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GÖRÜNMEZ DEVLETLER, GÖRÜNMEZ BİLGİ: ABHAZYA VE ULUSLARARASI İLİŞKİLERDEKİ SESSİZLİK

Elçin BAŞOL[1]

Öz

Bu makale, Abhazya'nın Uluslararası İlişkiler (Uİ) disiplini içindeki epistemik görünmezliğini incelemekte ve cumhuriyetin marjinalleşmesinin yalnızca jeopolitik değil, aynı zamanda epistemolojik bir olgu olduğunu savunmaktadır. 1990'ların başından bu yana fiilî bir devlet yapısını sürdürmesine rağmen Abhazya, tanınmış devletleri, güç politikalarını ve Batı merkezli kuramsal çerçeveleri önceleyen ana akım Uİ literatüründe büyük ölçüde görünmez kalmaktadır. Epistemik adaletsizlik ve çevresel/periferik bilgi üretimi kavramlarından hareketle bu çalışma, bilgi hiyerarşilerinin hangi siyasi gerçekliklerin "uluslararası" olarak kabul edildiğini nasıl belirlediğini analiz etmektedir. Uİ literatürünün ve bu literatürdeki sessizliklerin meta-analitik bir okuması yoluyla makale, Abhazya'nın çoğunlukla "donmuş çatışma", "vekil bölge" ya da "ayrılıkçı yapı" gibi çerçeveler içinde ele alındığını ve bu durumun bölgeyi daha geniş kuramsal tartışmaların dışında bıraktığını göstermektedir. Ayrıca dilsel, kurumsal ve jeopolitik engellerin Abhaz araştırmacıların küresel akademik ağlarda görünürlüğünü nasıl sınırladığı tartışılmaktadır. Abhazya'yı jeopolitik bir istisna olarak ele almak yerine, bu çalışma Abhazya'yı Uİ disiplininin sınırlarını, dışlayıcı pratiklerini ve önyargılarını görünür kılan epistemik bir alan olarak kavramsallaştırmaktadır. Bu çerçevede makale, Kafkasya çalışmaları ve Küresel Uİ tartışmaları için daha çoğulcu, refleksif ve kapsayıcı bir bilgi üretimi yaklaşımı çağrısında bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Abhazya, Epistemik Adaletsizlik, Bilgi Üretimi, Uluslararası İlişkiler, Çevre-Merkez, Kafkasya Çalışmaları.*

INVISIBLE STATES, INVISIBLE KNOWLEDGE: ABKHAZIA AND THE SILENCE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Abstract

This article examines the epistemic invisibility of Abkhazia within the discipline of International Relations (IR) and argues that the marginalization of the republic is not only geopolitical but also epistemological. Despite maintaining de facto statehood since the early 1990s, Abkhazia remains largely absent from mainstream IR scholarship, which continues to privilege recognized states, power politics, and Western-centric theoretical frameworks. Drawing on the concepts of epistemic injustice and peripheral knowledge production, the article explores how hierarchies of knowledge shape what is considered legitimate international reality. Through a meta-analytical reading of IR literature and its silences, it demonstrates how Abkhazia is predominantly framed as a "frozen conflict," a "proxy territory," or a "breakaway region," thereby excluding it from broader theoretical engagement. The article further examines linguistic, institutional, and geopolitical barriers that limit the visibility of Abkhaz-authored scholarship in global academic networks. Rather than treating Abkhazia as a geopolitical anomaly, the study conceptualizes it as an epistemic site that

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reveals the boundaries, exclusions, and biases embedded within the discipline of IR. In doing so, it calls for a more plural, reflexive, and inclusive approach to knowledge production in Caucasus studies and Global IR debates.

Keywords: *Abkhazia, Epistemic Injustice, Knowledge Production, International Relations, Periphery-Center, Caucasus Studies.*

Introduction

The Caucasus occupies an uncertain place within the global discipline of International Relations (IR). The region is often represented as a geopolitical periphery or a "frozen conflict zone" positioned between larger powers such as Russia and the West. Within this marginal framing, Abkhazia remains almost absent from mainstream IR debates, despite sustaining its de facto statehood since the early 1990s. In this article, the term "limited-recognition polities" is used as an umbrella concept to refer to entities often described in the literature as "unrecognized" or "partially recognized" states. Most academic works that mention Abkhazia approach it through security, separatism, or legality rather than as an active producer of political and social knowledge. This absence is not accidental but reflects what Miranda Fricker (2007, 1-3) defines as epistemic injustice: the systematic exclusion of certain communities from recognition as legitimate knowers.

