

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# IDENTIFYING AN INTEGRATION MODEL FOR THE NORTH CAUCASUS

## Part 1: Politics, security and economy

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As the level of violence has dramatically dropped, military, law enforcement and judiciary practices that leave room for irregularities, such as violence and corruption, should be systematically investigated and outlawed.

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# IDENTIFYING AN INTEGRATION MODEL FOR THE NORTH CAUCASUS: POLITICS, SECURITY AND ECONOMY

Elena Zhirukhina

It has been 12 years since the official termination of Russia's counterterrorist operations in Chechnya. The North Caucasus progresses with its normalisation agenda despite evidence of a slight increase in political violence<sup>1</sup> and continuous law enforcement operations against suspected terrorists<sup>2</sup>. In the last three decades, this region has had special federal attention due to the legacy of the violent conflict. Government policies have included the lengthy counterterrorist campaign<sup>3</sup> that combined both military and law enforcement operations, and the co-optation of local elites<sup>4</sup>, financial support, and development programmes<sup>5</sup>. Targeted policies aimed not only at building regional peace but also at further integrating the region into Russia's federal structure.

Combining both peacebuilding and integration efforts has been crucial. The collapse of the Soviet Union led to a redefinition of the relationship between Moscow and Russia's regions<sup>6</sup>. In some cases, these processes provoked the rise of nationalist sentiments, secessionists movements and religious extremism. The North Caucasus, and particularly Chechnya, stood out in that regard. The pacification of political violence by military means and economic, social and political integration has been placed high on the political agenda<sup>7</sup> under President Vladimir Putin. This multifaceted strategy led to a dramatic decline in violence<sup>8</sup>. Now, as solid ground for regional normalisation has been reached, the question is to what extent the current integration model embodies a long-term solution?

Indeed, multiple challenges remain that can potentially hinder effective regional integration. For instance, corruption undermines the outcomes of economic

programmes and the accountability of local governance. Irregularities in law enforcement practices provoke distrust among residents and, at times<sup>9</sup>, violent backlash. In the socio-cultural sphere, there are still signs of an 'us' versus 'them' mentality and of insufficient integration of the region into the Russian cultural space<sup>10</sup>. Finding solutions to these and other challenges will define the sustainability of the integration process.

Building on expert interviews with Yevgeny Ivanov, Mark Galeotti, Irina Starodubrovskaya, Marat Iliyosov, and Helge Blakkisrud, this article investigates what the current vision of the integration model for the North Caucasus is and to what extent elements of this model should be prioritised or amended to ensure sustainable regional peace and prosperity. This paper offers the following findings. First, there is a growing demand for a legitimate and accountable regional government, which could be developed through popular regional elections. Second, along with security provision, there is a need for an accountable judiciary and law enforcement. Third, in addition to extensive top-down development programmes and federal transfers, the region needs to promote projects that are sensitive to local values and practices. Reinforcement of the anti-corruption agenda is intrinsic to all three dimensions as corruption undermines good governance, economic efficiency and security provision.

## BACKGROUND

The North Caucasus<sup>11</sup> (defined here as the North-Caucasian Federal District of the Russian Federation, including Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, Stavropol Region

1 <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/362431/>

2 <https://russian.rt.com/russia/article/841376-fsb-dagestan-terakt>

3 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022343312448389>

4 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1060586X.2014.900976>

5 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10758216.2015.1067750>

6 <https://www.peterlang.com/document/1051750>

7 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00396330802329030>

8 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00396330802329030>

9 <https://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/europe/caucasus/221-the-north-caucasus-the-challenges-of-integration-ii-islam-the-insurgency-and-counter-insurgency.pdf>

10 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17405629.2017.1336433>

11 The North Caucasus is defined here as the North-Caucasian Federal District of the Russian Federation, including Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, Stavropol Region and the Northern Ossetia-Alania

and the Northern Ossetia-Alania) is a border region. Border regions are usually treated specially by the state<sup>12</sup> to prevent cross-border illicit activities such as illegal migration or illicit trafficking of weapons or drugs. In addition to the management of border challenges, the relations between the North Caucasus and the federal government were largely shaped by the lengthy regional conflict. It was rooted in two Chechen wars from 1994–1996 and 1999–2000, with the ‘regime of counterterrorist operations’ continuing until 2009. Initially, the conflict was fuelled by secessionist goals. As it developed<sup>13</sup>, it also took on Islamist aspects.

