

MASARYK UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF SOCIAL STUDIES, DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

MVZ489 CAUSES OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Maja Rađa, 454344, a foreign student's short-term stay for the purpose of study

CST MUSFSS Multidisciplinary studies at Faculty of Social Studies, 1st semester, 1st year

Final paper

**CAUCASIAN CIRCLE OF CONFLICT – ETHNIC  
CONFLIC BETWEEN RUSSIA AND CHECHNYA**

SUMMARY

- 1. Introduction ..... 3
- 2. Ethnicity ..... 3
- 3. Conflict ..... 3
- 4. Theories of Ethnic Conflict ..... 4
  - 4.1. Primordialism ..... 4
  - 4.2. Instrumentalism ..... 5
  - 4.3. Constructivism ..... 7
- 5. Conclusion ..... 8
- 6. References ..... 10

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Chechen-Russian conflict is one of the most obstinate conflicts in modern history. It is centuries long, oftentimes armed and, it seems, never ending. My argument is that the conflict between the Chechens and the Russians is ethnic in its nature. In order to corroborate my argument, I will first give definitions of what ethnicity, conflict and ethnic conflict are, followed by short description of three main theories of ethnic conflict: primordialism, instrumentalism and constructivism. I will focus on instrumentalism and constructivism and state the characteristics of the conflict for each of them, to prove why I believe this conflict can and has to be explained with both theories. Lastly, I will conduct my conclusions from the main points of these two theories combined.

## 2. ETHNICITY

Ethnicity seems as an apparently candid and obvious concept, but when we start digging a bit deeper, it is evidently a subject to different interpretations. We can divide the concept into two separate segments: a subjective and an objective one. When we talk about the subjective part of the term ethnicity, we are talking about it as a product of the human mind because it is a way of identifying or a sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group. It is a belief of cultural distinction and difference from others and willingness to find symbolic markers of that difference to emphasize it. Ethnicity is objective because it had to be based on some objective characteristics and it is constructed by social severities, which makes it independent of individuals' desires. Therefore, we can describe ethnicity as an outcome of subjective perceptions that are based on objective characteristics (culture, national origin, physical attributes, presumed ancestry, etc.).<sup>1</sup>

## 3. CONFLICT

Conflict is an upshot of irreconcilable objectives between two or more entities. The incidence of conflict reflects the incapability of one actor to triumph over the resistance of other, through persuasion, threat or use of force.<sup>2</sup> Similarly to the term ethnicity, ethnic conflict is

---

<sup>1</sup> Q. Yang, Philip; *Theories of Ethnicity*; Ethnic Studies: Issues and Approaches; State University of New York Press, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Kumar, Rajan; *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict Resolution*

also susceptible to different definitions and explanations. An ethnic conflict is a conflict between two ethnic groups and the cause of the conflict ranges from political, social or economic reasons. The main difference from other forms of struggle is the individuals' fight for their ethnic group's position in society. It is also described as a form of conflict in which the objectives of at least one party are defined in ethnic terms, and the conflict, its antecedents, and possible solutions are perceived along ethnic lines. The conflict is usually not about ethnic differences themselves but over political, economic, social, cultural, or territorial matters.<sup>3</sup> But, for the purpose of this paper, ethnic conflict will be defined as any episode of sustained violent conflict in which national, ethnic and religious or other communal minorities challenge governments to seek major changes in status.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4. THEORIES OF ETHNIC CONFLICT

The question what causes ethnic conflicts is usually answered based on one of the three most common theories of ethnic conflict: primordialism, instrumentalism and constructivism.

