



Rewriting History: Allocating the Ganmukhuri Patriot Youth Camp in the Memory Politics of the Post-Rose Revolution Regime

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ABSTRACT

The article allocates the opening of the Ganmukhuri Patriot Youth Camp (GPYC) near the border of the conflict region of Abkhazia to a timeline of other historical processes unfolding in the same region. By doing so, the broader historical context is rebuilt and the chronological sequence of the events is reconstructed. The orderly investigation of the historical processes that led to the erection of the Ganmukhuri patriot camp only a kilometer from the administrative Abkhazian border and its demolition by Russian military forces reveals the motives standing behind the initiative to build the youth patriot camp in the conflict area.

The United National Movement (UNM) government built the camp in 2007 as a part of an extension of the state-sponsored programme, planning to set up youth patriot camps across Georgia. The GPYC was sheltering approximately six hundred youngsters during the summer vacation. By reconstructing a chronological sequence of the events, the article addresses whether or not the Ganmukhuri camp was part of the revanchism of the UNM government and if these spaces, like other patriot camps, were used to reinforce the official memory politics of the ruling party. In the process of analysis, we are to disclose whether participants of the camp were used as a human shield against Russian military aggression and if the building of the camp was a well-planned provocation of the UNM to justify their aggressive campaign of reclaiming the territories lost in the near past. For this, the paper examines the historical context and looks closely at the environment, disposition, and inner structure of the camps.

Keywords: *Memory Politics; Patriot Camps; United National Movement; Russian-Georgian Conflict; Abkhazia; Upper Kodori Valley; Ganmukhuri, United Nations.*

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1. Introduction: The Memory Politics and the Patriot Youth Camps

In an effort to comprehend the importance of the patriot camps within the politics of the ruling power, it is necessary to analyze a different dimension of these experimental spaces. In the mid-1980s, when Mikhail Gorbachev initiated the “glasnost” to encourage government institutions' transparency and openness in the post-Stalin era, Georgian historians felt unfettered to reevaluate Georgian national history. Almost a century-long Soviet history was challenged by the new national historical narratives produced to promote the struggle for national liberation, independence, and sovereignty. All these liberating historical narratives were thought to forge a new Georgian identity.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Georgian politicians were nominally involved in collective memory formation (except for the phenomenon of Zviad Gamsakhurdia and his followers). No serious attempts were made to create alternative historical narratives and to utilize them as political instruments. However, it was radically changed with the Rose Revolution of 2003. At this historical juncture, the architects of the revolution have announced the beginning of a new era. The new historical time was highlighted by the construction of the Georgian identity, enhanced with new national symbols and historical narratives.

The shift from relatively mild instruments for memory formation (such as the adoption of new state symbols, historical narratives, and historical analogies) to more aggressive strategies and instruments of memory politics was manifested in building up the new memory sites, demolishing the old ones, and developing new physical spaces where official memory politics was recirculated, ameliorated, and enriched. From 2005, memory politics entered into a more oppressive phase with state-supported educational patriot camps as the powerful instrument for framing the memory project appeared on the horizon.

The camps were experimental physical spaces and utopian projections where memory politics was practised, and the ground for the *mental revolution* and the aggressive memory politics had been prepared. What is so spectacular about *Patriot Camps* is that these micro-spaces represented the image of the future flawless society, where proud Georgians with the new identity had to be incubated and raised for the regime and the ruling party. The Patriot Camps were trespassing the temporal and spatial limitations. They represented an image of utopia that the ruling party targeted to transmit from these micro-spaces to the state level.

In 2005, the state-sponsored summer *Patriot camps* program was launched by the government, and they have mushroomed all across Georgia. The youngsters, aged 15 to 22, were spending ten days of their summer vacations there. The official part of the story is that camps were designed to develop patriotism, strengthen physical and mental health, support intellectual progress, and increase youth's moral qualities (Jones and Stephen, 2014, 324p.).

