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## Kinship, ethnicity and religion in post-Communist societies

*Russia's autonomous republic of Kabardino-Balkariya*

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**ABSTRACT** Among the consequences of *perestroika* and the subsequent break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 has been the rise of ethnic nationalism. In the non-Russian parts of the former USSR this process has been accompanied by the reactivation of clan and other primordial social networks which under Soviet Communism had been in abeyance. This article, based on extensive field research material, examines political and social transformation in post-Communist Kabardino-Balkariya, a Russian Muslim autonomy in the North Caucasus. In particular, it analyses the nature of the nation-building policies of the ruling regime, and its relationship with the clan system. It is also concerned with Islamic revival and Islamic radicalism in the region and their correlation with the Islam-related republican and wider federal policies. The article reveals some grey areas in the current academic debate on ethnicity and nationalism and injects more conceptual syncretism into the study of post-Communist societies.

**KEYWORDS** cossacks ● Islam ● nationalism ● North Caucasus ● Wahhabism

### INTRODUCTION

The disintegration of the Communist Party hierarchy and Soviet institutions, which for decades held the Soviet Union together as a multiethnic society, has caused a fundamental social and political change all over the former Soviet space. In Russia's Muslim regions<sup>1</sup> it has involved an ethnonationalist and Islamic resurgence and the resurfacing and reactivation of archaic institutions which hitherto were either frozen, or disguised by Soviet Communism. In the new sociopolitical setup the local ruling elites

have embarked upon an uneasy process of nation and state building. Much of the existing research into this process in post-Communist societies tends to apply the *institutionalist* (or *neoinstitutionalist*) and *instrumentalist* theoretical framework and therefore deals primarily with its institutional side – political elites, political systems, government, non-governmental and opposition organizations, as well as local administration. Of comparative value to the present study are findings by Rogers Brubaker, Tomila Lankina, Robert Bruce Ware and Enver Kisriev, and James Hughes and Gwendolyn Sasse. In particular, Brubaker offers a wider theoretical perspective on post-Communist nation-building by analysing it in terms of the relations between the nationalisms of national minorities, newly institutionalizing states and the external national ‘homeland’ (Brubaker, 1996: 8). Robert Bruce Ware and Enver Kisriev apply a *consociational* approach to the study of central political institutions in Russia’s Muslim autonomy of Dagestan, which they perceive as an example of ‘third wave plural societies’ (Ware and Kisriev, 2001: 129). Lankina applies an *institutionalist* approach to the analysis of the organized non-governmental actors – the social/nationalist movements in two other Russian Muslim autonomies, Bashkortostan and Adygheya (Lankina, 2002: 1038). By comparison, Hughes and Sasse, who are concerned with the political reshaping of the post-Soviet Russian Federation, argue in favour of combining *institutionalist* and *behaviouralist* approaches, due to the greater role of the personal factor in Russian politics (Hughes and Sasse, 2001: 25–6).

These studies on the subject, although contributing a great deal to a better understanding of post-Communist Muslim societies in transition, neglect some other key dimensions of this transition, in particular the role of informal non-institutional social networks. By contrast, this article, which is based on extensive data drawn from field research, adopts a synthetic conceptual approach which allows us to tackle the subject in all its complexity. This approach is rooted in a *constructivist* understanding of the relationship between ethnic identity, political power and nation-state formation. It is *instrumentalist* in exploring the way in which ethnic and confessional belonging is currently employed in competition for scarce resources, not least political power. It is also *primordialist* in dealing with the way in which *primordialism* is employed within elite narratives. In particular, this approach allows us to reveal the mechanism by which the ruling elite mobilizes archaic, primordial, clan- and region-based networks for the cementing and perpetuating of its power. The empirical focus of this article is Russia’s Muslim autonomous republic of Kabardino-Balkariya.<sup>2</sup> The article consists of an introduction, three sections and a conclusion: the introduction outlines the applied theoretical framework and research approach; the first section offers historical and ethnocultural insights into the present situation; the second examines the post-Communist nationalist

and religious resurgence; the third analyses the present ruling regime in Kabardino-Balkariya, paying special attention to its relationship with the clan system; and the conclusion evaluates the theoretical limitations of existing post-Communist society studies and suggests the implications of these research findings for the understanding of political and societal change there.<sup>3</sup>

## ETHNO-CULTURAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Kabardino-Balkariya is a relatively small republic, situated in the mountains of the north-western Caucasus. It has a multiethnic population with Kabardinians, Balkars and Russians being the largest ethnic groups. Historically, the republic's social and ethnocultural make-up was shaped by both indigenous and external cultures, including those of the Roman and Byzantine empires, the Arab Caliphate, the Khazar Kaganat, the Mongol and Ottoman empires, the Crimean Khanate and the Russian/Soviet empire. In the past Kabarda, largely populated by the Kabardinians (an Adygh people),<sup>4</sup> and Balkariya, the land of Balkars (a Turkic people), existed separately. In the Middle Ages both presented a conglomerate of princedoms, ruled by feudal rulers – the *knyazes* – who owned land and serfs. The Kabardinians had a relatively sophisticated social hierarchy and statehood tradition. By contrast, the Balkars maintained a strong reliance on the principles of patriarchal democracy. The authority of the Balkar feudal owners was superseded by that of the supreme *tere* (an elected council of elders). From the seventeenth century, most Kabardinians professed Sunni Islam of Hanafi *madhhab* (a juridical school); the Balkars adopted Islam of the same *madhhab* in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, their Islamicization was not as profound as that of various peoples of the north-eastern Caucasus (Emelianova, 1999: 3–8; Zelkina, 2000: 66–7). Thus, the Islamic beliefs of the Kabardinians and Balkars co-existed with remnants of Christianity, Judaism and paganism. Among important social and moral regulators, alongside Islam, was Caucasian etiquette, which was known as the *adyghe khabze* among the Kabardinians, and as the *tau adet* among the Balkars. Its major elements were veneration of elders, respect for a guest, military valour, humanity, deference, sensibility, bravery, honour, honesty, decency, loyalty and tolerance (Emelianova, 1999: 17–18; Gugov, 1999: 62–3; Smith, 1998: 32–6).

Throughout history, the rulers of Kabarda and Balkariya were in conflict with each other and with other neighbours over land and political influence. Since the fifteenth century they also experienced regular invasions by the Ottomans, Crimeans and Iranians. In the mid-sixteenth century the Kabardin aristocratic families of Dzhambulatonov, Cherkasskii, Bekov and

Kaitukin turned to Russia for protection.<sup>5</sup> They were co-opted into the Russian imperial hierarchy and, alongside Terek Cossacks, often acted as promoters of Russian influence in the region. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Kabarda and Balkariya, as parts of the Greater Caucasus, were contested for by Russia, Ottoman Turkey and Iran. Finally Russia gained the upper hand and the 1774 Kuchuk Kaynardzi treaty legitimized her supremacy in the region. In the 1860s Kabarda was fully incorporated within the Russian empire. By the end of the nineteenth century the Russians had pacified Balkariya, although sporadic outbreaks of resistance persisted there well into the 1930s (Danialov, 1996: 67; Etezov, 2000; Gugov, 1999: 258; 540–2).

The Cossacks began to settle along the Terek river on the territory of present-day Kabardino-Balkariya in the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> They were ferocious warriors in the service of the Russian tsar, who entrusted them with the defence of Russia's southern borders. They lived in militarized settlements – *stanitsas* – which functioned on the principles of military democracy and Orthodox Christian ethics. From the late eighteenth century the Cossacks made up the bulk of the population of the Russian fortresses erected along the Terek river, and the strategic route – *voenno-gruzinskaya doroga* (military Georgian highway) – built in 1820. Tsarist ideologists channelled the Cossacks' deep religiosity into animosity towards their Muslim neighbours. It is worth noting, however, that despite the religious differences between the Cossacks on the one hand, and the Kabardinians and Balkars on the other, their relations had never been entirely antagonistic and included grassroots cooperation and ethnocultural mixing, unsurprisingly since they shared similar economic and political structures, social and moral norms, architecture, music and folklore (Barrett, 1999; Glushenko, 2000: 114; Kipkeyeva, 2002; Landa, 1995: 78–9; Zasedateleva, 1974).

Following the October Revolution of 1917, Kabarda and Balkariya became parts of the Soviet state. In 1922 the Bolsheviks arbitrarily united Kabarda and Balkariya into a single administrative unit – the Kabardino-Balkar Autonomous Region (KBAO) of the Russian Federation. In 1936 its status was upgraded to that of the Kabardino-Balkar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (KB ASSR) of the Russian Federation. Following the mass deportation of Balkars to Central Asia in 1944 the KB ASSR was transformed into the Kabardin Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (KASSR). Some Balkar areas were transferred to the jurisdiction of neighbouring Georgia and North Ossetiya. In 1956, the Balkars were rehabilitated and allowed to return to their homeland and the Kabardino-Balkar autonomous republic was restored, albeit within a reduced territory.

