

Introduction

Natasha Kuhrt
Marcin Kaczmarek

Conceptualizing violence, and its close cousin, conflict, is not an easy task. All too often these terms are used very loosely and the interrelationship between the two phenomena tends to be poorly understood and defined. Rogers Brubaker and David Laitin in their work on ethnic and nationalist violence make the important point that conflict and violence should not be conflated. They argue that violence is not an inevitable outgrowth of conflict, noting that even “where violence is clearly rooted in preexisting conflict, it should not be treated as something that occurs automatically when the conflict reaches a certain ‘temperature.’” Violence is thus not a quantitative degree of conflict, but a qualitative form of conflict, with its own dynamic (Brubaker and Laitin 1998: 426).

This special issue deals with the phenomenon of violence and the related field of conflict, in the post-Soviet space. The central preoccupation is to examine both political and legal discourses and practices of internal and external violence, broadly conceived, in this space. Simultaneously the special issue aspires to situate these discourses and practices in the broader literature on political violence, and to examine these from political, historical, legal, and security studies perspectives. We approach the problem of violence in the post-Soviet space on three levels: the international-structural; inter-state; and domestic-political. The articles focus on structural sources of violence: the role of democratization, and the relationship between violent behavior inside and outside the state. The contributors also analyze the role of the Russian Federation in generating, perpetuating, and mitigating political violence. Finally, a bottom-up approach, exploring how non-state actors contribute to political violence, is applied.

Several aspects distinguish violence in the post-Soviet space when compared to other regions.

The heritage of the Chechen wars continues to exercise its influence in all dimensions: domestic, at the inter-state level, and outside of the post-Soviet space itself. This conflict has to a large extent corrupted the Russian state institutions rather than provided for the emergence of a “strong state.” The case of justice for the victim, presented by Danielle Jackman in this issue, remains the exception rather than the rule. Moreover, the assassinations of key figures engaged in protecting the rights of victims, including Anna Politkovskaya, Stanislav Markelov, and Natal’ia Estemirova, illustrate the long-term negative trend. Russia’s attempts to “outsource” violence as embodied in the Putin regime’s policies of “Chechenization,” allow Kadyrov to run Chechnya as a brutal semi-personalized fiefdom (Russell 2011; Galeotti 2014). Further, while Chechnya is held up by Russia as a pacified region, the North Caucasus has become a breeding ground for jihad, and we now see a growing trend of “foreign fighters” from the region traveling to Syria and Iraq (Marton and Kiss).

Secondly, Russia has been playing a dual role: of both peace-maker and perpetrator of inter-state violence. In the early 1990s, Russian diplomatic efforts and selective use of force led to the “freezing” of a number of inter-state and inter-ethnic conflicts along the post-Soviet peripheries. The most recent exemplification of Russia’s role was Moscow’s mediation in the 2016 “four-day war” between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. At the same time, Russia’s military interventions stand in stark contrast to such peace-making endeavors, starting with war against Georgia in 2008, followed by the annexation of Crimea and a “silent intervention” in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. It is against this backdrop that Hanna Smith analyzes the Kremlin’s approach to security threats over the past sixteen years by evaluating successive iterations of the Russian Federation’s National Security Strategy.

Finally, there is a surprising lack of correlation between the level of violence *inside* the state and its international behavior. As Anaïs Marin demonstrates in her contribution, for the majority of post-Soviet states a domestically violent authoritarian system does

not in fact translate into propensity to use force abroad, against other states. Interestingly, however, Russia remains an exception to this rule.

When Vladimir Putin took over the reins of power from Yeltsin, his mandate was in large part linked to his prosecution of the second Chechen War. His three presidential administrations have been punctuated by terrorist attacks in Russia proper (beginning with the controversial apartment bombings; then Beslan and others) and an ongoing insurgency in the North Caucasus. The year 2008 saw the Russo–Georgian war, followed by the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and a simmering separatist conflict in the Donbas with strong links to Moscow. In 2015 the Russian military embarked on an aerial campaign in Syria to support the embattled regime of Bashir al-Assad.

Given the growing plethora of security threats, from the Kremlin’s perspective, it starts to look, as in the Soviet period, very much as if Russia were “encircled” by threats. Putin had come to power on the strength of his pledge to rid Russia of terrorists and to reassert state power. The Beslan siege had appeared to undermine his image as “strongman,” and Putin was criticized not only by nationalist elements but also by those in the security structures close to him, the *siloviki*, who began to gain in prominence, along with the oligarchs (Tsygankov 2016). Over time, however, Putin came to rely more heavily on the *siloviki* and military elites, who favored a strong state, rather than the oligarchs (Tsygankov 2014: 105). The consolidation of the state was a pre-requisite for reasserting the state’s monopoly on violence, which appeared to be undermined by non-state actors, notably first by nationalists in Chechnya, then by insurgents in the wider North Caucasus. The establishment of the state as “power container” par excellence was Putin’s aim (Giddens 1987).

