

Western Georgia Blighted by Crime Wave

Author: [Nana Khubutia](#)

Smugglers and armed gangs flourishing in the border zone between western Georgia and Abkhazia

Georgia's prosecutor general Nugzar Gabrichidze has denounced his officials, especially those in the west of the country, for failing to curb a crime wave, stemming from the lucrative cross-border smuggling trade.

"I will sack the majority of prosecutors for unsatisfactory work in 2002," Gabrichidze threatened last week at an emergency meeting of his staff.

The prosecutor's office is especially worried about the Samegrelo region adjoining the breakaway republic of Abkhazia. The flow of smuggled petrol, cigarettes and hazelnuts across the border, combined with a trade in stolen cars, drugs and weapons have made this region a priority for Georgia's law enforcement agencies, eclipsing even the troubled Pankisi Gorge area in the northeast of the country.

So far this year there have been 13 major crimes and three high-profile murders in the Samegrelo area.

The politician Badri Zarandia, the leader of the Georgian National Union of Patriots, was gunned down in broad daylight in Zugdidi. On February 3 police chief Fridon Ponia was killed by smugglers and one of his officers, Valery Morgoshia also died in a shooting incident. Last week, two policemen were seriously wounded and a local gangster was killed in a shootout on Zugdidi's main street.

Local police say that gangsters on both sides of the Inguri river, which separates western Georgia from Abkhazia, are exploiting the border to escape capture.

"In most of our investigations of these incidents we've come to the conclusion that both Georgian and Abkhaz smugglers are involved," Gogi Nachkebia, chief of the regional office of the security ministry told IWPR. "This business is the main reason for the murders and explosions. And unfortunately we have to admit that men in uniform are often mixed up in the smuggling."

Smuggling has been a part of life in this area ever since the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict began more than 10 years ago. Locals say that Georgian partisans, who operate on Abkhaz territory, are some of the most active black market traders.

"The security zone in this post-conflict region stretches for about 70 kilometres along the river Inguri," Nachkebia said. "But the only place we can exercise real control over the people and goods passing through is the central bridge, so dozens of other bridges and fords are absolutely outside our control."

Gia Churgulia, a petrol salesman, does not conceal that he sells his customers smuggled fuel. "I know one of the partisans personally," Churgulia said. "He brings me petrol, I buy it off him for 70 tetri a litre (around 35 cents) and resell it for 85 tetri. And no one ever asks where the petrol comes from, only what quality is."

Although the law enforcement agencies estimate that 600-700 tonnes of petrol a month is smuggled through Abkhazia, no one has ever been arrested for the racket.

The authorities plead that as the Inguri is not a proper frontier, it is hard to prosecute the smugglers.

"We cannot lay any charges against anyone for the simple reason that the border zone with Abkhazia cannot legally be registered as a frontier," said Mebrdzol Chkadua, prosecutor for the Zugdidi region. "Georgia regards Abkhazia as being part of its territory. As a result, we have no legal basis to call this trade smuggling."

Independent analysts dismiss this line of reasoning. "The argument that Abkhazia is not another state is laughable in this case," lawyer Giorgy Vekua told IWPR. "Everyone knows you won't find rivers of oil flowing through Abkhazia and even our state has borders. All goods should have documents saying where they come from."

The crime wave in Samegrelo is one part of an overall surge in the crime rate. Last year, 16, 658 violations registered in Georgia - 996 more than in 2001. There were 29 cases of kidnapping and the abductors of three foreign businessmen, two Spanish and one British, remain at large.

President Eduard Shevardnaze has responded to public concerns by promising "a quick and massive attack on the criminal world". Plans are being made to hold a public meeting in Zugdidi prior to the launching of a large-scale anti-criminal operation similar to the one conducted in the Pankisi Gorge last year.

Members of the local police force warn, however, that they do not currently have the resources to cope. "The regional security services currently have only 30 employees, who cannot compete with smugglers who are armed to the teeth," said Gogi Nachkebia.

Many Zugdidi residents, meanwhile, prefer not to go the police at all.

"A few nights ago I was held up by three young guys," said Ruslan Gulua, who lives in the town. "They were pretty straightforward: they wanted my money, cell phone and cigarettes. A pack of cigarettes was all I had, so they beat me up. I didn't go to the police. Why? This sort of thing happens all the time."

"If we look at things realistically we have to say that the inertia of the Georgian law enforcement structures is actually helping the smugglers," concluded security ministry official Nachkebia. "You know in American films when the police and the FBI are both looking for a criminal and they argue who will get him first. With us it's the other way round - there's the criminal and everyone knows who he is. But is anyone going to catch him?"

Nana Khubutia is a journalist with Atinati radio station in Zugdidi

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