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## THE NORTH CAUCASUS CRISIS

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## Analysis

# Chechnya After the Cancellation of Counter-Terrorist Operations

By Aleksei Malashenko, Moscow

## Abstract

After Moscow lifted the counter-terrorist operations regime in Chechnya in spring 2009, the situation in the Caucasus deteriorated dramatically. The leader of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov has now eliminated all of his most important competitors. Ramzan has achieved considerable success in rebuilding his republic, though he has not been able to completely quash the armed fighters who continue to threaten the republic's fragile stability. In order to ensure his continued rule, he has used Islam as a way to control Chechnya's population. While Ramzan is now fully in charge, he faces extremely dangerous conditions.

## Kadyrov Unopposed

Since March 2009, when Moscow canceled the special regime providing for counter-terrorist operations, an unanticipated deterioration of the situation took place in Chechnya and the rest of the North Caucasus. This turn of events once again demonstrated that the region exists in a situation of instability and raised questions about the effectiveness of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov's policy.

As recently as April 2008, there was an armed clash between Ramzan and the only armed group that he did not control – The Vostok special battalion headed by Sulim Yamadaev. The Yamadaev Clan was the only one in Chechnya that openly opposed the Chechen president. The confrontation lasted less than a month and ended in victory for Ramzan: the Russian Defense Ministry ordered the restructuring of the Vostok battalion. In 2009, Yamadaev was assassinated. This year there was an attack on his brother Isa as well. In 2008 a third brother, Ruslan, a former member of the State Duma was shot in Moscow.

After the elimination of the Yamadaev clan, Ramzan has no more competitors either in Chechnya or among the diaspora. There is no one left who can stand up to him or even present themselves to Moscow as an independent force.

## Successes

In some ways, Ramzan has earned the trust that then-President Vladimir Putin placed in him after the death in May 2004 of Ramzan's father, the first Chechen president Akhmad Kadyrov. Ramzan became president in 2006 after a short transition period under the leadership of Alu Alkhanov. Ramzan's rise to power gained a boost from the very beginning from his informal, trust-based relations with Putin, whom he has the exclusive right to call directly on the phone. The fact that Putin visited the grave of Ramzan's father during his visit to

Chechnya testifies to the family-like nature of the relationship between the two men.

The super-ambitious Ramzan announced during his first days serving as Chechnya's deputy premier that he was the only person who could realistically rule Chechnya. In fact, he has accomplished much since his father's death. He has rebuilt Grozny, laid new roads, and repaired infrastructure, bringing natural gas and water into apartments. Earlier, he restored the electrical grid. Now stores and restaurants are operating. In addition to Grozny, he has rebuilt other cities and villages. He also brought natural gas lines to several mountain settlements for the first time.

In the capital and all the major cities, it is now safe to walk in the streets. In 2008 Kadyrov issued an order preventing police and other security officers from operating in masks, as had often been their practice. This change was important for local residents who frequently suffered when anonymous people broke into their homes and took hostages. According to the data of the Memorial human rights group, in 2007, 35 people were taken hostage, compared to 187 in 2006 and 325 in 2005. The Memorial activists point out that in trying to return their relatives, Chechens generally appeal directly to Ramzan and the people around him rather than to the human rights groups.

In recent years, Ramzan has evolved from being the "son of his father" into a charismatic national leader in his own right. He is especially popular among the youth who see him as a symbol of success. He represents the possibility for young people to quickly rise up the social ladder, skipping steps and ignoring the patriarchic traditions of society. All of Russia's leading national politicians have visited Chechnya and noted the special services of Ramzan and his father in imposing order and rebuilding the republic. He has been decorated with Russian orders and in the fall of 2009 he was promoted to the military rank of lieutenant-general.

## Problems

Nevertheless, Ramzan's success does not mean that everything in Chechnya is well. The republic's stability remains fragile despite external appearances. Ramzan has not been able to completely destroy the armed opposition. In 2006, the number of fighters who would not accept the amnesty offered to them exceeded 1,000 men. On the eve of Russia's decision to cancel the counter-terrorist operations, Ramzan claimed that only a few dozen fighters (*shaitany*) remained. But in January 2009 he admitted that some of the young fighters came from families of his own government's bureaucrats. He vowed to punish the families, including removing the public servants from their positions. If some of the fighters come from the Chechen establishment, then one can only guess how many fighters ordinary Chechen families send to the mountains. Some Russian soldiers claim that hundreds of fighters remain in the republic's most remote reaches. One sign of the strength of the Islamist opposition was the occurrence this year in Chechnya, including in Grozny, of numerous attacks on policemen and bloody terrorist acts. One of them almost killed Ramzan himself.

Chechen Islamists (Wahhabis) make up the most organized segment of the North Caucasus opposition. The leader of the Chechen Islamists Doku Umarov, although not as influential as the most famous Chechen "general" Shamil Basaev (killed in 2006), has influence and coordinates activities with like-minded individuals in other republics – Ingushetia, Dagestan, and Kabardino-Balkaria. He has even claimed responsibility for the November 2009 explosion on the Moscow-St. Petersburg train, which killed 27 people.

Paradoxically, Ramzan has an interest in prolonging the tensions to some degree. As long as the situation remains unstable, it is easier for him to show Moscow that only he can counter the fighters and his victory over them is only a question of time.

