Making and Breaking the Political Machine in Kabardino-Balkaria

Georgi Derluguian and Sufian Zhemukhov
New York University, Abu Dhabi and
The George Washington University

Abstract: Three very different forces are contesting social powers in the North Caucasus republics: the ex-nomenklatura from the 1980s reliant on their administrative skills, insider knowledge, and patronage networks; political capitalists or "oligarchs" wielding the weapons of violent entrepreneurship developed in the 1990s; and the social movement of young Islamist zealots rising from the mid- and lower strata in the 2000s. While the fractured elites of ex-nomenklatura and violent entrepreneurs are common results of the Soviet collapse, in the North Caucasus the cultural legacies of Islamic highlanders provided the ideological framing, transnational brokerage, and action repertoire to the third force of antisystemic rebels. The stalemated triangular contention, however, is fraught with state collapse rather than revolution.

Terrorist violence has become the hallmark of post-Soviet politics in the North Caucasus.[1] In April 2013, its effects allegedly reached as far as the finish line of the Boston Marathon, forcing the American public and policy makers to realize that Russia's internal security threats could become transnational.

What causes such destructive energy and ferocity? The prevalent

Georgi Derluguian, Professor of Social Research and Public Policy, New York University Abu Dhabi, P.O. Box 903, New York, NY 10276; GD44@NYU.edu
Sufian Zhemukhov, PONARS Eurasia Visiting Scholar, George Washington University, 1957 E St., NW, Suite 412, Washington, DC 20052, zhemukho@email.gwu.edu

[1] The authors express their gratitude to the two hard-working reviewers of this text whose names, of course, remain anonymous.

explanations for the political violence raging in the North Caucasus can be grouped under three broad categories: historical legacies and ethnic identities, socioeconomic problems including the "backwardness" of the region, and the political ideology of Islamic jihad, which has spread from the Middle East to supplant the region's discredited programs of secular nationalism.[2] Each of these three broad drivers highlight certain facts, yet they represent rather distant and indiscriminate causal explanations. Our intent here is to explore a more proximate layer of causality informed by state-centered theories of political mobilization and ideological framing.[3]

Our central argument is that the state is paralyzed from the top down in the Muslim-majority republics of the North Caucasus, such as Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachai-Cherkessia. Chechnya is a special case of the Russian state center delegating its powers and finances to an ostensibly tame warlord. The semblance of functioning sub-national states in the region is maintained by the flow of federal subsidies and the sheer inertia of Soviet-era institutions that remain deeply ingrained in the structures of everyday life, especially in urban centers. The Russian state, however, lost both the moral authority and infrastructural power to act on anything beyond daily repression and the brazenly inequitable redistribution of rents and subsidies.[4]

What makes the situation in the North Caucasus different from the rest of the Russian Federation is neither particular venality, nor the heavy dependence of local governments on budget transfers. It is rather the presence of an anti-systemic force that gives local politics a peculiarly triangular shape. Social power is contested by three distinct kinds of political elite: the late Soviet era officialdom; rent-seeking political capitalists (a local variety of "oligarchs") originating in the 1990s; and the Islamist underground, which emerged in the 2000s, putatively as an alternative state and society. None of the forces so far can prevail over the others. The triangular gridlock of three contestants, each with a distinct group culture and action repertoire, thus becomes at the same time both the consequence of

[2] Oliver Bullough. 2010. *Let Our Fame Be Great: Journeys Among the Defiant People of the Caucasus.* New York: Basic Books; Konstantin Kazenin. 2012. *Elementy Kavkaza: zemlia, vlast', ideologia v severokavkazskih respublikah*. Moscow: REGNUM; Domitilla Sagramoso. 2012. "The Radicalisation of Islamic Salafi "Jamaats" in the North Caucasus: Moving Closer to the Global "Jihadist" Movement?" *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 64, No 3 (pp. 561-595); I. V. Starodubrovskaia (ed.). 2012. *Severnyi Kavkaz: modernizatsionnyi vyzov*. Moscow: Delo; I. V. Starodubrovskaia and D. V. Sokolov. 2013. *Istoki konfliktov na Severnom Kavkaze*. Moscow: Delo; Marat Shterin and Akhmet Yarlykapov. 2011. "Reconsidering Radicalisation and Terrorism: the New Muslims Movement in Kabardino-Balkaria and its Path to Violence." *Religion, State & Society* 39: 2/3, June/September.

[3] Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly. 2001. *Dynamics of Contention.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[4] Michael Mann. 1986. *The Sources of Social Power.* Vol 1: *A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

state weakening and the cause furthering its collapse. This condition, as we demonstrate through in-depth case study analysis of Kabardino-Balkaria below, represents further stages in the erosion of the Soviet state following its disintegration in 1991.

Using historical evidence from the twentieth century, we will show that in the internal ethnic fringes of the USSR, state elites were organizing around neo-patrimonial chief-like figures rather than formal rational-bureaucratic institutions. The contentious and criminalized unbundling of the former Soviet state and its industries was conducted by the quarrelsome tandem of two elites, the inescapably politicized rent-seeking officials and the equally rent-seeking political capitalists of different hues and calibers.[5] In pursuing their goals, both elites employed violent means through either state agencies or private Mafioso retinues.[6] This sort of violence, however, remained non-ideological and largely targeted fellow elite competitors. It is a separate counter-factual question to ask why no revolutionary opposition of any ideological kind could be consolidated in Russia proper, although scholars like Henry Hale and Stephen Hanson suggest important clues.[7] Only in the North Caucasus after approximately 1999 (the time of the second war in Chechnya) did a third elite emerge from within local societies: the young Islamist militants. It was a product of ethnic culture and revived religious identity. But what exactly were the social mechanisms generating the destructive revolt and its attendant ideological framings? This question cannot be addressed without a theoretically disciplined excursus into the still more remote history of the nineteenth-century Russian conquest of the Caucasus.

The empirical example of this article is the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic (KBR), a unit of the Russian Federation incorporating two distinct titular nationalities, the majority Kabardins (57.2 percent) and the minority Balkars (12.7 percent) with Russians as the second largest population group (22.5 percent).[8] The selection of Kabardino-Balkaria is not only motivated by our particular expertise. In this case we can see with particular poignancy how things could go from bad but stable during the 1990s, to much worse and more violent after 2000. In other words, in Kabardino-Balkaria we can trace the processes and actors contributing to

[5] Steven L. Solnick. 1998. *Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press and David M. Woodruff. 1999. *Money Unmade: Barter and the Fate of Russian Capitalism.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

[6] Vadim Volkov. 2002. *Violent Entrepreneurs*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

[7] Henry Hale. 2005. *Why Not Parties in Russia? Democracy, Federalism, and the State.* New York: Cambridge University Press and Stephen E. Hanson. 2010. *Post-Imperial Democracies: Ideology and Party Formation in Third Republic France, Weimer Germany, and Post-Soviet Russia*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

[8] Perepis'. 2010. Vserossiiskaia Perepis' Naseleniia. [The 2010 Russian Census.] http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm

the present near-collapse of the state.

A special note on our oral sources: virtually none of the people we interviewed can be mentioned by their real name for the sake of their job security and/or personal safety. Kabardino-Balkaria today is a place where people often speak about local realities either in half-whispers or obliquely. Yet speak they do, for which we feel very grateful. We wish we could do more to ensure a better future for our interlocutors and their small land.

Pre-Histories

In the Caucasus one always hears that present-day conflicts cannot be understood without a deep awareness of traumatic histories, proud ethnic traditions, and enduring memories. Here, in the words of a Russian journalist, a "historian is more than a historian."[9] How much value is there in these popular claims? Let us use the method of retrospective anthropological reconstruction, dwelling on the key events of the past and the social mechanisms that make legacies relevant (or irrelevant) in the present.[10]

The Kabardins are one of the Circassian peoples, and probably as indigenous as it gets anywhere in Eurasia since their ancestral presence in their native land is traceable back to the Bronze Age. The wonderfully complex Circassian languages belong to the North Caucasus linguistic family, standing at the same taxonomical order of classification as the Indo-European or Turkic languages of their neighboring peoples. The formidable Caucasus Mountains, squeezed between the cradles of ancient agrarian civilizations in Mesopotamia to the south and the nomadic Great Steppe to the north, provided refuge to the endemic ethno-linguistic groups that would have been overrun and assimilated long earlier elsewhere. The protective mountainous landscape, however, also put severe limitations on the demographics and social complexity of the region's native peoples. This is why ethnic diversity in the North Caucasus is so mind boggling, while the traditional political organization of many small communities and clans seems so fractured and rudimentary.[11] The localized, segmented organization of traditional societies was, in fact, a robust social adaptation to the land of tall ridges and many isolated valleys, where the paltry agricultural surpluses could not sustain large, fixed, and easily taxable populations. For millennia the mountains remained stateless and proudly anarchic.[12]

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[9] Kazenin, 2012.

