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## COMMUNITY-BASED CURRICULUM FOR INTER-ETHNIC EDUCATION AND VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Iouri Zagoumenov and Ihar Zahumionau

While Belarus has been uniquely marked in its region by a history of productive coexistence between the majority of the population and the country's diverse ethnic, religious and national minorities the country is now faced by new challenges from an influx of recent refugees from the republics of the Former Soviet Union. This combined with increasing stresses on the nation's economy and dislocations due to fundamental changes in social organisation may potentially compromise the tradition of tolerance and good will. Especially sensitive are the cases of those groups which are associated with recent and ongoing conflicts in the Russian Federation. This may particularly be problematic with Chechens, and other adherents of Islam. The Roma may also face difficulties. Further potential complications could emanate from pressures by Russian nationalist groups exerting external influences and extreme nationalist formations developing internally. It is important that action is taken now to implant the lessons of historic coexistence in the emerging generation of Belarusian citizens.

For that reason the Belarus National Institute of Education in cooperation with the independent think tank SCAF have utilised the lessons learned over the past years of their joint research and innovations in this field and focused on amplifying their work on interethnic confidence building education in Belarus.

The project Community Based Curriculum for Confidence Building Interethnic Education in Belarus was initiated in 2001 and since that time has been successfully implemented in multi-ethnic communities in Belarus. The first phase of the project was accomplished in 2003 and resulted in the development and piloting of a national textbook, classroom and community resources, namely: a) the book *Methodology and Resources for the Teaching of Multiethnic Community History* (it provides teachers with teaching methods that support students research and community outreach projects and also with background information on major ethnic, religious and national groupings which are now the subject of the programme in participating schools);<sup>1</sup> it also contained exercises on traditional for Belarus local and national ethnic, religious and minority community history and traditions; c) web based information resources and links offering statistical information, printable exercises and downloadable interactive learning exercises (much of the design and content are provided by students nationally).

In 2001-2003, *Community Based Curriculum for Confidence Building Interethnic Education in Belarus* project successfully operated as a pilot program. During that initiative many local projects were independently undertaken by the teachers, students and community members in the areas in

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<sup>1</sup> Iouri Zagoumenov, Ludmila Shalkovich/ *Methodology and Resources for the Teaching of Multiethnic Community History*. Vol.I, Minsk, 2003.

which the program was conducted. A firm foundation was been laid, establishing an appreciation of the longstanding history of intercommunity coexistence amongst the ethnic, religious and national groups which compose Belarus. Additionally, attesting to the pilot project's impact on policy formation, the Belarusian Government, through the Committee on Religions and Nationalities, endorsed the continuation of the program and actively participated in it, assisting in outreach, curriculum formation and publication. Regional authorities also supported the expansion of the program by sponsoring additional workshops for other multi-ethnic schools' communities.

On this basis, the beginnings of a national programme, potentially extending to all of Belarus' secondary schools, was established.

It was evident that secondary school based programmes were ideal for both outreach into the community and for preparing the next generation to mediate the experience of growing cultural diversity. The local inter-ethnic and inter-religious confidence building workshops, with their spontaneous growth and spread demonstrated themselves as self-sustaining and ongoing. In order to maintain sustainability and to build on this foundation the following further work was proposed at the second phase of the project:

1. Extension of the work to other traditionally established minorities.
2. Curriculum consolidation based on the projects which had been created at the local level during the 2001-2003 pilot project.
3. Collective work on the development of a national textbook and classroom and community resources.
4. An additional module to measure and encourage attitudes of tolerance among students.
5. Extension of the goals of the project from work with traditionally established ethnic, religious and national groups to the intakes of new populations resulting from instabilities in the Former Soviet Union.

The second phase was implemented in 2003-2005. Its objectives were; a) to establish an informational infrastructure to support grassroots initiatives in the field of education promoting inter-community coexistence and co-operation and b) to create a proactive educational measure to respond to negative challenges to the integration of new minorities into Belarusian Society.

