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**Research Report**

## Dagestan: Russia's most troublesome republic. Political and religious developments on the "Mountain of Tongues"

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# SWP Research Paper

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for International  
and Security Affairs

*Uwe Halbach and Manarsha Isaeva*

## Dagestan: Russia's Most Troublesome Republic

Political and Religious Developments on the  
“Mountain of Tongues”

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**Dagestan: Russia's Most Troublesome Republic  
Political and Religious Developments on the  
"Mountain of Tongues"**

Since 2014 the Ukraine conflict has tended to sideline a number of issues that remain significant for Russia. These include the situation on Russia's Caucasian periphery. The patriotic fervour that greeted Russia's annexation of Crimea cast the security situation in the North Caucasus in a deceptively positive light. This region stands out like no other part of the post-Soviet Russian Federation on account of the two Chechen wars, an ongoing Islamist insurgency elsewhere in the region, and manifold socio-economic problems. Until recently the North Caucasus was the most violent part of the entire post-Soviet space, with armed struggle costing hundreds of lives – civilians, security personnel and insurgents – every year. In 2014, however, the North Caucasus was overtaken by eastern Ukraine, where the fighting caused at least six thousand deaths by March 2015 (according to official figures; other estimates put the toll much higher) and triggered massive refugee movements. At the same time foreign analysts continue to class the situation in the North Caucasus as a "permanent low level insurgency". Unlike the three independent states of the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia), external actors enjoy little access to the North Caucasus, whose development is regarded as Russia's internal affair. Consequently, rather than addressing recommendations for action to Berlin or Brussels, our advice would be not to let the Ukraine crisis push this region off the Russia analysis agenda.

At the eastern end of the Caucasus and the southern periphery of the Russian Federation, Dagestan stands out in multiple respects. A population of about three million makes it by far the largest Caucasian republic, with its position on the Caspian Sea lending strategic importance. At the same time, about three dozen autochthonous nationalities live in a territory roughly the size of Denmark or West Virginia, making Dagestan the entity with the greatest ethnic diversity not only in the Caucasus, but in the entire post-Soviet space. Demographic and cultural developments in the post-Soviet era have made Dagestan, more so even than the other Caucasian republics, into Russia's "internal abroad", with emigration noticeably shrinking the ethnic Russian population and cultural difference vis-à-vis the centre growing. Since the collapse of the

Soviet Union, Dagestan has been characterised by a unique political system designed to account for its ethnic diversity, which sets it apart from the other twenty-one republics of the Russian Federation (not counting Crimea, annexed in 2014). Until 2006, a State Council comprising the fourteen largest ethnicities served as a collective leadership, in place of a president. Since then three figures appointed by the Kremlin have successively headed the republic in an ethno-political balancing act between the two largest ethnicities, the Avars and the Dargins.

Since about 2009 Dagestan has topped the statistics on “incidents of violence” for the Russian Federation. In 2013, in the North Caucasus as a whole, 529 people died in terrorist attacks and fighting between security forces and the Islamist insurgency: 104 civilians, 127 members of the security forces and 298 insurgents; Dagestan accounted for 341 of the casualties. Although Nikolai Patrushev, head of the Russian Security Council, reported a fall in terrorist violence in Russia in 2013, 214 of the 218 incidents occurred in the North Caucasus, the majority in Dagestan. The number of deaths attributable to fighting in the North Caucasus in 2014 is significantly lower, with 341, 249 of whom were rebels.

Chechnya was for a long time the epicentre of violence in the Caucasus, but armed conflict has receded there, with only small scattered groups reportedly still active. Instead, there are increasing numbers of Chechens fighting on various fronts far from their homeland, for example on both sides in eastern Ukraine, and above all in Syria and Iraq, in what is currently the most prominent and brutal jihadist campaign. Dagestan is increasingly becoming the centre of gravity of the homegrown Caucasus Emirate (*Imarat Kavkaz*), which since 2007 has formed the theocratic backbone of the underground Islamist movement. However, Chechnya lives under the heel of dictator Ramzan Kadyrov and one cannot speak of a genuine pacification. This was vividly demonstrated by terrorist attacks in the last quarter of 2014, when an attack on security forces and the Press House in Grozny on 4 December paralysed the city and left two dozen dead.

As the most complex republic in ethno-demographic, cultural and religious terms, Dagestan deserves special attention in analysis of the Russian Federation. The present study sets out to address the specific questions that arise. How does its ethnic diversity, which sets Dagestan apart from all Russia’s other federal subjects, affect its politics and society? How is the development

of the armed insurgency connected to socio-economic problems such as high youth unemployment, poor governance, and systematic corruption? How do political leaders in Moscow and the Dagestani capital Makhachkala respond to these problems and challenges? What impact did the wars in Chechnya have on neighbouring Dagestan? The trajectory of the Islamic “rebirth” in this part of Russia is of particular importance. Throughout the Soviet era Islamic tradition continued to play a role, while the post-Soviet period has witnessed the emergence of tensions between traditional (especially Sufi) and fundamentalist (Salafist, “Wahhabi”) variants of Islam.

# Recent Developments in the North Caucasus

The North Caucasus last drew concerted international attention around the Sochi Winter Olympics in February 2014, before the Ukraine conflict came to a head. Threats from the Caucasus Emirate cast a shadow over the big event, especially in the aftermath of attacks on civilian targets in Volgograd in October and December 2013. The Games were consequently held under maximum security precautions – and passed off without incident. Immediately after the Sochi Olympics Russia adopted a harder line against Ukraine, and Russian and international interest in the North Caucasus waned. The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the accompanying propaganda generated a wave of patriotic fervour in Russia, in the course of which the North Caucasus situation became cast in a deceptively positive light. In January 2014 a survey by the Levada Centre was still showing just 18 percent of Russians regarding the situation there as positive. But by March the figure had risen to 41 percent, with the proportion classing the North Caucasus as “tense” down to 43 percent (from 60 percent in January).<sup>1</sup> Lev Gudkov, director of the Levada Centre, said the figures revealed how news about Crimea and Ukraine had pushed reports about problems in the North Caucasus so far into the background that many Russians now believed the situation there had stabilised.<sup>2</sup> Other events may also have contributed to the shift, including reports of the death of Chechen rebel leader Doku Umarov, who had declared the jihadist Caucasus Emirate in 2007. Russian security forces also announced that the level of terrorist activity had

1 “Vsplesk optimizma rossijan po otnošeniju k situacii na Kavkaze obusloven prisoeдинeniem Kryma k RF, uverenij sociologi” [Sociologists believe increased Russian optimism on Caucasus situation stems from annexation of Crimea], *Kavkazskij Uzel*, 15 April 2014, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/240984> (accessed 7 April 2015). The news portal “Kavkazskij Uzel” [The Caucasian knot], which is frequently cited as a source in the present study, was founded in 2001 by the human rights organisation Memorial. It provides comprehensive information on developments in the North and South Caucasus and southern Russia.

2 “Počemu rossijane stali položitel’no ocenivat’ situaciju na Severnom Kavkaze” [Why Russians now see the North Caucasus situation positively], *Novoe Delo*, 21 April 2014, <http://ndelo.ru/politika-5/3057-lyubov-i-nenavist-v-protsentakh> (accessed 7 April 2015).

receded and that prominent insurgents had been eliminated.

In August 2014 the Federal Security Service announced counter-terrorism successes in the North Caucasus, although this met with scepticism in expert circles. The claim was that 328 “potential terrorists” had been detained in the first half of 2014. But given that the security forces pursue a policy of collective punishment in the North Caucasus, these may have been relatives and social contacts of insurgents, rather than active fighters themselves. In January 2015 the Russian interior ministry reported that 259 rebels, including 36 commanders, had been killed by security forces in 2014, and 421 insurgents detained.

The overall Russian perception of terrorist threat shifted in the course of 2014, driven by the Kremlin’s massive propaganda since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis. Opinion surveys show that dangers are now rarely associated with the Caucasus, but with Russia’s “external enemies”, first and foremost the United States.<sup>3</sup> A survey in November 2014 found that more than 60 percent of Russians saw the main threat to their country coming from abroad, while only 18 percent felt the danger was at home.<sup>4</sup>

At the beginning of December 2014, however, the aforementioned assault on the Chechen capital Grozny brought the North Caucasus insurgency back into Russian threat perceptions. The region attracted further attention in the first quarter of 2015 through the supposed “Chechen links” in the assassination of Boris Nemtsov and escalating reports about North Caucasian fighters in Syria and Iraq.

There is little sign of any lasting stabilisation in the North Caucasus. In 2009 then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev declared the Caucasian periphery Russia’s biggest internal security challenge. In January 2010 he made the region a federal district in its own right, comprising all the Caucasian republics apart

3 In a recent opinion poll 22 percent of Russians said the United States presented a terrorist threat (2013: 4 percent), while just 3 percent associated the Caucasus with such a threat (2013: 20 percent). 13 percent regarded “radical Islamists” as a terror risk, 7 percent the Ukraine. “Kavkaz ustupil mesto SŠA” [Caucasus falls behind USA], *Kommersant*, 21 October 2014.

4 TASS, 28 January 2015.



from Adygea, plus the south Russian Stavropol district, with Pyatigorsk in Stavropol district as its capital. Alexander Khloponin, a successful manager who had earned a positive reputation as governor of the Siberian district of Krasnoyarsk, was placed in charge of the North Caucasian Federal District as plenipotentiary envoy of the President. As such, Moscow was signalling a strategic shift in the North Caucasus. In place of a one-sided focus on military operations, which lay in the hands of the security organs and the “siloviki”, the Kremlin now turned to a policy of modernisation based on socio-economic reforms.<sup>5</sup> Where Russia had previously largely closed off the region, new programmes were launched to open it up to domestic and foreign investment, for example courting Azerbaijan, as the South Caucasian economic heavyweight, for investment in its North Caucasian neighbourhood.<sup>6</sup> 70 percent of trade between Russia and Azerbaijan crosses Dagestan’s southern land border. Efforts to connect Dagestan and the South Caucasus are currently concentrating on a road-building project into Georgia, the Avaro-Kakhetian highway linking Makhachkala and Tbilisi.

