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WRESTLER MASCULINITY IN DAGESTAN AS A LOCAL HEGEMONY

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Abstract. *The article presents an analysis of the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity in the local context on the example of masculinity of freestyle wrestlers in the Republic of Dagestan. Based on the materials of semi-structured in-depth biographical interviews with current and former wrestlers, as well as with young Dagestan men who are not involved in wrestling practices, it is concluded that the male subjectivity cultivated in this sport is reproduced as hegemonic in the context of the entire Dagestan society. This occurs due to the following institutional and cultural instruments: the massification of freestyle wrestling, its importance as a talent factory for politics, the alliance of wrestling communities with religious elites, the function of freestyle wrestling as an institution to maintain power and control of the elders over the juniors in the conditions of decay of traditional society.*

Keywords: *hegemonic masculinity • Dagestan • freestyle wrestling • mass sports • power of elders*

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Statement of the research question. Boys in Dagestan begin training in freestyle wrestling schools and classes at the age of 8–10. Some come to the sport under the influence of older brothers and friends from school and the yard; others are led into the sport by fathers. The award-winning champions of prestigious Russian and European competitions admitted that in their childhood they never thought about a wrestling career and were interested in less martial sports – soccer or volleyball – but were nevertheless *forced* to be engaged in wrestling.

In Dagestan, freestyle wrestling is perceived as a privileged institution of male socialization. Other martial arts – Greco-Roman wrestling, hand-to-hand fighting, boxing, unarmed self-defense or judo – can also be regarded as schools of courage, but are greatly inferior to freestyle wrestling in their reach and social prestige. It can be stated that in the context of modern Dagestan society freestyle wrestlers are a reference group that most fully embodies the local ideal of dominant masculinity, which, following Connell [Connell, 2005], we'll call hegemonic masculinity.

The consensus in gender studies [Messner, 1989; 1990; McKay et al., 2000; Connell, 2005; Wellard, 2009] is that institutionalized competitive sport in the context of the widespread decline of manual labor meets two basic needs of patriarchy by promoting dominance over women and

other men. First, it is in sport rather than anywhere else that dominance over women is naturalized and correlated with the social distribution of violence through the repression, construction and exaggeration of gender differences [Messner, 1989]. Second, training and competitions establish hierarchical relationships among men: the most successful receive recognition and authority, while the less capable are phased out in fierce competition [Connell, 2005].

As Connell explains [ibid.], hegemony emerges when there is a match between the cultural ideal and institutional power. This article aims to show how a particular configuration of social practices organized around wrestling classes and involvement in wrestling communities is maintained and reproduced in the context of Dagestan society as the most welcomed and privileged form of male subjectivity.

Hegemonic masculinity as a conceptual framework. It is well known that the term “hegemony” is borrowed by R. Connell from A. Gramsci, who used it to analyze the cultural instruments of legitimizing the domination of the bourgeoisie in capitalist society [Gramsci, 1991]. Without dwelling on the concept of hegemonic masculinity in detail, let us briefly outline its focal points.

Firstly, according to Connell [Connell, 2005], hegemonic masculinity can only be thought of in relations to articulated femininity and non-hegemonic versions of masculinity. The essence of hegemony lies in the legitimization of these relations – subordination, complicity, marginalization. Secondly, hegemonic masculinity cannot be reduced to a set of timeless attributes [ibid.]. Each cultural period exalts one form of masculinity over another. For example, today transnational business masculinity, which is institutionally based on multinational corporatism and the global financial market, dominates on a global scale [Connell, 1998: 3]. Thirdly, following the temporal variability, a logical step in the development of the conceptual framework was the recognition of the significance of the spatial context of gender practices. Hegemony is constructed at the local level, encompassing face-to-face iterations within families, organizations, and immediate communities, at the regional level, in the context of the nation-state, and at the global level, in the context of international politics, business, and media [Connell, Messerschmidt, 2005]. These levels are linked: “Global institutions put pressure on regional and local gender orders; while regional gender orders provide cultural materials adopted or reworked in global arenas and provide models of masculinity that may be important in local gender dynamics” [ibid.: 849].

