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Dagestan - An Ethnic "Powder Keg" on the Caspian Sea

On the Ethnic Structure and Dynamics of Dagestan

The Balkans and the Caucasus are frequently compared with one another. Both regions are characterized by an unusually rich variety of peoples, "fragments" of peoples and languages, by ethnic conglomerations that resemble patchwork rugs and by great cultural differences - all of this in a very limited geographic space. With the collapse and demise of the two "socialist" federations, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, another common feature of the two regions - tragic and "pathological" in character - has impressed itself painfully and deeply on the political consciousness of the people of the world: outbreaks of violence between the ethnic groups, blockades, war, expulsion, and genocide. In former Yugoslavia these events have taken a "serial" course because it has been largely a single actor - the political leadership of Serbia - that has dedicated itself to the idea of a chauvinistic policy of power and expansion. Of course, a dominant actor is not lacking in the Caucasus either, but Russia, although it may be more or less heavily involved in the ongoing conflicts - Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, Ingushetia, South Ossetia, Chechnya - is no longer pursuing an expansionist policy in the Caucasus but, rather, struggling to maintain possessions that are in a process of gradual disintegration. The outbreaks of violence between ethnic groups in the Northern Caucasus have turned into a wildfire since early 1999 when the attempt, for the first time, to elect a head of government democratically in the Republic of Karachaevo-Cherkessia caused the losing side, the Cherkessians, to resort to force, with the result that - as in the case of the Chechens and Ingush in 1991/92 - the fault line of yet another of Russia's "hyphenated republics" was seriously affected.

While the continually escalating conflict between the Karachais and the Cherkessians has been (and is still being!) largely overlooked by the international public, Dagestan, which lies at the eastern end of the Northern Caucasian crisis curve, hit the front pages of the world press overnight when the islamistic Chechen field commanders, Khattab and Basaev, acting independently, marched into this most southerly Russian republic with their combat units during the first days of August 1999. They occupied parts of the mountainous districts of Botlikh and Tsumada, formally declared themselves the "Shura of Dagestan" (i.e. its Islamic leadership organ) and put out a "declaration on the restoration of the Islamic State of Dagestan", to which Chechnya was also to belong. Driven back after a few days by the Russian military, they penetrated in early September, with considerably stronger forces, into

the districts of Novolakskoe, Khasavyurt and Kizlyar on the northern border and also became militarily active in central Dagestan, in a number of Islamic Jamaats south of the old capital city of Buynaksk.

Under these circumstances it might seem obvious to attribute the danger in which Dagestan lies simply to the smouldering problems in Chechnya, but this would be a fundamental misreading of the situation. Even without the dramatic events of recent weeks, the Republic of Dagestan, which borders Chechnya on the east and south-east and is stretched out along the Caspian Sea, has long been regarded as a region greatly threatened by inter-ethnic strife, collapse of public order, disintegration into local power centres, war and chaos.¹ In many respects - ethno-political, socio-economic, mental/cultural, religious and, not least, geo-political - conditions are depressingly ripe, for in all of these dimensions a dangerous conflict potential has been developing. The international public, understandably focused on Chechnya as a dangerous source of unrest since the war of 1994-1996, has not paid attention to the worsening crisis in Dagestan.

There is no end in sight for this depressing development in the Northern Caucasus. The reason is clear. We are obviously witnessing a symmetrical process of nations and ethnic groups being pulled apart, aggravated and hastened by the socio-economic decline of the region and by the political/administrative weakness of the central (federal) government. Indeed, since the collapse of the Soviet Union began all of these details, along with their inherent tendency towards bloody confrontations, have been familiar to specialists, politicians and international organizations - and not just a general outline. Hence we must face the question why the international community, and the OSCE in particular, has not gone beyond its involvement in an already burning Chechnya (February 1995)² and established "missions" at an early point in the other Republics of the Northern Caucasus that belong to Russia - above all in the particularly endangered Dagestan. Does not Dagestan's transformation into an "ethnic powder keg", as described below, fit particularly well the criteria associated with an OSCE long-term mission, namely to be an organ for early warning of "hot" conflicts and an instrument of preventive diplo-

1 Cf. Uwe Halbach, Rußlands schwächstes Glied. Die Republik Dagestan wird zum Notstandsgebiet [Russia's Weakest Link. The Republic of Dagestan Turns into a Crisis Area], in: Bundesinstitut für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien, Aktuelle Analysen [Federal Institute for Russian, East European and International Studies, Current Analyses] 53/1997.

2 For a detailed account, see: Ursel Schlichting, Das Engagement der OSZE in Tschetschenien [The OSCE's Involvement in Chechnya], in: Institut für Friedensforschung und Sicherheitspolitik an der Universität Hamburg [Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg]/IFSH (Ed.), OSZE-Jahrbuch [OSCE Yearbook] 1995, Baden-Baden 1995, pp. 211-220; Tim Guldemann, Supporting the Doves against the Hawks. Experiences of the OSCE Assistance Group in Chechnya, in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (Ed.), OSCE Yearbook 1997, Baden-Baden 1998, pp. 135-143; and Odd Gunnar Skagestad, Keeping Hope Alive, in the present volume, pp. 211-223.

macy and, in extreme cases, to engage in crisis management and the peaceful settlement of disputes?

Without wishing to diminish the mediation work done in Chechnya by the "OSCE Assistance Group" and its Heads, István Gyarmati, Tim Guldimann and Odd Gunnar Skagestad, we can be permitted to express the opinion that an OSCE commitment there *before* the outbreak of war might have offered a chance for greater success, i.e. the maintenance of a fragile peace. Ought we not to have drawn the conclusion that it was important now to be present "on time", at least in the endangered neighbouring republics, and especially in Dagestan, so as to let the mechanisms of preventive diplomacy have their effect? It appears that there was no initiative along those lines. Of course it would not have been easy to extract from Russia the necessary agreement for establishment of OSCE long-term missions in the crisis areas of the Northern Caucasus, but attempts to do so would not have been condemned *a priori* to failure. It is true that the high cost of this kind of expansion in OSCE involvement in the Caucasus would have been a big obstacle. But this kind of thinking could be countered with the argument that escalation of these conflicts into civil war and genocide will in the end be far more expensive for the countries of the world.

Is it too late to set up OSCE missions in the countries of the Karachais and Cherkessians, of the Kabardins and the Balkars, of the North Ossetians and, of course, in Dagestan? The fact that all of the international assistance organizations hitherto active in the Northern Caucasus (MSF, UNHCR, ICRC) discontinued their operations in July 1999 would seem to point to this conclusion.

Nevertheless, the OSCE should undertake just such an initiative. A look at the "landscape of conflict" in Dagestan, if one reads between the lines, will make clear that especially this republic, independently of the Chechnya factor, urgently requires the establishment of an OSCE long-term mission.

