

of NGOs Dealing with Ethno-political Conflicts

Strategies and Needs

in the New Eastern Democracies.

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Summary

The study describes the strategies and needs of local and regional NGOs focusing on the transformation of ethno-political conflicts in the countries of the former - Soviet Union and (Central-) Eastern Europe. On the basis of 70 semi-structured (group-) interviews it discusses 56 NGOs and active individuals dealing with a number of issues ranging from education and training via human rights advocacy and fact-finding to mediation. Their common trait is the commitment to the constructive and non-violent transformation of ethno-political conflicts.

The first part of the study focuses on the strategies and goals of the NGOs in the assumption that they are better adapted to the local situation than Western Non-State Actors (NSAs) and that they may develop into the representatives of internal peace constituencies. In a tentative classification relating to the dimension of high vs. low escalation of the conflict they are dealing with their activities are summarized under either mediation & advocacy for non-violence and bridge building in highly escalated conflicts or minority rights advocacy & empowerment and multi-ethnic community building in conflicts with low escalation.

In the second part of the article the adequacy of the support that some of the Western NSAs are offering to the NGOs will be analyzed taking into account differing interests, the cultural distance and power asymmetries. By giving voice to the NGOs themselves the study discusses issues relevant for supportive programs, such as center-margins hierarchies and international exchange and learning. It criticizes the role of Western NSAs in the fields of qualification and funding and develops suggestions for change.

1 The role of NGOs in the transformation of ethno-political conflicts

Ethno-political movements and confrontations are among the main challenges in the transformation process in the countries of the former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe.¹ Conflicts along ethnic lines are often described as ›protracted conflicts‹, because they have a long history, effect basic principles of statehood and sovereignty and are characterized by strong reservations, fear and mistrust on all sides of the divisions. If it is possible to contain these conflicts on a relatively low level of escalation, they nevertheless represent basic obstacles to the legitimacy of the new democracies, the reconciliation after historic crimes, and a coherent and just social economic development. In former Yugoslavia and in the Caucasus some of these conflicts escalated to wars and complex emergencies. And even if all the wars in these regions can be terminated, there will be the tedious task of a sustainable process of post-conflict peace building.

Relevant actors in all phases of these conflicts include International Governmental Organizations, International NGOs and NGOs located in Western Europe and North America (Western Non-State-Actors (NSA))² and local and regional NGOs. This study focuses on the latter two, the majority of which are small organizations or individual activists. On the basis of 70 semi-structured (group-) interviews³ and ob-

1. K. Rupesinghe, P. King, O. Vorkunova, ed., *Ethnicity and Conflict in a Post-Communist World: The Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

2. Compare G. Geeraerts, A. Mellentin, 'Analyzing Non-State Actors In World Politics' *Pole-Papers*, vol. 33, no. 4, 1994.

3. The interviews ranged between 1-3 hours in length with one or several representatives of the same NGO or individual activists. We tried to cover all conflict zones in the region equally, but did not counteract random influences on sample selection, such as access problems or unexpected organizational difficulties. The regional distribution of our interviews is as follows: Albania: 1, Bulgaria: 5, Croatia: 1, Macedonia: 3, Yugoslavia: 10, Romania: 1, Moldova: 1, Czech Republic: 2, Slovak Republic: 2, Poland: 7, Latvia: 2, Moscow based: 19, South-

servations during two 5-day-workshops we can discuss 56 NGOs and active individuals, among which 16 can be considered as institutionalized NGOs, i.e. they consist of more than 10 members and have existed for more than 2 years, they are working on several projects at the same time and their internal structure is rudimentarily institutionalized. These NGOs and individual activists can be considered as networks of concerned citizens who are dealing with a number of issues ranging from education and training via human rights advocacy and fact-finding to mediation. Their common though not always explicit trait is the commitment to the constructive and non-violent transformation of ethno-political conflicts.⁴

So far the direct influence of these NGOs on ethno-political conflicts generally speaking is marginal.⁵ Yet, as transformation societies are challenged in the development of (legitimate) actors that can represent interest groups⁶ we can consider these NGOs as early representatives of peace constituencies. In time they might develop into powerful – and more controversial – actors. While the role of NGOs during conflicts has received some research attention recently, the debate focused mainly on the work of large humanitarian NGOs which has justly been criticized for decapitating already weak states.⁷ Referring to local and regional peace NGOs in the New Eastern Democracies we should keep in mind, that their size, goals, and role in the field differ from that of international NGOs. They are internal actors and

ern Russia 5, Ossetia: 2, Ingushetia: 3, Armenia: 1, Nagorny-Karabakh: 1, Azerbaijan: 2, Georgia: 1, Abchasia: 1. The discussion is aided by 3 interviews with experts in the support of NGOs - 2 locals and one US citizen, who has lived and worked in the region for more than 20 years.

