

Democracy Research Institute (DRI)



## The needs of the villages located along the occupation line

2020

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### Introduction

In 2020, the Democracy Research Institute (DRI) identified the problems and needs of the population of the villages located along the occupation line. DRI researchers visited 24 villages and two IDP settlements in Gori, Kareli, Kaspi, Dusheti, Tsalenjikha and Zugdidi municipalities. The population in the visited villages is mostly of retirement age.

The monitoring revealed cases relating to freedom of movement, security, unjustified prohibition of entry into populated areas and constant control; socio-economic and infrastructural problems. Many settlements do not have preschools or schools; Roads in some of the visited villages are damaged or there are no roads at all; People suffer from the lack of irrigation and drinking water; Most of the villages do not have pharmacies or medical facilities. A number of settlements have no grocery stores.

As a result, the migration rate in the villages along the occupation line is high. Young people are leaving the villages.

### Gori municipality

Ergneti village of Tirdznisi community of Gori municipality is located near the dividing line. Ergneti borders the territory now controlled by the Russian military. There is a Georgian police point at the entrance to the village, but it is possible to freely enter and move across the village. During the Russian-Georgian war of 2008, Ergneti suffered huge losses, the material property of the village was almost completely destroyed. After the 2008 war, a new school was built in Ergneti, equipped with proper environment and inventory. Although there are many children of preschool age, the village does not have a kindergarten. There is still no pharmacy in Ergneti. The village does not have a place where people would be able to gather or communicate with each other, an entertainment center, a sports ground or a library, which is especially problematic for the youth. There is an Occupation Museum on the first floor of a war-damaged house.

### Mereti community - Zardiantkari and Gugutiaantkari

There is active migration of the population in both settlements. The reason, along with security, is socio-economic problems. The Georgian side regained control of **Zardiaantkari** in 2012, there is a police point in the village. Entry is possible only after passing the Georgian point, where Georgian law enforcers check the documents of passengers, ask them about the purpose of their visit and provide police escort to ensure security. The population, who returned to the village four years after the war, found their houses damaged and their pastures lost as a result of the so-called "borderization". Young people leave Zardiaantkari because of fear and hopelessness. The village has one schoolchild and two university students.

The population of **Gugutiaantkari**, who lost pastures and orchards due to the so-called "borderization", also demands compensation for the damage caused by war. Residents, who have returned to Gugutiaantkari, have so far been unable to replace bullet-damaged roofs. Gugutiaantkari does not have a kindergarten. The primary school building, which had been functional before the 2008 war, is now home to a family affected by war. Consequently, schoolchildren have to go to a school located in the village of Mereti. It is true that

schoolchildren are served by transport, but the population demands the restoration of the functioning of the Gugutiaantkari primary school.

**Karapila** borders the village of Orchosani, which is now controlled by the Russian military. There is also a Russian military base in Orchosani. There is no Georgian police point on the road section or barbed wire between the so-called "border" and the village. The village does not have a pharmacy or an outpatient clinic. If locals need medical help, they have to walk about five kilometers to get the service. There is no grocery store in Karapila. Locals go to the neighboring villages of Saribari and Zadiaantkari to buy basic necessities and products. According to the residents, the village does not have a primary school. However, children are taken to the school of the village of Kodistskaro by state transport. As everywhere, unemployment is a major problem in the village. There are 18 young people in the village, although none of them is currently employed. There has been no minibus transport in the village for years, which at least could have allowed the population to get to Kaspi.

There have been several instances when, at dusk, people were taken to the occupied territories. Some believe that in order to prevent illegal detentions and enhance the sense of security among the population, the installation of outdoor lighting is necessary.

The main problem of the village has been the supply of drinking and irrigation water for years. After the spread of the viral infection, the problem became particularly acute. Drinking water is available only in one district, which is not enough for the entire village. The quality of drinking water is low and requires laboratory testing.

