



Report on Situation in Shida Kartli, Georgia

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Executive Summary

Georgia's new strategy for occupied territories (adopted earlier this year) was presented to the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers in February. However, the separatist leaders refused to discuss the document. Moreover, the South Ossetian leadership warned that it could pull out of the conflict settlement negotiations in Geneva.

The question of relations with Russia remained a matter of divide between Georgia's political groups in February. Former Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Noghaideli's negotiations in Moscow were condemned both by the government and a number of opposition parties. The Russian government, for its part, started negotiations with the separatist South Ossetian leadership over visa-free travel and demarcation of the border. Meanwhile, little progress was made by the Georgian government and the separatist leadership toward ending the controversy over the missing persons and prisoners.

The economic problems facing IDPs living in Shida Kartli drew the attention of Georgian press during the reporting period. IDPs from Akhalkgori District held protest rallies in Tbilisi, demanding government compensation for their lost homes. Notably, they received backing from some opposition groups. Utility arrears remained a problem in a number of IDP settlements. The CIPDD monitors who visited the villages adjacent to South Ossetia in February mostly highlighted the same problems that were recorded in other villages of the conflict zone in previous months. These include the loss of access of agricultural land, loss of markets for the produce and shortage of irrigation water. The residents of Shida Kartli interviewed by CIPDD monitors continued to voice dissatisfaction over the volume of government aid and the manner in which it is distributed.

There were two hostage-taking incidents in February. According to CIPDD monitors, the residents of some villages located near the de facto border have expressed doubts regarding the ability of the police forces stationed there to provide adequate protection.

The hostage-taking incidents that occurred in February marked the reversal of a positive trend that had been noted in previous reports by CIPDD and are likely to exacerbate the tension and sense of insecurity in the region. The failure of the parties to reach a compromise on prisoners and missing persons continues to fuel mutual distrust and is likely to have a negative impact on the resolution of other matters as well.

The problems of IDPs appear to be drawing wider public attention as demonstrated by the involvement of opposition groups in their latest protests. Regardless of whether these protests stem from a lack of information or an actual failure by state bodies to deliver on their commitments, the matter seems to merit greater attention from the government.

Monitoring Risk Factors/Indicators

Political Indicators

General Political Developments

Georgian Minister of State for Reintegration Temur Iakobashvili presented the government's new strategy for occupied territories to the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers in Strasbourg on 3 March. Iakobashvili later told *24 Saati* that Georgia needs international support in order to be able to implement the strategy and urged the international community to "exert pressure" on Russia. The newspaper noted that the strategy was rejected by the separatist leaders earlier.¹

24 Saati reported on 12 February that the Georgian parliament was discussing possible amendments to the Law on Occupied Territories based on the recommendations made by the Council of Europe's Venice Commission. According to the newspaper, the draft amendments were primarily designed to simplify the procedures for entering the breakaway regions.²

Georgian press devoted some attention to the political developments in South Ossetia in February. *Rezonansi* reported on 17 February that some of the breakaway region's opposition groups were lobbying the idea of an early presidential election in Moscow, while separatist leader Eduard Kokoyty was mulling the possibility of a constitutional amendment that would allow him to stand for a third presidential term. The newspaper noted that the South Ossetian opposition was led by businessman Albert Jusoity and also included former prime minister Yuriy Morozov and former security council chief Anatoliy Barankevich.³ *Rezonansi* further reported on 19 February that Fatima Margiyeva, the editor-in-chief of a pro-opposition newspaper, had been arrested in Tskhinvali.⁴

Georgian-Russian Relations

The issue of relations with Russia continued to cause a divide between the government and the opposition, as well as inside the opposition itself, in February.

24 Saati reported on 10 February that former Prime Minister Zurab Noghaideli's opposition Movement for Fair Georgia had signed a cooperation agreement with Russia's United Russia ruling party. According to the newspaper, Noghaideli held a joint news conference with Russian State Duma Chairman Boris Gryzlov after the signing of the agreement and the latter offered cooperation to Georgia's other opposition groups. The newspaper cited Georgian parliamentary majority leading member Pavle Kublashvili, who described Noghaideli's move as "treason".⁵ Noghaideli himself later described the agreement as an "historic document" in an interview with *Rezonansi* and suggested that it would promote improvement of Georgian-Russian relations. He emphasized that he had a "plan for government change" and warned that any attempt to rig the upcoming local elections would be the "end of Saakashvili".⁶

¹ "Strasbourg Has Accepted What Puppets Have Rejected", Dato Gamisonia, *24 Saati*, 4 February 2010.

