

ACCESS TO QUALITY EDUCATION IN GALI AND AKHALGORI



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Access to Quality Education in Gali and Akhalgori

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Introduction

The right to receiving quality education in mother tongue for Gali and Akhagori communities has been struck hardest by the conflict. In the core of the Russification process in these regions lies the attempt to exert pressure and intimidate local Georgian communities, which has turned ethnic Georgian population into victims of systemic discrimination and cultural intimidation. Even though this right belongs to the fundamental civic rights, in the context of the conflict it tends to be excessively politicized and thus, difficult to be captured through the lens of human rights. The violation of the right has been made an agenda item for numerous negotiation formats. However, not only have the parties to the conflict reached any kind of agreement over the contested matter, but they have not made even the slightest progress towards resolving the problem. Meanwhile, the situation gets deteriorated from year to year with the project of the Russification of education reaching its goal in both regions. In this light it is of critical importance that the Georgian government fulfil their positive obligations and undertake all possible measures to ensure access to quality education and the protection of the native tongue for communities of the regions in question.

Georgian language schools in Gali and Akhagori districts have been progressively denied the rights to receiving education in the mother tongue over years. In Gali the process of Russifying schools and education started step by step and gradually shortly after the end of the armed conflict. Finally, by September 2022, for all grades of Gali district schools Georgian, as a language of instruction had been completely replaced by Russian and Russian textbooks. In Akhagori the similar process was launched in 2017 and continues to this day.¹ Since September 2022 five out of six schools in Akhagori, have used Russian as a language of instruction (one school in Akhagori has always been Russian language).²

The Abkhaz and Russian parties have justified the policy shift by using the following arguments: 1. Georgian, as a language of instruction in schools in Abkhazia poses threats to the self-declared “Abkhaz state” since education based on “Georgian ideology” induces deficit of loyalty towards Abkhazia 2. In addition, it has been widely promoted that the knowledge of the Russian language would allow local youth to pursue careers in Abkhazia and Russia while if Georgian remained the language of instruction they would have remained tied to the Georgian state.³

Against claims of the Abkhaz authorities that pursuant to their de-facto “legislation” Georgian ethnic minorities of Gali receive education just like other minorities and their rights are protected

¹ Democracy Research Institute, Access to Education in the Native Language in Gali and Akhagori Districts, 2019 – 2020, 2020, 7.

² Report of the Public Defender of Georgia on the Situation of Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia, 2022, 330 [Available in Georgian]. An interview with an Akhagori activist, 2 August 2023.

³ Tornike Zurabishvili, Restricting Education in Native Language in Gali District: In Search of Solutions, Georgia’s Reforms Associates (GRASS), January, 2016, 12-13.

in line with the international standards⁴, discrimination against Gali communities is easy to discern. For instance, students with ethnic Armenian background can receive education in the Armenian language (as early as in 2011 there were three times as many Armenian schools as Georgian).⁵

Therefore, it is evident that it is within interest of Abkhaz and Russian sides to completely replace and eliminate the Georgian language and civic self-identification linked to Georgia among ethnic Georgian communities. Together with other political intentions, the Russification of the education policy serves to cause a shift in Georgians' identity.⁶ The explicit link between the right of the child to education and their cultural identity is acknowledged by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Pursuant to Article 29 of the Convention "States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to the development of respect for the child's cultural identity, language, and values."⁷ Being a central element of cultural identity, ensuring to education in the child's mother tongue is of critical importance. In addition, such a provision is important for accessing inclusive and quality education.⁸

Coercive transition to the Russian-language education has been a challenge for both students and teachers since the latter's command of the Russian language is not sufficient to receive or provide general education. Therefore, this circumstance creates barriers to accessing quality general education. Conversely, in those communities where problems of transition have been overcome to varying degree (for instance, in schools of Gali's upper zone villages where the transition process had been finalized as early as in 2004-2005),⁹ there have been problems related to the knowledge of the Georgian language, which in turn, tends to create a barrier for those students who wish to pursue higher education in Georgia's higher education institutions.

Present article aims to analyze barriers to quality education in the two regions left beyond the effective control of the Georgian central authorities. In addition, the paper looks into opportunities and resources offered or the ones that should be offered by the Georgian authorities to communities residing in the two regions for effective and full implementation of the right to education.

To this end, the author has studied the most recent reports, a body of research, and statistical data (including those provided by the Public Defender as well as civic and international organizations). In addition, the information has been retrieved from four interviews conducted with residents of Gali, Ochamchire, and Akhalgori, and the head of Gali education resource center, and a

⁴ Constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia, Article 6.

⁵ Tornike Zurabishvili, Restricting Education in Native Language in Gali District: In Search of Solutions, Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS), January 2016, 12-13.

⁶ Public Defender of Georgia, A Special Report on the Right to Education in Gali: New Developments and Challenges of the Academic Year 2015-2016, Tbilisi, 2015.

⁷ Human Rights Watch, Living in Limbo, 2011, 48.

⁸ Human Rights Council, A/HRC/43/4, Report of the Special Rapporteur on minority issue, Education, language and the human rights of minorities, 2020.

⁹ Public Defender of Georgia, A Special Report on the Right to Education in Gali: New Developments and Challenges of the Academic Year 2015-2016, Tbilisi, 2015.

representative of the Public Defender's Office. The document also contains an analysis of information provided by the Georgian Ministry of Education and Science.

1. Access to Education in Gali

Georgian schools and the entire educational system of Gali received a blow from the very onset of the military actions in 1992-1993.

