

Chapter 7

Youth initiatives in the context of extremism: the Chechnya case

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The context for youth initiatives in the Chechen Republic is directly related to an analysis of extremism and young people's involvement in armed gangs, as well as their social marginalisation. The central argument of this article is that the youth of Chechnya is highly fragmented and suffers from the risks of being "socially excluded" due to unemployment and poor access to education, as well as through their experience and the influence of extremist propaganda which offers an alternative social reality and realisation of identity via religious radicalism and participation in jihad. Mainly based on the descriptive features and empirical materials related to the current situation among youth in Chechnya, this article looks at the substantial disconnections from mainstream society among different society segments of young people in the Chechen Republic. There is hardly any literature available on these realities for Chechen youth, but the issues identified in this article are based on the research into Chechen extremism that has been conducted over the last five years.³⁴

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DISCONNECTIONS FROM THE LABOUR MARKET, PRODUCING EMIGRATION AND CONNECTION WITH ARMED GANGS

Young people in Chechnya are hindered in their efforts to start a rewarding professional career and more generally to achieve their long-term career goals. Obviously, this is related to access to education for young Chechens. The concentration of state and reputable private universities is in Moscow primarily (more than 64) in comparison with only three universities in Chechnya. This stark contrast often stimulates youth to relocate to the Russian capital or to major cities in the southern part of Russia. This established flow of students was compounded by what was widely seen in Moscow as an invasion of applicants from Chechnya and other Caucasian Republics to Moscow's high schools. This began in 2005, at the end of the active phase of the second Chechen war when officials decided that a certain loyalty to the students of the Southern Federal District (SFD) would contribute to preventing the recruitment of young people into terrorist gangs [1] [2].

Chechen students in fact come to the capital's high schools in two ways: under the budget funds programme and through a common basis of admission. Chechen students are usually enrolled in high school within the target quota and study for free within the national budget. It leads to understandable conflicts between ethnic Russian students who resent Chechens because they are privileged to receive certain benefits at the early stages of the learning process. According to A. Grazhdankin, a specialist at the autonomous non-profit organisation "Levada-Center", as a rule these youngsters are well-educated young people who understand the growing control of Russian authorities over their privacy, and it is impossible to influence the government. He also emphasises that:

... the business running and even the scientific activity in Russia due to the high level of corruption require young people to be involved in corruption for a further self-realization, and the constant feeling of risk existing that a private life may be destroyed because of conflict with the authorities at any moment [3].

These specificities of labour market entry conditions and personal circumstances are a major motivation for young people to move abroad. Recently, the number of migrants from the Chechen Republic has dramatically increased. In the first weeks of May 2013, 1 943 Chechens applied for refugee status in Poland, compared to just 616 in January 2013. By the beginning of 2014, Polish officials took more than 14 000 decisions on refugee status, and about 83% were Russian citizens of Chechen nationality [4]. The results of the survey conducted by the interregional public organisation Center of the Caucasus Initiative, explains the above-mentioned trend of increasing the number of refugees from Chechnya. According to this survey, 78% of young people in Chechnya see their future career not in Russia but abroad. It was carried out in September-October 2012 with 1 120 Chechen university students (856 men and 264 women) being interviewed [5].

Those who are unable to migrate abroad and who are forced to remain in the Republic often fail to find work or only employment that does not match their qualifications. They often start with and stay for some time in low-paid jobs, which can make sustaining a household financially difficult. According to data for 2012,

the Chechen Republic had an unemployment rate of 29.81%, while the national average for the Russian Federation was 5.46%. The minimum level of unemployment (0.81%) was in Moscow and the maximum (47.70%) in Ingushetia. In 2012, the total number of unemployed Chechens was 178 000 [6]. These figures visually demonstrate a significant gap between the developed “centre” of the Russian state and its “periphery”, with regard to the level of unemployment and social benefits. According to various unofficial sources, about 70% of the young population in Chechnya is unemployed. The lack of youth-oriented jobs leads to well-established trends whereby young people seek employment opportunities outside the Republic. This has produced a labour migration of young Chechens, if not beyond the borders of the Russian Federation, then to major regional centres, or sometimes to engage in alternative forms of survival; this is sometimes described as going “to the forest”, a shorthand for engagement in religious radicalisation and involvement in armed groups [7] [8].

This alternative form of youth survival can be analysed through perspectives on the age structure of extremist groups in the North Caucasus. For the period 2010-2011, the proportion of young people under 25 in armed groups was about 30% and approximately 50% of the membership was younger than 35. By the beginning of 2013, however, the age structure of armed gangs had changed in favour of an older generation. The presence of young people up to 25 decreased by 10-20% while the number of adults increased (50-60% aged 25-35 years and 20-35% over the age of 35 years) [9].

These figures indicate a relatively high percentage of participation of young people in the older armed group who found an alternative way to fight for their economic survival and ideological foundations that are, clearly, very different from civic values based on civil rights [10]. In this case, youth extremism is a form of social and political protest, deriving from exclusion from society and a discernible move away from traditional Caucasian civil society values. In the academic community and mass media such protest is considered as radical opposition [11], a struggle on the basis of religious radicalism that focuses on jihad against existing federal political power, as well as the Republican government. However, there is also a view that this is a reasonably compelling escape from the unemployment and the current challenges in the Republic. Nonetheless, various extremist organisations targeting youth in this way react negatively to the realisation of mainstream legitimate social and political development projects in the North Caucasus. In their view, any initiative of the Federal and Republican authorities, including health care, is presented in a form of action that damages the spiritual development of the population and is designed essentially to divert young people from jihad.