Several events at the regional and global levels in the 2000s were key points in the crystallization of Putin’s evolving views on security and how to deal with threats. The war in Iraq in 2003, which Putin condemned as unlawful regime change, was followed by several so-called “color revolutions” in the post-Soviet space, the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine, as well as the “Rose Revolution” in

Georgia and the “Tulip Revolution” in Kyrgyzstan. For Putin and his colleagues, these were all of a piece: the color revolutions were depicted as being inspired by US liberal ideology, just as the Iraq war was a neo-con ideological project wherein Iraq would be the first building block in democracy promotion across the Middle East. The later “Arab revolutions” starting in 2011, confirmed to the Kremlin the danger in supporting regime change, which could only lead to chaos and instability. Fear of contagion and spillover of the violence and unrest to the post-Soviet region was also a factor, in particular in the case of Syria.

Unrest in Russia itself, notably the December 2011 demonstrations following the elections, as well as the Bolotnaia protests, while not amounting to “color revolutions,” were nevertheless significant challenges to the regime, and allowed the Russian government to justify to some extent, a rejection of liberal policies (Sakwa 2015).

Any actions to overthrow the established state that might lead to chaos and instability are seen from the Russian state perspective as a grave threat to regional and global order and the internal-external security nexus has thus become more and more tightly interwoven. The legitimizing “glue” that bonds this nexus has increasingly become a nationalist discourse. In the nationalism literature the debate as to whether nationalism is inherently violent has a long pedigree. Jack Snyder saw the end of the Cold War as increasing the prevalence of nationalism by forcing the post-Communist states into a “dangerous transition towards democratic, market societies” (Snyder 2000: 20). For Snyder democratization itself has in many cases led to violence. Yet although this was the case with respect to the former Yugoslavia, violence in the former Soviet space was surprisingly limited by comparison. Of course, the nature of the breakup of Yugoslavia on the one hand, and the USSR on the other, was qualitatively different. All former republics accepted Russia as the continuer state of the USSR while Milosevic’s claim was rejected by the other Yugoslav entities.

Although at first sight the break-up of the Soviet Union appears much less bloody, violence has permeated the post-Soviet space since then. It is both material and at the same time constitutes

a threatening potentiality. The annexation of Crimea, and the Russian–Ukrainian conflict remain the most visible recent eruptions of violence, but the two and a half decades following the Soviet collapse witnessed a series of inter-state and intra-state armed conflicts throughout the region. New sites of violence, such as borders between Central Asian states, continue to emerge. Here, discourse on both domestic and regional security is dominated by the narratives of potential violence against the three “evils” of terrorism, separatism, and extremism, promoted particularly within the forum of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Violence has become an intrinsic element of the post-Soviet state and often permeates everyday life. While at least in the first couple of decades after the collapse of the USSR, there was, it’s true, no full-scale war such as was seen in Yugoslavia, there was continuing brutality in Chechnya, albeit now “outsourced” to Ramzan Kadyrov, as part of the policy of Chechenization (Hughes 2012), the insurgency across the North Caucasus, as well as simmering tensions in Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria. Yet in the 2009 Russian National Security Strategy it was declared that Russia had “largely overcome the contradictions of the early 2000s.”

Already by the time of the Munich conference of 2007, the security canvas was being stretched extremely wide, as multiple threats were securitized by the regime, leading to what the Copenhagen school has termed “an excessive widening of security” (Buzan and Hansen 2009: 214).

The special issue opens with an article by Anaïs Marin, who investigates the interface between violent domestic political systems and the propensity of post-Soviet states to engage in militarized disputes. While the level of intra-state violence has remained high throughout the post-Soviet space, inter-state conflicts are relatively rare. The relationship between growing authoritarianism and foreign policy aggressiveness can be easily observed in the case of Russia. However, states with entrenched authoritarian systems, such as Belarus, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan, are in fact, in the words of Marin, “paragons of peaceful dictatorships.” The study by Marin analyzes the patterns of behavior of twelve post-Soviet states between 1992 and 2014. Marin argues that there is no clear link

between the level of authoritarianism and aggressive foreign policy behavior. Instead, it is the degree of stability which plays a vital role, i.e. the more consolidated a regime, the more peaceful its foreign policy. Marin grounds her argument in the broader literature on the democratic peace and the “rogue states.” In addition, she proposes a typology of conflict-prone regimes in post-Soviet Eurasia.

