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Dagestan: Power in the balance

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Community in the mountains of Dagestan
PHOTO: ANNA MATVEEVA

Summary

In Dagestan, an autonomous republic of the Russian Federation, there is a strong 'gun culture', and many people kept arms even in Soviet times. Arms are now very widespread. The main source of weapons currently appears to be Chechnya. In the early 1990s, Dagestan developed unique political institutions to suit its ethnic diversity. These institutions, combined with the influence of traditional clan communities known as jama'ats, were successful in preventing tensions in the region escalating into war. Recently, Moscow's influence in the area has increased, prompting fears that interference from the centre could undermine this stability. There are four federal brigades on Dagestani territory, and also Border Guard troops. Yet there are also a number of informal paramilitary groups who are loyal to individual politicians and leaders and a number of Chechen militants in the republic. The Dagestani government has at times undertaken attempts to collect weapons and disarm informal groups, but these are generally perceived as attempts by one political faction to disarm another faction, rather than initiatives that will benefit the whole society.

Introduction

Dagestan is the largest republic in the Russian part of the Caucasus both in area (50,300 km²) and population (in 2002 the registered population reached 2,200,000). It is a frontier republic of the Russian Federation, whose borders cover more than 1200 km, of which more than 350 km are on dry land (with Azerbaijan and Georgia) and 850 km are at sea (with Iran, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan).

Although Dagestan formally became part of the Russian Empire after the 1813 Gulistan Peace Treaty between Russia and Iran, in practice its integration into Russia took place gradually over decades of conflict in the Caucasian Wars of the early 19th century. It was only after 1859, when the leader of the mountain peoples' independence movement, Shamil, the third Imam of Dagestan and Chechnya, surrendered to Russian forces at Gunib, that Dagestan truly became part of the Russian Empire. It was incorporated into the Russian empire as the Dagestan Oblast and ruled by a 'popular military administration' headed by a military governor. Following the 1917 Russian Revolution and the Civil War, a peoples' congress of Dagestan was held on 13 November 1920 in Temir-Khan-Shura (now Buinaksk), then the capital of the oblast. At this congress a 'Declaration on the Autonomy of Dagestan' was proclaimed.

There was no change to the political status of the Dagestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (DASSR) throughout Communist rule. It was only *perestroika* (restructuring) in the late 1980s and the subsequent fall of the Communist regime that led to revisions to Dagestan's political status, culminating in the new Constitution of the Republic of Dagestan in 1994. This describes Dagestan as an autonomous democratic republic within the Russian Federation.

Today, the republic comprises 41 rural administrative regions, 1,603 settlements (including 680 village administrations), 19 larger urban type settlements and 10 towns. Officially, 47 percent of the population is registered as urban, yet the real number of people living and working in urban areas is considerably higher, and experts estimate that it may be as high as 75 percent of the population.

Dagestan's post-*perestroika* history can be divided into two periods. The first began with Moscow losing administrative control, leaving Dagestan to resolve for itself the problems engendered by the dissolution of the USSR. The second, which began only very recently, has seen Moscow attempting to reconstruct direct administrative control over its periphery.

1989–1999: Genuine autonomy

The first period began around 1989 when the ruling Dagestani elite, which had always taken its orders from Moscow, suddenly came up against social protest movements that sprung from below. Faced with these previously unheard-of forces, the ruling class suddenly had to make its own decisions. Moscow had not simply relinquished its control, but actually provoked radical political changes in the regions. Under these conditions a genuinely autonomous political process began to take shape, and Dagestan's deep socio- and ethno-cultural features once again began to influence politics. From this complex and sometimes conflictual process emerged the unique political institutions which still exist today.

The system which developed after the fall of the Communist regime was embodied in the 1994 Dagestan constitution, in the electoral laws and in a number of unwritten rules of political behaviour. It represented a finely balanced equilibrium. The constitution established political institutions capable of preserving a political balance between the various ethnic groups. It rejected the role of a single Dagestani president, recognising that the concentration of power in the hands of one individual would destroy this political balance. The highest organ of executive power, the State Council, would have 14 members, of whom no more than one could come from any one ethnic group. The constitution required the parliament (the National Assembly), to represent all ethnic

groups in proportion to the ethnic make-up of the republic, and a subsequent electoral law instituted a system of ethnically-based electoral districts to ensure this. An unwritten rule required that senior figures in different branches of government should be of different ethnic backgrounds, as should their deputies.

This political system demonstrated its effectiveness in solving the many problems of a society with an unprecedentedly multi-ethnic population and with deeply-rooted traditions about Islamic ideology and social organisation. In 12 stormy years Dagestan has managed to create legitimate government institutions and to overcome a number of extremely dangerous tendencies. It has succeeded in:

- overcoming ethno-national separatist movements and preventing Dagestan's disintegration into national fragments;
- avoiding large-scale inter-ethnic conflicts and ethnic purges;
- avoiding being drawn into the conflicts on its borders and avoiding war with its neighbours over ethnic Dagestanis in their regions, or over ethnic Azerbaijanis and Chechens living in Dagestan;
- preventing the development of any significant popular movement in Dagestan calling for separation from Russia;
- preventing Islamic fundamentalists from influencing Dagestan's social and political life, notwithstanding the great influence of Islam (which is far higher than in any other region in the Caucasus).

1999 onwards: Moscow reasserts control

The second period of post-*perestroika* history was characterised by Moscow's renewed assertion of direct influence over Dagestan. Although this tendency was already visible in 1998 with the 'Kolesnikov' purges,¹ it is more accurate to consider the beginning of this period as August-September 1999, when armed groups from Chechnya invaded Dagestan aiming to unite the two republics under the banner of Islam and achieve political independence from Russia. The newly-appointed Russian Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, decided to provide direct military support to Dagestan, whose population unanimously opposed this Chechen expansionism. Since 2000, the formation of Russia's Southern Federal District, of which Dagestan is merely a part, has led to a systematic attempt by Moscow to override Dagestan's autonomy. This has radically altered the political dynamics in the territory. The main axis of confrontation is no longer between different groupings or senior members of the political elite, but rather between the unique system of political institutions that has developed, and Moscow's increasingly direct influence.