Factors Causing and Aggravating Conflict in Today's Dagestan

General Initial Position

There is no other region in the Caucasus - perhaps not in the entire world, as is occasionally claimed - where such great ethnic and linguistic variety exists on such a small territory and in such a small population (today: ca. 2.2 million, without refugees) as in Dagestan. In addition to ca. 30 ethnic groups with independent languages that must in part be classified as descending from totally different roots - Indo-European, Turkic and Caucasian - over 70 dialects have been identified.³ To be sure, only a half dozen or so of these

3 For general information on Dagestan, see: Roland Götz/Uwe Halbach, Politisches Lexikon Rußland [A Political Lexicon of Russia], Munich 1994, pp. 115-127; Christian

peoples succeeded in the course of history in creating reasonably stable feudal power structures and they, following Dagestan's incorporation into the Russian empire, served as the basis for administrative structures.⁴ The peoples with larger populations, in addition to so-called "free societies" or territorial communities, had feudal power structures which always included at least small quantities of other ethnic groups. Numerically strongest were the Avars. But socially and politically speaking, the Kumyks had an outstanding position because they lived in the richer valleys and coastal areas and because their language was the regional *lingua franca* (during the Soviet period Russia took over this role).⁵

Dagestan's relief, to a considerable extent mountainous and deeply fissured, in earlier times favoured rather peaceful relations among the mountain people (*gortsi*) themselves because they were largely separated from one another and there was not much contact and between the mountain people and the valley dwellers. Thus the ethnic borders of settlements remained for the most part stable, even after the great Caucasus War (1828-1864) had badly decimated the population as a result of the genocide by Russian generals during the war. Today, after the demise of the USSR and as a part of the association of states that constitute the Russian Federation, the 14 peoples of Dagestan recognized under state law have the following relationship to one another in terms of population size (approximate figures): Avars (28 per cent), Dargins (16 per cent), Kumyks (13 per cent), Lezgins (twelve per cent), Laks (five per cent), Tabasarans (five per cent), Azeri (4.2 per cent), Chechens (five per cent), Nogai (two per cent) and the Aguls, Rutuls, Tats and Tsakhurs taken together (three per cent).⁶ The share of Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians (in short, of the Slavs) now only amounts to about six per cent (1999).⁷

Historical experience tells us that a community such as Dagestan, made up of many languages and culturally differing ethnic groups, is much more suscep-

Neef, *Der Kaukasus, Rußlands offene Wunde* [The Caucasus, Russia's Open Wound], Berlin 1997, pp. 21-32; Uwe Halbach/Andreas Kappeler (Ed.), *Krisenherd Kaukasus* [The Caucasus - Focal Point of Crisis], Baden-Baden 1995. Dagestan has about the same area as Lower Saxony, Denmark or Holland.

4 Cf. Andreas Kappeler, *Rußland als Vielvölkerreich. Entstehung, Geschichte, Zerfall* [Russia as a Multi-Ethnic Empire. Origins, History, Collapse], Munich 1992, pp. 149ff.; *Svod zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii*, tom 1yi, St.-Peterburg 1913, pp. 149f.

5 Cf. Junus Junusovich Junusov, *Dagestanskaya ASSR - Sovetskoe sotsialisticheskoe gosudarstvo*, Makhachkala 1970, pp. 59ff. In 1923 the regional party committee of Dagestan formally elevated the Kumyk (Turkic) language to be the language of administration, but in the summer of 1928 there followed already another completely new arrangement: at village and district level the languages of the (dominant) ethnic groups were to prevail, at the level of the republic it would be Russian. At the same time the Latin alphabet was introduced (in place of Arabic) and it in turn was replaced in 1938 by Cyrillic (Russian).

6 Cf. Ilya Maksakov, *Problemi Dagestana razreshimi*, in: *Nezavisimaya gazeta* of 19 September 1997, p. 3; and, on the status as of 1 January 1999, Magomed-Zagid Varisov, *Elektoral'nye nastroyeniya v Dagestanye*, in: *Nezavisimaya gazeta* of 9 July 1999, p. 4.

7 The percentage share of "Russians" in Dagestan has been sinking steadily since the census of 1959 (20 per cent) - to twelve per cent in 1979 and 7.5 per cent in 1996; since the emigration is continuing we can expect that in a few years the share will once again have been halved.

tible to hostilities, disputes and discord than is a society which is more or less homogeneous. This seems to apply especially to the current phase of world history in which the ethno-national principle of state-building, influenced by the experienced or at least declared principles of democracy, universal suffrage and majority rule, along with an unbridled expansion of the electronic media operating in national languages and expressing a one-sided national/cultural point of view, is completing its triumphal march which began with the French Revolution. For the everyday conflicts that develop inevitably in all groups of human beings and in all societies - whether political, economic, social or otherwise in origin - tend, in multi-ethnic societies, to take on an ethnic colouration and hence risk being perceived and evaluated primarily from this point of view, leading to inter-ethnic disputes which sometimes escalate to the level of violence.

The conflict potential in post-Soviet Dagestan is determined by three factors, i.e.:

1. by the loss of certain stabilizing mechanisms in the Soviet system of rule;
2. by general social destabilization and heightening of tensions;
3. by processes of inter-ethnic disintegration, fragmentation and segregation.

The Loss of Soviet Stabilizing Mechanisms

Dagestan was especially affected by the demise of the USSR because the structures of the Soviet state tended to stabilize administrative districts that were fragmented for ethnic reasons. This resulted, first, from politico-economic centralism under which even relatively insignificant issues were decided in Moscow; second, from the socio-economic support provided to this structurally weak republic; and, third, from the proportional representation of nationalities and ethnic groups applied to the building of the Soviets⁸ and to cadre policy in the administration and the party. This meant that many controversial issues were taken away from competing local interest groups. As a consequence, none of the nationalities of Dagestan was able to assume a dominant position. And there was another factor that worked to lessen and contain conflicts, namely the fact that the Caucasus *as a whole* was incorporated into the Soviet state, that the borders between the Union republics of the Trans-Caucasus and the "Autonomous" Republics of the Northern Caucasus were only of an administrative nature and did little to interfere with the freedom of movement of Soviet citizens.

8 On this, see: Junusov, cited above (Note 5), p. 103: Of the 178 representatives elected on 12 March 1967 to the Supreme Soviet of the Dagestan ASSR, 46 were Avars, 28 Kumyks, 21 Lezgins, ten Laks, twelve representatives of the peoples with smaller populations in Dagestan; in addition there were 25 Great Russians, five Ukrainians, five Azerbaijani, three Chechens, one Ossetian and one Mordvin.

The rise of the Union republics to the status of sovereign states with all the attributes of subjects of international law destroyed the administrative unity of the Caucasus. Divisive borders - political, legal, economic and customs-related in nature - arose and the result was a separation of the Northern Caucasus, and hence of Dagestan, from the Trans-Caucasus in a form without historic parallel - a development which is particularly injurious to the Lezgins who also live in Azerbaijan.

The change in Dagestan's status - its elevation to the position of a constituent state within a federation - was hardly less consequential. It is true the "Russian Federation" still has central power over Dagestan, but there are fundamental differences compared with the former political-administrative relationship between the Central Committee of the CPSU and the Council of Ministers of the USSR, on the one hand, and the organs of the Dagestan ASSR on the other.

When the CPSU ceased to exist as the most important political and administrative force uniting the USSR, the regional political elite, including that of Dagestan, lost a sovereign, superordinate command centre; they were left to deal with the internal development of the republic under their own authority and responsibility. Admittedly these are limited factually (e.g. the police, the fight against crime, raising taxes) and functionally (e.g. administration of justice) by the competences of the Russian Federation but these limits exclude a key area of political responsibility, namely the sovereign right to appoint personnel to the constitutional organs and regional administrative authorities; moreover, Russia's new federal centre is financially and economically - and hence also politically and administratively - so weak that it is hardly able to exercise its prerogatives and competences.

