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# An Empire's Fraying Edge? The North Caucasus Instability in Contemporary Russian Geopolitical Culture

Vladimir Kolossov and Gerard Toal (Gearóid Ó Tuathail)<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** A Russian and a U.S.-based political geographer explore how geopolitical cultures and traditions function in imagining and discursively framing events in specific regions within a particular state. More specifically, this paper undertakes a focused examination of competing elite storylines in Russian geopolitical culture about the North Caucasus during an eventful year (October 2005–September 2006) that encompassed the large-scale terrorist attack against the city of Nal'chik, the change of leadership in Dagestan, and the assassination of the prominent terrorist Shamil Basayev by federal forces. The paper first summarizes Kremlin, left/Communist, national-patriotic, and liberal "storylines" on the basis of a content analysis of major periodicals representing each of these viewpoints, followed by a survey of the opinions of ordinary citizens in the North Caucasus ( $n = 2,000$ ) regarding the validity of these storylines. *Journal of Economic Literature*, Classification Numbers: H11, I31, O18, P30. 7 tables, 66 references. Key words: Russia, North Caucasus, geopolitical culture, geopolitical storylines, critical geopolitics, international terrorism, corruption, criminality, Chechnya, Putin, public opinion, modernization, economic growth, separatism.

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Critical geopolitics argues that the study of geopolitics requires the study of geopolitical cultures and the interlocking networks of power that condition how these cultures operate and function (Ó Tuathail, 2006). Within this nexus, explanations for political instability, such as that characterizing Russia's North Caucasus region, for example, are primarily dependent on the prevailing power structure at the center of the Russian state and hegemonic ways of representing, narrating, and emplotting the meaning of events, personalities, and processes in the North Caucasus. Where vigorous open political debate exists, explanatory storylines can be deeply contested and hegemonic meanings can be illusive. Geopolitical meaning is also dependent upon the narratives beyond Russia within the international community that can affirm or challenge dominant Russian storylines. *The Economist*, for example, used the narrative image of an "empire's fraying edge" to enframe a special report on political instability in the North Caucasus, a conceptualization that most Russians would

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<sup>1</sup>Respectively, Institute of Geography, Russian Academy of Sciences, Staromonetnyy perulok 29, Moscow 119017 Russia (email: vladk@online.ru) and School of Public and International Affairs, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 1021 Prince Street, Alexandria, VA 22314-2979 (email: toalg@vt.edu). This research was supported by a grant from the Human and Social Dynamics Initiative of the U.S. National Science Foundation, grant number 0433927, and by a grant from the National Geographic Society's Committee on Research and Exploration. The authors thank Alexei Grazhdankin of the Levada Center, Moscow for coordinating the public opinion survey of the North Caucasus, Edward Holland for translation assistance, and to PI John O'Loughlin for comments and setting a Stakhanovite pace for field work in Russia.

reject (An Empire's, 2005). Finally, geopolitical meaning is also dependent upon local storylines from the region, which can constitute an alternative form of narrating the meaning of processes and the causality of events in the North Caucasus. Understanding political instability in the North Caucasus, in other words, is not something that can be established objectively and independently from struggles within and across geopolitical cultures over political meaning. It is not a singularity but a contested field of meanings and power, pitting competing interests at the state center against each other, the state against other international actors, and the state center against localized meanings.

Critical geopolitics provides a series of concepts by which we can study the contested geopolitical meaning of regions like the North Caucasus. Ó Tuathail (2006) distinguishes between geopolitical culture and, within geopolitical cultures, between more popular geopolitical imaginations and elite geopolitical traditions. He defines *geopolitical culture* as the practices by which states make sense of their identity, position, and role in a world of states. This culture is formed not only by the institutions of a state, its historical experiences, and geographical embeddedness, but also by networks of power within society and how these condition debates over national identity, prevailing geopolitical imaginations, codified geopolitical traditions, and the institutional processes by which foreign policy is made in the state. *Geopolitical imaginations* include the prevalent images, conceptualizations, and discourses in popular culture and among the general population of where that state is positioned and located within the world's community of states. Geopolitical imaginations are a mix of popular culture geopolitics and the geopolitical orientations of a state's population. *Geopolitical traditions* are the range of relatively formalized and competing schools of geopolitical thought that comprise the "high culture" of a state's geopolitical culture. Each tradition is a canon of thought on state identity, the national interest, and normative foreign policy priorities.

