

Analysis

Dagestan and the Russian State: “Stable Instability” Forever?

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to explain to the Western reader the reasons for the crisis in the North Caucasus on the basis of its largest republic, Dagestan. At the base of the analysis is the research I conducted during trips in June and September 2009 to the republic. As the article explains, the root of the problem is not the local specifics of the North Caucasus, but the political system.

Misperceptions of Dagestan

If the average Russian citizen were to judge by what he saw in the federal media, he would have the impression that life in Dagestan consists entirely of explosions, terrorist acts, and attacks on the local police and soldiers. In this part of the North Caucasus there are almost weekly skirmishes between the police and soldiers, and fighters (“lesnye – those who have gone to the forest,” as the Dagestani media call them). The armed OMON and SOBR special police forces, covering their faces with black masks, have patrolled the streets for many months. Entire neighborhoods have been declared zones for conducting anti-terrorist operations and in Dagestan the fighters succeeded, and are succeeding, in taking control of entire villages, introducing sharia law in them.

Why is this happening? There are no obvious reasons for it. During the last decade, Russia, led by Vladimir Putin, has made great strides toward stability and economic well-being. One would think that the people would be happy and enjoy the benefits of the prosperous years. However, in Dagestan the situation is becoming ever more alarming. This article will start with a short description of recent events.

A Difficult Summer

The bloody chain of events in August-September 2009 had roots in two spectacular attacks in June that were unprecedented in their audacity. On June 5 in downtown Makhachkala in the middle of the day, assassins killed Dagestan Minister of Internal Affairs Adilgeri Magomedtagirov, the sinister face of contemporary Russian policy in the republic. On June 22, a suicide-terrorist attacked Ingushetia’s president Yunus-Bek Yevkurov. The leader of the republic barely survived the explosion and it took Moscow surgeons to save his life. After these attacks, there was a series of terrorist acts in August-September. On August 13, fifteen fighters shot up the police post in Buinaksk, killing four Interior Ministry employees. After this they smashed into a nearby sauna and shot four women there. This act

of intimidation had its effect: it shook up the population, Dagestani cities closed almost all massage parlors, and beer bars are now deserted. At the same time, in Makhachkala there has been a series of cruel attacks on police officers. Most notably, a sniper shot one of them on a downtown street, just 50 meters from the Interior Ministry headquarters. The city fell into panic. Rumors immediately began to circulate about various dates when the fighters would openly attack Makhachkala and capture its government buildings. The authorities remained silent and the police disappeared from the streets of the city for several days. Almost simultaneously, in neighboring Ingushetia a truck full of explosives blew up at the gate to a police station. The explosion killed at least 20 police officers and wounded approximately 100 civilians. On the night of September 2, unknown individuals threw flyers in the vicinity of a Makhachkala mosque that has the reputation as serving the “Wahhabis.” The anonymous flyers announced the plans of a group that sought to take bloody revenge against the Islamists and called for cleansing the republic of fighters and their accomplices since the authorities were not able to do so. All of this was a provocation because, in addition to the threats, the flyers said that the group had already prepared a list of 250 people to be shot, including journalists, lawyers and human rights defenders allegedly supported by the fighters. The list included the names of many famous people in Dagestan. One night before the flyers appeared, an automobile exploded at the police force’s northern post in the city. Moreover, for the entire last week of August as children prepared to go back to school, rumors spread that there would be a “second Beslan” in Dagestan, summoning memories of the September 1, 2004, attack on a North Ossetia school that killed more than 300 people, including many children. The September 26 murder of Khasavyurt Mayor Alimsultan Alkhamatov stoked the situation even further. All these events created an atmosphere of general suspicion and mistrust in Dagestan.

However, the analysts paid little attention to these occurrences. In Moscow and abroad, they love to point to the authoritarian character of the rulers in the North Caucasus republics. Many see events in the North Caucasus as some sort of authoritarian clan-based exception to the general Russian norm. According to this logic, the Kremlin, where for the last ten years there has been a quasi-dynasty of presidents who hand power to carefully-chosen successors, is a model of mature democratic competitiveness, while the Caucasus represents an annoying authoritarian pathology. At the base of such thinking is an echo of the out-moded liberal thesis of the 1990s about the “stagnant provinces” and the “democratic capital.” No less simplistic is the explanation given by Masha Lipman, the editor of the journal *Pro et Contra* published by the Moscow Carnegie Center, in the *Washington Post* on August 24, 2009. She explains the events in Dagestan as the result of an interethnic battle between the ethnic groups who have power and the dozens of other ethnic groups who do not. As a result, the Western reader only gains a superficial picture of what is really going on.

