



“A Step to a Better Future”

Peace Initiative

**Enhancing Educational Opportunities for the residents
of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia**

**2018
Tbilisi**



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POLICY GOALS

The below presented peace initiative “A Step to a Better Future” reflects the policy of the Government of Georgia (GoG) and its approach to increase education opportunities, ensure and simplify access to all steps of quality education in Georgia as well as abroad for the population living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia.

Supporting access to education is one of the priorities of the GoG 2016-2020 Government Program “Freedom, Rapid Development, Prosperity”. The GoG takes active steps to ensure that youth are equipped with relevant knowledge and develop practical skills under the education system oriented on quality, access and inclusion.

Youth living on both sides of the dividing line represent the generation that need to coexist and engage in building a common future. Hence, their future, education and welfare is of utmost concern. Receiving education corresponding to modern international standards is of particular interest for the youth living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. Therefore, the GoG initiative “A Step to a Better Future”, aimed at enhancing educational opportunities for the population of these regions directly addresses existing interest and needs.

Access to quality education for the population in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia relates to a number of challenges and obstacles. The hurdles especially concern the restrictions to education in native language. In this respect, the situation is particularly dire in Gali district where ethnic Georgian population find themselves in especially vulnerable and discriminated position.

Educational institutions in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia have not undergone relevant authorization stipulated by Georgian legislation. Therefore, the mentioned institutions are not engaged in the Bologna process and the instruction is not performed in accordance with modern international standards. Consequently, graduates of educational institutions in these regions hold internationally illegitimate educational documents and are thus deprived of the possibility to participate in international educational programs.

The existing situation affects the quality of education of population living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia and complicates access to modern, high quality education. Therefore, with regards to the people living in the mentioned regions, as of a vulnerable group with particular needs, the state has developed a **special approach** that envisages offering of specific conditions and programs, ensuring access to all stages of quality education within Georgia as well as abroad.

The GoG approach and vision is based on the principles of the freedom of choice, cooperation, provision of equal opportunities, civic equality and respect for the cultural identity and supports the people living in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region to acquire knowledge necessary for success and self-realization as well as to develop skills.



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Furthermore, **preservation and protection of the Abkhazian language, as of the Second State Language stipulated by the Constitution of Georgia** is the key **priority for the GoG**; this implies promoting the knowledge and instruction of the Abkhazian language, as well as research and subsequent development of Abkhazian identity and culture. The above-mentioned approach is a part of the GoG reconciliation and engagement policy. At the same time, it represents an important direction in building confidence with Abkhazian and Ossetian communities.

Consequently, the following issues are of particular priority for the GoG, with respect to people living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia:

- **To ensure education in native language;**
- **To protect and develop the Abkhazian language;**
- **To enhance and simplify the possibilities for engaging in education system;**
- **To simplify enrollment and education at higher educational institutions of Georgia; to provide access to quality education;**
- **To establish/simplify mechanisms and procedures for engaging in international education programs and studying abroad;**
- **To support vocational education and enhancement of qualification;**
- **To support scientific work.**

ENSURING EDUCATION IN NATIVE LANGUAGE

Prior to the 1990's conflict 58 schools were operating in Gali district, out of which in 52 schools the instruction was conducted in native language of the population, in Georgian. Following the conflict, the number of schools was reduced to 31, out of which one school was closed in 2017.

From 1994 to 2015, gradually the Georgian language was replaced by Russian in all schools. In 2015, in 11 schools of the so called lower zone of Gali, where education in Georgian was still maintained, the instruction in the initial 4 grades was moved to Russian. In 2016 and 2017, 5th and respectively 6th grades moved to Russian language instruction. According to the representatives of the de facto authorities, each year every following grade will move to the instruction in Russian (7th grade in 2018, etc.).

It should be noted that the instruction in Georgian language is prohibited in all pre-school education institutions in Gali district.

Education in native language was also restricted for ethnic Georgian population of Akhlagori district in Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. Starting from 2017-2018 academic year, according to the representatives of de facto authorities, the instruction in all Georgian-language schools (6 schools) in the region moved to Russian.



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It's important to note that the restriction of instruction in Georgian language relates not only to the right of education in native language, but also to the only possibility to receive education, since the population in Gali and Akhalgori, majority of teachers, students and their parents do not simply speak the Russian language. Their native language is Georgian.

