

2021

DEMOCRACY  
RESEARCH  
INSTITUTE

CORONA VIRUS  
2019-NCOV

**ONE YEAR  
OF THE PANDEMIC  
IN ABKHAZIA AND  
SOUTH OSSETIA/  
TSKHINVALI REGION**



EUROPEAN  
ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY

The Democracy Research Center prepared this report based on open sources and information provided by contact persons. The study covers the period from April 2020 to May 5, 2021.

In Abkhazia and South Ossetia/the Tskhinvali region, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to an increase in human rights abuses and significant deterioration in the social, economic and rights situation of the local population, especially in the areas of freedom of movement, access to medical services and the right to health.

# CONTENTS

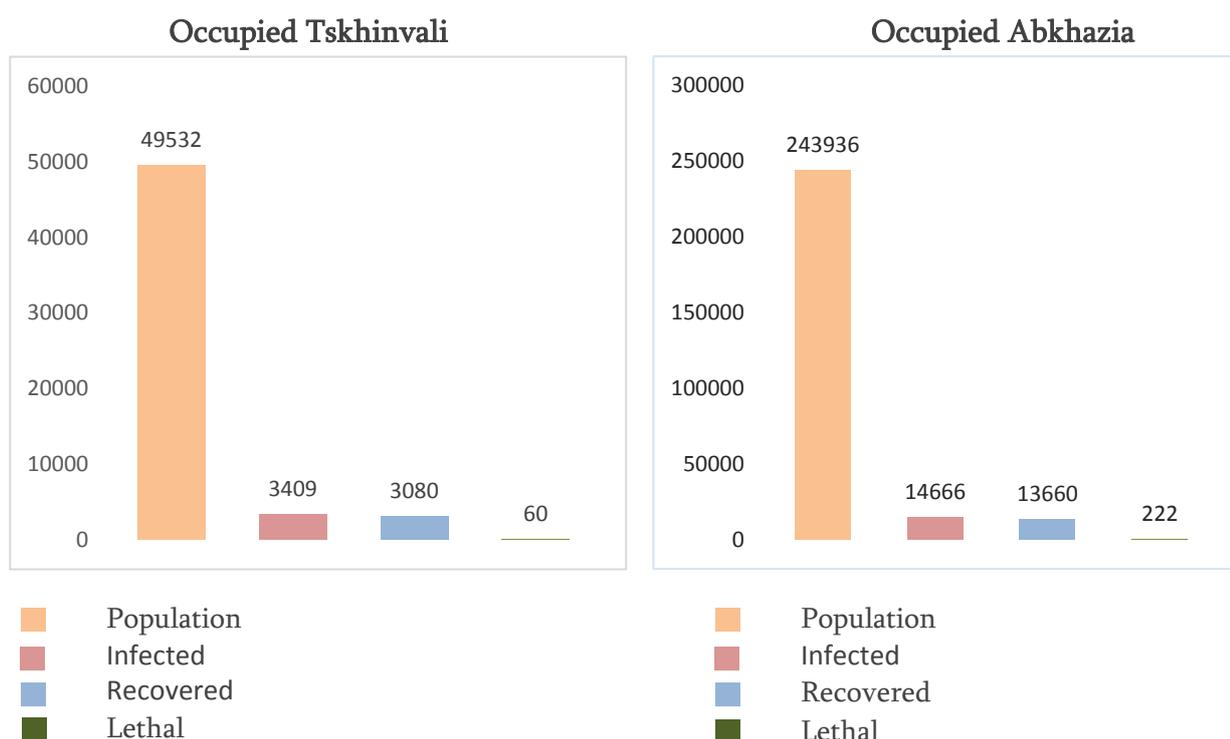
1. SITUATION AND STATISTICS .....	4
2. VACCINATION.....	5
3. PANDEMIC-RELATED RESTRICTIONS .....	5
4. THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE RIGHTS SITUATION OF PEOPLE LIVING IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES .....	6
RIGHT TO EDUCATION .....	6
ACCESS TO MEDICAL SERVICES AND MEDICINES .....	6
5. MEASURES TAKEN BY THE GEORGIAN GOVERNMENT .....	7
6. ACTIVITIES/RECOMMENDATIONS OF NGOS .....	8
RECOMMENDATIONS: .....	8

