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ACCESS TO EDUCATION IN THE NATIVE LANGUAGE IN GALI AND AKHALGORI DISTRICTS

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1. INTRODUCTION

The right to education is a fundamental human right and implies ensuring both physical and economic access to education. One of the determinants of the accessibility of the right to education is the possibility of receiving education in one's native language. Although the European Convention on Human Rights does not specify the language in which education must be conducted, the right to education would be meaningless if it did not imply, in favour of its beneficiaries, the right to be educated in the national language.¹

The right to receive education in the native language is extremely restricted for Georgians living in the occupied territories of Georgia. It is virtually a part of the political agenda followed by the de facto regimes of the occupied territories. This practice is systemic and manifested in actions such as the express prohibition of receiving education in the Georgian language, persistent harassment of Georgian-language teachers at their workplace, banning Georgian handbooks from curricula and preventing Georgian university entrants from continuing their studies in higher education institutions of Georgia through imposing direct restrictions on their movement or exerting other direct or indirect pressure. While the process of russification had started in Gali District long ago, the restriction of studies in the Georgian language in Akhalkgori became particularly relevant in the reporting period.

The Government of Georgia decided to allow university entrants from the occupied territories to be enrolled in the universities of their choice without taking the Uniform National Examinations and have their study funded by the state to a maximum degree.² The number of entrants from the occupied territories has doubled in the last year and the number of registrations exceeded 360 this year.³

2. METHODOLOGY

Stemming from the systemic and complex nature of the problem, a mixed research methodology was applied to develop this report. In particular, at the first stage of the research, we analysed the information available from open sources (after verifying the credibility of sources and establishing their validity) such as reports of international organisations, materials prepared by international experts and analytical centres as well as information covered by media.

¹ Catan and Others v. the Republic of Moldova and Russia, applications nos. 43770/04, 8252/05 and 18454/06, judgment of the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights of 19 October 2012, para. 137.

² University Entrants from the Occupied Territories Will Be Enrolled in Higher Education Institutions Without Examinations and Their Studies Will Be State Funded, 06.07.2020, <https://1tv.ge/news/okupirebul-teritoriaze-mckhovrebi-abiturientebi-ugamocdod-chairickhebian-da-mat-swavlas-sakhelmwifo-daafinansebs/>.

³ The Minister's Statement: More than 360 University Entrants from Gali and Akhalkgori Will Be Enrolled in University Without Examinations, <https://netgazeti.ge/news/466485/>.

Furthermore, public information was requested from state agencies; public strategy and policy documents were studied and numerous informative and analytical reports and surveys were analysed. Locals were also interviewed on the spot during the field visits to the villages across the administrative border.

The gaps identified from the analysis of open sources and public information were filled with in-depth interviews with contact persons living in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia who, due to their position, have access to relevant information. To ensure the safety of our contact persons, their identities and workplaces are kept confidential.

A particular challenge in the process of developing the report was the fact that the occupation forces of the Russian Federation make it impossible to move freely in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia and study the situation in person.

3. GALI DISTRICT

Since 1 September 2015, teaching has been conducted in Russian in eleven Georgian-language secondary schools of Gali District. The handbooks approved by the Ministry of Education of Georgia have been destroyed.⁴ Georgian as a foreign language is taught only in one school in Gali and several schools in the coastline villages. The possibility of receiving education in the Georgian language is prohibited in all preschool institutions of Gali District. This constitutes a part of the policy of russification of Georgian-language schools after which the Georgian language will gradually disappear from educational institutions in Gali.

If this trend continues, the last Georgian-language class will finish secondary education in 2022 and the Georgian component will be completely removed from the education system in Gali District from 2022.

Apart from bans on the studies, pupils are also deprived of access to handbooks on Georgian language, literature, history and geography in school and local libraries. The handbooks have been removed and destroyed.⁵ Documentation in all schools is maintained in Russian. Considering the fact that residents of Gali District, as a rule, do not know Russian well, the prohibition of studies in the Georgian language will virtually make it impossible for ethnic Georgians to exercise their right to quality education.

Apart from the disappearance of the Georgian language from the education system, the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality points out a dangerous trend of active war propaganda in secondary education institutions.⁶

⁴ A New Wave of Russification in the Occupied Gali, Voice of America, 04.08.2015, <https://www.amerikiskhma.com/a/gali-georgian-books/2900478.html>.

⁵ An interview with an anonymous respondent.

⁶ Ketevan Tsikhelashvili's Report: Psychological Pressure on Children and Suppression of Identity in Gali, <https://netgazeti.ge/news/315893/>.

In the long-term perspective, this will significantly damage the process of restoration of trust between Georgians and Abkhazians.

According to a local activists,⁷ “on several occasions, ethnic Georgian pupils of pre-schools were forced to participate in ‘celebrations marking the victory over Georgia’”. Notably, ethnic Georgian children against their will were forced to put on military uniforms and take part in simulation games aimed at propagating war and portraying Georgians as enemies.

