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JIHADIST VIOLENCE IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS

Political, social and economic factors

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Introduction

The North Caucasus witnessed significantly high levels of violence after the end of the USSR, as conflict first erupted between Ingushetia and North Ossetia in 1992, while a major war broke out in Chechnya first in 1994 and then again in 1999 (see Chapter 15). While the mid-2000s saw a reduction in the level of fighting in the Russian republic of Chechnya between federal troops and Chechen rebel fighters, violence in the region did not entirely subside. Instead, it started spreading to neighbouring regions in the North Caucasus, as a loose network of formally autonomous violent groups, or Islamist \textit{jama’ats} (‘communities’), established itself throughout the region, primarily in the Muslim republics of Ingushetia, Dagestan, and to a lesser extent in Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachaevo-Cherkessia. These groups conducted relentless terrorist attacks against law enforcement structures, government officials and also local religious figures. Responsibility for most of the killings and attacks in the North Caucasian republics was regularly claimed by Islamist \textit{jama’ats} calling for the withdrawal of Russia’s presence from the region and the establishment of an Islamic state. These \textit{jama’ats} advocated the separation of the North Caucasus from Russia, and the replacement of the existing secular and pro-Russian regimes by Islamic rule based on the \textit{shari’ah}, or Islamic code of law (Kavkazcenter 2005, 2007). However, the origins and the intricacies of the violence in the North Caucasus are much more complex, and are only partially related to the spread of radical Islam and separatist aspirations. Other underlying factors, such as the perpetuation of discredited and corrupt ruling elites, the persistence of severe economic hardship, youth unemployment and social alienation, and the absence of proper and effective channels of political expression are also driving the violence (Sagramoso 2007; Yarlykapov 2018). This chapter will argue that ‘environmental factors’ external to Islamism, that is to say, the socio-political milieu in which Islamist groups operated, had a strong impact on the outburst of terrorist violence. However, the attraction of an Islamist ideology which calls for the establishment of an Islamist state, ruled by \textit{shari’ah} law through violent jihad – and which has penetrated the region from abroad – also played a significant part.
The spread of Salafi-Jihadism

Jama’ats adhering to strict Salafi (Islamic fundamentalist) principles are not new to the region. Initially, the majority of Salafi jama’ats espoused a peaceful Islamist agenda. They emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the collapse of the Soviet system and the revival of Islamic religious practices in the North Caucasus (Bobrovnikov and Yarlykapov, 1999). Islamic preachers such as Akhmad-qadi Akhtaev in Dagestan and Musa Mukhozhev in Kabardino-Balkaria focused most of their efforts on the pursuit of educational and proselytising activities to convey the word of Salafi Islam to Muslims in the North Caucasus. Although some radical figures, like the brothers Bagauddin and Abbas Kebedov in Dagestan, did support the immediate creation of an Islamic state in the Caucasus, they remained in a minority (see Chapter 13). More significantly, they did not call for the use of force, or violent jihad, to reverse the existing secular regimes (Makarov 2000: 25). However, during the late 1990s, and especially after the end of the first Chechen war, many young Muslims in the North Caucasus started embracing a radical Salafi-jihadist agenda, which called for the use of violent force, or jihad, to overthrow the existing ‘infidel’ regimes in the region. In some areas, local Salafis even succeeded in introducing Islamic rule, as epitomised by the ‘Islamic enclave’ that was set up by the Salafi leader, Djarulla Radjbadzinnov, in the Kadar region of Dagestan in the summer of 1998. In Chechnya, attempts were made by several Chechen and Arab warlords to create an Islamic state in the republic, based on a strict interpretation of shari‘ah law, and modelled on the rigid Islamic codes introduced by Hassan al-Turabi in Sudan during the 1980s (Yemelianova 2002).

More significantly, during the late 1990s, foreign and local jihadists set up military and religious training camps in southern Chechnya to spread armed jihad to the rest of the North Caucasus. These jihadists were supported by many young Muslim fighters from neighbouring North Caucasian republics who sympathised with the Chechen cause. Shocked by the horrors of war, and inspired by the ideas of violent jihad, these young individuals decided to support their Muslim brothers and join in the fight against Russian forces in Chechnya. Furthermore, during this period, many leading Salafi religious figures also went to Chechnya to support and advance the jihadist cause. Bagauddin Kebedov was of particular relevance in this respect. He fled from Dagestan to Chechnya in December 1997 and began spreading the word of jihad among local believers (Muhammad al-Dagestani 2006: 510–11). However, not all Salafi jama’ats in the region called for violent jihad against Russian forces and against the secular ‘infidel’ regimes in the Caucasus at that time. A significant number of leading Salafis, such as Musa Mukhozhev and Anzor Astemirov in Kabardino-Balkaria, remained peaceful throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s as violence raged in neighbouring Chechnya (Sagramoso and Yemelianova 2010).

In the early 2000s, there was little evidence of a genuine desire among most Chechen fighters to become part of a single universal Islamic project, although creating an Islamic state in the Caucasus may have remained their ultimate dream. The pan-Caucasian Islamic projects espoused by the Arab jihadist, Ibn al-Khattab, and the Chechen propagandist Movladi Udugov did not appeal to the vast majority of Chechen fighters, although they did have the support of some leading warlords such as Shamil Basayev and Arbi Barayev, the leader of the Special Purpose Islamic Regiment (Rotar 2002: 109). Instead, in the early 2000s, national and local objectives, although enmeshed in an Islamic agenda, prevailed among most leading Chechen fighters, such as Aslan Maskhadov and Doku (Dokka) Umarov.