[10] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.) 1983. *The Invention of Tradition.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[11] But see on the tenacity of "achievement societies" the eminent anthropologists Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus. 2012. *The Creation of Inequality: How Our Prehistoric Ancestors Set the Stage for Monarchy, Slavery and Empire.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

[12] James C. Scott. 2008. *The Art of NOT Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland*

This historical situation, producing the enduring narrative of proudly independent highlanders romanticized in the literary masterpieces of Alexander Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, and Leo Tolstoy,[13] had in fact three major causes, all of them external in origin. The first was the collapse of nomadic hegemony over the Great Steppe after the roving invaders of Tamerlane in the 1390s had wiped out the remnants of the Tatar Golden Horde and then left the region in a geopolitical vacuum.[14] As often happens in history, groups later referred to as tribes began as alliances of successful warriors who captured what mattered most in the social reproduction of pre-modern societies: women, livestock, and lands.[15] The ancestors of Kabardins were successful warriors whose advantage lay in acquiring excellent battle horses, the world-famous Kabardin steeds, as well as the expensive body armor imported mostly from Persia, but eventually manufactured locally as well.[16] These knights soon developed the elaborate cultural mores and dispositions of chivalry[17] along with the feudal political economy based on the racketeering extortion of tribute from the farming and pastoralist communities in exchange for protection.[18] At the same time, the ancestors of the present-day Balkar people, whose Turkic language descended from the erstwhile Steppe nomads, found themselves defeated and forced into the farther refuge of Alpine meadows. This exile is why the Balkars remained so few in numbers, (known as five mountain communities of Kabarda in the upper canyons) and poorer relative to their neighbors (Musukayev, 1982).[19]

The knightly domination, however, was eroded with the introduction of two foreign innovations: American crops and European guns.[20] New World crops in general, and the highly productive maize specifically,

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Southeast Asia. New Haven: Yale University Press.

[13] Bruce Grant. 2009. *The Captive and the Gift: Cultural Histories of Sovereignty in Russia and the Caucasus.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Susan Layton. 2005. *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy*. New York: Cambridge University Press; and King, Charles. 2010. *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus.* New York: Oxford University Press.

[14] Michael Khodarkovsky. 2002. *Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500-1800.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

[15] Timothy K. Earle. 1997. *How Chiefs Come to Power: The Political Economy in Prehistory*. Stanford University Press.

[16] L. I. Astvatsaturian. 1994. *Oruzhie narodov Kavkaza*. Nalchik: El-Fa.

[17] Barasbi Bgazhnokov. 1999. *Adygskaia etika.* Nalchik: El-Fa.

[18] Charles Tilly. 1997 (c1985). 'War-making and State-making as Organized Crime', in Charles Tilly, *Roads from Past to Future*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 165–91.

[19] Alexandr Musukayev. 1982. *O Balkarii I Balkartsakh.* Nalchik: Elbrus.

[20] Georgi Derluguian. 2008. "The Forgotten Complexities of Jihad in the North Caucasus", in: Lale Yalcin-Heckmann and Bruce Grant (eds.) *Caucasus Paradigms: Anthropologies, Histories, and the Making of a World Area* [Halle Studies in the Anthropology of Eurasia]. Münster: LIT Verlag.

allowed local societies to feed significantly greater numbers of people. Though demographic data from this time is difficult to obtain, proxies such as the growing size and distribution of villages point to big increases in farming populations during the eighteenth century.[21] During this same period of time, guns provided a relatively cheap and easy-to-handle weapon countering the exceedingly expensive and skill-intensive battlefield advantages of knights.[22]

The combination of increased numbers and newly accessible weapons enabled a veritable anti-feudal revolution. In the eighteenth century farming communities descended from the mountains to colonize the fertile Steppe foothills. In the process peasants defended themselves with the new firearms against the extortions of elite horseback warriors. Islam gave peasants both their fighting ideology of justice and the overarching network of Sufi mystics whose spiritual and political influence transcended the confines of traditional communities. As surprising as it might now seem, Islam is historically quite recent in most parts of the North Caucasus,[23] though it was introduced almost a millennium ago in the region.[24] Before the social turmoil of the eighteenth century, the majority of highlanders remained essentially pagan and abided by the tribal codes, or *adat*, which were controlled and regulated by the princely elite.[25] The demand to abide by the Islamic law thus profoundly challenged the traditional privileges and legitimacy of the knightly elite. At the same time the introduction of Sharia jurisprudence empowered Sufi Islamic teachers (*murshid*) and their followers (*murid*), who were predominantly young male commoners ready to fight for a just cause. Firearms, once again, ensured that the rebellious peasants would not be easily subdued.

The Russian imperial conquerors then arrived in the midst of social conflicts engulfing the North Caucasus. The class and cultural prejudices of Russian aristocratic officers ensured that they took the side of the local aristocracy against the insubordinate peasants, dubbed "fanatics" and "brigands."[26] The result was the longest and costliest colonial war ever

[21] Arthur Tsutsiev. 2013. *Atlas of the Ethno-Political History of the Caucasus.* Translated by Nora Seligman Favorov. New Haven: Yale University Press.

[22] William McNeill. 1982. *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[23] Anna Zelkina. 2000. *In Quest for God and Freedom: The Sufi Response to the Russian Advance in the North Caucasus.* London: Hurst & Co.

[24] Sufian Zhemukhov. 2011. "One Thousand Years of Islam in Kabarda: An Experiment in Periodization," *Anthropology & Archaeology of Eurasia*, vol. 49, no. 4 (Spring), pp. 54-71.

[25] E. Panesh. 1988. 'Bifurkatsiia v protsesse sotsializatsii: na materialakh traditsionnogo vospitaniia adygov, XVIII—nachala XX v', in *Problemy arkheologii i etnografii Severnogo Kavkaza*. Krasnodar: Kubanskii gosudarstvennyi universitet and V. Kh. Kazharov, V. Kh., 1994. *Traditsionnye obshchestvennye instituty kabardintsev i ikh krizis v kontse XVIII—pervoi polovine XIX v.* Nalchik: Elbrus.

[26] Moshe Gammer. 1994. *Muslim Resistance to the Tsar: Shamil and the Conquest of Chech-*

fought by the Russian Empire. The war lasted a century, until the 1860s, when the empire finally overpowered the local rebels with a large military force and the newest weapons supplied by the American Samuel Colt.[27]

What ensued in the aftermath of this past defeat has become a present-day point of highly contested historical memory.[28] Does Russian imperial conquest in the North Caucasus conform to the definition of colonial genocide? The historical reality is highly contradictory. Imperial authorities exploited the moment of their victory to order massive punitive resettlements from the depths of the mountains into the much more easily controlled plains.[29] Despair among the natives reached the proportions of eschatological panic, leading to a veritable exodus across the Black Sea to the Ottoman lands of fellow Muslims. The tsarist generals in fact opportunistically increased the moral and military pressure on the vanquished rebels, evidently calculating that ridding the new provinces of their untamed populations ensured the results of conquest.[30] Even if direct killings played a relatively small role in this tragedy, the huge stress, starvation, disease, and the hardships of unorganized emigration of as many as a million people caused enormous casualties among the North Caucasus *muhajirs* (Muslim refugees from the infidels). Moreover, entire nations have disappeared from the Black Sea coast of the North Caucasus and even in areas farther inland, the rates of depopulation were truly staggering. At the same time, Russia also incorporated its erstwhile allies among the natives in the local military and civil service and even offered honorable conditions of surrender to some of its previously staunchest foes, starting with Imam Shamil himself, the famous founder of the jihadi state in Dagestan and Chechnya during the 1830s–1850s. Such demonstrative magnanimity was also part of the imperial calculus.[31] The long Caucasus war taught St. Petersburg that its rule over problematic territories would necessarily have to be indirect and reliant on the locally prominent intermediaries, either the traditional tribal princes or even the former Islamic warlords, who were handsomely rewarded and honored for their service to the empire.[32]

How relevant is all this history now? In the Soviet 1980s, it did

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nia and Dagestan. London: F. Cass and N. I. Pokrovskii. 2000. *Kavkazskaia voina i Imamat Shamilia.* Moscow: ROSSPEN.