The second volume of the book *Methodology and Resources for the Teaching of Multiethnic Community History* was developed. This time it was focused on new ethnic minority and religious groups in Belarus<sup>2</sup> and accompanied with a student workbooks with exercises on these new local and national ethnic, religious an minority community history and traditions.

The main target groups for both stages of the project included local education professionals nationwide; representatives from the local departments of education nationwide; secondary school students; parent representatives; local lay leaders and members of ethnic and religious communities derived, in part, from relevant ethnic minorities associations such as those involved in the "ethnic" sub-sector group of the Civicus Index on Civil Society program in Belarus (SCAF is the National

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<sup>2</sup> Iouri Zagoumenov, Ludmila Shalkovich/ *Methodology and Resources for the Teaching of Multiethnic Community History*. Vol. II, Minsk, 2003.

Lead Organization for this program)<sup>3</sup>; local and national representatives of traditional and new minority communities.

The basic assumption of the project was that young people need to play an active role in promoting tolerance and inter-ethnic and inter-religion confidence in their communities. Students got engaged in these activities through research and community outreach projects. Through these initiatives they learnt about the ethnic and religious roots and traditions of their families and also of their multi-ethnic communities. They researched the history, traditions and culture of the ethnic and religious minorities living in their communities and identified the factors that supported peaceful and friendly inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations. They also developed new initiatives aimed at inter-ethnic and inter-religious confidence-building in their communities. Through their community outreach projects students involved other members of their multi-ethnic communities in the activities aimed at confidence-building.

The project methodology proved to be the most effective and efficient way to engage young people in inter-ethnic confidence building activities in their community.

Project methodology promotes independent inter-ethnic and inter-religious confidence building activities by students in their school and community based on their individual choices in solution of relative cognitive and practical problems in a non-standard situation. It is an educational methodology as it includes clear educational goals and objectives of each project, concrete research or/and practical ideas it is based on, algorithm for implementation of activities by teachers and students, measurable criteria and indicators of progress and achievements.

Project methodology applies rational combination of theoretical knowledge and practical actions in an exploration of inter-ethnic and inter-religious issue. It applies a combination of research and practical methods of implementation that are always creative by their nature.

The use of project methodology in inter-ethnic and inter-religious confidence building education implies the following:

- the inter-ethnic and inter-religious issue to be explored through the project needs to be actual and relevant for young people, it should be challenging and require integrated knowledge and independent research of most effective and efficient ways of the problem solution,
- expected outcomes of the inter-ethnic and inter-religious confidence-building project activities should have practical, theoretical, cognitive relevance and importance for all the participants of the project as well as for its target groups and beneficiaries
- individual, peer and group activities of young people on planning, implementation and evaluation of a community project are organized
- everyone assumes his/her role and responsibility in project development and implementation
- resources are researched and ensured for project successful implementation

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<sup>3</sup> Iouri Zagoumenov. Belarus Civil Society: In Need of a Dialogue, 2001 Civicus Index on Civil Society Occasional Paper Series, Volume 1, Issue 3.

- the content of the project needs to be structured, have an algorithm, including indication of outcomes to be achieved at each stage of its implementation, for example, the research stage could result with the creation of a computer database on ethnic and religious minorities that live in the school community.
- project activities imply the use of research methods, analysis and synthesis of data, understanding the roots of the issue, advancing hypothesis, observation, conducting experiments, etc.
- description of directions, methods and procedures of research and other project activities, drawing conclusions, providing recommendations, and presentation of project outcomes need to be done in line with the approved standards.
- inter-ethnic and inter-religious confidence building projects could involve young people of the same or different age groups, school graduates, parents and other community members and implies cooperation, intellectual and practical interaction between the participants.
- different methods of working with information are encouraged.
- young people get expert and practical support from adults (for example from teachers, parents, local lay leaders and members of ethnic and religious communities) to the extent each individual and the whole group need to be successful.