Data collection and analysis methodology. The empirical material on which the article is based was collected during the case study of wrestling milieu in Makhachkala in March 2020 and June 2021. The case study combined a semi-structured in-depth interview method with non-included observations as well as non-structured conversations. The interlocutors were pupils of children’s and youth sports schools and private classes, their parents and coaches, active and former professional wrestlers, men who continue to practice freestyle wrestling “for themselves”. A total of 45 informants between the age of 12 and 55 were interviewed and talked to. The search was conducted in sports organizations (children’s and youth sports schools, official and non-official wrestling classes), thematic communities of wrestlers in social networks. The researcher’s personal networks, formed during repeated research expeditions to Dagestan in 2015–2017, and recruiting by the “snowball” method were also used.

The interview guide included questions about the life trajectory and various aspects of the informant’s daily life (training, leisure, studies, work, family), as well as a series of questions allowing to reconstruct ideas about ideal masculinity (qualities of real men, acceptable/unacceptable behavior) and the gender order in general (“male” and “female” social positions, distribution of power and responsibility between genders in society, family, labor market). The observation method was used both to verify the information that was obtained in communication with the informants and to grasp the poorly reflected and un verbalized aspects of social reality. Observations were carried out in sports schools and classes, private gyms, and on the city public beach of Makhachkala, which during the summertime turns into a place of mass training.

Ten semi-structured biographical interviews with young men of the age from 17 to 25, collected as part of the “Positive fields of interethnic interaction and youth cultural scenes of Russian cities” project (RSF, Russian Science Foundation) by the Centre for Youth Studies of

the National Research University Higher School of Economics (St. Petersburg) in 2016–2017 in Makhachkala, were used as an additional source. None of the informants was freestyle wrestler; they represent an external assessment of the status of wrestlers in Dagestan society and an outside view of wrestler masculinity (designated in the text – RSF).

The analysis of the data was carried out in the NVivo program, the method of analysis in general terms repeats the analytical logic of grounded theory – from the search for topics and codes of low level abstraction through their organization into categories to the systematic linking of all categories with a central category [Strauss, Corbin, 1997; Strauss, Corbin, 2001].

Mass Sports. The domination of freestyle wrestling in the regional sports landscape was the result of the sport specialization of the Republic that began to form in the 1960s-1970s. Victories of Dagestan wrestlers S. Asiyatilov, A. Aliev, Z. Abdulbekov contributed to the development of freestyle wrestling in the Republic simultaneously as a mass sport and a sport of setting records. During that period and subsequent years, a ramified system of mass training of wrestlers was created, which survived the collapse of the Soviet Union and to this day continues to prepare a large number of athletes who for many decades have been achieving impressive results both in Russia and abroad. Dagestan freestyle wrestling school produced 19 Olympic champions and 49 world champions. Many athletes, due to the high internal competition for a place in the national team, perform under the flags of other countries, while continuing to live and train in Dagestan. In Russia, more than 70% of skilled wrestlers are residents or natives of the North Caucasus, and this figure is even higher among the elite, approaching 100% [Brusov, 2012a]. The status of Dagestan as a homeland of champions is supported by a constant inflow of young people to wrestling classes and schools. In 2010, 29,769 freestyle wrestlers were trained at children's and youth sports schools and specialized children's and youth (sports) schools of the Olympic reserve in the Republic of Dagestan [Brusov, 2012b]. This estimate does not take into account the pupils of numerous classes organized at schools, universities and colleges, as well as numerous private gyms opened by coaches-enthusiasts and often working without official registration. From 2010 to 2019, the number of people enrolled in mass sports in the Republic increased more than sixfold, with growth observed in all age categories and in all sports¹. This is due to large-scale financial and infrastructural investments in the development of physical culture and sports. At the same time, it is known that due to the specialization of the region established back in Soviet times, support and financing of freestyle wrestling as the most promising area of training was a priority, while other areas were financed with whatever funds remain.

