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PANEL K7:

Historical Memory and Conflicts of the Present in Ukraine and the Caucasus: the Dynamics of Radicalisation and Peacebuilding

Memory – Mobilisation – War: the Case of Chechnya (1986 – 1994)

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Abstract

During the years that preceded and followed the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Autonomous Republic of Chechnya in southern Russia has experienced an intensive movement of civil society mobilisation, nationalist radicalisation and armed conflict. Referring to the case of the society “Kavkaz” as an example for the emerging movement of civil society, this paper traces the mobilising role of history and historical memory during the period of reform under Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid-1980s, until the onset of the first Chechnya War in 1994. It argues, that the use of historical memory is not that much a cause, than it is an indicator of conflict and radicalisation in society, whereas these processes of radicalisation are closely linked to their context at a local, national and international level.

Drawing on data collected from interviews with representatives of the Chechen national movement, from local newspapers and legal acts, the paper tracks the evolution of civil society movements in Chechnya in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Doing so, it departs from a relational approach to conflict analysis (della Porta 2018; Alimi, Bosi, and Demetriou 2012; Tilly and Tarrow 2015; Hughes and Sasse 2016). Located at the intersection between conflict- and memory studies, the paper thus adds insights to the study of the pre-war period in post-Soviet Chechnya, and in general to the conceptual discussion about the link between historical memory, mobilisation, radicalisation and conflict.

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Introduction

After almost 70 years of Soviet rule, the policy of opening, transparency and reform in the mid-1980s under Mikhail Gorbachev, also referred to as “Glasnost” and “Perestroika”, initiated a period of deep changes in the economic, political and cultural life. At a macro-level, this meant the end of the Cold War and a policy of rapprochement and “New Thinking” towards the former enemies in the West. At a meso-level, “Perestroika” unleashed (or was caused by?) strong movements of national(ist) self-determination and de-Sovietisation in the Russian SSR and in different parts of the Soviet periphery, including the North Caucasus. At the level of local politics in Chechnya, the abolition of the communist party's monopoly and the attempt to increase inclusion brought with it a boost of mobilisation for civil society, to a trial of strength between competing political actors and, later, their increasing radicalisation and fragmentation. Historical memories and their use as a justification for the creation and consolidation of new frameworks of meaning play a crucial role in these societal processes.

This paper is dedicated successively to the emergence, strengthening, radicalisation and fragmentation of civil society in Chechnya during the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period, and to the role of historical memories. As a starting point for the analysis, it chooses the moment of the first formal move of ‘democratisation from above’, which was the “Regulation on amateur association, hobby clubs” issued by the Soviet Ministry of Culture in May 1986. This regulation encouraged civil society to participate in political processes and had a crucial impact on the development of the movement of “Neformaly” (“non-formals”) – also in Chechnya. Whereas the paper’s main focus will be on the pre-revolutionary years of mobilisation in Chechnya (1986-1991), it also gives an outlook on the following years of radicalisation and fragmentation of civil society during the last months before of the Soviet state, and during the years of Chechnya’s de-facto independence under Djokhar Dudayev. As an end point of the analysis the paper defines 1994, when the civil society movements in Chechnya slid more and more towards militarisation, and exchanges of blows between local armed groups (under the influence of the Russian army) finally escalated into a full-fledged war against Moscow.

The present analysis is organised along the lines of the following sets of questions:

Actors and contexts of radicalisation (1985-1994): Which were the key stages in the processes of mobilisation and radicalisation in pre-war Chechnya, against which political context did they happen? Who were actors of civil society who became active with Perestroika, what were their political claims?

The role of historical memory: How far is historical memory linked to these processes of mobilisation and radicalisation in Chechnya (1986 to 1994)? Did the role of historical memory change during the given time frame? If yes, why?

In search of answers to these questions, this article takes a closer look at the case study of the society “Kavkaz”, which started its activities in 1986 in Grozny as a discussion club on locally relevant issues. Among other things, there was an explicit interest in historical topics, such as the hitherto repressed memory of episodes from the Caucasian War (1817-1864), the Stalinist purges of the 1920s and 1930s, or the deportation of Chechens and Ingush to Central Asia (1944-1957). The “Kavkaz” example is interesting in that, although the society was founded as an only loose association of local intellectuals with broad thematic interests, its members gradually became more political, and more radical in their claims towards the government and fellow representatives of civil society. During the years before the collapse of the Soviet Union, various (former) members of “Kavkaz” played a formative role in the emergence and radicalisation of the Chechen civic movement – as founders of independent parties, advisors to political actors, etc. And after 1991, under Djokhar Dudayev, many of them helped to build the de facto independent state of the “Republic of Chechnya-Ichkeria”.

As primary sources, the present analysis in a first instance refers to interviews with representatives of the society “Kavkaz”, conducted in spring 2021. I would like to use this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to my respondents and former members of the “Kavkaz” society for the insightful information they provided, and for their enthusiastic participation and patience during the long and, partially, difficult process of exchanging questions and answers under difficult circumstances during the Covid-19 pandemic. Also, it was helpful, that they made available precious primary material from their private archives; this is all the more important, because today, it is difficult to get official access to data from the early 1990s, and because large parts of the documents at the official archives and the state library in Grozny have not survived the two Wars. Secondly, the paper is based on information from local periodicals linked to specific actors of the civic movement, such as the newspapers “Bart” or “Spravedlivost”, and from national legal acts initiating the period of political reform and civil society inclusion during Perestroika.

