

## Interview 'My reconciliation policy is not about just getting territories back. It's about people'



Ketevan Tsikhelashvili has served as Georgia's State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, responsible for coordinating the country's conflict resolution policy, since 2016. Tsikhelashvili sat down with OC Media to discuss the ministry's successes and failures, her new peace initiative, and the barriers to and prospects for peace.

**OC Media:** What do you consider to be the biggest success in Georgia's reconciliation policy during your time in office?

**Ketevan Tsikhelashvili:** I think when we're asked this question, we sometimes omit things we take for granted, for instance, that during quite difficult times, regionally, geopolitically, but also locally, despite many provocations, we kept the peace.

Peace is a very tentative notion when blatant human rights violations happen, even as tragic as a person's life being taken, as was the case for Archil Tatunashvili. People have a lot of rage and they protest.

It is very important to understand that it is not the cause of either Georgians or Ossetians. People don't want that. It's not in their favour what happens and these provocations equally damage communities on each side of the divide. We have mitigated these provocations and we keep peace, which is the number one priority for Georgia and conflict resolution.

Most important is that the peace initiative — the biggest step in at least the last ten years — was put forward recently. 'A Step to a Better Future' was launched by the government after over a year of consultations, reaching out to the other side, testing, and finally bringing it out. I think it lays a very solid ground for reconciliation over time.

**OC Media:** One of the aims of the programme is to simplify access to EU and Georgian markets for Abkhazian and South Ossetian entrepreneurs. Given that the Georgian market was already open to Abkhazian entrepreneurs, what incentives does this programme offer to kindle these entrepreneurs' interests in conducting business in Georgian-controlled territory?

**Ketevan Tsikhelashvili:** We have an even longer — 25-year-long period of conflict — and an abundance of mistakes. Unfortunately, people can see better in hindsight. Having a conflict at all was the biggest mistake from all sides. It should have never happened. Unfortunately, we cannot change the past, but we can change some things, taking stock of this past, for the future.

What's important and what's already being done, at least on 'this side' of the divide, is admitting that the conflict caused pain — for everyone and it's a shared pain.

There were some clearly missed opportunities. I think the scrapping of the Ergneti Market in 2004 (a sporadic illegal market that emerged close to Tskhinvali) was a mistake. It brought together many local Georgians and Ossetians to trade and in fact helped the conflict be exhausted on a community level. I believe, it had an unique value for peace and reconciliation. It could have been dealt with differently, be transformed and legalised.

After 2008, the policy was mostly rhetoric, although some elements of it worked well — for instance, the healthcare programme [providing free medical treatment to inhabitants of Abkhazia and South Ossetia]. And the healthcare programme works best now, as we are in power. We've had a six- to seven-fold increase in Abkhazians and Ossetians coming over to Tbilisi-controlled territory for healthcare purposes alone.

**OC Media:** There are no official statistics on how many people participate in these kind of initiatives. You mentioned a sharp increase in the numbers for the medical programme, would you be able to name some numbers for how many people per year cross into Georgian-controlled territory?

**Ketevan Tsikhelashvili:** We have a register, but we don't make it public. We are talking about thousands overall, so it's not just tens or so.

**OC Media:** Recently, Georgia addressed FIFA to protest a football match which was to be held between Abkhazia and Nigeria, arguing that the event would contradict the principle of Georgia's territorial integrity. This particular event was supposed to take place in Sukhumi, but Georgia has also often blocked the participation of Abkhazians in athletic and cultural events abroad, which has provoked negative reactions in Abkhazian society. Aren't you worried that such measures could hinder reconciliation between Abkhazians and Georgians?

**Ketevan Tsikhelashvili:** I don't know who addressed FIFA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Football Federation perhaps.

But here is the point. When I hear that for instance, a cultural troop of Abkhaz kids are unhappy or crying when being returned home... I have a confession. I really don't like that kids may be returned, disappointed, or misused, or abused — like for instance kids in Gali (ethnic Georgians) who are deprived of the possibility to speak their language in kindergartens or schools and it's tragic.

One could really not be against cultural exchange or [self] promotion, but the problem is when it's all used for promoting political agenda, [their] recognition policy. If the kids are used as 'agents' for political recognition, that creates a contradiction with [international] policy of non-recognition.

I know of cases in which host countries took measures themselves, while some in Abkhazia thought the Georgian Foreign Ministry did it. Anyway, it's not only about me, it's mostly the job of the Foreign Ministry.

The problem is that there are 300,000 people who are also Abkhazians, when it comes to their place of origin, their home [ethnic Georgians and others displaced during the war], and these people are completely deprived of a say.

And then we talk about the returns, in Geneva for instance... Unfortunately we don't discuss it most of the time, because Russians, and also Abkhazians and Ossetians, don't want to engage in discussions. The returns don't mean that suddenly thousands of people will rush [into Abkhazia and South Ossetia]. No, and they wouldn't, the process doesn't function like that. It's very complex, requiring a long-term and multifaceted solution.

