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Georgians Face Apartheid in Abkhazia

By Paul Rimple

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On the Abkhaz side of the Inguri River, which separates Abkhazia from Georgia, there is a real border crossing now with razor wire and Russian soldiers with handheld metal detectors and Federal Security Service officers to interrogate the foreigners.

"Is this Russia or Abkhazia?" I joked with my Russian interlocutor, but I knew better. This is neither. This is Gali.

The Gali region is home to most of Abkhazia's 47,000 Georgians, who make up about 99 percent of the region's population. The Abkhaz need the Georgians to harvest the mandarins and hazelnuts, which are the backbone of the local economy. Without these Georgians, Abkhazia would suffer. The problem is that nobody really wants them here.

When asked, most Gali Georgians would say they would prefer to live in a "united Georgia," but they understand the reality. They are first and foremost loyal to their land. Called traitors in Tbilisi and a fifth column in Sukhumi, these people have endured Gali's deplorable living conditions and its lawlessness for two decades. They should be admired for their

perseverance, but they are disdained.

There are virtually no Georgians in administrative, government and police positions, and education in the Georgian language is severely restricted. Authorities have stopped issuing Abkhaz passports to Georgians, while some in the Abkhaz parliament want to strip Georgians of their Abkhaz citizenship altogether. Without Abkhaz citizenship, Georgians are stateless residents and cannot vote, own property or travel to Russia.

Abkhazia's Georgians are stuck in the middle of a conflict between Sukhumi and Tbilisi. While Tbilisi frowned at what it called "the forced 'passportization' of Georgians," the Abkhaz want them to give up their Georgian citizenship. But these Georgians are economically tied to the town of Zugdidi, located across the Inguri River in Georgia proper, where products are cheaper and health care favorable to the chamber-of-horror medical services in Gali.

Gali's Georgians may be ambivalent to Abkhazia's aspirations for total state recognition — not just because they are Georgian, but also because the Abkhaz have done nothing to make them feel secure or respect their rights as equals.

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