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Russian (Re)centralization and its Effects on the Insurgency in the Caucasus: Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria

Introduction

The Russian Federation ended its costly and longstanding intervention in the Chechen Republic on April 16, 2009, fifteen years after the decision to intervene was first made by Boris Yeltsin.\(^1\) Since then, the situation in the North Caucasus has taken an interesting but dangerous turn. The Chechen Republic is no longer the locus of insurgency-related attacks and deaths; instead, irredentist movements have significantly extended their operations into neighboring republics. Specifically, the Republic of Dagestan, the Republic of Ingushetia, and the Kabardino-Balkar Republic (KBR) have seen drastic increases in the number of insurgency related attacks and casualties.\(^2\) In 2009, for the first time, each of these three republics had rates of violence that significantly outweighed those in the Chechen Republic. The emergence of these new hotbeds of violence demonstrates the political complexity of states in the North Caucasus, as strategies that proved somewhat effective in Chechnya have failed in other contexts. As a result, instability and unrest have risen despite Russia’s intensive counter-insurgency policy in the region.\(^3\)

Which trends help explain recent upticks in violence and insurgent activity? In a complex multivariable geopolitical environment such as the North Caucasus external management of local affairs creates resistance and counter-reaction. For the past two hundred years, the Caucasus has been subject to Russian rule, which exacerbates local self-determination campaigns and violent rebellions. In the current Russian federal system, this dynamic involves strengthening the powers of the federal government in Moscow at the expense of the individual republics. This model of

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\(^1\) O’Loughlin, Holland, and Witmer, 596.
\(^2\) Ibid., 597–598.
\(^3\) Vatchagaev, “Victory over North Caucasus Insurgency Remains Elusive for Moscow.”
governance nurtures a vertical hierarchy of power with Moscow at the apex. Local and regional organizations are thus often manipulated and restructured by the federal government to coordinate regional objectives with federal goals.

Recentralization of the Russian federal system has resulted in “tit-for-tat” exchanges in the North Caucasus, whereby Moscow directly appoints the leaders of ethnic republics deemed “security risks” and then coerces those leaders into maintaining the endemic corruption that cedes Moscow total political control. In turn, a growing number of citizens have become disenchanted with regional politics and are more likely to express anti-Moscow sentiment, resulting in increased violence throughout the Caucasus. These trends partially explain why certain ethnic republics in the North Caucasus have been so prone to violence. Additionally, reactions to political recentralization can explain the shift in violence from the Chechen Republic to its neighbors. Each republic’s situation is contextually different, which is precisely why applying a top-down, one-size-fits-all model has resulted in the failure of regional governments to respond to social unrest.

Using the Republics of Dagestan, Ingushetia, and the KBR as case studies, this article first examines various approaches that have been used to explain the increase in violence in the North Caucasus. Then, by analyzing insurgent activities and the Russian practice of direct presidential appointment in a historical context, it demonstrates how Russian federal policy has resulted in increased instability in the region. Using geo-spatial analysis, John O’Loughlin and his coauthors have demonstrated that there has not only been an overall increase in violence in the North Caucasus, but also a significant shift in the distribution of violence throughout the republics.4 While current literature has generated numerous explanations for the increase in

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violence, few studies have investigated why the distribution of violence has changed so significantly since 2007. Qualitative studies of Russian federalism emphasize the impact of direct presidential appointment, or the so-called Kadyrov model, on Chechen politics, but do not analyze recent developments in other republics with similar models. This article expands on existing literature regarding the development of Russian “power vertical” federalist policy and its effects on insurgent violence. It seeks to demonstrate a strong correlation between failing Russian federal policy and the strength of the current insurgency.