It was only in 2004–5 that many young Muslims, including previously peaceful Salafis, such as Mukhozhev and Astemirov, started to engage in violent jihad against the existing...
secular regimes of Ingushetia, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachaev-Cherkessia (Sagramoso 2012). In the late 2000s, these fighting jama’ats radicalised even further, and became closer in their aims and strategies to the global Islamic jihadist movement. Islamist fighters in the North Caucasus increasingly viewed themselves as being part of the broader Islamist global jihadist movement and started adhering to the strict Salafi principles of tawhid (oneness of God) and takfir (accusation of apostasy) (see Chapter 18). As a new generation of younger fighters emerged, national aspirations slowly gave way to transnational Islamist dreams of participating in the current global jihad (Sagramoso 2012).

Furthermore, in the late 2000s the jihadist North Caucasian movements became less ethnically based and more pan-Caucasian in terms of their objectives and organisation. This was clearly demonstrated by the declaration of the ‘Caucasus Emirate’ by Chechen leader Doku Umarov in November 2007, and by the appointment of non-Chechen fighters, such as Anzor Astemirov, to key positions in the resistance movement. Moreover, North Caucasian jihadists’ websites, such as Kavkazcenter, VDagestan3 or Islamdin, made constant references to other jihads currently taking place in the Muslim world – in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine – and regularly report the views of famous Islamic jihadist preachers, such as sheikh Anwar al-Awlaki and Abu Muhammad Asem al-Maqdisi (Sagramoso 2012). In the 2010s some North Caucasian jihadists also adopted an explicitly anti-Western and anti-Jewish discourse, as they engaged in a series of indiscriminate terrorist acts against civilian targets, as indicated by the March 2010 attack in the Moscow metro and the January 2011 attack on the Domodedovo airport (Sagramoso and Yarlykapov 2013: 68). Furthermore, jihadist fighters also targeted members of the ‘traditional’ Islamic clergy, Sufi imams and representatives of the official Islamic structures, who were seen as ‘apostates’, and collaborators of the authorities (Sagramoso and Yarlykapov 2013: 68).¹

The advent of the Arab Spring and the outbreak of the war in Syria in 2011 represented a watershed in the North Caucasus jihadist insurgency, as it produced a gradual exodus of young radicalised Sunni Muslims from the North Caucasus and other parts of Russia to the Middle East, eager to fight against the brutality of Bashar al-Assad’s regime. This phenomenon significantly reduced the number of North Caucasian youngsters willing to join the virtual ‘Caucasus Emirate’ and fight jihad in the Caucasus, as many preferred instead to fight what was seen as the ‘real jihad’ in Syria and Iraq. The strength of the Caucasus Emirate jihad was also weakened by a substantial decrease in the funding that it received from Middle Eastern sources, as the pivot of the global jihadist insurgency turned to Mesopotamia. While the Caucasus Emirate leaders Doku Umarov, and his successor Emir Ali Abu Muhammad (Aliaskhab Kebekov) tried to prevent the outflow of fighters to Syria and Iraq, and insisted that the North Caucasian jihad had to take precedence over the fight in the Middle East, their calls went unheard. During 2013 and 2014, a significantly high number of North Caucasian fighters, estimated at about 3,000 individuals, including many Chechens living in Europe and in Turkey, travelled to Syria and joined the various jihadist groups, such as Jaish al-Muhajireen wa-l-Ansar (‘The Army of Emigrants and Supporters’), Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahli al-Sham (‘Front to Help the People of the Levant’), Junud al-Sham (‘Soldiers of the Levant’), and the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Many fought fiercely, with some reaching high positions within the Islamist insurgency, such as Islam Atabiyev (aka Abu Jihad), who originally came from Karachaev-Cherkessia (Chablin 2016). One of the most legendary figures was Umar al-Shishani (Tarkhan Batirashvili), who was originally from the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia, and became the military Emir in northern Syria.

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The declaration of the establishment of the ‘Islamic State’ (IS, also known as Daesh) by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2014 increased the appeal of travelling to the region for those North Caucasus Muslims wishing to live a purely Islamic life under an Islamic caliphate. As the IS gained strength and breadth, it increasingly attracted fighters not only from abroad but also from inside Syria, as many rebels abandoned their original groups and joined the newly established Islamist ‘state’. Furthermore, as self-proclaimed ‘Caliph’, or leader, of all Muslims, al-Baghdadi declared all Muslim emirates, groups, nations and organisations as now being part of the ‘Islamic State’, and this included the North Caucasus (Yarlykapov 2017). As a result of these developments, and because of the inflows of Middle East funding reaching ISIS groups, several fighting jama’at commanders in the North Caucasus, belonging to the Caucasus Emirate, began declaring one-by-one their allegiance to the ‘Caliph’ al-Baghdadi during 2014–15, starting with the Emir of the Aukhov jama’at in Dagestan, Suleiman Zainalabidov, followed by Rustam Asildarov (aka Abu Muhammad Kadarsky), the Emir of the entire Dagestani jama’at, who later became the leader of ISIS in the North Caucasus, as sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Kadari. This predicament led to the establishment of a ‘branch of ISIS’ in the North Caucasus, and the subsequent weakening of the Caucasus Emirate, even though the leaders of the jama’ats of Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria swore their allegiance to Emir Ali Abu Muhammad. The latter, in turn, became closer to the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front in Syria, and more importantly, to al-Qaeda’s leader al-Zawahiri, who praised in glorious terms the North Caucasus jihad against Russia. The success of ISIS’ policy in the North Caucasus was nevertheless confirmed when the ‘Islamic State’ declared in 2015 the creation of the ‘Wilayat Kavkaz’ in the North Caucasus as part of its state. While the relevance and strength of the Caucasus Emirate was diminished – Ali Abu Muhammad, and several of his successors were killed by the Russian security forces – local members of ISIS engaged in a series of terrorist attacks in late 2015–early 2016 in Dagestan, as well as operations against military columns, even though they also suffered severe casualties (Yarlykapov 2018).

