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**Abkazia – Indispensable Part of Georgia
(according to historical records)**

Abkhazia (Apkhazeti) is a Georgian historical-geographic province like Kakheti, Samegrelo, Svaneti and Kartli among others. Located in the extreme north-west region of western Georgia, it stretches from the south slope of the Caucasian Ridge to the Gumista River (to the north of Sokhumi). An Abkhaz (Apkhaz) denoted a resident of Abkhazia, like a Kakhetian signified a person living in Kakheti, a Kartlian meant a person living in Kartli and Svanetian a person residing in Svaneti.

Colchis is the name with which the Greeks referred to the state located on the territory of western Georgia in the late 2nd millennium BC and the early 1st millennium BC. The name can be found in Assyrian and Urartian cuneiform inscriptions from the period between the 12th to the 8th century BC.

Despite the application of the term Lazica in relation to western Georgia, Roman and Byzantine historians highlighted that the Laz were the same as the Colchians. For example, the 2nd century writers Arrian and Claudius Ptolemy mention a geographic entity Lazica located at Nikopsia (what is now Tuapse). Arrian calls it 'old Lazica', which is truthful evidence of the presence of Colchian-Laz population on this place from ancient time. The 6th century Byzantine historian Procopius of Caesarea noted: 'Colchis, which is now called Lazica', meaning that Lazica Kingdom was an immediate successor of Colchis.

The etymology of Egrisi, an old Georgian name of western Georgia, is related to the Enguri River. Like Colchis and Lazica, it denoted the whole of western Georgia and its population.

Opinions differ in historiography with respect to the ethnic origin of the Abkhazs and their original place of habitation. There are scholars who consider them to be north Caucasian tribes who settled on the territory of Georgia (present-day Abkhazia) in the 18th century, while others claim that they are the Abazgs and Apshils referred to in the 1st and 2nd century Georgian and Greek sources and that the Abkhazs as mentioned in the feudal period are the ancestors of contemporary Abkhazs (Apsuas) and that they lived in this region from ancient time. Both viewpoints as versions have a right to existence since there is no direct reference to the ethnic origin of the Abazg-Apshils in the historical records. The only point that can be debated is that beginning from the 2nd century BC to the Antiquity, Colchian culture was spread on the whole territory of western Georgia (this is witnessed by archaeological evidence) and the Abazg-Apshils and Abkhazs living in the Antiquity and the Middle Ages in one part of this territory culturally and historically were Georgians. It is also to be taken into consideration that according to Georgian chronicles, in the 8th century the Abkhazs and Apshils were two different neighboring tribes with their own administrative-territorial units. During the raid led by Murwan the Deaf (735-737), Arab commander-in-chief 'ravaged the Apshils' city of Tskhumi' (Juansher), while at the end of the same century, under the reign of Leon II, of eight principalities making up 'the Kingdom of the Abkhazs', the principalities of Abkhazia and Tskhumi were mentioned separately (Prince Vakhishti Bagrationi).

According to Georgian historical records (there are no other sources) erismtavari (governor) Archil of Kartli, who had no offspring, arranged for the marriage of Gurandukht, the daughter of his elder brother Miri, who had died in the battle against Murwan the Deaf at Anakopia, to King Leon I of the

Abkhazs and handed to the latter a crown sent to Miri by the Byzantine emperor. This dynastic marriage led to the unification of Egrisi and Abkhazia. Since then 'Leon obeyed Archil to the end of his life'. Slightly earlier Leon I had incorporated Apshileti. From that time on there is no mention of the Apshils in written records.

The unification of western Georgia was one side of the process unfolding across Georgia in conditions of struggling against external enemies. Around the same time, Kakheti (780s), Tao-Klarjeti (late 8th and early 9th century) and Hereti (9th century) were formed.

At the end of the 8th century, the ruler of this united west Georgian state, nephew of Leon I, Leon II took advantage of the difficult home and foreign affairs in Byzantine Empire, set free from its vassalage and declared himself king. The state founded by Leon II, which encompassed the whole of western Georgia and stretched from Nikopsia to the Chorokhi gorge and from the Black Sea to Likhi Ridge, was referred to as 'the Kingdom of the Abkhazs' and their kings, as the 'Kings of the Abkhazs' in 11th century and later Georgian written sources. It was then that the concept of Abkhazia expanded to include entire west Georgia. Abkhazia proper came to denote one part of it. Similar facts have many times been noted in the history of Georgia. For example, in the 4th century, the west Georgian state consolidated on the initiative of the Lazi, was called Lazica; united under the hegemony of Kakheti in the 780s, in parallel with the 'Kingdom of the Abkhazs', Kakhet-Kukhet-Gardabani was called Kakheti Bishopric.

