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# INTERETHNIC RELATIONS IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS

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## Abstract

The North Caucasus is the most multi-ethnic region of the Russian Federation and one of the main foci of ethnic tension in the country. The ethnic strife there affects not only relations between the indigenous peoples and the Russians, but also relations between the various North Caucasian indigenous peoples. A high birthrate and the relative underdevelopment of the region have resulted in agrarian overpopulation and growing unemployment and underemployment. This situation aggravates the struggle for land and the competition for a limited number of privileged and lucrative positions in the local administrations between the members of different ethnic groups. Given the diverse character of various ethnic conflicts in the region and the deep historical roots of many of them, one may dare to predict that the North Caucasus will remain one of the most explosive parts of the Russian Federation.

## Introduction

The North Caucasus is one of the most multi-ethnic regions in the world. Dozens of different ethnic groups who speak different languages and have different cultural traditions live there in a relatively small territory, sometimes occupying the same areas. Ethnic tensions and conflicts are the perennial problem in the region, and the events of the last one hundred fifty years have only aggravated it further. The Chechen crisis, on which a special report will be devoted this fall, has demonstrated that the situation in the North Caucasus may become crucial for the fate of the Russian Federation in general and for the ongoing political process in the country.

## Historical Background

The Russian empire conquered the North Caucasus only in the 1860s, after the long Caucasian war. Soon afterwards, a significant part of the indigenous population, particularly in the North-Western Caucasus, was expelled to or forced to emigrate to the Ottoman empire. Their lands were given to the Cossacks and to other Russian settlers in the region. In the Soviet period, the region was delimited into several administrative units and autonomous formations; the latter were based on an ethnic principle, but this principle was never pursued consistently. At the same time, the ethnic composition of the region became even more

complicated. In the 1920s, many Cossacks were persecuted, while, in 1944, some indigenous peoples were exiled by Stalin to Central Asia and Siberia, and their lands were allocated to other peoples and new migrants.

The return of exiled peoples beginning in 1957, internal migrations of the indigenous population, and numerous administrative border changes have contributed to the region's mosaic pattern of ethnic composition and further aggravated ethnic tensions there.

### **The Current Situation**

At the same time, a high birthrate and relative underdevelopment of the region resulted in agrarian overpopulation and growing un- and under-employment. A struggle for land between different ethnic groups is the underlying reason for many conflicts in the North Caucasus, which are often aimed at ousting members of some ethnic groups from specific territories on which members of other groups claim their historic rights.

This relatively quiet and gradual ethnic ousting in the North Caucasus has recently acquired three main forms:

(1) Some Russian groups, mainly the Cossacks in the Stavropol'skii and Krasnodarskii administrative territories (*krais*) are trying to expel people who belong to the indigenous North Caucasian ethnic groups, as well as the recent refugees to the area, such as the Armenians and the Meskhetian Turks.

(2) On the other hand, members of indigenous ethnic groups are trying to oust the Russians from the territories of their autonomous formations.

(3) Members of some indigenous ethnic groups are trying to oust the members of other North Caucasian groups from the territories on which the former claim their historical rights. This form of ethnic ousting is at present the most widespread.

This ousting attracts relatively little attention because it rarely takes the form of outright ethnic cleansing, as happened during the Ossetian-Ingush conflict. More often, those ethnic groups who claim a historical right to a given territory try to oust the others from that territory by making them pay ransom for their property, or by using various kinds of unofficial discrimination in employment, promotion, or everyday life, or even by resorting to threats, arson, beating, and other similar measures.

Some exceptions notwithstanding, tensions in ethnic relations, and in the ongoing political process in the North Caucasus tend to increase towards the east. One may trace other differences which explain this situation. A shortage of arable land and pastures, and high unemployment are much more acute problems for the North-Eastern than for the

North–Western Caucasus. Ethnic composition also becomes more complicated in the eastern direction, and in the same direction the influence of Islam is growing.

Since the situation in the North Caucasus varies significantly in different parts of the region, I will describe briefly the most important local differences.

### **The North–Western Caucasus**

The indigenous ethnic groups in the North–Western Caucasus are now the minority. The majority consists of Russians. However, the indigenous peoples there have three separate autonomous formations: the Adyge Republic, the Karachay–Circassian Republic, and the Kabardino–Balkar Republic. Actually, Adyge, Circassians, and Kabardinians, along with Abazins and Shapsug who lack autonomous formations of their own, are but territorial groups of one and the same people, usually called Adyge or Circassians. At the same time, Karachay and Balkar speak the same language which is quite different from that of the Adyge, and differ culturally from the latter in many ways. The arbitrary political delineation of the area has resulted in struggles for power and for lucrative positions in administration between the ethnic groups.