Economic Decline

Even during the Soviet period Dagestan was one of the most weakly developed regions of the RSFSR. With its mountainous territory, the country was not attractive to big investors. The collapse of the centrally administered economy along with its core, the military-industrial complex (which in Dagestan accounted for 80 per cent of the industrial complex),⁹ introduced a decline that was further accelerated in the mid-nineties - with shrinkage in two-digit percentages - by the war in Chechnya and the related economic blockade.¹⁰ The work of many plants came to a stop as a result of conversion

9 Cf. Vitali Eremin, Rukovoditel' vulkana, in: Rossiiskaya federatsia 8/1997, pp. 25-28, here: p. 26; Interview with the Minister for Nationalities and Foreign Affairs of Dagestan, Magomedsalikh Gusaev, in: Nezavisimaya gazeta of 12 May 1998, p. 5.

10 On this see Magomedkhan Magomedkhanov in: Nezavisimaya gazeta of 1 July 1996, p. 3; according to the various parameters on industrial production, Dagestan is located in the bottom group of Russian regions. Cf. Roland Götz, Rußlands regionale Industrie im Jahre 1998 [Russia's Regional Industry in 1998], in: Bundesinstitut für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien, Aktuelle Analysen [Federal Institute for Russian, Eastern Euro-

measures and the reduction or loss of federal subsidies and, in addition, the interruption in 1990/91 of the vital north-south transportation links through Chechnya to Azerbaijan. The unemployment rate, always a problem in Dagestan, has long been said to be the highest in the Russian Federation; in industrial cities it has climbed as high as 90 per cent (Kaspiisk, for example) and in the countryside over 60 per cent when for a variety of reasons some of the traditional canning factories, fish processing and wine growing operations lost their former markets and had to close down.¹¹

Hopes of the government of Dagestan that the Federation would alleviate this misery with strong financial assistance and the promotion of certain infrastructural measures have thus far not been realized. Neither the (open water) harbour of Makhachkala nor the republic's airport were developed into international transportation centres, the planned "free economic zones" were not established, and the goods traffic and transit trade to Azerbaijan, far from being favourable to economic progress, was not even organized in a minimally satisfactory way.

Although Dagestan's budget is 85 per cent dependent on the federal budget of Russia, Dagestan for years has often got no more in real terms than (at the most) half of what was calculated in the federal budget.¹²

Chechnya - A Manifold Destabilizing Factor

1. Territorial Conflicts - The Akkinian Problem

The most varied and dangerous destabilizing effects for Dagestan stem from the continuing conflicts in and around Chechnya. Historically, these neighbouring regions, which ethnically and culturally spill over into each other, have always been very closely linked - closest, perhaps, in the long decades of common resistance under their Islamic leader, the Imam Shamil, who quickly became a legend. against the annexation of the Caucuses into the Russian empire.¹³

Not only has the Chechnya war caused great economic suffering in Dagestan but the Republic, from time to time at least, has been a place of refuge for about 200,000 refugees - Russians, Nogai and also Chechens -¹⁴ causing the

pean and International Studies, Current Analyses] 5/1999, pp. 4/5; on conversion in Dagestan see Milrad Fatullaev, Zhizn' posle zhizni, in: NG-Regiony 2/1999, p. 13.

- 11 Officially, a figure of 30 per cent unemployment was mentioned for 1998 (cf. Nezavisimaya gazeta of 12 May 1998, p. 5); this would appear to point to a *real* rate of 60-70 per cent.
- 12 Cf. Interview with the Chairman of Dagestan's State Council, Magomedali Magomedov, in: Nezavisimaya gazeta of 11 February 1997, p. 3.
- 13 Cf. Uwe Halbach, "Heiliger Krieg" gegen den Zarismus ["Holy War" against Tsarism], in: Andreas Kappeler/Gerhard Simon/Georg Brunner (Ed.), Die Muslime in der Sowjetunion und in Jugoslawien [The Muslims in the Soviet Union and in Yugoslavia], Cologne 1989, pp. 213-234.
- 14 Cf. Rossiiskaya federatsia 8/1997, pp. 25-28, p. 27. For a detailed account of the refugee problem: Uwe Halbach, Migration, Vertreibung und Flucht im Kaukasus. Ein europäi-

population of Dagestan to grow quickly to about 2.3 million, with all of the additional burdens that naturally result from such a development. About 70,000 Chechen refugees have been taken in by relatives and acquaintances in the area close to the border, especially in the districts of Novolakscoe (formerly Aukh) and Khasavyurt, in the process disturbing deeply the inter-ethnic balance in these areas, which was already fragile, and creating a permanent source of virulent conflicts.

Moreover, there are unhealed historic wounds. The district of Khasavyurt, until the Dagestan ASSR was created in 1920/21, belonged to the administrative district of the Terek area and thus, roughly speaking, to Chechnya. Traditionally, it had been settled by the Chechen tribe of Akkins and by Kumyks. And the district of Aukh, immediately to the south, was almost exclusively settled by the Akkins. In 1944, when the Chechens were deported to Kazakhstan and Central Asia for alleged collaboration with the German *Wehrmacht* and the Autonomous Republic of the Chechens and Ingush was dissolved, these measures were extended to include the Akkins of the districts of Khasavyurt and Aukh; Kumyks, Avars and particularly Laks were forcibly settled in the latter and it was renamed the Novolakskii district. After Stalin's death, these expulsion measures would turn out to be "time bombs".

Rehabilitated after the XX. Congress of the CPSU (1956), the Akkins, too, returned in group after group and as a consequence of perestroika there was an even bigger return of Chechens.¹⁵ Just how dangerous the ethnic tensions had become could be seen in 1997 in the elections for the administrative chief of the city council of Khasavyurt. There were armed disturbances and grenade launchers were used against prominent leaders of ethnic groups.¹⁶

2. Open Borders and Attacks; Taking of Hostages

One of the main reason why the "Chechnya factor" has such a powerful destabilizing effect is precisely because the border between Chechnya and Dagestan is *de facto* open. Difficulties start with the fact that the legal status

sches Problem [Migration, Expulsion and Flight in the Caucasus. A European Problem], Berichte des Bundesinstituts für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien [Reports of the Federal Institute for Russian, East European and International Studies] 13/1999, pp. 12ff.

- 15 Cf. Igor' Rotar', Chei Dagestan?, in: Izvestia of 26 January 1996, p. 2. As early as the sixties there were serious conflicts. Evidence of this is the decision of the Supreme Soviet of the Dagestan ASSR of 29 November 1967 "On the work of the Executive Committee of the Soviets of workers' delegates from the city and district of Khasavyurt concerning the organization of work and arranging provisions for persons returning from banishment". Cf. Junusov, cited above (Note 5), p. 124.
- 16 Cf. Igor' Rotar', Protivostoyanie v Khasavyurte, in: Nezavisimaya gazeta of 23 April 1997, p. 3; Vadim Il'in, Krisis vlasti v Khasavyurte, in: Nezavisimaya gazeta of 13 May 1997, p. 3. In the city of Khasavyurt the Chechens and Kumyks constitute about 60 per cent of the population, each group being about equally large; in the district of Khasavyurt as a whole, however, the Avars dominate.

of the border is unclear.¹⁷ Because Moscow has up to now refused to recognize the "Chechen Republic of Ichkerya" under international law, the border (also) with Dagestan is nothing more than an "administrative border". Chechnya, however, is "internal foreign territory" (Halbach) and, viewed in terms of *realpolitik*, more thoroughly separated from Russia today than from any former Union republic and present day neighbouring state.

