



ABKHAZIA

# LOST IN TRANSITION

©Pierpaolo Mittica  
parallelozero





Inside the abandoned and derelict parliament building in Sukhumi.

- ▶ During the Soviet years, Abkhazia was a holiday destination favoured by the political elite. Stalin, Beria, Khrushchev and Brezhnev had dachas here facing onto the Black Sea
- ▶ Abkhazia was devastated by the war that broke out following the breakup of the USSR, when the country proclaimed its independence from Georgia. The conflict caused 30 thousand deaths and tens of thousands of people were displaced
- ▶ Today Abkhazia is to all intents and purposes an autonomous republic, but neither the United Nations nor the European Union recognise its independence. Georgia continues to claim sovereignty over the territory, while an international embargo suffocates its economic development
- ▶ During the war, a large proportion of the Georgian population of Abkhazia fled, consequently depopulating the eastern part of the country. After more than 25 years, half of the buildings and towns remain abandoned
- ▶ Due to depopulation and decay, the notable architectural heritage from the Soviet era and also from the time of the Tsars, including entire towns built in the Stalinist neoclassical style, risks disappearing forever



A local fair in Sukhumi. A girl dressed as a princess poses for pictures during the New Year celebrations.



A guard tower, where the war's first two victims – two policemen – lost their lives.



The abandoned airport in Sukhumi.



A hot spring in Oчамchire. During the Soviet Period Abkhazia was famous for its holiday destinations and spa resorts, renowned for the properties of their sulphuric waters.

Abkhazia is a non-place. However, it was once considered a paradise. In the years of the Soviet Union, this strip of land spanning 200 kilometres by 100 and facing onto the Black Sea was the chosen holiday destination of the political elite, who could enjoy hospitality of the highest standards. Figures such as Stalin, Beria, Khrushchev and Brezhnev had dachas there.

Following the fall of the USSR, Georgia proclaimed independence, and in turn, in July 1992, Abkhazia attempted to secede from Georgia. There followed a ferocious war that, over the course of one year, devastated Abkhazia, leaving 30 thousand dead and tens of thousands displaced.

Today Abkhazia is an autonomous republic to all intents and purposes, but neither the United Nations nor the European Union recognise its independence. Only five UN member states (including Russia) and three other disputed territories acknowledge its legitimacy as an independent nation. An international embargo continues to stifle economic development and foreign investment in the country.

In spite of the fact that more than 25 years have passed since the end of the war, at least half of the buildings and towns remain abandoned. A large part of the Georgian population of Abkhazia fled during the conflict, thus depopulating the eastern part of the country. Ochamchire, which before the war was home to 20 thousand inhabitants, today has a population of less than one tenth of that number. In places such as Akarmara, Dzhantukha and Polyana, which enjoyed a golden era during the Soviet period and had populations of 4,000 inhabitants each, are now home to just a few dozen people.

While the arm wrestle between the Abkhazia government and its Georgian counterpart continues, the population struggles to establish a semblance of normality in that lost paradise that many still remember. As daily life in the region seems trapped in a permanent state of limbo, buildings that date back to the Soviet era and the time of the Tsars, such as hotels, spas, sanatoria, castles, railway stations as well as entire towns built in the Stalinist neoclassical style, are crumbling and this cultural heritage risks disappearing forever.



An abandoned train station in Aqua Fon.



The abandoned parliament building in Sukhumi, which has also been damaged by fire.



Elena Zavodskaja is a journalist for Radio Freedom. During the war she escaped to Russia.



Sheep by the sea, Gagra.



The Abkhaz flag on the roof of the abandoned and derelict parliament building, Sukhumi.



The abandoned private plane of Eduard Shevardnadze, Georgia's president at the time of the war, at the airport in Sukhumi. When the war between Georgia and Abkhazia broke out, Shevardnadze was in Sukhumi. Unable to use his private plane, he returned to Tbilisi by train. Today the plane lies abandoned at Sukhumi Airport.



Vladislav Bargandzhia, one of the inhabitants of the semi-abandoned village of Dzhantukha. Dzhantukha was a coal mining centre and enjoyed its moment in the sun during the Soviet period, when it had a population of 4,000. Today it is home to fewer than 30 people.



The abandoned and derelict parliament building in Sukhumi.



A wedding ceremony in Sukhumi.



The semi-abandoned village of Polyana.



Miron Zukhba is the owner of the Mandarin guest house in Ochamchire; he is trying to develop tourism in Abkhazia.



The semi-abandoned village of Polyana.



A school book lies on the floor in an abandoned school in Ochamchire.



A house in Ochamchire.



Asmat and Balla are presenters on Radio Sputnik in Sukhumi.



The sea front in Sukhumi.



Abandoned sanatorium Gruzija, Gagra.



Nana in her house, in the semi-abandoned village of Dzhantukha.



The abandoned electric power station in Tkvarchal.



DISCO

Концерт  
Лука  
Галесин

Концерт  
Лука  
Галесин

parallelozero

via Donatello 19/A Milan- info@parallelozero.com - www.parallelozero.com - +39 02 89281630