

Demographic Situation in Modern Abkhazia - Fact or fiction?

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Abstract

In the period after the armed conflict in Abkhazia (14.08.1992-27.09.1993), there is no reliable information about demographic data. The first official information about the population - published by the Department of State Statistics (in 2019 was renamed the State Committee) of unrecognized Republic of Abkhazia appeared in 2005. Since 2010, the statistical abstract "Abkhazia in Figures" has been regularly published, which, unlike the 2005 edition, no longer has classified as - "for official use". The demographic situation of modern Abkhazia is discussed on the basis of official Abkhaz sources. The article also uses data from foreign, Abkhaz experts and various international organizations, which significantly differ from official data. Even such a general indicator as the total number of population is unclear. The opinion was expressed that the official data does not reflect the reality. The theory of demographic transition and the estimated crude mortality rate were used to calculate the population size. According to calculations, the population is in the range of 140-160 thousand.

Keywords: Abkhazia, population, demographic transition, birth, death, migration.

Introduction

According to the 1989 Soviet census, population of Abkhazia made up 525 061, including 239 872 ethnic Georgians (45.7%), 93 267 – Abkhazians (17.8%), 76 541 – Armenians (14.6%), 74 914 Russians (14.3%) and other nationalities 40 467 (7.7%) ([Saqartvelos mosakhleobis erovnuli..., 1991](#)), among which the Greeks and Ukrainians stood out in numbers.

The military operations in Abkhazia began in 1992. The opposing side of Georgia was represented by Abkhaz, North Caucasian mercenaries and units of the Russian regular army. It can be said that it was conflict disguised by diplomatic rhetoric between Georgia and its former metropolis Russia ([Gachechiladze, 2011](#)).

The exact number of those killed during the ethnic cleansing is disputed. According to the Georgian government's Committee on Human Rights and Interethnic Relations, 4000 individuals from the Georgian side, both civilians and combatants, were killed, 10000 were wounded, and 1000 are missing. The Abkhazian Committee for Human Rights gives the following casualty figures for the "duration of the war," which they set as August 14, 1992 through September 30, 1993: 4040 killed (2220 combatants, 1820 civilians); approximately 8000 wounded; 122 missing in action ([Georgia Abkhazia: Violations ..., 1995](#)), more than 20 thousand became refugees ([Aphkazeti udzvelesi droidan..., 2007](#)). Other sources, emphasizing ethnic cleansing, cite the figure for deaths as between 25 000 and 30 000 ([Derloquian, 1998](#)). Nearly 250 thousand Georgians were forced to escape blood freezing horrifying humiliations, tortures, shootings. Apart for ethnic Georgians, nearly 100 thousand persons of other ethnic origin escaped from Abkhazia, including ethnic Russians, Greeks, Armenians, Estonians. Even thousands of Abkhazians left native land, unwilling to be the part of the Fascist Regime ([Alexidze, 2009](#)).

Although there are no active hostilities today, ethnic cleansing and genocide continue to this day through various methods. As a result of the tragic events that took place in Abkhazia, the number of population sharply decreased, and the ethnic composition changed radically.

Methods and Materials

Primary sources of data are: scientific works and articles published in the Abkhaz, Georgian and foreign press. Official data from National Statistics Office of Georgia and The State Statistics Committee of the unrecognized Republic of Abkhazia, about natural movement and the population censuses conducted in different years. Based on research interests, for study and analyze of relevant materials, methods of historical-comparative, descriptive, statistical analysis and expert assessment are used.

Results

Population dynamics

The last information about the population of Abkhazia was published by the Social and Economic Information Committee of Georgia (currently National Statistics Office of Georgia) in 1993. After that the official publication, which contained information about the population, was published by the State Statistics Committee of unrecognized Republic of Abkhazia only in 2005 - with a stamp „for official use” ([Abkhazia in numbers, 2005](#)). This publication is based on the results of the 2003 population census. According to the latter, the population of Abkhazia made up 214.0 thousand inhabitants (see Table 1) and the number of ethnic Abkhazians amounted 94.6 thousand.