Although ethnic tension in the North–Western Caucasus has not yet acquired a bloody form, it is quite appreciable.

(1) The main goal of various Adyge nationalistic movements and organizations is political unification of all Adyge into a single political formation, as well as the return of the descendants of those who were exiled from their homeland after the Caucasian war in the 19th century. Those people number now 1.5 to 2 million and are dispersed in many Middle Eastern countries where they are known by the common name Circassians. So far only 3 thousand people have returned, but many more are visiting their historical homeland, and are trying to establish business contacts with their compatriots, or to propagate Islamic values, including Islamic fundamentalism. All these developments alarm the non-Adyge ethnic groups in the area.

(2) Two Turkic-speaking peoples in the North–Western Caucasus, Karachay and Balkar, complain that they are discriminated against by Russians and particularly by Adyge. They want to secede and establish autonomous formations of their own; this intention meets the resistance of the Circassian and Kabardinian political elites occupying most of the privileged positions in the corresponding republics. The territorial dispute in which the Kabardinians and the Balkar are involved, and the problem of power sharing in Kabardino–Balkaria, strain relations between these two peoples.

(3) The third focus of ethnic tensions in the North–Western Caucasus is connected with the attitude of the Russian population towards the indigenous North Caucasian peoples, which is sometimes overtly aggressive and chauvinist. In this respect, the Cossacks, who enjoy the support of the Russian military in the region and of some politicians in Moscow, and who often put themselves beyond the effective control of the local administration, are certainly playing a negative role. Thus, the Cossacks in Karachaevo–Circassia unilaterally declared the creation of their own Urupsko–Zelenchuksko Cossack republic and are trying to oust the Karachay minority from this territory.

Russian policy in the North–Western Caucasus is influenced mainly by a desire to preserve the status quo. The Russian leadership prefers to rely on, and to support, the conservative political elites - the ex-Communists who still retain power. At the same time, it is trying to placate the Cossack movement with one concession after another. Some Russian experts on the North Caucasus characterized Yeltsin's decree on the Cossacks as "crazy" and "inflammatory."

### **North Ossetia**

The political situation in this republic is determined mainly by two factors: the conflict between South Ossetia and Georgia, and the conflict between the North Ossetians and the Ingush. North Ossetia is separated from South Ossetia by the Great Caucasian mountain range. The former belongs to the Russian Federation, while the latter, until recently, was an autonomous district of Georgia. Historically, South Ossetia was always a part of Georgia and the Ossetians began to settle there only in the medieval period. Still, in the Soviet period many South Ossetians wanted their autonomous district to be united with North Ossetia, into a single political body within the Russian Federation. Although this desire was more wishful thinking than a direct political demand, one should take into account that the Ossetians, the majority of whom profess not Islam but Orthodox Christianity, are traditionally the group most loyal to Russia, and the people in the North Caucasus most favored by Russia.

When Georgia, under the leadership of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, took the path of independence, the South Ossetians, encouraged by Moscow, unilaterally elevated the status of their autonomous formation and explicitly indicated their desire to secede from Georgia and to unite with North Ossetia. The military conflict that followed in 1992 receded only after Russia sent peace-keeping troops to the area. However, the armistice did not solve the political problem — the status of South Ossetia remains unclear, as does the problem of refugees. Most South Ossetians who had fled to North Ossetia returned home. However, there are about 30,000 ethnic Georgians who fled from South Ossetia and are still unable to return home; and

in addition, there are about 50,000 Ossetians who fled to North Ossetia from western and central parts of Georgia. Not particularly liked and welcomed by their North Ossetian brethren, they turned out to be very prone to extremism and, consequently, are playing a destabilizing role in the North Caucasus.

The second conflict in which North Ossetia is involved at present is its conflict with the Ingush. Initially, it began as a territorial dispute over the Prigorodnyi district, which is a historical homeland of the Ingush people. After the Ingush were defeated in the Caucasian war, this territory was confiscated by the Tsarist government for Cossack colonization. However, in 1918, the Soviet government expelled the Cossacks from this district and returned it to the Ingush. In 1944, it was the Ingush's turn. They were exiled to Central Asia, and the Prigorodnyi district was given to the Ossetians as a reward for their loyalty. In 1957, the Ingush were allowed to return home, but the district was not given back to them. Although the Ossetian authorities tried to prevent individual Ingush families from settling in the district, already by the beginning of the 1980s the Ingush constituted the majority there. This territorial dispute could develop into a bloody conflict at any time, and the policy of the Russian leadership only facilitates its outbreak.