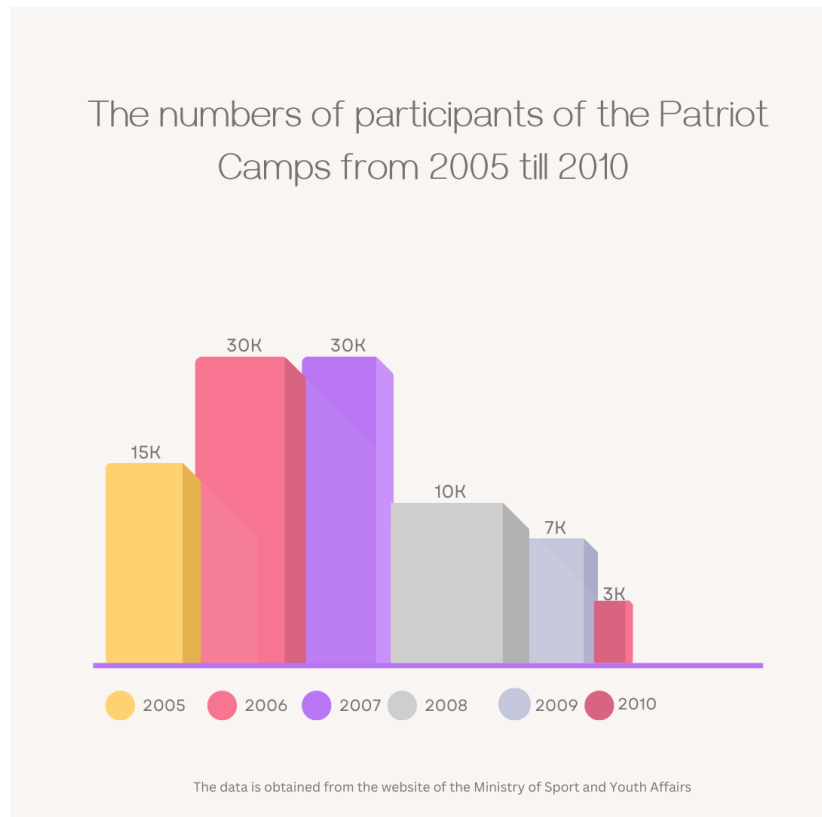
From 2005, when the camps were established, until 2010, approximately 150 thousand Georgian teenagers participated in the project across the country (Esslemont, 2010). Other sources claim that only

100 000 young Georgians were engaged in the state-sponsored program in five years (see picture - 1). To understand the scope of the project, it is essential to note that many of them were affiliated with the program.

Patriot camps were the type of spaces where Georgian history was supposed to be reinvented in conformity with the visions of the ruling party. The integral part of the memory project was to acknowledge Russia as the supreme enemy of Georgia and the main cause of its underdevelopment. This dominant narrative divided the world into two parts: the civilized world, mainly embodied in Europe and the US, and the barbarian world, represented by Russia. This kind of dichotomous mode of thinking was symptomatic for the UNM government. It helped them divide the world naively into two parts. For instance, the so-called “progressive West” and “backward Russia”, “patriots” and “Russian spies”, people who were loyal to their government and Homo Sovieticus (depicting the Soviet people with “poisoned” consciousness), the path towards European integration and the path that leads towards the orbit of Russian influence, etc.

The oppressive official memory politics with an active component of anti-Russian sentiment started long before *the Russian-Georgian War in 2008*. In 2005, the relationship between these two countries was strained by the *energy crisis* when Russia stopped supplying electricity and gas to Georgia. This event was followed by a radical reassessment of the role of Russia by the Georgian government; they declared Russia as an “unreliable and untrustworthy partner” (Karaia, 2017).

There were other reasons for such a radical reevaluation of the attitude towards Russia: the mass deportations of Georgians from Russia in 2005 and, most importantly, the hysterical fear of the government that Russia could intervene in Georgian domestic politics through financing and supporting the oppositional forces. Accusing and tagging all the oppositional forces as Russian spies constituted the permanent threat of being subverted or occupied by Russia. On the other hand, this alarming mode was legitimating the rule of the UNM. That is why Salome Zourabichvili, former minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia and fifth president of Georgia, made a convenient point when she asserted in 2010



Picture - 1: The number of participants of the Patriot Camps from 2005 to 2010. The data is obtained from the website of the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs

that “Saakashvili needs to have a permanent threat from Russia, it’s the last argument for this staying in power” (CBS News, 2010).

