

DAGESTAN

**Russian Hegemony and Islamic
Resistance in the North Caucasus**



Robert Bruce Ware and Enver Kisriev

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Dedicated to Frid and Magiyat Kisriev

and

to all the Peoples of Dagestan

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One must not approach the mountains without humility,
nor remain among them without reverence.

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Robert Bruce Ware
St. Louis, Missouri



1-2 Federal State borders

Administrative boundaries

Break-away territories

4. Republic of Abkhazia, including
4a. territories controlled by authorities of Abkhazia (2004)
4b. territories controlled by authorities of Georgia (2004)

5. Republic of South Ossetia, including
5a. territories controlled by authorities of South Ossetia
5b. territories controlled by authorities of Georgia (2004)

6. Nagorno-Karabakh republic, including
6a. territories controlled by authorities of Nagorno-Karabakh
6b. territories controlled by authorities of Azerbaijan
6c. Shekinovo district disputed by Nagorno-Karabakh

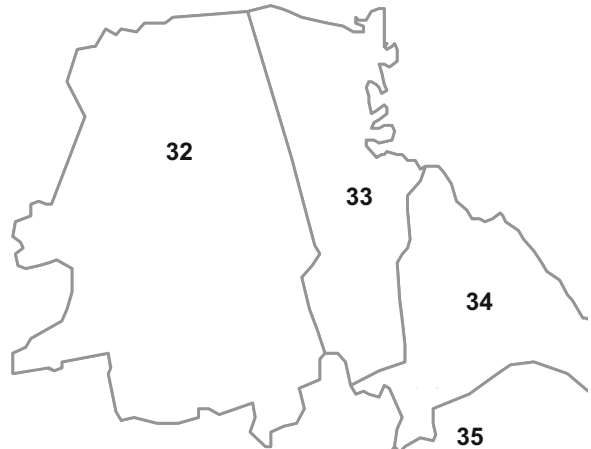
7. Territories of Azerbaijan occupied by Nagorno-Karabakh forces

8. Territories of Azerbaijan annexed by Armenia

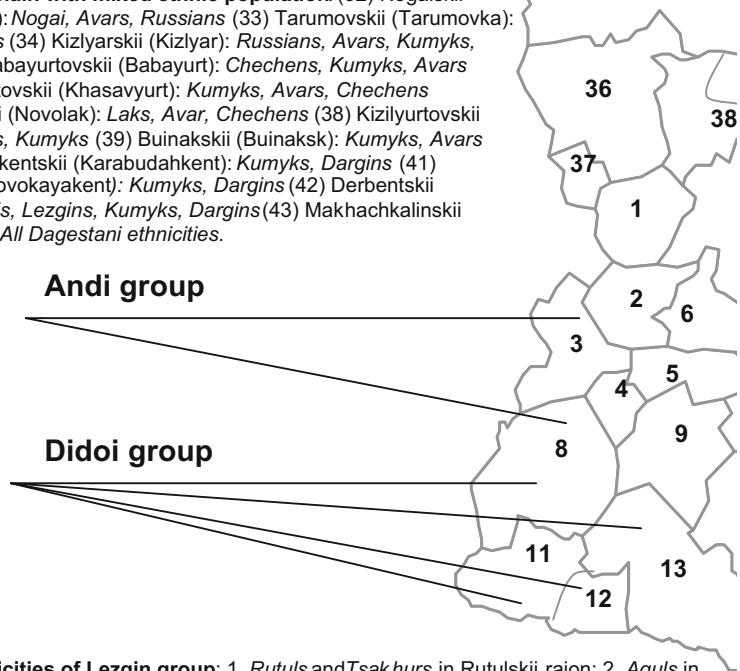
9. Territories of Armenia annexed by Azerbaijan







