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Conducting qualitative data collection in Abkhazia, Transnistria and the Samegrelo region of Georgia: Methodological reflections

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Abstract

This article draws from the methodological chapter of my PhD dissertation, *Social Services within and across contested borders: Insights from Transnistria, Abkhazia and Samegrelo* and expands on a blog post titled "Doing empirical research in Abkhazia and Transnistria between 2020 and 2024: Challenges and creativity". A first version of this work was presented at the study day titled "Ethnography of vulnerability on former soviet spaces," held on 26 May 2025, at Charles University, Prague. Focusing on the methodological dimensions of qualitative research conducted in politically sensitive and hard-to-access regions, I reflect on the negotiation of access to the research field and researcher positionality. I argue that while such situated knowledge gains ontological depth and contextual richness, it simultaneously challenges claims of universality and objectivity, two long-standing characteristics of scientific inquiry. Lastly, this piece opens a reflection on an ethical challenge: going beyond a do-no-harm approach to generate mutual benefits and hence reduce the extractivist bias of research.

Keywords: qualitative research, standpoint, Transnistria, Abkhazia, Samegrelo, methodology

Résumé

Cet article s'appuie sur le chapitre méthodologique de ma thèse de doctorat, Social Services within and across contested borders: Insights from Transnistria, Abkhazia and Samegrelo, et prolonge un billet de blog intitulé « Doing empirical research in Abkhazia and Transnistria Between 2020 and 2024: Challenges and creativity ». Une première version de ce travail a été présentée lors de la journée d'étude « Ethnographie de la vulnérabilité dans les espaces post-soviétiques », qui s'est tenue le 26 mai 2025 à l'Université Charles de Prague. En me concentrant sur les dimensions méthodologiques de la recherche qualitative menée dans des régions politiquement sensibles et difficiles d'accès, je propose une réflexion sur la négociation de l'accès au terrain et à la positionnalité du chercheur. Je soutiens que si un tel savoir situé gagne en profondeur ontologique et en richesse contextuelle, il remet simultanément en cause les prétentions à l'universalité et à l'objectivité, deux caractéristiques de longue date de l'enquête scientifique. En dernier lieu, cette contribution ouvre une réflexion sur un défi éthique : dépasser l'approche du *do-no-harm* afin de générer des bénéfices mutuels et ainsi réduire le biais extractiviste de la recherche.