[27] Joseph Bradley. 1990. *Guns for the Tsar: American Technology and the Small Arms Industry in Nineteenth-century Russia.* DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press.

[28] Walter Richmond. 2013. *The Circassian Genocide*. Rutgers University Press.

[29] Bullough. 2010.

[30] King, 2010; Richmond, 2013.

[31] Stephen Jones. 1987. "Russian Imperial Administration and the Georgian Nobility", *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (Jan., 1987), pp. 53-76 and Gammer. 1994.

[32] V. O. Bobrovnikov. I.L. Babich, et al. 2007. *Severnyi Kavkaz v sostave Rossiiskoi imperii, XVIII—nachalo XX v.* Moscow: NLO.

not seem relevant at all. The Kabardins carried into the Soviet version of modernity a certain nobility of manners, a highly gendered sense of social roles within the family, prizing both traditional masculinity and femininity, as well as the marked deference for seniors, which distinguished them from the majority of fellow Soviet citizens. But the old internal divisions along the lines of clan and traditional class, luckily, became almost incomprehensible to the modern North Caucasians. The Kabardins and Balkars in the process of Soviet modernization grew nearly as secular as the Slav majority of Russia.

Things began to change following the collapse of the Soviet Union to the extent that some observers spoke of a de-modernization. The eminent Russian anthropologist Sergo Arutyunov described this phenomenon with a poignant metaphor: when electricity disappears, people may find useful the oil lamps of their ancestors.[33] In a more analytical way, we might say that the disintegration of the Soviet state and central economy severely undermined the once prestigious modern professional occupations, such as engineers and scientists, at the same time making valuable the resilience, toughness, self-reliance, and large patriarchal families typically found at the lower rungs of the social hierarchy among the rural and small-town populations of sub-proletarians.[34] Religiosity is another hallmark of lower social status in many contemporary societies. It could be regarded as a sign of "backwardness" and mere lack of education as long as the core of society was firmly in the hands of educated elites.

But what happens when the modernist core founders on economic and political upheavals and loses ideological faith in its superior progressive mission? One way professors, artists, and poets might stay relevant to their societies is by asserting the spiritual values of renewed religiosity. Indeed, the first generation of Islamists to emerge in the North Caucasus during the 1990s boasted many highly educated people. Another possibility was nationalism. This idea took hold in the aftermath of Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika when prominent Kabardin and Balkar intellectuals began promoting the revival of ethnic cultures and traditions. It is almost an axiom of sociology that nothing can more effectively focus and mobilize a new social movement than a collective grievance against atrocity. For the Balkars a major grievance was the 1944 Stalinist deportation of their people. The Kabardin activists focused rather on the tragic Circassian exodus of the 1860s that turned their people into scattered minorities in

[33] S. A. Arutyunov. 2012. *Siluety etnichnosti na tsivilizatsionnom fone*. Moscow: Infra-M Publishers and Znanium.com.

[34] Pierre Bourdieu. 1973. 'The Algerian Subproletariat', in I. W. Zartman (ed.), *Man, State, and Society in the Contemporary Maghreb,* London: Pall Mall, pp. 83–9 and Georgi Derluguian. 2005. *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus: A World-System Biography.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

the gorgeous mountains that for millennia had been the homeland of their ancestors.

The 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, one of the ancestral Circassian territories with only a tiny relic minority of aboriginals, provided a mighty catalyst to Circassian national sentiment in both Kabardino-Balkaria and the overseas diaspora descendants from the *muhajirs* of the 1860s. The various Circassian activists, including many Kabardins, passionately debated the political demands they might pursue and the ideal tactics to follow in the wake of an event that would bring the world's attention to Sochi. In the meantime Moscow has continued to assiduously ignore the whole issue because directly approaching it openly and honorably would require a measure of political will and vision that is scarce in Vladimir Putin's regime.[35] Yet the issue of the Circassian historical trauma is certainly not going to disappear any time soon; all such national grievances, once realized, tend to linger for generations.

Formative Period

The first three decades of Soviet power in Kabardino-Balkaria were as rambunctious and violently disruptive as the next three decades would become placid and (eventually) plainly stagnant. The earlier period was epitomized by Betal Kalmykov (1893–1940), the barely literate Kabardin guerrilla who joined the Bolsheviks in 1918, soon becoming a proud friend and loyalist of Stalin. Kalmykov was more an honorable revolutionary bandit than a bureaucrat, like the equally legendary Caucasus Bolsheviks Nestor Lakoba of Abkhazia or Shahan-girei Khakurate of Adygeia. Isaac Babel, the author of the colorful and brutal *Odessa Tales* and *Red Cavalry*, relates two typical stories about Betal Kalmykov.[36] In one, Kalmykov, at great risk, negotiates the honorable surrender of an armed enemy. In another story, Kalmykov counters theft from kolkhoz fields by posting roadside signs invoking the traditional norms of hospitality: "Traveler, take a rest and taste our watermelons. You are being hosted by the people of this kolkhoz." Less romantically, Kalmykov built an extensive network of patronage staffed with an opportunistic assortment of his personal promotions, including the outcasts of traditional society, such as former slaves and divorced women.[37] Of course, Kalmykov's kindness is matched only by his violence; he is also remembered locally for personally dragging his opponents to their executions in the backyard of government offices.[38]

[35] Anonymous 1; Moscow, October 2012.

[36] Vladimir Kantorovich. 1989. "Babel o Betale Kalmykove," in: *Vospominaniya o Babele* http://www.bibliotekar.ru/rus-Babel/18.htm

[37] Gregory Massel. 1974. *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919-1929.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

[38] Ch. Kardanov. 1993. *Grupovoi Portret v Aushigere: Gody I Sud'by.* Nalchik: Elbrus and

Ultimately, this burly, tempestuous character himself perished in 1940, after actively participating in the Great Purge of 1937.

For the rest of the Stalinist period Kabardino-Balkaria was ruled in rapid succession by ethnic Russian outsiders. Purges decimated Kalmykov's patronage network and destroyed it. Moreover, in 1944, the Balkars were deported wholesale on the pretext of their allegedly having welcomed Nazi forces during World War II.[39] As in other such instances of mass repression, Stalin's actual motives can only be surmised from circumstantial evidence. Local resistance to collectivization during the 1930s was especially ferocious because the highlanders could rely on their traditional solidarities, personal weapons, and the protective mountains. The Kabardin peasants resisted in all possible ways no less than the Balkars or, for that matter, the Chechens and Ingush, but somehow the Kabardins were spared deportation.[40] It was probably a matter of logistical and administrative expediency and surely Stalin's terroristic brand of social engineering. The Balkars were dragged from their native canyons and deported to Central Asia after the threat of German invasion was already gone. Exile destinations probably give a clue to Stalin's motivation, too. The deported Caucasus peoples were forcibly settled mainly in the virgin lands of Kazakhstan where Moscow needed agricultural labor for the new collective farms that proved impossible to run with the recently nomadic locals. Whatever Stalin's imperial-revolutionary designs, the human cost of such population transfers reached genocidal proportions.[41]

Stalin was losing control over his totalitarian party-state in the war years and their aftermath.[42] Bureaucratic managers became irreplaceable in the face of dire external challenges to the Soviet state. The nomenklatura scored their collective revenge following the death of the supreme despot. Locally, this trend in 1956 brought Timbora Malbakhov to the position of First Secretary of Kabardino-Balkaria—an office he would hold for the next thirty years. Malbakhov (1917–1999), an ethnic Kabardin, rose through the ranks in the 1940s from kolkhoz agronomist and Red Army commissar during the war to become a party and state official.[43] Malbakhov, an epitome of his own epoch, could not look more different

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Anonymous 3, Nartkala, November 2007.

[39] K. M. Azamatov. Temirzhanov, B. Temukuev, A. Tetuev, and I. Chechenov. 1994. *Cherekskaia tragediia.* Nalchik: Elbrus.

[40] Dzhabrail Gakayev. 1997. *Ocherki politicheskoi istorii Chechni.* Moscow: n.p. and Terry Martin. 2001. *The Affirmative Action Empire. Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

[41] Vladislav Zubok. 2008. *A Failed Empire*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press

[42] Elena Zubkova. 1998. *Russia After the War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments*. Armonk, NY: Sharpe and Rudolf G. Pikhoia. 2011. "Kak ubivali pobeditelei" http://newsland.com/news/detail/id/793539/.