4. Our interviews adequately represent the described NGOs and activists with the exception of those local NGOs whom we could not contact because they have no links on the state or international NGO level. Partly overlapping with this systematic bias, we mainly reached Russian speakers in the countries of the Former Soviet Union and English speakers in (Central-) Eastern Europe.
5. For an overview of the possible roles of NGOs in peace making see: International Institute for Peace, »Agenda for Peace« and NGOs' Peace and the Sciences, vol. XXV, September 1994, pp. 28-55.
6. R. E. Rubenstein, 'Dispute Resolution on the Eastern Frontier: Some Questions for Modern Missionaries' *Negotiation Journal*, July 1992, pp. 205-213.
7. For a general overview of the debate about the implications of humanitarian interventions see O. Ramsbotham, T. Woodhouse, *Humanitarian Intervention in Contemporary Conflict* (Cambridge MA: Blackwell 1996). This specific argument was drawn from a paper by Tim Allen, »International Interventions in War Zones« at the conference »Fehde, Krieg, Genozid« in Mainz, May 9th-11th, 1996.

the state in transformation societies is rather strong – especially in the minds of its citizens shying away from volunteer commitment. The NGOs that we are describing are hardly in danger of weakening state functions, but they can be the seeds of democratic self organization while retaining the typical advantages of NGOs as compared to state actors: They can act flexibly, have high credibility in the eyes of the population and easier access to the low and medium level representatives of conflicting communities. These are the reasons why in some cases they have moved much despite of their limited resources. Western NSAs like state actors suffer from access problems to informal local networks and lack the local and regional NGOs' insider knowledge. As the NGOs' methods are more adapted to the culture, situation and conflict they are dealing with, in the first part of this study we will survey their strategies and goals in dealing with ethno-political conflicts. By analyzing their functions we are offering a tentative classification referring to the dimension of high vs. low escalation of the conflict that they are working in (compare table).

Thereby we hope to challenge some of the ethnocentric assumptions that are underlying the discourse of those Western NSAs who wish to support the NGOs in the hope that they will develop into a stabilizing part of Eastern civil societies. Despite of their good intentions the Western NSAs' projects do not always serve the needs of the Eastern NGOs and they can be criticized for a neglect of local capacities for peace making and some adverse effects on local and regional NGOs. While the NGOs do need (material) support from abroad in order to widen the scope of their work, the differing interests, the cultural distance, a lack of knowledge and the power difference between the Western NSAs and their target groups make it hard for the NGOs to be serviced adequately. The resulting difficulties may be attributed to a lack of evaluation of supportive projects and a lack of (acknowledged) feedback from the NGOs to the Western NSAs. In the second part of this article we are attempting a first step towards the evaluation of Western support by giving voice to the NGOs themselves. On the basis of a summary of the main needs and criticism of the target group we are discussing issues relevant for supportive programs, the pitfalls of existing support projects by Western NSAs, and making suggestions for change.

2 Strategies and Goals

Many of the NGOs who are called 'peace workers' in this article perceive and define themselves in a wide array of other tasks and goals. They do educational work – which includes training of conflict resolution techniques or they work on human and minority rights issues – with the goal of developing peaceful and just approaches to ethno-political conflicts. Just a few are working directly on the transformation of violent conflicts. For a tentative classification of the NGOs we suggest analyzing their functions relative to the dimension of high vs. low escalation of the conflict they are working in. In each of the resulting categories we can then distinguish at least two different spheres of action: mediation & advocacy for non-violence and bridge building in highly escalated conflicts and minority rights advocacy & empowerment and multi-ethnic community building in conflicts with low escalation.

Table: Summary of Activities

The number in brackets refers to the number of NGOs in our sample.

High	Escalation (28)	Low	Escalation (28)
Mediation & Advocacy for Non-Violence (6)	Bridge Building (22)	Minority Rights Advocacy & Empowerment (7) *	Multi-Ethnic Community Building (21)
by outsiders	by outsiders and insiders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> political protesting monitoring & early warning education & developing an elite representing minorities income-generating projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> school education trainings for multipliers cultural centers and joint celebrations dealing with past crimes round tables on the local and state level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> shuttle diplomacy persuasive communication human rights monitoring fact finding & rumor control often combined with humanitarian work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (re-)establishing symbolic and factual interaction and communication round tables common economical and social projects 		

* These NGOs are numerically underrepresented in our sample as we focused on minority rights NGOs who reach out to the other side of the conflict.

2.1 Highly escalated Conflict

Peace work in the war-torn areas is a medley of protests, human rights monitoring, humanitarian work, rescuing civilians, trying to contain violence, mediation, exchange of prisoners of war, legal defense of deserters, etc. – closely interconnected and serving the goal of crisis management with a view towards longer term conflict transformation. In this field we can analytically distinguish between activities that directly or indirectly aim at the political and military actors in the conflict and those that focus on bridge building on the civilian and the grass-roots level.

