



HUMAN RIGHTS IN ABKHAZIA AND VILLAGES ALONG THE DIVIDING LINE

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PREAMBLE

The report reviews the situation of human rights in occupied Abkhazia. It brings together the materials published by the Democracy Research Institute regarding the occupied region of Abkhazia from March to September 2023. It should be noted at the very beginning that it is difficult to objectively and comprehensively analyze the current human rights situation in Abkhazia, especially considering that the operation of international organizations is

extremely limited in the region due to occupation. The lack of opportunity to assess the rights situation of the population on the ground emphasizes the extreme vulnerability of people living under occupation, especially ethnic Georgians, and the difficulties associated with the protection of their rights.

Given the above-mentioned limitations, the present report does not review in detail several issues that are of constant concern to the Democracy Research Institute. Among them are: improper response to the cases of gross violation of human rights in occupied Abkhazia; the rights situation of ethnically Georgian prisoners in the penitentiary institutions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali; illegal detentions along the occupation line; and what is most alarming, the inefficient policy of the Georgian Government to achieve the release of illegally detained Georgian citizens, including Irakli Bebu.

The main part of the report is based on the analysis of information provided to the Democracy Research Institute by contact persons living in occupied Gali, Sokhumi and Akhagori, and is therefore limited to the most pressing issues identified during the observation period. During the research, we used mixed methods of collecting information - including desk research, fieldwork, interviews, and information from public sources. For the purposes of the research, we used the acts issued by the central authorities of Georgia, the documents obtained as public information and the so-called legal documents of Abkhazia; During the visit to the villages located near the occupation line, we interviewed the local population.

Based on the information provided by contact persons, the materials prepared by the Democracy Research Institute on physical integrity, education and freedom of movement were grouped in the first chapters of the report. The report reviews problems related to gender

equality in Abkhazia, frequent cases of femicide and the experiences of LGBTQI+ people. The document also analyzes the recently intensified Russian soft power in Abkhazia, the strengthening of Russian influence and control, and the social problems of people living in the villages located along the occupation line.

1

FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

1.1 TEMPORARY VISAS ARE ISSUED TO ETHNIC GEORGIANS IN EXCHANGE OF BRIBES

Entry into and exit from the territory of occupied Abkhazia is regulated by the law adopted by the de facto parliament of Abkhazia in 2016. The so-called legislative act “On entry into the Republic of Abkhazia and exit from the Republic of Abkhazia” establishes the list of documents necessary to enter Abkhazia and determines the types of visas.

Getting a visa to enter Abkhazia is difficult and involves several stages of procedure. According to the information available to the Democracy Research Institute, the procedure is particularly difficult for ethnic Georgians. The number of people who want to come to the territory of Abkhazia from the territory controlled by the central government is not small and the desire to come is mainly related to visiting the graves of ancestors or close relatives.

In order to move to the territory of occupied Abkhazia, ethnic Georgians have to get the so-called visa, which is usually issued for 10 days. According to the information available to the Democracy Research Institute, visas are not issued without a bribe, the amount of which is two times higher for ethnic Georgians.

1.2 THOSE WISHING TO ENTER ABKHAZIA FACE BUREAUCRATIC BARRIERS FROM THE CENTRAL AUTHORITIES

According to the Democracy Research Institute, from 2022, the population has been agreeing the transportation of cargo to Abkhazia and South Ossetia with the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality. Unlike the residents of the Tbilisi-controlled territory it is problematic for the population of the occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali to properly enjoy fundamental rights and freedoms. Against this background, the restrictions on cargo transportation additionally worsens their rights situation. Part of the population notes that the vague restriction on the transportation of goods, inter alia, refers to food and other basic necessities.

The above information was initially spread via the social network. Additional information about the issue was provided to the organization by contact persons. **In order to clarify the position of the State on the above issue, DRI addressed the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality of Georgia.** According to the Democracy Research Institute, the population is not aware about what type of cargo they are allowed to transport and what kind of legal provisions are in force; whether there is a legal restriction that prevents non-entrepreneurial individuals from transporting a certain type or quantity of cargo; what is considered an amount of personal consumption or, if desired, how they can use the special enterprise status.

