

Interview with Vano Merabishvili, Interior Minister of Georgia (translation from Russian into English)

An excerpt from the article by **Olga Allenova**, [“We Are Not Police, We Are Humans,”](#) *Kommersant – Vlast*, no. 12 (865), 29 March 2010.

Vano Merabishvili, the head of the Georgian Ministry of Interior explained to Olga Allenova that it is not that difficult to change citizens’ attitude toward the law enforcement authorities. To achieve this, one needs to simply change the attitude of the law enforcement authorities towards the citizens.

The police station in Gori is a glass building. In the hall on the third floor Interior Ministry Chief Vano Merabishvili is checking some folders. We greet each other and enter a spacious, glass-covered room of the chief of the Gori regional police.

Merabishvili sits down at the table and asks me: “Why is there so much talk about the abuse of power by the [Russian] police right now? What is happening? If the police work so badly, why isn’t Nurgaliev [Russian Interior Minister] fired?”

I don’t have an answer to this question.

Vano Merabishvili tells me that prior to the [August 2008] war, Rashid Nurgaliev frequently came to Georgia to participate in various meetings of law enforcement representatives from CIS countries.

Vano Merabishvili (VM): Last time he visited us in June 2008.

Olga Allenova, interviewer (OA): Did he show interest in your reforms?

VM: No.

OA: And did you tell him that your police do not take bribes?

VM: No, what for? It would be tactless of me to say this.

All of a sudden, the minister gets up, opens the window and points to the black jeeps parked in a row.

VM: It used to be that only thieves in law could drive such cars. And now it’s policemen!

That is how this interview started.

OA: You buy such expensive cars for all police stations?

VM: I don't buy them. The head of each police branch/district is in charge of procurement. They have the right to do it. They buy good cars and good equipment because it makes their work more effective. Here in Gori, Jugelia buys cars, monitors, food, and fuel for the police.

OA: But no one checks him, right?

VM: What does it mean - no one "checks" him?

OA: Well, what if he buys more cars than he actually needs?

VM: He won't buy more than he needs. Because if he buys more cars, he will receive less in bonuses, or will build fewer buildings, or will buy fewer cars. He himself decides what is it that he needs – be it paper, cars, clothing or a salary bonus.

OA: And whose was the idea with transparent police buildings?

VM: It's my idea. You like it, right?

OA: Yes, I do.

VM: Do you recall that I told you several years ago that we would have such police stations throughout the country? And you didn't believe me then.

OA: I admit that I was mistaken. And what is the secret behind your success?

VM: We have everything like normal people. Because we are not police. We are humans.

OA: And why did reforms in Georgia start specifically with the Ministry of the Interior?

VM: And where were they supposed to start? When one is building a state where no state had previously existed, one builds state institutions first. And for success, one needs order, security, freedom of movement. The order in the state is maintained by the police. It's simple. That's where we had to start. All the rest, directly or indirectly, is not the relationship between the state and society but rather the relationship between different representatives of society. Order and security are necessary for the development of the economy. And also for helping people to lead normal lives. If your rights are infringed and you don't have the freedom of movement or expression, you won't be able to open your own business.

OA: And why don't the majority of leaders in the post-Soviet space come upon this thought?

They had very lofty goals. They thought strategically. For them, the “now” was less important, they were building a better future. They wanted the proletariat to win in the entire world. That’s the environment in which they grew up.

OA: But you also grew up like this.

VM. Yes, we did too. But we wanted to live in a normal state. To be successful, to be in the vanguard. For instance, how is love born? People have to meet first. We also met the voter and fell in love with him. Love is when you care more about others than you do about yourself. If a minister first and foremost wants things for himself, he will do everything for himself at first, and only then for the police and other citizens. He will take away from others to benefit himself. And we have it the other way around. Or rather, we have it the right way.

OA: For the reform to be successful, you had to change society’s mentality — so that society wouldn’t oppose the changes.

VM. And even if society would oppose them, so what? If you believe you are right, what’s the difference? In each society there is a section which wants to create something. There is also a section which is indifferent but is generally satisfied with the changes. And then there are people who do not want changes. In our case, the latter group is in the minority.