Raewyn Connell (2007, 45-49) argues that global academic hierarchies privilege theories produced in metropolitan centers while treating knowledge from the periphery as secondary. This dynamic, visible across the social sciences, is particularly pronounced in IR, which tends to reproduce what Amitav Acharya (2014, 649-650) describes as a "core-periphery divide." Peripheral cases like Abkhazia are treated as anomalies rather than as potential sources of conceptual insight. The problem is therefore not the lack of empirical data but the persistence of epistemic hierarchies that decide what counts as "international reality."

In this sense, Abkhazia exemplifies the structural invisibility embedded in IR's Eurocentric foundations. John Hobson (2012, 13-15) demonstrates that Eurocentrism functions not only through content but through methodology, determining which actors and experiences are deemed relevant to world politics. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018, 29-33) terms this process epistemicide, a form of intellectual exclusion that erases alternative knowledges. Abkhazia's exclusion from IR parallels broader patterns of marginalization faced by other unrecognized or partially recognized states, such as Northern Cyprus or Somaliland, whose experiences rarely inform theoretical debates.

Existing scholarship on Abkhazia's politics focuses primarily on domestic governance and its relations with Russia. Thomas Frear (2014, 84-85) examines how Abkhazia navigates the tension between dependence on Moscow and the pursuit of external legitimacy. Vincenc Kopeček, Tomáš Hoch, and Vladimír Baar (2016, 90-92) highlight how democratic practices are used to consolidate internal legitimacy under conditions of limited recognition. Mary Elizabeth Smith (2018, 182-184) and Andreas Pacher (2019, 565-567) explore the diplomatic strategies and symbolic "social moves"

that allow de facto states like Abkhazia to maintain agency despite stigma and isolation. Yet, as these works show, the knowledge produced about Abkhazia rarely becomes part of mainstream theoretical conversations in IR.

This article approaches Abkhazia as an epistemic case rather than a geopolitical anomaly. It asks why a polity that has functioned for decades as a self-governing state remains largely invisible in IR scholarship and what this invisibility reveals about the discipline's hierarchies of knowledge. Through a meta-analysis of existing literature, the article argues that Abkhazia's silence reflects deeper epistemological boundaries that privilege certain voices, languages, and institutions while silencing others. The following sections develop this argument by outlining the theoretical framework of epistemic injustice and peripheral knowledge production, reviewing how the Caucasus is represented in IR, and examining the epistemic consequences of Abkhazia's marginalization.

Methodologically, this article adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and theory-driven approach grounded in meta-analytical reading of International Relations scholarship. Rather than conducting original fieldwork or quantitative analysis, the study examines how Abkhazia appears—or fails to appear-within dominant IR debates, conceptual frameworks, and patterns of representation. This approach is informed by critical epistemology and Global IR perspectives, which emphasize the importance of silences, absences, and hierarchies in knowledge production. By tracing recurring discursive framings and omissions across IR and area studies literature, the article seeks to identify the epistemic mechanisms through which certain political realities are rendered marginal or unintelligible.

This methodological choice also entails certain limitations. The article does not offer a systematic corpus-based or bibliometric analysis of IR publications, nor does it aim to measure visibility through citation mapping or database surveys. Instead, it prioritizes analytical depth over quantitative exhaustiveness in order to interrogate the structural conditions of epistemic exclusion. While future research could complement this analysis through large-scale corpus studies or comparative citation analyses, the present study deliberately focuses on conceptual patterns of absence and framing. In this sense, the limitations of the method are inseparable from its analytical purpose: to foreground how epistemic invisibility operates not through empirical scarcity, but through disciplinary habits of recognition and exclusion.

1. Theoretical Background: Epistemic Injustice and Knowledge Hierarchies

The question of whose experiences are recognized as legitimate knowledge lies at the heart of global scholarship. Every discipline develops boundaries that privilege certain voices while silencing others, and International Relations (IR) is no exception. The concept of epistemic injustice, first articulated by Miranda Fricker (2007, 1-3), captures these dynamics by showing how credibility and

intelligibility are distributed unequally. What Fricker originally described as a moral condition between individuals has since evolved into a framework for understanding institutionalized hierarchies of knowledge. In IR, these hierarchies determine which histories are considered theoretically relevant and which are relegated to the margins of curiosity.