Article 242 of the Tax Code recognizes a special enterprise status for people living/doing business in the occupied territories. This relationship is also regulated by Article 6, part 2, of the Law of Georgia on Occupied Territories. The law prohibits the transfer of a product that belongs to the scope of permit and license activities, as well as a product that is of military purpose, or considers it an object of control. **However, for the second year, there has been a harmful practice beyond the provisions of the law. Namely, it is possible to import products from the Tbilisi-controlled territory to the occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali only with the individual consent of the relevant official.**

According to DRI's assessment, it is important for the State to abandon the harmful practices/regulations that create additional barriers for the population to enjoy their freedom of movement; If there is a need for such a regulation, the State must justify the critical necessity of the said restriction and the impossibility of achieving the set goal by other, less painful methods; And the Office of the State Minister of Georgia should provide information to the population about what kind and quantity of cargo is allowed to be transported; what is considered an amount of personal consumption and, if desired, how stakeholders can benefit from the special enterprise status.

1.3 EXPIRED RESIDENCE CERTIFICATES

In 2017-2018, the residents of Gali, who refused Abkhaz and Russian passports, were given residence certificates, which were also considered a temporary movement document. The residents of Gali were able to travel to the Tbilisi-controlled territory with those certificates. However, since the validity period of the residence certificate was 5 years, the majority of the residents of Gali were left without a document necessary for movement at the beginning of 2023.

The amendments made to the law on the rights situation of citizens of a foreign country („О правовом положении иностранных граждан“) in January 2023 complicated the procedure for obtaining a residence permit. The Democracy Research Institute has already reported that the residents of Gali were required to prove their permanent presence in the territory of Abkhazia for the past 5 years in order to get the movement document. This requirement proved to be particularly problematic for students and locals employed in the Tbilisi-controlled territory. **To solve the problem, the Gali population was offered a corrupt solution. It costs one hundred thousand rubles (about GEL 3,110) to falsify a document proving continuous residence in Gali.**

From December 2022 to the end of March 2023, a large part of the population of Gali had been actually unable to enjoy the freedom of movement due to the lack of documents. Currently, until the full resolution of the problem and for the neutralization of the locals' protest, the validity period of form #9 has been extended from the end of March to December 31, 2023, although the population will probably still have to pay a bribe to receive a document certifying their continuous residence in Abkhazia.

1.4 TAXES FOR MINIBUS TAXIS OPERATING ON ENGURI BRIDGE

According to the Democracy Research Institute, in April 2023, minibus drivers taking passengers between Gali and the Enguri bridge were summoned to the de facto militia and were demanded to pay a bribe in order to be able to continue to work. Drivers pay 300 rubles (approximately GEL 9.5) per day, of which, as they say, 100-100 rubles is intended for the on-duty militiamen, and 100 rubles goes to Zurab Jinjolia, the head of the local de facto state automobile inspection (“GAI”).

1.5 THE CENTRAL AUTHORITIES IMPOSE ADDITIONAL BARRIERS ON FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT FOR THE AKHALGORI POPULATION

The residents of Akhalgori are allowed to move to the territory controlled by the central government only for 10 days a month. The road connecting with occupied Akhalgori - the so-called Razdakhani checkpoint is open from the 20th to the 30th day of every month. Since special permits are issued at a slow pace, not everyone has yet benefited from the right to travel.

According to the information available to the Democracy Research Institute, the road has been opened, but only for pedestrians. The Akhalgori-Tbilisi municipal passenger route has been cancelled. As a result, for the residents of the occupied territory, the one-way fare is about GEL 100 - by private taxi to the Russian checkpoint and from the Georgian checkpoint to Tbilisi. On the way back, the municipal bus drives passenger from Tserovani to the dividing line only in the morning hours. Locals are unable to use it according to the existing schedule due to family issues or work. The cargo of some passengers cannot fit in the transport, which creates additional difficulties.

According to the local, the Georgian checkpoint has recently established new regulations. Those, who do not have registration in Akhalgori and/or Akhalgori is not written as a place of birth in their identity document, will not be allowed to drive to the Russian checkpoint. The population has to walk one and a half km between the Georgian and Russian checkpoints. An alternative to this is to hire the transport of a person who has registration in Akhalgori.

In the past, the passengers who wanted to go to Tbilisi tried to fully use the time left before the closure of the checkpoints. In the evening, they used to return by taxi or take transport from Didube to the village of Odzisi, the last stop of which was at the Russian checkpoint. The relatives of the Akhalgori residents or persons accompanying them could also go freely to the Russian checkpoint. In addition to drivers, the new regulation will affect many locals. The only solution is to apply to the Akhalgori municipal administration in Tserovani for a special certificate. It should be noted that a similar problematic rule was in effect in 2008-2012 and created a lot of problems for the local population.

