

## **2. Russian governance of the North Caucasus: dilemmas of force and inclusion**

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(Wilhelmsen, Julie (2019) 'Russian governance of the North Caucasus: dilemmas of force and inclusion', in Oskanian, Kevork and Derek Averre (eds) *Security, Society and the State in the Caucasus*. Routledge. pp 37-56)

### **Introduction**

While Vladimir Putin's Russia struggles to strike a balance between security and freedom within the Russian polity, nowhere is the problem as acute as in the eastern parts of the North Caucasus. This chapter reviews Russia's approach to the republics in that region since Putin came to power, and asks what the potential for mobilisation against Russian rule in the North Caucasus amounts to. The current decrease in violence in the region is often taken as a sign of 'success' in curbing the insurgency. I argue that the heavy focus on repression and exclusion in Russian policies may well backfire and create conditions for a new mobilisation against Russian dominance.

The analysis is guided by the assumption that, to achieve efficient governance, the state needs to cater for a broad set of needs in the population. Not only does it have to provide security and welfare, but it also has to keep open bottom-up channels for a voice in the system, and articulate an inclusive state identity. The two latter needs are particularly important in establishing effective governance over populations in formerly colonised, ethnically and religiously diverse areas like the North Caucasus. Informed commentators argue that the social contract in Russia primarily hinges on economic efficiency and does not concern political questions (Makarkin 2011: 1471). This chapter suggests that this is too narrow a focus if we want to understand the potential for mobilisation and opposition against the state in the North Caucasus.

Starting with the second post-Soviet war in Chechnya from 1999 onward, Russian governance in the North Caucasus has relied heavily on the maintenance of security. Even if conscious efforts have been made to complement this approach with socioeconomic development, inclusive articulations of identity in official rhetoric and opportunities for North Caucasian populations to have a say in the political system have dwindled. This chapter reviews developments in Russian policies in the eastern part of North Caucasus since the coming to power of Vladimir Putin. I begin by mapping the policy of force in the region and suggest that Russian counter-terrorist efforts often amount to the physical repression of broad sections of the population. I then move on to discuss Moscow's socioeconomic policies in the region. In the third section I look at opportunities for political representation and participation of regional elites, in particular their part in policymaking in their own republics. Finally, the politics of identity are discussed; I suggest that the subjection of key groups in the North Caucasus to exclusionary state policies has triggered a new emergence of distinctive religious and ethnic identities. At the same time the Russian leadership has begun to articulate a less inclusive Russian state identity. This situation creates fertile ground for alternative political entrepreneurs who claim to offer security from state repression, alternative socio-economic services, and differing visions of where the North Caucasian populations belong.

## The policy of force

Since the start of the second Chechen war, the use of force has been a core instrument in Russian efforts to govern the North Caucasus. The war institutionalised violent state practices as the prime instrument to curb dissent and control Chechnya's population. It also made agents that administer violence, both Russian and Chechen, the key interlocutors in Moscow's relations with Chechnya (Gilligan 2010, Wilhelmsen 2017). Akhmed Kadyrov's rule over the territory formed a continuation of this type of rule. Today, Russian governance in Chechnya, carried on by Kadyrov's son Ramzan, takes the form of imperial indirect rule through a middleman (in the ideal-typical sense), relying even more heavily on practices of brute force than the Russian government (Wilhelmsen 2018). Indeed, as Memorial (2016: 29) notes, abductions, unlawful detentions and forced disappearances continue to be widespread and systematic in the republic. Moreover, this middleman operates through the use of force against the population in Chechnya – and, in fact, beyond – with near total impunity (Wilhelmsen 2018).

Chechnya is a special case in the North Caucasus. Still, when the insurgency subsided in Chechnya, it re-emerged in the neighbouring republics, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachai-Cherkessia and Dagestan (O'Loughlin, Holland and Winter 2011). While the federal counterterrorist operation in Chechnya officially ended in 2009, more limited versions of this operation soon emerged in these other republics. The re-organisation of the North Caucasus Federal Military District into the Southern Federal Military District in October 2010, aimed at strengthening the counterterrorist campaign in the wider region, was another concrete manifestation of this development. The heavy-handed imposition of force by Russian servicemen spread to Chechnya's neighbouring republics. As documented by Toft and Zhukov (2012 and 2015) the counterinsurgency strategy in this region over the past ten years has relied heavily on repression, focusing on the selective but widespread liquidation of insurgents. This practice has been particularly pervasive in Dagestan, often as part of counterterrorist operations involving police, military, security, civil defence and emergency ministry forces. But it is also manifest in calmer republics such as Kabardino-Balkaria. Government forces usually kill rebels instead of negotiating their surrender, and arrests of suspected militants are rare (Regnum 2016a).