## 1. SITUATION AND STATISTICS

The first cases of Covid-19 were confirmed in Abkhazia on April 8, 2020 and in Tskhinvali on May 6, 2020.<sup>1</sup>

According to Georgian sources, the population of the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia consists of about 49,532 people,<sup>2</sup> while the population of Abkhazia is 243,936.<sup>3</sup> As of May 6, 2021, 3,409 people were infected in the Tskhinvali region, while the number of recovered patients was 3,080;<sup>4</sup> The first case of death caused by coronavirus was reported on October 18, 2020.<sup>5</sup> According to the latest publicly available data, Covid-19 killed more than 60 people in the Tskhinvali region.<sup>6</sup>

### Covid-19 statistics (numbers)



As of May 6, 2021, the number of infected people in Abkhazia was 14,666, while the number of recovered patients was 13,660 and the number of deaths caused by the virus was 222. The first patient died on April 26, 2020.

In 2020-2021, part of the population of both Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region used to move to the territory controlled by Georgia for treatment, in the event of extremely critical cases (and not only). As of December 30, 2020, medical service was provided to more than 250 Covid patients<sup>7</sup> from the occupied territories.

<sup>1</sup> Civil.ge, 2020, "International Crisis Group assesses Covid-19 response in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali", available at: <<https://civil.ge/ka/archives/350885>>, last accessed 17.05.2021.

<sup>2</sup> Administration of Shida Kartli State Representative, "Occupied territories", available at: <<http://shidakartli.gov.ge/ge/pages/index/47>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>3</sup> Government of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, "Demographic situation in Abkhazia", available at: <<http://abkhazia.gov.ge/page/demografia>>, last accessed: 17.05.21.

<sup>4</sup> Civil.ge, 2021, "All COVID-19-news", available at: <<https://civil.ge/ka/archives/342458>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021

<sup>5</sup> Radio Liberty, 2020, "Tskhinvali closes the so-called border with Russia", 2020, available at: <<https://bit.ly/3uB32xR>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>6</sup> Radio Liberty, 2020, "A teacher dies in Akhgori, another victim of isolation", available at: <<https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/30894962.html>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>7</sup> Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Equality, 2020, "Tea Akhvlediani - We have transferred more than 250 Covid patients from the occupied territories to the territory controlled by Georgia for treatment", available at: <<https://bit.ly/3uCqfzP>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

## 2. VACCINATION

On January 15, 2021, Russia started vaccination of its military contingent deployed in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. On the basis of a decision made on March 30, 2021, official Tbilisi offered Abkhazia and Tskhinvali to involve their doctors and persons over 65 in the immunization process,<sup>8</sup> however, the de facto authorities of both regions rejected the offer.<sup>9</sup>

On April 30, 2021, the first batch of the Russian-made vaccine<sup>10</sup> was delivered to the Tskhinvali region and Abkhazia. Tskhinvali started vaccination on May 4. According to the source of the Democracy Research Institute in Abkhazia, the immunization process will start in the region on May 12.<sup>11</sup> According to the decision of the de facto authorities of Tskhinvali, the newly arrived 2,000 doses will be given to the medical personnel and employees of educational institutions at the first stage. In Abkhazia, 6,500 doses will be given to medical personnel and teachers at the first stage, followed by law enforcement officers, government officials and, finally, all others who wish to be vaccinated.

## 3. PANDEMIC-RELATED RESTRICTIONS

Under the pretext of the coronavirus pandemic, the Abkhaz authorities closed the Enguri crossing point at the end of February 2020. Since then, Sokhumi opened the humanitarian corridor with the rest of Georgia several times. On March 2, 2021, the Ombudsman of Abkhazia<sup>12</sup> called on the de facto leader of the region to revise the restrictions imposed on the Enguri crossing point, referring to discrimination against ethnic Georgians, as the crossing point used for moving to the territory controlled by Georgia was completely closed, whereas Abkhazia has been reopened to Russia in August 2020. The Ombudsman's statement was preceded by the easing of restrictions imposed on the Enguri crossing point. From February 11, 2021, certain groups: older people, pensioners and people with special needs have been allowed to move to/from the Tbilisi-controlled territory.<sup>13</sup>