Drivers behind the spread of the jihadist insurgency

The popularity of radical Islamist ideologies can be explained by a general dissatisfaction with the socio-political and economic conditions in the North Caucasus, and the ideological void which engulfed the region after the end of the communist regime. The perpetuation of corrupt ruling elites, the absence of alternative channels of political expression, and the dire socio-economic conditions in the North Caucasus provided a fertile ground for the emergence of radical Islamic ideologies calling for the establishment of an Islamic state in the region, based on the shari’ah. Hence, an Islamic state is seen as an ideal answer to both the socio-political demands, as well as to the moral and spiritual needs of local societies. Islamic ideologies proved particularly attractive to many young individuals in the region, who became extremely disappointed with the failures of the economic and political transitions that took place in the 1990s, and thus proved eager to adopt new promising ideas in order to fill their ideological void. Although not all those attracted to Islamist religious ideologies resorted to violence to impose their views, a small group turned to force and military means in order to introduce an Islamic state. Such resort to violence was facilitated by the brutality of the two consecutive Chechen wars which not only created a sense of solidarity among individual Muslims throughout the region, but also provided the necessary logistic and mobilising potential for the creation of Islamist terrorist networks.
Discredited and corrupt ruling elites

The systematic abuse of power by the authorities, the widespread embezzlement of government funds and the entrenched corruption that has engulfed ruling elites created a strong feeling of frustration and a deep sense of injustice among the population at large, especially among the young in the North Caucasus. Despite the establishment of formal democratic procedures in most republics in the 1990s, proper democratic institutions and effective governance failed to materialise. During the 1990s, all the North Caucasian republics adopted constitutions of a democratic nature, which usually envisaged elections to the executive organs of power and to regional legislatures. The only exception was Dagestan, which set up a collective presidency. They also enshrined in law the protection of human rights and individual freedoms, and guaranteed the right of free speech and free association. However, truly competitive elections hardly ever took place during the 1990s and early 2000s in the North Caucasus. Moreover, with the October 2004 federal reforms introduced by President Putin, which abolished direct gubernatorial elections in Russia, elections to the executive organs of power were cancelled altogether. They were replaced by nominations approved by the local parliaments. In addition, no proper separation of powers between the executive, the legislature and the judicial branch was ever established, and the rule of law has failed to be properly implemented and respected. Local government autonomy has remained limited, independent media outlets were often either silenced or restricted, and strong political parties and interest groups failed to emerge. Instead, informal arrangements, such as clans, client-patronage networks and shadow economic relations, dominated the political life of the North Caucasus republics during the 1990s and the 2000s. In most republics, the old local nomenklatura managed to keep itself in power with the aid of administrative resources, its own personal networks and professional experience, and the support from the federal centre. This allowed it to preserve many features of the ‘old system’ and concentrate power into its own hands.

In Kabardino-Balkaria, Valery Kokov, the former First Secretary of the local executive committee (obkom) of the Soviet Communist Party and chairman of the local Supreme Soviet, succeeded in ruling the republic with an iron fist from the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 until health problems compelled him to resign in September 2005. The republic of Karachaevo-Cherkessia was headed by Vladimir Khubiev from 1979 until the first presidential elections were held in 1999. Khubiev was another former obkom Communist Party First Secretary who relied on administrative resources and institutional structures to preserve his position in power. Two subsequent elections held in 1999 and 2003 brought about changes of leadership in the republic, but they did not substantially alter the undemocratic and clientelistic nature of the regime. The rule of the next president, Mustafa Batdyev, was also characterised by corruption and inefficiency, and by increased efforts to take control over all levers of power. The republic of Dagestan was led uninterruptedly from 1991 to February 2006 by Magomedali Magomedov, the former chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the republic, despite the fact that the 1994 Dagestani constitution stipulated the establishment of a rotating collective presidency. He succeeded in remaining in power as a result of his ability to keep a balance between the local clans (see Chapter 13).

