



## **From Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict to the Possibility of Returning to One Another**

Today, on 27 September is 24<sup>th</sup> anniversary of fall of Sokhumi, Georgian-Abkhazian tragedy that turned about 300 thousand people into the refugees and sacrificed about 40 thousand lives.

What were the most significant changes that occurred for these years and what were the lessons we learned – ways and visions for Georgian-Abkhazian conflict resolution: “Pirveli’s” interview with Ketevan Tsikhelashvili, State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality.

**- Today is the 24<sup>th</sup> anniversary of fall of Sokhumi. How would you assess the past period? What are your conclusions? What are the achievements and mistakes?**

The main conclusion one can make is that the conflict, confrontation and war are unacceptable. Peace, human life and dignity – these are the main values and all actions and steps should be made based on this position. Our government’s declared approach is that the human life is the main value, and conflict resolution policies and especially the reconciliation and involvement policies oriented towards restoration of trust in the society split by the conflict, rely on this fundamental postulate. We should understand that current situation is detrimental for people, whether these are Georgians, Abkhazians or Ossetians. Therefore, in my opinion, one more conclusion is that these were very heavy 24 years, especially for Abkhazian Region. Today, the situation there is indeed severe in economic, criminal, health and education spheres. There is heavy situation with respect of human rights and security as well. Russia takes advantage of the illusion related to so called independence, maintaining the conflict in unresolved condition and promotes extensive Russification process. Certainly, Abkhazian society is clearly aware in the danger to its identity, especially significant in the recent years. The agreements made after 2008 are actually the chronicle of declared annexing. This is not the situation corresponding to the interests of Abkhazian and Georgian societies.

As for the mistakes, in my opinion, too much time was lost before any effective steps were made for conflict resolution. Today, the conflict resolution and the process of approach of two societies is prevented by artificial barriers. In my opinion, loss of time is the main mistake; time does not work for our interests. These steps should be made in time and I hope that the society beyond the dividing line shares this opinion.

Achievements? Perhaps the fact that there is no large scale armed confrontation. We do our best to prevent this. This is very significant as human life is the main value. But the dignity and human rights are of significance as well and here, especially for the recent years, many steps were made to relieve the heavy situation resulting for long term occupation for the people living there.

**- If you were ethnic Abkhazian living in the occupied territory, would you have desire to become the part of Georgia again?**

Frankly, I have thought about this. Perhaps, first of all, it is significant to understand the existing situation – what does the situation means for the Abkhazians, the Abkhazian society? The situation in the occupied territory actually does not serve to the interests of the Abkhazians. Naturally, from this perspective, for any reasonable society and people it should be unacceptable to live beyond the barbed wire, isolated from the outer world. If I were them, I would not desire to sacrifice future freedom, welfare of my children to all these. I would wish them to live in the protected, safe environment, with high quality education and health care, with freedom of movement, having the opportunity to satisfy their interests and desires. Hence, I would think what could be the only choice except for full Russification.

**- What can Georgia offer to the Abkhazians and Abkhazia?**

We should build the common future and this future must be different from the existing situation there. This is well developed European future to which Georgia strives and naturally, this should be of interest for the Abkhazian society thinking reasonably. In addition, the experience of the conflict is indeed very heavy. I think, this is similarly painful for all of us. There are the mothers who have lost their children on both sides and this is a very severe trauma. But, in addition to this experience, we have plenty of common – similarity of culture, mixed families, relatives. Currently, all these are artificially divided. I know that certain part of Abkhazian society is interested in the prospects related to European orientation of development and all these could be achieved only with joint efforts. Hence, I think, Georgia, with its way of development, offers interesting choice to the Abkhazians and Ossetians. The model of relations and cohabitation offered to them implies maximal protection of identity of each individual and each ethnic group providing similar opportunities to all. Naturally, for the Abkhazian society their culture, identity is of great significance. Abkhazian identity, culture and language are similarly significant for the Georgian state.

**- In your opinion, what is the main reason of non-resolution of the conflict and what is the role of Russian Federation in this process?**

This conflict has the one and only dimension – Russian-Georgian one, as Russia acts similarly in our entire neighborhood. It promotes escalation of conflicts or, at least, prevents their

resolution. Moscow regards the unresolved conflicts as its main instrument of influence over these countries. In my opinion, in the long run, this is against the interests of Russia as well. But this is the politics currently implemented by Kremlin. If we regard this period, we shall see that in the critical moments Russia has always intervened in a destructive way to prevent any steps for conflict resolution. Currently its acts openly, with the barbed wires and soldiers, closing the paths, with the policies restricting the human rights, Kremlin attempts to make break-up between the peoples deeper and prevent increasing number of contacts that takes place in the recent years. What happens here, i.e. the unresolved conflicts, is the Russia's strategy to maintain its influence among the neighboring countries and turn our development from European and democratic development to Russia but this will never happen. But, unfortunately, victims of all these in real time are people.

**- If not Russia, would Abkhazia rejoin Georgia?**

We have to return to one another – this would be the right approach and right formulation. Of course, if, hypothetically we exclude the Russian factor, the situation here would be absolutely different. This does not mean that we have no work at all to improve Georgian-Abkhazian relations. Unfortunately, the conflict and the years passed have impacted these relations. In the people born after the conflict the estrangement is deeper, as they have no experience of common life. Naturally, the efforts are required to restore the broken bridge between the societies. That's why our peace policies have two main dimensions. The first one is freeing from Russian occupation and the other one – reconciliation now in Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian relations. The former is the most significant as at the strategic level the main problem is occupation though there is much to be done with respect of reconciliation. Here the peace resource is indeed very serious.

- What levers are required for successful implementation of the strategy of restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity?

The policies of non-recognition from the side of international community confirm that the Russian recognition policies have failed. In my opinion, long-term and increasing support from the side of international community is of great significance. This is not a passive support, they do not recognize so called independence of these territories, calling for Russia to terminate and revoke this recognition and stop destructive actions. This is one of the directions where extensive work will further continue, using all available levers. The other one is our internal politics – or approaches to involvement and reconciliation are very dynamic. Though, in many cases, we cannot discuss these issues openly, regarding their sensitive nature. In the future, we plan to implement numerous incentives to provide wider services to people, share the benefits originating from the European agenda and work on trust building. We should act with firm support from the international community to deal with the conflict promptly and peacefully.

**- You mentioned prompt dealing with the conflict. Does this imply changes in foreign and domestic policies in the conflict resolution process?**

This direction will be maintained in the foreign policies, until freeing from occupation. This has the other dimensions as well, like returning of the refugees etc. Similarly, with respect of involvement and reconciliation, we plan more changes at the level of specific incentives and projects dealing with simplification of crossing dividing lines, social, trade, economic opportunities, new incentives in the spheres of education and health care etc.

It is significant to understand that the conflict is the greatest misfortune between us. We should realize that the conflict outcomes are indeed very severe for the Abkhazian and Georgian societies. We should also understand that there is no any other choice except for reconciliation, trust building, contacts between the societies as we, all want to have peaceful and well developed future.