

Recent Developments in Inter-Ethnic Relations in Stavropol'skii krai

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Abstract

Interethnic relations and conflicts are an increasingly important feature of contemporary Russia. This is especially true in the North Caucasus where ongoing insecurity combined with a depressed economy has led to growing Russian nationalism, xenophobia, and fears over immigration. In Stavropol'skii krai, the only ethnically Russian dominated territory in the North Caucasus Federal District, the situation is especially acute. Here, growing levels of inter-ethnic tension and violence indicate that ordinary citizens have their own understanding of interethnic relations, which stands in stark contrast to the “eternal interethnic peace” proclaimed by the authorities.

Tensions in Inter-Ethnic Relations

On 10 September 2010, a 220-word petition was posted on the internet in Russia calling for Moscow to re-draw the boundaries of the North Caucasus Federal District to remove Stavropol'skii krai and include it in the Southern Federal District. Under a week later, on 15 September 2010, a riot took place in Stavropol' involving around 80 youths (30 ethnic Russians and 50 ethnic Caucasians). This was followed by smaller-scale mass brawls in Stavropol' on 19 and 26 September. Although the two events do not, at first sight, appear to be related, they are both indicative of a widening of Russian ethno-nationalism in Stavropol'skii krai, a territory long seen as the last bastion of Russian influence in the “barbarian” North Caucasus. While current inter-ethnic violence in Stavropol'skii krai is not of the same scale that took place in Stavropol' four years ago (in 2007), the absence of violence at a similar level in the years since does not mean that the situation is stable. Rather, SOVA Centre, the Moscow-based NGO, report that ethno-national attacks on ethnic Caucasians in Stavropol'skii krai have increased year on year since 2004. Recent events—including the internet petition and riots of September 2010—suggest that inter-ethnic violence shows no sign of abating. Amid the widening of Islamic insurgency and economic uncertainty in the North Caucasus, citizens are beginning to take matters into their hands and this is certain to contribute to further inter-ethnic tension.

Instability in the North Caucasus Federal District

The North Caucasus republics are characterized by a near continuous cycle of violence, insurgency, and repression. While initially located in Chechnya, this violence has spread to neighboring Ingushetia and Dagestan (where there is a latent civil war) and on to the republics of Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Adygeya which, according to commentators, are increasingly becoming one large battlefield. Occasionally this violence has spread into Stavropol'skii krai, most notably in the

Budennovsk hospital siege in 1995 and the Essentuki train bombing in 2003. More recently, operations conducted by the Russian security and military forces to eliminate insurgents in Stavropol'skii krai is evidence, some political analysts have suggested, of the spread of insurgency.

As a result of the wider instability in the North Caucasus, ethnic relations in Stavropol'skii krai have become increasingly violent. This mirrors the situation throughout Russia, where levels of Russian ethno-nationalism have increased as the situation has deteriorated in the North Caucasus republics. Indeed, despite having their basic human rights guaranteed under Article 19 of The Russian Constitution, discrimination of ethnic minorities is widespread in Russia. This is particularly the case for ethnic groups from the North Caucasus as, since 1991, *Kavkazofobiya* (Caucasophobia) has permeated virtually every aspect of society. In October 2002, Lyudmilla Alekseyeva, Chair of the Moscow Helsinki Group, identified *Kavkazofobiya* as “definitely the most serious problem that Russia is faced with today. It is very widespread among the population in general, at all levels”.

Demographic Anxieties in Stavropol'skii Krai

Central to the growing nationalism, xenophobia, and fears over immigration in Stavropol'skii krai is the demographic situation in the krai. According to the 2002 Census, Stavropol'skii krai is the only territory in the North Caucasus Federal District with an ethnic Russian majority population (81.6%): this compares with 3.7% in Chechnya and 1.2% in Ingushetia. This represents a decrease in the ethnic Russian population in the krai from 91.3% in 1959, 87.8% in 1979, and 84% in 1989. Such long-term “de-Russification” reflects the in-migration of ethnic Caucasians and out-migration of ethnic Russians (combined with a low rate of natural increase). This is seen as politically sensitive for the Kremlin and Russian society, as the retreat of ethnic Russians from Stavropol'skii krai has long been equated with losing control over the North Caucasus. As the ethnic populations in the North Caucasus republics have grown rapidly they have migrated

into regions traditionally occupied by ethnic Russians outside the republics. As a result of this, ethnic Russians increasingly consider themselves as an embattled minority group. For example, in Neftekumskii raion (which borders Dagestan) in south-eastern Stavropol'skii krai, ethnic Russians composed just 37.6% of the raion population in 2002, versus 52.7% in 1970. In the raions along Stavropol'skii krai's southern and eastern borders, such as Neftekumskii raion, there is a spatial segregation of ethnic groups, and there are signs that this segregation is spreading throughout Stavropol'skii krai.