² "Changes in Occupation Terms", Dato Gamisonia, *24 Saati*, 12 February 2010.

³ "Kremlin Is Not Planning To Replace Kokoyty with Tedeyev or Someone Else Yet", Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 17 February 2010.

⁴ "Kokoyty Has His Own Political Prisoners", Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 19 February 2010.

⁵ "What Kind of Music Will Noghaideli Be Asked To Play?" Veriko Tevzadze, *24 Saati*, 10 February 2010.

⁶ "Zurab Noghaideli: Saakashvili Will Be Held Accountable for This War", Tamta Karchava, *Rezonansi*, 2010.

The opposition Alliance for Georgia (comprising the Republican Party, New Right and Our Georgia – Free Democrats) condemned Noghaideli’s visits to Russia and urged other opposition groups to exclude the former prime minister from any coalition ahead of the upcoming local elections.⁷ Moreover, the question nearly led to the collapse of the Alliance as Irakli Alasania (leader of the Our Georgia – Free Democrats party and the Alliance’s candidate in the upcoming election of Tbilisi mayor) engaged in negotiations with Noghaideli at one point.⁸ However, he reverted to his original stance later.⁹

Conflict Settlement Talks

A report published in *Rezonansi* on 5 February suggested that the South Ossetian separatist leadership could pull out of the conflict settlement talks in Geneva. The newspaper carried comments by South Ossetian envoy Boris Chochiyev, who said that the proposals put forward by South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Russia were constantly ignored during the talks, noting that the South Ossetian leadership had been “lured” into the kind of negotiating format that did not reflect the actual state of affairs. Chochiyev warned that South Ossetia would leave the negotiations unless its interests were respected. The newspaper also carried comments by political analyst Mamuka Areshidze, who suggested that the negotiations were likely to continue regardless of the South Ossetian’s leadership’s opinion so long as Russia saw a benefit in holding them.¹⁰

Security Situation and Border Issues

There were two hostage taking incidents in February.

A resident of the town of Chiatura (in west Georgia) who was visiting his friends in the village of Nikozi in Shida Kartli went missing in early February. The South Ossetian authorities later announced that he had been arrested for crossing the border illegally. The separatist leadership has claimed that the person in question could be a Georgian spy.

Rezonansi reported on 25 February that two residents of the Kirbali village (Gori District) were detained near the administrative border by the separatist and Russian troops the previous day. The newspaper contacted a separatist official who said that the two had been charged with illegal entry into South Ossetia. *Rezonansi* also cited Paata Zakareishvili, member of Georgia’s opposition Republican Party, who cited the lack of trust between the two sides as the primary reason for such incidents and blamed President Saakashvili for causing “alienation” between Georgians and Ossetians.¹¹

A CIPDD regional monitor noted a continued sense of insecurity in some of the villages adjacent to South Ossetia. According to a resident of the village of Mereti of Gori District (who was interviewed

⁷ “Alliance for Georgia Actively Urging Opposition To Unite”, Civil Georgia, 10 February 2010, <http://civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=22360&search=წმინდაივანე> (accessed on 9 March 2010).

⁸ “Rift in Alliance for Georgia”, Civil Georgia, 23 February 2010, <http://civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=22381&search=წმინდაივანე> (accessed on 13 March 2010).

⁹ “Alasania Changes His Mind and Backs Alliance for Georgia’s Position Again”, Civil Georgia, 1 March 2010, <http://civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=22412&search=წმინდაივანე> (accessed on 13 March 2010).

¹⁰ “The 10th Round of Geneva Talks Could Turn Out To Be Last One”, Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 5 February 2010.