In this situation, the support of the population of Gali and Akhalgori districts, as of the most vulnerable groups, safeguarding their rights, including the right to education in native language, as well as the protection and preservation of the Georgian language gains utmost importance.

The GoG, at all relevant international forums and formats, including in the frames of the Geneva International Discussions, regularly raises the issue of ensuring education in native language.

Intensive cooperation is maintained with international partners and organizations with the aim to, on the one hand, mobilize international efforts through the discussion formats, to halt and reverse the ongoing process and enable population living in Gali and Akhalgori to receive education in Georgian language while, on the other hand, to plan and implement various projects and activities aimed at protecting/bolstering the right to education in native language, as of internationally recognized right, for local population as well as looking for and sharing some relevant international practices in this regard.

To emphasize and ensure education in native language, as of a fundamental human right, international organizations (including UNICEF and the Council of Europe) partnering with the GoG, plan and implement bilateral (Georgian-Abkhazian) study visits to different countries (e.g., Spain, the United Kingdom, etc.). Best international practice, identified as a result of the mentioned visits, that ascertains the right to education in native language, is further discussed in the frames of Geneva International Discussions.

The mentioned efforts also envisage raising general standard in Abkhazia and expanding the possibilities of education in native language at all general education institutions in other districts as well (e.g., in Abkhazian schools for the pupils for whom Abkhazian is a native language). Nevertheless,

notably in schools where instruction is in Abkhazian, Armenian or Russian languages, no artificial restrictions similar to Gali district are imposed.

Ensuring education in native language

The GoG will continue to resort to all available political, diplomatic, practical and legal mechanisms to enable population living in Gali and Akhalgori to receive education

in Georgian language. The goal of the efforts described above is to have constructive approaches used instead of restrictions, to introduce new opportunities and to facilitate **access to education in native language for all.**

PROTECTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ABKHAZIAN LANGAUGE



The objective of the GoG, including based on the commitments stemming from the Constitution of Georgia, is to protect and promote the Abkhazian language as the Second State Language. The GoG is taking steps for the protection and development of the Abkhazian language, notwithstanding the existing situation when the GoG is deprived of the possibility to resort to direct mechanisms for implementing the mentioned objective in Abkhazia. In this respect, one of the important directions is to support introducing and instruction of the Abkhazian language in general educational institutions on the Georgia controlled territory.

Abkhazian language is taught at 6 public schools in Tbilisi and in regions. At the beginning of 2017, **Abkhazian language classes** were additionally opened at Batumi N14 and Peria public schools in Khelvachauri Municipality, where ethnic Abkhazians live, however, any interested person is eligible to learn Abkhazian language there. To further promote Abkhazian language and considering the interests of the population, the opening of similar classes is also planned in other public schools as well.

State Program for the Protection
of the Abkhazian Language

The GoG plans to step up the state policy for the protection and development of the Abkhazian language.

In 2017, **Special State Program** was designed for the development of the Abkhazian language. The program is aimed at the protection and preservation of the Abkhazian language and culture, as well as at supporting Georgian-Abkhazian cooperation on this issue.

As part of this program, on October 27, 2017, on the Abkhazian Language Day, a **Memorandum of Cooperation** was concluded between the Ministry of Education and Sciences of Georgia and the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality of Georgia. The goals of the above-mentioned Memorandum are as follows:

- protection, preservation and development of the Abkhazian language, supporting Georgian-Abkhazian relations;
- support to scientific activities and Abkhazian language specialists, as well as to the ideas and initiatives facilitating Georgian-Abkhazian relations with the aim to promote the learning, research, preservation and development of the Abkhazian language;
- support to the implementation of projects by universities and scientific-research institutions directed at the instruction and research of the Abkhazian language, scientific activity for maintaining and developing the Abkhazian language and the support of Abkhazian language specialists;
- support to the cooperation of Georgian and Abkhazian specialists and professional groups working on the protection, preservation and development of the Abkhazian language and implementation of joint confidence building projects; support to various publications in the Abkhazian language, production of radio and TV programs.



The State Program will enable all educational and scientific-research institutions to submit and implement interesting initiatives. The Program will support funding of the projects that include the instruction and research of the Abkhazian language and culture, scientific activities to maintain and develop the Abkhazian language, training of Abkhazian language specialists, as well as the projects of Georgian-Abkhazian dialogue and cooperation. For instance, in the frames of the Program, **the Institute of Abkhazian Language and Culture** will be established at LEPL-Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University.