Knowledge production, as Raewyn Connell reminds us, follows the same uneven paths as power. Her idea of Southern theory (2007, 45-52) reveals that intellectual flows move asymmetrically: theory tends to originate in metropolitan centers, while empirical material is extracted from the peripheries. This geography of knowledge transforms entire regions into laboratories for others' conceptual claims. What is often described as global in scope thus remains provincial in practice. Recognizing this imbalance means questioning not only who writes theory, but also whose realities are allowed to inform it.

Within IR, this imbalance has prompted calls to rethink the architecture of the field itself. Amitav Acharya's notion of Global IR (2014, 649-651) offers one of the most systematic responses to epistemic inequality. His approach does not aim for a simple inclusion of more regional cases; it seeks to reconstruct theory-making as a dialogical and plural process. In Acharya's view, ideas should circulate horizontally rather than vertically, creating a discipline grounded in conversation rather than hierarchy. This move from extraction to exchange is crucial for addressing deeper patterns of epistemic exclusion.

Such exclusion, however, has historical depth. The universal categories that define IR—sovereignty, civilization, order, progress—did not arise from neutral observation. They emerged through colonial encounters that positioned Europe as the epistemic center of world politics. As John Hobson (2012, 17-19) demonstrates, this legacy produced a methodological Eurocentrism that naturalized the Western experience as the standard of political modernity. Once this standard became embedded in theory, entire regions were written out of the story, not because they lacked agency, but because their experiences resisted translation into dominant vocabularies.

Other scholars have taken this critique further by exposing how modern knowledge systems perpetuate inequality even as they claim universality. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018, 29-33) calls this process epistemicide: the gradual erasure of alternative ways of knowing. The mechanism is rarely overt. It unfolds through language barriers, selective citation, disciplinary gatekeeping, and the constant framing of peripheral knowledge as anecdotal rather than analytical. The result is a form of epistemic hierarchy that operates quietly but persistently, shaping how legitimacy is assigned.

If epistemic injustice is sustained by these deep structures, then addressing it requires more than ethical awareness. Scholars such as Meera Sabaratnam (2017, 5-7) and Branwen Gruffydd Jones (2006, 12-15) argue that the remedy must be transformative, not merely inclusive. They propose a

decolonization of knowledge that reconsiders the very foundations of theory, methodology, and authority. The goal is not to insert marginalized voices into existing frameworks but to alter the frameworks themselves so that multiple epistemologies can coexist. Such transformation demands reflexivity: a readiness to question how our own concepts reproduce asymmetry even when we seek to overcome it.

Understanding epistemic injustice as both structural and habitual reframes how we think about theory-making in IR. It is not only institutions that maintain exclusion, but also the routines of scholarship—citation patterns, language preferences, and the tendency to universalize certain experiences while particularizing others. A discipline that aspires to globality cannot remain comfortable with such selective listening. What is needed is an ethics of engagement: a willingness to treat knowledge as relational, situated, and co-produced. This perspective does not merely diversify the field; it alters its foundations. It invites IR scholars to imagine a discipline built on mutual intelligibility rather than epistemic hierarchy, one capable of learning from the world instead of continuously categorizing it.

2. The Caucasus in International Relations: Between Periphery and Abstraction

The Caucasus occupies a peculiar place within International Relations (IR): geographically strategic, yet conceptually peripheral. It often appears in the discipline as an object of conflict management or security governance, rarely as a site of theoretical insight. This duality reflects what Dov Lynch calls the "unresolved status of Eurasia's separatist states" (2004, 3), where the region becomes more a problem to be stabilized than a context to be understood. The persistence of this framing reveals how IR translates complexity into abstraction, transforming diverse political experiences into simplified categories such as frozen conflicts or post-Soviet instability.

In the early post-Cold War literature, much of the scholarship on the Caucasus relied heavily on transition paradigms derived from Eastern Europe. Svante E. Cornell's Small Nations and Great Powers (2001) remains one of the most comprehensive studies of that era. Cornell's analysis of the Abkhaz-Georgian and Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts demonstrates how local autonomy struggles intertwined with regional geopolitics and external intervention (Cornell 2001, 12-16). Yet, as he acknowledges, the conceptual tools available at the time—ethnic conflict, security vacuum, weak state—often obscured the agency of smaller polities. The Caucasus thus entered the discipline not as a producer of ideas but as an empirical testing ground for models imported from elsewhere.