##### 4. 1. PRIMORDIALISM

Primordialism was the first of the theories to explain the origin of ethnic conflicts. It explains that ethnicity is embedded in primordial objects such as biological attributes, history of practicing cultural differences, or both. Maybe the most important characteristic of this theory is that it does not account for the variations in ethnic violence but rather defines it with the term “ancient hatred“ to explain why we see ethnic groups constantly trapped in a circle of violence. Primordialists see ethnicity as a fixed characteristic of each individual and community, unique in intensity and durability and capable of mobilizing the whole group in a political struggle.<sup>5</sup> I have decided not to approach the explanation of Chechen-Russian conflict with primordialism for several reasons. Firstly, primordialist would portray this conflict as an inevitable one that was caused by ever present ancient hatreds, which in a way “romanticises“ the conflict. Ethnic differences between the Chechens and Russians were culturally constructed during the last 300 years, especially during the 19th century, which is far from the definition of what ancient is. Secondly, primordialism argues that ancient hatreds result in “all against all“ conflict, which is not the case here. During the Chechen-Russian war

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.britannica.com/topic/ethnic-conflict>

<sup>4</sup> Kumar, Rajan; Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict Resolution

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.britannica.com/topic/ethnic-conflict#ref1226117>

in 1995, both Russian public and soldiers were confused with why exactly they were fighting the Chechens. Media was trying to present the Chechens as usurpers, trying to take part of the Russian land, but the people couldn't really connect with the cause, because the reasons were evidently geopolitical ones and they didn't find it important enough to pay with Russian lives.

## 4.2. INSTRUMENTALISM

Instrumentalism defines conflict as an instrument or strategic tool for gaining resources in the hands of elites – political, social and economic ones, which use it as a divide and rule approach. The basis of division the elites create can derive from religion, language, economy, politics, territory, culture. The elites emphasize common interests that unite the community or group and the dividing elements so an exclusive element(s) could be created. Common or division elements may already exist or can be additionally constructed by the elites.

Instrumentalists believe people are ethnic when their ethnicity brings significance to them – it exists and persists because it is useful. They see it as a mean of political mobilization for advancing group interests.<sup>6</sup> Instrumentalism argues that ethnic conflict usually emerges out of a desire for economic gain and, how Paul Collier would describe it, it is referred to as “greed and grievance“. In the case of our Chechen-Russian conflict, it is important to emphasize that Chechnya is important for Russia for several reasons. Because of its geopolitical position between the Caspian and Black Sea, most of the Russian oil and gas pipelines leading from Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan pass through it. And the struggle for Euroasian oil has multiple facets – there are huge reserves of around 25 billion barrels, located in the Caucasus and Central Asia alone. 20 percent of the world's population consumes 80 percent of the world's resources - Europe uses 70 percent of primary energy and fossil fuels. It is this attitude of the world's population and consumption of world resources that is one of the reasons for the existence of military force and the struggle for the division of these funds. Adding to this the phenomenon of terrorism, Chechens made themselves into an “ideal“ enemies – public view on Chechnya is that it can serve only war or profit.

And maybe the most distinct characteristic of instrumentalism is that it argues that ethnic conflict emerges from deliberate manipulation by elites based on their rational decision to encourage or incite ethnic conflict. It's hard to say when exactly the conflicts between the Chechens and the Russians started, but we can easily say they got more complex after the

---

<sup>6</sup> Q. Yang, Philip; Theories of Ethnicity; Ethnic Studies: Issues and Approaches; State University of New York Press, 2000.

huge amounts of oil reserves were found near the city of Grozni in the 19th century and after the modern media could be used to influence the public opinion. "... If you just step back a hundred steps from the walls, somewhere that gross devil is crouched and lurking at you and if you only get a little lost, take care – he is waiting with a noose for your neck or with a shot for your nape." This is how Mikhail Lermontov's Byronic (anti)hero Pechorin, from his "A Hero of Our Time" novel, comprehended the views Russian aristocracy, and for that time the only relevant opinion makers, had of the Chechens. Describing them as wild, dangerous people that you should be afraid of. That opinion carried out till today's times. Since the ending of the 1996 Chechen-Russian war, the internal coherence withing the leaders of independence-seeking Chechnya, has eroded, as well as the popular support for them. That situation allowed the Russian side to "internalize" the conflict. While successful in terms of changing the power structures of the Chechen republic – and thereby its relationship to Russia – the "chechenization" strategy has undermined the possibilities for achieving a lasting peace. The strategy reflects an instrumentalist approach to the conflict relying on elite manipulation and co-optation as a means to establish peace. Since we are living in an age where information are one of the most important things, especially in a military operation, it is important to mention the modern media influence Russian elite has used to its advantage. We can say: "The battle for public opinion, the "information war," was on during the second Chechen campaign. The Russian's information victory changed public support for the conflict almost overnight. For example, in May 1999 President Boris Yeltsin was almost impeached for his decision to intervene in Chechnya in 1994. By October of 1999, with the press under control, Yeltsin gathered widespread support for the second intervention, and raised the popularity of then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin."<sup>7</sup>

