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Ethnic competition, radical Islam, and challenges to stability in the Republic of Dagestan

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ABSTRACT

Previous academic work on stability in Dagestan has focused on two potential cleavages, the republic's ethnic diversity and the challenge from radical Islamist groups. Using results from a December 2005 survey, and focusing on Dagestan's six main ethnic groups, this paper investigates attitudes towards the dual topics of the politicization of ethnicity and the relationship between terrorism and Islamism. We find that Dagestanis maintain layered conceptions of identity, and do not attribute violence predominantly to radical Islam in the republic or the wider North Caucasus. Scholars should be aware of Rogers Brubaker's concept of groupism in analyzing not just ethnic groups, but religious movements as well.

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Introduction

Research on Dagestan in the post-Soviet period has noted that the republican leadership has had to “walk a tightrope between nationalism and Islam” (Gammer, 2002: p. 139) in order to maintain political stability. Discussions of nationalism are commonly juxtaposed against institutionalist studies of the breakup of the Soviet Union, which emphasize the role of the Soviet federal structure in cultivating distinct identities resulting from the national territorialization of political space (Roeder, 1991; Suny, 1993; Kaiser, 1994; Brubaker, 1996). This institutional model was examined by Bremmer (1993) using the concept of *matrioshka* nationalism, which summarized the layering of identities, including national ones, associated with Soviet federalism, and explained how nations asserted their political autonomy. National activists representing titular groups with their own union republics positioned their political actions against the Soviet center, while those on the lower three tiers, the autonomous republics, autonomous *oblasts*, and autonomous *okrugs*, positioned themselves against the union republics and their titular nationalities.¹ This model of political geographic organization, however, was not uniform across the Soviet space; Dagestan's noted ethnic diversity, with thirty-four ethno-linguistic groups, made the assignment of a singular titular nationality to the area impractical.² Despite its location abutting conflict-ridden Chechnya and its dire economic situation during and after the transition from communism, a significant national challenge to the post-Soviet Russian state has not emerged in Dagestan. The necessary territorial ‘perforations’ were not in place to spur nationalist opposition; rather, identities in the republic were overlapping, territorialized at multiple scales, and associated with various social and political communities (Walker, 2001).

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¹ In the Soviet model the ‘most developed’ nations, or those theorized as closest to international socialism, were incorporated as union republics. The next three tiers, mentioned above, were also designated according to level of national development.² The political and demographic structuring of ethnic groups in Dagestan is complex. Though there are thirty-four ethno-linguistic groups, this number would be larger if local dialects of the same language are counted as distinct. Ware and Kisriev (2001) and Ibragimov and Matsuzato (2005) discuss more thoroughly the Soviet federative model.

Political instability in Dagestan during the post-Soviet period is therefore most frequently attributed to the rise of Islamism in the Northeast Caucasus, associated with the radicalization of certain elements in Muslim communities in the region as a result of the two Chechen wars (Yemeljanova, 2007; Russell, 2007). An Islamist state has been viewed as a potential solution to the social and economic problems, including high unemployment, endemic poverty, and corruption, confronting the republic (Yemeljanova, 1999; Gammer, 2007). Yet Islam in Dagestan is simultaneously affected by an internal division between traditionalists, who follow the strictures of Sufism, which has been localized and adapted to the Northeast Caucasian context, and Wahhabism, the austere Sunni Islamic movement that appeared in the area following the breakup of the Soviet state. The followers of the latter tradition are most closely linked with the network of *jamaats*, or militant Islamist organizations, which oppose both the Russian government and official Muslim organizations in an effort to establish a *sharia*-based Islamic state in the North Caucasus (Hahn, 2007). To summarize, while nationalism is rarely perceived as a threat to Dagestan's political system, Islamism and the violence associated with terrorist actions are interpreted as dangers to the republic's stability (Rotar', 2002; Gammer, 2002; Hahn, 2007).

This general distinction between nationalism and Islamism, however, downplays particular, group-specific positions towards Dagestan's political system, specifically on questions of political power and institutional control in the region, the strength of ethnic group attachment among Dagestan's population in comparison to other native groups in the wider North Caucasus, and, most importantly, the potential consequences of the rise of radical Islam in the republic. To explore further these nuances, we use the results of a spatially- and ethnically-stratified survey conducted in the republic in December 2005 to analyze variation in nationalist sentiment and interpretations of the Islamist threat among Dagestan's six leading ethnic groups.³ The analysis of the survey results shows that, following Gammer (2007), Walker (2001), and Ware and Kisriev (2001), *inter alia*, the political-territorial structure applied to Dagestan during the Soviet period did not lead to the politicization of ethnicity among the republic's various ethnic groups. At the same time, Islamism is not perceived as a coherent threat to stability by interview respondents; more prosaic concerns, associated with employment, political corruption, and organized criminal elements consistently come through as areas of worry (see also Gerber and Mendelson, 2009).

The paper proceeds as follows. We first introduce in greater detail the six ethnic groups to be analyzed, and adumbrate the current political situation in Dagestan, with particular emphasis on recent political developments and the fallout from the strengthening Islamic insurgency. Subsequently, we discuss the results of the survey, situating the responses for Dagestan within the North Caucasus as a whole and then analyzing the republic-scale results. Three central issues that arise in the literature review are discussed in greater detail through the lens of the survey: inter-group sentiment regarding control of Dagestan's political institutions, support for the creation of ethnically homogeneous political territories, and societal interpretations of the seriousness of the Wahhabi challenge. The paper concludes by situating the current state of affairs in Dagestan within the sociological critique of "groupism," or the ascription, in social scientific analysis, of substantive characteristics or traits to national or ethnic groups, drawing particularly on the work of Rogers Brubaker (2004) to caution against this practice when discussing both nationalism and religious-centered movements.

