Radboud University

Nijmegen, the Netherlands

Syrian-Armenians and their Return to the 'Ancestral Homeland'

EXPLORATIVE RESEARCH ON ARMENIAN RESETTLEMENT POLICY

Rosenberg, E.E. (Eelco)

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SUPERVISOR: VAN HOUTUM, H. (HENK)

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Preface

You are now reading my thesis for the Master of Human Geography: Conflict, Territories & Identities. Ever since my first visit to Georgia and Armenia in 2015 I have been intrigued by and interested in the South-Caucasus region. The affection I had for this region was strongly reinforced when I lived and studied in Tbilisi (Georgia) in 2017-2018 for six months. During this time I had the chance to travel over the whole South-Caucasus including both conflict regions that are central in this research: Artsakh and Abkhazia. The visits to these region made a big impression on me. When, in the fall of 2019, I needed to choose a topic for my Master Thesis I instantly knew the region for my research: The South-Caucasus. Eventually, I found a connection between the territorial conflicts in this region and the conflict in Syria and that's how the specific topic came about.

I want to express my gratitude for everyone who supported me in the process of writing my thesis. I want to thank Babak Rezvani, who helped me in the early phase of writing to come to a specific topic and connected me with contacts in the region of research. I also want to thank Henk Van Houtum, who took over the supervision, for his enthusiasm and proficiency in the feedback on my research. Furthermore, I want to thank my friends, roommates and family for their support. Specifically, I want to thank my brother Laurens, his girlfriend Marte and my mother Anke for their mental support in the process. Lastly I thank my father Theo for his mental support and be the first critical reader of the end product.

Rosenberg, E.E. (Eelco),

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Introduction

The Syrian refugee crisis might be the biggest humanitarian crisis in the world at this moment, this crisis is well into its 10th year. Since the beginning of the civil war in Syria in 2011 over six million people are displaced within Syria itself. Moreover, approximately 6.6 million other people have fled Syria to seek refuge across the border (UNHCR, 2020). Together this equates more than half of the total Syrian population (Campos, 2016). The great majority of these people are hosted in states that are a neighbor of Syria or states that are near Syria, like Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Turkey (UNHCR, 2020). According to the U.N. around 5 million Syrian people are taken in as refugees in the before mentioned states (ibid.). Moreover, tens of thousands of Syrians have sought and are still seeking refuge in Europe every year. Almost 100.000 people from Syria were granted asylum in the European Union in 2018 alone (Eurostat, 2019). The migration of Syrians towards Europe has sparked a humanitarian as well as a political crisis in Europe (Evans, 2020). In Western-Europe we have encountered a lot of political unrest and animosity regarding the received refugees. Most affluent Western-European states are reluctant to host a sizeable amount of refugees from Syria or any other country for that matter. It is not just reluctance but it is also an actual policy to try to protect the external borders of Europe and the civil and political unrest the refugee situation seems to cause is tremendous (Erlanger, 2020). All European Union member states have signed the '1951 refugee convention' the signing of this treaty obliges these states to protect the rights of refugees (UNHCR, N.D.). Despite the signing and ratification of this treaty by all EU member states, the European Union seems to do everything they can to keep refugees out of Europe as much as possible (Van Houtum & Pijpers, 2006).

Meanwhile in Armenia, a country where almost a quarter of the population lives under the national poverty line (World Bank Group, 2020), the refugees from Syria received a warm welcome (Hayrapetyan, 2020). Of the above mentioned total of Syrian refugees, around 22.000 Syrians have fled towards Armenia (Hayrapetyan, 2020). As opposed to most countries in Western-Europe the Armenian government welcomed refugees from Syria with open arms. I think this observation is at the very least remarkable. This attitude with regard to refugees is not only remarkable because of the economic situation in Armenia, but there are other things going on in Armenia that make the situation there less preferable to host refugees. Armenia is entangled in a long-lingering territorial conflict with their neighboring country Azerbaijan over the ownership of the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The history and recent developments of this conflict will be extensively discussed in the next chapter. What is important for now is the position of Armenia regarding Syrian refugees. At first glance it would seem that Armenia has more urging matters to tend to than receiving such an extensive amount of refugees. Economically they are not doing well and the relation with Azerbaijan is tense. In short: Armenia receives a substantial amount of refugees although it has limited resources to accommodate such an amount. So where you would expect the political and civil support for receiving refugees would be very limited, this is not the case at all (OSF-Armenia, 2017). There is little to none political or public debate around the refugee

policy in Armenia, let alone the animosity and the fierceness of the debate we encounter in Europe. How is this possible? This difference between expectations and the actual situation lead me to the research question:

How can we explain the Armenian position and policy with regard to Syrian refugees?

At first glance there is an obvious answer to this question, however the situation is more complex. The obvious as well as the simple answer to that question would be that Armenia signed the 1951 refugee convention, which obliges them to protect the rights of all refugees (UNHCR, 2021). So they are obliged to help Syrian refugees in this case, because of the signing and ratification of this treaty. The ambiguity and complexity about the question (and the proposed answer) is that they are not helping all refugees from Syria, Armenia is specifically focusing their help on Syrian-Armenians (Hayrapetyan, 2020). These Syrian-Armenians are often people whose grandparents were Armenian, people that often have an Armenian cultural heritage and were brought up in Armenian communities within Syria (Thomas, Felten, Yagaloff & Yarmaloyan, 2020). That raises some doubts about the intentions of Armenia with regard to these refugees. This raises the question if there is more to it than simply carrying out the mandate of the refugee convention.

Societal & Scientific Relevance

The relevance and importance of this research are twofold: political and humanitarian. First I will discuss the political importance thereafter the humanitarian. At last I will discuss how these two parts are intertwined. The political relevance of this research resides first and foremost with the region in question: The South Caucasus. The South-Caucasus is a name commonly used to describe the area south of the greater Caucasus mountain range and it consists of the states Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Every state in the South-Caucasus is involved in at least one territorial dispute with one of their neighboring countries. Azerbaijan and Armenia have a conflict over a region that is commonly known as Nagorno-Karabakh, called 'Artsakh' in Armenian[1]. Georgia has to deal with two territorial disputed regions of respectively Abkhazia and South-Ossetia. The most important difference is that these regions border and are supported by Russia. The history and recent developments of these territorial disputes, the Artsakh and Abkhazian case, will be extensively explained in the next chapter.

Important for now, in terms of scientific relevance, is that in this region there are many (geo) political conflicts of interest and according to some authors these geopolitical relations in the South-Caucasus are best described as a *zero-sum* game (Cuthberson, 1994; Felgenhauer, 2019; Ter-Gabrielyan, 2009). This application of game theory in practice means that any decision or development (e.g. a policy) that yields benefits for the one party automatically has negative effects for the other party, the adversary (Von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1944). When there is only one shared political gain, the one party

[1] In this thesis I will use the names Artsakh and Nagorno-Karabakh interchangeably, as I try to stay politically neutral

obtaining this gain means always that the other party is not able to obtain it. In a zero-sum game situation the adversary winning or gaining something, means always a loss for the other party and vice versa. Regarding the question at hand for this research, the acceptance of refugees, it is not immediately clear what the political benefits might be for Armenia. It is the goal of this research to find out what the political benefits are. If we can find what these political benefits are this research would have a significant scientific as well as a societal relevance.

That brings us to the second part of the societal relevance: humanitarian relevance. It is not immediately clear what the political gain is, so Armenia might be accepting refugees for humanitarian reasons. It might be an act of mercifulness from the Armenian government towards the victims of the Syrian refugee crisis. The humanitarian relevance of this research is present in multiple ways. There are people's lives and livelihoods at stake for Armenians and refugees from Syria. For the people living in Armenia these changes in demographics, or in total population, can yield benefits or losses. For the Armenian society poverty and unemployment already are big problems (World Bank Group, 2020). So an increase in population means more people that need a job, housing and other utilities. This could lead to more pressure on the housing as well as the job market. Not only for the people already living in Armenia this causes challenges. What is at least equally, if not more, important is that it also causes challenges for the people who are coming to Armenia with little or nothing to their name (Thomas et al., 2020). Then there are integration problems as these people where brought up in another country (ibid.). These people fled from a war-torn country and are being expected, or at least encouraged, to resettle in a state that has suffered from multiple violent conflicts over the past few decades. With the most recent escalation of violence as recent as the fall of 2020 (BBC, 2020a).

There is a remarkable observation that makes the humanitarian case of Armenia a bit more ambiguous and were the humanitarian relevance gets intertwined with the political relevance. As I already slightly touched upon Armenia is not accepting all refugees from Syria, the refugees that come to Armenia are almost exclusively Syrian-Armenians (Hayrapetyan, 2020). That means that these people have an Armenian (cultural) heritage. Although most of these people grew up in Syria they were brought up in Armenian communities, where they often were taught about Armenian culture (Thomas et al., 2020). The reason for the acceptance of these people is based on the notion that these people are regarded as Armenians by the Armenian government. They might not be Armenian by nationality, but they are regarded as Armenian by virtue of their cultural heritage. Therefore Armenia does not classify these people as refugees, their assessment of the situation is different. Namely that these people are finally returning to their ancestral homeland (El Mawy, 2015). The Armenians living in Syria, approximately 100.000 up to 2011, made up roughly 2 percent of the total Syrian population (Shoup, 2018, p. 6). How this Armenian diaspora in Syria became so big, I will explain in the second chapter. What is important for now is that Armenia is saying that they are merely giving these people a place to live in their ancestral

homeland. For Armenia, this ancestral homeland also encompasses Nagorno-Karabakh, called Artsakh in Armenian.

Sub question

That last sentence of the previous paragraph is where the ambiguity of the Armenian policy comes to the fore. The notion that (the ancestral homeland of) Armenia encompasses Artsakh is at least disputable. Azerbaijan does not concur with this notion, they believe that Nagorno-Karabakh should be a part of the Azerbaijani state. Both states believe that Nagorno-Karabakh is rightfully a part of their state. That is where the discrepancy in the Armenian and Azerbaijani account lies and this is the core of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The policy of Armenia, allowing these (or any other) people to relocate to Nagorno-Karabakh, is politically motivated according to Azerbaijan. The foreign policy advisor of the Azerbaijani president, Hikmet Hajiyev stated that:

'Armenia has always pursued a policy of strengthening the status quo based on occupation and annexing Azerbaijani lands. For this purpose, a policy of illegal settlement has been pursued in the occupied Azerbaijani lands. '' (Pashkin, 2020).

So the Azerbaijani government accuses Armenia of actively resettling people in Nagorno-Karabakh in order to gain a political advantage. These accusations are not new but have become stronger recently and directed to Syrian-Armenians as well (Defence AZ, 2020). According to Azerbaijan Armenia wants to increase the population and change the demographic makeup of the region in favor of the Armenians (ibid.). By placing ethnically Armenian people in the region Armenia, including the Artsakh region, strengthens its negotiation position according to Azerbaijan. If this is what is happening, these extra people from Syria could be the political gain for Armenia in the zero-sum game of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. As I just explained there could be a political gain for Armenia in the acceptance of Syrian-Armenians. According to Azerbaijan they are actually pursuing this refugee policy in order to strengthen their negotiation position in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This brings me to my sub question:

Can we explain the Armenian refugee policy towards Syrian-Armenians in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict?

Research Method

In this paragraph I will discuss the method I will use in this research. The specific method I will use in this research is triangulation. First I will explain the theoretical foundation of the triangulation method. Thereafter I will explain why and how the triangulation method will be applied in my research. Lastly, I will explain the way this research is set up and lay out what will be examined in which chapter. I will address per chapter what the goal and the meaning of that particular chapter is. In the end they will all serve to answer my research question and sub question as posed in the previous paragraph.

Triangulation

I will use a combination of different methods to answer the research question. In this research I will use different methods to retrieve evidence (or so called data) and comprehensively explain a phenomenon. This type of qualitative research is called triangulation (Patton, 1999). Triangulation is used in multiple fields of study, in the field of Social Science (and Political Science) it means that a single phenomenon is studied using multiple different methodologies (Denzin, 1978). It basically means different methods of gathering evidence to research the phenomenon. Triangulation generally is ‘*’an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question.’’* (Denzin, 2012: p.82).

Sometimes triangulation is equated to a mixed-methods approach, which means that quantitative as well as qualitative data is used in order to do the research. The mixed-methods approach is one of the ways to use triangulation (Flick, 2007). In its origin triangulation was meant for different methods of qualitative research but triangulation is also possible by using different data of the same qualitative or quantitative character (Denzin, 2012; Flick, 2004). In my research, I will not use this mixed-methods approach but I will do a qualitative research. The different points of view I will discuss are all qualitative. These qualitative points of view might not differ from each other in that way, there are however numerous ways to do qualitative research and I will use a few of them.

There are multiple ways in which the usage of triangulation can yield significant advantages. In (academic) research it might occur that the originally planned method of research turns out to yield less useful results than expected. When you make use of the triangulation method you can counter this problem by making use of different methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Secondly, and more often in Social Science, triangulation can serve as a tool for validation or as an alternative way to validate research findings (Flick, 1992). With the alternative Flick (1992) describes he refers to an alternative way instead of the classic tools for validation, which derive from the quantitative research field and are grounded on set rules, numbers and formulas (ibid.). These rules are hard, if not impossible, to make for qualitative research because as opposed to quantitative research, qualitative research is way more open to interpretation (Denzin, 2012). To be clear I am not stating that numbers or statistical data is not open to interpretation or unbiased but I want to emphasize that doing quantitative research is in its very nature different than qualitative research. I want to explain that when I find an outcome with a certain method

(or source) and another method (or source) gives us a similar outcome, this outcome is more trustworthy (Polit & Beck, 2016: p.631). Because it is researched from multiple angles, it gives it more credibility and validity (ibid.). The third reason for using triangulation is because a single way of looking at the phenomenon might not be enough to explain everything that plays a role. Multiple methods and sources will contribute to a more comprehensive explanation of a phenomenon. According to Jick (1979: p. 603) triangulation can *''capture a more complete, holistic, and contextual portrayal of the unit(s) under study''*. With holistic is meant that the answer to a question or the explanation of a phenomenon is not only the sum of its components. So there is more room for a contextual explanation. In the following paragraph I will explain why this is specifically important for my research. In short, for my research the second and the third are the main reason why I chose to use triangulation as my research method.

Denzin (1979) and Patton (1999) both use the same categorization of four different types of triangulation which are: (1) method triangulation, (2) investigator triangulation, (3) theory triangulation and (4) data source triangulation. For this research I will mainly focus on the fourth type, as distinguished by Denzin (1979): data source triangulation. I will use different sources to see whether or not these findings corroborate with each other. My main sources are academic literature, news articles and interviews (I will extend a bit more on my sources in the next paragraph). Next to that I will also make use of the first type: method triangulation. Method triangulation basically means to use different methods to gather data (ibid.). This overlaps with the data source triangulation because the interviews I use in the data-source triangulation I have conducted myself. I compare the evidence I gather in interviews with the information of academic literature and news articles.

Triangulation in the South-Caucasus

''Any single theoretical framework is insufficient and incapable of explaining such complex social phenomena as the Caucasus conflicts'' (Ter-Gabrielyan, 2009: p. 73).

The quote above explains that it is hard to understand the complex situation of the Caucasus conflicts through a certain single theory or theoretical framework. That is basically the reason why triangulation is a good method to use when researching this region. I argue that this quote is not only applicable to the Caucasus conflicts as this author stated but rather to the whole situation in the Southern Caucasus region. Within the triangulation method there is an important role for the contextual reasons to (partially) explain a phenomenon (Jick, 1979). The context and the reasons for the situation in this region being so complex will extensively come the fore in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2. In these chapters I will discuss most of the reasons which makes the region and the conflicts so complex. Naturally it would not be useful to explain only the complexity itself. Therefore, these chapters will also serve to unravel the complexity and make more sense of the situation. To make explain the situation in the South-Caucasus many different things need to be discussed and many of these subjects are interconnected, hence the complexity. The goal of this research is not to prove or strengthen a certain theory by using the case of

the refugee situation in Armenia. The goal will be to unravel the Armenian border policy itself. To achieve this goal I believe that a combination of different approaches will yield the best results.

What I mean to say is that this research is looking at the situation from a couple of different lenses. These lenses or different points of view are part of the triangulation method. The different sources I will use to implement the triangulation method are extensive. This method gives me the possibility to use a wide variety of sources to do research. Basically, every source that says something about the situation can be useful for the triangulation method and it can all be used as evidence. Of course, I need to take into account the background of the authors of the information, the possible bias or political agenda. By triangulating sources with different possible biases, the triangulation method can obviate biases in sources of information (Turner & Turner, 2009).

I will elaborate on the different sources here. One of them is basically also one of the methods of research I will elaborate on later on: interviews. I have conducted 13 interviews, both written questionnaires and face to face with people in the regions of interest (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Artsakh and Abkhazia). Furthermore, I will were possible make use of academic literature. For the theory and the background this is often possible but for the recent developments this is not always possible. Therefore, I will also make use of news articles, news videos and opinion pieces. Moreover, I will also use reports from Non-governmental Organizations (NGO's) such as the UNHCR and government reports from Armenia, Artsakh and Azerbaijan. The evidence, or data, will be presented in chapter 3. In chapter 4 I will use the triangulation method to critically analyse the evidence. This critical analysis will be used in chapter 5 to present a comprehensive answer to the sub and main question.

Explorative & Inductive

This research will have an explorative character. This means that this research will try to explain the research question not from a fixed standpoint but rather from a broad overview of the field of research. An explorative research is needed for the research question I posed because it is not fixed on a specific theory or theoretical framework. Rather than proving something that already exists, like a theory or theoretical framework, I will gather information to explain the phenomenon. This means I will answer the question and come to a conclusion in an inductive way. Inductive research means that the starting point is the gathering of information, which will lead to the eventual conclusion about the phenomenon in question. That is the reason why the background information in Chapter 1 and 2 is quite extensive but all this information is needed for a vital understanding of the situation in the region. All this information is a part of the explorative and inductive way of research.

For a couple of reasons I argue that this method of explorative qualitative triangulation will yield the most useful results for this research because the specific phenomenon of this research has not been well researched before. It is quite a recent phenomenon, therefore it is useful to first gather all information that is relevant for research about this region instead of diving right into the problem without taking the

background into account. In case I would fixate on one theory or theoretical explanation there are two problems that could arise. The first potential problem could be that it does contribute to the explanation of the situation but it explains only a part of it. The second possible problem is that it does not contribute at all to the explanation. Of course disproving a theory or possible theoretical explanation would also be a relevant contribution to the scientific debate. But as the specific phenomenon is relatively unknown and the (academic) attention to it has been minor, the logical first step would be to provide an extensive explorative research on the subject. Therefore, the goal of this research is to provide the most comprehensive explanation as possible. I argue that the explorative qualitative triangulation is the best possibility to come to such an explanation. In the next paragraph I will go into the building blocks (different methods) that I will use to help me answer the research question.

The Different Methods

The different methods I will use are threefold. Firstly, I will make use of a most similar case. In my research, as well as in the background chapters, I will not solely focus on the Artsakh region. I will also discuss the situation in Abkhazia because the case of Abkhazia is, in many ways, similar to the Artsakh case. Very bluntly said Abkhazia is in the same boat as Nagorno-Karabakh. The region is, according to internationally recognized borders, located on the territory of Georgia but is a self-proclaimed independent state. The regions show many resemblances in terms of the conflict they are entangled in and the people's history. All these components I will discuss in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2. Most importantly, Abkhazia is hosting a sizeable amount of Syrian refugees, just like Armenia. In Abkhazia these are Syrians with a Circassian or Abkhazian heritage. Because of these resemblances it is not unlikely that they also show resemblances in the policies they implement regarding refugees from Syria. Therefore it can be useful to look into the situation in Abkhazia. So this similar case will contribute to the explanation of the situation in Artsakh and Armenia regarding the Syrian repatriates.

Secondly, I will make use of a literature review. On the background and the history of the subject a lot has been written already, so here I will use academic litarature. For both Abkhazia and Artsakh, and the Caucasus region as a whole, I will make use of mostly academic literature. For the (background) part about the most recent developments this is a little bit different. Some things that I will describe and explain here have happened (relatively) recently and as a result not much academic research has been published on these developments. For this reason I will not only use academic literature but I will make use of news articles and opinion-pieces as well. Although the movement of Syrian-Armenians to Armenia is a relatively recent phenomenon some literature has been written about this subject but I will combine academic literature with news articles and reports. Moreover, in the literature review I will introduce and explain the ethno-geopolitical theory. This theory basically explains reasons or ways that groups of people are used as a tool in order to serve a political goal, in this case a geopolitical goal. I will discuss this theory in chapter 3. In the fourth chapter I will analyse the added value of this theory to explain the way that Armenia treats Syrian-Armenian refugees. Also with this theoretical lens I will

analyse the Abkhazian case and the reasons why they are accepting quite a substantial amount of (Circassian) Syrian refugees.

Thirdly, I will make use of interviews, I have in total conducted 13 interviews. Mainly, face to face albeit digital, via Skype or Zoom. But a few of these interviews were questionnaires on which I received written answers. The transcripts of the all the interviews that I have conducted are added in the appendix. Except for one interviewee who would only be interviewed off-record. I have interviewed people from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Abkhazia. I have interviewed people in different positions in order to avoid a one-sided view. I have interviewed a professor and a PhD at the Yerevan University but also I interviewed a policy advisor of the Nagorno-Karabakh president. I must note here that due to the emergence of war in Nagorno-Karabakh itself during the time of research, it was very hard to find people who were available for an interview in Armenia or Nagorno-Karabakh. So in the end the majority of the interviewees are from Abkhazia. In Abkhazia I have interviewed people working in the Abkhazian government, people working for NGO's and people who fled Syria to resettle in Abkhazia. I think all these different people can have a valuable contribution to this research. Some of the interviewees asked that their names are not to be used in the research, or that their specific role at the NGO or other occupation not to be published and naturally I will honour this agreement with my interviewees.

Reading Guide

Here I will describe what will be discussed in which chapter in chronological order. Firstly, before I can analyse the situation, I need to give an overview of important background information. I will discuss this background information, which is quite extensive, in Chapter 1. Like I have stated before the situation in the region of research is very complex. There are a lot of components I need to discuss which are all important for the analysis and to ultimately formulate an answer to the research question. Therefore, the reasons, history and the recent developments of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict will be extensively discussed. Chapter 1 will serve as an extensive background for the region, it's history and the conflict. Also Important building blocks to understand the conflict will be discussed in this chapter. I will start with a critical analysis of maps and the usage of maps in the conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh. Then I will use geographical maps as a tool to pinpoint the exact geographical location of the region of interest

Following that, I will give a short introduction of the reason why so many of the Armenian and Abkhazian people ended up in Syria in the first place. Thereafter, I will discuss the core of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the two opposing claims that are the reason for the conflict. Attached to these claims there are important concepts that I will introduce: borders and ethnicity. The concept of a 'border' is a highly contested concept, which will be discussed here in the light of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Also, I will analyse the (contested) ethnicity of the inhabitants of Abkhazia and Armenia and the subgroups of these people that are important for this research. The last part of the first chapter will be dedicated to the Geopolitical parties that are involved in the region. The parties I will discuss are the

(geo)political actors that either play a role in one of the two conflicts or are important in a different way to the region.

In the second chapter I will extensively set out the history of Armenia and Abkhazia. However, the emphasis will not be so much on the history of the (recent) conflict, this chapter is focused on the history of de inhabitants of the region. The Armenian and the Abkhaz people both have a similarly tragic history when it comes to the reason why their population has such a big diasporic community in, amongst other countries, Syria. In the late 19th Century the Circassian people, of which the Abkhaz are a part, were forced to flee from the Russian Empire. The Circassians had lost a long during war with the Russian Empire and most of them were sent into exile and sizeable amount ended up in Syria. In 1915, during the Armenian genocide, between 1 and 1.5 million Armenians were killed by the Ottoman Empire (which now constitutes the Turkish State). Besides that many Armenian people fled the state or were sent onto death marshes into Syria. This is a very short and blunt explanation of the history of these people which will be extensively explained in the second chapter.

In the third chapter I will continue with the groundwork for the analysis. With the different lenses and methods that I shortly set out in the research method paragraph I can make an assessment of what is going on. It is possible to assess the local situation through the interviews I conducted. In the end, the research is about real people. So I think it is important to take into account the evidence I gathered from them, at first hand. Secondly, I will make use of ethnogeopolitical theory to see if this can possibly contribute to the explanation. Also the Abkhazian case will come to the fore in this chapter. The policies of both self-proclaimed independent states can be compared in order to find similarities and differences in their policies regarding Syrian refugees,

Chapter 4 will serve so to say to 'put the pieces together'. With that I mean to put together everything that we have learned in the background and in Chapter 3 and then try to link it together to try to understand the Armenian border policy. All the information that is gathered, and possible explanations I discussed in the third chapter, will be brought together. First I have to formulate an answer to the sub question, this will help me to answer the main question. This way we can formulate a complete as possible answer to the research question.

In the fifth Chapter we will formulate the most comprehensive answer possible to the research question. Undoubtedly this explanation and answer of the research question is not a full explanation, as a Master Thesis cannot fully explain such a complex phenomenon. However, this does not mean that it will not have a valuable contribution to the scientific field as this research. Because it is an inductive research I will in the last chapter explain the added value of this research to the debate. Also this research can spark further and more comprehensive research on the subject. The research has its limits and shortcomings which will be discussed in this chapter as well.

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Chapter 1: Background

In this chapter I will extensively explain the needed background information to understand the region of interest: the South-Caucasus and especially the conflict about Nagorno-Karabakh. Needless to say that I cannot explain everything about the region and conflict but the most important aspects and concepts will be discussed in this chapter. The case of Nagorno-Karabakh is the central point of this research. As mentioned before Abkhazia will serve as a tool which can possibly contribute to the analysis of the situation in Armenia. Therefore, in this chapter I will also describe the situation in Abkhazia, although the focus remains on the Nagorno-Karabakh region and that conflict. I will first discuss the geographical location and the adhering debate around maps and mapping.

1.1: The Geographical Location of the South Caucasus

The region in which this is all taking place is probably not to everyone familiar, therefore I think it is useful to pinpoint the exact location of the different states, borders and how they are related to each other. I have circled the region as a whole on the Gall-Peters map, (Map 1). I am aware of the politization of maps and borders and I will discuss this in the next paragraph. However I think that maps are still a very useful tool to depict and pinpoint the location of my research. Therefore in the following description these maps will merely serve as a practical tool to locate (de facto) states in relation to each other and the world. On map 2 I zoomed in on the region that is important for this research, the Caucasus region. The Caucasus region (map 2) is geographically located between the Black Sea in the West and the Caspian Sea in the East. Bordering the Russian federation in the North, Iran in the South and Turkey in the (South-) west. The Caucasus region can be divided in a Northern-Caucasus region, consisting of different oblasts and republics within the Russian Federation and the Southern-Caucasus (or Transcaucasia) consisting of de states Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan as well as the de-facto states of Nagorno Karabakh, Abkhazia and South-Ossetia. All the states and partially recognized states, I have so far mentioned are depicted on Map 2 .

Map 1: The Caucasus Region on the (Gall-Peters) World Map (Maps on the Web, 2020).

Map 2: Geopolitical map of the Caucasus region

(Patterson Board, 2016)

Map 3: The Near-East

(Geology.com, 2020)

The regions of interest for this research are clearly depicted on map 2. In the North-East of Georgia, bordering Russia, located at the Black Sea, is the de-facto state of Abkhazia. Also a little North from the Caucasus mountain range the North-Caucasian oblasts the Circassian people are from are depicted (Adygea, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia and Krasnodar Krai). These are a Russian oblasts where a part of the Circassian people come from and where a small minority of them still lives. These people have a culture that is very much akin to the Abkhazian culture, the Abkhaz people belong to the greater Circassian family.

Nagorno-Karabakh is located between the states of Armenia and Azerbaijan and borders Iran to the South. However, due to the recent war and subsequent ceasefire agreement the borders of this de-facto state have changed significantly (see Map 6). Important to mention is the Azerbaijani exclave Nakhichevan, which borders Armenia, Iran and Turkey. This region is important because it is the only place where Azerbaijan shares a border with Turkey. Om map 3 we see in the South-West how relatively close Syria and Iraq are to the Southern-Caucasus. This is important because people fleeing from Syria to resettle in the Southern-Caucasus, particularly in Abkhazia and Armenia, are the central point of research in this thesis. The geographic sphere that includes Syria and Iraq (also Lebanon and Jordan), is by some scholars called the 'Near-East', hence the name of the map.

1.2: The Debate about Maps

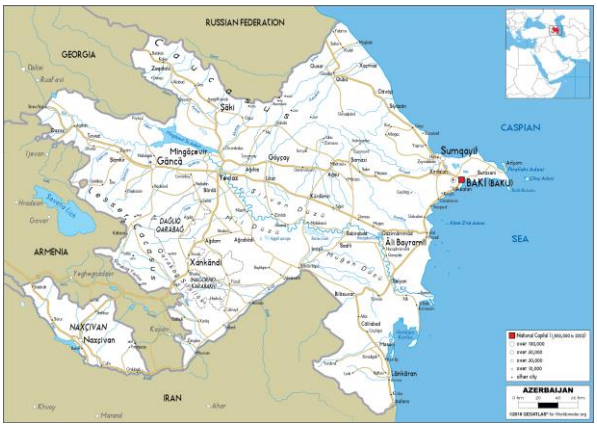
By showing the world map we encounter immediately a problem around the whole cartographic debate. When you take a look at the map this might probably be a different world map than the one that many of us are used to. This Gall-Peters map shows the actual size of the continents relative to each other. Whereas on most of the Mercator (world) maps you encounter in Europe and North-America this is not the case. These maps are said to be politically influenced or even having a political agenda (Klinghoffer, 2006: p. 45). This encompasses the practice that the Western world, Europe and North-America, is projected bigger than it is in reality and at the same time depicting development countries smaller than

they are. This practice is a part of what in cartographic studies is called ‘Eurocentrism’ (ibid.), mapping as if the world is centered around Europe. We should however make the reservation that the Gall-Peters map is not completely undisputed as well (Vujakovic, 2002). However, there is some consensus that this map is less politicized and more truthful than most world maps. It would have no added value to this research to go too deep into the debate about world maps, however I think it is important to show a more realistic map, than the ‘ordinary’ (Westernized/Eurocentric) world map most people are accustomed to.

This debate around maps is not limited to world maps. On the contrary, debate and disagreement are inherent concepts to almost all maps. The debate or problems I will bring to the fore are important for all maps. However, as this research is focused on the territorial conflicts in the Southern-Caucasus this discussion about maps will focus on that area as well. Like I described above there is not much consensus about the world map and how it must be depicted. Especially in conflict areas where the whole conflict revolves around territory maps are quintessential tools for people to make sense of the world around them to distinguish between what belongs to you and what belongs to the other. The way this is divided largely depends on the map you will consult.

There are a few important problems that are inherent with all maps. Firstly, all maps contain, to put it in a Foucauldian way, a power-knowledge structure (Crampton, 2001). This means that is maps are in no way a neutral instrument but they can serve as a tool of power, for instance to favor the pursuit of one’s side political agenda. In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh this is not different. The maps that are shown in Armenia will be completely different than the ones that are shown in Azerbaijan. Maps in Azerbaijan will depict no borders between any areas of the country including the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Most maps of this region, except for the ones in Armenia, will show the same picture (see map 5). The reason for this is that it is under international law (and politics) recognized as an integral part of Azerbaijan. Take a look map 5 and you will believe that nothing is going on there and people can freely travel to all parts of Azerbaijan. This belief is hugely in favor of the Azerbaijani political agenda. In reality however, there is a physical border which is controlled by Armenian forces and this border is impossible to cross for the average Azeri or Armenian for that matter. On the other side of the conflict, in Armenia, the maps will show the whole Karabakh region (and much of surrounding areas) as an integral part of Armenia (See Map 4). This favors the political agenda of the Armenian state. For example when in Armenia they use these maps in school, they will teach the children the idea that Artsakh is an integral part of Armenia while the reality is, like I have shown above, far more complex than that.

Map 4: Armenian depiction of the Situation
(OST Armenia, 2021)



Map 5: Azerbaijani depiction of the Situation
(Worldofmeters, 2021)

The second problem with maps, especially in conflict areas, is that they present a static depiction of a region. This static depiction can be close to the reality in cases where the territory and borders are not disputed. For instance about the Dutch and German border there is far less dispute, not to say there is none, and it will probably not change overnight. However, in conflict areas like Nagorno-Karabakh, this static depiction can be misleading. The reality on the ground in conflict zones is way more dynamic, especially in times of actual conflict, like late 2020. Take for instance Map 4 as depicted above, this is an accurate map of wat areas were factually (*de facto)*, not to say rightfully, under control of Armenia before the war in September and October of 2020. Not to say that this map depicts what is rightfully Armenian, like I have stressed before I am not making a case for either party being in the right or in the wrong. I use this map purely as a practical tool to illustrate what the situation on the ground was at that time. Because as you will see in map 6 (on the next page) this situation has completely changed. Most of the areas that were de-facto under control of Armenia are now under control of Azerbaijan. As you can see on the map, the orange colored area is the only territory that remained under control of Armenia after the war. So especially in times of conflict maps can be very misleading as they can only show the situation at one moment in time. The next hour, day or month this situation can be very different. In this case, over the course of 44 days, the situation on the ground has completely changed. You can see how much the situation has changed when maps 4 and 6 are compared to each other. Moreover, by showing these two maps I can only depict what is going on at two exact moments in time which shows again the shortcomings of maps.

Map 6: Territorial Changes of the 2020 war

(Caucasian Knot, 2020)

1.3: The Syrian Refugees

Before I will discuss the conflict itself it is important to discuss the people that this research is about. The history of these people, the Armenian and Circassian (Abkhaz), share an important resemblance. This resemblance, their history, is the reason why they are so substantially represented in Syria. I will briefly introduce this history because it is a quintessential part of the background of this research. This description will give the basic information which is important to understand the rest of this background chapter. In the next chapter I will go a little bit deeper into their history to give a more complete and comprehensive overview.

The Armenian people are dispersed over the whole world. The reason for this dispersion has mainly to do with the events which are by most people referred to as the Armenian genocide in 1915-1916. At that time the area, that nowadays constitutes Eastern-Turkey, was first and foremost inhabited by Armenians. Many of these people were prosecuted, exiled or killed in 1915 and 1916 (Suny, 2015). The Armenian inhabitants of that region fled to many different parts of the world. The Armenian diaspora is immense, it is estimated that there are approximately living 7 – 10 million Armenians outside of the state of Armenia itself (Black, 2015). The Armenian diaspora can be found everywhere around the world and can have a substantial influence in the political process, mainly on the policy making level of

governance. For instance in the United States the Armenian lobby can have a tremendous influence, albeit mostly at the state level, on political policy. For example in May of 2020 Minnesota became the 10th federal state in the United States to recognize the independence of Artsakh (Toronto Hye, 2020). Moreover, it is not unthinkable that the Armenian lobby was one of the driving factors behind United States President Joe Biden's decision in April of 2021 to recognize these 1915 events as a genocide (Baillie, 2021).

The Abkhazian people are a part of the greater group of people who are called Circassians (also called Cherkess in Russian, or Adyghe as they call themselves), who predominantly lived in the Northern-Caucasus region. There used to be a Circassian state in the North-West portion of the greater Caucasus region, called Circassia or Adygea. This state does not exist anymore and the area it encompassed now falls under the Russian state. This Circassian state was destroyed after a war between the Circassians and the Tsarist Russian Empire in the 19th century (Shenfield, 1999). Since the end of this war over 90 percent of the Circassian people live in exile, i.e. in other countries then Russia (ibid. p.150). This war ended over 150 years ago, in 1864. Therefore, the diaspora of the Circassian community is harder to estimate. Also because it depends on which communities you count as Circassian, whether or not these people identify themselves as Circasssian and after how many generations living in exile the culture of the Circassians is preserved. These factors hold for every diaspora, the estimations of the Circassian diaspora range from 1-4 million, who predominantly reside in Turkey and the Middle East (Kaya, 2005).

Both diaspora's have a substantial amount of people in Syria. Syria is located approximately a thousand kilometres to the (South)-East of Transcaucasia (Georgia, Armenia & Azerbaijan). For approximately the last 150 years Syria hosted a substantial amount of both Circassians and Armenians. Important for now is that is these people recently became victim to possibly the biggest humanitarian crisis of the past decade(s). This crisis was sparked by the violent conflict in Syria, which started as a protest against the government like there were protests all over the Arabic world in 2011. This period of protests and demonstrations against the ruling powers is called the Arab Spring. In Syria this turned in to an armed rebellion against the ruling government of President Assad which lasts to this day. Since the beginning of the civil war in Syria over six million Syrians (amongst who are many Armenians and Circassians) have fled from their homes and became refugees (UNHCR, 2020). Many of these refugees wanted to seek refuge in Europe. However, also a sizeable amount of these people were encouraged (by Armenia and Abkhazia) to seek refuge and to (re)settle in the Southern-Caucasus being the historical motherland. These people, or at least their (grand) parents, are descendants of people that used to live in this historical motherland of respectively the Armenians and Abkhazians. So for these people who still identify as Armenian, Abkhazian or Circassian, it was an attractive option to resettle in a place where the cultural aspects are more or less the same.

1.4: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

The situation on the ground in Armenia, Azerbaijan and especially Nagorno-Karabakh, as it is nowadays, is very important to take into account when we assess the border policy. Therefore I will shortly set out the recent developments regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and discuss the underlying causes. October and November of 2020 marked the period of the biggest uprising of violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan since the collapse of the Soviet-Union. After the collapse of the Soviet-Union in 1991-1994 a war raged between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, called the First-Karabakh War. This war ended in a ceasefire in 1994 and the result was that Nagorno-Karabakh and much of the adjacent regions came under military control of Armenia. For nearly 30 years, apart from some violent incidents, the status quo in terms of territory and ceasefire remained the same, it was considered as a frozen conflict (Özkan, 2008). Until the fall of 2020 this was the case. The two sides are, again, diametrically opposed on the account who committed the first act of military aggression in September 2020. What is clear however is that both parties in the end have violated the 1994 ceasefire and it resulted in a war between the two states. The war that was fought in 2020 is mostly referred to as the 'Second-Karabakh war' (Broers, 2021). In this war Azerbaijan recaptured all of the adjacent regions, and parts of Karabakh (ibid.).

After six weeks of being entangled in a war, on the 10th of November 2020 Russia brokered a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan (BBC, 2020a). This six week war between Armenia and Azerbaijan has resulted in more than 5.000 casualties, both sides accounted for (ibid.). Amongst those casualties are hundreds of civilians, also on both sides. The conflict also resulted in an estimated 75.000 people to be displaced from their homes in the Nagorno-Karabakh region and most of them fled into the main Armenian State (Deutsche Welle, 2020). Although the actual numbers can vary depending on the source you consult, what seems to be clear is that this conflict has affected a lot of lives and livelihoods of people. This eruption of violence and the damage caused by this did not come out of nowhere.

The 2020 clash of the two former Soviet states erupted out of a long lingering territorial dispute over the region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Both states have made territorial claims to the region ever since these states existed. These claims became harsher and entangled with violence since these states became independent after the collapse of the Soviet-Union in 1991. In the fall of that year Armenia and Azerbaijan both declared their independence. During the disintegration of the Soviet-Union the same year both states saw a chance to become independent and subsequently claimed Nagorno-Karabakh as theirs. Moreover the Soviet army, which was stationed in the South-Caucasus to keep the peace, disintegrated (Faydengold, 1991). These were the two most important reasons that a war erupted between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the mountainous region of Karabakh. Armenia chose the side of Karabakh and Azerbaijan stood against the forces of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh combined.

Hereafter, I will very shortly set out both claims and the way they are diametrically opposed to each other. Both claims in some way derive from the United Nations Charter. When I describe these claims

immediately two very important, at the same time highly debated, concepts come to the fore: *ethnicity* and *borders*. I think these two concepts are quintessentially important for this conflict and therefore also for this research. Because the Armenian case is based on ethnicity whereas Azerbaijan's case is based mainly on borders. I will further explain these concepts in the next paragraph.

I think it is useful to already briefly introduce these claims. First of all, Armenia grounds their claim on historical and ethnic arguments. Arguing that historically seen the region has always mostly been inhabited by ethnic Armenians. The specific chapter in the United Nations charter they refer to is: '*The right of self-determination'* (United Nations Charter, Chapter 1, Article 1). This right is stated as follows:

'' All peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.'' (UNPO, 2017).

This very bluntly means that all peoples have the right to create their own political system. The creation of this system includes the right to choose who they are governed by. Some people call it the full right to choose your destiny (ibid.). However, the definition of 'peoples' is highly contentious, the United Nations itself is not clear on what they define as 'people with a right to self-determination'. There is not a clear script provided to ensure the right to self-determination or clear required conditions that you need to meet to make a claim to this. The United Nations states that: ''it should be seen as: as a process providing a wide range of possible outcomes dependent on the situations, needs, interests and conditions of concerned parties'' (ibid). Albeit being vague in its requirements this right is enshrined in the U.N. Charter and defined as *hard* International Law by the U.N. These rights and obligations hold for all members of the United Nations, both Armenia and Azerbaijan are member states of the United Nations. Shortly said the people, Armenians in this case, living in the Nagorno-Karabakh region make a claim to this article and state that they want to govern themselves and that they want to create their own political system, they have done so after the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1994 ended in a ceasefire (Kolstø, & Blakkisrud, 2012: p. 141). Because, as I described above, the absence of clear requirements, there is much debate on whether or not this was legitimate. The requirements for such a claim are not the only problem there was with this independency claim of the Nagorno-Karabakh region. In 1994 it was not the first time Nagorno-Karabakh made a claim to this self-determination. In the late 80's the Karabakh Oblast leaders called for the unification with Armenia, this was rejected by the Soviet leadership then lead by Gorbachev (Rost, 1991: p. 17). The Armenian population was angered by this because in their eyes they were correcting a historical wrongdoing, when the Soviet-Union placed Nagorno-Karabakh under control of Azerbaijan in 1923. Moreover, the right of *self-determination* was also enshrined in the constitution of the Soviet-Union, so there were basing their request of unification on a constitutional right at that time (ibid.).

The adversary in this debate: Azerbaijan also grounds their territorial claim by referring to the United Nations Charter. However they do this by saying that the whole area is internationally recognized as the

territory of Azerbaijan. So it makes a claim to internationally recognized borders (United Nations Charter, Chapter 1, Article 2). The integrity, to keep these borders as they are determined by the U.N. member states, is also a right that is enshrined in the U.N. Charter. According to the borders established, by U.N. members after the Soviet-Union seized to exist, Nagorno-Karabakh belongs to the internationally recognized territory of the Azerbaijani state (Broers, 2020: p. 1471). However, because Armenia won the war and seized the territory, the Nagorno-Karabakh region has practically been under control of Armenia since 1994. This means that this is a breach of the charter regarding the '*Territorial Integrity'* of Azerbaijan. (United Nations Charter, Chapter 1. Article 2). This concept beholds the commitment to respect these internationally recognized borders. The article states that internationally recognized borders cannot be breached and changed, using the means of force, by another U.N. member. The state of Azerbaijan makes a claim to this article and says that the occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh by ethnic Armenians is a violation of this article. They are stating that the state of Nagorno-Karabakh is illegal as they do respect the borders that were established by the United Nations.

This research will not serve as an argument in favor of any of the two parties' claims involving the entitlement to this particular land. Nor will this research be fully focused on the conflict I briefly described above. However, the conflict plays an important role in this research in another way. Therefore I think it is important to give a brief description of the situation. The reasons for explaining the recent developments and the core of the conflict are twofold. The first obvious reason is to show how imminent the danger of war is in this region which adds to the societal relevance. The imminence of the danger has shown itself in this case in 2020. Secondly, it gives the reader a glimpse of the complex situation in the region and the concepts that underlie this complexity.

This imminence of danger is not only important to take into account for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This is important for the region as a whole because there are, besides this example, two other conflicts looming in the other state located in the South-Caucasus: Georgia. In this former Soviet state the regions of South-Ossetia and Abkhazia are entangled in a conflict with Georgia. The conflicts in Georgia show much resemblance to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. These conflicts became more violent after the collapse of the Soviet-Union. The violent period in the early 1990's ended with a ceasefire. Moreover, it ended with Russian troops on the ground in Abkhazia and in South-Ossetia which started as a 'peacekeeping mission'. Just as Russia is nowadays overseeing the peacekeeping in the region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Also this conflicts has shown a relatively recent period of violence: in 2008 this conflict erupted into a full scale war between Georgia and the Russia which lasted 5 days (Friedman, 2008: p.1). But for the most important resemblance I turn again to the United Nations Charter. In Abkhazia and South-Ossetia there is also the claim to self-determination and both of these states claim to be independent. The right of self-determination, of the Ossetian and Abkhaz people, stands opposed to the claim to territorial integrity of Georgia in this case.

1.5: Debatable Claims & Concepts

The territorial conflicts about Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia symbolize the complexity of the situation in the South-Caucasus. The complexities in this case are substantial. As shown above the gridlock that the U.N. Charter has caused between the two parties becomes immediately clear in both cases. Because both parties make a claim to an article that is not at all complementary to the other, in fact in these cases they are diametrically opposed to each other. It is not the case that one of the two concepts overrides the other. There is no United Nations article that explains what should happen if these two concept clash with each other. I think I have shown that the concepts of borders and ethnicity are the core of the conflicts that I will discuss in this research. Therefore it is due time I discuss these concepts and the debate around them more extensively.

To understand the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh (as well in Abkhazia), and the conflict and its complexity, there are two concepts that are quintessentially important: borders and ethnicity. These two are the most important concepts because both the two opposing claims to territory are mainly based on one of these two concepts. On the one side the claim of Azerbaijan relies completely on the concept of (internationally recognized) borders. On the other side the Armenian claim is largely based on the concept of ethnicity, in combination with the history of the people(s) in the region.

These two concepts are one of the reasons why the situation is so complex. Both are far from straight forward terms which are easily explained. There has been, and still is, an extensive debate about these concepts, both in the public sphere and the scientific sphere. Therefore, the goal here is not to set out a clear cut definition of these concepts and I do not want to set out the whole debate. However, I will show the problems that come to the fore when there are important political claims based on these concepts. I will here try to concisely describe what these concepts will mean in the context of my research. So I will explain it in a way that it contributes to a better understanding of the place and the importance of these concepts in the conflict and in my research.

1.5.1: Borders

The claim to territorial integrity may seem, at first glance, pretty straightforward: there are (internationally recognized) borders and these should not be violated. For many people it is a clear cut case: you have to respect these borders and that is it. This point of view is understandable when you think within the strict boundaries of the international law. The law says that there are set borders which should not be violated. However, when one takes a closer look at the concept of borders in itself in a more fundamental way the debate changes. Within the ethical debate about borders I will look beyond what the laws say. The discussion is more the origin of these borders and what the moral implications of such borders are. My opinion is that when you take these points into account it becomes, to say the least, more ambiguous. To put it bluntly, can a line drawn some years ago, in most cases by a politician, create a rightful divide between two groups of people or between two states? Philosophically speaking, I would argue that this is not a valid ground to divide two (or more) states or groups of people. I could

set out the whole philosophical and ethical debate about borders here, but I think it is more useful to use the case in question. Because the debatable righteousness of certain borders, in this case Nagorno-Karabakh, are very clear in this example.

