



**Conference**  
**ARE WE ON THE RIGHT TRACK?**  
**PARADIGM REVIEW BY CSOs AS**  
**DEVELOPMENT ACTORS**

Prague, Czech Republic, 14<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> May 2008

**Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> May 2008**

**Thematic working group with Olga Ponizova (Russia)**

Facilitator: Petra Kreinecker, TRIALOG

14 Participants from Austria (2), Belgium (2), Czech Republic (2), Georgia (1), Germany (1), Ghana (1), Great Britain (1), Lithuania (2), Macedonia (1), Moldova (1)

Questions to Olga Ponizova

Do you agree with Chico's anti-capitalist approach to development?

*Olga Ponizova:* The question is what we understand by capitalism. Chico had in mind to overcome "economic growth". I agree on a NO to simple economic growth. The priority for economic growth in the minds of the decision makers is really a problem when it violates the environment and human rights. At a UN Conference in the early 90ies (1992) on Environment and Development, the concept of "sustainable development" was widely discussed. Unfortunately governments didn't stick to that. The role of NGOs and civil society is to call for balanced economic growth which takes into account the environment, social issues, labour standards etc.

*Comment from audience:* Important not to mix "neo-liberalism" with "economic growth". In this sense, Chico is not right to oppose growth per se. Growth is good, but it is the neo-liberal system which needs to be questioned.

Is there any chance for Russia to reach good governance?

*Olga Ponizova:* There is no clear answer to that. Russia has a controversial development in this field. It is a fact that the dialogue with civil society increased – Federal Ministries have advisory committees, organise meetings with NGOs. This is a sign for more openness. It is also something new that there are funds for NGOs from national government and from the subjects of the Russian Federation. On the other hand, there are rules on NGO control, e.g. new tax regulations which bind a lot of human resources in NGOs and require a lot of paper work.

Is most NGO activity on domestic issues? Are NGOs encouraged to work on services, but not on advocacy which the government does not like. Is it like that in Russia?

*Olga Ponizova:* The government is especially afraid of movements which get financed from abroad. Here stupid rules and measures are undertaken to prevent "colored revolutions" but this just creates problems. To the question which NGOs the government likes and which ones

not - this is a problem of a society with a short tradition of democracy; in communist times there were only governmentally organised “NGOs”. But still in Russia the situation is different from China. In Russia, it seems that the government starts to appreciate additional opinions and organises meetings with NGOs on own initiative.

Are NGOs encouraged to have international relations?

*Olga Ponizova:* Some officials meet NGO experiences in other countries with hate and jalousie. NGOs are not encouraged to work on international level. It is also a big difference whether you work with countries like Turkmenistan and former Soviet Union or e.g. the UN.

*Comparison with situation in Moldova:* The Moldovan government would stop activity of NGO which it does not like, e.g. international NGO. Money is given only to NGOs with relation to government. Another problem is that officially, NGOs from Moldova and Transnistria (which is officially part of Moldova but has its own government, passports) are not allowed to cooperate.

What about human rights in Russia? Who is involved in peace activities in Russia?

*Olga Ponizova:* This is a complicated issue. There is a lot of critics abroad, criticism of the Russian government for many issues, e.g. governmental control on media, but media is controlled more by money and oligarchs than by government. It depends very much on the topic. Still, I do not agree with pessimistic views. Russians are very big optimists now, not only in Moscow. Situation is now much better than in the mid 90ies. People started to do something and believe in their future, even in the regions. I do not see big obstacles what could be dangerous. E.g. there are examples that environmental groups stopped enterprises, there are NGOs in court with enterprises, e.g. in Volgograd.

*Comments from audience:* Critical NGOs are disliked. Criticism regarding Chechnya is a “non-starter”. During the Chechen wars, there were peace activities from very different groups and with very different focuses.

*Comparison to situation in Lithuania:* NGOs in Lithuania are not very strong although there is freedom of speech, but it takes time.

*Comparison to situation in Moldova:* see Russia as a democratic country, a lot of things are better than earlier incl. also progress with human rights.

In case of an emergency situation e.g. in Georgia or Russia, would it be possible to organise an international coalition of NGOs from West-East- incl. Russia to help?

*Olga Ponizova:* Yes. At personal level there are still good contacts and feelings of solidarity with Georgia, Armenia etc.

Is inequality still growing in Russia?

*Olga Ponizova:* Difficult to say. Seems that in past 3 years inequality has been “stable on a high level”.

What are the expectations from Western NGOs, not only from Russia but also from other NGO representatives of countries in transition or developing countries?

*Macedonia:* The mentality of post-communist countries remains un-understandable for the West. E.g. in Macedonia and the countries of ex-Yugoslavia, there was a different type of socialism, a kind of “free socialism”. The EU is now giving support, but the people are suspicious because governments are corrupt and people are not living better after 17 years of transition. The EU gives support to the governments, but the money isn’t used for the right purpose.

*Georgia:* Before the revolution/Saakashvili, the civil society was supported from Western donors. Now, after the revolution, the government is strongly supported by the West; situation for NGOs is bad - donors follow political interest and recommend NGOs to propose “constructive projects”. After Soviet times, political rights were high on the agenda and social rights lost importance. Now, still nobody talks about social rights.

*Moldova:* People expect knowledge, contacts and information (e.g. books for villages without internet). There is also a need for opportunities for internships to see how NGOs can work in a democratic state.

*Ghana:* Africa can bring something to Europe, e.g. support in health aspects (smoking is regarded as really bad in Ghana, in Europe smoking is present everywhere); experience from the grassroot level (Ghana has very rich experience on the grassroot level). Cooperation needs ideas and time to really develop.

*Olga Ponizova* called Western NGOs to put more attention on the need of an international development dialogue with countries in transition and developing countries. She called for closer cooperation since the discussion reflected the need for exchange of information and experience in order to learn from each other and to address burning issues together.

*Minutes: Anita Bister, TRIALOG*