



EUROPEAN
ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY

Human rights in Abkhazia and South Ossetia / Tskhinvali region

DRI
2022

Human rights in Abkhazia and South Ossetia / Tskhinvali region

Table of Contents

Human rights in Abkhazia and South Ossetia / Tskhinvali region	0
Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia	3
DRI once again responds to increased number of detentions of Georgian citizens	3
We call on the government to apply effective measures to secure the release of Zaza Gakheladze... 4	
Unprecedentedly high rate of illegal detentions in Tskhinvali.....	5
Ineffective investigation of Jabiev's case, restriction of the right to a lawyer and repressions in Tskhinvali.....	6
Political opponent assaulted in Tskhinvali.....	8
KGB conducts search in the village of Midelaani in Akhagori district.....	9
DRI: The isolation policy of de facto Tskhinvali claims lives of two more people	9
Epidemic situation gets extremely difficult in Tskhinvali – The region needs humanitarian aid	10
Creeping "ethnic" cleansing of Akhagori continues	11
Blacklists and restrictions on movement in Akhagori.....	12
“Precision terror” in Akhagori.....	14
DRI: Russification of Georgian-language schools continues in Akhagori.....	14
29 years have passed since the tragedy of Dzari.....	16
Abkhazia.....	17
What is happening in Gali?	17
Attempt to evade quarantine claims lives of 3 people	18
24-year-old Anri Ateiba allegedly dies as a result of violence in Abkhazian isolator	18
Irakli Bebuga to be released from illegal imprisonment in 2029	19
Gali between Abkhazian and Russian cultural-educational policies	20
Lata tragedy.....	21
Russian soft power gets active in Gali.....	22
In the captivity of elections: Gali population between Tbilisi and Sokhumi	24
The tempting policy of the de facto authorities of Abkhazia in the Gali district	25
Preparations for tourist season in Abkhazia and their impact on the Gali district	26
Will the de facto authorities of Abkhazia start large-scale privatization?.....	27

The amount of bribe for crossing the Enguri Bridge reduced from 3,000 to 2,000 Russian rubles...	28
Corrupt and occupation aspects of energy crisis in Abkhazia	29
What we can expect from Inal Ardzinba	32
What does the fight against criminals mean in Abkhazia?	34
Preparations for tourist season in Abkhazia and their impact on the Gali district	36
Movement documents in Gali district	38
Identity and passport policy in the Gali region.....	39
After New Year, freedom of movement may be restricted for part of Gali population.....	40
Freedom of Religion in Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region.....	42
One year of the pandemic in Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region.....	43

Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia

DRI once again responds to increased number of detentions of Georgian citizens¹

12.02.2021

On February 11, the occupation regime of the occupied Tskhinvali region released illegally detained Eric Drulev.

In recent years, the so-called borderization of the former autonomous region of South Ossetia has been accompanied by the detentions of Georgian citizens on charges of "illegal border crossing". In terms of freedom of movement, the situation is concerning in the direction of Abkhazia as well. The Chorchana-Tsnelisi crisis and the Covid 19 pandemic have further worsened the situation.

In addition, both Tskhinvali and Sokhumi have a completely unnecessary strict approach towards ethnic Georgians, which is detrimental to the Georgian-Ossetian and Georgian-Abkhazian relations. The most obvious examples of such treatment are the cases of Zaza Gakheladze and Irakli Bebug. Gakheladze was sentenced to 12 years in prison for absolutely absurd charges, while Irakli Bebug was sentenced to 9 years for burning an Abkhazian flag.

These actions have a very negative effect on the attitude of the Georgian community towards Ossetians and Abkhazians and damage the prospect of a peaceful, result-oriented and direct dialogue with Tskhinvali and Sokhumi.

Currently, 4 citizens of Georgia are in illegal detention in Tskhinvali: Genadi Bestaev (sentenced to 2 years), Lasha Khetereli (1 year), Ramaz Begeluri (2 months), Zaza Gakheladze (12 years and 6 months). According to some sources, another Georgian citizen Sandro Berianidze is in the Tskhinvali pre-trial detention center. As for Abkhazia, 1 citizen of Georgia - Irakli Bebug is sentenced to 9 years in prison.

The Georgian government cannot directly influence the occupation country or the de facto authorities of Tskhinvali. However, Tbilisi and Sokhumi, Tbilisi and Tskhinvali have a positive experience of cooperation. For example, in 2016, the parties exchanged prisoners after a difficult diplomatic process. This story shows that along with the use of tools, such as hotline, provision of information to international organizations, etc, the government should also consider the use of less standard methods.

The practice of unlawful arrests and restrictions on movement is typical of conflicts. It is true that the conflicts in Cyprus, Moldova and Ukraine differ from the context of Georgia, but the best practices followed by our partner countries are worth paying attention.

The Democracy Research Institute once again calls on the Georgian authorities to pay special attention to the population living in the conflict zone. Today, keeping them in the occupied regions is of paramount importance for the further security of the state. It is true that the government has taken

¹ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/518/>

some steps in this direction, but they have not led to a qualitative improvement in the lives of the locals. Unfortunately, migration processes from these areas are intensive. Therefore, the government and the civil sector should discuss this issue together, in order to take effective measures.

We call on the government to apply effective measures to secure the release of Zaza Gakheladze²

23.06.2021

NGOs call on the Georgian authorities to step up their political and diplomatic efforts to secure the release of Zaza Gakheladze, detained in Tskhinvali, and to develop a more effective human rights policy in the occupied territories.

A Georgian citizen Zaza Gakheladze has been detained in occupied Tskhinvali for almost a year. The detention of Zaza Gakheladze in Tskhinvali for crossing the so-called border is the longest and most continuous case of illegal violation of the freedom of our citizens and creates an alarming experience. The Georgian government has so far failed to enable Zaza Gakheladze's release despite his long incarceration and many public pledges.

On July 11, 2020, Russian forces apprehended Zaza Gakheladze as he was out in the woods for agricultural purposes near the historic Skhivilo Fortress in his village in Kaspi Municipality. During the arrest, Zaza Gakheladze was shot in the leg. The de facto prosecutor's office accused Gakheladze of crossing the border illegally and assaulting troops with a hunting shotgun to take their life. The de facto Supreme Court of South Ossetia sentenced him to 12 years and 6 months in prison. Despite the military's testimony that Zaza Gakheladze did not fire shots at them, the Tskhinvali court gave him the harshest penalty possible. It's worth noting that this is the most severe penalty the de facto regime has invoked throughout the many years of unlawful incarceration of our citizens.

The increased threats of human rights violations in Tskhinvali isolators and penitentiaries add to Zaza Gakheladze's family and the public's concerns over his illegal incarceration. Inal Jabiev, a defendant in a separate case, was reportedly beaten to death at a pre-trial detention center in Tskhinvali in August 2020, and his family has yet to obtain a fair trial. The cases of Davit Basharuli and Archil Tatunashvili's deprivation of life, which occurred under the effective control of the Tskhinvali de-facto law enforcement authorities, should also be noted here.

Although the Georgian authorities have been claiming for over a year that they will utilize all international diplomatic instruments to free Zaza Gakheladze, it is apparent that these procedures do not allow for the release of an illegal prisoner and his transfer to Georgian-controlled territory.

Even though family members were allowed to see the imprisoned Zaza Gakheladze with the assistance of the Red Cross a few months ago, their worries, helplessness, and despair only increase. In the coming days, they plan to organize a peaceful protest.

² <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/644/>

It is clear that the steps taken by the government in international formats and bilateral negotiations are insufficient to resolve the issue of Zaza Gakheladze's release. In light of the ongoing negotiations, the government has not appealed to international judicial mechanisms (such as the European Court of Human Rights) to protect the interests of Zaza Gakheladze's family.

We are aware of the difficulties in protecting human rights for the Georgian state in the territory of South Ossetia during the occupation. However, despite the lack of real control over a particular territory, our state has an obligation to take all possible political, diplomatic, administrative, and legal actions, both for the people living in the region in general and for the victims of specific rights violations.

Unfortunately, human rights policy in conflict regions is not effectively institutionalized and developed in our country. Despite many years of conflict experience, we still lack international mechanisms in the conflict regions that will be effective tools for monitoring, responding to, and preventing human rights violations. Human rights policy does not adequately address the resources for communicating and negotiating with de-facto governments, which would be in the format of regular dialogue and cover human rights, security, and humanitarian issues.

Given the above, CSOs call on the Georgian authorities to:

- Strengthen the use of diplomatic, political, and legal mechanisms to facilitate the timely release of Zaza Gakheladze;
- Establish lines of communication with the de-facto regime of Tskhinvali to guarantee the inviolability of Zaza Gakheladze's life and health and his timely release;
- Based on best practices and expertise in this field, develop effective human rights policies in conflict regions.

Unprecedentedly high rate of illegal detentions in Tskhinvali³

17.12.2021

As of today, 7 people abducted from the Tbilisi-controlled area are in the Tskhinvali detention facility. According to the information published in open sources by the State Security Service of Georgia, from August 2021 until today, 10 people have been arrested for crossing the de facto border; three of them have already been released.

For its part, the press service of the de facto regime's KGB published information that in November the number of illegal crossing of the so-called border increased dramatically. According to Tskhinvali, a total of 35 people were detained, 31 - for violating the so-called state border and 4 - for violating the de facto border. As a result, 24 persons were fined, 7 were released without fines, administrative proceedings were terminated against one person.

³ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/826/>

Along with active borderization by the so-called border guards, the detention of Georgian citizens on charges of "illegal border crossing" without any legal basis has intensified in Tskhinvali and the Georgian authorities do not have a clear public reaction to it. The facts show that the Government fails to provide adequate protection and security to the population living along the occupation line.

Occupation forces arrested 3 people on October 5 and 2 others on December 10. The identities of these 5 people have not been made public, their current condition is unknown. On December 12, occupation forces abducted former military servant Mamuka Chkhikvadze from the village of Nikozi. According to unconfirmed reports, he has been beaten. Mamuka Janelidze, who was arrested on December 1 and released on December 4, also pointed to physical violence by the so-called border guards.

Gela Gochoshvili, who, according to official information, was detained for crossing the so-called border, has been illegally detained since August 14, 2021. According to the Democracy Research Institute, the Gochoshvili family lives in the Kaspi district and has family members in Akhgori as well. His arrest became known to Tbilisi in late September. According to unconfirmed information, Gochoshvili was charged with other criminal offences as well. Information about his rights situation and health is still unknown.

According to the Democracy Research Institute, the passivity of the Georgian authorities at the international level and lack of information on the grounds and number of detentions, as well as the condition of the detainees, indicate not only illegal deprivation of life, but also the violation of the fundamental rights of the detainees, whose lives and health are endangered.

The Democracy Research Institute calls on:

The Georgian authorities - to take immediate measures to clarify the rights situation of Georgian citizens detained in Tskhinvali and to provide comprehensive information to public.

The international community and the Georgian authorities - to use all the levers at their disposal to ensure the immediate release of Gela Gochoshvili, Mamuka Chkhikvadze and Georgian citizens detained in Tskhinvali. It is necessary to stress the worsening tendency in Tskhinvali and to work proactively with the international community to resolve the above-mentioned issues quickly and effectively.

Ineffective investigation of Jabiev's case, restriction of the right to a lawyer and repressions in Tskhinvali

31.05.2021

Inal Jabiev, 30, who was charged with assaulting a car of the de facto South Ossetian Interior Minister, died in the Tskhinvali pre-trial detention facility on August 28, 2020 in "uncertain circumstances", after several days of interrogation. Analysis of information related to the case reveals that Inal Jabiev allegedly became a victim of torture and inhuman treatment that led to his death. At the same time, his case revealed serious systemic problems in South Ossetia/Tskhinvali. Jabiev's case contains a whole chain of human rights violations: violation of the right to life; torture; deprivation

of the right to a fair trial; restrictions on freedom of assembly and association; restriction of the right to a lawyer, etc.

Russia exercises effective control over the entire region. It is noteworthy that an unreliable medical examination of the body of Inal Jabiev was conducted in the main forensic center No. 111 of the Russian Federation in Moscow. Ineffective investigation, violence against witnesses, an attempt to corroborate a false medical report - as if Jabiev died of a heart attack because of the withdrawal pains and not as a result of torture, are easy to see.

Inal Jabiev's case triggered large-scale protests. Pressure and harassment of those who in any way participated in the protests or supported Jabiev's family continue to this day.

- The de facto Prosecutor's Office declared Inal Jabiev's brother Atsamaz Jabiev wanted for obscene anti-state remarks made at the rally and in the Prosecutor's Office;
- Employees of South Ossetian "state institutions" were threatened with dismissal in case of participation in the protests;
- Nikolai Tskhovrebov and Gersan Kulumbegov, who were detained together with Jabiev, have been interrogated as witnesses. According to media reports, during interrogation, one of the so-called police officers inflicted severe bodily injuries to They were tortured for the second time.

