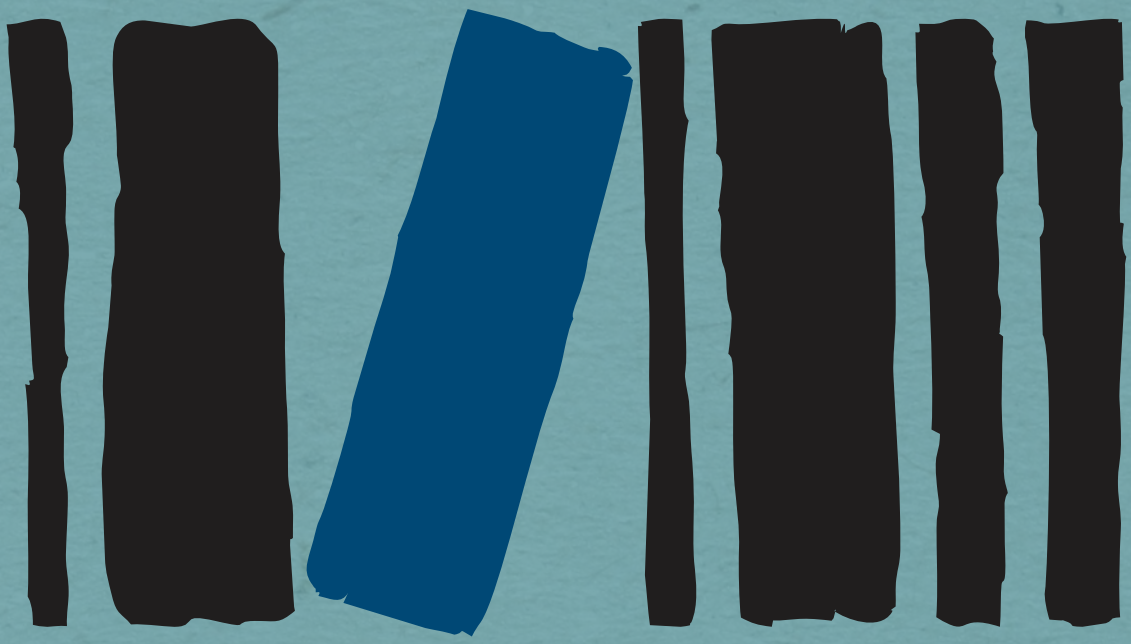
POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT OF INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS (IDPs) IN GEORGIA

Reality, Challenges, and Standards



SOCIAL JUSTICE CENTER

Political Engagement of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Georgia - Reality, Challenges, and Standards

(Primary Research)

Social Justice Center

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Glossary

Methodology and Objectives

Participation in public processes, the ability to influence decision-making, and the unrestricted right to engage in elections are fundamental prerequisites of a democratic society. However, for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), the issue of political participation takes on even greater significance due to the complex social and legal challenges they face. Aside from the fact that forced displacement is the most severe form of human rights violation, its associated consequences, including the loss of property and income, the inability to access personal documentation, and the separation from family members and social circles, have a detrimental effect on the lives of IDPs and hinder their ability to exercise a range of fundamental rights.[1] IDPs have a legitimate and well-defined interest in influencing political and social processes that affect their socio-economic well-being, as well as in matters concerning their return and the restoration of their rights.

Regardless, despite the fact that around 300,000 individuals in Georgia have been displaced, their engagement in political activities and public affairs continues to receive limited positive support and response from the government. As a result, these issues are rarely prioritized on the political agenda, and research concerning them remains scarce.

The objective of this primary research is to examine and describe the legal and institutional framework governing the political participation of IDPs in Georgia, as well as to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of IDPs regarding the opportunities and structural barriers to political participation. The document further outlines international standards and guiding principles for ensuring the effective and equitable political participation of IDPs. It is important to highlight that in the context of a protracted conflict, where displaced persons cannot return to their permanent homes, they are further deprived of the opportunity to engage in political processes within occupied territories. Additionally, IDPs residing in occupied territories are also excluded from participating in local political processes due to restrictions imposed by de facto authorities. However, the present study does not address this aspect of the right to political participation and is confined only to issues of IDP participation and integration in Georgian-controled territories.

The research primarily employed qualitative research methods, including: 1. Desk research on the needs and integration of IDPs in Georgia; 2. A Review of international guidelines and standards on the engagement and participation of IDPs; 3. Fieldwork, which involved conducting in-depth interviews and field recordings with displaced individuals residing in ten villages within the Gali district (Saberio, Lekukhona, Dikhazurga, Chuburkhinji, Nabakevi, Tagiloni, Otobaya, Gagida, Zemo Barghefi, and Rechkhi), as well as in compact settlements of displaced persons in various cities across Georgia (Zugdidi, Kutaisi, Tsqaltubo, Tserovani, and Tbilisi). In the course of the study, 78 in-depth interviews were conducted (41 female, and 37 male). 31 respondents aged 18-34, 32 respondents aged 35-59, and 15 respondents aged 60 and above participated in the study.

[1] Protecting Internally Displaced Persons: A Manual for Law and Policymakers, 2008, Brookings, University of Bern, 2.

Respondents were asked a variety of questions, such as their personal and public experiences with civic engagement, the identification of their priority needs, opportunities and challenges associated with political engagement for IDPs, and issues related to electoral participation, among other topics.

The study serves as an initial analysis and establishes groundwork for further research on the political participation and integration of IDPs in Georgia. It examines issues such as the impact of prolonged conflict and displacement on the right to political participation and its transformation alongside the integration process, the identity of displaced individuals and its connection to the realization of the right to political participation, the evolution of integration policies, the analysis of the right of IDPs to return within this context, and etc. A comprehensive examination of these issues (through examining international standards, conducting extensive interviews with IDPs, and employing quantitative research methods) is critical in determining the most effective models and approaches that the state should adopt to facilitate and enhance the political participation of this group.

Statistical Data

According to the 2023 data, a total of 94,850 displaced households were registered, comprising of 295,872 IDPs.[2] However, based on information presented by the Ministry of Labor, Health, and Social Protection in September 2024, the number of IDPs from the occupied territories of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region amounts to 298,307 individuals. 270,587 individuals have been displaced from Abkhazia, while 27,720 individuals from the Tskhinvali region.[3] The aggregate number of displaced individuals constitutes approximately 8% of Georgia's total population.

The subsequent figure illustrates the resettlement of IDPs by region in Georgia:

	IDPs from Abkhazia	IDPs from Tskhinvali Region	Total
Tbilisi	114332	3240	**117572**
Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti	91653	95	**91748**
Imereti	29159	391	**29550**
Shida Kartli	9185	9824	**19009**
Kvemo Kartli	11254	3529	**14783**

[2] Public Defender's Annual Report, 2023, p. 323.

[3] Letter No. MOH 6 24 00929659 of the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Healthcare and Social Protection dated September 2, 2024.

Mtskheta-Mtianeti	1695	10299	**11994**
Adjara	7810	39	**7849**
Samtskhe-Javakheti	2450	24	**2474**
Kakheti	1600	261	**1861**
Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti	756	3	**759**
Guria	694	12	**706**
Total	270587 53% Female 47% Male	27720 50.3% Female 49.7% Male	**298307**

As the table shows, the highest number of IDPs live in Tbilisi (117,572 people - 39.5%) and Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti (91,748 - 30.7%).