While extant literature displays consensus in predicting an increase of violence in the Caucasus from 2007 onward, substantial disagreements remain over the origins of the violence. Many analysts mistakenly default to the “single-factor fallacy,” which assumes that one cause or policy is responsible for the entirety of the increase in violence. The two causes that authors most frequently cite as responsible for the development of violence in the Caucasus are 1) the failure of Russian regional policy (“Chechenization”); or 2) the increased influence of international Salafi-based jihadism on regional insurgent movements (“jihadization”). Scarcely any studies compare the two factors and their effects on one another. Proponents of the second explanation claim that the increasing prevalence of international terrorist groups has had an impact on religious ideology in the Caucasus and that this development is responsible for the increase in violence. Gordon Hahn, for example, argues that advocates of “Chechenization” unfairly blame the Russian government and fail to account for the development of Islamic

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5 The so-called Kadyrov model receives its name from Akhmad Kadyrov (President of the Chechen Republic, 2003–2004) and his son Ramzan Kadyrov (Head of Chechen Republic, 2007–) both of who were directly appointed to positions of leadership in Chechnya.


7 King and Menon, 30.

8 Hahn, 17.
extremism and its role in the Caucasus.\textsuperscript{9} This approach, however, ignores the underlying sociopolitical conditions necessary for individuals to prefer Salafi-jihadist Islam. The increased “jihadization” of the insurgency in the Caucasus is a development of the past ten to fifteen years only, whereas violent responses toward external Russian rule characterize two hundred years of Caucasian history before the advent of modern Islamic extremism. Hahn’s explanation also fails to account for the decrease in violence in Chechnya, the historical hotbed of Islamic extremism in the region. Analysis of religious shifts is important for determining how the modern insurgency utilizes ideology as a tool for political gain. To identify these shifts as the underlying cause of violence, however, assumes that individuals turn to radical religious beliefs randomly and unwittingly rather than in response to dissatisfaction with the sociopolitical state of affairs. Determining the causes of political instability, corruption, and poverty is therefore paramount to understanding violence in the Caucasus.

This article draws on both sets of explanations and argues that while the perceived failure of Russian governance is a major driving force of the insurgency, it is still important to distinguish between “root causes” and “proximate causes” of violence. The Islamic institutions (e.g. judicial, administrative, police, etc.) established by jihadist groups in the Caucasus are intended to provide an alternative to Russian-controlled politics.\textsuperscript{10} Social perception of Russian “power vertical” governing structures has the potential to convince residents of the Caucasus that only jihad can create regional governmental frameworks that act independently of Moscow. “Jihadization” is the most recent iteration of resistance in the Caucasus to centralized rule, and is thus a “proximate cause” of violence. Because the negative reaction to Russian rule is the “root


\textsuperscript{10} Grebennikov, 163.
cause” of increased violence in the Caucasus, it warrants further investigation into how Russia politically manages its ethnic republics. The history of Russian federalist policy in the North Caucasus after 1991 is explored below.

**Russian Federalism in the North Caucasus: An Overview**

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 created immense problems for the new Russian leadership in governing and managing its remaining territory. Fifteen Union Republics gradually declared independence from the USSR, and many ethnic subdivisions therein demanded self-rule. The new Russian Federation, however, maintained administration of the former Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSR) in the North Caucasus, including Dagestan, the former Chechen-Ingush ASSR, and the KBR, as well as other ethnic republics throughout its vast territory. The North Caucasian republics differed from other ethnic republics because they were especially underdeveloped and plagued by inter- and intra-ethnic strife.11 Boris Yeltsin was faced with the herculean task of reconciling the constitutions of each of the twenty-two ethnic republics in Russia’s territory into a single federal model. Nineteen of these republican constitutions contained conditions that were directly in breach of the proposed federal constitution and its guidelines for power sharing. The individual republics would not budge, so Yeltsin opted to consolidate the power of the federal government over the ethnic republics by dampening the power of regional leaders.12 This feature of Yeltsin’s policy, known as “executive federalism,” allows for local self-governance but it is highly managed by the executive branch in order to synchronize regional and national politics.13