Table 1. Dynamics of population by nationality. Data source (National Statistics Office of Georgia; ([Abkhazia in numbers, 2005](#); [Abkhazian statistical yearbook, 2023](#)))

Ethnic group	in Thousands				Percent			
	1989	2003	2011	2023	1989	2003	2011	2023
Abkhaz	93.3	94.6	122.2	125.4	17.8	44.2	50.8	51.4
Georgian	239.9	44.0	46.5	46.9	45.7	20.6	19.3	19.2
Armenian	76.5	44.9	41.9	41.4	14.6	21.0	17.4	17.0
Russian	74.9	23.4	22.1	22.3	14.3	10.9	9.2	9.1
Other	40.5	7.1	8.105	8.047	7.7	3.3	3.4	3.3
Total	525.1	214.0	240.7	244.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

In post-war Abkhazia, the 2003 population census was carried out unsatisfactorily. As a result of justified criticism, the event received the official name “Population registration 2003” ([Yamskov, 2010](#)).

According to experts, during the 2003 population registration there was a double count of the population in both rural and urban settlements ([Yamskov, 2009](#)). As a result, the population of Abkhazia and Abkhazian nationality increased artificially. The data of the mentioned event was taken as a basis, which means that in subsequent years, the total number of the population was determined by mechanical addition-subtraction of the current registration of population (birth, death, migration). The shortcomings of the „Population registration 2003”, were not taken into account during the 2011 population census, moreover, apparently with the double-enumerated population, resided in Russia were also registered as residents of Abkhazia ([Piirsalu, 2018](#)). As of the 2011 census, the population of Abkhazia made up 240.7 thousand. The number of ethnic Abkhazians in the total population amounted to 122.2 thousand. In the period 2003-2011, the population of Abkhaz nationality increased by 27.6 thousand (29.2%), which corresponds to an average increase of 3.2% per year. The recorded fact is practically impossible (see Figure 1). During the years of the demographic explosion (1950-1960), the average annual increase of the African population was 2.2%. We also note that during the intercensal period (1959-1989) over 30 years, the number of Abkhazians increased by only 32.1 thousand people.

Before the 2011 census, according to official data, the population of Abkhazia in 2003-2010 increased slightly by 2.7 thousand people, in 2007-2008 the population even decreased (see Figure 2). According to the mentioned data, the population in 2010 made up 216.7 thousand ([Abkhazia in numbers, 2010](#)).

After the 2011 census, due to the differences between the population figures, State Committee of the unrecognized Republic of Abkhazia on Statistics, recalculated the data for the period between 2003-2011. From 2003 to 2010 the mentioned procedure was probably carried out by interpolation, annually were added 3 338 people.

According to the latest data, as of January 1, 2023, the number of populations amounted to 244.0 thousand inhabitants. The share of Abkhazians increased and amounted to 51.4%. The share of all other nationalities has decreased (Table 1).



Figure 1. Percent change by main nationalities in the period between the censuses in 2003-2011. Source: *Abkhazia in numbers*, (2005); *Abkhazian statistical yearbook*, (2023).

Paradoxes of Abkhazian statistics

It is hard to find a country in the world where official statistics and expert assessments differed so much from each other. The reason for such sharp differences in assessments can be explained by the interest of the Abkhaz government to present the desired as reality.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimated the total population of Abkhazia to be in the region of 180 000-220 000 in 1998 (*World directory of minorities...*, 2008).