Despite the emerging competition from mixed martial arts in recent years, interest in freestyle wrestling remains high, which, in particular, is noted by all coaches: *"Well, at that time there must have been a lot of children in the gym, and now we have a lot for that matter. And now we have a big flow. We have a lot of coaches who are not accepting newbies. And they close the admission, but anyway through their acquaintances, through their friends, people call and ask to take the kids. Because there is a lot of people there. In the morning at 8:15 a.m. many, maybe 120–130 people start training"* (No. 1, 32)².

Mass participation is interesting to us not so much as a quantitative category, but as a certain condition where homosociality, formed around the practice of freestyle wrestling, has a compulsory force far beyond the sporting environment, extending to all male youth in the Republic. Elements of this compulsion we can see, for example, in the fact that the decision to engage in freestyle wrestling is often understood by informants as a Hobson's choice, taking the form of agreement with their gender destiny, which they label with the phrases "what else to do" and "there is nothing else".

¹ Website of the Territorial Body of State Statistics in the Republic of Dagestan. 2021. URL: <https://dagstat.gks.ru/> (accessed on 15.05.2021).

² Hereinafter in brackets is the number and age of the informant.

The field data also shows that the practices, behavioral codes and symbols of freestyle wrestling are closely interwoven into the everyday life of Dagestan teenagers and young men, from wrestling duels at school recesses to the desire to copy the trappings of wrestling physicality: *"At my school, I went to the school number eight, there was a boy who broke his ear on purpose. And, you know, how he got busted, that he broke his ear, not everybody blown his cover that he did it on purpose. Really, who'd break his own ear on purpose and wouldn't say he broke his ear on purpose. He just broke it in a way so that's just LOL"* (No. 2, 23, RSF).

At the expense of the instruments of homosociality working to normalize and exclude the non-normative, the composition of gender practices, which has developed within the sports ideoculture and forms the core of wrestling masculinity, acquires universal significance: *"An informant [the father of one of the trainees] said that a mass stratum of wrestlers has formed in Dagestan society, the wrestling ethos (he said "mob rules") has turned into a generally accepted system of values. Everyone finishes each other's sentences and instantly reads the status of a man. Everyone knows which wrestler is the real champion, and which one was just promoted by powerful sponsors or family"* (observation diary entry, 07.06.2021).

Wrestling and Politics. The high prestige of wrestling masculinity is supported by the fact that in the eyes of many Dagestanis freestyle wrestling is seen as one of the few working means of social mobility: *"[My brother] always made me sit that way, we always had conversations with him, he always talked to me like a psychologist. He told me, look, he said, if you want to achieve something, you have to practice. If you want an apartment, you practice. You want a car, you practice. You want to have a wedding, you want to go up in the world somehow, you practice"* (No. 3, 30 s.).

It's not just about a purely competitive career. Due to the current configuration of relations between sports and authorities in Dagestan, victories on the mat often become a launch pad to a career in politics and power structures [Kolesnik, 2018: 394]. Champion status in Dagestan opens the door to prestigious sectors of employment associated with power and forceful domination: former athletes are elected to deputies, appointed to responsible positions in the state apparatus and regional authorities, invited to work in the police or the FSB (Federal Security Service) [Solonenko, 2012]: *"Athletes are now the youth elite in Dagestan, in any case. If you are an athlete, your road is clear everywhere. We have young deputies in power now, etc., they are all athletes, it may be somehow related. Olympic champions, any door is open for you. You can become anything you want to be"* (No. 4, 23, RSF).

The formation of this system began back in the Soviet period, when successful athletes often became deputies, heads of municipal formations and departments in the administrative agencies [ibid.]. Gym halls were and still are important platforms for the formation of informal alliances that play an important role in the functioning of power institutions in this region [Kolesnik, 2018: 402]. In the 1990s, the weakening of the state launched the process of forming new elites, and wrestling communities used the power and organizational influence they had to actively penetrate the structures of political and economic authorities, as well as the law enforcement agencies [Solonenko, 2012]. Since V.V. Putin came to power, the recruitment of athletes into the political elite has become a federal trend that defines the relationship between government and sports in Russia [Vladimirova, 2020]. For example, there are 17 former athletes in the 7th session State Duma, including two freestyle wrestlers: three-time Olympic champion B. Saitiev (Dagestan) and A. Taymazov (North Ossetia). Obviously, there is a connection between these practices and the political culture that has been formed in the Republic under the pressure of the central state institutions and is characterized by the exclusive role of the force factor in political and economic life [Sokiryanskaya, 2019]. Under these conditions there is a constant demand for the services of quasi-professional groups, whose main resource is real or potential violence. Wrestling communities are perhaps the most massive, cohesive and entrenched of such groups in Dagestan. In addition, the power resource they possess has a high symbolic value, since wrestlers defend the honor of Dagestan and Russia in the international sports arena. This is important to emphasize because there is an alienation of the ruling stratum from the rest of the population, the political leaders of the Republic, which consists of appointees from the federal center, is seen by many