In 1991, the Supreme Council of the Russian Federation issued a law on the exoneration of persecuted peoples, in accordance with which all the territories that they had possessed before their deportation should be given back to them. The Ingush were jubilant. However, it soon became clear that the new territorial re-allotment in the North Caucasus was fraught with numerous new ethnic conflicts. The law was suspended, to the extreme disappointment of the Ingush.

At that time, Moscow encouraged the Ingush to secede from the recalcitrant Chechen republic and to declare the creation of their own republic within the Russian Federation. Actually, the Ingush and Chechen are two closely related peoples who speak the same language. Prior to 1934, each of them had their own autonomous formation; then, by the Kremlin's order, the binational Checheno-Ingush autonomous republic was created. Being in the minority, the Ingush thought that they were at a disadvantage in this republic. Moscow's hint that they would have a better chance to get their territory back if they demonstrated their loyalty to Moscow was taken too seriously.

In 1992, the Ingush seceded from Chechnya and promulgated the creation of their own republic, which was promptly recognized by the Russian leadership. The Ingush were told, however, that the immediate solution of their territorial dispute with the Ossetians was impossible.

Thus, both sides became dissatisfied with Moscow: the Ossetians —because the Russian leadership did not provide them with a firm guarantee that the disputed territory would always remain Ossetian; the Ingush — because the territory was not returned to them. This divide and rule policy soon backfired.

In the fall of 1992, the Ossetian–Ingush conflict turned bloody. In a few days, several hundred people were killed; thousands were wounded; 900 Ossetian houses and 3,000 Ingush houses were burned or blown up. The Russian troops that were sent to the region on an alleged peace-keeping mission joined the Ossetian side and actively participated in ethnic cleansing of the disputed territory.

There are many facts that prove that the decision to support the Ossetians was made at the highest level of the Russian leadership. Thus, several Russian generals who protested against the participation of the Russian troops in reprisal against the civilian Ingush population were forced to resign. After the airing on Russian TV of a documentary film that objectively dealt with the conflict, Yeltsin fired its chairman, Egor Yakovlev, although the President owed this man a lot for his staunch support during Yeltsin’s ascension to power.

Sixty thousand Ingush were expelled from the Prigorodnyi district and had to join 200,000 compatriots on the tiny and overcrowded territory of Ingushetia. The Ingush were trapped. They lost the support of their Chechen relatives and were betrayed by Russia. Although the Russian leadership declared many times that the refugees would be allowed to return home, the Ossetian authorities sabotage all measures aimed at the implementation of this decision; while the Russian government demonstrates no desire to enforce it against the Ossetian will. This situation can hardly last for long, and the probability of another explosion is very high.

### **Dagestan**

While the North Caucasus is one of the most multi-ethnic regions in the world, Dagestan is the most multi-ethnic region in the North Caucasus. The country is occupied by more than forty different ethnic groups. It would be a miracle if these peoples avoided ethnic tensions. They do not. Yet, under the currently prevailing conditions in the ex-Soviet Union, they have so far miraculously managed to avoid overt and bloody conflicts. Still, the tension exists and is connected mainly with two problems: (1) the problem of power sharing between members of different ethnic groups who compete with each other for a limited number of privileged positions in the local government and administration; and (2) the problem of competition for scarce land resources.

Significantly, with the exception of the Communists, the most numerous and active parties and movements in Dagestan are organized strictly along ethnic lines. Thus, nationalities

became political bodies with corporate interests. The struggle for political power is particularly strong between the major ethnic groups of Dagestan: Avars, Dargins, Kumyks, and Lezgins, and, to a certain degree, also Laks and Nogay. In all appointments to ministerial and other high positions, the ethnic affiliation of aspirants, as well as the number of positions already occupied by members of their ethnic group, are seriously taken into account and always become a political bargaining point. At the same time, ethnic favoritism is taken for granted in Dagestan as something quite natural.

An even more acute problem in Dagestan is land competition. A shortage of arable land pushes the mountaineers to migrate to the plain and piedmont areas of the country. In the Soviet period these migrations were sometimes voluntary and spontaneous, but sometimes people were forced to migrate by the government. In any case, these migrations resulted in the further complication of the ethnic composition of Dagestan. Territory occupied now by Avars, Dargins, and Laks increased significantly over the last fifty years, sometimes at the expense of other ethnic groups. Members of different groups are now living not only side-by-side but often together, sharing the same territory; and those who consider it as their homeland complain that new settlers encroach upon their historical patrimony.

