



# **Report on Situation in Shida Kartli, Georgia**

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## Executive Summary

The Georgian government presented its new strategy for occupied territories to parliament in December. It is planning to prepare a detailed implementation plan for the strategy by the end of June 2010.

The negotiations over the release of the four Georgian teenagers detained by the South Ossetian separatist authorities in November remained at the center of the Georgian public's and media's attention in December. Having released five Ossetian prisoners in order to secure the release of two of the four teenagers by the Tskhinvali leadership in early December, the Georgian government ruled out the possibility of any further exchanges of this sort, dismissing the South Ossetian side's proposals as "blackmail". Civil society representatives and opposition politicians, including former Prime Minister Zurab Noghaideli, travelled to Tskhinvali to discuss the question of the other two teenagers with separatist leader Eduard Kokoyty. The two prisoners were eventually released on 19 December (along with another teenager who had been held in Tskhinvali since the summer) following the negotiations conducted by Thomas Hammarberg, the Council of Europe commissioner for human rights.

During the reporting period, representatives of the Georgian opposition publicly criticized the government's policies towards the separatist-controlled territories. Meanwhile, the separatist leadership condemned the detention of an Akhgori resident in Tbilisi on counterfeit money charges and threatened to ban movement across the administrative border.

The residents of an IDP settlement located in Gori District staged a protest in December and blocked the railway after they had electricity supply suspended due to arrears. Two members of the Georgian cabinet met the protesters and persuaded them to disperse. A CIPDD regional monitor who later travelled to the settlement reported that representatives of the local authorities tried to prevent him from communicating with the IDPs directly.

According to reports by CIPDD regional monitors, residents of Shida Kartli have little information about the international/foreign organizations providing aid in the region. The monitors have noted that the goods supplied by these organizations are frequently distributed by central or local government officials and are thus perceived by the people as government aid.

The overall security situation in the parts of Shida Kartli adjacent to separatist-controlled territories appears to have improved at least to some extent in December. No major incidents (such as hostage-taking or exchange of fire) were reported by the media or the CIPDD monitors. It remains to be seen, however, whether this was a temporary improvement or a part of a long-term trend. Meanwhile, according to the CIPDD monitors, security concerns continue to affect the activities of international organizations in Shida Kartli and prevent them from delivering aid to some villages of the border zone.

# Monitoring Risk Factors/Indicators

## Political Indicators

### General Political Developments

In late December, Minister of State for Reintegration Temur Iakobashvili presented a new *State Strategy for the Occupied Territories* at the joint session of three parliamentary committees and the Ad-Hoc Parliamentary Commission on Territorial Integrity. According to Iakobashvili, the new document aims to promote ties between the people living on both sides of the dividing lines, inter alia, through the restoration of transport movement and economic activities across the de facto borders. Iakobashvili also said that a detailed implementation plan of the strategy will be prepared by the end of June 2010. Opposition Christian-Democratic Movement MP Nika Laliashvili praised the strategy as the “best document on occupied territories to date”.<sup>1</sup> Iakobashvili discussed the strategy with the expert community earlier.<sup>2</sup>

The Georgian Foreign Ministry announced on 24 December that the Qazbegi-Zemo Larsi border crossing point between Georgia and Russia is to reopen in the spring of 2010. The agreement was reportedly reached as a result of the negotiations mediated by Swiss diplomats.<sup>3</sup>

### Security Situation and Border Issues

#### *Release of Georgian Teenagers*

In December, the attention Georgian public and media remained focused on the story of the four teenagers from the village of Tirdznisi who were detained by the separatists in November. Thomas Hammarberg, the Council of Europe commissioner for human rights was able to secure the release of two of the four teenagers in early December and said that the South Ossetian leadership had promised to release the other two within 10 days. However, contrary to expectations, the teenagers were not released on 14 December and it was suggested that the South Ossetian side was seeking an exchange of prisoners. Separatist government representative Merab Chigoyev said that “specific and quite constructive proposals regarding the release of prisoners by both sides” has been presented to Hammarberg during his visit to Tskhinvali.<sup>4</sup> However, Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister Nino Kalandadze insisted that anything but an unconditional release of the two teenagers would be considered “blackmail”.<sup>5</sup>

*24 Saati* reported on 8 December that, according to the two released prisoners, another Georgian teenager – 16-year-old Giorgi Archvadze who had gone missing in July - was also being held in Tskhinvali.