Ahead of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, which was propagated not least as a regional development project, new resorts and winter sports centres were to be built in all the Caucasian republics. The project could be said to have followed the motto “tourism not terrorism” but immediately became a target for the armed insurgency. Four years after the “strategic turn” it was clear that the move had not really succeeded, and the precarious security situation had certainly not settled down. In May 2014 President Vladimir Putin installed a new head of the North Caucasian Federal District. This ended the Khloponin era, although he did retain his post as vice-premier in Moscow. On 18 June 2014, in the latter function, he announced that the Russian government had abandoned large parts of its tourism programme for the problematic Caucasian region. Of seven projects originally planned, only three were now to be realised.<sup>7</sup> Altogether the Kremlin’s hopes of attracting private investment as a means to pacify the region had been disappointed.

Earlier, in 2012, Moscow had unveiled a development programme for the North Caucasus with a

timeframe extending until 2025. It provided for investment totalling \$70 billion, most of which was to be sourced from outside the state budget. Today that programme is regarded as unrealistic, not least because of the faltering Russian economy. At the same time the Ukraine crisis has relegated the North Caucasus in the ranking of Russian security and development headaches. Former Russian finance minister Alexei Kudrin estimates that the investment required to integrate the Crimea into the Russian Federation could exceed the cost of reconstruction in the North Caucasus after the two Chechen wars.<sup>8</sup> In 2014 Moscow cut its development spending in the North Caucasus in association with the Ukraine crisis,<sup>9</sup> while in July 2014 the chair of the Russian Audit Chamber expressed concerns about the budget assistance granted to the seven most highly subsidised regions: four North Caucasian republics, including Dagestan, plus Altai, Tyva and Kamchatka.<sup>10</sup>

In 2014 Russia’s Caucasian republics, and especially Dagestan, found themselves neglected through the withdrawal of financial and military resources associated with the Kremlin’s Ukraine policy. Corresponding fears were expressed in October 2014 at a conference in Pyatigorsk, where one participant from Dagestan said that many in his republic were convinced that the war in the Ukraine was being fought at the expense of operations against militant Islamists in the North Caucasus, from where military resources were increasingly being redeployed to the Ukrainian border. Other participants criticised Russia’s “double standards” over national self-determination, contrasting support for pro-Russian “freedom fighters” in eastern Ukraine with the massive military force used against Chechen “freedom fighters” in the North Caucasus.<sup>11</sup>

Nor was Khloponin granted any lasting success in his political dealings. Local leaders like the Chechen autocrat Kadyrov preferred to deal directly with Moscow, without detours to Pyatigorsk. On the very same day Khloponin was dismissed as head of the North

5 Uwe Halbach, *Russia’s Internal Abroad: The North Caucasus as an Emergency Zone at the Edge of Europe*, SWP Research Paper 5/2010 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, November 2010).

6 Paul Goble, “Moscow Seeks Baku’s Help in Developing the North Caucasus”, *ADA Biweekly* 4, no. 20 (15 October 2011): 1.

7 *Lenta.ru*, 25 June 2014.

8 Interview with Alexei Kudrin on “Nedelya”, published 17 May 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46WN\\_OaiWXs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46WN_OaiWXs) (accessed 7 April 2015).

9 Valery Dzutsev, “With Eye on Ukraine, Kremlin Reduces Aid to the North Caucasus and Eases Travel Abroad”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11, no. 80 (30 April 2014).

10 Idem, “Russian Official Proposes Cutting Financial Aid to the North Caucasus”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11, no. 144 (6 August 2014).

11 Idem, “North Caucasians Point Out Moscow’s Double Standard on North Caucasus and Ukraine”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11, no. 195 (3 November 2014).

Caucasian Federal District, Putin signed a decree establishing a dedicated ministry for the region's affairs, signalling that it had absolutely no reason to fear any loss of attention in Moscow. The ministry, the decree states, will "make decisions on questions in connection with the socio-economic development of the North Caucasus".<sup>12</sup> So was the reform course associated with Khloponin to be maintained after all?

Khloponin was succeeded in the North Caucasian Federal District by Sergej Melikov, an officer of Dagestani extraction who had previously been responsible for the deployment of Russian interior ministry forces in the region. Regional experts read two signals for Russian policy in the North Caucasus into his appointment: firstly, a turn away from reform and development priorities, back to the security policy of the "siloviki"; secondly a prioritisation of Dagestan in this context.<sup>13</sup> Although Russian elite forces were redeployed from the North Caucasus to the Ukrainian border in 2014, apparently relativising the region's security status,<sup>14</sup> a conference of North Caucasian republic heads in March 2015, chaired by Nikolai Patrushev, head of the Russian Security Council, reiterated the importance of combating extremism and terrorism in the region. Some commentators interpreted increasing numbers of military exercises in the Southern Military District and the North Caucasus as a warning shot to neighbours in the South Caucasus.<sup>15</sup>

Under Khloponin, Dagestan was already moving increasingly to the heart of the armed Islamist resistance, through the Caucasus Emirate led by Chechen underground president Umarov. Chechnya slipped into the background in this respect. After Umarov's death, which was not publicly announced until March 2014 but had been suspected for months beforehand, Ali Abu Mukhammad (Aliaskhab Kebekov) succeeded to the leadership. Now, for the first time, there was a Dagestani leader at the head of the Caucasus Emirate, which had hitherto been largely dominated by Chechens. Since the end of the first Chechen war in

1996 a religiously driven jihad had increasingly supplanted ethno-nationalist slogans in the North Caucasus insurgency. Chechnya's insurgency stood for both: nationalist separatism and jihad. In the multi-ethnic republic of Dagestan, on the other hand, nationalist and separatist aspects were secondary. Instead, Dagestan is the historic emblem of nineteenth-century Muslim anti-colonial resistance to tsarist forces. Today it forms the flashpoint of state counter-terrorism operations in the North Caucasus. In 2014 barely a week passed without a major operation, although contacts between security forces and rebels in the region as a whole fell in the course of the year.<sup>16</sup>

With respect to underground Islamist activities, international attention moved on in 2014. The murderous activities of the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq and the global threat emanating from those quarters have sidelined the regional Islamist formation of the Caucasus Emirate, even though many jihadists of North Caucasian provenance are active in IS and other groups in Syria and Iraq.<sup>17</sup> According to the Federal Security Agency in Dagestan there were already about two hundred Dagestanis fighting against the Syrian regime in March 2014.<sup>18</sup> They can expect to be imprisoned if they return to Russia, as a law of 2013 provides for sentences of up to six years for

<sup>16</sup> These counter-terrorism operations caused massive disruption. In March 2014 forests were set alight in several districts of Dagestan, endangering the livelihoods of local populations. In November 2014 residents of a village in Untsukul district appealed to the public to take note of the enormous damage caused by permanent counter-terrorism operations in their area. See "Žiteli Vremennogo prosjat obščest'vennost' prinjat' učastie v ocenke ponesennogo imi uščerba" [Residents of Vremenyj ask public to note harm caused], *Kavkazskij Uzel*, 24 November 2014, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/252865> (accessed 13 April 2015).

<sup>17</sup> Guido Steinberg, *A Chechen al-Qaeda? Caucasian Groups Further Internationalise the Syrian Struggle*, SWP Comment 31/2014 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, June 2014); Emil Souleimanov, "Globalizing Jihad? North Caucasians in the Syrian Civil War", [https://www.academia.edu/7998656/Globalizing\\_Jihad\\_North\\_Caucasians\\_in\\_the\\_Syrian\\_Civil\\_War](https://www.academia.edu/7998656/Globalizing_Jihad_North_Caucasians_in_the_Syrian_Civil_War) (accessed 13 April 2015); idem, "Von Groznyj nach Aleppo: Nordkaukasische Dschihadisten im syrischen Bürgerkrieg", *Osteuropa* 64, no. 8 (2014): 17–25; Murad Batal al Shishani, "Islamist North Caucasus Rebels Training a New Generation of Fighters in Syria", *Jamestown Foundation Militant Leadership Monitor*, 2 October 2014; Mairbek Vatchagaev, "Number of Disillusioned North Caucasian Militants Returning from Syria Increases", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11, no. 189 (24 October 2014).

<sup>18</sup> "V Dagestane zaderžali boevika, voevavšego v Sirii" [Rebel who fought in Syria detained in Dagestan], *Rossijskaja Gazeta*, 26 July 2013, <http://www.rg.ru/2013/07/26/reg-skfo/terrorist-anons.html> (accessed 13 April 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Musa Muradov, "Severnyj Kavkaz ostavili za Aleksandrom Chloponym" [North Caucasus left to Alexander Khloponin], *Kommersant*, 16 May 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Mairbek Vatchagaev, "Appointment of General Melikov to Replace Khloponin Points to Kremlin Bid to Subdue Dagestani Insurgency", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11, no. 92 (16 May 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Valery Dzutsev, "War with Ukraine Pulls Best Russian Military Units from North Caucasus", *Daily Monitor* 11, no. 156 (8 September 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Mairbek Vatchagaev, "Are Russian Military Exercises in the North Caucasus a Signal to Azerbaijan and Georgia?", *Jamestown Foundation Blog on Russia and Eurasia* 12, no. 67 (10 April 2015).

participation in militant formations fighting against Russian interests.<sup>19</sup>

As far as possible IS blowback into Russia's North Caucasus problems is concerned, assessments diverge. While returnees from fighting in Syria and Iraq could radicalise and brutalise the Islamist insurgency in their home region, the involvement of North Caucasian fighters in the IS campaign has also provoked an internal conflict that divides and weakens the Caucasus Emirate. Since the end of 2014 there have been increasing reports of splits in the Emirate and rifts within its new leadership, stemming above all from the involvement of North Caucasian fighters in the IS jihad in Syria. A growing number of field commanders (emirs) from Dagestan, Chechnya and other parts of the North Caucasus have sworn allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, thus placing them in opposition to the new leader of the Caucasus Emirate.<sup>20</sup>