Contemporary Dagestan: ethnic distributions, political competition, and radical Islam

The six Dagestani ethnic groups analyzed in this paper, the Avars, Dargins, Kumyks, Lezgins, Laks, and Nogays, were selected on two criteria. First, the intertwining of both geographic and political conditions has at times led to strained relations between representatives from these groups. By way of an example discussed in more detail below, the rivalry between the Dargins and Avars for control of political leadership has been notably contentious. Second, these groups have a history of organizing politically to put forward distinct, nation-specific projects, including calls for the construction of national homelands for Dagestan's constitutive groups, as first occurred during the transition from communism in the early 1990s. In some ways, instances of nation-specific organization were reactions to the problems associated with rivalries that grew out of Dagestan's complex political system and national melting pot; we thus recognize that the two justifications that serve as the basis for selection of the six groups are closely linked.

Fig. 1 indicates the traditional areas of habitation for the six ethnic groups by mapping population statistics by *rayon* (equivalent to county) from the 2002 Russian census.⁴ These territories, given their lack of codification in the Soviet and Russian federal structures, are defined here as the areas in which a plurality (more than 40 percent) of the selected populations resides.

The Avars, Dargins, and Laks are traditional inhabitants of the highlands. This area of the republic is characterized by relative ethnic homogeneity, with distinct pockets that are dominated by specific ethnic groups (see Fig. 1). The Lezgins are concentrated in the mountainous south of the republic, although their position in Dagestani politics and society has been complicated by the bisection of their traditional homeland by the post-1991 Russia–Azerbaijan border. Of the five largest groups in the republic, only the Kumyks traditionally live in the plains, in and around the republic's capital of Makhachkala. The Nogays, who we will also analyze, are historically a nomadic steppe population related ethnically to the Mongols; they reside in the northern part of the republic.

³ See the Appendix for details on the questionnaire's format and text. The disaggregation of the survey results by ethnic group was necessary for analyzing the role of nationalism as currently interpreted in the republic.

⁴ The data were collected for us by Alexander Panin of the Geography Department of Stavropol' State University from the republic of Dagestan's statistics office in Makhachkala. We include the Nogays here since their responses in the survey were so distinctive.

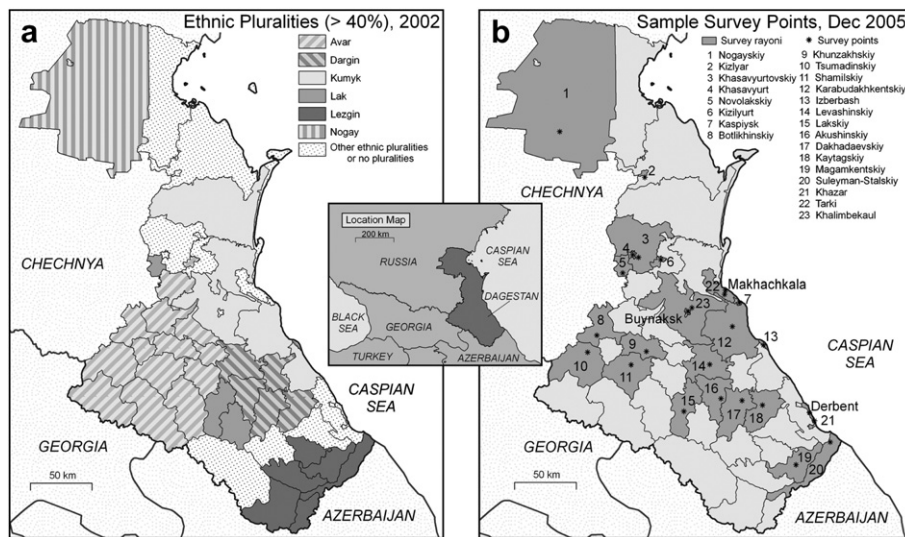


Fig. 1. Distribution of ethnic groups (a) and survey sample points (b) in Dagestan.

Soviet authorities classified the mountain populations of Dagestan into nine distinct ethnic groups. The Avars and Dargins were the largest, in part because the Soviets incorporated other, smaller minority populations into these groups (Walker, 2001). Both the Dargins and the Avars have capitalized on their large numbers to become the two most influential ethnic groups in the political institutions of the republic, both during the Soviet period and following the breakup of the Union. The Avars have traditionally viewed themselves as the leading ethnicity in Dagestan, because of their numeric superiority and because the republican leadership has traditionally hailed from this ethnic group. This prominence also has an historical basis; Imam Shamil, the leader of the Caucasian resistance in the 19th century, was an ethnic Avar. For much of the post-Soviet period, however, Dagestan's most important leadership position, as Chairman of the State Council, was held by Magomedali Magomedov, a Dargin. Despite the guarantees provided in the republic's 1994 Constitution, stipulating that the Chairmanship would rotate between ethnicities, Magomedov was consistently able to maneuver around the Avar bloc (led by Mukhu Aliyev) in the People's Assembly to prolong his tenure as Chairman (Ware and Kisriev, 2001; Blandy, 2006). Said Amirov, also an ethnic Dargin, was elected mayor of Makhachkala, the multiethnic capital of the republic, in February 1998. This gave the Dargins control of Dagestan's two most important political positions, a monopoly they maintained until Aliyev replaced Magomedov in February 2006. Cornell (2001) has argued that the rivalry between the Avars and the Dargins has led to the increased marginalization of other, smaller ethnic minorities within the republic's political structure and nascent interethnic tensions.