Inal Jabiev was not provided with a lawyer at the time of his arrest. His wife, as his legal successor/victim, is still deprived of the right of defence. In Tskhinvali, where the standard of human rights is extremely low, having a lawyer is the only legal way to protect one's interests. However, Jabiev's family still has no access to the lawyer of their choice.

Local lawyers are mostly applied only in relation to civil or simple criminal cases, but when the case is politically sensitive, locals always prefer to bring a lawyer from Russia.

According to the information obtained by the Democracy Research Institute, the lawyer invited from Russia was threatened from Tskhinvali and was banned from entering the region. He has been waiting for accreditation for two months, but the process is delayed. Despite threats, the lawyer says he continues to work on the case. As a rule, the term for accreditation is one month for a foreign citizen. The fact that the law enforcers accused in Jabiev's case already have a lawyer from Russia, who did not face any problem in getting accreditation, once again indicates the selective approach to the case.

Violations of fundamental human rights, including the violation of Inal Jabiev's right to life and its subsequent processes, are easy to see, and the local de facto authorities are responsible for the above.

The Democracy Research Institute:

Calls on international organizations to take an interest in the investigation of Jabiev's case and intensify their work to monitor the human rights situation in South Ossetia/Tskhinvali;

Urges the Georgian authorities to make the protection and advocacy of the rights of all ethnic groups living in the occupied territories one of the highest priorities of the country's domestic and foreign policies.

Political opponent assaulted in Tskhinvali

31.08.2021

Alan Bekoev, who is actively involved in the so-called South Ossetian political life was assaulted and abused by a group of individuals in Tskhinvali in August 2021. During the last de facto parliamentary elections, the de facto central election commission did not register Bekoev as an election subject. Years ago he was a supporter of de facto presidential candidate Alla Jioeva and head of her headquarters. In addition, Bekoev is considered to be a person trusted by Jambulat Tedeev in Tskhinvali.

The group attack on Alan Bekoev may be related to his political activity on social networks; After he wrote an insulting comment about the de facto parliamentary speaker, he was contacted by some of his acquaintances from the government structures and was advised to leave Tskhinvali temporarily for security reasons. Bekoev was in Vladikavkaz for a month, but was assaulted after arriving in Tskhinvali for two days to visit his friend's grave. His car, in which he was together with his companions, was blocked by several cars, from which about 15 armed people got out, including two members of the state security service (surnames I. and K.). After getting out of the car, Bekoev was told to kneel and apologize, which they were going to videotape with a mobile phone camera. After Bekoev refused to apologize, he was severely beaten. One of the members of the state protection service shot near Bekoev's legs several times.

Bekoev's beating had many eyewitnesses, but no one dared to help him. Bekoev was forcibly put in a car and taken to the state protection service building, where he was severely beaten again. He was later taken home. As far as the Democracy Research Institute is aware, Alan Bekoev is currently receiving medical treatment in Vladikavkaz.

The Democracy Research Institute condemns violence against Alan Bekoev and calls on the Georgian authorities and international organizations to closely monitor the deteriorating human rights situation in the occupied region. At the same time, we call on the parties and co-chairs of the Geneva International Talks to discuss this issue at the next meeting in order to enable Alan Bekoev to carry out his activities without hindrance.⁴

⁴ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/716/>

KGB conducts search in the village of Midelaani in Akhagori district⁵

11.10.2021

As far as the Democracy Research Institute is informed, on October 8, 2021, a resident of the mountainous village of *Midelaani* of Akhagori municipality was detained for 48 hours without any grounds. His house was searched by the so-called South Ossetian KGB, ostensibly to seize weapons and drugs.

The detainee lives alone and is engaged in farming. His family is currently in the Tbilisi-controlled area. Locals learnt about his arrest by chance, after the detainee's cattle had been unattended for two days.

About 20 people live in the village of *Midelaani*. There is a Russian military base near the village. The Democracy Research Institute considers that the search of the house and the temporary detention of the above person indicate the intensification of Russia's repressive policy, the ultimate goal of which is to intimidate locals and make them abandon the villages of Akhagori municipality. The de facto South Ossetian authorities try to intimidate and subjugate the local population through arrests and illegal actions.

The Democracy Research Institute calls on the Georgian authorities to pay due attention to the situation in the occupied territories and to intensify efforts to stop the policy of intimidation of the remaining population in Akhagori and the violation of their rights.

DRI: The isolation policy of de facto Tskhinvali claims lives of two more people

20.01.2022

According to the Democracy Research Institute (DRI), residents of Akhagori do not have access to quality medical care, which has aggravated the health condition of many patients. In January alone, de facto Tskhinvali's isolation policy claimed the lives of two people.

In December last year, Akhagori District Hospital was inspected by representatives of the Tskhinvali de facto administration. The inspection allegedly revealed a corrupt scheme, which led to the dismissal of the hospital's chief doctor, Jemal Bedoev, and the appointment of Monika Jioeva as temporary chief doctor. Jioeva, who was transferred from Tskhinvali, was positively characterized by the population and the medical community, but since her appointment, it has become more difficult to transfer patients to Tbilisi-controlled areas. On the basis of the order of the chief doctor, patients are transferred only to Tskhinvali for treatment, although the road connecting Akhagori and Tskhinvali is especially difficult for patients due to its difficult landscape.

Due to the above circumstances, the condition of several patients living in Akhagori became critical, which in two cases ended fatally.

⁵ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/756/>

- In early January, a man under the age of 70 was admitted to Akhagori Hospital with a diagnosis of heart attack. Despite the desire of the relatives to transfer the patient to the territory controlled by Tbilisi, he was taken to Tskhinvali due to Monica Jioeva's categorical refusal. The man died while being transported to Tskhinvali.
- In January, a woman from Akhagori was not allowed to be transferred to Tbilisi despite her request. Instead, she was transferred to Tskhinvali. After surgery, the patient's condition worsened. Only after that, she was taken to the Tbilisi-controlled area. The patient, who is still in critical condition, continues her treatment in Tbilisi.
- On January 12, a man from Akhagori died in Tskhinvali after the chief doctor of the hospital did not allow him to be transferred to Tbilisi despite being in critical condition.

According to the Democracy Research Institute, the ban on free movement of Akhagori residents violates fundamental human rights, for which the Russian Federation and the de facto Tskhinvali regime bear full responsibility. However, this does not exempt the Georgian Government from its obligation to take care of its own citizens living in the occupied territories.

Accordingly, the Democracy Research Institute calls on the Georgian authorities to use all formats and opportunities to protect the rights of people living in the occupied territories.

Epidemic situation gets extremely difficult in Tskhinvali – The region needs humanitarian aid

02.11.2021

The de facto administration of South Ossetia decided to close the "border" with Georgia on February 27, 2019, citing the first officially confirmed case of coronavirus in the Tbilisi-controlled territory. It has been a year and eight months since the communication and movement between Tskhinvali and Tbilisi has been reduced to a historical minimum. The Democracy Research Institute (DRI) considers that the pandemic is being used by the de facto authorities to isolate the region from Tbilisi, which, in addition to restricting freedom of movement, has extremely negative effects on the health and life of locals.

Access to medical services, medicines, testing and vaccination remains a serious problem in Tskhinvali. Population lives in complete physical and informational isolation, where isolation is not a means of protecting from the virus but distancing from the controlled territory of Tbilisi. The situation on the ground is much worse than the de facto administration officially acknowledges. The cases of infection and deaths caused by the infection had been hidden for two years in Tskhinvali. They started to publish statistics just a few days ago. Population suspects that the number of infected people is much higher than the official data. According to official information, 317 people were tested for coronavirus on October 29 and 77 of them tested positive for the virus, while the death toll has risen to 134 since the beginning of the pandemic.

According to Marina Kochieva, so-called South Ossetia's chief sanitary doctor, "The disease is spreading throughout the region. We have a serious shortage of medical staff. Doctors are overtired. We tried to bring doctors from Vladikavkaz, but their hospitals are also overcrowded and there is a shortage of doctors." There is not safe environment for human life and health at the local clinic, which has been declared a red zone. Severe patients are transferred to Vladikavkaz in order to keep the death statistics of South Ossetia low. Infected people in Tskhinvali hospital openly talk about their serious condition on social networks. According to them, there are no more places, beds are placed in the corridor and patients have to find free places on their own. The sanitary situation is poor at the medical facility, with more than 20 people using one shared bathroom. There are not enough medications and safety regulations are not observed.

The de facto South Ossetian KGB manages lists/queues of people wanting to move to the Tbilisi-controlled territory. However, even in case of health problems, obtaining a permit is associated with corruption.

As of today, the situation is especially bad in Akhagori. In a settlement with a total of 800 inhabitants, up to 20 new cases of infection are officially reported every day. Due to the lack of appropriate doctors on the spot, Akhagori hospital is practically empty. Patients are either treated at home or transferred to Tskhinvali. In an interview released by news agencies, the chief doctor of the Akhagori district hospital, Jemal Bedoev, says that the situation is much worse and the number of infected people is higher. 2000 doses of Russian vaccine Sputnik were handed over to Tskhinvali, but due to the violation of storage conditions, the vaccine became unusable. No one, nor even the hospital medical staff, has been vaccinated with this particular vaccine in Akhagori.

The Democracy Research Institute calls on the Georgian authorities, with the involvement of international community, to immediately draw up and effectively implement a plan to manage the Tskhinvali epidemic. To increase access to quality health care, it is important to open crossing points that have been closed in recent years and to establish a medical vaccination and testing point near the crossing points; If possible, Tskhinvali should be provided with vaccines, medical equipment and medicines. If desired, Covid patients should be able to receive treatment at hospitals in Tbilisi-controlled areas.

Creeping "ethnic" cleansing of Akhagori continues⁶

03.02.2021

The humanitarian situation in the occupied Akhagori district has deteriorated sharply since the Chorchana-Tsnelisi crisis in August 2019, when the Georgian authorities opened a police post in the area under its control (in the village of Chorchana) in order to ensure the security of the local population. Tskhinvali demanded the abolition of the post as an ultimatum, but no agreement has been reached and Akhagori and its population have been completely cut from the outside world. Tskhinvali de-facto authorities' policy towards Akhagori residents has changed over time. As a result of the 2008 war and the occupation of Akhagori, many local ethnic Georgians and Ossetians left the

⁶ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/505/>

area. Some of them, however, soon returned. During the so-called presidency of Eduard Kokoity and Leonid Tibilov, the residents of Akhagori were able to enjoy freedom of movement, although with obstacles. They could move to the rest of Georgia with special documents. Accordingly, they were able to enjoy the Georgian healthcare system, receive appropriate assistance and be involved in trade. The situation sharply deteriorated after Anatoly Bibilov came to power. Education in the Georgian language has been restricted in schools, detentions on charges of crossing the so-called border have become frequent, bureaucratic barriers have been imposed for obtaining the right to movement. The situation was especially aggravated by the Chorchana-Tsnelisi crisis, after which the de facto authorities of Anatoly Bibilov restricted the freedom of movement of the Akhagori population in order to exert pressure on Tbilisi. The complete isolation put Akhagori in a humanitarian catastrophe, which serves to make the local population abandon Akhagori and can be called a creeping "ethnic" cleansing.

Over the past year and a half, as a result of summing up different sources, we can conclude that the number of the Akhagori population has decreased significantly. Locals do not have access to quality health services, which made their situation particularly difficult during the pandemic. At the same time, due to restrictions on freedom of movement, Akhagori residents are unable to move to areas controlled by the central Government of Georgia and receive appropriate assistance. As a result, many families decided to leave the district.

At the end of 2020, due to the sharply deteriorating migration processes, the de facto authorities of Tskhinvali began to issue special movement permits. However, the process is difficult and discriminatory. The so-called black list of the de facto authorities includes about a hundred people, who, for unknown reasons, will not be able to get permits. Representatives of the de facto authorities have not made comments on the issue. It is worth noting that a large part of those on the list are employed in the public service.

Regardless of the motive of Tskhinvali's policy on freedom of movement, it is discriminatory and restricts fundamental human rights, as a result of which, the local population are forced to abandon the district.

In view of all the above, it is important for the Georgian authorities to mobilize the efforts of the international community so that the de facto authorities of Tskhinvali and the Russian Federation, which exercises effective control over this area, stop restricting the rights of the Akhagori population. In addition, the Georgian Government must develop a special aid package for Akhagori residents in a timely manner so that they can enjoy basic living conditions, in the light of the long-term isolation, without leaving their homes.