In the era since the resignation of Russian President Boris Yeltsin in December 1999, Moscow has sought a 'unified legal space' across the whole of Russia. Dagestan's system of political institutions differs significantly from the norm. Though they developed without Russian involvement, Dagestan's political institutions were formed in response to the very fragmentation that Moscow fears so much. Yet Moscow argues that Dagestan's political constructions 'do not correspond with civilised legal norms'. It seeks a government structured according to its own model, built by external hands. Forcing a mechanical reconstruction of political institutions on Dagestan from the outside would certainly lead to radical changes to the character of the territory's

¹ After the murder of the chairman of the Spiritual Board of Dagestani Muslims, Saidmahomed-haji-Abubakarov, at the end of August 1998 and the terrorist attack of 4 September, when a large explosion on Parkhomenko street in Makhachkala killed 16 people, left 90 wounded and destroyed a whole block of houses, the Russian Deputy Interior Minister, General Vladimir Kolesnikov, began arresting some of the most important political figures in Dagestan. Among those arrested were Magomed Khachilae, a deputy in the Dagestani Parliament and leader of the Lak National Movement, K. Makhmudgajiev, the Chairman of the Makhachkala City Assembly, E. Magomedov, the chief of Zapkasrybvod, M. Bizhamov, the Dagestani Minister of Justice, and R. Gajimuradov, the mayor of Kaspiysk. Sh. Musaev, a deputy in the Dagestani Parliament and head of the Pension Fund, was also investigated. In all, the RF General Prosecutor's Office issued arrest warrants for 37 senior Dagestani officials. Eventually, all except Makhmudgajiev were released. After the 'Kolesnikov Purges', however, there was a noticeable change to the political balance in Dagestan.

internal politics. Dagestan's behaviour as both a federal entity and as an independent actor in the Caucasus geopolitics could also change radically.

A Russian 're-styling' of politics in Dagestan would probably mean the abolishment of the provision for proportionate ethnic representation in Dagestan's National Assembly and in the local self-government assemblies, and the introduction of an elected president of the Republic of Dagestan rather than a collective presidency. These changes could well have serious and destabilising consequences through their effect on the delicate existing power structures. Changes would first occur below the surface, but once new political forces begin to emerge, a totally different Dagestan would develop. That entity would have none of the self-made stability which exists today. Its political stability would depend not on an internal balance of power, but on bureaucratic strength; not on the system of political institutions that has developed independently in harmony with Dagestan's ethno-social realities, but on all-embracing control and administration from an external centre. The local elite would have to pay heed not to the internal order, to public opinion and the balance of power and interests in the region, but only to the views and position of the centre. Dagestan's rulers would consequently become alienated from the needs and demands of the domestic public.

In the past all those who fought among themselves for power and resources, including the losers, sought support and sympathy from Moscow in their battles. But in these new circumstances the losers (and whatever happens, there will be more and more of them) will likely seek to harness the hitherto dormant forces of nationalism, Islamic fundamentalism and anti-Russian sentiment (directed both at ethnic Russians and the Russian state) in their ongoing struggle.

Arms availability in Dagestan

Traditional gun ownership

It is a tradition in Dagestan to possess arms and to carry them in public. However, Dagestani culture does not provide for training in handling arms – historically there were no tournaments, martial arts, competitions or other games connected with the use of weapons. Any man older than 14 had to carry arms, but there were many taboos. For instance, touching just the sheath of a knife or drawing a knife even slightly were not allowed. Such offences were punished with fines in line with clan community (*jama'at*) traditions.

In mountainous *jama'ats* where government control is weak, each citizen and his family form an autonomous social unit who protect themselves from others' arbitrary actions. These *jama'ats* function like city-states, with very dense and mixed populations and a comparatively high respect for law and order in the interests of ensuring public safety and survival. The violation of such laws is severely punished. This tradition, combined with the weakness of central government security forces led to the emergence of a distinct pattern of governance. Each member of the *jama'at* was an object and a subject of law enforcement. There was no penitentiary system, instead victims carried out the punishment on behalf of the *jama'at* and with everyone's approval. There were no physical punishments or imprisonment, since the consequent humiliation was deemed to prevent the guilty party and his relatives from enjoying all the rights of *jama'at* citizenship. This is why, depending on the nature of the crime, the guilty were fined, exiled from the *jama'at* or killed. The carrying of weapons was therefore obligatory. A rich person differed from the poor only in the length of his knife: the poorer the individual, the longer the knife tied to his waist-belt.

In fact, the Soviet regime did to some extent succeed in disarming the population at the start of the 1930s, but only as a result of extremely tough measures. Nonetheless, as the Soviet Union began to collapse it became clear that Dagestanis had still managed to hold onto significant stashes of SALW. These weapons, mostly pistols, were carefully hidden and kept in families since the First World War, the Civil War of 1918–1921, and

in particular the Second World War. It seems that for the mountain peoples, tradition in all aspects of life was more powerful than the harshest control measures the Soviet system could come up with.

Popular armament

The demise of the Soviet state was accompanied by great economic difficulties and a drastic rise in the levels of violent crime. As relations between the public and the Soviet authorities deteriorated, and small arms proliferation began to erode the police's ability to act, it became virtually impossible to obtain redress in the face of criminality.

Under these new circumstances the supply of, and demand for, small arms continued to grow, as Dagestanis returned to the traditional principles of social life and resorted to weapons possession. Ill-disciplined army units sold arms to the population. One eyewitness recounted the tale of his ethnic Russian grandmother receiving a truck-load of arms, including machine-guns, automatic rifles, pistols and grenades from his Dagestani father and relatives in 1998. These weapons were packed in metal barrels and buried in the small yard of his grandmother's house. The location of the secret storage site was chosen on the assumption that an old Russian lady would not be the subject of suspicion. The arms were sourced from a military unit deployed nearby which was selling military equipment to local people on a large scale.