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Abkhaz authorities adopted standard regulations<sup>14</sup> relating to curfew, as well as termination of the educational process and introduction of distance learning. As of today, these restrictions are lifted. Only the decision on the closure of borders with Georgia remains in force.<sup>15</sup> By the decree of the de facto President of Abkhazia, at the initial stage, in March 2020, foreign nationals were banned from entering Abkhazia, although the restriction did not apply to Russian citizens. In April, the regulations were tightened and all foreign nationals were banned from entering the region, except for the staff of diplomatic institutions accredited in Abkhazia, servicemen of the Russian Federal Security Service in Abkhazia, servicemen of the Russian unified military bases paying business trips to Abkhazia and drivers of international trucks. Similarly, the de facto authorities of Tskhinvali<sup>16</sup> banned foreign nationals from entering the region in March 2020, although the restriction did not apply to Russian citizens. On February 27, 2020,<sup>17</sup> Tskhinvali closed all crossing points connecting the region with the rest of Georgia.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Civil.ge, 2021, "Tbilisi offers vaccination to doctors and people over 65 in the occupied regions", available at: <<https://civil.ge/ka/archives/409333>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>9</sup> Civil.ge, 2021, "Occupied Tskhinvali and Abkhazia receive Russian vaccine against Covid-19", available at: <<https://civil.ge/ka/archives/417749>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>10</sup> Radio Liberty, 2021, "Occupied Tskhinvali and Abkhazia receive Russian vaccine against Covid-19", available at: <<https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31220838.html>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>11</sup> Oc-media, 2021, "Abkhazia to begin long-delayed vaccine rollout", available at: <<https://oc-media.org/abkhazia-to-begin-long-delayed-vaccine-rollout/>> last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>12</sup> Civil.ge, 2020, "Abkhaz Ombudsman speaks about violations of the rights of Georgians living in Gali", available at: <<https://civil.ge/ka/archives/357938>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>13</sup> Civil.ge, 2021, "Sokhumi eases restrictions on Enguri", available at: <<https://civil.ge/ka/archives/396771>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>14</sup> Livepress, 2021, "Pandemic restrictions extended in Abkhazia", available at: <<https://bit.ly/2Sxxbjk>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>15</sup> De facto president of Abkhazia, 2021, „ПРЕЗИДЕНТ АСЛАН БЖАНИЯ ПОДПИСАЛ РАСПОРЯЖЕНИЕ О ПРОДЛЕНИИ ОГРАНИЧИТЕЛЬНЫХ МЕР“ available at: <[http://presidentofabkhazia.org/about/info/news/?ELEMENT\\_ID=13486](http://presidentofabkhazia.org/about/info/news/?ELEMENT_ID=13486)>, last accessed: 17.05.2021

<sup>16</sup> Radio Liberty, 2020, "OMON at Tskhinvali hospital", available at: <<https://bit.ly/3y4Vohw>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>17</sup> Civil.ge, 2020, "Tskhinvali imposes coronavirus-related restrictions on citizens of more than 60 countries wishing to arrive in the region", available at: <<https://civil.ge/ka/archives/340794>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>18</sup> Radio Liberty, 2020, „Emergency measures tightened in occupied Tskhinvali region,“ available at: <<https://bit.ly/33tuAcC>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

## 4. THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE RIGHTS SITUATION OF PEOPLE LIVING IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

### Right to education

The issue of involving Gali schools in distance learning in the context of the pandemic remained beyond the proper attention of the Georgian authorities. Students living in Gali, who go to educational institutions in the Tbilisi-controlled territory, were unable to engage in distance learning due to lack of technical equipment or poor internet coverage.

### Access to medical services and medicines

Quarantine restrictions have made it particularly difficult for the population of the Gali district to receive medical services.

Gali and Saberio hospitals do not have enough medicines or equipment. It has been impossible to supply medicines to the region for a long time.

