

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Eastern Europe & Russian Federation > Russia > **The media still misrepresents Russia's North Caucasus. Here's how to stop**

The media still misrepresents Russia's North Caucasus. Here's how to stop

Wednesday 16 June 2021, by [KOSTERINA Irina](#) (Date first published: 29 April 2021).

Documenting this multifaceted region and its complex communities takes patience and the willingness to remove a colonial lens

When I was growing up in the 1980s, films about American Indians were very popular in the Soviet Union. A favourite was the East German film 'Chingachgook', set in 18th century America and starring the Yugoslav actor Gojko Mitić. We were sure that he was a real Indian - brave and noble, speaking a 'primitive' language, incredibly exotic in his feathers.

When I began working for the Heinrich Böll Foundation in the Russian North Caucasus ten years ago, I was naive in my understanding of the region. As part of my role I organised educational events on women and peace-building with local NGOs, and I epitomised the familiar "colonising missionary in a cork helmet" who wants to immediately free the woman of the East and change her life for the better with feminism.

As I listened to people's stories, I would focus on their incredible traditions and customs, asking in detail about tales of 'honour killings' and blood feuds. But when we [conducted a study of the lives and views of women and men in four North Caucasus republics](#), I was amazed not only by the differences between them, but also by the differences in society and values within a single republic.

Over the years, I listened more deeply and as my understanding grew, I discovered a completely different North Caucasus. Nowadays I often connect journalists and researchers who are looking for people to interview for their articles and films with residents. But locals invariably turn to me to ask: "Ira, will they make a film about 'Indians'?"

Last month, a popular Russian video blog, Redaktsiya, [released a special report](#) about violence against women in the North Caucasus. Its very title was intriguing: 'Who is challenging the rules of the most closed region of Russia?'

The film provoked a lot of comments, controversy and criticism - not only from the audience, but also from people in the film themselves, who, as it turned out, thought they were taking part in a film about "safety in the North Caucasus", but ended up in one about violence against women.

As the [the Caucasian Knot media reported](#), two musicians from Kabardino-Balkaria who starred in the film, Beka Kurdanov and Darina Taova, did not know that it would be devoted to women's rights in the North Caucasus, "and now they find their image inappropriate in it".

One expert from an Ingush NGO, who participated in the film anonymously, also expressed her frustration with the final cut - she thought she was going to be in a film about "safety". A Caucasus-based [YouTube channel](#), Zoom, later [released a longer analysis](#) of the film's problems.

Contrary to how it may seem, it is possible to create meaningful and in depth media coverage of the North Caucasus without misrepresenting its residents, if you take the time to learn a little about the region.

Three typical mistakes

One of the common misconceptions for journalists and researchers who come to the North Caucasus is the idea of it as a single region, with common problems, culture and religion. However, a glance at a map clearly shows that the region consists of separate republics. Each one of these is home to extremely different groups in terms of ethnicity and culture.

It is generally accepted, at least, to distinguish between the western and eastern North Caucasus, but even this distinction turns out to be too wide in practice: in multinational Dagestan alone, different peoples communicate in Russian, because they do not understand each other's native languages. Adygea is as different from Chechnya in terms of culture and society as Siberia is from Russia's Black Sea coast. It's important to understand the region's multifaceted nature and to be aware of the cultural characteristics of each republic and people.

The second delusion is that the visitor's eye picks out the most "exotic" aspects of a several violent practices: 'honour killings', blood feuds and now also female circumcision in Dagestan. According to the norms of international and Russian law, these practices are considered illegal but of course they exist in reality. However, the real number of cases of this seemingly exotic violence appears minor compared with statistics regarding [other brutal crimes and killings](#) that occur in the region.

Indeed, from locals' point of view, the structure of violence in the region looks quite different: its source is often law enforcement agencies (consisting not only of local, but often of ethnically Russian employees).

"In an effort to maintain the image of Chechnya, local news often resembles the best propaganda of Soviet television and is expressed by the sarcastic local phrase "only good news from Chechnya""

Considering the nature and scale of the violence, the logic of local residents begins to look like this: "Your Russian policemen grab and torture hundreds of our Salafis but you reproach us over one or two cases of honour killings, portraying us as savages as a result."