Mediation and Advocacy for Non-Violence

We are using ›mediation‹ in its extended meaning as ›a process of conflict management, related to but distinct from the parties' own efforts, where the disputing parties or their representatives seek the assistance, or accept an offer of help, from an individual, group, state or organization to change, affect or influence their perceptions or behavior, without resorting to physical force or invoking the authority of the law.‹⁸ Several Moscow NGOs can act almost like an outside third party in the conflicts in the periphery of the former Soviet Union because of the geographical distance of the conflicts to Moscow, the existence of an official opposition in Russia, and the Russian population's low support for and limited involvement in the Chechen war. Therefore they are perceived and accepted as ›outsider‹ mediators in the Caucasus. In contrast to their former Yugoslavian counterparts they are able to reach not only grass roots, but medium and even high level representatives on all sides of the conflicts.

Typically these NGOs act on the local, regional and governmental level at the same time: For example a Moscow NGO⁹ working on the Ossetian-Ingush conflict in

8. J. Bercovitch, 'The Structure and Diversity of Mediation in International Relations' in: J. Bercovitch, J. Rubin, ed., *Mediation in International Relations*, (London: St. Martin's Press 1992) p.7.

9. We have chosen to anonymize our interview partners as some of them voice criticism against the NSAs that they depend on for their funding (compare chapter 3).

Ingushetia and North Ossetia during 1994 studied the situation, worked in refugee camps, and met with regional authorities, with members of the Joint Inquiry Group of the General Prosecutors Office of Russia and with the Provisional Administration of the Prigorodny region.¹⁰ The NGO developed approaches to reduce the tension and help refugees return. These proposals were then delivered to the governments of North Ossetia, Ingushetia and the Head of the Provisional Administration of the Prigorodny Region. An agreement was signed with the government of Ingushetia on the status of public observers and mediators. In October 1994 members of the NGO were monitoring the problems of Ingush refugees and their return to their homes and were also involved in the delivery and distribution of humanitarian aid. Developing plans is one of the NGOs' strategies and quite often their suggestions are then accepted by governments.

While working in crisis zones some peace activists conduct shuttle diplomacy. Frequently they can reach (temporary) agreements with parts of the military about local cease fires or the exchange of prisoners or corpses. During the first months of the Chechen war peace makers using old connections could convince several military commanders not to advance or not to bomb a village. Later these commanders were replaced. In this sphere of action NGOs are vastly superior to state actors. Interaction with them stays confidential and is not subject to political calculations. They solve problems by skilled communication: For example a women's NGO explicitly uses those gender stereotypes that serve to exclude women from the position of a negotiating partner in order to deescalate disputes in the process of peace making: »A woman – after provoking a dispute – may say: ›It is very good that you finally clarified things. Can you be our advisor? It was my incompetence.« This is accepted by men.«¹¹ Or they use the authority of a mother or grandmother to give advice. One Moscow peace maker is unable to take care of his and his family's material well being and he dresses strangely, much like a saint. His credibility is high because it is obvious that neither the government nor the Mafia nor anyone else does or would want to pay for him. In contact with stubborn hard-liners NGO activists are some-

10. In this area in North Ossetia pogroms against the Ingush population were committed.

11. All interview quotations are not word-by-word transcripts but refer to written notes.

times forced to rob Peter to pay Paul. After a long talk with a religious leader in Nagorny-Karabakh he could finally be persuaded not to kill the children and women among the enemy, as children can be converted to the true faith and the women can give birth to children who can also be saved from the grip of Satan.

The NGOs have to be persuasive ›as human beings‹ because they do not command the resources necessary for direct power mediation. Indirectly they can sometimes exert some pressure for non-violence, if a positive international image is at stake. In that case human rights monitoring and the publication of violations can be a factor in the process towards peace.¹² In the experience of our interview partners the mere presence of neutral observers can de-escalate a conflict, especially in cases where a specific ethnic group feels violated and isolated from the world. That someone is concerned for their rights makes it harder for extremist forces to gain power and it may create a situation where it seems advantageous for the conflicting parties to use constructive means of conflict resolution. In cases such as Transnistria where rumors contributed substantially to the mobilization of violent actors fact-finding and the publication of well-documented facts was a vital factor in the de-escalation of the conflict.

Bridge Building

During highly escalated conflicts communication between enemy populations usually is completely interrupted. NGOs try to reestablish communication channels first symbolically and later factually. This strategy is not only applied by outsider NGOs as in the Caucasus but also by insiders there and in former Yugoslavia, where e.g. women's groups organize common conferences despite of the war. In former Yugoslavia mailboxes organized from abroad made it possible to continue intellectual exchange across battle lines and to offer e-mail messages to relatives and friends on enemy territory as a service to the population. One can imagine how

12. Note that they do not solve the practical dilemma between reporting all human rights violations and mediation. Instead their human rights monitoring directly serves the goal of advocating non-violence.

easing reliable information about endangered relatives is in times of war. When local insider activists attempt bridge building they run a high risk of being accused and treated as traitors. Thus outsiders still have some advantages and often they at least initiate insider action. One NGO which explicitly unites insiders from both sides of a conflict in its membership was founded with the help of an initiating and supporting Irish NGO. Due to the careful selection of the members (different professions and political orientations) they represent several segments of their respective communities. By identifying and discussing problems of the conflicting communities during round tables or conferences they are (re-) establishing communal links and preparing the ground for reconciliation.