Residents of Abkhazia, who often move to the Tbilisi-controlled territory for emergency medical services, had to undergo a two-week mandatory quarantine at the beginning of the pandemic, which delayed their treatment. The mandatory quarantine period was later reduced to 8 and then to 5 days.

To avoid quarantine, a number of patients attempted to reach the Tbilisi-controlled territory by crossing across the Enguri River. Several patients luckily escaped drowning.

On April 7, 2021, four people drowned while swimming across Enguri.<sup>19</sup> After this tragic incident, the Georgian authorities lifted the quarantine requirement for people arriving from the occupied territories. As of today, only rapid tests are mandatory.

Patients often have to wait 6-7 hours near the Enguri Bridge for emergency crews to arrive. In one of the cases, due to the fact that the ambulance was unable to cross the Enguri Bridge to transport a patient, who was in unbearable pain and needed surgical intervention, relatives had to carry the patient to the Tbilisi-controlled territory by hand. The patient was initially placed in quarantine space without any examinations and emergency surgery was performed only after 24 hours.

The hospital located in the village of Saberio, Gali district, is periodically left without the supply of medicines. The crisis is aggravated by periodic closures of crossing points and restrictions on movement, making it impossible to send medicines from the Tbilisi-controlled territory. The population of Gali is unable to receive adequate medical care due to the pandemic.

In Tskhinvali, since the beginning of the pandemic, there have been discriminatory<sup>20</sup> allegations that the virus was spread by the Georgian population.<sup>21</sup> The main "suspect" of the de-facto agencies was the Georgian population living in Akhagori.<sup>22</sup> Locals suspected that the de facto security officials were deliberately creating a background to convince the population of occupied South Ossetia that the Georgian population in Akhagori had deliberately spread the virus. According to the myth, a person infected with the virus might "sneak" in the region from Tbilisi and spread the infection.

Officials at the de facto agency stated publicly at the start of the pandemic that there they were fully ready to combat the pandemic, although according to reports, the situation in medical facilities was

<sup>19</sup> Radio Liberty, 2021, "Nanuashvili: The Government should ask a question - What is forcing thousands of residents of Gali to take a risk and move to the Tbilisi-controlled territory ", available at: <<https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31192885.html>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>20</sup> Radio Liberty, 2020, „Pearls" of absurdity from Tskhinvali - Disinformation attack on the Lugar Center and international observers", available at: <<https://bit.ly/2RJWXQV>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>21</sup> Radio Liberty, 2020, „Zurab Bedianashvili on the isolation of the occupied territories", available at: <<https://bit.ly/3f2z7YQ>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>22</sup> Radio Liberty, 2020, „Anti-Georgian propaganda in Tskhinvali, preparing for the state of emergency", available at: <<https://bit.ly/3eAOoRK>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

critical.<sup>23</sup> In one of the cases, a local doctor refused to provide services to patients in the quarantine space due to the fact that the hospital did not have the necessary equipment for doctors.<sup>24</sup> The doctor was threatened to be fired, however, later he was given a hospital outfit and protective equipment. Two people died in Akhgori<sup>25</sup> reportedly due to the indifference of the local medical personnel and the lack of medicines and medical equipment necessary for qualified medical service at the Akhgori hospital.<sup>26</sup>

## 5. MEASURES TAKEN BY THE GEORGIAN GOVERNMENT<sup>27</sup>

For the purpose of raising awareness about the virus, the Georgian authorities translated recommendations and rules for the prevention of Covid-19, including protocols and guidelines prepared by the National Center for Disease Control, into Abkhazian<sup>28</sup> and Ossetian languages. Information posted on the official website<sup>29</sup> is available in Abkhazian and Ossetian languages; Online consultations are provided for local doctors on a regular basis; With the support of the Georgian authorities, the World Health Organization mission visited Abkhazia to assess the situation in the region and develop recommendations; The Georgian Government and international organizations have been regularly supplying Abkhazia with medical equipment, medicines and hygiene products. However, the de facto Government of South Ossetia rejected the Georgian aid.