Arms and conflicts

It is possible, but hard to confirm, that the widespread arming of the population at this time was masterminded by ruling officials who wanted to stimulate riots and civil unrest as a precursor to reversing Gorbachev's reforms. Certainly the bloody clashes that started in Dagestan's neighbouring republics in 1989 were not accidental. It would be no surprise if the Communist regimes in Union republics other than Russia might also have been preparing for the break-up of the Soviet Union, and wanted to create advantageous fall-back options for themselves by arming the populace. In May–June 1989, in the towns of Novy Uzen, Zhetybai, Yeraliev of Guriev Oblast of Kazakhstan, local Kazakhs attacked Dagestanis, who made up the majority of oil production specialists in this region. In the wake of these bloody inter-ethnic clashes, about 2,000 families (8,300 people) had to return home to Dagestan, abandoning their houses, property and jobs. More than 80 percent of them were Lezgins and other natives of the Derbent, Kurakh, Khiv, Tabasaransky and Suleiman-Stalsky districts of southern Dagestan.² Today there is no doubt that this inter-ethnic violence was well organised. Lezgins maintain that the locals were brought to this industrial part of Kazakhstan from remote rural areas, were well armed and were promised the property and housing of fleeing Dagestanis.

An activist of the Lezgin national movement (Sadval) reported at the time that in 1989 Sadval leaders held negotiations with the commanders of Soviet Army units deployed in Azerbaijan. They discussed the possibility of obtaining arms for Azerbaijani Lezgins 'for the annexation of the Lezgin-populated areas of Azerbaijan to Dagestan'. Unfortunately there is no way to verify this claim.

Meanwhile, a new bone of contention emerged with Georgia. Beginning in 1989, inhabitants of four villages near Kvareli in the north eastern Georgian highlands who had migrated from the Avar-populated area of Dagestan about 120 years earlier (under tsarist rule), were deliberately forced out of Georgia. This caused public anger in Dagestan against the Georgian authorities. In 1990, when the first exiles from Kvareli reached Dagestan, mass protests began.

In Dagestan itself, conflict emerged over the Aukh district. In early July 1989, young Laks and Chechens engaged in armed clashes for the first time near the exit from the

² 'Relations between Nationalities in the Records of the Supreme Soviet', *Makhachkala*, 1992, pp 29–30.

Khasavyurt highway to Novolakskoe district. Even before that, in 1987–8, Makhachkala witnessed the first public protests by Chechens-Akkins (Dagestani Chechens) demanding the return of Novolakskoe (formerly Aukh) district and two large villages in Kazbek district. This was the first national protest movement in Dagestan. These Chechens lived in the districts in question until they were forcibly exiled by Stalin along with the entire Chechen population from the neighbouring Chechen-Ingush Republic in 1944. Laks and Avars from the mountainous regions of Dagestan were then moved to the area. With the beginning of *perestroika* the authorities could neither meet the demands of the Chechens, nor suppress their activities as they had under Communist rule. The population of the districts began to mobilise and form paramilitary organisations on ethnic lines, quickly acquiring arms.

Two influential leaders of ethnically-based groups, Magomed Khachilaev and Gadzhi Makhachev, came to prominence as a result of this early confrontation between Chechens-Akkins and Dagestanis. Makhachev lived in Khasavyurt and originates from Kazbek district, which borders Novolakskoe district. The local Avar population mobilised to protect the land (two villages, Leninaul and Kalinaul, which used to belong to the Chechens) from Chechen claims. Khachilaev comes from Makhachkala and is a Lak. A prominent sportsman with a strong following among the youth, Khachilaev became the leader of the Lak Popular Movement.³ Khachilaev's ethnically-based group became one of the strongest in Dagestan, all but monopolising representation of the Laks. This made it different from other ethnically-based groupings, which were normally limited to one *jama'at* or a group of traditionally linked *jama'ats*. Laks managed to compensate for their small number with ethnic cohesion and the authority of their leader. Laks and Almak Avars were the first victims of clashes and confrontation in this Dagestani region (Kazbek district), so they had better starting conditions to form strong ethnically-based armed groups. This region gave birth to the militarisation of *jama'ats* and launched the fashion for forming ethnically-based groups elsewhere in Dagestan.

The most eloquent example of armament of *jama'ats* was the case of the rural settlements of Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi. During local armed violence in May 1997 and spring 1998 involving Wahhabis and the Tariqats⁴ the parties used such sophisticated weapons that the public and the authorities were shocked. Senior officials discussing the situation in Karamakhi noted with surprise the *jama'ats'* advanced military equipment. These events spurred other villages in Dagestan to procure arms for themselves.

When in September 1999 the Russian authorities decided to restore law and order in this Islamic *jama'at* (in the course of repelling the invasion of Chechen militants in Dagestan), Russian Federal troops had a chance to test the combat power of the Islamic fundamentalists in Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi. The villages repelled the attacks of the regular army and police units for two weeks. Though supported with artillery and aircraft, the federal forces lost more than 20 people during the operation. When artillery and aircraft destroyed all the buildings in the villages, the militants withdrew from their positions and escaped to Chechnya, leaving only about half a dozen fresh graves.

Availability of weapons

Although it is difficult to estimate the number of weapons available to the population, it seems to be the case that practically anyone who wanted to acquire arms in recent years has had an opportunity to do so. The biggest single source of arms currently in Dagestan appears to be Chechnya, where the secessionist struggle has allowed large stockpiles of army weapons to diffuse into society since 1990. In the early 1990s in Khasavyurt, a predominantly Chechens-Akhins area on the Chechen border, one

³ In and around Dagestan there are approximately 100,000 Laks, as compared to 600,000 Avars, 400,000 Dargins and 350,000 Kumyks and Lezgins.