Across Georgia, there are 1,211 compact settlements designated for IDPs, housing a total of 126,235 individuals (38,420 households), which accounts for 41% of the overall displaced population.[4] Georgian legislation does not define what constitutes a compact settlement. According to the definition provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a collective settlement serves as a temporary solution for IDPs, where multiple families share common spaces. Collective centers are inherently intended to serve as a temporary solution, with the ultimate aim of securing permanent housing for IDPs. Information provided by the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Health, Labour and Social Affairs of Georgia indicates that nearly half of the total displaced population currently resides in collective or compact settlements. However, it remains unclear how the state defines this term and what standards it adheres to when granting this status. Statistical data from the ministry reveals that some settlements are occupied by a single family (for example, the Art House in Gldani, Tbilisi), while others accommodate tens and hundreds of families (for example, on Abkhaz Street, Batumi).
According to the latest report from the Public Defender, the state has already provided long-term housing to 54,862 displaced families, while 51,845 families are still awaiting resettlement.[5] The same report indicates that 506 families continue to reside in the 29 inadequate living structures, moreover, the number of families resettled from these facilities has not changed significantly in the past year. Despite the Public Defender's recommendation in 2022 (when the number of families living in highly hazardous was 716), to relocate at least 550 families, only 210 families were

[4] Letter from the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Protection dated September 3, 2024 MOH 6 24 00929659.
[5] Public Defender's Annual Report, 2023. p. 323.

relocated. Between 2018 and 2023, over 180 facilities inadequate living structures, posing imminent threats to life or health, uninhabitable and/or unsuitable for residence, were closed, and more than 2,200 families were resettled.[6] Based on information received from the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Health, Labour and Social Affairs of Georgia, the state plans to close all collective centers, including those deemed inadequate for living, by 2026. The construction of a multi-storey building block in 2023 marked the beginning of a plan to relocate 6,000 displaced families.

Furthermore, according to the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the occupied territories, there are 84,895 individuals with IDP status in the Gali district and 8,152 in Akhalgori. However, it is evident that the actual number of IDPs in the Gali and Akhalgori districts is significantly lower than the inidicated number. Media outlets and local residents have frequently reported a steady decline in population within these districts. The National Statistics Office of Georgian does not conduct population censuses in the occupied regions; however, based on unverified information, approximately 22,000-25,000 people currently reside in the Gali district. According to the head of the de facto administration of Gali, 1,130 individuals hold Abkhazian passports, while up to 21,500 people have residence permits.[7]

1. International Standards and Guiding Principles

International standards and guiding principles related to the political participation of internally Displaced Persons are derived from the principles of human rights, the prohibition of discrimination, and equality. Both at the regional and international levels, numerous instruments address the political rights of IDPs, including, among other things, the right to participate in elections, hold leadership positions within administrative bodies, and activly engage in public life.

One of the primary instruments to be considered is the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998). Despite its non-binding nature, this document is the sole document that comprehensively outlines the rights of IDPs and functions as a compilation of human rights law, international humanitarian law, and international criminal law in the context of internal displacement. Principle 22 of the United Nations Guiding Principles, guarantees the right of IDPs to participate in community activities in a free and equal manner, as well as the right to vote and to partake in public and state affairs. Additionally, this principle ensure that internally displaced individuals are provided with the necessary resources to exercise these rights.[8]

[6] Letter from the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Protection, MOH 5 24 00383933, dated April 3, 2024.
[7] The situation is dire in terms of the outflow of population from the Gali region - Filia, March, 2024. Radio Atinati. Available at: https://www.radioatinati.ge/regioni/article/84550-galis-raionidan-mosakhleobis-gadinebis-mkhriv-mdzime-situaciaa-filia.html
[8] UN Guiding Principles, Principle 22.

The engagement of displaced persons in the decision-making process is a matter of rights and should not be perceived as a gesture of goodwill from the state. It is one of the fundamental rights that enable the protection of other rights for IDPs. Engagement in public and political processes rests on three core assumptions: first, it is essential to recognize that the right of displaced persons to engage in public life and politics is an integral part of the freedom of expression and fundamental rights of participation in political processes, particularly when specific decisions and processes impact this particular group (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Articles 19 and 25); second, it is crucial to note that the involvement of displaced persons in public and political life will form the foundation for effective and equitable policies towards them, as IDPs themselves have a better understanding of their own needs, and the state's policies should precisely be shaped by their experiences. third, it is evident that the participation of displaced persons in public and political life reduces dependence on others (the state, humanitarian organizations, etc.) and feelings of marginalization, thereby facilitating the process of integration.

The involvement of IDPs in various forms of political activity, including awareness, consultation, and active engagement, is particularly important in two key areas: 1) the development of legislation and policy documents pertaining to IDPs; and 2) the organization of humanitarian assistance at the operational level, and in the implementation of other practical measures. [9]

Furthermore, the 2006 recommendations of the Council of Europe on the rights of IDPs stipulate that member states must ensure IDPs' unhindered right to vote. Additionally, displaced persons must be promptly informed and consulted regarding any decision that affects their status, whether during their displacement or afterwards.[10]

In accordance with the Council of Europe's recommendations, the collection of information regarding the specific needs of IDPs should be a key component of the IDP participation processes when drafting of legislative and political documents.

When a specific state body plans to consult with IDPs or involve them in decision-making processes at an operational level, it should consider the following: 1) the physical ability of IDPs to participate; 2) their mandate, expertise, and level of engagement with the community; and 3) the credibility and recognition of those selected as representatives of the IDP community.

In addition to the obligations to engage in decision-making processes and consultations, the ability of the displaced population to participate in elections without impediments is of paramount importance for their level of political involvement. Consequently, it is essential for the state to consider the following elements:[11]

[9] Protecting Internally Displaced Persons: A Manual for Law and Policymakers, 2008, Brookings, University of Bern, 33.
[10] Available at: https://rm.coe.int/16806b5aaf
[11] Protecting Internally Displaced Persons: A Manual for Law and Policymakers, 2008, Brookings, University of Bern, 207.

- IDPs must be included in the election management process.
- Consultations with IDPs should be held regarding necessary electoral reforms and the establishment of appropriate infrastructure in the context of forced displacement.
- IDPs should be provided with the opportunity to vote in the locations where they have been forcibly relocated.
- During the registration of electoral lists, measures should ensure that IDPs have the option to return to their place of origin.
- Access to polling stations must be ensured for IDPs.

Technical and legal questions regarding the participation of IDPs in elections should be addressed based on the scenarios that have emerged for them following the conflict. In this regard, the literature identifies three main scenarios:

1) IDPs cannot return, but the state where the conflict occurred retains control over the entire territory;
2) The government has lost control over a certain part of its territory from which the IDPs have been internally displaced from;
3) In the context of achieving a sustainable resolution to the conflict, where IDPs have the opportunity to return to their places of origin, it must be ensured that IDPs are not compelled to return solely for the purpose of voting in the area from which they were displaced. IDP should be able to cast their votes in their places of origin, and mechanisms for absentee voting must be established to allow their participation in elections without the need for physical presence in their home areas. This scenario applies to situations where IDPs have the option to return—such as under a peace agreement—but their physical return is delayed or where they no longer meet the residency requirements for voter registration in their places of origin. In such cases, flexible electoral arrangements are essential to ensure that all citizens can exercise their right to vote, regardless of whether their return occurs earlier or later than anticipated.

In both the first and second scenarios, when the violence persists and the return of IDPs is improbable, it is unrealistic to discuss the participation of IDPs in elections in their place of origin. In such circumstances, IDPs should be provided with the opportunity to re-register in the locations where they have been forcibly relocated to and allowed to vote based on their current place of residence. Displaced persons enjoy full freedom of movement and the ability to freely choose their place of residence; therefore, the ability to cast a vote should not be strictly tied to their actual address. Consequently, they should be permitted to register temporarily in their current place of residence while retaining the option to re-register in their place of origin if they choose to return. In the second scenario, where the state does not have authority over the place of origin of IDPs, they should have the opportunity to elect governments or representatives in exile. Nevertheless, this should not prevent their participation in national elections or in elections within the regions in which they currently reside. In the context of prolonged displacement, their participation in the

electoral processes of their host communities is very important.[12] It is worth mentioning that in the context of protracted displacement, concerns frequently, arise regarding the participation of displaced persons in elections and their place of registration, potentially leading to the revocation of their IDP status. In such instances, it is important to ensure that the exercise of political rights by a IDPs does not hinder their ability to voluntarily return when appropriate conditions are met.[13] For example, in the early period following the end of the armed conflict in Georgia, IDPs were eligible to receive assistance from the state as long as they held IDP status in accordance with the law. However, possessing this status prevented them from participating in local (municipal) elections (Law on Local Self-Government Sakrebulo Elections, 1998, Article 36). IDPs were eligable to participate in national parliamentary elections through a proportional system to elect parliamentary representatives who themselves were in displacement (Organic Law on Parliamentary Elections, 1995, Article 33). However, displaced persons also had the option to re-register at their place of relocation, which required them to forfeit their IDP status. There were concerns that this could hinder their prospects of retur. Taking this into account, in 2003, the parliament amended the law to grant IDPs the right to participate in both parliamentary (national-level) and local government elections without the need to relinquish their IDP status or their place of permanent registration.[14]