Since the completion of military actions of the 1990s, 30 out of Gali's 58 schools¹⁰ are still active. There were 34-31 school at different times, however, they were gradually shut down due to a decrease in the number of students. The last school was closed in 2017 in Tagiloni village. Since then, 30 schools continue their normal functioning).¹¹ Since 1994, after Abkhaz de-facto administration has unilaterally changed the borders of the Gali district, 11 schools have been part of Ochamchire and Tkvarcheli.¹² Gali was divided into "upper" and "lower" zones. As of today, there are nine schools in "lower" Gali and 10 in the "upper" zone. According to the latest report of the Public Defender, for the academic year 2022-2023 there are in total 30 complete general education schools, nine preschools and five art schools operating in Gali (note: central authorities of Georgia do not recognize changed boundaries of Gali district and considers schools assigned to Ochamchire and Tkvarcheli districts as of Gali).¹³

Russian as a language of instruction was introduced in Tkvarcheli and Ochamchire districts as early as 1995 and currently Georgian language and literature, as a subject is no longer taught.¹⁴ The transition to the Russian language in upper Gali schools took was finalized in 2004-2005.¹⁵ As for lower zone schools, the process of Russification of education was launched in 2015 and finalized in September 2022 resulting in Russian becoming a language of instruction for all grades. The Georgian language and literature, as a foreign language is taught to varying degree and frequency. However, based on reports of local communities, number of hours allocated to teaching the Georgian language and literature is fewer in upper grades: some students are taught Georgian 3-4 hours per week while other schools for just a weekly hour.¹⁶ According to the director of Gali education resource center, the Georgian language and literature is taught for an hour per week in schools of so called lower and upper zones. However, some schools may dedicate more hours to the subject upon a "good will" of a director. Notably, such an arrangement is an exception rather than

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, *Living in Limbo*, 2011, 48.

¹¹ Interview with the head of Gali Education Resource Center, 14 July 2023.

¹² Tornike Zurabishvili, *Restricting Education in Native Language in Gali District: In Search of Solutions*, Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS), January 2016, 4; See also: Social Justice Center, Teona Piranishvili, "Double Exclusion Places: Human Rights and Social Challenges in Gali and Akhlagori", 2022, 33.

¹³ Report of the Public Defender of Georgia on the Situation of Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia, 2022, 329 [Available in Georgian].

¹⁴ Anonymous interview with a Gali resident, 12 May 2023. Interview with the head of Gali Education Resource Center, 14 July 2023.

¹⁵ Social Justice Center, Teona Piranishvili, "Double Exclusion Places: Human Rights and Social Challenges in Gali and Akhlagori", 2022, 26.

¹⁶ Anonymous interview with a Gali resident, 12 May 2023; an anonymous conversation with a Gali resident, 19 May 2023. See also: A Special Report of the Public Defender of Georgia on the Right to Education in Gali: New Developments and Challenges of the Academic Year 2015-2016, Tbilisi, 2015, p.5.

a rule. This information is corroborated by a consolidated report produced by the Council of Europe for the year of 2021 according to which one hour per week is dedicated to the Georgian language for students in the first to the 11th grades. The report also highlights that teaching in the Abkhaz language has also been reduced.¹⁷

Along with the process of transitioning to the Russian education, Georgian textbooks certified by the Georgian ministry of education and science have been eliminated from Gali schools.¹⁸ The scope of this policy has gone beyond schools with Georgian books of the Georgian language and literature, history and geography disappearing from local libraries.¹⁹

In an interview a Gali resident who preferred to remain anonymous, says that the transition turned out to be difficult for both students and teachers. Teachers have to learn their respective subjects in the Russian language including terms and expressions which may take several years. Upper Gali schools where the transition had been completed by 2005, have already overcome this challenge. However, the process is still ongoing in lower zone schools with both students and teachers facing the challenge. If a teacher fails to deliver classes in the Russian language in several years, s/he chooses to give up teaching, said a Gali resident in an interview with the researcher.²⁰ According to the director of Gali resource center, teachers are subject to pressure and harsh control. There have been numerous cases of search and inspections, and special law enforcement authorities carry out unannounced visits to schools to check which language is used by teachers. Inspections are carried out spontaneously or in a form of planned attendance at open lessons and school events. The director also recalls cases of searching teachers' homes to see whether they keep Georgian books.

A representative of the Public Defender's Office notes that local authorities exercise harsh control over schooling in the Russian language and if a teacher fails to manage the task, s/he get fired.²¹ The director of Gali education resource center questions the accuracy of this information. However, she says teachers might get fired on grounds of cooperating with the Georgian side, organizing Georgian events etc. She also argues that some teachers pursue education in Russian language in Sukhumi State University in order to maintain their jobs. In addition, a representative of a Gali based CSO interviewed within the frame of the present research points out that schools in Gali town find it easier to teach in Russian due to the fact that their staff consist of many young teachers who received their education in Russian in Sukhumi. Consequently, students are also versed in the Russian language.²² However, in rural areas of Gali both teachers and students find it challenging to cope with the Russian language schooling and teachers often have to resort to Megrelian or Georgian languages during classes.

¹⁷ Council of Europe Consolidated report on the conflict in Georgia (April – September 2021), SG/Inf(2021)30, 49.

¹⁸ Democracy Research Institute, Access to Education in the Native Language in Gali and Akhlagori Districts, 2019 – 2020, 2020, 5.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Anonymous interview with a Gali resident, 12 May 2023

²¹ Interview with a representative of the Public Defender's Office, 19 May 2023. See also 2019 annual report of the Public Defender. 309