During the Soviet period, Kabardino-Balkariya, like the entire country, underwent a radical socioeconomic and cultural transformation. It moved from medieval backwardness into a sovietized form of modernity

acquiring, for the first time in its history, electricity, water supplies, comprehensive educational and health care systems, a number of high-tech industries, mainly of a military nature, large agricultural complexes – *kolkhoz* and *sovkhos* – and some tourist resorts of national importance. Perhaps the major achievement was the elimination of the almost total illiteracy of the population.<sup>7</sup> This positive change was, however, overshadowed by the numerous excesses of totalitarianism, economic opportunism, social, administrative and ecological engineering and ideological brainwashing. Of particular social and cultural significance was the massive influx into the republic of Russians and other Slavs. Additionally, local Muslims suffered from the official anti-Islamic stance and from the dual alphabetic change (in the 1920s and 1930s, respectively), which cut them off both from their literary heritage and from their ethnic and religious brethren abroad. Another troublesome development was the actual promotion of Kabardin dominance over the Balkars and Russians who represented the other major ethnic communities. By the end of the Soviet era, the Kabardinians made up about 51 percent of the population, while the Cossacks, Russians and other Slavs constituted over 30 percent, and the Balkars nearly 10.6 percent (Akkieva and Dumanov, 2001: 71).

The linguistic situation changed dramatically under the Soviets. Kabardin and Balkar languages were downgraded to use only in the private sphere, while Russian became dominant in official and educational spheres. From 1972 Russian was the only medium of instruction in higher education and in grades 1–10 in national schools, while Kabardin and Balkar were taught as individual, optional subjects. Similarly, the mass media were overwhelmingly in Russian with just a few television and radio broadcasts and periodicals in titular languages, and even then in Cyrillic script. Given the republic's linguistic diversity, Russian became the *lingua franca*. On the whole, as in other non-Russian parts of the USSR, the majority of Kabardinians, Balkars and representatives of other ethnic minorities became bi- or even trilingual, although the Cossacks, Russians and other Slavs remained predominantly monolingual (Akiner, 1983: 195, 228).

## THE POST-COMMUNIST NATIONALIST AND RELIGIOUS RESURGENCE

### *The impact of perestroika*

The Communist leaders of Kabardino-Balkariya, unlike their counterparts in Chechnya and Tatarstan, met the Gorbachevian *perestroika* of the late 1980s with caution and suspicion. One reason was the republic's high dependency on federal subsidies. The other was Moscow's political

guarantee for the existing sociopolitical system, which presented a peculiar synthesis between Communist party and Soviet institutions and traditional mechanisms of power and resource distribution. The break-up of that system, as well as the disintegration of the Soviet centralized economy, were therefore disastrous for the republic. Among its most socially devastating consequences were the paralysis of military-industrial plants, which had ensured employment for the bulk of the population, the rapid impoverishment and displacement of the latter and the rise in crime and other illegal activities, including arms sales, drugs trafficking and hostage-taking for ransom. An aggravating factor was the proximity of semi-independent Chechnya, which accounted for the continuous influx to the republic of Chechen refugees and the proliferation of terrorism and various forms of extremism (Anchabadze and Perepelkin, 2001).

During the 'parade of sovereignties', the republican leadership under Valerii Kokov<sup>8</sup> refrained from any abrupt actions which might compromise their loyalty to the Kremlin had the old order been restored. Only on 30 January 1991 – that is much later than in many of Russia's other autonomies – did the Supreme Soviet (Parliament) of Kabardino-Balkariya adopt a declaration of sovereignty and upgrade the republic's status to that of 'union republic'. In the context of Moscow's actual indifference to the republic and the entire region, the Kokov government faced a growing democratic and ethnonationalist opposition. Following the abortive *coup d'état* in Moscow in August 1991, the opposition leaders organized a series of anti-government meetings and hunger strikes in front of the Parliament building in Nal'chik. They accused the republic's leadership of a secret alliance with the *putschists* and called for Kokov's immediate resignation and the dissolution of Parliament. It is significant that during this period the Kabardin and Balkar nationalists acted together within the wider political opposition movement Democratic Kabardino-Balkariya (DKB).

At the end of August 1991, Kokov, his deputies, prime-minister and a number of ministers, were forced to resign. In an attempt to retain political supremacy, Kokov and his close associates opted for the introduction of the post of President of the republic. In December 1991, Kokov initiated the formation of the movement 'For unitary Kabardino-Balkariya', which was central in securing his victory during the presidential election in January 1992 (Akkieva, 2002: 35). However, until the autumn of 1992, Kokov's authority remained fragile and the republic was on the brink of disintegration into separate Balkar, Kabardin and Russian parts.

### **Kabardin nationalism**

The first Kabardin national educational and cultural organizations emerged in the late 1980s. Most noticeable among them was *Ashamas*, an Adygh cultural organization, created in 1986 by a group of Kabardin intellectuals

under the leadership of Zaur Naloyev. Its programme included the revival of the Kabardin language and culture, the re-evaluation of Kabardin history and Kabardin involvement in the Caucasian war, in particular, and the repatriation of the descendants of the Adygh *muhajirin* (the Kabardinians, Cherkess and Adyghei) from abroad, especially from Turkey, to their historic homeland in the North Caucasus. From the late 1980s the issue of Adygh repatriation had been central in the Kabardin national debate. Members of the *Ashamas* and other Kabardin national organizations established links with their Adygh brethren in more than fifty countries, especially in Turkey, the Middle East, Europe and the USA (Kushkhabiyev, 1997: 194).

In October 1990, Kabardin national activists convened the first congress of the *Adyghe khase* (Adygh council), dedicated to the revival of the Adygh culture and language and the repatriation of the Adyghs. However, according to some informants, its hidden agenda included the ethnopolitical consolidation of the Adyghs of the North Caucasus and the diaspora, and the creation of the federation of Greater Cherkessiya on the territory from Shapsuga on the Black Sea to the El'brus mountains, which corresponded to the Adygh-populated regions of Krasnodarskii *krai*, Karachaevo-Cherkessiya and Kabardino-Balkariya. The goals of the *Adyghe khase* were shared by the *Kongress Kabardinskogo naroda* (Congress of Kabardin people, hereafter referred to as the KKN), which was formed in 1991, the Kabardin women's organization *Sataney*, and some other smaller Kabardin national organizations.

In Nal'chik in May 1991 the Kabardin nationalists organized the first world Cherkess congress in which Adygh delegates from the North Caucasus and abroad participated. The congress established the *Mezh-dunarodnaya Cherkesskaiya assotsiatsiya* (the International Cherkess association, hereafter referred to as the MCA) as the supreme governing body of the regional *Adyghe khases* from both the North Caucasus and the diaspora. The delegates adopted the charter and programme, which described the *MCA* as a non-political public organization dedicated to the revival and preservation of the Adygh language, culture, traditions and customs. Its first president became Yurii Kalmykov, deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. The *MCA* began to publish the newspaper *Nart* and the journal *Cherkesskii mir* (the Circassian world), both simultaneously in Russian, English and Turkish.<sup>9</sup> Despite their declared non-political character, the *MCA*, as the *Adyghe khase*, indirectly pursued some political goals, such as those related to Adygh repatriation and the Greater Cherkessiya project. It is significant that the Kabardin nationalists, in comparison to their Balkar counterparts, sought international publicity for their cause. Among their first moves in this direction was their appeal to the United Nations to recognize the Adyghs as 'a people-victim of Russian repression for the last two centuries' (Akbashev, 2001b; Borov et al., 2000: 110).

In its early stage the Kabardin national movement had relatively harmonious relations with the authorities. Kokov's government was sympathetic to the goals of the Kabardin nationalists whom they regarded as natural allies against the rising Balkar nationalism and as an effective leverage in dealing with the weakened federal centre. Initially Kokov followed the example of his Tatar counterpart Mintimir Shaimiev, who manipulated the Tatar nationalist movement in order to gain considerable concessions from Moscow (Yemelianova, 2000). The authorities thus responded positively to the Kabardin nationalist demands regarding Adygh repatriation, the revival of the Adygh language and the official recognition of the Adyghs' suffering during the Caucasian war. In August 1990 the Supreme Soviet of the republic passed a decree establishing the Remembrance Day of 21 May for the Adygh victims of the Caucasian war and their subsequent forced deportation abroad. In October 1990 in Nal'chik, the Kokov government organized and sponsored a conference on the 19th-century national-liberation struggle of peoples of the North Caucasus and the problem of *muhajirin*. The conference's resolution called for revision of the official Russian and Soviet historiography of the Caucasian war and recognition of the Tsarist policy towards the Adyghs as genocide. In accordance with the conference's recommendations, the authorities undertook measures towards facilitating the immigration to Kabardino-Balkariya of over 2000 Adygh repatriates, most of whom were from Syria and Kosovo. Officially Nal'chik also turned a blind eye on such acts of Adygh solidarity as the involvement of over 1500 Kabardinians in the Abkhaz secessionist movement against Georgia (Kushkhabiyev, 2001).

