

Violence, Politics, and Ethnicity in the “Russian Riviera”

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 191
September 2011

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The Krasnodar region is a wealthy province in southern Russia with a population of over five million. Located on the Black Sea coast, it borders Ukraine, Georgia (the breakaway region of Abkhazia), and Russia’s own North Caucasus. The region has highly productive agriculture, a major military port (Novorossiysk), and a large tourist sector that includes the resort of Sochi, site of the 2014 Winter Olympics. The region was incorporated relatively late into the Russian state – only in the 19th century, after years of “frontier” conflict between the Russian imperial army (and Cossacks) and indigenous Circassians. The final Russian conquest was the 1864 Battle of Kbaada (Krasnaya Polyana), which was accompanied by a mass expulsion of the local population leading to an irrevocably changed ethnic map. Today, the population of Krasnodar is roughly 85 percent ethnically Russian, and even Adyghea (nominally a Circassian enclave within Krasnodar) has an ethnic-Russian majority.



There is a long-standing and intimate relationship between politics and violence in the region that is linked to issues of territory, ethnicity, business, and agriculture. Exclusionary politics and discourses of authority, seen in numerous cases in the region, generate overt violence toward targeted groups both from the population and law enforcement. Strong-arm traditions have not changed, as exemplified by the horrific events of November 2010 in Kushchevskaya, a locus of post-Soviet criminality located on the border of the Krasnodar and Rostov regions. Twelve people, including children, were murdered in their house by the Tsapok family gang. The murders were a culmination of decades of competition between the Tsapok agro-business holding, Artex-Agro, and a local farmer (and ethnic Tatar), Server Ametov. The Tsapok family partially owned a private security firm, Centurion, which was really just an organized

criminal group consisting of about thirty “associates.” After the Kushchevskaya killing spree, eight members of the group were detained and news of the event spread across Russia. Journalists began to uncover details about the activities of the Tsapok gang, including evidence of connections between the group and Krasnodar’s governor, Alexander Tkachev. The tragic events raised questions about agricultural profits, ethnic tensions, patterns of lawlessness, all-powerful governors, and center-periphery relations.

Cossacks, Minorities, and Center-Periphery Dynamics

During the transition to a market economy after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Krasnodar government’s disputes with its migrant populations reached unprecedented levels of vitriol. For a long while, Tkachev and former governor Nikolai Kondratenko sponsored Cossack revivalists (“neo-Cossacks”), vigilantes who essentially became ethno-paramilitary arms of the local government.

Migration issues took on political dimensions in the North Caucasus in a manner unparalleled anywhere else in Russia. Regional policies toward migrants have been openly hostile. To make matters worse, regional authorities have had considerable freedom to create migration legislation independently of Moscow. Some of the official local migration policies have contained an overtly ethnic component. Characteristic challenges have been the refusal of regional officials to issue registration documents (including immigration and residence papers), blatant corruption in the immigration bureau, and violence against migrants by “government” agents.

Tkachev and Kondratenko have both indulged in fiery denunciations of migrants, usually on an ethnic basis, emphasizing the “threats” that migrants pose to the region’s security (as well as to the Russian or Cossack “character” of the “*Kuban*,” an ideologically loaded moniker for Krasnodar). Kondratenko, in office until 2000, had the dubious honor of being Russia’s leading anti-Semitic political figure. He also turned away federal (and foreign) investments into the region. Tkachev did not continue with Kondratenko’s anti-Semitic discourses, but he did not abandon his mentor’s practice of fanning ethnic phobias for the purpose of populist politicking.

The relationship between regional authorities and the federal government has always been tense. In the early period of Soviet collectivization, Cossacks were labeled “*kulaks*” and suffered severe repressions. Nearly all Cossacks were exiled to Siberia. The traumatic experience of these Stalinist persecutions became a part of the Cossacks’ unique identity. After *perestroika* and changes in the structure of the local elite, their “disobedience” against Moscow arose again and was encouraged by Kondratenko. Their new core issues revolved around agricultural profits – the region, which contains only 3 percent of the Russian Federation’s arable land, produces 6 to 7.5 percent of its agricultural output. During a dispute with the federal government, the Kondratenko administration began a so-called “bread policy,” which was a deployment of “neo-Cossacks” in order to block grain shipments out of the region to increase profitability. By the late 1990s, these neo-Cossacks were rapidly integrated into the regional government apparatus, adding backbone to the heavy air of hostility between the local

government and “outside” businessmen and companies. The relationship with the federal center and investors began to normalize under Tkachev, but a decade of “damage” had already been done.

An instructive point could also be made regarding the use of federal funds in the North Caucasus regions. Attempting to create a genuine federation, Moscow has injected an enormous amount of financial resources into the North Caucasus Federal District. According to experts, however, this has had no effect, except to enrich a host of cronies, such as Tsapok and Tkachev, who grabbed a large share of these funds. Though the most shocking financial waste in the North Caucasus is in Chechnya and Ingushetia, parallels elsewhere in the region can be drawn.