The extreme permeability of the Chechnya-Dagestan border has turned the border districts of Dagestan into a favourable area for operations undertaken for various reasons - political, military and economic - by diverse Chechen groups, and the reverse holds true, although to a much smaller extent, for actors from Dagestan.¹⁸ In recent years, as desperation resulting from the wrecked economy has grown in Chechnya, villages and settlements in Dagestan near the border have been regularly attacked by bands of robbers from Chechnya. Even the Dagestani Chechens, the Akkins, have been affected. The Baku-Novorossiisk oil pipeline, which goes through the Novolakskii district, has also become the object of attacks.

Far more serious are the abductions of Dagestani or of persons who come from other parts of the Federation - private people and state officials, from militiamen to a presidential representative - who are taken to Chechen territory and held for ransom.

Hostage taking has become a daily occurrence. In 1997 the Federal Interior Ministry recorded 1,140 cases of abduction and hostage taking, in 1998 the figure was 1,415;¹⁹ and in the Interior Ministry of Dagestan a "kidnapping division" has been established.²⁰ It is an open secret that the opposition to President Maskhadov, organized by the field commanders Shamil Basaev and Salman Raduev, carry out such abductions in order to finance their organizations and activities; for lack of other sources of income, kidnapping has become a "source of employment".²¹ Actions of this kind are, of course, anything but popular in Dagestan but so far they have not led to any broadly based, supra-national, anti-Chechen solidarity on the part of the border population in Dagestan; indeed, such a development is rather unlikely.

17 Cf. Uwe Halbach, Rußlands weiche Grenzen, Teil II: Der Grenzraum und die Binnengrenzen der Föderation [Russia's Soft Borders, Part II: The Border Area and the Internal Borders of the Federation], in: Bundesinstitut für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien, Aktuelle Analysen [Federal Institute for Russian, East European and International Studies, Current Analyses] 14/1997, p. 3.

18 Every day about 2,000 vehicles and ten to fifteen thousand people travel from Chechnya into Dagestan. Cf. Moskovskie novosti 47/1997, p. 10.

19 Cf. Izvestia of 14 May 1999, p. 2; see also the figures in Nezavisimaya gazeta of 24 October 1997, p. 3.

20 Cf. Nezavisimaya gazeta of 19 June 1999, pp. 1/5.

21 On this, cf. Uwe Halbach, Die Tschetschenische Republik Itscherja 1998 [The Chechen Republic of Ichkerya 1998], in: Bundesinstitut für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien, Aktuelle Analysen [Federal Institute for Russian, East European and International Studies, Current Analyses] 49/1998, pp. 2ff.

3. Armed "Commando Raids"

Recently, political forces in Chechnya, partially in co-operation with sympathetic Dagestani groups, have focused their efforts on installing television stations on both sides of the border. These are to broadcast propaganda which is massively anti-Russian and simultaneously militantly Islamic as well as emphasizing the points in common between Chechens and Dagestani in the hope of indoctrinating the youth of Dagestan, who are especially hard hit by unemployment, and winning their support for joint political, and if necessary, armed action.²²

That Chechen commandos are quite capable of action in the interior of Dagestan, far from the border, was demonstrated in December 1997 by a militarily prepared night attack on a military installation - once Tsarist, then Soviet, now Federal - of the 135th Motorized Infantry Brigade not far from the historic capital of Buynaksk which led to a two hour battle. Just how powerless the federal and Dagestani security forces are in the face of Chechen commando actions can be seen from attacks carried out simultaneously by the latter in June 1999 in the Stavropol region and in Dagestan, some of them very far away from their bases in Chechnya.²³ They showed that the measures ordered by Sergei Stepashin at the end of April 1999 (border closure, blockade, "focused attacks", etc.) were largely hot air and it was thus a particular irony that Stepashin, on the occasion of his official visit in Dagestan, was in serious danger of being the target of terrorist actions (which, however, were discovered in time). Now a great deal of pressure must be mounting to come to a decision on the still pending border question - including its course between Chechnya and Dagestan - both with regard to its status and the kind of security to be provided.²⁴

Organized Crime

A destabilizing factor closely associated with Chechnya is organized crime, which takes many forms. The catastrophic condition of the economy, the flows of migration into and out of the Republic of Dagestan, the exposed situation of the republic right next to the geo-political epicentre of the Caspian Basin and the Trans-Caucasus, the open border to a Chechnya which is for practical purposes independent, the impression - which has grown over the years - that no help can be expected from Moscow and that Dagestan must in the end depend on its own resources - all of these things create highly

22 Cf. Dmitri Nikolaev, Razvedka boem, in: Nezavisimaya gazeta of 4 June 1999, pp. 1/5.

23 See, *inter alia*, Kommersant of 3 June and 19 June 1999, pp. 2 and 1, which surmises that these actions constitute a kind of "final examination" for fighters trained in the camp of the "Jordanian" field commander Khattab - including, supposedly, Russians, Ukrainians, etc. This supposition is based on the observation that the attacks were carried out with a certain regularity.

24 Cf. Magomed-Zagid Varisov, Chechnyu neobkhodimo izolirovat', in: Nezavisimaya gazeta of 20 January 1999, p. 5.

favourable conditions for those who seek economic gain and financial success at any price, regardless of the law and free of moral scruples. Dagestan also offers them an especially fertile ground because the poor living conditions have always nourished the temptation to seek improvement in criminal activity and because the large number of ethnic groups crowded together in a small area promote organized, illegal methods of self-assertion.

In recent years the federal government in Moscow has been increasingly concerned about how rapidly law and order in Dagestan deteriorated, especially in 1997/98 after the end of the Chechnya war - to the point that the stability of the republic appeared to be in danger, particularly because subversive influence of Chechnya was becoming more and more noticeable. But there is much evidence that the measures introduced in summer of 1998 against organized crime were to a large degree motivated politically by the desire to get rid of the opponents of the republic's leadership surrounding Magomedali Magomedov²⁵ and to ensure that in the parliamentary elections set for March 1999 they would not get a mandate. It is a widespread phenomenon in Russia and the CIS that members of criminal gangs seek parliamentary mandates for the sake of attaining parliamentary immunity and this is also the case in Dagestan. Of the 121 members of the People's Assembly during the legislative period that ended in 1999, no fewer than 35 had a criminal record.²⁶

The "Re-Islamization" Factor: a Cause for Insecurity

Closely linked to developments in Chechnya and in the entire Northern Caucasus is the growing strength of Islam in the public life of Dagestan, especially the appearance of radical currents and doctrines with a high level of politicization which finds expression, not least, in a sharp rejection by Russia, its former role and its present position in the Caucasus. Ever since Chechnya, under pressure from radical forces, declared itself to be an Islamic Republic and as the most visible sign of this step made the Sharia the basis of its legal system, Chechen "missionary efforts" in Dagestan have been on the increase. It is particularly difficult to evaluate the situation with regard to religion because a variety of factors and developments intersect. First, there was the religious renaissance in the late Soviet period which took on further strength with the granting of religious tolerance under perestroika. For the entire Northern Caucasus this meant that the "parallel" Islam²⁷ which had continued to exist there for decades in the informality of ethnic clan associations (*teip*) -

