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PEOPLE'S PEACEMAKING PERSPECTIVES

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North Caucasus

OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES THE NORTH CAUCASUS, a volatile and hugely diverse region, has been struggling with the legacy of major conflict, in which thousands died and which has left an aftermath of brutality affecting the local population to this day. There is a striking contrast between a degree of superficial stability, on the one hand, and underlying tensions and risks, where violent episodes are never far away.

The North Caucasus faces a number of major challenges, many of which centre around security: the need to respond to growing radicalisation across the region; socio-economic development; and ways to manage multi-ethnicity and power relationships within the Russian Federation. Insecurity hinders socio-economic development which in turn generates security problems. This harms the prospects for ordinary people, and not least local youth.

The research shows that social and political conditions for people on the ground – particularly for youth, who feel excluded from both economic and political life – do little to defend society against the influence of ideological extremism. More engagement with the problems affecting young people, and improved governance, including in the security and justice sectors, can help build resilience to violence.

Findings and recommendations in this policy brief and accompanying report are drawn from consultations in five of the republics of the North Caucasus: Chechnya, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Dagestan, and Kabardino-Balkaria. The research looked at the mix of challenges and opportunities in the region from the perspective of ordinary people; insights which are rarely reflected in analyses of the region.

The European Union (EU) can and does play a constructive role through its programme funding to support initiatives in the North Caucasus. The research points to ways in which it could do more, including through sharing know-how and experience with the Russian authorities.

KEY OUTCOMES

- **Promotion of a climate that strengthens resilience to ideological extremism** is needed to address risks of radicalisation in society.
- **There is a pressing need to engage with the problems of young people** by providing room for meaningful social and political participation and improving their prospects for professional development.
- **Improving governance, including in the security and justice sectors**, important in its own right, is essential for peaceful development in the region.
- **Supporting development of local civil society in the region** is a key area for continued EU support.

The People's Peacemaking Perspectives project

The People's Peacemaking Perspectives project is a joint initiative implemented by Conciliation Resources and Saferworld and financed under the European Commission's Instrument for Stability. The project provides European Union institutions with analysis and recommendations based on the opinions and experiences of local people in a range of countries and regions affected by fragility and violent conflict.

"We are losing our young generation, some leave for the forest, [...] others die fighting those who went to the forest. [...] We don't know how to stop this and it worries us."

Student, Ingushetia

Findings and Recommendations

1.

Promotion of a climate that strengthens resilience to ideological extremism is needed to address risks of radicalisation in society.



Young boy and old man in Dzeirakh-Assa regions, Ingushetia. © ELENA MICHAJLOWSKA

A lack of tolerance towards diversity, ethnic barriers and group loyalties are a feature of societies in the North Caucasus. The disconnect between formal political tolerance and prevailing social intolerance undermines trust at many levels, not just between people, but also between people and authorities. Weak community resilience, coupled with intolerance and societal divisions, allow radical religious movements to spread insecurity and destabilise societies in the region. In 2011, over a thousand people were killed or wounded in armed clashes and explosions.

Participants in group discussions felt that negative attitudes in other parts of Russia towards people from the Caucasus have knock-on effects within society in the North Caucasus, accentuating perceived divisions in society and adding to a sense of broader marginalisation. While not explored in the study, a more tangible 'North Caucasian' identity is forming as a reaction to the rise of these 'anti-Caucasian' attitudes in other parts of the Russian Federation. Media coverage and standards of reporting on the region bear a large portion of responsibility in this respect.

"I am worried that I observe the growth of nationalism. Artificially it's started to pit us against each other."

Participant in group discussion, Kabardino-Balkaria

In group discussions and interviews people felt that, unless actions taken by the authorities to counter radicalisation and terrorism are transparent and less focused on 'hard security' objectives, they are likely to be ineffective and more likely to be counter-productive. The cooperation of communities in efforts to tackle and prevent radicalisation and insecurity would be better achieved through engagement, consultation and a well-tailored development agenda, which meets locally identified needs. An accountable and rules-based environment is needed that offers people, particularly the young, meaningful prospects and opportunities for the future.

"People should become more humane, respectful, understand each other, laws should function on the territory of our republic, relations should be equal [...]. People of different nationalities should be tolerant of one another."

