



Report on Situation in Shida Kartli, Georgia

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Executive Summary

The detention of four Georgian teenagers from the village of Tirdznisi by the South Ossetian authorities on 4 November was the most significant development of the reporting period and received extensive coverage in the media. The teenagers were charged with carrying explosives and plotting a terrorist attack and were placed in a two-month per-trial detention by a Tskhinvali court. Top Georgian officials, including President Mikheil Saakashvili, strongly condemned the arrest and tried to mobilize international support to secure the release of the teenagers. In response to this, the South Ossetian leadership brought up the question of the Ossetians who had gone missing after the 2008 war and were, in the South Ossetian leadership's opinion, held by Georgian law-enforcers. Two of the four Georgian teenagers were eventually released when Thomas Hammarberg, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights traveled to Tskhinvali and the Georgian authorities handed over five Ossetians who had been arrested earlier. According to Hammarberg, the South Ossetian leadership promised to release the other two Georgians within 10 days.

A Georgian newspaper reported in mid-November that the separatist authorities were conducting a census in Akhlagori, citing locals who suggested that the South Ossetian government was planning to start distribution of South Ossetian or Russian passports among the district's Georgian residents.

The separatist administration of Akhlagori expressed its anger over the disruptions in the supply of electricity to the district in early November and cut off the supply of irrigation water to the adjacent Georgian-controlled villages. The CIPDD regional monitors reported that unstable supply of irrigation water remained a major problem in many parts of the monitoring zone.

The recurring instances of detention of civilians continue to have a negative impact on the overall security situation. While raising general level of tension and straining relations between the Georgian and the South Ossetian leadership, they also reduce the potential for communication between the Georgian and the Ossetian villages. The rows over the supply of electricity and water have a negative impact both on political relations and the overall economic situation. There seems to be a general discontent among the residents of the monitoring zone over the (real or perceived) inadequacy of the aid provided by the Georgian government.

Monitoring Risk Factors/Indicators

Political Indicators

Security Situation and Border Issues

Although all of the nearly two dozen Georgian civilians arrested by the South Ossetian forces during the month of October were eventually released, detainment of the residents of Georgian villages adjacent to South Ossetia remained a major source of tension in November. Consequently, the situation continued to receive extensive coverage in the Georgian media.

The *Rezonansi* daily noted on 9 November that the frequency of “abductions” had led some Georgian analysts to suggest that the separatists and their Russian allies were trying to intimidate the residents of the villages adjacent to South Ossetia and force them to abandon their homes in order to turn the area into a kind of a “buffer zone”.¹

The CIPDD regional monitors continued to report a general tension and sense of insecurity from the Georgian villages adjacent to South Ossetia.

Detainment of Four Georgian Teenagers

The *24 Saati* daily reported on 6 November that four teenagers from the Georgian village of Tirdznisi were “abducted” by the separatists on 4 November and taken to a Tskhinvali jail on 5 November. According to the newspaper, the separatist Interior Ministry claimed that the teenagers carried explosives and were planning a terrorist attack though the Georgian authorities dismissed the allegations as absurd.² The teenagers were subsequently placed in a two-month pre-trial detention by a Tskhinvali court.

The detainment of the teenagers was condemned by a number of top Georgian officials in the following days. Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze described it as a “shameful show”, while President Mikheil Saakashvili announced his intention to discuss the matter with French President Nicolas Sarkozy and US Vice President Joe Biden.³ Parliament Speaker Davit Bakradze accused Russia of acting in an “absolutely cynical” manner.⁴ The Georgian government later appealed to the European Court of Human Rights over this incident and other violations of human rights allegedly committed by the Russian troops stationed in South Ossetia.⁵

Georgian opposition parties also reacted to the story. A group of Christian-Democratic Movement MPs led by party leader Giorgi Targamadze visited Tirdznisi to meet the families of the four detainees on 9 November and met President Mikheil Saakashvili on their return to Tbilisi. Targamadze said that his

¹ “A Kind of Ethnic Cleansing”, Mari Otashvili, *Rezonansi*, 9 November 2009.

² “Impudent Action”, Dato Gamisonia, *24 Saati*, 6 November 2009.

³ “Red Cross representatives Have Visited Abducted Teenagers”, Dato Gamisonia, *24 Saati*, 10 November 2009.

⁴ “Important Mission for EU”, Dato Gamisonia, *24 Saati*, 13 November 2009.