[43] T. Malbakhov. 2008. *Rechi. Stat'i. Pis'ma.* Nalchik: El-Fa.

from Betal Kalmykov. He was a grey bureaucrat of Brezhnev's generation who, in the deferential words of his obituary, "spoke softly but was heard by everyone."[44]

The decades-long tenure of Malbakhov allowed him to install in Kabardino-Balkaria a bureaucratic patronage network that endures to this day. The true formative period of the network was in the 1950s, when Stalinist henchmen in the party and security apparatus were quietly rusticated under the pretexts of their age and lack of formal education. In the meantime, the impressive growth of the Soviet economy offered many additional positions in industry, higher education and science, or urban planning. Moreover, Malbakhov exploited extraordinary advantages provided by nature. Mount Elbrus, the tallest peak in Europe and a popular mountaineering and hunting destination for over a century, is located in Kabardino-Balkaria. Its foothills are rich in mineral waters and famed spas dating back to imperial times. The resorts offered Kabardin leaders not only additional investments from the central Soviet budget, but also the political advantage of personal access to the various Soviet leaders vacationing in the North Caucasus. Politburo members, like Yuri Andropov who suffered from a chronic kidney condition, would prove to be a valuable source of political protection.[45] The second-tier Soviet bosses of industries and richer northern provinces could be induced to barter their resources for the allocation of gorgeous landscapes to build hunting lodges and ministerial resorts. All this helped to secure for Malbakhov's provincial bailiwick its reputation of well-managed stability, prosperity, sophistication and perhaps even coziness.

As a good nomenklatura leader, Malbakhov acted, above all, carefully and judiciously.[46] In 1957, when Balkars were returned from exile, he avoided the disruptions and violent confrontations of the sort that were flaring up in the neighboring Checheno-Ingushetia and Dagestan. The majority of Balkar were not settled in their impoverished ancestral canyons, but rather in more fertile locations and closer to towns. This policy helped the near-destitute people gain employment and subsistence, even if the majority remained only at the lower ranks of the occupational hierarchy. A few carefully selected Balkars were welcomed into the local nomenklatura, albeit into subordinate positions.[47] Malbakhov's patronage strictly followed the unwritten rules of its own "Lebanese protocol" of appointment by ethnic quota. In any administrative office, institution, or factory the top appointment always went to a Kabardin, the second

[44] B. Zumakulov, S. Beituganov, and V. Kudaiev. 2005. *Govoril Tikho – Slyshali Vse*. Nalchik: El-Fa.

[45] Roi Medvedev. 2008. *Andropov*. Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia.

[46] Anonymous 4, Nalchik, October 2003; Anonymous 5, Moscow, December 2007.

[47] Zumakulov, 2005; Anonymous 6, July 2004.

to an ethnic Russian, and the third to a Balkar. Moreover, replicating Malbakhov's own example down through the hierarchy, all nomenklatura cadres were expected and helped to establish "working and friendly contact" with their Moscow counterparts at the respective levels and branch ministries.[48]

Malbakhov's thirty years in power were, in a word, uneventful. Perhaps recognizing that Kabardino-Balkaria could not afford the exorbitant corruption levels of Brezhnev-era Georgia and Azerbaijan, he preached diligence and moderation (one of his bland aphorisms: "Do not stuff your guests with barbecued lamb and drinks, lavish them with attention and respect.") He certainly did not please everyone, but the local dissidents and complainers were isolated by stolid consensus and could never get Moscow to act against Malbakhov because he was both careful to avoid any scandals and deeply rooted in his small republic.[49]

Perestroika and Survival

One of Gorbachev's first moves after coming to power in Moscow in 1985 was to retire Malbakhov. Perhaps it was personal. As first secretary in the neighboring Stavropol, Gorbachev was intimately familiar with the old master of Kabardino-Balkaria. Then again, the move was also part of Gorbachev's general campaign for the "rejuvenation of cadres." Indicatively, Moscow did not select a local to replace the veteran incumbent. The new man in Nalchik was a Russian and complete outsider transferred from Siberia. This choice violated all unwritten, and even the written, "Leninist" norms of appointment in national autonomies. Gorbachev was obviously impatient. But he also proved ill-prepared himself, sending his new man into the tight web of Malbakhov's patronage network with neither a clear mandate nor the carrots and sticks required to make things happen. Like the rest of Gorbachev's hastily appointed "parachutists" (in nomenklatura jargon, an outsider dropped from above), Malbakhov's successor was first received with a combination of great fear and hope that soon grew into universal disdain and ridicule.

Things, however, did start to change rapidly and unpredictably. Perestroika charged the local intelligentsia with the emotional energy and daring necessary to challenge the placid complacencies of the previous epoch. All sorts of previously suppressed issues emerged in the focus of public attention, from the degradation of the environment to the revival of ethnic cultures and, inevitably, the historical grievances of Balkars and Kabardins. Moreover, Malbakhov's long incumbency dramatically

[48] Anonymous 7, March 2009 and Michael Urban, with Vyacheslav Igrunov and Sergei Mitrokhin. 1997. *The Rebirth of Politics in Russia.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[49] L. Kumykova. 2011. Obzor Lichnogo Fonda T.K.Malbakhova. *Arkhivy I Obshestvo.* http://archivesjournal.ru/?p=1787.

impeded the career mobility of younger cadres, forcing them to remain either in their homeland and grumble within their inner-circles, or leave for the wider expanses of Russia. The result was a considerable accumulation of junior elites unable to realize their career aspirations and therefore ready to take an unorthodox bypass — what is now established as a classical precondition of political revolutions.[50] Such opportunities did appear in the form of new social movements, entrepreneurial market "cooperatives" (small private businesses allowed to exist in the Soviet context), and above all in the partially competitive elections of 1989–1990.

Gorbachev and his Politburo faction of reform-oriented Communists designed the new, deliberately complex and bulky procedures for electing legislatures (supreme soviets) at all levels, from the USSR and Russian Federation down to the autonomous national republics, to serve the dual purpose of ousting the conservative patronage networks of Brezhnev's era, while channeling the vocal intelligentsia into minority opposition.[51] The plan worked imperfectly owing to the fact that Gorbachev's faction did not succeed in creating its own political "machines" at the local level.

The failure of perestroika was often blamed on Gorbachev's unwillingness to fully embrace the nascent democratic movements in the USSR. A closer and more sober look at what was actually happening at the time in the national and autonomous republics suggests the opposite. Gorbachev, like Khrushchev before him, grievously mishandled controls over the state pyramid, built by Stalin, and perpetuated by Brezhnev in a more benign form. Both Soviet reformers were enthusiastic believers in techno-scientific progress and the Soviet brand of socialism. Both tended to equate Stalinism with terror alone, ignoring its other component in the careful work of cultivating political clients who would, at critical junctures, supply the votes of support to their patrons in Moscow.

Gorbachev tried to accelerate the process of constituency formation in support of his reforms first through old-fashioned direct appointments during his "rejuvenation of cadres" campaign. This effort failed to deliver the expected results because, in the absence of a true purge, Gorbachev's new appointments lacked the tools necessary to break up the tightly knit old networks of local patronage, and therefore ended up being irrelevant. Criticism of local power abuses, or glasnost, coupled with competitive elections potentially could have served as a non-lethal substitute for the cadre purge, but then Gorbachev had few trusted clients to fill the emerging openings in the party and state institutions. Instead of calling Gorbachev insufficiently democratic, an anachronistic accusation because career communist cadres were not democratic politicians, the last General Secretary should be regarded a woefully insufficient patron and careless

[50] Goldstone, 1993.

[51] Urban et al., 1997.

politician who ignored the capillary metabolism of the state over which he presided.

