

## **Social integration / disintegration in post-communist societies Reintegrating communities in the North Caucasus – successes and technique challenges**

The future of the Newly Independent States of the former USSR will depend greatly on how they are able to manage existing conflicts and tensions on their territories. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, practically all of the Newly Independent States have experienced serious inter-ethnic tensions, which in a number of cases resulted in violent conflicts. These conflicts that took place in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Tajikistan and Russia have taken many thousands of lives, created huge refugee flows, devastated regional economies and led to serious setbacks in the process of democratic developments of those countries. It is impossible to build democracies in states where rights of various ethnic and other minorities are continuously violated or where citizens are in a military conflict with each-other. The importance of any work carried out in order to prevent and resolve such conflicts, ease tensions and develop inter-ethnic cooperation cannot be overestimated.

In many regions of the ex-USSR years of violence has resulted in a situation where people feel alienated from each other, think in terms of “us” and “them” based on ethnic, religious or territorial groupings.

Especially alarming remains the situation in the North Caucasus. The return of IDP's to Chechnya continues at a low pace, due primarily to the lack of human security in the region. Also, it is practically limited to the ethnic Chechen population, while the majority of other IDP's don't even consider returning. At the same time extremely worrisome is the fact that violence is more and more affecting other North Caucasus regions – outside the borders of Chechnya. And, as was demonstrated during the latest tragic events in Nalchik, the capital of the Kabardino-Balkar republic, which was for years considered the most stable region in the North Caucasus - such violence is not simply a spillover of Chechen problems, but it has its own sources and dynamics.

Human security remains the number one issue for the settlement of the conflict in Chechnya. Also important, and not only for Chechnya but, to a lesser extent, for other regions in the North Caucasus, is the reintegration of the local population, especially the youth into mainstream Russian society. Recognizing the particular importance of the continued international humanitarian work in the region, we should admit, nevertheless, that along with the mitigation of the aftermath of conflicts it is necessary to develop new ways of working in the North Caucasus that would be more focused on the elimination of the causes of conflict and on post-conflict reintegration and reconciliation.

It should be noted, that if in the 90's the most violent conflicts in the CIS states were closely linked to issues regarding ethnic identities and interethnic relationships, lately the character of violent conflict has been changing. More and more often CIS states face threats, related to the activities of organizations, which are built not around ethnic issues, but around certain extremist ideologies. This is specifically relevant in regards to the spread terrorism, the geography of which continues to expand. At the same time, the terrorist threat often is used as an excuse for strengthening authoritarian rule. But it often is precisely the violations of elementary human rights and freedoms that drive people to turn to violent means.

In such an environment, achieving progress toward a long-term resolution to the crisis requires not just restoring damaged infrastructure and paying compensations, but also working with people's minds, bringing peacebuilding activities down from the conference tables into the field on the level of local communities and to the people directly affected by violent conflict. Peace dialogue is one of the key techniques for such a task.

It is simple to make a case for reintegration and the need for dialogue as one of the tools to deal with the current challenges in the post-soviet states. But is it reasonable to expect that these tools may actually be effective in real life? Are there specific techniques which may be used that yield verifiable results? Based on my own experience, as well as on the experience of

many of my colleges who work in conflict-torn regions, I would like to provide some answers to these questions.

It is commonplace to speak about the need to address the root causes of conflict. Certainly, it is necessary to work towards effective ways to solve socio-economic problems that cause conflicts and violence. There are many international, national and private institutions and NGOs involved in such activities. However, it should be recognized that a genuine resolution of these problems might require both time and resources far beyond the capacities of outside actors or local civil society groups. Focusing on the most effective strategy, it is necessary to search for the key factors, which lie between the conflict as such and the way (violent or not) in which it manifests itself. This is precisely where peace dialogue may play a crucial role.

Speaking about a situation which is ripe with armed conflict, we can outline two types of work public organizations should focus on:

First, they may try to prevent or mitigate the consequences of direct causes, incidents and situations provoking violent conflict.

Second, it is important to focus on the positions of the conflicting parties' leadership and elite circles and key groups in regard to the means by which they want to realize their interests.