Russian geopolitical culture has long been distinguished by a generalized split between "Westernizers," who promote Western modernization of Russia, and "Slavophiles," who are commonly associated with national exceptionalist narratives about Russian identity. Several distinctive geopolitical traditions have been identified in post-Soviet Russia: liberal-Westernizers, democrats, democratic-statists, neo-communists, and Eurasianists (Smith, 1999; Kolossov and Mironenko, 2001; O'Loughlin, 2001; Tsygankov, 2002; 2003; O'Loughlin et al., 2005). Simplifying greatly, liberals hold Western liberal democracy as the beacon for Russia. To them, Russia should be part of an alliance of democratic states confronting authoritarianism and human rights abuses across the world. Russia's national security is threatened not by "the West" but by its own backwardness. Statists, by contrast, are political realists who view international relations as characterized by self-seeking power-accumulation by state actors whose interests require constant balancing. The interests of the Russian state are served by it remaining an independent civilization capable of resisting the hegemonic ambitions of other states and their allies. Neo-Communists believe in the need to restore Russia's role as a great power. The main threat to Russia's national security is the military, political, economic, and cultural expansion of the West. Ironically, far-right radical-expansionists, often called also "national-patriots," share the vision of the neo-Communists but adhere to a Darwinian view of world politics as a constant struggle for territory between empires seeking to expand their spheres of influence (O'Loughlin et al., 2004b).

How geopolitical cultures and traditions function in imagining and discursively framing dramas *in specific regions within the state* has not been the subject of systematic critical geopolitical study. This paper seeks to do this through a focused examination of the competing storylines in Russian geopolitical culture about the North Caucasus during a year, between October 2005 and September 2006. This period included the large-scale terrorist attack

against the city of Nal'chik (13–14 October 2005), the change of leadership in Dagestan (December 2005), which provoked a public discussion of the situation in this republic, and the death of the “terrorist number one” Shamil Basayev, assassinated by federal forces in August 2006. The Nal'chik attack and the death of Basayev were global news stories that generated international diplomatic comment and response. In this paper, however, we do not have the space to examine international discourses on the North Caucasus. Rather, we concentrate on competing domestic storylines on the region in Russian geopolitical culture, and juxtapose these to select results from a regional public opinion survey on the area and its problems.

We begin by briefly noting the transformed image of the North Caucasus in the contemporary popular Russian geopolitical imagination. A second section examines the official Putin administration discourse on the situation in the North Caucasus and its reaction to the most important events in the region. For this, we analyzed all speeches, interviews, and press conferences of the President of Russia available at his official site [<http://www.kremlin.ru>] and all the materials of the official government daily, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* (*Russian Gazette*), which is printed in 31 cities across Russia and has a self-reported daily circulation of 482,000 copies. In a third section we examine all newspaper articles on the North Caucasus in three federal newspapers in order to sample the political spectrum of opinion within Russia on the region and its dynamics. The first, *Sovetskaya Rossiya* (*Soviet Russia*), which has a circulation about 300,000 copies, represents the view of the Communist left opposition in Russia. Officially an independent daily, the newspaper maintains close ties to the Communist party. The Communist leader Gennadiy Zuganov, for example, writes regularly in its pages. The second newspaper, *Zavtra* (*Tomorrow*), is known for its so-called “national-patriotic” perspective and implacable opposition to the post-Soviet ruling system under Presidents Yel'tsin and Putin which, it claims, represents the interests of a narrow stratum of bureaucracy and comprador bourgeoisie. Lastly, *Novaya Gazeta* (*New Gazette*) also is defined by its sharp opposition to the current federal authorities. It tends to provide a Westernizing and modernizing “liberal perspective” on international events and developments within the Russian state and across its territory. It is the intellectual home of a series of critically minded Muscovite journalists and observers who often reflect the modernizing impulses of the city's Western-minded business elite. The internationally celebrated journalist Anna Politkovskaya, murdered in October 2006, was a regular contributor to *Novaya Gazeta* and a fearless critic of the Putin administration's approach to Chechnya. Some regular contributors to this newspaper are close to the largest liberal party, SPS (Union of Right Forces).

Finally, as a contrast to the geopolitical storylines found within these various sources of elite geopolitical thinking on the North Caucasus, we present the results of a public opinion survey that we organized in the region in November–December 2005, by coincidence just after the killings in Nal'chik. As far as we know, this survey of 2000 respondents was the first large social scientific survey in the region. These results offer an interesting counterpoint to Kremlin discourse because “Moscow's policies” are seen by a plurality of the people in the North Caucasus as a principal cause of instability and conflict in the region. We elaborate the significance of this finding in the conclusion.

### THE NORTH CAUCASUS IN THE RUSSIAN GEOPOLITICAL IMAGINATION

With the process of conquest and incorporation into the Russian Empire, the North Caucasus region acquired a special place in the Russian geopolitical imagination as a liminal zone between civilization and barbarism, a place of noble heroes yet also one of empire and

the brutalities of power politics. Lermontov, Tolstoy, Pushkin, and Griboyedov all made noteworthy contributions to the region's romantic image in Russian literature. Russian schoolchildren, consequently, acquire a series of popular geopolitical conceptions of the region from an early age. On the one hand, the Caucasus is a region of natural beauty, heroic warriors, Islamic tradition, and mysticism. On the other, it is a region of ruthless bandits and racialized otherness, an unruly place that is opaque to the gaze of the central state.

