

**Reconciliation in Conflict-Affected Societies:
Multilevel Modeling of Individual and Contextual Factors in the North Caucasus of Russia**

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, there has been a growing interest in reconciliation in societies emerging from conflict. The North Caucasus region of Russia has experienced multiple and diverse conflicts since the collapse of the Soviet Union, though violence is now at its lowest level over the past decade. We examine willingness to forgive members of other ethnic groups for violence that they have perpetuated as an indicator of the potential for reconciliation in the region. Using the data from a large representative survey that we conducted in five ethnic republics in the North Caucasus in December 2005, we analyze responses to the forgiveness dependent variable in relation to social-psychological models of reconciliation and we add a key geographic measure, distance to violent events, to the usual theories. Using the survey data (n=2000) and aggregate data for the 82 sampling points, we use a multi-level modeling approach to separate out the effects of individual and contextual factors. We find little support for the Social Identity Theory expectations as ethnic hostility is not an important factor, except for the Ossetians, a mostly-Orthodox minority disproportionately affected by multiple conflicts and the Beslan school killings. Instead, personal experiences of violence and terrorism, the impacts of military actions against communities, differences in general trust of others, and the extent to which the respondent's life has been changed by violence negatively influence the willingness to forgive. Conversely, respondents in ethnic Russian communities and those relatively close to violence are more willing to engage in post-conflict reconciliation.

Key Words: post war reconciliation, North Caucasus, contextual effects, multi-level modeling

Restoring peace in post-conflict and conflict-affected societies is a complex process. The warring parties need to lay down their weapons, agree on an institutional division of power and resources, and begin the material reconstruction of properties and infrastructure damaged during the fighting—with or without the help of the international community (e.g. Roeder and Rothchild 2005; Collier 2006). Our study focuses on an equally important element of post-war reconstruction, conflict reconciliation that concerns the emotional and cognitive processes that help former adversaries to live together in peace. We investigate why some individuals in conflict-affected societies are more inclined to forgive the perpetrators of violence than others. We do so by examining individual and district-level indicators likely to affect reconciliation in the North Caucasus region of Russia, employing survey, census, and violence data. Since the end of the Cold War, the North Caucasus region of Russia has been the scene of different types of violent conflict—inter-ethnic, religiously-motivated, and separatist struggles. Based on a large public opinion survey carried out in December 2005 and original data that pinpoints the locations of violent incidents between 1999 and 2005, this is the first study that systematically examines inter-group forgiveness in the region. Unlike previous works of this genre, we specifically examine whether there is a “geography” to reconciliation, beyond that explained by variations in the characteristics of the people in conflict zones. Does it matter in which community one lives in understanding the ability to forgive? Does the community’s relative level of violence produce a climate of forgiveness or of blame and accusation?

Conflict in the North Caucasus

Our study region in the North Caucasus is an ethnically-diverse area of the Russian Federation, consisting of six republics (Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, North Ossetia) and the large Russian-dominated territory of Stavropol’ (see Figure 1). The most destructive conflict has taken place in Chechnya, where civil war broke out in 1994 when Moscow responded to Chechen separatist demands with military force. In 1992, North Ossetia was the scene of a violent inter-

ethnic conflict, when informal militias representing the Ingush population concentrated in the region's Prigorodnyy *rayon* clashed with North Ossetian militias, both sides laying claim to the territory. The violent phase of the conflict, though short-lived, resulted in a large outflow of Ingush settlers from North Ossetia. While unresolved and still a very sensitive matter (O'Loughlin et al. 2008), this conflict has not resulted in large-scale violence since November 1992.

By 1999 the Chechen conflict began to spill over into the neighboring regions, in particular Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria, each of which also faces its own internal domestic conflict(s). While fighting in Chechnya has diminished since 2002 as the rebellion has been quashed by Chechnya's new pro-Moscow president Ramzan Kadyrov, violence is increasing in other parts of the North Caucasus. By one estimate, at least 17 insurgent organizations of varying sizes (50-2000 members) were active in the Northern Caucasus in 2005 (Lyll 2006). Readily-available weapons, unemployment, radical Islamist forces, and religious discrimination are contributing factors to the violence (Matsuzato and Ibragimov 2005). Overall, the North Caucasus has been characterized by violence directed at Russian military targets, local police, and government officials rather than civilians (Lyll 2006; O'Loughlin 2008), although there has been a considerable number of kidnapping of civilians, both at the hands of the Russian security forces and the militias under the control of local leaders. Perhaps the most well-known of these attacks was the tragic Beslan (North Ossetia) school hostage crisis of September 2004. Estimates of the total killed in the various inter-meshed North Caucasian conflicts over the past 15 years range from 75,000 to 100,000.