A Short History of the Borders of Nagorno-Karabakh

In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh the question about the righteousness of borders is to say the least ambiguous. From the beginning of the 1920's until the early 90's the whole Transcaucasian area was part of the Soviet-Union. The early years of the Soviet Union, under control of Joseph Stalin, provided the ground for this territorial conflict. In 1921 the Soviet authorities decided to place the Autonomous Oblast of Nagorno-Karabakh, which was ethnically predominantly Armenian, under the control of Baku, or (The Soviet Republic of) Azerbaijan (De Waal, 2003). The oblast still retained some of its autonomy, however effectively it became part of Azerbaijan.

There is debate amongst authors whether or not this decision was part of the (in) famous Stalinist tactic of 'divide and rule' in the South-Caucasus (Danielyan & Babayan, 2016). This measure by Stalin was a policy to use a minority, an ethnic group of people, to gain more grip on a region (Rezvani, 2013). The writers who favour this notion claim that this is a classic Soviet policy to create animosity between the states in order to set them opposed to each other. For the Soviet state it was favourable that these states would fight each other rather than fight together against the Soviet state (De Waal, 2003). On the other hand it can be said that it was a long term decision where economic arguments were as important as the colonial part (ibid.). According to some authors, Nagorno-Karabakh would be more economically viable if it was connected to Azerbaijan. Moreover, the Soviet Union wanted to make quick progress in completing the conquest of Azerbaijan with its rich oil fields and in that sense Azerbaijan was of a much greater importance than Armenia (ibid.). So to put Nagorno-Karabakh under the rule of Azerbaijan could also have been a decision that was partially economic, some authors argue.

Now we skip roughly 70 years in time. After the collapse of the Soviet-Union, in 1991, Nagorno-Karabakh was internationally recognized as a part of Azerbaijan while the demography still showed a great majority of ethnic Armenians. The academic debate I set out above, about the decision to put Karabakh within the borders of Azerbaijan, shows two different reasons for the drawing of these internationally recognized borders of Azerbaijan. These reasons are both in favour of the Soviet state, but more importantly both these reasons make clear that the people living within or around these borders are not taken into account whatsoever. What I wanted to show here, and this is a very important notion for this research, is that the righteousness of the borders does not always (if ever) precedes the lawfulness of a border.

1.5.2: Contested Ethnicity

The concept of ethnicity is in this case very important because almost the entire Armenian claim to the land rests on this concept. However, this is all but a clear cut concept. There are probably as many different scholars as there are different definitions or meanings attached to the concept of ethnicity. One of the problems about ethnicity I have already briefly touched upon earlier. Ethnicity is sometimes something how we describe a group of people, even though these people do not identify themselves as belonging to this ethnic group.

For this research I think it is very important to discuss the highly contested concept of ethnicity. Although, I will not give a clear cut definition of the concept of ethnicity or ethnic groups. Rather I will try to explain the concept in the light of the research. Like I stated, there are as many scholars as different definitions of the concept. I will try to make clear what the concept of ethnicity means in these specific cases, like I have done in the explanation about borders. For this research two groups of people are important, these groups of people are often regarded as two distinct ethnic groups: Armenians and Circassians. In this paragraph I will discuss the Armenians and Syrian-Armenians. Thereafter, the Circassians, which the Abkhaz people are a part of.

The Armenian People

First, I will discuss the most important group for this research: the Armenians. Historically seen the Armenian people have had a long presence in what nowadays constitutes, Armenia, Turkey, Iran and Georgia. The first occurrence of people using the exonym Armenian, in other words the first time people called themselves Armenian, comes out of the 6th century B.C. (Payaslian, 2007). This was around the same time as the first establishment of the Historical Kingdom of Armenia, which encompassed the same area as Armenia plus Azerbaijan, Eastern-Turkey and parts of Syria (ibid.). There is consensus among historians that the Armenian people have had a long history being inhabitants of the Armenian Highlands (which are nowadays in Eastern Turkey) and Armenia including Artsakh (ibid.). This is precisely the Armenian argumentation for the support of the Armenians in the Artsakh region, Armenians have always lived there and are the native inhabitants of that region. Moreover, they claim that there is no cultural or ethnical difference between Armenians that live in Armenia and those that live in Artsakh (Gasparyan, 2020). That is exactly the reason why ethnicity is so important for this research because that is what the Armenian claim to the land is based on.

There is a subgroup of Armenians that is important for this research as well: Syrian-Armenians. Syrian-Armenians are a subgroup of all the Armenians that live in diaspora. These are people that descend from the Armenians that left the Armenian Highlands around hundred years ago in 1915. At that time the Armenian Highlands were a part of the Ottoman Empire. Very bluntly said, the Ottomans did not want the Armenians on their lands they started to prosecute, exile and kill the Armenians that lived in the Armenian Highlands, which is now Eastern-Turkey. I will analyze these events more in depth in the Second Chapter. What we need to know now is that these Armenians were either killed or exiled into

Syria which is located directly south of the Armenian Highlands (Suny, 2015). Many of the people that survived the genocide settled in Syria because a part of the genocide and exile strategies were death marches into the Syrian dessert. The people that survived this and ultimately settled in Syria often lived in Armenian communities (Thomas et al., 2020), this is part of the reason why they were able to retain much of the Armenian culture and religion. Although these people lived for multiple generations in Syria, they still kept a lot of their Armenian cultural Armenian and that is why they are still regarded as Armenians (Campos, 2016). The Armenian governments encourages these people to return to their 'historical motherland' and since 2011 22.000 Syrian-Armenians have done that. How many of these people have remained in Armenia is not clear but estimations are around 15.000 (Hayrapetyan, 2020).

The People of Abkhazia

The group of people that are of importance for the Abkhazian region are, like I mentioned before, the Circassian people. The term Circassian itself however is highly contested. The term has different meanings and synonyms. The Russian state for instance has a different definition of Circassians and have divided them into different groups over four different North-Caucasian states: Adygea, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia and Krasnodar Krai (Arutyunov, 2010). All these small states, with some level of autonomy within Russia, are depicted on map 2 (in paragraph 1.1). Historically seen these people are all Circassians but the Russian state uses different names, such as 'Cherkess' and 'Balkarian' for them (ibid.). The majority of the Circassian people in these different republics call themselves 'Adyghe' (Olson Et al., 1994). I will use neither of these definitions. With this short introduction I wanted to discuss the complexity and debate about the Circassian name and illustrate why I do not want to go into the full debate about this concept. Because that would unnecessarily complicate my research.

The way I will use the term Circassian is as an overarching name of different North-Caucasian ethnic groups which includes, among others, the Abkhazians. My definition is partially based on the way the Abkhazian state defines the Circassian people. I understand that this is not uncontested but I have done this for the practical reason not to get confused with the different naming of the people in the regions. These Circassian people, as I define them, also encompass the Abkhaz people. Basically, the Circassian people in my research refer to the people who are, on account of their ethnicity, able to resettle in Abkhazia. The Abkhazian state has defined this 'ethnicity' as acceptable if at least one of your grandparents have Abkhazian or Circassian ancestry. So Abkhazia accepts people who either have an Abkhaz or Circassian (grand) father or (grand) mother to repatriate to Abkhazia (D. Başol, Personal Communication, 10th of October, 2020). More importantly these people can relatively easily obtain a Abkhazian passport.

There is however one significant difference between most of the Circassians and most of the Abkhaz people. The latter are nowadays predominantly Orthodox Christian while many Circassians are followers of the Circassian religion, albeit with small influences of either Christianity or Islam. I will explain the importance of this in the second chapter. The specific group of Circassian people that are of

importance for this research are the Circassian people in diaspora. During and after the Circassian war and the Circassian genocide in the second half of the 19th century, the Circassian people were exiled or killed. I will explain these historical events in the second chapter. During these times many of the original inhabitants of Circassia were exiled or fled to the area that now constitutes Turkey, Syria and Jordan. These areas, apart from Eastern-Turkey, were also predominantly Muslim. Therefore, the majority were welcomed to these areas. Among these Circassians that settled in Syria are also Abkhaz people. The Circassian diaspora in Syria, and the part of them that *returned* to Abkhazia is the 'ethnic group' that is of importance for this research.

1.6: The Geopolitical position of the Southern-Caucasus

In the first paragraph I already discussed the location in geographial terms. Also it is important to discuss the *place* of the states in a figurative sense. So hereafter I will describe the important geopolitical entities that are or were involved in this region. I will discuss how they are involved in the conflict(s) or in the region as a whole.

Armenia & Nagorno-Karabakh

It is important to mention that first and foremost Artsakh (which is the Armenian name for the region) claims to be independent. The people of Artsakh have their own political system as they believe it is their right, as enshrined in the U.N. Charter, to choose by whom they want to be governed (Kolstø, & Blakkisrud, 2012: p. 141). The independency and legitimacy of this government however is recognized by none of the U.N. Member states. Nevertheless they are recognized by mon-U.N. states that are, bluntly said, in the same boat regarding recognition: Transnistria, South-Ossetia and Abkhazia (Marsili, 2016). Moreover, they are recognized at a state level by multiple states in Australia and the United States (Ter-Matevosyan & Ghazaryan, 2009).

The claim on the land is from the people in Nagorno-Karabakh itself which are Armenians. Officially, for diplomatic reasons, the state of Armenia does not even recognize the independency and legitimacy of the state of Artsakh. If Armenia would officially recognize Artsakh this would trouble their relations with Russia, but Russia wants to keep a good relationship with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Despite this official stance Armenia is the only state that Artsakh shares an open border with and they also provide economic and military support. They provide these services and open border policy because they claim that the people live in that region are Armenians. As the European Council stated: '*they have ties with each other involving all important matters'* (Chiragov et al., 2015). Moreover, the latest prime-minister Pashinyan visited Artsakh shortly after he was inaugurated and stated: *'' Artsakh is Armenia, and that's it!''* (Kucera, 2019). So in reality it is pretty clear what the intentions of Armenia are regarding the region of Nagorno-Karabakh. At least they want to keep the region under control or rather recognized as an independent state.

Abkhazia & Georgia

Abkhazia's history, the current situation regarding repatriation and the conflict itself are resemble the case of Artsakh. Also Abkhazia claims to be an independent state and they proclaimed their independence after the fall of the Soviet-Union. Moreover, they make a claim to the same article in the United Nations charter as the Armenians in Artsakh: the right to choose who they are governed by. Abkhazia was 'gifted' to Georgia by Joseph Stalin in the early 1920's, just as Artsakh was 'gifted' to Azerbaijan. Before that the state had different rulers and was part of different kingdoms. However, after the Soviet-Union was disintegrated the Abkhazian region was internationally recognized as a part of Georgia. So another resemblance is the fact that Georgia claims that Abkhazia and South-Ossetia is violating its territorial integrity. Abkhazia and South-Ossetia are militarily and politically supported by Russia. There are different reasons for the Russian Federations' interest in doing this. It gives them more power and leverage over Georgia and with that Russia extends its influence sphere in the Southern-Caucasus (Gerrits & Bader, 2016). Moreover, by having troops on the ground and conserving the situation of the 'frozen conflicts' Russia is making it harder for Georgia to join Western institutions such as NATO and the European Union (Yakobashvili & Kulick, 2010).

However as opposed to Artsakh, Abkhazia can count on at least some U.N. countries to recognize them as an independent and legitimate state. In 2008 Georgia tried to forcefully regain control over the area but failed because the Abkhazians and South-Ossetians where backed by Russia. Directly after the 'five-day war' in 2008 followed the first international recognition of the independent state of Abkhazia by Russia and Nicaragua, later followed by Venezuela and Nauru (Reuters, 2009). These cases of recognition are often regarded as merely symbolic because these countries are nowhere near these states either politically or geographically. The most probable reason they did this is too strengthen the ties with Russia or at least please Russia in this sense. Also it is said that these countries receive economic aid from Russia in return for this recognition (Hill, 2018). Most recently, in 2018, Syria followed to recognize the independent state of Abkhazia (Reuters, 2018). This is a very interesting development from the side of Syria. Especially regarding this research because, as I mentioned before, Syria hosts a sizeable amount of people who originate from the Caucasus region, amongst other Abkhazians. It is more likely that they carried out this policy to strengthen the ties with, or at least please, Russia. The Syrian Foreign Ministry stated the following: *''in gratitude for the assistance against terrorist aggression, the Syrian Arabic Republic has decided to establish diplomatic relations with the republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia''* (Lomsadze, 2018). In other words they thank the Russians for their support of the Assad regime and in return they recognize these disputed states. With that they are directly strengthening their ties with the Russian Federation.

Russia

Probably one the most influential geopolitical actors in this region, as in many other parts of the world, is Russia. For multiple reasons the influence of Russia is very important to discuss when I describe the

situation in the Southern-Caucasus. Not only when we discuss the situation of the South-Caucasus nowadays but also in the history of the region Russia has been one of the most important actors. This will extensively be discussed in the second chapter where I will discuss the historical background of this research. In the previous sections I have already briefly touched upon the influence that Russia had in the history and the present of the Southern-Caucasus.

For the greater part of the last two centuries the whole Southern-Caucasus was part of the Russian Empire. First it was part of the Tsarist Russian Empire and after that it became part of the Soviet-Union. In the early years of the Soviet-Union the groundwork for the two conflicts was laid by the decisions of the Soviet-Union regarding the dividing or combining of territory. To gain grip on the region and to improve the economy of the region as a whole the decision was made to incorporate the predominantly Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh into the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan (De Waal, 2003). Thereafter, the Soviet-Union placed the Soviet Republic of Abkhazia under the rule of the Soviet Republic of Georgia.

Nowadays, it seems like Russia still does not want to loosen its grip on the region, or to say the least they are trying to regain some grip on the region. The most recent evidence of this ambition Russia has shown in the peace-deal they brokered between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Because an important part of this peace-deal is the deployment of 2.000 Russian peacekeepers along the frontline of Nagorno-Karabakh (Hovhannisyan, 2020). This is the first time that Russia is militarily involved in the Karabakh conflict by having military forces on the ground. Before they started this military deployment they were already involved but only in a diplomatic way. Russia together with France and the United States are chairs of the Minsk group, this is a platform created by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) devoted to find a political and peaceful resolution to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh (OSCE, 1994).

Although, it is the first time that Russia has military presence in Artsakh this is not the first time that Russia started a peacekeeping mission in the Southern-Caucasus region. Already in 1994, shortly after the first war between Abkhazia and Georgia, Russia started a peacekeeping mission in Abkhazia (Socor, 2008). The account of Russia was that this peacekeeping mission was necessary to avoid further hostilities between the two parties. At that time they deployed 3.000 peacekeepers along the border between Abkhazia and Georgia (Bird, 1994). This peacekeeping mission eventually evolved into Russia having troops on the ground in Abkhazia. In October 2008, shortly after the conflict escalted again, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia at the time stated that the Russian troops in Abkhazia would: *‘’no longer be peacekeepers. They will from now on be armed forces*. ‘’ (Socor, 2008). Of course, these peacekeepers were armed before but they were operating under a peacekeeping flag. It was a logical step for the Russians, after they recognized the independence of Abkhazia earlier that year, to reiterate this recognition by supplying military forces and equipment to defend this independence.

Turkey

Another geopolitical actor involved in the Caucasus region (I would argue) is Turkey. Historically, in the times of the Ottomans their history is, to say the least, deeply intertwined with the Armenian people. This history will be extensively discussed in chapter 2. Nowadays, Turkey keeps strong economic, military and diplomatic ties with Azerbaijan (Oskanian, 2011). Moreover, the two countries are even seen as 'friendly and brotherly' towards each other, as Erdoğan called repeatedly that they are *'One Nation, Two States'* (Keddie, 2020). Generally speaking the most important reason for that is that culturally these countries have much in common, for example they have the same religion and the language is akin. Turkey borders the Azerbaijan exclave of Nakhchivan in the east and they fully support the Azerbaijani claim to the Nagorno-Karabakh territory. Subsequently they, at the same time cut all ties with their neighbouring country Armenia, as well as they closed the border between Turkey and Armenia in 1993. They did this after Armenia occupied one of the adjacent regions of Nagorno-Karabakh called Kalbajar (Shırıyev & Davıes, 2013). The dispute of Nagorno-Karabakh does not include a dispute over the adjacent regions according to Turkey (ibid.).

Moving on to the role of Turkey in the second-Karabakh war. The recently brokered ceasefire has positive outcomes for Turkey in two ways. Firstly, Turkey is constituted as an actor that will help to monitor the ceasefire (Reuters, 2020a). How this exactly will take shape is not clear yet. It is not determined whether they will join military forces on the ground, which they prefer, or if they will join the Russians in a shared monitoring centre in Azerbaijan, which the Russians prefer (ibid.). Turkey prefers the military presence in the region to, where necessary, support their ally Azerbaijan. Russia, at the same time, prefers to be the sole actor in the peacekeeping process itself. Secondly, there will be a transit road through Armenia which connects Azerbaijan to its exclave Nakhichevan, which borders Turkey (Reuters, 2020b). So Turkey and Azerbaijan will be connected through this transit road. The exact details of this road have to be determined as well. This is a road that will go straight through the territory of Armenia but can only be used by Turkey and Azerbaijan (Devonshire-Ellis, 2020). The region where this road is to be established is very mountainous and the infrastructure is poorly maintained (ibid). Therefore, the benefits that this road will yield are disputable, symbolically however this is a great victory for the two Turkic allies because they now will have a more prominent border, albeit being connecting through a transit road. In any case it is clear that Turkey will play a bigger role in (peacekeeping) the conflict and possibly to its resolution in the future. In the past their role in the conflict was different, their role only considered closing the border on the other side of Armenia and supporting Azerbaijan. The role is now more active as they will be involved in the monitoring of the peace (Reuters, 2020b).

NATO & the European Union

In terms of 'Western' influence in the region there are basically two important actors I will discuss here: The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union. As far as direct influence in

the conflicts goes, the two Western parties do not have much to show for when compared to Turkey and Russia. This does not mean that these two parties do not play an important role in the Southern-Caucasus region. Armenia is a known ally of Russia (Keddie, 2020). This alliance has its roots in religion because both countries share nearly the same religion and Russia has always protected countries with the same religion. Also Russia has backed Armenia in its conflict with the Ottoman Empire in 1915 (Sofuoglu, 2020). Azerbaijan's biggest ally in the region, as explained above, is undoubtedly Turkey. The relationship of the two parties (NATO and the EU) with Turkey and Russia is to say the least, not great.

Georgia however, since the fall of the Soviet-Union, is aiming to move away from the Russian sphere of influence. Georgia wants to Westernize and build up relations with Western countries and organizations (Ingle, 2020). A big reason for this is their conflict with Russia, which backs the regions of Abkhazia and South-Ossetia in their independence. So to join these two organizations (NATO & EU), or at least strengthen the ties, would be an important step towards the realization of this ambition (ibid.). Since 2003 Georgia have made some steps towards EU membership by strengthening the ties between them and the EU (Tsuladze, 2011). The first big step was made in 2008 when, after the five day war, the European Union instigated a monitoring mission along de administrative borderline (ABL) between Georgia and respectively South-Ossetia and Abkhazia (Fisher, 2009). At the same time Russia changed its peacekeeping mission into being a present military force in Abkhazia. The goal of this monitoring mission is to stabilize the situation in Georgia and reduce the risk of the resumption of hostilities (ibid.).. The initial duration of the mission was one year but as of 2021 the mission is still ongoing.

The last couple of years Georgia has made some big steps to strengthen the ties with the European Union. The biggest step Georgia made towards a possible European Union membership is undoubtedly the European Union Association Agreement (AA) that entered in to force in 2016. The biggest pillar being the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) that Georgia entered in 2017 (EEAS, 2018). In general the AA encompasses the fact that the EU provides assistance to Georgia for increasing democracy, the rule of law and the protection of human rights. The specific DCFTA had the ambitious objective of integrating Georgia into the European trade market (ibid.). Because of this agreement the trade between the EU and Georgia has been steadily growing. Nowadays, the EU is the biggest trading partner of Georgia (ibid.). Last but not least, a key part of this AA is that Georgia entered the visa free Schengen Zone, which means that people of the Schengen zone since March 2017 can travel without a visa to Georgia and vice versa (ibid.).

Regarding NATO the situation is different. The North-Atlantic Treaty Organization is a political and military alliance between 30 countries from Europe and North-America. When one member gets attacked by an external party all parties have the responsibility to guarantee a collective defense for that member (NATO, 2021). As they put it strikingly on their website: *'' an attack on one is considered an attack on all ''* (ibid.). Georgia also wants to be a member of this organization, however NATO is

reluctant to integrate Georgia as a full member. While for some time Georgia was promised eventual membership, this was withdrawn in 2015 when NATO released a statement saying that it would not accept any new members any time soon. Some members are opposed to the entrance of Georgia into the alliance, as they put it: *'not a good response for the balance of power between Russia and Europe'* (Reuters, 2008). Which is a politically measured way of saying that it might anger Russia and they are afraid of what the retaliation of Russia might be. This reluctance is not unfounded because as the leader of the armed forces in Russia released the following statement about the steps they would take if NATO would accept Georgia as a member state: *'These will not only be military steps, but also steps of a different nature' (*Reuters, 2018a). Without specifying what these steps would be, this is can undoubtedly as considered a serious threat.

Chapter 2: Historical Background of the People

In this chapter I will set out the historical background which is important for this research. As I have explained this research revolves around two self-proclaimed independent states that are entangled in a conflict with their neighbouring states. The two regions in question show much resemblances. In the previous chapter some of these resemblances have been discussed already. In this chapter I will dive deeper into the historic similarities of these regions and their peoples (inhabitants). In the first chapter I already zoomed-out to discuss the geopolitical interests of different actors in the region. Also in this chapter some of these aspects will come to the fore, as this is inseparable to the history of the peoples that are of interest for this research. Moreover, it also works the other way around, as the historic background will contribute to the understanding of the geopolitical actors and their interests.

Let me shortly repeat the most important information up the two regions in question. By doing this we come across the first resemblance between the two regions and their adhering disputes. Firstly, Nagorno-Karabakh, which is claimed by both Armenia and Azerbaijan, itself claims to be an independent state. The second region of interest, Abkhazia, also claims to be an independent state. However, Georgia (as well as the international community) is persistent in claiming that it is a part of the Georgian state. Before I go any further I want to stress again that this thesis' goal is not to make a case for any of the parties involved in the conflicts. It is not a matter of who is in the wrong and who is in the right. The main goal of this research is to make sense of the situation in these conflict prone regions. What I am trying to do can bluntly be described as *making sense of it all*. Concluding, I am all but choosing a side in both of the conflicts at hand.

2.1: Etymology

I want to begin with the etymology of the region of Nagorno-Karabakh because there is some interesting history in the naming of the region to begin with. In Azerbaijan it is known as Nagorno-Karabakh (Dağlıq Qarabağ in Azeri). It comes from Nagorny which means 'Mountainous' in Russian and Karabakh comes from an Azeri word that means 'black garden' (BBC, 2020b). However, this etymology of the word Karabakh itself is disputed, so I cannot really discuss this in depth. What is important is the difference between the Azeri and Armenian naming. The Armenian name 'Artsakh' comes from the name of a province in the ancient Armenian Kingdom, which existed from around 600 B.C. until 700 A.D. (Hewsen & Salvatico, 2001). This province was called Artsakh as well, the etymology and meaning of the word Artsakh itself remains unknown. However, the fact that Armenians use a name that derives from an ancient Armenian Kingdom is no coincidence. I believe this choice is part of a strategic political policy. The official name for the territory was changed from 'Nagorno-Karabakh Republic' to 'The Republic of Artsakh'. This name change was substantiated with a referendum held in the region 4 years ago (Radio Free Europe, 2017). The OSCE Minsk Group and the European Union have stated that this referendum has no meaning because it was held in an unrecognized state and it will not affect the political status of the region (ibid.). Therefore, this change is often considered as a merely symbolic

gesture or even as a provocation as claimed by Azerbaijan. Some say it is invoked to prevent confusion about the name of the region, I argue this is highly unlikely because most Armenians were already calling it Artsakh before the official name change (Dabaghyan, 2011). I argue that it is more than a symbolic change because naming can be a very important tool of power in a conflict such as this (Peteet, 2005). If the Armenians living there keep using the Azeri name for the region I argue they indirectly strengthen the case of Azerbaijan. Armenians themselves strengthen the case by using this consciously, many may also use it unconsciously. Moreover, nearly all neutral English sources I consulted used 'Nagorno-Karabakh' (or Nagorny Karabakh) as the name of the region without realizing the consequences this may have. So the naming and the change of name for the region is not so symbolic (and innocent) as it may seem at first. The strategy as used by the unrecognized state of Artsakh is not merely symbolic or a provocation to Azerbaijan. But getting the name to be covered in the media can really strengthen the case of Artsakh and Armenia. Like for instance the United States Federal state Minnesota recognized Artsakh as an independent state (Toronto Hye, 2020). The recognition of a state on this government level in the U.S. does not change anything about the (international) legitimacy of Artsakh. But by recognizing *Artsakh* they give an extra boost to the naming of the particular region in the media. Bu using the Armenian name in their recognition they strengthen the Armenian case.

2.2: The Peoples

The peoples that are important for this research also show important resemblances, predominantly in their history. Firstly I will discuss the Armenian people thereafter the Circassian people and the similarities and the differences between these peoples will become clear from this description. Keep in mind that I cannot go into the full extent of the history of the both peoples.

2.2.1: The Armenian Story

Like I have already briefly touched upon before there are big communities of Armenian people living all around the world. What is even more extraordinary is the fact that there are more Armenian people living abroad than there are Armenian people living in the nation state Armenia itself. In Armenia the total population is approximately 3 million (Central Intelligence Agency, 2020). The Armenian diaspora is widely known and represented in almost every Christian country, as they are predominantly Christian themselves. Often there are not exact numbers available. The United States and Russia are the biggest hosts for the Armenian diaspora. In the U.S. the estimations vary between 800 thousand and 1.5 million (Armenian Embassy to the U.S., 2021), in Russia the estimations are around 2 million (Kremlin, 2020). So if these estimations are near, it could be the case that even in these two countries together live more Armenians than in the Armenian state itself.

What is more important than the actual size of the Armenian diaspora is of course the underlying reasons for this phenomenon. To explain the tragic events that lead to the diaspora, I first have to set out a bit of the ancient history of the Armenians and Armenia. In the previous chapter I have explained what encompasses the Armenian state today and where, according to international law, the state borders other

nation states: Turkey, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Iran. These borders are predominantly the same as the borders that were drawn up by the Soviets in the early 1920's. Later they were reconfirmed as internationally recognized borders after the fall of the Soviet-Union in the early 90's.

History of the Armenian State and People

The state of Armenia, as we know it nowadays, is a mere fraction of the Ancient Armenian Kingdom where the name 'Armenia' derives from. The Armenian Kingdom and more importantly the Armenian people have been part of many different empires. The first official documentation of Armenians is from 600 B.C., on the area that nowadays constitutes Turkey (Ahmed, 2006). It would not be in service of this research to go into the whole history of the Armenian people here. Nevertheless, I will give a short overview of the important history of the Armenian people and touch upon the most important milestones and developments.

The Armenian Kingdom (or Greater Armenia) at its largest (69 B.C.), encompassed large parts of what now constitutes: Georgia, Azerbaijan, Syria, Iran and Turkey (Cleveland, 1994). This Kingdom of Greater Armenia was dissolved in 387 A.D.. Subsequently, it was split into Western-Armenia, which was annexed by the Byzantine Empire and East-Armenia became a part of the Persian Empire (ibid.). Western Armenia, encompassed the area that now constitutes Eastern-Anatolia, which is in Turkey (Rayfield, 2013). Eastern-Armenia is the mainly the region that now constitutes Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and parts of Azerbaijan. Thereafter, the Armenian people fell under different rulers, such as the Ottomans, Persians, Russians and the Mongols (ibid.).

Undoubtedly the most important, certainly for this research, was the Ottoman rule over Western-Armenia. This period started more than a millennium after the Armenians settled in this area (Ahmed, 2006). The Ottoman rule was also the longest not Armenian rule over Western Armenia. They conquered the area halfway the 16th century and their rule over Western-Armenia lasted until the end of the First World War, in 1918. Within the Ottoman Empire all non-Muslim people were considered second class citizens. Thus all Armenians, who are almost exclusively Christians, were seen as second class citizens. This meant that they had less rights and were both legally and illegally discriminated by the state, mostly in the form of taxation (Akçam, 2007). Moreover, they were not uncommonly a victim of forced labour, robberies, murder or sexual assaults (Astourian, 2011). Also, many of the Armenian lands were without warning taken away and given to Muslim refugees (ibid.). Despite these challenging circumstances the Armenian people were able to preserve much of their culture. They were able to maintain this identity largely because the Armenian Church, the apostolic church, formed a so called 'millet' within the predominantly Islamic Ottoman Empire (Suny, 2015). A millet is the name for a religious community which had a certain level of autonomy within the Ottoman Empire. The Armenian Millet had an own rule of law. So despite the fact that Armenians were considered second class citizens, as a side effect of the millet system, the Armenian people were able to retain certain traditions, language and maybe most importantly their religion (Kasymov, 2013). The importance of this, for this research, lies in the fact that

even after hundreds of years of Ottoman rule, the people within this community were still distinctly Armenians.

The Ottoman Armenian Massacres and the Armenian Genocide

The end of the 19th century marks the turning point for the Armenians within the Ottoman Empire. In the second half of the 19th century, the Armenian people in Anatolia (Eastern-Turkey) started to ask for reforms and equal treatment from the Ottoman Empire. The sultan at that time, Abdul Hamid II, took this as an attack on the empire's Islamic nature and even on its very existence (Suny, 2015). As a retaliation the Sultan between 1894 and 1896 had thousands of Ottoman Armenians killed in wat is called the 'Hamidian Massacres' (Akçam, 2007). The estimated death toll of these massacres range between 100.000 and 300.000 people. Initially it was only aimed at Ottoman Armenians but during these years also Assyrian Christians and Greek orthodox Christians became victims of these pogroms. After big international condemnation of these actions the prosecution of Ottoman Armenians slowly dwindled in 1896 and ended in 1897 (Hovannisian, 1997).

Later it became clear that the 1890's massacres were a mere harbinger of the tragedy yet to come for the Ottoman Armenians. The massacres came to an end in 1897, however that does not mean that the problems for the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire were over. On the contrary, when the despotic Sultan Hamid II was overthrown by the 'Young Turks' the situation of the Armenians worsened tremendously (Suny, 2015). The Young Turks were a revolutionary group of nationalist Turkish people, who took over the power from the Sultan. For them pan-Islamism was quintessential important for the survival and endurance of the Ottoman state (Bloxham, 2006). What they wanted was a largely homogenous state in terms of religion, meaning that they wanted the whole population to be Muslim. However, the Ottoman Armenians, at that time around 2 million people, were almost exclusively Christian (Cooper & Akçam, 2005). So there had to come a solution to the 'Armenian Question' as this was dubbed by European diplomats in the end of the 19th century (Bloxham, 2006).

It started in the wake of the First World War in 1914. At the end of 1914 the Ottoman suffered a devastating defeat at the hands of the Russians in the battle of Sarıkamış, (Akçam, 2007). Sarıkamış is a town in Eastern Anatolia. The Ottomans lost an estimated 60.000 - 80.000 of their 90.000 soldiers deployed in the fight against the Russians (ibid.). The Ottoman army leader Enver Pasha blamed this defeat on 'Armenian treachery', stating that the Armenian people actively sided with the Russian Army. These allegations were widely spread and believed by the Ottoman leaders. Historians later would conclude that these allegations are based on no clear evidence and were deliberately forged in order to use the Armenians as a scapegoat for their own military failure (Akcam, 2007: Suny, 2015). They could use this as a reason to solve the so called Armenian question with violence.

Historians commonly name the events of 'Red Sunday' as the start of the Armenian genocide. On the 24th of April 1915, more than 250 Armenian intellectuals and people of power were arrested in

Constantinople (Suny, 2015). These people were disestablished from their official functions, relocated, deported and ultimately killed. The goal of these actions was to kill the leadership of a widespread Armenian conspiracy against the Ottoman state, which historians later conclude did not even exist (Suny, 2015). This date is now also used to commemorate this genocide, it is called: 'Armenian genocide remembrance day'. After the events on 'Red Sunday' the systemic deportations of Armenians begun. Half a year later nearly 900.000 Armenians in total were sent on death marches into the Syrian Desert (Kevorkian, 2014). These people were deprived of food and water and often died along the way. Even if they did survive many of them were held in concentration camps near Aleppo. Reportedly they were moved from camp to camp, without food or water, until most of them perished (ibid.). In total between 1 and 1.5 million Armenian were either killed or deported into the Syrian and Iraqi desert. When they were deported into the desert most of them did not survive these death marches (ibid.). The numbers are a little bit unclear but according to the Armenian Patriarch there were approximately 2 million Armenians living in Western-Armenia, so in the Ottoman Empire, before 1915. In the end the Armenian genocide reduced the Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire with 90 percent (Suny, 2015).

The Survivors

The people that did survive these death marches, or fled from Western-Armenia before they were killed, are dispersed all over the world. Like I slightly touched upon in the beginning of this chapter there is a substantial Armenian Diaspora all over the world which consists of more people than currently live in the Armenian state itself. A substantial amount that survived the genocide, the death marches into Syria, settled in Syria itself. But also in nearby areas that now constitute for instance Israel, Jordan and Lebanon (Migliorino, 2008). That is the reason that Armenians made up for a total of 2 percent of the Syrian population in 2013, approximately 100.000 people (Shoup, 2018) and approximately 4 percent in Lebanon (Migliorino, 2008). In Syria they often lived in Armenian communities were they preserved much of their culture and most importantly their religion: Orthodox Christianity (Thomas et al., 2020). Therefore, the Armenians still see these people as their people who should be able or even should be supported to return to their historical motherland: Armenia. Of course for the Armenian the real historical motherland would also encompass parts of what is now Eastern-Turkey.

2.2.2: The Circassian Story

The Circassian story is different than the one of the Armenians. Although, it does have some similarities as well. The most important similarity is that both of the stories involve genocide and mass exile of the indigenous people. This subsequently resulted in a sizeable diaspora throughout the world, more importantly in Syria. At some point the two stories even intersect. The description of the Circassian will be somewhat shorter than the Armenian history I just described.

Etymology of the word Circassian

The Circassian people have a long history of being at war or under attack by other people or empires. The two most important and influential wars in the history of the Circassians are the war with the Mongols and the war with the Russians. In the 13th century they were almost completely destroyed and ultimately pushed further west by the Golden Horde of the Mongol Empire (Richmond, 2013). The Mongols referred to these people as *Jerkess*, which literally translates to 'those who blocked the path' (ibid.). This later was taken over by the Russian as *Cherkess* and ultimately it became internationally 'Circassian'. They don not refer to themselves as Circassian however, they refer to themselves as *Adyghe*. Note that my usage of the word Circassian is purely practical and it is in no way whatsoever politically motived or meant to offend the Adyghe people.

The History of the Circassians

The Circassian ethnic group is the overarching name of the people whose ancestors are the indigenous people of the North-West Caucasus. The Circassian people traditionally lived along the Black-Sea coast in the North-West Caucasus, close to the Crimean peninsula. The Northern-Caucasus was long divided into small tribes and so was Circassia. Circassia was never really one big state, but the Circassian people were spread over many different princedoms. Despite that, they regard themselves as one people.

Between 300 and 500 A.D. Christianity begun to spread in the Northern-Caucasus due to the rise of the Byzantine Empire (Minahan, 2000). The Circassians became to a large extend Christian while in the 17th and 18th century many of them were converted into the Islam (Shenfield, 1999). However, the Circassian people never became fully committed either one of these religions. They had their own religion called 'Adygage', which literally means 'to be Adyge' (ibid.). This religion consists basically out of knowledge and respect for the ancestors of the Circassians and the Circassian ancestral homeland (Richmond, 2013). To some extend they added some Islamic or Christian rituals to it, but the main part of their religion remained Adygage. In practice this meant that they organized their society by the practical manifestation of this religion, called 'Adyge Xabze'. This is a number of unwritten rules based on ancient Greek philosophy. In this form of their rule of law, social practices and sociality was the central point (ibid.).

The End of the Circassian State

Because of the strategic importance of the Black Sea shoreline that the Circassians inhabited the Russian Empire was long interested in conquering this region. The Empress of Russia at the time, Catherine the Great, first mentioned the interest in the conquering of Circassia in 1768 (Richmond, 2010). Early in the 19th century, Russia started the Caucasus campaign with the ultimate goal to conquer the whole of the Caucasus and the Northern coastline of the Black Sea.

Although it is very interesting to describe the whole history of nearly a century long during war for Circassia it would not help achieving the goal of the research. Most historians agree that the war lasted from 1768 until 1864. The final battles and conquest of the Russians in the North-Western Caucasus (Circassia) started in 1860 and lasted until 1864 (King, 2008). Ultimately, according to most historians, in 1864 the Circassian state was destroyed and every Circassian still alive was sent into exile into the Ottoman Empire (ibid.).

Genocide and Expulsion

During the 100 year war between Russia and Circassia the initial goal of the war was conquering the land (Jersild, 2002). The goal of the war became not only to conquer the land but also get the indigenous Circassians out of there, in other words to cleanse the land of Circassians (ibid.). The goal changed because of two interconnected reasons. The Russians had not expected the conquest of the Caucasus to take this long. The frustration of the Russians to not being able to conquer this land from what they saw as savages, lead them to commit war crimes and atrocities long before the end of the war (Richmond, 2010). This in turn made the Circassian and other Caucasus commanders even more resilient and convinced to fight until the last man (ibid.). Due to the Russian war crimes the inhabitants of the Caucasus became even more convinced of their own right and this made diplomacy impossible.

And so, the Russian started to see the Circassians as enemies and as a threat to the Russian Empire. The conquering of Circassian land was not to replace these people with productive farmers like the Russian Empire did in some other places during that time. The expulsion and ethnic cleansing of these people from their homeland became a goal in itself (Jersild, 2002). The numbers differ according to various sources but in the end between 800.000 and 1.500.000 Circassians were killed (Richmond, 2010). And even more were exiled into the Ottoman Empire (ibid.). Figures again differ between sources, but estimations say that in the Circassian Genocide 75-90% of the Circassian people were annihilated (Richmond, 2010). The rest was exiled on boats mainly towards the Balkans and Turkey, both were part of the Ottoman Empire at that time. Among this exiled Circassians were many Abkhaz people. Especially Abkhazians that were converted to Islam were not welcome in the Russian Empire. In this process Abkhazia lost 60 percent of its indigenous population, most of them were resettled in the Ottoman Empire (Chirikba, 2003).

The Survivors

The story of the survivors has two sides that both need to be discussed. All the exiled Circassians were sent to the Ottoman Empire but these Circassians were placed in different parts of the Ottoman Empire. Two places where they were placed are relevant for this research. Firstly, many Circassians were settled in Eastern-Anatolia, what now constitutes Turkey. Secondly, many of them were sent to the Balkans, what at the time also was part of the Ottoman Empire.

The Ottomans regarded the Circassian, mostly the Adyghe, as experienced and hardened fighters. So they placed many of them in Eastern-Anatolia, where they were fighting a war against the Russian Empire (Hamed-Troyanski, 2018). This is where the Circassian and the Armenian story intersect. Because, as I described at that time Eastern-Anatolia (or *Western Armenia)* was predominantly inhabited by Armenians. Moreover, as I also described in the last paragraph, at that time Armenians were put out of their houses to make place for Muslim refugees (Astourian, 2011). Many of these Muslim refugees were actually Circassian refugees who were placed on the lands of Armenians.

The second group of people were initially sent to the Balkans. It was a tactic of the Ottoman government to place these Muslim people in places were the local people, mostly Christians, were rallying against the Ottoman Empire (Gammer, 2002). So that they would fight each other instead of fight together against the Ottoman Empire. However, this resettlement of the Circassians did not last long. As in the 1870's the Russians were also fighting the Ottomans in the Balkans and the Circassians were driven out of their homes once again (Richmond, 2010). So the Circassians residing in the Balkans were forced to flee even further into the Middle-East. Finally many of them ended up in Syria, predominantly in the Golan Heights and other Southern provinces of Syria (Gammer, 2002).

Chapter 3: Gathering of Data

In the foregoing chapters I have extensively explained the needed background information for this research. All this background and historical context is needed to understand the rest of this research. In this chapter I will gather evidence that can help me answer my research question. Like I have explained in the *Research Method* paragraph, the method that I will use is triangulation. Mainly because it is a fairly broad question and the research will be inductive. The next logical step after the background is to gather information, or data, to construct an answer to the sub question and main research question. All the sources I will consult in this chapter will serve to construct a comprehensive answer to these questions. In this chapter the data I will gather is important for the explanation that will be presented in chapter 5. In the next chapter a critical analysis of this data will follow. It is important to keep the question in mind so that it is clear why I am discussing certain topics.

Therefore, the first thing I will do in this chapter is shortly re-introduce the research question and the way this question and the sub question came about. I think it is useful to concisely repeat this, before we dive into the analysis. Thereafter, I will discuss a theory (Ethnogeopolitics) that can be one of the building blocks for answering the question or at least the sub question. As this theory very closely ties in with the sub question I posed for this research. After introducing this theory I will gather pieces of evidence that possibly can connect the theory to what has happened and what is happening on the ground in Artsakh. I will end this chapter with a short summary of the information that I have gathered.

3.1: The Research Questions

This chapter will merely serve to discuss the building blocks to answer the question. Therefore, in this chapter it is quintessentially important to keep in mind the research question, which is posed in the introduction as follows:

How can we explain the Armenian position and policy with regard to Syrian refugees?

This question followed out of the, at least, remarkable stance of Armenia regarding the acceptance and hosting of refugees from Syria, as opposed to for instance European Union member states. While most affluent EU member states are reluctant to host any amount of refugees, the relatively poor state of Armenia is less withholding with the acceptance of refugees. While all EU member states as well as Armenia have signed the refugee treaty of 1951. As I examined shortly in the introduction Armenia, as opposed to the EU, is welcoming refugees with open arms. In this research, as stated before, I will try to uncover the underlying reason(s) behind the Armenian refugee policy.

Two intertwining factors that are important to immediately discuss are Syrian-Armenians and the Karabakh conflict because they will lead me to the sub-question. The first factor is the fact that Armenia is almost exclusively taking in Syrian-Armenian refugees, thus Syrians that have Armenian ancestors. These people are by Armenia seen as culturally and ethnically Armenian. The second factor that is important, is the long lingering territorial conflict that Armenia and Azerbaijan have over the territory

of Nagorno-Karabakh which has been explained in the previous chapters. Specifically in terms of demographics this could play an important role because Azerbaijan accuses Armenia to actively resettle these Syrian-Armenian refugees in, as they call it, 'the occupied Azerbaijani territories'. Azerbaijan argues that Armenia uses the Syrian refugees to repopulate these regions and subsequently positively influence the demographic make-up in Karabakh in favor of the Armenian population. These two factors have lead me to the following sub question:

How can we explain the Armenian refugee policy towards Syrian-Armenians in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict?

If Azerbaijan's accusations are true this is a striking case of strategic ethnogeopolitical practice. This encompasses a policy in which an institution (such as a government) uses ethnicity (or an ethnic group) as an instrument often in order to gain a strategic advantage. This classification comes out of the ethnogeopolitical theory which will be discussed in the next paragraph. Of course for me it will be very hard, if not impossible, to prove this accusation. Especially, because I am writing this research in the Netherlands, far from the place this policy might be carried out. If this is happening Armenia would never be very open about this, as this would trouble diplomatic relations with their allies and even more so with Azerbaijan.

To be clear the goal of this research is not to prove or disprove these allegations. That goal would be too ambitious for this research, as it would be nearly impossible to find hard evidence for such policy, especially because I cannot carry out research in Armenia. The goal of this thesis will be, through inductive research, to see if there are enough grounds and data to construct a plausible case if this is happening or not. To analyze if the ethnogeopolitical theory is applicable in this situation, I will first broadly set out what this ethnogeopolitical theory encompasses and what it will mean for this research. Thereafter I will set out the gathered data about Lebanese and Syrian-Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh. In the next chapter I will critically analyze the gathered data in order to answer the research question.

3.2: Geopolitics & Ethnogeopolitics

The theory, that will be one of the tools which I use to review the Armenian border policy, is called ethnogeopolitics. This is a theory that discuss geopolitics with, as the name suggests, an emphasis on the ethnic (and cultural) component (Rezvani, 2019). Before I will further explain the theory and practice of ethnogeopolitics its first and foremost important to introduce and discuss the term geopolitics itself, as ethnogeopolitics is a subdiscipline of this.

Geopolitics

It would not be in service of this research to go fully in depth on the whole geopolitical debate. Geopolitics is a term that is very hard, if not impossible, to define precisely. The reason for this is that geopolitics is first of all a widely researched concept in different academic fields such as: Human Geography, Political Science, Economics and even History (Mamadouh, 1998). However, there is not

a clear cut definition or a broad consensus about what it exactly entails in any of these particular fields (Agnew, 2003). So only in any of these different academic fields the meaning of this concept would be different. Moreover, not only in the academic field geopolitics is widely represented but also the term has become important among politicians, diplomats, military experts and journalists (Mamadouh, 1998; Tuathail, 2006). The point that I want to make here is that 'geopolitics' is a highly contested concept. The same goes for ethnogeopolitics, because this is an subdiscipline of geopolitics, so the definition of ethnogeopolitics is connected to the definition of geopolitics that one uses (Rezvani, 2019). As Rezvani & Gonzalez wrote in 2018: *'' There is no general consensus on the definitions of geopolitics and ethnopolitics, and hence ethnogeopolitics also cannot be easily or non-controversially defined''* (Rezvani & Gonzalez, 2018: p. 9).

Ethnogeopolitics

The notion that there is not a clear cut consensual definition of the concept does of course not mean that this perspective cannot yield useful information or insights for this research. I will hereafter distinguish between two usages of ethnogeopolitics and then the theorization of the concept. Furthermore, I will explain why this particular theoretical perspective is useful in my research.