During the turbulent years of 1991–92 relative harmony in the relations between Kokov's government and the Kabardin national movement began to crumble. The nationalists became more assertive and critical of the government's alleged indecisiveness towards Balkar separatism and the slowing down in the realization of Kabardin national aspirations. In April 1991 these criticisms were voiced at the national conference of the Kabardin people. The conference denounced the decisions of the first Balkar congress on Balkar sovereignty. In the aftermath of the abortive anti-Gorbachev *coup d'état* in August 1991 Kabardin radicals accused the republic's leadership of a secret alliance with the *putchists* and of indifference towards Adygh national interests, and called for Kokov's replacement by a more nationalistic Kabardin leader. In August–September 1991, they participated in anti-government demonstrations organized by the DKB. In September 1991, in order to defuse the situation, Valerii Kokov introduced the post of president, which would allow the Kabardinians to institutionalize their political domination. This measure secured Kokov the backing of most of the Kabardin nationalists while the Kabardin radical minority, as well as the majority of Balkars and Russians, remained in opposition to him (Dokshokov, 1998: 145).



Having won the presidential elections, Kokov strengthened his alliance with the Kabardin moderate majority and distanced himself from the hard liners. In order to further undermine the radicals he incorporated into official policy some of their programme demands, such as the strengthening of pan-Adygh ties, dual citizenship for the Adygh *mahajirin*, multi-lateral relations with those countries with considerable Adygh minorities, and the establishment of the Adygh international academy of sciences. In 1997 Valerii Kokov presided over the creation of the *Mezh-parlamentskii sovet* (the Inter-parliamentary council, hereafter referred to as the MPS), which united the parliaments of Kabardino-Balkariya, Karachaevo-Cherkessiya and Adygheya along pan-Adygh lines. The proclaimed aim of the MPS was the gradual unification of the legislatures and closer political and economic collaboration between the three republics.<sup>10</sup> In May 2001 the Parliament of the Kabardino-Balkar Republic (KBR) passed a decree 'On repatriation of the Adyghs', which granted Adygh expatriates, mainly from Turkey, Jordan and Syria, the legal right to return and settle in the KBR.<sup>11</sup> The government also called upon historians to rewrite the history of Kabarda, to produce the world Circassian encyclopaedia, to generate a single name for the Kabardinians, Cherkess and Adyghei and to create a unified Adygh alphabet.

On the other side, the authorities intensified the political and administrative suppression of national radicals. In May 1992, the Supreme Soviet adopted a decree 'On social formations', prohibiting the activity of those organizations which sought to topple the existing constitutional regime, or threatened the territorial integrity of the republic and the Russian Federation as a whole. In October 1992 the Parliament passed a decree 'On the congress of Kabardin people', which qualified the KKN as 'an anti-constitutional organization' (*Kabardino-Balkarskaiya Pravda*, 1992, 11 October). The KKN's activists were put under police surveillance and subjected to various forms of persecution. Parallel to the crackdown on Kabardin and Balkar nationalists, Valerii Kokov promoted his own image as a President of all peoples of Kabardino-Balkariya, irrespective of their ethnic origins, and the guarantor of the territorial integrity of the republic. By the end of 1992 Kabardin radical nationalists were marginalized. Subsequently, many of them were co-opted into the political and economic establishment, while the irreconcilable Kabardin minority remained critical of the Kokov government for its alleged betrayal of the Kabardin cause. In 1998 the Kabardin radicals were further weakened as a result of the emigration of their leader Valerii Khetazhukov to Moscow. In 1999 the Kokov leadership promoted Muhamed Khafitse, the Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper *Adyghe psal'e*, as the new *tshamada* (leader) of the increasingly pro-government organization *Adyghe khase*.

As for the International Cherkess association, the authorities embarked upon a policy of its gradual de-politicization and 'etatization'. Most of its

non-political goals were appropriated by the political establishment. Some of the MCA's activists were invited into the government structures, while its radical leaders were gradually sidelined. By the end of the 1990s the MCA's activity and rhetoric were hardly distinguishable from the official line. This evolution was reflected in the decisions of the four successive congresses of the MCA in 1993, 1996, 1998 and 2000.<sup>12</sup> The fifth congress, which took place in Nal'chik in July 2000, elected Zaurbi Nakhushiev, a high-ranking Kabardin official, as its new president, replacing the less obedient Boris Akbashev. The congress modified the MCA's charter by dropping any political demands and stressing its purely cultural orientation. It adopted a new programme outlining the MCA's goals for the period between 2000 and 2003.

### ***Balkar nationalism***

In 1985 a number of Balkar intellectuals and university students, under the leadership of Bagauddin Etezov, a journalist of the state radio, founded the Balkar cultural organization *Nag'ysh* (village assembly). Soon, its activity transcended the cultural context and acquired a political character, an important impetus for which was the Supreme Soviet's declarations on the restoration of the rights of repressed peoples, adopted in November 1989. Acting on this the *Nag'ysh* appealed to the authorities to establish Kabardino-Balkar parity in all administrative spheres, as decreed in 1922, and to restore the Balkar administrative-territorial districts, which existed before the deportations of Balkars in 1944. In May 1991 the Balkar demands were partially satisfied: the parliament issued a decree 'On the rehabilitation of the repressed peoples' which contained a programme of practical measures towards the restoration of the violated rights of Balkars, including their right to return to the territories lost in 1944.

Alongside the *Nag'ysh* there emerged a number of other Balkar organizations all of which united into one Balkar organization – the *Tere* – under Etezov's leadership. At that stage the *Tere* claimed to have over 32,000 members (Etezov, 2000). The key demands of the *Tere*, supported by the Balkar parliamentary deputies, were the restoration of Balkar autonomy on the territory of the present-day El'brusskii and Cherekskii (Sovetskii) *raions* which existed in the early 1920s within the borders of Kabardino-Balkariya; equal job opportunities for Kabardinians and Balkars; comprehensive material and financial compensation for the hardships incurred by the Balkars during the deportation; and Moscow's official recognition and apology for the Cherek massacre of 1,500 Balkar men, women and children by the 'execution squads' of Lavrentii Beriia in the summer of 1942 (*Ustav i programma* 'Tere', 1990: 2; Akbashev, 2001a).

The lack of response from the federal and republican authorities prompted the Balkar nationalists into more radical measures. On 19 August

1990 they organized a Balkar national conference which issued a resolution on the state sovereignty of Balkariya. In March 1991 the Balkar nationalists convened the first stage of the first congress of Balkar people, which was to continue its work until 1996, adopting a programme of Balkar socioeconomic and territorial rehabilitation. In November 1991 the *Tere's* leaders organized the second stage of the first congress of the Balkar people, which elected the *Natsional'nyi soviet balkarskogo naroda* (the National council of the Balkar people, hereafter referred to as the NSBN) under the leadership of Boris Chabdarov. The NSBN adopted a declaration of national independence of the Balkar people which envisaged the secession of Balkariya from Kabardino-Balkariya and the formation of a separate Balkar autonomous republic within the Russian Federation (*Kabardino-Balkarskaiya Pravda*, 1991). In December 1991 the NSBN organized a referendum on the national independence of Balkariya, in which 85 percent of the republic's Balkar population took part. 94.8 percent of them supported Balkar independence (Yaz'kova, 2000: 47).

A vital element of the NSBN's success was its appeal to the injured ethnic feelings of the Balkars. However, the Balkar national leadership did not capitalize on this popular vote of trust. Instead it became divided over tactics and relations with Kokov's government. Some of the Balkar activists back-pedalled in fear of repercussions by the authorities. Meanwhile President Kokov declared the results of the referendum invalid and applied a 'divide and rule' policy towards the Balkar nationalists. Thus, during the period between 1995 and 1998, the authorities secured payment by the federal centre of compensation to every Balkar family that had endured deportation. In 1994 the Parliament of the republic restored the El'brusskii *raion* and returned the original name of 'Cherekskii' to the Balkar-populated Sovetskii *raion*.

Also, the Kokov leadership co-opted some of the Balkar opposition activists into the political establishment. Among those who moved from opposition into political office were, for example, Georgii Cherkesov (Prime Minister from 1992 till 1997), Huseiyn Chechenov (Prime Minister since 1997) and Il'as Bechelov (Chairman of the Parliament's chamber of representatives). By the end of 1992 these official policies had brought the predictable results: the Balkar national movement was substantially weakened and ceased to present a viable political alternative to the ruling regime. This was reflected in the NSBN's dropping of its original demand for Balkar sovereignty and its support for President Kokov's line on preserving the territorial integrity of the republic.

In the mid-1990s, in conditions of deepening economic crisis, the NSBN undertook an attempt to regain the political initiative. In November 1996 it convened the next, fourth stage of the first congress of the Balkar people which returned to the initial demand for the formation of a sovereign Balkar republic on the territory of El'brusskii and Cherekskii *raions*.