Equally unconvincing is the thesis that the main reason for the impoverished situation of the Caucasus and Dagestan is the region’s excessive clannishness. It is hard to believe this explanation. The presence of clans is a character of all current Russian politics. The entire “hierarchy” of the Putin-Medvedev system consists of clans.

No less superficial is the economic explanation. Some see the high level of unemployment, the destroyed economy, and the outflow of labor as the basis for the protest feelings among the people. The logic of this argument leads to the following conclusion: it is necessary to improve the economy, end unemployment and then all the problems of the Caucasus will be resolved. In reality, this is an extremely complicated issue.

Yes, the economy plays an important role. Individuals under 30 years old make up 53 percent of the residents of the republic. Dagestan President Mukhu Aliev described the youth problem effectively: the population grows by 25,000-30,000 people a year, while the number of jobs increases only 9,000-10,000 during the same period. It would seem that with no work there is no future. But this is too simple a view. First, discussions about Dagestan and Ingushetia as the poorest regions of the country are either the insinuations of people who don’t know anything about this subject or a conscious deception. Official statistical data should not confuse people. The highly developed shadow economy occu-

pies an enormous space in the republic’s life and the income generated there is almost never included in official accounts. In Dagestan, this income pays for beautiful palaces and villas. It created a construction boom in Makhachkala, making it one of the most dynamically expanding cities in Russia.

Second, in Dagestan (as in Chechnya and Ingushetia) even in the best of times there were always high levels of unemployment. During the Soviet era, part of the male population worked informally in construction brigades in Russian cities and villages far from home. Such practices did not create any kind of instability.

Finally, during the Soviet era Dagestan was a dynamically developing region. It hosted a naval base, several strategic institutes, important military factories, high-tech production, and an excellent technical, engineering, and scientific school. Everything is now destroyed. Society is quickly disintegrating. But why is this happening even as the rest of the country is prospering? As an explanation, it is necessary to look at three aspects of the problem.

The Political Aspect of the Dagestani Problem

One must seek the key to understanding the many negative processes taking place today in Dagestan in the current republican political situation. Conditions are complicated by the fact that 2009 is the last year in the term of current president Mukhu Aliev. This is something like an “electoral” year. The only correction one must make is realizing that the electorate is not the population of Dagestan, but a few high-level officials in the Russian presidential administration. Openly-declared and shadow candidates for the highest post in the republic are now actively fighting for their “vote” and they are not skimping on the amount that they spend. The bloody summer and fall of 2009 is very similar to the “electoral” season of four years ago. The year 2005 still leads in the number of acts of sabotage, terrorist incidents, high-profile killings, and attacks on police and Russian soldiers, however, it is entirely possible that the combined losses of the current year will surpass it.

What forces are involved in this confrontation? In order to give a correct answer to this question, one must have a clear understanding of the current Dagestani political system. Dagestani politics today is, above all, a battle between various clans. It is not only blood ties or ethnic identities that define the clans. Additionally, they bring together people from the same village or raion and can thus be built on interethnic ties. At the head of each clan stands “respected people” as they are

called in Dagestan – the heads of city and raion administrations, high-level bureaucrats, members of legislatures at various levels, and businessmen. For example, in 2003-2006, Magomed-Ali Magomedov, the chairman of the State Council (at that time the highest executive branch body) opposed the so-called “Northern Alliance,” a typical alliance of similar clans. This coalition brought together several heads of raion administrations in the north of the republic. Another example, is the clan of Makhachkala Mayor Said Amirov, who is an ethnic Dargin, but his group includes representatives of the Kumyk ethnic movement.

The Dagestani political elite has been criminalized to a significant degree since the 1990s and the method of conducting political battles in the republic often include murder and explosions. The object of conflict is most frequently lucrative bureaucratic positions which make it possible to receive bribes and kickbacks and directly loot the republican budget. In such conditions, the only politician who can be successful is the one who had the backing of his clan, including through arms. Those who do not have such backing have few chances for success in Dagestani politics. This situation explains the weakness of current president Aliev. As a representative of the old Soviet Communist Party nomenklatura, he is not part of the existing clan-mafia structure. Without his own clan backing, he frequently must appeal to leaders who have such support. Accordingly, he is strongly dependent on those officials who provide this kind of service. While he was still the chairman of the Popular Assembly, he had the reputation as a politician who was never implicated in corruption scandals.

