

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

IDENTIFYING AN INTEGRATION MODEL FOR THE NORTH CAUCASUS

Part 2:
Discourse and perception, culture and language

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Raising awareness among the population about developments in the North Caucasus and creating a balanced and fair image of this region seems to be non-separable from other measures aimed at building regional peace. The media content should not contribute to reinforcing existing (or creating new) negative stereotypes.



The image of the North Caucasus needs rebranding and careful handling to avoid misrepresentation. Drawing public eyes towards stories of innovative local businesses, e.g., tourist projects, fashion brands, art galleries, and other local successes is one way to serve this cause.



Preservation and promotion of local cultures and languages is extremely important for Russia and for the North Caucasus in particular. At the same time, promotion of Russian culture and Russian language presents a key undertaking in integrating the region.

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IDENTIFYING AN INTEGRATION MODEL FOR THE NORTH CAUCASUS: DISCOURSE AND PERCEPTION, CULTURE AND LANGUAGE.

Elena Zhirukhina

In response to the decades of violence and instability that have weakened the ties between the North Caucasus and the rest of the Russian Federation, Moscow has gradually implemented a strategy that aims to integrate the region with the rest of the country on a new basis. Creating a new political and economic system¹ is at the core of this policy. But there are other key dimensions too. 'The North Caucasus has to be fully integrated into informational and humanitarian space of our country [Russia]. Federal TV and radio channels shall provide more content about the region. Local journalists are to be actively involved in this process as they are aware of both advantages and problems of this region,' - noted Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in 2010, speaking about socio-economic strategy for the North Caucasus till 2020². Indeed, raising awareness among the general population about developments in the North Caucasus and creating a balanced and fair image of this region seems to be non-separable from security and economic measures aimed at mitigating consequences of a lengthy conflict and building regional peace. Highlighting regional progress and promoting a positive picture are equally important to harmonize perception of this region impacted by the recent conflicts and to counter negative associations. The management of informational space around the region is a two-sided process too. The authentic regional 'image' needs to be communicated to the rest of Russia explaining regional peculiarities in a knowledgeable way, providing context, and ensuring that the media content does not contribute to reinforcing existing (or creating new) negative stereotypes. Russia's 'image' too needs to be promoted within the North Caucasus. And this is not an easy mission.

Territories, currently known as the North Caucasian Federal District of Russia (Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, Stavropol Region, and the Northern Ossetia-Alania)

and Russia have had extensive history of interactions³ going back in centuries. These interactions left marks of tragic events and grievances⁴, as well as accounts of progress and development on collective memories. Average Russian mind would associate the region with resistance and coexistence, stunning nature, distinct traditions, complexity, war and honour culture, but also with danger and ruthlessness. Since mid-1990s, the dominant narrative connects the region to violence and terrorism. In addition, efforts of integration are impacted by region's diversity and complexity in terms of cultural norms, traditions, languages, ethnicity, and historical events that shaped collective memories⁵. Thus, navigating between discourse and perceptions, cultural and linguistic distinctiveness present additional challenge to integration of the North Caucasus.

This project investigates what constitutes the current vision of integration model for the North Caucasus being implemented by national and regional authorities and to what extent elements of this model – separate policies - should be prioritised or amended to ensure sustainable regional peace and prosperity. Building on expert interviews with Yevgeny Ivanov, Marat Ilyasov and six other anonymous experts, this paper engages with matters that somewhat less tangible but no less important for successful integration of the North Caucasus with the rest of the Russian Federation such as discourse and public perception, and accommodation of diversity, e.g., cultural and linguistic uniqueness.

The sustainable integration of the North Caucasus with Russia will require a shift in the mutual perceptions. To achieve a quality change in perceptions, engaging with media alone will not be sufficient. It will require a change in key practical areas, notably federal policies to accept and promote the cultural and linguistic diversity of the North Caucasus and reciprocal willingness of the populations of the North Cau-

1 <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/rusi-newsbrief/identifying-integration-model-north-caucasus>

2 Vladimir Putin demanded that the media fully integrate the North Caucasus into Russia's information and humanitarian space. ITAR-TASS. 6 July 2010. URL: <https://fapmc.gov.ru/rospechat/newsandevents/media/2010/07/item10042.html>

3 <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195177756.001.0001/acprof-9780195177756>

4 <https://www.routledge.com/The-Northwest-Caucasus-Past-present-future/Richmond/p/book/9780415693219>

5 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.2747/1538-7216.48.2.202>

casus to integrate with the rest of Russia culturally, linguistically, institutionally. Together, such conjunct processes will help to change mutual perceptions in Russia of the North Caucasus and in the North Caucasus of Russia. Thus, this paper focuses on a shared positive national narrative as a part of integration policy. It sets two sub-questions. In discourse, it investigates to what extent the discourse about the North Caucasus supports integration efforts. In culture and language, it analyses to what extent current policies accommodate diversity, promote unity, and contribute to building multicultural environment and feeling of belonging.