The first important remark I need to make about ethnogeopolitics is the distinction between ethnogeopolitical practice and the study of ethnogeopolitics (Rezvani, 2018). Under ethnogeopolitical practice fall ethnogeopolitical policies, such as forced migrations and forced resettlement of populations (ibid.). Examples of these policies are found in the history of the Circassian (and Armenian) people, as described in Chapter 2. In the case of the Circassians both of these ethnogeopolitical practices were carried out subsequently by the Russian and Ottoman empire. Circassians were first expelled by the Russian Empire which is forced migration (Richmond, 2010). Many of them were brought to the Ottoman empire, were they were strategically settled in Eastern Anatolia, the battlefront with Russia, this would be forced resettlement (Hamed-Troyanski, 2018). The study of ethnogeopolitics is the (academic) research of such ethnogeopolitical polices, which is mostly reflective of and critical onthese policies (Rezvani, 2018). The thesis you are reading now is an example of such a study of ethnogeopolitics. This distinction can also be described, as discussed by Tuathial (2006), ethnogeopolitics for scholars and for practitioners. The scholars are in that case the ones wo are studying the practices carried out by the practitioners. Although these distinctions might be blurry or overlapping sometimes (ibid.). For example a scholar can be a member of a think tank that makes policy, or works on certain policies (Rezvani, 2019: Mamadouh, 1998). There is also the example of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, which is a scholar of ethnogeopolitics and a high-level political strategist of the Kremlin at the same time (Bassin, 2009; see also Zhirinovsky, 1998).

This last example is part of the reason why I think ethnogeopolitics can yield useful insights for this research. Not because this specific author also has a political function in Russia but because the majority of studies about ethnogeopolitical theory are about policy making, in either the Tsarist Russian Empire,

the Soviet-Union or Post-Soviet Russia. Not to say it is a Russian invention per se (Rezvani, 2019), however there are many examples of Russian practices of ethnogeopolitics (Bassin, 2009). These numerous examples are the reason why most of the theorization of the ethnogeopolitical theory comes out of Russian history. Even more strikingly there are multiple examples of Russian ethnogeopolitical practices and theorization for both regions that are of interest for this research. These ethnogeopolitical practices of Russia all contribute to the complexity of the contemporary situation in the Southern-Caucasus, especially in Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh. These complexities have all been discussed before in chapter 1 & 2.

I will give such an example of ethnogeopolitical practice in each of the last three forms that Russia has existed in: The Tsarist Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and Post-Soviet Russia. With these examples I will show how omnipresent the Russian ethnogeopolitical influence in the history of my area of interest is. The first example is the expulsion of Circassians out of the Tsarist Russian Empire I mentioned here before, which is extensively discussed in Chapter 2 (Rezvani, 2018; Richmond, 2010). Furthermore, there is the Bolshevik decision to place the Nagorno-Karabakh oblast under the control of the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan, as explained in Chapter 1 & 2 (De Waal, 2003). In the Post-Soviet time there are articles of Bassin (2009) and Gulina (2019), the latter calling ethnogeopolitical practice by (Post) Soviet Russia strikingly: '' *Migration Management as a Geopolitical Tool''* (Gulina, 2019: p. 29). An example of a Post-Soviet ethnogeopolitical practice is the support for the Abkhazian and South-Ossetian secession from Georgia and the subsequent ethnic cleansing of Georgians out of these regions (Tarkhan-Mouravi & Sumbadze, 2006).

Most of the early authors about ethnogeopolitics are Russian (See for example: Boroday, 1995; Gumilev, 1989; 1990; 1993, Zhirinovskiy, 1998). Ethnogeopolitical theory puts focus on the ethnic component, on the international, national and regional level (Rezvani, 2019). The theory suggests that *''ethnicity—in all of its various manifestations—represents the most fundamental force driving the political life of the 21st century''* (Bassin, 2009: p. 133). Ethnogeopolitical authors in the mid 1990's, when it first really came to the fore, argued that the traditional geopolitical discourse was putting too much emphasis on the geographical boundaries (borders) of (nation) states (Bassin, 2009). Ethnogeopolitical authors claimed that it was an: '*' uncontroversial fact that the boundaries of ethnic homelands almost never coincide with those of political states ''* (ibid. p. 134). So the central point is something called *ethnography*, instead of as in traditional geopolitics where the focus was on geography and political statehood (Boroday, 1995). This notion ties in with the debatable borders of Nagorno-Karabakh I described (see paragraph 1.3.1). Here I stated that the righteousness of borders does not always (if ever) precede the lawfulness of a border. In the ethnogeopolitical discourse they agree with this statement because they state that ethnic divisions should override the focus on territorial integrity and internationally recognized borders which t is found in the classical geopolitical discourse (Bassin, 2009). It directs its interest to the behaviour of ethnic groups (*ethnosy)* rather than nation-states and studies

poly-ethnic spaces rather than international relations (Smirnov, 1998). What Smirnov (1998) means with this statement is basically again stressing the importance of ethnic components in the geopolitical realm. Borders do not take the multiple ethnicities into account that are divided by such a border, therefore the theory focusses on the poly-ethnicity of these spaces (ibid.). Moreover, ethnogeopolitics ‘’*sees conflict as based not on ideological or traditional geopolitical considerations but rather on ethnic biases that are inherent to the countries and groups involved’’* (Bassin, 2009: p. 145). That coincides with the conflictual situation in the South Caucasus, were the conflict around Abkhazia and Artsakh are both deeply rooted in the ethnic composition of the regions (explained in chapter 1 and 2). Just like ethnogeopolitical theory explains, the driving factors of geopolitics in the South-Caucasus are not nation-states, because Abkhazia and Artsakh are not even nation-states. But both these states make their claim to legitimacy on deeply rooted ethnic grounds. Just as in the ethnogeopolitical theory the concept of ethnicity, according to Artsakh and Abkhazia, overrides the concept of internationally recognized borders of nation states.

In conclusion, the critical component regarding (internationally) recognized borders, and nation states, combined with the emphasis on ethnicity makes the ethnogeopolitical discourse a good point of view to review the situation in the South-Caucasus. This critical stance on borders and nation-states makes the ethnogeopolitical theory interesting for my research. As I extensively explained in the first chapter, the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh as well as in Abkhazia first and foremost revolves around borders and ethnicity. On top of that the theory is largely rooted in Russian politics which is important for this research. The ethnogeopolitical practice, carried out by Russia, largely shaped the contemporary political situation in the South-Caucasus and the adhering conflicts around Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia.

3.3: Ethnogeopolitical evidence?

In this paragraph I will start presenting evidence that might contribute to a plausible case that Artsakh and Armenia are carrying out such a ethnogeopolitical practice. To be clear I will merely present some developments, policies and news reports here. The critical analysis of these data will follow in the next chapter.

3.3.1: Artsakh Encouragement Policy

In 2003 the Government of Nagorno-Karabakh (at that time the official name was still Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, (or NKR for short) launched a program to encourage people to (re)settle in the Nagorno-Karabakh region (NKR Government, 2021[2]). A program that was available for so called ‘resettlers’. The NKR government defines ‘resettlers’ as people from the other parts of the State of

[2] This information is publicly available, on the NKR governments’ website, albeit only in the Armenian language. One of my Armenian interviewees has been so kind to translate this for me (I. Manukyan, Personal Communication, August 27, 2020).

Armenia who express readiness to establish permanent residence in the Nagorno-Karabakh republic (ibid.). Moreover, resettlers are not only people from other parts of Armenia but from any other country. As long as they are ready to establish permanent residence in the NKR they are welcome to apply for this program. So this will be predominantly be people with Armenian heritage but heritage or an Armenian passport is not necessary.

This encouragement program encompasses different things to convince people to move to Nagorno-Karabakh. For the travel from Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh the travel expenses are covered. Free housing was provided for families that consisted out of two or more members. And the first 5 years of residence they are granted exemption of utility bills, in other words they do not have to pay for rent, water, sewage, and land taxes (ibid.). Moreover, in terms of financial support there are even more incentives in place. There is travel reimbursement for every people that resettles, a sum of money that equates the yearly minimum wage and every household gets 0.6 hectares of land with the right of permanent use (ibid.). To summarize, these people were granted free property, a quite large sum of money and a job opportunity to work on the land, in exchange for settling in Nagorno-Karabakh. Important to make clear here is the fact that this program has been in place since 2003. So, this is not a new phenomenon. What is nevertheless striking is that these 'resettlers', as I described above, do not even need an Armenian passport to apply for this program. So, for people from outside of Armenia it does not even take an extra step and it is the same procedure as for Armenian citizens.

According to my source, who is an advisor to the Artsakh Republics' president on international relations, the program has yielded positive effects. As she said '*the programs have largely justified themselves, otherwise the flow of applicants for housing would have stopped'*. (N. Baghdassaryan, personal communication, 26-09-2020). So, as of September 2020, the program was still in place, and the people were still making active use of this program according to the advisor of the President of Artsakh.

3.3.2: Lebanese Resettlers

Like I described in first two chapters the Armenian diaspora was dispersed all over the world but predominantly represented in the Middle-East, mainly in Syria and Lebanon. For this paragraph the latter state is of importance. On the 4th of August 2020 in Beirut, Lebanon there was a big explosion of stored Ammonium nitrate which caused the death of at least 200 people and injured over 7.000 more (BBC, 2020c). Moreover, it left approximately 300.000 people homeless (Mejlumyan, 2020). In short this was a humanitarian disaster for all people in Lebanon. Of course the relevance for this research is confined to the Lebanese with Armenian heritage, in other words Lebanese-Armenians.

A day after the blast, on the 5th of August, Armenia immediately offered humanitarian aid as well as an offer to resettle Lebanese-Armenians in Armenia proper (ibid.). At the same time the president of Artsakh: Arayik Harutyunyan, had issued a statement that Artsakh is ready to receive 150 Lebanese-Armenians and resettle them on their land (Elliot, 2020). Also housing, jobs and other social guarantees

are ensured for these people. The budget for this came from different parts of the Artsakh government (Ghazanchyan, 2020). At the end of August, two of these families were resettled in Artsakh and the President of Artsakh stated that they were ready to resettle nine more Lebanese-Armenian families. Less than a month after the blast, on September 3rd, Armenia proper had received over 1.100 Lebanese-Armenians (Mejlumyan, 2020). Of which eleven families, and a lot more people without families, settled in Artsakh. According to my source in Armenia[3] there were about 100 Lebanese-Armenians who have resettled in Artsakh in the end (A. Yevstratov Personal Communication, 04-11-2020). The goal as stated by the ministry of Diaspora Affairs in Armenia was to accommodate for the arrival of 5.000 Lebanese-Armenians in total (Martyros, 2020). This plan was halted, mainly because of the outbreak of the Second-Karabakh war in the fall of 2020 (Petrossian, 2020).

This resettlement resembles the case in question of this research. The Armenian and Azerbaijani account are also in this case diagonally opposed, just as is the case regarding the Syrian-Armenians that sought refuge in Armenia. Armenia and Artsakh stated that they are merely offering humanitarian aid and a chance for Armenian people to live in their ancestral motherland (ibid; N. Baghdassaryan, 26-09-2020). Azerbaijan claims that this resettlement is highly politically motivated (Mammadov, 2020). Despite these resemblances there are however a couple of big differences with the case of the Syrian-Armenians. The first difference in the case of the Lebanese-Armenians is that it happened in one moment and the biggest amount of people came within one month (Meljumyan, 2020). Whereas in the case of the Syrian-Armenians the refugees came more gradually over a longer time. Secondly, the Armenian government in this case did actively took action to help the Lebanese-Armenians and offered help to those who want to repatriate to Armenia. They chartered flights from Beirut to Yerevan, despite the COVID-19 restrictions in both countries that were previously preventing people from flying (Sahakian, 2020). The third, and possibly the most important, difference is that the Artsakh government actively and openly plays a role in the resettlement in Artsakh itself. The president of the region issued a statement in the media, urging Lebanese-Armenians to resettle in their historical motherland, with which he meant Artsakh (Ghazanchyan, 2020). This openness about the resettlement and active role for the Artsakh government has not been there for the Syrian-Armenians.

3.3.3: Syrian-Armenians in Artsakh and adjacent regions

I have found different news articles, both Armenian and Azerbaijani, of Syrian-Armenian families that settled in Artsakh and its adjacent regions over the past decade. The numbers of Syrian refugees in Artsakh differ very much. The Armenian government is not clear on these numbers, the Artsakh government is not clear about either. So, I need to follow the data that is provided by the Azerbaijani

[3] I had contact with an Armenian free-lance war journalist (A. Yevstratov Personal Communication, 04-11-2020).

government, Armenian and independent news articles and the information I gathered from my interviewees.

The earliest account, in 2013, about Syrian repatriates that found a new home in one of the adjacent regions of Nagorno-Karabakh, called Kashatagh in Armenian. This article I found on Eurasianet, this is a United States' news station which reports news about Central-Asia, it is largely considered as an independent source of information (Crumlish, 2004). Kashatagh is one of the adjacent regions of Karabakh, lying to the South-West of Nagorno-Karabakh itself. It is not an integral part of the Karabakh region. However, since the Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1993-1994, it has been under control of Armenia (Yavuz & Huseynov, 2020). All the Azerbaijani inhabitants of that region were driven out. In contrary to the Nagorno-Karabakh itself, in this Kashatagh region the majority of the people were Azeri (ibid.). So the majority of the inhabitants were forced to leave during and after the first-Karabakh war. Therefore, the region is not densely populated since that time, the Article stated the following:

'*Since early 2012, Armenia has been accepting diaspora members seeking to escape Syria's civil strife. In recent months, 29 refugee families, roughly 90 people overall, have found new homes in what Armenians call the Kashatagh district'* (Eurasianet, 2013).

Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent territories (Newswire.com, 2020).

All the adjacent regions of Nagorno-Karabakh are depicted in orange in the map above. All these territories are not part of Nagorno-Karabakh but they have been under Armenian control since 1994 (Yavuz & Huseynov, 2020). One of these regions is Kashatagh. Important to know is that most of these regions are back under control of Azerbaijan after the 2020 war. You can see this if you compare this map with map 6 which is depicted in paragraph 1.1.

It is hard to exactly pinpoint the role of the Armenian government in this settlement of Syrian refugees in these districts, apart from the support program I described in paragraph 3.3.1 which is largely run by the NKR government. However, what is clear is that there are (non-governmental) organizations that

play an active role in the (re) population of these regions. One example is the Tufenkian foundation, an Armenian social justice foundation. They also work on projects in Nagorno-Karabakh and the adjacent regions which connect Armenia with Nagorno-Karabakh. They state one of their goals on their website:

''Resettlement plays a vital role for the future of Artsakh, as the liberated territories remain lightly uninhabited despite the massive agricultural and economic potential of the region. To date, we have built or renovated dozens of houses for resettling families in Kashatagh, both native to Armenia as well as refugees from Syria and elsewhere'' (Tufenkian Foundation, n.d.).

I have decided to use this quote here, because within this piece of text quite a few things about the resettlement policy can be unravelled. There are a few very interesting parts in this quote which need to be discussed. With the *'liberated territories'* they mean the adjacent regions which were in their eyes liberated from Azerbaijan in the first-Karabakh war. The Azerbaijani call these adjacent regions the 'occupied territories' (Pashayeva, 2020). This region was during the time Armenia controlled it *'lightly inhabited',* the majority of the people that lived in the adjacent regions before the 1992-1993 war were not Armenian. The inhabitants of these adjacent regions were predominantly Azeri, Kurdish or Russian (De Waal, 2013). During the war these people (non-Armenians) were all expelled from these regions. More than 500.000 Azeri people are internally displaced (IDP's) within Azerbaijan following the war (IDMC, 2014). Most of these people have fled from the adjacent regions rather than from Nagorno-Karabakh itself (De Waal, 2013). That is the reason that these places were lightly inhabited. The light inhabitation is the reason why the Tufenkian foundation wants to resettle people there. The choice to resettle people in this particular region can be considered strategical. Another thing out of this quote that is important is the following: '*despite the massive agricultural and economic potential'*. Like I said, ethnogeopolitical practice can have multiple reasons, for example economic. In this case it is literally stated by a foundation that is settling people in this area that the reason is among others economic. This of course does not mean the reason is solely economic but it is at least part of the reason for the resettlement. Also the last sentence of this quote is important: *both native to Armenia as well as refugees from Syria and elsewhere.* This reiterates the policy of Nagorno-Karabakh to resettle people with Armenian roots but they do not need an Armenian passport to resettle. To summarize the reasons that the Tufenkian foundation gives for resettlement of people here are economic (agriculture) and strategic (population).

Another district that Azerbaijan gained back after the 2020 war is the district of Zengilan (Zəngilan in Azeri), also located South-West of the Nagorno-Karabakh region. This was one of these lightly inhabited territories. I will use numbers from a Soviet-Census to illustrate exactly how lightly inhabited these regions became after the First Karabakh War. In the Zengilan District, in a census conducted by the Soviet-Union, only 0.1 % of the inhabitants were Armenian (EthnoCaucasus, N.D.). The majority of the people in the Zengilan district were Azeri (97.6%), Russian (2 %) or members of other ethnic groups

such as Tatar and Georgian (ibid.). So, in the Zengilan District, over 99 percent of the inhabitants were driven out by the Armenian Army during and after the first-Karabakh war (De Waal, 2013). In 2020, after Azerbaijan reclaimed this region, they immediately reported that around 60 Syrian-Armenian families were relocated to Zengilan district as part of Armenia's illegal resettlement (DefenceAZ, 2020). They published this along with a list of names and copies of some of their passports. This accusation of Azerbaijan of resettlement of Syrian-Armenian refugees seems to be true. I found an Armenian news article stating that the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) donated farming tools such as tractors to Syrian-Armenian farmers in the Zengilan district (ArmeniaNow, 2013). These two sources, combined with the light inhabitation, makes this a likely place for resettlement. However, the AGBU is a (non-governmental) non-profit organization located in the United States, so still the role of the Armenian government remains unclear.

The Zengilan District (Wikipedia, 2021).

3.4: Most Similar Case of Abkhazia

A part of my analysis will be dedicated to the case of Abkhazia. As I have pointed out multiple times before the case of Abkhazia is very similar to that of the Artsakh region. In this paragraph I will first shortly summarize these similarities which are already extensively explained in the first two chapters. For the clarity, and to have an overview, I think it is useful to concisely summarize these similarities again here. Thereafter I will, as I did for the Artsakh case, describe some data that could contribute to the plausibility of ethnogeopolitical practice in the Abkhazian case.

3.4.1: Similarities between Abkhazia and Artsakh

Both states are self-declared independent states, located in the South-Caucasus, with very limited international recognition. Although Abkhazia has a little bit more international recognition than Artsakh. Abkhazia is recognized by 6 U.N. member states, the most important one being Russia (Lomsadze, 2018), whereas Artsakh is not recognized by any U.N. member state, including Armenia (Sassounian, 2020). Both these self-declared states are entangled in a conflict with another state over their territory. In the case of Abkhazia the adversary in the conflict is Georgia. Georgia, along with the majority of the international community, regards the lands than entail Abkhazia to be an integral part of Georgia. Their account is that Abkhazia, by seceding and declaring independence, is violating the internationally recognized borders of Georgia (territorial integrity). This argument is directly opposed to the Abkhazian

argument which is based on the freedom of people to choose their own government (right to self-determination). Both of these arguments are enshrined in the United Nations Charter and in both the Artsakh and the Abkhazian case these two articles stand directly opposed to each other.

The second important similarity is that, due to their tragic history, the people of both states have a quite substantial diaspora over the whole world, but predominantly in the Middle-East. The Circassians and Abkhaz were killed or exiled out of their 'ancestral homeland' by the Tsarist Russian Empire in the 19th century. Their ancestral homeland is basically the whole North-West Caucasus region and the South-Caucasus region of Akbhazia. The Armenians were killed and exiled out of their ancestral homeland by the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century (Suny, 2015). The region the Armenians were driven out of nowadays constitutes Eastern-Turkey (ibid.). Both these groups of people have partially settled in the area that now constitutes Syria (Shoup, 2018). For roughly the last one and a half century these people lived here (Gammer, 2002; Shoup, 2018). Due to the civil war in Syria, which is well into its tenth year now, many of the inhabitants of Syria have fled the country to seek refugee somewhere else (UNHCR, 2021) A part of them are returning to their 'historical motherland', from which their ancestors had to flee from in the first place, back to Abkhazia and Artsakh (Hayrapetyan, 2020; Melnikov, 2013).

3.4.2: Ethnogeopolitics in Abkhazia?

Before I start describing the case in Abkhazia I first need to make clear that there is one big difference regarding politics between Abkhazia and Artsakh, especially when we talk about international politics. The important difference being that Abkhazia is openly backed by Russia, which is as I described in paragraph 1.6 a decisive geopolitical actor in this region. Being backed by Russia Abkhazia is able to be more open about their policy. The information about their (international) politics is more widely available on the internet and people were less reluctant to be interviewed by me.

As said Abkhazia is quite open about their international policy, also regarding repatriation. Since 1993 Abkhazia has had a political committee in the government that is dedicated to repatriate people from the Abkhazian diaspora (Ardzinba, 2019). As of 2019 this committee evolved into a ministry within the government called *The Ministry of Demography and Repatriation*. It is actually a policy goal of the government to enlarge the population as the deputy chairman of the repatriation committee told me (A. Bagatellia, personal communication 15-10-2020). Repatriation, according to him, is playing an important role in the population growth. Also they give financial support to families that have 3 or more children (ibid.). Between 1993 and 2018 around 10.000 people have been relocated in Abkhazia by the committee of repatriation (Ardzinba, 2019). How many of these people are living permanently in Abkhazia is another case because some of them only live in Abkhazia for a part of the year (D. Başol, personal communication, 28-09-2020).

In 2013, the Abkhazian government brought approximately 500 Syrians from Abkhaz and Circassian descend into Abkhazia. (Kuprashvili & Arshba, 2013). This was called a humanitarian corridor and the

goal was to repatriate ethnic Abkhaz and Circassian people that fled from the war in Syria. The government chartered two planes from Damascus to Sochi (located in what used to be Circassia), from there the people were transported with busses to Sukhumi, the capital of Abkhazia (ibid.). They stayed in hotels until housing was provided by the committee of repatriation. The resettlement policy in Abkhazia shows resemblance with the support program in Artsakh. The ministry provides the repatriates with permanent residence, a house or an apartment. They either get a house from the government for free or the government pays for their rent. Furthermore, they pay the tuition for them if they are eligible to go to the Abkhazian University (Anonymous repatriate, personal communication, 4-12-2020), and they attempt to provide jobs for them (Pender & Aedy, 2017). In the end, according to the Ministry of Repatration, a total of 800 Syrians with Abkhaz or Circassian roots were repatriated in Abkhazia (A. Bagatellia, personal communication 15-10-2020). The numbers differ, between my interviewees, on how many have stayed permanently in Abkhazia. I think my anonymous source from an NGO in Abkhazia is the most trustworthy, as he works for an international NGO his estimation will be more neutral. He estimated that around 500 repatriates from Syria have stayed (Anonymous source International NGO, Personal communication. 27-10-2020)

When violence broke out in the Eastern-Ukrainian provinces of Luhansk and Donetsk in 2014, quite some families fled to Abkhazia (ibid.). Although a lot of them did not have Abkhazian roots, these families were welcomed by the government (Borovikova, 2020). In 2015 there were 205 families from Ukraine in Abkhazia, most of them left Abkhazia after Russia granted these people Russian passports (ibid.). As far as I could find the government of Abkhazia did not play an active role in this. Even if only a few of these families finally stayed in Abkhazia it means a growth in population which is exactly what the state is aiming for.

One of my interviewees, who worked for several NGO's in the region and the Abkhazian presidency on the subject of repatriation, said that he thought that the governments' reasons for their political aim to enlarge the population are threefold (D. Başol, Personal Communication, 28-09-2020). Firstly, the international recognition, as Abkhazia is currently recognized by 6 U.N. members. Recognizing Abkhazia's independence would effectively mean breaking the ties with Georgia, which happened most recently when Syria decided to recognize Abkhazia. Georgia immediately cut all the bilateral agreements they had with Syria (Lambert, 2020). The bigger the population the more sense it would make to recognize Abkhazia was the opinion of my interviewee. I think in the most basic sense this is true but in the numbers Abkhazia's population is growing this is going to have little to no effect. The second reason for Abkhazia's aim to achieve a growth in population is economic. According to two of the aforementioned Abkhazian sources I spoke with (Başol, and the NGO employee), in the region there is ample opportunity to make a living on farming because there is a lot of fertile ground. Moreover, Abkhazia has the space to house many more people than there live now. More people coming in to Abkhazia, that also integrate into society, would really boost the economy is the general idea of my

interviewees. The third and last reason is demographic. At the last official census in 2013 the states' population was 235.000 of which approximately half of the people was Abkhaz (Abkhazian Government, 2013). The rest of the demography is mainly made up of Georgians, Armenians and Russians. According to multiple sources I talked to the Abkhazian government would want to repatriate more ethnic Abkhaz (and Circassian people) in order to increase the percentage of Abkhaz people (Anonymous Source[4], personal communication, 3-11-2020). The idea is when only slightly less than half of the population is Abkhaz you cannot really call it an Abkhazian state (D. Başol, Personal Communication, 28-09-2020: Anonymous source in International NGO, personal communication, 27-10-2020).

3.5: Short Summary of the Gathered Evidence

In this chapter I have first re introduced the research question and sub question. Thereafter I explained what Geopolitics and ethnogeopolitics is. Subsequently I have shown some policies that the Artsakh state have implemented. It seems that the following policies are aimed at growth in population. A support program for everyone who is willing to permanently resettle in the Artsakh state or any of the adjacent regions. Furthermore, the Armenian and Artsakh state acted quickly to assist the Lebanese-Armenians that became victim of the Beirut port explosion. Many people were evacuated and offered to live in Armenia and the Artsakh president immediately stated that they were ready to assist 150 families to resettle in Artsakh. Thirdly, I explained the projects of Non-Governmental agencies together with the Artsakh government, to resettle Syrian-Armenians in the Artsakh region. All these three paragraphs could be evidence of efforts of ethnogeopolitical practice (policy), however in all these projects and efforts the role of the Armenian government remains unclear. My research question is about the Armenian border policy. The role of Armenia is not as open as the role of the Abkhazian government.

Then I turned to the most similar case, Abkhazia. I have described the policies of Abkhazia. Where possible I have connected the information I gathered in interviews with news articles and other documents. In the Abkhazian case I could count on more evidence, first and foremost from my interviewees who were easier to find and more open and eager to talk. Moreover, also the government itself is overall more open about their policy. Where Artsakh lacks the international recognition even from their closest ally Armenia, Abkhazia is backed by Russia, probably the biggest external actor in the region. I have presented evidence from different sources that Abkhazia has a political aim or at least the ambition to enlarge its population. What this similar case and the information about Armenian policy can contribute to the answer of the research question will be critically evaluated in the next chapter.

[4] This anonymous source has worked for the Abkhaz Government.

Chapter 4: Critical Analysis

In this chapter I will critically analyze the situation in Armenia and Artsakh with a special focus on the Armenian border policy. In the foregoing chapters I have presented an extensive background for this analysis. In the introduction I have introduced the topic and the region and how I came to the research question. The research question and sub question are posed there, as well as the triangulation method that I have used in this research. In the following two chapters I have extensively explained the situation in the South-Caucasus, first I have described all the needed background information about the conflicts in the region, mapping and the location in a literal geographical sense and the place in a figurative geopolitical sense (Chapter 1). Thereafter, in Chapter 2 I have extensively discussed the history of the Armenian as well as the Circassian people. The Armenian people because they are the subject of interest and the Circassian because they are the inhabitants of Abkhazia which will be used as a similar case. And Abkhazia will used as a similar case which is one of the tools of triangulation. In the foregoing chapter I have explained the theory of ethnogeopolitics and tried to describe policies in Artsakh and Armenia which could possibly be regarded as a practice of ethnogeopolitics.

In this chapter I will critically analyze the gathered information discussed in chapter 3. Furthermore, this chapter will extensively analyze the needed information to answer the sub question. This sub question is needed in order to be able to answer the research question in Chapter 5 (Conclusion), this main research question is:

How can we explain the Armenian position and policy with regard to Syrian refugees?

The sub question is posed as follows:

Can we explain the Armenian refugee policy towards Syrian-Armenians in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict?

Basically, the sub question uses the ethnogeopolitical theory to analyze if this theory can help explain the Armenian policy with regard to Syrian-Armenians. In order to answer this question I will first set out the official stance of Armenia with regard to Artsakh and their refugee policy and I will oppose this to the official standpoint of Azerbaijan. Thereafter, I will critically analyze the situation in Abkhazia with regard to their stance on (Syrian) refugees, as a similar case study. Most of this information has already been presented in the previous chapter, so in this chapter I will critically analyze this information. I will analyze if Abkhazian case learns us anything we can use in the case of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Then I will discuss the policies of the Artsakh republic and try to connect them to the ethnogeopolitical theory. In the last part of this chapter I will extensively discuss the role of Armenia. In this last chapter I will first I will critically analyze the official Armenian stance on Artsakh. Thereafter how these two political entities are intertwined. The political relations of Armenia and Artsakh will be the main subject of this part of the analysis.

4.1: Official Stance of Azerbaijan & Armenia

In this paragraph I will describe the official stance of both of the adversaries in the conflict about Nagorno-Karabakh, border policy and Syrian-Armenian refugees. I will start with Armenia and thereafter describe the stance of Azerbaijan on these topics. Keep in mind that this is merely a presentation of the official stances of the two states, I will critically reflect on these two opposing accounts later in this chapter.

Armenia

First and foremost it is important to note that not a single United Nations member state, including Armenia, recognizes the legitimacy of the self-declared independent Republic of Artsakh. So not even Armenia recognizes the independence of Artsakh (Sassounian, 2020). Nevertheless, they have deep economic and political ties with the Artsakh Republic (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Armenia, 2020). Moreover, the Armenian army was, from the ceasefire in 1994 until the war in 2020, protecting the borders of the Artsakh Republic and its adjacent regions (De Waal, 2013). Regarding refugees in general, Armenia has signed and ratified the 1951 refugee convention, also the 1967 protocols (UNHCR, 2008). All countries that signed this convention (and the protocols) are obliged to make sure that '' *the rights of refugees are respected and protected* '' (UNHCR, N.D.). The official stance of Armenia is that it is trying to fulfil this obligation. It is also enshrined in the Law on Refugees and Asylum of the Republic of Armenia that this international law on refugees should be fulfilled even if it conflicts with domestic law (UNHCR, 2018). Regarding the substantial amount of Syrian-Armenians, around 22.000, that came to Armenia in approximately the last 10 years, their official stance is that they merely give these people a chance to live in their ancestral homeland (UNHCR, 2020; El Mawy, 2015). Because these people's ancestors lived in Western-Armenia and therefore they have a similar culture and religion these people are Armenians according to the Armenian state. That is the reason that Syrian-Armenians refugees are granted more rights than the average refugee that comes to Armenia. For these people, with Armenian heritage, it is much easier to obtain a passport, citizenship or a 10-year residence permit (Zolyan, 2015).

Azerbaijan has been accusing the Armenian state for years of having an active role in the building of settlements in mainly the adjacent regions of Karabakh, in order to place Syrian-Armenians refugees there (Pashkin, 2020). The U.N. Ambassador of Armenia stated that Azerbaijan is: ' *'using the Syrian crisis for political goals, not a single Syrian-Armenian has been moved into that territory*'' (Nazarian, 2013). This statement is diametrically opposed to the account of Azerbaijan that is stating that Armenia is using the Syrian-Armenian refugees for political goals. By repopulating the adjacent regions of Karabakh and changing the demographic makeup of these regions, they improve the political position of the Artsakh republic, is the Azeri argument (Pashkin, 2020).

What is important to note is that it is a official strategy goal of the Armenian State to repatriate ethnic Armenians from all over the world (Mejlumyan, 2020). The chief commissioner of the Armenian

Ministry of Diaspora Zareh Sinanyan stated the following: '' *Our goal is to repatriate 2 million Armenians over the next 30 years*'' (ibid.). So it is a political goal of the Armenian government to repatriate ethnic Armenians from all over the world.

Azerbaijan

According to Azerbaijan, the international law and most of the United Nations member states the declared independency of Artsakh violates the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan (De Waal, 2013). Because Artsakh is located within the internationally recognized borders of Azerbaijan that were established in 1992 after the disintegration of the Soviet-Union (Broers, 2020). Therefore, logically they do not recognize the independence of the Artsakh Republic. Just like Armenia, also Azerbaijan has signed the refugee convention of 1951 and the 1967 protocols. As opposed to Armenia they have not taken many Syrian refugees in the last decade. There are basically two important reasons for that, firstly the dominant religion in Azerbaijan is Shia Muslim, while Syria's Muslim population is predominantly Sunni (Campo, 2009). It is fair to say that these two groups of Muslims often do not go well together. Secondly, Azerbaijan still has to deal with the approximately 500.000 internally displaced people (IDP's) that became internally displaced as a consequence of the First Karabakh War in the early 1990's (UNHCR, 2009). This internal refugee problem is seen as a more persistent problem by Azerbaijan. Most of these IDP's come out of the adjacent regions of Nagorno-Karabakh (De Waal, 2013). These regions were ethnically cleansed of Azeri people and other ethnic groups residing there, by the Armenian army during and after the first-Karabakh war (ibid.).

There are multiple reports and press statements from Azerbaijan that accuse Armenia of building settlements in the *occupied territories* (referring to Artsakh and its adjacent regions) and subsequently placing settlers there from Syria (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Azerbaijan, 2016; Pashkin, 2020). In a 2016 report published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, multiple Armenian organizations are mentioned, amongst others the (non-governmental) Tufenkian Foundation and the Hayastan All-Armenian foundation (ibid.). The first is a foundation that is founded in the Diasporic community in the United States (Tufenkian, N.D) This organization is funded by American members of the Armenian diaspora (ibid.). The second foundation: The Hayastan All-Armenian fund is also established in in the United States, they are also mainly subsidized by international donors (Hayastan All Armenian Fund, N.D.). Both these foundations are funding projects in NKR and the adjacent regions of Karabakh (Tufenkian, N.D., Hayastan All-Armenian, 2018.). According to Azerbaijan the Armenian, government through these organizations, has a role in the settlement of Syrians in Artsakh and the adjacent regions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Azerbaijan, 2016). The Tufenkian foundation indeed, as shown in chapter 3, plays a role in the resettlement of Syrian-Armenians in Artsakh. However, there is no connection between this foundation and the Armenian government.

For the Hayastan All Armenia fund this is different. Azerbaijan accuses the Armenian government, the Armenian Ministry of Diaspora to be precise, of playing an active role in these resettlement practices in

the adjacent regions of Artsakh, predominantly in the regions: Kalbajar, Lachyn, Gubadly and Zangilan (ibid.). On account that the Hayastan All-Armenian foundation is subsidized by the Armenian government since 2015 (ibid.). In 2015, the Armenian Government did partially fund one of the projects of the Hayastan All-Armenian fund (AmNews, 2015.). This particular project was the renovation of a highway between Vardenis, which is in Armenia, and Martakert which is in Artsakh (Armenia Fund, 2016). In the Azerbaijani report this is presented as proof that the Armenian government plays an active role in the resettlement of Syrian-Armenians in Artsakh.

Wat is presented as proof of the Armenian governments' involvement is the fact that high-level politicians from Armenia have visited the occupied territories in the past couple of years and that "*the former and incumbent Presidents of Armenia, Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan, came from within the ranks of the separatists''* (ibid.: p. 9). Both these statements are true, but neither are proof of an active role of the Armenian government in the resettlement of Syrian-Armenians itself. The report however does prove the deep economic, military and political ties of the Armenian and Artsakh government. But this is not something that is denied by the Armenian government, these claims are openly published in the report: *National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia*, that was published in 2020 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia. A quarter of this report is dedicated to: *'Ensuring the Independence, Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity of Armenia and the Security of Artsakh'* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, 2020). According to some authors these ties are so deep that de facto Artsakh is best be seen as a part of Armenia (Hughes 2002; Cornell, 2011).

Now that the official stances of the two states are presented I will start with a critical reflection of all the possible data that is presented in the foregoing chapters about the border policy of Armenia. I will start with the most similar case of Abkhazia, thereafter I will discuss the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh and lastly I will critically analyze the full Armenian account. This will all serve to answer the research question in Chapter 5: The conclusion.

4.2: The Most Similar Case Of Abkhazia

The importance of the Abkhazian case resides with the question what the Abkhazian case can learn us about the similar situation in Armenia and Artsakh. To answer this question we firstly need to analyze the situation in Abkhazia. The similarities and the possible importance of Abkhazia have been explained in the foregoing chapters extensively (so I will not into detail here again). In Chapter 3 I have described the situation in Abkhazia and its repatriation policies. In this paragraph I will analyze the refugee (repatriation) policy of Abkhazia and try to connect this to the Artsakh case. In this paragraph I will focus on two major parts of the Abkhaz refugee policy in the last couple of decades, which are interconnected. Firstly, the ministry of demography and repatriation and the adhering policy goal to enlarge the population (A. Bagatellia, personal communication 15-10-2020). Secondly, there is the humanitarian corridor from Syria in 2013 (Kuprashvili & Arshba, 2013), carried out by this same governmental institution: the Abkhazian committee for repatriation.

First, let's discuss the the ministry of demography and repatriation of the republic of Abkhazia itself. This ministry originated from the state committee for repatriation that was established in 1993 during the war Abkhazia fought against Georgia (Ardzinba, 2018). After the war Abkhazia called out its independence (ibid.). Multiple interviewees have stated that it is a policy goal of the government of Abkhazia to achieve a growth in population (A. Pataraya, Personal Communication, 28-10-2020; D. Başol, Personal Communication, 28-09-2020; Anonymous Source International NGO, Personal communication. 27-10-2020). According to Mr. Bagatellia, the deputy chairman of the committee for repatriation, the repatriation of ethnic Abkhazians is one of the ways to achieve this policy goal (A. Bagatellia, personal communication 15-10-2020). Another example to contribute to this goal is to financially support to Abkhaz families with three or more children (ibid.; Başol, Personal Communication, 28-09-2020). The fact that there is a ministry for demography and repatriation itself implicates that the repatriation of Abkhazians (and Circassians) has a strong demographic reason connected to it. With demographic reason I mean an ethnic component, which could be the attempt to change the demographic make-up in Abkhazia in favour of the Abkhaz people. As multiple of my interviewees suspect the government wants to have more ethnic Abkhaz people in Abkhazia (Anonymous Source International NGO). Because at the last census in 2013 only approximately half of the population was ethnic Abkhaz. In Abkhazia there is the prominent thought that you cannot have a real Abkhazian state if there is a relatively small amount of Abkhazian people in the state (D. Başol, Personal Communication, 28-09-2020). So the existence of a Ministry that handles demography and repatriation is the first piece of evidence that not only the growth in population is important but that also the ethnicity is important. This is reiterated by multiple of my interviewees that stated that Abkhazia would want to change the demographic make-up of the state in favour of Abkhaz people (D. Başol, Personal Communication, 28-09-2020; Anonymous Source International NGO, Personal communication. 27-10-2020; Anonymous Source[5], personal communication, 3-11-2020). One of these interviewees stated that in the last trustworthy census, in 2013, the ethnic Abkhaz population was only 44 percent of the total population, which was around 235.000 (Anonymous Source International NGO, Personal communication. 27-10-2020). So roughly 100.000 of the inhabitants were Abkhaz in the beginning of 2013 (ibid.).

The second 'piece of evidence' is connected to the first one, because this is a mission that is carried out by the precursor of the ministry I just discussed. The 'humanitarian corridor' that Abkhazia established in 2013 was the event where Abkhazia brought approximately 500 ethnic Abkhaz and Circassian people from Syria to Abkhazia (Anonymous source International NGO, Personal communication. 27-10-2020). The Abkhazian state provided the travel means from Damascus to Sukhumi for people who were willing to repatriate in Abkhazia (ibid.). The name of this action as a humanitarian corridor suggests that the action was first and foremost carried out for humanitarian reasons. However the fact that this

[5] This anonymous source has worked for the Abkhaz Government.

humanitarian mission was only targeted at Circassian and Abkhaz people makes it highly likely that the ethnic component was also very important. Moreover, this humanitarian corridor was coordinated by the state committee of repatriation, the precursor of the Ministry of demography and repatriation as just discussed. Not to say that the demographic (ethnic) issues were the only reason for this mission to be carried out by Abkhazia. However, I think that this is an important part of it. Especially, because Abkhazia is a state with very limited (financial) resources (D. Başol, Personal Communication, 28-09-2020; Anonymous Source International NGO). Bringing in 500 people and provide them with housing and numerous other financial support is very costly. It would be logical that the Abkhazian government saw a political gain in this mission too. I argue it is highly likely that specific gain for Abkhazia would be a growth in population and a change in the ethnic composition. Like I stated above, the ethnic Abkhaz population at that time was roughly 100.000, to add 500 overnight people to this total is quite a significant change. The anonymous source at the NGO, also told me that over the course of the last seven years many Georgians ('a few thousand') that were living in Abkhazia moved out because they were obliged to take up an Abkhazian passport instead of their Georgian passport (Anonymous source International NGO, Personal communication. 27-10-2020). A decrease of Georgian people in the total population is in itself beneficial for the percentage of Abkhaz people. In addition to that an increase of Abkhaz people can mean quite a significant change in the percentage of Abkhaz people for the total population.

I think I have shown ample evidence in the paragraph above that Abkhazia is trying to not only achieve a growth in population, but they are also trying to achieve a growth in the part of ethnic Abkhaz people in the total population. The policy to change the ethnic make-up for political goals is a striking example of an ethnogeopolitical policy, as I explained in the foregoing chapter. Therefore, I can conclude that Abkhazia is carrying out an ethnogeopolitical practice. That brings me back to the importance of the similar case of Abkhazia: what does this case learn us about the situation in Artsakh. I think the importance of the Abkhaz case is twofold. What the Abkhaz case has shown us is that also in the specific reasons for the population growth there are resemblances with the Artsakh case. Furthermore, on the basic level the policy of Abkhazia resembles the policy of Armenia, with regard to Syrian refugees (or repatriates). First I will explain the resemblances between Abkhaz and Artsakh policy. Thereafter I will explain the similarities of policy on a more basic level with Armenia.

The first big resemblance is the program that is in place for people that want to resettle in Artsakh, which I have described in paragraph 3.3.1. Just like in Artsakh, the government provides housing and financial programs to support the people that want to resettle. Moreover, in paragraph 3.3.3 I have discussed the (Non-Governmental) Tufenkian organization that was resettling Syrian-Armenians in Artsakh and the adjacent regions. The reasons they gave for that were both economic (because of the agricultural potential) and strategic/political (growth in population). This also is very akin to the reasons I have found in Abkhazia where the growth in population is an actual policy goal of the government. Also

multiple interviewees recognized the agricultural (thus economic) potential of Abkhazia as a realistic reason to repopulate Abkhazia (D. Başol, Personal Communication, 28-09-2020: Anonymous source in International NGO, personal communication, 27-10-2020).

Now I will discuss the resemblances between Abkhazia and Armenia, because on the basic policy level there are also clear similarities visible. For Abkhazia it is a policy goal to achieve a growth in population and the repatriation program is a part of it. The chief Commissioner of the Armenian Diaspora Ministry also stated that they want to repatriate as many Armenians as possible to Armenia (Martyros, 2020). Just like in Armenia (as mentioned in the introduction) the Abkhazian economic situation is dire. Many people live in poverty, unemployment rates are very high (around 70 percent) and the government does not have adequate resources to tackle these problems (Fuller, 2017; Blakkisrud et al, 2021). So both Armenia and Abkhazia are in a bad economic situation with little (financial) resources to fix these problems. Yet both these states are welcoming Syrian refugees with open arms. Moreover, both states explain this situation by referring to humanitarian aid and a chance for people to live in their ancestral homeland. Lastly, both states are mainly bringing people in that are living in diaspora and that are ethnically akin to their native inhabitants, according to the governments. The only difference is that Abkhazia is more open about their aim to achieve a growth in population as a policy goal and as a positive (side) effect of their humanitarian mission. This similar case of Abkhazia is one of the pieces of triangulation, with which I will try to figure out what the reasons are for Armenia to bring all these Syrian-Armenian people in. In conclusion, the resemblances that I already established in earlier chapters combined with the resemblances in repatriation policy, make it at least more likely that Armenia and Artsakh are following the same reasoning as Abkhazia but are less open about it. This openness can be explained by the Russian support for the Abkhazian case. Which is not there for Artsakh, or Armenia in general.

4.3: The Case of Artsakh and Repatriation

In this paragraph I will critically analyze the situation in Artsakh and its adjacent regions regarding their refugee policy. The reason that I analyze the Artsakh case separate from the case of Armenia as a whole is because it is officially not a part of Armenia, moreover the Artsakh republic has an own (de-facto) government with its own policies that need to be discussed. As introduced in the foregoing chapter I will now critically analyze the 'NKR Encouragement Policy', the situation regarding Lebanese-Armenians and of course the situation regarding Syrian-Armenians.

Since 2003 there is an encourage program in place for people who want to settle in Artsakh (described in paragraph 3.3.1). This program encompasses support by different means: housing, jobs and other financial compensation. Furthermore, in 2020 this was accompanied by extra financial support for people who suffered from the COVID-19 pandemic (N. Baghdassaryan, personal communication, 26-09-2020). This program is in place to ensure a growth in population. Anyone that was willing to resettle in Nagorno-Karabakh or any of the adjacent regions was able to apply for this program. I am writing

this in the past tense because the adjacent regions are all back under control of Azerbaijan. As of now it is unclear if this program is still in place, in any case for the adjacent regions it cannot be in place anymore. According to Nelli Baghdassaryan, one of my interviewees who is advisor to the president of Artsakh, the program had yielded good results because she said, as of September 2020, the application flow had not stopped (ibid.). She emphasized that although Armenia and Artsakh have good relations, the Armenian state did not actively support this program of resettlement. This is not the only policy that is in place in Artsakh, in terms of 'demographic policy', to achieve a population growth. My interviewee told me that there are five more policies in place to increase the population of Artsakh: *'' promotion of birth rate, protection of the family, reduction of mortality rate, maintenance of public health, creation of conditions for leading a healthy lifestyle''* (N. Baghdassaryan, personal communication, 26-09-2020). How this exactly is executed is not clear for all components. One of the things that was clear in execution is promotion of birth rate. Because, just as in Abkhazia, people with larger families get financial support from the Artsakh government. She furthermore stated that the creation of a safe state and a feeling of protection was important to keep people coming and staying in Artsakh: '*'The following chain operates: creating a favorable environment for the security of its citizens, which gives them confidence in the future''* (ibid.). So there is both an economic plan and a bigger political plan. The economic plan is to attract resettlers to move to Artsakh in the first place. The long-term political plan (of which the economic plan is a part) is to create a favorable environment in which people are encouraged to stay, which would lead to a natural population growth (ibid.).

I am now moving on to the case of Lebanese-Armenians. Where the diametrically opposed stances of Azerbaijan and Armenia/Artsakh returns. Artsakh states it is merely providing humanitarian assistance (ibid.). Azerbaijan claim that Artsakh goal of the hosting of Lebanese-Armenians is politically motivated, to change the demography in the favor of ethnic Armenians (Mammadov, 2020). These claims themselves by Azerbaijan are, according to Artsakh, politically motivated and forged to put Artsakh in a bad light (ibid.). These two claims need to be put into context, because the humanitarian crisis that erupted in Lebanon caused the lives of around 200 people and injured 7.000 more people (BBC, 2020c). Moreover, due to the blast around 300.000 people have lost their home, so these people became homeless overnight (NRC, 2020). These people from one to another day lost their homes and many of their belongings.

