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THE AKHALGORI DEADLOCK



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INTRODUCTION

Against the background of the 2019 Chorchana-Tsnelisi crisis, the *de facto* authorities of Tskhinvali restricted the Akhagori population's freedom of movement, thus literally holding the residents of Akhagori hostages.¹ A year and a half have passed since then and yet Tskhinvali has not changed its position. As a result, the people of Akhagori found themselves faced with severe socioeconomic and medical problems. The situation was further aggravated by the coronavirus pandemic.

The purpose of this document is to analyse the Akhagori situation thoroughly and identify possible solutions. In particular, the report reviews Georgian-Ossetian relations, Tskhinvali's attitude towards Akhagori before the Chorchana-Tsnelisi crisis, reasons leading to the crisis and consequences of the latter. In the end, recommendations are provided in terms of what policy should be pursued by the Georgian authorities and the international community towards Tskhinvali to ensure that the Akhagori situation is eased gradually and Georgian-Ossetian relations are improved in general.

THE CONTEXT: GEORGIAN-OSSETIAN RELATIONS SINCE 2008

A number of variables affect the formation of Tskhinvali policy towards Akhagori, perhaps, the most important of which are the relations that were established between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali after the 2008 war. Therefore, it is necessary to review the broad context to analyse properly the events that took place in Akhagori after the Chorchana-Tsnelisi crisis. Seeing the full picture will also help us to understand the steps that are needed to be taken in order to transform the conflict.

Until 2008, when Russia recognised South Ossetia, Tskhinvali, being vulnerable and weak in terms of military and economy, did not shy away from maintaining relations and direct dialogue with Georgia. Georgian and Ossetian politicians, experts and civil activists quite often held heated discussions on subject matters important for both sides. Both the parties realised that vital issues could not have been resolved without such cooperation.

However, since 2008, the approaches of the Ossetian side have changed significantly. Having received recognition from Russia, security guarantees and considerable economic support, Tskhinvali has lost any desire to maintain relations with Tbilisi. The Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia closed all roads connecting with the rest of Georgia, prohibited the movement of the local population (except for the people of Akhagori) and methodically restricted the work of all

¹ In August 2019, the Georgian authorities, in order to ensure safety of the local population, set up a police checkpoint on the territory under its control, in the village of Chorchana (Shida Kartli, Khashuri Municipality). Tskhinvali demanded Tbilisi to abolish the checkpoint as an ultimatum and stated that if the ultimatum was not fulfilled, it would resort to all available means. After Tbilisi did not relinquish its positions, Tskhinvali actually took the population of Akhagori hostage (for more on this issue, see subchapter of this document: The Chorchana-Tsnelisi Crisis and the Creeping Ethnic Cleansing in Akhagori).

international organisations.² In fact, except for the Russian Federation, South Ossetia completely isolated itself from the rest of the world.

Such a rigid position taken by Tskhinvali was, until a certain period, perceived as distrust in Mikheil Saakashvili's government and inertia of the post-conflict years. However, as a result of the 2012 parliamentary elections, Georgian Dream came to power in Georgia and Saakashvili's government, unacceptable to Russia and Ossetia, had been replaced by a more desirable political group. It seemed that it was the time for changes in Georgian-Russian-Ossetian relations.

One of Georgian Dream's election promises, among many others, was to start a direct dialogue with Ossetian and Abkhazian communities.³ Paata Zakareishvili, well known to Ossetians and Abkhazians, was appointed the minister of the respective portfolio. According to the Georgian side, which seemed quite logical at the time, in parallel to the normalisation of Georgian-Russian relations, Moscow would allow Tbilisi to reset relations with Ossetians and Abkhazians.⁴ According to the same logic, Tskhinvali and Sokhumi would be willing to talk to Tbilisi.

However, it soon became clear that, despite public statements, Russia was not going to encourage Georgian-Ossetian and Georgian-Abkhazian dialogue and viewed such a prospect with great scepticism. It also turned out that Sokhumi was entering into a dialogue with Tbilisi with certain reservations and set a number of conditions; Tskhinvali did not consider such a prospect at all without Georgia recognising South Ossetia.