In response to the pre-eminence of the Avars and Dargins in the Dagestani political system, other ethnic groups in the republic have at times reacted to their marginalization with increased political mobilization. These national movements first emerged during the latter stages of *perestroika*. Via their national movements, some Kumyks, Lezgins, Laks, and Nogays pushed for secession from the Russian Federation during the transition period of 1989–1991; Ibragimov and Matsuzato (2005: p. 238) contend that "the nationalist movements in Dagestan during 1990–1992 were characterized by a tendency to demand that Dagestan as a multiethnic republic be dismantled in order to create mono-ethnic republics." A Lak national movement, *Tsubarz*, was controlled by the Khachilaev brothers, who are representative of the ethnic entrepreneurialism that characterized Dagestani politics during the 1990s. In an attempt to force new elections and the resignation of certain government ministers, the pair organized the storming of the State Council building in Makhachkala in May 1998. *Birlik*, the Nogay national movement, supported the creation of a Nogay autonomous region in the north of the republic, which would unite Nogays in Dagestan with co-ethnics in neighbouring Chechnya and Stavropol' kray (Ware, 1998). *Sadval* advocated for the political unification of Lezgins living in Dagestan with those across the now-internationalized border in the south with Azerbaijan, either within Dagestan proper or as a distinct territory (Matveeva and McCartney, 1998). As a more in-depth example of ethno-political mobilization, during the Soviet period, the Kumyks were pushed out of their traditional homeland in the piedmont and plains around Makhachkala; by 1991, they composed less than a quarter of the total population in their historical areas of habitation (Kisriev, 2004). More radical elements in their national movement, *Tenglik*, wanted to proscribe further migration from the mountains to the traditional Kumyk homeland, and also wanted to establish ethno-territorial homelands under the control of the traditional ethnic majority. This was further complicated by calls to resettle ethnic Laks in the environs of Makhachkala (some Laks had been previously moved to the western border of the republic in the wake of the large-scale deportation of Chechens to Central Asia) after the Gorbachev-era government acceded to calls by the Chechens for the return of their native lands (Eldarov et al., 2007 and Gammer, 2007 for more detail). Notably, the returns process has been delayed by internal corruption, staunch opposition from ethnic Kumyks, and the re-ignition of the Chechen conflict in 1999. The influence of the national movements reached its peak in October 1992, when the Congress of the Peoples of Dagestan, at its first official meeting, called for the creation of a federative

structure in Dagestan with the guarantee of the right to political self-determination for the republic's constitutive ethnic groups (Tsapieva and Muslimov, 2007).

Since the 1992 high point of ethno-territorial mobilizations, Dagestan's government has taken steps to dampen such calls for autonomy. An initial agreement passed in June 1993 was followed by the drafting of the republic's constitution, which formally inscribed a consociational political system that built on the historical legacy of the *djamaat*, or localized, territorially- and historically-based political communities (Ware and Kisriev, 2001; Lijphart, 1977). As a result, overt national movements have been marginalized and in some cases disbanded. The political undercurrents in the region, however, remain salient, with continued political posturing by ethnic elites; in March 1999, the republic held its third referendum on the establishment of a directly elected president (the first two were held in 1992 and 1993, before the adoption of Dagestan's post-Soviet constitution). This measure was roundly rejected by a number of groups in Dagestan, in particular the Lezgins and Dargins, while most strongly supported by the Avar population (Kisriev and Ware, 2005). Another continued worry is that any potential destabilization in the republic could lead to the resumption of national campaigns for autonomy, in particular among the Lezgins, whose more radical elements have again recently called for the incorporation of the group into a single state.⁵

These renewed fears of fragmentation along ethnic lines arose in response to the transition to a presidential system in the republic in early 2006. The "quasi-consociational" (Ware and Kisriev, 2001: p. 110) system was significantly modified in 2003, specifically in response to the centralizing tendencies of President Vladimir Putin's government in Moscow. Of fundamental importance was the revision of the republic's political institutions, as structured in the constitutional document, away from the fourteen-member State Council, in which each of the eleven titular ethnic groups in Dagestan as well as the Russians, Azeris and Chechens was represented, to a directly elected executive. This election was initially scheduled to take place in June 2006 (Blandy, 2006). President Vladimir Putin negated these changes to the executive branch a year later in the wake of the hostage crisis at Beslan (North Ossetia), when the federal center instituted a law that gave Putin control over the nomination of regional governors throughout the Russian Federation. As mentioned above, in February 2006 Putin subsequently used his power to appoint a regional executive to force out the long-serving Magomedali Magomedov, a Dargin, and replace him with the Chair of the People's Assembly, Mukhu Aliyev, an Avar.

After Aliyev was installed as Dagestan's first president, there was an attempt to lessen the role of ethnic identification in regional politics through greater emphasis on political parties; the system was first implemented in the March 2007 parliamentary elections. While this did not result in an increase in interethnic tensions, there was fierce competition between the republic's political elites and localized reports of election-related violence (International Crisis Group, 2008). During the March 2008 Russian Federation presidential elections, federal police levels were increased to prevent a recurrence of such violence. With respect to interethnic relations Magomedov had taken a different tack during his tenure as regional executive; "his [Magomedov's] overriding concern during his long period in office was to avoid interethnic violence leading to large-scale conflict within the republic after the fall of Communist power" through the maintenance of the ethnic balance in Dagestan's political system (Blandy, 2006: p. 5). During an interview in Makhachkala in October 2006, Zikrulla Ilyasov, the republic's first deputy Minister of Nationalities, emphasized that conflicts occur primarily over land resources; though the parties in conflict are aligned along ethnic lines, the conflict is not ethnic in origin, indicating that existing policies were generally successful in defusing ethnic rivalries. In an interview last spring with the Russian-language news service *Kavkazskii Uzel* (Caucasian Knot), President Aliyev further stressed the successes of the Dagestani government with respect to ethnic questions, including improved relations with Azerbaijan, and the resultant marginalization of more radical elements among the Lezgins who continue to call for the redrawing of borders between the two states, as well as tangible improvements, specifically increased funding from the federal center, regarding the issue of Chechen repatriation in *Novolakskiy rayon* (Shvedov, 2009). Aliyev called the issue of Chechen-Lak resettlement "the most difficult and most complex of all issues in the field of interethnic relations in Dagestan" (Shvedov, 2009).