Next, Hanna Smith analyzes this broadening of security threats, tracing the evolution of threat perceptions from the early 2000s. What are the consequences of this seemingly endless proliferation of threats listed in the Russian National Security Strategies—is this simply a “laundry list” of threats? As Smith suggests, they lead, amongst other things, to a sense of embattlement, of being “under siege” with “the enemy at the gate” (Monaghan 2008), and in this scenario, violence or the use of force can be justified more easily, in particular if it is presented as necessary to avert an imminent threat. The “enemy” is increasingly becoming identified with the West, and as Hanna Smith points out, the former Soviet states are increasingly viewed by Russia as part of an out-group rather than an in-group.

Mischa Gabowitsch notes the growing importance of commemoration and memorialization in Putin’s Russia. This should be seen as part and parcel of the preoccupation, nearing fixation, on the past. Here we also see the way in which security threats proliferate: thus attempts to “revise the results of the Second World War” began to be described as threats to national security (Kuhrt 2012: 425). The 2007 Foreign Policy Survey already pointed to historical revisionism as a threat. Gabowitsch explains how the tradition of what he calls “panhistorical militarism” is embodied in the construction of a new, vast “Russian Arlington.” The recent scale of anti-Western rhetoric masks the fact that this new national cemetery was, initially, modeled on its US counterpart, even though in the event it has come to serve as “a departmental cemetery for the defense ministry” which spearheaded the initiative. Gabowitsch also explains that the armed forces’ direct involvement in this project is part and parcel of the practice of involving them in public commemoration “as a form of compensation for its [the military’s] lack of political influence.” Importantly, the author demonstrates

the unquestioned “unproblematic continuity” between Soviet and post-Soviet Russia: i.e. while hitherto, veterans and relatives of victims of the Afghan and Chechen Wars had to make do with memorials and cemeteries dedicated to the Great Patriotic War, and were denied public recognition, with the building of Russia’s “Arlington,” the “equitable juxtaposition” of conflicts seems to be underlined, lending legitimacy to the more recent wars. Despite this, however, the conflict in the Donbas remains unacknowledged in the public arena, and the secrecy extends to military casualties and their burial. Gabowitsch notes the contrast with Ukraine, where the commemoration and burial of the victims of Maidan and Ukrainian soldiers who died in the Donbas have been the subject of much public debate.

Olga Lebedeva’s piece introduces the “Topography of Terror” website linked to the International Memorial Society research project “Moscow: Sites of Memory.” The website’s aim is to map out—quite literally—the sites of past political repression and state killings across Moscow. This project is part of Memorial’s ongoing mission to commemorate the victims of state terror. It also represents an attempt to reconnect present-day Moscow citizens with their city and its past; the aim is to bring the history of state violence into the public sphere, thereby transforming people’s relationships to urban spaces, communities, and politics in the present. Memorial’s current project is inspired by the *Topographie des Terrors* in Berlin, but the political environment is more difficult in today’s Russia where as the article points out, “there is no public consensus about the state security apparatus in Soviet history,” and where the pressure being exerted on civil society by the state is intense, such that, for example, the different branches of Memorial have now been officially declared “foreign agents.”¹ Part of the aim of this project is to encourage reflection on individual civic responsibility; Memorial researchers thus see their remit as

¹ The Inter-regional NGO “Memorial” Rights Defense Center and the International Historical-Educational, Charity and Rights Defense Society “Memorial” were officially declared to be “foreign agents” on 21 July 2014 and 4 October 2016 respectively. “Memorial” is appealing both these decisions in the courts.

consisting in revealing “the entire chain of repressive orders,” acknowledging that “every step involved in state crimes is connected to concrete decisions made by specific people.” Russia is of course not alone in finding coming to terms with the past a difficult enterprise, and issues of civic responsibility have likewise become especially acute and relevant again throughout the West, too, with the current rise of xenophobia and populism.

The connection between physical sites of violence and processes of remembering and forgetting is also explored by a report on the “Places of Amnesia” conference held in Cambridge, UK, earlier this year. As this report shows, there is a clear value in interdisciplinary research that can bring together those working on historical, cultural, psychological, and sociological issues within the broad field of Memory Studies.

Two subsequent articles deal with the domestic-international (transnational) dimension of violence in the post-Soviet space.