⁴ Wahhabism is a name given to an extreme Islamic ideology that originated in Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism is not restricted to the Caucasus and thrives throughout the world. The Tariqats are Sufi brotherhoods.

could buy any type of SALW at the market for moderate prices. Because of its location, Khasavyurt is the centre of arms proliferation in the North Caucasus. Together with cross-border flows from Azerbaijan and Georgia, this means that weapons spread across Dagestan. In 2000 the authorities seized 542 firearms, including 2 machine-guns, 96 sub-machine-guns, 315 industrially-produced and 103 home-made pistols and rifles, 24 grenade launchers, 2 flamethrowers, 4 radio-guided anti-tank missiles, 3 *Strela* anti-aircraft missile systems, 123,000 rounds of ammunition, and 43.7 kg of explosives. Similarly, in 2001, the authorities seized 649 illegal arms, 1,333 grenades, 41 mines, 221 shells, 76,000 rounds of ammunition, and 150 kg of explosives. Lt.-Gen. Vladimir Muratov, head of the FSB Directorate in Dagestan, maintained that 200,000 rounds of ammunition and 150 kg of explosives were seized that year.⁵ This is likely to be the tip of the iceberg: there are now enormous arsenals in the countryside which will be difficult to seize, because both the leaders of ethnically-based armed groups and the rural population have an interest in possessing weapons and controlling arms trafficking by means of the traditional mechanisms which are strong in *jama'ats*.

Further evidence for the existence of large arsenals in Dagestan is the level of arms smuggling. Dagestanis are known for their pilgrimages to Mecca and other sacred places in Saudi Arabia (in some years up to 10,000 Dagestanis take part in the *Hajj*). It is an open secret that many use the pilgrimage for commercial purposes, buying and selling a variety of goods. Media reports indicate that the most popular commodity among illegal exports is Russian small arms.⁶

Thefts from military storage facilities are a further source, and continue to feature regularly in media reports, despite assurances from officials that the problem has been solved. In November 2001, Vitaly Korolkov, who had completed a six-month army contract serving in Chechnya, was detained in Makhachkala. Among others, he was carrying four blocks of TNT, Bickford fuses, two grenades with fuses and other related tools.⁷ However, given the rate of leakage from official stocks to date, this source is probably near to exhaustion.

Decline in arms production

Dagestan has traditionally been an arms production centre and is still renowned for this throughout the Caucasus and Central Asia. *Jama'ats* like Gotsatl, Kubachi and Kharbuk preserve these traditions, despite the collapse of Soviet era production between 1990 and 1998 as state orders dried up. Since 2002 these facilities have tried to reinvigorate their activities. Production has doubled since 2000, but remains nowhere near pre-1989 levels. On 4 February 2002, the Russian government discussed the plight of Dagestan's military-industrial facilities. The meeting, presided over by Deputy Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov, brought together leaders of the relevant federal ministries and agencies. The participants decided to increase the state defence order at each Dagestani enterprise and to pay all the wages arrears by late 2002. Defence enterprises in Dagestan were integrated into the unified structures of the Russian military-industrial complex. Klebanov expressed his intention to visit Dagestan to get to know the enterprises and to provide them with practical assistance.⁸

⁵ *Molodezh Dagestana*, No. 51, 20 December 2001.

⁶ *Assalam*, No. 2, 2002.

⁷ *MK Dagestan*, 29 November–6 December 2001.

⁸ *Dagestanskaya Pravda*, 8 February 2002.

Security structures in Dagestan: major actors

Official structures

After the invasion from across the border with Chechnya in August-September 1999, Dagestan was reinforced with Russian federal troops. At the beginning of the 1999 clashes, there were three brigades deployed in Dagestan, two of them from an elite tier of federal forces. They are currently based in Buinaksk, near Kizlyar and Derbent.

In October 2000, a year after the clashes, Russia started to form another separate brigade – the 77th Marine Brigade, based in Kaspiisk. It is presumably deployed on the territory of *Kaspiiskii Zavod* (the Caspian Factory), once a large military enterprise situated on the Caspian Sea shore close to a harbour capable of docking large vessels. At present, the plant is all but idle and appears to have been chosen as the deployment base for the marines. The brigade's formation was completed in December 2000.

Republican authorities have repeatedly stated that the armed forces in Dagestan will be increased and promised efforts to raise the share of funding from the federal and republican budget for that purpose. Akhmed Magdigadzhiev, Secretary of the Security Council, emphasised that all military units based in Dagestan 'have highly skilled personnel and are equipped with the most advanced weapons and technical resources'.⁹

On 9 May 2002, the 77th Marine Brigade suffered a terrorist attack when a landmine laid in Kaspiisk's main street exploded as soldiers were marching past. By late May 43 people had died of their injuries, 20 of them from the brigade.

Besides these four brigades, Dagestan is a base for the Russian Border Guard. Major Border Guard checkpoints are situated in Magaramkent, Kasumkent and Dokuspara districts near Dagestan's southern border with Azerbaijan. A large base is being built near Akhty in southern Dagestan. Border Guard units are also deployed in the mountainous areas on the borders with Georgia and Chechnya.

Also present in Makhachkala are some units of the former Caspian Sea Fleet. After leaving the Azerbaijani capital Baku, the fleet moved to Makhachkala and Astrakhan. The latter is the major base of the Caspian Fleet, whereas the port in Makhachkala is being modernised and converted into a commercial facility. However, there are still about 20–25 old warships there, making up the Caspian Red Banner Brigade of Border Guard Patrol Boats.

Since summer 2000 Russia has been conducting a command and staff exercise in Dagestan (Caucasus-2000). The exercise brings together all units deployed in Dagestan, including federal troops of the MOD, internal forces of the MOI and police officers. It is noteworthy that Dagestani militia (irregulars) also participated in the exercise. Special exercises have been held in Khasavyurt, Novolakskoe, Kazbek, Gumbetov, Botlikh and Kizlyar districts on the border with Chechnya.