1. References and Methodology: Restoring the Historical Context of the Ganmukhuri Camp

The research on the Patriot Camps was meant to be done within the framework of memory studies but as a means to maintain the effective methodological apparatus that would help us to grasp the importance of the Ganmukhuri camp and allocate it in the broader political context we relied on two approaches: First of all, we’ve utilized the theoretical knowledge on memory politics that is rooted in memory studies and then we have applied historical analysis in order to comprehend the historical context and socio-political environment where the idea of building the Patriot camps was materialized. The combination of these methodological approaches made it possible to see the erection of the Patriot Camps in the light of intertwined local, regional and global politics. The mixture of memory studies and historical analysis allows us to ascertain the political regime of the United National Movement and the memory politics it has imposed.

To the extent of understand the historical context of the Ganmukhuri Patriot Youth Camp, it is necessary to restore the timeline of the preceding events. The Upper Kodori Valley of Abkhazia (see picture - 2) was the only part of Abkhazia under Georgian jurisdiction until the Russo-Georgian War in 2008.



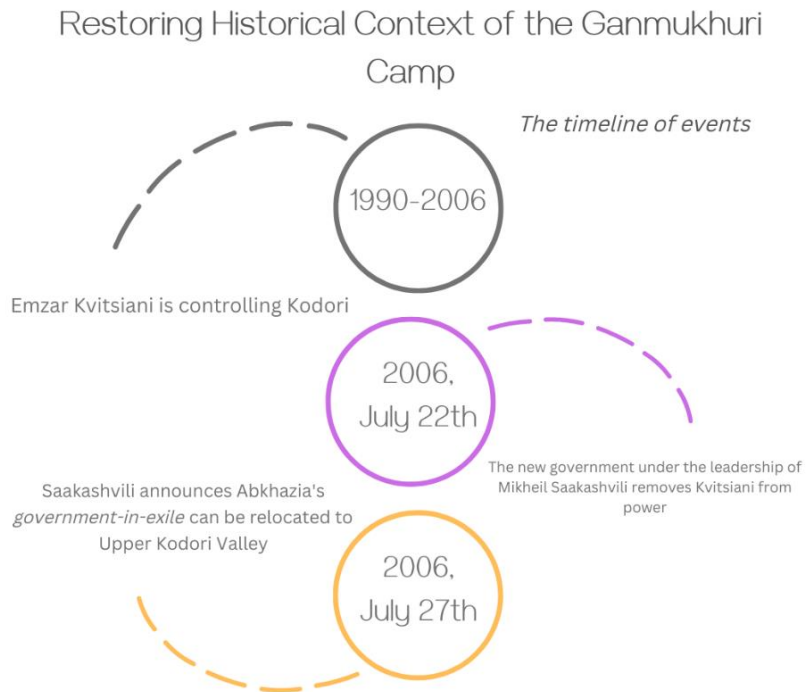
Picture - 2: Map of Abkhazia, showing the location of the Upper Kodori Valley (Battle of the Kodori Valley).

The Upper Kodori Valley has remained outside Abkhazian control since the end of the war on 30 September 1993 and subordinated to Tbilisi. The history of this region is crucial to be briefly recollected to grasp the idea of the building of the GPYC. The timeline of historical shifts in the region begins with Emzar Kvitsiani, a former Georgian military commander who was a warlord of the Valley.

Emzar Kvitsiani was the head of the Upper Kodori Valley during Eduard Shevardnadze’s presidency from 1992 until the 2003 Rose Revolution. On 22 July 2006, the new government, under the leadership

of Mikheil Saakashvili and the UNM, ousted Emzar Kvitsiani through a military operation (Hewitt, 2013, 216-219p.). Kvitsiani fled to Russia, and later in 2014, he was arrested upon his return to Georgia at Tbilisi International Airport. In the same year, a court found him guilty and sentenced him to 16 years in jail, but he was released in 2015. As of now (2019), he is one of the leading figures of the political party “Alliance of Patriots” in Georgia.

