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Suddenly a Border: Hazelnut Trade across the De Facto Border between Abkhazia and the Zugdidi Municipal Region of Georgia

By Ketevan Khutsishvili (Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University)

Abstract

After the Georgia–Abkhaz conflict that began in 1991, a new border appeared on the Enguri River, where the border of the Autonomous Region of Abkhazia was previously located. This separated the markets in Zugdidi town from the hinterland, where hazelnuts and other agricultural products were produced. In the 2.5 decades since, the variable border regime has created conditions where those who purchase the nuts from producers have had to use a variety of informal means to cope with a difficult and variable border crossing. Those moving these products across the border have had to face a wide variety of changing conditions, including hostilities between Russia/Abkhazia and Georgia, the quality of the annual seasonal harvest, the changing power of criminal groups that prey on cross-border trade, and the work of different institutions, including the border control, municipal authorities, and international groups that engage in mediating activities. This paper focuses on the dynamics of how trade interacts with formal institutions, including borders. The research is based on fieldwork in this region, with observations and interviews of the participants in the aspects of these processes that occur on the Georgian side of the border since 2012.

Description of the General Situation

After the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict in 1992–1993, Georgia lost control over the Autonomous Region of Abkhazia, and a new de facto border appeared. The borderline was defined across the river Enguri (Ingur) and separated the Gali and Zugdidi districts. Russian troops and Abkhazian units control this border. Political tension and discharge impact the situation on the de facto border, which is either strictly locked or relatively free for the movement of residents from both sides of the borderline. The population on both sides of the river has the same ethno-cultural roots and a common linguistic and religious belonging—they are Georgians. Thus, the cultural boundaries do not overlap with the physical ones. Such a discrepancy affects the considerations of the border and establishment and the reconstruction of the border relations. In addition, as a result of the conflict, thousands of ethnic Georgians were forced to leave their homeland. Currently, many Internally Displaced People (IDPs) inhabit the Zugdidi municipality. Before the emergence of the borderline, the Gali and Zugdidi districts were parts of a common economic system that depended strongly on each other. The new reality destroyed old structures and connections. This caused the separation of markets in Zugdidi town from those in the hinterland. The Gali district was famous for its good agricultural conditions (e.g., soil, climate irrigation) and well-developed agriculture. The cultivation of hazelnuts is one of the most important aspects of agriculture in this district. Additionally, hazelnut plantations are one of the main sources of income for Gali residents. For 2.5 decades, the variable border regime has created conditions in which those who purchase nuts

from producers have used a variety of informal means to cope with the changeable border, which can be difficult to cross. Moving these products across the border has been connected to a wide variety of changing conditions, including hostilities between Russia/Abkhazia and Georgia, the quality of annual seasonal yields, the changing power of criminal groups that prey on cross-border trade and the work of different institutions, including border control, municipal authorities and international groups that engage in mediating activities.

My research is based on fieldwork in this region, which has been conducted since 2012, including observing and interviewing Georgian participants who participate in trade on the Georgian side of the border.

Characteristics of the Region

The Georgian population of the same kinship is generally closely connected, and in this region, the responsibilities and obligations of kin are even stronger. The territory of both districts is well populated. The population density of these territories is directly linked to the qualities and opportunities of economic activities. It should be noted that after Tbilisi, Zugdidi is the second largest centre of IDP settlements. The population concentration in the city is highest in the Samegrelo region. Zugdidi Municipality includes one city (Zugdidi is conventionally called a city, but it has no official status) and 30 territorial administrative units (comprising 58 villages). The representation of the de jure government of Abkhazia in Samegrelo region is located in Zugdidi. This local government is mainly oriented to solving tasks for both IDPs and those living on the Abkhazian side of the border. Georgia does not recog-

nize the independence of Abkhazia; therefore, the citizens of Abkhazia are considered citizens of Georgia. Protecting them and dealing with their problems are the responsibilities of the local government, which executes and monitors the implementation of various state programs (e.g., healthcare programs, cultural events) for the IDPs and the population on both sides of the de facto border. Some projects are carried out by NGOs. In the Zugdidi district, there are more than 30 registered and operating non-governmental organizations, both local and international.