Raions of the plain with mixed ethnic population. (32) Nogaiskii (Terekli-Mekteb): *Nogai, Avars, Russians* (33) Tarumovskii (Tarumovka): *Russians, Avars* (34) Kizlyarskii (Kizlyar): *Russians, Avars, Kumyks, Dargins* (35) Babayurtovskii (Babayurt): *Chechens, Kumyks, Avars* (36) Khasavyurtovskii (Khasavyurt): *Kumyks, Avars, Chechens* (37) Novolakskii (Novolak): *Laks, Avar, Chechens* (38) Kizilyurtovskii (Kizilyurt): *Avars, Kumyks* (39) Buinakskii (Buinaksk): *Kumyks, Avars* (40) Karabudahkentskii (Karabudahkent): *Kumyks, Dargins* (41) Kayakentskii (Novokayakent): *Kumyks, Dargins* (42) Derbentskii (Derbent): *Azeris, Lezghins, Kumyks, Dargins* (43) Makhachkalinskii (Makhachkala): *All Dagestani ethnicities.*



Ethnicities of Lezgin group: 1. *Rutuls* and *Tsakhurs* in Rutulskii raion; 2. *Aguls* in Agulskii raion; 3. *Tabasarans* in Tabasaranskii and Khivskii raions.

Minor Avar groups: 1. *Andi group* in Botlikhskii and Tsumadinskii raions, 2. *Didoi group* in Tsumadinskii, Tsuntinskii, Bezhtinskii and Tlyaratinskii raions.

Ethnic Map of Dagestan by Administrative Raions (and Administrative City for Each Raion)

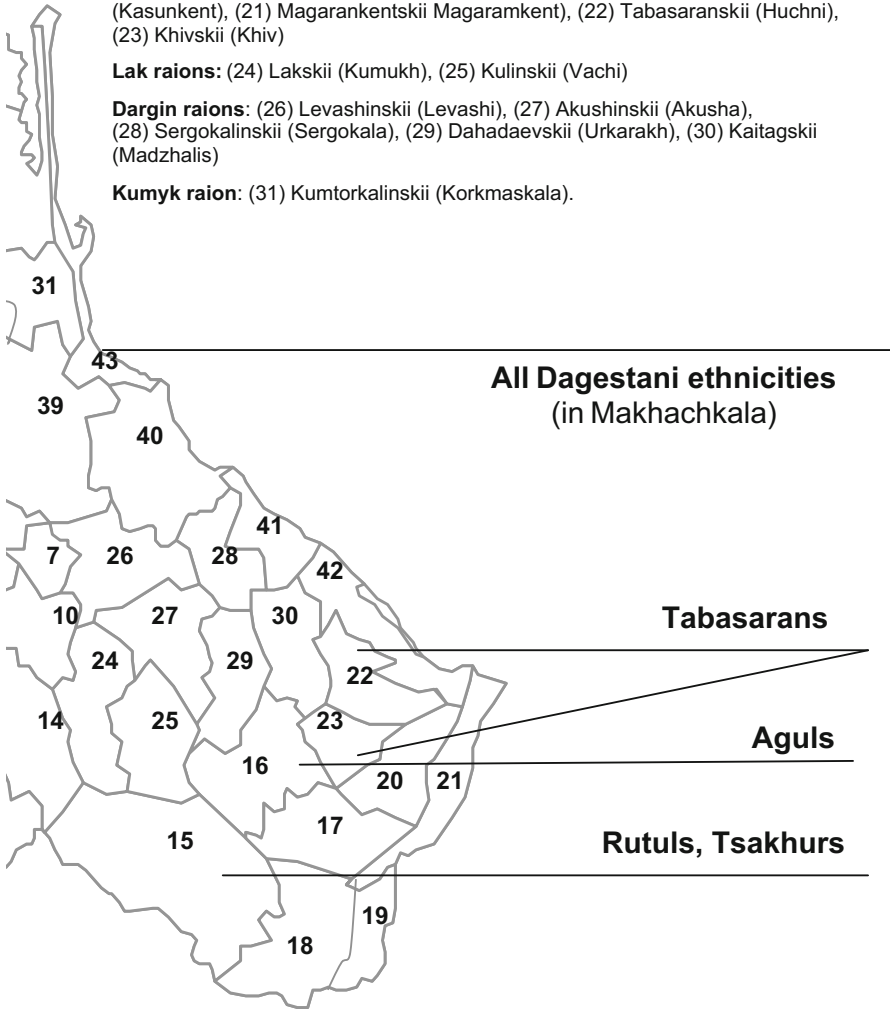
Avar raions: (1) Kazbekovskii (Dylım), (2) Gumbetovskii (Mekhelta), (3) Botlikhskii (Botlikh), (4) Akhvakhskii (Karata), (5) Khunzakhskii (Khunzakh), (6) Untsukulskii (Untsukul), (7) Gergebilskii (Gergebil), (8) Tsumadinskii (Agvali), (9) Shamilskii (Khebda), (10) Gunibskii (Gunib), (11) Tsuntinskii (Kidero), (12) Bezhtinskii (Bezhta), (13) Tlyaratinskii (Tlyarata), (14) Charodinskii (Tsurib)