After subverting the rule of Kvitsiani, the region has become one of the central spots of the new government’s revanchist aspirations. On 27 July 2006, Saakashvili announced that Abkhazia’s “government-in-exile” could be relocated to the Upper Kodori Valley. This sensitive geographical area was turning into the primary garrison for reclaiming the lost territories. It has caused alarm on the Abkhazian side, which has already been concerned with the Georgian law-enforcement officers’ activity in the region. It became apparent that the Georgian government had far-reaching plans for this region (see picture - 3).



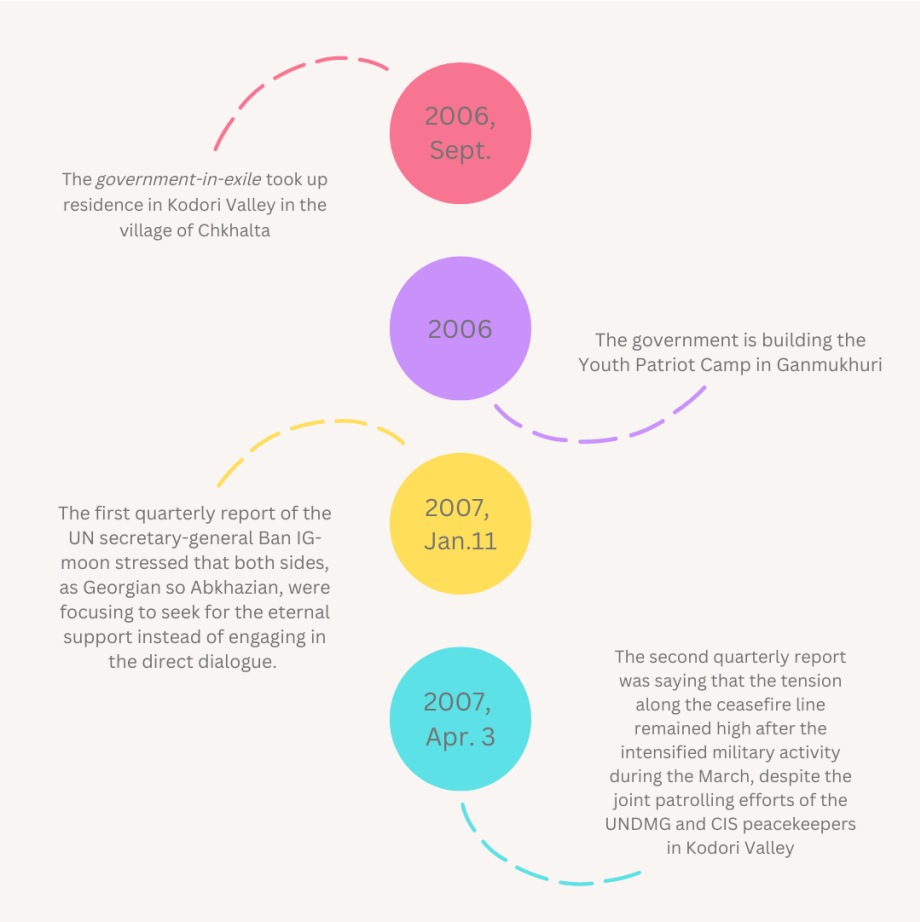
Picture - 3: Restoring the historical context of the Ganmukhuri Camp - Part I

Soon enough, the government-in-exile took up residence in the valley of the village of Chkhalta. Simultaneously, the term “Upper Abkhazia” was introduced by the Georgian government to refer to their Kodori outpost. In September 2006, the government-in-exile was already present in the Upper Kodori Valley. At this point, the UNM government is building the Youth Patriot Camp in the vicinity of Zugdidi in the village of Ganmukhuri (see picture - 4), trying to reinforce their positions on the civil level (Hewitt, 2013, 216-219p.). From this moment on, it became obvious that Saakashvili was going to fulfil his promise and make an attempt to reclaim lost territories.