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<sup>1</sup> “Parliament Examining Georgia’s New Strategy on Occupied Territories”, Tamar Ivanidze, *24 Saati*, 25 December 2009.

<sup>2</sup> “Government Discussing Conflicts with Experts”, Eka Basilaia, *Rezonansi*, 15 December 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Civil.ge, “Georgia, Russia to Agree on Border Reopening”, 24 December 2009, <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21828&search=larsi> (accessed on 17 January 2010).

<sup>4</sup> “Expectations That Did Not Come True”, *24 Saati*, 15 December 2009.

<sup>5</sup> “People in Tbilisi Hope That Tskhinvali Will Release Children”, Mari Otashvili, *Rezonansi*, 15 December 2009.

Although the case had not been made public, a Georgian Interior Ministry official told the newspaper that the ministry had been trying to secure Archvadze's release since the summer.<sup>6</sup> The Georgian Foreign Ministry subsequently issued a statement, saying that a total of 14 Georgian citizens were being held by the separatists. The ministry urged the EUMM and the Council of Europe commissioner for human rights to step up the efforts towards their release.<sup>7</sup>

Opposition Republican Party member Paata Zakareishvili travelled to South Ossetia on 16 December together with journalist Vakhtang Komakhidze and NGO representative Manana Mebuke and met separatist president Eduard Kokoyty in Tskhinvali to discuss the release of the Georgian teenagers. Kokoyty reportedly said at the meeting that he had decided not to use his "constitutional right" to pardon the prisoners because of the statements made earlier by Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili and Minister of State for Reintegration Temur Iakobashvili. Zakareishvili subsequently said in an interview with the *Rezonansi* newspaper that the trip was organized with the assistance of South Ossetian NGOs. He also said that the separatist government was not releasing the two teenagers because of the pressure from the families of the Ossetians who had gone missing after the August 2008 war. He noted that the families showed him some evidence suggesting that the missing individuals may have been arrested by the Georgian police.<sup>8</sup> Georgian Interior Ministry official Shota Utiashvili commented on the meeting, noting that it was "very strange" that the three Georgians found it so easy to set up a meeting with the separatist leader.<sup>9</sup>

Thomas Hammarberg travelled to Tskhinvali again on 17 December. Although he was unable to secure the release of prisoners during the visit, he told journalists on his return that negotiations were underway. Meanwhile, Georgian officials continued to deny possessing any information about the missing Ossetians. Davit Darchiashvili, head of the Georgian Parliament Committee for European Integration, told *24 Saati* that the Georgian side had "no hostages" as all Ossetians held in Georgian prisons had been arrested for "specific crimes".<sup>10</sup>

The three teenagers were finally released on 19 December when Thomas Hammarberg travelled to Tskhinvali again. Former Georgian Prime Minister (and currently an opposition party leader) Zurab Noghaideli visited Tskhinvali on the same day and met Eduard Kokoyty. The teenagers returned to Georgian-controlled territory together with Noghaideli and Hammarberg. The press service of Noghaideli's party promptly released a statement, crediting the ex-premier's "successful negotiations" for the release.<sup>11</sup> Noghaideli later told the *Kviris Palitra* weekly that the separatist leader had made a "courageous decision" by releasing the two teenagers despite the demands of the families of the missing Ossetians. He also highlighted Russia's role in securing the release of the Georgians, emphasizing that he had discussed the matter with Russian officials during his earlier visit to Moscow in Mid-December. He also said that it was important to prevent resumption of hostilities and urged the Georgian government to "stop voicing threats".<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "Unpublicized Disappearance", Tamar Katsitadze, *24 Saati*, 8 December 2009.

<sup>7</sup> "Tskhinvali Regime Holding 14 Georgian citizens", *24 Saati*, 16 December 2009.