Lezgin raions: (15) Rutulskii (Rutul), (16) Agulskii (Agul), (17) Kurakhskii (Kurakh), (18) Akhynskii (Akhti), (19) Dokuzparinskii (Usuhchai), (20) Suleiman-Stalskii (Kasunkent), (21) Magarankentskii Magaramkent), (22) Tabasaranskii (Huchni), (23) Khivskii (Khiv)

Lak raions: (24) Laksii (Kumukh), (25) Kulinskii (Vachi)

Dargin raions: (26) Levashinskii (Levashi), (27) Akushinskii (Akusha), (28) Sergokalinskii (Sergokala), (29) Dahadaevskii (Urkarakh), (30) Kaitagskii (Madzhalis)

Kumyk raion: (31) Kumtorkalinskii (Korkmaskala).



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1

Introduction

Where Mountains Rise

Vertical versus Horizontal

Shortly after beginning his first term in the spring of 2000, Russia's president Vladimir Putin embarked upon a program of government recentralization. The program was presented as a necessary antidote to constitutional, administrative, and security issues arising from the period of sometimes chaotic decentralization that began in the final years of the Soviet Union and extended through the administration of Boris Yeltsin. On September 13, 2004, President Putin dramatically advanced this agenda with his announcement of sweeping electoral reforms culminating in the centralized appointment of regional governors.

These proposals were presented by President Putin in response to the Beslan school tragedy, as a means for reducing corruption and increasing security throughout the Russian Federation. In fact, it appeared that these proposals had been long in the making, but their presentation as a response to a hostage crisis in the North Caucasus served to sharpen questions about their efficacy and propriety in connection with regional problems of extremism and terrorism.

It is plausible that Russian decentralization was carried too far in the 1990s. Certainly the corrupt and self-serving regimes that it produced in the North Caucasus did little to address chronic problems of economic stagnation, infrastructural decay, environmental degradation, infectious disease, and organized crime that together contributed to alienation, radicalism, and terrorism in the region. Hence, it appeared that President Putin was correct in his premise that the problems of this region required political transformation. Yet the diminished political access and local accountability that resulted from renewed centralization led to increased levels of corruption, alienation, radicalism, and terrorism in this volatile region.

Few would fault the Kremlin for attempting to reconcile the federal constitution with its local counterparts or deny that local potentates have contributed to Russian administrative and security problems. Yet in assessing tradeoffs among corruption, economic disparity, accountability, and security it may be helpful to consider Russia's recentralization within a broader historical framework.

Russia's program of recentralization is the latest chapter in a series of struggles that have constituted the history of the North Caucasus over at least the past two millennia, and it bears similarities to much that has preceded it.

Historically, conflicts in the North Caucasus have derived from two competing approaches to social organization. On the one hand, the alpine geography of this region has given rise to a particularist approach to social organization based upon traditional North Caucasian values of parochialism, kinship, egalitarianism, and self-determination. On the other hand, a series of universalist approaches have been imported by civilizations that have attempted to incorporate this region into systems of expansive socioeconomic organization, commonly described as empires. Due to the demands of their geographical expanse, each of these empires has involved hierarchical systems of administration incompatible with traditional North Caucasian values.