This paper offers the following findings. First, public discourse on the region requires repairing and balancing out, changing negative associations no longer reflective of the situation on the ground, and showcasing successful local projects related to development. Storytelling about the region should educate the Russian audience about the complexity and diversity, emphasizing its drive to development in first place. Second, to ensure accommodation of diverse nationalities within unified Russian society, two coinciding efforts should be reinforced: support and promotion both of minority languages and cultures to preserve and promote diversity and distinctiveness within the federation and Russian language and culture to foster the integration of the north Caucasus with the rest of Russia.

INTEGRATION MODEL FOR THE NORTH CAUCASUS?

In this paper, an integration model is defined as a set of state policies that serve the purpose of promoting regional peace and development, e.g., peacebuilding, and aim to link the region with the Russian political, legal, economic, social, cultural spaces and in public discourse. While political, legal and economic dimensions provide a foundation for sustainable peace and integration, the more subtle elements dealing with narratives, discourses and promoting larger socio-cultural identities while accommodating linguistic, ethnic, religious distinctiveness are crucial in shaping the perception of common space and of belonging. Experts note that more work needs to be done in that regard as there is still a lack of acknowledgement that the North Caucasus is composed of very diverse regions and needs targeted treatment according to the local dynamics of its constituent elements. Such diversity makes it very challenging to formulate an integrated approach. The next three sections will focus on discourse and perception, and culture and language.

DISCOURSE AND PERCEPTION

Undeniably, the two Chechen wars and a follow-up political violence shaped the public discourse around the North Caucasus for decades. The conflict resulted in forming of a strong and dominant narrative among the general Russian population of the North Caucasus being a breeding place for criminals and terrorists. Labelling violent groups operating in the North Caucasus as 'gangs', 'criminals', and especially 'terrorists', contributed to construction of public support for their neutralization⁶. The word 'terrorist' itself contains popular negative meaning and imposes particular attitudes on the carrier. Usage of labels with negative connotations to mark adversaries justifies the methods employed to defeat them⁷. Due to intense political violence and its reporting, the North Caucasus took a niche of ever troubled place in media feeds. Transition from conflict to peace requires different narratives suitable for peacetime and management of residual impact of hostile narratives remaining from active armed combat.

To counter the legacy of negative images one of the counternarratives currently channelled by both the federal centre and regional elite refers to unity of the North Caucasus and the rest of Russia. Chechnya, as the ex-separatist republic, has been placed in the heart of that discourse. To illustrate, it is useful to note reoccurring themes in speeches of Ramzan Kadyrov who has been heading the republic since 2007. Aiming at federal audience, Kadyrov has repeatedly stated his loyalty to Russia⁸, emphasizing willingness of the Chechens to live in Russia⁹ and linking prosperity of the republic to strong and stable Russian state¹⁰. At the same time, regime survival in Chechnya required keeping the federal government satisfied while manifesting that the Chechen nation reached its objectives by staying in the federation¹¹. Targeting audience in Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov articulates his foremost loyalty to his own nation¹². These narratives negotiate between compliance with the Russian demands and the Chechen autonomy. This communication at the level of leadership is in no way reflective of views at the societal level. Yet it showcases the current official discourse.

Overall, the image of the North Caucasus needs rebranding and careful handling to avoid misrepresent-

6 <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-1-4614-5140-2>

7 <https://products.abc-clio.com/ABC-CLIOCorporate/product.aspx?pc=A3073C>

8 <https://iz.ru/news/571431>

9 <https://ria.ru/20070301/61427938.html>

10 <http://old.memo.ru/hr/hotpoints/caucas1/msg/2007/04/m89083.htm>

11 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09668136.2011.557540>

12 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4G9yAq8Mmk>

tation. Then Prime Minister Putin mentioned in a faraway 2010¹³ that there is an urgent need in improving the image of this region in Russia and beyond, including by means of fighting stereotypes and phobias. Experts note that the North Caucasus is still perceived as ‘uncivilised frontier where one can meaningfully talk only to elites.’¹⁴ The region is viewed through narrow lenses of ethnography and of threat. First, ethnographic perception gets reinforced via manifestation of cultural distinctiveness by highlighting its archaic nature. Second, negative perception builds on reports about terrorism, crime, violence against women among other topics. Along with discussing sensitive security issues, experts suggest that media should report more on successful stories from the North Caucasus, ‘stories of those people who live in the Caucasian context but are educated, mobile and modern’¹⁵. It is vital to mitigate level of public anxiety associated with the region for its proper integration. Drawing public eyes towards stories of innovative local businesses, e.g., tourist projects, fashion brands, art galleries, and other local successes is one way to serve this cause.