Blacklists and restrictions on movement in Akhagori⁷

08.06.2021

⁷ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/geo/620/>

In late May, the de facto authorities of South Ossetia tightened restrictions imposed on Akhagori residents. If up to now obtaining "propusk" (pass) to get to the rest of Georgia had been a long and painful process for most of the residents of Akhagori, it has now become impossible to obtain such a permit. The Akhagori district administration published a blacklist of people who were refused to get a movement permit for an indefinite period. The list includes up to 300 names. The criteria or purpose of the refusal are unknown.

According to the Democracy Research Institute, holders of "Ossetian passports" were able to cross the so-called border without "propusk". However, now they have also been blacklisted. They are not aware, on the one hand, of the reason for the refusal and, on the other hand, of the impact the above will have on their movement to the rest of Georgia. The blacklists further strengthen the atmosphere of fear in the region.

The blacklists are attached by another decision of the de facto authorities of South Ossetia, which concerns cars with Georgian license plates. Owners of such vehicles are allowed to drive to the rest of Georgia, but they are not allowed to bring the cars back. At the same time, the fate of those who do not drive to the rest of Georgia by cars with Georgian license plates is unclear, as it seems that they will not be able to move around Tskhinvali because of the Georgian license plates. In this case, not only the owners of the cars will be affected, but also those who used these cars as public transport. Due to this restriction, Akhagori will be cut off from the villages whose elderly population needs cheap transport to receive basic social and health services.

According to the Democracy Research Institute, the goal of the policy of the South Ossetian de facto authorities, which artificially aggravates the social situation and marginalizes the region, is likely to bring the population of Akhagori to the point where they will be forced to abandon their homes. This assumption is based on the already identified trend. Recently, the Democracy Research Institute has learned that a teacher from Akhagori, who was under house arrest, was allowed to leave Akhagori without the prospect of returning. In addition, the 25 young people, who graduated from school this year (a total of 519 throughout South Ossetia) have the right to travel to the rest of Georgia and study in Georgians educational institutions, although most likely without the right to return to the region.

This situation shows the short-sightedness of the de facto authorities of South Ossetia and the ambiguity of the perception of the real needs of the society. The so-called South Ossetian Republic, since the 2008 war, has received an unprecedented amount of Russian financial aid (per capita), but this could not stop the depopulation of the territory. On the one hand, the ethnic cleansing in the Liakhvi Gorge, and on the other hand, the lack of prospects caused by deliberate isolation from the rest of Georgia, completely changed the demographics of South Ossetia. Even Ethnic Ossetians travel to the Russian Federation and leave their homes, albeit with the prospect of returning. The policy that creates equally intolerable conditions for ethnic Georgians and Ossetians in Akhagori is illogical. The Democracy Research Institute calls on the Georgian authorities and international actors to highlight and respond to similar trends both in the Geneva format and in official statements. It is critically important to constantly and proactively inform the public and international actors about the ongoing violations.

“Precision terror” in Akhalgori⁸

14.05.2021

The Democracy Research Institute is closely monitoring the recent situation in Akhalgori. Unfortunately, due to the lack of Georgian Government’s effective control over the territory of South Ossetia and the systematic disregard for human rights standards, it is difficult to disclose the names and stories of specific individuals, so the Democracy Research Institute is limited to general information only.

The de facto authorities of South Ossetia continue to harass Georgian representatives of the education and culture spheres living in Akhalgori and to restrict their freedom of movement. In some cases, the movement ban applies not only to movement in the direction of Tbilisi, but also to crossing the border of the Russian Federation. In April, a Georgian teacher was banned from traveling to Russia and is being prosecuted on grounds unknown to the public.

According to the Democracy Research Institute, restrictions on freedom of movement are not the only form of pressure. The de facto security service of South Ossetia has recently shown interest towards representatives of the cultural sphere as well. In particular, an experienced cultural worker was summoned for questioning relating to the alleged removal of artefacts of cultural and historical significance from South Ossetia.

It is important to assess whether these two cases of persecution and pressure, which took place in Akhalgori in recent weeks, may be seen as a tendency of "precision terror" directed against members of the local Georgian educational and creative intelligentsia. Tamar Mearakishvili, an Akhalgori-based teacher and civil activist, has the longest history of similar persecution and pressure, and her trial resumed last month after a fourteen-month break.

After the 2008 war, the Akhalgori district has been virtually abandoned by locals and the small part of the population that remains there obviously depends on the local educational and creative intelligentsia in terms of realizing and accessing their cultural and educational rights.

Destruction of the latter obviously means a denial of local Georgian population’s cultural and educational rights.

DRI: Russification of Georgian-language schools continues in Akhalgori⁹

29.09.2021

On September 6, the schools of the Akhalgori district, which had been Georgian-language until 2017, started teaching in Russian in 1-8 grades. If the process continues in this way, schools will become fully Russian-language in 3 years.

⁸ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/583/>

⁹ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/742/>

The "Russification" of Akhagori Georgian-language educational institutions has been underway since 2017, which means that the languages of education in the district's schools and kindergartens are Russian and Ossetian only. According to the decision made by the de facto authorities of South Ossetia in 2017, Georgian schools are subject to the general curriculum developed in South Ossetia; textbooks and curricula meet the general education standard of the de facto republic; the Georgian language is just one of the subjects.

Until 2017, the language of education in eight Georgian schools of the Akhagori district had been Georgian and the textbooks and curricula had been certified by the Ministry of Education of Georgia. In 2017, representatives of the de facto authorities announced that the curriculum of Georgian schools could not fit the so-called South Ossetian reality, focusing on a problem with teaching history. According to the de facto authorities of South Ossetia, the lessons were biased – not in the so-called South Ossetian interests. After examining the textbooks, the de facto authorities came to a "conclusion" that the history textbook was directed against so-called South Ossetia as a "state". Consequently, the textbook was removed from the curriculum; In order to control the situation, the curriculum that was taught in other schools of South Ossetia has been introduced in Georgian schools as well.

According to the Democracy Research Institute (DRI), the Akhagori district has 17 first-graders in the current academic year, namely, Akhagori Russian high school has 9, Akhagori high school, which was Georgian until 2017 has 3, the school of the village of Orchosni has 3, the school in the village of Ikoti has 1 and the school in the village of Korinti has 1 first-grader. Other Ossetian villages in the district, such as Zakori, or even a large village like Tsinagara, have no first-graders. A similar situation in the latter is caused by labour migration, mainly to Vladikavkaz and Akhagori. At this stage, nothing is known about the school in the village of Akhmaji, although it will most likely be closed in the near future, as the school did not admit any students this year. As far as the Democracy Research Institute is informed, the only first-grader living in the village was enrolled by the parents in the Akhagori Georgian high school instead of Akhmaji.

According to DRI, the schools of the Akhagori district met the start of a new school year unprepared in terms of infrastructure and health care. No minor cosmetic repairs or disinfection were carried out in the classrooms before the start of the studies, even though the above had been a common practice in previous years. This creates an unfavorable situation for both students and staff of educational institutions, especially given the pandemic.

The above facts prove that the policy of pressure on the ethnic Georgian population and discrimination on ethnic grounds has been deliberately pursued in the occupied region for years. The clearest example of the above is the restriction of access to education in the mother tongue.

DRI calls on stakeholders to use all available mechanisms to end discriminatory practices in the Akhagori district and to restore access to the right to get education in a mother tongue in all educational institutions.

29 years have passed since the tragedy of Dzari¹⁰

20.05.2021

Today, May 20, the Ossetian people recall the most horrific date of the 1991-1992 Georgian-Ossetian conflict. 29 years ago, a convoy traveling from South Ossetia to North Ossetia was attacked and fired by unidentified individuals in the village of Dzari in the Java district. 32 people were killed, including children; 16 were injured. The violence of unheard brutality in Dzari left us with an incurable wound on both sides of the conflict.

Due to the distrust and alienation created by the war, neither in the 90s nor today can we share grief and mourn together. However, we want our Ossetian compatriots, friends and relatives to know that the Dzari tragedy is a tragedy of Georgia, first of all, due to the fact that such a thing happened, we accepted it, tolerated it and could not ensure justice for those who lost family members. Secondly, none of the authorities have taken measures to inform all the citizens of the country of this calamity. Thirdly, none of the authorities deemed it necessary to personally offer condolences to the families who lost their mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters and children. Fourthly, even today we cannot share our sincere condolences with our Ossetian compatriots and tell them that their pain, which cannot be alleviated by our words, is a heavy pain for us too.

We have high hopes that our Ossetian friends, who are alienated from the rest of Georgia, will hear our voice and know that the massacre in Dzari is a tragedy of Georgia. With this statement, the Democracy Research Institute reminds all citizens of our divided country that it is inadmissible to repeat such a crime. For this we call on the Georgian authorities to:

1. State its official position on the Dzari tragedy
2. Establish a parliamentary commission to review and complete the investigation launched years ago
3. Ensure the investigation of the Dzari tragedy to identify all the perpetrators and to bring them to justice
4. Inform Georgian citizens about the Dzari tragedy, who have the right to know what happened on May 20, 1992 in the village of Dzari, Java district
5. In order to immortalize the memory of the victims of the Dzari tragedy, declare May 20 as a Day of Remembrance to honor all those who died on both sides of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict.

Conflicts start easily, but are very difficult to resolve. Mistrust and irreconcilability with each other, resentment and pain of the past do not allow us to take the past and the policies conditioned by the past to a human, moral dimension and to have clear conscience relating to specific cases of crime, cruelty and injustice.

¹⁰ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/588/>

The memory of people who died in the massacre on May 20, 1992 obliges us to be righteous before them and their families. We believe that loud tribute to the memory of innocent victims will help us understand each other and begin the process of rebuilding trust together.

Abkhazia

What is happening in Gali?¹¹

03.03.2021

For years, part of young people living in Gali have been choosing higher education institutions of Tbilisi to get higher education. The above has drawn the attention of the de facto authorities. On February 23, Inal Gablia, de-facto Minister of Education, visited Gali and met with public school teachers and representatives of school administrations. According to the contact person of the Democracy Research Institute, the topic of discussion at the meeting was the youth of Gali, who choose to go to Tbilisi instead of Sokhumi for getting higher education. According to the Minister, the de facto authorities are negotiating with the Russian Federation to achieve full funding for higher education in Russia for young people from the Gali district. Under the agreement, Gali school leavers will be able to get full funding for their higher education in Russia. Gablia expressed hope that this initiative will reduce the number of people wishing to study in Tbilisi. This approach of the de facto authorities has become especially active for the last 3 years. However, at this stage, a large number of young people from Gali want to continue their education at Tbilisi universities. The Democracy Research Institute believes that if implemented, the educational policy of the de facto authorities of Abkhazia will further reduce the opportunities of Gali residents to have contact with the Georgian party.

Among other issues, the occupied Gali has power supply problems. With the Enguri HPP closed for major repairs, the attempts of secret cryptocurrency mining has dramatically increased electricity consumption. According to locals, there will be a severe energy crisis in Abkhazia unless additional resources are allocated for the occupied region.

Gali residents are also worried about the difficult serious criminal situation. There are frequent cases of racketeering against store owners. In addition to the criminal groups, the Abkhazian militia also demands its "fee".

Some positive developments have been observed in the field of health care. Within a year after the start of the pandemic, people coming from Abkhazia used to be taken to a quarantine area where they had to stay for 12 days. About a week ago, in response to the insistent demand of the Gali population, the quarantine period was reduced to 5 days, which partially alleviated the situation of the Gali population. As a result, mobility from Gali increased and it became easier to transport medicines to

¹¹ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/533/>

Abkhazia. In addition, according to the contact person of the Democracy Research Institute, the field post located near the Enguri checkpoint plays a positive role.

The Georgian Government needs to pay special attention to the needs of the population of the occupied regions. The rights of ethnic Georgians are least protected in Abkhazia. Therefore, it is important for the Georgian authorities to take effective steps in a timely manner to alleviate the grave humanitarian situation created by the occupation, conflict and pandemic.

Attempt to evade quarantine claims lives of 3 people¹²

07.04.2021

According to media reports, three people drowned in the Enguri River while trying to reach the Georgian-controlled territory from the occupied region of Abkhazia through a bypass road.

The above is not the first case when people trying to enter the territory controlled by Georgia lose their lives. Citizens living in Abkhazia try to enter the Georgian-controlled territory in similar dangerous way in order to avoid a five-day mandatory quarantine.

The Democracy Research Institute calls on the Georgian Government to immediately lift quarantine that puts people's lives at risk.

24-year-old Anri Ateiba allegedly dies as a result of violence in Abkhazian isolator¹³

20.09.2021

On August 12, Anri Ateiba, born in 1996, was found unconscious in the temporary detention isolator of the de facto Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Gagra district. The young man died on September 14 after being in a coma for a month.