Still, what Memorial (2016: 5) refers to as a 'new direction' in Russian counterinsurgency in the North Caucasus developed from 2009 to 2012. These policies involved dialogue with various sectors of society and religious communities, law abidance during counter terrorist operations and reintegration of armed insurgents (Parfitt 2011). They were pursued in Dagestan under the leadership of Magomed salam Magomedov (2010–2013) and in Ingushetia under Yunus-bek-Yevkurov (2008–present), but not in Chechnya. The 'new direction' was short lived, however: in Dagestan it ended in 2012. While it had been supported by the Dagestani elite and was conducive to the cultural traditions and social fabric of Dagestan, it was opposed by the state security agencies; it was also undermined by the armed insurgents (Aliyev 2013).

According to Caucasian Knot, the most reliable available source of data, casualty numbers for the eastern republics of the North Caucasus dropped significantly from 2012 onward following the decapitation of the insurgent leadership. This trend has continued through to 2016, corresponding with a decrease in the level of insurgent activity.<sup>1</sup> However, this does not necessarily indicate that Russian governance in the region has relied less on the threat or use of force in these past few years. Federal policies are still driven by the Russian government's counterterrorist efforts in the region; in the official Russian definition 'counterterrorism operations are special operations intended to suppress a terrorist attack,

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent compilation of casualty numbers based on Caucasian Knot see Klimenko and Melvin (2016). Caucasian Knot can be accessed at [www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/](http://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/).

secure civilians, neutralise terrorists and minimise the effects of the attack' (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation).<sup>2</sup> The renewed emphasis on the terrorist threat in official discourse in connection with the crisis in Syria has renewed the focus on counterterrorism in the North Caucasus as well. Indeed, despite the exodus of fighters from the North Caucasus to Syria in the past couple of years, and a reduction in the immediate threat, the preoccupation with 'preventive' counterterrorist activities in the region has only increased with the rise of Islamic State, the Russian military engagement in Syria, and the growing fear that radicalised fighters there could return to the North Caucasus (Stepanova 2015).

From 2013 onward there has been a continuous pattern of reprisals and repressions, targeted in particular against Salafi communities – in Chechnya, merely manifesting Salafi views is severely punished. In Dagestan, 'cleansing' operations in villages and towns, involving gross violations of the law and of the rights of local inhabitants, were carried out in 2013 and 2014, with some lasting over two months and affecting entire village populations (Memorial 2016: 40–44). While the Dagestani authorities seemed to be aware of the devastating effects such policies have on the delicate social structure and balance between different religious and ethnic communities in the republic, a return to the policies of dialogue and reparation from 2010 to 2012 has not transpired.

When what looked like religious sectarian conflict between officially sanctioned Sufi on one side and Salafi communities on the other escalated in Dagestan in 2015–2016, the republican authorities intensified repression of the latter, including the detention and arrests of worshippers, the dismissal of Salafi Imams and the forceful closure of mosques by security personnel, at times even through arson. The introduction of so-called 'preventative' practices targeting large sections of the Dagestani population, including watch-lists of thousands of people who are considered potential extremists or terrorists and are frequently checked and detained by the police or security services, was a new trend. Police officers interviewed by Memorial stated that they lack the personnel to carry out the required practices of control and repression of these Salafi communities in connection with the new campaign (Memorial 2016: 47, see also Economist 2016).

Given the key social and political role Islam plays in the eastern part of the North Caucasus, a particularly problematic development is the attempt by the authorities to employ 'traditional' Sufi Islam and its official structures as tools to subdue Salafism and the insurgency. The attempt to shut down the Salafi mosque on Kotrova Street in Makhachkala, Dagestan in November 2014 is illustrative. While police forces were brought in to carry out the raid, up to 200 Sufi adherents acting on behalf of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Dagestan were mobilised to appear at the Mosque after it had been emptied. Moreover, the Sufi Imam who was appointed to take over the Mosque alleged that he was pressured to do so by the security forces and the Dagestani authorities, who otherwise threatened to close down the Mosque altogether (Memorial 2016: 47-48). Such practices of using official religious structures as a cover to repress Salafists have a long precedent in the neighbouring republic of Chechnya. Under the Kadyrovs, Sufism has been amplified, projected and instrumentalised both ideologically and practically to overcome radical Salafi influence (Wilhelmsen 2018, Falkowski 2016).

Recently, Ramzan Kadyrov has also tried to spread and enhance the use of Sufism as a counter-force against Salafism to the neighbouring republics. In February 2016, a meeting of Sufi brotherhoods from Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia took place in Grozny, where

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<sup>2</sup> As summarised by Stepanova (2015), Russia's anti-terrorist policies and measures have been shaped by four principles since the 2002 Nord-Ost theatre hostage crisis: make no concessions to terrorists; destroy them or bring them to justice; isolate and apply pressure on the actors (both state and non-state) which sponsor or support terrorism; and bolster the anti-terrorist capabilities of your partners.

