

## DETERMINANTS OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN THE NORTHERN CAUCASUS: REGIONAL ASPECT

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### ABSTRACT

**T**he conflict potential that the Northern Caucasus had accrued throughout its history has made it a complicated and depressed region, a scene of confrontation of different political systems, diverse peoples and ethnic groups, seeking power and access to its resources.<sup>1</sup> In the absence of

political pluralism and freedom, poverty and social inequality provoke violence as an efficient mechanism of interaction. These conditions provide the background for the authors' discussion of various types of political

<sup>1</sup> See: M.M. Betilmerzaeva, "Severny Kavkaz na styke traditsionnoy i globalizatsionnoy kultur: strategii vzaimodeystvia," in: *Kavkaz: poisk modeley uskorenno*

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violence, its nature and causes. They present specific examples of how power elites use violence and the methods to which they resort to profit from conflicts.

The authors have concentrated on political elites as the main factors responsible for decision-making in different spheres. As subjects of political violence, they rely on ethnopolitical, religious and economic slogans to be actively involved in the political processes unfolding in the region.

In the early 1990s, we witnessed an upsurge of what was presented as the "national consciousness" and which was, in fact, tension, conflicts and contradictions, stirred up by the North Caucasian political

and administrative elites. Moscow has no choice but to take into account their interests and their strategies, in order to keep them away from using mobilizing resources to ignite and fan conflicts. The regional elites habitually use political violence as one of the instruments of their strategy: uncompromising opposition to any political or religious polemic, the use of force when dealing with any issues, including economic, as well as repressions, violations of electoral process, etc.

The authors have concluded their discussion with concise recommendations on how to possibly prevent political violence in the region.

**KEYWORDS:** *Russia, the Northern Caucasus, violence, political violence, conflictology, determinants, ethnopolitical elites, political process.*

## *Introduction*

The ethnopolitical situation in the Northern Caucasus is habitually described as contradictory, erratic and conflicting, and determined by numerous political, social, economic and cultural dissonances. With the Soviet Union's disintegration, the national republics have acquired sovereignty, economic problems and the "historical memory," which changed political realities and triggered permutation within ethnic elites, separatism, etc. Political violence is used to seize and retain power, and to base it on archaization, ethno-centrism, cultural dissonance, identity crisis, poverty, and other factors.

We are living in a technogenic civilization, which, while improving the quality of everyday life, had created a lot of problems in some of the regions of the world.<sup>2</sup> The regional administrative-political elites are based on ethnicity, their members belonging to definite clans or ethnic groups. This means that conflicts have become frequent and inevitable, while their escalation threatens, to a great extent, the democratic process and political stability.

Terrorism is one of the main aspects of political violence in the region, in which terrorist and extremist organizations operate as integral parts of international terrorist network and as such, threaten the region with conflicts.<sup>3</sup> This means that we should identify the reasons that force young peo-

<sup>2</sup> See: M.M. Betilmerzaeva, "Mesto i rol gumanitarnogo znanja i dukhovnoy bezopasnosti v kontekste multikulturalizma," in: *Sbornik materialov II Mezhdunarodnoy nauchno-prakticheskoy konferentsii (Grozny, 19 December, 2015)*, ALEF (IP Ovchinnikov M.A.), Makhachkala, 2015, pp. 74-82.

<sup>3</sup> See: G.V. Volgushev, "Vooruzhennyye sily i sovremennyye vidy politicheskogo nasilia," *Nauchnye issledovaniya i razrabotki molodykh uchenykh*, No. 1, 2014, pp. 55-58; [<http://news.bcm.ru/topic/164>], 11 October, 2016.

ple to join terrorist organizations. It seems that driven by poverty and the lack of fairness in everyday life, they become easy prey for ideological brainwashing of extremist emissaries.<sup>4</sup> In fact, rather than fighting the repercussions of terrorist acts and the separatist sentiments, the elites should concentrate on the social and economic factors in which terrorism and poverty are rooted.

In the last few years, Russia's geopolitical position has changed dramatically, its economics being weakened by the impact of sanctions initiated by the European Union, the U.S. and other countries, plummeting oil prices and international pressure directed at Russia. The budgets of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation were likewise affected. The North Caucasian republics (80% of their budgets depending on subsidies from Moscow) lost a great deal of their incomes; this increased social and political tension and exacerbated the disagreements among the elite groups.

