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Russian-Chechnya Ethnic Conflict

Political Causes of Violence

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Content:

Introduction

Ethnicity is a term which has been globally present for centuries. However, the collapse of Communism generated a large number of new nation-states, who were finally autonomous but at the same time had difficulties with finding their new identity. At that point a lot of attention within academic circles was brought to terms like *nation, ethnicity, state, identity, etc.* In that environment some ethnic groups recognized themselves as different from Russia and powerful enough to seek for their own country. That is what happened with Chechnya – a Russian province. The aim of this paper is to explain whether Russian-Chechnya conflict is an ethnic one. Before that, I will give a brief insight in terminology and theory of ethnic conflicts in general.

Term ''ethnicity'', as well as many nation-regarded terms, has a lot of definitions and is a subject of variety of theories. After the collapse of Communism and the emergence of new nation-states, ethnicity had become fairly discussed term. That is why there are a lot of interpretations of ''ethnicity'', ''nation'', ''nation-state'', etc. However, a lot of literature agrees on few basic and inevitable notions of the very term. According to Phillip Q. Young, and may I say common sense, one can talk about ethnicity from a subjective perspective, where belonging to an ethnic group is a matter of feeling because it is ''a product of the human mind and human sentiments.''[1] On the other hand ''ethnicity'' has more objective dimension because ''it must be based on some objective characteristics such as physical attributes, presumed ancestry, culture or national origin.''[2]T. H. Eriksen simplifies it and refers to a group that shares some common features and feels culturally distinctive.[3]N. Meer defines ethnicity as ''concept that describes the real or imagined features of group membership, typically in terms of one or other combination of language, collective memory culture ritual, dress and religion, among other features.''[4] As noted, there are few more ideas that cannot be neglected in defining ''ethnicity'' and those are race, religion. It is very hard to define the line that separates these notions one from another, because they are thought to be mutually constitutive. Every ethnic conflict has either cultural and/or religious and/or racial background and scholars usually disagree about where ethnicity comes from.At the point of that disagreement three school of thoughts about ethnicity have emerged: primordialism,

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[1] Young, 2000: 40
[2] Ibid. 40
[3]Eriksen, 2010: 17
[4]Meer, 2014: 37

constructionism and instrumentalism. They can be distinguished according to their central ideas about the very nature of ethnicity and its basis.[5]

The Primordialist school

According to the primordialist school, ethnicity is ''something inherited from one's ancestor''.[6] That means that we belong to a certain ethnic group because we inherit and share physical and cultural characteristics from ancestors. In this case ethnicity is deeply rooted in one's blood and one cannot change membership to another group. All the members of that group share common biological and cultural origins – *primordial factors*. Young says that there is a culturalist perspective within primordialism which emphasizes the importance of common culture in defining an ethnic group and its members. Moreover, this perspective does not demand a common ancestor to form such a group identity; its role can be undertaken by shared language e.g.[7]Either way, groups tend to stick to their identity primarily because it something that its members learned from their parents. S. J. Kaufman says that some groups go that far that its members even tattoo symbols of their identity.[8]In fact, ''this view of ethnicity implies that ethnic conflict is based on ''ancient hatreds'' which are impossible to eradict and nearly impossible to manage.''[9]However, Large number of people have multiple identities, which can even overlap. Certain historical, political or geopolitical tendencies, especially crisis, may cause emergence of new identities and disappearance of old ones. The problem with primordial school is that it does not provide answers why do those identities change. At that point one talks aboutconstructivism.

The Constructionist school

In the eyes of constructionists, identity is something created by society. That implies that ethnic boundaries are changeable and permeable – dynamical. ''Ethnicity emerges as a response to structural forces of society (…) Ethnicity is a reaction tochanging social environment(…) and is embedded in tradition, which is created, sustained, and refashioned by people.''[10] For example, people will form certain groups according to place of living, type of work they do, church they go to, etc. However, placement of individuals to particular ethnic groups can be made by external actors such as governments, churches, schools, other

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[5]Young, 2000: 42
[6]Ibid. 42
[7]Young, 2000: 43
[8]Kaufman, 2010: 92
[9]Ibid. 93
[10]Young, 2010: 44, 45)

immigrants, etc. and the exact same actors can discriminate, act hostile and violent. The downside of this school, as well as the primordialist one, is that it pays too little attention to the role of political and economical actors and institutions.

The instrumentalist school

The name itself implies that ethnicity is used as an instrument, meaning that it is useful. According to Young, ethnicity can be used as means of political mobilization for advancing group interest, which makes interests the only notion of ethnic identity.[11] Moreover, Kaufman says that ''leaders, when it is in their interest to do so, try to create ethnic solidarity when it works for them (…) and clashes are motivated by economic or criminal disputes, but are later reinterpreted as having been ethnically motivated for political purposes.''[12] However, there are scholars who believe that cultural homogeneity of people produces the most effective organization fir them thus increases ethnic solidarity and identity. Rational choice theoretics interpret ethnicity as a choice. Group members choose to affiliate in order to make the best of their life in a certain society, so that they prosper from it more than they would lose from it. In reality, it is hard to find ideal examples of all three schools thus experts combine all three models in explaining ethnicity and causes of ethnical conflicts, which is called Integrated approach. As the name itself implies, this approach sees identity, and ethnicity, as something we are born with but can undergo certain changes caused by society and societal, economical and political environment.