⁵ “Georgian Government’s Appeal to European Court”, *24 Saati*, 18 November 2009.

party understood that the Georgian government's levers for influencing the situation were "very limited", emphasizing that the Christian-Democrats would never urge the president to take any "violent action".⁶ Viktor Dolidze, a leading member of the opposition Free Democrats for a United Georgia movement, later suggested that it was necessary for the OSCE to exert pressure on the separatist government in order to secure the release of the Georgians.⁷

In response to the Georgian outcry over the incident, the South Ossetian side highlighted the question of Ossetians allegedly arrested by Georgian law enforcers at various times since the 2008 war and held in Georgian prisons. *Rezonansi* reported on 11 November that South Ossetia's *Osinform* news agency had posted on its website a footage showing three Ossetians being verbally and physically abused by unidentified Georgian-speaking individuals whom the Ossetian side believed to be Georgian police officers. The newspaper carried comments by former Georgian Ombudsman Sozar Subari, who said that, while he had some suspicions regarding the possible involvement of Georgian police, his investigation had failed to produce any evidence, while the Georgian Interior Ministry had denied possessing any information regarding the whereabouts of the three Ossetians.⁸ The Tskhinvali leadership subsequently released a list of some 20 Ossetians who had allegedly been arrested by the Georgian law enforcers. Vladimir Jugheli, head of the Shida Kartli regional police department, said that, while a number of Ossetians were serving sentences for various crimes in Georgian jails, the Georgian side did not possess any information about the missing Ossetians on the list.⁹

The question was brought up by the South Ossetian delegation at the 8th round of the Geneva negotiations. Separatist envoy Boris Chochiyev announced that Tskhinvali would not agree to an unconditional release of the Georgian detainees, emphasizing that the Ossetian side still did not know anything about the Ossetians who had been missing since the war.¹⁰ The separatist president's advisor Kosta Dzugayev told *Rezonansi* that the "best solution" would be to exchange them for the three Ossetians who were allegedly held by the Georgian police.¹¹

Thomas Hammarberg, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, arrived in Georgia in late November to negotiate the release of the detainees. Despite the initial reports in Georgian newspapers that he had been denied entry to South Ossetia, Hammarberg arrived in Tskhinvali on 30 November and met a number of separatist officials, including President Kokoyty, who informed the Council of Europe envoy that over 40 South Ossetians were being held in Georgia.¹² *24 Saati* reported on 2 December that Hammarberg had offered Kokoyty a deal whereby the separatist leadership was to release the detained teenagers and he would then advise the Georgian government to free the Ossetians held in Gori. The Council of Europe commissioner took five Ossetians released by the Georgian side to Tskhinvali on 2 December though he was only able to bring two of the four Georgian teenagers back with him as the other two were given a one-year jail sentence by a South Ossetian court. However, *24 Saati* quoted

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Political Bargaining Over Abducted Teenagers", Natia Mskhiladze, *24 Saati*, 25 November 2009.

⁸ "Following Arrest of Four Georgian Teenagers, Tskhinvali Releases Footage Showing How Three Ossetians Were Tortured Last Year", Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 11 November 2009.

⁹ "Tskhinvali's List Includes Those Who Are Dead or Missing", Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 29 November 2009.

¹⁰ "Eight hours of wasted time in Geneva", Lali Khmaladze, *Rezonansi*, 12 November 2009

¹¹ "Tskhinvali Is Ready To Exchange Four Young Georgians For Three Arrested Ossetians", Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 17 November 2009.

¹² "Hammarberg's Visit to Tskhinvali Will End in Exchange", Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 1 December 2009.

Hammarberg as saying that the separatist leadership had promised to release the remaining two Georgians within 10 days.¹³

A CIPDD regional monitor visited Tirdznisi on 12 November and met with the families of the four teenagers. All families expressed concern over the conditions in the Tskhinvali jail and the future of their children though the father of one of the teenagers (who, as it turned out, has relatives among high-ranking officers of the separatist law-enforcement bodies in Tskhinvali) said he was convinced that the detainees would be treated well and criticized the Georgian authorities for “using the case for PR”. The regional monitor described the general situation in Tirdznisi as tense, noting that the locals were trying to stay away from the de facto border.