This imbalance has been repeatedly critiqued by later scholars. Laurence Broers (2019, 64-67) emphasizes that conflicts in the South Caucasus cannot be reduced to static categories, arguing that even under non-recognition, social and institutional innovation persists. His ethnographic reconstruction of the Armenia-Azerbaijan rivalry demonstrates how informal diplomacy, civic

initiatives, and trans-border linkages create alternative political orders. In a similar spirit, Nina Caspersen (2012, 59-61) reframes sovereignty as a process rather than a fixed legal status, showing that legitimacy in unrecognized states is continuously negotiated among domestic and external audiences. Both authors point to a theoretical blind spot: IR often classifies such entities as anomalies, instead of recognizing them as laboratories for understanding how authority and recognition function beyond the formal state.

Empirical studies further challenge the assumption that these societies exist in isolation. The survey work of John O'Loughlin, Vladimir Kolossov, and Gerard Toal (2011, 20-23) in Abkhazia reveals patterns of political identity that defy simplistic binaries of loyalty or separatism. Their findings show that local conceptions of citizenship and governance combine Soviet-era institutions with new forms of pragmatism and local belonging. This complexity is rarely reflected in mainstream IR, which tends to privilege the perspectives of metropolitan observers over the self-understandings of regional actors. The Caucasus thereby becomes epistemically distant, even when empirically documented.

Theoretical engagement with the region remains limited also because IR's dominant frameworks often universalize the experiences of large powers. Dov Lynch's interviews with officials in Abkhazia and Transnistria illustrate how policymakers in de facto states articulate notions of security and diplomacy that differ from classical realist expectations (2004, 110-112). These variations challenge the discipline's tendency to treat sovereignty as a binary of presence or absence. Instead, the Caucasus invites us to consider sovereignty as a gradient, constantly re-negotiated through everyday political practices.

Nicolae Popescu's policy study on "Outsourcing De Facto Statehood" (2007, 17-18) expands this argument by tracing how external patronage—particularly Russia's—coexists with autonomous decision-making within unrecognized entities. His analysis of Abkhazia and South Ossetia shows that dependency and agency are not mutually exclusive. The Caucasus thus offers a vantage point from which to rethink global hierarchies of power: rather than passive recipients of influence, these polities enact their own diplomatic rationalities, albeit under constraints.

Broers (2019, 83-85) and Caspersen (2015, 88-90) both suggest that moving beyond the language of "frozen conflict" requires a relational understanding of peace formation. From this view, stability is not externally imposed but co-produced through local negotiation, symbolic recognition, and memory politics. Such insights resonate with broader constructivist debates in IR, where the focus shifts from structures to practices. Yet, despite these contributions, the region's scholarship rarely informs theoretical innovation in major journals. Its insights circulate laterally—within area studies, peacebuilding, or anthropology—without transforming disciplinary assumptions at the core.

The persistence of this epistemic divide indicates that the problem is not empirical scarcity but disciplinary selectivity. The Caucasus has generated abundant data, fieldwork, and theoretical reflection, but much of it remains compartmentalized. The limited permeability between regional expertise and IR theory exemplifies what Raewyn Connell (2007, 47) describes as the "intellectual division of labor," where peripheral knowledge is valued as illustration rather than interpretation. Bridging this gap requires not merely translating regional findings into existing categories but re-examining those categories themselves.

Ultimately, the study of the Caucasus reveals the costs of abstraction in International Relations. By seeking theoretical coherence, the discipline often suppresses complexity, producing what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018, 31) calls "epistemic impoverishment." The region's hybrid sovereignties, contested borders, and overlapping identities expose the inadequacy of universalist assumptions about order and legitimacy. Recognizing this does not provincialize IR; it enriches it. Treating the Caucasus as an interlocutor rather than an exception allows the discipline to move closer to what Acharya (2014, 650) calls Global IR—a field that listens to the world instead of speaking for it.

3. Abkhazia and the Epistemology of Absence

Abkhazia's position within the discipline of International Relations (IR) exemplifies what Miranda Fricker (2007) terms an epistemic injustice, a condition in which certain knowers or sites of knowledge are systematically excluded from credibility. Within IR's hierarchy of visibility, Abkhazia appears as a silence rather than a subject. It exists empirically, politically, and historically, yet rarely conceptually. The republic's absence from theoretical debate does not result from a lack of material to study but from a disciplinary habit of filtering which experiences count as knowledge.

