

The Abkhazians and the Ossetians did not gain independence, they got full dependence on Russia

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10 years have passed since the 2008 August war. The State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality Ketevan Tsikhelashvili in her interview to “InterPressNews” gives assessment to the post war situation in the occupied territories. The State Minister also talks about the programs implemented by Georgian side and actions of occupation regimes.

- Mrs. Tsikhelashvili, how would you assess past 10 years period. What is the outcome of infringement of Georgian sovereignty and occupation of its territories by Russians?

-Ten years have passed since the most tragic days in the history of Georgia. First of all, we remember and pay tribute to all those, who died during the war – heroes, as well as civilians. It is not just recollection of our history, it is everyday processes and everyday challenges for thousands of people during these 10 days. Therefore we cannot definitely talk about these events just in the past terms. The outcome is extremely hard – hard from humanitarian as well as safety perspective – refugees are not able to return to their homes. In more than 60 villages people have to deal with barbed wires, they see how Russian soldiers move around, the population suffers of illegal detentions, they are deprived of their right to have access to their pieces of lands, to visit graves, to enter church and light candles. This reality is very harsh.

Conditions of population isolated by barbed wires is even harder from social-economic, humanitarian and human rights point of view. I don't only mean ethnic Georgian population, living in Gali and Akhagori and really being victims of ethnic discrimination. I mean all people, since actually very few of them have retained feeling of future perspective. Consequently, it is not a surprise that compared to the last Soviet census of 1989, the population in Tskhinvali region is reduced by 80 % and population of Abkhazia is reduced by 70%. Naturally, it happened mostly because of exodus of ethnic Georgians, however that is not the only reason. Tskhinvali region recently was also abandoned by the Ossetians and the region became extended military base/ polygon for the last 10 years. Almost every day people can witness explosions of military drills – unfortunately this has become “natural” way of life. More than 100 such maneuvers are conducted in the both regions every year and it is obvious that the population is not and cannot be happy with it....

The reality is that three times as much people are arrested during attempts to cross the border from Tskhinvali towards the rest of Georgia, than vice versa. Desire of the people to come from both Abkhazia and Tskhinvali is increasing and at the same time passes are closed.

There are anonymous users of Facebook, who “unmask” and try to condemn for “betrayal” individuals communicating with the Georgians. This is undisguised and actually rather easy to detect policy of dividing and separation, serving to Russian military and political interests for short run.

For long run it would not have been in Russian interests either, since it would have been more beneficiary to have good and solid neighboring relations with free and well developed Georgia. Neither it can be possible to stop people with such rigid methods, with armored vehicles and barbed wires, and deprive them of opportunity of development and progress, especially in the 21st century. Humanitarian, social-economic and security issues at spots work against anyone.

It does not serve to the interests either the Georgians, or the Abkhazians and the Ossetians. Instead of independence declared by Russia, Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region received full dependence on Russia. Especially in Abkhazian society people frequently and absolutely fairly express fear and criticize Russia, since there is a fear to lose their identity. The dynamic of past 10 years is very adverse, directed against our interests, or in other words time in this case does not work in favor of local population.

- Maybe in this case time works in favor of the occupied regime? You have frequently mentioned that the environment in the occupied territories does not benefit either side – neither the Georgians, nor the Ossetians or the Abkhazians. We conduct peaceful policy, we implement lots of programs and in return we get barbed wires, kidnapping and rather hard situation in the occupied territories. Does our policy, conducted by the Government of Georgia in relation to occupied regions, have bilateral outcome?

- We carry out programs for the Ossetians, Abkhazians and other ethnic groups, who live in the occupied territories and are part of Georgian population. Their aim is to overcome the conflict, which started in the 90-ies and brought much pain, and to restore relations between us. We do not remove barbed wires in the villages, which population complain, that they do not have an entry to the rest of the territory of Georgia. They demand to open the pass, because it has a vital importance for them. Barbed wire is not the response of local communicates. Barbed wire is the image and face of the force, interested in separation, face of the occupation regime. Barbwire has become the symbol of Russian occupation, directed against humans.