The Democracy Research Institute believes that any changes in the existing regulations should be adjusted to the interests of the population as much as possible and should not complicate the existing situation. The above-mentioned changes make the difficult living conditions of the Akhalgori residents even more unbearable.

2

RIGHT TO EDUCATION

2.1 ABKHAZIAN YOUTH ARE ABLE TO GET HIGHER EDUCATION ABROAD ONLY IN RUSSIA

General and higher education systems are outdated in Abkhazia. Until now, it had been a taboo to talk about the problems in the education system. However, recently, the Abkhazian society has started to discuss this issue.

The Soviet system of education, which still operates in Abkhazia, cannot respond to the challenges of the 21st century - young people with school education cannot continue their studies at higher education institutions and are uncompetitive. The locals believe that at the first stage the introduction of specialized education, as well as changing the education system and dividing 11 years of education into middle (9 grades) and senior grades (grades 10 and 11), can eliminate the problem. According to the current plan, the first 9 years may remain unchanged, at the end of which a certificate of secondary education will be issued, and students will need to pass a profile class to enter the university. Taking into account that not all schools in Abkhazia will be able to conduct specialized classes, it is likely that “school migration” will be introduced - changing schools, according to the chosen thematic education.

As for higher education, according to some Abkhazian students, the isolation of Abkhazia by the central authorities of Georgia is the biggest problem for those wishing to study abroad. After the start of the war in Ukraine, according to the locals, the European educational space has been closed for Abkhazia. This is due to the limitation of western education for people with Russian passports, which they had been enjoying relatively easily before the war. According to the Democracy Research Institute, part of the Abkhaz population believes that Tbilisi should solve the problem for Abkhaz students; However, as a solution to the problem, they consider it correct to recognize the Abkhazian passport and, in this way, to grant them the right to study at European universities.

In Georgia, Erasmus+ is actively working in the field of higher education, both in the direction of student scholarships and in terms of supporting the higher education reform. Abkhazians and Ossetians, unfortunately, remain outside of similar programmes. The Erasmus+ programme has a clearly defined list of countries that can participate in the programme and Abkhazia and South Ossetia are not among them. Only

higher education institutions authorized by the state can participate from Georgia. Therefore, as Abkhazian universities do not have accreditation, students do not have the opportunity to participate in the short-term student exchange programmes.

Despite the fact that the representatives of the Erasmus programme operating in Georgia had an offer to the Abkhazian side to allow students to participate in the name of the accredited universities in Georgia, the offer was rejected. According to the information available to the Democracy Research Institute, such agreements, which would give Abkhazian youth the opportunity for European education, are hindered by the local security service of Abkhazia.

The deficiency of Abkhazian educational programmes and the system in general can be seen more clearly in international programmes that are not tied to universities. In this case, the student participates in the general competition, where the competition is higher than usual. As a rule, the secondary or higher education received in the occupied territory is not enough to win the competition of international programmes.

According to the information posted on the website of the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, the Georgian Government tried to make it easier for Abkhazians and Ossetians living in the occupied territories to participate in international educational processes within the framework of “A Step to a Better Future” initiative. The list of various scholarships can be found on the official website of the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, through which Abkhazian and Ossetian youth can receive education abroad. According to the same information, Abkhazian and Ossetian youth can also be enrolled in the Georgian state scholarship programme by the Center for International Education. However, it is not known how accessible this information is to the residents of the occupied territories.

The right to education is a fundamental human right and implies both physical and economic access to education. The Democracy Research Institute calls on the Georgian Government to plan and take steps to proactively provide information on opportunities for receiving higher education abroad for Georgian, Abkhaz and Ossetian youth living in the occupied territories of Georgia.

2.2 DISCRIMINATION AND HARASSMENT IN GALI PUBLIC SCHOOLS

On May 14, 2023, the director of Gali public school No. 2, Akhra Kvekveskiri, instructed teachers and children to decorate Vladislav Ardzinba's grave with flowers to pay respect to his birthday. During the mentioned period, the director was on a business trip to Russia. After coming back, the director checked whether the teachers and schoolchildren had fulfilled the task, and after finding out that not a single teacher or student had arrived at Ardzinba's grave, the director gathered the teachers/children and verbally abused them.

On May 17, 2023, Akhra Kvekveskiri organized an exhibition of Ardzinba's photos in Gali public school No. 2, wrote a special text and forced students to read it in order to celebrate May 14 at school belatedly. Kvekveskiri threatened not to give the students school diplomas in order to ensure that they would not refuse to participate in the mentioned event.