ENHANCEMENT AND SIMPLIFICATION OF THE POSSIBILITIES FOR ENGAGING IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

The goal of the GoG is to ensure and simplify education opportunities and access to all stages of education for the population of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia.

With the initiative of the GoG, even persons who live Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia and do not possess Georgian citizenship and neutral documents will become eligible **to enter pre-school, general, higher and vocational education based on individual number**.

Particularly, to expand access for persons living in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia to state services, a new **status-neutral mechanism, so-called “individual number”** (hereinafter – personal number) will be introduced.

Identity of persons will be established considering one’s biometric data (biometric photo) and available documents at hand. As a result, a person will be assigned a personal number, which will be stored in relevant electronic system and, along with biometric data, will be used to identify an individual while receiving various services.

Engaging in all stages of education with a personal number

Registration with a personal number does not imply establishing of or granting citizenship. Unlike prior regulation and practice, a person registered with a personal number will be able to enjoy various state services without presenting any document, or even in case of presenting a document at hand. Hence, the mentioned initiative will further simplify for persons living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia the access to specific state services in the education system, such as, for example:

- **electronic registration at public pre-school institutions and enrollment in private pre-school facilities;**
- **electronic registration at public general education institutions and enrollment in private schools;**
- **electronic registration for unified national exams and enrollment in Georgia’s higher educational institutions (HEI), including under the so-called 1+4 program;**



- **electronic registration at vocational education programs and enrollment in vocational educational institutions;**
- **electronic registration at the Center for International Education and application for funding the studies abroad;**
- **receipt of educational/scientific-research grant;**
- **enrollment in post-secondary education preparation center.**

SIMPLIFICATION OF ENROLLMENT AND EDUCATION AT HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS OF GEORGIA, ACCESS TO QUALITY EDUCATION

I. Background

To simplify the procedures of enrollment and education at Georgia's HEI for ethnic minority students, in November 2009, the GoG amended the Law of Georgia on Higher Education and introduced a simplified system for ethnic minorities – a simplified **1+4 mechanism and the so-called quota system**. Namely, under the quota determined by the National Center for Education Quality Enhancement (EQE), HEIs are required to allocate 1% of predetermined quota for entrants who will become eligible to continue education at the Georgian language training educational program, based on the results of general aptitude test in the Unified National Exams in Armenian and Azerbaijani languages, **and starting from 2016-2017, in Abkhazian or Ossetian languages**. Furthermore, entrants may take only one – general aptitude test exam – in Abkhazian and Ossetian language and respectively enroll in HEI based only on the results of this exam. All other entrants are required to pass four exams in order to be admitted to HEIs.

Ethnic minority students enrolled through simplified system, enter the Georgian language training (the so-called 1+4) program, and following successful completion of the one-year step, become eligible to continue study at the initially selected faculty. Under 1+4 program, the GoG annually allocates resources for funding those entrants who become eligible to continue studies at HEI on a Georgian language training educational program **through only one exam, general aptitude test in Abkhazian or Ossetian language**.

In case of mobility from university operating in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia to an educational institution in the rest of Georgia, such student also receives full funding for HEI and is **enrolled to a relevant university without passing any exams**.

Moreover, annually, the **study of those 150 students** living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia who are admitted to HEI following the passing of four exams at Unified National Exams is also fully funded. Primarily these students are from Gali and Akhagori districts.

Old school education system is in place in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, which envisages 11 grades education and is not in line with international standards. Teaching methods in these regions are also not in conformity with international educational space and such important



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modern approaches as, for example, student-centered education process and inclusive education are not yet introduced. All the above-mentioned forms the basis for non-competitive conditions for the students from these regions.

Other challenges remain as well. Considering the level of education in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, as well as given inadequate development of Abkhazian and Ossetian language in the instruction process, interested Abkhazian and Ossetian entrants face difficulty in passing general aptitude test translated into Abkhazian and Ossetian languages, as it includes numerous specific terms. Hence, each year the number of Abkhazian and Ossetian students benefitting from 1+4 program is not high.

The analysis of higher educational programs evidences that engagement in competitive environment in Unified National Exams is considerably difficult for students living in Abkhazia region and is related to exceptional efforts. Furthermore, due to the quality of education in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia and restriction of education in native language in Gali district, the possibilities for preparing for Unified National Exams become considerably complicated.