This kind of peace building usually takes place outside the zone of or after the phase of violent conflict. Then and there humanitarian organizations place an emphasis on preventing a renewal of violence. For example one organization provides urgently needed treatment for the victims of war, but only in a multi-ethnic hospital. A Moscow charity organization takes care to always support both sides and to tell each side that the others are suffering as much as they. Those who work with traumatized children tend to organize multi-ethnic children's groups or international summer camps. The same is true for refugee workers.

On the other hand the NGOs focusing on peace work also understand the urgent needs of the war-torn populations and they know about the inverse relationship between the chance to reconstruct your house and the motivation to go to war again. While Western Slavonian cities were divided into Croatian and Serbian parts a Belgrade and a Zagreb Anti-War NGO worked on the respective sides of Pacrac for the reconstruction of essential infra-structure. This is aimed at initiating activities that would lead to a normalization of life in the divided community and to the re-establishing of trust between former neighbors and current enemies. International volunteers could cross the border and thereby begin with a very practical kind of shuttle diplomacy. Post-conflict peace building gradually comes close to the more varied and less crisis oriented strategies of conflict transformation common during conflicts on a low level of escalation.

2.2 Low Level of escalation

During war NGOs are eager to make their actions symmetrical between the parties even in cases when many observers would be willing to take sides. For the persons involved it may be difficult to remain neutral, but they agree that neutrality is the basis for their work. Within a relatively stable situation however it is easier for NGOs to address asymmetry in the conflict: Either by advocating the rights of those groups who are frequently violated¹³ or by building culturally tolerant communities which offer stable structures of constructive conflict resolution despite of power asymmetries.

Minority Rights Advocacy and Empowerment

Among the many human and minority rights NGOs working on the transformation of ethno-political conflicts in the New Eastern Democracies we have focused on those who are under particular pressure because they reach out to the other side despite of the polarization of the conflicts. Empowerment can be used to describe supportive measures, that reduce economical, social and political asymmetry with the goal of mobilizing disadvantaged communities for the improvement of their situation. A Yugoslav NGO is educating the minority population in Vojvodina region about minority rights by organizing public discussions in villages. A Romanian Roma organization uses human rights monitoring as a basis of (inter-)national political protesting and for the development of an early warning network. Education promotes ethnic communities' ability for self-representation and sometimes compensatory programs are started early as in the case of the Bulgarian NGO who

13. In contrast to the above mentioned procedure-oriented neutrality this can be considered a content-oriented neutrality, which is strongly disputed. Eastern NGOs for historical reasons are suspicious of anyone claiming to represent a disadvantaged group. However their debates and practice also reflect the debate about equal treatment vs. equal opportunities.

raises money for kindergarten fees of minority children – but also for university scholarships. Most NGOs in this field work on very different projects at the same time. Income-generating projects are part of their work and in Bulgaria even architectural and city planning changes are envisioned in the ›anti-ghetto-program«.

Multi-Ethnic Community Building

Projects of this type can also be geared at the entire population. When attractive courses are offered to all the mayors of an ethnically mixed region, chances are high that they will find a way to coexist during the project. In areas with low escalated conflicts many activists decide to work on projects that produce long-term changes in the attitudes and structures of the minority and majority communities. This explains why education for democracy, human rights, conflict resolution, and multiculturalism is a frequent activity of the NGOs. One Yugoslav NGO has succeeded in making their exercises part of the official school curriculum.

Several Western NSAs have placed an emphasis on educational and training programs. By conducting multipliers' trainings they have created NGOs who now train students, teachers, social workers, managers, administrators, politicians and other professional groups, thereby creating a snowball effect. Only some of these trainings are focusing on ethno-political conflicts and their resolution, such as sensitivity-trainings for the police in ethnically mixed regions or trainings uniting -respected persons from different communities, who are expected to continue cooperation after the workshop.

Work on common projects generally is expected to (re-)start cooperation between segregated groups. For example several cultural centers or theater projects are open to all the ethnic groups in the region and/or refugees. In a Southern Russian cultural center with about 20 different ethno-cultural groups under one roof the presence of other national or religious groups during the celebration of holidays of one group or joint festivities and cultural events is of some consequence: Those present will loose face if they fight against those they have celebrated with. Other NGOs go deeper into one core of ethno-political conflicts and publish data on his-

torical pogroms and massacres together with NGOs from former enemy states. The reason that acceptance of the truth is the foundation for the development of good neighborly relations and they are borne out by the amount of public discussion that they invoke.