Dagestanis as an external administration, indifferent to local interests. The recruitment of wrestlers into the political elite is a tool to legitimize the latter.

Religiosity. Like many other social institutions, Dagestani sport in the post-Soviet period has undergone intensive Islamization. The mass exodus of young athletes to Islam in the early 2000s was encouraged and sometimes directly initiated by Islamic organizations and movements, such as the Muslim Spiritual Directorate of Dagestan. With political ambitions, they try to gain the power and reputational support of sports communities [Territory..., 2020].

The most obvious consequence of the alliance between religion and sports is the Islamization of the public image of the Dagestani male athlete, who, in addition to outstanding physical data, became considered to be obliged to appear demonstratively pious, attend mosques, and observe the Muslim dress code. One often hears from informants that "a strong iman (faith) creates a strong body." Along with the mosque, the gym is a space where religious experience becomes shared. It must have a prayer room and a room for prayer ablutions. Many informants in their interviews emphasize their religious education along with sporting wins: "Informant: *And I finished the Quran long ago. I know the Quran by heart.*" Interviewer: "Yes, really?" Informant: "I know it". Interviewer: "And where did you learn it?" Informant: "I have a good teacher, he lived in Egypt for 10 years and learned the Quran there. He is a good man, a religious one" (No. 5, 14 l.).

Religion can perform the function of an ideology that legitimizes the dominant position that is achieved through the effective utilization of violence. Analyzing the contradictory relationship between violence and hegemony, Connell writes that violence is part of a system of domination, but at the same time it is a measure of its imperfection [Connell, 2005]. A carefully covert hierarchy would have less need for intimidation.

In Islamized Dagestan society, the status of a man consistently observing religion at least partially removes the problem of the moral precariousness of the right of the strong. At the same time, religious education gives wrestlers a reason to perform in alliance with religious elites, if not in a leading role, then at least as an equal partner. This claim, in particular, is expressed in the fact that well-known wrestlers (and representatives of other martial arts) often strive to act as moral authorities and simultaneously as defenders of the moral order, publicly – through social networks and the media – calling to combat manifestations of "depravity" and "vice," as well as exerting force on those who are considered carriers and propagandists of dissolute lifestyle and alien values: "I will even say more: they had a group in WhatsApp. I remember, all the athletes who were for morality in Dagestan were there. They were catching all kinds of singers who, in their opinion, were committing all kinds of depravity, well, indeed, the ones they were catching, they brought depravity, like, 'If you're going to perform again, we'll kick your head in, and they'll calm down'" (No. 6, 27, RSF).

The Power of Elders. Biographical cases in which the main motive for attending training is the will of the father or another senior relative (uncle, elder brother) demonstrate another important point: sports socialization is thought to be preferable for boys and teenagers because along with the ability to be a man it instills socially approved ideas about age hierarchy and supports the social control of older over younger ones outside the home space.