Gali district residents have relative freedom to cross the Enguri Bridge, which is the main legal communication channel (with the 4 crossing points on the border that was opened later). Many Gali residents cross the bridge daily, with some working or studying in Zugdidi and others going for various businesses (e.g., visiting relatives, trading). In fact, although the physical barrier exists, the communication channels function actively in the conflict zone. They are used to promote cooperation in healthcare issues and crimes. The agents that participate in the cooperation are international organizations, non-governmental organizations, governmental agencies, criminal groups and the local population. The general political situation is reflected in the variation and intensity of use of the communication channels. According to the locals' narratives, it is evident that the border is considered an imaginary barrier in a very complicated system of relations, even in the most difficult periods.

Chronology of Interactions

Chronologically, the situation has been permanently changing. Currently, it is quite different from what it was in 2008. After the open conflict (in 1992–1993), economic activities were totally destroyed. The territory was emptied, and there was a lack of workers. The legislative base was disordered, and the general situation was unstable and dangerous. Robberies occurred frequently. The nut harvest was especially interesting to the robbers. Despite their differences in ethnic backgrounds, Abkhaz and Georgian criminals were working well together. They easily found a common language and jointly repressed the local population on both sides of the border. They were particularly active during the harvest seasons. Their targets were those involved in economic activities. To avoid more difficulties, the Gali district residents agreed to pay a third of their harvest and ensure the patronage of such groups to regulate issues concerning the border crossing. For some groups of people, criminal activities turned into the only way of profiting.

Gradually, the situation became calmer. In 2011, so-called “nut collecting points” (the counters or booths,

where the nuts are bought for pre-set prices) were opened in Gali district with the purpose of not allowing the transfer of nuts to the Zugdidi bazaar, thereby avoiding economic dependence on the Georgian side. For that period, there was no difference in price, and of course, the locals were avoiding the risk of crossing the border because it was unsafe. In this period, a significant proportion of trade was illegal.

Slowly, everyday routines took over and agricultural and trade activities began to improve. Since 2013, the locals started to involve additional hired workers in the harvesting process. When the harvest is large, owners hire additional workers. This is a common practice in western Georgia. Compared to Zugdidi, more additional labour is demanded in Gali, and the payment is better, which encourages workers to take the risk and cross the border on a daily basis. This was the usual practice from 2011 to 2013. In 2013, the gathering of cheap workers in the neighbouring spaces of the village of Otobaia in Gali district and the village of Orsantia in Zugdidi district was evident. Later, the gathering point was moved to the Ganmukhuri Bridge to reach the more remote villages of Gali district. The workers (men) were coming from various parts of Samegrelo and belonged to different age and social groups. To a certain degree, the workers were helping with the corn and nut harvests. In 2013, the nut business was the most profitable activity for Gali district residents. However, the risk was high, and it required extreme caution.

Over time, the nut business's rules and players have changed. The informants mentioned people who were involved in the business and controlled it. Most of them were killed in clan rivalries. Still, the business is controlled by clans from the Gali and Ochamchire districts.

In 2013, the construction of a modern nut-processing factory started in Gali district's village Achigvara. As the locals stated, Russian soldiers were also involved in activities connected to the nut business.

In 2014, the selling of nuts was quite difficult for the residents of Gali because the border was controlled strictly by Russian-Abkhazian troops, who had forbidden the transfer of nuts to Zugdidi. In 2014, the nut harvest was good, and the seasonal prices in Zugdidi were record-breaking. However, the Abkhaz authorities, along with the Russian troops, were forcing a decrease in prices in the Gali district, making locals sell for less and border crossing restrictions harsher. The locals indicate that there are cameras at Russian military checkpoints and that all movements on the border are observed and registered. In the case of transgressions on the border, the soldiers are too severe. The violators are arrested and taken to Gali prison/isolation. They may be kept there for several days, any goods will be confiscated and a ransom must be paid.

Some locals buy nuts from neighbours so they can later resell them in Zugdidi. Occasionally, transportation is unaffordable, and these locals have losses. Occasionally, the Russians force a decrease in prices to buy the yields and resell them to the other border, the Russian Federation, at a better price. People suffer, including those Abkhazians who are uncooperative with the Georgians. According to informants, Russians have started to dominate the nut business because they have the power to control.