25 See, for example: *ibid.*

26 Cf. Milrad Fatullaev, V Dagestane prodolzhayutsya aresti, in: *Nezavisimaya gazeta* of 12 November 1998, p. 5.

27 This expression had come into common use during the Soviet period to take account of the various groups, mullahs, Sufi-associations, etc. which existed parallel to the religious centres tolerated by the one-party state, specifically the "Muslim Religious Board of Dagestan" (Buynaksk). An informative source is the brief survey by Alexander Iskanderjan, *Der islamische Radikalismus im Nordkaukasus* [Islamic Radicalism in the Northern Caucasus], in: *Wostok* 6/1998, pp. 20-22.

which had always remained intact - could once again go public without fear and, as a consequence, put down new roots. Second, there was a reawakening and revitalization of national ideals, linked in many ways with the religious dimension but independent and quite different from it. Third, there was the rediscovery of their own pre-Communist history - of the spiritual and cultural traditions of Dagestan which had for so long been buried and suppressed and distorted by the Soviet state. Fourth, there were the foreign influences which were now - because of the collapse of the USSR - suddenly able to pour into the country without hindrance and whose attraction was great because the people had so long been cut off from them.

Contrary to a tendency towards oversimplification and political dramatization that is often encountered, especially in the central media of Russia, the picture we see of Islam in post-Communist Dagestan is in fact a very unclear one. To interpret it as a "fundamentalist danger" is not only a distortion of reality but must in the final analysis be called perverse. It is a fact, however, that the situation of "organized" Islam, looked at numerically, has changed a great deal in the past decade. In 1988 there remained only 27 mosques in Dagestan, along with their related associations, registered by the state and controlled by the Muslim Religious Board in Buynaksk; by the end of 1996 there were 1,670 of them and in 1998 almost 2,000! In addition there were ten Islamic universities and seven "Islamic Centres".²⁸

As things now stand, it is relatively easy to answer the question of which currents or tendencies predominating in today's Islam have been or are likely to be adopted by the people: this is the Sunni tradition, historically rooted in the various ethnic groups of Dagestan. Since the beginning it has been very closely linked with the so-called "people's Islam" - with the honouring of saints, experiencing miracles, the worship of holy places, etc., and widespread Sufism provided sufficient room for co-existence with the local customary law (*adat*) widely followed by the tribes and village communities of the mountain people in the Caucasus.

At various times, however, completely different tendencies have made themselves felt in Islam, those focused on the "real" teachings of the Prophet and on the maintenance of their purity - often with a strikingly political character. This has been the case in Dagestan as well, in the form of Muridism, an Islamic doctrine which the legendary Imam Shamil - an Avar - forced upon the tribes of Dagestan in the twenties and thirties of the nineteenth century and then used as his most important spiritual weapon in resisting and fighting Russia when it was conquering the Caucasus. It is this other strain of Islam, specifically linked to the anti-colonial resistance of the peoples of Dagestan and Chechnya against Russia, which since the end of the USSR has been gaining strength in the Northern Caucasus. Today there are radical Chechen groups that have also written "liberation of Dagestan" on their banners and

28 Cf. Eremin, cited above (Note 9), p. 28; Interview with the Mufti of Dagestan, Abubakarov, in: *Literaturnaya gazeta* of 1 April 1998, p. 3.

want to unite both republics in a single independent Islamic state, with the Caspian Sea as its "Gateway to the World".²⁹ Their declared model is the Imam Shamil and the "Holy War" (*gazavat*) he declared against Russia.

The Russian press, along with the opponents of a politically radicalized Islam in the Northern Caucasus itself, call them Wahhabis, in accordance with the "puritanical" version of (Sunni) Islam that prevails in Saudi Arabia - perhaps because field commanders in the Chechen war, like the "Jordanian" Khattab, grew up in the Middle East as Wahhabis during the Chechen emigration/diaspora and returned to Chechnya in the early nineties to fight for the independence of their historic homeland, where they of course proselytized for their religious convictions and organized the fighting centres under their control along the lines of strict "Islamic communities".³⁰ There is no information available on just how many Jamaats of this kind exist in present-day Chechnya or on the extent to which they are controlled by the legitimate government of President Maskhadov.

In 1993/94 a number of Jamaats arose in Dagestan as well.³¹ As a result of the war in Chechnya and the wave of anti-Russian solidarity that has been caused by it, they have fallen firmly under the influence of the radical wing in Chechnya. Judging from the official reactions in Dagestan's capital of Makhachkala one would have to conclude that the Dagestani leadership is deeply concerned - that they view the situation as possibly being equivalent to the proverbial spark in a powder keg and are determined to act quickly against a process of Islamic/confessional party-building that runs counter to the ethnic peculiarities of the country.

Tendencies Towards Ethnic Fragmentation and Segregation

We must now turn our attention to the establishment of political "movements" among the individual ethnic groups which claim to represent them authentically.

29 One of the main representatives of this movement is the Chechen field commander and former Prime Minister, Shamil Basaev, along with the organization he leads, the "Congress of the Peoples of Chechnya and Dagestan".

30 Cf. Iskanderjan, cited above (Note 27), p. 21; also, Uwe Halbach, "Wahhabiten" im Kaukasus und Zentralasien. Religiöse Konflikte an der Südflanke Rußlands ["Wahhabis" in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Religious Conflicts on Russia's Southern Flank], in: Bundesinstitut für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien, Aktuelle Analysen [Federal Institute for Russian, East European and International Studies, Current Analyses] 19/1998, pp. 2ff. Because Wahhabi doctrine is strongly against Islamic mysticism and thus opposed to Sufism and the Naqshbandiyya that is related (although not always very clearly) to it, it also distances itself from Muridism because the approach of the latter is to follow the Sufi Tarikat. Even so there are similarities between them - emphasis on stern morality, for example, and, generally speaking, the obvious Puritanism of both movements, along with their equivocal striving for a "pure" Islam - so that the confusion or commingling of these two strains by outsiders is not entirely coincidental. It is noteworthy, in any case, that President Maskhadov also uses this form of expression. Proof can be found in Halbach, cited above (Note 21), pp. 5ff.

31 Cf. Interview with the Mufti of Dagestan, Abubakarov, cited above (Note 28).

1. Organization of the Ethnic Groups into Partially Militarized Movements

Among the earliest movements was the "Avar People's Movement" and the "People's Front Imam Shamil" linked to it. The "Union of Avar Jamaats" is an association of radical Islamic communities. Others that have become prominent are the Kumyk national movement "Tenglik", the "Kumyk National Congress", the Lak people's movement "Kasi-Kumukh", the Dargin national movement "Tsadesh", the Lezgin national movement "Sadval", the "All-national Congress of Lezgins" and the national movement of the Nogai, "Birlik". The peoples with a smaller populations have also produced movements.

In contrast to the political parties registered in Dagestan, the national movements have a certain foundation in their ethnic groups - we cannot, however, say how strong this is for lack of dependable figures.

In any event, their political importance does not depend directly on impressive figures showing mass support - none of them have that - but on other factors. The first is that they must have a leader who can get things done, has political experience and a position in the central power structure of the republic which provides not only access to but control over economic and financial resources. These facilitate the construction of an extensively broadening "downward" base of client relationships that thus provide a solid personnel base and reliable support to the "godfather" at the top of the ethno-social pyramid.

