

Social Security in North Ossetia

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The traditional clan structure offers Ossetians an alternative to existing social institutions

The sensational kidnapping of Vladikavkaz businessman Aslan Dzutsev provides a revealing insight into the rebirth of clan values in North Ossetia today.

Days after Dzutsev was abducted from his home - and taken, apparently to Chechnya - his immediate family received a ransom demand for \$330,000. Unable to raise the cash, they turned to the extended Dzutsev clan who, after weeks of frantic fund-raising, managed to muster around \$80,000.

But, just as the Dzutsevs were reaching their wits' end, a local mafia godfather was murdered and, during a police search of his underground cellars, the missing businessman was discovered alive and well.

As a result, the extended Dzutsev family was saved from financial ruin since social etiquette would have demanded that they spend every last kopeck on freeing their relative rather than abandon him to his fate.

Traditional clan loyalties are making a dramatic comeback in modern Ossetian society.

The clan phenomenon dates from the days before the tsarist invasions when the majority of the population lived in secluded mountain valleys and had only limited contact with neighbouring tribes.

Consequently, the extended family circle lay at the heart of everyday life and any clan member could rely on his relatives to rally round in times of adversity. In the Ossetian language, the word for "surname" is the same as the word for "clan".

In the post-Soviet age, the clan structure is once again offering Ossetians an alternative to the existing status quo.

Extended families across the republic have begun to hold "clan festivals" where members gather together and discuss the future of the clan as a whole.

Incidents of clans clubbing together to free kidnapped members have become less frequent in recent times but there are still plenty of advertisements in local newspapers pleading for distant relatives (who may not be personally acquainted) to contribute funds towards live-saving operations.

It is a trend that has caused growing concern amongst the ruling authorities who fear that other ethnic minorities in North Ossetia will be marginalised and the economy dominated by a chosen few. The local Russian population (30% of the total) is particularly vulnerable as it is completely excluded from the clan network.

Bu the revival of clan loyalties has much to do with the lack of social security provided by the authorities themselves. The ancient social institutions have simply started to replace many of the state's functions - especially in an atmosphere of "free competition" where not everyone is free to compete.

The clan offers both employment opportunities and social support. Nepotism dominates most areas of industry - with businessmen simply staffing their enterprises with members of their immediate family.

In the same way, an Ossetian bureaucrat would consider it deeply shameful to impose a fine on a member of his own clan. And, by extension, serious crimes are covered up by relatives of the perpetrators while the local media finds it impossible to penetrate the clan's united front.

Many social observers have questioned whether or not a small nation like North Ossetia can survive on a system of outmoded loyalties.

But supporters of the system argue that the clan is the only effective weapon for fighting problems such as drug abuse, which are wholly new to Ossetian society. The authorities in Vladikavkaz are often helpless to tackle these issues and clan leaders have been instrumental in laying down the law within their own family circle.

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Chechnya

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