But the most important thing is that they cannot be denied, just like that, [their rights].

**OC Media:** Currently, the European Union strictly follows Georgia's policy on Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which Abkhazia and South Ossetia claim contributes to their isolation. Would you welcome the European Union to conduct a policy towards these regions independently of Tbilisi?

**Ketevan Tsikhelashvili:** What does it mean to operate independently of Tbilisi? The EU strongly supports Georgia's peace policy. In the meantime, it has its own policy of engagement without recognition, and we support it.

Visa free travel for instance, which is granted for Georgian passports, cannot be done directly with Sukhumi, with 'Abkhaz passports'. This is a clear example of this non-recognition policy.

And these assumptions that now Georgians are pulling all the strings... We aren't. We foster international engagement as much as possible; the problem is elsewhere.

For instance a recently adopted [Abkhazian] 'regulation' restricted all the de facto government's employees from taking part in any event organised by international organisations. People who are funded with international funds are often persecuted. It's like a replica of the Russian Law on Foreign Agents, and the Abkhaz themselves fear that.

This is the isolation imposed on them. This is a real sanction that is imposed on them. And they are definitely not happy. This is a problem — not that Tbilisi is doing that. We are not, not at this time.

**OC Media:** The Russian delegation in the Geneva discussions, with representatives of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, often expresses frustration with the lack of progress in the talks. Do you believe the discussions should be continued in their current format?

**Ketevan Tsikhelashvili:** If anybody has grounds to be frustrated it's us, myself included. I have seen and conducted fourteen rounds [of humanitarian working group meetings at the Geneva discussions]. Fourteen is a lot for one life. They're very important, but not because we have progress on any major issues so far. Unfortunately, we don't.

Russia seemingly tries to use these talks to legitimise what they have achieved through their hard power policy and to back away from their responsibilities as a party to the conflict. In Geneva, their tendency

is to say, 'You guys talk, and we will lean back, as we are not a party to the conflict but a big security guard'.

But when it comes to 'us talking' outside Geneva, all I've seen for years is that those talks are being hampered by Russia in many ways.

There is little movement towards real talks. Also to some very achievable humanitarian solutions.

For instance, when I've been talking [in Geneva] about the access of a group of elderly women to cemeteries on Easter, or about a few farmers who have land across the dividing line, I don't call it an occupation line. That was not the main point. I say, let us agree that at 10 o'clock in the morning and at 5 o'clock in the evening, on these days, this guy can tend his field. That's it.

But what they answer is 'first recognise the border, then we can talk about it'. An opposite, politicised position from us would be if we always called it an occupation line. When you seek a humanitarian solution and get such an answer, that's a stumbling block. That's an over-politicisation of humanitarian issues, and this is frustrating.

Yet, this is the only format stemming from the EU-brokered ceasefire agreement, where it still stands that Russia has to fulfil these obligations [of removing their troops to pre-August 2008 positions and letting international security mechanisms in].

At my first round in Geneva, I invited the Abkhaz participants to also set up a different line of talks. Still waiting for reciprocity.

**OC Media: There is a widespread idea that the leader of Georgian Dream, Bidzina Ivanishvili, is the country's main decision maker. Is Ivanishvili involved in shaping Georgia's reconciliation policy?**

**Ketevan Tsikhelashvili:** The general lines for reconciliation policy are shared. Ivanishvili himself was a prime minister who voiced readiness [to reconcile] in August 2013, for first time for Georgian Dream's history in power. He said in Gori [on the fifth anniversary of the August War] to Abkhazians and Ossetians that we are ready and open for dialogue from today on. So he definitely agrees with this policy.

The whole parliamentary majority supported me recently on the new peace initiative. It has been very encouraging because these politicians were very outspoken for reconciliation, for confidence, for returning to each other. They did not say we have to return to Abkhazia or South Ossetia, they said we have to find ways back to each other, which is very important.

This is also a slogan for myself, because my reconciliation policy is not about just getting territories back. It's about people, first and foremost. About finding ways back to each other. This is a very important message.

You go to Zardiantkari or Khurvaleti [villages divided between South Ossetian and Georgian-controlled territories] and you see people, relatives even, in Georgian–Ossetian mixed villages [divided by fences]. They live here, they look at each other, and they cannot shake hands. It's ugly. But this is a

symbol and a reality of occupation. And this is why I think it's not sustainable. This cannot be sustainable. Barbed wire is not a lasting measure.

If we invest more and more in these people-to-people contacts, these contacts will rise. They need to be supported. It's not something that we need to artificially generate. It's already there. We just need to help it.

I have asked the international community to help us, but of course the job is ours to do — first and foremost from the Georgian side. Hopefully it will be reciprocated from the other sides.

The reality is very difficult, but we have to be realistic. This doesn't mean that we should do nothing or shy away, resorting only to rhetoric or talking about 'visions'. This can be useful, but it does not help. We have to act.