

SPECIFIC INTERESTS OF THE NORTH CAUCASIAN ELITES AS A CONFLICT POTENTIAL

Ali SALGIRIEV

*Ph.D. (Political Science),
Leading Research Associate, Sector of Philosophy and
Sociology, Institute of Humanitarian Studies,
Academy of Sciences of the Chechen Republic
(Grozny, Russian Federation)*

Maret BETILMERZAEVA

*D.Sc. (Philos.), Professor,
Department of Philosophy, Political Science and Sociology,
Chechen State Pedagogical University; Professor,
Department of Philosophy, Chechen State University;
Chief Research Associate, Sector of Ethnology,
Institute of Humanitarian Studies,
Academy of Sciences of the Chechen Republic
(Grozny, Russian Federation)*

Magomed SOLTAMURADOV

*Ph.D. (Philos.), Associate Professor,
Department of History of Russia and Political Science,
Chechen State University; Leading Research Associate,
Sector of Philosophy and Sociology, Institute of Humanitarian Studies,
Academy of Sciences of the Chechen Republic
(Grozny, Russian Federation)*

Magomed-Emi SHAMSUEV

*Ph.D. (Political Science), Senior Research Associate,
Laboratory for the Studies of Social, Political,
Legal and Spiritual Processes, Department of Humanitarian Studies,
Kh.I. Ibragimov Interdisciplinary Scientific Research Institute,
Russian Academy of Sciences; Leading Research Associate,
Sector of Philosophy and Sociology, Institute of Humanitarian Studies,
Academy of Sciences of the Chechen Republic
(Grozny, Russian Federation)*

A B S T R A C T

The authors have studied the main potentially conflicting factors of the regional ethnopolitical elites' actions in their respective regions, traced the emergence and development of these factors and sorted out the origins of conflicts and their escalation using the Northern Caucasus as an example. The region's economic backwardness, poverty, unemployment and social differentiation are considered the main source of potentially conflicting behavior. Much attention is paid to indirect indicators of the local population's standard of living.

Regional stability is threatened, first and foremost, by the local elite's clan and tribal organization principles and the mechanism of new member incorporation that excludes the majority of the local younger generation from adequate employment that would have helped them realize their educational and professional potentials. So far, the regional political system is developing as paternalist and traditionalist, and is replenished from the channels inaccessible to common people; this causes well-justified irritation and lowers the level of institutional trust. To remain in control of power distribution in clans and cliques, the regional elites relied and are still relying on the ethnic mobilization potential. The archaic replenishment mechanisms and the low quality of the ruling elites are responsible, to a great extent, for the region's depressive economies.

The authors have thoroughly described how those determined to remain in power invent myths and use them as a brainwashing instrument. People have not yet disentangled themselves from the web of traditional practices and pagan prejudices. This is confirmed by numerous examples of mythologization of public consciousness and speaks volumes of the fairly low educational and cultural levels of the local population.

In conclusion, the authors recommend blocking out conflict behavior for the sake of a smoothly functioning political system in the region. To achieve this goal, corruption should be finally curbed, while transparency should become an inalienable characteristic of elections and power institutions. The region needs more jobs in all economic sectors; its industry should be revived at a faster pace, while the tourist sector should become more attractive. The Northern Caucasus should be fully integrated into the common social and cultural space by tuning up inter-regional cooperation and working out a more balanced information policy designed to prevent all forms of discrimination, first and foremost, religious and ethnic.

The economic agenda cannot be addressed until all political tasks—security, uncompromising struggle against corruption in all spheres, including the judicial, nepotism, and strict observance of human and civil rights — have been resolved.

KEYWORD: *Russia, the Northern Caucasus, conflicting factors, particularism, conflicts, region, political elites, economics, political mythology, clan system, trust, extremism.*

Introduction

All destructive and destabilizing factors behind conflicts and violence should be carefully studied. This is a task of huge practical importance. Much has already been written about the trends, tasks and methods of political governance in polyethnic regions. Such are the works dealing with regional

and ethnic factors behind the conflicts in the Northern Caucasus written by V. Avksentyev, V. Chernous, M. Savva, I. Dobaev, V. Akaev and others.¹ An in-depth analysis of the entities of political processes (in the Northern Caucasus they are the high-status ethnopolitical elites) is very important for applied political science.

