

POLITICAL ELITES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ETHNOPOLITICAL PROCESSES IN THE NORTHERN CAUCASUS

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ABSTRACT

The author discusses the North Caucasian political elites as a subject of the political processes unfolding within the regional ethnopolitical processes.

The main role in these processes belongs to the local ethnopolitical elite (regional heads and their closest circles, business elites, clergy, etc.), who also rely on traditional ethnic institutions, national culture and time-honored practices, another source of influence on the masses. The federal Center has to take into account the interests of the ethnopolitical elites rooted in clan, family, and teip solidarity and realized through infor-

mal patron-client relationships. The elite's closeness and durability are significantly slowing down the democratic processes in the region and interfering with the development of civil institutions.

The ethnic elites never hesitate to use their mobilization resource to haggle with the federal administrative elite over budgets. Not infrequently budget conflicts move to the next, extremist phase.

The author traces and systematizes the specifics of the ethnopolitical tension and contradictions in the region down to their historical, culturological, psychological, social, and economic roots.

KEYWORDS: *the Northern Caucasus, Russia, regions, elites, political elites, ethnopolitical elites, conflicts, national relations, nationalities policy, political process, clans.*

Introduction

Ethnic relations are very sensitive to social changes: according to the available data, at the turn of the 1980s, about half of the countries of the world were involved in ethnic political conflicts; in the mid-1980s, 98 out of 120 armed conflicts (82%) were ethnic conflicts. The number of ethnopolitical conflicts is steadily climbing up under the pressure of globalization, marginalization, modernization, migrations, mounting global and regional instability, ethnization, ill-devised and poorly realized nationalities policy, etc.

The economic situation in the Soviet Union was extremely negative. Production decline, the nagging shortage of consumer goods, shrinking real incomes, steadily climbing unemployment and corruption, customary wage arrears in the budget sphere, and the huge federal budget deficit fanned ethnic and political tension in the Northern Caucasus and moved it into the streets in the form of mass protest rallies, etc.

The highly unstable social and political situation in Russia on the eve of and after the Soviet Union's disintegration, the economic problems and political miscalculations of the country's political leaders, and the absence of a national doctrine geared toward the new economic and political reality were exploited by the ethnic elites to fan ethnic contradictions and separatism.

The Soviet Union fell apart, while the "parade of sovereignties" and economic problems that followed fanned ethnic tension in the region.

The newly independent states became openly ethnonationalist, which provoked several ethnic conflicts between the Ossets and Ingush, Georgians and Abkhazians, Russia and Chechnia, etc.

Today, the conflict potential of the ethnopolitical situation in the Northern Caucasus is high.¹ Many of conflicts are unresolved; such is the frozen conflict between the Ossets and Ingush; the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict is kept within certain limits by the Russian peacekeepers, etc.

The democratic processes in the Northern Caucasus were slowed down by an upsurge of ethnicity, xenophobia, intensive ethnocultural and ethnopolitical mobilization, and the high degree of ethnicization of governments in the region.²

Applied political science concentrates on the guiding role of the subjects of the political processes, particularly the top subjects with the greatest impact on political strategies. The political elite, with the biggest resources of power and legitimacy, determine the aims of the political processes and

¹ See: V.A. Avksentyev, G.D. Gritsenko, A.V. Dmitriev, *Regionalnaia konfliktologiya: kontsepty i rossiiskaia praktika*, Moscow, 2008; V.A. Avksentyev, *Etnicheskaia konfliktologiya: v poiskakh paradigmy*, Stavropol, 2001; V.V. Chernous, "Sovremennye geopoliticheskie faktory konfliktogenosti na Yuge Rossii," in: *Faktory konfliktogenosti na Severnom Kavkaze*, Rostov on Don, 2005.