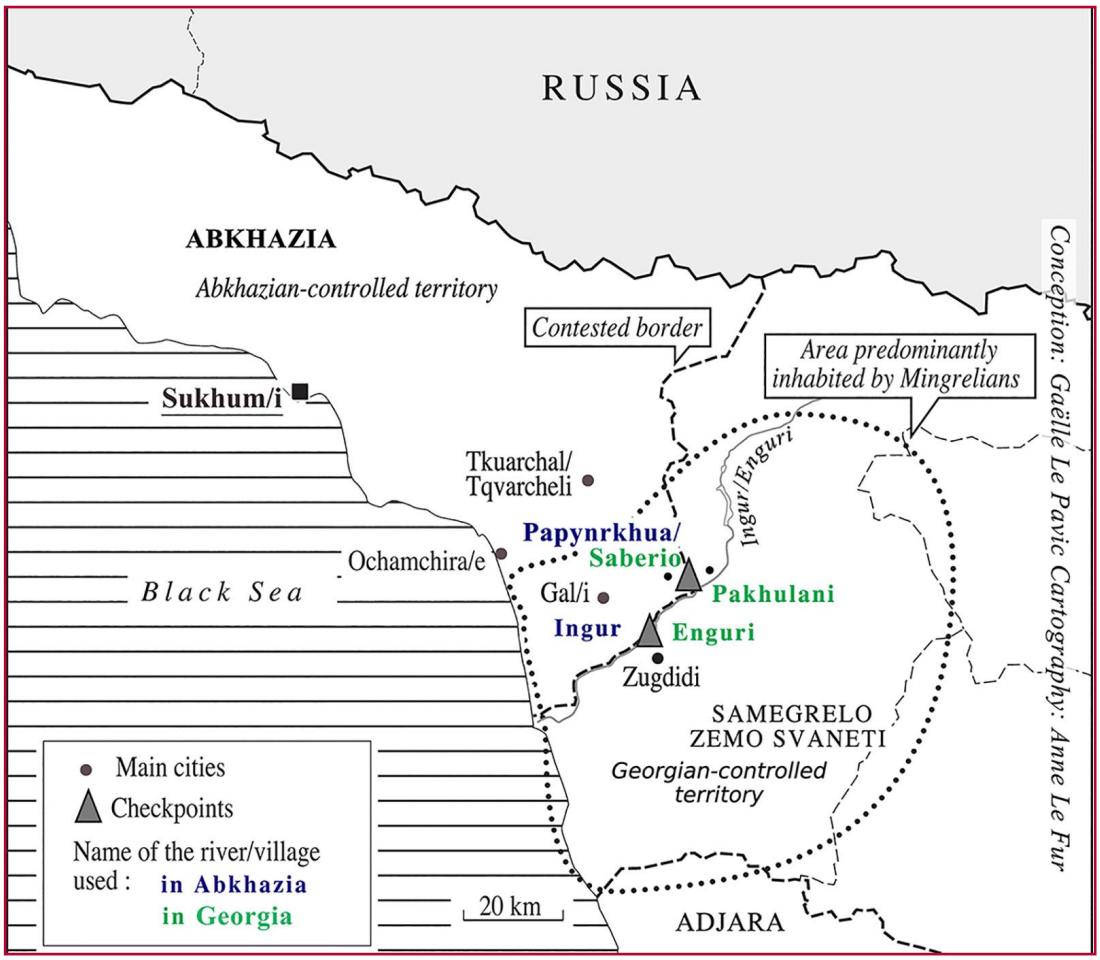
Mots-clés: recherche qualitative, perspective, Transnistrie, Abkhazie, Samegrelo, méthodologie

Introduction

"Social facts must be treated as things," argued Émile Durkheim in *The rules of sociological method* (2019 [1895]). This statement summarises a long-standing tradition in social science, looking at social facts as "things *sui generis* and not mere verbal entities that may be measured, their relative sizes compared, as is done with the intensity of electric currents or luminous foci" (Vargas et al. 2008, 764). This methodological reflection departs from this approach to highlight the everyday practices and decisions of researchers as pivotal in shaping the research design, data collection, analysis, and ultimately the outcomes of the research. I align with Latour and Woolgar's (2013 [1988], 36) analysis of laboratory life and share their "conviction that a body of practices widely regarded by outsiders as well-organised, logical, and coherent, in fact, consists of a disordered array of observations with which scientists struggle to produce order." This analysis applies to every research, including the one conducted in a sterilised laboratory.

The environment of this research is far from a controlled one, epitomised by the laboratory image. Data collection took place in three specific fields: Abkhazia and Transnistria, which seceded respectively from Georgia and Moldova in the early 1990s following the dissolution of the USSR (Ó Beacháin et al. 2016). Thirdly, the Samegrelo region of Georgia was added due to its immediate vicinity to Abkhazia (see Map 1). The status of Abkhazia and Transnistria remains contested to this day. This contestation is materially expressed through the demarcation separating Moldova from Transnistria and Georgia from Abkhazia. The terminology used to describe these demarcations already frames the research object in different ways. For example, the Georgian authorities and some residents located farther from the area refer to it as the *line of occupation* (Le Pavic and Prelz Oltramonti 2025). At the same time, for the Abkhaz and many inhabitants of Georgia's Samegrelo region, it is considered and lived as a *border*. International organisations, meanwhile, have adopted the term "Administrative Boundary Line" (ABL) to avoid using the term *border*, which conveys a sense of sovereignty (Le Pavic and Prelz Oltramonti 2025).