Self-isolation of the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia⁵ looks completely logical and consistent considering the current political processes in the Tskhinvali region. At the time, Tskhinvali received from Russia almost everything it wanted, viz., security guarantees and stable financial support. In 2008-2020, Tskhinvali received at least USD 2.5 billion from Moscow in the form of direct budget transfers alone. According to this data, it is ahead of highly subsidised entities in Russia such as Chechnya, Dagestan, North Ossetia, etc., in terms of *per capita* income.⁶

It is also noteworthy that Anatoly Bibilov won the so-called parliamentary elections (in 2014) and later the so-called presidential elections (in 2017) with the slogan of joining Russia.⁷ It

² G. Kanashvili, "Why and how many Ossetians come to the rest of Georgia and what C Tskhinvali afraid of?!" (2019), available at: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/393611/>.

³ „Nine Steps, Georgian Dream Made to Stabilise Relations With Russia, (2018), available at: <https://jam-news.net/ge/8-ნაბიჯი-რომელიც-ქართულმა/>.

⁴ According to Georgian Dream's pre-election promise, trade, economic and humanitarian ties between Tbilisi and Moscow were to be gradually restored, after which the parties would move on to more difficult issues. In difficult matters softening relations with the occupied territories were meant. Unfortunately, tangible changes in this direction have not been achieved by the parties. This was confirmed by Bidzina Ivanishvili, the leader of Georgian Dream, in one of the interviews, (2021), see at: https://youtu.be/1nm_sJxYisY.

⁵ Self-isolation implies Tskhinvali's minimal interest in establishing any kind of connection with the outside world. A good example of this is not allowing foreign citizens from the rest of Georgia. In this regard, the different approaches of Sokhumi are noteworthy.

⁶ This amount does not include the pension assistance received by the population of the Tskhinvali region from the Russian Federation. In addition, the costs of various infrastructure projects are not included. For example, the rehabilitation of the Rock Tunnel cost USD 400 million. These funds make the financial support received by Tskhinvali even more impressive.

„Глава Южной Осетии заявил о 100%-ной вероятности присоединения к России“, [The Leader of the South Ossetia Says It is 100% Probability to Join Russia], (2017), available at: <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/58ee51029a7947fae2a2cd96>.

proves that the political elite of the Tskhinvali region, unlike Abkhazians, has no illusions of building an independent state.

Stemming from the above-mentioned, it is not surprising that today Georgian-Ossetian relations have been reduced to a historical minimum; they have been limited to several negotiation mechanisms.⁸ Backed by Russian military and financial support, Tskhinvali has little fear of Tbilisi, nor is it particularly interested in any economic ties with it.⁹ Accordingly, the Georgian authorities should take this reality into account when pursuing policies with the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, or when taking individual steps. Unfortunately, during the Chorchana-Tsnelisi crisis, it became clear that the *de facto* government, emboldened with impunity, was ready to take even a certain part of its "own" population hostage when confronting Tbilisi.

THE SITUATION OF THE POPULATION OF AKHALGORI BEFORE THE CHORCHANA-TSNELISI CRISIS

Prior to 2008, about 40 per cent of the former South-Ossetian Autonomous Region was controlled by the Georgian authorities, namely, Didi Liakhvi Gorge, Patara Liakhvi Gorge and the Akhagori district. During the August war, predominantly Ossetian paramilitaries destroyed many Georgian villages, forcing the majority of the population to flee the region.

According to the data of the Georgian authorities and international organisations, as a result of the 2008 war, 26,000 Georgian citizens had to leave their homes.¹⁰ The same year, houses were built for them in Shida Kartli. However, the population of Akhagori gradually started to return.

The then Tskhinvali authorities did not prevent the return of Georgians to Akhagori. Moreover, the then *de facto* President Eduard Kokoity himself arrived in the Akhagori district and promised safety to the locals.¹¹ Such a different approach towards Akhagori can be explained by several interrelated reasons. Above all, the Akhagori district did not have a large military significance for Tskhinvali, as did *Didi* and *Patara* Liakhvi gorges and the Georgian villages that surrounded Tskhinvali. It can be assumed that it was this factor that saved the local infrastructure from complete destruction.¹²

The fact that there was no systematic violence against ethnic Ossetians in Akhagori when it was under Georgia's control also played an important role in Tskhinvali's attitude towards the population of Akhagori. They were treated leniently, and the percentage of mixed families was high. The fact that Ossetians from Akhagori did not resent Georgians on a large scale is also evidenced by the fact that the local court upheld only 14 of the claims for property restitution

⁸ *I.e.* Geneva International Discussions and Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM).