## The Nature of Political Violence

According to Ozhegov's classical *Tolkovy slovar russkogo yazyka* (Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language) violence is "the use of physical force against somebody; coercion and violation of personal immunity."<sup>5</sup> We, on our side, tend to agree with the definition given by Svetlana Kuzina: "A method of institutionalization of social relations in the course of which individuals or groups of people rely on various means and methods of external coercion and manipulation to subjugate the consciousness, willpower, ability, productive forces, property and freedom of others to capture power, retain it and continue functioning."<sup>6</sup> In other words, this means: violence used by state institutions to achieve political aims.

There are all sorts of factors (determinants) that stir up conflicts and escalate political violence, including political determinants (lack of rights and freedoms, power struggle, etc.), social (social differentiation, unemployment and dissatisfaction with one's own status), economic (property inequality, stratification and unfair distribution of benefits and resources), international and cultural factors (chauvinism, ethnocentrism, nationalism, anti-Semitism), etc.<sup>7</sup>

It would be useful to separate political legitimate violence and illegal coercion. Legitimate violence is the mechanism, which is used to persuade citizens to obey the legal demands of the authorities and observe the rules and norms of behavior. This is a voluntary submission, achieved by persuasion, authority, etc. Illegal coercion means suppression of civil and political freedoms, persecution of political opponents with the help of fabricated criminal cases, suppression of contrary opinions, unwarranted use of force by authorities, corporal punishment, etc.

As Neil Smelser pointed out, in democratic states the authorities are more or less tolerant of manifestations of protest, rallies or other forms of public criticism. In less democratic regimes, the

<sup>4</sup> See: O.A. Kovrizhnykh, "Spravedlivost kak ideologicheskoe obosnovanie politicheskogo nasilia," *Vestnik Tambovskogo universiteta*, Seria: Gumanitarnye nauki, Vol. 20, No. 11 (151), 2015, pp. 170-176.

<sup>5</sup> [<http://www.xn--80aacc4bir7b.xn>], 21 October, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> S.I. Kuzina, *Politicheskoe nasilie: priroda, manifestirovanie i dinamika v globaliziruiushchemsia mire*, Author's synopsis of doctorate thesis, 23.00.02, Rostov on Don, 2010, p. 3; I.Yu. Zalyzin, "Ponyatie 'politicheskoe nasilie' v politologii i ugovnom pravie," *Probely v rossiiskom zakonodatelstve*, No. 1, 2014, pp. 166-169.

<sup>7</sup> See: E.V. Pykhteeva, "Determinanty politicheskogo nasilia v sovremennoy Rossii," *Vestnik Omskogo universiteta*, No. 1 (63), 2012, pp. 331-339.

authorities treat criticism by journalists, activists or common people as a threat and firmly rebuff it.<sup>8</sup> In the Northern Caucasus, the destructive model of conflict behavior prevails; it includes different forms of physical and psychological deterrents, designed to cause the greatest possible damage to an opponent. Destructive conflict behavior is typical of authoritarian and unstable political systems, in which violence is used to achieve desired results.

Political violence provokes negative responses: opposition and dissent, emotional protests and the desire to settle scores. In view of the very special cultural heritage of the North Caucasian peoples, public reprimands and reproaches, as well as applied forms of political violence are regarded as the worst of insults; they cause alienation and social deviations, especially acute among the younger generation.

The attitude of the electorate toward those in power is determined by the way the material benefits are distributed; the degree to which people are satisfied with their social roles, possibilities of self-organization, and their place in the hierarchy. Injustice by the regional elites, shady economics, the fact that the same people remain in power for a long time may stir up riots, public dissatisfaction and migration, etc. That is precisely why terrorist organizations are involved in charities; they patronize orphans, widows and the poorest social groups to open doors to political opportunities and access to institutions of state power. Having found no fairness in the society in which they live, young people turn to extremist organizations. The ethnic elites, for their part, do not seek consensus with their opponents and their critics.

It should be kept in mind that the Caucasus is a very complicated political entity, made of numerous ethnicities, clans and social groups. Moscow should tread carefully, since any rash act might start long conflicts and periods of opposition. The regional ethnic elites are fully aware of this and are skillfully manipulating their resource base to retain the status quo.

## Political Violence and the Regional Political Elites

The ethnopolitical elites are one of the catalysts of political violence in the region. They are an important cog in the administrative wheel of the political process and an important factor that influences the regional and federal political transformations.