Although the 2006 Moscow-imposed change in executive leadership was initially viewed as a step towards combating the republic's endemic corruption and preventing the Islamist insurgency from gaining more strength, the Aliyev regime experienced mixed success in achieving these two goals (Smirnov, 2006). Aliyev viewed corruption and insurgent Wahhabism as mutually reinforcing; the police force, in particular, is viewed as a sort of "kakistocracy" that pushes young Dagestanis towards criminality and radicalism (International Crisis Group, 2008). The continued mistrust of law enforcement organs is substantiated by a 2008 survey in the republic, conducted by the All-Russia Center for Public Opinion (VTsIOM), in which fifty-seven percent of respondents stated that the police forces work poorly, and more than three-quarters responded that corruption in the republic is either high or very high.⁶ Lack of trust in official institutions extends beyond the police, as well. Gerber and Mendelson (2009) report low levels of trust among young Dagestani males in the local government and the region's courts.

More recently, events in the republic have further undermined the credibility of the local political leadership. The October 2009 mayoral election in Derbent, Dagestan's second-largest city, was widely viewed as fraudulent. A municipal court

⁵ Elizabeth Fuller (2006) addresses the continued instability associated with the legacy of deportations of Chechens from western Dagestan during World War II, as well as the demands of the Lezgin minority along the region's southern edge.

⁶ VTsIOM conducted the survey in early September 2008. The results are available in Russian via their website, <http://wciom.ru/arkhiv/> (last accessed: 18 December 2008). A summary of the findings is available in English: View of inhabitants of Dagestan on the state of affairs in their republic. Russian Analytical Digest 51, 8–9, viewed 18 December 2008, <http://www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/rad/>. Also, see our discussion below regarding causes for conflict in the republic.

invalidated the results, a decision that was upheld by Dagestan's Supreme Court and further supported by the federal government in Moscow. This was one of a string of setbacks for Aliyev, who was viewed as a mentor to the improperly elected candidate, and which also included a row with Azerbaijan over the distribution of water from the Samur River in the republic's south and opposition to the appointment by Moscow of an ethnic Russian to the post of Dagestan's Chief Tax Inspector (Leahy, 2010). This resulted in Aliyev being replaced in February 2010 by Magomedislam Magomedov, the son of Dagestan's former leader, Magomedali Magomedov.

These political dealings, however, draw attention away from the fact that the problems resulting from Islamic radicalism in the region are significant and, arguably, growing. Religion in general has experienced a renaissance in Dagestan during the post-Soviet period, benefiting from the wider juridical changes that occurred with respect to religion at the federal center during the 1990s (Bobrovnikov, 2006 for a more detailed discussion of attempts to legislate traditional forms of Islam in Dagestan). Whereas there were only twenty-seven mosques in Dagestan in 1990, there were more than 1700 by December 2004 (Bobrovnikov, 2001; Matsuzato and Ibragimov, 2005). These mosques have been built primarily through the sponsorships of the *djamaats*, who then install their own imam to lead the religious community. This patronage at the local level has complicated the influence of the republican-level leadership, the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Dagestan, the primary religious institution during the Soviet period, given the influence that local clerics are able to cultivate among their specific religious communities (Ibragimov and Matsuzato, 2005). While religion has grown increasingly relevant on the wider social scale, it has also formed one foundation for conflict in the territory. As Ware and Kisriev (2000: p. 247) argue in reference to Dagestan, "religion itself has opened up more precipitous cleavages than those which exist between nationalities, presenting deep new divisions within a society that is already extraordinarily diverse."

One of the most destabilizing factors in the republic, which is closely linked to the religious composition not only of Dagestan but of the wider North Caucasus, has been spillover from, and resultant regionalization of, the conflict in Chechnya (Sagramoso, 2007). Dagestan was a key site in launching the wider struggle for a North Caucasian Islamic republic. In Buinakskiy *rayon*, located to the southwest of Makhachkala, three villages proclaimed their independence, organized on the basis of Islamic law, and ejected representatives from the Dagestani and federal governments in 1998. This group of villages, which came to be known as the "Islamic *djamaat*," forcibly opposed Dagestani police in May 1998, and subsequently fought alongside Chechen Islamists against Dagestani and federal security forces during the August 1999 Chechen rebel invasion (Ware and Kisriev, 2009).

The 1999 events led directly to the outlawing of Wahhabism in Dagestan. Yet the proscription of Wahhabism has not diminished the role of Islamic paramilitaries in the republic. The Sharia Jamaat (from the Arabic word for community, to be distinguished from the local-scale political units in Dagestan)⁷, under the leadership of Rappani Khallilov, emerged in late 2004 as the primary resistance organization in Dagestan, targeting FSB, police, and government officials for their perceived illegal actions against Muslims in Dagestan (Smirnov, 2005). It now serves as an umbrella organization for the other *jamaats* in Dagestan (Vatchagaev, 2008). Khallilov, who was closely aligned with Shamil Basaev during the second Chechen War, spearheaded a number of terrorist attacks in Dagestan, including a May 2002 bombing of Russian Army barracks in the Dagestani town of Kaspisk, and notably claimed responsibility for the recent widespread violence in the republic in March 2004 (Ware, 2005). Khallilov was killed after engaging Russian federal forces in the village of Novy Sulak in September 2007. While the Russian army believed that the elimination of Khallilov would weaken the resistance, new leaders have stepped forward to head the Sharia Jamaat. While each of these have been killed by Russian security forces in quick succession, these actions have had further consequences for the Russian state; the widow of Umalat Magomedov, who was killed in a roadside shootout in the town of Khasavyurt on 31 December 2009 while acting leader of the *jamaat*, was one of two suicide bombers in the 29 March 2010 attacks on the Moscow metro. Moreover, the networked structure of the Sharia *jamaat* has not prevented the organization from carrying out anti-state actions in Dagestan proper; the recent high-profile assassination of the republic's Interior Minister, Adilgeri Magomedtagirov, who played a central role in a December 2007–August 2008 republican security operation against insurgents in the highland village of Gimry, serves as a case in point (The Jamestown Foundation, 2009).⁸ This is one of several attacks on high-profile political leaders that have taken place in the republic in the last year. Particularly troubling is the increased incidence of suicide bombings in the republic and in the North Caucasus as a whole. Mendelson et al. (2010) find that the number of suicide bombings in the region increased fourfold from 2008 to 2009. While most of these attacks occurred in Chechnya, there was one suicide attack in Dagestan in September 2009, and three further attacks thus far in 2010 (as of 29 April, the date of the most recent bombing). One of these three, the dual suicide bombing in the historically Russian town of Kizlyar on 31 March 2010, gained international attention in part because it occurred the same week as the Moscow bombings (Ware and Kisriev, 2009). In characterizing the situation more generally, the five-year period 2004–2009 saw the number of terrorist incidents remain relatively consistent in Dagestan for the first three years, with a significant increase over each of the last two years (Russell, 2009). This trend has been accompanied by a sharp decrease in incidents in Chechnya proper.⁹ According to Russell (2009), in response to these developments the

⁷ For clarity, in this paper we refer to the traditional, local-scale communities as 'djamaats', following Ware and Kisriev (2001). Islamist organizations are referred to as 'jamaats', also following the convention of previous work on the republic.