The perestroika elections, with their untested rules, at first produced a large unexpected crisis. The Balkar elements of the local nomenklatura and intelligentsia saw their chance to step from the shadow of the Kabardin majority and promote their own issues and careers. In the words of a Balkar activist, "The sense of urgency was tremendous. We had to be heard now."[52] But the Balkars failed to realize their goals because, with at the time less then 10 percent of the KBR's population, in truly competitive elections they might not win any parliamentary seats at all. This dreadful lesson was delivered by the first round of voting in 1990 and produced two reactions. Balkar radicals organized Balkar People's Assemblies in November 1991 and demanded their own separate republic. Kabardin nomenklatura swiftly countered by offering to restore the unwritten "Lebanese protocol" of Malbakhov's times all the way to removing from the running a few Kabardins in favor of Balkar candidates. Such strategic generosity, obliquely praised in official pronouncements as "wisdom for the sake of internationalism and friendship," immediately achieved three goals. First, it split the nascent bloc of Balkar nomenklatura and intellectuals by re-incorporating some and politically marginalizing others who were subsequently called troublemakers. Balkar separatism would still flare up in the future, but it would remain contained. Secondly, the informal deal revived the network of Malbakhov's loyalists and showed their collective ability to maintain order in their autonomous republic. Last but not least, the outsiders appointed by Gorbachev were totally discredited, outflanked, and eventually expunged as a result of the same new policies that were intended to undermine the networks of conservative nomenklatura.

Valery Kokov (1941–2005) became the leader epitomizing the counter-perestroika restoration in Kabardino-Balkaria. Son of one of Malbakhov's long-standing allies, Kokov himself had benefited from patronage in the early stages of his career. Kokov had advanced through executive positions in the agro-industrial complex since the age of 23, alternating with stints in graduate school and the party school. Following Malbakhov's retirement in 1985, Kokov remained the highest-positioned ethnic Kabardin in the republic. His ultimate elevation in early 1990 was certified by the simultaneous election to three key positions: party first secretary, member of the USSR parliament, and chairman of the local legislature. Kokov would remain in charge of what was now called the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic (KBR) for fifteen more years, nearly until his death from natural causes in 2005. But in 1991 he had to fight for his political survival against popular revolution.

[52] Derluguian, 2005, pp. 208–211.

Missing the Chechnya Turn

During the reactionary coup attempt in August 1991 Kokov had the misfortune of being present in Moscow and endorsing the plotters. Back in Nalchik, he was greeted by a storm of protests of the same extremely emotional kind that rolled over the capitals of Soviet republics precipitating the USSR's collapse. Kokov found himself on the wrong side of the triumphant Boris Yeltsin and his enthusiastic supporters among the democratic intelligentsia. Yet by January 1992, Kokov was elected president of Kabardino-Balkaria with 88 percent of the vote. Understanding the dynamics of this miraculous revival matter, in fact, much more than Kokov's personal fortunes.

Like all revolutionary situations, the stormy events of 1991–1992 in the KBR had their causation in two meshing planes, the structural foundations of the sociopolitical scene and the more contingent alliances and actions of different contenders. Analytically, the example of Kabardino-Balkaria offers valuable insights into the contrasting outcome of similar revolutionary events in Checheno-Ingushetia, where the rebels had actually succeeded in ousting the old Soviet nomenklatura. Both autonomous republics had two titular nationalities divided by their unequal size and representation in state institutions. Moreover, the subordinate smaller nationalities, the Balkars and Ingush, had strong historical grievances stemming from the Stalinist deportations of the 1940s that could be mobilized in separatist movements and calls for the creation of new mono-ethnic republics. Ingushetia successfully separated in 1991, while the emergence of a separate Balkaria was aborted. This divergence corresponded to the key fact that in September–October 1991, rebellious crowds in Chechnya's capital of Grozny successfully seized all government buildings, physically ousted their occupants, and proceeded with unilateral declaration of independence from Russia. In Nalchik this course of events was prevented, and the local nomenklatura proved capable of durable counter-revolutionary restoration.

Structural differences therefore seem more illuminating. Two related facts rendered political power in Checheno-Ingushetia weaker and ultimately unable to repulse a popular rebellion. Grozny was an important center of the Russian oil industry and populated predominantly by the ethnic Russians resettled there during the years of post-war recovery, while Chechens and Ingush lived in exile from their homeland. Although ethnic Chechen and Ingush were granted managerial and party positions, such roles were largely tokenistic; until 1989 no Chechen or Ingush had risen to the top offices in their own autonomous republic.[53] Accordingly, Checheno-Ingushetia had no local equivalent to Malbakhov's deeply

[53] Gakayev, 1997.

entrenched political machine.

At the same time the local Russian population of skilled workers and professionals preserved their near-monopoly on the better urban jobs, leaving the majority of Chechens and Ingush in the margins of the official Soviet economy. The traditional patriarchal norms, however, did not permit the native sub-proletarian males to simply become drunks, parasitically exploiting the women of their households. This is certainly one area where culture made a big difference. The North Caucasus males were expected to provide for the symbolic consumption of their extended families by whatever means available. The sub-proletarian predicament,[54] coupled with the informal persistence of traditional Caucasian norms,[55] goes a long way towards explaining the peculiarities of Checheno-Ingushetia—including the notoriously high rates of economic and "honor" crimes, seasonal labor migrations to the better-paying destinations in Russia and Kazakhstan (often familiar to the Chechens and Ingush since the period of their exile in those locations), the informal solidarities of kinship and religious sect, high birthrates and extended cooperative households, and the commonly observed fact that modern Chechen villages with their conspicuously large brick houses glaringly contradicted the bleak official statistics of rural incomes in Chechen-Ingushetia.[56] But the political paralysis of the Soviet economy in the endgame of perestroika suddenly trapped in their republic and without income perhaps as many as forty thousand Chechen and Ingush males of prime age who would otherwise be away every summer as labor migrants.[57] The revolutionary "crowds" of Grozny in 1991 were swollen with these disgruntled men who brought into the mobilization their informal networks and tough social skills.[58]

Kabardino-Balkaria arguably had its own marginalized populations of tough and aggrieved sub-proletarian males, both rural Kabardins and especially Balkars, many of them excelling in the martial arts ever popular in the region. Through our observational data of lists of activists who participated in protests between 1991–1992 in Nalchik, the crowds appeared more urban and urbane and considerably less prone to direct action of the sort that took place in Grozny. The Nalchik protests were dominated by intelligentsia who favored symbolic and overtly legalistic means towards achieving their goals of democratization.[59] The earliest leaders of the

[54] Bourdieu, 1973.

[55] Gerald Mars and Yochanan Altman (1983). "The Cultural Bases of Soviet Georgia's Second Economy," *Soviet Studies* 35: 4 (October), 546-60.

[56] Anatol Lieven. 1998. *Chechnya, the Tombstone of Russian Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

[57] Guzhin, G.S. and N.V. Chugunova. 1988. *Selskaia mestnost Checheno-Ingushetii i yeyo problemy.* Grozny: Checheno-ingushskoe knizhnoe izdatelstvo.

[58] Lieven, 1998.

[59] Sufian Zhemukhov. 2012. "The Birth of Modern Circassian Nationalism," *Nationalities*

Chechen movement, as anywhere in the Soviet national republics, were poets, historians, journalists, and the moderate technocratic reformers.[60] They were, however, rapidly sidelined in the course of revolution by the mercurial General Dzhokhar Dudayev and an opportunistic assortment of criminalized "violent entrepreneurs."[61] In Kabardino-Balkaria, the chief opponent of Kokov remained a progressive technocrat in charge of Nalchik's municipality and an assortment of poets and locally prominent public speakers. Their main leader and political asset was jurisprudence professor Yuri Kalmykov (no relation of Betal Kalmykov).[62]

Kalmykov, an ethnic Circassian from Russia, had no connection to Kabardino-Balkaria and never mastered the Kabardin dialect. Instead he enjoyed prominence in Moscow politics as a member of the 1989 USSR parliament and close ally of Yeltsin. In the first months after the August 1991 coup attempt, the democratic heavyweight Kalmykov seemed an obvious choice for replacing the discredited Kokov as the new president of the KBR. Two considerations intervened in the run up to the local presidential elections scheduled in January 1992. The first was Moscow's humiliating loss of control over separatist Chechnya, which in Yeltsin's circle was taken personally and as a threat to the integrity of the Russian Federation. The second consideration was the tenacity of Kokov and his numerous clients still populating virtually all offices in the republic, with the retired but still vigorous Malbakhov looming in the background as the patriarch of local politics. Breaking through their resistance would require extra-parliamentary mobilization that, as Moscow now feared, could acquire the runaway direction producing another Chechnya. In fact Kokov, still enjoying considerable clout and connections in Moscow, staked his survival on presenting himself as the more credible guarantor of stability. Yeltsin withdrew Kalmykov from Nalchik and gave him a ministerial portfolio in Moscow, which cleared the way for the comeback of Kokov and left his opponents to their own political defenses. Local patronage then delivered a spectacularly massive vote for Kokov. In the meantime, Moscow itself was in dire political disarray as a result of Yeltsin's confrontations with the Russian parliament. Kokov astutely used his regional connections and influence over the votes of parliamentarians from the KBR, emerging in the end as one of Yeltsin's critically important supporters (Gel'man, 1999).[63]

Papers, Vol. 40, no. 4 (July), pp. 503-524.

