Dynamics of Belonging, Tradition, and Conflict in Chechnya

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Since Tsarist Russian times, the North Caucasus region has been a site of conflict, namely between indigenous ethnic minorities and colonizing Russian forces. Although the region is unique for its high density of diverse populations and incredible natural landscape, other factors commonly attributed to conflict include the region's economically strategic geographic location (due to its proximity to oil and sea trade routes), military importance as a gateway to the Middle East and Asia, and metaphorical border between Orthodox Christianity and the Muslim world. It is a difficult task to fully and accurately address every factor shaping times of peace and moments of conflict, although scholars and the media alike have often disregarded the role of insider-outsider dynamics in favor of neatly molding the region into existing archetypes of conflict or reductive worldviews. Foreign policy and political leaders tend to focus disproportionately on the role of radical Islamic ideology and Jihadists, as it aligns with the West's priority of combatting the Islamic State and waging the "war on terror." On the other hand, popular media, especially made in the Soviet Union and exported worldwide, propagated negative stereotypes of Caucasians as belligerent, simpleminded, or uncivilized, while the state orchestrated mass deportations in an attempt to forcibly submit border republics to central Soviet authority. In modern Russia, discrimination persists in all

aspects of society and informs the rhetoric surrounding public discourse and media coverage of North Caucasian conflict. Given the distorted focus on religion and supposedly immutable ethnic qualities in mainstream narratives of the North Caucasus, this paper aims to understand aspects of North Caucasian minority identity by specifically examining how traditional Chechen values and insider-outsider dynamics inform modern responses to conflict.

Although the Russian Federation has named its southern republics along ethnic lines, the region's history of migration and invasion has led to a high density of diverse populations making frequent contact. [1] Chechnya is almost entirely composed of ethnic Chechens, who are considered Vainakh people, along with the Ingush (of neighboring republic Ingushetia) and Kists (of eastern Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, bordering Chechnya). A history of official policies of forced migration, violent suppression, and discrimination have eroded the North Caucasus's capacity for loyalty to the central Russian state. In the Chechen collective consciousness, they have always been the victim of each stage of Russia's evolution. [2] However, there have been periods of potential coexistence between Russia and Chechnya, such as the 1996 truce between Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Chechen Vice-President Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, and the 1997 signing of peace accords by Yeltsin and interim Chechen Prime Minister Aslan Maskhadov, which rendered the republic practically autonomous. [3]

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[1] Svante Cornell and Michael Jonsson, "The Nexus of Crime and Conflict" in *Conflict, Crime, and the State in Postcommunist Eurasia,* ed. Svante Cornell and Michael Jonsson. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 84.

[2] Shorena Kurtsikidze et al., "Georgia's Pankisi Gorge: An Ethnographic Survey." *Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Working Paper Series*, 3, https://escholarship.org/content/qt64d7v9hj/qt64d7v9hj_noSplash_cf19e4cbb452f4d4ab0cb2b5c98d20cb.pdf.

[3] Reuters, "Chronology of Russian Involvement in North Caucasus," *New York Times*, August 9, 1999, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/world/europe/080999russia-timeline-rtrs.html.

More so than Russian-drawn borders, the North Caucasian concept of clans (*teipy*) has played a significant and nuanced role in Chechen politics, and in many ways modern interactions among the region's players are shaped by historical societal codes.

Some historians and anthropologists have adopted the lens of cultural geography to theorize that highlander communities derive many of their unique characteristics and traditions from their demanding and isolating environment. For example, some have suggested that herding communities, as opposed to agricultural ones, face the constant risk of losing their livelihoods if their herd is stolen or killed, which means violence and suspicion exist not for their own sake but as preventative measures. While difficult to define universally, regions such as the Scottish Highlands and Appalachian Mountains have been studied for how territorial control and pastoralism connected to collective clan identities, extrajudicial dispute resolution mechanisms, and social hierarchies— all issues that modern societies face, even if their economic and environmental circumstances have changed. Highlander culture has also been connected to the idea of honor cultures, and while there is limited credible research on cultures of honor, the general theory is that one's honor or reputation is central to their social capital and identity. Men in particular are expected to uphold this honor through conventionally masculine means, typically using violence as a display of courage and strength.[4] This ideal has especially been observed in the ungoverned pastoral lands of Britain and the American South, although aspects of honor culture appear even in modern societies across the world. Although these scholarly theories do not form the basis of this paper, they produce dangerous stereotypes of North Caucasians when combined with popular culture and news media portrayals of the region.