Ethnic conflicts

Conflict is a situation of disagreement between at least two parties. Conflict is usually a mean of gaining certain goals, which are different from the other party. The disagreement most often appears as political one (although it can arrive from economic, social or even territorial issues) but it can also turn into violence. For a conflict to be an ethnic one, at least one party has to be defined in ethnic terms. M. Koinova explains the difference between ethnic conflict and violence: ''ethnic conflict is a struggle in which the aim of the opposing agents is to gain objectives and simultaneously to neutralize, injure, or eliminate rivals''[13], where ''objectives'' can represent leadership of minorities and majorities. Violence on the other hand, is the ''deliberate infliction of harm on people and can be inflicted on physical infrastructure, as

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[11]Ibid. 46
[12]Kaufman, 2010: 93
[13] Koinova, 2013: 9

many instances of this study demonstrate. (…) It can vary from genocide and ethnic expulsion through rape and various corporal mutilations.''[14] Ethnic conflicts can be managed peacefully but in this case, I will focus on violent ethnic conflicts.

Ethnicity as a generator in Russian-Chechnya war

The Chechen Republic is a federal subject of Russian Federation. It is located on southwest of Russia, and therefore on the north of Kavkas. Most of the population is Islamic-oriented and numbers more 1.2 million people. Since second half of twentieth century Chechnya and Ingushetia were forming Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. By the end of the 90s it was perceived within political and public realm that the Soviet Union might dissolve.Thus, political streams in Chechnya, as well as in other Soviet countries, started to feel unsatisfied with Moscow politics and their treatment and that could had been scented in the public life. Once Gorbachov put *Perestoyka* in action, as a method of decentralization and economic development, Chechens intensively mobilized in attempt to support those reforms. However, that had not stop waking up certain radical nationalistic aspires that appeared among some individuals highly involved in politics and military. Those individuals used national congress as a platform to gain support. One of them was generalDohar Dudayev, whose passionate patriotic speeches succeeded in gaining support among national congress members, and which made him become leader of, at that time very powerful, radicals. At the same time, while Russia was dealing with coup against Gorbachov which turned Yeltsin into a national hero, Dudayev and his sympathizers occupied some of the government's buildings and TV and radio stations. That eventually led to Dudayev becoming the chairman of the congress, which was at the same time pronounced to be the only state authority. In October 1991, Dudayev and his allies organized state parliament and presidential elections. The whole voting system and the votes themselves were manipulated in order to make Dudayev a president, which in the end happened. That is when he pronounced Chechnya independent country and separated it from Ingush. Reaction to that decision were quite intensive and immediate: Russian congress of national deputies pronounced Chechen election illegal, and Boris Yeltsin pronounced state of emergency and therefore ordered the military to send troops in Chechnya. However, since Russia had been going through a big crisis Yeltsin's decision was ineffective. Namely, the military force was still under direct orders from Soviet Union, thus the only institution that could have made such a decision was the president – Gorbachov.

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[14] Ibid.: 9

If one takes into consideration that Gorbachov was not keen on violence and eventually he could not let himself cooperate with Yeltsin that could explain why he hesitated with decision-making, and thus was missing a timely reaction. As time passed Chechnya and Russia relations became tense. Dudayev took advantage of Russian inertness and started to work on creating a big army and acquisition of a firearm. ''But the problem occurred in the absence of a formal army. This meant that a large amount purchased or stolen weapons ended in the hands of rival gangs, more oriented towards crime, but the defense of national interests. Thus, the criminal activities began to spread across borders, to Russia.''[15]Although solicited by associates, Yeltsin, now president of Russia, did not put intoconsiderationmeetingwithDudayev. The solution to the Chechen crisis, according to Yeltsin, could be solved only by a military coup. But even this did not happen because Yeltsin was too busy dealing with internal problems and control of the authorities. Duringthis time Dudayevvisited European countries and even began negotiations on international cooperation. On the internal political level, he took over the characteristics of a true authoritarian leaders, dissolved the parliament which gave all the powers to the President. Therefore, the situation in Chechnya was getting worse. The terrorist and criminal acts were more common, and began to create opposition forces that didagreewithDudayev'spolicy. Soon, "in November 1994, Chechen opposition, which was equipped by Russia, tried to bring down the Chechen government. But poorly conceived and executed military action proved to be a disaster which has not made a single defined goal."[16]Yeltsinresponded to Dudayevandhisforces giving an ultimatum. He asked for their surrender and release the hostages who had previously been kidnapped. Russian forces were spread along the border and waited for the decision. The ultimatum was rejected, and the Russian Federation began with air bombing, and soon with ground attacks.Thus, Russian troops continued infiltrating the capital. However, situation on the battlefield was just as unorganized as in the political and military forces. The Russian army was confronted with unexpected motivation and resistance from the local population. They also confroted a large number of fierce and unarmed civilians, who hesitated to carry out orders. One of the army captains described the situation on the battlefield to a reporter: ''we are not doing anything good here. Since we are fighting civilians, it would be better to leave. We will not shoot. We will not use tanks against the people. Such orders are orders for a criminal act."[17] However, Russian army continued mistreating Chechen civilians: ''Behavior