[60] Timur Muzaev and Zurab Todua. 1992. *Novaia Checheno-Ingushetiia*. Moscow: "Panorama" and Dunlop, John. *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

[61] Volkov, 2002.

[62] Zhemukhov, 2012.

[63] Vladimir Gel'man. 1999. *Transformatsia v Rossii: politicheskii rezhim i oppozitsia.* Moscow: MONF; Hale, 2005; and Woodruff, 1998.

The improbable alliance served Kokov splendidly during the second flaring of street protests a year later. In August 1992, Georgian warlords invaded Abkhazia.[64] Many Kabardins felt distressed and outraged because the native Abkhaz were regarded as fellow Circassians, in fact the last Circassian people remaining on the Black sea coast after the expulsions of 1864. The initial reaction of both Moscow and Kokov was confused and repressive, but, as internal pressure mounted, a realpolitik solution presented itself. The Kabardin and other North Caucasian volunteers, who demanded arms and free passage to Abkhazia, were dispatched with barely concealed help from the Russian military. Simultaneously, this military engagement released the steam driving protest mobilization and put pressure on the increasingly pro-American Georgia and, thus, a hostile neighbor.[65]

Two years later, the victorious, yet decimated and weary, volunteer brigades returned from Abkhazia to discover that in the face of Kokov's state power they had become completely irrelevant. By 1994, emotional energy[66] had almost entirely evaporated from Circassian national mobilization efforts – at least in its perestroika generation. There still remained the Balkar movement, but its leaders were fairly easily intimidated and/or incorporated into various sinecures. The 1994 anti-climax suggested to Moscow that Chechnya, itself, grew ripe for re-incorporation.[67] Moscow's decision to coerce Chechnya back into its fold was a disastrous blunder. Yet it is rarely appreciated that, despite General Dudayev's bombast and bluster, no pan-Caucasus war happened in the 1990s. The Chechen separatists had to fight their war alone.

The New Islamists

In the end of his life and tenure in 2005, Kokov increasingly looked like an archaic anomaly. His demeanor, pomposity, and paternalism smacked of Brezhnevism, and his official newspaper was still called *Kabardino-Balkarskaia Pravda*. The shrinking but hardly changed economy of the KBR remained centered on the state budget that was chronically dependent on central subsidies. Kokov and his acolytes defended the persistence of their Soviet-era relic as the only alternative to the example of Chechnya next door. Playing along the same lines, local police in the late 1990s and the early 2000s lobbied Moscow for vastly increased budgets in order to control the spread of Islamic militancy from Chechnya.

[64] Stephen Jones. 2013. *Georgia: A Political History Since Independence.* London: I.B. Tauris.

[65] Lieven, 1998; Derluguian, 2005.

[66] Randall Collins. 2001. "Social Movements and the Focus of Emotional Attention", pp. 27 – 44 in: Jeff Goodwin, James Jasper, and Francesca Poletta (eds.) *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[67] Dunlop, 1998.

Young Muslim converts had indeed appeared in the KBR by the late 1990s, but there was hardly any indication of their radicalization until the fall of 2004. In the wake of the horrific Beslan school hostage-taking, the police began waging a campaign of humiliating and indiscriminate intimidation against young Muslims, especially the adherents of new alternative mosques. The campaign was widely perceived as a bureaucratic tactic, intended to report back to Moscow an increased number of operations, and thus lobby for still more funding and promotions for the police.

The Russian security services straightforwardly explain the emergence of the Islamist underground in the KBR as a foreign import from the Middle East and spillover from Chechnya. In a bizarre irony, the Islamists themselves essentially agree that they represent a front in global jihad against everything corrupt and Godless, like the Russian state and its local servants in the Caucasus. Curiously, nobody claims continuity with the nineteenth-century holy war of the highlander commoners. In the contemporary historical memory fighters against the Russian imperial conquest retrospectively became national-liberation heroes, rather than religious zealots. Besides, Imam Shamil and his followers adhered to Sufi mysticism, which had since become the official version of Islam in the North Caucasus.[68] The new Islamists profess the Salafi brand of Islamic piety, which regards traditional Sufi practices as idolatrous hypocrisy. This dispute is an internal doctrinaire tension between the competing currents of Islam and their various state patrons, from Soviet and Russian authorities to Saudi royalty. Still, theological differences explain nothing about the timing and intensity of terrorist violence that has engulfed the KBR since 2004.

The early social dynamics of neo-Islamization in the North Caucasus uncannily resemble the conversion of higher-status intelligentsia to Western liberal causes with the assistance of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The new Islamic centers were also a variety of foreign-supported NGOs, offering to their recruits an ennobling sense of social mission and belonging. The liberal, secular NGOs appealed mostly to the more urbane and middle-class strata, preferably conversant in English. In contrast, religious NGOs held greater appeal among the lower classes, especially the young sub-proletarians from rural towns, where religion survived as popular tradition. In addition, the prospects for social mobility, especially following the collapse of Soviet-era promotional channels, appeared minimal and this state of affairs was experienced as an enormous injustice. The first wave of religious students traveled to Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria, already in the last years of perestroika. Upon their return, they discovered the official Soviet-era mosques too tightly controlled and

[68] Lieven, 1998.

stale for their tastes, while often brazenly pecuniary and corrupt. With their youthful energies and, yes, some foreign resources (though perhaps nowhere as lavishly generous as claimed by Russian police), the preachers of new piety began building alternative mosques and charities that soon became the nodes of social support networks beyond the scope of official controls.

Amidst the hardships and moral vacuum of the post-Soviet 90s, the spiritual solidarity of reinvigorated Muslims spread rapidly. At first it encountered no active opposition from local authorities, who felt disoriented after the sudden collapse of communist ideology. Add to this the waning of national movements in the mid-1990s. Neither ethnic Kabardin nor Balkar activists had much to offer in the face of a collapsing economy, rampant corruption, and social ills. The national movements could no longer bring huge crowds into the streets, and their political influence had collapsed accordingly. Like many declining social movements, the activist core was plagued by factional intrigues. In the meantime, an opportunistic variety of business and political sponsors tried to wield the remnant factions in their own intrigues. In a place as small as the KBR, such manipulation looked too transparent and further contributed to the decline of secular nationalists. Amidst this political and moral disarray, little could compete against a religious movement with a strong ethical message, internal solidarity, and a principled non-ethnic appeal. The Islamic revival movement remained non-violent and mostly above the ground in its first years. Perhaps its activists felt too successful to seek confrontations with the state.

Systematic study of the newly reinvigorated Muslims in the KBR was never easy, which we understand from difficult personal experience. After the movement went underground and mutated there into an armed insurgency, directly obtaining scholarly data has become practically impossible. In an inevitably rough estimate derived from "triangulation" of the communiqués issued by Russian counter-terrorism agencies, human-rights advocates and journalists,[69] and our own ethnographic observations and interviews, the ranks of Islamic revivalism in the KBR are young, overwhelmingly under the age of 25. The great majority are rural and sub-proletarian, although a few children of intelligentsia and even officials were among the ranks of the first wave of movement participants. The movement encompassed all ethnic groups, including some Russian Muslim converts. Reflecting the situation in sub-proletarian neighborhoods, quite a few young male converts had previously been arrested on criminal charges, mostly street fights and drug possession. These data,

[69] For example, Anna Politkovskaia. 2005. "Skolko shagov ot molitvy do boya?" [How many steps from prayer to battle?] originally published in *Novaia gazeta*, 7 November 2005 http://politkovskaya.novayagazeta.ru/pub/2005/2005-096.shtml

however, come from police records, which may well reflect the common police practice of planting drugs on suspects during an arrest, especially when the suspects are lower status youths. We must add that interviews with the neighbors of many killed terrorists are dominated by emotions of sadness and astonishment. Typically, one hears that the boy was of the kind who could help an old granny cross the street. In fact, altruism and social righteousness are the traits commonly cited by terrorism experts.[70]

Soon, the attacks began to escalate. The Islamists, who previously only threatened action or undertook symbolic destruction of property, like the burning of wine shops, launched their first lethal attacks on the police in 2004. Apparently seizing weapons was a major motivation. Then, in the morning hours of October 13, 2005, the previously relaxed and cozy, provincial Nalchik was shocked by the simultaneous attack of 150 rebels on local police precincts, the directorate of prisons, and FSB headquarters. More than a hundred people, including police, civilians, and attackers were dead by the end of that terrible day. Responsibility for organizing the attack was claimed by the notorious Chechen terrorist Shamil Basayev and the local Kabardin Islamist Anzor Astemirov (1976 – 2010).