¹¹ “Brothers Who Had Gone Hunting Were Detained for ‘Crossing Border’”, Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 25 February 2010.

by the monitor), the Georgian police personnel stationed in the village have told the locals that they will not be able to offer any protection in the event of a separatist raid. The residents of the village were disturbed by the sound of gunshots when the separatists conducted a military exercise in February. The Georgian police checkpoint located in the village is frequently targeted by the separatists, which poses an additional threat to the civilians. The situation appears to be somewhat different in the village of Kvemo Artsevi (Kareli District), where the locals told a CIPDD monitor that the situation is generally calm and there have been no raids though they did complain about a lack of police presence.

According to a CIPDD regional monitor, separatist leader Eduard Kokoyty criticized the South Ossetian Interior Ministry in his televised speech on 18 February. Specifically, the South Ossetian leader expressed his discontent with the failure of the law enforcers to tackle the problem of drug trafficking. Kokoyty also accused the employees of Russian construction companies working in South Ossetia of smuggling drugs into the region.

The situation on Georgian-Russian border was also discussed in the Georgian press in February. Political analyst Mamuka Areshidze spoke about the “alarming situation” on Georgian-Russian border in an interview with the *Kviris Palitra* weekly on 1 February. Areshidze said that Russia now fully controls 20 of the 44 border crossings between the two countries. He noted that gradual depopulation of the adjacent mountain villages undermines Georgia’s ability to defend its border. He suggested that Russia’s ultimate goal is to gain control over the Georgian military highway and Moscow is therefore planning to seize Georgia’s Qazbegi District.¹²

The signing of a visa-free travel agreement between Russia and the South Ossetian separatist government drew sharp criticism from Georgian officials and politicians. Minister of State for Reintegration Temur Iakobashvili described Russia’s move as a “mean joke”, while parliamentary opposition leader Giorgi Targamadze noted that Russia’s relations with the “puppet regimes” were becoming “increasingly ridiculous”.¹³ *Rezonansi* further reported on 22 February that Russia and South Ossetia were about to start negotiations over the demarcation of their border. The newspaper cited separatist envoy Boris Chochiyev, who said that the Georgian government had failed to respond to the invitation to participate in the talks.¹⁴

Human Rights

The controversy over the missing persons and the prisoners allegedly held by the Georgian authorities and the South Ossetian separatist government remained a central topic in February. *Rezonansi* reported on 11 February that the International Committee of Red Cross was planning to organize a meeting of Georgian, Russian and South Ossetian representatives in Geneva to discuss the establishment of a new mechanism on missing persons. The newspaper noted that an ICRC representative had discussed the idea with the separatist leadership in Tskhinvali.¹⁵ Thomas Hammarberg, the Council of Europe commissioner for human rights, visited Georgia in late February to continue the talks over the search for the missing persons and the possible exchange of prisoners.¹⁶

On 2 February, *Rezonansi* published a report about the claims by the Georgian Foreign Affairs Ministry and some of the country’s central TV stations that the South Ossetian separatists and Russian troops were forcing the residents of Akhlagori District to acquire South Ossetian or Russian passports.

¹² “Alarming Situation”, Khatuna Paichadze, *Kviris Palitra*, 1-7 Feb 2010.

¹³ “Agreement on Visa-Free Travel”, Natia Mskhiladze, *24 Saati*, 2 February 2010.

¹⁴ “Moscow and Tskhinvali To Draw New Border Along Caucasus Mountains”, Ia Abulashvili, *Rezonansi*, 22 February 2010.

¹⁵ “Meeting on Missing Persons To Be Held in Geneva”, Tiko Osmanova, *Rezonansi*, 11 February 2010.

¹⁶ “Hammarberg Looking for Missing Persons”, Mari Otashvili, *Rezonansi*, 27 February 2010.

The newspaper cited a woman living in Akhagori, who said that she had not heard of a single such case.¹⁷ In a similar story, in response to claims aired on Georgia's Rustavi-2 TV station, the separatist South Ossetian government denied having any plans to rename the region's Georgian villages or to force breakaway republic's remaining Georgian residents to change their surnames. Separatist MP Merab Chigoyev told *Rezonansi* that the reports were an "absolute lie", while separatist parliament deputy speaker Mira Tskhovrebova told the newspaper that the South Ossetian leadership was not going to violate the rights of the Georgians.¹⁸

According to a CIPDD monitor, the Tskhinvali court considered a dispute between an ethnic Ossetian and an ethnic Georgian over a house in Akhagori and ruled in favour of the former.