What remains is the fact that, politically motivated or not, within a day after the humanitarian crisis erupted in Lebanon the Artsakh president encouraged Lebanese-Armenians to resettle in Artsakh. And a month after the blast the first Lebanese-Armenian families were already in Artsakh (Mejlumyan, 2020). All of these families were brought in the first place to Armenia and in the two months after the blast the Armenian government help approximately 1.100 Lebanese-Armenians to come to Armenia (ibid.). The fact that this humanitarian crisis, causing the homelessness of so many people in one day, makes the case of humanitarian aid more defensible. However, as most probably Azerbaijan would

claim, why would these people not resettle in Armenia proper, rather than Nagorno-Karabakh? To be clear, the majority of these people did because of the 1.100 that arrived in Armenia only approximately a hundred ended up in Nagorno-Karabakh (A. Yevstratov Personal Communication, 04-11-2020). As explained before the ties are strong between Armenia and Artsakh and there is an open border between the territory of Armenia and that of Artsakh. This is actually the only open border that Artsakh has with its neighboring states. This is one of the reasons why authors call it de-facto a part of Armenia (Cornell, 2011).

So the people that were brought to Armenia are free to go to Artsakh, if they want to. Taking into account that many of these people just became homeless and lost most of their belongings in combination with the encouragement program that is in place in Artsakh it is much understandable that these people choose to go to Artsakh. These people were basically given a chance of a fresh start with a house, some land and financial support. This clearly shows that this encouragement program does work to get people to resettle in Artsakh. It does also raise the question if the people who make use of this program really have a viable alternative. To me it raises the moral question whether this program should be targeting the most (financially or otherwise) vulnerable people in the Armenian society and diaspora. Nevertheless, it seems to be working and it is clear that the Artsakh government played an active role in the resettlement of Lebanese-Armenians in Artsakh. The role of Armenia will be discussed in the next paragraph.

Finally I will elaborate on the matter of Syrian-Armenians, which are the subject of this research. In this case the role of the Artsakh government is a little bit more ambiguous. There are some signs that also they actively played a role in the resettlement of Syrian-Armenians although they were less open about it in the media then in the case of Lebanese-Armenians. This can possibly be explained by the difference in urgency of the housing of these people. This does not mean that the Lebanese-Armenians were more important than the Syrian-Armenians but in the case of the Syrian-Armenians these people came gradually over the years between 2011 and 2020. Where in the case of the Lebanese-Armenians 1.100 people came in the time frame of a couple of months. In the case of the Syrian-Armenians the Artsakh government, or at least the President of Artsakh, did not issue a press release inviting the Syrian-Armenians to resettle in Artsakh. Although, when I interviewed the advisor of the President of Artsakh and asked about the possible growth in population she said the following: *'' Giving our compatriots from Syria & Lebanon the opportunity to live in Artsakh is by no means for demographic purposes. This is an opportunity for people in need to reach out and live in safety* (N. Baghdassaryan, personal communication, 26-09-2020). So she was also making a claim to the humanitarian argument, however more important for now is that she stated that they are giving their Syrian (Armenian) compatriots a safe place to live.

In the case of Syrian-Armenians two Non-Governmental organizations have played an important role in the resettlement: The Tufenkian Foundation and the Hayastan All-Armenian. Both are as non-governmental organizations largely funded by international donations (Tufenkian, N.D.; Hayastan All-Armenian, N.D.) The Tufenkian foundation is located in Yerevan, the latter mentioned is based in the United-States. According to Azerbaijan these foundations are also partially funded by the Armenian government (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Azerbaijan, 2016). Which is partially true for the latter foundation: The Hayastan all Armenian fund (Hayastan All Armenia, 2015). Since, 2015 the Armenian government is partially subsidizing this organization as the (international) donations have dwindled (AmNews, 2015). I will explain more on this foundation in the next paragraph. It seems evident though that these beforementioned foundations worked together with the government of Artsakh, because they funded housing projects, infrastructure projects and provided multiple Syrian-Armenian farmers with farming equipment (JamNews, 2013). All these things they did on the territory which is de-facto under control of the Artsakh government.

Concludingly, I can say that the Government of the Republic of Artsakh is aiming at a growth in population, which is reflected in multiple ways. Firstly, there are multiple policies in place that are aiming at a growth in population. Secondly, they are actively involved in the resettlement of Lebanese-Armenians as well as Syrian-Armenians on their territory. All these people that they are placing on their territory have Armenian heritage, so by their definition these people are Armenian. The fact is however that in Artsakh and its adjacent regions the great majority of people were already ethnically Armenian because of the ethnic cleansing carried out during and shortly after the first Karabakh war in 1993-1994 by the Armenian Army. So the ethnic makeup of the region did not change significantly due to these policies and there remained a big majority of Armenian people. Nevertheless, attempting to achieve a growth of population in which the ethnicity of these people is a central point is a striking case of ethnogeopolitical practice. So the Artsakh government is, just as the Abkhaz government, carrying out ethnogeopolitical practices. The fact remains however that the independence of Artsakh as well as the legitimacy of the government of Artsakh is not internationally recognized. Often it is seen as de-facto part of Armenia (Hughes, 2002), therefore I will reflect in the next paragraph on the role of the Armenian government in all of this.

4.4: The Role Of Armenia

After describing the situation and the policies of Abkhazia as well as Artsakh, there is one important actor that needs to be discussed and that is, of course, Armenia. I have already introduced the official stance of Armenia (and Azerbaijan) regarding the recognition of Artsakh and now I will critically reflect on this stance. This chapter is dedicated to a critical analysis of the situation in Armenia and of course I will also critically review the Republic of Armenia and its policies. Because the main question is about explaining the border policy of Armenia.

4.4.1: Recognition of Artsakh

When we critically analyze the policy of Armenia we first need to discuss Artsakh and especially the (complicated) relation between the two governments. Like explained before, Armenia does not recognize the independence of the Artsakh republic, or at least not in diplomatic terms. However, out of the policies and their deep economic, political and military ties, I can draw a different conclusion. There are a couple of reasons for this difference. First of all, Armenia is the only trade partner of Artsakh, so economically they are dependent of Armenia (Chitadze, 2016). Secondly, like for example stated by Azerbaijan, politicians of Armenia regularly visit Artsakh and the other way around. The most (in)famous recent example being President Pashinyan who shortly after being inaugurated in 2019 visited Stepanakert (the capital) and publicly stated: ''*Artsakh is Armenia, and that's it!''* (Kucera, 2019). Thirdly, military speaking they are also completely dependent on Armenia. Officially they have an own army but in the last conflict in 2020 they also received full military support of Armenia (BBC, 2020d). One day after the war begun Armenia declared full mobilization and martial law and sent thousands of soldiers to the front-line in Artsakh (ibid.). The Armenian government supports the defense forces of Artsakh also in financial terms (Lis, 2016). Moreover in the 'National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia' (2020), it is among other things stated: '' *The Republic of Armenia is the guarantor of the security and liberty of the Armenians of Artsakh''* and as a national goal *''International recognition of Artsakh's right to self-determination without preconditions''* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, 2020) This and multiple other statements of the Armenian support to Artsakh are made in this report. Note that these statements are made in the national strategy plan of Armenia, this means that the security of Artsakh is a part of the national strategy of Armenia. Lastly, there is the border between Armenia and Artsakh which is the only open border that the Republic of Artsakh has with any other state and it was under control of Armenia. Or at least this was the case until November of 2020 when, in the brokered peace agreements, the border has changed into a 'land bridge' connection between Armenia and Artsakh, controlled by a Russian peacekeeping mission (BBC, 2020a). With these points about the relations between Armenia and Artsakh I want to reiterate the notion by multiple academic authors that stated that Artsakh de-facto is an integral part of Armenia (Hughes, 2002; Cornell, 2011). Officially, Armenia might not recognize the independence or legitimacy of Artsakh, but in reality it is practically a part of the Armenian State.

4.4.2: The Direct and Indirect involvement of the Armenian State

I argue that in the above (in 4.3) I have shown ample evidence that Artsakh is carrying out ethnogeopolitical practices to (re)populate the region of Artsakh and its adjacent regions, this repopulation is attached to an ethnic component. This, substantiated by the similar case of Abkhazia, contribute to suspicions about Armenia's involvement on a state level. However still the role of the Armenian state remains ambiguous. There are accusations of Azerbaijan, as presented above, but these are not substantiated with clear proof though. I have found no direct proof of Armenia's direct involvement of the repatriation of Syrian or Lebanese-Armenians in Artsakh. Using the triangulation

method I have however quite some interesting points that can connect the policies as carried out in Artsakh to Armenia, and the involvement of the Armenian state.

All the refugees or potential repatriates from Syria, a total of 22.000, arrived firstly in Armenia (UNHCR, 2020). The same goes for the approximately 1.100 people that arrived from Lebanon (Mejlumyan, 2020). Of these 22.000, Armenia claims that still approximately 14.000 remain in Armenia and it is unclear if in this count those in Artsakh (and adjacent regions) are included (UNHCR, 2020). These 14.000 have almost exclusively chosen to be naturalized as an Armenian, in other words they gained Armenian citizenship (Uzelac & Meester, 2018). Based on the evidence I presented in 3.3.2 and 3.3.3, at least a couple of hundred Syrian-Armenians and around a hundred Lebanese-Armenians resettled in Artsakh. For these people with Armenian heritage it was easy to obtain a passport, or at least a long term residence permit (OSF, 2017). An Armenian passport was not even necessary for people who wanted to live in Artsakh (NKR Government, 2020). So either these resettled people were naturalized, had a double passport (Syrian or Lebanese) or they had only the passport of the state where they were born. Especially for Lebanese-Armenians it is hard to believe that this migration has gone unnoticed by the Armenian government who controlled the border between Armenia and Artsakh. Because, officially these people left Armenia proper and entered Artsakh. Especially when you take into account that it was a relatively big group of people to move in a short time.

Then there is the NKR government program to encourage people to live in Artsakh. Although an Armenian passport is not a necessity, this program is mainly targeted at Armenians. To resettle people from Armenia proper to Artsakh it seems necessary, to at least partially, coordinate these operations in Armenia itself. I can connect this with the Armenian policy goal of repatriating 2 million Armenians in the coming 30 years which is stated by the Chief Commissioner of Diaspora issues, (Martyros, 2020). In the foregoing paragraph I have tried to make clear that Artsakh de-facto, or practically, is a part of Armenia and according to many Armenians an integral part (Kucera, 2019). That makes it more likely that the Armenian chief commissioner of Diaspora affairs, although not explicitly, also meant Artsakh, as a place to repatriate these Armenians to. Moreover, it seems unlikely that bringing in 22.000 Syrian-Armenians in the course of nine years, would have nothing to do with the overarching goal of repatriating 2 million Armenians over the course of the next 30 years. It seems highly likely that this is policy falls under that political goal of the Armenian Ministry of Diaspora.

This big number of refugees in Armenia proper has caused problems for the Armenian government in different ways. Predominantly in terms of providing these people with houses, jobs and education (Goodyear, 2019). Moreover, these Syrian-Armenians tend to face problems of social and economic integration into society (ibid.). One of the big problems for Syrian-Armenians is that they don’t speak the same dialect of the Armenian language. I have mentioned before that these Syrian-Armenians have cultural and religious traditions that are very alike or the same as the Armenians of Armenia proper and

that is largely the reason these people are still regarded as Armenians (Thomas et al., 2020). The biggest difference is however that they do not speak the same language. The people in diaspora almost exclusively speak Western-Armenian, whereas in Armenia proper they speak Eastern-Armenian (Uzelac & Meester, 2018). These languages derive from the two parts Armenia was split into in 387 A.D. (as described in paragraph 2.2.1), Western and Eastern Armenia. These language ares vastly different from each other and generally someone who speaks one of the two dialects would not understand the other language (ibid.).

Due to these problems Syrian-Armenians often face unemployment and poverty (Goodyear, 2019). Not surprisingly as unemployment and poverty are already a problem for the Armenian country as a whole (World Bank Group, 2020). It is not unthinkable that the Armenian government as well as these people themselves saw an opportunity in the NKR encouragement program. As aforementioned, when they make use of this program these people would get housing, financial assistance and a job in Nagorno-Karabakh. This job would be working (farming) on a piece of land that they would own themselves (NKR Government, 2021). Farming is a job in which at least one of the above mentioned problems can become obsolete or can become at least a smaller obstacle to overcome: the language barrier. I argue it is fair to assume that farming is one of the jobs you can do without speaking the same language as the people in the host country. Especially when there is also a foundation that provides farming equipment which has happened in a couple of occasions (ArmeniaNow, 2013). At the very least I argue it is relatively more easy farming than obtaining for example a job in government or a local business when you do not speak the language of your employer. As a farmer you already overcome part of the problem because you are mostly self-employed. Also as a farmer you could start to work right away learning the (necessary) language on the way, instead of first learning the language in order to get a job. Another possible contributing factor is that the lands in Nagorno-Karabakh are fertile, so the farming would give a good prospect on making a decent living (Sharrow, 2007). Either way the farming gave the opportunity to provide food for their family, it is a faster and a more direct way to take care of your family (Varshalomidze, 2017). Basically, the program would offer them stability and an opportunity for a fresh start in Nagorno-Karabakh. It was the goal of the Ministry of Diaspora of Armenia to give these people a chance to live in their 'Ancestral Homeland' (Ministry of Diaspora Affairs, 2020) and applying these people to this program might be one of the ways they did that. Although this is mainly speculation and I have no hard proof for this, it seems likely that this program is more attractive for Lebanese and Syrian-Armenians than for regular Armenian citizens.

Then there is the policy goal of Artsakh that to increase the population they must ensure: '' ' *a favorable environment for the security of its citizens''* (N. Baghdassaryan, personal communication, 26-09-2020). This is one of the pillars of the ethnogeopolitical practice of Artsakh. This encompasses amongst other things safety and economic stability in the region (ibid.). Because if these two things can be ensured this would increase the trust of people in the republic and people will have more faith of the future, therefore

people would be more eager to live there. So these things need to be established in order to secure a growth in population. At least that is the argument that the policy advisor of the Artsakh president informed me on (ibid.). So let's discuss how Armenia is connected to Artsakh when it comes to achieving the policy goal of population growth.

The first topic I will explain is the economy, Artsakh aims to ensure economic growth, economic stability and the creation of preferable socio-economic conditions (Lis, 2016). This is not a new or a recent policy goal of the Artsakh republic, since after the war that lasted until 1994 Nagorno-Karabakh has been trying to create economic stability. Because after the war the economy was unstable and the border with Azerbaijan was closed (Lis, 2016). The biggest necessary change was the transfer into a market economy and the creation of a welfare system (ibid.). I do not want to go deep into the economic argumentation why transformations would be beneficial because that is beyond the goal of this paragraph. What is important to notice is that the transformation into a market economy, was according to the NKR Government: '' *aimed at accomplishing economic stabilization''* (Economic Reforms, NKR National Assambly, N.D.). Secondly, the welfare system, which is including pension reforms free basic health care and free primary education (Adamczewski, 2012). This is all clearly aimed at the creation of a more favorable socio-economic situation in Artsakh (ibid.). Both stability and the best socio-economic position of the people according to the NKR government are means with which they aim to achieve a growth in population.

The economy of Artsakh is far from independent or self-sustainable, on the contrary it is dependent on the Armenian and the financial support from the Diaspora (Graham, 2009). It is dependent on Armenia in terms of trade because their markets are interdependent (ibid.). In other words the Artsakh economy or economic stability could not continue to exist without Armenian support. Some authors claim that the Artsakh budget is predominantly subsidized by Armenia (and Armenian diaspora) on top of that Armenia covers the state deficit every year (Adamczewski, 2012; Krüger, 2010). Armenia and Artsakh strongly deny these claims but the whole economy and economic stability is highly dependent of Armenia (Lis, 2016). Furthermore, since the most recent conflict Artsakh has received large amounts of financial support from Armenia, since September 2020 the total financial support from Armenia towards Artsakh is nearly 50 billion Armenian Dram (AMD), which equates roughly 85 million Euros (JamNews, 2021). Secondly, the Armenian parliament adopted a resolution for annual support for Artsakh of 10 billion AMD, which is roughly 17 million in Euros (ibid.).

Concludingly, Armenia has deep economic ties with Artsakh, even in such a way that the economy of Artsakh cannot be healthy without Armenian support (Graham 2009; Lis, 2016). The economic stability and favorable socio-economic aspects of the Artsakh policy are important to ensure the growth in population according to the Artsakh government. These economic conditions are means to the goal of

population growth. So in this way Armenia does play, albeit indirectly, a role in the population growth of Artsakh.

The second part of the policy to create a favorable environment is security. Security can be perceived and interpreted in many different ways. In a conflict area, such as Artsakh, one of the interpretations I argue is prevailing, the security that the inhabitants are protected from violence. In this case this also means the guarantee that the people can keep living in Artsakh. The role of Armenia in the security and safety of the Artsakh people is substantial. Like I have discussed before in this paragraph, in the course of the most recent war, the army of Armenia was the main defense force of Artsakh. Within a day after the declaration of war, Armenia declared full mobilization and martial law (BBC, 2020d). Moreover, some authors call Armenia a 'patron-state' of Artsakh, because it is responsible for most of the national defense system of Artsakh (Adamczewski, 2012; Lis, 2016).

I have touched upon the *'National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia'* (2020) a couple of times before in this chapter. In this official strategy report the security of Artsakh is presented as an essential part of the whole security of the Armenian State. I argue it is important to exemplify a couple of statements that are made in this strategy report of Armenia. In the introduction written by Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan is stated: '' *The Republic of Armenia is the guarantor of the security and liberty of the Armenians of Artsakh. ''* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, 2020). Further the following statements are made: *'' As the guarantor of Artsakh's security, the Republic of Armenia directs its defense policy towards ensuring the security of* Artsakh'' (ibid.) and ''*The Republic of Armenia shall continue to support human rights and democratic institutions in Artsakh, as well as further strengthen its economic and environmental security.''* (ibid.). What I tried to emphasize here is that the Republic of Armenia has an official national policy to ensure the safety and security of the people of Artsakh and the state as a whole. The fact that this is embedded in national policy and that this is reiterated by the Prime Minister shows again how deeply involved Armenia is in the state of affairs in Artsakh. A government official of Artsakh has literally stated that the security and safety of the people of Artsakh is one of the pillars with which they try to achieve a demographic growth (N. Baghdassaryan, personal communication, 26-09-2020). Concludingly, also trough means of security and safety Armenia plays a role in the population growth of Artsakh. I have drawn the same conclusion for the economy, in both these cases the role is indirect, but it is quite a substantial role.

Lastly, I want to discuss one of the foundations that have already come to the fore a couple of times: the Hayastan All Armenian foundation. Most recently the Armenian Ministry of Diaspora, in the aftermath of the 2020 war, has set up a worldwide fundraising campaign together with the Hayastan All Armenia Fund (The Armenian Ministry of Diaspora, N.D). As already discussed one of the projects of this foundation was partially subsidized by the Armenian government (AmNews, 2015). This project was a highway between Vardenis in Armenia and Martakert in Artsakh (Armenia Fund, 2016). Also the

foundation is tax exempted, which means it does not have to pay taxes (Armenia Fund 2016). Over the years this organization have completed a lot of projects in terms of water supply, infrastructure and renovations of kindergartens, schools and community centers (Hayastan All Armenia, 2018). They have carried out these projects in Armenia, Artsakh and the adjacent regions of Artsakh. All these projects contribute to an improved standard of living in Artsakh. This subsidy in 2015 and now the cooperation project does not proof their involvement in the resettlement, however it does hint to a closer connection between the foundation and the Armenian government.

I will discuss the importance of this foundation for Artsakh region. Generally, this is a foundation that subsidizes many different development projects in Artsakh. In 2015, in the Kashatagh District, one of the adjacent regions, this foundation started a residential project for families with 5 or more children, this project was planned to be finished in 2021 (Hayastan All Armenia, 2015). Before, I have discussed two things that come together here. Firstly, the adjacent regions of Karabakh, such as Kashatagh, are lightly inhabited (De Waal, 2013; Tufenkian, N.D.). Secondly, just like in Abkhazia, in Artsakh families with 5 or more children get financial help from the government and apparently they are also helped with housing (Hayastan All Armenia, 2015). Moving families with more children to lightly inhabited regions means a direct increase in population and a higher density of people. Which is clearly something that Artsakh aspired. Earlier in this chapter I already found out that Artsakh has these aspirations. What is striking is that apparently this foundation is at one time funded by the Armenian Government, and seems to be in close connection with the Artsakh government.

Everything I have discussed in this chapter contributes to an explanation of the Armenian border policy. In the next chapter I will answer the sub-question and the main research question. Furthermore, I will discuss what this research contributes to the society (societal relevance) and to the academic debate (scientific relevance).Also I will critically reflect on my research, it beneficiaries and shortcomings regarding the process as well as the end result. Lastly, I will give some ideas how the phenomenon discussed in my research can be worked out further in future research.

Chapter 5: Conclusion & Discussion

The introduction and the following 3 chapters have served as the groundwork for the analysis, which was conducted in chapter 4. Following this analysis, in this chapter I will work towards a comprehensive answer to the research question. To construct this answer all foregoing chapters have served as building blocks to eventually come to the explanation I will give here. The answer to the sub question will be an important part of the answer to the main question. After the answering of the sub and main question, I will shortly reflect on some of the moral implications of this conclusion. Because the character of the research is explorative and inductive, the conclusion will be quite extensive. Moreover, because of this inductive character the goal is not only to give the most comprehensive and extensive explanation as possible, I will also draw a conclusion about the contribution of this research to the (academic) field of research. After the conclusion the discussion will follow. In this part of the chapter I will critically reflect on the process of the research, the shortcomings of this research and give suggestions for further research.

5.1: Conclusion

The main question of this research followed out of the, at first glance, illogical policy of Armenia. Very bluntly this policy is about receiving and accepting a large amount of refugees from Syria, while the economic situation is dire and at the same time the state has been entangled in a conflict with Azerbaijan for nearly 30 years. It seemed that Armenia had nothing to gain and more urgent matters to tend to than receiving this big amount of refugees. So the main research question is posed as follows:

How can we explain the Armenian position and policy with regard to Syrian refugees?

5.1.1: The Sub-Question

Before I can answer the main research question, I first need to formulate an answer to the sub-question that I have posed in the introduction. Because there are two topics that are quintessentially important for a full explanation of the Armenian policy, these two topics are incorporated in the sub question. Firstly, the conflictual territorial dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh plays an important role in Armenia in general. This conflict was regarded as a frozen conflict from 1994 to 2020. Chapter 1 has served as an extensive explanation of the conflict and all the factors that are important for an understanding of the region. The second topic is the fact that the Syrians that took refuge in Armenia all have Armenian heritage and therefore they are regarded as Armenian people by the Armenian government. How these people ended up in Syria has extensively been explained in the second chapter. So combining these two factors with the main question, the sub-question is posed as follows:

How can we explain the Armenian refugee policy towards Syrian-Armenians in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict?

In this research I am talking about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as a whole, so not only the military conflict in 2020 but also the years it was a frozen conflict. In order to answer this question two tools

were important: the similar case of Abkhazia and the ethnogeopolitical theory. Throughout the research I have shown and discussed all the ways in which the case of Artsakh and Abkhazia are akin. As they are important for the explaining power of the similar Abkhazian case I will shortly repeat them here. The conflicts these regions are entangled in revolve around two highly contested concepts: borders and ethnicity. The peoples of Abkhazia and Artsakh share a history of being victim of genocide and expulsion which is the main reason how their ancestors ended up in, amongst other countries, Syria. These expulsions are, as I explained, examples of ethnogeopolitical practices. Nowadays the cases show another resemblance, both (de-facto) governments have implemented policies that are aiming for a growth in population.

To research the sub-question and the main question, in the fourth chapter, I have analyzed if the ethnogeopolitical theory was able to contribute to a possible explanation. I did this for Artsakh and the Abkhaz case. In this analysis chapter I have drawn the preliminary conclusion that Abkhazia was pursuing an active policy in repatriating Syrians with an Abkhazian or Circassian heritage to Abkhazia. Because they were actively placing people that are ethnically alike or akin on their territory, I argued that they were pursuing an ethnogeopolitical practice. In this policy the ethnicity of the people is an integral part of the motivation. In Abkhazia the motivation for this kind of policy is a desired growth in population and a growth in the percentage of Abkhazian people in the state. Thus I argue that for Abkhazia's refugee policy ethnicity is a central point, the differentiating role of ethnicity is precisely what is important for the ethnogeopolitical theory and practice. What this learns us for the case of Artsakh is based on multiple similarities between these two cases. In this chapter I have shown that the resemblances of the Abkhazian and Artsakh case do not stop at the likenesses I have discussed in Chapter 1 and 2. In the policies, carried out by both governments, there are also substantial similarities. Both of these governments have a support program in place for people that are willing to resettle in the region, they refer to these people as resettlers or repatriates. These repatriates are helped by the government with housing, jobs and receive other financial support. In both cases the main reason for this support program is a growth in population. The difference is that in Artsakh the desire, like in Abkhazia, to change the ethnic makeup of the region is not clearly present. But this can be explained by the fact that since 1994 in Artsakh and the adjacent regions, the demography already shows a big majority of ethnic Armenian people. Having said this the fact remains that the people who resettle in Artsakh and the adjacent regions are almost exclusively Armenians, or people with Armenian heritage.

The policy and actions of the Abkhazian state do not only resemble the policy of the Artsakh state. It does, at some points, also resemble the policy of Armenia itself. In 2013 Abkhazia established a humanitarian corridor. This encompassed the chartering of planes from Damascus to Sochi (in Russia) and thereafter busses to Sukhumi (Abkhazia) for Syrian people with Abkhaz or Circassian heritage. This humanitarian corridor was arranged and fully paid for by the Abkhazian government. In 2020, shortly after the explosion in the port of Beirut (Lebanon), Armenia carried out a similar action. In the months

after the explosion Armenia helped approximately 1.100 Lebanese-Armenians to relocate in Armenia, out of which 850 people are planning to stay long term. Both in Abkhazia and Armenia the economic situation is, to say the least, not favorable to carry out such large humanitarian actions (as explained in 4.4.2). Therefore I argue that it is highly likely that in both cases the policy goal of repatriating the respectively ethnic Abkhazians and Armenians prevailed over the economic consequences.

There is, apart from all these similarities, one important difference between the two cases. The difference is that Abkhazia is more open about their policy and the underlying strategic (political) reasons for this policy. Strikingly this difference makes the extensive amount of resemblances all the more relevant. As I just noted, like Armenia and Artsakh, Abkhazia does also make a claim to humanitarian reasons and talks about a chance for people to resettle in their historical motherland. However, Abkhazia also acknowledges the opportunities the policies have had for the growth in population and the positive effect it might have for ethnic makeup of the region. Shortly said they acknowledge the political advantages the policy might yield on top of the humanitarian reasons. That these potential political advantages play a role in the resettlement policy is something that the Armenian and Artsakh government both strongly deny. Armenia and Artsakh claim that the help is purely based on a combination of humanitarian aid and ethnic kinship. As the policy advisor of the Artsakh president told me: '' *Giving our compatriots from Syria & Lebanon the opportunity to live in Artsakh is by no means for demographic purposes. This is an opportunity for people in need to reach out and live in safety''* (N. Baghdassaryan, personal communication, 26-09-2020). There is a pretty straightforward explanation for Armenia and Artsakh to deny this involvement. Although, Abkhazia and Artsakh are both disputed territories, Abkhazia enjoys the full support of Russia, whereas Artsakh can only count on the Armenian state for support. The involvement in such policies for political ends would very much worsen the relations and the negotiation position of Armenia and Artsakh in this dispute with Azerbaijan.

All things considered I argue that this denial of Armenia and Artsakh of the political component is not convincing for two major reasons. Firstly, the Tufenkian Foundation that I have discussed earlier, is involved in the resettlement of Syrian-Armenians in Artsakh and the adjacent regions (Tufenkian, 2020). They clearly state the resettlement to happen in lightly inhabited places which are the adjacent regions of Artsakh (Tufenkian, N.D.). The population growth in combination with the fertile grounds would benefit the agricultural sector. In Abkhazia, where the same reasons are given that population growth will benefit the agriculture, the political motivation is acknowledged. Therefore, it seems likely that this political motivation would be the same in Artsakh. Secondly, the statements and policies of Artsakh seem to contradict each other at some points. There is a demographic policy in place and, as described in the foregoing chapter, Artsakh desires a growth in population. A part of this policy is the encouragement program for people to resettle in Artsakh. So the fact that the increase in population is a goal for the Artsakh government is evident. That the movement of numerous Syrian-Armenians families, as well as the moving in of approximately hundred Lebanese people would not be a part of this policy

or would just coincidently overlap the aim in population growth seems very unlikely and is, I argue, not convincing.

To be clear, I am not arguing to discard the argument of humanitarianism and ethnic kinship as a whole. I think the humanitarian argument and that fact the Armenian people want to help refugees they see as part of their people is part of the explanation. I think this argument surely plays a role, but it is not the full explanation. For the reason I think this argument is not the full explanation, I would like to refer to the societal relevance that was discussed in the introduction. Where I explained that geopolitics in the South-Caucasus is best regarded as a zero-sum game because of the intertwining interests of the different (de-facto) states, when one actor gains something this means a direct loss to the adversary. In this geopolitical *game*, I argue, this mercifulness or humanitarianism would not outweigh the financial costs. For the receiving of 22.000 refugees and naturalizing over 60 percent (approximately 14.000) of them the financial costs are substantial. The same goes for the 1.100 Lebanese-Armenian people. With this financial costs I do not mean only the direct financial costs but also the strains it puts on the job and housing market. The Armenian state was already facing big problems regarding poverty and unemployment and these extra costs would be too big to bear, unless there was another (geopolitical) factor on which the gain would be higher. Thus this geopolitical gain would outweigh the economic impact.

The specific gain for accepting these refugees, I argue, can be found in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. To be more precise in the adjacent regions of Nagorno-Karabakh that were under Armenian control between 1994 and 2020. These adjacent regions were before the First Karabakh war inhabited by a mix of Azeri, Armenians, Kurds and Russians (De Waal, 2013). The Armenian people were only a small minority here. Other ethnic groups (mainly Azeri and Russians) were the big majority of the population (ibid.). To illustrate this majority, in Zengilan (one of the adjacent regions) in the Soviet census of 1979 more than 99 percent of the people were non-Armenian (EthnoCaucasus, N.D.). During and shortly after the war the Armenian army expelled all the non-Armenian people from these regions and most of them fled into Azerbaijan. During that time over half a million Azeri people fled Nagorno-Karabakh and the adjacent regions. The big majority of this total fled the adjacent regions (De Waal, 2013). As the majority of the inhabitants fled the region or were expelled around 25 years ago, the political gain for Armenia and Artsakh, I argue, would be the repopulation of these territories. For the beforementioned Zengilan district I have shown evidence (as presented in paragraph 3.3.3) that Syrian-Armenians were resettled here by the Artsakh government with the help of Non-Governmental organizations (Tufenkian, N.D.).

In the analysis chapter, three important things came to the fore about the relation between the governments of Artsakh and Armenia. Firstly, the government of the Republic of Artsakh is trying to achieve a growth in population, as discussed above. Especially in the adjacent regions they tried to

resettle more people, as these regions are lightly inhabited and have great agricultural potential. Non-Governmental organizations, Tufenkian, AGBU and Hayastan All-Armenia, were supporting the Artsakh government to carry out these policies (ArmeniaNow, 2013; Hayastan All Armenia 2018; Tufenkian, 2020). Secondly, through foundations, the Armenian government is in multiple ways involved in the state of affairs in Artsakh. One of these involvements is connected to the Hayastan All-Armenia foundation. The Armenian Government is responsible for part of the funding of one of the projects of the Hayastan All-Armenia foundation, a road from Armenia to Artsakh (Armenia Fund, 2016). Furthermore, after the Second Karabakh war in 2020, the Armenian Ministry of Diaspora Affairs set up a fund together with the foundation to help victims of this war (Ministry of Diaspora of the Republic of Armenia (N.D.). Thirdly, as explained in chapter 4, Artsakh is fully dependent on Armenia in terms of defense and economy. A part of Armenia's national strategy is supporting Artsakh in terms of security and economic stability (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, 2020). These policies, according to Artsakh, would contribute to a growth in population (N. Baghdassaryan, personal communication, 26-09-2020). That this population growth, or at least the policy that contributes to it, is indirectly supported by Armenia brings me to the most important finding about the role of Armenia. In the foregoing chapter I have argued how, in terms of defense and economy, Artsakh is almost fully dependent of Armenia. I concluded that basically the Artsakh state would not be viable without the help of Armenia, in other words it could not exist if it did not receive the Armenian support. Therefore, the Artsakh state and its policies are so intertwined that we should consider Artsakh politics as a part of Armenian politics. Although, officially Armenia does not recognize the Artsakh state, as discussed in 4.4.2, the actions of Armenia contradict this official statement. This point is reiterated by multiple authors who state that practically Artsakh is de facto a part of Armenia (Hughes, 2002; Cornell, 2011). Although, this quote might be merely symbolic also the Prime-Minister Pashinyan recently stated: '' ''*Artsakh is Armenia, and that's it!''* (Kucera, 2019).

What is also important to note here is that the existence of a Ministry of Diaspora already hints to a substantial importance of the diaspora in the Armenian community. This importance can of course be expressed in many different ways but, as I discussed in chapter 4 already, the chief commissioner of this ministry stated that it is a policy goal of Armenia to repatriate (2 million) people from the diaspora to Armenia (Martyros, 2020). How this ministry exactly intends to achieve this remains unclear but the structural policy to bring Syrian-Armenians into the state can surely be accounted as one of the ways. The policy goal to bring people to Armenia can also include the goal to bring them to Artsakh, as it can be seen as a part of Armenia, this notion is reiterated above by the Armenian prime minister and multiple academic authors.

Concludingly, I return to the sub question which was aimed at analyzing two things regarding the Armenian refugee policy. The role of the Armenian heritage of the Syrian refugees and the role of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. For the conflict I have used the similar case of Abkhazia as one of the ways

to explain the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh. First of all the similar Abkhazian case gives us reason to believe that Artsakh and Armenia are involved in ethnogeopolitical practices. The similarities appertain to the history of the people and the core of the conflict but also at the recent developments regarding the position and actions taken in the matter of the refugee policy. The only essential difference is the official position of Armenia and Artsakh which refers strictly to the argument of ethnic kinship and humanitarianism. This argument might hold for the Lebanese-Armenians, for them the problem was really urgent, as many of them became homeless overnight and the majority came in a short amount of time. So to get them relatively quick a safe place to live (within two months) is defendable from a humanitarian point of view. But receiving 22.000 people did not happen overnight, this happened in a time span of nine years. The acceptance of Syrian-Armenians is a structural long term policy instead of a quick ad-hoc solution to the problem of Lebanese-Armenians. So for the Syrian-Armenians I think the humanitarian argument is not enough, like explained above, I think there must be a relatively big (political) gain for the high costs which are made. I argue this gain is a growth of population of the lightly inhabited part of the disputed territories, the adjacent regions of Artsakh.

To put everything together as a concise answer to the sub question. The Armenian refugee policy can be explained by the desire to repopulate Artsakh and predominantly the adjacent regions, that became lightly inhabited due to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The Artsakh government carried out this ethnogeopolitical practice. As the politics, economy and defense of Armenia and Artsakh are deeply intertwined it seems undeniable that the Armenian government played an important role. Furthermore, in the case of the Syrian-Armenian people the Armenian government carried out a structural policy to bring them into the state. Altogether, I have not found any evidence that people were forced to resettle in Artsakh or the adjacent regions though. There was nudging by the Artsakh government (encouragement program), were it seems highly likely the Armenian state was also involved. Nevertheless, it is an ethnogeopolitical practice by the Armenian and Artsakh government to resettle people in occupied areas in order to gain a strategical advantage. There are likenesses between this case and the case of the Circassians that were resettled among the front lines of the Ottoman empire (see paragraph 2.2). The most important difference however is that these Circassians were forcibly resettled but there was no force involved in the case of Syrian-Armenians in Artsakh as far as I could prove.

5.1.2: Main Question

Now that I have constructed a comprehensive answer to the sub question, I return to the main question of this research:

How can we explain the Armenian position and policy with regard to Syrian refugees?

Basically, the foregoing pages have already explained most of the information needed to answer this question. The answer to this question, like I have shown, can be split in two answers that both explain a part of the Armenian position with regard to Syrian refugees. The first part is the official account of the

Armenian government, the second part is the part I unraveled with my research. The latter part has been extensively explained already above, so I will now focus on the first part. The official account of the Artsakh and Armenian government is based on ethnic kinship and humanitarian aid. As Baghdassaryan summarized it: '' *Giving our compatriots from Syria & Lebanon the opportunity to live in Artsakh….this is an opportunity for people in need to reach out and live in safety''* (N. Baghdassaryan, personal communication, 26-09-2020). I have discussed the humanitarian argument already in contrast to the political gain of the ethnogeopolitical practice. But I want to stress again that I do not discard this argument as a whole. I think the part of the ethnic kinship is very important to this humanitarian aid for Syrian-Armenians. So I want to discuss this combination of compatriotism and humanitarian assistance. I think the reference to the ''Historical Motherland'', that I have mentioned a couple of times before, is very important for this argument. This is undoubtedly linked to the biggest tragedy in the Armenian history: the Armenian genocide (as discussed extensively in Chapter 2). This genocide is the most far-reaching event in the Armenian history. For every Armenian this is still very important but it is even more important for the Armenian community in Syria. Of the relatively few survivors of this genocide, many of them found a place to live in Syria. So the Syrian-Armenians are direct descendants of survivors of the Armenian genocide. What is important is that these people, at that time, were driven out of their historical motherland. This historical motherland, Eastern Anatolia or Western-Armenia, was once part of the greater Armenian Kingdom. Now these people can finally return to the only part of this greater Armenian kingdom that is left: Eastern-Armenia, which is now Armenia proper and Artsakh. So for emotional, cultural and even patriotic reasons this move of Syrian-Armenians is quite understandable. Then follows the move to Artsakh and there is an interesting dynamic here. At first glance it might seem not understandable to move from one conflict area to another (albeit frozen) conflict area. But there are two things which might be compelling for these Syrian-Armenians to move there, assuming that there was no obligation or force in play. The first is the extensively discussed encouragement program of the NKR Government, consisting out of financial support, housing and land to farm. But maybe as important are the historical and patriotic reasons. These people descend from the Armenians that lost their historical homeland of Western-Armenia to the Ottomans (Turks) and this can be an opportunity to protect a part of their historical homeland that they might be losing to the Azeri people (allies of the Turks). At least this emotional and patriotic argument can explain partly the willingness of the Syrian-Armenians that have resettled in Artsakh and the adjacent regions.

5.1.3: Moral Implications

These patriotic reasons can partly play a role in some of the families that have resettled in Artsakh, from Syria as well as from Lebanon. Although, it might not be fully in the scope of my research, for me, as befits my background in Political Philosophy, the resettlement in Artsakh of Syrian-Armenians and Lebanese-Armenians does also raise some moral complexities that I want to discuss. These moral implications are mostly related to the argument presented above being the claim to humanitarian aid and

reaching out to people in need. For Armenia proper you can argue that it is better to live there, despite all the problems regarding integration, poverty, housing and jobs, than in an active conflict area such as Syria. For the resettlement in Artsakh and the adjacent regions this is totally different. It is evident that for nearly 30 years this area has been prone to conflict and still was an active, albeit frozen, conflict during the time of resettlement (2011 – 2020). To get people out a dangerous place (Syria) and straightly bring them to another conflict area can hardly be called a sincere helping hand. You can even question if this can really be called humanitarian aid at all. This moral complaint of course is strongly exemplified by the second-Karabakh war of 2020 in which Armenia lost control over parts of Artsakh itself and all the adjacent regions. More importantly, hundreds of civilians were killed and approximately half of the Artsakh population was displaced by this war: over 75.000 people (BBC, 2020e). Logically, as Armenia lost control over the adjacent regions, all the people that lived there are displaced (again). As far as I could find the people were not forced to live in Artsakh or the adjacent regions, so one could argue that those people made their own choice. But did these people really have a decent choice? They came from a war torn country and had no were to go back to, because of the language barrier and the dire economic situation there are little to none good job prospects in Armenia proper. So then the choice has to be made between almost surely living in poverty or take the opportunity to get financial support, housing and a place to farm in Artsakh or the adjacent regions. So it seems that the encouragement program of the NKR was targeted at the most vulnerable people of the society. Or at least it was most appealing for the most vulnerable people in the Armenian society. Refugees (or repatriates) are of course eminently vulnerable people. This adds to the questionable ethical considerations of this policy. Moreover, it is unclear about how these people were informed about the situation in these places they were going to live, the advisor of the Artsakh president presented it to me as *''a safe place to live''* (N. Baghdassaryan, personal communication, 26-09-2020). It seems likely that this was presented to the potential resettlers in the same way.

5.2: Contribution to the field

I have split the contribution this research has for the societal and academic debate in three parts. First the contribution to the debate between Armenia (Artsakh) and Azerbaijan. Thereafter I will discuss the contribution to the Abkhaz case. Thirdly, I will explain what this research can conceptually contribute to the ethnogeopolitical theory.

5.2.1: Debate between Azerbaijan and Armenia

I argue, a quite substantial case has been made for the carrying out of ethnogeopolitical practices by Artsakh with the involvement of the Armenian government. Although there is no hard evidence of the Armenian government being involved, there is evidence of Artsakh being involved in this practice. Subsequently I have shown the links between the governments of Artsakh and Armenia and these connections make it highly likely that the Armenian government was involved in the practice as well. It was not the goal of this research to find hard evidence because, as I have pointed out before, such a goal

is too ambitious. Despite that I think, by using the triangulation method, a substantial case has been built. The conclusion of this research substantiates the accusations of Azerbaijan towards Armenia. To repeat these accusations as they were stated in the introduction: *''Armenia has always pursued a policy of strengthening the status quo based on occupation and annexing Azerbaijani lands. For this purpose, a policy of illegal settlement has been pursued in the occupied Azerbaijani lands. ''* (Pashkin, 2020). Keep in mind that these are not my words, but the word of the Azerbaijani Policy advisor: Hikmet Hajiyev (ibid.). So although this quote contains stronger words than I would use there seems to be truth to it. This research's conclusion largely concurs with the second part of this statement. Because it is highly likely that the Armenian government has played a role in the resettlement of Syrian-Armenians on the lands that Armenia captured from Azerbaijan in the first-Karabakh war in 1994. Another side-note I need to make is about the reason for this resettlement policy. In this quote the sole reason is stated as *'strengthening the status quo'* (ibid.). So Azerbaijan claims the whole reason is to strengthen the situation like it was, being Artsakh's adjacent regions as a part of Armenia. According to Azerbaijan the resettlement was solely for political and strategical reasons. Like I have discussed above, I believe this is not the full explanation of the Armenian resettlement policy in Artsakh. Because I think the humanitarian argument combined with ethnic kinship also plays a role.

5.2.2: The Abkhaz Case

However the goal of this research is to investigate the ethnogeopolitical practices of the Armenian government, I have also build a case for ethnogeopolitical practices in Abkhazia. Initially the Abkhaz case served as a similar case to the research about Artsakh. Information about Abkhazia was easier accessible and people to interview were easier found. Therefore in the end the case about Abkhazia was stronger than the Artsakh case. The fact that Abkhazia wants to achieve a growth in population seemed clear from the start, from information in media outlets as well from information given by people I interviewed. So I would not call that a substantial contribution to the field of research in this case. More importantly I have made quite a substantial case for the likeliness that not only the total population is important for the Abkhaz government but also growth in the percentage of ethnic Abkhazians in the total population. They try to achieve this goal by bringing people in that are ethnically Abkhaz (or Circassian) but also by moving people out that have another ethnicity, for example people with Georgian heritage. So however it is not fully within the scope of the research I have also made a contribution to the case of ethnogeopolitical practice in Abkhazia.

5.2.3: Theoretical contribution to ethnogeopolitics

This research also adds relevant insights for the theorization of ethnogeopolitics. In paragraph 3.2 I have discussed the distinction between the theory of ethnogeopolitics and the practice of ethnogeopolitics. These two concepts can overlap and are of course interconnected. There are different ways to theorize ethnogeopolitics. There is ample theorization about ethnogeopolitics itself and the place it should have in the academic world, more specifically in the field of geopolitics(see e.g. Bassin, 2009; Smirnov 1998;

Rezvani, 2018; Zhirinovskiy, 1998). Also there is some research, predominantly case studies, that can be characterized as ethnogeopolitical research (see e.g. Gulina, 2009; Rezvani 2015). Often these articles or books do however not specifically mention the ethnogeopolitical theory or practice, other concepts are used to describe the subject: '*Migration Management as a Geopolitical Tool'* (Gulina, 2019), '*ethno-territorial conflicts'* (Rezvani, 2015), or '*The Territorialization of Ethnopolitics'* (Jaramillo, 2014). However, in all of these researches ethnicity is the central point of research, just like is the case with ethnogeopolitics.

Remarkably the theorization about what constitutes ethnogeopolitical practices is limited. What I mean to say is that the theorization about the demarcations of ethnogeopolitical practice is limited. Moreover, the same holds for differentiation of multiple forms of ethnogeopolitical practices. The exact demarcations of ethnogeopolitical practices are hard to pinpoint and what constitutes an ethnogeopolitical practice is pretty broad. In this research the ethnogeopolitical practice has been: the migration of people in order to gain a political advantage. A central point here is the specific ethnicity of these people and the political (or strategic) goal that formed the motivation for this migration. That is however not the only form of ethnogeopolitical practice I have mentioned, the placement of Nagorno-Karabakh under the Azerbaijani Soviet Republic during the Soviet Union can also be classified as an ethnogeopolitical practice (see paragraphs 1.5 and 3.2). This policy is different from the one researched in my thesis because in this case there was no migration involved. But still the ethnicity of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh, which was predominantly Armenian, was quintessentially important for this policy and its ramifications. So both cases are examples of ethnogeopolitical practices, but both policies are distinctly different. Therefore, I would propose to make a categorization of different types of ethnogeopolitical practice. Because my research is focused on the one were migration is a central part I will focus on the concept that beholds this form of ethnogeopolitics. I would propose to call this form: *Strategic Migration Policy.* To give a more exact definition I would say this concept beholds the practice (or policy) to migrate a group of people, with a certain ethnicity, to a certain place in order to achieve a political strategic advantage. This advantage can be a variety of different things. For example it can be the (re)population of a region which is beneficial for the agricultural sector and the economy (Artsakh and Abkhazia), or it can be the expulsion of a certain ethnic group to create more ethnic homogeneity in the state (Armenian genocide). It can even be a combination of both these reasons, like seems to be the case in Abkhazia, because there economy and the ethnic makeup of the region are both reasons for the carrying out of strategic migration policy.

