



## **EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS AND SITUATION OF GEORGIAN SCHOOLS IN THE CONFLICTS ZONES (GALI DISTRICTS)**

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### **Abstract**

The education policy of the de-facto Abkhaz authorities since 1995 aims at introducing Russian language teaching in all schools within the original boundaries of Gali district. In their substance, developments in Gali region are similar to those taking place in Transnistria and considering the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights it is apparent that processes in Gali district aim at the Russification of Georgian language. Decisions made in the sphere of education serve to a specific political agenda rather than children's best interests or the purpose to provide best of education to them. Such interference is beyond justification and infringes the fundamental human rights of Gali population. Protection of rights of conflict affected communities and individuals, is a guarantee of peaceful cohabitation between the confronting sides. A society where human rights and dignity respected has better chances to progress and develop towards democracy, based on economic prosperity.

**Keywords:** Gali Abkazia Education.

### **INDRODUCTION**

Starting from September 2015, the Abkhaz administration in the so-called "lower zone" of Gali district changed the language of education in the primary classes (I-IV classes) of all 11 Georgian schools to Russian and reduced weekly hours of Georgian language even further. According to this plan, all following classes will continue studying on Russian and if this does not change, the last Georgian-speaking class on the territory of Abkhazia will graduate in 2022.

It is evident that the education policy of the Abkhaz administration aims to discard Georgian language in Gali district and substitute it with Russian completely. Abkhaz and Russian sides hope that by restricting the education on Georgian language in schools, they will weaken cultural and political ties of local Georgians with the rest of Georgia, thus, strengthen their positions in Gali district.

### **RESTRICTING EDUCATION ON NATIVE LANGUAGE IN GALI DISTRICT**

#### **The Right To The Education In The Gali District**

After almost 19 years since the first exchange of fire in August 1992, the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict remains as far from political resolution as ever. Although internationally recognized as part of Georgia, in the years since the end of the conflict in 1994 Abkhazia's de facto authorities have developed their own state institutions – process that has accelerated since the Georgia-Russia war in August 2008. The manner in which these authorities conduct themselves weighs heavily on the ability of the many displaced persons to return to their homes.

More than 200,000 people displaced by the 1992-1993 hostilities. The overwhelming majority were ethnic Georgians who have not been able to return to their homes. The only area where returns have taken place has been Gali, the southern-most district of Abkhazia. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 96 % of Gali's 79,688 inhabitants were ethnic Georgians before the 1992-1993 conflict. For a short period in 1994, the UNHCR organized returns to Abkhazia; several hundred persons were able to go back. However, the spontaneous return of Gali resident



continued well after that, and in early 1999, the Abkhaz side launched a unilateral initiative to implement returns to Gali. Many families soon went back, initially commuting daily across the ceasefire line and migrating seasonally to tend their fields and look after what remained of their houses.

According to Gali's de facto authorities, as many as 47,000 people have returned permanently to Gali and an additional 5,000 commute back and forth across the administrative boundary line (ABL). Georgian authorities in Tbilisi do not contradict these figures. However, they dispute the notion that these individuals are returnees. They treat them as internally displaced persons (IDPs) because their returns has not organized in conditions that ensure their dignity and safety. Most of the thousands of ethnic Georgians who have gone back to Gali – Whether temporarily or permanently – maintain close ties with Georgian-controlled territories and are largely dependent on their ability to commute across the ceasefire line.

Many families remain divided across the ABL, particularly those with schools in Zugdidi, just across the ABL. High-school graduates also often leave Gali to do their higher education in Georgian-controlled territories. Young men of conscription age also often stay away from the province to avoid drafted into Abkhaz forces. Ethnic Georgian returnees face a number of problems that loom large in their decision whether to return to the area (in some cases, to stay) or leave it for good. Personal security and protection from crime is daily anxiety. Guaranteeing returnees security and upholding law and order in Gali has proved difficult. This is large due to the weakness in the rule of law and administration of justice in the area and deep, mutual distrust between the Georgian population and Abkhaz security authorities.