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11 Cuffe and Siroky, 43.
12 Douglas, 23.
13 Ibid., 21.
The Russian Federation was officially established in 1992 under a federal system that combined self-rule by local authorities and joint rule between the federation and its subjects. Of the eighty-five federal subjects, twenty-two are republics, which, under Article 5 of the Russian Constitution, are designated for a particular ethnic group and, depending on the republic, are allowed some degree of local self-governance.\textsuperscript{14} Dagestan, Ingushetia, and the KBR are all republics in the federal system. Due to the early difficulties in creating the Russian constitutional framework, however, “federalism” was implemented in theory but never consolidated. Political and economic volatility after 1992 placed the formation of democratic institutions (especially at the regional or local level) on the back burner in favor of the centralization of the federal government. The 1993 Constitution as well as numerous bilateral treaties between Moscow and the regions created a patchwork of federal policy that was dependent largely on interpretation. To this day, Russia remains a \textit{de jure} federalist state, but almost certainly not a \textit{de facto} one.\textsuperscript{15}

The lack of local and regional government structures exacerbated the volatility of the already unstable Caucasus ethnic republics during the transitional period from Soviet to post-Soviet Russian rule. The independence of the Union Republics from the USSR stirred intense nationalist feelings. Seizing on the dilapidation of local Caucasian economies that occurred under \textit{perestroika}, parties demanding ethnic, national, or regional independence emerged.\textsuperscript{16} In 1991, a group of Chechen rebels led by Dzhokhar Dudaev rejected the federative documents proposed by Yeltsin and declared Chechnya a sovereign state.\textsuperscript{17} Yeltsin initiated military operations in November 1991 out of concern for Russian territorial integrity were Chechnya to become independent. His efforts failed to unseat Dudayev. However, in the midst of the conflict,

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{16} Evangelista, 16–17.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 19.
the Republic of Ingushetia split from Chechnya as ethnic tensions between the Ingush and Ossete 
ethnic groups heightened. Ingushetia reluctantly joined the Russian Federation in 1993, but the 
new Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (CRI), under Dudayev, refused to accede to the federative 
treaty.

In 1994, the Russian Army formally invaded Chechnya, attacking the capital city of 
Grozny. The ensuing conflict, referred to as the First Chechen War, resulted in numerous civilian 
casualties and the obliteration of the CRI. However, it was Vladimir Putin’s Second Chechen 
War (1999–2009) that “gave [him] an unbeatable argument for launching a campaign to solidify 
the so-called “vertical power” intended to restore Russia’s dominance in the North Caucasus.”

The second iteration of the conflict started when Chechen rebels staged military operations in the 
nearby region of Dagestan. The extension of operations to Dagestan reveals the greatest 
difference between the two Chechen wars: while the first conflict was focused solely on Chechen 
national aspirations, the second conflict had a distinctly trans-Caucasian motivation. Shamil 
Basayev, head of the International Islamic Brigade, sought to establish an Islamic emirate in the 
Caucasus and created vilayats or administrative divisions in several of the republics, including 
Dagestan, Ingushetia, and the KBR. In response to this increased insurgency inside and outside 
Chechnya, Putin drastically limited the autonomy of several of the Caucasian republics, 
collapsing the federative framework of Russian state under the guise of “national security.”

Along with intrusive security crackdowns called zachistki (clean-ups) and other FSB 
(Federal Security Service) operations, the Russian “war on terror” also caused overwhelming 
changes in the administration of the Caucasian republics. Since 2004, Putin has adopted a

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18 Hunter, 121–22.
19 Grebennikov, 163.
20 Cornell, 124
21 Ibid., 131–36. A vilayat (Tsez: wilayat, wilayatyobi) is an administrative division descendent from the Ottoman 
Empire and still used in the Caucasus today.
strategy of abolishing popular regional elections for presidents of the republics in favor of direct appointment from Moscow in regions deemed as “security threats.” Additionally, in 2010, then president Medvedev established regional federal districts intended to provide an intermediary between local governments and Moscow. The North Caucasus Federal District, currently headed by Russian ex-general and Dagestan native Sergei Melikov, serves the purpose of synchronizing regional leaders’ initiatives with those favored by Moscow. The argument for increased recentralization is perpetually made on security grounds: Moscow’s military operations in the North Caucasus are strengthened when regional leaders are sympathetic to Russian counter-terror concerns. This strategy was implemented most famously in Chechnya, where in 2000, the Kadyrov family was granted explicit rule over the entirety of the republic despite waning popular support. Since Ramzan Kadyrov effectively stabilized Chechnya, this model of direct executive appointment has become the norm in Russia’s institutional interactions with the North Caucasus. Ethnic republics in other regions of Russia vote to elect their own regional presidents, but, as of 2015, in the Caucasus, only the Republic of Adygea has the ability to elect its own leader. While recentralization has occurred throughout the Russian Federation, the Caucasus is the only region restricted from holding republican elections because it is considered a “security risk” by Moscow.

