

How can the leadership of the universities promote intercultural dialogue?

How can university leadership promote intercultural dialogue in a wider society? To think about such topics in modern Russia means to think politically. The country still is in a situation in which pivotal, strategic decisions are needed in major spheres of its life. This involves, in turn, the ability (1) to take into account the immense variability of socio-cultural environment in which institutions of higher education are functioning, (2) to understand clearly the outcomes of preceding period of "postsoviet transition", (3) to identify adequately the basic social and cultural processes that are determining factors of the foreseeable future.

In this presentation I mean to state my principal position on the topic of the seminar as it may be conceptualized in reference to the experiences and social functions regional university center must be bearing in the specific situation of the North Caucasus.

(1) North Caucasus is a plural region in various respects - linguistic, ethnic and religious. Here, on a comparatively small area side by side there live peoples differing in specific economies, ways of life, traditions, customs. Such diversity has been formed since time immemorial and is still preserved.

Under such conditions it was inevitable that the Caucasians formed the concepts of "one's own" and "someone else's"; another's; others' The idea of one's own was regarded at different levels – "One's own family", "one's own kinship, neighbours, settlement (village), people". The priority of "one's own" is vividly demonstrated by the Caucasians' folklore. The preference given to "one's own" developed a somewhat alert attitude to "someone else's". The Caucasus people think that a man could only become lucky and happy in his mother land, in the very place of his birth and it was here that he was bound to settle his life.

But there is the commonality of basic values and normative structures in indigenous cultures while all of them are in a sense marked by "otherness" in reference to Russia's cultural mainstream.

So, mutual ability or disability to maintain intercultural dialogue may be seen as a constant issue of local communities and of the greater Russia's society as well as regional policies of the state. Not of lesser importance is inner duality of sociocultural systems of the peoples of North Caucasus which are structured around elements that are both indigenous and borrowed from great civilizations, reflecting historical tradition and values of modernity.

(2) Towards the end of the soviet epoch local societies were bearing some characteristics making it possible for them to participate fruitfully in the process of Russia's transition to democracy and market economy. But the presence of powerful elements of traditionalism make it vulnerable to any factors that can "activate" these elements simultaneously weakening the "governability" of social and political processes in the region. The practice of democratization and economic reforms in Russia was abundant with such factors.

As far as the North Caucasus is concerned, the specificity and preliminary results of the major social and political upheavals at the end of the 20th century, is that the crisis and the destruction of the Soviet system, the "laissez faire" economic reforms and Russian "transition to democracy" have been shaped to a large extent by the domination of the socio-cultural factors.

Firstly, the initiative and most important impulses of political and economic changes proceeded from the socio-political and cultural/ideological "center" of the Russian society, whereas the processes in the North

Caucasus may be treated as the reaction to and adaptation of local ethno-social communities to the radical changes in the “surrounding” socio-political environment. These regional developments in turn were later becoming a constituent part of the general process of the changes in Russia as a whole. Evidently, the local responses to modernizing initiatives depended on the mode of their specific “refraction” in various sociocultural contexts. In these conditions not only social groups or political units, but ethnocultural communities as well have become the actors in the political process.

Secondly, mass political mobilization in the region mainly concentrated around symbols and slogans, aimed at preserving ethnic or national identity, revival of national languages and cultures, indigenous traditions and customs. These problems have become the focal points for national-political movements and later have been incorporated into the activity of governmental structures. As a result, the vital mechanisms of ethno-cultural reproduction have acquired legal and institutional recognition.

Thirdly, the crisis of statehood, disruptions of the social order, violation of normal functioning of the social mechanisms at all its levels – all of this objectively conditioned a compensatory and stabilizing counter-reaction of local societies in the form of partial restoration of regulative functions of a number of traditional social institutions and brought about the actualization of corresponding patterns of identity, mental structures, values, norms and modes of social behavior. And this was in parallel to the purposeful politics of the cultural revivalism.

One must say that North Caucasus has been confronted at the end of XXth century with the challenge of archaization rather than with opportunities of modernization. Extreme, and even violent forms of the expression of the aforementioned processes have long been actively discussed by experts, political elite and in mass media. Here belong the growth of ethnic nationalism, separatism, interethnic conflicts, the increase of the influence of Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism:

(3) It has become obvious by now that some “conjunctural” aspects of post-soviet transition in North Caucasus acquired “structural” content upon which the prospects of regional development essentially depend.

If being compared with the Russia’s average economic indicators the region is characterized by structural “backwardness”. This factor will, for a long time, significantly limit the ability of the regional community to solve main social and economic problems without external assistance. From this come out destabilizing factors and negative social phenomena – marginalization and criminalization of a certain part of the society, growth of the influence of religious radicalism and nationalism on the youth. It is worth emphasizing that this takes place not in a stagnant patriarchal society, but in the awakened society which got rid of the rural isolation. So, it is impossible to merely localize these phenomena having isolated the rest of the population from them.

All the previous experience of reforms shows that culture in the society performs basic rather than superstructural functions. It is those values and norms that dominate in a society’s culture that actually determine individual behaviour and social practices. It is obvious that the cultural space of the Russia tends towards fragmentation and disintegration. Society as a whole and young generations especially are, on the one hand, being influenced by mass culture which is devoid of “national” content or symbols. On the other hand, it is influenced by the traditional “indigenous” cultural forms which are being survived at present. The latter may be characterized by ethnic and religious exceptionalism.