Gaji Makhachev, the leader of the Avar People's Movement, combines these elements in an almost ideal way. He is one of the bosses of the Russian-Dagestani oil business, also deputy Prime Minister and - naturally - a member of the People's Assembly, the latter for the purpose of providing parliamentary immunity in the event of possible actions against him by the central public prosecutor in Moscow.³²

There is another advantage of these people's movements which is organically related to the personality of the leader and whose importance can hardly be overestimated, especially in the Dagestan of today. At their organizational heart they represent ethnically homogeneous para-military associations, recruited largely from the great army of unemployed young men, and they give these people a real job to do. The morale of these "fighters" (Russian: *boeviki*), and often their weaponry as well, are generally superior to those of the state militia. In this republic, whose inhabitants have traditionally armed themselves but nowadays - following the (legal or illegal) dissolution for commercial purposes of innumerable Soviet arsenals and given the effects of the war in Chechnya - can be said, in the opinion of the Dagestani themselves,³³ to be armed to the teeth, the fighters in the people's movements can,

32 On Makhachev, see the interview in: *Nezavisimaya gazeta* of 28 November 1997, p. 3.

33 Cf. *NG-Stsenarii* 5/1998, p. 14.

depending on the circumstances, reach substantial numbers through the addition of more and more unemployed and sympathetic countrymen.

In May 1998 the whole world was able to convince itself of the importance and the effectiveness of the ethnic fighting groups. When militiamen in the capital, Makhachkala, surrounded the house of the leader of the Union of Russian Muslims, Nadirshakh Khachilaev, to arrest alleged suspects entrenched there, hundreds of his armed supporters along with those of his brother Magomed, the leader of the Lak people's movement, came together to assist the Khachilaevs. Under their leadership the *boeviki* then took advantage of the absence of the Chairman of the State Council, Magomedov, occupied the centre of the city, stormed government buildings and raised the green banner of the Prophet on the roof of the State Council.

These events showed how dangerous a relatively small national movement as that of the Laks - given their determined and authoritative leadership - is or can be in today's Dagestan; at the same time it demonstrated how unstable the domestic political situation in Dagestan is - as well as how insecure and vulnerable the central organs of the republic are.

2. *The Lezgin Irredentists*

The Lezgin ethnic group is another, completely independent, hotbed of political tensions, constant unrest and armed conflict. The Lezgin's situation became a problem at the start of the nineties when the border to Azerbaijan was transformed into a state border, thus dividing them. The "border policy" of the responsible people in Moscow and Makhachkala has reacted very uncertainly to the Lezgin's need for freedom of movement and has, on the whole, paid little attention to it. Then, in the course of the Chechnya war, the border to Azerbaijan was closed completely. Since that time the situation has improved only to a limited degree as no one in Moscow, Makhachkala or Baku takes an interest in it. In fact, both the federal government in Moscow and the ethno-oligarchic leadership clique currently holding power in Makhachkala - and, of course, Azerbaijan as well³⁴ - want to keep the Lezgin people's group split: Moscow because a unified Lezgistan would constitute an unpredictable and uncontrollable source of conflicts in the Southern Caucasus; Makhachkala because in the event of their territorial unification the Lezgins, with close to 500,000 people, would be almost as strong as the Avars and as a result would fundamentally change the ethno-political structure of Dagestan; and Baku because a united Lezgistan, as the leaders of the Sadval people's movement would have it, should leave Azerbaijan. One inevitable consequence would doubtless be that Dagestan becomes more and more auto-

34 When in 1996 bombs exploded in the "Metro" of Baku, the Azerbaijani authorities seized the occasion to prohibit the representatives of the Lezgin and Avar people's movements (altogether about 120 people) for the foreseeable future from entering Azerbaijan. Cf. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* of 1 July 1996, p. 3.

mous, which would presumably lead to its disintegration - with unforeseeable consequences for stability in the region as a whole.

Just how explosive the situation is in the south of Dagestan was demonstrated once again in July 1999 when activists of the Lezgin people's movement Sadval occupied the "Golden Bridge" on the border to Azerbaijan (so named because of its profitability) in protest against the arrest of their leader, Nasir Primov.³⁵

Factors in Conflict Containment, Promoting Stability and Strengthening Consensus

An Oligarchy of Ethnic Concordance

Aware of the mortal danger to domestic peace and the territorial unity of the republic, the Dagestani political elite, who in comparison to Soviet times had changed little structurally but had become increasingly heterogeneous on an ethno-political level, decided to continue in principle the system of ethnic proportional representation used under the Soviet system including both of its main elements: first with regard to the composition of the Parliament, second in the sense that certain ethnic groups would be given priority consideration in staffing some public offices and functional areas.

Along these lines, the post-Soviet constitution of 20 July 1994 stipulates that "in the People's Assembly the representation of all of the peoples of Dagestan is guaranteed", namely by the relevant provisions of the election law (Art. 72, Para. 2).³⁶ The election law of 1994, along with that of 1998 which for these purposes was unchanged, divides the electoral districts for the 121 seats up amongst the 14 strongest, officially recognized, ethnic groups in proportion to their size (headcount in accordance with the 1989 census) so that a good quarter go to the Avars, a good sixth to the Dargins, an eighth to the Kumyks, about a tenth to the Lezgins, a twelfth to the Russians, a twentieth to the Laks, etc.³⁷

The ethnic key to fill the positions of the State Council, which is the collective head of state and leading executive organ, is even more radical - i.e. formally equal: it is made up of 14 members, one representative from each ethnic group: Aguls, Avars, Azeri, Chechens, Dargins, Kumyks, Laks, Lezgins,

35 Cf. Ilya Maksakov, Aktsii protesta lezgin, in: *Nezavisimaya gazeta* of 22 July 1999, pp. 1/2. Primov was accused of having forcibly prevented the handing over or transfer to Azerbaijan of a Lezgin who was charged with carrying out the attack on the underground train in Baku in 1994. The Lezgin had been arrested in St. Petersburg and his transportation across Dagestani and Lezgin (!) territory was obviously part of a provocative scenario laid out by security authorities in Moscow.

36 Text of the Constitution: *Konstitutsii Respublik v sostave Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 1 izdanie Gosudarstvennoi Dumy 1995, pp. 37-62.

37 Cf. *Nezavisimaya gazeta* of 19 Sept. 1997, p. 3. For the most recent figures (summer 1999) see Varisov, cited above (Note 6).

Nogai, Russians, Rutuls, Tabasarans, Tats, Tsakhurs. The State Council is put together by the Constitutional Conference which is made up of 242 members selected on the principle of proportional ethnic representation³⁸ and convened by the People's Assembly.

Political developments of the last five years have in fact shown that the functioning of the system of proportional representation is increasingly precarious and that its legitimacy has been correspondingly weakened. The main reason for this is that the office of the Chairman of the State Council, by virtue of the political and administrative decision-making authority vested in it, has eroded the collegiality of the body and, furthermore, that the "government" headed by the Prime Minister, created by the State Council and responsible to it, is powerfully controlled by the Chairman in its day-to-day work; that the executive, under the direction of the Chairman of the State Council particularly through the local administrative leaders, can to a great extent influence the political composition of the Parliament; and, finally, that Magomedali Magomedov, who rose during the period of perestroika to become Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Autonomous Republic of Dagestan, by virtue of his long-standing control of the executive apparatus and through his shift to the Chairmanship of the State Council has succeeded in transforming his power position.