Nevertheless, the threat to stability is increased by the fact that only one person guarantees this stability – Ramzan Kadyrov. If for some reason he is not able to carry out his role as a guarantor, the republic could return to crisis.

Catastrophe could come from anywhere. Ramzan has numerous enemies in Chechnya seeking bloody revenge. Similarly, many in the Kremlin and the government do not support him.

If Kadyrov suddenly disappears from politics, then there are three possible scenarios for future developments. According to the first scenario, no major changes take place. Tired of war and the endless quarrels, the Chechens

ignore his disappearance and agree to any leader sent to them from Moscow. In the second scenario, there could be a battle for power among the pro-Russian Chechen clans which could lead to a civil war. According to a third scenario, Kadyrov's police and soldiers, former fighters, could return to the mountains and then launch a third Chechen war for independence.

It is curious that Chechens, both in Chechnya and in the diaspora, believe that the first peaceful scenario is more likely, while Moscow politicians and analysts give greater credence to the second and third scenarios.

It is important to remember that authoritarianism, whether personal or through clan leadership, is not characteristic of Chechen political culture. The regulation of internal relations is based on consensus – balancing between clan interests.

The methods of direct repression, which Ramzan uses, and which are encouraged by Moscow, were needed immediately after the military conflict. However, with time it is becoming obvious that their extensive use cannot continue forever. Ultimately, the success of Ramzan Kadyrov will depend on dialogue with the opposition and a wide amnesty granted to those who oppose the authorities.

## Ramzan Maneuvers

Beginning in 2007, Ramzan has sought to establish control over society with the help of Islam. Both father and son Kadyrov opposed Salafi (usually called Wahhabi) Islam. Differences with the Salafis and the refusal to build an Islamic state in Chechnya were the main reasons for Akhmad Kadyrov, who had served as mufti under General Dudaev's separatist regime, to switch to Russia's side. Akhmad supported the Caucasus version of Islam, which emphasized the Sufi schools of Islam, the most important of which in Chechnya are Kadyriia and Nakshbandiia.

Ramzan has not rejected the views of his father and effectively is politicizing traditional Islam. Kadyrov is trying to turn the Kunta-khadzhi brotherhood to which he and his clan belong into an instrument for consolidating all Muslims. The brotherhood supports the ideas of its founder, the authoritative sheik Kunta-khadzhi, who preached in the middle of the nineteenth century that jihad against Russia was dangerous and harmful. Instead he argued that the main goal was to preserve the Vainakh (Chechen) people. However, Ramzan's approach antagonizes the followers of other brotherhoods, who believe that he is suffocating them.

Positioning himself as a true Muslim, Ramzan demands that people closely follow Sharia laws. He requires

women to wear appropriate clothing, particularly head scarves, even awarding prizes to female students who do so, supports polygamy, bans the consumption of alcohol, and forbids gambling. He is building many new mosques and their number in Chechnya has already exceeded 400. In 2007 Grozny opened the largest mosque in Russia and Europe, with room for 10,000 faithful. Following the norms of Islam, Ramzan in 2009 even ordered the removal of a statue of his father from the center of Grozny since Islam forbids making images of people.

In the 1990s, the idea of politicizing Islam in the Caucasus was associated exclusively with radicals. “Now – as was noted in the ‘Islam in Chechnya: History and Contemporary Times’ seminar which took place in June 2008 in Chechnya – Islam is becoming one of the legitimate factors in the social and *political* [my emphasis – AM] life of the Chechen Republic. The secular authorities appeal to its basic principles and values, thereby confirming their religious identity.” The secular authorities are personified in Ramzan.

Ramzan took control of Chechnya’s mosques as part of his efforts to control society, particularly young people. The history of the North Caucasus makes clear that mosques have been the bastion of the opposition. Ramzan has established double control over the mosques – they are subordinated to him spiritually and personally. In 2008 at a meeting of Muslim judges, Chechen Republic Mufti Sultan Mirzaev declared that several mosques “lacked the appropriate order” and that it was necessary “in all mosques in the republic to install a responsible person who would ensure that discipline and order were maintained.” Additionally, he recommended conducting quarterly educational, religious seminars in the republic’s middle schools. The main goal of these seminars would be to inculcate devotion to the main Chechen saint and current president.

In effect, the republic is attempting not only to spread Islam, but to introduce Sharia law to society, which could lead to the fracturing of society rather than its consolidation. (Former State Duma Deputy Ruslan Yamadaev said that the Vostok battalion fighters prevented Ramzan from building a Sharia state.) The middle aged and older generations, born and raised in Russia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan after being deported from Chechnya in 1944, are indifferent to religion. The youth, having gained life experience during the Chechen wars, the anti-Russian jihad, and under the influence of the Middle East, are more prepared for Islamic indoctrination.

In Moscow, where they are mostly worried about Ramzan’s political loyalty to the federal government,

they do not recognize the seriousness of the evolving situation or the meaning of Chechnya’s ideological and cultural drift from Russia. Clearly, the Moscow politicians are hypnotized by the results of the 2007/2008 presidential and parliamentary elections, and the 2009 local elections, in which the ruling United Russia party won more than 90 percent of the votes.