With the findings of my research I can conceptualize important distinctions between different forms of strategic migration policy. Not only in the specific goal that is pursued with this policy like I have explained above. Most remarkable in my research is the difference in the way that such policies are carried out. The examples that came to the fore in the history of the region (paragraph 2.2) constituted mostly the pushing out of people; The expulsion of the Circassians out of the Russian Empire and their

forced resettlement in the Ottoman Empire, also I described the expulsion of the Armenians out of Eastern-Anatolia. In all these cases the people were forcibly pushed out the area of residence and it was compulsory for them to settle elsewhere, in other words they were forcibly migrated. Sometimes to a predestined location but mostly the focus was on the fact that these people were out of the original place of residence. These expulsions (forced migrations) I would also classify as strategic migration policies. Because one specific ethnic group is migrated to a certain place to achieve a strategical advantage.

There are two distinctions between these cases and the case of the Syrian-Armenian (and Abkhaz) strategic migration policy. Firstly, instead of a top-bottom dynamic you find in a forced migration of people, in the cases of present day Armenia and Abkhazia there was a more leveled dynamic between the two actors: governments and refugees. For instance in the case of the Abkhaz and Circassian in 2013 the Abkhazian government reached out to the diaspora in Syria. They chartered planes for these people who signed up. This is very similar to the Armenian aid with regard to Lebanese-Armenians. The case of the Syrian-Armenians is a little bit different as they had to come to Armenia themselves and only when they arrived in Armenia they were actively helped by the government and NGO's. Once they arrived in Armenia the strategic migration policy came into play. What is similar in all three cases is that the actor on the individual level had an active role in the process, this is completely different from the beforementioned types of strategic migration policy. Although, as pointed out in the foregoing paragraph, we cannot speak here of a full freedom of choice what is important is that there is an absence of force. The absence of force in the dynamic is tied in with the second difference. The second difference is that the ethnic groups that were involved in these cases were not pushed out but pulled in. Probably, the most important pulling factor was that they were offered a way out of the conflict area. Moreover, they were offered a chance to live amongst their own people with a very similar culture and to return to their ancestral homeland. Apart from these safety and emotional promises these people were in both cases offered substantial financial assistance, housing and jobs in the area of the 'pulling actor' (Artsakh and Abkhazia). So instead of pushing out they are actively pulling people in. However, there was not only the encouragement based on emotional and financial reasons but there was also the active helping of people getting out of Syria by Abkhazia. The same goes for the Lebanese-Armenians towards Armenia: the chartering of planes from Syria towards respectively Sochi and Yerevan.

Despite the differences, the actions by Artsakh and Abkhazia can also be classified as a strategic migration policy because in these cases the migration of a group of people is used to achieve a political goal. Furthermore, ethnicity is a central point of the specific people with which the political goal needs to be achieved. The political goal was growth in population of a (de-facto) republic in which, according to them, ethnicity is more important that (internationally) recognized borders of nation states. Although I would not classify this form of ethnogeopolitics as the same category as forced migration and expulsions.

That brings me to the second specific conceptual addition to the ethnogeopolitical theory. I would propose to make a distinction between the form of strategic migration policy which is imposed on a group of people and the form which is free of force. As I discussed in 5.1.3 I do not think it is fair to speak of a full freedom of choice if it the policy is aimed at the most vulnerable people in society. But we can still make the difference whether or not there is the presence of physical force. The most important distinction between these two is that in the latter form the people who are migrated have an active role in the decision. I propose we speak of a 'hard' and 'soft' form of strategic migration policy. By referring to these classical terms of hard and soft power in geopolitics, we can differentiate between two forms of strategic migration policy. The hard form would then be the form in which the movement of people is forced, so in which the individual actors do not have an influence in the process. An example of the hard form of strategic migration policy would be the beforementioned expulsion of the Circassians from the Russian empire towards the Ottoman empire. On the other hand, both cases described in this research: the pulling in of Armenians by Artsakh and Abkhazians by Abkhazia would be examples of soft form of ethnogeopolitical practice.

Concludingly, this research has contributed in different ways to the societal and scientific debate. The societal relevance can predominantly be found in the cases that has been built for the usage of ethnogeopolitical practice in Artsakh (Armenia) and Abkhazia. To be more specific these states have used: *soft strategic migration policy*. That is where the scientific relevance comes to the fore. I have constructed a concept which explains one of the ways that ethnogeopolitical practice can be carried out. This concept I have called strategic migration policy. Within this concept I have made a distinction between *soft strategic migration policy* and *hard strategic migration policy*.

5.3: Discussion

I have presented an extensive answer to the sub-question and the main research question and I have presented some moral implications of the answer to the research question. Lastly I have discussed what this research might contribute to the field. In this last two paragraphs I will critically reflect on my research, the process of the research and provide suggestions for further research.

5.3.1: The Research Process and Shortcomings

The shortcomings of this research are interconnected to the process of the research in a couple of different ways. When I first started working on this project in the fall of 2019, the initial plan was to go to Armenia and Artsakh to do fieldwork in the summer of 2020. I already had the plan to use the triangulation method but the data was initially supposed to be mainly focused on information gathered from interviews. My supervisor at that time had a substantial amount of contacts in the region who I could contact for an interview. From there on I was planning to use the snowball method to gather more contacts whom I could interview. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic this initial plan had to be changed. During the spring and the beginning of the summer the time plan did not change very much because at that time I was still working on the research proposal and the first version(s) of the background chapter.

Eventually I started the interviewing process during which I preferred to interview people face-to-face albeit via Skype. I could use some of the same contacts my supervisor provided and my plan was still to use the snowball-method to gradually gather more respondents. However, as it turned out, setting up appointments via email for face to face interviews was more time consuming than expected and therefore the first interviews I held were at beginning of the fall of 2020. During the fall the interviews from Abkhazia slowly kept on coming and eventually I managed to interview 9 people that had in different ways a connection to Abkhazia and the repatriation (NGO employee, government employee and repatriates from Syria). In the case of Armenia and Artsakh this was different because also in the fall of 2020 (in September) the second-Karabakh war broke out. This turned out to be the heaviest fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan since the first-Karabakh war in the early 90's. In the weeks prior to the war I managed to interview two people face-to-face from Armenia (a teacher and a free-lance journalist) and I received a written answer of one more person from Artsakh itself (advisor to the president). During and in the aftermath of the war I did not try to interview people from Armenia anymore. As I would not have found many people that would be eager to speak to me anyway. But I did not try to find people as I felt like it was not the time nor I was in the position to ask them questions about sensitive political topics. These sensitive topics being a strategic policy carried out by the Armenian government on the exact territory the war was about. Moreover, Armenia lost this war and large parts of these territories.

Therefore, I slightly changed my research method. Originally the plan was to triangulate the gathered evidence, however initially I expected to gain more information from the interviews. So instead of the main focus on my interviews, the interviews became merely one of the parts of the triangulation method. The first obvious shortcoming is that on the similar case (Abkhazia) I have more firsthand (interview) information than on the actual case which is the focus of the research. This is one of the reasons that the case of Abkhazia on ethnogeopolitical practice is stronger than the case I have built for Artsakh. But this also had to do with the available information while, as discussed before, Abkhazia is also more open in regular media about their policies in general and also about their repatriation program. So, as you might have noticed, the argumentation for the case of Armenia and Artsakh is a little bit more ambiguous.

My main sources of information were internet sources: government and NGO reports but most importantly news outlets. For this type of information two big challenges lurked. Firstly, my language knowledge is limited to English and many news sources were written in Armenian, Azeri or Russian. So I was not able to read a big chunk of the available news sources. This could partially be countered by using translation websites but this mechanism was not flawless. For some Armenian sources one of my contacts in Armenia was so kind to translate them for me. Secondly, information about the situation in such a politically complex situation is always biased. I tried to counter this bias by triangulating different sources from both sides of the conflict. Furthermore I tried to counter this by using news

sources that I estimated to be impartial, such as: Eurasianet, BBC and Al-Jazeera. Concludingly one of the main challenges for this research was the gathering of (trustworthy) evidence. However, by triangulating many different sources (see Bibliography), I think I have overcome these issues pretty well.

Lastly, one of the most important lessons I can draw from this research is that the reason for the ethnogeopolitical practices are hard to pinpoint exactly. The conclusion I draw in my research is mostly based on rationality. Very bluntly I have argued that the humanitarian argument cost too much to be the most important, let alone the only, factor for the explanation of Armenian border policy. This rational argument followed out of my triangulation method, in which I have tried to convincingly fill in the gaps of the argumentation with logical explanations. What is almost completely left out in this research is the emotional factor. It is from a distance, literally and figuratively, as a researcher hard to estimate how big the influence is of the emotional factor. In this research this emotional factor was the fact that Armenia showed mercifulness to their compatriots that suffered from the Syrian conflict. Maybe, in the eyes of the Armenian government, the common tragedy of the genocide and the fact that the survivors were suffering again was way more important than the economic consequences this would have for their state.

5.3.2: Suggestions for Further Research

In the foregoing paragraph I have explained the argument on which the first suggestion on further research is based. My first suggestions would be to research this part which was underexposed in my research. The emotional factor for the Armenian desire to repatriate people to their country could be researched. Of course this is very hard to measure but I think by conducting interviews with Armenian citizens, repatriates and people from the government (preferably the ministry of diaspora), you could construct a comprehensive answer to this question.

Furthermore, the recent war has on itself already sparked many reasons for further research on the Artsakh region. But also in the light of this research it has led to a couple of important developments. Azerbaijan has recaptured the ‘occupied territories’ in other words the adjacent regions of Artsakh and I have shown in my research that numerous Syrian-Armenian families have resettled there. The question of further research could be what has happened to these people now, traumatized by yet another conflict. Also it might be easier now to estimate the total amount of Syrian-Armenian families that in the end resettled in this area, as they had to go back now to Armenia proper or find a new place to live in the part of Artsakh that is left under Armenian control.

Lastly, this research has also yielded insights in the case of the Abkhaz ethnogeopolitical practice. As this region is under control of Russia, further research could be carried out on the role of the Russian government in this ethnogeopolitical policies in Abkhazia. The planes that were chartered landed in Sochi, on Russian soil. So it seems likely that Russia played a role in the movement of Syrian

Abkhazians and Circassians from Syria to Abkhazia. Moreover, the border between Russia and Abkhazia is controlled by Russia. So these people crossed two borders, controlled by Russia, to come into Abkhazia. Further research could be done on how big the role of Russia is and the specific merit for the Russian involvement.

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Appendix:

Interview Transcript Anonymous Source (NGO)

00:00:00
Anonymous Source (NGO): So, wait, where are you based now?

00:00:02
Eelco: I'm in the Nijmegen, in the Netherlands.

00:00:05
Anonymous Source (NGO): OK, and you are yourself Dutch?.

00:00:07
Eelco: Yes.

00:00:08
Anonymous Source (NGO): OK, good.

00:00:11
Anonymous Source (NGO): So so actually it's good that we had this meeting this week because just for you to hear me coughing a bit, actually, I got covid infected during my first week in Abkhazia and almost 70 percent of the colleagues had also been infected. And so I was five days, a half in bed and not very well in the night last week. So now it's already five days.

00:00:42
Anonymous Source (NGO): But so if you had had to do this interview last week would not have been very, very easy. So I survived so far.

00:00:55
Eelco: But you feel better now, hopefully?

00:00:57
Anonymous Source (NGO): Yeah, Yeah, I can tell that it's a it's a very I mean, if you ever get infected, probably the older you'll get it said it's not very fun. I mean, you have a first night, like, terrible headache and the fever.

00:01:10
Anonymous Source (NGO): And then I had for four nights a week during the day, but during the night, almost like somebody beating up my lungs with you have like almost electroshock in the lungs. So where you have the impression that all your ribs are broken and you can even have the walk, you cannot move. You know, you're like you're holding yourself together. Because of pain, but I could breathe normally, so it was OK. And then the fourth day disappeared totally. So yeah, that's fine but it's OK. It's the old memory for me, so it's OK. I hope it will not come back again.

00:01:52
Eelco: No, I hope so too. So should I introduce the subject again?

00:01:57
Anonymous Source (NGO): Yeah, yeah.

00:01:58
Eelco: OK, so I'm currently writing a master's thesis for my study in human geography. The focus of my research is on the influx of refugees from Syria and Iraq towards the southern Caucasus region since roughly 2013, 2015 in the times of the refugee crisis.

00:02:27
Anonymous Source (NGO): Uh huh.

00:02:32
Eelco: Because I think the region is underexposed in the academic literature as well as in just Western media. But however, Syria and Iraq that are countries that host is hosted or still hosted, a sizable amount of people that descend from regions of the Caucasus, such as Armenians, Abkhazians and Circassians. Yeah, so I I think it's been an interesting topic to, to write a research about and, um, well, mainly it's focused on the repatriation of the, the put it, uh, correctly, the not fully recognized republics of the southern Caucasus, such as Abkhazia and Karabakh. So.

00:03:36
Eelco: Do you mind, by the way, if I record this interview,

00:03:41
Anonymous Source (NGO): The thing is that I mean, if you could avoid because actually I had the twice nice experiences and twice not so nice experiences were in the Humanitarian Digest. I mean, they're meant to draw a list. And then the way it was mentioned created was in the final text was not put exactly the same way I had said it. And then it ended up being publicized and then the authorities in charge. In Abkhazia when I came back said, why are you saying this? And it created issues for the agency. So, I mean, you never know where it goes. But I mean, so, of course, I mean, you could you could always record. But then I don't want it to be irritating either the Georgian side or the Abkhaz side, because we are working on both sides. So I'm always very cautious with the recording. I mean, if you don't mind.

00:04:37
Eelco: I can also. Do it anonymously.

00:04:44
Anonymous Source (NGO): Yeah, or if you if you if it says and if it remains anonymous, I think that's fine. If you just would not name the name of the NGO because it created sometimes, I mean, tensions either on one side or the other one.

00:05:01
Eelco: OK, that's fine.

00:05:03
Anonymous Source (NGO): If you think it's OK, you can mention one of the NGOs working in Abkhazia, but not specifically mentioned which and which NGOs and maybe not my name, if it's OK.

00:05:15
Eelco: It was so I will record my own and write down what you maybe important information, but you will stay anonymous in the research.

00:05:31
Anonymous Source (NGO): OK, that's fine. Yeah. Good, good, good.

00:05:34
Eelco: First, can you introduce yourself a bit maybe your your political background, you and your line of work within the NGO

00:05:43
Anonymous Source (NGO): Yeah. So actually, I mean, I've been with the agency for more than 15 years, but in the caucuses now for I mean, in November will be. But I started I mean, I was out of this 10 years and six years area manager for the NGO in Abkhazia. So I was based in Abkhazia actually with two field offices, one in Galli and one in Sukhumi at that time. I mean, different types of projects. But in 2014, the primary focus of all the projects were on the IDP's/ returnee's. So more the Galli population that have been, that have been allowed to return in the Galli district in its old boundaries in virtue of an agreement from 1994 under the UN auspices. And then after 2014, there's been I mean, first wave of Syrians in a refugee like situation came during December 2013. And those were initially assisted by the, uh, the de facto what they call the state committee for Repatriation. And that had quite some funding. I mean through a humanitarian assistance scheme funded by the Russian Federation. They had some funding actually from December 2013 before the Sochi Olympics, till the Sochi Olympics. And then this funding just became scarcer and scarcer. And at that time, it was all in the hands of the authorities in Abkhazia. And they just started approaching us in January, February 2014, telling that they had an issue with funding now except basic allowances for for covering the the rents for some of the of the what they call the repatriates.And you had about 500 Syrians who had come to Abkhazia through this humanitarian corridor. There's been also a wave. You remember we from three? Of Syrians who went to the North Caucasus, so actually in the in Cherkess family. You have different groups. But I mean, the divisions, political divisions happened in the way that different families of the of the Cherkess in the district. But the Adygeans actually are one of the of the of the Cherkess, and the Cherkess are some I mean. You have also the Ugur that is a group that has totally disappeared. The Abazin, you have the Abkhaz and so and there's another group sorry I cannot forget the part. The Kabards, they call it Kabardina actually, I saw this this in group. I mean some have maybe moved, must've moved to Maykop in the north from Syria. Knowing that the Cherkess community was estimated before the conflict in Syria to 130, between 110 and 130.000 people. But very small number has actually moved to Abkhazia, some that had already ties with Abkhazia, because some had relatives who had fought together with the North Caucasians during the 92' 93' war. And some stayed in that case, actually, and then got married. But then they said and the same in the North Caucasus, you had a few Syrians who studied after 92', 93', stayed in the South Caucasus, in Russia during the boundaries of the Russian Federation, and then that with Russian ladies. I mean, it happened quite, quite a lot. So the State committed for repatriation, started having this issue. They addressed UNHCR in early 2014 and requested for assistance. And this is where UNHCR looked at it was just before the huge wave of refugees came to Europe because the funds of UNHCR are divided by regions and Europe at that time at still very low number of Syrian refugees. So they had gathered some friends within the global appeal, but the European region at the quite some amount to be spent.So we ended up in June 2014, The NGO. by receiving a first grant to end up because the projects of UNHCR year and it used to be a year project, we received the first set of funding for about one million dollars till the end of 2014. And then we had in 2015 something like eight hundred fifty

thousand and 2016 and about half million euros. So those three years. So 14, 15, 16, 17, we did have a little bit of funding as part of this refugee crisis.

00:11:09
Anonymous Source (NGO): But at the end of sixteen, beginning of 17, the focus was much less on the on the on the refugees or persons in the refugee situation from the from Syria, but much more from Ukraine. So there's been also a group of 100-200 Ukrainians from Donbas, but mainly of Russian ethnic origin who had ties with Abkhazia in the past and decided to, uh, to come. And so, I mean part of this, our funding So we had to kind of close cooperation with the state red state committee for repatriation and in identifying the beneficiaries and so on. Of course, it had to be it was very politically sensitive because UNHCR had to say things in a politically accepted manner, to the Georgian authorities, who, of course, did not want to have any support, and too persons in the refugee like situation, even though they might have been a humanitarian need.

00:12:15
Anonymous Source (NGO): But they were telling us that it would change the demography of Abkhazia. And this is a this is politically motivated. So we don't want any type of support. And then UNHCR advocated quite a lot and the humanitarian principles that prevailed in the way that some activities be implemented, but not all. And then we had actually three dimensions in in our project.

00:12:39
Anonymous Source (NGO): One dimension was a long economic recovery where we gave trainings and subsidies and grants to businesses. And so based on the profiling of the different entrepreneurs who had entrepreneurship capacity. With the best, something like 50 grand to Syrian entrepreneurs in different sectors and next to this component we, I mean, within this component for some of the most prominent, like promising entrepreneurs will build some commercial premises in one when the settlement that is in the Guli district. So we built four commercial buildings, for 11 businesses to host workshops. So those being publicly owned, but put on the Syrian beneficiaries of being a publicly owned meeting, being on the balance of the state committee for repatriation, but given for use without any renters fee being charged to the beneficiaries. And in this economic recovery thing, for those who did not have the entrepreneurship skills, we decided to launch a work placement scheme. So there was about 30 beneficiaries who were placed in companies that had their own production processes and were receiving some equipment in the form of a grant from DRC. But then over a period of two years, the agency for the first six months was paying seventy five percent of the salary and then 50 percent and 25 percent in the last six months and zero once the equipment could be transferred to the company. So this has worked pretty well in terms of economic integration, knowing that most of them could not speak Russian at all. Or Abkhaz when they came, they came to the region. So this was one of the pillars that we had.

00:14:48
Anonymous Source (NGO): This second pillar was about the building of housing solutions, which was pretty tricky because the state committee for repatriations, when they stop paying rents, they were trying to find alternative solutions for them. And in the same settlement in Gulrich district where you had some abandoned apartment blocks that used to be belonging to a state company that was called the 'Droyda Strum Combinat' these buildings actually, or the flats were totally empty since the conflict, but the building itself was pretty good. And the Syrians had received some of the flats already in this neighborhood, but some of some of the flats were actually in very bad shape and some of them had not been renovated at all.

00:15:40
Anonymous Source (NGO: So it was a long negotiation between the Georgian authorities to make sure, because by placing people in publicly owned flats, I mean, even though the DSC had been dissolved, it is still officially, according to international law funding, and that the state property not knowing which state is in charge. But I mean, actually the Georgian state with Crimea still belongs to us. And the authorities in charge now say it is also belongs to us. So there was no contradiction in the DRC through UNHCR to fund the renovation of those flats because they still belonged to the state in charge. That prevented actually some of the other members of the state committee for Repatriation to actually push for illegal occupancy of Georgian houses in the in Sukhumi or other parts of Georgia. So actually, we renovated like something like 25 flats. So from this 500 individuals, there was about 125, 130 families. So about 25 percent of the families received support from D.R.C. through this project where we fully equipped those flats, renovated them and even had some electrical wiring system in there and two of their apartment blocks where those people were replaced.

00:17:14
Anonymous Source (NGO): And then the last component that was related to education and that it was in different phases where in the sense of Drumgold, we repaired almost 70 percent of loss in the downturn that had been abandoned since the conflict. But almost one thousand. I mean, from outside, the building looks very nice and different sections could still accommodate 80 kids. It was a long back and forth. I would not enter into this, but it took four years to actually allow the kindergarten to operate fully because of legal disputes between the state committee of Repatriation and the district administration of Gulrich, arguing about whether who would be in charge of it.

00:18:14
Anonymous Source (NGO): And then at the Ministry of Education of Abkhazia about the coverage of the salaries of the staff,

that this component actually has been resolved and in the past two years that the kindergarten has been functioning normally in the settlement. But very small number of Syrian kids, actually about five Syrian kids that are 80 kids because it's a neighborhood where only two apartment blocks were hosting Syrians. The other apartment block party abandoned, hosting different communities. Mainly Abkhaz in this town, the settlement. And we had within this education a little bit of support to language classes for Abkhaz language classes and Russian language classes for two years, for about 100 persons in different groups in one of the schools of Sukhumi. And also some of those who could go to university so that the Syrians could go to university. We also to them in doing some internships during the summer time. So they were subsidized internships for about an average two months in the in the sectors they were studying, more as an integration scheme Knowing that their command of Russian at that time was very weak. By that have been studying in Russia and then spending the summer doing internship within two years and does quite improve quite significantly from these 500.

00:19:48
Anonymous Source (NGO): It came to 550 and then it fluctuated time 570 then came back to 500. We estimate about 500 are still here. I mean, there was a group of 20, 30 who left to Germany from Turkey in 2015-16 and when there was this huge wave to Europe. But many youngsters, I mean, the boys between the age of 18 and 25 without families. So those ones tried to go and most of them actually managed to to reach Germany and now have a status in Germany and Austria. And for you to know but now you have seen some spontaneous returns from Syria. I would say that maybe 10 to 20 families have spontaneously returned. And because the situation in Syria is, I mean, economically, a bit of a catastrophe.

00:20:49
Anonymous Source (NGO): And since those who come directly to Abkhazia are granted citizenship immediately and this allows them to access the Russian Federation and for some of them, it is quite easy to get Russian residence permit. And then, I mean, we have two of our colleagues who are Syrians, actually. We hired them for the project in 14 and they are still working with us.

00:21:14
Anonymous Source (NGO): And these two colleagues, for instance, one of them has received the Russian citizenship now, even though she is based in Abkhazia in that case. But of course, to have a Syrian passport alone is a bit complicated. And I know that some of their family members who used to work in the girls and so in Qatar, Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia, when jobs were not secured, it became harder to get jobs. Some of them, instead of going back to Syria, decided to go back to the South Caucasus or to Abkhazia. So some of our colleagues have got like coming back from five, six and uncles and aunts and only two or three that decided to move to Maikup in the north of Adygea. And actually quite a lot. Yeah. So that is more or less on the on the on this the Syrian component, maybe I'm quite a lot of information out here, but yeah, I hope I'm not confusing.

00:22:16
Eelco: You know, I think you actually answered already a lot of the questions that I wrote down. So that's good.. So I'm. I'm little bit confused by the actual population of Abkhazia because I read different numbers and so

00:22:50
Anonymous Source (NGO): Abkhazia itself and there was a vacuum. I mean, the most reliable census that was conducted was in 2013. And there was the estimate of 235.000 people, out of which 44 percent being Abkhaz and 20 percent being Armenian. And I mean 99% (Armenians) of them being and survivors of the of the genocide of, 1915, and that moving to the North Caucasus and then 20 percent of Georgian. And so that 99 % of these being in Galli district. And yeah. So these are the three main groups and 10 percent of Russian speakers. And then the remaining six percent are different groups.So, for instance, we know that there are some I mean, these about 6000 Tajiks & Uzbeks, all the the workers on the market, especially after the Sochi Olympics, a lot of the workers that were in the construction sites in Sochi did not go back to Central Asia and came back to Abkhazia. So you have to add in all the loaders on the market, all the street cleaners, the construction workers in the main sites in Abkhazia, all Tajiks, Uzbeks and some of them have married with Abkhaz and some of them have brought in their families. And then there are very small groups, what they call because you mentioned the repatriates. So these 500 plus repatriates from Syria is only one part of the repatriates, because as part of the of the Turkish-Russian war of 1876-1877, when there was a huge displacement of population from the Caucasus to to the Ottoman Empire, though, you probably heard of this very big battle of Krasnaya Polyana, where actually the Cherkess used to be up to Sochi and all the coast north of Abkhazia. It was all mainly populated by a the Cherkess, the Cherkess group being Adygeans and so on.And one of the groups was exterminated then even I mean, there was one last speaker of this of this group called the Ugur. Maybe you you you heard about them, but it's one of the groups that was totally exterminated during this war. I mean, they were a few survivors, but then the language extinguished in the middle of the of the 20th century. So the Cherkess itself, the Cherkess in group, I mean the pure Cherkess actually went back to what is now in Karachay-Cherkessia, which the Karachay being Turkish by ethnicity that estimated 5million and descendants of Cherkess moved to the Ottoman Empire within these five million one hundred thirty thousand in Syria and little bit in Lebanon and little bit in Jordan.

00:26:13
Anonymous Source (NGO): So you have some repatriates of Turkish origin whose family names are Abaza or are without this type of Machon and so on.

00:26:23
Anonymous Source (NGO): That basically returned. And they were a few families who returned from spontaneously from Jordan to Abkhazia in the last decade. But the vast majority of these 5 million are actually in Turkey. So there is an estimate that we estimate from 4-5 million descendants of Cherkess currently in Turkey and out of which about half a million are Abkhaz. So you have whole villages in the eastern part of Turkey which still have Abkhaz schools. And they have I mean, they speakin Abkhaz. That is actually an Abkhaz from the 19th century. And from 5-6 thousand descendants of Abkhaz holding Turkish passports are actually living in Abkhazia. So you have quite successfully a number of successful businessmen whose family name would be typical Abkhaz being Arzimba or Achbar and the like.

00:27:27
Anonymous Source (NGO): But their first name, these are Abkhaz, Muslims that are I mean, who are descendants of of the of the Cherkess, That were displaced during the 19th century, so it is about 10 percent of the Afghans that are Muslim and 80 percent are Christian or secular, but it's not at all a determining factor in the Abkhaz identity, religion doesn't play at all a role. And actually all the religious holidays are celebrated equally. So it is a little bit like like Kosovo in the sense where religion is not so important to are belonging to the to the to the nation is more important when you compare with Georgia, where religion is is really a constitutive element of the nation. And if you are not Orthodox, you cannot be a Georgian. I mean, you're not you're not really a Georgian because you are not affiliated to the church. I would say so. So you have some returnee's when you speak about repatriate that spontaneously, also still return from Turkey to Abkhazia. So, of course, the tensions when you had I mean, the tensions in Turkey between Turkey and Syria and Russia, they were a few opponents of Erdogan who decided to actually go to Abkhazia in 2015 when there was this shooting of a plane. And some of them actually went to Abkhazia and established themselves to open businesses, knowing that they still keep the Russian passport, they keep the Turkish passport, and they can trade freely between Turkey and Russia using Abkhazia as a platform. So that is more or less the.

00:29:31
Eelco: OK, thanks.So these are the last reliable census was in 2013 and. Do you think the population, uh, in numbers changed a lot since then or. More or less the same amount?

00:30:36
Anonymous Source (NGO): And then the numbers, you mean the number of Syrians, you mean not just the children. The population has not changed drastically. I would say maybe if it's 5000 more. But I would I would consider that are still at maybe 240, maybe in the best case, 245.000 But I mean, if some and spontaneous I mean, some groups have spontaneously moved from Turkey to Abkhazia or some Russians have also started establishing businesses in in Abkhazia. The numbers, I would not say, are very, very significant. And probably from the 20 percent of the Georgians who used to be counted in 2020 that I counted, I would say maybe like forty five. Fifty thousand. I would say that is close to forty five thousand. I would not be surprised that 5000 Georgians have left Georgia since, because there's been quite some movement after the election of Raul Khajimba, I would imagine, back in in 2014. So he stayed in power to 2020. There's been a lot of discussions around the access to peasant documentations, to Georgians who used to get Abkhaz passport during the previous regime of Alexander Ankhvab.But then all these 26.000 passport had been annulled by the the the the government of the Raul Kajimbaa. So this has created a lot of uncertainties. And in 2018-17, I mean, it was voted actually in 16 and 17, 18. And they've actually started issuing some residence permits to the Gali residence. And this has created a lot of uncertainty for them in terms of exercise of their basic rights. And a few thousands left to to, uh, to Georgia and a lot of young people who finished university tend to emigrate to Georgia.

00:32:57
Eelco: So you talked about this big Cherkess group in Turkey. That also some of them might go to Abkhazia.

00:33:10
Anonymous Source (NGO): Yes, some of them in about 5-6000, have moved to Abkhazia since the early 2000. So you have a few Abkhaz of them in the with with the Turkish community In Abkhazia and some are mainly active in the in the field of the business sector, so they do a lot of trading between Turkey and Abkhazia. Or Turkey and Russia through Abkhazia the.

00:33:53
Eelco: So maybe you mentioned it before, but do you know how many of these repatriates from Syria are staying now still in Abkhazia?

00:34:04
Anonymous Source (NGO): I would say may maybe five, 500, 550.I mean, I don't think the number some have left that some spontaneously. So I would say it's coming about to that

00:34:20
Eelco: And, In 2018 in Syria recognized Abkhazia. Has this led to any meaningful trade or diplomatic relations between the two states?

00:34:38
Anonymous Source (NGO): Well actually the Syrians were easily moving before, but they had to go through Russia. So they wanted to renew some documents. They had to go to the to the Syrian embassy in in in Moscow, which is not which is not the case now. So I mean, it it's facilitating. I know they opened the embassy in Moscow and they did like one months ago in the in Sukhumi. So I think I think it has improved for them. I mean, individually, I think people are. Pretty, Pretty happy for that.

00:35:24
Eelco: So it is easier to travel or to come to Abkhazia from Syria?

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Anonymous Source (NGO): I mean, yeah, any Syrian citizen can go directly to. I mean, no matter if they are Abkhaz or not Abkhaz, they can go to Moscow just with a tourist visa and then they can enter Abkhazia. This is not a this is not an issue at all. Actually, and it used to be easy for the ones who were part of this humanitarian corridor because they were receiving immediately Abkhaz passports with an Abkhaz, passports, you can enter Russia as if you had an international passport.

00:36:03
Eelco: OK, and.

00:36:08
Anonymous Source (NGO): Um, I don't know if I answer your question, no.

00:36:13
Eelco: Yeah, I think so, so it's easier for Syrians to travel now or to even apply for citizenship.

00:36:26
Anonymous Source (NGO): I mean, again, all the repatriates are allowed and entitled to get citizenship of Abkhazia. So it is not this recognition has not impacted at this on that at all because every member of the Abkhaz diaspora can get citizenship provided that he proves his origin back. It's very detailed, the work for those who want to keep that their Syrian passport at 99 percent, of course, pressure also to keep an internationally recognized passport. So when they need to renew his passport, they can do it directly in Sukhumi when before they had to go to Moscow to do it. So it's just facilitating the process. But it's not changing actually much for them. But knowing that many of the Syrians who got after Abkhaz documents, then they also try to get Russian documents and especially the Russian citizenship, because it's facilitates international movements much more than just having a Syrian passport.

00:37:40
Eelco: Is it a specific goal of the Abkhazian government to achieve a growth in population?

00:37:52
Anonymous Source (NGO): I mean, it is never been a declared thing of the day for them to treat all the Abkhazia's as potential returnee's. And this is this is I mean, just seen in this perspective, I would say it is not. I don't think there's an intention for the Abkhaz to actually I mean, there is maybe a vision to have as many repatriates coming back to Abkhazia, but there is no policy intended policy beyond the establishment of the state committee for Repatriation to do maybe like Israel to bring thousands and thousands of Jews from all over the world to change the demographic structure of the country. So, of course, if Abkhazia would have the same financial resources as Israel has, then probably they might pursue the same objective. But since it is a very poor state and they and they are fully dependent, I mean, to a great extent on the Russian subsidies. It's very difficult to pursue this individually. I mean, except if you have some businessmen who want to give some donations or if you had this a little bit of financial support that was taking place in 2013-14 through the Russian Federation.Of course, that this vision and ambition, but I think the means are not there to achieve this ambition, whereas, for instance, Israel has much more financial means to do so. And even though I mean for Israelis is mainly motivated by religion and for Abkhazia, it's more motivated by it, by ethnicity

00:40:06
Eelco: OK, um. So do you think the Committee for Repatriation. Has yielded the results they wanted, like repatriate people and try to integrate them, I guess, in society.

00:40:38
Anonymous Source (NGO): They have done a lot. But again, there's been very, very little financial means allocated except in ‘13, ‘14. So there is a very high commitment on their side. And they've been trying, to the extent possible, to pay rent, to support them with suitable housing solution, with the provision of language classes. But it has never reached a level that that could be, you know, a level that could really make a big, big difference in terms of repatriation. But I mean, they are very dedicated. And I would say the very much in the mission that they have, but the financial means that they have to do so, they are not so high.

00:41:32
Eelco: OK. Uh. Well. I think you answered most of my questions already,

00:41:47
Anonymous Source (NGO): So you will do an interview, quite a lot of other people now. Or How does it shape?

00:41:53
Eelco: Well, I'm trying to but I, uh, well, it's hard to find people who want to be interviewed or even to contact people because via email and it's going pretty slow. But, uh, yeah, I'm trying to interview people who have expertise about the subject as well in Abkhazia as in Karabakh

00:42:23
Eelco: Now, it's really hard to people there because the recent outburst of violence.*:* But, uh, yeah, if you know any people who might be able to help me, maybe a written questionnaire or an interview,

00:42:38
Anonymous Source (NGO): uh, do you speak Russian or not so much?

00:42:42
Eelco: No.

00:42:42
Anonymous Source (NGO): No. Yeah. So I think I mean, I could I could try to see whether there are some I mean, there are few Syrians that speak English and. But I yeah.

00:42:53
Anonymous Source (NGO): I don't I don't know how much they would be willing to be interviewed, but I could ask them.

00:43:01
Eelco: Yeah. Also I can provide the via my, uh supervisor who can translate the written question out to Russian.

00:43:11
Anonymous Source (NGO): So then maybe there are people who would be able to fill it in in Russian and then I can so I could ask around and then I will let you know I can drop a line on on Skype, OK. Have you managed to speak to other people besides that or not so much.

00:43:29
Eelco: Uh, yeah, a few. And I have planned an interview for tomorrow and the day after too, so it's slowly getting I'm getting more interviews, but it's OK.

00:43:43
Anonymous Source (NGO): You have not spoken to anyone from the diaspora itself.

00:43:46
Eelco: Now that will be very much helpful if that is possible. Yes.

Interview Transcript Anton Yevstratov

00:00:03
Eelco: Then it's recording now. OK, so.

00:00:10
Eelco: Yeah, it's not my main topic of the research, but I'm also interested in the conflict for now. Do you do you see, how do you see it developing? Do you see a chance for a sustainable future for Karabach and peace?

00:00:30
Mr. Yevstratov: I don't see the normal future if, for example, Armenia and Azerbaijan, least together and so on, because of course, of course too many blood for now, too many killed people, too many already barbaric situations.

00:00:55
Mr. Yevstratov: And we, of course, with just citizens, not with militants, and not only by rockets and bombs, Azerbaijanis, but also because of who they are, hands in their villages or near that border. And of course, after that, after this all military crimes, I don't see the possibility of in near time, in the near future to live together.

00:01:36
Mr. Yevstratov: So I think, I think only one solution and we speak about it every time, we talk about it every time. And it's only recognition of Artsakh, As a free Republic, as a free state.

00:01:53
Mr. Yevstratov: And of course, I can understand that it can be a discussion between about borders. Of course we can discuss about it. It's a hard question. I agree. But I think it can be discussed. A discussion about status, about status. So after this war, another war to end after a little war, sorry, and after a little war of 2016 and after the situation in Tavush in July of this year, it's impossible for Artsakh and for other Armenian territories to be part of Azerbaijan. And of course, Aliyev said that he can give Armenian citizens of Artsakh all people pride and so all rights and so on. But of course we understand which person is near us. We understand. This regime broke already three agreements, peace agreements for the last two weeks, as I remember. So it's impossible to believe even one word of this dictator. And my opinion, and not only my opinion, is that it's completely impossible to have another solution, not recognization of Artsakh, only this. So under. Even after this solution, I think, we cannot say it is finished. Because we should have the we should have walls guarantees. We should ban it from other from centers of power to stop another aggression. Of course, Artsakh was ready, Artsakh was ready for this aggression. Its army is goal was and is now ready for this and are ready for military activities. But it is a very small country. So it is only one hundred and fifty thousand and even less of that citizens. And of course, for normal future of region of South Caucasus, we should have some guarantees. I don't I don't know. Is there any ability of the world structures of United Nations, of other structures to do something? In this case? I say true. I don't see anything of this case, anything, really. I mean, but if we talk about a real solution around a real peace, so it's we have only one away, only one letter. And I I think something like these.

00:05:55
Mr. Yevstratov: Wait, my power is not enough.

00:06:01
Mr. Yevstratov: It's OK, you can ask me just like, oh, it's OK, it's OK.

00:06:09
Mr. Yevstratov: Yeah.

00:06:12
Eelco: So can you give introduce yourself a bit and your background and your work?

00:06:23
Mr. Yevstratov: As I said, I talked, I had I told my name is Anton Yevstratov , I am a Phd in history. I'm a lecturer of Russian Armenian University in Yerevan, Armenia. So and also as a hobby, I am a journalist and political analyst in some projects for Russian, Armenian and European, for example, European Project was 'Walls and Strategic insights' and columnist and also write some Iranian products. So my topic of my research is the main topic of my research is Middle East Islam, Shia Islam and of course, the political policy of the Middle Eastern country, mostly Iran, Syria and other and Iraq and other Shia countries.

00:07:31
Mr. Yevstratov: Also, of course, as I live here, I specialize in the South Caucasus or the South Caucasus problems mostly, of course. Of course, here Karabakh conflict and Armenia history and the Armenian policy, Armenian Future Solutions as we talked about it. Now, I think like this. What can I say?

00:08:09
Mr. Yevstratov: I think that so if you have some questions I can answer.

00:08:16
Eelco: Are you like a freelance journalist or are you working for certain companies?

00:08:24
Mr. Yevstratov: Yeah, I'm a columnist of some companies like Armenian Museum of Moscow, and I'm a freelance journalist of some projects in Russia, mostly in Russia, as a war journalist. As a military journalist, I am a freelancer.

00:08:46
Mr. Yevstratov: Yeah. I find. And abilities to work. Yeah.

00:08:52
Eelco: So, I think you publish your articles or your things in Russian or Armenian or also in English?

00:09:03
Mr. Yevstratov: Mostly in Russian. Mostly in Russian of course. But also I have publications in English of course, especially political analysis in English. I have many articles in this case and also Armenian too. I mean I have our many articles. Yeah, I have Armenian articles and even some Farsi articles. What. Ahead, not so much about the in Iran, I, I mean, which was published in Iran.

00:09:41
Eelco: So now will move on to more specifically my subject of research.

00:09:51
Eelco: So first question is, do you think that since, uh, the new president of Armenia Pashinyan, if I'm pronouncing it right. Do you think it has had a big effect on the negotiations or the stance on the Azerbaijan and Artsakh , do you think in rose up the tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan?

00:10:24
Mr. Yevstratov: First of all he is not the president, he is prime minister, head of the head of government. Now, after constitution changes. We had a parliamentary republic. So he's yeah, he's a head of state.

00:10:39
Mr. Yevstratov: But we have another president. Yeah. It's not so important. But about negotiations, you know, he did reasonable words in his speeches. And it was. Yeah, as well. It was very popular in Armenia. It wasn't very popular in Azerbaijan. They started with President Aliyev, even some polemics about outside with a point and other signs.

00:11:22
Mr. Yevstratov: And yes, there are some people who like to make him guilty in this present process because of his speeches. But of course, I can't believe in this because, of course, I can believe that Aliyev, starts to buy weapons, starts to prepare to a war because of words. It's impossible, of course, I think. As everybody the words were very good for Aliyev because now in his interviews to Russian media, to European media, is to make it here, he had many interviews. He also talked about these speeches of Pashinyan, to present him as an aggressor. He said that Artsakh is Armenian so he starts this war. But everybody knows that Azerbaijan bought weapons for the last minimum 10 years, I think. So he spent a lot of money, billions of dollars for that. It was. And it starts not a year ago, not half of a year ago. It started many years ago. And I can say that the last time he more or he did less. Well, it's because he has less money from oil because of crisis and so on.But it's not new for Baku it's just the reality. But of course, he had so much weapons, weapon for moving forward, not to stop Armenians so moving forward to take Artsakh back. So I couldn't believe I can say I can't even imagine that. Just words, of Pashinyan, were the reason of that. No, because no, it's a strategic line, a strategic vector of Aliyev's policy of all Aliyev's, policy setting and not only Aliyevs of course, I think Erdogan policy is mostly. Turkish, I mean.

00:14:10
Eelco: I don't know if you if you know anything about the refugee situation in Armenia, but I found an article that's from Al Jazeera that estimated that between 2011 and 2019, somewhat twenty thousand people have fled from Syria to Armenia, which were mainly Syrian-Armenians and Yazidis .Do you think this estimation is correct?

00:14:43
Mr. Yevstratov: I think more and more or less correct. I think more or less correct, because, I mean, faced another number, I think that maybe it's not so incorrect. About ten thousand people from Syria. Yeah. In Armenia and also some families moved to Artsakh. But maybe at all. There was 20 thousand here and maybe it was more maybe I think Al-Jazeera was more or less correct.

00:15:26
Eelco: So, um. So you think, like half of them stayed and the rest moved further to Europe or to other parts of the world,

00:15:40
Mr. Yevstratov: there are no exact statistics of that. I have never faced but I think about it Maybe a little less maybe. But yes,

I think some refugees, if they just had Armenia and saw Armenia as a trampoline, as a step to go to Europe, maybe USA to. So, you know, Armenians they are easy to move for that.Because of diaspora's, because of the relatives because of connections. So they are more mobile.

00:16:34
Eelco: Let me see. So there is this the government run programs by Artsakh and the Armenian government, I think, to encourage people to resettle in the Artsakh region, which has incentives to offer lands, jobs, money for people moving there. What do you think this this program has over the last years yielded results? In other words, Do you think many people have moved to Artsakh because of this program?

00:17:15
Mr. Yevstratov: Not many people moved to Artsakh. But there was something there or some people, of course. Yeah, it works. Some programs for in some regions. For example, Karvachar region, it's a region of the north of Arstakh. And yeah, it was. You know, it's not so, so warm or so easy regions and they have many territory, much territory. So it was a goal. I think I can call it a goal to have more citizens there.

00:18:01
Mr. Yevstratov: And yeah, for example, in Karvachar region, they gave, as I remember, they gave territory for farming. They gave even as I remember homes, it was like a credit but, like easy credit. It is. Yeah. And some people from mostly Armenia and took these programs and they used these programs. As for refugees from Syria. I know some of them, some of them. It was just like some families, not many people, some live in Stepanakert. And I know this family is very interesting. They are very interesting people and some are in villages, but in Artsakh villages. I don't remember that they used to these programs. And now I know I don't know. But before war, they were there. And a family in Stephanakert is still there. This is for sure.

00:19:30
Eelco: So is it like a goal of the Republic of Artsakh to achieve a growth in population by this program?

00:19:41
Mr. Yevstratov: I can call that is a goal, but I, I can't say that they were successful in this. So, yeah, they do. They did it. And, as I said, not by many Syrian refugees. Mostly by Armenian people. Just Armenian people who wanted farming, who wanted normal conditions, better conditions of farming to start with their farm business and so on. So I can’t say that the refugees are The strong factor on this, but yes, we have some families. But I think a long time ago, because now this this works. It worked, as I said, not too successful. Just start. I can say that it was just started in some villages and some even some towns, like in Karvachar. It's a town. There are maybe 700 people. But it's only small steps.

00:21:14
Eelco: OK.

00:21:19
Eelco: So I did find some info in some articles that said that after the explosion in Beirut, in Lebanon, that the Artsakh government had reached out to some ethnic Armenians in Lebanon and they relocated them to Artsakh. I don't know exactly how many people that were.

00:21:43
Mr. Yevstratov: Some families. Yeah, it's about about a hundred, as I remember.

00:21:49
Eelco: A hundred people or a hundred families?

00:21:49
Mr. Yevstratov: About hundred people and some with families. It was strange in my opinion and strange policy by the new president of Artsakh. Because many opposition leaders told that it is better to first, it is better to make a better life for people here, only that after that we should invite people. But he did it. It was in my opinion, it was a just political decision just because just because of growth in population because of the PR and so on, I don't think that it was really economical or really economical viable. I don't think that it was that. I don't think that economic of Artsakh really needed. Just the president needed it. It just it by the way, it's normal. He almost integrated them now It was the start. Now the war started. Of course, we will have problems not only with refugees, but with our Artsakh populations.

00:23:50
Mr. Yevstratov: So I thought if we didn't have war, I think it wasn't it would not have a problems with integration. You know, we have many land in Artsakh can accumulate refugees and new people, but now I can say and think about it, it will it will depend of results of war and it will depend of all of the activities of government too. To rebuild, to reconstruct everything, I hope they will. We, of course, must spent a lot of money for that. I don't know what can happen, what can happen with a republic to and where find money. I think it must be in investments from of course, from other countries, but now it's important to stop war, of course, to stop war, to declare victory.

00:25:22
Eelco: So this this relocation of people from Lebanon, do you think it's possible that they they did it with Syrian-Armenians as well, like this comparable policy or with the Yazidi's?

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Mr. Yevstratov: I repeat the first part of the question, what do you want to ask exactly?

00:25:50
Eelco: So, like the government help some people for humanitarian reasons or, as you said, political reasons too?

00:26:01
Mr. Yevstratov: Yeah.

00:26:02
Eelco: Do you think it might have happened with the Syrian-Armenians as well?