In the republic of Ingushetia, the Kremlin orchestrated victory in the presidential elections of April 2002 for Murat Zyazikov, a former Federal Security Services general, in a poll marred by irregularities. His rule was characterised by incompetence and corruption, and by the spread of violence from neighbouring Chechnya. He was replaced in 2008 by Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, a military intelligence officer, who managed significantly to improve the
security of the volatile republic by conducting a more effective counter-terrorism strategy and convincing many fighters to lay down their arms (RFE/RL 2011). He initially won widespread popular trust as he engaged in an open dialogue with the opposition, and tried to address the population’s grievances. However, his popularity dwindled as dissatisfaction grew over endemic corruption within the government bureaucracy, lack of economic growth, and continued police brutality. In Chechnya, the Kremlin ensured the election of Akhmad Kadyrov, the Mufti of Chechnya, in October 2003, after persuading all serious alternative candidates to withdraw from the race. Moscow also engaged in a process of ‘normalisation’ of political life in the republic, which entailed the introduction of a Constitution confirming Chechnya’s status within the Russian Federation. The Kremlin also ruled out any kind of political dialogue with either opposition figures or rebel forces. When Akhmad Kadyrov was killed in a terrorist attack on 9 May 2004, Alu Alkhanov, Chechnya’s Interior Minister and a Kremlin loyalist, was picked by Moscow as its favoured presidential candidate. This ensured Alkhanov’s victory in the August 2004 Chechen presidential elections, in a ballot marred by irregularities. In March 2007, Ramzan Kadyrov, son of the previous President, and head of the Chechen security forces, was named President of the republic upon President Putin’s request. Upon taking control he quickly succeeded in consolidating his power, by eliminating – at times even physically – his main rivals and quelling all forms of internal political dissent. With the support of loyal security forces and the employment of ruthless counter-terrorism methods, he managed largely to suppress the Islamist insurgency. However, this came at a very high price. By the end of the 2000s he had succeeded in establishing a fearsome autocratic regime, built on a personality cult around his leadership.

In most republics, local leaderships also managed to ensure that loyal individuals were elected to parliament, and that influential dissenting figures and opposition parties remained marginalised. In Kabardino-Balkaria, Kokov disbanded the old republican parliament or Supreme Soviet in 1993, and established a new parliament, composed primarily of members of the old nomenklatura (McFaul and Petrov 1997). He also succeeded in reducing the power of opposition parties, by either banning them (as in the case of the Balkar national party Tëre (‘Forum’) or subduing them (as in the case of the Kabardian national movement, Adyge Khase (‘Adyge Council’). In Ingushetia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Chechnya, elections to the local parliaments in 2003–4 were managed by the local authorities, and as result, most seats were won by individuals loyal to the centre. In Ingushetia, opposition parties were prevented from holding rallies, and were forced to abandon any kind of political ambitions. While Zyazikov was removed from power in October 2008 with the help of the local opposition whose leaders organised massive rallies against the incumbent leader, the ability of opposition groups thereafter to hold sanctioned demonstrations was significantly curbed – the police regularly broke up rallies and banned the holding of strikes under Yevkurov’s rule (ICG 2013: 25). Opposition figures were also completely marginalised in neighbouring Chechnya, as Ramzan Kadyrov managed to become the sole master of the republic, and dissenters were treated as enemies of the republic (see Chapter 27).

These authoritarian practices continued well into the 2010s. Voter-manipulation characterised all elections held to local parliaments in the North Caucasus in the current decade, with pro-government parties garnering substantial majorities in all North Caucasus regional assemblies. For example, in the 2012 regional elections, the pro-Kremlin United Russia party held 37 out of 41 seats in the Chechen regional parliament, while in Karachaevo-Cherkessia it won between 70 and 74 per cent of the vote in several key districts. Pro-government candidates obtained between 81 per cent and 93 per cent of the votes in Dagestan’s elections to the regional assembly in 2012 (ICG 2013: 14, 15). The Dagestani opposition party ‘People
Against Corruption’, with links to the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the republic, was also prevented from taking part in the People’s Assembly elections held in September 2016 (Biurchiev 2018). Furthermore, with the introduction of Putin’s ‘vertical of power’, elections to the Russian national presidency and the Russian national parliament held in the North Caucasus were also characterised by widespread violations, ballot stuffing and massive vote-rigging, in order to produce substantial victories for Putin and his United Russia party. For example, in the 2011 Duma parliamentary elections, United Russia officially garnered 99.5 per cent of the votes in Chechnya, 89.9 per cent of the votes in Karachaevo-Cherkessia and 91 per cent in Ingushetia, while in the 2012 Presidential elections, Putin officially obtained 99.76 per cent of the vote in Chechnya, 92.84 per cent in Dagestan, 91.9 in Ingushetia and 91.3 per cent in Karachaevo-Cherkessia. This left little room for any democratic alternative to materialise, leading to great frustration among the population.

Moreover, in many republics, independent media outlets were either harassed or forced to close, and all open political debate was suppressed. Public discussion in Chechnya has been virtually banned ever since Ramzan Kadyrov took power, while several influential NGO activists have been either arrested or abducted and murdered. Natalya Estemirova, a leading member of the human rights group Memorial was kidnapped by unknown assailants and shot dead in July 2009, while Zarema Sadulayeva, director of Save the Generation, and her husband Alik Dzhabrailov were abducted, tortured and killed a month later, in August 2009. These kinds of actions created great despair among several sectors of the Chechen population. As the security services regularly engaged in torture, brutal punishment and abductions, a pervasive climate of fear installed itself in the republic. Targeted killings of opposition figures also occurred in neighbouring Ingushetia. Two of the key leaders of the 2008 anti-Zyazikov demonstrations – businessman Masharip Aushev and former prosecutor Magomed Yevloev – were murdered in 2008 and in October 2009 respectively. In March 2011, security personnel beat up and detained the organiser of an opposition rally, Magomed Khazbiyev, while in 2013, Sultan-Girey Khashagul’gov, co-chair of the ‘alternative parliament’, the Mekhk-Khel (‘Council of the Land’), was killed by the security services, after having suffered an attempt on his life in 2011 (RFE/RL 2011; ICG 2013: 25).