In 2014, the so-called “Vegetable War” occurred between the Georgians and Abkhazians. Because of the prohibition of transporting nuts to Zugdidi, Zugdidi-ians stopped selling these goods to Abkhaz traders. The Gali district is vitally connected to the Zugdidi Bazaar. Thus, Gali faced lack of fruits and vegetables from Zugdidi. Quite quickly, authorities on both sides reached an agreement, and the ban was removed, as it appeared to be too problematic for both sides. The largest demand in Abkhazia was for Imeretian vegetables. Abkhazian traders visit Kutaisi (the second biggest city in Georgia, situated in west Georgia), but Georgian traders mainly provide goods to Sukhumi. Along with food, there is a significant demand for household goods and furniture. According to informants, the Gali and Sukhumi bazaars are not significantly different from each other. The only difference is the prices, as Gali is cheaper and calmer. It is very important not only for Gali residents but also for the Sukhumi and Zugdidi districts, who play an intermediary role between them, even if trade is limited. The Zugdidi bazaar provides the Gali bazaar with all kinds of goods and products, some of which end up in Sukhumi. The flow of goods is mainly directed from the left bank of the Enguri to the right. The goods arrive in Georgian ports or airports; reach the Abkhazian side and occasionally also reach the border with the Russian Federation. Goods come from Russia as well, but these come in limited amounts. They are preferred by the locals; for example, Russian flour has recently been in demand, as have Russian sausages and chocolates. The Gali bazaar is open on Wednesdays and weekends. The activities there start early in the morning and end in the afternoon. Buyers come from all districts of Abkhazia to buy livestock and other goods. The geography of goods is wide. Here, one can find condiments and vegetables from Georgia, watermelons from the Russian Federation, American and German uniforms, and Turkish and Chinese household goods transported from Zugdidi, Kutaisi and Batumi. Georgians and Abkhazians cooperate for trade purposes, and Abkhazians take care of travel documents and, of course, payments for Abkhazian and Russian border guards.

In 2015, the Abkhaz authorities again banned the transportation of nuts to Zugdidi. They introduced taxes, which caused tension in the Gali district. However, the rules became stricter. The transport of nuts in large amounts was not allowed, and each kilogram was taxed.

Conclusions

Changes in the general political context are influencing the intensity and character of the use of communicational channels between Gali and Zugdidi, Georgian and Russian-controlled Abkhazia. There are also a number of illegal connections across the river. The river serves as a border, but it is not completely guarded. In some places, locals from both sides cross the river. At some points, informal communication comes into play, and locals negotiate with the heads of the checkpoints to allow them to cross the borderline. In the early years, locals used such illegal ways more often. This strategy later became in operational, especially for trade purposes. Locals from both sides developed various elaborate strategies to survive and improve their living conditions. Many IDPs are trying to re-establish connections with their neighbours or relatives living on the Abkhazian side. There are frequent cases where former citizens of Sukhumi and IDPs living in Zugdidi are building a kind of network for trading. An IDP woman from Sukhumi told me that she is permanently crossing the border to provide household goods and clothes to Sukhumi from the Lilo bazaar (the largest wholesale bazaar in the Caucasus situated in a Tbilisi suburb). She is assisted by Abkhazian neighbours, who often also visit Zugdidi and Kutaisi. Others buy in Zugdidi and sell in Sukhumi. Usually, they make this trip twice a week. Often traders receive orders to bring certain goods. Gali residents state that they generally visit Zugdidi 2–3 times a month. Their purpose is mostly to buy goods in Zugdidi and visit relatives. Another strategy developed in Gali is to buy the nut harvest from neighbours and later sell it in small amounts at the better-paying bazaar (mainly in Zugdidi).

The de facto border has divided the population and destroyed old economic orders and nets. However, the locals fighting for survival have developed new networks and attitudes. For them, the border remains just a relative barrier in a complicated system of relationships that has never been cut, even during the most difficult periods. The reason for such a situation can be found in the cultural, ethnic, and lingual homogeneity of the population settled on both sides of the de facto border and their perception of the border as a virtual line.

See overleaf for information about the author and further reading.

About the Author

Ketevan Khutsishvili, Dr. Associated Professor in Anthropology at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University Institute of Ethnology, Faculty of Humanities. Fields of interest: ethno-cultural processes in the Caucasus, religious issues, ethnic identity and relations, and IDP studies. Author of 62 scientific works.

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