Hence, we can distinguish two approaches to be used by civil society institutions to prevent violence:

The first approach can be called metaphorically a "position of a fireman". Numerous sharp conflict situations are like haystacks, which may or may not catch fire. A spark can set the haystack on fire only if it can kindle. In other words, an armed conflict can break out when there are forces or situations able to provoke a violent chain reaction.

In "traditional" wars such incidents often take place as a result of the conscious decision of the leaders of a party interested in conflict. When Hitler wanted to attack Poland, he just staged a provocation.

However, conscious and planned actions are not always the spark that sets off violent conflicts nowadays. A role of spontaneous and occasional factors becomes more important, and "the haystack can be set on fire by an occasional spark from a campfire nearby". In a critical situation a conflict can be accelerated by an occasional incident.

In such a situation both outside actors, and especially local civil society institutions being mobile and capable of immediate intervention, can play an important, and sometimes decisive, role. An initiative undertaken in the right place and at the right time can channel a conflict towards a nonviolent form and an ongoing peace dialogue process is crucial in such a situation. It is necessary to apply significant efforts to set up serious public institutions in potential conflict regions that would be capable of playing such a role. The concrete steps towards this should include:

- Study of “success stories” of civil society institutions’ activities in crisis situations and the dissemination of information about such practices;
- Creation of new methods based on the analysis of such successful experiences;
- In areas of concern, searching for and establishing contacts with official or unofficial figures, such as people with a high level of authority, who might be capable of playing a positive role in a critical situation and working with them in advance; and
- Developing civil society institutions in regions of potential conflict and assisting them in developing working relations with organizations in other areas and with international institutions.

A practical example of this type of work are activities of the Dagestan Regional Charitable Fund, “SOS-Salvation” and a number of other NGOs during a crisis situation in a border conflict in the Novolak district of Dagestan in September 1999. The attack of extremist groups from the territory of Chechnya into Dagestan villages in August-September 1999 led to a serious aggravation of tensions around the Dagestan Chechens, one of the many peoples living on Dagestan soil.

The situation around the Dagestan Chechens\* was no piece of cake to begin with. Chechens were deported in 1944 from the Auhov (currently - the Novolak) district of Dagestan. After they returned from exile they were not able to come back to their houses because there were other people living there, mainly Laks (another ethnic group in Dagestan) who were "resettled" (also without anyone asking their consent) from mountainous areas of the republic. Tensions continued, as well as demands, on the part of the Chechens, to have their houses returned.

In such a situation the actions of the terrorists who came into Dagestan from Chechnya led to the rapid growth of anti-Chechen feelings. A real danger that this might turn into an interethnic conflict against the Dagestan Chechens developed. The situation was further aggravated by the fact that during the military events many local "militias" were set up in Dagestan. These consisted of people, officially allowed to carry weapons, who were only under loose control of official authorities and often directly controlled by different "informal leaders". Provocative leaflets began to circle in the republic; in the general disorder during the fighting in the Novolak district of Dagestan, a tragic incident took place between a "militia" group of local Chechens and a similar "militia" group of people of other ethnic backgrounds.

Here is a list of some of the various actions, undertaken by the NGOs in a time of crisis, and their effect, which helped to stabilize the situation:

<b>NGO actions</b>	<b>Results</b>
➤ Appeals to local and federal authorities, prepared immediately as tensions rose	➤ Drawing attention to the problem. ➤ Overcoming the feeling of isolation for the local Chechen community, giving hope for a nonviolent resolution.
➤ Work in the conflict zones, monitoring the situation “on the	➤ Encouraging local authorities to stop human rights violations.

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\* Also referred to as the Akkin Chechens.

ground”.	➤ Providing objective and up to date information about the situation in the conflict zone.
➤ Working with the local Chechen community, providing an “outside perspective” of their actions and statements.	➤ Helping them in preparing statements and taking action which worked toward easing tensions. ➤ Increasing the influence of the reasonable and moderate local NGO leaders within their community.
➤ Previous work on restoring relationships between Chechen and Dagestan villages.	➤ Preventing the development of a general negative stereotype toward Chechens.
➤ Work with federal authorities.	➤ Clear position of the Republican leadership regarding the need to prevent an escalation of an inter – ethnic conflict.
➤ Organizing joint work of representatives of various ethnic communities on restoring the devastated villages.	➤ Overcoming the psychological tensions between ethnic communities.