According to the de facto Ministry of Internal Affairs of Abkhazia, on July 5, Ateiba resisted the Head of the Gagra Criminal Investigation Department after being requested to undergo a drug test. Due to the above incident, Ateiba was arrested on August 7 and was charged with violence and endangering the life and health of the Head of the Gagra Criminal Investigation Department.[1]

On August 8, 2021, Anri Ateiba's lawyer applied to the Gagra District Prosecutor's Office, claiming that his client had multiple injuries to his body due to beatings and torture, and requested a forensic medical examination. However at 1:30 a.m. on August 12, 2021, Ateiba was found unconscious in a cell and was taken to a hospital where he died a month later.[2] According to the de facto Ministry of Internal Affairs of occupied Abkhazia, the detainee tried to commit suicide.

The de facto authorities of Abkhazia are full responsible for the fundamental human rights violations, including the torture and inhuman treatment of Anri Ateiba and violation of his right to life.

¹² <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/561/>

¹³ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/731/>

Democracy Research Institute:

Calls on international organizations - to take an interest in the investigation of the case of Anri Ateiba and to intensify efforts to monitor human rights situation in Abkhazia.

Calls on the Georgian authorities - to make protection/advocacy of the rights of all ethnic groups living in the occupied territories one of the priorities of the country's domestic and foreign policies.

[Irakli Bebuga to be released from illegal imprisonment in 2029¹⁴](#)

[30.09.2021](#)

One year ago, on September 30, 2020, Georgian citizen Irakli Bebuga was arrested for burning an Abkhazian flag in Gali. The maximum sentence for the act shall be one year in prison, although the charge against Bebuga was artificially aggravated, alleging that he had a hand grenade and an automatic firearm at home. As a result, he was sentenced to nine years in prison.

Irakli Bebuga is a church servant and is characterized as a positive person in the Gali district. In a publicly spread video allegedly showing his questioning, he confirms the burning of the flag and explains that he is not against Abkhazians. On the contrary, he believes that the date of the division of ethnic Georgians and Abkhazians should not be marked and he still supports friendly relations.[1]

Irakli Bebuga's imprisonment and severe punishment are still lobbied by local radical groups. According to the information available to the Democracy Research Institute (DRI), it was said at the meeting held at the Gali House of Culture on June 7, 2021 that Bebuga should have been publicly shot by a firing squad in the square. Former de-facto Minister of Internal Affairs Aslan Kobakhia said in his speech: "I would shot him on the spot, the residents of Gali should lynch him ...".

An Abkhazian flag was damaged in Abkhazia in 2017 as well. An ethnic Armenian young person living in Gagra insulted the Abkhazian flag then and posted the relevant video on social media. This was followed by a stir in the society. The young man and his father publicly apologized for burning the flag, which turned out to be a sufficient punishment.[2]

According to the family members of Irakli Bebuga, the illegal prisoner has health problems, does not have access to medical services and his life and health are in danger.[3]

The Democracy Research Institute calls on the Georgian authorities and the international community to use all available political and legal mechanisms to ensure the immediate release of Irakli Bebuga from the unlawful imprisonment.

¹⁴ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/744/>

Gali between Abkhazian and Russian cultural-educational policies¹⁵

20.04.2021

The cultural and educational policies of Russia and the de facto government of Abkhazia are increasingly taking the form of deep integration of the region of Abkhazia into the Russian space. The soft power of Russia and compliant educational policy of the de facto government of Abkhazia are consistently intensifying in the Gali district and are aimed at further distancing the Georgians living in the district from the rest of Georgia.

On March 25, Gudisa Agrba, de facto Minister of Culture of Abkhazia, during his visit to the capital of the Russian Federation, signed the so-called 2021 action plan for cultural cooperation between the so-called Republic of Abkhazia and Russia. According to Russian Minister of Culture Olga Lyubimova, the Russian Federation "pays special attention to the development and deepening of cultural relations with the Republic of Abkhazia."^[1] According to a source of the Democracy Research Institute, two high-ranking officials from the Russian Ministry of Culture visited Abkhazia a week after signing the above agreement. The agreement reached in Moscow was covered by the Abkhazian media and the relevant information was posted on the website of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, but the visit of Russian high-ranking officials to Sokhumi remained beyond the media spotlight.

The Democracy Research Institute does not know what was discussed between the de facto government and the Russian guests, but it is expected that the popularization of the Russian language and culture will intensify throughout Abkhazia, including in Gali. It is also expected that the cultural ensembles of Gali will be involved in cultural events in Russia, which will likely bring them financial support. In addition, Russia may open the door of its cultural and educational institutions to Gali youth, which once again indicates that Russia is trying to change the public attitudes and gain support in Gali.

Along with these events, on April 5, Ada Kvarchelia, Chief Specialist of the Abkhazian Language at the de facto Ministry of Education and Language Policy of Abkhazia, visited Gali. In an interview with Radio Sputnik, she cited compliance of schools with epidemiological regulations as the main motive for her visit. However, in the same interview, she noted the need to create an Abkhazian-Russian educational space in Gali schools.^[2] According to the source at the Democracy Research Institute, the purpose of Ada Kvarchelia's visit was to introduce compulsory teaching of the Abkhazian language in Gali. To this end, the de facto Ministry of Education and Language Policy of Abkhazia intends to make the examination of the Abkhazian language necessary for obtaining a school certificate. This will create uniquely difficult situation for Georgian students who plan to enter higher education institutions operating not only in Abkhazia, but also in the rest of Georgia, where the submission of a school certificate is a necessary condition.

It seems that the education policy of Abkhazia is provided to the Georgian population of Gali not only in the language of an ultimatum. According to the source at the Democracy Research Institute,

¹⁵ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/573/>

Ada Kvarchalia's visit to Gali was soon followed by a visit by a delegation from the Abkhazian State University of Sokhumi. The delegation was led by Vice-Rector Julieta Adleiba. According to the source, the meeting was held without journalists, which indicates that the purpose of the visit was not to demonstrate that they talked to the locals in an administrative tone. On the contrary, it was desirable for them to discuss the whole package of "generous" offers for the youth of Gali in a friendly atmosphere. These offers included admission to the Abkhazian State University in Sokhumi, which will allow young people from Gali to continue their education at universities in the Russian Federation after three years of study. Obtaining internationally recognized diplomas will give them opportunities to establish themselves in the Russian labour and employment market on an equal basis with Russian citizens.

The events developed in the last two weeks clearly show the intensification of Russian soft power against the Georgian population of Gali. For people in isolation, which is exacerbated by the pandemic regulations, there are opportunities that, on the one hand, will allow them to escape isolation, but on the other hand, shed light on the prospect of further distancing Georgians from the rest of Georgia.

Lata tragedy¹⁶

The tragedy that took place near the village of Lata in the Gulripshi district of Abkhazia on December 14, 1992 became one of the most tragic events of the fratricidal war. A shell fired from the territory controlled by the military units of the State Council of Georgia shot down a helicopter flying from Tkvarcheli, killing 87 people on board, including 35 children and 8 pregnant women.

The war-related horror made the Lata tragedy part of war statistics. Today, 29 years after the tragedy, we must realize the gravity of this day for the Abkhazian society. Nothing can bring back any Georgian or Abkhaz lives lost during the war. However, we have to realize our mistakes and guilt and, where possible, remedy them. Offering sincere condolences to the Abkhaz side and a proper examination and assessment of the Lata tragedy would be important steps towards rebuilding trust.

We would like to reach our voice to our Abkhazian friends, who are separated from the rest of Georgia by the pain of war, and tell them that the Lata tragedy is a tragedy of Georgia. With this statement, the Democracy Research Institute reminds all citizens of our divided country that such crimes are not allowed to be repeated.

To this end we call on the Georgian Government to:

1. Express an official position on the Lata tragedy;
2. Ensure the investigation of the Lata tragedy to identify all responsible persons involved in it;
3. Ensure that Georgian citizens are informed about the Lata tragedy;

¹⁶ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/824/>

4. Declare December 14 a remembrance day in order to immortalize the memory of the victims of the Lata tragedy and pay tribute to all the civilians who died during the 1992-93 war in Abkhazia.

Russian soft power gets active in Gali¹⁷

17.09.2021

Problems relating to documentation in the Gali district

The population of Gali has been facing problems relating to documentation since 2017. As most of them refuse to renounce their Georgian citizenship, they cannot receive the so-called Abkhazian citizenship either. As a result, due to the lack of documents, they have been deprived of political rights, including the right to vote, and have encountered problems in terms of movement as well.

In 2013, the de facto authorities of Abkhazia suspended the issuance of Abkhazian passports to the ethnic Georgian population on the grounds that the process could lead to the "Georgianization of Abkhazia." In 2017, the de facto administration decided to withdraw old Abkhazian passports and replace form No. 9 with a residence permit. The de facto authorities of Abkhazia made the Georgian population choose between Georgian citizenship and Abkhazian passports.

However, since the majority of the population refused the above choice, the de facto structures gave residence permits to a part of the population of the Gali district in order to prevent a collapse. However, the attempts to win over the ethnic Georgian population has not stopped. The Gali residents have been offered a number of benefits in exchange for renouncing their Georgian citizenship, including the so-called privileges when joining the Murzakhani Abkhazians organization, as well as Russian passports, but in vain.

As far as the Democracy Research Institute (DRI) has been informed, currently the target of the de facto authorities are young residents of Gali. On August 27, the head of the de facto administration, Konstantin Pilia, and the de facto deputy defence minister, Oleg Arshba, who were visiting Gali, told young people summoned to the commissariat that in case of serving in the Abkhazian army and refusing to "go to Georgia", they would get Abkhazian passports, enjoy certain privileges in universities and receive Russian passports in the future. To emphasize that the promise was real, on August 30, Abkhazian "passports" were handed over to 30 residents of Gali, who passed compulsory military service in the "Abkhazian Army" in 2010-2020. As far as the DRI is informed, this is an attempt by the de facto administration of Abkhazia to counter strong Georgian influence in the Gali district. However, in all probability, this attempt will also be fruitless. Military service in the "Abkhazian army" does not look attractive due to widespread systemic problems – the practice of extorting money from soldiers and violence against them, as well as ethnic discrimination against the residents of Gali.

The head of the Abkhazian administration in occupied Gali, Konstantin Pilia, also spoke about the issue of passportization in an August 20 interview with Sputnik Abkhazia.^[2] According to him, it is a

¹⁷ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/729/>

"catastrophe" that the ethnic Georgians of the district, who constitute the vast majority of the population, do not have the opportunity to get "Abkhazian Passports" or study at the "Abkhazian State University". According to Pilia, this year, only 17 out of 223 schools leavers of the Gali district continued to study at the "Abkhazian State University", whereas more than half of the Gali budget is spent on education. Pilia also noted that those who have Georgian passports should not hope for Abkhazian citizenship. At the same time, he said that even those who want to renounce Georgian citizenship and obtain "Abkhazian citizenship" cannot do so, as the Ministry of Justice refuses to suspend their Georgian citizenship in exchange for Abkhazian citizenship on the grounds that such a state does not exist. According to Pilia, this issue should be resolved through joint efforts, because "those who sincerely want to be a citizen and a patriot of Abkhazia should be given such a chance."

According to the information available to the DRI, at a closed meeting with teachers on September 1, Gali school principals reprimanded teachers over the fact that only 17 school leavers of the Gali district continued their studies at the "Abkhazian State University". This figure is particularly alarming for the de facto administration of Abkhazia given the great efforts and resources devoted to reducing Georgian influence in the Gali district. The school principals blamed the poor work of teachers for the result. Unfortunately, this discussion creates grounds to think that pressure on school leavers will continue in the coming years.

Visit paid by the Center for the Protection of Russian Compatriots in Abkhazia to Gali

Representatives of the Russian Center for the Protection of Russian Compatriots in Abkhazia, Elena Zhilinskaya and Albina Topchyan, visited the Gali district a few weeks ago and met with representatives of the Gali administration. It was said at the meeting that the organization will open an office in Gali, where all Russian citizens or persons holding a residence permit in Russia, including Georgian nationals, would be able to enjoy free legal aid, including the services of a lawyer. If the population wishes, they will provide legal assistance in obtaining Russian passports. According to the representatives of the organization, considering the weak judicial system in Abkhazia, their goal is to promote human rights in the region. According to them, the Gali district will have the opportunity to get involved in the Russian public life. To this end, a polling station will be opened in the Gali district for the Russian Duma elections, where citizens will have the opportunity to vote for the party of their choice. Elections will be held on September 19, 2021. In addition to Gali, polling stations are planned to be opened in Sokhumi, Gagra, Bichvinta, Gudauta, Ochamchire and Tkvarcheli.