Kadyrov announced that he would fight Salafism across the Caucasus. A *fatwa* was issued, representing Salafists as dangerous separatists and only recognising followers of the Sufi *tariqat* as true Muslims (Caucasian Knot 2016, 30 September). Kadyrov's initiative has been widely criticised by Muslim leaders elsewhere in Russia, but could affect developments in the tiny neighbouring republic of Ingushetia especially negatively. Despite contributing to the general anti-Salafi campaign in the North Caucasus in connection with the Sochi Olympics, the republic's head, Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, has in the past few years strived to reconcile sectarian interests within Ingushetia, reportedly preventing official clergy from seizing the most important Salafi mosque in Nasyr-Kort, Nazran. The Ingush authorities have not made general watch-lists of Salafis, and the latter are in general not harassed. Accordingly, Yevkurov's policy toward Salafis and returning insurgents has been considered the region's most moderate (ICG 2016: 23). This Ingush 'model' is coming under pressure with Kadyrov's growing influence in the region, however (Le Huérot 2016).

Thus, not only in Chechnya, but also in Dagestan and to some degree Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachai-Cherkessia, the use or threat of force is becoming more widespread as the government increases its efforts to fight off extremists and terrorists. Government policies also seem to be turning more intrusive into the social, cultural and religious life of the republics, in addition to touching ever-larger segments of the population. This development is likely driven by the dominance of actors that administer violence in the Russian governance apparatus. Here, Ramzan Kadyrov's key role and growing influence are important, as is the influence of agencies such as the Russian investigative committee, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Federal Security Service. The recent anti-Salafi campaign in Dagestan, for example, is not primarily a result of sectarian conflict, and was not initiated by the Sufi Imams in the Council of Muftis. It was, rather, instigated by the authorities and the security forces. Such initiatives are primarily driven by increasing counterterrorist efforts in the face of the rising influence of Islamic State (regnum 2016b, Memorial 2016: 48).

On the wider regional level, we have observed a similar trend towards the increasing influence of security actors. Preparations for the Sochi Olympics in 2014 included a broad set of security measures (Coaffee 2015). On the leadership level the substitution of the business-oriented Aleksandr Khloponin with Interior Ministry General Sergei Melikov, formerly the region's anti-terrorist chief in his role as head of the North Caucasus Federal District in 2014, was symptomatic of this development (*Eurasia Daily Monitor* 2014, 16 May). In July 2016 Melikov was replaced by Vice Admiral Oleg Belaventsev, Presidential Envoy to Crimea from 2014, closely allied with Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, signalling what kind of policy tools were viewed as most adequate in Moscow's rule of this region. Even the new Federal Agency for Nationalities Affairs (established in March 2015), potentially of major importance for Moscow's governance of the North Caucasus, is headed by a security service veteran, Igor Barinov. The use of security actors as middlemen and agenda-setters in Russian governance in the North Caucasus is also evident in government support for the Cossacks and their militarised self-defence groups in Kabardino-Balkaria, as well as in other republics (*North Caucasus Weekly* 2016, Goble 2016).

These developments raise several questions about the social contract between the Russian state and the population in the region. Firstly, do the policies of force pursued by the Russian government there actually decrease the threat from militant Salafi Islam? Many (such as two foremost experts on developments in the North Caucasus, Irina Starodubrovskaya and Akhmed Yarlikapov) argue that it does not, pointing to the fact that the current counterterrorist practices merely contribute to violent radicalisation and an increase in the ranks of the insurgency (Falkowski 2016, Memorial 2016). If this is the case, the Russian state will be even less capable of delivering on the very basic aspect of the social contract: providing the population with security. Secondly, a very high cost – in terms of repression and violence – has

been inflicted upon the population, far beyond the armed insurgents themselves. With the indiscriminate treatment of all Salafis as potential terrorists or bandits, the entire Salafi community (including its non-violent members) has become alienated from the Russian state. The fact that more than 5,000 Salafi believers took to the streets to protest against the forceful shutdown of the Makhachkala mosque on Kotrova Street, as discussed above, testifies not only to the inefficiency of force as a tool of governance in this region, but also to a growing local insistence on preserving cultural and religious identity and autonomy, a challenge we will discuss in the final section of this chapter. Moreover, the process of alienation from Russian rule probably goes beyond the Salafi communities: the more widespread the use of arbitrary practices of force in this region, touching ever wider circles of the civilian population, the more this population, like the Chechens during the Second Chechen War, will feel rejected by the Russian state and cultivate alternative forms of governance.