However, this decision was purely symbolic, given the decline in the NSBN's popularity and political credentials. The authorities declared the congress's resolutions illegitimate and began a crackdown on the organizers. The *Tere's* activity was suspended; its leaders were put under police surveillance; and its main office was taken over by the department of the Interior (Eteзов, 2000). Furthermore, in 1996 the authorities managed to forge a deal with Sufyan Beppayev, who in exchange for a seat in the Parliament and other privileges, agreed to substantially moderate the Balkar political demands. In 1999 he headed a parallel pro-government Balkar national organization *Malkar awazi* (Voice of Balkariya).

Further depoliticization of the Balkar national movement occurred in October 2000 when the authorities orchestrated the merger between the *Malkar Awazi* and the interregional Karachai organization *Alan* (as Karachais and Balkars call themselves) into a unified Balkar-Karachai organization, also called *Alan*, under the joint leadership of Sufyan Beppayev and Ahmet Katchiyev. *Alan* pledged its loyalty to the Kokov government and declared its intention to focus its activity on the socio-economic and cultural problems of Balkars and Karachais. Since then, the newspaper *Malkar Awazi* has been a mouthpiece of *Alan* (*Malkar Awazi*, 2000). Bagauddin Eteзов, Rasul Dzhappuyev and other Balkar nationalist hard liners distanced themselves from *Alan* and accused Sufyan Beppayev of betrayal of Balkar national interests (Eteзов, 2001; Bottayev, 2000).

### **Russian and Cossack nationalism**

The disintegration of the Soviet centralized state, and Moscow's de facto withdrawal from its ethnically non-Russian periphery, was particularly painful for the Russians and Cossacks who constituted the second largest ethnic group. Alongside the general socioeconomic hardships, they suffered from the psychological shock of being transformed overnight from the dominant ethnic community, safeguarded by the Russian-based polity and society, into an ethnic minority. In the late 1980s, in conditions of continuous Russian cultural decline in the region, Cossack and Russian activists formed a number of Russian cultural and educational organizations. The most articulate among them was a Russian cultural and historical society called *Veche* (assembly) which emerged in Nal'chik. In 1990 a group of *Veche's* members created two more Russian organizations – the *Rossiyanе* (Rus people) and the *Slaviyanе* (Slavs). The activity of the *Rossiyanе* was limited to Nal'chik, while the *Slaviyanе* claimed to represent the Russians of the entire republic. Unlike *Veche*, the programmes of both organizations included some political issues, such as the protection of Russians from political, juridical and social discrimination by the Kabardin-dominated establishment.<sup>13</sup>

In August 1992, yet another Russian organization – the *Russkoyazychnyi Kongress* (Russian-speaking Congress, hereafter referred to as the RK) – was formed, claiming to represent the Russian-speaking population of the towns of Prokhladnyi and Maiskii. The first leader of the RK was Viktor Protasov. At the heart of the RK's agenda were the issues of preservation of the territorial integrity of Kabardino-Balkariya and constitutional change towards recognition of the Russians, alongside the Kabardinians and Balkars, as a titular ethnic group (*Ustav Dvizheniya 'Russkoyazychnyi Kongres'*, 1992). The leaders of the RK also envisaged it as a counter-balance to the Kabardin and Balkar national organizations and indicated their readiness in extreme circumstances to similarly press for the secession of the Russian-populated areas and their incorporation within the neighbouring Stavropol'skii *krai* (province).

Parallel to these organizations uniting Cossacks, Russians and other Slavs, there also emerged purely Cossack organizations. In August 1990, Cossacks of the *stanitsa* Kotliarevskaiya created *Tersko-malkinskii otdel terskogo kazachestva* (Terek-Malkin department of the Terek Cossacks, hereafter referred to as the TMOTK), which represented the Cossack communities from the towns of Prokhladnyi and Maiskii and the *statitsas* of Kotliarevskaiya, Soldatskaiya, Ekaterinogradskaiya, Alexandrovskaiya and Priblizhnaiya of Prokhladnenskii *raion*.<sup>14</sup> The first *ataman* (leader) of the TMOTK was Mikhail Klevtsov; its headquarters was in Prokhladnyi. The TMOTK was concerned with the restoration of the traditional Cossack lifestyle, including their communal farming, horse riding, rituals, dances and singing, as well as the revival of the special role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Cossack community. Of considerable significance was the TMOTK's campaign for the comprehensive rehabilitation of the Terek Cossacks, the reinstatement of their property rights<sup>15</sup> and the official recognition of the Cossacks as a particular sub-ethnic group of the Russian people. Alongside the TMOTK emerged a Cossack women's organization *Beregini* (Caring Sisters) which was concerned with the particular problems of Cossack women and children.

In terms of political orientation, the Cossacks stressed their adherence to the principle of the territorial integrity of Kabardino-Balkariya. However, in 1991, like the RK, the Cossack *atamans* seriously talked about the possibility of the establishment of a separate Terek republic on the territory of Prokhladnenskii and Maiskii *raions*. There was also discussion about the restoration of the major function of the Cossacks as defenders of the southern borders of Russia (Klevtsov, 2001; Pevnev, 2001). At that time there were signs of a growing rapprochement between the RK and the TMOTK, as well as a drawing towards them of smaller ethnic groups, such as the Jews, Koreans and Germans. In the event of their consolidation they could have presented a serious challenge to the Kokov government. However, the development of this scenario was averted by President

Kokov's 'divide and rule' tactics. In particular, during his negotiations with *ataman* Klevtsov in January 1992, President Kokov guaranteed the territorial integrity and the civic equality of all peoples of the KBR, including Russians and Cossacks (Klevtsov, 2001). In return, Klevtsov undertook to withhold most of the Cossack political demands. Since the mid-1990s the TMOTK and the RK have been in decline. Their activity has increasingly borne more of a rhetorical than practical character. They have preferred to complain rather than to act against the political and economic advance of Kabardinians and Balkars on their traditional positions. Additionally, the clerics of the Russian Orthodox church, who historically played an important ideological and spiritual role among the Cossacks and Russians, have also been inactive and incapable of providing a framework for a Russian ethnocultural revival. As a result, in spite of their resentment, the Russians and Cossacks have not prevented the 'Kabardinization' and to a lesser extent 'Balkarization' of the administration, even in the solidly Russian regions of the republic. In Maiskii *raion*, where Cossacks and Russians constitute 95 percent of the population, all top managerial jobs have been occupied by Kabardinians. Among the passive forms of protest by the Russians and Cossacks has been their emigration to the neighbouring Stavropol'skii and Krasnodarskii *krais* and Rostovskaiya *oblast*.

On the whole, the national movement of the Russians and Cossacks, who constitute the second largest ethnic group after the Kabardinians, has been relatively passive. The prevailing feelings among them have been those of frustration and bewilderment due to a sudden deterioration in their social status and socioeconomic conditions, and to Moscow's indifference to their needs in the face of rising Kabardin and Balkar nationalisms. Compared to the Balkars and Kabardinians, the Russians and Cossacks have failed to organize a viable political movement in order to defend and assert their national interests. Most of the TMOTK and RK's ambitious goals have remained on paper and the actual impact of these organizations on the life of the Russian/Cossack community has been marginal. It could be argued that the main reasons for this have been an inertia grounded in their misplaced belief in Moscow's eventual interference on their behalf, along with the absence of clan-based social networks which have been crucial in the national mobilization of Balkars and Kabardinians. In addition, there is the lack of political and material support from ethnic Russian *apparatchiks* and businessmen (Klevtsova, 2001).

### **Religious resurgence**

Compared to Dagestan and Chechnya, the Islamic factor has not played a direct role in the politics of Kabardino-Balkariya. Nevertheless, since the late 1980s the republic has experienced an Islamic renaissance which has been characteristic of most Muslim-populated regions of the former USSR.

There has been a steady growth in the number of mosques, schools and Islamic publications. Following the disintegration in 1989 of the *Dukhovnoe upravlenie musul'man Severnogo Kavkaza* (the Spiritual board of Muslims of the North Caucasus) there emerged the *Dukhovnoe upravlenie musul'man Kabardino-Balkarii* (the Spiritual board of Muslims of Kabardino-Balkariya, hereafter referred to as the DUMKB) which began to publish its newspaper *Golos religii* (Voice of religion) in the Kabardin language and to conduct a weekly educational programme on Islam on republican TV and radio in Russian, Kabardin and Balkar. Until 2002 the DUMKB was headed by muftii Shafiq Pshikachev (an ethnic Kabardinian). By the end of the 1990s there were 145 Islamic communities under the DUMKB's jurisdiction, compared to 30 communities in 1990; 138 imams, 10 *rais*-imams (chief imams), and over 60 primary Islamic schools (Kuchmezov, 2003; Pshikachev, 2003). During the period 1994–2000, and since 2003, an Islamic institute in Nal'chik has been operating offering a five-year period of education. Its director has been Sharafuddin Chuchayev, an ethnic Balkar. During the initial period most of its lecturers were from Islamic colleges in Syria, Jordan and Turkey (Atmurzayev, 2000). At present the institute's staff consists of 11 lecturers, all of whom are natives of the KBR. The institute aims at recruiting between 15 and 20 applicants every year, though so far it has produced only 25 graduates. Between 1991 and 2002 there was a *medresse* (Islamic secondary school) in the town of Baksan named after Adam Dymov. Until 2001 there was also a network of primary Islamic schools and all-year Islamic courses (Babich and Yarlykapov, 2003: 18–19).