For example, before a [2016 investigation by the Justice Initiative NGO](#), few people in Dagestan had heard of female circumcision. The publicity around this scandal [caused surprise and even distrust](#), and seemed to locals like a deliberate attempt to "blacken Dagestan's name".

The third misconception is the emphasis on the otherness of the North Caucasus in comparison with other regions of the Russian Federation. For example, Redaktsiya's film was preceded by the following preamble: "The North Caucasus is one of the most closed regions in Russia. It is very difficult to see its real life if you are not local. It is even more difficult to talk about real problems if you are local. Especially if you are a woman."

These kinds of statements about a "closed Caucasus" appear inaccurate when compared with other parts of Russia. Is Redaktsiya unaware of the [several dozen "closed cities" across Russia](#)? Perhaps the filmmakers are referring to the complexity of filming in Chechnya, where you need to obtain a special permit to avoid clashes with people in uniform.

Chechnya really does have a special status, since the national government has de facto endowed the head of the republic with broad powers to govern the region. In an effort to maintain the image of

Chechnya, local news often resembles the best propaganda of Soviet television and is expressed by the sarcastic local phrase “only good news from Chechnya”. This is also associated with the difficulties of encouraging local women to speak on camera – conversations about violence, of course, go against this tradition.

Confusing myths

At the same time, when analysing modern Chechen society, it is necessary to remember both the history of the colonisation of the Caucasus by the Russian Empire, and the history of the very recent war, when, right before the eyes of a very young generation, Russian troops killed civilians en masse. This is why locals’ attitudes to criticism of Chechen culture by those in Russia can be mistrustful.

In part, misconceptions are the result of a willingness to accept myths at face value – and here conversations with locals can be confusing at first. In the Caucasus, local traditions and rituals are highly respected, as a source of pride. But at the same time, modernity often irresistibly changes the lives of people, and so these seemingly proud traditions often aren’t upheld any more.

In an effort to keep this thread intact, residents frequently tell visitors about the peculiarities of the culture with great pride, embellishing and mythologising this image. Therefore, stories about how “we do things here” may not tie in at all with reality – for example, specific rules about a rigid hierarchy of elders over juniors and gender-segregated spaces in the house and on the street are very difficult to follow in modern life.

It’s important to take a look at the specific question raised by the Redaktsiya film: what does the assumption about the “otherness of the region” mean in relation to women? Is there more violence? Does it have a special characteristic? Do women have fewer rights and opportunities here? Do they find it harder to protect themselves from violence and ask for support?

Unfortunately, in order to answer all these questions and understand whether the North Caucasus is an outlier when it comes to violence, it would be necessary to conduct a national study of violence against women and compare the results by region. But as the [author of the largest gender study in the region](#) over the past five years and someone who regularly communicates with dozens of local NGOs and activists who work in domestic violence, I will risk sharing my thoughts based on qualitative rather than quantitative data.

“Visiting journalists exoticise the North Caucasus, and residents perceive any story about the region’s “unusual problems” as a colonial, hierarchical slur”

The first thing that needs to be emphasised is that there’s nothing different about violence in the North Caucasus compared with other areas. However, there are cultural differences that are often used to commit and legitimise violence.

Describing the system of law and social relations in the region, many researchers talk about “legal pluralism” or the so-called “[legal triangle](#)”, which consists of: local traditions and customs (customary law); religious ethics; and Russian legislation. In Chechnya, this triangle forms a very different shape, the most significant part of which is the phrase “Ramzan said”. This refers to any written or oral statements of Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the republic, which acquire the status of a law or an insistent wish.

There is legal pluralism (the presence of several regulatory systems) in action here, but in the case of women’s rights, there’s another important concept. In terms of social anthropology, the Caucasus is similar to other parts of the world such as the Middle East, the southern United States, some

Mediterranean regions and certain urban areas controlled by gangs in that there is a so-called 'honour culture'.

