

4. Ethno-Political Change in the North Caucasus

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Introduction

The announcement of the “Declaration on the State Sovereignty of the Russian Federation” marked a new stage of Russian history—a stage full of stormy political events and an intensive search for ways to reform the national-state system of the Russian Federation. In the Northern Caucasus, various models of statehood have been adopted, ranging from the Adygei to the Chechen versions. The model chosen depended on the pro- or anti-Russian orientation of the local authorities. Hence, it is already possible to identify certain regularities of development in the Northern Caucasus region:

- in the transitional period (from the Soviet to the post-Soviet society) the ethno-social factors came to the fore and politics acquired an ethno-political character;
- as a result of the crisis of government and rebirth of an ethnic consciousness, the most socially and politically active groups proved to be ethnic groups, on which the social structure of the population of the Northern Caucasus was based;
- new political actors have appeared. Various ethnic elites have created institutions which effectively express the political interests of their ethnic constituencies and usurp the role of governmental structures;
- the entire system of managing ethnic and national processes has changed, from top to bottom;
- the need to coordinate the interests of various and competing ethnic groups has led to a variety of competing and often contradictory ethnic policies, advocacy of which has become the distinguishing trait of various political powers;

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- the historical memory of ethnic groups has turned out to be a significant factor in political life, with historical arguments becoming a major component of political debates;
- real federalism and confederalism have become issues on the agendas not only of official governmental structures, but of unofficial but highly organized ethnic movements; and
- ethnic and nationalistic separatism left the area of theory and entered the sphere of political reality.

Ethnic Movements and the Formation of a New Political-Legal Order

Between 1990 and 1996, the formation of politicized national movements with their own ideas about reforming the national-state system in the North Caucasus was completed. Projects for the division, or federalization, of the republics (Daghestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachai-Cherkess) in accordance with ethnic principles were put forward, as well as projects for the creation of a two-chamber legislature with equal representation of the primary ethnicities of the republics in one of the chambers. The initiators of these processes were the political opponents of the incumbent republic authorities, i.e., the ethnic movements.

Thus, in Daghestan the Kumyk movement (“Tenglik”) demanded creation of a Kumyk state, while a Nogai organization (“Birlik”) demanded autonomy for the Nogai people; the Lezgin movement (“Sadval”) threatened to create an independent state if Russia did not grant the Lezginis autonomy in a Dagestani federation; and the Tersk Cossacks declared their secession from the republic.

In Kabardino-Balkaria the Balkar national movement demanded the formation of a Federal Republic of Kabarda and Balkaria in which the minority Balkars would enjoy both full equality and virtually complete autonomy. Later, the Kabardanian and the Balkarian movements went even further and agreed to the dissolution of the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic—an agreement that was supported by the Supreme Soviet of the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic. Meanwhile, the republic’s Russian-speaking population, first and foremost the Cossack assembly, began to agitate either to secede from the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic and join the Stavropol *krai* or to remain in the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic as an equal and autonomous subject of the Kabardino-Balkarian Federal Republic. All of this created an enormously unstable ethnopolitical situation in the region.

The greatest contradictions engendered by the efforts of ethnic movements to obtain a legal-constitutional status occurred in the Karachai-Cherkess Republic, where five ethnicities demanded recognition as “full subjects” of the federation. While the Karachai, the Cherkess, and the Cossack movements cited the fact that their peoples had earlier had their own forms of statehood, which should now be reestablished, the Abazin and the Nogai movements demanded the *de novo* creation of their own ethnic districts.

It is notable that, regardless of ethnic specifics, all of these movements went through the following stages of development:

- the creation of an organization (e.g., “Adyge Khase,” “Tenglik,” Birlik,” Cossack Circle,” etc.) which proclaimed ethnic-cultural rebirth as its aim;
- the establishment by these organizations of political parties dedicated to changing the state system, enforcing the claims of their constituents to their “historic” land, to property that had been confiscated as a result of deportation, and/or to financial compensation for past deprivations; and
- the consolidation of ethnic community and political organizations in order to take over the government and to carry out the full range of governmental functions.