OA: Many say that the success of the reforms in Georgia hinges on the small size of its territory. That such reforms are impossible in big countries.

VM. If someone else wants to implement reforms, they don’t have to copy us or anyone else. They don’t have to learn something from us. Because all the principles of reforms are well-known. You just have to want it to happen. For instance, your government officials can very well take care of their houses, their apartments, their relatives. In the same way, you have to take care of your state and of your colleagues.

We went through the first stage of the reform two years ago. At that time we ourselves, the 50 individuals in power, implemented reforms. Now we’ve reached a new stage – the reforms are taking place at the medium level. You just came from Rustavi, right? There, we just developed the initial concept of a service agency, and the rest has been developed by the people who work there.

For example, the head of the service agency asked himself once: why, when you buy or sell a car, do the seller and the buyer have to be personally present in the same place? And he came up with the following idea: if the seller lives in Batumi and the buyer in Tbilisi, they don’t have to go meet each other. One will come to a service agency in Batumi and the other to one in Tbilisi – and the deal will be finalized over the internet. We looked and saw that this was very convenient, and accepted this proposal. So now people are able to buy and sell cars “long-distance.” If you put your mind to making

people's lives easier, you will come up with such ideas. And if you only think about what is written in the law, you will never come up with such ideas.

OA: But perhaps you would need some legislative changes for that?

VM. It's enough to have my decree. I will tell you more: when we come up with good things but they contradict the law, we do them anyway. The law is a law because it can be changed in the interests of citizens.

Or here's another example. I have noticed that Azerbaijan imports four times the number of cars from Dubai than it does from Georgia. We did some research on that and found out that it takes three days to bring cars from Dubai to Baku but four days for the same procedure from Tbilisi. So we began to simplify the sale/purchase procedure. We found the root of the problem: according to the law, both in Armenia and Azerbaijan one must have a notarized certificate when buying or selling a car. It's an old tradition, you have it too [in Russia]. In Georgia, the notary is not necessary for these issues. You don't need the car owner's authorization (*doverennost*) either – we have abolished it. Authorizations create red tape. They breed corruption. Everyone was afraid that the number of car thefts would rise. But car thefts went down, because we cracked down on this type of crime.

So, Azerbaijanis who bought cars from us would have to go to a notary where they translated the document from Georgian into Azeri and would thus waste at least a day on that. We simplified the scheme: we gave a special license to an organization of ours, so that a person buying a car would receive a notarized certificate in addition to all other sale/purchase documents right there. And during the past three months the transit of cars through Georgia to Azerbaijan and Armenia has increased fourfold. And this means extra revenues for the state. And it wasn't my idea. It was the idea of the people working there. That is why our reform works and is moving ahead.

OA: And your subordinates are not afraid to come to you and propose something?

VM. They are afraid not to come and not to propose anything. I don't like when a person doesn't come up with initiatives. But I also chastise them when they come to me with every single idea – everyone has to come up with good things and implement them in their own police district. It's their responsibility. I personally have to sign only 0.1 percent of the documents in the ministry. I delegated these powers to other people – there are over 30 people in Tbilisi and in the regions right now who make decisions which used to be the prerogative of the minister.

OA: When you were just starting the reform, what was the policemen's reaction?

VM. There aren't any of those policemen here any more.

OA: But you still have some thirty percent of them left.

VM: Some people from the SWAT units have stayed, some military personnel, investigators. But there are virtually no more *khozshniki* – they left on their own, because they couldn't work under the new conditions. Some of them weren't even corrupt, and I left them to work here, but they couldn't deal with it. When your relative is imprisoned but you are not, you feel deficient, unable to defend the interests of the family.

OA: And how did you envisage a solution to this problem?

VM: There's no solution. One has to accept that when serving the state, one cannot defend the interests of the family but only the interests of society. Today, society has much higher expectations of the police than the police could even deliver on. And I am nervous about it. In every society, the police are representatives of the middle class. It's a bit different with us today. So we have to maintain this reputation – make video clips, organize concerts, bring schoolchildren on field trips to police stations.