Ironically, the expansion of these empires horizontally, across the lowlands, necessitates their organization within vertical hierarchies of social control. Conversely, the vertical terrain of the mountains sustains the egalitarianism, self-determination, and horizontal social organization of societies localized within the alpine valleys. In other words, the vertical-hierarchical organization of these empires was necessary for their successful geographical expansion, but when that expansion brought them to the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains it rendered them fundamentally incompatible with the horizontally egalitarian values of the societies that it encountered therein. At an elementary level, the series of great conflicts¹ that historically have beset this region may be seen as involving systems of lowland social administration that were organized vertically-hierarchically in order to facilitate horizontal expansion, spreading successfully until they bumped up against incompatibly parochial and horizontally egalitarian systems, which were no less a product of their vertically alpine geography.

In the past two millennia, the region has been visited by Arab, Mongol, Persian, Ottoman, and Russian empires, among others. It must be emphasized that each of these empires brought a unique culture and organizational structure. Yet all of them involved similar contrasts to indigenous social structures, all of them encountered similar problems, and all of them produced accounts that described the local populations in similar terms.

The Arrival of Islam

The Islamic expansion reached the North Caucasus soon after it began in the seventh century. Mohammad died in 632, and by 642 Suraqa bin 'Amr had led a contingent of Arabs to the gates of Derbent, in what is now southern Dagestan. After rapidly overrunning the Persian Empire, the Arabs pushed

up the western shore of the Caspian Sea to the threshold of Eurasia. There they stood beneath the walls of Derbent, which span those three strategic kilometers that separate the eastern reach of the Caucasus Mountains from the Caspian shore. Recognizing the importance of the city to their northward expansion, and to virtually any other regional strategy, they proclaimed that the ancient city² had been established by the angel Gabriel, and declared its conquest to be divinely prescribed with divine absolution as a recompense for all who joined the struggle.³

Yet while they clearly recognized the strategic significance of the city, and while they had so recently overrun Persia, the Arab army proved incapable of controlling either Derbent or its environs. In 652, the Dagestanis decisively defeated the Arabs on the battlefield, and then rededicated themselves to their relentless and devastating raids against the Muslims. Though the Arabs periodically made punitive forays up the rugged slopes that they called “language mountain” as a homage to Dagestan’s linguistic heterogeneity, and though they eventually managed to convert a few local potentates, they found themselves incapable of securing their own boundaries, let alone deterring constant harassment from the highlanders.⁴ Ironically, the Eurasian antecedents of contemporary Russians were spared from Muslim conquest by the fierce resistance with which Dagestani parochialism met imperial expansion from the south. As Michael Reynolds puts it:

Dagestan, in short, proved to be a difficult place to rule: geographically isolated, topographically rugged, and unrelentingly hostile. The Arabs and their chroniclers repeatedly expressed exasperation with the warlike North Caucasian infidels. Suraqa bin Amr described the torment of fighting the mountaineers in verse, and al-Masudi’s angry description of a local Dagestani chieftain as a “host of robbers, brigands, and malefactors” hints at the Muslims’ frustrations.⁵

Though the Muslims finally took Derbent in 686, they were never able to control Dagestan’s interior. Yet if the Arabs never conquered Dagestan, they planted the seeds of its conversion when Derbent’s population gradually adopted Islam. In the hills and mountains outside the walls of Derbent, the Lezgins were among the first of the Dagestani groups to come into contact with Islam at the end of the seventh century. The tradition of Islamic mysticism known as Sufism appeared in Dagestan in the eighth century, at the early stages of its development. Al-Farabi⁶ and Al-Ghazali⁷ are often credited with the elements of Sufism, yet its principles were also elaborated in a manuscript titled “Raihan al-Hakaik va bustan ad-Dakaik”⁸ by an eleventh-century thinker from Derbent, known as el-Derbendy.