Changing views of the region among the Russian population will inevitably challenge deep-rooted stereotypes. Residents of the North Caucasus travelling to other Russian regions are still viewed as strangers¹⁶ and often face similar attitudes expressed towards external migrants, particularly, from Central Asia. Moreover, the North Caucasian agenda blends with agendas on migrant-phobia and Islamophobia. Moreover, fears and lack of acceptance to someone distinct give a raise to xenophobia and intolerance among Russians, a difficult environment for planting a new vision¹⁷.

Overall, experts suggest prioritising measures that will improve perception of the North Caucasus among other Russian regions and visa versa. In such work, the key is to walk away from archaic conceptualisation of the region, to avoid the folkloric Soviet approach which does not help its development. Uniqueness and competitiveness of the North Caucasus is first and foremost ‘in its development, movement forward where simultaneously its residents wish to preserve their identity’¹⁸.

CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

‘The North Caucasus is a major center of diverse but united Russian spiritual culture. Any attempts to break this unity have always met with resistance, including from the Caucasus peoples themselves. The people of Russia and the peoples of the Caucasus share a common destiny,’ said President Putin in 2004¹⁹. Building (at least in discourse) a common cultural space was important then, in years following the war, as it is still important now with normalisation in its full force. Notions of ‘Historic Russia’²⁰, of ‘Russian cultural code’ promote Russia as multinational society but united nation. Formula of ‘diversity but unity’ suggested by the President Putin seems the only possible model to accommodate great variety of ethnic groups, languages, religions and confessions, traditions and beliefs coexisting in the North Caucasus.

Diversity potentially sources economic growth, but it also could cause confrontation. Regional distinctiveness, for instance, got embodied in a cultural clash between ‘the Caucasian’ and ‘the Russian’. This clash particularly manifested itself in perception of behaviour expressed by residents from the North Caucasus in other Russian cities considered as ‘uncivilised’. Socialising in exclusive ethnic groups with contrasting sub-cultures in large Russian cities only reinforced stereotypes. This narrative was translated into media reports, evident in people to people contacts and to an extent in police practice of stop-and-searching people looking ‘Caucasian’.

The clash along cultural and symbolic lines is also evident in some historical narratives like celebrations of 23 of February and 8 of March. While the rest of Russia celebrates 23 of February as Defender of the Fatherland Day, or a day of all men, and 8 of March as International Women’s Day, or a day of all women, in the North Caucasus these dates mark anniversary of tragic deportations of the Vainakh and Balkar peoples. While the rest of Russia enjoys gender holidays, the North Caucasus commemorates. Such discrepancy was settled between the federal center and regional elites. For example, in Chechnya, 23 of February is celebrated as Defender of the Fatherland Day (as everywhere in Russia), while the Deportation Day was moved to 10 of May²¹ that is also a day of commemoration of Akhmad Kadyrov, the father of the current regional leader, who was assassinated on 9 of May 2004. Moving

13 <https://fapmc.gov.ru/rospechat/newsandevents/media/2010/07/item10042.html>

14 Interview with an anonymous expert, March 2021

15 Interview with an anonymous expert, March 2021

16 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0147176716300736>

17 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0147176716300736>

18 Interview with an anonymous expert, March 2021

19 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.2747/1538-7216.48.2.202>

20 https://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1_national.html

21 https://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2014/02/140224_chechen_in-gush_deportation_anniversary

commemoration of deportations to other dates presents a very sensitive issue in the North Caucasus. There is also a reverse trend of commemorating the regional resistance to the Russian rule, for instance, exemplified by the opening of the Dadi-Yurt Memorial in Chechnya²².

Overall, hierarchy of 'remembering' aims at connecting the North Caucasus to all-Russian cultural and historic narratives. To an extent, commemorating historical events selectively or shaping collective memories in politically acceptable manner demonstrates loyalty of regional elites to Moscow. To an extent, it also reflects general approach in managing dark moments of Russian history and politically delicate events by redirecting a spotlight elsewhere. Such approach, however, is not particularly efficient in addressing grievances of the past in a long-term and more open public debate is needed to accommodate dark moments of the common history for a quality step forward.

