** 187; ***ACAC*, 1866:** 553 – №695).

It seems that Grigol had come with a considerable number of troops, as the king was troubled when he heard that he would have to fight on two fronts (**Dadiani, 1962:** 187). The retreating Abkhazians plundered the population of Samegrelo and returned to Samurzakano *"with great spoils"* (**Dadiani, 1962:** 187).

Notably, Grigol felt safe in Samurzakano and did not need to flee to Kelesh-bey. This suggests that the region was quite strong at the time, as Manuchar did not attempt to expel him from there. By this, he practically lost control over Samurzakano. However, it is important to note that Samurzakano had not went out of influence of Dadiani family. The Samurzakano Sharvashidze recognized only Grigol's authority and supported him. In 1798, in the village of Ojola, Grigol Dadiani met with the king and regained the throne of Odishi (**Dadiani, 1962:** 189-190; ***ACAC*, 1866:** 113 – №34). The influence of Samegrelo once again extended over Samurzakano. However, it should also be noted that the support of the Samurzakano nobles Grigol Dadiani against the king of Imereti was not always unambiguous.

In 1799, Kelesh-Bey, through internal betrayal, captured the fortress of Anaklia, a de facto recognition that Grigol Dadiani had to accept (**Balamberg, 2010:** 87).

It is likely that by 1802, during the conflict between Grigol and Solomon, in which Kelesh-bey was involved, the Samurzakano Sharvashidzes maintained a certain level of neutrality. In a letter from the Metropolitan of Akhtala dated November 18, 1802, it is mentioned that Levan Sharvashidze's nephew, Bezhan, had mediated a peace between Solomon and the ruler of Abkhazia (***ACAC*, 1866:** 578 – №756).

Kelesh-bey tried to exploit internal conflicts in Odishi to gain control over Samurzakano. It seems that he was only able to win the support of the brothers of Manuchar Sharvashidze – Levan and Bezhan (***ACAC*, 1868:** 537 – №1048, 1049). According to a report from Pyotr Maximovich Litvinov dated February 20, 1805, it is noted that only Manuchar's brothers, Bezhan and Levan Sharvashidze were under Kelesh-bey's influence, and the weakness of Grigol Dadiani's rule being cited as the reason for this (***ACAC*, 1868:** 428 – №838). According to N. Dadiani, Kelesh-bey had *"taken control*[1] *of the Dadiani estates in Samurzakano-Abkhazia"*

[1] Acted forcibly (vide.: **Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 187-189).

(**Dadiani, 1962:** 192). A. Vvedenskiy believes that the ruler of Abkhazia entrusted the region to his son, Mehmed-bey (**Vvedenskiy, 1872:** 18).

While this information is used by G. Dzidzariya (**Dzidzariya, 2016:** 185) and is primarily compiled during the period of Russian rule, the sources of this information remain unclear. However, elsewhere it is mentioned that Kelesh-bey only transferred control of the Anaklia fortress to his son (***Essay on the Structure of Social and Political Life..*, 1870:** 20, 22). Additionally, Mehmed-Bey's name does not appear in subsequent historical events.

As we can see, this excerpt does not provide a basis to assume that the ruler of Abkhazia controlled this region, especially from 1794 onwards, as some historians (**Letodiani, 2012:** 100, 101) suggest. It is a fact that by 1798, Samurzakano was still under Grigol Dadiani's control. Ir. Antelava's opinion is entirely justified, suggesting that Kelesh-bey had minimal control over Samurzakano, with the Samurzakano Sharvashidzes entering under Russian protection without Kelesh-bey's sanction. As the researcher stated, "It can be confidently said that Samurzakhano did not recognize Kelesh-bey's authority… N. Dadiani only speaks of Kelesh-bey's influence on Samurzakano affairs. But even this influence seems to be rather weak" (**Antelava, 1951:** 83).

N. Dubrovin also notes that Grigol Dadiani controlled a portion of the Abkhaz population, but his rule was very weak due to Turkish support (**Dubrovin, 1866:** 141). Here, the "Abkhaz" are understood to refer to the Samurzakano people, and the "Turks" means Kelesh-bey. However, according to N. Dubrovin, there is no evidence to assert that Dadiani had lost influence over Samurzakano at this time. The government of Odishi had limited reach in the region of Enguri-Ghalidzga, but the local population still paid taxes to Dadiani, although in a smaller amount (**Dubrovin, 1866:** 141).

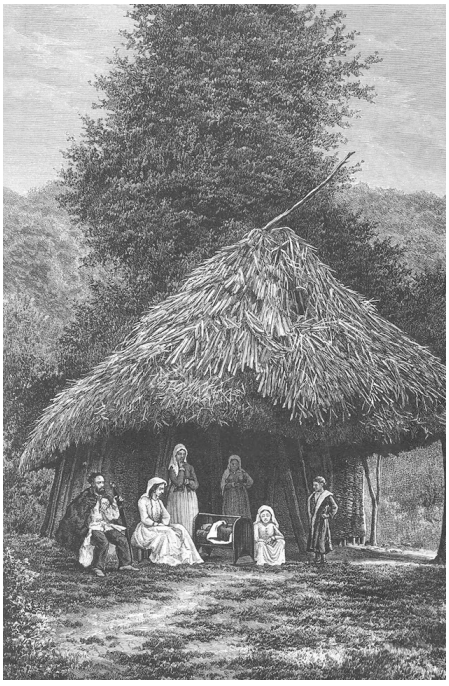
It appears that due to his complicated situation with the king of Imereti and ongoing internal strife, Grigol did not give much attention to the developments in Samurzakano, which Kelesh-ey took advantage of. Although the ruler of Abkhazia managed to gain the support of two influential members of Samurzakano's ruling family, this was not sufficient to take full control, as the government remained in the hands of Manuchar Sharvashidze. There is no evidence to prove that Levan or Bezhan attempted to deprive Manuchar from power. As P. Litvinov reported, the reason for this was Bezhan and Levan Sharvashidze's desire *"to have absolute right to capture and take away people from Dadiani's lands"* (***ACAC*, 1868:** 428 – №838). It looks like, that in Samurzakano the Samegrelo must be implied as well. The Sharvashidze brothers, being protected and influenced by Ottoman Empire and Kelesh-bey encouraged the slave traders. Although they did not repudiate their faith and still were the parishioners of the eparchy led by Tsaishi top clergyman (***ACAC*, 1868:** 428 – №838).

Thus, even during these hard times, Samurzakano remained an integral part of the Georgian political and cultural landscape. Local nobility-maintained connections to Georgian cultural heritage, as evidenced by the presence of copies

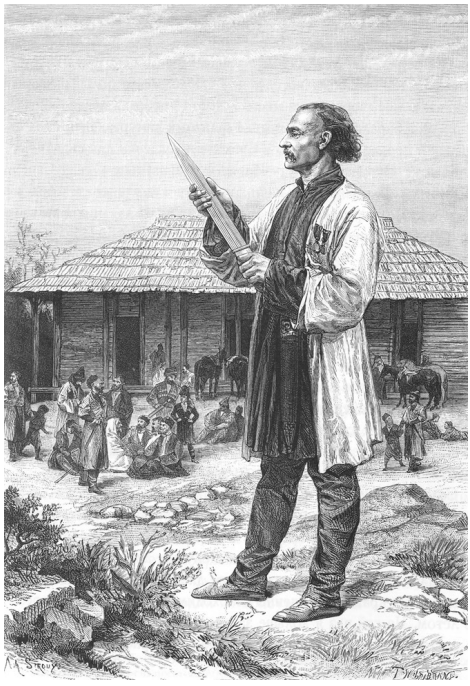
of "The Knight in the Panther's Skin", printed in 1712 in the printing chapel of King Vakhtang VI, and adherence to the legal code developed by the same king (**Gugushvili, 1984:** 752).

As for Levan Sharvashidze, it is evident that he was an ambitious ruler who sought connections with both the king of Imereti and the ruler of Abkhazia. His leadership broke the tradition established by his father and grandfather, which had excluded political activity beyond the borders of their domain. Under Levan's rule, the Sharvashidzes of Samurzakano became actively involved in political developments in the southeastern and northwestern parts of their territory, sometimes even influencing the course of events, such as the return of expelled Turks from the fortress of Sokhumi and the first deposition of Grigol Dadiani from the throne.

The period of Levan Sharvashidze's rule is typically identified as spanning from 1757 to 1790, though it may extend to 1792, marking a significant period of political and military influence for the Samurzakano Sharvashidzes within the broader Georgian context.



Peasant Family from Samurzakano
(Serena, 1882)



Samurzakano Noble
(Serena, 1882)

CHAPTER III. SAMURZAKANO IN 1800-1839

§1. Receiving the Russian Patronage

On the verge of 1780s-1790s in spite of fruitless negotiations with Tottleben Levan Sharvashidze turned the trend of his foreign policy to the North. Especially that Russian-Turkish war ongoing in that time clearly showed the success of Russia. At the same time the warfare came up to Imereti frontier. As far as the king of Kartli-Kakheti kingdom had been already under Russian protection the king of Imereti Davit carried out vigorous activity. While audience with king Davit of Imereti he talks to him on the issue of having Russian protectorate. The king promised him to secure for Abkhazia the Russian protectorate (**Matcharadze, 1968:** 278)**.**

As King Davit wrote to B. Gabashvili, the Abkhaz greeted this with enthusiasm (**Matcharadze, 1968:** 278). However, the government of Imereti had already raised the issue of Abkhazia in negotiations with Russia since 1787, presenting the region's serious geostrategic importance for fighting against Türkiye, both in western Georgia and in Northern Caucasus (**Matcharadze, 1968:** 268-269).

The details of the conversation between David and Levan are not preserved in the sources, but based on the documents related to B. Gabashvili's diplomatic activities, we can speculate about the issues that might have been discussed. Presumably, the results of these negotiations are reflected in the letter from the Imereti-Abkhazian Catolicos Maxime II to B. Gabashvili: *"Sharvashidze, the head of Abkhazia, tried to unite with the king through his attempt and the king agreed to the loyalty to the Russian Emperor. Would it be better, if this issue is followed up, then for a while, our king Sharvashidze, the head of Abkhazia, will be"* (**Matcharadze, 1968:** 280).

Of course, the perspective of Abkhazia's allegiance here is too much exaggerated, where the pro-Turkish oriented Kelesh-Bey ruled. We consider it less convincing that such a radical shift in foreign-policy orientation would have been made by the ruler of Abkhazia in such a short time after coming to power. Certainly, the Archbishop correctly pointed out that, in the ongoing Russian-Ottoman War, the situation was turning in favour of Russia, and this would have had some influence on Kelesh-Bey's orientation. However, we have no grounds to assume that the ruler of Abkhazia even considered exploring ways of connecting with Russia. England

Ir. Antelava rightly rejected Kelesh-Bey's anti-Ottoman stance during this period, as he was not part of the military-political alliance of Georgian kings and rulers signed in 1790 (**Antelava, 1951:** 87-88). Therefore, the head of Abkhazia, by the end of the 1780s, did not express a desire for union with Russia, and neither would he have instructed Levan to do so. G. Dzidzariya also thought that Kelesh-Bey's pro-Russian orientation only appeared at the beginning of the 19th century (**Dzidzariya, 2017:** 38). The fact that only Levan appears in discussions

about matters related to Russia (negotiations with Tottleben, King Davit) clearly indicates that, at that time, only the Samurzakano branch of the Sharvashidze family was interested in receiving Russia's protectorate. Some speculation could be made about Zurab's stance, but after his deprive from power, such efforts likely would not been possible.

The Imereti ecclesiastical leader, in the same letter, instructed B. Gabashvili to interest Russia by emphasizing that through controlling Abkhazia, the Imperial Court would deprive the Kuban rebels from the support which they needed (**Matcharadze, 1968:** 280).

As we can see, if Samurzakano, together with Imereti, had received Russian protection, this would positively influenced the victory of the pro-Russian orientation in the principality of Abkhazia itself, what in this document is expressed by the phrase *"they will soon choose Christianity."*

The issue became particularly topical for the Samurzakano Sharvashidzes after December 2, 1803, when Grigol Dadiani signed a protectorate agreement with Russia in the village of Tchaladidi, and on December 4, in the presence of the Bishop of Tsaishi and Odishi nobility, he solemnly swore allegiance to the Russian Emperor. Thus, Odishi accepted Russian protection under the condition of limited autonomy (**Khorava, 1996:** 170). The Russian authorities took full advantage of the tense relationship between Odishi and Imereti to enter western Georgia. Via Samegrelo, the Russians approached the eastern coast of the Black Sea and gained a significant foothold for an attack on the kingdom of Imereti, which was acknowledged by Russian military historian V. Potto (***Confirmation of Russian Dominion..*, 1901(a):** 104-105). The short-sighted controversy between Solomon II and Grigol Dadiani contributed to the Russian invasion of western Georgia (**Khorava, 1996:** 170). Although this was indeed a fierce struggle, if we take into account V. Potto's assessment, in our opinion M. Dumbadze's conclusion is correct that the reason for Russia's establishment in Samegrelo should be viewed as part of the Russian government's imperial policy, aiming to open a path for Russia towards the eastern coast of the Black Sea (**Dumbadze, 1957:** 148). According to the assessments of Russian officials themselves, bringing Samegrelo under Russian protection was for Dadiani a *"necessity, not an act of goodwill"* (**Dumbadze, 1957:** 148). The Ottoman Empire was so weakened, especially against the background of the ongoing Napoleonic wars which covered its territories in north Africa, that İstanbul did not even protest (**Gonikashvili, 1979:** 94).

Although Grigol Dadiani was protected by Solomon II, in exchange for vassalage and "protection," his internal and external independence was limited, and this was already under the control of Russians. Dadiani was obliged to obey the chief administrator or his representative, and, at the same time, Russian troops entered Odishi, and the local population became responsible for settling and maintaining the Russian forces.

The entry of Odishi under Russia's "protection" was a significant blow to Solomon II long-term political objectives. He lost the opportunity to unify the

country. On January 3, 1804, the Russians took control of Ganja. According to N. Berdzenishvili, this worsened more the position of the last king of Imereti, as there was no longer any hope for external assistance (**Berdzenishvili, 1965:** 299-300). Surrounded by Russia from the east and the west, Solomon soon lost support of the nobles, who were his allies. They took Dadiani's side (**Rekhviashvili, 2012:** 73). On April 25, 1804, he signed the articles of request to the Russian Emperor, in keeping with which the kingdom of Imereti came under the subjection of the Russian Empire. Solomon managed to maintain his throne, but his authority was significantly limited. According to M. Rekhviashvili's assessment, with the act of April 25, 1804, the kingdom of Imereti, as a political entity, practically ceased its existence (**Rekhviashvili, 2012:** 76).

By bringing the two significant political entities of western Georgia under the Empire's subjection, Russia significantly strengthened its military, political and economic positions in the region.

From this point on, Russia was connected to Transcaucasia by sea, and the trade and transit route between Asia and Europe remained under its control for a durable period. By securing this strategic position, St. Petersburg got strong foot and influence in the region, which was one of the key priorities for Russia in the pursuit of its Oriental policy.

Samegrelo was the first political entity in western Georgia to accept Russia's "protection." Manuchar Sharvashidze actively sought to establish Russia's protectorate over Samurzakano (***ACAC,* 1868:** 401 – №794). He was initially a supporter of Grigol Dadiani's foreign policy; however, he did not have much support within Samurzakano, even from his own brothers. Russia initially refrained from addressing the issue of Samurzakano, while Manuchar urgently sought political support. His position weakened so much that, by February 20, 1804, Pyotr Maksimovich Litvinov (**Weidenbaum, 2021:** 470) noted in a report to P. Tsitsianov that his letter would encourage the ruler of Samurzakano and would positively influence the enticing of his brothers (***ACAC,* 1868:** 428 – №838). By April 4, 1805, Litvinov was already requesting from P. Tsitsianov that the Russian authorities immediately support the ruler of Samurzakano, who was loyal to both the Russians and Dadiani (***ACAC,* 1868:** 510 – №993).

Manuchar needed Russia's protection not only for defence against Kelesh-bey but also because he feared that the ruler of Abkhazia might completely seize Samurzakano. As P. Tsitsianov noted in his letter to P. Litvinov dated from June 3, 1805, Manuchar expected an attack from Kelesh-bey along with Ottoman forces (***ACAC,* 1868:** 538 – №1051). However, the Ottoman Empire took no action (**Kadaria, 2003:** 108).

The Sultan was concerned with France's increased political and military activity, and Napoléon Bonaparte's army's successful military operations in Egypt, in the Ottoman Empire's African territories (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 196). This, in its turn, facilitated the rapprochement between İstanbul and St. Petersburg.

Russia's establishment of political control over Samurzakano, along with

Samegrelo, clearly indicated the region's affiliation with Odishi. The ruler of Abkhazia became particularly active after the death of Grigol Dadiani (October 23, 1804). Kelesh-Bey was already directly controlling a part of Samurzakano's territory (***ACAC,* 1869:** 176 – №324). On March 29, 1805, Nino Bagrationi-Dadiani requested that the Russian authorities ensure the return of the seized lands to their lawful owner, namely Samegrelo principality (***ACAC,* 1869:** 176 – №324). Therefore, Manuchar Sharvashidze urgently requested in a letter dated from November 26, 1804, to P. Tsitsianov that Russia establish a protectorate over his domain, justifying this by recognizing Samurzakano as part of the ancient territory of Odishi (***ACAC,* 1868:** 490, 536 – №956, 1046).

It is notable that the descendants of Kvapu Sharvashidze considered the lands of Samurzakano to be part of Samegrelo from the very beginning. For the Russians as well, Samurzakano was a region of great geostrategic importance, especially against the backdrop of strained relations with Kelesh-Bey. Additionally, Samurzakano, together with Odishi, would play a crucial role as a staging ground for the conquest of the Abkhazian principality. However, the situation with Manuchar's two brothers was unclear, as they had significant influence in Samurzakano and owned large estates (***ACAC,* 1868:** 537 – №1048).

The brothers feared that the Russians would seize their estates. However, the Russians did not want to leave them among the supporters of Kelesh-Bey (***ACAC,* 1868:** 428 – №838).

They also feared that supporting only Manuchar would provoke a heavy and undesirable reaction from his brothers, which would hinder Russia's advance towards Abkhazia. Therefore, in his letter to Manuchar on March 31, 1805, P. Tsitsianov outlined as a condition for entering the Russian protectorate the necessity of winning over the repudiating brothers (***ACAC,* 1868:** 537 – №1048). P. Tsitsianov himself also wrote a letter (on the same March 31) to Bezhan and Levan, assuring them that by entering the protectorate, they would receive personal and property security and their estates would remain inviolable (***ACAC,* 1868:** 537 – №1049).

In order to fulfill the "appeall" of the Russian authorities, Manuchar took active steps, and the first results appeared just two weeks later. On April 16, General I. Rikhoff informed Commander-in-Chief P. Tsitsianov that all of Samurzakano's nobles, under the active persuasion of Manuchar Sharvashidze, had recognized themselves as subjects of Dadiani (***ACAC,* 1868:** 514 – №1001). Here, it seems that the general wanted to distinguish himself before the leadership and even lied about the situation. Not all of Samurzakano's "nobles" agreed with this position, as the issue of Manuchar's brothers was still unresolved. Levan did not recognize the ruler of Samegrelo as his suzerain and continually ravaged the Odishians living along Samurzakano's borders (***ACAC,* 1868:** 531 – №1037). Bezhan, on the other hand, had taken refuge in the mountains (***ACAC,* 1868:** 514, 531 – №1001, 1037). It should also be noted that Manuchar's "agitation" alone would not have been enough to shift the orientation of the Samurzakano people towards pro-Russian alignment. The fact was that at the time, General I. Rikhoff's military detachment

was stationed there, with the mission of rescuing Levan, the heir to the late Grigol Dadiani, from Kelesh-bey's captivity.

After a three-hour assault, the Russians captured the Anaklia fortress and came closer to the principality of Abkhazia. At that time, the Anaklia fortress was one of the main bases for slave trade (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 198). "Gripped with fear," Kelesh-Bey was forced to release Levan (**Dadiani, 1962:** 194). As S. Bronevskiy wrote, the capture of Anaklia had not been planned, as it was Ottoman territory, and this would worsen relations with Türkiye. However, several shots, possibly from the Abkhaz side, might have provoked a retaliatory reaction from the Russians (**Bronevskiy, 1823:** 349). It is quite possible that this clash was actually provoked by the Russians, as the general wanted to distinguish himself in front the commander-in-chief, and as we saw earlier, he did not hesitate to tell blatant lies for this purpose. Therefore, at that moment, the external political consequences of this adventure for Russia would have been of lesser importance. Soon, on October 1, 1805, the Russians returned Anaklia to Kelesh-bey and compensated for the damage caused (**Bronevskiy, 1823:** 349; ***ACAC,* 1868:** 539 – №1054; **Dubrovin, 1866:** 349).

The fact that damage was compensated indirectly supports our view that the capture of Anaklia was the result of Rikhoff's provocation. Otherwise, it is unclear why St. Petersburg would have paid financial compensation for an attack carried out by the Abkhaz (in this case, the enemy). If the shots indeed came from the defenders of Anaklia, as S. Bronevskiy wrote, the Russians would have found themselves in a defensive position, and therefore, morally and politically, they would have been exempt from paying compensation. P. Tsitsianov immediately issued an order regarding the return of Anaklia and the compensation for the damage, fearing that the Ottomans would not leave this incident without a proper response (**Dubrovin, 1866:** 385). Thus, with the "Anaklia precedent," the Samurzakano nobles clearly saw the danger that would befall them in case of disobedience (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 199).

Levan Sharvashidze, evidently fearful, seemingly preferred "does not go against the flow" and decided to part ways with Kelesh-bey. According to Manuchar, he, along with his supportive nobles, would join the Russia's supporters in the shortest time possible (***ACAC,* 1868:** 520, 538 – №1015, 1050). As for Bezhan, who seemed to be a person of strong character, he continued resistance. Manuchar did not trust him and warned P. Litvinov that Bezhan would not cease fighting against Dadiani and would encourage his brother to wage war against him (***ACAC,* 1868:** 520 – №1015).

Naturally, the Russians needed him in Samurzakano to consolidate their position, which would allow them to subdue the powerful and influential brothers. If they defeated them, they would also seize their estates. Later, Manuchar succeeded in taking control of Levan's and Bezhan's inherited lands (**Tsintsadze, 1989:** 97, 100).

As P. Litvinov reported, Manuchar decided to attack Bezhan. However, P. Tsitsianov ordered Manuchar to stop this hasty decision in order to avoid harming

Russia's interests by starting a new fratricidal war (***ACAC,* 1868:**538 – №1051). Moreover, P. Litvinov himself reported that Bezhan would soon join his brothers (***ACAC,* 1868:** 538 – №1051). However, this did not happen. During those times, Bezhan could not be convinced, and in the end, Levan (Manuchar's brother), along with his supporters, swore allegiance to Russia and Dadiani at the end of May.

On July 9, 1805, in Bandza, the new ruler of Samegrelo, Levan V, son of Grigol Dadiani (1805–1840), who had been held captive by Kelesh-bey, swore allegiance to the Russian emperor. At that time, he was only 12 years old, so until he turned 20, his mother, Nino Bagration-Dadiani, held the office as the ruler of Samegrelo (**Dadiani, 1962:** 195-196). The ceremony was attended by the nobility of Odishi and also by Levan Sharvashidze and his nephew Manuchar, who also took the oath on the same day, pledging allegiance to Emperor Alexander I (***ACAC,* 1868:** 526, 527 – №1031). It is clear that the elder Levan is implied here, as his name precedes Manuchar's in the signature, keeping with the seniority order.

Additionally, P. Litvinov, in his report to P. Tsitsianov, mentioned that the ceremony was attended by the owners of Samurzakano, Levan and Manuchar Sharvashidze (***ACAC,* 1868:** 526, 527 – №1031). Naturally, Levan, Manuchar's brother, was not the ruler of Samurzakano. However, another hypothesis about these two is offered by A. Tughushi, who correctly identifies Levan as the former ruler of Samurzakano, but makes a mistake by referring to Manuchar as his cousin, rather than his nephew (**Tughushi, 1996:** 5). We disagree with A. Tughushi's assertion that Levan of Samurzakano died shortly after 1805 (**Tughushi, 1996:** 5). As our research has shown, he was still alive during the events of 1812 (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 236-245; **Kvashilava, Kartvelishvili, 2020:** 34).

Saint-Petersburg decided to reach an agreement with both branches of Khutunia Sharvashidze and bring them under Russia's sovereignty, which, in a way, preserved the "territorial and political integrity" of Samurzakano and removed the basis for dispute with Kelesh-bey over the ownership of this region. In this act, the chief of the military-historical division of the Russian Caucasus Military District, Major-General- V. Poto, reasonably saw the conclusion of the process of Samegrelo's annexation to Russia (***Confirmation of Russian Dominion..*, 1904:** 125-126). As it appears, politically, the Russians considered Samurzakano as part of Odishi. Professor V. Janjgava correctly assessed these processes by stating that Russia regarded Samurzakano as a part of Samegrelo, and therefore the entire principality was transitioning to Russian sovereignty, undivided (**Janjgava, 2004**: 58).

In accordance of M. Dumbadze's evaluation with the encouragement of Russians, Samurzakano "joined" Odishi (**Dumbadze, 1957:** 215). T. Kadaria believes that Russia helped Samegrelo's principality, its only stronghold in western Georgia, return Samurzakano (Kadaria, 2003: 105). However, as we have seen, in reality, it was more about consolidating this region under Russian control.

The entry of Samurzakano into Russia's "protectorate" irritated Kelesh-bey. He requested defence from the Sultan's court. However, the Ottoman authorities did not send an army (Dumbadze, 1957: 215). Yet, Russia, which felt the cer-

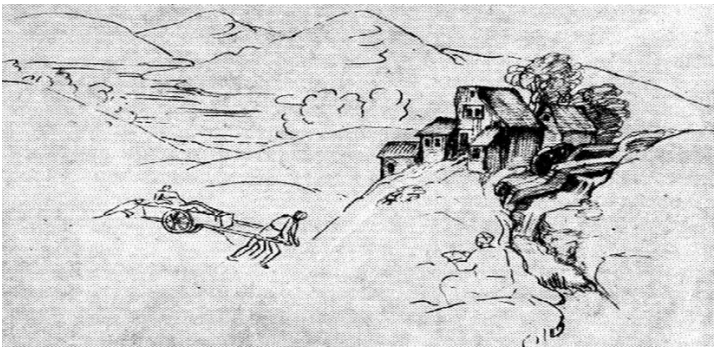
tain weakness of the ruler of Abkhazia, ignored Kelesh-Bey's claims and considered them groundless, what was also reflected in a letter from P. Litvinov to A. I. Italinski, who was the Russian Ambassador in the Ottoman Empire at that time (***ACAC,* 1868:** 525 – №1028). It must be noted that the ruler of Samegrelo, Nino, mistrusted Levan Sharvashidze (the senior), and P. Tsitsianov intervened their relationship, as he did not want a new source of tension to arise, which would further complicate the process of joining other Abkhaz nobles the Russian side. He asked Nino Dadiani to show goodwill toward Levan Sharvashidze (***ACAC,* 1868:** 522 – №1020). However, Levan also took steps to approach the authorities of Odishi. Specifically, he supported Samegrelo's claims to Lechkhumi, which was a subject of dispute between Odishi and Imereti (***ACAC,* 1868:** 512, 537 – №998, 1047; **Tsintsadze, 1989:** 89-95).

To ensure the loyalty of the Dadiani house, Levan V rewarded Manuchar Sharvashidze. Specifically, he granted him a village in the former Abkhazian cathedral lands, Khibula, with 14 households (***ACAC,* 1868:**529 – №1033). The work that Levan Sharvashidze had started 35 years ago was completed by his nephew. With the acceptance of the northern empire's suzerainty, Kelesh-Bey's attempts to seize Samurzakano came to an end. Furthermore, the *"Abkhazian nobles"* officially confirmed that Samurzakano was the property of the Dadianis and that the Sharvashidzes had always obeyed them.

Inscription of Sagdukht Deopalt Deopali
(Village Ghumurishi, 1st Half of the 11th Century)

Iscription of Archbishop Grigol
(Village Mokvi, 12th Century)

Village Ilori by Don Cristoforo de Castelli



§2. From the Possession of Samurzakano to the Mouravi[1] of Samurzakano (1805-1812)

The entry under the "protection" of Russia facilitated the consolidation of Manuchar Sharvashidze's position, who, as mentioned above, had strong competitors in the form of his own brothers – Levan and Bezhan. It has already been mentioned that the remark of Niko Dadiani about the control of Kelesh-bey over Samurzakano was reflected in the latter's control. However, Levan, who was intimidated by Russian weapons, soon abandoned the position of the head of Abkhazia. Yet, he did not show any support for Russian governance. On the contrary, along with his father, he was involved in anti-Russian activities, for which both of them had their estates confiscated. These lands, including the village of Didi Koki, were given by Levan Dadiani to his son-in-law, Manuchar, in 1810 for loyal service (**Tsintsadze, 1989:** 99). Manuchar also controlled the inheritance of his second brother, Bezhan, because the latter remained oriented towards anti-Russian views (***ACAC*, 1873:** 506 – №597).

Manuchar's political orientation, as we have seen, was clear from the beginning, and later, he remained an active implementer of Russia's and the Dadianis family's interests in Samurzakano. Of course, Manuchar's firm "political orientation" was directly related to the strength of his position. At the same time, like a typical feudal lord, he had his eyes set on his brothers' inherited estates.

With the entry of Samurzakano under Russia's "protection," Russia's frontiers moved closer to Abkhazia. Kelesh-bey was well aware that during these years, the situation in the South Caucasus was continuously shifting in favour of Russia, while the Ottoman Empire no longer had the strength to protect its interests in the region. He also observed the active efforts of Solomon II to maintain the independence and power of the Kingdom of Imereti. However, this goal of the Imeretian Bagrationi was becoming increasingly hopeless.

In this situation, the head of Abkhazia keenly felt[2] that Russia would inevitably attempt to seize his country in order to control the northern and eastern coasts of the Black Sea and the Caucasus mountains, which would eventually lead to the removal of Ottoman political influence from the region (**Dzidzariya, 2017:** 37). This favourable geostrategic position of Abkhazia was pointed out to Russia as early as 1789 by the leaders of the Kingdom of Imereti (**Matcharadze, 1968:** 281-282). Moreover, Abkhazia was attractive to Russia for its natural resources, particularly the excellent timber used for shipbuilding, which the Turks were making good use of (**Dzidzariya, 2017:** 39).

[1] *Mouravi* was an administrative and military officer in early modern Georgia, translated into English as seneschal, bailiff, or constable. A Mouravi was an appointed royal official who had a jurisdiction over particular town or district.

[2] G. Dzidzariya for some reason held, that at the beginning of the 19th century, the border between the principalities of Abkhazia and Samegrelo ran along the Enguri river, and that Samurzakano, which was indeed governed by the Sharvashidze family, but a lateral branch, was part of the principality of Abkhazia, one of its provinces (**Dzidzariya, 2017:** 38, note 1), what completely contradicts historical truth.

The resolution of this issue was only a matter of time. Therefore, Kelesh-bey, the *"wise politician"* (**Berdzenishvili, 1965:** 400), took precautions to establish relations with Russia (**Berdzenishvili, 1965:** 400, 402; **Dzidzariya, 2017:** 38). Moreover, he was already quite elderly, and the fate of his heirs to the throne was also on his mind. However, this issue was very complicated. Kelesh-bey considered his second son, Safar-bey, to be his heir, whom he had from a peasant woman, nee Leiba, from the village of Mugudzirkhva (***Establishment of the Russian Domination..*, 1904:** 540).

Initially, he was married to a daughter of an influential Abkhaz family, the Dzapsh-ipa family (***Establishment of the Russian Domination..*, 1904:** 540; **Esadze, 1907:** 102). However, this marriage was a pragmatic political act, initiated by Kelesh-bey's uncle, Zurab, the then head of Abkhazia. As we have already mentioned, after the three main figures of the Sharvashidze family were taken to the Ottoman Empire in the 18th century, the Dzapsh-ipa family gained significant influence and, in fact, became the most powerful in Abkhazia. After returning from the Ottoman Empire, Zurab arranged the above-mentioned marriage to improve relations with this family. It was from this marriage that Kelesh-bey's eldest son, Aslan-bey, was born. However, neither the marriage was based on love, nor did Kelesh-bey, who planned to subordinate the influential families of Abkhazia and unite the principality under a single ruler, intend to remain under the influence of the Dzapsh-ipa family. He soon divorced his wife and as previously mentioned, married a woman of low social status. This ultimately worsened the relationship between the Dzapsh-ipa family and Kelesh-bey. As V. Potto and S. Esadze note, the hatred to his wife's family extended to the ruler's relationship with his own son (***Establishment of the Russian Domination..*, 1904:** 540; **Esadze, 1907:** 102), what contributed to the increase of Safar-bey's chances of succeeding.

According to Islamic law, a ruler's son, even if born from a woman of a lower social class, was legally considered as legitimate heir. However, certain restrictions applied to him, specifically, he could not enjoy the political rights of the ruler(prince) (***Establishment of the Russian Domination..*, 1904:** 540-541). Furthermore, in Abkhazia, marriages between people of different social classes were prohibited (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2008:** 381).

The Dzapsh-ipa family and Aslan-bey were not willing to give up their positions. They even planned a conspiracy against the ruler, but Kelesh-bey found out about it in time and was able to neutralize it (***Establishment of the Russian Domination..*, 1904:** 541; **Esadze, 1907:** 104). Therefore, the ruler of Abkhazia acted preemptively and married Safar-bey to Tamar, the daughter of Grigol Dadiani, and also baptized him Christian (***Establishment of the Russian Domination..*, 1904:** 540-541; **Esadze, 1907:** 102-103). From then on, Giorgi (formerly Safar-bey) had the support of the principality of Samegrelo and its protector, the Russian Empire. According to K. Matchavariani, Kelesh-bey himself was secretly Christian (**Matchavariani, 1913:** 248). J. Gamakharia believes that the "ruler of Abkhazia" mentioned in the 1822 report by Metropolitan Grigol Tsaisheli, who was baptized by Father Ioane Ioseliani[1] of the Dadiani family upon his return from

[1] His name is associated with the start of the process of restoring Orthodoxy in Abkhazia (**Rogava,**

St. Petersburg (he had been in the imperial capital in 1805-1806), must have been Kelesh-bey (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 368). However, according to other sources, Safar-bey was baptized by Father Simon Asatiani, a priest of the Dadiani court, and it was he who officiated at the wedding of the son of the ruler of Abkhazia and the daughter of Grigol Dadiani (**Beradze, 2018:** 430).

The first report regarding the desire of the ruler of Abkhazia to connect with Russia came to P. Tsitsianov from the house of the Dadiani family in 1803, and it was also reported that Kelesh-bey was independent from the Ottoman Sultan (***ACAC*, 1868:** 536 – №1045). According to S. Bronevskiy, the ruler of Abkhazia felt so secure and independent that he rarely followed the orders of the Sultan (**Bronevskiy, 1823:** 347). P. Tsitsianov became very interested in this proposal because the Abkhazian principality and Kelesh-bey would have been a good acquisition for Russia. He requested that Kelesh-bey express his desire in written way, but the ruler of Abkhazia was still just testing the situation and was not in a hurry to proceed in this direction (**Berdzenishvili, 1965:** 401). However, some negotiations between Kelesh-bey's representatives and Russian authorities in the Caucasus continued during the first half of 1804 (***ACAC*, 1868:** 395 – №783). Soon, relations between the ruler of Abkhazia and the Russian authorities abruptly deteriorated due to Grigol Dadiani's son, Levan, who was held hostage by Kelesh-bey. Moreover, the Russians suspected that the ruler of Abkhazia was in an alliance with Solomon II (***ACAC*, 1868:** 400, 413 – №794, 807). According to O. Bghazba and S. Lakoba, the tension between the ruler of Abkhazia and the Russian authorities was of interest to the ruler of Samegrelo, Nino (**Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 197-198).

In this situation, interesting events unfolded in the principality of Abkhazia. Specifically, in late January 1805, Manuchar Sharvashidze, the owner of Samurzakano, informed P. Litvinov that his relative, Safar-bey, *"along with many other highland nobles, whose lands border the great Kabarda,"* sought to take an oath of loyalty to Russia. Russia was not inclined to expedite the matter at that time. However, P. Litvinov informed him that resolving such matters was within the competence of the Caucasus Commander-in-Chief, P. Tsitsianov. In reality, this was a diplomatic refusal (***Litvinov's Report..*, 1805:** 605). Soon, Kelesh-bey's son, Prince Marshania, was sent to the Russians, declaring that the Marshanias *"wished to submit to the one chosen by Safar-bey and requested that Christianity be restored among them, as it had been before. As a sign of submission, they were ready to expel the rebellious Kabardians who had settled in their mountains from their lands... or try to capture them if the Emperor's order is given"* (***Litvinov's Report..*, 1805:** 605).

Safar-bey did not give up his efforts to directly contact the Russian authorities and on January 24, 1806, addressed P. Tsitsianov directly: *"We are of old kinship with the Shervashidze nobility, the owners of Samurzakano, and we have heard with joy that they have come under the protection of the Russian Emperor. We wish to share their fate, and therefore have decided to become eternal subjects of the Russian Emperor with all our territories... We urgently request permission to take an*

2015: 158-159).

oath of eternal loyalty to the Russian Emperor" (***Safar-Bey Shervashidze's Letter..,*** **1806:** 604-605). Once again, official St. Petersburg was not inclined to take any action in this regard.

Soon, certain changes occurred in the relations between the Ottoman Empire and Abkhazia. Specifically, at the end of March 1806, Kelesh-bey's relations with the Sultan's court deteriorated. The ruler of Abkhazia provided shelter to his relative, the Trabzon-based Beylerbey, Tayyar Mahmud Pasha, who was accused of treason (**Bilge, 2015:** 534; **Balamberg, 2010:** 88; **Khorava, 1996:** 174). The exiled governor had very active contacts with the population of Batumi, Poti, and Sukhumi. Therefore, he decided to escape in this direction (**Serbestoğlu, 2006:** 98-99).

İstanbul demanded the punishment of the traitor from the ruler of Abkhazia (***ACAC,*** **1868:** 872 – №1795). Kelesh-bey "crossed the Rubicon" and, in fact, rebelled against Türkiye, as he refused to fulfill the Sultan's order. An interesting note on these events is preserved by Jacques François Gamba. The French diplomat wrote that Kelesh-bey and the exiled Tayyar Pasha had become *"Konak"*[1] friends and *"since* (Kelesh-bey – ***K.K.***) *was bound by a hospitality obligation to him* (Tayyar Pasha – ***K.K.***), *a duty that is very sacred to the local people, he did not obey the divan's order and did not give him his Konak"* (**Gamba, 1987:** 88).

The ruler of Abkhazia knew that the Sultan's court would not forgive this disobedience, and therefore, he requested Russian protection (**Esadze, 1907:** 103). Father Ioane Ioseliani, who was present in Abkhazia at the time, also advised him to make this decision (***ACAC,*** **1875:** 429 – №570). To give more credibility to this request, in June 1806, the ruler of Abkhazia raised the issue of union with Russia at a public assembly (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2010:**379-380).

The Abkhazian community and its public assembly were, in effect, the highest legislative, executive, and judicial authority in society. It regulated social relations, norms of behavior for individuals and the community, governed by common law. The members of the public assembly were representatives of the elder generation of men, who formed the *"Council of Elders,"* the governing group, based on the principle of democratic elections. The ruler himself attended the Assembly, but the decisive vote was only held by the "Council of Elders." As Sh. Nogma writes, *"... the people could ... decide, according to their will, whether to accept or reject the proposal of the landlords. A verbal pronouncement of the people's decision had the power of law"* (**Nogma, 2018: 36**).

Kelesh-bey received support from the assembly (**Khorava, 1996:** 176). However, peace between Russia and the Ottoman Empire was still, formally, in place, and therefore, establishing a protectorate over the Sultan's vassal was not considered expedient in St. Petersburg (**Esadze, 1907:** 104). Tsar Alexander I only planned to protect Kelesh-bey in case of a conflict with Türkiye (**Dzidzariya, 2014:** 188). This was not such a distant prospect, as at that time, serious diplomatic cooperation between Paris and İstanbul was ongoing, one direction of which was radically anti-Russian.

1 *Konak* (Turkish) – place to spend the night.

This process became even more active after Emperor Napoleon's rout of the Russian and Austrian armies at Austerlitz on December 2, 1805. This was a hopeful event for Türkiye. Therefore, Russia also realized that an armed conflict with the Ottoman Empire was inevitable. Moreover, since 1805, the Russo-Persian War had been ongoing. St. Petersburg's affairs in the Caucasus were complicated, and as a result, *"Kelesh-bey became more valuable"* (**Berdzenishvili, 1965:** 403). Therefore, in order to strengthen Russia's position in western Georgia, it became necessary to settle relations between Samegrelo and Abkhazia.

On May 20, 1806, in Anaklia, through Russian mediation, a reconciliation took place between Kelesh-bey and Nino Dadiani (***ACAC*, 1869:** 192 – №351).

As Z. Papaskiri suggests, in exchange for the reconciliation, the ruler of Samegrelo demanded that the Abkhazian principality renounce its claims to Samurzakano, whah was fulfilled indeed (**Papaskiri, 2004:** 120). I believe the researcher's opinion is entirely justified, as the issue of Samurzakano would inevitably have come up in the negotiations. If we also consider that the ruler of Abkhazia was unable to achieve significant success in this direction in a timely manner, it becomes clear that, for Kelesh-bey, this matter was no longer relevant at this stage, as he was facing threats not only to his life but also to the very existence of his rule.

Russia, by subjugating Abkhazia, thought that it would extend its influence over the Circassian tribes and establish peace on its southern borders. Therefore, Russia considered the separation of Abkhazia from the Ottoman influence as the 'most difficult issue' and was so interested in its annexation that it even allowed the Abkhaz prince, Kelesh-bey Sharvashidze, to trade in captive people, if only he would become loyal to Russia" (**Iobashvili, 1998:** 309-310).

Outraged by Kelesh-bey's audacity, the "Sublime Porte," together with Tayyar Mahmud Pasha, decided to punish him, and on August 12, 1806, an Ottoman fleet of 11 ships arrived on the Abkhazian coast from Trabzon (**Bilge, 2015:** 534). According to an Ottoman document discovered by Turkish researcher Sadık Bilge (*Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi*. Hatt-ı Hümâyûnlar. *№4045/A,E,H,İ,K,L*), Kelesh-bey tried to resolve the situation through negotiations with the Ottomans: he informed İstanbul that Tayyar Pasha had departed for Crimea on a Russian merchant ship (**Bilge, 2015:** 534). However, this argument was not sufficient for Sultan Selim III, and he still decided to punish him (**Bilge, 2015:** 534). But Kelesh-bey did not remain idle and met the enemy fully prepared. As a result, the Ottomans were forced to retreat without engaging in battle (**Serbestoğlu, 2006:** 100). The Sultan took the throne of Abkhazia from Kelesh-bey and gave it to his son, Aslan-bey (**Bilge, 2015:** 534). As S. Bilge notes, Kelesh-bey stripped his eldest son of all inheritance rights (**Bilge, 2015:** 534).

Before this military operation, the Ottomans used their usual method to achieve their goal, attempting to use feudal rivalry. The head of the Ottoman squadron, gave Manuchar Sharvashidze the Sultan's firman, which demanded him to lead an expedition against Kelesh-bey. Similar firmans were sent to other Abkhaz nobles (***ACAC*, 1869:** 192 – №355). Manuchar was not particularly

friendly toward Kelesh-bey, so he was indeed not in favour of waging war against the Abkhaz prince. However, before making a final decision, he informed I. Rikhoff. The Russian general took into account that a fragile peace had just been established between Samegrelo and Abkhazia, and advised Manuchar to refrain from participating in the operation (***ACAC*, 1869:** 192 – №355).

I. Rikhoff made the right decision for sure, because Kelesh-bey, as we have seen, had recognized Samegrelo's ownership of Samurzakano, and Manuchar's military campaign against him would have been perceived by the Abkhaz prince as a violation of the peace agreement by Samegrelo, which would have endangered Russia's interests. This was of greater concern of the Russian general than the relations between Abkhazia and Odishi. Additionally, the removal of Kelesh-bey from power by the Ottomans would have led to the increase of Ottoman political influence in Abkhazia, which was entirely unacceptable for Russia.

The issue of reconciling Manuchar and Kelesh-bey also came to the forefront, which was very important, because the peace between the principalities of Samegrelo and Abkhazia would not be complete unless Manuchar and Kelesh-bey reconciled. This problem was also positively resolved under Russian influence by the beginning of 1807. However, the owner of Samurzakano still did not fully trust the Abkhaz prince and demanded one of his sons as a hostage (***ACAC*, 1869:** 197 – №364, 365). Kelesh-bey complied with Manuchar's request. Therefore, it is not surprising that, in March 1807, the ruler of Samurzakano, with his army, appeared as a supporter of the Abkhaz prince against the Ottomans (***ACAC*, 1869:** 197 – №364).

For the Russians, peace and alliance with Kelesh-bey was a highly sensitive matter, as by the end of 1806, another war had broken out between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, and the Black Sea coast of western Georgia was one of the fronts of the military operations, along with the Balkans.

The reconciliation between these two influential Sharvashidzes was apparently an unexpected event for many, especially for pro-Ottoman forces. Therefore, shortly after this event, in early May 1807, the Russians received alarming information. Specifically, Major-General I. Rikhoff was secretly informed by prince Jaiani of a message he received from his relatives in Abkhazia–specifically, from the Matschutidze family. The message stated that Kelesh-bey and Manuchar Sharvashidze had agreed on a joint attack on the Russian garrison in Kulevi (***ACAC*, 1869:** 197 – №364). These individuals, as it turns out, were reliable informants for the Russian general, so he could not determine whether to believe the message or not.

However, no such agreement actually existed, and therefore, it was never carried out. It is likely that Ottoman agents spread these rumors in an attempt to stir up tension between the Abkhazs and the Russians. Nonetheless, there remained a reason for suspicion regarding Kelesh-bey, as he had done nothing to defend Kulevi from the Ottomans, nor had he assisted the Russians in the capture of the fortress of Poti, where his relative, the grandson of Shervan-bey Sharvashidze, Kuchuk-bey, was the commander (**Berdzenishvili, 1965:** 404). He also controlled the fortress of Batumi (**Surmanidze, 1998:** 4). The Russians suspected that

the ruler of Abkhazia was playing a double game. However, he had not allowed the Ottomans to launch a landing on the Abkhazian coast (**Khorava, 1996:** 176-177).

According to N. Brezenishvili, Kelesh-bey's "dangerous neutrality" was the result of Russia's caution in resolving the issue of Abkhazia (**Berdzenishvili, 1965:** 404-405). As for the suspicion about Manuchar, it was completely groundless, as he was actively supporting the Russians and was the most fervent pro-Russian politician among the Sharvashidzes of Samurzakano.

On June 13 (25), 1807, a temporary truce was signed between Russia and France in Tilsit, which dealt a heavy blow to St. Petersburg's position in the Eastern Mediterranean: Russia was forced to withdraw its fleet from the region (Кудрявцева, 1999: 103). At the same time, the rapprochement between the two empires affected the course of the war with the Ottoman Empire, as on August 12 of the same year, a temporary truce was also signed between St. Petersburg and İstanbul, further worsening the situation for the ruler of Abkhazia (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 212). The Northern Empire was still cautious on this issue: Russia, at this time, refrained from fulfilling Kelesh-bey's request and did not promise military support in case of potential Ottoman aggression against Abkhazia (**Berdzenishvili, 1965:** 405).

The "Sublime Porte" attempted to take advantage of the situation and remove the unstable and questionable Kelesh-bey from power. On May 2, 1808, Kelesh-bey, aged 61, was treacherously killed in the Sokhumi residence. Aslan-bey declared himself the ruler of Abkhazia and recognized the loyalty to the Ottoman Sultan. Incidentally, one Ottoman document directly states that Aslan-bey is *"a very loyal person to the Ottoman state"* (***The History of Adygs..,*** **2009:** 37 – №21). In contrast, Safar-bey's opinion of him is sharply different: he is described as *"apostate and traitor"* (***The History of Adygs..,*** **2009:** 37 – №21).

In historiography, it is generally believed that the organizers of this crime were Aslan-bey and his relatives, the Dzhapsh-ipas (**Dadiani, 1962:** 197; **Berdzenishvili, 1965:** 405; **Beradze, 2018:** 430; **Khorava, 2021(a):** 116-117; **Papaskiri, 2004:** 122; **Bronevskiy, 1823:** 349; ***Establishment of the Russian Domination..*****, 1904:** 541; **Esadze, 1907:** 104; **Dzidzariya, 2014:** 116; **Antsupov, 1989:** 45-46; **Antsupov, 2024:** 59).

N. Diachkov-Tarasov identifies Aslan-bey as a person under the influence of Levan Dadiani (**Diachkov-Tarasov, 1910:** 152). S. Lakoba associates the murder of the ruler of Abkhazia with the Dadiani family, claiming that it was ordered by the temporary ruler of Samegrelo, Nino Dadiani, with support from the Russian military administration. According to the Abkhaz scholar, Samegrelo needed a submissive ruler in Abkhazia, i.e., Safar-bey, and I. Rikhoff regarded Kelesh-bey as an enemy (**Lakoba S., 2004:** 22).[1] This "version" by S. Lakoba has become increasingly acceptable in contemporary Abkhazia, due to the existing political-ideological context (**Agumaa, 2008:** 10). However, M. Gumba, although he might agree with Lakoba's conclusions, ultimately remains cautious and con-

[1] In his book, published in 1990, S. Lakoba says, that Aslan-bey was the assassin of his father, incited by the Ottomans (**Lakoba S., 1990:** 10).

cludes that the death of Kelesh-bey was desired equally by the Ottomans, local opposition, and the princely family of Samegrelo (**Gumba M. V., 2014:** 109-110). Among those involved in the conspiracy against Kelesh-bey was Manuchar Sharvashidze's brother, Bezhan (***ACAC*, 1869:** 199 – №367). The anti-Russian sentiment of Bezhan had already brought him into conflict with Kelesh-bey. Bezhan's subordinates also supported Aslan-bey (***ACAC*, 1869:** 199 – №367). Despite remaining a Christian, Bezhan was still opposed to Russian involvement in Abkhazia. Given that there were some connections between Aslan-bey and Solomon II (**Rekhviashvili, 1989:** 382; **Anchabadze G., 2006:** 133), it seems probable that Bezhan sided with the politicians led by the King of Imereti in western Georgia. Russian army officer Manuchar Sharvashidze, however, actively fought against these forces, and according to the Russian military administration, he succeeded in showing his prominence in this "matter" (***ACAC*, 1870:** 243 – №324).

Safar-bey Sharvashidze, who was considered the main contender for the throne (he was the owner of the Bzipi domain and had actually governed Abkhazia during his father's lifetime), marched against Aslan-bey. However, he did not have enough strength to oust his rival brother, and therefore turned to the Dadianis for help (***Establishment of the Russian Domination..*, 1904:** 542, 544). Nino Dadiani did not refuse to help her son-in-law, especially since it was the best opportunity to resolve the disputed issues with Abkhazia (including the matter of Samurzakano).

In this dispute over the inheritance of Kelesh-bey, the chief administrator Ivan Gudovich (1806-1809), of course, supported Safar-bey. According to V. Potto's remark, the crucial factor in this case was the Christianity of Giorgi Sharvashidze (***Establishment of the Russian Domination..*, 1904:** 543). However, the chief administrator, due to the treaty with Türkiye, considered it unwise to send Russian armed units into the principality of Abkhazia in order to avoid a new conflict with the Ottoman Empire (***ACAC*, 1869:** 200 – №368). But the Russian general found a solution and, in a moment of difficulty, provided some military assistance to Safar-bey. With his permission, on May 8, a military force of Odishians and Samurzakanians, led by Niko Dadiani and Manuchar Sharvashidze, set off toward Sokhumi (***ACAC*, 1869:** 207, 208 – №367, 374). Although Odishi, along with Samurzakano, was part of the Russian Empire, and it might seem that Russian military intervention was occurring in the affairs of Abkhazia, which was a vassal of the Ottoman Empire, by sending the Odishi-Samurzakhan forces, the Russians could deny the Ottomans' claims, as it could be portrayed as a local conflict between the inhabitants of the region.

The Dadiani-Sharvashidze army camped near the Besleti river, but was unable to capture the Sokhumi fortress as it was not adequately prepared (**Dadiani, 1962:** 197). Moreover, Aslan-bey had become significantly stronger, as for his help, Kuchuk-bey Sharvashidze arrived to Sokhumi with three ships and about 300 Circassians (***ACAC*, 1869:** 207, 208 – №374). He was married to a woman from the Jiks' family of the Gechba clan and therefore, had significant support from the Sadzes, Ubikhs, and Adyghs (**Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 201). On

Aslan-bey's side were his younger brother Hasan-bey and Ali-bey Sharvashidze, the ruler of Abzhua, who hated Safar-bey and feared that he would come to power in Abkhazia through the Russians (**Khorava, 2021(a):** 118). However, Niko Dadiani and Manuchar Sharvashidze did not want to return "empty-handed" and began negotiations with Aslan-bey about surrendering the fortress (***ACAC*, 1869:** 207, 208 – №374). However, Aslan-bey, who was quite powerful, had no intention of surrendering the fortress, and the only result of these negotiations was that Safar-bey's widow, Rebia-Khanum Marshania, and her son Batal-bey were released from captivity (**Dadiani, 1962:** 197). Levan and Manuchar ultimately made the decision to evacuate *"all of Abkhazia from the borders of Jiketi to the boundary of Ghalidzga-Dadiani"* (**Dadiani, 1962:** 197).

This campaign did not strengthen Safar-bey's position. The expectation of Russian assistance also was not fulfilled. The Ottoman Empire, however, reacted quickly and sent help to Aslan-bey, providing significant military support: while in 1807, there were 16 cannons in Sokhumi, by the time of Aslan-bey, their number had increased to 70, and several Ottoman military ships were stationed near Sokhumi (**Berdzenishvili, 1965:** 407; **Dzidzariya, 2014:** 120). This reversal of the situation further increased Aslan-bey's support. Even some of the Abkhaz, who had been held hostage by Levan Dadiani and Manuchar Sharvashidze in exchange for Safar-bey's loyalty, switched sides (**Dadiani, 1962:** 197).

Safar-bey went to Zugdidi again for help. Following the advice of the ruler of Samegrelo, he sought Russian protection to strengthen his position. In Odishi, it was believed that Safar-bey's rule was a good opportunity to resolve the long-standing tensions and problems with this principality. Nino, for her part, sent a letter of support for her son-in-law to Chief Administrator I. Gudovich, once again emphasizing Odishi's historical rights not only over Samurzakano, but over all of Abkhazia, thereby attempting to establish Russian protectorate over the region (**Papaskiri, 2004:** 123).

The ruler of Samegrelo pointed out that, historically, Abkhazia *"was an existing and neighbouring region of ours and, first and foremost, part of the principalities under our rule"* (***ACAC*, 1869:** 202 – №370). As an argument for this, besides the historical coexistence of Abkhazia and Odishi, he also mentioned the current religious state of the new prince and his subjects. Later, Levan considered it one of his family's merits to have *"brought the principality of Abkhazia under the imperial throne, starting from Ghalidzga to the borders of the land of the Jiks"* (***ACAC*, 1869:** 202 – №370).

A particularly noteworthy point in this letter is the clear indication of the status of Samurzakano, namely that this territory was not considered part of the "principality of Abkhazia" and that the territory of this principality is began only from the Ghalidzga river.

According to Nino Bagrationi, if the Christianized Giorgi Sharvashidze were to receive Russian protection, it would positively affect the entire Abkhaz population (***ACAC*, 1869:** 202 – №370).

Against the backdrop of the renewed war with the Ottoman Empire (spring

of 1809), St. Petersburg decided to establish a protectorate over Abkhazia. It was clear that delaying the matter any longer was no longer possible, as it would ultimately result in the loss of even the small trust that existed among parts of the local population. This, in turn, put at risk the security of St. Petersburg's southern territories. As noted by N. Brezhenishvili, I. Gudovich felt *"a certain smell of claim"* towards Abkhazia, even though Nino Dadiani's letter was rather cautious. Therefore, in order to bring this country under Russia's protectorate, Gudovich formulated another argument, namely that Christian Abkhazia had historically been considered part of feudal Georgia and, until recently, was a principality dependent on Imereti (**Berdzenishvili, 1965:** 407). According to the researcher's observation, Russia's far-reaching plans were felt here: in relation to Imereti, whose fate had essentially already been decided by Russia, Gudovich was removing the basis for Samegrelo's claims over Abkhazia (**Berdzenishvili, 1965:** 407). In the first half of the 19th century, Samegrelo was an active supporter of Russia, but it seems that the Russians never fully trusted it, and they did not want the principality of Odishi to be strengthened in the future. For St. Petersburg, the existence of political entities in western Georgia was only a temporary and necessary phenomenon. The abolition of the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti already showed king Solomon II the true "nature" of Russia's protection. The northern neighbour was as imperialist as the former southern "protectors" and "patrons" – the Ottoman Empire and Persia. This is precisely why Solomon II struggle was so unyielding.

However, generally speaking, Gudovich's argument was still valid when he considered Abkhazia as an organic part of the Georgian political world.

On August 12, 1808, Giorgi (Safar-bey) Sharvashidze and his supporting Abkhaz nobles signed a "petition" to accept Russia's protection and swore loyalty to the Emperor (***Materials & Notes..,* 1913:** 7-9). N. Brezhenishvili notes that a positive response from St. Petersburg to the Abkhaz prince's request reached Chief Administrator Alexander Tormasov (1809-1811) in mid-1809 (**Berdzenishvili, 1965:** 408). In reality, it was still Gudovich who, on July 17, 1808, gave General I. Rikhoff the order to assist Safar-bey, whose acceptance as a subject of Russia's highest authorities was being planned (***ACAC*, 1869:** 409 – №373).

At that time, Safar-bey did not have real power in the principality and was residing in Samegrelo. At the beginning of 1809, Dadiani's army again set out to assist him toward Sokhumi, but once again, they were unsuccessful (***ACAC*, 1870:** 409 – №549).

During these events, Khutunia's son Levan Sharvashidze, the former ruler of Samurzakano, reappeared. It seems that this active politician, who played a significant role in the political life of western Georgia in the second half of the 18th century, after being removed from the governance of Samurzakano, tried to stay out of the political scene. It is doubtful that his nature would have reconciled with this passive position in the end, and he was probably waiting for a more favourable situation to take action.

Levan, who, as we saw, never had great sympathy for the Dadianis, decided to attack the rulers of Samegrelo. For this military campaign, he filed a complaint

with the Russian military administration against Nino Dadiani, stating that the people's army of Samegrelo, which had passed through Levan Sharvashidze's territory on its way to assist Safar-bey, was demanding food, bread, ghomi (*a sort of Megrelian porridge*) and wine from the local population (***ACAC*, 1870:** 409, 410 – №549). According to Levan Sharvashidze, this resulted in significant economic damage to his already impoverished subjects, and he demanded compensation for the loss. The complaint of the former ruler of Samurzakano did not go unnoticed, and on February 27, 1809, I. Gudovich assigned the investigation of the case to the governor of Imereti, Major General Dimitri Orbeliani. The governor of Imereti did not need much time to clarify the matter, and on May 12 of the same year, Dimitri Orbeliani reported the results of the investigation to the new chief administrator, Alexander Tormasov. As he found out, the issue concerned Samegrelo's irregular army, which, as usual, did not carry provisions during their military campaigns, and the obligation to supply them with food was on the local population where the army camped, whether inside Samegrelo's principality or outside its borders. Levan Sharvashidze was well aware of this, and therefore, as noted by D. Orbeliani, the complaint was groundless, and it could not be satisfied (***ACAC*, 1870:** 410 – №549).

Meanwhile, the Ottoman Empire continued to provide material and military support to Aslan-bey. At the end of June 1809, a Turkish ship arrived at the port of Sokhumi, bringing precious gifts (furs) and money for the prince of Abkhazia and his entourage (***ACAC*, 1870:** 202, 390 – №519, 559). Additionally, Manuchar Sharvashidze informed D. Orbeliani that the commander of Poti, Kuchuk-bey, had called the tribes living along the Black Sea coast, whose ruler was Tushchi-Ogli-Beg, to launch campaign to help Aslan-bey (***ACAC*, 1870:** 202, 390 – №519, 559).

Kuchuk-bey himself was in a difficult situation at the time. Since the early May 1809, the Russians had been fighting for the capture of Poti (**Dadiani, 1962:** 243, note 485; **Berdzenishvili, 1965:** 408). To maintain the political and military successes achieved by them and to secure Georgia's final incorporation into the Russian Empire, it necessary to increase the number of troops in western Georgia, but this was not easy (**Rekhviashvili, 1989:** 345). Moving armed forces through the Darial Gorge and from eastern Georgia to the west was not safe, as the 1804 revolt in Mtiuleti showed, and it was also a prolonged process with significant costs. Therefore, Russia paid special attention to the fortress of Poti, which at that time was still under Ottoman control.

As early as 1803, P. Tsitsianov informed St. Petersburg that Samegrelo was nothing without Poti, and according to him, capturing this fortress was far more important and necessary for Russia than the entire principality, which was still dependent on Poti (**Dubrovin, 1866:** 278). In 1804, Russia's ambassador in İstanbul, A. I. Italinski, tried to convince the Sultan's government that the various docks and fortifications in the area of Kuchuk-Kainarji bay belonged to those who had long held them, and that Poti had always been part of Samegrelo. Therefore, Poti should be handed over to Odishi (**Fadeev, 1960:** 120).

Ultimately, Russia only managed to secure the right to use the port of Poti to supply provisions for its army (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 221). However, this "idyll" did not last long, as the Russians not only started bringing provisions from here but also began to deploy troops, and İstanbul soon closed the gates of Poti to them.

D. Orbeliani attempted to capture Poti without fight and sent Kuchuk-bey to Sharvashidze to send Soslan and Manuchar Sharvashidze, Vakhtang Gurieli, and Lieutenant-Colonel Eristavi, but this attempt also ended in failure (**Berdzenishvili, 1965:** 408). Kuchuk-bey was not going to surrender easily, as the fortress was well-fortified, and the Turks had 600 soldiers stationed there (**Dadiani, 1962:** 199). Therefore, the battle for Poti turned out to be a prolonged one.

In November 1809, the Pasha of Akhaltsikhe came with 9,000 soldiers to assist Kuchuk-bey. The Pasha hoped for the support of the prince of Guria (***ACAC*, 1870:** 763 – №1158), but the prince of Guria disappointed those hopes and routed enemy at Maltakva. This was a significant blow to the Ottoman garrison in Poti. On November 15, 1809, Kuchuk-bey admitted defeat. However, Russia's control of this important settlement on the Black Sea coast was short-lived, as according to the Treaty of Bucharest in 1812, Poti was returned to the Ottoman Empire.

Manuchar Sharvashidze, the ruler of Samurzakano, actively participated in the battles for Poti with his army. On August 14, 1809, D. Orbeliani and Levan Dadiani ordered Niko Dadiani to occupy the outskirts of Poti, a mission he successfully completed along with Manuchar Sharvashidze (**Dadiani, 1962:** 199). In this battle, their army lost 8 soldiers and 12 were wounded (***ACAC*, 1870:** 331 – №520). Overall, the Dadiani army suffered significant losses in the battles for Poti (***GNCM*, Ad-1508**).

The bravery and devotion shown by Niko Dadiani and Manuchar Sharvashidze earned them recognition for leadership, and D. Orbelian addressed Governor-General A. Tormasov to reward them (***ACAC*, 1870:** 392 – №523). Although Manuchar was in the service of the Russians and worked for the Empire, like many other politicians, he viewed Russia as the path to restore a united Georgia. After the liberation of Poti, Manuchar turned his attention to other parts of the country, namely Batumi and Adjara.

The defeated Kuchuk-bey, along with his soldiers, was allowed to leave peacefully and arrived to Batumi (**Dadiani, 1962:** 200). It seems that Manuchar assumed that the once brutally defeated Kuchuk-bey would now be more amenable, so he initiated negotiations to hand over the Batumi fortress to the Russians. This initiative of the ruler of Samurzakhan aroused Russia's interest, but A. Tormasov did not place great hopes on this plan. The governor-general was planning a campaign against Akhaltsikhe and believed that the Russian capture of Akhaltsikhe would naturally lead to the fall of the Batumi fortress as well (***ACAC*, 1870:** 281 – №281).

Nevertheless, Russia's higher authorities in the South Caucasus agreed to implement this plan with the argument that getting the Batumi fortress, without a battle, before the Akhaltsikhe campaign would not be detrimental to Russia's cause. On March 16 and June 8, 1810, through secret correspondence, Major-General Tevdore Simonovich, who replaced D. Orbeliani, was advised not to

spare anything for Kuchuk-bey's surrender and, at the same time, promised that Manuchar Sharvashidze would certainly be rewarded if the plan would successfully completed (***ACAC*, 1870:** 281, 938 – №359, 1438).

On November 10, 1810, A. Tormasov launched a campaign against Akhaltsikhe, where King Solomon II, who had escaped from Russian captivity in September, was staying (**Dadiani, 1962:** 201-202). Levan Dadiani also participated in this operation, gathering a combined troops of Odishi, Abkhazians, and Lechkhumians (**Dadiani, 1962:** 202). Naturally, the troops of Abkhazians imply the forces from Samurzakhan, likely led by Manuchar Sharvashidze. However, this attempt to capture Akhaltsikhe was unsuccessful because *"at that time the army was struck by a sickness (meaning bad weather)"* (**Dadiani, 1962:** 202).

The unsuccessful attempt to capture Akhaltsikhe, along with the strengthening of the fortress at Tsikhisdziri by Turks, which posed a threat to the principality of Guria, increased the value of Manuchar Sharvashidze's plan (***ACAC*, 1870:** 339 – №452).

In this situation, Kuchuk-bey's stubbornness determined his fate. R. Surmanidze suggests that the Russians killed Kuchuk-bey, dating this event to 1809 (**Surmanidze, 1998:** 4). However, this opinion is not supported by sources. On the contrary, it appears that Kuchuk-bey was still alive in the first half of 1810 (***ACAC*, 1870:** 281, 938 – №359, 1438). The Ottomans appointed instead of him Omar-agha Zhordania, Laz by origin (**Surmanidze, 1998:** 4). He was the brother-in-law of Kuchuk-bey (***ACAC*, 1873:** 100 – №127). It seems that part of the population of Batumi did not accept Omar-agha's candidacy, because, as Manuchar Sharvashidze reported to T. Simonovich in December 1810, the residents of Batumi were loyal to the Sharvashidze family, to which Kuchuk-bey also belonged (***ACAC*, 1870:** 339 – №452).

The ruler of Samurzakano quickly found a suitable candidate to "satisfy" the desires of the people of Batumi. This was Soslan-bey, the younger brother of Safar-bey, who was a close relative of Kuchuk-bey. It is likely that he was the son of Kelesh-bey, whom Manuchar had held as a hostage (**Kvashilava, 2015:** 116). As Manuchar claimed, he had certain information that the local population of Batumi would accept Safar-bey's brother. According to Manuchar's plan, it was necessary to send Soslan to Batumi and marry the widow of Kuchuk-bey (***ACAC*, 1870:** 429 – №582).

It seems that Batumi had once belonged to Shervan-bey Sharvashidze and his heirs. That is why the Ottomans appointed a close relative of Kuchuk-bey as the commander of the fortress. If the majority of the population supported him, it would then be easy to capture Batumi (***ACAC*, 1870:** 339 – №452).

Russian authorities had certain doubts about the Muslim Soslan-bey. The Russians needed to be convinced that Safar-bey's younger brother would not support Aslan-bey's cause in Batumi, meaning that he would not side with the Ottomans. Soslan-bey's "testing" began, and the first results were reported by T. Simonovich to A. Tormasov on May 6, 1811. In case the plan to capture Batumi was successful, Soslan-bey demanded Russian protection under the same conditions

that had been granted to his brother Giorgi (Safar-bey), which included internal autonomy and hereditary rights of the prince (***ACAC*, 1870:** 429 – №582).

T. Simonovich was still not fully convinced of Soslan-bey's reliability, and in his report, he often used the phrase "as if" (***ACAC*, 1870:** 429 – №582). Therefore, Russian authorities did not permit Soslan-bey to travel to Batumi. Moreover, they were apparently considering the position of the population of Batumi. The Russians requested written confirmation that the people of Batumi would accept Soslan-bey. Manuchar received such confirmation in October 1811. He wrote to T. Simonovich on October 24 (the letter was written in Georgian – ***K.K.***) that he had the assurance of two influential Batumi residents – Yusuf-aghā (who was the son-in-law of both Kuchuk-bey and Soslan-bey) and Omar-agha Zhordania – that they were ready to accept Soslan-bey as the new bey of Batumi (***ACAC*, 1873:** 100 – №127). Manuchar requested the Russians' approval to take advantage of this favourable situation and planned to send Soslan-bey to Batumi by land (***ACAC*, 1873:** 100 – №127).

Thanks to the Russian bureaucratic system, T. Simonovich only informed A. Tormasov about this on November 3 (***ACAC*, 1873:** 100 – №127). The new governor-general, Marquis Philippe Paulucci (1811-1812), gave a positive response two weeks later (on November 15). The Russians had been negotiating a peace treaty with the Ottomans since October 1811, so they were in hurry to capture Batumi. If the plan succeeded, Marquis Paulucci was prepared to fulfill Soslan-bey's request, meaning he would receive the same protection as Safar-bey (***ACAC*, 1873:** 183 – №253).

It seems that the Russians considered Soslan-bey and his supporters' travel by land unjustified, as Ottoman troops were stationed in Batumi and its surroundings, including Tsikhisdziri, and fully controlled the area. In the second half of January 1812, Soslan-bey, traveling by sea from Sokhumi with 60 followers, arrived to Batumi (***ACAC*, 1873:** 102 – №131).

T. Simonovich ordered Manuchar Dadiani to send a trusted person to Batumi to monitor the situation and if possible, capture Batumi (***ACAC*, 1873:** 102 – №131). The continuation of these events is not seen in the sources.

This plan was thwarted by the peace treaty signed on May 16 (28), 1812, in Bucharest, which ended the Russo-Turkish War of 1806-1812 (**Kvashilava, 2015:** 117). R. Surmanidze dated Soslan-bey's appointment as bey of Batumi to 1811-1812 (**Surmanidze, 1998:** 4). However, this conclusion is not supported by the sources, as according to the document cited above, Safar-bey's brother traveled to Batumi only in January 1812.

Thus, Manuchar Sharvashidze's plan did not succeed, and at that time, Batumi could not be returned to the embrace of its motherland, as the Russian Empire still lacked sufficient strength to seize this important region. The return of Georgian lands conquered by the Ottoman Empire required several more wars and decades. Ultimately, Batumi, along with Adjara, were united to Georgia in 1878. Despite this sort of failure, it can be said that Manuchar's aforementioned idea was the first effective step toward freeing Batumi from the Ottomans in the early 19th

century (**Kvashilava, 2015:** 118).

After the capture of the forts of Poti and Anapa, Russia turned its attention to Abkhazia, the issue of which being "under Russian protection" was virtually already decided (**Kvashilava, 2020(b):** 498-499). On February 17, 1810, Alexander I signed a document accepting the protection of the ruler of Abkhazia, Giorgi (Safar-Bey) Sharvashidze. Aslan-Bey remained the ruler of Abkhazia, and Safar-Bey did not dare to enter that area. He requested military assistance from the Russians, which was granted, but Russian regular troops were engaged in fighting the insurgent Imeretians under the command of Solomon II at the time. Therefore, the ruler of Samegrelo was asked to send at least 1,000 soldiers, to be led by Manuchar Shavashidze, described by A. Tormasov as *"a loyal and devoted person of Russia"* (***ACAC*, 1870:** 396 – №532). With this step, the governor aimed to gain the people's trust for Safar-Bey. The Russian official thought that if the new ruler entered Sokhumi solely with Russian support, he would not be accepted as one of their own. Thus, Manuchar, the Georgian nobleman, would somewhat neutralize this mistrust.

On July 8, 1810, a Russian squadron, led by Captain Dodtt, approached the Sokhumi fortress. After fierce fighting, the city was significantly damaged (**Butkov, 1869:** 393-394; ***Establishment of the Russian Domination..*, 1904:** 543). The battle lasted nearly two days. On July 10, with the accompaniment of Russian troops, Safar-Bey entered Sukhumi. The defeated Aslan-Bey, who was under Ottoman protection (**Kvashilava, 2020(b):** 499-500), fled into the mountains (**Kortua, 1964:** 264-265). A Russian garrison was stationed in the city, which was commanded by a Russian officer (***Letter From Tamar Dadiani-Shervashidze..*, 1821:** 608). Provoked by Aslan-Bey and Ottoman agents, some Abkhazs fled to Türkiye in 1810.

D. Orbeliani gave Giorgi Sharvashidze the protection document of the Russian Emperor (***Materials & Notes..*, 1913:** 5-7), investiture symbols, and the Order of St. Anna, First Degree (**Paitchadze, 1999:** 220). The oath document signed by Safar-bey was written in the Georgian language. According to N. Berdzenishvili's rightful observation, this was because *"Abkhazia was a country of Georgian feudal culture, and its cultural communication language was also Georgian. The Muslim Kelaysh-beg also used Georgian when communicating with his own nephews, as well as when corresponding with the rulers of Samegrelo or the king of Imereti"* (**Berdzenishvili, 1965:** 409). Despite its somewhat "barbaric" nature, Abkhazia remained part of the Georgian world (**Papaskiri, 2004:** 130). J. Gamakharia rightly notes that "Abkhazia entered Russian 'protection' as a historical province of Georgia... After all, no criticism can withstand the loud statements of today's Russian leaders, who justify their illegal decision to recognize the 'independence' of Abkhazia with false history – that Abkhazia supposedly joined Russia independently of Georgia. In reality, Abkhazia entered Russian 'protection' as a province of Georgia" (**Gamakharia, 2007:** 60).

According to V. Potto's observation, Safar-Bey's situation was very difficult as he was supported by the Russians but was rejected by his own people, as a significant part of the Abkhaz principality did not obey him (***Establishment of***

the Russian Domination..*, 1904:** 544). However, Safar-Bey also had supporters among his subjects. As shown in Dodtt's report, a large portion of the inhabitants of the outskirts of Sokhumi were joining the Russians and were requesting to become subjects of Russia (**Dzidzariya, 2017:** 43; **Paitchadze, 1999:** 220). Nevertheless, parts of Aslan-Bey's supporters strongly harassed the new ruler's supporters, and to calm them, in December 1810, Giorgi Sharavashidze requested the sending of a military detachment by T. Simonovich (ACAC*, 1870:** 339 – №452).

Manuchar raided Abkhazia and again took hostages from the local nobility as a guarantee of Safar-bey's loyalty, which he brought to Nabakevi. However, he failed to subdue Tsebelda and its owners, the Marshanias (***ACAC*, 1870:** 425 – №576). For this operation, A. Tormasov promised to reward Manuchar Sharvashidze (***ACAC*, 1870:** 426 – №577). However, this promise remained null and void for a long time. In May 1811, the chief administrator, Nino Dadiani, asked A. Tormasov to resolve the matter of awarding her son-in-law, to which Tormasov gave a positive response, and Manuchar Sharvashidze was granted the military rank of colonel (***ACAC*, 1870:** 405 – №544; ***ACAC*, 1873:** 100 – №127).

With the above-mentioned letter, the spiritual leader of the Dadiani family of Abkhazia, Father Ioane Ioselian, was also summoned (***ACAC*, 1870:** 339 – №452). A demand for conversion to Christianity had already arisen among the population, as indicated by Nino Bagrationi-Dadiani, who called for the inclusion of Safar-Bey under Russia's protection. A year earlier, when the issue of Russian protectorate over Abkhazia was being discussed, the governor, Al. Tormasov, became interested in the state of Christianity in the region. On December 23, 1809, he received information from father Ioane that there were six churches in Abkhazia: in Bitchvinta, Zuphu (i.e., Likhni), Mokhvi, Ilori, and Bedia. As the spiritual mentor of the Dadianis noted, Bitchvinta represented the patriarchal seat, Dranda the episcopal seat, and the churches of Zuphu and Ilori were court churches. Among them, only the Church of St. George in Ilori had a clergy member, and the Holy Liturgy was celebrated there, while the others were deserted (***ACAC*, 1870:** 416 – №557; ***ACAC*, 1869:** 202 – №370).

By the way, after the dissolution of these episcopal seats, the former dioceses of Mokvi and Bedia were united under the jurisdiction of the Tsaishi Bishop during the tenure of Metropolitan Grigol (Chikovani) (**Tughushi, 2001(b):** 10, 31, 97).

During this period, active life was developing in Samurzakano as well. Safar-Bey, who could not control Abkhazia due to Aslan-Bey and was dependent on the Dadianis for assistance, practically renounced his claims over Samurzakano, as evidenced by the title of the ruler of Abkhazia mentioned in his letter to the governor of Odishi: *"I am the lord and* ***ruler of the most internal parts of Abkhazia*** *and the heir of Zuphu and Tsebelda"* (***ACAC*, 1869:** 204 – №370).

After the deposition of Giorgi Sharvashidze in Abkhazia, the Dadianis became more involved in Samurzakano affairs. As A. Diachkov-Tarasov noted: *"The Megrelian Dadiani... were trying to gain control over their fellow countrymen in Samurzakano"* (**Diachkov-Tarasov, 1910:** 159). I think this is an interesting piece

of information for those who doubts the ethnic affiliation of Samurzakano.

At this point, the Dadianis could freely manage the affairs of the region. From 1805, this area should have caused fewer problems for Odishi, but in reality, this was not the case. Manuchar's younger brother, Bezhan, remained anti-Russian and created certain problems: behind him stood Kelesh-Bey, and later – Aslan-Bey. As a result, the Dadianis had difficulty controlling Bezhan and his subjects. Levan, the son of Khutunia also enjoyed a certain "autonomy," as he had obtained Russian protection in 1805.

In 1809, Nino Dadiani imprisoned Bezhan and appointed Manuchar Sharvashidze as the ruler of the region with the status of a *"mouravi"* (**Dadiani, 1962:** 199). Nino Dadiani's appointment of Manuchar as ruler of Samurzakano is dated to the first half of 1809: before the establishment of the governance of Samurzakano, he wrote about the death of Major-General I. Rikhoff in Kulevi on January 14, 1809, and later described the battles for Poti, which resumed in May of the same year (**Dadiani, 1962:** 199). This date is shared by S. Makalatia (**Makalatia, 2006:** 228) and T. Beradze (**Beradze, 2018:** 433).

In historiography, it has been suggested that after Russia's imposition of control over the principality of Abkhazia, the positions of Samegrelo in Samurzakano strengthened (**Anchabadze G., 2018:** 31). At first glance, this may seem true. However, it should be noted that from the beginning of the 18th century until the verge of the 18th-19th centuries, only for about a decade did the power of Kelesh-Bey in Abkhazia extend to the mid-stream of the Ghalidzga-Enguri region. Therefore, official jurisdiction of Zugdidi always extended over Samurzakano. However, I. Antelava somehow believed that during the 18th century, the feudal lords of Samurzakano were subject to the ruler of Abkhazia, but at the same time enjoyed considerable independence (**Antelava, 1960:** 112). It should be noted that the researcher's conclusion is unsupported.

At the request of D. Orbeli, Nino Dadiani soon released Bezhan (**Dadiani, 1962:** 199). She avoided potential unrest among the people, while the Russians at the time were too busy to pacify Samurzakano (**Berdzenishvili, 1965:** 409).

The New Stage of Manuchar's Rule Began in 1809, when, with the support of the Dadiani family, he managed to consolidate power. However, his status was downgraded, and he became the *"Mouravi"* (governor) of Samurzakano. The Mouravi was an official of the principality, who was endowed with administrative powers and limited judicial authority (**Tughushi, 1999:** 250; **Gabisonia, 2005:** 119). Generally, Odishi consisted of several Mouraviates (from 3 to 12 – **Kvaratskhelia B. (K.), 2009:** 114), and the mouravi was the representative of state authority in his district (**Murier, 2018:** 237).

From 1805, the Dadiani princely court became more daring in its actions in Samurzakano, as emphasized by N. Dadiani (**Dadiani, 1962:** 203). Assigning Manuchar to an administrative post in Samegrelo indicated the direct annexation of Samurzakano to Odishi, as this region lost its special status within the principality and became a regular province of Samegrelo. According to M. Dumbadze,

alongside the mouravi position, Manuchar should have also been a commander, thus he would have been a *"commander-mouravi,"* though the author notes that no historical documents confirm this (**Dumbadze, 1949:** 26). The title of "commander" was significant in Samegrelo, just as it was in Georgia in general, as it was directly related to military leadership (**Gabisonia, 2005:** 126-128). However, after entering Russian "protection," Dadiani no longer had the right to assemble an army independently, but the title of commander remained, and he led the principality's army, which was formed at the request of Russian rule. Therefore, it is assumed that Samurzakano represented one of the military commands of Odishi (**Tughushi, 1999:** 248-249).

In the final period of his rule, Manuchar managed to extend his reign, although it was limited by the factor of his rebellious brothers. He was able to spread his authority over the entire Samurzakano, which had already become a Mouravi's office in Odishi. However, he was still forced to make certain concessions, as, just like in Abkhazia, the ruler was required to submit important decisions for discussion at the people's assembly, and abide by the decisions made there. But by the second half of the 18th century, the authority of the people's assembly in Samurzakano had likely lost its influence compared to the principality of Abkhazia. According to I. Antelava, it must have been somewhat diminished (**Antelava, 1951:** 145). Additionally, Samurzakano was divided into small fiefdoms, which were headed by the Sharvashidze family or other influential noble families. They enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy.

Soon, opposition to the mouravi of Samurzakano, Manuchar, arose among the Sharvashidze family of Samurzakano. At its head was his uncle Levan Sharvashidze, a man who had fought his whole life to distance Samurzakano from the influence of Abkhazia and Odishi, and for him, the transformation of Samurzakano under the Sharvashidze family into the "Mouravi" of the Dadiani was especially unacceptable. Folklore sources reveal that part of the nobility of Samurzakano was not favourable towards the mouravi (**Antelava, 1951:** 23-24).

Opposition to Manuchar was also supported by the discontent of the people, in addition to the aristocracy. According to surviving oral traditions, he was a cruel and ruthless feudal lord who was fond of women and enjoyed the right of the first night. The mouravi of Samurzakano often visited the homes of his noble subjects, who had to play host to him and his 10-15-person entourage as *"honoured guests"* (**Antelava, 1951:** 23-24, 145).

"Hospitality" in the Abkhaz tradition was a customary obligation to the lord, but it often led to the economic ruin of the host family, as the Abkhaz would pay significant costs to provide "worthy" hospitality (**Inal-ipa, 1965:** 499). Therefore, as one folklore source reveals, the people of Samurzakano, if possible, tried to avoid hosting such "guests" (**Antelava, 1951:** 149). However, the same source also reveals that when Manuchar Sharvashidze entered a village, he would inquire in advance among the locals about who could host him and his entourage (**Antelava, 1951:** 149).

Manuchar was known for his extreme cruelty towards peasants and was

also involved in the slave trade (**Antelava, 1951:** 145; **Anchabadze, 1986(a):** 82-83). T. Simonovich was concerned about the increase in slave trade by the Turks in Samurzakano and requested the governor, A. Tormasov, to forbid Sharvashidze from engaging in this activity. The governor considered his intervention inappropriate, as Manuchar would perceive it as an act of denunciation, and it would ruin the relationship between the mouravi of Samurzakano and Simonovich. Therefore, on May 31, 1811, A. Tormasov advised Simonovich to resolve the issue personally and diplomatically (***ACAC*, 1870:** 495 – №370).

Manuchar's involvement in the slave trade was further confirmed by his widow, Ketevan's "letter of donation to the Church of Tsaishi," in which she promised, through the mediation of Levan Dadiani, to free four people from captivity for to save the soul of Manuchar. However, Ketevan was only able to fulfill half of her promise and donated the freed brothers Jumashkhia and Khukhutia, along with their families, to the church (**Tughushi, 2001(b):** 82-83).

The Metropolitan Grigol of Tsaishi, a prominent figure, devoted cleric to the church and its flock, actively fought against the slave trade. He was able to buy out some of the captives either with his own money or through his influence. For instance, he used his personal funds to redeem the Samurzakano resident Kuchu Gelenidze from captivity, who was later assigned as a monk to the church; he also settled the freed Samurzakano resident Gelenava on the land of the Kheta Church. Levan Sharvashidze handed over *"the three Sarchimelias, father and sons,"* who were settled in Tsaishi (**Tughushi, 2001(b):** 65-66).

There are also some positive aspects preserved in the sources regarding Manuchar's activity. The Mouravi of Samurzakano took care of the restoration and renovation of churches. In 1812, he renovated church in Tsamkhari[1] and donated an icon of the Virgin Mary. T. Tchitchinadze saw this icon in the Church of St. George in the village of Koki. The inscription on the icon mentions the donation (**Tchitchinadze, 1897(b):** 529-530). In the same church of Koki, the "bardzimi" (*goblet*) was also preserved, and the inscription there mentions Manuchar Sharvashidze, his wife Ketevan, and their children (**Tchitchinadze, 1897(b):** 530).

The day of Manuchar's opposition activation came soon. Of course, this dissatisfaction ultimately turned into discontent with Russia, as Manuchar was in the service of the Russians and remained loyal to them. On June 24, 1812, Napoleon's army invaded Russia. The Ottomans believed they could reclaim western Georgia from the weakened Russia. Moreover, according to the Treaty of Bucharest, Russia was obligated to cede to Türkiye territories, previously occupied by military force. As a result, by the end of 1812, the Ottomans had retaken Poti and Akhaltsikhe. İstanbul also demanded the city of Sokhumi, but St. Petersburg asserted its position on this matter and rejected the transfer of the city to İstanbul as soon as the French withdrew from Russia (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 239). The "Sublime Porte's" demands were maximal, and they sought a vast territory from the Kuban River to the eastern Georgia (**Burjanadze, 1953:** 139; ***ACAC*, 1873:** 792 – №931; **Dzidzari-**

[1] Currently one of the areas of the village of Tagiloni (**Shonia N., 2019:** 61-63).

ya, 2017: 47). However, the Russians were not willing to concede and argued that these political entities had voluntarily entered Russia's protection (***Establishment of the Russian Domination..*, 1904:** 545).