To reflect the multiplicity and contestation of this terminology, I use the term "contested border" throughout this research. I argue that this contested border not only shapes life within Abkhazia's controlled territory but also significantly impacts the adjacent Georgian-controlled region of Samegrelo, which thus constituted an interesting field in my research on the social consequences of contested borders (Le Pavic 2024). Representing such contestation raises several methodological challenges. Any form of representation, be it through maps, written accounts, or visual media, risks implicitly strengthening and legitimising one side's perspective over another, while the research aims to reveal and analyse the contestation among differently situated actors. The map below intends to capture the socio-spatial complexity of the relationship between Abkhazia and Samegrelo, including the ethnicised dynamics of the Mingrelian population, a Georgian subgroup whose presence spans over the contested border (Broers 2001).



Map 1. Division between the Abkhazian and Georgian-controlled territory, as of 2025
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Both separations occurred in the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR, with Transnistria separating from Moldova in 1990 and Abkhazia from Georgia in 1994, as a result of violent conflicts. The Transnistrian region declared independence on 2 September 1990, triggering armed clashes that escalated into full-scale conflict by March 1992. Hostilities officially ended in July 1992 through an agreement between Moldova and Russia, which allowed Russian troops to remain as "peacekeepers," a presence criticised for preventing conflict resolution (Rodkiewicz 2011).

On 14 August 1992, amid rising tensions and Abkhazia's growing alignment with Russia, Georgian paramilitary forces entered Abkhazia (Ó Beacháin 2016). In response, Abkhaz fighters – supported by ethnic minorities such as Armenians and North Caucasus groups including Adyghe and Chechens – opposed the Georgian advance. The conflict lasted until 30 September 1993, resulting in up to 10,000 deaths and the displacement of around 250,000 Georgians, mostly Mingrelians. Although a ceasefire agreement signed on 3 April 1994, secured the return of displaced persons, the vast majority have remained unable to return to date (Toria et al. 2019).

Historically, Transnistria became an autonomous political entity in 1924 under Soviet rule and was later integrated into the Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldova in 1944, along with Bessarabia, thus becoming a *late addition* (Dembinska 2009, 617). Tensions emerged in the late Soviet period as Moldova's leadership grew divided over relations with Russia and the role of Russian versus Romanian/Moldovan languages. Fears of potential unification with Romania led Transnistrian elites and residents – largely Russian-speaking – to push for separation (Kosienkowski and Schreiber 2014).

Abkhazia became an autonomous region, evolving into the Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Abkhaz ASSR) from 1921 to 1929, connected with a treaty to the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia (Ó Beacháin 2016). Despite both Georgia and Abkhazia being Soviet Socialist Republics, Abkhazia's autonomy

was progressively diminished, culminating in the abolition of its autonomous status by Stalin in 1931, triggering protests against the policy of "Georgianisation" (Kvarchelia 1998). During the Soviet Union, Abkhazia remained an Autonomous Republic within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (Clogg 2008). Tensions intensified in April 1989 after the Soviet Army violently suppressed peaceful protests in Tbilisi, strengthening Georgian calls for independence. In contrast, Abkhazia sought to remain within the USSR, seeing it as protection against growing Georgian dominance in the region (Ó Beacháin 2016).

In the context of Russia's all-out war in Ukraine, which started on 24 February 2022 – and so far, resulted in the Russian occupation of (part of) the Donbas, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts of Ukraine – this research topic is marked by acute politicisation, with borders and the respect of territorial sovereignty at the heart of the debate. This makes the research more salient and emphasises the entanglement of knowledge and power, where the latter is deconstructed "based on daily struggles at grassroots levels, among those whose fight was located in the fine meshes of the web of power" (Foucault 1980, 116). At a time when access to many research sites in the Caucasus and Eastern Europe is narrowing, uncovering these everyday struggles on the ground becomes an increasingly complex task. Both the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine have contributed to the closure of several field sites to external scholars, while local researchers continue to face structural barriers that hinder the publication of their work (Trubina et al. 2020). Analysing the politics of knowledge production is thus essential to addressing ongoing forms of epistemic imperialism, referring to the dominance of one system of knowledge over others, often in ways that marginalise, suppress, or delegitimise alternative ways of knowing, especially those rooted in non-Western, Indigenous, or subaltern traditions, thus contributing to the silencing of certain voices and perspectives (Hendl et al. 2023). In this piece, I reflect on the constrained access to research sites, the researcher's standpoint, and potential ways to move beyond the "do-no-harm" approach, an ethical mantra in (Western) academia, towards more reflexive and collaborative research practices.