When reviewing international standards, it is important to highlight the framework document developed by the Brookings Institution on creating durable solutions for IDPs.[15] According to this framework document, a durable solution for IDPs is achieved when there is no longer a need for specific assistance and protection stemming from their displacement. This implies that either the goal of their return has been achieved, or they have successfully integrated into their place of physical residence (local integration). The opportunity to engage in public life is one of the most vital elements of local integration. The following **indicators are proposed to monitor the progress of such integration:**

- Displaced individuals face no distinct legal or bureaucratic barriers that would hinder their ability to vote, run for office, or participate in public service, beyond those faced by the general population.
- The percentage of eligible IDP voters who voted in elections, and their comparison of the participation rate across the general population at the national level.
- The percentage of displaced individuals holding positions in public service or serving in elected offices. [16]

[12] Protecting Internally Displaced Persons: A Manual for Law and Policymakers, 2008, Brookings, University of Bern, 210.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Erin Mooney, Balkees Jarrah, *The voting rights of Internally Displaced People, The OSCE region*, Occasional Paper (Brookings Institute – John Hopkins SAIS project on Internal Displacement, November, 2004) 32-38.
[15] IASC Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons. 2010. Available at: https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2021-03/IASC%20Framework%20on%20Durable%20Solutions%20for%20Internally%20Displaced%20Persons%2C%20April%202010.pdf
[16] Ibid, pg. 42.

Thus, although international human rights instruments contain legally binding provisions related to the IDPs, including their political participation and integration, these provisions are generally broad. In the context of protracted displacement, recommendations, studies, and guidelines provided by reputable international organizations can play a crucial role in shaping state policies. This holds special importance especialy in the context of protracted displacement, where state policies and approaches require appropriate adaptation.

2. Social exclusion and Political Participation

Social exclusion refers to processes that systematically marginalize individuals or groups from fully participating in social, economic, and political processes.[17] The Academic literature explores theories of social exclusion not only through the lens of economic factors but also from the lens of social and political dysfunctions. Under this umbrella theory, social exclusion is presented as an outcome of various institutional and societal barriers.
Participation in public life and political processes is a central research issue in studying the extent and causes of social exclusion of specific groups in society. The inclusion of individual needs in the political agenda serves as a means to facilitate the resolution of the aforementioned challenges.

The theory of social exclusion originated in France in the early 1970s. It was initially used in the opposite context of "social solidarity", as an antonym for political, cultural and moral cohesion.[18] Today, both in academic circles and public policy, social exclusion is presented as a framework for explaining political, economic, social, cultural, spatial, and other forms of inequalities. "[…] Social exclusion is the lack of political participation, solidarity, and access to rights".[19] The popularity of the theory and the discussions surrounding it are driven by several factors. One of the primary factors was the deep economic and social crises in Western states, the empirical study of which convinced scholars that human vulnerability is not solely linked to financial resources. The rise of precarious employment, labor market segmentation, increased migration, violations of human rights, and the decline in social and political participation provided researchers with a new perspective on the causes of marginalization of various groups. As Silver notes, the scope and causes of social exclusion and characteristics differ across societies. [20]

[17] Silver, H. (2015). The contexts of social inclusion (DESA Working Paper No. 35). New York: United Nations,Department of Economic and Social Affairs.
[18] Williams, F. (1998). Agency and structure revisited: Rethinking poverty and social exclusion. In M. Barry & S.Hallett (Eds.), Social exclusion and social work: Issues of theory and practice (pp. 13— 32). Lyme Regis:Russell House.
[19] Silver, H., & Miller, M. (2003). Social exclusion: The European approach to social disadvantage. Indicators, 2(2),1—17.
[20] Silver, H. (2007). The process of social exclusion: The dynamics of an evolving concept (CPRC Working PaperNo. 95). Manchester: IDPM/Chronic Poverty Research Centre.

Institutional and social structures play a key role in shaping individuals' sense of belonging and citizenship. The causes of social exclusion presented by Silver also require a renewed approach when examining IDPs, where—contrary to social inclusion—we see social exclusion not only in the form of poverty, but also in the violation of civil, political, and social rights. This exclusion manifests across various systems, including democratic and legal framework, labor and welfare structure, and even family and community dynamics. Later on, Chimini expanded this list to encompass severe psychosocial factors, further highlighting the extent of social exclusion.[21] Despite the significance of this issue, both internationally and locally, there is limited research on the social exclusion of IDPs concerning their political and public participation. Furthermore, the scholarly literature remains scarce, mainly focusing on refugees' electoral engagement and voting practices.

The study of social exclusion of IDPs is possible in three dimensions: (i) the social dimension, which entails access to services such as housing, education, healthcare, and social and cultural integration; (ii) the political dimension, which reflects opportunities for political and public participation; and (iii) access to financial resources.

Exclusion becomes particularly evident when states make political decisions regarding integration, social protection, and social inclusion policies. The social integration of IDPs is frequently a multifaceted and multilayered process that encompasses legal aspects such as status and housing rights, economic independence, social integration, and complete participation in social, cultural, and political life.[22]

One of the main causes of social exclusion is considered to be collective housing settlements, where both the first and subsequent generations of IDPs live together. From the perspective of local residents, IDPs are viewed as "foreign" and "other", who have occupied abandoned buildings or former educational institutions. While these perspectives were taking root, the state and international organizations prioritized the provision of humanitarian services and the mitigation of economic challenges. This depiction of social exclusion also exposes challenges related to political participation.[23] It becomes especially evident when collective settlements are replaced with new housing complexes in which rooms, apartment buildings, and neighborhoods for IDPs are organized in ways that fail to accommodate their needs.[24]

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[21] Chimni, B. S. (2003). Post-conflict peace-building and the return of refugees: Concepts, practices and institutions.In E. Newman & J. van Selm (Eds.), Refugees and forced displacement: International security, human vul-nerability, and the state (pp. 195— 221). New York, NY: United Nations University Press.

[22] *Nemanja Džuverović & Jelena Vidojević (2017): Peacebuilding or 'Peacedelaying': Social Exclusion of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in Post-war Serbia, Ethnopolitics, pg 8.*

[23] Ibid.

[24] Otruba, A. (2020). No woman's land: Risking detention along the South Ossetian administrative boundary line. ResearchGate. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346541398_No_WoMan%27s_Land_Risking_Detention_Along_the_South_Ossetian_Administrative_Boundary_Line/figures?lo=1&utm_source=google&utm_medium=organic

3. Political Participation of IDPs in Georgia

3.1. Legal and Administrative Framework

The political participation of displaced persons in Georgia can be understood through de jure and de facto realities. On the one hand, de jure institutions associated with conflict regions, representing the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia and Administration -Territorial Unit of the Former Autonomous Region of South Ossetia. On the other hand, IDPs de facto can engage in electoral and political processes only within government-controlled territory, and their de jure political participation remains frozen until the conflict is resolved. This means that IDPs from Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region can not elect the de jure representative bodies, which continue to function as governments-in-exile within government-controlled areas.

The highest Representative Body of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia is the Supreme Council of Abkhazia.[25] In turn, the Supreme Council of Abkhazia appoints the Government of Abkhazia.[26] According to the Regulations of the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic, until the full restoration of Georgian jurisdiction in Abkhazia, the composition of the Supreme Council is governed by the Resolutions of the Parliament of Georgia No. 662 of February 24, 1995 and No. 759 of June 14, 1995. These regulations stipulate that the Council consists of the members elected to the Supreme Council of Abkhazia in 1991, as well as members elected to the Georgian Parliament from Abkhazia in 1992. In 1996, the Georgian Parliament proclaimed null and void the elections allegedly conducted in Abkhazia on November 23, 1996. Due to the fact that a significant part of Abkhazia is under occupation and it is impossible to hold free elections there, the Georgian Parliament has extended the mandate of the Supreme Council until the full restoration of Georgian jurisdiction.[27] Consequently, to this day, displaced populations remain unable to elect their de jure representative body. Regarding the de facto participation of IDPs in the activities of these institutions, no formal mechanisms for their participation exist at the level of either the Supreme Council or the government.