By this time Sufism was becoming the dominant form of Islam in Dagestan, which continued to nourish significant traditions of Sufi scholarship through the nineteenth century. Dagestan's localized social order and rugged terrain provided fertile ground for Sufism, which has sometimes shown antiestablishment tendencies. Followers of the Qadiri tariqah⁹ appeared in Dagestan in the eleventh century, while the Naqshbandi tariqah arrived from eastern Anatolia in the fifteenth century, acquiring adherents especially among the Avar, Dargin, and Kumyk ethnicities. The Naqshbandi tariqah has acquired contemporary prominence in Dagestan through the influence of Sheikh Sayid-Efendi Cherkeevskii, but the Shazilya tariqah is also represented.

The *tariqah* is the Sufi path to God. The term is also used to identify the brotherhood with which an adherent walks that path. Each of these brotherhoods consists of a *sheikh* (teacher) and his *murids* (disciples). While all Muslims are on a path toward God, to whom they will draw closer after death, Sufism offers a mystical path toward a living union with God through the power of suffering and love. Sufis do not focus upon legalistic praxis, which they deem the "outward" manifestations of Islam. Rather, they are concerned with the "inner" meaning of the sacred texts (Koran and hadith). As a result, many orthodox/legalistic or puritanical believers have accused the Sufis of not being Muslims at all.

By the eleventh century, Derbent had become a center of Sufi practice at the northern boundary of the Muslim world. There locals were educated as *gazi* or holy warriors, and dispatched toward the highland heart of Dagestan on military marches that aimed to bring Islam to the fierce mountaineers. Because of the ceaseless resistance that the latter encountered from the locals, the spread of Islam from Derbent to central Dagestan was measured in centuries. Indeed, the indigenous Muslims of Derbent were no less beleaguered than the Arabs. In 971, for example, Christian attackers from Sarir, who may have been the ancestors of the modern Avars, overran Derbent's Muslim defenders.¹⁰ Derbent's Muslim *amir* was occasionally driven to seek military support from the northern Slavs who were raiding Dagestan's Caspian coast from the tenth century on.¹¹

Yet by the fourteenth century, Islam had reached Dagestan's largest ethnic group, the Avars. By the end of the fifteenth century, most Dagestanis had subscribed to the Shafi'i *madhab* or school of Sunni Islam.¹² Among Dagestan's numerous ethnic groups, Islam struck its deepest chords among the Avars, Dargins, and Kumyks.¹³ In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Islam spread to the Chechens and Ingushis, though it was not well established among these Vainakh peoples until the eighteenth century. Yet if the Vainakhs were among the region's youngest Muslims, they were also among its most zealous.

The Arabs may have failed to conquer Dagestan in the name of Allah, but Allah eventually triumphed over the next 1,000 years. And if the Dagestanis

would not yield to the Arabs' imperial organization, they eventually learned to wield the faith of the Arabs as a weapon against another imperial expansion that would impinge upon them from the north at the end of that millennium. Reynolds concludes that:

From the records left by the Arabs, we can already identify a number of factors that have distinguished the dynamics of the conflict in the Caucasus ever since. The first is the strategic nature of the region as a gateway between the Near East and the Eurasian steppes. The second is the rugged nature of its topography, which impeded the maneuver, command, and control of large fighting forces. Third, and perhaps most significant, is the equally rugged and fierce nature of the region's inhabitants. These latter two factors combined to exact a forbidding cost upon every power that has attempted to subdue the North Caucasus. The Arabs, who had overrun the Persian Empire in a mere ten years and would go on to phenomenal conquests elsewhere, were stunned by the truculence of the mountaineers. Their propensity for raids and banditry further infuriated the original Muslims. Finally, the linguistic and ethnic complexity of the region also impressed the Arabs. All of these traits would impress the later, non-Muslim conquerors as well.¹⁴