Insurgency in the North Caucasus: An Exploration of Three Republics

Applying the direct leadership appointment model used in Chechnya to other North Caucasus republics creates conditions that “[are] the kind most likely to provoke revolution:

24 Ibid., 597.
25 Dzutsev, “Kabardino-Balkaria Joins Russian Regions Not Allowed to Elect Governors.”
simultaneously repressive, patrimonial, and organizationally weak.”26 As O’Loughlin argues, “export of the personalistic leadership model associated with Chechenization ‘to Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Dagestan only seem[s] to provoke militant Islamist reactions.’”27 The ongoing insurgency in the Caucasus is a counter-reaction to organizationally weak and repressive local governments. Centralized control of these distinctly multiethnic regions has led to inter-ethnic competition, corruption, and sectarian violence. The following sections discuss how the repudiation of self-governance in Dagestan, Ingushetia, and the KBR has resulted in an increasingly dangerous security atmosphere in each of these republics.

Republic of Dagestan

The Republic of Dagestan would be a formidable nightmare for any model of governance. In an area smaller than West Virginia, forty distinct ethno-linguistic groups live, none of which comprise a simple majority.28 There is a long tradition of inter-ethnic strife between these groups, as well as a very pronounced history of mutual resistance to Russian rule. As a result, most of the republic’s history has been dominated by insurgent violence and social instability. The new millennium introduced the specter of Islamic conflict as yet another dimension of Dagestan’s ongoing instability, especially as extremist Salafi clerics began to challenge more traditional Sufi teachings.29 Additionally, the fact that the Dagestan-based cleric Aliaskhab Kebekov, more commonly known by his nom du guerre, Ali Abu Mukhammad, replaced the Chechen warlord Dokka Umarov (also known as “Russia’s Bin Laden”) after Umarov’s death in March 2014 as leader of militant jihadist organization known as the Caucasus Emirate indicates the growing

26 O’Loughlin, Holland, and Witmer, 601.
27 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 301.
importance of Dagestan for the new insurgency in the Caucasus. These conditions demonstrate the immense difficulty the Russian Federation faces in managing its most ethnically diverse republic.

Dagestan was the test case for Russian sovereign democracy, a philosophy that implies the need for “managed and recentralized political development,” especially in cases of internal threats to territorial integrity. Federalist policy is an important aspect of the broader political philosophy of sovereign democracy, which seeks to ensure Russian territorial control while preventing external influence on the way Russia manages internal democratic affairs. This distinctly Russian idea of democracy was introduced by Deputy Chief of Staff Vladislav Surkov, one of Putin’s most faithful allies. Amidst the increasing militarization of the Caucasus, Surkov supported the decision to abolish regional elections for the President of Dagestan. In 2006, in hopes of quelling ongoing instability, Putin directly appointed Mukhu Aliyev, a stringent counter-terrorist and Russian ally, as President of the Republic of Dagestan. Unfortunately for Surkov and Putin, “the opposite result occurred. The region became mired in corruption, inter-ethnic conflict, and rising crime, while attacks and bombings organized by resistance movements continue to occur almost daily.” Despite the adverse reaction to Moscow’s choice of Aliyev, the policy of directly appointing Dagestan’s president continues.