The return of the Ottoman pasha to Poti caused a panic among the people of western Georgia, as it was perceived as Russia's retreat. The Ottomans and their agents actively promoted this sentiment, declaring that the Russian Tsar had recognized western Georgia as part of the Ottoman Sultan's domain (***ACAC*, 1873:** 789 – №928). The pasha, who had returned to Poti, issued an order to take control of Odishi at the first opportunity and informed the ruler of Samegrelo that from now on, the pasha of Poti would be the governor of Odishi's affairs (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 240).

This situation confused Levan V Dadiani as well (**Burjanadze, 1953:** 136). To clarify the matter, he appealed to the Russian administration. On March 16, 1813, Levan V Dadiani informed the chief administrator, Nikolai Rtishchev (1812-1816), that the Ottomans were negotiating with him to return under the Sultan's rule, and the same was happening in Abkhazia, where the Turks had already gained some supporters (***ACAC*, 1873:** 499 – №588). Despite their efforts, the Ottomans were unable to gain the support of either Dadiani or Giorgi Sharvashidze (**Dzidzariya, 2017:** 46-47). The Turkish agents tried to exploit the internal strife within the principalities, encouraging internal feudal conflicts and supporting pro-Turkish figures in every way possible (**Dzidzariya, 2017:** 48). They were also active in Samurzakano. The return of the Ottoman forces to Poti revived the slave trade in western Georgia. This was further fueled by the fact that, in 1811, parts of western Georgia (Imereti, Odishi, Guria) were struck by a terrible plague and famine that lasted two years and caused massive human casualties among the local population (**Dadiani, 1962:** 203; **Gonikashvili, 1979:** 206).

The epidemic started in Akhaltsikhe in 1810 and spread throughout Georgia. As noted above, this outbreak was one of the reasons why the liberation of Akhaltsikhe from the Ottomans could not be accomplished during that period. The situation became so dire that parents were forced to sell their children in order to save other family members from starvation (**Rekhviashvili, 1989:** 417-418). The people of Imereti and Odishi sought refuge in Abkhazia and Samurzakano. Here, the Abkhazs and Samurzakano inhabitants began selling the Imeretians and Odishians they had taken captive as slaves (**Rekhviashvili, 1989:** 206). In this matter, the ruler of Samegrelo and his family members (his uncles–Tariel and Manuchar) were accused (**Burjanadze, 1953:** 136). In 1812, Levan issued a special order in Samurzakano to prohibit the slave trade and sent bokauli[1] (head of local law enforesment) from his Enghursgava estate to enforce the order, who returned some of the Imeretians to their homes, thus protecting them from being sold (**Dadiani, 1962:** 203).

However, this did not resolve the issue, as there were still Imeretians who were

[1] *Bokauli* was the representative of the principalitiy's police. His duty was to arrest thieves, investigate case on site according to prince's order and put into effect the ruling of the court (**Tughushi, 1999:** 248; **Gabisonia, 2005:** 113).

targeted by slave traders. Therefore, in the early 1812, Levan Dadiani himself decided to address the matter (**Dadiani, 1962:** 203). He was accompanied by the Metropolitan of Tchkondidi, Bessarion, the Metropolitan of Tsai, Grigol, Niko Dadiani, and Manuchar Sharvashidze (**Dadiani, 1962:** 203).

The composition of this delegation is significant, as it served as a kind of message from Dadiani to his subjects: if they obediently followed his orders on the prohibition of the slave trade and repented, then the ruler would forgive their transgressions, and this would be confirmed by the clergy. However, if disobedience ensued, Niko Dadiani and Manuchar Sharvashidze would intervene with their forces. Levan Dadiani, with his entourage, stayed at the house of Khakhubia, a resident of the village of Bedia (**Dadiani, 1962:** 203). It is noteworthy that the ruler of Samegrelo and the officials of Samurzakano did not visit hereditary castel of Levan Sharvashidze, the son of Khutunia. It looks like that they were unwelcomed there and therefore avoided possible complications. Niko Dadiani's information hints, that there were strained relations between cousins, Manuchar and Khutunia(1780-1847), the son of Levan (**Dadiani, 1962:** 203). There, at Khakhubia's House, Manuchar was killed while sleeping (**Dadiani, 1962:** 204).

The murderer was sent by Khutunia (**Dadiani, 1962:** 203). However, as A. Diachkov-Tarasov noted, according to circulating rumors, the murderer was carrying out the task assigned by Levan and Niko Dadiani (**Diachkov-Tarasov, 1910:** 154). According to popular tradition, the killer was a Samurzakano peasant, whose wife had been insulted by Manuchar. This person in his turn was incited by Eristo Emkhvari,[1] who also had been insulted by the lord of Samurzakano and sought revenge (**Anchabadze G., 2006:**228). One version suggests that this peasant was Maj Kvaratskhelia (**Avidzba V., 1968:** 15)[2]. Later, a public assembly was held in Samurzakano with the participation of the local nobility and peasants, which justified the murderer (**Antelava, 1951:** 145). However, he was still forced to resettle to Bzipi Abkhazia (**Anchabadze G., 2006:** 228-229).

Levan Sharvashidze and his son fortified themselves in the Bedia fortress (**Dadiani, 1962:** 204). Neither the capture of this castle nor the opportunity to confront the rebellious father and son was available to Levan Dadiani at the time, so they went to the village of Barbalo, which was Manuchar Dadiani's hereditary property. The deceased was buried there (**Dadiani, 1962:** 204). The deceased was buried at the Tsai church (**Dadiani, 1962:** 204).

Immediately when the murder was uncovered, Levan Dadiani clarified the circumstances of the case: "*Whoever was lying in the stable of my son-in-law, I caught him, hung him, and made him confess everything*" (**Burjanadze, 1953:** 136). From this interrogation, it became clear that the murder of the prince of Odishi and Manuchar Sharvashidze was planned by Manuchar,the son of Katsia and

[1] According to another folkloric source, he was a wealthy peasant Geji Ezugbaia (**Antelava, 1951:** 149).
[2] According to Sh. Inal-ipa, after this, Maj Kvaratskhelia fled to the village of Abghara (now one of the districts of the village of Duripsh), where in 1951, 13 families of his descendants lived **(Inal-ipa, 1951:** 195, note 3**).**

Levan Sharvashidze, in order to seize Samurzakano for Levan and Bezhan, and Odishi - for Manuchar, the son of Katsia (**Burjanadze, 1953:** 136-137).

To subdue the rebels, Levan Dadiani marched into Samurzakano with his own forces and, as a sign of submission, took hostages from the local nobility (**Burjanadze, 1953:** 137). However, Levan Sharvashidze remained adamant. He was well-prepared and had fortified his position in Bedia, where he faced Dadiani's troops (***ACAC*, 1873:** 499 – №591; **Dadiani, 1962:** 204). He asked Russians to help him, who sent two infantry battalions of artillery under Colonel Merlin (***ACAC*, 1873:** 481 – №569). The Imeretians, led by Grigol Tsereteli and Sekhnya Tsulukidze, and people from Guria, led by Mamia V Gurieli's uncle Davit and Vakhtang, son of Rostom, Eristhavi, also marched to Dadiani's aid (**Dadiani, 1962:** 204; **Kadaria, 2003:** 109).

In December 1812, Dadiani's forces arrived at the opposite side of Bedia Fortress. A plan was developed to capture the fortress, which involved splitting the army into two parts: Levan Dadiani led the Russian, Odishian, and Samurzakano forces, who captured the upper side of Bedia, while Niko Dadiani led the Imeretians, Lechkhumians, and Gurias, who attacked the fortress from the lower side (**Dadiani, 1962:** 204). Levan's forces began defencive battles outside the fortress, but they could not withstand the offensive and were forced to retreat inside. Naturally, the Turks, seeing the unrest in Samurzakano, decided to take advantage of the situation. At Bezhan's first request, they sent their own troops to assist the rebels (***ACAC*, 1873:** 481, 506 – №569, 596). Since the attacking forces at Bedia vastly outnumbered the defenders, Levan soon requested a truce (**Dadiani, 1962:** 204). Notably, he only demanded safety from Niko Dadiani (**Dadiani, 1962:** 204). Meanwhile, Khutunia Sharvashidze managed to escape and sought refuge in Tsbelda (**Dadiani, 1962:** 204).

Due to his old age, Levan V pardoned Levan Sharvashidze and his wife Mariam Inalishvili (**Chikovani, 2007:**39), but he took away Bedia and gave him the village of Pakhulani for sustenance (**Dadiani, 1962:** 204; **Khorava, 1996:** 179; **Kadaria, 2003:** 109). Dadiani left Niko Dadiani in Bedia with a Lechkhumian forces to oversee the repair and fortification of the fortress (**Dadiani, 1962:** 204). Eventually, Levan stationed his own guards in Bedia, led by Giorgi Mkheidze,, the son of the nobleman Petre Mkheidze (**Dadiani, 1962:** 204). Later, through the mediation of Levan's father-in-law, Zurab Tsereteli, he pardoned Khutunia and returned him, along with his brothers, to Bedia.

As we can see from the document from 1846, by the end of the first half of the 19th century, Levan Dadiani's descendants were still living in Bedia. However, only half of the ancestral estate was returned to the brothers, while the other half went to Zurab Sharvashidze, son of Bolikhukhu (**Dadiani, 1962:** 206). He was the grandson of Avtandil, the second son of Ghvapu (**Chikovani, 2007:** 37). The village of Pakhulani was confirmed for Dadiani's widowed sister and her children (**Dadiani, 1962:** 206).

After the capture of Bedia, Dadiani, with the help of the Beliavsky Infantry Regiment, expelled the Turks from Samurzakano (***ACAC*, 1873:** 481 – №569),

who had greatly benefited from the chaos in the region. As reported by the chief administrator N. Rtishchev to the Russian ambassador in İstanbul, A. Italinski, only five months after Manuchar's murder, the Ottomans had abducted about 300 people from Abkhazia (***ACAC*, 1873:** 789 – №928). Here, "Abkhazia" clearly refers to Samurzakano, as the domain of Manuchar Sharvashidze is being discussed.

After resolving these issues, in the summer of 1813, Levan V turned his attention to Bezhan, who, as we saw earlier, was accused of involvement in his brother's murder. Dadiani and the Russians attacked Bezhan's estate, but Manuchar's brother managed to escape, leaving behind only his young children (a son and two daughters) in the hands of the attackers (***ACAC*, 1873:** 502, 506 – №592, 596). However, Bezhan's vassal nobles and gentry were subdued, and they swore an oath to assist the authorities in the capture of the fugitive Sharvashidze, from whom the estate had been taken (***ACAC*, 1873:** 502, 506 – №592, 597).

In the summer of 1815, Bezhan returned, but he was captured and handed over to Dadiani. On July 27th of the same year, the chief administrator N. Rtishchev entrusted the decision of his fate to the prince of Odishi (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 65-66). However, it soon became clear that Bezhan had not been involved in his brother's murder and had been falsely accused. Therefore, he requested permission from the prince of Odishi to return to his estate and Levan informed again N. Rtishtchev about this (***ACAC*, 1873:** 205 – №592). The chief administrator knew that Bezhan's estates were held by Levan Dadiani's, so he avoided angering the prince of Samegrelo, who was a much more important ally to Russia than the dubious Bezhan. Thus, the resolution of the matter was again left to Dadiani (***ACAC*, 1873:** 205 – №592).

However, at the same time, the chief administrator "suggested" to Levan that, before making the decision to free Bezhan, it would be good to ensure the prisoner's loyalty to the Russian Tsar and the prince of Odishi (***ACAC*, 1873:** 205 – №592). N. Rtishchev assumed that Levan, who considered Samurzakano his own estate and did not want to see the Sharvashidze family return to power there, would not free Bezhan (who died in 1840 – (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 13, 28). The Russian general exacerbated the conflict between them. Such a situation would turn Odishi into a Russian hostage and later ease the issue of abolishing the Samegrelo principality. However, Dadiani recognized the thoughts hidden behind the Russian general's "advice" and freed Bezhan. This "mercy" from Dadiani, one of his strongest opponents, who had great influence in the region of Galidzga and Enguri interflue, was, according to Levan's calculations, a way to soften the mistrust of the Samurzakano people toward him.

§3. Samurzakano in 1813-1839

On the anniversary of the death of the commander and last ruler of Samurzakano, Manuchar Sharvashidze, in September 1813, Levan V Dadiani, with the help of the Russians, was able to subdue almost all Ghalidzga-Enguri interfluve (***ACAC*, 1873:** 506 – №597). The people of Samurzakano submitted to Ketevan Dadiani-Sharvashidze, who was appointed as the costodian of Manuchar's heirs, young Alexander and Dimitri (***ACAC*, 1873:** 507 – №598), but, in fact, Levan V became the real governor of the Ghalidzga-Enguri region.

However, Levan's direct and immediate rule over this region began much later (in the 1830s), when he was free from direct competitors, the children of Manuchar Sharvashidze.

Soon, his position strengthened further, as in early 1815, the brother of the Prince of Abkhazia, Giorgi, decided to marry Manuchar's widow, Ketevan. He even intended to convert to Christianity for this purpose. The Governor-General N. Rtishchev did not trust Hasan-bey, who had considerable support in Abkhazia and created certain problems for Giorgi, who had been enthroned by the Russians. Therefore, he feared that the brother of Safar-bey would need Samurzakano to be master of Abkhazia, as the Samurzakano Abkhazian nobility, especially the Sharvashidzes, would support him. The Russians feared that if Ketevan married Hasan-bey, the son of Kelesh-bey would take control of Samurzakano as part of the widow's share (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 137, 149; **Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 250, *footnote 1*). Therefore, the Governor-General warned Ketevan that if Hasan-bey tried to seize Samurzakano, the region would be handed over to the state treasury until Alexander and Dimitri come of age (***ACAC*, 1873:** 507 – №598).

This was the first attempt to impose direct Russian rule over Samurzakano. It seems that at the court of Alexander I, this issue was already being processed. The first attack on the autonomy of the Georgian principalities is associated with the name of Governor-General Alexei Ermolov (1816-1827), the author of a harsh and merciless policy toward the Caucasians, who practically began the process of abolishing the principality of Guria, which was completed in 1829. In 1830s, Russian officials, like Krok, considered the existence of other principalities in western Georgia unnecessary, as they thought they were hindering the full submission of this region (**Dumbadze, 1957:** 266).

Later, in early 1840s, when Russian officials conducted an "investigation" regarding Samurzakano's "ownership," they interpreted the letter from the Governor-General in such a way that N. Rtishchev was concerned about the rights of Manuchar Sharvashidze's children, ensuring that "foreign-named" persons did not take away their inheritance (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 138). The aspiration of the highest-ranking Russian official was quite clear: he sought to prevent the strengthening of Aslan-bey's supporters.

Ketevan Sharvashidze herself renounced Samurzakano. Based on this, T. Kadaria considered the marriage of Hasan-bey and Ketevan to be complet-

ed (**Kadaria, 2003:** 109). However, this is not confirmed by the sources. In the *"Donation Letter"* dated January 4, 1818, Ketevan, with her son, donated to the Tsaishi church in memory of Manuchar Sharvashidze, for the benefit of the freed prisoners of war, including the inhabitants of Ledgebie village: Burdgunia Kobalia and orphans Butsa and Nochoia Kobalia, who were released from captivity by Metropolitan Grigol (**Tughushi, 2001(b):** 84). Levan married her off to another brother of Safar-bey, Rostom-bey only in 1823, and even baptized him as a Christian (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 44; **Dadiani, 1962:** 212). Afterward, Ketevan lived in Abkhazia, in the village of Merkheuli, which was Rostom's estate (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 4, 44, 122). As N. Dadiani writes, the Russians did not like Levan's initiative, as they had certain issues with Rostom, but due to respect for the Prince of Samegrelo, they forgave him (**Dadiani, 1962:** 212).

Levan took advantage of this situation and assumed the responsibility for raising and guardianship of his nieces and nephews (**Tsintsandze, 1989:** 97; **Khorava, 1996:** 179; **Kadaria, 2003:** 105). To avoid provoking the dissatisfaction of the Sharvashidzes, Levan officially governed Samurzakano in the name of the Emperor. Therefore, neither local Sharvashidzes nor the Prince of Abkhazia could oppose him (**Esadze, 1907:** 106-107).

Governor-General N. Rtishchev did not oppose Levan's active actions in the region, as the Russian government recognized this territory as part of Odishi (**Esadze, 1907:** 107). Safar-bey also recognized Levan as the guardian of Manuchar's heirs and the sole recipient of the revenues from the region (**Gumba M. V., 2017:** 106). A. Fadeev believed that Levan had squeezed out Samurzakano from the Prince of Abkhazia for the battle against Aslan-bey (**Fadeev, 2022:** 79). Abkhazian researchers consider the Prince of Abkhazia's decision a mistake, claiming it turned Samurzakano into a disputed territory between 2 principalities (**Gumba M. V., 2017:** 106). However, this conclusion is completely groundless. Giorgi Sharvashidze justifiably acknowledged the de facto and de jure dependence of Samurzakano on Odishi.

Thus, Levan Dadiani established direct control over Samurzakano, and the commanding post of Samouravo, created in 1810, was abolished. Levan actively began organizing the affairs of the Ghalidzga-Enguri region, which should lead to the strengthening of his rights and authority (**Takalandze, 1999(b):** 77).

The first major problem in Samurzakano was the fight against various crimes. On November 20, 1815, Levan issued a decree, re-enforcing the prohibition of theft, banditry, and slave trading. Those accused of these crimes were to be tried at the court of the principality of Odishi (***GNCM*, Ad-2232**; ***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 158-159).[1] The presence of the Turks in Poti still facilitated the slave trade. They used all means to ensure that this trade did not cease. Of course, by sentencing the criminal Samurzakano citizens, Levan emphasized his supreme authority.

[1] Slave trade continued to be a problem in the 1840s. For example, the Samurzakano noble Uchana Marghania and the Bzipi noble Shishaka Marghania, along with other feudal lords, frequently crossed the Enguri river to plunder and capture Megrelian boys (**Dzidzariya, 2016:** 408).

In general, Samurzakano remained a difficult region to govern for Odishi.

On December 7, 1825 (Old Style), the secretary of Samegrelo, Niko Dadiani, assigned the "great" Samurzakano bokauli to reconcile a dispute between local nobles – Lomkats Chkhotua's sons and Manuchar Akhirtava – and Odishi's Niko Dgebuadze. Despite numerous attempts, the chief judge of Samegrelo was unable to resolve the dispute (**Dadiani, 2022:** 86 – №501).

To curb the slave trade, Russia launched a new expedition in the principality of Abkhazia, led by Zurab Tsereteli (***Description of Manuscripts*, 1954:** 155 – №1130). In July 1815, Levan informed Russians that he would do everything in his power to ensure the success of this campaign (***Description of Manuscripts*, 1954:** 156 – №1130). The expedition was successful, but it required the taking of hostages from the Sharvashidzes and an oath of loyalty to the Emperor (***Description of Manuscripts*, 1954:** 159 – №1130).

According to the decree, the Imeretian and Megrelian peasants who had fled due to famine and plague were to return to their homes, as they were often victims of human traffickers (***GNCM*, Ad-2232**; ***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 159-160).

There was another issue in Samurzakano. Specifically, marriages were common between the Samurzakano population and the people of the Principality of Abkhazia, especially between families of different religions. Moreover, there were marriages between blood relatives, which is forbidden by Christianity but allowed in Islam. It seems that this had become a permanent practice, and Levan, in order to regulate this process, included a relevant provision in the aforementioned decree, effectively prohibiting such marriages. (***GNCM*, Ad-2232**; ***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 159-160). However, even in the late 19th century, there were instances of Christian Samurzakano women being sought for marriage by Muslim Abkhazians (**Gogebashvili, 1882:** 316).

Levan V also cared for the force that his authority in Samurzakano was largely based on. This was the Russian army (***GNCM*, Ad-2232**; ***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 157-158). The Samurzakano people were obliged to assist Russian military units by providing housing and food (**Kadaria, 2003:** 110).

On November 20, 1815, in Nabakevi, Levan ordered the local nobility to swear to ensure the implementation of this decree. This *"Oath Book"* is a very important document for determining the families of the nobility and their settlement areas. The Samurzakano people swore and signed with crosses: the widow of Levan (son of Khutunia Sharvashidze) Mariam Inalishvili, together with her children – Murzakan and Zurab; the children of Bolikhukhu Sharvashidze (the branch of Avtandil Kvapus' son) – Khukhuloba, Zurab, Manuchar, Rostom; Sorekh son of Solomon Sharvashidze; the princes Anchabadze: Bolikhukhu, Temurka, Uchna, Tada, Uchardia, Eristu, Lomkatsi, Khukhuloba, Mirzabeg, Mirzabeg,[1] Manuchar, Burdghu, Dovlat, and Murza (according to J. Gamakharia and B. Gogia, the last one was probably Muslim, because, unlike others, the name had two dots and a

[1] Presumably, two men in Samurzakano at that time had the name and surname of Mirzabeg Anchabadze.

dash instead of a cross symbol next to it) (**Gamakharia, Gogia, 1997:** 666). The prince Chkhotua Zurab and his children: Eristou, Manuchar, Katsi; Chkhotua Katsi, Temurka, and Sharvani; Bezhan Marghania (despite this oath, he did not cease the slave trade and was arrested in 1821 and taken to Zugdidi) (**Dadiani, 1962:** 211) from village Gudava; The Emkhvari nobility: Eristou, Lomkatsi, Levan, Uchardia, Tulapsu, Sersika, Temurka, Tulapsu; the noble Aslanbei Inalishvili; the Marghanians from village Dikhazurga: Jambulat, Bolikhukhu, Khitu, Burdghu, Shaardeni; the Gali Marghanians: Jambulat, Aslangeri; Chkhotua Uchana, Aslangeri, Jambulat, Rostom; Akurtava Tsutske and Khitu; Gvartskia Gejila; Zenobaia Ezugbaia; the noble Bezhan son of Solomon Sharvashidze (***GNCM*, Ad-2232**).

In Samurzakano, the execution of the order of November 20, 1815, would have been impossible if the problem of Tsebelda would not be resolved. This region was controlled by the powerful noble family of Marshania, who did not recognize the authority of the Safar-bey's government. During this period, the jurisdiction of the Prince of Abkhazia did not extend to Tsebelda. On the contrary, Tsebeldians supported the rebellious Aslan-Bey (**Gumba M. V., 2022:** 77). However, this family had been resisting the spread of the Sharvashidze family's influence in their territory since the 17th and 18th centuries (**Antelava, 1951:** 146).

The Marshanias of Tsebelda created certain difficulties for the peace and political stability of the Odishi and Abkhaz principalities. They had close and active relations with the Sharvashidze family of Samurzakano. Refugees who were persecuted by the authorities often found shelter with them. Moreover, this area became one of the "centers" for the trade of slaves. Manuchar Sharvashidze traded slaves with the Tsebelda Marshanias (Mahmatkiri, Omari, and others) (**Antelava, 1951:** 146; **Anchabadze, 1986(a):** 689). Like other Abkhaz nobles, they relied on this "craft" for survival and were engaged in the abduction of people in Samurzakano. According to T. Sakhokia, a 20-30 men strong group from the Marshania family roamed the mountains of Samurzakano, harassing Samurzakano shepherds and abducting both livestock and shepherds as slaves (**Sakhokia, 1985:** 365).

The Marshania family, one branch of which settled in the Jgerda village in the Abzhua region, considered themselves so independent and powerful that it even defied the Prince of Abkhazia and actively engaged in the slave trade within this territory. In January 1839, Mikheil, whose authority was being solidified with the support of the Russians (**Salakaya, 2022(b):** 72-73), demanded from the Russian authorities the punishment of the Marshanias and the extension of his authority to Jgerda (***HANAG*, 345:** sheets 1-3). The Russian occupation regime was pleased with this conflict (not only this particular case but generally the confrontation between the feudal political forces of western Georgia) and the further escalation of it was in the interests of St. Petersburg. Due to the difficulties of deploying large forces in the Caucasus, the possibility of conflicts between rival princes created favorable conditions for Russian rule in this area (**Surguladze A., 1968:** 88).

To resolve this situation, it seems that in the late autumn of 1814, Levan Dadiani launched a campaign against Tsebelda (***GNCM*, Ad-2229**). This mili-

tary expedition was successful, and the local Marshanias submitted to Dadiani. The expression of this was the oath of allegiance made on November 29, 1815, in the village of Okumi by the sons of Uchardia, Tulafsi, the son of Saralafu and Omer, the son of Zerepkhu, who were Marshanias. They acknowledged that Samurzakano was part of Dadiani's domain (***ACAC*, 1873:** 507, 508 – №599). At the same time, the Marshania nobles emphasized that *"Although since our forefathers we were loyal and subordinate to your forefathers, certain upheavals have distanced us from each other"* (***ACAC*, 1873:** 508 – №599).

Certainly, this document was of great importance for Levan because it indicated to the Russians that he had legitimate influence in this region, as Tsebelda had once been part of his ancestors' domain. Therefore, he chose the village of Okumi, in Samurzakano, i.e., the principality of Samegrelo, as the place for signing. Consequently, this reflected Dadiani's advantage over Abkhazia and his corresponding claims, as evidenced by the inscription on one of the icons from 1814: *"Prince and ruler of Odish-Abkhaz, Svan-Lechkhumi"* (**Makalatia, 2006:** 228-229).

The Russian local administration welcomed Dadiani's actions, which were seen as laying the foundation for stability in the region. Therefore, Levan V's acts of November 20 and 29 were approved by N. Rtishchev (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 147-148). Ultimately, Levan was unable to benefit from the Marshania's oath. His opponents continued to find refuge in this area (***ACAC*, 1878:** 396 – №325).

Levan Dadiani attempted to engage the Samurzakano nobility, who mostly lived off the profits from the slave trade, in agricultural activities. However, this attempt ended unsuccessfully, and the slave trade could not be stopped in Samurzakano. As long as the Turks were present in Poti and Akhaltsikhe, they still managed to maintain the human trafficking business. As Samurzakano noble Temurkva Anchabadze confirmed, the situation in Samurzakano had become very difficult due to the slave trade, theft, and other crimes (***ACAC*, 1878:** 396 – №325). This "oath" essentially remained on paper, as part of the noble families who signed it (Bezhan Marghania, Bezhan Sharvashidze, and others) continued with these activities (**Dadiani, 1962:** 211; ***ACAC*, 1878:** 396 – №325).

However, it was possible to minimize the slave trade in the plains of Samurzakano, but the situation in the mountainous areas remained alarming because the authorities' control in these areas was minimal compared to the plains (***ACAC*, 1878:** 395 – №325).

To fight these crimes, Levan Dadiani actively involved the clergy. For example, the aforementioned oath was witnessed by the Metropolitan of Tsaishi, Grigol, who officially confirmed this Act (**Gamakharia, Gogia, 1997:** 666). Of course, with the activation of the church in Samurzakano, Dadiani was also trying to strengthen his power. However, at the same time, he and Bishop Grigol understood that the weakening of Christianity in this region would lead to the separation of the Ghalidzga-Enguri interfluve from the Georgian world. For this reason, the Metropolitan of Tsaishi played an important role not only in Samurzakano but also in strengthening Christianity in the principality of Abkhazia itself (***ACAC*, 1875:** 429 – №570).

The Samurzakano people, who had been freed from the Sharvashidze's rule,

did not intend to recognize Levan's authority (**Takalandze, 1999(a):** 77). Temurkva Anchabadze directly told the Russians that *"there is no authority in this region because Dadiani does not have the ability to subdue the population; and be sure that neither Dadiani nor anyone from the Sharvashidze family will be able to rule here or control this place"* (***ACAC*, 1878:** 396 – №325). This is confirmed by Jacques François Gamba: *"It* (Samurzakano – ***K.K.***) *is part of the Dadiani state; but one could say that it does not obey any authority"* (**Gamba, 1987:** 112). Therefore, unrest against Dadiani in Samurzakano never ceased (**Dumbadze, 1942:** 75). Although Giorgi Sharvashidze acknowledged that he was the owner of the "remote areas" of Abkhazia, it was inconceivable that he would support Dadiani's control over Samurzakano (**Papaskiri, 2004:** 147).

This is exactly why Levan asked the Russian administration to increase the Russian detachment, one company, stationed in Gudava, if necessary, increase by additional two companies, which could be used by Dadiani in case of disobedience from the Samurzakano people (***Description of Manuscripts*, 1954:** 159 – №1130). M. Dumbadze holds that Safar-bey, on his part, was trying to extend his influence over Abkhazia (**Dumbadze, 1942:** 75). Z. Papaskiri dismisses the idea that the Prince of Abkhazia was taking countermeasures against Dadiani, as the authority of the Prince of Abkhazia was directly dependent on Dadiani's support (**Papaskiri, 2004:** 147). In general, agreeing with this viewpoint, we hold that Giorgi Sharvashidze was secretly trying to oppose Levan Dadiani and was supporting forces which opposed him in Odishi, on both banks of the Enguri river. Levan V junior brother, Giorgi, who was known for his disobedience to Dadiani, often sought refuge in Abkhazia and Samurzakano. It seems that Levan suspected that his brother Giorgi (Safar-bey) was being protected by Sharvashidze (***GNCM*, Hd-10595**; ***GNCM*, Hd-10597**). Therefore, in 1818, Levan demanded an official stance from him regarding the problem of Samurzakano. Levan chose an appropriate moment for this. In April 1818, another rebellion broke out in Abkhazia. He sent the Odishi troops[1] to help his uncle, and they subdued the opposing nobles of Abkhazia (**Kadaria, 2003:** 112).

After these events, Dadiani requested an official commission from the Russian authorities to determine the borders of Odish-Abkhazia-Svaneti (**Kadaria, 2003:** 112). Giorgi, who maintained power with the help of the Megrelians, officially recognized four Samurzakano territories as part of Odishi in May 1818[2], in the presence of the governor of Imereti, General V. Kurnatovski (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 13; **Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 259, *footnote 4*).

A Turkish document dated June 15, 1819, reveals that during this period, relations between Russia and the Prince of Samegrelo became strained. The document does not specify the nature of this confrontation (***In the Archives of Türkiye.., I-2,* 2022:** 402). Presumably, the occupying regime was irritated by Dadiani's efforts to extend his influence as much as possible, what was particularly evident in his dealings with Abkhazia.

[1] The Prince of Abkhazia Giorgi Sharvashidze was the husband of Levan Dadianis's aunt.
[2] Representatives of Russian occupational regime points out January (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 140).

Later, in the early 1840s, when the issue of Dadiani's rights over Samurzakano was raised, the Russians tried to use this agreement against the Odishi administration with the absurd justification that Giorgi did not know what he was signing. Colonel N. N. Muraviov informed General P. E. Kotzebue that during the signing of this act, the Prince of Abkhazia did not understand the Georgian language (on which the document was written), and he was represented by the priest Ioane Kavtaradze (referred to by N. N. Muraviov as *"a native of Samegrelo"*). According to the Russian official, when Giorgi realized what kind of agreement he had signed with Levan, he immediately expelled Father Ioane from Abkhazia (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 40-41, 141).

This is such an absurd piece of information that, most likely, its direct author and the creator of this legend must be Mikheil Sharvashidze, who was directly interested in the issue of stripping Samurzakano from Odishi and, accordingly, was biased. It is highly doubtful that Giorgi was such a naïve politician that he did not know what he was signing. He knew very well from the very beginning what was happening in this case. Another important document we found in the National Centre for Manuscripts of Georgia is worth mentioning. It is a letter addressed to A. Veliaminov, which was signed by Giorgi Sharvashidze himself. This document refers to Levan's junior brother, Giorgi Dadiani, who, according to the Prince of Samegrelo, was hidden in Abkhazia. Safar-bey denies this and informs A. Veliaminov that Giorgi Dadiani should have been in Samurzakano. According to the Prince of Abkhazia, Safar-bey, *"Dadiani Levan's rival"* was providing protection for him (***GNCM*, Hd-10597**; emphasis is ours – ***K.K.***).

Thus, as clearly shown here, he was well aware of the borders between the two principalities and recognized the Enguri-Ghalidzga interfluve as Levan V Dadiani's administrative territory. Moreover, contemporary accounts confirm that Giorgi Sharvashidze understood Georgian, although he had difficulty speaking it (**Avalishvili, 1967:** 29-30). From this, it becomes even clearer that any claims suggesting that Safar-bey was deliberately misled by Father Ioane are completely unfounded. If Father Ioane's expulsion from Abkhazia is connected to this agreement, the likely reason would be Giorgi Sharvashidze, who may have used it as a form of "scapegoat" to justify himself in front of his rebellious subjects. Father Ioane, a passionate patriot of Georgia, naturally would not have hidden the essence of the agreement from the ruler of Abkhazia if it was part of his duties as a priest. Therefore, the portrayal of this clergyman as "guilty" was mainly a goal of the Tsarist officials, who were searching for a "legal" basis to strip Dadiani of Samurzakano and, at the same time, deliberately tried to sow discord between Georgians and Abkhazians. This is why the report specifically emphasized father Ioane's origin – *"from Samegrelo"* (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 40-41, 141) – as mentioned above.

The agreement achieved by Levan Dadiani expressed and defended the interests of the Prince of Samegrelo in Samurzaihano. The boundary between Odishi and the principality of Abkhazia was set along the Ghalidzga river (Евецкій, 1835: 8). In 1821, when Russian and Odishian forces were sent to suppress the

unrest in Abkhazia, Levan Dadiani escorted them up to Ghalidzga river. This was specifically noted by N. Dadiani in his work: *"Our Prince himself, Levan Dadiani, accompanied them up* ***to his boundary, to Ghalidzga river****"* (**Dadiani, 1962:** 209; emphasis added – ***K.K.***).

We believe that the 1818 agreement should have been reflected in Levan Dadiani's title, which would clarify the reference to "Abkhaz" in the 1814 title. Specifically, in the document we found in the Dadiani Museum, dated May 19, 1823, the Prince of Samegrelo is referred to as: *"The hereditary owner of Odishi, Lechkhumi,* ***parts of Abkhazia****, and Svaneti"* (***ZSHEM*****, №7312:** sheet 8; emphasis added – ***K.K.***). A similar reference appears in a 1824 document: *"Hereditary owner and prince of Menghrelia and* ***some parts of Abkhazia*** *and Svaneti"* (**Tughushi, 2001(b):** 98; emphasis added – ***K.K.***). According to the aforementioned agreement, both parties were obligated not to provide shelter to rebels and other criminals (***HANAG*****, 357:** sheet 13). This clause removed the possibility for Giorgi Sharvashidze to protect the rebellious Samurzakano inhabitants against Dadiani. Levan Dadiani was satisfied and noted that this agreement would be a guarantee of peace between the two principalities (**Takalandze, 1999(a):** 77). According to N. Takalandze's fair assessment, it legalized Levan V rights over Samurzakano and, in the event of any future dispute with the Prince of Abkhazia, made these rights inviolable (**Takalandze, 1999(a):** 77).

Aslan-bey, who had no intention of implementing the agreement signed with Dadiani, reappeared in Abkhazia in 1821, when an anti-Russian uprising was underway (**Dzidzariya, 2017:** 65-66). The cause of this uprising was the Russians' appointment of Safar-bey's widow as the ruler of Abkhazia. According to V. Potto, the Russian mistake was appointing a woman to lead the Abkhazians, especially since Tamar did not like the Abkhazians, and they were not fond of her either (***Establishment of the Russian Domination..*****, 1904:** 550, 558). One Ottoman source mentions that her army included many Circassian fighters (***The History of Adygs..*****, 2009:** 39 – №23). She soon succeeded in taking over almost all of Abkhazia, except for the fortress of Sokhumi, where, on February 19, 1821 (7th of February, Old Style), Giorgi Sharvashidze's widow and children were present (***Establishment of the Russian Dominatione..*****, 1904:** 560). The Russians appointed Tamar Dadiani-Sharvashidze as the temporary ruler of Abkhazia (***Establishment of the Russian Domination..*****, 1904:** 560). As G. Paitchadze believes, this decision was influenced by the Prince of Samegrelo (**Paitchadze, 1999:** 223). By mid-September 1821, Aslan-bey, with his army that included Circassians, marched towards Samurzakano (***Establishment of the Russian Domination..*****, 1904:** 560; **Matchavariani, 1913:** 252).

Levan urgently mobilized the army and informed the governor of Imereti, General M. Gorchakov, who was sent to suppress the Abkhazian rebellion, that he intended to fight against Aslan-bey in order to save his homeland and "widows and orphans" (***Establishment of the Russian Domination..*****, 1904:** 560). According to V. Potto, the general understood the plan of Dadiani, who aimed to take control of the part of Abkhazia that had previously belonged to Samegrelo.

Therefore, he did not allow Dadiani to launch a campaign (***Establishment of the Russian Empire..*, 1904:** 560). Moreover, the great Niko also used his influence in the Abkhazian nobility and managed to force the elder son of Kelesh-bey, without allies, to leave (**Anchabadze G., 2018:** 35). But in the end, M. Gorchakov included Dadiani's army in his own, which, incidentally, was the first to engage in battle with Aslan-bey, who was camped near Kelasuri, suffering heavy losses (**Potto, 1994(a):** 637). Naturally, the Russian general also wanted to weaken Dadiani's military power so that the ruler of Samegrelo would become more dependent on the Russian colonial regime.

Aslan-bey was unable to invade Samurzakano. M. Gorchakov suppressed the Abkhaz rebellion in blood and installed the son of Safar-bey, Dimitri (Omar-bey, 1821-1822), as the ruler, who had grown up in Russia and was quite Russified. However, the man dressed in a Russian colonel's uniform had forgotten his native language, and moreover, he arrived in his homeland with the punitive troops. His subjects did not accept him, and on October 28, 1822, they assassinated him (**Fadeev, 1960:** 40; **Paitchadze, 1999:** 224).

The new ruler of Abkhazia was Safar-bey's other son, Mikheil (Hamut-bey, 1822-1864), who was 11 years old at the time. Tamar temporarily became the ruler of Abkhazia. It is noteworthy that she dealt with the issue of Mikheil's enthronement from Samurzakano, where she was in November 1822 (***ACAC*, 1874:** 661 – №947, 948). Levan, naturally, was interested in ensuring that the future ruler of Abkhazia, his cousin Mikheil, would be obedient like Safar-bey.

Although the people of Samurzakano were subjects of Dadiani, they actively participated in the political life of Abkhazia, including in the matter of the new ruler's approval. For instance, Tamar Sharvashidze's interests were represented by the Samurzakano noble Temurkva Anchabadze and the Abkhazian Tlabsu Marghania in dealings with the Russian authorities (***ACAC*, 1874:** 661 – №947, 948).

To gain the trust of the Abkhaz people for her family, Tamar invaded Samurzakano in 1823 to assert the authority of her family over the region (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 13). Levan complained about his aunt's actions to the governor of Imereti, M. Gorchakov. The Russian general demanded the return of Grigol Dadiani's son to the principality, but Tamar, who was actually a hostage of the Abkhazs' attitude towards her family, was unwilling to give up her position. In this situation, M. Gorchakov allowed Levan on May 30, 1823, to use force to resolve the affairs of Samurzakano (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 13, letter №1594).

Levan was to solve this problem only with his own forces (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 13-14, 25). The ruler of Samegrelo quickly abandoned his nephew's respect towards his aunt and expelled her forces from the central part of the Enguri river. However, Tamar did not abandon her plans and continued her efforts to consolidate Samurzakano, but these attempts proved fruitless (**Takalandze, 1999(a):** 77). Dadiani still could not establish order in Samurzakano. All of his attempts in this regard ended in failure (***ACAC*, 1878:** 395 – №325). This became even more difficult by the fact that the Abkhaz continued to support the Samurzakano people

against Dadiani. However, the invasion of the Abkhaz into the central part of the Enguri-Ghalidzga region, with looting (capturing prisoners, seizing cattle, etc.) was ongoing (**Khorava, 2021(b):** 160).

In May 1826, Levan launched campaign against the invading Abkhazs and also undertook fortification works along the border with Abkhazia (**Khorava, 2021(b):** 160). However, subduing this region remained a difficult task for the ruler of Samegrelo. The people of Samurzakano still did not submit to his rule (***ACAC*, 1878:** 395 – №325).

The ruler of Odishi could control Samurzakano only with the help of the Russian army[1]. In 1826, at the request of Levan Dadiani, the Governor-General Ermolov sent a 300-man strong detachment equipped with one artillery cannon (***ACAC*, 1878:** 395 – №325). Peace temporarily settled in Samurzakano, and the locals submitted to Dadiani's authority (***ACAC*, 1878:** 395 – №325). This resulted in a decrease in the slave trade (**Kilasonia, 2018:** 142). However, due to the Russo-Persian war, the Russians quickly withdrew this detachment (***ACAC*, 1878:** 395 – №325). According to M. Dumbadze, the purpose of the Russian detachment in Samurzakano was far more significant than merely securing Dadiani's interests. The scientist rightfully argued that Russia was already preparing for the direct imposition of its authority in the region (**Dumbadze, 1957:** 268).

The campaigns of Tamar Dadiani-Sharvashidze, the de facto ruler of Abkhazia, made her nephew, the ruler of Odishi able to realize the need to obtain new guarantees from the Abkhazs regarding Samurzakano. The Russian administration commissioned the "Great" Niko Dadiani with normalizing the situation, what he successfully accomplished (**Dadiani, 2022:** 93 – №269, 270), and on April 21, 1827, the feudal lords of Zuphu signed a written agreement before Levan V, pledging not to engage in looting and robbery in Samurzakano: *"We, the Zuphu people, both great and small, will not steal, loot, or insult your subjects of Odishi and* ***Samurzakano in your realm****"* (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 14, 140; **Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 266, *footnote 1*; emphasis ours – ***K.K.***). This document was also signed by Tamar, the ruler of Abkhazia (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 14). N. Takalandze holds that Mikheil's concession was motivated by political weakness, which was especially evident during the early years of his reign (**Takalandze, 1999(a):** 77). However, this also did not bring peace to Dadiani. As soon as the people of Samurzakano thought the Russians had departed, Dadiani's problems began again. Although, as V. Potto notes, the Samurzakano people requited like for like and devasted the Abkhaz principality (**Potto, 1994(a):** 643).

At this time, Manuchar Sharvashidze's senior son, Alexander, who was born in 1808 (**Chikovani, 2007:** 71), was coming of age and was expected to take control of the region. However, the people of Samurzakano realized that Levan would not retrieve power to his nieces and nephews. As already mentioned, the nobility of Samurzakano did not want to be subjects of either the Sharvashidze or the Dadiani family. A certain faction formed among them, demanding the direct

[1] According to information from 1828, about 1798 families lived in Samurzakano (***Materials on the History of Abkhazia in the 19th Century..*, 2008:** 165-166).

imposition of the Tsar's authority in Samurzakano. This "party's" interests were represented by Temurkva Anchabadze, who advised Russian authorities to *"declare Samurzakano as the property of the treasury"* (***ACAC*, 1878:** 396 – №325).

The instigation of frequent unrests against Dadiani was aimed to deprive the ruler of Samegrelo his authority, as it was claimed that the prince of Samegrelo lacked the necessary means to maintain order in the region, thus the principality of Samurzakano was taken from the family of Dadiani. In this situation, they even resorted to obvious provocation: in November 1827, the people of Samurzakano drove their cattle into a reserved hunting area belonging to Dadiani, which was guarded by a special garrison (**Potto, 1994(b):** 207-208).

This forest was located on the banks of the Enguri river in the Odishi region and was 8 versts away from Zugdidi. On the opposite bank of the river was the property of Samurzakano's Marghania (***ACAC*, 1878:** 398 – №326). Naturally, Dadiani's guards drove the cattle out of the forest. The Samurzakano shepherds called for help, and they were assisted by the nobleman Marghania, who came with armed peasants. During the quarrel, the Samurzakano people killed Dadiani's garrison. A nobleman from Zugdidi, whose neighbour was one of the murdered peasants, witnessed the incident. This nobleman demanded blood vengeance for the crime. The argument tragically ended when Marghania was mortally wounded (***ACAC*, 1878:** 398 – №326).

Ultimately, this incident led to serious consequences for Samegrelo: it became the constant target of attacks from the people of Samurzakano and, for a certain period, from the Abkhazs (**Dumbadze, 1942:** 76). The attacks occurred almost every day, mostly at night. They killed or kidnapped the inhabitants of the villages near Samurzakano, selling them to the Turks, as well as their cattle (***ACAC*, 1878:** 398 – №326).

In order to restore order and bring the people of Samurzakano under control, Dadiani requested a 200-man detachment from the authorities and demanded the expulsion of the brothers Temurkva and Thada Anchabadze, Alexander Manuchar's son Sharvashidze, Sesirkva Emukhvari, and Jambulat Marghania from Samurzakano (***ACAC*, 1878:** 396 – №325). Apparently, these individuals were the instigators of the unrest (**Kadaria, 2003:** 113-114). Colonel Vasily Bebutov reviewed the case and concluded that Temurkhva Anchabadze, who had served Russia several times, especially during the Abkhaz uprisings of 1821 and 1824, could not be considered an anti-Russian figure. According to Bebutov's findings, Dadiani was trying to remove him due to personal disagreements (***ACAC*, 1878:** 396 – №325). Levan, however, managed to have Temurkhva exiled to Russia for 3 years, while his brother Thada and Sesurkva (Sesirkva) Emukhvari were arrested (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 46). Temurkva Anchabadze's participation in the 1821 Abkhaz uprising is mentioned by Niko Dadiani, who lists the Samurzakano figures rewarded by the authorities: *"Temurkhva Anchabadze himself was promoted to the rank of poruchik and granted a pension for life, which he earned through his service as a translator and other actions, while his brothers, Sharvashidze, and Thada*

Anchabadze were made officers" (**Dadiani, 1962:** 211). Bebutov assumed that the others might also could been involved in the unrest (***ACAC*, 1878:** 396 – №325).

To study the situation, on February 5, 1828, the Governor of Imereti, Major-General Karl Hesse, arrived to Zugdidi. However, the Abkhazs and Samurzakano people continued their attacks as usual, showing no respect for his presence (***ACAC*, 1878:** 396 – №325). As already noted, their likely aim was to demonstrate Dadiani's weakness. However, the Russians were already well aware of this: *"The disregard and disobedience of the Samurzakano noblemen towards the ruler of Samegrelo, Levan Dadiani, had long been a matter of complaint before the authorities"* (***ACAC*, 1878:** 395 – №325).

On February 14, 1828, K. Hesse summoned the Samurzakano nobility to Zugdidi. However, some of them did not appear due to fear of arrest by the Russian general (***ACAC*, 1878:** 397, 398 – №326). It is likely that these were the nobles whom Dadiani demanded to be exiled.

The Samurzakano nobles who arrived in Zugdidi promised Hesse that they would obey Dadiani (***ACAC*, 1878:** 398 – №326). Regarding the issue of leaving the army, Levan was only allotted one company, which was stationed in Zugdidi, in his palace, because General Hesse believed that a hundred soldiers would not be sufficient to quell the rebellion in Samurzakano, and it was possible that they could be destroyed, which would negatively affect Russia's position in the region and the morale of Russian soldiers (***ACAC*, 1878:** 397, 398 – №326). However, according to the opinion of the Governor of Imereti, Nikolai Sipyagin, this company would serve as a deterrent to the attacks of Samurzakano nobles (**Takalandze, 1999(a):** 79).

General Hesse forbade Levan from using force to suppress the uprising and considered taking hostages as the only means of resolving the conflict (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 269). Levan eventually defeated the rebels, and his rival, the legitimate heir to Samurzakano, his nephew Alexander, who had come of age by that time, was exiled to Siberia by the Russians in 1829 (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 269). However, he did not reach Siberia and died on the way (**Kavshbaia, 1989:** 4). Apparently, Dadiani did not find it difficult to remove him, as early as the beginning of 1827, Colonel V. Bebutov met with Alexander and urged him to submit to Dadiani, but this attempt was unsuccessful (***ACAC*, 1878:** 396 – №325). According to A. Diachkov-Tarasov, Alexander became a victim of his uncle's slander (**Diachkov-Tarasov, 1910:** 159). It seems that there was no slander here. Manuchar's son Alexander was quite disobedient and did not shy away from certain violations, as evidenced by V. Bebutov's meeting with him. Had it been slander, Bebutov would have surely mentioned it in his report, as he did with other individuals. Moreover, one archival source, which we are bringing to scientific circulation for the first time, notes that Levan's senior nephew was involved in murder and other crimes (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 198).

It doesn't really matter whether Alexander was a victim of his uncle's "slander," as A. Diachkov-Tarasov suggests. As we have seen, Alexander was not particularly law-abiding. The main point is that the government considered Levan

Dadiani's accusation to be well-founded. Therefore, if Samurzakano had been an independent entity separate from Samegrelo, it is unlikely that anyone would have taken Dadiani's accusations seriously. It is clear that St. Petersburg considered the interfluve of Ghalidzga and Enguri rivers as part of Odishi. Therefore, in response to Dadiani's accusations, appropriate measures were taken, and both Count Ivan Paskevich and Baron G. Rosen acknowledged Manuchar's children as subjects under Levan's rule (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 188).

The fate of Manuchar Sharvashidze's second heir also ended tragically. Seeing the fate of his brother, Dimitri realized the reality and in 1833, he too rebelled against the tyranny of Levan Dadiani (**Diachkov-Tarasov, 1910:** 159). However, this was not his first uprising against Levan. Archive sources reveal that he had participated in the disturbances as early as 1827 and had clearly not obeyed his uncle since that time (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 188). This fact was known to the chief administrator, Count Paskevich (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 188). However, he soon met his end on February 27, 1833, when he was killed in a clash with Levan Dadiani's troops (led by Tariel, Katsia II Dadiani's son) in his own village of Tchuburiskhidi (Tchuburkhinji) (***ACAC*, 1878:** 435 – №301; ***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 44). Levan, however, attributed the tragic incident to an unfortunate accident (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 122-123). During this rebellion, along with the Samurzaikani people, the Tsebeldians (Dimitri was the son-in-law of Tsebeldians (**Kadaria, 2003:** 116, note. 42) and other Abkhazians also joined. As the chief administrator Baron Grigol Rosen noted, the disturbances in Samurzakano were incited by the Abkhazs and the Tsebeldians (***ACAC*, 1881:** 436 – №301).

It appears that in October 1828, Levan offered now the elderly Nikoloz Dadiani, the secretary of Samegrelo, who had requested to step down due to his age, the position of governor of Samurzakano. It seems that the reason behind this offer was the friendly relationship between Nikoloz and the influential Samurzakano nobles (including Temurkva Anchabadze, who had family ties with the ruling house of Abkhazia). It seems that Dadiani's court hoped to overcome certain difficulties in the region on the other side of the Enguri river by this means. However, on October 11 of the same year (Old Style), Nikoloz rejected this offer (**Dadiani, 2022:** 101 – №402).

By eliminating Manuchar's sons, Dadiani legitimatized his rule, as he himself became the first-degree heir to Samurzakano's landholders, according to the laws of Vakhtang VI (Articles 131, 137, 160, and 248 of the 1st section of the law code and local customs), which stipulated that if the deceased had no direct heirs, their immovable property should pass to the ruler (**Tsintsandze, 1989:** 100). This rule was also applied among the Abkhazians (**Tornau, 2008:** 219-200; **Dzidzariya, 2015:** 366). This demonstrates that the Abkhazians were part of the Georgian feudal culture and formed an integral part of it. Therefore, Levan Dadiani's rule over Samurzakano was legitimated according to both Georgian laws and Abkhaz customs. Thus, in 1835, T. Tornau noted that Samurzakano, which had been a separate domain during the rule of the Sharvashidze family, was now annexed to

Samegrelo (**Tornau, 2008:** 190; **Dzidzariya, 2015:** 362).

The Samurzaikano people actively participated in establishing and consolidating Russian rule over Abkhazia. The empire actively utilized this dedication and did not hesitate to reward them. For example, on December 14, 1831, Levan Sharvashidze, Tada, Bezhan, Bezurkva and Guza Anchabadze, Narchuk, Dadurkva, Rostom, Tighu, and David Inalishvili, Sosran Chabalurkhva, Khamurza Marshania, Shinakma[1] Eshibaya, and Tlabs Marghania (***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..*, 2018:** 41-43) were awarded military ranks, orders and financial encouragement.

Levan received significant revenue from Samurzakano. The local noblemen of the region would annually send the Odishi ruler taxes in the form of: cattle and domestic fowl worth 2,000 rubles; various gifts worth about 1,500 rubles; income from forests amounting to 3,000 rubles; pastures – 5,000 rubles; corn lease – 1,500 rubles; sea usage – 500 rubles. Additionally, in some cases, the people of Samurzakano would pay taxes for weddings and unfortunate incidents (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 57). One of the important trading centres in Samurzakano was located in the seaside village of Gagida. Therefore, the supervision and security of this area were entrusted to Grand Nikoloz Dadiani (**Dadiani, 2022:** 107 – №23).

With the support of the ruler of Samegrelo, Christian missionaries began their activities in Samurzakano in the 1830s. Although it remained under Christian oversight, with the Tsaishi Bishop supervision (**Bubulashvili, 2006:** 52), it still suffered from a shortage of clergy, and Islam was becoming increasingly powerful (***From the Travel of the Bishop of Imereti..*, 1869(c):** 3). The reason for this was, of course, the upheavals of the 17th and 18th centuries that affected the region. Therefore, in the early 1830s, the first group of missionaries, led by Archimandrite Anton[2] (Dadiani), was sent to Samurzakano and Abkhazia. The group included Priest Vasil Kutsia and a deacon (from the village of Okumi); Saba Topuria and a dean (from the village of Gali); Nikoloz Kuprava, Davit Svanidze, and Mikheil Gagua (from the village of Nabakevi); Markoz Shonia and Markoz Arkhania (from Saberio and Letcharaie); Davit Antelava (from the village of Dikhazurga); Iese Khocholava (from the village of Ganarjia Mukhuri); Petre Zhghenti (from Ilori); Priest Ioane Jikia, Deacon Koiava, Deacon Khocholava; Iese Mikaberidze was appointed Blagochin, who resided in Darcheli (**Bishop Kyrion, 1903:** 61; ***Kyrion II*, 2006:** 384).

It is noteworthy that the mission of Archimandrite Anton to Abkhazia, with the aim of reviving and strengthening Christianity there, was requested by Mikheil Shavashidze as early as 1831. He noted that his relative and representative of the principality, Father Anton, who was known as a good pastor in the population (including among the Abkhazians), an upright person, and someone who

[1] Unlikely that it would be private name. It is more his social which Russians assumed as the private name.

[2] Archimandrite Anton was a great patriot, who strengthened the position of Christianity in Samurzakano-Abkhazia, protected Abkhazians, and tried to send to Abkhazia clergymen who spoke Abkhazian. One such clergyman was Priest Roman Mertchule, who, at his request, was appointed as a priest in Ilori. He actively fought against the buying and selling of captives. He managed to free a Megrelian peasant, Uchana Adamia, who had been sold by the noble Katsia Anchabadze in Bzipi, as well as Khukhua Shapatava, who had been kidnapped in Gumista (**Rogava, 2015:** 170-171).

knew the local language (***Kyrion II,* 2006:** 380). It seems that the abbot also knew the Abkhazian language; otherwise, Mikheil would not have drawn attention to it based on knowledge of only Megrelian. The ruler of Abkhazia demanded that father Anton be consecrated as the Archbishop and, accordingly, the establishment of the Abkhazian diocese. However, the Synod of Georgia-Imereti did not grant his request for the establishment of a new diocese, as it kept the leadership of the clergy in Abkhazia within the competence of the Samegrelo diocese[1] (***Kyrion II,* 2006:** 378).

The assistants to Archimandrite Anton were appointed from the clergy of the Tsageri Monastery: Abbots – father Davit Akhvlidiani and father Theophanes Gabunia; Priests – Father Giorgi Beridze and father Andria Gelovani; Deacons – father Pavle Dekanozishvili and father Basil Nemsadze (***Kyrion II,* 2006:** 384-385). As it is clear from the report dated July 22, 1833, from the Archbishop Moses, Mikheil Sharvashidze had warned father Anton about the impending invasion of Circassians in Abkhazia, and father Anton had refrained from going there (***Kyrion II,* 2006:** 385). **2012: 194).**

The first positive result of the activity of Georgian clergy was visible by 1832. By that time, 1,071 Samurzakano Abkhazians had been baptized as Christians (***ACAC*, 1881:** 249, 250 – №172). This was a clear confirmation that the Abkhaz living in Samurzakano considered themselves part of the Georgian world. The Georgian clergy acted very cautiously in the region in order to return the population to the mother church (**Pavliashvili, 1995:** 46). **They also spoke the Abkhazian language and were well acquainted with the customs and traditions of the region's population** (**Pavliashvili, 2000:** 44).

In 1831, the consecration of churches began actively in Samurzakano (***Kyrion II,* 2006:** 381). At the same time, the restoration of the Bedia Church was also on the agenda. In 1810, divine services had been renewed there, but they were soon discontinued after the church was damaged by Russian artillery during the 1812 attack on Bedia (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 364). In 1832, with the support of Metropolitan Davit Tsereteli and his sister Marta (wife of Levan V Dadiani), restoration work began, but it was soon halted due to the unexpected death of the Queen of Samegrelo (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 382).

Mikheil Sharvashidze's activity in Samurzakano became more noticeable starting from the early 1830s, when he had somewhat secured the throne of the Prince of Abkhazia (**Papaskiri, 2004:** 147). He had been involved in the unrest of 1827. General K. Hesse informed N. Sipyagin: *"I asked the owner of Abkhazia, Major Sharvashidze, about the reasons why he was in Samurzakano and causing unrest there"* (***ACAC*, 1878:** 398 – №326). It seems that the involvement of the Abkhazians in the Samurzakano unrest was not happening without his permission (**Takalandze, 1999(a):** 78). Although his father officially recognized Samurzakano as belonging to the Dadiani family, the young Abkhazian prince did not intend to accept this

[1] In 1829, Tsarism carried out another administrative "reform" in Western Georgia, uniting the three dioceses in the Odishi principality (Tchkondidi, Tsageri, and Tsaishi) and named it the "Samegrelo Diocese" (**Japaridze An., 2012:** 194).

recognition. This cast doubt on the legitimacy of the Dadiani family's rights over Samurzakano. Later, he wrote that *"he never lost hope that the Russian Emperor would recognize his rights over Samurzakano"* (**Takalandze, 1999(a):** 78).

It is worth noting that by the early 1830s, Samurzakano was quite populous. According to data from 1831, there were 10,788 people and 1,798 households living there (***Abkhazia & Abkhazians*, 2005:** 19). Naturally, such sources of income were very attractive to the Prince of Abkhazia.

The rivalry between Levan Dadiani and Mikheil Sharvashidze over Samurzakano became particularly active from the 1830s, what greatly alarmed the Russian authorities. Baron Georg Andreas von Rosen considered this area as part of Samegrelo (***"The lands under the authority of Samegrelo and its ruler, including Samurzakano"* /Esadze, 1907:** 107/), and in this regard, Dadiani had the clear support of the Russians (***ACAC*, 1881:** 453 – №338, 339). Theodor Tornau expressed concern that the Russians would annex Samurzakano to Samegrelo (**Tornau, 2008:** 184). It is evident that the Russian government's policy was oriented towards the abolition of principalities. They deemed the existence of local rulers unnecessary. Dadiani, though loyal to the Russians, was also seen as a figure whose further strengthening was unacceptable.

By the beginning of 1832, the situation in Samurzakano had become slightly tense again. According to the ruler of Samegrelo, several "bandits" sheltered in Tsebelda and Abkhazia were behind this unrest, and they also contributed to the slave trade (**Kilasonia, 2018:** 146). Indeed, slave trading in the Enguri-Ghalidzghi region was largely protected by the Abkhazian principality. At the head of this operation were Prince Khalil-bey Sharvashidze and nobleman Hasan Marghania (**Kilasonia, 2018:** 151).

Levan entrusted the task of restoring order to his secretary, Nikoloz Dadiani. Nikoloz, in turn, delegated this responsibility to his son-in-law, Alibeg (later baptized as Alexander) Sharvashidze. By March 5, Nikoloz reported to Levan that he had received an oath of loyalty from the Anchabadzes, but he was still unsure whether the issue was truly resolved: *"They are preparing for hostility,"* warned the great Niko Prince Levan (**Dadiani, 2022:** 128 – №28). However, by May of the same year, a hostage was taken from the Anchabadzes (**Dadiani, 2022:** 130 – №48). However, it was becoming more difficult to stop the unrest, and by August 25, 1832, Alibeg Sharvashidze requested 300 horsemen to ensure stability in the region (**Dadiani, 2022:** 131, 132 – №104). Ultimately, the issue was resolved by February 1834, when the rebellious Anchabadze swore allegiance to Dadiani, and his lands were returned to him (**Dadiani, 2022:** 143 – №40).

In the same February, Baron G. Rosen met with Colonel Mikheil and Lieutenant-Colonel Hasan-Bey Sharvashidze, where the senior officials of the Abkhazian principality pledged that they would recognize Samurzakano as the property of the Prince of Samegrelo (***Materials on the History of Abkhazia..*, 2011:** №108 – 73-74).

In 1832, Levan V handed over the governance of Samurzakano (the administration) to his cousin Tariel Katsia II's son Dadiani (**Soselia, 1990:** 96). He held

this position until 1840 (**Khorava, 2001:** 54). Two years after his appointment, Tariel suspected that "Grand" Niko Dadiani was trying to replace him, which prompted the secretary of Samegrelo, the elderly relative, to officially convince him of the groundlessness of his concerns with a letter dated February 7, 1834 (**Dadiani, 2022:** 143 – №32).

In 1832, the Russians built a fort at the Enguri river on its right bank, where the river divides into two branches, in present-day Tagiloni, and stationed a Russian garrison there (**Dubois, 1839:** 338; **Dubois, 2002:** 259-260). The fort at Atangelo controlled the route to Samegrelo and essentially served as a control mechanism for the princes of Samegrelo and Abkhazia (**Dumbadze, 1957:** 268). Its location was significant because the Russians had granted Dadiani control of the border on the Enguri (**Kadaria, 2003:** 114). This garrison was led by Lieutenant-Colonel Gedrimovich (***ACAC*, 1881:** 435 – №301). Its main task was to monitor Samurzakano, but despite this, Dadiani continued to exercise his authority over the region: he issued orders, handled civil affairs, and more (**Dumbadze, 1942:** 78). This was entirely natural, as despite the Russian garrison in Atangelo, at that time, the Russians had not categorically considered limiting Levan's powers in the Enguri-Ghalidzga area (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 6).

However, one of the proposed locations for the fort was the village of Ilori, but it was rejected on the grounds that it would provoke dissatisfaction among the neighbouring Abkhazians (***Anthology of Law Documents..*, 2017:** 176 – №2.52). However, it seems that the issue was more complex. Despite the Russian administration considering Samurzakano as part of Samegrelo (***Anthology of Law Documents..*, 2017:** 175, 178 – №2.52, 2.53), St. Petersburg did not rule out the possibility of annexing this area to Abkhazia in the future. Especially considering that the Russians were equating the Samurzakano people with the Abkhazians (***Anthology of Law Documents..*, 2017:** 161, 239, 251 – №2.48, 2.91, 2.94). This likely influenced the decision to station troops on the border between Samegrelo and Samurzakano.

As noted earlier, during the unrest of 1827, the Russian local authorities had refused Levan Dadiani's request to station Russian armed units in Samurzakano to ensure peace, leaving only one company in Zugdidi. However, from the early 1830s, the Russian army began increasing its presence in the Odishi principality. This was primarily related to ensuring the security of the Black Sea coastline. On August 21, 1831, the headquarters of the Samegrelo Infantry Regiment's 2nd Battalion, the 2nd Grenadiers, and the 4th Musketeers were stationed at Redut-Kale (***HANAG*, 311:** sheet 7).

Also stationed in Odishi was the 5th and 6th Musketeers of the Samegrelo Infantry Regiment (***HANAG*, 311:** sheets 4-5). Soon, these units were transferred to Imereti, but shortly afterward, on February 3, 1832, Colonel Tikharev requested their return to Samegrelo, as they found the climate at their new location unfavourable. Furthermore, he argued that it was necessary to strengthen the Atangelo fort (***HANAG*, 311:** sheets 4-5). It is not clear from whom the fortification of this fort was required. It was likely related to the potential risk of unrest in Samur-

zakano. Tikharev's request was partially fulfilled very quickly, and on February 5, the 5th Musketeers returned to Redut-Kale (***HANAG*, 311:** sheets 8, 13).

The Russians also justified their increasing military presence in the region by the need to prevent the slave trade. Dadiani struggled to combat this problem in Samurzakano (**Kilasonia, 2018:** 147). The slave trade was secretly protected by the Turks living in the village of Okumi, who were connected to Emukhvari and bought slaves from him, transporting them secretly to İstanbul (Kilasonia, 2018: 147).

Dadiani was gradually losing Russian support in Samurzakano. This was especially true after the fortress of Atangelo was built on the Enguri, instead of at Ghalidzga. Mikheil Sharvashidze believed that the Russian Empire was returning Samurzakano to Abkhazia. In 1834, the Prince of Abkhazia swore an oath of loyalty to the population of Ilori. This village, which had 70 households, belonged to the church and its inhabitants did not pay taxes either to the Prince of Odishi or to the Prince of Abkhazia (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 71).

It is worth noting that in addition to its religious influence, Ilori had significant economic importance. Near the church, one of the largest markets in the region was held, attracting people from all over the area (**Fadeev, 2022:** 280). Therefore, it brought substantial income to Dadiani's treasury.

The year 1834 began with certain actions by the Prince of Abkhazia aimed at claiming Samurzakano. On January 29 of the same year (Old Style), Levan Dadiani traveled to Tbilisi to meet with the governor-general, leaving the governance of Samegrelo to Grand Niko Dadiani. Niko then sent Lieutenant Ivan Gavrilovich Kaputsin, stationed in Tagiloni with the Samegrelo Infantry Regiment, to gather information about the activities that Mikheil had undertaken in Samurzakano (**Dadiani, 2022:** 140 – №15).

Although Russia was gradually restricting Dadiani's rights and influence in Samurzakano, this did not mean that Mikheil Sharvashidze got the upper hand. As a result, Baron G. Rosen demanded on June 12, 1834, in a stern tone, that Mikheil cease his arbitrary actions and clearly define his borders: *"I cannot express my surprise that you have decided to take such arbitrary actions in another's domain, for the authorities are aware that the boundary between Samegrelo and Abkhazia runs along the Ghalidzga river. Since the village of Ilori is located on the left bank of this river, it cannot belong to Abkhazia"* (***ACAC*, 1881:**447 – №329).

The governor-general demanded that Mikheil officially annul in a written way the oath of allegiance taken by the people of Ilori, return hostages, and inform them that their ruler was the Prince of Samegrelo (***ACAC*, 1881:** 447 – №329). Baron Rosen ordered the Prince of Abkhazia to document the execution of these instructions and send them to Tbilisi, from where they would be forwarded to St. Petersburg (***ACAC*, 1881:** 447 – №329).

Naturally, these documents would include the recognition by the Prince of Abkhazia that Ilori belonged to Samurzakano, and that Dadiani was the rightful ruler of Samurzakano. It seems that the Governor-General had already been tasked with gathering the relevant documentation, since after the entry of the

Russian administration into Samurzakano, the Prince of Abkhazia's claims were effectively nullified by his own words.

Mikheil was forced to comply with Baron Rosen's "instructions," and on June 20, 1834, the Prince of Abkhazia officially acknowledged that his authority did not extend to Ilori: *"I do not deny that* ***the village of Ilori, located on the left bank of the Ghalidzga River, belongs to Samegrelo,*** *and I will inform the people of Ilori of this, and you will send this declaration where necessary"* (emphasis in the document; ***HANAG*****, 357:** sheet 14). Mikheil declared that this settlement was part of Levan Dadiani's domain (***HANAG*****, 357:** sheets 6-7). Mikheil did not fully recognize the border between the princedoms of Samegrelo and Abkhazia, as defined by his father and Levan. Therefore, the principality of Samegrelo occasionally had to seek certain conditions from him. Specifically, on May 17, 1832, when Grand Niko Dadiani arrived in Likhni, Mikheil confirmed that the border passed along the Ghalidzga river (**Dadiani, 2022:** 130 – №50). The same was confirmed by the Prince of Abkhazia on July 28, 1834 (**Takalandze, 1999(a):** 80).

While the two princes were preoccupied with their own rivalry, the Russians were strengthening their position in their domains. In particular, between 1834-1835, a road was constructed from Redut-Kale to Sokhumi and from Sokhumi to Gagra. In 1835, fortresses were built at Ilori (Dadiani's domain) and Dranda (Sharvashidze's domain) (**Khorava, 2021(b):** 163).

While Mikheil was engaged in justifying himself before Baron Rosen, his younger brother Alexander, together with the Tsbeldians, was planning an attack on Samurzakano. On July 25, 1834, the Governor-General sent suggested Tamar Sharvashidze to send to Tbilisi her son Alexander with a "recommendation". Rosen promised Katsia Dadiani's daughter, that her son would not be arrested (***ACAC*****, 1881:** 449 – №331).

Despite a temporary retreat, Mikheil was not going to give up Samurzakano. He decided to undermine his cousin from within, by weakening his "fortress." To implement this plan, in January 1836, he married Levan Dadiani's servant, Giorgi Dadiani's daughter, Alexandra (Tsutsa) (**Esadze, 1907:** 133). Mikheil's goal was precisely calculated – his father-in-law, Giorgi Dadiani, was one of Levan Dadiani's opposition leaders (**Kadaria, 2003:** 115). According to M. Dumbadze, Giorgi Dadiani helped facilitate this marriage (**Dumbadze, 1942:** 84). It is possible that Mikheil's abduction of Tsutsa was even pre-arranged by the future father-in-law and son-in-law, since Levan V would never have allowed this marriage, and with the "abduction" legend, the Prince of Samegrelo could not prevent it.

It is notable that until then, the Prince of Abkhazia had been married twice. His first wife was a "Circassian woman" raised by his mother, whom he divorced due to childlessness (**Esadze, 1907:** 133), and his second wife was Mariam, the daughter of the Prince of Samegrelo Niko Dadiani (**Kadaria, 2003:** 115-116). However, Mikheil considered both of these marriages to be forced upon him (**Kadaria, 2003:** 116). Notably, in 1833, he sought to marry his cousin Levan V daughter, Nino (**Papaskiri, 2004:** 148). The Prince of Abkhazia's "desire" was scandalous, as

it involved signs of incest, according to Christian (Orthodox) morality. Naturally, Mikheil incurred Baron Rosen's wrath over this matter (**Papaskiri, 2004:** 148-149). The Prince of Abkhazia shamelessly and audaciously claimed that this marriage would help establish peace between the Megrelians and the Abkhazs and asked the Governor-General not to interfere with it (**Kadaria, 2003:** 115).

Baron Rosen justly rejected the "arguments" of Safar-Bey's son, and the marriage did not take place. The prince did not specify how peace would be established between the two principalities if it could not be facilitated by cousin relationships. It is doubtful that Levan Dadiani would have granted a pretext for Samurzakano through his daughter. However, as T. Kadaria suggests, the Prince of Samegrelo was not opposed to the marriage, but Rosen, who, in the researcher's view, was frightened by the potential alliance between Samegrelo and Abkhazia, caused even him to fall into confusion with his harsh tone (**Kadaria, 2003:** 114-115). We believe M. Dumbadze's conclusion is correct, that Levan's refusal was due to the close blood ties between the two princes (**Dumbadze, 1942:** 84). Because of this, Mikheil bragged that Levan would have to "baptize" the insult from the Prince of Abkhazia with blood (**Kadaria, 2003:** 115). The third marriage of the Prince of Abkhazia was also deemed illegal by the Governor-General of Georgia (***ACAC*, 1881:** 453 – №338). The government ultimately recognized this marriage, which was conducted according to ecclesiastical rites, and Alexandra Dadiani-Sharvashidze was awarded the Order of St. Catherine (**Esadze, 1907:** 133).

This marriage still caused Levan Dadiani's indignation, and he dismissed Giorgi Mdivanbegtukhutsesi from his position (**Dumbadze, 1942:** 84). Niko I "the Great" Dadiani's (author of *The Life of the Georgians*)[1] disinherited descendants first moved to Svaneti and then to Abkhazia. This event further exacerbated the disagreement between the descendants of "the Great" Niko and the Prince of Samegrelo, a conflict that continued until the end of the principality's existence (**Dumbadze, 1942:** 84).

In the spring of 1836, an uprising against Levan V broke out in Samegrelo, led by the noblemen of Odishi, Katsia and Giorgi Chichua, with active participation from Mikheil's brothers-in-law. On April 27, 1836, Baron Rosen sent a letter instructing Levan to arrest Giorgi Dadiani and send him to Kutaisi (**Kadaria, 2003:** 28). However, the Governor-General's order could not be executed by the Samegrelo authorities.

The unrest that began in Odishi soon spread to the area between the Enguri and Ghalidzga rivers. The start of this uprising was directly linked by G. Rosen to the Prince of Abkhazia's third marriage, and he directly accused the Prince of Abkhazia of stirring up the situation in Samurzakano, which, according to the Gove-

[1] In the first half of 19th century in Samegrelo principality there were two Niko Dadiani. Niko I was grandson of Otia Dadiani and Levan Dadiani's father's cousin. Niko II was grandson. Niko I cousin's son and Levan V father's cousin's son (**Dadiani, 1962:** 10). Niko I is also referred to by the epithet "the Great," which was attributed to him for 2 reasons: a) his great influence and authority as a person, and b) his older age compared to the second Niko. Therefore, Mikheil's second and third wives were blood relatives of each other.

rnor-General, belonged to the Prince of Samegrelo (***ACAC*, 1881:** 453 – №338).

It is likely that the father-in-law and son-in-law had already coordinated their actions and were planning to change the government in Samegrelo. On August 20, 1836, Levan's heir, Davit, wrote to his brother Grigol: *"Giorgi Dadiani is in Abkhazia, he is supporting Mikheil, Abkhazia is in revolt, both are threatening me to kill"* (**Kadaria, 2003:** 28-29).

However, Levan Dadiani did not sit idly by either. He also attempted to exacerbate the internal problems of his cousin so much that he would have no time to think about Samurzakano. Mikheil, indeed, faced a difficult situation in his principality. In 1827, after six years of exile, the Russian authorities returned Hasan-Bey, the son of Kelesh-Bey, to Abkhazia. Hasan-Bey had previously supported Aslan-Bey and opposed the rule of Safar-Bey. This was the same Hasan-Bey who, as mentioned earlier, had wished to marry the widow of Manuchar Sharvashidze. Hasan-Bey had considerable authority among the Abkhazians who were dissatisfied with the existing situation in the principality (**Tornau, 2008:** 189; **Eichwald, 2005:** 219).

The Russian authorities hoped to pacify this portion of the population through Hasan-Bey, as Ermolov held that a six-year exile was enough for Mikheil Sharvashidze's uncle to stop thinking about the throne (**Antelava, Dzidzariya, 1953:** 233). This opinion had also been formed by the ruler of Abkhazia, who therefore also intervened to have his uncle returned. However, Hasan-Bey did not intend to play the role of Mikheil Sharvashidze's loyal vassal, and thus, in the 1830s, the covert conflict between the uncle and nephew turned into an open confrontation (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 282). Naturally, this situation was advantageous for Levan Dadiani, and in this conflict, he secretly supported Hasan-Bey (**Tornau, 2008:** 190-191).

Levan Dadiani was able to pacify the rebels in Samegrelo and Samurzakano, but the defeated Mikheil still considered renewing the disturbances in Samurzakano. In November of the same year, it became known to the Russian administration that the ruler of Abkhazia was preparing to attack Samurzakano and had called up several hundred Jiks for this purpose, while his brother Alexander had gone again to Tsebelda (***ACAC*, 1881:** 453, 454 – №339). Tamar Dadiani-Sharvashidze officially informed the Russians that her son did not recognize the rights of the Dadianis in Samurzakano and intended to take hostages from the Samurzakano people, *"because he considers this land unlawfully seized by the ruler of Samegrelo*" (***ACAC*, 1881:** 454 – №339). In response, the Russians quickly reinforced the military units stationed near the village of Ilori and placed two companies near the Enguri river (***ACAC*, 1881:** 454 – №339). Levan Dadiani himself, with his heir Davit, arrived with 500 men near Ilori (***ACAC*, 1881:** 454 – №339). Such serious preventive measures by the Russians and the Odishians forced Mikheil to abandon his plans and retreat once again. On November 3, he informed the commander of the Russian forces in Abkhazia, - Major-General A. G. Pantsovski, that he had no hostile intentions regarding Samurzakano, and that his mother had provided incorrect information to the Russians (***ACAC*, 1881:**

454 – №339). M. Dumbadze mistakenly assumed that the village of Ilori, which Mikheil had captured in 1834, was only now given up (**Dumbadze, 1942:** 77). As mentioned, Mikheil had already relinquished this village in the same year.

The confrontation between Abkhazia and Odishi in Samurzakano negatively affected the economic life of the region. While a hundred years earlier, Samurzakano had been "prosperous," in the first quarter of the 19th century, due to the constant military tension between the two principalities, permanent rebellions against Dadiani, and the buying and selling of prisoners, the region had become more devastated and impoverished. The main occupation of the population was agriculture, but the harvests were so meager that they could barely meet their own needs (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 134). This branch of agriculture was mainly traditional for the region (**Antelava, 1951:** 106).[1]

As J.-F. Gamba says, cultivated lands were rarity for this area. The rest of population, about 800 households lved mostly in the highland. Lowland was depopulated (**Gamba, 1987:** 122-133). Different figures give well-known German scientist and traveler Eduard Eichwald. He traveled through the Caucasus between 1825 and 1826, following Gamba's journey. According to E. Eichwald's data, there were approximately 1,798 households in Samurzakano with a population of 10,788 (**Eichwald, 2005:** 223).

It seems that Eichwald's data is considerably more reliable, as according to the 1850s data, when the territory of Samurzakano had been somewhat reduced, the population of the region was recorded as 10,100 (**Romanovski, 2004:** 258). However, these figures were likely still somewhat inaccurate, as official data from 1867 recorded 22,000 people living in Samurzakano (**Totadze, 1995:** 81). According to Russian officials' calculations, in the first half of the 1840s, there were 2,064-3,000 households in Samurzakano (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 57, 134). If we consider the average number of people in a household to be 4, then the population of Samurzakano should be estimated at 12,000. Other data suggest that by 1847, the population of Samurzakano varied from 6,000 to 8,000 people (***ACAC*, 1885:** 248 – No. 256). These figures are not entirely accurate. As it turns out, the impoverished population of Samurzakano mainly moved towards the interior regions of Samegrelo, such as Tsalenjikha, Zugdidi, Martvili, and other areas (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2008:** 68). In relatively peaceful conditions, some of the displaced persons returned, but in the 19th century, their numbers significantly decreased because officials of the Russian Empire did not allow them to return **Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2008:** 68).

After unsuccessful forceful actions, Mikheil attempted to gain control over Samurzakano by "legal" means — by sending complaints to the Russian administration of Georgia. In August 1838, he petitioned General Evgeny Golovin (1838-1842), requesting the establishment of the border between Samegrelo and Abkhazia (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 5). The ruler of Abkhazia accused the house of Dadiani of seizing Samurzakano (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 16). He claimed that Levan

[1] Formerly there was a thriving textile industry here. However, in the 18th-19th centuries, this sector appears to have declined in Samurzakano.

had no legitimate rights to Samurzakano, and that the border between Abkhazia and Samegrelo should be drawn along the river Iskhurei, rather than at Ghalidzga. Therefore, he demanded that the matter be discussed in the court of Imereti (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 16). Mikheil apparently deceived Golovin by claiming that Samurzakano was supposedly subordinated to his grandfather, Kelesh-bey (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 19).

A little bit earlier before these events, the ruler of Abkhazia organized a protest against Dadiani and gathered the Sharvashidze family from Samurzakano in Sokhumi (**Tsintsandze, 1989:** 97). On December 20 of the same year, the ruler of Imereti, General Akim (Ekim) Espejo informed Levan of this petition (***ZSHEM*, №**7486). In early January 1839, the ruler of Samegrelo sent a reply to Golovin, expressing his indignation that his cousin was attempting to initiate a court process without grounds, in which Dadiani would be summoned as an ordinary citizen of Imereti. Levan considered this an affront to his honor, stating that the matter of Samegrelo's ruler was only within the jurisdiction of the Russian governor of Georgia (***ZSHEM*, №**7486). The ruler of Samegrelo explained that Samurzakano had passed to him by inheritance, and to confirm his rights to the region, he referred to the agreement made with Giorgi and Mikheil Sharvashidze between 1818 and 1827 (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 16). The Russian authorities were already preparing to establish a new political system in Western Georgia, which would involve the abolition of local princedoms and the establishment of direct Russian rule. The first victim of this policy was the Kingdom of Imereti in 1810, followed by Guria in 1829, and in 1837, Tsebelda was also annexed. The subjugation of the latter was a significant military-strategic and political success for Russia in its struggle for control over the Caucasus. This increased activity by Russia was facilitated by the victory over Türkiye in the 1828-1829 war, and the signing of the Treaty of Adrianople on September 2 (14), 1829, which affected Eastern Black Sea coastal regions and Georgia. Specifically, Russia gained the entire Black Sea coast from the confluence of the River Kuban to the St. Nicholas checkpoint (Shekvetili, Guria), including the forts of Anapa, Sokhum-kale, and Poti; the Ottoman Empire recognized the Russia's ownership of Kartli-Kakheti, Samtskhe-Javakheti (Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki), Imereti, Guria, Samegrelo, and Abkhazia (**Svanidze, 2007:** 282).

Emperor Nicholas I (1825-1855), already in 1829, presented a clear plan to the governor of Georgia, Count Ivan Paskevich (1827-1830): *"The permanent submission of the mountain peoples or the destruction of the disobedient"* (**Shcherbatov, 1896:** 229-230).

Against this backdrop, the ruler of Abkhazia once again raised the issue of Samurzakano, making a splendid "gift" to the Russians. They did not delay and took excellent advantage of this dispute. Moreover, as noted by the Vice-Roy, Mikheil Vorontsov, this ongoing dispute between the two rulers was creating significant problems for the effective functioning of the Black Sea coastal line (***ACAC*, 1885:** 254 – No. 262).

Governor E. Golovin requested the documentation from the authorities of Samegrelo, which stated that the boundary between the two princedoms was the

river Ghalidzga (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 16). Levan sent the necessary documents and information from Tbilisi on February 18, 1839 (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 16). Specifically, these included Grigol Dadiani's "Request Points" and the Russian authorities' decree regarding the acceptance of Grigol as a subject of Russia. The title of the ruler of Samegrelo was recorded as *"Lord of Odishi, Svaneti, and Abkhazia."* According to Levan, "Abkhazia" at the time referred to Samurzakano, as the people living in this region were subjects of the ruler of Samegrelo, the Abkhazians (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 22-23).

In addition, the documents presented included: the 1818 agreement between Levan Dadiani and Giorgi Sharvashidze (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 24); the 1827 act signed by the nobles of Zuphu and Mikheil Sharvashidze (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 25); these documents were accompanied by a letter from M. Gorchakov, sent on May 30, 1823 (№1594), which granted the ruler of Samegrelo the right to forcibly expel Tamar Sharvashidze from Samurzakano (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 25-26). Since most of these documents were issued or signed by high-ranking local Russian authorities, it was clear that Russia considered Samurzakano to be an unquestionable part of Samegrelo.

On April 10, E. Golovin responded that a special investigation would be initiated to clarify the matter (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 16). The "investigation of truth" was to determine the actual border between Samegrelo and Abkhazia. In the spring of 1839, Golovin assigned this task to Lieutenant Petrov of the Topographic Corps (***ZSHEM*, №**7487: sheet 17). Dadiani was required to fully assist the investigator in completing the assignment *"within Samegrelo and especially in Samurzakano"* (***ZSHEM*, №**7487: sheet 17).

The Abkhaz historian M. Gumba believes that the investigation was biased from the outset and that the conclusions were destined to favor the Principality of Abkhazia (**Gumba M. V., 2021:** 224). However, this assertion is completely weak and baseless.[1]

The investigation was soon concluded, and based on it, on December 31, 1839, E. Golovin issued a decree, establishing the boundary between the two rival princedoms as the river Ghalidzga, from its source to its confluence with the Black Sea (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 6, 16). Levan Dadiani was notified of this decision in written (letter №238 – ***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 16). It should be noted that E. Golovin's decree was entirely just and objective.

In reality, however, this investigation was only a formal act, since the issue of Samurzakano had already been decided in St. Petersburg (**Dumbadze, 1942:** 77). Therefore, the Governor-General himself annulled his previous decree after five months and made a new, radically opposite decision: Samurzakano should be taken from Dadiani (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 6). In February 1840, the area between the Ghalidzga and Enguri rivers was separated from Odishi (***ACAC*, 1885:** 248 –

[1] Territorial disputes were not only between the principalities in Samurzakano. In the late 1830s, the Saberio princes Batu and Almaskhan Sharvashidze could not divide a small estate in the village of Otsartse and found a way out by selling this land, along with the peasants living there, to Levan Dadiani for 1,000 rubles. The local population protested this decision of the nobles and even planned to revolt, but did not dare to go against Dadiani's army (**Dzidzariya, 2015:** 551).

№256). There, like in Tsebelda, a military district was established, with its center in the village of Okumi. The boundary between Samegrelo and Samurzakano was set at the Enguri river (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 20). Interestingly, in the same year, the Russian occupation regime created the "Ossetian Okrug" in Shida Kartli (**Topchishvili, 2023:** 79).

M. Gumba, although he critically assesses the investigation conducted in 1839, praises the decision made by St. Petersburg and completely unjustifiably asserts that this act allowed the people of Samurzakano to escape the influence of Samegrelo (**Gumba M. V., 2021:** 225).

The flag given to the Samurzakanoans by the Russian Emperor in 1841

Rabai and Nugamtsira Inscription
(Gudava, 2nd Half of 11th Century)

CHAPTER IV. SAMURZAKANO IN 1840-1918

§1. Samurzakano Sabokaulo in 1840-1864

The establishment of "Pristavstvo"[1] (Georgian – *"Sabokaulo"*) institute in Tsebelda and Samurzakano was a precondition for the commencement of civil reforms in South Caucasus. The institution was considered as a sort of intermediary link and aimed at the full incorporation of a certain territory into the state system of the Russian Empire. The first Pristavstvo in the Caucasus was established on November 3, 1769, in Kabarda, and the position was entrusted to the Christianized and at St. Petersburg-educated local nobleman, Nogay Murza[2], Second Major Dmitry V. Taganov, who was tasked with overseeing the Kabardian nobility. These nobles were required to carry out all their activities in agreement with the Pristav. In addition, Taganov was also assigned the task of establishing contacts with the Cherkessians of the Trans-Kuban region (**Afaunova, 2007:** 101; **Khlynina.., 2012:** 33; **Nakhusheva, 2020:** 63, 64). By 1802, the imperial government had appointed a Russian national as the Pristav in Kabarda (**Khlynina.., 2012:** 34), which indicated the tightening of the colonial policy.