NGOs can try to influence public opinion with a long-term perspective. To make changes more durable it is advisable to create institutions who work in the same direction. A Polish human rights NGO regularly organizes a meeting of the representatives of the Polish minorities where they discuss with government representatives and articulate their problems. Especially on the local level round tables assemble respected persons from all ethnic communities for a discussion of the conflicts with the goal of finding mutually acceptable solutions.

3 Needs for Support and Training

Considering the importance of the peace building NGOs in the New Eastern Democracies for the development of peace constituencies and for a potentially constructive conflict transformation on the societal level the amount of resources spent in their support is rather low. Moreover the quality of supportive measures leaves much to be desired and does not always coincide with the needs they voice. Those support projects that have been conducted are evaluated at best by the initiating organization. In this study we cannot offer an adequate scientific evaluation, but we are summarizing the needs and criticism of the target groups and giving some suggestions.

During the interviews the hierarchies between centers and margins and the need for international exchange and learning evolved as issues for optimizing support. As concerns existing and possible support by Western NSAs the role of the West as a powerful third party, difficulties with funding and fundraising structures, and the NGOs' experiences with a frequent form of intervention – the training seminar – will be described.

3.1 General Problems

Center-Margins

Looking at the situation of the NGOs one of the issues that are at stake is the difference and the hierarchies between the centers and the margins.¹⁴ A huge gap

14. ›Margin‹ refers to regional differences, but also to social and educational marginalization, sometimes even to age differences.

opens between the two with the margins doing grass-roots-work with little access to resources, foundations, training, networking, information etc. and the centers suffering from too much of the latter two and being unable to cater to the margins. Often margin activists do not speak English, which excludes them from most of the international attention. They may be very poor: teachers, retired persons, doing odd jobs, which makes it hard to even pay the bus to the next city. These two factors also effectively exclude them from information for example about international or novel solutions to the problems they are dealing with. Accordingly margin activists feel that they are doing the real work and that they are neglected by the professionals in the centers, who are ›cold-hearted‹, unreliable and not inclined to spend time in a village, when they can go to Germany instead.

Yet the centers are not as bad as they seem. Usually they do try to cater to the margins, and they are concerned about their own inability to reach the broader population and/or the province. But as they themselves are struggling to continue and finance their activities they have to capitalize on those few activists who do know English and therefore have access to contacts, funds, information, networks, and training offers. What is commonly referred to as ›seminar tourism‹ often is the only rational and effective way for supporting the work of entire NGOs and their ›grass-roots dependents‹. Consequently they feel overburdened and misunderstood by the margins and the international community blaming them for imbalances that they are not responsible for.

Referring to this issue, international foundations should consider the possibility of stable long-term funding for native-language-speakers who are paid for catering to the margins. The NGOs themselves sometimes unite in one center and collectively pay an office staff to do fundraising. In a few cases an internationally experienced activist has decided to devote her entire time to offering a roof to several grassroots organizations.

Not all activists care for their colleagues as well as this. Sometimes the center-margins gap exists within organizations. One expert in a foundation claimed that her offers only reach the person who sits next to the fax machine. Usually they will be the ones who travel to conferences, that the rest of their group may know nothing about. However the frustration of the expert could also be attributed to the fact

that many NGOs consist of one activist mainly who claims that there are others. Those others are mobilized for specific projects and appear only when the leader is too occupied. Western NSAs expect a self-organization in groups due to their own cultural background. But loosely connected networks of individuals without formal meetings and statutes may be more adapted to the political traditions and the unstable situation in the New Eastern Democracies. In that case the disappointment of liaison persons who reach one leader when they expect an organization may be explained by the cultural pressure on individual activists to invent the existence of a formal organization that suits outside expectations.

International Cooperation and Learning

All kinds of international exchange are highly appreciated by the NGOs, because they offer learning opportunities. Some NGOs have specific requests, such as English courses, NGO management skills or a psychological approach to dealing with prejudice. These could be answered by trainings, preferably native language trainings in their home country. Most of the time the NGOs requested meetings with activists doing similar work like them, but from another country. Hands-on learning, exchange and learning from models are emphasized. One trainer in conflict resolution put it this way: »We used to ask in jokes: ›Where does communism really work?‹ As to ethnic reconciliation commissions we sometimes have the same feeling. We would like to see a really successful, good group who can say: ›Thanks to our work we have not had a bomb in this community since '88.«

This wish to learn more about the hands-on experience in other countries can be used for peace work and networking purposes, when several persons who do not communicate at home are participating in the same exchange or travel program. One US foundation invited journalists from most of the media in Macedonia, thereby ensuring a politically and ethnically representative group. During an educational 2-week trip to the U.S.A. the group got to know each other and afterwards founded a new inter-ethnic professional organization. Often the lack of cooperation between local NGOs does not have political but practical or structural reasons,

which can be amended by common programs, such as competition for scarce funds, a lack of effective networking or the urgency of short-term projects.