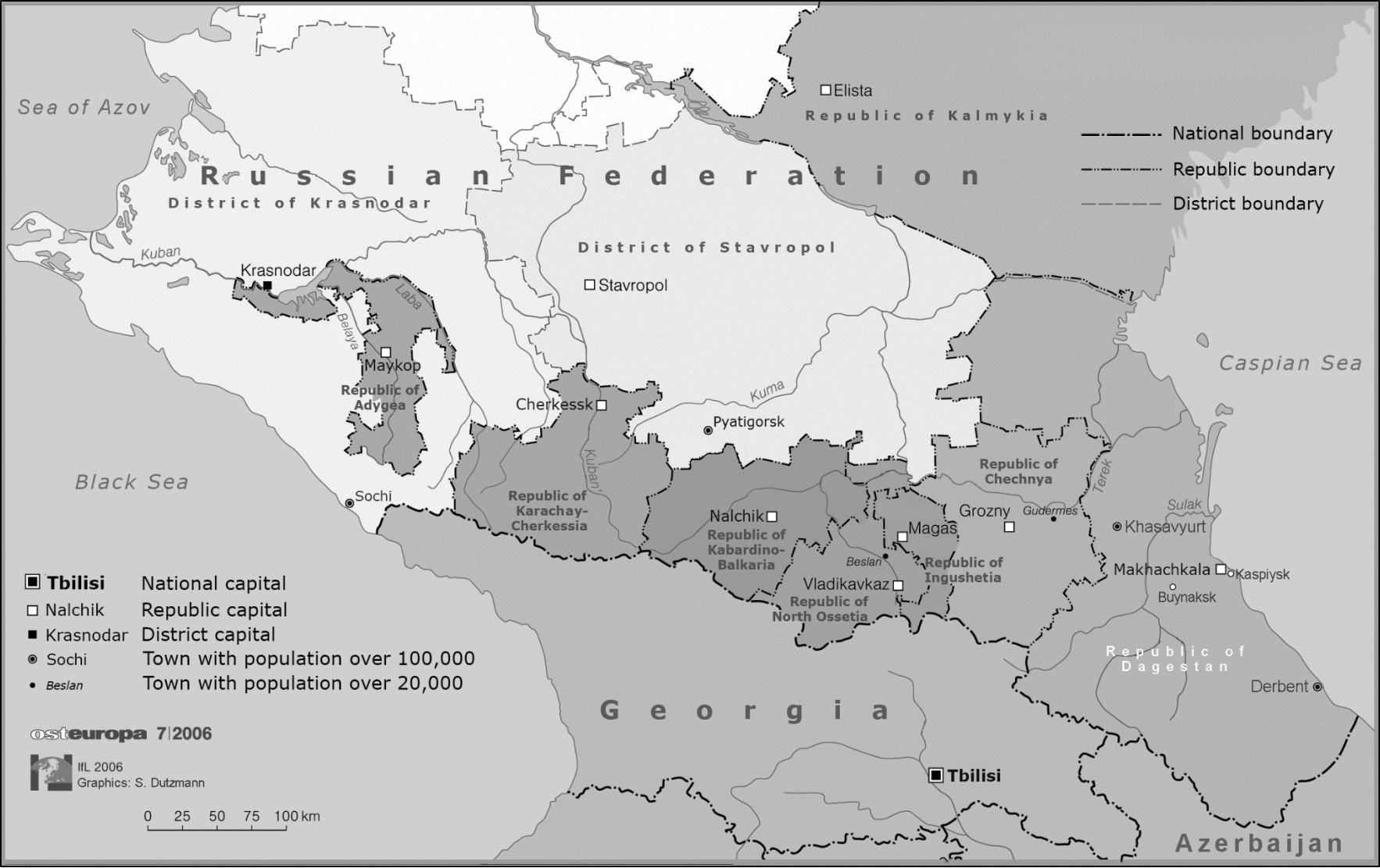
Shortly before this study was completed, it became known that Emir Abu Muhammad had died on 19 April 2015, after serving as leader for just a year. He was reportedly killed in a Russian special forces operation in a village in the Bujnaks district of Dagestan, in which altogether five people died.<sup>21</sup> Splits in the Emirate are now expected to deepen and the influence of IS in the North Caucasian insurgency could potentially increase.

**19** "Žitel' Čečni Šachid Temirbulatov podozrevaetsja v učastii v voennykh dejstvijach v Sirii" [Chechen Shahid Termirbulatov suspected of participation in fighting in Syria], *Kavkazskij Uzel*, 9 January 2014, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/236388/> (accessed 13 April 2015).

**20** For more detail see "Dagestan in the Caucasus Emirate" below.

**21** Mairbek Vatchagaev, "Caucasus Emirate Amir Killed in Dagestan", *North Caucasus Weekly*, 24 April 2015.

Map: North Caucasus



# Mountain of Tongues: Dagestan as *the* Multi-ethnic Republic

The tenth-century Arab geographer al-Masudi called the Caucasus “The Mountain of Tongues”. And nowhere in the region does the metaphor apply more convincingly than in Dagestan. With its Turko-Persian name, which emerged in the sixteenth century and means “land of mountains”, Dagestan differs from other national entities in Russia and the former Soviet Union in having a geographical rather than ethnic designation. Its autonomy is based not on one or two name-giving nationalities, as in the case of other republics, but on a multitude of autochthonous ethnicities. The ethnic diversity generates a Babel-like tangle of languages in a dense patchwork of identities. Languages practically unknown in Europe, such as Dargin, Tabasaran and Rutul, are further subdivided by linguists, with Dargin possessing a dozen dialects. However, the spread of Russian is increasingly stifling the use of indigenous languages in Dagestan and across the North Caucasus, as representatives of the Caucasian ethnicities complained at a conference in Stavropol in March 2015.

Close to three dozen autochthonous ethnicities make up Dagestan’s population, which is today close to three million. Of these 29 percent are Avars and 17 percent Dargins, both belonging to the Nakh-Dagestani language family in the narrower sense, along with Lezgians (13 percent), Laks (5.6 percent), Tabasarans (4.1 percent), Rutuls (1 percent) and others. The Turkic-Altaic ethnicities include Kumyks (15 percent) and Nogais (1.4 percent). Emigration has reduced the proportion of ethnic Russians from a good 10 percent at the end of the Soviet era to less than 3 percent today. The Chechen minority comprises 3.2 percent of the population, the Azerbaijani 4.5 percent.

Dagestan thus differs from other republics in the North Caucasus, such as Chechnya and Ingushetia, which have achieved a high degree of ethnic homogeneity in the post-Soviet era, and from the binational “hyphenated republics” Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Cherkessia. In each of the latter, two titular nationalities – one larger, one smaller – compete over the political and economic power resources, with the smaller feeling discriminated in the ethnocracy of the larger.

Is this ethnic diversity a conflict factor? In a survey in spring 2013 only 2.8 percent of respondents in Dagestan named inter-ethnic tensions as the main source of instability.<sup>22</sup> So great ethnic diversity and complex inter-ethnic relations should not be regarded *per se* as conflictual. At the same time they have played a central role in the republic’s post-Soviet development.

At the beginning of the 1990s Valeryj Tishkov, a leading Russian ethnologist, described the transition from the multi-nationality Soviet state to the post-Soviet period as an “explosion of the ethnic” (*vzryv etničnosti*). The metaphor turned out to be especially pertinent in the case of Dagestan, where one national front after another appeared with demands for autonomy or territory.<sup>23</sup> During this period inter-ethnic relations were certainly tense. In an opinion poll conducted in 1994 in the capital Makhachkala, 52 percent said they were willing to fight for their ethnic group in armed conflict.<sup>24</sup>

The “explosion of the ethnic” became especially risky in regions where the post-Soviet state borders intersected the settlement areas of particular ethnicities. Borders that had served purely administrative purposes in Soviet times now divided states, and their laws, customs and economies.<sup>25</sup> In Dagestan this concerned above all the “Lezgian question” on the southern border with Azerbaijan. At the beginning of the 1990s the *Sadval* national movement fought for an independent state uniting Lezgian settlements on both sides of the Samur river that marks the border. Correspondingly, they also rejected moves to fortify the frontier to Azerbaijan. In Soviet times Lezgian shepherds had driven their flocks unhindered across

22 “Opros: Žiteli Dagestana nazvali tri glavnye pričiny vspleska nasilija v respublike” [Survey: Dagestanis name three main reasons for violence], *Caucasus Times*, 10 May 2013.

23 First the Nogai movement *Birlık* (unity), then the Lezgian *Sadval* (also: unity), the Avar *Shamil Popular Front*, the Kumyk *Tenglik* (equality), the Dargin *Zadeh*, the Lak *Gazi-Kumukh* and others.

24 Gordon M. Hahn, *Russia’s Islamic Threat* (New Haven et al.: Yale University Press, 2007), 100.

25 Otto Luchterhandt, *Dagestan – Unaufhaltsamer Zerfall einer gewachsenen Kultur interethnischer Balance?* (Hamburg: Institut für Friedensforschung und Sicherheitspolitik, September 1999), 13.

the border in search of summer grazing. The Nogai settlements, which are divided between Dagestan, Chechnya and the Stavropol district, also witnessed irredentism during the period of the national movements. Close to the Chechen border, the Akkin nationality problem arose in the Dagestani districts of Novolak and Khasavyurt, when Chechens deported in 1944 returned in the Chrushev era to find a new ethnic composition, after members of other groups had been settled there.