In South Caucasia, two administrative units were established – the "Georgia-Imeretian Governorate" and the "Caspian District." The imperial government and its officials believed that these changes would "improve" administration and facilitate the accomplishment of the region's colonization and Russifying tasks (**Vanishvili, 1989:** 18).

As a result of the reform, local participation was entirely removed from the colonial administration, and the civil laws of King Vakhtang VI were excluded from the civil legal framework. The reorganization completely disregarded local, traditional customs. Despite the activation of civil governance, the military component remained unchanged (**Dumbadze, 1957:** 269-270).

These changes caused drastic dissatisfaction among the population. The Russian bureaucracy, in addition to discriminating against locals on an ethnic basis, also increased the economic pressure on the population. This discontent exploded in the form of the 1841 uprising in Guria (**Khatchapuridze, 1931; Dumbadze, 1957:** 271). This popular-national protest also found support in Samurzakano (**Khatchapuridze, 1931:** 54; **Dzidzariya, 2015:** 434). When the government demanded the sending of a 600-person militia from Samurzakano to suppress the rebellion in Guria, only 336 volunteers were found, and the Abzhua refused altogether to mobilize for this purpose (**Khatchapuridze, 1931:** 54; **Dzidzariya, 2015:** 550).

[1] An administrative-territorial unit of the Russian Empire in the late 18th and early 20th centuries. *Pritavstvos* (bailiffs), territorially corresponding to the *uezds* (counties), were formed to control the Muslim nations of the Caucasus and Central Asia. They could be both the main administrative unit on any territory, and the unit of management of "foreigners" in the presence of parallel administrative units for the management of Russian or other Christian populations.

[2] *Murza* – (Persian: "prince") an aristocratic title in Persian and Turkoman societies.

The rebellion had an impact on Western Georgia and other regions of the Western Caucasia. Among them was Samurzakano, where rumors spread that the new Russian administration would impose higher taxes and conscript the local population into the Russian army (***ACAC*, 1884:** 173 – №199). However, the strict actions of the colonial regime against the rebels and the introduction of additional Russian forces into Guria allowed for the prevention of an uprising in Samurzakano (***ACAC*, 1884:** 172 – №199).

The situation also escalated in Eastern Caucasus, which led to a certain retreat of Tsarism, and representatives of the local population once again appeared in the administrative offices of South Caucasia, and some of Vakhtang VI's laws were partially reinstated (**Dumbadze, 1957:** 274).

It is noteworthy that Levan himself requested the establishment of a Russian military administration in Samurzakano to ensure security there (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 20). Apparently, E. Golovin took advantage of this situation, and on January 20, 1840 (***List of Documents..*, 2021:** 118), Russian military authority was established in Ghalidzga-Enguri interfluve, in the form of *the Samurzakano Okrug*, which was subordinate to a military officer – Pristav (*the Bokauli*). The Bokauli of Samurzakano, in turn, was subordinated to the head of the II Department of the *"Black Sea coastal line"* (which was later renamed the "III Department") (***ACAC*, 1885:** 248 – №256; **Beradze, 2018:** 441). The Russians justified this decision by stating that after many years of unrest, order had to be established in the region (**Dumbadze, 1942:** 78). Abkhazian researchers note that the Russians introduced direct rule in Abkhazia in 1837 and 1840 (**Dzidzariya, 2014:** 209). However, as we have seen, this area neither belonged to Abkhazian principality at that time nor before. It was separated not from Sharvashidze, but from Dadiani. Thus, the aforementioned claim is entirely groundless. Similarly, the claims of O. Bgazhba and S. Lakoba that the establishment of Russian rule in Samurzakano was supposedly connected to the confirmation of M. Sharvashidze's rights over the region (**Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 229) are also completely groundless, as this area was not transferred to the Russians for their "owner" – the ruler of Abkhazia.

In reality, this was just a pretext, as disturbances continued in the region in the following years (**Dumbadze, 1957:** 269). The first Bokauli of Samurzakano was appointed Lieutenant Kirilov (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 47). Interestingly, the Russian term *"Pristav"* was chosen as the equivalent of the Georgian legal term *"Bokauli"* (In Russian historical sources – «*Бакаулъ*»), and the officer's salary was also referred to as "Sabokaulo" (In Russian historical sources – «*Сабокаулo*») (***ACAC*, 1904:** 331-332 – №289). This indicates that the Russian colonial regime was forced to recognize Georgian law as the only legitimate legal system in Georgia (including Samurzakano).

In the 1840s, the title of the Bokauli of Samurzakano was also held by Staff-Captain Gabaev, Major Davidovskiy, and Staff-Captain Abashidze (***ACAC*, 1885:** 249, 255 – №257, 262). As we can see, two of these Bokaulis – *Gabaev (Gabashvili)* and *Abashidze* – were Georgians.

The deputy Bokauli of Samurzakano were mostly local people who knew Georgian (***ACAC*, 1904:** 333 – №289). Of course, the authorities were forced to recruit a Georgian military officer to the region who would not have truble establishing relations with the local population, the vast majority of whom were of Georgian (Mingrelian) origin. The commanders of the 5 companies were appointed from the local nobility of Samurzakano, each with 10 assistants, and 20 Uriadniks[1] were also assigned. The militia was formed from the local aristocracy and peasants (**Anchabadze G., 2018:** 63). Besides them, by Kirilov's proposal, the authorities established an oral court (*Словесный судъ*)[2], whose clerks were also representatives of the local nobility. However, the authorities did not pay them a salary. Their income was supposed to come from the fees collected from the cases they examined (**Esadze, 1907:** 121). As a result, the judges often abused their position and were more focused on personal gain than on a fair judgment of the matter (**Esadze, 1907:** 122-123). The court was governed both by the laws of Vakhtang VI and the local customary law (**Esadze, 1907:** 122).

Despite the fact that Samurzakano was separated from Samegrelo, the local population still considered themselves subjects of the Dadiani family. In 1853, a peasant from Samurzakano cut off his ear and placed it by the corpse of the deceased ruler, David Dadiani, as a sign that he would obey him even in the next world (**Inal-ipa, 1965:** 594).

Mikheil Sharvashidze, however, did not succeed with his petition. The authorities refused to transfer Samurzakano to him on the grounds that this region, which had long been separated from the Principality of Abkhazia, as an independent political entity, was not rightfully his. According to archival documents, General Evgeny Golovin personally went to Samegrelo and Abkhazia on June 6, 1840 (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 1), and informed both rulers of the official decision from St. Petersburg regarding the establishment of a Bokauli institute in Samurzakano (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 109).

It seems that after this visit, it was still unclear for Levan about the true motive behind the new decision by the main administrator, which is why Golovin, in a letter dated July 12, 1840, explained that neither side had convincingly proven its claim to Samurzakano before the Russian authorities (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 6).

Despite this "explanation" from the Head of the Russian military-political administration, Mikheil gained some "benefit." The territory of Samurzakano was reduced to the Okhurei river and transferred to the Principality of Abkhazia (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 1). Notably, this zone includes the village of Ilori, which, as seen earlier, both Mikheil and the main administrator, Count Rosen, considered part of Dadiani's domain. This upset Levan, as it categorically contradicted the explanation provided by Golovin in the letter of July 12 (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 7).

It is important to note that the decision to cut Samurzakano's territory to

[1] *Uriadnik* – a low-ranking position in the Tsarist Russian provincial police, specifically the head of a district police force.

[2] The institution was established in the Russian Empire in 1754, primarily to consider trade-related matters. Judicial decisions were not presented in written form, only orally (**Belovinskiy, 2007:** 628).

the Okhurei river was made, but one of the plans did not foresee the transfer of the village of Ilori to Abkhazia. It was supposed to remain within Samurzakano because the Russians intended to establish military fortifications there (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 76). However, the documents we have found do not indicate what caused the later change in this plan. It seems the Russians did not consider these fortifications strategically important, or they believed that the deployment of additional forces in the Principality of Abkhazia would better serve to strengthen their positions in the region. Moreover, the Principality of Abkhazia was often subjected to aggression by rebellious highlanders during the Caucasian War.

From the documents we discovered in the archives, it is clear that during the "investigation of the Samurzakano issue," the Russians "failed to clarify" that the owner of this region was Manuchar Sharvashidze (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 43-19). Therefore, after his death, since the region was *"left without a master,"* it was to be directly administered by the Russian authorities as a "neutral region" (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 74-75). To determine this, the Russians interrogated the princes[1] and gentry[2] of Samurzakano.

These individuals were likely members of the so-called "Independence Party," which we previously discussed, and its representative or leader appears to have been Prince Temurka Anchabadze. This assumption is strengthened by the fact that Temurka himself was among those ones who were questioned. They informed the Russian "investigating" officers that Samurzakano had never been subject to Abkhazia and Samegrelo, and, therefore, its rulers were independent governors (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 43; **Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 291, note 1). As we can see, this closely resembles the words that T. Anchabadze wrote to V. Bebutov back in 1827: *"There is no authority in this area, because Dadiani does not have the ability to subdue the population; and be assured, neither Dadiani, nor anyone from the Sharvashidze family will be able to govern or control this place"* (***ACAC*, 1884:** 396 – №325).

The respondents stated that the first ruler of this area was Kvapu Sharvashidze, then his son Murzakan, followed by Khutunia the son of Murzakan, Levan the son of Khutunia, and finally, Manuchar. When describing the latter, the Samurzakano nobility noted: *"He began ruling this area without inheritance, even while his cousin Levan had been alive, and forcibly took it"* (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 43-44). However, for unclear reasons, the respondents were mistaken here, as we have seen, Manuchar was Levan's nephew, not his brother, as they claimed.

Interestingly, the content of this interrogation is presented in the secret report from the Chief of Staff of the Caucasian Corps, Major-General Kotsebu, to the Head of the Black Sea Line's III Division, Colonel Muravyov, dated March 27,

[1] ***The Sharvashidzes:*** Ensign Levan, Almaskhan, Manuchar, Anton; ***The Anchabadzes:*** Staff-Captain Temurka, Junior Ensign Bezhan, Eristu, Burdghu, Lomkats, Zurab, Bezhan; ***The Emkhvaris:*** Beslangur, Butu, Murza-Kuli, Jamlet, Sharakhmet, Zurab, Aslan-bey, Omar, Rostom, Sorekh, Manuchar, Sosran, Balakhukhu; ***The Chkotuas:*** Ensign Jamlet, Ensign Makhu, Ensign Zurab, Katsi, Aslan-bey, Rostom, Islam, Manuchar; ***Inalishvili*** Kats.

[2] ***The Marghanias:*** Jamlet, Bezhan, Temurka, Sosran; ***The Akirtavas:*** Beslan, Temurka, Manuchar, Lomkats; ***The Zukhbaias:*** Tlapsu and Solomon.

1841 (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 42-43, 168). E. Golovin sent a letter to the Dadiani family on July 12, 1840. It seems that the Russians needed to "retroactively" "legitimize" their decision to take Samurzakano. They, of course, were aware of the existence of the so-called "Independence Party" and used this fact for their purposes.

Thus, the Tsarist authorities sought to find a "legal" basis for this illegal decision. In contrast, the rulers of Samegrelo, father and son, Levan and Davit Dadiani, noted that their son-in-law ruled the area as a subject of the Dadiani family, not as an independent ruler (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 27-28). According to their explanation, if Manuchar had held such a status, upon his death, power would have passed to his brother, Bezhan, according to the principle of seniority (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 27-28). However, this claim by the father and son did not correspond to the truth, as the principle of seniority had already been violated in Samurzakano's succession, as after Levan, the ruler became not his son, but his nephew. Moreover, as we know, Bezhan was well-known for his clearly anti-Russian stance, and, therefore, the government would never have agreed to his coming to power in Samurzakano.

Levan Dadiani did not expect this outcome. On November 20, 1840, he sent a complaint to Tsar Nicholas I (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 1-9). He appealed by stating that the protectorate act signed with Russia was a guarantee of his principality and authority, and that all of his military-political activities only confirmed his loyalty to the Russian Emperor, giving him no grounds to seize part of the principality (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 2). It was also noted that the decisions made by the new governor regarding this issue contradicted both the establishment of Russia's protectorate over the principality of Samegrelo by the Russian Emperor, in which Samurzakano was considered part of Odishi, and the positions of the previous governors (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 4-8). This was a clear complaint against the highest representative of the local government Russian.

In his complaint, Levan emphasized the loss of the revenues from Samurzakano (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 8). The Dadianis requested an annual compensation of 10,000 silver coins on May 21, 1840, for the economic damage inflicted by the government (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 57, 133).

Grigol Dadiani's son felt that Samegrelo would have to share the fate of Imereti and Guria (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 8). This fear was even more alive because he had certain problems with the lands of Racha, which was part of the principality of Odishi, over which Imereti had claims (***GNCM*, Ad-2229**).

At the end of the letter to Emperor Nicholas I, Levan stated that if circumstances required the surrender of Samurzakano, they were *"ready to sacrify it"* (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 7-8).

Levan "conceded," but it was difficult to him to give in Samurzakano. The irony of fate was that, as a truly loyal subject of the Russian Emperor, as he had repeatedly proven, no one was asking him anything anymore. The Russians already knew well that the leader of Samegrelo, the Dadiani, was their loyal ally in western Georgia (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 124). With these requests, Levan tried to defend his damaged honour. But this no longer concerned anyone except himself and his

family. Official St. Petersburg no longer needed Dadiani. In Russia the final decision on the abolition of the principality of Samegrelo was only a matter of time.

On November 20, 1840, Levan V asked for help in the matter of the return of Samurzakano from Count I. Paskevich. However, the former Chief Manager, as expected, responded that the resolution of this issue was not within his competence. Of course, it was less likely that Levan would receive assistance from someone as actively involved in Tsarist colonial policy in the Caucasus as Count Paskevich was. As sources confirm, Paskevich was well aware of how "independent" Samurzakano was from Samegrelo, but his priorities were the interests of the empire, rather than determining the borders of the small principality lost beyond the Caucasus mountains. Therefore, Ivan Paskevich informed E. Golovin about this correspondence on February 19, 1841 (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 48).

After this, the Dadiani family decided to seek justice directly in St. Petersburg, and they contacted the military minister, Adjutant-General Alexander Chernyshev. Levan wrote him a letter on April 22, 1842 (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 82-88), which his mother, Nino Bagrationi-Dadiani, handed over to the military minister in the beginning of November of the same year (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 91-92).

On November 11, 1842, A. Chernyshev sent a letter to E. Golovin (#8042) asking for conclusions on the matter of Samurzakano to be presented to the Emperor (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 90-93). Apparently, Nino succeeded in meeting with Nicholas I on this matter and handed him Levan's letter at that time. Eugene Golovin gave a rather short answer to Alexander Chernyshev. He noted that his conclusion on the Dadiani family's rights to Samurzakano was negative (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 94).

However, this dispute did not end there. A new phase of discussions on the Samurzakano issue began after the appointment of Adjutant-General Alexander Ivanovich Neidhardt (*Alexander Lorenz Wilhelm von Neidhardt*) as a Chief-Manager on Civil Affairs on December 21, 1842. The Russian local government, which was searching for "legal" grounds to seize Samurzakano, found itself in a very difficult situation. The case proved difficult for legalization. Furthermore, the Dadiani family's demand for appropriate compensation, which had been on Russia's agenda since May 21, 1840, provoked the new governor's outrage. Apparently, from the beginning, before clarifying the real situation of the case, he agreed with E. Golovin's corresponding decision as "correct." Therefore, A. Neidhardt opposed the idea of paying the Dadianis any money because, in his belief, the region never belonged to the Dadianis, as his predecessor had clarified. Therefore, A. Neidhardt sent his negative conclusion on this issue to the military minister, A. Chernyshev, in May 1843 (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 114).

Since the Dadianis' complaints did not cease, A. Neidhardt initiated a new investigation. He tasked the Titular Councillor Ferdinand Ray to investigate the essence of the case, and Ray presented two reports to Neidhardt on October 4 and 15, 1843 (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 176). The first report summarized the main points of the Dadiani family's complaint and provided a brief review of the materials related to Samurzakano (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 177-185), while the second report con-

tained Ferdinand Ray's analysis and conclusions (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 187-189).

According to Ray's conclusions, E. Golovin's decision on the Dadiani family's loss of Samurzakano was groundless, as it was clearly shown in the petitions presented to the Emperor by Count Paskevich and Baron Rosen that Samurzakano was a dependent part of Samegrelo and was not independent of the Dadianis. Consequently, Ray rejected Manuchar Sharvashidze's sovereign rule over the region of Ghalidja-Enguri, which, according to his words, was E. Golovin's main "argument." However, Ray could not be an advocate for the Dadianis, as he primarily defended the interests of the colonial government and therefore understood well that E. Golovin's decision was based not on the desire to ensure peace in Samurzakano but on the empire's interests, which sought to strengthen its military and political positions in the Caucasus region and could no longer tolerate the existence of local autonomous political entities. Therefore, Neidhardt's subordinate wrote that the removal of Samurzakano could be possible if such measures were necessary for governance (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 188).

Thus, Ray, defending the interests and dignity of the Russian Empire, advised Neidhardt to pay the Dadianis money solely because they were loyal subjects of the Emperor and their activities in Samurzakano also served Russia's interests. According to Ray, this solution would both satisfy the Dadianis' request and would not "dishonor" Russia's dignity in this *"complicated and unclear case,"* as he wrote (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 189).

The essence of Ray's advice was entirely clear, because, if the government paid the leader of Samegelo money for Samurzakano, St. Petersburg would implicitly acknowledge that E. Golovin's decision was wrong and confirm that the Ghalidja-Enguri interfluve was subordinated to the Dadianis. Thus, the Russian official resolved the issue while protecting the empire's interests, since the Dadianis were being paid not for Samurzakano, but for their loyal service. Consequently, E. Golovin's unjust decision was not questioned.

A. Neidhardt considered the advice of F. Rey and sent it as recommendations to A. Chernyshev. According to the Neidhardt's proposal, the government should give Dadiani a one-time monetary compensation, and Colonel Davit Dadiani should be promoted to the rank of Major-General. This should be presented in such a way that the highest authority appreciates the contribution of the ruler of Samegrelo to the protection of the interests of the Russian Empire (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 201-202; **Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 297, note 2).

As we can see, the annual payment, requested by Dadiani was to be replaced by a one-time compensation. A. Neidhardt fully understood that the return of Samurzakano to Dadiani was already impossible, as the decision to impose the "sabokaulo" tax on this region had already been signed by the Emperor (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 201).

Additionally, he recommended that the administrative border between Samurzakano and Samegrelo would be established (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 202). The thing is that, along with the money, on May 21, 1841, the Dadianis demanded

certain settlements (including the village of Pakhulani) (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 57). E. Golovin confirmed Pakhulani for them (***ACAC*, 1885:** 249 – №257). It seems that the Neidhardt needed this as a kind of counterbalance for the transfer of part of Samurzakano to the ruler of Abkhazia.

On May 11, 1844, the report of the Governor of the Caucasus was presented to the members of the Committee for Transcaucasian Affairs by Al. Chernyshev (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 235). This state body, which was forced to maintain the prestige of the government, upheld E. Golovin's decision. However, as the archival document we reviewed shows, he indirectly emphasized the incorrect decision made by the former Governor of the Caucasus regarding the transfer of part of Samurzakano to Mikheil.

The committee supported the payment of a certain amount of money to the ruler of Samegrelo, but it should be explained to Dadiani that Samurzakano was an unprofitable region for Russia and, on the contrary, it required more expenses due to the maintenance of the Russian administration and military units stationed there (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 236-237). Therefore, Dadiani should not have expected to increase the amount of money. The decision of the Committee for Transcaucasian Affairs was also approved by the highest authority (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 219).[1]

For reasons that are unclear to us, A. Neidhardt could not carry out this decision, and its implementation was entrusted to the Viceroy of the Caucasus, Prince M. Vorontsov (***ACAC*, 1885:** 257 – №262). In March 1845, he sent Colonel Alexei Brusilov, the acting head of the IV department of the Black Sea Line, to negotiate with David Dadiani. It seems that Brusilov's mission had another purpose, as his name was well known in western Georgia at that time: he had suppressed the 1841 uprising in Guria. It appears that M. Vorontsov wanted to suppress any possible tensions from Dadiani while the negotiations with Brusilov.

As we have seen, initially, the Dadiani family requested 10,000 silver rubles annually. However, this time, David asked A. Brusilov for 5,000 silver rubles annually (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 238-241). The Viceroy's envoy, in accordance with the committee's aforementioned decision, "explained" to the prince that the amount he requested was rather "large" for the Russian government. Colonel Brusilov informed Prince Levan V heir that emperor was planning to grant him the title of major-general, thereby equating him to Mikheil Sharvashidze. According to A. Brusilov's report to M. Vorontsov, Davit was pleased with this news and became even more compliant (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 238-241).

However, things were not entirely as they seemed. While David Dadiani considered it an honour to receive a high military rank, he still had no intention of easily giving up his positions. During these negotiations, he wrote to M. Vorontsov, stating that the explanation provided by the Russian authorities, claiming that the reason for the removal of Samurzakano was to establish peace, was not credible, as the area still faced robberies, abductions of prisoners, and other violations of law (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 215-217; **Meunargia, 1939:** 118; **Kvashilava,**

[1] This document (№29) was set up on 29th of April, 1846 by Major-General Espejo.

2011(b): 299-300, note 4).

Despite these difficulties, it seems that A. Brusilov eventually succeeded in gaining Dadiani's agreement. Afterwards, M. Vorontsov proposed to Aleksei Chernyshev on April 1, 1845, that the one-time compensation for Dadiani should be determined as 25,000 silver rubles (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 238-241). The viceroy considered this compensation completely justifiable, given the circumstances regarding Samurzakano (***ACAC*, 1885:** 257 – №262). This proposal was quickly approved by the authorities at the end of the same month (April 29) (***HANAG*, 357:** sheet 242). However, Dadiani did not receive the approved amount until 1847.

This angered Mikheil Sharvashidze and on December 22, 1845, he sent a protest letter (№109) to Adjutant-General A. I. Budberg, Head of the Black Sea Line Corps in Kerch. According to him, this decision of the authorities undermined Mikheil Sharvashidze's authority among his subjects and the mountain peoples (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 260-263). Mikheil requested to be freed from his duties and in return demanded a land grant with 1,500 households in Imereti (**Esadze, 1907:** 135; **Janashia, 1988:** 8).

The introduction of Russian rule and the establishment of new regulations were naturally unpopular with many. Thepart of the Anchabadze clan, along with their supporters, fled to the mountains and joined the populations of Dali and Tsebelda. Ultimately, however, they were forced to reconcile with the authorities. In June 1845, they returned to Samurzakano, took from them their hostages and legal prosecution against them was ceased (***Anthology of Law Monuments..*, 2017:** 287 – №2.117).

The new administrative-territorial unit was governed by Bokauli, along with 4 Yesauls[1] and one translator (***ACAC*, 1904:** 332 – №289). The Russian administrator of Samurzakano (from July 23, 1848, was subordinated to the military governor of Kutaisi), was also the Head of a verbal court consisting of four Mdivan-Begi (chief-judge) (established by E. Golovin's order on October 16, 1840) (***ACAC*, 1904:** 330 – №289). The Mdivan-Begi represented judicial authority, and their jurisdiction (which included criminal and serious cases) applied only to the respective administrative-territorial unit.

The police authority was carried out by assistants to the Mdivan-Begi, based on their designated territories. Both categories of officials had to be residents of the Samurzakano Bokauli. Fines imposed for theft were divided into three parts: 1/3 remained with Bokauli, 1/3 went to the landowner who owned the land on which the crime occurred, and 1/3 was directed to public needs of the Bokauli's office for communal needs, from which translators, clerks, scribes, assistants to the Mdivan-Begi, and spies, who were responsible for identifying suspicious individuals, were paid. However, due to a shortage of money in the population, fines had to be paid in kind, in the same type of goods. The theft of small or low-value

[1] *Yesaul* – initially, it was the name of the assistant to the military commander, his deputy. Later, it was a senior officer rank in the Cossack troops. In the 19th century, a esaul commanded a Cossack hundred and was therefore comparable to the rank of captain or captain.

goods was considered by the village Bokauli (63 in 1844, 74 in 1847), and the fine also remained with them (***ACAC*, 1904:** 331 – №289). The village Bokauli considered the theft of small cattle or of the goods of insignificant value (in 1844 – *63*; in 1847 – *74*) and they still had the money (***ACAC*, 1904:** 331 – №289).

Since the Mdivan-Begs received a percentage of the cases, they often incited or provoked crimes to increase their income. Moreover, since most of the provisions of King Vakhtang VI legal code were unknown to the majority, judges frequently "created" rulings themselves" and issued judgments for their own benefit. In 1844, a proposal was made to appoint them a permanent salary (***ACAC*, 1904:** 332 – №289), but the authorities refrained from this decision. They did not want to lose the support of local nobles and condoned to the existing arbitrariness of the judges.

As seen in the report compiled by the ruler of Samegrelo on March 25, 1859, fines were not being recorded in Bokauli' office, so there were no accurate data on how many cases had been reviewed and how much in fines had been collected (***ACAC*, 1904:** 331 – №289).

In February-March of 1844, the reorganization of the Bokauli administration took place. Specifically, a "scribe-clelrk" position was introduced in the oral court with an annual salary of 120 silver rubles, and the amount of Yesauls increased to 6 (monthly salary – 7 rubles and 50 kopecks). As it turns out, implementation of the court's decisions was not an easy task, so an additional enforcement body was created, which included 47 local nobles (***ACAC*, 1904:** 332 – №289).

A part of the Sharvashidze family in Samurzakano did not avow the transfer of some villages to Samegrelo and continually attempted to assert their lordship rights over these settlements. For example, on June 4, 1847, the Sub-Lieutenant Katsia Sharvashidze and his household members – Second Lieutenant Paata, and civilian persons Manuchar, Anton, Zurab, and Niko Sharvashidze – along with those subject to them in Samurzakano, took control over the village of Pakhulani and demanded the traditional foodstuffs from the population (***ACAC*, 1885:** 249 – №257). However, in the summer of the same year, a famine started in Samurzakano. The situation was so difficult that there were reports of deaths from starvation (***Anthology of Law Monuments..*, 2017:** 283-284 – №2.113). Despite Dadiani's demands, they refused to leave the village. Bokauli's Staff-Captain, Gabaev, was also involved in the matter (***ACAC*, 1885:** 249 – №257). It seems he had some influence in the region. However, the Sharvashidze clan did not let him enter Pakhulani. Moreover, they even fired warning shots (***ACAC*, 1885:** 249 – №257). Subsequently, the Deputy-Governor of Kutaisi arrived to the neighboring village, but his appeals were in vain. The representative sent by General-Major Karl Wrangel, the head of the III Department of the Black Sea coastal line (**Weidenbaum, 2021:** 201), also failed to achieve his goal (***ACAC*, 1885:** 249 – №257). The crisis lasted for 15 days. Eventually, the Sharvashidze family, realizing the complications their actions would bring, left the village, but the population was significantly harmed (***ACAC*, 1885:** 249 – №257).

The Viceroy, M. S. Vorontsov, sent the Head of the main administration

of the Caucasus Viceroy's office, Alexey Fiodorovich Krusenstiern (*Peter Magnus Alexis von Krusenstiern*), to investigate the situation in Samurzakano (**Weidenbaum, 2021:** 432; ***ACAC*, 1885:** 249 – №257). It was revealed that behind this action stood the assistant of the Bokauli of Samurzakano, Lieutenant-Colonel Levan Sharvashidze, who was considered a claimant to the ownership of Pakhulani, although he himself did not visit the village (***ACAC*, 1885:** 249-250 – №257). M. Vorontsov issued an order for the arrest of Katsia, Zurab, Manuchar, Anton, and Paata Sharvashidze and instructed that they be sent to Tbilisi. The brothers – Katsia and Manuchar, who had interfered with the execution of Bokaul's duties, were first sent to Stavropol and then permanently exiled to Voronezh (although it was possible for the local governor to end their exile and send them back to their homeland). They were each assigned a daily stipend of 1 ruble and 50 kopecks (***ACAC*, 1885:** 250 – №257, 258). The others were sentenced to three months' imprisonment in the Metekhi prison, after which they were returned to Samurzakano (***ACAC*, 1885:** 250 – №257, 258). Levan Sharvashidze was dismissed, and the youngest among them, Niko Sharvashidze, was forgiven for his actions (***ACAC*, 1885:** 250 – №257).

The Sharvashidzes of Samurzakano actively demanded the return of the village of Koki. Levan Sharvashidze was also active in this matter. M. S. Vorontsov conducted a special investigation (two inquiries were conducted during 1847-1848) and determined that Koki, along with its peasants, should be transferred to the rule of the ruler of Samegrelo. This decision caused discontent among M. Sharvashidze, who considered it an insult to the Sharvashidze family. The execution of this decision became difficult, as the Sharvashidzes were actively obstructing it in every way (***ACAC*, 1885:** 255 – №262).

On December 8, 1847, the Caucasus Viceroy, M. S. Vorontsov, asked the Empire's Minister of War, Alexander Ivanovich Chernyshev (1827-1852; **Weidenbaum, 2021:** 739), to place the Bokaul of Samurzakano under the jurisdiction of the Black Sea Coastline IV Department. After the creation of the Kutaisi Governorate, Samurzakano was to be incorporated into its jurisdiction, which was justified by the "local situation" (***ACAC*, 1885:** 249 – №256). The matter was resolved very quickly, and on May 11, 1848, Samurzakano was placed under the authority of the Kutaisi Governorate (***Materials of "Kavkaz"*, 2012:** 39-40). According to English scientist D. Rayfield, M. Vorontsov skillfully resolved the problem of Samurzakano without damaging Russia's interests (**Rayfield, 2012:** 289).

The Governor of Kutaisi demanded the immediate implementation of the viceroy's decision, but L. Sharvashidze began to resist. In September 1848, in the village of Ilori, during a religious holiday,[1] Levan, along with other noble allies, decided to swear in the people of Samurzakano, assuring them that they would resist the government's attempts to bring the region under the jurisdiction of the

[1] The document does not specify which holiday the author is referring to. Two significant holidays were celebrated in September: on the 8th (according to the old style) – the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos (Mother of God), and on the 14th – the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. Additionally, on September 8th, the population of the Empire also celebrated the birthday of Emperor Nicholas I (***Caucasian Calendar-1847*:** 38).

Kutaisi Governorate and prevent the village of Koki from being transferred to Samegrelo. The local Bokauli Major Davidosvkiy could not manage the difficult situation. Additionally, L. Sharvashidze and his supporters enjoyed the backing of the Prince of Abkhazia (***ACAC*, 1885:** 255 – №262). The Bokauli's powerlessness further fueled the rebellious Samurzakano people's resistance, which led the viceroy to send a new Bokauli to Samurzakano – Staff-Captain Prince Abashidze (***ACAC*, 1885:** 255 – №262).

At the end of September, M. Vorontsov himself met with the Samurzakano people in Samurzakano. The locals convinced him that they were not opposed to being subordinated to the Kutaisi Governorate and requested his intervention in sending new schools and Orthodox clergy, to what the viceroy agreed (***ACAC*, 1885:** 255 – №262). However, it seems that the authorities deemed it necessary to involve someone familiar with local customs and language to resolve these issues. By the end of 1848, Bokauli Abashidze actively engaged in resolving the Samurzakano crisis. L. Sharvashidze became active again, but the distinguished noble families no longer supported him (***ACAC*, 1885:** 256 – №262).

M. Vorontsov assigned the military governor of Kutaisi, Major-General Konstantin Yakovlevich Beliavski (1847-1851), to resolve the issue by military means. The governor gathered two companies of infantry, a 150-man strong Don Cossack detachment, and added militia from Samegrelo and Imereti (***ACAC*, 1885:** 256 – №262). Due to heavy snowfall, K. Beliavski sent 100 Cossacks under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Tertsilov ahead, ordering the secretary-begs of Samurzakano to come to Zugdidi (***ACAC*, 1885:** 256 – №262). L. **Sharvashidze** confronted them with 200 armed Samurzakano people and Abkhazians and told the Russians that if they wanted to talk to the secretary-begs, they would have to come to Samurzakano. The governor left one company in Zugdidi and moved to Samurzakano with the rest, where the locals immediately pledged full obedience. L. Sharvashidze, left alone with his few supporters, sought refuge in the principality of Abkhazia (***ACAC*, 1885:** 256 – №262).

The Governor of Kutaisi arrived to the village of Okumi, the administrative centre of the Samurzakano Bokauli's district and set up an investigative commission to punish the offenders. He also summoned the "highly respected and beloved" bishop of Samegrelo, Anton (Dadiani, 1843-1852), who administered an oath of loyalty to the Empire from the local population between January 14-20, 1849 (***ACAC*, 1885:** 256 – №262). Soon, the Governor of Kutaisi was visited by Bolikhukhu Emukhvari and Kats Marghania, who sought forgiveness for participating in Levan **Sharvashidze**'s group. The governor sent them to Tbilisi. M. Vorontsov, taking into account their repentance, and considering the requests of the Kutaisi military governor and the Samurzakano people, decided to return both men to Samurzakano (***ACAC*, 1885:** 256 – №262). Of course, the viceroy was not motivated by mercifulness. This was ordinary imperial policy aimed at increasing the number of supporters of the Empire. The authorities only imposed imprisonment on Manuchar Sharvashidze, despite the fact that he had also submitted to

the governor, because "his criminal activities were later uncovered" (***ACAC*, 1885:** 256 – №262).

Mikheil Sharvashidze was asked to arrest Levan Sharvashidze and his supporters, but the Prince of Abkhazia refused to allow their presence on his land. An investigation did not confirm Mikheil's involvement in the Samurzakano crisis, because, as M. Vorontsov noted, he was cautious of Russia's goodwill and did not want to provoke conflicts with the imperial authorities (***ACAC*, 1885:** 256-257 – №262).

On January 31, 1849, M. Vorontsov sent Lieutenant-General Vasiliy Bebutov to Samurzakano (**Weidenbaum, 2021:** 92; ***ACAC*, 1885:** 258 – №263). From Samurzakano, he moved to Ochamchire, where he was soon joined by Levan Sharvashidze, along with eight nobles and Mdivanbegs. They repented their actions. V. Bebutov sent Levan, along with two nobles, to M. Vorontsov. Soon, Mikheil Sharvashidze also arrived to Tbilisi, where he again expressed dissatisfaction with Samurzakano being assigned to Kutaisi and the village of Koki being allocated to the Dadiani family. However, he was made to understand that the Russian authorities considered the matter closed. M. Vorontsov decided to use the situation to his advantage and further secured the support of both Sharvashidze brothers. He informed Levan that he was considering his repentance, and, in light of the Prince of Abkhazia's intervention, they could return to Samurzakano (***ACAC*, 1885:** 258 – №263).

The issue of delineating the borders between Samegrelo and Samurzakano was a very sensitive process. In 1847, a Samurzakano noble, Thada Chkotua, complained that he had bought lands in the village of Saberio, which had been transferred to Samegrelo. Shortly after, in the same year of 1847, the landowner Zurab Chkotua demanded the protection of his rights over lands in the village of Mazandari, which he had lost along with the peasants to Levan Dadiani (**Kadaria, 2003:** 120-121). Two years later, on April 23, 1849, noble Manuchar Sharvashidze demanded compensation for financial losses related to lands he owned in the village of Orsantia, which had been transferred to Dadiani (**Kadaria, 2003:** 120). In October of the same year, another rebellion was launched by noble Levan Sharvashidze, who was supported by Mikheil Sharvashidze. To resolve the issue, the authorities had to resort to force (**Kadaria, 2003:** 120).

In 1849, the border villages previously part of Samurzakano were transferred to Samegrelo: the villages of Greater and Lesser Koki, Ganjaria-Mukhuri, Orsantia, and Shamgona (**Tsintsadze, 1989:** 101). This marked the end of the territorial dispute between the Samurzakano Sharvashidze family and the Dadiani house, a conflict that had lasted for 9 years.[1]

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[1] It is interesting that by the mid-19th century, the borders of the territory of Samurzakano were the only officially defined borders on the territory of present-day Abkhazia (***Anthology of Law Monuments..*, 2017**: 298 – №2.218).

conflict that had lasted for 9 years.[1]

O. Bgazhba and S. Lakoba, remaining true to their stance, offer a "new" approach regarding the establishment of Russian administration in Samurzakano. They claim that in 1840, "the Prince of Abkhazia confirmed his rights to this region, and from that time, it represented a separate Bokauli" (**Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 245), which is complete absurdity.

In 1840, the Samurzakano people, who were already directly under Russian colonial-occupational rule, actively participated in the submission of Tsebelda to Russia. For this, Emperor Nicholas I awarded them with a special banner (**Basaria, 1923:** 99).

The Russians immediately began actively utilizing the human resources of Samurzakano. While, in the past, during their time as part of the Principality of Samegrelo, the region's population, along with the Odishians, had participated in military operations to a certain degree, after being separated into an independent administrative unit, the Samurzakano people were fully involved in Russian campaigns. At the end of September 1840, news spread about an invasion by Haji-Berzek Dagumoko's 7,000 men strong troops in Sochi. The Russians urgently gathered an army, which included a 1,000-man strong militia from Samurzakano (***ACAC*, 1884:** 449-450 – №391). This militia even reached the village of Bitchvinta (***ACAC*, 1884:** 513 – №439). On October 25th, during a clash with Ubykhs, they lost one militiaman (***ACAC*, 1884:** 321 – №440). In this operation, the head of the militia, Staff Captain Prince Temurkva Anchabadze, glorified himself his leadership (***ACAC*, 1884:** 519 – №439).

Thus, the Samurzakano people earned the goodwill of the colonial authorities. For example, Colonel Nikolai Nikolaevich Muraviov (**Weidenbaum, 2021:** 534), the Head of the III coastal section, informed the Chief Manager E. Golovin (**Weidenbaum, 2021:** 250) in late 1840 that the Samurzakano people, known for their determination and bravery, were always ready for loyal service. According to the colonel, this was due to the efforts of the local military officer, Lieutenant Kirilov, who imbued the Samurzakano people with trust and loyalty towards the government. This referred to an expedition in December 1840 in the Dali Gorge, where Russia sought to control an additional route connecting it to the Northern Caucasus. In January 1841, a military expedition, which included both Russian forces and the militias from Abkhazia and Samurzakano[2], stormed the Bagada Pass ("gate" of the Dali Gorge) and occupied the gorge despite fierce resistance from the local people (**Khorava, 2014:** 41-42). The Samurzakano fighters, who were in the front lines, fought vigorously and selflessly. During the battles, several Samurzakano warriors were wounded or killed, including notable persons such as Lieutenant Tado Anchabadze, Balakhukhu Emukhvari, and Zazola Marghania, who died from their wounds. Others, such as Kudmakhan Emukhvari and gentry representative Shirvan Mertchule (***The West Caucasus..*, 2019:** 70 – №24), Bolokhukhu Anchabadze (awarded golden medal),

[1] The educator of the Prince of Abkhazia, Mikheil Sharvashidze (**Weidenbaum, 2021:** 716).

[2] It was planned to send 10,800 soldiers (***The West Caucasus..*, 2019:** 68 – №23), but ultimately, 500 infantry and cavalry men were sent to Dali (***The West Caucasus..*, 2019:** 69 – №24).

Porutchik Bezhan Anchabadze (promoted to Staff-Captain), Murzakan Anchabadze (promoted to Praporshchik, in 1848 became Podporutchik; Birdgu Anchabadze (awarded Saint George's Silver Cross Order); Shervan Zumbaia (awarded Saint George's Silver Cross Order); Tutu Emukhvari and Tlaps Zumbaya, were honoured with orders and 50 silver rubles (**Tsvizhba, 2014:** 134-136).

For their selflessness, Colonel Muravyov, on January 7, 1841, requested from the government that Samurzakano be awarded a special imperial standard (***ACAC,* 1884:** 497 – №432; ***The West Caucasus..*, 2019:** 74 – №25; **Tsagareishvili, 1953:** 197 – №155). This request was okayed, and on June 12, 1841, the Samurzakano people were presented with the Imperial standard bearing the Georgian-Russian inscription: *"For loyal service to our army, the Samurzakano people, who remained faithful during the 1840 peacekeeping operations in Dali"*[1] (**Viskovatov, 1862:** 277, *pic. №1341a*; ***Abkhazia & the New Athos Monastery.., 1898*:** 28).

It should be noted that K. Serena highly appreciated the military skills of the Samurzakano people (**Serena, 1882:** 367).

From the outset, the Russians tried to treat Samurzakano as a sort of "project" to strengthen their authority among the Abkhazs and, at the same time, sow discord between the Abkhaz and the Georgian world. According to records from 1842, Samurzakano had a population of 8,990 (***Materials on the History of Abkhazia..*, 2011:** 162 – №185).

The adaptation to the new bureaucratic and legal order imposed by the Russians proved difficult for the Samurzakano people. Particularly challenging was the refusal to participate in popular assemblies, which the new administration demanded from them. This consultative institution had a significant influence on the Samurzakano population, including the nobility (***Abkhazia & Abkhazs..*, 2005:** 424-425). However, by the fall of 1846, a shift occurred, and the population began to submit to the new way of life (***Anthology of Law Monuments..*, 2017:** 291 – №2.121).

In 1847, on August 3rd, Davit I Dadiani (1846–1853) asked M. Vorontsov to assist in the return of the Megrelian peasants who had escaped from Samurzakano to the area (***Anthology of Law Monuments..*, 2017:** 293-294 – №2.124). The issue was assigned to the Governor of Kutaisi (***Materials on the History of Abkhazia..*, 2011:** 186 – №212), who, on March 24, 1848, determined two approaches to the matter: those who had escaped from Samurzakano before 1840 should be treated according to the laws of Vakhtang VI, while those who had escaped afterward should be dealt with by the customs in place in Samurzakano (***Anthology of Law Monuments..*, 2017:** 296 – №2.217). As for those who were found on the other side of the Enguri River after this decision, they were not granted permission to live there (***Anthology of Law Monuments..*, 2017:** 297 – №2.217).

However, this did not solve the situation, and the escape to Samurzakano continued. As a result, on March 13, 1853, Dadiani was forced to prohibit free movement across the Enguri river altogether (***MGL*, 1985:** 786 – №816). More-

[1] The text was written in Georgian and Russian: *„მხედრობასა ჩვენსა სარწმუნო სიყვარულისა სამურზაყანო ერისა ერთგულებისთვის, რომელიცა ჩვენთვის 1840 წელსა დამშვიდების დროს დალისა".*

over, he presented the Russian authorities with lists of peasants who had crossed into Samurzakano and demanded their return (**Kadaria, 2003:** 122).

In the 2nd half of the 19th century a significant problem in western Georgia was the fight against smugglers. Apart from economic difficulties, lawbreakers also did not hesitate to engage in the abduction of captives. Therefore, on October 10, 1848, the authorities decided to place cruisers along the western Georgian (Samegrelo, Samurzakano, and Abkhazia) coastline for patrols (***ACAC*, 1885:** 218 – №224). A corresponding decision was soon made (***Abkhazia & Abkhazs..*, 2005:** 108). However, this still did not fully succeed even for the Russians. Specifically, in the 1840s, the local Bokauli often reported that slave traders were operating in his district (**Kilasonia, 2018:** 171). In 1853, Lieutenant-Colonel Ivanov informed the military governor of Kutaisi that Hasan Shinkuba and his domestic servant had abducted two young men (Sabekia and Khojava) from Samurzakano (**Kilasonia, 2018:** 171). On April 27, the same year, David Dadiani, the ruler of Samegrelo, reported that the nobleman Zurab Emukhvari and the peasant Vakha Tchanturia from Samurzakano had abducted the son of a peasant from Odishi and sold him to the noble Marshania of Tsebelda who intended to sell him to the Karachais. However, on the way, the nobleman Niko Ureshidze from Odishi encountered them, bought the child back, and returned him (**Kilasonia, 2018:** 171-172).

In the autumn of 1846, an epidemic of typhus spread in Samurzakano (also in Jikhs and Ubykhs). To control the situation, the Russians sent a doctor from Abkhazia (***Materials on the History of Abkhazia..,* 2011:** 182 – №206).

By the mid-1840s, the Russian administration realized that Samurzakano's subordination to the Chief of the Black Sea Coastline was not the correct decision. Therefore, in 1847, they were forced to place the region under the jurisdiction of the Military Governor of Kutaisi. This was a fully justified decision that accurately reflected the natural developmental needs of the region. Additionally, the authority of the Bokauli of Samurzakano was expanded: he was granted the powers of district and regional governors (**Maltsev, Chirg, 2012:** 89-96).

The importance of Samurzakano was much higher, and it culturally outpaced the Principality of Abkhazia and Tsebelda's Sabokaulo. It was also evident that the first school in this region (and generally on the territory of modern-day Abkhazia) was opened in the village of Okumi in 1851 (**Gaprindashvili, 1990:** 543). The initiator of its foundation was the Georgian clergyman, Archdeacon Davit (Matchavariani), whom the Exarch of Georgia Isidore sent to Samurzakano[1] in 1850 (***Abkhazia & the Abkhazs..*, 2008:** 248). Of course, the initiative to open the school came from the colonial regime, which, in 1850, approved the project for the reorganization of the Samurzakano Sabokaulo, proposed by the Military Governor of Kutaisi, Major-General K. Beliavski in 1849. The idea to open a school in Okumi was put forward there (***ACAC*, 1904:** 333 – №289).

Naturally, this noble idea was still in the service of the empire and aimed at

[1] At this time, there were only seven priests and six old wooden churches in Samurzakano (***Abkhazia & Abkhazs..*, 2008:** 249).

raising loyal subjects to Tsarism. D. Matchavariani, whose missionary and educational activities were highly praised by Catholicos-Patriarch Kyrion II (***Kyrion II*, 2006:** 369), annually, without any salary, engaged in the education of 25 young Samurzakano children, teaching them Georgian and Russian languages, as well as arithmetic, catechism, and writing (***Abkhazia & Abkhazs..*, 2005:** 192). It is noteworthy that among the students of this school were prominent figures such as Akaki Tchkhenkeli, Dimitri (Arzakan) Emukhvari, and Valerian (Valiko) Jugeli (**Jguburia, 2021:** 17-26).[1]

The school building was a hut with the fern roof. The teachers received no salary, yet the local population was glad send their children to school. The Governor-General, M. Vorontsov, donated 400 silver rubles for the construction of the school building (**Rogava, 2015:** 197). The school quickly gained a great reputation and was considered a model in Abkhazia for many years (**Dudko, 1956:** 18-19; **Dzidzariya, 1979:** 23-24; **Tchanturia, Gegetchkori, Kakava, 2003:** 10). By the early 20th century, the authorities decided to close the Okumi school. As G. Rogava rightly pointed out, this idea was inherently anti-Georgian and directly aimed at accelerating the Russification of Abkhazia (**Rogava, 2007:** 95).

Abkhaz society has always regarded itself as a natural and integral part of the Georgian world (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press,* 2022:** 96).

The process of restoring Christianity in the region was also actively continuing. Already in 1852, 600 Samurzakano residents were baptized (***ACAC*, 1884:** 240 – №241). The population was returning to its natural religious-cultural space, which, as we saw above, had been somewhat impaired due to the passage of time. It should also be noted that this process played a significant role in the second half of the 1860s when a new wave of Muhajirism swept across the principality of Abkhazia.

After a quarter-century pause, on June 21, 1853, the Black Sea region was affected by a new confrontation between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, in which, supporting İstanbul, the Western Europe, was also involved. St. Petersburg, which had actively participated in suppressing democratic processes in Europe, considered itself a significant power and believed it could use the "Eastern Question" (the Ottoman issue) to its advantage: specifically, to gain control over "the inheritance of Constantinople" (straits, Christian holy sites in the Near East, etc.) (**Badem, 2010:** 60-65). The opposing side intended to restore Ottoman jurisdiction in the Caucasus to block Russia's advancement to the south (**Tsurtsumia, 2012:** 131). As a result, the new war front passed through the territory of western Georgia, and the Ottomans paid some attention to Samurzakano as well.

The territory of western Georgia became a battlefield only from the autumn 1853, when, on the night of October 15-16, the Turks attacked the garrison of St. Nicholas fortress, located near the Russia-Ottoman frontier, and completely destroyed it in an unequal battle (**Orjonikidze, 1990:** 147).

[1] In the incomplete secondary school of Okumi studied the famous Georgian scientist, Academician of the USSR Academy of Sciences and the Academy of Sciences of the Georgian SSR, President of the Academy of Sciences Georgian SSR, Hero of Socialist Labour, Doctor of Physical and Mathematical Sciences, Professor Ilia Vekua (**Jguburia, 2021:** 48).

By the beginning of May 1854, two Ottoman ships entered the port of Sokhumi, carrying 1,500 soldiers. This had a certain impact on Samurzakano as well. Therefore, the ruler of Abkhazia, M. Sharvashidze, ordered the Samurzakano Bokauli to patrol the area with a militia company to calm the population (***ACAC*, 1885:** 275 – №287). By April, five militia companies had been created (three cavalry and two infantry), and simple fortifications were built on the borders (including along the sea) (**Dzidzariya, 2015:** 392, 546). Three of them were composed solely of peasants. The names of the unit commanders are also known: Bata Sharvashidze, Makhu Chkhotua, Bakura Marghania, and Murzakan (Grigol) Anchabadze. The latter, on the orders of the Russians, also held negotiations with the Ubykh. Some noblemen and landowners, for example, the nobleman Pakhvala Marghania from Saberio, also formed guard units. In addition, defencive fences were established throughout Samurzakano using barriers (**Dzidzariya, 2017:** 186).

The situation in western Georgia required quick responses, and in July 1854, General Ivane Mukhran-Batoni was appointed commander of the Guria detachment. On November 27, 1854, he prepared a battle plan to help the Russian army when the enemy's military landing in Western Georgia took place (***Materials on the History of Abkhazia..*, 2011:** 236-237 – №272). First and foremost, special attention was paid to Samurzakano, where local militias were formed, and all roads leading from Abkhazia were closed off (**Orjonikidze, 1990:** 156). By December 28, the Samurzakano militia had taken the positions outlined in the aforementioned plan (***Materials on the History of Abkhazia..*, 2011:** 238-239 – №274).

At the beginning of September, the Russian authorities got an information that the chief of Adyghes, Safar-Bey Zanokho (Zaneipa, 1789-1879), was planning to conquer Samurzakano (**Tsurtsumia, 2012:** 141). However, he was unable to win over the Ubykh, Abkhaz, and Tsebelda leaders, and thus, the plan failed (**Tsagareishvili, 1953:** 413-414 – №334). Here, the involvement of the ruler M. Sharvashidze was significant, who bribed part of the highlanders with 25 Ottoman rials, preventing them from joining the Ottomans (**Dzidzariya, 2017:** 176).

New complications began in the spring of 1855. With the Ottomans' initiation, an attack by the Northern Caucasians on Samurzakano was planned. In May, Ottoman agents were actively working with the Samurzakano nobility to persuade them to join the Sultan's side. They achieved some success (**Chkhetia, 1963:** 171 – №22). It seems that the population, which was completely defenseless, had to maneuver in the difficult situation to save itself. However, due to the withdrawal of the Russian army from the area, some of the population was less obedient to the Bokauli's administration, which led the Bokauli, Major Mikeladze, to request the dispatch of three Cossack units and two units of the Imereti militia to Samurzakano (***Anthology of Law Monuments..*, 2017:** 347 – №2.168).

In the early June, rumors spread in Samurzakano that an attack by the Northern Caucasians was expected (***ACAC*, 1888:** 367 – №370). However, M. Sharvashidze used his influence with the Northern Caucasians to make them abandon the planned operation (**Khorava, 2014:** 53). Nevertheless, the attack

did not take place because the Anglo-French assault on Sevastopol was defeated (***ACAC*, 1888:** 367 – №370). This also changed the pro-Ottoman sentiments of the apostate Samurzakano nobility (**Chkhetia, 1963:** 186 – №33). On June 28, the Ottomans sent two military units to strengthen their position at the approaches to Sukhumi (***In the Archives of Türkiye.., I-2,* 2022:** 334).

On October 2, 1855, the Ottomans landed a 300-man cavalry unit in Ochamchire, to which an additional 100 warriors joined. Soon, they seized the crossings over the Ghalidzga river (***ACAC*, 1888:** 184 – №159). By October 16, General Nikolai Nikolayevich Muravyov (**Karskiy;** 1854-1856) informed General Vasily Bebutov that the movement of Omar Pasha towards Samurzakano might be caused by M. Sharvashidze's desire to take control of Samurzakano (***ACAC*, 1888:** 132 – №98). However, the Samurzakano nobility, who had specially traveled to Zugdidi, declared to Major-General Ivane Bagration-Mukhraneli (who was married to Levan V Dadiani's daughter, Nino (**Gelovani, 2003:** 252)) that they would resist the Ottomans (***ACAC*, 1888:** 134, 242 – №102, 223). Soon after the Ottomans entered Samurzakano, the Head of the Samurzakano militia, Staff-Rotmistr Zurab Chkotua[1], and the militia unit declared loyalty to the Ottomans (***ACAC*, 1888:** 136 – №104). The Russians suspected that M. Sharvashidze was involved in this, as he personally knew many of them (***ACAC*, 1888:** 242 – №223). However, the population of the region still held an anti-Turkish stance (***Abkhazia & Abkhazs..*, 2008:** 251).

The Ottomans had difficulty moving along the roads of Samurzakano, as they were impassable and needed repairment (***ACAC*, 1888:** 134 – №102). As a result, the Turks were only able to cover 70 kilometers in 16 days (**Megrelidze, 1974:** 43). On October 14, Major-General Ivane Bagration-Mukhraneli ordered the organization of guerilla actions in Samurzakano, but on the 17th they were recalled because the population expressed resistance. Additionally, Abkhazian militiamen appeared along the right bank of the Enguri river, who were collaborating with the Ottomans (***ACAC*, 1888:** 136 – №104).

Soon, the Ottomans appointed Lieutenant-General Kats Marghania, son of Bezhan (1786(?)-1866(?)), the Pasha of Samurzakano. He was a very respected figure in Abkhazia, Tsebelda, and among the highlanders, as the Pasha of Samurzakano (**Dumbadze, 1957:** 305; **Salakaya, 2022(a):** 30). He gathered Samurzakano peasants in Tchuburkhinji and ordered them to submit to the Ottomans (**Borozdin, 2019:** 45). However, Mikheil Sharvashidze did not approve K. Marghania's actions. According to the ruler, as a general of the Russian army, he should have left the region with the Russian forces (**Chkhetia, 1963:** 142 – №6). Later, Ottoman support for K. Marghania waned, but the Russian authorities no longer trusted him. After the abolition of the Principality of Abkhazia, he settled in Gudauta, where he built a mosque and converted to Islam (**Salakaya, 2022(a):** 31).

Some members of the Anchabadze family also sided with the Ottomans (***ACAC*, 1888:** 279 – №260). Apparently, this was a branch that had been exiled as an

[1] It is interesting that, for his bravery in the battles against the Ottomans and the mountaineers at the beginning of 1855, the Emperor promoted Zurab Manuchar's son Chkotua (***Materials of "Kavkaz"*, 2012:** 173).

abrek[1] for several years and was later reconciled with the Russians.

In October 1855, Ottoman General Ömer Lütfi Pasha, with an army of 40,000 moved from Abkhazia towards Samegrelo (**Badem, 2010:** 253). Due to droughts that year, in the Enguri river the waterflow was so small that it was not difficult to cross it. It became necessary to fortify positions from Anaklia to Jvari, but with the small forces at General Ivane Mukhran-Batoni's disposal, this was impossible. Special fortifications were made at the Rukhi crossing, which blocked the convenient road leading to Zugdidi. The detachment stationed there was led by Grigol Dadiani. Below Rukhi, at the Kakhati crossing, one battalion of infantry and a detachment of cavalry from Lechkhumi under Konstantine Dadiani's command were located. Slightly farther from Kakhati, at the Sanarmanio crossing, there was a battalion with two artillery pieces under Colonel Ioseliani. The defence of the Sanarmanio crossing was led by the Abkhaz lieutenant-colonel Zvambaia. Two versts from Sanarmanio, at the Koki crossing, two companies of regular infantry and two companies of Cossacks with 2 artillery pieces were stationed. Nearby, in the forest, there was a general reserve of 2 battalions of Kurinsk and 4 Cossack militia units from Imereti. The overall command of the forces at the Kakhati, Sanarmanio, and Koki crossings was vested to Dimitri Sharvashidze. According to Ottoman historian Candan Badem, around 20,000 armed fighters stood on the left bank of the Enguri river against the Ottomans (**Badem, 2010:** 254).

On October 23, 1855, near the village of Lia, the militia of Samurzakano led by lieutenant-colonel Solomon Zvanbaia (a well-known ethnographer; **Weidenbaum, 2021:** 345-346) fought a fierce battle against the Ottomans. They did not allow the enemy to cross the Enguri (**Megrelidze, 1974:** 43). On October 25, the Ottomans renewed their attack near the village of Lia, Rukh, and Sanarmanio (**Chkhetia, 1963:** 125). Now, the way was blocked by the Samegrelo militia under General Grigol Dadiani's leadership. A bloody battle ensued, which lasted until almost evening. In this engagement, Solomon Zvanbaia and his detachment, aided by Dimitri Sharvashidze's Imereti militia, again made a name for themselves. Eventually, the Ottomans managed to resist at the vulnerable points along the river. In the battle at Sanarmanio, the commanders Zvanbaia and later his substitutes, Colonels Ioseliani, Ivin, and Kobelev, gave their lives (***ACAC*, 1888:** 108 – №73; **Chkhetia, 1963:** 125; **Megrelidze, 1974:** 43). On the night of October 25-26, the regular army and the militia retreated, and a few days later the battle at Enguri, General Ivane Mukhran-Batoni unexpectedly abandoned Samegrelo, took up positions in Aketi, in Guria, and gathered all his forces near the village of Marani on the left bank of the Tskhenistskali River (**Orjonikidze, 1990:** 158-159).

The Ottomans decided to utilize the human resources of Samurzakano as well. On December 31, 1855, Grigol Dadiani informed Vasiliy Bebutov that the Ottomans had requested the formation of a 100-man cavalry in Samurzakano

[1] *Abrek* is a Caucasian term used for a lone Caucasian warrior living a partisan lifestyle outside power and law and fighting for a just cause. Abreks were irregular soldiers who abandoned all material life, including their family and friends, in order to fight for a just cause, to worship, and to meditate.

(***ACAC*, 1888:** 52 – №42).

With the Russian administration withdrawn from Samurzakano, M. Sharvashidze took it upon himself to restore order, raising suspicions in St. Petersburg that he might seek to establish control over the region with Ottoman support. These suspicions were further enhanced by the actions of the priest D. Matchavariani, the administrator of the church in Samurzakano, who reported to Exarch Isidore on January 23, 1856, that the Ottomans had confirmed M. Sharvashidze's control over the region. As a result, the ruler of Abkhazia, along with his family, lived in Samurzakano and issued orders as the legitimate owner of the area. However, he also encouraged the spread of Christianity (**Chkhetia, 1963:** 242 – №62).

The ruler of Abkhazia had to justify his actions, stating that they were solely aimed at maintaining order in the region and that he had not received any formal mandate from the Sultan (**Chkhetia, 1963:** 241 – №61). Nevertheless, the ruler of Abkhazia did not hide the fact that he had never given up hope that the Emperor would eventually assign Samurzakano to the principality of Abkhazia, as he acknowledged in discussions with official representatives in St. Petersburg (***ACAC*, 1888:** 204 – №191).

Ultimately, by April 6, 1856, the Ottoman army had left Abkhazia, and peace was restored in Samurzakano (***ACAC*, 1888:** 271 – №247). However, Ottoman traders remained in Abkhazia, supplying goods imported from the Ottoman Empire, and they secretly engaged in pro-Turkish propaganda, although they did not achieve the desired results (**Dzidzariya, 2017:** 216).

Soon, the Russians began to restore the old administration. As noted by the Viceroy General Muraviev, the local population demanded the reestablishment of the Russian system of governance (***ACAC*, 1888:** 279 – №260).

After the Crimean war, St. Petersburg turned its attention to the western Georgian principalities, which still held autonomous rights. During this time, some administrative reorganizations were carried out in western Georgia (**Shvelidze, Vachnadze, 2004:** 125-128). While the Caucasian war raged on, St. Petersburg needed the loyalty of Samegrelo, Svaneti, and Abkhazia. However, it was already clear that the final subjugation of the Caucasus was near, and Russia could no longer tolerate local rule in the region. "...The military-political situation that developed in western Georgia during the war led the Russian authorities to the conclusion that even the formal existence of autonomous principalities could become a threat to Russia's dominance in the region during external complications" (**Bendianishvili, 2012(a):** 50-51). The first blow was delivered to Samegrelo. On September 26, 1857, Nikolai Petrovich Kolubiakin was appointed as the "temporary"[1] governor of Odishi, the region's military authority (**Weidenbaum, 2021:** 410-412).[2]

To quell M. Sharvashidze's claims, the Russian authorities carried out an-

[1] The ruler of Samegrelo had the rights of a military governor (**Esadze, 1907:** 116).

[2] Formally, the principality of Samegrelo ceased to exist on January 4, 1867, when the ruling prince, Nikoloz Dadiani (1847-1903; who had formally been in power since 1853), having reached adulthood (20 years of age), voluntarily renounced his princely rights at the suggestion of the Russian authorities. In exchange, Tsarist Russia provided him with a compensation of 1 million rubles (**Tughushi, 2001(c):** 38).

other administrative reform, and in 1857, the Bokhauli of Samurzakano was subordinated to the ruler of Samegrelo. Thus, 17 years later, the region was once again under the jurisdiction of Zugdidi.

By the end of 1859, Samurzakano was divided into four districts – Okumi, Saberio, Nabakevi, and Bedia (***ACAC*, 1904:** 345 – №295). Additionally, the local Bokhauli's powers were expanded, granting him judicial authority to handle civil and criminal cases and make decisions (**Maltsev, Chirg, 2012:** 89-96). However, this project had been proposed to the authorities as early as January 26, 1849 (***ACAC*, 1904:** 333 – №289).

By this time, Christianity had significantly strengthened in Samurzakano, as a result of the tireless work of Deacon D. Matchavariani. He learned Megrelian and preached in a language that was understandable to the people of Samurzakano, quickly growing his congregation (***Abkhazia & Abkhazs..*, 2005:** 192). This once again disproves the claims of Abkhaz historians that the main language of the Samurzakano people was Abkhaz.

During the Crimean War, there was effectively anarchy in Samurzakano. Local authority was left to its own devices, which ultimately created such chaos that a reform became necessary in the administration of Bokaulo. Specifically, military officers from the staff or Ober-officers were appointed as Bokaulo, and their assistants were civil servants from the Kutaisi Governorate who knew the Georgian language. The administration consisted of 5 secretaries, 4 of whom, along with their assistants, were district managers, while the fifth was an indispensable member of the oral court. Bokaulo's administration also included a writer-secretary, two translators, 12 Yesauls (10 horsemen and 2 infantry), 2 clerks, and a crier. Criminal cases were judged according to Russian law, civil cases by the laws of King Vakhtang VI, while those disputes not covered in the aforementioned codes were settled according to local customs (***ACAC*, 1904:** 333, 334 – №289). The oral court was tasked with recording the short summary of the disputes and decisions and entering them into the relevant book (***ACAC*, 1904:** 345 – №295).

The nobility always managed to come to agreements with the Bokauls and resolve disputes in their favour. The elderly from Otobaya, Giorgi Bokuchava, was expelled from his farm by the landlord Anchabadze. The peasant did not file a complaint in court because, according to him, the landlords always settled such matters with the Bokauls (**Dzidzariya, 2015:** 552). However, there were cases when peasants were able to defend their rights. For example, in 1860, K. Marghania from the village of Gali attempted to take over the land of the peasants the Zakaraias to build his own house. But this attempt by the landlord was thwarted by the peasants. In the same village, the peasants Khanashv, Gvatu, and Davit Gablaia were not so lucky in defending their land against Rostom Marghania. In the dispute, the plaintiffs involved the Bokauli, who ruled that Gablaias should be alloted an estate elsewhere (**Dzidzariya, 2015:** 552).

The Bokauli and his administration in Samurzakano acted arbitrarily and cared more about enriching themselves than establishing order in their adminis-

trative territories, and even the colonial government did not deny this (**Dzidzariya, 2015:** 579).

As a result of the heavy war in the East and the endless and exhausting battles with the Caucasian peoples, the Russian Empire needed to strengthen its position in the Eastern Black Sea region. To this end, in 1862, it was decided to form irregular cavalry units from the population of Samurzakano, Tsebelda, and Abkhazia in the Kutaisi Governorate (***List of Documents..*, 2021:** 154). However, by the beginning of the 1880s, it had still not been formed in Samurzakano (**Serena, 1882:** 367). As for the final issue of the principality of Abkhazia, the colonial authorities were forced to temporarily postpone it due to the ongoing Caucasian war. For pragmatic reasons, the Russians were cautious about Abkhazia (if they lost this region, the front line would have significantly increased and moved into Abkhazia) and also about Mikheil Sharvashidze, who had significant authority among the Caucasians (**Orjonikidze, 1970:** 224; ***Materials of "Kavkaz"*, 2013:** 67 ***Archival Documents..*, 1/2023:** 19). However, military interests for necessary routes to the mountains from the seaside were being actively pursued, along with attempts to strengthen positions there. To this end, the invaders entered Pskhu in August 1860, but they still could not take full control of the area (**Khorava, 2021(b):** 168; ***Archival Documents..*, 1/2023:** 22). For M. Sharvashidze, it was completely clear what the final goal of these actions was, and he expressed no goodwill towards them (**Khorava, 2021(b):** 168).

In 1864, Russia succeeded in concluding its half-century struggle with the Caucasians, which also marked the end of the autonomy of the Principality of Abkhazia. St. Petersburg already had a plan for this historical Georgian region. Cossacks were to be settled along the Black Sea coast of Abkhazia (including Samurzakano), from whom the Abkhaz Cossack army would later be formed (**Orjonikidze, 1970:** 225-226; ***Archival Documents..*, 1/2023:** 31). This would lead to the full Russification of northwestern Georgia. Even in 1892, according to the newspaper *Russkaya Zhizn* (*"Русская жизнь"*), the government had decided to allocate a large area of free land on the Black Sea coast (250,000 dessiatinas) exclusively to Russian colonists (**Dzidzariya, 1970:** 10).

Interestingly, the settlement of loyal Russians in Abkhazia was planned as early as the early 1840s (**Gugushvili, 1979:** 251). The Abkhaz scholar D. Gopia goes even further and categorically states that with these processes, the colonization of the eastern part of Abkhazia began by the "Mingrelians and Georgians" (**Gopia, 2022:** 99).

On July 12, 1864, the Principality of Abkhazia was abolished, and direct Russian rule was established in this Georgian province. "In 1864… my father was exiled, and Russia annexed Abkhazia," later recalled Babo Shvarashidze, daughter of Mikheil Sharvashidze (**Sharvashidze B.,** 2019: 20). It should be noted that after the Crimean War, the colonial authorities no longer trusted the prince of Abkhazia, and the principality's existence was no longer necessary. In fact, M. Sharvashidze was surrounded by Russian troops, and there was no sense in opposing

them (**Papaskiri, 2004:** 175-177; **Khorava, 2011:** 260-261; ***Archival Documents.., 1/2023:*** 38).

Before the approval of the Abkhaz governance regulations, a temporary "military-popular administration" was in place, led by Major-General Pavel Shatilov (1822-1887; **Khorava, 2021(b):**172). A new unit, the *"Sokhumi Military Department,"* was created to govern the region, which included 3 okrugs (Bzipi, Sokhumi, Abzhua) and 2 sub-units (Tsebelda and Samurzakano) (**Dzidzariya, 2014:** 213; ***Materials on the History of Abkhazia in the 19th Century..,* 2012:** 31).

2 years later, on April 16, 1866, the sick Mikheil Sharvashidze, exiled in Voronezh, passed away. His body was transported to Georgia and buried at the Mokvi Monastery next to his wife, Alexandra Dadiani. His tombstone bears an inscription in Asomtavruli (*old Georgian alphabet*): *"Here rests the Prince of Abkhazia Mikheil Giorgi's son Sharvashidze, deceased in 1866."*

It is noteworthy that the restoration of the monastery was carried out by Hamut-Bey himself in 1862-1864, and he spent 25,000 rubles (in silver) for this purpose.

According to Professor Z. Papaskiri's justifiable comment, the inscription on the tombstone is clear evidence that "the House of the Principality of Abkhazia remained an inseparable part of the common Georgian Christian-cultural-political world" (**Papaskiri, 2004:** 187). The recording of this Georgian inscription at a time when the state and ecclesiastical language in Georgia was Russian clearly represents an opposition of both: princely family and the unity of Abkhazs and Georgians to the Tsarist Russian authorities.

Thus, in 1864, Russia effectively completed the full incorporation of the Georgian provinces under its control into the Empire. Historiography holds that this event was a continuation of the process of the establishment of full Russian rule in Tsebelda and Samurzakano.

In fact, this process began in 1801 with the annexation of Kartli-Kakheti kingdom, followed by the abolition of the Kingdom of Imereti in 1810. Subsequently, St. Petersburg began to abolish the principalities, the first being Guria (1828), followed by Samegrelo (1857)[1], Svaneti (1859), and others. Thus, the inclusion of Samurzakano in the process of Russian rule in Abkhazia is not relevant, as it was part of the Odishi Principality by 1840.

[1] Legally, Nikoloz Dadiani, the nominal ruler of Samegrelo principality in 1853-1867 relinquished the princely rights only after his age of maturity, in 1867. Although, this was absolute formality.

§2. Samurzakano in 1865-1918

Death of imprisoned Mikheil Sharvashidze negatively influenced population of Abkhazia. A lot of people came to his funeral did not disguise pity on former life (**Janashia, 1988:** 14). This event coincided with peasants'[1] reform, which indigenous peasants could not understand. They refused to buy out that land which they held as their own property. The situation was also extremely aggravated through the rude acts of Russian colonial administration, which insulted dignity of Abkhazs (**Lakoba S., 1990:** 24-26; **Khorava, 2021(c):** 171). Russian government held that anti-Russian manifestations were inspired by M. Sharvashidze's relatives (**Diachkov-Tarasov, 1910:** 187). This caused insurrection. Risings, started through socio-economic problems soon turned into national-liberative movement (**Lakoba S., 1990:** 26; **Papaskiri, 2004:** 192) and on 29th of July the rebels declared 20 years old Giorgi Shervashidze the new Prince of Abkhazia. The son of Mikheil Sharvashidze was forced to take this responsibility (**Janashia, 1988:** 15-16). Although the rising was not durable and took place only for one week (26.07.–31.08.), but it got very dangerous forms that Sokhumi was threatened. In order to put down this rising the occupants were forced to mobilize auxiliary forces,[2] the Tsebelda, Abzhua and group of militiamen from Samurzakano (**Dzidzariya, 2015:** 640, 651; ***Materials on the History of Abkhazia in the 19th Century..*, 2012:** 245).

After strengthening positions on the both sides of the Caucasus from military point of view, St. Petersburg decided to enhance this achievement by means of political and military reorganization. Proceeding from above mentioned in 1866, on 11th of August (old style) Russian authorities issued Provision. By this Provision the Tsebelda and Samurzakano districts, headed by the *Bokauli* (Head of local police) being part of Abkhazian principality (along with Sokhumi), now had been united into special Sokhumi Division (***Caucasian Calendar-1867*:** 283). Samurzakano entered this new bourn administrative entity as Okumi okurg (area) and was by led Major-General Pavel Shatilov (1822-1887). This new administrative body was subordinated to Kutaisi Governor-General (***Abkhazia & Abkhazs..*, 2005:** 275; ***Materials on the History of Abkhazia in the 19th Century..*, 2012:** 203; ***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 14). This area was joined to Abkhazia because Russian colonial regime wanted to colonize Black Sea coastline completely and carry out Russification here. This implied exclusion of Georgian national influence here. As Russians wrote *"Thus the one unity was created along with Abkhazia"* (***Caucasian Calendar-1917*:** 322). This approach was wrong, deviated from the reality from the very beginning.

Through this act the special state of Samurzakano and Tsebelda was abol-

[1] As the German historian Jiorg Baberovski holds. These reforms pursued the only goal – to set up the one social-judicial system within the state and thus speed up the process of Russification of population of the Empire (**Baberovski, 2004:** 313).

[2] The part of the leaders of rising was executed (shot) publicly. Others were exiled, among them was Giorgi Sharvashidze. He was prohibited to live durably in Abkhazia. Giorgi was permitted to live in his homeland only in 1905 (**Janashia 1988:** 16, 18).

ished (***Materials on the History of Abkhazia in the 19th Century..*, 2012:** 203). Both administratively became equal to other districts.[1] The judiciary system was formed in the following way: in the districts (okrugs) verbal courts were located, Sokhumi became whereabout of the Main Court, and insignificant litigations were settled in the villages by means of arbitration.

Verbal court, except of the Chairman, who was bokauli (the Head of local police unit) consisted of four Deputies elected by the okrug (district) population: 1 – from the upper layer of the community, and others were elected from the lower layers of community (***Abkhazia & Abkhazs..*, 2005:** 275-276; ***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 14).

It is interesting, that "Droeba" newspaper wrote that *"the name Samurzakano was thrown away. Now Samurzakano is the name of Okumi military district"* (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 18). Although it was general rule of Russian Empire, in order to seize among population, the mentioning of the historical provinces. Especially this dealt with those ones, which had a certain experience of political-systemic structuring. The journalist of "Droeba" newspaper notices interesting fact while elections of Samurzakano administration. *"When we came to Okumi we witnessed assembly. They elected Mdivanbegis. One prince, one gentry representative and four peasants. But terrible rivalry started between the princes and gentry representatives. Princes wanted Mdivanbegs from peasants would be elected only from the peasants belonged to the princes. But gentry resisted it violently. After certain quarrel just one was elected from the gentry and the rest from the princes' representatives. To Samurzakno new governor arrived"* (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 18).

That rising of Abkhazs encouraged colonial administration to think about their exile to Ottoman Empire.[2] Although documents prove that Russians started to think about such exile even long ago this insurrection. It was early February 1866 (***Archival Documents..*, 2/2023:** 18). Muhajir movement started in 1864 and at first only highlanders of the Northern Caucasus were involved in it. But it must be said, that part of Abkhazs were involved int it. The Ottoman authorities settled them in Lazistan and Batumi, where an appropriate infrastructure was arranged for the newcomers, eg. Schools (***In the Archives of Türkiye.., I-1*, 2022:** 350, 351). Thus Russians hoped to master Abkhazia peacefully (***Archival Documents..*, 2/2023:** 19). On 27th of October 1864 Kutaisi Governor-General Dmitri Sviatopolk-Mirsky noted, that the last events in Abkhazia showed that exile of indigenous population to Ottoman Empire was the only tool to avoid endangering of Russian rule there (***Archival Documents..*, 2/2023:** 22).

The exile of Abkhazs to Ottoman Empire, which is known as "Muhajir"

[1] The researcher A. Saparov thinks that by this act Russia accomplished the many years standing discussion on Samurzakano and delivered it to Apkhazs (**Saparov, 2014:** 26). He blunders that generally Russia left Abkhazia under the jurisdiction of Kutaisi.

[2] Georgian public figures protested Tsarism's policy and defended exiled Abkhazs, demanded to bring them back to the homeland (**Botsvadze, 1968:** 118). Regrettably our Abkhaz colleagues for some reason do note it.

movement (Arab.: migrant) started on 6th of April 1867. It was carried out voluntarily and forcibly as well (**Khorava, 2021(c):** 173). Russia, the conqueror of the Caucasus was interested in this process. In order to carry out its own economic and military interests Russia needed region absolutely drained from indigenous population. *"If not the anti-national policy of Russian Empire, the Muhajir movement would take place on a rather insignificant level and it would not be reflected so tragically on the fate of Caucasian highlanders"* (**Janelidze, 2023:** 144-145). But our Abkhaz colleagues still continue to falsify history and categorically state, that Georgian press did not manifest sympathy towards Abkhazs, who were forcefully exiled from their homeland to Ottoman Empire (**Achugba, 2007:** 248-250).

In 1866-1867 the first groups of the Greeks and Bulgarians were settled in Abkhazia, in order to prepare this area for Russification. In 1870s here Russian colonists and Russian clergy were settled who took possession of a significant land estates (**Gamakharia, 2018(a):** 190-191). It is interesting, that before the end of the war in the Caucasus, particularly in 1859 Russia's representatives held negotiations in İstanbul with Ottoman authorities concerning reception of the Caucasian Muslims (**Janelidze, 2023:** 149). Dealing with the issue of en masse populating Abkhazia by Georgians in post-Muhajir period, Abkhaz colleagues deliver statistics on coming Georgians, Greeks, Armenians, Russians and others to this area. Even simple summation of their figures is enough to prove, that against the background of other nations (Russians, Greeks, Armenians etc.) Georgians were in minority (**Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 245).

The Muslim population of Sokhumi Division was exiled most of all. Therefore, this process did not take place in Samurzakhano. But it caused some turbulence in Samurzakano: *"People are trembling in Samurzakano, God forbid us to be thrown there, who knows what will happen to us? But they hope for their merits and banner, which was granted to them by the Tsar Nicholas… local ones and Abkhazs. Local ones and Abkhazs have very close kinship... one say, if all of them will be driven out, we must go as well. Local women say, what shall we do? We must be there where our parents, brothers and sisters are"* (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 19).

The new flow of Abkhazs came to Ottoman Empire in 1868 were settled in Batumi again (***In the Archives of Türkiye.., I-1*, 2022:** 358; **Uzunadze, 2009:** 578). But soon the controversies started between the local population and the newcomers. Therefore government was compelled to tend there additional armed forces (***In the Archives of Türkiye.., I-1*, 2022:** 357-358). Later Abkhaz muhajirs tried t o settle in Adjara and come to their native places via this region (**Khorava, 2021(c):** 179-180).

Abkhaz researcher S. Salakaia says, that Muhajir movement did not take place in Samurzakano because this area was defended by Russian troops (**Salakaya, 2022(b):** 42). By means of this approach he wants to hide that very fact, that majority of population Samurzakano were Georgians. Abkhazs, who lived there were mostly Christians. Therefore they were not subjected to exile to Ottoman Empire (**Khorava, 2014:** 85).

In 1868 in Abkhazia the next administrative reform was held. As soon

as this independent principality was abolished instead of three districts (Bzipi, Sokhumi, Abzhua) and two to Bokaul's subjected areas (Samurzakano and Tsebelda) formerly being in Sokhumi Military Division in 1866 four districts were created; in 1868 two districts were created. Bichvinta district consisted of Gudauta and Gumista localities, Ochamchire district, Kodori and Samurzakano localities. Tseblda exercise separate governance (**Gamakharia, 2018(a):** 189; ***Materials on the History of Abkhazia in the 19th Century*.., 2012:** 409, 410). This administrative status quo existed till 1883.

On 8th of November, 1870, in Sokhumi Military Division Russian authorities published Provision on the peasant's Reform. When this topic was put in operation local authorities, Abkhaz nobility (Bada Emkhvari, Misoust Marshania, Titu Marghania, Konstantin Inal-Ipa) sent letter to Adjutant-General Dmitri Sviatopolk-Mirski. They noticed, that since time out of mind Abkhazia was the part and parcel of Georgian cultural and political space. Therefore they stressed, that in Abkhazia the Reform must be carried out as in the rest of Georgia (**Menteshashvili, 1998:** 28-30; **Papaskiri, 2004:** 187-189).

Serfdom was abolished and peasants became personally free. But the land, which they received was so small and the amount of money payed for to buy out themselves was so big that situation had not been changed significantly (**Olonetskii, 1960:** 211-214; **Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 236-237). Peasants even had no right to dispose of their estates (**Nikoladze, 2003:** 281). The Reform implementation was protracted also. This caused dissatisfaction of nobility and peasants what was used by colonial authorities to make their regime tougher. This increased dissatisfaction of the natives (**Papaskiri, 2004:** 194). The local opposition to Russian rule found support among countrymen exiled to Ottoman Empire (**Dzidzariya, 2017:** 373-375).

In Abkhazia people remembered well 1866 insurrection still. It looked like that situation was convenient. Since the early 1870s the relations between Russia and Ottoman Empire were on the brinkmanship of the war. This was well known in Abkhazia and to muhajirs as well. Ani-Russian propagation was invigorated from the side of those ones who came from Ottoman Empire (***Materials for the Description of the Russian-Türkiye War..*, 1909:** 258; **Papaskiri, 2004:** 195).

On April 12(24), 1877 Russia declared war on Ottoman Empire. A little bit earlier, on 10th of April the Abkhazs demonstrated some signs of disobedience (**Dzidzariya, 2017:** 388, 394). Ottomans hoped, that it will succeed in the region by means of Abkhaz muhajirs, who would play the leading role in military operations on the Black sea coast and Caucasian highland (**Papaskiri, 2004:** 196). They were armed very well and there rather modern weapons for that time gave them superiority over Russian army (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 40; **Anchabadze G., 2009:** 191).

The rebelled Abkhazs supported Turks. Ottoman spies made Abkhazs in the swim of the Firman issued by the Sultan Abdülhamid II(1877-1909). Sultan appealed local population to fight Russians. Soon the Mullah brought al-Koran and Abkhazs swore an oath of loyalty (**Anchabadze G., 2009:** 188). But soon Ot-

tomans got an information that the majority of Abkhazs will not take to arms to fight Russians (**Dzidzariya, 2017:** 405).

Soon the whole Abkhazia found itself under Ottoman control. The Samurzakano's population, supported by Georgian clergy retained loyalty to Russia (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 508). The brothers Shmap and Murzakan Anchabadze appealed population to defend their motherland (**Dzidzariya, 2017:** 458). The territory from Enguri to Kodori surrendered to Megrelia and Samurzakano militiamen (***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..,* 2018:** 159-160). The Turks planned to take Okumi in order to start to Megrelia (**Dzidzariya, 2017:** 419).

Russian military command was losing Abkhazia. Therefore, it decided to turn the avenue of approach to Samurzakano into the area of the main battle. They hoped that this area was loyal. But in case of defeat the local population could take Ottoman side (***Materials for the Description of the Russian-Türkiye War..,* 1909:** 304). By 13th of June several cases of betrayal of Russian troops by Samurzakhano people in favour of Ottomans already had taken place (***Materials for the Description of the Russian-Türkiye War..,* 1909:** 333). Russians noticed, that Samurzakano warriors did not relay the power of Russian weapons (**Anchabadze G., 2009:** 193). But it was not en masse phenomena.

Major-General I. Alkhazov (Alkhazishvili) who was in charge of Abkhaz front took the strongholds on Ghalidzga river. There were Samurzakano militiamen in his troops. They consisted of six regiments of irregular cavalry, five companies of irregular cavalry militia and three companies of militia infantry.[1] These detachments were the pieces of Enguri forces. On the 1st of July these troops started attack and soon destroyed enemy's defence on the opposite side of Ghalidzga river (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 43). By 19th of July Abkhazs retreated up to Kodori river, Soon Ottomans started to evacuate Sokhumi. Thus, Abkhazs had been left without support surrendered to Russians (**Anchabadze G., 2009:** 194). While this military operation the Samurzakano warriors took captive one of the leaders of the rebels Kherips Marshania (**Anchabadze G., 2009:** 194). While coming back they took a lot of booty (**Anchabadze G., 2009:** 196). While Ochamchire battle Batu Emkhvari got trophy, the Ottoman banner. Enemy tried to get it back, but in vain. Batu Emkhvari handed over this banner to General Alkhazov (***Abkhazia & Abkhazs,* 2008:** 501-502).

In this war in Samurzakano the main rendezvous took place in its centre – Okumi(***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 52). As soon as the war started, there the Samurzakano nine companies' strong militia was fomed. These troops immediately entered warfare and created problems to Ottoman troops (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 52). It must be mentioned that the Anchabadze brothers, Shemap and Murzakan encouraged population. They told people, that

[1] The commanders and fighters of these units – Colonel Grigol Sharvashidze, Guard Colonel Mikheil (Almakhsit) Marshania, Lieutenant Batu Emukhvari, Ensign Ivane Sharvashidze and Ensign Kujmakhan Marghania, Data Anchabadze, Giorgi Kurtsikidze, Chagu Marghania, Chagu Anchabadze, Kvaj Marghania, Chagu Emukhvari, Eristo Emukhvari, Sharvan Kozmava, Gvaj (Ioseb) Dzadzua (peasant from village Nabakevi) – were distinguished with various awards (**Dzidzariya, 2017:** 444).

Russian retreat was temporary. The Anchabadze brothers, Shemap and Murzakan, princes Almaskhan and Chigo Marshania gained fame in fighting. Warriors from Samurzakano were on the front line of the battlefield. The archive data prove that each peasant family from Samurzakano sent to the battlefield at least one or two horsemen or foot soldiers. Many even returned back injured.

During the Russian-Türkiye war of 1877-1878[1] Okumi school temporarily turned into military hospital. Academic year renewed there in 1879. Local teachers: A. Emkhvari, G. Emkhvari, G. Sharvashidze, B. Inal-Ipa became the warriors of Enguri regiment and fought bravely. For their bravery they were awarded Saint George Crosses (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 509).

In spite of this selflessness the militiamen manifested protest when the war finished. "Natives of Samurzakano, who were fighting look forward for awards. But things turned vice versa. That one who really deserved award received nothing, but those ones who had no hand in war had been honoured and awarded (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 51). At the same time it had come out soldiers got payment less, then it was provided officially (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 51). In order to seize protest, authorities were forced to settle this issue immediately. Therefore in 1878, in early July, the new Head of Sokhumi Military Division, Colonel (in 1878-1883) and General since 1881 P. I. Arakin personally went to Samurzakano and satisfied demands of local population (***Materials for the Description of the Russian-Türkiye War..*, 1909:** 55). The correspondent of "Droeba" newspaper wrote that at first the colonel instructed representatives of the local community to distribute money to those Samurzakano inhabitants who suffered damages. But they set up lists where noble people were inserted. Being dissatisfied P. Arakin decided to communicate former combatants personally, commanders and warriors and carry out this process himself (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 55).

Russian-Türkiye war continued in Abkhazia only 3.5 months. In the same 1877 Abhkhazs, named by the colonial regime the *"nation of criminals"* suffered the wave of Muhajir movement. But Samurzakano again saved from this tragic process. The reason was the same – the majority of population were Christian-Orthodox Georgians.