00:26:06
Mr. Yevstratov: Syrian-Armenians were before it, so, you know, and mostly Armenian government helped them and I told it's just some of them, just some people, some families move to Artsakh. I don't know, I don't I didn't hear even that they used some special programs. But they are successful, very successful in Artsakh. And it's very interesting. But maybe because of that reason, because of their own reasons, they are very creative, very interesting people. So they could start some project in Artsakh. Cafe Santa to arrange to have a winter gardens is a balance and so on with tropical fruits and the and other projects. So but it was not a program, as I remember. It was just that they are all their own abilities. They are all kinds of good.

00:27:27
Eelco: The last census of the Artsakh population of found was from 2015, and then it counted like 145 thousand people, do you think that it has changed for the last years or less stayed the same like before the war? Because I think now. Maybe people have fled.

00:27:52
Mr. Yevstratov: Now, of course, we have less population in Artsakh for sure, because we have now our own refugees from Artsakh to Armenia. Many, many people have refugees in our home, I have refugeer in my home. We can't say how many exactly. We don't have this statistic because some people move there and they go back and so on. Some people, for example, like I were in Artsakh, first day of this war, we woke up from the from the war, from the artillery shelling. Yes, and I, for example, moved my family to Yerevan. I called a car, the driver, and they went to Yerevan. So I and I stayed there, stayed in Stepanakert. And now I'm here (in Yerevan) after some days and they will be there. So it's impossible to have exactly the exact statistic. But many, of course, people and, you know, we have people from villages near the border who must go somewhere because it's a field of war. It's a field of battle and battlefield. And of course, until sure. You know, that even Stephanakert and Sushima, and towns and cities. Towns, of course, are in there are they are goals for rockets and artillery from Azerbaijan too. we have a refugees from the four of them from these cities and towns to of course.

00:30:22
Mr. Yevstratov: But no, but there are many people in the state in Stephanakert too.Even in my building when I were there, I saw that there are many people there with children, with their kids, with the old people, mothers, grandmothers, grandfathers and farther town. So what I can say, but if you ask to about dynamics, of course, I can say that now we have much less population in Artsakh. and maybe less by dozens of thousand. I think we can stay and we can say about dozens of thousand, maybe 10.000, maybe 20.000 of these. But exactly I can say and nobody can say, I think nobody can say maybe after war we can have some statistic. But for what I know for my afterward, some people, for example, will stay in other villages and towns because their homes are broken now. And of course, we have this problem too. And they will they will move towards it. It will be just one way for them to move maybe a Stepanakert and Artsakh get enough to maybe move to Armenia. I mean, we don't know that. But of course, for now, it's much less people in Artsakh only not safe in the in the every town that are down and terror, we have we have more militants there, but less citizens, of course.

00:32:40
Eelco: I read something about the suspicion that Azerbaijan had hired mercenaries from Syria. I think a few weeks ago, it wasn't sure yet, but now it has been confirmed also by Western-Media. But I also read that there are volunteers in Artsakh from other countries, then Armenia, for example, Greece, they were for nothing. What do you think about that?

00:33:19
Mr. Yevstratov: OK, I have an example for you. Hold on.Yeah, now everybody knows that we have Syrian legionnaires in in Azerbaijan aside, of course we have and we have managed and now the special services. So for all the countries of the world, Russia, USA, France and so on, have made a statement about it. They open talked about it and president's talked about it. Macron talked. Putin talked about it, Pompeo talked as I remember. And many politicians and officers in other countries and in these countries too. So about people from other countries in Artsakh army. I can say that it's for them. For me, I am not citizens or citizen of Armenia. I have a Russian passport. And Thursday I had a wish to join the Artsakh army and to be in

there in its side. But in the military wing commander, I mean, the military commission, the military commission, wo work with soldiers, so they said no, because they said no. Because I don't have an Armenian passport and they don't want these soldiers. So and I have many examples of, for example, one of my students. I have many, many foreign students here. One, I have one. I have my student from USA. He also went to a military commission and they said no to him. So but we have we are in good physical shape. We are we can be useful for them there. We are young and so on. Now there are many people. Yeah. Armenians, I'm not Armenian so there are many Armenian people move and try to move from Russia, from Greece, from other countries. But and they. I mean government tries to not use them just and just to give them some military education, some are preparing and yet we may be for for future years. But it's a very big problem for using Armenians from other countries, just people For now, they just use people with Armenian passports. And I can say that because I couldn't pass this door and I couldn't join. I and I had a wish of course.

00:36:47
Eelco: OK, I want to go back to one question, because I forgot to ask a question about the programs for people, incentives to move to Artsakh is the only possible to obtain or to opt for this program if you have an Armenian passport or is it also possible if you dont have a passport?

00:37:08
Mr. Yevstratov: Uh, if you. You know, if you if you are a refugee and you know, if you are mean, if you are Armenian refugee, it's very easy to have an Armenian Passport and it's easy conditions. For example, I'm not Armenian, so I have common conditions to get this passport and I still didn't have, it but don't have it. But if you are Armenian and these refugees are Armenians, so they have it very easy to get a passport. And yes, after athey get this Armenian passport, they used to these problems there with Armenian passport. And I can even say that some of them have an Armenian passport before now. You know, many Armenians in Diaspora took these passports just. And for what? For what? Some people have it for fun. And the many American Armenians have Armenian passports.

00:38:19
Mr. Yevstratov: It's it's another problem, especially for me to get an Armenian passport. But I don't know what to do with it. Just, yeah, many Armenians from Diaspora have passports and even don't have to take it here.In here, Yerevan, in passport center. Imean, it's not a point of discussion, it's not a problem. It's very easy.

00:38:53
Eelco: So basically, if you. They are ethnically Armenian, then you are able to get a passport?

00:39:05
Mr. Yevstratov: Because of your nationality, if you are basically Armenian and if you have one of your parents, Armenian, yeah, you'll have easy conditions. So I think exactly, exactly. You will get this passport.

00:39:27
Mr. Yevstratov: I have only one only one experience when people are of Armenian nationality, couldn't get a passport from some years, but he was an opposition leader.

00:39:51
Eelco: All right, I think I asked most of the questions that I wanted to ask you. Yeah. Thank you very much. And I want to ask you one last question, if you have for me: Acquaintances, people you know, who have also expertise on this, when the subject might be able to help me, then you can hopefully bring them into contact with me.

00:40:20
Mr. Yevstratov: And why not? I just want to ask, how long should you work on this research? Because, for example, now I have I can give you something about eye contact with people here, mostly by Facebook, but Azerbaijanis blocked my Facebook for a month. So I will be able to use the Facebook only maybe about one or two days later after that. Yes, I can speak with some people. You may be friends with some of the refugees. You can speak with them. I have a person, as I said, in Artsakh. I think, who can speak with you and he can explain you everything about his family and about his life there and all you're interested in. I don't know, because not now. I am only in in other social networks. Just talk to the Telegram and on Instagram. They couldn't block it and I can use it. But yes, if it's a long time research, why not. I can.

00:41:36
Eelco: Yeah, I don't know. I think I need it completed in the next few months,

00:41:44
Mr. Yevstratov: so it's OK.

00:41:45
Eelco: OK, so why not have maybe if their Facebooks are not blocked, you can give me the names and I can look them up and or you can email.

00:41:55
Mr. Yevstratov: I just must to speak with them if they are agree of OK, so there's no problem.I just know they keep silence and then Facebook will be unblocked.

00:42:11
Mr. Yevstratov: Of course I hope near the new day this week, maybe the end of this week, I would be able. So if they will not block me again, I will able to help you.

00:12:25
Mr. Yevstratov: It's no problem I will inform you, of course. Yeah. And my. When will you present your research or will you publish your research? I don't know. We only publish it or not. Can I read it thing for me. You. No, you know, I don't want to edit my words.I can use all my words or I can answer for every one of them. It's not a problem. But and you can interpret it to them as you want. I believe you. And I believe in your in your other adequate. That you are adequate. So I just it's just interesting to me for me to read.

00:13:23
Eelco: Of course I will. I will let you know if it's finished and maybe I will publish a version of it in an academic journal, but it's not sure yet. But I will let you know when I finished. Then you can read it. Of course.

00:13:40
Mr. Yevstratov: OK, ok. Of course we do want to read or do we want to publish.

00:13:48
Eelco: My supervisor is. It's a small journal. It's. It's the Journal of Ethnogeopolitics.

00:13:58
Mr. Yevstratov: I know I know this, but let me OK, I will, if you will publish. I just read it maybe. Of course. If of course. If you will not if you will not to publish and read it in your native language.

00:44:17
Eelco: No, it will be in English. But, OK, maybe we'll see. OK, thank you very much for your time and for your expertise. And yeah, if you can let me know if you have any people. It would be great. OK.

00:45:29
Mr. Yevstratov: Oh, OK.

00:45:30
Eelco: I hope you you will stay safe.

00:45:32
Mr. Yevstratov: Thank you very much.

00:45:36
Eelco: This situation will hopefully better for the near future.

00:45:43
Mr. Yevstratov: Hope so. Thank you very much. Thank you very much.

00:45:47
Eelco: So bye, it was nice talking.

00:45:53
Mr. Yevstratov: So bye.

Transcript Interview Dunya Basol

''I am Eelco Rosenberg, a masters student from the Netherlands. Currently I am conducting research for my Master's Thesis in the field of Human Geography. I received your contact information via Babak Rezvani, who is my thesis supervisor. The focus of my research is on the influx of refugees from Syria and Iraq towards the Southern-Caucasus region since 2015. The research is focused on the Southern-Caucasus for multiple reasons. Firstly, this region is underexposed in the academic literature as a whole. In terms of the refugee crisis in the mainstream media as well as (Western) academic literature this region might be even less exposed. as well goes for the refugee crisis. Secondly, Syria and Iraq were/are countries that host a sizeable amount of people that descend from inhabitants of the Caucasus regions, mainly Armenians, Abkhazians and Circassians. Lastly there are the geopolitical complexities in the region that makes the influx of refugees that are ethnically akin to people living in the region, even more interesting.

Therefore, in my opinion this region with regard to the refugee crisis is unfairly underexposed for the reason that first of all these developments caused some of the same problems it has posed in the West. Furthermore, it has also yielded opportunities for some parts of the region. These opportunities are the main focus of my research.

Forgive me for being blunt about some subjects, if you do not want to answer about certain topics then we will just move on to another question. Moreover, if you desire so, I can guarantee your anonymity in the process ''

General Questions

1. Can you introduce yourself a bit, for instance your (political) background, your line of work?

State Burecracy, used to be a citizen, moved back to Turkey 1.5 years ago.

Doctor, graduate in Israel on Middle-Eastern Studies, not really narrow anymore. Caucasus and Southern-Caucasus is also included in the "greater Middle-East. Masters degree in the Turkish military academy. Double Bachelor Degree – International Relations and Public relations. Mostly interested now in ethnicity – transnationalism, Ethnic relations between groups that are living in the different countries (of the 'Greater Middle-East'). **Which exactly overlaps with your topic because Abkhazia is transnational, there are only 100.000 Abkhazians in Abkhazia**, but something around 500.000 of them are abroad. Mainly, working on the Kurdish case and Kurds, Abkhazia is naturally overlaps my field of interest as well. I got married with my wife in Akbhazia, she is from the Abkhaz diaspora from Turkey. We got married there and resettled there up until 1.5 years ago, when we moved back to Turkey. We worked in the Abkhaz presidency strategic research centre, also I worked for Unicef as a consultant also for the Danish Refugee council in Abkhazia. Although we do not call them refugees but repatriates, because they are resettling in their ancestral homeland, we call them for diplomatic reasons (regarding Georgia) Refugees/repatriates when in the DRC or Unicef.

I worked for the Abkhaz presidency writing reports on Syrian Refugees, spent most of my them with them for different projects.

Thank you in advance for sending me the book, I think it will greatly help me with my research.

Questions

1. The last official census I found of Abkhazia in 2003 the population consisted of approximately 215.000 people. There are however doubts, by predominantly Georgian critics, who claim the actual population is smaller.
   Do you think the Abkhazian census was correct?'

Approximately this is correct, maybe it is even more now around: 260-265 (thousand). But as you probably know only half of the population is Abkhaz, the other half is made up of ethnic groups. ‘

2. Okay, but there are doubts, mainly by Georgian critics, who claim that the population is way smaller? The war/conflicts, resulted in a lot of IDP’s, who now reside in Georgia.

Okay, I don’t want to call it propaganda, but the Georgians are wrong in this sense. The government says something, but also NGO’s, really good NGO’s who do a good job. According to them and their reports it is approximately over 250.000. They may claim that, the Georgian government, that the population is lower, but it is a small country. I know people in every village, so roughly I can say the statistic are correct.

3. Do you know if the population has changed since then (2003) (*i.e. Smaller or Bigger)?*

It increases, the population number is small, it is increasing but the number in which it increases is very small. There is a trend among Abkhazian people to have more and more kids, to increase the population. I don’t know if it is relevant or not, many people asked me and my wife when we got married when we were planning to have our first child. Normally in the Abkhaz culture, it is very rude to ask such a question. Because there might be variable reasons why you are not able to have a child, so normally people do not ask this question. But very surprisingly, now, they did ask this question. Everyone knows that we need more population, and we need to grow and repopulate the ancestral homeland. Diaspora, for Abkhaz people they normally have one child, but IN Abkhazia the trend seems to be more children.

4. What influence did the recognition of Abkhazia by Syria in 2018 had on the relations between the two governments? Has this lead to any meaningful relations between the two states?

I was actually one of the first Abkhaz people to go to Syria, for this official negotiations. But, the main trouble is that the Abkhazian population is to small, there are Abkhazian Syrians, vice versa. It is not very meaningful trade-wise or diplomatic-wise. But it caused Abkhazia to have more power, and for the Abkhazian people more motivation to go on. The same is the case with the smaller countries recognizing Abkhazia, it is the moral support that counts.

5. So it was mostly symbolic?

Yes that is the case, on the main square of Sukhumi there are the all the flags of the countries that recognize Abkhazia. Adding one flag, and Syria is not a small country, an important country, does mean a lot to the population.

6. I have read in some news articles that already in the beginning of the outbreak of violence in Syria, the Abkhaz Government helped approximately 500 ethnic Abkhazians to flee tto repatriate in Abkhazia. Do you have information or suspicions whether or not this number is close or correct?

Let me clarify, not all those people were ethnically Abkhaz, according to the passport bureau in Abkhazia they are all Abkhaz. But I know all of them, some of them were not Abkhaz some of them were Circassian, that is ethnically a very close group to the Abkhaz. Officially you can be only an Abkhazian if your father is Abkhaz as well, like in many other countries the heritage comes from the father. But now the case is that if your mother is Abkhaz, or in some cases even if your Grandmother was Abkhaz you could apply for a Abkhaz passport to get you away from the civil war. So a big number of them were ethnic Circassians with mixed backgrounds.

7. Where do the ethnic Circassians come from?

They come from in the Northern-Caucasus, in most places they are called ‘Cherkess’ (dutch: Tjserkes). Or they call themselves Adygea. But many of them have mixed backgrounds, at least 90% of them had an Abkhaz grandmother or grandfather or mother or vice versa. So out of that 500 people the Abkhaz government accepted the Circassian people too.

8. Is this kind of policy ordinary for the Abkhaz government? With other words have they done this more often?

Yeah, the Abkhaz government has a basic and straightforward policy. The Abkhaz government wants to help all the Ethnic Abkhaz people in the world, regardless of the country to return to their ancestral homeland. So they try what they can do, it’s a very small country not a very rich country. But since the foundation of Abkhazia, or so to say the breakaway of the Georgian government this was one of the main pillars of the government. It has always been like this since 1992. It was an important goal of the Abkhaz government to repatriate all the ethnic Abkhaz people to Abkhazia in one way or another. This is not extraordinary case, even before the war in Syria there were Syrian people living in Abkhazia the number was not that high, about 50 or 60. Right after the war, because it was an emergency, the Abkhaz government started to focus on that specific country so much.

9. Has the total number of repatriates (from Syria and Iraq) since then increased? So since 2013.

On the contrary, it decreased a lot. The last time I heard there were between 250 and 300 repatriates left. The number really dramatically decreased.

10. Do you know what the reason is for that? Did they move back to Syria or other parts of the world?

Majority of them moved to Europe, including my neighbors. They moved to Norway for example.

11. The (repatriation) policy of Abkhazia, is it mainly based on ethnicity? Or also for economic reason, to make the country more viable?

Well, both. With 250.000 people it is too little for other countries to recognize it. Take for example Turkey, they have great sympathy for the Caucasians, including the Abkhaz, the ethnic Turks. Most of the people would choose to recognize Abkhazia, because of the sympathy they have. But when it comes to the real politics it is not very logical and really not possible. Because on the other hand there is Georgia, 6-7 million people live there. On the other hand there is Abkhazia with only 250.000 people that is an insignificant number for anything really.

But the land is very fertile, so the Abkhaz region could carry way more people than it currently does.

The second thing is, the country’s name is Abkhazia, it is and always has been the land of the Abkhaz people. But due to the forced migrations during the war between the Ottomans and Russia, a lot of the Abkhaz people were exiled, 85-90% of the population was exiled. So the Georgians, Armenians and Greeks started to settle on this land. So now the Abkhaz is 50%. Imagine you are a politician in Abkhazia and only half of your population is actually Abkhaz. 50 percent is a critical number, no matter if you are ‘independent’ now of Georgia. If you had like 70%, of the people who are Abkhaz, you could say you had an Abkhaz land so to say, but 50 percent is critical. So for that reason they are try to increase the number.

So to answer you other question is Abkhazia an ethnic state. It is not like Turkey, in Turkey regardless of you ethnicity, you are a Turk. Your identity is that you are a Turk, of course you can be Kurdish, Abkhazian or whatever but it means that you identify as a Turk. In Abkhazia it is different people are free to identify not as Abkhaz. Armenians for example have their own school, the Georgians have their own school. It is not an ethnic centered country but still I would say it is a mixture of …. (at 22:25 could not understand what he was saying) but in an very old soviet way.

12. So it is important, but it is not the MOST important thing?

No it is not the most important thing, otherwise there would be no Armenian schools in Abkhazia. They are free to send their children to their ethnic schools. But there is one thing, the president must know the Abkhaz language, that is the case. You can be Armenian and president, but you have to know the language fluently.

13. I am aware that since the early 1990's there have been (Abkhaz) government run programs to encourage people to (re)settle in the Abkhaz region, by the governments department for repatriation. Do you think these programs yield the desired results? Since the starting of this program have many people repatriated to Abkhazia?

Well, if you ask my personal opinion because I was a repatriate too, it Failed. I repatriated with my wife. We were very ideological, but for us it simply did not work out. There are many reasons why I did not work out. The first reason is the economic reason, I have had various jobs, I was a professional basketball player I played in the Russian league, I worked for the United Nations, I worked for the government, I gave lectures at the University. But at the end of the month the money I got from all these jobs together is not even a quarter of the money I am getting for the single job I have in Turkey now. I you go to another country, if you have the opportunity, the standard of living is much higher. In Turkey, Egypt etc. So at the end the capacity of Abkhazia, it does not give you so much of a higher live standards, in terms of houses/property, everything. So no matter how idealistic you are, if you have a chance to live abroad at the end the majority will do that, towards Europe or in my case Turkey. So I would say it failed. Im not saying that Abkhazia is doing nothing, they are trying their best. They are giving houses and furniture for free, they try to find a job for you. But at the end the system in Abkhazia, the trust is very low and the system is corrupted. Those who can find a way to go away they go away. There are people that are even more idealistic then us (him and his wife) they go away, but these numbers are very very few.

14. Does the Russian government support these repatriation incentives? And do they actively help the republics' government facilitate this?

The Russian government neither blocks nor supports the repatriates to Abkhazia. The Russians really see Abkhazia as a separate country. When I lived there I was going to Russia for my basketball games. I spoke to a lot of people from both countries (i.e. Russia and Abkhazia), and they really consider Abkhazia as a separate country. Yet, we can not travel to Abkhazia because the airport is closed. And the ferry is a pain in the back, so the only solution for us is to go to Sotsji. Let me tell you, the Russians are not very nice on the border control. They do not beat you, hit you, mob you or anything. But I have to wait for a lot of hours. When I was a basketball player we needed to cross the border from Abkhazia to Russia because we played in the Russian division. Every single time we had problems, when we wanted to cross the border. In the end they let us go every time. But it is really painful, so people don not like to come back to Abkhazia because of this hassle.

But Russia is not supporting or blocking the way for repatriation to Abkhazia. But for the Northern-Caucasus is different case.

15. So, what do you mean with this? Are there people from the Northern-Caucasus coming to Abkhazia?

No I mean that in the Northern-Caucasus there are repatriates too. But as you know Abkhazia is much more welcoming to them, in Abkhazia they are receiving them with open arms. When they want to repatriate to Russia it is way harder. Because they have a culture, and you never now the background of the people you are tacking back. You never know who is a radical Islamst or not. But in Abkhaiza the Russians say this is your country, your land, you do whatever you want.

16. Lastly I want to ask you if you might know any people, or do you have any documents that support your vision? Or organizations or authorities who might be willing to talk to me about this subject? This can be journalists, government officials, community leaders, actual refugees or civilians living in the region, I am interested in anyone who might be willing to talk to me. Or anyone who can send me any interesting information on this subject.

The documents I got are mostly classified. They are from the government or the United Nations. I will send you my book by the post soon. We got the fund for that book from a German NGO. When we published the book, at the last minute, they saw that we had interviews with Syrian repatriates, and they were shocked, they didn't want it to nbe published.. So they did not distribute this book anywhere. So what you are getting is a off the record copy. When we made the second version we deleted this interviews. **But the one you are getting there are around 20 interviews with Abkhazians and Circassians that repatriated to Abkhazia.**

Great, Thank you for that, and the Interview!

Written Questionnaire Astamur Bagateliia

1. **Can you introduce yourself a bit, for instance your (political) background, your line of work?**
   My name is Astamur Bagateliia, I have been on public service since 2015, started at the department of Turkey and Middle East of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Abkhazia, in 2018 was appointed as the Representative Assistant in the Plenipotentiary Representative of the Republic of Abkhazia in the Republic of Turkey. In July of 2020 have been appointed as the Deputy Chairman of the State Committee of the Republic of Abkhazia for Repatriation. Both in the Ministry, Representative and in Committee, relations with Abkhaz diaspora have always been a part of the job.

2. **The last official census I found of Abkhazia in 2003 the population consisted of approximately 215.000 people. There are however doubts, by predominantly Georgian critics, who claim the actual population is smaller. Do you think the Abkhazian census was correct?**
   The 2003 census was made in compliance with all the procedures and the results should not be subjected to doubt, unless, politically motivated doubt by the representatives of our neighboring state. Last official census was held in 2011, according to it the population of the Republic of Abkhazia is 240 705, according to the Department of State Statistics of the Republic of Abkhazia, in 2018 the population is estimated at 244 832.

3. ~~Do you know if the population has changed since then? (*i.e. Smaller or Bigger)*~~

4. ~~Are the recent sources about the current population you can provide me with?~~

5. **I have read in some news articles that already in the beginning of the outbreak of violence in Syria, the Abkhaz Government helped approximately 500 ethnic to flee to Abkhazia. Do you have information (or suspicions) whether or not this number is close or correct?**
   In 2013 the government of the Republic of Abkhazia conducted a mission to bring ethnic Abkhaz, living in Syria, who were willing to come to their historical Motherland. Ministry of Foreign Affairs and State Committee for Repatriation were in charge of the mission, the Government chartered two planes, that brought 490 representatives of our diaspora to Abkhazia.

6. ~~Is this kind of policy ordinary for the Abkhaz government? With other words have they done this more often?~~

7. **Has the total number of repatriates (from Syria and Iraq) since then increased?**
   Yes, the number of repatriates from Syria has increased, currently the number of those, who repatriated, is around 800.

8. **Do you have information, or suspicions about how much of these repatriates are still living in Abkhazia?**
   The number of repatriates, still residing in the Republic of Abkhazia is about 600. Some have left for Syria, some others went to Europe and Russian Federation, mostly for education and professional matters.

9. **Is it a goal of the (breakaway) republics' government to achieve a growth in population? If Yes, how are they trying to achieve this?**

To start with, the Republic of Abkhazia is not a breakaway republic, but an independent, sovereign state. When it comes to growth in population, of course, it is our government's goal. We have the programme, that aims at supporting families with three and more children, repatriation is also a part of the solution to population issues.

~~10. What do you think is the merit for Abkhazia to increase its population?~~

11. You are working in a department that tries to repatriate ethnic Abkhazians to their ancestral homeland? Has this committee over the years yielded results in terms of repatriation?

The State Committee has helped more than 10.700 compatriots to repatriate, of course, not all of them reside in the Republic of Abkhazia for the whole year, most of them still stay connected to the countries they grew up in, they live there for couple of months a year.

12. **Is there anything else you want to talk about, regarding this topic**?

The State Committee has a lot of programs, that aim not only at repatriation, but also at acquainting the youth from diaspora with their Motherland. Every summer we hold camps for children from Abkhaz families in Turkey, Jordan, Egypt and Syria. We also help our diasporas by providing Abkhaz language teachers to the countries, where our diaspora representatives live. Currently, the State Committee is working on the student exchange program for ethnic Abkhaz and Adige students, living in Syria.

~~13. Lastly I want to ask you if you might know any people, organizations or authorities who might be willing to talk to me about this subject? This can be journalists, government officials, community leaders, actual refugees or civilians living in the region, I am interested in anyone who might be willing to talk to me. Or anyone who can send me any interesting information on this subject.~~

Wish you all the success in your Masters in Human Geography, hope answer I have supplied you with will be useful.

Written Questionnaire Baghdassaryan

(Translated via google translate)

1. Can you introduce yourself? About for instance your (political) background and a little bit more about your function(s)? What are the main activities within your line of work?

Nelly Baghdassaryan, Associate Professor, Candidate of Historical Sciences Artsakh State University, Head of the South Caucasus Scientific Branch Mesrop Mashtots University, Adviser to Artsakh Republic President on International Relations

2. <u>General Questions</u>

Moving on to the refugee crisis, the subject of my research.

What do you think is the effect of the statements/policies of Pashinyan (strongly in favour of Artsakh to be part of Armenia) on the negotiations with Azerbaijan?

Արցախը Հայաստան է, պատմական և քաղաքական իմաստներով: ՀՀ վարչապետ Փաշինյանը որևէ նոր բան չի ասում, Արցախը հայկական պատմական հայրենիքի մի մասն է, որը 1991 թ. սեպտեմբերի 2-ին հռչակվել է որպես հանրապետություն: Բացի պատմական հիմքերից Արցախն իր ինքնորոշման իրավունքի հարցում ունի իրավական անխոցելի հիմքեր, այդ թվում՝ 1990 թ. ապրիլի 3-ի ԽՍՀՄ կազմից Միութենական հանրապետությունների դուրս գալու մասին օրենքը, որը հնարավորություն է տվել ինքնորոշվելու: Սա նաև «Մեկ ազգ, երկու պետություն» միջազգային պրակտիկայում առկա ֆորմատն է: Ինքնորոշված Արցախը գնում է միջազգային ճանաչման ճանապարհով: Հայաստանի Հանրապետությունը Արցախի Հանրապետության անվտանգության երաշխավորն է և սատարում է նրան միջազգային ճանաչման գործում: Արցախի Հանրապետությունն ունի պետական ինստիտուտների կայացած համակարգ, որի չափանիշներով առաջ է անցել աշխարհի մի շարք միջազգայնորեն ճանաչված պետություններից: Թե՛ ՀՀ-ն և թե՛ ԱՀ-ն ունեն կանոնավոր պրոֆեսիոնալ բանակ, անվտանգության կայացած համակարգ: Հայկական բանակների հնարավորությունները գործարկվել են ադրբեջանա-ղարաբաղյան 1991-1994 թթ. պատերազմում, ինչպես նաև 2016 թվականի Ապրիլյան պատերազմում: Բանակների պրոֆեսիոնալիզմը գնահատում են ըստ գրանցած արդյունքների, ուստի միջազգային հանրությունը տեղյակ է, թե ինչ մակարդակով են ԱՀ-ն և ՀՀ-ն պաշտպանել սեփական պետության սահմանները: Գտնվելով միասնական անվտանգային միջավայրում ԱՀ և ՀՀ շարունակում են ամրացնել այդ համակարգը՝ հաշվի առնելով նաև տարածաշրջանային սպառնալիքները: Երբեք, ոչ մի դեպքում, անգամ մինչև կանոնավոր բանակի ձևավորումը՝ 1990-ական թթ. սկզբներին երկու հայկական հանրապետությունները չեն օգտվել որևէ օտար, երրորդ ուժի հնարավորություններից: Բացառվում է նաև ապագայում նման հնարավորությունների օգտագործումը: Արցախի Հանրապետությունը բանակցային կարգավորման գործընթացում խնդիր է դրել վերականգնելու բանակցային գործընթացի լիարժեք ձևաչափը: Բանակցային կարգավորման լիարժեք ձևաչափը ենթադրում է Հայաստանի Հանրապետություն, Արցախի Հանրապետության և Ադրբեջանի Հանրապետության մասնակցության ձևաչափով կարգավորման գործընթաց, որը գործել է 1992-1997 թթ. և ամենաարդյունավետ պայմանավորվածությունները ձեռք են բերվել հենց այդ ժամանակ:

Artsakh is Armenia, in historical and political terms. Repuplic of Armenia's Prime Minister Pashinyan does not say anything new, Artsakh is a part of the Armenian historical homeland, which in 1991 It was declared a republic on September 2. In addition to historical grounds, Artsakh has inviolable legal grounds for its right to self-determination, including the 1990 The law on the secession of the Union Republics from the USSR of April 3, 1945, which allowed for self-determination. This is the format of the "One Nation, Two States" international practice. Self-determined Artsakh is on the path of international recognition. The Republic of Armenia is the guarantor of the security of the Artsakh Republic; it supports it in its international recognition. The Artsakh Republic has an established system of state institutions, by the standards of which it has surpassed a number of internationally recognized states. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan have a regular professional army and an established security system. The capabilities of the Armenian armies were launched in the 1991-1994 Azerbaijani-Karabakh conflict. in the war, as he did in the April 2016 war. The professionalism of the armies is assessed according to the registered results, so the international community is aware of the level at which Azerbaijan & Armenia has protected the borders of its own state. Being in a common security environment, Azerbaijan continues to strengthen that system, taking into account its regional threats. Never, by any means, even before the formation of the regular army in the 1990s. In the beginning, the two Armenian republics did not use the opportunities of any foreign, third power. The use of such opportunities in the future is also excluded. The Artsakh Republic has set a task to restore the full dimension of the negotiation process in the negotiation process. The full scale of the negotiation settlement presupposes the process of settlement of the Republic of Armenia, the Republic of Artsakh the Republic of Azerbaijan, which operated in 1992-1997. The most effective arrangements were made at that time.

3. Al-Jazeera has estimated that between 2011 and 2019, over 20.000 (+/- 22.000) Syrian-Armenian people have fled from Syria to Armenia. Do you have information if these estimations are correct, or do they come close?

Որպես անկախ աղբյուր ես կվկայակոչեմ 2015 թ. The Economist-ի տվյալները, ըստ որի սիրիական հակամարտության սկսվելուց ի վեր ավելի քան 22.000 մարդ, առավելապես ազգությամբ հայեր, ինչպես նաև արաբներ, քրդեր, ասորիներ տեղահանվել և պաշտպանություն են գտել Հայաստանում: Հայաստանը մեկ բնակչի հաշվով ավելի մեծ թվով տեղահանված անձանց է հյուրընկալել: Այսինքն Հայաստանը 1.000 բնակչի հաշվով մոտ 8 տեղահանված անձ է հյուրընկալել: Համամասնորեն այդ ցուցանիշն ավելի բարձր է, քան Գերմանիայում, Շվեդիայում, ԱՄՆ-ում կամ

Կանադայում: Որպես համեմատություն՝ մոտ 38 մլն. բնակչություն ունեցող Լեհաստանը, համաձայն ԵՄ կողմից սահմանված պարտադիր քվոտաների, պետք է տեղավորի ընդամենը 12 հազար փախստական:

Ըստ 2018 թ. տվյալների՝ Հայաստանում ապրում էր 22.000 սիրիահայ, ներկայի մասին որևէ հստակ թիվ չկա:

As an independent source, I will refer to 2015. According to The Economist, since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, more than 22,000 people, mostly Armenians, as well as Arabs, Kurds and Assyrians, have been displaced and protected in Armenia. Armenia has hosted more IDPs per capita. In other words, Armenia hosted about 8 displaced people per 1,000 inhabitants. Proportionally, this indicator is higher than in Germany, Sweden, USA or Canada. As a comparison, about 38 million. According to the mandatory quotas set by the EU, Poland, with a population of only one, must accommodate only 12,000 refugees.

According to 2018 According to the data, 22,000 Syrian-Armenians lived in Armenia, but there is no definite number about the current one.

4. Is it a goal of the Artsakh government to achieve a growth in population? If Yes, how are they trying to achieve this?

Բնականաբար յուրաքանչյուր պետություն շահագրգռված է իր բնակչության որակյալ և բնական աճն ապահովելու հարցում : ԱՀ-ն ունի համապատասխան օրենքներ և որոշումներ , որոնք նպաստում են դրան: Մասնավորապես՝ ԱՀ-ն/ ԼՂՀ-ն/ առաջնորդվում է Լեռնային Ղարաբաղի Հանրապետության պետական ժողովրդագրական քաղաքականության հայեցակարգով: Հայեցակարգից բխող տարեկան ծրագրերն իրականացվելուց հետո ամեն տարի ամփոփվում են հաշվետվությամբ: Ժողովրդագրական քաղաքականությունն իրականացվում է 4 հիմնական ուղղություններով՝ ծնելիության խթանում և ընտանիքի պաշտպանություն, մահացության մակարդակի նվազեցում, բնակչության առողջության պահպանում և առողջ ապրելակերպի վարման պայմանների ստեղծում :

Սիրիայից և Լիբանանից մեր հայրենակիցներին Արցախում բնակության հնարավորություն տալը ոչ մի դեպքում ժողովրդագրական նպատակներ չի հետապնդում: Սա կրիտիկական կացության մեջ հայտնված մարդկանց ձեռք մեկնելու և նրանց անվտանգ ապրելու հնարավորություն տալն է: Սա ԱՀ մարդասիրական քայլն է, որի մասին մի քանի առիթով խոսել են Արցախի Հանրապետության նախագահ Արայիկ Հարությունյանը, ինչպես նաև Արցախի Հանրապետության Արտաքին գործերի նախարարությունը: Բեյրութի պայթյունից հետո Արցախի Հանրապետության կողմից Լիբանան ուղարկված մարդասիրական օգնությունը, որևէ PR բաղադրիչ չի պարունակում: Դժվարին կացության մեջ հայտնված Լիբանանին ուղարկված մարդասիրական օգնությունը ամենաբարձր մակարդակով շահարկվում է Ադրբեջանի կողմից: Հատկանշական է, որ այս մարդասիրական քայլը, որպես բնակչության թվաքանակի ավելացման թեզ շրջանառության մեջ է դրվել մեր հակառակորդ պետության՝ Ադրբեջանի կողմից և նրա քաղաքական վերնախավի բոլոր հայտարարություններում հնչում են մեղադրանքներ ուղղված Արցախին: Արցախի Հանրապետությունը ինստիտուցիոնալ առումով ունի բոլոր իրավական հիմքերը օտարերկրյա քաղաքացիներին բնակության իրավունք տալու առաջին հերթին ապահովելով նրանց անվտանգությունը և կեցության համար անհրաժեշտ պայմանները: Այս առումով Արցախը համաքայլ է պետությունների միջազգային ընտանիքին, իսկ չճանաչվածությունն այս առումով որևէ խոչընդոտ չէ

Naturally, every state is interested in ensuring quality, natural growth of its population. The Republic of Azerbaijan has relevant laws and decisions that contribute to this. In particular, the Republic of Azerbaijan (NKR) is guided by the concept of state demographic policy of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic. Annual programs based on the concept are summarized in a report each year after implementation. Demographic policy is implemented in 4 main directions: promotion of birth rate, protection of the family, reduction of mortality rate, maintenance of public health, creation of conditions for leading a healthy lifestyle.

Giving our compatriots from Syria և Lebanon the opportunity to live in Artsakh is by no means for demographic purposes. This is an opportunity for people in need to reach out and live in safety. This is the humanitarian step of the Republic of Azerbaijan, about which the President of the Artsakh Republic Arayik Harutyunyan, as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Artsakh Republic have spoken on several occasions. The humanitarian aid sent by the Artsakh Republic to Lebanon after the Beirut bombing, which does not contain a PR component. The humanitarian aid sent to Lebanon, which is in a difficult situation, is being exploited by Azerbaijan at the highest level. It is noteworthy that this humanitarian step, as a thesis of increasing the population, has been put into circulation by our rival state, Azerbaijan, in all the statements of its political elite, accusations are voiced against Artsakh. Institutionally, the Artsakh Republic has all the legal grounds to grant foreign citizens the right of residence, first of all, ensuring their security and living conditions. In this respect, Artsakh is in step with the international family of states, and non-recognition is not an obstacle in this respect.

5. What is the specific merit, according to you, for the republic to increase its population?

Սողացող հակամարտությունների տարածաշրջաններին, այնպիսին ինչպիսին մեր տարածաշրջանն է հատուկ են այնպիսի երևույթներ ինչպիսիք են քաղաքական, տնտեսական, ժողովրդագրական համակարգի անկայունությունը: Իրականում Արցախի Հանրապետությունում իրավիճակն ունիկալ է այն իմաստով, որ կա նաև արտագաղթի բացակայություն: Գործում է հետևյալ շղթան՝ սեփական քաղաքացիների անվտանգության ապահովում-կենսապայմանների համար նպաստավոր միջավայրի ստեղծում, ինչն էլ ապագայի հանդեպ վստահության հնարավորություն է տալիս:

Արցախի Հանրապետությունը պետական մակարդակով ժողովրդագրական լուրջ քաղաքականություն է տանում: Արցախի Հանրապետությունը պետական մակարդակով ապահովում է շարքային քաղաքացու սեփական պետության կողմից պաշտպանվածության և ապահովության զգացողություն համար հիմքերը, ինչն էլ իր հերթին նպաստում է հասարակության բնականոն զարգացմանը: ԱՀ-ում գործում են ծնելիությունը խրախուսող ծրագրեր, ինչպես նաև բազմազավակ ընտանիքներին պետական մշտական աջակցության մեխանիզմներ: Բարձր մակարդակի վրա է «Առողջ սերունդ» ծրագիրը, որն իրագործվում է պարբերաբար կազմակերպվող սեմինարներով, առողջապահական համակարգի կողմից մշտական և գրագետ վերահսկողությամբ:

Regions of creeping conflicts, such as ours, are characterized by phenomena such as political, economic and demographic instability. In fact, the situation in the Artsakh Republic is unique in the sense that there is no emigration. The following chain operates: creating a favorable environment for the security of its citizens, which gives them confidence in the future.

The Artsakh Republic pursues a serious demographic policy at the state level. At the state level, the Artsakh Republic provides the basis for an ordinary citizen's sense of protection and security by his own state, which in turn contributes to the normal development of society. There are birth control programs in the Republic of Azerbaijan, as well as permanent state support mechanisms for large families. The "Healthy Generation" program is at a high level, which is implemented through regular seminars, under the constant and competent supervision of the healthcare system.

6. I am aware that since the early 2000's there have been (NKR) government run programs to encourage people to (re)settle in the Artsakh region, including incentives to offer land/jobs and money to people moving to Artsakh. To me this seems like a program with mutual benefits, for Artsakh and Armenia as well as for the people involved. Did these programs yield the desired results? Why do you think it did or did not work?

Լեռնային Ղարաբաղի Հանրապետությունում ոչ միայն սեփական պետության քաղաքացիները, այլ նաև հայրենադարձվող անձինք պետական ուշադրության կենտրոնում են: Ծրագրով նախատեսվում է հայրենադարձված ընտանիքին անհատական տնով կամ բնակարանով ապահովում, միանվագ դրամական օգնության ցուցաբերում: Հայերնադարձների սոցիալ-կենցաղային կարիքների բավարարման համար երկարաժամկետ բյուջետային վարկերի տրամադրում: Հայերնադարձվող և գյուղատնտեսական աշխատանքով զբաղվելու պատրաստակամություն հայտնած յուրաքանչյուր ընտանիքին անասունների, սերմնացուի և դրա համար անհրաժեշտ այլ նյութական միջոցների ձեռք բերման համար երկարաժամկետ (10 տարով) տարեկան 0,5 տոկոսադրույքով բյուջետային վարկի տրամադրում: Հայերնադարձվող ընտանիքի յուրաքանչյուր շնչի հաշվին բնակավայրում գյուղատնտեսական նշանակության հողերի առկայության դեպքում ԼՂՀ օրենսդրությամբ սահմանված կարգով անհատույց /մշտական/ օգտագործման իրավունքով 10 տարի ժամկետով 0,6 հա հողամասի տրամադրում ներառյալ տնամերձ հողամասը: Հայրենադարձվող ընտանիքին 5 տարի ժամկետով բնակարանային կոմունալ ծառայությունների վարձից ազատում: Նոր ընտանիք կազմած զորակոչային տարիքի անձանց ժամկետային զինվորական ծառայության երկու տարով հետաձգում. հայրենադարձների համար աշխատատեղի ապահովում:

ԱՀ-ում գործող օրենքները և կառավարության որոշումները ծառայում են նրա տարածքում ապրող, կամ նրա տարածքում ապրելու համար դիմած օտարերկրյա քաղաքացիների համար բավարար կենսապայմանների ապահովմանը: Սրանք ոչ թե շահագրգռելու նպատակ ունեցող ծրագրեր են, այլ դժվարին կացության մեջ հայտնված մարդկանց օգնության ձեռք մեկնելու և ապրելու հերթական հնարավորություն տալու նպատակ ունեն: Արցախի Հանրապետությունն աշխարհին ներկայանում է մարդակենտրոն քաղաքականությամբ: Ծրագրերն հիմնականում արդարացրել են իրենց, հակառակ դեպքում բնակության համար դիմողների հոսքը կդադարեր:

In the Nagorno Karabakh Republic, not only the citizens of their own state, but also repatriates are in the center of state attention. The program envisages providing the repatriated family with an individual house or apartment, providing one-time financial assistance. Provision of long-term budget loans to meet the social and household needs of repatriates. Provision of a long-term (10 years) annual budget loan of 0.5% per annum (for 10 years) to each family who returns to Armenia and is willing to engage in agricultural work to purchase livestock, seeds and other necessary material means. Provision of 0.6 ha of land for 10 years with the right of gratuitous (permanent) use for 10 years, including the adjacent land plot, in case of availability of agricultural lands in the settlement at the expense of each per capita of the repatriated family. Exemption from housing utility bills for repatriated families for 5 years. Two-year deferral of military service for conscripts who have formed a new family. Providing jobs for repatriates.
Laws in force in the Republic of Azerbaijan և Government decisions serve to provide adequate living conditions for foreign nationals living in or within its territory. These are not programs that aim to interest, but aim to reach out to people in need in a difficult situation, to give them another chance to live. The Artsakh Republic presents itself to the world with a people-centered policy. The schemes have largely justified themselves, otherwis

7. Does the Armenian government support this specific programs? And do they actively help the republics' government facilitate this?

Արցախի Հանրապետությունն ինքնուրույն է իր պետական ծրագրերում և ֆինանսական քաղաքականության հարցում: Երկու հանրապետությունների միջև գործում է ամուր կապ, որը փոխադարձ խորհրդատվական, փորձի փոխանակման հնարավորություն է տալիս:

The Artsakh Republic is independent in its state programs and financial policy. There is a strong connection between the two republics, which enables mutual consulting and exchange of experience.**8. Do you think that the influx of Syrian-Armenian refugees into Armenia also yields opportunities for the Republic of Artsakh to increase its population?**

Հայրենադարձությունը բնակչության կարդինալ աճ չի նախատեսում: Արցախի Հանրապետությունը բաց է թե՛ փախստականների կարգավիճակ ունեցող օտարերկրացիների և թե՛ դժվարին կացության մեջ հայտնված իր հայրենակիցներին օգնության ձեռք մեկնելու համար: Մասնավորապես՝ Արցախի Հանրապետության նախագահ Արայիկ Հարությունյանը Բեյրութի աղետին հետևած իր օնլայն հայտարարության ժամանակ խոսել է լիբանանահայ 100-150 հայ ընտանիքներին ապաստան տալու պատրաստակամության մասին:

Repatriation does not envisage cardinal population growth. The Artsakh Republic is open to helping both foreigners with refugee status and their compatriots in distress. In particular, during his online statement after the Beirut disaster, the President of the Artsakh Republic Arayik Harutyunyan spoke about the readiness to provide asylum to 100-150 Lebanese-Armenian families.

9. Do you think that the relocation of refugees can potentially be mutually beneficial for Armenia and Artsakh?

Կարծում ենք, որ փոխշահավետությունը մշակութային և կենցաղային փոխազդեցությունների իմաստով կարող է լինել: Մյուս կողմից ընդունող պետությունները՝ ԱՀ-ն և ՀՀ-ն COVID-19-ի պայմաններում ստեղծված դժվարությունների պայմաններում լրացուցիչ բյուջե են հատկացնում փախստականներին, ինչը բնականաբար ֆինանսական լուրջ ռեսուրսներ է ենթադրում:

We believe that mutual benefit can be in terms of cultural and domestic interactions. On the other hand, the host countries, the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia, provide additional budgets to refugees in the face of the difficulties created by COVID-19, which naturally implies significant financial resources.

10. In the last official census in 2015 of the Arstakh region the population counted 145.053 people. Do you know if this number has changed significantly since the last Census?

Ես կխուսափեմ չճշտված տվյալներից և կսպասեմ հաջորդ մարդահամարի տվյալներին:

I will avoid unverified data, I will wait for the next census data.

11. What do you think are the main reasons for this population change?

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12. Forgive me for being straightforward, can you give me your personal opinion on the influx of refugees, possibly to de-facto states in the Southern-Caucasus? For example there are reports that Abkhazia might be actively endorsing such a policy, by bringing in ethnic Abkhaz people and Circassians. I hope you feel free to speak your mind on this subject, and once again I can guarantee you anonymity in the process if you desire so.

Արցախի Հանրապետության կողմից իրականացվող միգրացիոն քաղաքականության մասին վերը նշված հարցերում ես մեկնաբանություն տվել եմ: Ինչ վերաբերում է Աբխազիային, ապա կարծում եմ, յուրաքանչյուր պետություն ինքն է որոշում տվյալ քաղաքականությունը ի՞նչ նպատակներ ունի և ի՞նչպիսի ռազմավարական նշանակության հարցեր է լուծում, հետևաբար զերծ կմնամ որևէ մեկնաբանություն տալուց:

I have commented on the migration issues pursued by the Artsakh Republic in the above-mentioned issues. As for Abkhazia, I think each state decides for itself what the goals of this policy are, what strategic issues it solves, so I will refrain from commenting.