A similar situation applies to the Temporary Administrative-Territorial Unit on the Territory of the Former Autonomous Region of South Ossetia, established by the President's decree in May 2007. According to this decree, the administration of the Temporary Administrative-Territorial Unit is responsible for the following functions: to engage in negotiations with the Georgian government on behalf of local political forces and society to define an autonomous status within the framework of the Georgian state and to grant broad political self-governance; to prepare the necessary conditions for the holding of democratic elections in the territory of the Provisional Administrative-Territorial Unit; to protect the rights and freedoms of individuals and ethnic groups

[25] Constitution of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, Article 93. Available at: http://scara.gov.ge/ka/2010-03-17-12-48-03/2010-03-17-13-48-11.html

[26] Law of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia on the structure, powers and procedures of the government.

[27] Resolution of the Parliament of Georgia on the Extension of the Term of Office of the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, December 25, 1996.

residing in that territory, as well as their interests; to promote the rehabilitation of local infrastructure, and to develop and implement social-economic development programs for the Provisional Administrative-Territorial Unit; to implement state programs in various sectors. The head of the aforementioned administrative unit is appointed by the Prime Minister and is financed from the state budget. Tamaz Bestayev, the current head, was appointed in 2022, replacing Dmitri Sanakoev, who had led the temporary administration for 16 years.[28]

The head of the administration also participates in the Geneva International Discussions (GID) however, despite his mandate, the political activity and positions of this unit are practically invisible, and the extent of its involvement in political or public negotiation processes remains unclear.

Furthermore, the representative bodies (including the administration and self-governing territorial authorities) elected in 2006 in the municipalities of Akhalgori, Eredvi, Kurta, Tighva, and Ajara continue to exercise their powers until Georgia's jurisdiction is restored in these municipalities and until local self-government bodies are established in accordance with the procedural requirements outlined by law. These municipal bodies carry out their delegated powers in areas within the government-controlled territory where displaced populations from these municipalities reside.[29] The delegated powers are limited to measures directly related to providing assistance to these individuals until they return to their permanent places of residence, as well as improving their social and living conditions. It should also be noted that IDPs living in settlements near the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) frequently point out the administrative barriers they encounter when interacting with municipal authorities. These difficulties often arise from the lack of a clear distinction between the competences of de jure and de facto bodies, leading to frequent cases of referrals from one authority to another, particularly concerning local infrastructure and social support programs.[30]

Under the current electoral legislation, IDPs can participate in elections at both the national and local self-government levels, based on their temporary (actual) place of residence. Article 31 of the Election Code states that individuals with active suffrage who are duly registered under the law are included in the unified voter list. In the case of IDPs, as they are officially registered in occupied territories, the law permits them to participate in elections based on the address of their actual place of residence, which was allocated to them upon acquiring IDP status in the territory controlled by Georgia. Without this actual address, they cannot be included in the unified voter list, as they remain officially registered in the occupied territories. The Law on IDPs does not specify whether the address of actual residence assigned to the individual should be revoked if they lose their IDP status for any reason, such as based on their request or if they failed to obtain IDP status within the

[28] Head of South Ossetia Administration Dimitri Sanakoev Resigns, Radio Liberty, 2022. Available at: https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/32082141.html

[29] Research on the needs of displaced people in Zugdidi, Poti, Tskaltubo, Gori and Tetritskaro. 2023. p. 13.

[30] Interview with the displaced population in the Tserovani and Shavshvebi IDP settlements, May 2024.

permitted time frame in the scope of mandatory registration (last mandatory registration was conducted in 2013), and did not subsequently apply to the agency to reinstate their status. However, in practice, the Agency provides the Central Election Commission with a list of only those IDPs who hold an active IDP status. Consequently, individuals who have lost this status may be omitted from the unified voter list. This barrier arose during the current elections for those IDPs who have lived abroad for many years and have not reinstated their IDP status. [31]

It should be emphasized that, for IDPs, maintaining a permanent address in the occupied territories is critical for their potential return. Preserving the registration could serve as a significant legal basis in the future. Therefore, retaining factual addresses during displacement is vital for safeguarding the right to vote, including for those citizens who no longer reside in Georgia and are living abroad. The state must place these individuals on an equal footing with other Georgian citizens who are not displaced from the occupied territories and are also living abroad.

The primary normative framework governing the protection of IDP rights is the Law of Georgia on Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories. This law regulates the procedures for granting, terminating, revoking, and restoring IDP status, as well as to define the rights and obligations of IDPs, along with their legal and socio-economic guarantees. One of its objectives is to facilitate the integration of IDPs at their place of registration and to protect their rights during displacement (Article 3).[32] Furthermore, under Article 17 of the Law, until an IDP returns to their permanent place of residence, the state is required to support their integration by creating the socio-economic conditions necessary for a safe and dignified life, ensuring that IDPs can participate freely and equally in socio-economic relations and have access to social services.

Apart from this law, there exists a decree issued by the Georgian government in 2007 endorsed the state strategy for IDPs. Among the challenges identified in the Strategy are dependence on assistance and lack of initiative. The Strategy states that "the disappointment and despair of many IDPs result in social inactivity, lack of initiative, and a reliance on assistance, posing a significant problem for both their social integration and eventual return to their permanent places of residence".[33] To address this, the Strategy aims to provide IDPs with the same legal, political, living, and socio-economic conditions as other Georgian citizens, removing obstacles that hinder the goal. The Strategy further notes that, from a legal standpoint, IDPs have same rights as other Georgian citizens.

[31] It is alarming that the voting rights of IDPs living abroad are being violated, Social Justice Center, 2024. Available at: https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/sagangashoa-rom-sazghvargaret-mtskhovrebi-devnilebis-saarchevno-ufleba-irghveva

[32] Law of Georgia on Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories of Georgia – IDPs, Article 3.

[33] Decree of the Government of Georgia No. 47 of February 2, 2007, Tbilisi, on the Approval of the State Strategy for Internally Displaced Persons - IDPs, Chapter 2, 1.6.

a) In accordance with the Constitution of Georgia, IDPs, like the general population, are entitled to select any location within the state to reside in.
b) IDPs are entitled to receive the same benefits from state and non-governmental programs of social protection, healthcare, and education that the Georgian government and the non-governmental sector provide to all Georgian citizens.
c) IDPs are entitled to access economic resources and engage in economic activities, just like any other Georgian citizen.
d) IDPs are entitled to equitable participation in public discourse and in the decision-making processes related to matters of public concern, as well as the full exercise of democratic rights, including both the right to vote (active suffrage) and the right to run for election (passive suffrage).

Chapter 5 of the strategy outlines steps to advance IDPs integration, including improving housing and social conditions for IDPs, enhancing their health and economic well-being, and developing appropriate social and economic programs. Notably, the strategy emphasizes that for the successful social integration of IDPs, their displacement status should be separated from social assistance: "IDPs, like other citizens of Georgia, can fully participate in the state's social programs, which will be determined solely based on need, regardless of the recipient's status. At the same time, the inclusion of IDPs in social programs should not reduce the state assistance specifically allocated to IDPs. Until the first goal of the strategy (return) is achieved, the participation of IDPs in state social programs may be considered an additional measure." Despite this, under Article 11 of the Law on Internally Displaced Persons, IDP assistance is terminated if an IDP agrees to receive social assistance meant for families living below the poverty line.

The strategy also underscores the importance of economic empowerment for IDPs to facilitate their integration. Although the strategy explicitly highlights the significance of IDPs' involvement in public life and participation in public discussions and decision-making processes, it does not propose any specific mechanisms or regulations to achieve this goal. Furthermore, dialogue with IDPs and their involvement in decision-making processes is one of the guiding principles for implementing this strategy. The strategy also stresses the need for regular updates to reflect current trends and challenges. However, Paradoxically, the strategy document has not been updated since 2007.

SInce 2019, the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation, and Refugees of Georgia was abolished and transformed into the LEPL IDPs, Eco-Migrants, and Livelihood Agency (the Agency). The Agency operates under the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health, and Social Affairs of Georgia. The Agency is responsible for implementing the Strategy and developed an action plan for 2023–2024. However, over the years, the Agency has not published a report on the progress made toward achieving the Strategy's goals, nor has there been any work undertaken to update the strategy.