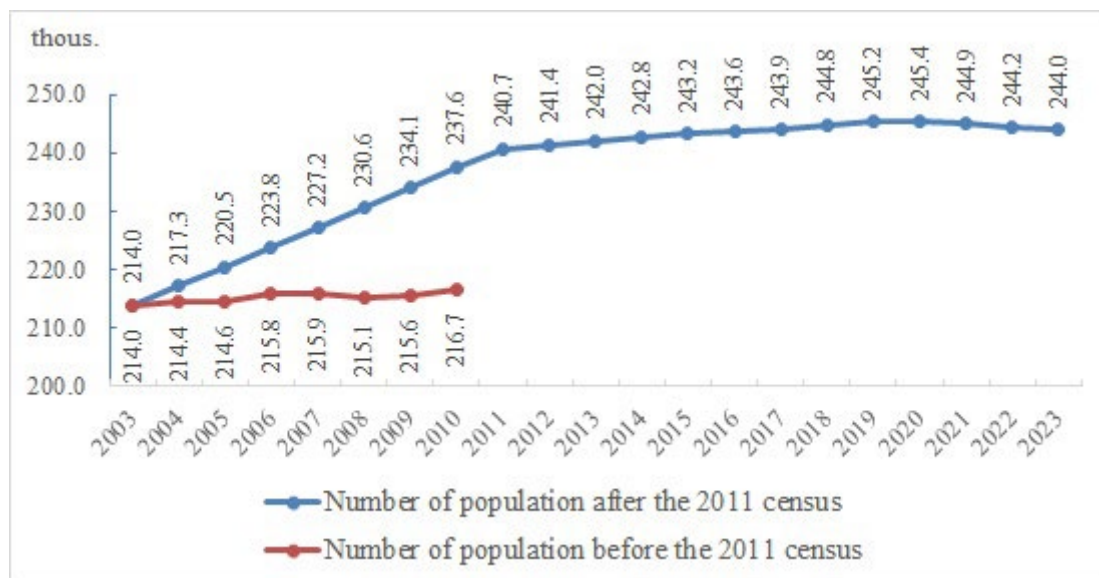


Figure 2. Number of population before and after 2011 census. Source: *Abkhazia in numbers*, 2005; *Abkhazian statistical yearbook*, 2023

According to the estimation of the official sources of Georgia, the population of Abkhazia in 2002 made up 180 thousand and at the beginning of 2005, 178 thousand (Statistical yearbook of Georgia, 2005). According to one of the georgian expert - „The actual population of Abkhazia should not exceed 170 thousand“ (Archvadze, 2005).

In 2005 the President of Abkhazia S. Bagafsh stated that less than 70 thousand Abkhazians lived in the republic (Bagapsh Speaks of Abkhazia's Economy, 2005). Speaking at MGIMO (Moscow State Institute of International Relations) in 2010, he said that 120 thousand Abkhazians live in Abkhazia (*President of Abkhazia*, 2010).

In January 2005 the electoral roll, probably a more reliable guide to the numbers of those at least of voting age, comprised 129 127 individuals, suggesting an overall population between 157 000 and 190 000 ([Abkhazia today, 2006](#)). According to the mentioned source, Abkhaz are thought to constitute some 35 per cent of the total population of the republic ([World directory of minorities..., 2008](#)).

In 2006, Abkhazian officials stated in an interview with Crisis Group that 320,000 people lived in the republic, including 110,000 Abkhazians ([Abkhazia today, 2006](#)).

According to the authors of the Encyclopedia Britannica, in 2007 population of Abkhazia made up 180 thousand people ([Encyclopedia Britannica, Abkhazia](#)).

In the report published in 2015 under the auspices of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), which is based on the data of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the unrecognized republic, noted that „Abkhazia has a permanent population of around 200 000” ([The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation, 2015](#)). During the 2019 presidential election, the number of voters in Abkhazia made up 127 232 ([Results of the elections of the President of the Republic of Abkhazia on September 9, 2019](#)).

In any period, the number of population can fluctuate because only as a result of natural increase (difference between births and deaths) and net migration (the number of immigrants minus the number of emigrants). In 2003-2011, the officially published total population does not correspond to the total population obtained from natural increase of population and migration data. For example, according to official data, the population of Abkhazia at the beginning of 2004 made up 214 281 people, if we add and subtract the indicators of natural increase and migration in 2004, the result obtained at the beginning of 2005 differs from the officially published one.