Project methodology allows young people to understand and practice the entire process of the inter-ethnic and inter-religious issue exploration - from setting project goals and objectives to presentation of the project results in a class, school or a community. Project methodology helps to integrate theoretical and practical knowledge and skills. Active engagement of young people in inter-ethnic and inter-religious confidence building projects allows them to learn new ways and means of human activities in a concrete multicultural environment, develop themselves and improve life in their communities.

As noted above, over the past several years there has been an influx of members of other groups, many of them refugees from areas of conflict and instability in the Former Soviet Union. Often these groups lack historic links with Belarus' established population. There is, in consequence, a risk of cultural misunderstandings leading to antipathy. After the October hostage crisis in Moscow the utility of the programme showed its utility with School No. 8 in Novopolotsk, for example, convening a student roundtable to discuss events. Several of the students in the school were of Chechen origin and they were reassured by their fellow students that their situation was understood and the underlying issues of the recent events were discussed and analysed.

Many of the conclusions drawn from the inter-ethnic and inter-religious confidence-building activities of the pilot phase of the project were based on local and expert observation and anecdotal evidence. While this gave a useful snapshot of views by students and others it did not easily lend itself to a) quantitative empirical analysis, b) the detection of emerging trends and c) the measurement of the pilot's impact on students and others over the term of the project.

In cooperation with Professor Alfred McAllister of the University of Texas in Austin Belarus National Institute of Education and NGO SCAF developed a testing procedure, based on internationally demonstrated models which measure attitudes of tolerance and dispositions to intolerance. These tests were particularly effective when coupled with tolerance building exercises derived from the results of the pre-test. Results were measured by a) post-testing and b) measurements of untrained control groups.

One of the outputs was a publication for students with introductory material, questionnaire, training scenarios dealing with issues of tolerance and interviews with students and community members whose attitudes towards minorities and tolerance had been changed during the course of the programme.<sup>4</sup> Much of the content was produced by students and community members. This publication is intended for long-term use with renewal every 3-5 years. The schools have been trained in the testing, pedagogical and publication production elements of this activity and have already created prototypes. They now guide schools encompassed in the outreach of the extended programme.

Several outstanding initiatives arose spontaneously from the pilot project and were further developed into national programmes. One of them was the Virtual Museums of minority cultures that are essentially local history based student driven exercises to gather information about local ethnic, religious and national groups and present them in a way that is relevant to the local community. The project was initiated by the Babinichi Secondary School in Orsha District.

Surveys of local ethnic, religious and national groups were also conducted. During the course of the 2001- 2003 pilot project several schools sent teams of students into surrounding villages to research their multi-tradition history and current lifestyles. Out of this process came demographic statistics, oral histories and cultural information. These exercises were *ad hoc* in nature and, as a result, there was no coordination between these endeavours. These activities, however, provided important, student derived resources for other features of the overall programme. During the second phase this practice was consolidated in order to make it more productive and meaningful. The output was a newsletter format distributed in schools, local libraries and to the local community. Schools in rural and border areas where potential community friction exists were encouraged to participate. Regionally oriented current events newsletters were produced by students and lay members of minority communities directed, in part, to explaining background of recent history and contemporary issues. Subject matter included:

- Personal stories about recent minorities in Belarus
- Student and lay member opinions about relevant topics
- Historical background
- Current events
- Cultural information about customs, food, traditions and beliefs

National conference of secondary school students who were involved in the local projects was organized in December 2004. In addition students from newly involved communities also participated in this meeting. This offered an opportunity for student based views, suggestions and evaluation of the programme. The student conference was a micro-exercise in political efficacy as students helped to create their own inter-ethnic confidence building curricula. National and regional experts monitored, coordinated and facilitated preparation of this meeting.

The schools that participated in the 2001-2003 and 2003-2005 projects not only established their own self-sustaining programmes but now function as regional resource and training centres assisting other schools and multi-ethnic communities in establishing and maintaining their own inter-ethnic and inter-religious confidence building projects and educational programmes.

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<sup>4</sup> Learning to Live Together: Inter-Ethnic Confidence Building and Violence Prevention in School and Communities. Minsk, 2004.