On the whole, the mobilization potential of ethnopolitical elites that rely on political practices is very strong. In the Northern Caucasus the ethnic, teip and family clans as well as cliques of all sorts are especially powerful, which explains why the federal center prefers to move cautiously when dealing with political issues and take local traditions and customs into account. The ethnic elite, on their side, exploits this to haggle for greater budget subsidies and delineation of the spheres of influence.²

Armed with economic, political and ethnocultural resources, the elites strongly affect strategic decision-making and impose certain behavior norms (the rules of the game) on the main actors of political governance in the region. They have preserved the authoritarian traditions of the past and continue functioning as paternalist protectionist structures in line with the patron-client model. This cannot but affect ethnogenesis and stir up social conflicts.

Today, political scientists concentrate on identifying and analyzing the factors that may cause conflicts and the way they affect political processes. In this context it is especially important to analyze the mechanisms and specifics of political processes unfolding in the region that are, on the whole, responsible for destructive conflicts and social tension. All conflicts can be classified according to the disposition of the sides involved: the center-region vertical, inter-republic horizontal, the region-local vertical. In the North Caucasian Federal District (NCFD) the multisided and protracted clashes of interests and values can be subdivided into ethnopolitical, economic, socially stratified, political, religious and identity conflicts.³

The region owes its very high conflict potential to the huge amount of privately owned weapons, legal nihilism and the chain of inter-state and national conflicts (the Russian-Chechen conflict that has spread to the neighboring areas of Dagestan, as well as the Osset-Chechen events).

In the region where the state is merged with business, where the elites keep distinctly apart from common people, where common law predominates together with authoritarianism and corruption, old conflicts inevitably become even more pronounced while new problems appear.⁴

Social and Economic Factors behind the Causes of Conflicts

Economic backwardness, low incomes of the common people, social differentiation, poverty, unemployment and marginalization are the main obstacles on the road towards social integration.

¹ See: V.A. Avksentyev, *Etnicheskaia konfliktologiya: v poiskakh paradigmy*, Stavropol, 2001; V.M. Iurchenko, *Politika kak faktor regionalnoy konfliktnosti*, Krasnodar, 1997; V.V. Chernous, "Sovremennye geopoliticheskie faktory konfliktogennosti na iuge Rossii," in: *Faktory konfliktogennosti na Severnom Kavkaze*, Rostov on Don, 2005, pp. 237-247; V.A. Avksentyev, G.D. Gritsenko, A.V. Dmitriev, *Regionalnaia konfliktologiya: kontsepty i rossiyskaia praktika*, ed. by M.K. Gorshkov, Corresponding Member, RAS, Alfa-M, Moscow, 2008; M.V. Savva, *Etnicheskiy status (Konfliktologicheskiy analiz sotsialnogo fenomena)*, Krasnodar, 1997.

² See: A. Salgiriev, "The Northern Caucasus: Tribal-Clan Structure of the Political Elites as a Factor of Political Tension," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2016, pp. 29-35.

³ See: A.R. Salgiriev, *Politicheskie elity sovremennoy Rossii kak sub'ekt upravleniya politicheskimi protsessami (na materialakh respublik Severnogo Kavkaza)*, Ph.D. thesis, Kuban State University, Krasnodar, 2012, p. 18.

⁴ See: P.Ia. Feldman, "Partikuliarizm interesov kak ugroza sotsialno-politicheskoy stabilnosti sovremennoy Rossii," *POISK: Politika. Obshchestvovedenie. Iskustvo, Sotsiologiya. Kultura*, No. 4 (51), 2015, pp. 90-98.

Indeed, low incomes are clearly correlated with high social and political tension; they may stir up crime, extremism and even terrorism.

An average annual level of unemployment is presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1

**Dynamics of the Level of Registered Unemployment
(according to the RF Ministry for the Northern Caucasus) in 2015-2017**

	By 1 April, 2015		By 1 April, 2016		By 1 April, 2017	
	Number of Unemployed, thou.	Level of Unemployment, %	Number of Unemployed, thou.	Level of Unemployment, %	Number of Unemployed, thou.	Level of Unemployment, %
RF as a whole	1,001.5	1.3	1,062.0	1.4	911.3	1.2
NCFD	197.7	4.4	170.8	3.8	144.8	3.2
RD	27.6	2.1	28.4	2.2	27.3	2.0
RI	33.6	15.9	29.7	13.3	24.9	10.8
KBR	9.1	2.1	9.4	2.2	8.9	2.1
KChR	4.3	1.9	4.4	2.0	3.9	1.8
RSO-A	9.3	2.8	8.8	2.7	9.0	2.8
ChR	98.1	15.5	74.6	12.1	57.2	9.2
Stavropol Territory	15.7	1.1	15.5	1.1	13.8	1.0