All of these conditions limited the options for peaceful change and political pluralism, and thus encouraged individuals in the North Caucasus to turn to violence to express their grievances. The changes introduced at federal level in 2004, which involved the appointment rather than the election by direct vote of the presidents of all republics, only exacerbated the situation. Even though some of the leaders that were selected by the Kremlin in the mid-to late-2000s were chosen on the basis of their competence and integrity, as was the case of Boris Ebzeyev, the new head of Karachaev-Cherkessia, Arsen Kanokov, the new leader of Kabardino-Balkaria, or Mukhu Aliev, the new president of Dagestan, the popularity of most of these new leaders remained quite limited. Boris Ebzeyev, a former judge of the Russian Constitutional Court, who was unmarred by corruption allegations, was elected to lead Karachaev-Cherkessia in 2008, but he was unable effectively to administer the region and balance the interests of all five ethnic groups in the republic – Karachais, Cherkess, Abazas, Russians and Nogais. He was therefore replaced in 2011 before he could reach the end of his term by Rashid Temrezov, a Batdyev ally, thus opening once again an era of clientelism and corruption (Dzutsati 2011; ICG 2013: 28). In Kabardino-Balkaria, resistance to the new Kanokov leadership from members of the ‘Kokov clan’, who had strong support within the law-enforcement agencies, continued, complicating matters for the running of the republic. Magomedsalam Magomedov, the head of Dagestan between 2010 and 2013, initially
succeeded in ensuring the support of the most influential elites to his rule while also managing to attract new investment into the republic, leading to substantial economic growth. Furthermore, in an effort to curb the relentless violence in the republic, he established a dialogue with representatives of Salafi groups, introduced mechanisms for the rehabilitation of former fighters, and engaged in a more open religious policy, which initially seemed to bear fruit. However, despite his efforts, Magomedov failed to uproot corruption and end terrorist violence in Dagestan (Magomedov 2013). As a result, he was removed from office two years before the end of his term against the explicit wishes of the local republican parliament (Magomedov 2013). He was replaced by Ramazan Abdulatipov, a Russian State Duma deputy, with no previous political experience in the republic, who engaged in an active and quite ruthless effort to dismantle several Dagestani corrupt networks – this also included the arrest of the powerful mayor of Makhachkala, Said Amirov, in June 2013. Abdulatipov also conducted a heavy-handed counter-insurgency campaign, which was characterised by intimidation against Salafi religious leaders, mass arrests and widespread repressions, clearly reversing previous policies. This once again drove many young individuals to join the jihadist insurgency (ICG 2013: 22, 24).

In 2012, direct gubernatorial elections to regional leaders in Russia were restored, but the measure was partly reversed by the Russian State Duma in March 2013, when it gave the regional assemblies the right to suspend direct elections to the head of their regions or republics. Under Putin’s instructions, all the republics in the North Caucasus were, therefore, compelled to approve the cancelling of direct gubernatorial elections. The hope that real elections could finally take place, unpopular leadership be replaced, and that governance could be improved were immediately dashed, creating increased great frustration among the population. As a result, the legitimacy of the existing regimes was increasingly questioned by the local population. In all of these republics, moreover, power remained in the hands of a small elite which not only controlled most government positions, but was also in possession of substantial amounts of wealth. For example, in Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Batdyev’s son-in-law acquired control over the lucrative cement and chemical factories, whereas in Chechnya, Kadyrov remained in charge of all the funds that were destined for the reconstruction of the republic. Much of the illegal income extorted from the population was transferred to the Akhmad Kadyrov charitable foundation which was run by Ramzan’s mother Aymani Kadyrova (ICG 2015a: 26). In Dagestan, Said Amirov, the mayor of the capital city Makhachkala had access to the substantial profits generated by the city’s port activities, whereas in Kabardino-Balkaria it was alleged that former President Kokov controlled the lucrative network of petrol stations (Laipanov 2000; Kavkazskii-uzel 2005). Generally, most of the wealth has been acquired through the semi-legal process of privatisation of state property during the 1990s, or as a result of access to budgetary resources which were regularly forthcoming from the federal centre (Slider 1997). This process continued in the 2010s, as rich oligarchs became increasingly influential in their own republics. For example, Dagestani businessman Suleiman Kerimov was considered the backer of Dagestani President Magomedsalam Magomedov (2010–2013), and this allowed him to place the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of his company Nafta-Moskva, Oleg Lipato, as the republic’s first vice-premier (ICG 2013: 20–21). In Kabardino-Balkaria, in a struggle over the republic’s resources, individuals with links to the ‘Kokov clan’ allegedly ordered the arrest of three senior members of Kanokov’s inner circle in June 2012, on the basis of unsubstantiated corruption allegations (Gukemukhov 2012).

This extra-legal accumulation of wealth and power, as well as the widespread corruption, became another constant source of resentment among the local populations, especially when contrasted with the limited economic possibilities offered to the vast majority of the people...
(Vyzhutovich 2005). Not only were regimes in the region quite authoritarian and highly corrupt, they also became incapable of ensuring the wider population’s economic well-being, thus creating widespread frustration. As in many other regions of the Muslim world, such unsatisfactory conditions left a void which was filled by Islamist ideologies. Such ideologies proved particularly attractive to young and alienated individuals in the region, because they envisaged the introduction of an Islamic state which would, among other things, restore social justice and equality, and put an end to embedded corruption. The promise of Islamic jama’ats in Dagestan to curb corruption, reduce criminal violence and impose law and order was one of the main reasons why they became so popular among mountainous communities in the Kadar region during the 1990s. In Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Islamic jama’ats gained support by providing assistance and employment to those losing jobs as a result of the closure of various factories. All these elements combined explain the popularity of political Islam among certain groups of the North Caucasus. Although the illegitimacy of the current regimes, the lack of political pluralism and widespread corruption do not in themselves account for the outbreak of violence, they did create an enabling environment in which radical ideologies emerged and violence could erupt. Frustration and dissatisfaction over the political situation, moreover, was compounded by great disappointment over the lack of economic prospects.