The region's physical endowments and romantic image helped bolster the development of tourist and recreational industries during the Soviet regime. As a consequence, the region became well known to most Russians. A national survey conducted by Moscow Foundation of Public Opinion (FOM)<sup>2</sup> shows that for an overwhelming majority of Russian citizens, the North Caucasus is understood and accepted as an integral part of Russia's national geopolitical space. The survey found that 30 percent of respondents have some personal familiarity with the North Caucasus region (another 10 percent live there). About half of the respondents that know the region visited it more than 10 years ago, mostly in the Soviet period, well before the beginning of the first Chechen war (Bavin, 2005). Respondents tended to cite well-known Soviet-era characteristics of the region—viz., recreational facilities on the Black Sea, the Mineral'nyye Vody spa area, its famous corn belt, and its ethnic diversity (Chikhichin, 2006).

This positive popular geopolitical imagination changed radically when the North Caucasus became the region bordering the unstable newly independent states of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia (South Caucasus). Instead of skiing and spas, the region became known for separatism and secessionism. Today, the prevailing images of the North Caucasus in Russian public opinion surveys are those of "war," "terrorism," and "violence". For example, 42 percent of answers to the open-ended question on associations with this region included these words, and in only 8 percent of respondents did its name invoke positive associations with "sea," "mountains," "good weather," "rest," and "resorts" (Bavin, 2005). Revolt, not resorts, has been the region's defining cognitive frame over the last decade. Despite the considerable increase of tourists traveling to the Mineral'nyye Vody area in the last number of years, tourist traffic to the region has not returned to the level of the late 1980s (Chikhichin, 2006). In a study of national television network coverage of the Southern Federal District (SFD), Druzhinin (2005) coded more than 70 percent of the information as negative. Persistent currents of Islamophobia and Russian racism toward what law-enforcement authorities term "people of Caucasian extraction," together with a well-founded cynicism towards political corruption, fuel the predominantly negative image of the SFD that now prevails in the popular Russian geopolitical imagination outside the region (Trenin and Malashenko, 2004, pp. 60–69).

### THE CONTEMPORARY KREMLIN STORYLINE ON THE NORTH CAUCASUS

The North Caucasus occupies an important place in the rise to power of Vladimir Putin. Through deft handling of the violent incursion of Islamic rebels into Dagestan in the fall of 1999, Putin was propelled to the Russian presidency and subsequently presided over a renewal of the centralized power and capacity of the Russian state. This crisis, and the

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<sup>2</sup>The survey was held in 100 urban and rural settlements in 44 regions of the Russian Federation on August 6–7, 2005. The standard FOM sample of 1500 respondents is representative of Russia's population. The statistical error is less than 3.6 percent.

bombings of apartment buildings in Russian cities at the same time, facilitated the projection of Putin as a new Russian strongman, a competent patriot who stood for the territorial integrity of the state and a no-nonsense response to terrorism, lawlessness, and corruption. The second Chechen war has been a bloody affair, with the Putin administration allying itself to a series of brutal local warlords as a means of pacifying the republic, and Russian special forces and contractors have perpetuated some horrific human rights abuses (Human Rights Watch, 2005; Politkovskaya, 2006d). Dramatic spectacles like the Dubrovka theater siege of October 2002 in Moscow, the bombings of airplanes in mid-air in August 2004, the Beslan school shootout in September 2004, the Nal'chik attacks in October 2005, and the Cherkess shootout in December 2006 are high-profile reminders that political violence has not been vanquished in the region. Lower intensity conflict persists.<sup>3</sup> Whether things are getting better in the region, with Kremlin's policies "winning," or whether they remain "explosive" as Kremlin critics charge, is hotly contested and widely debated.

As noted above, we examined all speeches, interviews and press conferences of the President of Russia available at his official site [<http://www.kremlin.ru>] and all the materials of the official government daily, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* for the year October 2005 to September 2006. Following a modified version of Ó Tuathail's (2002) "grammar of geopolitics" scheme, we have constructed a portrait of the geopolitical storyline of the Kremlin on the North Caucasus. Table 1 provides a condensed summary of our analysis. We begin with the primary interpretative frame used by the Kremlin to define the status of the region. This is organized around the conviction that the region, although characterized by great diversity and heterogeneity, is an organic part of the Russian state. President Putin expressed this primary frame succinctly in an address to a public forum "of the peoples of the Caucasus and southern Russia" on March 26, 2004:

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... for Russia, the Caucasus is not just another region, and this is well known throughout our country. There is a special fondness for the nature of the Caucasus. The Caucasus and its history is something close to us from our time as schoolchildren. (Putin, March 26, 2004)

This "unity amidst diversity" description elides the many contradictions and tensions associated with the imperial history of the Russian state's relations with Islam and within the Caucasus region. An alternative storyline prevails among many. Most observers, Figes (2006, p. 74) writes, perceive the encounter between Russia and the Muslim world as "a simple tale of imperial conquest and confrontation epitomized by Russia's long and often brutal war with the Muslim rebels in Chechnya and Dagestan." In the Caucasus war of 1817–1864, the Tsarist state gradually conquered the region, forcing the surrender of the rebel leader Imam Shamil in 1859, after which he swore allegiance to the Tsar. In this saga of resistance and suppression, Figes points out, "Russia's southern border represents a crucial front in the 'clash of civilizations' between Islam and Christianity; the recent war in Chechnya is a return to the 'natural state of conflict' between these religious traditions after the collapse of the artificial peace imposed by the Soviet regime."