<sup>8</sup> "What Did Kokoyty Discuss with Guests from Tbilisi", Mari Otashvili, 17 December 2009.

<sup>9</sup> "What Can One Achieve by Appeasing Criminal?", *24 Saati*, 17 December 2008.

<sup>10</sup> "Kokoyty Sent Hammarberg Back Empty-Handed", *24 Saati*, 18 December 2009.

<sup>11</sup> "Tskhinvali Has Released Three Teenagers", *Civil.ge*, 19 December 2009.

<http://www.civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=22142&search=%E1%83%99%E1%83%9D%E1%83%99%E1%83%9D%E1%83%98%E1%83%97%E1%83%98> (accessed on 12 January 2010).

<sup>12</sup> "Zurab Noghaideli: 'Kokoyty Made Courageous Decision'", Eka Asatiani, *Kviris Palitra*, 21 December 2009.

Several of CIPDD's regional monitors travelled to Tirdznisi in December. According to one of them, the residents of the village mostly disapprove of the government's decision to release five Ossetian prisoners in exchange for the release of the Georgian teenagers who were held in Tskhinvali, fearing that the exchange of "criminals" for innocent civilians could set a dangerous precedent. The majority of locals are also said to disapprove of Noghaideli's and Zakareishvili's visits to Tskhinvali though some of them believe that any efforts that could yield a positive result must be welcome. They are grateful to the Red Cross for making it possible to communicate with the teenagers when they were held in the Tskhinvali prison.

The father of one of the detained teenagers, who was interviewed by a CIPDD regional monitor, said that the separatists would have released the detainees sooner if not for the stir raised by the Georgian government and "government-controlled" media (a similar view was expressed by opposition Republican Party member Paata Zakareishvili, who said in an interview with *Rezonansi* that the Georgian government had complicated the matter through its "propaganda" and "PR campaign"<sup>13</sup>).

### *Other Developments*

No major incidents were recorded in the border zone in December. According to a CIPDD monitor, a 57-year-old resident of the village of Dvani was abducted and taken to separatist-controlled territory on 21 December though he was treated well and was released a few hours later. Another CIPDD monitor was told in the village of Ditsi (located near Ossetian-controlled territory) that the separatist troops frequently start shooting in the air at night.

*24 Saati* reported on 11 December that the HALO Trust had completed removal of unexploded ordnance from the August 2008 war in Shida Kartli. According to the report, the organization spent 4.3m dollars on the project that covered 18 villages of the province.<sup>14</sup>

*Rezonansi* reported on 25 December that the separatist leadership had announced its plans to close the border of Akhgori in order to thwart the Georgian side's alleged plans to carry out terrorist attacks in the district. The statement was condemned by the Georgian government, with Deputy Foreign Minister Nino Kalandadze urging the international community to "react strongly" to Tskhinvali's move.<sup>15</sup>

## **Human Rights Situation**

The security measures implemented by the Georgian law enforcers at the checkpoint outside the separatist-controlled Akhgori District were criticized by the Georgian opposition in December. Sozar Subari, former human rights ombudsman and currently co-chairman of the opposition Alliance for Georgia movement, accused the authorities of setting up barriers for the residents of Akhgori who attempt to travel to Georgian-controlled territory, noting that the government was "adding barbed wire

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<sup>13</sup> "Tskhinvali Is Planning To Use Remaining Two Prisoners for Exchange", Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 8 December 2009.

<sup>14</sup> "Removal of Mines Has Ended in Shida Kartli", *24 Saati*, 11 December 2009.

<sup>15</sup> "Tskhinvali Is Threatening To 'Close Border', while Official Tbilisi Is Threatening To 'React Strongly'", Salome Gogokhia, *Rezonansi*, 25 December 2009.

and bricks to the Berlin Wall that the occupation forces are constructing”.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, opposition Republican Party member Paata Zakareishvili accused the Georgian government of “terrorizing” the Georgians living in Akhgori and suggested that the Tbilisi leadership wanted the Georgian population to move to Georgian-controlled areas.<sup>17</sup>

According to a local CIPDD monitor, a taxi driver from Akhgori was denied passage to Georgian-controlled territory in December, allegedly because he had refused to collaborate with the Georgian counterintelligence service earlier. It has also been suggested that the Georgian police could have been angered by the fact that the person in question had provided transport for Russian military officers travelling from Akhgori to Tskhinvali.