Picture - 4: The location of Ganmukhuri (Ganarjiis Mukhuri) is a village in the Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region, western Georgia (Ganarjiis Mukhuri, Wikipedia)

This escalated military and civil activity near the conflict region was not left beyond the attention of international organizations. On January 11, 2007, the first quarterly report of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon was released. It was stressed that both sides, Georgian and Abkhazian, were focusing on seeking external support instead of engaging in direct dialogue. The direct dialogue was suspended after the Kodori operation of 27 July (Bureau of International Organization Affairs, 2007, 55-27p.). The Abkhaz were setting specific conditions for proceeding with the dialogue. They were demanding the demilitarization of the Upper Kodori Valley and the withdrawal of the government-in-exile from there. Contrarily, the Georgian government has increased its presence in the Valley. On the first anniversary of the operation in July 2006, a NATO information office was opened there, and more importantly, the government declared that it would open a Patriot youth camp similar to the Ganmukhuri camp (Vignansky and et al., 2007).



Picture - 5: Restoring the historical context of the Ganmukhuri Camp - Part II

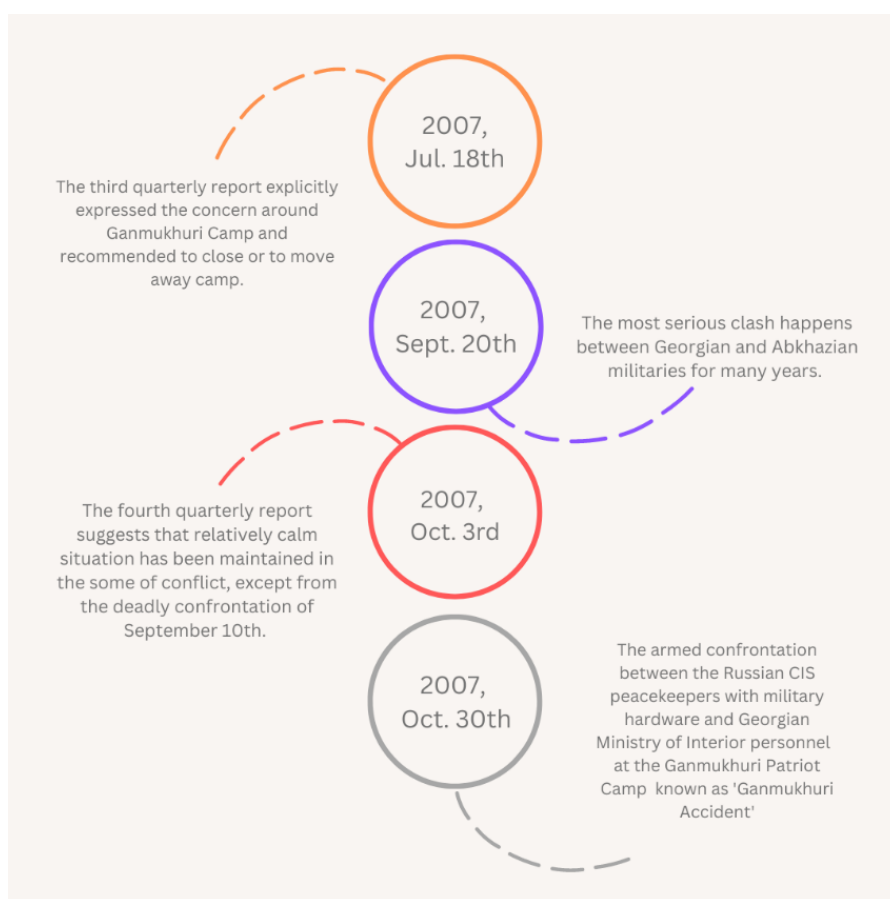
On March 11, 2007, military activities escalated in the area, including the bombardment of villages and the presence of helicopters. It was well-demonstrated in the second quarterly report (delivered on April 3) of the Secretary-General that tension along the ceasefire line remained high after the intensified military activity during the March, despite the joint patrolling efforts of the UNOMIG and CIS peacekeepers in the Kodori Valley.

The third quarterly report of July 18 of 2007 is the most important document as it explicitly expresses concern about the GPYC (Bureau of International Organization Affairs, 2007). The geography of the revanchist activities in the Upper Kodori Valley (North-East of Abkhazia) and in the village Ganmukhuri (South-Eastern border of Abkhazia) makes it easily detectable that the UNM was trying to create an arc-shaped military and civil influence zones. These zones were meant to be fertile ground for upcoming tensions around Saakashvili's and the UNM's intention to reclaim the lost territories.