Of course, Tsars's authorities wanted to exploit this territory completely. This would be finalized into departure of this land from Georgia. This tendency was noted from the very beginning by Georgian intellectuals (G. Tsesreteli, I. Gogebashvili, I. Tchavtchavdze, N. Janashia) who immediately launched their protest (**Katcharava, 1975:** 29). Such national approach and position predetermined that Russia failed to carry out Russification of Abkhazia and Abkhazs completely. Regrettably our Abkhaz colleagues willfully do not notice this fact (***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..*, 2018:** 132). Despite that from various parts of Abkhazia population once more removed to Ottoman Empire, nobody

[1] In 1877-1878 the population of Samurzakano lost more than 400 men. In 1876 there were 26,915 inhabitants. In 1879 this figure was equal to 26,514 (**Dzidzariya, 2014:** 385).

left Samurzakano again (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 510). This was the result of the activity of Georgian clergy. In Okumi village four beds of honour (cemeteries) were opened for the Russian warriors died in 1877-1878 war. By 1904 they were in a such deplorable condition, that authorities try to find extra money to take care of them (***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..,* 2018:** 132).

In early 1850's there were about 5,000 families in Samurzakano (***Archival Documents..,*** 1/2023: 39). In Samurzakno and Abkhazia poor peasants were in plight (***Economic Situation..*,1872:** 11). In 1860s trade in Samurzakano was still at the disposal of Turks (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 13), although as Serena informs, by 1880's this field had been already at the disposal of Megrels. Turks removed to Abkhazia (**Serena, 1882:** 358). Of course, the development of trade was hindered through the lack of good roads. This negative factor had been already noticed by Russians in 1854(**Dzidzariya, 2016:** 112). Notwithstanding this, nothing had been changed 13 years later. As the correspondent of "Droeba" newspaper wrote, *"Do not take here to the road without guide, otherwise be sure, you will lose your way"* (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 14).

By the late 19th century (1898) the issue of river crossing bridges in Samorzakano was none too encouraging (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 485). Therefore, the local prince Petre Anchabadze (1869-1928), arranged ferry with his own expenses. This ferry worked for a long time and even in Soviet period it was named Petre's ferry (**Anchabadze G. (*GE*)**). He was enormous fan of his native land and after having education in Russia came back to his native village Otobaia, where he planted new plants and shared his knowledge of agriculture with local peasants. He even distributed his own lands to them. In 1898 he initiated the opening of two forms(primary) school in his native village. In 1912 the special building was built for school. For the youngsters of the village, he opened workshops for carpenters, smiths and shoemakers (**Anchabadze G. (*GE*)**).

The end of Caucasian war of course brought to the region a certain economic stability. Trade developed intensively. In 1865 D. Bakradze informed that Samurzakano population was engaged in trade throughout Abkhazia (**Dzidzariya, 2016:** 160). Proceeding from the natural and climatic conditions, Abkhazia (Samurzakano inclusive) was one of the best areas for agricultural activity in whole Georgia. This was well noticed in 19th century (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 377, 523). Okumi and Gudava gentry had business ties with Al. Avgerin, who was engaged in the field of oak timber trade (**Chitaia D., 2006:** 62-63). Since 1880s in Sokhumi Division (Samurzakano inclusive) the spread, cultivation of new species and the development of agriculture are connected significantly with Ivane Gegia (1860-1941). Originated from Okumi he was teacher, poet, significant representative of national movement in Abkhazia, member (since 1886) of the Society for the spread of reading and writing skills among Georgians) (**Zhordania, 2011:** 9-10).

In 1867 Samurzakano had very good harvest of maize, natives started to process cotton (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 18). By the late 19th century Okumi district along with Megrelia became regions specializing on maize

manufacturing (**Bendianishvili, 2008:** 229; **Smyr, 1996:** 62). It must be mentioned, that in 19th -20th centuries Okumi district along with Megrelia turned into the main regions specialized on maize manufacturing (**Bendianishvili, 2008:** 229; **Smyr, 1996:** 62). It must be mentioned, that on the verge of 19th -20th centuries the main buyer of Samurzakano maize was company "The Kavtaradze Brothers" located in Senaki (**Kavtaradze M., 2001:** 11, 14, 23-24). Also, on the verge of 19th -20th centuries agricultural science and an appropriate technology were under development. Novelties entered Russian Empire and the new knowledge was delivered to the outskirts of the Empire by sending their experts of this field. Therefore in 1909 in Abkhazian villages (Samurzakano inclusive) agronomists, equipped with new knowledge met local population and acquainted them with novelties necessary to manage agriculture better (**Smyr, 1996:** 121). These meetings soon delivered results and since 1910 in Samurzakano the space of estates for maize and other cultures had been increased. In Samurzakano the sheep breeding was also underway. But in 1867 sheep flock was struck by plague and this field of cattle breeding was damaged. In the same year the vintage was also on rather low level (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 18). Generally cattle breeding was highly developed in the region. Usually, local shepherds looking for pastures from time-to-time used pastures in Chubakhevi and Latali. But this caused dissatisfaction of Svanetian population (**Gasviani, 1991:** 58). In response Svanetian herdsmen revenged by means of abduction cattle from Samurzakano (***Archival Documents..,*** 3/2023: 11). The special tax for using pasture, so called *"Sabalakho"* – consisted of one sheep per flock (**Dzidzariya, 2016:** 272). Even this Georgian name of the tax (graze in Georgian) irrefutably points out on the ethnic character of population of this area. Besides of sheep breeding Samurzakano population also were engaged in the field of cattle and pig breeding and maintained poultry farms. In early 29th century the sericulture was developed as well (**Dzidzariya, 2014:** 312-313; **Dzidzariya, 2017:** 569). In 1860s in Samurzakano cotton manufacturing started (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 18).

Pastures was significant problem in the relations of Samurzakano people with the neighborhood population, mainly Svans. Sometimes these quarrels turned into clashes and cases were considered by Russian authorities. But sometimes they did not consider cases profoundly. For instance, in 1863-1865 ruler of Megrelia Georgii Vlastov legitimized to Svans the pastures which belonged to Samurzakano population. Samurzakano population even were obliged to pay taxes to Svans (***Archival Documents..,* 3/2023:** 11).

Maize cultivation was still novelty for Samuzakano by then times, although unlike Abkhazia, here wheat ultivation(like in Megrelia) was maintained (**Serena, 1882:** 358). The local timber (along with the Abkhazian and Megrelian similar goods) were highly demanded in Russia. Therefore, colonial authorities from the very beginning started to exploit it vigorously. In 1858 trees (oak tree mostly) were cut in Megrelia, Samurzakano and Abkhazia, in order to supply with timber, the construction of Feodosia-Kharkov railway (***List of Documents..*, 2021:** 100).

This activity was highly developed in Samurzakano. In 1864-1867 about twenty contracts were arranged among them – the Zvambaias from Rephi, who signed contract with businessman D. Avgerin. In 1867 Kvach Anchabadze gave right to to Karapet Chukhandmian to get timber in in Bargebi and Mukhuri. The contract was legalized between Samurzakano landowners and timber tradesmen (**Dzidzariya, 2016:** 107-108).

In 1874 population of Gudava and Bargei suffered heavily from torrential rains. Later plague spread there which caused great damages to cattle breeding. This situation was repeated in 1877. Now apiculture was damaged (**Dzidzariya, 2017:** 391; ***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 27). Animal illnesses in 1887 as well, but on a much lower scale and mostly were witnessed in Saberio village (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:**202).

In late 1870s in this area Belgian businessmen appeared. They set up here "Gezi Etseri" company (**Akhobadze, 1970:** 44). Although their activity came out very damageable for local flora. Indigenous oak-tree forests virtually were completely destroyed (**Chitaia D., 2006:** 63). Appearance of telegraph connection in Samurzakano encouraged economic activity and political governance. In 1877 the first contact line connected Zugdidi and Okumi (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 42).

The Russian-Türkiye war of1877-1878 did not damage economy and territory of Samurzakano. As the officials pointed out, local population completely retained cattle which was hidden in the mountains. At the same time harvesting took place on time. Salaries of conscripts were rather high (***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..*, 2018:** 56). Against the background of former years 1881 came out as much more profusive for Samurzakano. Harvest was of enormously big amount (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 106). Soon the laurel cultivation was started and by 1886 peasants had significant harvest of this culture (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 172). But in 1888 the harvest of wine was scanty (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 255, 258).

In 1890-1900 the significant minerals (coal, copper, magnate metal) were discovered in Abkhazia. This fact became focal point of businessmen (**Agumaa, 2023:** 171). As the studies proved local coal was of much more higher quality then of Donetsk (**Chitaia D., 2006:** 64). Since early 20th century the pig breeding became the main field of local economy (**Gugushvili, 1959:** 615; **Agumaa, 2023:** 145).

In 1895 the drought came, therefore the maize yield decreased (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 401). Situation was so hard, that priest Ivane Chkhenkeli noticed: *„Notwithstanding the enormous natural wealth Samurzakano suffers enormous poverty"* (**Engureli, 1895:** 1).

By 1904 people from Guria manufactured timber and only in this area they had about 12 special plants. But labourers were also from Guria and this caused conflict with local population. Therefore, these labourers soon returned to Guria. This caused serious crises of three plants (***MGPP*, 2014:** 104).

Despite climate was very convenient for agriculture, it endangered the

health of local population (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 63-64, 255, 258). The specificity of climate, dense population and lack of arable lands compelled people of Samurzakano to ask authorities permission to remove to other places of Sokhumi Division to settle there (***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..*, 2018:** 79).[1] Therefore according to census of 1886 a certain part of the population of Mekhreuli village were representatives of Samurzakano (**Bagapsh, 2022:** 38). Along with people from Megrelia they set up settlements in various places of Abkhazia (**Tsintsadze, 1998:** 141). In early of 20th century they lived in Sokhumi along with other Georgians (***Rare Books about Abkhazia*, 2024:** 175).

In the middle 1870s Prince Chavchavadze donated 20,000 rubles for founding communal agricultural bank in Samurzakano (**Yakimov, 1897:** 187). The author of the letter does not name him, but we may supposes, that he was the Head of Zupu district in 1866-1867, Major, prince Dimitri Chavchavadze, son of Sulkhan Chavchavadze (1826-1886, ***Caucasian Calendar-1867:*** 114; ***Caucasian Calendar-1868:*** 89)[2]. Through his vigorous activity from the territory, which was under his authority very insignificant number of Abkhazs took to Ottoman Empire during Muhajir movement (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 19).[3] Iv. Gegia says, that donation was made by Nikoloz Chavchavdze, son of Zurab Chavchavadze, *"who during the last war carried out the duty of the Head of Sokhumi district"* (**Gegia, 2011:** 120). But documents do not prove that in the second half of 1870s Nikoloz Chavchavadze was the Head of Sokhumi Division. In those times this amount of money. The public official's income were 300-400 rubles per year. But it must be said, that that money had not been expended even 20 years later (**Yakimov, 1897:** 187). P. Iakimov demanded to carry out the request of deceased prince and to open branches of Samurzakano bank in each village community with an its own representation (**Yakimov, 1897:**188). The similar opinion was stated by Iv. Gegia, who thought, that bank would give to local peasants possibility to get rid of private usurers and manage their estates in a more independent way (**Gegia, 2011:** 120). By the early 1880s each family in Samurzakano (in keeping with the amount of family members) annually payed tax in the tune of 2 rubles (**Serena, 1882:** 367).

After abolishing of serfdom Samurzakano peasants felt much more independent (this provision stated for peasants of Abkhazia and Samurzakano on the 8th of November. In 1866 they did not permit Kvach Anchabadze to cut trees in the wood in Obobaia village. In 1870 the peasant from Gali Budghu Tarba took away the section of the forest from middle-class nobleman Murzakan Marghania(**Dzidzariya, 2015:** 552-553).

[1] There were 70 villages here. This number of villages was not recorded in any other region of (***Rare Books about Abkhazia*, 2024:** 296).

[2] In the 1877-1878 war, a certain Prince Chavchavadze appears to have been the commander of the irregular cavalry regiment of the Samurzakano (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 65). Unfortunately, we were unable to determine the identity of "Prince Chavchavadze", although we do not rule out that he was D. S. Chavchavadze, who enjoyed great respect and love in Abkhazian society.

[3] Through the efforts of D. Tchavtchavadze, 2,867 Abkhazians were baptized and thus he saved them from deportation to the Ottoman Empire.

In the second half of 19th century social and economic protest increased in Western Georgia. In Megrelia, Samurzakano and Abkhazia like in other provinces of Western Georgia it was manifested in brigandage. These brigands or robbers even got some sympathy and solidarity from society. In 1879 "Droeba" newspaper wrote: *"From Megrelia wrote, that theft and brigandage are increased gradually there, in Samurzakano and Abkhazia. Local administration tries its best to catch these thieves and brigands, but in vain. Because, unfortunately population protect and hide them"* (**Akhobadze, 1970:** 271-272; ***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 28, 83). Although, frequently theft was not a form of social protest and was committed as ordinary crime. Population of Samurzakano was forced to take to some measures in order to prevent this criminal activity. On 10th of July, 1880 in Bedia on the assembly of community the anti-theft by-law was passed (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 88-90).

Results of these measures were received by the end of the same year (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 95). But as the "Kvali" magazine wrote in 1886 theft was not rooted out completely (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 181). On the 1st of April, 1888 Samurzakano, particularly Okumi village was visited by Kutaisi Military Governor-General, Major-General Alexander Grossman (11.03.1887-1.12.1890), who demanded population to deliver him thieves. But Samrzakano people did not betray them (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 212-213).

Educational activity was under vigorous development in Samurzakano. In 1862-1863 here 16 schools were under operation. To a great extent it was contributed by Chief clergyman, Saint Alexander (Okropiridze, 1824-1907), who in that very time was appointed Bishop of Abkhazia. He took exclusive care to the development of education in his eparchy (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 457). N. Gogoberidze, the Auditor of the Recovery of Orthodox Christianity in the Caucasus highly appreciated the activity of Okumi two forms school and its teacher I. Kekelia. As C. Serena said it was exemplary school (**Serena, 1882:** 388). In 1864 in Samurzakano were 268 pupils, in Okumi – 68, in Dikhazurga – 43, in Pakhulani – 20, in Saberio – 32, in Kuburkhinji – 43, in Nabakevi – 16, in Tagiloni – 13, in Gali – 15, in Gudava – 4 (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 434-435).

In 1868 on that territory there were 11 schools under operation already (Okumi, Dikhazurgi, Bedia, Gudava, Tagiloni, Saberio, Bargebi, Nabakevi, Tchuburkhiji and Pakhulani). There were 12 teachers (priests) and 287 pupils (among them 37 girls) (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 457). In the same year Bishop Gabriel visited Samurzakano schools. He was dissatisfied by the level of teaching there. Although in other areas of Abkhazia there were not even similar schools (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 499).

By 1869 the Society for Recovery Orthodox Christianity in the Caucasus had already founded 11 schools in Okumi, Dikhazurga, Bedia, Gudava, Tagiloni, Saberio. 2 schools in Bargebi, Nabakevi, Pakhulani and Tchuburkhinji. In winter the schools were in plight, because nobody took care to their heating (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 18). Thus in Samurzakano the amount of schools

and pupils permanently increased, what could not be seen in other parts of Abkhazia (**Dudko, 1956:** 35). K. Matchavariani in 1879 the newspaper "Tiflisisskii Vestnik" wrote that pupils from Samurzakano are very diligent (***Abkhazia & Abkhazs,* 2008:** 35).

Education was focal point in Samurzakano. In 1881 delegation from Samuzakano visited the Viceroy of the Caucasus and set forth the issue of improving school teaching. The delegates requested just only assistance and stated that financial provision would be their own duty (**Rogava, 2002:** 129).

The early 1880s were marked by the strengthening of political reaction. "Liberal epoch" of Alexander II was finished. Especially left wingers faced severe attack. But in the national outskirts of Empire these drastic measures were combined with fierce attack against national movement. Colonial authorities started to treat conquered nations much more violently. Regime took to complete Russification of other nations. It was prohibited even to use the word "Georgia". The position of the Viceroy of the Caucasus and the rather restricted autonomy of the region were abolished. The power was vested to the Chief Executive Officer of the Caucasus. This position was occupied by the chauvinist General Alexander Dondukov-Korsakov. The religious scope was delivered to Exarch Pavel. Kirill Ianovskiy was in charge of Caucasian Regional Educational. These names point out very well what was the new Imperial course. Even more, Empire decided to destroy the basis of national unity of Georgians and at primary schools Megrelian, Svan and Turkish replaced Georgian language.

In 1883 Sokhumi Okrug replaced Sokhumi Division. Instead of two administrative areas four were established: Gudauta, Gumista, Kodori and Samurzakano. The new entity was subordinate to Kutaisi General-Governor's Military-Folk Board (**Gamakharia, 2018(a):** 193; **Dzidzariya, 2014:** 138). In this administrative division Samurzakhano consisted of following communities: Bargebi, Bedia, Gali, Gudava, Mukhuri, Nabakevi, Okumi, Saberio and Chubukhinji (**Khorava, Tchanturia, 2019:** 8).

These are those years when the process of Russification harshly strengthened. Speaking, teaching, praying on national languages were prohibited (**Ioseliani, 1990:** 418-424). The consideration of the project of Russification of Abkhazia started even ten years earlier, when the Minister of Education D. Tolstoy stated the fusion of other nationalities with Russians the main goal of education. On 25th of January 1891 the State Department of Economy permitted the Chief Prosecutor of Synod to allocate money for 16 ecclesiastic schools in Abkhazia and Samurzakano(***List of Documents..*, 2021:** 16). Ap. Silagadze and V. Guruli absolutely properly point out the Russian imperial policy pursued in Abkhazia following goal – to change demographic situation harmfully to Georgians. Therefore, Georgian language was ousted from the church, prohibited in ecclesiastic and lay schools. Georgians were oppressed in order to Russify Abkhazs (**Silagadze, Guruli, 2001:** 240).

The active participant of this campaign was K. Matchavariani. Back in 1884 he requested Russian authorities to implement education in Samurzakano

schools in Megrelian and Abkhazian languages. This officially was positively evaluated (**Khundadze Tr., 1939:** 115). But finally, this project failed. All Georgian community rejected it: nobility, businessmen, peasantry (**Khundadze Tr., 1939:** 116-117). Georgian society resisted Tsar's Imperial and chauvinist policy and stated Abkhazs, absolutely properly the children of Georgia (**Kvariani, 1901:** 55).

Okumi (population 306 people) two forms school still retained its high level of education (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:**85). In this school in 1891-1893 the position of Second Teacher was hold by Ivane Gegia. Being 23 years old young man, he opened private school in Ochamchire, where he taught pupils to read and write in Georgian and Russian. Through his personal traits and devotion to duty he soon gained respect of local population (**Zhordania, 2011:** 9). But his patriotic activity was unacceptable to authorities and he was dismissed from office (**Zhordania, 2011:** 12-13).

In 1894 authorities permitted Iv. Gegia to set up library in Okumi. Soon in the centre of Okumi the small wooden house was built where the book repository was located. The first set of books donated by Iv. Gegia himself consisted of 200 books. Soon this fund was increased by the donations of Z. Tchitchinadze, Gr. Rtskhiladze etc. Editorial office of "Iveria" sent newspapers to the school library for free. Soon the fund increased up to 500 examples. The library was assisted by population of all Georgia (**Zhordania, 2011:** 15). When the book fund augmented Iv. Gegia presented the extra examples to Sokhumi library. A certain amount of books were presented to local population. He led Okumi book repository more than 30 years (**Zhordania, 2011:** 18). As Professor O. Zhordania writes *"In Abkhazia, in 1993, when the warfare finished, Abkhaz gunmen burned this many years standing library. A lot of unique books were destroyed. The pages of these books were decorated with autographs of well-known Georgian writers and public figures"* (**Zhordania, 2011:** 18).

Despite of all troubles in late 19th century Samurzakano still had been developing well. This is proved by statistics. According to 1896 census in Akvagha[1] village there were 10 stone and wooden churches, 5 shops; in Bargebi village(on the bank of the Qiri river) – one wooden church, school and 2 shops; in Bedia – 1 stone and 2 wooden churches, 1 parochial school; in Gali – 2 wooden churches and 2 trade shops; in Ghumurishi[2] – 1 wooden church; in Dikhazurga – wooden church and school; in Mukhuri[3] – wooden church, school and 9 trade shops; in Nabakevi[4] – wooden church, school and18 trade shops; in Otobaia[5] – wooden church and 2 shops; in Rechkhi[6] – 2 churches; in Saberio[7] – 3 stone churches, school, village

[1] Toponym is of Megrelian origin and mean high, elevated place (**Tskhadaia, Khorava, 2016:** 161).
[2] Toponym contain Svan substrate form: "ghumir"- fair tree, „-ish"-belonging, purpose with Zan-Svan suffices (**Tskhadaia, Khorava, 2016:** 157).
[3] Toponym is Megrelian and mean region, area (**Tskhadaia, Khorava, 2016:** 146).
[4] Toponym is Megrelian, with verb "bakua" and mean trample (**Tskhadaia, Khorava, 2016:** 147).
[5] Toponym in Megrelian mean deep water, swamp (**Tskhadaia, Khorava, 2016:** 147).
[6] Toponym in Megrelian mean dry, stone slope (**Tskhadaia, Khorava, 2016:** 153).
[7] Toponym in Georgian mean the place of origin of the Berias (**Tskhadaia, Khorava, 2016:** 154).

administration and 3 trade shops; in Tagiloni[1] – wooden church and trade shop; in Khumushkuri[2] – wooden churches; in Tsarche[3] – schools and wooden church and trade shop; in Tskhiri[4] – wooden and stone churches; in Tchuburkhinji[5] – stone and wooden churches, 4 trade shops; in Chkhortoli – wooden and stone churches; in Shesheleti[6] – 22 wooden churches and 4 trade shops(***List of Documents..*, 2021:** 47-52). In early 1890s population of that area consisted of 40,000 men, among them 7,000 peasants, 1, 400 – belonged to the high ranks of community (***Abkhazia & Abkhazs,* 2008:** 308).

Russia purposefully acted in order to deprive Samurzakano from Georgian cultural influence. Therefore by the decision of Russia's Holy Synod from 30th of September 1896 service in Abkhazian churches and monasteries were carried out in Russian instead of Georgian. Back to 16th of July 1895 priest Ivane, who belonged to progressive part of clergy of Samurzakano and Abkhazia, father of Ak. Chkhenkeli wrote in "Kvali" newspaper (he published under the pen name "Engureli") (**Engureli, 1895:** 2) pointed out on importance and necessity of teaching of Georgian language.

On 17th of March 1898 the Georgian-Imeretian Synod Office decided to prohibit teaching in Georgian in Samurzakano and Abkhazia (**Silagadze, Guruli, 1999:** 82; **Rogava, 2007:** 123). On the 3rd of September of the same year the Holy Synod passed resolution which prescribed to hold service for Georgian (Megrelian) parishes of Sokhumi eparchy in Georgian. In Abkhazian parishes prayers would be carried out only in Russian. Some fragments would be pronounced in Abkhazian (***Saint Ambrose the Confessor..,* 2006:** 63). Although top cleric Arsenii (Izotov), who came from Moscow was categorically against it. He recovered Georgian service only in Merkheuli, Abjakva and Pakhulani. Other parishes, Samurzakano inclusive were declared non Georgian (***Saint Ambrose the Confessor..,* 2006:** 63).

Here the longtime goal was clearly manifested. As Kutaisi Military Governor-General General Fiodor Gerschelmann (1898-1901) said *"colonization of this region by Russia has great national importance from political point of view"* (**Kvashilava, Papaskiri, 2021:** 186). The Governor was troubled that Georgians tried to make Sokhumi region Georgian. This was not true of course. It is absurdity to make Georgian the region of Georgia. But the Satrap of the Empire understood well that vigorous activity of Georgian clergy and public figures in Abkhazia endangered Russification of Abkhazia. Although our modern Abkhazian colleagues forbear to verify this fact (**Papaskiri, 2004:** 228). Georgians lived

[8] Etymology is uncertain, although scientists think that the name is Georgian. It must be taken in consideration that in Adjara there is Tagiluri mountain. As locals say Tagiluri means beautiful, looking nice. May be both names have on base (**Tskhadaia, Khorava, 2016:** 143).

[9] In Megrelian mean "Dry apple tree" (**Tskhadaia, Khorava, 2016:** 153).

[3] In Megrelian "White water" (**Tskhadaia, Khorava, 2016:** 159).

[4] According to experts Megrelian "Tskhiri" is poor fence, while enclosing wood or pasture (**Tskhadaia, Khorava, 2016:** 145).

[5] In Megrelian "Chestnut bridge" (**Tskhadaia, Khorava, 2016:** 160).

[6] The name is Georgian, the original name "shesheli", is added by suffix "-et" producing geographical names (**Tskhadaia, Khorava, 2016:** 146).

in Sokhumi district were very vocal against Russian regime. They demanded to have church services in Georgian, to sack from the schools Russia oriented clergymen and to substitute them for Georgians. The movement of Georgian patriots was contradicted by Kutaisi governor, who ordered to enhance repressions in Sokhumi district (**Bubulashvili, 2006:** 192-193).

It is interesting, that situation did not change even on the twilight of Russian Empire. For example, Ak. Chkhenkeli being Deputy of the region to the State Duma, in early March, 1913 toured Abkhazia. He specially was met by clergymen, came from Samurzakano. They complained that being Georgians, they were persecuted because of their nationality (***MGPP*, 2014:** 270). Samurzakano Deputy did not forget his native region. Through his intercession Imperial government assisted local peasants (**Shengelia G., 1991:** 95; **Kupatadze, 2005:** 124). The priest Ivane Chkhenkeli, was sent to Samurzakano as a missionary by Bishop Gabriel Kikodze. He succeeded to implement very wise national things so smoothly that even Russian clerics could not convict him and okayed his activity. There are a lot of archive data proving positive activity of father Ivane in Samurzakano. On 9th of August, 1877, he was appointed assistant of prior of military regiment quartered in Okumi and refused to salary which he officially had to have. On 11th of March, 1880, he appointed Blagochinniy (taking care of churches, monasteries and clergy of the parish) of Samurzakano (**Kupatadze, 2005:** 124).

It must be said, that Russian clerical policy in Abkhazia targeted creating anti-Georgian intentions. The Bishops of Sokhumi eparchy in a great majority were Russians by nationality. By means of the paramount spread of Russian language in Abkhazia and Samu;rzakano they tried to make for themselves strong foundation in local Georgian population. Thus they will have strong tool and use it against Georgians whenever they needed (**Bubulashvili, 2006:** 298).

Colonial regime violently fought Samurzakano patriots. *"Permanent punitive regiments, burning of houses, destruction of estates, shooting…everything this in the opinion of Russians was needed "in order to make noble the wild and robber character of Samurzakano population." The core element of this conversion to nobility was to force this people to forget that they are Georgians and root out from their memory reminiscences on brilliant Georgia. In order to implement this "noble" mission Russians unequivocally persecuted everything Georgian and what remained Samurzakano people that they were Georgians. First of all they started to persecute Georgian prayers which within the centuries were actually the only connecting bridge between Samurzakano and the rest of Georgia"* (***MGPP*, 2014:** 410).

All this soon influenced the quality of education and caused the protest of society. *"It is pity and lamentable, that today Georgian language is refused and expelled from Samurzakano schools. And this happens when this language must be focal point both in village and parochial schools, especially in Samegrelo-Samurzakano. Otherwise no output we shall have from parochial schools"* (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press*, 2022:** 399). At the same time ecclesiastic Slavonic would become the only language for liturgy. In 1895 Samurzakano population addressed

Sokhumi Bishop to permit teaching of Georgian language in Okumi school (**Jguburia, 2021:** 5), but there was not positive response. Therefore in 1901 parents from Samurzakano sent children to Zugdidi district village border school to have education in Georgian (***MGPP*, 2014:** 35).

The goal of Imperial authorities was pretty clear: to assimilate Abkhazia only by means of complete expulsion from here Georgian language, church and cultural influence. This would cause the separation and alienation of Georgians and Abkhazians from each other (**Silagadze, Guruli, 1999:** 8; **Guruli, Tushurashvili, 2015:** 164). The Chief Executive Officer Grigorii Golitsyn (1897-1904) and Exarch Aleksiy wrote to Ober-Prosecutor of Synod Pobedonostsev (1880-1905) that *"Sokhumi eparchy with its abundant Abkhaz and Russian population must be separated extremely from very unwanted Georgian influence. For this it will be very useful to join the small and multilingual Sokhumi eparchy to Kuban region. Kuban region consist of 1 716 245 men strong Orthodox purely Russian population. They will absorb easily 100,000 men strong Black Sea coastline multilingual population"* (**Khundadze Tr., 1969:** 65). At the same time Imperial regime tried its best to establish in Samurzakano and Abkhazia *"Russian citizenship"* (i.e. Russification – ***K.K.***) (**Kvashilava, Papaskiri, 2021:** 186).

But parishioners resisted this and government was forced to make secession. In 1898 Georgian liturgy was recovered in those parishes where majority were Georgians (Megrelians) (**Zhordania, 2011:** 6-7). Back to 15th of September, 1897 the Deputy of Kutaisi area Governor wrote, that in *"Sokhumi okurg Georgian nationalism hampers Russification of this area"* (**Toidze, 1999:** 59).

Samurzakano population was in guard of Georgian national interests. For example, in 1899 colonial authorities bring on the agenda the issue of joining Sokhumi okrug to Black Sea province. The goal was clear, complete Russification of Abkhazia (**Tsintsadze, 1998:** 146). Researchers truly noticed that the reason for this was revival of Georgian element in Abkhzia, improvement of economic conditions of this area and connecting of it with the internal regions of Western Georgia (**Khorava, Tchanturia, 2019:** 9). In order to prevent it Samurzakano population sent letter to the Viceroy, where they wrote, that it was inexpedient to implement this decision. They wrote, that unification of Imereti, Guria, Samegrelo, Samurzakano and Abkhazia under the aegis of Kutaisi General-Governorship was caused by the geographical closeness of Abkhazia to other regions of Georgia, similarity of political system and cultural unity (**Tsintsadze, 1998:** 142-144).

For sure, activity of Georgian clergymen in Samurzakano disturbed to carry out their Russian Imperial policy which pursued complete Russificationm of the region. Therefore, the teaching of Georgian language was inexpedient for them. Education should be maintained only in Russian (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 500-502). Colonial regime continued to work in this direction. This activity colonial regime invigorated especially since 1870s. They see fit to decrease the number of Georgian priests, so small (49) and increase the amount of Russian clergy. This at least would restrict the influence of Georgian language.

All this was opposed by Imereti Bishop Gabriel (Kikodze), under whose jurisdiction in 1869-1886 was Abkhazia too. He annually visited Abkhazia-Samurzakano and did a lot of for to strengthen Christian community among local populace (**Rogava, 2002:** 100). In 1870s in Samurzakano diligent activity and pedagogic work was maintained by priests Spiridon Jinjikhadze in Gudava, G. Shervashidze in Bedia, Ioseliani in Okumi (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 504). Although, there were renegades too. This was son of above mentioned Davit Matchavariani Konstantine, who from the very beginning set up goal to prove that Samurzakano populace were Apsuas (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 504-505).

Although authorities tried to declare Samurzakano populace Abkkhzs, they were forced to avow, that Samurzakano people were different and this was well manifested in educational policy: in Samurzakano the main text books, the book on Russian were created by Iakob Gogebashvili. Local pupils learned out mother tongue by means of his "Deda Ena" (***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..,* 2018:** 401-402).

On 22nd of February 1899 (Old Style) in newspaper «*Санктпетербургскія Вѣдомости*» the anonymous article «*Сухумъ*» (Sokhumi) **was** published. The author as it was supposed could be Ambrose Khelaia or Tedo Sakhokia. In this article the violation of the Holy Synod ruling by Sokhumi eparchy Head was criticized and at the same time the author stressed, that Samurzakano population, who were sacrificed for Russian liturgy absolutely were Georgians and therefore the liturgy would be Georgian (***Saint Ambrose the Confessor..,* 2006:** 63-64).

This letter caused discussion in press. The core of this discussion was clarification of ethnic identity of Samurzakano populaion. Discussion became very emotional and continued several for years (***vide this monograph: 208-209***). It was already said, that this issue became vitally important for Tsar's authorities. If It would be solved positively for Imperial power government would have prerequisite of success in the solution of Abkhazian issue. This process was vigorously participated by priest Ambrose Khelaia, later became Catholicos-Patriarch of all Georgia. He published his articles under the pen name «*Голосъ Самурзаканца*» (the Voice of Samurzakano man) (***Saint Ambrose the Confessor..,* 2006:** 62). It must be mentioned, that his opponent and the trumpet of Russian Empire was Georgian renegade Konstantine Matchavariani. While Khelaia's letters were based on historical sources, K. Matchavariani set forth baseless "data" and poor arguments (***Saint Ambrose the Confessor..,* 2006:** 65-66). Therefore absolute absurdity are proofs of T. Achugba, that in early 20th century Samurzakano population held themselves Apsua-Abkhzs (**Achugba, 2010:** 162-163). Authorities tried their best to deprive Samurzakano and its population from Georgian body. In 1900 the issue of Okumi school closing was put on the agenda. The main entity of education would became Sokhumi highlanders school, where teaching was carried out in Russian (**Rogava, 2002:** 131).

This policy of Russification in Abkkhazia was resisted by so called *"Georgian Party."* The members of this party were Tedo Sakhokia (founder), Antimos

Jugheli[1] (teacher at Sokhumi school for highlanders), Spiridon Norakidze (local entrepreneur, sworn enemy of Tsar's power and financier of organization), Ivane Burtchuladze, Grigol Kandelaki (Okumi pharmacist), Ivane Gegia (Okumi library Head, former teacher), Parna Davitaia (Ochamchire retailer). The sympathizers of this organization were Petre Tcharaia (Samurzakano school teacher of Georgian language and researcher of Abkhazian language), Niko Janashia (school teacher from Gudauta and journalist). Clergymen-Deans: Davit Matchavariani, Ioane Chkhenkeli, Ioane Kereselidze, Arch-Priest Ambrose Khelaia, Akaki Chkenkeli (then times lawyer) etc. (**Khundadze Tr., 1969:** 68; **Gelenava, 2011:** 364; **Tchumburidze, 2018:** 9; **Kvashilava, Papaskiri, 2021:** 188). The secret protectors and supporters of the "Party" were such an influential Georgian clergyman as Guria-Megrelia Bishop Aleksandre Okropiridze, Bishop Kyrion Sadzaglishvili and Bishop Leonide Okropiridze – so called "autocephalysts" (**Papaskiri, 2004:** 230). Police revealed as members of *"Georgian Party"* princes from Samurzakano – Astamur Emkhvari and Merab Zukhbaia (**Silagadze, Guruli, 1999:** 112). They declared war on Russification of the region and especially on those Georgians, who served Empire in this field. These were prior of Ghumurishi Church Ivane Kavzharadze, Ochamchire overseer Boris Khorava etc. (**Papaskiri, 2004:** 230).

T. Sakhokia from the very beginning bravely opposed the chauvinistic, ant-Georgian and anti-Abkhazian policy. *"Tedo Sakhokia was the most influential and selfless protester. He fought Tsar's officials with his speeches at public meetings, unmasked their chauvinistic activity by means of local and central press, united Georgians of Samurzakano-Abkhazia around national ideas"* (**Khundadze Tr., 1969:** 66).

On the 3rd of August, 1900 Kutaisi Military Governor reported to Chief Executive Officer G. Golitsyn: *"Sakhokia set up in Sokhumi district Georgian party, which pursues: a) to perform in the churches of Abkhazian populace not in Slavic, but only in Georgian language, b) to teach all subjects in parochial- cleric schools and schools for recovering Christianity in the Caucasus which are in Abkhazia and in Samurzakano in Georgian and not in Russian, in order to make population of Abkhazia and Samurzakano Georgians"* (**Khundadze Tr., 1969:** 66). It is pity that along with Russian chauvinists Bishop Arseniy, Overseer of Sokhumi eparchy parochial schools V. Iastrebov to patriotic activity troubles were made by renegade Georgians – the overseer of churches and monasteries in the parish Marghania, priest Khutsishvili from the village Dranda, the priest from village Okumi Iv. Kavzharade. They permanently delivered to police information about members of "Georgian Party" (**Khundadze Tr., 1969:** 66).

Exarch Arseniy directly addressed police: *"The activity of Tedo Zhordania and Jugheli must be evaluated as harmful for Orthodox Church, because converted to Georgian spirit* (it means bring up as nationalist – ***K.K.***), *they will become enemies of Russian Church. While Russian Church acts Abkhazia pursuing rather different goal – to set up controversy between Georgians and Abkhazians"* (**Var-**

[1] Father of Valerian (Valiko) Jugheli, Commander of the People's Guard of the Democratic Republic of Georgia.

dosanidze, 2009: 17; **Vardosanidze, 2017:** 127).

On the 2nd of September, 1900 F. Gescherlmann clearly noticed, that expulsion of Georgian language from the Church and schools *"will reliably protect population of Sokhumi okrug from Georgian influence"* (**Silagadze, Guruli, 1999:** 13). He noticed, that Tedo Sakhokia's Georgian Party disturbed to set up in Samurzakano Russian citizenship (Russification – ***K.K.***) and tried to convert this region into Georgian (**Silagadze, Guruli, 1999:**71-72). The members of Georgian Party mentioned, that Samurzakano population are Megrelians and therefore the Order of Holy Synod on 3rd of September 1898 maintaining liturgy in Georgian regards them too (**Guruli, Tushurashvili, 2015:** 174-175). *"Tedo Sakhokia and his fellows do not impose Georgian language and culture on Abkhazians, but defended them from assimilation and disappearance"* (**Karalidze J., 2019:** 12).

Of course, authorities did not leave this without attention. On the 1st of May, 1904 the Board of Chief Executive Officer considered the investigation materials dealing with activity of the members of "Georgian Party" and decided to expel them as the enemies of the Russification of the region. Concerning the fate of the clergy, who were the members of this group, authorities considered them as people with *"low level of education"* and decided hand over their case to the office of the Exarch (***Kyrion II*, 2006:** 38-39). But "Georgian Party" stayed adamant and party members continued their patriotic activity (**Gelenava, 2011:** 364).

V. Guruli and O. Tushurasvhili are right while saying that: *"It is known that the Russian colonizers divided the Georgians into the following ethnic sub-groups: Mingrelians, Gurulians, Svans, Imeretians, Ajarians and Georgians (Kartlelians and Kakhetians). Russia's aim was obvious: If the Georgians were not a united nation, there would not be any claim to the country's unity and Abkhazia would easily become a breakaway region. The Georgian language was the main factor that prevented Russia from realizing its colonial policies. The Georgians would be an integrated nation so long as the language of the various Georgian ethnic groups and the language of Church services was Georgian. Thus, the main goals of Tedo Sakhokia's Georgian Party served the consolidation of Georgian national consciousness, national integration, and the construction of a central ideology to fight for the country's unity"* (**Guruli, Tushurashvili, 2015:** 169).

But not only Georgians were defending Abkhazs and Georgians from this policy Black Hundred. The distinguished representatives of Abkhazian society were their fellows in arms. Their leader was well known poet and public figure Girogi Sharvashidze, loyal son of Georgia who glorified his motherland. *"For our motherland Iveria"*– this was his creed.

Giorgi Sharvashidze was supported by his foster (milk) brother from Samurzakano Davit Chkotua. He was close to Ilia Chavchavadze and vigorously participated national-liberative movement. Although, soon he was arrested and exiled to Siberia, where he came back in 1906 seriously ill.

In 1906 Bishop Arsen died. Till his successor would be elected Sokhumi eparchy was vested to Bishop Kyrion Sadzaglishvili, future Katalicos-Patriarch of

all Georgia. He occupied this position about one year: form 3rd of February 1906 till 24th of January 1907 (***Kyrion II*, 2006:** 10). This was great victory of patriots. Against this background, this concession, even temporal, was significant sign to colonial regime, that in Empire, especially in the outskirts, in national provinces the time of changes was coming. Bishop Kyrion was well known as vigorous supporter of autocephaly of Georgian Church and opposer of Russification. At the same time, laymen worked in Georgia on the issue of political autonomy within the Russian Empire (**Pavliashvili, 1995:** 121).

Although Bishop Kyrion temporarily occupied position of the Head of the Church of Sokhumi region still this caused negative reaction of ultra-right-wing reactionaries of Russian Church. Their trumpet was Dean Ioann Vostorgov. This reactionary was responded by Archpriest Ambrose Khelaia on 8th of March 1906 (***Saint Ambrose the Confessor..*, 2006:** 440-485).

Appointment of well-known chief priest to Abkhazia was powerful stimulus for anti-Imperial nationalists. It is interesting, that this decision this step was welcomed not only by Georgians, but by non-Georgians too, what was rather significant fact.

Bishop Kyrion could come to Abkhazia only in the second half of1906 and launched vigorous activity. Meetings with parishioners, sermons, setting up of new parishes (***Kyrion II*, 2006:** 32). Chief priest was welcomed by Abkhazians. It must be mention, that he created special commission for to translate religious literature into Abkhaz language (***Kyrion II*, 2006:** 33). To Abkhaz perishes according to mutual agreement he sent only Abkhaz or Georgian (who new Abkhaz language) clergymen were sent (***Kyrion II*, 2006:** 34). Some groups decided to use this disturbances and inspire enmity between Georgians and Abkhazians. Kyrion was welcomed in Samurzakano too (**Rogava, 2002:** 155).

Chief Priest could get the right to teach Georgian in Samurzakano. But after his departure new Bishop Dimitrii abolish this decision (***MGPP*, 2014:** 282). At the same time authorities tried to spread in Samurzkano Abkhaz language and started to teach it in various schools what was absolutely incomprehensive for local inhabitants (***MGPP*, 2014:** 295). Although in one or two schools patriot teachers still teach Georgian language (***MGPP*, 2014:** 295). Among them was Petre Tcharaia, who being supported by the Society for the Spread of Reading and Writing taught Georgian in the parochial school of Gali village (***MGPP*, 2014:** 330). Such acts were categorically prohibited. On 9th of July, 1904 newspaper "Iveria" wrote: *"There is two forms school in Gali, where Georgian is held as an extra burden for Samurzaknao populace. One say - they cannot learn out two foreign languages – Georgian and Russian. At the same time Georgian language is in ubiquitous use in Gali and throughout Samurzakano"* (***MGPP*, 2014:** 95).

Notwithstanding that ecclesiastic-administrative reform failed Tsar's authorities attacked the other side: in 1903 Sokhumi region, which was governed by the self-government set up in 1899 was separated from Kutaisi province and delivered under the control of Command of the Caucasian Army. Next year Gagra

climatological station with its territory was joined to Black sea province. But before, in 1902, authorities decided to remove the administrative centre of Gali or Okumi district to the Ghali village. This irritated populace (***MGPP*, 2014:** 39). This process was finished in 1906 and district received new administrative centre,

The final goal of all this acts was depriving Abkhazia from Georgia. Back to spring 1900 in keeping with the project presented to the Council of State Abkhazian region would be joined to Black sea province, Sa;murzakano would be delivered to Zugdidi district (***MGPP*, 2014:** 16). It looks like through these acts Empire tried somehow to flatter Georgians who in the opinion of Imperial authorities would be satisfied by receiving Samurzakano and ceased to have claims to the rest of Abkhazia (**Kvashilava, Papaskiri, 2021:** 192). Consequently, the issue of eparchy would be solved as well. In the letter, written in 1918 Ambrose Khelaia negatively evaluated this decision. He properly noticed, that Georgian population of Samurzakano disturbed Russian authorities in Russification of Abkhazia. If Abkhazia would subjected to Kuban region this process would become irreversible (***Saint Ambrose the Confessor..*, 2006:** 683).

Bourgeois reforms carried out in Russian Empire with shortcomings and protracted in time created revolutionary situation. It was necessary to destroy already outdated absolutist regime which hampered farther development (**Bendianishvili, 2012(b):** 113-114). Therefore, in early 20th century various social and political protests made situation turbulent. Climax came as revolution of 1905 which shattered Tsars's power and created tension in Abkhaia. Some groups decided to use this disturbances and inspire enmity between Georgians and Abkhazs (***Kyrion II*, 2006:** 35).

The tension began in late April 1905 and continued almost until the end of 1906. In December 1905, an armed uprising was planned in Gudauta under the leadership of Sergo Orjonikidze. For this purpose, weapons were also brought in from abroad (**Fadeev, 2022:** 302). As a result, on December 20, a "reinforced defense regime" was established in Abkhazia, and on February 28, 1906, a state of martial law was declared throughout the entire region (**Lakoba S., 1990:** 47). While in other regions of Georgia, this event had a socio-political conflict character, in Abkhazia, it took on an inter-ethnic confrontational character, but it did not result in the desired outcome, and no blood was shed (***Kyrion II*, 2006:** 36, 38).

Since 1903, the local branch of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party also existed here (**Fadeev, 2022:** 301), which was subordinate to the Batumi committee. This process began back in 1894, when Mikha Tskhakaya (a well-known Georgian social-democrat and Bolshevik) arrived in Abkhazia (**Lakoba S., 1990:** 47). In Georgia, which even emerged as a protest leader in the Caucasus, as reflected in the resolution of the RSDLP's third Congress, the social-liberation and national-liberation ideas intertwined in these events. Interestingly, one of the main demands here was the introduction of universal and free education in the Georgian language for children under 16 years old.

During the 1905 Revolution, Samurzakano stood out with particular activ-

ity, where the local Bolshevik, the nobleman Platon Emkhvari (1870-1922), proclaimed the establishment of the *"Social-Democratic Republic of Samurzakano"* (which existed from December 15, 1905, to January 9, 1906) (***History of the Revolutionary Movement..*, 2019:** 110; **Lakoba S., 1984:** 40-63). Pl. Emkhvari, along with his associates (teachers Vasil Kavzharadze and Konstantine Sharia, nobleman Levan Chichua, and peasant Evstath Gulua), represented the Batumi committee of the Russian Social-Democratic (Workers') Party (**Lakoba S., 1984:** 42). They succeeded in disarming the local police (***History of the Revolutionary Movement..*, 2019:** 105). Pl. Emkhvari began his agitation among the population in June 1905 (**Lakoba S., 1984:** 43). According to records from the Gali District Police (31.08.1905), Pl. Emkhvari, Dimitri (Arzakhan) Emkhvari, and Pavle Jonjua, *"together with two unknown individuals",* were urging the people of Samurzakano to resist the authorities (**Lakoba S., 1984:** 44). The local revolutionary authority in the Gali District was called "Unity," and under Pl. Emkhvari's orders, each community had its own leader, such as captain and commander (**Lakoba S., 1984:** 48). An armed detachment was formed, led by noblemen such as Kochora Marghania's son, Bakhva Chachibaia, Jokhia Kvekhveskiri, Shakhan Kvekhveskiri, Tcharaia, and Jgerenaia. Their coordination was entrusted to noble Kochotcha Bakurisdze Marghania (**Lakoba, 1984:** 48-49).

Due to his active participation in the revolutionary movement (in the Samurzakano and Kodori regions), Dimitri (Arzakhan) Emkhvari was placed under police surveillance (***History of the Revolutionary Movement..*, 2019:** 120). Arzakhan is one of the prominent public and political figures in the history of early 20th-century Georgia. For instance, it is worth noting that he served as the prototype for Tarash Emkhvari, one of the main characters in K. Gamsakhurdia's great novel "*The Abduction of the Moon*" (Marshania, 2012: 9). Konstantine Kandelaki, a member of the Constituent Assembly of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, and a friend of A. Emkhvari, recalled: *"I remember you as a 14-15-year-old child, who hardly knew the Georgian language, and no one forced you, as an Abkhaz, to study it in school... I remember your fascination with learning Georgian literature and the history of Georgia. As a result, you would often say: 'For those who know the history of Georgia and Abkhazia, it is impossible to think of separating them, even just to imagine"* (**Marshania, 2012:** 25).

During the same years, the anti-government protests of the people of Samurzakano were supported by the prince from Otobaia, the aforementioned Petre Anchabadze (**Lakoba S., 1984:** 46-47), and teacher P. Tcharaia (**Surguladze A., Surguladze P., 1991:** 157). It is interesting, amidst the rising public unrest, the Imperial secular and ecclesiastical authorities were forced to make concessions, and on June 5, a Georgian-language liturgy was held in Sokhumi (***MGPP*, 2014:** 111).

The differences in the events of 1905-1907 can, of course, be attributed, on the one hand, to the peculiarities of the social development of the Abkhazia, which, for well-known reasons, were different from the social structure of Georgian society. The differences in the stages of development are noteworthy. It

should be pointed out that this fact was specifically highlighted by the aforementioned Giorgi Sharvashidze in due time (**Lakoba S., 1990:** 55). On the other hand, as Professor Z. Papaskiri rightly pointed out, this was a certain success achieved by the Imperial regime in inciting antagonism between the Georgians and the Abkhazs (**Papaskiri, 2004:** 243). In this regard, the researcher categorically disagrees with S. Lakoba's view that, for the Abkhazs, this revolution was seen as a "Georgian" event (**Lakoba S., 1990:** 55).

During these turbulent years, the Imperial authorities noticed and duly appreciated the loyalty expressed by the Abkhazs towards the government: on April 27, 1907, Emperor Nicholas II removed the *"guilty population"* designation from them (**Papaskiri, 2004:** 246). The purpose of this concession was quite clear: to promote the Abkhaz opposition to the Georgians. Rumors spread widely that the Georgians were attempting to exterminate the Abkhazs and seize their lands (**Gamakharia, 2018(a):** 209). The authorities demanded that the Abkhaz recognize that *"Abkhazia is not Georgia"*, and to this end, a special "work" was prepared with this title (**Voronov L., 1907**). At the beginning of the book, the author mentions that a number of Georgian authors – Bishop Kyrion, Archimandrite Ambrose, and Professor Khakhanov (referring to the Georgian philologist, historian, and professor Aleksandre Khakhanashvili) – actively published works in Russian, attempting to prove that Abkhazia is a historical province of Georgia (**Voronov L., 1907**: 3). The author "cared" for the Abkhazs and stated that Abkhazia had no connection with Georgia. Therefore, the Abkhazs should connect their future development with Russia and the Russian language. Unfortunately, this absurd and unscientific publication "fulfilled" its purpose and continues to do so today: it became a desk reference for separatists. Naturally, all of this was done to separate Abkhazia from the cultural-political space of Georgia, which was by then time represented as part of the Russian Empire. As we have seen, in early 20th century, this issue was on the agenda, and certain actions were taken, including the creation of an independent eparchy.

However, the events that began in 1905 postponed the resolution of this problem. In 1914, the issue of forming the Sokhumi district into an independent province once again arose before the Viceroy of the Caucasus. The newly started World War I also introduced adjustments to this matter (**Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 252). In this regard, in 1909, in articles published in the newspaper "Droeba" the well-known Georgian public figure, educator, and expert on Abkhaz ethnography and folklore, Niko Janashia, precisely observed: the Russians, *"until now, had been pushing the Abkhazs away and shouting 'get away from us,' but now they seem to be flattering them, cajoling them, and this is only because they want to put an end to and eliminate the small remnants of historical ties that have connected the Abkhazs and the Georgians for many centuries"* (**Gamakharia, 1990:** 8).

The issue of the ecclesiastical-administrative reform was not an easy one for the Tsar's regime. Despite numerous attempts (in 1907-1908, 1912-1915), the Sokhumi eparchy could not be separated from the Georgian Exarchate. Natural-

ly, all of this was aimed against the Georgian "autocephalists". At the beginning of 1916, the plan to separate the Sokhumi eparchy from the Georgian Exarchate was once again considered, but with one condition: Samurzakano would remain part of the Georgian Exarchate (**Gelenava, 2011:** 383).

It seems that this political turmoil would cause a certain reaction within Georgian society, and some began to consider the separation of Abkhazia and Samurzakano. It seems that this idea is addressed in an article titled *"On the Shores of the Black Sea (Impressions of a Traveler)"* published in the January 13 (26) issue of the newspaper *"Sakartvelo"*. The author, Z. Edili (Shakro Edilashvili, 1873-1956), notes that Samurzakano is more distant from its political centre, Sokhumi, than from Samegrelo. Furthermore, the majority of the population is Megrelian, with the exception of a few villages where Abkhazs live (***MGPP*, 2014:** 391-392).

The author believed that the integration of the region with Samegrelo would have been more justified. In 1909, under the agrarian reforms of Russia's Minister of the Interior, Pyotr Stolypin, the process of land division began. In the Okumi district of Samurzakano region, 78 households were allocated a total of 219 desiatinas, with an average of 2.6 desiatinas per household. Of these, 11 households received 1 desiatina each, 44 households received between 1 and 5 desiatinas[1], and 23 households received more than 5 desiatinas (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 8).

The summer of 1914 was extremely rainy in Abkhazia, which led to a crop failure. By December of that year, it became clear that feeding the population would be difficult throughout the next year. In this regard, Samurzakano suffered significantly, especially villages like Refo-Shecheleti, Nabakevi, Saberio, Rechkhi etc. The maize harvest was almost completely destroyed, and due to food shortages, livestock also perished. According to contemporary statistics, the population barely managed to stock up on between 4 and 10 poods[2] of maize (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 23-25).

Chauvinists and their associates made considerable efforts to weaken Georgian influence in Samurzakano. In addition to falsely spreading the idea that Samurzakano population had Abkhaz-Apsuar origin, which did not stand up to even minimal criticism (***MGPP*, 2014:** 122), they sought to promote Russification in the region. To this end, with the support of local aristocrats Meliton Emkhvari and Tarkhan Bakurbei, efforts were made to unite the population under the Black Hundred organization "The Union of True Russians" (***MGPP*, 2014:** 239). They attempted to create controversies between the locals and the settlers from other parts of Georgia, also fueling the instigation of conflict in this direction. However, their actions did not gain much support from Samurzakano people.

The ban on teaching and learning in Georgian language in spite of had bad consequences, and the Georgian press of that time brought attention to this dire situation. Writers demanded to employ teachers who knew the Georgian language in schools (***MGPP*, 2014:** 309).

[1] 1desiatina = 1.09 hectares.
[2] 1 pood = 16.4 kg.

In 1912, elections were held for the 4th session of the State Duma (September-October 1912 – February 1917), in which Ak. Chkhenkeli won a contested race and became the representative from the Sokhumi, Batumi, and Kars districts (**Gelenava, 2011:** 376; **Tchumburidze, 2018:** 11-12).

At the time, Georgian society demanded representation in the highest legislative body that would be exclusively oppositional in its stance. This role was predominantly fulfilled by the Menshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party (*RSDWP*).

Although there were signs of anti-Georgian sentiment being provoked by the Black Hundred elements in some parts of Abkhazian society, a large part of the local aristocracy remained in favour of preserving a unified Georgian ecclesiastical and cultural space. It was their delegation (which included figures like A. Sharvashidze, Giorgi Sharvashidze, Petre Anchabadze, Dimitri Marshania, Meliton Emkhvari, Astamur Inal-ipa, Nocho Marghania, Mikheil Ezugbaia, Anton Chukbari, and others) who, on April 26-27, 1916, met the Viceroy of the Caucasus Nikolai Nikolaevich Romanov and Exarch Platon. During the meeting, they expressed concern about the separation of Abkhazia from the political and ecclesiastical Georgian space and emphasized that such a project was contrary to both the historical coexistence of the Georgian and Abkhazian peoples and the will of Abkhazian society (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 744-750; **Rogava, 2007:** 132). They demanded the immediate restoration of education in Georgian-language in Samurzakano (**Rogava, 2007:** 132). However, once again, the issue was not resolved in favour of the Empire. A week later, on May 4, an article was published in the newspaper *"Sakartvelo"* by the members of the aforementioned delegation – Samurzakano nobles Petre Anchabadze and Meliton Emkhvari – entitled *"A Brief Clarification of Abkhazian Demands"*. In that article they wrote: *"...We want an administrative and if possible, ecclesiastical governance that will particularly care for the inhabitants of the Sokhumi district. We know very well that there are many threats to our existence, but we are fighting by all means to preserve our existence. We are convinced that the Georgians, historically and circumstantially linked to us, will do everything in their power to help us preserve our national identity. We understand very well that unity with Georgians saves us from many hardships, and therefore, in all matters, we stand together and will continue to stand with Georgian activists"* (***"Sakartvelo"*, №99 (1916):** 3).

In 1914-1915, a natural disaster struck Samurza inundated rivers destroyed the fields, therefore local population found themselves in plite.. People lacked food and found themselves on the verge of starvation (***MGPP*, 2014:** 317-318, 2014: 317-318). The government provided loans to the population (450.000 rubles for Samurzaqan-Abkhazia, of which 250,000 rubles were allocated to Samurzaqan) to buy corn, however, in the end, only one-third of this amount was transferred, which was a meager sum (***MGPP*, 2014:** 323). As a result, the people of Samurzaqan activated tobacco cultivation, as it was more profitable on the market (***MGPP*, 2014:** 338). However, they had already started cultivating this crop in the

19th century (**Gugushvili, 1965:** 162). It is interesting, that high-quality Egyptian papyrus was made from Georgian (Abkhaz) tobacco, which was in serious competition with Greek and Turkish counterparts (**Gugushvili, 1965:** 220).

World War I had a negative impact on the already fragile socio-economic situation of the Empire, which the Bolsheviks took advantage of. The loss of Poland, the wealthiest and most densely populated region of Russian Empire, created a dire situation in the Empire (**Pipes, 2023:** 61). In 1916, a worker named Demyanov, who was involved in the construction of the Black Sea railway, established contact with local workers (Yason Khaburzania, A. Gablaia, K. Kolbaia, and others), introduced them to Bolshevik ideas, and under the leadership of I. Khaburzania, a local underground organization was formed (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 38). It was relatively easier to work here because most of them were radically inclined ethnic Russians (**Blauvelt**, 2023: 24). In December of the same year, they organized a strike (with about 300 workers participating) to demand a wage increase, and they achieved some success (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 46). However, soon the situation changed, and starting in April 1917, the workers stopped receiving their wages, which led to several strikes in April-May 1917 (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 76). Nevertheless, this situation failed to win popularity for the Bolsheviks in Samurzaqano. In July 1917, the Bolsheviks[1], led by E. Eshba, tried to control the situation in the region, but soon the Mensheviks were able to strengthen their positions, and the local district commissar, K. Sharia, was appointed (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 66). As T. Blauvelt rightly points out, the Mensheviks were more popular among the local Georgians, while among the Abkhaz peasants, mainly in the Gudauta region, the Bolsheviks were more prominent (**Blauvelt, 2023:** 24).

Despite the ongoing military operations, the Empire continued its struggle against the centrifugal national forces in its ethnic provinces. On February 27, 1917, the Sokhumi city council addressed the issue of separating the Sokhumi eparchy but the unity of Georgians and Abkhazians prevailed here as well (**Gelenava,** 2011: 384). Although a few months later, from May 24-27, the spiritual and elected secular leaders of the Orthodox population of Abkhazia presented the issue of transforming the Sokhumi eparchy into the autocephalous Church of Abkhazia to Georgian Patriarchy, its development did not progress further (**Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 253).

By this time, the situation on the territory of the Russian Empire had radically changed. The February Revolution of 1917, and the abdication of Emperor Nicholas II on March 2 (15), resulted in the transfer of power to the Provisional Government (March 2 [15] – October 26 [November 8], 1917). This process further enhanced the crisis in the state, for which the new government lacked the power to resolve (**Pipes, 2023**: 63-64). By the decision of the central government, the Transcaucasian Special Committee (TSC) – the so-called *"Ozakom"*[2]

[1] In May 1917, the Sokhumi District Committee of the RSDWP(b) was formed. It exercised leadership over all party organizations in Abkhazia. The leading role in the Abkhazian party organization was played by G. A. Atarbekov, E. A. Eshba, N. A. Lakoba. K. L. Meladze and others (***Transcaucasian Communist..*, 1971:** 394).
[2] Особый Закавказский комитет (*Special Transcaucasian Committee*), March 9 (22) – November 15 (28), 1917).

– was created to govern South Caucasus. Akaki Tchkhikvishvili was a member of this body (**Daushvili, 2023**: 450). This institution did not have much influence in Transcaucasia (**Tchanturidze, Vatcharadze, 2022:** 30), because simultaneously the Central Executive Committee of the region, elected by the representatives of the regional executive committees of the Transcaucasian governorates, was in operation. Before the October Revolution of 1917, in a speech at the All-Russian Democratic Conference held in Petrograd, Akaki Chkhenkeli stated that the Georgian people and their political parties were demanding national-territorial and political autonomy for Georgia.

In the state left without official authority, the population itself began to organize order. For this purpose, on March 15, 1917, in Gali, a *"General Assembly of the Inhabitants of Part of Samurzakano"* was held, which elected Prince A. G. Sharvashidze as chairman, Prince Dimitri (also known as Arzaqan) Emkhvari as his deputy ("comrade"), and N. K. Meunargia and P. G. Karaya as secretaries. The members of the "Executive Committee of Part of Samurzakano" were elected as follows: M. Z. Chkhotua, I. K. Gegia, I. S. Sartania, E. A. Eshba, N. B. Kirtbaia. The Commissioners of Samurzakano were: D. Emkhvari, Varlam Sharvashidze, and M. Tsaava.

The organization of the militia in the district was entrusted to Joto Sharvashidze, the assistant of A. Sharvashidze. The assembly decided that the official language for conducting business in the district would be only Georgian (***MGPP*, 2014:** 364). At the time of the fall of autocracy, Abkhazia, which was referred to as the Sokhumi district, was part of the Kutaisi governorate. Therefore, in March 1917, a temporary local committee of the government, established in Sokhumi, subordinated to (TSC), which was an attorney of Provisional Government of Russia. Abkhazia was focal point of the interest of Ottoman Empire, the Union of Caucasian Highlanders, Red and White Russia. In Abkhaz social and political movement, itself several trends appeared. One was pro-Ottoman, second was inclined to Union of Highlanders, third was sympathetic to Bolshevist slogans. There was the group which supported the independence of Abkhazia. But the whole Samurzakano, the part of Gudauta peasants and Sokhumi workers demanded for unification with Georgia (**Janelidze, 2009:** 123).

The committee was subordinate to the representative of the Russian Provisional Government, Ozakom. Abkhazia attracted special interest from the Ottoman Empire, the Caucasian Mountain Union, Bolshevik Russia, and White Russian forces. In Abkhazia's public-political movement, several currents emerged. One exhibited pro-Ottoman orientation, another sympathized with the Mountain Union, and a third sympathized with Bolshevik appeals. There was also a group advocating for Abkhazia's independenc All of Samurzakano, the peasantry of Gudauta, and part of the workers in Sokhumi demanded to join Georgia (**Janelidze, 2009:** 123).

The weak political authority of South Caucasus faced big difficulties. It struggled to manage the economic processes in the region, which the Bolshevists took advantage of. On September 5, 1917, M. Jafarov, the Commissioner for trade and industry of Ozakom, instructed V. Chkhikvishvili, the labor Commissioner

of Ozakom on the Black Sea Railway, to react to the situation (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 74). Due to the severe economic situation, V. Chkhikvishvili was forced to raise the issue of halting the construction of the railway altogether before the government, which was accepted (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 76-77). The Bolsheviara and the "trade unions" controlled by them tried to use the country's difficult socio-economic situation and managed to organize strikes several times in 1917 and the first half of 1918, with one of the largest being the workers' strike on the Black Sea Railway line in the Samurzakano and Kodori regions in May 1917 (**Khatchapuridze, 1957:** 293).

Before the statehood of Georgia was achieved, the restoration of the autocephaly of the Georgian Orthodox Church, which existed for 1500 years, took place on March 12, 1917. This was followed by the first council of the Georgian Apostolic Church held on September 8-17 of the same year (the sessions were held in the Sioni Cathedral), in which Archimandrite Ambrose Khelaia participated. It is noteworthy that 22 delegates from Samurzakano-Abkhazia attended the council (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 782). When presenting to the council, he read a greeting from the Samurzakano nobleman Mikheil Anchabadze, where the unity of Georgians and Abkhazians within the framework of the Georgian state and the Georgian Church was emphasized (**Vardosanidze, 2009:** 47; **Vardosanidze, 2017:** 134). On September 9, the delegate from Abkhazia, Chkhotua, requested the opening of an episcopate in Samurzakano and proposed a title: *"Samurzakano-Tskhumi"* or *"Bedia-Tskhumi"* (**Rogava, 2022:** 225). Therefore, the people of Samurzakano were at the forefront of the fight for Georgia's ecclesiastical independence, and from the very beginning, they remained within the Georgian Church (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 781). This is also manifested in their address (12.12.1917) to the leadership of the Georgian Church, as the district, which refused to obey the Russian Exarch residing in Sokhumi, would be subordinated to the Tchkondidi eparchy (**Vardosanidze, 2009:** 49; **Vardosanidze, 2017:** 135).

The people of Samurzakano were actively involved from the very beginning in the process of building the new national life. In 1917, Iv. Gegia established a branch of the "*Society for the Propagation of Literacy Among Georgians"* in Samurzakano, under whose patronage reading rooms were later opened in Otobaia, Barghebi, Tchuburkhinji, Achigvara, Saberio, and Okumi. As Academician R. Metreveli notes, the central administration of the society was well aware of its activities in Samurzakano and within its capabilities, provided material assistance, sending Georgian books, magazines, and newspapers (**Metreveli, 2023:** 19).

On October 29, 1917, a public Assembly was held in Samurzakano, which was supposed to confirm the joining of Abkhazia to the Union of Highlanders. The population harshly opposed this initiative, and a turning point was played by Iv. Gegia, who, in a speech before the Assembly, spoke to the people about Georgian history and Georgian-Abkhazian relations. *"Since we are supporters of brotherhood and goodwill with the Abkhaz, we will say and wish this, but because we are organically inseparable children of Georgia, we, the people of Samurzakano, will join the Union of Highlanders only when the whole of Georgia also joins the Union*

of Highlanders. Our decision is as follows: wherever the rest of Georgia goes, we will go too," said the speaker (***MGPP*, 2014:** 372-373). For some reason, G. Dzidzharia dates this event to the beginning of September 1917 (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 88).

This gathering preceded the "Abkhaz Assembly" planned for November 7, 1917, in Sokhumi, which was to determine the region's and people's attitude towards both the Bolshevik coup in Petrograd and Abkhazia's political orientation towards North Caucasus or South Caucasus (***Sovlab*, 2023:** 13-14). The Samurzakano delegation and representatives of the Georgian National Interparty Council (A. Chkenkeli, V. Jughheli, I. Gomarteli) were trying to convince the other participants of the Assembly of the advantages of integration with Georgia (***Sovlab*, 2023:** 14). The assembly did not take this position into account. From the very beginning, the Abkhazs held a categorical position and had no intention of making any concessions (**Gamakharia, 1990:** 8).

As O. Bghazba and S. Lakoba point out, the Georgians, who threatened to politically and ecclesiastically sever of Samurzakano from Abkhazia if the latter supported the Republic of the Highlanders, were unsuccessful. Researchers hold that Akaki Chkenkeli influenced the position of the representatives Gali county, or *"Galelebi"*[1] (**Bghazba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 270-271). It must be said that in those years, the region was not referred to in this way, even by the local population.

The Abkhaz People's Council created by the Assembly (Chairman: S. Basaria) was merely a structure formed along ethnic features, which, moreover, remained under the jurisdiction of the Ozakom and never made a decision to join the Republic of the Highlanders (**Gamakharia 2021(b):** 213). However, it is a fact that the council only represented the interests of one specific ethnic group – the Abkhazs – and in this way, it usurped power (**Papaskiri, 2007:** 6).

In the meantime, power in South Caucasus changed once again. After the Bolshevik coup, on November 15, 1917, the political parties of South Caucasus demanded that the Ozakom cease operations. The government was taken over by the Transcaucasian Commissariat (Chairman: E. Gegetchkori), and Akaki Chkenkeli entered this political body as well. A few days later, the National Assembly held in Tbilisi elected the National Council and its executive committee, which represented the first form of the future independent state's restoration.

At the first National Assembly of Georgia (November 20, 1917), a representative from Samurzakano, Iv. Gegia, spoke: *"I wish to draw your attention to the fraternal relationship between Samurzakano, Abkhazia, and Georgia. Historically, they have borne the same yoke. They have been brothers and will remain brothers. Samurzakano plays the role of being the bridge between Georgia and Abkhazia"* (***"Sakartvelo"*, №258 (1917):** 1). At the same time, he raised the issue of granting the Sokhumi district, that is, Samurzakano-Abkhazia, the status of national-cultural autonomy within the united Georgian state (**Papaskiri, 2007:** 9). In those years, the region was not referred to in this way, even by the local population.

[1] This term only became established during the Soviet period, when the *"Samurzakano mazra (uezd)"* was initially renamed the *"Gali district"*, and later became the *"Gali region"*.

The Bolshevists made significant efforts to establish themselves in Samurzakano. Since local staff were not succeeding, they sent to help a student from Moscow's Commercial Institute, a native of Samurzakano, the Bolshevist Nikolai Samsonovich Svanidze[1]. This decision somewhat strengthened the local communists (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 84). As G. Dzidzaria notes, the success of the Bolsheviks was facilitated by the fact that the local population was economically struggling; moreover, only the people of Samurzakano were subjected to military corvée (forced labor). Therefore, they came under the influence of left-wing ideologies in the army (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 84-85).

In the late 1917, Samurzakano soldiers, who were influenced by Bolshevists propaganda, returned to their native land. Among them was the peasant Pavel Dzigua[2]. In the autumn of the same year, he held an illegal meeting in the village of Nabakevi, which was attended by Philipe Toria (1889-1941), D. Toria, B. Ekhvaia, and others (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 110). They began preparations for organizing an armed uprising (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 133).

On January 7, 1918, Akaki Chkenkeli, the Deputy Chairman of the Georgian National Council, invited the Abkhaz National Council to Tbilisi for negotiations about their relations. It was also noted that representatives from Samurzakano would attend the meeting with them (**Gozhba, 2009:** 17-18). On the same day, the Georgian National Council sent a message to the executive committee of Samurzakano: *"The Georgian National Council is confident that Samurzakano will fervently support the work of organizing our homeland's life and will use its influence to strengthen the neighborly relations between the Abkhazs and Georgians"* (**Makharadze, 2020:** 83). Akaki Chkenkeli rightly believed that the position of Samurzakano was crucial in the relationship between the Abkhazs and Georgians, as well as in the neutralization of pro-Russian and pro-Ottoman orientations in Abkhazia.

On the basis of this invitation, on February 9, 1918, a delegation of the Abkhaz People's Council arrived in Tbilisi (Alexandre G. Shavrashidze, Dimitri (Arzakan) Emkhvari,[3] N. Marghania, Colonel N. Chkhotua, B. Tsaguria), among

[1] 1885-1937; the grandfather of the famous Russian journalist and TV presenter Nikolai Karlovich Svanidze (1955-2024).

[2] 1885-1918; born in the village of Saberio; joined the Bolshevists in February 1917.

[3] The distinguished representative of the Emkhvaris family and an officer of the "Abkhaz Battalion Nikoloz (Nikvala) Emkhvari". He was a native of the village of Okumi and, along with his childhood friend, Smel Badia, daringly confronted Bolshevist deserters from the Russian Black Sea Fleet on the evening of February 16, 1918, aboard the counter mine ship "Dakya." The Bolshevist sailors were attacking settlements, bombing, and looting the population. On February 15, the ship "Dakya" arrived to Sokhumi, where they also planned to replenish their water and food supplies. The heroism of N. Emkhvarya and S. Badia formed the basis of L. Kiachieli's famous story *"Haki Adzba"* (**Gvantseladze, Chaava, 2019:** 114-116; **Emukhvari B., 2024:** 9-10). It is interesting to note that N. Emkhvari was handed over to Russian sailors by his childhood friend, the head of the Sokhumi Revkom and Bolshevist E. Eshba, whom the author of the story named "Narik Eshba," while referring to Nikoloz as "Uzhush Emkha." According to the researchers' just opinion, the name, deliberately created by the writer must be derived from the Megrelian adjective *"Jgiri"* (good) in the superlative form *"Ujghushi"* (the best) (**Gvantseladze, Chaava, 2019:** 116). See also: ***Chachkhiani*, 2014**: 222-

whom Samurzakano was represented by D. Emkhvari. When discussing the relationship between Samurzakano-Abkhazia and Georgia, he noted that the people of Samurzakano did not share the views of Abkhazs concerning membership of Republic of Highlanders.

If Abkhazia took this step, the people of Samurzakano would immediately separate from it, which would place Abkhazia on the verge of disaster. His position played a significant role in changing the sympathies of some members of the delegation toward the Highlanders (**Gasviani, 2004:** 192-193; **Menteshashvili, 1998:** 16). In reality, the jurisdiction of the Abkhaz People's Council of Abkhazia did not extend to Samurzakano (**Menteshashvili, 1998:** 16). Additionally, the Abkhaz delegation agreed with the view of the Georgian side, represented by the head of the Georgian National Council, Akaki Chkenkeli, that the existence of Abkhazia between the rivers Mzimta and Enguri would only be possible within unified Georgia (**Gasviani, 2004:** 193; **Menteshashvili, 1998:** 16). It is interesting that Samurzakano's significance became evident in these negotiations: it was the unifying factor between Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia. Moreover, Samurzakano would never accept separation from Georgia (***Sovlab*, 2023:** 20). Ultimately, an agreement was reached, which involved the restoration of Abkhazia's borders from the Mzimta River to the Enguri River (**Gozhba, 2009:** 27). It is out of question, that significant contribution to this important national decision was made by Arzakhan Emkhvari's principle position. Some Georgian researchers groundlessly hold that the borders of Abkhazia were being "restored" (**Menteshashvili, 1998:** 75). In reality, this was not the case: Samurzakano never belonged to Abkhazia; it was always separate. The unification of these two historical-ethnological Georgian provinces into a single administrative unit, as we have seen above, was only carried out by Tsarism, and the goal of this decision was clearly anti-Georgian in nature. Moreover, it was an attempt to provoke Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

From March 4-9, 1918, the Peasant's II Congress of Sokhumi district took place, which was opened by Arzakhan Emkhvari, the Chairman of the Executive Committee. Despite the destructive action of the pro-Russian Bolshevists, the Congress completely operated. The Congress expressed its desire for Abkhazia's future to be connected to democratic Georgia (**Papaskiri, 2007:** 12-13).

Meanwhile, the situation in the South Caucasus worsened significantly. Russia began withdrawing its troops from the territories occupied by the Ottoman Empire. At the same time İstanbul started to occupy the lands lost during the 1877-1878 war (**Svanidze, 2007:** 364-365). The retreating Russian soldiers were largely under the influence of Bolshevist propaganda. On March 11, 1918, the Bolshevists took advantage of the difficult situation in the region and initiated mass armed uprisings in Abkhazia. By this time, the Bolshevists had consolidated their political positions in Russia and began actively usurping power (**Vachnadze, Guruli, 2005:** 121). They were able to capture Gagra and, on April 6, declared the establishment of Soviet power in Sokhumi (**Khatchapuridze, 1957:** 294).

223; ***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..*, 2021:** 105-107.

On April 11, 1918 (April 24, new style), the Bolshevists held an extraordinary Congress in Gali with soldiers returning from the war, which was attended by radicals from Sokhumi and Zugdidi. They were forced to flee toward Sokhumi after the government troops of the Democratic Federative Republic of Transcaucasia had invaded (**Janjgava, 1982:** 82). The speakers at the Congress called on the population to establish Soviet power. Armed individuals attended the Congress, terrorizing anyone who expressed opposition to the Bolshevists (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 141-142). They began preparations for organizing an armed uprising (**Dzidzariya, 1963:**133).). Representatives of the "Soviet Government" of Sokhumi and the Zugdidi district also attended the Congress (**Beridze S., 1941:** 130). The Social Democrats' newspaper of Transcaucasia, *"Ertoba"* wrote: *"… In the village Gali, the administrative center of Samurzakano, a so-called Samurzakano Congress was held. The Congress was initiated by former soldiers who dominated the meeting... Although the Congress was supposedly called for all of Samurzakano, in reality, it was attended by representatives from a few nearby villages and former soldiers... Representatives from the Sokhumi Bolshevists attended the Congress, who informed the Congress about the great happiness e that had happened with Sokhumi… and urged the Congress to inform the Samurzakano people about Soviet power… Kolia Svanidze, one of the leaders of the Sokhumi Bolshevists, stayed at home that day, despite the Congress being held in front of his house, and did not attend the meeting. Instead, others, by the way such as B. Arkhania, spoke at the Congress, who, had been persecuted by the old government for his discreditable practices"* (***"Ertoba"*, №90 (1918)**: 3).

By the end of the day, the Congress declared the establishment of Soviet power in Samurzakano. The local revolutionary committee (Revkom) was headed by P. Dzigua, with its members including I. Khaburzanija, F. and D. Toria, B. Ekhvaia, and others. Soon, armed units were formed (approximately 2,000 men). A large amount of weaponry was amassed by the returning soldiers from the front. The headquarters was located in the Refo-Shesheleti area (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 142, 148). Their main goal, as N. Lakoba noted, was to create difficulties for the central government, which was to be achieved through attacks on the enemy (***To the History of the Revolutionary Movement..*, 1922:** 17-18). A *"punitive expedition"* was formed to fight against the supporters of the central government (**Janjgava, 1982:** 101). The official government – the Military-Revolutionary Committee (Revkom) – led by Commissioner Demuria, was forced to leave Samurzakano (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 142, 148).

The Bolshevists of Samurzakano began an agricultural "reform" in their "Republic," distributing land to peasants from the lands of the nobility.[1] Additionally, they started collecting food and money taxes from former landowners (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 150, 152). They also began terrorizing the merchants of Gali, extorting money from them (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 155). The local Revkom came un-

[1] They acted in accordance with Lenin's Decree from 26s of October (8th of November) 1917 "On land" and the Law on the Provision on Socialization of Land passed by the 2nd and 3rd Congresses of Soviets of All Russia (**Blauvelt**, 2023: 34).

der the authority of the Abkhazian Revkom (led by Ephrem Eshba), though they were territorially isolated from one another (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 152, 160). The Abkhazian Revkom appointed Bolshevists V. Gogia and E. Shonia as liaison officers (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 161). The agents of the Russian Bolshevist Empire tried their best in attempting to unite these factions, with the aim of directing the front towards Samegrelo. On April 18, 1918, the representative of the central government in Samurzakano, V. Emukhvari, requested firm action from A. Chkhenkeli against the Bolshevists in order to maintain the support of the population, especially since armed former soldiers were on the enemy's side (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 166). The fact that the Bolshevists had significant military units was confirmed by the Head of the Georgian People's Guard headquarters, Valerian (Valiko) Jugheli (1887-1924) (**Jugheli, 2022:** 75).

L. Toidze rightly wrote that Soviet Russia played a very negative role in the relationship between the Georgians and the Abkhazs: *"As soon as Georgia took to the path of independence, both Soviet and Denikin's Russia immediately began to play the Abkhaz card. They managed to provoke an extreme confrontation between Georgians and Abkhazs, therefore a certain part of the Abkhaz being frightened by Georgia's independence. However, there was no objective basis for the conflict between Abkhazia and the Democratic Republic of Georgia. When Georgia declared its independence on May 26, 1918, it was not only for the Georgian people: the Abkhaz also sincerely shared the great joy of the Georgian people. To say nothing else, many notable Abkhaz figures, such as Varlam Shervashidze, Arzakan Emukhvari, and others, also signed the Act of Independence on May 2"* (**Toidze, 1999:** 60).

The Abkhaz People's Council was unable to defend itself from the Bolshevist occupation on its own and turned to the Georgian National Council and the Transcaucasian Seim for assistance. A group of members in the Council, with pro-Ottoman inclinations, attempted to curb Bolshevist violence by means of the mediation of Türkiye (**Janelidze, 2009:** 124).

The Bolshevists, who had hastily established a "defensive barrier" from Pakhulani to Anaklia, were unable to resist the state's army and retreated towards the Refo-Shesheleti area. Bolshevik propaganda had a significant effect on the population, and initially, the Samurzakano people were very hostile towards the central government. This is confirmed by V. Jugheli's report: *"The Samurzakano region, which had previously been hostile towards us, now mobilized 2,000 people to help us"* (**Chachkhiani, 2013:** 93). By mid-May, the central government regained control of Gali (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 168).

After suppression of the Bolshevists' disorders in Samegrelo, in early May 1918, the government began to cleanse Samurzakano from communists. This task was assigned to Sejm member V. Jugheli and Colonel Alexander Koniyev (Koniashvili; 1873-1951), but before that, Captain Dundu and Captain Chkadua's units were sent to the region. The latter was appointed as the head of the military forces in the area (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 168; **Tchania, 2007:** 244). The difficult situation once again benefited those opposing Georgia and the unity of the Georgians

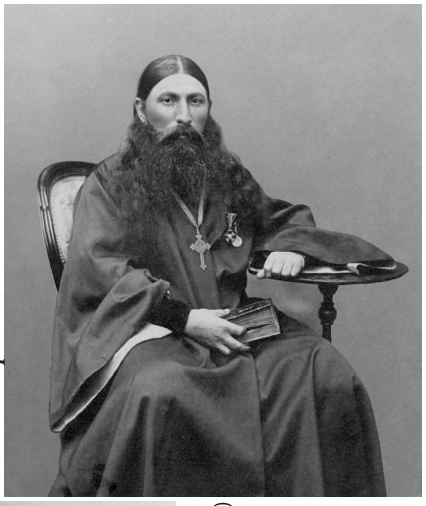
and Abkhaz. As a result, A. Chkhenkeli intervened in the matter, personally addressing the "people of Abkhazia and Samurzakano". He called on the region's population to do everything possible to stop the anarchy and send representatives to Tbilisi to work on the constitution of the Caucasian Federation and determine the country's borders, ensuring that their interests were taken into account in the process (***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..*, 2021:** 210).

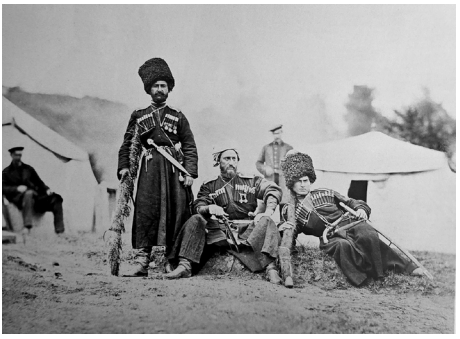
The Bolshevists occasionally achieved successes, but ultimately, they were forced to leave Samurzakano region (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 169). Soon, all of Abkhazia was cleansed of communists (**Jugheli, 2022:** 78, 80).

Due to the disorder, the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs of Georgia temporarily placed the region under the authority of the Commissioner of the Kutaisi Governorate for the maintenance of state order (***MGPP*, 2014:** 402). Samurzakano was also linked to Samegrelo in economic terms, and the Zugdidi-Samurzakano District Cooperative Union "People's Work" was established. In 1918, it sold 2,115,508 roubles worth of goods, generating a net profit of 350,000 roubles. From this amount, 15,000 roubles were transferred to the State University, 25,000 roubles to the cooperative school, and 15,000 roubles to the scholarship fund for the school's students. The educational and cultural sector also received 75,000 roubles (***MGPP*, 2014:** 413).

Meliton Emukhvari
(https://iverieli.nplg.gov.ge/handle/1234/131955)

Samurzakano Missionary and Blagochinniy Archpriest David Matchavariani





Samurzakanoans, 1860s
(***Abkhazia, 19th Century*, 2011:** 186)

CHAPTER V. THE ISSUE OF SAMURZAKANO IN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF GEORGIA

The complex foreign and domestic problems in the region put an end to the attempt to unite the peoples of the South Caucasus, and after a brief existence, the Transcaucasian Federal Republic was declared dissolved at 11 a.m. on May 26, 1918, by the last decree of its Parliament (Sejm).

By that time, Georgian society was already prepared for this. Politicians also realized that an independent development (in close alliance with Germany) would provide the country with the opportunity to survive in the difficult situation it found itself in. Therefore, at 5 p.m. on the same day, the independence of the Georgian state was declared.

The restoration of Georgia's state independence was immediately welcomed by Samurzakano. Therefore, May 26 was marked there with special warmth and enthusiasm. The celebration often included elements of a military parade. For example, on the first anniversary of independence, *"the entire town was decorated with garlands and live flowers. The celebration began at 3 p.m. Local guards led the procession, followed by representatives of political parties. The chairman of the Unity Association greeted the procession near the Unity Building. Then the people headed toward the free field. There, representatives of the Social Democrats, Social Revolutionaries, and Social Federalists spoke about the significance of May 26. Afterward, a sport competition and dance-singing followed"* (***MGPP*, 2014:** 407, 411).

Naturally, the newly established Georgian Democratic Republic made Abkhazia a key issue of state significance. On May 28, just two days later, the Sokhumi District Court specifically addressed the issue of Georgia's declaration of independence and the future relations between Abkhazia and Georgia. Legally, Abkhazia was part of the Kutaisi Governorate, and the court ruled that from now on it would be considered part of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (**Saralidze, 2022:** 249). On the same day, May 28, through a treaty with Germany, official Berlin recognized Abkhazia as part of Georgia (**Astamadze, 2023:** 235-236).

The establishment of peace in Georgia was obstructed by Bolshevik Russia. With its support, local Bolsheviks were actively disrupting the traditional way of life (including social relations) between Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia. Bolshevik anarchy placed Samurzakano in a difficult situation. The population, for safety reasons, was forced to leave their homes and seek refuge in Zugdidi (**Papaskiri, 2007:** 25). Vladimir (Ladi) Emukhvari, a member of the People's Council of Abkhazia[1] from the village of Okumi, sent a telegram to the Council on June 12, 1918, and categorically demanded the cessation of Bolshevik actions: *"The brutality of the Bolsheviks has reached an extreme limit"* (**Khojaa, 2007**). Based on his recommendation, it was necessary to send an appropriate message to the central government (**Marshania, 2018:** 25).

[1] The representatives of Samurzakano in this council were: G. Zukhbaia, Khonelidze, V. Emukhvari, M. Tsaava, Andria Kiria (**Khojaa, 2007**).