Some experts consider that if now prevalent trends that are transforming demographic, socio-economic and cultural mapping of North Caucasus continue to develop, it will end by the middle of the XXIth century with the overall “restoration” of region’s demographic structure of the beginnings of the XXth century. Further divergence of the two cultural strata – one that is Russian and orthodox Christian and the other Caucasian and predominantly Muslim is predicted.

So, current cultural processes acquire some ambivalence: they can serve either as a dynamic factor that enhances intercultural dialogue or as a source of xenophobia, national and religious intolerance. However, this must not give rise to the question of what-to-do with ethnic diversification of the region, but, instead, to the question of how to fruitfully create culture of intercultural dialogue and polylogue, which will help to exclude ethnic conflicts.

The tensions created in dual structures of social and spiritual life of the North Caucasus region during the transitional period of 1990s are not yet relaxed. It cannot be removed by any single action in legal, administrative or political sphere. At the same time the intensity and multiplicity of economic, political and cultural interactions with surrounding world would lead to the variability and unpredictability in regional development.

In such conditions the opportunities to realize any rational strategy will depend on the adequate knowledge of the structure of identities, pattern variables of value orientations and social action among the younger generations. Hence come out specific role of the system of education in the regional development. It remains, as a matter of fact, the only social institution which has a long-term and universal effect on youth. Its efforts ought to be directed to the formation of general conditions which will enable the rising generations to organically adopt the norms and values of the society and simultaneously be apt to positive innovations.

Crises and conflicts of the last decade of the XXth century cannot be explained by the mere multiplicity of ethnic and confessional groups encountering each other in this area. It is rather caused by the fact that all of them, and the region as a whole, have reached some culmination point in time, from which all the complexities of their past, contradictions of their present and uncertainties of their future is most obviously seen. Ultimately, such destructive phenomena as separatism or religious fundamentalism can be overcome only on the ways of further modernization of the local communities, with the simultaneous preservation of their cultural and historical identity.

Evidently, this cannot be provided by means of education only. ***Purposeful and sustainable policy of regional modernization, with the system of education playing the key role in it, is needed.***

Current tensions and conflicts should pose before us not the question of “What to do with ethnic diversity?” – but rather the question of “How to build the culture of peace in interethnic relations?” This is one of the most reliable means capable to preclude ethnic conflicts and to foster the development of mutual tolerance and positive co-operation of the peoples in the multicultural environment of the North Caucasus. The movement towards a peaceful democratic order and securing human rights in this region are attainable only through the dialogue of cultures. Due to this it is the University that must play a special role in the solution of the problems of socio-cultural modernization of the region on the basis of high synthesis of the values of the modernity and distinctive cultural traditions of the indigenous peoples of the region. A University should serve as a model for modern – i.e. effective, multicultural, democratic and united – commonwealth. So, important

aspect in the University's activity is "education" of the public in general in the spirit of human rights, democracy, peace and tolerance.

The strategy to conform these purposes should be related to the establishing of the mechanism of sustainable development of the regional system of education. The Universities of the classical type located in the region can serve as a basis of the regional system of permanent education.

Consequently, the regional system of education must be arranged in a specific way, to secure the youth's true participation in the life of the society, to secure a kind of the whole spectrum of social opportunities for the self-realization of every young man.

It's worth noting in this connection, that the regional universities appear as the most important social institutions for the promotion of human rights in North Caucasus. The reasons are twofold.

On the one hand, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims in the Article 26 that everyone has the right to education. And more than that, we can say that in the modern world the right to education is indispensable for the full realization of other human rights, such as the right to work, the right to free choice of employment, the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community, the right to equal access to public services etc. There is no need in lengthy argumentation for the importance of these rights in the present economic condition of the North Caucasus region. One may consider in this respect the meaning of the fact that in the Kabardino–Balkarian State University more than 10 thousand students are educated in 15 professional fields and 24 specialties. On the other hand, Article 26 sets forth an explicit demand: "Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace". So, human rights will be universally secured only if they have an adequate cultural basis in every society throughout the world.

In accordance with this, our public activities are aimed at spreading and strengthening in contemporary Russian society a modern outlook, based on the values and principles of the culture of peace and human rights.

We are quite conscious of the fact that the main trends in modern world culture are related to the growing diversity of "world views" and life styles, to the spreading of individualism and multi-culturalism. One can question the possibility of the mere existence of a single "modern outlook", and even more, the right of anybody to define and "enforce" it to others. Such a vision, however, ignores the simple fact that the individualization and diversification in the ways of life are taking place within one and the same world. The need for a rational and humane "ordering" of the life of people in a family, a community, a nation, and obviously, all over the world is ever growing. So, a modern world outlook conjoins the understanding of the rights and interests of the individual with those of the community, the nation and humankind. Undoubtedly, it is always personal, but hardly particularistic. It may be based on rational or scientific premises and, together with it, to be guided by humanitarian values. It must not be something given once and forever, but always be open for dialogue and innovation.