This conflict provoked a range of political implications for the whole federation, including contributing to the justification of federal power centralisation under Putin, as well as to the steady limitation of freedoms as proscribed by anti-terrorism laws during the 2000s. Tackling secessionist impulses and conflict in the North Caucasus became vital for Russian stability and state survival as the conflict was not confined to the region itself. Multiple terrorist attacks, emanating from North Caucasian unrest, occurred in the Russian ‘mainland’, including large-scale hostage-taking<sup>14</sup>. Such attacks shattered the belief<sup>15</sup> in the capability of the state to protect its citizens.

Asserting control over the North Caucasus occupied a central place in Putin’s presidential programme of 2000<sup>16</sup>, remained a significant challenge addressed by the government<sup>17</sup> before elections in 2004 and was referred to as a success<sup>18</sup> of his administration during the presidential campaign in 2012. Indeed, defeating the insurgency in the North Caucasus served as one of the key means by which Putin consolidated his position at the pinnacle of Russia’s political system.

The increased use of integration policies in the 2010s highlights that Russia has progressed from conflict management to post-conflict integration. But how effective were these policies in building a sustainable peace and ensuring the development of the North Caucasus?

## AN INTEGRATION MODEL FOR THE NORTH CAUCASUS?

An integration model is a set of state-led policies that promote regional peace and development. Russia’s integration model aims to link problematic regions with key Russia political, legal, economic, social, cultural spaces and in public discourse. To be successful, such integration efforts should strike the right balance between unification and autonomy. Unification plays a key role in ensuring that the region, however diverse in terms of political autonomy, traditions and local practices, is well integrated with Russia’s political and economic processes, and its national identity and legal space. However, it should also allow those regions to retain their distinctiveness<sup>19</sup>, given the legacy of two wars fuelled by separatist sentiments. This could be well accommodated by the flexible handling of regional needs within an asymmetrical federation such as Russia – ‘asymmetrical’ here meaning constitutionally embedded differences between the legal status and prerogatives of different sub-units within the same federation.

Since the early 2000s, federal policies directed at the North Caucasus have included management of regional political elites, intensive law enforcement and military operations to ensure security, law and order, economic support via federal transfers and development programmes, and the management of issues related to culture and language, identity and discourse. The next three sections will focus on three areas that have been key to Russia’s strategy<sup>20</sup> in the North Caucasus: regional elites and governance; security, law, and order; and economic and anti-corruption measures.

## GOVERNANCE AND REGIONAL ELITES

Adjusting to the return of regional elections<sup>21</sup> in 2012 and the follow-up law passed in 2013<sup>22</sup> that grants Russian regions the right to decide how to select their governors (either by popular vote or by the vote of the local parliaments), the North Caucasian republics, with the exception of Chechnya, preferred to refrain from holding direct elections in favour of the presidential appointment of candidates, confirmed by the vote of the republican parliaments<sup>23</sup>.

12 <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/99.html>

13 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.2747/1539-7216.52.5.596>

14 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1060586X.2002.10641512>

15 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10576100701767122>

16 <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/141144>

17 <http://www.linia2003.ru/>

18 [http://er.ru/party/presidential\\_election/](http://er.ru/party/presidential_election/)

19 <https://doi.org/10.2307/357120>

20 <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/144244>

21 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21599165.2014.956925>

22 [http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_144340/](http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_144340/)

23 <https://tass.ru/info/754125>

Traditionally, political leaders of the North Caucasian republics represented local elites and major ethnic groups, and understood the local political climate. And, due to the conflict's legacy, heads of the republics tended to have either law enforcement, security or military backgrounds. Ingushetia, for example, has only ever had leaders with those backgrounds. Heads of republics rarely came from outside the region. This arrangement worked as long as political elites confirmed their loyalty to the federal centre and delivered on their priority tasks.

Things have changed in recent years. There is a growing trend towards political unification and the demolition of special regional political arrangements. For example, in Dagestan, Vladimir Vasilyev who headed the republic from 2017 to 2020 was half-Russian and half-Kazakh<sup>24</sup>. His appointment was a break from decades of the tradition of appointing representatives from the three major ethnic groups. Vasilyev launched an assault on the corrupt Dagestani elites, resulting in high-profile cases<sup>25</sup>, including the arrest of the mayor of Makhachkala, and the acting prime minister. Although the anti-corruption agenda is popular in Dagestan, such changes in the composition of the political elites were not received lightly. His successor, Sergei Melikov, half-Lezgin and half-Russian, although born outside of the region, has a strong connection to the North Caucasus, including previously serving as the Plenipotentiary Representative of the President to the region<sup>26</sup>. These new appointments signal a transfer to soft political unification and a possible diversion from the practice of appointing representatives of local elites.

