



Problems of the population living near the occupation line

(Ganmukhuri, Khurcha, Orsantia, Anaklia, Rukhi, Tkaia, Rike, Potskho-Etseri IDP
settlement, Muzhava and Pakhulani communities)

(2023)

Introduction

In July 2023, the Democracy Research Institute studied the situation in the villages located along the occupation line. In order to study the problems of the population living near the occupation line, we visited the villages of Ganmukhuri, Khurcha, Orsantia, Rukhi, Tkaia, Rike, Anaklia, Muzhava community, Pakhulani community, Potskho-Etseri IDP settlement and crossing points of Tsalenjikha and Zugdidi municipalities.

The visit showed us that compared to the past years, the local authorities carry out infrastructural works in some of the settlements near the so-called dividing line and certain progress can be observed in this direction. Currently, the economic hardship and the concerns relating to the depopulation of the villages are the main problems of the locals. The difficult socio-economic situation and security problems along the occupation line have practically emptied the villages near the dividing line.

According to the observations of the Democracy Research Institute, compared to previous years, security and control measures by the Georgian checkpoints have been drastically reduced along the so-called dividing line; It is a fact that compared to 2021, the preparedness of the local checkpoints and/or the preventive measures are now drastically weakened several hundred meters away from the Russian checkpoints; Unlike the practice of previous years, only one person is on duty at each checkpoint. One gets the impression that the checkpoints are formal and actually cancelled, like they no longer expect a threat from the occupying forces; In the conditions of the ongoing war in Ukraine, such relaxation is surprising.

Muzhava community (Muzhava, Olori, Nashamgu)

The Muzhava community is located in the Tsalenjikha municipality, near the Enguri HPP tunnel. 200 households (719 people)¹ live in the community. The main problems in the Muzhava community are drinking water and poor internal roads. The village of *Olori* is not served by municipal transport. Due to the old wiring, the electricity supply is unstable - during bad weather, the locals are not supplied by electricity. We were told in *Nashamgu* that they are not supplied with water during the rains. Children go to school to the neighboring village of *Jvari*; Because of this, several families with children moved to live in Jvari on rent. Transport is problematic and insufficient. There is no shop or pharmacy in any village of Muzhava. Gas has been delivered to the houses, but locals cannot actually use it, since the works were stopped halfway - the reason is unknown to them.

¹ The population statistics presented in the report are data from the 2014 general census and do not reflect the situation in 2023. Data for 2014 are available at:

<https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/568/mosakhleobis-2014-tslis-saqoveltao-aghtsera>

A total of three families live near the Muzhava-Lekukhona crossing point. The houses are located between the Georgian and Russian checkpoints. Getting to this settlement is usually difficult - however, unlike 2021, when we were not allowed to enter the settlement, this year we were given the opportunity to interview one of the locals.

Pakhulani-Saberio crossing point

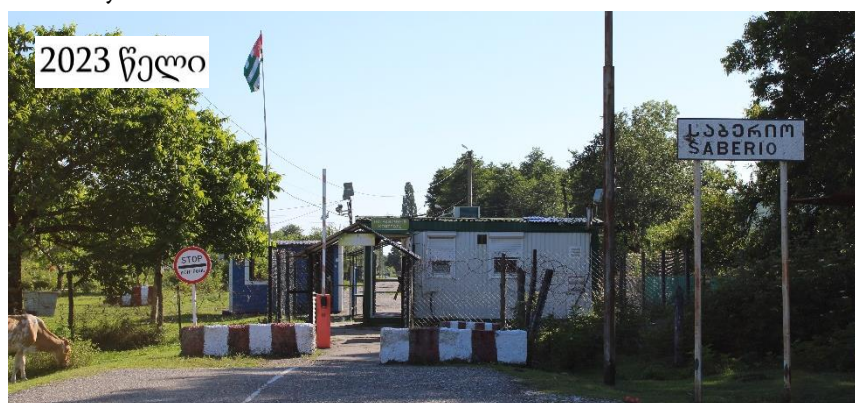
About 275 people live in the village of *Pakhulani* in the Tsalenjikha municipality. Pakhulani is bordered by the village of Saberio of the Gali district. The so-called "checkpoint" is located on the Saberio-Pakhulani administrative border. Before entering Pakhulani, the local police check the identity cards and ask about the reasons for travelling to the village. According to the villagers, they live in constant fear and have the feeling of insecurity. Water and gas have been delivered to the houses, but in fact they cannot be used - the situation was the same in 2021.