The 2023–2024 Action Plan[34], developed to implement the 2007 strategy, outlines the following four objectives:

a) Improve the living conditions of IDPs through the provision of long-term housing;

b) Enhance the socioeconomic conditions of IDPs;

c) Increase awareness among IDPs;

d) Manage, coordination, and monitore.

Although the strategy aims to enhance the participation of IDPs in public life and decision-making process, the latest action plan does not define a strategic objective for political participation and integration, nor does it propose mechanisms or consultative platforms that would enable IDPs to influence decision-making process. For example, in 2022, amendments to the Law on Internally Displaced Persons, which addressed fundamental issues related to the housing rights of a new generation of IDPs, were drafted and approved by Parliament without substantial consultations with IDPs. Under these legislative amendments, the state is no longer obligated to provide housing for IDPs born after January 1, 2023.[35] The 2023–2024 Action Plan defines the strengthening of IDP engagement solely in a passive form, focusing primarily on raising their awareness and failing to recognize them as active participants in the development, implementation, and monitoring of strategies and action plans.[36] The fourth section of the action plan also envisions a coordination mechanism to oversee its implementation. The coordination council is chaired by the Minister of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health, and Social Affairs. The council includes representatives from central government bodies, the Government of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, and the former Provisional Administration of South Ossetia, as well as the Public Defender's Office and international organizations, including the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the United Nations Resident Coordinator (UNCT); one local and one international organization also have advisory voting rights. The council may also address specific issues in cooperation with other organizations.

It is also important to note that the agency's statute does not take into account consultation platforms and mechanisms. [37]

Moreover, it is noteworthy that the involvement of IDPs in peacemaking processes and their participation in consultation processes is neither sustainable nor consistent. The Office of the State

[34] Available at: https://idp.moh.gov.ge/editor/upload/20230915024557-SamoqmedoGegma.pdf

[35] IDPs born after 2023 will no longer be able to receive apartments - draft law, Radio Liberty, December 15, 2022. Available at: https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/32178182.html

[36] 2023-2024 Action Plan - Part 2.3. - Available at: https://idp.moh.gov.ge/editor/upload/20230915024557-SamoqmedoGegma.pdf

[37] Order No. 01-109 of the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Health, Labour and Social Affairs of Georgia, 2019, October 31.

Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality,[38] the primary body responsible for implementing peace policy, has not established a regular dialogue mechanism with the population living near the ABL or with IDPs to ensure their consistent engagement in matters related to peace policy. The only platform that partially includes organizations working on IDP-related issues is the consultative platform "Women, Peace, and Security," created in 2021 to implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. The platform meets twice a year and is coordinated by the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality. According to Order No. 45 of the State Minister issued in 2021, organizations working on women's issues and female activists residing in villages near the ABL can be invited to participate in these consultative platform meetings. However, the involvement of civil society organizations in this process remains fragmented and inconsistent.

As for informational meetings with the displaced population, they are also fragmented and do not contribute to a sustainable dialogue process or regular consultations. [39]

3.2. IDPs Political Participation Experience and Existing Challenges – Observations from Field Research

IDPs, like the rest of Georgian population, face numerous barriers to participate in public and political life. Amid a protracted conflict, IDPs occasionally make efforts to seize opportunities to draw the attention of the state and society to their needs.

In an act of protest, a 52-year-old male IDP residing in the compact settlement of the sanatorium "Kartli" jumped from the roof on January 16, 2022, in order to draw the attention of the state.[40] The IDPs were demanding relocation from the inedequate building structures. The primary demands of IDPs over the past 32 years have been to enhance housing and social conditions, and this tragic event is one of the few notable instances of visible public/political activism.

According to a 2022 study conducted by the Public Defender of Georgia on the mobility and economic empowerment of displaced women,[41] IDP women lack opportunities to participate in decision-making, program and project development, budgeting, modification, and/or monitoring processes initiated by central or municipal authorities. Moreover, the majority of women reported being unaware of these processes. The same study reveals that a significant number of displaced women are uninformed about opportunities for participation, their right to demand engagement,

[38] Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civil Equality - A Critical Analysis of the Mandate and Activities, Social Justice Center, 2023, p. 20.
[39] Interim Report on the Implementation of the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2018-2020): Findings and Recommendations, Office of the Public Defender. 2020. p. 3.
[40] TV Formula, program "Droeba": "Suicide in an IDP settlement." Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TXleu-XLPs8
[41] Barriers to the Mobility of IDP Women and Their Impact on Women's Economic Empowerment, Public Defender of Georgia, 2022. Available at: https://ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2022122312304281594.pdf

or the services available to them. Additionally, certain survey participants indicate that they do not seek assistance from central or local governments to resolve their problems due to their lack of trust in their ability to take action.

This chapter of the primary research presents the perspectives and opinions of IDPs (including those residing in Gali) regarding political and civic engagement.

IDPs from Abkhazia recall the period immediately following the end of the war and their displacement, which became their new identity, felt "unbelievable" and "dreamlike." At that time, they still hoped that the conflict would soon be resolved, allowing them to return home. At the time, their engagement in social and political processes as a group was still passive.

> "Our daily life revolved around feeding our children and waiting for news, thinking that we would return home any moment now. It never crossed our minds that we would remain displaced for years. I don't recall any organized protests as such, but from the very beginning, we were making demands—after all, we had young children, and we lacked even basic living conditions," – Zugdidi, Female, 61 years old

The armed conflicts of the 1990s, coupled with the severe economic and political conditions and civil unrest, had a particularly devastating impact on IDPs. Research respondents recall that during this challenging time, "the state did not assist them," and they "survived" through the help of relatives, neighbors, and mutual support.

> "Our natural instinct was to support one another, no one had any hope that the state would help us. In reality, I think that this natural instinct helped us survive" – Tbilisi, Female, 47 years old

> "We learned how to survive as a group, as IDPs, and to this day, whenever I'm somewhere, I always look for IDPs. I always have this feeling that I should help them in some way, because they really need help, we need help," – Zugdidi, Male, 67 Year old

The analysis of political and social participation of IDPs cannot be separated from their integration into new living spaces and interactions with local population. Respondents displaced from Abkhazia and South Ossetia shared that they did not develop a sense of belonging to their new environments, recalling their early coexistence with the local population with a heavy heart. For them, especially for older generations of IDPs, the issue of returning remains a priority, and their current housing is regarded as "temporary."

> "Rejection, ridicule—we were treated as outsiders. I often imagined back then, what if the situation were reversed and they [the locals] had come to Gulripshi as IDPs—how would we have treated them? I don't think it would have been the same. I am certain of that," – Kutaisi, Female, 55 years old.

For a younger respodent, the reality is a bit different.

> "Our real home is something no one forgets, but now that we've received apartments, we are trying to make this place more beautiful. We planted trees, set up benches and tables. In the evenings, we're always busy with something. I don't know many people here; my neighbors from the sanatorium aren't nearby. But what can I say, we'll get to know them as well," – Tskaltubo, Male, 28 years old

The resettlement process has profoundly impacted IDPs, breaking apart the shared experiences developed over years of living in collective centers and the relocation to isolated apartment blocks, was described by them as an action that effectively "fragmented" their community once again. The collective spaces in these settlements, where weddings, birthdays, funerals, and other important gatherings took place, served as crucial venues for fostering their new identity and articulating their political views.

One of the displaced respondents, who resided in Tbilisi and had not experience living in a collective settlement, observed that individuals who resided in collective centers were more engaged in political activism. This observation was later confirmed by other residents of sanatoriums.

> "In the sanatorium, we had a space—a hall—where we could meet with visitors or anyone who came. Here, in the new apartments [new settlement], such a space does not exist. When someone comes, it's too sunny outside, and you can't stand there for even five minutes. There is no common gathering place", – Tskaltubo, Female, 50 years old.

IDPs consider the period after 2000 to be an important phase for their active social and political participation. Over time, they "faced reality" and gradually began actively putting forth specific demands on the agenda. However, their non-institutional forms of organized political participation—demonstrations, road blockades, and various types of performances—went unanswered by the state.