These new appointments will be soon tested during the State Duma elections in September 2021<sup>27</sup>. Traditionally, Russian national republics, in particular those located in the North Caucasus, record high percentages of votes<sup>28</sup> for the ruling party, United Russia. For instance<sup>29</sup>, Chechnya voted 99.36% for United Russia in 2007, and 96.3% in 2016. Managing the gap between the real vote and the registered vote and ensuring good results for United Russia is indicative of loy-

alty<sup>30</sup> to the federal centre (and thus the subsequent capacity to secure funds) and serves to evaluate the efficiency of regional leaders.

It is still an open question whether new appointees will be able to deliver the expected results. An unfavourable percentage of votes cast for United Russia might well lead to changes in the composition of regional heads of republics to ensure that more loyal and active officials are in place before the presidential elections. Following the September vote, the federal centre might either progress with soft political unification or adjust this process by resetting to more traditional options.

Although direct elections in the republics have intrinsic risks, more popular participation in this process could be demanded in the future. The current procedure of appointing the heads of republic is increasingly perceived by residents as a lack of faith in the region and its people. The expression of public dissatisfaction using lawful and peaceful means provides public feedback to regional political elites.

At the grassroots level, however, it is failures to adequately provide public services such as healthcare and utilities that causes dissatisfaction with the state. Thus, improvements in public services could also have positive impacts on state legitimacy.

## **RULE OF LAW, SECURITY PROVISION AND LAW ENFORCEMENT ACCOUNTABILITY**

Maintaining security and order remains the key task for a region that has emerged from three decades of intense political violence<sup>31</sup>. Despite a dramatic decline in the level of political violence, the risks are not completely gone: in recent years a significant number of North Caucasians have travelled to conflict zones in the Middle East to join the Islamic State<sup>32</sup>.

Russian security operations in the region over the past two decades were reported to include actions beyond the rule of law, such as the imposition of collective punishment for terrorist attacks on relatives of per-

24 <https://tass.ru/info/4613209>

25 [https://users/Tom/Downloads/Elena Mukhametshina and Svetlana Bocharova](https://users/Tom/Downloads/Elena_Mukhametshina_and_Svetlana_Bocharova),

26 <https://tass.ru/info/9631659>

27 The article was written in June 2021. The distribution of votes for United Russia in the North Caucasus is as follows: Chechnya 89.2 percent (96.3 percent in 2016), Ingushetia 85.2 percent (72.4 percent), Dagestan 81.2 percent (88.9 percent), Kabardino-Balkaria 79.2 percent (77.7 percent), Karachay-Cherkessia 80 percent (81.7 percent), North Ossetia 71 percent (67.1 percent) and Stavropol Krai 61.8 percent (54.3 percent).

28 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15387216.2015.1120680>

29 [http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/region/izbirkom?action=show&root=1&tvd=100100021960186&vrn=100100021960181&region=0&global=1&sub\\_region=0&prver=0&pronetvd=null&vi-bid=100100021960186&type=233](http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/region/izbirkom?action=show&root=1&tvd=100100021960186&vrn=100100021960181&region=0&global=1&sub_region=0&prver=0&pronetvd=null&vi-bid=100100021960186&type=233)

30 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2016.1163826>

31 [https://www.jstor.org/stable/26910403?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/26910403?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)

32 Recognised on the territory of the Russian Federation as a terrorist organisation by the decision of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation of 29.12.2014, No. AKPI 14-1424S, entered into force on 13.02.2015

petrators and abductions and disappearances<sup>33</sup>. For instance, in Chechnya, head of the republic Ramzan Kadyrov had to deny systematic detention and disappearances while meeting with Putin in 2017<sup>34</sup>.

Claims of irregularities during counterterrorist operations, including instances of torture during questioning or other forms of ill-treatment, are frequently submitted by residents of the North Caucasus to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR)<sup>35</sup>. Interestingly, the recent amendment to the Russian Constitution, in particular Article 79, states that the decisions of international institutions will not be executed by Russia should such decisions contradict the Russian Constitution. In 2015, the Russian Constitutional Court decided<sup>36</sup> that the Russian Constitution has priority over the decisions of the ECHR. This trend could impact the ability of Russian citizens, including residents of the North Caucasus, to seek justice in the ECHR.