The absence is particularly telling because it is performative. Abkhazia is not merely overlooked; it is actively produced as invisible through what Raewyn Connell (2007) calls the "metropolitan canon" of the social sciences. This canon privileges Northern experiences as the standard of validity while relegating Southern or peripheral cases to the realm of deviation or exception. In IR this manifests through language: the "de facto state," the "frozen conflict," or the "post-Soviet anomaly," all terms that describe Abkhazia's reality by negation, never by its own logic. Such labels do not simply describe the region; they silence it and transform absence into a disciplinary product.

Fricker's framework helps clarify why this silence persists. She distinguishes between testimonial injustice—when speakers from marginalized contexts are disbelieved—and hermeneutical injustice—when the concepts to express their experience are missing. Abkhazia suffers both. Its political actors are deemed unreliable narrators of their own statehood, and the conceptual

vocabulary of IR lacks the tools to articulate their experience of limited recognition. Thus, the silence surrounding Abkhazia is not ignorance but a structural incapacity to listen.

Connell's Southern Theory (2007, 50-53) extends this argument by exposing how global knowledge systems depend on asymmetrical flows of ideas. The South, she argues, produces theory continuously, but those theories are rarely recognized as such. Abkhazia, like many post-imperial societies, generates political and institutional knowledge in conditions of constraint—knowledge about survival, legitimacy, and adaptation—yet IR treats these as local anecdotes rather than contributions to theory. The discipline's geography of knowledge remains inverted: the periphery knows, the center explains.

While the global discipline continues to reproduce this asymmetry, Abkhazia's domestic institutions have begun to articulate their own epistemic agency. In the last decade, the republic has invested in local think tanks, academic forums, and policy institutions that attempt to systematize indigenous research traditions. The Center for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Abkhazia (Центр стратегических исследований при Президенте Республики Абхазия) is the most notable example. Established in 2014, it publishes regular analyses on socio-cultural and geopolitical transformations, including the policy paper "Деизоляция Абхазии как важный фактор государственного развития" (CSI 2024). The document frames de-isolation (деизоляция) as both a political and an epistemic process, arguing that overcoming isolation requires the strengthening of domestic analytical capacity and intellectual autonomy. This reframing implicitly contests IR's assumption that legitimacy flows from recognition; instead, it positions knowledge production itself as a pillar of sovereignty.

By identifying de-isolation as "a key factor in state development" (ключевой фактор государственного развития), the Center connects political independence to epistemic independence. Its publications repeatedly insist that "the Republic must not only be an object of study but a subject of knowledge production" (CSI 2024). In doing so, the institution transforms marginality into authorship. Rather than pleading for inclusion, Abkhazia's researchers present analytical self-reliance as the foundation of nation-building. This discourse of self-description resonates strongly with Fricker's notion of testimonial repair: Abkhazia restores its credibility not by seeking validation from others but by asserting its right to speak in its own epistemic grammar.

The same logic is evident in the "Стратегия социально-экономического развития Республики Абхазия до 2025 года" (Government of Abkhazia 2020). The document identifies education, research, and information policy as strategic priorities and calls for the institutionalization of data-driven analysis across all ministries. Far from being a technocratic exercise, the strategy represents an explicit effort to embed knowledge production into the architecture of governance. The

republic seeks to govern through knowledge rather than despite the absence of recognition. This move challenges IR's dominant assumption that epistemic authority must be externally conferred; here, authority is internally constructed through deliberate reflection and systematic inquiry.

In Abkhazia's case, the production of knowledge continues despite isolation. Local academics, journalists, and policy practitioners have developed sustained discourses of legitimacy and governance that mirror, contest, and reinterpret global norms. Interviews with policymakers and civic figures from Sukhum illustrate how concepts such as sovereignty, democracy, and security are re-signified through daily practice. This local epistemology of endurance does not deny the external world; it dialogues with it on unequal terms. The challenge lies in IR's refusal to treat these dialogues as knowledge rather than resistance.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018, 29-34) describes this dynamic as epistemicide, the killing of knowledge systems through global hierarchies of validity. For Abkhazia, epistemicide occurs when its experiences are measured solely by recognition or legality, rendering alternative forms of political rationality unintelligible. The absence is therefore institutional: archives, databases, and curricula rarely include Abkhazia except as a footnote. Yet on the ground, the republic sustains a vibrant discursive life in education, media, and religion, all of which construct legitimacy outside the state system that denies it. The CSI's analytical publications and the 2025 Strategy further prove that this intellectual vitality is neither accidental nor peripheral—it is state-supported and self-reflective.