This experience bred nihilism among many in the displaced population, giving them a sense that "your voice is unheard." This was compounded by ongoing structural violence, which tied the displaced community to daily social and economic struggles. The collective needs of the displaced were replaced by individual demands.

> "Day breaks and night falls without me seeing anyone—neither neighbor nor family member—to talk to. We are working. We have been like this for years. Frankly, if someone wants to see me, they have to come to me, because if I leave this place [the street vendors' area], tomorrow there may no longer be a spot here for me," – Zugdidi, Female, 59 years old.

As one respondents noted, "those who still had the time and energy to protest" would occasionally remind the government of the needs of the IDPs, though this unstable dynamic ultimately paved

the way for the manipulation of their problems. Over time, The well-known phrase "politicians only remember the IDPs before elections" became entrenched in society.

> "I have been living and teaching in Tserovani for many years. It is not a big place, but quite a few people have come here to see us. I consistently attended those meetings and listened attentively to their statements and promises. Every hope I had back then has now turned into heartache. When I remember how many things I believed… I wouldn't paint them all with the same brush, but some politicians used and still use this as a bargaining chip. I will not shrink from stating the truth—what else can I do?!", – Tserovani, Female, 45 years old

The current political life of IDPs is precisely a reflection of these events. They lack trust in state institutions and have no experience in cooperating with them. Theorists and practitioners of participatory planning emphasize that involvement in political processes is cyclical and "learnable," with both the state and the citizen simultaneously acting as a teacher and a student. [42]

When describing the present reality, respondents note that discussing politics with family members, neighbors, or friends is part of their daily routine. They follow both domestic and foreign political events. They actively deliberate on specific happenings, including the ongoing war in Ukraine. Their engagement in political discussions and reflections stems from a continuous sense of fear and instability.

According to interviewed experts, the resettlement process should have had a positive impact on IDPs socio-political participation. With private property and a stronger sense of citizenship, they were expected to have increased motivation and opportunity to become more involved in political processes.

We inquired the IDPs involved in the study to examine this opinion. First, they think that the resettlement policy was designed in a manner that excluded them from the process. A large number of respondents who have already been resettled noted during interviews that their living space does not meet their families' needs (for example, in a two-bedroom apartment, seven people are housed: a couple and their two children, a grandmother, and two sisters). Secondly, while the primary demand of the IDPs was satisfied through the obtaining of permanent residency, the challenging social and economic circumstances continue to render it impossible for certain families to relocate to a new residence, buy furniture, and purchase other essentials. The third factor, also linked to the issue of integration, is that socio-political activity often takes place in collective gatherings, whereas new residential buildings for IDPs are largely situated separately and isolated from other settlements.

[42] Cilliers, Elizelle & Timmermans, W.. (2014). The Importance of Creative Participatory Planning in the Public Place-Making Process. Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design. 41. 413-429. 10.1068/b39098.

The IDPs' protest is also directed at the information "vacuum" that concerns not only the programs developed for IDPs, but in general the political decisions in their cities.

While many of the respondents in the study have participated in demonstrations, fewer have signed petitions, and an even smaller group has been engaged in institutional mechanisms. According to them, these state engagement opportunities are merely formalities; they are neither tailored to the needs of IDPs nor are representative. The majority of participants are unaware of institutional engagement mechanisms and do not take part in the development of projects or budgets led by local self-government. They note that their activism is largely directed at the central government, since local self-government is unable to meet the needs of the displaced community.

> "I am not aware, nor have I heard from other IDPs, of any communication by the de jure Government of Abkhazia with displaced persons. We rarely even recall their existence," – Tskaltubo, Female, 48 years old.

The absence of public transportation was one of the basic needs that was identified in the new IDP settlements. According to the displaced women in the square of the new settlement of Tskaltubo, they approached the local municipality with the help of one of the "active" displaced women. Although transportation was eventually arranged, it operates irregularly, making morning commutes especially difficult for many IDPs.

During a neighborhood gathering in the Tserovani IDP settlement, respondents discussed small business support programs, where, in addition to target regions, they believe it is important to have seperate support programs specifically for IDPs.

IDPs note that there are prejudices regarding their socio-political activism, both in the government/local bodies and in society. IDPs have the feeling that everyone is well aware of their needs, but "no one is in a hurry to solve them".

Some respondents note that ideas proposed by IDP groups such as cultural, educational, or other informational events and projects, are often usupported, not only by decision-makers but even within the IDP communities themselves. The IDPs believe these matters are deemed as a low priority, and they constantly fear of instability and of "losing the little they have." Consequently, IDPs' believe their fundamental needs become a matter of political manipulation, with frequent attempts to "temporarily silence" them.

> "We [the Displaced Women's Initiative Group in Zugdidi] always say that we must keep pushing. We must constantly have projects and submit them everywhere. Then other women ask us to hold events, dance performances, we have to ask what we need. We also deserve everything that other groups have, don't we? This includes handicraft training,

which enabled many to learn sewing and now have their own tailor shops. Was that not needed?" – Zugdidi, Female, 51 years old.

"They would visit, present something before the New Year, and then the whole settlement would go silent. Later, we would demand something again and then would go silent once more. We should not have stayed silent. It is just like bartering; what else could it be? Bargaining for temporary silence", – Zugdidi, Female, 49-year-old

Self-criticism, associated with the need for "constant engagement" or "not stopping," leads to internal discussions among IDPs regarding the establishment of mechanisms for citizen participation that would ensure their active involvement.For instance, predetermined quotas for displaced representatives in institutional mechanisms of citizen participation. These could be regulated through legislation and internal regulations.

"In Tskaltubo, for example, we need a representative in the council and at municipal meetings so our voices are consistently heard. Regarding any project or future decision, they should, for instance, understand our opinions on the matter. We live and work in this city and we also walk these streets," – Tskaltubo, Female, 47 years old

"We proposed having such representativeness, for example, for them to meet annualy or bi-annualy, I don't Know. Let it be one woman or a man, or both, let them come together and talk about us" – Zugdidi, Female, 49 years old

Perception of IDPs as a distinct segment of society whose needs should be addressed separately within engagement mechanisms varies across the cities where interviews were conducted. For instance, in Zugdidi and Tbilisi, IDPs tend to view these needs as issues to be addressed at the central rather than the municipal level. Some respondents in Tskaltubo believe that in smaller cities, local municipalities have greater capacity to facilitate IDP representation. Others, however, argue that such representation could impede both the social and political integration of IDPs.

"There is no real integration; a new kindergarten will soon be constructed, and I am sure that people will shortly label it as an IDP kindergarten", – Tskaltubo, Female, 49 years old

"When they hear that someone is an IDP, they immediately assume that person needs something or is asking for something. But what am I asking for? Only good things for our city—like a local food festival, opportunities for youth and such events. But the moment I bring it up, they drag out the meetings, like they're trying to figure out what I really want, and they avoid dealing with it. Honestly, the only time they pay any attention to us is just before the elections, when they suddenly act all nice and welcoming", - Tskaltubo, Female, 41 years old

Social identity encompasses an individual's perception of belonging to a specific group and is influenced by personal emotions, values, and socio-demographic characteristics.[43] Interviews with IDPs revealed that while their social identity has evolved over time, its core focus has consistently remained on the aspiration to return to their place of origin.

Discussions on return are confined to two temporal dimensions: the past, when events are remembered, and the future, when IDPs receive promises of returning to their homes. This division of time is problematic, as it excludes the present, thus the daily needs of IDPs from the political agenda. (i) Alongside the issue of return, (ii) the everyday necessities of IDPs represent the second key axis of their identity. As one respondent stated, “this is a daily displacement,” where housing insecurity, low wages, and limited access to resources force individuals to “fight” on a daily basis. However, this "fight" is not always political in nature.

A respondent observed that, while they consider themselves to be more or less integrated as an IDP, integration does not inherently lead to the loss of certain parts of their original social identity.