The local monitor also reported that a woman from Akhgori was arrested in Tbilisi and charged with carrying counterfeit money. Akhgori residents have told the monitor that the family of the arrested woman often hosted Russian military, which, they believe, may have been one of the reasons for her arrest. Following the incident, separatist government official Boris Chochiyev accused the Georgian authorities of attempting to render life “intolerable” for the residents of Akhgori.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> “We Are Adding Barbed Wire and Bricks to ‘Berlin Wall’ That Occupation Forces Are Building”, Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 10 December 2009.

<sup>17</sup> “Travelling to Akhgori With Printer: Second Attempt”, Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 11 December 2009.

<sup>18</sup> “Tskhinvali Is Threatening To ‘Close Border’, while Official Tbilisi Is Threatening To ‘React Strongly’”, Salome Gogokhia, *Rezonansi*, 25 December 2009.

## **Economic Indicators**

### **Economic Problems of IDPs**

According to a CIPDD regional monitor, residents of an IDP settlement located near the village of Skra in Gori District blocked the railway on 23 December in protest against suspension of electricity supply. Minister for Refugees and Accommodation Koba Subeliani and Energy Minister Aleksandre Khetaguri arrived at the site of the protest and were eventually able to persuade the IDPs to disperse. The monitor later interviewed a representative of Energo Pro (a privately-owned Czech company that supplies electricity to most of Georgia outside Tbilisi), who said that the company will not resume the supply until the IDPs pay the arrears. The law enforcers have reportedly opened an investigation into the railway blockage.

According to another CIPDD monitor, the problem arose because the authorities did not provide the IDPs with firewood in a timely manner and they had to use electric heaters instead. The IDPs told the monitor during his visit to the settlement that they had not received cash aid for the preceding five months.

IDPs living in kindergarten buildings in Gori told a CIPDD monitor that they have received no aid for over three months now. They cannot afford to buy medicines and face a severe shortage of firewood. They also appear to be suffering from a lack of information regarding the types of aid and benefits they are entitled to receive.

### **Economic Situation in Villages Affected by War**

The regional monitors continue to highlight the economic problems of the villages of the border zone in their monthly report.

A CIPDD regional monitor travelled to the village of Ditsi in December. A number of houses in the village were destroyed during the war and their owners received 15,000-dollar payouts from the Georgian government. According to the monitor, most of these people opted to buy apartments in Gori rather than restore their homes in Ditsi due to the security situation in the village. Employment is a major problem in Ditsi and government pensions are said to be the main source of income for the locals since they get very little money from the sale of agricultural produce. Most of the cropland and gardens where the locals used to grow fruit are now within Ossetian-controlled territory, while the remaining land is affected by poor irrigation as the separatists have suspended water supply. According to the locals, the amount of firewood provided by the government is too small and they have no access to the local forest which is also controlled by the Ossetians. The head of the village administration told the CIPDD monitor that the government will allocate additional firewood and there are also plans to build a new water supply system.

## **Societal Indicators**

### **Media**

Journalist Vakhrang Komakhidze, who travelled to Tskhinvali together with opposition Republican Party member Paata Zakareishvili on 16 December, was interviewed by the *Rezonansi* daily on 23 December. He said that people living in Tskhinvali have strong ties with Georgia and have a “vital interest in maintaining normal relations” with Tbilisi. He criticized negative coverage of his visit to South Ossetia by Georgia’s national TV stations and noted that he was briefly detained at the Georgian police checkpoint on the administrative border on his way back to Tbilisi.<sup>19</sup>

*Rezonansi* reported on 10 December that the separatist government is planning to sue Radio Liberty over its “illegal broadcasts” in South Ossetia. The newspaper noted that Radio Liberty began broadcasting Russian-language programs to Abkhazia and South Ossetia on 1<sup>st</sup> November. The report cited Giorgi Kabisov, head of the separatist state committee for information and communication, who said that the Tskhinvali government could suspend Radio Liberty’s broadcasts or take the case to an international court.<sup>20</sup>

### **Relations between neighbouring Georgian and Ossetian villages**

During the reporting period, the regional monitors visited some villages adjacent to Ossetian-controlled territory.