Based on the above information, we can assume that Russia is pursuing a policy aimed at increasing the support of the people of Gali towards Russia. Given that the Georgian Government's access to the Georgian population of Gali is extremely limited and that the isolation of the region has increased during the Covid-pandemic, the strengthening of Russia's soft power can be seen as a serious challenge, especially considering that this process has been very intense recently. Such a policy is aimed at increasing pro-Russian sentiments among the Georgian population remaining in Abkhazia, which may be a precondition for deepening and strengthening Russia's annexation of Abkhazia.

In this situation, it is important for the central Government of Georgia to use all the levers and develop special programmes tailored to the needs of the people of Gali, which will ensure the improvement of the rights situation of the local population.

In the captivity of elections: Gali population between Tbilisi and Sokhumi¹⁸ 10.11.2021

The residents of Gali are seen as unreliable citizens by the de facto authorities of Abkhazia for their ethnicity and by the central government of Georgia for their "undesirable" political activism, which was particularly evident during the local elections.

Tensions were high on both sides of the Enguri Bridge during the pre-election period. This tension became especially alarming during the second round of elections. Residents of the Gali district, who have daily activities or periodic necessities in Zugdidi and moved to an area controlled by the central government, found that the Enguri crossing point was closed by the Abkhaz side. The de facto government limited itself to making general statements about the Covid situation, however, many residents of Gali believe that the "temporary" measure was linked to the elections. This view is reinforced by the fact that the situation with regard to the spread of the virus has not stabilized, although the crossing point was officially opened on November 1. According to the information available to the Democracy Research Institute, de facto Abkhaz border guards were saying in private conversations that the decision to close the "border" was made at Tbilisi's request.

Many residents of Gali are registered in Zugdidi in order to receive public services in an area controlled by the central government. Registration in Zugdidi gives them the opportunity to be involved in political processes and exercise their civil and political rights. It is difficult to speak about the loyalty of the population of Gali to any Georgian political party. Nevertheless, residents of Gali think that some circles of the central government perceived the political activism of Gali as a threat due to the fear of a possible advantage of the opposition forces in Zugdidi. Perhaps this is why an opinion was raised that the closed "border" prevented the mobilization of the supposedly opposition-minded voters.

This view is reinforced by the reports that supporters of the ruling party asked residents of Gali to hand over their Georgian ID cards, which was refused by most of them. As far as the Democracy Research Institute is aware, individuals with criminal backgrounds were actively involved in this process and moved freely across Gali and its villages.

Georgian legislation criminalizes obstruction of the expression of the free will of voters in elections, referendums and plebiscites. The artificial obstruction of the local population from participating in the local self-government elections by closing the Enguri Bridge is alarming and requires a proper explanation from the central government of Georgia – about who obstructed the freedom of movement of Gali residents during the elections and why.

¹⁸ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/790/>

The tempting policy of the de facto authorities of Abkhazia in the Gali district

01.12.2021

The integration of the only ethnic Georgian enclave remaining in Abkhazia, the Gali district, into the economic and political space of the de facto republic is still considered a matter of urgency. Although some attempts were made in this direction during the rule of late de facto President Sergei Bagapsh and former de facto President Alexander Ankvab, such steps have always been viewed with skepticism by Abkhazian right-wing patriotic parties. The result is that the Gali issue is not a visible part of the Abkhazian political agenda and requires special attention from outside observers.

De-facto President Aslan Bzhania's visit to the Gali district on November 24 was important in this regard. According to official sources, the visit was part of scheduled visits to the districts of the de facto republic of Abkhazia. Bzhania visited Gali after the Gudauta, Gulrifshi and Ochamchire districts. Officially, the reason for arriving in Gali was to visit social infrastructure and economic facilities. Aslan Bzhania also visited the Enguri crossing point and was assured of its proper functioning. However, according to the information available to the Democracy Research Institute, the informal part of this visit was much more important.

According to unofficial reports, during the November 24 visit, Aslan Bzhania met with three young people from Gali, who declared themselves as Abkhazians from Samurzakhano and chose to study at higher education institutions on the territory of the Russian Federation. In order to facilitate their movement and demonstrate their advantages compared to other residents of Gali, they were given the so-called Abkhazian and Russian passports. The de-facto President promised similar gifts to all the young residents of Gali, who declared themselves as Abkhazians from Samurzakhano and wanted to go to Russia to study.

Georgians in Gali are particularly affected by the attacks on their identity through the tempting policy. Every resident of Gali who, for a number of reasons, renounces his/her Georgian ethnicity is considered to be "sold". The de facto President's meeting with such people is a sign to the locals that the de facto authorities of Abkhazia will continue its policy of tempting even more residents of Gali to recognize themselves as Abkhazians from Samurzakhano.

It is unfortunate that the de facto authorities of Abkhazia continue to divide the population of the territories under its control on the basis of ethnicity, thus irritating a significant part of them - Georgians living in Gali. Such a policy deepens the internal dividing lines in the Gali district and creates mistrust between those who want Georgian ethnicity and those who give it up. And finally, what will this policy give to the future of Abkhazia, if the policy of identity implies the replacement of one ethnicity with another, and if the change of ethnic boundaries is justified by any method on the basis of this principle? The de facto authorities of Abkhazia, on the one hand, irritate people and, on the other hand, lower the moral standard, which in pragmatic terms will not play in favor of the idea of Abkhazian independence. Passportation and cultural-educational tools do not contribute to the strengthening of Abkhazia's identity as a country, but encourage the soft power of the Russian Federation.

Preparations for tourist season in Abkhazia and their impact on the Gali district¹⁹

06.05.2021

Tourism accounts for a large part of Abkhazia's own, non-subsidized revenues. In 2019, a few months before the pandemic, the fact that more than a million tourists visited Abkhazia for the first time since the 1992-1993 war was particularly marked. According to the report of the de-facto Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Abkhazia, the volume of paid services during the tourist season in 2019 exceeded 2.4 billion Russian rubles, which, according to current data, is more than 92 million 118 thousand GEL. The same data shows that the circulation of these services and revenues covered the entire territory of present-day Abkhazia, except for the Gali district. The latter has not been considered in Abkhazia's tourist routes or infrastructure since Raul Khajimba's presidency (2005-2009; 2014-2020).

According to a source of the Democracy Research Institute, preparations for the current tourist season will cover the Gali district as well. This, on the one hand, can be explained by a different view of the current de facto authorities towards Gali and the desire to integrate it into the de facto Republic of Abkhazia. On the other hand, the de facto authorities may be hoping for attracting more Russian tourists due to the limited travel opportunities in the context of the global pandemic. Consequently, they want to welcome the increased number of Russian tourists with larger and better tourist potential.

According to the source, Davit Kajaia, Abkhazia's de facto Deputy Minister of Tourism, visited Gali last week to discuss the planned measures at a meeting with locals. He introduced a plan to the population of Gali, according to which, the de facto authorities of Abkhazia plan to build a new road in the village of Saberio and to integrate the Enguri HPP and the Gali Reservoir into tourist routes. However, it is doubtful whether the region will be able to host tourists from Russia without developing hotel infrastructure. It seems that the de-facto Ministry of Tourism of Abkhazia expects one-day visitors to arrive, which accounted for half of tourists in 2019 (517 000),^[3] or those who stay at hotels in other parts of Abkhazia and visit the Gali district for one day only.

However, such preparations for the tourist season, which require the development of infrastructure, creates challenges apart from economic opportunities for the Gali residents.

Firstly, corruption is still an unresolved issue on the territory of Abkhazia, to which the residents of the Gali district are most vulnerable, due to the lack of de facto citizenship of Abkhazia, and secondly, due to discrimination on the ground of their ethnic identity. Ahead the tourist season, the de facto authorities' priority is to curb corruption, especially in the structures with which Russian tourists have the most frequent contact. According to the source of the Democracy Research Institute, for example, the traffic police received a direct instruction not to stop cars with Russian number plates. However, Gali residents are not protected from corruption. They may become the main targets of extortion, especially if the flow of tourists enters Gali and brings income for the locals.

Secondly, the epidemic, despite the ongoing vaccination in Russia, still remains alarming. Consequently, the probability increases that the tourist season in Abkhazia will aggravate the situation. With this in mind, it is important to know how available the Georgian health care system

¹⁹ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/582/>

will be to the residents of Gali and the rest of Abkhazia, if necessary. Unfortunately, the de facto authorities of Abkhazia may create more obstacles in this direction. According to the source, Alisa Ardzinba, de facto Deputy Minister of Health, told local doctors in Gali that patients should be referred to Krasnodar and Saratov clinics, instead of Georgian clinics, in order to avoid the "bad impact" that Georgia has on the people of Abkhazia and to prevent that the health care system of Abkhazia looks weaker than that of the "opposing party".

The income from tourism will obviously be a great relief for the people of Abkhazia during the crisis caused by the pandemic, but the challenges that may arise in the Gali district for the reasons discussed above are also worth noting.

Will the de facto authorities of Abkhazia start large-scale privatization?²⁰

17.11.2021

Abkhazia has de facto not been part of Georgia's legal-political or economic space for twenty-eight years now. During this time, the once economically prosperous region has collapsed and most of its residents live in the survival mode. According to the de facto authorities of Abkhazia, economic infrastructure was destroyed during the 1992-1993 war. The de facto authorities estimates the damage at \$ 11 billion to \$ 13 billion and expects compensation from the Georgian Government. However, apart from the war factor, the non-functioning of the local infrastructure after the withdrawal from Georgia's economic space is no less important. Over the years, the abandoned infrastructure has turned into scrap.

Today's Abkhazian economy is represented by tourism and agriculture. Under the conditions of occupation, it is completely tied to the economy of the Russian Federation. Officially, 60% of the current budget of Abkhazia is financed from the Russian federal budget. According to various sources, after the 2008 Russia-Georgia war and the unilateral recognition of Abkhazia's independence by the Russian Federation, the de facto authorities of Abkhazia has received more than 40 billion rubles (more than half a billion dollars) in financial assistance alone. This does not include technical or infrastructural assistance flowing from the Russian Federation into the occupied territories in the form of vehicles, train tracks, construction materials, timber, etc. It also does not include the financial resources received from the sale of minerals and other raw materials obtained on the territory of Abkhazia, during the implementation of large-scale infrastructure projects in the south of Russia, such as the Sochi Olympics.

Is the assistance selfless? How long will the Russian Federation continue to send huge financial flows through non-transparent channels to the occupied region of Georgia? What will it demand in return, other than the loyalty and hostile stance of the de facto authorities of Abkhazia towards Georgia?

According to the Democracy Research Institute, large-scale privatization is already openly being discussed in Abkhazia. The latter involves the alienation of both economic infrastructure facilities and real estate to Russian businesses and Russian citizens. Most of the real estate in Abkhazia is

²⁰ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/802/>

abandoned. The personal property of more than 250,000 ethnic Georgians - land and buildings - may be of interest to many Russian citizens. However, agricultural land and Soviet-era tourist infrastructure will be much more valuable for Russia. In our opinion, we may see the first wave of privatization exactly in this direction, which, in the first place, will be a benefit for the Russian business and economic actors operating in the Russian Federation. This process will further deepen the annexation of Abkhazia by the Russian Federation.

This perspective was not met with enthusiasm in Abkhazia. Opposition forces have openly stated that large-scale privatization would allow ethnic Georgians displaced from Abkhazia, who have Russian citizenship, to acquire property in Abkhazia. In addition to this semi-official argument, Abkhazians fear that the acquisition of property in Abkhazia by a large mass of Russians will put local ethnic Abkhazians in the extreme minority. Given this, it is unlikely that the current de facto authorities of Abkhazia will start alienating property on an individual basis. It is more likely that it will transfer large assets to Russian businesses or the Russian state.

It is extremely difficult for Georgia to control this process in the current situation. However, it is necessary for the Georgian authorities to make it clear that they will use international legal leverage for disputes with the Russian Federation and to sanction economic actors who dare to acquire property in the occupied territory of Abkhazia.

The amount of bribe for crossing the Enguri Bridge reduced from 3,000 to 2,000 Russian rubles²¹

23.06.2021

Discussions about the isolation of the Gali district mostly concern the strict regulations on the Enguri crossing point, the purpose of which is to isolate citizens remaining beyond the Enguri River from the rest of the territory of Georgia and state space. This crossing point on the Enguri dividing line is some kind of mechanism for forming awareness; on the one hand, it closes Abkhazia to the rest of Georgia, and on the other hand, it strengthens the sense of distance, difficult accessibility of the rest of Georgia among the population of Abkhazia. As a result, the difficulty of crossing the "border", push Georgians living in the Gali district to "violate" procedures and restrictions, sometimes at the risk of their own life.