> "Just imagine – It is a daily dissplacement; It is a daily experience. It’s a status you want to move past from, yet at the same time, you don’t. Rejecting this status and merely stating, 'I, Tamar, am also a citizen of this country,' would imply disregarding the challenges faced by other IDPs. Ignoring this reality and pretending it doesn’t exist would be a mistake for us as a community", – Tbilisi, Male, 39 years old

IDP integration and identity are tightly intertwined with issues of political participation. It is interesting that, large segments of society view IDPs as politically active group, since, in their perception, the typical IDP brings forward demands such as housing needs. This perception creates a sense of “shame” for IDPs, rooted in the awareness of their difference. One of the primary causes of marginalization is this sense of shame.[44] “Political noise” tends to diminish especially when IDPs realize that their efforts produce no tangible outcomes and that they remain subject to manipulation. On one hand, their activism generates a sense of shame; on the other, this “noise,” accompanied by shame, yields no real results. Consequently, these perceptions evolve into nihilistic political steps, which, in turn, impede their political and social integration.

The interview analysis revealed that, IDPs percieve that their “real” participation in public and political life is entirely dependent on political will. If the country lacks the administrative, human, or financial resources at the public policy level to ensure the distinct inclusion of IDPs in institutional mechanisms, collaboration with existing IDP initiative groups or organizations in the country offers a valuable opportunity to bridge the big gap between IDPs and the state.

[43] Tajfel, H. (1972). Social categorization. In S. Moscovici (Ed.), Introduction à la psychologie sociale (pp. 30-37). Paris: Larousse.

[44] Herzfeld, Michael (1980). Honor and sha me: Problems in the Com para ti ve Analysis of Moral Systems. Man, 15, 339–351.

Respondents believe that the identified problems can be resolved through the collaborative efforts of the political, non-governmental, and civil sectors.

> "In the past, NGOs would come here and talk to us about political participation. I was involved too, as a trainer. Now, it's so quiet, and projects like that are scarce. Honestly, I think those meetings really did make a difference. That's how I learned most of what I know—and later on, I even taught others", – Tskaltubo, Female, 45 years old

3.3. Perceptions of the population of Gali district on political participation

The level of political participation among Georgians residing in Gali and the Gali District has remained very low since the end of the war, and in recent years, the downward trend has intensified further. This is primarily linked to restrictions on movement, which become particularly severe during election and pre-election periods. Currently, the Enguri checkpoint, and to a lesser extent Fakhulani-Saberio crossing, represents the only avenue for Gali's population to enter Georgia-controlled territory. Transportation expenses and scheduling issues render the Enguri checkpoint inaccessible for certain part of local residents. Consequently, physical limitations on mobility significantly hinder Gali residents' participation in political processes. Their political engagement is further constrained in their own place of residence, given that, without the necessary documentation in Abkhazia, they cannot take part in local political affairs, lack the right to vote, and are unable to stand as candidates.[45]

Amid three decades of exclusion, political inaction, and neglect, residents of Gali have all but lost the conviction that political participation holds significance or can foster meaningful change. The prevailing view among respondents was that no one can alter the existing order, and that everything is predetermined, making any effort or consideration of changing the status quo pointless. Only ten out of forty respondents believe that political engagement is necessary in a country like Georgia.

Different perceptions can be observed among the Gali residents who maintain higher mobility in government-controlled territory, the majority of whom are students. Nevertheless, these individuals report that representatives of the de facto regime closely monitor their engagement in political and public activities on Georgia's controlled territory, thus necessitating constant vigilance. They note that by leveraging social media, participating in demonstrations, and conducting discussions with peers, they seek to enhance the political awareness of those around them. From their perspective, the widespread nihilism observed among Gali residents is unacceptable; although they recognize the existing difficulties, they maintain that now is not the time to abandon the cause.

[45] Teona Piranishvili, Places of Mutual Exclusion - Rights and Social Challenges in Gali and Akhalgori, Social Justice Center, 2022. pp. 41-42.

"My relatives have told me countless times that it's pointless to go to protests and that standing there isn't safe for me. They don't believe that speaking up or sharing your opinion really matters, which is understandable, because they've had their right to vote and speech taken away. They cannot fathom that participation in politics is our collective duty, because we're the ones who should be in charge of what affects our lives", – Gali, Male, 25 years old.

The strict control of the de facto regime and the occupation forces over any public activity in the Georgian-controlled territory makes it difficult to engage in political and public processes. This is the reason why the Gali residents consistently refrain from participating in public and political processes, as it may pose a safety risk to them and their families.

"During last year's and this year's March protests, I concealed my identity carefully, not just for my own safety but also so that I would not be seen/photographed/televised anywhere—mainly because my parents, who live in Gali, are very concerned, and this could cause problems for them. There was a case when a family was relocated from Gali because of their political stance, in particular, for showing support for Ukraine. Another reason is that having trouble-free access to Abkhazia is very important to me. If any media outlet reports that I took part in the protests, I might never be able to enter Abkhazia again. There was one occasion, when I visited Gali for the first time after the rallies, that the Russians took me into a separate room, thoroughly searched my luggage, and checked everything on my phone, even deleted and hidden photos. I didn't resist because I was scared. It's hard to stand up to them or ask why they're searching you so thoroughly", – Gali, Male, 23 years old

Gali residents are refraining from political activism and from voicing their opinions—even among relatives and neighbors—Because mutual trust is diminishing on daily basis.

"In our household, my dad and I talk about local and global politics every day, because it's really important to us. Our fate depends on global politics, and we know we can't influence it much, but that doesn't stop us from discussing and debating it at home. However, bringing neighbors or relatives into these discussions could be risky, because everyone's afraid to voice their opinions. Fear and mistrust have become so ingrained—both towards politics and toward each other", – Zemo Barghepi, Male, 30 years old

"Coming back here [to Chuburkhindzhi] was a big challenge for me in some ways—I don't have friends or people who share my views here. I come here during COVID and ended up staying. It's tough living in a community where you're not sure who you can trust. Even though I have a lot of respect for my relatives and neighbors, sometimes I don't share my thoughts with them for their own safety. When I decided to come over for the protests against the so-called 'Russian law' last March, only my family knew. Not because I feel any

> danger eminating from relatives and friends, but because I felt it was better that way. I couldn't just sit and watch on TV while they used excesive force against my friends and fellow citizens. When I came back to Chuburkhindzhi after the Georgian Dream party announced they were recalling the law, I was interrogated at the border. They searched me from head to toe. Of course, I didn't have any photos or videos proving I'd been at the protests, so I passed through without a problem. Still, it's really tough. It's hard when your own government is your enemy!" – Chuburkhindzhi, Female, 29 years old.

Respondents from Gali believe that there is no place in Georgian politics for them; not only are they excluded from any processes, but no one even informs them.

> "The Government of Georgia and the Ministry for Internally Displaced Persons, along with the Georgian Security Service, should ensure that we encounter no difficulties at the Enguri checkpoint, so that we can travel without hindrance. We also need information on the services available to us, both as Gali residents and as IDPs", – Zemo Barghephi, Male, 30 years old

3.4. 2024 Parliamentary Elections: Electoral Participation and IDP Mobilization /Demobilization Causes and Practices

The increased political discourse surrounding the needs of IDPs as elections approach is not a novelty to them. Nonetheless, community leaders argue that this increased in attention is primarily populist and lacks depth or practical importance. They underline that territorial integrity is largely used as a "Bargaining chip" in talks with IDPs.

When asked what should be prioritized on the political agenda concerning IDPs, respondents highlighted the following key issues:

(i) Concluding the resettlement process and suppling housing for every internally displaced person, it is imperative to prioritize IDPs that are living in inadequate structures. Additionally, taking into account the views of IDPs and ensuring their involvement in resettlement programs is crucial for the effectiveness of the initiative.

(ii) Implementing social and economic policies tailored to the needs IDPs, which entails identifying the needs of IDPs through research and developing a new state strategy that includes supportive programs for their employment, healthcare, and education. It is important to ensure the execution of these programs through participatory monitoring and evaluation.

(iii) Determining the representation of IDPs in institutional mechanisms for citizen engagement within legislation, including ensuring the involvement of IDPs in peacekeeping policies;

(iv) Developing psycho-emotional support programs.

The study also revealed the factors that contribute to the indifference of the IDP community toward electoral processes. Opinions vary regarding the perception of IDPs as an active electorate. For instance, respondents from the Tserovani IDP settlement believe that displaced persons from South Ossetia are active voters. However, they also note that political parties primarily target IDPs from Abkhazia, which is consistently reflected in their electoral promises and campaign strategies.