In 2010, Aliyev was replaced by Magomedsalam Magomedov, who was subsequently forced by Putin to resign in 2013 and replaced, in turn, by the current president, Ramazan Abdulatipov. Each of Dagestan’s three appointed presidents and their associated federal employees were hand-selected by Moscow from Dagestan’s local political scene, which is

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30 Vatchagaev, “North Caucasus Militants Announce New Leader to Replace Umarov.”
31 Trofino, 258.
32 Ibid., 258.
comprised of an intricate network of competitive ethnic clans. Aliyev and Abdulatipov are Avars, members of the largest ethnic population in Dagestan, while Magomedov is a Dargin, the second-largest group. Their political influence comes directly from their connection to elite members of their ethnic groups. Abdulatipov and many of his cabinet members, for example, are Avars from the mountainous Tlyaratinsky District.\textsuperscript{33} Because the discretion to determine who has political power in Dagestan now rests exclusively with the Russian federal government, the result is a “desperate struggle of ethnic elites for political power and for an ethnic division of interests.”\textsuperscript{34} Direct political appointments have exacerbated local rivalries in Dagestan such that “political power has become the main capital resource in the republics of the North Caucasus, where ethnic clans scramble to obtain power at all cost, [which] precisely reflect their views of the methods needed to ensure their economic well-being.”\textsuperscript{35} Moscow’s control of presidential appointments adds fuel to the fire of local ethnic disputes by centralizing power in the hands of bureaucratic, often corrupt ethnic elites who represent the interests of their own ethno-political group rather than those of Dagestan as a whole.

The resulting corruption and nepotism in regional politics exacerbates local tensions and provides citizens with a strong incentive to join the insurgency. Currently, “Dagestan more closely resembles a war zone than a functional law-abiding Russian republic,” where the rule of law weakens each time Russia seeks to shuffle around leadership.\textsuperscript{36} Moscow’s constant replacement of Dagestan’s president for the sake of its own national security interests has not only failed to ensure regional security, but instead perpetuates the anti-central government mentality that engenders violence. A 2008 report by the International Crisis Group cited the

\textsuperscript{33} Dzutsev, “Abdulatipov’s Staff Selection in Dagestan Reflects His Clan Base.”
\textsuperscript{34} Grebennikov,162.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Ibid.}, 162.
\textsuperscript{36} Trofino, 259.
perceived failure and corruption of the regional government as a primary motivator of increased societal violence in the republic. Ali Aliev suggests that in the long term “the situation in Dagestan won’t change for the better. Partisan warfare is going to continue endlessly…and one of the main reasons for that is the corruption and clan mentality of the leading agencies in the country, which encourage all this.”

Recent discussions about the potential firing of Abdulatipov bring the issue of Russian recentralization in Dagestan to the forefront. If Dagestan’s first three appointed presidents are any indication, Abdulatipov’s future replacement is unlikely to change the Dagestani status quo in any meaningful way.

Republic of Ingushetia

The Republic of Ingushetia is the smallest of the republics in the Russian Federation and also one of the poorest. It is the most ethnically homogenous of the three republics discussed in this study, as the ethnic Ingush people comprise about 60% of the population. In 1944, as part of a mass geopolitical reconfiguration of the Caucasus staged by the NKVD, the Ingush were deported to Central Asia along with several other North Caucasian groups. Ingush lands in the Prigorodny District of Ingushetia were consequently awarded to the Ossetes by Stalin, sparking cross-border conflict when the Ingush returned to the Caucasus during the Khrushchev era. The Ingush-Ossete conflict and the spillover of violence from Chechnya next door created underlying tensions that threaten the stability of the already destitute republic.

Like other Caucasian republics, Ingushetia has also had a frequently rotating cast of presidents. At the height of the Second Chechen War in 2001, Ingush president and ex-Afghan war hero Ruslan Aushev was moderately successful in quelling insurgency violence and ethnic

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38 Dzutsev, “Head of Dagestan Faces Criticism from Moscow,”
39 O’Loughlin, Holland, and Witmer, 605.
40 Ware, “Has the Russian Federation Been Chechenised?” 503.
conflict by providing economic support directed at would-be combatants. Aushev, however, was highly critical of Moscow’s war effort in Chechnya, and, in return, the Kremlin manipulated regional elections so that steadfast FSB colonel Murat Zyazikov defeated Aushev in the next election.\textsuperscript{41} Zyazikov’s rule was marked by both “negative public response to his placement in office, as well as a subsequent harsh crack-down on rebellious and dissident elements in the region.”\textsuperscript{42} In the midst of steadily declining social conditions related to government corruption, the increase in FSB anti-terrorist operations implemented by Zyazikov “fueled a violent resistance with Islamist aspirations” in Ingushetia.\textsuperscript{43} At the height of the violence from 2004 to 2008, Ingushetia saw attacks on government targets nearly every day, with Zyazikov himself as the target of multiple assassination attempts.\textsuperscript{44}