Of course, there is no point in idealizing Aliev. He is an integral part of the existing power system in Russia. During his tenure, there were massive falsifications of all elections in support of the pro-Kremlin United Russia political party and the pre-determined nature of the vote totals for all participants took on an openly aggressive and cynical character. For example, the undisguised administrative pressure on ordinary voters in the October 11, 2009, mayoral elections for Derbent, the second largest city in the republic, provoked a wave of indignation and even a protest rally. The Derbent elections became a symbol of electoral lawlessness in Russia, with open criminality in the massive purchasing of votes and shooting and kidnapping the members of the precinct-level electoral commissions. On election day, 16 polling stations were closed. According to the accounts of witnesses, one vote in support of incumbent mayor Feliks Kaziakhmedov, who had presidential support, cost 10,000 rubles (\$350). This money actually traded

hands. As a result, Kaziakhmedov, backed by United Russia, won 67.5 percent in the “elections.”

Nevertheless, it is necessary to keep in mind that republican president Aliev is the last of Soviet nomenklatura to serve in public office in the republic. After his term ends, there is a possibility that criminals who work in ethnic-based clans will come to power. Therefore it is clear that one of the main reasons for the sharp destabilization in the region is internal. In Dagestan, they are preparing for the next redistribution of power with the active participation of the “new wave” of politicians, who are constantly gaining power, and have the fitting label of “hawks” and “broken ears,” which is how Dagestanis describe freestyle wrestlers who prefer to use force rather than diplomacy in solving problems.

Social Protest Aspects of the Dagestani Problem

Another reason for the hotbed of war on the territory of the republic is the inevitably growing protest feelings and the obvious increase in the influence of the armed fighters in society. The Russian media likes to claim that people despairing in their life, beaten down by poverty and need are the ones who become fighters. The people in Dagestan who actually are in great need – and there are such people – either work a lot or depart to work in other parts of the country, particularly Moscow and Surgut. Accordingly, the people who go to join the fighters are those who have some complaint against the authorities, for example, because the police or judges did some kind of injustice to them, but these are typically at the lowest level. As the author’s 2006 analysis demonstrated, the political and religious opposition to the current regime is not poor (see Arbakhan Magomedov, “Wahhabis or Muslim Protestants? Local Islamic Alternatives in the Caspian Sea,” *Russian Regional Report* 11:3, January 16, 2006.)

Armed groups, or Jamaat, as they call themselves, do not operate in every raion in Dagestan, of which there are 42. Battles only take place in a few of them, as well as Makhachkala and its surroundings areas. If you look at a map of the republic, there is a hot swath stretching along a twisting route from the north to the south. While the northern Kizilyurtovsky, Buinaksky, and Untsukulsky raions have long been local hot spots, now the influence of the fighters is spreading to the long quiet southern part of the republic. The so-called armed underground is becoming increasingly diverse, with new ethnic groups joining it. If earlier there were mainly ethnic Avars and Dargins, now the jamaats are filled with representatives of almost all ethnic groups.

Who becomes a fighter? Mostly, it is young men. They are active, poorly educated, believing in Islamic order, jihad, and establishing a caliphate, but usually with no real conception of the world. The primary, secondary, and university education systems in Dagestan (as in the rest of Russia) have deteriorated and are overwhelmed with corruption. The passionate young people are attracted to political Islam, they want to change the world, seek social justice, and are looking for a way to apply themselves. If the authorities do not address this problem, the young people will organize themselves. It is easy for them to get in touch with each other and they want to act, however, the authorities are not ready to give them any room to do so.

Buinaksk Mayor Gusein Gamzatov with great sorrow says that the young people are dying and that this process is taking place frequently without a judge's intervention. Magomed Abubakarov has described how this works in Buinaksk: "If the police notice that a young man has begun to pray, they make a note of it. Then they might accuse him of theft. This destroys his reputation in the eyes of his neighbors and he is considered thoroughly bad. How is this dangerous for society? If he drinks or goes out at night, no one cares. But if he prays, then he is dangerous." A young man named Ibragim from the seaside city of Izberbash said, "All my guilt comes from the fact that I spent a year in Egypt studying Arabic and grew a beard. This was enough for them to put me on the black list of Wahhabis. But the most interesting thing happened later. I cut off my beard. Then I went to the police and asked how to take my name off the black list. They said that I needed to get a certificate from the imam at the mosque that I was not a Wahhabi. Please tell me what law describes this process? Why do I have to get a certificate from the imam for the police? They told me directly that they would chase me into the forest. If I did not leave, a bullet would catch me. Why do they treat me as if I am the enemy?"

