

26 January 2005 / 00:20



Remarks - H.E President Mikheil Saakashvili to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Mr. President, Mr. Secretary, Members, Distinguished Guests:

I would like to begin my remarks today by expressing special thanks to the Parliamentary Assembly for the opportunity to address this institution.

Throughout its history, the Assembly has been instrumental in helping to promote Georgia's democratic development and to strengthen its commitment to human rights. Even when those fundamental freedoms were under threat, the Assembly never abandoned Georgia - choosing instead to engage and to partner with us, with the knowledge that the people of Georgia would one day embrace lasting change.

I am proud that that day finally came - just over one year ago. I am pleased that through our joint efforts the Assembly has helped to establish a permanent home in the European family of nations, for Georgia.

From this unique rostrum, I would like the Parliamentary Assembly to become a home not just for the defence of democracy and the protection of human rights in Georgia. Rather, this Hall, its Members, and this Institution should become a permanent home for the promotion of lasting peace in Georgia. That is why I have chosen to launch our Peace Initiative here in this Hall with all of you as our witnesses.

Georgia today is a nation undergoing a profound transformation. It is a transformation that requires us to acknowledge who we are - in order to be sure of what it is we want to build.

It is a transformation that requires us to frankly assess our strengths and weaknesses, and to confront sometimes painful realities. And it is a transformation that is producing results.

One year ago, when the people of Georgia rose up to defend their freedom - they also rose up to reclaim their future. A future that would no longer be defined by the false promises, wholesale decay, and state disintegration of the recent past. A future no longer dominated by the politics of division, state sanctioned theft and disregard for the poorest parts of society.

Instead - the voices that gave the peaceful Rose Revolution its unique strength - are the same voices calling Georgia to succeed today. And to succeed today means adopting new rules, new principles, and the renewed promise of democracy. If something from the Rose Revolution continues to resonate today - it is the voice of freedom, reminding us of the historic opportunity and tremendous responsibility we bear. And now the voice rings in Kiev. And I want to say that visiting Kiev for the New Year and being on Independence Square with my friend Victor Yushchenko was one of the greatest days of my life.

We Georgians are not unique now - and for that I am very happy. Happy for the people of Ukraine that they too can now enjoy their liberty and freedom. It is thus our common charge - to create prosperous - more equitable - and more peaceful countries - now and for all generations to come.

My aim in coming here today, however, is not to sing the praises of Georgia one year after the revolution. Rather, it is to establish and to testify that Georgia having

expressed a profound and irreversible commitment last year - to move forward and build a stable and modern European democracy. And it has made significant advances already in honoring that commitment, and with the peace initiative we will launch today, we are making further steps along that road with which we will need your help.

The strength of this commitment is an expression of in our most deeply held values. It reflects our common aspirations. Our commitment to democracy is simply an expression of who we are.

Georgia's character - now and forever - celebrates tolerance, embraces diversity, relishes lively and open debate, and above all, respects liberty and human dignity. Georgia is a democracy, because above all - its national identity is rooted in the traditions of democracy. For us, the greatest thing about the Rose Revolution was that it allowed us to reclaim our dignity, which is the foundation of our commitment to democracy.

And sometimes it takes a revolution to remind us of that. I believe that this is what has enabled us in the last year to achieve so much, and surprise the skeptics.

Because we are resolute and because we are fair, we have made great progress in reducing corruption in the police forces, combating money laundering and putting an end to religious intolerance.

Because we are disciplined and because we are accountable, we have tripled our state budget, doubled state pensions and paid back a decade of arrears.

Because we are transparent and because we are impartial, we have established the first public service broadcasting network in our region - from the ashes of state control and censorship.

And because we are just and because we are deliberate, we have peacefully reunited Ajara and dedicated new funds to building roads that help integrate dislocated regions such as Javakheti.

Those accomplishments reflect the collective will and the collective demands of the Georgian people. Those political choices demonstrate how a united Georgian state is being built today - with the participation, consideration - and inclusion of all Georgia's people.