The Kumyks are particularly resentful since at present they constitute only 23.6% of the population on the territory they consider their own. No wonder their influential ethnic organization, "*Tenglik*", demands the creation of a separate Kumyk republic.

A separatist movement is also strong in Southern Dagestan, although for different reasons, among the Lezgins. First, the Lezgins complain that they are underrepresented in the government and administration of the republic. Second, and more important, a significant number of Lezgins live in the neighboring districts of Azerbaidjan, and until recently the Azerbaidjanian government was pursuing a policy of discrimination and assimilation towards them. The leaders of the Lezgin mass organization "*Sadval*" claim that the best solution to these problems would be the creation of a separate Lezgin republic which should embrace the Lezgin-populated districts of Dagestan and Azerbaidjan. At the moment, this demand is hardly realistic, but potentially it may become explosive and aggravate the situation in Dagestan, as well as relations between Azerbaidjan and Russia.

Another problem of Dagestan which could have a serious impact on future political development in the region is the growing influence of Islam, particularly among the Dargins and Avars. The events in neighboring Chechnya make Islamic identity more salient and more popular, since historically this religion in Dagestan was always connected with anti-Russian and anti-colonial struggles. Besides, many people are looking to Islam for the unifying force that should help to overcome ethnic divisions and rivalries.

In spite of all these problems, a relatively peaceful ethnic coexistence is still maintained in Dagestan. Several times ethnic tensions reached a level at which they could have easily developed into direct confrontation, but at the last moment opposing sides understood the possible dangerous consequences of their dispute and preferred to step back. In contrast to the other republics of the North Caucasus, Moscow has so far not meddled directly in the ethnic relations in Dagestan and is not trying to play one ethnic group against another. Apparently, two factors define this non-interference policy. First, the number of Russians living in Dagestan is rather small, less than 20% of the whole population, and has been constantly decreasing during the last twenty five years. Second, the secessionist movements in Dagestan are at present rather weak, and political power remains in the hands of ex-Communist elites who do not wish to break with Moscow.

Be that as it may, the peoples of Dagestan are allowed to settle their disputes themselves. Sometimes, a political, albeit temporary, compromise has been achieved. Thus, it was decided that, contrary to the other republics of the Russian Federation, Dagestan would not have a presidency; instead, a collective body was instituted in which each ethnic group would have its own representative. A ban on internal resettlements, and some successfully negotiated reallocations of land, also help to decrease ethnic tensions.

Still, the future of Dagestan remains unclear, and different groups of the Dagestania society have different visions of this future. Some would like the country to remain a unitary republic within the Russian Federation. Others want to transform it into a federate republic maintaining ties with the Russian Federation in general. Still others dream about independent Dagestan as a part of the confederation of the mountain peoples of the Northern Caucasus. Only the future will tell which of these visions, if any, will be realized in practice.

### **The Impact of the Military Campaign in Chechnya on the Ethnic Situation in the North Caucasus**

The Russian military campaign in Chechnya again pushed to the forefront the problem of relations between the Russians and the indigenous peoples of the North Caucasus. Only the Ossetian leadership was supportive of the actions undertaken by the Russian leadership, although public opinion in Ossetia is much more ambiguous on the issue. The leaders of all other north Caucasian republics continue to call for a peaceful solution of the conflict. Public opinion is overwhelmingly on the Chechen side and conceives the Chechen crisis as another proof that the federative character of the Russian Federation exists mainly on paper.

In the beginning of the Chechen campaign, Russian forces that moved through Ingushetia and Dagestan met resistance from the local population attempting to thwart the invasion of

Chechnya. Ingush civilians, including women and children, barricaded roads and placed themselves in front of advancing columns. Some tanks and military vehicles were fired on, and others were captured and set ablaze. Similar events occurred in Dagestan. Ingushetia is already subject to "occasional" air strikes, and many people there are afraid that what has happened to Chechnya will soon be repeated in Ingushetia. Some volunteers from other North Caucasian republics are fighting on the Chechen side. At present it is impossible to estimate their number; however, in the spring of 1995 my Kabardinian informants claimed that at least several dozens of their compatriots joined the Chechens in fighting against the Russian troops. As late as May 1995, my informants in Dagestan insisted that the Chechens continued to receive arms from Azerbaidjan through Dagestan and that this was possible only because sympathy with the Chechen plight persists in Dagestan. Although the predictions that the invasion of Chechnya would result in the second Caucasian war turned out to be wrong, anti-Russian feelings in the North Caucasus are today stronger than ever during the last decades.