Written Questionnaire Anonymous Syrian Repatriate in Abkhazia (1)

1. Can you introduce yourself a bit, what is your background? Your line of work, education?

Hello again, my name is [redacted]. I am a private English teacher, I graduated from Abkhaza University in Sukhumi, the only university in Abkhazia.

2. When did you move to Abkhazia?

I moved to Abkhazia 6 or 7 months after the war started in Syria like August 2012.

3. Where do you live now?

I live in Sukhumi. The capital of Abkhazia.

4. Why Abkhazia?

We (me and my family) moved to Abkhazia because my mom was born here, she is Russian but was born in Abkhazia. My grandmother also lives here so that's why we moved here.

5. How much did you know about Abkhazia before? *(Was the Caucasian (Circassian/Abkhazian) culture a part of your childhood)*

A quick sidenote, my situation is different then the situation of the other Syrians who are here. Because I am not Abkhazian or Circassian. My father is Syrian and my mother is Russian. But we came here to Abkhazia, because my grandma lives here. But other Syrians, they came here because the Abkhazian government invited them to come here.

So no the Abkhazian culture was not a part of my childhood.

6. Did you receive help from the Abkhazian government (Repatriation committee) in terms of for example: Housing, education or other financial help?

Our family didn't receive any financial or housing help because we're Arabs in root .

But other Circassian and Abkhazian families received help (their tickets from Syria to Abkhazia were afforded by the government, they stayed in hotels at first altogether and then lived in separate apartment where the rent was also paid by the repatriation committee, and after 3-4 years they received their own furnished apartments. They also pay for students education. And if two people get married or a woman get pregnant they receive a specific amount of money As well as covering all medical care. My mom used to work as an interpreter in the Repatriation committee, And she knows about all these things.

7. What is your nationality now? Do you still have the Syrian nationality, or only Abkhazian?

My nationality is Abkhazian and Russian, I have both passports. I don't have the Syrian one because it is kind of expensive to get it, around 500 dollars, plus it is useless. I don't need it personally

8. Is the Abkhazian culture much different?

For me no it is not much different. The Syrian one is even more conservative maybe, but they have a lot in common.

9. Did you have problems integrate into society?

Yes I have had some problems integrate. In terms of language here, they speak two languages, Abkhazian and Russian. In General everyone speaks Russian. But still they expected of me to speak Abkhazian. Even though I am not Abkhazian, and many Abkhazians don't even speak Abkhazian. I felt the pressure to speak Abkhazian, because I live in Abkhazia, so I

dislike the language. That's why I only speak Russian right now. In terms of religion, no not really. Also when I started to the University, we were separated into a different group. With 'we' I mean like the Syrian students. And we were also called like that 'the Syrian group'. We had different lectures, we didn't have the chance to intereact with the Abkhazian students, we were always together, that was also bad in terms of language. We were only speaking Arabic (me and my friends). Otherwise it would have been a good opportunity to practice, Russian and Abkhazian language. So that was maybe a mistake from the University side I guess, to separate us like that.

10. Is it/ was it hard to find a job?

Yes, Yes, Yes. It is really hard to find a job here. Actually, I am moving to Istanbul in a few weeks. Because I graduated like a year ago, and I still can't find a job here. I only work as a private English and Arabic teacher. I don't have a full time job, because I can't speak Russian fluently, and here if you want to get a job you also need good connections. Like relative connections, illegal connections .If you would call it like that.

11. You talked about the 'illegal connections' you need to get a job, can you explain that maybe a bit more?

Umm I mean you don't get hired based on your qualifications but based on your relatives (Abkhazia is a very small country). So all the good and high-paid jobs goes to Abkhazian people not to Armenian, Georgian, Syrian etc...But of course there are always exceptions.

12. How did you experience the Abkhaz Desk project?

Abkhaz desk, personally, was very useful for me. I made a lot of friends there. From different cultures, from Armenia, Turkey and there were many useful workshops. I used to practice there, my Turkish and my English. I sometimes went there to study, I didn't feel like I was wasting my time when I was there. So it was really useful and good.

13. Do you feel at home in Abkhazia?

After 8 years of living here in Abkhazia, yes I feel like I am at home. But still… Some Abkhazians make you feel like you are not home, because you are not Abkhaz. But I don't mind, I feel very safe in Abkhazia. I like it very much here. And I would love to come back to live here.

14. Are you planning on staying in Abkhazia? Or do you want to go back to Syria, or move on to Europe?

I would like to stay here in Abkhazia, but unfortunately it is hard to stay here, and find a job. I want to move out for a couple of years, to have some other experiences. Maybe I can come back in a couple of years to start my own project. This is the only way you can really have a job in Abkhazia. To have your own business or your own project. So at the moment I don't want to stay in Abkhazia, I am moving to Turkey. That is the only option right now because it is really hard to move to Europe.

15. If you know any other people, organizations or anyone who would be able and willing to talk to me, please let me know.

I have Circassian friends, I think they would like to share their experiences with you as well. I will ask them and I will let you know. I hope I answered all your questions, if you would like to know more, let me know.

Interview Transcript Anonymous Source (Abkhaz Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

00:00:00
Eelco: I will just to leave your name out of it, OK?

00:00:06
Anonymous Source: So I'm currently doing work with UNICEF, I'm an education officer working here in the field office, based in Abkhazia. But I sort of have a wider background in conflict related studies. I've done work on unresolved conflicts. Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict was a member of the youth dialogue with I mean, sort of like the track to track one point five sort of negotiation process related to them, to the ongoing conflict. And therefore there are a lot of components, but primarily my sort of area of expertise would be protracted, unresolved conflicts, ethnic conflicts, youth and development and education.

00:00:50
Anonymous Source: So I'll probably stop over here.

00:00:55
Eelco: OK. Thank you very much. You also worked for the committee of Repatriation itself, right?

00:01:02
Anonymous Source: No, no, no.

00:01:05
Eelco: OK, then my information was incorrect in that.

00:01:10
Anonymous Source: No I have never worked in that. I work for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, although that was it.

00:01:14
Eelco: What can you maybe tell me something about what you did you have anything to do with the repatriation of refugees.

00:01:21
Anonymous Source: No, this is this was my sort of next point would be to actually put you in touch with people who have been personally involved in this process. I have colleagues who worked in that, but I personally was not involved in the process. So some people that I worked with at the ministry, they've been working closely in arranging for the resettlement for, you know, for the logistics and providing support when the outbreak of Syrian civil war started and when a lot of people move to a position so that they were the ones covering my primary area of expertise was sort of international development, the overseeing the work of international agencies working in Abkhazia and covering primarily the sort of the European and American relations, because that was my sort of area of expertise.

00:02:15
Eelco: Ah Okay

00:02:15
Anonymous Source: But I've done some work on not so much on the day because I did when I did my Masters, I was also focusing on the role of diaspora, but I was primarily looking at the at the Turkish, Abkhaz-Turkish diaspora and the Abkhazians residing in Turkey. So that was my sort of focus. But I also know a number of people who are representatives of the Syrian repatriates who move to Abkhazia. And I don't know, I can if you have any concrete questions, I might try and answer them and then maybe I can give you one to understand more or less need to the approaches. Maybe I can put you in touch with some people who might have much more on this.

00:03:02
Eelco: Well, yeah, my questions are basically about the ethnic Abkhaz that the government brought to Abkhazia.

00:03:18
Anonymous Source: Yeah, I mean, I won't be able to give you a very extensive answer, so might be might be better if I, I know more or less things because I've been involved. I know the process and I know more or less the approaches that they have. But I think that if you need anything concrete, I don't know, it might be better if I put you in touch. There's a person who his name is [redacted] don't know if you have been in touch with him.

00:03:42
Eelco: No. I mean, how do you spell it. Maybe it's easier to send me the email or the maybe Facebook. I don't know.

00:03:56
Anonymous Source: Here you go. I wrote it to you in the chat box over there. OK, so the these two people will know most what we'll know the most because they've been the ones that are actually overseeing the entire process. I can put you in touch. I can double check with them and then try and put you in touch regarding this issue, because I'm not necessarily that

much of the expert in the topic. And I mean. I can answer something, General, but I think that, well, I want to know the approach, why it actually happened and how it was done.

00:04:37
Eelco: OK, I have also some general questions like about the population, because the last estimations or like trustworthy estimations according to. Well. *:* Said that in 2011, the population of Abkhazia was approximately 240 thousands and there are some critics who say it's actually less, but I don't know what I should believe. (Which numbers or critics red.) Do you know anything about the growing population or if this estimation was correct?

00:05:11
Anonymous Source: I would say that it's more or less and in those numbers, because, again, as you know, the data is and remains to be a major, major issue. I mean in Abkhazia there's not much of a reliable data that would be that would be that would allow to understand better what are the dynamics turn when it comes to population. Naturally, as you know that Abkhazia is not a homogeneous we have a number of different ethnicities residing. All of that information is also something that can easily be used for speculation and various components. Therefore, I would say that roughly it's in in a similar figure. But at the same time, I wouldn't necessarily say that it's probably 100 percent correct because there is also an outdated methodology on how to collect data, how to process it. And I know that I've spoken with a number of people because in my current work, we are also looking into data and unfortunately, we know that it's not 100 percent reliable, would not necessarily say that it's less. But at the same time, I know that whenever they conducted the popular census, they're not necessarily involving everyone. There are bits, bits and pieces that are missing. Therefore, I would say roughly we are in that figure, because physically, probably there are many more people residing in Abkhazia because of the way it works, the seasonal work, because a lot of people are not documented properly and calculations are not carried out properly. A lot of people reside in Abkhazia without residentship and local residents, sort of like on paper at least. Therefore, there are a number of components that I would say are hindering the actual figures. But when it comes to the question of ethnicity, I think that the figures are carefully crafted.

00:07:01
Anonymous Source: So they actually make out the needed ethnic balance.

00:07:06
Eelco: OK.

00:07:08
Eelco: Yeah, and it's kind of a general question also about the repatriations, because The Abkhaz government helped approximately, according to the to the official documents, 500 ethnic Abkhazians and Circassians to flee to Abkhazia like it in the first wave. Is this a correct number? Or has this increased over the years?

00:07:39
Anonymous Source: No, no, I think it's a correct number because, I mean, there's well, when we talk about Turkey, for example, and the Abkhazians residing in Turkey, it's easier for them to to move to Abkhazia. It's rather sporadic. It's not necessarily very well organized. And when it comes to the population naturally from Syria, because physically we don't have the connection, it's a bit further apart. Therefore, I would say that that number is still accurate because that was sort of the organized approach. And a lot of people who actually move to Abkhazia at that time. They didn't they had a very I mean, it was only an emotional or sort of, you know, background wise, they knew that their ancestors came from Abkhazia. It wasn't necessarily that they preserve the language or customs or traditions, because when we when we talk about the Turkish diaspora in Abkhazia. The Abkhazian-Turkish diaspora, they speak the language. Most of them would speak the language. They adhere to Abkhaz traditions and approaches to the way to the family morality, the way to the relations is structured. So they still adhere to that. While with the population in Syria, that was a bit of a different situation. They were very well integrated into their societies and they didn't speak the language and they didn't follow the sort of traditional beliefs that the Turkish Abkhazians managed to preserve.

00:09:07
Eelco: OK.

00:09:12
Eelco: Probably your contacts know more about that, but what do you think that the committee has tried for them to integrate better? Can you tell me something about what the achieved maybe?

00:09:23
Anonymous Source: What they tried to show, actually, this was maybe what they I mean, I know a number of people who have been quite well integrated. They're working locally, they're working in different businesses. They're working a couple of them started their own businesses because they've received help. This was probably one of the very unusual examples for Abkhazia. It was a very structured and I would say well thought and organized approach, because there were components that allowed them opportunities. One of the issues was naturally regarding the accommodations, the process of how people resettled to Abkhazia physically they were provided housing. In addition to that, they were also provided with quite an

extensive and well organized program of sort of cultural integration. Included with language courses, both in Abkazian and Russian, because, you know, the Russian remains to be quite a language of inter-ethnic communication locally. So that was provided there are a number of students at the university who have been enrolled without the exams and provided additional support in order to to feel better integrated. Therefore, I know a number of success, sort of successfully integrated people, individuals. There are a number of people who work in the restaurant business in the sphere of the catering and that sphere. Also, a number of people, some people actually started working for the government because when I worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there was a person who was also working, who also moved to Abkhazia as a part of that repatriation process that the government organized and the person with a fitting background was working in Abkhazia and also other people, some of them are running their own businesses and a number of people. But at the same time, one has to understand to acknowledge the fact that some people left. They moved further on when they moved to Abkhazia. It was I think for them in many cases, it was just a safe way to get outside of Syria at that time. And they moved to Abkhazia, spent some time in here, and then they moved on to Germany or other European countries. So I know those cases as well.

00:11:39
Eelco: So it's a bit of a mixed result.

00:11:42
Anonymous Source: Yes very mixed one yeah.

00:11:43
Eelco: OK, and this this this policy of helping the ethnic Abkhazians get out of trouble or get out of a war. Has this happened more often?

00:11:55
Anonymous Source: No, no. I think that the organized one was this. And I don't remember anything else like that structured, also very targeted, this was specifically organized for the Abkhaz community. Ethnic Abkhaz community in Syria. *:* So it was not anything like that, there's always support for the Turkish community from the from the Turkish community that is, you know, so they're welcomed. It's easy to get passports, documents when you can prove that you are Ethnic Abkhaz. I will not necessarily say that it's very structured because the repatriation committee works quite actively. They're covering a number of components. They have a system of how to approach to issues and resolve issues, how to provide support. But at the same time, I would not necessarily say that they have such a structured and clear approach to repatriate policies when it comes to Abkhazians residing in other parts of the world, apart from the from this particular case in Syria. Because in Syria, I think that there are a number of cases. Also, a lot of people wanted to move because, you know, when you leave somewhere, you can have you know, you can have ties with your country. You can have emotional ties with your sort of late native land where you come from. But at the same time, you make decisions based on other things you have. You know, the economy has to be taken into consideration the situation and stability.

00:13:24
Anonymous Source: And I think that with the Syrian case, because the situation was so bad after a certain period of time that people decided that they want to apply for this opportunity to move to Abkhazia, a lot of them didn't really have a clear understanding of what it was. But I think that that sort of worked out in a way, because the situation in their home country, where they come from, where they were born, where they grew up, was so bad that they decided to organize themselves and opt for Abkhazia. So Abkhazia also responded.

00:13:46
*Eelco:*Did they manage to provide all the necessary support? As far as I know. I mean, they were I mean, because they were ships, trains, their planes are organized for them to be safe, to be safely sort of moved from Syria. I think that the the cross they border on land to Lebanon and they flew from Beirut to Abkhazia. Therefore, this was also well-organized, coordinated with the Russian Federation because obviously they would land in Russia, in Sochi, and they would be transported to Abkhazia because it was not possible to have the direct flight. But but yet, anyway, I think that one of the main this is one of the examples where sort of everything fell through and it worked out in a very structured way. Apart from that, the Abkhaz community in Turkey is not getting the same type of treatment. And a lot of and at the same time, one has to understand that not all of them would want to move to a positive, because in Turkey, the economy is doing much better. They have business opportunities to develop over there. And there was a wave of people moving to Abkhazia, but that was early 90s. You know, the war and after the war, there were a lot of people moving in. And then also in Turkey with more sort of more control, the Turkish government is exercising on the society. You also see sometimes sporadic movements towards Abkhazia from a number of people. I remember that they had a discussion with someone. And when there was this coupe d'état attempt in the recent one in Turkey, a lot of people also spoke about in case there is a destabilization in Turkey, you might be considering moving to Abkhazia. So I would put it this way. I mean, I don't know to what extent that answers your question, but I think that the Syrian program worked in such a way because all the variables came into place and it worked out well with everything else. It's a bit of a different thing. *:* A lot of considerations are applied.

00:16:01
Eelco: OK, now it does answer my question. So out of this five hundred, do you know how many still reside in and of course, you know how many of them have integrated?

00:16:17
Anonymous Source: No, I would say roughly one third. I'm not I'm not sure. I think that the people that worked on that would be able to give you concrete answers.

00:16:28
Eelco: OK. So, Is it the actual goal of the government to increase the population?

00:16:39
Anonymous Source: I think so. There is still I wouldn't not necessarily say that there is a very clear strategy. Because whenever you talk to people, to government as well, there's not a very clear understanding how to do this, because everyone talks about demography and says, well, you know, for even for economic reasons, we need to have more people. But then it's not very clear how to attract the population, how to attract people from outside. Naturally, because there is this ethnic component, a lot of people are ideally saying, well, you know, it would be great to have more and more Abkhazians. But that's not going to work out because you I mean, that doesn't work necessarily the same way. And therefore, they're not very clear understandings on how to approach it. But I think that that particular sort of like, you know, the campaign of bringing in Abkhazians, because it was also clear it was only applicable to Abkhaz and Abaza origin. *:* It was not only Cherkess, the Circassians. Because there was also a component that did that sort of excluded a number of other North-Caucasians because, I know how it is by Constitution. Any one of Abkhazia/Abaza sort of ethnic background can get the passport. It does not necessarily involve Cherkess, the Circassians because they that's considered to be a different that's a different ethnic group and they're not necessarily involved in the in the scheme of attracting. It sometimes is lost in translation because Cherkess, The Circassians are a bigger group and a lot of people would equate the Abaza community with them included. But at the same time in Abkhazia there is a differentiation. So I think that yes, it was a policy that part of the policy, because it's overall policy of increasing the population of Abkhazia, as I said.But at the same time, I would not necessarily say that it was a very I mean, I didn't actually see that happening any more. *:* It was over there. It sort of did happen. They've brought in people. But at the same time, I would not necessarily say that it was that anything like that has been considered or done for anyone else. I mean, as we mentioned in Turkey, there are people in Albania there people are Abkhazians residing. But it's not I haven't seen anything like that happening.

00:19:10
Eelco: So like basically the people that they want to bring into Abkhazia, have to be ethnically Abkhazian or Abaza?

00:19:18
Anonymous Source: Because there's always this absorption capacity, because a lot of them would not be able to speak the language. A lot of them are by faith Muslim. And also, you know, the Middle East has its own different approaches to a lot of things. Therefore, I think that a lot of people will also considering to which extent it would be possible to absorb and integrate the populations, because, you know, the one positive thing about the Abkhaz society isthat were very accepting of religion. We are not very religious, per se, which doesn't really matter what the background is, Muslim or Christian, the population is very a-religious. That I know not very religious, not very involved in different practices. And therefore, a lot of people are always a bit of afraid if there is a situation where that that balance would be tipped. So I think that is all. There is always that element behind where you think thinking.

00:20:28
Eelco: Yeah, that was basically the questions, the general questions, I think you had something to say about. *:* So if you if you have any other information or people you can contact with, it would be great. But otherwise that was it.

00:20:48
Anonymous Source: So let me I think that the two [redacted] and the in there were the people that they work for, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and they were both overseeing the process. They both traveled to Syria. They both went to Beirut to organize different components. To make this trip happen. And I will get in touch with them and see what would be their response. And then I'll try to put you in touch. Both of them speak English so they will be able to explain everything because they will have the numbers. And also they have personal connections with people so they will know how many of them were integrated, how many of them actually left. While I have a more of a general and sort of and I know more. But at the same time, I would not necessarily want to give you a false information because this is not necessarily my sort of area of expertise. So let me put you in touch with them. Let me check first with them and then I'll try to put you in touch with them. And I do hope that they will be able to help a great group not. If not I will see, I'll try to approach other people, maybe.

00:21:57
Eelco: OK, great. Thank you very much for your help already. So, yeah, have a nice day then and I will see your messages coming.

00:22:07
Anonymous Source: Yeah, I'll, I'll write to them both right away and see what they respond.

00:22:12
Eelco: OK, thank you very much. Thank you.

00:22:14
Anonymous Source: Have a great day.

00:22:15
Eelco: Have a nice day, bye.

Interview Transcript Anonymous Syrian Repatriate in Abkhazia (2)

00:00:00
Eelco: Should be recording now, OK?

00:00:03
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: Yes.

00:00:08
Eelco: If you if I if I ask you a question you're not comfortable with, you can just skip it and it's not it's not a problem at all. So, yeah, can you introduce yourself with, you know.

00:00:26
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: What is it that you want to know? My name is [redacted] from Syria. I was born in Saudi Arabia because my parents were working there, but I grew up I lived in Syria. I'm originally Kabardian from the Kabardino-Balkaria, which is in Russia.

00:00:49
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: But my mother is Abkhazian so. And I am currently living in Abkhazia.

00:01:00
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: I don't know what else you want to know.

00:01:02
Eelco: Yeah, maybe your education, maybe your line of work,

00:01:08
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: I have finished, the Abkhazian state University of English Philology.

00:01:17
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: Yeah, which is in 2019, then I went to the Army for a year and now I finished them, I don't work.

00:01:31
Eelco: Um, your parents are both from the caucuses then, yeah, What is, uh, what is this culture like in your childhood? Was it important or did you. Experience it.

00:01:52
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: Yeah, because we're living in a community where most of them from, where from the Caucasus. They were either, Abkhaz, Kabardian Adygea or Abaza but whether we were are living together and we had nearly the same traditions are here. We had them. Not everything, but most of them.

00:02:20
Eelco: OK, and when did you move to Abkhazia?

00:02:27
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: In 2013, that's 7 years ago.

00:02:45
Eelco: The screen froze, Can you hear me still?

00:02:51
Eelco: Maybe it's better without the video maybe than the. The connection is OK as.

00:02:59
Eelco: can you hear me

00:03:15
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: Yes

00:03:15
Eelco: I hope it's better now.

00:03:16
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: Do you hear? Yeah. It's still not.

00:03:24
Eelco: Pretty good, I think.

00:03:26
Eelco: Well, um, how did you move to Abkhazia came about like, uh. Did you reach out yourself and arrange it yourself or did you get any help?

00:03:44
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: No, we had help. There was this. How to say. In 2013, the Abkhazian government decided to help the diaspora, the Abkhaz people In Syria. They arranged two or three flights to take people from Syria to Abkhazia, they arranged everything from like busses to the tickets, to the visas, everything. And when we were told about that. We signed our names and we came that way.

00:04:35
Eelco: Did you move together with your parents then?

00:04:39
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: Yeah, I was me, my sister, my father, my mother and my cousin. We came together then after two or three months, my elder brother came with another group. Also the same way through Abkhazian government flights and so on.

00:05:11
Eelco: It was in 2013?

00:05:14
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: Yeah.

00:05:16
Eelco: OK, do you know how many people the government has helped in that time and.

00:05:27
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: I would say around 500. That's including children and elderly people, I think, like in general, there were around a hundred families. Because they brought people on in three groups, we were with the second group.

00:05:55
Eelco: OK. Uh. Did you know much about Abkhazia before you moved?

00:06:08
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: No, not really. I have an uncle, my mother's brother, who was living here even before the war with Georgia. So we sometimes spoke with him, but I didn't really know anything much about the Abkhazia I just knew that there was this country. And then in 2008, also, there was a conflict between Georgia, Ossetia and Russia and so on. And I also heard about the war in Abkhazia and that's it. Like didn't really search or anything.

00:06:52
Eelco: So does the Abkhazian government still assist you or helps you in ways of work or education or that kind of stuff?

00:07:05
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: Uh. Yeah, they're telling us they are helping, like the children with enlisting in schools, Whenever new people arrive, they help them with what they're studying, with their documents. It maybe if they can, they will help them find work. Yeah, I studied five years old. I didn't pay anything like the government paid for our University fees.

00:07:52
Eelco: Okay.

00:07:52
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: And by the way, they also help with house rent. Most at first, when we came were living, they we were staying at hotels, then they, like, gave every family a separate house to, like, rented them and for I don't know. For a long time, they have been paying the rent. I don't know if they are paying still now, but mostly they are paying. But also most of the people have already been given their own apartments, their own houses, so they don't have to pay rent.

00:08:43
Eelco: These houses were also provided by the Government.

00:08:47
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: Yeah, by the government, like we are staying in this apartment right now. We don't pay any rent. It belongs to the government.

00:08:59
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: But we are living here, but we can't, like, sell it or rent it. But if we want, we can also buy it from the government who are staying here, we don't pay rent, but it's not fully ours.

00:09:15
Eelco: OK, yeah. Um, is it is it hard to find a job for you or for. Now, four people in general?

00:09:33
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: I don't know, I didn't have any troubles finding a job for myself, for example, I've been working studying all this time. I didn't have much trouble. Uh. No, I'm just I had. Some other work to do. That's why I didn't look for any job seriously, but many people complain that they don't find the job. But I think that if you really want to, you can find any job that you want. It's not it's not impossible.

00:10:16
Eelco: OK, how did you experience the Abkhaz desk project? Did you take part in it?

00:10:25
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: Yeah, I was really active there because my friend was working with them and I also, like I after the university didn't have anything much to do. So I went there, helped them because, yeah, it was a really nice experience. They had many different activities. They had this coffee breaks that I used to like.

00:11:03
Eelco: OK, uh, um. Do you know if most of the or how many of the people that the government brought in have stayed out there? Are there Still many, uh, Syrian people in Abkhazia?

00:11:28
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: You yes, there were some people who went back or maybe went to Europe, but the majority of the people stayed here.

00:11:49
Eelco: Did the other still people coming in, like from Syria or from other places? That you know about?

00:12:00
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: And maybe there are people, but not like we came, in large groups, even after we came, the three large groups, there were many people who came by themselves, Like they went to Russia and then came to Abkhazia or straight to Abkhazia or because their target was to come to Abkhazia. But there were a lot of people who came even after. So those three groups.

00:12:40
Eelco: Do you do you feel at home in Abkhazia like because it is like, Yeah, your ancestral land, maybe.

00:12:54
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: Well, I don't know about home, but I think I feel comfortable. And I don't really have a connection to a specific piece of land, like I call it home. I can't say about Syria that is my home or Abkhazia that it's my home. I know. It's just my way of thinking.

00:13:24
Eelco: OK, um, so do you plan to stay in Abkhazia longer or do you want to go back to Syria eventually after the war, or to Europe?

00:13:41
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: No, no, I'm not planning to go back to Syria or, uh, or Europe. Like staying in Abkhazia, I think has many opportunities. There is a future in Abkhazia. But if I get a chance for a better life, I wouldn't say no. Maybe, Europe, Canada, I don't know any other place, but not like because I want to go there, but for my future.

00:14:17
Eelco: So it's not that you really are planning on going, but if the opportunity is there, then

00:14:24
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: yeah, I wouldn't say no.

00:14:27
Eelco: OK. Um. Yeah, did the Abkhaz desk experience help you to integrate or to maybe feel better and feel better in the community, like make friends or something like that?

00:15:04
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: Yeah, actually I met a lot of great people there, whether they were locals like Abkhaz, Armenians or other nationalities or people from Syria who I didn't know before or maybe people from Turkey. Yeah, I've made great friends over there. And this this also helped me in my life.

00:15:36
Eelco: Um, OK. Um, is there any other experience you want to share with me or. Uh, yeah. Maybe other contacts, that want to help me.

00:15:57
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: Huh?

00:15:59
Eelco: Maybe you know, some other people who are. Are willing to maybe help me in my research.

00:16:10
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: Some other people, hmm. I don’t know There is. You want people who are. Originally from the North Caucasus, right?

00:16:35
Eelco: Yeah, yeah, people like you maybe who, uh. Because of the war in Syria, move to Abkhazia.

00:16:52
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: OK. Oh, I'll see. Maybe I'll just ask them and then I'll send you there and their contacts because I don't know if they are willing to help or not.

00:17:09
Eelco: OK.

00:17:14
Eelco: Um, yeah, well, um, I think I asked the questions that I wanted to ask.

00:17:24
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: OK.

00:17:27
Eelco: So, yeah, well, thank you very much for helping me.

00:17:32
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: No, it's no problem. And, uh.

00:17:36
Eelco: Now, have a nice day and

00:17:38
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: thank you, you, too. It was nice talking to you.

00:17:44
Eelco: So if you have any people or things you want to share with me, just send me a Facebook message if you want...

00:17:51
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: OK. OK, I'll see

00:17:58
Eelco: OK. OK, bye bye then,

00:18:01
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: good luck with your research.

00:18:03
Eelco: Thanks.

00:18:04
ANONYMOUS SYRIAN REPATRIATE: Good bye.

Interview Transcript Anonymous Syrian Repatriate in Abkhazia (3)

00:00:02
Eelco: It's recording now, so thank you very much already for your time, and I well, I'm back un.I'm a master's student from the Netherlands and I'm writing a master's thesis in the field of human geography. Um. Last week, I interviewed a friend of you. Yeah, um, the focus of my research is on the repatriation of people from Syria into the Caucasus with a special focus on Abkhazia.

00:00:41
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Mm hmm.

00:00:43
Eelco: So I would really like to hear from you about how you experience it. And, uh, yeah, that's basically it. So the first question to you is, can you introduce yourself a bit like what is your background? Maybe.

00:01:00
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: OK, so my name [redacted], you and I came from Syria about seven years ago. I actually didn't know that a country existed called Abkhazia before, so until I came here, I was the first time I ever heard or knew about Abkhazia, even though my mother is originally from here. It was actually very shocking when I came here, like I didn't expect it to be like that.

00:01:40
Eelco: Well. What was the shocking part, What do you by mean shocking?

00:01:47
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Well, I lived in Syria, it's not a very civilized country, but it was like, everything was there. And then we came to Sochi. We landed in Sochi and we saw all this amusement park and the airport and all this stuff. And then we took a bus and came to Abkhazia. It's like we went back in time until the 1980s and 1990s. Yes. It's a very old city. Like everything is old here, even until now. Now they are making some kind of improvement, but it's taking them too long like it took them twenty five years, like only to build some buildings here, like to renew some buildings, some roads. But in twenty five years I said that this is too little. Too little.

00:02:55
Eelco: OK, interesting, and so you said your mother is from Abkhazia, OK. And was that this culture or anything about this part of your childhood?

00:03:11
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: No, I'm originally Circassian, but the Circassian culture and the Abkhazian culture I see like there is some similarities between them, even though, like, they are completely different. But I kind of spotted some similarities in the way the. they live, yeah. But I grew up in Syria, so I was like, I'm. I kind of live with a Middle Eastern culture more than the Abkhazian culture.

00:03:50
Eelco: OK, yeah, so when did you move to Abkhazia? What was it with, when they brought in the big numbers of people from Syria?

00:04:05
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Yeah, it was 2013. So we came as the two groups, the first group came a year before us and then we came with the second group.

00:04:30
Eelco: Um. How did this came about, did you did you or your family had to reach out yourself to Abkhazia or did they?

00:04:42
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: They've reached out, yes, they reached out to all the and people who live lived in Syria, they wanted to help the Abkhazian people who are in Syria during the war in Syria. So, yes, they invited them to come to Abkhazia

00:05:06
Eelco: Where in, uh, where did you used to live in Syria and where do you live now?

00:05:11
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: I used to live in. Damascus.

00:05:23
Eelco: And where do you live now in Abkhazia?

00:05:26
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: In Sukhumi, Yes.

00:05:34
Eelco: The governments that they help you to settle in Abkhazia?

00:05:40
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: I'd say yes, they helped everyone to settle. They even rented houses for every family who came here and they provided education for all the students. So, yeah, they did what they can. But we live with a very bad economy, like I would say, it's really helped. It did more than its power in its power.

00:06:15
Eelco: Did you also get an education from the Government?

00:06:19
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Yes, I studied here at the university for four years now, I'm a graduate and I'm working as an English teacher. Um, good.

00:06:34
Eelco: So what is your nationality now? Is it still Syrian?

00:06:38
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Yes i have the Syrian nationality and the Abkhazian nationality

00:06:47
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: But in the Abkhazian passport, it's written that I'm originally Circassian, not Abkhazian.

00:06:54
Eelco: Is it, um, does it make any difference or is it just really down there?

00:06:59
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Yes, because the rights here for the Abkhazian people are different. Like the right to own a house. Or to own a property, I think. Yes.

00:07:16
Eelco: So so you're not allowed to own property?

00:07:20
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: It's not I'm not allowed to, but I can, but here the people who came as Abkhazian. They provided them with houses to stay in to settle in. But in my case, we didn't get a house because my family, for example, my family, they left and I stayed here in Abkhazia. But they don't consider me as an Abkhaz person, so. They didn't give me a place to stay, so right now I'm renting on my own.

00:08:00
Eelco: Did you did your family went back to Syria or.

00:08:05
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: No, they moved to Norway.

00:08:07
Eelco: Oh, OK.

00:08:10
Eelco: Is there is there a reason you didn't want to go?

00:08:15
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: No, of course, I would love to go, but I me and my sister were rejected with the , with the family reunion, so we stayed here.

00:08:32
Eelco: If I'm being to too personal, then you can just stop me. Uh.

00:08:37
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: OK, no problem.

00:08:40
Eelco: Uh, is it? Was it or is it hard to integrate into society and Abkhazia?

00:08:50
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Hmmm, I guess that's a good question, because me personally, yes, I find it hard to integrate with people like seven years and I still don't really consider having a friend here an Abkhazian friend. It's not that they are difficult to talk to, but they are not very open to other people.

00:09:21
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: And I consider myself also an introvert, like I don't really I'm not very social person, so for me, yes, it was, but for other people like I have here, friends who have a lot of Abkhazian friends. So, yeah, it depends on the person. Oh, good. Yeah, it depends on the people here, because you have there are some people who are very welcoming and there are some people who don't like the idea of foreigners.

00:09:57
Eelco: Do you consider yourself to be an Abkhazian or do you still feel like you are Syrian?

00:10:04
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: That's a very good question. I actually consider myself like identity less, like I really don't feel like I belong not to Syria, not the Abkhazia I don't know actually what my identity is. Because in Syria I felt like I'm they treat you as a foreigner because I'm Circassian, that's what they say in Syria. When I came here, they say you are Syrian. When I went to the Caucasus, they say you are Syrian. So. In each country, I didn't feel welcomed. This is why maybe I don't feel like I belong anywhere.

00:10:46
Eelco: You feel sad about this kind of

00:10:49
Anonymous Syrian Repatriate: Not really. I feel like I belong to this planet. So I was I existed on this planet. So I belong here on this earth.

00:11:05
Eelco: Is it hard to find a job and to make a living?

00:11:12
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Yes, and it's difficult to find a job, actually. This is why my parents left. For me personally. Since I speak English and Russian, it wasn't difficult for me to find a job as a teacher, but still the salaries here they are, they aren't that good for comparing to Russia, for example. This country, it's the economy here is related with the tourism. So if tourists come, then the country is benefited. But if there is no tourists, they kind of I don't know. The economy is very bad.

00:12:04
Eelco: Probably only tourists from Russia going, right?

00:12:07
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Yes, only from Russia because the border.

00:12:12
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: But Syria, I always hear people like it's very difficult to find a job here.

00:12:26
Eelco: Do you know about the Abkhaz desk project from.

00:12:32
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Applause Yes, yes, I heard about it, I went there once, I think. They had a gathering for the youth here in Abkhazia. Yes, I went there once, but I was busy so I could always go there.

00:12:49
Eelco: OK.

00:12:53
Eelco: So I kind of asked you this already, but do you feel at home in Abkhazia?

00:13:04
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Since I lived here for seven years, I kind of feel like it's going to be difficult for me to separate from you, but at the same time, I have to move on. But maybe in the future I want to come back live here.

00:13:22
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Like, it's a very beautiful country and I thought, I feel safe here, you know, like Abkhazia as people want for me, I can walk in the street, like at 2:00 a.m., 3:00 a.m. and no one can harass me and. Yes, I feel I feel safe as as a woman.

00:13:46
Eelco: More than Syria?

00:13:48
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Yes. Oh, my God, yes. In Syria, it's not safe at all, like even if I walk in midday.

00:14:01
Eelco: So, um. But, uh, are you religious, has this played a role in the integration?

00:14:12
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Not really, I'm not very religious, even though my family are religious, but.

00:14:22
Eelco: Does that play a role in the society of Abkhazia?

00:14:26
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Not really, you can find like some Christian people, Catholic people, but the religion is not very important. What's important here is the traditions. Traditions control people here.

00:14:42
Eelco: So Abkhazian traditions?

00:14:45
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: yes,

00:14:45
Eelco: Abkhazian tradition, you talked a bit on that, like what kind of traditions do you mean?

00:14:56
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: For example, they respect the older people.

00:15:02
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: They have like some things they do on a daily basis. Like, for example, when someone comes in and whoever it is, you have to stand and greet them.

00:15:17
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: What else when, yeah, when there is a woman walking like they don't even stare at her. It's I find this very respectful because it makes you feel comfortable even walking down the street. And yet they consider every Abkhazian person as a part of their family. So this is why when they know very well this is. Two sort of things they respect only occurs in people like if there's a girl, a Russian girl walking, they can trust her like it's for them. It's OK to harass her because she is Russian.

00:16:04
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: She's not Abkhazian. So this is a sort of a racist thing, yeah. Yeah, but when they know she's an Abkhaz person, they will back.

00:16:18
Eelco: OK, and you as Circassian, are they do they consider that as Abkhazian?

00:16:25
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Yes, because they consider that everyone from the Caucasus, they are like brothers. If it if people from Chechnya and. Well, not Georgia, of course, but in the Caucasus region. Yeah.

00:16:43
Eelco: The Northern Caucasus.

00:16:45
Eelco: Yeah. OK. Are you planning on staying in Abkhazia?

00:16:57
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: No, I'm planning on leaving, but I don't know where yet, for now, I'm going to stay in Maikup.

It's also. Apart of the Caucasus group, I have some relatives there, so I'm going to stay there for a while, then maybe I can move someone somewhere else.

00:17:18
Eelco: Well, it would be what was it, not Maikup? yes. Is it a city or region is a city?

00:17:26
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Yes, it's a city in Kabardino-Balkaria

00:17:33
Eelco: There is the part where a lot of Circassians come from, right? Yes.

00:17:41
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: The Republic of the. Yes, Maikup republik. It's called Maikup

00:17:50
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Maikup, yes.

00:18:00
Eelco: Why do you know why you and your sister weren't allowed to come to Norway and your parents are?

00:18:09
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Well, they told us that because we are above 18 and we are now responsible for ourselves.

00:18:18
Eelco: OK. So there was not a family reunion?

00:18:23
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Yes, they only took my little siblings. Yeah,

00:18:29
Eelco: OK.

00:18:34
Eelco: Um. Well. I think it's about. Oh, yeah, we went through it pretty quick, actually. I do have the question, do you see a future for yourself in Abkhazia, would you already answer that?

00:19:01
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Well, actually, I wanted to start like a business here, but it's difficult to start a business enterprise because. Well, it's a tribal way of living here, like if they are from this family and they are this from this family, so families control Abkhazia, not the government. You see, so everyone who starts a business here, they track them down. Because they want some profit from your business, if you can share your business with them, then your business is going well, but you on your own, you can't start the business. And this is a very sad think about here, because no one can work well unless they are working for these types of families.

00:19:56
Eelco: Sounds like a mafia. Almost.

00:19:59
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: exactly.

00:20:02
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Yeah, OK.

00:20:06
Eelco: So it's. [redacted] also told me a little bit about this, that you can't well make it, if you don’t have to have connections.

00:20:18
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Exactly. you have to have connections here.

00:20:23
Eelco: Uh, yeah, yeah, is there if there is anything you want to tell me, please be still free. Uh.

00:20:35
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Well, I don't know, I really like Abkhazia, but at the same time, I have a love hate relationship with you because it's a very, very, very beautiful place. Like I haven't been to such beautiful places and there are so many even nice places that are abandoned here. But I'm sad that people don't really realize that. And if they, like, put an effort to it, it can be like a very, very beautiful country for tourism. People from all over the world would come here.

00:21:15
Eelco: Yeah.

00:21:16
Eelco: But it's now not possible because of the Conflict.

00:21:22
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Yeah, because of the conflict and because a person wants to stay independent, but it's not doing anything to improve the country, like she only wants to stay independent. But the president comes and goes and nothing happens. And this country.

00:21:45
Eelco: I I've been to actually, uh

00:21:48
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: You have been here.

00:21:52
Eelco: Yeah, three years ago, I was, uh, I was living in Georgia for, uh, for studying and well, it was very hard to come into Abkhazia, but I thought that I had to try it. Um, yeah. I thought it was very beautiful. And it's really sad that so hard to come there because.

00:22:15
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Exactly.

00:22:18
Eelco: But it's also very complex and they like the history and, yeah, the war and now the recent wars and everything. They maybe have any friends or other people who might want to talk to me.

00:22:44
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: I didn't know, but I will ask some of my friends if you want to witness. OK, I will check with them, they're willing to answer.

00:22:57
Eelco: OK. Uh, well.

00:23:00
Eelco: I think that's it. So very nice talking to you. Thank you for your help. And if I come up, any other questions, can I show them to you?

00:23:16
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: Yes. Yes, of course. You can send me any questions you have.

00:23:19
Eelco: OK, thank you very much.

00:23:22
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: You're welcome

00:23:23
Eelco: Have a nice evening.

00:23:24
Syrian Repatriate anonymous: You too, Bye Bye.

Interview Transcript Angie Pataraya (Abkhaz Desk, Abkhazia).

00:00:02
Mrs. Pataraya: And we will see until such organizations like with different organizations in Aplysia and doing a lot of second front diplomacy in youth dialogues, Georgian peace-building things and some projects with the repatriates, I mean, involving repatriates not directly, but I mean, apart from these I interact with repatriates a lot and have a lot of friends in and outside.

00:00:36
Mrs. Pataraya: You are recording right now.

00:00:39
Eelco: Yes is it a problem?

00:00:48
Mrs. Pataraya: No but you should have told me

00:00:48
Eelco: Yes, I am sorry

00:00:48
Mrs. Pataraya: It's okay

00:00:48
Eelco: OK, so can you tell me about the project you are, uh. You worked on with the with the with the repatriates?

00:01:00
Mrs. Pataraya: I was only one project, I mean big one, a few years ago. It's called the Abkhaz Desk.

00:01:12
Mrs. Pataraya: And while it was not like really for the repatriates, but it was like it was about creating a platform for young people, both local and repatriates, to come together because Abkhazians a multicultural country. Right. So we have not only Abkhazians but we have Russians, Georgians, you know, ethnic Megrelians ,Armenians, Greek, whatever, nationality, ethnicity, people living in Abkhazia. The variety. And then we have the repatriates who are mostly ethnically a Abkhaz or Adygea

00:01:49
Mrs. Pataraya: And we wanted to bring them together so that the repatriates can experience this kind of multiculturalism, because normally they live and interact only with each other. So, like, you know, Abkhazians and Adyge with each other within the diaspora, within the repatriates both in the countries where they came from, whether it's Turkey or Syria or Jordan or Egypt and also in Abkhazia, they also interact within their community. And in order to open up a little bit, kind of a Abkhazia for them and so that they can have, you know, friends from among other people as well, we created this kind of platform. Also for the local people as well, like once I asked the students whether they have friends among the repatriates and out of the whole course, maybe like one or two, had some acquaintances, not even friends. So we're talking about people who are like, you know, in their 20s. So I thought that it's a bit wrong, kind of, because, I mean, everyone has been living in Abkhazia for some time. And, you know, we should be more supportive and helpful and open. So that was a kind of idea behind. And also another idea was that. To help the repatriates through these platform to to come over there kind of, you know, their problems, their stereotypes about the time to help them to adjust better. So, yeah, I mean, that was that was fun. And we were really helpful to lots of people whom we touched through the activities of the project.

00:04:04
Eelco: So is this platform still in place, is still there?

00:04:11
Mrs. Pataraya: You know, you can explore I mean, it's not because I also have to tell you that this project was supported under it was it was implemented by the local CSO, but it was supported by UNDP as part of the civil society support program that they have. And it was in place for nine months. The project ran for nine months. And there are social you can Abkhaz Desk on Instagram and you can find Abkhaz Desk on Facebook so you can get the insight of what kind of people came, what kind of activities, because it has a lot of information, more detailed information on the on activities that we conducted because there was a variety of them not directly involved. Living like you've done some joint activities, like English speaking club or a Abkhazians language courses, or like lots of workshops, and kind of talks with the people well known, so that kind of things. And also the we even had the support, we had sessions with a lawyer because, like lots of repatriates, had issues with, you know, paying the taxes, citizenship rights, responsibilities, voting, things like a bunch of questions. And then the lawyer was also kind of providing some guidance on these legal issues, legal advice is one of the they had it, so yeah, and it was it was a very nice platform where the people would hang out and just come for a cup of coffee or tea and use the Internet, bring something in like share their talents as well. Kind of. You know, if if you do yoga, then you come and you do yoga

with other people or if you speak some language, you can do some language courses for them. I mean, of course, or if you're a particularly talented in something, you can you can organize a workshop of your own and teach them how to do it. I mean, whoever wants to. We even raised some money for the charity organization. And sold some things that were done by the repatriates, I mean, that was a very, very interesting process where people. You know, you get people who speak Arabic, Turkish, Russian, Armenian, you know, all together in one place, studying Abkhazian, for example. So it's very interesting experience, or doing something for the community where they were living. I mean, that was that was good. And the project also was not written only by me, but it was written by me and my friend, who herself is a repatriate. From Turkey. Because she wanted to help other people like her to adopt better in Abkhazia. So, yeah, I mean, it really rose out of needs, emerged out of needs on the ground, and now I mean, we like we intended to cover up to 200 people, but in the end of the project, like there were like around 600 people who came and benefited from the activities. Whatever it is today, I'm. That was kind of a success.

00:08:04
Eelco: OK, that's good to here, nice

00:08:12
Eelco: So do you think it helps the repatriates to integrate into the community and maybe interact more with the was it like the original Abkhaz people?

00:08:27
Mrs. Pataraya: It definitely did. Absolutely, because I'm not saying that we substituted, as you know, of course, there is there is a ministry on repatriates like Repatriation Ministry with funds and stuff like this. I'm not saying that we could have. I took their place and carried out their things, but we were able to to attract much more attention to the topics of integration of repatriates within those nine months compared to what the the officials do, and because, I'm not just saying it because it was our project and we loved it, but because of the feedback that we got from the repatriates themselves, I mean, feedback for the quality of Abkhazians language classes that we did and other activities. The quality of support that was provided and we had repatriates, especially young people who would be, you know. Who would have been living in that position at that moment back in around five or seven years and would not still have local friends? And then with this project, they were able to make friendships. Like, you know, it's been, I think, two years that the. One, two year, let's say, two years that the project is over, but the friend like that, the connections that they built are still there and we see them hanging out together, posting things together. And they themselves, you know, like said this, that, you know, their classmates, their friends in university are treating them in a different way more warmly because they were able to open up. Better so, yes, definitely in in means of no better adaptation and making friends among the locals no matter. This is also important when I say locals, it doesn't mean original Abkhaz, everyone. But we get the that we get the Syrians-Abkhazians coming from Syria or the Turkish opposition is coming from Turkey, making friends with Armenians in Abkhazia, with Greeks inapposite, with Georgians in Abkhazia. I mean, with the Abkhaz-Abkhazians, of course. But like. No everyone. Because the point was it and actually I mean, you can you can that you can never tell people whom they have to be friends with. So it's like going to the locals and the repatriates they made friends and even older the generation as well, because there were people not only like, you know, young people, but those who were, let's say, in the 40s and 50s. They also came and. Oh, they had a really, really good time because they also need some adaptation. It's not about only young people, but then we found out that the elder generation also needs it because they, like, lack the friends they lack for other sources of communication rather than like, let's say, those who came from Turkey. They interact only with Turkish speaking people. But with that way, they had more chances to to communicate with others as well. I mean, in Abkhaz or in other language, whatever was.