Views expressed by participants in discussion group, Chechnya

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The EU should build on existing dialogue with Russia to advocate more strongly the idea of political pluralism, ethnic and religious tolerance and active citizen participation in public affairs.
- Explore opportunities to share experience and know-how with Russia on community-based approaches to security and justice provision, to enhance and build on expertise in this area.
- Encourage the Russian government to clarify and precisely define by law what constitutes hate speech; so that they explain those standards to those involved in the public sphere in the republics, e.g. media, education and activist groups, and hold them accountable if they use hate speech.
- Donors should explore with the Russian Government and civil society actors how global influences interact with local problems and grievances; which local issues are used in order to mobilise and recruit people for extremist movements, and establish how the causes underlying these problems can be addressed.
- Encourage the Russian authorities' efforts to combat violent extremism through a preventative, rather than a reactive and punitive, approach.

2.

There is a pressing need to engage with the problems of young people by providing room for meaningful social and political participation and improving their prospects for professional development.

Young people make up a growing proportion of the population in the North Caucasus and face a number of pressing challenges. Unemployment, insecurity and tough socio-economic conditions rank among the problems. Widespread discontent among youth was reflected by participants in the consultations. This stems from a lack of political participation, a dearth of opportunities for self-fulfilment, a degree of moral decay in society, a governance system based on patronage, the absence of rule of law, pervasive corruption, dishonesty in official structures and an inability to get a job on merit.

These factors are compounded by the lack of ideas and initiative on how this can be changed, how young people can be part of that change and break with prevailing attitudes and behaviour.

"When we manage to get positions in the state structures, we will take bribes in exactly the same way. It is impossible to reject money."

University students, group discussion, Dagestan

The experience of the last decade shows that youth problems, mitigated in earlier times by the traditions of Soviet upbringing and social organisation at the workplace, have emerged as a potentially destabilising issue. Those consulted cited a range of motivations by young people to join Islamist groups, reflecting a more general lack of understanding about the latter's appeal:

"Some people 'head for the forest' because of discontent with the existing situation; some because they adhere to their views, and there are some who join because of money."

Youth participant, rural discussion group, Chechnya

The conclusions of the consultations that took place point to the need for more opportunities for the younger age-group to give them hope and enhance their prospects. For example, with diminished possibilities on offer, recreation activities for male youths tend to centre around sports clubs, mosques, the internet and visiting relatives. In such conditions, young people have plenty of pent-up energy and lack avenues for meaningful engagement in society or somewhere to belong and need more opportunities for outside contacts across social and ethnic divides.

"I would prefer my children to study outside [the region] because they say that it is impossible to get a job with the education obtained in our republic."

Participant in discussion group, Kabardino-Balkaria

Young people in the Caucasus are not unique in their attitudes and desire to rebel. It is natural for youth to be fascinated by bigger causes than careerism and consumerism, especially at times when society is changing. Yet, a recurrent theme in the research was the gap between the more religious younger generation and their Sovietised parents and grandparents, and a shared desire of many young people to leave the North Caucasus.

"Unemployment, violation of rights, lack of security, lack of recreation facilities, lack of conditions for entertainment, housing problems and some people want to get an education."

Participants, youth discussion group, Chechnya

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Support for dialogue and people-to-people contacts, focusing on youth initiatives, across social and ethnic divides is essential. The EU could explore further support for this in consultation with the Russian Government.
- In measures targeted to reach youth, including those aimed at preventing ideological extremism, the Russian authorities should be encouraged to transparently use innovative communication technologies that young people use, such as social media, internet, and mobile phone technology.
- The EU Delegation should fund activities focused on improving the competencies of youth institutions, such as sports clubs, to ensure they contribute to young people's positive development by strengthening teaching skills of trainers to enable them also to act as youth mentors.
- Support youth activities that encourage self-reflection, challenge stereotypes, and promote critical thinking, as well as socially responsible action.
- In consultation with young people, donor programming should identify recreation activities that are attractive to young people and suited to the local context, and identify opportunities for federal and republic authorities to help develop facilities in these areas.

3.

Improving governance, including in the security and justice sectors, important in its own right, is essential for peaceful development in the region.

In all republics participants cite methods used by security agencies as often unlawful and cruel, including shooting and killing of suspects instead of detaining and putting them through a due legal process. They also cite torture, arbitrary detentions, arrests of relatives of Islamist suspects, and pinning blame for unresolved cases on innocent people. A lack of transparency in detentions and prosecutions of cases of violent radicalism leaves local society suspicious of their fairness and makes it harder for the authorities to win the support of communities in efforts to increase security.