According to a report on the measures taken by the Government of Georgia,<sup>30</sup> the relevant state agencies jointly prepared a plan for the management of patients from the occupied regions. A field point was opened near the Enguri Bridge to serve patients from the occupied territories. The Rukhi Hospital, which was built to provide easier access to free medical care for the population living in the occupied territories, has also been equipped and opened for the treatment of Covid patients. It should be noted that all of these measures were taken following the appeal and recommendations of NGOs.

The situation is different in the direction of Akhgori, where as a result of the closure of the so-called Mosabruni-Odzisi crossing point, the Tskhinvali region remains completely closed and artificially isolated.<sup>31</sup> The de facto authorities of South Ossetia refused the assistance of the Georgian side.

---

<sup>23</sup> Radio Liberty, 2020, "Formal quarantine in Akhgori, civil and medical supervision in Gori", available at: <<https://bit.ly/3fb62dB>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>24</sup> Radio Liberty, 2020, "Tskhinvali doctor refuses to be on duty", available at: <<https://bit.ly/3eAl4um>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>25</sup> Radio Liberty, 2020, "Alarming situation - people killed in closed Akhgori", available at: <<https://bit.ly/3vTdxwE>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>26</sup> Radio Liberty, 2020, "Novel coronavirus and the situation in the occupied territories", available at: <<https://bit.ly/2SxmywW>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>27</sup> Civil.ge, 2020, "Tsikhelashvili on "borderization" and lack of medical services in occupied territories", available at: <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/352926>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>28</sup> Prevention of the spread of coronavirus in Georgia - in the Abkhazian language, available at: <<https://stopcov.ge/ab/>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>29</sup> Prevention of the spread of coronavirus in Georgia - in the Ossetian language, available at: <<https://stopcov.ge/os/>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>30</sup> Government of Georgia, 2020, "Report of measures taken by the Government of Georgia against COVID-19," available at: [http://gov.ge/files/76338\\_76338\\_444796\\_COVID-19angarishi...pdf](http://gov.ge/files/76338_76338_444796_COVID-19angarishi...pdf), last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>31</sup> Oc-media, 2020, "What danger does Georgia's healthcare programme face in relation to Abkhazians and Ossetians", available at: <<https://oc-media.org/ra-saprthkis-tsinashe-dgas-sakartvelos-jandatsvis-programa-apkhazebisa-da-osebistvis/>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

## 6. ACTIVITIES/RECOMMENDATIONS OF NGOS

On August 18, 2020, NGOs<sup>32</sup> called on the Georgian Government to enhance humanitarian and medical assistance to Abkhazia amid the sharp outbreak<sup>33</sup> of the virus in the region. The Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality responded to the appeal with a statement, in which she talked about the measures taken by the Government.<sup>34</sup>

At the beginning of the second wave of the epidemic, on October 19, 2020, NGOs responded<sup>35</sup> to the aggravated epidemic<sup>36</sup> in the Tskhinvali region and called on the Georgian authorities<sup>37</sup> to intensify negotiations with the de facto Tskhinvali regime and use international political mechanisms to restore movement timely and increase access to medical services.

As soon as the pandemic began, NGOs, including the Democracy Research Institute, made recommendations to the Georgian Government, the European Union Monitoring Mission and the International Committee of the Red Cross for the purposes of improving the situation in the occupied territories.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, along with other issues in occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, the following problems remain unresolved:

- Medical infrastructure
- Access to Covid 19-testing
- Access to medicines
- Lack of qualified medical personnel
- Realization of the right to education/protection of the best interests of the child
- Freedom of movement

The pandemic has made it easier to popularize Russian forces and increase its influence in occupied Tskhinvali and Abkhazia, resulting in higher numbers of human rights abuses. The social, economic and rights situation of the locals has significantly deteriorated.<sup>39</sup>

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ❖ **It is important for the Government to take more active measures, as well as to use the resources of the civil society in the peace process**

The Democracy Research Institute welcomes the establishment of the Consultative Council of Reconciliation and Engagement Policy Experts at the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, and hopes that the Council will be effective and cooperation with it will be fruitful.

Beyond that, it is essential that the Government actions towards the occupied regions be proactive. The events developed around Akhagori show that the Government does not have a specific action plan for managing crises. It is important to make a list of people working in the humanitarian direction.