Attempts to increase number of populations

The de-facto government of Abkhazia is interested in increasing the population of Abkhaz nationality. Achieving the mentioned goal by natural increase is unrealistic. One of the ways out of the situation authorities consider the repatriation of the population who left the region as a result of the conflict. The direct descendants of those refugees who left the territory of historical residence of Abkhazians (Abaza) as a result of the Russian-Caucasian and Russian-Turkish wars and other events of the 19th century are considered to be repatriates (Konstitucionny zakon Respubliki Abkhazia)

In 1993, the Law on Repatriation was adopted and the State Committee for Repatriation was approved, which, as a result of reorganization in 2018, was transformed into a ministry. 7856 repatriates were registered in Abkhazia for 23 years (1993-2016). Among them 4 427 people from Turkey, 550 from Syria, 126 from Egypt and Jordan. According to the head of the State Committee for Repatriation of Abkhazia, only 3 000-3 200 repatriates lived here in 2016 ([23 years ago, 2016](#)). Between the years 2017 and 2022 the number of repatriates who came for permanent residence in Abkhazia amounted to 1138 people. By 2022, 3117 repatriates lived in Abkhazia ([Abkhazian statistical yearbook; 2023](#)). A significant part of repatriates are people from Turkey, Syria and Jordan. Despite the efforts of the government of the unrecognized Republic of Abkhazia, many repatriates left Abkhazia due to the unfavorable socio-economic situation. From a demographic point of view, the results of the campaign to attract the population through repatriation are practically negligible.

A ban on abortion in Abkhazia was introduced in early 2016 ([Law of the Republic of Abkhazia](#)). The main purpose of the ban on abortion in Abkhazia was to increase the fertility. Over the past eight years, there have been no significant changes, in the field of fertility, on the contrary, the birth rate has decreased. Women continue to terminate unwanted pregnancies by travelling to neighbouring countries or performing illegal abortions in Abkhazia.

According to Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of occupied Abkhazia N170, dated December 28, 2021, for 2022 was developed a short-term target program - “Demographic Development”, the main goal of which was to increasing the number of children of Abkhaz nationality among the total number of births (Demographic Development for 2022). The latter should be assessed as discrimination against other nationalities living in Abkhazia.

On July 12, 2021, the Parliament of occupied Abkhazia adopted the law “On the demographic policy of the Republic of Abkhazia” in the 1st reading. The objectives of demographic policy are: improving the standard of living of the population; increase in fertility; reduction of mortality;

strengthening family traditions and relationships; return of Abkhazians to the country. Despite the measures taken, the desired result was not achieved.

Natural movement

There is scant information concerning the natural movement of Abkhazia's population. In the post-war period, we find the mentioned data in a report, which was prepared by staff of the statistical service, at the request of one of the Abkhazian journalists, according to which in 1994 1470 children were born in Abkhazia and 1730 people died (Sharia, 2016). The author of the article explains the excess of the number of deaths compared to the quantity of births with the fact that most of the latter received severe wounds during the ongoing hostilities in Abkhazia, which eventually became the cause of their death most of the deceased were seriously injured during the ongoing fighting in Abkhazia, which ultimately became the cause of their death. As for the fertility, the conception of the largest part of those born in 1994 mainly coincided with the war period. Subsequently, the absolute number of births in the period of 1995-1999 was: 1611, 1551, 1396, 1432 and 1169 newborns. According to the official data in 2002 the crude birth rate made up 7.2‰, which was approximately 2 times less than the identical indicator in 1991(14.3‰). According to official data, the birth rate in 2002-2009 showed tendency to increase (see Table 2).