On September 20, 2007, the most severe clash happened between Georgian and Abkhaz military forces. Upon the next day, with the consent of both sides, the UNOMIG fact-finding team began an inquiry into the incident that lasted until the end of the year, but the investigation was never concluded or reported. On October 3rd, the fourth quarterly report of the Secretary-General suggests that a relatively calm situation has been reached in the zone of conflict, excluding the deadly confrontation of

September 20 (Bureau of International Organization Affairs, 2007, 55-57p.).

The next key event in the web of the timeline largely echoed the confrontation between the Georgian and Russian peacekeepers known as the Ganmukhuri Accident in the international media. It started with the Russian CIS peacekeepers' attack on personnel of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia who were guarding and patrolling around the Ganmukhuri Patriot Camp on October 30. During the confrontation, Russian peacekeepers in armored vehicles brutally beat Georgian troops and detained at least four people from the



Picture - 6: Restoring the historical context of the Ganmukhuri Camp - Part III

Georgian Interior Ministry crew. The camp has been temporarily emptied due to the end of the summer vacation (Civil.ge, 2007).

It was followed by the whole series of well-set performative actions/stunts from the top Georgian government members quickly reaching the borderline of Abkhazia to demonstrate their strength and rigidity. At 3 PM, the Georgian Interior Ministry issued a statement declaring that Russian peacekeepers using military hardware intruded into the territory near the Ganmukhuri patriot camp and took five Georgian police officers as hostages with the use of physical violence (Akhmeteli, 2013).

In a while, the Georgian televisions broadcasted new footage showing a special task unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia and Russian peacekeepers standing face-to-face and pointing guns at each other. In less than half an hour, President Saakashvili, accompanied by the Minister of Internal Affairs, Vano Merabishvili, Minister of Defense, Davit Kezerashvili, and Gigi Ugulava, the Mayor of Tbilisi at that time, arrived at the scene with the long column of bodyguards, Georgian Ministry of Interior Forces and other law-enforcement personnel (Civil.ge, 2007).

The broad spectrum of Georgian media was fully represented and mobilized on the spot to broadcast how bravely Georgian political leaders would push back Russian military forces. Saakashvili gave a ceremonial speech, knowing it would be broadcasted through all the Georgian television channels. In his overly emotional performance, he was angrily speaking to the chief of the Russian peacekeeping forces:

Instead of protecting the local population, the peacekeepers have been turning a blind eye to killings, kidnappings, and extortions for years. We created this youth camp in compliance with Georgian laws. We established a police post to protect it. You attacked the police this morning, in violation of your mandate, in violation of all international norms, in violation of the mandate, including that of the UN Observer Mission, which was inactive, and you beat up our policemen, who were protecting a peaceful population here. Immediately take your servicemen from here, so they never return here, because we have ordered them to stand on the defensive in case of consequent attacks. And you know that we have all the means at our disposal to respond appropriately. Tell your commander, Mr. Chaban, that I announce him as an undesirable person in Georgia. In the following days, he should leave the territory of Georgia. I want you to know that Sokhumi (the capital of the breakaway republic of Abkhazia) is part of Georgia, just like Ganmukhuri, Zugdidi, and Tbilisi. You should immediately put everything in order here. We expect apologies for beating up our police officers and we expect a suspension of any provocations. This is the firm position of the Georgian authorities. The Georgian authorities will make a statement regarding the Russian peacekeepers' future fate here in the near future. If such an incident occurs again, you will drag Russians and Georgians into a huge provocation. I warn you, your provocations will not work here anymore. We are very decisive. Remember it well (Civil.ge, 2007).

In less than a year after this speech and the Ganmukhuri accident, the Russo-Georgian War occurred. That was the only logical development of the UNM's speculative foreign policy. The timeline of events reconstructed above is very helpful in allocating the construction of the Ganmukhuri camp to the large web of events and putting it in the historical context. The GPYC was a part of elusive and veiled revanchist politics that aimed to set up a powerful military and civilian presence on the Abkhazian border. In this way, Saakashvili would be able to demonstrate military and civil superiority over the Abkhazian side. Additionally, he hoped that this would attract Abkhazians and would turn out to be a

proper strategy for regaining territorial integrity. This chain of events was a distraction from an internal political crisis severely exposed after a week in the capital, Tbilisi.