Resistance to epistemic erasure takes subtle forms. Historical memory, war narratives, and cultural symbols operate as repositories of counter-knowledge. The emphasis on Apsny—"the land of the soul"—in public discourse functions as both a claim to authenticity and a critique of external objectification. This re-semanticization of identity transforms absence into agency. Abkhazia's political narratives are not pleas for inclusion but assertions of interpretive autonomy, a demand to speak in its own conceptual language.

IR's methodological practices have been slow to adapt to such voices. As Amitav Acharya (2014, 649-651) argues, Global IR requires an inclusive universalism, one that derives theory from plural experiences rather than universalizing a single path. Yet in most academic publications, Abkhazia appears only within the logic of conflict management or Russian influence. The problem is not bias alone but the epistemological architecture that frames which questions can be asked. Bringing Abkhazia into conversation with Global IR thus becomes not a regional correction but a disciplinary test.

At a metatheoretical level, the case of Abkhazia reveals how knowledge production depends on controlled ignorance. As Broers (2019, 102-105) notes in his comparative work, external actors often engage with the South Caucasus through a language of stabilization that forecloses understanding.

This tendency is mirrored in scholarship: the more IR seeks order, the less it tolerates complexity. The epistemology of absence functions, paradoxically, as a mechanism of stability, silencing what cannot be assimilated.

Ultimately, Abkhazia's invisibility in IR is not a void but a mirror. It reflects the discipline's own anxieties about legitimacy, universality, and authority. By tracing how Abkhazia is known and not known, we encounter the boundaries of the possible within IR's epistemic order. To make such knowledge visible is not to politicize scholarship but to decolonize it, to recognize that the silence of International Relations is itself a political fact. In this sense, Abkhazia's greatest contribution to the discipline may be precisely its absence: it teaches IR what it has chosen not to see.

4. Reclaiming Peripheral Knowledge: Towards a Global Dialogue

A brief comparative perspective further illuminates the uneven regimes of epistemic visibility among limited-recognition polities. Entities such as Northern Cyprus and Transnistria, while similarly excluded from full international recognition, have developed partial channels of representation and interaction within European institutional and academic spaces. Both cases are treated here as limited-recognition polities, despite differences in their degree of international engagement. Turkish Cypriots, for instance, have maintained forms of engagement with bodies linked to the Council of Europe and the European Union through legal, educational, and civil society mechanisms, thereby mitigating their epistemic invisibility despite unresolved sovereignty. By contrast, Abkhazia remains almost entirely absent from such institutional environments, with Abkhaz scholars and civic actors facing far more limited access to transnational academic networks and platforms of representation. This divergence suggests that epistemic visibility is shaped not solely by legal status, but by broader geopolitical alignments, institutional permeability, and historically embedded hierarchies of legitimacy. Rather than serving as a comparative case study, this brief juxtaposition highlights how Abkhazia occupies a particularly marginalized position within the global economy of knowledge, reinforcing the article's central claim about structurally produced epistemic absence.

Reclaiming knowledge from the peripheries requires more than correcting omissions in the academic record. It demands a critical reorientation of how International Relations (IR) defines knowledge and who is allowed to produce it. The case of Abkhazia, long situated at the edge of visibility, reveals how epistemic hierarchies operate not through absence alone but through selective acknowledgment. The challenge, therefore, is not only to make the invisible visible but to interrogate the structures that produce invisibility in the first place.

Every epistemic order has its exclusions. The concept of epistemic injustice, first articulated by Fricker (2007), exposes how credibility is unevenly distributed among speakers. Yet later thinkers

such as Dotson (2011) and Tuana (2006) push this insight further by examining how ignorance and silence are actively produced. Dotson's idea of "epistemic violence" and Tuana's "epistemology of ignorance" both highlight that marginalization is not accidental but structured. In the context of Abkhazia, this dynamic manifests in the persistent framing of its political experience through external lenses that obscure its own categories of meaning.