As a result of the activity of the ethnic movements in the region the political and legal status of ethnic groups won official recognition as a debatable issue. This became clear as early as November 1992 at the Congress of the Peoples of Dagestan, which was convened under the aegis of the republic’s incumbent ruling elite. This recognition, in turn, determined subsequent developments: the ethnic movements shifted from active opposition to collaboration with reformed organs of government, while the latter appropriated many of the slogans of their former opponents. The dialogue, which began between the authorities and the ethnic elite, was reflected in the evaluation of the situation by the population of the region. (See Table 4.1.)¹

¹ Here and further are summations of the results of sociological surveys which were conducted, under the direction of the author, by the personnel of the Laboratory of Regional Management of the Northern Caucasus Academy of State Service in 1995–96. During a mass survey based on a quota selection, 1,484 respondents were questioned in the republics of the Northern Caucasus and the Rostov region. The selection is representative in terms of ethnicity, sex, and age. During the conduct of an expert survey, 183 members of the region’s political-administrative elite were used as experts. The percentages shown in the tables is that of the total number of respondents.

Table 4.1
How Has the Republic's Declaration of Sovereignty Affected the Political Interests of Ethnic Groups?

	Region: Population (in percents)						
	Adygei	Daghestan	Ingushetia	Kabardino- Balkaria	Karachai- Cherkess	North Ossetia- Alania	Rostov Region
Improved	36.23	40.17	47.24	40.30	38.13	34.97	15.64
Deteriorated	12.32	28.61	24.41	21.39	28.13	25.17	36.02
No Change	45.65	30.35	22.05	30.35	32.50	30.77	22.27
Undecided	5.80	0.87	6.30	7.96	1.25	9.09	26.07
Total:	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

The enhanced political status of ethnic groups on the federal level raised the authority of the ethnic movements, political parties, and social organizations of the Northern Caucasus among local residents and led to a qualitative change in the character of their activity. This was expressed in the mass mobilization of the entire population and its grassroots differentiation along ethno-political lines. In a relatively short time, three basic attitude sets emerged: pro-Russian, anti-Russian, and pan-ethnic regionalist.

In addition, federal authorities began to recognize the leaders of ethnic movements as legitimate interlocutors on behalf of their constituents in political negotiations. An early case in point was a meeting convened on the initiative of the Supreme Soviet and the State Ethnic Committee of the Russian Federation in Pyatagorsk in January 1993. Although the unambiguously pro-Russian orientation of the meeting precluded the participation of the representatives of the Chechen republic, the representatives of 93 North Caucasian social organizations participated, and many of them signed the meeting's final act, the "Declaration on the Principles of Inter-Ethnic Relations in North Caucasus," which gave important (though insufficient) impetus to negotiations to end the Ossetian-Ingush conflict which was raging at the time.

Although the leaders of many of the ethnic movements in the region favored the creation of mono-ethnic states, the incumbent ruling elite was far less radical.

(See Table 4.2.)

Table 4.2
Do You Support the Creation of Ethnic States?

	Region: Administrative/Political Elite (in percents)					
	Summary	Adygei	Daghestan	Ingushetia	Kabardino-Balkaria	Rostov Region, Krasnodor Territory
Yes	6.01	0.00	3.85	11.36	2.86	16.67
No	73.77	74.19	82.69	59.09	82.86	72.22
Undecided	20.22	25.81	13.46	29.54	14.29	11.12
Total:	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

In the event, moreover, moderation prevailed. Although the constitutions adopted by the North Caucasian republics in 1996 claim sovereignty on the basis of the right of ethnic groups to political self-determination, they also claim to express the will not only of the ethnic majority but of all resident ethnic groups, thereby providing ethnic minorities with a constitutionally guaranteed status. The legal status of ethnic minorities is explicitly guaranteed, for example, in the constitution of Daghestan: “The Republic of Daghestan guarantees the rights of indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities in accordance with generally accepted principles and provisions of international laws and international agreements. Each of the ethnicities of Daghestan is guaranteed equal rights to the defense of their life interests on a constitutional basis.” Elsewhere, constitutional references to “indigenous peoples,” “ethnic minorities,” “peoples constituting the republic,” and “historically formed community of peoples, living on its territories” leave no doubt about the acceptance of the concept of ethnic rights.

The acceptance of ethnic groups as subjects of political and legal rights on the republican level has been accompanied by the development of the mechanisms for realizing these rights in practice. Among such mechanisms are:

- the creation of national districts for indigenous ethnic groups in districts where they are compactly settled;
- establishment of quantitative and qualitative norms for the representation of given ethnic groups in republic organs of government;
- a requirement for fluency in both the indigenous and Russian languages as a condition for high office in the republic governments;
- demarcation of the rights and of republican bodies and ethnic movements in managing ethnic processes;

- creation of a system of reciprocal restraint among ethno-political elites (the creation of inter-ethnic movements, the integration of ethnic minorities into the official structures of authority, the blocking but not the destruction of extremist ethnic groupings, etc., and;
- mobilization of institutions of customary law (councils of elders) and religion as regulators of inter-ethnic relations.