The Islamic construction and publishing boom has produced some qualitative changes in the local *ummah* (Islamic community). There has been a steady growth in mosque attendance, observance of fasting and other pillars of Islam, and a rise of interest in Islamic education among Muslim youth. For example, in the mid-1990s, daily attendance at the newly opened mosque in Nal'chik varied between eight and ten elderly people. By 2000 it had risen to over 50 people, most of whom were aged 15 to 35. It is not unusual now to see in mosques children as young as 5 (Babich and Yarlykapov, 2003: 5–6; Mal'bakhova, 2000). This Islamic revival has been largely spontaneous, occurring with very little involvement by the DUMKB, the local *muftiyat* (mufti's office), which has been strongly dependent on the authorities and has been unable so far to represent the grass-roots Muslims and to provide them with much-needed material and administrative assistance, as well as spiritual guidance. Its members, with very few exceptions, have been characterized by low professional standards and a high level of corruption and nepotism (Muhammad-efendi, 2001).

The *muftiyat* has failed to organize the training of Muslim clerics, either abroad or at home. Out of 100 local young men who were sent by the *muftiyat* to study abroad only seven actually acquired professional

qualifications and returned home. At present the demand for qualified Muslim clerics is satisfied only by one-third. Only 10 percent out of the existing clerics have some sort of Islamic education, while the rest are self-taught and semi-illiterate elderly imams. They do not know Arabic and base their prayers on memorized *khutba* (prayer) and *suras* (chapters of the Koran). They are incapable of theological debate and can deal only with the ritual side of the Islamic faith. They represent so-called popular, or traditional Islam, which is a peculiar amalgamation of Islam, *adat* (customary norms), pagan and early Christian beliefs, the Caucasian ethical code and Soviet-era practices. It is quite common to discover that these imams combine their religious duties with heavy drinking, which is prohibited in Islam. Ordinary Muslims have deplored the *muftiyat's* unconditional support for the authorities' tough policy on genuine and imagined Islamic extremism as a result of which many innocent Muslims have suffered (Atmurzayev, 2000; Kuchmezov, 2003).

The combination of continuously dire socioeconomic conditions, the ineffectiveness of the government, and the inadequacy of the *muftiyat*, has provided fertile soil for various forms of non-official Islam, largely of a fundamentalist nature.<sup>16</sup> Compared to official Muslim clerics, the representatives of non-official Islam, widely known as *Wahhabis*, *salafis* or *novye musul'mane* (new Muslims), have been prepared to address the key social problems.<sup>17</sup> Islamic fundamentalist ideas have been generated both within local society and imported from abroad. Among its local ideologists have been, for example, Rasul Kudayev, Anzor Astemirov, Musa Mukozhev and Ruslan Nakhushiev. Foreign Islamic fundamentalism has been represented by the ideas of Ibn Taimiya, Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab, Abul Alaa Maududi, Sayid al-Kutb and at-Turabi, and proliferated in the republic in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, brought there by local *hajjees* (pilgrims to Mecca and Medina) and foreign missionaries and teachers from a number of official and non-official Islamic organizations, funds and colleges. Some of those organizations and funds opened their branches in Nal'chik and other cities of the KBR. Among the latter were an Islamic computer centre *Minaret*, an international Islamic organization *Islamic relief*, and the OUE's bookshop *Islamskie tovary* (Islamic goods), which specializes in Islamic fundamentalist literature (Atmurzayev, 2000; Bottayev, 2000; Yarlykapov, 1999).

It is difficult to assess the scope and intensity of the actual Islamic fundamentalist movement in the republic due to the lack of agreed and accurate criteria for the definition of *Wahhabism* and the degree of politicization of the issue. There is no doubt, however, that it has been considerably weaker than in neighbouring Dagestan or Chechnya. Nevertheless, the local *Wahhabis* have displayed some similarities with their Dagestani and Chechen counterparts, although on a smaller scale. Thus, they have been largely represented by those young men, both Kabardinians and Balkars,



who have been frustrated with the continuous economic and social disorder, the proliferation of crime, alcoholism and drug abuse, as well as the overwhelming corruption of the ruling regime. They have accordingly seen in Islam a potent ideology for the social and spiritual revival of the people. In doctrinal terms they have adhered to *salafi* Islam and regarded the existing Islamic practices and the mode and language of prayers as deviations from true Islam.

New Muslims have focused their activity on the Islamic education of Kabardinians and Balkars, which they regard as an essential condition for the gradual re-Islamicization of society. Compared to the Islamic radicals in Chechnya and Dagestan, they have perceived a direct political engagement as inappropriate in Kabardino-Balkariya, given its political and cultural integration within Russia, its low level of religiosity and its multi-confessional demographic composition (Astemirov, 2003; Kudayev, 2003). In 1993, new Muslims under the leadership of Musa Mukozhev organized the Islamic Centre of Kabardino-Balkariya (later the Islamic Institute). Its declared goals included the promotion among the wider public of knowledge of Islam, shariat and Islamic moral norms and values, which are incompatible with the growing alcohol production sponsored by the ruling elite. Of particular significance was new Muslims' criticism of the archaic clan- and ethnicity-based stratification of the local society and their ambition to replace it by an inclusive Islamic identity. It is significant that new Muslims have been the most potent agents of trans-clan and trans-national solidarity so far. They particularly targeted young people of 10–14 years old. Among their recruitment successes were students of a number of sports schools in the town of Tyrnauz. Before the schools were closed by the authorities in 1998, the students had become increasingly critical of the ruling elite for its anti-Islamic policies of enhancing alcohol production and consumption in the republic (Ahmedov, 2000; Astemirov, 2003; *Severnyi Kavkaz*, 2000a; Zhamborov, 2000).

The new Muslims have criticized the old imams for their distortions of Islam and Islamic practices. In particular, they have opposed the existing practice of *israf* (wastefulness) in the main events of the life circle, especially funerals, which have a devastating impact on the bulk of the poverty-stricken population.<sup>18</sup> Also, compared to the old imams who used to memorize Arabic without understanding it, the new Muslims have begun to conduct prayers in Kabardin and Balkar, which enabled them to explain the meaning of the Koran to their parishioners. Most old imams have resisted these innovations, which they regard as manifestations of *Wahhabism* and a threat to the traditional Islam that they allegedly represent (Atmurzayev, 2000). Interestingly, the new Muslims deny the existence of any intrinsic conflict between themselves and Islamic traditionalists and argue in favour of constructive dialogue and cooperation between old and new imams. They insist that the existing split in the local *ummah* is

deliberately created by the authorities and Islamic officialdom for their own political ends (Dzhappuyev, 2003; Kudayev, 2003).

Alongside the moderate majority, there have been a few Islamic activists who have been closely linked to Chechen and Dagestani Islamic radicals and international *Islamist* centres.<sup>19</sup> Some of them were trained in the *Islamist* camps in Serzhen-Yurt, Achkhoy-Martan and Urus-Martan in Chechnya; the others in similar camps in Pakistan and in Afghanistan under the *Taliban*. In 1996 a group of Islamic radicals, under the leadership of Imam Kazdokhov, organized an anti-government demonstration with Islamic slogans. They called for the resignation of the Kokov government and the formation of a more Islam-friendly and less corrupt administration and *muftiyat*. Their religious demands included a return to the initial purity of Islam through the cleansing of so-called traditional Islam from paganism and other non-Islamic accretions. The authorities dealt harshly with the campaigners: some were arrested, others put under close police surveillance. In 1997 imam Kazdokhov died in mysterious circumstances. Limited *Islamist* activity was reported in Hasanya and in El'brus under the leadership of Atabiyev and Bekkayev respectively. Since the late 1990s Islamic radicals have either gone deeply underground, or have fled the republic. It is symptomatic that two out of eight Russian detainees at the American base at Guantanamo are from Kabardino-Balkariya (*Gazeta Yuga*, 2002).