The Dagestani MOI has been steadily building its strength and now comprises about 25,000 people. Half of them are occupied with promoting law and order in the districts bordering Chechnya.

The Federal Security Service (FSB) in Dagestan is normally headed by outsiders rather than by local officers. It has recently intensified its activities and is often mentioned in the press. On 8 December 2000, the Dagestani government issued a special resolution establishing the post of 'Deputy Head of the Administration on Public Security Issues' in 22 districts and seven towns. The official explanation was the need to combat the religious extremism of what are usually termed the 'Wahhabis'. This move appears to be a resumption of the practice of having security emissaries in the field.

There are cadet academies in Makhachkala and Derbent, which have about 300 students between them.

⁹ *Dagestanskaya Pravda*, 14 December 2000.

Informal groups

Dagestan has a developed network of informal combat units. As the Soviet political regime was collapsing and new structures were emerging, security units loyal to the new politicians began to play an extremely important role. Most major armed forces loyal to individual politicians and rulers are based in rural areas along with their *jama'ats*, and are made up of rural youth armed with automatic rifles and grenade launchers. These weapons are typically kept at storage sites.

If necessary, 500–2,000 militants can be transported to a required destination by bus or truck. Once, the author of this paper was invited onto such a bus standing on one of Makhachkala's main streets. Welded to the floor of the bus was a heavy machine-gun, whose barrel faced the centre of the darkened windows. Several large boxes with sub-machine-guns and ammunition stood nearby. The bus was located close to the site of business negotiations that were taking place between ethnic leaders. Several groups of young people from rural areas (five to seven in each group) sat on the street near the bus. Larger groups stood a little further off. They were drinking soda or mineral water, while suspicious trucks and buses waited for them nearby. At crucial moments of political decision-making (especially personnel reshuffles), such groups of young people from the countryside flood the parks near government buildings.

Given the existence of these political structures, it is amazing that Dagestan has managed to resolve most of its problems peacefully. Although terrorist acts, political assassinations and other incidents have occurred, during its transition period Dagestan has avoided mass clashes with widespread casualties.

The collapse of the Soviet state and the authorities' loss of control resulted in a growing crime wave. By 1990 some senior state officials had to turn to criminal bosses for advice and help. In the face of the breakdown of law and order in Makhachkala in 1989, the criminal 'authorities' soon became an important law-and-order institution in their own right. There were even cases of prominent figures from the Soviet regime turning to the criminals for help and patronage. The entire capital knew the name of its criminal overlord and, to some extent, he contributed to the re-establishment of stability and public order. However, this situation lasted only for about a year. Old criminal structures slowly disappeared, and many of their bosses have either been ousted from Dagestan altogether, killed or 'retired'. They rarely became prominent businessmen or politicians, except where they led ethnically-based groups or had family ties with such leaders.

The older criminals were generally replaced by new groups, often young people without a criminal background or intent (including many famous sportsmen) under the command of charismatic leaders. In many cases they have played a stabilising role and enjoyed considerable support. Most of the successful groups were formed from one traditional *jama'at* or coalition of *jama'ats* (one large village or an entire rural district) and led by a prominent figure or a family. They initially played a self-defence role, guarding commercial interests amid the business boom of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The strongest groups were then invited to provide security for local bosses from among the old party apparatchiks actively involved in privatisation of state property in Dagestan. Very soon many new leaders joined the ranks of the rich and gained some political influence.

Naturally an individual could stay at the top only with the strong support of his community. As a result, the old guard was reshuffled and many former party bosses were replaced. The top of the hierarchy was occupied by leaders who managed to combine ties from the Soviet past with authority over paramilitary groups based on *jama'at* solidarity. Such organisations acquired the name of 'ethnic parties', which supplied candidates for senior positions in Dagestan, both for appointed and elected posts. These groups were of two kinds. One represented leaders with senior posts who used their power to form paramilitary groups from members of their *jama'at*. The other comprised people who mobilised military support and the financial means to

move into power. This is why Dagestan witnessed a large number of assassinations and power clashes between groups in 1990–6.

Criminal groups

Nowadays, the new criminal groups keep out of politics. They confront the ethnically-based groups in a routine way (just as any unofficial structure opposes the official one), but they are also set up on the basis of *jama'ats*. They are broadly of three types.

The first are local groups fighting Dagestan's new urban and rural elite. They are no more criminal than the ruling officials, but, as outsiders who missed their chance to gain a grip on the levers of power, they moved towards outright criminal activities or are labelled by officials as 'criminal groups', 'religious extremists' or 'Wahhabis'.

The second are groups at the Dagestani-Azerbaijani border involved in smuggling, many of them ethnic Lezgins. The Lezgins, one of the largest ethnic groups in Dagestan, failed to integrate into the system of ruling ethnically-based groupings. Strong Lezgin *jama'ats* are based a long way from the capital and have limited access to the seat of power. There are not many Lezgins living in the capital and most of them have already lost links with their *jama'ats* in southern Dagestan. The majority of eminent Lezgin leaders live and work outside Dagestan, mostly in large cities in Russia and other former Soviet republics. As a result, they do not control the situation in Makhachkala or even in southern Dagestan, where Lezgins make up the majority of the rural population. Despite this overwhelming majority, the most profitable posts (those connected with the customs or Border Guard) are held by protégés of the ruling clans.

If Lezgins were in control of the border, there would be no independent smuggling groups, as illicit trafficking would be handled in an organised way. Without access to these profits, powerful smuggling groups have emerged instead. The mountainous terrain, knowledge of the local environment and the support of the population on both sides of the border (the Lezgins are split between Dagestan and Azerbaijan) facilitates smuggling.