A History of Imperial Failures

In the thirteenth century, the Mongols arrived on the next wave of imperial expansion to strike the Caucasus. They swept down from the northeast along the Caspian shore, and occupied Derbent in 1233. Yet the Mongols had no more success than the Arabs in subduing the Dagestani highlanders, who seemed to have regarded these newest invaders essentially as "fresh meat." Eventually, the Mongols were compelled to pay tributes in order to stop the mountaineers from raiding them.¹⁵

Timurlenk (Tamerlane) occupied Dagestan in 1395–96; yet he moved on to the southern side of the mountains without establishing a lasting presence in the North Caucasus. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Ottoman and Safavid empires made incursions into the northeast Caucasus without consolidating their control. Dagestani leaders successfully played the Ottomans against the Safavids, and occasionally even the Russians, in order to preserve a measure of independence.

Beginning in the eighteenth century, the Safavids met growing resistance in Dagestan. When a local Muslim leader named Hadji-Daud announced that he had been called by Allah to liberate Dagestan's Sunni population from southern Shiite oppression, he won support from Surhai-Khan, the sovereign of Kazi-Kumukh, as well as from Akhmed-Khan of Kaitag. In 1712 Surhai-Khan liber-

ated the town of Shamakhi from the Safavid Persians. By 1721, this movement succeeded in expelling the Persians from Dagestan and northern Azerbaijan.

After he was encouraged by military successes elsewhere in his southern empire, the Persian ruler Nadir Shah vowed to reestablish the Persian presence in Dagestan in 1742. Yet just three years later, he too was forced to withdraw from Dagestan, and died soon after. Relentlessly, the Dagestanis resumed their raids into Safavid territory. As Reynolds remarks:

The patterns first observed during the Arab invasions of the region thus repeated themselves in the period leading up to the Russian conquest. The mountaineers vigorously opposed all attempts by outsiders to impose their rule and proved to be indomitable . . . the difficult terrain, the mountaineers' pugnacity, and the lack of a central government—put a decisive stamp on the form of conflict in the North Caucasus. . . . The geography, in addition to sheltering the mountaineers from outside rule by raising the costs and lowering the benefits of intervention, also fostered the development of a culture that prized such attributes as athletic prowess, physical courage, and self-reliance; that is, martial virtues.¹⁶

While geographical theories of cultural determinism are often controversial, the influence of the rugged terrain upon regional character types is mentioned anecdotally by the people of this region, and has figured historically in the accounts of outside observers. For example, the Ottoman historian Ahmed Cevdet Pasha connected the region's topography to the egalitarian traditions of its natives in his conclusion that: "Since their land is steep and difficult, they do not submit to a government."¹⁷ At the beginning of the twentieth century, John Baddeley wrote that, "The people of the Caucasus owe it not only their salient characteristics, but their very existence. It may be said without exaggeration that the mountains made the men."¹⁸ Reynolds remarks that the geographical obstacles of the region were compounded by their cultural counterparts, rendering the mountaineers

allergic to central control. These same factors acted to block local sovereigns as much as outside hegemony from uniting and centralizing the region. Because ad-hoc coalitions of local leaders proved sufficient for withstanding outside invasions, up until the nineteenth century there was neither much incentive nor a sociocultural basis for the formation of a state or other political-administrative structure that would embrace the North Caucasus as a whole.¹⁹

Nevertheless, Reynolds observes that Sunni Islam provided the North Caucasus with a "conceptual foundation for nation building." In contrast with

some world religions, for example, Buddhism or Christianity, Sunni Islam is geared intrinsically toward political activity. Indeed, it would be misleading to suggest that Islam joins theology with politics, for in Islam these are not two distinct spheres of life.²⁰ This is because the Prophet Mohammed was, among many other things, a military and political leader.²¹ He sought to offer his followers a comprehensive set of guidelines for most aspects of human life, including political affairs. For centuries, his life has been taken as a model for military and political leadership. This model was further developed by a series of Islamic political philosophers, including Al-Farabi (870–950), Avicenna (930–1037), Ibn Bajja (d. 1138), and Ibn Tufayl (d. 1185). Eldest among Russia’s Muslim regions, Dagestan has contributed to Islamic thought through the work of Sufi writers such as Magomed Abu Bakr ad-Derbendi (early eleventh century), Abu Khamid al-Ghazali (1059–1111), and Magomed Yaragsky (d. 1839).