Barbwire cannot and will not be sustainable measure, to constantly enclose people with. Why do we strive towards EU integration? Or why do people want to provide good education for their children? Or generally speaking why do we wish to have better lives? Simply enough, this is human, natural requirement. It is impossible to keep people in barbwire prison, to deprive them of all opportunities and to have these people happy. Barbwire is not response of local people to our policy, it is response of occupation forces. But we have no other choice, this

is the way we need to keep going. We have lost each other because of the conflict, barbwire and propaganda, and we need to regain each other again. At the same time we need to carry out policy of de-occupation with regard to Russia.

- Where is the key to change the situation that can deal with such steps of the occupying states?

– Lets judge based on the outcomes. For the recent years we have abandoned the loud rhetoric but many steps are made with respect of engagement. Our policy is apparently peaceful. We have openly propose dialogue to the Abkhazians and Ossetians. We said: Yes! We communicate with Russia, as the main side of the conflict with whom we have had war in 2008, though, at the same time, we, Georgians, are ready to talk with the Ossetians and Abkhazians implying solution of problems and issues related to the conflict at this level. For the recent period, contacts between people have expanded, they are interested to see each other. People are attracted by the benefits, they come to attend concerts, football matches, etc. Turnover has increased, while, simultaneously the barricades were increased as well. The barricades are increased to prevent such contacts. You asked me, what the solution is. The answer is simple – as many contacts between the people as possible. The most effective and powerful instrument to eliminate the stereotypes is to develop contacts. I have seen tens of meetings where the image of enemy disappears for few hours. People understand that we have many in common, maybe, our grandmothers were even the relatives, we discover that we have similar values and traditions and irrespective of separation, we still have many things in common. The solution can be our common desire to have better life and better future. Therefore, we presented a new peace initiative “A Step to A Better Future” offering specific ways to these people, on the one hand, not mentioning the issue of status, so painful and politicized for these people, while improving the economic situation as well as education and facilitate access to various services, including visa free travel. Our young people visit Rome and Barcelona, I doubt that people in Tskhinvali, whose freedom of travel is restricted, would not like to visit these cities. With reasonable, common interests, we really have the opportunity to find the solution that would be beneficial for all.

- It is known that Georgian side implements various programs for the people residing in the occupied territories, including new initiative “A Step to a Better Future” that you have mentioned. What is its content and goal?

- We cannot even give public answer about what the state performs, not to endanger these directions in the future. More or less everyone is aware of health care programs, there are also programs in the spheres of agriculture, environment, programs related to power supply. In the recent period there were more frequent meetings between the representatives of some groups – teachers, specialists of different areas. At these meetings the status issue is not discussed. The

conversation is ended immediately if the status is mentioned. We discuss the creative solutions to the issues. Our goal is to continue the engagement policy and provide assistance to those, who need it. We initiated “A Step to a Better Future” in order to support the residents of the occupied territories to create the constructive space for a dialogue, collaboration and more stable and safe environment. There were no expectations that this initiative will be accepted, in political respect, the response was – not bad or good, recognize us and only after this. Indeed, these are the neutral status decisions. It cannot be unattractive and at the public and individuals’ level there are positive signals that they wish to get some benefits from these incentives. These are careful messages, though, not very careful ones. What we have achieved? In the very complicated situation we maintained peace. Let us recall the murder of Tatumashvili, for 26 days we were waiting that they would return the body at least. It is very hard to control the negative emotions and prevent escalation. We live with such provocations. This was the case when Giga Otkhoshoria was killed, when David Basharuli went missing and so on. Such actions always bring hostility and this tactics is not good also for the ossetians and many of them made efforts to reach to assure they had not shared such position.

- “Otkhoshoria-Tatumashvili list” has the form of some kind of prevention so that such crimes were prevented in the future and the representatives of the occupation regime were afraid to commit such crimes. How do you think, can this list become some restricting factor to prevent such facts?