A State that has rejected the politics of ethnicity, division... and mistrust. A State that instead defines itself and governs itself by upholding rule of law and the principles of impartiality.

A State that derives its strength from our diversity and lasting stability by respecting our millennia-old culture and collective values.

These are the sources of my political mandate - and the foundation for lasting peace. Re-building a nation requires the courage to review past errors and to correct forgotten injustices.

Unfortunately, the wounds of conflict are too present in our world today - diminishing the human potential of many societies. My Georgia has suffered more than its fair share of bloodshed, dislocation and destruction. The conflicts that have fragmented my country have left us with hearts that ache so much that we find it hard to speak. My heart breaks when I look at the conditions of the people in South Ossetia and in Abkhazia.

Sometimes people call these situations "frozen conflicts" - but what those words don't describe are the frozen or hungry people whose lives are damaged because

we are unable to resolve the conflicts.

When I assumed the office of the presidency a year ago I promised to oversee the peaceful reunification of Georgia. And I said the first step in making this vision a reality was to make Georgia a well governed and more prosperous country.

Our efforts - our attitude - and our results speak more loudly than anything I could say here today.

When I made that promise, I pledged to re-unite Georgia in a manner that would preserve the dignity - the culture - and fundamental rights of all who have suffered - and all who live in our country. Because no person should be born without the right to live in peace. And no person should be denied the chance to receive an excellent education, to earn a decent living and to raise a healthy family.

Violence, conflict and greed make these things impossible.

We must do better - and we must work harder.

So that our generation will be remembered as the generation that had the courage to make and sustain peace.

Today I stand before you with the purpose of sharing our vision for a lasting peace in an area now called the Tskhinvali region - but more generally known as South Ossetia. A small, but important area that has for too long been forgotten by the outside world. And for too long neglected at home.

In speaking about the challenges and the needs of Tskhinvali region, I speak also about the situation in Abkhazia. I speak to all the peoples of Georgia. Because together, we share a common land - we share a common history - and we share a common future.

And together, our common challenge is to re-build and re-integrate our societies, so that never again will any child grow up with the fear of war.

On behalf of the Government of Georgia, I am pleased to present the main features of our Tskhinvali Region (South Ossetia) Peace Initiative.

First and foremost - our vision for a united and peaceful Georgia is based on respect for the desire - and respect for the right - to Tskhinvali Region's Autonomy. If, during the Soviet period Tskhinvali Region enjoyed a moderate form of autonomy, today - under this plan - it will enjoy a distinctly broader form.

Even broader in fact, than that accorded to the Republic of North Ossetia.

Specifically, our plan envisions a Constitutional guarantee of Autonomy, that includes the right to freely and directly elected local self governance - including an Executive Branch and a Parliament for Tskhinvali Region. The Region's parliament will be a parliament with substance - and that means having control over issues such as culture, education, social policy, economic policy, public order, the organization of local self governance and environmental protection.

At the same time, the people of Tskhinvali Region must have a voice in the national structures of government - and this plan establishes a constitutional guarantee to do just that...

...In the national government - in judicial and constitutional-judicial branches - and in the Georgian Parliament, their voices will be present.

To keep Georgia whole and strong, we must learn to work together - in Tbilisi and in Tskhinvali.

This plan established that institutional basis. A meaningful peace initiative is one that respects the uniqueness of Ossetian history, its rich culture, traditions and language.

This plan achieves that by granting language rights and status - by decentralizing education policy - and by committing funds from the Georgian budget.

Differences in ethnicity and language, history and tradition - these are the very traits that make Georgia's tapestry of culture so exceptional - and this plan seeks to celebrate, protect and promote that richness.

Understandably, no peace can sustain when people continue to suffer from hunger, lack of jobs, lack of basic public services - and, most of all - lack of opportunity or hope.

The people of Tskhinvali Region deserve to share in the economic prosperity and stability that is now characteristic of the rest of Georgia. They deserve to benefit from the investments taking place and opportunities now blossoming.