**The village of Bershueti** borders an area now controlled by the Russian military. Instead of barbed wire, the area near the occupation line is marked with a large cross. It is possible to enter and move across the village freely. There is no Georgian police point on the road section. After the Russian military placed a banner on the outskirts of the village, above the cemetery, the population's sense of insecurity intensified. According to local residents, it is risky to approach the area. The village has lost its pastures as a result of occupation. Most of the land used by the locals as pastures is now on the other side of the so-called occupation line. The Mother of God Church is also on the occupied territories, which is a matter of particular concern for the population. The people interviewed by us name the unsuitable drinking water as the main difficulty of the village. The unsuitability of water was proved by testing as well. There are also problems with irrigation water, which hinders the growing of annual and perennial crops. During the visit, locals showed us uncultivated lands, which, according to them, is related to the lack of irrigation water. The poor state of both central and internal roads has remained an unresolved problem for years. The village does not enjoy the status of a highland settlement or the corresponding benefits. The population is economically disadvantaged. We talked to five lonely retirees who were reluctant to talk about their daily problems. They do not have gas or electricity. Despite migration, there remain young people in the village, who want the village to have a stadium and a small park. Several of them even talked about the need to restore and save the historic tower of the village.

The village of **Kirbali** borders an area currently controlled by the Russian military. It is possible to enter and move around the village freely. There is no Georgian police point on the Zerti-Kirbali road section. From 2013 to the present, the Russian military have stretched ribbons and placed banners on the outskirts

of the village, exacerbating the local population's sense of insecurity. According to the locals, approaching the area is risky.

People interviewed by us complain about the quality of drinking water, which is supplied each other day, for an hour. According to them, the water is unsuitable for drinking, which was proved by laboratory testing. Locals want the suitability of water to be checked by the State as well.

The population considers the malfunction of the drainage canals as the second major problem, which prevents children from going to school during heavy rainfall and bad weather and make it difficult for farmers to irrigate their orchards. Locals also point out that due to low incomes, it is difficult to fully cultivate their orchards.

Most families do not have cattle. According to locals, since 2013, due to the beginning of the creeping occupation, the village has lost 62 hectares of land, including pastures. They say that last year alone, 18 animals were lost in the so-called border area, but they were compensated only for 6 of them.

The local population is especially concerned about the fact that their cemetery is currently on the other side of the so-called border. It is difficult for them to visit local temples as well. The niche of Lomisi St. George's Church, which is built on a hill near the village, is currently in the occupied zone, and consequently the residents of the village have been denied access to the church. Before 2018 they had the opportunity to go to the church to celebrate holidays, but in 2019 they were deprived even of that opportunity. As for the Church of Assumption of Virgin Mary, which is on the territory controlled by the Georgian Government, the locals have limited access to it due to security reasons, because the church is ten kilometers away from the so-called occupation line.

There is a school (9 grades) in the village. After leaving the school, students continue their education at Zerti public school. Currently, the village has only 4 students above the 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

The population is mostly extremely poor and complains about unemployment. They want at least young people to be employed on the Kirbali-Bershueti road rehabilitation works that are currently underway.

The village of **Tsitsagiaantkari** borders the occupied territory. There are no Georgian police points at the entrance to the village or near the occupation line. According to locals, the village is particularly suffering from the problem of irrigation water. As for drinking water, only one of the three districts is not supplied with it. Locals also complain about the absence of an outpatient clinic and a pharmacy. The village does not have a kindergarten or a primary school either, which is why children are transported to the neighboring village of Akhrisi by state transport. Due to the named problems, the village is being abandoned. According to locals, 60-70 families remain in the village.

### **Kareli municipality**

The village of **Dirbi** in Kareli municipality borders the villages of Dvani and Takhtisdziri. Locals mainly complain about problems with selling their crops and unemployment of the youth.

We were stopped at the police checkpoint in the village of **Dvani** and were not allowed to enter the village despite the fact that the Ministry of internal Affairs was informed in advance about the visit.

### **Kaspi municipality**

Vake, Saribari and Zadiantkari - the villages of Kvemo Chala and Kodistskaro communities of Kaspi municipality – are inhabited by ethnic Ossetians.

**Vake** - Internal roads and drainage canals are being constructed in the settlement. Respondents say that efforts were launched about two years ago to solve the issue of drinking water, however, the village still faces the issues of both drinking and irrigation water. Locals are worried that drinking water is supplied in insufficient amount, with frequent interruptions. Of the nine respondents interviewed, no one talks about security-related fears. They say they know where the occupation line is and they do not cross it. The village enjoys the status of a highland settlement.