Table 2. Natural movement of the population 2002-2022. Source: *Abkhazia in numbers (2005, 2011, 2016, 2019); Abkhazian statistical yearbook, (2021, 2023)*

Years	Absolute data			Per mille		
	Number of births	Number of deaths	Natural change	Crude birth rate	Crude death rate	Natural change
2002	1557	1059	498	7.2	4.9	2.3
2003	1816	1142	674	8.5	5.3	3.2
2004	1919	1233	686	8.9	5.8	3.1
2005	1669	1533	136	7.7	7.1	0.6
2006	1715	1493	222	7.9	6.9	1.0
2007	1772	1761	11	8.2	8.2	0.0
2008	1990	1553	437	9.2	7.2	2.0
2009	2207	1699	508	10.2	7.8	2.4
2010	2156	1699	457	9.9	7.8	2.1
2011	2143	1645	498	8.9	6.8	2.1
2012	2258	1723	535	9.3	7.1	2.2
2013	2017	1561	456	8.3	6.4	1.9
2014	2004	1467	537	8.2	6.0	2.2
2015	1927	1654	273	7.9	6.8	1.1
2016	1768	1465	303	7.2	6.0	1.2
2017	1711	1262	449	7.0	5.2	1.8
2018	1430	1282	148	5.8	5.2	0.6
2019	1274	1240	34	5.2	5.1	0.1
2020	1295	1411	-116	5.3	5.8	-0.5
2021	1110	1785	-675	4.5	7.3	-2.8
2022	997	1532	-535	4.1	6.3	-2.2

In 2009, its maximum value was recorded (10.2‰), which was much lower than the level of simple reproduction of the population (15‰), after which the crude birth rate (except for 2011-2012 and 2019-2020) permanently decreased. In 2022, only 997 children were born in Abkhazia, the crude birth rate made up 4.1‰.

According to the information published by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which includes data about 228 countries, no country has such a low birth rate (The World Factbook, 2022). If the above-mentioned fertility level is maintained for a long time, each subsequent generation in Abkhazia will be approximately 73% less than the previous generation. Based on the mentioned fact, a catastrophic situation has been created in Abkhazia in the field of fertility. Probably the extremely low

value of the crude birth rate is related to the problems of registration of births, as well as the unrealistically high number of the population.

The current mortality rate is surprising because of its low values. In 2002, its indicator made up 4.9‰, which was one of the lowest rates worldwide ([2002 World Population Data Sheet](#)).

A country is categorized as an “aged” society when the share of persons aged 65 years and over more than 7 per cent of the total population, in such countries the mortality rates are high. In 2003 the share of people of this age group in Abkhazia amounted to 16.9% ([Abkhazia in numbers, 2005](#)), which was one of the highest rates in Europe. In 2002-2007 the mortality rate showed an increasing trend. By 2007 the highest value - 8.2‰ was recorded, after that, the mortality rate was mainly characterized by a downward trend.

In 2002-2022, despite some fluctuations, the main vector of direction of rate of natural change showed a decreasing trend. Since 2020, its negative values have been fixed (Table 2), which is mainly the result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Today a very difficult demographic situation has been created in Abkhazia. According to one of the Abkhaz specialists - the course of demographic processes in the republic is affected by traffic injuries, car accidents, suicides, low fertility, increased mortality, changes in age and sex composition, late marriages, unsatisfactory health status of the population and drug addiction ([Khashba, 2023](#)). At a meeting of the Center for Social and Economic Research, one of the former Abkhaz deputies stated - „Abkhazians are endangered nation, which requires a special protection regime ([Challenges and answers, 2023](#)).

Migration

The problem of migration is very significant for Abkhaz society. Due to the incompleteness of migration records from the 90s of the last century until 2003, it is impossible to restore a complete picture of migration processes ([Khashba, 2015](#)).

The negative balance of external migration in Abkhazia in 2003-2007 changed positively in 2008-2019 (except for 2014). In the early years of the Covid-19 pandemic, emigration exceeded immigration. In 2022, the migration balance was still positive (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Dynamics of migration balance in 2003-2022. Source: [Abkhazia in numbers 2010](#); - [Abkhazian statistical yearbook 2021, 2022](#)

Intensive migration processes from villages to cities are observed in Abkhazia. In 2003, the share of the rural population was 55.1% ([Abkhazia in numbers, 2005](#)), in 2023 this figure was equal to 49.8% ([Abkhazian statistical yearbook, 2022](#)). The main reasons for migration from rural areas to urban areas are more employment opportunities, the desire to get a better education, better living conditions. According to Abkhaz experts, a third of school graduates go to study further outside Abkhazia, and not all return. If this trend continues exactly as it is now, the size of each next

generation in Abkhazia will be one third less than the size of the previous one (Sharia, 2022; Demographic Abyss, 2022).

