

ESSAYS

ABKHAZIA: AMATEUR CARTOGRAPHY, POINTS OF REFERENCE, AND MEANS OF ASSEMBLY. *Summary*

Oksana Zaporozhets

This text is part of a series of essays by Russian sociologists who took part in a two-week “fieldwork school” on both sides of the border between Russia and the breakaway republic of Abkhazia in the fall of 2005. They spent the first week in a village on the Russian side of the border, and the second in the Abkhazian resort town of Gagra. The school focused on transborder networks and the border as a social space, as well as social conditions specific to Abkhazia, such as civil society in a weak state and the tourism industry in an unrecognized republic. The authors reflect on their own experiences as outside observers in this region.

This essay recounts the author’s attempts to decipher the ways in which Abkhazia’s image is constructed by Russian visitors. A range of metaphors and associations is available to describe the Caucasus as a whole, drawing on Soviet-era stereotypes of the Black Sea coast’s attraction as a tourist destination as well as post-Soviet perceptions of violence and danger. Abkhazia is rarely singled out in such descriptions. Locally-produced images of Abkhazia addressed to Russian visitors tend to stress historical and cultural commonalities, whereas constructions of a separate Abkhaz identity are mostly directed at local residents and use tourists only as passive sounding boards. Visitors experience otherness as a result of the often clumsy and parochial ways in which touristic images of Abkhazia are presented, regardless of the content of these images. This is partly due to the underdeveloped nature of Abkhazia’s tourism economy; yet the unrecognized government’s attempts to regulate this economy are aimed at maintaining ideological control over the content of representations rather than creating transparent economic conditions.