In such situation, special importance is **attached to improving access to HEIs of Georgia for population residing in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, including for those in Gali and Akhgori districts**. Therefore, the GoG is taking steps to increase access.

II. Upcoming amendments

Considering the situation in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, with the aim of improving access for local population to HEIs of Georgia and to quality education, the GoG is planning to initiate relevant amendments to Georgian legislation, following which **any individual** who has graduated the school in mentioned regions and those willing to continue studies **will find it easier to enter the educational space**.

Several additional possibilities will become available in this direction:

1. Quota and the state grant upon passing Unified National Exams

Any person, willing and successful to pass unified national exams as well as directly continue studying with a 4-year Bachelor program or in respective vocational educational institution, will still be able to take advantage of state grant (within the quota annually allocated for 150 students).

2. Passing Unified National Exams in Russian and Abkhazian/Ossetian language

Entrants living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region willing to directly continue studies with a 4-year Bachelor program through passing unified national exams (instead of “1+4” program including 1-year Georgian language learning program), and having restraints because of insufficient command of Georgian language for that purpose, will have the possibility to pass



in the frames of the Unified National Exams **native language exam in Abkhazian/Ossetian language and the rest of exams - in Russian language.**

3. Abkhazian and Ossetian language test for the 1+4 program instead of general aptitude test:

Furthermore, enrollment through “1+4” program for Abkhazian and Ossetian language speaking entrants will be simplified. In particular, respective amendments will be introduced to the law of Georgia on “Higher Education” and consequently, in 2018 entrants will be able to **pass Abkhazian/Ossetian language test** within unified national exams instead of general aptitude test in Abkhazian and Ossetian as it proved to be a challenge for a number of students due to difficulties of understanding specific terminology of general aptitude tests in Abkhazian and Ossetian languages.

Passing Abkhazian/Ossetian
Language exam instead of general
aptitude test

4. Post-secondary education preparation center for any interested person:

Considering that the level of preparation of population in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia is lower than in the rest of Georgia, a new possibility will be developed – **post-secondary Education Preparation Center** (hereinafter - the Training Center) **and relevant program**. It will specifically target the persons residing in the mentioned regions and will ensure raising of their level of general education and full-fledged preparation for continuing studies in higher and vocational educational institutions. Any person from Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia will be able to enroll in the preparation center.

The preparation program/center is in fact an alternative level to XII grade with more intensive and needs-oriented program. Under a one-year course, the Center will prepare and equip students with necessary skills. Respectively, the Center will considerably simplify entry to HEIs and study for those entrants living in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, including from Gali and Akhagori districts, who due to limited access to secondary quality education, need additional and due preparation for continuing study at HEIs.

Special Preparation Center

In the frames of the above-mentioned program/Center, the students from Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia will be prepared/trained in preferred subjects, including Georgian language and literature, and/or Abkhazian or Ossetian language, foreign language, also in optional subjects within unified national exams, general aptitude skills, computer program, etc. to make it easier for them to continue study at a selected faculty at a HEI.

Acquired knowledge and skills will also help interested entrants to have access to **international educational programs and opportunities.**



5. **Continuation of education at higher educational institutions for the graduates of Preparation Center:**

Following the completion of a one-year training course, accumulating necessary credits in selected subjects, successful graduation tests conducted by the LEPL-NAEC **and passing of minimal competence threshold, students will become eligible to continue studying on Bachelor's program without passing unified national exams.**

Respectively, the operation of the Training Center/Program will, from educational and procedural standpoint, considerably improve access to **and enrollment for population** of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia **to local as well as foreign HEIs in Georgia.**

Higher education without Unified National Exams

6. **Access to vocational education**

Entrants from Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia who are not able to obtain enough scores, for enrolling at higher educational institution through unified national exams, or through the graduation tests, upon the completion of one year course at the Preparation Center, will have access to vocational education and be eligible **to enroll in vocational education institution.**

7. **Accommodation and student dormitory**

The GoG will cover the tuition fee of people residing in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. Nevertheless, in certain cases persons from these regions who have enrolled in Georgia's HEIs face difficulties with the payment of accommodation expenses – payment of rental fee. The GoG will attach priority to the consideration of applications with such requests and **funding of accommodation expenses to certain extent.**

Furthermore, the GoG is focusing on the **building and maintaining of student dormitories.** Such campuses are planned to be built in Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Batumi, Gori and Akhaltsikhe. Students from Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia who have enrolled to HEIs in Georgia, as well as to vocational education institutions will be accommodated in the mentioned dormitories.