Honour cultures are societies in which a person (usually a man) feels obligated to protect his reputation and, in response to insults and threats, can often use violence (including murder). The emphasis in honour cultures is on morality related to gender and group life. At the same time, different cultures have different ideas about where exactly "honour" lies: some communities overly value female chastity, while others focus on rules around male interaction. Some have strict standards of hospitality and courtesy towards strangers, while others actively encourage aggression against them.

Fear of shame

However, all honour cultures share the centrality attached to insults and threats and the need to respond to them with violence or the threat of violence. In this regard, the North Caucasian communities are close to the Middle East, where female chastity is an important part of the local "honour", and men are ordered to protect it. Hence the notorious practices of revenge and 'honour killings', when a reputation can only be restored by shedding the blood of the offender.

Turning to legal systems or in this case, Russia's national laws, in these cultures is less encouraged than trying to get justice with your own hands. Collective reputation is also inherently important when a man feels responsible for his family, or even the whole clan. In modern times, this sense of collective responsibility sometimes extends to the idea of an entire ethnic group or even a republic.

That is why any unfavourable stories about the behaviour of people from the North Caucasus that penetrate the media are perceived as a generalisation - since one Avar has done something bad, then the whole of Dagestan is perceived badly.

Since the sanction for loss of honour is shame, honour cultures have a particular sensitivity to insult, disrespect, and even unintentional neglect. Unni Wikan, in her 2008 book, ['In Honour of Fadime'](#), wrote: "People who value 'honour' are not only motivated to attain and retain 'honour' but also concerned with avoiding shame."

This is where the main conflict begins: visiting journalists exoticise the North Caucasus, and residents perceive any story about the region's "unusual problems" as a colonial, hierarchical slur in the spirit of "look at these wild mountaineers, how stupid/ridiculous/brutal they are behaving" - that is, shame.

This is why Chechen viewers were particularly indignant at Redaktsiya's film: the main Chechen character left (and therefore was no longer "one of us"), calling her homeland "the planet of the apes".

There is another problem with the Redaktsiya film: North Caucasian viewers did not see the women featured as people they could identify with their region.

Listen more, talk less

Rather, the principal characters were people whom locals consider atypical, if not marginal: a blonde woman from Dagestan with short hair and piercings, a young man with a mohawk, and finally a Chechen heroine in a white wig, whom many viewers identified as ethnically Russian.

For a film billed as a 'special report', this choice of characters seems odd. The authors of the film decided what problems women have in the Caucasus and now to present their vision to us.

In discussing the film, local viewers often raised an important question: why do Russian journalists always focus exclusively on the need to “liberate the women of the East” from the hijab and traditional values, but it never occurs to anyone to film the struggle of Muslim girls for the right to wear the hijab, despite the fact that conflicts between young religious women and their more secular parents are quite common.

This question concerns not only the Redaktsiya film, but also a 2020 [film](#) by the Russian independent TV channel, Dozhd. This film, titled ‘Those who took off their hijab: stories of girls from Dagestan who escaped from conservative families’ features a woman, Nina, who also appears in the Redaktsiya film and, indeed, [other articles](#) published in the Russian media in recent months.

From my field experience, I can say with confidence that Muslim women from Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan will criticise a single unifying approach to the situation of local women – it appears colonial, Western-centric and often Islamophobic.

Allowing for inclusive participation of vulnerable groups, taking the approach of “Nothing about us without us” would help to avoid these mistakes. If Moscow journalists engaged more actively with local consultants and included them in their crew, then there would be less coverage of “Indians”.

If they responded to the requests and ideas of Caucasus residents about what worries them and what problems they see in the lives of women, perhaps we would see new films about poor quality healthcare, corruption and unemployment, housework and difficulties with kindergartens – and other non-exotic topics.

Residents of the North Caucasus have long mastered their external roles, and often approach visiting listeners with memorised speeches about local customs, traditions and the high role of women in society. To get to the truth, researchers and journalists need a little more patience – as well as a greater willingness to leave their colonial hats at home.

Irina Kosterina

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Open Democracy

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/how-not-to-do-colonial-journalism-north-caucasus/>