The chart below illustrates the statistics of the pupils enrolled in schools of Gali district.⁸

Study Year	Enrolled in School		Graduated from School
	Preparatory Class	First Class	
2014 -2015	202	353	323
2015 -2016	282	320	348
2016 -2017	288	404	362
2017 -2018	266	395	372
2018 -2019	261	343	410
2019 -2020	236	352	348
Total:	1535	2167	2163 Graduates
	3702 Pupils		

From 1 January 2015 to 1 June 2020, 3,702 pupils were enrolled in the preparation and beginners’ classes in 31 schools of Gali District as of pre-war boundaries. From 1 January 2015 to 1 June 2020, 2,163 pupils graduated from the secondary education institution in Gali. From 1 January 2015 to 1 June 2020, in accordance with Order no. 147 of the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia of 19 March 2009 on the Procedure of Acknowledging Secondary Education Received on the Occupied Territory, secondary education received by 528 pupils on the occupied territory was approved.⁹

In the reporting period, the so-called gamebeli of Gali District was reported to be annoyed by the fact that, despite multiple obstacles, more and more pupils from Gali District come to Georgian-controlled territory to receive education. “In public schools, we are not obliged to provide instruction in Georgian. Megrelian is the native language for the locals and we will enable children to study Megrelian in public schools”.¹⁰

⁷ An interview with an anonymous respondent.

⁸ Letter no. MES 6 20 00465721 of the Minister of Education and Culture of the Minister of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, dated 15 June 2020.

⁹ Idem.

¹⁰ Gamebeli of the Occupied Gali: We can Introduce in Schools Megrelian Instead of Georgian, <https://ipress.ge/new/okupirebuli-galis-gamebeli-shegvidzlia-skolebshi-qarthulis-natsvlad-megruli-enis-stsavlaba-shevitanoth/>.

During the pandemic, the Government of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia gave financial aid of GEL 150 to 31 school graduates and socially vulnerable students from occupied Abkhazia; 20 Students who were stuck in Zugdidi were given food.¹¹ Under the initiative of the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, with the support of the Administration of the Government of Georgia and the third sector, during the pandemic, 235 students that had to stay on the Georgian-controlled territory were given food and items of personal hygiene.¹²

Despite the efforts made, the problem is profound and, considering its scale, those measures cannot be considered as sufficient.

4. AKHALGORI DISTRICT

A similar situation exists in the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia where, under the decision of the Minister of Education and Science of the de facto Republic of South Ossetia, in 2017-2018, teaching can only be conducted in Russian and Ossetian in the schools and preschools of Akhalgori District populated by ethnic Georgians. Georgian schools came under the control of the secondary education programme developed by the de facto republic.¹³ The Georgian language is banished not only from schools but also from preschools. This is to be considered a part of the long-term policy of purposeful eradication of the Georgian language from the occupied territories.

In the reporting period, personnel of the Georgian educational institutions in the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia were systematically harassed. In this period, directors of two Georgian schools in Akhalgori were dismissed, viz., Nino Amiranashvili (First Secondary School of Akhalgori) and Mzia Psuturi (Secondary School of the village of Ikoti). In the case of Nino Amiranashvili, the de facto regime based its decision on alleged transfer of pupils from Tserovani without proper documentation.¹⁴ In the case of Mzia Psuturi, “lack of pedagogical education” is cited as the reason. However, according to our contact person, before her dismissal as the Director of the First Secondary School of Akhalgori, Nino Amiranashvili was disciplined because pupils and teachers spoke in Georgian in the beginners’ classes. The director was warned that pupils could not speak in Georgian even during breaks with those children whose classes are still conducted in Georgian.¹⁵

¹¹ Letter no. MES 6 20 00465721 of the Minister of Education and Culture of the Minister of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, dated 15 June 2020.

¹² Idem.

¹³ Teaching in the Georgian Language Will Be Banned, Radio Tavisupleba, 2017.11.08, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/kartuli-enis-sakitkhi-akhalgorshi/28671045.html>.

¹⁴ Nino Amiranashvili was reinstated in her job under the Tskhinvali Court’s decision. The local education unit was ordered to pay Nino Amiranashvili 10,000 Roubles for lost payment and moral damage. The information is available at: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/471115/>.

¹⁵ DRI: Akhalgori Pupils and School Personnel are Banned from Speaking in Georgian, 14.02.20, <http://www.democracyresearch.org/geo/228>.

The so-called educational commission, which visited Akhagori from Tskhinvali, gave the same warning to almost all educational institutions. Teachers and service personnel were banned from speaking in Georgian not only to children but to each other as well.

Apart from teachers, university entrants are harassed and intimidated as well. By the end of the study year of 2019-2020, university entrants from Akhagori were categorically warned by the representatives of the security committee and local administration of the de facto republic that they were prohibited from receiving education on the territory controlled by the central authorities, i.e., Georgia. It was reported that the meeting with the university entrants was attended by four officers of the so-called security committee of South Ossetia.¹⁶ According to a local educator, the pupils were intimidated during the meeting.

Despite these prohibitions, in 2015-2019, 23 youths from Akhagori District were enrolled in higher education establishments in the territories controlled by Georgia.¹⁷

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Georgian Authorities:

- To enhance their diplomatic efforts for the protection of the rights of ethnic Georgians living in the occupied regions. Stronger international pressure should be exerted on the Russian Federation which is the only subject wielding effective control in the occupied regions and therefore, responsible for the breach of human rights;
- With regard to inter-state application no. 39611/18 lodged by Georgia with the European Court of Human Rights against the Russian Federation on 22 August 2018 in relation to the deterioration of the human rights situation along the administrative boundary lines between Georgian-controlled territory and Abkhazia and South Ossetia, to supply additional information to the European Court about the administrative practice of violation of the right to education that took place in Gali and Akhagori districts in the reporting period;
- To allocate additional resources for the social protection of Ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia. Furthermore, exchange and informal education programmes should be introduced for ethnic pupils and teachers living in the occupied territories, which would enable them to fill in the lacunae in their education.

¹⁶ KGB's Pressure on Students from Akhagori - an Attempt to Depopulate the Region, 18 June 2020, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/30678195.html>.

¹⁷ Letter no. 472/06 of the Administration of South Ossetia, dated 6 July 2020.