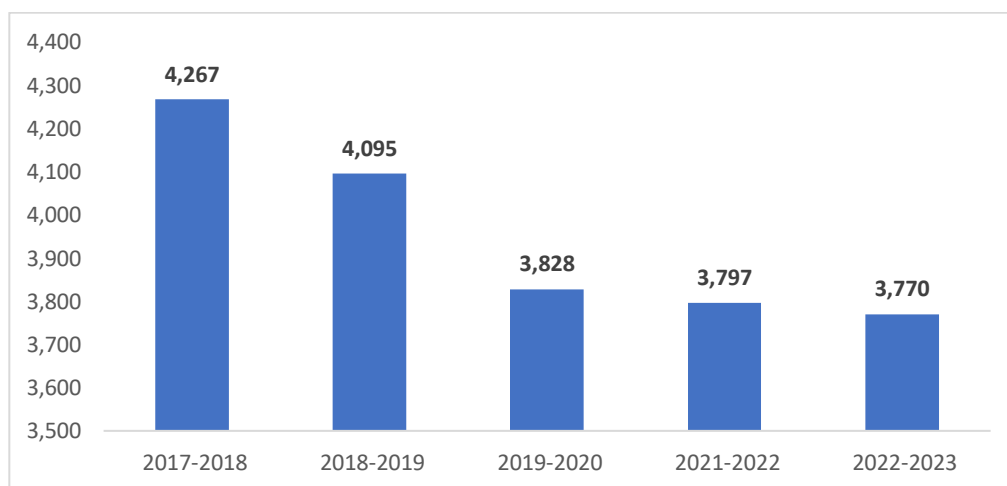
²² Interview with a representative of a Gali based non-governmental organization, 24 July 2023.

The transition has been equally challenging for students with Georgian and Megrelian as the mother tongue who were exposed the Russian language only when in school.²³ Those students who had not attended preschool (preschool education is also conducted in Russian in Gali) are particularly affected by the challenges of the transition.

Back in a day when so called checkpoints at the villages along the Administrative Boundary Line were less restrictive towards freedom of movement, students residing in the vicinity would often cross the ABL to attend Georgian language schools in the territory under the control of the Georgian central authorities. For instance, dozens of students residing in Saberio, a village in Gali, would cross daily to attend a nine-grade school in the village of Tskoushi and a twelve-grade school in Pakhulani, Tsalenjika municipality. Likewise, students from Otobaia, Gali district, would cross the ABL to receive education in Ganmukhuri school, Zugdidi municipality.²⁴ Since 2016 such an opportunity is no longer available to local communities due to the closure of the checkpoint and harsher restrictions imposed over the freedom of movement.²⁵

With regard to the number of students in Gali schools, it has been on a steady decline from year to year. Local residents believe that in addition to harsh social and economic conditions, persisting infrastructural problems and discriminatory policies in general account for the sliding numbers.²⁶ According to the 2022 report of the Public Defender’s office, as of January 2023, there were 3770 registered students attending preparatory through 11th grades in Gali’s 30 schools.²⁷ The table below shows the number of students in Gali district schools from 2017 to 2023.

Number of students in Gali schools, 2017-2023



²³ Anonymous interview with a Gali resident, 12 May 2023

²⁴ A Special Report of the Public Defender of Georgia on the Right to Education in Gali: New Developments and Challenges of the Academic Year 2015-2016, Tbilisi, 2015.

²⁵ De-facto regime shut down two walking passages (Sukhcha, Otobaia) at the Gali administrative border, Abkhazia.gov.ge, 3 April 2017. Available in Georgian at: <https://abkhazia.gov.ge/news/7104/ge>

²⁶ Social Justice Center, Teona Piranishvili, “Double Exclusion Places: Human Rights and Social Challenges in Gali and Akhgori”, 2022, 29-30.

²⁷ Report of the Public Defender of Georgia on the Situation of Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia, 2022, 329 [Available in Georgian]

Source: Report of the Public Defender of Georgia on the Situation of Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia, 2022, p. 329

Problems related to accessing education were further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on the findings of a survey commissioned by the Gali education resource center in November 2020 suggested that only 1648 out of 3861 students had access to computers and internet. However, only 874 students attended online classes since the rest could not afford purchasing internet package suitable for undertaking online classes.²⁸ The director of the Gali education resource center recalls several cases of students joining in online lessons from a local cometary located on a hillside for the strength of the signal. Access to education during the pandemic was also restricted to those students who lost their jobs and subsequently were not able to pay their tuition fees or rent.²⁹ At the same time, students who failed to collect minimum credits had their scholarships suspended on account of lack of access to the internet or devices. 47 out of 110 students enrolled in 2019 were affected by this problem.³⁰ Students stuck in Gali as a result of the restrictions of movement introduced during the pandemic were unable to participate in online lectures and seminars because of technical problems and consequently had their student status suspended.

Yet another barrier to quality education is the lack of preschool education institutions. As of January 2023, there were just nine kindergartens operating in Gali district with 533 children.³¹ Education and communication in all kindergartens is in Russian which creates conditions for children to be better prepared for receiving general education in the Russian language.³² In an interview with the Social Justice Center, a Gali resident notes that children attending Russian language preschool education institution find it easier to pursue general education in Russian. However, not everyone has access to preschool and early child education. Moreover, the majority of the Gali villages are left without kindergartens. For instance, there is no preschool institution in Nabakevi, a village in the vicinity of the Administrative Boundary Line and bordering Khurcha. Children from Nabakevi attended a kindergarten in Khurcha crossing the ABL on a daily basis. However, since 2017, the closure of Khurcha-Nabakevi checkpoint, Nabakevi children of pre-school age, have been deprived of this opportunity.³³ In 2016 there were 11 children from Nabakevi registered in the Khurcha kindergarten, the following year - only two and since then, as a result of the closure of Khurcha-Nabakevi checkpoint, the kindergarten in Khurcha is no longer available for Nabakevi community where there is no kindergarten³⁴ The situation in Orsantia, where the

²⁸ 2020 annual report of the Public Defender of Georgia, 2020, 444.

²⁹ EMC Demands Special Social Support for Students, 14 April 2020. Available in Georgian at: <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/emc-studentebistvis-spetsialur-sotsialur-mkhardacheras-moitkhovs>

³⁰ Annual report of the Public Defender, 2021, 260.

³¹ Ibid 329.

³² Anonymous interview with a Gali resident, 12 May 2023.