## The policy of economic development

In line with the idea that the Russian social contract primarily hinges on socio-economic matters, the daunting socio-economic challenges in the region have worried Russian policy makers, not least because they are deemed to create fertile ground for terrorism. On its pages on ‘Combating terrorism’, the official website of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation (2016) notes that ‘in general, terrorism is a response to the continuous foot dragging in resolving burning social issues’. The republics in the eastern North Caucasus are the most underdeveloped of Russia’s federal subjects, with the highest unemployment rates and the lowest quality of life; crime and corruption levels are also the highest in Russia. Accordingly, Russian policies there have repeatedly included economic development strategies or simply large-scale allocation of economic resources to the region from the federal budget.

Direct allocation of economic resources to the Kadyrov leadership was a key part of the ‘normalisation’ policies after the Chechen war (Wilhelmsen 2017b). From 2004 onward, what looked like a more conscious development strategy for the entire region was embarked upon. Dmitry Kozak was appointed as the Presidential Representative to the Southern Federal District, with the special task of improving social and economic conditions in the region, in particular directed at the creation of new jobs. These policies were followed up during Dmitry Medvedev’s presidency: in line with his modernisation approach, Medvedev (2009) announced that Russian policies would be aimed at alleviating the ‘root causes of violence’ in the region. Subsequently, the politician and businessman Aleksandr Khloponin was appointed head of the new Northern Caucasus Federal District, in 2010. A ‘Strategy for the Socioeconomic Development of the North Caucasus Federal District Until 2025’ was adopted that same year, with the aim of making the republics in the North Caucasus ‘self-sufficient’ through business development and major investment projects guaranteed by the state, particularly in the tourist and agricultural sectors (see Holland 2015).

However, the strategy was not based on firm knowledge about local conditions and set unrealistic goals; it produced meagre results in terms of economic development as a result (Starodubrovskaya and Kazenin 2014). The replacement of Khloponin by General Melikov in 2014 symbolised a shift away from the policy of economic modernisation, towards re-emphasising security policy in the region (Caucasian Knot 2014, 13 May).<sup>3</sup> Still, being acutely aware of the potential danger of growing social and economic grievances, the Russian

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<sup>3</sup> A North Caucasus Development Ministry was set up in 2014 to follow up the implementation of economic policies in the region. However, the recent multiplication of administrative bodies there decreases rather than increase the government’s ability to stimulate economic development (Starodubrovskaya and Kazenin 2014).

government has continued to invest generously in the region's economies and social services through large-scale state programmes in recent years. Ironically, from 2014 onwards, the Western sanctions regime and the ensuing embargo of Western products and goods also seem to have facilitated a certain development in the agricultural sector in the region (in Kabardino-Balkaria for example).

Nevertheless, the net result of Moscow's economic policies in the region is a dangerous reliance on economic subsidies from the federal centre, which, for example, accounted for 85 percent of Chechnya's and 48 percent of Kabardino-Balkaria's budget in 2015. Such reliance is not a problem when oil prices are high and the economy is growing, making the re-allocation of funds to poorer regions possible. But it can represent a serious challenge to Moscow's rule over the region in a time of economic crisis – like the one in effect since 2014 – if Moscow decides to cut down on economic transfers to the North Caucasus republics. Such decreases would make it difficult for the republican authorities to continue carrying out even their present low level day-to-day economic and social responsibilities towards the population. While the economic situation is not all that matters for the residents of this region, social-scientific surveys conducted in the North Caucasus identified it as a primary concern of the residents (Danndeuher 2014). Combined with increasing use of force and repression, this development could exacerbate their perception that Moscow's rule does not provide for their basic needs.

This view is reinforced by the way in which resources and funds are allocated. While Putin did initiate a so-called anti-corruption and -clanship campaign in 2013 – resulting in the arrest of numerous officials in Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria – federal funds have for years been allocated to the regional leadership without corruption being dealt with at all. In fact, the mismanagement of budget funds is deemed to be the largest source of corruption in the region (ICG report 2015); while tolerance of such corruption linked to resource allocation has been a key way for Moscow to secure the loyalty of the regional elite, it may have the opposite effect for the population at large. Nowhere is the result of this practice, in terms of economic inequality between the regional leadership and its population, as glaring as in Chechnya (Wilhelmsen 2018). For the North Caucasian population, which the Russian leadership ultimately aims to govern, this pattern of corruption and unequal economic distribution creates a sense of exclusion and alienation, not only from the regional elite but also from the Russian state. Moscow's economic policies in the region do not seem to enhance the federal authorities' ability to deliver on the most crucial aspect of the social contract in the Russian context: economic efficiency and development for the population.