OA: By the way, it is impressive that schoolchildren visit the Ministry of the Interior.

VM. Because it's not the Ministry of the Interior, generally speaking. Have you noticed that it's not the Ministry of the Interior? When you come to our new police stations, do you notice that they are like service points? There is no special window through which you have to speak – it's just a room with a table, like in a bank, and you tell us about your problem. We want to say that the police is not just a state institution, it's a service which helps people solve their problems. The concept itself has changed. And that is why public trust in the police stands high, at 75 percent. Everyone understood that a policeman is not above society, he is part of society. The police help solve people's problems instead of adding more problems. And that is why in such a society the police cannot be corrupt. It's impossible in principle. Not without friends or accomplices.

OA: Because police partners rat on each other?

VM. We don't call it like this. If you commit a crime, every citizen has a duty to report the crime to the police. If someone knows about the crime but fails to report it, it means they are also committing a crime and will be punished for this.

OA: This is very harsh.

VM. When you are changing the Soviet way of life for a Western one, you cannot stop at half-measures. You need non-ordinary methods. Today, we care not about the statistics of the percentage of crimes solved, but whether crimes are actually solved in reality. We don't have a system based on being forced to do something. No one gives an order from above that a certain percentage of cases have to be registered and another percentage solved. But everyone knows that it's bad to have many unsolved cases. Everyone also knows that if you have a lot of cases that were hastily "solved," they will fail in court, and it will be your failure. That is why we win 89% of the cases in court.

OA. And if one simply doesn't register citizens' complaints so as to lower the percentage of difficult-to-solve cases?

VM. It's impossible. Everyone knows that if you didn't register someone's complaint, you will go to prison. From the start of the reform we began fighting against concealment. Our General Inspection often organizes checks: they come to police stations dressed as civilians, file a complaint, and if a policeman doesn't register the complaint, they initiate proceedings against that policeman.

OA: The General Inspection is something like a directorate charged with your own safety?

VM: That's what you call it. We, normal people, call it General Inspection. Do you know that we have 26 thousand staff in the Ministry of the Interior? The General Inspection has only 50 staff. But they do their job well.

OA: So the main driving force behind everything, everywhere, is simply fear?

VM. It's true only in the beginning. One knows that they won't be able to take bribes here. Or to conceal cases. Or to work badly. That if they take a risk and violate the law – we will arrest them. Our General Inspection still carries such arrests. During all these years of the reform, we have put around 250 policemen into prison. Lately there haven't been almost any arrests, maximum 2-3 people per month. For each case there is evidence, witnesses, video recordings. This is the first stage, when people are afraid. The second stage is when the person already understands that it is bad to take bribes, break the law and abuse their authority.

OA: You know, I have this feeling that your police are from another planet. But even next to your beautiful glass buildings there is a completely different, poor life going on.

VM: It's not like this. Everything is changing. And because every three months we invent something new, society is gradually changing as well.

OA: That means you are changing society?

VM. And you cannot see that society is changing? Only five years ago society was different. In the past two years there haven't been any cases of showing resistance to the police, even though the first two years witnessed 27 policemen killed. I know many pro-Western people who five years ago were used to calling me and asking me to release a relative of theirs. And lately I don't even remember that someone would call me or even my parents. In the first two years, my parents would lock themselves up at home, away from the capital city, wouldn't pick up the phone, wouldn't go out in the street, because they were constantly approached with requests to release someone, to intervene on

someone's behalf. But in the past three years, they have been freely walking around because it's over now, and people are used to the new realities.

OA: Your reforms are already an irreversible process?

VM: If someone comes who wants to bring everything back to how it used to be, they would be able to do it in a couple of months.

OA: So it's about the persons currently in power?

VM: If you put it this way, yes. But to be more precise, it's about political will and political culture.

[Excerpt omitted on the statistics from the Georgian Ministry of the Interior, according to which the crime rates in Georgia have been mostly falling].

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