An additional instrument of conflict prevention and control is the traditional practice of dividing up important positions in the state and the economy - those that carry political, administrative, financial and economic power - amongst the ethnic groups at the central, middle, and lowest levels. Thus it has become a kind of rule to give responsible jobs in the energy sector by preference to members of the Avar ethnic group, those in the financial sector to Dargins. To be sure, this principle is applied mainly to the three largest ethnic groups; the smaller ones, on the other hand, are clearly under-represented in the leading positions of the state bureaucracy (ministries, state committees, etc.) and in state enterprises, and here, too, the Lezgins feel most strongly discriminated against.³⁹

Typical procedures for ethno-political conflict control can be seen in the following events: when the former Head of Parliament, Magomedov, overcame, in 1994, his strongest challenger, Magomed Tolboev, by getting elected to the Chairmanship of the State Council, he did not push him into the political trash can but made him Secretary of the Republic's Security Council - a position which Tolboev used to play a key role in 1996 as a mediator in the successful cease-fire talks of Khasavyurt between Aslan Maskhadov and Alexander Lebed which ended the Chechen war. Another example: When the Minister of Finance, Gamid Gamidov, a Dargin, was murdered in August 1996, leading to huge demonstrations and disturbances that were organized

38 Cf. *Nezavisimaya gazeta* of 11 February 1999, p. 5.

39 Cf. Mohammed-Arif Sadyki, *Detsentralisatsia ne est' separatizm*, in: *Nezavisimaya gazeta* of 24 July 1999, p. 5.

by his family and supporters, the dangerously aggravated situation was defused when the State Council quickly named Gamidov's brother as his successor.⁴⁰

Thus it can be seen that the Republic of Dagestan is governed by an oligarchic group made up of representatives of the three most important ethnic groups in the country who are politically more or less closely linked by virtue of their careers and long years of working together.

Under these circumstances it is hardly a sensational insight when Kazbek Sultanov, a Dagestan expert in the State Duma, observes that the real structure of the Republic's political system is dominated by the rivalry of ethnic clans working together, against each other, and in parallel, and that the country's leaders have so far focused their efforts almost exclusively on satisfying these clan interests through compromises, coalitions and consensus-building.⁴¹ Sultanov's ultimate judgement is negative, however; he concludes that this system has manoeuvred itself into a dead-end street and become unproductive because the strategy of holding on to power at all costs by maintaining the stability of the established power cartel - and retaining its personnel - while parasitically enjoying its advantages, stands in increasingly clear contradiction to the republic's dramatically worsening socio-economic problems. From the standpoint of modern, rational and effective governance this criticism appears convincing. However, Sultanov overlooks the positive accomplishments that an oligarchy of ethnic concordance brings to the inner strength and cohesiveness of the republic, especially in light of the catastrophic living conditions - a genuine crisis - that prevail. He completely fails to take into consideration that this system is deeply rooted in the history of Dagestan, that it existed in modified form even during the Soviet epoch and, for that reason, can count on broader agreement and support from the multi-ethnic population than any other alternatives. The criticisms of Sultanov and others can, however, certainly be taken as an indication that the existing consensus, supported not only by conviction but also by habit and passivity, is getting weaker and coming under pressure from several quarters - partly nationalist and partly radical Islamic forces. For the time being the system is withstanding the pressure for change. One of the main reasons for its resilience is doubtless the fact that Dagestan has been continuously ruled, and for practical purposes is still ruled, by a secularized, Soviet-Communist-socialized nomenclature which by virtue of its supra-national and pan-Soviet character is inwardly opposed to nationalism and religious zealotry and consequently tends to adopt more moderate political positions and has an easier time dealing with the search for inter-ethnic compromise. Hence what its critics hold against it constitutes in fact the strength of this system, namely its

40 Cf. Ilya Maksakov, Dagestan: Vzryvoopasnaya respublika, in: *Nezavisimaya gazeta* of 12 October 1996, p. 3.

41 Cf. His article: Dagestan, *Ispitanie naprochnost*, in: *NG-Regiony* 20/1998, pp. 9-10.

capacity for supra-ethnic integration and its ability to contain and neutralize socio-ethnic conflicts.

Other Stabilizing Factors

Among the factors that mitigate the political and socio-economic causes of conflict is the life style of the people who live in Dagestan, the high level of communality in their everyday culture, their unwritten customs and their habits of life. These are in part rooted very deeply in the indigenous "Caucasian" traditions of the mountain people, partly in the (popular) Islamic traditions of the country, and partly in those peculiarities of the Russian-Soviet way of life and ordinary culture that have been taken over. These common socio-cultural elements, which also contribute to the mentality of the people, are superimposed on the various ethnic-national forms of consciousness and represent a kind of politically relevant resource for the achievement of inter-ethnic balance and civil tranquillity in Dagestan.

Another closely related factor is the subsistence economy characteristic of the residents of Dagestan, especially those who live in the mountains - their ability to nourish themselves from whatever can be produced on their small plot of arable land. The living conditions which have always been frugal because of the unfavourable soil conditions make it easier for the people of Dagestan, under the particularly difficult present circumstances of a generally disintegrated industry, to make optimal use of the agrarian secondary economy - also very much alive during the Soviet epoch - to the advantage of the family and the clan and thus ensure their survival. The traditionally modest expectations of the mountain people and, indeed, the undemanding nature of the "Soviet man", constantly battered by supply crises, contribute to a psychological readiness to accept today's circumstances of poverty and shortages.

Concluding Remarks: on the Role of the Federal Centre

The political course which the federal centre, "Moscow", is following today with regard to the Republic of Dagestan and the role that it plays there are pale, blurred and unclear, on the one hand, and contradictory and inconsistent on the other. This is partly due to the peculiarities of the region itself. For Dagestan cannot be viewed in isolation - that has been confirmed by this study in practically every respect. Not only does the republic participate in the ethno-political conflicts, socio-economic difficulties, and the processes of cultural change going on in the "Russian" Northern Caucasus but in the political earthquake zone of the Caucasus in its entirety - one of the geo-political crossroads of the post-Soviet area. In view of the great domestic political instability in the three trans-Caucasian republics and of the many unsolved ethnic conflicts on their territories and taking into account the uncertainty and

divisiveness of the most important political groups and the main actors in Moscow with regard to Russia's political interests in the Caucasus region and, generally, with regard to its place and course in a world that is reshaping itself following the end of the East-West conflict, one can hardly expect a well-founded, consistent and convincing political concept for the region.⁴²

The National Security Concept of the Russian Federation of 17 December 1997⁴³ does, however, identify certain political, economic and military interests with respect to the Caucasus region such as: securing domestic tranquility, stability of state power, upholding the law, maintaining the unity of the area with regard to the economy and the law, fighting against separatism, securing the transportation lanes for gas and oil, securing state borders, defence against pan-Turkish schemes, keeping the US and NATO out of the region, use of peacekeeping military forces under an international mandate to settle conflicts, etc. It is still unclear, however, how these abstractly formulated objectives are to be achieved. According to what has been said, this gap is to be closed by the "Conception for the Policy of the Russian Federation in the Northern Caucasus". Work has been under way on it for a long time but its completion has repeatedly had to be postponed because the political views of those involved, even on matters of principle, are often quite different. Nonetheless, they had managed by March 1999 to complete a draft and send it to the federal government for adoption.⁴⁴ Quite apart from its content, however, it is safe to say that Dagestan will continue to be one of the lowest on the totem pole amongst the regions of Russia that are supposed to receive subsidies but, because of persistent shortages in the federal budget, will continue to go away with empty hands.