Source: Information about the realization of the state program of the Russian Federation "Razvitie Severo-Kavkazskogo Federalnogo Okruga" na period do 20125 goda i sotsialno-ekonomicheskoe razvitie Severo-Kavkazskogo federalnogo okruga ianvar-mart 2017 goda, available at [http://www.minkavkaz.gov.ru/upload/iblock/7e5/ser_2017_invar_mart.pdf].

Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate that the level of unemployment in the North Caucasian Federal District was and remains high. According to the RF Ministry for the Northern Caucasus as of 1 April, 2017, the level of registered unemployment in the district constituted 3.2% against Russia's national average of 1.2%; the number of unemployed—144,800 in the Northern Caucasus and 911,300 in Russia. Calculated by the WTO methodology, the level of unemployment was 11.4% against Russia's national average of 5.6%; the number of unemployed—517,000 (Russia's national average is 4,207,900). This is the country's highest level of unemployment (2.67 times higher than Russia's national average); today, the level of unemployment is gradually decreasing.

A prohibitively large share of shadow economy (the workforce in it has already reached 40 to 60% of the total) is another potentially conflicting factor especially pronounced in the North-Eastern Caucasian republics.⁵ According to the RF Federal Service of Statistics,⁶ in 2015 the workforce in the

⁵ See: G.G. Matishov, L.V. Batiev, I.V. Pashchenko, I.V. Romanov, *Atlas sotsialno-politicheskikh problem, ugroz i riskov Yuga Rossii*, Vol. 5, Special issue, Moscow, 2011, p. 43.

⁶ See: *Ekonomicheskaya aktivnost naseleniya Rossii*, Official Site of the Federal State Statistics Service of RF, available at [http://www.gks.ru/wps/wcm/connect/rosstat_main/rosstat/ru/statistics/publications/catalog/doc_1139918584312], 14 August, 2017.

North Caucasian Federal District comprised 4,492,300, while the number of those employed in the non-formal economic sector was 1,882,600, that is, 45.6% of the total. This means that shadow economy (and small businesses) employs a considerable share of the able-bodied population and produces a sizeable amount of goods and agricultural products.

Table 2

**Dynamics of the Level of Unemployment
(based on the WTO methodology) in 2015-2017**

	By 1 April, 2015		By 1 April, 2016		By 1 April, 2017	
	Number of Unemployed, thou.	Level of Unemployment, %	Number of Unemployed, thou.	Level of Unemployment, %	Number of Unemployed, thou.	Level of Unemployment, %
RF as a whole	4,360.0	5.7	4,474.6	5.9	4,207.9	5.6
NCD	509.9	11.4	526.3	11.7	517.0	11.4
RD	140.2	10.9	153.6	11.6	171.2	12.6
RI	66.8	30.0	71.4	31.0	65.9	27.1
KBR	51.6	12.2	48.7	11.3	49.5	11.7
KChR	30.2	14.1	27.4	12.4	31.5	15.9
RSO-A	34.5	10.4	40.4	12.9	42.2	12.9
ChR	107.3	17.6	103.0	16.6	88.8	14.3
Stavropol Territory	79.3	5.7	81.8	6.0	68.0	5.0

Those who analyze social and economic results pay particular attention to indirect indicators of the income level: the number and class of cars, value of housing, the number of illegal distilleries, heavy-duty trucks, etc. Business-class automobiles, such as Toyota Camry and Mercedes E-Class⁷ dominate the secondary market in the North Caucasian Federal District. In other regions people prefer more affordable brands. On the other hand, the district trails behind where housing construction is concerned; this is probably explained by a low legal culture and legal nihilism: people prefer not to register their new housing (high corruption barriers being one of the reasons) so as not to pay taxes on it.

The region's social and political backwardness is explained by protectionism in economy, family and clan relationships in business and the practically undeveloped market. Distribution and redistribution of considerable financial and economic resources are controlled by ethnic elites; this further consolidates the very specific nature of the region's economy typical of African and Asian countries.⁸

Today, very much as before, the North Caucasian political elites are formed under pressure from ethnic and clan factors and, therefore, are strongly aware of their dependence on these factors. Hence the numerous conflicts among decision-makers. The latent and persistent nature of the principles on

⁷ See: "Inomarka bizness-klassa stala samym populiarnym avto s probegom na Kavkaze," RBK, available at [<https://www.rbc.ru/business/03/02/2016/56b1c16c9a7947bf322feddb>], 3 May, 2017.