According to the information available to the Democracy Research Institute, the director of the second public school of Gali has been insulting the locals of Gali every day for 11 years, emphasizing their ethnic origin and place of residence.

The Democracy Research Institute notes that bullying, humiliating treatment and coercion of children by the supervisor in the workplace represent a crime. The actions of the director of the second public school of Gali, Akhra Kvekveskiri, are contrary to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and it is necessary for the Georgian authorities and the international community to discuss the ill-treatment of children in the Geneva format.

2.3 TSKHINVALI SECURITY SERVICE CONDUCTS SEARCHES IN AKHALGORI SCHOOLS

On June 13, the so-called security service of Tskhinvali conducted a search in Akhalgori municipality schools. According to the information obtained by the Democracy Research Institute, documents and textbooks were seized; phones were also taken away from teachers and representatives of the administration, which were returned after inspection. The searches were conducted illegally, without any explanation, early in the morning, and simultaneously at schools where education had been conducted in the Georgian language before 2017.

Currently, there are six schools in the Akhalgori municipality, where education had been conducted in Georgian before 2017: one in Akhalgori township and five in the villages - Ikoti, Korinta, Akhmaji, Balaani and Zemo Boli. The population still refers to these schools as Georgian schools. The policy of Russification of previously fully Georgian-language schools began in 2017, when the

language of education in grades 1-6 was switched from Georgian to Russian. A similar process was launched in the Gali district as well, where all Georgian schools became Russian-language. It has been forbidden to receive education in the native language in Akhalgori for years, and a large part of the Georgian population is forced to receive education in the Tbilisi-controlled territory.

The reason for the search is unknown to the school administration. According to the locals, it must be connected to the increased control over the Akhalgori population, which is also proved by the fact that the search was conducted only at schools where education had been conducted in the Georgian language. No search was conducted in the Russian school of Akhalgori, which has been operating since 2008. The opening of a Russian-language school in a district mainly inhabited by Georgians and Ossetians is another sign of intensified Russification. The search once again points to the practice of discrimination and violation of the rights of the Georgian population in the region.

The Democracy Research Institute calls on the Government of Georgia to respond to the mentioned fact. The authorities should use all the available mechanisms to protect the fundamental rights of the population of Akhalgori, to prevent illegal interference in the educational process and to restore the right to education in the native, Georgian language for the population living in the Akhalgori and Gali districts.

3

RUSSIAN SOFT POWER

3.1 BZHANIA'S DE FACTO AUTHORITIES BETWEEN THE FEAR OF ANGER OF ABKHAZIAN SOCIETY AND RUSSIAN BLACKMAIL

Last week was quite tensed in Abkhazia. De-facto president Aslan Bzhania, who was visiting Moscow, had to ease a political tension in his absence. De-facto foreign minister Inal Ardzinba, whom Abkhazian and Georgian civil society and political circles consider to be the direct representative of Moscow, announced his resignation. It is true that the statement was spread through the Telegram channel and not from the government's official tribunes, but the reference to the disagreements in the Abkhaz ruling circles was obvious. According to the information available to the Democracy Research Institute, Aslan Bzhania had to convince Inal Ardzinba not to leave his position in the de facto government. These developments raised several questions: First of all, why did Inal Ardzinba decide to step down? Second - why doesn't Aslan Bzhania want the resignation of the politician who may become his competitor in the fight for the post of de facto president in the near future?

There is an opinion that the reason for the conflict between Ardzinba and Bzhania is the so-called draft law on Russian apartments ("On regulation of the legal status of apart-hotels and apartments"). For a long time now, Russia has been demanding from the de facto government of Abkhazia to grant property rights to its citizens on the territory of Abkhazia. For this purpose, the de-facto government of Abkhazia was requested from the Russian Federation, on the one hand, to lease the territory of Bichvinta, and on the other hand, to allow construction of apart-hotels in different regions of Abkhazia. The fate of both draft laws is still unknown, since the de-facto parliament of Abkhazia, and apparently the government as well, considering the unanimous objection of the Abkhazian society, do not want to initiate the relevant legislative initiatives, which would greatly undermine their already weak legitimacy.

The act of démarche by the direct representative of Russia, Inal Ardzinba, regarding his resignation can be seen as a sign of blackmail and pressure from Russia. By taking away its protégé, Russia may be signaling to Bzhania's de facto government that he will be left face-to-face with the

Abkhazian public, which is getting more and more resentful by the worsening socio-economic situation (to which the reduction in Russian subsidies has contributed greatly). Accordingly, Ardzinba's démarche is in unison with Russia's secret blackmail policy ongoing behind closed doors, which will lead to the termination of Russian budgetary aid and the crisis of the budget sector (including social and health care systems), if the Russian apartment bill is further delayed or not adopted. In addition, the population of Abkhazia is threatened with disconnection from the Russian energy network in the forthcoming winter.