Despite the defeat, the Samurzakano Revolutionary Committee periodically carried out partisan raids on representatives of the central government[1]. Therefore, the council agreed with V. Emukhvari's views, and on June 28, 1918, the People's Council of Abkhazia requested General Giorgi Mazniashvili (1871-1937)[2] to prevent the influence of Bolshevism in Samurzakano (**Papaskiri, 2007:** 26; **Dzidzariya, 1963:** 193). However, this was not the first appeal. Before his appointment, in mid-April 1918, three members of the Abkhaz National Council and the Head of the city of Sokhumi (Mayor) addressed the Georgian commander fighting against the Ottomans in Natanebi and asked for his assistance in cleansing Sokhumi and Abkhazia from Bolsheviks (**Mazniashvili, 2014:** 56). After this, on June 16, members of the Abkhaz National Council visited General Mazniashvili again and once more requested his help. However, there were certain individuals in the Abkhaz government (such as district commissioner I. Marghania) whose actions were hindering the Republic's army from restoring order in Samurzakano (**Papaskiri, 2007:** 27).

The central government decided on June 28 to restore and strengthen order in Samurzakano by temporarily placing the region under the authority of the Kutaisi Provincial Commissioner (**Papaskiri, 2007:** 25). Soon, on June 23, Georgia's first military minister, Grigol Giorgadze (26.05.1918 – 13.02.1919), appointed him as the General Governor of Abkhazia and the Commander of the Black Sea Coast Forces (**Mazniashvili, 2014:** 58). Although separatist historiography considers General Mazniashvili's expedition as occupying forces and tries to discredit him in every way (**Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 287), there were also Abkhaz military personnel with the general (**Mazniashvili, 2014:** 61).

The Samurzakano Bolshevik units coordinated with other Georgian party members and tried to make the situation more difficult for the Georgian government through joint actions. For example, on June 28, 1918, the Bolsheviks, with the participation of their Samurzakano supporters (D. Toria with 22 fighters), seized Zugdidi (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 162, 166, 194; **Janjgava, 1982:** 102). This success of the Bolsheviks was preceded by the significant military-political crisis in the history of independent Georgia, which was linked to the Ottoman aggression against our country. Specifically, on June 27, 1918, the Ottomans landed at the mouth of the Kodori river in Abkhazia, at the estate of Alexander Sharvashidze. Their goal was to strengthen and support pro-Turkish forces in the region. The Young Turk's government aimed to establish a pro-Turkish Muslim state in the North Caucasus, which would serve as a buffer against Russia. In this formation, Abkhazia played a decisive role (**Tsurtsumia, 2012:** 202-203). In the Ottoman landing, led by Jamalbek Marshania, a descendant of the Abkhaz muhajirs, many of the soldiers were also descendants of Abkhaz muhajirs. They were tasked with

[1] But As V. Sharvashidze noted, the Bolsheviks significantly supplied Samurzakano with weapons for these uprisings. He mentioned that there were not just thousands of bayonets in the region, but most likely millions of bullets mobilized. Based on counterintelligence data, he believed that the Turks were providing this kind of assistance to the Bolsheviks (**Gozhba, 2009:** 97-98).

[2] On June 18, 1918, G. Mazniashvili was appointed as the General Governor of Abkhazia and the Commander of the Black Sea Forces.

ensuring the success of the operation by gaining the support of the local population. In Abkhazia, their political positions were reinforced by local pro-Turkish feudal lords (A. Sharvashidze, Tatash Marshania) and politicians (S. Basaria) (**Gamakharia, 2021(b):** 218). Therefore, the unfounded claim by O. Bgazhba and S. Lakoba that Georgia's measures against the "Turkish landing" were anti-Abkhaz actions is entirely groundless (**Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 293).

Samurzakano communist forces, coordinated by N. Svanidze, launched a new attack in the summer of 1918. However, the government, supported by the local population, gave a harsh response and regained control over part of the region in July (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 193). In the autumn, the central government launched a new offensive, which, despite Bolshevik resistance, progressed successfully. On September 10, 1918, the jurisdiction of the official government was restored in the village of Tagiloni, on September 13 and 14 in Tchuburkhindji and Gali, and on September 15 and 17 in Bedia and Achigvara (**Jugheli, 2022:** 128; **Dzidzariya, 1963:** 195-196). The government, which tried not to exacerbate the situation in Samurzakano, offered a truce to P. Dziguas and invited him to negotiations. However, the communist from Saberio fled and went into hiding (**Jugheli, 2022:** 130, 135). Soon the government succeeded in arresting several Bolsheviks, and in October, P. Dzigua was liquidated in the Refo-Sheshelti region (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 202).

To restore order and ensure the safety of the population, the government had to carry out repressions against the Bolsheviks (**Jugheli, 2022:** 128-129, 137). The Bolsheviks operating in Abkhazia did not shy away from looting and other criminal activities (**Chachkhiani, 2014:** 224). On February 3, 1919, Beniamin Chkhikvishvili, the Extraordinary Commissioner of the Georgian government in the Sokhumi district (in office from late 1918 until April 1919), informed the Minister of Justice of Georgia, Shalva Alexi-Meskhishvili (who served from May 26, 1918, to March 21, 1919), about the detention of criminals in his administrative territory, four of whom were from Samurzakano (***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..*****, 2021:** 202).

On February 13, 1919, elections were held for the Abkhaz People's Council, resulting in the election of 40 deputies to the legislative body (with the majority being Social-Democrats) through a proportional representation system (**Gamakharia, 2021(b):** 220). The 1st session took place on March 18, and the chairman of the council was elected to be Arzakan (Dimitri) Emukhvari from Samurzakano. On March 20, the council adopted an act regarding the autonomy of Abkhazia within the framework of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (**Gamakharia, 2021(b):** 221). This was an important achievement that immediately undermined Russian-imperial plans to create discord between the Georgians and the Abkhaz. Additionally, the political term "Abkhazia" was revived, which had been abolished by the Tsarist regime in 1864 (**Khorava, Tchanturia, 2019:** 15).

Z. Papaskiri notes: "Among the Abkhaz leaders of that time, there was not a single figure who would openly oppose Abkhazia's entry into Georgia as an autonomous entity. Moreover, it was the Abkhaz side that urged Georgian parliamen-

tarians to immediately approve the draft 'Constitution of Autonomous Abkhazia,' adopted by the Abkhaz People's Council on October 16, 1920, thus accelerating the legal formalization of state and legal relations between the center and the autonomy" (**Papaskiri, 2007:** 61-62).

On May 13, the legislative body established the government of Abkhazia's autonomy – the Commissariat – with Arzakan Emukhvari as its head, while the "Abkhaz People's Council" was referred to as the "Abkhaz People's Council" (*Chairman – Varlam Sharvashidze*). In the same session, the Sokhumi district was renamed Abkhazia, and its subdivisions were called *"mazras"* (**Gamakharia, 2021(b):** 221). This effectively included Abkhazia within its modern borders. Even in a project presented by the Constitutional Commission in 1918, which was led by P. Sakvarelidze, the administrative territories of Samurzakano and Autonomous Abkhazia were represented separately (**Matsaberidze, 2021:** 319). This situation, where Samurzakano and Abkhazia were perceived separately, continued to exist among the population of Samegrelo even in the second half of the 20th century (**Eliava G., 2024:** 540).

In 1918, Georgia's division into guberniyas was abolished. Following the local government reform, elections for the assembly were held in every district.[1] In Samurzakano, the elections took place in February-March 1919, with four parties participating: Social-Democrats, National-Democrats, Socialist-Federalists, and Socialist-Revolutionaries (Esers). The final vote distribution was as follows: SDP – 26, SFP – 6, NDP – 2, SRP – 4 (**Iremadze, Tchanturidze, 2009:** 166). On August 20, 1920, the First Congress of the Districts and Cities of Abkhazia took place in Sokhumi with the participation of the city councils of Sokhumi, Ochamchire, Gudauta, Gagra, the Samurzakano district[2], the Kodori district, the Gumista district, and the Gudauta-Gagra district. The congress founded the *"Union of the Districts and Cities of Abkhazia,"* which, in effect, was a member of the *"Union of Districts and Cities of Georgia"* (***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..*, 2021:** 188-189).

The complex political and criminal situation in Samurzakano forced the government to pay special attention to maintaining law and order. To this end, a local unit of the People's Guard was formed in Gali in early 1919, and V. Jugheli carried out an inspection of it on June 2 of the same year. He was satisfied with the spirit of the fighters (**Jugheli, 2022:** 232-233). The government also focused on the local militia. Since the region was of particular importance, the recently discovered archival documents show that the militia in Samurzakano had a higher salary compared to neighboring Zugdidi (**Lashkhia, 2024:** 234).

Although Samurzakano was under Abkhazia's administrative subordination, it was more economic connections with Samegrelo. Therefore, there were frequent opportunities for joint economic projects. For example, on December 7, 1919, agricultural issues were discussed in Zugdidi district assembly. The adminis-

[1] The executive body of the district assemblies was represented by the district administrations (*gamgeoba*).
[2] One of the prominent members of the Samurzakano district was I. Gegia, who was entrusted with overseeing the educational sector (**Gegia, 2011:** 23).

tration was considering the export of 10,000 poods (1 pood = 16, 380 kg) of tobacco in cooperation to the cooperative bodies of Zugdidi and Samurzakano to foreign markets. The revenue would be used to purchase necessary products for the districts, which would satisfy the needs of the local population (**Lashkhia, 2024:** 258). Unfortunately, the further implementation of this plan remains unknown.

The government's policies in Samurzakano were opposed not only by the Bolsheviks but also by the Esers. Their newspaper («*Голосъ труда*»), frequently published articles containing harsh criticism on this matter (***"Golos truda"*, 2024:** 21-27). However, the Socialist-Revolutionaries also did not approve the local policy of Tbilisi central governmenti. The Esers emphasized the vital importance of Samurzakano in Georgian-Abkhaz relations (***"Golos truda"*, 2024:** 28-30).

Bolshevik Russia had no intention of leaving the South Caucasus unattended. Local Bolsheviks were active in the region and did not lose hope of coming to power (**Bendianishvili, 2012(c):** 255). Interestingly, V. Lenin urged local Bolsheviks to temporarily form an alliance with N. Zhordania if active military operations against the Social-Democratic Republic (SDR) were impossible (**Mikhailov.., 2012**). American journalist and historian Eric Lee's observation is correct: Bolshevik Russia, through the use of Abkhaz and Ossetians, was trying to inspire an ethnic conflict in Georgia, which, according to the researcher, was a much more serious problem than the threat posed by General I. Denikin (**Lee, 2018:** 181). Some Georgian politicians (e.g., G. Veshapeli) accurately assessed the situation and understood that the attitudes of both "Red" and "White" Russia toward Georgia were identical. The government also tried to isolate their agents (**Bendianishvili, 2012(c):** 255).

However, the Bolsheviks, unlike the "White" Russian armies stationed near the South Caucasus, did not yet have the strength for more energetic actions, but they were already getting closer to the Caucasus (**Rayfield, 2012:** 334). Despite this, Leninists were operating quietly. In May 1919, N. Akirtava and N. Svanidze restored the Bolshevik party organization in Samurzakano. The leadership was once again assumed by I. Khaburzania and T. Toria (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 236). They were so active that by the summer, they had managed to train 200 armed Samurzakano citizens (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 263). Bolshevik ideas were spreading among the local youth as well. Therefore, in October 1919, the Abkhaz Bolsheviks began preparations to form youth organizations. In Samurzakano, this task was assigned to N. Bokuchava. Soon, in the summer of 1920, the local committee of the Komsomol was established, with its cells in Tagiloni (N. Sakania), Refo-Sheshlet and Nabakevi (F. Sharia) (**Patiashvili, 1971:** 17; **Dzidzariya, 1963:** 241).

In early 1920, the Entente and its allied states (January 12 – Italy, France, Great Britain) officially recognized the Democratic Republic of Georgia. This was an important diplomatic achievement for the country, for which an official statement was made by the special representative of the Republic in Europe, Samurzakano native Akaki Chkhenkeli. The active participation of the Samurzakano delegation in this significant process filled the local population with pride, leading to a special congress and the sending of congratulations to the capital (***MGPP*, 2014:** 422-423, 429).

However, this did not stop the Bolsheviks. Lenin's state needed the Caucasus both economically (for Chiatura's manganese, and the Baku-Batumi pipeline) and politically: to advance into the Middle East. Therefore, Moscow played a diplomatic trick, and in 1920, official Tbilisi agreed to sign a peace treaty. The document was signed on May 7 of the same year. For Tbilisi, this was a great relief, as it seemingly ensured security from the Bolsheviks and, at the same time, Moscow recognized the borders of the DRG, including in the direction of Abkhazia (***File №11*, 1922**). However, V. Lenin did not think so. He knew well that Georgia's Sovietization was only a matter of time, and he did not hide this in his talks with Turkish diplomats in August of the same year (**Cebesoy, 2002:** 71; **Lenin, 2000:** 359).

In the second half of May 1920, elections for the Constituent Assembly of Georgia were held in Abkhazia, an event which the Bolsheviks tried to disrupt. Their appeal was partially responded by the proletariat of Abkhazia, except for the population of Samurzakano, which fully supported the central government (***To the History of the Revolutionary Movement..*, 1922:** 38). However, as archival materials have revealed, elections were held not only in Samurzakano: "Out of about 65,000 registered voters, more than 22,250 people from the cities of Sokhumi, Gudauta, Gagra, Ochamchire, as well as from the districts of Kodori, Gudauta, Gumista, and Samurzakano went to the polling stations" (**Janelidze, 2022:** 39).

After the signing of the peace treaty between the DRG and the RSFSR, Georgian Bolsheviks were given the opportunity to engage in legal activities. They immediately began preparations to lay the groundwork for Georgia's Sovietization, which, of course, included military components. Special battalions were created in Samurzakano as well (**Janjgava, 1982:** 203).

Despite the fact that the May 7th treaty granted the Bolsheviks the opportunity to engage in legal activities, and the document partially protected them, official Tbilisi remained vigilant. Georgian intelligence was actively working here as well, and it managed to obtain the plans developed by the Red Army's 11th Army for aggression against Georgia (**Tevzadze, 1990:** 91). It seems that one of the main directions was Abkhazia, as, very soon, by the end of 1920, the government specifically launched an attack on the Bolsheviks. Communists from the Kodori and Samurzakano districts were arrested and placed in the Ochamchire prison (**Dzidzariya, 1963:** 321).

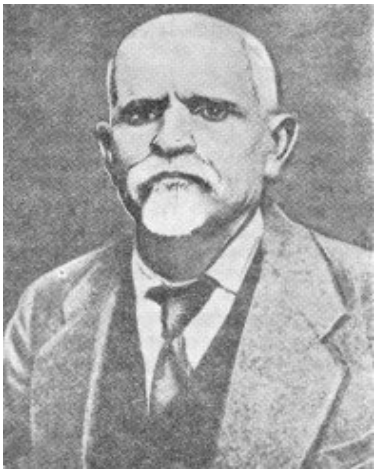
Despite these minor setbacks, Lenin's Russia did not abandon the idea of occupying Georgia. In 1921, a favourable situation emerged for Moscow to achieve this goal. The Kremlin had practically completed military operations against European states successfully, and the West was preparing to normalize relations with the Kremlin. Great Britain also withdrew from Georgia, despite N. Zhordania's government offering to open here a military base (**Bendianishvili, 2012(c):** 263).

In mid-February 1921, Russia launched a large-scale aggression against Georgia from three directions. Abkhazia was again of crucial importance, as noted by S. Orjonikidze and S. Kirov at the beginning of January. At the same time, the RSFSR embassy in Tbilisi reported successes of the activities in Abkhazia (the

creation of the military revolutionary committee, the arming of the population) (**Papaskiri, 2007:** 75-76).

On February 19, 1921, parts of the 31st Brigade of the 9th Army, with the help of the Red Army units from Sochi and Tuapse, crossed the Psou River and moved towards Gagra and Sokhumi (**Papaskiri, 2007:** 78). As soon as the aggression began, the Abkhaz military revolutionary committee sent Kavernin, a member of the Kodori revolutionary committee, to Samurzakano to work with local Bolsheviks to develop an action plan (***Revcoms of Abkhazia*, 1961:** 9 – №4).

On March 4, the aggressors captured Sukhumi, and the temporary revolutionary committee of Abkhazia (Chairman: Isaak Zhvania) declared the establishment of Soviet power in Abkhazia. On March 6, a new revolutionary committee was formed: E. Eshba (Chairman), N. Lakoba (Deputy), N. Akirtava. Soon, they continued the advance towards the Enguri river. On March 8, Russian Bolshevik occupiers approached Samurzakano. Near the village of Achigvara, they were joined by the 60 Samurzakano Bolsheviks, led by F. Thoria, and they captured Gali the same day (**Dzidzariya, 1987:** 74). The next day, the occupiers crossed the Enguri river.



Ivane Gegia

Taraskhan Eshba

***Okumi School* (Serena, 1882:** 366)

CHAPTER VI. HISTORICAL SOCIAL AND ETHNO-CULTURAL PORTRAIT OF SAMURZAKANO

§1. Social Situation

The settling down of the Abkhazs in the region between the Ghalidzga and Enguri rivers naturally led to a change in the previously existing social conditions. This was, at first glance, a sort of return to a tribal structure typical of late medieval Abkhaz society (**Papaskiri, 2004:** 131). However, the social situation established by the Abkhazs in Samurzakano had some distinctive features, as it also absorbed some of the developed social order characteristics of the principality of Samegrelo. P. Charaia noted that there were no substantial differences between Samurzakano and Abkhazia in terms of landownership (**Tcharaya, 1897:** 218). It seems that in this area, the Abkhaz borrowed the situation existing among the Megrelians, as the latter were mainly engaged in cattle breeding, especially during the late Middle Ages.

S. Esadze believed that three factors influenced the social structure of the Abkhazian tribes: the Highlanders, the Ottomans, and the Georgian (Georgian-Megrelian) Christian society (**Esadze, 1907:** 118). However, in reality, it would be more accurate to say that the first two brought certain "corrections" to the social order characteristic of the Georgian feudal relations in the territory of present-day Abkhazia. As noted by N. Berdzenishvili, with the decline of the low social order of the North Caucasians and their settling on the territory of modern Abkhazia, "early feudalism" was revived in this region, which attracted the serfdom-strangled Georgian peasantry (**Berdzenishvili, 1990:** 609-610).

It is believed that one of the signs of the "rejuvenation" of feudal relations on the territory of modern Abkhazia was the existence of the "tribe" institution, which had a special role among the Abkhazs (**Dzidzariya, 2016:** 165). The Abkhazian society was based on familial and clan principles, where several simplest kin groups (large or small families) formed the patronymy.[1] Several patronymies formed a "brotherhood" (*"Aeshara"*), and all these units were united under a surname (*"Azhvla"*). The Abkhazian surname was a genealogical and social unit characteristic of patriarchy (**Inal-ipa, 1965:** 405-406; **Soselia, Chkhataraishvili, 1973:** 597). Accordingly, there were settlements of the clan type, which represented rural communities – these were called "Akyta" (**Inal-ipa, 1965:** 395-397; **Soselia, Chkhataraishvili, 1973:** 597).

However, the idea that Abkhazian society was based on familial and clan principles has been refuted by Georgian ethnologists (A. Robakidze (**Robakidze, 1968:** 93-104), S. Bakhia-Okrushvili), whose research shows that, like the North Caucasians and the Georgian Highlanders, the Abkhaz had a patronymic system

[1] In Abkhazia, it was called *"Abiphara"* (**Bakhia 1986:** 8). Analogues of this term can also be found in Georgian reality: *"Mamani"* (Khevsureti), *"Lamkhubi"* (Svaneti), *"Turi"* (Samegrelo), and others (**Robakidze, 1986:** 4).

that represented the families of the elder brothers of a large family (descendants of approximately 5 or more generations), with the Head of the family being the representative of the elder generation. Newly established families of close relatives had several characteristics of a group: exogamy, a well-preserved genealogy extending up to the 4th or 5th generation, determined by the rights and duties of kinship categories: territorial integrity, according to which the families were settled next to the paternal household; unity of interests in certain spheres of economic life, leading to the organization of collective labour and the development of forms of mutual material assistance; joint participation in some events and holidays (e.g., Easter). The real or mythical eponym of the large family was the basis for the name of this social institution and its ideological unity. The complex social system of the patronymic is assumed to have developed in the context of social differentiation (**Bakhia 1986:** 5-68).

Regarding the form of property, there existed feudal, communal, and familial property side by side. What distinguishes the patronymic from the clan structure is that, for the patronymic, the clan ownership of the means of production was unknown (**Bakhia 1986:** 64). It is also noted that in the Caucasus, it was the patronymic, not the ancient clan, which preserved the notions of kinship and the unity of interests of its members up until the recent past (**Bakhia 1986:** 65).

This institution, in social and structural terms, was practically analogous in Samurzakano, with the difference that, primarily, Megrelian terminology was used, and the term for patronymic was *"Turi"* (**Bakhia 1986:** 9). It is associated with the Megrelian-Tchan term *"Ti,"* which should refer to the archaic form of the social cell or family, and "ur" is a suffix indicating the place of origin. According to S. Bakhia, *"Ti"* became extensive over time and was used for a broader kinship group, *"Chemiani"* ("Mine"-concerning related ones) (**Bakhia 1986:** 9). In Samurzakano, just like in Samegrelo, the first-order patronymic was expressed with the term *"Jinji Turi,"* while the later-created ones were referred to as "New Turi" (**Bakhia 1986:** 9). In Samurzakano, as in Samegrelo, the unification of more distant relatives formed a "brotherhood," locally called *"Jimaloba,"* and its further expansion formed a "clan" (**Bakhia 1986:** 8-9).

The community, or *"Akyta"* in Abkhazian, was somewhat different from the rural communities in other parts of Georgia and is considered as an intermediary link between feudal units and common rural communities. The Abkhaz community was practically based on "Akyta," which also represented an administrative unit (**Inal-ipa, 1965:** 395; **Dzidzariya, 2016:** 165; **Soselia, Chkhataraishvili, 1973:** 597). Naturally, the Abkhaz established the "Akyta" in Samurzakano as well, as evidenced by some toponymic examples: one of the districts of the village of Meore Kopiti is called *"Gvaramiaakyt"* (Gvarami's district) (**Tskhadaia, 1999:** 231).

"Akyta" was based on customary law and seriously limited the authority of both the nobles and the prince, who stood at the head of the community (**Dzidzariya, 2016:** 253). The head of this authority was called "Akhilafshu" (patron, protector, "monitor"), and the members of the community were called *"Akhifshu"*

(those under protection) (**Esadze, 1907:** 119; **Inal-ipa, 1965:** 496, 503). However, according to G. Dzidzariya, this term had a narrower meaning, referring to peasants who were dependent on other peasants (**Dzidzariya, 2016:** 227). The "Akhilafshu" were mostly the nobles (аҩауад – *atauad*) and gentry. These last ones were called *"Aamsta"* in the principality of Abkhazia, and in Samurzakano, like in Samegrelo, they were called *"Zhinoskua"* (**Esadze, 1907:** 498; **Inal-ipa, 1965:** 496; **Papaskiri, 2010:** 103).

Some researchers believe that until the early 19th century, the title of *"Tavadi"* (prince) was unknown in the Bzipi society, and it was introduced in Abkhazia by the Megrelians, specifically by the servants and attendants who accompanied the wife of Safar-Bey, Tamar, from Samegrelo (**Antelava, Dzidzariya, Olonetskiy, 1950:** 400-405; **Inal-ipa, 1965:** 501).

The nobility and gentry of Samurzakano included: the Sharvashidze, Anchabadze, Emkhvari, Dzaphshishvili, Inalishvili, Marghania, Sotishvili (Sotiskua, in the principality of Abkhazia – Chabalurkha), Chkotua (Chkhotua)[1], Lakerbaia, Gabunia, Akhirtava (Akhurtava), Tchitanava, Ghvartskhia, Ezugbaia, Zvanbaia, Mikhanbaia, and Tsishbaia families (**Kvashilava I., 2003:** 127; **Gamakharia, 2007:** 221-223; **Matchavariani, 1913:** 311). According to Volume IV of the *"Geographical-Statistical Dictionary of the Russian Empire,"* Samurzakano had 6 noble families (Sharvashidze, Anchabadze, Emkhvari, Inameshvili[2], Satishvili[3], Chkhotua) and 4 gentry families (Marghania, Akhirtava, Lakerbaia, Zvanbaia) (***G-SD of RE*, 1873:** 423). Academician N. Berdzenishvili justifiably considers these surnames to be of Georgian origin (**Berdzenishvili, 1966:** 349).

In 1901, *the Commission on Titles and Landownership of Sokhumi* officially recognized the Sharvashidze, Anchabadze, Inalipa, Marshania, Dzaphsh-ipa, Chaabalurkhva, Chkhotua, Emkhvari, and Tsamba families as the nobility of Abkhazia-Samurzakano-Tsebelda. As for the "Aamista-Zhinoskua," they recognized the families of Marghania, Zvanbaia, Lakerbaya, Akirtava, and Mikanba (***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..*, 2018:** 179).

Some of the nobility of Samurzakano, in some cases, owned common lands (e.g., forests). For example, the forest near Gindze-Etseri was owned by the Anchabadze family from Otobaya and Marghania family from Gudava. It seems that there was abundant game in the area, which caught the attention of Mikheil Sharvashidze, a self-forgetful hunter. Soon, the prince of Abkhazia, could establish control of the forest (**Antelava, 1951:** 118).

In the 1870s-1880s, a special government Commission on title granting was presented a list of families that should be granted noble titles. However, the issue could not be resolved at this stage, and its discussion continued in the Senate until 1910. Ultimately, most of these titles were either unconfirmed or rejected

[1] This surname is found only in Samurzakano, and they reside in the village of Saberio. According to tradition, they descend from the *Chkhetidze* family (**Kvashilava I., 2003:** 125).
[2] It seems that it should be *Inalishvili*.
[3] It should be *Sotishvili*.

(**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2009:** 84; **Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2010:** 269). According to an anonymous source, the nobility of Samurzakano, who were mainly of Abkhaz origin, spoke mostly Megrelian (***Main Information..,* 1868**: 2).

In a secret letter from the Chief of the Caucasian Corps Headquarters, Major-General Kotsebu to the, Chief of the Third Division of the Black Sea Line Colonel N. Muravyov, a list of Samurzakano's nobles and gentry is presented in a certain sequence: Nobles – Sharvashidze, Anchabadze, Emkhvari, Chkhotua, Inalishvili; Gentry – Marghania, Akirtava, Zukhbaia (***HANAG*, 357:** sheets 42-43, 168). This seems to reflect the hierarchical order within the aristocracy of Samurzakano.

The duties of the "Akhilafshu" included ensuring the security of the community, defending it from enemies, protecting the property of the community members, what was very important due to the widespread brigandage and banditry, and he was responsible for avenging the death of a fellow community member or facilitating reconciliation with opponents (**Esadze, 1907:** 498). In return, the "Akhilafshu" demanded material support and loyalty from the *"Akhifshu"* (**Tcharaya, 1897:** 219). In Samurzakano, the *"akhifshas"* were primarily peasants, who were divided into 2 groups: free peasants – *"fioshi"* (in Abkhazia – *"ankhayu"*) and dependent peasants *"moinale"* (in Abkhazia – *"amatsurazku"*), *"dolmakhore"* (in Abkhazia – *"ahoiyu"*), and *"mojalabe"* (in Abkhazia – *"akhashvla"*).

According to 1865 data, Samurzakano had: 16,943 fioşhi (including: 8,933 men (7 of whom were Muslim, the rest Orthodox); 8,010 women (9 of whom were Muslim, the rest Orthodox)); 1,397 moinale (including: 762 men; 635 women; all Orthodox); and 3,057 mojalabe (including: 1,702 men (2 of whom were Muslim, the rest Orthodox); 1,355 women (3 of whom were Muslim, the rest Orthodox) (***Materials on the History of Abkhazia in the 19th Century..,* 2012:** 94).

A "fioshi" was commoner, free peasant tiller and, unlike other peasant groups, was relatively privileged. They lived on the feudal lord's land, although sometimes they owned their own land, purchased (**Anchabadze, 1966:** 49-50). According to Sh. Inal-Ipa's theory, only the upper layer representatives of this category could be landowners (**Inal-ipa, 1965:** 508). The peasant group of "fioshi" and "ankhayu" were quite numerous, what indicated that feudal relationships were less developed in this region (**Esadze, 1907:** 504; **Dumbadze, 1957:** 96). Their obligations included military service and the payment of labour and natural taxes – "dzghveni" (**Esadze, 1907:** 504; ***Anthology of Law Monuments..,* 2017:** 400-401 – №3.5; **Jamburia, 1973(a):** 199). The landowner could, whenever they wished, visit the "fioshi" with his family. This custom was called *"samendzelo"* or *"matchkomuri"* (in Samegrelo – *"gotchkomuri"*) (**Esadze, 1907:** 505; **Jamburia, 1973(a):** 194). This right was also enjoyed by the main noblemen and aristocrats under their authority (**Inal-ipa, 1965:** 499). This "hospitality" was a heavy obligation, as hosting a "respectable" meal was quite costly for the host (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 312).

Of course, this obligation became particularly unbearable for Samurzakano peasants in the 1st half of the 19th century when the economic situation in Samurzakano was very hard. Additionally, the "fioshi" were obliged to pay a monetary

tax to the landowner if the latter was found guilty of a crime or murder and was required to pay compensation to the sufferer (**Esadze, 1907:** 505). However, all these obligations were collective and not individual. According to the established rule, neither party had the right to arbitrarily increase or reduce these taxes. If any disagreement took place between the "fioshi" and the landowner on this matter, they would turn to an authoritative person or the community for resolution. The rights of the "fioshi" were protected by the fact that, in case of violence by the landowner, they could be relocated to another community (**Esadze, 1907:** 119, 505; **Dzidzariya, 1976:** 121).

According to G. Dzidzeria, by the dawn of the 19th century, the social situation of "ankhayu" and "fioshi" worsened, and they became, in fact, equal to the predatory peasants – *"amatsurazku-moinale"* (**Dzidzariya, 1976:** 301-307). This conclusion by the Abkhazian scientist is also shared by O. Soselia (**Soselia, 1966:** 80, 83-84).

According to N. Derzhavin, the nobility of Abkhazia was not the direct owner of the land, and the strength and influence of a nobleman or gentleman were determined by how many "fioshi" lived on his estate (**Derzhavin, 1907:** 28-29). K. Matchavariani also agrees with him (**Matchavariani, 1913:** 321). Therefore, the nobles, including the Sharvashidzes, tried to weaken their opponents by capturing or enticing their "fioshi" (**Derzhavin, 1907:** 28-29). This became especially intense in 1820s and 1830s. The nobility of Samurzakano was engaged in robbery and brigandage within each other's territories (***ACAC*, 1878:** 396 – № 325). However, even without the land of "fioshi", the nobility owned considerable estates (**Tcharaya, 1897:** 219; **Esadze, 1907:** 509). The number of "ankhayu" (free peasants) in the second half of the 19th century still made up about 80% of the total peasant population. According to Z. Anchabadze, this category should have formed during the period of late feudalism (**Anchabadze, 1947:** 46). It is noteworthy that the wealthy "fioshi" (ankhayu) were also owners of serf peasants, "dolmakhore", and slaves (**Inal-ipa, 1965:** 513, 515; **Dzidzariya, 1976:** 121).

The category of "moinale" (serf peasants) was mostly widespread in Samurzakano (**Esadze, 1907:** 503; **Dzidzariya, 2016:** 330). Their main obligations were labour service and natural taxes (such as pigs or goats, wine, grain, etc.) (**Jamburia, 1973(a):** 200). "Moinale" had lost their personal freedom and were tied to the land of the landowner (**Jamburia, 1973(a):** 200). The "moinale" was oblijed to send one family member to serve the landowner for 5-6 days, but if there was only one able-bodied person in the family, this obligation would be reduced to 2-3 days (**Esadze, 1907:** 503; ***Anthology of Law Monuments..,* 2017:** 401 – №3.5).

The next group of peasants were the "dolmakhore", who, according to J. Murie, were called "mojalabe" in Samegrelo (**Borozdin, Eristavi, Murier, 1927:** 124). G. Jamburia believed that this category of peasants had lost their personal freedom and were tied to the land (**Jamburia, 1973(a):** 200). Similarly, S. Janashia held this view when discussing the "ahoiyu" category (**Janashia, 1988:** 219). M. Dumbadze suggested that, unlike the mojalabe in Guria, Imereti, and Samegrelo, the "dolmakhore" had certain "personal and property rights" (**Dumbadze, 1957:**

103-104). This view was also shared by S. Esadze and N. Derzhavin (**Esadze, 1907:** 501; **Derzhavin, 1907:** 30-31).

The family of "dolmakhore" was obliged to send 3 members for 3 days to work in the fields with their own livestock and tools. During this time, the landowner had to provide them with food (**Esadze, 1907:** 501). The "dolmakhore" was obliged to give one boy or girl to the feudal lord. However, the service of girls at the landowner's house was less common in Samurzakano compared to the Abkhazian principality (**Esadze, 1907:** 502). A "dolmakhore" girl remained with her family until marriage. Before her marriage, the family of the Samurzakano peasant had to provide the landowner with a "dowry" ranging from 1 cow and 10 kopecks to 5 cows and 50 kopecks (**Esadze, 1907:** 502). After that, the girl was completely free from the landowner's control. The feudal lord did not have the right to arbitrarily expel or sell the "dolmakhore" from the family (**Dumbadze, 1957:** 103-104). If such an attempt was made, the "dolmakhore" would seek a new protector (**Derzhavin, 1907:** 30). The same result occurred if the landowner demanded an increase in taxes (**Derzhavin, 1907:** 31).

The replenishment of the "dolmakhore" class in Samegrelo was done with purchased serfs. It was primarily the Megrelians who constituted the majority in this category, and, consequently, the "dolmakhore" were often referred to as "agiru" ("Margali"/Megrelian) (**Dumbadze, 1957:** 103-104; **Jamburia, 1973(a):** 200). As noted in several historical sources, the main activity of the Abkhaz was banditry, robbery, and pillaging (**Inal-ipa, 1965:** 509). As a result, it was the "margali" (agiru) who were responsible for agricultural labour. The most rightless class in Samurzakano were the "mojalabe", known as "akhashvla" in Abkhazia. They were in much more worse conditions than the "mojalabe" of western Georgia (**Jamburia, 1973(a):** 200-201; ***Anthology of Law Monuments..,*** **2017:** 402 – №3.5).

The "akhashvla" originated from peasants captured in battles and then sold as slaves (**Esadze, 1907:** 500; **Inal-ipa, 1965:** 514). This explains why the majority of them bore Georgian surnames. According to K. Matchavariani, they performed the hardest works (**Matchavariani, 1884:** 61). The "akhashvla" were almost slaves and lived in the homes of their owners, from whom they received labor benefits (**Esadze, 1907:** 500; **Inal-ipa, 1965:** 514). An "akhashvala" was the full property of the landowner, and the latter had the right to freely sell or gift them (**Esadze, 1907:** 500). An "akhashvla" had no right to marry. However, the "mojalabe" in western Georgia could make family (**Jamburia, 1973(a):** 201). If the landowner allowed them to marry, they would remove to the "dolmakhore" category and also receive land from their lord (**Esadze, 1907:** 500; **Inal-ipa, 1965:** 514).

In the intermedia between peasants and feudal lords were the "shinakma"(inner serve), known as "ashnakuma" (in Abkhaz – *ашьнақума*) in the region. They were exempt from agricultural work, and their main obligations were personal service at the lord's court (such as serving as a valet, craftsman-official, etc.) and military service in the lord's personal squad (**Esadze, 1907:** 499; **Derzhavin, 1907:** 28; ***Anthology of Law Monuments..,*** **2017:** 400 – №3.16). It is as-

sumed that this category emerged in Abkhazia in the late 18th century to the early 19th century (**Antelava, Dzidzariya, Olonetskiy, 1950:** 404-405).

In Samurzakano, the institution of *"asasoba"* (guests) was also widespread. An *"asa"* (guest) was someone who had sought refuge from one community in another or had come from another region, finding shelter with an Abkhaz noble or community. Both nobles and peasants could be in the status of "asa" (**Esadze, 1907:** 513; **Dzidzariya, 2016:** 392-393; **Soselia, Chkhataraishvili, 1973:** 596). The "asas" were landless (**Dumbadze, 1957:** 104-105). They had no personal property in their host's estate and only used the resources temporarily provided by their protector. S. Esadze pointed out that the settlement of "asas" by their hosts ensured the safety of the host's estate because the hosts themselves were forced to protect their property and life. Therefore, the host did not take any compensation from the "guest" (**Esadze, 1907:** 514). The "khizani" (hiding peasant) was obligated to pay a tribute (called *"ghala"*) to their protector (**Jamburia, 1973(a):** 198).

It is significant that the terms representing the social classes of Samurzakano (such as "tavadi", "zhinoskua", "shinaqma", "moinale", "dolmakhore", "mojalabe") were rooted in the Georgian language and its Megrelian dialect, what clearly points to the ancient Georgian-Abkhaz connection. Until the late Middle Ages, the feudal class was referred to by the term "aznauri" (noble), which was used throughout Georgia, but simultaneously, local terms also existed to designate this class in specific regions. For instance, in Samegrelo, "zhinoskua" and in Abkhazia, "aamsta" were used, which, according to Z. Papaskiri, suggests that these concepts originated in the early Middle Ages when western Georgia – Egrisi, and Abkhazia – were still not fully incorporated into the unified Georgian feudal structure (**Papaskiri, 2010:** 104).

We encounter a different situation regarding the terms *"tavadi"-"atauad"*. It is clear here that Abkhazia was a part of the Georgian feudal world, where the system of nobility had already been formalized. Therefore, there was no need to create a local term for nobility. In this regard, it is crucial to emphasize the fact that elevating a person to the rank of nobility was solely the prerogative of the royal authority, and thus, the nobility was officially established through royal decrees. As a result, the Abkhaz nobility considered themselves representatives of the common Georgian feudal aristocracy (**Papaskiri, 2010:** 103-104).

In Samurzakano, as in Abkhazia, social relations were regulated by the institution of wet-nursing (***Abkhazia in the Georgian Press,* 2022:** 553).

During the period which is the field of interest to us, Samurzakano did not have urban-type settlements. The population mostly lived in villages. The inhabitants of the central part of the Ghalidzga-Enguri region did not live-in clustered settlements, as their houses, resembling huts, were surrounded by cornfields, creating a certain distance from their neighbors (**Serena, 1882:** 359). As noted by V. Shamiladze, this scattered settlement pattern in the region (which was different from the clustered settlements of Eastern Georgia) and its resemblance to the type of settlements in Samegrelo were first pointed out by T. Sakhokia (**Shamiladze,**

2001: 211). In the 1st half of 19th century, the construction of wooden houses began (**Serena, 1882:** 359).

The important villages in the Ghalidzga-Enguri interfluve included Bedia, Phakhulani, Barbalo (Koki), Saberio, Nabakevi, Okumi, Ilori (which later joined the Principality of Abkhazia), Gudava, and Dikhazurga. Among these, Bedia was relatively more populous, with around 500 households living there in 1868, according to the records of Saint Gabriel Kikodze (***From the Travel of the Bishop of Imereti..*, 1869(a):** 3). Along with it, the large village of Saberio was also noteworthy (***From the Travel of the Bishop of Imereti..*, 1869(b):** 3). Other villages in the region included small Koki, Gainarjia-Mukhuri, Orsantia, and Shamgona, which, as mentioned earlier, joined the Principality of Samegrelo after January 4, 1849.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Samurzakano district included 11 communities and 69 villages (**Matchavariani, 1913:** 127-129). A remarkable description of the local villages and their inhabitants is preserved by Tedo Sakhokia, who visited the region in the early 1890s (**Sakhokia, 1985:** 336-351). The author emphasized the similarities in lifestyle between the local population and that of Samegrelo (**Sakhokia, 1985:** 343), which, naturally, was due to the shared ancestry of the inhabitants of Samurzakano and Samegrelo. As field ethnographic studies have shown, the settlement of Abkhaz people in Samurzakano did not cause significant changes in the structure of local homestead complexes (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2010:** 69). The reason for this was, of course, that the local Georgian population mainly remained in the area (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2010:** 362-363).

Furthermore, the settlement type in this region, "village," with its church, cemetery, internal roads, and agricultural paths, which was undergoing a process of fragmentation, was much more advanced than the settlement types typical of the northern Caucasian tribes who settled here (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2010:** 348). The integration processes between Georgians and the other ethnic group had a certain impact on both peoples' way of life. However, the influence of the highly developed Georgian socio-economic and cultural life was naturally stronger, and as a result, the "guests" (the newcomers) "adopted many traditional elements of Georgian culture and life... including the western-Georgian form of settlement" (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2010:** 350).

It is noteworthy that in Samurzakano, as in the rest of Georgia, the practice of storing wine in wine cellars survived, which was entirely foreign to the Bzipi Abkhazs, who did not even have such buildings (**Bakhia 1986:** 16). However, the Abzhui Abkhaz did have wine cellars (**Bakhia 1986:** 16, 22). This again shows that the Abzhui Abkhazs were mostly Georgians, converted to Abkhazs, mostly of Megrelian descent.

§2. The Ethnic and Cultural Appearance of Samurzakano

As a result of a tragedy of the last quarter of 17th century an ethnic Abkhaz element appeared in the territory of modern Samurzakano. Although permanent military actions, abduction of captives, and the migration of part of the local Georgian population to the interior areas of Samegrelo caused some changes in the ethnic landscape of the Ghalidzga-Enguri interfluve, although these changes were not significant, since the Abkhaz ethnic presence in this direction was relatively weak, and the local Georgian (Megrelian) population mostly remained in place. After a relatively peaceful period, part of the displaced population returned. As we mentioned, the process of returning should have started during the period of Murzakani's rule. This was what determined the Megrelian character of the toponyms in this region.

Today, representatives of the so-called Abkhaz historiography are stubbornly trying to present Samurzakano as the ancestral homeland of only the Abkhaz ethnic group. In this regard, the work recently published by T. Achugba (**Achugba, 2010:** 47) is noteworthy. However, his opinion does not bring any special "novelty" to this field.

The issue of the ethnic belonging of the Samurzakano population was raised by the Tsarist regime in the first half of the 19th century. Its goal was to prove the Abkhaz origin of the Samurzakano people. According to S. Bakhia-Okruashvili's fair assessment, this was an entirely artificially created problem (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2010:** 56). The continuation of this policy was the promotion of targeted migration to Abkhazia by Tsarist officials, which granted settlement rights to people from various ethnicities in the region, except for Georgians (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2010:** 54). The first to "research" this issue was M. Seleznev, who unequivocally attributed the Samurzakano people to the Abkhaz ethnic group (**Seleznev, 1847(b):** 135-136). This direction continued with the works and memoirs of A. Bergé (**Bergé, 1857:** 273), S. Dukhovsky (**Dukhovsky, 1864:** 44), E. Kovalevsky (**Kovalevsky, 2014:** 122-123), General G. Philipson (**Philipson, 1885:** 208), French scientist J. Schnitzler (see: **Maan, 2016:** 79). Deacon Georgi Golubtsov of Sokhumi Cathedral considered the Samurzakano people "Georgianized" Abkhazs (**Golubtsov, 2022:** 60).

A. Bergé's opinion was soon criticized by D. Purtseladze, who in his arguments emphasized the historical past of Samurzakano, the historical monuments with Georgian inscriptions, and the spoken language of its contemporary Samurzakano population, which, according to the author, was Megrelian (**Gamakharia, Gogia, 1997:** 328-329). N. Albov made a substantial "innovation" in the study of the ethnology of the Samurzakano people. According to him, the Samurzakano people are the same as the Abkhazians, as, like the Abkhazians, they differ from the Megrelians by their aversion to trade (**Albov, 1893:** 306).

The authors of the fourth volume of the "Geographical-Statistical Dictionary of the Russian Empire" recognize the "Georgian origin" of the Samurzakano

people, but they note that they resemble Abkhazians, especially the inhabitants of the western part of Samurzakano. Regarding the religious situation of the population, the "Dictionary" states that they were Christians in the past but are now mostly pagans (***G-SD of RE,* 1873:** 423).

The result of the Tsarist political course mentioned above and the "scientific research" conducted in this direction reflected in the records of the "Class and Land Reforms Commission" created in the 1860s for the implementation of the agrarian reform in Abkhazia, where the Samurzakano people were categorically assigned to the Abkhazs, despite the fact that they considered themselves Megrelians (**Esadze, 1907:** 514). In response to this decision, P. Tcharaya wrote: *"The Samurzakano people are the same as the Megrelians, although many do not believe it. The language, the most important marker of nationality, proves this. In all of Samurzakano, they speak Megrelian. In the western part of the region, more mountainous areas, they also know Abkhaz language"* (**Tcharaya, 1897**: 218). In the reports of the "Caucasian Society for the Revival of Christianity" published in 1869 and 1899, it is clearly recorded that "*from Ilori to the entire Samurzakano, the Mingrelian language dominates,"* and *"there is no doubt that the people of Samurzakano belong to the Georgian tribe. The Samurzakano people speak Mingrelian, not Abkhaz"* (**Totadze, 1995:** 85-86). This is confirmed by the French scholar and archaeologist Amour-Auguste-Louis-Joseph Berthelot (baron de Baye), who traveled in Georgia at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries. He writes that in Samurzakano, they *"speak Megrelian"* (**De Baye, 2011:** 112; also: **Beridze Sh., 1920:** 20). This is also confirmed by Carla Serena (**Serena, 1882:** 364).

The population of Samurzakano was heled Megrelians by Iacob Gogebashvili as well (**Gogebashvili, 1882:** 316). In his review of the religious situation of the locals, the author notes that they were originally Christians, but due to the historical upheavals they faced, their religion weakened. However, unlike Abkkhazia, the Ottomans failed to establish Islam in Samurzakano, as no mosque can be found anywhere in the region (**Gogebashvili, 1882:** 318). However, I. Gogebashvili also writes that certain elements of paganism have appeared in the religious practices of the Samurzakano people, which is connected to the cult of blacksmithing (**Gogebashvili, 1882:** 318-319).

In the 1890 issue 134 of the newspaper "Iveria," it was noted that *"the Samurzakano people are the same as the Megrelians, and therefore, Georgians... Everywhere in Samurzakano, they speak Megrelian and are the same kind of Christians as their Megrelian brethern."* Therefore, the language of education in local schools should be primarily Georgian, instead of Russian, which the local population does not understand (***Abkhazia in Georgian Press*, 2022:** 291). The same publication informed its readers at the turn of the century (1899) that *"Samurzakano is part of Georgia, where 40,000 Mingrelians live"* (***Abkhazia in Georgian Press*, 2022:** 553). In 1894 the Georgian weekly newspaper "Kvali" wrote: "*Samurzakano is, although the same as Samegrelo, part of Georgia"* (***Abkhazia in Georgian Press*, 2022:** 376).

In monograph published in 1930 in Sokhumi, Soviet musicologist K. Ko-

vach (1899-1939) studied the folklore of the population of the Kodori district and noted that local peasants, while working in maize fields, sang a folk song "Kililesa." The author also pointed out that this is from the Greek language, where "Kyrie eleison" means "Lord, have mercy." However, K. Kovach raised the question of why an Abkhaz person would sing such a song (Ковач, 1930: 15). The Mingrelian folk song "Kirialesa" is well known. Here, it is evident that the population was, in terms of confession, Christian, and ethnically Georgian (Megrelian). This is why the local Abkhaz person sang "Kililesa."

It is noteworthy that K. Matchavariani supported the assessment of the "Class and Land Reform Commission" (**Matchavariani, 1913:** 311). According to him, the Samurzakano people were primarily Abkhaz, while the Megrelian settlers in this region were "from Samegrelo" (**Matchavariani, 1913:** 311). K. Matchavariani began publishing his "views" at the turn of the 19th century, and particularly actively propagated these ideas through his articles in the newspaper *"Chernomorsky Vestnik,"* where he claimed that the Samurzakano people, by customs, language, and religion, were Abkhazians (**Kvashilava, 2011(a):** 153-154). His "works" were not left responseless by the members of Georgian society (**Kvashilava, 2011(a):** 153). Notably, the debate between him and the priest Besarion (in monasticism: Ambrose) Khelaia (who published letters under the pseudonym *"Samurzakhanets"*) deserves special attention. Each of the Georgian clergyman's writings was well-argued and convincing, which could not be said for K. Matchavariani's views[1]. However, K. Matchavariani occasionally unintentionally acknowledged the Georgian identity of the Samurzakano people when he mentioned local Georgian holidays and noted that Abkhaz language was spoken in only three villages of the region (***Abkhazia & Abkhazs..*, 2008:** 247-248). This can be considered the first official discussion on the ethnic identity of the Samurzakano people. Even S. Basaria did not doubt the "Abkhazian" origin of the Samurzakano people (**Basaria, 1923:** 99).

Deacon Davit Matchavariani, unlike his son, considered the Samurzakano people to be Georgians (**Engureli, 1895:** 2). In contrast to others, I. Bartolomei did not have a categorical tone in his assertions regarding the Samurzakano people, but mentioned that their customs more closely resembled those of the Abkhazians than the Megrelians (**Kvashilava, 2011(a):** 153-154).

In contrast to the aforementioned views, an anonymous author expressed a different opinion about the origin of the Samurzakano people in a large article on the population of Transcaucasia published in the 1868 *"Kavkaz"* newspaper, where, although the Samurzakano people were listed as a separate tribe, the author noted that they originated from the Megrelians (***Main Information..*, 1868:** 2-3). The author substantiated his opinion with a series of arguments: he noted that although the local nobility was mostly of Abkhaz origin, the population primarily spoke Megrelian, which, in his view, was one of the dialects of the Georgian language (***Main Information..*, 1868:** 2-3). Based on this, he categorically disagreed with A. Bergé and French scientist Schnitzler's views that the Samurzakano

[1] For more details on this, see: ***Saint Ambrose the Confessor..*, 2006:** 69-75.

people were Abkhazians (***Main Information..*, 1868:** 2). Therefore, according to the author, the Samurzakano people had not even attempted to create their own theological language, as they traditionally used Georgian for this purpose (***Main Information..*, 1868:** 2). He also provided a noteworthy piece of information: *"We know that the ecclesiastical authority assigned a Samurzakano clergyman to translate the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, but the people of Samegrelo and Samurzakano opposed this work... Therefore, the translator's honorable labor remained without practical use"* (***Main Information..*, 1868:** 3).

In 1904, the Georgian newspaper *„Iveria"* (July 9, 1904) properly wrote that *"the Georgian language is in widespread use both in Gali and throughout the entire Samurzakano"* (***MGPP*, 2014:** 95). In 1905, the Georgian newspaper *"Tsnobis Purtseli"* (April 1, 1905) noted: the *"kinship of the Samurzakano people with Georgians (Megrelians) is beyond any doubt. It would be ridiculous to prove this"* (***MGPP*, 2014:** 121-122).

In 1892, the Russian scientist I. Pantyukhov presented the results of his "research," which was first published as a newspaper article and later as a separate brochure with the approval of the censors, i.e., the authorities (**Pantyukhov, 1892**). The researcher aimed to prove the similarity of the Samurzakano and Abkhaz peoples and mainly sought distinguishing features between the Megrelians and the Samurzakano population. However, if this research had been directed towards the Abkhaz, more objective conclusions would likely have been made.

I. Pantyukhov began his work with the statement that *"Samurzakano was historically mentioned as a country located between Abkhazia and Samegrelo"* (**Pantyukhov, 1892:** 1). He then informed the readers that historical sources (though not specifying these "sources") indicated that "some special people lived on the territory of Samurzakano," and that local Christian churches were built by the Byzantines during the reign of Emperor Justinian (5th century AD) (**Pantyukhov, 1892:** 1). It is doubtful that the author did not see the Bedia church, or perhaps did not understand its significance, especially given the earlier references to Samurzakano (***Main Information..*, 1868**), and the fact that the constructor of this masterpiece of Georgian architecture was King Bagrat III. According to I. Pantyukhov, the Samurzakano people originally spoke Abkhaz lnguage, but after the pressure of the Megrelians, they forgot their mother tongue and now consider themselves Megrelians (**Pantyukhov, 1892:** 2).

I. Pantyukhov also held anthropological "research," concluding that the population of this region differed from the Megrelians of Zugdidi and Senaki. If the conclusions of this Russian author had any scientific value, and if we were to accept the Samurzakano people as Abkhazs, as he suggested, his conclusions would still be easily refute. A century and a half before this "researcher," Vakhushti had already noted that the Abkhazs are *"similar to the Megrelians"* (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 785). This observation was later confirmed by anthropological studies in the 20th century (**Abdushelishvili.., 1968:** 7-8).

Interestingly, the Russian anthropologist V. Bunak placed the Abkhazs in the lower Imereti type of the local version (**Bitadze, 2011:** 203). V. Alekseev,

on the other hand, directly stated: "Anthropological data... confirm the historical connection of the Abkhazs with the Georgian ethnic world rather than with the Adyghean one. The entry of the Abkhazs into the Adyghean language group seems to have occurred relatively late and, in any case, represents a secondary event in their ethnic history" (**Alexeev, 1974:** 194).

Unlike I. Pantyukhov, another Russian researcher, A. Dyachkov-Tarasov, after analyzing the Abkhaz customs, preserved traditions, and historical data, rightly concluded that the Abkhazs were a population that came to the Enguri-Ghalidzga interfluve (**Kvashilava, 2011(a):** 155).

For N. Dubrovin, the Samurzakano people are Abkhazs, though he also knew well that the border between Samurzakano and Abkhazia passed along the Enguri river (**Dubrovin, 1871:** 2).

In 1919, Nikolai Vorobyev, the secretary of the Society for the Study of the Black Sea coast, published a work entitled *"On the Groundlessness of the Georgian Claim to the Sokhumi District (Abkhazia),"* in which he declared the Samurzakano people to be "significantly mixed Megrel-Abkhaz ethnicity." It seems that the author could not entirely avoid the Georgian trace (**Vorobyev, 2022:** 277).

As N. Berdzenishvili rightly observed, the Tsarist regime "while truth and its servant – true science – were persecuted in this world, and the arena was left for total violence and falsehood, the agent-scientists of Tsarism also had an outlet for their falsification. Even among the locals, there were many were bribed agents, cowardly renegades, short-sighted naïve persons, or ignorant and misguided people who, through words, pen, or practical actions, caused no small damage to the rightful cause" (**Berdzenishvili, 1966:** 349).

However, this policy of Russia was successfully continued by the Bolsheviks. In the early 20th century, Kh. Bgazhba attempted to clarify the ethnic belonging of the Samurzakano people using toponymy. According to the author, in the toponyms of the Ghalidzga-interfluve highland is clearly seen an Abkhaz layer, while in the low land, Georgian (Megrelian) toponyms frequently are found. In the Gali district, however, in the field of toponyms an Abkhaz layer gives in to Megrelian (**Bgazhba, 1974:** 180). According to P. Tkhadaya's evaluation, the Abkhaz researcher correctly identified the situation, but Kh. Bgazhba did not mention that the Georgian toponymic layer is primary, while the Abkhaz one is later (from the late 17th century). Therefore, the Abkhaz layer did not "give in" but rather, the arrival of the Abkhazs led to the decrease of the Megrelian layer in the Ghalidzga-Enguri interfluve (**Tskhadaia, 2001:** 203-205).

The toponymy of Samurzakano also attracted the attention of Sh. Inal-Ipa. Initially, he supported the view that the Abkhazs took over the Ghalidzga-Enguri interfluve during feudal internal wars with the Megrelians (**Inal-ipa, 1965:** 42). However, he soon radically changed his point of view, considering the entire toponymy of modern Abkhazia as Abkhazian, and therefore recognizing the Abkhazs as the only autochthonous population of Samurzakano. The Georgian toponyms, he claimed, were attributed to the population who had moved from the left bank

of the Enguri, being land-poor and in distress (Inal-ipa, 1971: 315, 382-386; **Inal-ipa, 1976:** 218). However, the author had to acknowledge that Megrelian songs are sang in the region (**Inal-ipa, 2016:** 132).

Sh. Inal-Ipa saw the primacy of the Abkhaz layer in the toponymy of Samurzakano in his unique interpretation of certain materials (**Inal-ipa, 1976:** 382). The complete futility of this reasoning is immediately apparent.[1] With convincing arguments, Georgian researchers demonstrated that local toponyms and hydronyms (Ghalidzga, Okumi, Eristskhali, Tsarche, Okhirei, Okhoza, Ojoch'gore, Anaria, Nishoni, Kvishoni, Vatapi, Olie) are undeniably Megrelian in origin and were created long before the appearance of the Abkhazs in the region (**Tskhadaia, 2000:** 68-78; **Tskhadaia, 2001:** 203-205; **Tskhadaia, 2004:** 36, 39, 47, 140; **Gvantseladze, 2008:** 74-81; **Gvantseladze, 2011:** 172-254; **Kekua, 2021:** 204-208, 217-219, 220-221, 223-225, 227-228, 231-232).

At the very least, it would take a strong desire to declare "Chkhortholi" as an Abkhaz toponym, without noticing the two Megrelian words "Chkhoro" (nine) and "Toli" (eye). According to popular tradition, this name was given to the place due to a building that was said to have nine holls (rooms). However, according to P. Tskhadaya, this toponym could also reflect a place abundant with water sources and streams (**Tskhadaia, 2000:** 75).

In Samurzakano, Abkhazian-origin toponyms (Achigvara, Agavera, Lekumkhara,[2] Patrakhutsa, Shashikvara, Akvarikva) are mainly recorded in the narrow strip between the rivers Okhurei and Ghalidzga (on the border between Samurzakano and the principality of Abkhazia), in the Abkhaz "insular" settlements (also villages: Adkhida, Azhara, II Kopiti, Najkheu, Patrakhutsa, Reki, Sachino), where the Abkhaz language already prevailed (**Kipshidze, 1994:** 29; **Tskhadaia, 2001:** 206-207; **Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2008:** 70). However, even here, the Megrelian language has infiltrated, as ethnographers have confirmed several cases of the use of Georgian forms in the naming of Abkhazian surnames (Sazukhbaio, Sabutbaio, Saezugbaio, etc.) (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2008:** 68). In this zone, the dual nature of artificial or natural-geographical objects is confirmed (toponymic synonymy), which is a general toponymic phenomenon, caused by later-coming peoples translating already fixed toponyms or translating them into the languages active in the specific geographical area (**Tskhadaia, 2001:** 231). Examples include: Petrash Tskhari – Petreidzikh (spring, village Sachino), Bakhvaidzikh – Labakhuash Tskurgeli (spring, village Reka), Agruakvara – Agruash Ghal (ghele-stream, village Sachino), Matsiabokhu – Matsiash Kirdi (hillock, village Sachino), Ilorguri – Elirnikha, Agubedia – Gurbedia (**Tskhadaia, 2001:** 232-233). S. Bakhia-Okruashvili suggests that "Agu" should correspond to the Megrelian *"Guri"* (Georgian: heart) (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2010:** 68).

In general, it can be firmly argued that the local toponyms are of purely

[1] Sh. Inal-Ipa's widow, Mira Khotelashvili, also unequivocally considers the Samurzakano population as Abkhazians (**Khotelashvili-Inal-ipa, 2019:** 107).

[2] Lekumkhara is borrowed from Megrelian as *"Khetchreli"* (**Tskhadaia, 2001:** 206-207).

Georgian (Megrelian) origin (**Natchkebia, Tabidze, 2010:** 26). The thesis by K. Bgazhba mentioned above was also agreed upon by Z. Anchabadze, who concluded that, along with the Abkhaz, "also" Megrels lived in the plains of modern-day Ochamchire and Gali regions (**Anchabadze, 2010:** 469). However, in a later publication, Z. Anchabadze emphasized that the Abkhaz started to take control of the Ghalidzga-Enguri lowlands from the late 17th century, but since the number of Abkhaz settlers in this region was quite small, the process of "Abkhazization" of Samurzakano was very slow. According to the author, additional barriers were created by peasants fleeing from Samegrelo (**Anchabadze, 2011:** 76). The researcher also noted that the population of Samurzakano was ethnically mixed between Abkhazs and Georgians, with the Abkhaz forming the dominant class, while the majority of peasants were Megrels (**Anchabadze, 2011:** 85).

Z. Anchabadze's conclusion was not a new one. Already in the early 20th century, N. Janashia, who published articles under the pseudonym "Hamut-Bey" in the newspaper *"Tsnobis Purtseli"*, wrote that in Samurzakano *"the upper class was Abkhazian nobility, while the peasants were initially Megrels, although Abkhaz also lived here and there"* (**Hamut-Bey, 1902**). Over time, some of the Abkhazs and highlanders who settled in Samurzakano assimilated into Georgian culture, which also contributed to the suspension of the "Abkhazization" process mentioned by Z. Anchabadze. S. Bakhia-Okrushvili hods that after settling in this region, the "Georgianized" Abkhaz population quickly and painlessly returned to their ancient religious, agricultural activities and other traditional Megrelian customs (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2010:** 66).

Fr. Dubois de Montpéreux noted that in Samurzakano, Georgians and Abkhazians coexisted and spoke both languages (**Dubois, 1839:** 341; **Dubois, 2002:** 261). V. Potto confirms that in the early 19th century, the population of Samurzakano was diverse: in addition to the natives of Samegrelo, Guruls and Imeretians also lived there (**Potto, 1994(a):** 261).

By the beginning of the 20th century, a similar situation was preserved. The population of Samurzakano was primarily Megrelian, but, as noted by Iv. Javakhishvili, they had adopted the Abkhazian language and customs (**Javakhishvili, 2012:** 245). As A. Tsagareli specified in the 1880s, the Abkhaz language was primarily known by the male inhabitants of Samurzakano (**Tsagareli, 1880:** VIII). However, Megrelian and Abkhaz women and children did not know the neighbouring language (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2010:** 70). Apparently, Megrelian men often interacted with Abkhaz men, and these contacts were probably of a "professional" nature, related to shepherding. According to T. Sakhokia, livestock farming (especially of small cattle) was practiced by the population of seven villages in Samurzakano (Saberio, Dikha-Zurga, Rechkhia, Ghumurishi, Chkhortoli, Bedia) (**Sakhokia, 1985:** 363). However, unlike the Abkhaz, Samurzakano residents were also engaged in agriculture (**Sakhokia, 1985:** 320-323, 338; **Bakhia-Okruashvili, 1999:** 333).

The relationships between the Abkhaz and Megrels in Samurzakano also left an imprint on the local religious practices. Despite a certain degree of Islamic

influence, the region remained predominantly Christian. However, certain Abkhazian pagan rituals, characteristic of the Abkhaz, were introduced and became established in the local traditions (worship of the blacksmith's anvil, which is connected with the Abkhazian deity Shasshu Abzhnikha; "Aergi" – a transformation of Saint George, and others) (**Sakhokia, 1985:** 369-377; ***From the Travel of the Bishop of Imereti..*, 1896(b):** 3; **Zvanba, 1982:** 34-42; **Abakelia, 1999:** 369-377).

It is confirmed that the Abkhazs also adopted Megrelian cultural practices. Specifically, this refers to *"Akamgaria,"* which is associated with the Megrelian Mikam-Gario, i.e., the Archangels Michael and Gabriel (**Sakhokia, 1985:** 369-377; **Abakelia, 1999:** 356, 360). T. Sakhokia draws attention to the peculiar burial customs in Samurzakano. Specifically, the cemeteries were primarily arranged outside churches, along roadsides in cut down forests, near their homes (**Sakhokia, 1985:** 336-339). According to S. Bakhia-Okrushvili, only the indigenous, local population of the Enguri-Ghalidzga interfluve was buried in churches, while newcomers, including those from Samegrelo, did not have this privilege. The Abkhaz, traditionally, were buried on their own living territory, in the family burial grounds (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2010:** 67). According to the researcher, this is an additional argument supporting the identification of the local autochthonous population in Samurzakano as Megrelian (Georgian) (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2010:** 67).

Thus, the Ghalidzga-Enguri interfluve was a habitat for the Georgian ethnic group since ancient times, and the Abkhaz ethnic element appeared here only in the late 17th century. After that, a mixed Megrel-Abkhaz population was formed, but as J. Anchabadze rightly concluded, "the population of Samurzakano was still predominantly Georgian" (**Anchabadze J., 2005:** 20). A. Totadze holds that historically, the interfluve of Enguri-Ghalidzga was the homeland of the Georgians, and as evidenced by the statistical data provided by the researcher, the predominance of Georgians in the ethnic composition of the region in the second half of the 19th century is quite evident (**Totadze, 1995:** 62-63). This situation remained intact at the beginning of the 20th century (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 337).

These facts are also confirmed by ethnological evidence. Specifically, out of more than 25,000 surnames known in Georgia, more than 500 are found in Samurzakano, a large portion of which are Georgian, indicating a significant proportion of Georgians in the region's ethnic composition, while Abkhaz and other ethnic surnames are in the minority (**Kvashilava I., 2003:** 123).

Thus, the research based on ethnographic, linguistic, and toponymic studies provides objective conclusions that the indigenous population of the territory between Ghalidzga and Enguri rivers is Georgian (**Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2010:** 62). The locally recorded Abkhazian toponymic material is only 300 years old. This situation remained unchanged throughout our study period, and almost until the early 21st century. On the contrary, the local Megrelian (Georgian) population succeeded in preserving its ethnic identity (language, traditions, self-consciousness). The local population adopted the social structure of the incoming Abkhazs, but with certain adjustments.

CHAPTER VII. GALI DISTRICT DURING THE SOVIET TIME (1921-1991)

On February 16, 1921, when the Bolsheviks had not yet fully occupied Georgia, the Georgian Revolutionary Committee declared Georgia a Soviet Socialist Republic and announced that *"the brotherly nations of Adjara, Abkhazia, and Ossetia will determine their own fate"* (**Sagaria, 1981:** 40). Based on this, on March 26, the Abkhaz Revolutionary Committee addressed a letter to the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR and the Nationalities Commissar I. Stalin, stating that Abkhazia should be declared an independent Soviet Socialist Republic and join the RSFSR (**Sagaria, 1981:** 41-42). On March 28, in Batumi, a meeting of the Caucasian Bureau of the Central Committee of the RCP(b) and the Central Committee of the Georgian Communist Party, along with Bolshevik representatives from Adjara and Abkhazia, was held. The meeting discussed the issue "regarding the structure of Soviet power and the Communist Party in Abkhazia" and decided that "until the Congress of Soviet Councils in Abkhazia, the issue of federation with the RSFSR or the Georgian SSR remains open, and Abkhazia is declared a Socialist Republic. The party organization will carry the name of the RCP(b)'s Caucasian Bureau in Abkhazia and will operate in accordance with the directives of the RCP(b) Central Committee's Caucasian Bureau. The decrees of the Georgian Revolutionary Committee should serve as material for the Abkhaz Revolutionary Committee to ensure there is no contradiction between the actions of both revolutionary committees" (**Gamakharia, Gogia, 1997:** 469). According to researchers, this decision contradicted the Bolshevik approach to the establishment of republics: "The practice of Soviet state-building at that time did not consider granting the status of a republic unless the population of the territorial unit exceeded one million. The population of Abkhazia at that time was about 200,000, and Abkhaz people made up only 17% of the population, but the Caucasian Bureau's decision at the Batumi meeting satisfied the demand of the Abkhaz Bolsheviks" (**Khorava, Tchanturia, 2019:** 19). This idea was supported by the representative of the RSFSR in Georgia in 1920-1921, Major-General Pavel Sytin (1870-1938). Moreover, he also demanded a similar resolution for Samegrelo. In the General's opinion, this would make it easier for the RSFSR to control the disintegrated Georgia (**Ganin, 2014:** 239-240).

As a result, on March 31, a formally "independent" state formation, the Abkhazian Soviet Socialist Republic (Abkh. SSR), was proclaimed in the northwestern part of Georgia occupied by Soviet troops, just outside Tbilisi. On May 21, the Georgian Revolutionary Committee recognized this fact. Our Abkhaz colleagues consider this to have been the "restoration" of Abkhazia's "statehood" (**Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 319).

However, in reality, this was not the case. The Abkhaz SSR actually represented a fictitious "statehood," which even the officials of the then Soviet establishment in Sokhumi (N. Lakoba, E. Eshba) did not take seriously and regarded as a temporary phenomenon (**Lakoba N., 1987:** 176; **Sagaria, 1981:** 44; **Gamakha-**

ria, 1991: 117-118; **Gamakharia, 2021(c):** 233)[1]. Moreover, although O. Bgazhba and S. Lakoba considered Abkhazia's "independence" to be a result of V. Lenin's actions (**Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 319), it seems that Lenin had a radically different view on the matter compared to the Abkhaz historians (**Gamakharia, 2021(c):** 234). On July 23, 1921, at a meeting of responsible workers of Abkhazia, N. Lakoba himself spoke about the impossibility of Abkhazia's annexation to Russia and the necessity of close ties with Georgia, considering the ethnographic and historical conditions (**Gamakharia, 2021(c):** 235). Interestingly, on November 24, 1921, the Caucasian Bureau of the RCP(b) transferred Abkhazia's authority to the Georgian Communist Party, which was legally formalized in January 1922 (**Gamakharia, 2021(c):** 236).

Everyone knew well that the Abkhaz "SSR" could not exist independently. Its political and economic potential was not sufficient to solve this task successfully. Therefore, it is clear that the approval of the governing officials of the Abkhaz SSR's party and state structures took place in Tbilisi. Economic issues were also managed from there (**Gamakharia, 2021(c):** 234). In order to correct this absurd situation, and to maintain Abkhazia as an "independent" Soviet republic for some time, a compromise decision was made: on December 16, 1921, Tbilisi and Sokhumi signed an alliance agreement (text: ***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..,* 2021:** 228). In this way, Abkhazia soon joined the *Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet* Republic (TSFSR).

Despite the fact that the Bolsheviks carried out their own administrative reforms in the South Caucasus (the creation of "Soviet Socialist Republics"), the Kremlin did not seriously regard the "independent" status of Abkhazia. An example of this is the words of Soviet military and political figure M. I. Lisovskiy (1887-1938), who was the responsible secretary of the Chelyabinsk Provincial Committee of the RCP(b) in 1922-1923, at the X Congress of the All-Russian Soviet of Soviets (December 23-27, 1922), where he mentioned the three Soviet republics of Transcaucasia and then referred to Abkhazia as a "republic-like" entity (**Voytikov, 1921:** 65). Interestingly, this "Soviet Republic" was rightfully referred to as an "Autonomous Republic" in the first USSR Constitution (see *Chapter IV, note to Article XV*) (***Constitution of the USSR*, 1924**).

By creating the "independent" Abkhaz SSR, the Kremlin, on one hand, tried to justify the propaganda of Georgian "oppression" of Abkhaz people from 1918-1921, which it had promoted. At the same time, it was an attempt to break the Georgians. Interestingly, in August 1924, Abkhazia was shaken by an anti-Soviet and anti-occupation uprising, which the government quickly and brutally suppressed. After this, we see attempts at a shift in political orientation in Sokhumi. Specifically, the Third Congress of Abkhaz Soviets (March 26 – April 1, 1925) approved a constitution on April 1, 1925, without any discussion, which contradicted the constitutions of the Georgian SSR, TSFSR, and the USSR, as well as the

[1] N. Lakoba himself referred to this "independence" as a temporary measure they needed at the time (**Lakoba N., 1987:** 176).

agreement with Georgia. Abkhazia was declared a sovereign republic (**Gamakharia, 2021(c):** 237). Of course, such a document could not have been adopted in Sokhumi without Moscow's approval. We believe that the Kremlin needed this as a signal both to the Georgian Bolsheviks, who had unexpectedly turned into "Nationalist Deviationists" (*"Национал-уклонисты"*)[1], and to the anti-Russian inclined society, that Georgia would ultimately be deprived of its historical part – Abkhazia. Ultimately, this "constitution" was only recognized as a "draft" by the Congress, and it was not published (**Gamakharia, 2021(c):** 237). This was a clear signal from the communist new Russian empire.

The situation changed at the beginning of the 1930s. By this time, the "nationalist deviationist" opposition among Georgian Bolsheviks had practically been destroyed. At the same time, the Soviet Union's constitution did not recognize the status of a *"Treaty Republic,"* so a decision was made that Abkhazia, considering its lack of political and economic potential to exist independently, would function as an autonomous republic within Georgia. This decision was adopted by the 6th Congress of Abkhaz Soviets on February 11, 1931 (**Gamakharia, 2021(c):** 240).

The occupiers soon began to carry out administrative reforms that would ensure their control. On March 10, 1921, the Samurzakano District Revolutionary Committee was established (***Revcoms of Abkhazia,* 1961:** 383), and its composition was completed by March 22, with members such as Gvaramia, Data Labakhua, and Dimitri Toria (***Revcoms of Abkhazia,* 1961:** 45 – №48). On April 1, the Caucasian Bureau of the RCP(b) and the Revolutionary Committee appointed N. Svanidze as the head of the Samurzakano Revolutionary Committee, with members such as D. Toria and R. Gogokhia, and divisions heads like I. Khaburzania, F. Toria, and others. The local party leader was N. Bokuchava (**Sagaria, 1981:** 80). Soon, village Revolutionary Committees were formed (**Kuprava, 2013:** 551).

The occupying regime could not find competent staff in Samurzakano for forming local government structures, as pointed out several times by the local Revolutionary Committee in May-July 1921 (***Revcoms of Abkhazia,* 1961:** 110 – №105). The population avoided cooperating with the Bolsheviks (***Revcoms of Abkhazia,* 1961:** 269 – №230).

In January 1922, the first Soviet elections were held in Abkhazia. Unlike other districts, Samurzakano's[2] local council was entirely composed of communists (**Sagaria, 1981:** 80). Based on these elections, on February 18, the Central Executive Committee of Abkhazia (CEC) was formed, with E. Eshba as its chairman and N. Lakoba taking over the People's Commissars Council.

Although in 1925 the Abkhaz Bolsheviks almost rejected the connection with

[1] The National-Uklonists, among whom were leading members of the Central Committee of Georgian Communist Party (Philipe Makharadze, Budu Mdivani, Kote Tsintsadze, Mikheil Okujava, Sergo Kavtaradze etc.) to a certain extend defended the independent statehood of Georgia (what at that time was absolute figment) and demanded to enter the Soviet Union, which was under making not as the RSFR member, but as the independent political unit.

[2] In November 1925, the name of the Samurzakano district was changed to the Gali district (**Khorava, Tchanturia, 2019:** 27).

Georgia, it is hard to believe that N. Lakoba would have pursued this path. As early as November 16, 1921, when E. Eshba was requesting Abkhazia's direct entry into the TSFSR, the Caucasian Bureau clearly pointed outthat Abkhazia could not exist independently, and it had only two options: 1) a treaty relationship with Georgia; 2) the status of an autonomous region in the RSFSR (**Gamakharia, 2021(c):** 235). Therefore, N. Lakoba, for whom it was clear that the *"Treaty Republic"* status was an unattainable goal for Abkhazia, felt very comfortable under Tbilisi's umbrella. This is why, in 1926, he stated: *"...Abkhazia will either decide to leave Georgia, or will decide to stay. To avoid any misunderstanding in the future, we must state clearly that Abkhazia cannot leave Georgia, has no intention of doing so, and does not wish to"* (**Gamakharia, 2021(c):** 238). In this context, N. Lakoba established an ethnocratic regime in Abkhazia by 1925 (**Papaskiri, 2021(d):** 242).

On June 20, 1921, the Chairman of the Abkhaz Revolutionary Committee, E. Eshba, met with the population of Samurzakano, who expressed strong dissatisfaction with the creation of the Abkhaz SSR, which was perceived as a separation from Georgia. Therefore, they demanded the region be subordinated to Tbilisi (**Jikia, Silakadze, 2024:** 94). The Gali people elected Khopo Eteria as their representative. He delivered the population's demands to the Head of the republic, some of which were of a socio-economic character. The issue of future relations between the Abkhaz and Georgian SSRs, as well as the provision of Georgian-language education in local schools, was also discussed (**Gamakharia, Gogia, 1997:** 474-475). E. Eshba tried to convince the people of Samurzakano that, in the Soviet system, it didn't matter whether Abkhazia was aligned with Russia or Georgia. They were Abkhaz, and therefore, instead of Georgian, they should learn Abkhaz and Russian in schools. The local population strongly opposed this. On the contrary, they demanded the provision of Georgian-language education. Additionally, someone named Yason Agumava, who seems to have been a supporter of Eshba-Lakoba's ideas and a member of their team, stated that the Samurzakano people spoke an Abkhazian dialect and therefore, education should be conducted in that language. The population did not accept this idea either (**Gasviani, 2004:** 315, 317; **Khorava, Tchanturia, 2019:** 19; **Gamakharia, Gogia, 1997:** 474-475). Thus, the local population was firmly oriented toward Georgia. As a result, the Abkhaz Bolsheviks were pushed to take decisive steps.

Interestingly, researcher G. Lezhava believed that, for some reason, up to 1940s, there was a deliberate assimilation of the Abkhaz population of Samurzakano (**Lezhava G., 1989:** 13). Later, the Abkhaz themselves would admit that the Gali region was a Megrelian (Georgian) part of the country. For instance, Abkhaz composer Ivan Lakerbaya (1888-1978) noted in 1945, *"Abkhazia has turned into Samegrelo. Zugdidi and* ***Gali*** (emphasis ours – ***K.K.***) *have flooded Sokhumi"* (***AA – 20th Century*****, 2002:** 26).

N. Lakoba's ethnocratic regime exerted heavy pressure on the Georgian population of Abkhazia, a large portion of which was concentrated in the Gali district. The authorities made every effort to assimilate the Georgians of Samur-

zakano. To this end, unjustified privileges were given to the Abkhazs: exemption from military service, preferential land allocation, and favoritism in the selection of leaders for official positions, etc. (**Gamakharia, 2021(c):** 240; **Blauvelt, 2023:** 140).

As documents preserved in the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs' archives attest, the Abkhazs were given all sorts of privileges: *"In Abkhazia, Soviet power only has a formal appearance... It can be said without exaggeration that by 1925, Abkhazia had not only Soviet, but also oligarchic rule, with the aim of completely Abkhazizing the population."* Moreover, the Abkhaz were instilled with the belief that the Georgians were their enemies (**Kipshidze N., 2015:** 114-115). E. Eshba and N. Lakoba completely disregarded the interests of the Georgians (**Papaskiri, 2021(d):** 242).

The Bolsheviks were able to conquer the region in about a month and a half, but establishing control and ensuring stability was not easy. The population periodically resorted to military uprisings. The 1921-1922 Svaneti uprising echoed beyond Georgia's borders and even attracted the attention of the Genoa Conference. In early September 1922, the uprising spread to Kakheti and Khevsureti, and the international community learned about it (**Daushvili, 2023:** 539). Meanwhile, Georgian patriotic forces, who were in constant contact with the government in exile, naturally did not accept the loss of their country's independence and sovereignty. It was also evident that the declared "sovereignty" of the Georgian SSR was, in reality, a farce, and the country had returned to the status of a Russian province. The Bolsheviks began repressions against both opposition political parties and those in society who sympathized with the First Republic.

In the occupied Abkhazia, members of the Social-Democratic party dispersed and hid in various villages. The underground Mensheviks were preparing an uprising against the occupying Bolsheviks. May 26, 1922 was set as the date for the rebellion, but the regime managed to gather information, and the plan was thwarted. The conspiracy only succeeded in spreading anti-Soviet proclamations in Abkhazia (**Jikia, 2012:** 121-122). On May 28, the Bolshevik security service, the special commission (the *"Cheka"*), began arresting the Mensheviks living in Abkhazia (**Jikia, 2012:** 124). On June 1, they gathered in the Mokvi forest and decided to march toward Ochamchire. However, the mass repressions initiated by the authorities thwarted this plan as well (**Jikia, 2012:** 122). At the end of September of the same year, on errand of N. Khomeriki from İstanbul was sent Taraskhan Eshba, (1886-1923) son of Dimitri, an Abkhaz nobleman, native of Bedia, former Commissioner of Samurzakano and former Head of the Special regiment in Sokhumi (from April 1920 until the Sovietization) (**Sarsvanidze, 2008:** 84-85). His mission was to fight against illegal Bolshevik organizations. In his capacity as head of the special regiment, he fully uncovered the underground committee in Sokhumi (***"Tulni",* 2015:** 47). Eshba's return to the region further intensified anti-Soviet sentiments (**Jikia, 2012:** 125). Eshba soon formed a group (Okum Kacharava, Nocho Ghurtskaia, Evgeni Jobava, Athanasius Shelia, Gogia, Giorgi

Buskadze, and Elizbar Mikadze)[1], which operated in the vicinity of Bedia and Saberio (**Sarsvanidze, 2008:** 86-87). In early June 1923, Eshba attempted to organize an uprising in Abkhazia (**Jikia, 2012:** 125), and some risings took place, but they were unsuccessful. The authorities reacted quickly (**Sarsvanidze, 2008:** 88). Soon, on July 7, Eshba was forced to surrender to the regime (**Jikia, 2012:** 125). He was executed that same year (**Sarsvanidze, 2008:** 89). With the neutralization of Eshba's group, the occupying regime failed to pacify Samurzakano. Shortly afterward, Khuda Emukhvari's group rebelled against the regime, and on October 28, 1923, in the village of Barghes, they opened fire on the district militia (**Jikia, 2012:** 125-126). As Professor B. Khorava discovered, the August 1924 uprising in the Samurzakano district also included: Giorgi Anchabadze (Ochamchire), Konstantine Bokuchava (village Lekukhona), Khacha Buliskeria (village Okumi), Lavrenti Jobava (village Tskhiri), Arsen Gvagalia (village Dikhazurga), Mose Ketsbaia (village Gali); teachers from the Gali school: Bagrat Khorava, Grigol Kavtaradze, Giorgi Torua; teacher from Ghumurishi, Teimuraz Zukhbaia; former member of the national guard, Teote Zarandia, and others (**Khorava, 2022(b)**). This was the situation in the Gali-Enguri region before the August 1924 uprising. It was the only district in Abkhazia that fully supported the national cause. Bolshevik arbitrariness and the breakdown of the existing order caused widespread discontent among the population. They resisted the regime's attempts to force their children into the pioneers' organization (**Kuprava, 2013:** 368).

Samurzakano was within the jurisdiction of Samegrelo's headquarters (**Jikia, 2012:** 99). According to the military plan, in case of a successful uprising, the Samurzakano people were to attack Sokhumi (**Jikia, 2012:** 128). As is known, the uprising began a day earlier than planned, on August 28 instead of the 29th (**Shvelidze, 2021:** 126). The main battles took place in the Saberio region (**Jikia, 2012:** 192). The Samurzakano rebels were supposed to receive help from the troops coming from Svaneti, but the actions of the occupying regime thwarted this plan (**Jikia, Silakadze, 2024:** 496).

After the defeat of the uprisings, the regime moved to severe repression (**Jikia, Silakadze, 2024:** 496). In Samurzakano alone, they had so many prisoners that, along with the prison, they also held detainees at the Gali school (**Jikia, 2012:** 213). The Bolshevik execution did not spare anyone or anything; part of the rebels sought refuge in the mountains of Svaneti (**Jikia, Silakadze, 2024:** 533, 535).

The Bolshevik security service – the Main Political Directorate – by September 16, 1928, prepared a list of former nobles, landowners, and gentry who lived in Abkhazia (***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..,* 2021:**232-267). This document reveals that almost the entire former aristocracy of the Gali district was hostile towards the Soviet government and actively participated in the *"August Adventure"* (as the source's compiler writes) (***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..,* 2021:**258-263).

[1] This group was also joined by Leonti Okujava, Bagrat Zantaria, Iona and Jason Jinjolias, Taraskhan (Taras) Anchabadze (**Sarsvanidze, 2008:** 88).

N. Lakoba saw the hard socio-economic condition of the local peasants as the reason for the participation of Samurzakano inhabitants in the August uprising. He believed that, due to the lack of proper assistance from the Soviet government, they placed their hopes in the Mensheviks (**Lakoba N., 1987:** 147). In reality, the socio-economic situation was merely an excuse. The local population, first and foremost, fought for the restoration of their homeland's independence. As we saw in the previous chapter, it was Samurzakano that carried the banner of the Georgian cause in Abkhazia from 1918 to 1921. Naturally, this sentiment had not disappeared.[1]

The government realized that the involvement of Gali in the 1924 uprising was primarily driven by national factors. In order to regulate the situation, the central executive committee of the Abkhazian SSR sent a special commission led by Haik Azatyan, Deputy Chairman of the Armenian SSR's Central Executive Committee. At the end of the summer of 1925, the Commission submitted its report, which stated: "It can be said without exaggeration that Abkhazia in 1925 is not a Soviet Socialist Republic at all. It is an example of oligarchic rule by ethnic Abkhazians over the Georgians, whose goal is not the full socio-political Sovietization or socialization of the country, but rather its "Abkhazianization," by granting all possible privileges to ethnically Abkhaz citizens… Therefore, frequently people who are not of Abkhaz nationality call themselves Abkhaz in order to find work more easily" (**Blauvelt, 2023:** 98).

On July 31, 1925, the Presidium of the Georgian SSR's Central Executive Committee discussed the situation in Abkhazia and developed a special resolution, the 10th point of which demanded solving the language issues, particularly concerning the Georgian population of Gali (**Blauvelt, 2023:** 93). Russian was implemented as the official language in the republic. According to Abkhaz Bolsheviks (as they confirmed at the 3rd Congress of the Soviets of Abkhazia in March 1925), this was more acceptable for multi-ethnic Abkhazia than either Georgian or Abkhaz (**Blauvelt, 2023:** 97, 100).

Lakoba's attempt to create a mono-national regime in Abkhazia quickly showed results: according to the 1926 census, the majority of the population in the Gali district consisted of Georgians (36,802)[2] and Abkhaz (12,962 people) (**Lezhava G., 1989:** 16). Lakoba's government actively attempted to Abkhazize the Georgian population of the Gali district. It is interesting to note that this was reflected in the aforementioned census, where nearly 9,000 "Abkhaz" named Megrelian as their native language (**Lezhava G., 1989:** 20). However, these numbers were significantly inflated, as in 1909, the population of Samurzakano was 40,687, of which only 1,100 were of Abkhaz nationality, and by 1917, the number of Georgians in the region had reached 40,959 (**Gasviani, 2004:** 46-47; **Menteshashvili, 1998:** 98).

[1] Interestingly, N. Lakoba himself, as the chairman of the special field court body – the so-called *"troika"* (three-man panel) – participated in the trial of those involved in the August uprising and sentenced 13 people to death at the sessions held on September 15-17 of the same year (**Gamakharia, 2021(c):** 240; ***One Hundred Years After the Uprising*, 2024**: 159-160; ***The Uprising of 1924..*, 2024:** 95).

[2] Among Georgians the Megrels (19,019 men) and Svans (36 men) were distinguished separately.