Along with culture, issue of languages is also key and sensitive to the region. It becomes evident that Russian language plays a role of 'lingua franca', it is necessary for keeping the unity of societies in Russia. Latest amendments to the Russian Constitution restated a special place of Russian language. In article 68 (1), the Russian language is secured as the language of 'a state-forming nation which is a part of the union of equal nations of the Russian Federation'²³. This phrasing should not be considered as attempting to undermine other languages. In fact, article 68 (2) reiterates that the national republics retain their rights to use their own national languages along with the Russian language²⁴.

Noteworthy amendments to the law on education, adopted in 2018, concerned the issue of national (native) languages. Russian citizens have right to get educated in their national (native) language²⁵ and study national languages from the list of national languages of the Russian Federation, including Russian as native language. Amendments secured freedom to choose language of education and to study national language based on application of parents or other legal guardians during admission of children to edu-

cational institutions²⁶. Important to note that such variability of languages of education is determined by capacity of the Russian system of education²⁷. In practice it means that options for language of education are limited by capacity of specific educational institution²⁸. Experts believe that such amendments indirectly impact the future role of national languages in national republics: less demand from parents for their children to be either educated in or study national language will result in less supply due to logistic reasons such as less allocated funding. Evidently, a full class of students studying a specific national language receives higher institutional support than one student interested in a subject. Less allocated funding for teaching might result in less quality too. Thus, national languages risk to be used in everyday life only. When it comes to receiving a higher education in and of national languages, options largely remain limited to degrees in philology and linguistics.

Approach to teaching²⁹ national languages varied among the subjects of the Russian Federation, as varied sensitivity of language issue³⁰. In Chechnya, both Russian and Chechen are state languages that are embedded in education system. After adoption of above-mentioned amendments, Kadyrov ensured the public that the Chechen language will be preserved³¹. In his view, those interested in learning national languages have no obstacles to do so and added 'a Chechen who does not want to study native language regardless of one's residence is not a Chechen.'³² Keeping demand and supply for national languages in monoethnic republics like Chechnya where the Chechens constitute 95% of population might differ significantly from other federal subjects featuring diverse ethnic and linguistic composition³³.

Promotion of national languages in Russia needs state support but also public interest in national republics. State support manifests itself in building space for media to operate in national languages, e.g.

22 <https://lenta.ru/news/2013/09/16/dadiyurt/>

23 "Constitution of the Russian Deferation (with Amendments from 04.07.2020)" (1993), <http://duma.gov.ru/news/48953/>.

24 "Constitution of the Russian Deferation (with Amendments from 04.07.2020)" (1993), <http://duma.gov.ru/news/48953/>.

25 FL 273, "Federal Law from 29.12.2012 N 273 'About Education in the Russian Federation'" (2012), http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_140174/

26 FL 273, "Federal Law from 29.12.2012 N 273 'About Education in the Russian Federation'" (2012), http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_140174/

27 http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_140174/

28 State Duma, "Six Questions about the Draft Law on Study of National Languages," [duma.gov.ru, 2018, http://duma.gov.ru/news/27352/](http://duma.gov.ru/news/27352/)

29 national Crisis Group, "North Caucasus : The Challenges of Integration (IV): Economic and Social Imperatives" (Brussels, 2015), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/caucasus/237-north-caucasus-the-challenges-of-integration-iv-economic-and-social-imperatives.pdf>.

30 <https://realnoevremya.ru/articles/81691-v-rossii-otmenyayut-obyazatel-noe-izuchenie-nacionalnyh-yazykov>

31 TASS, "Kadyrov: Chechnya Will Do Anything to Preserve Native Language in the Republic and Abroad," [tass.ru, 2018, https://tass.ru/obschestvo/5403002](https://tass.ru/obschestvo/5403002).

32 TASS, "Kadyrov: Chechnya Will Do Anything to Preserve Native Language in the Republic and Abroad," [tass.ru, 2018, https://tass.ru/obschestvo/5403002](https://tass.ru/obschestvo/5403002).

33 <https://chechenstat.gks.ru/folder/38713>

in multiple languages³⁴ in Dagestan, or local authorities to communicate in native language along with Russian, e.g. key Chechen officials often speak publicly in Chechen language. Russian federal support is also exemplified in establishing the Foundation for the preservation and study of the native languages of the peoples of the Russian Federation in 2018 tasked with production of textbooks to study national languages and support of authors publishing in national languages³⁵. This presents an ambitious mission as Russia has over 250 languages and dialects, 58 languages are used in education, 36 languages have status of state languages in 22 subjects of the Russian Federation³⁶. Dagestan alone speaks 32 languages³⁷. To preserve its linguistic plurality, Dagestan combines top-down activities under the republican Ministry of national policy and religion and bottom-up initiatives, e.g., creating applications to study national languages and audio books in national languages³⁸.