Aslan Bzhania may be well aware of what it means, on the one hand, to face angry Abkhazian society if Russia's demands are met, and on the other hand, to face the same anger if Abkhazia is engulfed in a financial and energy crisis, and therefore, if the already fragile social and economic infrastructure is completely paralyzed. That is why it has to maintain the unity in which the coexistence of actors with conflicting political interests based on the principle of oil and water will at least someday break the status quo and tip the scale in favour of one or another - Russian or more Russian side.

3.2 THE SO-CALLED APARTMENTS DRAFT LAW GIVES RUSSIAN CITIZENS THE RIGHT TO PURCHASE REAL ESTATE IN ABKHAZIA

The sale of real estate and land to foreigners is still prohibited in Abkhazia. Prohibitions related to the purchase of property in Abkhazia for Russian citizens have repeatedly become a reason for the irritation of high-ranking Russian officials. For years, the de facto authorities of Abkhazia have tried and succeeded in postponing the consideration of the issue. However, the request of the Russian side has not been removed from the agenda. According to the information posted on the website of the de facto parliament of Abkhazia, in the hot days of July, the parliament of Abkhazia is discussing the adoption and enactment of a new law "On the regulation of the legal status of apart-hotels and apartments". The initiator of the legislative proposal is the de facto president. According to the information spread by public sources, Aslan Bzhania is demanding from the de facto parliament to adopt the draft law in July.

According to the draft law, foreigners or stateless persons **will no longer prohibited** from buying apartments in aparthotels. The only exceptions will be the cases when a citizen of a foreign country or a stateless person (or their family member) participates in actions against the “independence” of Abkhazia. Even though owning property will not become the basis for obtaining the right of residence or citizenship in Abkhazia, the main part of the Abkhazian society opposes the adoption of the draft law. According to them, the goal of the new legislation will be to transfer the strategic property of Abkhazia to the ownership of Russians.

While the Abkhazian opposition is campaigning against the draft law on the grounds that it will facilitate the purchase of property in Abkhazia by ethnic Georgian citizens of Russia, it is clear that part of the Abkhazian civil society is critical of Russian “investors”. Some Abkhazians believe that the government is using Abkhazian property against national interests. Russian money is expected to be invested in Gali as well, in old hotels.

According to the assessment of the Democracy Research Institute, the processes ongoing in Abkhazia, contain a significant threat of annexation of Abkhazia in the long term and the implementation of similar initiatives should not be allowed until the regulation of the conflict.

3.3 ABKHAZIA'S ANNEXATION WILL BE FURTHER STRENGTHENED BY THE OBLIGATION TO ENFORCE THE DECISIONS OF THE COURTS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Abkhazia's de facto minister of justice Anri Bartsits signed an agreement on mutual recognition of court rulings on arbitration cases between Abkhazia and Russia. In case of ratification of the document by the de facto parliament of Abkhazia, the enforcement of the rulings of the courts of the Russian Federation on arbitration cases will become mandatory for Abkhazia. The agreement has already been ratified by the Russian State Duma. Vladimir Putin has also signed it. The document is now forwarded to the de facto parliament of Abkhazia for ratification, although it is strongly criticized by the opposition and experts.

In addition, the Abkhazian opposition fears that based on the said agreement they will have to return property to the Georgian refugees living in Russia, who have Russian citizenship. Accordingly, according to the Abkhazian opposition, Abkhazia has only one option - not to ratify the agreement.

According to the Democracy Research Institute, the fear that the agreement will protect the interests of ethnic Georgians is irrational and does not correspond to reality. In fact, the agreement serves not to protect the property rights of Georgian refugees, but to strengthen the annexation of Abkhazia. Russia will use the above-mentioned agreement only in one direction: to protect its own inter-

ests and to ensure that the real estate located in Abkhazia moves to Russian jurisdiction; Russian investments in Bichvinta are a classic example of the above.

According to the de facto minister of justice, the text of the document sent from Russia to Abkhazia was changed and brought into compliance with the interests of Abkhazia. The document originally provided for the enforcement of the court rulings made only in Russia. Later, at the request of the Abkhazian side, the obligation to enforce the court decisions of Abkhazia in the Russian Federation was added to the agreement. According to the updated text of the agreement, the area of application of the document is limited and it only applies to the rulings of arbitration courts relating to economic cases, while the original version covered many areas of civil relations.