⁸ This case, however, is complicated by the fact that Magomedtagirov was emerging as a challenger to Aliyev for the post of president in Dagestan (Zalasky, 2010).

⁹ According to the Russell's (2009) source, the United States' National Counterterrorism Center's database of terrorist events, available at <http://wits.nctc.gov/>, Dagestan experienced 96 terrorist incidents from the year-to-date as of 31 March 2009; this is up from 60 incidents, year-to-date 31 March 2008.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics, North Caucasus survey December 2005, Dagestan sample.

| National groups | 2002 Russian census (thousands) | | December 2005 survey | |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | Absolute total | Percentage of total population | Absolute sample | Percentage of sample |
| Dagestan | 2577 | 100.0 | 625 | 100.0 |
| Avars | 758 | 29.4 | 176 | 28.2 |
| Dargins | 426 | 16.5 | 131 | 21.0 |
| Kumyks | 366 | 14.2 | 87 | 13.9 |
| Lezgins | 337 | 13.1 | 81 | 13.0 |
| Laks | 140 | 5.4 | 55 | 8.8 |
| Nogays | 38 | 1.5 | 18 | 2.9 |
| Other ethnicities | 512 | 19.9 | 77 | 12.3 |

Russian government has shifted its focus in its war against terrorism away from the Chechen insurgency, instead focusing its attention on the militant Islamist groups found throughout the North Caucasus region.

Design of opinion survey and research questions

In public opinion analysis, a number of interesting geographic questions emerge that cannot be answered by a random public opinion sample that does not have a stratified areal design. Among these questions is the level of spatial variation of support for ethnic, political, and other forms of social identification across a geographic area. Is there a contextual variation in the strength of relevant identities after controlling for the classification of respondents into state-constructed national groups? Does context-specific support for certain political positions vary depending on urban versus rural residence? In Dagestan, the requirement of a stratified areal design also served a utilitarian purpose; given the patchwork nature of ethnic settlement, spatial stratification was particularly necessary to ensure that each of the republic's ethnic groups was proportionately represented in the overall sample.

Our analysis relies on the results of a survey carried out in December 2005. Part of a larger project on civil war outcomes in both Bosnia-Herzegovina and the North Caucasus, the survey was conducted in five North Caucasian areas: Karachay-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Stavropol' kray and Dagestan. The survey collected both demographic data and attitudinal responses to a variety of questions that were centered on post-civil war outcomes in the region. (For more detail on its representativeness, see O'Loughlin and Ó Tuathail, 2009). To achieve areal stratification, survey locations were randomly sampled within the geographic units which, with the aid of a grouping algorithm, were used to cluster the *rayoni* according to 2002 Russian census socio-demographic information. This generated a six-cluster solution that was a compromise between gross aggregation and cluster complexity; within each cluster, districts were sampled randomly, with the exception of the main cities. Within the districts, individuals were also surveyed randomly, through the use of a random route method. Overall, the sample was designed to be ethnically representative of the wider population in the region; the distributions in terms of population reflect the actual population breakdown according to the 2002 census (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics of the sample).¹⁰ However, because this sampling does not precisely correspond to the ethnic proportions in the surveyed republics, a vector weight was assigned to each survey respondent to account for this small discrepancy and weighted samples are used in the analyses reported in this paper. This survey was supplemented through fieldwork in the North Caucasus in September–October 2005, October 2006 and August 2007 that focused on interviews with local governmental officials.

Ethnic identity in Dagestan and the wider North Caucasus

In analyzing the survey results, we first attempted to situate Dagestan within its wider geographic region, the North Caucasus. Interestingly, compared to other non-Russian nationalities in the area, Dagestanis have a higher ratio of identity with their ethnic group. (Due to ongoing high levels of violence in 2005, the North Caucasus survey did not include Ingushetia or Chechnya samples where identification with the ethnic group would be expected to be very high). Asked to select their primary identity amongst the three categories “member of my nationality”, “Russian citizen” and “Russian citizen and member of my ethnic group”, 30.4% of Dagestanis who are not of Russian nationality (that is, a member of one of the other nations in the republic, $N = 600$) chose “member of my ethnic group” compared to 19.8% of non-Russian nationalities in Stavropol' kray, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia and Karachay-Cherkessia. In contrast, the ratio of those picking “Russian citizen” was 36.5% for Dagestanis and 55.3% for other republics' respondents. For the last category, “Russian citizen and a member of my ethnic group”, Dagestanis showed a ratio of 33.1% compared to 24.9% for the other regions.

That ethnicity is a salient identity for Dagestanis is an important foundation for further interpretation of the republic's internal political dynamics. Interethnic competition within Dagestan, as detailed in the literature review, is complex and dynamic. The survey asked whether power is fairly shared among ethnicities in Dagestan; among the six major ethnic groups,

¹⁰ Previous survey work in Dagestan (Ware et al., 2003) employed sample stratification along ethnic lines. We employ a geographic stratification, which prevented selection on the basis of the dependent variables associated with the wider project, in this case the populations most affected by the analyzed conflicts (King et al., 1994).

only a majority of Dargins (53.4%) agreed that it is. Approximately 20% of Avars and Lezgins responded positively to this question, while only 12.7% of Laks did. Furthermore, the two smallest of the major groups, Laks (40%) and Nogays (50%), were most likely to indicate that other ethnic groups control institutions of power in Dagestan; only 3.8% of Dargins responded that other ethnicities held such control. In contrast, when asked about interethnic relations in the republic more generally, few respondents chose to describe the situation as either “very” or “moderately tense”; approximately 10% of Avars, Kumyks, and Lezgins and 18% of Laks indicated that this was the case. No ethnic Nogays and only 2.3% of Dargins selected either of these two categories. For each of the selected groups, a plurality described the interethnic situation as “calm” while the next largest number characterized the situation as “friendly”.

