

Problems faced by population living along the occupation line

(Ganmukhuri, Khurcha, Orsantia, Rukhi, Muzhavi community, Pakhulani community and Potskho-Etseni IDP settlement)

In August 2021, the Democracy Research Institute studied the situation in the villages located along the occupation line. In order to explore the problems of the population living near the occupation line, we visited the villages of Tsalenjikha and Zugdidi municipalities: Ganmukhuri, Khurcha, Orsantia, Rukhi, Muzhavi community, Pakhulani community and Potskho-Etseni IDP settlement.

The visit convinced us that the central and local authorities do not pay due attention to the socio-economic or infrastructural problems of the villages located along the occupation line. It is obvious that the competencies and responsibilities of the local and central authorities in the villages bordering the occupation zone are mixed up. The security of the population is "ensured" at the expense of their isolation and, in some cases, at the expense of their intimidation and neglect of their rights. The Democracy Research Institute believes that isolation harms people living along the occupation line, violates their rights and deprives them of opportunities for free development. Such a high degree of isolation gives an impression that the villages along the occupation line are formally controlled by the central authorities (through the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the State Security Service), although the interests of the local population are also restricted by the occupation regime.

Ganmukhuri

The Ganmukhuri administrative unit of the Zugdidi municipality is located 25 km away from the city. The village has more than 600 households and 1,300 inhabitants. The so-called border runs between Ganmukhuri and Pichori, a village of the Gali district. The "crossing point" between the villages has not been functioning since March 2017. Part of the lands of the three families living in the immediate vicinity of the "border" are under the control of the central authorities, while the other part is now on the occupied territory. Residents of Ganmukhuri have to live in fear and mutual control. The Georgian side observes Russians and Abkhazians from afar. Those living along the so-called border avoid communicating with outsiders, think carefully of every word, speak to others with fear, restraint and neutrality. "Russians will come in half an hour after you leave, they will ask us who you were and what we talked about ..." - one of the locals told us.



Meeting with locals, Ganmukhuri

Those who remain on the other side of the "border" have to sneak in the territory controlled by the central government from their gardens. "The Russians count us like chickens" - G.A.¹ complained in a conversation with us from the yard located on the occupied territory. "If they need something, we throw it to their yard" - this is how the people of Ganmukhuri help the residents of Pichori.

We had to inform both the State Security Service and the Ministry of Internal Affairs and get a permission from them in order to arrive in the villages, take photos and talk to the population. We managed to talk to the population living in the Tbilisi-controlled area, along the occupation line, only with the consent of the Security Service. Such a procedure is required in order to enter any of the villages located along the "border".



A fence that serves as the so-called border, Ganmukhuri

¹ The initials were changed for the safety of the respondent.

In addition to the restricted freedom of movement and excessive control, the residents of Ganmukhuri have a number of socio-economic problems; The issues of drinking water and drainage canals are unresolved; unemployment and economic hardship have made the young people leave the settlement. Locals point to the lack of utility and other benefits. Despite annual promises, the internal roads of the village are still in poor condition.

As we were told, the Russian military, standing 200 meters away from the village border, control the area and population with the help of dogs. According to the locals, the central authorities have tightened movement in the direction of the Tbilisi-controlled for two years and the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the State Security Service check all the people crossing the "border" one by one.



The so-called border in the village of Ganmukhuri

Although according to the information provided by the Ganmukhuri administration, there are 600 households in the village, in reality, only 80 families live in the municipality. Most of the population have gone to Tbilisi, Poti or abroad. Locals cannot live in their natural environment or create economic wealth. 1/3 of the Ganmukhuri population is supplied with electricity from Abkhazia, for which, regardless of the real cost, they pay fixed 20 GEL per month.

Only 2 kilometers out of the 9-kilometer Anaklia-Ganmukhuri road has been repaired. Complete rehabilitation of the road would help the village to easily connect with the tourist area of Anaklia.

Like other villages located along the "border", access to the internet is a problem in Ganmukhuri as well. According to locals, there had been a plan to cover Anaklia-Ganmukhuri with Magti fiber-optic internet, but later, Ganmukhuri was removed from the project. Internet-related difficulties significantly hampered the remote learning process for schoolchildren. Locals express regrets that since 2020, the State has stopped subsidizing higher education tuition fees for students from villages located

near the dividing line because of "abuse" of this privilege, putting many students at risk of dropping out of educational institutions.

Khurcha

160 households (535 people) live in the village of Khurcha, Zugdidi municipality. Until 2017, four crossing points had been functioning along the Abkhazia-Samegrelo occupation line, one of which was the Khurcha-Nabakevi crossing point. Hundreds of people had been crossing the so-called border every day, making the village an economically active zone. The closure of the checkpoint in 2017 has virtually isolated and halted the village. Local small businesses, cafes and fast food facilities have been shut down; Taxi drivers have been left unemployed. As a result, the unemployed population has a sense of hopelessness. There has been an outpatient clinic building in the village for several years, which was supposed to open in 2020, but is still closed. As locals told us, the floor in the newly renovated building has already been damaged due to poor quality. The problem with access to the Internet makes the local population unable to register for vaccination. And as we were told, it is also extremely difficult to call the hotline in order register for vaccination.