'The Kingdom of the Abkhazs' is a Georgian, namely a west Georgian state, inhabited chiefly by the Georgian population. This is the assertion of not only Georgian historians, but also of the best-known Abkhaz historians, Z. Anchabadze and G. Dzidzaria.

Different viewpoints are expressed with respect to the ethnic affiliation of 'the kings of the Abkhazs'. Some scholars consider them to be Greek since they were descendants of the rulers of Byzantine Empire (archonts), while others associate them either with the non-Georgian Abkhazs or the Georgian Abkhazs. All of these three opinions are propositions. However, it is of note that 10th century Armenian historian Hovhannes Draskhanakertsi (Catholicos John) refers to this state as Egrisi, and the kings - the kings of as the Egrs. Being a contemporary of these events, he thus identifies this state, Egrisi, with western Georgia, and its kings as Georgians. 12th century Armenian historian Vardan the Great calls them descendants of Vakhtang Gorgasali, i.e. for him, these are Georgians, descendants of king of Kartli. It is also to be mentioned that it is not only their ethnic background (though it is also of interest), but their national self-consciousness that is essential for history. Judging by their national self-consciousness and state-building efforts, 9th-11th century kings of the 'Kingdom of the Abkhazs', i.e. western Georgia, are Georgian kings of the Georgian state. It is essential that with its language, writing system, culture, religion and policy the Kingdom of the Abkhazs was a truly Georgian state, and its kings – Georgians considering the same features. Their Georgian national self-consciousness and the mode of public thinking can be illustrated by the decision of Leon II, who undertook to move the capital of the state from the fortified city of Anakopia in the Kingdom of the Abkhazs to Kutaisi, one of the ancient Georgian cities and an important Georgian cultural centre.

The most obvious manifestation of the efforts of the kings of the Abkhazs aimed at building a single Georgian state was an ecclesiastical policy pursued by them after gaining political independence.

The Patriarchate of Constantinople periodically made up lists of subordinated eparchies, the so-called 'notations', which provide information on the large-scale church reforms implemented by the kings of the Abkhazs.

From the end of the 9th century, the western Georgian ecclesiastical centres (Sebastopol from the 10th century) incorporated into the Patriarchate of Constantinople were no more mentioned in the notations. It was on the initiative of the kings of the 'Abkhazs' that these centres withdrew from the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and later united with the rest of western Georgian eparchies under the Catholicos of the Abkhazs. Later, again with the efforts of the kings of the 'Abkhazs' and the support of the Mtskheta Catholicate, they became subordinated to the Mtskheta See and united with the all-Georgian Church. After this act, Catholicos Ioane IV of Kartli (1080-1001) was conferred with the title of Patriarch and came to be referred to as the Patriarch of Kartli and the Whole of the East (i.e. of all Georgia) (Parkhali inscriptions). This is how the consolidation of the Georgian Church came to an end, which preceded and prepared grounds for the political unification.

With the aim of eliminating Greek influence, the kings of the Abkhazs abolished the Episcopal Sees founded by Constantinople and established new, Georgian bishoprics instead. For example, Giorgi II founded Chkondidi Bishopric, Leon III – Mokvi and Bagrat III – Bedia. These bishoprics served as Georgian cultural centres. E.g. Mokvi Church had a rich library. Of the manuscripts surviving to our day, of particular note is an illuminated Gospel copied in 1300 by Daniel Mokveli (Daniel of Mokvi). The manuscript testifies to the high level of writing tradition at Mokvi. Patriarch Dositeo of Jerusalem (who visited Mokvi in 1659) noted that according to the inscriptions on the church, the walls were painted in the reign of King Davit Aghmashenebeli (David the Builder). The well-known Georgian historian, T. Zhordania wrote that Mokvi inscriptions were deliberately erased by 'ill-wishers' of Georgia and the 'ignorant'. There is only one photo negative of the inscriptions commemorating 'Archbishop Grigol of Mokvi' that survives. Comments of the Mokvi manuscripts and Georgian historical records preserve names of 12th-17th century Mokvi archbishops.

If the Kingdom of the 'Abkhazs' had not been a Georgian state and its kings Georgian kings, the Church would not have separated from the Patriarchate of Constantinople and if separated, would have established itself as an Abkhazian Church proper instead of consolidating with and subordinating itself to the Catholicate of Mtskheta; Neither Georgian liturgies would have been established.

Beginning from the 9th century the Georgian language became dominant in the Kingdom of the Abkhazs: Georgian became an official language and the one used by the Church. Inscriptions on churches, stone blocks, bridges and other structures were all made in Georgian. The history of the kings of the Abkhazs *Apkhazta Mepeta Divani* was written in the Georgian language at the royal court.