On the other hand, ethnic diversity also mitigated against separatism. While a secessionist movement against Russian supremacy developed in neighbouring Chechnya from 1991, no republic-wide separatism of an ethno-nationalist slant was to emerge in Dagestan. As Rasul Gamzatov, the best-known Dagestani writer, said: Dagestan had not joined Russia of its own volition, and had no intention to leave voluntarily. And indeed, opinion polls show identification with Russia on a par with ethnic and local identities. Despite growing identification with Islam, the Dagestani population differentiates itself from Russia and the Russians less than for example the Muslim population of Tatarstan in the Russian interior.<sup>26</sup> However, it must be remembered that ethnic Russians make up just a tiny minority in Dagestan, but half the population in Tatarstan. Dagestanis do note an increasing anti-Caucasian xenophobia, for example among the Russian majority in the neighbouring district of Stavropol, where Cossack formations have been established to police Caucasian migrants.

Nor is Dagestan's loyalty exactly reciprocated with in Russia. Whereas 44 percent of Russian citizens in recent surveys identify Ukrainians and Belarusians as "Russians", only 7 percent would say the same about North Caucasians like Dagestanis, Chechens and Ingushians.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, in 2014 Russia resumed conscripting North Caucasians to the armed forces, after having largely exempted them during the previous decade. But the recruitment quotas remain relatively low: in 2014 Dagestan was expected to supply two thousand men, the other republics between five and fifteen hundred. The move was justified on the basis that Russia must prepare to fight wars on

several fronts, including regions where Europe meets Asia. North Caucasians are ideally suited for that task, it is argued, with Chechens having proven their loyalty in conflicts in South Ossetia and Ukraine.<sup>28</sup>

Separatism in Dagestan today is less a matter of ethno-nationalist organisations than Islamist networks fighting the rule of the "infidel". Equally, the lines of division and conflict in society today tend to run between opposing versions of Islamic "rebirth", such as Salafism and Sufism, to which we will return in greater detail below. Ethnic diversity also encourages a certain degree of political pluralism, which distinguishes Dagestan from neighbouring Chechnya, the latter having degenerated into a kind of private state under Moscow's dictator Kadyrov. In Dagestan the need for ethno-political equilibrium has to date precluded autocracy.

Politically, post-Soviet Dagestan cloaked its ethnic diversity in an oligarchy, where a State Council with members from the fourteen main ethnicities functioned as a collective head of state, while initially doing without a president. Plebiscites held in 1992, 1993 and 1999 all rejected proposals for presidential elections, motivated by concern not to upset the republic's inter-ethnic balance. The highest office was chair of the State Council, which was to rotate between prominent representatives of the larger ethnicities. This structure, which distinguished Dagestan from other Russian republics, was supposed to ensure cohesion and integration within the Russian Federation. In fact, however, the system was so dominated by complex relations between ethnic power groups that the political leadership was largely preoccupied with balancing individual clan interests and found itself unable to respond adequately to urgent socio-economic and security challenges. Moreover, the proposed rotation principle was not actually applied. The first chairman, the Dargin Magomedali Magomedov, lasted fourteen years as the head of the State Council and substitute president, to the chagrin of the Avars and other ethnicities. In 2004, Moscow grasped the opportunity presented by a new law permitting the President of the Federation to appoint the administrative heads of the republics and regions to intervene in this political structure, and introduce the office of president (later head of the republic) in Dage-

<sup>26</sup> Natalja Gontscharowa, "Russische Muslime in Tatarstan und Dagestan: Zwischen Autonomie und Integration", in *Auf der Suche nach Eurasien: Politik, Religion und Alltagskultur zwischen Russland und Europa*, ed. Markus Kaiser, 220–47 (226f.) (Bielefeld, 2004).

<sup>27</sup> "Rossijane sčitajut Krym svoim, a nasčet Kavkaza – somnevajutsja" [Russians regard Crimea as theirs – less sure about Caucasus], *Radio City FM: Vse novosti Moskvy*, 21 February 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted from Valery Dzutsev, "Russia May Use North Caucasians for Hybrid Warfare in Central Asia and European Conflicts", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11, no. 178 (8 October 2014).

tan too.<sup>29</sup> In 2006, President Putin appointed Mukhu Aliyev, previously speaker of parliament, as first President of the Republic. The Magomedov clan was compensated by a son of the outgoing State Council chairman succeeding as speaker.

This institutional change came at a point where crisis and conflict in Dagestan were threatening to surpass Islam-led radicalisation in the Chechen arena that had already brought forth an armed insurgency. However, the political relevance of ethnicity was not completely overshadowed by trans-ethnic identification with Islam. The “Lezgian question” burdening relations between Dagestan and Azerbaijan remains acute today (or, it could be said, has resurfaced). The problem sharpened in 2010 after two Lezgian villages were handed to Azerbaijan. Azeri political and economic influence engenders mistrust in Dagestan. Demonstrations occurred in southern Dagestan against Azerbaijan’s supposedly repressive nationality policy which was said to disadvantage not only the Lezgians but also the approximately fifty thousand Avars living in Azerbaijan. In 2014 protests occurred after a street in Derbent, the oldest and most southerly city in the Russian Federation, was renamed after Azerbaijan’s state icon Heydar Aliyev. Ethnic conflict potential also finds expression in border conflicts with neighbouring Chechnya, affecting the Dagestani districts of Novolak and Khasavyurt.<sup>30</sup>

**29** The title of “president” has since been replaced with “head of republic” (glava respublik) in all the republics apart from Tatarstan, on the grounds that there is only one President in Russia.

**30** Musa Musayev, “Jugoslavskij scenarij dlja Dagestana?” [A Yugoslav scenario for Dagestan?], *Sevkainform.ru*, 20 February 2015 <http://sevkainform.ru/articles/society/mezhdu-molotom-i-nakovalney-risk-raspada-dagestana-usilivaetsya/> (accessed 7 April 2015).



# Islamic “Rebirth” and Islamist Uprising

Dagestan also occupies a special position in the religious history of the Russian and Soviet empires. It was one of the first regions in the territory of today's Russian Federation – and indeed the entire post-Soviet space – to convert to Islam, already in the seventh century. To understand the position of Dagestan in the majority Muslim North Caucasus, one must also consider the resistance offered by the mountain people in the east of the region against Russia's nineteenth-century colonial expansion. This struggle was couched in religious terms and stood under the leadership of Islamic authorities such as Imam Shamil. Dagestan formed the centre of a resistance declared as jihad or *ghazwa*,<sup>31</sup> which contemporary Islamist networks such as the Caucasus Emirate cite as their model today. In their terminology the Dagestani capital is Shamil-Kala (in memory of the historic Imam Shamil, rather than the Chechen terrorist leader Shamil Basayev).

During the early Soviet era there were still about 2,500 mosques and hundreds of religious schools in Dagestan, representing probably the highest density of Islamic institutions in the entire Soviet Union. Thousands of mullahs, popularly referred to as “Arabists”, supplied a broad theological base. After the Soviet authorities began suppressing Islamic institutions from the end of the 1920s, religion existed largely as an “unofficial” or “parallel” Islam. By the 1970s “official Islam” in Dagestan was restricted to two dozen “working mosques” and about fifty mullahs under state oversight. But below that level religion and tradition were kept alive in everyday rituals and family rites, as well as in a network of “holy sites”, including the tombs of prominent Sufi sheikhs, which became places of pilgrimages. At the same time, currents calling for strict obedience of sharia appeared during the late Soviet period, rejecting everything not demonstrably mentioned in the Koran and Sunnah as unlawful innovations (*bid'ah*). In this milieu traditional practices such as the pilgrimages to the holy tombs

were regarded as “heathen”. Here we already see signs of the fracture between traditional and fundamentalist religion that has erupted into open conflict in today's Dagestan. Given that Islam was not in fact “extinguished” during the Soviet era (especially in Dagestan, where there was nothing unusual about senior party officials joining Sufi brotherhoods, or *tariqas*), the term “rebirth” for a growing turn to Islam following the dissolution of the Soviet Union needs to be placed in quote marks.

By the end of the first post-Soviet decade there were already about two thousand mosques and ten Islamic colleges.<sup>32</sup> Oversight over this expanding “official Islam” was now conducted by the republic muftiate DUMD (the Russian acronym for the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Dagestan), which emerged in 1992, alongside other ethnic and republic muftiates, from the Soviet-era Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of the North Caucasus (Russian acronym DUMSK). As in other Muslim states and societies in the post-Soviet space, however, the “official clergy” stood under suspicion of loyalty to the regime and collaboration with the state, and were unable to shake off the Soviet-era stigma of “the KGB's Islam”. DUMD and the official clergy were now responsible above all for arranging pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia, in which Dagestani Muslims participated in large numbers; in 2012 according to official figures they made up 8,450 of the total of 20,500 from Russia.<sup>33</sup>

In place of the leaders of ethnic national movements, who characterised the political landscape at the beginning of the post-Soviet period, religious actors became increasingly prominent both in local congregations (*jama'at*) and at the republic level. This development heightened a contradiction between

<sup>31</sup> Russian sources on the colonial war in the eastern North Caucasus between the 1830s and 1859 refer to the Islamic resistance of the mountain peoples as *gazavat*, derived from the Arabic *ghazwa* (also the source of the Italian “razzia”).

<sup>32</sup> Luchterhandt, *Dagestan* (see note 25), 28. Today there are 1,290 Friday mosques, 827 local mosques and 79 religious schools (medressas) in Dagestan. Asiat Buttaeva, “Islam in Polyconfessional Daghestan”, *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 13, no. 1 (2012): 68–78 (70).