The low priority which the "centre" assigns to Dagestan can be seen in a narrower political context, i.e. in the elections to the State Duma. By virtue of its population Dagestan almost reaches the level of those subjects of the Federation with a claim to four direct mandates (out of 225 seats) so that it ought in any event to have three; however, it is assigned to the group of subjects with populations between one million (the Murmansk region) and 1.6 million (the Leningrad region) which are represented in the State Duma with two direct mandates - a flagrant violation of the principle of electoral equality.⁴⁵

Moscow's political relationship with Dagestan is completely overshadowed by the Chechnya conflict and the question of what strategy to pursue towards

42 For discussion of a sound Russian policy on the Northern Caucasus see the material in *Novoe Vremya* 50/1997, pp. 14-18; Sergei Shakhrai/Ramazan Abdulatipov, *Formula mira i stabil'nost'*, in: *Nezavisimaya gazeta* of 13 March 1996, p. 3; Ramazan Abdulatipov, *Die russische Nationalitätenpolitik im Kaukasus: Konzeptionelle Visionen* [Russian Nationalities Policy in the Caucasus: Conceptual Visions], in: *Wostok* 3/1998, pp. 20-23.

43 Text: *Sobranie Zakonodatel'stva Rossiiskoi Federatsii (SZRF)* 1997, No. 52, Pos. 5909.

44 On this see Ilya Maksakov, *Vopros o "ministerstve Kavkaza" sozrel*, in: *Nezavisimaya gazeta* of 9 April 1999, p. 5. See also the table of contents in: *Nezavisimaya gazeta* of 30 May 1998, p. 5.

45 Cf. Varisov, cited above (Note 6). It is uncertain whether this error will be corrected for the Duma elections in December 1999.

that renegade Republic. It is particularly difficult to find such a strategy because the conflict not only makes itself felt in the whole of the Northern Caucasus but broadly and in principle affects Russia's integrity as a federation; and so Russia wavers between spiteful determination to retain its territorial holdings and its weariness over a republic whose people are felt to be "like a cancerous tumour on the body of Russia" (Vladimir Zhirinovski).

The agreement of Khasavyurt (30 August 1996) which was worked out by General Lebed and Aslan Maskhadov - like the "peace treaty" concluded between President Yeltsin and Maskhadov on 12 May 1997 - only provides for an interim solution with the requirement that by 31 December 2001 an agreement on the foundations of mutual relations be concluded which would "be based on the generally recognized norms of international law". Ideas of the two sides about the nature and content of this fundamental treaty were at first very far apart. While Moscow was thinking of a treaty to define competences, similar to the one with the Republic of Tatarstan of 15 February 1994, Chechnya had in mind a treaty on good neighbourly relations and co-operation between the Chechen Republic of Ichkerya and the Russian Federation - a treaty "purely under international law" without any element of subjection.⁴⁶ For the time being the federal government is continuing to exclude the status question. At any rate, the draft concept of a Russian national policy for the Northern Caucasus, completed in March 1999, openly shifts the problem to the level of a socio-economic development strategy or a balancing of interests related thereto. In the meantime the view seems to be gaining strength that a legalized separation, including recognition of Chechnya, would in fact strengthen Russia.

There is no agreement about how to deal with Chechnya in the meantime. The federal security forces, especially the Ministry of the Interior, want to respond to the terrorist attacks of Chechen commandos against neighbouring regions with tough measures and are considering "focused attacks", the closing of the border to Chechnya, a blockade of the republic and, under certain circumstances, the declaration of a state of emergency for the entire Northern Caucasus, but Dagestan's State Council Chairman, Magomedov, and all Presidents of Northern Caucasus republics are agreed that there should be no further use of force in the region.⁴⁷

Ramazan Khajibulatovich Abdulatipov takes an unusual position. An Avar by nationality and since Gorbachev's perestroika the most prominent Dagestani in the political leadership in Moscow, he is today a deputy Prime Minister of Russia and one of the chief actors in the field of Northern Caucasus policy; thanks to his origins he appears to have a particular, if informal, responsibility at the federal level for Dagestan.⁴⁸ Supported in part by the Avar

46 Text: *Nezavisimaya gazeta* of 21 October 1997, p. 3.

47 On this see Ilya Maksakov, *Kavkazskaya politika Moskv i vse dal'she otkhodit ot real'nosti*, in: *Nezavisimaya gazeta* of 19 March 1999, pp. 1/5; the same, cited above (Note 41).

48 On Abdulatipov's positions, see the interview with him in: *Nezavisimaya gazeta* of 9 September 1997, p. 5.; also Christiane Hoffmann, *Das Problem ist nicht der Kaukasus*

People's Movement and in part on the basis of a political agreement with State Council Chairman Magomedov, Abdulatipov succeeded in the elections of December 1995 in winning one of the two direct State Duma mandates allowed to Dagestan, in electoral district 10 (Buynaksk).

To be sure, Abdulatipov has, since the end of the Chechnya war, appeared publicly as a determined advocate of tough measures, including the use of force, blockade, and the declaration of a state of emergency against Chechnya - also as supporter of a strict border regime in Dagestan, particularly regarding the border to Azerbaijan. This position is not inconsistent in light of his ideas - put forward in a wealth of articles, interviews and public appearances - on federalism and on the nature of the Russian Federation, namely its orientation towards a strong, capable and rationally structured federal state. It has, however, put Abdulatipov in opposition to almost all political groups and actors who play a role in Dagestan. To be sure, there is also the not insignificant fact that Abdulatipov expressly favours the dissolution of the national movements in Dagestan. This has not necessarily hurt his authority in the centre (Moscow) but the deep differences of view that have been opened up between him and the regional leaders of the Northern Caucasus with regard to how to proceed politically in the region have done nothing to ease the difficult situation in which the federal centre finds itself vis-à-vis the Northern Caucasus as a whole. With its decision, reached at the beginning of July, to go beyond the closing of Chechnya's borders and destroy the terrorist commando centres in Chechnya through calculated counter-strikes, including the use of air power, the federal government has overcome the reluctance it had shown since 1996 to use the only means available to it for "creating order" in the Northern Caucasus - military force.

One does get the impression, however, that - under the pressure of everyday difficulties, of hopelessness about any improvement in living conditions for the foreseeable future, growing frustration, particularly amongst the smaller ethnic groups, massive unemployment among young people, and the spreading loss of authority on the part of the political leadership of the country - those forces in Dagestan which have worked for inter-ethnic balance, peacefulness, social compromise and tolerance and, generally, for the unity and integrity of the republic, are on the decline. The Chechnyan invaders seem to have concluded that with determined actions they will be able, sooner or later, to bring the Republic of Dagestan down like a house of cards and into their own hands. Without the military forces of the Federation, an early success would be quite certain. But under the present circumstances, with the use of Russian troops foreign to the territory and without inner motivation, fighting spirit or battle experience in difficult field conditions, the fate suffered in Chechnya could, *mutatis mutandis*, repeat itself in Dagestan. The probability is high.

[The Problem is not the Caucasus], in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) of 16 March 1999, p. 9.