On November 7th, President Saakashvili announced a temporary state of emergency and banned all news broadcasts except state-controlled television due to widespread unrest after the riot police violently suppressed demonstrations held by the opposition forces. According to all records, Saakashvili unleashed extreme violence over the vast part of the demonstrations calling for his ouster (over 500 people were in need of medical treatment) (Collin, 2007). The inner political tumult was not sporadic; it was emerging slowly, and Saakashvili needed to find a solution to the conundrum and keep order in the country. Nonetheless, Saakashvili blamed Russian secret service agencies and claimed that they provoked a civil uproar (Collin, 2007). The shift towards aggressive foreign politics was directly interlinked with the rising popular discontent in society and the anti-government protest rallies. As the wave of dissatisfaction steadily increased, so did state violence.

2. Research Outcomes and Discussion: Inside the Ganmukhuri Patriot Youth Camp

The final layer of analysis looks closely at the atmosphere within the Ganmukhuri camp in order to determine if it was a part of the revanchist politics with its speculative nature, as well as to investigate whether memory politics was practiced or not.

The camp was built in 2007, in the village of Ganmukhuri, a kilometer away from the breakaway territory of Abkhazia. A little more than 600 young people aged 15-22 were visiting the camp for ten days of their summer vacation. There were 56 chalets erected in a large area on the Black Sea coast (Narimanishvili, 2007).

A bell rang at eight o'clock and woke up the youngsters. Then it was followed by half an hour of morning exercises and breakfast in the dining area. They had meals three times a day. After having some leisure time, they were expected to attend various activities. Some have prepared plays to entertain the audience in the evening, and others have engaged in different workshops and seminars. The most enjoyable time for young people was in the late evening when they could sit at the campfire without having any obligations and chit-chat.

The 2007 edition of the GYPC participants mentioned that mostly their late-night teenager chit-chat conversations ended up discussing the Abkhazian issue. The closeness to the border had this strange impact that pushed youngsters to talk about it. Even though they admit their generation knows nothing about Abkhazia, they still have a sense of connectedness and an immense desire to be there (Narimanishvili, 2007).

As one

of the participants put it, the fact that the camp is so close to the Abkhaz border might have angered the Abkhaz authorities, especially when every evening there is too much noise, music is played, and youngsters are shouting slogans such as "long live united Georgia," "long live Abkhazia," and "we will return." She considered that all of it could raise a wave of anger on the other side of the border. Another

participant, whose family was against letting him go to the Ganmukhuri camp because they believed it could be dangerous, particularly after the UN critical report was released, still stayed insistent and went there. He believed that the authorities would not have risked the lives of 600 teenagers if any threat lurked around. However, the fact that the UN regarded this place as unsafe has affected many parents' opinions, and many young people have cancelled their participation (Narimanishvili, 2007).

It is interesting to draw attention to the resonance that followed the UN Secretary-General's report, where he called for the camp to move away and not to keep it so near to the conflict zone. Konstantine Gabashvili, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Parliament of Georgia, believed that the Ganmukhuri camp was mentioned in Ban Ki-moon's report "at the urging of Russia" (Vignansky et al., 2007). A Georgian Foreign Ministry press spokesperson, who preferred to stay anonymous, admitted that there were no plans to move away or close the camp even after the UN report. The head of the GPYC, Sulkhan Sibashvili, said that there were no instructions from Tbilisi to shut down the camp and he was expecting a new influx of 600 teenagers on 9 August 2007. In his interview with IWPR (Institute for War and Peace), he stressed that Ban's report had come as a surprise to them. Then he naively added, "We are not provocateurs; we are patriots, and we only want peace. Our camp has a special function. We are one kilometer from Abkhazia, and this is the best place for arousing and developing feelings of patriotism in young people" (Vignansky et al., 2007). The top Georgian officials have not reacted directly to the demand to move away or close the camp, but it was apparent that no one was going to listen to the call and follow the UN's advice. At that time, Salome Zourabichvili, who is now the fifth President of Georgia, said that she was concerned about the fact that political leadership, instead of reinforcing the country's position on the international stage, was drawing so much criticism (Vignansky et al., 2007).