ESTABLISHMENT/SIMPLIFICATION OF MECHANISMS AND PROCEDURES FOR ENGAGING IN INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND STUDYING ABROAD

I. **Recognition of higher education**

Orders N147 and N1067 of 2009 of the Minister of Education and Sciences define the procedures for Recognizing General and Higher Education received in the Occupied Territories. As a result, LEPL-EQE operating under the Ministry of Education and Sciences is authorized to recognize the higher education.



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Any person living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia willing to receive the recognition of the education, needs to apply to a relevant body stipulated by the legislation and submit a written application, personal identity card or status-neutral document, certificate/diploma to be recognized, or any other document that proves the fact of education in the mentioned regions, as well as refer to specific individuals (witnesses) who are able to prove the fact of education, or present a notarized written statement of such witnesses.

In case of recognizing higher education and following the examination of submitted documents, EQE issues an individual administrative-legal act that confirms the fact of receiving general/higher education in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. The mentioned act entitles a specific individual to continue study at a HEI in the rest of Georgia or abroad. **Education recognition procedure is free.**

II. Amendments and simplification of education recognition

With the goal of ensuring the right to education, as well as for supporting and promoting the receipt of education in the rest of Georgia and abroad, the GoG has considerably simplified the procedure of **recognition of higher education** received in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, as well as **developed a status-neutral mechanism for such recognition.**

In particular, on January 11, 2017, amendments were passed to the Order N1067 of 2009 of the Minister of Education and Sciences of Georgia, as a result of which a person living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia becomes eligible to:

- apply to EQE for the recognition of higher education **electronically, including in the Abkhazian language;**
- file an application and enclosed documentation to EQE **using status-neutral mechanism – through an international organization;**
- also use the mentioned mechanism for engaging and participating in the administrative procedure for the recognition of higher education, submitting of relevant documentation, as well as proving the fact of receiving the education. In particular, request a duly authorized international organization operating in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia to certify the fact of receiving education that no longer **requires presenting of additional witnesses;**
- use **status neutral mechanism of registration with a personal number** in case of residing in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia and not holding Georgian identification document (or status-neutral document), or **even without a personal number**, submit for consideration other documents at hand which enable the identification of this person;
- receive administrative act on the recognition of education issued by the EQE **through an international organization.**

Status-neutral mechanism for the recognition of higher education



As a result of passed amendments, persons living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia are given the opportunity to apply to the EQE and get the recognition of higher education received in the mentioned regions **electronically, without coming on Georgian controlled territory and taking the identity card of a Georgian citizen, or any other document** (although, importantly, the previously existing procedure also remains valid). An act issued by the EQE on recognizing the education received in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia allows an individual living in these regions to enroll in **international educational programs** and study abroad.

The GoG plans to enable submitting of the application for the recognition of higher education received in the mentioned regions **to EQE electronically or in hard copy, also in another language**, e.g., in Ossetian, English or Russian. This will boost the interest of persons living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia to receive the recognition of higher education and will further simplify the established procedures.

The Ministry of Education and Sciences plans to pass similar amendments to the Order N 147 of March 19, 2009 on Recognizing General Education received in the Occupied Territories. Consequently, persons living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, in case of willingness, **will also be able to have general education recognized electronically, without coming to Georgian controlled territory and obtaining Georgian citizenship**.

III. Participation in international educational programs

Enabling access to information on all stages of education, educational opportunities in the rest of Georgia and international educational programs for population living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia remains important.

For these purposes, **information about education programs and opportunities abroad have been placed on the website of the State Minister's Office (www.smr.gov.ge)** in Georgian, Russian and English languages. Information for individuals living in Georgia comprises scholarships and bachelor's, master's and doctoral study opportunities at various EU member states, Switzerland, the USA, Turkey and Asian countries, including about EU ERASMUS+ program, Visegrad countries scholarships fund, UK Chevening scholarships, German DAAD, USA Fulbright program, etc.