Reconciliation after Conflict

Conflict reconciliation is distinct from conflict settlement and resolution. Central to reconciliation is the removal of the negation of "the other" in people's identities (Kelman 2008, 24-27). As such, reconciliation goes beyond conflict settlement, which concerns the interests at stake in a conflict, and conflict resolution, which concerns pragmatic changes in the relationship between former adversaries. Reconciliation is about internalizing and integrating the changed relationships into one's identity. More

generally, social psychologists define inter-group reconciliation as “a process that leads to a stable end to conflict and is predicated on changes in the nature of adversarial relations between the adversaries and each of the parties’ conflict-related needs, emotions, and cognitions” (Nadler et al. 2008, 4). While reaching and implementing a settlement are critical for lasting peace in conflict-affected societies, such formal steps may not be sufficient in the absence of empathy, trust, understanding and forgiveness among the former adversaries. Indeed, truth and reconciliation commissions in South Africa and elsewhere begin by hearing personal testimonies and applications for amnesty in societies characterized by a violent past through reconciliation and “truth telling” (e.g. Gibson and Gouw 1999; Ross 2004).

A critical step towards reconciliation is inter-group forgiveness, which is not about forgetting the past, but about trying to come to terms with the past and creating a shared vision of the future by learning new aspects about oneself and one’s own group and exploring the world from other group’s points of view (Noor et al. 2008, 101). Forgiveness can help prevent collective memories of violent events feeding into a recurring cycle of violence. While forgiveness is often thought about in terms of inter-personal relationships, in societies where members of different ethnic groups have fought one another, a growing body of research in social psychology suggests that forgiveness is conceptualized as a group concern (Hewstone et al. 2008). We assess inter-group forgiveness based on a question asked of respondents in the North Caucasus in December 2005 that (indirectly) probed whether they could forgive people of other nationalities for the violence they have committed in the post-Soviet years .

Social Psychology and Inter-Group Forgiveness

Several of the empirical findings on inter-group forgiveness are based on studies of Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland. There, researchers have found that identity with one’s own group (in-group identity), trust in members of other ethnic groups (out-group trust), and contact with members from other ethnic communities (the contact hypothesis) are key determinants for inter-group forgiveness (Hewstone et al. 2006; Noor et al. 2008). These studies draw on social identity theory, which views identity as central to both conflict emergence and reconciliation. Social identity theory assumes that

people have both personal and social identities, and social identity comes from group membership. Because people seek a positive social identity, they compare their own group (the in-group) with relevant other groups (out-groups). In experiments, people tend to behaviorally favor their own group, the in-group, even if they are randomly assigned to a group with no substantive bonds holding the group members together. Indeed, even when people are assigned to groups based on some arbitrary and minimal criteria, they will favor members of their own group if, for example, they are to allocate rewards to different individuals (the minimal-group paradigm) (for overviews, see Brown 2000; Hewstone and Greenland 2000). The implications are that conflicts can arise out of inter-group relations where there are no apparent material conflicts of interest.

Two hypotheses for our study are suggested by social identity theory. First, individuals who express strong pride in their ethnic group (in-group) may be less likely to forgive perpetrators of violence from other ethnic groups (out-groups) than those who express less pride in their in-group. In our analysis, we include a survey question that asks the respondents the following: “To what extent do you feel proud to be a member of your national group?” The answers, given on a 1-5 scale, range from “very proud” (1) to “not proud at all” (5). Second, individuals who express low levels of inter-ethnic trust may be less likely to forgive perpetrators of violence from other ethnic groups than those who are more trusting of outsiders. To consider this hypothesis, we include a survey question that measures individuals’ trust in their own ethnic group—and by implication, their trust in other groups. The respondents were asked whether they agreed with the following statement: “It’s possible to trust only people of my nationality”, using a 1-5 scale, from “strongly agree” (1) to “strongly disagree” (5).