- Ministry of Foreign Affairs works to ensure that the sanctions actually affected the persons who are criminals. It is a big tragedy, when young people are murdered so violently. It is a tragedy as well, when guilty persons are not punished at all. In case of Otkhoshoria’s murder, we all have seen who the murderer was but this person is free and this is a problem. Both, Abkhazians and Ossetian sides, as well as entire society should think about this. We all should adopt high profile on the issue of crime. We cannot accept the crime. We shall fight with it mercilessly. Criminals have no nationality, no one can like Georgian criminal because the victim is of the other ethnic origin. This should be our approach to this list. As for prevention in general, there is IPRM and as we have this mechanism, we’d better use it more effectively. Abkhazians and ossetians participate in the Geneva International Discussions. Our proposal is to negotiate with the abkhazians and ossetians beyond these formats. This proposal is open since 2013. We have repeated this within the frames of “A Step to A Better Future” and we repeat it regularly. We imply different parts of the society – farmers living beyond the dividing line, as well as the professional groups, even decision-makers, though, of course, not as independent persons, as we are not talking about the status. There are status-neutral formats and dialogue can be at all levels and we are ready for this. Unfortunately, the other party does not show similar readiness though they always claim that Georgians do not talk to them. We

say that we have to talk to abkhazians and ossetians, talk about education, health care, agriculture etc. We have some conversations but not on the regular basis.

- After murder of Tatunashvili, former Prime Minister of Georgia, Giorgi Kvirikashvili applied to upgrade the level of Geneva format. What are the views of the new Prime Minister with regard to the Geneva discussions?

- The Prime Minister has emphasized significance of Geneva format while presenting the Government program. We shall go on with constructive participation in this format as our objective is to deal with the problems through dialogue. If this requires any changes or strengthening of the format, we are ready to do this. We always have the incentives, when the solutions are required, whether this is non-use of force, access to the international mechanisms, returning of the refugees or teaching children in their native language at the education institutions. Georgian party discusses not only the problems within this format, we deliver the proposals to offer the new solutions. The problem is that no readiness can be seen from the side of the other party. This format is used by Russia to politically justify the outcome achieved by force and Russia always tries to stay aside and serve as a guarantor of security, while actually it is the occupation army. It tells us, Georgians and Ossetians, talk to one another while it does nothing except for hampering.

- In relation to the August War, there is polemic who has started a war. How would you, as a State Minister, evaluate this and whether it is correct to appeal to this issue?

- Generally, such polemics is incorrect as war of 2008 has not occurred instantly and without any preconditions. You just ask the population and they will tell you that people hide in their cellars because of whiz of the bullets. There were attacks, provocative firing from the side of Russia, there was a smell of gunpowder.

This war has commenced in the 90s. What is common between this conflict and the conflicts in our neighborhood? This is Russia, participating with different roles and helmets and manages to maintain each of these conflicts unresolved. This conflict started not in 2008. In my opinion, many mistakes were made... In 2004, the trade took place in Ergneti and this was indeed the shady economy but the people were close to one another and the conflict was almost dealt with on the level of grass-roots. I remember very well the special operation and after this, the contacts gradually disappeared. To the question, what would be right to terminate trade in Ergneti or to normalize it, I, as a State Minister, would answer that the latter would be the correct way. Elimination of trade and use of force method was incorrect as the conflict between Georgians and Ossetians was completed and there was no problem of travel; now we are in a very strange situation. Where the shipmaster sees the iceberg, the main objective is to avoid the collision in some way. No one disputes that this was Russian aggression

and intervention. Therefore, this is the serious responsibility of Russian Federation as the subject of international law and no any other questions can exist here...

In summary, 10 years is a quite sufficient time to fully understand, what has happened to us and what the outcome was. When we, Abkhazians and Ossetians analyze this, analyze, we see that this is not what we wanted. I mean people living beyond the barbed wires. Therefore, I state that this situation does not serve to the interests of any of us. We should put the questions, what would be the outcome, if this situation persists and how we can change the situation? I see as a solution building of bridges between us, collaboration on the specific and pragmatic issues, confidence building and reconciliation. What do we want for the future? In my opinion, today we all can agree. I am sure that mothers in Tskhinvali, as well as those living in Sokhumi or Tbilisi, desire that there was peace, well-developed future for their children. Peace is the most significant priority. And in the conditions of permanent provocations the peace is very fragile, to ensure peace, the confrontation should be eliminated and not escalated through confidence building and reconciliation. We have to follow this way. This is a very hard way, the way of overcoming pain and many visible and invisible obstacles but we have to overcome it and do everything for this.