The landscape played a significant role in culture and society, and not only in creating conflict, but also kinship and hospitality in the

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[4] Dov Cohen et al., "Insult, Aggression, and the Southern Culture of Honor: An 'Experimental Ethnography.'" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70, no. 5: 945-960, https://mypages.valdosta.edu/mwhatley/7670/activity/honor.htm.

context of the North Caucasus. Ethnic Chechens migrated around the region into parts of eastern Georgia such as Tusheti and Pankisi for a variety of reasons, ranging from Dagestani invasion to economic hardship (particularly under Russian rule), and lived relatively peacefully beside other minorities.[5] The difficulty of governing the mountainous region led to the exclusion of these groups from full participation in centralized government and rule of law— a grievance which contributes to modern unrest. Transient ownership of land meant collective identity could not be connected to geographic origin or inhabitance, so each *teip* had to develop robust self-governance procedures in the absence of consistent geographical ones. To be a member or "insider" to the *teip* meant to be party to its social contract and act in the interest of its collective function, upending the superficial media narrative of North Caucasian lawlessness and primitivity.

Minority cultures of the Caucasus have been extensively documented in the fieldwork of anthropologists Vakhtang Chikovani and Shorena Kurtsikidze. Although modern borders depict Chechens as Russian citizens, their cultural practices can be observed in the ethnography of neighboring Russian republics and Georgia's borderlands. Kurtsikidze and Chikovani's ethnographic survey of the Chechens specifically in the Pankisi Gorge notes that members of a *teip* had to be blood relatives, broken down into individual families (*goors*) based on patriarchal lineage, thus denoting men of *goors* and *teips* as defenders against outsiders and decisionmakers in the event of a dispute. Women exercised autonomy over domestic life, as well as certain agricultural tasks, reflecting a deep-rooted commitment to equity, but also to traditional masculinity.[6] Sworn brotherhood or sisterhood could be considered a secondary layer of familial relation, as it established familial bonds among unrelated individuals. According to Kurtsikidze

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[5] Kurtsikidze et al., "Georgia's Pankisi Gorge," 8.

[6] Aurelie Campana, "Collective Memory and Violence: The Use of Myths in the Chechen Separatist Ideology, 1991-1994," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 29, no. 1 (March 2009): 44, https://doi.org/10.1080/13602000902726756.

and Chikovani, the Chechens of Pankisi had a unique system of village-elected elders who facilitated negotiation, *teip* membership, and natural resource use, although Russians banned this practice under their rule. Traditional forms of justice were regulated by unwritten but highly respected rules, potentially involving village elder courts, mediators, and neutral observers, although Chechen *teips* were more partial to blood revenge than those in eastern Georgia. Overall, these customs and laws enabled the organization of independent societies, even in cases of conflict with North Caucasian "outsider" clans, such as those of Ingushetia or Dagestan. In many ways, traditional Chechen culture and procedures reflected those of an honor culture, where seemingly indiscriminate violence was intentionally employed as a type of *lex talionis*, a self-contained method of dispute resolution and social capital restoration in the absence of mechanisms provided by a centralized state.[7]

Every aforementioned aspect of Chechen society incorporated the insider-outsider dynamic and strong community ties as a necessary response to their detachment from a fixed territory, which translated into the wars of the 1990s which took place when Russia attempted to incorporate North Caucasian populations into the Russian Federation. In fact, the 1990s Chechen resistance formed army units along *teip* lines.[8] Although modern Chechens may not experience the same strong clan ties that their ancestors did, the insider-outsider dynamic is internalized to the extent that many of them identify with narratives of oppression that they may not have necessarily experienced, such as surviving Russia's past attempts at colonizing the region[9]. This thought process is especially logical in the collective Chechen consciousness, given the culture's many mechanisms of kinship and loyalty, such as the

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[7] Dov Cohen et al., "Insult, Aggression, and the Southern Culture of Honor".

[8] Cornell, "The Nexus of Crime and Conflict," 86.