<sup>3</sup>See Kramer (2004/2005) for a comprehensive review of Russia's counterinsurgency campaign.

**Table 1.** Summary of the Kremlin Storyline

	“Grammar”	Discourse
A	Why is the North Caucasus so important for Russia?	The matter is <i>in the very existence</i> of the Russian state. Chechnya was not only a source of terrorism. It is clear that if a Muslim fundamentalist state is created in the North Caucasus, it will be deeply hostile to Russia, and it would spread to other areas of a compact Muslim population in the country. Every country protects its territorial integrity.
	In what way is the situation changing?	Everything goes in the right direction: the number of terrorist attacks has considerably decreased, the economic situation is improving, etc.
	What are its international consequences and connections?	Terrorism in North Caucasus is a regional version of international terrorism. The role of Russia in the GWOT is very important, but instead of support, the West applies double standards, one for itself in the Balkans and another for Russia in the Caucasus.
B	What are the reasons for instability, conflict, and violence in the region?	The economic and social situation (poverty, unemployment, corruption, the lack of trust in authorities) is very important but only a partial explanation.
	Who and what are to blame for the situation in the North Caucasus?	International terrorism. Problems of post-Soviet transformation.
C	What political conclusions should be made?	No compromises with terrorists! The territorial integrity of the country is a necessary condition of prosperity. Defending it is a patriotic duty of every citizen.
	What to do?	To improve law enforcement, strengthen police forces, as well as stimulate economic growth and to create a middle class.

A = Situation description and location specification.

B = Protagonist typifications and causality.

C = Interest calculation and presumed solution.

But as Figes and others point out, the Caucasian wars and Chechen revolt were unusual events within a long history of peaceful coexistence and collaboration between the Russian state and Islam (Crews, 2006). Some go further. For Putin, the Caucasian wars are firmly in the past, and the North Caucasian peoples now willingly accept their position as part of the Russian state. Imam Shamil’s oath of allegiance to the Tsar is paradigmatic of the new relationship established between the region and Russian authorities after 1859. Putin, in the same address, recounts Shamil’s testament to his sons: “to remain loyal to the Russian state and live in peace and harmony with its peoples.” This, according to the president, has been the disposition of the great majority of the peoples of the North Caucasus who do not think of themselves without Russia. The common fight by Dagestani militias alongside federal troops against the Chechen terrorist “invasion” of 1999 is substantive proof of this for Putin.

How Putin frames this key moment illustrates a storyline on the instability in the North Caucasus that features a different “clash of civilization”—that between “good Russian

Muslims” versus “international terrorists” with a fundamentalist geopolitical agenda (rather than nationalist aims). It is not Orthodoxy against Islam, the Kremlin against a “frontier,” or Russia versus Chechnya. Speaking to French television in July 2006 he argued:

[i]t was not us who began the war in 1999. Back then, international terrorist groups launched an attack on Dagestan, also a Muslim republic, from Chechen territory, and the Muslims of Dagestan, together with a large part of the Chechen population, fought back against these terrorists, and only later did our regular armed forces come to their aid. Only later. We had no choice but to take this action. I think that any country would rise to the defense of its territorial integrity, because in this case we were not just trying to stamp out a hotbed of terrorism in the North Caucasus and in Chechnya in particular. For us it was clear that if we allowed the creation of a fundamentalist state from the Caspian to the Black Sea, this would spill over into other parts of Russia where Muslims are a large part of the population. This was a question of the survival of the Russian Federation itself, of our statehood, and I think that all of our actions were justified. (Putin, July 26, 2006a)

The passage is also illustrative of how Putin, especially when speaking to international media networks and foreign audiences, strives to embed Russian actions within apparently reasonable and legitimate international norms like territorial self-defense. Putin even claims that a principled commitment to democracy underpins his controversial federal policy toward Chechnya, which is characterized by giving a free hand to former rebels to act as local strongmen—Ahmad-Haji Kadyrov and subsequently his son Ramzan, now Chechnya’s president—and passage after a local referendum of a republican constitution in 2005 that states that Chechnya is an integral part of the Russian Federation. “This is a question of principle for me. It was settled in the most democratic way possible...,” Putin claimed in the same interview. He pointed out that the referendum passing the constitution was backed, in a poll monitored and certified by international Islamic observers, by 80% of voters. He also cited, as evidence of Russia’s beneficence toward the region, the fact that federal authorities contributed on average about 74 percent to the budgets of North Caucasian republics (Putin, September 29, 2006).