**Severe economic decline**

The republics of the North Caucasus suffered severely from the deep economic crisis which engulfed the Russian state during the 1990s. As a result of the collapse of the Soviet command system and the abrupt transition to the market, the old Soviet industrial and agricultural enterprises fell into disarray, and only very limited new economic activity emerged in their place. For example, between 1991 and 1998 the volume of industrial production in Dagestan fell by 80 per cent (GKS 1997, 1999). Agricultural production, a major economic activity in the republic, also suffered severely. In 1998 volumes of production had contracted by 65 per cent from 1991 levels (Kosikov and Kosikova 1999). Kabardino-Balkaria, a predominantly industrial republic, also saw its overall production drop significantly. Industrial output fell by an average of 21 per cent a year between 1993 and 1995 because of sharp falls in demand (GKS 1991–97). Karachaevo-Cherkessia’s broad manufacturing base also experienced significant decline during the 1990s (GKS 1997). The sharpest falls in production and economic activity during the 1990s, however, were registered in Chechnya and neighbouring Ingushetia. Chechnya saw its economic potential erode with the arrival at the head of the republic of nationalist leader Dzhokhar Dudaev in the autumn of 1991. After the Chechen leadership declared independence from Russia, Moscow imposed a partial economic blockade on the republic and began cutting off transfers from the federal budget. The growing economic isolation of Chechnya, coupled with the anarchic nature of the Dudaev regime, plunged the economy into deep crisis. In the place of the old Soviet economy a highly criminalised economy emerged, dominated by powerful figures close to the Chechen leadership. With the outbreak of war in 1994, the republic’s economy was almost completely destroyed. Neighbouring Ingushetia suffered severely from the war in Chechnya, over 300,000 refugees arrived in the republic during 1994–95, putting severe strains on the republican budget and contributing significantly to its further impoverishment. Primarily an agrarian region, Ingushetia experienced significant declines in agricultural production during the 1990s. Its limited industrial activity also collapsed with the end of the command system. Concentrated in the energy sector, industrial output shrank by an average of 23 per cent between 1995 and 1997. By 1997, Ingushetia had joined Chechnya as one of the poorest regions of the Russian Federation.
These significant declines in output throughout the region resulted in the massive impoverishment of the populations of the North Caucasus. By the mid-1990s the North Caucasus republics were among the poorest regions of the Russian Federation, in terms of income, GDP growth, industrial output and unemployment (van Selm 1998). In 1997, over 85 per cent of the population in Ingushetia lived below the official poverty line, while in Dagestan, a traditionally rich republic, levels of poverty reached almost 80 per cent of the population. In Kabardino-Balkaria over 62 per cent of the population fell below the poverty line (World Bank 2005). More significantly, unemployment soared, as companies closed down and economic activity failed to develop. Real, as opposed to official, levels of unemployment were estimated in 1998 at 35 per cent of the active population in Kabardino-Balkaria, and as high as 52 per cent in Ingushetia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Dagestan (Kosikov and Kosikova 1999). Levels of unemployment were particularly elevated among those under 30 years old, reaching almost 70 per cent (Kosikov and Kosikova 1999).

Although a very significant informal economy developed in the North Caucasus, and this became a major source of income and employment for people in the region, it did not really provide a response to the region’s economic problems. Unemployment and lack of economic prospects created great strains within the population, and a strong sense of dissatisfaction, especially among young individuals. Finding a job and improving their own economic well-being became one of the main concerns of young people in the region. Despite notable increases in economic growth and income in the mid-2000s – in 2006, the region registered an 8–9 per cent economic growth rate, and incomes among the population as a whole rose substantially – the overall socio-economic picture of the region did not improve significantly (FSGS 2019). Some republics like Dagestan witnessed a significant drop in poverty (from 60 per cent in 2002 to 21 per cent in 2005); however, in Ingushetia, almost 61 per cent of the population still lived below the poverty line in 2005 (UNDP 2007; World Bank 2005). A Vulnerability Assessment and Mapping (VAM) survey of Ingushetia and Chechnya conducted in 2006 by the World Food Programme, jointly with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the Danish Refugee Council, noted that poverty remained endemic in the region, and that progress towards recovery had been irregular and uneven (OCHA 2007). Unemployment was still high in 2004 – 54 per cent of the active population in Ingushetia and 24 per cent in Dagestan (WFP 2006a). Unemployment figures for Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachaevo-Cherkessia in 2003 ranged between 17 and 22 per cent (NISP 2005). Some reports mention unemployment levels as high as 70 and 80 per cent among young males in certain regions of the North Caucasus – in particular in Ingushetia and Chechnya (WFP 2006b). According to the UN World Food Programme, in 2006 between 50 and 80 per cent of the active population in Chechnya remained unemployed, and 60 per cent of the active population in Ingushetia did not have a job (WFP 2006b).