Seeking to strengthen his position, Ramzan in 2009 attempted once and for all to break the “external opposition” of the Chechen diaspora in Europe, which continues to claim that the battle for Chechen independence continues. Ramzan offered its leader, the London-based Akhmed Zakaev (who served as Chechen prime minister in 2006) to return to Chechnya as the minister of culture. Ramzan bet that Zakaev’s return would make possible an intra-Chechen consolidation and make a positive impression on the Russian humanitarian elite. Zakaev is a talented actor who once worked in the Grozny theater. The Russian authorities are well inclined to Zakaev’s return though they have said nothing about it officially and the prosecutor put him on the wanted list in 2001 for crimes allegedly committed during the first Chechen war.

Upon learning about the possible return of Zakaev, the leaders of the virtual Caucasus Emirate, part of the radical opposition, sentenced Zakaev to death. At one time they had also sentenced Ramzan Kadyrov to death. In some sense this sentence equalized the Chechen president and his main foreign opponent, creating additional, though somewhat extravagant, preconditions for them to find a common language.

Through intermediaries, including the head of the Chechen parliament Dukvakha Abdurakhmanov, there were negotiations which ultimately produced nothing. Zakaev worried that he would play only a secondary, decorative role under Ramzan, and that he was still threatened with arrest since Moscow had not declared an amnesty. Ramzan eventually became irritated at the non-compliance of his partner and after several months he stopped trying to convince Zakaev to return to Chechnya. In October 2009, at an extraordinary conference of the regional branch of United Russia, Ramzan called Zakaev a “chameleon, hypocrite, and liar.” The argument with Zakaev effectively ended Ramzan’s efforts to position himself as a leader of all Chechens, a concession he was not happy to make.

Ramzan has not given up the hope of appearing to those around him not only as a powerful and ruthless leader, but as someone who is flexible and contemporary. In 2009 he did not shun giving interviews to the liberal media, such as Radio Liberty, talks frequently

with a variety of journalists, and values contacts with the Russian artistic elite.

At the same time, he does not have good relations with human rights organizations. These activists pose obstacles for Ramzan as do the Russian authorities. In 2009, he forced them to leave Chechnya. The murder of the famous human rights defender Natalia Estemirova in July 2009, hardly helped him, as many of his opponents accused him of being behind it. He did not need this problem. The murder slightly spoiled his image in the eyes of Moscow and even caused irritation. One cannot exclude the possibility that the murder of Estemirova was carried out by Ramzan's enemies.

### What Next?

The ending of counter-terrorist operations in Chechnya did not bring stability. Moreover, over the course of the year, it was necessary to restore such operations in some parts of the republic.

The end of the operations allowed Ramzan to feel that he is completely in charge in Chechnya, something that he always wanted. While remaining inside the Russian Federation, Chechnya is becoming more au-

tonomous and quasi-independent. In my view, Ramzan will never support separatism (which some politicians and experts have recently claimed) because he is comfortable to be self-standing within the framework of the Russian Federation.

The end of the counter-terrorist operations took place within the context of the economic crisis, when the federal government had to delegate greater power, rights, and responsibility to the country's regional leaders. Subsidies from the federal budget are shrinking everywhere and in Chechnya as well. In compensation for the diminishing subsidies, Kadyrov won international status for Chechnya's airport, making it a chief source of additional income that is not controlled by the federal government.

The official end of the counter-terrorist operations in Chechnya does not mean the achievement of quiet and stability in the whole region. Chechnya has difficult neighbors – Ingushetia and Dagestan – which are far from stable. The North Caucasus and the Caucasus in general is a system of interconnected units around which at times flow potentially explosive political “fluids.”

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## Analysis

### Ingushetia: on the Road to Overcoming Social-Political Instability?

By Sergey Markedonov, Moscow

#### Abstract

Although it is the smallest region in the country, Ingushetia has been in the news thanks to its seemingly unending cycle of violence. The appointment of President Yunus-bek Yevkurov just over a year ago provided some hope for change, but the situation remains unstable. Yevkurov's predecessor violated civil and human rights in his campaign against terrorists, creating a secular and Islamist opposition. Yevkurov has brought a new approach to governing by opening dialogue with the republic's civil society, but his efforts and the attempt on his life demonstrate that one man cannot solve all the problems alone. A comprehensive policy is needed.

#### A Difficult Situation

The North Caucasus Republic of Ingushetia, located right next door to Chechnya, frequently has been at the center of attention. Only in June 2009, terrorist attacks killed Deputy Chairman of the Supreme Court Aza Gazgireeva and republican vice-premier Bashir Aushev,

the former republican police chief who was in charge of law enforcement agencies. On June 22 there was an attack on Ingushetia President Yunus-bek Yevkurov and on October 25 the famous human rights defender Maksharip Aushev was shot dead in his car. After the August 19 explosion at a Nazran police station killed

more than 20, Moscow imposed a state of emergency under Ministry of Internal Affairs control.

As a result of this spate of attacks on high-profile figures, a number of articles and opinions have appeared on the ethno-political situation in Ingushetia. In this analysis, it is common to find either direct or indirect comparison with the experience of Chechnya. However, the situation in Ingushetia differs from that of its neighboring republic in several ways, and understanding its specific circumstances is important, firstly, for gaining an adequate sense of the current 'Ingush challenge', and secondly, in forming a strategy for overcoming the political turbulence in the region.