And last, but not least, social media were a crucial primary source for this paper. Especially the topic of Chechnya's de-facto independence under Dudayev, but also the years of political reform that precede it, are today highly disputed, and their memory is more or less successfully purged from official historiography. When trying to fill this gap, it was especially interesting to study facebook groups initiated by Chechens from the diaspora, such as "Gorod Djokhar" and "Chechentsy Evropy": here, otherwise unavailable documents, such as Dudayev's conception of state-building are shared and discussed. It thus becomes clear that social media, often linked to the Chechen diaspora, play a crucial role in keeping memories of Chechnya's past quest for freedom, statehood and independence alive.

Conceptually, the paper loosely draws upon a relational approach to conflict analysis (della Porta 2018; Alimi, Bosi, and Demetriou 2012; Tilly and Tarrow 2015; Hughes and Sasse 2016). This concept emphasises the importance of the local, national and international context on processes of mobilisation and implies, that actors do not mobilise on their own, but that the emergence and radicalisation of social movements is always a mutual process.

Linking these considerations to the role of historical memory, the paper argues, that the use of the latter is not that much a cause, than it is an indicator of conflict and radicalisation in society, whereas these processes of radicalisation are closely linked to the context, and to the behaviour of other political actors at a local, national and international level. That is, the prevailing historical narratives and the radicalisation of civil society in Chechnya is influenced by and impacting on the behaviour of the own, local authorities, on the political moves at a national level (Perestroika reforms, Putsch and counter-revolution, disintegration of the Soviet state etc.), and on the development at an international level (end of the Cold War, de-colonisation of the post-Soviet space).

1 The “Kavkaz” Society and the democratisation of memory

“...The emergence of the club ‘Kavkaz’ was a key moment for me, when Perestroika, imposed from above, in Chechnya-Ingushetia began to transform itself into a national movement that increasingly escaped the control of the authorities. Despite the fact that none of the future leaders of the different social movements got ‘settled’ in the club, it was where everything started.”

(Member of “Kavkaz” society, 2021)

The “Scientific Society ‘Kavkaz’” was initially established as “Interest club Kavkaz” in 1986, thus, at an early stage of Perestroika. Under the lead of the historian Salman Dzhamirzayev and other key figures of the local intelligenciya, the society brought together students and scholars from Chechen universities, workers at various Chechen enterprises, and other persons who were interested in the fate of the Checheno-Ingush ASSR. Clearly intellectual in its thrust, “Kavkaz” was mainly active in the capital (Grozny), with punctual events held also in the countryside. In terms of ethnic origin, the permanent members of “Kavkaz” were almost exclusively Chechen (Author interview with “Kavkaz” representatives (2) and (3), 2021).

The main aim of the organisers was to raise awareness and provide knowledge to the local youth about questions of national interest. High in demand were hitherto unknown and taboo episodes of local history, such as the migrations and origin of Caucasian peoples, the Caucasian War (1817-1864), the purges of Chechens and Ingushs under Stalin, and the deportation of 1944-1947. Beyond this ‘democratisation of historical memory’, the debates were dedicated also to burning questions of the present, such as such as the representation of the Chechen language, ecological questions and unemployment.

The members of “Kavkaz” were young, mainly born in the 1950s, at the time of the Chechen forced exile in central Asia. They had all experienced hardship and lost relatives – not only during the deportation of 1944-1957, but also during the period of Stalinist purges preceding it, which has hardly been dealt with to this day, but had hit the North Caucasus particularly hard. *“Rarely did any of us have grandfathers. They were subjected to repression in the 20s and 30s, mainly as Kulak and Mullah elements and anti-Soviet organisations.”* (Author interview with “Kavkaz” representative (1), 2021). The meetings of “Kavkaz” were key for the collection of oral histories and their transformation into more formal, scientific projects. That is, to speak in Jan Assman’s terms,

“Kavkaz” acted as a translator from “communicative” into “cultural memory”.¹ Moreover, the collective remembering of historical injustice was an important element that emotionally united the members of the club – and guided them to become politically active. An initial, symbolic upheaval of “Kavkaz” was for example to scientifically debunk the concept of “voluntary incorporation of Chechens into Tsarist Russia” (Author interview with “Kavkaz” representative (3), 7.4.2021) – a myth conjured up by the local party leadership in an attempt to justify Russian domination and to smooth inter-ethnic tensions (Shnirelman 2006, 291; Vatchagaev 2019, 4–7).

2 Developments at the national level and their relevance for Chechnya

“Take as much sovereignty as you can swallow! [...] But you are in the centre of Russia - and you need to think about that.”