The principal (and supposedly principled) international norm within which Putin seeks to embed Russian actions, however, is the so-called “war on terrorism.” After 9/11, the Putin administration actively made common cause with what the Bush administration announced as the defining geopolitical drama of the era: the “global war on terror” (which Washington abbreviated with its own acronym GWOT). In an earlier study, we showed that, in official and other texts, President Putin sought to represent the events of 9/11 as a “global Chechnya.” The terrorist attacks in America provided the occasion for the development of a shared global geopolitical script that asserted the identity opposition “civilized/barbarian” as a fundamental divide in world politics. In such a script, Russia was (re)located within the West as a “civilized power” and partner in the GWOT (O’Loughlin et al., 2004a). To consolidate the storyline that Russia’s military actions in the North Caucasus were part of a GWOT and legitimate the Kremlin’s policy in the region, the Putin administration has always stressed that “international terrorists,” like the Jordanian fighter Ibn al-Khattab (killed in 2002) were operating in Chechnya. At times, the Putin administration inflated the presence of these foreign fighters into evidence that the goal of Chechen fighters was to create an Islamic Caliphate from the Caspian to the Black Sea (e.g., Putin, May 5, 2006). This externalization of the causes of political instability in the North Caucasus was a persistent theme in Kremlin discourse after 9/11.

Narrating Russia's war in Chechnya as part of the GWOT has only partially worked. Criticism of human rights abuses by Russian and local state forces have received considerable publicity in the West. At the same time, many former Cold Warriors within the Bush administration, particularly those gathered around Vice President Richard Cheney, are deeply suspicious of the Putin administration and its renewal of Russian influence and power in Eurasian affairs (Trenin, 2006). The result has been increasing criticism of the Putin administration by the Bush administration and NATO, and vice-versa. Gone is the common solidarity of the GWOT alliance. In its place, one has a testy US administration suffering humiliation in Iraq and a more self-confident Putin administration brushing aside international criticism. A favorite theme of the Putin administration is the "double standard" that NATO and Western powers apply when speaking of democracy in Russia or Russian policies in the North Caucasus and the so-called "Near Abroad." Putin frequently analogizes the situation of Kosovo with that of the "frozen conflicts" in the Trans-Caucasus and Transdnistria, in a transparent effort to justify Russian policies supporting breakaway movements in Georgia and position Russia to take advantage of any precedent that is established by granting independence to Kosovo (Putin, November 15, 2005; July 6, 2006).

At the same time as the Kremlin is excoriating Western security structures, administration officials and supporters are citing other Western institutions if they record trends and tendencies favorable to the Russian state. Thus, for example, a series of articles in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* stressed that official delegations from the Council of Europe have noted an improved human rights condition in Russia (Falaleyev, 2006; Vorob'yev, 2006). The persistent theme of the last year in the official storyline is that the situation in the North Caucasus is improving and that this proves that current government policy toward the region is correct. Dmitry Kozak, representative of the President in the Southern Federal District (SFD), reported to Putin in August 2006 that from 2004 to 2006, the number of terrorist attacks decreased by a ratio of three. The general level of criminality, calculated as the yearly number of crimes per 100,000 inhabitants, is 40 percent, which is lower than the national average.<sup>4</sup> Signs of economic growth were positive: in the first half of 2006, industrial production increased by 7.9 percent. Survey evidence records that ordinary citizens are feeling more optimism about their conditions (Putin, August 29, 2006; Putin, August 31, 2006). State authorities also tout the success of their initiative to grant amnesty to all those not involved in serious crimes and terrorism in the region and have extended the term of its validity. Finally, the operation that resulted in the killing of Shamil Basayev and other terrorist leaders in summer 2006 is cited as proof that the Russian state is now decisively winning the battle against notorious terrorists in the North Caucasus (Finn, 2006).

An important element in the official Kremlin storyline is how it attributes causality to terrorism in the North Caucasus. First, as already noted, there is a persistent externalization of blame, with officials pointing out that the observed extent of terrorist attack would be impossible without external and clandestine support networks. At times, this rhetoric echoes the conspiratorial geopolitical genre that characterized the Cold War. Second, more extensive discourse on the subject usually yields official acknowledgment that terrorism is conditioned and made possible by the poverty, unemployment, and corruption found throughout the North Caucasus. This becomes the rationale for a series of state imperatives. On the one hand, the state must improve law enforcement and strengthen police capacity in the region.

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<sup>4</sup>It should be noted that it has always been lower than in the country as a whole, in part due to a high number of non-registered crimes. Many non-Russian peoples prefer to solve disputes and conflicts according to the norms of *adat*, namely traditional law.



There should be no compromise with those who take up arms against the state. On the other hand, the state needs to stimulate economic growth and to create a middle class. “We have money, the problem is how to use it,” declared President Putin at a special meeting with the heads of regions of South Russia and with representatives of Russian state and private companies in Sochi (Putin, September 29, 2006; see also October 31, 2005). Investment risks, the president declared, are exaggerated, the terrorist threat is decreasing, and the problem is to a great extent the need to overcome the region’s negative image (Putin, August 31, 2006). Putin announced the creation of a special commission on the improvement of the social and economic situation in the SFD. Refurbishing the “region’s image” is more challenging than it appears, and Putin’s inclusion of private sector representatives in his policy pronouncements on the North Caucasus implicitly acknowledges a longstanding Kremlin challenge: federal financial subventions to the region are often stolen and diverted for private use (Trenin and Malashenko, 2004, p. 38).