The second proposed approach assumes work with various categories of people involved in conflict with special emphasis on work with possible leaders.

Conflicts in the CIS area are similar in their basic causes to conflicts in other regions. Their root causes are complicated social and economic problems, demographic and migration processes, difficult historical legacies including experience of inter-ethnic tensions and deportations and other factors which are difficult to influence. However, the specific ways by which these problems manifest themselves depend on a number of factors that can be influenced. First of all, there are the specific positions of the conflicting parties’ elites including not only the formal, but also the informal leaders, as well as certain key groups such as media, police, religious leaders, etc. A lot depends on their attitudes toward peaceful or violent approaches toward realizing their interests, their readiness to maintain a dialogue with their opponents, the presence or the absence of real hopes to reach a constructive solution via such a dialogue, and their readiness to make mutual concessions.

Thus an effective strategy in such a case may be to try to “channel” the conflicting parties into having a constructive dialogue and interaction, while “removing” the basic causes of the conflict may by far exceed the available resources. For this purpose it is possible:

- To utilize the potential of traditional reconciliation techniques such as meetings of elders as a starter, an “icebreaker” for developing inter-community dialogue;
- To conduct different activities which, besides their direct purposes, will promote an establishment of constructive and confidential relationships with the conflicting parties at different levels (leaders, young people, the media, elders, and others);

- To organize joint events on mutually important and recognized issues (environmental issues, sports, culture, etc);
- To find people from different social, professional and age groups who represent opposing conflict parties and are ready to cooperate in finding the ways to a constructive conflict settlement;
- To support initiatives in the field of peace dialogue by raising the status of local initiative groups involved in it and drawing the attention of conflicting parties' leaders to their positions and recommendations; and
- To assist and facilitate the conflicting parties in negotiation processes.

If we look at the already mentioned case from the North Caucasus - the development of a cross-border cooperation program between Chechnya and Dagestan - we may see how such programs developed over the years from the phase of initial reconciliation to the phase of cooperation and reintegration.

Unfortunately, however, it should be noted that such activities develop more often in post-conflict situations than during pre-conflict stages. It is very difficult to win the laurels of a peacemaker by preventing a conflict that has not unfolded. For example, taking into consideration a great number of programs on the Georgian-Abkhazian dialogue sponsored by various international, national and private agencies, we can say with sad certainty that such attention to the problem at an early stage had good chances of preventing the conflict in the first place.

As for the North Caucasus, there is a need currently to carry out such activities in many different areas. For example, in the so-called "Kadar zone" of Dagestan – an area that for a number of years was under the physical control of extremist forces, usually referred to as "Islamist" or "Wahhaby" - it is crucial to develop a constructive dialogue between the proponents of different branches of Sufi Islam (traditional for the region) regarding the concepts of peace, nonviolence and tolerance in their teachings and interpretations of Islam. It is also important to ensure dialogue between law enforcement bodies and local residents, especially youth, and to improve interaction between residents of the "Kadar zone" and other areas of Dagestan.

**Another way in which peace dialogue may contribute** to effective conflict resolution can be described as "reducing" the problem. In most cases of conflict, especially in cases where there is open violence, there are a number of openly manifested contradictions between the parties. These contradictions can include the struggles for "independence" vs. "territorial integrity", for the territories and mineral/water resources, for the establishment of a secular or religious state, and so on. As a rule, these are the causes named by the majority of people involved in the conflict if you ask them what are they fighting for.

"Reducing" the problem is a technique that involves breaking up the problem into "components", and then into "components of the components" and so on up to the level when it

is possible to offer concrete actions and solutions. Having done this, work must be carried out systematically and with great patience in order to develop practical tools to solve the elements of the problem one by one. The purpose of such work is double-faceted. On the one hand, it may help in making at least some slight contribution to the problems faced, and local communities create an environment of change and thus may contribute to the end of open hostilities.