Astemirov, who adopted the Islamic name Saifullah (Allah's Sword), was in many respects indicative of the movement he helped to create. A scion of a medieval princely family, Astemirov actually grew up in modest circumstances in the Ukrainian industrial town of Kremenchug. He was barely sixteen years old when the Soviet Union collapsed, and his family moved back to the KBR. In the early 1990s Astemirov enrolled in university in Saudi Arabia, where he also worked briefly for the TV channel Al Jazeera. Upon his return to Nalchik in the late 1990s, Astemirov became prominent in local Islamic revivalism, though not its most prominent leader, as he was still young and reputedly not particularly charismatic or eloquent. Yet the "prophylactic" campaign of police intimidation scared away from the movements its weaker adherents, while forcing the stronger ones to close ranks and consider their difficult options. This is when, according to reports, Anzor (Saifullah) Astemirov emerged as the leader of a radical wing, advocating going underground and forging ties with the jihadi groups operating in the Middle East, and above all, neighboring Chechnya. It is widely believed that it was also Astemirov's project to proclaim the "Caucasus Emirate" (CE), a rebel jihadi state encompassing the whole North Caucasus regardless of ethnicity. The proclamation of the Emirate (or Imarat, in the purist spelling preferred by jihadists) split the Chechen anti-Russian resistance and purged into irrelevance the secular nationalists who were trying to lead from the safety of foreign exile. Astemirov became Kadi (ideological and judicial leader) of the Supreme

[70] Marc Sageman. 2004. *Understanding Terror Networks*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Sharia Court of the CE and was also widely credited with designing the strategies and organizational structures of the Islamist underground along the classical models of urban guerrilla warfare: combat cells acting independently from each other yet subordinated to central command while fed and protected by communities of civilian supporters. The Imarate developed its own Shariat courts, social services helping mostly the families of its slain fighters, and even a scheme of taxation. Finances were laundered through the bank accounts of businesses and other legal covers, such as (allegedly) the Freestyle Wrestling Federation of Kabardino-Balkaria.[71] Large sums of money were regularly extorted for personal protection from local businessmen and, allegedly, many state officials, as well. In numerous rural towns, armed Islamists became de facto "rulers of the night." In effect, this new development put an end to the ordinary criminality that had preyed on the chaos and privatizations of the 90s. Bandits could not compete against the ideologically inspired, better-organized, and ruthlessly violent Islamists. The surviving criminals in effect faced three choices: flee from the KBR or stay and try to join either the Sharia squads or the state-sanctioned paramilitary "private security."

Enter Political Capitalists

In 2005, Moscow forced the resignation of Kokov, who was already politically undermined by grave health issues. This move was part of the general campaign to replace the old, entrenched barons of Russia's territorial governments with less prominent younger men, preferably outsiders, who owed their positions personally to the president, Vladimir Putin. Additionally, it was hoped that the energetic business-minded managers of a new generation could stem the inexorable economic decline of backwaters like the KBR.[72] In the case of the KBR, there were also high hopes that market-based economic growth and job-creation could act as a brake against the spread of radical Islam.

The new president of the KBR, Arsen Kanokov, appeared to fit the bill perfectly. Trim and energetic like Putin himself, Kanokov was a self-made businessman from Moscow where he had studied and worked since the age of 17. Kanokov's humble beginnings as a shop floor supervisor at a wholesale vegetable warehouse provide some insights into his spectacular, if murky, ascendency into the world of Russian business. Yuri Luzhkov, future mayor and master of post-Soviet Moscow, started his ascent from a vegetable warehouse as well.[73] This might explain how Kanokov was

[71] "Okhota na volkov", *Lenta.Ru*, 24 February 2011 http://lenta.ru/articles/2011/02/24/elbrus/

[72] Sergey Markedonov. 2005. Kabardino-Balkariia: Konets Ery Kokova. *Agentstvo Politicheckikh Novostei*, 22 September. http://www.apn.ru/publications/article1573.htm

[73] David Hoffman. 2011. *The Oligarchs: Wealth And Power In The New Russia.* Revised edition. New York: Public Affairs.

able to go from founding one of the earliest trade cooperatives in 1987 to owning a sizable chunk of prime real estate as well as several shopping centers and casinos in the city by means as brazenly corrupt and murderous as Moscow itself during the early 1990s. While the patronage of Mayor Luzhkov was the necessary condition for realizing these opportunities, it was not a sufficient condition for staying alive. On this count we may consider another hint suggested by a fellow Kabardin who had visited one of Kanokov's lieutenants in Moscow. Our informant relates that within Kanokov's business offices in Moscow, phones rang seemingly off the hook, and Russian was all but a foreign language in conference calls. It was, as Kanokov's lieutenant admitted with a chuckle, "our own Kabardin mafia!" (In Russian, the word mafia can have the ironic meaning of close circle of friends and relatives.) It is nevertheless a fact that Kanokov's business empire, called Sindica (another double-entendre, as apparently both the Ancient Greek name for Circassia and "syndicate"), contains its own private security firm Sindica-Shchit (shield).

At the time of Kanokov's appointment as new president of the KBR, hints at his contradictory reputation were, in fact, flouted as promising serious business. The new master was independently wealthy and presumably uninterested in corruption; an effective manager who could attract innovative investments to the region; and not in the least, Kanokov brought along his security firm and various heroic legends. In short, he was to become the latter-day capitalist Betal Kalmykov. Yet Kanokov failed to bring order, let alone law. Contrasts to the Bolshevik chieftain are indeed illuminating. Kalmykov could be very violent, courageous, and astonishingly generous to his supporters and poor peasants. This Bolshevik honorable bandit (*abrek*) uprooted the traditional feudal hierarchies and replaced them with the new ruling estate of nomenklatura, from the capital of Nalchik all the way down to the smallest villages on the outskirts of the KBR. In effect, the grandchildren of communist nomenklatura are still occupying significant offices in the KBR.

Kanokov neither dislodged the cadres dating back in their positions to the reigns of Malbakhov and Kokov nor could he really attack the new Islamists. The Russian *siloviki* (police and FSB) did not permit Kanokov any autonomy in the use of force of the kind granted, surely in a more grievous situation, to Ramzan Kadyrov in Chechnya. At the same time Kanokov's early effort to fill the top appointments in the KBR with his own clients collided with the tenacious webs of patronage running all the way to various powerful patrons in Moscow. Here we see rather a cardinal difference between the regimes of Stalin and Putin. In the latter case, the perennial problem of bureaucratic fiefdoms (*vedomstvennost* or *mestnichestvo*), more than any democratic resistance to authoritarianism, defeated and made a travesty of Putin's ambition to build the "power vertical." We

could observe how this happens at the micro-level of Kabardino-Balkaria. Unlike the Soviet-era Communist Party and KGB, today no state agency enjoys undisputed power over the prosecutions, sackings, and appointments. The actors ensconced in the fragmented and venal state defend their positions by building their own local insider networks, independently reaching out to their patrons in Moscow. Money from the state budget and kickbacks from private businesses are what really course through these network connections. Financial flows are divided and zealously guarded against interlopers from other agencies. In effect, no actor possesses the power to reshuffle the architecture of corruption networks wholesale. But localized scuffles occur all the time as competing cliques raid each other's turf with the private use of the various branches of judiciary, state audit, police or purportedly, even the Islamist underground in paid assassinations.