In contrast to Dagestan, where ethnic disunity prevented a popular uprising against Moscow’s direct appointments, the Ingush majority united to demand Zyazikov’s removal and the return of Aushev to presidency. In 2008, Zyazikov resigned fearing a mass popular uprising.\textsuperscript{45} Moscow refused to accept Aushev as president, instead installing Yunus-bek Yevkurov, a Russian military intelligence officer with some popular support. Yevkurov accepted Medvedev’s five-year appointment as President of the Republic of Ingushetia and still remains in power today. In his five years as president, Yevkurov has achieved mixed results for the republic: although the total number of insurgency-based attacks has decreased, attacks on government targets have increased. Yevkurov’s support in Ingushetia also declined substantially after charges of corruption and perceived capitulation to Moscow’s demands surfaced.\textsuperscript{46} The increase in

\textsuperscript{41} O’Loughlin, Holland, and Witmer, 605.
\textsuperscript{42} Osborne, 21–23.
\textsuperscript{43} Ware, “Has the Russian Federation Been Chechenised?” 501.
\textsuperscript{44} Osborne, 23–24.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{46} Ware, “Has the Russian Federation Been Chechenised?” 504.
insurgency violence targeted specifically at the government and declining support levels for Yevkurov demonstrate the “general mistrust of Moscow and its actions in the region, including the appointment of leaders such as Zyazikov and Yevkurov.” In 2009, Yevkurov was the target of a car bomb that hospitalized him and killed the Deputy Chairman of the Supreme Court of Ingushetia. Just before the end of his first term in July 2013, Yevkurov resigned as head of the republic, but was reappointed anyway by Putin in January 2014.

The security situation in Ingushetia “[depends] on Moscow’s ability to appoint good leadership,” and continued support for Yevkurov could continue trends of increased violence in the future. Yevkurov and Zyazikov have experienced low levels of political support because their regimes have been mired in corruption, most apparently during Russia’s legislative elections when Ingushetia’s leadership exaggerated both turnout rates and election results. During the 2011 Duma elections, Russia’s Central Election Commission (CEC) reported an 86% turnout rate in Ingushetia. Neutral and opposition observers agreed that the actual turnout could not have been more than 15%. United Russia, Putin’s electoral party, won a reported 90.96% of the total vote. The results suggest that votes were blatantly manipulated on the regional level. Given the security conditions in Ingushetia today, it is reasonable to conclude that most of its citizens are not political supporters of Putin or his party.

The example of election fraud in Ingushetia reveals the second major problem with directly appointing regional leaders: in return for their appointment, presidents such as Yevkurov are expected to engineer local elections to fit the demands of the ruling party elite in Moscow. Currently, a “system of incentives exists whereby regional political elites have, as their primary

47 Osborne, 27.
48 O’Loughlin, Holland, and Witmer, 606.
49 Orttung, 514–42.
50 Arghir, 4.
51 Ibid., 4–5.
incentive, that of currying favor with the Kremlin.”52 Because Moscow now controls who is in power in individual republics, party bosses are trapped in a prisoner’s dilemma where their only strategic imperative becomes “support the incumbent or suffer the consequences.”53 In turn, these bosses experience increasing pressure to manipulate the elections “better” than their counterparts in other republics. Myagkov and Ordeshook thus explain, “with no boss wanting to show less support for Putin than any other, each was compelled to exert the maximum effort to that end, fair or foul and regardless of how absurd.”54 Moscow’s chokehold on all top-level political positions in the region creates leaders who are responsible to Moscow, but not to their own people, which goes against popular perceptions of power and prompts locals to join the insurgency.