Interestingly, according to Lakoba himself, "several thousand people declared themselves of Abkhaz nationality, although their language was not Abkhaz, but Georgian (Megrelian)" (**Songhulashvili, 2004:** 181). More precisely, from the figures above, only 5,295 people were native Abkhazs, while the remaining 7,668 spoke "another language," which leads researchers to reasonably believe that *"in 1926, the regime grossly falsified the results of the census – part of the Georgians were recorded as Abkhazs"* (**Gvantseladze G. & Others, 2024:** 69-70). Therefore, S. Lakoba's rhetoric, when he speaks on the deliberate "Georgianization (Megrelianization)" of the Abkhazs in the Gali district during Lakoba's era, which supposedly reduced their number, is entirely unclear (**Lakoba, 1990:** 43).

At the Third Congress of the Georgian Central Executive Committee held in Sokhumi on June 3, 1926, Lakoba remarked that the number of Abkhaz in Abkhazia was about 50,000, with Greeks – 18-19,000, and Armenians also about 18-19,000, while the total population was estimated between 190,000 and 200,000. He did not mention the number of Georgians, but noted that one-third of them lived in the Gali district. Unlike the Abkhazs, Georgians were settled across all districts of Abkhazia (**Lakoba N., 1987:** 207).

By 1927-1928, he confirmed that the only spoken and written language in the Gali district was Georgian (**Lakoba N., 1987:** 215-216, 296; ***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..,* 2021:** 347). Indeed, according to the 1927 Constitution of the Abkhazian SSR, Georgian was designated as the working language in the Gali district (**Kuprava, 2014:** 324; ***Constitutions of Abkhazia..*, 2015:** 52). According to data from 1925-1926, the local government was primarily composed of Georgians (***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..,* 2021:** 345).

In order to artificially reduce the number of Georgians in the Gali district, Lakoba's regime placed several villages where both Georgians and Abkhazs lived under the jurisdiction of Ochamchire in 1931 (***Abkhazia..*, 1992:** 429). Since this process was under the authority of the local government, Lakoba's regime had excellent opportunities for manipulation (**Khorava, Tchanturia, 2019:** 29).

Nevertheless, according to the 1932 data, the number of Georgians in the Gali district remained significant (39,854 people), while the number of Abkhaz was only 8,645. At the same time, representatives of other nationalities were the least represented here (**Gvantseladze G. & Others, 2024:** 62-63). In the following years, Georgian remained the only language used in schools and for official business in the Gali district (**Gvantseladze G. & Others, 2024:** 117).

According to the 1934 census, the following villages were entirely inhabited by Georgians: Gudava, Nabakevi, Saberio, Okumi, Tchuburishkhinji, Pirveli Gali, Refo-Shesheleti, Zemo Barghebi, Lekukhona, Dikhazurga, Khumushkuri, Tagiloni, and Tskhiri-Gali, Rechkhi-Tskhiri, Otobaia, Gagida-Notchkadue, Achigvara, Tcharche, Meore Bedia, Kvemo Barghebi, Ghumurishi, Pichora, Mukhuri (**Gvantseladze G. & Others, 2024:** 126-127). T. Achugba, who was well acquainted with the region, attempted to distort the local ethnic composition, stating that in 1930s, Abkhaz people who had not been assimilated earlier were forcefully "Georgianized" in Gali (**Achugba, 2010:** 166). According to him, the reason for

the Georgianization of the Abkhaz people of Samurzakano was the mixed families, where the mothers were Georgians/Megrelians. However, he also mentions a certain Chvata Zukhbaia from Kokhori (1896-1963) and his Abkhaz wife Olga Zvanba (1892-1982). Nevertheless, the researcher is compelled to note that their children did not speak Abkhaz (**Achugba, 2010:** 174-175).

The Soviet Bolshevik regime contributed to the process of disintegration of the Georgians. In the population census (1926, 1937), the Georgians (here included: *Kartvelians, Kakhetians, Tushians, Pshavs-Khevsurs, Javakhs, Meskhs, Klarjetians, Taoites, Adjarians, Gurians, Imeretians, Rachvelians, Lechkhumians*) were divided into Georgians proper and also – Megrelians, Chans, Svans, Batsbs, Adjarians (**Kipshidze, 2008:** 37). This policy was actively pursued in the contractual republic of Abkhazia as well. Therefore, newspapers in the Megrelian language were published here: *"Mshromeli Qazakhi"* (the press organ of the Gali district Committee of the Communist Party of the Georgian SSR, the district Executive Committee, and the district Council of trade unions) – it was printed since 1931, renamed in 1932 to *"Kolmeurneshi Khuma,"* and in 1936 – *"Stalinuri Sharat"*, *"Bolshevikuri Tempit"* (the six-day organ of the political department of the Gali tractor station, 1934) (**Gvantseladze G. & Others, 2024:** 290). After N. Lakoba's death, the "Apsuanized" Georgians regained their nationality, and the historical ethnic balance in the region was restored: in 1939, 1,786 Abkhaz were registered[1] (**Lezhava G., 1989:** 20-21).

With the establishment of the Soviet Union, the authorities began working on the development of education in Abkhazia. According to the census (ages 18-40), in the Gali district, illiterate and slightly educated population was found (respectively – 13,000[2] and 6,500) (Documents on the History of Abkhazia, 2021: 383). The local department of public education established the "Special Council for Combating Illiteracy in the District" (**Kuprava, 2016:** 143). By 1923, according to the People's Commissioner of Education of the Abkhaz SSR, S. Tchanba, the district already had 51 incomplete and 2 complete schools (in Gali and Tchuburkhinji) (***Materials on the History of Abkhazia..*, 2015:** 21). However, due to material hardships, the population found it difficult to pay for education. Therefore, by the decision of the Council of People's Commissars of the Abkhaz SSR, dated April 4, 1924, Gali 7-year school pupils were exempted from the tuition fee for the 1923-1924 academic year (***Materials on the History of Abkhazia..*, 2015:** 129). To successfully carry out the 1924-1925 academic year, teachers from Gali district were sent to Zugdidi and Senaki for qualification upgrading (***Materials on the History of Abkhazia..*, 2015:** 39).

In the years 1923-1924, illiteracy elimination groups were active in the villages – Otobaia, Barghebi, Tagiloni, Tchuburkhinji, Saberio, Mukhuri, Bedia – and in Gali. Interestingly, the teachers were specifically selected by the district party committee and the political education leadership. The local party committee, led

[1] There is no the population of the villages: Reka, Agubedia and Bedia, which in 1930s were attributed to Ochamchire district.

[2] According to another document: 13,376 (***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..*, 2021:** 329).

by D. Toria, specially equipped the groups with Georgian and Russian literature (**Kuprava, 2016:** 149).

Only in Saberio in 1925, there were already 4 similar groups (**Kuprava, 2013:** 380, 417). In February 1927, the government conducted a revision of these schools and approved their work (**Kuprava, 2016:** 165). In 1926, 69 women were educated in these groups (**Kuprava, 2016:** 168). Interestingly, some of the graduates were not satisfied with the results and continued to deepen their education (**Kuprava, 2016:** 170-171). Teachers actively tried to transfer knowledge to the trainees. Based on the results of the 1926-1927 academic year, the government recognized the successful teachers. Such teacher in Gali district was Besarion Kiuti (village Mokvi) (**Kuprava, 2016:** 171).

Due to the increased accessibility of education, the number of students grew. Thus, it became necessary to reorganize the existing schools. For example, by 1929, the Barghebi elementary school was transformed into a 7-year school (***Materials on the History of Abkhazia..*, 2015:** 76). In 1925, a library was opened in Gali. In the villages, there were also small reading huts (**Kuprava, 2013:** 393, 410).

Although the Soviet Empire cared for public education, it was aimed at one specific goal: to create the new Soviet person. Free-thinking members of society were persecuted by the government. One such person was I. Gegia. As Professor O. Zhordania notes, unfortunately, due to the lack of specific materials, the biographical passages of the mentioned figure cannot be determined for the period 1921-1941 (**Gegia, 2011:** 31). However, it is known that during this period, I. Gegia could not publish his collection of poems or other works. Moreover, in 1937, he was arrested for being a member of the Socialist-Federalist Party, but was soon released as an 80-year-old elder (**Gegia, 2011:** 31).

The Bolshevik terror of the 1930s, which spread throughout the empire, naturally did not bypass the population of the Gali district. Documents in the State Archives of Georgia contain records of hundreds of repressed Samurzakano residents (***Great Terror..*, 2017**).

The population of the Gali district actively participated in World War II. Due to the outbreak of war with Nazi Germany, 6 destructive shooting battalions were created in Abkhazia. The Gali battalion, with 403 men, was stationed in the Gali district: 2 units, 124 fighters and a headquarters, were stationed in the centre of the district; the 3rd company, with 65 fighters, was in Saberio; the 4th, with 107 fighters, was in Nabakevi; and the 5th company, with 109 fighters, was in the village of Okumi. Additionally, there were 92 operational groups consisting of 2-8 people (**Gasviani, 2004:** 418-419).

The population of Gali actively participated in both combat[1] and rear operations. Already in the first days of the war, around 200 people from the village of Okumi went to the front (**Ioseliani, 1958:** 45). The Samurzakano people also distinguished themselves in rear operations. Only in 1941-1942, the population

[1] Among the 5,489 Gali residents who participated in the war, 3,528 died (***Book of the Eternal Memory*, 1987:** 49-109; **Akishbaia, 2001:** 37).

of Gali district worked for free on defense construction for 215,000 man-days and 16,000 cart-days with their oxen (**Ioseliani, 1957:** 69). The populations of Okumi and Barghebi stood out with their rich corn harvest (**Ioseliani, 1958:** 264).

At the end of the 1960s, an important event occurred in the life of the Gali district. In 1969, 250 families of Muslim Meskhs left Azerbaijan and returned to their homeland. They were settled in the village of Achigvara, where they soon proved their worth.

Other Meskhs were also planning to join (altogether – 3,000 people). However, soon, at the request of the Azerbaijani SSR, a special commission created in Moscow decided to expel the Meskhs from Abkhazia and resettle them in Azerbaijan. Despite the Meskhs' resistance, they were deported from Gali. They refused to return to Azerbaijan and settled in Kabardino-Balkaria (**Okropiridze U., 2023:** 61-62).

The Soviet government began land reform from the very beginning, because the wealthy population was not exactly their ally. They primarily sought their main allies among the landless population. In a document dated May 20, 1918, it was mentioned that the Bolsheviks were supported by a *"part of the peasants with an aggressive attitude,"* whose goal was to seize others' property (***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..,* 2021:** 109). Despite this, there was a problem. Part of the population was in a difficult socio-economic situation, which, naturally, was also a cause of social instability. This is why, as we saw above, the Bolsheviks were able to constantly stir up the situation in Samurzakano and, in some cases, seize power.

The Samurzakano Revolutionary Committee received a letter from 29 peasants (landless and small landholders) from the villages of Tchuburkhinji and Tskhiro-Gali, demanding that the land distribution issue be regulated (**Kuprava, 2013:** 49-50). In the same March, the local authorities sent instructions to village representatives on the principles of land distribution **(Kuprava, 2013:** 51). The landowners, including peasants, whom the "workers' and peasants' government" called "kulaks," soon had their manors confiscated, and only small landholders in Samurzakano were given 2,488 desiatinas of land (**Kuprava, 2013:** 61-62). Interestingly, in 1917, this category of peasants had leased 2,117 desiatinas of land (**Kuprava, 2013:** 71).

This process caused discontent among landowners. The nobleman from Bedia Levan Khakhubia requested the return of his estate from the Council of People's Commissioners of Abkhazia in 1922, stating that he supported not only his family but also poor relatives (**Kuprava, 2013:** 63-64). Fearing the unconditional loss of their land, landowners attempted to sell their property. For example, Marghania, a resident of the village of Reka in the Gali district, sold his land to peasant Badra Kuchuberia. By 1926, 86 such cases were recorded. However, the authorities quickly confiscated these acquisitions (**Kuprava, 2013:** 64-65).

By 1926, no representatives of the former noble gentry remained in the Gali district with a surplus of land. As the chairman of the local Executive Committee I. Khaburzania boasted, some of them had very small plots left (**Kuprava, 2014:** 66). Protests against the Bolshevik government started. For example, on the night of April 2, 1922, a lady from Otobaia burned the village barn and the militia's food

storage, protesting the increased food tax. Despite the protest, the authorities did not reduce the tax, and the protests continued in1924 as well (**Kuprava, 2013:** 129).

To neutralize private entrepreneurship, the government began to create cooperatives in 1922. At the end of that year, the Samurzakano and Okumi cooperatives started their activity (**Kuprava, 2013:** 145). According to official data, 200 peasants were united in these cooperatives (**Kuprava, 2013:** 169-170). By 1925, they had achieved some success. Their products were much cheaper than those of private peasant farms (**Kuprava, 2013:** 162). This led to dissatisfaction among private entrepreneurs (**Kuprava, 2013:** 151).

To support agriculture, credit cooperatives were formed, where peasant farms could unite. In the 1920s, two out of 12 credit cooperatives in Abkhazia (Achigvara and Gali) were located in the Gali district. In 1924-1925, they received loans of 52,000 and 74,300 rubles from the Abkhazian SSR's Agricultural Bank (***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..,*** **2021:**316). Through this financial consolidation, a special tractor cooperative was created in Samurzakano district, which purchased its first tractor in 1926 (**Kuprava, 2013:** 111, 184).

From 1927 to 1929, by the government's efforts, more than 3,000 poor peasant farms were united into cooperatives. The best example of the cooperative movement's success was the "Musha" cooperative in the Gali district's Gagida-Otobaia, which managed to produce 1,800 poods (*old Russian unit of weight, 1 pood = 16 kg*) of raw cotton, 2,000 poods of hazelnuts, and over 600 poods of corn in a short period. As researchers point out, this was a normal result at the time, but in subsequent years, these villages did not succeed in agricultural production (**Anchabadze J., 2012:** 96). Otobaia's cooperative was considered one of the lagging agricultural enterprises in the autonomous republic. By the late 1970s-1980s, the cooperative turned into a Soviet farm, but its lagging behind continued until the collapse of the Soviet Union (**Anchabadze J., 2012:** 96). Interestingly, the first collective farm[1] (named after Mikha Tskhakaya) was established in the village of Nabakevi in 1927, specializing in tea cultivation (**Kuprava, 2015:** 360).

In general, the Gali district advanced in tea leaf production, as the largest tea plantation area was there. It was served by five major cooperatives (Gali, Tchuburkhinji, Nabakevi, Achigvara, and Okumi), 30 cooperatives, and 7 Soviet farms (**Lezhava G., 1968:** 147-148). The collective farming movement that began in 1929 was soon followed by dissatisfaction among the rural population of Abkhazia due to economic hardship, compounded by new obligations and taxes. According to archival materials, B. Khorava discovered that in the summer of 1930, there were mass protests by women in the Kodori and Gali districts. The government managed to calm the protests with promises, but later carried out repressions against the activists (**Khorava, 2022(b)**).

[1] By late 1931 the most of the Gali district was united in collective farms. In each of 10 villages there was one big unit, in three – Okumi, Otobaia, Bedia – 2 or 3 (**Kuprava, 2015:** 581-582). Although population resisted making of the collective farms. For instance, in Gudva people manifested significant protest (**Kuprava, 2014:** 641).

New complications soon arose in the Gali district. The integration into co-operatives was carried out in very rough and harsh forms in the *"Workers' and Peasants' Socialist State,"* which caused protests from the peasants throughout the Bolshevik Empire (Shearer, 1996: 195-196). A similar protest occurred in the Gali district in 1931. However, the authorities again suppressed the protest and quickly arrested teachers from Gali's primary school for anti-Soviet agitation against the cooperatives (**Khorava, 2022(b)**).

Samurzakano was primarily an agricultural region (***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..,*** **2021:** 274), with complete underdevelopment of industry. In early October 1922, the Samurzakano district Executive Committee developed and approved a project for the electrification of several villages and the centralization of water supply to places like Nabakevi, Barghebi, and Otobaia (**Sagaria, 1981:** 92). Some of this work had started even during the Democratic Republic of Georgia: in Samurzakano, a hydroelectric station was built in the second half of 1920, based on the initiative and designs of Alexi Gamisonia, the Commissioner of the Samurzakano district, and the Head of the Economic Department of the People's Economy Commissariat of Abkhazia. It still provides water to the village from the Enguri river (**Akishbaia, 2014:** 13).

As in the previous period, the population primarily engaged in corn farming. In 1922, the Samurzakano district was assigned a food tax of 70,091 poods of maize and 679 buckets of wine, which 67% of the district's population was required to pay. In this regard, the largest number of taxpayers was in comparison to other administrative units of Abkhazia (***Congresses of Councils of Abkhazia*****, 1959:** 113). At the same time, by March,1, of the same year, as the relief for famine, to the starving people, to the all-Russian fund of assistance of starving people was to be transferred, totaling 238,000 rubles in cash and 8,000 poods of corn, although the plan had only allocated 300 poods (***Congresses of Councils of Abkhazia*****, 1959:** 116-117). However, the population itself was struggling, and therefore, in October 1921, the conference of Samurzakhao district delegates held in the village of Gali postponed the "Famine Relief Week" for some time because *"the old corn has been consumed already and the new one has not yet been harvested"* (***MGPP*****, 2014:** 439). Nevertheless, by 1925, the Bolshevik government noted that corn was always being overproduced in the Samurzakano district (***Socialist Industry..*****, 1981:** 37).

In the 1920s, hazelnuts were the main agricultural crop in the Gali district (***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..,*** **2021:** 44; ***Rare Books About Abkhazia*****, 2024:** 307); with tobacco production, Abkhazia ranked last in the region (***Rare Books About Abkhazia*****, 2024:** 316). In 1928, 10 plantations were established in the Gali district (**Kuprava, 2015:** 297). By 1923, there were 46,113 people living in rural areas of Samurzakano, with 10,272 farms (***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..,*** **2021:** 188). The density was influenced by small landholdings. The summer was a difficult period for the Gali district, as rivers in several settlements dried up, leading to irrigation issues. To address this, the creation of an irrigation system was decided. In 1925, the government planned a process to drain marshy

lands in the Gali district, which would create 40,000 desiatinas of land for cultivation (**Lakoba N., 1987:** 194; ***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..*, 2021:** 274). In 1926, the construction of the Samurzakano irrigation canal began (***Rare Books About Abkhazia*, 2024:** 418). The construction was completed in 1929. The 8.7 km long main irrigation canal supplied water from the Enguri river to the population. In total, 1,200 hectares of land were irrigated by this system. The Georgian SSR's budget spent 189,000 rubles on this project (**Kuprava, 2014:** 52; ***Materials on the History of Abkhazia..*, 2016:** 84-86).

By 1928, the process of drainage of the marshy places was completed, and tea was planted in the area (**Kuprava, 2014:** 50). The cultivation of tea in Samurzakano had begun in the 1910s. Initially, a test plot was set up in the yard of the Gali school, but the planting soon failed (**Kantaria, 1952:** 7). By the end of the 1920s, several settlements had achieved some economic success, and by the 1928-1929 budget year, the government removed the town of Gali and the villages of Achigvara, Okumi, Otobaia, and Saberio from the list of subsidy recipients (***Documents on the History of Abkhazia..*, 2021:** 167).

Unlike other districts of Abkhazia, the production of wool was developing in Samurzakano. In 1925, 1,300 people were involved in this activity (**Kuprava, 2013:** 260). Wool production was mainly developed in the mountain and foothill zones (**Kuprava, 2014:** 87). Livestock centers were villages such as Bedia, Chkhortoli, Okumi, Saberio, Rechkhi, and Ghumurishi (**Kuprava, 2014:** 87).

From 1951 to 1958, the hydroelectric power station of the village of Mokvi, the tea factories of Tchuburkhinji and Okumi, and the Gali bread factory were launched (**Adleiba D., 2002:** 109). In the second half of the 1970s, the active development of agriculture in the Gali district began. During this time, livestock complexes were built in Refi, Nabakevi, and Ganakhleba; mechanized farms for livestock were built in Otobaia and Gudava; the tea factory in Mziuri; microfactories for tea in Achigvara, Sida, and Chkhortoli; the Mziuri tea dryer factory; the Refi meat processing plant; the Megebroba juice factory; and administrative buildings for Soviet enterprises in Gali and Tchuburkhinji (**Akishbaia, 2014:**: 39).

Although the work on the electrification plan of Abkhazia began from the very first days of Soviet occupation, it took years to be fully implemented. Only from the 1930s the electrification works were begun actively in Abkhazia, aiming to improve the living standards of the population and develop the economy (**Akishbaia, 2014:** 6).

Some individuals were involved in the electrification process. One such innovator was a surgeon from Gali, Andria Pataria, who was also skilled in engineering. In 1935, he built the first electric power station in Gali based on a tractor engine, but the generated power could only supply the main square, the hospital, and administrative buildings (**Zukhbaia, 1988:** 144). In 1948, the 60-kW hydroelectric power station of Chkhortoli began its operation. Despite the fact that it was supposed to meet the needs of the village of Tsarche, it failed to do so due to power shortage (**Akishbaia, 2014:** 10). The Chkhortoli hydroelectric station operated until

1972, when it was replaced by the *Vardnil Hydroelectric Station* due to the high cost of operation and outdated technology (**Akishbaia, 2014:** 11). In July 1950, the diversion hydroelectric station of Tchuburkhinji began operation. However, due to a construction error, it could not operate at full capacity, leading to its closure in 1956 (**Akishbaia, 2014:** 15-16). From 1954 to 1965, the construction of the Rechkhi diversion hydroelectric station, designed for 700 kW, was underway (**Akishbaia, 2014:** 16-17).

As a result of the merger of the electrical networks of the city of Gali and the Gali district in 1970, the Gali district electric network was formed, which was subordinated to the Sokhumi electricity company of *"Sakmtavarenergo"* (Gruzglavenergo) (**Akishbaia, 2014:** 31). On January 14, 1931, the railway reached the Gali district through the Enguri (**Akishbaia, 2001:** 73; **Gasviani, 2004:** 393).

From 1986 to 1990, the Agro-industrial combine "Gali" produced an average of 175.8 million rubles of products (tea, citrus, corn, vegetables, meat, milk), which accounted for 41.8% of the corresponding figure in the Abkhaz SSR (**Akishbaia, 2001:** 36).

Thus, by the second half of the 20th century, before the occupation, the Gali district had a strong and complexly developed economy with a corresponding high social and cultural backdrop (**Akishbaia, 2001:** 36). As a result, in the 2nd half of the 20th century, before the occupation, the Gali district had a strong, comprehensively developed economy with a high socio-cultural background (**Akishbaia, 2001:** 36).

In the 2nd half of the 20th century, the process of modernization that began in the USSR, known as *"Perestroika,"* was aimed at prolonging the existence of the Bolshevik empire. This process caused decentralization in an economically exhausted state. The Kremlin struggled to control the national peripheries, where local populations began fighting for independence (**Papaskiri, 2007:** 195-196). In contrast, Moscow opposed this process by promoting forces under its control – Abkhaz and Ossetian separatism – and tried to strengthen the positions of these movements through the national minority organizations of autonomous entities (**Papaskiri, 2007:** 197; **Kvaratskhelia, 2012:** 33-34). Separatist historiography regards this as the national-liberation movement of the Abkhaz people (**Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 348). However, whether this was a "national-liberation movement" became clear in 1992 when one of the leaders of Abkhaz separatism, Zurab Achba (1950-2000), openly stated: *"It's time to understand that Abkhazia is Russia"* (***"Den",*** №48, 1992: 2).

The peak of the separatist movement's encouragement occurred on March 18, 1989, in Likhni. At this meeting, which was attended by a large part of the political-party establishment and intelligentsia of the Abkhaz ASSR (without Georgian colleagues), their so-called "address" presented the issue of the separation of the Abkhaz ASSR from Georgia to the highest authority of the USSR, claiming that there was a deliberate oppression and persecution of Abkhazs by Georgians (***"The Likni's Appeal",*** **1989:** 2).[1]

[1] As Professor O. Janelidze notes, "it later became clear that a similar document, in the form of the *"Abkhaz letter",* had already existed and was sent to the 19th Conference of the CPSU back in June

This action caused widespread outrage across Georgia. It was particularly pronounced in Abkhazia, which, for some reason, "surprised" T. Achugba (**Achugba, 2010:** 269). Naturally, the population of the Gal district also had a significant voice in this matter and organized a large (12,000 people) protest rally on March 25 (***"Rally in Gali", 1989***; **Lezhava G., 1998:** 36). Soon, the epicentre of the events shifted to Tbilisi, where the population, particularly students, demanded that the central government take a firm stance on the Likhni gathering. The assembled individuals soon demanded the restoration of Georgia's independence. April 9, 1989, became the Rubicon, when the Kremlin expressed its stance towards the Georgian people and their constitutional rights through the brutal, harsh, and bloody suppression of peaceful protesters. These constitutional rights were explicitly enshrined in the constitution of the USSR. At that time, the constitution guaranteed: *"Each Union Republic shall retain the right freely to secede from the USSR"* (Article 72) (***Constitution of the USSR*, 1977**), though in practice, it was virtually impossible to implement.[1]

The crisis that began in Abkhazia on March 18, 1989, reached its climax on July 15-16 of the same year, when an armed mob led by separatists attacked and raided the first secondary school in the city of Sokhumi, where the newly created (**Diasamidze T., 2002:** 5) Iv. Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University Sokhumi branch was temporarily located. Soon, the geographical scope of the attacks on Georgians expanded (**Papaskiri, 2007:** 236, 238-250).[2]

These tragic events shocked all of Georgia. Unrest continued in Gulripshi, Ochamchire, and Gali districts. The de facto Georgian government showed "complete helplessness" in this situation. It was clear that, in the fight against Georgians, Russia had chosen to support the separatists (**Daushvili, 2008:** 474). On July 16, thousands of people from Gali and Samegrelo started to Sokhumi. Abkhaz militants stationed themselves on the right bank of the Ghalidzga river and opened fire on the Georgians heading to Sokhumi, who, according to Abkhaz propaganda, were allegedly going to "punish" the Abkhaz (Чирикба, 2022: 131). During this time, the Gali people were killed: Revaz Ekhvaya, Nuri Shamatava, and Omar Shengelia (**Papaskiri, 2021(e):** 267). According to the last all-Union census of the USSR, conducted in 1989, the majority of the population in the Gali district were Georgians (74,712 Georgians, 93.8%). According to T. Achugba's "observation," this was not the district's natural ethnic makeup, but rather that the population had been "recorded as Georgians" (**Achugba, 2010:** 46), which, of course, is far from the truth.

Analysis of the July events concluded that the Kremlin decided to strengthen the separatist movement in Georgia with the support of North Caucasians. To this end, the so-called "*1st Congress of Representatives of the Mountain Peoples of*

1988. This fact shows that the ground for the emergence of the separatist movement in this region had already been prepared" (**Janelidze, 2009:** 201).

[1] Only on April 3, 1990, was the law on leaving the USSR passed (**Diasamidze T., 2002:** 14-15), which was never implemented.

[2] Abkhaz historiography tries to either bypass these events or reduce them to ideological confrontation, removing the anti-Georgian element (**Bgazhba O., Lakoba S., 2007:** 349).

the Caucasus" was held in Sokhumi on August 25-26 of the same year. Soon, the formation of mercenary and "volunteer" groups began, aimed at "protecting" Abkhaz compatriots and fighting against Georgia (**Papaskiri, 2007:** 250-254; **Kvaratskhelia, 2012:** 45-46).

A difficult period began in Abkhazia, which was heading toward armed conflict. On August 25, 1990, under pressure from the separatists, the Supreme Soviet of the Abkhaz ASSR held its 10th session of the 11th convocation, and under conditions of a lack of quorum[1], it illegally adopted the "Declaration on the State Sovereignty of the Abkhaz ASSR" and the decree "On Legal Guarantees for the Protection of the Statehood of Abkhazia" (**Diasamidze T., 2002:** 2002: 20-24; **Papaskiri, 2007:** 281)[2]. Interestingly, the meeting was attended by E. Kvarandzia, a deputy of Abkhaz nationality from the village of Chkhortoli. Although he did not participate in the vote, this was not reflected in the minutes of the session (**Papaskiri, 2007:** 281).

An attempt to neutralize this tense situation occurred on October 28, 1990, with the first nationwide, democratic, and multi-party elections held in the Soviet Union. The newly elected national government had representatives from the Gali district, namely Jemal Shonia and Edisher Jangulia (both from the ruling *"Round Table – Free Georgia"* bloc) (**Papaskiri, 2007:** 289). The latter was appointed as the prefect of the Gali district on February 11, 1991 (**Diasamidze T., 2002:** 37), which was not agreed upon with the Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic, V. Ardzinba, who, in turn, declared the central government's decision illegal (**Diasamidze T., 2002:** 38 **Papaskiri, 2021(e):** 277-278). Regrettably, Tbilisi committed a mistake by introducing the new prefect with the support of nearly a thousand-armed individuals from Samegrelo (**Papaskiri, 2007:** 307).

On March 17, the de facto separatist government of Abkhazia allowed the Soviet Union's preservation referendum initiated by Moscow, which, in Georgia's view, was illegal.

The government did not adopt or join the referendum process (**Diasamidze T., 2002:** 40-41). According to the official Tbilisi position, the Georgian population of Abkhazia did not support this process. Since the Kremlin's referendum was boycotted in the Gali district, V. Ardzinba's regime annulled the local voters (more than 50,000) (**Diasamidze T., 2002:** 42). As a result, Ardzinba's regime obtained the desired percentage – 50.3% – and the "result" was that allegedly more than half of the population of the Abkhaz ASSR voted to preserve the USSR (**Papaskiri, 2021(e):** 277).

On March 31 of the same year, the national government held a plebiscite aimed at restoring the state independence of Georgia. The multi-ethnic population of the country fully supported the idea of independence. Based on this, on

[1] The session was attended by 68 deputies out of 138 members; Georgian national representatives did not participate.

[2] These acts were immediately annulled by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Georgian SSR the next day (**Diasamidze T., 2002:** 24-25). On August 31, the Supreme Soviet of the Abkhaz ASSR made a similar decision (**Diasamidze T., 2002:** 25-26).

April 9, 1991, the Supreme Soviet of Georgia declared the restoration of national state independence (**Shvelidze, 2021:** 315).

Soon, Tbilisi, which noticed the flirtation between Moscow and "Ardzinba's regime," offered Sokhumi a new electoral formula, which, in practice, established ethnic discrimination in the region: Abkhaz people, who constituted only 17% of the autonomous republic's population, were given 28 seats in the 65-member Supreme Council, Georgians (45% of the local population) were given 26, and representatives of other nationalities (approximately 35%) were allocated 11 seats (**Papaskiri, 2021(e):** 279).

Professor Z. Papaskiri rightly observes: "All of this meant that Georgians... were suddenly presented as second-class citizens. This was truly insulting to the 250,000 Georgian population of Abkhazia. Considering it as a compromise is completely unjustifiable. This was not only a political-ideological but also an historiographical capitulation" (**Papaskiri, 2021(e):** 279-280).

Based on this principle, on October 31 and December 1, 1991, elections were held for the deputies of the Supreme Soviet of the Abkhaz ASSR in two rounds. In the newly formed legislative body, the Gali district was represented by: Jemal Gamakharia, Rinald Dgebuadze, Otar Zukhbaia, Napoleon Meskhia, Tamaz Khubua, Zurab Jguburia, Rudik Tsatava, Vakhtang Kolbaia, and Rostom Shamugia (**Papaskiri, 2007:** 320, 322).

Akaki Chkhenkeli

Arzakan Emukhvari

CHAPTER VIII. GALI MUNICIPALITY[1] (1992–2022)

On December 22, 1991, an armed coup d'état began in the capital of Georgia, which led to the overthrow of the government on January 6, 1992, and the departure of President Z. Gamsakhurdia from Georgia. Military-political chaos began in Georgia, which provided separatist forces with an opportunity to strengthen their positions, as it abolished the constitutional-legal mechanisms that prevented Abkhazia's secession. The new government restored the Constitution of February 21, 1921. Using the legal vacuum created by this situation, V. Ardzinba began implementing his plan for to make Abkhazia "sovereign state" (**Jojua D., 2011(a):** 466).

The separatist regime in Sokhumi was purposefully moving towards complete secession, which, in the end, implied an armed conflict with Tbilisi. This is why, already on March 31, by the order of V. Ardzinba, the "Internal Troops' regiment of the Supreme Council of Abkhazia" were created, and conscription began on April 30 (**Jojua D., 2011(a):** 543). Soon, the fighters of this "unit" were sent to Grozny for military training (**Papaskiri, 2021(e):** 286). At the same time, with the agreement of the State Council of the Republic of Georgia, parts of the "Internal Troops" were stationed on the Inguri river to prevent the entry of military forces loyal to President Z. Gamsakhurdia into Abkhazia (**Papaskiri, 2021(e):** 286). Separatist propaganda openly stated that the "state border" of Abkhazia passed along the Inguri River, and the "Internal Troops" were "defending the homeland" (**Papaskiri, 2007:** 341).

In the summer of 1992, tensions escalated in the Gali district. Certain groups attacked trains, trains belonged to Armenia and Azerbaijan were looted (**Daushvili, 2008:** 477). Tbilisi was forced to take measures to resolve the issue, and with an agreement from Sokhumi, on August 14, military units of the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Georgia entered Abkhazia, which was a fully legitimate action (**Papaskiri, 2007:** 365). The separatists, who, as it turned out, had long been preparing for war (**Zantaria, 2021:** 48), seized this opportunity to begin the war.

V. Ardzinba and his team developed a rather effective scenario: at 10 a.m., the chairman of the Supreme Council of Abkhazia instructed the Head of the Gali district administration, R. Tsatava, to escort the troops to the Ochamchire border. Moreover, no more than a 50-man squad could be left behind from the military contingent (**Papaskiri, 2021(f):** 293). Nevertheless, the "Internal Troops" gunmen opened fire on the government forces at Okhurei and Agudzera (**Papaskiri, 2021(f):** 293; ***The Tragedy of Abkhazia,* 2017:** 197). Soon, the separatists called on their supporters to fight against the aggressors (**Papaskiri, 2021(f):** 293).

The fighting mostly took place outside the borders of the Gali district. With the support of North Caucasian mercenaries and Russian military forces, Abkhaz separatists were able to seize Sokhumi on September 27, 1993, and by September 30, they reached the Enguri river.

[1] The district mentioned here means territorial-administrative unit in keeping with the data by 28th of December 1991.

The confrontation between Russian and Georgian forces on the Abkhazian front was against official Tbilisi, and the corresponding result followed. The Kremlin managed to successfully achieve its long-term goal and gained complete control over Abkhazia. Of the half-million population of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, more than 300,000 people of various nationalities (Georgians, Abkhaz, Russians, Armenians, Estonians, Greeks) were forced to leave their homes. A large portion sought refuge in Georgia across the Enguri river, and others fled to foreign countries (Russia, various European countries, the USA).

In "independent" Abkhazia, the events of September 27-30, 1993, are considered by some as a "historical victory" achieved in the so-called *"Abkhaz people's war of liberation."* Z. Papaskiri's entirely fair remark is that this thesis cannot withstand elementary criticism, as "almost two-thirds of this "Abkhazian people" were forced to leave their native land and became refugees in their own homeland. This logic implies that these two-thirds were not part of the "Abkhazian people", which is completely absurd and does not fit into any legal norms" (**Papaskiri, 2016:** 435).

Thus, with direct Russian support, the Georgian population of the historical Georgian region of Abkhazia was effectively expelled and genocide and ethnic cleansing were committed. Interestingly, Georgia raised this issue before the international community back in the course of the war – on April 1, 1993 – when the Supreme Legislative Body passed a resolution accusing the Russian Federation of promoting ethnic cleansing and genocide in Abkhazia (**Saralidze, 2016:** 445; **Kvashilava, 2023:** 100). *"Ardzinba and the Abkhazs* (in Abkhazia – ***K.K.***) *began ethnic cleansing"* (**Rayfield, 2012:** 380).

On September 30, 1993, at 5:00 PM, the separatists entered the town of Gali: "That evening, they swarmed the town (district)[1] like locusts, mercilessly dealing with innocent civilians, two peaceful people, to settle scores" (**Akishbaia, 2001:** 152). In Gali city alone, more than 70 people were killed in October 1993 (**Akishbaia, 2003:** 32). The separatists treated helpless elders with cruelty (**Papaskua, 2021**).

For several days, the conquered Samurzakano region was looted. Marauders raided the belongings of displaced Georgians: the occupiers "cleared out the Georgian houses so thoroughly that nothing remained inside except the floor" (**Akishbaia, 2003:** 33). Abkhaz writer Daur Natchkebia vividly describes this process in his novel *The Edge of Night*: *"The job in Saberio was quite pointless for him, but he could not leave his friends. When the new shift arrived, Beslan read on their faces that they never smelled the gunpowder, but they were ready for the usual but already large-scale looting – to rob small factories, plants, workshops, and reservoirs. Beslan returned to Sokhumi. For almost half a day, his truck, which was packed with*

[1] The identity of the victims of ethnic cleansing and genocide in the Gali district can be found in: **Tchanturia, 1998:** 88-429; **Akishbaia, 2001:** 154-159; ***The Tragedy of Abkhazia*, 2017:** 99, 436-494, 507-510. The situation has not significantly changed even after 30 years: on December 9, 2023, members of the occupied Gali militia killed to death 44-year-old V. Karbaya, a resident of the village of Tsarche. The local "court" immediately acquitted the accused from the court room (***The Case of Vitali Karbaia*, 2024**). The local ethnographic museum was looted and destroyed (***The Tragedy of Abkhazia*, 2017:** 249).

looted wardrobes, chairs, and sofas from Gali and the surrounding area, was on the way. In addition, the truck trailer dragged seven or eight trophies – "Zhigulis" and "Volgas"; among them was one primitive "Zaporozhets," which looked more like scrap metal than automobile car, but still, it was attached to the others… From Megrelia to Abkhazia, incomers drew buffalos, cows, and bulls" (**Natchkebia D., 2010:** 142-143).

The administration of the occupied Gali district was entrusted to the separatists' "Council of Ministers Chairman" Vazha Zarandia (originated from the village Okumi), who was demanded by the remaining local Georgians to restore order. However, despite some attempts (he was forced to obtain additional powers from V. Ardzinba to "establish order"), his actions proved completely ineffective (**Akishbaia, 2003:** 34-36). At the beginning of October, an 8 men strong "militia" group was sent to the district. Soon, a garrison was formed in Gali, but they took no action to protect the rights of the peaceful population (**Akishbaia, 2001:** 153).

In the second half of October, V. Zarandia and the separatist "leadership" asked the remaining Georgians to meet with those who had fled to other territories of Georgia and offer them a chance to return to their native region. A special "deputation," which included the former Head of Gali, O. Akishbaia, was forced to move to Zugdidi, though the members advised their fellow residents to refrain from returning to their homes (**Akishbaia, 2003:** 42-43).

After the occupation, the administration of the Gali district became entirely Abkhazian and did not correspond to the demographic composition of the population. The Head of the administration and other leading positions were held by ethnic Abkhazians. For instance, the police and security forces were fully Abkhazian (**Gelantia, 2011:** 51).

After the end of the military actions, in November 1993, under the auspices of the United Nations, with the support of the European Security and Cooperation Council and Russia, the Georgian-Abkhaz negotiations began in Geneva. In the first round (30.11-01.12), both sides signed a memorandum of understanding. In the second round (11-13.01.1994), the discussion focused on the introduction of peacekeeping forces in the conflict zone (**Avidzba A., 2013:** 210). On April 4, 1994, a quadripartite agreement (UN, OSCE, Russia, Georgia) was signed in Moscow regarding the voluntary return of refugees and displaced persons. The document was practically capitulatory in its essence, as subsection "g" of paragraph 3 blocked the possibility of returning persons who had participated in the combats to their native areas. Such concessions by the Georgian authorities were considered a harmful action for the national interests of the country (**Pipinashvili, 2008:** 126; **Khonelidze, Kvashilava, 2021:** 328).

In February-March 1994, military actions resumed in the Gali district. Some of the displaced tried to return to their homes. The separatists launched a new wave of repression to limit the return process of Georgians (***The Tragedy of Abkhazia*, 2017:** 202). Even in conditions where the number of Georgians in the district had significantly decreased, according to the de facto regime's statistical data (as of 2019), their number is 98.2% (***The Economy of Abkhazia,* 2020:** 56).

According to the statistical data of January 1, 2019, 30,262 people lived in the district, ranking it fourth (after the cities of Sokhumi, Gagra, and Gudauta). As for the local budget revenue – 49,327,000 rubles, it already ranks 7th, only surpassing the Tkvarcheli district (**Ardzinba D., 2020:** 148).

In 1994, a 24-kilometer security zone (12 km on each side of the Inguri river) was established, in which CIS "blue helmets" (essentially parts of the Russian Armed Forces) were deployed (**Kvashilava, 2023(a):** 103).

In 1995, the separatist regime carried out an administrative reform and divided the Gali district, which was predominantly populated by Georgians (***Conciliation Resources*, 2015:** 4). Several villages were allocated to the Ochamchire district (villages: Achigvara, Shesheleti, Gudava), and to the newly created Tkvarcheli district in 1995 (villages: Bedia, Chkhortoli, Okumi, I Gali, Mukhuri, Tsarche, Ghumurishi, Rechki). The remaining Gali district, as a result of this "reform," retained only half of its previous area of 1003 km² – 502 km². The city of Gali and the following villages were left: Lekukhona, Upper Barghebi, Lower Barghebi, Gagida, Ganakhleba, Dikhazurga, Makhunjia, Nabakevi, Saberio, Tchuburkhinji, I Otobaia, II Otobaia, Fichori, II Gudava, Refo-Etseri, Sida, Tagiloni, Shishikvara. The reduced Gali district was divided into "upper" and "lower" zones. The "upper zone" contained 9 villages, while the "lower zone" contained 11 (**Kvashilava, 2023(b):** 134). According to researchers, "this was done to divide the Georgian population of Gali district into several administrative units for the purpose of reducing the district's territory and speeding up the assimilation of the population" (**Khorava, Tchanturia, 2019:** 65).

On September 9, 1994, the separatist "Supreme Council of the Republic of Abkhazia" adopted a decree on "restoring the old names of certain settlements in the Republic of Abkhazia," according to which the names of several settlements in Gali district were changed (**Khorava, Tchanturia, 2019:** 65-67).

On February 6, 1994, separatist forces began a military operation in Gali district, which continued until February 23, codenamed "Cleaning." The military action (using armored vehicles) began from the borders of Ochamchire and within a few days covered the entire Gali district. 841 peaceful residents were killed, including 27 teenagers (**Gelantia, 2011:** 266). The gunmen burned down the villages in the lower zone: Refi, Ganalva, Gagida, Mziuri, Upper Barghebi, Lower Barghebi, Otobaia, Fichori, Khumushkuri, Nabakevi, Tagiloni, Tchuburkhinji. Mountain villages, such as Dikhazurga, Saberio, Lekukhona, Rechki, Achigvara, Ghumurishi, Tchkhortoli, Tcharche, Mukhuri, Shesheleti, and I Gali, were also burned (**Gelantia, 2011:** 268). "Only those who took refuge in the tea plantations, forests, thickets, and hillsides survived. At night, the living would find the deceased, bury them where they had died, and perform funeral rites" (**Gelantia, 2011:** 268).

As a result of this massacre, a new wave of refugees emerged, who crossed over to the village of Jvarcha in the Chalenji region. Some of them died along the way (**Vachnadze, 2007(b):** 222).

On June 9, 1994, Russian President B. Yeltsin signed a decree regarding the

participation of Russian armed forces in the CIS peacekeeping operations. On June 21, the contingent of CIS collective peacekeeping forces, entirely made up of Russian soldiers, was deployed in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict zone (**Pipinashvili, 2008:** 127).

In reality, this created the "border defence" for the separatist regime. The Russian "peacekeeping forces" in Abkhazia did nothing to stop the ethnic cleansing and genocide of Georgians carried out by the separatist forces (**Daushvili, 2008:** 480). Later, it was revealed that the "peacekeepers" were not serving to ensure peace, and the Georgian society repeatedly raised the issue of their withdrawal from the conflict zone (**Khonelidze, Kvashilava, 2021:** 329). As Professor B. Kvaratskhelia rightly assesses, the placement of Russian "peacekeepers" between Georgians and Abkhazians "was an unforgivable mistake. The Russian Federation had no moral right to take on a peacekeeping mission in the conflict zone, especially since it had actively participated in military operations in 1992-1993. In fact, Russia was a party to the conflict" (**Kvaratskhelia, 2012:** 67).

However, there was an occasion when tension between the separatists and the "blue helmets" (CIS peacekeepers) was also observed. Specifically, a conflict occurred on August 25, 1994, between Russian military personnel and the Abkhaz population (**Avidzba A., 2018:** 131). On September 13, Abkhazs killed two Russian "peacekeepers" in Gali (**Charkviani, 2016:** 174). This angered the Russians to such an extent that on the night of September 13, they dismantled the block-posts on the Enguri river (**Avidzba A., 2018:** 131). On the morning of September 14, Russian "peacekeepers" seized Gali's militia, communications, and other important buildings. The process was overseen by Russian Federation Deputy Minister of Defence General Georgi Kondratiev. As the commander of the "peacekeepers" stated, he had orders from President Boris Yeltsin to bring refugees to Gali (**Avidzba A., 2018:** 131). Kondratiev himself spoke with the refugees about this (**Charkviani, 2016:** 174).

It seems that the conflict between rival groupings in the Kremlin may have been the cause. On one hand, there was President Yeltsin, whose team member looks like was General G. Kondratiev, and on the other hand, the Minister of Defense, General Pavel Grachev, who, as is known, had an extremely negative attitude toward Georgia and was a patron of the Abkhaz separatists. It is known that a conflict existed between the Minister of Defense and his deputy, which soon became evident – related to the "First Chechen War" – when G. Kondratiev disagreed with P. Grachev's "hawkish" position and resigned (**Kvashilava, 2023(a): 103**). Yeltsin's team believed that Georgia was now fully dependent on Russia, with pro-Kremlin figures holding key positions in the government (e.g., Defense Minister Vardiko Nadibaidze, and Chairman of the State Security Service of the Republic of Georgia, Major-General Igor Giorgadze). Therefore, it seemed acceptable to them to offer a certain "bait" to Tbilisi – the return of refugees to the Gali district. It appears that this was indicated by General Kondratiev's words, who, according to V. Ardzinba, told him that he had received certain instructions from the leadership in this regard (**Ardzinba, 2018:** 325-326).

The prospect of refugee return led to protests in Abkhazia. The situation became so tense that the separatist "Supreme Council" even made statements against the Russian "peacekeepers" (**Ardzinba, 2018:** 326). The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs urgently issued a statement that "peacekeepers" were not responsible for the return of refugees (**Charkviani, 2016:** 174). With the intervention of P. Grachev, on September 16, the "peacekeepers" returned to their places of deployment, and a fruitless meeting took place in New Athos between E. Shevardnadze and V. Ardzinba (**Avidzba A., 2018:** 131).

At the end of July 1995, the situation in the district became tense again. The spontaneous return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their homeland caused indignation among the separatists: "Abkhaz gunmen carried out a retaliatory action, during which about 20 people were shot" (**Vachnadze, 2008:** 81). Repressions continued into the early days of January 1996 (**Vachnadze, 2008:** 106). On January 2, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1036 (1996), which acknowledged the absence of security for the peaceful population in Gali district (**Diasamidze T., 2002:** 131).

In the spring of 1996, the Parliament of Georgia discussed the situation in Abkhazia. On April 17, Georgian lawmakers adopted a resolution "On the Measures for the Settlement of the Conflict in Abkhazia," noting that more than 1,000 Georgians had died in the Gali district since September 1993 (**Diasamidze T., 2002:** 135).

A new escalation in the Gali district occurred between May 19-25, 1998, when hostilities resumed. The pressure from the separatist regime, terror, and looting led to a backlash, which involved informal armed groups such as the "Forest Brothers" and the "White Legion." These militarized units were, in fact, voluntary formations of displaced persons who had lost hope for a peaceful resolution of the conflict and were attempting to defend their homes and assert their right to return to their native regions (**Jojua, 2007:** 230, 236).

Approximately 400 armed separatists, led by "General" Mirab Kishmaria, attacked the defenseless Georgian population (**Kvashilava, 2023(a):** 108). The resistance from the Georgians was so strong that Sokhumi had to deploy an additional 1,000 armed personnel and heavy military equipment to the region. In response, Tbilisi, in agreement with the CIS and peacekeeping forces, sent its own armed forces to protect the Georgian population in the Gali district (***The Tragedy of Abkhazia*, 2017:** 203). Abkhaz propaganda referred to this as the "invasion" of Georgia's Ministry of Internal Affairs forces in Gali to establish Georgian control (**Chirikba, 2022:** 101, 149).

Unfortunately, the balance of power was in favor of the opposition. A ceasefire agreement was signed on May 25 in the town of Gagra (***Bulletin.., №2*, 2009:** 20). According to O. Akishbaia's assessment, this was a shameful capitulation for Tbilisi (**Akishbaia, 2001:** 150).

40,000 Georgians were forced to leave their homes and seek refuge in Georgia beyond the Inguri river (**Diasamidze T., 2002:** 177). The second displacement left them again in harsh socio-economic conditions (**Vachnadze, 2008:** 244).

On May 28, 1998, V. Ardzinba declared a state of emergency in the Gali district, which was later extended several times (on August 25, December 14, 1999, March 12, and June 16) (***Bulletin.., №2*, 2009:** 45, 74, 89, 95, 106).

American journalist T. Goltz referred to the events of May as a "dirty Abkhazian provocation" (**Goltz, 2014:** 285). The expulsion of the Georgian population in the district demonstrated (***The Tragedy of Abkhazia*, 2017:** 224-225) that Russia's peacekeeping forces, deployed under international auspices in Abkhazia, were unable to fulfill their mission – ensuring peace and stability in the region (**Vachnadze, Guruli, 2003:** 241). On the contrary, they were backing the separatists (***The Tragedy of Abkhazia*, 2017:** 208).

In response to these events, the European Parliament adopted a special resolution on July 17, 1998, titled "On the Situation in Georgia," condemning the crimes committed by the Georgian population (**Diasamidze T., 2002:** 175). It is noteworthy that between 1994 and 1998, the separatist regime killed 1,272 Georgians in the Gali district and destroyed over 1,000 houses. Settlements such as Gali, Achigvara, Upper and Lower Barghebi, Bedia, Chkhortoli, Tchuburkhindji, Dikhazurga, Ganakhleba, Gagida, Ghumurishi, Gudava, Lekukhona, Mukhuri, Mziuri, Nabakevi, Okumi, Otobaia, Pichori, I Gali, Kokhora, Rechki, Refi, Saberio, Sheshelethi, Sida, Tagiloni, and Tcharche were severely affected (***The Tragedy of Abkhazia*, 2017:** 223).

Georgians also suffered displacement and persecution in other parts of Abkhazia, with no response from the "peacekeepers" (**Kvaratskhelia, 2012:** 75-77; ***The Tragedy of Abkhazia*, 2017:** 224).

The Gali district remains crucial for the separatist regime as the main economic asset of Abkhazia. Through the Enguri river, the Gali population brought agricultural products and other goods from Georgia's internal regions into Abkhazia. It is noteworthy that this process continued even after 2008 (**Chitaia M., 2015**).

Nevertheless, the separatists and occupiers perceive the growing Georgian ethnic population in Gali as a potential threat. It is clear that they will obstruct efforts to carry out Russian policy in the long run. As a result, Gali residents were denied "citizenship," which restricted their involvement in local political processes. Despite the lack of "citizenship," Georgian conscripts from Gali were still recruited into the separatist "armed forces" (**Tsuladze, 2013**).

It is noteworthy that the Georgian population of the Gali district is a significant and serious force, which can realistically initiate certain anti-separatist and anti-occupation processes. Naturally, this became a major problem for the occupiers in 2013, when the local political establishment, specifically Alexander Ankvab, needed the support of the Gali population (**Stateynov, 2017**).

The mandatory acquisition of Abkhaz "passports" became a requirement after Russia recognized Abkhazia's "independence" on August 26, 2008. However, the Gali population continued to use the so-called "Form #9," which confirmed that they lived in the Gali district. This document allowed them to cross the so-called "state border" (**Soboliev V., 2017**).

The initiative to issue separatist passports to Georgians was opposed by

the well-known historian and political figure, Stepan Lakoba, who served as the Secretary of the Security Council of Separatist Abkhazia (2005-2009, 2011-2013). He saw the granting of Abkhaz "citizenship" to the Gali population as an issue of "Georgianization" (**Tsuladze, 2013**).

The process of issuing passports was temporarily suspended. As a solution to the problem, "residency rights" were introduced, based on a decision by the Abkhazian "parliament" in late December 2016. In 2017-2018, the Georgian population of Gali refused to accept Abkhazian and Russian passports (***Human Rights in Abkhazia..*, 2023:** 4). Corresponding amendments were made to the "Legal Status of Foreign Citizens" (**Kvashilava, 2021:** 244). As a rule, based on international legal norms, this right is granted to foreign citizens. This document grants the holder the right to reside permanently in Abkhazia and does not prohibit leaving or returning to the region. However, "residency holders" are prohibited from purchasing or selling real estate and participating in elections (**Stateynov, 2017**).

Additionally, the Gali population is prohibited from disposing of property inherited through inheritance or acquiring property. They cannot register marriages or newborns in the occupied territories (***The Tragedy of Abkhazia*, 2017:** 118). In practice, the indigenous population of the Gali district is categorized as foreign citizens (**Toria, 2022:** 3). Moreover, the separatist clergy blatantly violates the rights of Georgian Orthodox Christians in Gali (**Gamakharia, 2018(b):** 323).

Despite these obvious anti-Georgian and discriminatory rights, obtaining the mentioned document is still a complicated process. Gali residents are humiliated in local police departments and are required to pay an official fee (1,500 rubles) in addition to a bribe (2,000 rubles) to receive the document (**Soboliev V., 2017**).

Thus, artificial barriers are created for the participation of the Georgian population of Gali in the internal political life of separatist Abkhazia.

After the population's protest, the de facto authorities were forced to make certain concessions (**Zantaraia T., 2024**). In February 2024, a change in the "Law on the Legal Status of Foreign Citizens in the Republic of Abkhazia" came into effect, with amendments made in December 2023. The validity of the already issued "residency certificates" was extended from 5 to 10 years, and a list of documents required for first-time applicants was defined. However, in the absence of these documents, applicants have the right to present another document issued by "state or local government authorities, which confirms a 10-year residency in the territory of the Republic of Abkhazia." Nevertheless, the authorities retained a lever of influence: those needing a new "residency certificate" may face a process that could last up to one year. In the meantime, citizens can cross the administrative boundary using the *"Form №9"* document or even enter the occupied territory with an old Soviet passport (**Zantaraia T., 2024**).

The separatist regime is trying to "return" the Samurzakano population to Abkhazian identity. In 2014, the "Council of Samurzakano Abkhazs" (*"Совет мырзаканских абхазов"*) was created, which aims to protect the interests of the descendants of Samurzakano Abkhazs, their linguistic, social, cultural, and eco-

nomic integration into "common Abkhazian" society (**Zavodskaia E., 2018**). As noted by the chairman of the council, Tengiz Inal-ipa, at the second congress of this community, between 2014 and 2018, 500 people reclaimed "truly Abkhazian surnames and ethnicity." However, according to him, 5000 people live within the old borders of the Gali district, who bear Abkhaz surnames (**Zavodskaia E., 2018**). As we can see, the "progress" of the society in this direction over the past 4 years has only targeted 10% of the group. It appears that the population of "Abkhazian" descent is not particularly eager to return to "truly Abkhazian ethnicity."

As we see, the separatists try to "assist" those who identify with the Georgian ethnic group in "reclaiming" their "true" ethnicity. This is one of the ways to reduce artificially the number of the Georgian population in the Gali district. Researcher M. Toria accurately observes that the de facto authorities do not have the resources to settle ethnic Abkhaz people in the Gali district to colonize the area, and thus they attempt to assimilate the population (**Toria, 2022:** 8-9).

It is interesting to note that while the separatists attempt to instill the so-called "Megrelian" self-awareness in the Georgian population of Gali, aiming to split the united Georgian ethnic group, the Russian occupiers clearly do not share this view regarding their protégés. It is evident that Moscow needs "independent Abkhazia" primarily to punish Georgia for its pro-Western interests. Therefore, for the Kremlin, Abkhazia's "independence" is merely a fiction, and they are thus interested in preventing the growth and strengthening of the ethnic Abkhaz population. Consequently, while the occupiers seek to isolate the Georgian population of Gali from the common Georgian social, cultural, and political space, they also try to "Russify" them. A Russified Georgian population in Gali would naturally oppose both the Georgian state and the Abkhazs. This confrontation further strengthens Moscow's position on the occupied Georgian land.

One of the components of this goal is the Abkhaz-Russian-Megrelian language newspaper "Gal",which has been distributed in Gali since 1993. The purpose of this publication is to incite so-called "Megrelian separatism" among the local population, most of whom are Megrelians, which should then spread to Samegrelo. The local television station "Gal TV," which also broadcasts in three languages, serves the same purpose. The television station began broadcasting on May 14, 2017. However, in both cases (the newspaper and the television), the proportion of Russian language content is much bigger, covering approximately 80% of the newspaper's material and 95% of the broadcast time. From this, it is clear what the Russian occupiers' goal is, as discussed earlier: they are not attempting to "Abkhazianize" the Georgians but rather to "Russify" them. This is also evidenced by the competition held in the spring of 2022 by the Russian Ministry of Education in Abkhazia, where the winner was granted the opportunity to pursue higher education (with full funding) in Russia. Interestingly, the winner was a Georgian girl from the Gali district. In 2023, Russia showed particular interest in the youth of the Gali Georgian population and implemented certain projects for them (***Human Rights in Abkhazia..*, 2023:** 12). It is quite clear that the Kremlin

tries to increase pro-Moscow sentiments among the Georgian population of Gali.

On August 3, 2008[1], following Russia's large-scale aggression against Georgia and its recognition of Abkhazia's "independence," life for the Georgians in the Gali district became even much more harder. Fully equipped Russian military bases have been established in Okumi, Gali, Saberio, Lekukhona, Tchuburkhinji, Tagiloni, Nabakevi, II Otobaya, and Fichori (**Gamakharia, 20189(b):** 314). In addition, the local regime decided to further activate the process of de-ethnicization of the local Georgians, which began in 1994, and to return the Samurzakano population to their "true ethnicity" – Abkhaz (**Kvashilava, 2023(c)**).

Furthermore, the separatists encourage moral degradation of local population by promoting drug addiction, crime, and prostitution among the Georgian population of Gali, depreciating local traditions and customs (**Gelantia, 2011:** 16). It is noteworthy that before the start of the military actions in Abkhazia, there were 58 schools in the Gali district, where a significant portion of the population was ethnically Georgian. These schools had 13,180 pupils and 1,638 teachers, along with 76 preschool institutions, 1,125 children, and nearly 300 educators. The district also had professional-technical schools, an agricultural technical college, a humanitarian institute, a student youth house, music and art schools. Among the local secondary schools, 2 were Russian (Gali №3 and the village of Gindze Etseri), 3 were Georgian-Russian (Achigvara №2, Kokhori, Saberio №2), and 1 was Georgian-Russian-Abkhazian (Chkhortoli village)[2]. After the occupation of the territory, the separatists burned down a certain amount of schools, preschool and extracurricular institutions, and a library. Between 1993 and 1994, more than 20 Georgian teachers were killed (**Gelantia, 2011:** 12). It might seem incomprehensible why one would destroy a building in the absence of military operations when it could be used for its primary or other functions. However, they acted deliberately to hinder the return and continuation of life for the Georgian population (**Kvashilava, 2023(b):** 134). Educational processes were only restored in 33 schools (***Ombudsman*, 2015:** 4) during the period from 1994 to 2006.

The "Head of the Department of Education" of the occupied Gali district was appointed Aza Agumaa, a sniper who participated in the war and immediately set a course toward the russification of the education process.[3] Agumaa repeatedly violated the human rights of both teachers and students: she would enter classrooms unannounced, searched bags, beat children, expelled pupils, and dismissed teachers.[4]

By 2010, 31 secondary schools were functioning in Gali. Due to a small number of students, the Shesheleti secondary school was closed in 2005, and the

[1] By this time, over 3,000 Georgians had been murdered in the area of operations of the "CIS peacekeeping forces", i.e., in the Gali district (**Jojua D., 2011(b):** 481).

[2] The information was provided by Ms. N. Shonia, the head of the Gali Resource Centre of the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia.

[3] Information was delivered by Mrs. N. Shonia.

[4] Information was delivered by Mrs. N. Shonia.

Dikhazurga primary school in 2009.[1] By 2015, their number had nearly halved, totaling 19 schools, of which 2 were primary and 11 were Georgian schools.

Since 1995, the de facto government of Abkhazia developed an education plan that included transitioning these schools to Russian-language education. This process occurred gradually: in schools belonging to Tkvarcheli and Ochamchire, all eleven grades switched to Russian at once. In the "upper zones" of Gali, Russian-language teaching was introduced according to the "first-class principle," meaning that each first-grade class would start the school year in Russian. As a result, since 2005, all classes in the "upper zones" of Gali have been taught in Russian.

In the villages of Gali's "lower zone," where education had previously been maintained in Georgian, Russian-language education was introduced for grades one through four starting from the 2015-2016 academic year, and every subsequent first-grade class also began in Russian.

As a result, the Georgian language was completely removed from the education process in Gali district, and since the 2021-2022 academic year, school education has switched entirely to Russian. Initially, Georgian was taught for three hours a week in the occupied Gali schools and was granted the status of a foreign language. Currently, only one hour is allotted for Georgian language instruction (**Piranishvili, 2022:** 28). This fact represents a clear violation of the rights of the Georgian population, as they are not provided with the opportunity to be educated in their native language. This is in contrast to the Russian and Armenian ethnic minorities, who are taught in their native languages (**Piranishvili, 2022:** 27). Of course, for the population whose knowledge of the Russian language, even after 30 years of occupation, is not even satisfactory, this process undoubtedly prevents them from receiving quality education. However, this is not the main issue. The goal is more far-reaching: it is the complete de-ethnicization of the Georgian population in the Gali district through their Russification (**Kvashilava, 2023(b):**135).

It is clear that this plan aims to further remove local Georgians from the Georgian cultural-political space in their complete de-ethnicization. It should also be mentioned that in 2013, the "Ministry of Education" of occupied Abkhazia developed and published 500 copies of a Megrelian-language "Mother Tongue" for the population of Gali, titled "Chkini Nina" (*Our Language*), written by Nargiza Basaria. However, this "manual" found no users among either teachers or pupils. Therefore, the local regime was soon forced to abandon it (**Kvashilava, 2023(b):** 134).

It is noteworthy that the majority of the population in the Gali district, including schoolchildren, identify themselves ethnically as Georgian, and this ethnicity is also indicated in the so-called "Abkhaz passports." The fact that children are denied the right to receive an education in their native language creates a problem in terms of receiving quality education and access to education.

The occupying regime constantly subjects Georgian teachers and students in the Gali district to terror. In the first Georgian school of Samurzakano, in the village of Okumi, the display of the Georgian alphabet in classrooms was prohib-

[1] Information was delivered by Mrs. N. Shonia.

ited. It was even removed from the school's museum. Representatives of "security" conduct raids in educational institutions, searching both the buildings and the teachers. In 2005-2006, Tamaz Biblaia, the principal of Narinjovani school, was dismissed from his position after Georgian textbooks were found. Interaction with the Georgian educational space is also considered an "unconstitutional" act and is punishable (***Conciliation Resources*, 2015:** 12). Special raids were unexpectedly conducted in Georgian schools, during which students' bags were checked for the discovery of Georgian textbooks (**Toria, 2022:** 10).

The local regime, which seeks to appoint school principals who are directly supportive of it, supports the terror against Georgian pupils by school leadership. For example, in 2010, the principal of Gali №2 School was appointed, a certain Akhra Kvekveskiri, who brought ethnic Abkhazs into the school. They intimidated students who defended their Georgian self-identity. He said a lot of times that he hates Georgians and everything Georgian. Currently, pupils and teachers primarily try to comply with the district and school administrations' demands to learn and speak Russian at school (**Piranishvili, 2022:** 29). Children living in villages close to the administrative border used to transfer to schools in Samegrelo. Since 2016, this opportunity has also been restricted (**Piranishvili, 2022:** 30).

The occupying authorities do everything they can to sever the contact between the Georgian population of the Gali district and Georgia across the Enguri river, and to ensure that university entrants receive their education in higher educational institutions in Abkhazia and Russia.[1] As of the summer of 2022, out of 350 applicants living in Gali, 5 enrolled in Sokhumi, 20 in Moscow, and the remaining 325 study in territories controlled by the Georgian government (***Human Rights in Abkhazia..*, 2023:** 7). This is while the de facto government has been enrolling Gali Georgians at the State University of Abkhazia since 2002, based on interviews, and since 2014, a free bus route has been designated for students between Gali and Sokhumi (***Conciliation Resources*, 2015:** 12). Considering the stable statistics of those wishing to receive higher education in Georgia, on March 16-17, 2023, the local de facto government of Gali held a meeting with university applicants at the cultural house. The purpose of the meeting was to persuade young people from Gali to pursue education in Russia, promising them privileges in return (***Human Rights in Abkhazia..*, 2023:** 7).

The occupying regime has been relatively successful in making locals speak Russian, and applicants are enrolling. In the lower zones, where the influence of the Russian language is still weak, and people fear that speaking Georgian will be a problem in Sokhumi, they try to move to study across the Enguri river. On October 3, 2019, the Georgian government made changes to the Higher Education Law, which grants applicants who have lived in the occupied zone for the past two years free university admission without exams (they do not take the national exams and master's exams). The occupying authorities are trying to prevent Georgian applicants from Gali district from moving to Georgia across the Enguri river,

[1] Information was delivered by Mrs. N. Shonia.

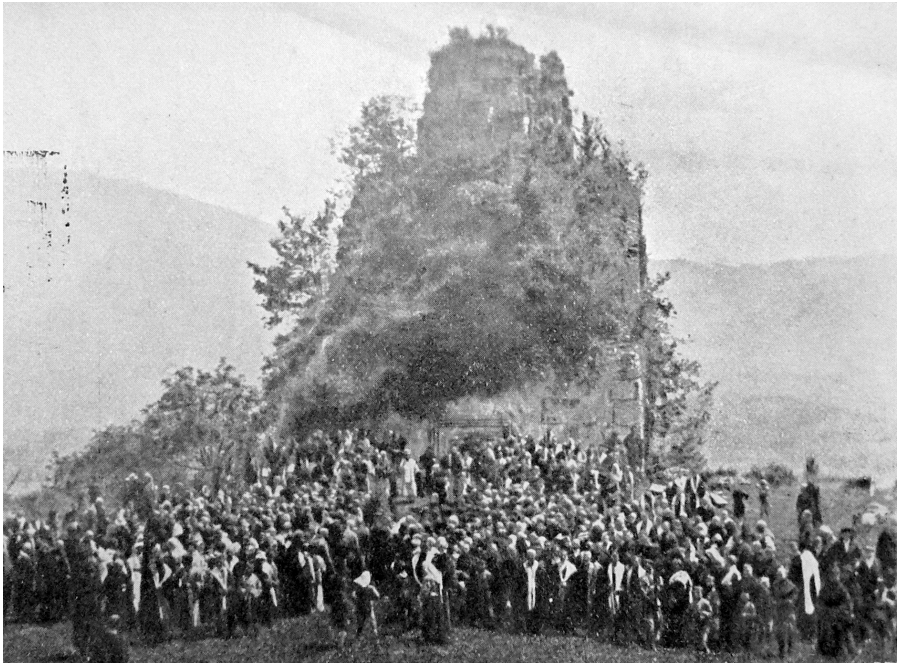
and they attempt to terrorize them by canceling their legal registration addresses (**Piranishvili, 2022:** 33).

By the end of March 2023, Georgian teachers employed in Gali schools were accused of spreading anti-Abkhaz propaganda and ideology and were reprimanded for their children's studies in Georgian higher education institutions (***Human Rights in Abkhazia..*, 2023:** 7).

Those who have received education in other parts of Georgia face problems with the recognition of their diplomas in the occupied territories. This is an attempt to either attract Gali applicants to their universities or to hinder their employment.

Additionally, special barriers have been created for Georgians to participate in local political processes. It is important to emphasize that Abkhaz separatists (who aim for the Abkhazization of Gali Georgians) and Russian occupiers (who strive for the Russification of Gali Georgians) have different views on the de-ethnicization of Georgians. Both sides consider them only part of their camp, which creates a kind of conflict foundation between the occupiers and separatists (**Kvashilava, 2021:** 241).

Despite the harsh reality, the Georgian population living in the Gali district is adamant, resists spiritual breakdown and rebuilds their homes, which were destroyed in the war (**Akhvlediani D., 2023:** 38).



Gathering of the residents of Samurzakano in the courtyard of the Bedia Temple, 1913
(**Ermolaeva, 1913**)

CHAPTER IX. THE ISSUE OF OCCUPIED GALI MUNICIPALITY IN THE POLITICS OF THE INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

§1. Commonwealth of Independent States (1993-2009)

The history of the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) begins on the eve of the restoration of Georgian statehood. Its formation was an initiative of the United States and, naturally, it was implemented on the basis of a kind of agreement with Russia. It is known that during the Cold War, the US was deliberately trying to disintegrate the Soviet Union. However, when it came to action, the White House administration was not ready to follow through (**Khonelidze, 2008:** 19), and there were reasons for this: first, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which consisted of 15 allied republics, it was not clear which of these republics would become the successor of the Soviet Union regarding nuclear weapons. Second, it turned out that these republics had territorial claims to each other (**Khonelidze, 2009:** 5), and it was necessary to develop mechanism to resolve these issues.

In 1989, in Malta, based on the negotiations between George H. W. Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev, a joint agreement was reached according to which the Soviet Union would maintain its territories and Moscow's influence in the region as of 1983. In the same meeting, it was decided that the Kremlin would renounce the three Baltic republics, whose annexation by the Soviet Union in 1939 under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact had never been recognized by the West (**Khonelidze, 2008:** 19).

On December 8, 1991, in Belovezhskaya Pushcha (Belarus), the leaders of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine – Boris Yeltsin, Stanislau Shushkevich, and Leonid Kravchuk – met. On this day, they agreed on the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States and signed an agreement declaring the collapse of the USSR and the formation of the CIS. The CIS quickly gained the status of a regional international organization in the UN. The United States granted Russian President Boris Yeltsin the status of controller of the CIS space. Shortly thereafter, the number of member states of the CIS grew to 11, where Georgia, as part of global policy, not included. As a result, on December 22, 1991, a coup began in Tbilisi.

In the early 1990s, amid the ongoing military, political, and economic crises and the constant pressure from Russia, on October 8, 1993, Georgia applied for membership in the CIS at the Council of Heads of state of CIS members, and this was accepted on December 3, 1993. It can also be said that due to the difficult political and military situation in the territory of Abkhazia, Georgia chose to join the CIS as a mechanism for protecting the remaining population in the autonomous republic following the war. This was a forced step for Georgia; within the CIS framework, the country aimed to eliminate the consequences of the 1992-1993 war in Abkhazia, save the lives of the remaining population, begin a reconstruction process, and so on. This was essentially the reason for Georgia's decision to join the CIS, but in reality, this step was influenced by global political factors.

After the tragic events in Abkhazia in 1993, the issue of Gali district was often considered by international organizations as a separate and independent issue because the absolute majority of the population of Gali municipality was Georgian, and their situation was extremely difficult, especially in the years following the fall of Sokhumi. During this period, various band formations of different origin in the region treated the local population by extremely harsh methods, forcing them to leave their homes.

After December 1993, when Georgia became a member of the CIS, naturally, negotiations on the ceasefire were considered within the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States. On May 14, 1994, the Moscow Agreement on Ceasefire and the Separation of Forces was signed between the parties. This event led to the agreement of the signatories of the Moscow Agreement to deploy CIS peacekeepers in Abkhazia (although these peacekeepers had been stationed in Georgia for years, and continued to operate near the administrative border of Abkhazia under the CIS umbrella, the military units were entirely composed of Russians – ***Z.Kh.***), with the United Nations monitoring their activities (136 military observers). According to the agreement, a 24-kilometer security zone was to be established, where the CIS peacekeeping mission would patrol. The goal was to create a safe environment for the return of displaced persons (**Kapanadze S..., 2015:** 51; **Kvaratskhelia, 2015:** 108).

Against the backdrop of political instability in Georgia and due to the demands of certain parts of the political spectrum, the Georgian government at the time, under Eduard Shevardnadze, was forced to agree to the Russian side's proposal to deploy the CIS peacekeepers along the administrative border of Abkhazia. On June 26, 1994, under the CIS mandate, the Russian Federation's military contingent began a peacekeeping operation. This situation gave Russia the opportunity to carry out military-political manipulations without interference, and it maintained a serious lever of pressure on Georgia (**Kvaratskhelia, 2015:** 109, 110). Events in the following years demonstrated that the real goal of this mission was to detach Abkhazia from Georgia.

International organizations found themselves somewhat passive, as reflected in the UN Secretary-General's 1994 report, which suggested that the UN did not want such a development of the process but was unable to control the situation due to insufficient political will for deploying UN peacekeepers in the region. In durable negotiations, the UN, despite its assessments, was not adequately prepared to perform the role of mediator. This became evident during the February 1994 negotiations in Geneva, when the Abkhaz side refused to sign any agreement that would recognize Georgia's territorial integrity (***UN Document*, S/1994/253**).

By 1994, Moscow had already managed to assume a leading role in the region and in the conflict, becoming the main negotiator for the UN mission as well. As for the OSCE, it had minimal interaction in the conflict, mostly acting as an observer, but at this stage, it did not make a significant contribution to the conflict resolution. Among the other UN agencies, the Human Rights Office (since 1996) was actively involved in the region (which included staff from both the OSCE and the UN High

Commissioner for Human Rights). The office was part of UNOMIG and reported to the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Later, UNDP, UNOCHA, and UNV were involved in the conflict region at various levels (mostly in the Gali district).

In 1994, the UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali (1992-1997) positively welcomed Georgia's accession to the CIS and the involvement of the CIS peacekeeping mandate in the resolution of the Abkhazian conflict: "This will be a step forward in the cooperation between the United Nations and regional organizations/alliances in peacekeeping missions, similar to the cooperation with the Organization of American States (OAS), the European Union, and the North Atlantic Alliance. I am confident that the first joint initiative of the UN and the Commonwealth of Independent States will contribute to the effective protection of peace and security in troubled areas" (***UN Document*, S/1994/818**). It is no longer disputed today, how this cooperation helped address the ongoing conflict in Abkhazia. Despite the fact that "Russia, initially, appeared as a supporter of Georgia's territorial integrity, it quickly shifted its stance and now uses Russian-Abkhaz relations as a lever to pressure Georgia" (**Kopiters, Legvold, 2006:** 19).

On January 19, 1996, a decision was made by the heads of state of the CIS member countries (Azerbaijan, Belarus, Turkmenistan, Moldova, Armenia, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan) regarding the "Regulation of the Conflict in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia" (***CIS Decision on Abkhazia*, 01.19.1996**). According to the decision of the heads of state, the political, military, and economic isolation of the Abkhaz separatist regime was to take place. This was a historic decision, but unfortunately, the Russian Federation never fully implemented it. The decision and Russia's position at the time raised certain hopes in Georgian political circles.

With the January 19 CIS decision, the heads of state condemned the destructive position of the Abkhaz side, which hindered the achievement of mutually acceptable agreements for the political resolution of the conflict, the safe and dignified return of refugees and displaced persons to their permanent homes. According to Article 2, "The Council of Heads of State of the Commonwealth expects that the parties will achieve significant results in negotiations, particularly on political issues and the problems of refugees and displaced persons, with the mediation of the Russian Federation" (***CIS Decision on Abkhazia*, 01.19.1996**).

The member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States, through this decision, openly declared that they would prevent the sale or supply of weapons, military equipment, spare parts, and military vehicles, or any other supplies to the separatist regime of Abkhazia from their citizens, or from ships or airplanes under their flags or territory.

Furthermore, according to Article 4, the member countries of the Commonwealth prohibited: "a) providing any technical advice, assistance, or services to the Abkhaz side or its legal or physical persons in military matters; b) recruiting persons permanently residing in the territories controlled by the Abkhaz authorities into the armed forces of the CIS member states" (***CIS Decision on Abkhazia*, 01.19.1996**).

The member states of the Commonwealth decided to take measures to *"a) prevent the recruitment and dispatch of their citizens to participate in any armed formations in the conflict zone; b) facilitate the return of citizens of CIS member states currently serving in the armed formations of Abkhazia; c) withdraw all of their officials, representatives, or citizens who are located in the territories controlled by the Abkhaz authorities, to prevent them from assisting the authorities in military matters*" (***CIS Decision on Abkhazia*, 01.19.1996**).

According to paragraph 6 of this document, the CIS countries, including Russia, confirmed that Abkhazia is an integral part of Georgia, and the member countries of the Commonwealth would not carry out trade, economic, financial, transport, or other operations with the authorities of the Abkhaz side without the consent of the Georgian government; they would not enter into official contacts with the representatives or officials of the structures existing on the territory of Abkhazia, nor with the members of armed formations created by them.

For Georgia, it was significant that this document was signed by Russia, which recognized Georgia's state independence and pledged not to engage in relations with the Abkhaz regime, which was considered a separatist authority, without Georgia's support (***CIS Decision on Abkhazia*, 01.19.1996**).

Additionally, the member countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States declared that they would not allow the establishment of representative offices of the Abkhaz authorities on their territories. They also would not permit official representatives of the Abkhaz separatist authorities.

The heads of the CIS member states expressed their readiness to support and intervene in the full-scale resolution of the conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia. This would primarily involve the immediate, unconditional, and dignified return of all refugees and displaced persons to their permanent places of residence.

The Commonwealth of Independent States called on the UN Security Council to support the measures taken by the member states to exert pressure on the Abkhaz authorities and to recommend that all member states of the UN join these measures.

In addition to the document above, within the CIS framework, Georgia managed to achieve the adoption of documents that emphasize the territorial integrity of Georgia and the inviolability of its borders (specifically, the CIS Summit Decision of January 31, 1996). Despite the adoption of such documents and a certain degree of optimism, Russia's participation in the negotiation formats left no room for bilateral dialogue, and in any other case (without Russia's involvement), the Abkhaz representatives, citing the alleged imbalance of forces, refused to participate in negotiations without Russia, thus making the resolution of the conflict dependent on Russia and its participation in the forums (**MacFarlane, 1999:** 50-53).

Unfortunately, in May 1998, another "ethnic cleansing" of the Georgian population took place in Abkhazia, in the Gali district, resulting in 49,000 internally displaced persons, who had spontaneously returned to their homes, being displaced once again. Following the tragic events in Gali, the Georgian government, outraged by the inaction of the CIS peacekeepers, demanded the expansion

of the peacekeeping mandate. The official Tbilisi also declared that if Russia would not agree to expand the peacekeeping mandate, Georgia would demand their replacement with multinational peacekeeping forces.

At the OSCE Summit held in İstanbul in November 1999, the states "once again declared" their firm condemnation of "ethnic cleansing" as formulated in the Budapest and Lisbon high-level meetings, which led to the destruction and forced displacement of the predominantly Georgian population in Abkhazia (Georgia), as well as acts of violence that occurred in the Gali district in May 1998, targeting those who had returned, with the aim of instilling fear in those wishing to return. The recommendation was made for a fact-finding mission to be sent to the Gali district in early the following year, with the participation of OSCE and UN, to assess reports on the ongoing cases of ethnic cleansing (***İstanbul Document*, 1999**).

Since 1999, the epicentre of the conflict has shifted to the Gali district and also to the Kodori gorge, part of which is under the control of the Georgian side. During this period, the Russian Federation began strengthening its ties with the de facto authorities of Abkhazia. It opened the border and lifted the de facto economic blockade that had been in place since 1992. It facilitated the granting of Russian citizenship to residents of Abkhazia and imposed a visa regime on Georgian citizens. This action further escalated the situation in the region, but the UN mission continued to implement stabilization measures. By the year 2000, the lives of the mission members themselves were at risk: several incidents of their homes being robbed and shots fired at them were reported. On January 17 and June 1, mission members were kidnapped for several hours. On December 10, two military observers from the mission were abducted in the Kodori Gorge and held captive for three days.

In parallel with these actions, the crossing of the border by the local population via the Enguri Bridge was suspended multiple times, but control of the security zone continued via helicopter (except for the Kodori Gorge, which was under Georgian control). On October 8, 2001, a UNOMIG helicopter was shot down while on regular patrol in a disengagement zone. The patrol was conducted by the UNOMIG headquarters in Sukhumi. Nine observers on board were killed (the patrol also included sector offices in Gali and Zugdidi). Despite the UN's requests, the incident remains unresolved. On October 11, the Georgian Parliament adopted a resolution on replacing the CIS peacekeepers with an international mission, in contrast to which the Abkhaz side and its "Prime Minister" A. Jergenia, supported closer ties with Russia (***UN Document, S*/2001/1008**).

In April 2002, CIS forces, without notifying the UN mission, brought heavy weaponry into the Kodori Gorge. The risk of confrontation between the parties was high, but the situation was quickly defused. Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze called Russian President Vladimir Putin, and they agreed to the immediate withdrawal of additional peacekeeping forces and heavy equipment (***UN Document*, S/2002/469**).

In the summer of 2003, a meeting took place between the Georgian and Abkhaz sides. The very fact that both sides attended the meeting was already con-

sidered a success. The Georgian side once again raised the issue of the return of displaced persons, while the Abkhaz side requested that a statement be made once more regarding the non-use of force in resolving the conflict. To prevent incidents, a set of recommendations was developed by the joint mission, suggesting the establishment of a civil police unit of 20 officers to be sent to the Gali district to facilitate the adoption of legal norms to ensure the dignified return of displaced persons (***UN Document*, S/2003/1019**).

On March 6-7, 2003, a meeting took place in Sochi between Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze and Russian President Vladimir Putin, also attended by the de facto authorities of occupied Abkhazia, represented by Gennadi Gagulia. Following the meeting, the Presidents of Georgia and Russia signed a joint statement, according to which the following actions were to be taken: the return of refugees and internally displaced persons to Abkhazia, primarily to the Gali district; the launch of the "Sochi-Tbilisi" railway link; the modernization of the Enguri hydro cascade, and the construction of other hydrotechnical facilities in the upper Enguri river. After the meeting, Vladimir Putin declared that "the conflict in Abkhazia must be resolved considering Georgia's territorial integrity and the legal rights and interests of the multiethnic population of Abkhazia" (**Sepashvili, 2003**). The statement clearly indicated that the activation of the "Sochi-Tbilisi" railway should occur in parallel with the return process of displaced persons to Abkhazia (Gali district).

Later, after the new President Mikheil Saakashvili took office, his initiatives were based on the peace proposals for the resolution of the Abkhaz conflict, which were presented to the separatists in 2006 in the city of Sokhumi.

The aforementioned initiatives included the resolution of constitutional issues such as: broad political representation for Abkhazia in Georgia's central government, including the introduction of a Vice-President position for Abkhazia in Georgia; granting Abkhazia a veto power over any legislation related to Abkhazia's constitutional status, as well as issues concerning Abkhaz culture, language, and ethnic identity; the creation of a free economic zone in the Gali district of Abkhazia, utilizing the Ochamchire seaport; ensuring international guarantees for Abkhazia's broad autonomy.

On March 28, 2008, the President of Georgia presented new peace proposals for the peaceful resolution of the Abkhaz conflict. Specifically, the Georgian government's proposal towards Abkhazia included the creation of a joint free economic zone in the Gali and Ochamchire districts, guaranteed representation of Abkhazia in Georgia's central executive and legislative branches, the establishment of a constitutional Vice-President position in Georgia with an Abkhaz representative, and the right for Abkhazia to veto any decisions made by the central government concerning Abkhazia's status and rights. It was again emphasized that the Georgian government was offering a broad federalization to Abkhazia, ensuring all necessary conditions for the development of Abkhaz language, culture, and national identity. Abkhazia would have unlimited autonomy within Georgia, and

the international community, including the Russian Federation, would guarantee this agreement, thereby establishing the legal and political basis for resolving the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

However, the Abkhaz authorities practically did not consider the proposals made by the Georgian government, as the war began on August 7, 2008, and Russia launched a large military operation on Georgian territory, which resulted in Georgia losing additional territories.

Due to Russia's involvement in the 2008 war and the participation of Russian peacekeeping forces, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili made a statement on August 12, 2008, announcing Georgia's withdrawal from the Commonwealth of Independent States. On August 14, 2008, the Georgian Parliament unanimously (117 votes) passed resolutions on the matter (**Rekhviashvili J., 2009**).

On August 18, 2008, before Russia officially recognized the independence of Abkhazia and the so-called South Ossetia, Georgia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent a special note to the CIS Executive Committee, informing them of the Georgian Parliament's resolutions and Georgia's withdrawal from the CIS. As of August 18, 2008, Georgia no longer held any obligations arising from its membership in the CIS.

On August 26, 2008, Russia officially recognized the separatist republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, thus blatantly violating the peace agreement that Russian President had signed only two weeks earlier (***Six-Point Plan*, 2008**). This was a clear culmination of a long-term plan to destabilize Georgia's statehood and control its territories. Over nearly two decades of inter-state conflict between Russia and Georgia, Moscow successfully used the separatists as its puppets; now, Russia had effectively occupied these Georgian territories and was attempting to fully annex them (**Khonelidze, Kvashilava, 2021:** 335).

In this context, remaining in and being a member of the CIS had become a matter of dignity for Georgia. According to Article 9 of the CIS Charter (***CIS Charter*, 1993**), Georgia's formal withdrawal process from the CIS was completed on August 18, 2009. At the same time, according to the 1969 Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (***Vienna Convention..*, 1969**), a number of international multilateral agreements signed within the CIS framework remained in force for Georgia, in which Georgia's participation was not limited by its membership in the CIS. These included agreements on visa-free movement of citizens of CIS countries, agreements on the creation of a free trade zone, and the convention on legal assistance and legal relations in civil, family, and criminal matters, etc.

§2. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations (1992-2021)

Throughout the entire post-conflict period of Abkhazia, from the 1990s to the 2010s, negotiations between the conflict parties were mediated by the United Nations (UN) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). One of the main themes of these negotiations has been, and continues to be, linking the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to the definition of the political status of the occupied territories (***From Exclusion…,* 2009:** 13).