---

<sup>32</sup> Democracy Research Institute, 2020, "Special statement of non-governmental organizations on the situation in Abkhazia", available at: <<http://www.democracyresearch.org/geo/379>> last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>33</sup> Democracy Research Institute, 2020, „DRI: Recommended rules for combating pandemic are systematically violated in occupied Akhagori“, available at: <<http://www.democracyresearch.org/geo/308>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>34</sup> Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, 2020, Statement of the Office of the State Minister, available at: <<https://smr.gov.ge/ge/news/read/1904/saxelmwifo-ministris-aparatis-gancxadeba>> last accessed: 17.05.2021

<sup>35</sup> Democracy Research Institute, 2020, „NGOs respond to the aggravated epidemic situation in the Tskhinvali region“, available at: <<http://www.democracyresearch.org/geo/433>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>36</sup> Radio Liberty, 2020, „Infected doctors in Tskhinvali, medical staff on the edge of possibilities“, available at:<<https://bit.ly/3vWXNc1>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>37</sup> Democracy Research Institute, 2020, „NGOs respond to the aggravated epidemiological situation in Tskhinvali region“, available at: <<http://www.democracyresearch.org/geo/349>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>38</sup> Democracy Research Institute, 2020, „DRI: Deteriorating humanitarian situation in the occupied regions“, available at: <<http://www.democracyresearch.org/geo/266>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

<sup>39</sup> Radio Liberty, 2020, "Relatively open Sokhumi and more closed Tskhinvali", available at: <<https://bit.ly/2R0yNSB>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.

In addition, several alternative ways should be planned in advance for the timely delivery of food and medicines to the population.

#### ❖ Access to education and protection of the best interests of the child

The State should provide additional assistance to schools in the Gali district, including by supplying technical equipment and encouraging the entry of a high-speed internet provider in the villages adjacent to the dividing line.

By March 1, 2020, the Government of Georgia had to develop necessary documents and plan measures for the purposes of the Code on the Rights of the Child. This process did not take into account the children living in the occupied territories or their needs. The Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality was not involved in the process either. When planning measures relating to the rights of the child, it is important for the State to take into account the needs of children living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, as well as along the dividing line.<sup>40</sup>

#### ❖ Access to healthcare services

People living in Tskhinvali and Abkhazia should be able to receive medical services/medicines on time. Therefore, it is necessary for the State to start taking measures to address these issues, as well as to simplify services for patients from Gali and Akhagori.

Proper supply of local hospitals with medicines and other medical equipment should be promoted. Communication lines should be established with medical personnel in the Tskhinvali region in order to share experience in virus management and treatment.

#### ❖ Economic and social rights of those living in Tskhinvali and Abkhazia and along the dividing lines

The anti-crisis plan approved in response to the pandemic did not address the specific needs of thousands of people living in Gali and Akhagori. Due to the closure of the crossing point, the conflict-affected population, who live in the territory controlled by Georgia, but move to Gali for seasonal work or trade (mostly women), have been left without a source of livelihood. It is important that their needs be addressed in the state support programme.

The State, in cooperation with international organizations and in compliance with sanitary norms, should provide permanently functioning points along the administrative boundary line to enable persons coming from Abkhazia to purchase medicines, products and bare necessities.

#### ❖ Freedom of movement

The Georgian side must use all mechanisms to achieve the reopening of the crossing points closed in recent years.

#### ❖ Elimination of Covid-19 effects

The State should develop *targeted programmes* tailored to the needs of the population of Tskhinvali and Abkhazia, as well as people living along the dividing line, in order to reduce the impact of the pandemic and alleviate the situation of the population.

The challenges faced by people living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali differ from those faced by the population of the Tbilisi-controlled territory, so they need special support mechanisms. Specifically, in addition to the existing education and healthcare programmes, it is necessary to create a state programme of *special financial assistance*.

---

<sup>40</sup> Legislative Herald of Georgia, 2019, Code on the Rights of the Child, Article 99, Transitional Provisions, available at: <<https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/4613854?publication=2>>, last accessed: 17.05.2021.