³³ Communities in ABL villages Khurcha and Pakhulani live under dire social conditions, Social Justice Center, 23 August 2022. Available at: <https://socialjustice.org.ge/en/products/gamqof-khaztan-mdebare-soflebis-khurchas-da-fakhulanis-mosakhleoba-mdzime-sotsialur-mdgomareobashia>

³⁴ 2017 annual report of the Public Defender of Georgia, p.199

kindergarten accommodated five children from Otobaia, a Gali village, remains the same. After the shutting down of the checkpoint, there are no children from Otobaia attending the kindergarten.³⁵

According to the information provided by Gali education resource center at the ministry of education and science of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, there are two preschool education institution in Gali town. There are also kindergartens in the following villages: Chuburkhinji, Sida, Okumi, Zemo Barghebi, Saberio (two), as well as the kindergarten “Shashikvara” of Mziuri.³⁶ According to the director of Gali education resource center, there is a dire shortage of kindergartens especially in rural areas where many have no means and opportunity to provide pre-school education to their children. Sadly, there are neither will nor capacity to build additional kindergartens at a local level.

With freedom of movement restricted, local youth in Gali find it difficult to participate in various educational and cultural events, summer schools, and trainings.³⁷

2. Access to education in Akhalgori

In 2017, further to a decision of the de-facto authorities, a process of transition to the Russian language education was launched in Akhalgori. The same year elementary school students of Akhalgori’s 6 Georgian language schools started their schooling in Russian while Georgian is now taught as a foreign language.³⁸

Declining number of students in Akhalgori schools reflecting looming depopulation of the entire region, raises particular concerns. For instance, only five out of seven schools in Akhalgori (one being a Russian language school) had applications submitted by first graders, while the following year this number dropped to three.³⁹ The problem persisted in 2019 as well.⁴⁰ In 2021, two of Akhalgori’s schools had no first grader (villages Balaani and Zemo Boli). A Georgian school in Akhalgori was the biggest school in the entire district. According to a former head Akhalgori mayor the school accommodated more than 1000 students in before the war.⁴¹ According to the 2021 report of the Public Defender, for the academic year 2020-2021, there were 34 registered students at the school.⁴² In addition, as explained by an Akhalgori activist, there have been talks going around

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Letter MES 6 22 0001320894 of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia dated 19 October 2022

³⁷ Annual report of the Public Defender 2017, 200

³⁸ Report of the Public Defender of Georgia on the Situation of Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia, 2017, 202.

³⁹ Report of the Public Defender of Georgia on the Situation of Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia, 2018, 265.

⁴⁰ Report of the Public Defender of Georgia on the Situation of Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia, 2019, 308.

⁴¹ Interview with an Akhalgori researcher, 20-23 September 2022.

⁴² Report of the Public Defender of Georgia on the Situation of Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia, 2021, 261.

about shutting down two of the five schools (in Boli and Korinta villages) due to sliding number of students.⁴³

While the number of students registered at six Georgian language schools totaled 118 during the academic year 2015-2016, the number dropped to 53 in 2022-2023. Because of a decrease in the number of students, a Georgian language school in Akhmaji had to be shut down cutting the number of Georgian language school in Akhmagori to five. In these schools Georgian remains as a language of instruction in grades from 9th to 11th while previously Georgian used to be a language of instruction since grade 7. Similar to the situation in Gali district, teaching in the Georgian language will be completely eliminated in just few years if the Russification policy continues to be implemented in Akhmagori district.

Number of students in Akhmagori schools:

2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023
118	105	98	85	63	58	53

Source: Annual reports of the Public Defender of Georgia for 2017-2023

Over the past years, the security committee of de-facto authorities in Tskhinvali have routinely intimidated teachers and students. Information about pressure and discrimination exercised against the Georgian communities can be found in the public defender’s annual reports. For instance, on 3 February 2020, a director of the Georgian school was fired after s/he refused to expel five students as ordered by the education department.⁴⁴ Director of Ikoti school was also fired due to alleged “lack of pedagogical education”.⁴⁵ Those who wish to continue education in the territory under the control of the Georgian central authorities, are also victims of harsh pressure.⁴⁶ In the 2022 annual report, the Public Defender points out that the security committee in Tskhinvali continues to intimidate both teachers and students so that they use Russian as a language of instruction during classes.⁴⁷

⁴³ Interview with an Akhmagori activist, 2 August 2023.

⁴⁴ Former director of Akhmagori Georgian school standing up for her rights, Radio Liberty, 8 July 2020. Available in Georgian at: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/ახალგორის-ქართული-სკოლის-ყოფილი-დირექტორი-საკუთარი-უფლებების-დასაცავად-იბრძვის/30714177.html>

⁴⁵ Social Justice Center, Teona Piranishvili, “Double Exclusion Places: Human Rights and Social Challenges in Gali and Akhmagori”, 2022, 56.

⁴⁶ Public Defender’s Statement on intimidation university entrants by de-facto security service of Occupied Akhmagori, 24 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.ombudsman.ge/eng/190307023143siakhleebi/sakhalkho-damtsvelis-gantskhadeba-okupirebul-akhmagorshi-de-fakto-ushishroebis-mier-abiturientebis-dashinebis-faktebze>

⁴⁷ Report of the Public Defender of Georgia on the Situation of Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia, 2022, 330-331 [available in Georgian].

After transitioning to Russian, the quality of education in Akhagori schools has drastically dwindled. Majority of teachers have poor command of Russian and have not obtained qualification for years.⁴⁸

Pre-school institutions in Akhagori are exclusively run in the Russian language. There are two kindergartens in the district: one in the town and the other one in Tsinagara village (in the Ossetian part). Before the war there was a kindergarten in Ikota village which was shut down in 2008 because of lack of children in the area. In 2018 two of Akhagori's kindergartens were merged due to decreasing number of children. Teachers with poor command of Ossetian and Russian were fired causing protest from the local community.⁴⁹ The decision to restrict communication in the Georgian language in the kindergarten also led to protests and anger.⁵⁰

3. Recognition of general and higher education institutions in the Occupied Territories

The rule for recognizing general and higher education received from institutions operating in the Occupied Territories is laid down in Resolutions #147 and #1067 of 2009 of the minister of education and science of Georgia.