With its gratuitous financial grants, Moscow appears ready to go to any length to purchase the loyalty of regional elites without changing the structure of regional economics. This leads to the addiction of elites to financial resources from Moscow, multiplying deeply rooted corruption and criminality. Economists have criticized Moscow’s strategy as one of simply circulating money among elites rather than attending to the structural development of regional economies.

Agriculture and Organized Crime in Krasnodar

The Krasnodar region is an agrarian paradise with fertile “black earth” and ambitious and capable farmers. Land privatization over the past twenty years has been a matter of great importance. Today, more than half of the agricultural companies in the region are now joint-stock companies. These companies have usually been created with the expectation of becoming larger enterprises that require vast investments. But the needed investment is often not found, while the management structure, which is often vague, can serve to alienate farm workers from owners, creating a class of people who receive dividends without participating in production. A fiercely competitive struggle exists between family farmers and large agrarian enterprises.

The Tkachev clan could be found front and center in these struggles. In the Tkachev home district, for example, there were 14 family farms. Now only two remain. The take-over method was usually “alleged bankruptcy” or “ineffectiveness.” It was alleged that the local joint-stock company, Agrokompex, assuredly connected to the Tkachevs, illegally liquidated 32,619 land titles out of 52,000. Such titles were once issued by Russia as part of its privatization process.* But during this transition, much of the country’s best land (and lucrative businesses) ended up with the elites.

Faulty privatization methods led rural populations, such as those in Krasnodar, to be disenfranchised. Land reform in Krasnodar was once hotly debated in the local legislature in the early 1990s, especially by neo-Cossack factions, and many feared that “rich, non-Slavic” peoples would come away as key landowners. In the end, it was the local government and government-connected business groups that came away as the primary landowners. The owner of two of the biggest agrarian companies in the region were Tkachev (in his native village of Vyselki) and Sergei Tsapok (in Kushchevskaya).

* <http://www.u-f.ru/node/636498>

The former, according to independent media sources, has since sold his agro-industrial complex, partly due to post-Kushchevskaya media pressures, while the latter is now in jail.

In short, farms have been ownership battlefields. Crimes associated with these struggles include, for example, an unsolved fire at the head office of the Stepnyansky kolkhoz (1999); the assassination of Boris Moskvich, a district manager (2001); the murder of the elder brother of Sergei Tsapok, Nikolai (2001); and the shooting murder of the Bogachev farmers (2002). The Tsapok gang was implicated in tens of other crimes as well, including rape, but they got off scot-free, using counterfeit certificates from psychiatrists. Instead of punishment, the younger Tsapok was actually elected to a district council where he presided over a lucrative budgetary committee.

Server Ametov was head of an association of farmers and small businesses who were united in their rejection of the Tsapok-associated gangsters' demands for tribute. They took a stand against the criminal group, which had been extorting people since 1995, but they paid a price for it. The resistance, by these predominantly Muslim farmers, led to the gruesome violence of November 2010. The Tsapoks had blamed Ametov for the aforementioned murder of Nikolai Tsapok, though the murderer was apparently an assassin hired by the son of the past head of the Kushchevskaya district. Sergei Tsapok and fellow assassin Sergei Tsepovyaz were prosecuted for burglary (of Ametov's house) and a violent act of revenge.

According to ITAR-TASS, at a session of the regional legislature in November 2010, Tkachev admitted that the gangsters had connections in the governor's office. Investigative reporters claimed that Sergei Tsapok was spotted next to the Krasnodar governor at the Moscow inauguration of President Dmitry Medvedev. As a result of these revelations, some officials and top militiamen were forced into submitting their resignations. One senior militia official tried to flee the region but was apprehended. The head of the Krasnodar region's internal affairs office attempted to sue investigative journalists for their alleged misrepresentation of the situation in Kushchevskaya (there were no eyewitnesses of course – local residents were frightened to death). He ended up being sacked but then apparently landed a job as head of a security enterprise associated with Krainvestbank.

Conclusion

The struggle for power and resources along Russia's borderlands remains a profitable pursuit for some, and deadly for others. From the murky and complicated Kushchevskaya case, we can draw the conclusion that oppression and exploitation in the region are still regular phenomena and they are applied with indiscriminate ruthlessness in the interests of the regional elite. After the Kushchevskaya outrage, the national spotlight exposed the unfairness of political-business practices within Krasnodar, but no one asked for the governor's resignation. Perhaps most interestingly, we have seen the strong determination of the Kremlin to keep Tkachev in place. This illustrates a neo-feudal structure of power ("*votchina*"), with Russia's elites continuing to wield the levers of the law. Moreover, political and business activities are

accompanied by xenophobic attitudes toward minorities ranging from open violence to symbolic violence (on the level of discourses, as mentioned earlier). Often the boundary between the two kinds of violence vanishes; more accurately, both symbolic and mechanical violence can be mutually transmitted and sustained into narratives that cause chronic hardship for minorities and immigrants. The xeno- and Caucaso-phobic policies of Krasnodar authorities are perhaps similar across the entire country. The March 2011 riots on Manezh Square may confirm this, as do ongoing cycles of protests and clampdowns across the North Caucasus, which have similar political and economic structures and federal-local relationships as in Krasnodar.