# Inter-Group Relations and Conflicts in the North Caucasus:
## Stereotypes and Realities

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I t would be superficial to categorize all conflicts within the context of modern state-building in the North Caucasus as interethnic or religious. Every region is currently plagued by tense internal conflicts over resources, posts, spheres of influence and various power struggles between groups organized around common interests or strategic aims ('strategic groups'). Ethnic antagonisms are not typically the source of inter-group conflict, but rather power struggles between different groups for control over economic resources. A painful adaptation to new economic conditions in the North Caucasus is currently taking place, to a large extent as a result of new competitive networks.

For example, the tragic street fighting in 'peaceful' Kabardino–Balkaria in the town of Nalchik in October 2005 between young men of similar ethnic backgrounds, which led to the deaths of dozens of people, demonstrated that rather than ethnic differences, power relations between states and local societies have a more important role in the development of local conflicts. The attack of government buildings in the Kabardino–Balkaria capital was reportedly in response to Moscow's repeated targeting of what it calls "Islamic extremist groups," including the persecution of practicing Muslims in the region and the wholesale closure of mosques. But perhaps the most influential factor

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in the outbreak of such conflicts, often overlooked by contemporary research on Caucasus conflicts and crucial to the search for solutions, has been the practice of 'divide and conquer' so often utilized by Moscow, which in Soviet times involved the carving of North Caucasian lands and peoples into national and ethnic groups. Only recently have anthropologists begun to critically assess stereotypes about nations, religious or ethnic groups inherited from Soviet



times as constituting 'imposed identities.'[1] Another often-overlooked factor contributing to Caucasus conflict is related to kinship and professional-clan association practices of usurping power by force when engaging in business and political entrepreneurialism.[2]

The North Caucasus is a region with a high diversity of social, economic and cultural forms of development and modes of governance, with each republic characterized by its own development trends and set of problems. Despite persistent stereotypes about a region plagued by conflict, in reality the anarchy so often predicted in most 1990s scholarship about the North Caucasus did not occur. Local conflicts did not become subregional or fundamental, and traditional daily life has been preserved. Inevitable inter-group tension over economic resources may have even have played a positive role in certain multiethnic regions where large-scale conflict and violence was once predicted (Dagestan and Karachaevo-Cherkessia being prime examples). In Dagestan, for example, sporadic clashes came to an end during negotiations that managed to establish an economic power balance that "played a stabilizing role for the political system as a whole."[3]

At the same time, the existence of ethnic conflict and dangerous levels of tension in some areas should not be underestimated. The most serious conflicts have occurred in relatively homogenous areas (Chechnya) rather than in regions with multinational (Dagestan, Karachayevo–Cherkessia) or bi-ethnic (Kabardino–Balkaria) populations. Ethnicity as well as religious belonging play an important but not pivotal role in the outbreak of conflict. The creation of a 'market' for ethnic, religious and regional identity is the most important factor contributing to conflicts in the North Caucasus. This includes manipulating the 'price' of individual identities by engaging in ethnic entrepreneurialism to mobilize, seize, and/or redistribute power and resources. The most vivid example of such manoeuvring was the presidential elections in Karachaevo–Cherkessia (1999, 2003), which divided the republic along ethnic lines.

In Caucasus conflicts, ethnic belonging can serve as a 'bargaining chip' for political speculation—a means of mobilizing popular support for the leaders of ethnic groups. Sufficient financial support and promises of more land and resources can often spark the emergence of a new ethnic splinter group that had previously considered itself part of a larger ethnic group, and suddenly strives to define differences between themselves and the larger group.[4] The use of ethnicity as a mobilizing tool is the principal method whereby 'we-group' leaders attain their interests and is therefore an important resource,[5] hotly contested by state and private entrepreneurs alike.

Markers of socio-cultural identification in the Caucasus include the following (according to priority):

1) **Family association** (marriages are often contracted by representatives of different ethnic groups). Family and cognate ties play a dominant role in the practice of usurping power and organizing business and political undertakings.

2) **Religious association.** For example, Russians who adopted Islam become at once 'familiar' to the indigenous population of the Caucasus, while Kabardinians who adopted Christianity are much closer to the non-indigenous Russian-speaking population.

3) **Ethnic affiliation.** For example, the leaders (historians, intellectuals) of two kindred peoples—Karachai and Balkarians—were able to influence public opinion to such an extent that they convinced many among their communities to claim that they are ethnic Alans in a population census in order to boost their chances for increased financial and organizational assistance.

## Spotlight on two North Caucasus regions: Kabardino–Balkaria and Karachaevo–Cherkessia

The demarcation of the territories of Kabardino–Balkaria and Karachaevo–Cherkessia, two of the nine North Caucasus regions, was not determined solely on the basis of ethnicity, but primarily according to the groups' efforts to form separate compact settlements while maintaining traditional links between peoples from the mountains and plains in a way that would promote shared development and mutual benefit.