They function on the basis of personal loyalty to a leader, close kinship relations and common origins of one family, *teip*, etc. Incorporation and functioning are rooted in the patron-client system; new people are recruited to circulate within the same guilds. Protectionism in recruiting personnel and in distribution of posts is one of the typical features of the North Caucasian elites, together with the extremely closed nature of their circles and decision-making.

The structure of the regional ethnopolitical elite does not necessarily correspond to the structure of the bodies of state power. The political process is dominated by informal pressure groups, clans or cliques that close ranks around their leaders and control certain structures of state power or business. The clandestine power struggle and the efforts to seize power and spheres of influence from the rivals never end. The North Caucasian elite is driven by a group rather than national interests—a very typical feature of the clan system.

In the 1990s, when the power base was being changed in the Chechen Republic, the ethnic elites did not hesitate to use political violence. The coup that removed the administration of the republic

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<sup>8</sup> See: S.I. Kuzina, "Institutsionalizatsia politicheskogo nasilia," *Filosofia prava*, No. 3, 2009, pp. 48-51.

dredged up political adventurers, marginal groups and even lumpens. They set up the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, in which abductions, slave trade, drug trafficking, illegal oil production, and trade in oil and oil products were common practices. Criminal and terrorist structures moved their criminal businesses outside the Republic.

Not infrequently, ethnic elites rely on stereotypes of autochthonous people as justification for seizing power. This happened in Chechnia where the elites exploited the political, economic, psychological and cultural specifics of the local society to remain in power and grow rich. Later, in 1999, the Russian-Chechen conflict spread into the mountainous part of Daghestan: terrorist units from Chechnia invaded the neighboring republic. Russia responded by bringing its armed forces into Chechnia to restore the “constitutional order.”

The Russian-Chechen conflict of 1994-2000 can be described as a tragedy for the republic’s civilian population. Chechnia and its capital, Grozny, were completely ruined. The social fabric and economic activity, infrastructure, agriculture and industry ceased to exist. The “democratically” elected authorities relied on the harsh forceful methods of Soviet-style totalitarianism to deal with civilian population. Some historians describe it as a war between people, who have been fighting against each other with unrestrained ferocity for centuries in an effort to capture the territory and destroy the opponent.<sup>9</sup>

High mortality, unemployment, famine, political and civil lawlessness, social apathy, anomie and military psychosis were the main elements of social life in Chechnia. All written and implicit human rights and freedoms were flagrantly violated: settlements were mercilessly bombed, people were deprived of gas and electricity, the military exterminated civilian population in huge numbers.

Property was changing hands; corrupt ethnic elites imagined that everything was permitted. As a result, the ruling elite ran into an irreversible conundrum. In 2004, for example, in Karachaevo-Cherkessia seven people were abducted and murdered in the country house of Ali Kaitov, the son in law of the then President of the Republic, Mustafa Badyev. Indignation spread far and wide among the common people, resulting in mass protest rallies, with enraged protesters capturing the republican White House. Society associated this crime with the President and his closest retinue. Only the interference of the Kremlin, which, by dispatching its representative, Dmitry Kozak, to stabilize the situation, prevented the escalation of the situation and avoided human casualties. Later, Badyev was appointed to head the republican pension fund, only to be removed after another financial audit.

On 13 October, 2005, illegal armed units attempted a coup in Nalchik (Kabardino-Balkaria).<sup>10</sup> According to the Internet site Kavkazskiy uzel, “there were no fewer than 250 fighters who attacked the city. Thirty-five members of the security forces and 15 civilians were killed; 129 members of the security forces and 66 civilians were wounded. Ninety-five militants were killed in armed clashes.”<sup>11</sup> This attack was organized by Wahhabi clandestine organizations and was intended as a demonstration of Russia’s inability to control the Northern Caucasus. The organizers wanted to sow fear among the locals and create tension. Indeed, 250 fighters could hardly capture the city and remain in it; the separatists pursued other aims. These events demonstrated the highly explosive social and political situation in the region.