In this manner, in the Northern Caucasus republics, the focus of policy has become the regulation of relations between the state (represented by republican authorities) and the various ethnic groups.

The animating force behind this policy has been the acceptance of the legal status of ethnic groups, through the introduction of constitutional provisions for their representation in the highest organs of authority. For example, the principle of equal representation of the Adygei and the Russian-speaking populations in the executive and legislative organs of the republic is enshrined in the Constitution of Adygei. In the Constitution of Dagestan there are provisions for equal representation of the indigenous peoples of Dagestan in the executive branch; and for proportional representation in the legislature. In Kabardino-Balkaria, introduction of a two-chamber parliament with equal representation of indigenous ethnicities in one of the chambers is being discussed.

The significance of ethnic representation for both the general population and the political elite was once again confirmed by the result of sociological surveys conducted in 1995–96 by the Laboratory of Regional Management of the Northern Caucasus Academy of State Service. (*See Table 4.3.*) Ethnic representation in both the legislative and executive bodies turned out to enhance feelings of satisfaction among the majority of the region's population. (*See Tables 4.4, 4.5, and 4.6.*) It is interesting that the opinions of both surveyed groups (the population and the elite) corresponded on this issue.

Table 4.5
Are the Various Peoples of the Republic Equitably Represented in the Legislative Organs of Authority?

	Region: Administrative/Political Elite (in percents)					
	Summary	Adygei	Daghestan	Ingushetia	Kabardino-Balkaria	Rostov Region, Krasnodar Territory
Yes	57.92	67.74	38.46	59.09	62.86	88.89
No	19.67	25.81	42.31	2.27	11.43	0.00
Against Ethnic Representation	11.48	0.00	7.69	20.45	17.14	11.11
Undecided	10.92	6.46	11.54	18.19	8.57	0.00
Total:	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Table 4.6
Are the Various Peoples of the Republic Equitably Represented in the Executive Organs of Authority?

	Region: Administrative/Political Elite (in percents)					
	Summary	Adygei	Daghestan	Ingushetia	Kabardino-Balkaria	Rostov Region, Krasnodar Territory
Yes	51.91	77.42	17.31	52.27	68.57	77.78
No	22.95	12.90	63.46	2.27	8.57	0.00
Against Ethnic Representation	14.21	0.00	7.69	29.55	17.14	16.67
Undecided	10.93	9.68	11.54	15.91	5.71	5.56
Total:	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

At present, the acceptance of a legal status for ethnicities is being debated by the center and the republics as an effective means for stabilizing inter-ethnic relations. This status can only be realized, however, through the development of a solid legal base, which, in turn, depends on the highest legislative and executive organs of government. Today the legal bases in the republics of the Northern Caucasus and in the center are markedly different—a situation which considerably retards the realization of ethnic stability.

Ethnic Self-Consciousness and Conflict

Along with the stabilizing aspects, the aspiration of ethnic groups toward a legal status (in the extreme case, a mono-ethnic state) is utilized by ethnic elites and by some representatives of the federal government as a “wild card” in national politics. This can be seen in *Table 4. 7*

Table 4.7
To What Extent Do Regional Authorities Take Into Consideration the Interests of Ethnic Groups?

	Region: Administrative/Political Elite (in percents)					
	Summary	Adygei	Daghestan	Ingushetia	Kabardino-Balkaria	Rostov Region, Krasnodar Territory
To a large extent	21.31	29.03	28.85	18.18	17.14	5.55
Not significantly	37.16	41.94	21.15	56.82	37.14	33.33
Not at all	10.38	3.23	7.69	13.64	22.86	0.00
Undecided	15.30	16.13	15.38	11.36	8.57	33.33

The government of the Russian Federation must keep pace with the process of lower-level ethno-political reform and give ethno-political aspirations legal recognition. In particular, the mutual rights and claims of various ethnic groups need legal recognition. Otherwise, the inequality of rights of ethnic minorities will continue, leading, as today, to the expulsion of Russians or their exclusion from prestigious positions and consequent exodus of the Russian-speaking population from the Northern Caucasus.

Ignoring the ethno-political situation in the Russian Federation, and underestimating the strength of aspirations for ethnic self-preservation and self-determination can destroy Russian statehood itself, since denying the non-Russians the right to a political-legal status within the boundaries of a unified nation will rekindle and feed the flame of radical ethnic separatism. In the case of the Russians of the Northern Caucasus republics, the result can only be an upsurge of nationalism.