(Boris Yeltsin, head of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR, 6 August 1990)

It is a question of hens and eggs: what came first, the movements of nationalist mobilisation unleashing centrifugal forces at the periphery, or the the disintegration of the Communist Party (CP) and thus of the backbone of the Soviet Union’s central power? The causal relationship between the rise of nationalism and the collapse of the Soviet state is disputed among analysts of the (post-)Soviet space.²

Based on the Chechen case, I would argue that the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the emergence and radicalisation of the nationalist quest for self-determination were mutual processes where both factors, the gradual abolition of the guiding force of the CP, as well as the will to ethnic self-determination, structural inequality and the exclusion of minorities from decision-making played a role.

¹ “Communicative memory”, according to Assman, is the non-institutionalised memory of social groups and appears in everyday interactions and oral history. “Cultural memory”, on the other hand, is an externalised and objectified form of memory that is created by common symbols, such as traditions, museums, monuments, textbooks etc. (Assmann 2008).

² Some scholars hold that the vacuum of ideological power due to the gradual abolition of monopoly of the Communist Party during Perestroika were at the heart of the emergence of nationalism in the periphery (Gammer 2002, 117). Others, however, argue that nationalism, as it was contained in the Soviet nationalities policy, was the main reason for the collapse of the Union (Beissinger 2002; Slezkine 1994).

2.1 The “Regulation on amateur association, hobby clubs” (1986)

The “Regulation on amateur association, hobby clubs” was issued by the Soviet Ministry of Culture in spring 1986, with the aim of stimulating civil society to participate and to take responsibility in political processes (Ministry of Culture 1986). This regulation foresaw the legalisation of civil society associations, at an early stage mainly organised as informal circles or clubs (i.e. Sport clubs, environmental clubs, “clubs of sobriety” etc.).³ It made a key contribution to the emergence of the movement of “Neformaly” (“non-formals”), which throughout the post-Soviet space led to mass-mobilisation and protest of civil society and gave way to a ‘democratisation from below’. Thus, the 1986 regulation lays the basis of the formalisation and institutionalisation of civil society as an independent factor of socio-political life.⁴

In Chechnya, the developments of 1986 in Moscow were met with suspicion and nobody believed that this reforms “from above” would lead to tangible changes in the societies of the periphery (Author interviews with “Kavkaz” representatives (1) and (2), 2021). However, one nevertheless could observe a gradual emergence of local a civil society movement, at this stage dedicated mainly to the formation of a new, specifically Chechen civic identity and to the popularisation of formerly taboo episodes in Chechen history.

2.2 The constitutional amendment of 1990

The constitutional amendment adopted in March 1990 de-facto initiated the abolition of the Communist Party’s monopoly of power and prepared the ground for the introduction of a multi-party system. Concretely, the amendment of March 1990 brought an addition to the controversial Article 6 of the Constitution about the exclusive responsibility of the Communist party to organise all parts of social, cultural and political life of Soviet citizens. In its new reading, the article said: *“The Communist Party of the Soviet Union, other political parties, trade unions, youth and other public organisations and mass movements shall participate in the formulation of the policy of the Soviet State and in the management of state and public affairs, through their representatives elected to the Congress of of People’s Deputies and in other forms”* (Congress of People’s

³ In a way, the civil society associations in the Soviet Union of the late 1980s remind the “circles” or “kruzhki” of the mid-19th century, where members of the Intelligentsia debated actual issues and united based on their political interests (e.g. Westerners or Slavophiles) (Walicki 1979).

⁴ For the emergence of the movement of “Neformaly” see also (Glezin 2008).

Deputies 1990). That is, the new formulation foresees the mobilisation of civil society and enshrines its right (and duty) to participate in political decision-making.⁵

In Chechnya, the formal abolition of the CP's monopoly of power in spring 1990 led to a politisation and institutionalisation of the civil society movement: if earlier they were organised as "clubs" or "groups", the constitutional amendment now allowed them to transform into political parties. The civil society's claims towards an increasingly disoriented and repressive local government radicalised, which resulted in more aggressions on all sides, and in an intensification of conflict between civil society associations and the local CP leadership (Doku Zavgaev).

2.3 The "Parade of sovereignties" and Yeltsin's speech of 6 August 1990

Democratisation, as the supporters of Perestroika took it upon themselves, means not only empowerment for civil society, but also equality of nations and participation of the various ethnic groups in the processes of decision-making. At the level of national institutions, the creation in 1989 of the "Congress of People's Deputies of the Soviet Union (CPDSU)" was the most important move in this direction. At a level of Soviet Republics and Autonomous regions, the different ethnic groups formed their own "Congresses", which formed the backbone of the individual national movements. The Russian nationalist movement, and notably Boris Yeltsin as the nationalist leader and later the first President of the Russian Republic, played a key role in this development. "Take as much sovereignty as you can swallow!" Yeltsin urged the representatives of Russia's diverse ethnic groups in his famous speech in Kazan' in August 1990 ('The Making of Today's Russia' 1999).

This sentence had a key impact on titular nationals and ethnic minorities throughout the Soviet Union, among them in Chechnya. It became for the Chechens one of the reasons, why they stood behind the Russian nationalist movement – at least at an early stage. For the majority of the Chechens, however, it was clear that their own state's sovereignty would stand on an equal footing with independent Russia.