The attempted murder of Yevkurov came within a year of his appointment, which was precipitated by President Dmitry Medvedev's decision to remove previous governor Murat Zyazikov from his post on 30 October 2008. The day Medvedev announced his choice of Yevkurov, he was well known among the narrow circles of specialist officers, following a distinguished career in the military, with experience in the North Caucasus and peacekeeping in the Balkans, but in the course of the last year he has come to be known at the national level. In keeping with the emergency situation that prompted the removal of Zyazikov, Yevkurov's candidature was put to the National Assembly (Ingush Parliament) only a day after Medvedev's endorsement, where it received practically full support. With this change in leadership, expectations among both politicians and experts were high that the security situation could be improved.

In the years preceding Yevkurov's appointment, the situation in Ingushetia began increasingly to resemble that of a car without a steering wheel or brakes. The number of terrorist acts increased significantly. According to official data from the procurator in 2007, the number of attacks on law-enforcement officers in Ingushetia increased by 85 percent. In contradiction to the worsening security situation, Ingushetia led the country in the number of votes cast for President Medvedev and United Russia during the 2007–8 national electoral campaign. This gave the appearance that the authorities functioned in their own world detached from the realities of security on the ground, whereby interaction with wider civil-society was considered optional, even a sign of weakness. As a result, there was a growth in radical feelings, even among secular opposition groups who did not seek to challenge Russian sovereignty. Indeed, dissatisfaction with the situation and Zyazikov's leadership caused at least some sections of the Ingush population to call for the return of the first Ingush president, Ruslan Aushev, with a mass meeting of protest held in

January 2008. Therefore, a change of leadership was seen as necessary for a long-time before Medvedev actually replaced Zyazikov.

### A New Beginning

In spite of the expectations heaped on Yevkurov, a year later the crisis in Ingushetia has not been resolved. Since the arrival of Yevkurov, the sense of confusion has not disappeared from either the republican or the federal authorities. At all levels, officials do not know how to address the situation in Ingushetia and what resources to use. In October 2009 a personnel shake-up took place when Yevkurov sacked his entire cabinet. Prime Minister Rashid Gaisanov, who had served as acting president in Yevkurov's absence, was replaced by Aleksei Vorobyev, whose background is in the siloviki and who has no experience in carrying out economic reforms. However, instead of generating greater unity, these changes provoked controversy over whether a person from Moscow would be able to resist the influence of the republic's clans. Yet, in parallel to bringing yet another Muscovite to the region, developments have also suggested a bigger role for local actors. President Yevkurov has hinted at the necessity of creating a Council of *teips*, whose members must come from the Ingush territorial-clan units. In the words of President Yevkurov, "the Council of *teips* must become a real power, for both the leadership and wider society, in imposing order in our homeland". This development has again provoked discussion about the role of "tradition" in the North Caucasus, something with which many influential people in Moscow are not familiar. And finally, the authorities are apparently seeking to use Ingush oligarch Mikhail Gutseriev, the former owner of RussNeft. In August 2007, a Moscow court issued an arrest warrant for him and placed his name on the international wanted list. In October 2009 the warrant was replaced with the more liberal agreement not to leave town. While all the machinations surrounding Gutseriev remain murky, the authorities will likely try to coopt him to bring peace to Ingushetia.

What should be made of these eclectic management tendencies? A year after the change in leadership, the authorities have not found any great support for fundamentally changing the situation. Therefore they try to catch hold of anything they can to address the problem, whether it is *teips*, disgraced oligarchs or federal powers. Therefore, should we conclude the change the leadership has been an ineffective solution to the Ingush problem? Such a response would be premature and too simple.

## Two Models of Leadership in Ingushetia

Yevkurov inherited a political legacy of problems that have not been resolved in many years. In the post-Soviet period, two different models of government have been used in Ingushetia by the two presidents that preceded Yevkurov. The charismatic Aushev's (1993–2002) approach was based on maintaining significant autonomy and privileges for the regional Ingush government. These included independent contacts with the separatists in neighboring Chechnya, and acting as arbiter between the separatists seeking an independent "Ichkeria" and the federal center, and setting up an off-shore tax haven. Such an approach, in essence, converted the republic into a state within a state, working in contrast to the rest of Russia and turned in on itself. Yet, in spite of regular charges that the Ingush leader was complicit with separatists, Aushev did not take the Chechen path. He governed in an authoritarian style, banning all other political groups and successfully creating a distinct political-legal and economic structure for Ingushetia. Yet, at the same time, neither Aushev, nor other politicians who aspired to the Ingush presidency, raised the question of secession from the Russian Federation.

Zyazikov introduced the second model of leadership. He was elected on 28 April 2002, with many observers at the time noting that the federal centre had strongly backed his candidacy. Today pundits in the Russian media claim that Zyazikov was an outsider who did not understand Ingush reality. This view is not entirely correct since in 1992–96 he had been the republic's deputy minister of security and the deputy head of the Federal Security Service as well as secretary of the republic's Security Council. From 1996–2002, he was head of the FSB in Astrakhan Oblast and worked in the Federation Council Commission on the North Caucasus. He also worked for a month on the staff of the presidential representative to the Southern Federal District. Accordingly, Zyazikov was not an outsider, but he had a very specific view of the republic. Under Zyazikov's rule, Ingushetia's political opposition to the federal centre disappeared. Moreover, the republic showed overwhelming support for the federal ruling party "United Russia" in elections. At the same time, however, he ended all dialogue with non-governmental structures and human rights organizations. For the six years of his presidency, the Congress of the Ingush Assembly, which in essence is the congress of civil society, did not meet. During Zyazikov's presidency, one of the largest terrorist attacks in Ingushetia during the post-Soviet period took place with a mass armed attack by fighters led by Shamil Basaev on Nazran and Karabulak in June 2004. In the

course of this attack, 97 were killed and 105 were injured, mainly from the police and military. This action, as cynical as it sounds, functioned as a turning point in the public mood in Ingushetia, and served to create a more constructive relationship between officials and opposition at all levels. However, instead of building on this mood for cooperation, the joint anti-terrorist measures between the federal centre and the republic's siloviki resulted in extensive abuses and created a wall of the non-communication between the authorities and Ingush society.