These responses lead to a set of conclusions regarding the interethnic situation in Dagestan. First, while the political system is not necessarily viewed as fair in either implementation or practice, this has not resulted in increased inter-group discord. There is widespread acceptance of the consociational model, with the smaller ethnic groups, such as the Laks, Lezgins, and Nogays, strongly agreeing that ethnicities should be accorded a specified number of seats in the republic’s legislative body. The changes implemented at the federal center in the wake of the 2004 Beslan killings, specifically to appoint the head of the republic, was anticipated to lead to improved ethnic interaction by two-fifth of the sample, while another one-third stated that this new process would have no effect on inter-group relations. In sum, while Dargins and Avars have control of the key posts in Dagestan, the smaller ethnic groups appear to be generally satisfied with their limited, but continued, political influence.

Second, the survey results highlight important, group-specific issues present in the republic in December 2005. The relative disquiet among ethnic Laks regarding their lack of political influence is most likely attributed to the ongoing situation regarding group members’ resettlement from Novolakskiy *rayon*. Also in 2005, Dargins controlled the two key political positions in the republic, the Chairmanship of the State Council (the republic’s *de facto* presidency) and the mayorship of Makhachkala; 38.9% of Dargins indicated that power in Dagestan belonged to their ethnic group. We recognize that this result is likely attributable to the timing of the survey, and it is probable that this percentage would change if the survey had been conducted after March 2006 with the change in presidential power (likewise, the February 2010 change again instating a Dargin as president further complicates such observations).

Analyzing support for ethno-territoriality in Dagestan: testing the institutional hypothesis

Recognizing that interethnic tensions are low despite mixed perceptions regarding control of power and political institutions in Dagestan, we performed a more in-depth analysis of the question of support for the creation of homogenous ethnic territories in the republic. This was one of the key positions in the platforms of Dagestan’s ethno-political organizations during the window of nationalist mobilization in the early 1990s. In the context of asking about measures to improve interethnic relations in the respondent’s republic (“What, in your opinion, should be done in order to improve relations between ethnicities in your locality?”), each respondent was asked to answer a series of prompts that addressed scenarios to improve interethnic relations. Respondents were allowed to respond affirmatively to three of these prompts. One of the statements addressed the creation of ethnically homogeneous homelands: “Each native ethnicity should have their own territory, and people of other ethnicities should be required to leave this land.”

A generalized linear fit through logistic regression is appropriate for the modeling of responses to the question on support for ethno-territorial separatism. Transforming a nonlinear relationship into a linear one through the use of logged odds eases the process of interpretation, and also establishes a more parsimonious model, given that a one unit increase in an independent variable value is clearly reflected in either an increase or decrease in the odds of support for a certain position. The initial test of the question measuring support for ethnically homogeneous territories allowed for two responses; respondents either supported the establishment of these territories or did not support such a territorial structure, a straightforward logistic coding.

In modeling this question, we included three control variables in the statistical model: a sense of generalized trust, whether the respondent or a family member directly witnessed or was affected by violence, and a continuous variable associated with economic outlook in the region in the coming 1–2 years. The modeling also incorporated a set of socio-demographic controls, both to strengthen the analysis and to explore the possibilities of other explanations for the creation of ethnically homogeneous territories. These included the respondent’s current quality of life (question: “How would you characterize the situation of you and your family members...”), level of education, age, and gender (males as the base category). (See [Appendix](#) for questions and possible responses). We first fitted the logit model with the primary independent variables of interest, the ethnic categories (these are compared to the baseline category composed of Dagestan’s other ethnic groups), then added the selected demographic variables to investigate variance in support for separatism across socio-demographic lines; the third model incorporated the three attitudinal variables introduced above. The results of these regression models are reported in [Table 2](#).

Among the selected ethnic groups, the Laks, Kumyks and Nogays exhibit significant preference for ethnic territories with respect to the baseline category. The latter two groups traditionally hail from the lowlands of the republic, and as discussed above members of mountain groups either migrated to or were resettled by the state in these areas during the Soviet period. That the Lak population is more likely to support the creation of homogeneous territories is also not surprising, given the instability of their position in Novolakskiy *rayon* after the return of Chechen deportees. In the interview mentioned above, Zikrulla Ilyasov, the republic’s first deputy Minister for Nationalities, said that the republic’s government tries to alleviate conflicts over lands in the plains by improving the economic situation in the mountains through a program called “*Gori*” designed to reduce the outmigration to the plains and, thus, resulting conflict.

Table 2

Logit model of the support for the creation of ethnically homogeneous territories (odds ratios reported in parentheses).

| Independent variables | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 |
|---|----------------|------------------|------------------|
| Ethnic group | | | |
| Avars | −0.742 (0.47) | −0.617 (0.54) | −0.259 (0.77) |
| Dargins | −0.430 (0.65) | −0.425 (0.65) | 0.144 (1.16) |
| Kумыks | 0.651 (1.92) | 0.744 (2.10) | 1.226 (3.41)** |
| Lezgins | −0.956 (0.39) | −1.002 (0.37) | −0.417 (0.66) |
| Laks | 0.799 (2.22) | 0.731 (2.08) | 1.169 (3.22)* |
| Nogays | 5.136 (170)*** | 5.073 (159.8)*** | 5.628 (278.0)*** |
| Socio-demographic variables | | | |
| Gender (males baseline) | | 0.173 (1.19) | 0.290 (1.34) |
| Age | | 0.013 (1.01) | 0.008 (1.01) |
| Urban–rural (rural baseline) | | −0.295 (0.75) | −0.167 (0.85) |
| Quality of life | | 0.204 (0.1.23) | −0.029 (0.97) |
| Level of education | | −0.029 (0.97) | −0.100 (0.91) |
| Religiosity | | −0.610 (0.54) | −0.409 (0.66) |
| Attitudinal and experiential variables | | | |
| Generalized trust | | | 0.049 (1.05) |
| Outlook in the coming 1–2 years | | | −0.071 (0.93) |
| Witness to conflict | | | 1.096 (2.99)*** |
| Log likelihood | −167.3 | −163.7 | −146.7 |

Significance levels are indicated by asterisks: * $p \leq 0.10$; ** $p \leq 0.05$; *** $p \leq 0.01$.