Another governance challenge across the republics is patronage. Political elites tend to form along clan ties and constitute a close-knit network of family members and kinsfolk, who enjoy exclusive access to administrative resources. Participants expressed high levels of mistrust and at times frustration towards the republic institutions. This is due to irresponsiveness, lack of representation, corruption and the fact that patronage, rather than merit, determines position and employment opportunities. The federal authorities are blamed for other failings.

"Here, a business without a civil servant's seat or backing is an empty shell. If you don't have a state official on your side you have no levers of executive power; therefore your business would suffer, they will try to make you incur losses and take the business away from you."

Businessman, discussion group, Kabardino-Balkaria

The sense of injustice and exclusion that this can create is a further driver of tensions in society; in consultations, issues of governance came out more strongly than ethnicity as a driver of insecurity. Ethnic Russians in the North Caucasus can also fall into the category of those suffering from a feeling of exclusion.

Again, improved political and economic governance and promoting the rule of law can go a long way to alleviating perceived and real tensions.

"Everything is for sale...whoever has money always goes unpunished."

Discussion group, Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia

Some republic authorities have made an attempt to foster dialogue with society. This needs to be replicated more widely, to engage and give more buy-in locally. The situation varied from Chechnya, where the republic is governed by 'command methods', to Dagestan and Ingushetia where there is relatively more openness, a freer media and politicians are more accessible for communication and dialogue, though there is some way to go.

"We are open and have come out of the underground. But we are ready to go back at any time, because we are not confident that the new policy is serious and lasting."

Interview with a Salafi respondent, Dagestan

Participants in discussion groups and those interviewed in Chechnya indicated that society is gradually becoming more demanding and there is a growing constituency which is concerned not only with daily bread, but wider civic engagement.

"We are not content with the political order of our life, i.e. the lack of opportunity to influence those in power. People elect those who are already chosen. Everything happens here because those on top [...] decided everything between themselves."

Youth participant, discussion group, Chechnya

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Encourage the idea of initiatives through which citizens can hold politicians and officials to account e.g. effective public inquiry mechanisms, and complaints procedures such as hotlines and independent ombudspersons.
- Be supportive of practical steps to include governance indicators (such as perception of corruption existence of independent media, freedom of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), quality of management) into the monitoring system operated by the Ministry of Regional Development, which regularly conducts surveys.
- Share with the Russian authorities the western experience of public cooperation and openness which allows civil society and journalists to monitor police and other law enforcement officials' work where possible, including detention operations.
- Promote the idea of adopting community-based policing methods, encouraging security structures, particularly police, to regularly meet and cooperate with communities in addressing security concerns.
- Recognising that it is a matter for the Russian authorities to decide, suggest the idea of regular debates on main issues of public concern, in which all relevant stakeholders, including marginalised groups and a diversity of opinion is represented.
- In cooperation with the North Caucasus Federal District authorities, the EU Delegation could support the publication of independent annual reports locally on issues of social tension and the human rights situation in the region. Leading NGOs and the District's Public Council could act as founders of such a periodical.

A village school near Mugi in Dagestan.

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State–society relations

Following a series of major terrorist attacks in Kabardino-Balkaria and an appeal from the republic authorities to Moscow, a counter-terrorist operation was introduced in several areas in March 2011 to prevent terrorist actions and stabilise the situation. According to residents in the Elbrus district, the authorities were quick to provide information and guidance to the local population about the measures.

“The former head of the police in the Elbrus region helped in this process. He used to come and meet people. He did not hide from anybody, did not go around in an armoured car and all this while the special operation was taking place. It was both a wise and brave step.”

In turn the residents started becoming active too, feeling that it was not right to sit and do nothing. Some started upgrading amenities; others renovated the irrigation and drainage systems. Rubbish and large rocks were cleared away, fences were mended; of their own initiative people did things themselves that had not been done for many years.

Yet the closure of the area to tourists under the measures affected residents in the Elbrus district more than most, given their dependence on tourism for income. While not against the operation, they resent the resulting impact on their livelihoods.