The optimism of the minister of justice is not shared by the opposition or experts. Given Russia's refusal to enforce the decisions of international organizations, it is doubtful it will enforce the court decisions and arbitration rulings delivered in Abkhazia, especially considering that according to the agreement, in case of the need to protect the “public interests” of the Russian Federation, Russia is exempted from the obligation to enforce the decisions of the courts of other countries. Accordingly, the opposition believes that if Russia refuses to enforce the decision of the Abkhazian courts, Abkhazia will not have any mechanism to change the above, whereas Russia has a number of mechanisms to influence Abkhazia and, accordingly, to ensure the enforcement of Russian court rulings.

From July 2022, in the wake of the war in Ukraine, the Russian Federation has been the owner of the famous Bichvinta country house, which had been owned by the state earlier, and 186 hectares of land around it. The object of protection of the said agreement will be the former hotel Abkhazia, as well as Moscow Resort, which, according to the information provided to the Democracy Research Institute, belongs to Putin's daughter.

Taking into account the developments in Abkhazia, the Democracy Research Institute calls on the Georgian Government to:

- express its clear position on the agreement between Abkhazia and Russia on the mutual recognition of the court rulings on arbitration cases and to raise the issue in international formats.

3.4 RUSSIA CONTINUES TO FULLY FINANCE THE STATE SECURITY SERVICE OF ABKHAZIA

On May 26, 2023, the deputies of the de facto parliament of Abkhazia ratified additional protocols to the 2021 and 2020 agreements in the first and second final reading at the meeting of the spring session. The documents con-

cern the conditions of co-financing of Abkhazian public agencies by the Russian Federation.

As a result of the bilateral ratification of the additional protocol to the co-financing agreement between Abkhazia and the Russian Federation, the Russian Federation will fully finance the salaries and pensions of the employees of the state security service of the republic of Abkhazia until January 2026. The agreement was originally signed on February 28, 2023 in Moscow. In their turn, the Abkhaz MPs unanimously supported the document. As a result, funds continue to flow from the Russian Federation to the security service of Abkhazia; As the locals point out, the funding has increased.

As far as the Democracy Research Institute is informed, the fact that the state security service of Abkhazia is fully financed by Russia is unacceptable for part of the population of Abkhazia; It is obvious to them that due to being fully financed by a foreign state, the security service of Abkhazia represents and protects the interests of Russia, not their own.

3.5 RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA INTENSIFIED IN ABKHAZIA AFTER THE PARLIAMENT OF GEORGIA DROPPED THE SO-CALLED RUSSIAN DRAFT LAW

Russian propaganda has been particularly intensified in the occupied territories after Georgian Dream was forced to drop the so-called Russian draft law, which was directed against independent civil society organizations and the media, in the background of the general public protest.

The protests held in Tbilisi on March 7-8-9 were portrayed by the Russian propaganda as an attempt to open a second front in the occupied territories. By spreading disinformation, they tried to demonize people criticizing the Georgian Dream authorities. The withdrawal of the Russian-spirit draft law "On Transparency of Foreign Influence" regulating the issues relating to the media and non-governmental organizations was considered a "state" threat in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, and there was a fear that people critical of the authorities might want a war with Russia and, respectively, with the population of Abkhazia. The de facto president of Abkhazia, Aslan Bzhania, and the de facto minister of foreign affairs, Inal Ardzimba, openly stated a position similar to the one expressed by the Russian minister of foreign affairs, Sergey Lavrov. Aslan Bzhania said that they would strengthen their combat readiness, because **the opposition in Tbilisi was trying to overthrow the authorities and open a "second front" against Russia.**

It should be positively noted that Abkhazia does not/cannot adopt a law of similar content regarding the regulation of the activities of civil society organizations due to the protest of the Abkhazian society. Unfortunately, a similar law has been in effect in Tskhinvali since 2014.

According to the Democracy Research Institute, after the spread of the Russian disinformation that the "war party" had won in Tbilisi and Georgians were planning a military attack on Abkhazia, residents of Gali were asked the following questions by people living in Sokhumi and other cities of Abkhazia: "Are tanks deployed in Zugdidi?!", "When are the "Georgians of Gali" starting a war?!"