2.4 the Putsch of August 1991

On August 19 in 1991, the USSR was shaken by a coup d'état. The main objective of the putschists under the lead of the "State Committee on the State of Emergency" (GKChP) was to prevent the

⁵ For the significance of the constitutional amendment of March 1990 see also (Glezin 2008).

liquidation of the USSR, which, in their opinion, should have begun on August 20, during the first stage of signing the new Union Treaty, which aimed at the transformation of the USSR into a confederation, the Union of Sovereign States. The response to this putsch were massive demonstrations and protest rallies in Moscow, Leningrad and a number of other cities in the country, which made the military withdraw and the leaders of the coup flee the capital. In a final account, the coup was thus defeated, but at the same time the Soviet leadership under Gorbachev had also lost its authority and had to gradually transfer power to the Russian leadership (RIA Novosti 2011).

During the Putsch, a detachment of Chechens under the command of Shamil Basayev, who was later to become one of the most wanted terrorists of the Russian Federation, was dispatched in front of the White House in Moscow in order to defend the young Soviet democracy.⁶ That is, in August 1991, even Chechen militants like Basayev, stood still firmly behind the Russian democratic movement and worked hand in hand with Boris Yeltsin (Zakurdaeva 2020).

At a local level in Chechnya, the events of August 1991 initiated a period of escalating violence between the local authorities and representatives of the national movement, which finally led to the “Chechen Revolution” of October-November 1991.

2.5 The constitutional crisis of October 1993

During the constitutional crisis in October 1993, Boris Yeltsin was declared deposed by the national parliament, after he had attempted to dissolve it. In order to regain and consolidate his power, Yeltsin formed an alliance with parts of the security sector, which helped him to regain control of the parliamentary building and to dissolve the two legislative bodies by military force. The State Duma and the Federation Council were created instead. The events of fall 1993 led to a strong polarisation between the different political camps of the Russian political establishment – among others also with regard to the “Chechen question”. Increasingly controversial debates

⁶ The Russian human rights activist and former State Duma deputy Yuli Rybakov, who had met Basayev several times, recalls: “He was there along with a couple of his comrades. When the Muscovites were building barricades around the White House, Basayev was with them. They brought a crate of grenades and were waiting for an assault, they were going to defend Russian democracy. On this crate of grenades he was playing chess with the other defenders” (Rybakov, as quoted in (Zakurdaeva 2020)).

between liberal and conservative parliamentary fractions reflect this competition between different political forces in Russian society and governmental circles.⁷ In the run-up to the first Chechnya war, liberal forces started to sympathise with the Chechen population and Russian civil society have mobilised in favour of the Chechens' right to national self-determination. On the other hand, the politico-military elite, which from October 1993 had emerged as a winner, was strongly opposed to the idea of "self determination", which were considered as a threat to national security and territorial integrity.

At a local level in Chechnya, the developments of October 1993 caused frustration about the reactionary turn of the Russian democratic movement and dashed hopes for a peaceful resolution of the conflict surrounding Chechnya's political status: in the immediate aftermath of the constitutional crisis, the Republic of Chechnya-Ichkeria was again made a constitutional part of Russian territory, with the aim to re-establish full control via co-optation of the local population and, if need be, by military force.

⁷ For the power struggle between liberal and conservative political fractions and the detrimental impact on conflict management in the post-Soviet space see also the seminal interview with foreign minister Andrey Kozyrev in 1992, warning of the "Party of War, the party of Neo-Bolsheviks", which was again raising its head" (Kozyrev 1992).

3 The socio-political processes in Chechnya: from nationalist mobilisation to independence (1986-1994)

“What kept me in the club [“Kavkaz”] was, first of all, the opportunity to witness first hand the birth of the Chechen national movement, which, in my view, was involved in political developments before it had had time to fully form. That is what explains the lack of far-sightedness of the ideologues of the ‘Chechen revolution’ in 1991, and the complete collapse of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria in the aftermath”.

(Member of “Kavkaz” society , 2021)

This chapter discusses the different forces of civil society represented in the Chechen national movement and the increasing tensions that emerged inside the movement, as well as between civil society and the government.

3.1 The emergence of the movements of “Neformaly” in Chechnya

Despite an initial distrust of local civil society in the ideas of Perestroika as “imposed from above”, the civic movement in Chechnya emerged at a very early moment, within months after Mikhail Gorbachev’s arrival to power. Seminal in this respect was the foundation of the society “Kavkaz” in 1986, whereas the fate of the organisation also neatly demonstrates the processes of mobilisation and radicalisation. During its active period (1986-1994) “Kavkaz” did not in a direct way exert influence on political decision-making, which, according to former members, was not the aim either. However, through its awarenessraising activities and lively debates led by professional scientist, “Kavkaz” developed great public appeal and contributed to patriotic sensibilisation and political empowerment of the Chechen youth. It is thus not surprising, that most of the organisations of “Neformaly” that emerged in the Chechen-Ingush ASSR were formed with the participation of “Kavkaz” members and, in one form or another, the ideas and issues raised at meetings of that society (author interviews with “Kavkaz” members (1) and (3), 2021).