Of course, not all of Dagestan suffers from lawlessness. Saigidpasha Umakhanov, the mayor of the city of Khasavyurt, which is known as the sporting capital of Dagestan, has through the force of his will cut to a minimum the strife between various religious movements. Ten years ago, Saigidpasha began holding meetings among religious groups. Since then they have met more than 50 times. "In the city, the authorities do not track down those who wear Muslim clothing or grow a beard. The Salafites go to three mosques. The faithful among us do not fight. How do I solve the problem? Without the participation of the law enforce-

ment agencies, but rather through my personal authority," Saigidpasha said. In the city where there are five Olympic champions and dozens of world, European or Russian champions in freestyle wrestling, the majority of children – 20,000 boys and girls – are involved in sports. Girls participate in both judo and volleyball. Religious families do not complain about this because decisions are made based on rationality rather than tyranny. "In our city we welcome it if a girl wears a hijab, whether to kindergarten, school, or work. I approve of this and sympathize with those who cover up. Accordingly, we do not have the same problems that they have elsewhere," the mayor of Khasvyurt said. He believes that no one in Dagestan needs the republican law banning Wahhabis except for those officials who want to continue detaining innocent people and sooner or later this law will be canceled.

Returning to the problem of armed confrontation, it makes sense to ask: is the number of fighters and their active accomplices large in Dagestan? Measuring as a percent of the overall population, they are not a big group. Throughout the republic, counting the armed underground in Makhachkala and the groups in the forest, there are approximately 150-200 people involved. Plus there are several thousand active accomplices, particularly, the fighters' relatives and fellow villagers.

The fighters are suffering serious losses: in 2009 the authorities killed about 100 men and more than 80 were arrested. In 2008, the number of fighters killed was even higher - 134 men, according to President Aliev, who gave these figures while speaking at a conference dealing with the problems of extremism on November 21-22, 2008. But killing the fighters does not solve the problem. While the authorities control the entire territory of the republic, they have not won the hearts and minds of its population. The fighters, in contrast, are conducting an effective informational-psychological war. Even the Dagestani bureaucrats openly admit that the groups in the forest are winning on the information-propaganda field.

The Dagestani social system is complex, and this complexity does much to explain its stability. The action of each destructive group is often countered by the actions of other similarly destructive groups because they are working with opposite aims. For example, the efforts of the Wahhabi fighters seeking to establish a unified Dagestani or Caucasus-wide jihad often comes to nothing thanks to the ethnonational differences of the various Dagestani peoples. This is a case when both movements are anti-Russian and anti-Russian Federation unity on their own, but when they come

into conflict, they effectively play into Russia's hands. As a result, in the North Caucasus we have "stable instability" (two years ago, observers described the situation as an "underground fire"). However, such a situation cannot continue for long – there is already the stench of extensive bloodshed in the air.

The Ideological-Values Aspect of Dagestan's Problem

The people of the republic are in a condition of collective stress. All constraining factors have disappeared. There is no ideology, party, morality, or strategy. Perhaps, only the columnist for the Russian newspaper *Gazeta Nadezhda* Kevorkova saw what other experts who are used to viewing events in Dagestan do not see – namely that people of all types of backgrounds constantly engage in reflection and emotional conversations about what is happening to them. "Never before and nowhere else," she writes, "have I met such a concentration of apparently healthy people, who so desperately grieve about the state of society and their own state."

One cannot say that the federal authorities have an obvious desire to avoid solving all the difficult problems of the Russian North Caucasus: whether political, religious, national, or social. In his November 12 address to the federal parliament, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev ordered the government to appoint a person responsible for the situation in the North Caucasus. This step reflects the degree of desperation that the federal government is experiencing in its attempts to solve the North Caucasus's problems within the existing corrupt-oligarchic Russian model. Within the framework of this system, the ruling elite at various levels seeks only to drag out the transition period and not to modernize the country. The system of governance, built on the principle of mutual irresponsibility between the branches and levels of authority, produces all the defects of transitional statehood. Thus, the problem, as noted at the beginning of his article, is not in local specifics or flaws, but in the political system.

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