Horowitz (1985) explained ethnic conflicts as non-instrumental competition. He pointed out that because ethnicity cannot easily be changed, inter-group comparisons between ethnic groups become even more salient than when groups are randomly assembled. Focusing on the difference between dominant and subordinate groups, Horowitz found that economically-poorer groups are most often the initiators in ethnic conflicts because they perceive that they are less-developed or inferior to more advanced groups. As such, it is plausible that individuals who are poorer or who have experienced ethnic discrimination are

less likely to forgive perpetrators of violence from other ethnic groups than individuals who have not experienced ethnic discrimination. To account for such a possibility, we include a survey question that asks the respondents the following: “Have you been discriminated against because of your ethnicity or religion?” The answers, given on a 1-4 scale, ranged from “yes, often” (1) to “never” (4).

More generally, inclusion, empathy, and respect for others are factors that both constitute and further foster conflict reconciliation (Kelman 2008, 27). For our analysis, we include a question that asks the respondents whether: “Generally speaking, can most people be trusted, or do you need to be careful?” Our expectation is that individuals who are generally trusting of others are more likely than untrusting individuals to forgive perpetrators of violence.

Experiences of Violence

We hypothesize that an important determinant of forgiveness is the respondents’ experiences of violence since research on post-conflict societies often assumes that violent conflict damages inter-personal trust (e.g. Posner 2004; Widner 2004). Yet not all individuals living in a conflict-affected society personally experiences violence. We would expect that someone who lives in an area that has been the target of frequent attacks is less likely to forgive perpetrators of violence than a person without such experiences. To assess this hypothesis, we include two individual-level indicators and one district-level indicator for experiences of violence. First, we include a question (with a binary response) that asks whether the respondents’ lives have significantly changed due to violence and danger in the North Caucasus. Our assumption is that changes caused by violence are likely to make individuals less forgiving. We also include a question that asks whether the respondents’ community was targeted by military operations or police actions in the conflicts in the North Caucasus (binary response), expecting that those living in communities targeted in such actions would be less forgiving.

In addition to examining the effect of individual—and, thus, subjective—experiences of violence, we also assess whether survey respondents residing in violence-ridden areas were less likely to forgive perpetrators of violence than respondents living in more peaceful areas. Based on original data

(O’Loughlin, 2008), we aggregate violent events for 82 sampling points across the North Caucasus region and thus create an indicator that counts the number of violent incidents between 1999 (the start of the second Chechen conflict) and 2005 (the time of the survey) within a 50 kilometer radius of each survey respondent. Our expectation is that respondents residing in areas characterized by violent incidents are less likely to forgive perpetrators of violence.¹

Socio-Economic Status and Ethnic Composition

As control variables, we include each individual’s self-reported material status, based on a question that assesses the degree to which they can purchase the things they need and want. The expectation is that economic hardship may cause more negative assessments of others, which can affect individuals’ ability or willingness to forgive perpetrators of violence. We also include an indicator for the share of Russians in the sample districts. There has been a significant re-distribution of Russians in the North Caucasus since the conflicts began in the early 1990s with big drops in the Russian proportions in the ethnic republics (especially Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia) and a growth in Stavropol’ due to flight from conflicts elsewhere (Belozerov 2005). We thus expect less forgiveness in communities with a high Russian ratio. Finally, we include a predictor of whether the respondent was Ossetian. A small, mostly Orthodox population in a predominantly Muslim region, Ossetians have traditionally been allied to Moscow and have fought three recent wars with their Ingush and Georgian neighbors over territory. The horrific violence at the Beslan school occurred just over a year before our survey and caused an enormous shock to locals. We expect that the nature of this terror, which killed about 330, including over 180 children, will foster low levels of forgiveness among the Ossetians.