Similarly some local reconciliation NGOs have elaborate ideas about exchange projects that would facilitate peaceful coexistence. For example when Serbs from Hungary meet Serbs from Yugoslavia anti-minority legislation in Yugoslavia may be challenged. The Serbian minority in Hungary has some negative minority experiences and they immediately get to feel tensions after any mistreatment of the Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia. When Ukrainians from Poland meet Polish from Ukraine they share the experience of ethnic discrimination and may be challenged in their nationalist sentiments against each other. Meetings of this kind have the advantage of confronting people with another perspective. Being in a neutral country especially during hot conflicts facilitates emotional changes.

All of these advantages of exchange and interaction can be offered by Eastern as well as Western partners depending on historical links in the respective countries, past opportunities and actual preferences of the NGOs. They did agree however about the advantages of both: Eastern neighbors tend to struggle with transformation problems also and that makes them very helpful. As there are large differences in experience between neighboring countries, East-East exchange is increasing, and for example Polish NGOs provide quite a few opportunities for their Eastern neighbors Belarus and Ukraine. Western exchange partners may be less accustomed to transformation problems, but they provide Eastern partners with new approaches and long-term experiences, e.g. Northern Ireland is interesting, because of the long experience with de-escalating community work there. East-South exchange was not mentioned by our interview partners. A long tradition of political activism despite of general poverty and economical pressure and experience in ethno-political conflicts are advantages that an exchange with Southern experts could offer in our opinion. International supporters could aid this need for exchange and interaction in diverse ways: By facilitating contacts, specifically with professional organizations in the West, by networking, invitations and funding also for East-East exchange.

3.2 Support by Western Non-State Actors

The NGOs' relationship to Western NSAs

As Western NSAs do not only represent a neutral and interesting outside actor, but powerful organizations with their own interests and internal dynamics, many NGO representatives have collected ambivalent experiences while dealing with them. On the one hand their power invites hopes that they may have a positive influence on complex political situations that the local NGO networks feel unable to solve. For example an Albanian activist requests good services from neutral Western organizations, because he cannot get access to Yugoslav officials. Progressives hope for a more powerful than neutral role and attribute the struggle for human/minority rights etc. to Western NSAs. Consequently they assume that Western involvement will move matters in the direction that they wish for, but for which they cannot find a constituency (yet). Being internationally known helps against political repression and it gives clout to NGOs negotiating with public authorities. Western NSAs are perceived as having better access to international media, and as providers of unbiased information.

Visits by Western guests usually serve official and unofficial purposes. When they are involved in teaching and exchange programs they can reach many people at a relatively small cost. This is their official *raison d'être*. However their impact on local conflicts is as important as their official role. A Yugoslav NGO working in mostly nationalist refugee camps does so together with Western guests. By showing everyone that the NGO is ethnically and nationally diverse prejudice is challenged without many words. The NGO activists themselves perceive their guests as a symbol of solidarity and of the results of their work.

Powerful contacts offer advantages, but they are also criticized for their dominance. Repeatedly we were told, that most Western guests stay in the country for a short time and afterwards act as experts. Rarely do they take the time to stay and learn. Most programs are short-term offers and we met an activist who was motivated by an inspiring 2-day-workshop, but could not get any support from the

organizers during the years afterwards. As far as contents and methods are concerned quite a few professionals have their own ideas about them which they do not find reflected in the Western trends. A Macedonian professor is angry that Western NGOs focus on the ethnic question, while she herself is deeply critical of the re-ethnization of Ex-Yugoslav society and believes in citizen identity. Accepting the ethnic divisions as given is a danger for every NSA dealing with ethno-political conflicts. Yet this danger turns into a severe shortcoming, when the NSA in question is a powerful organization claiming to bring democracy to a formerly totalitarian state.

Funding Structures

Most NGOs are dependent on Western foundations for larger scale funding, because their own countries apart from being poor lack tax exemptions for donations. As they offer neither immediate relief for the needy like charities nor political decisiveness like parties peace workers have difficulties advocating their cause towards traditional donors.

That funding usually comes from abroad is a problem in itself. Apart from the related power asymmetry and clashes between different cultural systems, it also makes the NGOs vulnerable to nationalist accusations of being traitors or spies paid from abroad. Nevertheless some NGOs explicitly prefer foreign funding, because the local business community is linked with the Mafia and they want to avoid taking money of doubtful origins.

Assuming that a NGO is successful in raising funds, it can then use the vulnerability of other needy institutions in order to influence them. A Moscow women's organization distributes charities and thus has access and credibility for their negotiations in crisis regions. In a situation where education in ›modern‹ skills is a scarce resource, a Yugoslav grass roots worker organized a computer donation to a school. The school director in turn made sure that even nationalist teachers participated in a course on human rights. The same applies to English courses by human rights activists.