Promoting the learning of foreign languages in both regions

Development of a web portal in Georgian, Abkhazian, Ossetian, Russian, English, Armenian, Azerbaijani languages is planned where information about all stages of education (general, higher and vocational education) will be placed. This portal will provide full-fledged access to necessary information for the population in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, for ethnic minorities and diaspora representatives. Web-portal will enable interested individuals to obtain additional information in interactive mode.



For participation in international educational programs, the **relevant command of a foreign language** is of special importance that appears a problem for persons living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. In this respect, the GoG closely cooperates with international partners. With their assistance foreign language teachers living in the mentioned regions are being trained in instruction methodology. At the same time, the GoG plans to intensify work with international organizations and educational centers in Georgia to **introduce long-term, high level foreign language courses** in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia.

Funding education abroad

The GoG supports interested individuals to receive quality education abroad that often relates to considerable funds. In May 2014, with the initiative of the Prime Minister of Georgia, LEPL-**Center for International Education** was established, which currently operates under the Ministry of Education and Sciences. The goal of the Center is to establish education opportunities - studies at bachelor's, master's and doctoral educational programs, at leading universities of Europe, USA and Asia for population, including those living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia and to support successful applicants **through relevant funding**.

The Center accepts applications from individuals living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia who are willing to continue education abroad and obtain education funding. For this purpose, persons who applied to a preferred US, European or Asian university themselves and received a positive response, are eligible to submit an application and enclosed documentation every year to the Center for International Education electronically on the website- www.iec.gov.ge, to request the reimbursement of tuition and accommodation costs in a foreign country. The IEC will consider submitted documentation and take a decision on funding.

IV. Travel abroad

Possession of a travel document is necessary for receiving higher education abroad and participation in international educational programs.

Majority of population in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia lack legitimate travel documents. As a result of illegal passportization process implemented by the Russian Federation, majority of the population hold illegal Russian passports issued by Russian so-called "embassies" in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali. International community does not recognize the mentioned passports as they are issued in violation of the principles of international law and no travel and educational visas are issued in these passports.

The GoG, in light of humanitarian principles, offers various opportunities to the population of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia for free movement and international travel:

Georgian citizenship passport



The GoG offers **Georgian citizenship passport** to the population in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia for traveling abroad.

Since March 28, 2017, obtaining of a Georgian passport is also related to an opportunity of visa-free travel to the EU member states that is a significant and tangible achievement in the process of Georgia's association and cooperation with the EU. As a result, persons with Georgian citizenship passport are able to travel to Schengen zone countries without a visa for short-term period (90 days within 180 days).

The GoG is committed to share the benefits of political association and economic integration process with the EU, including the possibility of visa-free travel to Schengen zone countries, with those living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. Therefore, the population of the mentioned regions are eligible to apply to any territorial office of LEPL-State Service Development Agency, a Public Service Hall or community center, including in Gori and Zugdidi, as well as adjacent the dividing line – in Orsantia, Rukhi and Mejvriskhevi to obtain a biometric passport of the citizen of Georgia. A biometric passport of the citizen of Georgia will enable them to freely travel to Europe without a visa, during short-term educational visits, or obtain a relevant visa for participation in long-term educational programs.

Visa free movement
Simplification of the issuance of
Georgian passport

The GoG plans to **simplify the rule** of establishing the citizenship of Georgia for persons living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia and **of issuing identify card/biometric passport of the citizen of Georgia**. In particular, for establishing the citizenship for interested persons, LEPL-State Service Development Agency will be able to consider the documents issued in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia and based on the facts of birth, death, marriage/divorce and residence in these regions, issue various civil documents. The procedure will be free within the timeframes prescribed by the legislation (or if necessary, in speedy manner).

Status neutral document

Considering political situation in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, the population of these regions often face various obstacles for taking Georgian citizenship passport. Therefore, in 2011 the GoG has **developed a status-neutral travel document** for persons living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia.

A neutral travel document has been developed in accordance with International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) standards and requirements. It is absolutely neutral with respect to citizenship from legal as well as technical standpoint. Respectively, holders of neutral travel document are able to travel abroad even without direct recognition of Georgia's jurisdiction.



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Neutral travel document is issued by any territorial office of LEPL-State Service Development Agency, Public Service hall or community center. A person willing to obtain the document may apply in person, through the duly authorized third party, or electronically, using the SSDA website. Neutral travel document is issued within 10 working days. The document is valid for 10 years and may be renewed.