In the autumn of 1999 the authorities of the KBR began a crackdown on actual and imagined *Islamists*. This policy reflected the toughening of Moscow's position on Islamic extremism and international terrorism. Following the beginning of the second Chechen war in September 1999, the Kokov government expressed unambiguous solidarity with President Putin's stance on Chechen separatists and their *Islamist* allies (Gekkiyev, 2000). It has undertaken a series of harsh measures against indigenous and foreign Islamic organizations. The Interior Ministry identified alleged *Wahhabi* enclaves in Nal'chik, Baksanskii and El'bruskii *raions*. Local *Wahhabis* were routinely depicted as criminals and terrorists who had been trained by the Chechen rebels and subsidized by western intelligence ('Mechet' vam ne gostinitsa', 2000; *Severnyi Kavkaz*, 2000a; Tsagoyev, 2001). The authorities closed down the Islamic Centre, as well as mosque schools affiliated to it. Most foreign Muslim missionaries were deported; most offices of foreign Islamic funds and organizations were closed. The links between local Muslims and their co-religionists abroad were severed. In 2000 the Parliament of the KBR adopted a new restrictive law on religious communities. In 2001 this law was reinforced by the Parliament's decree 'On extremism', which in 2002 was overridden by the federal decree 'On fighting extremist activities'. These provided a legal base for suppression of religious, or any other, opposition to the regime. As in Soviet times, the local FSB (the former KGB) has begun to compile lists of active and

passive *Wahhabis*, as well as *Wahhabi* sympathisers. In 2002 the FSB had registered over 300 *Wahhabis* (Shashev, 2003).

The pro-government mass media have played a central role in reinforcing the anti-*Wahhabi* and anti-Islamic hysteria. Thus, the daily newspaper *Severnyi Kavkaz* has specialized in 'exposing' *Wahhabis* in the republic and all over the North Caucasus, and their alleged links with international Islamic extremist centres based in Turkey, the UAE and Syria. In particular, the newspaper pointed to the links between local *Wahhabis* and foreign *Islamists* (Bitokova, 2001; Dadievich, 2001; Urazaeva, 2000). The ongoing war on Islamic extremism has frustrated the local *ummah* and intensified its alienation from the regime. Ordinary Muslims have complained about their fear of being accused of *Wahhabism* on the basis of their going to mosque, wearing a beard in the case of men, or a head scarf in the case of women, or even driving a luxury car (Ahmedov). This, together with the continuing extreme poverty of the bulk of the population and the breathtaking enrichment of the ruling elite have created a fertile soil for the popular reception of Islamicized forms of social protest among local Muslims.

## REGIME-FORMATION AND THE CLANS

By the mid-1990s, Valerii Kokov and his entourage had created an ethno-cratic authoritarian regime beneath the democratic facade. In social terms, it represented the old Soviet *nomenklatura*, co-opted members of the opposition and representatives of semi-criminal business. Publicly, the republic's leaders have emphasized their adherence to the principles of the free market economy, civil society and political democracy. They have praised themselves for their alleged achievements in creating steady economic growth, social stability and interethnic harmony. In particular, they have promoted the image of a just and equal ethnic participation at all levels of the republican administration and advertise Kabardino-Balkariya as a unique example of a successful democratic accommodation of the interests of various ethnic groups. They point to the Constitution (1997), which holds that the major ethnic groups are proportionally represented in the Parliament. The President of the republic is a Kabardinian, the Prime Minister is a Balkar and the Vice-President is a Russian. One chamber of the Parliament is headed by a Kabardinian, and the other by a Balkar. The Kabardin, Balkar and Russian languages have the status of state languages (Akkieva and Dumanov, 2001; Gekkiyev, 2000).

The reality, however, has been quite different from this image, which is designed mainly for external consumption. As elsewhere in the former USSR, the stabilization of the ruling regime has occurred against the background of the pervasive economic and social degradation of the

republic. Despite the official statistics, the republic has remained one of the poorest in post-Soviet Russia. Over 50 percent of its population are below the official poverty line in Russia. The republic's military industry, which in the past employed the bulk of specialists and skilled workers, is in ruins. Similarly, previously flourishing *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes* have been destroyed, and agricultural production and the number of cattle have reduced many fold.

The cumulative economic outcome of the 12 years of Kokov's reign has been industrial paralysis, a predominance of the black and grey markets related to oil transportation and refining, alcohol and drugs production and financial fraud. This has been accompanied by the emergence of a stratum of ultra-rich 'new Kabardinians and Balkars'. Nal'chik and its outskirts have witnessed the construction of luxurious multi-storied villas belonging to the ruling family, the government and *raion* administration functionaries, whose official incomes could hardly cover their basic needs. This discrepancy has been one of the obvious sources of discontent among the public who tend to perceive the existing government as little more than a sanctuary for indigenous criminal groups. Among the social consequences of the economic disintegration have been the marginalization and pauperization of the majority of the population and its moral degradation, including the proliferation of crime, prostitution, drugs and alcohol abuse. The republic has been overwhelmed by the contract killing of politicians, businessmen and the leaders of various opposition organizations (Fadeyev, 2002; Klevtsov, 2001).

Despite the democratic façade, the authority of Parliament has been merely symbolic: it has simply rubber-stamped the decisions taken by the ruling elite. The authorities have consistently suppressed and neutralized any viable opposition. The local mass media have been put under strict censorship. The actual political and economic power in the republic has been monopolized by a few Kabardin and Balkar clans, the most powerful of which is the clan of the president. Valerii Kokov enjoys enormous power which could be compared to that of a medieval despot. During the presidential elections in 1992, 1997 and 2002, Kokov was the only real *de facto* candidate in spite of the formal participation in the elections of several other candidates. The election results were known long before their actual date (Tkhapsoyev, 2002; 'Zachem stol'ko shuma?', 2002). Professionalism and competence have been superseded by personal loyalty to the president, while nepotism and cronyism have become a norm of local politics. The republic's bureaucratic apparatus has been expanded in order to accommodate the president's relatives and friends. The regime's stability has been secured by the inflated police and FSB services. The republic has been overcrowded with police and surveillance troops. This has contributed to the proliferation among the population of the culture of mutual distrust and surveillance.

At the top of the Kokov clan are President Kokov and his relatives who constitute the ruling *semiya* (family). Members of the *semiya* occupy many of the central and most lucrative positions in the republic's economy, administration, legal and power structures. It is widely believed that Violetta Kokova, the President's wife, is the richest person in the republic and holds the republic's purse strings. Allegedly, she owns a network of petrol stations, which deal in contraband Chechen oil, as well as a number of markets and shops (Laipanov, 2000). The republic's central political figure, after the President himself, is yet another *semiya* member, Khauti Sokhrokov, a Vice-Prime Minister in charge of education and science who in reality is more powerful than the actual Prime Minister Huseyn Chechenov. Sokhrokov is related to Violetta Kokova: both came from the same Urvanskii *raion*. The republic's grey cardinal is Marat Akhokhov, the Minister of Agriculture, and a patrimonial cousin of the President. Kokov, his wife, Khauti Sokhrokov and Marat Akhokhov decide the major cadre issues in the republican establishment. Among other influential figures are Ruslan Giyatov, chief of the republican customs services, whose daughter is married to one of President Kokov's sons; Khasan Betuganov, the Deputy Minister of Interior and a close relative of the President via his wife; and Yurii Tchagazitov, the Culture Minister who is married to the President's niece. The President's younger brother heads the government's Hunting Department, which is instrumental in accommodating important visitors from Moscow. The President's sister is Director of the Zaiukovskii hospital in Baksanskii *raion*, the best in the republic. The President's nephew Aslan Kokov is Director of the prestigious recreation complex in Nal'chik, which is currently affiliated to the Ministry of the Interior and during the Soviet period belonged to the central committee of the Communist Party.

The other politically and economically important Kabardin clans are the Shogenovs, Kushkhovs and Kharayevs. The members of the Kokov clan and of these three other clans are closely linked with each other and often intermarry. Together they control the Parliament's council of the republic; the Ministries of the Interior, Agriculture, Transport, Press, Information and Mass Media, Education and Science, Culture, Trade and Health; the Public Prosecutor's Office; and the government's Customs and Tax Departments. Of particular influence is Khachim Shogenov, the Minister of the Interior. Among their other representatives are, for example, Khazratoli Berdov, the present Mayor of Nal'chik and Anas Pshikachev, the head of the DUM KBR. They also prevail in the republic's most profitable businesses such as the production of alcohol and mineral water, petrol stations and city's public markets.

Following the Soviet tradition, the ruling Kabardin elite has tolerated the limited participation of ethnic Balkars in all governing bodies, albeit in second and third ranking roles. As mentioned earlier, a new influx of Balkars into administration occurred during the political crisis in 1991–92

when the Kokov leadership co-opted a considerable number of activists of the Balkar national movement, as well as representatives of the largest Balkar clans. The most powerful among them have been the Chechenovs, the Babayevs and the Zumakulovs. The leader of the Chechenov clan is Huseyn Chechenov, the Prime Minister. Members of these clans, like their Kabardinian counterparts, are often linked with each other through marriage. For example, a daughter of the leader of the Zumakulov clan is married to a member of the Babayev clan. Representatives of those three clans hold the posts of Prime Minister, the Chairman of the Parliament's council of representatives, the head of the constitutional court, the Minister of Economy, the Minister of Labour and Employment, the Minister of Justice and the Chairman of the government's committee for forestry.