The third and final type is that of the drug traffickers. The Dagestani economy is increasingly run by a small group of ruling clans. Therefore, many successful businessmen, who enjoyed freedom of action during the initial capitalist period, have had to submit to the constraints of working under these ruling groups or transfer their activities to Russia proper. The monopolisation of power and the economy has also caused capital flight into industries not yet controlled by local oligarchs. The human and financial resources of many 'defeated' groups have been invested in the black economy, such as clandestine vodka production (though this business too is gradually being taken over by the ruling elite) and drug trafficking/production. The latter is a new and mushrooming business with extremely high profits, attracting huge investments and making use of a highly skilled workforce.

There are a number of other reasons for the growth in the drug business. Ethnic pariahs have no other outlet for their financial investment, and the structures of these ethnically-based power groups suit this business well. The geographical position of Dagestan, which borders Azerbaijan to the south, facilitates its role as a gateway to the vast Russian drug market.

External combatants

There are also external combatants in Dagestan, ie Chechen militants. During the first war between Chechen and Russian forces in 1994–6, the conflict on the Dagestani-Chechen border was mostly symbolic. Firstly, most of this border passes through mountain regions inhabited by ethnically, historically and economically close *jama'ats*. Secondly, Chechens live on both sides of the border in the plains. Numerous federal troops and police (federal, republican and local), as well as *jama'at* self-defence

units, tried to protect the border. However, they often failed, and militants continue to cross it regularly in both directions. These troops also helped to arm the allied *jama'ats* (especially in Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi), transported hostages in order to make money, or stayed in hiding in Chechnya or in Dagestan, depending on the situation.

Humanitarian ramifications of arms proliferation in Dagestan

Paradoxically, there was a decrease in street crime during the transition period of 1990 when the population became armed. The mass proliferation of firearms helped to cut the wave of street crime. The proliferation of arms in society made people calmer – men did not pester young women and stopped insulting each other or making verbal threats, as was typical in the Communist era. But unlike in the Soviet period, murders were no longer rare. They were hardly ever solved and often not even investigated. Most were committed for selfish ends rather than because quarrels got out of hand. Every day brought news of the death of a relative, a neighbour, a fellow countryman or a colleague.

The number of accidental killings and woundings from inappropriate handling of firearms, such as celebratory shooting at wedding ceremonies, also grew. New Year celebrations in Makhachkala became a one-hour bout of continuous gunfire.

However, according to 2001 figures, the crime situation in Dagestan and in the regions neighbouring Chechnya did not change drastically (see **Table 1**).

Table 1. Crime in Dagestan (Dagestani MOI estimates)

	2001, in numbers	Percentage comparison to		
		1997	1999	2000
Total number of recorded crimes, including:	15,692	123.3	108.2	98.4
Murder and attempted murder	224	83.0	88.2	86.0
Grievous bodily harm	129	87.8	95.6	82.5
Rape and attempted rape	91	107.1	131.9	123.1
Banditry	150	55.6	85.7	87.9
Robbery	257	95.9	88.9	87.2
Theft	3,420	101.2	94.1	92.8
Burglary	1,245	118.7	110.0	102.0
Fraud	396	300	113.5	86.9
Hooliganism	980	103.3	116.1	116.9

In 2001, there were 73 crimes per 10,000 people, 22 percent more than in 1997. Such an increase can be explained by the growing number of recorded incidents of illicit drug trafficking, fraud, extortion, hooliganism, infliction of light and moderate damage to health, and economic crimes.

At the same time, the disparity in the crime rate between different districts increased. In 29 towns and districts the crime rate is falling, while in 23 the trend is upwards. The gravest situation is in Buinaksk (up 84.1 percent), Novolakskoe (up 56.4 percent), Gunib (up 51.7 percent), Magaramkent (up 36 percent) districts and Khasavyurt (up 33.2 percent). In southern Dagestan the situation deteriorated only in Magaramkent district, which is close to the border. Other areas with rising crime are the recent conflict areas close to Chechnya.

Unfortunately, the murder rate is increasing. Makhachkala accounts for 30 percent of murders, Derbent – 4.9 percent, Izberbash – 4.5 percent, Kizlyar – 4 percent, and Khasavyurt – 3.1 percent. Urban street crime is also growing, with 75 percent of all street crimes committed in cities and towns. Makhachkala accounts for 35.5 percent of all recorded crimes and 40 percent of all serious crimes in Dagestan. In 2001, the crime rate in Makhachkala amounted to 146.3 crimes per 10,000 people, twice the average for

Dagestan. The highest crime rate is in Kirov district of northern Makhachkala – 189.3. The major problems are premeditated murders (26 out of 69 murders committed in 2000 remained unsolved).

The areas adjacent to Chechnya remain a highly criminal zone. In 2000, the crime rate grew by 3.7 percent (in the towns of Kizlyar and Khasavyurt, as well as in Khasavyurt, Kizlyar, Babayurt, Gumbetov, Botlikh, Kazbek, Novolakskoe, Nogai, Tsumada and Tarumovka districts) and accounted for 19.9 percent of all recorded crime in Dagestan. Petty crime increased by 13.8 percent, including burglary (up 5.6 percent), arson (up 66.7 percent), fatal car crashes (up 2.9 percent) and car theft (up 14.3 percent). According to official figures, 92.1 percent of these crimes in the border regions were solved in 2000 (0.2 percent more than in 1999).

In 2001, the authorities recorded an increase in drug-related crimes, which accounted for 19.6 percent of all crimes solved. Among the solved crimes, drug dealing was up by 28 percent, drug smuggling six times, group drug-related crimes by 65.7 percent. Dagestan has begun to witness a war between the law-enforcement agencies and groups of drug dealers, who have no compunction in using firearms.

The adoption of a law in Dagestan in 1999 to crack down on Wahhabi activity led to the stipulation of a new crime of ‘religious extremism’. The Dagestani police have registered more than 2,500 ‘active supporters of the religious extremist movement – Wahhabism’, most of them in Buinaksk, Tsumada, Khasavyurt, Gunib, Kizilyurt, Kizlyar, Derbent, and Untskul districts. The courts tried and handed down sentences in 77 criminal cases connected with armed clashes in Dagestan (48 in Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi, 18 in Tsumada and Botlikh districts, 11 in Novolakskoe district). A total of 119 people were sentenced *in absentia*, and international arrest warrants were issued for 71 of them. 56 have so far been detained.