[9] Julie Wilhelmsen, "Exclusion and Inclusion: The Core of Chechen Mobilization to Jihad." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, no. 2: 30, www.jstor.org/stable/26910405.

sworn brotherhood that appropriated a brother's enemy as one's own. Narratives of exclusion have been a common theme in Chechnya's historical interactions with Russia, from imperial Caucasian conquests to Soviet deportations, with each event challenging the uniquely Chechen concept of *marsho*, which combines the ideals of liberty, wellbeing, and peace.[10] Transmitting awareness of oppression across generations is a way of remembering history which also centers modern Chechen identity on the Chechens' historical role as a subjugated "other." Combining this marginalization-centered identity with the *teip's* tradition of retributive justice increases the likelihood that Russia's violation of Chechen honor (or in this case *marsho*) will receive an equally violent response.[11]

One example of how traditional Chechen notions of loyalty and belonging translate into the context of modern conflict can be seen in Chechen Yusup Temerkhanov's murder of Russian Colonel Yuri Budanov. Among other crimes, Budanov was found guilty of murdering a Chechen girl during the Second Chechen War, and Temerkhanov killed him as symbolic retribution for his father's murder during the war, despite Budanov's lack of involvement in the senior Temerkhanov's death.[12] Temerkhanov died in prison after probable maltreatment and became not only a symbol of disproportionate abuse of Chechens in the Russian prison system, but also an avenger of wrongdoings by the Russian state.[13] Given the incompatibility between Chechen law (based on *marsho*) and Russian law (implicitly violating *marsho*), Temerkhanov's actions and the Chechen response can be seen as *lex talionis* and culturally justified violence restoring honor in a modern

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[10] Campana, "Collective Memory and Violence," 45.

[11] Wilhelmsen, "Exclusion and Inclusion," 33.

[12] РАПСИ, "Обвиняемый в убийстве Буданова приговорен к 15 годам," Май 7, 2013, http://www.rapsinews.ru/judicial_news/20130507/267289901.html.

[13] Kazbek Chanturiya, "The death of Temirkhanov again raises the 'mistreatment' of Chechens in Russian prisons," August 10, 2018, https://oc-media.org/features/the-death-of-temirkhanov-again-raises-the-mistreatment-of-chechens-in-russian-prisons/.

context of lawlessness (i.e. selective or non-existent enforcement by the central Russian state).

The insider-outsider dynamic has also played a role in the region's alienation from mainstream Russia and subsequent rise of Islam. The Russian term *narod*, meaning a people united under collective nationhood, never seemed to include Caucasians fully and equally. Although the Soviet Union aimed at the creation of a people united under Soviet ideology despite their ethnic differences, it required naming outsiders as a necessary step to making them insiders to the Soviet *narod*, thus maintaining the historical view of Caucasians as outsiders who could be successfully assimilated but never fully integrated.[14] Leading up to the First Chechen War, separatist insurgents looked to liberal democracies of the West in supporting their quest for sovereignty. However, upon the West's inaction in the face of brutality from Russian security forces (which was likely connected to the Western perception of radicalized Chechen Muslims as being part of the "war on terror"), insurgents instead found membership in the Jihad movement. Not only did the separatists find belonging in this movement, but their ties were strengthened by flows of financial support from fundamentalist groups in the Middle East, and the taxonomy of Jihadism provided Chechen insurgents a way to redefine their oppression at Russian hands in terms of both ethnicity and religion.[15] The once-moderate separatist movement became outnumbered by radicalized Jihadist insurgents, and whereas ethnicity defined insider-outsider dynamics in the First Chechen War, religion became the dominant differentiating factor during the Second Chechen War.

The dynamic of exclusion not only appeared in conflicts on the battlefield, but also in conflicts on the political and economic stage, especially as the Soviet Union collapsed and a fragmented Russia

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[14] Philipp Casula, "Between 'ethnocide' and 'genocide': Violence and Otherness in the coverage of the Afghanistan and Chechnya wars," *Nationalities Papers* 43, no. 5: 703, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2015.1048673.

[15] Wilhelmsen, "Exclusion and Inclusion," 34.

ventured into the unfamiliar territory of free-market democratization. Every period of conflict between Russia and Chechnya involved the former attempting to dismantle the latter's seemingly backwards indigenous rule-of-law customs. By the early 1990s, Chechnya was the only republic that did not sign the Treaty of Federation, which granted republics selective autonomy to prevent the further splintering of a post-Soviet Russia. [16] In other words, after undermining the indigenous systems that governed the region, Russian forces failed to implement their own legal system, furthering Chechnya's instability. General Dzhokar Dudayev rode a wave of anti-Russian sentiment to stage a coup, leading to a low-level civil war and beginning a period of heavy militarization by both pro-separatism and pro-Russian factions. In some ways, Chechens also suffered at the hands of their own cultural values and identity, such as their emphasis on victimhood, *teip* membership, and retributive justice, which enforced the insider-outsider dynamic at several levels (*goors*, *teips*, etc.) and fixated on historical clan-level disputes. In a modern context, these values impede efforts to unite *teips* under a successful ethnicity-based self-determination movement. An inability to foster this kind of unity led to the division of the Chechen republic. The aforementioned lack of rule-of-law combined with economic distress made 1990s Russia, and Chechnya in particular, a breeding ground for organized crime. The Chechen mafia was split between supporting the separatist movement and Russian security forces, and its illicit dealings were indicative of Dudaev's apathy towards maintaining order and the Russian elites' private interest in keeping Chechnya an ungoverned territory. [17] The Chechen mafia, organized on the basis of *teip* membership, referred to themselves as a