⁸ See: A.R. Salgiriev, "Etnopoliticheskiy protsess na Severnom Kavkaze: rol elit," *Teoria i praktika obshchestvennogo razvitiya*, No. 3, 2012, pp. 242-244.

which the elites are formed—family, teip and tukum contacts—is primarily responsible for social differentiation, poverty and the archaic nature of social relationships, amidst which no favorable investment climate is possible. The social and cultural realities that go back many centuries reproduce and cultivate traditionalist attitudes and norms of social behavior.⁹ local customs, mental attitudes and practices develop into political factors of their own right, strongly affecting market relationships and business climate.

Regional conflicts emerge and develop under the pressure of clashes of the local elites' interests. For example, massive protests were caused by the murder, on 11 October, 2004, of seven people in the country house of Ali Kaitov, a local parliament deputy and the son-in-law of the then President of Karachaevo-Cherkessia. The federal center had no choice but to respond to the signal “from below” with arrests and trials. Today, the situation within the local elite remains tense.¹⁰

Right before our eyes ethnic clans are gradually developing into political, party, trade, economic, religious and territorial groups, while ethnic principles are gradually retreating under the pressure of the elite principles. The newly formed elites consolidate their positions by expanding their resource base.

Mythologizing Public Consciousness: North Caucasian Specifics

Identity crisis, social conflicts, the plummeting standard of living, the challenging geopolitical context in which Russia has found itself because of international sanctions and other problems have created the foundation on which myths (primarily political myths, a time-tested brainwashing instrument) flourish and gradually fill human minds.

Irina Krolivetskaia and Irina Ostapenko have identified two ways—spontaneous and organized—of mythologizing common people's consciousness.¹¹ Political elites deliberately use mythologization to achieve their political aims. People are inclined to accept myths as real; they are unable to rationally sort out their content. In this way new myths appear, while the old ones are accepted as true.

In the Northern Caucasus this process is well-organized: the ruling elites, which are clinging to the status quo and the rules of the game, are not strangers to creating political myths about the leader as the *chosen one*, allegedly endowed with charisma and other exceptional qualities. The groups that prefer to keep closer to the elite (*the court*, to borrow the term from Rostov sociologists) spare no effort to create and promote the image of an ideal ruler with the help of the media, adverts and PR technologies. Askar Kaybushev has correctly noted: “The general principle on which the mythology of the ruling elites is based states: what is good for the ruling elites at any given moment of history should be accepted by all and everyone as true.”¹² The events that took place in Chechnia in the early 1990s are the best confirmation of the above. The highly agitated crowds that gathered in Grozny to protest, demand independence and carry out religious ceremonies were encouraged by the myth that

⁹ See: M.M. Betilmerzaeva, *Mentalnost v kontekste kultury (filosofsko-kulturologichesky analiz)*, Doctoral thesis, Southern Federal University, Rostov on Don, 2011.

¹⁰ See: “Karachaevo-Cherkessia pod udarom,” KChR Inform, available at [<https://kchr-inform.ru/politika/karachaevo-cherkesiya-pod-udarom.html>], 8 August, 2017.

¹¹ See: I.E. Krolivetskaia, I.A. Ostapenko, “Stikhiynoe i organizovannoe v protsesse mifologizatsii massovogo soznaniya sovremennogo rossiiaina,” *Nauchnyy almanakh*, No. 4-4 (18), 2016, pp. 128-131.

¹² A.D. Kaybushev, “Genesis politicheskoy mifologii praviashchey elity,” *Kaspiyskiy region: politika, ekonomika, kultura*, No. 2, 2008, pp. 57-64.

if the federal center attacked, the republic would be protected by *ovliya* (saints) who would fly in the skies to down enemy aircraft with their sticks. There was also a myth of “golden” taps: the republic’s rulers promised that after gaining independence each and every household would be supplied with taps through which people would extract gold (meaning oil in this case). Attracted by the prospect of easy enrichment and unable to separate truth from lies, people perished in the war.

In recent years, the ruling elites have doubled their efforts to create a positive or even ideal political system in the region by glorifying, among other things, the image of the federal political and administrative elite, which speaks of the political system as authoritarian.