Experts suggest that preservation and promotion of local cultures and languages, however façade it might look, is extremely important for Russia, and for the North Caucasus in particular. Especially, in such conflict-torn republics in past as Chechnya where accommodating distinctiveness of local culture, traditions, and the use of the Chechen language serves *inter alia* as an achievement of peacetime. At the same time, promotion of Russian culture and Russian language presents a key undertaking in integrating the region.

CONCLUSION

Integration constitutes a balancing act between unification and preservation of uniqueness. Both are key in this process. Preservation of regional complexity and distinctiveness contributes to building regional strength and competitiveness, e.g., in economic development and tourism. At the same time, integrating means overcoming an existing mental border between the North Caucasus and the rest of Russia. As one expert noted: 'You have to have multi-policy

where you want to integrate while preserving uniqueness of the region to allow for local culture to develop within the Russian project'. Moreover, regional individuality should not be channelled exclusively through its traditions. Distinctiveness of the region is in its modernisation and development that also preserves wide range of regional identities. Promoting integration narratives requires joint effort of Moscow shaped by targeted policies and of the North Caucasus that combine participation of local authorities, private stakeholders, and civil society.

However, overemphasizing special traits of the North Caucasus is not useful. It is likely to contribute to further alienation of this region. Rather, policy makers, media and other stakeholders shall provide the context in which the North Caucasus is comparable to other Russian regions. Indeed, the North Caucasus features the very same trends occurring in other regions and beyond Russian borders such as conflict of modernisation, conflict of generations, and conflicts of narratives.

Overall, in discourse, there is a need in further normalisation of the regional agenda. Effective integration requires managing the discourse about the region and presenting adequate picture which does not distort reality, instead introduces regional complexity and balances out positive and negative stories. In culture and language, along with preservation and development of diversity and richness of national languages and cultures there is a need to further promote Russian language and all-accommodating Russian culture. The aim is in building the unity of distinct but linked nationalities.

34 Ministry of national policy and religion, "Media in National Languages in Dagestan," minnacrd.ru, 2021, <http://minnacrd.ru/>.

35 "Foundation for the Preservation and Study of the Native Languages of the Peoples of the Russian Federation," родныеязыки.рф, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://родныеязыки.рф/>.

36 State Duma, "Six Questions about the Draft Law on Study of National Languages," duma.gov.ru, 2018, <http://duma.gov.ru/news/27352/>

37 TASS, "More than Half of National Languages in Dagestan Are on the Edge of Extinction," tass.ru, 2017, <https://tass.ru/v-strane/4632812>.

38 Ministry of national policy and religion of the Republic of Dagestan, "Projects and Ideas to Support Native Languages Were Discussed in the Ministry of National Policy and Religion in Dagestan," minnacrd.ru, 2019, <http://minnacrd.ru/news/item/1423>.

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SUMMARY



Raising awareness among the population about developments in the North Caucasus and creating a balanced and fair image of this region seems to be non-separable from security and economic measures aimed at mitigating consequences of a lengthy conflict and building regional peace. Highlighting regional progress and promoting a positive picture are equally important to harmonize perception of this region impacted by the recent conflicts and to counter negative associations. The authentic regional image needs to be communicated to the rest of Russia explaining regional peculiarities in a knowledgeable way, providing local context, and ensuring that the media content does not contribute to reinforcing existing (or creating new) negative stereotypes.



The image of the North Caucasus needs rebranding and careful handling to avoid misrepresentation. To the detriment of other topics, the region is viewed through narrow lenses of ethnography and of negative perception: ethnographic perception is reinforced via manifestation of cultural distinctiveness and by highlighting its archaic nature, whereas negative perception builds on reports about terrorism, crime, violence against women. Along with discussing sensitive security issues, media should report more on successful stories from the North Caucasus. Drawing public eyes towards stories of innovative local businesses, e.g., tourist projects, fashion brands, art galleries, and other local successes is one way to serve this cause.



Preservation and promotion of local cultures and languages is extremely important for Russia and for the North Caucasus in particular. In such conflict-torn republics in past as Chechnya accommodating distinctiveness of local culture, traditions, and the use of the national language serve as evidences of peacetime. Promotion of national languages in Russia needs state support but also public interest in national republics. At the same time, promotion of Russian culture and Russian language presents a key undertaking in integrating the region.