## The policy of political participation

The North Caucasus is a very complex region, not only in terms of ethnicity and religion, but also in terms of elites and types of political participation and representation. Elites in this region are closed groups, prefer to remain in the shadows, are highly traditional and replenish their ties through ethnicisation, authoritarianism and kinship (Salgiriev 2016); meanwhile, the study of political participation, representation and recruitment at this 'local' level remains crucial to understanding developments in the region. This account will focus on the extent to which North Caucasians are represented and have a say at the official regional political level, over questions concerning the way they organise their lives. We are interested in whether developments in this field can alleviate the 'deficiencies' of the Russian state in terms of providing security and socio-economic development to the people of this region. There might not be a strong political participatory component to the social contract for most Russians; but it is reasonable to assume that there is one for the peoples of the North Caucasus because of their distinct ways of organising religious and social life. This was already evident during Soviet times, when the first

protests against Soviet rule emerged in the North Caucasus and were underpinned by *ethnic* rather than *socio-economic* concerns (Kozlov 2002).

Looking at participation and representation in today's North Caucasus, Chechnya again emerges as a special case. While the Kadyrovs are Chechens, the strictly authoritarian system which has been erected around them contradicts the traditionally egalitarian and clan-based nature of Chechen society, undermining social institutions where power was negotiated and decisions made in a less top-down fashion (Bullogh 2010 and 2015). We have few means to assess systematically what goes on today, but it is unlikely that any Chechen outside of the Kadyrov clan has any influence over how his republic should be governed. As expressed by Ramzan Kadyrov during a televised meeting with Chechen officials in 2011 'I'm the boss...and no one else but me, understand?' (Yaffa 2016). Federal policies on Chechnya are, for their part, shaped through the personal contractual relations between the Russian president and the leader of the Chechen republic (Wilhelmsen 2018). Kadyrov's militias can act with total impunity in the Federation beyond Chechnya, to the frustration of the Russian law enforcement agencies (Moscow Times 2013). Kadyrov can also secure continued generous funding for his republic simply by complaining publicly at a time when budgets are being cut across the board. In return, Kadyrov keeps Chechnya under control and secures the continued legitimacy of the Putin regime. For example, the presidential party, United Russia, received 96.29 percent of the votes in Chechnya during the September 2016 parliamentary elections (*RIA Novosti* 2016). This speaks of the mutual and personal dependence between Putin and Kadyrov, and shows how policies on Chechnya are decided within this relationship.

The dominance of Kadyrov in the governance of neighbouring republics at the expense of their leaderships is an emerging trend. We have already mentioned Kadyrov's recent attempt, at the meeting of Sufi brotherhoods in Grozny, to define and decide religious affairs in the wider North Caucasus. Moreover, during the past five years, Kadyrov has on several occasions carried out policing functions in neighbouring republics; the Kadyrov regime has 'tried to claim a role for itself in shaping the direction and implementation of regional counterterrorist operations across the rest of the North Caucasus' (Snetkov 2014: 177). While Kadyrov might be perceived in Moscow as a useful tool to control the eastern parts of North Caucasus, the expansion of his influence serves to disenfranchise the leaderships of the neighbouring republics. It also triggers animosity and potential conflict on the popular level: the Chechens are already viewed with great scepticism by many of their neighbouring peoples, who are eager to preserve their own distinctive ways and protect their autonomy.<sup>4</sup>

Kadyrov's increasing influence is a particularly disturbing development because it is complemented by federal policies directed at curbing regional representation and power in the neighbouring republics. In line with Putin's ambition of erecting a 'power vertical' in Russia, and following the terrorist attack in Beslan in 2004, a new system of selecting governors was introduced. It substituted the direct elections of governors and presidents in the regional units with their temporary appointment by the Kremlin, subject to confirmation by regional legislatures. In practice, this has meant that the Kremlin chooses the governors. To begin with, the Kremlin continued to select regional representatives as governors/presidents in the North Caucasus republics, and in some cases incumbent heads were simply re-appointed. This centralisation of government skewed the regional policy agenda towards the Kremlin's: Sokolov (2016) argues that the regional governments were co-opted into the federal cause of

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<sup>4</sup> While the Dagestanis supported the Chechens during the First Chechen War, they did not during the Second War, as evidenced in the treatment of the Chechen Akkintys in Dagestan in 1999 (see for example *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* 17 September and 29 September 1999). Repeated Chechen law enforcement actions on Ingush territory in recent years have given rise to hostile exchanges between Chechnya and Ingushetia at the government level (Vatchagaev 2012).