According to the information available to the Democracy Research Institute (DRI), the so-called border, apart from the function of political-psychological isolation from the rest of Georgia, performs an important economic function for persons involved in its control. Despite restrictions, the bridge can be crossed in exchange for a bribe; it is possible to transport any cargo, including prohibited goods, for 2000-3000 Russian rubles (equivalent to 88-132 GEL) and the age-related restriction on movement is also often ignored (under current regulations, people aged 17-40 years are prohibited from crossing the border). This situation further deepens the economic misery of the locals and highlights the inequality of people living in the Gali district in relation to Abkhaz officials, who make money by these "regulations" - corruption.

²¹ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/645/>

According to the information available to the Democracy Research Institute, the existing age limit was increased in early June. Earlier movement on the Enguri Bridge was prohibited for persons aged 17-40 years, while now the upper limit has been increased to 59, which sharply increases the number of potential bribe-givers. Obviously, exactly this was the purpose of the change and not the security of the so-called border.

As DRI has been informed, a resident of Gali secretly took photos of bribe-taking on the so-called border and spread photos through the Internet. The exposure of this reality was followed by a protest rally of local citizens. As a result of the protest, the administration of the Gali district promised locals that the restrictions would be lifted. However, at present, the only change is that the "border guards" take 2,000 Russian rubles instead of 3,000.

This situation and recent developments in the Gali region show that corruption on the Enguri Bridge further underscores ethnic segregation and incitement to discrimination on the above grounds, which brings monetary dividends to the ruling groups of Abkhazia's de facto law enforcement agencies. The above makes us think that despite the demand of the Gali population and a number of tragic incidents that occurred along the dividing line due to the avoidance of corruption, the so-called border regime is unlikely to change. The above-mentioned corruption scheme remains a lucrative business for the de facto authorities and law enforcement officials of Abkhazia. The Georgian authorities and the international community must take into account that the effects of these "regulations" exacerbate the already dire socio-economic situation of the Gali population, which sometimes puts their health and lives at risk.

Corrupt and occupation aspects of energy crisis in Abkhazia²²

03.11.2021

As early as January 2020, the shutdown of the Enguri HPP due to rehabilitation works plunged Abkhazia into a deep energy crisis. The situation could not be improved even after the completion of the works. The system of importing electricity from the Russian Federation failed and the energy crisis remains an unresolved challenge for the de facto authorities.

What creates the electricity shortage in the Abkhazian power system? The simplest explanation for this problem is the Bitcoin mining farms. The free supply of electricity to Abkhazia from the Georgian power system, in particular from the "shared" Enguri HPP, has prospered this sector of the shadow economy and turned it into a real disaster for the region. In addition to the fact that the amount of electricity consumed by mining farms causes a supply collapse and imposes an immeasurably large social burden on ordinary consumers, it also hinders the production and expansion of other types of economic activities.

The de facto authorities of Abkhazia offer the public nothing but shutting down the Bitcoin mining farms to address this challenge. However, the above does not seem to be successful. The population of

²² <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/777/>

Abkhazia is still supplied with electricity on schedule and even the proper observance of the schedule is problematic. It seems that this issue cannot be remedied by police methods. It is easy to move the infrastructure and equipment needed for Bitcoin mining from one place to another. The ban in this regard, even if effective in a particular case, is generally not effective. No matter how many mining farms the de facto law enforcement agencies of Abkhazia close, the actors involved in this shadow sector can always set up alternative farms.

The given situation exposes the corrupt side of the energy crisis. On the one hand, the power institutions are unable to regulate the illegal business of bitcoin production due to the flexibility of this sector, and on the other hand, the corrupt factors of such flexibility become impossible to be addressed for the de facto authorities. Due to the scale of corruption, the proceeds from the bitcoin production are divided between the owners of this illegal business and representatives of the de facto authorities and its law enforcement agencies.

In addition, this situation highlights the varied role of the Russian Federation in the energy crisis. On the one hand, Russia undertakes to assist its protégé de facto government in securing Abkhazia's energy supply and there is the principle of energy co-financing for this. Due to the failure to manage the energy system, Abkhazia is not able to fulfill its share of responsibility, in particular, it is not able to ensure that the consumed electricity is paid off, nor does the Russian Federation undertake to allocate money from its budget. In addition, privatization of the power supply network is on the agenda, which seems to be in Russia's interests, but is delayed by the de facto government of Abkhazia. Currently, the Abkhazian power system is managed by the so-called “Chernomorenergo” - a closed state-owned joint-stock company, which is reportedly planned to be bought by Russia. However, before that, the de facto authorities of Abkhazia, plunged into an energy crisis, are unlikely to find a solution or get a promised full gasification project that would alleviate the social cost of the crisis.

[Annexation of the village of Aibgha of Gagra district - A governor accountable to Russia appointed in the village²³](#) [18.06.2021](#)

In May 2021, the Russian Federation officially formalized, beyond de facto control, the annexation of the village of Aibgha, which is part of occupied Abkhazia. The area is marked as part of the Adler district of Krasnodar region, and more specifically, as one of the villages in the Nizhnyaya Shilovka community. According to the information available to the Democracy Research Institute, the governor of the Krasnodar region of Russia was charged with the supervision of the governor of the village of Aibgha, which means that a territory of Abkhazia has been formalized as part of Russia.

Russia first voiced its desire to annex Aibgha in 2001, in a conversation with the then de facto President Vladislav Ardzinba. As then Russia had not recognized the so-called independence of Abkhazia, meaning that they would have to discuss this issue with the Georgian side, they decided to

²³ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/637/>

suspend the issue. The situation changed radically in 2008 when Russia recognized Abkhazia and demanded the delimitation and demarcation of the "state border" with Abkhazia. Preparations for the above began in the spring of 2010. The Russian side intensified the publication of scientific articles and monographs, as well as organization of conferences in Sokhumi, where "studies" claimed that the village of Aibgha was part of the Krasnodar region. In response to this and for the purpose of preventing possible annexation, on May 21, 2010, the de facto Parliament passed the Law on State Borders of the Republic of Abkhazia, which states that "the state border between Abkhazia and the Russian Federation runs along the borders recognized by the USSR," which implied that the village of Aibgha remained part of Abkhazia. In 2010, Abkhazians categorically rejected Russia's offer to concede the village, although Russia resumed the process during the 2014 Winter Olympics. Abkhazia was offered to hold part of the competitions in Aibgha and to involve the village in sports events, but the Abkhaz side rejected this offer too.

The Russian Federation successfully annexed the village after the end of the 2014 Winter Olympics. The appointment of a governor in May 2021 is a proof of this. The annexation of the village was facilitated by two factors. The first factor was the poverty of the local population and the lack of infrastructure in the village, which Abkhazia could not eliminate with its scarce budget dependent on Russia. By 2019, none of the two schools of the village was operational, there was no medical facility, and there were problems with electricity supply. As a result of the avalanches, roads were damaged so badly that it became virtually impossible to reach the lowlands. Second, the majority of the population in Aibgha is ethnically Russian. This circumstance was again used by the Russian Federation successfully for the de facto and formal annexation of the village.

In early 2020, the local population appealed to the governor of the Krasnodar region of the Russian Federation and "asked for help" in changing the unbearable conditions. Abkhazians presume that the appeal was organized by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB). The "appeal of the people" was followed by immediate actions by Russia, without asking for permission from Abkhazians. Russians solved the problem of electricity and transport logistics in the village, built a new road with the funding of the Sochi City Hall in the summer, built a new bridge and connected the village directly to the Psou River, but it is only possible to get to the Russian and not Abkhaz side of the village through the bridge. Sending medical brigades and humanitarian aid, as well as employing local men in the villages in Adler and Sochi, has been intensified.

In August 2020, in response to the above-mentioned processes, the Abkhaz side opened a border checkpoint on the newly built bridge on the River Psou. The opening of the border checkpoint was followed by a protest of locals. The delegation from the de facto Parliament, which arrived from Sokhumi to negotiate, was directly told by locals that they wanted the village of Aibgha to become part of the Russian Federation. On November 13, 2020, Aslan Bzhanias, de facto leader of Abkhazia, raised the issue during a meeting with Putin, who promised a fair solution to the issue. On May 19, 2021, speaking at Sokhumi University, Astamur Logua, Head of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the de facto Parliament, said that they were working with the Russian side to resolve the issue. However, according to the information available to the Democracy Research Institute, beyond official statements, Abkhazians believe that Aibgha is lost.

Ethnic Russians living in the region and representatives of the occupying forces, who are currently in Gali, have said in informal conversations that their interest is bigger - they want to fully annex the

Aibgha Plateau, which stretches from the Psou River to Lake Ritsa and Avadhar, covering about 20 percent of the Gagra municipality. As it turns out, in addition to the heights of strategic importance, the Russian side is very interested in this area due to the large reserves of minerals on this perimeter.

In view of the above, the Democracy Research Institute calls on international actors to immediately express their position on the *de facto* and *de jure* annexation of part of Abkhazia by Russia.

The Georgian authorities should immediately use all possible formats to properly respond to the annexation of Abkhazia by the Russian Federation and to hold Russia accountable.

What we can expect from Inal Ardzinba²⁴

20.12.2021

The appointment of Inal Ardzinba as *de facto* Minister of Foreign Affairs of Abkhazia and his meeting with international organizations operating on the territory of Abkhazia have already been widely reacted by the Georgian media and experts. *Inter alia*, reasonable fears were expressed about the possible desire of the Russian Federation to control the development of the civil sector in the occupied territories and, in general, the activities of this sector. These fears are well-founded. The civil sector in Abkhazia is already talking about a possible step by the *de facto* authorities to introduce and enact a foreign agency law, which is applied in the Russian Federation. However, at the official level, nothing has yet been said openly in this regard. What we see is the desire of the newly appointed *de facto* Foreign Minister to make it clear to international organizations that all their steps should be agreed with the *de facto* authorities of Abkhazia. Clearly, we cannot conclude from just one meeting that Inal Ardzinba's policy is aimed at banning the activities of locally operating international organizations. In case of such a wish, the *de facto* authorities of Abkhazia will have to submit a relevant proposal to the so-called Parliament.

So what can we expect from Inal Ardzinba's policy towards international NGOs? First, we can assume that the policy may be aimed at determining their mandate, area and partnership network in the Gali district. It seems that the *de facto* authorities of Abkhazia have a kind of fear of losing control of the activities of international organizations in Gali, which are implementing important social and infrastructural projects for the health and educational-cultural rehabilitation of the Gali district. Clearly, their activities cover a wider geographical area, including the districts of Ochamchire, Gulripshi and Tkvarcheli, but the Gali district may be an object of traditional jealousy so that to prevent that the local Georgian community does not feel "excessive" autonomy or independence.

Second, according to the Democracy Research Institute, Inal Ardzinba's meeting with representatives of international organizations took place in a not-so-friendly tone. This tone can also be regarded as a belated response to the Georgian Law on the Occupied Territories, which requires international and local NGOs operating in Georgia to agree the projects to be implemented in Abkhazia and South Ossetia with the Georgian Government. We can assume that the newly appointed *de facto* Minister

²⁴ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/832/>

of Foreign Affairs is not going to simply supervise NGOs and international organizations, but is sending a signal to both the Georgian Government and the international community that Abkhazia is a sovereign state like Georgia, telling the international organization that their activities should be carried out in agreement with Sokhumi, not Tbilisi. It is a completely different matter whether it is possible to implement any project in the Gali district without the consent of the de facto authorities, without political formalities. Clearly, such consent has always been necessary.

The sense of rigidity created after the above meeting may be a kind of political gesture, but at the same time, it may indicate changes regarding the activities of international organizations operating in the Gali district. Of course, time will show all this.

Abkhazia in anticipation of a stable and long-lasting Russian authoritarianism?²⁵ 11.01.2022

Last week was tense in Abkhazia. The opposition of the de facto authorities tried to seize power in a revolutionary way, but failed. Aslan Bzhania's government retained power - apparently due to Russia's unequivocal support. Clearly, the question arises as to why the Russian authorities decided to support the current protégé in the Abkhazian "news"? Why might his predecessor, who is no less loyal, be unacceptable?

According to the information available to the Democracy Research Institute, there is one major version in Abkhazian society relating to the Kremlin plans. A significant change in the de facto government of Abkhazia recently was the appointment of young Inal Ardzinba as Minister of Foreign Affairs. Both Abkhazian and, generally, Georgian media covered this topic with great interest. It was even said that Ardzinba would pursue Moscow's interests. He was even nicknamed "Moscow boy". Amid the crisis in Sukhumi, a meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov in Sochi and the violent methods used to defuse the situation were seen by Abkhaz society as a proof that Inal Ardzinba was "Moscow's man" who guaranteed stability for Aslan Bzhania's government and that in a few years the Kremlin would "transfer" Abkhazia to Ardzinba. It seems unrealistic to change the constitution of Abkhazia and lower the presidential age, so Bzhania's government is a kind of transitional government until Ardzinba reaches the age of 35.