² See: G.S. Denisova, *Etnicheskiy faktor v politicheskoy zhizni Rossii 90-kh godov*, Rostov on Don, 1996; L.L. Khoperskaya, *Sovremennye etnopoliticheskie protsessy na Severnom Kavkaze: kontseptsia etnicheskoy sub'ektnosti*, Rostov on Don, 1997; V.A. Avksentyev, *Stabilnost i konflikt v rossiyskom prigranichye: etnopoliticheskie protsessy v Sibiri i na Kavkaze*, Moscow, 2005; A.N. Smirnov, *Etnopoliticheskie protsessy na Severnom Kavkaze: osobennosti i osnovnye tendentsii*, Moscow, 2001; A.K. Aliev, *Severny Kavkaz: sovremennye problemy etnopoliticheskogo razvitiia*, Makhachkala, 2003.

the administrative methods to be used; they play the greatest role in the political activities unfolding in the region. I have posed myself the task of assessing the degree to which the local political elite influences the ethnopolitical processes in the Northern Caucasus.

The Emergence and Development of Ethnopolitical Elites in the Region

In the 1990s, the federal Center and regional authorities largely neglected the internal contradictions in the North Caucasian republics. Meanwhile, the influential clans and teips that acquired power from the Center and were prepared to go to all lengths, up to and including social and political destabilization, to remain in power, might have been dangerous as a source of corruption, crime abetting, and extremism.³

Political extremism can be described as one of the causes of the ethnopolitical clashes in the Northern Caucasus. For example, a group of Ingush (which operated on the political margins), determined to return the Prigorodny District of North Ossetia-Alania (before deportation it belonged to the Ingush), ran against the firm resistance of Osset nationalists and the federal Center, which supported one of the sides. This was the beginning of a multi-layered ethnic conflict.

In September 1991, the legal power structures of the Chechen-Ingush A.S.S.R. collapsed under the pressure of the political extremism led by General Dudaev with tragic repercussions for the Chechens; two wars in Chechnia followed.⁴

Throughout its history, the Northern Caucasus attracted and continues to attract the attention of different states and different economic structures seeking social, political, and economic destabilization there. They rely on local separatist and extremist forces, fund them, and look after their interests at the international level. The terrorist acts in Ingushetia, Daghestan, and Kabardino-Balkaria testify to the fact that the Northern Caucasus remains a zone of ethnopolitical tension.⁵

So far the threat of extremism, ethnonationalism, and religious radicalism in the Northern Caucasus remains prominent, therefore the academic community should concentrate on the study and prevention of extremism and ethnonationalism of the ethnopolitical elites.⁶

The ethnic elites in the North Caucasian republics have a lot of political power: they might play a positive role in conflict settlement or might prove to be a destructive force. In fact, their determination to come to power in 1990-1992 on the wave of the Soviet Union's disintegration when all the autonomous republics of the Russian Federation sought and acquired sovereignty added to the regional political tension.

The degree of their influence cannot be ignored: they are developing into political subjects at the federal level. In May 2015, according to the monthly expert polls conducted by the Agency for Political and Economic Communications, Head of Chechnia Ramzan Kadyrov was second out of 83;

³ See: Yu.V. Vasiliev, *Etnopoliticheskie protsessy na Yuge Rossii na rubezhe XX-XXI vekov: ot konflikta k stabilizatsii*, Rostov on Don, 2004.

⁴ See: V.Kh. Akaev, "Chechnia: put ot konflikta k stabilizatsii obshchestvenno-politicheskoy situatsii," in: *Faktory stabilizatsii situatsii na Severnom Kavkaze*, Rostov on Don, 2006, pp. 131-146.

⁵ See: M.V. Savva, *Etnicheskiy status (Konfliktologicheskyy analiz sotsialnogo fenomena)*, Krasnodar, 1997.

⁶ See: V.M. Yurchenko, *Politika kak faktor regionalnoy konfliktnosti*, Krasnodar, 1997, pp. 237-247.

