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DAGESTAN: FACTORS OF CONFLICT AND STABILITY

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Throughout the transition period the Caucasus remained the most conflict-prone part of the former Soviet Union. Because of its ethno-political circumstances and geographical location Dagestan is potentially the most dangerous place there, but the republic has demonstrated an amazing political stability. In the general picture presented here I set out to identify the destabilizing factors and analyse the factors of stability that have so far allowed Dagestan to cope with its problems.

Causes of conflicts

Analysis reveals the causes of numerous social conflicts that have been plaguing the republic since 'perestroika', each with a face of its own. The factors determining the content and significance of each of the conflicts can be grouped into four sets: ethno-political, geopolitical, sociopolitical and ideological.

The ethno-political factors

I want to examine how the unique multi-ethnic structure affects the political situation in Dagestan. There is no 'title nation' there; the republic's name means 'mountainous country', and it is the home of more than 30 ethnic groups.

The Avars make up 28 per cent of the total population and are divided into the Avars proper and 13 smaller ethnic groups with their own languages: the Andiitsy, Archintsy, Bagulaltsy, Bezhitintsy, Botlikhtsy, Genuzhtsy, Godaberintsy, Gunzibtsy, Didoitsy, Karatintsy, Tindintsy, Khvarshintsy and Chamalintsy. The Darghins account for 16.2 per cent and include the independent groups of the Kubachintsy and Kaitagtsy. The Kumyks comprise 13 per cent, the Lezghians and kindred groups in southern Dagestan 12.5 per cent; the Tabasarantsy, 4.7 per cent; the Rutultsy, 0.8 per cent; the Agultsy, 0.8 per cent; the Tsakhurtsy 0.3 per cent; the Laks, 5 per cent; the Nogais, 1.6 per cent; and the Tats, 0.4 per cent. There are also Russians in the republic (7.1 per cent), Azeris (4.3 per cent) and Chechens (4.5 per cent).¹

The peoples of Dagestan speak languages belonging to three different language families: the Iberian Caucasian (the Avars, Darghins, Lezghians, Laks, Tabasarantsy, Rutultsy, Agultsy,

Tsakhurtsy and Chechens), the Turkic (the Kumyks, Nogais, Azeris) and the Indo-European (the Russians and the Tats, who speak an Iranian tongue). Three world religions are traditionally represented: Islam (Avars, Darghins, Kumyks, Lezghians, Laks, Tabasarantsy, Rutultsy, Agultsy, Tsakhurtsy, Nogais and Chechens are Sunnis; Azeris and people from a Lezghian village of Miskinzhi are Shi'ites); Christianity (Russians); or Judaism (Tats).

By the time perestroika began nationalism had become a noticeable factor among the republic's political and creative elite. In the last 30–40 years of Soviet history increasing attention was paid to the ethnic factor. The subsequent crisis and collapse of the communist regime were marked by still greater awareness of this factor. Movements of ethnic groups and the republic's multi-ethnic structure in general gained weight in the complex situation and power struggle of the transition period. Today, political structures are based not on ideologies and party convictions but on the firm basis of ethnic affiliation. Both ethnic cohesion and opposition among different ethnic groups are constantly evident in Dagestan.

The geopolitical factors

One geopolitical factor is the active colonization of the valleys by the mountain dwellers, a process that started in 1952 and ran out of control in the 1970s. Since then there have been growing tensions between the newcomers and the local people because the lands had to be redistributed among the mountain peoples (Avars, Darghins, Lezghians, Laks, Tabasarantsy, Agultsy, Rutultsy and Tsakhurtsy) and valley peoples (Nogais, Kumyks, Chechen-Akkinty, Russians and Azeris). As a result many villages in the valleys became home to people of varied ethnic affiliations.

This explains why the first, and most active, ethnic organizations appeared among the Chechen-Akkinty, Kumyks and Nogais. From the very beginning of perestroika the former have been demanding the Novolakskiy (former Aukhov) district back: in 1944, as soon as the Chechens had been deported from it, Laks and Avars from the mountains had been forced to take their place. On 19 November 1989 at a constituent congress in the village of Endirei, the Kumyks formed their own ethnic movement—Tenglik (Equality). A month later the Nogais set up their own Birlik (Unity) society at their congress. The Cossacks in the Kizliar and Tarumovka districts in northern Dagestan became more active. Their organizations demanded independence from the republican powers to prevent further resettlement into the valleys. With this aim, and to promote their economic and political demands, the valley peoples closed ranks and started forming inter-ethnic organizations. Kumyks sided with Chechens or Azeris, and Nogais with Kumyks or Cossacks.