Ethnic Conflict in Stavropol'skii krai up to 2007

According to Amnesty International in 2006, Russian authorities have created a state of "impunity" against violent ethnic attacks and discrimination. In Stavropol'skii krai, reports from the Moscow-based SOVA Centre suggest that while racially-motivated attacks are on the decrease (down from 21 attacks in 2005 to 8 attacks in 2009), ethnic violence is on the increase (exact figures for instances of ethnic violence are hard to obtain due to chronic under-reporting, particularly in rural areas).

For much of the post-Soviet period inter-ethnic relations have been in flux and the potential for conflict has been ever present. In the 1990s, in response to the first Chechen War and the high level of migration into the krai of ethnic Caucasians, the leadership of Stavropol'skii krai established a tightly controlled migration code. Unlike that in neighboring Krasnodar krai however, the migration code of Stavropol'skii krai was deemed un-constitutional by the Russian Supreme Court. As a result, krai authorities installed Cossack guards on the borders with Chechnya and Dagestan. At the same time, there was a marked growth of Russian nationalist movements in Stavropol'skii krai, with the Russian National Unity Party particularly active in the late 1990s. Since 2000, ethnic tension, as result of instability in Chechnya (which borders Stavropol'skii krai to the south-east) and elsewhere, has become widespread. In the southern and eastern raions of the krai, conflicts between ethnic Caucasian groups over equal access to education, jobs, housing, and land are increasingly common. Occasionally such conflicts have reached Stavropol' itself, such as in November 2010 when there was a mass brawl involving 60 ethnic Turkmen and ethnic Armenians at a construction site. More recently, the Union of Slavic Communities of Stavropol' (which emerged from a split within the Russian National Unity Party) has been particularly active in coordinating Russian ethno-nationalist initiatives, supporting the actions of militant Cossacks, and violently opposing ethnic Caucasian migration into the krai. After the bomb attack

outside the House of Culture and Sport in Stavropol' in May 2010 by Russian nationalists, Vladimir Nesterov, head of the Union of Slavic Communities of Stavropol', said large-scale ethnic Caucasian immigration into the krai was deemed unacceptable by the ethnic Russian majority. While it is debatable whether, as some commentators have recently suggested, Russian nationalists and Islamic extremists feed off each other in the region, it is true that many Russian nationalist groups cite perceived "lawlessness" in the republics as one reason for their presence in Stavropol'skii krai.

Ethnic Riots in 2007

In 2007, widespread ethnic tension—which had been noticeable for a number of years—lead to the deaths of three youths (two ethnic Russians and one ethnic Chechen) during six weeks of intermittent rioting in late May and June in Stavropol'. During the riots, OMON and local police forces joined with nationalists, including members of the now-banned Movement Against Illegal Immigration (DPNI), in attacking ethnic Caucasians. Cossacks are also reported to have joined with nationalists in calling for ethnic Caucasians to be evicted from Stavropol'. These riots—which occurred less than one year after the ethnic riots in Kondopoga (Karelia)—became central to regional authorities' attempts to manage interethnic relations, as authorities analysed and reviewed existing policies and programmes in light of the riots. Despite this, ethnic conflict has continued in Stavropol'skii krai. In early 2008, for example, as part of a wider campaign by Russian nationalists to use imitation aggression from Caucasian and Muslim groups as a means of provoking xenophobic moods and actions, a hoax bomb was left in the Nevinnomissk branch of the FSB. In 2009 there were inter-ethnic clashes in: Pelagiade, Izobil'nenskii raion (August 2009); Irgakly, Stepnovskii raion (June 2009); Georgievskii, Predgornii raion (May and June 2009); and Stavropol' gorod (April 2009). Although high profile, none of these clashes were as large as the 2007 riots.

Events since 2010

The September 2010 internet petition calling on President Medvedev to re-draw the structure of Russia's Federal Districts to remove Stavropol'skii krai from the North Caucasus Federal District (NCFD) and shift it to the Southern Federal District reflected discontent, which had been simmering in Stavropol' for several months. Posted on the internet on 10 September 2010, the 220-word appeal attracted more than 10,000 signatures in the first few days of its appearance. According to the appeal, residents in Stavropol'skii krai have suffered in a variety of ways since their krai was combined with the North Cau-

casus republics in the NCFD. The level of ethnic Caucasian migration has increased, as has violence and crime in general. While three terrorist attacks did take place in Stavropol'skii krai between January and September 2010, it is unclear whether the inclusion of Stavropol'skii krai in the NCFD was the cause of them.