According to the source of the Democracy Research Institute, on March 10-11, 2023, the de facto power structures of Abkhazia switched to the emergency regime and mobilization of reservists was announced; On March 11, military units were brought into the Gali region; Heads of civil society organizations of Abkhazia were summoned to the local security service and were questioned about the alleged launch of hostilities by Georgia. On March 14, Aslan Bzhania arrived in Gali. He ordered the immediate construction of defense structures along the dividing line. On March 16, the situation calmed down and military units and special forces began to leave Gali. However, representatives of the local power structure are still working in emergency mode.

The Democracy Research Institute calls on:

The executive and legislative authorities of Georgia to take into account the difficult situation of people living in the occupied territories and not to feed Russian disinformation. To this end, it is necessary to stop demonizing people enjoying freedom of assembly and speech and deepening polarization with civil society.

3.6 RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA IN GALI

The Democracy Research Institute wrote earlier that Russian propaganda and the process of ideologically winning the ethnically Georgian population over had entered a new phase in Abkhazia. Representatives of the Russian Federation offer new projects to the population of Gali in a planned and step-by-step manner. For example:

- At the beginning of June, on the initiative of the Russian Embassy, children living in the Gali district were taken on excursions; Ritsa Lake, Bichvinta, Bedia and New Athos. For children living in the conflict zone and their families, the transportation, food and other expenses were completely covered by the Russian side as a "gift of friendly Russia". At the second stage, the Russian Embassy again selected villages inhabited by ethnic Georgians; children from 15 villages, which belong to Ochamchire and Tkvarcheli according to the new division, were taken on excursions.
- On the initiative of the Ministry of Education of Russia, an Open Learning Center was opened at Gali Humanitarian College, with which an exclusive memorandum of "cooperation" was signed earlier. Trainings and retraining courses in Russian language and literature will be provided for philologists in the center. In the future, retraining is planned in all subjects. Specialists will

be brought by the Ministry of Education of Russia. At the same time, within the framework of the memorandum, the Russian Ministry of Education undertakes to increase the salaries of the Gali Humanitarian College employees.

- Alexander Pushkin's birthday was celebrated in Sokhumi on June 6. Public school students of Abkhazia, including those from Gali district, took part in the event. According to the information available to the Democracy Research Institute, the main purpose of the gathering was likely to have an ideological impact on minors, as the event was dominated by statements about the positive aspects of living in the Russian Empire and the USSR.
- To solve the problem of land cultivation in Gali, Russians brought 120 tractors from Krasnodar and helped the residents of Gali free of charge: "This is Russia's gift to our fraternal Georgians, don't betray Russia and everything will be solved, tell this to whoever you can reach."

The Democracy Research Institute considers that Russia is trying to ideologically win over Abkhazian residents. Against this background, it is not known what the Georgian Government is doing against Russia's strengthened influence in Gali. The Democracy Research Institute believes that the Government should create mechanisms to restrain the intensified ideological campaign in Gali and also develop additional social packages for the Gali population.

4

GENDER EQUALITY

4.1 MURDER OF NATIA BAKHTADZE – FEMICIDE AND CONCERNING RIGHTS SITUATION OF WOMEN IN ABKHAZIA

On July 28, 2023, Georgian citizen Natia Bakhtadze, an ethnic Georgian, went missing in the city of Gali. According to the initial reports, the young woman was “abducted for the purpose of marriage”. A few days after Natia’s disappearance, the body of a young woman was found in the village of Ilori. It was later found out that the deceased was a young woman who had gone missing in Gulripshi a week earlier. Although the identity of the deceased was established as a result of autopsy, the circumstances of her death have not been made public.

Natia Bakhtadze’s body has not been found yet. The de facto authorities detained Ochamchire resident Aynar Tsvihba on charges of the murder of Natia Bakhtadze. Tsvihba pleaded guilty and named jealousy as the motive. According to him, the woman’s refusal and her upcoming wedding became the reason for the murder.

Aynar Tsvizhba’s father Tamaz Tsvizhba is considered an influential person in the region. In the past, he was the first deputy of Temur Nadaraia in the Gali district; currently, he has a flour business in eastern Abkhazia. The camera footage seized in connection with the murder shows that on July 28, the day of Natia Bakhtadze’s disappearance, Tamaz Tsvizhba drove the car in which the young woman was allegedly killed to the car wash. Tamaz Tsvizhba also accompanied his son when he tried to cross the border in order to hide in Russia. Tamaz Tsvizhba is currently not detained.