Head of Ingushetia Yu.-B.B. Evkurov occupied 27th place, President of Daghestan R.G. Abdulatipov, 26th place; Head of North Ossetia-Alania T.D. Mamsurov, 40th place; President of Kabardino-Balkaria Yu.A. Kokov, 42nd place; Head of Karachaevo-Cherkessia R.B. Temrezov, 45th place; and Head of Adygey A.K. Tkhakushinov, 79th place.⁷ It should be said that Yevkurov, Tkhakushinov, and Temrezov had fortified their positions compared to April 2015: their ratings have been improving for several years now.⁸

The elites of the Chechen Republic and North Ossetia demonstrate the greatest cohesion, while the elites of Daghestan, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Adygey are divided into ethnic and clan groups. This means that the strategy “winner takes all” is combined with the “community of the elites” principle.

The relative clout of the regional ethnopolitical elites depends on many factors, since they are a fairly complicated element of the political processes as relatively independent and influential subjects with interests and resources of their own. The national and regional ethnopolitical elites should work together to achieve the normal functioning of social institutions. The regional ethnopolitical elites delegate their members to the national elite and can play a positive role in social processes, and vice versa.⁹

Classified by informal features, the political elites form clans of all sorts, cliques, strategic groups and groups of pressure, inner parties, and other groups. On the whole, the sum-total of informal ties inside this system can be described as client relations based on personal dependence that has nothing in common with the rational distribution of resources and power. The ties between the patron and his numerous clients add another dimension to the hierarchical structure of the political elite found outside its formal organization. These mini-pyramids of power rest on personal protection.

Not infrequently they follow the patron to his new office. In Soviet times, the situation was very much the same. The principle of selection (the so-called nomenklatura principle) inherited from Soviet times persists and remains far from transparent: personal loyalty, obedience, and personal or kindred relations are preferred to professional qualities.

In 1989-1993, the nomenklatura principle (which had been used for many years) was destroyed to be replaced with elections, which, in the course of time, developed into one of the main mechanisms for forming elites in the upper echelons of power in particular. Civil society was shaping its own independent segment of the elite, many of its members coming from the democratic movement. In practice, the quota-clan principle of elite-forming did not disappear: it survived and became stronger. This causes dissatisfaction among the local people irritated by the lack of visible progress in this respect.¹⁰ Even though the federal Center tried to keep the elite under control, in 1994-1999, these elites were actively involved in institution-building.

Today, many positions in the Russian elite are monopolized, both vertically and horizontally, by a group that closed ranks around an influential leader. Such groups, often described as political clans, are organized as “puff-pastry” or an iceberg, the upper (visible) part of which is represented by a well-known politician, while the lower (invisible) parts are formed by a political support

⁷ [http://www.apecom.ru/projects/item.php?SECTION_ID=101&ELEMENT_ID=1896], 1 June, 2015.

⁸ See: *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 10 October, 2012.

⁹ See: A.R. Salgiriev, “Politicheskie elity kak faktor politicheskikh protsessov,” *XXI vek: itogi proshlogo i problemy nastoiashchego plus* (Penza), Vol. 1, No. 11 (15), 2013, pp. 193-197; idem, “Elity v politicheskom prostranstve Yuga Rossii,” *Nauka i biznes: puti razvitiia*, No. 9 (27), 2013, pp. 156-159.

¹⁰ See: I. Babich, “The Clan Structure and Its Impact on Political Situation (case-study of Northwestern and Central Caucasus),” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 1 (19), 2003, pp. 32-39.

group, an economic (financial) support group, a media group, and a group of special services and security.¹¹

The status, administrative functions, and wider possibilities of mobilizing resources make the regional political elites the most prominent political actors in the RF constituencies. They largely shape relations with the federal Center, determine social and economic dynamics, and ensure stability. Throughout the period of reforms this became an involved and, therefore, contradictory process. In the first half of the 1990s, this segment was dominated by former Soviet and party officials. Many of them had become adjusted to the new reality, they abandoned ideological preferences and became pragmatics under the pressure of everyday problems (unemployment, economic crisis, pensions and wage arrears, etc.). By the late 1990s, liberally-minded elite, businessmen, military and law enforcers came to power in many regions.