While the economic situation in some of the North Caucasus republics did improve in the late 2000s to early 2010s, growth remained uneven throughout the region. Between 2008 and 2013, industrial production grew by 64 per cent in Dagestan, by 50 per cent in North Ossetia, and by 45 per cent in Karachaevo-Cherkessia. However, in other regions of the North Caucasus, the increase was much less pronounced – industrial production grew only by 16 per cent in Ingushetia, while in Chechnya it fell by over 45 per cent – reflecting the end of the 2008–2012 Federal Target programmes destined for the socio-economic development of the republic (NISP 2018). This fall in production led to plans to develop a special economic zone straddling Chechnya, Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Stavropol’ krai and to establish a more investor-friendly legal framework (Fuller 2014). However, the special economic zone set up in southern Chechnya did not attract the necessary investments.
because of the absence of a friendly business climate and because of the high risks that existed to personal safety (Fuller 2017b). Paradoxically the insurgency’s extortion of ‘jihad money’ from business only reduced the chances of economic growth and investment from occurring (ICG 2015b: 7). While great efforts were conducted by Kadyrov in the late 2000s to rebuild Chechnya through a massive reconstruction programme – hundreds of apartments were rebuilt as well as roads, gas and electricity networks, parks, hotels, shopping centres and mosques – investment in the republic remained limited (Fuller 2017b). Concerns increased as successful businesses were seized by members of the authorities’ inner circles (Wesolowsky 2018).

As far as Kabardino-Balkaria is concerned, the region enjoyed significant economic improvements in the late 2000s to early 2010s – GRP trebled from 35.2 billion roubles in 2005 to 94.9 billion in 2012, unemployment fell from 34,500 in 2005 to 20,000 in 2009, and the share of federal subsidies in the republic’s budget was reduced from 64.9 per cent to 53.7 per cent (FSGS 2019; ICG 2015a). However, the republic registered a steep decline in industrial output in the first six months of 2013 – 68.9 per cent in relation to 2012 – with investment falling by almost 50 per cent (NISP 2018).

Even though overall levels of unemployment improved in all North Caucasus republics since 2005, the region still suffered from quite high unemployment rates in 2013, ranging from 43.7 per cent in Ingushetia, to 26.9 per cent in Chechnya, and 11.6 per cent in Dagestan. While other North Caucasus republics managed to keep the levels of unemployment slightly lower – Karachaevo-Cherkessia’s and Kabardino-Balkaria’s unemployment rates totalled 8.9 in 2013 – the official levels of joblessness were still quite high (FSGS 2019). The North Caucasus Federal District had among the highest numbers of unemployed in absolute numbers in the Russian Federation – a total of 663,000 registered as unemployed in 2013 (FSGS 2019). Furthermore, the level of unemployment remained particularly high among the young, many of whom filled ranks of the insurgency. Those between 20 and 29 years old represented 56 per cent of all unemployed in Ingushetia, 52.2 per cent of all unemployed in Dagestan, 44.3 per cent in Kabardino-Balkaria and 38.2 per cent in Chechnya (FSGS 2019). Significant federal support in the form of various targeted programmes such as the ‘North Caucasus Federal District Development to 2025 programme’, which was launched in 2012 for a 13-year period, involving the vast sum of $77 billion, helped to stabilise the economy, provide for basic social services and allow for increases in income (ICG 2015b: 4).

However, many of these projects resulted in high levels of corruption and led to the substantial embezzlement of government funds by local officials. In Ingushetia, an ex-agriculture minister was accused in 2013 of embezzling 65 million roubles ($2 million) which were originally destined for paying subsidies to agriculture (ICG 2015b: 14). In Dagestan, residents from several villages in the Untsukul’ district were left without income when a new dam was built at the Irganai hydroelectric power station in 2008, and their land was seized and the compensation money was embezzled (ICG 2015b: 17). In Chechnya, state funding and compensation money destined to civilians for housing destroyed during the war and during the 2008 earthquake was regularly embezzled by government officials (ICG 2015a: 24). Furthermore, employees at government institutions – including hospitals, law-enforcement organs, and courts – were compelled to give part of their monthly salaries to their employers, while small businesses were regularly asked to pay money to state inspectors (ICG 2015a: 24). In Ingushetia, the Health Minister allegedly embezzled 200 million roubles ($7.12 million) in 2011 by inflating procurement prices intended for medical equipment (Geroeva 2011). This situation created great resentment among the population, driving many to join the insurgency out of a deep sense of frustration and injustice.
The situation was exacerbated by the strong natural growth of the population that occurred in the North Caucasus republics over the past 20 years, in significant contrast with developments elsewhere in Russia. According to official data, between 1989 and 2002 the population of the region grew by 25 per cent (Kozyrev 2005). The vast pool of young unemployed men that arose became an ideal breeding ground for the emergence of violent groups and the spread of extremist ideologies. The high unemployment levels and low incomes typical of mountain villages were part of the reason why young men joined Islamist violent groups in Kabardino-Balkaria, Dagestan or Ingushetia. For example, the home village Gendelen of Muslim Atayev, the late leader of the Kabardino-Balkarian Islamist jama‘at Yarmuk, was one of the poorest villages in Kabardino-Balkaria. According to members of the local administration, 99 per cent of working-age adults, of a total population of 6,000, were considered to be unemployed, surviving mainly on subsistence farming (Tlisova 2005). The North Caucasus has also been characterised by acute income polarisation and a widening gap between the rich and the poor. As a result of the rapid and badly conducted transition to a market economy in the 1990s, traditional economic elites have been disrupted and new groups of rapidly enriched people have emerged. In turn, the vast majority of the population became highly impoverished. During the 1990s, the inequality of wealth between the richest and poorest individuals in the region grew exponentially. In the late 1990s, on average in the region, the richest 10 per cent of the population had incomes ten times higher than the poorest 10 per cent. In Ingushetia, incomes of the richest 10 per cent were over 15 times higher than the incomes of the poorest 10 per cent (Kosikov and Kosikova 1999). Such a picture of income inequality has inevitably led to frustration and social tension, and has played a significant part in pushing young people to join radical groups. The radical Islamist ideologies, dubbed as Wahhabism, preached in the region during the 1990s, and their spiritual egalitarianism, proved particularly appealing to those frustrated with the existing socio-economic conditions. Their condemnation of traditional forms of social organisation, and of local customs (which often involved spending substantial amounts of money at funerals or weddings), struck a chord with those young individuals in search of a remedy for the socio-economic distress faced by the societies they lived in (Makarov 2000). Although in themselves, the dire economic conditions cannot be directly accountable for the recourse to violence, they did contribute to a climate of general dissatisfaction and lack of prospects, especially among the young.