The police accompanied us as we moved across the village, based on security considerations, as they said. However, in one case, during a meeting with the local population, the police chief of the village of Lia intervened in the conversation and tried to correct the content of our conversation, or sometimes tried to deny it.

At the Georgian checkpoint, the police check the cargo of ethnic Georgians crossing into Abkhazia and delay them for this purpose. Locals note that no such control is carried out by Russians or Abkhazians. This practice introduced recently is illegal and has no legal basis. During our visit to the village, we saw a local who was not allowed to take a plastic sewer pipe in the direction of Abkhazia; In one case, a local who wanted to take chicks to Abkhazia was asked to take photos of the chicks. He was allowed to take the chicks only after the photos were sent to "someone" in Tbilisi, who gave consent to the above. In a private conversation, the police said that there were restrictions only on the transfer of cheese and tires.

A week after the monitoring, a local contacted us through the hotline. According to him, he was delayed at the checkpoint because of a potted flower.

The so-called border mark near the Saberio crossing point is changed compared to 2021 - the barbed wire is pushed back by about a few meters.





It should be noted that fewer people are seen on the Russian side of the checkpoints. The tightened regime that we observed during our monitoring in 2021 is now more relaxed - Russian soldiers move less, as if there is a shortage of border guards.

Rike and Tkaia

The villages of *Rike* and *Tkaia* are located in the Zugdidi municipality. The situation in the villages is satisfactory. The infrastructure, compared to other villages, is well-organized. There are many blueberry plantations in the forest, where the population is employed as a day laborer. However, in Tkaia, as well as almost everywhere, the scarcity of population and migration of locals abroad were named as the main problems.

Anaklia

Anaklia is deserted. All old and new projects are halted. According to the locals, there is no house from which at least one family member has not emigrated. We have not noticed young people in the streets. The locals talk about increased control and pressure during the election period. They asked us to arrive in Anaklia during elections and see what is happening there by ourselves. When asked to name a specific problem that worries them the most, they could not single out one specific issue because "everything is problematic." Electricity and water are not supplied when the weather worsens, houses are flooded during rains, drainage systems are faulty, precipitation accumulates in the plots and yards and cannot reach the sea, because during the construction of large hotels, the sea side rose and the yards remained low.

In the past, the main source of income for the residents of Anaklia was fish trade. Now they are practically forbidden to catch fish, because they cannot get a fishing permit due to complicated procedures. Permits are usually issued to fishing vessels, which has taken away a source of income from the locals.

Ganmukhuri

The *Ganmukhuri* administrative unit of the Zugdidi municipality is located 25 kilometers from the city. More than 600 households and 1,300 inhabitants live in the village. The dividing line runs between

the villages of Pichori of the Gali district and Ganmukhuri. The "crossing point" between the villages is no longer functional since March 2017. Part of the house area of the three families living in the immediate vicinity of the "border" is under the control of the central government, and the other part is on the occupied territory.



The internal road near the Ganmukhuri-Pichori checkpoint is graveled, but damaged. Unlike the visit paid in 2021, when we were able to talk to the villagers, the village looks deserted. We noticed only one law enforcement officer at the checkpoint.

Khurcha

160 households (535 people) live in the village of *Khurcha*, Zugdidi municipality. Until 2017, there were four checkpoints at the so-called occupation line of Abkhazia-Samegrelo. One of them was the Khurcha-Nabakevi crossing point. Hundreds of people crossed the conditional border every day, which made the village an economically active area. The closure of the checkpoint in 2017 practically isolated the village and halted it. Local small businesses, cafes and fast food facilities were closed; Taxi drivers remained jobless. The unemployed population has a sense of hopelessness. A large part of the youth has left the village.