Regional Elites: Structure and Functioning

Today, interaction between the most influential business and administrative elites and close interconnections between business and power can be described as the main feature of the regional political elites.¹²

The ruling regional elites were strengthened by newcomers from the law-enforcement structures and federal power structures to fortify the vertical of power and settle contradictions between the Center and the regions. These changes enhanced the status of those regional officials who supported the president and enjoyed his support. Personnel policy became less democratic. In the past, the governor corps was formed amid sharp conflicts and mud-throwing; legal and moral norms were pushed aside, while huge amounts of money were poured into the process. On the one hand, it was a defect of unconsolidated democracy, while on the other, it was an outcrop of the servile political culture of the elite and a conflict between various groups and corporate economic, financial, and political interests. Closer scrutiny of the ruling elite reveals the still very low level of consolidation and fairly pronounced economic and political biases. At the same time, the regional political elites are gradually growing more loyal to the Center. In fact, stronger relations between the federal and regional elites based on the delimitation of powers and responsibilities can be described as a positive trend that helps realize the thesis “strong Center-strong regions-strong Russia.”

Here are the most typical features of the clan-organized elite:

- decision-making is concealed from the public and is independent of it. Those responsible for decision-making are guided not by national interests, but by the interests of their groups (clans or “families”), the main interest of which is to remain in power;
- monopolization of power through control over the most influential financial and industrial groups and the media;

¹¹ See: D.A. Zhuravlev, “Politicheskie klany kak sotsialnyy institut,” *Obrazovanie. Nauka. Nauchnye kadry*, No. 5, 2012, pp. 196-199.

¹² See: I.R. Akhmadullin, “Osobennosti funktsionirovaniia biznes-elity v sovremennoy Rossii,” *Vestnik Kazanskogo tekhnologicheskogo universiteta*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 2013, pp. 257-258.

- laws are reduced to instruments of political domination;
- high posts are divided among those who are ready to obey the rules of the game, professional people are obviously not needed.

The Russian regional elites are staffed according to these principles, even if the processes might be different and geared toward regional specifics.¹³

Aware of the above, each of the elites knows that its rights and interests (legal and illegal) are guaranteed by its continued involvement in state power. There is another and better option: a couple of administrative regions (municipal units) should be detached from two- or multi-titular republics, their federalization should be achieved, and their ethnic statehood should be created or restored.

The Abazin and Nogai ethnic regions of Karachaevo-Cherkessia can serve as an example of the above. On the other hand, nothing came of the attempts to divide the Karabudakhkent District of Dagestan into two ethnically different parts.¹⁴ Despite the consistent efforts to enlarge the districts in Dagestan, they are divided into smaller units to be further divided into even smaller districts. Today, an area of 50.3 thousand sq km with a population of 2.6 million is divided into 41 districts, while the Rostov Region, the territory of which is twice as small and has a population of 4.4 million, has 42 districts.¹⁵

Irrespective of the number of titular nations in any of the polyethnic North Caucasian republics, the state and municipal power structures are formed according to democratic principles that take into account ethnic composition; this is typical, to different degrees, of any state¹⁶ and explains why the republics' political elites invariably seek compromises when forming structures of power. Formally, the election system does not prevent the biggest ethnicities from forming a relatively homogenous parliament, but this never happens: all ethnic groups are represented to a certain extent in the legislatures and the executive bodies of power; the legal sides of these processes are of secondary importance.

In the Northern Caucasus, the traditional practices of power of the elites are highly sustainable. The republics of the Southern Federal and North Caucasian Federal districts (Chechnia, Ingushetia, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Adygey, and partly North Ossetia) organized cooperation on the basis of *adats* (common unwritten laws) and forms of self-organization (*teips* and *tukhums*); the institution of traditional courts has been revived.¹⁷

These are positive factors that consolidate society; at times of transformation, they might become stumbling blocks abused by political leaders in their interests. Late in the 1990s, some leaders of the North Caucasian republics wanted to include certain local specifics, up to and including blood feuds, in the federal laws. Revival of the Shari'a has stirred up contradictions; not infrequently, local elites use religious slogans to fan enmity and xenophobia.