The increasing number of illegal migrants from Central Asia, Armenia and other countries is a serious problem in Abkhazia.

An attempt to calculate the number of the population

Officially published information about the population size of Abkhazia is clearly far from reality. We will use the theory of demographic transition to determine the estimated number of the population. For the calculation, it is necessary to determine the expected level of the crude mortality rate that corresponds to the current phase of the demographic transition. We focus on the mortality rate because, that unlike the birth rate, this is an indicator which - except in extreme situations - does not undergo sharp changes. If the total number of deaths and the value of the crude mortality rate are known, it is not difficult to calculate the population size (Meladze & Tsuladze, 1997). This calculation does not pretend to be absolutely accurate, although the latter is closer to reality than the officially published numbers.

Since the 1960's Abkhazia and Georgia have been in the third phase of the demographic transition, which is characterized by an increasing in death rate as a result of demographic aging (see Figure 4). The dynamics of the coefficients shows that they are close to each other.

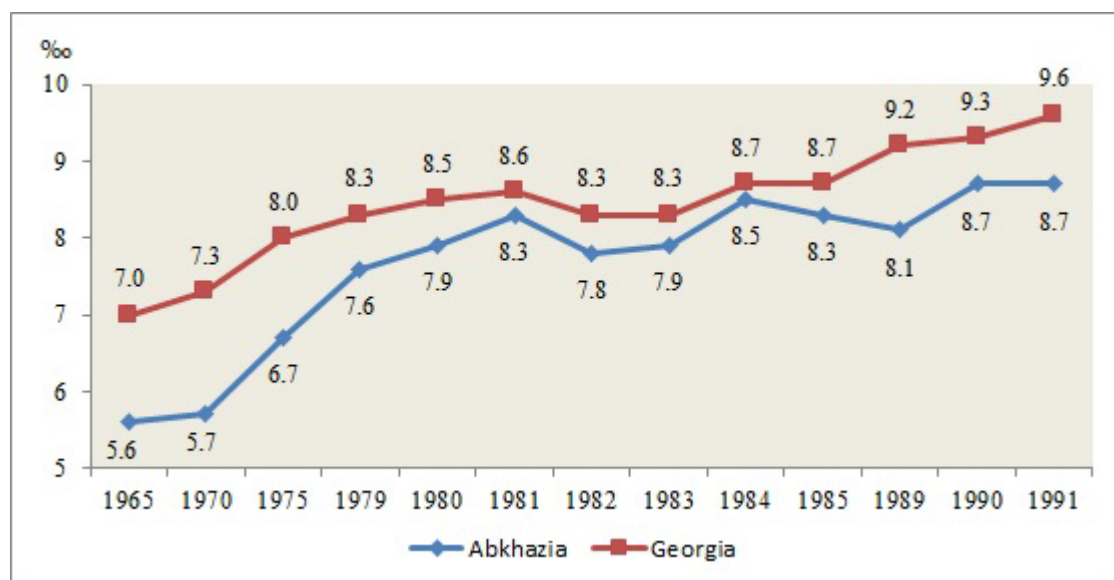


Figure 4. Dynamics of crude mortality rates in Abkhazia and Georgia in 1965-1991. Source: 1965-1985 - Abkhazia in numbers, 1986. 1989-1991 – calculated by author, based on National Statistics Office of Georgia materials

In the middle of the 1990's, Georgia begins to move into the fourth phase of the demographic transition (Meladze & Tsuladze, 1997). In this phase, the crude mortality rate continues to increase, reaching approximately 13-14‰ at the end of the phase. Abkhazia's mortality rates, officially published since 2002, are clearly far from reality (see Figure 5).