The OSCE, together with the UN, is an important international mechanism for conflict resolution, security, and peacebuilding. The institutionalization of the OSCE coincided with the conflict in Abkhazia and the subsequent period. Despite this, from the early days, the OSCE paid attention to the issues created in both Abkhazia and the so-called South Ossetia and initiated the peaceful resolution of the conflict and the negotiation process. The OSCE's 1992 Helsinki Declaration was effectively the founding act of the organization, but subsequent declarations – those of Budapest (1994) and İstanbul (1999) – reflected the conflicts in Georgia and the prospects for peaceful resolutions (**Khonelidze, Kvashilava, 2021:** 330). According to the famous international relations expert L. Alexidze, the OSCE played a decisive role in the international condemnation of the ethnic cleansing of the Georgian population in Abkhazia (**Alexidze L, 2008:** 34).

Already on May, 24, 1994, a report by the expert commission created by the UN Security Council was published, in which the term "ethnic cleansing" was introduced. This refers to the premeditated policy aimed at the expulsion of one ethnic or religious group by another ethnic or religious group from a specific geographical area through brutal treatment or terror. It mainly occurs under the banner of false nationalism, historical grievances, and the powerful driving force of vengeance. The real goal of this act is the occupation of the territory and its cleansing from certain groups (***UN Document*, S/1994/674**).

On December 6, 1994, the OSCE's Budapest Summit recognized the fact of ethnic cleansing in Abkhazia (***Budapest Summit Declaration*, 1994**). The Budapest document was called *"Towards a True Partnership in the New Era,"* and it addressed the issues of nearly all the conflict zones in the world at that time, dedicating a separate chapter to the conflicts in Georgia (Budapest Summit Declaration, 1994: 7-8). In the first article of the decision dedicated to Georgia, the OSCE declares that despite the alarming situation in Georgia, the participating states of the summit once again expressed strong support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within internationally recognized borders and that the resolution of the conflicts in Georgia must be based on the respect for these principles. The declaration also emphasizes that when resolving the conflict, the interests of the multi-ethnic population in the conflict areas should be taken into account (***Budapest Summit Declaration*, 1994:** 7 (2)). The OSCE condemned the "Constitution" adopted by the self-declared republic of Abkhazia on November 26, 1994 (**Khone-**

lidze, Kvashilava, 2021: 330), calling it a unilateral act that undermines both the UN and the efforts of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to facilitate a peaceful political resolution of the conflict in Georgia through negotiations between the conflicting parties (***Budapest Summit Declaration*****, 1994:** 7 (2)).

With the 2nd Article of the Budapest Summit Declaration, the OSCE member states expressed deep concern over the "ethnic cleansing" and the en masse expulsion of people in Georgia, specifically in Abkhazia. The document explicitly states that the forced displacement primarily affected Georgians from their residential territories, and this process was accompanied by a large number of innocent civilian deaths (***Budapest Summit Declaration*****, 1994:** 7 (2)). The OSCE expressed hope that, under the UN's auspices, efforts would be made by the Russian Federation, as a facilitator, to improve the situation in Abkhazia and allow refugees and internally displaced persons to return to their homes in safety and dignity (***Budapest Summit Declaration*****, 1994:** 7 (2)). The OSCE called on the parties involved in the conflict to strictly adhere to the established principles and recommendations, as well as the relevant UN Security Council resolutions and agreements reached during negotiations.

The particular attention the OSCE paid to the conflicts in Georgia was reflected in another article of the Budapest Declaration, which states that the participating states of the summit consider it desirable and appropriate, when the time comes, to convene international conferences under the auspices of the OSCE and the UN, as well as with the participation of other international organizations and interested states, to review the progress of conflict resolution and development, as well as the development of democratic society in Georgia (***Budapest Summit Declaration*****, 1994:** 7 (5)).

No less significant was the OSCE's 1996 Lisbon Summit on December 3 and its declaration, which recognized the fact of ethnic cleansing in Abkhazia (***Lisbon Document*****, 1996:** 4 (§20)).

The OSCE's subsequent summit, held in İstanbul on November 17-18, 1999, also addressed the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The document adopted at the meeting acknowledges the fact of ethnic cleansing in Abkhazia (***İstanbul Document*****, 1996:** 46-55). The summit once again reaffirmed Europe's strong support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, emphasizing the need for resolving the conflicts related to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, particularly by determining the political status of these regions. Compared to previous summits, the İstanbul Summit Declaration specifically addressed the issue of the rapid, safe, and unconditional return of refugees and internally displaced persons to contribute to the peaceful resolution of these conflicts. Furthermore, the OSCE welcomed the progress achieved in Georgian-Russian negotiations during the summit, particularly regarding the reduction of Russian military equipment in Georgia (***İstanbul Document*****, 1996:** §15).

The İstanbul Summit also reaffirmed the recognition of the ethnic cleansing fact acknowledged by the Lisbon Summit Declaration, which was followed by

mass destruction and the forced expulsion of people from Abkhazia. This was further compounded by acts of violence in May 1998 in the Gali district against the returned population. The İstanbul Declaration strongly condemned these events and, considering the unstable situation in Abkhazia, recommended that the UN send a fact-finding commission to the Gali district at the beginning of the year 2000, to assess whether cases of ethnic cleansing had continued. The declaration expressed the hope that such a mission would enhance international support for the unconditional and safe return of refugees and internally displaced persons and contribute to the overall stability of the region (***İstanbul Document*, 1996:** §17).

Unfortunately, the aforementioned commission was never established. However, according to L. Alexidze, the significant attention given to the Abkhaz conflict in the OSCE's declaration and the repeated condemnation of ethnic cleansing and the horrible crimes of the separatists was of great importance in mobilizing the international community's attention (**Alexidze L., 2008:** 35).

In November 1998 and October 1999, violent acts against the population of Gali and new cases of ethnic cleansing were confirmed. In these circumstances, when 47% of the native population of Abkhazia had been expelled, and an illegal referendum was held in Abkhazia on October 3, 1999, based on which the so-called People's Assembly of Abkhazia ("parliament") adopted an act on state independence, which was not recognized by either the OSCE or the UN. The OSCE's İstanbul Declaration firmly condemned and declared the so-called presidential elections and referendum in Abkhazia illegitimate and called on the UN to prepare a draft document that would distribute constitutional powers between the central Georgian government and the Abkhaz authorities.

Despite the efforts of international organizations, Russia began even closer cooperation with the separatist regime in Abkhazia. On January 12, 2005, presidential elections were held in Abkhazia, and Sergei Bagapsh was re-elected as de facto "president," who was effectively elected based on the votes from the Gali population. During his presidency from 2005 to 2011, it seemed that the situation and living conditions of the Gali population had improved, but in reality, the situation worsened. From April 16, 2008, under the orders of the Russian president, closer economic, political, and military cooperation began between Russia and the de facto Abkhaz government, which contradicted the CIS's decision on January 19, 1996, regarding the regulation of the conflict in the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic (***CIS Decision on Abkhazia*, 01.19.1996**). Although Russia, along with other CIS countries, signed this decision, it did not show much commitment to its implementation. The escalation of the situation was also facilitated by the fact that on April 20, 2008, Russian air forces shot down an unmanned Georgian aerial vehicle over Abkhazian territory.

For Georgia, relations with the UN hold particular importance. It is noteworthy that since the start of the Abkhaz conflict, the UN has been monitoring both the course of the war and the post-war situation in Abkhazia. Based on the special reports of the UN Secretary-General on Abkhazia, nearly 40 resolutions

were adopted between 1993 and 2008, in which the UN recognized Abkhazia as an inseparable part of Georgia and supported its territorial integrity in accordance with international law. The UN urged both sides to resolve the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict through peaceful means by activating diplomatic dialogue and ratifying the final agreement on the status of Abkhazia in Georgia's constitution (***Georgia/ Abkhazia: Violations of the Laws..,* 1995**). Furthermore, the UN called for the immediate return of all displaced ethnic Georgians (approximately 250,000) and the determination of Abkhazia's final status as either maximum autonomy or a federal structure within Georgia's borders. It is noteworthy that the resolutions also assess Russia's role as a peacekeeper and conflict resolution facilitator."

On July 9, 1993, the UN Security Council adopted its first resolution (№849) on Abkhazia, requesting the Secretary-General and his special representative to assist the parties in reaching a ceasefire agreement (***Resolution 849*, 1993**).

In April 1994, an agreement was reached in Moscow between the parties regarding a ceasefire and the separation of forces. In this situation, Russia managed to assume the role of a "mediator" and "peacekeeper" in the conflict, which was inspired under the auspices of the CIS (**Khonelidze, Kvashilava, 2021:** 329). In June 1994, CIS peacekeeping forces were deployed in Abkhazia, but in reality, they were composed solely of representatives from the armed forces of the Russian Federation. During their "peacekeeping" mandate, over a thousand people died, and in May 1998, a second wave of ethnic cleansing against the Georgian population took place in the Gali district (**Khonelidze, Kvashilava, 2021:** 332).

Many UN resolutions addressed the establishment and expansion of the UN Observer Mission in Georgia, primarily aimed at monitoring the situation in Abkhazia, particularly in the Gali district, and reporting information to the UN Secretary-General. Numerous crimes against the remaining Georgian population in Abkhazia were documented by these missions and observer groups.

In accordance with the demands of UN Security Council Resolution №1716, on January 15, 2007, the UN Secretary-General's interim report on the situation in Abkhazia was officially published. This report covered the period from October 2006 to the first half of January 2007. The report noted that despite challenges, progress had been made in implementing the resolution's provisions, which was considered quite positive. The document emphasizes that the main focus of the UN observer mission's activities in Georgia was to facilitate the political resolution of the conflict, based on the "principles of power division between Tbilisi and Sokhumi" (the so-called "Boden Document") (***Resolution 1716*, 2006**). Attention was particularly drawn to developments in the Gali district, where the situation had significantly escalated due to actions by the Abkhaz side. The report highlighted actions by separatists, such as the forced conscription of young Georgians to the military service, restrictions on the freedom of movement of the local population, and en mass arrests.

As a result of these and other incidents in the conflict zone, particularly in December 2006 and early January 2007, the UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) was compelled to take appropriate measures, including increased

patrolling and the initiation of investigations into the events taking place in the conflict zone. One of the main issues discussed in the report was human rights, where it was rightly pointed out that the Abkhaz side continued discriminatory practices against individuals who were not recognized as "citizens" of Abkhazia. This was expressed in their refusal to return illegally confiscated property, especially outside the Gali district.

This approach was noted as a threat to the process of the voluntary return and reintegration of internally displaced persons (IDPs).

On May 15, 2008, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution recognizing the right of refugees and IDPs to return to Abkhazia. The Assembly also acknowledged the right of all refugees and displaced persons (including their descendants) to return to Abkhazia, Georgia. The resolution was adopted with 14 votes in favor, based on a text proposed by Georgia, which recognized the right of displaced persons and refugees, as well as their descendants, to return. The resolution emphasized the importance of protecting the property rights of refugees and displaced persons and underscored the urgent necessity of ensuring their voluntary return (***Resolution GA/10708*, 2008**).

According to L. Alexidze's assessment, on May 29, 2008, the 62nd session of the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution of historical significance – *"On the Status of Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees from Abkhazia, Georgia,"* in which for the first time in UN practice, the fact of ethnic cleansing of Georgians in the occupied Abkhazia was recorded (**Alexidze L., 2008**). The resolution states: *"Acknowledging all relevant resolutions of the Security Council, and considering the conclusions of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) summits held in Budapest (1994), Lisbon (1996), and İstanbul (1999), specifically the reports on ethnic cleansing in Abkhazia, Georgia, and other serious violations of international humanitarian law."* As mentioned above, in November 1999, at the OSCE summit in İstanbul, participating states categorically condemned ethnic cleansing, as formulated at the high-level meetings in Budapest and Lisbon.

The UN has presented separate resolutions regarding the status of internally displaced persons and refugees from both Abkhazia and the South Ossetian region. All these documents were adopted by the UN General Assembly. These include the following resolutions: 2007, 2009, 2010, and 2013. The UN General Assembly also adopted such resolutions in 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020. The adoption of this number of resolutions on the subject indicates the UN's stance on the rights of forcibly displaced persons. For instance, the preamble of the 2019 resolution mentions that the General Assembly recalls all of its relevant resolutions on the protection and assistance of internally displaced persons, including resolutions of December 18, 2007 (62/153), May 15, 2008 (62/249), September 9, 2009 (63/307), December 18, 2009 (64/162), September 7, 2010 (64/296), June 29, 2011 (65/287), December 19, 2011 (66/165), July 3, 2012 (66/283), June 13, 2013 (67/268), December 18, 2013 (68/180, 68/274), June 5, 2014, June 3, 2015 (69/286), December 17, 2015 (70/165), June 7, 2016 (70/265), June 1, 2017

(71/290), December 19, 2017 (72/182), and June 12, 2018 (72/280) (***Resolution A/73/880*, 2019**).

The document also recalls all relevant resolutions of the Security Council regarding Georgia, which address the necessity of a comprehensive peace and the return of forcibly displaced persons and refugees to their homeland, emphasizing the importance of their full and timely implementation and recognizing the guiding principles of internal displacement as the fundamental international framework for the protection of displaced persons. The document expresses concern over the forced demographic changes caused by the conflicts in Georgia and the humanitarian situation resulting from the armed conflict of August 2008, which led to further forced displacement of the peaceful population. It emphasizes the urgent need to resolve issues related to internally displaced persons in Georgia and underscores the importance of discussions initiated on October 15, 2008, in Geneva regarding the voluntary, safe, dignified, and unhindered return of displaced persons and refugees, based on internationally recognized principles and conflict resolution practices (***Resolution A/73/880*, 2019**).

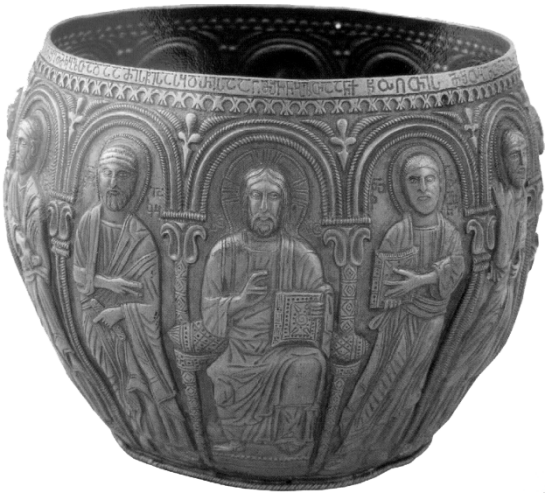
It is interesting to note that the UN General Assembly's resolution of May 29, 2019, states the following: 1) It recognizes the right of all internally displaced persons, refugees, and their descendants to return to their homes in Abkhazia and the South Ossetian region, regardless of their ethnic affiliation; 2) It emphasizes the necessity to respect the property rights of all internally displaced persons and refugees affected by the conflicts in Georgia and to refrain from acquiring property by violating these rights; 3) It confirms the unacceptability of forced demographic changes; 4) It emphasizes the urgent need for unhindered access to humanitarian activities for all internally displaced persons, refugees, and other persons living in conflict-affected areas across Georgia; 5) It calls on all participants in the Geneva discussions to intensify efforts to establish sustainable peace, and affirms the obligation to adopt enhanced measures to restore trust, take immediate steps to ensure respect for human rights, and create favorable security conditions, which will contribute to voluntary, safe, and dignified living. It also stresses the unhindered return of all internally displaced persons and refugees to their homes; 6) It emphasizes the necessity of developing a schedule for the voluntary, safe, dignified, and unhindered return of all internally displaced persons and refugees affected by the conflicts in Georgia; 7) It requests the Secretary-General to submit a comprehensive report to the General Assembly at its 74th session on the implementation of this resolution; 8) It decided to include in the temporary agenda of the 74th session a point entitled *"Protracted Conflicts in the GUAM Territories and their Impact on International Peace, Security, and Development"* (***Resolution A/73/880*, 2019**).

On September, 8, 2020, the UN General Assembly published a resolution adopted on September, 3, 2020, in which the Assembly members explicitly highlight the decisions made in previous years. In the 8-paragraph document, they once again emphasize and recognize the right of all internally displaced persons,

refugees, and their descendants to return to their homes in Abkhazia and the South Ossetian region, regardless of their ethnic affiliation, and stress the necessity to respect the property rights of all displaced persons. They also call for refraining from acquiring property by violating the rights of displaced persons.

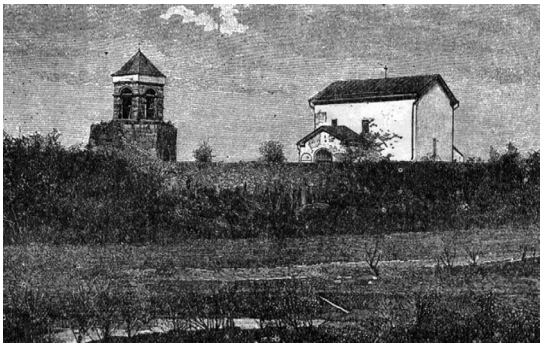
It is noteworthy that each subsequent resolution repeats the decisions of the previous one, and at the end of the paragraph, it is stated that the temporary agenda of the next session will include a point titled *"Protracted Conflicts in the GUAM Territories and their Consequences for International Peace, Security, and Development"* (***Resolution A/RES/74/300*, 2020**).

As we can see, the efforts of the OSCE and the UN are of paramount importance in resolving the conflict in Abkhazia (as well as the so-called "South Ossetia"). Despite Russia's steadfast opposition between 1992 and 2021, both at the UN General Assembly and at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the decisions made at the summits of these international organizations serve as a constant reminder to the international community that Abkhazia and the so-called "South Ossetia" are part of Georgia and that the indigenous populations of these regions have the right to return to their ancestral lands.



Chalice from Bedia Cathedral

Tagiloni Church



Ilori Church in 19th Century

CHAPTER X. CULTURAL MOSAIC OF SAMURZAKANO IN THE MIDDLE AGES

The cultural mosaic of the Middle Ages in the Ghalidzga-Enguri interfluve of the Middle East is an integral part of this area's diverse political, economic, and cultural life. It is just as intertwined with the historical destiny of Georgia as the culture of other regions of our country. Throughout the entire Middle Ages (5th-18th centuries), the territory that we now call *"Samurzakano"* was a part of the ancient Georgian political and cultural space, as evidenced by the ancient cultural monuments that have survived to this day in this region, the inscriptions found on them, and the manuscripts and ecclesiastical items created in this region, bearing appropriate Georgian inscriptions. Naturally, this does not exclude cultural influences from the West and the East, particularly from the countries of the Byzantine cultural sphere, which had an overall influence on Georgian culture.

The historical cultural mosaic of Samurzakano in the Middle Ages is diverse and includes several groups: material identified based on archaeological excavations, architectural monuments, samples of visual arts, and written heritage. The region is rich in monuments from all four groups – these are the most valuable monuments of Georgian cultural heritage created over centuries, with Georgian inscriptions and various types of artifacts that still amaze viewers today. The architectural monuments in the region are divided into two groups: ecclesiastical and secular monuments.

The importance of Bedia and Mokvi as cultural-educational centers in medieval Georgia was already recognized by our ancestors at the beginning of the 19th century. By the 19th century, Georgian intellectuals were well aware of the significance of these centres in medieval Georgia and, together with the local population, they made efforts to restore them. In the 20th century, much more attention was given to the study of medieval Georgian cultural-educational and ecclesiastical centres, including monastic centres located in present-day Abkhazia, as centres of ecclesiastical culture.

Both Georgian and foreign historical sources unambiguously point out that the churches of Georgia and the monastic centres founded by Georgian ecclesiastical figures were at the same time the greatest cultural-educational centers, both within the country and abroad. Naturally, modern Abkhazia, and especially Samurzakano, is an inseparable part of this history, and the monastic centers that developed here played an important role in the cultural life of the country. Monastic life in Abkhazia was founded in the early Christian period, as confirmed by the ancient ecclesiastical monuments.[1]

Nevertheless, the intensive development of monastic life in Abkhazia seems to have begun in the 8th-9th centuries, and its rise is linked to the ecclesiastical

[1] The clearest example of this is the monastic complex on Mount Lashkendari, which is located 6 kilometers from Tkvarcheli and represents one of the oldest monastic complexes in the territory of Abkhazia.

policies of the kings of the Abkhaz (Egrisi-Abkhazia) Kingdom. One of the first to care about the expansion and strengthening of monastic life was King Demetre II of Abkhazia (825-861), who, in order to expand monastic life, invited the famous Georgian enlightener and the founder of large monastic and cultural-educational centers in Southern Georgia, Grigol of Khandzta, to the Kingdom of Abkhazia.

The kings of Abkhazia (Egrisi-Abkhazia) are known for being active promoters of ecclesiastical policies towards the Mtskheta Catholicosate, and for building churches and monastic centres.

The study of manuscripts, inscriptions, and other sources preserved in the monastic centres of Bedia, Mokvi, Likhni, Bitchvinta, Dranda, and others make us sure that portraying these monasteries just only as the cultural centres does not reveal their history sufficiently. They were at the same time cultural-educational centres, where not only the ancient manuscripts were renewed and renumbered, but also theology, hagiography, hymnography, psalms, history, mathematics had been taught, then time Georgian educational data were stored. All these are exemplified in the Shatberdi collection (***Shatberdi Collection*, 1979:** 67-423).

The monastic centers on the territory of modern Samurzakano played an important role in the development of spiritual culture of medieval Georgia from a cultural-historical perspective. Numerous manuscripts, ecclesiastical items, and other cultural heritage artifacts from this region suggest that historically, this was the hub of Georgia, and the culture it produced was in no way inferior to the material and spiritual culture created in the central regions of Georgia. This small region, which was called Samurzakano at a certain period of history, historically and geographically belonged to Odishi, where the "Odishians" lived for centuries and created medieval Christian culture, which conceptually is the part of Georgian culture. This is the cultural-historical identity of the "Odishians," clearly reflected in the Georgian written cultural monuments they created.

This region has preserved the oldest churches, monastic centers, fortifications, castles, and watchtowers, whose architecture, composition, and history of creation and development are part of Georgia's unified political and cultural-historical context.

The Monastic Centre of Bedia and Its Antiquities. In the centre of the village of Bedia stands a beautiful sample of Georgian architecture – the Bedia monastic complex, which includes the church of the Virgin, the Episcopal palace, the bell tower, and the remnants of several other buildings necessary for monastic life. According to one of the authors of "The Life of Kartli," Leonti Mroveli, the city of Egrisi (modern Bedia) was built at this location and was called Egris (**Leonti Mroveli, 1955:** 5).

The Bedia Church is well known in both ancient Georgian and foreign sources. According to *"The Chronicle of Georgia,"* King Bagrat III of United Georgia (978-1014) (***Matiane Kartlisa*, 1955:** 281) is credited with having restored the church. According to the same sources, after his death, Bagrat III was buried at the Bedia Church (***Matiane Kartlisa*, 1955:** 283).

Information about Bedia can also be found in the writings of foreign trav-

elers. According to Arcangelo Lamberti, *"Bedia is built on a hill and is named after the Virgin Mary. The bishop is called "Bedieli"* (**Lamberti, 2020:** 64). Lamberti locates Bedia as an episcopal cathedral on 1654 map (**Tabaghua, 1986:** 51). Cristoforo Castelli mentions among Bedia's treasures a silver-covered cross, a white cloth with Greek inscriptions, a crucifix, and other Christian relics (**Castelli, 1976:** 172).

On February 10 of 1637, the Russian ambassador, Fedot Elchin, visited Bedia. He speaks about the treasury of Bedia, the activities of the Abkhazian Catholicos Andria Sakvarelidze at the Bedia Church (***Embasies*, 2014:** 297).

One of the first to take interest in the architectural style, inscriptions, and paintings of the church was Marie Brosset. During his travels in Georgia, she described the Bedia monastic complex along with other Georgian antiquities and photographed the ancient Georgian inscriptions remaining on the church.

The main building of the monastic complex is the Church of the Virgin Mary in the centre of the courtyard. To the west of it, 40 meters away, is the gateway, where the church bell tower is located. To the south of the church, the gateway connects to the residence of the Bedia Metropolitans, which is a two-story building. The church underwent significant renovation in 13th-14th centuries and again in the 15th century. The bell tower dates back to the 13th-14th centuries, while the episcopal palace was built in 16th century by the Bedia Metropolitan *Anton Zhuanisdze*. Art historians talk about the three layers of fresco paintings preserved in the church's interior, dating from the 10th-11th, 13th-14th, and 16th centuries (**Schmerling, 1957:** 504-511; **Shervashidze, 1980:** 42-66).

Currently, it is possible to read 12 full inscriptions. There are inscriptions that have only survived in fragments, and it cannot be ruled out that new epigraphic monuments may be discovered in the future. For example, in 2008, another inscription was found, which is part of the group of lapidary inscriptions (**Silogava, 2009:** 116-119). The social status of the historical figures mentioned in these epigraphic monuments varies. Among them, there are names of kings, *"diophalt-diophalta*" (Queen of the Queens), eristavs (*Heads of the regions*) and architects, Catholicos, metropolitans and numerous saints. The architect of the Bedia church was *Svymeon Galatoztukhutsesi* (*Head of the masons*, late 10th century), the Abkhazian Catholicos *Nikolaos Gonglibaisdze* (1280-90s), Bedia Metropolitans: *Sophron Gonglibaisdze* (13th-14th century), *Anton Zhuanisdze* (16th century), *Germane Chkhetidze* (17th-18th centuries), the patrons of the Bedia church during its construction and subsequent restoration: the first King of United Georgia, Bagrat III Bagrationi (978-1014), the King of Imereti, Konstantine Davit son of Narin (1293-1327), Odishi "Diophali" (*Queen*) Rodab and her son Kakhaber (13th century), the "Diopalt Diopali" (*Queen of the Queen*) of Odishi Marikhi and her son, the "Eristavt Eristavi"(*Head of the Heads*), and the Mandaturtukhutsesi (*Minister of the Interior*) Giorgi Dadiani (14th-15th centuries), Abkhazian Catholicos, or Bedia Archbishop Ioane Pharezasdze etc. The fresco images of saints are accompanied by preserved Georgian Asomtavruli (*ancient bloc capitals*) inscriptions, which inform us that there once were frescoes of the Virgin Mary, Saint Constan-

tine, Saint Helen, Saint Basil, Saint Gregory the Theologian, Saint Stephen, Saint Zacharias, Saint Nicholas, and others (**Shervashidze, 1980:** 7-29; **Akhaladze, 2005:** 21-74; **Akhaladze, 2018:** 86-89; **Akhaladze, 2021(a):** 139).

From a historical-source and paleographic perspective, these inscriptions are an important primary source for the study of the history of Georgia, its church, and specifically the history of the church itself.

1. *The Georgian Asomtavruli inscription of Svymeon Galatoztukhutsesi* is considered the oldest among the inscriptions in the Bedia church. It was placed on one of the stones of the western wall of the church. The inscription is now lost, and it is known in scientific literature by the name of Svymeon Galatoztukutsesi's inscription. A record of it is preserved in Marie Brosset's 8th Rapport (**Brosset, Rapp. VIII, 1849:** 94). All other publications are based on this publication, as the inscription had already been lost by the 1880s, and even Andrey Pavlinov, in his 1888 report, provides the Russian translation of the inscription based on Brosset's account (**Pavlinov, 1893:** 26). Furthermore, the inscription was published in 1893 in the journal *"Mtskemsi,"* which reviews the Bedia church and its inscriptions. According to Brosset, the text of Svymeon's inscription was published in lay transliterated form (***The Temple of Bedia*, 1893, #13:** 13-14), which is based on Brosset's publication. According to V. Silogava, the inscription of Symeon must have been destroyed during the church's restoration in the second half of the 19th century (**Silogava, 1980:** 38).

According to Marie Brosset's publication, the inscription was four lines long and informed us about construction of the Bedia church by Svymeon Galatoztukhutsesi. There is no disagreement on the dating, but the current dating of the Bedia Church's buildings to the 13th-14th centuries has caused ambiguity in the dating of Svymeon's inscription. According to Brosset, the inscription belongs to the period of the church's construction, i.e., the reign of Bagrat III. V. Silogava shows more caution in dating of inscription: "The inscription, in its content, seems to belong to the period of the construction of the Bedia church, so we date it from the 10th century" (**Silogava, 1980:** 38).

In specialized literature, the construction date of the Bedia Church has been considered to be 999 (**Chubinashvili, 1940:** 1-18). In the 2nd half of the 1960s, during the restoration of the church, a larger portion of the foundation of older, ancient buildings was discovered, partially supporting the current structure (**Khimshiashvili, 1968:** 77). This view was confirmed by architect-restorer I. Varsimashvili (**Varsimashvili, 1973:** 54).

In studying the architectural style of the Bedia Church, the renowned architect N. Severov stated that "the church should be classified among the earliest examples of the type of ancient Georgian religious buildings that became dominant in the 11th-12th centuries" (**Severov, 1947:** 193).

The issue of dating the original construction of the church and the frescoes has been discussed in our research (**Akhaladze, 1998:** 14-20; **Akhaladze, 2005**: 23-32), where, based on the survey work on the church and the historical-source analysis of Svymeon's inscription, the following conclusions were made:

1. Since part of the "decorative ornamentation" of the Bedia church is not in its original location, carries signs of reuse, and is the product of 10th-11th centuries craftsmanship (**Varsimashvili, 1973:** 54), it is likely that the stone slab, on which Svymeon Galatoztukhutsesi's inscription was carved, was reused during the church's substantial renovation or reconstruction, or in a subsequent rebuilding phase; 2. The term "Galatoztukhutsesi" (*Head of the masons*) in the inscription is found only in 10th-11th century Georgian epigraphy (in the inscriptions of Dikhazurga and Shorota), and it is not mentioned in any other sources, including narrative works, legal documents, or historical records. It seems that Svymeon Galatoztukhutsesi was a high-ranking official and a servant of the Georgian king, belonging to the council of elders at the royal court. Clearly, Svymeon Galatoztukhutsesi was a close associate of the royal court, considering the importance Bagrat attached to the construction of the Bedia church (evidenced by the specially made "sacred service" for the church and its transformation into a royal tomb, etc.). Therefore, it is understandable that such a significant task would have been entrusted to the kingdom's foremost and renowned architect; 3. Based on these arguments, it seems unwise to date the inscription according to the present-day buildings of the church. We still agree with this viewpoint today. In our opinion, the current structure of the Bedia church was built in the late 10th century, and its substantial renovation or reconstruction must have occurred during the reign of Konstantine Davit son of Narin (1293-1327), as confirmed by two subsequent inscriptions found at the church.

2. A 3-line Asomtavruli inscription of King of Kings Konstantine is carved on a stone slab inserted in the western wall of the bell tower of the Bedia Church. The first publication and dating of the inscription belong to Marie Brosset (**Brosset, Rapp. VIII, 1849:** 93). The King of Imereti, Konstantine, was rightly considered by Tedo Zhordania as the son of Davit (son of Narin), and based on this, the inscription was dated to 1327 (***Chronicles, 2*, 1897:** 179).

3. The inscription of Nikoloz the Catholicos, and Sophron of Bedia is carved on a stone slab located above the eastern entrance of the bell tower, which is part of the Bedia monastery complex. The information about this inscription was preserved in Marie Brosset's VIII Report (**Brosset, Rapp. VIII, 1849:** 93). This reading was corrected by Valery Silogava, who also clarified that Nikoloz the Catholicos and Sophron of Bedia belonged to the "Gonglisbaisdze" Georgian feudal family (**Silogava, 2004:** 286). Based on the study of the text of the inscription and other sources, it was determined that Nikoloz the Catholicos was the Catholicos of Abkhazia, and Sophron of Bedia was the Archbishop. Both were active during the reign of King Konstantine of the Abkhazian dynasty, at the turn of the 13th-14th centuries.

Both epigraphic monuments clearly point to the discoveries of the 1960s that significant restoration and construction work indeed took place at the Bedia monastery in the late 13th-14th centuries, and the initiator of this work was the King of Likhthimereti. Such construction could only be carried out by a strong authority with considerable influence and prestige in northwestern Georgia (**Akhaladze, 2005**: 35).

4. The Georgian Asomtavruli inscription of the Paresazdzes was discovered on an antefix in 2008. The three-line inscription was first read and published by V. Silogava. The text reads: *"K(riste), Sh(eitskhale) i(o) v(a)ne m(adi)bedeli mati Ph(a)r(e)z(a)sdze"* (**Silogava, 2004:** 119). When working on the inscription with V. Silogava, we had a different interpretation of the text, which we present here. In the second line of the inscription, after the graphemes *"i v n e,"* the text does not read *"m d m a t i"* as V. Silogava reads, but rather *"m d m t i,"* where the first 2 graphemes (*m* and *d*) have a diacritical mark over them, and the second one is placed over the *"t"* grapheme. Naturally, not every inscription has diacritical marks in the place the artisan intended, but in this case, the artisan seems to indicate that the grapheme *"t"* and *"n"* should be understood as part of a single word rather than 2 different words. This suggests that the artisan intended to represent the word *"m(ama)dmt(avar)i"* as a single word, rather than two separate words. It is clear that the graphemes *"m d m t i,"* even if represented with just one diacritical mark, would be sufficient to reconstruct the word *"mamadmtavari"* (meaning "the one who rules over the church"). We also note that the word „მათი" (mati) in inscriptions is often without the diacritical mark. This is not the case on the antefix at Bedia. Based on this, we think the text of the inscription should be interpreted as follows*: "K(riste), Sh(eitskhale) i(o)v(a)ne 'm(ama)dmt(avar)i,' Ph(a)r(e)z(a)sdze"* (Christ, be merciful to Ivane, the Chief, Pharesasdze"). To name first Christian name, title and then family name is traditional to Georgian epigraphs. Even more, this was the part and parcel of ancient Georgian language, because we frequently meet it in inscriptions. Here is ana example form Mokvi bell tower inscription: "Grigol Mokveli, the Archbishop Gudzanisdze (**Silogava, 2004:** 284; **Akhaladze, 2005:** 113).

Among inscriptions the significant ones are from Abkhazia, in Gudauta municipality, Khuapi church of Saint Nicholas, in Imereti, Jrutcha Saint George church etc. in all these churches the clerics are mentioned as "Mamadmtavari", of sometimes "Mamatmtavari". From the written souses the most ancient is the manuscript from Mount Sinai which presents the "Mamadmtavari" version (**Alexidze Z., 2007:** 24). The same word is given in Shatberdi and Tchelishi consolidated version: *„მ(ა)მადმთავარი და მწყემსი კეთილი, სამწყსოთა სულიერთა"* (The Chief and the Shepard kind, of the flocks spirituals) (**Abuladze, 1963:** 102).

Regarding the ecclesiastical office of "Mamadmtavari," this title has been used throughout the medieval period to refer to high-ranking clerics in the Georgian church, mostly Catholicos and, rarely, Archbishops. The earliest texts supporting this title include the ancient Georgian text *"Moktsevay Kartlisa"* (The Conversion of Kartli) and various inscriptions and historical documents, where Catholicos is referred to as "Mamadmthavari." A notable example is the seal of King Giorgi II of Georgia (1072-1089), where the title "Mamadmthavari of Kartli" is mentioned (**Enukidze.., 1984:** 70). As we can see, this ecclesiastical title appears in different forms in the sources: *"Mamadmtavari," "Mamatmtavari,"* and *"Mamamtavari."* According to the sources, the earliest form is *"Mamadmtavari,"* which is the version found in the Bedia inscription.

Thus, the Bedia Church antefix with a cross and an inscription naming *"Mamadmtavari Ioane Pharezasdze"* is evident. Ioane could either be the Catholicos of Abkhazia or the Archbishop of Bedia.

5. A three-line Asomtavruli inscription of Anton Bedieli is carved on the tympanum of the eastern right entrance of the Episcopal palace of Bedia monastery, on a reddish stone slab. The inscription was first noticed, published, and a graphic sketch was made by M. Brosset.

In 1988, during the cleaning works at Bedia church, the Episcopal palace was completely covered with vegetation. After it was cleaned, Anton Bedieli's inscription appeared, which had been hidden among the plant leaves. The inscription was damaged at the time, and parts of the second line and the entire third line were unreadable due to the flaking of the stone.

The third line of the inscription was reconstructed by V. Silogava based on the graphic sketch published by M. Brosset (**Silogava, 2004:** 296-297; **Akhaladze, 2005:** 52-58). The historical figure named in the inscription, Anton Zhuanisdze, was a prominent figure in the medieval Georgian Church (**Akhaladze, 1998:** 41-46; **Akhaladze, 2005:** 52-58). Under the leadership of Anton Bedieli, the episcopal palace in Bedia was built, which housed a library and the church's sacred vessels. Under Anton's direction and supervision, the restoration of Georgian manuscripts took place, notably the restoration of the Vardzia Gospel, a 12th-13th century manuscript of the Georgian translation by Giorgi Mtatsmindeli. The manuscript includes annotations, one of which refers to Anton Bedieli, the Archbishop.

The 11th-century manuscript of the Urbnisi Four Gospels, which was kept in Bedia's library, has added references. These were written in the 16th century on the free pages of the manuscript. In the third and fourth annotations, representatives of the Dadiani feudal family are mentioned. The fifth annotation refers to Bedieli, the Archbishop Zhuanisdze (***Description of Manuscripts*, 1957:** 308).

What stands out in the sources is Anton's ecclesiastical title. In the aforementioned inscriptions and annotations, he is referred to both as Archbishop and Metropolitan. It is easy to notice the chronological difference between Anton's Archbishopric and Metropolitan titles. In the annotations of the Vardzia and Urbnisi Gospels, when Anton is mentioned together with Mamia Dadiani, he is only referred to by the title of Archbishop. In the inscription of the icon of Saint George of Ilori by Levan I Dadiani, both titles – Archbishop and Metropolitan – are mentioned, while in the inscription of Bedia's Episcopal palace, his ecclesiastical title is defined only as Metropolitan.

To clarify this issue, it is important to establish the exact date of the Ilori icon, as it reflects the transitional period in the title of Bedieli bishops, with the replacement of the Archbishop title by Metropolitan (this change seems to have occurred during the rule of Levan I Dadiani) (**Akhaladze, 2005:** 56).

In our opinion, the mention of Levan I Dadiani as the Mandaturtukhutsesi in the Ilori inscription determines the dating of the icon, which should be placed between 1533 and 1545. This date helps to establish the period of Anton Bedieli's

Metropolitan title, which should be after 1545. This is because, in the Ilori inscription, Anton is referred to by both ecclesiastical titles, while in the annotations of Vardzia and Urbnisi Gospels, he is mentioned only with the title of Archbishop (**Akhaladze, 2005:** 57-58). This reasoning allows us to date the annotations in the Urbnisi and Vardzia manuscripts to the period between 1633 and 1645.

Anton Bedieli's activity in the Bedia Cathedral can be divided into three periods: *Period I* – During the reign of Mamia III, when Anton held only the title of Archbishop; *Period II* – The 1st period of Levan I Dadiani's rule (1533-1545), during which Anton simultaneously held the titles of Archbishop and Metropolitan; *Period III* – After 1545, when the title of Metropolitan became definitively established in the titles of the Bedieli clergy.

According to this, the change in the ecclesiastical title of the Bedieli bishops occurred during Levan I's reign, around 1533-1545. This is further confirmed by the fact that Anton is the first Bedieli Bishop mentioned with the title of Metropolitan in the sources. Prior to this, the bishops only held the title of Archbishop (**Akhaladze, 2005:** 58).

Naturally, the construction of the episcopal palace in Bedia, considering Anton's ecclesiastic titles, should be dated to the period after 1545, meaning after Anton was solely referred to by the title of Metropolitan.

6. Fragment of Asomtavruli Inscription on the Fresco of King Bagrat. Among the frescoes in the Bedia Church, the oldest is the fresco of King Bagrat III on the southern wall, where the king, dressed in luxurious royal attire and a crown, is depicted in full alongside a model of the church. During our visits to the church in 1988 and 1991, the fresco was heavily damaged, and some of the explanatory inscription's individual letters were faint, but the inscription could still be read above the king's halo from top to bottom. Based on the missing (erased) parts of the inscription, it can be assumed that the inscription would have originally been presented without so called "Karagma" (cryptic symbol): "Bagrat" (**Akhaladze, 2005:** 59).

The dating of Bagrat's fresco to the 10th-11th centuries was proposed by R. Schmerling (**Schmerling, 1957:** 504-511), and this dating was accepted by the art historian Leon Shervashidze (**Shervashidze, 1980:** 43-67), a view with which we agree.

This highly competent scientific dating of Bagrat's fresco to the 10th-11th centuries suggests that the reconstruction of the Bedia Church did not take place at the end of the 13th or 14th centuries, but rather than a substantial reconstruction and possibly even an expansion occurred during that time.

7. Fragments of Georgian Asomtavruli Inscriptions on the Fresco of the Nobility. On the northern wall of the church, there is a fresco depicting the entire family of a Georgian noble. In front of the richly dressed figures of a man and a woman stand 2 young men. Fragments of Asomtavruli inscriptions are preserved near the figure of the woman and one of the young men. To the right of the woman's figure, from the top to the bottom, the following inscription can be read in Asomtavruli: *"Odab."* M. Brosset read this inscription as *[R]odab*, which was also supported by René Schmerling and is confirmed by the version seen in the copy

of the Bedia fresco held in the State Museum of Georgian Art, which was taken in 1939 by G. Eristavi (**Vachnadze D.,** 2021: 39). During the restoration works in Bedia in 1988, the faint white outlines of the inscription could be discerned. The inscription was painted in white, top to bottom. According to the interpretations by M. Brosset, René Schmerling, and the preserved copy of the fresco, the name of the distinguished lady is read as: "[R]odab" (**Akhaladze, 2005:** 60).

The fragment of the inscription near the figure of the young man was likely presented in four lines. The first line is unreadable, the second line retains two combined characters. The third and fourth lines show two characters each. The inscription, as intended by the artist, was read from top to bottom: *".../...dze/[Ka] kha/[Be]ri"* (**Akhaladze, 2005:** 61).

Based on the missing parts of the inscription, René Schmerling's reconstructions appear to be the most optimal. It seems that the man standing behind the young man is his father, and the inscription, accordingly is read *"dze Kakhaberi."* The frescoes of Rodab and Kakhaberi with the corresponding inscriptions were dated by René Schmerling from 10th-11th centuries.

Our cautious assumption is that the above mentioned fresco depicts Giorgi II Dadiani with his family, including his wife Rusudan and sons Vamekh and Kakhaber. In the inscription for the distinguished lady, should it not be read as *[R] o[s]o[da]n?* And could the letter 'ბ' (b) points out the beginning of another word?

Recently, T. Jojua expressed the opinion that, according Mari Brosset's reading, the inscription should not be read as *"[R]odab,"* but rather as *"Qor|da|b,"* or "ქურ|და|ბ" ("Kurdab"), and his identification of this name is based on the mention of *"di|of{a}lta diop|li qurdab"* in the synaxarion of the Cross Monastery, №272. According to T. Jojua's hypothesis, Giorgi II Dadiani had not two, but three wives, and the queen mentioned in the synaxarion, *Kurdab(i)*, should be his third wife. Therefore, the woman depicted in the Bedia fresco is indeed Giorgi II Dadiani's wife Kurdab, and the two names refer to the same person (**Jojua T., 2021:** 169-174). Based on this, the inscription can be dated to the second half of the 14th century.

The Bedia fresco indicates that the portrait depicts Giorgi II and his family, which reflects the relationship of the Dadiani feudal house with the Bedia Church, the monastic centre.

8. *The "Deopal"(queen) inscription of Marikh and Giorgi Dadiani*, written in Georgian Asomtavruli (block capitals) inscription is preserved on the fresco of the northern wall of Bedia Cathedral, among the donor portraits. The inscription mentions "Deopal" Marikh and Giorgi Dadiani. The first publication of this inscription was made by M. Brosset with a French translation (**Brosset, Rapp. VIII, 1849:** 92), followed by A. Pavlinov's Russian version (**Pavlinov, 1893:** 26), and later, art historian R. Schmerling studied the paleographical features of the "Deopal" Marikh inscription during the dating of the Bedia church paintings (**Schmerling, 1957:** 504-511). The fresco depicts a distinguished lady and a young man. The "Deopal" 's figure is especially clear in the portrayal of her attire. She is dressed in luxurious clothing, her face calm, with a crown decorated with precious

stones, and a white veil up to her shoulders. The young man's face is more open in the fresco. Both figures are depicted in a praying pose, with their hands raised in front of the altar, and they have halos above their heads.

The inscription is placed between their halos and is written in a grayish paint. A long wavy line marks the "karagma" sign, and two dots indicate a break in the text. Some of the characters are written with the final stroke marks. The beginning of the third line and two characters near the woman's halo are unreadable, but these missing characters do not hamper a correct reading of the inscription. Our reading of it is*: "Deopal(t) Deopali [ma]rikh/ [dze]mati e(risthav)t e(risthav) i da madatu/ruthukhutkhutsi Dadi(a)ni G(iorg)i"* (Queen of the queens Marikh, their son the Eristavi of the Eritavs and Mandaturtukhutsei Dadiani Giorgi) (**Akhaladze, 2005:** 63).

According to M. Brosset, Giorgi Dadiani should be Giorgi III (1572-1582), the son of Levan I Dadiani (1533-1572) (**Brosset, Rapp. VIII, 1849:** 92). A. Pavlinov repeated Brosset's interpretation, while R. Schmerling and L. Shervashidze dated this layer of the Bedia painting to the second half of the 16th century. A somewhat different view was expressed by Sh. Amiranashvili in the introduction to N. Tolmachevskaya's monograph, where he suggested that Giorgi Dadiani and Marikh lived sometime in the 13th century (**Tolmachevskaya, 1930:** 8). According to T. Zhordania, "Deopalth Deopali" Marikh mentioned in the Bedia inscription should be Giorgi II (1345-1384) mother and the wife of Mamia I (1325-1345) (***Chronicles, 2,* 1897:** 199).

Based on the analysis of the fresco inscription and other sources, primarily epigraphic monuments, and through the identification of Deopal Marikh from the Khobi, Bedia, and Tsalenjikha frescoes, we conclude that the young man depicted in the Bedi fresco, the prince of princes, and the Mandaturtukhutsesi, Giorgi Dadiani, is the senior son of Vamekh I. This person was previously unknown in historiography. Vamekh, after the death of Giorgi II Dadiani (1345-1384) in 1384, became Dadiani under the protection of Bagrat V. However, sources confirm that Vamekh was active in political life even during his father's lifetime. The fact that Vamekh is mentioned as Mandaturtukhutsesi during the reign of Giorgi II suggests that Vamekh was a prominent political figure at the court of Bagrat V (1360-1393), and so he got the title of court official during his father's lifetime.

It is notable that Vamekh emphasizes his loyalty to the central authorities and the unified Georgian state in all his actions. In 1927, a coin was found in Sokhumi, which depicts the face of a man, and on the reverse, a Georgian Asomtavruli inscription reading *"Vamekhi."* It has been suggested that this coin belonged to Vamekhi I (**Kapanadze D. , 1955:** 95), and we share this view. After his successful endeavors in the churches of Khobi and Tsalenjikha, Vamekh's cultural programme seems to have included the restoration of Bedia Cathedral. It is possible that he had already started restoration work, but after his death, his wife *"Deopal"* Marikh continued his plans.

We think that by the time of the fresco painting at Bedia, Vamekh had already passed away, that is why he is not mentioned in the inscription with his wife and children in the donor inscription. Finally, we can conclude that the histori-

cal figures mentioned in the Bedi fresco inscription, "Deopalt Deopali" Marikh and the prince of princes and Mandaturtukhutsesi Giorgi Dadiani, are Vamekh I (1384-1396) wife and eldest son.

9. Inscriptions of Saints on the Frescos. Between 1988 and 1991, a small portion of the inscriptions from the frescoes in Bedia Cathedral was preserved. According to data from those years, we can unequivocally say that the inscriptions in the cathedral included references to Saint Constantine, Saint Helena, Saint Basil, Saint Gregory the Theologian, Saint Stephen, Saint Zacharias, Saint Nicholas, and the Most Holy Mother of the God. The inscriptions can be grouped as memorial inscriptions of the Bedia Cathedral, with up to 10 inscriptions falling under this category. Some of these inscriptions appear to still be present in the cathedral. In 2002, photos were taken specifically for us, but unfortunately, the inscriptions were not legible. The condition of the fresco inscriptions is even more unclear today, but with modern video and photo materials, we can visually observe the deteriorating condition of the frescoes and their explanatory inscriptions. These materials indicate that the condition of the Bedia frescoes is deteriorating from year to year.

10. Bagrat of the Kings of Abkhazia and Queen Gurandukht's Asomtavruli Inscription is carved on the rim of a chalice from Bedia Cathedral. According to G. Chubinashvili, the chalice was made from a single solid lump of pure gold (**Chubinashvili, 1959:** 312). The primary donor inscription on the rim of the chalice is beautifully carved in Georgian Asomtavruli script. The inscription's execution demonstrates that the artist skillfully calculated the necessary space for the Asomtavruli script and adhered to its traditional cutting technique. We think the calligrapher was highly skilled in the art of engraving text on metal and was likely a renowned master of his time. The inscription does not contain any "karagma" signs, but the artist spaced the words appropriately to make the text easily readable (**Akhaladze, 2000:** 50; **Silogava, 2004:** 313; **Vachnadze D., 2021:** 32). According to G. Chubinashvili, since Bagrat is not referred to by the title of "Curopalate" in the inscription, it indicates that the inscription was made before Bagrat acquired this title. Based on this argument and a reference found in the Dadiani Chronicles by T. Zhordania, the researcher dated the creation of the Bedia chalice and the construction of the cathedral to between 989 and 999 (**Chubinashvili 1940:** 1-17). This dating is widely accepted in scholarly circles.

11. Explanatory Inscriptions for Saints' Figures on the Rim. The artifact has a spherical surface with 12 sections. Within each arch is the figure of a saint, with the entire rim decorated with images of the Savior, the Mother of the God, and various saints. According to G. Chubinashvili, these figures are grouped around the two main images of the Savior and the Mother of God, which are positioned opposite each other (**Chubinashvili, 1959:** 312). Around these 2 figures, there are 12 sections, each containing the image of the Savior, the Mother of God, and other saints. Each of these figures is accompanied by an explanatory inscription, though the image of the Mother of God does not have an inscription, while the Savior's inscription is in Greek.

The inscription on the Savior's depiction is followed by the names of 10 saints, each with an explanatory inscription. Paleographical analysis of the inscriptions suggests that the inscription by King Bagrat of Abkhazia and Queen Gurandukht and the saints' depictions were made by the same artist, thus dating them to the second half of the 10th century (**Akhaladze, 2000:** 52; **Silogava, 2004:** 310-312).

12. The Inscription of Germane Chkhetidze on the Rim of Bedia Cathedral (17th Century). In 1865, D. Bakradze visited Ilori monastery and examined the rim of Bedia Cathedral, which, during the later period, had been attached to a column. He noted an inscription carved on the rim, which he copied. Upon his second visit to Ilori, D. Bakradze confirmed that the rim was now detached, and the inscription had been lost. Unfortunately, information about this inscription is only preserved in D. Bakradze's work.

Metropolitan Germane Chkhetidze of Bedia is known from other sources, and based on these, his activities in Bedia Cathedral can be dated to the 17th century.

The broad mosaic of written monuments from Bedia monastery suggests that the library at Bedia was still operational until the 16th century. In the 16th century, the Archbishop of Bedia, Anton Zhuanisdze, was able to build the Episcopal palace and expand the existing library, thanks to the support of the Dadiani feudal house.

After the destruction of the literary schools of Tao-Klarjeti at the end of the 16th century, some calligraphers sought refuge in Kartli, while others fled to Western Georgia. Symbolically, Metropolitan Germane Chkhetidze, who later embellished the Bedia cathedral's base, invited calligraphers Gabriel Lomsanisdze, Svimeon Giorgisdze, and Ambrose Kargareteli from Shavsheti to renew the altar (***Description of Manuscripts*, 1976:** 319; see also **Akhaladze, 1998:** 31-32; **Akhaladze, 2005:** 46-48).

The Churches and Inscriptions of Ghumurishi. In the cultural mosaic of Samurzakano, the two churches of Ghumurishi draw attention. The oldest of these is the church located in the Ghumurishi mountain ridge, which was studied by L. Shervashidze in the 1960s. Even earlier, in 1953, local historian N. Shonia found a Georgian epigraphic monument near the church ruins, known by the inscription *"Sagdukht Deopalt Deopali."* The inscription, deciphered by T. Barnaveli, was published twice by Khukhuti Bgazhba (**Bgazhba, 1959:** 251; **Bgazhba, 1967:** 13). The archaeological description of the inscription, its text, and the Russian translation have been included in several publications and dissertations (**Silogava, 1980:** 126-127; **Akhaladze, 1998:** 47-52; (**Silogava**, **2004:** 267-268; **Akhaladze, 2005:** 76-83). The inscription was kept in the State Museum of Abkhazia. It is carved on a gray limestone slab, which features a relief ornamented cross; the cross and inscription are damaged, with the upper horizontal arms broken off. The lower arm of the cross remains, with an inscription in equal-sized Asomtavruli letters on both sides. The beginning of the inscription is not visible, as it was placed at the top of the vertical arms of the cross, while the last four lines of the inscription are readable at the bottom part of the arms. Due to the breaking of the stone, the last letter of the second line is unreadable.

When assessing the historical and source-critical value of the inscription,

some details in the opening of the "karagma" in the text drew our attention. According to T. Barnaveli's reading, the second line of the inscription's karagma is დფლთა (dplta) დფლ[ი] (dpl[i]), which is interpreted as *"Queen of Queens."* In earlier editions, this cryptogram was not interpreted in this way, as such a reading might lead to the incorrect identification of the person referred to in the inscription (Sagdukht).

In other sources, we encounter the names of queens and the wives, mothers, or daughters of local rulers (the princes of princes). However, their titles differ in the cryptic writing, where their social status is clearly maintained and can be distinguished. Specifically, if the queen of the country is mentioned in the source, her title is always presented cryptically as *"d(e)d(o)p(a)lth d(e)d(o)p(a)l(i)"* or simply *"d(e)d(o)p(a)l(i)"*. On the other hand, if the wife or mother of the prince of princes is mentioned, the cryptogram appears as *"d(e)(o)p(a)lt d(e)(o)p(a)li"* or *"d(i)o(p) al(t) d(i)o(p)a(li)"*. This represents a "weakened" form of the title "Queen," and it becomes clear to the reader that the inscription refers to a woman of a lower rank, though still a distinguished lady.

Often, "d(i)opalth d(i)opali" or "d(e)opalth d(e)opali" is considered a western Georgian variant of the title for a queen. Naturally, this is a general Georgian phenomenon, used only when referring to a wife or mother of a prince of princes, a woman of a higher rank but lower than the queen.

Thus, the cryptic inscription in the Ghumurishi text should be interpreted as "d(e)opalth d(e)opali," which suggests that Sagdukht cannot be considered the queen of the country, meaning she was not the wife of the king (**Akhaladze, 2005:** 77-80).

The Ghumurishi inscription refers to historical figures from the 1st half of the 11th century: the Prince of Princes of Ratcha and Novelisimos Niania, and his daughter, the wife of the Prince of Odishi, Deopalt Deopali Sagdukht. She is involved in the patronage of a church in Odishi and most likely founded the church in the ruins of which this inscription was found.

The second church of Ghumurishi was built in the 19th century by the local population. According to the information provided by local historian Nodar Shonia, the church was constructed on the site of an older church, which was likely from the 11th century. During the Soviet era, the church was used as a collective farm warehouse. In the early 21st century, the locals cleaned the church, and as a result, in 2006, numerous tombstones with Georgian inscriptions were uncovered (**Akhaladze, 2006:** 208-211). It seems that Ghumurishi and its surrounding area belonged to the private estates of the Emkhvaris or the Anchabadzes.

Recently, several more inscriptions – a tombstone epitaph – were discovered in the churchyard. Among these, there is a distinct 7-line relief inscription in Nuskhuri script. Decoding the inscription requires cleaning the stone's surface of construction debris, after which reading the text will become much more valid.

The Monastery of Tskelikari and Its Inscriptions. In 1962, an ancient church was discovered in the village of Rechkhotskhiri. During the excavations, L. Shervashidze found Georgian lapidary and fresco inscriptions. The surrounding artifacts found during the excavations suggest that there was once a monastic

complex here. Local inhabitants refer to this Christian shrine as Tskelikari.

In studying the architectural style and fresco paintings, L. Shervashidze expressed the opinion that the church was likely built in the 11th century, with frescoes from two periods – one from the 11th century and another from the late feudal era, specifically the 16th-17th centuries.

The lapidary and fresco inscriptions from Tskelikari were published with accurate readings in 2005 (**Akhaladze, 2005:** 87-96). Let's examine each of their historical significance.

***1. The Inscription of the Altar's Construction*:** The inscription related to the erection of the altar was found on a plastered and painted wall. L. Shervashidze considered it to be written in Asomtavruli script, while V. Silogava argued that the inscription was done in the correct epigraphic Nuskhuri script. The inscription was damaged at the time of discovery as it was covered by a thin layer of plaster and paint. Only a fragmentary reading of the inscription was possible: *"This altar was erected by [name], may Giorgi have mercy [...] in the times [...]"*. Based on paleographic evidence, Shervashidze dated the church to the 11th century.

***2. Fragment of the Priest Merkile's Inscription*:** A 6-line Asomtavruli inscription fragment is preserved on five pieces of a limestone slab. The inscription is likely housed in the State Museum of Abkhazia. There is some disagreement about the reading of this inscription. L. Shervashidze stated that the fifth line was unclear, while V. Silogava restored the name of a man as *"Tarkil"* based on the remaining *"rkil"* graphemes. However, in our view, the restoration of the name as *"Merkile"* is more plausible, as it is clear from Teimuraz Barnaveli's graphic reconstruction that after *"rkil"* the letter "i" or "e" followed. Thus, it seems more accurate to restore the inscription as *"(Me)rkile"*, a name commonly found in the historical onomastic and epigraphic sources of western Georgia.

In addition to this difference, in T. Barnaveli's graphic reconstruction, the sixth line contains the Asomtavruli characters ⴆⴓⴚⴔ ("khutse"), which can be read as "khutse" (priest). This was not considered by Silogava, or it seems he did not agree with this reading, as the damaged fourth fragment might have obscured these letters. We think there is no reason to disregard T. Barnaveli's graphic reconstruction, as it clearly shows that during the discovery of the fourth fragment, these characters – ⴆⴓⴚⴔ("khutse") – were readable. Taking into account the tradition of Georgian inscriptions and Barnaveli's graphic reconstruction, we restored the word "khutse(s)" (priest) at this spot.

Leon Shervashidze interprets Teimuraz Barnaveli's reading of the inscription as "khotse[sa]" (priest or leader) as "mthavartukhut'esi" (chief priest) or "molaretukhut'sesi" (senior priest). Since there is a free space before "khotse[sa]," it could potentially be "mthavartukhut'esi" or "molaretukhutsesi" (**Shervashidze, 1967:** 52). In our opinion, neither "mtavartukhutesi" (a title that did not exist in Georgian reality) nor "molaretukhursesi" is plausible because no noble in this region of Georgia ever held such titles. Moreover, it is known that the Dadianis family held the titles of "msakhurtukhutsesi" (Vardan Dadiani) and later "manda-

turtukhutsesi" (Bedani, Vamekh I, Giorgi, Khajigi, Ozbegi, Shamdavla, Levan I, and others). If we consider the dating of the church to the 11th century by Leon Shervashidze, then the restoration of "mandat'urtukhutsesi" in this inscription is not possible, as this title was adopted by the Dadiani family much later. Based on the oral recommendation of Zaza Aleksidze, it is suggested that the inscription could be interpreted as "khutsesi" (priest), which we gladly accept. Therefore, the inscription can be restored as follows:

"[This is] for the sake of [Saint] George, the priest [in Tskelikari], may mercy be upon the servant of Christ, [Merkiles], [who is a priest] at the end of days" (**Akhaladze, 2005:** 89-92). Based on paleographic evidence, the inscription should be dated to the 11th century.

3. The Rusha Inscription. The 3-line inscription, a mix of Nuskhuri and Asomtavruli scripts, is carved onto a limestone slab with deep cuts. The first letters of the second and third lines are damaged, and the ends of the lines on the right side of the slab are missing. According to L. Shervashidze, the inscription is in Asomtavruli script, but Valeri Silogava considers it to be in Nuskhuri. In our opinion, the inscription contains both Asomtavruli and Nuskhuri script, so it should be classified as a mixed Asomtavruli-Nuskhuri inscription. The inscription reads: *"[This is] for the sake of Saint George, who showed mercy to Rusha, may mercy be upon him, the servant of Christ"* (**Silogava, 2004:** 272). Paleographic features suggest the inscription is from the 11th century.

It is impossible to reconstruct the cultural history of Samurzakhano without considering the Ilori church. Architecturally, the Ilori church has been studied by the Abkhazian scientist Anatoli Katsia. He acknowledges that the church was one of the important ecclesiastical centers in western Georgia but claims that it was built on a site of worshipping of the ancient Abkhaz heathen deity "Elir-Nikhas" (**Katsia, 1968**). In our opinion, this claim does not stand up to criticism because the name "Ilori" is applied to numerous villages in Georgia.

The Ilori church, with its harmonious proportions and technical execution, belongs to the architectural traditions of medieval Georgia, reflecting the artistic aspirations of the leading regions of the time. It is a single-nave structure with an apse, featuring various annexes on the north, south, and west sides. Unfortunately, during the restoration conducted between 2005 and 2011, the church lost its authenticity, as a so-called "Russian dome" was added, and both the interior and exterior were whitewashed. As a result, none of the six Georgian inscriptions that once existed on the eastern façade are readable today (for more details on the authenticity issues of the church, see: **Akhaladze, 2011:** 9-15).

Currently, only lapidary inscriptions remain on the façade. The frescoes and other inscriptions are not preserved because, after the church was repaired by the ruler of Samegrelo, Levan II Dadiani (1611-1657), in the 17th century, it was later burned by the Ottomans in 1736 (**Vakhushti, 1973:** 886). After this tragedy, in the 17th and later in the 19th century, the rulers of Samegrelo significantly restored the Ilori church and whitewashed its walls.

All inscriptions at Ilori are carved on stone slabs embedded in the eastern façade of the church. The first two stones each have two inscriptions, the third one has one inscription, and the fourth stone contains a faintly readable three-line inscription. The inscriptions were first published by A. Katsia and Kh. Bgazhba, based on the reading of T. Barnaveli (**Katsia, 1963:** 50; **Bgazhba, 1967**). Later, in the 1970s, V. Silogava also worked on these inscriptions, and in the 1990s, the Author of this chapter contributed significantly to the study.

A) Galatoz' Inscription is damaged, and its end has been washed away due to the weathering of the stone. According to the paleographic transcription, the text reads: *"For the sake of Saint George, Ilori [blessed] Galatoz"* (**Silogava, 1980:**159). This inscription is dated to the 1st quarter of the 11th century, based on the period of construction of the church.

B) The Inscription of Archbishop Giorgi: On the 1st stone, there is a one-line inscription written in a Georgian script, which is also damaged due to erosion. The inscription's middle and final parts were washed away, and the stone was coated with lime. There is some disagreement over the exact reading of the inscription:

Teimuraz Barnaveli's interpretation: "For the sake of Saint George, blessed Archbishop Giorgi" (**Katsia, 1963:** 46).

Valeri Silogava's interpretation: "For the sake of Saint George, blessed... Giorgi..." (**Silogava, 2004:** 273).

In our opinion, we should trust T. Barnaveli's graphic interpretation, as he worked directly at the site and provided a detailed graphical diagram. Based on A. Katsia's published work, we accept Barnaveli's reading and restore the text as: *"For the sake of Saint George, blessed Archbishop Giorgi."*

Paleographic evidence suggests that this inscription belongs to the period of the church's construction and can be dated to the 1st quarter of the 11th century. Based on historical context, this Archbishop Giorgi is most likely Giorgi of Bedia, as Ilori was part of the Bedia bishopric.

C) Inscription Fragment: On the 2nd stone of the eastern façade, according to A. Katsia, two inscriptions are carved: one in Asomtavruli and the other in Nuskhuri script. The Asomtavruli inscription is three lines long and appears to be fragmented. According to T. Barnaveli's reading, it reads: *"[For the sake of] Saint George, [of Ilori]... Son of... [blessed]"* (**Katsia, 1963:** 46). V. Silogava's interpretation of the inscription is slightly different, but it also reflects a damaged text: *"For the sake of... [Michael]... [blessed]."*

D) Inscription of Giorgi, Son of Gurgen: This inscription is a 3-line Asomtavruli inscription carved on a stone slab, which is located to the right of the relief image of Saint George, near the roof ridge of the church. The inscription was made with fine lettering. The left edge of the slab, where the initial lines of the inscription are carved, was once covered with plaster, which today is entirely whitewashed.

"[Tsmidao] G(iorg)i / [Ilo]ris(a)o [Sh(eitskal)e] / G(iorg)i Gurge[n]-is dze" (O, Saint George of Ilori, have mercy on the Giorgi, son of Gurgen).

Giorgi, son of Gurgen, which is known to us from this inscription is un-

known from other sources available to us. However, it seems that he was a local nobleman who, for his patronage during the construction of the temple, received the right to be commemorated in inscriptions. An interesting parallel can be drawn between the building epigraphic monuments of Abkhazia and Javakheti. It is known that in the 12th century, a representative of the feudal family of the Gurgens, Ichkit Gurgenidze, was engaged in patronage activities in southern Georgia. His name is mentioned in three lapidary inscriptions from Javakheti, two of which were found in the Vani (Vahan) caves (***Epigraphy of Javakheti*, 2012:** 46-47, 132-133).

We do not know the connection between Javakhetian Ichkit Gurgenidze and Samurzakano Giorgi Gurgenidze, but it is a fact that both were involved in patronage and actively participated in the cultural life of Georgia during their respective periods. We do not rule out the possibility that one branch of the Gurgenidze family migrated to western Georgia during the period when the Kingdom of Abkhazia controlled Javakheti. The Gurgenidze family is also found in Racha, and according to Ioane Batonishvili, the family represented one of the fiefdoms of Kakheti and was originally from the Shilda (**Bagrationi I., 1997:** 46).

E) Giorgi Kocholava's Inscription: Another inscription of historical significance is found on the eastern façade of the Ilori church, engraved on the third stone identified by A. Katsia. This inscription consists of five lines. T. Barnaveli believed that it was written in Asomtavruli, while V. Silogava attributed it to the Nuskhuri script. In our opinion, Giorgi Kocholava's inscription is more inclined towards Asomtavruli script. The engraved slab is placed in the eastern wall of the church, above, towards the southeast corner. The script is written in a rounded, cursive style, and due to the washing of the slab, some parts of the inscription are faded. According to the paleographic transcription, the text reads: *"O, Saint] George, have mercy on the Giorgi Kocholava, the priest; O, Saint George become protector on this great day"* (**Silogava, 2004:** 275-276; **Akhaladze, 2005:** 101-103).

Ilori's 6th inscription is also engraved on the eastern façade of the church. It is executed in Nuskhuri script, consists of three lines, and belongs to the same period as the other five inscriptions. Unfortunately, this inscription was carefully washed and partially erased.

Ilori inscriptions hold great historical and scholarly value for the study of the history of Georgian script development. From a paleographic perspective, it is noteworthy that six inscriptions were engraved on the façade of this small, seemingly insignificant church. Remarkably, these inscriptions represent all three stages of the development of the Georgian script: Asomtavruli, Nuskhuri, and Mkhedruli scripts. In Georgian epigraphy, it is rare to find inscriptions in all three forms of the Georgian alphabet on one church.

Thus, the famous Ilori Church in Samurzakano and all of western Georgia was built in the early 11th century, dedicated to St. George, during the reign of king Bagrat III Bagrationi (978-1014). The secular and ecclesiastical founders were: the local feudal lord Giorgi Gurgenidze, Archbishop Giorgi (presumably Bedieli – from Bedia), and priest Giorgi Kocholava. Among the builders of the church, Giorgi Gala-

tozi and the secular figure Michael, who may also have been a builder, are mentioned.

Dikhazurga and Its Ancient Monuments. Several cultural monuments attract attention in Dikhazurga and its surroundings: 1. The Church of St. Barbara, 2. An inscription discovered at the beginning of the 20th century in the churchyard, 3. The Satanjo fortress.

The current ruins of the church in Dikhazurga are referred to as the Church of St. Barbara. It was built in the 19th century on the ruins of an older church. At the beginning of the 20th century, peasants found two stones in the churchyard. One had a figure of a man with a Georgian inscription, and the other had just a figure of a man.

Historian Mose Janashvili described the church where the inscribed stone was found as being located on the right bank of the Enguri river, in the estate of the noble Mikaia. According to the researcher, the church was apparently built from the same white limestone used for the aforementioned stones with the Georgian inscriptions, human figures, and crosses (**Janashvili, 1907:** 19). He read the inscription as: *"K. Grigol Galatozi, the elder, Let Him God forgive"*. M. Janashvili reissued the inscription in the notes of Vakhushti Batonishvili's "Geography of Georgia." Afterward, the inscription of Grigol was temporarily lost, but it was rediscovered, this time in the cemetery of Dikhazurga. After its second discovery, the inscription was preserved at the Gali Regional Museum. Currently, the stone slab is kept at the Sameba Cathedral in Tbilisi.

The 4-line Mkhedruli inscription of Grigol Galatozi, the elder, is engraved on a white limestone slab. The upper part (head) of the slab is finely smoothed, and in the middle, a cross with a raised relief is depicted, with thickened ends. The slab is damaged, and the sides have been broken off. The upper left arm of the cross is also broken, which was not visible in M. Janashvili's photograph. It seems the slab was damaged at a relatively later period. Despite this, the damage does not hinder the reading of the inscription, which is fully legible: *"K. Gr(i)gols G(a)l(a)t(o)s[t]ukh(u)tse[s]s, sh(e)und(o)s g(mertm)a(n) a(me)n"* (Christ. Let God forgive Galatostukhutsesi Grigol).

In dating the inscription, M. Janashvili paid attention to the type of script, which, at the time the inscription was made, "should have been already developed and fully formed from the ancient 'Khutsuri' script in the X-XI centuries. The construction of the same church, from the ruins of which these stones with Georgian inscriptions and human figures were extracted, should be attributed to this period" (**Janashvili, 1907:** 19).

The historical significance of this inscription is invaluable, both as it records an administrative term and as one of the earliest instances of the use of the Mkhedruli script in western Georgia. The inscriptions of Bedieli Simeon and Dikhazurga's Grigol Galatozi, the elder, are unique in that this administrative term appears only in the inscriptions of Bedia, Dikhazurga, and Shorota. Naturally, the term "Galatozi" appears in sources, but "Galatoztukhutsesi" does not. As noted above, this administrative term was created at the time of the unification of the country, when the royal court, due to the need to assume control over ecclesiastical and

secular construction initiatives, introduced it. Accordingly, the inscriptions of Svymeon and Grigol belong to the same chronological period.

The Satanjo fortress-tower is located on the Satanjos mountain near Dikhazurga. It is believed to have been built in the 17th century using limestone and sand. According to P. Tskhadaia and B. Khorava, a monument of Georgian architecture from the Middle Ages is preserved on the slope of Satanjo Mountain – a three-story tower known as the Otsartse tower, which the local population refers to as the Satanjo fortress. The fortress includes a tower and is surrounded by a wall (**Tskhadaia, Khorava, 2016:** 141). It seems the authors consider Satanjo and Otsartse to be the same fortress, but according to Sergi Makalatia, these are two different fortresses (**Makalatia, 2006:** 309-310).

Gudava Church and Its Inscriptions. On the left bank of the Okumi river, 12 km from the centre of Gali, lies the historic village of Gudava. Humans have lived here since the late 2nd millennium BC . In the late antiquity and early Middle Ages, Gudava was a city-type settlement and was known by the name Zigana or Zegani. Gudava was part of a system of fortresses that protected the approach to the Roman Empire's Anatolian provinces. In the 4th-5th centuries, a Roman cohort was stationed here. The rise of Gudava is indicated by the fact that in the 7th-10th centuries, one of the four episcopal sees of Lazica was in Gudava. As is known, in the second half of the 10th century, the first king of united Georgia, Bagrat III, abolished the Episcopate of Gudava and established a new cathedral in Bedia: "He built the church in Bedia and made it the cathedral, and transferred the episcopate from Gudava" (***Matiane Kartlisa*, 1955:** 281). It seems Gudava was a significant centre of Byzantine ecclesiastical policy in Georgia. Thus, the abolition of Gudava's Episcopate was prompted by the strengthening of the unified Georgian feudal monarchy and the necessity to form a unified Georgian religious and ecclesiastical policy. After this, Gudava, as a large ecclesiastical centre, is no longer mentioned in the sources. On the 1654 map by Arcangelo Lamberti, Gudava is recorded in its folk form "Guda" (**Tabaghua, 1986:** *Map of Colchis*).

In the courtyard of Gudava church, a stone slab was found, which, according to local residents, had been embedded in the south wall of the church. Today, this slab is kept in the Stone Monuments Fund at the Simon Janashia Museum of the National Museum of Georgia. It is divided into two parts and placed in an ornamental frame, with 2 inscriptions engraved on it: *a) the inscription of Rabai and Nugamtsira* and *b) the inscription of the dean*.

A) Inscription of Rabai and Nugamtsira: In the centre of the carefully smoothed surface of the gray-coloured elongated rectangular stone slab, there is a 4-line Asomtavruli inscription, surrounded by a triple pine-cone ornamented frame. The stone slab is damaged: the end of the first and second lines of the inscription is damaged due to the breakage of the upper right corner. The inscription was first published by Vasil Tsiskarishvili (**Tsiskarishvili, 1980:** 141).

"Sulsa Rab[(a)ys] / sh(uen)dn(vne)s g(mertma)n da me[(ugles)]a misa Nugamtsi/ras / sh(uen)dn(vne)s g(mertma)n" (God, forgive the sole of Rabai and his

spouse Nugamtsira also will be forgiven).

B) Dean's Inscription. The Gudava church stone slab is fully embedded in an ornamental frame, which continues on the left side of the slab. It is likely that there was a similar frame with a cross depiction. Its horizontal right arm can still be seen on the stone. In the upper and lower parts of the cross's arm, a 3-line Asomtavruli inscription can be read; the break mark is indicated by a double dot; due to damage, the symbol of the script is not visible. The 1st line of the inscription is damaged due to the breakage of the stone.

The Mkhedruli transliteration of the inscription is: *"[S](u)li / dek(anozisa) / sh(eitskale)n g(mertma)n"* (The mercy will be to the soul of the Dean) (**Silogava, 2004:** 293-294; **Akhaladze, 2005:** 133-138).

The names Rabai and Nugamtsira mentioned in the inscription of Gudava are likely those of a married couple. Rabai and Nugamtsira are members of a local noble feudal family, as it was common for inscriptions on church facades to be made by clergy or large secular feudal patrons (ktitors). From an onomastic research perspective, the name Nugamtsira is noteworthy. This name is typical and characteristic of the onomastic lexicon of western Georgia (compare with: Nugesha, Nebiera, and others).

The male name Rabai appears in a well-known written source, specifically in the 1459 epistle of the last king of united Georgia, Giorgi VIII, and in the letter sent by Atabeg Kvarkvare II (1451-1498) to the Duke of Burgundy. In both sources, the ruler of Anakopia, Rabai, is mentioned (**Tamarashvili, 1902(2011):** 58).

It is possible that Rabia, who participated in the anti-Ottoman coalition, and Rabai of Gudava are the same historical figure, and that the ruler of Anakopia carried out ktitorial activities at the Gudava Church. Regarding the relationship between the inscriptions of the Dean and Rabai, they were likely created by the same master during the same period. Considering the mentioned historical and paleographical data, the inscriptions of Gudava can be dated to the 15th-16th centuries.

Tsarche and Its Antiques. Tsarche is mentioned in ancient sources (**Arrian, 1961:** 41). The remnants of ancient architectural monuments preserved here indicate that Tsarche once represented an important political and cultural centre in northwestern Georgia.

The architectural complex *"Mapash Okhuame"* – the King's Church, is dated to the 13th-14th centuries. It consists of 2 churches, a wall, and the remains of a gate. During the cleaning of the north side of the apse of one of the church's hall-type buildings, part of the wall painting was revealed. Fresco painting was also discovered on the south wall. The preserved paintings were studied by art historian Leo Shervashidze, who believed that the church's walls depicted standing figures facing the apse, and according to their clothing, they represented 3 saints and 2 secular figures (**Shervashidze, 1971:** 115-116).

Shervashidze paid special attention to the large Bolnuri (from Bolnisi) Cross at the centre of the church's painted composition. The Bolnuri Cross is named after the Bolnisi Church, where this form of cross was first encountered.

It has spread throughout almost all regions of Georgia, including in the architectural decoration of Abkhazian churches. Despite the fact that earlier, slightly different variations of the "Bolnuri Cross" can be found in the early Christian world of the Near East, the cross, where the arms are of equal length and widen toward the ends, dates back to the 5th century in Georgia and has not only ecclesiastical significance but also carries cultural-historical gist. Today, it is recognized as a symbol of Georgian national unity. The Bolnuri Cross has become one of the most important characteristics of Georgian cultural identity and provides an indirect response regarding the cultural-historical origin of a particular monument.

Based on the artistic analysis of the preserved frescoes Tsarche's church, Shervashidze dated the frescoes to 15th century (**Shervashidze, 1971:** 117-118).

It appears that one of the churches in Tsarche was dedicated to the Archangels Michael and Gabriel. This is evidenced by an icon donated to the church by Levan II Dadiani (1611-1657), which Ekvtimé Takaishvili found in the Martvili Cathedral, bearing a ktitorial inscription (**Takaishvili, 2017:** 56-57).

The extended inscription on the icon is significant because it indicates that the Church of the Archangels in Tsarche had been destroyed, and it seems that Levan restored it between 1640 and 1657 and placed the icon there. Moreover, this region is part of Levan Dadiani's domain, but the story of the church's destruction in the inscription points to complex political relations with the Abkhazian principality, which is located to the northwest.

In the castle across the river from Tsarche, more specifically, in the castle's church, one lapidary inscription was discovered, carved on a grey limestone slab. On the processed side of the slab, a 9-line inscription in Nuskhuri script is engraved, with the lines slanted. The inscription is damaged, and part of the text on the right side of the slab is broken off. The bottom part of the inscription is open, and the first and seventh lines are damaged. The location of the inscription is currently unknown, and its complete reading is not possible at this stage. Based on paleographical features, the inscription should be dated to 16th-17th centuries.

The person mentioned in the inscription, Phashadze, is unknown from other sources, but according to tradition, in the 19th century, one of the mountains near Tsarche was considered Sacred Mountain and was called Phashadze's Mountain.

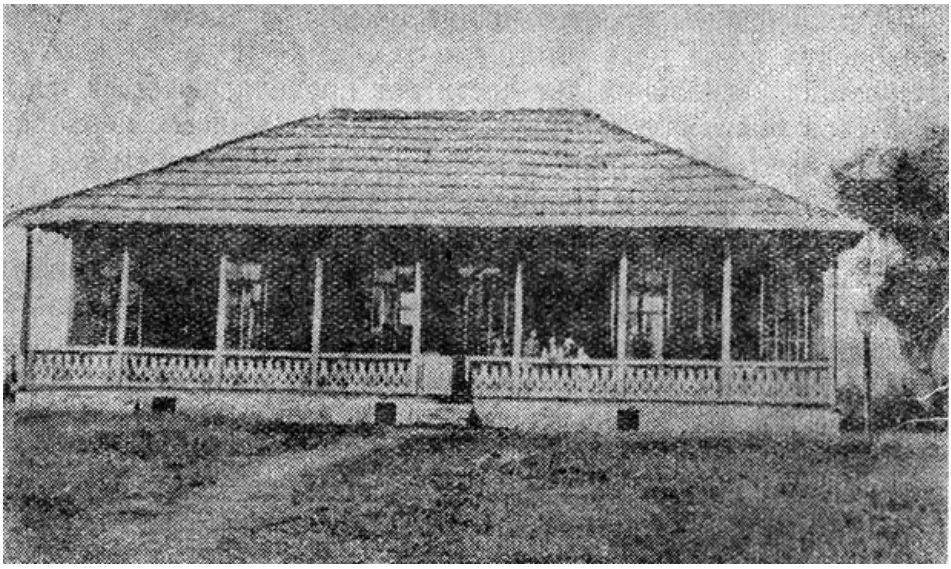
In the medieval ecclesiastical life of the middle Ghalidzga-Enguri region and, more generally, in the church life of Samegrelo-Abkhazia, the Chkhortoli Churches seem to have played an important role. The village is marked as a significant ecclesiastical centre on Arcangelo Lamberti's map (**Tabaghua, 1986**).

The village's first church is a hall-type building from the early Middle Ages and is located 5 km from the village. Revaz Khvistani dated its first construction period to the 9th-10th centuries (**Khvistani, 2009:** 41). Chkhortoli church belongs to the group of rectangular apse churches, which, in terms of compositional scheme and architectural features, finds analogies with other Georgian architectural examples – specifically the churches of Eredvi, Kheiti, Disvi, Kusireti, Lashkendari, and Ilori. The hall-type church of Chkhortoli is organically connected to

the evolution of Georgian architecture, fitting perfectly within the broader context of Georgian national ecclesiastical architecture, expressing a unified creative search and direction in Georgian architecture. Considering the architectural style and analogies of the church, it is believed to have been built during the period of King Constantine of the Abkhaz (893-922), relating to the cultural expansion of eastern Georgia toward the western one (**Khvistani, 2009:** 13-24).

The second church is located in the centre of the village and was built at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries on the ruins of an older church (probably from the 11th century) by the local nobility and a Christianizing community. During the Soviet period, under Bolshevik rule, the church was deliberately damaged. It is noteworthy that local residents still find grave markers with Georgian inscriptions in the churchyard.

In the Samurzakano region, many other historically significant monuments have been identified and cataloged: the Pshauri hall-type church, the churches of St. George of Tchuburkhinji and Okumi of the Holy Cross, the medieval Okumi tower (in Eskerdashi), the Saberio churches, where another Georgian Asomtavruli inscription was recently discovered, and so on. These monuments are significant not only for their architectural forms but also for their cultural and historical importance, as well as for the inscriptions they bear. The language of these monuments and the expressions of the local community's religious practice and cultural identity are unequivocally Georgian. The history of each monument, the storyteller of past events, is a great book that needs to be compiled and passed on to future generations.



Two-Class Parish School of Village Okumi

CHAPTER XI. HISTORICAL-ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

The 2008 Russian-Georgian War and recent political changes in the post-Soviet space have provided some Abkhazian and Russian "scholars" with the opportunity to question the ethnic identity of the population of Samurzakano, a historic region in western Georgia. Why has the issue of the ethnic identity of Samurzakano's population become important now? One of the Abkhazian scholars' works clearly shows that the current authorities of Abkhazia and their northern researchers are "concerned that the right of Georgians to the important economic and strategic region of Abkhazia (Samurzakano, the Gali district) may not be restored" (**Achugba, 2006**). Therefore, they try to justify that the region was originally inhabited by Abkhaz people.

The issue of the ethnic identity of the Samurzakano population was intentionally raised by the officials of Tsarist Russia to carry out colonial policy. To implement their colonial agenda, they found it necessary to spread disinformation suggesting that the historical population of Samurzakano was ethnically different from Georgians and was closer to the Abkhazs (*as mentioned here:* ***???-???***).

During the 1865-1866 agrarian reform, the Russian government not only declared the people of Samurzakano to be Abkhaz, but the Sokhumi Estate Commission also officially registered them as Abkhaz in their records. Despite the fact that the representatives of Samurzakano repeatedly pointed out to the members of the commission the differences between Samurzakano and Abkhaz people in terms of both language and way of life, the decision was upheld.

During the Soviet period, Abkhaz "scholars" were relatively restrained in distorting history, but in the post-Soviet era, when they felt the support of the Russians, they crossed all boundaries.

For us, the Abkhazian "epic tradition" (***Adventures..*, 1962**) seems quite interesting, as its oral traditions agree with Georgian historical sources regarding the settlement of Abkhaz people in the region. According to oral traditions, the Abkhaz settled in two waves: the first wave is associated with the *"Aps'ha"* or "first Abkhaz," who came from Egypt, Africa, and sometimes even from North Caucasus. The second wave is connected to the late Middle Ages and the North Caucasian "*Aches and Chaches*". This settlement process laid the foundation for the formation of the modern Abkhaz people (from 1570s).

For example, one Kabardian tradition, which is close to the historical source, informs us about the unification of different tribes in Northwest Caucasus in the 15th century under the leadership of the prominent Kabardian leader Inal. Inal was leading one of the Adyg-Kabardian kinship groups at the time and was resolving conflicts among the various clans. According to tradition, an Abaz feudal lord, Ozdemir, opposed him. Fearing defeat in battle, Ozdemir fled to the territory of Georgia, specifically to the modern Psou mountain in Abkhazia. Inal pursued him and killed him there. However, Inal liked the area of Psou and allowed his warriors and Abazas to settle there. According to historical sources, the

place where the second wave of settlement took place in the later Middle Ages is Pskhu Mountain. The climate and the conditions in the Pskhu valley were particularly favorable for herders, so they established the first village there, named Pskhu. Inal soon died, and upon his request, he was buried on Pskhu mountain by his successors, and his grave is still known today as Inalkube (*Inal's koffin*) (**Nogmov, 1994:** 96; **Gadlo, 1978:** 43).

The first non-Georgian, North Caucasian surname to appear in the *"Life of Kartli"* is *"Inaldifa"* (***"Paris Chronicle", 1980:*** 42). This likely refers to one of Inal's descendants, a Kabardian living in the 15th century. Abkhazian authors write that Inal is associated with four political figures, who caused confusion in significant historical events. The oldest of these figures was Dzhik "Tavadi"[1] Tsandia Inaldifa. To explain this further, in the commentary, it is stated that the Abkhazian *"du"* and shortened *"d"* mean "great" or "mighty," meaning that Tsandia Inaldifa (or Tsandba) was "great," or Inali's great Tsandia (**Khotelashvili-Inal-ipa, 2019:** 182).

Clearly, Sh. Inal-ipa and Khotelashvili-Inal-ipa likely referred to the Inaldifa wandered among the Georgians in the "Life of Kartli." If we translate "Inaldifa," it would mean *"Inal's great son."* However, it should be noted that it is not accepted in the Abkhaz language to include an adjective (e.g. great) in a surname. Therefore, we must assume that for the compilers of the *"Life of Kartli,"* this surname was so foreign that it appeared in the source in an incorrect form.