In general, the recognition is important for an individual residing in the Occupied Territories to have the opportunity to pursue general or higher education in institutions or targeted state programs operating in territory under the control of the Georgian central authorities, including the ones offering the enrollment in Georgia's higher or vocational education institutions without entrance exams, participation in scholarship programs etc.

Recognition of general education received in the Occupied Territories falls under the purview of the Georgian ministry of education and science, ministry of education and science of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia or the temporary administration of the former Autonomous District of South Ossetia while the LEPL National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement is the state agency responsible for the recognition of higher education received in the Occupied Territories.

Order #147 on the recognition of class/grade/step/semester of general education defines the list of documents that an individual should submit in order to get his/her education recognized:

- Written application
- A copy of a personal identification document

⁴⁸ Social Justice Center, Teona Piranishvili, "Double Exclusion Places: Human Rights and Social Challenges in Gali and Akhagori", 2022, 56.

⁴⁹ Staff of Akhagori kindergartens fired because of lack of language skills, Radio Liberty, 13 June 2018. Available in Georgian at: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/ახალგორის-საბავშვო-ბალებიდან-თანამშრომლები-ენის-უცოდინრობის-გამო-გაათავისუფლეს/29288409.html>

⁵⁰ Social Justice Center, Teona Piranishvili, "Double Exclusion Places: Human Rights and Social Challenges in Gali and Akhagori", 2022, 56.

- A document confirming that the applicant received general education (class/grade/step/semester) if there is such a document available
- Personal and contact information of witnesses who can corroborate that the applicant has received general education in the Occupied Territories
- A list of those institutions which might keep document/documents confirming that the applicant has attended class/grade/step/semester of general education in the Occupied Territories
- Any other document or information which might corroborate that the applicant has received general education in the Occupied Territories

With regard to recognizing higher education, pursuant to Order #1067, the applicant must provide the same documentation as in case of general education. The only exception, however, concerns a personal identification document: if there is no document and therefore, no copy can be made, the applicant can submit any document which can confirm the identity of the applicant. The amendment aimed at simplifying the process of higher education recognition was brought to the ministerial order in 2017.⁵¹ Similar changes are stipulated by A Step to A Better Future peace initiative. However, they are not referred to in the ministerial order #147.

The applicant wishing to have his/her higher education recognized can submit an online application including one in the Abkhaz language. Interested individuals can also use a status-neutral mechanism and send their application through an international organization.

As reported by Gali residents in anonymous interviews with the Social Justice Center, the process of higher education recognition is mostly smooth without significant complications. The director of Gali education resource center says they accept documents electronically since it would have been complicated to submit them in person under harsh restrictions over the freedom of movement. However, even electronic submission seems to be a problem since many schools lack relevant technical equipment (printers, scanners, computers). Therefore, they agree to accept photocopies made by mobile phones in the process of application.

In addition, since it is a must for the applicant to present the ID issued by the Georgian authorities, this creates a series of problems for those applicants who have failed to cross to the territory under the control of the Georgian central authorities to obtain an ID. If students and their parents have no travel documents, they are not able to obtain IDs and consequently, the process of education recognition gets stalled. An interviewed Gali resident recalls a case when a young person who had finished school two years ago, could not cross to the territory controlled by the Georgian central authorities to obtain an ID, which was a necessary precondition for the recognition of his/her general education.

⁵¹ “A Step to a Better Future”, peace initiative, developing education opportunities for communities residing in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, 2018

It should be noted that A Step to a Better Future peace initiative offers a status-neutral mechanism in a form of “granting of an personal/individual number”, which allows individuals without Georgian citizenship or neutral documents residing in the conflict regions to get involved in education institutions of any step operating in the Georgian controlled territory and access various educational services and grants. Considering this opportunity, it is not entirely clear why individuals residing in the conflict regions need to submit an ID document for having their education recognized when obtaining such documents is challenging due to restrictions imposed over the freedom of movement. In addition, an individual seeking the recognition of higher education, can submit any document which allows personal identification, however, changes aiming at simplifying the process and lifting off red tape have not yet been applied to the process of higher education recognition.

The statistics related to the recognition of education looks as follows:

In 2021 the recognition commission at the ministry of education and science of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia recognized complete education received by 294 applicants based on the review of school documents provided by the applicants.⁵² Between 2020 and 2023 the commission recognized 1147 cases of complete general education, 46 cases of basic education and 198 instances of separate grades.⁵³

As for the matter of recognizing education provided by institutions in the Occupied Akhgori, in 2021 and 2022 the respective agency recognized education received 17⁵⁴ and 7 students respectively.⁵⁵ As compared to Gali region, these figures are relatively small, which is reflective of a dire situation with regard to the number of students in Akhgori.

As for graduates from Gali district schools and the number of recognition seekers of complete general education, statistical data provided by Gali education resource center suggest that on average 80-85% of the graduates have their general education recognized.⁵⁶

Recognition of Education in 2018-2023																							
2018				2019				2020				2021				2022				2023			
# of graduates	Recognized			# of graduates	Recognized			# of graduates	Recognized			# of graduates	Recognized			# of graduates	Recognized			# of graduates	Recognized		
	Complete	Basic	Separate grades		Complete	Basic	Separate grades		Complete	Basic	Separate grades		Complete	Basic	Separate grades		Complete	Basic	Separate grades		Complete	Basic	Separate grades
372	311	34	99	410	359	15	95	348	305	5	31	322	294	10	72	320	282	24	62	320	266	7	33

⁵² Annual report of the Public Defender of Georgia 2021, P.263.

⁵³ Information provided by Gali education resource center, 22 July 2023.