CONNECTIONS TO THE POLITICS OF RUSSIA, THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE WEST

In light of these trends and perspectives, it is necessary to consider the modern political implications throughout the North Caucasus region. Almost all local youth activities countering extremism are based on a close relationship with the government and the political sphere. Existing initiatives and youth projects in Chechnya are significantly

focused on sport, and are patriotic in nature, drawing on the symbolism attached to the identities of mainstream political leaders in both the Republic of Chechnya and the Russian Federation. Examples of this can be illustrated simply through the names of such initiatives and organisations – the patriotic youth movement “Ahmad” (the first president of Chechnya), or “Ramzan” (current president of the Republic), or “Putin” (the President of the Russian Federation). All of these movements, and others, are actively involved in the implementation of state youth policy, together with close ties to government agencies. Similarly, “The Union of Chechen Youth” operates in the Republic bringing together students. Almost all of these organisations aim to create a positive image of the Chechen youth in the media. However, evaluation of the actual activities of such organisations is complicated due to the unfilled sections of the organisations’ web sources on youth projects.

This intention to unite the young Chechen generation under the flag of the strong and authoritative leader (for instance, the current Head of the Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, ironically himself a former Chechen rebel and son of former President Akhmad Kadyrov, who was assassinated in 2004) [12] is, nevertheless, a significant alternative (or counter-force) to the growing influence of jihadist attitudes emanating from the Middle East through the current political transitions prevailing in those countries.

Actually, most Chechens do not in fact share al-Qaeda’s or any Islamist strategic vision. The majority of the Chechen population embraces moderate Sufi traditions and shuns the strict religious interpretation and expansionist political goals that Arab jihadists promote [13]. Nonetheless, several prominent extremist Chechen commanders have teamed up with powerful foreign extremists. While some Chechen commanders have been radicalised by years of war, many others have embraced the jihadist ideology largely for pragmatic reasons – to become the beneficiaries of funding from wealthy Persian Gulf patrons [14]. As a result, the current situation in the Middle East, and its spin-off effects in Chechnya, has forced many authorities in Russia to apply pressure on the Republic’s head to establish measures to decrease the influence of the jihadists [15]. For example, Ramzan Kadyrov has ordered Chechen officials, clerics and public figures to “constantly educate the youth about the real nature of Syrian events, to prevent possible recruitment of young people for participation in the war” [16] [17].

It has been confirmed by the National Anti-Terrorist Committee (NAC) that the promotion of extremism in the North Caucasus is provoked and accentuated by such foreign ideology [18]. Indeed, North Caucasus-based fighters have become increasingly visible online, as well as on the ground in Syria. Along with a growing number of foreign fighters from the Arab world as well as Europe, fighters joined a legion of al-Qaeda offshoots and Syria-based movements to fight against the regime of Bashar al-Assad [19].

This situation is exacerbated by the non-participation of Russia in the Mediterranean Dialogue (EuroMed), which is actively supported by the European Union, and where the priorities at the moment are concentrated on multi-sectoral aid to fragile states in North Africa and the Middle East (Egypt, the Palestinian Authority, Libya, Tunisia, etc.). The non-participation of Russia in this platform of co-operation deprives Russian

youth of the opportunity to participate in the process of intercultural learning and inter-religious dialogue, as well as peace building based on the values of adequate conflict resolution within a multicultural context. In Russia, especially in the North Caucasus, intercultural and inter-religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims is very limited and heavily obstructed by a number of factors.

DISCONNECTIONS FROM TRADITION AND OLDER GENERATIONS

Within this context, there is another important trend in the development of youth activities in the Chechen Republic which is more inclined towards co-operation in the sphere of spiritual and moral education with elements of Islam [20], where the youth organisations of the Chechen Republic are ordered to observe the customs and public behaviour of the young generation. The modern faith and religion in Chechnya are highly associated with understanding the authority of the Republic's leader and his politically conditioned influence [21].

The post-war generation of young people has grown up deliberately isolated from the real cultural environment of Caucasians; it has lost close cultural ties with the older generation, the pre-war Chechnya and the former way of life. For instance, in pre-war Grozny there was a huge Russian community (in 1989, 293 000, 23.1% of the population of the Republic; in 2002, it had fallen to 40 645, or 3.7% of the population) [23] [24]. Between 1989 and 2002, the capital prospered and ethnic tensions were barely observed. The demographic dynamics of the Russian population in Chechnya indicate a sharp decline in the number of ethnic Russians in the 1990s as a result of displacement which, arguably, assumed the character of ethnic cleansing from a Russian perspective. It strongly affected the subsequent inter-ethnic co-existence of Chechens and Russians.

There have been attempts to counteract these trends and effects. The recent creation of the special "Code of Conduct of the Chechen youth" [25] by the Ministry of the Chechen Republic for National Policy, Press and Information is particularly significant. The document is the integration of the Constitution of the Russian Federation articles, excerpts from the Koran, Hadith, folk tales and even tips on how to behave.

CONCLUSIONS

In view of the circumstances of the young post-conflict/war generation in Chechnya – a combination of economic, cultural and social exclusion in the context of paradoxes, contradictions and tensions in relation to conflict, ethnicity and religion – measures to combat extremism in many forms need to be developed. The current Russian and European instruments being used seem to be patently insufficient. The many current disconnections facing youth in Chechnya – in the labour market and in relation to faith and generations – are all too evident and there is a need for more robust attention, in both research and policy, through greater dialogue and understanding with young people in the Republic. Only then are stronger connections for them between their cultural and ethnic roots and their economic and social futures likely to be forged.

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