Another source of anxiety for returnees is the need to obtain Abkhaz ID documents. Although Abkhaz passports are not internationally recognized, returnees require them before the authorities will extend certain civil and political rights, including property rights. The citizenship measures implemented by the de facto authorities discriminate on ethnic grounds, automatically granting ethnic Abkhaz the right to a passport but creating barriers for non-ethnic Abkhaz to obtain them. They also require ethnic Abkhaz the right to a passport but creating barriers for non-ethnic Abkhaz to obtain them.

As mentioned above, the ability to commute across the ABL is vital for ethnic Georgian returnees. Prior to the August 2008 war, there were four official crossing points and about a dozen unofficial ones, particularly when water was low in the Enguri River, which serves as a natural border between the conflicting parties. Currently, with only one official crossing point and requirement to obtain a special crossing permit from the Abkhaz authorities in the town of Gali, many returnees are in a difficult situation, particularly those who live rural areas far from the town. The language policy of education in the Gali district is major concern for residents. Although Article 6 of the Abkhaz constitution guarantees every ethnic group in Abkhazia the right freely to use their mother tongue, in practice access to Georgian-language education for ethnic Georgians is restricted.

Although Abkhazia is an unrecognized entity, and as such is not party to core international human rights treaties, human rights guarantees applicable in Georgia also apply to Abkhazia. The de facto authorities therefore have the obligation to respect and protect those guarantees. This includes the requirement to address the problems that ethnic Georgian returnees face. Abkhazia's constitution explicitly recognize this obligation and guarantees the rights and freedoms provides in the Universal declaration of Human Rights and international human rights treaties.

So, regardless of Abkhazia's status, its authorities have an obligation to ensure freedom of movement with respect to the ABL, non-discrimination – in particular, with regard to identity documents – and the right to education in one's mother tongue. The international community should increase its efforts to convince the de facto authorities and all parties involved in negotiations of the need for an on-the-ground, international presence in Abkhazia. The UN and OSCE both had a presence in Abkhazia that they were forced to withdraw shortly after the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia.



## **THE STATUS OF THE RIGHT OF SCHOOL STUDENTS RESIDING IN THE GALI DISTRICT**

The academic year of 2015-2016 has seen the introduction of Russian as the language of instruction for all primary school students (1-4 grades), who now have to use Russian textbooks published in the Russian Federation. The de-facto administration has decided that this will be the practice for years to come. It is worth noting that most of the Gali population, including school students, identify themselves as ethnic Georgians, as also indicated in so-called Abkhazian passports. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights puts a strong emphasis on the right to education and states that education shall be directed 'to the full development of the human personality and the sense of dignity and promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic or religious groups.

Fifty-eight general education institutions with 13,180 pupils and 1,638 teachers operated in Gali district prior to 1992-1993 military actions.<sup>1</sup> The population that spontaneously returned after the war, restored the study process in 31 schools with their own initiative, with 4,428 pupils and 749 teachers as of today. Before the commencement of military actions in Abkhazia, the Gali district, in which ethnic Georgians form the majority of the population, enjoyed 58 schools with only two of them having Russian as their language of instruction.

Students find it difficult to learn subjects in Russian. The same applies to a great majority of teachers, as they are ethnic Georgians who received education in Georgian and therefore feel uncomfortable teaching their respective subjects in Russian. The access to education remains a burning problem. Many Gali families, especially those who reside along the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL), prefer their children to study in schools on the Georgian controlled territory, due to two main reasons: firstly, the nearest school is located across the ABL (within 0.5 – 1 km) and secondly, parents prefer their children to receive an education in their native language.

By 2015-2016, school students still commute across the ABL, despite the fact that Russian border guards<sup>28</sup> have repeatedly detained them and prevented them from receiving an education due to an absence of necessary documents. The issuance of these documents by the de-facto authorities has been irregular over the course of many years, contributing to the decreased number of students moving across the ABL.

The Ministry of Education and Culture of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia and the Provisional Administration of the Former South Ossetian Autonomous Republic (for their respective domains) are responsible for making the list of beneficiaries of the program. As for the two public schools in Gali district (#13 Public School in Nabakevi and #16 Public School in Meore Otobaia), the teachers of these schools funded via voucher system. The existence of this program is unambiguously a positive fact.