Internal Kremlin debates on the best strategy toward the North Caucasus are rarely public. One exception was in the spring of 2006 when a strategy characterized as based only on “subventions and guns” was severely criticized. The source was a confidential report to the President on the situation in the North Caucasus by Dmitry Kozak. Some parts were leaked to newspapers, with statistics that countered the positive “we’re winning and things are getting better” spin of official Kremlin discourse. Leaked sections of the report (quoted in Shogenov, 2005) noted:

In a number of the SFD regions, federal authorities do not have substantial support among the population. In six of twelve regions of the SFD, the sum of negative evaluations exceeds the sum of positive ones. The activity of the law enforcement system is not efficient, although the number of their staff at 1180 per 100,000 inhabitants is the highest in Europe. Fifty-four to 90 percent of businessmen are convinced that they do not have any chance to defend their rights in trials when in conflict with regional authorities. Forty to 88 percent of them constantly deal with the arbitrary actions of the police.”

Also, the emphasis in the official geopolitical discourse on the positive direction of economic and social dynamics in North Caucasus clashes with the coverage of the region evident in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*. Reporting in this newspaper is more detailed than in others. In the year from September 2005 to October 2006, 52 of its 63 articles on the North Caucasus reported on terrorist attacks, the activity of federal and regional forces in the struggle against terrorists, and the fate of the federal amnesty program. Most often *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* provides information without any comments and attempts to maintain a positive tone: only 6–7 of these reports can be called analytical, and in these cases, the newspaper does offer criticism of federal authorities, although often in the form of quotes from interviewees. For instance, the former President of North Ossetia, Alexander Dzasokhov (a member of the last Politburo before 1991), indirectly blamed the authorities for the sharp industrial decline across the North Caucasian republics that has provoked the departure of Russians and deepened isolation, poverty, and corruption. The solution to Caucasian problems lies with economic recovery (Dzasokhov, 2006). Echoing the same sentiment, former president Alu Alkhanov of Chechnya heavily criticized the federal program of aid to Chechnya, comparing it to drug dependency. The program matched the interests of “corrupted functionaries” and increased Chechnya’s dependence on neighboring regions. The true hope of the republic, he

suggested, lies in the restoration of agriculture and in the rise of small and medium local business (Borisov, 2006).

## COMPETING STORYLINES ON THE NORTH CAUCASUS

### Left/Communist

As noted earlier, we examined three Russian daily newspapers for evidence of alternative storylines on the North Caucasus in Russian geopolitical culture. We first examined *Sovetskaya Rossiya* and have developed a concise portrait of what we are terming the “left storyline” on the North Caucasus (see Table 2). It shares the same fundamental assumption as that of the Kremlin’s storyline: this region is vitally important for Russia and any successful secession there will be a first step to the disintegration of the Russian state. The newspaper devotes space to an article by an American anti-imperialist intellectual, James Petras, who develops a distinctive Kosovo analogy as a way of articulating this danger. The outcome of Chechnya’s independence, he writes, would be similar to Kosovo—a “client” state living on foreign money with a big American military base, run by gangsters transiting drugs, weapons, other smuggling, and sex-slaves and deeply involved in the separatist terror all along the southern boundary of Russia (Petras, 2006). Unlike the official Kremlin discourse, the leftist storylines believe that the war in North Caucasus is continuing and that the risk of large-scale conflict is escalating.

The leftist storyline on the protagonists and causality of this conflict has internal and external dimensions. First, the legacy of Anglo-American imperialism accounts for a share of the instability the Russian state faces in the region. Here the narrative is one of geopolitical conspiracy on the part of implacable Western imperialism. “Self-determination” is merely a transitional slogan for the inclusion of new territories in the American sphere of influence. Supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan against the Soviet army and the Kosovo Liberation Army against Serbia, the U.S. has contributed to the development of radical Islamic terrorist groups. The U.S. state is interested in a further expansion of its economic and financial control, especially of oil resources, and in the disintegration of the Russian Federation, one of the few states that still can resist its dictates (Popov, 2006). It was the U.S.-backed Russian “democrats” who ruined the Soviet Union only because it did not look like America’s own immoral society (Shogenov, 2006). As usually, Communist (as well as “national-patriots”) abundantly cite Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997) as evidence of the underlying American geostrategic goals.