On August 31, 2023, Natia Bakhtadze’s mother published an open letter, addressing the so-called president, the minister of internal affairs and the ombudsman of occupied Abkhazia. Yamze Agumava asked them to find her daughter’s body and said that the murderer’s relatives knew everything: “More than a month has passed since the murder of my daughter and Natia’s body has not been found yet. I don’t believe that my daughter’s body is where they are looking for it. The relatives of the killer know everything. I’m sure they were the ones who helped him get rid of the body. Please arrest and interrogate the relatives of Aynar Tsvizhba, because he admitted that he called his father and said that he committed the murder. He would not be able to hide the body alone - his relatives

helped him to hide the crime. They decided to hide the body and bury it somewhere in the forest, hoping to get away with the crime. Please find my daughter’s body,” reads the mother’s letter.

In addition to the problem that women cannot enjoy their rights in Abkhazia, where murder on the grounds of jealousy is considered a mitigating circumstance, the ethnic origin of the murdered may also hinder the objective investigation of the case.

The Democracy Research Institute believes that the circumstances related to the murder of Natia Bakhtadze and the investigation of the murder clearly show the alarming situation in the direction of women’s rights in Abkhazia, where violence against women, femicide, abduction of women and minors for the purpose of marriage still remains unresolved problems.

The Democracy Research Institute calls on the Public Defender of Georgia:

- in cooperation with Abkhazia’s de facto ombudsman and the Abkhazian civil society, ensure the publicity of information about the investigation related to the murder of Natia Bakhtadze in order to achieve an objective verdict and punish the perpetrators;
- to ensure the monitoring of the rights situation of women in occupied Gali;
- in cooperation with Georgian and Abkhazian civil society, plan and implement awareness-raising campaigns to combat all forms of discrimination against women.

4.2 RIGHTS SITUATION OF LGBTQ+ PERSONS IN ABKHAZIA

There is a prevailing opinion in the Abkhaz society that representatives of the queer community do not exist in the region. As a result, the majority of the LGBTQ+ community, fearing that they might be killed on the street because of their orientation, mainly hide their identity or move abroad to escape the social pressure and imminent threat of violence.

The Democracy Research Institute offers several stories of the representatives of the local LGBTQI+ community from Abkhazia:

Respondent No. 1, 23-year-old, Sokhumi

“I decided to reveal my orientation to my family because I was tired of lying to my loved ones. It is difficult to invent any kind of alternate reality. In addition, I am very worried about the issue of homophobia in Abkhazia. I believe that if people raise their voices and recognize us, it can have an impact on the general level of homophobia in the republic. I went to St. Petersburg, but my father and older brothers brought me back to Sokhumi twice. My father took my passport away, but I managed to run away, after which I started receiving unpleasant messages from my loved ones, threats. One of my brothers wrote to me: “You’d better die.” After all this, I no longer felt safe in St. Petersburg. For several months now, my boyfriend and I have been living in another country. Despite all this, I don’t regret revealing my orientation. I feel better because I have told my family the truth about myself.”

Respondent No. 2, 27-year-old, Gagra

“My mother threw me out of the house when she found out that I was in a relationship with boys. I didn’t tell her, one of my friends told her. I still don’t know who he was, but I broke up with almost everyone I was friends with at that time. I left for Sochi. My mother, of course, was worried about me, she cried and asked me to refuse my orientation and only after that to return home. As time passed, my mother’s attitude changed. Now I live with a boy and my mother knows about him. They have a good relationship.”

Respondent No. 3, 25-year-old, Sokhumi

“The first person I told that I loved a girl was my husband. For three years I had been in love with my best friend. I naively assumed it would change. Now I am happy with her, we have been together for more than 7 years. My relationship with my mother was ruined, she did not support me, compared me to a drug addict, insulted the person I loved. A year later I told my father. He didn’t like my orientation either, but he accepted me anyway. He helps me and my partner. I will fight for my happiness.”

The Democracy Research Institute supports the idea of equality. Every person, whether in the Tbilisi-controlled territory or in Abkhazia, should be provided with a decent and violence-free environment.

5

PROBLEMS OF PEOPLE LIVING ALONG THE DIVIDING LINE

5.1 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.

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.

5.2 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.

5.3 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.

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>

5.4 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.

5.5 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.

5.6 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-Samgrelo. 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 to 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.

5.7 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.

5.8 IDP SETTLEMENT OF POTSKHO-ET-SERI

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.

5.9 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 checkpoints 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.

HUMAN RIGHTS IN ABKHAZIA AND VILLAGES ALONG THE DIVIDING LINE

<https://southcaucasus.fes.de/>
<https://www.democracyresearch.org/>