This plan addresses that need by dedicating Government funds for the rehabilitation of the economy - including critical infrastructure...

By leveraging the generosity of the international community to pursue economic revival projects.

By creating conditions to spur the development of small and medium-sized enterprises that create stable and lasting jobs.

By offering to discuss innovative development ideas such as free economic zones... and easing border crossings into Russia. And, most importantly, by allowing the authorities of Tskhinvali Region to determine and control their economic policies, so that choices reflect local needs, local interests and local priorities.

As Georgia becomes more prosperous, so too do the people of Tskhinvali Region. The courage to build a lasting peace requires us to confront the crimes, suffering and misdeeds of the past.

And unfortunately, there were many.

This plan calls for the establishment of a special law on property restitution - that will make generous payments to victims of the 1990-92 conflict. The Government is prepared to pay pension arrears to those who have been denied state benefits, that will not be less than the current framework.

Confronting the wrongs of the past, this initiative allows for the establishment of a special commission to deal with unresolved property disputes - and another empowered to deal with allegations of crimes against the population.

So, that the past -while difficult to face - can finally be put to rest in a fair and dignified manner.

And for all those who were forced to flee - this initiative guarantees the right of return - a right that is backed up with will State sponsored financial assistance.

The road to peace will not be immediate. It will not be easy. And it may not always be smooth.

In recognition of that reality, this initiative calls for the establishment of a transitional 3 year conflict resolution period. A period during which mixed Georgian and Ossetian police forces - under the guidance and auspices of international organizations - shall be established to guarantee public order and freedom of movement.

A period when Ossetian forces will be gradually integrated into a united Georgian Armed Force.

A period when trust will replace fear - when hope conquer suspicion.

A period when the fruits of peace and renewed prosperity will be shared and enjoyed by all.

The cause of peace is a just and noble cause - but it cannot be accomplished alone.

If we are to succeed, it means that this Institution, and others around the world, will have to take a more active role. A more visible role. A more pronounced. Specifically, the Council of Europe should act as a facilitator. And I have asked the Secretary General to take a personal role in this.

The OSCE as a peace monitor. With a more active and robust presence on the ground in the very near future.

The EU as a peace guarantor. It is time for the EU to take much more clear stand in favor of peace and for their common foreign and security policy to be more active. We and the EU cannot afford to live side by side, next to regions that function as virtual black holes presenting security risks for Member states. These regions can bring alarming problems - so let us - and EU in particular - do more to bring out stability and peace.

And the Russian Federation is very welcome as a constructive partner for peace. Peace on its borders is a source of stability for peace in Russia itself. We can work together. And of course, we appreciate the support of the United States as a peace supporter.

In order for the bonds of trust and institutions of governance to be re-built - the people of Tskhinvali Region and the people of the rest of Georgia will need your help.

I believe this initiative provides a refreshed platform - and a renewed commitment that can make peace last.

The components contained in this initiative prove that Georgia, under this democratic government - is willing to offer and willing to guarantee - a new future to the people of Tskhinvali Region.

It means that we have taken a decision in favor of peace.

And it means that we have taken a decision that is both challenging and necessary.

Today, we have committed on paper an offer that forms the basis for a lasting and just settlement.

And in doing so, we recognize that it will take time to work out the details.

That it will take flexibility. That it will require compromise. And that it will require good will on all sides.

We also recognize a painful truth - that unfortunately - peace is not always in everyone's interests.

So we must be prepared for challenges - prepared for attempts to derail the process - and prepared for the risks that come with making difficult decisions.

Georgia today is ready to take those risks.

Today - I declare that the time has come to put these deadly conflicts in the past.

The time has come to end divisions between peoples.

The time has come to end the cycle of poverty, hopelessness and despair.

The time has come when all those affected by this conflict must become genuine advocates for peace and no longer promoters of instability and an unhealthy status quo.

It is my hope that the people of Tskhinvali Region, and the international community of responsible nations to which we belong - will join together to lend their active support.

So that this conflict, and others like it - can once and for all become permanent features of our past.

Now is the time.

THANK YOU