Some of the parties had active links with national movements in other Soviet republics. Notably, the Lithuanian nationalist movement “Sayudis” and its leader Vytautas Landsbergis played an important role, for example in providing political advice and operational support to the representatives of the “Bart group” (since 1990 “Vaynakh Democratic Party”, VDP) and other actors of the national movement. It was also in the Baltic States, in Tartu in Estonia, that representatives of the VDP met the still unknown Soviet general Djokhar Didaev and were able to persuade him to participate in the Chechen movement.

Annex 1: Overview of civil society organisations in Chechnya (1986-1994)

organisation (leader/s)	Period of action	Repertoires, resources, alliances	Claims, roles
Society "Kavkaz" (S. Dzhamirzaev and others)	1986-1994	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Informal debates and roundtables - Scientific publications; - Conferences; - Participation in official political events; - advisory function to government; - Organisation of commemorative events; - Loosely links to local CP structures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Scientific discussion of actual problems from a Chechen (and Ingush) point of view; - Awareness-raising for Chechen popular culture among urban and rural youth; - Popularisation of Chechen and all-Caucasian historical memory;
Party "Niyso/ Spravedlivost' ('Justice')" (L. Saligov)	1988-1994	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Awareness-raising activities - Own journal "Niyso/ Spravedlivost'") - Ideological, methodological and material support received from Baltic nationalist movements (esp. "Sayudis", Lithuania). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promoting Perestroyka; - Popularisation of Chechen historical memory; - Fight against corruption; - Inclusion of civil society/bottom-up decision making; - Multi-party system, political pluralism; - Ecological claims;
"Bart" group, since 1990 Vainakh Democratic Party (VDP) (Z. Yandarbiev, M. Udugov)	1989-1994	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Publishing activity; own journal "Bart" - Mass meetings - Linked to - Ideological, methodological and material support received from Baltic nationalist movements (esp. "Sayudis", Lithuania). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Popularisation of Chechen culture and historical memory; - Fight against corruption; - De-colonisation, self-determination of Caucasian people - Multi-party system, political pluralism; - Democratic reform; - Chechen statehood, sovereignty, independence; - Declared aim of VDP: destabilising the political situation in the ChIASSR; providing a political alternative to the local CP;
Ecological movement (R. Goytemirov)	1990-1994	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Awareness-raising activities; - Linked to the whole-Caucasian and other (post) Soviet ecological movements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ecological claims; - Inclusion of civil society/bottom-up decision making;
Popular Front (Kh. Bisultanov)	1990-1991	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mass meetings - Commemorative events, e.g. 23 February (anniversary of 1944 deportation). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fight against corruption; - Inclusion of civil society/bottom-up decision making; - Multi-party system, political pluralism; - Ecological claims;

National Congress of the Chechen People (OKChN) (Dj. Dudayev)	1990-1996	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mass meetings - Televised debates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Chechen independence - Democratic reform - De-colonisation; - Restoration of rights of the Chechen nation; right to self-determination; - Chechen statehood, sovereignty;
Party "The Islamic Way" (B. Gantamirov)	1990-1994?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mass meetings - Statebuilding activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Declared aim: resignation of the republican "partisan" leadership - Supporting "chechen Revollution" (1991)

(source: author interviews with "Kavkaz" members)

3.2 Politisation, radicalisation and split or the Chechen "Neformaly"

Against the accelerated pace of Perestroika, the Chechen national movement got more politicised, and, as it is often the case in revolutionary movements, the new groups soon broke away from the old ones, from which they had emerged. This rupture between radicals (aspiring rapid political change and full independence) and moderates (aspiring de-colonisation and self-sustainability of the Chechen state) began to manifest itself in the late 1980s. Many new organisations felt that the impact of intellectual discussion clubs, such as "Kavkaz" was not strong enough, and that the situation required more resolute measures notably against the acting government. Mass protest meetings became the new repertoire, whereas historical topics, and especially the deportation of 1944 proved to have a particularly mobilising effect.

Moderate groups have followed this development with suspicion. In particular, they criticised that the exclusive focus on political subversion prevents substantive discussions that would have been urgently needed to tackle the problems at hand and to build a new, viable state. *"I remember a meeting with Kh. Bisultanov from the Popular Front, organiser of mass meetings, who basically kept repeating 'Down with the CPSU!' We tried to explain to them that if one denies an existing order, the people must be offered an alternative solution, first of all regarding social security and economy as a basis for life. This [lacking sense of reality – C.D.] was their weak point."* (Author interviews with "Kavkaz" member (1), 2021).

During the early 1990s, and especially under the influence of the 1990 amendment of the Soveit Constitution, some of the "clubs of interest" and "discussion circles" got registered as political parties with the corresponding administrative attributes (statutes, formal governing body, etc.). This formalisation and institutionalisation of the civil society movement was not a smooth process, but caused lively discussions and conflicts, also inside the "Neformaly" movement. For

example, the group “Spravedlivost’/Niyso – Narodniy Front” (“Justice – Popular Front”) in early 1990 split into a more radical, official party, the “Popular Front”, and the group “Niyso/Spravedlivost’”, which only later formed a party, and always kept a preference for informal activities (see (Spravedlivost’ 1990)).