To understand how this hierarchy operates, it is necessary to consider the broader colonial legacy of modern knowledge. Mignolo (2011) describes Western modernity as a project of "epistemic territorialization," in which the capacity to define rationality became concentrated in Eurocentric institutions. Quijano's (2000) concept of the "coloniality of power" further explains how such hierarchies survive long after formal decolonization. Abkhazia's marginalization thus does not arise from isolation alone but from the persistence of these global structures of validation. The republic's experiences are filtered through external grammars that deny its epistemic authority, reproducing what Mbembe (2017, 19) calls "epistemic erasure."

Responding to this pattern requires an epistemology of resistance rather than victimhood. Medina (2013) proposes that resistance emerges not simply in opposition to power but through the creative reconfiguration of epistemic practices. From this perspective, Abkhazia's intellectual and institutional efforts—whether in media, education, or diplomacy—can be read as acts of epistemic agency. They do not seek validation from the center; they enact alternative grammars of knowing. This shift from silence to authorship represents a crucial move from epistemic injustice to epistemic resilience.

Such intellectual activity is evident in the republic's own knowledge networks. Apsny.land, the official portal of the Abkhaz state, routinely publishes cultural, educational, and scientific reports that articulate the republic's developmental vision in its own voice. Its features on environmental protection, tourism, and education policy present an indigenous discourse of sustainability rooted in local priorities rather than external models. For instance, a 2024 article titled "Perspektivy razvitiya turizma v Abkhazii" emphasizes the role of cultural heritage in tourism strategy and frames it as a form of national self-representation. Similarly, local analytical pieces such as "Analiz demograficheskoy situatsii v Abkhazii" (Khashba 2023) discuss demographic policy as a tool of state consolidation rather than simply a technical field of governance. These discourses illustrate a form of epistemic authorship: the republic narrates its own developmental logic through publicly accessible, locally authored analyses.

Abkhazia's intellectual sphere also extends beyond state institutions into cultural and archival initiatives that preserve historical knowledge. The Apsnyteka Digital Library (apsnyteka.org) collects and digitizes rare manuscripts, oral histories, and academic works in Abkhaz and Russian. Texts such

as Oleg Damenia's "Abkhazia at the Turn of the Century: Conceptual Reflections" (2011) and the multi-volume Materials on the History of Abkhazia XVIII-XIX Centuries serve not merely as repositories of the past but as epistemic interventions that assert continuity and intellectual autonomy. Through these digital and scholarly projects, the republic constructs what Santos (2018) calls "an ecology of knowledges," where different forms of understanding coexist without being hierarchically ordered.

The notion of multiple coexisting rationalities, developed by Santos (2018), reinforces this view. His "ecologies of knowledges" framework insists that diverse epistemic systems coexist without hierarchy and that the South is not a geographic but an epistemological location. In the Caucasus, this means recognizing that local traditions, oral narratives, and linguistic nuances constitute legitimate political knowledge. Abkhazia's intellectual practices, shaped by historical constraint, become examples of creative adaptation—a politics of learning under conditions of exclusion.

Beyond structural critique, reclaiming peripheral knowledge entails confronting the psychological and ontological effects of epistemic marginalization. Jaeggi's (2014) work on alienation helps explain how disconnection from one's own epistemic agency produces dependency and self-doubt. In post-Soviet spaces like Abkhazia, where intellectual labor has long been mediated through external validation, reclaiming authorship is a form of emancipation. The task is not merely to "be included" but to redefine the terms of participation in global knowledge production.

This reclamation also resonates with Haraway's (1988) concept of "situated knowledges," which calls for acknowledging the partial and contextual nature of all understanding. By situating knowledge within its own historical and linguistic environment, Abkhazia produces what Connell (2007) would call "southern theory"—theorizing from experience rather than abstraction. Such reflexivity allows local scholars to engage with global debates while maintaining epistemic self-definition.

Such a transformation also requires confronting the colonial residue embedded in IR's epistemic architecture. Mbembe (2017) reminds us that the modern knowledge order has often relied on "epistemic erasure," the systematic exclusion of non-Western ways of reasoning from the category of the rational. Abkhazia's partial visibility within scholarship mirrors this logic: it exists as an object of study but not as a producer of theory. Challenging this asymmetry aligns with Acharya's (2014) call for Global IR, where theory flows in multiple directions and the margins speak back to the center.