*Characteristics of the titular ethnic groups*
*in Kabardino–Balkaria and Karachaevo–Cherkessia*

| Name of ethnic group | Language | Share of the ethnic group in the republic's population (%) | | Basic form of traditional agriculture | Predominant religion |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | 1989 | 2002 | | |
| Kabardians | Adyghian group (Caucasian family) | 49 | 55 | Arable farming (foothills/plains) | Sunni Islam |
| Cherkessians | | 9.7 | 11.3 | | |
| Balkarians | Turkic group (Altaic family) | 9.6 | 11 | Mountain stockbreeding | |
| Karachai | | 31 | 38.5 | | |

In both republics, traditional Soviet methods of political control including ethnic representation, stratification, and centralized Moscow appointment of important positions were used with varying degrees of success. In Kabardino–Balkaria the formation of a single (Kabardinian–Balkarian–Russian) ruling elite led to a rapid adaptation to the new political reality and stable loyalty to the federal center. The leaders of Kabardinian and Balkarian national-democratic independence movements at the beginning of the

1990s were quickly neutralized or co-opted. The shared institution of the Soviet party nomenclatura controlling the leading and all important posts led to political stagnation. Although inter-group tension is at first glance low in Kabardino–Balkaria, the lack of fresh leadership and the suppression of initiative and criticism has led to low rates of development and a great dependence on Moscow.

By contast, no single ruling elite emerged during the both Soviet and post-Soviet periods in Karachaevo–Cherkessia. Attempts to establish a Moscow-backed ruling elite proved susceptible to popular criticism, as it was linked to the Soviet repression and deportation of the Karachai, not to mention the distortion of information or silence about this dark chapter of Soviet history. The successive changes in government in the 1990s created political instability at regional levels, but this instability was to some extent compensated for by a strengthening of power at district and local levels. The heads of districts, especially in ethnically homogenous areas, have considerably greater administrative powers than the district administrations in Kabardino–Balkaria. Furthermore, the multiparty system in Karachaevo-Cherkessia supports development, competition and criticism. Although the greatest competition has taken place between ethnically-based parties, the level of political openness enjoyed in Karachaevo–Cherkessia—where the mayor of the republic's capital city, Cherkessk, is a Communist in opposition to the region's leadership and press reports detail kinship ties among the elite—is virtually inconceivable in Kabardino–Balkaria.

## Preventing inter-group conflict in Kabardino–Balkaria and Karachaevo–Cherkessia

Case studies of Kabardino–Balkaria and Karachaevo–Cherkessia shed light on apparently successful models of conflict prevention in the North Caucasus. A comparison between the two regions reveals the following strategies for conflict prevention employed between different strategic groups:

1) *The creation of joint institutions.* These include joint formal institutions of authority and informal agreements on the redistribution of spheres of influence (quotas, ethnic representation), joint use of land, pastures, markets. In Kabardino–Balkaria, the common strategy of forming a joint elite via interethnic marriages between members of the Kabardian and Balkarian elites highlights the age-old high esteem placed on kinship.

2) *The creation of heterogeneous zones of transition within administrative structures and electoral constituencies, along with the stratification of authority in the upper echelons.* The formation of republics with mixed ethnicities is a deliberate method of regulating conflicts. Examples of ethnic homogenization such as the division of Chechnya and Ingushetia

demonstrate how the 'unmixing' populations can disembed conflict and lead to the outbreak of violence. Conflicts are often based on the production of ideas of inequality between small ethnic groups in situations where ethnic minorities are over-represented in the regional elite.

3) *When conflict appears imminent, the temporary state monopolization of strategic resources or positions (the elimination of local competition and risk).* Moscow's strict control over some positions is also an attempt to lower the salience of ethnic competition.[6] The most blatant example is the state veto on land privatization in Kabardino-Balkaria and the awarding of federal status to a number of territories. But the short-term positive effects of such means of regulating conflicts may be counterproductive in the longer run.

De-emphasizing the importance of ethnicity or religious belonging in fueling conflict allows for a deeper analysis of the important markers of differentiation that can lead to violence, which are often connected to issues of self-identification and aspirations toward the attainment of immediate, often ecomomic, goals.

## Notes

[1]    Tishkov V.A. Rekviem po etnosu. Issledovania po sozialno-kulturnoi antropologii. Moscow, Nauka, 2003.

[2]    Galina M. Yemelianova, Kinship, ethnicity and religion in post-Communist societies. Russia's autonomous republic of Kabardino-Balkariya. Ethnicities, Vol. 5(1), pp.51–82.

[3]    Kisriev, E. Formirovanie demokraticheskoi sistemy upravlenia v postkommunisticheskom Dagestane. In: Mestnoe upravlenie mnogoetnicheskimi soobshchestvami v stranah SNG. Ed. Tishkov, V.A. and Filippova, E. Moscow, 2001, pp.71–90.

[4]    Tishkov, V.A. Ibid.

[5]    Zürcher, Christoph and Koehler, January 2003. Potentials of Dis/Order. Explaining Conflict and Stability in the Caucasus and in the Former Yugoslavia. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p.12.

[6]    Coining the term "Soviet people" clearly artificially lowered the value of ethnicity. To a certain extent, the hierarchical structure of identification (for instance, allegiance to both Russia and Balkaria) holds down the price of regional ethnicity.