The rule of law and the proper functioning of the Russian legal system are still weak in the North Caucasus. In particular, Chechnya implements some elements of Russian law and at the same time ignores others. Official Russian law enforcement and justice institutions coexist with the unofficial practices of customary law – adat, and Islamic law – sharia. Adat and sharia could be useful tools in resolving minor local conflicts to the extent that their norms do not directly contradict Russian laws. However, the most damaging factor to the applicability of the rule of law is widespread corruption that distorts the image of the Russian justice system and undermines institutional accountability.

Measures that reduce corrupt law enforcement and legal practices will also contribute to regional security<sup>37</sup> as the sense of injustice that citizens feel towards corrupt institutions fuels the agenda of violent groups<sup>38</sup>. The proper operation of law enforcement and justice institutions is crucial to regional stability. Stability should not just be measured by the number of terrorist attacks nor the effectiveness of law enforcement by the number of counterterrorist opera-

tions. It is crucial for integration that residents of the North Caucasus feel they are protected in the same way as residents of other Russian regions.

## FEDERAL TRANSFERS, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND ANTI-CORRUPTION

Peacebuilding in the North Caucasus has been financially supported by the federal government through targeted programmes designed to address special regional challenges. These mechanisms<sup>39</sup> include inter-budget transfers, such as subsidies, grants and subventions, and federal-targeted programmes, such as federal sectoral programmes, and special economic zones.

The national republics in the North Caucasus are traditionally highly dependent upon federal financial support. Their budgetary dependence on federal transfers has been fluctuating from 50% to over 90%<sup>40</sup>. For example, federal transfers covered 91% of the Chechen budget in 2009, the year when the 'regime of counterterrorist operations' ended<sup>41</sup> in the republic. Maintaining federal transfers is essential to regional pacification. Failure to maintain financial support could be destabilising. However, to maximise the impact of federal transfers, it is important to address challenges related to patronage, nepotism and corruption, and ensure that the whole population benefits from federal support.

Inter-budget transfers has been accompanied by large-scale government programmes designed to boost economic development<sup>42</sup>. Federal-targeted programmes prioritise investing<sup>43</sup> in agriculture, manufacturing, infrastructure, health, education and particularly in tourism. However, to be effective, the implementation of large-scale development initiatives, however positive and necessary, should also account for local values to bring results.

Extensive top-down development programming should be reconciled with local projects that build on local communities, resources, human capital, vi-

33 Memorial Human Rights Center, "Counter-Terrorism in the North Caucasus: A Human Rights Perspective. 2014 – First Half of 2016" (Moscow, 2016), [https://memohrc.org/sites/all/themes/memo/templates/pdf.php?pdf=/sites/default/files/doklad\\_severnoy\\_kavkaz\\_-\\_angl.pdf](https://memohrc.org/sites/all/themes/memo/templates/pdf.php?pdf=/sites/default/files/doklad_severnoy_kavkaz_-_angl.pdf) (Organization performing the functions of a foreign agent)

34 <http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/146/events/54342>

35 <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng-comold#%7B%22cite-mid%22%3A%22003-3435608-3860981%22%5D%7D%20ECHR>,

36 <http://www.consultant.ru/law/hotdocs/43697.html/>

37 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10611-013-9446-x>

38 <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/north-caucasus/north-caucasus-challenges-integration-iii-governance-elections-rule-law>

39 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10758216.2015.1067750>

40 [http://link.library.eui.eu/portal/Interrogating-illiberal-peace-in-Eurasia-/HKEtVkcIc\\_g\\_c/](http://link.library.eui.eu/portal/Interrogating-illiberal-peace-in-Eurasia-/HKEtVkcIc_g_c/)

41 [http://link.library.eui.eu/portal/Interrogating-illiberal-peace-in-Eurasia-/HKEtVkcIc\\_g\\_c/](http://link.library.eui.eu/portal/Interrogating-illiberal-peace-in-Eurasia-/HKEtVkcIc_g_c/)