Initiatives to combat SALW proliferation

The first concerns about SALW proliferation were voiced in 1990 at a session of the Dagestan Supreme Soviet. Many deputies demanded measures against those carrying arms in public. This issue was discussed in the context of the increasing confrontation between the old apparatchiks and new leaders (some of whom used to belong to the Communist elite). The latter carried arms almost openly, because they needed them for self-protection. Old party bosses demanded that the MOI and the KGB seize these weapons and punish their owners for illicit possession of arms. Suddenly N. Moshkov, who headed the Dagestani KGB, proposed a bill to legalise the possession of and free trade in arms, but provide for strict registration and accountability. The bill proposed making the registered ownership of pistols legal.

While it may seem strange that a proposal of this nature came from the KGB, the bill would have had a good chance of success if the Supreme Soviet had not blocked its passage, declaring that the problem did not exist. Deputies assumed the attitude that if they legalised arms possession, all hell might break loose. These phrases were uttered at a time when no ‘serious’ person could go out into the street without carrying a gun. It was obvious that the ruling elite preferred to have illegal arms without any system of registration rather than making the possession of registered arms legal.

Thus, Dagestan did not approve any laws to deal with the problem and the spread of weapons continued. Arms possession became routine among close associates of the leaders, then among their security guards. Finally, everyone involved in business or politics had to acquire a gun.

The matter was discussed for the second time in August 1999, when hostilities in the Tsumada Mountains began. The Russian Federal authorities had to decide whether to disarm the public or arm the Dagestani militia. The latter demanded arms to fight the

Wahhabis. Moscow decided to legitimise the arms available to the militias and let them participate in military operations against Chechen combatants.

This state of affairs lasted until spring 2001, when the Dagestani authorities (at Moscow's behest) attempted to disarm the population and seize the previously legalised arms. This caused unrest in *jama'ats* and the leaders of ethnically-based power groups complained to Magomedali Magomedov, the Chairman of the State Council of Dagestan. In his speech at the 18th session of the National Assembly of Dagestan on 6 March 2001, Magomedov asked the law-enforcement agencies not to take any legal measures against Dagestanis who received and registered arms after the August 1999 developments. 'We easily forget people's honours, forget what kind of situation it was and forget our pledges to these people,' he said.

A curious comment was published two days later in the *Dagestanskaya Pravda* newspaper. One may assume that the interpretation was not simply the personal viewpoint of its author, the journalist Ismail Ismailov. 'The speech by the Chairman of the State Council was addressed to the prosecutor's office, the MOI and the MOD of the Russian Federation,' Ismailov wrote. 'One may presume that these agencies have raised the issue of collecting arms from the population.' He went on to express some concerns about the possibility of these Russian power ministries gaining control over the disarmed population of Dagestan, 'Armed structures with huge staff, unified command and significant powers [ie Russian "power ministries"] may not co-ordinate their actions with the political leadership [of Dagestan]' he warned. 'This fact raises mixed feelings. They may end up gaining control over numerous civil servants, organisations and enterprises [in Dagestan].'

Another reason for keeping arms in Dagestan, he argued, was the threat represented by Georgia and Azerbaijan. 'If we take a wider look at the problem,' Ismailov continued, 'it is evident that Georgia and Azerbaijan are NATO-oriented countries. Meanwhile, the nearest Russian airbases are in Mozdok and Astrakhan. By the time aircraft arrived, our warships would already have been destroyed along with the majority of personnel and equipment of the Army units deployed in Dagestan. Under these circumstances, arms possession is a factor deterring aggression... Registered arms in the hands of the militias do not infringe the security interests of the republic and its people'.¹⁰

In 2002 the law-enforcement agencies intensified disarmament activities. 'Terrorist acts, the large number of pre-mediated murders and other grave crimes are connected with illicit trafficking in firearms, ammunition and explosives,' Chairman Magomedov declared in a speech to the Dagestan State Council in March 2002. 'Hence, it will be necessary to enhance prevention efforts in order to impede arms smuggling and to tighten the security regimes at the storage sites'.¹¹ Nonetheless, the authorities have pursued this avowed clampdown with caution, finding arms caches in the mountains and often reaching an agreement with the owners on a voluntary surrender of the weapons the population does not 'need'. This helps to avoid criminal investigation and charges for illegal arms possession.

This process has been described well in a newspaper article by Abdurakhman Magomedov in March 2002. 'I would not be saying anything new, if I note that the population of the republic has lots of arms (mostly illegally). This is a result of the criminalisation of society, which occurred partly because of the politicians... Today we see disarmament going on; this process is slow, but it is under way. Our readers can follow these developments in the information provided by the Dagestani MOI: here and there the authorities find arms caches, seize weapons from individuals and criminal groups. But let me emphasise one detail. Some citizens decided to get rid of these dangerous and not always legal items voluntarily. This process is proceeding well in Kizilyurt district. For instance, inhabitants of Zubutli-Miatli handed in an arsenal of

¹⁰ Ismailov I, 'The Danger of Any Weapon Depends on Its Owner', *Dagestanskaya Pravda*, 8 March 2001.

¹¹ *Dagestanskaya Pravda*, 12 March 2002.

advanced weapons. Mr Akhmedilov from Kirovaul has recently got rid of 12 grenades, 5 fuses and about 100 cartridges. A *Sovkhoz* (collective farm) director from Aknada handed in 5 grenades and 2,160 cartridges... Such initiatives should be encouraged by the authorities at different levels... But let me focus on one detail – such volunteers are not subject to criminal prosecution and, on the contrary, can be rewarded. This idea belongs to the Dagestani MOI, but has not yet been approved by the appropriate agencies. We assume that the initiative will soon be endorsed, since it is a matter of the health and well-being of our citizens.¹²

Conclusion

SALW proliferation in Dagestan to the present day can be divided up into two stages: a first stage, lasting from about 1989 until the invasion of Dagestan by Chechen armed groups in August 1999, and a second stage, continuing to the present day, which is markedly different in several respects.