As a result, by 2007–8 two main streams of protest had emerged. The first was the secular opposition (human rights activists, NGOs). Their protests revolved around the excesses associated with the security structures in Ingushetia, although they continued to act within the framework of Russian laws and appealed to the federal centre to instigate change. Indeed, the secular opposition called attention to the multiple avenues of violence directed against ethnic minorities in Ingushetia, above all the Russian minority. The second source of protest stemmed from radical Islamic underground groups active from the mid-2000s onwards. This activity was connected with terrorism, and led to the assassination attempt on Yevkurov.

## Reestablishing Trust

Therefore, on coming to power, each of these opposition challenges demanded significant attention from Yevkurov. However, many of the problems he faces are significant and require strong support from the federal authorities and coordination with other republics. Ingushetia only has limited capacity to enact widespread change and develop. There are only a few large cities and weak development of all types of social infrastructure. Less than a half (42.5%) of the population live in cities. Indeed, the average population of a rural settlement in Ingushetia is 25 times greater than the average in the rest of Russia. Almost three quarters of the population lives on 10 percent of the territory. Ingushetia faces a whole array of problems due to its lack of resources, which this small and relatively poor republic (heavily dependent on subsidies from the federal centre) cannot resolve on its own. A federally coordinated strategy, in conjunction with a regional approach that includes the neighboring republics of Dagestan and Chechnya is needed. This is paramount in the strategy to counter terrorism, whereby a common North-Caucasus counter-terrorist strategy, in which Ingushetia is integrated into a common context with Dagestan, Chechnya and the western part

of the Caucasus, is required and without it any “new approach” adopted internally within the republic will have only limited success.

In spite of these challenging circumstances, Yevkurov has attempted to re-establish the trust of the population in the republican leadership. In general, his behavior is atypical for a North Caucasus “sultan”. As an example, following his inauguration by parliament he chose to forego the usual inauguration ceremony, in order to save money. In the course of the first two months of his presidency he arranged dialogue with public figures and human rights activists, and began preparations for holding a Congress of the Ingush Nation. Even prominent secular opposition activists have spoken about the need for productive dialogue with the authorities, some of them even moving to work in the presidential apparatus. However, it would be inaccurate to claim that the president of Ingushetia is a “human rights activist in epaulets.” As a product of the military, the third Ingush president did not remove the issue of counter-terrorism from the agenda. On the contrary, he regularly calls for an increase in the effectiveness of counter-terrorist measures. To this end, Yevkurov is drawing on his experience of peacekeeping in the Balkans, where only the support of society gives the right to use force legitimately. Hence, a dialogue with the population and civil society is necessary. It is also important to make sure that the use of force is effective and strictly within the limits of the law.

In addition to re-establishing some degree of trust in the authorities among the population, Yevkurov has also succeeded in constructively avoiding an expansion of the Ingush-Ossetian conflict. Following his inauguration he dropped the official Ingush claim to the disputed Prigorodny raion, concentrating instead on the rights of citizens, calling for the return of forced migrants and demanding that their human rights be observed with-

in Ossetia. In return, for the first time since 1990s, the North Ossetian leadership has begun to discuss the possibility of returning forced migrants of Ingush nationality to the disputed territory.

Yevkurov has attempted to lead Ingushetia out of unstable conditions by adopting an approach somewhere between the two previous Ingush models of government: Aushev’s semi-independence with relative stability and Zyazikov’s ultra-loyalty to the federal authorities while sliding into civil conflict. In practise Yevkurov is attempting to alter the perception of a choice between democracy and security in Ingushetia. The extremists attempt to frame this as the choice facing the republic, and resist any form of change in the socio-political reality, because such a change will cause them to lose the basis of their support. It is much more convenient for them to build support in conditions of an ineffective government and a corrupt civil administration, in which corruption by the federal and local elites is swept under the carpet.

However, “the new course” of Yevkurov also demonstrated that simply being open is not sufficient. He needs a team to support him, but this does not exist. Likewise, a coordinated national and regional strategy is required. However, this is not evident in Ingushetia at the current time. Consequently, the situation in the smallest republic of the Russian Caucasus illustrates, firstly, that it is not possible to change the context within a given republic alone; rather it is necessary to take the whole region into account. Secondly, neither a single individual nor a single example is able to alter systemic policy; what is needed is new cadres who can supply the regional leaders with ideas and people. Finally, no fundamental change is possible until the leader can work on the basis of a comprehensive base of academic and practical knowledge about the local situation.

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## Analysis

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

By Arbakhan Magomedov, Dagestan and Ulyanovsk

## 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 Untsukul’sky 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."