Contextual Effects in Post-War Reconciliation

It is now widely acknowledged by geographers that “places matter”, that is, that individual-level predictors do not fully account for variation in political and social behavior between communities. Long a debating point between political geographers and political sciences (e.g. Agnew 1996; King 1996;

O'Loughlin 2000), recent methodological advances have allowed geographers to clarify the relative importance of contextual effects and to point to the limitations of place-free approaches in the behavioral sciences. Work in electoral geography especially has indicated the significant influence of community interactions (titled the "friend and neighbors" effect) on voters' choices (Johnston et al. 2004). A growing recognition of the value of multilevel modeling approaches for separating out the individual (first-level) and community (second-level) effects has generated dozens of studies that indicate modest (5 to 15 percent) but important contributions of contextual effects (Jones and Duncan 1996). Given the variability in the local geographies of civil wars (Kalyvas 2006), our expectation is that the reconciliation process is also geographically-variable and related to violence experiences. A multilevel approach allows us to measure the social-psychological effects on the individual reviewed above *and* the geographic effects of community exposure to violence.

Data, Methods, and Results

We assess inter-group forgiveness based on the responses of 2000 individuals in four North Caucasus republics (North Ossetia, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachaevo-Cherkessia) and one territory (Stavropol') to the question, "There are people who are convinced that they could never forgive people of other nationalities for the violence they have committed in the last 15 years. Are you among those people?" The sensitive nature of this question required an indirect wording, a tactic that was confirmed in the pilot testing of the survey instrument. Due to missing data, 78 responses were dropped from the analysis. Because of the dangers involved in door-step interviewing in the most violent republics, Ingushetia and Chechnya had to be excluded from the analysis. The survey was distributed in proportion to population and ethnicity in the sample regions and is the most comprehensive carried out to date. A geographically-stratified sampling strategy captured the locational variation within the republics--urban-rural, mixed and homogenous communities, mountains-piedmont-plains location, and material well-being. There are 82 sample points, ranging from large cities (e.g. Stavropol', Mineralnyy Vody,

Makhachkala, Vladikavkaz) to isolated rural settlements (see Figure 1). Details on the survey are available in Bakke et al. (2009).

