

Interview with VSP alumnus, Hon. Ms. Ekaterine Guntsadze, Deputy Minister of Finance of Georgia



For the benefit of those who do not know Eka, can you please tell us about yourself, where you come from, your educational and family background as well as how you found for yourself at the World Bank and what you are currently doing?

My name is Ekaterine Guntsadze, though most people call me Eka. I was born on March 31, 1985, in a small and ancient city of Kutaisi, Georgia (a small and picturesque country in the South Caucasus). My mom was a full-time emergency doctor and my dad was a steel engineer. My younger brother and I were raised as hard working and independent individuals by our parents in extremely difficult times. Georgia regained its independence from Soviet Union in 1991 and the following decade was very challenging because of the economic collapse and the occupation of Georgia's territories by Russia, leaving hundreds of thousands of families, including my family members, internally displaced for over 30 years.

I attended St. Nino Secondary High School which was founded in 1847 as women's Gymnasium. I got my Bachelor of Arts degree at Kutaisi Akaki Tsereteli State University (2006) and my Masters of Public Administration degree at Georgian Institute of Public Affairs (2008).

Thereafter, I joined the Budget Department of Ministry of Finance in Georgia in 2008 and have continued to advance on my career path in the civil service, including serving as Head of the Budget Department for almost 7 years, that is, from 2015 to 2021. Currently, as the Deputy Minister of Finance, I am in charge of External Relations and Foreign Financing which includes promoting close cooperation between the Ministry and all international financial institutions (IFIs) and bilateral partners.

The year 2019 was exceptionally important year for me, despite facing some personal challenges when I lost my mother. I spent 6 unforgettable months at the World Bank, as a VSP from Georgia, but lost my mom to her long fight against cancer within 3 months of my arriving in Washington DC.

How would you describe your stay at the World Bank as well as your experience on the World Bank Voice Secondment Program (VSP)?

I was obviously lucky to be a VSP Secondee before COVID-19 hit the world. I felt welcome and supported for the whole duration of my stay at the World Bank headquarters. The VSP program was very well organized and structured. Among many success stories of the Program, I can highlight, for example, the following: (i) training and capacity building has given us, the VSP Alumni, a much deeper awareness and understanding of how the World Bank operates and functions; (ii) the diversity of the VSP Secondees from all corners of the world made us, as VSP Secondees, feel well-connected across the planet. For example, some VSP Secondees came from countries as far as Guyana and the Philippines. and (iii) the decent hotel accommodation for all VSP Secondees in the affluent neighborhood of Georgetown in Washington DC allowed us to see the most memorable colors of the city.

At the World Bank, I was very lucky to be placed with team working on Europe and Central Asia (ECA). My Manager was Mr. Sudharshan Canagarajah. I felt incorporated in the team and was provided with a very rich and engaging work program. I settled into my new role at the World Bank very quickly and was involved in a number of World Bank operational assignments and missions in the ECA region. My World Bank host unit was very welcoming and supportive. It made me feel like a true member of the team.

As you know, Georgia, my home country, is in the ECA Region. So, my VSP Secondment worked very well for me, as it helped me to grasp the World Bank's decision processes, business practices and approaches to preparing, designing and implementing projects in the ECA region as well as elsewhere. Indeed, I found my VSP Secondment experience extremely useful for my current role as Deputy Minister in the Ministry of Finance of Georgia, especially that I often serve as the key negotiator, on behalf of the Republic of Georgia, with major IFIs and development partners.

[What was the total number of participants in your VSP class, which Regions did they come from, and how many were women and men?](#)

If I remember correctly, we were 24 overall, that is, 13 women and 11 men. The group was diverse and brought many cultures together, stretching from Africa, Asia, Caribbean, Europe, Middle-East, South America to all the three countries in the South Caucasus.

[How did you find the capacity-building World Bank operational training provided by the World Bank under the VSP?](#)

The VSP program was very well structured, harmonizing a fine blend between theoretical and practical training and allowing us to have the real-time experience by working side by side with World Bank staff. Pedagogical issues were covered in the first couple of weeks before we moved to the practical side of the work. That way, it made us understand and appreciate the practical side of the work even better.