Distribution of new plots of land among the old population and the newcomers caused serious conflicts which developed into direct clashes and caused loss of life. Local political elites were also involved, supported by their ethnic groups in the power struggle. This blended the large-scale conflicts over land and the struggle of the political elites for their interests.

The sociopolitical factors

The social and class structure changed, property differentiation created wider gaps and this, in turn, gave rise to various sociopolitical factors. It seems that nowhere else in Russia are the differences between the incomes of the common people and the narrow circle of the richest families as great as in Dagestan. Its living standard is one of the lowest in Russia, eight times lower than in the richest subjects of the federation.

Common people are becoming destitute while the rich are growing unprecedentedly richer. My

rough estimates suggest that 200 extended families own enormous capital and dictate policies in the republic. They comprise about 1000 nuclear families (6500 members)—0.3 per cent of the total population. About 5–7 per cent have considerably improved their material situation; 20–25 per cent are working hard to maintain incomes 2 to 5 times higher than the subsistence level; and the majority, about 70 per cent, are poor.

According to official figures the total number of crimes in the republic has remained the same since 1994, yet the number of violent crimes (murders and attempted murders, robbery and banditry, premeditated bodily harm, rapes and attempted rapes, and disorderly conduct) is growing.² The authorities are obviously unable to cope with the rising wave of crime, which leads to criminal methods of fighting criminals. People arm themselves (especially in the countryside), they form paramilitary detachments to support local economic and political bosses, there are unofficial civil trials, etc. Rural communities organize mob trials that are readily accepted by society. While public law and order has recently been strengthened to some extent, the economic situation remains the same; the gap between the rich and poor is widening.

There are more mass rallies and strikes. In the early 1990s public protest was mostly inspired by political slogans—today, it is moved by economic considerations. Teachers, medics and others are demanding their wages and allowances; the number of labour conflicts at state and joint stock companies is increasing; petty businessmen are trying to protect their rights by opposing the authorities and organizing protest marches. The Independent Trade Union of Businessmen and Drivers of Dagestan, which detached itself from the Federation of the Trade Unions of Dagestan (the heir to the Soviet trade unions), is rapidly gaining weight.

The ideological factors

Ideologically, society is divided into two more or less equal groups: those who support European norms and values and those who look to the East and support Islamic norms and values.

Naturally it is the urban dwellers who look to the West. They are mostly Russians and Russian-speaking Dagestanis, as well as Laks, Lezghians and other ethnic groups of southern Dagestan. The faithful, those who obey Muslim rituals, comprise only 15–20 per cent of the total population. A considerable number of people believe themselves to be Muslims and support Islamic values—mainly Avars, Darghins, Kumyks, Azeris and Chechen-Akkintysy.

Those who support the European values can be broadly divided into communists and democrats: the former are more numerous while the latter comprise only 8–10 per cent of the number of communists. The democrats are few, not more than several dozens. They are urban intellectuals and marginal groups. The communists, also found in towns, are older, well educated professionals (doctors, teachers, academics and engineers) who have become much poorer and a large share of workers and peasants, mainly from southern Dagestan where Islam had retreated under Soviet power and is slowly reviving.

Those who actively or passively support the Islamic values can also be classified.

There are *traditionalists*, who support everyday Islam common in the republic. They view Islam as a way of life rather than as a political or ideological issue. They are mainly rural people.

There are *supporters of Tariqat*, who profess the intellectual trend in Islam. They belong to Sufi brotherhoods headed by sheikhs. Tariqat arrived in Dagestan in the early 19th century and inspired

the mountain peoples' ideological and organizational liberation movement against Russia's colonization. Today, there are at least 15 Murid brotherhoods in the republic, all monoethnic. They are especially popular among the Avars, Kumyks and Chechens and form the backbone of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Dagestan (SAMD), the main and most respected organization of the faithful in the republic. Recently, the Administration has been developing into a semi-official institution close to the state.

Three are *Wahhabis*, who support Islam 'purified' of the local traditions. There are not many of them in the republic, some 2–3 per cent of those professing Islamic values. They live mainly in the villages of central Dagestan, in the mountain and piedmont areas and the neighbouring valley settlements (Avar mountain villages in the Buinaksk district that became well known after the Wahhabis from the Darghin villages of Karamakhi, Kadar and Chabanmakhi openly proclaimed their ideas, and the Kiziliurt and Khasaviurt valley districts). There are Wahhabi groups among the Lezghians in southern Dagestan. Today, after the events of August–September 1999, they are persecuted by the state and the Spiritual Administration as a 'subversive sect.'