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[15] Evangelista, 2002: 21.
[16] Barberić, 2005.
[17] Evangelista (2002): 38.

of Russians to Chechen civilians and non-combatant population has resulted in their utter consternation and developing some kind of general popular resistance, with the major role played by Islamic fatalism.''[18]In August 1999 about two thousand Islamic fundamentalists from Chechnya along with members of other Muslim countries, attacked the Russian federal entity – Republic of Dagestan, which is also a bordering country of Chechnya. In the meantime, Russia had new president Vladimir Putin, who organized successful defense of Dagestan. By the end of the month, Chechen forces were expelled from Dagestan and pushed back to the border. But the problem was that the Chechens in Dagestan had allies - Wahhabi Muslims – who continued performing various terrorist acts on the territory of Dagestan.At the same time, Russian bombing of Chechen towns and villages were more frequent and more effective. The refugees who left the destroyed homes coming to the border, were returned back by Russian troops. They were banned from entering Russia and Dagestan because they were said that they are already in their country, Russia. As Ogorec said, "tactics of the Russians in this case was better planned, so they concurred, in a relatively short period of time, all the major cities, and Islamic rebels have been pushed into inaccessible areas."[19] Eventually, the combat culminated by the February 2000 when Grozni was completely demolished and the number of victims was enormous. Even though the war is officially over, Chechen rebellions still combat Russian soldiers, who are basically the only Russian population on Chechen territory. Rebels have grown into terrorist attacks which continue nowadays. Russia has a very hard time fighting against terrorism in Chechnya and it negatively affects the political, economic and social life, which leaves a mark on the internal and foreign policy of Russia. Continuation of such instability in the coming years, will inevitably lead to a further downgrade to achieve any political reform and strengthening of Islamic radicalism.

As afore mentioned, I dare to conclude that Russian-Chechnya war was a ethnical one. Kaufman talks about three main factors that lead to ethnic riots and eventually war:

''First, there needs to be a hostile ongoing relationship between the groups – tensions of long standing to motivate the killing. Second, there needs to be authoritative social support: potential rioter need to be assured by public statements from community leaders in their group that the leaders agree killing members of the other group is justified. At the same time, this support usually extend to the security forces: riots

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[18] Ogorec, 2005.
[19]Ibid.

usually become large only if the police are sympathetic, or at least do not make determined efforts to stop the killing. Finally, there needs to be some event that provokes fear, rage or hatred in the rioting group.''[20]

Russian-Chechnya war, primarily by number of civilian victims, can be classified as an ethnical war according to all three factors. Russia had executed orders at one point to kill and destroy everything that gets in their way. Furthermore, explanation of the very nature of ethnicity and ethnical conflict in this case depends on the phase of war. Initially, I would embrace instrumentalist perspective. Ethnicity has at the begining been used for advancing group interests. Chechnya is rich with oil reserves and is of high geopolitical importance because it is placed between the Black and Caspian Seas. Besides that, the whole region is basically natural frontier, dividing Europe from Asia. The other possible effect that autonomous Chechnya could have is that

''Economically, Russian interests in Chechnya are in the gas pipeline that runs westward through Chechnya from the Caspian basin, there are also vital transport links. The Moscow-Baku highway and railway run through Chechnya. Chechnyan independence will sever Russia's vital links with the Caucasian states; which would cause severe economic constraints for Russia and the region.'' [21]

However, there are some obvious differences between two groups (Russians and Chechens) which are deeply rooted in their nations, thus they have solid ground for demanding autonomy. Besides that, as time passed the nature of conflict for Chechens became primarily a matter of their religion and turned the focus on nationalism and, of course, secession. Moreover, Russia keeps referring to Chechens as bandits, Islamic fundamentalists and terrorists. It cannot be denied that religion was incentive for their political goals.

Conclusion

Complexed nature of ethnicity makes it hard to explain ethnic conflicts from only one perspective. Relations in Russian Federation have changed through history, thus have incentives of different conflicts. It is very clear that countries within Federation diverse in various ways. First of all and due to the size of Russian Federation, it is presumable that groups within it will differ and it is considerable that the differences might lead to either

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[20]Kaufman, 2010: 93
[21]Dash:1995: 371

compromise or conflict. Reasons for conflict between Russian and Chechens are on multiple levels but it is a matter of interest and religion. In my opinion it is quite a challenge to find a solution to bring their differences and interest together.

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