Major SALW proliferation in the republic began in about 1988–89. By this time it had become clear that the old public order provided by the Soviet authorities was collapsing, and all sorts of increasingly shocking and unheard-of crimes were occurring, armed robbery of homes and businesses among them. Moreover, in this period, instability was also rising in neighbouring republics. In 1989 armed clashes forced thousands of Dagestanis to leave Kazakhstan. War had started in Nagorno Karabakh, relations between Ossetians and Ingush in the Prigorodny region of Vladikavkaz had deteriorated sharply, and supporters of the Georgian national movement had started attempts to oust Avars from the Kvareli region of Georgia.

Events in the neighbouring Chechen-Ingush Republic also had a significant effect on the way that SALW proliferation developed in Dagestan. As early as 1989, the Dagestan leadership decided to sell 400 army carbines to representatives of the republican elite so cheaply that they were virtually handed out. It appears that this decision was made in response to the urgent demands of the privileged class of the crumbling regime.

The rapid growth in independent economic activity amongst the populace served as another motive for acquiring arms. Shuttle trading (where individuals travel back and forth purchasing small amounts of goods) was increasing, commercial shops and stores were being established, and innumerable cash transactions were being carried out directly, outside of the banking system. All this required reliable physical protection, which the state was not able to provide.

Another equally important reason why people felt the need to acquire arms was the power struggle over the 'socialist inheritance', ie control over all of the republic's assets, including its natural resources, state enterprises and bank accounts. In this new environment, sustaining or acquiring a position of power became impossible unless one had sufficient force available as back-up. Hence certain factions within the ruling class acquired weapons in order to appropriate this 'socialist property' by force. Indeed, the whole of the new political structure that was quickly forming out of various political, nationalist, religious, and other movements, needed force to back it up, and consequently set about acquiring weapons.

All of these trends continued to develop until Dagestan was invaded by Chechen militants in 1999. By then the republic had reached saturation point as far as SALW were concerned. Buying arms presented no difficulty at all. Moreover, people could gain access to weapons simply by being a member of a *jama'at*, a national movement or some other grouping, and expressing a desire to participate in any actions that might involve force.

¹² Magomedov A, 'How to Demilitarise Society', *Dagestanskaya Pravda*, 14 March 2002.

The events of August and September 1999 not only demonstrated just how many SALW there were in Dagestan, they also provided a reason to officially sanction the right of certain informal groupings to own firearms. The paramilitary and self-defence groups that were founded using newcomers who brought their own weapons were officially recognised and became, in effect, another component of the security sector in the republic. These events can be considered as marking the end of the first stage of SALW proliferation in Dagestan. From then on, the general situation in the republic has changed considerably. Moscow is becoming the most powerful actor, and the various ethnic groupings have either been integrated into official state structures, or have been suppressed and their influence vastly reduced. Government control over SALW circulation in civilian society is now increasing greatly. It is beginning to organise seizures of illegal arsenals, mostly from supporters of ousted ethnic parties.

However, this second stage cannot really be considered a reversal of the first stage. This new stage has not led to a significant reduction in the amount of SALW in Dagestani society; it is more the case that a greater degree of order has been introduced to SALW ownership. The general population still possesses the largest amount of weapons, but now they are better hidden. Moreover, legal methods of acquiring arms are becoming more popular – there are more gun shops, and their service and customer care is improving. Although for the most part the political elite in the republic has become integrated into the official state structures, it still preserves within it various ethnic factions that are opposed to one another. Hence attempts to disarm the population, even if they apparently have popular support, are not backed by elite consensus, rather they always turn out to be organised by certain fractions within the government against certain other groups. Thus such initiatives always generate tension at the top, even if this is hidden from the public eye. So far, this has meant that disarmament measures have had little tangible success, as the different factions tend to cancel each other out.

Moscow is worried about the high levels of SALW possession in Dagestan, and is trying to solve this problem. However, such attempts come up against stiff resistance because of the nature of politics in the republic, as has been discussed above. In fact, the centre's initiatives add to the political tensions in the republic, because by putting pressure on Makhachkala to act, it is actually exacerbating the cleavage between those factions that see the benefit of disarming their enemies, and those whose interests are threatened by such one-sided disarmament measures. As a result, politics in the republic is becoming increasingly volatile.

About the author

Enver Kisriev studied history at the University of Dagestan in Makhachkala. On completing his undergraduate degree in 1972, he began a post-graduate sociology course in Leningrad at the USSR Academy of Sciences. On finishing this in 1976, he began work for the Sociology Department of the Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography at the Dagestan Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences, where he has remained till the present day. In 1979 he completed his doctoral thesis, and in 1988 he was made head of the Sociology Department. From 1995 to 1998, while continuing to hold that post, he worked as an advisor to the Chairman of the Parliament of the Republic of Dagestan. Since February 2001, as well as holding the post of Senior Associate in the Sociology Department in Makhachkala, he has been Senior Associate at the Centre of Civilisation and Regional Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow. He is the author of several books and more than 150 articles on ethno-cultural, social and political problems in contemporary Dagestan.

Saferworld's research project on arms and security in the Caucasus

This chapter is part of a wider Saferworld report, entitled *The Caucasus: Armed and Divided – Small arms and light weapons proliferation and humanitarian consequences in the Caucasus*, which collects together case studies from local experts on the situation in their particular geographical region. The report focuses on the conflicts in the region, the relationship between conflict and levels of arms possession, and the effects of small arms proliferation since the break-up of the Soviet Union. It also includes a chapter on Russia's policy towards the small arms issues in the Caucasus.

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