In order to enter **Zadiantkari**, it is necessary to pass the Karapila police point. After checking documents, we were escorted by a police car for security reasons. There are many abandoned houses in the village. Some of them are almost ruined. Light poles could be seen fallen in some sections of the rural road, which is not asphalted. Barbed wire runs along the fields of Zadiantkari. The so-called Orchosani border military base of the Russian Federation is located a few meters away. The three respondents interviewed by us do not talk about problems in the settlement, show distrust and ask us not to record the conversation. They explain that it is true that there is a problem with drinking water in the village, but it is already "being resolved". We have an impression that they cannot understand/evaluate the problem related to the occupation. Against the background of the nearby barbed wire, the respondents explain that they are not afraid of the Russian military and "live in peace." They say their cattle have crossed the so-called "border" several times, however, they have been sent back. They also emphasize that no one from their village has been detained by the military of the Russian Federation.

19 people live in the village of **Saribari** located near the dividing line in Kodistskaro community. Like Zadiantkari, almost every other house is abandoned here. The road to the village is not asphalted. The settlement also has a problem with drinking water. Four locals talked about the difficulties in the village. All of them said they expected the issue of drinking water to be resolved soon and the road to be asphalted. Locals also want a small playground to be arranged for children. Poverty, shortage of water and poor state of roads are problems in the mentioned settlement too. Locals try to shun questions. They explain that talking about problems will not solve anything, but create new ones.

**Tvaurebi** is located in Kaspi municipality, Lamiskana community, on the right bank of the Ksani River. The village is located 18 kilometers away from Kaspi. Tvaurebi borders an area currently controlled by Russian border guards. Due to security reasons, the village can be accessed only through the Georgian police point, which is located at the entrance to the village. There are 40 households left in the village, most of them of retirement age. There is no school or kindergarten. The village has an outpatient clinic but does not have a pharmacy or a grocery store. The people of Lamiskana have to walk about 4 kilometers to buy basic necessities and products. According to them, the village lost its pastures after the war. Lands near barbed wire cannot be cultivated due to lack of security guarantees. Locals virtually have the only income from their orchards. They say they had been selling products on the Akhalgori market before the 2008 war, which is now impossible. Most of the respondents say that the barbed wire has separated them from their close relatives, which is their main concern. Residents of the village complain about the poor state of internal roads and the contamination of irrigation wells, which significantly hinders agricultural activities.

## **Tsalenjikha municipality**

**Pakhulani** community, which unites four villages (**Pakhulani, Kalaghali, Tskoushi, Chvele**), is located in **Tsalenjikha** municipality, on the right bank of the Enguri River. Getting here is possible only through the Georgian checkpoint, where law enforcement officers check the documents of passengers, specify the purpose of their visit and keep copies of identification documents.

The caution of the law enforcement has a reason. In May of this year, the Russian military began renewing the barbed wire fence between **Pakhulani and Saberio**. They replaced old, damaged poles with new ones and changed the barbed wire. Surveillance cameras installed on the perimeter of the dividing line are easily visible to the naked eye. The so-called **Saberio-Pakhulani** checkpoint is located at the end of the settlement. Before the introduction of pandemic restrictions, hundreds of people had been moving to the rest of Georgia through this section every day. The socio-economic situation of the community population is dire. Most of the arable lands were lost as a result of the so-called "borderization". Nuts are the main source of income for the locals. The community does not have a gas supply network, which is why the population uses firewood for heating in winter. In Pakhulani, both drinking and irrigation water are a constant problem. It is true that there are 5-6 shops in the settlement, but there is no pharmacy. We were told by locals that every day they are waiting for the opening of a new outpatient clinic, which has already been built, but is still closed. The population of Pakhulani is especially worried about the fact that their cemetery is on the other side of the so-called border. The cemetery located directly beyond the dividing line, which is closed with an iron chain and a lock to "protect it from visitors", can be easily seen from the vicinity of the "border". When asked about what they would like the local or central authorities to change, the respondents asked us to mediate the installation of a speed limit barrier ("sleeping policeman") in the vicinity of the village school.

The village of **Lia** in Tsalenjikha municipality is located along the Zugdidi-Jvari road and railway, on the left bank of the Enguri River. The village borders an area currently controlled by Russian border guards. The village has no gas supply. The main source of income is nuts. People have problems with agricultural land registration. Part of the population, who have not registered land, cannot receive state programme vouchers for promoting agricultural activities.

## **Zugdidi municipality**

**Tkaia** is located on the left bank of the Enguri River, at 125 meters above sea level. The village borders the occupied territory of Abkhazia. It is possible to enter the village freely. People named the unstable supply of irrigation water as the main problem. According to them, due to the high temperature in summer, the irrigation canal dries up, which hinders agricultural activities. The village does not have a pharmacy or an outpatient clinic. Migration of the youth is high.