Combination of factors

Each of the above typological sets of factors can be regarded as a matrix of the republic's political reality. They can be applied to any specific social incident to identify the forces involved in it. As a rule not less than two factors are present in the conflicts fraught with social instability. For example, the problem of Wahhabis belongs, on the whole, to the ideological matrix yet in certain cases there are ethno-political, sociopolitical and geopolitical matrices. If a conflict embraces several typological matrices mounting tensions can be expected.

The Lezghian and Chechen problems

There are special factors extending outside the republic which help identify conflicts. They are the problems of the Chechens and Lezghians.

The Lezghian problem was born by the division of the people's territory between Azerbaijan and Russia when the Soviet Union fell apart. The frontier along the Samur River, the Lezghians' geographical axis, radically changed the ethno-cultural, social, economic and geopolitical aspects.

I shall not go into the painful sociocultural and political echo of this fateful event, but concentrate on the economic aspects. The frontier drawn by ethnically alien bureaucrats in both countries turned the Lezghians' home territory (in the past an active intermediary between the Southern and Northern Caucasus) into a marginal area in two not quite friendly states.

This deprived the Lezghian economic and political elites of influence in the capital: they live too far from the main economic regions in the republic's centre and north and from Makhachkala (there are not more than 9 per cent of them in the capital while the Avars are represented by 23 per cent; the Kumyks, 17 per cent; Russians, 15 per cent; Darghins, 13 per cent; and Laks, 12 per cent³). The absence of influential Lezghian 'ethno-parties' in the republic makes people feel vulnerable, they protest against injustices and reject the political regime. Opinion polls say that the Lezghians are the most consistent opponents of the authorities in Moscow and Makhachkala.

The Chechen factor has two sides: the problems of the Chechen-Akkinty, living along the frontier with Chechnya, and the problems created by the liberation movement in the Chechen republic of Ichkeria.

The former want the Aukhov (Novolakskiy) district back. This was slowly settled when in August–September 1999 militants from Chechnya invaded the frontier mountainous regions of Dagestan and the Novolakskiy district, which added fuel to the fire.

Since the early 1990s Dagestan has been affected by the political events in Chechnya. The solution lies in more protected frontiers that would isolate Dagestan from the Chechen chaos, and new transportation ties with Russia (new highways, railways, oil and gas pipelines and power lines to by-pass the troublesome republic).

Stability factors

In this context the republic preserves its political stability: there are obviously mechanisms that are maintaining political balance. How can this be explained? Which sociopolitical features and political mechanisms make relative stability possible?

The ruling elite

Let us examine the recent past: when the communist regime first collapsed there were practically no changes at the top yet some latent processes were obviously unfolding. Finally, they gradually altered the structure of the political elite and divided the ruling group into two categories. The first comprised the highest officials and civil servants and the second the key figures in the sphere outside the state structures, big businessmen and public leaders that rely on the money of their supporters.

Recently a third category evolved, recruited from the two mentioned above. This third top group includes highly placed officials who grew rich and went into public politics with the latent support of power structures, the nouveaux riches and charismatic figures who were appointed to top political and economic posts or reached them through elections. Gradually members of this group are acquiring key political influence and becoming the decisive force.

The evolution of the third group evoked sharp conflicts in the ruling class and gave rise to a dynamic structure of horizontal and vertical relationships of power and subordination. No matter what differences are tearing the third group apart, its members need a united front against other groups.

In this way, the collapse of communism deprived the ruling elite (consisting in the past of representatives of the republic's major ethnic groups) of a firm foundation. It had to look for different support groups and found them in the form of personal friendships and a system of trustworthy relatives and people from the same home districts. The traditional ethno-cultural values rather than ideology were behind mobilization of the political forces in the republic.

The political structure

On 26 July 1994 the new constitution of the republic crowned three years of painful efforts. It rests on the idea of the 'sovereign rights of each ethnic group' and it was this idea that caused discussion and contradictions in the course of writing the fundamental law. Wide public circles, politicians, academics and experts of the working group were trying to find a form of power that would guarantee all the peoples of Dagestan the right to their land and their natural resources, to ensure their just representation on the top and in the sphere of material production, education,

science and culture.