The First “National Congress of the Chechen People” on 25 – 27 November 1990 in Grozny was a key moment in the further radicalisation of the Chechen national movement, and a triumph for those parties that clearly sought full independence for Chechnya – most of all for the newly founded party with the same name of “National Congress of the Chechen People” (OKChN) and its leader, Djokhar Dudayev.

As a result of these developments, the moderate nationalists, who had been at the basis of mobilisation during the early years of Perestroika and made an important contribution to developing visions for a new state, were sidelined and overruled by the radicals. Over the years, this led to a deep fragmentation of power, first inside the civil society movement and – after the Chechen Revolution and the declaration of independence – among different fractions of the government.

3.3 The struggle for power with the local authorities

At an initial stage of Perestroika, the Chechen authorities were mainly surprised. They did not know what to do with these “Neformaly”, and did not take consolidated measures against them. According to former members of the movement, this caution of the acting elite was mainly due to the fact that they never imagined that they would ever have to share their power with groups from civil society. The clashes between local government and activists started only in 1988, when the first mass meetings took place and organisers were brought to court for organising unauthorised rallies. And, according to a respondent, physical violence in the form of forceful dispersal of rallies was not applied until August 1991, that is, the moment of the putsch in Moscow (author interview with “Kavkaz” representative (1), 2021).

The first “National Congress of the Chechen People” was a turning moment also for the escalating conflict with the government. On 25 November 1990, the delegates of the National Congress adopted the Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Chechen Republic of “Nochchi-Cho” (Dudayev 1990). On 27 November, obviously in an attempt to co-opt at least the moderate wing of the national movement, the local Supreme Soviet under Doku Zavgaev passed the “Dec-

laration of State Sovereignty of the Chechen-Ingush Republic”⁸. These parallel declarations initiated a political tug-of-war between the OKChN and the party leadership that eventually ended with the ousting of the latter during the “Chechen Revolution” in fall 1991.

3.4 State-building under Dudaev (1991-1994)

On 27 October 1991, Dudayev was elected as president of the Chechen Republic of “Nohchi-Cho”.⁹ In response to this, Boris Yeltsin, President of the RSFSR, issued a decree on the introduction of the state of emergency on the territory of the Chechen Republic, whereas this decree was not confirmed by the Russian parliament (RusTeam 2021). On 8 November, a group of Russian soldiers were temporarily taken hostage in the KGB building of Grozny by members of Dudayev’s party (OKChN) and the airport was blocked. As a result, the OKChN allegedly took over large parts of the KGB’s weapon’s arsenal (Viperson 2000). With the “Chechen Revolution”, as the events of October-November 1991 are also referred to, the radical wing of national movement seized power in the now de-facto independent Chechen Republic. As a result, members and supporters of the OKChN were appointed to replace the previous village administrations (Author interview with “Kavkaz” representative (1), 2021).

The electoral system in the Chechen Republic was formally adapted to the standards of the democratic movement in Russia. This was criticised by moderate nationalists as not sustainable for a society which had gone through 70 years of authoritarian rule and was simply not mature for such a steep reform process. Members of the “Kavkaz” society developed their own vision of state-building and cautious democratisation. They proposed an electoral system, which would consider also the specificity of Chechen traditions, such as longer deadlines and a focus on personal contacts and oral campaigning. However, the Dudayev government refused this nationalised idea of democratisation, opting for the “horse cure” strategy of foreseen by the Russian reformers who, in turn, had copied the electoral systems from the West (author interview with “Kavkaz” representative, 2021).

⁸ The declaration of the Chechen political leadership was created on the basis of the “Declaration of State Sovereignty” of the RSFSR of 12 June 1990, which recognised the right of each nation for self-determination in national, state and cultural forms and stressed the principle of voluntary union of peoples (Lapidus 1998).

⁹ On 14 January 1994, the official name was changed into “Republic of Chechnya-Ichkeriya” (Lapidus 1998).

The tragedy of the young Chechen state was, that its claim for self-determination and independence, although declaratively supported by various sides (including by the Russian government), stood legally on shaky ground: the principle of “*Uti possidetis iuris*”, as it was applied also to the collapsing Soviet Union, meant that only the highest administrative entities were recognised as newly independent states. As a result, claims for national self-determination inside these entities (that is, in the case of Chechnya inside the RSFSR) they were blocked at an international level by the Western states’ blind following of the Belovezhsk accord in their recognition policy, and at a national level by Russian nationalism (see also (Hughes and Sasse 2016, 325, 327)). Further, the Chechen independence movement received a blow at a regional, Caucasian level, with the Ingush in 1991 opting against a common Chechen-Ingush project of nation-building and to form their own republic under Russian jurisdiction (Gammer 2002, 118). Thus, the political narrative after 1991 fully shifted towards the defense of particularly Chechen national interests; two seminal articles written by Djokhar Dudayev, increasingly nationalistic and anti-Russian in tone, set an impressive example in this regard (Dudayev 1993; 1995).