International community has supported a neutral travel document as an alternative means for ensuring the freedom of movement and the neutral possibility for resolving the problem. At this stage, 12 countries (including 9 EU member states) – the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, as well as Japan, Israel and the USA have recognized the document.

Other status-neutral opportunities

The GoG applies pragmatic, flexible, humanitarian and status-neutral principles when it comes to the need to travel abroad for education, health care, humanitarian or confidence building purposes. Such approach envisages addressing the needs of conflict affected population via various unconventional and depoliticized ways.

Depoliticized approaches aimed at participation of persons living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia in specific international educational programs may envisage issuing national laissez-passer or similar documents by the EU member states, or, based on domestic legislation of host states, finding other creative, neutral solutions. The GoG stands ready to consider similar status-neutral opportunities together with international partners, or case by case.

International travel Status neutral opportunities

SUPPORT TO VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND ENHANCEMENT OF QUALIFICATION

Ensuring access to vocational education for persons living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia with the goal of raising their qualification, facilitating subsequent employment, including supporting the start-up of their own businesses or self-employment, training labor market oriented, competitive and qualified personnel is a key priority for the GoG. Considering the existing reality, vocational education should be better accessible for persons living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia and respectively, it is important to **further simplify existing opportunities**.

At present, state vocational education facilities are located in the following cities:

- Zugdidi
- Tsalenjikha (Jvari town)
- Gori
- Akhaltsikhe



- Batumi
- Kobuleti
- Poti
- Tbilisi
- Mestia
- Kutaisi
- Ozurgeti
- Telavi
- Gurjaani (Kachreti)
- Rustavi
- Ambrolauri
- Tkibuli
- Saguramo
- Tianeti
- Stepantsminda
- Gudauri
- Akhmeta
- Lagodekhi
- Dedoplistskaro
- Bagdati
- Samtredia
- Senaki

It is planned to introduce state vocational educational facilities in Khobi and Zestaponi in 2018.

Persons living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia have an opportunity to enter any of the above-listed state vocational educational institutions.

In addition to those possessing Georgian citizenship identity documents, **persons with neutral document or those registered with a personal number** will become eligible to **enroll in vocational education facilities**.

Registration of persons willing to receive vocational education is already possible electronically (www.vet.emis.ge). This portal will also become available in other languages for those living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia.

Simplified engagement in
vocational education

Instruction at state vocational educational institutions is conducted in Georgian language. Although, after entering vocational institution, prior to engaging in education process and considering professional profile, ethnic minorities are given the possibility to learn Georgian language from 3 to 6 months with the aim to master the educational program. Vocational education is mostly technical and comprises brief theoretical component. Hereby, persons living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali



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region/South Ossetia, in case of willingness, are able to benefit from the existing 3-6 month Georgian language courses. Depending on the need, interpreter may be engaged in the instruction process for the mentioned individuals.

A dormitory already operates at state vocational education institutions in Kobuleti and Kachreti where the state fully covers accommodation costs of enrolled individuals. At present, dormitories are being constructed at Senaki and Mestia vocational education institutions that will be completed in 2018. Hereby, the GoG will **fully fund the accommodation of persons living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia at dormitories** of state vocational education institutions.

Using student dormitory

Decree N 76 of the GoG of February 12, 2018 approved the state program for Professional Training/Retraining and Qualification Enhancement of Job Seekers. The goal of the program is to increase competitiveness of job seekers in professions popular on the labor market through professional training/retraining and/or subsequent internship, and thereby facilitate their employment. Supporting employment of job seekers is a necessary condition, considering the changes of the demands on the labor market, to attain the development of competencies and skills of citizens and to enhance their level of living and welfare. Training and retraining in various professions will be conducted at institutions implementing vocational education programs and their partner employer organizations. Program duration is 2 to 4 months. Program envisages **state funding through voucher**.

From 2017, the GoG has **also identified persons living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia** and ethnic minorities **as be beneficiaries of the mentioned program**. These persons are exempt from such mandatory condition for participation in the program as a proof of passing a basic step of general education. Hence, the persons living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia and ethnic minorities, will be able to receive services envisaged by the program even in the absence of such document. It is also worth noting that such persons **are given the priority over other applicants to enroll in the program**.

It is noteworthy that at present there is no rule for recognizing vocational education received in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. To support the employment or continuation of work on Georgian controlled territory of the persons living in these regions, **the Ministry of Education and Science will elaborate a relevant Order** that will prescribe procedures for recognizing vocational education received in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia.