Regarding Inal-ipa and some other Abkhaz surnames associated with "chieftainship," it is noteworthy that these only became widespread in the oral traditions of Abkhazia at the end of the 18th century and in 19th century. According to N. Berdzenishvili, "Feudal western Georgia could only been Georgian..." and that "The high-level feudal unity on the territory of ancient Colchis could only had been Georgian and not others" (**Berdzenishvili, 1990:** 299). Z. Anchabadze also attributed the feudal families of early feudal times, such as the Shervashidzes and Anchabadzes, to the feudal class of the Georgian Kingdom (**Anchabadze, 1959:** 195).

The early toponymy of northern Odishi (from the Kelasuri river to the Ghalidzga river) gradually changed during the 17th-18th centuries as a result of the mountainous Caucasian peoples – mainly Abazas, Circassians, and Kabardians – first through their inroads and then settling there. Many toponyms disappeared, new ones emerged in their place, and some were distorted under the influence of the settlers' language. Despite this, through comparisons with ancient sources and ecclesiastical documents, it is possible to determine the changes and identify the original Georgian toponyms (**Gvantseladze, 1989:** 13,14; **Gvantseladze, 1998:** 42, 53; **Tskhadaia, 2004:** 21-118; **Tskhadaia, 2000:** 67-68; **Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2004:** 36-44; **Bakhia-Okruashvili, 2005:** 85-96).

Sh. Inal-ipa initially expressed the idea that the Abkhaz shifted their southern border from the Kodori river to the Enguri river during their feudal wars with the rulers of Samegrelo (**Inal-ipa, 1965:** 42). However, in the 1970s, he changed his

[1] *Tavadi* (Georgian: თავადი (*"prince", lit. "head/chief" [man]*)) – from Georgian: *tavi* (head), with the prefix of agent *-di*). This feudal title in Georgia first applied in the Late Middle Ages.

viewpoint, and with his "special perspective" on historical and ethnological data, he considered the entire toponymy from the Mzimta river to the Enguri river to be almost entirely Abkhazian. He declared that the Abkhaz-speaking population in the historical Odishi and Samurzakano territories was indigenous. He connected the abundance of Georgian geographical toponyms in the southeastern part of Abkhazia with the political and social events of the time, such as the formation of the united feudal state of Abkhazia and Georgia, the harsh feudal exploitation in Samegrelo, and the scarcity or lack of land. Consequently, based on Sh. Inal-ipa's research, it was concluded that the abundance of Georgian toponyms in Samurzakano during the Middle Ages was the result of massive population movements from Samegrelo (**Inal-ipa, 1976:** 315, 382-386).

The toponyms of the villages in Odishi and Samurzakano (with a few exceptions, most of which are derived from the Middle Ages and are more correctly described as Abkhazized) are all Georgian (in Megrelian). This supports the idea that Odishi-Samurzakano has always been inhabited by Georgians (specifically Megrelians).

In the feudal period, the border of Abkhazia passed through Anakopia, and it remained unchanged until the end of the 16th century. This territory was owned by the Sharvashidze family. Below it, the Odishi principality was under the control of the Dadiani family. There were no "Abkhazian feudal lords" in Abkhazia. Instead, they were free commoners, peasants, and in the 18th century, they became corvee peasants. Sharvashidze was a Georgian feudal lord.

Entered Georgia since 1570s, the modern Abkhazs gradually settled in Bzipi (in Abkhazia) and, starting from the 17th century, they moved to the northern part of Odishi, eventually reaching the Ghalidzga river in the 18th century. These settlers attacked, plundered, and sold the local Georgians to the Ottomans. From the 70s of the 15th century, these robber settlers, modern Abkhazs, did not submit to the Georgian Sharvashidze family, the feudal rulers of Abkhazia. They settled wherever they pleased and did not pay taxes. It is not surprising that the Georgian population, which could not withstand the violence, naturally migrated to the south to settle.

The Sharvashidze family did not protect the Megrelian peasants; on the contrary, they, along with the modern Abkhazs, attacked the local Georgian population, including the Samurzakano people, and made a profit by selling captives. This was one of the causes of the "internal wars" described by L. Solovieva.

Concerning the issue of the identity and origin of the population of Samurzakano, our attention was drawn to the work of T. Achugba. He wrote that "it is evident how the political, demographic, and cultural-linguistic aspects of the events in Georgia helped the assimilation of the Abkhazs in Samurzakano." Following the path laid by previous Russian and Abkhaz authors, he considered the autochthonous population of the Gali region to be Abkhazian. He thought that the historical aspect of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict – the definition of the autochthonous population – would play an important role in resolving this issue, as they are the legitimate owners of the territory and its history. However, for the experts of Caucasian studies and other scholars around the world, this has never

been a subject of debate (**Achugba, 2006**).

The author's attitude towards this issue cannot be called objective or decent. It is clear that attempts to falsify historical aspects will never have a positive role in resolving conflicts.

To determine the indigenous, autochthonous population of the territory, data from the 18th-19th centuries are not enough. Historical written sources, toponymic materials, and the traditional culture to which the indigenous population belonged should also be used. This is something that can not be found in T. Achugba's work at all. In his discussion of the issue, he relies only on questionable data from Russian officials and the works of those scientists whose research suits his narrative. He develops the idea that the Georgian population, for whom the Georgian language was native, never lived in Samurzakano even during the conflict. "It is true-he says, the population there spoke Megrelian, but their ancestors were Abkhazians."

"In the 19th century, – continues T. Achugba, the indigenous Abkhaz underwent ethnocultural assimilation due to pressure. The indigenous Galians, or as they were formerly called, the Samurzakano people, ethnically and traditionally represented Abkhazians, though linguistically they spoke Megrelian. Although Megrelian is considered an old form of Georgian, it is not Georgian" (**Achugba, 2006**).

First of all, it must be said that in the above mentioned extract from T. Achugba, there is nothing but falsification. Secondly, the historian of Georgia, an educated person who knew the Georgian language, was well aware that the national and only literary language for all Georgian-speaking populations has always been and still is Georgian. The Georgian language, alongside its dialects, also has two significant family languages – Laz (Megrelian-Zan) and Svan. Since the 4th century up to today, the literary language of the Georgian population has been Georgian.

Although there were attempts to create a literary Abkhazian language in the second half of the 19th century, several times, using Russian graphics and special Latin and Georgian graphic signs in 1862 (by P. Uslar), and then in 1928, entirely in Latin graphics, the Abkhazian alphabet was eventually developed using the Georgian script in 1938, which was best suited to represent the complex phonetics of the Abkhazian language. However, Russia, with its imperial nature, could not accept this and, in 1954, replaced the Abkhazian script with the Slavic-Russian alphabet. Thus, the Abkhaz people were bilingual from ancient times. During the Soviet period, Russian as the dominant language replaced Georgian.

The migrants from Northwest Caucasus, before the formation of the Abkhaz ethnic group, went through a complex historical process. Their formation occurred on the basis of the merging of various related groups of people from Northwest Caucasus and Kartvelian (Georgian) populations. At the same time, due to their long stay on Georgian territory and the ethnocultural contacts they experienced, they were greatly influenced by Georgian culture. Despite this, their conservative traditional culture, which had strong ties to the North Caucasian peoples, has kept the similarity of their language and culture to the North Caucasian peoples even today.

From the beginning of the 17th century, the attacks of the Abkhaz, Dzhiks, and other North Caucasian highlanders on Odishi intensified. They ravaged the area, killed or captured the local population, and sold them to foreign countries. Starting from the 1670s, the Ottoman invasions in western Georgia became more frequent. They raided Abkhazia, Odishi, Imereti, and Guria. During these difficult times, Odishi's defence weakened, and the Abkhazian feudal lords took advantage of the situation to strengthen their attacks on Samegrelo even more (**Khorava, 1996:** 46).

It seems that up until the 1880s, the population between the Kodori river and the Enguri river was Georgian, as evidenced by the lists of peasants remaining in certain villages of historical Odishi in the 17th century. The surnames listed in the sources are all Georgian. Only in the village of Tkauri, where fishermen and navigators are listed, is there one Abkhaz surname – Shambia, but it is given in a Georgian form (Megrelian). The names of the heads of the Shambia family, Thavza, Mashutia, and Kuakula, are also Georgian (***MGL*, 1970:** 382-386, 419-435). Based on this, we can conclude that the Shambia family must have been merged with the Georgian society and "Georgianized."

An interesting document in this regard is the *"Book of Donations"* of Catholicos Malakia to Bitchvinta, which dates back to approximately 1616-1639. Catholicos, Malakia, along with treasures, donated several Georgian estates to the church in Bitchvinta. He lists the donated places and estates, the toponyms of which are entirely Georgian: Khauzheli, Thiliti, Ghalidzga, Anakria, Tchaladidi, Tskaligza, Gulveliskari, Ekali, Sakuchulorio, Ilori, Subeishi, Khoiri, Najaneuri, Khibula, and others, where he either built houses or bought land at his own expense. In the village of Thiliti, he settled a Dzhikia family as gardeners (***MGL*, 1970:** 498-502).

The Georgian population also inhabited the northern part of Odishi. This is confirmed by the fact that Megrelian lords donated villages in western Georgia to the Catholicos with their populations, which were already located on the territory of Abkhazia (**Gamakharia, Gogia, 1997:** 44-45, 623). Georgian Catholicoses and feudal lords never left the ancient church of Bitchvinta without donations. Donations to the temple of the Most Holy Mother of the God in Bitchvinta continued into the 17th and 18th centuries. In addition to valuable items, villages, and summer residences, they donated Georgian peasants from Samegrelo, Imereti, Guria, and contemporary Abkhazia, along with their families, as well as the lands on which they lived, whose family names were also Georgian (***MGL*, 1970:** 583-584, 611-616, 668-678, 714-734, 764-772, etc.).

The settlement of Georgian populations in this area is also confirmed by the legal texts and church documents which list Georgian surnames and toponyms that have been confirmed in Odishi and Samurzakano, prior to the settlement of Caucasian highlanders and Abkhazians. A large portion of the local population, which remained on their native land, became victims of the aggression of the incoming population and, for survival, had to assimilate with the Abkhaz. The majority of those settled, especially Abazas and Adyghes, managed to adopt their way

of life, customs, and traditions, along with the Abkhaz people. However, it is also worth noting that the settlers were influenced by the Megrelian population, which affected both their material and social existence. The Abkhazs of Bzipi area were more influenced by the Georgian language, while the Abkhazs settled in Odishi were affected by the Megrelian language, as the local population of western Georgia's Bzipi Abkhazians were mostly Georgian (from Guria, Lechkhumi, and Ratcha), while in the Northern Odishi region, the population was mainly Megrelian.

In 1883 Samurzakano became part of the Sokhumi okrug(district). The officials of Imperial Russia encouraged the settlement of population from various ethnic backgrounds such as Russians, Ukrainians, Baltics, Bulgarians, Greeks, Armenians, and others, through targeted migration in order to alter the demographic structure of the area. Meanwhile, Georgians were prohibited from relocating within their own country. They were impeded from moving from place to place and, in particular, from settling in Samurzakano.

There can be no doubt that in the 17th century and earlier, the entire territory of historical Odishi, from the Kelasuri river to up to Enguri river, was populated by Georgians with Georgian traditions, cultural practices, and lifestyle.

Ethnology helps reveal the ethnic characteristics of folk culture and traditional forms of life, both in terms of historical development and the conditions of the modern era. Therefore, it significantly utilizes and relies on ethnographic materials obtained from the field. In 1970-1973, our research conducted in historical Samurzakano aimed to explore forms of settlement, social-economic structures, family and household life, forms of ownership, residential characteristics, and the manifestation of distinctive behavior norms.

Ethnologists consider the form of settlement and material culture as historically formed unities. The peculiarities of settlements are always determined by the level of socio-economic development. The basis for a settlement's unity lies in territorial ethnic homogeneity, shared language, alignment of economic interests, and the necessity for collective defense of the territory. This is further reinforced by the ideological unity of the community, such as the simultaneous participation of village or neighborhood residents in daily life and festivals. Naturally, the material culture of the ethnic population under study is connected with the form of settlement. Residential and economic buildings reveal the folk culture, family social matters, the character of the economy, and the level of economic development.

In historical Samurzakano, the village was divided into *"Mukhuris"* (distiricts), in which one kinship group, with new extended families (patronymics), lived. For example, in the village of Okumi, each neighborhood had its own name: Samelaio, Sabuleskirio, Saakhvlediano, Sajonjuo, Sarigvavo, Sajguburio, Sakvarandzio, Sabadiskuo, and others. In the village of Dikhazurgha, the neighborhoods were Samikio, Sagogokhio, Sazakario, Sagvalio, Sakatcharao, Sagamsakhurdio, Saeterio, Sademurio, and others. In all of these cases, the surnames are Georgian.

In Ghumuri, previously, the village had been populated only by families with the surname Emkhvari, but by the 1970s, only one household with this sur-

name remained, due to the inroads of Abkhazs and the Sharvashidzes along with them. Despite this, the narrators knew very well that the village had originally been settled by the Emkhvari families. Therefore, the most central and cultivated area of the village retained the name *"Tutush Nokhori"* (i.e., Tutush's settlement), where Tutu's surname was Emkhvari. For example, in the village of Mukhuri, formerly people lived, whose surnames were: Guchua, Khanturia, and Sharashia. By the 1970s, none of these families were present in the village. According to narrators, these villages were attacked by Abkhaz people, who would abduct the population and sell them to the Ottomans. Despite this, the settlement names retained their toponyms: *Guchua's Nokhori, Chanturish Nokhori*, and *Sharashias Nokhori*.

In the village of Chkhortoli, according to all narrators, the inhabitants formerly were Chkhortoli families, but only memory about them remains today. In the Sagamisonio neighborhood of Chkhortoli, we recorded the tradition that two new neighborhoods, Sazarkuo and Sakvarandzio, were established near the *"Jikha"* (fortress) by people who had relocated from the village of Ochamchire in Samurzakano due to attacks of Abkhazs . However, everyone remembered that *"Jikha"* had been the home only of the Gamisonia family, and they had their graveyard there, where only members of the Gamisonia family were buried at that time.

In the village of Okumi, the family of Latsuzbaia Gugula and his brothers Thoma and Beso left. The brothers separated (*"Gorthuala"*) around 1930. At that time, the family lived in the prmises (*Jinji Kude*) of their great-grandfather (*Godi*). They had both plank house and *"Jargvaluri"* (Mingrelian term for round houses), various dwellings and other farm buildings. Gugula, as the eldest, remained in the family house, while Thoma was provided with a house from wooden pillars, and for Beso brothers built the plank house. The materials were brought from the forest, and they also built agricultural buildings. The three land plots – *Zeni, Neksi,* and *Kuapala* – were divided equally among them. *Kuapala* earlier was bought from the Emkhvari family, and in 1972, they still referred to this land as *"Emkhvarish Najikhari"*.

In the village of Okumi, Koko Cherkezia, 74 years old, the (son of Gedlachi), shared that his ancestors originally lived in the village of Tsarche (in the Gali district). However, due to a lack of land, in 1927, his ancestors acquired residential territory from Misha Rigvava. The Cherkezia family still preserved their *"Jinji Khati"* (in Megrelian: *main icon*) and *"Jinji Kude"* (in Megrelian: *main house*) in Tsarche. For religious festivals such as *"Saghoronto"* (given to God) and *"Samgario"* (*"Didi Okhvameri"* – the Major Shrine), they would visit the church in Tsarche. In honor of Samgario, they kept a cow dedicated to *"Samgario"* and the bull from that cow they sacrificed during the festival. The next day of Easter was named Samgario, a day of remembrance for the deceased. On Easter, they would sacrifice a goat to the Lord.

According to Tabaghua Jogo (son of Totia) narration from Saberio, his ancestors lived in the village of Khorga in Odishi, but when Abkhazs' attacks became frequent, a portion of the population moved lower down. However, these newcomers treated the local Georgian population harshly. Those who resisted were either intimidated or abducted at night and sold. As a result, his great-grandfa-

ther (Birtsghaia) decided to settle below the Ghalidzga River, and his ancestors eventually established themselves in Saberio. In the 1970s, the families in Saberio included Torua, Tabaghua, Markhulia, Tsaava, Gvinjilia, Gamisonia, Matkava, Dgebuadze, Beria, Mikaia, Badzaghua, and Akhalaia. *"In the past, Saberio was inhabited only by the Beria family, so the village was named after them,"* the narrator mentioned. The surnames and toponyms we recorded in this village were in the Mingrelian language: Shkaisuki (in Megrelian: *middle of the prolonged hill-ok*), Ghvashigverdi (in Megrelian: *black side*), Pharto Nokhori (in Megrelian: *wide abandoned settlement*), Samarqualo (in Megrelian: *egg storage*), Daurchela (in Megrelian: *white to be striken*), Chegali (in Megrelian: *white stream*), Rechkhi Tskaro (in Megrelian: *spring from flood*), Okibotegali (in Megrelian: *white stream full of crabs*), Ganatsude (in Megrelian: *destroyed*), and Ghalkhumla (in Megrelian: *dry ravine*). According to the narrator, the village had 799 households.

The resident of Ghumurishi, Zukhbaia Anton Chonchori's son (62 years old), who identified himself as a Megrelian, stated that his family had been relocated from Abkhazia due to turmoil, but he could not remember exactly when. He listed names of the land parcels which had been used: Osershe, Keishi, Harda, Kirili, Kvemo Ghumurishi, and others. According to him, in Ghumurishi village, the holy relic "Jinji Khati" was held by Kuchakhia family indicating that Kuchakhia had been the native family of Ghumurishi.

In Okumi, according to Meskhia Amerid Ilarion's son narration, his ancestors had told him that Okumi had nearly emptied due to Abkhaz invasions, with the original population driven out. During the period of Russian rule, someone named Gegia had opened a restaurant in the center of the village, but after the revolution, the land was taken from him. During the Soviet era, this area became a collective farm establishment called the *"Kantora"*. Amerid's family, as told by his ancestors, lived on the lands of Phakhuria Rigvava, but his surname had not changed after his relocation. According his information Amerid Meskhia was adopted by Pakhuria Rigvava and lived on his land, but adopted father did not changed his surname.

In the 1970s, the residents of Okumi included the families Shamatava, Buleskiria, Cherkezia, Meskhia, Rigvava, and others. The Rigvava family had its own territorial area, although they had originally migrated from Guria due to blood ties in the past. Among three brothers, one settled in Okumi, another in Tagiloni, and the third in Kvemo Barghebi. Because they were herders, each of them cleared a patch of forest near pastures and settled there. Gradually, they moved to the plains and engaged in agriculture.

According to Dzakva Buleskiria (83 years old) from Okumi, five married brothers lived together in his household. They had two residences: *Pitaptsara* and *Jargvaluri*. All 5 brothers had children and grandchildren. After the division of the household and the distribution of property, new patronymics were formed: Guluanish, Gergobeyish, Gugush, Makutalash, Boshiash *Turi* (*Mingrelian patronymics*). According to the narrator, their surname had been native to the village. When the time for sowing began, the families of each patronymic worked togeth-

er on their respective plots, helping each other with labor. During harvest time, they adhered to the practice of mutual assistance, helping the families who needed it most. The families within the patronymic were obliged to help each other with labor-intensive tasks. Moreover, they also helped each other during house construction, repairs, weddings, and rituals related to the deceased.

In Samurzaqano, forms of mutual assistance were expressed using terms like "Nodi" (Georgian: Nadi from Arabic *"nada"* – assistance) and *"Osershe."* A family that was offering "Nodi" would inform the participants in advance. After the assistance was completed, a traditional meal was provided. This form of labor organization was identified by Arcangelo Lamberti using the Megrelian "Nadoba" term in the context of the Colchian Megrelians, i.e., the people of Samurzakano.

In the 1970s, certain forms of mutual assistance were preserved both within blood-related family groups and among neighbors (in neighborhoods, villages), especially in cases of weddings and deaths. If, in the past, assistance was provided in the form of supplies like flour, beans, wine, and other products, over time, this tradition evolved into monetary help. In both cases, the agreements considered the proximity or distance of kinship and neighborhood ties. Monetary assistance in cases of death came to be referred to as *"Ginoporua"* (in Megrelian: *meaning covering, wrapping*), while in cases of marriage, it was called *"Diarash Shemtsieba"* (in Megrelian: *assistance during the wedding*).

This practice of mutual assistance was also noted among the Odishi Megrelians by Giuseppe Giudice Milanese (**Giudice, 1964:** 54-55).

In the 1970s, the village of Bedia was divided into two major villages – I and II Bedia. The villages were densely populated. The narrator was a resident of Second Bedia. The settlements within this village included Sanardo, Tchkonkakili (settlement of the Apshilavas), Agubedia, and Reka. In these years, residents of Second Bedia included the families of Kutelia, Gvaramia, Kacharava, Tsatsua, Chkadua, Lezhava, Bagbaia, Kvekveskiri, Shakaia, Nizharadze, Rapava... (140 households). Each settlement was named after a family – for example, Sakhutelio, Sagvaramio, Saapshilavo, etc. According to the narrator's account, the oldest family in this village was the Apshilava family.

According to Mikhako Apshilava's account in the past, it was impossible to divide property or separate families while both parents were alive, even if one of them was still alive. Therefore, the eldest brother would remain in the ancestral home and lead the household. Difficult matters would always be referred to him for resolution. Later, when this tradition was broken and it became acceptable to divide property during the parents' lifetime, the mother or father (if at least one was alive) would stay in the ancestral home with the youngest son, most often with an unmarried one. However, the property division process remained the same as formerly. Property (farm lands, buildings, livestock, etc.) was equally divided between the brothers.

According to the narrators, in the village of Chkhortoli, we recorded Megrelian toponyms for common village properties and pastures in the mountains,

such as *"Gvaleti," "Retchi,"* and *"Evirtsara."* The following families lived in Chkhortoli: Emukhvari, Pachulia, Ochigava, Khuntbaya, Zarkua, Kvarandzia, Gamisonia, Baghbaia, Mirokhi, Zukhbaia, Kokoria, Sirginava, Kvartskhava, Gegia, Katcharava, Amichba, Eshbaya, Malazonia, Tchitanava, Mgabloblishvili. When we visited Chkhortoli, there were 315 Megrelian households.

From the above-listed families, the surnames Zukhbaia, Amichba, and Eshbaia were originally from Abkhazia, but their surnames had already been adapted to Megrelian, indicating that they had already been assimilated. When asked about when they had settled in Samurzakano, all representatives of these families said they could not recall when they had come there. They considered themselves Megrelians, suggesting that their ancestors must have settled there in the late Middle Ages.

According to Tamshuk Kvarandzia Khandukh's- son (81 years old), after the Chkhortolias, the earliest families to settle in the village were the Morokhia family, and later the Pachulia and Katcharava families. Therefore, only members of these families were buried in the village's church cemetery, which was dedicated to St. George. Other families had a common cemetery outside the village.

The Eshbaya family had a settlement called "Saeshbayo." They knew that their ancestors had settled there from Abkhazia, but they considered themselves Megrelians now. In Chkhortoli, we also recorded two additional families from Abkhazia, who spoke Megrelian both at home and in public. However, they stated that they had been "pre-Abkhazian." Apparently, their ancestors had settled there during the Middle Ages and had already been assimilated.

In the village of Dikhabuzga, Jonjua Khukhu, the son of Abragi (91 years old), knew well that in the past, the village had been inhabited by the Marghanias. The second family name in the village was Gvagvalia, and the third was Lamadzia. In 1971, the village had already 340 households – Marghania, Gamsakhurdia, Gvagvalia, Zakaria, Eteria, Jonjua, Kvirkvelia, Kokaya, Zarkua, Tsanava, Lamandzia, Makhvava, and others.

In the Gali Municipality, as in the past, agriculture was the leading branch of the economy. Historically, in Samurzakano, the highest governing body of the community was the "Oshakharue"//"Tskhodi" – a council meeting. The common "Oshakharue" of the region (the gathering place) was located in the village of Okumi. The common *buki* (trumpet) and *bayraghi* (banner) were stored in the Okumi church. At this gathering, the most respected and famous elders of historical Samurzakano would meet to discuss various issues of the region. At the same time, each village community had its own gathering place – in Saberio, Bedia, Nabakevi, Lekukhona, Dikhazurga, Tchuburkhinji, and other villages. As the narrators told us, these gathering places were situated near the church, under a large, ancient tree – *"Okhvames"* – close to the graves of ancestors. The trumpet (*Oke*) and the banner (*Beragi*) were kept in the church, which were brought out when needed.

At the head of these gathering places were the "Dudi Kochepi" (in Megrelian: *head men, chiefs*) and "Unchashi Kochepi" (in Megrelian: *senior men*), who acted as "mediators" and "decision-makers." The council would select from three

to nine "Dudi Kochepi" based on the number of residents in the village. Most of the time, the elderlies would participate in the gatherings, although after the age of 25, younger men could also attend. Women did not participate in these councils, except when the issue of a divorce was to be discussed. In such cases, the woman always attended and had the right to defend herself. The council would discuss village matters, people's requests, conflicts, issues of *"ubado kochanash khirush"* (in Megrelian: *immoral persons, thieves*), murderers, those who maltreated women, but also *"sharash ketebash"* (in Megrelian: *road repairs*), and other issues.

In the Gali Municipality, ancient families held great significance. The elders of these families led traditional public customs and paid attention to various religious rites to ensure they were not violated. Every family had its own "Jinji Khati", which was kept in one of the churches – *"Okhvameshi."* Once a year, these families would gather at this place of worship and offer sacrifices. The elder would put a knife on the sacrificed beef, and then the younger men would replace him and carry out the slaughter. The hide of the sacrificed animal was always given to the elder. Both men and women participated in this ritual. The sacrificial animals were brought in turn by the families, and most often, it would be a goat, although sheep were also slaughtered.

The "Jinji Khati" of the Marghania's was in the church of St. Babale in the village of Dikhazurga, while the "Jinji Khati" of the Kvarandzias was in the church of the village of Ghumurishi. The "Jinji Khati" of the Rigvavas was in the church of Okumi. The material about the "ancestral churches" we have gathered once again proves that in the Gal district, in historical Samurzakano, the Megrelian population has long been indigenous. Their "ancestral church" was indeed located in historical Samurzakano.

In the Gal Municipality, we also recorded another place of worship called *"Jinish Khvama"* (in Megrelian: *main blessing*), which was considered a place for remembering ancestors, the heads of families, or patronymic groups. For example, according to the testimony of Marusia Kardava from the village of Chkhortoli, the *"Jinish Khvama"* took place every year in July, 20 days after the start of the month, on whichever week day it fell. This celebration was to be spent joyfully by everyone. Crying was forbidden during these days, and even the deceased were not mourned at this time.

For each celebration, wine-filled marked clay jars were designated for the villagers, which were opened only on the appointed day. The "Jinish Khvama" of the Cherkezia family (patronymic) coincided with the feast of St. George in November. In this celebration, all members of their patronymic – both men and women – participated. If they had a married daughter, she would return home on this day with her husband and children. They would gather with the head of the patronymic, and a feast would be laid at his household. The *Jinish Khvama* is further proof that the Megrelians have been indigenous inhabitants of the Gali region.

Interestingly, even after the "ethnic cleansing," Abkhaz people do not live in the Gali region today. There are still a few Megrelians living there. The Abkhazs continue to attack them, taking their hazelnuts and citrus fruits, but they do not wish to live there. Why? This has already been mentioned above, but we will repeat it here: because the Abkhaz avoid working the land. They only plant enough

for their own household's needs.

Foreign authors who visited Georgia in the 17th-18th centuries confirm, once again, through their writings, that Abkhaz people never lived in historical Samurzakano. Only in the late Middle Ages did some Abkhaz families settle there, but they were already fully assimilated and had no influence on the toponyms or Megrelian way of life.

The social structure, material culture, socio-economic system, and literacy culture of the Georgian population during the feudal era were completely different from that of the Abkhaz. During this time, "the village" in feudal Georgia represented the agricultural centre of the land, with its own church, cemetery, and internal trade and economic routes. The monogenetic districts of these villages were already undergoing fragmentation, especially in the plain regions, where Ottoman historian and geographer, Evliya Çelebi, during his travels in Samegrelo, visited such *"village-like cities"* (**Evliya Çelebi, 1971:** 95).

According to historical Georgian written sources, the term "village" had special significance for Georgians from the 8th century onward. It referred to a settlement where the majority of the population engaged in agriculture, especially farming (**Javakhishvili, 1998:** 10).

Il. Adamia considered the separate and simultaneously clustered settlement lifestyle on hills as the most ancient form of settlement. He believed that "such hills represented independent residential units of the population who had settled from the North Caucasus and were separated by 10-15 kilometers from each other" (**Adamia, 1968:** 39). The population living in foreign territories felt a sense of fear, and this helped them protect themselves. At that time, the Abkhaz referred to such small, monogenetic settlements as *"atsuta*" (**Ajinjal, 1969:** 15). Over time, as the integration process began between the indigenous and immigrant populations, the Abkhaz, influenced by the Georgians, began settling from the hills into the plain regions, and the term "atsuta" evolved to refer to a part of the village. However, in the 18th century, a new wave of migrants from the North brought with them the Arabic terms *"ahabla"* and *"akyta,"* which completely replaced the use of the term *"atsuta."*

As for *"akyta,"* it can refer both to a community and a village, though this Arabic word entered the Abkhaz language from Turkish. In the North Caucasus, the Abaza use this term to refer to both a village and a community. Therefore, it seems that the Abkhaz never lived in the depths of Georgia, especially in historical Samurzakano.

Thus, according to the ethnographic materials we collected, as well as both Georgian and foreign sources, it becomes clear that the ethnic Abkhaz have undergone a lengthy historical and migratory path. Their formation as "Abkhaz" occurred as a result of the integration of the northwest Caucasian kinship groups with the Georgian population. During their time living in the Georgian state, they experienced a significant influence of Georgian culture. However, due to the conservative nature of their traditions, their origins from the northwestern Caucasus roots and their similarities to other ethnic groups of different origins have been preserved to this day.

CHAPTER XII. THE CONFESSIONAL SITUATION IN HISTORICAL SAMURZAKANO

According to archaeological evidence, the spread of Christianity in the territory of historical Samurzakano dates back to the 4th century. A baptistery discovered in Gudava belongs to this period (**Khvistani, 2005:** 64; **Khvistani, 2009:** 40). It is believed that a church once stood to the north of the baptistery, but the Okumi river now flows through that location. It is presumed that the river eroded and carried away both the church and part of the baptistery (**Zamtaradze, 1979:** 64-68).

At the turn of the 9th-10th centuries, a single-nave hall church was built in Chkhortoli. This church fits precisely within the broader line of Georgian national ecclesiastical architecture and is organically linked with its evolution. It demonstrates that, prior to the political unification of Georgia, religious and cultural unity already existed, as evidenced by the construction in western Georgia of cult buildings typical of eastern Georgia during the same era (**Khvistani, 2009:** 23-24).

The territory of historical Samurzakano belonged to the Gudakva bishopric, which corresponds to modern-day Gudava. Although the date of the Gudakva bishopric's establishment is unknown, it existed until the end of the 10th century. The first king of united Georgia, Bagrat III, transferred the episcopal see from Gudakva to the newly built Bedia, thus founding the bishopric of Bedia (***Matiane Kartlisa*, 1955:** 281). From then on, for 800 years, the bishop of Bedia served as the spiritual shepherd of historical Samurzakano. From its inception, the Bedia see became a major ecclesiastical and cultural centre. For centuries, the icon of the Virgin of Blachernae and half of the Virgin's belt were kept in the episcopal cathedral of Bedia (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 126).

At the turn of the 10th-11th centuries, a church was built in Dikhazurga (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 135). The Mtskelikari Church, also built in the 10th-11th centuries, features inscriptions in Georgian Asomtavruli and Nuskhuri scripts (**Khvistani, 2009:** 23, 40; **Gamakharia, 2005:** 135). In the early 11th century, local nobleman Giorgi, son of Gurgen, and the Archbishop of Bedia, Giorgi, built the Church of Saint George in Ilori. It became one of the most significant sanctuaries in western Georgia. It preserved a notable example of Georgian metalwork – the Bedia Chalice (**Khvistani, 2009:** 26). In the 11th century, a single-nave hall church was also built in Ghumurishi, with a southern additional construction and a vestibule. It remained functional until the 15th century (**Khvistani, 2009:** 10).

The first known bishop of Bedia is Giorgi Bedielli, who likely served at the turn of the 10th-11th centuries (**Khorava, 2021(d):** 48). The bishops of Bedia paid considerable attention to the Georgian monasteries on Mount Sinai and in Jerusalem. In the second half of the 14th century, Archbishop Lazare is mentioned in a manuscript from the Georgian monastery on Mount Sinai. At the turn of the 14th-15th centuries, Bishop Markoz of Bedia was active and is mentioned in the Gospel Book of the Monastery of the Cross (**Kalandia, 2004:** 89).

In the 2nd half of the 15th century, the sees of Bedia and Tsaishi were united

under Joachim, who between 1470-1474 was consecrated as Catholicos of Abkhazia by the Patriarch of Antioch and Jerusalem, Michael. This effectively separated western Georgia ecclesiastically from the Catholicosate of Mtskheta (***Chronicles, 2,* 1897:** 294; **Gamakharia, 2005:** 163), though Joachim retained the title of Bishop of Tsaishi and Bedia (**Kalandia, 2004:** 91). By the end of that century, Bishop Grigol was serving in Bedia (***Chronicles, 2,* 1897:** 234; **Arakhamia, 2017:** 122).

In the 1630s, Catholic missionaries – the Theatines – settled in historical Samurzakano. In 1634, Levan II Dadiani (1611-1657) gave them residence in Tsipuria. There were two churches in Tsipuria, one dedicated to the Virgin Mary and the other to Saint George. In 1635, the ruler granted them the local Church of Saint George (**Merkviladze, Gabisonia, 2012/2013:** 242-243).

In the 1660s, the bishop of Bedia was Andria Bedielli. During this time, the religious situation was particularly difficult not only in Odishi and Abkhazia but throughout Georgia. In 1664-1665, Bishop Andria met with the visiting Patriarch of Antioch, Macarius, and described the dire circumstances in his diocese (**Macarius of Antioch, 1982:** 103). This was compounded by Abkhaz raids on the territory of the Principality of Odishi, during which churches and monasteries were looted and destroyed. The Patriarch of Jerusalem, Dositheus (1669-1707), wrote that the Abkhazians *"devastated churches and monasteries; Mokvi, Khopi, Khyachi, Zugdidi, and the entire region from Dioscurias (Sokhumi) to the Hypius (Tstkhenistskali) and the Phasis (Rioni)"* (**Seleznev, 1847(a):** 46). As a result of these events, religious items such as liturgical books, icons, crosses, and church inventories were transferred from the northwestern part of Odishi, including the territory of the Bedia bishopric, to safer locations farther within Odishi (**Khorava, 2021(d):** 67).

In 1681, following Abkhaz conquest up to the Galidzga river, the bishoprics of Dranda and Mokvi were dissolved (**Dadiani, 1962:** 166; **Khorava, 2021(d):** 67). The Bedia diocese also fell into a dire situation during this time, and its bishop was Gabriel Chikvani, who held the combined sees of Tchkondidi, Tsageri, and Bedia (***MGL*, 1970:** 581).

From the late 17th century for about 50 years, there is no record of any bishop of Bedia, nor is it known whether the episcopal see continued to function. During this time, the Catholicoses of Abkhazia tried to protect the Georgian population in historical Samurzakano from deportation and enslavement by the Abkhazians (***MGL*, 1970:** 647, 670; **Kakabadze, 1921(b):** 88).

By the 1750s, the Bishop of Bedia is mentioned again. Metropolitan Maxime Iashvili of Bedia took part in a council convened by King Solomon I. The council addressed church matters and banned the slave trade (**Khorava, 2021(d):** 67). Metropolitan Maxime also attended the 1761 ecclesiastical council (***MGL*, 1970:** 845). By the late 1760s, the Bedia bishopric was abolished. In a 1770 list of parishes in Western Georgia, Bedia is mentioned as a dissolved see (**Matcharadze, 1988:** 553). Between 1771-1772, Johann Güldenstädt also refers to Bedia, along with Mokvi and Dranda, as a dissolved episcopal see (***Güldenstädt's Travel*, 1962:** 171; ***Güldenstädt's Travel*, 1964:** 53). Soon after, the ruler of Samurzakano, Le-

van Sharvashidze, converted to Islam (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 166). His residence was in Bedia, and it seems his conversion led to the abandonment of the Bedia Cathedral and the cessation of Christian services there (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 331; ***Saint Ambrose the Confessor..*, 2006:** 767). After the dissolution of the Bedia bishopric, in 1777 Katsia Dadiani reinstated the Tsaishi bishopric and appointed Grigol Chikovani as bishop. Samurzakano was included within the jurisdiction of the Tsaishi bishopric. Bishop Grigol made efforts to strengthen Christianity in Samurzakano (**Tughushi, 2001(b):** 97).

At the beginning of the 19th century, the only functioning church in historical Samurzakano was the Church of Ilori. In 1810, services resumed at the Bedia Cathedral (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 364-365).

In 1812, Manuchar Sharvashidze, the steward of Samurzakano, restored the ruined church in Tsamkhara – he repaired and reopened it, and later had it consecrated in the name of Saint George by Metropolitan Grigol of Tsaishi (**Tchitchinadze, 1897(a):** 529–530; **Gamakharia, 2005:** 365-366). In 1818, the Georgian Exarchate abolished the Tsaishi diocese and merged its territory with the Tsageri diocese into the Tchkondidi diocese. As a result, on December 28, 1818, the Diocese of Samegrelo was established (***Caucasian Calendar-1866*:** 17), and the Bishop of Samegrelo became the spiritual head of Samurzakano.

On March 26, 1825, the process of extending the jurisdiction of the Georgian Exarchate over the churches of Samegrelo was completed. This was expected to support the organization of missionary activities in Abkhazia. From that day forward, by order of the Exarch and Levan V Dadiani, one of the primary responsibilities of the Tchkondidi diocese was to send missionaries to Abkhazia. The first mission was dispatched to Samurzakano in the early 1830s, led by priest Iese Mikaberidze, who held the position of Blagochin (*senior parish priest*) (**Bishop Kyrion, 1903:** 60-61; **Gamakharia, 2021(a):** 196).

Missionaries were assigned to various villages: to the village of Okumi – priest Vasil Kutsia and a deacon; to Gali – Saba Topuria with a deacon; to Nabakevi – Nikoloz Kuprava, Davit Svanidze, and Mikheil Gagua; to Saberio and Letcharie – Markoz Shonia and Markoz Arkania; to Dikhazurga – Davit Antelava; to Ganarjias Mukhuri – Iese Khotcholava; to Ilori – Petre Zhghenti; Iese Mikaberidze himself, as Blagochin, was assigned to the village of Darcheli (**Bishop Kyrion, 1903:** 61).

In Christian Samurzakano, the missionaries did not face much difficulty in reinforcing Christianity. This is supported by the surge in church construction during the 1830s. In 1831, in the village of Upper Saberio, with donations from the parishioners, a church was built in honor of the Presentation of the Virgin Mary (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 931). In 1832, with the support of Metropolitan Davit Tsereteli of Tchkondidi and his sister Martha – wife of Levan V Dadiani – restoration works on the Bedia Cathedral began, but they were soon halted due to Martha's sudden death (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 382).In 1838, a church dedicated to the Saint George was built in the village of Gali with funds donated by parishioners (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 931). By 1840, ten churches were functioning in Samurzakano (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 400).

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In 1840, the Russian authorities stripped the Prince of Samegrelo of control over Samurzakano and introduced direct Russian rule. A new Russian administrative-territorial unit was established – the Samurzakano Sabokaulo, which was placed directly under the authority of the Governor of Kutaisi (**Kvashilava 2011(b):** 288).

From the 1840s, the Blagochin of Samurzakano was Archpriest Besarion (Vasil) Mikaberidze. With donations from the parishioners, churches were built in 1848: one in the village of Mukhuri dedicated to the Archangels, another in Dikhazurga named after St. George, and another St. George's Church in Gudava. In 1849, the inhabitants of the village of Barghebi constructed a church also dedicated to St. George (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 929-931).

From 1850 to 1867, the Blagochin of Samurzakano was Priest Davit Matchavariani (***Holy Archbishop Alexander..,*** **2006:** 35-36). In 1850, a church dedicated to St. George was built in Okumi using funds donated by the local community. In 1851, the people of Bedia constructed a church dedicated to the Dormition of the Virgin (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 929-930). In 1852, the community in Chkhortoli built another church in honor of St. George. In 1860, a church was built in the village of Rechkhi dedicated to St. Nicholas (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 931).

In 1861, when the Society for the Restoration of Christianity raised concerns about the religious situation in Samurzakano, the restoration of Bedia Cathedral was put on the agenda, but this important task was ultimately not completed (***Saint Ambrose the Confessor..*****, 2006:** 769-770). In 1866, a wooden church dedicated to the Annunciation of the Virgin was built in Okumi with donations from local merchants (**Kobakhidze, 2017:** 29). By 1868, the population of Samurzakano was recorded at 25,601 people, of whom 25,067 were Christians and 534 were Muslims. That same year, 17 churches were operating in Samurzakano, served by 17 priests (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 938–939).

From May 27 to June 4, 1868, Bishop Gabriel Kikodze – Bishop of Imereti and Head of the Abkhazian diocese – toured all of Samurzakano. He visited the region again from May 11 to 19, 1870. He traveled through almost every village, met with the parishioners, and became acquainted with both the spiritual and socio-economic conditions of the flock (**Gamakharia, 2007:** 60-61).

In 1876, a new stone church was built in Okumi, but it remained non-functional for over a decade. As of 1888, the church still lacked an iconostasis and had not been consecrated (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 998).

By the late 1870s, the parishes had grown so large that dividing them became a pressing issue. For example, the Bedia parish spanned 25 versts and included 600 households, while other parishes ranged from 300 to 500 households. As a result, priests were unable to adequately serve all of them, and it became necessary to establish new parishes (**Gamakharia, 2007:** 105).

The issue of the ethnic identity of the people of Samurzakano was exploited by the Tsarist regime as early as the first half of the 19th century (**Kvashilava, 2011(b):** 323-329). According to N. Durnovo, there were attempts in Russia to insti-

gate Ossetians and Abkhazians against Georgians. One such idea was to introduce a supposed unique *"Samurzakano language"* in the region of Samurzakano (then part of the Sokhumi district), which derived its name from a commander named Murzakan. However, there is no writing system, nor any book or text book in such a language (**Durnovo, 1990:** 48). This is confirmed by an anonymous author (presumably Gabriel Kikodze), who published an article in 1868 reporting: *"We know that the ecclesiastical authorities tasked one Samurzakano priest with translating the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, but all social classes of Samegrelo and Samurzakano opposed this effort… and so, this honorable labour of the translator was left without any practical application"* (***Main Information..*, 1868:** 3). By 1884, the number of parishes in Samurzakano had reached 17 (**Gamakharia, 2007:**107).

On December 22, 1886, Gennady Pavlinsky was consecrated as the Bishop of Sokhumi (***"Mtskemsi", 3, 1887:*** 1; **Gamakharia, 2005:** 547). He visited Samurzakano on June 5, 1887, accompanied by Dean Davit Matchavariani, monk Harlampi, and the secretary of the diocesan chancery. At the border of Samurzakano, they were met by the local dean Ioane Chkhenkeli and the district chief. The bishop visited several churches in Samurzakano, where large crowds had gathered to greet him. He encouraged the local population to open schools. In response, the people pledged to build a house for a school and to hire a teacher at their own expense (**Jinjikhadze Sp., 1887:** 5-6).

Despite the positive impressions from this visit, the 1887 report of the Society for the Restoration of Orthodoxy in the Caucasus stated that the moral condition of the population in Abkhazia-Samurzakano was deplorable. It cited several obstacles to religious education, including: Divine services being held in the "incomprehensible" Georgian language, A shortage of Abkhaz priests; The harmful influence of muhajirs (Muslim emigrants returning from the Ottoman Empire), The growing number of mullahs etc. (***Report*, 1888:** 71; **Gamakharia, 2005:** 549-550). The same report contains this note about Samurzakano: *"The pupils know many prayers in Russian, but literacy in the Mingrelian language does not exist to this day. There are no translated prayers in this language. Consequently, it can be said that the conscious comprehension of Christian education has not yet begun – not only among the broad masses but even among schoolchildren in Samegrelo and Samurzakano. Church services and prayers are held in Georgian, a language understood only by the higher social class of the Samegrelo population"* (***Report*, 1888:** 71; **Gamakharia, 2005:** 550-551). This was the first official articulation of the imperial strategy to divide the Georgian nation – by proposing the use of the Mingrelian language for liturgy and education in Samurzakano and Samegrelo.

On March 1, 1890, Archimandrite Ambrose Kavkaskidze was appointed inspector of the schools in Abkhazia, Samurzakano, Guria, Svaneti, and Akhaltsikhe counties under the Society for the Restoration of Christianity (**Barnabishvili, 1890:** 2). At the end of April of the same year, Archimandrite Ambrose visited Samurzakano. During his inspection of the village school in Dikhazurga, he discovered a distressing state of Georgian language knowledge among students. It turned out that the teachers were teaching subjects in Russian and Mingrelian,

while Georgian was not used at all. Recognizing the vital importance of teaching Georgian, Archimandrite Ambrose made it mandatory for all teachers in Samurzakano to teach the Georgian language (**Barnabishvili, 1890:** 2).

On May 24, 1892, a gathering of delegates elected by the residents of Samurzakano was held in the town of Okumi. One of the six key issues they planned to present to the government was the restoration of the Bedia Cathedral, which, at the time, had reportedly been turned into a hideout for stolen livestock by thieves. The deputies signed a petition to raise this matter with the authorities. Additionally, the people of Samurzakano imposed a per capita tax of one abazi for the restoration of Bedia Cathedral. Any shortfall was to be covered through donations (***O-li V-no,* 1892:** 2).[1] However, the initiative ultimately was not carried out (**Sakhokia, 1896:** 27).

It seems the restoration effort ultimately failed, because when T. Sakhokia visited Bedia in 1895, he was met with a sorrowful sight: the cathedral was overgrown with thorny bushes and fig trees, the vaults had been ruined, the dome was half-ruined, and the other half was on the verge of falling. The wall paintings had been washed away by rain, with only faint traces of frescoes remaining above the southern entrance (**Sakhokia, 1896:** 27). As the restoration of the Bedia Cathedral came to nothing, by the end of the 19th century, a new church was built in the village of Bedia through the money, allotted by Alexandra Sharvashidze (***"Tsnobis Purtseli"*, 592, 1898:** 3).

Alongside the physical damage of the Bedia Cathedral, the Georgian language also was in a hardship in Samurzakano. From the 1870s, the Russian Empire altered its attitude toward Samurzakano. Sometimes it presented the locals as a "new ethnic group", sometimes classifying them together with the Megrelians as "Megrelian people" and pushing for church services and education in Mingrelian and sometimes stated them Abkhazians (***Saint Ambrose the Confessor..*, 2006:** 81). The situation deteriorated even further in the 1890s. The Bishop of Sokhumi at the time, Agafedor, had planned to introduce Slavonic-language church services in all parishes of Abkhazia and Samurzakano (***Ambrose (Khelaia),* 2005:** 127). Although this plan wasn't implemented immediately, the situation was already grave. According to Tedo Sakhokia, in Okumi, while the priest conducted the liturgy in Georgian, the deacon, who did not know Georgian, read the Scriptures in Church Slavonic (**Sakhokia, 1895:** 120). He also notes that, in 1894, a new priest, Father Giorgi Sajaia, and a deacon named Baghishvili (who likewise didn't know Georgian), were assigned to the Gudava church. From that time, the liturgy there was conducted entirely in Slavonic, under the pretense that the congregation didn't understand Georgian. In reality, Father Giorgi himself didn't know how to conduct a service in Georgian. The shift to Church Slavonic initially surprised the parishioners, but soon led them to stop attending church altogether (**Sakhokia, 1895:** 120-121).

The situation worsened further when, on January 17, 1895, Bishop Arsenii (Izotov) – an extreme reactionary and chauvinist – was appointed Bishop

[1] *"O-li V-no"* (Odisheli Vano – *Ivane from Odishi*) – the pen name of Ivane Gegia.

of Sokhumi. That same year, Father Ioane Kavzharadze replaced Archimandrite Ambrose Kavkaskidze as the overseer of parishes and Orthodox schools in Abkhazia. From his appointment onward, Kavzharadze made it his mission to "suppress the Georgian language" in all schools under his supervision, reportedly threatening schools in Samurzakano that he would *"wipe out any mention of Georgian"* (**Sakhokia, 1895:** 122-123). This incited a backlash: in August-September 1895, Georgian members of the Sokhumi Eparchy's educational council submitted a petition advocating for Georgian language instruction in Abkhazia and Samurzakano (**Sakhokia, 1895:** 124; ***Saint Ambrose the Confessor..*, 2006:** 169). The Teachers' Council reviewed statements from village communities and concluded: "In those parish schools where the population speaks the Mingrelian dialect of the Georgian language, teaching the Georgian language is necessary" (***Ambrose (Khelaia),* 2005:** 131).

Bishop Arsenii, in a letter to the chief of the gendarmerie of Kutaisi province, did not deny that the people of Samurzakano had favoured Georgian, though he openly opposed this decision (***Saint Ambrose the Confessor..*, 2006:** 169). He was supported by Boris Khorava, the inspector of the Ochamchire school, who composed a report addressed to Bishop Arsenii, claiming that for Mingrelians, Georgian was harder to learn than Russian. Khorava first requested signatures from the people of Ochamchire, who outrightly rejected his petition. He then approached villages in Samurzakano, spreading fear that Georgians were trying to forcibly assimilate the Megrelians, and urging indigenous people to address the government in avoid this. In the end, only 14 people signed the petition (**Sakhokia, 1895:** 125). Nevertheless, Bishop Arsenii now had in hand the "document" suggesting that Samurzakano's population rejected Georgian-language education. He dismissed the earlier village resolutions in favour of Georgian as being falsified by Georgian clergy (***Saint Ambrose the Confessor..*, 2006:** 168, 172). With this formal pretext, a decision quickly followed: on January 19, 1896, Bishop Arsenii issued a decree banning both religious services and education in the Georgian language throughout Samurzakano (**Gamakharia, 2021(a):** 200). On October 20, 1896, the inspector of parish schools of the Sokhumi Diocese, Deacon Yastrebov, sent a letter to the teachers of the Ilori school, in which he wrote: *"I instruct you to conduct clear explanations in the Russian language; do not use neither Megrelian nor Abkhazian, especially – Georgian"* (***Ambrose (Khelaia),* 2005:** 131).

Bishop Arsenii did not stop there. It had been decided that the Bedia church which had for a long time long remained unrestored due to the absence of will from the Russian authorities – to be handed over to the Russians. According to the December 23, 1896 newspaper *"Tsnobis Purtseli"* Bedia church was to be transferred to the monks. Two monks had already been sent from Russia; they visited the cathedral site and were very impressed by the location. The 30 peasant families living nearby were informed that by this ruling, they had to vacate their homesteads for the future monastery and relocate elsewhere (***"Tsnobis Purtseli"*, 65, 1896:** 2).

On March 17, 1898, the Synodal Chancellery of Georgia-Imereti is-

sued a complete ban on the teaching of the Georgian language in schools of Abkhazia and Samurzakano (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 590). As for religious services, the Holy Synod of Russia was eventually forced to make a concession: On September 3, 1898, the Synod decreed that in the Mingrelian-populated parishes, liturgy should be conducted in a comprehensible ecclesiastical Georgian (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 585). This was reinforced by a November 11, 1898 decision of the Synodal Chancellery as well (***Ambrose (Khelaia),* 2005:** 130). However, Bishop Arsenii only permitted Georgian-language liturgy in 3 parishes – Merkheuli, Abzhakva, and Fakhulani – while he declared Samurzakano to be non-Georgian and left in force his January 19, 1896 decree, maintaining the ban on Georgian-language worship and education in the region (**Gamakharia, 2021(a):** 200).

On July 28, August 3, and September 2, 1900, F. Gerschelmann, the Governor-General of Kutaisi, submitted reports to the Viceroy, requesting decisive measures. He advocated Russian priests substitute Georgians in Abkhaz and Samurzakano parishes, and appoint Russian teachers in the schools instead of Georgians. He believed these measures would ensure that the indigenous people would eventually assimilate with the Russian-speaking population (**Gamakharia, 2021(a):** 200). On December 14, 1904, during a presentation in St. Petersburg, Deacon Vostorgov, the inspector of church schools in the Georgian Exarchate, declared: *"Samurzakano residents have nothing in common with Georgians, and they do not understand the Georgian language at all. Therefore, education and worship in Samurzakano must be conducted entirely in Russian"* (**Vostorgov, 1905:** 6).

During the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), Russia suffered defeat, which triggered a wave of democratic revolution across the empire, including Georgia, particularly Abkhazia. Supporters of the Russification policy, both clergy and teachers, were forced to leave their posts. On February 25, 1905, Boris Khorava, school inspector of Samurzakano, was assassinated (***"Tsnobis Purtseli"*, 2769, 1905:** 3). The revolution compelled the Russian government to implement several liberal and democratic reforms, which extended to the Caucasus. In February 1905, Count Illarion Vorontsov-Dashkov was appointed Viceroy of the Caucasus. Bishop Arsenii who had escaped from Sokhumi, was replaced by Seraphim Chichagov. In March of the same year, I. Vostorgov, one of the leading ideologists of Russification, left Georgia (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 617).

On February 3, 1906, Kyrion Sadzaglishvili was appointed Bishop of Sokhumi Diocese. The bishop ensured that religious services could be held in each ethnic group's native language. Thanks to Bishop Kyrion's direct involvement, the Viceroy's decree on native-language education was implemented in Samurzakano's schools (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 650–651).

In September 18–24, 1906, a clergy Assembly of the Sokhumi diocese was held in Sokhumi. The chairman of the assembly was elected to be the protopresbyter S. Svanidze from Samurzakano, and the secretary of the meeting was priest Nestor Zhordania. According to Bishop Kyrion, this was the first victory for Georgians, this victory as he said *"was intolerable to the Northerners, who were used to*

be rulers." Therefore on the final day of the Assembly, the clergy of the Black Sea governorate demonstratively left the Assembly, for which they were reprimanded by the Bishop. As the Bishop Kyrion noted that among the Georgians, *"an awakening, enthusiasm and boldness were visible among Georgians – this was the work of the new wind; the oppressed and persecuted could finally breath freely"* (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 638; ***Kyrion II*, 2006:** 205-207).

Kyrion was not allowed to continue his mission for the Georgian cause. From the moment of his appointment to the Sokhumi see, opposition against him began. Particularly active was I. Vostorgov, a known Georgian-hater, who addressed numerous slanderous and offensive letters to criticize Kyrion's activity in Sokhumi. In response, Kyrion was forced to send a special explanatory letter to the Holy Synod of Russia, refuting Vostorgov's accusations (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 645-659). Of course, Vostorgov wasn't the only one dissatisfied – the Russian Empire had no interest in strengthening the Georgian language and identity within the Sokhumi diocese. On January 24, 1907, the Holy Synod dismissed Bishop Kyrion from Sokhumi and appointed him as coadjutor bishop of the Lithuanian diocese (***Kyrion II*, 2006:** 222).

Ahead of the Russian Church Council, Vostorgov's project was being considered. According to it, two metropolitanates were to be established in the Caucasus, and the Sukhumi diocese along with Samurzakano was to be separated from Georgian influence and placed under Russian ecclesiastical jurisdiction (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 664). In 1906, Samurzakano had a population of 35,000, of which 32,000 spoke Mingrelian as their mother tongue. Therefore, it was suggested that Samurzakano be part of the Samegrelo (Megrelian) diocese, not Sokhumi's. As Nikolai Durnovo, a great supporter of the Georgian church, wrote: *"Placing the Sokhumi Bishopric under a Russian Metropolitan in Transcaucasia and removing it from the Georgian Catholicosate is uncanonical and contrary to history"* (**Durnovo, 1990:** 57-58). Although Vostorgov's project wasn't implemented, the persecution of Georgian clergy and the Georgian language in Samurzakano resumed with renewed intensity (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 679-680).

Bishop Dimitri of Sokhumi actively suppressed Georgian clergy. In 1909, priest Iesse Shelia, originated from Samurzakano and serving in Guria-Samegrelo, requested to transfer to the Sokhumi diocese on the condition he could live near the ruins of the Bedia Cathedral. He wanted to take care of and protect the site. After much pleading, Bishop Dimitri agreed to accept him, but added this note to his approval: *"I accept priest Shelia to live in the Sokhumi diocese…but permission to reside beside the great Bedia Cathedral ruins will not be granted"* (***Saint Ambrose the Confessor..*, 2006:** 769). According to Ambrose Khelaia, the restoration of Bedia Cathedral was hindered during the time of Russian bishops due to the policy of Russification, which also prohibited local settlement by Georgian clergy (***Saint Ambrose the Confessor..*, 2006:** 770).

Bishop Dimitri went even further. On September 21, 1910, he ordered that only clergy of Russian origin be appointed in the diocese. This sparked public

outrage among the Georgian population, forcing the Holy Synod to intervene. On October 25, 1910, the Synod permitted the appointment of both Russian and Georgian clergy (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 688).

Due to dissatisfaction among the local population, the Russian ecclesiastical authorities recalled Bishop Dimitri and appointed Bishop Andria Ukhtomsky in his place. However, Andria only appeared to be a liberal – his actions revealed his hypocrisy.

On October 17, 1913, the Holy Synod officially founded the Bedia Vlachernae Monastery. Its first abbot was Schema-monk Ioseb (Iesse Shelia). Since the new monastery did not fit within the framework of official Russification policy, Bishop Andria did not support its development, nor did he allocate funds for the restoration of the historic Bedia Cathedral (**Gamakharia, 2021(a):** 202).

The selfless monk-priest Ioseb Shelia worked tirelessly for Bedia: he built two stone churches and residences near the ruins. He tried to gather Georgian monks, hoping they would preserve the site from falling into Russian hands, but he didn't succeed. Eventually, he planned to convert the monastery into a nunnery and began negotiations with Nun Nina, the then-Head of the Teklati Convent. However, he passed away before this could happen, as Bishop Andria did not support the plan. In 1916, Ioseb Shelia died, and soon after, the monastery was abandoned by its few remaining members (***Saint Ambrose the Confessor..*, 2006:** 770-771).

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In 1917, as a result of the February Revolution, the monarchy in Russia was overthrown. The Provisional Government of Russia entrusted the governance of the South Caucasus to a Special Transcaucasian Committee (Ozakom), headed by Akaki Chkhenkeli, a graduate of the Samegrelo Theological School and the son of Ivane Chkhenkeli, a priest of the Church of the Annunciation in Okumi and protopresbyter of Samurzakano.

The Georgian clergy took advantage of the changing situation in the Russian Empire and convened a gathering of Georgian clergy and lay representatives in Mtskheta on March 12, 1917. The assembly restored the autocephaly of the Georgian Orthodox Church.

The greatest opponents of extending the jurisdiction of the autocephalous Georgian Church over Abkhazia were the Russian monks. On May 24-27, 1917, a congress of Abkhaz clergy and parish representatives was held. A delegation from Tbilisi traveled to Sokhumi to meet with them and called for unity with the Georgian Church, but their proposal was rejected (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 777; (**Gamakharia, 2021(b):** 230). Soon after this separatist assembly, in early June 1917, a Congress of Samurzakano clergy was held, which supported the autocephalous Georgian Church. On June 3, 1917, a telegram was sent in the name of the Georgian Church's temporary governing body, stating: *"The autocephalous Georgian Church sends its blessing to its spiritual children – the clergy and faithful of the Samurzakano-Sokhumi district – for holding a congress to reorganize ecclesiastical*

and community life" (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 781).

On September 8, 1917, the Ecclesiastical Council of Georgia was opened in Tbilisi, with 620 delegates invited, including 14 from Samurzakano (**Gamakharia, 2005:** 781–782). The council elected Bishop Kyrion as the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia. Although Samurzakano had not yet been officially detached from the Russian-controlled Sokhumi diocese, the local clergy ceased reporting to the Russian Synod and began commemorating the leader of the Georgian Church during services (***Kyrion II*, 2006:** 356–358). On November 2, 1917, the Catholicosate Council requested Metropolitan Ambrose Khelaia of Tchkondidi to visit Abkhazia and explain to the local population the spiritual importance of religious reunification of Abkhazia with the rest of Georgia (***Saint Ambrose the Confessor..*, 2006:** 227). It is likely due to Ambrose Khelaia's efforts that on December 12, 1917, a Congress was held in the town of Gali, gathering clergy and parish representatives from part of Samurzakano and the village of Ilori. The Congress was chaired by priest Samson Svanidze, with priest Bartlome Kharebava as secretary. The congress unanimously declared: *"Until the ecclesiastical relationship between Samurzakano and Abkhazia is clarified, we will temporarily attach ourselves to the Tchkondidi metropolitanate and, as of today, root outy all ties with Bishop Sergi of Sokhumi and his chancery"* (***Saint Ambrose the Confessor..*, 2006:** 228-230, Doc. №37). In the same year, a Georgian women's monastery was founded in Bedia, considered a great victory for Georgia (***Saint Ambrose the Confessor..*, 2006:** 772).

On October 7, 1919, a Special Ecclesiastical Assembly of Abkhazia – attended by representatives of Georgian, Abkhazian, Greek, and Russian parishes –renamed the Tskhum-Bedia diocese to the Tskhum-Abkhazian Diocese. Metropolitan Ambrose Khelaia was elected as the head of the diocese.

In 1920, Nun Nino (Bokeria) was appointed abbess of the Bedia Monastery. According to 1921 data, the following clergy served in the monastery: Hieromonk Pavle (Gegia), Abbess Nino (Bokeria), Monk Ivliane (Beraia), Nun Elisabed (Ivanidze), Nun Makrine (Kolbaia), Novice Tekle (Rigvava), Novice Eugenia (Dzadzua), Novice Daria (Jobava), Novice Ekaterine (Dvalishvili), Novice Tamari (Mzhavanadze) Notably, five of them were from Samurzakano (**Tuaeva, 2009:** 55–57).

The appointment of a Georgian bishop to the Tskhum-Abkhazian Diocese brought great hope – not only for the restoration of the Bedia Cathedral but also for the spiritual reintegration of all Abkhazia and Samurzakano with the rest of Georgia.

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On September 7, 1921, Metropolitan Ambrose became the Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia. He understood well that abandoning the Tskhum-Abkhazian Diocese was not an option.

On September 21, 1921, the Tskhum-Abkhazian Diocesan Court (chaired by Deacon T. Jokhtaberidze) decided to appoint Archimandrite Ioane Margishvili as the new bishop of the Tskhum-Abkhazian Diocese. On October 3, 1921, a unified congress of clergy from the Kodori and Samurzakano districts convened in Ilori,

with 25 participants, and supported the candidacy of Ioane Margishvili (***Saint Ambrose the Confessor..*, 2006:** 470-471) On October 15, at the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, Archimandrite Ioane was ordained as the bishop of Tskhum-Abkhazia (**Vardosanidze, 2001:** 139).

Bishop Ioane Margishvili began his ministry in the Tskhum-Abkhazian Diocese in November 1921. During this time, both the political and religious situation in the diocese had become even more complicated. Seeking a way out of the difficult circumstances, Bishop Ioane concluded that it was necessary to take into account the specificities of Abkhazia and act cautiously. In his opinion, it was necessary to bless the bishop of Bedia, who would have his residence in Ilori and would be responsible for the spiritual well-being of Samurzakano (**Vardosanidze, 2001:** 139-140).

After the Sovietization of Georgia, the Church of the Annunciation in Okumi ceased functioning. Until 1924, Priest Khariton Shelia served here, but after that, the church was used by various state institutions (**Shonia N., 2015:** 124). Similarly, the Church of St. John the Baptist in Ghumurishi was closed, and its priest Cornelius Charkhishvili was exiled. The church ceased to hold services, its facade was altered, cemented, and its roof was covered with slate. The building was desecrated and repurposed for agricultural use. (**Shonia N., 2015:** 127). Similarly, the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin in Tskhratskaro was closed and repurposed as a warehouse for a collective farm (**Shonia N., 2015:** 127).

During the 1920s and 1930s, in the midst of atheism and anti-religious campaigns, many churches, including the Church of St. George in Ilori, were closed, despite local resistance.

The newly established Bedia Women's Monastery also faced a difficult situation, as the nuns were persecuted by the authorities and suffered from constant harassment by criminals. The monastery's last abbess was Nun Zoile (Dvalishvili). Some of the nuns sought refuge in other monasteries, while others continued their monastic lives secretly in their homes (**Tuaeva, 2009:** 57).

Despite the atheist regime, in the early 1940s, services were restored in the Ilori Church, and in 1952-1953, the church was repainted (**Sharia, 2012:** 8). In 1953, restoration work began on Bedia Cathedral, during which the lower part of the chancel was restored and a temporary roof was installed (**Giorgobiani, 1988:** 4). The Ilori Church was also restored that year, though the work was done without professional restorers. During the restoration, both the interior and exterior were plastered, and the columns, stone arches, and openings were painted white with oil paints (**Katsia, 1963:** 31).

In 1959, the wall around Ilori Church was restored (**Sharia, 2012:** 8). In 1969-1970, the outlines of Bedia Cathedral were restored, and the roof was renovated, but a full restoration of the facade could not be completed at the time. In 1984, research was conducted on the Bedia Cathedral, aiming to fully restore its facade and dome. The restoration of the facades to the neck of the dome was supposed to begin that year, while the restoration of the dome itself was planned for the future (**Giorgobiani, 1988:** 4).

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Since the end of September 1993, amid the ethnic cleansing of the Georgian population, the bishops and monks of the Bichvinta and Tskhum-Abkhazian Diocese were expelled (**Tsuladze Z., 2017**). Following the occupation of Abkhazia in 1993, services in Ilori Church in Georgian ceased (**Sharia, 2012:** 8).

From 2005, with the blessing of His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II, Father Pimen Kardava began work on the restoration of the ancient churches in the historic Samurzakano region. With the support of the local congregation, the Church of St. George in Tchuburkhinji was restored and adorned with Georgian icons. This initiative gathered many Georgians around Father Pimen. For the local inhabitants of historic Samurzakano, his presence was a great source of comfort. Although things seemed to be improving, unfortunately, the separatists saw a threat in this process and blocked further progress (**Tsiklauri, 2008:** 12-13).

The situation gradually intensified. Father Pimen Kardava, who had been ordained as a priest, was denied permission by the Abkhaz separatists to conduct services in the Church of St. George in Tchuburkhinji, which he had personally restored. They even forbade him from entering the church. Furthermore, if he attempted to enter, the congregation was prohibited from entering the church as well – everything was being done to prevent the local population from hearing the liturgy in their native language (**Tsiklauri, 2008:** 12).

By 2006, the local population of historical Samurzakano had gathered a substantial amount of money to build a church in the district centre. They brought building materials, dug the foundation, and Father Pimen (Roman Kardava) was overseeing the church construction in Gali. However, the Deputy Chief of the Abkhaz police in Gali, Otar Turnanba, prohibited the construction of a Georgian Orthodox Church. He even arrested three young builders working on the project, halting the construction (**Berulava, 2006(b)**).

On November 7, 2006, by the order of the President of Georgia, the two most significant monuments of historical Samurzakano – the Bedia Monastery and the Ilori Church – were granted national significance (***Decree of the President of Georgia №665*, 2006**).

On April 10, 2008, the religious community of historical Samurzakano witnessed an unimaginable and horrendous event: while Father Pimen (Kardava) was about to distribute religious literature to the congregation of the Ilori Church of St. George, he was detained by about ten armed Abkhaz separatists, who kidnapped him and forced him to move to the territories controlled by the Georgian government (**Papaskiri L., 2018**; **Tsamalashvili, 2008**).

Although Father Pimen's release occurred due to pressure from Russia, which was not at all in favour of religious services in Georgian in historical Samurzakano, this act was masked under the *"Abkhazian Council's"* directive, which, of course, was formal and non-canonical. The decree stated: *"Priest-monk Pimen Kardava is prohibited from performing religious services and rites in the Gali district, because such actions are only carried out by the clergy of the Abkhazian Diocese"* (**Gagua, 2012:** 11).

The situation worsened significantly after the Russia-Georgia war in 2008. As soon as the war ended and separatists gained control of Upper Abkhazia, Russian military representatives demanded that the clergy in the churches and monasteries in the region submit to the Russian Orthodox Church. They were threatened with expulsion from the monasteries if they refused. Additionally, the performance of liturgies in Georgian was prohibited. Even in Ilori Church, Georgian-speaking worshippers were not allowed to enter, and there were instances where the congregation was denied the right to baptize children (**Kekua, 2009:** 135).

Instead, an Abkhazian clergyman, Mate Tuzhba, who had been ordained in the Russian Orthodox Church, was sent to Gali district. During services, he referred to the name of the Russian Patriarch, thereby halting the mention of the Patriarch of all Georgia in the historical region of Samurzakano (**Tsiklauri, 2008:** 13). This process aimed to weaken the national consciousness of the Georgian population in the occupied Gali municipality.

After the ban on Georgian liturgies and the expulsion of Georgian clergy, the Georgian community in Gali decided to erect crosses at the entrances to their villages and in town centres. However, the occupiers did not allow them to do so and violently dismantled the crosses. Furthermore, they threatened the local population with more severe punishment if such actions were repeated (***Report*, 2018-2019:** 6; ***Report*, 2020-2022:** 51)

The Russian occupiers and Abkhaz separatists did not stop there; they began erasing Georgian traces in historical Samurzakano under the pretext of "restoration works." In 2010, they carried out an act of vandalism on the Ilori Church. The traditional church was subjected to a foreign, non-traditional architectural element—Russian architectural forms, with a angular volume and a hemispherical dome, which does not correspond to any stage in the development of Georgian architectural forms. The eastern facade, which previously had Georgian epigraphic inscriptions, was whitened. Additionally, the entire church facade and bell tower were whitened, and the decorative window frames were painted red. The stone steps of the bell tower were demolished and replaced with metal structures, and an air conditioning system was installed on the church (**Sharia, 2011:** 1). The Bedia Church suffered a similar fate. Under the guise of restoration, the unique fresco of Bagrat III, the first king of united Georgia, was destroyed, and almost all Georgian inscriptions and ornaments were either destroyed or damaged (**Tsuladze Z., 2012**).

In the Gali district, there were officially 16,000 registered Georgians and 4 Georgian churches, all of which had been restored by Georgians. However, no Georgian-language liturgies were being performed in any of the churches. Georgian clergy, who periodically visited the region because they were indigenous to the Gali district, were not allowed to perform religious services. In order to exercise their religious rights, the Georgian population of Gali would secretly travel at night to Zugdidi, especially during major religious holidays, to attend services. The clergy of the Abkhazian Diocese were ready to enter the area and perform religious services, but the situation was dire. The process of erasing Georgian traces

from cultural heritage sites, including churches and monasteries, was widespread. Frescoes were erased in almost every Orthodox church (***Report*, 2018-2019:** 6; ***Report,* 2020-2022:** 11).

As of July 20, 2021, in the operating churches in Gali (besides the 5 active churches, 1 was under construction in Otobaia village), Father Mate Tuzhba was performing services. Despite pressure from Sokhumi, he was conducting liturgies in both Georgian and Russian (***Complex Discrimination..,* 2021**).

Despite the difficult situation, the population of historical Samurzakano has made, and continues to make, efforts to preserve the monuments in the area. In 1993, at the initiative of Bezhan Emkhvari, the Okumi church was restored. Strengthening works were carried out, and the interior was renovated (**Kobakhidze, 2017:** 37). In 2006, the Okumi's church was freed from layers of soil that had been damaging the church walls. The following year, a reinforced concrete fence was built around the church, the building was covered, and iron doors were installed (**Kobakhidze, 2017:** 37).

From 2003-2008, the residents of Ghumurishi carried out cleaning works on the Church of St. John the Baptist. They removed the weeds and replaced the roof with a tin covering. Unfortunately, due to failure to adhere to architectural guidelines for church roofs, the building was not properly covered, and the roof started leaking (**Shonia N., 2015:** 127).

Through their efforts, the area around the church of St. George in Tchuburkhinji was cleaned. By 2015, a small prayer corner had been set up in the church (**Shonia N., 2015:**132).

At the same time, the de facto government of occupied Abkhazia, with the help of the Russian Federation, is actively attempting to deceive the international community and present the situation in such a way that the historical and cultural monuments located in the occupied territories have no connection to Georgia's cultural heritage. This goal is pursued through the deliberate alteration of the artistic appearance of Georgian architectural monuments in occupied Abkhazia over the years, as well as the falsification of history and indigenous socio-cultural identity. Part of this plan is the "care" demonstrated by the representatives of the de facto authorities of occupied Abkhazia and their supporters toward the cultural heritage sites in historical Samurzakano and Abkhazia (**Sharia, 2021:** 501)

According to locals, currently only a few churches are functioning in the historical Samurzakano region. Of these, Georgian parishioners can hear religious services in their native language only in the Church of St. George in Tchuburkhinji. There, the liturgy is performed in Georgian, Russian, and Abkhazian by Father Mate Tuzhba, who mentions the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, Kirill, during the prayer.

There is also a functioning church on the Gali military base where Russian clergy occasionally perform services in Russian. Regarding the most important monastery for Georgians, Ilori, Russian clergy serve here, and they are aggressively hostile toward both the Georgian congregation and the Georgian language, as well as anything related to Georgian identity.

Although the Russian Church does not officially recognize the autocephaly of the "Abkhazian Church", this is merely a formality, because Russian Orthodox clergy performs religious services in Abkhazia, and during these services, they invoke the name of the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia. The Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia also never refers to the title of the Catholicos-Patriarch of all Georgia as including the title of *"Metropolitan of Bitchvinta and Tskhum-Apkhazeti, i.e. Sokhumi-Abkhazia"* in any official documents (***Why Does Not the Russian Church Mention..*, 2018**).

In the occupied territories of Georgia, including Samurzakano, there have been violations of fundamental rights of ethnic Georgians and Orthodox Christians. These violations include breaches of their rights to life, religion, freedom of expression, education in their native language, and free movement, as well as intimidation of the population and defilement of sacred sites. The situation is reported annually in international reports. For instance, representatives of the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic, and Evangelical-Lutheran churches are allowed to enter the occupied territories of Abkhazia, which, of course, reflects the positive role of the Georgian state and fully aligns with fundamental human rights.

Unfortunately, Georgian Orthodox clergy are denied this elementary right. This constitutes ethno-religious discrimination specifically targeting Georgians, Georgian Orthodox Christians, and the clergy of the Georgian Orthodox Church (***Occupied Heritage*, 2021:** 5).

Residents of Samegrelo and Samurzakano.
Photo by V. Barkanov (1870-1880)
(from: https://archive.gov.ge/ge/barbare-gabunia-bebutashvilis-kolektsia-1?fbclid=IwY2xjawF_gH5leHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHYM9-rFlxut9AhwiepNQuOyF14zlOkMK1_hUoNX79gA9JtzUi-wVubp3nPQ_aem_Ol4L-0nSG2No3kyr1u_1kg)

CONCLUSION

In the late Middle Ages, the weakened condition of Odishi, due to internal strife and external aggression, was successfully exploited by the Principality of Abkhazia, and the Sharvashidze family took advantage of the opportunity, seizing a significant portion of the territory up to the Enguri River. By the end of the 17th and early 18th centuries, in the middle reaches of the Ghalidzga-Enguri region, the Samurzakano principality was established under the leadership of a offshoot of the Sharvashidze family. This political unit lasted only a few years within the boundaries of the Abkhazian Principality.

Soon, in 1702, Samegrelo partially restored its political influence up to the Ghalidzga River, and the region came under the dual influence of the Dadiani family and the Abkhazian ruler. However, the superiority of the Odishians in this region was evident because the local Sharvashidze rulers became vassals to the Dadiani family. They were obliged to muster troops at the summons of the Samegrelo ruler and pay certain taxes. But the authority of the Dadiani family over the Samurzakano Sharvashidze was somewhat limited. They could not interfere in the internal affairs of Samurzakano, including changing the local rulers.

This situation led to the establishment of a landownership system in Samurzakano, characteristic of late medieval Abkhazia, and a social order associated with it. However, due to the influence of Samegrelo, Samurzakano had certain distinctive features compared to the Abkhazian principality.

Naturally, the Sharvashidze family was not satisfied with the ambiguous situation in Samurzakano and constantly sought to dominate the region. Part of this effort included the Battle of Rukhi in 1780, which marked the end of the Abkhazian expansion beyond the Enguri river. At the end of the 18th century, Abkhazian ruler Kelesh-Bey took advantage of the internal turmoil in Samegrelo to gain control over parts of Samurzakano, although this did not result in the complete loss of Samegrelo's control over the region.

Even at this time, the Samurzakano people continued to pay the tribute owed to the Dadiani family, thus acknowledging the suzerainty of the Samegrelo rulers.

By 1805, this situation effectively ended when the region came under the protection of Russia. The Russian Emperor officially confirmed the belonging of Samurzakano to Samegrelo. This legal affirmation occurred in 1810 when the Dadiani family took advantage of the disturbances in the Abkhazian principality and officially recognized Manuchar Sharvashidze the Governor of Samurzakano, a position he had held since 1790. The appointment of Manuchar Sharvashidze as an administrative official of Samegrelo marked the formal annexation of Samurzakano into Samegrelo.

The local elite of Samurzakano could not come to terms with the reduction of the governor's status of the region. They constantly opposed the authority of the ruler of Samegrelo, who, after the death of Manuchar Sharvashidze, ruled the central part of the Ghalidzga-Enguri region unilaterally. Despite the fact that the

Dadiani family had repeatedly sworn their loyalty to the nobles of Samurzakano and had also received official confirmation of their ownership of the area from the rulers of Abkhazia, the situation remained unchanged. The aristocracy of Samurzakano, with the covert or open support of the rulers of Abkhazia, opposed the Dadiani rule.

In this situation, among the local nobles, one group, led by Prince Temurkhva Anchabadze began to formulate the idea of establishing direct imperial rule by the Russian Emperor over Samurzakano. Russia's colonial and occupation regime, which saw the autonomous existence of the Samegrelo and Abkhazian principalities as a temporary phenomenon, planned to abolish them in the long run. Naturally, the same approach was intended for Samurzakano, where the constant disputes between the Dadianis and the Sharvashidzes hindered the establishment of Russia's colonial system in Western Georgia. While St. Petersburg's positions in the Eastern Black Sea region were fragile, Russia needed a strong ally in the form of the Dadiani family, which is why it temporarily acknowledged the jurisdiction of the ruler of Samegrelo over Samurzakano.

By 1840, Russia had significantly strengthened its position in the region, using the dispute over Samurzakano between the Abkhazian and Odishi principalities as a pretext to introduce direct Russian rule in the central part of Ghalidzga-Enguri. At the same time, Russia actively began to conduct a "scientific study" of the origin of the Samurzakano people, attempting to prove their Abkhazian descent. This was the first step in a long-term colonial policy that aimed to break the historical coexistence of Georgians and Abkhazs and turn the two sister-nations into mortal enemies. It is worth noting that in 1843, the office of the Governor-General officially recognized the illegality and error of this act, but the empire's political and military interests in the region no longer considered correcting this mistake.

Kvapu, the founder of the Sharvashidze family of Samurzakano, was one of the leaders of the Abkhazian expansion towards the Ghalidzga-Enguri direction. The goal of this expansion was to displace the locals and settle the excess population that emerged in the northwestern part of Abkhazia as a result of the settlement of North Caucasians. All of this fit into the principle of feudal internal wars and implied to expand of one's territory by seizing part of a neighboring feudal lord's domain.

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Murzakan Sharvashidze, whose constructive and progressive activities earned the population's respect and led to the naming of the region between the Enguri and Ghalidzga rivers as *"Samurzakano,"* was less involved in the conflicts between the principalities of Samegrelo and Abkhazia. He managed to maintain peaceful coexistence between both principalities. During his rule, the population that had been displaced and scattered during Kvapu's time began to return to the region. Peaceful life was restored in Samurzakano, and the economic situation improved. The political course established by Murzakan continued unchanged during the reign of his son, Khutunia Sharvashidze, who died a heroic death in the battle of Khresili.

This position was reconsidered during the rule of Samurzakano's next ruler, Levan Sharvashidze, who set the goal of liberating the region from the influence of Abkhazia and Samegrelo. A ruler with great ambitions, he sought alliances with the King of Imereti and the ruler of Abkhazia. From this time on, the Sharvashidzes of Samurzakano actively participated in the processes unfolding to the southeast and northwest of their domain and in some cases, even influenced the development of these processes. Levan also attempted to conduct an independent foreign policy. The first connection with representatives of the Russian Empire is attributed to his

name. We disagree with the prevailing historiographical view that Levan ruled Samurzakano until 1810 and have tried to define his period of activity as 1757-1790.

The next and last ruler of Samurzakano, Manuchar Sharvashidze, who served in the Russian Empire, actively participated in the liberation of Georgian lands (Poti, Batumi) from Ottoman rule. As it is showed in our study, he was the initiator of the liberation of Batumi in the early decades of the 19th century. The revision of the date of Manuchar Sharvashidze's death (1812) in the historical sources, which has been reflected in the works of several Abkhaz and Georgian historians, is incorrect.

The rulers of Samurzakano (Kvapu, Murzakan, Khutunia, Levan, Manuchar) "culturally and politically were Georgians" and did not express a desire to sever ties with the Georgian cultural-political world. They were members of the Georgian Church (the exception being Levan, who later converted to Islam). In 1805, the "Abkhaz lords" officially confirmed that Samurzakano had always been part of Samegrelo.

The present study confirms the historical authenticity of Murzakan Sharvashidze. If his existence could only be verified by a single document, the recently discovered Ottoman Sultan's firmān allows us to assert with certainty the authenticity of Murzakan Sharvashidze. Additionally, the document shows that he was an outstanding politician and ruler who actively participated in the anti-Ottoman rebellion along with the Dadiani family.

The claim by some Abkhaz historians that at the end of the 17th century the "historical" borders of Abkhazia were restored on the Enguri river is entirely groundless. Historical sources and other materials (ethnographic, toponymic, local folklore, and legends) do not support the presence of the Abkhaz ethnic group in the Ghalidzga-Enguri interfluve region up until that period. The Abkhazs, who settled there from that time could not significantly alter the local ethnic composition, as happened, for example, in the Abzhua region. Furthermore, the assertion that the Samurzakano people were a separate Abkhaz tribe or, in general, a distinct ethnic group formed by the mixing of Georgians (Megrelians) and Abkhaz is also untenable. "Samurzakano" refers only to a person from the Ghalidzga-Enguri interfluve area, and not some hypothetical local ethnic group. The local indigenous population, undoubtedly Georgian (Mingrelian), was able to preserve and maintain its ethnic identity (language, traditions, national consciousness). This is precisely what gave rise to the name of the region – "Samurzakano" – with its Megrelian (not Abkhazian) linguistic origin. Despite the intermingling of Abkhaz and Georgian populations, the Ghalidzga-Enguri midstream region remained, and still remains, essentially Georgian. Despite the pressure of the Russian Empire, it firmly maintained its Georgian orientation. This is why the first Georgian school on the territory of present-day Abkhazia was established here. The imperial Russian authorities were unable to change this view or annex the region to Abkhazia. The Samurzakano people continued to consider themselves part of Georgia and bearers of Georgian identity.

This spirit was shared by the population of Abkhazia, particularly its aristocracy, as evidenced during the agrarian reform and later during the uprisings of 1918-1921 and the August 1924 rebellion. For this reason, the Russian Bolshevik Empire did everything to destroy this social class and found its main support in the lower classes, which it turned against the Georgians by emphasizing social and national differences. While this policy achieved some success among the Abkhaz, it was entirely ineffective in Samurzakano.

After the Bolshevik revolution, N. Lakoba's nationalist regime decided to launch an attack on Samurzakano and increase the number of ethnic Abkhazs in Abkhazia at the expense of the Georgian population in the Samurzakano district by "Abkhazianizing" them. The pressure, however, was completely ineffective in this case as well. On the contrary, the regime had to recognize the superiority of the Georgian population and, consequently, the Georgian language, which was established as the only language for administrative proceedings in state institutions. It is worth noting that such an exception was granted only to the Samurzakano/Gali district in Abkhazia.

The population of this historically ethnographic region of Georgia has always been oriented towards Georgia and has been a champion of Georgian-Abkhazian brotherhood. This is why the people of Samurzakano responded precisely to every disturbance that posed a threat to this direction, especially after the occupation of the Gali district, where an ethnic cleansing of the Georgian population was organized, a process that is, in fact, still ongoing.

The de-ethnization process of the remaining Georgian population in the occupied territories is actively continuing. Education in the native language is prohibited, which in the future will lay the foundation for the destruction of Georgian national identity.

From a cultural perspective, the region was originally a settlement of the Georgian population and, accordingly, bears the cultural markers of this ethnic group. The various epigraphic and architectural monuments found here belong solely to Georgian culture. It is in this region that some of the most important religious and educational centres were located. It is also noteworthy that it is hypothesized that the cultural influence of Tao-Klarjeti and its subsequent development extended to this area. Although this process began to decline in the early 18th century and gradually weakened, it still continued and continues to exist.

From an ethnological perspective, the traditional way of life and customs of the historical Samurzakano population are closely connected to the neighboring region of Samegrelo. However, there are certain, albeit minor, influence from the Abkhazian factor, which is attributed to the settlement of the Abkhaz people, who were, in turn, influenced more by the culture of the host ethnic group. According to ethnographic materials and both Georgian and foreign sources, ethnic Abkhaz went through a lengthy historical-migratory process, and their formation as "Abkhaz" occurred through the integration of North-West Caucasian related groups and Georgian populations.

It is important to emphasize that during their time in the Georgian state, the Abkhaz underwent significant cultural influence from Georgian culture. The region remained under the jurisdiction of the Georgian Church, and state-minded clerics worked there, focused on strengthening the country. Despite some infiltration of Islam, this religion never took root, and it did not influence the religious and cultural identity of the population.

The presented study has undoubtedly showed that Samurzakano is indeed a Georgian historical-ethnographic province.

Participants in the Russian-Ottoman War of 1877-1878 from Abkhazia-Samurzakano.

Standing from left: Giorgi Gvatua, Sirkva Lakerbai, Data Anchabadze, Eristo Emukhvari, Grigol Sharvashidze.

Sitting on benches from left: Kvaj Marghania, Zurab Chkhotua, Kujmakhan Emukhvari, Dzadzvi Marghania.

Sitting from left: Kvaj Akhirtava, Chagu Emukhvari.
(***Abkhazia, 19th Century,* 2011:** 82).

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კახა კვაშილავა, ზურაბ ხონელიძე, ლია ახალაძე,
სალომე ბახია–ოქრუაშვილი, დავით ჩიქოვანი

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ისტორიულ–ეთნოგრაფიული პროვინცია.
წარსული და თანამედროვეობა

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