However, instrumentalism as a theory has its limitations. It doesn't explain that ethnic choice is limited cause it's subject to ancestral constrain that is defined by society. A person can't choose its own ethnic identity. The notion that ethnicity is completely an elite concoction denies an active role to the masses by placing ethnicity solely in elite circles which implies that the masses are non-rational actors who can't make use of the ethnic resources. This model fails to explain why today the ethnic message continues to find appeal with ordinary people. Why is it easy to mobilize mass participation effectively along ethnic lines and how do elite know they can use ethnicity effectively for these gains? Ethnic feelings and mass sentiments are not manufactured by elites, they only recognize it and appeal to it. The rational "power-

---

<sup>7</sup> <http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/documents/chechiw.htm>

conserving“ elite strategies alone are not sufficient to address the complexity of this phenomenon.

### 4.3. CONSTRUCTIVISM

Theory of constructivism has three major arguments when it comes to explaining ethnic conflicts. Firstly, for constructivists, ethnicity is a socially constructed identity. It is something that was and is being formed through various means including conquest, colonization or immigration. Secondly, since it is artificially constructed, its boundaries are flexible and changeable because ethnicity is dynamic and originates within a set of social, economic and political processes. And thirdly, since ethnic affiliation is determined by society, it is a subject to changing social environment. The most used term that is used is “intervention of tradition“. We can explain it as a polarized distinction between pre-existing or indigenous customs and later invented traditions, as well as the notion of intervention which evokes a certain totalizing and unique process of scientific creation. Constructivism argues that different influences through history have an effect on relations between ethnic groups. They give an example of two groups that have a history of conflict over territory and are likely to have a particular image of each other, usually creating grounds for hatred. “The only good Chechen is a dead Chechen.”<sup>8</sup> As mentioned before, ever since the oil was found near the city Grozny, Russians have it their best to try and keep that oil for themselves. So, the image projected of Chechens that we know today has been around for about 200 years currently. Because, there must have been reasons for this hatred, and reasons for the ability to mobilise all of those people. This time, beginning and mid 19th century, had a distinct role in creating and exacerbating the differences that eventually led to hatred between the Russians and the Chechens.

Benedict Anderson says that the “imagined communities“ are characteristic of a socially constructed society. Those identities people have are made the same way because there are rules of membership, sets of characteristics (physical appearances, beliefs, morality, etc.). This is evidenced by the social grouping of the Chechens. Late Chechen leader, Dokku Umarov, urged the Chechens to: “... reject any laws, rules and establishments that do not come from Allah ... (and to) wage irreconcilable war with anyone who would oppose the establishment of (a Muslim nation).“<sup>9</sup> Fearon believes that “... ethnic war (is) the result of a ‘commitment problem.’ The majority ethnic group cannot credibly commit to protecting the rights of the

---

<sup>8</sup> General Alexei Yermolov, 1812; Open Wound, pg.72

<sup>9</sup> November 22nd, 2007

minority in the future. Anticipating that its rights will be trampled on in the future, the minority group rebels in the present.“

However, it is an apparent gap when it comes to observing these type of conflicts through constructivism. Would it possible for individuals to change their motivations over time? Is it possible for the ethnic groups to change their method for inducing ethnic conflict?