Ancient inscriptions on the territory of Abkhazia date from the 9th century. The disruption of the united Georgian feudal monarchy and the political, economic and cultural decline of Georgia beginning from the 17th century, which followed the Ottoman aggression of western Georgia, is evident in the epigraphic works in Abkhazia. From that time onwards less and less inscriptions were made in Abkhazia. However, neither other language inscriptions were made. According to the historical evidence, liturgy in western Georgia and in Abkhazia in particular was held in Georgian and church donors, architects, masons and the congregation, i.e. the local population belonged to the Georgian ethno-cultural world. This evidence also supports the statement made in the work of the 10th century eminent Georgian ecclesiastical figure, Giorgi Merchule, according to which 'And Kartli consists of that spacious land in which the liturgy and all prayers are said in the Georgian language', i.e. Kartli (Georgia) includes Abkhazia.

Between the 9th through the 11th century the Kingdom of the Abkhazs was together with other Georgian kingdoms and principalities actively engaged in the efforts aimed at the consolidation of all Georgian lands into a single state. Beginning from the 860s, it even played a dominant role. The

inscriptions at Armazi, Samtsevrissi, Eredvi, Tsirkoli, Kumurdo and other churches confirm the supremacy of the authority of Giorgi I, Constantine II, Giorgi II and Leon III in Shida (Inner) Kartli and Javakheti.

Appointed by Demetre III (967-975) as *eristavi* (governor) of Kartli, Ioane Marushisdze put forth a plan of the consolidation of Georgia, which was realized under the leadership of Davit III of Tao and thanks to the relentless efforts of Ioane Marushisdze himself. Bagrat Bagrationi, Bagrat III (978-1014) was crowned king of the 'Abkhazs' and 'Georgians' in Kutaisi. The first title which Bagrat received was the 'King of the Abkhazs' (978). The name of Bagrat III was added to the *Apkhazta Mepeta Divani*. By doing so, Bagrat III formally confirmed the legitimacy of his royal authority in western Georgia. Upon the death of Davit III (+1001), his title was extended to include the 'King of Kartvelis (Georgians)', and after taking Kakhet-Hereti (1008-1010) he was referred to as the 'King of the Abkhazs (i.e. western Georgia), Kartvelis (i.e. Kartl-Meskhi), Kakhs and Hers', title that Georgian kings retained unchanged. The fact that the king of 'the Abkhazs' was the first mentioned in the title explains a large number of instances when in foreign sources 'Abkhazia' and 'Abkhaz' were used to denote 'Georgia' and 'Georgian' respectively, and the kings of the Georgian feudal monarchy, Giorgi I, Bagrat IV, Davit Aghmashenebeli, Tamar and others were referred to as either Abazg/Abkhaz, or Gurji, or Iberi.

Across Abkhazia, namely Sokhumi, ran a road which had a great trade and political importance. This is why a single-span bridge was built over the Besleti River, which fully meets contemporary standards of bridge construction and has a capacity to bear a chain of vehicles with a total weight of eight tons. The bridge preserves an inscription glorifying Bagrat III. Similar bridges also survive in other Georgian regions: in Rkoni (Shida Kartli) and Dondalo (Achara).

Beginning from the 11th century to the early 18th century, before establishing as an independent principality, Abkhazia was incorporated into united Georgia, Imereti kingdom and Odishi principality on various grounds. Abkhaz *eristavis* and later *mtavaris* (rulers) were from the Shervashidze feudal house.

Difficult home and foreign affairs in Georgia created favorable conditions for the settlement of the north Caucasian tribes, the Apsuas. Affected by their raids and the Ottoman aggression, Catholicos-Patriarch Evedemon I Chkhetidze of Abkhazia (1557-1565) had to move the centre of the Catholicate from Bichvinta to Gelati (Bichvinta Church was built under Bagrat III, at the end of the 10th and beginning of the 11th century. The church preserves 16th century mural fragments. In the 19th century, the walls of the church were whitewashed by the Russians).

Apsua is a name given by the contemporary Abkhazs to themselves. They refer to themselves as 'Apsua', their language the 'Apsua language', and their state – 'Apsni'. Until the 17th century the Apsuas lived on the Kuban River in the north Caucasus. According to the 1st century Roman historian, Pliny, the place of living of the 'Absoe', i.e. 'Apsua' is in the north Caucasus. In the same place is located *Absvas regi*, i.e. 'the land of the Apsua' and their fortress Akva on a map drawn up by the Italian cartographer Jacopo Gastaldi in 1561. A map of western Georgia, made in 1738, already shows Akva, an Abkhaz (Apsua) name of Tskhumi in place of an old Georgian city of Tskhumi (Sokhumi). A map of western Georgia, made in 1738, has Akva, an Abkhaz (Apsua) name of Tskhumi instead of Tskhumi (Sokhumi). Nearby is Tskhumi Fortress (the original of the map is kept in Moscow ЦГБИА BYA, and a copy in the National Centre of Manuscripts RT IV, #1, Tbilisi). That the initial homeland of the Apsuas was in the highlands, is obvious from folk legends (they had no script of their own). The