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[16] Fred Hiatt, "RUSSIA, ETHNIC REGIONS SIGN TREATY SOUGHT BY YELTSIN TO PRESERVE UNITY," *Washington Post*, April 1, 1992, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1992/04/01/russia-ethnic-regions-sign-treaty-sought-by-yeltsin-to-preserve-unity/421c88ff-3a61-48c9-99b6-36ca366877e0/.

[17] Cornell, "The Nexus of Crime and Conflict," 86.

bratva, alluding to traditional values of brotherhood and once again reflecting how modern notions of Chechen belonging are informed by historical definitions of membership. Beyond identity, *bratva* membership provided economic and social benefits that the Russian state could not, much in the way *teips* did for hundreds of years in the absence of a centralized state.[18] After his 1991 election, Dudaev not only faced violent internal opposition, but also repeated Russian mobilization, leading to the Chechen government's fixation on militarization. Dudaev's neglect of civil society development in favor of militarization can be partially attributed to the Chechens' historical value of retributive justice and use of violence as a justified means of restoring order or liberating from oppressors.[19]

   The Chechen Wars can be considered the latest iteration of Russia's efforts to destabilize Chechnya's indigenous institutions: in the face of economic devastation due to the First Chechen War, Salafi-Jihadist radicalization met practical and social needs that young Chechen men could not find in what few employment opportunities remained, making religion another layer of division in Chechen society.[20] These various factors exacerbated clan divisions and exhausted the separatist insurgency, enabling pro-Russian forces to install Akhmad Kadyrov, whose assassination in 2004 led to the rise of his son, Ramzan Kadyrov. The Kadyrovs gained power despite inconsistent allegiance to either side: the senior Kadyrov defected to the Russian side in the Second Chechen War, taking his *Kadyrovtsy* paramilitary force with him, and the junior Kadyrov used a personal relationship with Putin to gain insider status to the Kremlin while also supporting select elements of Chechen conservatism to maintain ethnic loyalty.[21] Given Ramzan Kadyrov's dual loyalties, *Kadyrovtsy* formalized under the Russian

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[18] Ibid., 95.

[19] Campana, "Collective Memory and Violence," 51.

[20] Wilhelmsen, "Exclusion and Inclusion," 30.

[21] Cornell, "The Nexus of Crime and Conflict," 90.

Ministry of Internal Affairs and remains Kadyrov's de-facto force in maintaining his pro-Russian autocratic grip. Limited economic prospects forced youth, particularly men, into either the Jihadist insurgency or the *Kadyrovtsy*, and Chechen traditional values of kinship drew relatives of both groups into proxy feuds, mirroring the blood feud practices of past centuries and polarizing more recruits. In the same way the Jihadist insurgency fulfilled an economic and social vacuum, the Russian-subsidized *Kadyrovtsy* provided a reliable salary and informal benefits.[22] Yet again, the absence of an inclusive Chechen identity combined with an unfavorable political, economic, and social environment led to societal polarization and a modern form of tribalism.

The impermanence of land ownership and lack of consistent central government in the North Caucasus has played a significant role in Chechnya's unique conception of freedom, justice, and belonging. Throughout history, *teip* membership in particular has been a defining factor in modern Chechnya's political structures, military, and economic opportunities. Although modern interpretations of conflict in Chechnya (especially by Western and Russian media) are limited in scope and tend to draw on narratives of innate aggression and lawlessness, an analysis of traditional Chechen values provides insight into how the region's uncompromising commitment to values such as *marsho,* retributive violence, and loyalty to group insiders have led to the current militarized and fragmented society.

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[22] Emil Aslan Souleimanov et al., "Evaluating the efficacy of indigenous forces in counterinsurgency: Lessons from Chechnya and Dagestan," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 3: 402, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2016.1151658.

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