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Preventing Violent Extremism in the North Caucasus: The Case of the Regional Project “Together!” (“Vmeste!”)

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Abstract

The problem of radicalism and extremism has manifested itself in many different parts of the world and is usually associated with social tensions, civil unrest and violent conflict. The North Caucasus region is no exception. This article aims to analyze the context in which processes of prevention work take place through the prism of the experience of the Genesis Fund, a North Caucasus NGO that has been engaged in such work since 2005. The article describes the formats and methodologies of countering violent extremism (CVE) activities with youth and shares some of their results in the region. The experiences of many initiatives implemented in the North Caucasus are especially interesting and important given that the region has been home to protracted armed conflict for many years, and that North Caucasus youth are still the focus of attention for recruiters from various extremist and radical groups.

The Pressing Problem of Youth Extremism

The forms and contexts of violent extremism and radicalism vary across different parts of the world but are largely associated with social tensions that go hand in hand with unrest and armed conflict. The North Caucasus is no exception. Radicalization and extremism have led to significant violence in this region.

The NGO Genesis was originally confronted with the issue of radicalization and extremism in 2005–2007 while implementing a joint project with UNICEF. For several years, this issue has been acute. Genesis specialists and psychologists were regularly approached by school teachers, youth workers, and parents. The questions were similar: “How can we stop the radicalization of youth?”, “How can we teach our youth to think critically and minimize the influence of Wahhabism?”

In October 2012, the Advisory and Analytical Council for the Prevention of Extremism was established by Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, the then head of Ingushetia. A representative of Genesis joined the council at a time when the issue of extremism and radicalization were recognized at all levels. Numerous social, economic and cultural programs made youth a key focus group. Later, a similar council was created in Chechnya and the coordinator of Genesis projects in the Chechen Republic became a member.

The Role of NGOs in Countering Extremism

It is an important and promising sign that the role of NGOs in countering extremism has changed. Formerly, anti-extremism, counter-terrorism, and counter-radicalization efforts were considered to be mostly the prerogative of the security services. However, it soon became

obvious that it was impossible to deal with the issue with coercive methods exclusively.

In 2013, Genesis conducted research for the World Bank in five republics of the North Caucasus (“Research of the vulnerabilities in the North Caucasus”). Ninety percent of respondents mentioned radicalization and extremism among the most serious and pressing problems of the region. Most respondents believed that the main reason for radicalization is deep distrust of the authorities, lack of open social dialogue and limited possibilities for young people to articulate and solve their problems. “There is a wall of alienation and mistrust between youth and authorities in the region,” as one respondent described the situation.

Experts point out that in the national republics of the North Caucasus, radicalism and extremism manifest themselves not only through participation in armed groups but also through grassroots extremism aimed towards local ethnic and religious minorities. Minority representatives, namely, members of Russian, Greek, Armenian, Tatar, Roma, and other communities, report that they as well as their children face discrimination and marginalization in their places of residence and educational establishments.

In other regions of Russia, clashes between the youth of Caucasian origin (students, labor migrants, etc.) and the local population also contribute to the problem. Oftentimes the youth, especially from Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia, are not ready for non-violent or equal interaction with representatives of other cultural groups. The phenomenon is often explained by the isolation and violence they have experienced, as well as the region’s economic backwardness caused by two Chechen wars, repression, terrorism and long-term instability.

Addressing the Problem of Youth Radicalization

According to our experts, trainers, psychologists and active volunteers, there are several general characteristics of modern youth with regards to CVE:

- even though young people are an immediate target, as well as a direct victim of terrorism and radical recruiters, in many cases they are very passive;
- they assess most information through the lens of its practical applicability in daily life and its use for personal success;
- most of them are willing to participate in CVE events, but only if they are organized and conducted by someone else;
- young people are mostly motivated by some direct benefits (like trips, grants or awards); many do not consider the opportunity to gain knowledge, new experience or contacts, or personal development, to be “profitable” even if it brings dividends later.

According to experts working with youth in the North Caucasus, a systematic approach is required to address the problem of youth radicalization, which would include both educational methods and the opportunities for youth to speak out and be heard—the latter being the most important. It is crucial to involve representatives of major faiths and religions in this activity due to the fact that the content of extremism and radicalization in the region is often promoted under the banner of religion. Spiritual leaders of different denominations should deliver true messages and philosophies of the world religions, emphasizing the inadmissibility of violence and terrorism.

The “Together!” Project

The Genesis team was deeply concerned about the problem of youth radicalization and the growth of extremism in the North Caucasus. As a result we developed the “Together!” project. It focused on empowering and building the capacity of civil society, developing constructive civil dialogue to prevent radicalism and extremism among young people through the establishment of an information platform, and facilitating a dialogue among the government, civil society, clergy of various faiths and youth.

The project is guided by our own experience and the analysis of international agencies that studied the issue of youth extremism and radicalism. According to the Department of Communities and Local Government’s research (UK, 2010), there are two types of successful interventions in youth development: capacity building or empowerment of young people, and edu-

cation and training that can challenge theologically based ideologies.¹

While developing the project, we considered both the specificity of our youth and the recommendations of experts. Interactive methods like trainings, discussion meetings, case-studies, quests, and forum theatres, among other activities, are used. A wide range of youth-specific topics are covered:

- communication and non-violent conflict resolution,
- intercultural and interfaith communication and tolerance,
- counter-manipulation behavior, including in online forums,
- leadership and team building,
- social project design, and
- public speaking skills and creating public campaigns.

