the first protest in Chiatura to avoid the ecological disaster

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1. ***Everyone has the right to live in a healthy environment and enjoy the natural environment and public space. Everyone has the right to receive full information about the state of the environment in a timely manner. Everyone has the right to care for the protection of the environment. The right to participate in the adoption of decisions related to the environment shall be ensured by law.***
2. ***Environmental protection and the rational use of natural resources shall be ensured by law, taking into account the interests of current and future generations.***

CONSTITUTION OF GEORGIA, article 29.

Tsirkvali is the only village in Chiatura district, where the population, for the first time in the last 16 years, stood up against the decision made by the government without their participation, in order to protect this constitutional right.

All two attempts of "Georgian Manganese" to excavate the mine to extract manganese in Tsirkvali ended in vain. The tractors and the company's cooperators brought to the village were driven away by the local residents.

Valeri Chitadze, 34, is a resident of Tsiirkvali. After graduating from the Technical University, he worked as a resource officer in the Chiatura Public School for seven years. Three months ago, he gave up his job and devoted all his time to developing organic farming in Tsirkvali. The farm is divided into several parts - corn is grown in one plot, Imeretian soybeans in another. Two hundred meters away, on the stream, there is an old

mill that traditionally grinds grain. A small wooden house stands near the mill; there is also a zucchini garden - crops are grown everywhere without fertilizer and chemicals, following the laws of nature – he takes care of the environment and people's health. Two years ago, Valeri traced Imeretian soybean seeds in one of the villages of Chiatura. Last year he gained 30 kilograms; this year, he expects much more. He also produces milk and cheese from soy for vegetarians. Valeri plans to produce Tirishkvali Tetri - this grape variety is now only for collections. White, gentle and harmonious wine is made from it. Together with the young people who had not yet emigrated from Tsirkvali, he thought about the village's development of agrotourism and ecotourism. The tourist route also included the unique Bondi Cave, explored by an international Stone Age expedition two years ago. The plans of young people from Tsirkavali turned upside down after July 7, when the "Georgian Manganese" cooperators brought tractors into the village and started digging the ground to extract manganese.

"As soon as we heard the news, we arrived immediately. One of my plots is 10 meters from where the land was dug, and the other is a little further away, maybe 100 meters. There are also houses here. From here, 30-40 meters away, the small river originates, from which we use water for irrigation and drinking. My mill also works with water from this river. If they dig it, there is a big risk that that river will also be lost. If they start extracting manganese here, nothing will make sense, not only what we have planned, but even the continuation of what I have been putting all my physical resources for the last eight years. There will be no organic farming anymore, and the air will be polluted, the water and the soil will be polluted" Valery is checking the experience of the neighbouring villages:

> **Darkveti, Mgvimevi, Rgani. Closer around us - Khalifauri, Tabagrebi. You have been there, haven't you? You know very well what is happening there. We do not want to face the same dangers and misfortunes.**

There are already open pit mines in the yards near the houses. As a result, the environment is polluted, forests and fields disappear, and huge pits remain. That is why we are against it, and we are not going to keep quiet.

Only Tsirkvali and upper villages remain unexcavated in this area, where organic farming can be established. My goal is to set an example for people who were forced to believe that if there is no manganese extraction, Chiatura will remain hungry, poverty will increase, and we have no other choice."

The cooperators, expelled from Tsiirkvali on July 7, returned on the 8th and started digging the ground in another place, even closer to the residential houses. The locals repelled "Georgian Manganese" representatives for the second time, and this time they chased them out of the village.

"For some people, the cherry plums, corn, and beans here are laughable, but for me, this place, this nature, this field, this environment means everything".