[As a VSP Secondee, in which Region and/or Unit of the World Bank did you work and how did you find your Host Unit?](#)

I was really lucky to be placed in ECA DE. Since Georgia belongs to ECA region, though I obviously did not get Georgia related tasks, still being in the regional context was extremely helpful for me. I say this because currently I happen to be the key negotiator for Georgia's projects with all IFIs, including the World Bank. It is very helpful to know the quality, checks and processes that happen at the World Bank, using an insider perspective. Also, my VSP experience helps me to grasp quickly the terminologies and language of the World Bank, as we work together on project preparation and implementation.

As a VSP Secondee, did you get any chance to go on a World Bank operational mission and, if so, can you kindly mention the country(ies) and the project(s)?

Yes, I was able to actually participate in two missions. At ECA DE, I was tasked to carry out a major operational study on some Central Asia projects. I, together with my supervisor, Mr. Canagarajah, travelled on mission to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. We also attended the ECA region retreat in Montenegro, Budva.

Has your experience in Washington DC as a World Bank Voice Secondee proved to be useful in your daily work with the Government of Georgia, and, if so, please tell us the extent to which this experience has been useful?

My career at the Ministry of Finance has always been connected with investment and policy support projects financed by IFIs and bilateral donors, as part of the Budget and Medium-term fiscal policy formulation process. The experience I've gained, as VSP Alumnus, is extremely useful at my current capacity. I was assigned to serve as Deputy Minister of Finance of Georgia in charge of external relations and foreign financing last September (2021). Negotiating and monitoring the foreign finance projects portfolio is a key responsibility under current work portfolio. Hence, the experience I gained as a VSP Secondee is of utmost importance to me.

How often do you interact with World Bank Group teams in your daily work with the Government of Georgia?

My current work as the Deputy Minister of Finance includes managing donor communication and coordination. Considering that the World Bank Group (WBG) is one of the largest development financing portfolio-holders in Georgia, my engagement with BG teams is very frequent, almost on a daily basis, for example, with the World Bank Country office in Georgia. Tbilisi hosts a World Bank Regional Director and his office covers the countries in the South Caucasus. We have just recently celebrated the 30-year anniversary of cooperation with the World Bank. This celebration is very important to us in Georgia, as it marks a new chapter in our relationship with the WBG, as we join the international community of IDA donors, in contrast to where we were 30 years ago as IDA beneficiaries.

In your work with the Government of Georgia, how often do you interact with the Office of the World Bank Executive Director covering your Constituency?

Though COVID-19 has changed the way we all work, we continue to maintain very close ties with the ED's office. Preparation for Spring and Annual Meetings, as well as constituency meetings are very helpful to keep in touch and up-to-date on various issues within the Constituency. These platforms are extremely important especially under current circumstances when the unprecedented geopolitical developments have global impacts and especially in our ED's constituency countries. We have excellent cooperation from the ED's office and greatly appreciate their strong support.

Tell us about one of your most memorable experiences or highlights on the VSP.

Extraordinary friends all over the world, warm and friendly relationships with the World Bank teams and exceptional insider experience are things that will always remain with me.

I would also say that the VSP trip to New York and the opportunity to observe some UN sessions were memorable for many of us as VSP Secondees.

Though most of the experience I've gained as a VSP Secondee was at a professional level, living in Washington DC and adjusting to life away from home also stress-tested me. I

remember fondly the Food Festival organized by the World Bank. I joined a small Georgian community at World Bank/IMF and was able to honor my beloved grandmother's memory by cooking her recipes.

Are you in touch with other VSP Secondees from your class, and, if so, what would you say are their best impressions of the VSP experience?

We still keep in touch through social nets and whenever possible try to meet one another, though COVID-19 has clearly prevented us from being more active.

What advice would you give to the current class of the VSP Secondees as well as to anyone looking at prospects for participating in future VSP cohorts?

Definitely apply and participate and be sure that the experience will be unforgettable and super helpful. VSP experience does enlarge your circle of connections. Your network will grow beyond the World Bank professional groups to the global stage as you meet from various countries and regions. This is an opportunity you can't miss!