This project provides an opportunity for young people to participate in creativity contests and cultural festivals of different ethnic groups. An applied academic conference “Academia and Education for the Prevention of Extremism and Radicalism” was organized for young scholars.

The project is implemented in four republics of the North Caucasus: Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria. Weekly youth trainings are our main type of activity. Other formats are more time and resource consuming and therefore take place every 3–4 weeks.

Project updates are published on the Genesis website and social media, like Facebook, VKontakte, and Instagram, because these three are the most popular in the region. The main aims are:

- to inform society about the project and to provide visibility for it,
- to attract youngsters who would like to participate in such activities, but don’t know how to get involved,
- to encourage activists and motivate them, and
- to create a volunteer database for other organizations and projects.

Aside from organizational work, local project coordinators are invested in all the events personally. They act as mentors, friends, and protectors for our volunteers. It is not the designed goal of the project, but the consequence of it. We believe that the project values and the work atmosphere that our team has tried to create are the main reasons for it.

Communication with government agencies and spiritual leaders has been an important part of the project. Government agencies provided administrative support to the events and joined the discussions; at the same time they were also provided with advice and training for their own activities. Religious leaders explained to

1 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272348701_Preventing_Religious_Radicalisation_and_Violent_Extremism_A_Systematic_Review_of_the_Research_Literature/download (accessed 13 May 2020).

our participants that all the main world religions are non-violent and reject terrorism and that they spread the narratives of wisdom, mercy, forgiveness, and peace.

The Creation of Youth Networks

Experience has shown that the best way for engaging youth in public activities is the creation of youth networks. It provides young people from different regions, republics and social groups with strong and vibrant ties. The networks are highly effective in ensuring community mobilization when young people actively interact with their environment, which can include family, relatives, friends, elders, community leaders, clergy, civil society, and business professionals who can become influential agents of change. Ultimately, the network is the source of new initiatives and leaders. Girls and women play a critical role here but their capacity has been underestimated for CVE activities. By creating alternative reference groups for youth, networking can make CVE efforts more successful and help the participants turn their backs to extremist groups.

A networking format for youth work is not new for the North Caucasus; however, it requires time and significant funds to build a network. It should be sustainable after external support is terminated, which is the most difficult aspect of the project. As such, youth networks are rare in the region.

Within the framework of the “Together!” Project, a new network has been created. It is supported by the resource centers in the four republics of the North Caucasus and organizes at least 100 peer-to-peer events with some 3,000 participants annually.

Impact

Since 2014, Genesis conducted annual research within the framework of the “Together project”. Its aim is to measure the level of youth awareness about the causes of extremism and their interest in anti-extremism and anti-radicalism efforts. In addition, the dynamics of youth’s opinions and attitudes were monitored.

According to the results, the number of people aware of extremism has increased from 2014 to 2019. The vast majority of the respondents have a negative attitude towards it; some half of the respondents define extremism through extremely negative value judgments (illegal actions or extreme intolerance).

Over half the respondents associated the rise of extremism with social and political reasons, like social inequality, struggling for survival on the labor market,

low credibility of law enforcement agencies, the declining influence of national cultures, and the influence of mass media. Immaturity, distorted values of youth, and mental disorders were also mentioned as possible reasons for extremism.

In general, the results of the research reflect the main vulnerabilities of modern society. Most participants are deeply concerned about the issue.

It is noteworthy that the majority of respondents appreciated the importance of preventive activities and were interested in joining them. At least 2,000 people from four republics of the North Caucasus and 30–50 experts, like academics, government youth specialists, and representatives of law enforcement agencies, took part in the annual research.

Conclusions

We are often asked about the reasons for our project’s popularity and sustainability. The experience and certain fundraising skills of the organizers made a difference, for sure. We should pay tribute to our wonderful donors. I believe the projects’ core principle, “Do no harm!”, is the key to success. The ideas of tolerance and pluralism are the cornerstone of our events. We do not impose the “truth” but present our participants different opinions and positions. Non-violence and freedom of choice are attractive for the youth, and it motivates them to get involved and spread the ideas of non-violence.

Also, sincerity and honesty are a must when working with youth! They sense a phony a mile away. We always bear that in mind; and if we don’t know the answer, we just talk about it honestly and try to find the answer together.

We also try to use informal and creative methods for the prevention of violent extremism. We believe that activities should use appropriate language and tools understandable for the target audience. They should be disseminated by all possible means: interactive education, mass media, social media, videos, etc.

Genesis, like any other NGO, cannot address the problem of unemployment or provide access to material resources. But if we provide the youth of the North Caucasus with knowledge and life skills, they will be able to withstand the destructive influence of radical and extremist groups or acts. To this end, our team suggests informal approaches to overcome social apathy and alienation and for shaping a positive identity that is grounded in dignity and usefulness.

About the Author

Mareta Dzeitova, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology, Ingush State University. She is also the supervisor of educational programs at the NGO Genesis.