Today, the political elite play, to a certain extent, a consolidating role and form the region's cultural space. This is confirmed by the high level of interaction among the national-cultural auto-

¹³ See: A.V. Ponedelkov, S.A. Vorontsov, I.V. Gnidenko, "Rossiyskie elity v federalnom i regionalnom aspektakh," *Izvestia Altayskogo gosudartsvennogo universiteta*, No. 4-1 (84), 2014, pp. 290-294.

¹⁴ See: K.I. Kazenin, *Elementy Kavkaza: zemlia, vlast i ideologia v severokavkazskikh respublikakh*, Moscow, 2012, pp. 104-126.

¹⁵ See: L.V. Batiev, O.A. Belousova, I.V. Pashchenko, "Etnicheskiy printsip v formirovani organov gosudartsvennoy vlasti respublik Severnogo Kavkaza," in: *Vzaimodeystvie narodov i kultur na Yuge Rossii: istoria i sovremennost*, Collection of scholarly papers, Rostov on Don, 2008, pp. 201-202.

¹⁶ See: *Atlas sotsialno-politicheskikh problem, ugroz i riskov Yuga Rossii*, ed. by G.G. Matishov, Rostov on Don, Vol. 1, 2006; Vol. 2, 2007.

¹⁷ See: *Etnoetatizm i etnokratia na Yuge Rossii*, ed. by V.V. Chernous, Rostov on Don, 2006, pp. 57-70, 110-124.

mies, diasporas, and other social-cultural organizations that represent the interests of individual ethnic groups.

The threats and security challenges in the Northern Caucasus came to the fore during the deep-cutting ethnic and social transformation and crumbling social order.

The media, especially the national media, which offer biased coverage of the conflict situation in the region and breed confrontational feelings in the population of Russia, are negatively perceived by the North Caucasian population. More than that: the readers and TV audiences are deliberately deprived of reliable information by certain journalists who take orders from third parties¹⁸

Conclusion

The specific of studies of the emergence, exacerbation, and unfolding of ethno-political conflicts in the South of Russia have moved several system-forming features, i.e. economic, political, and ethnic, to the fore.

Restoration of Russia's single legal space, which began in 2000, consolidation of the federal structure, and overcoming of the economic crisis have allowed us to address the task of building a national model of the ethnocultural space designed, among other things, to protect human rights and the rights of the peoples, ensure equal cooperation of cultures and religions, and consolidate regional security in the Northern Caucasus.

It is fundamentally important to take into account the basic principles that ensure Russia's territorial integrity, protect its interests and national security in the Northern Caucasus, offer a set of measures designed to achieve peace and security, establish a balance between national interests and the interests of the North Caucasian peoples, and preserve and foster economic and cultural historical heritage. The Northern Caucasus remains a conflict-prone region; the state power structures, cultural figures, public organizations, and academic community are working together to change the situation for the better.

Ethno-political tension can be reduced by territorial-administrative reform. So far, the ethno-political elites are deliberately slowing down the process of modernization, while the region's persisting social and economic problems (unemployment, stratification, etc.) are waiting for attention.¹⁹ The dialog between the federal and regional government should be continued; migration policy should become more rational, migration flows controlled, and ethnic crime, reliance on clans and corruption liquidated; the region needs a network of ethno-regional monitoring. The state power structures should work toward building a civil society in the region, an indispensable condition of stabilized national relations.

¹⁸ See: M.-E. Shamsuev, "Russia's Information Security in the Northern Caucasus: Problems and How to Settle Them," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 13, Issue 4, 2012, pp. 94-105.

¹⁹ See: D. Khalidov, "The Northern Caucasus: An Alternative Approach. Systems Analysis and the Paradoxes of Statistics," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 11, Issue 2, 2010, pp. 114-138.