<sup>33</sup> “Iz Dagestana otpravilsja pervyj rejs s palomnikami po blagotvoritel'noj linii Sulejmana Kerimova” [First pilgrimage sets off from Dagestan with charitable support from Suleyman Kerimov], *Kavkazskij Uzel*, 1 October 2013, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/230912> (accessed 7 April 2015).



traditional and neo-fundamentalist variants of the Islamic “rebirth”, which boils down to “Sufism versus Salafism”. This antagonism generated conflicts between generations, within families, within mosques and at the political level of the republic.<sup>34</sup> In many communities the polarisation led to competition between two rival mosques, one attended by the “Salafists”, the other by traditional believers.<sup>35</sup>

The call to “pure”, “unadulterated” “early” Islam appeared especially attractive to young people. The appeal was directed against the arrangements by which their parents’ generation had guarded Islam and tradition through the anti-religious Soviet era, against the cooperation of the official clergy with organs of state power, and against the political and social turmoil of the post-Soviet period, especially rampant corruption in the administration. Where even the secular judiciary was characterised by venality, the call for exclusive application of sharia quickly found a hearing, especially among the youth. A study of the factors driving Islamisation among the young in Dagestan found that the proportion of “believers” in this group had risen to 95 percent by 2010. The study characterised 77 percent of the young people as “strict believers” who wished to see Islam practised as it was in the time of the Prophet (up from 54 percent around the year 2000). Dagestan’s youth thus offers a field of recruitment for a process characterised as “shariatisation”.<sup>36</sup> Along the southern periphery of the Russian Federation sharia represents a kind of “alternative justice”. Although standing in contradiction to Russian law, it is used to dispense justice at the local level with the consent of the involved parties.<sup>37</sup> The call for

“Islamic justice” motivates Dagestani youth more than any other idea, as demonstrated by the omnipresence of Islamic symbolism in public space. Whereas neighbouring Chechnya has experienced an Islamisation “from above” under Kadyrov, the process in Dagestan has flowed as it were “from below”, out of the midst of society.<sup>38</sup>

In 2012 the political leadership in Dagestan initiated a dialogue between the rival Islamic factions, bringing together representatives of both sides for a meeting in the Grand Mosque in Makhachkala in April 2012. DUMD represented the adherents of Sufism (*tariqat*), the scholars of *Ahl al-Sunna* the Salafists.<sup>39</sup> A joint resolution issued in May calling upon believers to refrain from violence and avoid defaming the other side as “infidels”, in other words not to make frivolous accusations of apostasy (*takfir*). Together with the authorities in Dagestan, the Kremlin also organised two international theological conferences in 2012, attended by Islamic scholars from the Middle East. At the first, held on 25/26 May in Moscow, more than two hundred influential Islamic scholars and experts from twenty countries met with the Russia’s official Islamic clergy. The second conference was held in November 2012 in Makhachkala, under the title “Dagestan is a territory of peace”, and was attended by the International Union of Muslim Scholars under its secretary-general Ali Al-Muhiddin Karadagi. A conference resolution opposing violence was framed as a legally binding religious fatwa, although it failed to impress the Islamist insurgency in the North Caucasus: the dialogue process was accompanied by repeated attacks on clergy, especially prominent Sufi sheikhs.

<sup>34</sup> On the relationship between religious identity and lines of conflict in Dagestan, see Manarsha Isaeva, “Religious Identity and Conflict in Dagestan”, *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 153 (25 July 2014): 5–8.

<sup>35</sup> Vachtang Kumaev, “Problema dvuch mečetej i odnoj religii” [The problem of two mosques and one religion], *Dagestanskaja Pravda*, 28 June 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Zaid Abdullagatov, “O vlijanii religioznogo faktora na ekstremistskoe povedenie dagestanskoj molodeži” [The influence of the religious factor on extremist behaviour among Dagestani youth], [http://www.isras.ru/files/File/Socis/2012\\_1/Abdulagatov.pdf](http://www.isras.ru/files/File/Socis/2012_1/Abdulagatov.pdf) (accessed 7 April 2015); Wojciech Górecki, *No Change in the Russian Caucasus: The Winter Olympics Amid a Local War*, OSW Studies 47 (Warsaw: Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, January 2014), 54.

<sup>37</sup> Aleksej Malashenko, “Dagestan on the Eve of the Olympics”, 16 January 2014, <http://carnegie.ru/eurasiaoutlook/?fa=54210> (accessed 7 April 2015). On application of and support for sharia in Dagestan, see also: International Crisis Group (ICG), *The North Caucasus: The Challenges of Integration (III)*, Europe Report 226 (Brus-

sels, 6 September 2013), 47ff., <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/caucasus/226-the-north-caucasus-the-challenges-of-integration-iii-governance-elections-rule-of-law.pdf> (accessed 7 April 2015).

<sup>38</sup> “We must return to our traditions,” is the Chechen dictator’s message to his subjects. However these supposed traditions represent norms that are closer to the repertoire of the Islamist insurgency against which Kadyrov is fighting than to the authentic culture of the Chechen people. They include dress codes for women, male marital prerogatives and application of sharia. In fact, while insisting on his loyalty to Putin and the Kremlin, Kadyrov has established an “Islamic state” within the Russian Federation. His objective in so doing is to raise his profile as a Chechen political and religious leader while stealing the insurgents’ thunder.

<sup>39</sup> “Islamskoe primirenje i buduščee Dagestana” [“Islamic pacification” and the future of Dagestan], *Moj Dagestan*, 6 June 2012, <http://moidagestan.ru/news/analytics/18745> (accessed 7 April 2015).

## The Origins of the Insurgency

Gordon Hahn's study on Islam in Russia distinguishes three periods of "re-Islamisation" in Dagestan, two of which were associated with violence.<sup>40</sup> The first phase was the transition from the Soviet to the post-Soviet era (1986–1991), which was associated, as outlined above, with tensions between traditional and fundamentalist forms of Islamic "rebirth". The first post-Soviet decade (1991–1999) then saw growing Salafist influence (discussed across the CIS as "Wahhabi") and spillover effects from the wars in neighbouring Chechnya.

At the beginning of the 1990s religious leaders from Dagestan played a prominent role in founding Islamic parties in the still extant Soviet Union and in Russia. The Russia-wide Islamic Revival Party, led by the doctor Akhmed-Kadi Akhtayev, an Avar from the home region of the historic Imam Shamil, represented a moderate Islamist current. The Union of Muslims of Russia was led by the Dagestani Nadir Khachilaev. This period marked the beginning of a process of "jihadisation" of Caucasian Islam, originating in the eastern North Caucasus (above all Chechnya) but especially strongly affecting Dagestan. Towards the end of the 1990s the "Wahhabis" gained ground in Dagestan, founding their own congregations (*jama'at*), seizing control of local mosques and attacking "heathen" ceremonies and Sufi tombs and holy sites. Political Islam increasingly came under influences from Chechnya, and foreign organisations supporting the armed uprising there.<sup>41</sup>

In 1998/1999 prominent Chechen and foreign field commanders in the underground Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, such as Shamil Basayev and the Arab Ibn al-Khattab, called for the jihad to be expanded to Dagestan, seeking an Islamic state transcending the existing borders in the North Caucasus. The escalating violence cost the life of the chair of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Dagestan, a determined adherent of traditional Islam and Sufism. In August 1999 three largely Dargin villages in western and central Dagestan declared a separate "Islamic territory", under sharia, and several thousand Chechens led by Basayev crossed into Dagestan to join their fellow believers in the enclaves. But most Da-

gestanis opposed the Islamist offensive and formed militias to repel "aggression from the neighbouring republic". The polyethnic population of Dagestan regarded Chechnya as its principal external threat.

Developments since 1999, the third period, have been characterised by escalating confrontation between state organs and Islamist opposition, and between supporters of traditional and fundamentalist/purist currents in Islam. In this situation, the state organs and the official clergy acted jointly to counter the Islamist challenge. In September 1999 Dagestan passed a law against "Wahhabism" that gave the republic muftiate DUMD supreme oversight over religious activities (but did nothing to enhance its religious authority in the eyes of the population). This throwing down of the gauntlet against "Wahhabism", which certain representatives of DUMD even presented as "jihad", also radicalised the official clergy. Citing Sufism and traditionalism, they treated the "Wahhabis" as heretics who had to be fought against. The republic mufti and DUMD chair said that a believer who killed a "Wahhabi" would go to paradise just like all the believers who had been killed by them.<sup>42</sup> In Russia and the Muslim regions of the post-Soviet space "Wahhabism" became a catchword tarring observing Muslims, peaceful political Islamists and terrorists with the same brush. In 2002 a representative of a mosque in southern Russia, who confirmed that there were indeed Islamist troublemakers in his congregation, described the consequence as follows: "Today we have another problem too. If someone performs their prayers correctly, does not drink, does not smoke, does not curse, then they think he is a Wahhabi. Today every militia member thinks he is an expert on Wahhabism."<sup>43</sup>

In Dagestan this development increasingly drove religiously active groups and a section of the youth underground. And this tended to broaden rather than restrict recruiting opportunities for jihadists. They gained a new point of reference in October 2007, when the last Chechen underground president, Doku Umarov, declared the Caucasus Emirate. Now terrorist attacks targeted not only representatives of the state security and administrative organs, but increasingly

<sup>40</sup> Hahn, *Russia's Islamic Threat* (see note 24), 104–11.

<sup>41</sup> See in particular Jean-François Ratelle, *Radical Islam and the Chechen War Spillover: A Political Ethnographic Reassessment of the Upsurge of Violence in the North Caucasus since 2009* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa, Faculty of Social Sciences, 2013).

<sup>42</sup> Quoted from Moshe Gammer, "Nationalisme(s), Islam(s) et Politique au Daghestan", in *Religion et politique dans le Caucase post-sovietique*, ed. Bayram Balci and Raoul Motika (Paris, 2007), 149–61 (157).