Despite the carefully engineered ethnic and clan division of spheres of influence, the relations between the Kabardin and Balkar clans have not been entirely free of problems. There has been a subdued resentment by the Balkars at their secondary positions. Therefore the *semiya* has been especially cautious in choosing the 'right' Balkar colleagues and has groomed them in advance. It has also introduced the practice of regular rotation of the Balkar *apparatchiks* in order to prevent them from creating their own power network similar to that among the Kabardinians. In those cases where some Balkar appointees have shown excessive initiative and independence, the *semiya* have taken measures aimed at their isolation and eventual replacement by more 'suitable' candidates. Among such critically minded officials were, for example, Muhammed Tsykapov (the Minister of Economics until 1997) and Zaur Gekkiyev (the Minister of Tourism until 2003).

The resurfacing of clan networks has been accompanied by growing competition and rivalry, both between and within the Kabardin and Balkar clans, over political influence and economic resources. The lengthy dominance of the Kokov clan and its associates has antagonized those Kabardin and Balkar clans whose economic strength has not been matched by appropriate political status. Among the Kabardins the most politically assertive have been the Kharayevs. Their recognized leader is Felix Kharayev, the general director of the Institute of business of Kabardino-Balkariya. Since the early 1990s the Kharayevs, who during the Soviet period were more powerful than the Kokovs, have been pressing for a radical political reshuffle in their interests. In 1991–92 they headed the Kabardin nationalist opposition to Valerii Kokov. Despite their defeat, they have remained the most serious opponents to Kokov within Kabardin circles. From the Balkar side, the Kokovs' dominance has been challenged by the earlier mentioned clan of Babayev, which is widely regarded as the most criminalized clan in the republic.

The actual supremacy of clan ties over modern forms of social cohesion has triggered the process of legitimization of the clan system and enhanced

the artificial clan formation among unrelated Kabardin and Balkar bearers of the same surnames. In 2000 the republican Ministry of Justice introduced an official registration of clans. It described them as viable and adequate social formations which were well suited to promote the interests of its members, and if needed, to provide them with material and moral support (*Severnii Kavkaz*, 2000b). It is plausible to suggest that, if the circumstances change, these clans could be easily transformed into political units serving the interests of their powerful representatives. The ongoing 're-clanization' of the local society has further disadvantaged the Russians, Cossacks and other ethnic groups who have not had clan networks and therefore have been increasingly isolated and consequently outmanoeuvred by their Kabardin and Balkar counterparts.

The political and economic prevalence of the Kabardin clans has enabled the Kokov leadership to promote Kabardin 'nationalizing' nationalism (Brubaker, 1996: 5). As noted earlier, the key elements of this process have been Kabardin control over the key posts, including that of the President, their institutionalized involvement in the pan-Adygh activity and pro-Kabardin historicization (Spencer and Wallman, 2002: 74). Local and Moscow-based historians have been encouraged to explore the historical leadership of Kabarda in the region, its 'unique' centuries-long special relations with Moscow compared to Balkariya and other territories of the North Caucasus and the particular heroism and bravery of the Adyghs (Kabardinians) during the 19th-century Caucasian war. Significantly, the sufferings of the Adyghs during that war have been given stronger emphasis than the hardships of the Balkars during the deportations in the 1940s (Gugov, 1999; Kasumov and Kasumov, 1992; Kумыков, 1994; Kushhabiyev, 1997). As under the Soviet regime, historical research has been given priority over contemporary studies. The latter has been largely of a legalistic, non-political and descriptive nature (Babich, 1999; Borov et al., 2000; Dysheikova, 1997). The censored mass media have been similarly instrumental in the promotion of the official version of the republic's history and present. Its central themes have been Kabardino-Balkariya as an oasis of stability and interethnic peace, and a bastion against advancing Islamic fundamentalism in this conflict-ridden and turbulent region. It is also symptomatic that official periodicals have attached an ethnic dimension to Islamic fundamentalism, linking it mainly to the Balkars and Chechens (Urazaeva, 2000).

The stability of the current regime has been linked to its relations with Moscow. The Kremlin's political backing has been vital for the continuity of Kokov's reign, particularly given the scale of opposition to it. Apart from that, federal subsidies have constituted a major source of enrichment for the ruling elite. Thus Nal'chik has carefully attuned its policies and rhetoric to the liking of the masters of the Kremlin. Following the advent in 2000 of Vladimir Putin as the new and strong Russian leader, President

Kokov was quick in establishing close relations with him. Kokov did not wait, like his counterpart in Tatarstan Mintimir Shaimiev, when the Kremlin began dismantling the Yeltsin-era asymmetrical relations between the centre and periphery. Instead, he expressed enthusiastic support for Putin's centralization project and welcomed the inclusion of Kabardino-Balkariya in the southern federal district under Victor Kazantsev. In June 2000 President Kokov authorized the creation of a special commission under the general prosecutor Yurii Ketov in order to overcome the existing discrepancies between the republican and federal legislatures. At the beginning of 2001 Kokov issued a decree on the 'Introduction of changes into the constitution and legislature of the KBR', which implied the adjustment of 25 republican laws to correspond to federal legislature (*Gazeta Yuga*, 2001).

As already mentioned, the Kokov leadership reacted promptly to Moscow's tougher stance on Chechnya and Islamic extremism by unleashing a similar administrative, political and propaganda crackdown on local 'Islamic extremists and international terrorists'. In November 1999, in Nal'chik, President Kokov in his address to the international conference on 'Islam – religion of peace' denounced *Wahhabism* as a totalitarian sect incompatible with Russian society and the mentality of Russian Muslims (*Kabardino-Balkarskaiya Pravda*, 1999, 2 November). The ruling regime has organized a series of widely publicized criminal proceedings against local *Wahhabis*. At the centre of the persecutions have been new Muslims and representatives of local branches of foreign Islamic organizations such as the Hizb-Allah, al-Ikhwan al-Musulimin, Islamic Relief and the computer-linguistic centre Minaret. The authorities have also closed the Islamic institute, the central mosques and some other Islamic organizations which had very little to do with *Wahhabism*. In September and October 2003 the authorities unleashed a new crackdown on Islamic radicals by closing down dozens of mosques and arresting over a hundred new Muslims (Kudayev, 2003).

During President Putin's visit to Kabardino-Balkariya in September 2001 Kokov further strengthened their personal relations, enabling him to raise his regional rating and outplay his traditional regional rival – the North Ossetian leader Alexander Dzasokhov. Since then, Moscow has persistently regarded President Kokov as one of the most reliable conductors of its regional policy, outdone only by the Dagestani leader Magomedali Magomedov. In March 2001 President Putin appointed Valerii Kokov to the newly created state council presidium, which consists of seven members. The corollary of Kokov's elevated status has been a substantial increase in federal subsidies to the republic and the Kremlin's unambiguous support for his re-election for a third term in office in January 2002.



## CONCLUSION

Russia's autonomous republic of Kabardino-Balkariya presents an interesting case study of post-Soviet societal transition, due to its specific ethnocultural and historical characteristics, formed by the interplay of Caucasian, Islamic and Russian cultural influences. Of particular significance for its contemporary condition has been its Soviet legacy, which included ethnosocial and administrative engineering, especially the political unification of the two ethnically different peoples, the Kabardinians and the Balkars; partial industrialization; atheization; Stalinist purges and deportation of the Balkars. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Kabardino-Balkariya, like most of the post-Communist world, experienced the rise of ethnic and religious nationalism in the conditions of Moscow's de facto withdrawal from the region. Compared to the leaders of Tatarstan and Chechnya, which represent two other interesting cases of post-Soviet transition, Valerii Kokov, the ex-Soviet leader of Kabardino-Balkariya, acting upon his instinct of self-preservation, took a cautious stance in his relations with the Kremlin. In the face of rising Kabardin, Balkar and Russian nationalist opposition, as well as Islamic resurgence he chose not to challenge the weakened federal centre by focusing instead on rebuilding his power base within the republic. Kokov's compliance with Moscow acquired a new momentum following the ascendance in 2000 of President Putin as a new and strong Russian ruler. Since then Kokov has skilfully attuned the republic's official policies and rhetoric to the Kremlin's liking and anticipated goals. Thus, he was among the first regional leaders who responded promptly and positively to Putin's state recentralization project and tough line on Islamic extremism. The central theme of Kokov's rhetoric, designed for both external and internal public consumption, has been his self-presentation as the guarantor of political stability and inter-ethnic peace in the politically volatile region. However, the less advertised side of the 'stability' under President Kokov has been social disintegration, economic stagnation and political stalemate. The republic has experienced pervasive corruption and nepotism, moral degradation, the rise of crime and ethno-religious tension. A similar discrepancy between the projected image and the actual situation has characterized Kokov's nation-building project. Thus, he has formally promoted the consociational model of state formation within a polyethnic society (O'Leary and McGarry, 1993) and subscribed to the principles of parliamentary democracy. In reality, he has hampered the democratic process and channelled the republic's political life along traditional, primordial vectors. This has been achieved through the reactivation of the traditional pre-Soviet forms of political and societal coherence, albeit disguised under modern institutional camouflage, and their fusion with the Soviet-era state law-enforcement and surveillance