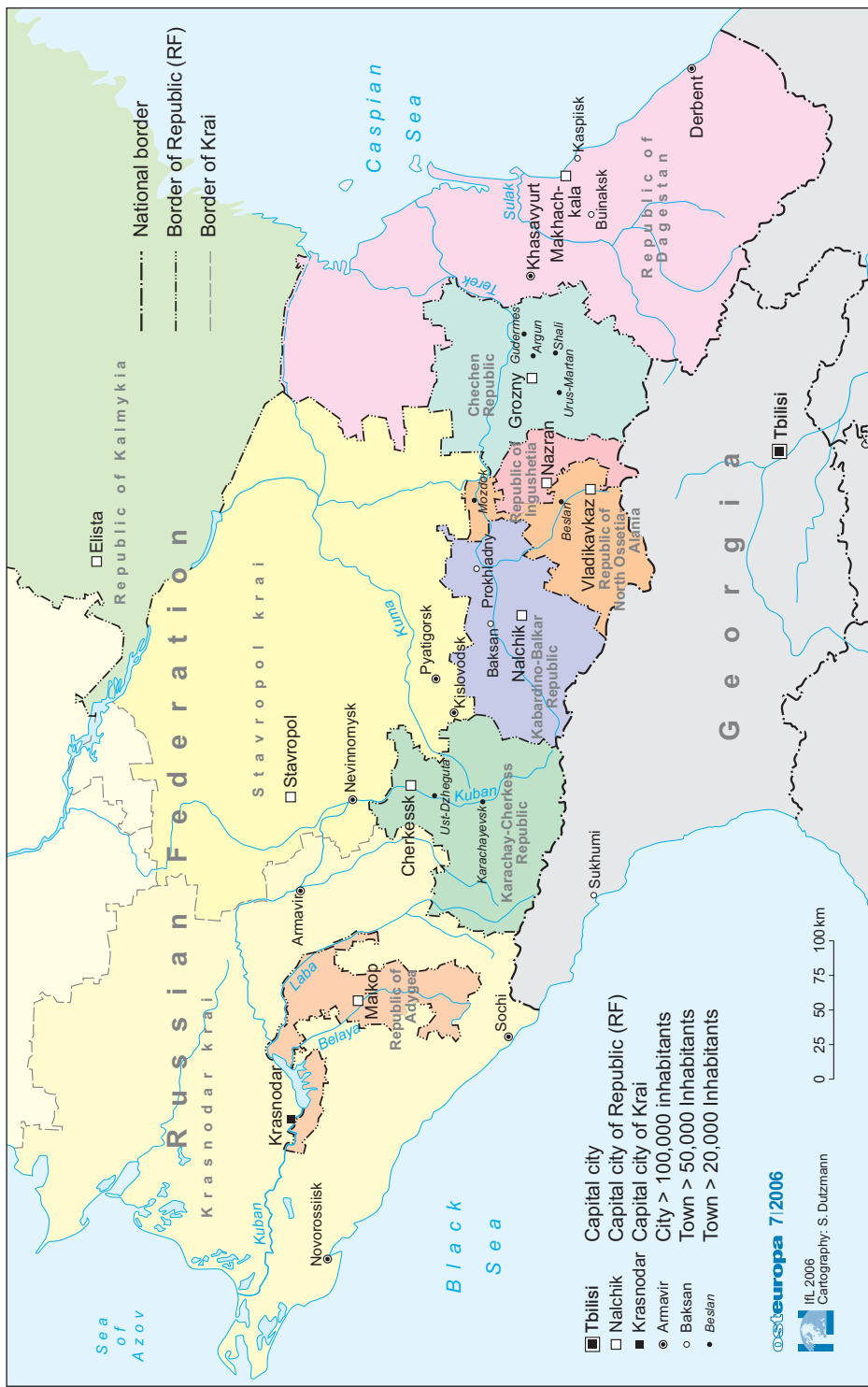
One cannot say that the federal authorities have an obvious desire to avoid solving all the difficult problems of the Russian North Caucasus: whether political, religious, national, or social. In his November 12 address to the federal parliament, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev ordered the government 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.

#### *About the Author:*

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**Map**

**The Northern Caucasus: Administrative Subdivisions**



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**Statistics**
**Official Statistics for the Southern Federal District**
**Regions in the Southern Federal District: Basic Data**

	Territory (1 Jan. 2008, thsd. square km)	Population (1 Jan 2009, thds.)	Annual mean no. of persons employed (thds.)	Percentage of population employed (in %)	Average monthly per capita income (rubles)	Average monthly per capita expenses (rubles)	Difference between per capita income and per capita expenses	GDP of the region (cur- rent prices, bln. rubles)
<i>Russian Federation</i>	17,098.2	141,904.0	6,019.2	47.9 %	15,135.8	15,111.2	24.6	28,254.8
<i>Southern Federal District</i>	591.3	22,901.5	9,317.7	40.7 %	11,051.8	11,091.8	-40.0	2,174.9
Republic of Adygea	7.8	442.8	153.2	34.6 %	7,875.7	6,809.8	1,065.9	29.2
Republic of Dagestan	50.3	2,711.7	906.4	33.4 %	11,354.0	9,508.2	1,845.8	166.7
Republic of Ingushetia	3.6	508.1	65.5	12.9 %	7,008.0	2,538.8	4,469.2	14.8
Kabardino-Balkar Republic	12.5	892.4	312.2	35.0 %	8,839.1	6,957.2	1,881.9	50.4
Republic of Kalmykia	74.7	284.0	115.7	40.7 %	5,662.6	3,716.9	1,945.7	16.7
Karachay-Cherkess Republic	14.3	427.2	165.7	38.8 %	8,914.7	6,480.9	2,433.8	28.2
Republic of North Ossetia-Alania	8.0	701.8	294.5	42.0 %	10,228.8	7,505.9	2,722.9	53.7
Chechen Republic	15.6	1,238.4	227.5	18.4 %	...	...	...	46.8
Krasnodar Krai	75.5	5,141.9	2,237.3	43.5 %	12,134.3	13,699.4	-1,565.1	655.3
Stavropol Krai	66.2	2,707.3	1,208.3	44.6 %	10,286.7	11,411.6	-1,124.9	221.1
Astrakhan Oblast	49.0	1,005.2	457.9	45.6 %	11,004.4	10,930.9	73.5	105.1
Volgograd Oblast	112.9	2,598.9	1,258.4	48.4 %	11,045.0	10,841.9	203.1	333.8
Rostov Oblast	101.0	4,241.8	1,915.1	45.1 %	12,041.4	12,814.2	-772.8	453.1