⁵⁴ Annual report of the Public Defender of Georgia 2021, p.260

⁵⁵ Annual report of the Public Defender of Georgia 2022, 331 [Available in Georgian]

⁵⁶ Information provided by the director of Gali education resource center on 31 July 2023

The data provided by the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement demonstrate that since 2016 has not denied any application for the recognition of higher education received in the Occupied Territories while administrative proceedings were dropped on four cases. As for the statistics of positive decisions, the table below demonstrates the dynamic from 2016 to 2023.

Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Decision	6	13	15	17	5	1	1

Source: The table is compiled based on information provided by the Gali education resource center on 31 July 2023

4. Programs, Resources, and Policies of the Georgian Authorities

Increases access to quality education for communities residing in the conflict regions is one of the top priorities of the Georgian authorities integrated in the peace initiative *A Step to a Better Future*. Developing education opportunities for communities residing in Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region is one of the two directions covered by this initiative⁵⁷ presented to the broader public as early as 2018. However, the office of the state minister of reconciliation and civic equality has not yet presented a progress report on the implementation of this initiative.

In the area of education, the peace initiative prioritizes the following directions:

- Ensuring access to education in the native language
- Protection and Development of the Abkhaz language
- Developing opportunities for and simplifying access to the education system
- Simplifying a procedure for enrollment and continuing education in Georgian higher education institutions, and ensuring access to quality education
- Introducing/simplifying mechanisms and procedures for enrolling in international higher education institutions and pursuing education abroad
- Supporting opportunities for professional education and enhancement of qualification
- Supporting scientific work

The authorities have identified two main problems that need to be addressed in order to ensure access to education in the native language: 1) eliminate the Russification of the education system within the frame of international negotiations and mobilize efforts at an international level, and 2) implement projects and activities aiming at protecting the right of local communities to receive education in the native language. However, no concrete steps except for strengthening diplomatic,

⁵⁷ A Step to a Better Future peace initiative, educational opportunities for communities residing in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia. Available in Georgian at: https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/_a2beda36.pdf

political, and legal mechanisms in Gali and Akhgori, have been defined to ensure the protection of this right.

For this very purpose, the peace initiative offers the sharing of international best practices regarding the realization of the right of receiving education in one's native language. According to the document the authorities intend to make efforts for enhancing education standards and developing opportunities for accessing education in the native language for all general education institutions including native speakers of the Abkhaz language. However, the documents also specifies that restrictions applied to receiving education in the Georgian language in Gali, do not concern Abkhaz, Russian and Armenian languages. Therefore, it is not entirely clear what kind of steps and programs are stipulated by the peace initiatives when it comes to enhancing the standard of education in the Abkhaz language and developing opportunities with this regard.

The peace initiative offers various mechanisms for students residing in Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region to be able to pursue education in Georgia's educational institutions. However, these initiatives do not adequately consider special needs of communities living in Gali and Akhgori. The peace initiative addresses several education needs of the Georgian-language communities residing in the two conflict regions such as an exam preparation center, access to vocational education, and a campus. However, these programs and the quality of their delivery do not fully respond to the needs and challenges faced by the Georgian-language communities of Gali and Akhgori. These challenges are addressed in below in the document.

One of the programs available to Gali and Akhgori communities is the *preparation program for postgraduate education*. The preparatory program/center serves as a replacement for the 12th grade which is designed to provide students with relevant skills for pursuing higher education. The program offers training in the Georgian language and literature, as well as in the Abkhaz and Ossetian languages, other optional subjects for national entrance exams, and IT programs. To test how well students have attained learning objectives, they have to take an exam. Successful students are granted permission to get enrolled in a higher education institution. The program is accessible for perspective students residing in Gali and Akhgori. In total 133 individuals undertook the program and have been granted permission to pursue higher education including 136 from Abkhazia and 2 residing in Tskhinvali region.⁵⁸ The program was terminated in 2019, the year it was launched following an amendment to the Law of Georgia on Higher Education of 2020 according to which individuals residing in the Occupied Territories can get enrolled in Georgia's higher education institutions and receive funding without any preconditions. Therefore, there is no need to go through a preparation program in order to get enrolled in a higher education institution even though the program continues to receive funding.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Information obtained from the ministry of education and science of Georgia, 8 September 2022, MES 0 22 0001024563.

⁵⁹ Information obtained from the ministry of education and science of Georgia, 31 May 2023, MES 0 23 0000620787, interview with the head of the Gali education resource center. 14 July 2023.

Providing the opportunity for enrolling in higher education institutions and receiving state funding in the territory under the control of the central authorities of Georgia has been an important step forward for youth residing in Gali and Akhlagori who had not been able to cross to the Georgian controlled side of the divide. Thanks to the legal amendments taking effect in 2019, individuals who have studied for the past two years and received complete general education in the Occupied Territories which is recognized by the ministry of education and science of Georgia, are allowed to enroll in higher education institutions without entrance exams. The introduction of this policy has led to a drastic increase of those who are willing to pursue higher education in the Georgian controlled territory. In 2020 the number of students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs without entrance/master's exams and with state funding reached 421 as compared to 114 in 2019. In 2021 and 2022, 276 and 231 individuals respectively benefited from this opportunity.⁶⁰ This trend is further confirmed by another set of statistical data: in 2015-2019, 23 individuals from Akhlagori got enrolled in Georgia's higher education institutions,⁶¹ however, the number grew considerably in the following years: between 2019 and 2021 in total of 312 students from Akhlagori pursued their higher education in higher education institutions operating in the Georgian controlled territory.

The opportunity for students from the Occupied Territories to get enrolled without exams aimed to remove barriers faced by them with regard to freedom of movement, especially during the pandemic. However, today many argue that provided with this opportunity, growing number of students give up on the preparatory programs or never get enrolled in them. Nor they choose to study under supervision of private tutors because of lack of motivation.⁶² For this reason, they find it difficult to cope with undergraduate or graduate programs, fail to collect sufficient number of credits and graduate from the university.⁶³ Statistical data provided by the ministry of education on this matter look rather interesting:

In 2016-2021, out of 9284 students from Abkhazia enrolled in Georgian higher education institutions, 1889 were from Gali. In the same years out of 2354 graduates from Abkhazia 701 were from Gali.