Venturing beyond more restrictive conceptions of theological doctrine, the Sunni faith draws upon the divinely mandated law, the *sharia*, which prescribes social and political relations as spiritual mandates comparable to the individual’s ritual obligations to God. Sharia offers a comprehensive, and often codified, body of social laws that it derives from Koran and the hadiths (anthologies based upon Mohammad’s statements and deeds). At the core of sharia is the recognition that its laws depend upon enforcement from *dawla*, or the state. Political philosophy and jurisprudence are integral elements in the study of classical Islam.

Confrontation and Compromise Among Competing Forms of Social Organization

In recent periods, two expansive social organizations have competed for control of the North Caucasus: Russian and Islamist. Because each has encountered opposition from traditional local structures, it is useful to consider three alternative forms of social organization as having joined in competition for preeminence in the North Caucasus. First, there have been the local systems of parochialism, egalitarianism, and self-determination that are traditional to North Caucasian societies. While these vary dramatically among themselves,²² they have proved, in varying degrees, resistant to the hierarchical forms of organization that a long series of empires have attempted to impose upon them. Second, there has been the hierarchical system of dominance and subordination that is more or less traditional to Russian society.²³ Third, there have been systems of expansionist absolutism advocated by Islamist extremists. Variations of these three systems—traditional-local, Russian, and expansionist Islamist—have competed on and off in the North Caucasus for the past 200 years.

During these years there have been periods in which each of these principles was in ascendance, and periods in which each was in decline. There were periods in which each system was advanced by its proponents in stark opposition to the others, and periods of relative compromise. This spirit of compromise was illustrated perhaps most stunningly when the Dagestani highlanders forced the Mongols to pay them tribute. But a more important instance occurred in the latter half of the nineteenth century when the Russian imperial administration in Dagestan accepted traditional village law (*adat*) and political organization, along with village-based Islamic functionaries, and played their parochialism against efforts by some Islamic leaders to organize another wave of expansive popular resistance.

By contrast, the Soviet Union offered North Caucasians different forms of compromise. On the one hand, the Soviet Union persecuted Islam, and imposed a stark system of hierarchy and domination in keeping with Russian traditions. Yet at the same time, Soviet collectivism was roughly concordant with traditional highland village life. Moreover, Stalin's ethnic policies paid lip service to local traditions of kinship and parochialism by carving the region into a series of titular republics, wherein linguistic and cultural distinctions were subsequently reified. In the post-Stalin period, the Soviet Union offered North Caucasians tangible benefits in terms of security and economic development.

Political stability in the North Caucasus has been strengthened by such periods of relative compromise. On the other hand, periods of stark opposition among any of these three social systems have tended to undermine regional stability. Have these oppositions been heightened by Moscow's efforts to re-centralize political control through the assertion of a hierarchically organized political system in place of parochial democratic structures? In the absence of tangible improvements in local security and economic development, are these efforts more likely to precipitate or to prevent the further destabilization of the region?

In the face of globalizing pressures of the twenty-first century, most local residents realize that North Caucasian parochialism is not sustainable. Hence, the questions are, which of the two competing approaches to a more expansive mode of social organization will eventually consolidate the region, and what kind of terms will that system reach with the traditional cultural and economic requirements of the region?

The Russian system has had advantages including: (1) political inertia resulting from current Russian control; (2) the legacy of Soviet security and economic benefits; (3) unattractive features of proximate states in the South Caucasus; (4) the Yeltsin administration's willingness to compromise with local sociopolitical structures. For example, from 1994 to 2003,²⁴ the Russian