The social significance of this function of freestyle wrestling becomes clear from an analysis of the transformations that have affected Dagestan society over the past thirty years. The dismantling of the socialist system and planned economy here proceeded synchronously with the urbanization of the rural backwaters, which in Soviet times retained many elements of the traditional way of life based on law of custom [Bobrovnikov, 2001; Lytkina, 2010]. In the post-Soviet period, the collapse of enterprises and the challenging crime rate provoked an outflow of the urban population outside the Republic and a mass migration of highlanders to cities, mainly to Makhachkala [Starodubrovskaya et al., 2011]. Urbanization erodes the foundations of the traditional authority of the older over the younger, because under conditions of urban anonymity "traditional rural control by family and community is no longer able to operate" [Starodubrovskaya, Kazenin, 2014: 71]. The loss of control is articulated in fears that a teenager, left to himself, will be involved in high-risk scenarios of street masculinity, the implementation

of which is associated with violence, crime, alcohol and illegal psychotropic substances. In this context, freestyle wrestling classes are functional in terms of preventive isolation of the teenager from cliques and situations where these scenarios can be implemented. The intensive training schedule (twice a day on weekdays) does not leave athletes free time, which the "street" can claim: *"That's the way it is in Dagestan. The people here are strictly educated. Since childhood, from the age of six, we know nothing but wrestling. Nothing extra"* (No. 7, 17 s.).

Migration to the cities transforms traditional patterns of masculinity. Under urban conditions, the role of a breadwinner is implemented outside the home, which leads to the alienation of men from the household [Lytkina, 2013]. At the same time, rural women, as a rule, do not aspire to enter the urban labor market, continuing to be engaged in housekeeping and child rearing [Lytkina, 2010]. The forced feminization of the domestic field can cause moral panic about the fact that without fatherly control, boys fall entirely under the influence of the mother, resulting in a breakdown in their gender socialization. This necessitates the need for wrestling sections as homo-social communities that provide at least partial isolation of growing men from female influence and correction of their gender "program." *"Well, let's say he comes to training, and you can see from the boy that he's pampered... that he's, how should I say, not stained by the street. He's not a beaten kid. You know what I'm talking about. A boy's supposed to be like... beaten, yeah. Sharp-toothed. Not a sharp-toothed boy at all. You can see that he grew up in a female collective, and they try to make a man out of him. There. They throw him in. And when he has his first encounter, when he communicates with them, he understands what kind of environment he is in. He understands whether it's worth staying in this fraternal family, should he become a part of this, let's say, wrestling family. And he makes some conclusions for himself. And if he passes his second or third training session, he basically understands that the guys are good. The guys are athletes, they are sensible, but they really want to make something out of me"* (No. 8, 42 g.).

Wrestling narratives emphasize the family nature of wrestler homosociality. One often hears that all wrestlers, especially those who train in the same school or class, are "like brothers" to each other, and "the coach is like a father." Delegation of the fatherly role can even be formalized by means of a verbal ritual: *"Some people come, it's your son they say, do whatever you want with him"* (No. 8, 30 s.). Specifically, it implies that the coach, as part of the training process, is given the unconditional right to demand absolute obedience from his students and to use physical punishment against them. It is also recognized that in the gym space the coach's word takes precedence over the mother's. *"Parents, one came to me, a woman was indignant, "Oh, what did you spank him for?" I had such a stick. "Why for did you do it to him," and there were mothers sitting there, too. I was saying, if you don't like it, take your boy, saying, and keep him at home, saying, under your skirt, saying"* (No. 8, 29 l.).

The wrestling community is seen as an ideal family unspoiled by the effects of urbanization and modernization, where the transmission and assimilation of the role of the head of the family, central to traditional masculinity, who dominates women and younger members, is carried out. Thus, freestyle wrestling works to maintain (or retrofit) two basic pillars of the traditional gender order – the power of men over women and of the older over the younger. Symbolically, masculinity, which relies on these pillars, opposes both marginalized street masculinity and subordinated feminized masculinity.

Some conclusions. Turning to the research question, we can briefly outline the institutional and cultural instruments that give wrestling masculinity its hegemonic character. Firstly, the unprecedented massification of freestyle wrestling and its affirmation as a national sport for the peoples of Dagestan leads to the generalization of the ideal of masculinity and related practices. Secondly, thanks to the regular recruitment of wrestlers into the political elite wrestling masculinity is associated with social prestige, power and success. Thirdly, wrestlers' alliance with religious elites provides this option of male subjectivity with ideological legitimation in the context of an Islamized society. Finally, the wrestling is in demand in the conditions of the corruption of traditional society resulting from urbanization as an institution for maintaining the power of older men over younger men.

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