As for South Ossetia, in 2016 – 2021, 1018 students were enrolled in Georgian higher education institutions including 312 from Akhlagori. Only 323 students managed to graduate including 69 from Akhlagori.⁶⁴

A low number of graduates, according to the ministry of education and science, can be explained by a length of programs (undergraduate programs - single-step medical, integrated undergraduate programs, graduate and postgraduate programs) as well as by suspension/termination of student

⁶⁰ Information obtained from the ministry of education and science of Georgia, 31 May 2023, MES 0 23 0000620787

⁶¹ Access to Education in the Native Language in Gali and Akhlagori, DRI, 2020, P. 8.

⁶² Interview with the head of the Gali education resource center. 14 July 2023. Anonymous interview with a Gali resident, 13 May 2023

⁶³ Anonymous interview with a Gali resident, 13 May 2023

⁶⁴ Information obtained from the ministry of education and science of Georgia, 31 May 2023, MES 0 23 0000620787

status.⁶⁵ However, the statistical data do not specify reason for the inability to graduate for individual cases.

In addition, there are additional measures in place for ensuring access to quality education for Gali and Akhgori communities:

The ministry of education and science has developed a subprogram for retraining Gali based teachers and entrants to support them accessing education in the native language. The program allows teachers to prepare ninth and tenth grade students and entrants in their native language.⁶⁶ In addition, Georgian central authorities provide funding for Gali based teachers to tutor students in various subjects with Georgian being a language of instruction so that the latter can continue their studies in Georgian higher education institutions. Aided by tutors, Gali students have the opportunity to their knowledge in Georgian language and literature, history, geography, and other optional subjects.

In 2021, online trainings were provided to 46 teachers based in the Occupied Gali who, in their turn, prepared 420 entrants for the national exams.⁶⁷ In addition to providing support to tutors, more than 4 million GEL have been allocated from the central budget to cover salaries and fees for Gali school teachers and administrative and technical staff.⁶⁸

Salaries of teachers and technical personnel of six Akhgori schools are also covered from the state budget on a quarterly basis based on a list subject to annual updates. According to the information provided by a representative of the Public Defender's office, in 2022, 108 teachers and 56 technical personnel receive financial support from the state budget. Akhgori based teachers are also eligible to benefit from training and re-training programs available to Gali based teachers. However, since 2019, after the introduction of harsher restrictions over movement, they no longer had such an opportunity.⁶⁹

The director of Gali education resource center explains that over the past years (especially during the pandemic), Georgian central authorities have introduced online retraining programs for various purposes including for supporting education in the native language. However, due to limited access to technical equipment and the internet, Gali community find it difficult to benefit from this program.⁷⁰

A preferential scheme to increase access to vocational education for communities of the Occupied Territories was introduced in 2021 providing the latter the opportunity to enroll in respective programs without exams. However, this has not sparked interest and an increase in the number of those who wish to pursue such an opportunity: in 2020, 182 individuals from Gali and Akhgori

⁶⁵ Information provided by the ministry of education and science of Georgia, 8 September 2022, MES 0 22 0001024563

⁶⁶ Information obtained from the ministry of education and science of Georgia, 8 September 2022, MES 0 22 0001024563

⁶⁷ Annual report of the Public Defender of Georgia 2021, P.263

⁶⁸ Letter MES 6 22 0001320894 of the ministry of education and science of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, 19 October 2022.

⁶⁹ Interview with a representative of the Public Defender, 19 May 2023

⁷⁰ Interview with the director of Gali education resource center, 14 July 2023.

were enrolled in vocational programs, dropping to 73 in 2021 with an insignificant increase to 77 in 2022.⁷¹

Limited access to accommodation is one of the barriers to higher education in Georgia's higher education institutions further exacerbated during the pandemic. Students pursuing higher education in institutions in the Georgian controlled territory, have to find temporary jobs to pay for rent and cover other daily expenses. In an anonymous interview, a Gali resident told the researcher that young people have to find jobs as cashiers and sales consultants, as well as in eateries to pay their rent. Most families cannot afford covering living costs of young people in other towns and cities. While the state authorities provide various forms of social support, this aid is rather fragmented and insufficient.⁷² A Step to a Better Future peace initiative also covered construction of student dormitories in Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Batumi, Gori, and Akhaltsikhe. There is a dormitory at Tbilisi State University (in Bagebi and Lisi districts) to accommodate in total 580 students. The dormitory in Bagebi with the capacity of 260 persons was building and currently is beyond repair.⁷³ While allocating rooms in dormitories, students from the Occupied Territories are prioritized⁷⁴ but because of dire scarcity of student accommodation or appalling living conditions in some of them, most students have to pay for accommodation from their pockets. At the same time, there are no student dormitories in other cities and while within A Step to a Better Future peace initiative, dormitories are planned to be built, the problem continues to persist.⁷⁵

Conclusion

Ensuring access to quality education for communities residing in the Occupied Territories is one of the declared priorities of the central authorities translated in several programs and preferential schemes. However, a fragmented nature of these efforts, inconsistency, lack of analysis in the presence of numerous challenges, and only partial implementation of planned and offered initiatives, hampers the delivery of and access to quality education.

The analysis presented in this paper demonstrates that Gali and Akhagori communities continue to face significant challenges with regard to accessing quality education in their native language. On the one hand, authorities have consistently failed to counter total restriction of the use of the native language and growing russification of the education system. Georgian central authorities have limited leverage to influence de-facto government to address the problems. Nor have international advocacy efforts resulted in any results which points to the ineffectiveness of advocacy mechanisms and approaches, and the need to shift respective policies, including via direct communication with de-facto authorities. It is evident that russification process has negatively

⁷¹ Information obtained from the ministry of education and science, 31 May 2023, MES 0 23 0000620787

⁷² Anonymous interview with a Gali resident, 12 May 2023.