Exteriority to the research field: An invariable characteristic of multisite fieldwork

Accessing the research site(s): Generative constraints?

The COVID-19 pandemic constrained many researchers, whose research site was not their 'home', to work remotely. Although research interviews conducted via phone and later through platforms such as Skype were already practised before COVID-19, the pandemic further popularised the use of technology to connect with research participants, many of whom were physically situated hundreds or thousands of kilometres away. While platforms such as Zoom and Teams facilitated conversation, the pandemic curtailed the possibility of "immersive engagement with participants, in their setting" (Wood 2007, 123; Howlett 2022, 388). In my case, when arranging interviews with Abkhazian CSO representatives from Belgium, I scheduled them based on Georgia time (+4 GMT). However, Abkhazia is on Moscow time (+3 GMT), resulting in missing interviews; fortunately, all could be subsequently rescheduled except for one. This is just one of the many pitfalls that can occur when conducting multi-sited research off-site, compounded by the fact that Belgium operates on +1 GMT and Transnistria on +2 GMT. Reading the insights shared by Andrea Peinhopf (2022) about Abkhaz (not) crossing to Georgia, I realised that overlooking the time difference between these relatively close locations is not uncommon, even for those immersed in the environment.

Even though I could not see the environment of my research participants, conducting online interviews during the pandemic proved overall generative. I rely on my existing network, which I have expanded through desk research and snowball sampling, to recruit participants. The pandemic created a shared experience and made the topic of contested borders and their social impact even more relevant to research, with healthcare becoming a central topic. This emphasises the relational shaping of academic research, which evolves through contacts and is often context-dependent. As the COVID-19 pandemic eased, I managed to go to Transnistria relatively easily in October 2021, yet the

Abkhazian authorities argued that, due to the pandemic, no access was permitted to Abkhazia. I, of course, lamented not being able to meet up in person with the CSOs and the Abkhaz representatives of the international organisation I talked to online. At the same period, I managed to travel to Georgia and tried to arrange meetings with Abkhaz in the Samegrelo region, the closest part to Abkhazia on the Georgian-controlled territory. However, I quickly understood that despite being physically so close, we were actually both confined to one side of the contested border, since Abkhaz crossing to Georgia face increasing scrutiny from their authorities and social pressure from their peers, deterring many from crossing to Georgia.

Overall, not being able to access Abkhazia physically led me to reflect further on the porosity of the contested borders, who can navigate them and under what conditions, and who cannot. I explored the Georgian region of Samegrelo more in-depth, gaining insights into an under-researched place (Broers 2001; 2012). While I never received a *отказ*, meaning refusal, from the Abkhazian authorities, my new request remained pending, never denied nor approved, a frequent limbo situation faced by (Western) researchers attempting to enter Abkhazia over the last years. Data collection can be considered sensitive, particularly when researching social services, as it can shed light on the shortcomings of the incumbent authorities, who have, over the past years, tightened access to Abkhazia to strengthen their control alongside Russian authorities (Merlin 2021).

As Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, I was about to go for a three-month fieldwork in Transnistria. Deeply affected not only as a researcher, but first and foremost as an individual and citizen, I cancelled this research-related stay and volunteered in a Moldovan-led initiative group to distribute food and hygienic items to displaced Ukrainians in Chișinău. I recall being amazed by many Ukrainians, most of them mothers with children and old people, coming to us, some smiling, and being thankful even when we had very little to give. Some Ukrainians volunteered and brought us food, which makes me reflect on Marcel Mauss (1925) work The Gift about the symbolic importance of reciprocal giving (*contre don*). The Gift from the Moldovan society was huge. With an average wage of 14,000 Lei (around 700 euros)[1] and important inequalities, many Moldovans supported Ukrainians, welcoming them at Palanka – the main crossing point at the border between Moldova and Ukraine – with food, tea, and donations to distribution points. One evening, as our distribution point was empty, one minivan arrived, full of products collected across the Northern part of Moldova, mostly made of farming villages. Inevitably, abuses also occurred, and some in Moldova took advantage of the vulnerabilities to make money, and some cases of human trafficking were reported (Kanevski 2023).