fighting the war on terrorism and extremism during these years. This implied a loss of autonomy, which was compensated for by high subsidies and the opportunity to suppress internal political opponents in favour of one's own supporters. Moreover, although the system afforded part of the regional elite a key role in governing the republics in line with the Kremlin's agenda, it served to deny political representation and participation to the population at large.<sup>5</sup> In the past few years, this system has seemed to be moving in a direction which gives even the regional elite less of a say in the politics and governance of their region. Again, the 2014 appointment of Sergei Melikov as head of the North Caucasus Federal District is illustrative. Together with the establishment of the North Caucasus Development Ministry that same year, the appointment granted the layer of federal administration *above* the republics more weight. Moreover, although Melikov is a Tabasaran, an ethnic group indigenous to North Caucasus, he is first and foremost a General in the Federal Interior Ministry, with close ties to the core group of *siloviki* in Moscow. The new head of the North Caucasus Federal District, Oleg Belaventsev (appointed July 2016), has the same close affiliation to the centre. In this gradual transfer of official power and representation towards the centre and away from the region, the appointing, by Moscow, of people from outside the republics as governors has proved most significant. In 2013, Ramazan Abdulatipov, a Moscow-based politician, was appointed to lead Dagestan, and Yurii Kokov, a security services officer, was appointed as head of Kabardino-Balkaria. The reasoning behind this shift seems to be that these people are detached from the region's intricate tensions, conflicts and corruption, while forming an integral part of the Moscow elite (Dzutsati 2016).

In addition to this development, Sokolov (2016) observes that the pressure on governors to stay loyal to Moscow's agenda is increasing. There are many ways to interpret the overwhelming support (compared to what was observed in other federal subjects) for the presidential party – United Russia – in the eastern North Caucasus republics during the September 2016 parliamentary elections.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to suggest that the results testify to a willingness of current regional elites to give Moscow what it demands. Moreover, Moscow has not only abandoned the strategy of aligning itself with established local elites, but is even moving to dismantle their regional empires without giving anything in return (Sokolov 2016). This trajectory of decreasing regional representation and participation in the North Caucasus' structures of governance is bound to create resistance to central rule. Although this pertains to all the republics in the region, Dagestan, which has a long tradition of community-based decision-making and direct democracy (Ware and Kisriev 2010, Souleimanov 2011), is particularly vulnerable to the decreasing political space afforded local institutions and elites.

## The policy of identification and belonging

While security, economic development and political participation are key factors in creating loyalty and deference to the state, the latter's ability to project an inclusive identity that encompasses the various social groups on its territory is also a significant and underrated factor,

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that there is a lot of variation between the republics in the eastern part of the North Caucasus. While in Kabardino-Balkaria power is highly centralised, democratic institutions are weak and censorship of the press widespread, Karachai-Cherkessia is more democratic and the population there enjoys more freedom of expression (Gunya 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Chechnya 96.29 percent, Dagestan 88.90 percent, Ingushetia 72.41 percent, Kabardino-Balkaria 77.71 percent, Karachai-Cherkessia 81.67 percent. Only Tatarstan (85.27 percent) Kemerovo (77.33 percent) Mordovia (84.36 percent) and Tuva (82.61 percent) have similar numbers (RIA Novosti 2016).

particularly in a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional polity such as Russia. In Russian scholarly debates, social problems and state terror/repression are given as the primary reasons for radical mobilisation.<sup>7</sup> Such expert explanations omit the wider societal developments that have been taking place within the Russian Federation in recent years, resulting in deep identity divides between North Caucasians and Russians, widespread distrust in the Russian government among much of the North Caucasus' youth, and the view that Islam, rather than the current Russian model, is the ideal model for society (Vatchagaev 2016).

In Soviet times, communist ideology, despite all its faults, resulted in the projection of an inclusive state identity. Regardless of religious or national origin, anyone could become part of socialist society and a citizen of the Soviet state. This overarching ideological construct disappeared when the Soviet Union started to unravel; on the regional level, lingering nationalisms and religious identities reappeared to fill the void. During the 1990s, few new ideas were launched by the rulers in Moscow on what kind of state the Russian Federation *was* and who the people belonging to this state *were*.<sup>8</sup> While this clearly was an inadequate strategy for nation-building, it meant that the ethnically and religiously distinct North Caucasians were not explicitly excluded from the new Russian state by the country's leadership. As I will outline below, this has changed over the past 15 years because certain groups – and in particular the North Caucasians – have been subjected to exclusionary practices by the Russian authorities, while these authorities have simultaneously begun to articulate a less inclusive Russian national identity.

During the Second Chechen War – labelled a counterterrorist campaign – the Russian leadership took care to use the word 'terrorist' rather than 'Chechen' or 'Muslim' to identify Russia's enemy (Wilhelmsen 2017, chapter 5); this was not always the case among deputies in the Federal Assembly, nor in expert and media language, however (Wilhelmsen 2017, chapters 7–9). Moreover, the constant cohabitation of the words 'terrorist' and 'Chechen' in public discourse during the war served to constitute and merge these social groups into one category of danger and otherness. The net effect of the campaign against Chechnya was the social exclusion of Chechnya from Russia and Chechens from Russian society. This exclusion was not only manifested in words, but also through the massive violence employed during the war, as well as other exclusionary practices against Chechens in Russian society (Wilhelmsen 2017, chapters 10–12). One should not underestimate the radical estrangement of the Chechens from Russia as a result: although public opinion polls are not available, Chechnya today bears all the marks of a society insisting on its distinctive identity in opposition to the norms of Russian society. While Ramzan Kadyrov dictates the use of headscarves and traditional codes of conduct to Chechen people, these people would most probably be easily mobilised in defence of their distinct identity against Russian rule, if so called upon.<sup>9</sup>