The importance of the national context became evident again with the 1993 constitutional crisis in Moscow. The dissolution of the Russian parliament and the constitutional amendments of November 1993 led to a polarisation and militarisation of the Chechen national movement and to armed skirmishes between supporters and opponents of the Dudayev administration. It was also at this moment, when the Chechen leadership irreversibly took distance from Russia, accusing them of anti-democratic behaviour and of introducing a new political plan oriented towards a “destruction of the Chechen state and a genocide of its people” (Dudayev 1995). And, finally, it would pave the way for the invasion of Russian troops and the outbreak of the first Chechen war in autumn 1994, following a decree of President Yeltsin about “measures to restore constitutional legality and order in the territory of the Chechen Republic” (President of Russia 1994).

4 Radicalisation, violence and historical memory

“All associations of “Neformaly” in the Checheno-Ingush ASSR of that time raised the issue of the repression of the Chechens and Ingush to one extent or another, published articles and held round tables. At the same time the communist authorities often took measures to block the manifestation of our thoughts”

(Member of “Kavkaz” society, 2021)

It is no new insight that historical memories are powerful tools of mobilisation, especially in case of an ongoing or past conflict and violations of human rights (Carretero 2011; Trouillot 2015; Bentreovato, Korostelina, and Schulze 2016; Cairns and Roe 2003). The Chechen case neatly illustrated this link between conflict and historical memory.

The period in the focus of this paper is particularly interesting in this regard, because it represents at the same time a post-conflict situation (i.e. Perestroika as an attempt to coming to terms with the 1944 deportation and Stalinist repressions) as well as a pre-conflict situation (i.e. First Chechen War 1994-1996). The changing role that historical memory plays during this period will be in the focus of this chapter, whereas we propose to use the “relational approach” as a conceptual lens for the analysis.

4.1 The “relational approach” as a conceptual link between historical memory and conflict

Traditional approaches to the study of radicalisation and violence focus either on the macro-level (traditional terrorism studies, political science, International relations: focus on “root causes” and structural changes) or on the micro-level (social psychology: focus on grievances and individual vulnerability) in order to explain radicalisation and escalation of violence. The “relational” perspective offers an alternative to these approaches, focussing on *“interpersonal processes that promote, inhibit or channel collective violence and connect it with non-violent politics”* (Tilly 2003, 20). It is interdisciplinary and in its analysis considers all levels of political and social life, that is the developments at a macro- and meso-level as well as the psycho-social situation and individual behaviour of actors, as they are seen as interconnected and mutually defining each other. Structural causes, such as inequality or historical grievances (traditionally defined as “root causes”), are not per se seen as producing violence, but only if they are activated (della Porta 2018, 462; Hughes and Sasse 2016).

Donatella Della Porta defines radicalisation as an *“escalation from non-violent to increasingly violent repertoires of action that develops through a complex set of interactions unfolding over*

time" (della Porta 2018, 462). Thus, the "relational approach" in conflict studies understands radicalisation not as punctual and localised phenomena, but as processes that involve different individuals, groups and institutional actors. The broader context is of key importance for these processes of radicalisation. Notably, the political opportunities¹⁰ of the involved actors play a key role for actors becoming radical or not, as well as their symbolic, material and organisational resources. And finally the "framing" of violence is important, that is the creation of a framework of meaning to underpin the action (della Porta 2018, 463).

If we apply these three key conditions for radicalisation to the case of Chechnya, we note that the opportunities were firstly in the context of political change at an international (end of Cold War), national (Perestroika) and local level (emergence of the movement of "Neformaly"); secondly, the increasingly violent repression and the power struggle between civil society and the government favoured radicalisation. In terms of resources, the Chechen movement of "Neformaly" was at least at an early stage of mobilisation mainly self-sustainable, with the exception of strong bonds between Chechens and other Caucasian peoples. With the increasing politisation of the movement, contacts were established with other national movements in the post-Soviet space, especially in the Baltic States. And only at an advanced stage of institutionalisation of the national movement under Dudayev did the Chechen representatives reach out to western states and international organisations (Vatchagaev 2019).

4.2 The use of historical memory

As of "framing", the third condition of radicalisation mentioned by the "relational approach", historical memory is a good example demonstrating how such frameworks of meaning are constructed and used as a symbolic resource to legitimise political action. Following Della Porta's logic, historical grievances and injustice suffered in the past are structural causes, thus by themselves not creating violence, unless they are politically activated. That is, historical memory requires a context and an ideological framing to become what Hughes and Sasse call "power ideas", or instruments enabling political actors to "turn linkages into leverage" (Hughes and Sasse 2016, 320).

¹⁰ Opportunities, or contexts potentially supportive to radicalisation would be, for instance, a change in the political system, clashes of protestors with security forces or political adversaries. "Resources" mean the material, logistical or symbolic support provided by third actors and symbolic rewards (della Porta 2018, 463).