Throughout interactions, during off-site and on-site fieldwork, my positionality played a role, and in the next section, I reflect on the impact it (potentially) had, mindful of the complexities and limitations inherent in such reflection.

Making the researcher's standpoint explicit

Gani and Khan (2024) argue for the right of the researcher not to disclose his/her standpoint, emphasising that positionality statements are often only instrumental for external researcher to legitimise their research finding, while scholars from within face the risk of accusation of partiality. Finding their point valid, I nonetheless contend that making the researcher's standpoint explicit is a necessary step, enabling more reflexivity on the research methods and findings. Drawing from the work of Madina Tlostanova (2015, 40) I further reflected on my specific position, mindful of those "insiders"

> who have been denied subjectivity and rationality and regarded as mere tokens of their culture, religion, sexuality, race, and gender. For such people, stressing the subjective specificity of [our] knowledge would be different from the start, from a mere postmodernist claim of situated knowledge.

1 Data available online.

I thus recognise that, despite extensive professional and personal engagement over ten to fifteen years with the sites where I collected data, as a French early-career scholar employed by a Belgian university, I remain situated outside all of them. However, I would argue that this familiarity with the field and knowledge of the Ukrainian and Russian languages facilitated a trusted outsider status (Bucerius 2013), as I am not embedded in any of the places, yet I gained substantial knowledge through a prolonged engagement with each of them. Multi-sited research always creates "outsiderness" when conducted by a single researcher. Additionally, I challenge the concept of "indigenous knowledge," which risks essentialising and overlooking the mobility and multi-positionality of knowledge producers, such as scholars. For example, a scholar who is anchored in an urban environment may be seen as external when conducting research in rural areas of the country s/he is from.

A multi-sited research is often multilingual, with some languages being used as *lingua franca*, yet carrying limitations in terms of access. To mitigate this limitation, researchers may work with a translator, whose intermediation has an impact on the data collection and analysis, which should not be silenced or underestimated (Almalik et al. 2010). During my research, I lacked proficiency in the Georgian language and conducted three interviews with a translator who used to work for an international organisation. While the translator did a great job, her intermediation elicited how respondents were naming the divide between Abkhazia and Georgia with a systematic translation into 'Administrative Boundary Line' (ABL). This reflects the terminology used by international organisations, while Georgian local authorities refer to the contested border as a "dividing line" [გამყოფი ხაზი]. The river named Enguri in Georgian (see Map 1) was mentioned as a 'border point' or 'bordering point' and implies a "crossing point" [სასაზღვრო პუნქტი], a meaning which is hard to convey in English. When talking about the geographical location of the Samegrelo region and, in particular, Zugdidi, its main city, one local official framed it as "border adjacent" or "on the brink of the border" [საზღვრისპირა].[2] I thus argue about the importance of back-translation and discussion with students and academics proficient in the language at stake.

When doing research in countries that used to be included in the USSR, a 'language trouble' can appear, echoing what Judith Butler (2002) theorised back in 1990 about gender. The choice of language and words became a "reiterated social performance rather than the expression of a prior reality" (2002, 1). I thus argue that Russian is no longer a taken-for-granted *lingua franca* in a space that cannot be labelled post-Soviet any longer. Not having a straightforward language to communicate necessitated trying and adjusting to understand each other; for example, Russian, Georgian, and English were spoken simultaneously, with some research participants sticking to one of the languages and others switching (between Georgian and Russian; and between English and Russian) during the same focus group I conducted in the Samegrelo region in August 2022. The Mingrelian language, spoken in Samegrelo and the eastern districts of Abkhazia, added a layer to this multilingualism, which the Russian-centric lens has long eclipsed. More than thirty years after the collapse of the USSR – and even more so since 24 February 2022 – greater linguistic reflexivity is needed, with researchers paying closer attention to language learning both before and during fieldwork. This can be part of a broader reflection on how to foster avenues for more meaningful interactions between researchers and those framed as "research participants," too often objectified by the research's needs. In the last part, I reflect further on ways to overcome this duality and suggest ways forward to address research ethics issues, such as data extraction.