⁷³ Conditions and costs of living in students' dormitory. Available in Georgian at: <https://bm.ge/ka/article/ra-pirobebshi-da-ra-fasad-sheudzliat-cxovreba-studentebs-saerto-sacxovreblebshi/116702>

⁷⁴ <https://tsu.ge/ka/domitory/page/ლობის-საერთო-საცხოვრებელი>

⁷⁵ A Step to a Better Future peace initiative, Access to quality education. P. 13. Available in Georgian at: https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/_a2beda36.pdf

affected the quality of knowledge of the Georgian language and creates risks for local communities to sever ties with the rest of Georgia. The process of adapting to receiving education in the Russian language over the course of time may yield a series of other negative consequences to the effect that local communities in Gali and Akhgori may no longer be able to receive education in their native language in the institutions operating in the Georgian controlled territory, which in turn, is likely to affect a level of interest of pursuing education across the divide in foreseeable future. Opportunities for receiving education and finding jobs on the territory under the control of the Georgian central authorities for communities residing in Gali and Akhgori are the main resource for maintaining links to the rest of Georgia.

In addition, the data presented in the paper point out to an apparent decrease in the number of populations in both Gali and Akhgori which, apart from dire socio-economic conditions, is closely linked to the Russification of the education system and the worsening of the quality of education in these places.

On the other hand, programs offered by the authorities with the aim to increase access to quality education and preserve the knowledge of the native language, are often conflicting when it comes to the implementation, and fail to serve the intended outcome. For instance, an initiative to enroll students from the Occupied Territories without exams launched during the pandemic was a step forward in circumstances under which local youth could not cross to the Georgian controlled side of the ABL to take exams. However, the initiative has never been revisited or assessed, nor has it been evaluated to measure its effects on quality of education in a long-term perspective. After the launch of the preferential scheme, the programs designed to prepare entrants and teachers for receiving education in their native language, and improve the quality of post-general education, have reduced the scope of their positive influence, since the number of students engaged in them has significantly reduced and so has their motivation. Therefore, it is critical that the authorities assess the performance of students enrolled without exams and compare the results with that of students enrolled after passing entrance exams. The authorities should also examine the quality of engagement of entrants/teachers/students in those programs which aim to improve the knowledge of the native language and support teaching various subjects in the native tongue.

At the same time, along with offering online programs to school, undergraduate and graduate students and teachers from Gali and Akhgori, it is important that the authorities take a step forward towards eliminating persisting technical problems with regard to accessing computers and the internet in these localities.

Yet another barrier to receiving education in the Georgian controlled territory is social vulnerability and lack of access to accommodation. Even though this problem is mentioned in the peace initiative, it remains a burden for young people from Gali and Akhgori whose majority choose to pursue higher education in the Georgian controlled territory. Evidently, it is critical to ensure access to higher education for Gali based youth since in the event of their enrollment in Abkhazia's higher education institutions, obtaining a diploma from these institutions is not

guaranteed. In an interview with the Social Justice Center, an Ochamchire resident explains that officially, communities from Gali can obtain diploma even in the absence of the Abkhaz passport, based on a residence permit. However, it rarely works this way in practice and students have to overcome numerous barriers.⁷⁶

Among unfulfilled initiatives that are yet to be implemented is the intended change to the order concerning the recognition of general education which, like the amendment brought to the order regarding the recognition of higher education, aims to simplify the recognition procedure and bureaucratic procedures. More specifically, these changes are designed to introduce a mechanism for submitting applications electronically (in fact, the mechanism has already been launched to some extent but is yet to be reflected in the order) and going through the recognition procedure without crossing to the Georgian controlled territory and obtaining a Georgian ID.⁷⁷

In light of above-mentioned challenges and due to dire social and political vulnerability of Gali and Akhlagori communities, it is of utmost importance that the authorities invigorate positive actions to keep the interest, motivation, and opportunity (both intellectual and practical/financial) alive for the communities living in Gali and Akhlagori to pursue education in the rest of Georgia. Access to education is the common ground and area shared with the other side of the divide considering existing needs and opportunities. Therefore, it is important that the authorities analyze these shared needs and tailor the design of A Step to a Better Future peace initiative to this practical perspective.

More specifically, the following measures should be taken based on the analysis of needs:

- **Effectively and actively use international political, diplomatic, and legal platforms and mechanisms to eliminate instances of the violation of education and language rights, as well as discriminatory acts in the Occupied Territories.**
- **Promote issues of the violation of education and linguistic rights to the agenda of various platforms and dialogue formats with the Abkhaz and South Ossetian de-facto parties, and more actively support the elimination of discriminatory practices.**
- **Develop a long-term vision and action plan to improve access to education for Gali and Akhlagori communities.**
- **Create informal platforms and programs for teaching the Georgian language and subjects of general education in Georgian (for instance, summer/winter schools camps, online programs, etc.) tailored to the local needs (including ones of a technical nature), ensure sustainability of these platforms and programs, and earmarked annual budget.**
- **Equip administrations of Gali and Akhlagori schools with respective equipment (printers, scanners, computers etc).**
- **Support digitalization of the conflict regions through partnering with de-facto regimes of Gali and Akhlagori to respond to the needs of local communities and set examples and experience for mutual cooperation.**

⁷⁶ Interview with an Ochamchire resident, 24 July 2023

⁷⁷ A Step to a Better Future peace initiative, p. 15.

- Support students in learning the Georgian language through creating additional programs; implement support mechanisms for students of higher education institutions at the country's leading universities, introduce a permanent social support program, including those providing accommodation, for students from Gali and Akhagori.
- Eliminate bureaucratic barriers and simplify the process of the recognition of general education certificates and documents.