Avars, Dargins, and Lezgins, when compared to the baseline category, exhibit less support for the creation of ethnically homogeneous territories, although these results are not statistically significant in any of the three models. This follows our expectations; the Avars and Dargins have been privileged in the political structures of the post-Soviet period, maintaining dominance over the leading positions and institutions of the republic. In sum, our survey indicates that low levels of support for the creation of homogeneous ethnic territories in Dagestan suggests that ethnic identities are neither politicized nor territorialized for most groups nor a threat to the existent and balanced political structure of the republic.

Among the attitudinal variable included in the final model, only those respondents who indicated that they had been personally affected by the civil conflicts in Chechnya and adjoining regions and the associated diffusion of this instability, by confirming that they themselves or their immediate family either survived, experienced or witnessed conflict, were more likely to support the creation of ethnic homelands as a political solution. With respect to the North Caucasus, O'Loughlin and Ó Tuathail (2009) posit that those who witnessed such events are more likely to support separatist agendas; this is confirmed in the case of Dagestan.

Interpreting Dagestan's Wahhabi challenge

The survey results and associated analysis are confirmatory of the previous literature on Dagestan, which has downplayed the importance of ethnic identification and the political territorialization of such national ties. Yet, this analysis presents only one of the two central cleavages currently affecting Dagestan and its long-term stability. The rise of radical Islam, as exhibited, by the increased activity of organizations like the Sharia Jamaat in the republic, is put forward as the growing challenge to Dagestan's political future. According to Hahn (2007: p. 131), given the recent changes to the republic's political structure and the instability associated with the renewal of fighting in Chechnya, "Dagestan has been transformed from a surprisingly stable polity into one experiencing full-scale low-intensity Islamist guerrilla warfare."

In order to gauge the near-term concerns of Dagestani residents, and to situate feelings about Wahhabism and associated radicalism within their wider social context, we first investigated the survey responses to the question that asked respondents to identify the most serious problem that the region would face in the coming five years. Lack of economic development, and the associated shortage of jobs, was identified as the most serious problem, according to 52.2% of the sample. Political corruption was the second-most popular answer to this question, while armed conflict and terrorist actions was third. This is in line with other work on the North Caucasus more generally (Gerber and Mendelson, 2009: p. 847), who have found that "the likely drivers of instability lie more with the socioeconomic conditions than with Islamic radicalism or ethnic strife." Though we disaggregated the response to this question (and the others discussed below) along ethnic lines, no inter-group differences of note emerged in the analysis.

While the lack of economic opportunities can be viewed broadly as a potential source of destabilization for Dagestan, when asked specifically about the increasing levels of violence and conflict in the North Caucasus, Dagestanis most commonly attributed the rise to the confrontational policies of the Russian government (28.8% of sample). The growth of organized crime networks and, notably, the regional presence of radical Islamists, particularly Wahhabis, were also popular answers; each was selected by approximately 20% of the sample. These results suggest that there is an interconnection between Russia's regional strategy, the response tactics of the Islamist movements, and the failure of law enforcement and local political entities to countermand the rise in criminal organization and the spread of corruption.

The last topic of importance associated with terrorism and the rise of Islamic radicalism in the North Caucasus are the high-profile attacks against soft targets in the region, most notably at the school in Beslan in early September 2004. When asked to select an explanation for this event, respondents in Dagestan chose 'international terrorism' most frequently (28.8% of the sample). Respondents did not, however, associate international terrorism with radical Islamism; only 12.3% ascribed Beslan to the aspirations of radical Islamists to construct an Islamic state in the North Caucasus. This suggests that Moscow's geopolitical script of equating the second Chechen war with America's post-9/11 campaign against terrorism has been accepted by a number of residents in Dagestan (O'Loughlin et al., 2004).

Discussion and conclusion: the nation, religion, and the practice of groupism

Walker Connor (2004: p. 29) questions if there has been "a general tendency to assume that national consciousness had rather thoroughly permeated this or that people long before such an assumption was justifiable?" Connor's point is particularly appropriate in the case of Dagestan, where the idea of the nation was consolidated during the Soviet period and thereby structured along Marxist-Communist lines (Gammer, 2007). In our analysis, while there are clearly consolidated feelings of national identification, this does not necessarily translate into support for the creation of ethnically homogeneous territories.

Both Brubaker (2004) and Megoran (2007) warn against the tendency for group identity, of which ethnicity is an example, to be theorized as a "tangible force from which the contours of efficacious action could be plotted" (Megoran, 2007: p. 257). Brubaker (2004: p. 35) emphasizes the mutability and contextual nature of such identities, which, when disregarded, leads to the practice of groupism: "in the domain of ethnicity, nationalism, and race, I mean by 'groupism' the tendency to treat ethnic groups, nations and races as substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed." In sum, both authors warn against the reification of ethnicity as a coherent force for political action and potential ethnic conflict; rather, they argue that ethnic ties are capitalized on by elites and organizations as the basis for such action. In a sense, the Soviet federal model, by promoting national cadres and distinct ethnic institutions, created a foundation for national leaders to organize a political base around ethnicity. In certain cases, this led to the emergence of ethnic mobilization, in the name of a particular national group, organized by the elites and carried out through their national organizations. We have tempered the discussion of groups by emphasizing the roles of both national organizations and ethnic entrepreneurs in Dagestani politics.