2 I am grateful to Louca Khourtsidze and Dr. Gela Merabishvili, who supported the translation and discussion of this specific terminology.

Going beyond the do-no-harm approach

> They [researchers] come and build their careers upon our shit (Betscher 2019, 237).

This sentence, uttered by an Internally Displaced Person (IDP) who took part in a research project (Betscher 2019, 237), highlights the need for a reflection on ethics, beyond the hurdles of obtaining approval from a research institution's ethics committee. I thus reflect further on the ethical dilemma of ensuring my work does not exploit or capitalise on the struggles of others. A do-no-harm approach[3] emphasises ethical considerations and responsibility to prevent harm, even if that means relinquishing one part of the data collection (Baron 1995). Informed consent, often fetishised in academic circles (Marino 2023, 74), remains indispensable – with some research requiring further steps – and needs to be carefully tailored to the research context. During this research, informed consent forms helped build trust with the participants who were eager to sign them, even though consent could also be given orally.

While emphasising anonymity encouraged participants to share information, they may not have revealed otherwise, it also obscures the contributions of the participants who may be eager to get public acknowledgement for their participation in the research. During two focus groups I conducted in Samegrelo in 2022, the participants from one CSO and a school published on Facebook – a popular social network in Georgia – the pictures taken during the focus group and after, with several participants identifiable. Reflecting on this, I reckon my first reaction: a willingness to reach out to the participants, asking them to delete the post, which is a breach of anonymity. However, upon reflection and given that none of the participants had asked to withdraw the pictures, I concluded that publicising a focus group on social media, in this specific research, is part of the participants' agency, for whom the data collection can be perceived as a social event, and thus, why not post it on social media? While this case is highly contextual and should not be taken as a rule of thumb, it invites us, researchers, to reflect further on how our participants interpret our research and what they want to make out of it.

Previous research has shown three main axes that enable us to go beyond the do-no-harm approach: 1) Developing capacities and skills among participants; 2) Guiding policies and influencing government; and 3) Changing attitudes within and to the community (Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007). However, a study published in 2020 examining a sample of 288 research projects conducted about refugee health, found that only 9% of them presented results to the participants, 3% shared findings with the studied community, 7% involved community workers, and 7% involved education in the community (Seagle et al. 2020, 7-8). Mindful of this pitfall, I drafted several dissemination briefs translated into Russian and Georgian and invited participants to comment on them. One of these briefs was discussed during a dissemination event with representatives of a prominent international organisation in Tbilisi in November 2024, further contributing to raising awareness of gender-based and domestic violence in Samegrelo and the condition of methadone users crossing daily from Abkhazia, attempting to guide policies towards improvement for social service users (Le Pavic 2024).

Lastly, the need to collect data can push researchers to access the field and reach out to participants at all costs. During discussions about access to Abkhazia with Georgians, I was offered to "cross through the wood," meaning in an illegalised way, but I denied it, having in mind not only my security but also that of my interlocutors. The question of (non-)access is inscribed in the politicisation of research in (post-) conflict areas and highlights the saliency of contested borders, at a time when the one between Georgia and Abkhazia is less easy to navigate for various actors, including residents and representatives of international donors and organisations, both local and international staff, and researchers.

3 This subpart is an exploratory reflection resulting from a series of workshops in the CESSMIR research groups at Ghent University in 2023-2024. Results have been published in a peer-reviewed article to which I am a co-author (See De Kock et al. 2025).

