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“Why It Is Difficult To Be A Chechen”

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Seminar Summary

In his remarks, Georgi Derluguian set out to explain what macro- and micro-sociological mechanisms have led to the tragic situation in which the Chechen people find themselves today. One of the main factors suggested was the negative impact of romanticized and often ignorant stereotypes placed upon the region largely by outsiders. Since these stereotypes continue to inform the analyses of the Chechen war, they become a major obstacle to formulating political alternatives. As an example, Derluguian cited a definition of “Chechens” from a recently published American encyclopedia describing them as a small, fiercely Muslim, mountainous people from the Caucasus, most remarkable for their hatred of Russians. This definition, Derluguian argued, is a pile of false clichés.

Derluguian argued that stereotypes such as this adversely impact a population because they inform the way people behave, including the Chechens themselves—how they view themselves, what they see as acceptable, and what they see as desirable. A peaceful resolution to the conflict of Chechnya would involve teaching history—a responsibility that is largely neglected and left to nationalists.

Derluguian traced the origins of the Russian–Chechen conflict to the Russian conquest of the north Caucasus in the late eighteenth century. Unlike other peoples of the region, the Chechens historically had no aristocratic class willing to cooperate with the Russian empire in return for privilege. The Chechens, rather, were a largely self-sufficient population (independent small-holding farmers), well armed with locally manufactured and thus cheap but deadly effective rifles. The eighteenth-century dispersion of firearms enabled the Chechen farmers to fight off the aristocrats of Kabardin or Daghestani origin who, in a typically feudal racketeering mode, used to collect tribute in exchange for protection. Since Russian rule in the Caucasus operated through the local aristocratic intermediaries (as for example in Georgia or Osetia), the mountain farmers came to be automatically regarded dangerous rebels and bandits. The compounded pressure of local class struggle and imperial conquest forced the Chechens to rely on their much-discussed family clans. For largely the same reasons, disparate clans ended up uniting under the banners of Islam, but a distinct Chechen-Daghestani variant of insurgent Islam, whose widespread adoption

in the 1820s was a response to Russian punitive operations and resulted in the sustained effort to build a rebel state, the legendary *imamate* under the formidable leadership of Shamil.

It is then logical that after 1917 many Chechens helped the Bolsheviks to defeat the Whites by waging a ferocious guerrilla war: the Marxist-Leninist ideology of national and class liberation seemed to promise what the holy war of previous generation failed to achieve. In the 1930s the brutal collectivization waged by Stalinist state was perceived a betrayal. This provoked a spiral of peasant resistances and Stalinist terror culminating in 1944 in the wholesale deportation of Chechen population.

The experience of exile at the same time forced the Chechens to maintain their traditional networks of clan and Islamic solidarity, yet it also forced them to adopt the modern education and careers leading to a more peaceful integration into the Soviet system. Almost half of Chechen society made a successful transition to the new urban industrial setting. All leading protagonists in the ongoing Chechen tragedy are prominent examples of Soviet-era modernization trend, be they General Dudayev and Col. Maskhadov or Moscow professor Ruslan Khasbulatov and the Soviet provincial literati like Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev and Movladi Udugov or even the failed student Shamil Basayev, whose hero is Ernesto Ché Guevara. What these people tried to achieve in the anti-nomenklatura rebellion of 1991 was dignity to be a Chechen nation, whether independent or in some sort of association with the new democratic Russia, as well as seeking the expansion of educational and career opportunities. The post-communist era brought instead ruin and pervasive criminalization of economy, society, and the state. To illustrate the deep ambiguity of Chechen nationalism and its misguided search for self-assertion against the impoverished and disarticulated Russia, Derluguian showed an excerpt from a documentary.

[FILM] by independent journalist Thomas Goltz, who caught on film internal cleavages of a typical Chechen village and its various political forces.*

Derluguian concluded by saying that the immense complexity of the region, as illustrated in the film, should be seen as hope. If indeed we observed in Chechnya a clear-cut clash of inherently hostile civilizations, then the situation would be hopeless. Instead, a careful analysis reveals a society painfully struggling to emerge in the new modern world. On the one side we see how the current war revived the mental and social mechanisms of survival such as clan solidarities, the Islamic faith and dignifying identity, and the heroic mythology of age-old resistance. On the other side, most Chechens exhibit the attitudes and aspirations of perfectly modern people who, above all, today dream of basic security and normal life, which they understand as the ability to live in their country where universities offer education, factories offer employment, and where the state can provide for basic amenities such as running water or pensions. The whole area seems to be experiencing long-term structural de-modernization and the return to its bellicose nineteenth century origins. Derluguian argued that relief to this conflict lies in the restoration of the modern functioning state and its educational components.

The first question in the discussion that followed Dr. Derluguian's remarks focused on the extent to which a loyalty to Muslim brotherhood in Chechnya was responsible for Chechen willingness to "perform acts of terrorism outside of their own country." Derluguian explained that Islam in

Chechnya became a marker on the divide between the Chechen population and the Russian forces. He argued that the role of religion and tradition in Chechnya is not about abstract Islamic identity or traditional clans, but rather about who can rely on whom in the times of extreme distress. The tactics of political terrorism arise from the radical fringes that otherwise possess very few ideological and organizational resources, which is why they seek to undo the moderate majority in the middle and instead present the conflict with Russia in terms of good and evil, Islam and its enemies. The Russian propaganda that pursued its own strategy of polarization by painting all Chechen separatists as terrorists surely reinforces the emotional and military dynamics of conflicts.

The next question addressed whether Russia is willing to allow conflicts throughout the Caucasus to be settled absent a solution in Chechnya. Derluguian said that, as far as we can reconstruct the current workings of Russian polity, the answer is that the Russian military has been radicalized by the war with more than five hundred top commanders resigning in protest against the senseless and costly war. By default, this left in charge the imperial chauvinists like General Shamanov (now governor in Ulyanovsk) and the careerists like the Chief of General Staff [now Minister of Defense] General Kvashnin who, at least until now, possessed the political capability and vested interest to actively resist the efforts to stop the war that made them. Given that President Putin presides over a weak state and fragile political base located mainly among the functionaries of this state, Moscow apparently considers it less costly to run the same war while minimizing its media exposure. It is precisely why the Chechen rebels, to the degree of their capabilities and imagination, embark on spectacular terrorist acts in order to bring back to Russia the horror of Chechnya's situation.

The session continued with a question on whether or not Chechens could at this point accept anything less than full independence. Derluguian believes that even though the Chechen people may clamor for independence, deep down they are willing to settle for a guarantee that they will not be slaughtered and for a chance to have normal lives with housing, institutions, employment, etc. Derluguian also suggested that with regards to the young male population, the solution lies with tying them down with education, employment and family.

In conclusion, Derluguian noted that Chechnya needs development, structural adjustment, infrastructure, manageable corruption, and civil society. "The solution," he argued, "is simple, it's the implementation that's impossibly difficult—who will pay for it, who will organize it?"

Summarized by Rodolfo Neirotti

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* For VHS or CD format copies of the Chechen video shown during Derluguian presentation, please contact producer Thomas Goltz directly at goltz@wtp.net