Building on this logic, the spread of counterterrorist campaigns and the intensified use of force outlined in the second section of this chapter is likely to be fostering a similar feeling of social exclusion from Russia among other groups in the eastern parts of the North Caucasus (Vatchagaev 2016). Such exclusion engenders social cohesion within the threatened group, and

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<sup>7</sup> For example, recent seminars and roundtables organised by the Institute for African Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences (Kavkazsky Uzel 2016) and *Memorial/Novaya Gazeta* (Vatchagaev 2016).

<sup>8</sup> See Kolstø (2016) on how the Russian Federation is far less multicultural than the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union and how the turn to ethno-nationalism in official Russian rhetoric came only after the turn of the century.

<sup>9</sup> Impressions from interaction during seminars with Chechen students from the State University in Grozny in connection with the project 'Dialogue and learning across the Russian/North Caucasian Divide' 2012–2015.

an insistence on preserving the distinctiveness of the group's identity. This problematique is particularly acute for groups with a primarily Salafi or Muslim identity; but it is also a social logic that seems to be at work in relations between Russian authorities and secular activist groups in the region. One example is the relation between the authorities and Circassian activists. While the Russian authorities sought to legitimise repressive security measures before the Sochi Olympics with reference to the protection of the people from terrorism, it was perceived as a policy of exclusion by the social groups who were subjected to it. Circassian activists endured heavy harassment in early 2014 (*Eurasia Daily Monitor* 2014, 8 January). A year on, responses to exclusionary practices manifested themselves in the accentuation of a distinct Circassian identity, and a clearer rejection of Russian rule through the activists' increasingly tough rhetoric on the Russian authorities (*Eurasia Daily Monitor* 2015, 5 January).

These processes of exclusion on the regional level are enhanced by recent developments in the articulation of Russian identity by the Russian leadership. During the past 15 years, that leadership has consciously tried to formulate a history that binds the Tsarist, Soviet and contemporary eras into a coherent narrative. They were also initially careful to project Russia as a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state (Hale 2015, Laruelle 2016). At the same time, there has been a movement in the Russian population towards embracing a more ethnic Russian national identity, visible in the emergence of right-wing nationalist groups like the Russian Civil Union, the Russian Public Movement, the Russian Platform and the New Force party, in public opinion polls and indeed during the first mass demonstrations against the Putin regime in autumn 2011.<sup>10</sup> To some extent this insistence on a more Russian identity among Russians themselves is a result of the mobilisation during the 'anti-terrorist campaigns' in Chechnya, produced in juxtaposition to North Caucasian identity (Wilhelmsen 2017) the numbers show a rise in xenophobia directed against North Caucasians among the Russian population following the Second Chechen War.<sup>11</sup> The centrality of North Caucasians as a significant Other in the new Russian nationalist movement was also demonstrated in the 2011 campaign to 'Stop feeding the Caucasus' (RT 2011). As was noted by several analysts, the North Caucasus and the North Caucasians were increasingly construed as 'foreign' to Russia in nationalist milieus, and there were demands for apartheid-like policies, or for separating the North Caucasus from Russia (Markedonov 2013, Petrov 2013).

In efforts to offset what seemed like an emerging protest movement headed by Russian nationalists, the Russian leadership moved to adopt a more ethnic state identity (Hale 2016). In January 2012, Putin wrote that 'the Russian people are state-forming [*gosudarstvoobrazuyushchy*] by the very fact of Russia's existence. The great mission of [ethnic] Russians is to unite and bind civilisation' (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 23 January). With the annexation of Crimea, the accentuation of Russianness as constitutive of Russia's state identity became even more explicit in official rhetoric (see, for example, Putin 2014). Judging by official statements in the past couple of years, the Russian leadership is retreating to a less ethno-nationalist state identity more fitting for a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state such as the Russian Federation (Pain 2016: 72, Laruelle 2016); but the Russian public might still continue to pressure and challenge its leadership to articulate a more exclusionary identity, and the leadership may have to respond.<sup>12</sup> This dilemma was amply illustrated during the Russian

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<sup>10</sup> For a thorough account of the new Russian nationalism see Kolstø and Blakkisrud (2016).