<sup>43</sup> "Každyj milicioner – specialist po vachchabizmu" [Every militiaman an expert on Wahhabism], *Gazeta Juga*, Nalchik, 30 May 2002.

also senior representatives of the official clergy. Altogether in the North Caucasus forty senior clergy were killed between 2009 and August 2014, most recently the mufti of the Republic of North Ossetia. In Dagestan such attacks affected prominent Sufi sheikhs who attracted attention as ideological adversaries of the “Wahhabis” or Salafists. Umarov himself had been a member of the Kunta Haji order before becoming a radical Salafist. He is regarded as one of the most controversial figures in the Islamic resistance in the North Caucasus. His six-year “reign” as emir was characterised by contradictory decisions and a dispute (*fitna*) within the emirate leadership in 2010/2011.<sup>44</sup> Dagestan increasingly stood out among the regional sectors of the Islamist uprising in the North Caucasus, and was in turn divided into dozens of local *jama’at*. Unlike the Chechen jihadists, the Dagestani “forest brothers” live in rural and urban settlements rather than hiding out in inaccessible mountain and forest regions.<sup>45</sup>

## Dagestan in the Caucasus Emirate

When it was founded in 2007, the Caucasus Emirate subdivided its sphere of influence into six provinces (“vilayats”), which covered the entire North Caucasus but ignored its existing administrative divisions and introduced new territorial designations.<sup>46</sup> In fact, the Emirate exercises at most rudimentary territorial authority in the sense of running alternative administrative structures and supplying services to the population. Its grip on the local level principally involves coordinating insurgent activities, and even there only partially because the local fighting units operate relatively autonomously. Later Umarov also projected his

Emirate into the interior of the Russian Federation, such as the Tatar regions on the Volga. Gradually Vilayat Dagestan became the heart and most active part of the emirate, ahead even of Chechnya (Vilayat Nokhchicho). Opinions diverge concerning the viability of this virtual theocracy following Umarov’s death in 2013. Some commentators believe the *Imarat Kavkaz* is on its way out, its structures now only discernible in Dagestan. Others say it is too soon to speak of a weakening of the Emirate and the Islamist insurgency in the North Caucasus.<sup>47</sup>

The new Emir Ali Abu Mukhammad (originally Aliaskhab Kebekov, born 1976), came from the largely Avar village of Teletl in a central Dagestani district named after Imam Shamil. He rose within the Caucasus Emirate to become its *qadi*, or senior judge, in 2010. As such he intervened in July 2011 to end the aforementioned *fitna*. He is reported to possess basic knowledge of Arabic and Islamic theology, which sets him apart from his theologically less educated predecessor. On the other hand, he has less military experience than Umarov and his Chechen compatriots.<sup>48</sup> According to the Russian security forces, whose claims always merit a dose of scepticism, it was Abu Mukhammad who ordered the assassination of Dagestan’s most prominent Sufi sheikh, Said Afandi al-Chirkawi, by a female suicide bomber in 2012.

Abu Mukhammad was the first non-Chechen commander-in-chief and leading “emir” of the Islamist insurgency in the North Caucasus. He possessed little in the way of relationships with the old guard of the armed uprising, who had earned their spurs in the two Chechen wars. He was reportedly supported by the four emirs of the vilayats Dagestan, Ingushetia, Chechnya and Kabardino-Balkaria-Karachay, against the candidacy of Aslambek Vadalov, a prominent Chechen field commander.<sup>49</sup> Once in charge, Abu Mukhammad made contradictory statements on operations against civilian targets and on Caucasian fighters in the foreign jihad in Syria. Since 2012 a statement has been expected from the Caucasus Emirate on the activities of North Caucasian, overwhelmingly Chechen, jihad-

<sup>44</sup> The *fitna* in the Caucasus Emirate lasted from August 2010 to July 2011. The dispute was triggered by Umarov first announcing and then withdrawing his resignation. The handover supposedly suffered procedural errors irreconcilable with sharia. It is thought that the background to the dispute was partly ideological and strategic differences between nationalists and Islamists in the insurgency, partly doubts about Umarov’s style of leadership. See Uwe Halbach and Michail Logvinov, *Das Kaukasus-Emirat und der internationale Jihadismus*, SWP-Aktuell 41/2012 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, July 2012).

<sup>45</sup> Mairbek Vatchagaev, “The Epicenter of Insurgency – A Net Assessment of the Situation in the Northeast Caucasus since the Start of 2014”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11, no. 182 (15 October 2014).

<sup>46</sup> Dagestan, Nokhchicho (Chechnya), Galgaiche, Iriston (Ingushetia), the United Vilayats of Kabarda, Balkaria and Karachay, and the Nogai Steppe.

<sup>47</sup> Magomed Tuaev, “Naznačenie predstavitelja Dagestana liderom ‘Imarata Kavkaz’ govorit o transformacii podpol’ja, sčitajut eksperty” [Appointment of Dagestani as leader of “Caucasus Emirate” suggests transformation of insurgency, experts say], *Kavkazskij Uzel*, 21 April 2014, <http://dagestan.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/239778> (accessed 7 April 2015).

<sup>48</sup> Emil Souleimanov, “Prospects for the Caucasus Emirate under Kebekov’s Leadership”, *CACI Analyst*, 5 August 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

ists participating in the Islamist advance in Syria and Iraq. Renowned Chechen field commanders have led brigades in different, sometimes warring, formations, such as ISIS, *Jaish al Muhajirin wal-Ansar* and *Jabhat an-Nusra*.<sup>50</sup> Autonomously operating North Caucasian/Chechen groups have also been seen.

Abu Mukhammad had tense relations above all with Umar ash-Shishani, the “star” among the Caucasian jihadists on the Syrian front. Shishani is a Georgian from the Pankisi Valley, which is inhabited by the Chechen-connected Kist people. In one of his first video messages as emir of the Caucasus, Abu Mukhammad forbade Shishani from speaking publicly on the subject of jihad, on the grounds of his lack of theological training. As such the new emir took the side of al-Qaeda leader Aiman al-Zawahiri and the Qaeda-affiliated jihadist network *Jabhat an-Nusra* in Syria; at the same time he criticised ash-Shishani’s connections to the “Islamic State” and stressed al-Qaeda’s leadership in global jihad. In another message he called on his North Caucasian compatriots to distance themselves from rival groups in foreign jihad fronts and swear allegiance to him rather than to the leaders of those groups. This earned him the hostility of Caucasian jihadists linked to ISIS/IS, who mocked him in a video of their own. On the other hand, he was supported by Usman Gimrinski, qadi of the Caucasus Emirate and emir of the mountain sector of Vilayat Dagestan. Gimrinski also attacked the North Caucasian IS fighters and firmly contradicted Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s claim to the title of caliph.

These disputes point to splits between North Caucasians fighting in Syria and the insurgents in the North Caucasus with their base in Dagestan.<sup>51</sup> But Islamist actors within the North Caucasus have also contradicted the new emir over their loyalty towards the Syrian jihad: In December 2014 two important field Dagestani commanders of the insurgency – the leader of *Sharia Jama’a*, Rustam Aseldarov, and the former emir of Shamil-Kala (Makhachkala), Arsanali Kambulatov – declared their allegiance to the Islamic State. In the following weeks further emirs in Dagestan and other parts of the North Caucasus came out on the side of IS leader al-Baghdadi. By the beginning of 2015

some experts already believed that the internal disputes over the relationship to IS had brought Vilayat Dagestan, the most active sector of the Caucasus Emirate, to “the brink of total collapse”.<sup>52</sup>

Another bone of contention was introduced by an hour-long video message placed on the internet in May 2014, where Abu Mukhammad discussed suicide attacks against civilian targets. Although such martyrdom operations represented a “demonstration of belief”, he said, they should follow tactical considerations and where possible avoid civilian victims because Islam forbade the deliberate killing of women, children and the old. In this statement Abu Mukhammad categorically opposes the participation of women in suicide attacks. Since 2000 female suicide attackers – so-called “black widows” – have featured in the Chechen and North Caucasian insurgency and in terrorist attacks in the region and in Russia’s interior. Now the emir was forbidding his field commanders from using women for attacks.<sup>53</sup> While Abu Mukhammad said that he himself had personally forbidden women to take part in suicide attacks, this is contradicted by the Russian security forces, which assert that he used a “shhahida” (female martyr) from Dagestan, the Russian convert Amina Saprikina, for the assassination of Sheikh al-Chirkawi in 2012.

The statement renouncing attacks on civilian targets generated speculation as to whether Sochi Winter Olympics in February 2014 had been able to pass off without incident on account of a change of leadership and strategy within the Caucasus Emirate.<sup>54</sup> In fact there had already been contradictory statements on the permissibility of civilian victims in jihad under Abu Mukhammad’s predecessor Umarov. Spectacular attacks against “soft targets” and civilians in Russia’s interior were initially followed by a moratorium that was lifted again in the run-up to the Olympic Games to permit new threats against civilians. As emir, Abu Mukhammad also generally called for a harder fight against “the infidel” and Russian rule over Dagestan and the North Caucasus.

The Caucasus Emirate leadership’s attitude towards Sufism also remains ambiguous. According to Abu Mukhammad, its adherents were not automatically

<sup>50</sup> Steinberg, *A Chechen al-Qaeda?* (see note 17); Murad Bata al Shishani, “Islamist North Caucasian Rebels Training a New Generation of Fighters in Syria”, *Terrorism Monitor* 12, no. 3 (February 2014).

<sup>51</sup> Mairbek Vatchagaev, “Statement by New Leader of Caucasus Emirate Creates Rift among Chechen Groups Operating in Syria”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11, no. 21 (3 July 2014).

<sup>52</sup> Idem, “The Islamic State Is Set to Replace the Caucasus Emirate in the North Caucasus”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 12, no. 4 (8 January 2015).

<sup>53</sup> “New North Caucasus Insurgency Leader Seeks to Avoid Suicide Bombings”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Caucasus Report*, 3 July 2014.

<sup>54</sup> Vatchagaev, “The Epicenter of Insurgency” (see note 45).

enemies of the jihadist movement in the North Caucasus. They had, he said, been driven into conflict against the Salafists by the official clergy (in which *tariqat* representatives are involved at senior levels). However, he said, the Emirate’s struggle continued to be directed against elements who collaborated with the authorities. Two years earlier Doku Umarov also said that the Sufis were brothers and called on them to support the Islamist uprising.<sup>55</sup> Both currents – Salafism and Sufism – regard sharia as the ideal form of organisation of society. But the differences over what is religiously legitimate run deep, and affect the everyday lives of Dagestanis. Whereas traditional Islam proved to be compatible with Soviet and secular culture over many decades, radical Islam rejects the inclusion of secular customs in social life. One of many topics of contention is the new year celebration, which many Dagestanis regard as a traditional celebration but the Salafists condemn as heathen.