Conclusion

The violence in the North Caucasus underwent a significant evolution over the past decades, as a separatist and nationalist movement based in the republic of Chechnya turned into a network of jihadists, which took root in many of the other Muslim republics of the region. Although Chechnya provided an ideological and logistic basis for the development of such networks in the early 2000s, the various jihadist jama‘ats developed in response to local conditions. They responded to homegrown grievances and circumstances, although the various insurgent groups remained interconnected, under the umbrella of the ‘Caucasus Emirate’. The drivers behind the violence are hard to elucidate, and result from a complex mix of factors, all of which played a part in radicalising young individuals in the region. As this chapter has shown, the prevailing poor socio-economic and political conditions created the necessary framework for radical groups to emerge. Although these conditions do not necessarily in themselves produce violence, they remained relevant as they provided the negative background against which people in the region rebelled. The authoritarian and clientelistic nature of the regimes that emerged in the North Caucasus region, as well as the limited economic prospects of the vast majority of the population during the 1990s and
2000s, encouraged individuals to turn to violence in an attempt to destroy the existing structures of governance and replace them with an ideal ‘Islamic state’ based on shari‘ah law. In the absence of any legal, peaceful alternative, violence was seen by some as the only option left available to transform the existing socio-political realities into a more equal society.

The illegitimacy of most of the North Caucasian regimes, and their inability effectively to respond to the demands of society, created a significant void which was filled by Islamic and Islamist groups and organisations. The disorientation that was experienced by societies in the region after the collapse of the communist system, and the search for new identities which accompanied that process, led many in the region to turn to Islam as an answer to their queries. The spread of radical Islamic ideas was facilitated not only by various exchanges with the Muslim world, but also by the limited knowledge that existed about Islam in the region, which provided fertile ground for the spread of Salafi ideas. These ideas proved attractive not only because of their egalitarian nature, but also because they went against the existing traditional structures of society. The radicalisation of Muslims and their recourse to violence, however, were not just the product of the indoctrination of young individuals in the North Caucasus with Salafi radical ideologies. These developments were facilitated by the Chechen war, and the radicalisation of the Chechen separatist movement.

Chechnya provided an initial network of support for the emergence of radical jama‘ats, especially in Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria. On a more individual basis, however, the repressive measures taken against individuals by law enforcement structures provoked young men and women into joining these violent groups in order to avenge themselves.

Despite a significant improvement in the economic situation in the most recent years, living conditions in the North Caucasus still remain difficult. Unemployment is rife among the young and opportunities to escape poverty do not always emerge. The local regimes still fail to gain legitimacy because of their lack of popular support. The efforts, in parallel to events elsewhere in Russia, to strengthen the ‘vertical line of authority’ have only made matters worse. As a result, most citizens in the North Caucasus feel increasingly disenfranchised and alienated from the political system. The economic crisis which hit Russia in 2014, due to sharp falls in world energy prices, Western economic sanctions and Russia’s counter-sanctions, forced stringent cuts in the funding by the centre of Russia’s regions. This has also affected the North Caucasus republics which still depend heavily on federal subsidies to balance their budgets, even though Chechnya was spared from significant cuts. Emigrating to the IS in Syria and Iraq offered an opportunity to those jihadists wishing to fight for the establishment of an Islamic state and eager to live under a ‘pure’ Islamic society. As the fortunes of the IS dwindle, however, the question remains as to what will happen to those hardened fighters willing to return home to the North Caucasus. Many may remain eager to engage in a continuous fight against Russia and its allied regimes in the Caucasus region.

Notes
1 The deputy Mufti of of Karachaevo-Cherkessia was shot dead in September 2009, while the Mufti of Kabardino-Balkaria was killed in December 2010.
2 The level of violence fell quite significantly, from 134 fighters and security personnel killed and 192 wounded in 2010 to just 15 killed in 2016.
3 In August 2012, the highly popular and extremely influential Dagestani Sufi religious leader Sheikh Sayid-Afandi Chirkeisky (Atsaev) was killed by a suicide bomber and in January 2013 the chief judge of Dagestan was shot by an unknown assailant.
4 About 464 billion roubles or $7.8 billion were destined to re-build Chechnya from 2002 to 2012 (Fuller 2017b).
5 The Audit Chamber calculated that in 2013 and the first quarter of 2014, a total of 1.3 billion roubles ($38.2 million) in subsidies from the federal centre had been misspent (Fuller 2017a).

6 The dependency on funding from the federal centre ranges from 52 per cent of the local budget for Kabardino-Balkaria to 70 per cent in Dagestan to over 85 per cent in Chechnya and 87 per cent in Ingushetia (ICG 2015a: 2, 12; Dzutsati 2014).

References


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