Economic development was the area where Kanokov's credentials and his mandate from Moscow seemed the strongest. New investments in the KBR were intended to modernize and build on traditional strengths in the production of fresh vegetables, mineral waters, non-ferrous metals, and, above all, tourism and resorts. For a while, developing the Mt. Elbrus area into a world-class skiing destination served as an illustrative showcase of a new business-like approach to solving problems in the North Caucasus. Critics, however, point out that investments were still coming predominantly from the federal budget and state corporations, and were absorbed by the businesses associated with Kanokov's Sindica conglomerate. The associates of President Kanokov usually argue in defense that the allocation of resources was determined by technical capacity, managerial acumen, and (as admitted more privately) the desire to prevent the investments from falling into the bottomless pits of local corruption. The development of Mt. Elbrus' western slopes, however, provoked an angry reaction from the Balkar minority who feared that their small businesses catering to tourists on the eastern side would be literally sidelined when new roads and larger, more modern hotels were built. The looming conflict of economic interests, especially the defense of communal land rights, suddenly revived Balkar separatism.

On February 18, 2011 a group of mountain skiers from Moscow were stopped and executed on their way to Mt. Elbrus. It is not clear whether this atrocity was intended to sabotage tourism in the KBR. This act could have been part of a surge in violence waged by the terrorist underground in revenge for the slaying of Anzor (Saifullah) Astemirov earlier in 2010. If under Astemirov's command Islamists waged their war mostly on police, the two years following his elimination by Russian security forces saw dozens of new assassinations targeting secular nationalist activists, businessmen, official Muslim clerics, intellectuals, and even traditional healers accused of propagating paganism. Several new leaders of the Islamist

underground emerged in Astemirov's place, both Balkars and Kabardins, each killed in succession by security forces. Shootings, happening almost weekly, became a grimly familiar part of life in Nalchik. The startled and terrified locals were left wondering where it might happen next and who would be the victims.

At the moment of this writing, in September 2013, President Kanokov appears severely weakened and, it is commonly speculated, on his way out of power. A year earlier, in May 2012, special police units flown in from Moscow were used in the spectacular pre-dawn arrests of several of Kanokov's top aides and close relatives. Formal charges against them were universally considered minor if not laughable. But what could this all mean? That Moscow intended this as only a show of force? But who exactly in Moscow initiated the raid, and why? Could it be Kokov's old loyalists? The power politics of the KBR remain shrouded in dirty secrets.

Conclusion: Three Elites in Violent Gridlock

In terms of contemporary theory of revolutions,[74] the present situation in Kabardino-Balkaria appears to be a nasty paradox. There is state breakdown and acute elite factionalism, the key elements of a revolutionary situation. But there is no revolutionary alternative capable of mobilizing on this opportunity structure. The measure of political weakness of the Islamist insurgency is its very adherence to individual terror and sectarianism that in effect exclude broader constituencies.[75] The new Islamic converts are revolutionaries in tactic and ideology, not in strategy. Unlike the erstwhile Bolsheviks, they have neither the political nor economic programs necessary to seriously challenge, let alone replace, existing structures. Despite their symbolic use of the Islamic caliphate title (military emirs, juridical qadis, vilayet governors), the terrorists are not state builders. Their violent campaign is mostly punitive and vengeful. The presumably large protection payments that jihadis extort from businesses and local officials go to support the underground and thus impose another parasitical burden on the local economy, atop the destructive and disruptive costs of retaliation by the state security forces. The North Caucasus, for all the "demodernizations" of the last twenty years, is still a post-Soviet society of large urban centers where a successful rural guerrilla movement in the manner of the Afghan Taliban seems very unlikely. Chechnya of the 1990s in fact strengthens the contrast because it was the nationalist

[74] Jack Goldstone. 1993. *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World.* Berkeley: University of California Press and Jeff Goodwin. 2001. *No Other Way Out: States and Revolutionary Movements, 1945-1991.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[75] Charles Kurzman. 2011. *The Missing Martyrs: Why There Are So Few Muslim Terrorists*. New York: Oxford University Press.

and still secular mobilization that had made possible the popular guerrilla resistance to occupation.

Still, the state in Kabardino-Balkaria is badly broken. During the deeply transformative twentieth century this republic was ruled by the Soviet nomenklatura bureaucratic estate. Its leaders were romantic and murderously violent in the initial stages; in the later decades their successor became the placid and uninspiring bureaucrats. The Soviet-made cadres still occupy the majority of positions in the local government and economy. Yet, as Ken Jowitt wryly noted, Catholic priests without a Catholic church cannot be Catholic; a communist nomenklatura without the Communist party cannot be communists.[76] The post-nomenklatura still hold the majority of appointments, but the method of appointment and the criteria of performance in office have changed dramatically with the introduction of capitalism in Russia. The post-nomenklatura essentially became venal office holders more akin to the erstwhile elites of absolutist states.[77]

Businessmen in the early 2000s held great promise for many Russians, especially by contrast to the corrupt and ineffective state officials. But the record of Russian businessmen who did join or were recruited into politics and state positions was mixed at best. Kanokov's tenure as president of Kabardino-Balkaria demonstrated that business acumen and methods would not suffice in the face of the monumental problems of the post-Soviet period. The state is not merely a bankrupt enterprise in need of external management. It is the machine of social power populated by specifically adapted elites who possess many micro-opportunities to sabotage and resist unwanted changes from the outside. The surprisingly mediocre record of Kanokov's presidency in Kabardino-Balkaria shows that even a beheaded and dysfunctional bureaucracy can still have staying power against a rich upstart.

The frustrating experience of Khazret Sovmen, the president of neighboring Adygeya during 2002-2007, provides striking parallels to Kanokov's presidency. Sovmen, another businessman outsider with close connections to Yuri Luzhkov, stormed into the politics of his small native republic and in a surprising electoral gambit defeated its ex-nomenklatura leader Aslan Djarimov. By contrast to his long-serving predecessor, who carried the air of Brezhnev's times, Sovmen styled himself as a crisis manager and market reformer. The new presidency started with spectacular reshufflings, appointing in short succession seven prime-ministers and six ministers of agriculture (a key economic sector in Adygeya). Attracting private investment was proclaimed the paramount goal and started when Sovmen's personal capital poured into new business ventures and charities.

[76] Ken Jowitt. 1992. *The New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

[77] Woodruff, 1998.

In the end, however, President Sovmen proved as powerless against the entrenched networks of local bureaucrats and their federal patrons as the Generals Rutskoi, Lebed, Shamanov, and Gromov who became governors of Russian provinces on the reputation of military heroes. These examples suggest that the troubles of Kanokov are part of a more general pattern observed across post-communist Russia.[78]

In sum, we see a triangular gridlock in the power field of the KBR and a potential revolutionary situation without any revolutionary outcome. The sides of the triangle are the three forces of different formation, each with its own social habitus and repertoire of strategies. These are the nomenklatura of the late Soviet 1980s, the businessmen (or perhaps better called violent entrepreneurs) of the 1990s, and the Islamic insurgents of the 2000s. They represent not only different social classes but also different epochs in recent history, which makes the prospect of any negotiated settlement highly improbable. Hence the ongoing warfare by death squads, official or not. In another nasty paradox, all three forces are too weak and isolated politically to afford competing by less lethal means. None of the contenders can hope to safely inscribe their political gains and bargains in a sufficiently strong and durable structure due to the dearth of such structures in a paralyzed state.[79] The condition thus becomes self-perpetuating.[80] Such a structure presumably could be imposed by an outside force possessing sufficient commitment and resources to see the North Caucasus rebound from the crumbling fringes of the world-system. Moscow is, of course, the nearest most interested party. Putin's Moscow is rich in traditional despotic power and, at the moment, energy export earnings. But does it have the modern infrastructural power[81] to prevent its own periphery from sliding into the troubles of the post-colonial world? The experience of independent Africa[82] and increasingly also the Middle East shows that states hollowed by decades of clientilism, corruption, and infighting can disintegrate suddenly and disastrously, giving way to warlords. These are really the two prospects in our murky times when revolutions, even if they happen, tend to founder instead of creating new stronger states.

[78] Nikolai Petrov and Alexei Titkov, eds. 2010. *Vlast–biznes-obschestvo v regionakh: nepravil'nyi treugol'nik.* Moscow: Carnegie Center.

[79] Arthur Stinchcombe. 1999. "Ending Revolutions and Building New Governments," *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, pp. 49-73.

[80] Georgi Derluguian and Timothy Earle. 2010. "Strong Chieftaincies Out of Weak States, or Elemental Power Unbound", *Comparative Social Research*, Volume 27, 27–51.

[81] Mann, 1987.

[82] Will Reno. 2001. *Warfare in Independent Africa*. New York: Cambridge University Press.