The death of Abu Mukhammad on 19 April 2015 poses the question whether Dagestani jihadists will continue to supply the leader of the emirate, and to what extent this virtual theocracy remains an independent force. However vital and capable the Caucasus Emirate turns out to be under new leadership, one thing is clear: an Islam controlled or managed by state authorities cannot represent the alternative to underground religious organisation. Enver Kisriyev, a Moscow-based regional expert of Dagestani extraction, underlined this in October 2014: “People are forced into oppositionist forms of Islam because they reject the policy of government-sponsored religious organisations.”<sup>56</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Idem, “Abu Muhammad Named New Dagestani Amir of Caucasus Emirate”, *Jamestown Militant Leadership Monitor* 5, no. 9 (30 September 2014).

<sup>56</sup> Enver Kisriyev, “Konfessional’nye problemy javljajutsja sledstviem vmešatel’sтва gosudarstva v religiju” [State intervention in religion creates confessional problems], *dagestanpost.ru*, 11 October 2014.

## Socio-economic Problems and Conflicts

In the official statistics on the districts of the Russian Federation, the North Caucasus stands out for its socio-economic problems. Its unemployment rate is higher than Russia's other districts, especially affecting the young. Average earnings are lower, and labour migration to Russia's interior stronger than from other peripheral regions.<sup>57</sup>

During the Soviet era Dagestan was in fact one of the more economically dynamic regions, and home to a naval base, various strategic institutes, important arms factories, and a scientific and technical college.<sup>58</sup> But after the demise of the Soviet Union, Dagestan's GDP fell and a significant shortage of employment arose. From the outset the younger generation was worst affected, in a republic where more than half of the population is aged under thirty. In 2009, then President Mukhu Aliyev pointed out that Dagestan's population was growing at a rate of thirty thousand per annum, whereas in the same period just nine thousand new jobs had been created.<sup>59</sup> Towards the end of the first post-Soviet decade a majority of the population was living below the poverty line. More than three-quarters of the republic's government funds were federal transfers, controlled by a group made up of about 6,500 members of various clans.<sup>60</sup> Corruption is far worse than the Russian average. Aliyev said in 2005 that not a single government job could be acquired without bribery.<sup>61</sup> Even a lowly rank in the police force cost up to \$5,000 at that time, a ministerial post up to \$500,000.<sup>62</sup> Field research in Dagestan has found a widespread belief, especially

among the young, that corruption impedes social mobility and makes it impossible to a job matching one's qualifications.<sup>63</sup>

Economic development is also paralysed by the clan ties that are particularly typical of Dagestan. Two businessmen of Dagestani extraction, Suleyman Kerimov and Ziyavudin Magomedov, are included in the Forbes list of Russia's wealthiest citizens. Although they did not make their fortunes at home in Dagestan, they compete for major investment contracts there and maintain close relations with the successive governments in Makhachkala. This has the consequence that economic concessions are redistributed when the government changes.<sup>64</sup>

Dagestan possesses relevant energy resources. Exploiting them could liberate the republic from the state budget of the Russian Federation, from which, as outlined above, most of its funding originates. The current Head of the Republic, Ramazan Abdulatipov, complained in 2014 that Dagestan had to import 85 percent of its natural gas needs, despite possessing its own reserves of 800 billion cubic metres. The Russian government, he said, was plainly not interested in initiating the development of energy resources in the Caucasus republic and reducing its financial dependency on the centre.<sup>65</sup>

In the industrial sector, on the other hand, Dagestan has demonstrated impressive growth rates in the past two years: 137.5 percent in 2013 and almost 140 percent in the first ten months of 2014. While these are currently the absolute highest amongst Russia's federal subjects, they owe less to indigenous economic growth than to massive investment from the centre. Funds have flowed above all into arms manufacturers, which in Soviet times formed a stand-out in the republic's industrial portfolio. These investment flows have

<sup>57</sup> In 2013 the average monthly wage in Dagestan was about 16,700 roubles (approx. \$510), significantly below the Russian Federation average of 23,000 roubles (\$710). The official unemployment rate in Dagestan fell to 12 percent in 2012, but this was still considerably above the average for the Federation. Górecki, *No Change in the Russian Caucasus* (see note 36), 31.

<sup>58</sup> Arbakhan Magomedov, "Dagestan and the Russian State: 'Stable Instability' Forever?", *Russian Analytical Digest* 70 (2009): 9–13 (10).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Shireen Hunter, *Islam in Russia: The Politics of Identity and Security* (Armonk, 2004), 44.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted from Tony Wood, *Chechnya: The Case for Independence* (London, 2007), 140.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>63</sup> Ratelle, *Radical Islam and the Chechen War Spillover* (see note 41), 111.

<sup>64</sup> Andrej Melamedov, "Mešanina klanovykh interesov i družeskikh svyazey" [Mix of clan interests and friendship ties], *gazeta.ru*, 13 January 2014, [http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2014/01/04\\_a\\_5829881.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2014/01/04_a_5829881.shtml) (accessed 7 April 2015).

<sup>65</sup> Valery Dzutsev, "Russia Stalls Expansion of Oil and Gas Production in Dagestan", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11, no. 173 (1 October 2014).

intensified in light of the Ukraine crisis. In other sectors, such as engineering, the figures are declining. The republic's leadership cites the aggregate industrial growth data to cast Dagestan's economic development in a positive light, but this conveys a distorted picture of reality.<sup>66</sup>

Opinion surveys show that the population regards economic problems as more pressing than the precarious security situation. In a survey of 475 Dagestan citizens in spring 2013, 61 percent named social and economic problems, especially the high level of youth unemployment, as a major problem. The security situation (terrorism and crime) came only second, with 50 percent. And inter-ethnic relations, which foreign researchers so like to focus on, ranked far behind.<sup>67</sup> The respondents associated the escalation of violence in their republic primarily with problems like unemployment and corruption (71 percent), only in second place (17 percent) with the influence of the external forces that the post-Soviet power elites are so quick to blame for instability. A large majority (91 percent) said in a survey in summer 2010 that systemic corruption harmed the republic more than religious and other extremism.<sup>68</sup>

Respondents also expressed clear views about human rights violations as cause and symptom of instability: 49 percent complained that state organs violated the "right to protection of life", while 29 percent felt that the "right to protection against arbitrary arrest" was ignored.<sup>69</sup> At a conference on countering religious extremism held at the beginning of August 2014 in Makhachkala, critical statements on these issues were heard from speakers with connections to the republic government for the first time. The activities of the federal and local law enforcement bodies were, they said, not only inadequate, but illegal attacks on the civilian population were counterproductive and provoked intra-Islamic conflicts in the first place.

In February 2014 the republic government addressed the supposed connection between socio-economic problems and Islamist insurgency by concluding an agreement with the administration of the district of Untskul and the village of Gimri. For years the mountainous region there had formed an especially fruitful

recruiting ground for the insurgency and had become the scene of permanent anti-terror operations. The Gimri agreement promises the district's residents better pay and social services if they support the fight against terrorism.<sup>70</sup>

However, regional experts warn against treating poverty and other socio-economic problems as a catch-all explanation for extremism and violence. High youth unemployment, they say, had become a mantra for local leaders seeking to explain destabilisation. But this, the experts object, represents nothing but an attempt to avoid deeper analysis of the causes of the spread of extremism, criminality and violence. Moreover, they say, the official socio-economic data needs to be treated with caution given the existence of a broad shadow economy outside the scope of fiscal and statistical recording. Indeed, 50 to 60 percent of economic activity in Dagestan lies in the unofficial economy.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, there are considerable differences within the republic. Whereas ratings place Dagestan as a whole thirty-third in the ranking of the attractiveness for investment in Russian districts,<sup>72</sup> its capital is one of Russia's more dynamic cities.<sup>73</sup> Here huge sums are being invested in projects including a port expansion, building new factories and promoting tourism on the Caspian Sea.

At the end of October 2014 Dagestan's parliament held an unusually open discussion of the inadequate political response to the republic's grave socio-economic problems. Matters that are largely passed over in silence in other parts of the North Caucasus, such as the fact that political elites and office-holders possess enormous riches for which they pay no taxes, were openly named. Dagestan, it was argued, possessed large potential for additional tax revenues, and a good third of land ownership in the capital was unregistered. Head of the Republic Abdulatipov also complained bitterly about this state of affairs, but at the same time admitted that he had no quick political solutions at hand.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Idem, "Dagestan's Industrial Output Grows Strongly – Thanks to Defense Spending and Loss of Russian Facilities in Ukraine", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11, no. 213 (1 December 2014).

<sup>67</sup> "Opros: Žiteli Dagestana" (see note 22).

<sup>68</sup> "Dagestan's President Suffers Further Rebuff", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 6 January 2011.

<sup>69</sup> "Opros: Žiteli Dagestana" (see note 22).

<sup>70</sup> "Can 'Gimri Agreement' Bring Stability to Dagestan?", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Caucasus Report*, 14 February 2014.

<sup>71</sup> Melamedov, "Mešanina klanovykh interesov i družeskikh svyazey" (see note 64).

<sup>72</sup> "Vozvraščenie Dagestana" [The resurrection of Dagestan], *Ekspert Jug*, no. 21 (2012), <http://expert.ru/south/2012/21/vozvrashchenie-dagestana/> (accessed 7 April 2015).

<sup>73</sup> "Dagestanskij ekonomičeskij ekspert Andrej Melamedov" (see note 71).

<sup>74</sup> Valery Dzutsev, "Government's Inability to Resolve Dagestan's Problems Gives Rise to Muslim Capitalist Class", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11, no. 207 (11 November 2014).

