

APPLICABILITY OF THE ALPINE CONVENTION MODEL TO THE MOUNTAIN REGIONS OF THE CIS: THE EXAMPLE OF THE CAUCASUS MOUNTAINS

Alexei Gunja
Thomas Bausch

With the collapse of the Soviet Union the geopolitics of the mountain areas of the former USSR changed fundamentally. While new borders appeared for some mountain regions, e.g. the Caucasus, thus making mountain-wide development more difficult, for other regions, e.g. the Altai, the new order finally allowed range-wide co-operation (Russia and Mongolia, Russia and China).

The social and political situation in the Caucasus has aggravated destructive processes that took the form of bloody conflicts, wiping out traditional economic contacts and accumulating ecological and social problems, etc. The rise of new boundaries in the Russian Caucasus, including boundaries between regions of the Russian Federation, had the following negative effects (Fig. 1):

- intensification of seasonal peaks of tourism (especially on the Black Sea coast near Sochi, in the Elbrus area, in the region of Caucasian Mineral Waters) and consequently closure of traditional transit routes across the Caucasus and inaccessibility of health resorts in Transcaucasia (many of which have been closed);
- overgrazing in middle mountains as a result of discontinued cattle migration and consequent development of erosion processes, loss of humus and stimulation of mudflow activity in middle mountain areas;
- uncertainty about the statute governing the Caspian Sea led to uncontrolled fishing, frequent poaching, uncontrolled destruction of the cultural landscape, especially in high mountains due to abandonment of marginal high mountain pastures, and in foothills due to sudden reduction of arable lands;
- soil pollution at illegal oil extraction sites;
- aggravation of contamination along overburdened interregional roads.

The conflicts over the use of natural resources, and dislocation in the natural environment and cultural landscapes related to these conflicts, are not very apparent against the background of socio-economic processes and conflicts in the whole of the Caucasus (Fig. 2), including:

- conflicts over sovereignty (Russia vs. Chechnya, Georgia vs. Southern Ossetia, Georgia vs. Abkhazia, Nagorny Karabakh vs. Azerbaijan);
- ethnic conflicts over territory (Ingushetia vs. Northern Ossetia);
- ethnic tension (Karachaevo-Cherkessia).

The conflicts are accompanied by the following problems:

- direct or indirect influence of the closure of boundaries on the lowering of life expectancy and living standards;

- abrupt decrease in the total number of tourists and holiday-makers;
- destruction of tourist infrastructure;
- peripherization and depopulation, especially along boundaries;
- separation of peoples and ethnic groups by new state boundaries (Ossetians in Russia and Georgia, Lezgins in Azerbaijan and Dagestan).

The data presented make it apparent that problem domains occurred mostly due to the division of a previously single area into new states and regions. This fact represents the main distinction between the Caucasus and the Alps. The development of the Alps during the last decades evidently reflects the processes of unification and integration. This universal trend forms the basis of the Alpine Convention (AC) as a protection-oriented common concept of development.

The years of democracy in Russia were also conducive to development of a number of regional and local initiatives oriented towards addressing problems. Currently regional initiatives in the field of transboundary co-operation suffer a great lack of methodological tools. In the context of sustainable development, the topical question is a problem of knowledge transfer which would allow the use of positive experiences with the application of principles and models of sustainable development in different countries, and also avoid negative effects in regional development.

Within the framework of a joint project of the Institute of Geography of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Alpine Study (Germany), an analysis of possibilities to apply the experience of the AC to mountain regions of CIS and Russia has been made. The project's final report specially points to considerable progress in the development of proper regional mountain conventions (Caucasus, Altai), but the initial stage is characterized by pretentiousness, haste in proposing hypotheses (that are frequently formulated in other domains), manipulation of international conventions' clauses, and the absence in practice of follow-up studies that could reveal the limits of application of international experience. It is emphasized that the AC is important not only as a finished document but also as a method and an approach to achieve an aim (especially important for the Caucasus). The AC is first of all a process characterized by:

1. gradual development (the AC has developed over half a century, but only 6 protocols have been passed; for instance, the protocol on Population and Culture has not been approved until now);
2. close interdependence of development, improvement of protocols, studies at the local level and practical realization of the protocols' provisions;
3. taking account of the interests of all sections of society, especially the local population;
4. methodological versatility allowing for change in scientific and social paradigms during the process of development and adoption of statements.

In the last case we can cite as an example the replacement of the paradigm "nature protection" (separation from the natural resource user) by "natural protection in the process of natural resource use" (combination of protection function and function of efficient use of natural resources and landscape that could scarcely be successful in Russia given the current state of ecological thinking and competence).

Proceeding from analysis of the current situation in the Caucasus, we propose to start a thorough, complex process of elaboration of the Caucasian Convention as a tool of sustainable development taking into account, first of all, current realities in the Caucasian region. The role of scientists in this process

should begin with setting priorities for steps and stages. With regard to geography these priorities are to be strictly established from the standpoint of which Caucasian regions, levels (from the all-Caucasian level up to the level of local administrative units), economic sectors (nature protection, tourism, etc.) could and should be given preference in the process of development of the Caucasian Convention. It is evident that the whole of the Caucasus is not ready for a full-scale process on Convention adoption for obvious reasons (such a Convention would be declaratory and could not work). Four main stages are possible to approach this aim gradually:

1. a preparatory stage aimed at creating information preconditions to implement the ideas of the Convention and concepts of sustainable development (the transnational level and the local community level would be most efficient for this stage);
2. an innovation stage (carrying out some small innovation projects, for example in the Western Caucasus, in the domain of tourist activities, etc.);
3. a stage of pre-statement agreements in some sub-regions, foreseeing, for instance, the optimization (reanimation) of transport, communications, renewal of interregional seasonal cattle migration, etc.;
4. a protocol stage, envisaging the adoption of a number of the most urgent protocols such as those pertaining to regulations of trans-boundary and trans-regional aspects in the domain of nature protection, tourism, agriculture.