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Anatomy of Ambivalence: The International Community and Human Rights Abuse in the North Caucasus

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Abstract

This paper advances explanations for the relative lack of international response to gross human rights abuses in Chechnya. Findings contrast starkly with scholarship that touts the power of human rights and instead highlights a crisis within the international human rights community. Regarding the responses to abuse in the North Caucasus, we find a lethal mix of residual superpower influence, coupled with widespread organizational dysfunction and high tolerance for noncompliance with human rights norms -- precisely within the very organizations that have as their mandate monitoring compliance. Russian and international human rights activists are profoundly discouraged about the international community and their inability to affect change. Despite official rhetoric on the importance of human rights, many government officials and senior members of international organizations betray a superficial knowledge of and an ambivalent relationship to human rights norms and laws. Interviews suggests that inside some policy communities in Europe and the United States, compliance with human rights law and norms is viewed as an overly expensive luxury and, rarely, if ever a necessity. Those who recognize the security implications of abuse and impunity are a minority.