However, it is also noteworthy that the funds allocated by the state for the teachers in Gali are more of a symbolic character, rather than a real financial aid. The case is that the funds allocated for them are much less than the salaries of teachers living in Georgia proper that places them in an unfair condition. Considering the conditions that the teachers in Gali have to work in, leaving the existing amounts unchanged is unacceptable. Protection of the rights of conflict affected communities and individuals is a guarantee of peaceful cohabitation between the confronting sides. A society where human rights and dignity respected has better chances to progress and develop towards democracy, based on equality and economic prosperity.

### **Movement Across The Diving Line**

Children, living in villages near the administrative border of Gali district, often prefer to study in schools of Zugdidi municipality with the aim of receiving quality education in their native language. Right after entering the territory controlled by Georgia, they served by the buses provided by the



Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia. However, the situation has become alarming in this regard, too; appearance of Russian border guards on the dividing line and restrictions imposed by the Gali Administration since 2008 significantly decreased the movement of pupils across the dividing line.

### **PARTICIPATION IN UNITED NATIONAL EXAMS**

The situation regarding enrolment in higher education institutions is as follows: in general, half of the graduates of Gali district schools either do not continue studies or apply to Sokhumi's Abkhaz State University, whilst the rest prefers to study in Georgian higher education institutions. However, based on available information, if the number of pupils going to the Abkhaz State University did not exceed 12 in 2012-2013, in 2015 it reached 6259, from which 24 are studying on a special free program.

We should estimate that in parallel with the ban on Georgian language, number of those from Gali district who wish to get enrolled in Sokhumi's Abkhaz State University, will increase even more. If the entrants will have received general education in Russian, they will prefer continuing studies in Russian, rather than in universities of Georgia, in Georgian. Several factors facilitate this, including the fact that a concession system is on for the graduates from Gali; in 2014, a free Gali-Sokhumi bus launched for these students. Moreover, citizens of Abkhazia enjoy quotas in Russian high education institutions that considered as a very good opportunity for career growth for many.

It is also noteworthy that the Abkhaz Administration does not recognize the education received in Georgia that restricts the option of returning to Gali and working there for the graduates of Georgian universities. It is noteworthy that the number of those who would like to continue studies in the rest of Georgia has slightly decreased already. Table #4 shows that if 65% of graduates registered for the Unified National Exams in 2010-2012, the number decreased by 7% in the following three years.

### **LEGAL FRAMEWORK**

The State Strategy Towards the Occupied Territories – Engagement through Cooperation – and its action plan approved in 2010 by the Government of Georgia are two of the most important documents of the state policy concerning the occupied territories. The policy of the Government conducted in relation to the schools in Gali implemented in the framework of these two documents.

The state strategy towards the occupied territories prioritizes the issue of receiving education in native language and concerns the provision of education in native language as well as the availability of Georgian textbooks for the Georgian-speaking population. Moreover, according to the strategy, joint scientific researches and academic study programs (including professional programs) should be promote between the population left on the other side of the division line and the rest of Georgia.

In addition, the Government should provide for the production of textbooks on Abkhazian and Ossetian languages and the youth living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia should receive opportunities to continue studies in the rest of Georgia or abroad. As for the action plan of the engagement strategy, the document concerns the issue of the availability of education to the population living on the occupied territories, in general and not the education of population in Gali district in native language, in particular.

It concerns the possibility to take Unified national Exams in Ossetian and Abkhaz language, recognizing educational certificates, strengthening the field of Abkhazology at Tbilisi State University, development of Georgian and Ossetian textbooks for primary classes, producing special literature for kindergarten tutors etc. Therefore, the action plan does not have any initiatives precisely for them, based on their needs. Naturally, in case of a full enactment of all activities included in the action plan, the ethnic Georgians will benefit as well, however, as their human rights situation of local Georgians is rather different from other groups living on the occupied territories, an individual approach is necessary.



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