This is confirmed by the disagreements between the Chechen Republic and Republic of Ingushetia over the Sunzha District. In August 2012, members of law enforcement agencies of the two republics clashed in the village of Galashki. The Chechen side claimed to have liquidated a group of terrorists, while the authorities of the Republic of Ingushetia disagreed, by saying that there had been

<sup>9</sup> See: *Chechnia: ot konflikta k stabilnosti*, Moscow, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> See: Kh.G. Tkhatapsoev, “Nalchik 13 oktiabria kak vyzov sovremennoy Rossii,” *Nauchnaia mysl Kavkaza*, No. 2, 2006, pp. 24-33.

<sup>11</sup> Kavkazskiy uzel, available at [<http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/219748/>], 25 September, 2016.

an unprovoked explosion. These events were followed by a conflict in the Ingush village of Arshty. The people in power in both republics accused each other of provocations and of far from adequate efforts to fight the Wahhabis. The tension that had somewhat subsided on the eve of the Sochi Olympics was rekindled by the incident at a checkpoint on the administrative border between Chechnia and Ingushetia.<sup>12</sup>

Mutual accusations between the heads of Chechnia and Ingushetia became more or less common. On the recommendations of Alexander Khloponin, Plenipotentiary Envoy of the President of the Russian Federation to the North Caucasian Federal District, several regional workgroups studied the conflict over the Sunzha District of Ingushetia; the results were presented to the Federal center (Moscow). The response from Moscow was vague; later the heads of the two republics met with the Administration of the President of the Russian Federation. Today, the conflict has been left to “smolder.”<sup>13</sup>

Recently, the clergy of the Republic of Ingushetia, who insisted that some of the Chechen theologians had moved away from the traditional Sufi Islam (the accusation denied by religious leaders in the Chechen Republic) stirred up confrontation between the religious elites of both republics. The leaders of both republics, however, seem to have been brought closer by that issue.

If the Federal administrative elites allow the situation to continue, a long latent conflict<sup>14</sup> will become practically unavoidable. This might rekindle the old territorial disagreements between the leaders of Ingushetia and North Ossetia over the Prigorodny District, and even create another source of ethnopolitical tension.

This territorial conflict is purely political; it can be described as a clash between different styles of governance and methods of containing the separatists. Other North Caucasian regions, such as Dagestan, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Adyghea and the Stavropol Territory have to cope with problems of their own, nowhere as violent as in Chechnia and Ingushetia.

In the contemporary sociopolitical realities of their regions, the administrative-political elites use political violence to retain power and influence. Violence can be used to maintain law and order, to prevent complications and be utilized as one of the main instruments but not in every situation. This is very typical of authoritarian regimes.

The current elites of the North Caucasian republics were brought to power by a wave of national self-awareness, of “revolutions,” conflicts, separatist and extremist sentiments that had become obvious on the eve of the Soviet Union’s disintegration and in the first post-Soviet years. Radical and antagonistic, they prefer to use force. According to the opinion poll carried out in 2007 by the Russian Academy of Civil Service experts, the positions of people in power are determined by wealth, prestigious education, loyalty to a new political regime, etc.<sup>15</sup> These trends cannot but cause concern among experts.<sup>16</sup>

The ways people are integrated into the ethnopolitical elites and the means and methods employed to retain power can be described as one of the most destructive factors that upsets the stability of the political system of the Northern Caucasus. This adds special importance to the sociological studies con-

<sup>12</sup> “Chechnia i Ingushetia: granitsa konflikta,” available at [[http://www.antiterror.kz/ingushetiya/news\\_2014-10-24-19-15-46-927.html](http://www.antiterror.kz/ingushetiya/news_2014-10-24-19-15-46-927.html)], 18 January, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> [<http://www.forbes.ru/sobytiya-column/vlast/114681-Chechnia-protiv-ingushetii-kolonialnyi-ugar>], 15 February, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> See: M.M. Yusupov, “Tsennostno-funktsionalnye grani soglasii v period konflikta,” *Konfliktologia*, No. 3, 2013, pp. 7-20.

<sup>15</sup> See: A.R. Salgiriev, “Politicheskaia elita Rossii: osobennosti formirovaniia i razvitiia,” *Vestnik Adygeyskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, Seria 1: Regionovedenie, filosofia, istoria, sotsiologia, yurisprudentsia, politologia, kultura i kulturnost (Maykop), No. 2, 2012, pp. 253-256.