However, while dealing with a specific aspect of the problem that is under consideration, it is necessary also to unite all efforts and work towards the establishment of a wide coalition of institutions to work on various aspects of the problem. These institutions will be ready to use the developed methods and probably will offer their own models of work. For example, for a number of years in the North Caucasus, a special format was tested for organizing united NGO conflict management efforts, called "Integrated Peacebuilding Programs". Within their framework a few dozen practical peacebuilding projects have been implemented in the region. The main objective of these projects was not to provide direct aid, but to gradually influence the general situation in a number of conflict zones, ease tensions and thus to address the main causes of humanitarian and human rights concerns. Specific features of these programs were:

- High level of the goals pursued (projects were set not only to assist victims, but to actually influence the situation at large);
- The projects involved worked with different age, gender and social groups of the communities concerned, not just with small group of local activists;
- Work was carried out directly in the conflict regions, on the ground;
- Work, carried out in a systematic manner, united efforts of different groups and institutions, and gradually raised the level of the objectives in the projects being implemented; and
- Efforts were narrowly concentrated on certain key problems and key areas, where their effect could be maximized.

Even the first results of these efforts showed that they could be effective. These programs united efforts of different local actors, working on specific regional problems. In the framework of Integrated Peacebuilding Programs various local NGOs worked with different groups of the population and used different tools, but their efforts were coordinated and focused, from various angles, on the same issue. After two years since the beginning of their implementation it became possible to present results that were qualitatively different from the usual results of humanitarian projects in that region. In a few cases it was possible to show not only **what was done** in terms of the different implemented activities, the numbers of people who participated, etc., but it also became possible to show **how these activities influenced the situation in the region, how they worked when critical situations developed** and so on. Today we may demonstrate cases where continuous and concentrated efforts have led to the development of tools for constructively influencing the situation in conflict areas (so far on the level of local communities). For example:

- The work along the border districts of Chechnya and Dagestan that led to a significant decrease of the animosity between Chechens and other ethnic communities since the violence of 1999. Despite the fact that relations between the two republics remain strained, today the communities where these reconciliation programs have been carried out are leading

in cross-border cooperation and are supporting stabilization efforts in Chechnya proper. This has resulted in newly-opened crossing points along the administrative border, better cooperation and mutual support among police, medical workers, educators, farmers and other professional groups of the two republics. Also, the local authorities have turned to our NGO colleagues involved in the Integrated Peacebuilding Programs to manage particular crisis situations that strain relationships between communities along the border of the two regions.

- The results of peacebuilding efforts in the area of the Ossetian-Ingush conflict, where, for example, it was possible to develop joint media programs in the local media and to begin working on overcoming the segregation of the school system. However, it must be mentioned that the tragic events in the town of Beslan in September 2004 have greatly aggravated the situation in the region, and some of the programs, which were developing relatively well prior to those events, need to be restarted practically from scratch.

- The results of reconciliation efforts between different ethnic communities in the Karachai – Cherkess republic, where it is now possible to involve the leaders of different “youth ethnic movements” into joint projects. This was previously impossible, because such organizations were widely used by local political figures in their stand-offs and young people from different ethnic groups practically did not communicate in any cooperative framework.

The united efforts of local authorities, as well as those in the public and private sectors and international organizations, can play a great role in achieving success by working on a specific aspect of the problem which rests at the core of the conflict.

Further, when concrete results are achieved dealing with a specific aspect of a conflict issue, it is necessary to use the experience received as well as the established relations with various sides as a basis to a work on its other elements.

As for the North Caucasus, the approach for working step by step may, in some cases, also mean working “village by village”. This is especially true in war-torn Chechnya, where the situation varies greatly between different locations.

Finally, there usually are ample opportunities for outside actors and local civil society institutions to work at the most basic level with the economic, social and other conditions that create the basis for various conflict situations.

The advantage here is that most of the existing public organizations already work on such problems. The disadvantage is that the scope of these problems is very extensive and often too huge for civic organizations and even governments to tackle. A basic principle of work at this level is to concentrate all efforts and available, though limited, resources on the specific regions and problems that are most likely to develop into a violent conflict.

