



**Georgia - Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 6 May 2010**

**Is a USSR passport issued in 1987 still considered a valid identity document in Georgia, Abkhazia and Russia? If not, what identity documents have replaced this for a Georgian living in Abkhazia and what year was this introduced? If a person's USSR passport states they are ethnically Georgian and born in Georgia but has been registered to an Abkhazian address since it was issued, would this cause them any problems if they tried to cross into Georgian territory (i.e. simply because they are a Georgian living in Abkhazia)?**

The *Institute for War & Peace Reporting* refers to Russian passports being issued to Abkhazians as follows:

“Abkhazians have infuriated Georgia by rushing to acquire Russian passports this month before Moscow tightens regulations on citizenship. Since June 1, the public organisation, the Congress of Russian Communities of Abkhazia, has been collecting Abkhazians’ Soviet-era travel documents. It has sent them to consular department specially set up by Moscow foreign ministry officials in the city of Sochi, on the Black Sea coast just north of breakaway region. When they have been checked, they are returned with a new page inserted certifying Russian citizenship. By June 25, an estimated 150,000 people in Abkhazia had acquired the new passports, joining 50,000 who already possess Russian citizenship. Seventy per cent of the population are now citizens of the federation.” (Institute for War & Peace Reporting (21 February 2005) *Abkhaz Rush For Russian Passports*)

In a section titled “2003-06: New Leadership in Georgia, New Agenda for Recovering South Ossetia” a *Human Rights Watch* report states:

“In the late 1990s the Russian government began proactively to offer to residents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia Russian citizenship and to facilitate their acquisition of Russian passports for foreign travel; by the end of 2007, according to the South Ossetian authorities, some 97 percent of residents of South Ossetia had obtained Russian passports.” (Human Rights Watch (23 January 2009) *Up In Flames: Humanitarian Law Violations and Civilian Victims in the Conflict over South Ossetia*, p.18)

A *Freedom House* report states:

“As many as 85 percent of Abkhazia's residents hold Russian passports and receive social benefits as Russian citizens, which they claim is a matter of necessity in light of the fact that Abkhaz travel documents are not internationally recognized.” (Freedom House (16 July 2009) *Freedom in the World 2009 - Abkhazia [Georgia]*)

An *Apsnypress* news agency report on Abkhazia issuing passports states:

“The president of Abkhazia, Vladislav Ardzinba, has signed a decree on the issuance of passports of citizens of the republic of Abkhazia from 1 November 2004. The president ordered the cabinet of ministers to approve regulations on passports of citizens of the republic of Abkhazia. The ministry of internal affairs was ordered to issue instructions on issuance, replacement, registration and safekeeping of passports.” (*Apsnypress* news agency (7 October 2004) *Georgia's breakaway Abkhazia to issue passports*)

A *Civil Georgia Online* article states:

“Authorities in breakaway Abkhazia said 146,121 residents of breakaway Abkhazia, which they say is 90% of the region’s population, were holders of the Abkhaz passports, Abkhaz news agency, *Apsnipress*, reported on December 7. Valery Malia, head of the breakaway region’s interior ministry’s passport and visa service, said the Abkhaz passports had been issued to 73,622 ethnic Abkhazians; 32,363 - Armenians; 17,795 - Russians and 12,156 Georgians living in the region. According to UN refugee agency, UNHCR, approximately 45,000 ethnic Georgians reside in the Gali district of Abkhazia. The breakaway region’s law on citizenship allows for dual citizenship, but only with the Russian Federation.” (*Civil Georgia Online* (7 December 2009) *Sokhumi Says 146,000 Abkhaz Passports Issued*)

In a section titled “Passports and identity documents” (paragraph 59) a report published by the Commissioner for Human Rights of the *Council of Europe* comments on passports being issued to members of the Georgian minority in Abkhazia, stating:

“The Commissioner discussed with the Abkhaz leadership and other interlocutors the policy as regards issuance of passports and identity documents to the Georgian minority in the Gali district, most of whom hold Georgian passports. The officials concerned have emphatically stated that the process of giving Abkhaz passports to Georgians who reside in Gali is carried out exclusively on a voluntary basis. However, according to Abkhaz law, an Abkhaz citizen is not allowed to concurrently hold Georgian citizenship.” (*Council of Europe: Commissioner for Human Rights (15 May 2009) Report on Human Rights Issues Following the August 2008 Armed Conflict, by Thomas Hammarberg, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe: Tbilisi, Sukhumi and Gali, 8 to 12 February 2009, p.13*)

Paragraph 60 of this report states:

“Apparently, the new Abkhaz passports are one of the main forms of identification within Abkhazia, and are said to be mandatory when filing court claims or collecting pensions. An alternative option for people who do not wish to obtain an Abkhaz passport is to obtain a residence permit; this is the option that most Gali residents have taken. However, the information as to the rights and entitlements applying to holders of residence permits is somewhat unclear. According to the representative of the de facto President in the Gali district, having a passport was a requirement for entering into any transaction involving real property (buying or selling); however, persons without an

Abkhaz passport would not be deprived of property they already owned.”  
(ibid, p.13)

Paragraph 61 refers to Georgians in Abkhazia obtaining residence permits as follows:

“Certain NGOs considered the possibility to have a residence permit was ‘the worst option’ for the people in Gali, as it inherently implied that holders of such permits can only remain on the territory for a limited period of time. Various interlocutors indicated that apart from being deprived of the possibility to engage in real estate transactions, people with a residence permit but no Abkhaz passport were prevented from any public sector employment (including in the health care and education professions), inheriting property, performing bank operations, establishing an organisation, enrolling in Sukhumi university, obtaining a driver’s licence or other business and administrative activities.” (ibid, pp.13-14)

Paragraph 62 comments on the reluctance of Georgians to apply for Abkhaz passports, stating:

“Within the Gali district, up to 10% of the population had applied for Abkhaz passports and nearly 250 had been issued as of February 2009. Most of those persons are apparently employees of the local administration. The reluctance of the large majority of Gali residents to apply for such passports is reportedly due to the requirement that they must renounce their Georgian citizenship (because of the lack of possibility of concurrent Abkhaz and Georgian citizenship under Abkhaz law), which for them would entail a number of disadvantages and difficulties, e.g. loss of social benefits, and which many experience as a distressing prospect directly affecting their sense of identity.” (ibid, p.14)

In a section titled “Arrest Procedures and Treatment While in Detention” the 2010 *United States Department of State* country report on Georgia states:

“Georgian authorities detained a number of individuals near the administrative boundary lines on various charges, including illegal entry into the country. Such individuals often carried only Russian passports with no evidence of authorization to enter Georgia.” (United States Department of State (11 March 2010) *2009 Human Rights Report: Georgia*)

In Footnote 94 an *International Crisis Group* report states:

“The vast majority of returned IDPs in Gali have no fixed legal status, as they hold Georgian passports, not Abkhazian or Russian documents. Crisis Group interviews, NGOs in Gali and Abkhazian officials in Sukhumi, December 2009.” (International Crisis Group (26 February 2010) *Abkhazia: Deepening Dependence*, p.10)

In a section titled “Population and Citizens” this report states:

“Abkhazian authorities now limit movement over the Inguri bridge, the lone administrative border crossing to the rest of Georgia, essentially to those with Abkhazian or Russian passports. Those holding only Georgian passports are

required to obtain a special permit, which can be time-consuming. Local residents say that it is sometimes possible to cross without these documents, including by using old Soviet passports or paying small bribes.” (ibid, pp.9-10)

## References:

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This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

**Sources Consulted:**

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European Country of Origin Information Network  
Freedom House  
Google  
Human Rights Watch  
International Crisis Group  
Refugee Documentation Centre Query Database  
UNHCR Refworld  
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