Other Incidents in Georgian Villages Adjacent to South Ossetia

A CIPDD regional monitor highlighted an incident that occurred in the village of Dvani on 29 November in his monthly report. According to villagers, three unidentified individuals entered the church located on a hill overlooking the village, removed the church bell and fired shots in the air. The head of the local council told the correspondent that the intruders also raised a Russian flag on the church. The church and the adjacent cemetery are located on a disputed territory and the residents of Dvani have refrained from going there lately as they fear that they could accidentally cross the de facto border and get arrested by the separatists. Locals told the correspondent that Ossetians are monitoring the situation in Dvani from nearby hills and Russian aircraft was seen flying low over the village in late November. Because of mutual fear, there is no communication between the residents of Dvani and the Ossetians living in adjacent settlements.

A CIPDD monitor interviewed a resident of the Georgian village of Ergneti who recently found three cows in his garden (which borders Ossetian-controlled territory) and later learned that the cows belonged to the residents of a nearby Ossetian village. He notified Georgian police officers who took the cows away. The owners are believed to have learned about the story and want their cattle back though Georgian police would not return it. The villager fears that the Ossetians could take revenge by attacking his house at night. The CIPDD monitor contacted the local police chief who told him privately that the police would not give the Ossetians their cows unless they returned the cattle taken earlier from the Georgian village of Nikozi.

Human Rights Situation

Rezonansi reported on 16 November that the separatist police had begun conducting a census in Akhagori. A local resident told the newspaper that two or three police officers would go to each house and ask for information about the people living there. The source said that the officers would sometimes visit homes at night in order to check whether the registered residents actually lived there. The source also suggested that the separatist authorities were planning to start issuing South Ossetian or Russian passports to the residents of Akhagori and were thus trying to determine how many passport forms would be required.¹⁴ The newspaper noted that, according to the locals, the separatist police was not harassing

¹³ “Imprisonment Ends for Two Teenagers”, Natia Mskhiladze, *24 Saati*, 3 December 2009.

¹⁴ “Census Has Begun in Akhagori Ahead of Planned Distribution of Ossetian Passports”, Mari Otashvili, *Rezonansi*, 16 November 2009.

anyone or forcing people to obtain South Ossetian passports but was rather using positive incentives, telling people that whoever got a passport would have his or her salary doubled. The newspaper interviewed Aleksandre Baratashvili, deputy chief of Akhagori's separatist administration, who said that gathering "statistical data" was the sole reason behind the census and emphasized that no one would be forced to acquire a South Ossetian passport.¹⁵

A CIPDD regional monitor reported from Akhagori that the separatist authorities arrested a former deputy chief of the district's Georgian police department on 22 November. The former police official is suspected of involvement in the abduction of five young Ossetians who have been missing since 1990's. According to the regional monitor, the residents of Akhagori were not surprised by the arrest as there had been rumors linking him to the abduction. The monitor reported that relatives of the detainee were allowed to visit him in an Akhagori jail and confirmed that he was being held in good conditions.

The monitor in Akhagori also reported that the district's separatist administration refused to let a group of local schoolchildren travel to Tbilisi for a one-day trip on 1 November. The monitor (who was involved in planning the trip herself) noted that she had obtained a verbal permission from the chief of the administration and had also informed Georgian Deputy Minister of State for Reintegration Elene Tevdoradze about the plan. However, Aleksandre Baratashvili, deputy chief of the Akhagori administration stopped their bus and refused to let the children leave the district, citing security concerns as the reason for this decision. The correspondent believes that the incident was linked to the ongoing row over the disruptions in the supply of electricity to Akhagori. Baratashvili was interviewed about the incident by *Rezonansi* on 4 November. He told the newspaper that the border between South Ossetia and Georgia was closed though the South Ossetian authorities were prepared to take the interests of the Georgians living in Akhagori into consideration and would let them travel to Georgian-controlled areas provided the Georgian authorities would undertake to ensure their security.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ "'Border' Is Closed, Says Deputy Chief of 'Leningori' Administration", Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 4 November 2009.