Analysis of the figure shows that in 2002-2022 there are enormous differences between the mortality rates of Georgia and Abkhazia, in most cases Abkhazia's rates are 2 or more times lower than those recorded in Georgia. The fact that the mortality rates in Abkhazia in the 1980s were higher than in 2002-2022 (with a few exceptions in 2007, 2009 and 2010), contradicts the knowledge of demographic science. We do not use mortality data for 2020-2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic for our calculations.

In Abkhazia between 2005 and 2016 the number of deaths is more or less close to reality. The average annual number of deaths in these years is 1604. Based on the development of the demographic system and relevant analysis, the estimated crude mortality rate in modern Abkhazia is at least in the range of 10-11.5‰. Accordingly, the population of Abkhazia should be equal to 140-160 thousand.

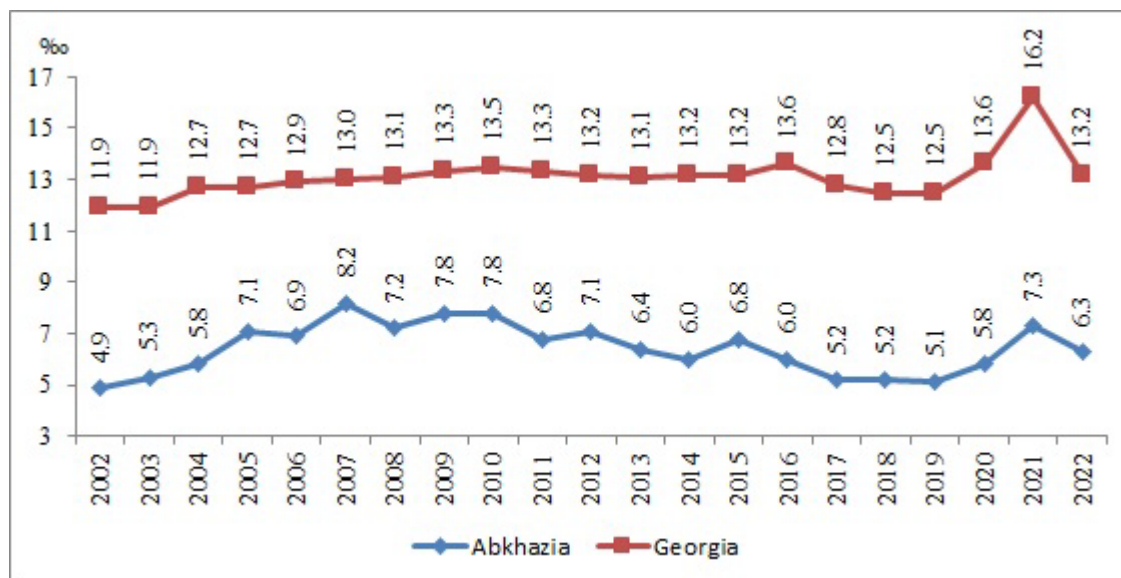


Figure 5. Dynamics of crude death rates in Georgia and Abkhazia in 2002-2022. Source: *Abkhazia in numbers 2005, 2011, 2016, 019; Abkhazian statistical yearbook, 2023; National Statistics Office of Georgia*

Conclusion

- Officially published statistical and demographic information about occupied Abkhazia does not reflect reality.

- It is necessary to conduct a population census in Abkhazia, which has not been carried out since 2011.

- State statistics committee of the de facto Republic of Abkhazia publishes only general data about natural movement of population and migration. Data required for demographic analysis, such as total fertility rate, age specific fertility rate, age specific mortality rate, life tables etc., are not known to the public, which complicates the assessment of the current situation.

- In the near future fertility will decrease, in the field of mortality the opposite process is expected.

- The growth of the population from 93-95 thousand to 120 thousand in 1993-2012 is less realistic.

- The process of demographic aging of the population is progressing, which will create serious socio-economic problems in the future.

- According to our calculations, population size in modern Abkhazia among 140-160 thousand.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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