⁹ Lack of interest from Tskhinvali side is particularly evident on the background of Sokhumi activities. While the Abkhazian political elite constantly voices economic initiatives, from 2008 Tskhinvali has not voiced any such initiative.

¹⁰ Amnesty International, Georgia: In the Waiting Room: Internally Displaced People in Georgia, EUR 56/002/2010, 2010, available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/EUR56/002/2010/en/>.

¹⁰ „Мы – бренд, связанный с войной“ [“We are the Brand Associated with War”], (2018), available at: <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/08/07/77413-my-brend-svyazanny-s-voynoy>.

¹¹ „Мы – бренд, связанный с войной“ [“We are the Brand Associated with War”], (2018), available at: <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/08/07/77413-my-brend-svyazanny-s-voynoy>.

¹² “Dense Forests Instead of Georgian villages”, (2017), available at:

<https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/უღრანი-ტყეები-ქართული-სოფლების-ადგილას/30097996.html>.

since 2008. This shows that there was no mass misappropriation of Ossetians' houses by Georgians in Akhagori in the 1990s.¹³

Demographics of the region is another reason the *de facto* government did not prevent residents of Akhagori from returning to their homes. The depopulation of the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia had been an unresolved problem until 2008 and has remained to be problematic to this day. According to the 2015 census, the total population of the Tskhinvali region is 53,532.¹⁴ Even against the background of these dubious statistics (probably the number has increased), the population density is only 14.4 people per km², which is extremely low against the background of the rest of Georgia (65 persons per km²). Consequently, Tskhinvali was probably aware that if the Akhagori district was emptied of Georgians, other populations, given the region's demographic situation, could not replace them.

It should also be noted that the population of Akhagori was not large enough to be perceived as a threat to Tskhinvali (for comparison, Abkhazians are wary of Gali Georgians due to their large numbers).¹⁵ According to the same 2015 census, 2,337 ethnic Georgians were living in the Akhagori district, which is just 4.3 per cent of the total population of the Tskhinvali region. Local Georgians are neither demographically active nor, in the short or long term, do they pose a challenge to Ossetian dominance in the "Republic".

Until recently, trade and economic ties also played a certain role. Due to the difference in prices, various products from the rest of Georgia to the Tskhinvali region were transported through Akhagori.¹⁶ The shadow economy has not gained as much significance in the context of Georgian-Ossetian relations as in the case of Abkhazia (trade along Enguri is so large-scale that even some local officials benefit from it).¹⁷ However, it is reasonable to assume that such activities were also in the interests of Ossetian officials. Trade was possible only in the conditions of more or less free movement of Akhagori residents.

The combination of these factors significantly determined the relatively lenient approach of Tskhinvali towards the population of Akhagori. In particular, after the return of residents to their homes in 2008, they were not subject to the restrictions on movement that applied to other residents of the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. Akhagori residents crossed the administrative border from the Mosabruni checkpoint without any particular impediments and moved to the rest of Georgia. They had to present a special permit issued by the local

¹³ „Остров Ленингор“, [“The Isle of Leningori”] (2011), available at: <http://osinform.org/print:page,1,29304-ostrov-leninor.html>.

¹⁴ ИТОГИ ВСЕОБЩЕЙ ПЕРЕПИСИ НАСЕЛЕНИЯ РЕСПУБЛИКИ ЮЖНАЯ ОСЕТИЯ 2015 ГОДА, [“Results of the General Census of the Republic of South Ossetia, 2015“], available at: <http://ugosstat.ru/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Itogi-perepisi-RYUO.pdf>.

¹⁵ According to the 2011 census, there are a total of 240,705 people living in Abkhazia; 46,455 of them are Georgians. Which, in turn, accounts for 19.2 percent of the population of Abkhazia. „АБХАЗИЯ В ЦИФРАХ за 2018 год“, [Abkhazia in Numbers, 2018], (2018), available at: <https://ugsra.org/abkhaziya-v-tsifrakh/2018-god.php>.

¹⁶ „Ленингор: блокада “двойного” быта на границе Южной Осетии и Грузии“, [“Leningori: Double Blockade, at the Border of South Ossetia and Georgia”], (2019), available at: https://sputnik-ossetia.ru/South_Ossetia/20190201/8007782/Leningor-blokada-dvoynogo-byta-na-granitse-Yuzhnoy-Osetii-i-Gruzii.html.