> "After the 2008 war, up to 26,000 people became IDPs – that's certainly not a small number. We've heard, both here and from others, that we often get the feeling that when people talk about the IDPs, they're mostly referring to those from Abkhazia. It's as if our needs are being overlooked. We're close to Tbilisi, we have our own settlement – there is a perception that we have everything, right?!", – Tserovani, Female, 27 years old

Respondents residing in Tskaltubo and Kutaisi indicate that after the resettlement of displaced persons from the Tskaltubo sanatoriums was completed (with only a few families remaining), the community's socio-political activity effectively ceased, and both political parties and the displaced population remain in "complete silence".

> "For years, the displaced in Tskaltubo were among the most active because resettlement was their most acute problem. Just imagine—we had to live in such harsh conditions that this issue was given the same importance as the return to our homes. Now, I don't know what to call it—it's complete silence", – Tskaltubo, Female, 45 years old

Regarding the procedural aspects of the electoral process, respondents discussed the absence of an effective mechanism for registering residences, which restricts their participation in elections. In the resettlement process—in the case of Tskaltubo, for instance—displaced persons found themselves in a state of uncertainty about their new residential addresses and the electoral districts in which they should have voted.

> "Hopefully, they won't have that problem this year. In the previous elections, many people were so confused that they thought they were registered at one place, and when they got there, it turned out they had to vote somewhere else", – Tskaltubo, Female, 47 year old

Using the example of Zugdidi, displaced persons note that during the pre-election period it is crucial for both the displaced community and society at large to provide detailed information about the locations of their electoral districts. They also advocate for the establishment of a temporary working group, operating under force majeure conditions in the pre-election period and adhering to the principle of party neutrality, to assist the "disoriented" voters.

> "We're completely confused. For instance, I had to help some neighbors figure out where they should go to vote, the kid just turned 18-year-old and did not know where to go. The problem isn't that the lists are mixed up—it's that no one knows where to find them. There's no one at the municipality who can explain it, and I doubt they know either, especially in a town this small", – Kutaisi, Female, 45 years old.

According to respondents from Gali, people do not understand why they should participate in elections or what the significance of each vote is. On one hand, this stems from low political awareness and limited mobility, and on the other, it is driven by distrust toward the Georgian side. Furthermore, the closure of the Enguri check point for several days prevents voters from recording their positions in the elections.

> " Many people around me are unaware of the true meaning of elections, largely due to the difficult economic circumstances they are under. These hardships limit their capacity to engage in political life because their primary concerns are ensuring daily food security and coping with month-to-month financial challenges. As a resident of my village and someone who wishes the best for both my community and our nation, I strive—particularly under the current strained political situation—to explain as clearly as possible what elections involve and why each vote matters. I am speaking specifically about those who, as a result of the war and subsequent adverse conditions, have been unable to pursue higher education. In light of this, it is clear why political awareness is so low among Georgians residing in Abkhazia", – Gali, Female, 27 years old.

Another respondent notes that many people around her too do not understand the importance of elections or the need to participate. She mentioned that, over time, a belief has taken root that elections are going to be rigged anyway, rendering individual votes pointless. Yet, the problem is not limited to low political awareness alone; it is further compounded by the Georgian government's lack of proactive measures to ensure that people living in Abkhazia receive sufficient information about why voting matters, how to express their views, and what the practical aspects of electoral participation are. In fact, in the days just before the elections, the sole checkpoint—Enguri—is closed, preventing those who wish to vote from doing so. This is one of the most significant challenges faced by Georgians living in Gali.

According to a 47-year-old woman from the village of Rechkhi in the Tkvarcheli district, the Georgian government and political parties have long disregarded the significance of the voices of Georgians residing in Abkhazia.

> "Nobody needs our vote, nor are they interested in our opinion and choice. It is hard to believe that any political party, and most importantly, the government, does not have the time or means to solve this problem. It is simply not important to them. From what I see, the majority of Georgians living in Abkhazia do not like the ruling party, and I do not rule out that the closure of the checkpoint is being done precisely on the basis of an agreement between the Georgian Dream and Abkhazian politicians", - Rechkhi, woman, 47 years old

The youth from Gali, now residing in Georgia, also echo this sentiment, having observed the evolution of political dynamics affecting Georgians in Abkhazia for many years.

> "There was an instance when the Enguri checkpoint was closed two or three days leading up to elections. Most residents of Gali and its district are involved in agriculture or work in places like Gagra, Sukhumi, or elsewhere. To go to vote several days early—and then return

> two or three days later—is unfeasible due to time constraints and, secondarily, financial limitations. The Georgian side fails to consider these factors and does nothing to alleviate the difficulties of crossing the checkpoint for those living on the other side of the border,"- Gali, Woman, 23 years old

According to Gali residents, no one tells them which polling station to vote at, and only a few people—those who travel to Zugdidi or know how to check online—find out, but there are very few of them.

According to a woman from the village of Okvinore, pre-election mobilization has not yet begun, although she recalls that in previous years:

> "During the presidential elections, for the first time in 19 years, I witnessed a record number of people on the Enguri Bridge—it was an immense crowd. Back then, the Enguri checkpoint remained open",- Okvinore, Woman, 42 years old.

According to her, as of august no political party has issued any pre-election statements, nor have the government or opposition presented any proposals or initiatives. The respondent noted that prior to the pandemic, political parties exhibited a certain level of engagement during elections; however, since the COVID period, the residents of Gali and the Gali district have received minimal attention.

> "We're completely forgotten. It seems that only when elections approach do we get even a minimal mention from Georgian politicians, but at other times we are entirely overlooked," Okvinore, Woman, 42 year old.

According to one of the respondent, an alternative mobilization method exists where one or more individuals are designated to promote the message that the electorate should back "Georgian Dream".With financial backing from the party, these individuals arrange for voter transportation and, if necessary, provide shelter, food, and a one-time cash payment.

> "I have also heard that some people returned to the village with bags of onions and potatoes. Maybe those bags are then divided among several families, or maybe each family is given a single bag of onions and potatoes, as well as oil and buckwheat. In short, the "dream" solves the financial and logistical challenges related to transportation, just to gain more votes", – Okvinore, Female, 42 years old

4. Main Findings

- Under protracted displacement, IDPs continue to encounter barriers related to integration. They are not actively engaged in social and political processes.

- There are no mechanisms or platforms in place at any level of governance that would enable IDPs to participate and influence the decision-making process.
- IDPs are either unaware of or lack proper access to formal participation platforms in political and public life. They have little to no experience with, or knowledge of, any consultative mechanisms that would enable their involvement in the decision-making process, including on matters related to peace policy.
- Respondents cite IDP initiative groups as their primary source of information, although there are instances where the information is provided to them belatedly.
- Even at the de jure level of government level in Abkhazia, there are no effective mechanisms for IDP engagement.
- IDPs have noted that political parties and the government tend to only remember them during the pre-election period, furthermore, they note that their participation in this years elections was significantly low.
- IDP activism and political engagement have traditionally been centered on their living conditions and social issues rather than broader political demands. Over time, unmet promises have contributed to a sense of nihilism and political disillusionment among many IDPs. Although occasional protests have taken place, a prevailing sentiment among IDPs is that their voices are ignored, further deepening their detachment from political processes.
- The study also revealed the gender dimensions of IDPs' political participation. The interviewed women expressed their desire to take an active role in political and public processes. They noted that in their respective cities, local initiative groups, in collaboration with international organizations, have played a crucial role in supporting women's development within their communities. To date, female IDPs have maintained the most active communication with municipal authorities and other institutions. The interviews further underscored the critical role of women's participation in political negotiations, particularly in the context of peacebuilding.
- According to respondents from Gali, the willingness to engage in political processes and actual participation in the region remain very low due to several factors. Physical and "legal" barriers related to freedom of movement significantly restrict the ability of Gali residents to actively take part in political and social affairs. Additionally, active involvement in certain processes within Georgia-controlled territory poses security risks for them. Furthermore, there is a profound lack of trust in the political process, as many believe their voices hold no influence. For years, they have been marginalized from political affairs by both the de facto authorities and the central government of Georgia.