On 20 September, Yuri Shepelin, first deputy of Stavropol' City authorities, reported that since the appearance of the internet petition there had been a sharp escalation in the conflict readiness of ethnic Russian and ethnic Caucasian youth in Stavropol'. Such is the situation in Stavropol' that ethnic tension occurs in a radical context and often banal conflicts lead to riots or mass brawls. This happened on 15 September when a fight between two students threatened to break out into widespread rioting. In the end, 80 youths (30 ethnic Caucasians and 50 ethnic Russians) were arrested. Fearing that violence might reach the levels of 2007, local security services responded by increasing their visibility and creating armed task forces, including Cossacks, to patrol Stavropol' and stop youths from gathering in public places. Despite these efforts, on 19 September, eight ethnic Caucasians were beaten up by ethnic Slav youths in Victory Park. The following day, after meeting in Victory Park, a group of largely ethnic Caucasian youths walked through central Stavropol' randomly beating up citizens. In response, the Stavropol' City Security Council introduced restrictions on entertainment and the public assembly of individuals: in effect, all recreational facilities became sites of criminal suspicion. Despite this, on 26 September a mass brawl involving 55 youths took place near Prospect October Revolution.

While not absolving ethnic Russian youths of any responsibility, the behavior of ethnic Caucasian youths in Russia is not a new issue. After clashes in Tuapsev, Krasnodar krai, in July 2010, Vladimir Shvetsov, a deputy to the Russian presidential envoy to the North Caucasian Federal District, recommended that republican authorities in the North Caucasus instruct their youths on how to behave when they travel to Russian-speaking regions. According to Shvetsov, youths from the North Caucasian republics do not take other people's feelings and opinions into consideration when they travel to regions such as Stavropol'skii krai, and while not breaking any laws, they still breach the "norms of behavior."

While inter-ethnic tension has, since the beginning of 2011, been localized—there have been reports of sev-

eral small scale brawls in Kurskii raion between ethnic Armenians and ethnic Chechens—recent events do not suggest that it will stay this way much longer. In particular, the January 2011 bomb attack at Domodedovo airport in Moscow, reportedly carried out by a member of the "Nogai jamaat" (based in Neftekumskii raion in eastern Stavropol'skii krai), resulted in clashes, in early February, between Russian security forces and suspected Islamic militants in Kochubeevskii raion (south-western Stavropol'skii krai) and led to the deaths of five militants and three security officers. There are reports that prior to the funerals of the three security officers in Stavropol' on 17 February there were a number of skirmishes between Russian nationalists and ethnic Caucasians in the city.

Looking to the Future: Rhetoric and Reality of Inter-Ethnic Peace

With rising levels of Russian nationalism, and with the widening of insurgency and terrorism in the North Caucasus republics, there is significant potential for further escalation of xenophobic violence and ethnic conflict in Stavropol'skii krai. Ethnic violence indicates that ordinary citizens have their own understanding of interethnic relations. When combined with current levels of anti-Caucasianism, these understandings are certain to contribute to further violence in Stavropol'skii krai as individuals become radicalized due to current social, economic, and political conditions. More broadly, events in Moscow—most notably, the largest Russian nationalist riots in modern Russia in December 2010—and elsewhere—in response to the Moscow riots there were protests throughout Russia, including in Rostov-on-Don where several thousand ethnic Slavs rioted against ethnic Caucasians in the city—are evidence that anti-Caucasian feelings are now widespread in Russia. President Medvedev's muted response to the December 2010 riots suggests that the Kremlin will continue to bury its head in the sand over increasing inter-ethnic tension in Russia. Recent events in Stavropol'skii krai, however, suggest that such a strategy is no longer sustainable and the ability of authorities (at both krai and federal levels) to use the Soviet-era slogan of "eternal inter-ethnic peace" is now finally out of question. With an underdeveloped civil society in Russia, the Kremlin may be forced to incorporate more Russian nationalist rhetoric into its policies.

About the Author

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Further Reading

- Foxall, Andrew (2010): "Discourses of Demonisation: Chechens, Russians, and the Stavropol' riots of 2007", *Geopolitics*, 15(4): 684–704
- Tsvetkov, Oleg (2006): "Ethnic Russians Flee the North Caucasus", *Russian Analytical Digest*, 7: Migration, pp. 9–13