The village of **Rike** is located in Zugdidi municipality, 8 kilometers from the center of Zugdidi. It borders an area currently controlled by Russian border guards. It is possible to move freely across the village. The population names unemployment and high outflow of young people as the main problems.

The village of **Khurcha** of Zugdidi municipality is located on the right bank of the Enguri River, 16 kilometers away from Zugdidi. The geographical boundary of the village is beyond the Khurcha River,

however, locals have been deprived of the opportunity to cross the river. As locals told us, the Russian military strictly control the so-called border - "If earlier they used to come 2-3 times, now they come once every half an hour. Entry to the village is possible after passing the Georgian police point, where law enforcement officers check the documents of passengers and specify the purpose of their visit. After passing the checkpoint, it is possible to move freely in the village. About 38 families are still unsuccessfully seeking full compensation for the damage caused by the 1993-1998 and 2008 hostilities. As a result of the occupation, the village has lost arable lands and pastures, due to which the population is practically unable to carry out agricultural activities. School-age children go to a high school in the village of Nabakevi. An outpatient clinic has been built in Khurcha for many years, but is not functioning. There is no doctor in the village and people rely only on a nurse. The closure of the so-called **Khurcha-Nabakevi** checkpoint has almost completely isolated and halted the village. Local small businesses, cafes and fast food facilities have been closed, leaving about 40 taxi drivers unemployed. Locals talk about the hopeless environment in the village and regret that the central authorities have offered them nothing as an alternative.

The village of **Orsantia** of Zugdidi municipality is located on the left bank of the Enguri River. The village borders the occupied territory of Abkhazia. It is possible to move freely in Orsantia. The so-called Orsantia-Otobaia checkpoint had been operational before 2017. Residents of Orsantia and Otobaia have close kinship and suffer from the closure of the checkpoint. Due to this, the number of detentions for illegally crossing the so-called border has increased. The Public Center of the State Service Development Agency of the Ministry of Justice operates in the village. Locals name unemployment as the biggest problem.

**Shamgona** is a settlement near the occupation line. Here we visited two compact settlements of IDPs. None of the buildings are intended for residence. One is a former kindergarten and the other is a facility of administrative category - called the "kantora" building. According to the locals, today 7 families live in the so-called "kantora" building. The building does not have drinking water, natural gas, or a bathroom. It has a shared bathroom in the yard. The families we spoke to say that they have lived in this building for more than 25 years and are in the "queue for apartments". All the respondents we interviewed demand apartments. They explain that scores are granted to families according to an unknown and incomprehensible scheme. They add that the Ministry of IDPs promises to provide apartments every election year. The last promise was to provide apartments to the families living in the "kantora" building in 2020. IDPs are not optimistic about this promise. The second IDP settlement is the former kindergarten of the village, where IDPs from Abkhazia live. There are four members in M.G.'s family, one of whom is a minor. "If you lift this linoleum, you will see what we have instead of the floor. This building is very old, the wall is wet and everything is rotten. We have a shared toilet and we live like that. We have been asking for an apartment for several years now. Sometimes they gave us five points, sometimes three and sometimes six. I do not know how they do it," said M.G., who lives in the former kindergarten in the village of Shamgona. M.G., M.Z. and N.N.'s families have been waiting for apartments from the State for years in vain. Broken floors, water leaking from the roof, dampness in all rooms, wooden doors and windows that cannot cope with the wind and cold - these are the daily hard reality of the IDPs living here.

## **Dusheti municipality**

**Odzisi** is located in Dusheti municipality, Mchadijvari community. Although Odzisi borders the occupied territory, movement in the village is possible freely. At the end of the village, together with the Georgian police point, the so-called Mosabruni checkpoint is located, which is currently closed. It was through this checkpoint that Akhagori residents were allowed to move to the territory controlled by the Georgian Government. Residents mostly complain about the unemployment and the less promising environment for the young people. Another problem is drinking water and its quality. The internal roads of the village are also in poor state. Locals also mentioned the absence of a ritual hall, which has been under construction for about 10 years. There is no pharmacy or shop in Odzisi. As we have been told, bread can be purchased at several private houses. To buy food or basic necessities, locals have to go to a nearby village.