<sup>16</sup> See: V.G. Ignatov, A.V. Ponedelkov, A.M. Starostin, et al., *Rossiyskie elity v zerkale sotsiologii*, Informational and analytical materials, Rostov on Don, 2007, pp. 17-18.

ducted in the South of Russia. The question “Which are the shortest ways to the region’s political elite?” drew the following answers: contacts (71.1%), wealth and money (62.4%), membership in the right party (26.4%), personal achievements (12.0%), intellectual level (11.8%), undecided (7.7%), other answers (0.5%).<sup>17</sup> The results point to the highly complicated nature of the political elites that are homogeneous and archaic. These descriptions of the system of power and the ways and means of its replenishment speak of a far from healthy political system, its closed nature and biases when it comes to decision-making. It is formed and functions in a shadow; its traditionalism builds up latent disagreements with the Federal authority and makes it harder to assess the real development level of the region.

When talking about different forms of political violence we should pay special attention to terrorism. According to the Ministry of Interior of the Russian Federation, “in January-October 2016, there were 1,937 registered crimes of terrorist nature (38.7%) and 1,251 crimes of extremist nature (11.2%).”<sup>18</sup> This means that the number of crimes of terrorist and extremist nature is steadily rising. In the Northern Caucasus terrorism is rooted in religion and separatism, with Islam being a mobilizing and integrating factor.<sup>19</sup> Every time the interests of the federal political and administrative elite clash with the interests of the local elites, Islamic propaganda starts talking about jihad. In fact, it is an instrument the elites present every time they want to achieve their political aims. It is particularly typical of Chechnia and Dagestan, where historically Islam has played a significant role in the ethnic consciousness of the mountain people.

The Federal center merely declares certain social and economic approaches designed to defuse or at least alleviate the ethnopolitical tension in the region. So far without much success. This is evidenced by the qualification roster of the choices of the heads of the republics and their repressions against those who disagree or are bold enough to think differently. Moscow has, in fact, moved away from dealing with the local problems and interfering in the republics’ political life: it has let the local elites to act as they see it fit. They, in turn, hastened to use this freedom to pursue their personal aims.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

The local population is irritated by the corruption, authoritarianism and biased nature of the local elites and does not trust them. Moscow should respond to these sentiments; it should take all the necessary measures to create new elites in the Northern Caucasus and finally abandon the principle “subvention in exchange for loyalty.”<sup>21</sup>

All institutions of state power (courts of justice and law enforcement in the first place) should act efficiently if we want to move away from the methods and practices of political violence. It is no secret that the judicial system is highly corrupt and is operating under strong pressure from the ethnopolitical elites; this means that common people cannot fully realize their constitutional rights.

<sup>17</sup> See: N.P. Gritsenko, “Osobennosti elitogeneza v politicheskom prostranstve regionov sovremennoy Rossii,” *Mir i politika. Mezhdunarodny politicheskij zhurnal*, 5 January, 2013, available at [<http://mir-politika.ru/3001-osobennosti-elitogeneza-vpoliticheskom-prostranstve-regionov-sovremennoy-rossii.html>]; M.A. Aligajieva, “Kriterii obnovleniya politicheskoy elity v respublike Dagestan,” *Vlast*, No. 2, 2016, pp. 68-71.

<sup>18</sup> “Sostoianie prestupnosti v Rossii za ianvar-oktiabr 2016 goda,” available at [[https://xn--b1aew.xn--p1ai/upload/site1/document\\_news/008/922/474/sb\\_1610.pdf](https://xn--b1aew.xn--p1ai/upload/site1/document_news/008/922/474/sb_1610.pdf)], 30 November, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> See: I.P. Dobaev, “Sovremenny terrorism na Severnom Kavkaze,” *Problemy natsionalnoy strategii*, No. 19, 2009, p. 78.

<sup>20</sup> See: A.R. Salgiriev, “Mekhanizmy formirovaniya politicheskikh elit v Chechenskoy Respublike,” *Globalny nauchny potentsial*, St. Petersburg, No. 17, 2012, pp. 82-85.

<sup>21</sup> A.R. Salgiriev, “Elity v politicheskom prostranstve Yuga Rossii,” *Nauka i business: puti razvitiia* (Moscow), No. 9 (27), pp. 156-159.

There is no recipe for political stabilization in the region, yet we should strictly observe human rights and freedoms, wage an uncompromising struggle against corruption and allow the NGOs that protect human rights to operate freely. The authorities should demonstrate restraint when responding to signals from the grass-roots level, and carry out more balanced policies, designed to create conditions conducive to the development of democratic institutions.

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