Second, the current Russian political regime is also responsible, in the leftist storyline, for the degradation of the situation in North Caucasus: pervasive corruption, the destruction of economic activity, and rising rates of poverty due to the withdrawal of the state from the local economy. Moscow’s irrational policy of the last 15 years allowed the self-isolation of local elites. Articles in *Sovetskaya Rossiya* by Shogenov (2005, 2006) and Kushkhov (2006) cite the example of Kabardino-Balkaria. Their claim is that the republic is in a state of social collapse. Contrary to official data, during the last five to six years, its GDP decreased at the rate of 3–5 percent annually. Per capita public expenditures of the republican budget put it in 88<sup>th</sup> place of the 89 subject regions of the Russian Federation. It regularly gets more than 70 percent of its budget from the federal government, and the average wage is less than half that in Russia as a whole. The current situation stands in stark contrast to the achievements of the Soviet past. In 1920, Kabarda and Balkaria had only two schools with 23 pupils. During the Soviet years, 10 higher education institutions and 15 technical colleges with 15,000 students

**Table 2.** Summary of the Left Storyline

	“Grammar”	Discourse
A	Why is the North Caucasus so important for Russia?	The matter lies in <i>the very existence</i> of the Russian statehood. For the U.S., the victory of terrorists will become a stage on the way to a further disintegration of Russia, starting with the Caucasus.
	How is the situation changing?	The risk of conflict continues to grow. The end of this war and the time of peace are not even visible.
	What are its international consequences and connections?	There is no convincing evidence of the involvement of international terrorism in the terrorist attacks in the North Caucasus. Anglo-American imperialists are not the allies but the accomplices of Caucasian terrorists: they support them in order to further the disintegration of Russia and place its secessionist parts under their influence.
B	What are its reasons?	“People do not find their place in the system created by the state. Forces of reaction actively use the growing social evil in the struggle for power and property” (Gennadiy Zuganov). Total corruption, the destruction of the economy and poverty provoked by the withdrawal of the state from economy.
	Who is responsible for the situation in North Caucasus?	The ruling regime, which is pathologically unable to act efficiently and is indifferent to the needs of millions of citizens. The West and particularly the US which declared Caucasus an area where it has interests. Russian “democrats” backed by the US destroyed the USSR.
C	What political conclusions should be made?	“In the Soviet time we did not even know about unemployment and inflation, terrorists’ attacks, racket, corruption and oligarchs who became billionaires profiting of state property”. “Moscow establishment should finally reject an unconditioned Westernism.”
	What to do?	The question about the change of power is growing. “It is high time to take a new realist and firm position in diplomacy with the USA, Great Britain, and the West.” “Russian authorities should no longer ignore their duty to react firmly to attempts to disintegrate the country, to protect the North-Caucasian ethnic groups from being sacrificed to the oil temptations of America.”

A = Situation description and location specification.

B = Causality and protagonist typifications.

C = Interest enunciation.

were created. The industrial production of Nal’chik alone in 1920 was 60 times that of Kabardino-Balkaria today. No one experienced unemployment, inflation, terrorism, corruption, prostitution, and oligarchs during Soviet times! Relations between peoples were peaceful and cooperative.

*Sovetskaya Rossiya* particularly excoriates the ruling Putin administration for constantly suppressing the truth from the North Caucasus, underscoring the full story about the events in Beslan and Nal'chik is not available to the public. The bosses who directed the actions of police and special forces in Beslan thought first of their own career interests and not about the lives of children (Polguyeva, 2005, 2006a, 2006b). For Gennadiy Zuganov (2005), the leader of the Communist Party, the conclusion is clear: the regime is bankrupt and pathologically unable to understand the needs of millions of citizens and to cope with existing challenges. It should be changed. Overall, surprisingly, *Sovetskaya Rossiya* pays relatively little attention to the North Caucasus, totalling only 11 articles in the course of our one-year study period. Of much greater interest to this paper are national and global geopolitical problems.

### National-Patriotic

The second newspaper we examined was the national-patriotic *Zavtra*. During the survey period, this newspaper published only 10 articles on the North Caucasus. The national-patriotic discourse defines and specifies the location in the same way as official and Communist left discourses: it is a matter of the very existence of Russia, and the state must fight for stability there or otherwise it will disappear from the world political map (see Table 3). *Zavtra* severely criticizes those who suggest Russia rid itself of Chechnya or all "ethnic republics" of the Caucasus to save the federal funds required in subventions for their budgets (Tukmakov, 2006; Saidov, 2006).

Two arguments distinguish this national-patriotic discourse from the two previous ones: first, an emphasis on the discrimination and persecution experienced by the Russian population in the North Caucasus, a group that is forced to leave the region and gets no help from federal authorities. *Zavtra* reiterates that, without a Russian population, the Caucasus cannot remain within the Russian state. Stoking discourses of "otherness," one article on the region quotes a notorious slogan that decorated the entrance to Grozny at the time of a quasi-independent Ichkeria (1994–1996): "Russians, please, do not leave: we need slaves and prostitutes!" (Soshin, 2005). There are no programs of assistance for the Russian population. A Russian refugee returning to Chechnya, it is claimed, receives from the government 125,000 rubles in compensation, while a Chechen gets 350,000 (Boikov, 2006).