A CIPDD regional monitor travelled to the village of Takhtisdziri which is located next to the Ossetian villages of Gvirgvina and Meguta in December. According to the monitor, only three houses were destroyed in Takhtisdziri, including the house of a local resident who reportedly owed money to Ossetians from Meguta. There have been no cases of abduction or theft in Takhtisdziri lately.

A CIPDD regional monitor who visited the village of Brotsleti in December noted in his monthly report that the residents of the village do not view Ossetians as enemies. A villager told the monitor that, during the war, Ossetian militias only burnt the houses of the few locals who had allegedly been involved in stealing cars from neighbouring Ossetian settlements.

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<sup>19</sup> “What Did Journalist See in Post-War Tskhinvali”, Lana Beridze, *Rezonansi*, 23 December 2009.

<sup>20</sup> “Kokoyty To Take Radio Liberty To International Court”, Giorgi Putkaradze, *Rezonansi*, 10 December 2009.

## **Institutional Indicators**

### **Activities of NGOs and International Organizations**

Several regional monitors highlighted the lack of information about international aid organizations among the residents of Shida Kartli in their monthly reports.

A CIPDD regional monitor noted that the aid provided by NGOs and international organizations is often perceived as government aid by the residents of Shida Kartli since the goods are usually distributed by local government officials or MPs. The residents of Shida Kartli only have information about major international organizations like the United Nations, the OSCE and the EU.

A CIPDD regional monitor who visited the village of Dvani in December reported that the locals have very little information about international and foreign organizations. Humanitarian organization Care built 45 cottages for the residents of the village whose homes were destroyed in the war but the locals believe that the cottages were built by the government. Head of the village administration told the monitor that security concerns prevent international organizations from conducting activities in Dvani. A similar suggestion was made in the village of Takhtisdziri. The residents of the village received food aid in November though they are not sure whether it was provided by the government or by international/foreign organizations.

The head of Kareli administration told a CIPDD monitor that, unlike the villages of Gori District, the villages of Kareli Administration are not receiving aid from international organizations.

A resident of the village of Zemo Khviti told a CIPDD monitor that communication with international organizations is conducted exclusively through the deputy governor and locals do not even know the names of the organizations that provide aid.

The village of Distsi used to receive aid from NGOs and the Orthodox Church but, according to the locals, those projects have ended.

### **Activities of Central and Local authorities**

Dimitri Sanakoyev, head of South Ossetia's provisional administration set up by the Georgian government in 2007, presented a report to the Georgian parliament in December. In the report, Sanakoyev identified addressing the problems of IDPs from South Ossetia and the residents of Akhalkgori as the primary task of the provisional administration.<sup>21</sup>

The speculation that the Georgian government wants the teachers who opted to stay in Akhalkgori after the August 2008 war to move to the school opened in the Tserovani IDP settlement was reignited in December by media reports suggesting that the authorities are planning to stop financing Akhalkgori's schools from January 2010. According to a Georgian newspaper, the government wants to avoid paying double salaries to the teachers who are registered both in Akhalkgori and in the IDP settlement. The

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<sup>21</sup> "Sanakoyev Has Presented Report to Parliament", *24 Saati*, 18 December 2009.

information was confirmed by the head of the Georgian teachers' labour union though the Ministry of Education and Science is yet to comment on the matter.<sup>22</sup>

A CIPDD regional monitor who travelled to an IDP settlement in December reported that representatives of local authorities tried to prevent him from communicating directly with the IDPs. According to the monitor, they accompanied him during his visit to the IDP settlement and exerted pressure on the IDPs in order to prevent them from voicing their concerns.

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<sup>22</sup> “Georgian Government To Refuse To Provide Funding for Akhgori Schools”, Mari Otashvili, *Rezonansi*, 18 December 2009.