It may be because of this imminent threat that the protest movement in Abkhazia, which has turned the nationalist part of the Sokhumi political spectrum against Bzhania, has accelerated. Supporters of former President Raul Khajimba appear to fear that Bzhania's government and then Ardzinba will make more concessions to the Russian Federation, which will deprive Abkhazians of the gains obtained by war. Part of Abkhazians are especially afraid that a large-scale privatization process will take place, including relating to lands, which will put the wealthy citizens of the Russian Federation in advantageous situation compared to Abkhazians. In addition, the presidency of a young politician backed by the Kremlin also threatens to reduce the possibility of changing the government, as well as the space for exerting pressure on it, drastically and for a long time.

²⁵ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/844/>

Finally, what will be the consequences of the above scenario for the Gali district? Of course, due to its legal status, the Georgian society of Gali is excluded from these processes. However, the protest movement in Sokhumi was watched by the people of Gali with great interest and cautious anticipation. According to a local source of the Democracy Research Institute, Raul Khajimba and his supporters, with their anti-Georgian and ethno-nationalist sentiments, look more dangerous to them than Aslan Bzhania's government. Clearly, with similar fears, the Russian Federation can still gain loyalty or at least use the inertia of the people of the Gali district. If we consider this possibility in the context of further, gradual annexation and incorporation of Abkhazia into the Russian Federation, it should be thought-provoking for both the Georgian authorities and Abkhaz politicians. The latter should think more about how the region's society can take a responsible part in Abkhazian politics.

What does the fight against criminals mean in Abkhazia?²⁶

29.01.2022

After defusing the internal unrest in Abkhazia in December 2021, the de facto government of Aslan Bzhania looks and acts more confidently. It seems that demonstrating the legitimate use of force and the principles of the rule of law is becoming a priority for him. It is also clear that Abkhazian society is, to some extent, adapting to Bzhania's policy. Demand for order and stability is growing and resistance to the regime is virtually no longer large-scale. This trend was evident earlier this year too, when the de facto government of Abkhazia opposed the burial of a criminal authority, the body of which was transferred from Greece to Gali. Clearly, it is difficult to say unequivocally that this incident was part of a general policy of fight against criminals, as the reason for the above might merely be the Georgian ethnicity of the deceased criminal.

However, the resistance shown by the de facto law enforcers of Abkhazia to influential Abkhaz criminals is evident. The mentioned developments were intensively covered by the Georgian media as well. On January 7-9, criminal groups from Sukhumi, Ochamchire and other parts of Abkhazia and their supporters, about 2,000 people, gathered on the other side of Enguri, waiting for a convoy transferring the body of the criminal authority from Zugdidi to Gali. It seems that criminals of Abkhazia, in addition to paying tribute to the late criminal authority close to them, intended to show their power to Aslan Bzhania and to convince their compatriots of the de facto government's weakness.

However, the events unfolded quite differently. As the Democracy Research Institute has been informed, the de facto government of Abkhazia twice dispersed the group of 2,000 people mobilized along the Enguri dividing line. The above was first carried out by the Abkhazian special forces and then by the Russian OMON. The involvement of the latter is particularly noteworthy. First of all, the question arises as to why it became necessary to use the Russian OMON. Was it because of the fact that Abkhaz law enforcers do not have the relevant experience, power or ability, or because of the fact that Bzhania's government does not fully trust them? How will the criminals of Abkhazia treat the de facto government after this incident?

²⁶ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/883/>

According to locals, the crackdown was unprecedentedly brutal and resulted in the arrest of about 30 people, while the criminal authority was buried in Zugdidi. All this happened against the background that the criminal groups had not felt any resistance in carrying out their activities on the territory of Abkhazia before this incident.

The developments related to the burial of the criminal authority showed, first of all, more self-confidence of Aslan Bzhania's de facto government, which was unequivocally ensured by the involvement of the occupation forces of the Russian Federation. At the same time, state structures in Abkhazia are trying to expel criminal gangs from public life. This policy is clearly in line with the expectations of Abkhaz society to establish order and stability, and in this regard, there is no resistance to the de facto government or the Russian forceful involvement.

In addition, it is important to note what was happening in the meantime on the other side of Enguri, in an area controlled by the Georgian authorities. Georgian criminal groups and so-called fraternities attended the burial of the criminal authority. The gathering was clearly characterized by the demonstration of criminal aesthetics, symbolism and vocabulary. Naturally, the question arises as to what is happening in Georgia in terms of the fight against crime that began years ago, as the de facto government of Abkhazia is now beginning the same.

Mortality of women and prohibited abortion in Abkhazia²⁷

10.12.2021

The de facto parliament of Abkhazia banned abortion by a regulation passed five years ago, which led to an increase in the number of illegal abortions and impacted women's mortality rate. The de facto parliament of Abkhazia voted on the amendment to the law on health care on December 18, 2015. The amendment was supported by 26 deputies against 3 and the law took effect on February 9, 2016. According to the so-called health care law of Abkhazia, any kind of abortion is prohibited, including for medical reasons.

Women are one of the most vulnerable groups in Abkhazia. It is an established belief in society that a woman is respected only after motherhood, after she manages her reproductive health in accordance with the requirements of the society.

The problem is complex and is rooted in the low standard of the protection of women's rights in the region. The complete abolition of the right to abortion introduced a mechanism for controlling women in Abkhazia in 2016. The ban on abortion was justified on religious grounds, according to which, "any living thing" must be born; The second argument was to increase the birth rate of ethnic Abkhazians. The female body has been declared as the object of reproduction and the right to health and free choice has been completely neglected.

²⁷ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/820/>

On September 27, 2021, information was spread on the social network about the tragic story of a woman who was refused an abortion necessary for medical purposes, despite the medical report confirming that the fetus would die at birth. The victim met with local politicians, though she was told that no living thing would be subject to abortion.

The incident sparked a local outcry and people started to speak openly about the issue on social media. As a result, it was found out that the mortality rate of women in Abkhazia was high. Because of the ban on abortion, women go to Sochi, if they can afford it. In some cases, they cannot come back – as delayed medical procedure can be lethal. The rate of *self-managed abortion* is also high. The socially upper class can solve similar issues by going to Russia, while the middle and lower strata are oppressed, controlled and deprived of the right to health.

According to open sources, the initiative to ban abortion originally came from *Leonid Sevastyanov*, who is the executive director of the St. Gregory the Theologian Foundation (founded by Metropolitan Hilarion of *Volokolamsk*). The Foundation is based in Russia and is characterized by the spread of radical anti-Western rhetoric. Based on the results of the "research" conducted by the Foundation on the territory of Abkhazia, the leadership of the so-called republic saw the "necessity" of banning abortions and protecting the right to be borne. The debate over the ban on abortion helped popularize the idea and ultimately the law was adopted. Abkhazia now admits that the legislation is strict, the birth rate problem has not been resolved, women's mortality rate has increased and their physical and mental health has deteriorated.

No qualified, credible research has been conducted in Abkhazia relating to the ban on abortion. It is unknown exactly how many women travel from Abkhazia to neighboring countries for abortions or how financially affordable it is for the locals to travel to another country for a similar medical procedure. Accurate statistics are difficult to find, although it is clear that the problem is exacerbating.

It is necessary to ensure the protection of women's rights in Abkhazia and to recognize them as subjects of rights. The Democracy Research Institute recommends that the legal framework governing abortions in Abkhazia be in line with the World Health Organization guidelines and international human rights standards.

Preparations for tourist season in Abkhazia and their impact on the Gali district²⁸

21.05.2021

Tourism accounts for a large part of Abkhazia's own, non-subsidized revenues. In 2019, a few months before the pandemic, the fact that more than a million tourists visited Abkhazia for the first time since the 1992-1993 war was particularly marked. According to the report of the de-facto Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Abkhazia, the volume of paid services during the tourist season in 2019 exceeded 2.4 billion Russian rubles, which, according to current data, is more than 92 million 118 thousand GEL. The same data shows that the circulation of these services and revenues covered the

²⁸ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/582/>

entire territory of present-day Abkhazia, except for the Gali district. The latter has not been considered in Abkhazia's tourist routes or infrastructure since Raul Khajimba's presidency (2005-2009; 2014-2020).

According to a source of the Democracy Research Institute, preparations for the current tourist season will cover the Gali district as well. This, on the one hand, can be explained by a different view of the current de facto authorities towards Gali and the desire to integrate it into the de facto Republic of Abkhazia. On the other hand, the de facto authorities may be hoping for attracting more Russian tourists due to the limited travel opportunities in the context of the global pandemic. Consequently, they want to welcome the increased number of Russian tourists with larger and better tourist potential.

According to the source, Davit Kajaia, Abkhazia's de facto Deputy Minister of Tourism, visited Gali last week to discuss the planned measures at a meeting with locals. He introduced a plan to the population of Gali, according to which, the de facto authorities of Abkhazia plan to build a new road in the village of Saberio and to integrate the Enguri HPP and the Gali Reservoir into tourist routes. However, it is doubtful whether the region will be able to host tourists from Russia without developing hotel infrastructure. It seems that the de-facto Ministry of Tourism of Abkhazia expects one-day visitors to arrive, which accounted for half of tourists in 2019 (517 000), or those who stay at hotels in other parts of Abkhazia and visit the Gali district for one day only.

However, such preparations for the tourist season, which require the development of infrastructure, create challenges apart from economic opportunities for the Gali residents.

Firstly, corruption is still an unresolved issue on the territory of Abkhazia, to which the residents of the Gali district are most vulnerable, due to the lack of de facto citizenship of Abkhazia, and secondly, due to discrimination on the ground of their ethnic identity. Ahead the tourist season, the de facto authorities' priority is to curb corruption, especially in the structures with which Russian tourists have the most frequent contact. According to the source of the Democracy Research Institute, for example, the traffic police received a direct instruction not to stop cars with Russian number plates. However, Gali residents are not protected from corruption. They may become the main targets of extortion, especially if the flow of tourists enters Gali and brings income for the locals. Secondly, the epidemic, despite the ongoing vaccination in Russia, still remains alarming. Consequently, the probability increases that the tourist season in Abkhazia will aggravate the situation. With this in mind, it is important to know how available the Georgian health care system will be to the residents of Gali and the rest of Abkhazia, if necessary. Unfortunately, the de facto authorities of Abkhazia may create more obstacles in this direction. According to the source, Alisa Ardzinba, de facto Deputy Minister of Health, told local doctors in Gali that patients should be referred to Krasnodar and Saratov clinics, instead of Georgian clinics, in order to avoid the "bad impact" that Georgia has on the people of Abkhazia and to prevent that the health care system of Abkhazia looks weaker than that of the "opposing party".

The income from tourism will obviously be a great relief for the people of Abkhazia during the crisis caused by the pandemic, but the challenges that may arise in the Gali district for the reasons discussed above are also worth noting.

Movement documents in Gali district²⁹

29.12.2021

The severe social and economic problems of the population of the occupied regions are further complicated by the obstacles artificially created by the de facto authorities, which exacerbate their daily lives and restrict their access to basic human needs and rights. The problem is particularly acute in the Gali district, where the majority of the population is ethnic Georgians - people who have not left their homes despite the conflict. One of the major problems facing the Gali population is related to the documents required for movement.

In 2017, the de facto administration decided to remove old Abkhaz passports and to replace Forms No. 9 with residence certificates. Obtaining a residence certificate is especially problematic for people living in the Kodori Gorge. They can only move with a special permit issued on the spot by the de facto Security Service for a period of two weeks.

According to the de facto Abkhaz citizenship law, only an ethnic Abkhaz, or a person who is not an ethnic Abkhaz but had lived in Abkhazia from 1994 to 1999 and is not a citizen of any state other than the Russian Federation, may hold a passport of an Abkhaz citizen. This provision does not apply to half of the 80,000 people living in the Gali district before the war or to the 200,000 ethnic Georgians living in different parts of Abkhazia, who fled the region during the 1992-1993 armed conflict.

Corrupt environment also makes it difficult for the residents of Gali to obtain documents. According to the locals, it is even difficult to enter a building to submit documents, as they have to stand in long queues and pay 1,500 rubles (about 29 USD) for each document to be submitted; otherwise they have to stand in queues for several weeks. They pay an additional 2,000 rubles (approximately \$ 34) as a bribe when the document is finally prepared.

The documents of the Gali population also affect the funding allocated from the de facto Abkhaz budget for the Gali district. The de facto central authorities of Abkhazia believe that the subsidies intended for the Gali district should be cut precisely because of the fact that a very small part of the Gali population has Abkhaz citizenship.