networks. As a result, Kokov has formed an ethnocratic regime representing a few powerful clans under the leadership of his own family. The regime's stability has been maintained through a crackdown on any potent opposition, a skilful manipulation and placating of ethnic and religious nationalisms and a suppression of the free press, as well as any independent academic research into the republic's current situation. The ruling elite has safeguarded the supremacy of the Kabardin clans by indirectly promoting the Kabardin 'nationalizing nationalism' in all major spheres of life. It could be argued that the ongoing re-traditionalization and primordialization of the local polity and society represents a historic regression from the Soviet version of civic nationalism to the clan- and region-based particularism of the Middle Ages. The case of Kabardino-Balkariya does not fit smoothly into the dominant concepts of post-Communist nation-building which downplay primordialism as 'a long-dead horse' of the postmodern world (Brubaker, 1996: 8, 15). On the contrary, it reveals the persistence and even pivotal role played in post-Communist national mobilization by primordialist networks.

### Notes

- 1 There are about 15 million Muslims in the Russian Federation, belonging to over 40 ethnic groups. The major Muslim enclaves are situated in the North Caucasus and the Volga-Urals. For further details, see Yemelianova, 2002.
- 2 The territory of Kabardino-Balkariya does not exceed 12,500 square km, which makes up less than 0.1 percent of the territory of the Russian Federation. Its population is 0.784 million, out of Russia's total population of 142 million. The urban population makes up 60 percent and the rural population 40 percent. The republic is divided into eight administrative *raions* (districts), seven cities and towns and seven urban-type settlements. Its capital is Nal'chik, which has a population of 239,000. Among the republic's few natural resources are deposits of molybdenum-tungsten ore (in Tyrnauz), complex ores, gold, facing stones (granite, diabase, marble and tuff) and other building materials. It is one of the least economically developed republics of Russia, its economy is ranked 72nd in Russia in per capita gross domestic product (GDP) (in 1995). Its industry, which in the Soviet period consisted of a number of defence-related plants, machine-building factories producing electrical engineering articles and instruments, wood-working machine-tools, cables, tractor trailers and automatic machinery, has been in decline. The republic is strongly dependent on federal subsidies. There is some viable local agriculture represented by the farming of grain (wheat, barley, corn), fodder grass, vegetables and sunflower and by dairy and beef cattle-breeding, horse-breeding, and sheep-breeding.
- 3 This article is based on the findings of a Leverhulme Trust-funded project 'Ethnic Politics and Islam in the western North Caucasus' (2000–03). The research focuses on the republics of Kabardino-Balkariya, Karachaevo-Cherkessiya and Adygheya. Its main methods are media analysis and elite interviewing.

- 4 Alongside the Kabardinians, the Abkhaz-Adygh ethnolinguistic group also includes the Cherkess and Abazins of neighbouring Karachaevo-Cherkessiya, Temigoevtsy and Shapsugs of Adygheya, and Abkhaz of Abkhazia (in neighboring Georgia), as well as the Abadzekh, Ubukh, Bzhadugh and Nabukhai who are dispersed over the western North Caucasus.
- 5 Here the author uses a Russified version of Kabardin and Balkar surnames in accordance with the Russian historiographical tradition. In the past most records were made by Russian officials who Russified the Kabardin and Balkar surnames. It is worth noting, however, that in those documents which were issued in the Nogai area, which in some periods was controlled by the Crimean khan, the Kabardin and Balkar surnames appeared in a Turkicized form and were written in Arabic script.
- 6 Cossacks' identity is a controversial issue. Some specialists regard them as a distinctive sub-ethnic group within the Russian ethnic community, while others describe them as military estate among Russians. In terms of geographical location the Cossacks are divided into the Urals Cossacks, the Dniepr Cossacks, the Don Cossacks, the Kuban Cossacks and the Terek Cossaks (Glushenko, 2000: 7).
- 7 In 1926 only 6.8 per cent of Kabardinians, and 5.3 percent of Balkars could read and write; in 1970 over 99 percent of Kabardinians and Balkars were literate (Akiner, 1983: 194, 228)
- 8 Valerii Muhammedovich Kokov, a Kabardinian, was born in 1941 in Tyrnauz. He is a typical Soviet *apparatchik* who rose from the bottom to the very top of the Soviet/Party *nomenklatura* (literally 'nomenclature', but in Russian this has the negative connotation of a 'bureaucratic class'). In 1990 he became the first secretary of the republican *obkom* (regional committee) of the Communist party.
- 9 The MCA's leadership believed the use of these three languages would enable them to convey their message to the majority of Adyghs worldwide (via Russian to Russia's Adyghs; via Turkish to Turkey's Adyghs; and via English to the Adyghs in the Middle East, Europe and the USA).
- 10 The MPS consisted of 27 parliamentary deputies, nine from each republic. The MPS functioned until 1999 when its activity was paralyzed as a result of the election of Vladimir Semenov (half Karachai and half Russian) as a new President of Karachaevo-Cherkessiya.
- 11 Altogether by the end of 2002 over one thousand Adygh repatriates from Turkey, Syria, Jordan, the USA, former Yugoslavia and Holland were residing in the KBR (*Gazeta Yuga*, 2002).
- 12 The second congress of the MCA took place in Maikop (Adygheya). It re-elected Yurii Kalmykov as the president of the MCA and elected Boris Akbashev, a professor and a parliament deputy of Karachaevo-Cherkessiya as the Vice-President of the MCA. The third congress of the MCA was convened in 1996 in Cherkessk (Karachaevo-Cherkessiya). It re-elected Kalmykov and Akbashev as the MCA's President and Vice-President, respectively. Following the death of Kalmykov in January 1997, Boris Akbashev took over as president of the MCA. The fourth congress of the MCA, which was held in 1998 in Krasnodar, elected Akbashev as its President. It decided to move the MCA's headquarters from Nal'chik to Cherkessk. The fifth congress of the MCA took

- place in Nal'chik. It elected Zaurbi Nakhushev, the Chairman of the Chamber of the Parliament of Kabardino-Balkariya as new president of the MCA and Boris Akbashev as Vice-President.
- 13 Between 1991 and 1996 *Slaviyane*, under the leadership of Fedor Bezgod'ko, organized a series of localized protests against the Parliament's declaration of sovereignty of the republic; the introduction of the post of the president; the actual elections of president; the resolutions of the Kabardin and Balkar congresses; the 1994 migration bill and some other government decisions which encroached upon the rights of the Russian and Cossack population. (Sourced from the personal archive of Fedor Bezgod'ko.)
  - 14 The TMOTK was a constituent part of the political movement *Terskoe Kazach'e Voisko* (Terek Cossack troops) and of the federal movement *Soyuz Kazakov Rossii* (Union of Cossacks of Russia). Interestingly, the TMOTK was not included in the *Reestr terskogo kazach'ego voiska* (State registration of the military formation of the Terek Cossacks) which treats the Cossacks as a *soslovie* (an estate) rather than a sub-ethnic group (Pevnev, 2001).
  - 15 The Cossacks argued that the legitimacy of their ownership rights to the vast land situated along the *voenno-gruzinskaiya doroga* (military-Georgian highway) in the northern Kabardino-Balkariya derived from the purchase of that land by the Russian Crown from the Kabardin noble family of Kadzokhov (Klevtsov, 2001; *Severnyi Kavkaz*, 1999)
  - 16 Here the term *fundamentalism* defines a reaction of believers against those influences which they perceive as a threat to their spiritual and political self-realization, according to their faith. In the case of Islam the fundamentalist movement is a desire to return to what is believed to be the pure, unadulterated Islam of Prophet Muhammad and the four righteous caliphs.
  - 17 In Kabardino-Balkariya, as well as in other Muslim regions of the former Soviet Union, the terms *Wahhabism* and *salafism* describe the local form of Islamic fundamentalist movements. Here I have kept this terminology despite its inadequacies because of its wide acceptance by politicians, journalists and the general public.
  - 18 According to the local tradition, during the first three days after the burial, the relatives of a deceased Muslim have to treat his or her friends, and anybody who happened to pass by, to a meal and to provide them with a food package containing 1 kg of lamb, 1 kg of sugar, 1 kg of flour and 1 kg of sweets. A similar procedure is repeated on the 40th and 52nd days after the burial (Akkiev, 2000).
  - 19 Here the term *Islamism* defines a political movement under Islamic banner.

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