¹⁷ "Residents of Gali and Akhagori Deny Being Forced To Obtain Russian Passports", Mari Otashvili, *Rezonansi*, 2 February 2010.

¹⁸ "Tskhinvali Denies Combating Georgian Heritage", Mari Otashvili, *Rezonansi*, 12 February 2010.

Economic Indicators

Economic Problems of IDPs

The IDPs from Akhagori who are demanding payouts for their lost homes continued to stage protests in February and received backing from a number of opposition politicians.

The IDPs gathered outside the parliament building in Tbilisi on 5 February. Sozar Subari, former human rights ombudsman and currently a leading member of the opposition Alliance for Georgia, attended the rally and made critical comments about the government's policy towards the IDPs. Meanwhile, a spokesperson for the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation said that the payouts would only be offered to the IDPs who had their own savings too and could therefore use the government money as a supplement to buy new homes. She noted that the rest of the IDPs would be offered accommodation instead of money.¹⁹ The IDPs from Akhagori held another rally outside the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation on 9 February and were initially planning to block the nearby road but changed their mind due to heavy police presence. Opposition Republican Party leading member Tinatin Khidasheli attended the protest and told *Rezonansi* that the party would aid the IDPs in filing a lawsuit.²⁰ The authorities, for their part, have reiterated the need to verify the list of IDP who are to receive the payouts, suggesting that some of them may not be entitled to receive this type of compensation as they have retained their homes in Akhagori.

Utility payments remained a major problem for IDPs in February. Residents of the Karaleti IDP settlement told a CIPDD monitor that the gas company continues to send them new bills despite the fact that gas supply has been suspended. According to the IDPs, the government has promised them to pay the gas arrears though it is not clear when the payment will be made. Meanwhile, the electricity company has agreed to allow the IDPs to pay their arrears gradually over a period of three months. The IDPs who failed to pay at least a portion of the arrears have had electricity cut off.

A CIPDD regional monitor was told by the residents of the Karaleti IDP settlement that the construction companies that built their homes were required, under the contract terms, to inspect the buildings and repair any detected flaws but have failed to do this so far. However, a local official told the monitor that the companies did carry out the repair work.

Economic Situation in Villages Affected by War

The question of the supply of gas from Georgian-controlled territory to the separatist-controlled Akhagori District and the supply of water from the separatist-controlled areas to the Georgian-controlled villages of Shida Kartli resurfaced last month. *Rezonansi* wrote on 18 February that the Georgian authorities and the separatist government were reportedly holding talks about the possible resumption of gas supply to Akhagori. The newspaper cited separatist MP Vladimir Gabarayev, who said that the South Ossetian side was, for its part, prepared to restore water supply to Gori and Kaspi Dsitriks. *Rezonansi* also carried comments by Georgian First Deputy Minister of Energy Mariam Valishvili, who said that the Georgian government did not object to the resumption of gas supply so long as the separatist authorities would reach an agreement with the private company distributing gas in the region and allow repair teams to inspect the damaged gas pipelines in Akhagori.²¹

¹⁹ "IDPs From Akhagori Still Staging Protests", Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 6 February 2010.

²⁰ "We Will Not Let Anyone Get Away With Lies, IDPs From Akhagori Said", Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 10 February 2010.

²¹ "Gas for Water", Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 18 February 2010.

CIPDD regional monitors visited a number of villages adjacent to the separatist-controlled territory in February. The residents of these villages mostly highlighted the same economic problems that were recorded in other villages of the region and discussed in previous reports.

A CIPDD monitor visited the village of Mereti in Gori District. The village is located near South Ossetia and most of the land that the locals used for agricultural work is now controlled by the separatists. According to the locals, there is a shortage of irrigation water and the crops have been damaged by the low-quality chemicals supplied by the authorities. The locals told the monitor, that some of their agricultural machinery was seized by the Ossetians after the war.

Shortage of irrigation water is also a major concern for the residents of the Dvani village in Kareli District.

Another CIPDD monitor visited the village of Kvemo Artsevi. The locals complained that they have to sell their agricultural produce at a very low price as a result of the loss of access to the South Ossetian and Russian markets. The locals claimed that they have tried to exchange their produce for tangerines and potatoes in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region but the law enforcers stationed near the village would only let them carry a limited amount of these through their checkpoint. The locals cannot use nearby pastures anymore since they are located too close to the territory controlled by the separatists and the Russians.