“The population has been living in a vacuum for seven months already. The worst is that the people are losing faith in the authorities, because nobody, not one representative, has been here and asked us how we live.”

According to an official in the local administration, social tensions arise from the lack of income; many are in need – people even buy bread on loans. But a source of tension also lies in the lack of cooperation “between the state authorities and the community, between the law enforcement agencies and the community, and even the state and the law enforcement agencies.” While some improvements had been made, he felt this had not gone far enough.

“The law enforcement agencies are now more in contact with the population and maybe the attitude to them is changing more quickly than to the state authorities. The authorities have in effect displayed indifference to us.”

4.

Supporting development of local civil society in the region is a key area for continued EU support.

The ability of communities to actively address their problems, defend their interests, or articulate needs through NGOs is low; many prefer to get things done through relatives instead. Often the civil society sector is inward looking and functions in isolation from mainstream society.

“There are some positive changes, but they happen slower than we wish them [...] Our citizens do not hurry to receive aid in consultative centres and public organisations, even knowing that an NGO exists and is ready to help.”

Participant, discussion group, Kabardino-Balkaria

Levels of civic activism vary. For example, over eighty public organisations are registered in Kabardino-Balkaria, one-third of them being youth organisations and one-quarter are different kinds of national-cultural centres. However, only a few of all registered organisations are active. This sometimes comes down to lack of qualified staff and lack of coordination.

Central Russian NGOs have found it difficult to engage in some republics; they have been unable to find people to work with them because of pressure from the authorities. Similarly, few donor organisations and international NGOs have a presence in the region outside Chechnya, limiting their ability to support relevant and informed programmes and initiatives. Work to support and build the capacity of local civil society and foster outside contacts is important, not only so they can champion improved governance, but also to increase information and understanding about the region.

“There is more freedom here than in other republics – but my colleagues paid for this with their lives. If they kill me, someone else will come in my place. We are treated the way we allow ourselves to be treated.”

Human rights activist, Ingushetia

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Support not only human rights work which deals with the consequences of radicalism and with prosecutions; but also continue to sponsor a preventative and developmental agenda which can help to address some of the root causes.
- In its programming, the EU Delegation should help build the capacity of North Caucasus NGOs, where necessary, so they are able to fulfil donor requirements in the fields of accountability and programme management.
- In cooperation with the federal authorities, prepare and disseminate a publication on the history of federal and international assistance to the North Caucasus in the last twenty years, analysing successes, as well as lessons learned.
- Support the development of local civil society by assisting North Caucasus NGOs to network and cooperate with NGOs from outside the region. That should include indigenous NGOs and community-based organisations, not only large NGOs from elsewhere in Russia.



This map is intended for illustrative purposes only. Saferworld and Conciliation Resources take no position on whether this representation is legally or politically valid.

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Methodology

The research informing this brief involved collaboration between international and Russian experts, including researchers from the North Caucasus, and collaboration between the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences and Saferworld. The methodology was developed jointly by consultants and staff from Saferworld, and with the local researchers and the Institute of Oriental Studies at a meeting in Moscow in August 2011.

The research covered three themes. Firstly, the problem analysis focused on social differences and the challenges arising from them, such as ethnicity, religion, the generation gap, migration and the relationship between communities and political institutions. Secondly, an analysis of responses explored the efforts by the state and society to address these challenges or to adapt to the existing situation. Lastly, people's views were solicited on what they consider needs to be done in future, on the basis of which recommendations were developed.

Research was carried out through discussion groups and interviews in five republics – Chechnya, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria. Discussions involved students from leading universities, less educated youth, journalists, academics, current and former staff of NGOs and international organisations in the region, public sector workers, representatives of small and medium-sized enterprises and rural communities. Participants were selected using criteria of age, gender, employment, ethnic origin and urban/rural background. Guiding questions were prepared for the discussions and the same categories of respondents respected across all research areas. In addition, interviews were conducted with civilian and security officials, experts in social, political and religious affairs, and religious figures. Altogether 30 discussion groups and 50 interviews were held, involving 250 individuals.

Finally, a chapter on each republic was prepared, in most cases by researchers from the region. These studies underwent rigorous peer review and were jointly analysed at a workshop in Pyatigorsk in October 2011. The findings are published in a report in English and Russian, *North Caucasus: views from within*.

We are grateful for advice from staff at the EU Delegation in Moscow.