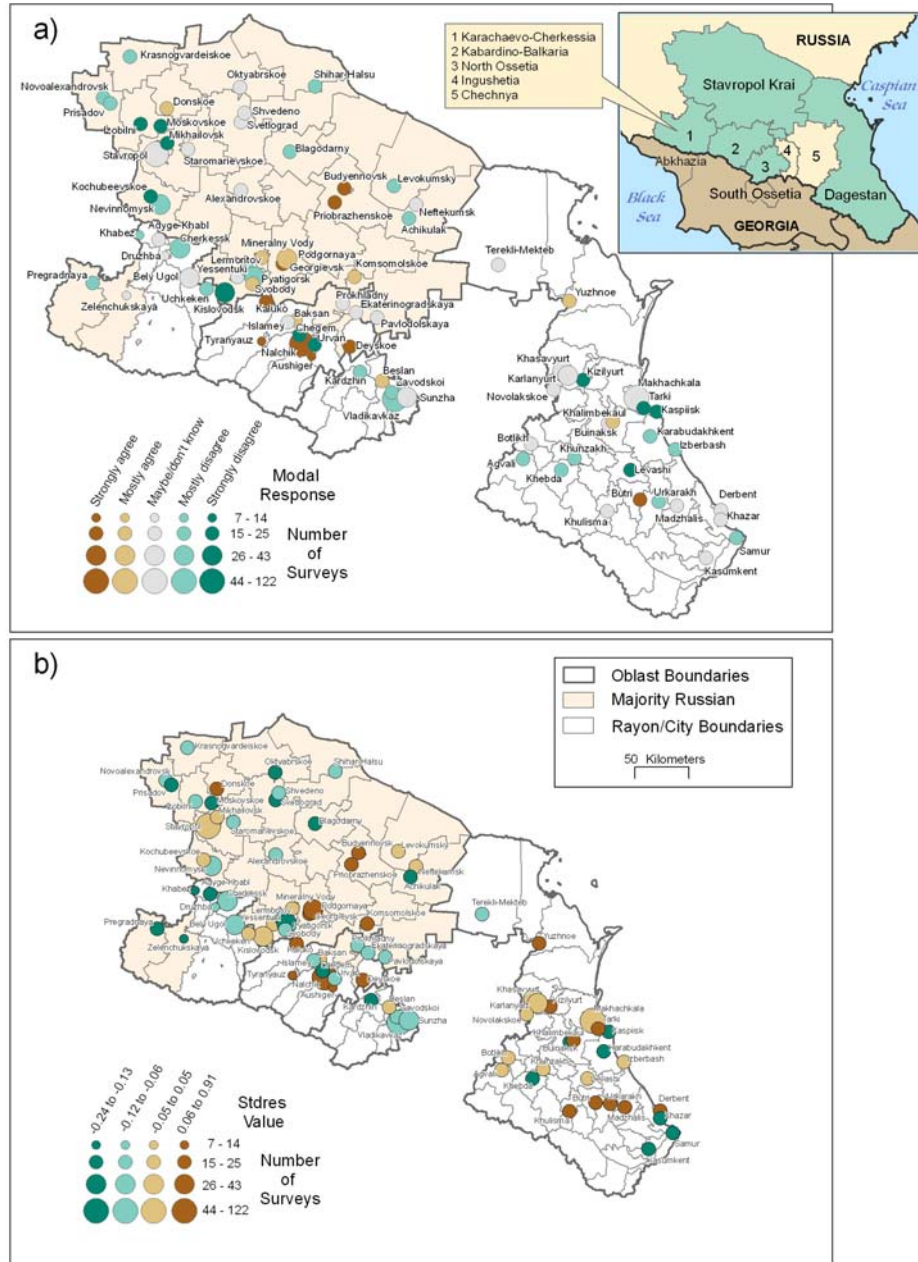


Figure 1: Modal responses to the forgiveness question (a) and standardized residuals from the GLLAMM model (b) with locational inset of the North Caucasus region.

The dependent variable, forgiveness, is an ordered, categorical variable, and the 1922 responses are ordered from “definitely no” (n=312), “mostly disagree” (n=527), “maybe” (n=536), “mostly agree” (n=328), to “definitely yes” (n=219). The map of the distribution of modal responses in Figure 1a shows both dramatic variation across the region and sizeable differences within each republic. “Strongly agree” and “mostly agree” (with the proposition) indicate a reluctance to forgive others for the violence they committed. These views characterize samples in or near places that experienced significant hostage-taking and consequent loss of life (Budyennovsk-Priobrazenskoye in 1995 and Beslan in 2004) or large-scale attacks and massive loss of life (Sunzha in 1992, Yessentuki-Mineralnyy Vody in 2003, and Nal’chik-Ausiger in 2005). Communities furthest from the zones of greatest violence, in northern Stavropol’, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, and most of Dagestan, have the highest levels of propensity to forgive.

The model’s independent predictors are personal attributes and self-reported attitudes of respondents *as well as* characteristics of each of the eighty-two *rayoni* (counties) in which the sampling points are located. Key contextual variables are the Russian proportion of the population in each *rayon* (from the 2002 Russian census) and the number of violent events that have occurred within 50 kilometers of the sampling point. This combination of individual and district-level data results in a statistical model that is somewhat unusual. We use a multilevel, ordered probit specification to capture the individual and aggregate variable elements of our model. Multilevel models are now common in the social sciences, and so are ordered probit specifications. However, only a few examples of a multilevel, ordered probits have been developed, mostly in the context of fitting conditional models across diverse societies (King and Wand 2007)

To represent the observed categorical variable, we define a latent response variable (Y_{id}) for the i^{th} individual in the d^{th} district such that the range of the latent variable is divided into $k + 1$ categories that correspond to the observed data by estimated parameters τ_k . The latent model for forgiveness is

$$y_{i,d} = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{(definitely no)} & \iff & -\infty < y_{i,d}^* < \tau_1 \\ 2 & \text{(mostly disagree)} & \iff & \tau_1 < y_{i,d}^* < \tau_2 \\ 3 & \text{(maybe)} & \iff & \tau_2 < y_{i,d}^* < \tau_3 \\ 4 & \text{(mostly agree)} & \iff & \tau_3 < y_{i,d}^* < \tau_4 \\ 5 & \text{(definitely yes)} & \iff & \tau_4 < y_{i,d}^* < \infty \end{cases}$$

This latent model has no analytical solution and is tackled by a normal quadrature approach (Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal 2008), available via the GLLAMM package in STATA, used to produce the estimates.