Russian direct political appointment of leaders in Ingushetia has “done little to address the long-term drivers of violence: distrust of officials among the region’s youth, the cycle of attack and retaliation, and the continued lack of an open and independent media to provide feedback mechanisms for political discontent.”55 Party elites frequently reject populist politicians like Aushev in favor of more Moscow-friendly candidates thus perpetuating the vertical power scheme that cedes Moscow full control of Ingushetian affairs. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the insurgency in Ingushetia will continue to attack high-value government targets as long as regional institutions are perceived to be corrupt and unresponsive to the needs of the Ingush people. Moscow has created a vicious cycle by appointing leaders, inducing them to falsify regional elections, and then firing them when the situation takes a more violent turn. This system ignores the critical link between perceived corruption and insurgency violence.

52 Myagkov and Ordeshook, 387.
53 Ibid., 379.
54 Ibid., 387.
55 O’Loughlin, Holland, and Witmer, 606.
Kabardino-Balkar Republic (KBR)

The Kabardino-Balkar Republic (also known as Kabardino-Balkaria or the KBR) is named after its two largest ethnic groups, the Kabardins and the Balkars. The Kabardins are a subgroup of the Circassians, a confederacy of ethnic groups that once controlled the territory stretching from the modern-day KBR to the coast of the Black Sea. Although the Kabardin population suffered significantly during the nineteenth century when the Circassians were expelled, the Kabardins remain one of the few Circassian ethnic groups left in the Caucasus.\textsuperscript{56} Their Turkic neighbors, the Balkars, were deported, along with the Ingush and Chechens, during the Stalin era.\textsuperscript{57} In the modern KBR, Kabardins, who make up approximately 50% of the population, control a majority of the republic’s economic and political resources. The remaining population, comprised of Balkars as well as other ethnic groups, is severely underrepresented among the political and economic elite of the KBR.\textsuperscript{58} Ethnic tensions between the Kabardins, Balkars, and other groups have threatened to divide the KBR into multiple constituent parts.

In contrast to Dagestan and Ingushetia, insurgency violence in the KBR was practically nonexistent before the Chechen War.\textsuperscript{59} Thus, the KBR provides a useful test case for determining the link between recentralization efforts and increased instability. In other republics of the North Caucasus, the abolition of local elections and the direct appointment of leaders occurred in response to already deteriorating security conditions. In Kabardino-Balkaria, central control of local politics was instituted preemptively to prevent the spread of violence into the region. Before 2003, there had never been a major insurgency attack in the KBR. The turning point came when Putin appointed businessman Arsen Kanokov to head the republic in September 2005. This

\textsuperscript{56} Arutiunov, 1.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{58} Ware, “Has the Russian Federation Been Chechenised?” 501–502.
\textsuperscript{59} O’Loughlin, Holland, and Witmer, 607.
provoked an immediate attack by Shamil Basayev and his supporters on the capital city of Nalchik in October of the same year. The attack fell short of its plan to destroy FSB headquarters in Nalchik, but did transform the KBR into a permanent new battlefield for anti-Russian insurgency in the Caucasus.

Although the KBR is relatively peaceful compared to Dagestan or Ingushetia, there are growing fears that continued recentralization could reignite ethnic tensions between the Kabardins and the Balkars, leading to greater instability. In December of 2013, Kanokov unexpectedly resigned and was replaced by General Yuri Kokov. Despite Kanokov’s improvements to the Kabardino-Balkarian economy, his presidency was doomed from the beginning. The fact that he was a Moscow-elected president in a Caucasian republic was sufficient to trigger violence and cause his resignation.

The situation in the KBR is expected to deteriorate further under Kokov, especially in light of the Kabardino-Balkar parliament’s decision to ban all local elections for federal government positions in favor of direct appointment by Moscow. The centralization of power and Russian intervention in local affairs have “benefited the Kabardin elite at the Balkar’s expense, and have exacerbated smouldering ethnic tensions,” resulting in growing violence in the KBR. Moreover, Russian control of Kabardino-Balkar political elections has caused disproportionate representation in favor of the Kabardins and explains why only ethnic Kabardins have been appointed to presidential office since the formation of the KBR.