Danielle Jackman analyzes the role of transnational human rights networks, centered around and partially established by one of the harshest critics of Putin’s policy in Chechnya, the Russian journalist, Anna Politkovskaya. The case under study is the abduction and murder of the Chechen civilian, Zelimkhan Murdalov. Jackman traces the process through which Politkovskaya, supported by human rights activists from Russia, Chechnya, and the West, managed to achieve what she calls “partial justice.” The case of convicted Russian police officer, Sergei Lapkin, represents one of a few such episodes, when the Russian state convicted one of its agents for the human rights violations, perpetrated during the Second Chechen War. As Jackman argues, such a result was possible due to a number of factors: determination on the part of Politkovskaya herself; support from Russian and local human rights activists; and the high levels of publicity that the case received, combined with the Kremlin’s willingness to co-opt and empower local elites in the process of “Chechenization.”

Péter Marton and Annamária Kiss in their review article explore yet another implication of the Chechen wars: the participation of Chechen veterans in “foreign” conflicts in Ukraine, Syria, and Iraq. The two authors focus on mechanisms of

mobilization, distinguishing between two major types of engaged combatants, those supporting Chechnya's leader Ramzan Kadyrov, and those promoting the Islamist cause. The question of the motives and inspirations of foreign fighters—i.e. those volunteering to participate in conflicts outside of their societies with no primary economic incentive—requires grounding in the literature on rebellion, social movements, transnational activism, and mobilization. Chechen combatants have been joining both sides of the Ukrainian conflict and various factions in Syria and Iraq. At the same time, the state plays a number of roles in fueling the phenomenon of foreign fighters. As Marton and Kiss argue, Russia and Chechnya support participation of Chechen combatants on the side of Donbas separatists, while Ukraine tacitly accepts Chechen volunteers fighting alongside the Ukrainian forces. The state thread is less obvious in the case of Chechen fighters in Syria and Iraq, though it seems plausible that the Russian security services at least acquiesce, if not urge, militants from the North Caucasus to go abroad.

It might behoove us to bear in mind Donald Horowitz' dictum regarding the nature of "meta-conflicts," i.e. "conflicts about the nature of conflict itself." This is in turn a key part of the conflict (Horowitz 2001). Thinking about Russia's foreign policy towards the West over the past decade, this could be a useful paradigm: the West sees Crimea as "annexation"; Russia terms it "reintegration." The West sees events in Eastern Ukraine as an inter-state war: Ukraine sees this as terrorism, while Russia has suggested it is a war of resistance. The war in Georgia to Russia was variously either a "humanitarian intervention," or a justified act of self-defense on Russia's part. Further, Russia's discourse of a peaceful and pacified Chechnya could also be seen as a de-securitization process.

As the articles in this special issue demonstrate, post-Soviet politics remains permeated with violence. We follow Thomas Claire's call (2011) to "talk about 'violence'"—violence which all too often may be obscured by terms such as "the use of force," "legitimate intervention," or other terminology—and to this end, we attempt to uncover these hidden meanings, and to explore the multiple forms that violence and conflict take in our region.

REFERENCES

- Brubaker, R. and Laitin, D. D. (1998) "Ethnic and Nationalist Violence," *Annual Review of Sociology*: 423–52.
- Buzan, B. and Hansen, L. (2009) *The Evolution Of International Security Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Claire, T. (2011) "Why Don't We Talk about 'Violence' in International Relations?," *Review of International Studies* 37: 1815–36.
- Galeotti, M. (2014) *Russia's Wars in Chechnya 1994–2009*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Giddens, A. (1987) *The Nation-State and Violence*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Horowitz, D. (2001) *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 2nd ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Hughes, J. (2012) "The Russo-Chechen Conflict," in G. Gill and J. Young (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Russian Politics and Society*. London and New York: Routledge, 232–48.
- Kuhrt, N. (2012) "Russian Foreign Policy," in G. Gill and J. Young (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Russian Politics and Society*. London and New York: Routledge, 421–31.
- Monaghan, A. (2008), "'An Enemy at the Gates' or 'From Victory to Victory'? Russian Foreign Policy," *International Affairs* 84(4): 717–33.
- Russell, J. (2011) "Kadyrov's Chechnya—Template, Test or Trouble for Russia's Regional Policy?," *Europe-Asia Studies* 63(3): 509–28.
- Sakwa, R. (2015) "Questioning Control and Contestation in Late Putinite Russia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 67(2): 192–208.
- Snyder, J. (2000) *From Voting to Violence. Democratization and Nationalist Conflict*. New York and London: W.W. Norton
- Tsygankov, A. (2016) *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*, 4th ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Tsygankov, A. (2014) *The Strong State in Russia: Development and Crisis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.