Maybe the biggest criticism for constructivism is that it tends to ignore the ancestral basis of ethnicist and that it de-emphasizes the limitations of social construction. When it comes to the ancestral basis, the primordialism comes to the stage. Even though primordialism is proven to be not working, that is stuck in time, mostly because it tends to explain everything through the “ancient hatred“ argument, it is still important to emphasize the impact it has.

There is a difference between the two nations, between the Russians and the Chechens, and there is no denying. They have different cultures, languages, religions, history. Those are just the facts. And all of that differences influenced the hatred, heated it up. Constructivism also pays insufficient attention to the role that political and economic interests have in the construction of ethnicity. As mentioned before, on the basis of differences that have existed since forever between these two nations, the Russians first, and then the Chechens later during the wars in the 20th century, the ethnic hatred was reinforced because of the different influences.

## 5. CONCLUSION

What is important to notice is that it's hard to explain any ethnic conflict using just one of these three theories. I choose instrumentalism and constructivism because I believe they have better basis and are more reliable to explain the conflicts that are happening between the Chechens and the Russians. This conflict is a modern, 20th century one, which can't be explain, and be reacted towards, only on the basis of primordialism. My conclusion at the end would be that the best solution would be to try to explain the conflict using all three of the theories that are offered to us. When we combine the explanations from all the mentioned above, the roots of this ethnic conflict actually have sense. There are ancient hatreds in a way between these two nations, because they are essentially different. The Russians were an empire that was spreading, the Chechens were defending themselves. When the time came, after the economic and political reasons gotten more important, the elites did take advantage of the intolerances that existed. But at the end, it is also important to ask ourselves are the today's



religious and ethnic conflicts guiding us back to a state of ethnic backwardness? The obvious answer to this would be a yes, even though we tend to forget about the nature and the causes of the ethnic conflicts in the time of peace. When it comes to the Chechens and Russians, both sides believe they have reasons to fight for. Russians consider Chechnya as its integral part. They have strategic concerns in the region and that makes them anxious and insecure about their safety. While the Chechens consider themselves as a de-facto independent state and they believe they deserve their own. They also believe they have been fighting to survive and that they are struggling for centuries now and they want it to stop already. Peace building, enforcement, keeping and making were all tried at one point or the other in this conflict. To make peace, Russia would need to withdraw their troops, recognize the Chechen autonomy and be open to solutions. The Chechens need to control and shut down the terrorist groups as well as choose a less radical leadership. The question is, is either side willing to do what is necessary to achieve peace?

## 6. REFERENCES

<http://www.e-ir.info/2016/06/01/linking-instrumentalist-and-primordialist-theories-of-ethnic-conflict/>

<http://www.britannica.com/topic/ethnic-conflict>

Kumar, Rajan; Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict Resolution:

[https://books.google.cz/books?id=Q7cR6QPajLwC&pg=PA7&lpg=PA7&dq=constructivism+and+instrumentalism+chechnya&source=bl&ots=XgqSh5BF9s&sig=dODZwzGFMp9DUcaIdOf6Bnj\\_6o&hl=hr&sa=X&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q=constructivism%20and%20instrumentalism%20chechnya&f=false](https://books.google.cz/books?id=Q7cR6QPajLwC&pg=PA7&lpg=PA7&dq=constructivism+and+instrumentalism+chechnya&source=bl&ots=XgqSh5BF9s&sig=dODZwzGFMp9DUcaIdOf6Bnj_6o&hl=hr&sa=X&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=constructivism%20and%20instrumentalism%20chechnya&f=false)

L. Thomas, Timothy; Manipulating The Mass Consciousness: Russian And Chechen "Information War" Tactics In The 2nd Chechen-Russian Conflict; Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, KS.:

<http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/documents/chechiw.htm>

Q. Yang, Philip; Theories of Ethnicity; Ethnic Studies: Issues and Approaches; State University of New York Press, 2000.