Apart from the scarcity of funds their distribution and the faults of funding programs cause major difficulties. Typical culture-clash conflicts arise around the different attitudes towards time, planning and bureaucratic procedure. To wait 4 weeks for an answer is a long time for someone who does crisis work together with a small group of friends. It is nothing for a complex institution. A large democracy program of the EU aimed at Eastern Europe demands detailed time plans at least half a year before the start of the project, but decides with delays of up to 6 months. This is enough to make a project linked to the school year topple. Big Foundations with financial clout usually expect a great effort by the applicants. As most of the NGOs have developed out of a few individuals' commitment, they spend as much time on the bureaucratic management of projects as on their actual realization. They are busy with writing proposals, while they are urgently needed for other tasks and after the course of some years we can witness burn-out syndrome and an increasing cynicism about the support they are nevertheless dependent on.

Western foundations tend to give advance credibility to Western partners and they either explicitly ask Eastern partners to cooperate with Western partners or Eastern NGOs will not know of their existence without a lot of networking. Yet this factual dependency on Western partners is a very random method of selection. Sometimes even a single hand written letter sent to the right address has more effect than a lot of publicity in a marginalized region. International foundations should make an effort to bridge this gap of credibility, e.g. by creating intermediary institutions run by locals in the country. In our experience those locals who have gained some independence from short-term project funding have better access to the NGO community and can judge applicants according to their benefits and work rather than random acquaintance with Western agencies.

Direct cooperation with Western partners is intended to bridge the cultural gap between East and West. However this often means a time-consuming assimilation of the Eastern activists to Western standards. One Polish professional who has mastered the art of writing proposals pointed out, that in Poland she has to present her organization as very poor and needy in order to get funding. When applying to Western organizations she tries to appear as a very professional organization, that has enough funds to supply the necessary infrastructure and just needs some extra

funding for a specific project. Her success with Western foundations has supplied her with an image of excellency in Poland that makes it hard to get funds there. In this context an intermediate institution in Poland would be helpful.

These subtleties effectively exclude the margins – and in this context ›margin‹ includes all countries of the former Soviet Union – from any foreign funding apart from some very small grass roots support projects for individual NGOs and the Soros Foundation, because their application procedures are rather simple and they help people with drafting proposals. Being the only institutionalized financial source available for the small scale funding of civil society groups causes an (unintentional) monopoly of Soros. In this case we are also witnessing adverse effects: Excessive competition for scarce funds from one or few foundations makes the cooperation of local groups more difficult.

Funding is particularly vital for the NGOs as a variety of activities and things, that are considered as ›available‹ in wealthier countries are lacking due to the general poverty in the New Eastern Democracies. The upkeep of a NGO is much more difficult as the volunteers may not be able to spare anything, be it time or material, unless they personally are in an exceptionally lucky situation. Classical volunteer constituencies such as retired people, teachers, public officials suffer from their dependency on the state in times of high inflation and often take up several jobs to support themselves. In some countries they are at risk of losing their job due to their human rights activism. In this situation our interview partners often referred to colleagues who would like to work with them, but who need at least a rudimentary compensation because they have to take care of children or other dependents.

The same is true for the infrastructure, equipment and facilities. Frequently there is no access to ›left-overs‹, i.e. free rooms in public buildings, donations of old office equipment, home telephones, spare rooms that can be used as offices, etc. Thus regular costs include more than in the West, but none of them are included in short-term projects, the common funding scheme. Such costs as telephone, rent, secretaries, office supply usually can be funded through contributions by short-term-projects, despite of the stress this causes. But long-term investments cannot be financed via project proposals. When a run-down building was donated to a NGO doing practical work with youngsters, they could not restore it. The building and the

volunteer workers were available, but it was impossible to get funding for the necessary materials. The situation is similar for office machines and their technical maintenance.

There are few alternatives to the dependency on structurally difficult Western funding programs. Some Yugoslav NGOs get some funding and support from the Diasporas. Others, such as professional trainers' NGOs, try to develop a commercial sister-NGO that can support their more idealistic projects. Western actors should try to adapt their funding structures to the needs of the NGOs. Some are already offering assistance with proposal writing, but generally speaking it should be the international structures who adapt to NGO necessities rather than the overburdened English language speakers learning yet another skill in the international arena.