It is also noteworthy how the commander of the Russian peacemakers in the conflict zone, Major-General Sergey Chaban, reacted to the report. He claimed that the conflict zone is not supposed to be used for such purposes. After the camp was opened, Chaban ordered enhanced security at the border and launched additional posts near Ganmukhuri (Vignansky et al., 2007).

Despite the fact that the GPYC was constantly guarded by the Georgian police, the question is whether it was safe to build the camp in the conflict zone and if this decision carried a sign of provocation. As Sulkhan Chipashvili, the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Culture of Georgia, said before they built the camp, the territory of Ganmukhuri was "uncontrolled and dangerous, even for the residents of the village." According to his statement, this territory has become much safer after the children have moved to the GPYC. The children were accompanied by the Georgian police, and it was creating safer conditions for the residents as well. Nevertheless, the most striking and highly important claim he was making is that the Georgian side never had guarantees for the safety of these youngsters (Georgia Today, 2008). This was the official position of the Ministry of Culture, which was in charge of the entire Patriot Youth Camp programme along with President Saakashvili.

The unclearness of whether the camps were secure places and whether the safety of the children was considered is perfectly elucidated by the following events. As one of the participants of the camp recalls,

on August 8 of 2008, she was in the Ganmukhuri camp when Russian helicopters (Mi-24 model) approached the area. This was her second trip to the GPYC. She said that while nearby cities, Senaki and Poti, were bombed, she started panicking as they could hear the sounds of nearby explosions (Georgia Today, 2006). As the leader of the GPYC, Mikhail Tatishvili, recalls, the administration of the camp evacuated the children in the dead of night in the nearby forest because they realized that there was a real danger of being targeted. That night, the lights were switched off in the chalets. In the morning, they returned to the camp, and 625 children were transported to Tbilisi, but the buses were not going in a row, they went one by one, says Deputy Minister Sulkhan Chipashvili. Shortly after the children left the Ganmukhuri camp, it was bombed and burnt to the ground (Georgia Today, 2006).

Concerning the question of whether the camps actually fueled the provocation, we can recall that during the first year of the Patriot Youth Camps, the participants were trained in loading and shooting their guns (AK-47 rifles), but after the international criticism of the informal military training in the camps, these kinds of activities were quickly abandoned (Antelava, 2005). In spite of that, all the podcasts and documentaries made around the Patriot camps tend to show that even though the military aspect of the camps was discarded, the fighting spirit and ultranationalist sentiments with a high dosage of hatred of Russia were still present in the camps (Jashi, 2010). The anti-Russian theatrical propaganda, which was an inseparable part of the evening activities in the camps, is one of the clearest illustrations of it (Esslemont, 2010). The slogans shouted in the camp, the environment of the camp itself, the UN critical report, and the parallel activities such as imposing “government-in-exile” in the Kodori Valley all together supplement the argument that opening the camp in the conflict zone was pure speculation from the UNM.

3. In Place of a Conclusion: Last Thoughts on the Ganmukhuri Accident

As a consequence of the Ganmukhuri Accident, Georgia has withdrawn its agreement for the presence of Commonwealth of Independent States Peacekeepers in breakaway Abkhazia. If one of the goals of the UNM government's provocative actions was to remove Russian peacekeepers (roughly 2,000) from Abkhazia, then the goal was accomplished (Akhmeteli, 2007). However, the price that the Georgian government had to pay was to risk the lives of more than 600 youngsters who could never believe that their government might use them as a human shield against Russian aggression. The Ganmukhuri Accident has to be seen in the light of the wider confrontation between Georgia and Russia, which ended in the 2008 August War. The accident was followed by a chain of events that made it impossible to extinguish the tension. It is difficult to determine how important the Ganmukhuri Accident was in igniting future military conflict. As we observed within the analysis, the event played a significant role in fueling the conflict.

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