42 [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/M-Zotova/publication/319859984\\_Economic\\_and\\_social\\_reforms\\_in\\_the\\_North\\_Caucasus\\_Goals\\_limitations\\_problems\\_and\\_results/links/5a6f1e7c0f7e9bd4ca6dab2c/Economic-and-social-reforms-in-the-North-Caucasus-Goals-limitations-problems-and-results.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/M-Zotova/publication/319859984_Economic_and_social_reforms_in_the_North_Caucasus_Goals_limitations_problems_and_results/links/5a6f1e7c0f7e9bd4ca6dab2c/Economic-and-social-reforms-in-the-North-Caucasus-Goals-limitations-problems-and-results.pdf)

43 [http://link.library.eui.eu/portal/Interrogating-illiberal-peace-in-Eurasia-/HKEtVkcIc\\_g\\_c/](http://link.library.eui.eu/portal/Interrogating-illiberal-peace-in-Eurasia-/HKEtVkcIc_g_c/)

sions, creativity and translate local identities, values and practices into business models. Indeed, the North Caucasus seeks encouragement and support for bottom-up economic development to build strong economic foundations at the grassroots level and unleash the potential for growth. Moreover, the region needs further economic, infrastructural, and logistical integration with the rest of Russia.

Anti-corruption measures should be prioritised in the region as corrupt practices distort the face of regional administrations and undermine public trust. Anti-corruption measures will, at first, impact political and business elites and the local power balance. Furthermore, shadow economies still support local populations and small businesses so policy responses need to be mindful of this. Disrupting small businesses could have a negative impact on peacebuilding. Thus, it is preferable to have a gradual reinforcement of lawful practices in political and economic life<sup>44</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the number of targeted polices in the region, there is a lack of academic agreement on whether the integration process is working or whether there is an adequate federal vision of integration at all. Integration is a complex task that requires sensitivity to the diversity of the North Caucasus. It also requires flexible balancing between short and long-term objectives.

In the political sphere, prioritising relations with regional elites, however corrupt, to reach a fragile but stable power balance could have been a pragmatic solution in the conflict or post-conflict context. Peacetime settings create an appetite for renewed legitimacy and accountability in local governance that could be acquired by means of regional elections. In addition, building a safe environment for channelling public feedback in peaceful and lawful formats becomes increasingly important.

In the security and justice sphere, providing an acceptable level of security at all costs could have been crucial in the context of armed hostilities and daily political violence. As the level of violence has dramatically dropped, military, law enforcement and judiciary practices that leave room for irregularities, such as violence and corruption, should be systematically investigated and outlawed. In addition, ensuring the rule of law and accountability are en-

forced would nurture public trust towards law enforcement agencies and the development of a culture of law.

In the economic sphere, tracing end-recipients of financial transfers for reconstruction and development purposes would have been very challenging in the unstable environment of armed hostilities. Now, it seems crucial that federal financial aid benefits the whole population, and corrupted networks can no longer embezzle targeted federal financial assistance. In addition to top-down economic programming, it is essential to promote bottom-up development projects that embody local values and practices and boost regional economic potential.

Now that the region has stabilised, short-term priorities might well be amended to meet new social demands. However, to ensure long-term peace, there should be a progressive transition from state security to human security, from manageable elites to good governance, as well as to the functioning of the rule of law and respect for human rights.

<sup>44</sup> <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10611-013-9446-x>

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## SUMMARY



An integration model is defined as a set of state policies that serve the purpose of promoting regional peace and development. Russian integration model aims to link the struggling regions with the key political, legal, economic, social, cultural spaces and in public discourse. Such integration efforts shall strike a right balance between unification and uniqueness. Unification plays a key role in ensuring that the region, however diverse, is well integrated in the Russian political and economic processes, national identity and legal space. Equally important it is to keep uniqueness and distinctiveness for the region that has a legacy of two wars fuelled by separatist sentiments.



In the political sphere, prioritising relations with regional elites, however corrupt, to reach a fragile but stable power balance could have been a pragmatic solution in the conflict or post-conflict context. Peacetime settings create an appetite for renewed legitimacy and accountability in local governance that could be acquired by means of regional elections. In addition, building a safe environment for channelling public feedback in peaceful and lawful formats becomes increasingly important.



In the security and justice sphere, providing an acceptable level of security at all costs could have been crucial in the context of armed hostilities and daily political violence. As the level of violence has dramatically dropped, military, law enforcement and judiciary practices that leave room for irregularities, such as violence and corruption, should be systematically investigated and outlawed. In addition, ensuring the rule of law and accountability of local governments are enforced would nurture public trust towards law enforcement agencies and the development of a culture of law.