Societal Indicators

Media

Saba Tsitsikashvili, editor-in-chief of the Voice of Kartli regional newspaper, was interviewed by *Rezonansi* on 1 February about the 22 January incident in which he was forced to leave the regional administration building in Gori and assaulted physically by the building's guard (The incident was mentioned in the January report). Tsitsikashvili recalled previous cases of this sort and emphasized that the perpetrators of such acts are rarely punished. He also noted that Georgia's national TV channels did not cover the story.²²

According to *Rezonansi*, a group of Russian journalists (mostly from the *Rossiya TV*) arrived in Akhgori District on 2 February. The newspaper cited a resident of Akhgori, who said that the Russian journalists interviewed the locals about their problems. They also reportedly visited the family of a woman who was arrested in Tbilisi earlier and charged with carrying counterfeit money.²³

Education

The recent speculation over the future of the Georgian schools that have continued to operate in Akhgori District since the establishment of separatist control over the area in August 2008 persisted in February.

Rezonansi reported on 9 February that it is becoming increasingly difficult for the students of high schools in Akhgori to obtain Georgian graduation certificates since the Georgian authorities are no longer supplying the schools with the necessary forms. Students from Akhgori are now required to contact the Tbilisi-based provisional administration of South Ossetia in order to obtain the certificates. They also need to provide proof that they studied in Akhgori for at least two years.²⁴ The newspaper further reported on 27 February that the Georgian government was allegedly planning to stop funding kindergartens, schools and other educational institutions operating in the separatist-controlled district.²⁵

On 8 February, *Kviris Palitra* carried a story about the problems of school teachers from the formerly Georgian-controlled villages of South Ossetia who were displaced and lost their jobs as a result of the August 2008 war. The newspaper interviewed the former director of the Kheiti village high school, who complained about a lack of aid and accused the Georgian government of "condemning some 800 people to starvation". She emphasized that very few of the displaced teachers were employed in the new school in the Tserovani IDP settlement.²⁶

²² "Journalist Beaten in Shida Kartli", Salome Tsetskhadze, *Rezonansi*, 1 February 2010.

²³ "Russian Journalists Are Showing Interest in Problems of Akhgori Residents", Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 3 February 2010.

²⁴ "Obtaining Georgian Graduation Certificates Has Become More Difficult for Residents of Akhgori", Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 9 February 2010.

²⁵ "Whether or Not Educational Institutions of Akhgori Will Continue To Exist Is Matter of Major Commotion", Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 27 February 2010.

²⁶ "IDP Teachers Are Threatening To Commit Suicide", Eka Lomidze, *Kviris Palitra*, 8-14 February 2010.

Institutional Indicators

Activities of Central and Local authorities

In February, the residents of Shida Kartli interviewed by CIPDD monitors continued to express discontent over the inadequacy of government aid and the manner in which it is distributed.

A CIPDD monitor was told that the Gori municipal authorities received some 12m lari (approximately 7m dollars) from the state budget for the restoration of homes damaged during the war but only part of the planned work was carried out. It has been suggested that the government aid allocated for the villages of Shida Kartli is spent inefficiently by the regional authorities. The locals cited the example of a kindergarten building in the village of Karaleti (Gori District) that was repaired twice within a year under two different government programmes. The residents of the Mereti village (Gori District) told a CIPDD regional monitor that most of the aid allocated to the village is given to the friends and relatives of the local officials. The residents of the Kvemo Artsevi and Dvani villages in Kareli District complained to the CIPDD monitors over the lack of government aid. The residents of Dvani also complained about the omission of the village from some of the new aid programs and said that they are planning to stage protests in Tbilisi.

Activities of NGOs and International Organizations

According to a CIPDD local monitor, humanitarian organization Care is implementing a small business promotion project for the female residents of the Karaleti and Akhalsopeli IDP settlements. The monitor noted that the IDPs are very happy about the initiative and hope to resolve some of their problems through the project. They told the monitor that they want the government to launch similar programmes too. Care is also reportedly providing small business loans to the residents of the villages affected by the war.