Economic Indicators

Electricity and Water Supply

Rezonansi reported on 2 November that the separatist administration of Akhalkalaki had threatened to restrict movement between the district and the Georgian-controlled areas and also to suspend water supply to the nearby Georgian villages due to the disruptions in the supply of electricity to Akhalkalaki. The newspaper cited Georgian Energy Ministry spokesperson Nino Kikacheishvili, who said that the Georgian side had never restricted the supply of electricity to the district. *Rezonansi* also interviewed Avto Dvalishvili, spokesman for Energo Pro (a private Czech company responsible for the distribution of electricity in large parts of Georgia), who noted that Energo Pro had provided a stable supply to Akhalkalaki and suggested that the disruptions were likely to have been caused by the damage to the local infrastructure which the company's technicians were unable to assess due to their lack of access to the district.¹⁷

Rezonansi further reported on 3 November that the separatist authorities had carried out their threat and cut off water supply to the Georgian villages. The newspaper interviewed Alan Jusoyev, head of the district's separatist administration, who said that the water supply had been suspended because of the Georgian side's failure to pay for the service. He also accused the Georgian authorities of ordering Energo Pro to suspend the supply of electricity to Akhalkalaki.¹⁸

Unstable supply of water (especially irrigation water) seems to be a common problem in the Georgian villages of the monitoring zone. For example, a CIPDD monitor reported from the Georgian-controlled village of Ergneti that some 90% of the agricultural land is presently not irrigated because the channel used by the locals in the past was closed by the South Ossetian authorities after last year's war. The Georgian authorities have promised to build a new channel though locals believe that the South Ossetians would be willing to restore the old channel if paid. The village of Tirdznisi still receives irrigation water from the Ossetian-controlled territory but the supply is said to be very unstable.

Problems of Agriculture

The CIPDD regional monitors continued to highlight the problems identified in the previous report. For example, a monitor reported from the village of Ergneti that the locals were unable to carry out seasonal work because of the security situation: Their land is located too close to Ossetian-controlled territory, while the unexploded ordnance from the 2008 war is yet to be removed.

Low market price of the produce (such as apples), a large portion of which was previously exported to Russia, has led to a considerable decline in the income of the local residents and could even render it unprofitable to grow fruit. The residents of three different villages (Ergneti, Tirdznisi and Tqviavi) highlighted this problem in their conversations with the regional monitors.

¹⁷ "Ossetian Administration Did Not Let Children From Akhalkalaki Travel to Tbilisi", Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 2 November 2009.

¹⁸ "Water for Electricity: Tskhinvali's Revenge", Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 3 November 2009.

Societal Indicators

Healthcare

The restriction of transport movement between separatist-controlled Akhagori and the Georgian-controlled territories continues to affect the work of the district's ambulance service. According to CIPDD's local monitor, whenever a patient needs to be taken to Tbilisi, the Akhagori medical staff has to contact the Georgian ambulance service and ask them to pick up the patient at the Georgian police checkpoint outside Akhagori District. The situation is complicated by the fact that the Georgian ambulance personnel in Tserovani need an informal permission from the Georgian president's representative in Mtskheta-Mtianeti province in order to travel to the checkpoint. According to the monitor, the Akhagori medical staff also faces a shortage of fuel and drugs.

Institutional Indicators

Activities of NGOs and International Organizations

NGOs and the Orthodox Church are providing aid for the residents of different villages of the monitoring zone. A CIPDD monitor reported that the Church and the ICRC have been delivering food supplies to the village of Ergneti and NGOs have also participated in the restoration of houses there. The head of administration in the village of Tirdznisi told a CIPDD regional monitor that the Church and the Danish Refugee Council have been helping the locals, noting that the local authorities do not have a list of the villagers living below the poverty line.

Effectiveness of Central and Local authorities

The locals are dissatisfied with the volume and the quality of government aid. For example, the residents of Ergneti and Tirdznisi have complained about the quality of pest control chemicals provided by the authorities. The residents of the village of Tqviavi told a regional monitor that the government is yet to deliver on its promise to provide them with firewood. People in Tqviavi believe that the government is neglecting their problems because of the fact that Tqviavi is the native village of exiled former Defence Minister Irakli Okruashvili.

The residents of the monitoring zone continued to voice discontent over the alleged inadequacy of compensation offered by the authorities to those affected by the war. A CIPDD monitor travelled to the village of Ergneti where some 90% of the houses are said to have been damaged or destroyed during the war. According to the correspondent, the majority of residents left Ergneti upon receiving the 15,000-lari (approximately 9,000 dollars) payouts for the destroyed houses. The remaining residents fear that the separatist forces could gradually take over the area if the outflow of population continues. A regional monitor reported from the village of Tirdznisi that the 15,000-lari compensation was only enough for partial restoration of the damaged houses.