As in other parts of the Caucasus, especially Georgia, where more than half the population also works in agriculture, development problems in farming are especially pressing. Despite its favourable climate, Dagestan's agricultural productivity lies far below other regions of Russia. The sector is especially important, given that more than 60 percent of Dagestan's population lives in the rural regions, and a technological modernisation has been on the agenda for years. A referendum in 1993 rejected land privatisation, but tiny plots were subsequently passed into private ownership. More than 80 percent of agricultural output originates from extremely small operations using the most rudimentary techniques. Especially when it comes to distributing scarce land resources, socio-economic problems intersect with inter-ethnic. In certain regions of Dagestan, such as the Kumyk areas and districts affected by the Akkin problem, land distribution has become a conflict factor.

In fiscal respects Dagestan, like the other North Caucasian republics, numbers among the federal subjects most heavily dependent on the federal budget. In 2014 Moscow's budget subsidy for Ingushetia was 83 percent, Chechnya 82 percent, Dagestan 70 percent, Karachay-Cherkessia 65 percent, North Ossetia and Kabardino-Balkaria each 55 percent.<sup>75</sup> Alone the reconstruction of Chechnya after the destruction of the two wars, for which Ramzan Kadyrov claims credit but was in fact largely funded by the centre, has consumed considerable sums. On top of this come the funding of the protectorates of Abkhazia (70 percent of whose budget comes from Moscow) and South Ossetia (91 percent), whose secession from Georgia the Kremlin supported. The subsidisation of federal subjects and protectorates in the Caucasus has popularised the slogan "Stop featherbedding the Caucasus!" among the population of Russia's interior and fanned an anti-Caucasian xenophobia. In fact, on a per-capita basis other regions of Russia receive much greater support from the centre.

<sup>75</sup> Idem, "Russian Expert Warns North Caucasus Faces Economic Recession", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 12, no. 6 (12 January 2015).



## Political Developments 2006–2014

As far as the political climate is concerned, the Republic of Dagestan is relatively liberal in comparison to Chechnya, and its civil society is stronger than in Kadyrov's fiefdom. There is also – unlike in Chechnya – at least limited freedom of the press. As described earlier, Dagestan's ethnic diversity supports a certain degree of political pluralism and hinders autocratic moves, with its multi-ethnic status long preventing the introduction of a single-person as president or head of the republic. Not until early 2006 did the Kremlin install the Avar Mukhu Aliyev as president. In the Soviet era he had been a high-ranking party functionary, and later for ten years served as speaker of parliament. He was regarded as a "man of the people" in a republic where political power had traditionally been tied to the support of local and ethnic patronage networks. Aliyev, it appeared initially, stood above that system of clans.

Hopes of anti-corruption and better governance were to be disappointed, however. The slogan "No to corruption and nepotism!", which ushered in the leadership change, dissipated. Instead the economy deteriorated and the security situation remained precarious. Senior government officials were killed in terrorist attacks. For all the hopes that had been placed in him, Aliyev's term ended in disappointment after three years.

Moscow replaced him in 2009 with Magomedsalam Magomedov, son of the long-serving State Council chair and substitute president. This shifted political power in the ethnic spectrum from the Avars back to the Dargins. The new president found himself confronted with the legacy of the fourteen-year rule of his father Magomedali Magomedov, which the intervening office-holder Aliyev had failed to tackle. This meant above all corruption and nepotism. Moscow deployed Magomedsalam Magomedov on the international stage, for example for a state visit to Jordan in October 2010, seeking to persuade King Abdullah to work together in the fight against religious extremism and terrorism. In Dagestan Magomedov worked above all to promote dialogue between the conflicting Sufis and Salafists and for the reintegration of the "forest brothers", the insurgency, into society. The aforementioned conferences with Islamic scholars from

the Middle East also fell in his term of office.<sup>76</sup> He also convened a Dagestani congress of ethnicities in December 2010, whose almost three thousand participants condemned religious extremism and terrorism and called on the populace to support the fight against the insurgency. One outcome of the congress was the creation of a committee for the reintegration of underground fighters. But like his predecessors, Magomedsalam Magomedov was unable to improve the security situation. Although the Republic's interior minister put the number of insurgents in 2010 at only 190, distributed across nine militant groups, fighting flared between security forces and rebels in Makhachkala, Khasavyurt and Derbent, and in the rural districts of Buynaksk and Untsukul.<sup>77</sup> Continuing security tensions finally led Moscow to initiate yet another leadership change.

At the beginning of 2013 the Kremlin replaced Magomedov with Ramazan Abdulatipov. Abdulatipov is probably the Dagestani best-known in Moscow, where he was regarded as an expert for inter-ethnic relations and religious conflicts in the North Caucasus; in 1999/2000 he briefly headed the Ministry for Nationality Affairs and Federal Relations before it was scrapped a year later. So once again a figure of hope stepped up to lead the republic, promising first of all to fight corruption and clan patronage. He had dozens of local administrators replaced, and sent a dramatic signal to the powerful clan leaders, breaking the power of Said Amirov, mayor of the capital since 1998 and regarded as one of Dagestan's most influential figures with a large following. Previously several assassination attempts had been made on Amirov's life. He was arrested in June 2013 and handed over to Moscow, where he was charged with the murder of an investigator in a criminal case against him.

Although Abdulatipov's campaign against corruption and nepotism led to the replacement of personnel, the underlying structures remained almost untouched. It was not to be expected that a problem like clanism and patronage, which has such fundamental social

<sup>76</sup> See above, p. 16.

<sup>77</sup> "Daghestan's Leaders Issue Ultimatum to Militants", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Caucasus Report*, 26 July 2010.

and political significance for Dagestan, could simply be abolished at a stroke. The problem is determined by many criteria of belonging and community alongside the ethnic, and decisively shapes the republic's politics and business life. Moreover, counter-insurgency remained the top priority and overshadowed reform programmes. The practice of counter-terrorism operations in the Abdulatipov era was characterised by a clear strengthening of the “siloviki” and the security forces. The security apparatus returned to earlier methods for fighting the rebels. As in Chechnya, the houses of relatives of fighters are blown up and detained “terror suspects” enjoy little expectation of a fair trial. Abdulatipov responds to complaints from citizens about heavy-handedness and impunity of the security forces with the argument that Dagestan needs to “cleanse itself”, and that requires a great deal of patience.

After two years under Abdulatipov's leadership, however, criticism of the government is growing. It is also expressed by Putin's new presidential envoy in the North Caucasus, the Dagestani Sergei Melikov. Awareness of a systemic crisis has grown in the republic. And again the people wait for Moscow to intervene.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Valeriy Dzutsev, “Moscow's Divide and Rule Policy in Dagestan Results in Much Divide but Little Rule”, *CACI Analyst*, 29 October 2014.

# Outlook

Russia regards neighbouring Ukraine as an internally torn state, a “non-state” according to President Putin. But Russia ignores the extent to which it is itself challenged by unresolved internal integration problems, above all in the North Caucasus and by an “internal abroad” like Dagestan. Russia’s position in the Caucasian region as a whole remains contradictory. On the one hand, the Kremlin counts the South Caucasus as part of its “privileged sphere of influence” in the post-Soviet space; in this sense, Russia binds a country like Armenia into its integrative Eurasian Economic Union project and responds with pressure and threats to Euro-Atlantic moves affecting Georgia’s foreign policy and security. On the other hand, Moscow struggles to ensure security, stability or even simply good governance in its own Caucasian periphery. Dagestan can be regarded as a prime example of that failure.

Dagestan is not only the most complicated republic of the Russian Federation. It belongs in the broadest sense to Europe, because the largely Muslim North Caucasus is geographically part of European Russia. And while Europe enjoys little access to the North Caucasus, the South Caucasus forms a relevant sector of the European Union’s eastern neighbourhood. Research into post-Soviet developments has generally treated the North and South Caucasus separately. But already in the transition from the Soviet to the post-Soviet period critical intersections existed between North and South Caucasian crisis and conflict regions. With its borders to Azerbaijan and Georgia, Dagestan represents such an intersection.<sup>79</sup>

From the European perspective, however, it is most relevant that the zone of Islamist insurgency in the post-Soviet space lies not in Central Asia, on the borders to Afghanistan, but in the North Caucasus; in other words, on Europe’s southern periphery. This is easily overlooked, because terrorist activities emanating from here have to date proliferated not into the territory of the European Union, but into Russia’s interior. In fact, Dagestan has displaced Chechnya, to which external perceptions of the North Caucasus were large-

ly restricted in the post-Soviet era, to the margins of the North Caucasian insurgency, and increasingly itself become the centre of the jihadist Caucasus Emirate.

Although the number of attacks and deaths fell in 2014 in the North Caucasus, and disputes within the emirate raise questions concerning its viability, the insurgency in Dagestan and the broader North Caucasus nonetheless remains a security challenge – for Europe as well as for Russia. The apparently relatively large number of fighters that have travelled from Chechnya, Dagestan and other parts of the Caucasus to Syria and Iraq indicates that the security relevance of Caucasian jihadism extends far beyond Russia itself. While the groups operating there tend to be labelled “Chechens” they actually include recruits from Dagestan and other republics as well as from the North Caucasian diasporas in Turkey, Germany and other European states. It cannot be excluded the new connections forged in Syria will also affect the security situation in Europe. After a period in the shadow of the Ukraine conflict, the rise of the Islamic State returned the North Caucasus to the heart of the security discourse in 2015, in Russia too.

## Abbreviations

CACI	Central Asia-Caucasus Institute (Washington, D.C.)
CIS	Confederation of Independent States
DUMD	Duchovnoe upravlenie musul'man Dagestana (Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Dagestan)
DUMSK	Duchovnoe upravlenie musul'man Severnogo Kavkaza (Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of the North Caucasus)
ICG	International Crisis Group
IS	Islamic State
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
OSW	Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich (Centre for Eastern Studies, Warsaw)

<sup>79</sup> Uwe Halbach, *Trennlinien und Schnittstellen zwischen Nord- und Südkaukasus*, SWP-Aktuell 31/2012 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, June 2012).