I am 65. I have been living here for 46 years. When a big earthquake happened in April 1991, our houses in Tirishkval were also destroyed. I didn't leave here then either. God bless Zviad Gamsakhurdia. He helped us with everything; they built us new houses. Now some company wants to destroy it and take what I have to get rich. Who are they to do this without me, without asking us? We have a license to extract manganese on 16,000 hectares in Chiatura - they say - you can't stop us. As long as I am physically able, I will fight. I will also stand in front of the tractor, take a hoe and call them from here so that we can preserve this environment" - Marina Metskhovrishvili lives in Tsiirkvali, the closest to the place "raided" by "Georgian Manganese" cooperators twice in a row. She also calls out to his neighbours as soon as he notices a tractor and reprimands those who no longer live in the village permanently but allow the company to extract minerals from their plots.

Women are the most active among opponents. There are several reasons for this - criminals mobilized in the villages of Chiaturi in favour of "Georgian Manganese" find it more challenging to oppress protesting women.

The company has another proven method of forcing residents to agree, which it uses in many villages of Chiatura. They even reminded the protesters: "Don't do that, or you will be begging us to evict you." This happens in the cases when the company starts extracting manganese near the settlement or directly in the residential areas, gradually expanding the territory, huge pits and ditches appear around, there is no longer a forest, the soil is also degraded, manganese dioxide and other heavy metal oxides from the open pits dust are carried by wind and rain for kilometres, the air and water become polluted, and life there becomes unbearable.

Due to these violations, and pollution of the Kvirila River with manganese-washed waters, in 2013-2017, "Georgian Manganese" was fined 416 million GEL due to the damage caused to the environment.

To eliminate environmental problems, the state-appointed Nikoloz Chikovani as a special manager in the company for three years.

"The company, which has been holding a license to extract manganese ore for years and has been carrying out manganese enrichment and processing activities, has been fined by the state and given reasonable deadlines for the correction of the difficult ecological situation at the site, continued to operate in serious violation of environmental legislation.

> **The situation, both in terms of river and soil pollution and degradation, was not corrected by the company, but made much worse, which creates a situation on the ground equal to the situation of an ecological disaster" - this is how the Ministry of Environment Protection and Natural Resources explained the appointment of a special manager in the company in 2017.**

Nikoloz Chikovani is a friend of Giorgi Kapanadze, nicknamed "Rizha" (Redhead), a businessman close to the "Georgian Dream". Kapanadze is an influential shareholder of "Georgian Manganese" and chairman of the supervisory board. The special manager was

supposed to solve the problems, but open pit ore mining increased, and the dire ecological situation in Chiatura worsened. As a result, fines imposed on the company were significantly reduced and cancelled. However, in 2020, based on the Ministry of Environmental Protection petition, the court extended the term of office of the special administrator for another three years until May 2023.

The owner of 100% of the shares of "Georgian Manganese" LLC is "Georgian American Eloise" LLC, registered offshore in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.

Last year, "Mountain News" prepared several reports from Chiatura about the uncontrolled and destructive practice of manganese mining, the worst environmental conditions, and the oppression of people. But unfortunately, the Ministry of Environment Protection and Agriculture of Georgia did not react to the detected violations.

Nino Gujaraidze, executive director of the non-governmental organization "Green Alternative", who has been monitoring the activities of "Georgian Manganese" since 2006, believes that the only reason for avoiding the inspection of the company's activities and creating comfortable conditions for it can be the informal instruction of high officials:

> **"This situation is a visible manifestation of elite corruption."**

Nino Gujaraidze confirms that in the 16 years since the issuance of the manganese mining license, Tsirkvali is the only village in the Chiatura Region where the residents stood up to the company's actions to maintain a healthy environment: "No one from any village applied to the court to cancel the license. The license was issued so that the villages of Chiaturi did not know anything about it. Even when the license was sold in an auction with significant irregularities, these documents were unavailable. People didn't know, and still don't know now, after all these years, that the license extends to their village, and they only find out when the company starts mining the area for manganese. No matter how pessimistic we are, given what happens in court, litigation is difficult, and cases take years to resolve, we should still go to court. An abundance of disputes will create the possibility that the company will no longer be able to do so. Two or three people will agree and start digging; many mines are in the residents' yards, and those who refused before are also forced to agree. The solution is to appeal. People should fight for their rights, and we are ready to help them legally."