We specify our ordered probit model of forgiveness as significantly related to Ossetian ethnic membership, level of targeting of the community by the Russian military, level of ethnic pride, the scale of changes in the respondents' life due to violence, the respondents' level of general trust, and to two aggregate measures, share of Russians in local population and incidents of violence within 50kms of the respondents' homes. We checked other possible socio-demographic controls (gender, occupation, age, etc.) but do not include them since they are insignificant. More importantly, four factors that we expected to be related to forgiveness from the social psychology of reconciliation literature cited above--perception of discrimination, material wealth status, pride in the respondent's own ethnic group, and trust in other ethnicities--are not statistically significant when considered in the same ordered probit regression as the significant relationships reported in Table 1; thus, they are dropped from the model. We retain the pride measure (a binary variable separating those who express strong pride or pride in their ethnic group) because of its central importance in the social-psychological theories of reconciliation.

In the null multilevel model (with no predictors), the level 1 (respondents) variance accounts for 71.3 percent and the level 2 (sample points) is 28.7 percent of the total variance. However, after the ordered probit model is fitted, the map of the standardized residuals for the 82 survey points (Figure 1b) shows no evident spatial or contextual patterning, nor any correlation with the original dependent variable values. Only in Dagestan is there any evident clustering of residuals but the overall range is small. The sample level variances for the survey points in the model, however, are significant at .470 with a standard error of .076.

Table 1: Multilevel Ordered Probit Model Estimates of Forgiveness– GLLAMM Estimates for the North Caucasus sample

Predictor	Coefficient	Standard error	Z-score (Probability)
Ossetian	.3235	.121	2.69 (.007)
Military Target	.3651	.093	3.92 (.000)
Pride in Ethnic Group	.0708	.061	1.18 (.239)
Changed Life	.2848	.054	5.31 (.000)
General Trust	.1676	.067	2.51 (.012)
Russian Share of Pop.	-.0004	.001	-2.86 (.004)
Violence within 50 kms	-.0002	.0001	-3.56 (.000)
τ_1	-1.147	.108	-10.64 (.000)
τ_2	-.225	.107	-2.11 (.035)
τ_3	.623	.106	5.87 (.000)
τ_4	1.425	.109	13.08 (.000)

Number of respondents (level 1 units) 1922 Number of level 2 units (survey points) 82

Log likelihood -2785.83

In examining the relationships, as expected, Ossetians are less likely to forgive than other ethnicities, an outcome of the involvement of this community in an unresolved territorial conflict with the Ingush and the attack on the Beslan school a year before the survey. People perceiving that they live in communities that have experienced disproportionate attacks from the Russian military and allied paramilitary forces are also less willing to forgive perpetrators of violence. While the ethnic pride predictor shows a coefficient in the expected (positive) direction, the relationship is not significant. Respondents who feel that their lives have been significantly changed by violence in the region are also less likely to forgive than those who have not experienced such violence-induced life changes. Persons who are more cautious (“you cannot be too careful”) are less likely to forgive than respondents with a higher level of general trust (“most people can be trusted”). Both of our aggregate indicators are negatively related to the dependent variable, indicating a higher level of forgiveness. The value for the Russian share of the population is undoubtedly related to the geographic distribution of this ethnicity to the north and west of the North Caucasus, and thus farther from the locales of highest violence. The only unexpected result was for the measure of exposure to violence; people living in communities with more violent incidences within 50kms are more likely to forgive than those in more peaceful locales.

To illustrate the results graphically in Figure 2, we present the predicted value of the latent representation of forgiveness (minus any random effects) in two different scenarios. The blue line shows the density of predictions for all 1922 respondents for the model. The brown line portrays a similar calculation, except that we removed a key contextual variable, the share of the Russian population in the model. The comparison of these two distributions illustrates clearly that inclusion of this variable changes the model predictions, increasing substantially the number of predictions of higher levels of forgiveness. This figure shows that ignoring the multi-level context yields results that are far too optimistic about forgiveness, while underestimating the number of respondents who self-report lower levels of forgiveness.