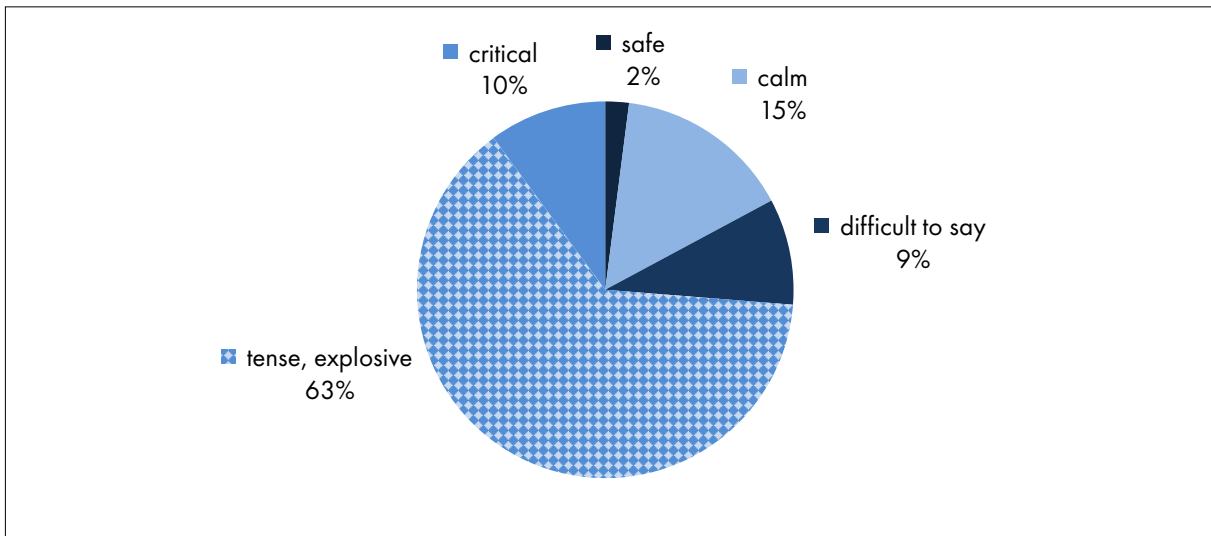
Source: data of Rosstat, Rossiya v isfiakh. Kratki statisticheski sbornik, Moscow: Rosstat 2009, p. 28ff. <http://www.gks.ru/doc/2009/rusfig/rus09.zip>

**Opinion Poll**

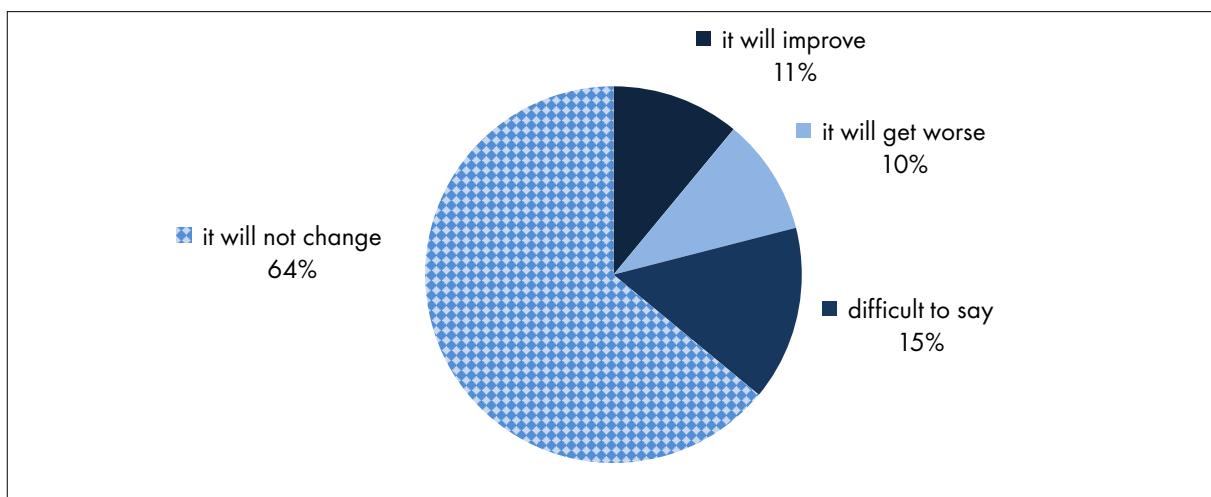
**“What is Going On in the Northern Caucasus?”**