Nonetheless, I acknowledging that the steps I took during my data collection do not completely correct the extractive bias inherent in any research, nor do they challenge the power relations between participants and researchers, with the latter having (financial) resources, (im)mobility privileges, and a position at an academic institution that emphasises the legitimacy of the knowledge s/he is equipped with. This dynamic was particularly at play when, in 2022, I conducted a focus group with methadone users residing in Abkhazia and crossing daily to the Georgian-controlled territory to access methadone in Rukhi, the last village on the Georgian-controlled side, before the Enguri/Ingur checkpoint, the main crossing point between the Georgian and Abkhazian-controlled territories. Upon hearing that I was then going to Tbilisi, participants insisted that I convey their claim to Georgian authorities to access methadone for several days, not to cross the contested border daily, which was for them demultiplying in three borders: Georgian, Abkhazian, and Russian, as the three authorities operate systematic checks at the Enguri/Ingur crossing point (Merlin 2021). Despite my willingness – including the above-mentioned insight brief – to advocate for a more liveable solution for this specific group of service users, my last contacts (July 2025) with the medical staff of the methadone programme revealed that Georgian authorities relocated the dispensary further from the contested border, making it even more difficult for methadone users coming from Abkhazia to access treatment (Le Pavic *forthcoming*).

Concluding thoughts

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to qualitative data collection, often requiring improvisation (Cerwonka and Malkki 2008), which is in many ways consubstantial with ethnography. In this specific research, conducted on-site in Transnistria and Samegrelo, and off-site in Abkhazia, my exteriority conditioned my (non) access to research fields, which inherently shape the data collection. As a French early-career scholar employed by a Belgian university, I am not from any of the places I researched, nor do I belong to any of the groups, beneficiaries of social services, I interacted with. Having engaged – through trips, research, and a work placement – with the different places for over a decade and knowing Russian proved to be helpful, yet also carries limitations, with the evolution of the status of the Russian language, which is not an official language in Moldova nor in Georgia, where it is taught less and less at school. On the contrary, Russian remains the main language of communication in both Abkhazia and Transnistria and speaking it proved to be invaluable in engaging and keeping contact with research participants.

In these interactions, the researcher's standpoint always comes into play, making the production of knowledge situated and reflexive, thus departing from the positivist approach and claims of "neutrality and impartiality in research." This trend encourages shifting the approach towards "studied subjects" as mere "research participants," to co-producers of knowledge and, as such, offering a way forward to counter epistemic imperialism. For this, I argue that a co-(academic) authorship with interested research participants could be a good practice, attenuating extractivism in research. I am currently exploring such a co-authorship with the Abkhaz scholar, Said Gezerdava, in drafting a publication on the participation of Abkhazian CSOs in the governance structures of today's Abkhazia. However, this is not always doable, nor advisable. In the framework of a fellowship at the University Viadrina (May to July 2025), in Frankfurt (Oder), Germany, I conducted research on Ukrainians displaced to Transnistria, in collaboration with the Berlin-based Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS). My task included a series of online interviews with representatives of CSOs and international organisations, while a Transnistria-based researcher conducted on-site, eight longitudinal interviews with displaced Ukrainians. Yet this researcher does not want to be associated with anyone who has worked for ZOiS and thus cannot be named in any publication since ZOiS was declared an "undesirable organisation" in Russia in November 2023. How to give him credit remains thus an open question.

In sum, conducting qualitative research in politically sensitive and hard-to-access regions such as Abkhazia and Transnistria requires a strong willingness and a high dose of creativity to adjust to the changing circumstances. While going to Transnistria in 2021 was possible, a longer research stay had to be cancelled due to Russia's all-out war on Ukraine, which changed the security situation, also shifting the researcher's attention. Despite many attempts, physical access to Abkhazia has remained impossible since 2021, yet I argue that in this case, collecting data remains doable through online (ethnographic) fieldwork and collaboration on an equal footing with an Abkhazia-based researcher. Such co-authorship may ultimately reduce the long-lasting inequality in access to publication platforms such as academic journals, yet it is not always possible nor desirable, as illustrated by the case of the Transnistria-based researcher. Overall, this piece invites more reflection on the researcher's standpoint and collaborative practices when conducting research in different contexts. In the present case, the collaborations go further than the instrumental need to "access the field," but aim to co-produce knowledge, ultimately addressing not only the extractivist bias of research, but also the epistemic inequality occurring when Western researchers work in the global South and East (Müller 2020).

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