<sup>11</sup> For a collection of statistics that illustrate the sharp divide between Chechens/North Caucasians and Russians see the 2013 report by the Valdai Club available at [http://vid-1.rian.ru/ig/valdai/Russian\\_Identity\\_2013\\_rus.pdf](http://vid-1.rian.ru/ig/valdai/Russian_Identity_2013_rus.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> As Hale (2016) notes Russia is ruled through 'patronal presidentialism', which means that although president Putin is constitutionally strong and also wields power through extensive networks of

President's latest annual call-in show, where Putin (2016) confirmed his support for Ramzan Kadyrov's rule over Chechnya. But at the same time, his representation of the Chechens/Caucasians had to conform to representations among the Russian audience:

One needs to understand what sort of people they are... Considering the fact that we are talking about the Caucasus where people are hot-headed, the very involvement of these people in a governing job at a high political level is not an easy thing.

Thus, the social differentiation and exclusion of North Caucasians in the Russian Federation is clearly expressed in words at the official, as well as at the popular levels. But it also materialises in concrete policies that make North Caucasian lives more dispensable than those of other Russians. As Pavel Felgenhauer (2016) recently commented on the news that the Chechen *Vostok* and *Zapad* Battalions will be sent to Syria as the only Russian forces to take part in ground operations, 'the majority of Russians do not really consider Chechnya or the Chechens as truly Russian, so potential Chechen casualties in Syria will not cause unwanted alarm or tension among the general population'. Current trends in Russian policies of identification and belonging might undermine the basis for loyalty and deference to the Russian state among the populations of the North Caucasus, but here, once again, the Chechens might turn out to be a special case.

## Conclusion

Since Putin came to power, Russian policies in the eastern part of the North Caucasus have been dominated by the use of force. While this has particularly been the case in the treatment of the Chechen population, it has in recent years also affected the populations of Chechnya's neighbouring republics. In their efforts to protect Russia from terrorism and extremism, the Russian authorities have subjected ever larger sections of the civilian inhabitants in the wider region to such policies. This situation is perhaps inevitable where the insurgency is deeply intertwined with the local population, and where Islamism has increased its social reach, but it is also the result of the growing influence of security actors in the federal apparatus of governance in the North Caucasus. The counterterrorist campaigns in the North Caucasus over the past 18 years may have increased security for Russia and the Russians, but for large parts of the local population, these campaigns have resulted in insecurity. It is unlikely that a state can subject part of the population to this type of physical exclusion over a long period without triggering a quest for other sources of security.

This situation becomes particularly acute because of its reinforcement by a growing identity divide between Russians and North Caucasians. The latter are increasingly viewed as foreign to Russia: as we have seen, there are even voices in favour of excluding North Caucasus from the Russian territorial state. This new rejection of the region even impinges on official articulations of identity, threatening to fracture the state-wide and inclusive national identity that the Russian leadership has sought to construct. The North Caucasians seem to be prone to a similar rejection of the Russians. There is hardly a Russian left in Chechnya, and we see the same kind of exodus taking place in the other republics of the eastern part of North Caucasus (Petrov 2013, Markedonov 2016). Moreover, as an alternative identity and source of social community, Islam will continue to have enormous traction among groups of Muslim heritage.

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personal acquaintances, he is still dependent on popular support and is highly sensitive to public opinion.

This process of revival is not going to stop any time soon. For those who have a strong ethnic identity – such as the Circassians – the tendency to retreat into and strengthen that smaller, ethnic social unit will increase if exclusionary state practices and narratives persist. A policy of economic inclusion and development has been consciously pursued by the Russian leadership in the North Caucasus, in an effort to curb extremism and terrorism and thereby make the widespread use of force superfluous in the longer run. But even this potential instrument of inclusion as a counterbalance to the policies of force is becoming dysfunctional. Not only have these populations long been excluded from their share in economic development due to corruption and clientelism at the elite level, but economic crisis and growing discontent in the Russian elite with the flow of money away from the federal budget, directly into the North Caucasian republics' could result in a sharp decline in these flows.

Finally, the recent move by the Russian government towards decreasing North Caucasian representation and participation in regional politics, in a challenge to established regional elites, is bound to create resistance and shift the balance between *force* and *inclusion* in favour of the former. Giving the North Caucasians a say in how to deal with the substantial security and economic challenges ahead could have functioned as a safety valve: regional elites would have had to carry responsibility for a coming crisis, they would have a stake in continuing Moscow's rule, and thus less opportunity and interest in leading resistance against it. While Derlugian (2005) identified a lack of leadership as an obstacle to revolution in the North Caucasus, precisely because incumbent elites enjoyed Moscow's support, this obstacle is about to be removed. Moreover, while representation at the highest federal level might not be so important for the population of a region that is becoming increasingly distinct from Russia in cultural, religious and social terms, *regional* representation and the possibility of having a say over the organisation of life within the republics has become all the more important. The lack of such representation and participation adds to the feeling of alienation from the Russian state among the North Caucasian populations; and, worryingly, it makes them easier targets for any future mobilisation against Russian rule by disgruntled regional elites.

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