¹⁷ „Сергей Шамба о противниках законной торговли с Грузией: они сильно заинтересованы в том, чтобы деньги шли мимо казны“, [“Sergey Shamba Opposes Legal Trade with Georgia: They are Very Keen on Keeping Money out of the Budget“], (2021), available at: <https://apsadgil.info/news/economics/sergey-shamba-o-protivnikakh-zakonnoy-torgovli-s-gruziyei-oni-silno-zainteresovany-v-tom-chtoby-dengi>.

government, which confirmed that the person lived in the Akhagori district.¹⁸ As a result, before the Chorchana-Tsnelisi crisis, despite difficult conditions and marginalisation, the Georgian population of Akhagori did not leave the district on a large scale.

In addition, there was no particular aggression against Akhagori residents in the political-social discourse of the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. Moreover, both local propaganda and free media favoured the view that the region needed to be gradually integrated into the South Ossetia.¹⁹ It can be said that, before the Chorchana-Tsnelisi crisis, even the so-called state media understood Akhagori residents' ties with the rest of Georgia. Akhagori residents' loyalty to Tbilisi was explained by the fact that they were ethnically Georgian and, therefore, had close ties with the other side of the "border".

According to the media, since it was impossible to receive high-tech medical services in the district, the population was forced to move to Georgia to receive appropriate medical treatment. However, some local officials added that, once the relevant infrastructure was in place and local passports were issued to all (South Ossetian and Russian passports were distributed), the situation would change; Akhagori residents would have to make a final choice between Georgia and South Ossetia.²⁰

A practical expression of this integrative approach was the infrastructure projects implemented in Akhagori after the occupation. For example, in 2014-2015, the construction of the 73-kilometre Tskhinvali-Akhagori road was completed at a cost of more than USD 10 million (this is one of the most expensive projects).²¹ During the same period, a house of culture, a boarding school, a hospital, etc., were built and renovated in the district. In other words, it can be said that Tskhinvali paid attention to Akhagori and seriously considered to tie this district with the "centre" socio-economically.

THE CHORCHANA-TSNELISI CRISIS AND CREEPING ETHNIC CLEANSING IN AKHALGORI

Georgian-Ossetian relations did not show positive dynamics before Anatoly Bibilov's *de facto* presidency but they significantly deteriorated after he came to power. Unlike the previous *de facto* leader, Leonid Tibilov, he made much harsher statements about Georgia. At the same time, he announced the plan to join Russia as a strategic goal of the Tskhinvali region.²²

Along with the rhetoric, the situation was deteriorating in practical terms as well. The incidents involving arrests of people charged with the crossing of the so-called border became more

¹⁸ "Restriction of the right to freedom of movement in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia", (2020), available at:

[http://www.democracyresearch.org/files/61DRI%20report%20GEO%202020%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.democracyresearch.org/files/61DRI%20report%20GEO%202020%20(1).pdf).

¹⁹ „Поселок Ленингор в пространстве и во времени (заметки на быструю руку)“, [“Leningori Settlement in Time and Space” (Hasty Notes)“], (2015), available at:

<http://respublikarso.org/elections/1065-kak-rozhdayutsya-geroi.html>.

²⁰ „Остров Ленингор“, [“The Isle of Leningori”] (2011). <http://osinform.org/print:page,1,29304-ostrov-leningor.html>.

²¹ „Дорога Цхинвал-Ленингор – «эпопея» близится к концу“, [“Tskhinvali-Leningori Road, - Epopee is Drawing to a close”], (2014), available at: <http://cominf.org/node/1166502657>.

²² „Анатолий Бибилов: Южная Осетия войдет в состав России“, [“Anatoly Bibilov: South Ossetia will be part of Russia”], (2017), available at: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-39568851>.

frequent.²³ It was difficult to receive education in Georgian, moreover, even speaking Georgian in the school area was banned and two principals were fired for violating this instruction.²⁴ An example was made out of the punishment of the Georgian activist Tamar Mearakishvili.²⁵ The murder of Archil Tatumashvili and the surrounding events strained Georgian-Ossetian relations even further. In parallel, the process of the so-called borderisation continued, which caused more backlash in the Georgian society.