Apsuas brought their own names, religious traditions and customary laws to Georgia. It is therefore that if before that time nobody distinguished, either from the social or religious point of view, between the land inhabited by the Abkhazs and the population of Georgian and western Georgia proper, in particular, beginning from the 1630s the situation changed markedly. In the 14th century there were no Abkhazs (Apsuas) living in Tskhumi. According to the bishop of Sokhumi Catholic Mission, Pietro Gerladi, in 1330 Tskhumi was inhabited by the Georgians, Muslims and Jews. The Abkhazs may have lived in Tskhumi at that time, but for Gerladi they are Georgians. The works of the foreign writers who were contemporaries or witnesses of these events (Italian Giovanni and Luke, Archangelo Lamberti, Turkish Evlia Chelebi and others) highlight that the way of life, dressing and the spoken language the Abkhazs (Apsuas) was different from those of the Georgians and similar to those of the Circassians.

In the middle of the 17th century, Abkhazia still included Dranda, Mokvi, Ilori, Bedia, Bichvinta and villages on the other side of the Enguri River. To protect from the intruding Abkhazs, Levan II Dadiani (1611-1657), ruler of Samegrelo, fortified and expanded Kelasuri wall, but the defense of the country under the Ottoman rule and the political aggression, appeared to be more and more difficult. Apart from that, from the 17th through the 18th century Ottoman Turkey tried to incite confrontation between the Georgians and the Abkhazs by spreading Islam.

This is how gradually the Apsuas occupied part of Abkhazia – a historical Georgian region. Contemporaries called them the Abkhazs because they lived in Abkhazia. According to medieval Georgian Law, foreigners who establish themselves on the Georgian land became local (but not aborigine). It was through Georgian that the name ‘Abkhaz’ entered Russian and other languages.

After the abolition of the Kingdom of Abkhazia by the Russians (1864), Abkhazia was incorporated into Kutaisi province, first under the name of ‘Sokumi Military Department’ and later, in 1883, as “Sokhumi District’. Thus the name ‘Abkhazia’ (Apkhazeti) was removed not by Georgians, as some scholars claim, but by the Russians. The Georgians, on the contrary, restored the name Abkhazia in the Georgian Democratic Republic (1918-1921), an independent state of the Georgians established after the fall of the empire (1918) and in line with the constitution of the country, granted a status of autonomy to it. The autonomy was recognized by the government of the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (RSFSR) under the Treaty of 7 May 1920.

After the establishment of the Soviet rule in Georgia (1921) the status of Abkhazia was changed several times. On the request of Abkhaz Bolsheviks and with the support of Georgian Bolsheviks and Soviet Russia, the Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia was declared in 1921. In November of the same year it was recognized as a republic associated with Georgia. Under the constitution of the Soviet Union of 1924, Abkhazia was an Autonomous Republic of Georgia, which is how it is referred in all other documents. This status was finally formalized in 1931, at the 6th Assembly of the Abkhazian Councils.

It is also to be noted that the area taken up by Abkhazia was less than required for granting a status of an autonomous republic under the Soviet legislation. Therefore, District of Samurzakano-Gali, fully inhabited by the Georgians, was added to Abkhazia.

Protests voiced by the population have not been taken into account. It is also of note that the Apsuas (the ABkhazs) always made the minority of the Abkhazian population, which is supported by the data official census. According to the final census (1989), they accounted for 17-18% of the population of Abkhazia, and Georgians - 45%. The rest part of the population was made up by the Greeks, Russians,

Armenians and others. Between 1918 and 1920 and towards the end of the 1980s anti-Georgian demonstrations, provoked by the Russians, were held, which ultimately led to the establishment of the separatist regime with the immediate intervention of Russia. The Russian 'role' once again became apparent during the August 2008 events.

Today the Abkhazs are an established nation, who have no other country apart from Georgia (Abkhazia proper). It goes without question that living in Abkhazia together with the Georgians is their legitimate right and that their interests and rights (national, political and social) must be protected. However, it is also to be highlighted that Abkhazia is an indispensable part of Georgia and the only homeland to the 250 thousand Georgians against whom genocide was perpetrated and who had to flee their homes.

Despite the tragedy that happened, the Georgians and the Abkhazs can still live together. The best way would be to start negotiations without mediators and work out principles and criteria, equally acceptable both to the Georgians and the Abkhazs, based on which normal living conditions could be restored in Abkhazia. Everyone must understand that Abkhazia is Georgia and that the Georgian nation will never reconcile with the withdrawal of Abkhazia from the jurisdiction of Georgia.