Applied to the case of Chechnya, we can see, how nationalist mobilisation and a mixed context of reform and repression helped to transform structural grievances, such as historical traumas of repression, deportation and political inequality, into leverage enabling mass mobilisation and the reversal of the political system.

The historical topics used in the mobilisation changed: at an early stage, the emerging actors of civil society focused mainly on All-Caucasian topics, such as the deportation, the “Mountain Republic” (1921-1924) or the Caucasian War (1817-1864). Oriented in particular towards all-Caucasian unity and cultural emancipation from central power, this early approach was primarily dedicated to the “decolonisation” of historical memory (see for instance the activities of the society “Kavkaz”).

If early representatives of the Chechen movement of “Neformaly” had an intellectual and rather apolitical interest in national culture and historical memory, the latter at the end of the 1980s became increasingly instrumentalised for political aims. Notably the topic of the deportation of 1944-1957 proved to have a high mobilisation effect, which, by the way, was for some political parties also of financial interest: it is reported that on a mass commemorative event in Grozny dedicated to the 56th anniversary of the deportation, the Chechen Popular Front on 23 February 1990 collected a sum of roughly 80’000 rubles (at the time equal to about 850 Euro), which was allegedly divided equally between the head of the party and the Association of Chechen Muslims (Shakhbulatov 1990, 2).

During de-facto independence under Dudayev, the role of memory again changed, the references to history used mainly to underline Chechen particularism and to accuse Russia’s aggressive behaviour in the Caucasus. Dudayev’s favourite topic thus was, beyond the perennial deportation, the myth of the Chechens’ “300 years of resistance against Russian aggression” (Dudayev 1995). The goals of the “300-years of resistance” narrative was, in a first instance, external: Chechnya was forcefully colonised, but has never voluntarily joined Russia; therefore, the latter has no legal right to impose its control, and Chechnya is not secessionist, since it never submitted to Russian rule. Secondly, the “300 years” narrative should legitimise the nationalist regime and its elected leaders, even if Chechnya has to pay its independence with the high price of war.¹¹

¹¹ For a discussion of the narrative of “300 years of resistance against Russia” see also (Gammer 2002, 121–23).

Conclusion

The turmoils of Perestroika, internal infightings and repression by the authorities, rapid deterioration of the economic and security situation and collapse of the Soviet state: the civil society movement in late Soviet and early post-Soviet Chechnya was submit to high pressure. Moreover, despite its young existence, was to take on important ideological, economic and state-building tasks that it was perhaps not up to.

The first finding of this paper is, as it shows at the example of the Chechen civil society movement, that radicalisation is based on mutual processes of escalation of conflict inside civil society and between society and the government, whereas these processes are closely linked to their context at a local, national and international level.

Three main stages of radicalisation of the Chechen national movement were identified during Perestroika and the early post-Soviet period. At an initial stage, mobilisation was based on the principle of self-determination of the Caucasian peoples, using repertoires such as intellectual debates, awareness-raising activities and commemorative events, which should help mobilising the Chechen youth to discover and defend its own history and national culture. At a second stage, the national movement became more politicised and more radical, claiming the inclusion of civil society in decision-making and political sovereignty, with mass protest meetings as a main repertoire. This mass mobilisation was met with suspicion and (later) repression by the acting government and its security apparatus, which led to frustration and to the formulation of even more radical claims by the protestors (independence, overturn of the local government) and, in turn, to a more radical and violent repression. At a third stage, during de-facto independence under Djokhar Dudayev, the radical wing of the national movement (OKChN and VDP) became the governing party and more moderate actors, such as the “Kavkaz” society, were marginalised. We can thus observe a de-mobilisation of civil society during this period, and at the same time a fragmentation and militarisation of the political parties.

A second finding of the paper is that historical memories were not that much a cause, than an indicator of conflict and radicalisation of the civil society movement in Chechnya. Depending on the national and local political context and the stage of radicalisation, the historical topics and their (political) use changed. During the period preceding the Soviet collapse, the emphasis was on a general democratisation of memory with the aim of making public formerly forbidden episodes from different stages of the Chechen past (decolonisation and de-Sovietisation of local

historical memory and creation of a North Caucasian Unity). After 1991, in turn, we can observe a “nationalisation” and “hierarchisation” of collective memory, with a focus on Chechen uniqueness and its long tradition of resistance against Russian rule. As a result, from the formerly diverse and pluralistic picture of historical discourses, two ‘master-grievances’ prevailed: the narrative of “300 years of resistance against Russian rule”, and the deportation of the Chechens of 1944-57 (together forming a narrative of “reiterated genocide”). In sum, the act of remembering was under the Dudayev administration no longer a pluralist movement ‘from below’, as it was practiced during the years of Perestroika by actors like the “Kavkaz” society. Rather, historical memory (again) became an instrument in the hands of the governing party, used to legitimise the choice for independence as a specifically Chechen path (instead of the whole-Caucasian choice or unity with the Ingush), to rationalise the possibility of an armed conflict with Moscow, to unite the Chechen population behind the narrative of the “reiterated genocide” and to prepare society for future hardship.

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