It was against this tense background that the Chorchana-Tsnelisi crisis developed. In August 2019, the Georgian government set up a police checkpoint in the area under its control (in the village of Chorchana) for the safety of the local population. Tskhinvali gave an ultimatum to Tbilisi to remove the checkpoint but no agreement was reached in this regard. The Georgian government, which had been constantly criticised by the opposition for its overly lenient policies, did not back down this time.²⁶

The deadline for the ultimatum expired and Anatoly Bibilov failed to achieve the desired result. Therefore, he decided to take the population of Akhagori into virtual captivity. He has restricted the freedom of movement of the population of Akhagori since September 2019. Since then, the situation has not changed. The pandemic made the situation even worse.

Over the past year and a half, as a result of cross-referencing different sources, it can be concluded that a significant part of the population has left the Akhagori district. It is difficult to name the exact number; however, about 400 people entered the territory controlled by Georgia on the day of the closure of the district alone.²⁷ This is 17 per cent of the ethnic Georgian population in the district.²⁸

It is known that the medical sector in the Tskhinvali region is in a deplorable state. In this regard, the situation is extremely difficult in Akhagori, where appropriately qualified staff is lacking and medicines and medical equipment is in shortage.²⁹ As a result, at least 25 Akhagori residents died due to closed checkpoints and the Covid-19 pandemic.³⁰ With timely medical care, a fatal outcome may not have occurred in all these cases. The point is that, according to the so-called new rule, a patient is transferred from Akhagori to Tskhinvali first and only after the certification of the Tskhinvali hospital, the patient can be transferred to the territory controlled by Georgia. Due to the difficult road features, some patients in severe conditions could not tolerate this route.

The citizens of Georgia, who received various types of social assistance in the territory controlled by the Georgian authorities, also found themselves in a difficult socio-financial

²³ G. Kanashvili, "Why and how many Ossetians come to the rest of Georgia and what C Tskhinvali afraid of?!" (2019), available at: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/393611/>.

²⁴ "Akhagori students and school staff are not allowed to speak Georgian", (2020), available at: <http://www.democracyresearch.org/geo/228>.

²⁵ "EMC Evaluates the Case of Persecution and Harassment of Akhagori Activist Tamar Mearakishvili", (2019), available at: <https://emc.org.ge/ka/products/emc-akhagoreli-aktivistis-tamar-mearaqishvilis-tsinaaghmdag-devnisa-da-shevitsroebis-sakmes-afasebs>.

²⁶ "New Disinformation on Chorchana-Tsnelisi Crisis, Analysts Predict Escalation", (2020), available at: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/ახალი-დეზინფორმაცია-ჩორჩანა-წნელისის-კრიზისზე/30676247.html>.

²⁷ The Slow Death of Akhagori Residents to Save Bibilov's Name, (2019), available at: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/402575/>.

²⁸ It is reasonable to assume that mostly ethnic Georgians left the district.

²⁹ "The Situation in Akhagori", (2020), available at: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/ვითარება-ახალგორში/30534343.html>.

³⁰ Information received from the contact person of the organisation.

situation. During this period, the road was opened to them only once for a few days in February 2020. Since then, they have not been able to receive a pension due to a closed road.

In general, as a result of the policy pursued by Bibilov's administration in 2020, the situation on the ground has deteriorated so much that several hundred people decided to use the "family reunification" programme to move to the rest of Georgia. This initiative implied relocating the local population to family members living in areas controlled by the Georgian central authorities and, consequently, leaving their homes in Akhagori for good. Beneficiaries of the programme were deprived of the right to return for good and they had to abandon their immovable property. Using this programme, Tskhinvali literally attempted to legitimise ethnic cleansing.³¹

Against the background of deteriorating migration processes, the *de facto* government of Tskhinvali started issuing special permits to Akhagori residents allowing movement, which is discriminatory. For completely incomprehensible reasons, some of the residents of Akhagori were blacklisted. Consequently, these people will not be allowed to enter the territory controlled by the central government of Georgia.³²

THE FUTURE OF THE POPULATION OF AKHALGORI AND THE POLICY TO BE PURSUED BY GEORGIAN AUTHORITIES

While the situation of the population of Akhagori was not easy even before the Chorchana-Tsnelisi crisis, life in the district became virtually unbearable against the background of the crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic. At the same time, due to general insecurity and lack of prospects, young people had been leaving Akhagori even before the pandemic. In fact, at this point, a significant portion of the population is pensioners and the elderly. Therefore, it is quite clear that, if Tskhinvali continues to restrict the freedom of movement of Akhagori residents, the district is doomed for gradual depopulation.

