Problems faced by the population living along the occupation line

In April 2025, representatives of the Democracy Research Institute visited the villages of Ergneti and Zemo Nikozi in the Shida Kartli region, located along the occupation dividing line, to study the basic needs of the local population.

Village of Ergneti

Overview

The village of Ergneti is located in the Gori municipality (Tirdznisi administrative unit) of the Shida Kartli region in eastern Georgia, on the left bank of the Liakhvi River, 840 m above sea level, 28 km from the city of Gori. It borders Tskhinvali.

During the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008, the village of Ergneti suffered the most. The occupiers first looted 90% of the houses and then burned them down. The village's infrastructure was completely destroyed. The war claimed the lives of 12 local residents.

According to the 2014 Georgian census, the village had a population of 457. At this stage, interviews with locals revealed that the vast majority of houses in the village are abandoned.

The village has been granted the status of a highland settlement. Despite the fact that Ergneti enjoys certain privileges established by law, locals rarely come here and mainly have to meet their economic needs and maintain their houses and lands at their own expense. There are also privileges for representatives of the medical and educational sectors, although there is no kindergarten, school, or medical center in the village.

Infrastructural challenges and lack of municipal transport

For years, the village has not had a shop of basic necessities. There is no pharmacy or kindergarten in the village. The district is not served by municipal transport. Two private minibuses, which cost GEL 2.5 one way, do not run on a frequent schedule. The population has to pay GEL 5 to travel to the nearest store in order to buy bread.

The lack of municipal transport has a negative impact on education and timely medical care. The school and kindergarten are available in the nearest villages - Meghvreki and Tirdznisi.

Accordingly, children from nearby villages, including Ergneti, are sent to the Tirdznisi kindergarten. Approximately 14 teachers have to come from Gori.

Availability of local municipal transport is important for improving the social conditions of the population and facilitating the return of local population to the abandoned houses. This will facilitate movement for both rural students and teachers arriving from Gori. At the same time, it will help people with medical needs to contact medical institutions in Gori in a timely manner.

Agriculture

There are challenges related to the cultivation of agricultural land. The rural population does not have the necessary equipment for arable farming. In addition, access to agricultural land plots located along the occupation dividing line is possible only when the locals are accompanied by an armed representative of the Georgian military or police forces. This causes many difficulties, including in terms of timely cultivation and use of land plots.

The population has to go to Gori for systematic registration of land plots. This process has not been completed to this day.

Museum of the August 2008 War

In 2017, local resident Lia Chlachidze founded a museum in her house, which survived the bombing during the August 2008 war. The museum was opened with the USAID support. The museum preserves the memory of civilians affected by hostilities. It also emphasizes the importance of peaceful coexistence between ethnic Georgians and Ossetians.

Despite Ms. Lia's numerous attempts, the museum is not registered and has no official status. In order to register the museum, she applied to both the Public Registry and the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation, but was unable to obtain registration or information about the procedures required for registration.

Village of Zemo Nikozi

The village of Zemo Nikozi is located in the Gori municipality (Nikozi community) of the Shida Kartli region in eastern Georgia, on the right bank of the Didi Liakhvi River, 850 m above sea level, 30 km from Gori. This village also borders Tskhinvali. According to the 2014 Georgian census, the village had a population of 643. The preliminary data for the 2024 population census will be published in June 2025, but interviews on the spot indicate that there are about 500 residents in the village.

Infrastructural challenges

Infrastructure is more or less in order, although population mainly has to take care of their houses and lands on their own. There is also high migration in this village and a large part of the houses are abandoned. For example, only 4 residents live on one of the streets, two of whom are elderly women.

One of the acute problems in the village is the spillage of fecal masses from Tskhinvali into the water pipes, which caused poisoning of the population, including several children. The population says that this problem has been going on for several years, but the local municipality has done nothing to date. Regarding this problem, the Democracy Research Institute requested information from the relevant state agencies about the measures planned to eliminate the damage caused to the population by the contamination of water pipes.

To facilitate the movement of population throughout Georgia, one of the requests of locals is the restoration of railway traffic in the direction of Tbilisi. According to them, this will simplify the connection of the village with the major administrative centers of Georgia, facilitate movement and delivery of agricultural products to the regional centers.

There is a football stadium in the village, which partially satisfies the local young people's needs for entertainment and sports activities, but there is no recreational or entertainment space for young children.

Agriculture

The rural population has a problem with the sale of the harvested crop. They also face problems in terms of maintenance of agricultural plots. Basically, these works are carried out with the personal finances of the population, which not all families can afford. There are unresolved everyday problems in the villages of Ergneti and Zemo Nikozi, including (especially in Ergneti) the acute problem of full use of resources such as agricultural lands, limited access to medicines and basic necessities, and unsolved circumstances that pose a threat to health, such as water pollution (in the village of Zemo Nikozi).

As a result of studying the needs of the villages, it is clear that the following issues need to be resolved at the first stage:

Provide municipal transport in the village of Ergneti;

Solve the problem with water pollution in Zemo Nikozi;

Implement support programmes for the agricultural sector.

In addition, it is important to officially recognize and support the 2008 August War Museum in the village of Ergneti, which serves as an important reminder of the need for peace and reconciliation in the region.