On the other hand, the top political leaders on whom the final variant of the fundamental law depended (if there is an agreement at the top) wanted to avoid concentration of power in the hands of one person. This would have obviously caused restructuring of the relationships, changes in the ruling crust and finally, would have given one group an advantage over the others. This would have amounted to a coup d'état.

Public discussions and the search for a balance behind the scenes created an original political system.

Under the new constitution the State Council of 14 is the highest body of state power, the members being elected by the Constitutional Assembly (CA) rather than popular vote. The Constitutional Assembly is convened specially to elect the Council or to amend the constitution. The CA includes all members of the parliament and representatives elected by district and urban self-administration structures.

Article 88 of the Constitution bans 'more than one representative of an ethnic group' in the State Council; its members cannot be elected to the parliament, serve in the Cabinet or be judges, yet they can continue working as public prosecutors, teachers or lecturers, they can head a joint stock company or a state organization or enterprise or be their employee.

The Constitution provides the minutest details of voting: at first the CA elects the Chairman of the State Council by secret ballot out of several candidates. Article 92 describes him as Head of State. The head of government suggested by the State Council's Chairman and approved by the parliament is a State Council member ex officio and First Deputy State Council Chairman.

As soon as the national affiliation of the two members is known the CA starts suggesting candidates for the remaining 12 seats, each of the members irrespective of his/her affiliation has the right to put forward any candidate of any nationality; then the preliminary secret ballot draws the list of 24 candidates (two for each nationality). The second, final round of secret ballot names the new members of the State Council.

The parliament, the Popular Assembly, consists of 121 deputies elected by popular direct and secret ballot in territorial constituencies. Art 72 guarantees 'representation of all ethnic groups of Dagestan' the mechanism of this constitutional norm being supplied by the Law on Elections to the Popular Assembly of Dagestan.

Under the law each of the ethnic groups is proportionally represented. To achieve this the republic is divided into ethnically homogeneous (mainly the mountain regions populated by Avars, Darghins, Lezghians, Laks, Tabasarantsy and other nationalities living in compact groups) and ethnically mixed constituencies (towns and villages in the valleys). The former can propose any number of candidates of one nationality. In the latter the law allows the Republican Election Commission to create 'ethnic territorial constituencies' in which candidates of only one nationality can be named. The voters in the ethnically mixed constituencies are not divided by their ethnic affiliation: all of them vote for a candidate of the same nationality. This is done to avoid ethnic conflicts in the course of election struggle. This keeps it within the limits of one ethnic group while ethnic affiliations of the candidates is of no importance for the multi-ethnic electorate.

It should be noted that the system functions smoothly thanks to Article 31 of the Constitution: 'Each is free to determine and state his/her ethnic affiliation. Nobody shall be forced to determine and

state his/her ethnic affiliation.'

These rules are efficiently complemented with another constitutional norm that protects the major ethnic attributes: Article 81, paragraph 22, introduces, in fact, the right of veto: 'When dealing with the questions related to changing the existing administrative-territorial division as well as the demographic, linguistic, socioeconomic and cultural environment of the peoples of Dagestan, in cases when a deputy or a group of deputies from this territory disagree with the proposed changes the decision shall be made after reconciliatory procedures by not less than two-thirds of the total number of the Popular Assembly deputies.'

It should be said that many of the rules designed to regulate the ethnic balance though not registered by the constitution, laws or any other documents are faithfully observed in practice. Thus, the highest officials (the State Council Chairman, the speaker and the premier) should belong to different ethnic groups. Deputy premiers are preferably selected with an eye on their ethnic affiliation, not more than one person of any nationality. The same unwritten rule applies to the Popular Assembly deputy speakers, heads of the parliamentary committees, administrations of the State Council, heads of higher educational establishments, research institutes, etc.

This model was set up totally outside the influence of the consociational democracy concept formulated back in the late 1960s by West European comparativists, yet it can be classed within it. Arend Lijphart is one of its most prominent critics.⁴ In consociational democracy it is traditional ethnic and/or confessional entities that play the role of social-class and ideological groups that stand opposed to one another. This is what makes consociational democracy different from classical democracy; it possesses two distinctive features: a clear vertical division of the population represented by ethno-cultural entities (religious, linguistic, ethnic or racial) and political institutionalization of their social interaction at the level of their elites.