00:12:25
Eelco: Great, thank you know for the explanation, the. I have read some articles that, um, in 2013, the Abkhaz government. Brought in like 500 ethnic Abkhazians from Syria and Circassians, I think you'll find shelter and to repatriate, uh, to Abkhazia. Is this correct? And have since then more people come.

00:13:06
Mrs. Pataraya: It is correct because I was a part of that initiative. We were meeting those. Planes and buses when they arrived, to abkhazia, I think a few, not only once, but two or three to remember if it was 2014, do I think. Yes, maybe, maybe even. I mean, it was prior to the to the start of the war in Syria because there were tensions already. And then we got messages for those people in Diaspora who were who had connections here that the situation was tense and that they would that they would like to. To seek shelter in Abkhazia to come and so like this, so then a few people just like the local, it was a local initiative. The people got together. They went to the Foreign Ministry of Abkhazia they said that we need to return these people, those who voluntarily want to come to Abkhazia. Of course, not everyone. And for us, the priority was to return ethnic Abkhaz and Circassians because, you know, in Syria, in Syria and in Middle East in particular, we do not really kind of. Uh, we don't really see the big change, I mean, between the ones one second, please.

00:14:41
Eelco: I met some of my roommates and making a lot of noise. I'm going to ask them to be a little quiet.

00:14:51
Mrs. Pataraya: Wonderful. That's amazing.

00:15:04
Eelco: Sorry for that

00:15:36
Mrs. Pataraya: It's good, happy for them, so we're not differentiating between Abkhaz, the ethnic Abkhaz and the ethnic Adygea. I mean, because in the Middle East, they live in a way that a mother is Adygea and the father is Abkhaz of course. So like, no, you cannot really. Take one and ignore the other. So, I mean, it all goes with the Circassian and Abkhazians in the diaspora. So several people went to Syria and in front of him, it was working from the thing. They were from the Middle East Department at the foreign ministry. So they went to Syria and they said that those guys who want to come back Abkhazia. Please write down your names or like, you know, apply, and then we will organize something. So a lot of people applied. And then with the help of Russian Foreign Ministry, it was possible to bring those people several times to Abkhazia And then they were posted in a hotel, in a big hotel. In Sukhumi And later on, I mean, it took some time, but they were like even because the Ministry of repatriation was building houses in several areas outside Sukhumi to repatriates so they would give them houses, flats and some allowance until they find a job or settle down. That was that was a really big thing for us, for everyone, and it was like everyone was very united in that in that kind of in that feeling and that motivation that so many people are returning to their actual motherland.

00:17:38
Mrs. Pataraya: And that should be actually helping them by bringing them back home. So, you know, but of course, not all of them stayed there are families who moved well. So seven years ago, but they moved like the whole family cousins like in big families. And they still Abkhazia, and they went to Damascus, for example, several times to visit relatives, but they still prefer to stay in Abkhazia because they feel at home. But there are others who were not able to adjust for some reasons, and they returned as well. Returned back or moved somewhere else? Like to Europe, for example, receiving refugee status there.

00:18:27
Eelco: So did these people get or were they able to get Abkhaz the citizenship.

00:18:40
Mrs. Pataraya: Well, according to the Constitution, every ethnic Abkhaz is entitled to get a citizenship and passport.

00:18:49
Mrs. Pataraya: If you prove that your ethnic Abkhaz and even you, Eelco, will be able to get a citizenship.

00:18:53
Eelco: But also Circassian people? then just because they were mixed with I mean the Abkhaz?

00:19:01
Mrs. Pataraya: When it came to Syria you as normally. Yes, normally like for pure Adyghe for someone who is coming from North Caucasus, it's a bit more problematic.

00:19:12
Mrs. Pataraya: But those who are in diaspora because they're like no intermixed and it has both opposing and Adygea and so they are given.

00:19:23
Eelco: But, um, so they were helped, but I think the Ministry of Repatriation to the find housing work education.

00:19:35
Mrs. Pataraya: Yeah, language courses sometimes. Also some international organizations like the Danish Refugee Council were helping them with the, um, we'd like rehabilitation. Still, it's like, you know, leaving everything in in Syria, escaping from war. I mean, it's not an easy thing and it's a trauma. So the organization is also providing them some support.

00:20:06
Eelco: And this this kind of policy or this this action as the government's done it more often, like in other regions where maybe Abkhaz people were living in trouble? Or something?

00:20:25
Mrs. Pataraya: Well, they haven't. There is no any other region that where the trouble started, apart from Syria, because the geography of diaspora, Abkhaz/Circassian diaspora is well. It's Middle Eastern countries and. Israel, I mean, also Middle Eastern country like Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and it's been it's been fine there. I mean, there were people from Egypt also coming in in that years or earlier, but it was not like because they have like, you know, some revolution there, but because it's like it was just like individuals wanting to be in Abkhazia and settle here. Also, people from the diaspora, from Turkey, for example. I mean, the government policy has always been this way of, whoever from the diaspora want to come to Abkhazia,

you are very welcome. And the government of Abkhazia will do everything possible to accommodate, help and welcome any individuals from Diaspora. And there has been this open call that has been reiterated every time. And there were Congresses like international congresses of Abkhaz/Abaza people and representatives of Circassian diaspora from around the world would come together and I'm going this now. And it has always been a policy for the Abkhaz State, yeah.

00:22:28
Eelco: So the total number has it much increased across from the 500 that came before the like people from Syria and Iraq?

00:22:40
Mrs. Pataraya: There is no one from Iraq.

00:22:42
Eelco: No one OK now. But has it increased since the 500 that came into the 2013?

00:22:49
Mrs. Pataraya: Or if it may increase, it may get I mean, it's always changes because I mean, it's not only five hundred.

00:22:57
Mrs. Pataraya: We should also count the other ones. I mean, when the when those five hundred came, they were already so over a thousand of repatriates from Turkey living in a Abkhazia. I mean we should remember that the first repatriates were coming even in Soviet times. So repatriation has always been there. I mean, not always, but in closer to eighties let's say, after the Soviet Union was, you know, falling apart, there was a moment. And then the connect the the contacts between the people here and the diaspora, they were intensified. And the people I mean, of course, first it was like writers, sportsmen and those people more often. Now elites or probably intellectuals, let's say, who were coming. But then in during the war time, there were very like a lot of people who came over maybe I mean, two hundred, three hundred, maybe even more to support during the war. A lot of them stayed and created families here. So some people come leaving a positive for five, 10 years, then go then come back again. Some of them have businesses here, have families here. So I think it's over. Thousand, maybe three thousand people were constantly living in Abkhazia.

00:24:40
Mrs. Pataraya: Including the Syrian refugees, I mean, the Syrians Circassians of course.

00:24:45
Eelco: And these two thousand, is it like since when?

00:24:52
Mrs. Pataraya: I think it's lets say since 90s.

00:24:56
Mrs. Pataraya: I mean, I don't know if the if the state I mean, the committee of the ministry has some numbers on their website or something like this. Yes, because I'm not really I was not really into the numbers for quite a long time. I mean, I was once interested, but I don't know how much the situation changed, you know.

00:25:19
Eelco: So, uh, do you think it's a apart from, helping people to or give people the opportunity to return to their ancestral homeland? Is it a goal of the republic to increase the population?

00:25:38
Mrs. Pataraya: Of course, yes. Of course, yes, but increased population through bringing those who were exiled. It's actually their historic, right, to I mean, if we talk about the rights of people. To kind of to the land in Abkhazia then it's the people from Diaspora who had that priority, right, because they were exiled, you know, 19th century by the you know, but the Russian Czar regime. So it's like them in the first place who has to return if they want to. And therefore and, you know, with the demographic situation also after they were exiled, the demographic situation changed. And with the other Stalin and very stimulative policies, I mean, we understand everything, of course, empty land should be inhabited again, inhabited by the Georgians, Megrelians. That's fine, OK, but then the demographics changed. Then after the war, demographics changed again.

00:26:50
Mrs. Pataraya: And, you know. This is kind of not going too much into history, but out of everyone. The representatives of Diaspora has the right to the land in Abkhazia First of all, and therefore both the right to return to Homeland and both the kind of the call and the hope to increase the demographics through these people?

00:27:23
Mrs. Pataraya: So, yeah, I mean, it's they go together, absolutely.

00:27:28
Eelco: So, uh, to to change the demographic more into favor of ethnic Abkhazians?

00:27:37
Mrs. Pataraya: I mean, it's. We're not really to kind of change into favor of one ethnicity or another ethnicity, but to kind of. No, this is not the kind of the right thing to say, because here I mean, without even Diaspora, we have Georgians, Armenians, Russians, and Abkhazians, and we can't say that the demographics of party should be enhanced. Only, you know, in Abkhazian families.

00:28:10
Mrs. Pataraya: But like. No, just in terms of the number of population, because, you know, it's just two hundred fifty thousand people. So the more repatriates return. The more people there will be and since they have the initial right to this land, then it should not be it's probably not the kind of, you know, the rights of Russians, Armenians and Georgians, but the rights of repatriates. To. to come back to Abkhazia and to leaving your families there and whatever, maybe they will marry some Armenians or Georgians and create a bunch of Armenian, Georgian kids, I don't know. But it's kind of the drama we're talking about, the demographics of applause, not the ethnic balance. I think that's not fair to say.

00:28:55
Eelco: OK. Initially or in the first place, ethnic Abkhazians are. Yeah, they're trying to. resettle Abkhazia, but also if you're. Is it also possible if you're not, uh, if you don't have a like Abkhaz history or backgrounds to settle in Abkhazia?

00:29:25
Mrs. Pataraya: Yes, of course. I mean, yeah, the people who come in again, I mean, you can come to a positive. Settle down here. I mean, do there's a there's a process that you have to leave to five years, pass the language exam, pay the taxes. I know the things if you want to be a citizen, if you don't want to be a citizen, then there is another procedure and you can leave as long as you want people to be. I mean, not everyone who is in Abkhazia is a citizen of Abkhazia of course. They allow people without Abkhaz passport and without Abkhaz Citizenship

00:30:11

Eelco: I think I asked most of the questions that I had prepared beforehand. But if you have anything that you want to share with me that is fine of course.

00:30:36

Mrs. Pataraya: Well in the first place I hope this was helpful. I have been talking about this with various people, different platforms, but it was a while ago. I still think this is very important still. We still need to learn more, not only about the Circassian Diaspora. Also about the Armenian diaspora, the Jewish Diaspora. Whatever the future is for Abkhazia. Diaspora is important because it makes it stronger, not in means of politics but in means of culture, language, values. I think that opening up Abkhazia for diaspora can only make Abkhazia a better place. On the governmental level and on the level of civil society we need to get involved more, learn other experiences as well. That's one thing. Another thing for you. I would maybe… explore a bit of the work of the DRC in Abkhazia. There are two young people that are working there from Syria, Circassian and Abkhazian. They are the people who came from Syria back in 2013, and they are still living here. There are also other people that you can explore, I would advise you to look up Abkhaz Desk on Facebook, and maybe look up some photos, than you might have some more food for thought.

00:33:11

Eelco: OK. If you know anyone in particular who might be able to help me, by all means feel free to connect me with them.

00:30:22

Mrs. Pataraya: Ok. I will look for some people and I will send you the names on Facebook, so you can easily look them up.

00:33:30

Eelco: that's it then, thank you very much for your time.

00:33:35

Mrs. Pataraya: you are very much welcome. Good luck with your work. Once you finish it, please share it with me.

Interview Jade Emre Erciyes

00:00:00
Eelco: I'll press record, again

00:00:01
Mrs. Erciyes: , OK, back to the beginning, I try to listen and do you have lots of losses in between, so I'll just repeat. So I I'm Jade Cemre Erciyes. I'm a sociologist and I have been working on North Caucasian diaspora, including the Abkhazians in Turkey since 2005. I have focused mainly on the Diaspora Circassian/Abkhazian diaspora in Turkey, we use the name Cherkess, including all North-Caucasian groups in the diaspora. And from 2007, I lived in Abkhazia working at the Center for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Abkhazia. I focused on mainly ancestral return migration from Turkey, but also I've worked on other social topics while I was in Abkhazia from 2010 till 2014, I did my PhD at the University of Sussex under Geography & Migration Studies. My PhD focused on Diaspora, return migration and post return adaptation, with focus on the on the Adygea and Abkhazia as two cases and when the Syrian crisis happened and the Syrian returnees were brought back to Abkhazia, I wasn't in Abkhazia was in the UK because I have finished my fieldwork already and I was writing up. So I didn't include the Syrian returnees in my study and a what else. And but when I came back in 2014, what I did was they were the repatriation committee of Abkhazia. Now it is the ministry at the time, which was the committee, it was organizing language courses for the Syrian returnees. And I met with young people who were attending the Abkhazian and Russian language course there. And I distributed them notebooks for them to write their memories of return, how they came and what they feel about being in a place, being there every day, but what they were. Only the girls or young women responded to this and they wrote their autobiographic experiences. It was an effort to write an auto-ethnography and autoethnographic work from their own experiences. But it was it contained a lot of emotional information. What they wrote in the notebooks, like I still every day miss the smell of the jasmine in the streets of Syria. So this kind of reminiscences and nostalgia was very strong. And those what they were saying that women, the friends of them who wear hijab, didn't feel very comfortable in the everyday life in Abkhazia, but the others were OK. And I thought that in one year I will take them back to notebooks and ask them how they feel now and what they feel about reading their own writing. One from one year ago. But in that year, I continued going back and forth to England because I was teaching a course. My graduation was there. There was a conference this and that. So I wasn't constantly in Abkhazia. And when I came back, everybody, because all these young people speak multiple languages. English, Russian and Arabic, they were all employed by international NGOs or other organizations. Some of them went on the migration to Europe, some of them got married. So they were all distributed all around and I couldn't get back to them so that projects stayed on the side. And later, a couple of years ago, I came to Turkey about three years ago to widen my field of study. So I haven't been focusing on the North Caucasian diaspora, returned migrants mainly, but I do a lot of work with my friends and colleagues all the time and about. In 2005, I attended a conference organized by Imagine Center in Armenia, and when I went there, it was a collective of scholars from all sorts of Caucasian republics, including South Ossetia, Artsakh. And Azerbaijan's wouldn't come to Armenia. So what they did was they first organized a meeting in Armenia and then they did another one in Georgia. So to the Georgian one Abkhazians wouldn't come. And also South-Ossetians. They'd go to the Armenian one. So this kind of mobility issues were sold by the same conference or same workshop being organized in two different places. And a couple of years later, they called me to ask if I will be a consultant to two young students they have who wants to do a comparative project on Syrian returnees in Artsakh and Abkhazia. The young student from Abkhazia was himself a Syrian returned migrant, and the person from Artsakh was a journalist from Armenia. So he had to travel to Artsakh for this, but he was not very communicative. So I couldn't really develop my understanding of Artsakh very deeply. But what they decided was they decided to have audio from interviews with Syrian return migrants. And with this they did a comparative study where there was a translation of everything in Arabic and Russian and Armenian and English. And so it was a multilingual project, but they spoke in Arabic. And I also wrote a piece based on secondary sources on Syrian refugee crisis. But that has been the only work I had done up to now on Syrian refugees, migrants.

00:07:32
Mrs. Erciyes: So I think I repeated everything

00:07:33
Eelco: Thank you very much. Thank you. The connection is perfect now. So, um.

00:07:42
Eelco: The project you mentioned, the comparison between Artsakh and Abkhazia, can I can I read it somewhere or.

00:07:51
Mrs. Erciyes: Oh, I didn't send it to you, OK?

00:07:54
Eelco: Yeah, it's online at Imagine Center website. OK, what's the title? Maybe I can write the. You can also send it afterwards.

00:08:16
Mrs. Erciyes: Yeah, I will do that.

00:08:22
Mrs. Erciyes: The finally 'escaping Syrian war resettlers life in Abkhazia and Artsakh is the name they settled for.

00:08:36
Mrs. Erciyes: I think they. Yeah. Yeah, when you search for that. It appears, the link.

00:08:57
Mrs. Erciyes: I'm sending you by email,

00:08:59
Eelco: OK

00:09:02
Mrs. Erciyes: Yeah.

00:09:08
Eelco: I have been doing some research now and have conducted some interviews. I'm still a little bit confused about the at the ethnic groups because some people refer to them as Cherkess, Circassians, Abkhazians and Adygeans. Can you maybe pinpoint the distinctions and the similarities like. How does it work?

00:09:37
Mrs. Erciyes: OK, so how it works is you take what people say and think about them like a single group. That's the easiest way. But you can think like in in terms of language, there is the North-West Caucasian languages, which includes Kabardian, Adygean and Abkhazian. But actually Kabardian is Eastern again language. So there are actually two languages and there is the third language, Uygur, which is a dead language. So in terms of language, there are three languages which are which are interrelated, which have a lot of commonalities. The structures are similar. They have a lot of groups with the same root. But they have developed into three different languages, Uygur, which is the dead language was actually containing more of Adygean and Abkhazian languages. So what happened is when they come to the diaspora, despite the fact that they spoke different languages according to them, they called themselves a Adygea or Abkhaz. But when they come to the diaspora after the exile, it was like they had to they were called from the outside, not during the exile, only. Actually before that as well, when people came to the Caucasus because there were so many different groups there. But they some of them were similar clothing and looked similar. They started to call them as Sheraz, Cherkess. So different names that come to the same meaning. The roots of that word is very controversial because linguistically different pronunciations by the Arabs, Russians and Turks have different meanings. Cercassian is the original name, it's usually argued, but sometimes some people who are connected to a local language are see it as a name they have developed as part of the Cherkessia, the greater Cherkessia, which existed for a while. It wasn't a whole entity, but it was made up of small entities and but to the outside they were strong ally groups. So they were one entity kind of thing. So in earlier maps we see Cherkessia appearing first in Italian maps in 15oo's , kind of so very early. We see Cherkassia somehow being represented there, which includes parts of the Abkhazian settlements, historical settlements as well.

00:12:41
Mrs. Erciyes: So this complicates things because it is not on the one People are Adygeans which have dialects of Adygea language, but it includes Abkhazians and Ugurs as well to Cherkessia. But then you also have the Abkhazian kingdom, which is also very controversial with the Georgian history. So what happens is during, I come to the last hundred and fifty years, because that's when the real problem starts. After the war's, 100 year wars, the Caucasus is lost piece by piece. And different allies appear in this time. But in the end, they are all left off in their own small communities with like the Shabzin speaking Adygean stay together because they see their connections are cut. So during this period, they are deported or sent to exile from their lands, or they have to leave because they have no chance of survival without communicating with the others. They have no food left. There are there are illnesses. So what happens? They start to migrate, but it's also deportation and exile. But the big exile is 1864. That's what we say. But actually it's happened in a couple of years, not in a single year or a single day. What happens is in 1864, a Russian Czar, Tsarist Russia says: Caucasus is freed. So all those who came in this 50 years before that. So the first migration starts in 1810's actually, because they couldn't stand to leave in the war. Same thing. The. Happened in Syria. Those who can leave, who had connections to the Ottoman Empire, left before the war, got very hot in their area. So it starts like this. Then in 1830's, a second wave of migration because of the lack of communication, the Shebzar leave but the Ugur continue to fight and are lost. This kind of there are divisions in the diaspora as well. Sorry.

00:15:04
Mrs. Erciyes: And. Yeah, and what happens is when they come to the last, because they look saying, I really need to take some water, sorry.

00:15:21
Eelco: OK, so it's fine.

00:15:42
Mrs. Erciyes: Sorry. So what happens is people start to call them Cherkess because they all look the same, they cannot

understand their languages. They are all fierce and angry because of the conditions of leaving their homeland so that they become to know as Cherkess. But they keep calling themselves different, in their own language, different names. So they, of course, call themselves Abasar but then they are started to be called by the others as Abaza. And the Adygea, they call themselves Adyg, but then they are known by others as Cherkess. But Abaza, when they leave their own communities, people don't know Abaza till the the Abkhazian war in 1992. So I mean outside of the communities they live in. And so when they go to the cities, they're also counted as Cherkess. And then because the political situation doesn't let them to get Cherkess names in their village, like my village, it was called Cherkess Balika, but it was banned. So they changed the name of the village and they said, you cannot use Cherkess with the village name. So this kind of political discourse is all throughout divided, naming and understanding. So this way, this is another way to divide the diaspora. So those who call themselves Cherkess believe in a united diasporic identity where all the Abkhazian, Aziga and other North Caucasian people are one nation with a similar experience of exile and suffering in the diaspora.

00:17:27
Mrs. Erciyes: So they are called Cherkess. Those who are more ethno-nationalists care about their own language and own identity. They call themselves Adygea or Abkhaz. So if they are talking in Turkish, they prefer to use Abaza till recently, they prefer to do that. But now, for example, they prefer Abkhaz because they want to focus on the fact that there is a homeland there which needs to be recognized.

00:18:02
Mrs. Erciyes: But with the Syrian returnees, the things are a little bit more different because, for example, in the Arabic speaking community, despite the fact that in the earlier period when the Cherkess Mamluk, little have you heard of them. The Mamluks in history, the.

00:18:29
Mrs. Erciyes: The Mamluk Kingdom.

00:18:30
Mrs. Erciyes: So which was called Cherkess Mamluks. So what's happened is the leaders of this Cherkess Mamluk Are actually of Abkhaz origin. So there they also have the same understanding that those who look similar in from the outside are all called Cherkess, but at some point these are earlier migrants, not exiles from the 19th century. They migrated there in the 15th and 16th century to Egypt. So in this area, they prefer. They forget all their family names, which is very important. And there they have the surnames, Abaza. Or if they are not of origin, they have the surname Shakas Or other.

00:19:29
Mrs. Erciyes: so mostly the ones in Egypt today. So Mamluks was settled in Egypt they are in Egypt So in Egypt, you have a lot of surname's that are Abaza as well. So the Arabic community now, the Abaza like in Turkey, and they haven't left calling themselves Abaza. They haven't adapted to this Abkhaz as those in Turkey because the communication between Turkey and Abkhazia was stronger during the war in 1992. Because of the direct sea transport. So all these names are very confusing, but what matters is that you have to take what people take, I think. What people say for themselves and do not get into the discussion of this or this, because it there is no single right answer. So you can say sometimes they're accepted as one people, sometimes they're accepted as different ethnic groups, sometimes they are. North mostly, they are North-Caucasian ethnic groups, so a geographical explanation saves you from all the discussion. Actually the whole story for you to clarify in your mind. But yeah, I avoided doing that in my Phd in the end because it wasn't going anywhere. All these discussions.

00:21:11
Eelco: OK. I will keep that in mind. Um, so, yeah, my first question or yeah, but the human the humanitarian corridor for the I think Abkhazians in Syria, I think it was 2013, and I found information that they helped approximately 500 people to resettle in. In Abkhazia, you just told me that you weren't there and but this information is correct or.

00:21:55
Mrs. Erciyes: Yes, that's correct. Have you communicated with Inar Itszba

00:22:02
Eelco: No, I haven't

00:22:03
Mrs. Erciyes: He was the one who organized the trip.

00:22:07
Mrs. Erciyes: OK, I thought I gave you his contact, but he's not very communicative to email, but find him on Facebook. You see his name in most of the news articles in our guest spot. OK. He was the representative in Turkey at the time and or he was working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. So just write him on Facebook.

00:22:35
Eelco: OK, can you give this spell his name or write it in the chat so.

00:22:45
Mrs. Erciyes: Sure

00:22:45
Eelco: Yes, OK, thank you so much.

00:22:51
Eelco: So this this this kind of policy by Abkhazia, is this ordinary for the Abkhaz government, like I know that they're really in the overall policy of repatriation. They are trying to bring back the diaspora but actually actively helping them to get out of a country or a troubled situation. Or come to Abkhazia have they done that more often than all the other cases in which they've done something similar?

00:23:23
Mrs. Erciyes: They haven't done anything like that, but they had a good example from the war. So in when in 1992, the Abkhazian independence war started. What's happened is Greece sent a ship to take all the Greeks from Abkhazia to Greece. So they have repatriated 800 people on a ship and they settled them in Alexandropoli So they really had a good example of what should be done by a homeland during the time of war. So I think that was very influential, a good example for the Abkhazians. So when the war started, so with those in Turkey, for example, they tried to help in 1925, a group of Abkhazians who were fighting with them during the Turkish independence war. Who Atatürk decided was a traitor to the Turkish cause, but actually because it was fighting with Ataturk for the Turkish coast, killed a lot of Abkhazians and Cherkassian leaders as well.

00:24:49
Mrs. Erciyes: But what's happened is he was gaining a lot of strength in the community in Turkey. So Atatürk decided to call him a traitor and those who fought with him or exiled with him to Greece. So these people sent a letter to the Abkhazian-Soviets SSR and asked to be repatriated. But the process was to about 2 years to settle. There is a book called The Macedonian Abkhazians, Macedonian Abkhazians, but it's in Abkhazian, but there is a Turkish translation as well. So this Macedonian Abkhazians applied. They sent a list of people who want to be repatriated, but the Soviet Union didn't let them. And finally, when they let these people were allowed to come back to Turkey, so some of them stayed in Greece, some of them went to Turkey, some of them went on to Europe.

00:25:53
Mrs. Erciyes: So it wasn't well, they didn't officially allow them to come, but they were positive to discuss this issue, the USSR. And so there is a history of an efforts to do that. And there is another case where a group of Abkhazians while being exiled from Abkhazia didn't agree to be sent to the Ottoman Empire. And they their ship sank in and they formed a Ajarian Abkhazian community, which is part of Georgia. So there are historical moments where they suffered from not being able to bring back. But this Syrian situation was the first that they had power or they tried their chance and they organized this return. Another thing one scholar told me who is an expert on Georgia, actually, she told me that I think the reason Russia let Abkhazia bring the Syrians. But always causing trouble to Turkish returning migrants is that there was a school in Syria sponsored by Russia where many of the parents of those young people already spoke Russian and some of them had some basic Russian knowledge from the school. So they attended the Russian school already to keep communication with their homeland. But because Russia is pro Syria and these people were pro-Syrian and pro-Russian, they were allowed to repatriate to Abkhazia, which makes sense in my opinion. I think I'm not very familiar with their life and or experiences in Syria and there, but. I know that the day some of them spoke Russian when they come and some of them studied in Russia for it for their university degrees.

00:28:11
Eelco: OK, it's clear, but I am. I had another interview with someone who told me that also I don't know if the if the government played an active role in that, but there were Abkhazians from the Donbas region in Ukraine. And quite an amount of them also went to Abkhazia when there was a conflict there.

00:28:44
Mrs. Erciyes: No, they were not Abkhazians, but they led some people to come as refugees to Abkhazia from Donbas. They were not Abkhazians Origins. So they are not returning migrants, but they are an. They have the refugee status or something like that because somebody was working at a hotel. That's why I know.

00:29:15
Eelco: OK, so that they didn't. And so there's still a lot of refugee status or they don't they are not repatriates, you say?

00:29:27
Mrs. Erciyes: no

00:29:31
Eelco: But did the Abkhazian in the Ministry of Repatriation, did they, like, actively brought them back or like, um,

00:29:45
Mrs. Erciyes: I don't know if they were supported somehow, but they were let to come. That's what I know, if there was any special project. But I don't think that's possible because Abkhazia's possibilities are limited economically. Humanitarian aid, if it was provided by any refugee organization, for example, that will be different I think. The thing that's happened with the Syrian return migrants was that some of them who were of Adygea origin, they weren't and they didn't become citizens immediately. So they were not return migrants, but they were refugees as well, which was good for them because then international NGOs could support them as refugees. But kind of it was a very complex process because they didn't want to they wanted to help those of Abkhazian origin as well who received citizenship, but who were of Syrian origin. So there were lots of politics working around those identity of the migrants from Syria.

00:30:00
Eelco: OK, so.I don't know if you know anything about the case of Artsakh or Karabakh?

00:30:14
Mrs. Erciyes: I have talked only with two, three Syrian returnees in Yerevan, not in Artsakh, I haven't been to Artsakh, and I really regret I didn't go at that time. But what they told me is that there were people who were settled in Artsakh and they were receiving support. But it was very complex to be a Syrian in Armenia because as a Syrian, you would get not just Armenian citizenship, but Armenian travel passport. So the ground passports, what they call them. So it was and then it was very complex because. They said: There we are it's six of us with our partners. They said what. Some of them was from France, so French-Armenian. Another was American-Armenian and four of them Syrian-Armenian. We cannot travel anywhere altogether. They were saying. Like, it's so hard to be stuck here and not being able to travel elsewhere with our friends. So I can go to Georgia. But she cannot he can go to Georgia, but I cannot or something like this. So traveling was what they talked mostly about because they were couch surfers. That's how we met actually. Yes, one. That's my only experience besides this project, which I sent to you.

00:31:02
Eelco: Do you think the in terms of the repatriation of the diaspora, the policy of the approach of Abkhazia is similar to Artsakh?

00:31:10
Mrs. Erciyes: I think Artsakh even had less opportunities because what's happened is, well, the Armenian government helped the repatriation of Syrians. But their law doesn't support a return as in Abkhazia. I think in Abkhazia the law of repatriation gives a lot of rights like immediate citizenship, but not in the Armenian constitution. There's no such thing. I did talk with some NGOs working on return migrants. So in Armenia, and that's what I understood. They have better support from American diaspora mainly the NGOs are well sponsored and they help people. But the government's legal status and this kind of things are more complex in Armenia and Artsakh, as far as I understand.

00:31:56
Eelco: OK. These repatriates from Syria in Abkhazia, do you do you know or do you suspect how much of them still reside in Abkhazia?

00:32:01
Mrs. Erciyes: There was a debate on that recently, I think only 40 percent of them stayed.

00:32:07
Eelco: The rest of them moved on to Europe or?

00:32:18
Mrs. Erciyes: Europe, Russia, back to Syria.

00:32:23
Eelco: There is it a specific goal of the Abkhaz governments to achieve growth and population?

00:32:32
Mrs. Erciyes: It's very complex because I also write a repatriation as a tool to better the demographic problem of Abkhazia. Was part of strategy 2025 of Abkhazia. They closed our center so the resources do not exist anymore. They well, they took my computer as well. I was here when they closed this and it was very complex political thing happened with us untill Now they reopened, but I don't think they will publish the report again. So there. What's to be discussed when writing that which other demographs and scholars who worked on demographic issues were that they were afraid that this different understanding of Islamic religion in the diaspora. The fact that they have influenced from Soviet and Russian culture and those coming from the diaspora are influenced from different cultures that do not fit our traditional culture. Like they see Turkish culture as very conservative and exclusive and not very welcoming, accommodating for our own cultural values. So they were afraid that if 10.000 people would come from the diaspora, that would be a good change for demography, but it will not be good for the culture and language and everything else. So they found it's very threatening. Everyone finds it very threatening. So the suggested project in the end was to bring one family each year and make sure they are adopted and then

bring in other families. So this way, the demography will be increasing slowly, but the cultural culture will not be affected. So bringing 500 people was a big thing, and it's really had an influence, negative impact from the society because of those who are wearing the hijab especially. But as they integrated, they started to learn Abkhazian and Russian and they took active part in the community events where they there was a project for one year, you can talk with Angie as well, I didn't think about that so long. Angie is Angela Pataraya.

00:33:20
Eelco: Yeah, I talked to her already. You already sent me her contact. Yeah.

00:33:24
Mrs. Erciyes: All right. Great. So Angie must have told you about this one year project they had where they bring together everyone. I think that we created an impact in the society because after that, people were more accommodating and more welcoming because they saw that these people were not there. As I others and strangers, they were there to be part of the community and to do some good and to understand each other changes everything.

00:34:04
Eelco: So. So the reason is mostly demographic reasons or also just the total number of as the population increased like. For bringing the diaspora back?

00:34:16
Mrs. Erciyes: It's they don't see it as reasonable or good solution, because the most important thing for to think for a policy is to increase the population who speak the language and who live by cultural values. So in this regard, those from the diaspora do not fit to this definition either. They don't speak the language or they speak, but they are culturally different. So just increasing the numbers will not be a solution. So they want to make sure the Abkhazians want to give more births to children, because what's happening is in the last three decade, two decades, young women do not want to have more than a child. So same for Abkhazians, so modernization arrived to the Abkhazians as well, and they see that there is a demographic problem, but they don't want to be the very those who carry this burden because the same strategic study interviewed only Abkhazian women below the age of 40 about how many children they want to have. And all of them responded, responded one or two. So population increase, but this is not the same for Armenian population in Abkhazia, for example, they give more births than Abkhazians currently. So to increase the Abkhazian population and to keep the ratio they have to have higher population increase. And that doesn't going to happen. I think.

00:35:29
Eelco: I think I went through most of the questions that I wanted to ask you. Um, yeah. So is there anything else you want to tell me or if you have any other people or organizations, you know, or really anyone journalists, government officials, community leaders.

00:35:59
Mrs. Erciyes: Well, Inar was a government official. So you can find his name in all of the you can find his photo even in the newspapers. He's the one in one meeting bringing the Syrians or meeting them at the airport. So he was the one who took care of this process, arranging the planes and everything. He was later the representative of Abkhazia in Turkey and now he is something in Abkhazia. But I'm not sure what he does now, but look at books as well. So he will understand research and he can tell you more people from the government officials who have taken active part in this process. Do you speak Russian?

00:36:44
Eelco: No i don't.

00:36:52
Mrs. Erciyes: So it's hard to talk with everyone but English, If you ask Inar, who speaks English, that can help. I'm trying to think. And unless I cover I totally gave his name to you before. Alias Akaba.

00:37:17
Eelco: I don't think so. I don't know.

00:37:22
Mrs. Erciyes: In this article you can find his name I sent you. Sorry i meant, Ansor Arayutaa. are you to so and some Soma's the journalist I told you about Samson Martirosyan so you can try to contact him on the Artsakh case as well. That's a possibility.

00:38:01
Eelco: What was his name. Is Samson Martirosyan. Some. This is from the link I sent you. This is the Journal article he wrote so I cannot find to imagine, the sounds recordings are not there.

00:38:22
Mrs. Erciyes: Think this is another side story I sent you. I wonder if Imagine, ah click to read the stories of our story from the Ngorno-Karabakh. OK. Imaginative journalists. OK, so they established a website for the project and they removed the sound

recordings. Interesting. The Imagine center has changed. I think it's. Website on everything has been removed, but you can see their names there, so contact with someone to ask about Artsakh.

00:39:12
Eelco: OK, yeah, that's very helpful. I will look into that. So thank you very much for your time and your willingness to talk to me. So, yeah, that concludes it then, I think. All right. Thank you very much.

00:36:44
Mrs. Erciyes: Good luck with your work. And if there's any question that comes up while writing, just something. Anything.

00:36:44
Eelco: Yes, I will do that. Thank you very much. OK, have a nice day.

00:36:44
Mrs. Erciyes: You too. Bye bye.

Interview Transcript Victoria Arakelova

Before the Interview begun, she asked me to freshen up what the interview was about. I told them that it was about ethnic Armenians, from Syria and Iraq, that would repatriate in Armenia. And what the problems and potential opportunities were. This was the immediate response to that introduction:

'' Armenia has always been absolutely open to refugees from the near-East, not only Armenians also for example: Yezidi's. We have the Yezidi community here and we have had several Yezidi families who moved to Armenia over the last years. The problem for Armenia is that Armenia itself is in an economic problematic situation. We are currently at war, this has been a reality of several decades, the current situation. We are besieged by Turkey and Azerbaijan, we only have open borders with Iran and Georgia. We have very little opportunities. The state itself has several refugee programs. But the facilities the government has are not big enough for large amounts of repatriates. That is not the only problem. It is very hard to integrate into society for these people. Even for the people that already live here the economic situation makes it pretty difficult to live here. But nevertheless Armenia accepted a lot of Yezidi refugees, later some of them went back to Iraq or went to Europe. But there are still refugees coming to Armenia. Recently we have had even several families who left Lebanon after the explosions (in Beirut red.), and they decided to settle in Artsakh, in Karabakh.
That's why there are protests from Turkey and Azerbaijan that say that Armenia is resettle refugees in their so called 'occupied territories'. Actually Armenia and Artsakh are both open for the Armenian diaspora from all over the world, they both are absolutely open. Even if that does not benefit Armenia.

General Questions

1. Can you introduce yourself? About for instance your background and tell me a little bit more about your function? What are your main activities within your line of work?

   Actually both professor Asatryan and myself are not specialists on proper Armenia. I work on heterodox Neast-Eastern , yezidi's heterodox shia sects. Professor Asatryan works on Iranian studies in different ways, lingual Iranian as well as ethnology etnhography history of religion etc. etc.

2. The recent developments in Karabakh make's my research even more important. I hope you are well. Can you tell me about the way the recent flare up of the conflict happened? What has sparked the violence?

The aggression of the Azerbaijani side started yesterday (September 27th red.), the bombing of Stephanakert (capital of Artsakh) and there were clashes all along the borderline. Everything as of now is still ongoing. It was not totally unexpected I would say. The Armenian side as well as the rest of the region could obviously see the Azerbaijani side there preparation for war. During the shared military teaching (training) of the Azerbaijani by Turkey, in Azerbaijan. And Turkey left their military units in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan was actually preparing this aggression. It was pretty predictable. It is a very heavy case I would say and still continues but the Armenian side is now, is not only defending but also attacking the aggressors also. As for the losses on both side the count of the Armenians is about 31 while the Azerbaijani is about 200. Tanks helicopters etcetera you can find the numbers only.

The worst thing is that Azerbaijan is sending minorities now to their frontline, representatives of autonomous peoples, like Tarts, Lezgi's? They traditionally take a disproportionate number of ethnic minorities to fight, they are taking them as people who are supposed to die for the Azeri. What is important, that even in the peace periods, not only while there is war, Azerbaijan has huge problems with ethnic minorities. They prosecute their leaders, they are

prohibiting them from speaking their language, or developing regional culture, they prosecute religious people, minorities etc. etc. In general it is a very bad situation for the autonomous peoples of Azerbaijan.

3. Do you think that the recent up flaring of violence, is more serious than the last (this summer or the few days war in 2016) ?

There are two main reasons:
Firstly there is the 'inside situation' in Azerbaijan. It is an artificial state created on the history, the land and the cultural heritage of the autonomous people of the pre- Caspian area, Kalishis? Tarts? Etc. What is an average Azerbaijani? These are mainly assimilated autonomous people who moved to Turkic dialect, Turkic elements was not widespread (very restricted) in the region. But over the last century it was brought to the political center (i.e. Turkic elements), and they created a so called Azerbaijani nation on the ethnic, historical, cultural, political heritage of the Ottomans. This new nation, their elite they persecute, suppress the real ottomans of the region. The situation in Azerbaijan is quite dramatic, despite the huge amounts of financial income that comes from the resources of oil in the Caspian Sea. The life of the average population is very hard. Tyrannical political system, Huge bribe system, all the income goes to the elite and never gets distributed among the people. The economic growth seems to be very rapid because of the big oil income, it is never betters the real life of the average Azerbaijani life or person. There is a very big difference between the elite and the rest of the population in Azerbaijan. It is started (bottom up) to seem like a revolutionary situation. The dissatisfaction of the whole population plus the protests of the minorities for prosecutions and repression of these minorities.
So for Aliyev to start another war (or war adventure) is a way to postpone this revolutionary developments, a way to say to the people to calm down, this is a war. We should win and we should bring back the occupied territories from the Armenians.

Another reason which is obvious right now, is the influence of Turkey. Turkey is sending weapons and they have sent officers to train Azerbaijani troops. Turkey supports Azerbaijan in all (war) aspects. Militrairy, economically, in all ways. Also Turkey has a closed border with Armenia. In that way Turkey supports and inspires Azerbaijan to start a war, to enlarge its presence in the South-Caucasus as well as in the North-Caucasus. Particularly Turkey in the last 10 years is trying to get a bigger influence in the region: it's a strategy of 'Neo-Ottomanism', to spread their influence every war.

4. With Turkey actively backing and supporting the Azerbaijani cause, and Russia as the biggest ally of Armenia, do you think it could become a sort of a proxy war, between Russia and Turkey?

Well it depends on the sting of the conflict, there is not such a danger coming from Azerbaijan that Armenia itself could not cope with. Yes, Azerbaijan is bigger has more money, has better weapons (they buy it from everywhere, Turkey, Israel, Ukraine Russia), well equipped. But as the history of the last decades has learned us, they cannot fight. Armenians are better fighters because they fight for their own land and survival for mere subsistence for them and their families. Particularly after the Armenian genocide carried out by Azerbaijan in the late 80's beginning of the 90's. Armenia can cope with just Azerbaijan. But if Turkey directly interferes than Russia is supposed to openly support Armenia and also interfere, because of the military agreements between Russia and Armenia. But sofar Turkey does support Azerbaijan but it is not so open (as of September the 28th red.). But we can see that yesterday and today there are pro-Turkish fighters from Syria. Who have come here just to fight for money, earlier they were used by Turkey in Syria. But now the situation has changed in Syria, they come to Azerbaijan to fight against Armenians. Many of them have already died, and we have proof that they are here. So far Turkey does support Azerbaijan but it does not demonstrate its interference in the conflict. Otherwise, Russia would immediately have to interfere, and that would mean that the conflict would evolve to a conflict of a whole other scale. As for the proxy-war, yes, it is a Turkish proxy war of Azerbaijan against Armenia.

5. This Turkish mercenaries, they have fought for Turkey in the Idlib region?

Exactly, they are from Idlib. It was kind of a revelation from them as well as one of the audio we heard of them stated: 'We have come here to fight for the Shia's'. That was not the direct intention, they were just supposed to fight for money, and then they found out that they were on the side of the Shia Azerbaijani's was kind of a surprise for them. For them it had nothing to do with religion. Because all of the autonomous peoples of Azerbaijan they all are Muslims, but different kind of Muslims. For example Talishes? Are Shia's and Abbas? (around 29:10, I couldn't understand the ethnic groups she was talking about) Are Sunnis but none of them are friends with Azerbaijan, that's the point here.

6. From the Azerbaijani side there are reports that are kind of saying the same thing that there are supposedly mercenaries fighting for Karabakh, do you think that is a valid point?

Not right now, because the borders are closed. So no one is here right now. In earlier wars (in the 90's) there were Armenians coming from everywhere, for example the United States, they came to protect their historical motherland, not many of them. But they were bright personalities and they became heroes, but this was not a secret actually. In the 90's this happened, not now. Again. Now only the Armenian and the Karabakh army are fighting. There were (I think she meant in the 90's) Russian Kazakhs, but also they were very few in numbers, and they were not paid, it was (ideological) volunteers. It was a few thousands not more. But they were not paid, because Armenian in the 90's was not even able to properly support its own army, it was a difficult time. So I would not even compare these other nations that are/were fighting on the both sides. For Azerbaijan in the 90's there were Chechen Bolsheviks and (afghan) Mujahedeen fighters, pretty many of them, people fighting for money. I do not blame them, because people from Afghanistan in that time would go anywhere to fight just to earn some money. Many of them were here, and many of them were killed. And after the fighting many of them were not brought back to Afghanistan, because nobody cared about them. Not properly buried, no signs of them, no graves. Azerbaijan wanted to hide these presence of Afghanistani's there, no one cared about these people that was the point. Also there was presence from Ukraine and Lithuania if I am not mistaken. But not in big numbers. The big numbers where Afghans and Chechens. However also the Chechens many of them left after a while, the famous band of Basayev, they stayed for some weeks, and they said, this is not our war and they left very quickly.

Strategic Demography Policy

7. Al-Jazeera has estimated that between 2011 and 2019, over 20.000 (+/- 22.000) Syrian-Armenian people have fled from Syria to Armenia. Do you have information if these estimations are correct, or do they come close?

This is not an objective number, I wish it would be like this. I know that even in the most dramatic moments of the conflict, such an amount could come to Armenia but this would only be a transit point for them, and many of them will leave to Europe, Canada or the United States. So it can be a several thousand at the most such an amount (referring to the 20.000) could not settle in Armenia. Only several thousands. I don't have the numbers but I am sure you could find them on the site of our immigration offices. These data is open for everyone.

8. Is it a goal of the republics' government to achieve a growth in population? If Yes, how are they trying to achieve this?

To achieve a growth in population? Actually Artsakh has growth in its population. This data is also available only on the governments websites of Artsakh. There is not a rapid growth in population. I think the growth is less than in Western countries, I think the growth in Artsakh is better than in Armenia itself.

9. In the last official census in 2015 of the Artsakh region the population counted 145.053 people. Has the number changed significantly since the last Census?

Its more or less objective, it sounds realistic.
I don't think it has changed dramatically/drastically. There can be some growth but I am not sure about it. Not significantly.

10. I am aware that since the early 2000's there have been (NKR) government run programs to encourage people to (re)settle in the Artsakh region, including incentives to offer land/jobs and money to people moving to Artsakh. To me this seems like a program with mutual benefits, for state and the people. Did these programs yield the desired results?
    Why do you think it did or did not work?

You know actually we cannot speak on this objectively and substantiate our answers, as we are not experts on this. I have heard of such programs, and we go to Artsakh very often and we saw some people who resettled in Artsakh, even from Russia, those people had Artsakhi roots they decided to come back to the motherland. We saw some number of peoples who resettled in Artsakh over the period of the last few decades.

11. Are these programs also available for people who don't have an Armenian passport or nationality (yet)?

I do not know. Maybe. Maybe those people from Russia they don't have an Armenian passport they have a Russian passport, but they have roots in Artsakh. I saw some of those families in Artsakh but I am not sure about their nationality. But I think they have Russian passports. But I have never met anyone who is from Europe or the near east, because Armenia and Russia have a very soft regime of travelling and living in both countries. It is easy for them to settle either Armenians in Russia or Russians in Armenia, or in Artsakh. '

12. Do you think that the Armenian government or the Artsakh government is trying to relocate these repatriates/refugees in Artsakh?

I don't think so but in certain case like I have mentioned before, those several families from Lebanon. To give them a helping hand, a chance for Armenians in other countries to settle in the historical motherland. But nothing more, I don't know if it is a special strategy. I think it is a quite natural phenomenon, that the historical motherland give some chances to people of the same nationality that are living elsewhere.

13. Again thank you very much for the interview. Lastly I want to ask you if you might know any people or organizations who might be willing to talk to me about this subject? This can be journalists, government officials, community leaders, actual refugees or civilians living in the region, I am interested in anyone who might be willing to talk to me. Or anyone who can send me any interesting information on this subject.

I would propose, because of the hectic moment. You can just write me if you have any more questions.