Poll by the Levada Center

*How Would You Assess the Present Situation in the Northern Caucasus (Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia etc.)? The Situation is...*



*In Your Opinion, How Will the Situation in the Northern Caucasus Change Within the Next Year?*

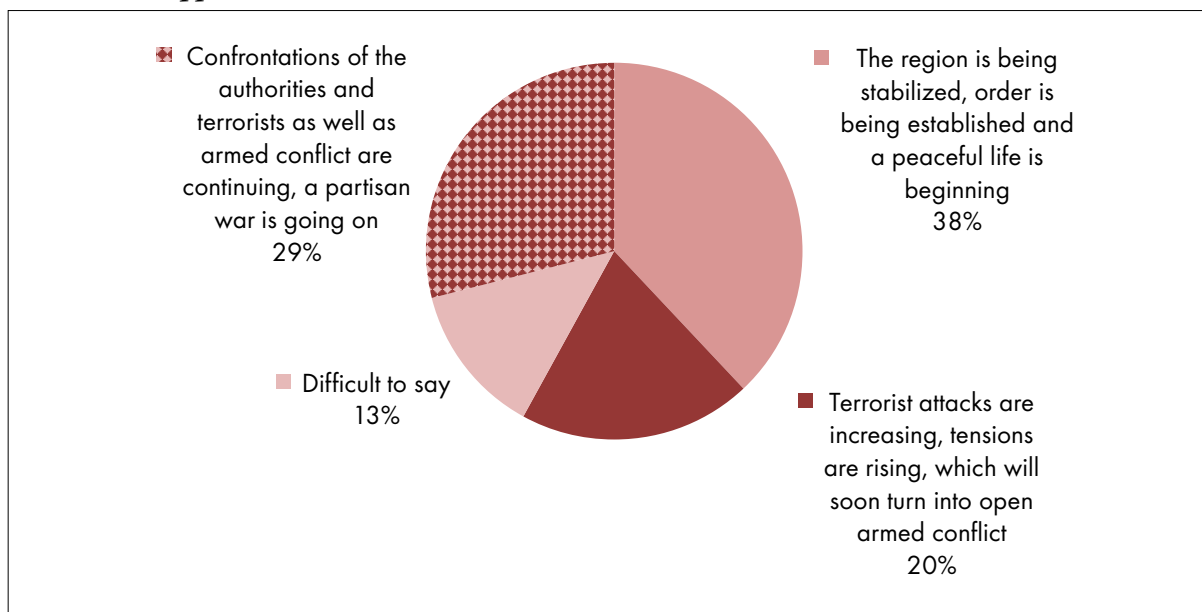


Source: opinion poll conducted by the Levada Center on 20–23 November 2009, <http://www.levada.ru/press/2009112505.html>



Poll by VTsIOM

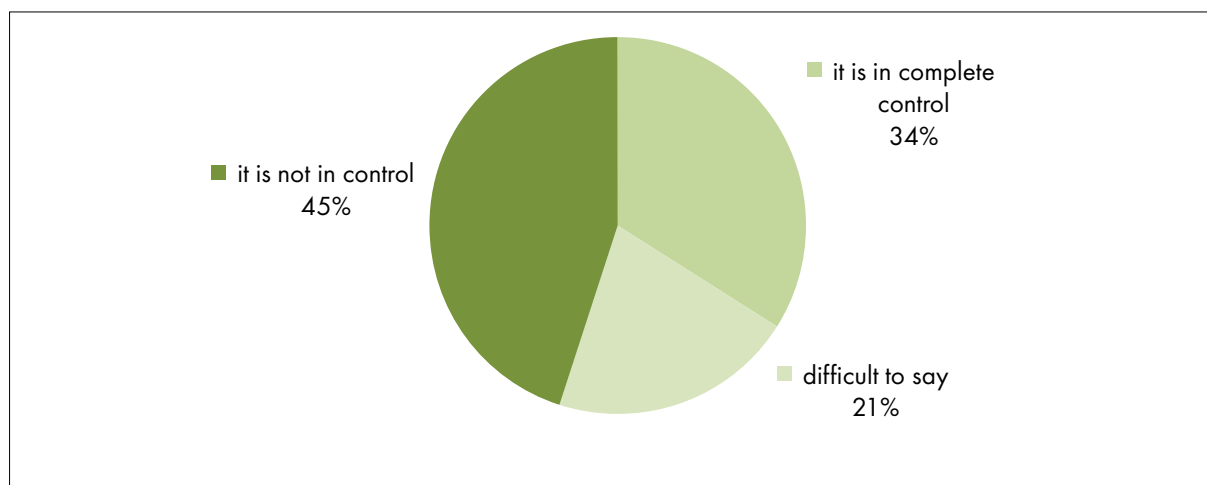
*What Has Happened in the Last Six Months in the Northern Caucasus?*



Source: opinion poll conducted by VTsIOM, 25–26 July 2009 <http://wciom.ru/novosti/press-vypuski/press-vypusk/single/12252.html>

Poll by the “Public Opinion Foundation” (FOM)

*Is the Federal Government in Control of the Situation in the Northern Caucasus?*



Source: opinion poll conducted by the “Public Opinion Foundation” (FOM) 12–13 September 2009 <http://bd.fom.ru/pdf/d38pril.pdf>

## About the Russian Analytical Digest

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