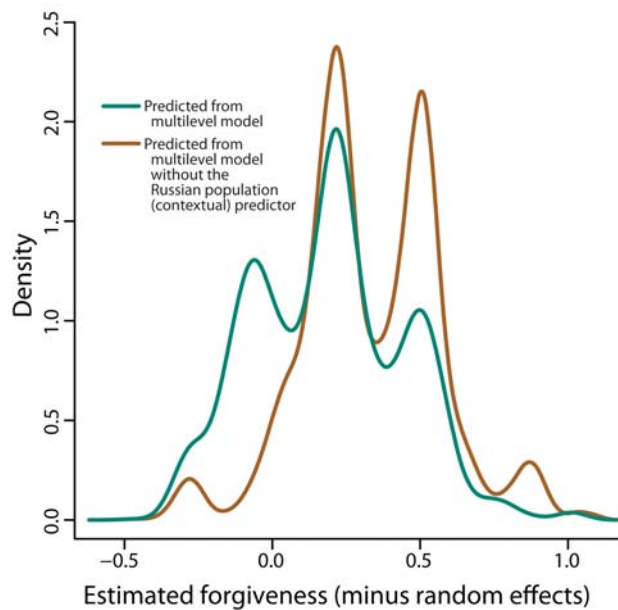


Figure 2: Effect of the removal of contextual variable (Russian percentage) from the model of forgiveness

Our results do not strongly support the theoretical propositions of the social-psychological theories of reconciliation after extended violence, but they are in line with other studies of inter-ethnic attitudes in former Communist states. Whitt and Wilson (2007), in an experimental game in Bosnia with different ethnicities, find that though there is a preference for the in-group, the bias against the out-groups (other ethnicities) is less than expected; they conclude that this higher norm of fairness bodes well for

reconciliation. For the former Soviet Union, Hale (2008) showed that the cognitive process of using ethnicity as an “uncertainty-reducing” process is associated with peaceful and cooperative ethnic relations in some regions but activated in movements for secession and conflict in others. With the exception of the Ossetians, whose experiences of violence are unique in the region, we did not find that ethnic group membership, nor other socio-demographic categories, helped us understand people’s willingness to forgive others for violence. Instead, like the study of long-term trauma among Bosnians exposed to violence by Ringdal et al. (2008), we find that those more directly affected by violence in their daily lives--those who consider themselves targeted and who feel forced to adapt to changed circumstances due to violence--experienced the most significant long-term effects. In our case, those with personal experiences of violence have a lower propensity to forgive those who have perpetrated it. In the most extreme example of war trauma’s effects, a study of 34 suicide terrorists in Chechnya (based on interviews with the terrorists’ family members, friends, and hostages), Akhmedova and Speckhard (2006) found that the terrorists’ own experiences of years of violence led to personal trauma and a wish to revenge the deaths of relatives or friends.

Conclusions

The study of inter-group reconciliation and forgiveness is a relatively new research agenda. Our aim in this study is not to develop a theory of inter-group forgiveness. Rather, building on the existing literature, our study empirically examines inter-group forgiveness in a society that has been the scene of several inter-group conflicts. The current situation in the North Caucasus is *not yet* a post-war one where on truth and reconciliation through national or international commissions can be promoted. Instead, multiple conflicts drag on in many localities, with occasional outbursts of dramatic violence, and their geographies shift from year to year. While the fighting in Chechnya, between federal forces and their local allies on one side and separatist rebels on the other has weakened in the past few years, low-level violence continues to diffuse to more communities outside Chechnya. The impact of this spread on communities

new to the conflicts will result in more forced adjustments by people previously (barely) unaffected This diffusion is also expected to postpone the possibility of reconciliation in the region.

Our study emphasized the importance of the level of personal exposure to violence and its effects on one's daily activities. Moreover, the usual socio-demographic categories are not very helpful in understanding the propensity toward forgiveness, which undermines any easy categorization of certain groups (ethnic, age, gender, socio-economic status) as more willing and able to engage in reconciliation. Since violence in civil wars is both localized and temporally-shifting, our modeling highlights the geography of willingness to forgive across communities, after accounting for its variation due to the socio-demographic composition of residents.

Unlike postwar developments in countries like Northern Ireland, Liberia, South Africa, Rwanda, and Guatemala, reconciliation in the North Caucasus of Russia is a work in progress. The multiple and shifting lines of conflict there, sometimes involving local communities, but usually involving some combination of state authorities and religious, ethnic or regional opponents, makes any assumptions about the permanence of a downturn in violence subject to rapid reversal.

Notes

¹ We use a threshold of 50 kilometers since a plot of violence by 25km distance bands shows a substantial decrease in the occurrence at this distance.

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