Federal TV channels and printed media have been especially successful: logic and common sense are muffled by shouts, exchange of denigrating comments and demonization of the opposition. Political governance progresses from one event to another; public attention is detracted from the domestic agenda by events that are stirred up deliberately. Federal TV channels that discuss the Ukrainian and Syrian agenda on a daily basis are particularly successful—this type of political behavior will be probably pushed to the fore as the presidential elections in Russia will be drawing closer.

Ways to Stabilize Political Processes in the Macro-Region

In order to develop and use the mechanisms of stabilization of the political processes launched by the ethnopolitical elites, we should first address the political, national, social and economic objectives.

The interests of the ethnopolitical elites should be constructively harmonized on the basis of the principles of democracy, secular nature of power, equality and prevention of oppression of any type. The elites should ensure sustainable functioning of the political system in the region and prevent, discontinue or settle conflicts at the earliest possible stage. To prevent separatism and extremism, traditional religious institutes, law enforcement structures and elements of people’s diplomacy (sport organizations, councils of elders, youth, female and other structures) should be involved in the process.

To improve political guidance in the region, public organizations and NGOs should add their considerable integration potential to what social institutes and regional elites are doing in the traditionalist society. Western elites trust the reports supplied by independent public structures as a source of information on the basis of which sanctions have been introduced and which strongly affect economic cooperation and business contacts.

At the same time, life has taught us that consultative public councils and public chambers at the structures of state power, local self-administrations, human rights organizations and NGOs are an efficient component of interaction.

Conclusion

The Northern Caucasus needs a new political elite comprising professionals and experts devoted to the cause entrusted to them. The federal center should help select the best candidates,

find the most suitable positions for them, organize their rotation, thus preventing corruption, nepotism, etc.¹³

The North Caucasian republics should be integrated in the country's social, cultural and political space,¹⁴ live according to common rules and obey laws. We should maintain contacts with the younger generation through cultural events, academic exchanges, wide-scale explanatory efforts and invite Russian speakers to the macro-region. Authorities should uproot, without hesitation, all outcrops of nationalism, xenophobia, Caucasus-phobia and chauvinism. Patriotism and civil responsibility of those who live in the Northern Caucasus should be consolidated by the awareness that they belong to a unified country.¹⁵

The youth, which is the most socially active part of society, should trust the authorities and the state. To achieve this, the elites should create social lifts, move away from corruption and protectionism when it comes to promotion to higher posts. They should also shift from declarations to real achievements in real life: new jobs, more investments and a developed tourist sphere. In fact, the political aims—security,¹⁶ transparent elections, a well-justified personnel policy, struggle against the corruption and the clan system, development of democratic institutions, discontinuation of pressure on independent media and on those who are of a different opinion—should be attained before the regional economic agenda is addressed.¹⁷

It is equally important to oppose religious radicalism, extremism and terrorism, engaging the clergy, the media and public organizations.¹⁸ The elites should abandon their favorite genre of polished TV reports, rather, they should create conditions for an independent media; they should finally admit that power can and should be criticized for its failures in a constructive and well-justified way.

¹³ See: A.R. Salgiriev, "Mekhanizmy formirovaniia politicheskikh elit v Chechenskoy Respublike," *Globalny nauchny potentsial*, No. 17, 2012, pp. 82-85.

¹⁴ See: M.M. Betilmerzaeva, *Etmicheskaia mentalnost v sisteme kultury*, Ph.D. thesis, Southern Federal University, Rostov on Don, 2005.

¹⁵ See: M.D. Soltamuradov, *Sufizm v kulture narodov Severo-vostochnogo Kavkaza*, Author's synopsis of Ph.D. thesis, Rostov on Don, 2007.

¹⁶ See: V. Iu. Gadaev, "Religioznaia bezopasnost v kontekste dukhovnoy bezopasnosti," *Teoria i praktika obshchestvennogo razvitiia*, No. 10, 2014, pp. 13-16.

¹⁷ See: A. Salgiriev, M. Betilmerzaeva, V. Gaziev, M. Soltamuradov, "Political Stratification within the Elites (A North Caucasian Case Study)," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 17, Issue 3, 2016, pp. 30-37.

¹⁸ See: V. Akaev, "Sufiyskie bratstva i Vakhkhability," *Azia i Afrika segodnia*, No. 6, 1998.