Under favorable conditions when such efforts are concentrated, implementation of various social, economic, educational and cultural programs may have direct relevance to the task of conflict prevention. These would be such efforts as:

- Supporting joint cultural activities that include representatives of different ethnic, social, religious and other groups;

- Carrying out programs with the media to increase the quality and objectiveness of reporting from regions with a high potential for conflict and to attract media attention to success stories of cooperation among representatives of conflicting parties;
- Supporting entrepreneurship, assisting in solving socio-economic problems in conflict regions, overcoming unemployment and developing small businesses in such areas;
- Through educational programs, assisting young people from conflict regions in gaining wider access to education and influencing the educational process in order to include tolerance and multicultural education;
- Women's, human rights and other programs may promote and assist in the development of public activity in conflict regions and direct it towards implementation of initiatives to reduce tensions in the regions.

Finally, I would like to make some practical recommendations, based on the experiences gained during the implementation of peacebuilding, dialogue and social reintegration programs in the North Caucasus:

When working in that area, it is important to address not only interethnic but also "ideological" conflicts (conflicts related to the spread of radical, extremist views, especially among the youth). This work may be assisted by the support of the following techniques:

1) Use "neutral" issues to unite people and engage them in constructive dialogue (such as health, sports, etc.). Rather than address ideological differences directly it is more feasible and effective to get people to cooperate, with mutual benefit, on such seemingly unrelated topics. However, as people begin to cooperate even on such "unrelated" matters, it creates an environment where deep differences in views and beliefs may be addressed in a much more constructive way.

2) Parallel to working with local authorities, develop groups of supporters on the community level and engage them in continuous ground-level activities. In many cases, this may seem counterproductive because it is often much easier to "get things done" by working through formal (and some times – informal) authorities. However, in the Caucasus, authorities are much more experienced in organizing "events" than in ensuring continuous day-to-day work. Also, the level of understanding of the problem and the interest in engaging it is too often inversely proportional to the official status of a person. To really work with "the hearts and minds" of people it is essential to find supporters among those who interact and engage with these people on a daily basis, even when this may require more resources than when simply working with authorities.

When developing peacebuilding programs, it is crucial to design them in a way that influence not only their direct participants, but also the larger community, and leads to sustainable relationships. This may be assisted by:

1) Working with groups, rather than with individuals. For example – approaching a class or a school rather than pin-pointing some children for a program.

2) Allowing the group to select "representatives" for participating in key activities through a transparent selection process, based on clear criteria (for example – some sort of a competition).

3) Ensuring continuity and follow-up (for example - developing pen-pal relationships between target groups, organizing exchange of "news" etc.). Relatively small investments in the



initial and the follow-up phase of different “peacebuilding” projects and programs may multiply the overall effect of such activities.

For our efforts to have an impact it is important to ensure that they lead to some even minor but positive changes regarding the well-being of target groups. For that it is key to encourage more “results-oriented” approaches in the activities of local civil organizations, including:

- 1) Developing dialogue within different professional groups (teachers with teachers, medical workers with medical workers, police with police, journalists with journalists, etc.) to highlight areas of mutual concern and of potential cooperation.
- 2) Arranging professional facilitation during round-tables, seminars and other events to help people involved to develop not only lists of concerns and “wish lists”, but also to help seek solutions to some of the problems through better cooperation and use of local resources.
- 3) During the development of projects and programs in the North Caucasus, including substantial funding to assist in the implementation of the arrangements made, as well as other contingency expenses.

*And, finally, it is crucial to keep expanding the pool of **actors involved in peacebuilding efforts in the North Caucasus that may be assisted by:***

- 1) Developing better cooperation between local activists in the North Caucasus and representatives of the international humanitarian community located in the region.
- 2) Informing NGOs of international programs in the region and vice-versa, assisting the participation of local NGOs in joint planning and training with internationals.
- 3) Informing federal, regional and local officials about civil programs and, when possible, engaging them in these activities.

Finally, I would like to mention that in the planning of international humanitarian operations coordinated by UN OCHA for the North Caucasus for 2006, for the first time there is a special thematic sector for “Peace & Tolerance” initiatives. I see this as a very important step in the development of programs that not only assist in overcoming the material damage caused by conflict, but also in working with the “hearts and minds” of people, bringing closer a lasting peace in the region. And, I would like to share my hopes that such efforts carried out in the North Caucasus may lead to valuable experiences and practices that may contribute to world-wide efforts to put an end to violence in so many parts of our world. I believe that peace dialogue, reintegration and reconciliation programmes will allow us to progress toward the ultimate goal of the UN – to save the current and future generations from the scourge of war.