Service of techno parks and training

Upon interest, the GoG will support youth from Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia **to use existing techno parks** in Tbilisi and Zugdidi **absolutely free of charge**, including laboratories and working space, acquire knowledge in innovations and technologies, directly participate in developing innovative ideas and creation of technologies, as well as to receive all the services available at the mentioned techno parks.



Innovation Center will be opened in the village of Rukhi, adjacent to dividing line, in June 2018. At the same time, construction of a Techno Park is planned in Gori, where the population living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia will have an opportunity **to undergo free trainings in various fields, including in information technologies**, study computer and various computer programs to enhance qualification and facilitate subsequent employment.

Common working space, computers' room, conference hall, classroom, library and fabrication laboratory will be set up at the Rukhi Innovation Center. Fabrication laboratory will be fit for teaching basics in Robotics to adolescents that will contribute to the enhancement of their technological skills. Similar services will be available in Gori. The goal of the GoG is to make Innovations Center and technological park the **venue for acquisition of knowledge and realization of potential** for the residents of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia.

SUPPORT TO SCIENTIFIC WORK

Enabling the researchers and scholars living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia to participate in various research and scientific grant competitions, obtaining of respective funding and continuing research or scientific work internally as well as abroad is another priority for the GoG. In light of this, promotion of cooperation between Georgian and Abkhazian, Georgian and Ossetian scholars and researchers and support to their joint projects and initiatives is of particular importance.

The EU-Georgia Association Agreement for the EU Research and Innovation Program - **Horizon 2020** of April 29, 2016 enables Georgian scientists, scholars and innovators, as well as legal entities registered in Georgia (universities, research institutions, NGOs, small and medium enterprises, business companies, foundations, government institutions, etc.) to participate in grant competitions in various fields announced in the frames of this program. The GoG welcomes and will facilitate joint Georgian-Abkhazian/Georgian-Ossetian scientific activity within the mentioned program.

New opportunities for scientific work

Moreover, the GoG supports participation of researchers and scholars living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia in such important international scientific program as **Fulbright Visiting Scholar Program**.

LEPL-Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia (hereinafter Shota Rustaveli Foundation) supports scientific work, development of innovative and high quality scientific researches corresponding to international standards and integration of Georgian scientists and young scholars in international scientific space. Shota Rustaveli Foundation implements state grant competitions, targeted programs and projects, is engaged in international scientific networks and joint projects. At present, only Georgian citizens are allowed to participate in competitions and programs.



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To promote and support cooperation of Georgian, Abkhazian and Ossetian scholars, the GoG plans to amend relevant GoG Decrees and Orders of the Minister of Education and Sciences that define the conditions of competitions and programs announced by the Shota Rustaveli Foundation as well as the participation criteria so that **the persons holding neutral document, as well as those registered with a personal number are eligible to participate in the mentioned competitions and programs.**

Moreover, to ensure bilateral research and scientific cooperation, in the frames of the existing competitions and programs, **creation of a special subprogram** is being considered; it will directly fund joint Georgian-Abkhazian/Georgian-Ossetian scientific work.

In addition to enhancing skills and qualifications of interested persons from Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region, the mentioned programs and subprograms create opportunity to gradually develop knowledge about international standards and methodology in education, research and scientific work and in general, to **facilitate the enhancement of quality education in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia.**

CONCLUSION

The reconciliation and engagement policy of the GoG serves the goals of improving the situation of the population living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, achieving their welfare and supporting reconciliation and confidence building between conflict divided communities.

Education is one of the most crucial dimensions in the task of taking care of the population living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. In this respect, the GoG's positive commitments cover the establishment of all those mechanisms or opportunities, inter alia through humanitarian and depoliticized/status-neutral instruments, that will ensure access to all stages of education for the population in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, their engagement in quality pre-school, general education, higher, vocational and international education, simplification of procedures and steps for this purpose and adapting the latter to existing reality.

Therefore, the GoG initiatives presented in this document "A Step to a Better Future" develop new, simplified opportunities for the residents of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, based on international standards, to acquire education that is extremely important against the background of existing situation in the mentioned regions. Furthermore, planned initiatives and steps further reinforce the reconciliation and engagement policy of the GoG focused on human welfare and cooperation based on common interests.