The obstacles created by the de facto authorities for the residents of Gali, which are already vulnerable as a result of the conflict, further complicate their daily lives, which should be considered a discriminatory treatment.

²⁹ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/files/141Movement%20documents%20in%20Gali%20district.pdf>

Identity and passport policy in the Gali region³⁰

29.04.2021

In order to distance the Gali district from the rest of Georgia, the de facto government of Abkhazia and Russia's local organizations pursuing soft power policy are actively using the tools of identity policy.

According to the information provided by a source to the Democracy Research Institute, the de facto parliament of Abkhazia once again held a hearing in Sukhumi this week on possible changes in the ethnic identity of Georgians living in Gali. The mentioned initiative comes from Akaki Zvanba, Chairman of the Council of Samurzakhano Abkhazians. On April 15, he wrote a letter to the speaker of the de facto parliament of Abkhazia, Valeri Kvarchia, asking him to facilitate the acquisition of Abkhazian ethnic identity and Abkhazian citizenship (passports) for those, whose surnames, according to the letter, were changed from Abkhazian into Georgian as a result of the 1930-1950 Soviet repression.

According to the letter, 125 people restored their Samurzakhano Abkhazian surnames (residents of Gali, Ochamchire and Tkvarcheli), although they have not renounced their Georgian citizenship. According to the same letter, 600 more people had been waiting for a positive response to their request for the restoration of ethnicity or "historical nationality", but were refused due to their Georgian citizenship. That is why the Council of Samurzakhano Abkhazians appealed to the speaker of the de facto parliament to consider the possibility of restoring "historic nationality" of citizens of a foreign country (in this case, Georgia) and stateless persons and to grant them citizenship of the de facto republic of Abkhazia.

Based on this request, the de facto parliament of Abkhazia discussed amendments to the Abkhazia's Acts of the Law on the Status of Citizenship and Civil Code. It seems that the de facto parliament of Abkhazia is going to allow the "restoration of lost Abkhazian citizenship" for those who wish so. It is expected that this opportunity will also be given to those who currently have Georgian citizenship. As a rule, the de facto government of Abkhazia helps holders of Abkhazian passports to obtain Russian passports. The passport of the Russian Federation may be an important motivator in this process.

According to the source of the Democracy Research Institute, despite these discussions, the process of "changing nationality" is not fast and the number of so-called Abkhazians from Samurzakhano does not exceed 1 000. The reason may be that until now the de facto government of Abkhazia had been in no hurry to grant Abkhazian nationality to those who wished to do so. For their part, neither the residents of Gali tried to take advantage of this "opportunity." However, since the discussion of this issue has been resumed and intensified in Abkhazia and as relevant legislative changes are being drafted, it is possible that the number of people wishing to "restore historical nationality" will increase, especially if they do not have to renounce Georgian citizenship.

³⁰ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/579/>

The readiness of the government of Abkhazia is evident. According to the source of the Democracy Research Institute, Saida Butba, a parliamentary representative of the de facto president of Abkhazia, came up with a responsive initiative and suggested that the government establish a registry together with the De facto Abkhazian Academy of Sciences to register the surnames that “were changed into Georgian” during the Soviet era.

It is possible to see the contours of the involvement of the Russian soft power in this process in the future. The head of the Russian community in Sukhumi, Roman Ryazantsev, launched the Abkhaz-Russian Strategic Alliance Platform, which aims to support the de facto government of Abkhazia in its ideological and propaganda activities. The memorandum of cooperation with this organization was signed by Zaur Adleiba, a member of the political board of the de facto Abkhazian ruling party Amtsakhara. The organization declared its activities in the Gali region a priority, as the influence of the "opponent" (Georgia) is strong there. It is unknown at this time how the Abkhaz-Russian Strategic Alliance Platform will help the de facto government, however, the Russian soft power propaganda and ideological work is definitely expected to intensify for the purpose of changing the mood of the Gali population.

[After New Year, freedom of movement may be restricted for part of Gali population³¹](#) 21.12.2021

According to the reports spread on November 27, 2021, Form No. 9, which is related to the freedom of movement of some residents of the Gali district, will be abolished from January 1, 2022.

In 2013, the de facto authorities of Abkhazia offered to renounce Georgian citizenship in exchange for Abkhazian passports. However, the issuance of Abkhazian passports to the ethnic Georgian population was later halted on the grounds that the process might lead to the "Georgianization of Abkhazia." In 2017, the de facto administration of Abkhazia decided to abolish old Abkhazian passports and gradually replace Form No. 9 with a residence permit for the Gali population.

There are more than 30,000 people living in the Gali district, more than 5,000 of whom have only Form No. 9 and 1,049 - Abkhazian passports. 19,707 people have received residence permits. Only 1,049 Abkhaz citizens of Gali enjoy the right to vote in Gali.

The abolition of the document required for movement during the New Year holidays serves to create an additional barrier for locals. For fear of not being able to return home, five thousand residents of Gali may be forced to use Abkhazian-Russian passports. There is another solution: to wait for more than two months to get a residence permit or pay a bribe to the Russian military.

Given that for the third year in a row the movement between Tskhinvali and Tbilisi has been completely restricted, while the de facto authorities of Abkhazia is artificially breaking Gali away from Tbilisi's controlled territory by repealing Form No. 9, the Georgian authorities have to express a

³¹ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/893/>

clear position. The Georgian Government must intensify its efforts to prevent discrimination against residents of Gali, to protect their interests and to restore their violated rights.

The issuance of de facto Abkhaz passports to Georgians living in Abkhazia is still on the agenda. Georgians constitute a large part of the population of the republic and their exclusion from both the political space and economic activities is only detrimental to the development of Abkhazia. At the same time, the views of the de facto political spectrum are not unanimous on this issue.

According to the Democracy Research Institute, one of the first initiatives of the newly elected Chairman of the Abkhaz People's Congress, Davit Pilia, to issue Abkhaz passports to the residents of Gali, sparked a public outcry, despite the fact that his public statement referred not to "passportization" but to "documentation" of the Gali population. It seems that in order not to irritate the Abkhaz war veterans' union Aruaa and the right-wing nationalist party Amtskhara, "neutral" terms were chosen. Nevertheless, even reference to the above issue provoked a harsh reaction among these organizations. Their biggest fear is that if residents of Gali are given de facto Abkhaz passports and a precedent of dual Georgian-Abkhaz citizenship is allowed in Abkhazia, the sacrifice they made to separate Abkhazia from Georgia will become meaningless. These forces say that they will fight "to the last drop of blood" if the de facto authorities of Abkhazia pursue the above policy.

In this situation, it is interesting that neither the de facto President nor the Government speak about the issuance of passports to Georgians. They are not initiators of the political debate. Apparently, the Government is trying to start a public discussion and prepare public opinion through its loyal Abkhaz People's Congress, thus avoiding the type of crisis that Alexander Ankvab could not cope with.

* * *

After the end of the war and expulsion of the majority of ethnic Georgians, which has been repeatedly mentioned in UN resolutions as ethnic cleansing, ethnocratic rule was established in Abkhazia. Although ethnic Abkhaz people do not constitute an absolute majority in present-day Abkhazia, they are represented by an absolute majority in the de facto parliamentary and executive branches. Representation of ethnic Armenians and Russians is protected, though disproportionately. As for Georgians, who make up the vast majority of the population of the Gali district, even their fundamental rights are not on the agenda, not to mention their representation. They do not have the right to vote, move freely or engage in free economic activities. All this is linked to citizenship.

The vast majority of the Georgian population in the Gali district are citizens of Georgia and hold Georgian passports. There are exceptions when some people individually manage to get Russian citizenship, though mostly those who have lived in Russia for a long time and periodically return to their houses in Gali. Russian citizenship guarantees greater mobility in economic terms, but not political rights. The latter is guaranteed only by the de facto passport of Abkhazia, which is inaccessible to Georgians for the fear of the far-right and conservative part of the Abkhaz political spectrum towards them. In all the known cases, when the de facto authorities of Abkhazia tried to issue de facto Abkhaz passports to the Georgians of the Gali district, the above became the basis for internal confrontation and political crisis. Opposition to de facto President Sergei Bagapsh, as well as his successor, Alexander Ankvab, was based on this nationalist sentiment. It can be said that the latter lost power due to the issuance of these very passports to Georgians.

Freedom of Religion in Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region³²

20.07.2021

Orthodox Christians living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are considered by the Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church to be subject to its canonical jurisdiction. The above is not formally denied by any Orthodox Churches. However, in both the political and ecclesiastical circles, the ruling elites of the occupied territories do not imagine their future together with either the Georgian State or the associated Orthodox Church. As a result of such attitudes and Russian influence, the Georgian Orthodox Church has no its clergymen in Tskhinvali or Abkhazia, cannot manage the property or relics owned by it before the conflict, and cannot provide adequate support to the parishioners that identify themselves with the Georgian Orthodox Church. This clearly represents complex discrimination on the grounds of religion and ethnicity.

In the occupied territories, Georgian believers do not have the opportunity to exercise their faith and cultural rights in the language of their choice, from their church clergymen, in traditional cult buildings.

As far as the Democracy Research Institute is informed, the number of Georgian clergymen in Abkhazia and South Ossetia is extremely low. It is very rare to hear Georgian services in the occupied territories. However, worship in Russian is actively taking place in both occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Apart from the Georgian church, there is also an Ossetian church in Akhagori, which is subordinated to the Diocese of Alanya and where worship is conducted in Ossetian as well. Metropolitan Isaiah is unable to return to Akhagori. He was not in Akhagori at the time of the closure of the Mosabruni crossing point, and like everyone else, he has been unable to return to the district.

As for Gali, there are no ethnic Georgian priests. Father Pimen (Roman Kardava) used to serve there in the past, but in 2008, the Abkhaz side banned him from being engaged in religious activity and expelled him from Gali.

Currently, services in the churches of Gali (except for five functioning churches, one is currently being built in the village of Otobaia) are conducted by Father Mate, who is of Abkhazian descent, in two languages - Georgian and Russian, despite pressure from Sokhumi. In terms of exercising the right to religious freedom, only the ethnically Georgian parishioners, who identify themselves with the Georgian Orthodox Church, are discriminated against.

The Democracy Research Institute considers that the Government of Georgia should use all international formats to address these issues so that the religious freedom of every citizen in Abkhazia

³² <https://www.democracyresearch.org/files/118Freedom%20of%20Religion.pdf>

and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali is equally protected and special attention is paid to those who have been discriminated against for years and cannot fully exercise their rights. In this regard, it is especially important not to restrict the right to hold services in the mother tongue and the right to receive the service of the desired Church on the grounds of ethnicity and affiliation with the Georgian Orthodox Church, which is currently neglected.

In addition, while managing the church property and infrastructure remaining in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, there should be no restrictions on local Georgian citizens' freedom of religion or expression in the form of the total or partial ban on their access to religious buildings or holy objects.

One year of the pandemic in Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region³³

24.05.2021

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.

The Democracy Research Institute published a report entitled "One year of the pandemic in Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region", which analyzes the developments in the occupied territories as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on the human rights situation. The report covers the period from April 2020 to May 5, 2021.

The report provides statistics on Covid-19 in the occupied regions; Vaccination process; Restrictions imposed due to the pandemic; The right to education; Access to medical services and medicines; Measures taken by the Georgian Government and activities of non-governmental organizations.

The Democracy Research Institute calls on the Georgian authorities to:

- Become more active in relation to the occupied regions. 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. In addition, several alternative ways should be planned in advance for the timely delivery of food and medicines to the population.
- 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.
- When planning activities relating to children's rights, take into account the needs of children living along the administrative boundary line in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali.

³³ <https://www.democracyresearch.org/files/108covideng.pdf>

- Ensure that people living in Tskhinvali and Abkhazia 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 Akhgori.
- Ensure proper supply of local hospitals with medicines and other medical equipment. Communication lines should be established with medical personnel in the Tskhinvali region in order to share experience in virus management and treatment.
- Consider the specific needs of thousands of people living in Gali and Akhgori in the anti-crisis plan approved in response to the pandemic. 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.
- In cooperation with international organizations and in compliance with sanitary norms, provide permanently functioning points along the administrative boundary line to enable persons coming from Abkhazia to purchase medicines, products and bare necessities.
- Use all mechanisms to achieve the reopening of crossing points closed in recent years.
- 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 for the population. Specifically, in addition to the existing education and healthcare programmes, it is necessary to create a state programme of *special financial assistance*.

The pandemic has made it easier to popularize Russian forces and increase its influence in occupied Tskhinvali and Abkhazia. Therefore, it is important to take into account the above recommendations and plan the necessary measures to implement them, in order to improve the situation of the population living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, as well as along the dividing line.