This mixed and layered identity of Dagestanis, what Bremmer (1993) has referred to as *matrioshka* nationalism, has come through consistently in this paper and the other works on the republic that we have cited. While showing a higher degree of in-group identity than most other nationalities of the North Caucasus, Dagestanis also exhibit notable levels of identification with the civic concept of the Russian state (over two-thirds either solely or added to the ethnic identity). The picture that emerges in the case of Dagestan is one of complex forms of identification, with other scales, most notably the local, *djamaat*-level, and republic, alongside national attachments. In order to explain the strength of national attachment and its simultaneous lack of territorialization, this article concurs with other works that the non-territorialized nature of nationality, as constructed during the Soviet period through processes disassociated from ethno-federalism, was particularly relevant in Dagestan, and helped to prevent widespread violence or the breakup of the republic along ethnic lines both during the initial transition away from communism and during the more recent political occurrences in the republic.¹¹ As Bunce (2004: p. 183) has argued with respect to ethno-federalism more generally: "those minorities that lacked their own institutions, even when they had other characteristics that encourage mobilization...were far less likely to mobilize in practice and, if they did mobilize, less likely to embrace a secessionist political agenda." A number of salient issues associated with Dagestan's varied ethnic composition are, however, still extant. Despite these remaining challenges, the results of our work suggest that the 'stable instability', which has characterized interethnic relationships during the post-Soviet period in Dagestan, will be preserved (Walker, 2001). The importance of the republic's consociational model in continuing the legacy of inter-group collaboration and preserving Dagestan's political stability post-1991 is still evident despite recent changes in the political structure of the republic. The results of our survey argue that this form of power-sharing has, in general, served to appease the national groups that initially agitated for wider political rights and ethno-territorial goals from 1989 to 1991; there is widespread support among our survey population, for example, for the continuance of the system of entrenched representation that underpins Dagestan's political system.

This research also suggests that the practice of groupism should be interrogated with respect to religion, as well. While Brubaker's (2004) critique of groupism is focused on national and ethnic groups, the portrayal of radical Islamists, or Wahhabis, as a cohesive element should be questioned. Rather, Wahhabi has become a catch-all term for Muslims who practice their religion outside the purview of official institutions controlled by the state (Knysh, 2004). These individuals belong to a number of different *jamaats*, which in themselves can be organized to achieve both peaceful and militaristic goals. At the same time, not all militants are members of *jamaats*, while the lawlessness of the North Caucasus is also attributable to the impunity of regional governments, most notably the Kadyrov regime in Chechnya. Additionally, the Russian government itself is guilty of groupism; as Gammer (2007) has noted, there is little distinction between Islamists and practicing Muslims

¹¹ Cornell (2002: p. 247) argues that the political and cultural institutions extended to the sub-level units in the Caucasus during the Soviet period, specifically Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics, such as Abkhazia and Chechnya, and Autonomous *oblasts*, such as South Ossetia, served as the bases for nationalist mobilization; "the institution of territorial autonomy may be conducive not to interethnic peace and cooperation but rather may foster ethnic mobilization, increased secessionism, and even armed conflict."

in official government policy. This results in an over-emphasis on the coherence of the radical Islamic threat, both in government statements and in academic work.

Our survey analysis contributes a set of valuable conclusions to the intersection of political and territorial understandings of nationalism and religion in the post-Soviet space. Some of these findings are confirmatory, specifically on the strength (or, rather, weakness) of nationalist mobilization in Dagestan. At the same time, by incorporating the question on the establishment of ethnic homelands, we have offered a direct test of one of the key components of nationalism among the selected populations. While the general trend is consistent with previous work, there are group-specific sentiments that are of importance to the wider literature on Dagestan. Regarding the question of radical Islam, our research finds that there is no consistent interpretation of the coherence of this threat among Dagestanis. Theoretically, our findings extend the applicability of the groupist critique introduced by Brubaker beyond ethnic groups (although this element of Brubaker's argument is also relevant to the case of Dagestan) to incorporate religious communities and radical offshoots.

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Appendix. Variables used in the analysis and their distributional values

Dependent variable

Support for creation of ethnically homogeneous territories

This question was part of a larger set of questions that asked, 'What, in your opinion, should be done in order to improve relations between ethnicities in your locality? You may choose up to three responses.'

Each native ethnicity should have their own territory, and people of other ethnicities should be required to leave this land.

| | |
|-----|-------|
| Yes | 10.7% |
| No | 89.3% |

Independent variables

Dummy variables were created for the following ethnic groups:

- Avars
- Dargins
- Kumyks
- Lezgins
- Laks
- Nogays
- Other ethnic groups (baseline)

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Gender | 52.6% female |
| Age | Median age – 37 years |
| Urban–rural | 40.0% urban |
| Quality of life | 11.7% – We can purchase everything we need 61.3% – We have money for food and clothes 24.3% – We only have enough money for food 2.7% – We do not have enough money for food |
| Level of education | 3.0% – Primary or below 7.0% – Uncompleted secondary (7–9 grades) 19.8% – Professional technical school 18.9% – Completed secondary (10–11 grades) 31.5% – Technical college 2.7% – Uncompleted higher 17.0% – Completed higher |

| | |
|---|--|
| Religiosity (measured through attendance) | 69.6% – Once a year or less 30.4% – More than once a year |
| Generalized trust | 73.6% – You need to be careful (baseline) 22.9% – Most people can be trusted 3.5% – Don't know (dropped in dummy variable) |
| Outlook in the coming 1–2 years | 1.1% – Will definitely deteriorate 12.5% – Will probably deteriorate 49.9% – Will not change 13.7% – Will probably improve 3.7% – Will definitely improve 8.8% – Don't know (dropped when coded continuously) |
| Witness to conflict | 15.4% – Yes 84.0% – No (baseline) 0.6% – Don't know (dropped in dummy variable) |

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