The trading location that was active in the past is now completely empty. As we were told, Georgian law enforcement officers no longer check people, attention and control have been reduced. However, the wires have been added in four rows in place of the old crossing point.



On May 19, 2016, the killing of Giga Otkhozoria near Khurcha-Nabakevi was caught by the surveillance video cameras of the so-called border checkpoint. The footage shows how the so-called border guards chase Otkhozoria, cross into the Georgia-controlled territory, physically abuse him and then shoot him. The camera that was seized has not yet been returned to its local owner.

The newly appointed municipal bus (Zugdidi-Koki-Khurcha) does not go the Zugdidi agrarian market. "Actually, it's more a tourist bus," locals say, because it doesn't pass through the entire settlement. In order to reach the Zugdidi agrarian market, where the population needs to go every week, it is necessary to change transport. Carrying cargo by bus is also a problem, since the amount of cargo is limited.

Locals are promised that in the autumn the government will hold a session in Khurcha and problems will be solved. Electricity and water are not supplied to the village during wind or rain, and the promised sewage system has not been installed yet.

Orsantia

The village of *Orsantia* is located in the Zugdidi municipality. The village looks deserted. The Orsantia-Otobaia crossing point had been operating in the village until 2017, which is now closed. There is only one person at the checkpoint. 594 households (2,052 people) live in Orsantia. Residents name drinking water supply, drainage canals and internal roads as the main problems.

IDP settlement of Potskho-Etseri

Potskho-Etseri

The IDP settlement of *Potskho-Etseri* is located in the administrative unit of Chale, Tsalenjikha municipality. The settlement is cut off from the outside world. IDPs have to live in harsh conditions, where the human right to adequate housing is neglected. Potskho-Etseri is located 22 kilometers from the municipality center. A large part of the settlement road has been built, but not completely; The bridge needs to be completely rehabilitated. The municipal bus serves passengers in the direction of Tsalenjikha Potskho-Jvari only once a week.

Water and electricity are supplied on schedule, gas has been delivered to the residential buildings, but it is not supplied. There is no pharmacy in the settlement. The outpatient clinic works several days a week.

The main source of income for the locals is offering "boat ride" service on Enguri to tourists and gathering firewood in Svaneti. There is a woodworking workshop and a vocational college in the settlement, where woodworking is taught. According to the locals, they were promised by the municipality that they would supply firewood in winter, but the promise remained a promise.

There is a problem with the privatization of apartments in the settlement - the IDPs have not yet legalized their residential spaces. As they say, "bases are messy."

Compared to 2021, Potskho-Etseri is depopulated, just like the rest of the villages near the occupation line.

Enguri Bridge

The problem for those going to Abkhazia is the lack and poor accessibility of transport. In front of our eyes, dozens of people (mostly women) heavily laden with hand luggage walked across the bridge, because there was no free space left in the minibus going to occupied Abkhazia. Enguri Bridge is used by Gali residents who live 5, 10 and 25 kilometers away from the bridge, but since all the other checkpoints are closed (except Pakhulani), they have no other alternative.



Locals come to the territory controlled by the central government mainly to receive services, to visit relatives or to shop. The so-called free economic zone, which was built to facilitate trade for the residents of Abkhazia on the Tbilisi-controlled territory, is not functioning; Shops are closed and abandoned. The control of goods at the Georgian checkpoint is problematic for those crossing the Enguri Bridge. By order of the new so-called local government of Abkhazia, it is allowed to import certain goods from the Tbilisi-controlled territory. Passengers have to pay for the minibus municipal taxi that runs between the checkpoints. As far as the Democracy Research Institute is informed, in the past it was possible to travel free of charge.

According to the locals, all kinds of goods, which are available in Tbilisi and Zugdidi, are sold in Abkhazia as well. A representative of the border police did not answer our question of how the Georgian cargo is transferred to Abkhazia.

Unlike the 2021 visit, video cameras are now installed in the vicinity of the Enguri Bridge checkpoint, which should be evaluated positively.