Seminars and Workshops

Organizing seminars one ought to be aware of the fact that the use the participants make of them may differ widely from the intentions of the organizers. This is legitimate and often works towards the benefit of both. When US trainers tried in vain to get an open discussion going between Yugoslav and Croat women during a seminar, some participants looking back claimed that they had experienced wonderful evenings crying and reconciling with a glass of wine and some cigarettes. This seminar was a success, but in a way quite differently from the organizers' plans. Such a success is somewhat contingent and judging from the criticism that was voiced despite of our organization being a potential workshop provider this success may also be considered as an exception among the workshops promoting ›techniques of democracy‹. A lack of understanding of the real needs of the target group, and the inadequacy of the workshops to the conditions of their work and life reduce the success of seminars as well as a perfunctory selection process, that includes some, who are not interested in practical work but rather in the opportunity to take part in any kind of Western project. Critics suggest that Western good intentions – much like those of missionaries – are concealing the fact that most seminar programs serve the domination and stabilization of the region rather

than democratization and constructive conflict transformation.¹⁵ Indeed the unbalanced relationship between invitations to rather luxurious seminars and the chances to get rather small peace projects funded was mentioned by several of our interview partners.

When seminars are ill-adapted it is not amazing that workshop participants utilize them for strategical goals and networking purposes rather than learning. Gradually the image of seminars is deteriorating with some activists explicitly stating that they do not travel to seminars, because they are doing real work. Seminars are criticized as too academic with no transfer to real life and normal people being possible. From our point of view native language and long-term offers are obviously lacking – the latter giving seminar providers a chance to learn what their clients really need. Despite of these difficulties some critics are those who now do their own trainings and who have profited from learning a new approach in the past. The seminars prompted them to develop their own culture-specific approaches and seminar providers might want to recognize these skills by employing local trainers or mixed teams. Some of the suggestions mentioned under ›international cooperation and learning‹ might also be utilized such as easy transfer and a close relationship between seminar content and the actual practical work that the NGOs are doing.

From our point of view it could be useful to experiment with seminars that do not only focus on teaching knowledge and skills but also take into account that many of the potential participants are doing difficult work under difficult circumstances. Long-term stress due to the above mentioned problems and the politically unstable situation should be tended to, especially since most of the activists are under a lot of pressure to seem confident and not show any weakness or despair.

15. Rubenstein, *ibid.*

Conclusion

So far neither research nor political practice offer satisfactory approaches for the transformation of ethno-political conflicts worldwide and in particular in the New Eastern Democracies. In the search for ›new‹ actors with innovative solutions the relevance of local and regional NGOs should be considered for the development of adequate approaches towards a civil transformation of ethno-political conflicts. Their direct impact on the conflicts generally does not end wars, even though it did de-escalate some very tense situations. Their methods are not always new, but while doing typical peace, human rights, advocacy, humanitarian, educational, multi-cultural and other work they are making an important political statement. They are showing their fellow citizens that it is possible to become active and to propagate non-violence and they personally are examples of the heterogeneity of their societies, of disagreement ›even‹ within ethnic groups. As seeds of a democratic self-organization and symbols of an internal and peaceful transformation of ethno-political conflicts they are superior to state actors and Western NSAs.

More controversial is the role of the Western NSAs servicing these NGOs mainly in the fields of funding and qualification. They have gained an amount of power that is not equaled by their legitimacy. Their efforts to replace the NGOs' methods with ›Western‹ methods and to adjust the NGOs' projects to Western funding and organizational structures can be regarded as decapitation. Considering this some may ask: Why should Western NSAs support these NGOs at all? Did they not develop by themselves and is not their work a positive example for some of the Western NGOs who patronize them? This would be a misunderstanding of the contentions in this article. Criticizing the current supportive approaches does not mean that help is not necessary or that the opposite of the current practice is optimal. The

NGOs we have been describing are poor, the scope of their projects does depend on outside support and it would be cynical to plead for pure non-interventionism.

While we are criticizing many seminars as representative of the funders' ideas rather than the NGOs' needs we agree that seminars are one method of answering the urgent quest for qualification and international interaction. However they should be assisted by other methods, such as exchange, internships, and longer-term support that encourage profound learning and transfer and they should include the marginalized and/or native-language speakers.

We are questioning funding structures that target a group of professionalized NGOs that are the exception among Eastern peace NGOs. Thereby they are creating detrimental effects, such as a forced focus of professional English-language activists on international contacts and fundraising while the many small-scale projects have to compete with each other over a single foundation or do not receive any funds at all. Nuanced funding policies are yet to be developed and they should adjust to different NGO structures and goals and shape the control mechanisms in a way that develops the project instead of impeding it by lengthy bureaucratic procedures. They should serve the NGOs instead of imposing agendas.

Finally research and practice should reconceptualize the relationship between foreign support and local and regional peace NGOs. Democratic and civil mechanisms and institutions for dealing with ethno-political conflicts can hardly be developed and supported within hierarchical relationships between powerful and potentially ethnocentric funders and dequalified dependents. Besides teaching the theory of civic values it is necessary to create conditions in which civic values can appear. That includes recognizing the existence, qualification and successes of those already working in the field and creating structures that ensure that their voice is considered. Our research shows that approaches in the New Eastern Democracies – far from being flawless – nevertheless represent a scope and quality of action that is an excellent basis for further developments in the field of conflict transformation both internally and internationally. The quality of future developments will depend on the extent in which very different actors succeed in interacting as partners.