No political structure based on ethnic representation can be stable: it breeds separatism and division by ethnic affiliation. Strange as it may seem in Dagestan nationalism, or ethnic bias, no matter how important for the sociopolitical process, has had no tangible political repercussions. In addition, political practice shows that the ethnic factor, widely discussed in the republic, takes a back seat or disappears completely when serious issues are at stake. For example, popular leaders of national movements whose popularity is based on holding forth about their ethnic groups' past and present insults and claims cannot gather enough signatures to be registered as parliamentary candidates. Those who manage to make it to the ruling class dropped their ethnic claims on the way to the top. Quite often an ethnic leader enters into political alliances with leaders of other ethnic groups and thus damages the interests of other popular politicians of the same nationality. There is something in nationalistic slogans that deprives them of their weight.

The structure of political forces

In-depth analysis of opposition at the top, of the mechanisms of appointment to and removal from the highest posts, of the people's electoral preferences, election technologies and of many other things prompt the conclusion that the nationalist discourse conceals rather than clarifies the true structure of political relationships in Dagestan. It is normally believed that ethnic groups act as subjects in political processes—yet this role belongs to different structures absent from the political language and, therefore, considered non-existent. They are revealed in the examination of specific details of the political processes.

These latent structures can be called ethno-parties since they reveal all the formal attributes of West European political parties: shared views that allow them to mobilize like-minded social forces

and shared corporate interests. They have organizational structures with one or several popular leaders and a great number of activists. They receive money from business elites and enjoy the support of certain population groups.

The difference is a significant one: these parties are supported by members of the same ethnic groups at the level of a village or several neighbouring villages, which is called *jamaat*⁵ in Dagestan. One can meet people from different ethnic groups among the functionaries of ethno-parties, yet the key components (such as the leaders, monetary and public support) belong to the same group. At the same time there is not a single political centre in the republic based on national principles, that is, according to the ethno-party principle. They serve definite groups and cannot spread its service to the nationality as a whole. The leaders of such quasi-parties often unite not only with other groups of their own nationality but also with other ethno-parties to the detriment of the interests of their own nationality if they believe it expedient.

Dagestan did not follow the road of ethnic division. Nationalism there did not feed separatism. Probably this happened because the true structure of the political forces that have taken shape there was based not on ethnic affiliation but on clearer identities rooted in the traditional political structures, the *jamaats*.

¹ The official list of ethnic groups in Dagestan contains 14 ethnoses. Today, there is a mounting movement in the republic to identify as independent those of the small ethnic groups that were included, in the post-war population censuses, into the larger ethnic groups of the Avars and Darghins.

² See the *Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoe polozhenie Respubliki Dagestan* reports for 1992 and later years, published in a limited edition in Makhachkala by the RD Committee for State Statistics.

³ See *Osnovnye natsional'nosti Respubliki Dagestan. Statisticheskiy sbornik*, published by the Dagestan Committee for State Statistics, Makhachkala, 1995.

⁴ See Lijphart, A., *Democracy in Plural Societies. A Comparative Exploration* (London, 1977).

⁵ *Jamaat* is a nucleus political unit of the traditional form of life in Dagestan, shaped in the 14th and 15th centuries as small societies made of small clan villages which united into large closely knit mountain townships with a unified republican-type administration system, as a rule, with clear borders, civil law protecting equal rights of all *jamaat* members (and private ownership of land). Their domestic life was rigidly regimented by the laws of natural clan solidarity. The *tukhum*, a rudimentary form of blood kinship by male line, did not have any common property or a leader. Each *jamaat* included at least 3 to 5 *tukhums*. Newcomers could join any of the *tukhums*, families were free to change *tukhums*. People could also move from one quarter to another provided they remained within their *jamaat*. In Dagestan there was no tradition of ex-territorial clan entities such as *teips* among the Vainakhs or *tukhums*, which were even wider clan entities. It was the judicial system as an auxiliary social institute designed, together with others, to maintain public order that registered an individual as belonging to a definite clan. In fact, the *tukhum* was an auxiliary instrument of justice. Neighbouring *jamaats* united into alliances while alliances formed, in some cases, super-alliances (confederations). In all cases the *jamaats* preserved their internal integrity and indivisibility. According to rough estimates by the time Russia and Dagestan came into contact at the turn of the 18th century there had been up to 400 *jamaats* in Dagestan and about 60

alliances (see Aglarov, M. A., *Etnogenez v svete poliantropologii i etnonimii v Dagestane* (Makhachkala, 1998); Aliev, B. G., *Soiuzy sel'skikh obshchin Dagestana v XVII—pervoi polovine XIX v.* (Makhachkala, 1999).