Practically, this reorientation must reshape how scholarship is produced and circulated. Peer review, publication venues, and funding mechanisms remain heavily concentrated in the metropole. Encouraging collaborative authorship, multilingual publication, and reciprocal fieldwork could begin

to redress these imbalances. The Abkhaz experience shows that intellectual partnership across asymmetrical contexts is possible when based on dialogue rather than extraction. The goal is not inclusion into an existing system but the co-creation of a more plural one.

In sum, reclaiming peripheral knowledge is both a political and epistemological act. It insists that theory should not travel in one direction—from North to South, from center to periphery—but circulate as dialogue. Abkhazia's trajectory, when read through this lens, illuminates how marginalized actors can transform epistemic dependence into creative authorship. Such experiences remind IR that its future relevance depends on listening to the knowledge it has long chosen not to hear.

Conclusion: From Silence to Reciprocity

The path from silence to reciprocity in International Relations (IR) is neither straightforward nor complete. This article began with a question of absence: why do certain political realities such as Abkhazia remain invisible within a discipline that claims to study global politics? The analysis revealed that this invisibility stems not only from geopolitical marginality but also from the structural design of knowledge production. This structure privileges certain ways of knowing while rendering others inaudible. Silence, therefore, is not an empty space but a reflection of order. It reveals how IR continues to determine what counts as knowledge and who is entitled to speak within its boundaries.

The concept of epistemic injustice provided a valuable lens through which to examine hierarchies of credibility and interpretation. As Medina (2013) argues, injustice is never permanent because resistance emerges when individuals and communities reclaim their capacity to interpret their own worlds. The experience of Abkhazia demonstrates that marginality does not imply passivity. It can instead become a foundation for what Santos (2018) describes as "epistemologies of the South," which are plural forms of reasoning that challenge the authority of singular and centralized knowledge systems. By exploring these practices of knowledge-making, the article has shown that Abkhazia's political condition reflects the wider pattern of epistemic asymmetry that continues to shape the postcolonial world.

Abkhazia's presence in this discussion should not be understood as a regional exception but as a conceptual mirror. Its trajectory reveals that limited recognition and invisibility can coexist with profound internal reflection, local theorizing, and forms of knowledge production that remain unacknowledged by mainstream academia. Such cases compel IR to confront its own disciplinary silences. Absence in theory often mirrors presence on the ground. The Abkhaz case therefore reminds us that international order is not built only through institutions or diplomacy but also through the politics of knowledge.

The broader implication of this analysis is that epistemic power does not belong exclusively to the center. Connell's (2007) idea of "Southern theory" and Acharya's (2014) framework of Global IR both emphasize that theory must circulate in multiple directions. This circulation is not merely geographical but dialogical. It requires listening, relearning, and reconstructing conceptual boundaries. When peripheral actors such as Abkhazia are engaged as interlocutors rather than as data sources, they reveal the partiality of existing theories and enrich the discipline's vocabulary for understanding legitimacy, sovereignty, and identity.

Reimagining IR in this way cannot be achieved by citation diversity alone. It requires an ethical transformation in how scholars understand collaboration, authorship, and expertise. Mbembe (2017) and Santos (2018) argue that the decolonization of knowledge is not a rhetorical gesture but an ontological shift that recognizes the coexistence of multiple epistemic worlds. This means designing academic spaces that value dialogue instead of representation and reciprocity instead of extraction. In practical terms, this calls for field-based research, multilingual publication, and shared intellectual ownership. Such reforms can begin to dismantle the mechanisms through which epistemic silence is reproduced under the guise of methodological rigor.

The normative dimension of this argument points toward a more inclusive and self-reflective discipline. A truly global IR must cultivate what Medina (2013) calls "epistemic humility." This involves acknowledging that no single framework can capture the complexity of world politics and embracing the courage to engage with uncertainty, contradiction, and hybridity. The story of Abkhazia illustrates that theoretical innovation often emerges from contexts of limitation rather than abundance. This understanding reverses the usual logic of dependence by showing that the periphery is not the place where theory is applied but the place where it is reinvented.

In conclusion, moving from silence to reciprocity requires IR to transform both its language and its modes of listening. This article has argued that Abkhazia's invisibility reflects a wider epistemic order sustained by habits of ignorance and selective hearing. Yet within this silence lies the potential for renewal when knowledge is understood as a shared and dialogical practice. If the discipline wishes to remain relevant in a plural world, it must learn not only to speak about difference but also to speak with it. In that moment of conversation, the boundaries between center and periphery begin to dissolve and a more reciprocal world of knowing comes into view.

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