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60 Ware, “Has the Russian Federation Been Chechenised?” 501.
61 Dzutsev, “Kabardino-Balkarian Governor’s Resignation Likely Tied to Sochi Olympics.”
62 Dzutsev, “Kabardino-Balkaria Joins Russian Regions Not Allowed to Elect Governors.”
63 Ware, “Has the Russian Federation Been Chechenised?” 502.
Lessons and Concluding Thoughts

This paper shows that in order to understand why there has been an increase in insurgency attacks in Dagestan, Ingushetia, and the KBR, it is necessary to take into account the unique history and sociopolitical environment of each republic. In fact, acute ethnic, social, and political differences between the republics strengthen the argument against governing them the same way. Since Russian external rule was established in the 1860s, the political situation in the North Caucasus has been determined on the basis of which ethnic groups can acquire political legitimacy. Dagestan is a multiethnic republic with a plethora of minority groups each seeking to maximize control, while Ingushetia has one majority group competing with many smaller groups. The KBR, on the other hand, is characterized by a dyadic struggle between its two main ethnic groups. Tensions between ethnic groups lead to violence and marginalization, both of which are important drivers of insurgency formation in the republics. Ignoring these core ethno-political struggles can result in the failure of effective governance.

While emphasizing differences, it is also important not to overlook the considerable similarities between the three republics, and especially the fact that all three regions are essentially governed by Moscow. Similar trends of instability in all three republics can thus be traced back to their administrative system and Moscow’s interventionist politics. Russian federal policy favors a top-down system of government that approaches the North Caucasus region in a uniform way. All three republics are therefore plagued with high rates of corruption, clan-based competition for political power, election fraud, and inter-ethnic conflict. These conflicts play out in unique ways, depending on the ethno-political situation in each individual republic, although the same result—an increase in insurgency violence—inevitably occurs. A contextual analysis of

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64 Grebennikov, 162.
each republic’s history and ethnic makeup serves as proof of the fact that a uniform framework of government cannot be effectively applied to the North Caucasus.

Supporters of direct appointment by Moscow point to decreased rates of violence in the Chechen Republic as proof of the viability of this model. Because of the differences between republics, the situation in Chechnya, however, cannot explain why Dagestan, Ingushetia, and the KBR have witnessed increased rates of violence. Regardless of whether recentralization has stabilized Chechnya, current Russian federal policy correlates with additional instability in many other multiethnic republics. Additionally, using Chechnya as a “case example” of successful federal direct appointment is not sufficient to justify the extension of such policies elsewhere in the Russian Federation. For example, it is still unclear whether the drop in violence in Chechnya actually proves that Ramzan Kadyrov and his allies “stabilized” the republic. Violence, corruption, and clan conflict are as prevalent in Chechnya as they were before 2007, despite the decrease in insurgent attacks. The Kadyrov regime, which governs Chechnya with an “iron fist,” has led to violent crackdowns and human rights violations. These tactics undoubtedly provide a strong “push factor” for individuals to join insurgent factions. The model of direct appointment has thus empirically failed in quelling insurgent violence throughout the North Caucasus.

Although Russia’s formal military involvement in the Caucasus has ended, it continues to hold a tight grip on the region through direct appointment of political officials. The circumvention of regional democratic institutions has resulted in increased rates of insurgency violence because leaders, appointed by Moscow, tend to generate an anti-central-government backlash and provoke further inter-ethnic tensions. This dynamic creates a “feedback loop,”

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65 Grebennikov, 164.
where Russia is thrown into a “vicious cycle of horizontal resistance and vertical reaction.”

Each time the security conditions in a certain republic worsen, Russia moves further to centralize the institutions of that republic, exacerbating the issues that motivated the insurgency in the first place. As a result of this vicious cycle, insurgency violence in Dagestan, Ingushetia, and the KBR has risen drastically since the end of the Second Chechen War in 2009. In each region, citizens must choose between two governance options because outside of the Moscow-run regional bureaucracies, the only political institutions that exist are those of Salafi Islam or national independence parties. The corruption and violence associated with centrally administered local politics has caused local Caucasians to support the insurgency as the lesser of two evils. Direct political appointment, therefore, serves only to magnify the resistance, creating a highly volatile security situation throughout Russia’s North Caucasus.

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66 Ware, “Has the Russian Federation Been Chechenised?,” 507

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