The current dire situation requires a bold, unorthodox policy from the Georgian authorities. They must continue to urge the international community to put pressure on the Tskhinvali authorities and Moscow. Georgia has been following this approach for a long time and has achieved some results.³³ At the same time, the Government of Georgia has to develop a special package of assistance for the people of Akhagori in time to enable them to enjoy basic living conditions under extended isolation without leaving their homes (for example, to create

³¹ According to the information at the disposal of the DRI, after the programme was covered by media, the Tskhinvali *de facto* government softened its approach and allowed some locals to move to the rest of Georgia for treatment. Consequently, the "Family Reunification" programme has lost its relevance at this stage. "Akhagori is being vacated by the local population", (2020), available at: <http://www.democracyresearch.org/geo/468>.

³² Creeping Ethnic Cleansing of Akhagori Continues, (2021), available at: <http://www.democracyresearch.org/geo/505?fbclid=IwAR0avmzNyBkTQbz5aQFky9nZIURPeauIPUHdNEFqMGrtqO9I6m5Tz5Hhj2U>.

³³ In some cases, it must be assumed that international pressure led to the relatively rapid release of illegal detainees. For example, the case of Dr. Vazha Gaprindashvili turned out to be quite resonant, which, in the end, led to a positive outcome of the issue.

a state programme of special financial assistance, develop a mechanism for timely delivery of medicines and food, etc.).³⁴

It is clear that such measures will only partially alleviate the conditions of the local population and somehow delay the process of the departure of the population from the district. Therefore, when thinking about Akhgori, the general context of Tbilisi-Tskhinvali relations should be taken into account and it is important to change the confrontational agenda.

After the 2008 Georgian-Russian war and the deployment of Russian occupation forces in the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, the central authorities' ability to influence Tskhinvali is limited. Therefore, the Georgian authorities should start developing a new policy. It is necessary to have a dialogue with Ossetians on issues that may be of interest to them.

The geographical location of the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia somehow determines the possible options for its development. It is surrounded by the rest of Georgia and the Caucasus mountains. Consequently, Tskhinvali can choose for itself whether to be a dead-end or build a development model on the south-north transit opportunities. If Tskhinvali is opened to relations with Georgia, it will automatically open the door to many interesting initiatives in the context of the South Caucasus region.

For example, it seems quite realistic to establish a free economic zone in the surrounding area, in case of its joint administration by Tbilisi and Tskhinvali (using the experience of the Ergneti market). In case of lifting restrictions on freedom of movement, the population of the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia will have quick and cheap access to the rest of the world through Tbilisi and Kutaisi airports. The East-West Highway of Georgia (which is only a few hundred meters from the Tskhinvali region) offers new opportunities for the movement of people and goods. Furthermore, due to the geographical-meteorological problems of the Larsi checkpoint, in case of an agreement, the cargo would be redirected to the Transcaucasian Highway.³⁵

A separate problem is that civil society is dying in the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. After the 2008 war, the withdrawal of the OSCE mission from the region and restrictions on freedom of movement, it became increasingly difficult to support local NGOs, media, human rights defenders and individual active citizens. The *de facto* government, following in the footsteps of the Russian Federation, introduced the Law on Foreign Agent, thus completely demonising the local civil sector.³⁶ With neither Georgia nor international organisations having access to the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, the role of local civil society is becoming even more important. Therefore, donor organisations should start discussing ways to assist the NGO sector in the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia.

However, to be able to implement the listed initiatives, the national authorities and Tskhinvali must be able to start a dialogue and move on from the negative agenda to the positive one. This, in the end, would lead us to a gradual transformation of the conflict, benefiting not only Akhgori but also the entire South Caucasus region.

³⁴ DRI, "The government must develop additional support programs for citizens living in the occupied regions, (2019), available at: <http://www.democracyresearch.org/geo/164>.

³⁵ The transcaucasian Highway connects the South Caucasus and the Russian Federation through the Roki Tunnel. Due to the political situation, its use is currently limited to the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia.

³⁶ "On Human Rights Challenges in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia", (2020), available at: [http://www.democracyresearch.org/files/63ggeo%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.democracyresearch.org/files/63ggeo%20(2).pdf).