

National Minorities issues in Abkhazia

“VERESK” charity foundation for disabled and amputees

Session 1

Thank you for giving this opportunity to share our concerns.

Abkhazia had already experienced the status of minorities in the Soviet past. At that time Abkhazia enjoyed political autonomy within Georgia. It was the Stalin period when the Abkhazian language was abolished, Abkhazian toponymy changed and Abkhazian schools closed. Within the Soviet period in 1937-1952 Georgians were forcibly resettled into Abkhazia to make the Georgian population in Abkhazia the majority.

That is why the concern of the Abkhazian civil society towards the treatment of representatives of other nationalities in Abkhazia is understandable. We have communities representing Russians, Armenians, Georgians, Estonians, Greeks, Jews, Poles and other nationalities. Many of them enjoy education in their own languages, have their editorial offices and cultural institutions. Some are represented in the Government structures and the Parliament of Abkhazia.

The Abkhaz Constitution contains clauses granting ethnic groups the right to native-language primary and secondary education.

I would like to focus special attention to the majority of the population of the Gal region bordering Georgia who belong to the Mingrelian subgroup closely related to Georgian. In 16 Georgian schools located in Gal, school curriculum unlike Abkhaz schools operate according to the Georgian curriculum in terms of the hours allotted to specific subjects.

Most of the Gal residents that had been forcibly resettled from their birthplace in the Western part of Georgia into Abkhazia during the Stalin times speak their native Megrelian language. They consider their mother tongue rather Mingrelian than Georgian, and view themselves both Georgian and Mingrelian identities as compatible.

Residents of Gal region of Abkhazia had been offered the opportunity to restore their alphabet. They have their editorial office and their regional paper.

Despite the fact that nearly 43 thousand of Gal residents have the Abkhaz citizenship the free movement of the Georgian population is practiced. The New York based human rights organization Human Rights Watch published a report on the situation in Gal where among the main issues discussed are the alleged violations of the rights of the Georgian population by the de facto Abkhazian authorities, including violations of the right to free movement, right to citizenship and Georgian-language schooling .

Richard Berge, a scholar on Politics and Georgian language from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London considers that the report made by the NY based human rights watch on the situation in Gal does not differ from previous reports written by various human rights organizations about the Gal region which in his view had received disproportionate attention compared to other conflict areas and minority populated areas (such as the Armenian populated Javakheti or the Azerbaijani populated Kvemo-Kartli region) within the internationally recognized borders of Georgia. He says the report in general is also symptomatic of the skewed viewpoint of the international community on this and a multitude of other

minority related issues in Georgia.

He considers that the HRW report fails to mention that most of the Georgian inhabitants of the Gal region are actually ethnic Mingrelians, who belong to a distinct ethnic group with their own language and culture. The Mingrelian language, despite having up to 500 000 speakers concentrated mostly in western Georgia, has no official status, and is not taught in schools in Georgia. In fact, the official Georgian government position is that the Mingrelians are an ethnic sub-group of Georgians speaking a Georgian dialect, and has therefore declined to grant Mingrelian status as a regional or minority language.

He noted that Georgia even refuses to sign the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, which is part of its commitments as a member of the Council of Europe. It is quite peculiar that HRW considers Georgian-language instruction to Mingrelians in Abkhazia to merit more attention than the status of Mingrelian in Georgia, a language which is under pressure, and which without some form of official recognition and support would probably become extinct in the course of a few generations, along with much of the Mingrelian cultural heritage.

In Abkhazia there is an understanding that the attitude to ethnic groups is among basic parameters of country's development level as a democratic state. It adheres to the implementation of international human rights standards. Abkhazia expects same treatment towards Abkhazia. It is a smallest nation in number that suffered Stalin oppression and under threat of disappearance.

Thank you for your attention.