Khurcha-Nabakevi crossing point

Khurcha had been served by the oldest and poorest municipal transport over years. The village had been jokingly called a "bus cemetery". This year the situation has changed for the better and a new bus is serving passengers in the village, but it has its own "conditions" - the bus refuses to serve passengers if they have more than three sacks of products. This "limit" is very small for the villagers, who mainly go to Zugdidi in order to bring food supplies.



“Bus cemetery”, Khurcha

As we were told in Khurcha, they now feel more abandoned and unprotected from the State than ever before. On January 18, 2021, the Russian occupants kidnapped three Georgian citizens from Khurcha, which intensified the feeling of insecurity among locals.

Pakhulani

About 275 people live in the village of Pakhulani, Tsalenjikha municipality. Pakhulani is bordered by the village of Saberio of the Gali district. The so-called "crossing point" is located on the administrative border of Saberio-Pakhulani. Before entering Pakhulani, the local police check ID cards and ask the reason for entering the village. However, this is not enough. A representative of the State Security Service also tried to further clarify the reason for our visit to the village. According to the villagers, they live under constant fear and insecurity. We talked to a Saberio resident at the crossing point, who was waiting for his family member on the territory of Pakhulani. However, Abkhazian "border guards" interrupted our conversation and the resident of Saberio was told in the Megrelian language to wait for his family member on the other side of the "border", in a special waiting area.



The so-called crossing point in the village of Saberio

Orsantia

The village of Orsantia is located in the Zugdidi municipality. The Orsantia-Otobaia crossing point had been functioning in the village until 2017, which is now closed. There are 594 households (2,052 people) in Orsantia. Residents name drinking water supply, drainage canals and internal roads as the main problems.



Orsantia

Muzhava community

The villages of the Muzhava community (Muzhava, Olori, Nashamgu) of the Tsalenjikha municipality are located near the Enguri HPP tunnel. There are 200 households (719 people) in the community. Villagers complain about drinking water and internal roads. The villages of the community do not have the status of highland settlements, therefore, they cannot enjoy the benefits provided by the Law of Georgia on the Development of Mountainous Regions. The village of Olori is not served by municipal transport. Due to old wiring, the power supply is unstable. There are no garbage bins in the village.

Due to lack of transport, the population of Olori cannot get vaccinated. As we were told, they want vaccination to be more accessible for the rural population.

Potskho-Etseri IDP settlement

Potskho-Etseri IDP settlement is located in the Tsalenjikha municipality, Chale administrative unit. The settlement is completely cut off from the outside world. IDPs have to live in the most difficult conditions, where the right to adequate housing is neglected. Potskho-Etseri is located 22 kilometers from the municipality center. The road to the settlement is extremely damaged. The settlement is not served by municipal transport. A privately owned vehicle takes passengers to Tsalenjikha three times a week, but only if there are a sufficient number of passengers. The fare is GEL 3.5, which is difficult to pay for extremely poor IDPs.



The damaged roads of the Potskho-Etseri settlement

The settlement needs to rehabilitate the drinking water tank, purchase water pipes and install outdoor lighting. Drainage canals and internal roads are also in a deplorable condition. IDPs have not registered agricultural lands in their ownership, therefore, they cannot engage in households. Buildings and houses in the settlement are in poor condition, sewage flows into the yards. Drinking water is supplied on schedule. Registration/legalization of houses needs legal regulation.



Houses in need of rehabilitation, Potskho-Etseri settlement

The Potskho-Etseri settlement was built for the employees of the Enguri hydro power plant during the Soviet period. The dam is located a few hundred meters away from the settlement. About 80 families displaced from Abkhazia, including IDPs evicted from the Tbilisi state-owned buildings, live in Potskho-Etseri together with locals. In 2010, 18 families were resettled from Tbilisi to Potskho-Etseri, however, due to the unbearable conditions in the settlement, almost all the families have already left the area.



Houses, Potskho-Etseri settlement

As the settlement is located in the so-called red zone of Enguri HPP, Potskho-Etseri residents had been supplied with free electricity until 2007. However, in 2007 this benefit was abolished for all families. No natural gas is supplied to the settlement. IDPs use firewood for heating during cold winter. The settlement is characterized by scarcity of livelihoods, limited access to public services and high unemployment.



Potskho-Etseri IDP settlement

A 10-year-old IDP child living in the Potskho-Etseri settlement has been diagnosed with glaucoma. However, the State does not fund for the medicines necessary for the child's treatment.

Enguri Bridge

Those travelling to Abkhazia face the problems of lack of transport and difficult accessibility. We saw how dozens of people (mostly women), carrying heavy bags, walked across the bridge after no space was left for them in a minibus taking passengers to occupied Abkhazia. The Enguri Bridge is used by

Gali residents, who live 5, 10 and 25 kilometers away from the bridge. As all other crossing points are closed (except Pakhulani), they have no other alternative. Locals move to the central government-controlled area mainly for trade. The so-called free economic zone, which was built to facilitate trade for Abkhazians on the Tbilisi-controlled territory (which would have deepened relations between the parties), is not functioning, shops are closed and abandoned.



Enguri Bridge

It should be noted that the Rukhi clinic located near the “border” is actively receiving patients. Restoration of traffic on the Enguri Bridge has significantly alleviated the situation of the ethnic Georgian population living in occupied Abkhazia. The Democracy Research Institute believes that the Georgian Government should intensify its efforts to restore the operation of the so-called Abkhazia-Samegrelo crossing point at least to the level of 2017.