Second, *Zavtra* focuses on the mass immigration of Caucasians into Russian cities as a result of political instability and poverty. This migration by "persons of Caucasian extraction," it claims, represents a serious threat to Russian identity and culture, and therefore, the situation in the North Caucasus directly concerns every Russian citizen. "What happened to Moscow which has been the capital of the Russian state and the proud center of the Soviet country, and became now like Babylon where a native Muscovite is pushed closer and closer to the periphery, and the downtown is settled by arrogant mountaineers, and very soon it will be necessary to translate the names of small Arbat [a part of the symbolic historical center of Moscow] streets to the unknown languages of Caucasian tribes." "There is a Turkic spirit here, there a Turkic smell . . ." continues Alexander Prokhanov (2005), founder and editor-in-chief of *Zavtra*.<sup>5</sup>

The national-patriotic discourse also characterizes the political situation in the North Caucasus region as deteriorating. After the events in Nal'chik, Dmitry Rogozin (2005a), at the time chairman of the parliamentary party *Rodina* (Motherland), called in the pages of

<sup>5</sup>The line imitates a famous Alexander Pushkin poem: "There is a Russian spirit here . . ."

**Table 3.** Summary of the “National-Patriotic” Storyline

“Grammar”	Discourse
<p style="text-align: center;">A</p> <p>Why is the North Caucasus so important for Russia?</p>	<p>1. The matter involves <i>the very existence</i> of Russian statehood. Russia cannot afford to leave the Caucasus. That would immediately create there a number of small emirates/sultanates/khanates who will declare further territorial claims against Russia. All the Caucasus will transform into a large zone of conflicts and instability.</p> <p>2. Discrimination and persecutions of Russian population, which is not protected by federal authorities.</p> <p>3. The invasion of hundreds of thousands of migrants from the Caucasus to Russian cities is a threat to Russian identity.</p>
<p>How is the situation changing?</p>	<p>The situation is close to the critical level.</p>
<p>What are its international consequences and connections?</p>	<p>1. It is impossible to explain the situation with the influence of international terrorism: the ideology of radical Islamism has existed in the eastern part of North Caucasus for centuries.</p> <p>2. The geopolitical pressure of the U.S. along Russian borders has become intolerable. The positions of the West are hypocritical and based on double standards. The U.S. is interested in weakening and producing the disintegration of Russia.</p>
<p>What are its reasons?</p>	<p>An inadequate policy of the federal center which allowed republican elites to create authoritarian regimes whose interests have nothing to do with the interests of people and which have no support. Poverty, unemployment.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">B</p> <p>Who is responsible for the situation in the North Caucasus?</p>	<p>“All problems are in Moscow, not in the peripheries.” Administrations and the law enforcement institutions are shaped by kin and clan communities. Corruption is the basic element of this system. The North Caucasian republics have returned to feudalism: state functionaries have unlimited power and control the most profitable branches of the local economy.</p>
<p>What political conclusions should be made?</p>	<p>The pro-Russian part of the North-Caucasian society lives only on the memory of the Soviet ideological heritage. But it retains a strong anti-Russian charge. In the present conditions, Muslim extremism becomes an “ideology of social justice,” a protest against the immoral character of the Western (and now also Russian) civilization.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">C</p> <p>What to do?</p>	<p>To change the political-administrative division and to make the provinces equal, to implement an active social policy, and to create new jobs in the North Caucasus. To put the end to corruption in the law enforcement system and to ethnic criminality, to replace regional elites.</p>

A = Situation description and location specification.

B = Causality and protagonist typifications.

C = Interest enunciation.

*Zavtra* for the declaration of a state of emergency in the North Caucasus. National-patriots agree with Communists that it is impossible to explain the situation by citing plots and conspiracies by international terrorists. Radical Islam, they claim, has always existed on the territory of Chechnya, Ingushetia, and northern Dagestan. Now, amidst an ideological vacuum, this tradition is being reanimated, even among peoples previously loyal to Russia. Pro-Russian elements in the North Caucasus are connected to the legacy of Soviet ideology. The Soviet heritage and the time of the Great Patriotic War are extremely important for the older generation. For them, it was the time when everybody could find a job and enjoy a strong state order and peaceful ethnic relations. Yet, paradoxically it is claimed, the Soviet past enabled anti-Russian feeling because Soviet propaganda declared that imperial Russia was a “prison of peoples,” and that only Soviet power brought freedom. Now, it is asserted, local elites teach the same (Soshin, 2006).

Like Communists, national-patriots also blame the U.S. state for pressure along Russia’s borders and for stimulating separatism in order to undermine Russian power, thus furthering U.S. control over the resource wealth of weak post-Soviet states. Like Communists and the Putin administration, national patriots are convinced that the United States and other Western countries employ double standards in geopolitical practice. This is “logical and inevitable” because Americans are firmly convinced of their own moral superiority according to Rogozin (2005b) and Shchoukin (2006). Articles in *Zavtra* apportion blame to the Kremlin and local power structures for misfortunes in the North Caucasus to an even greater extent than do the Communists. They note how ethnic and tribal clans monopolize control in republican and local administration, in the law enforcement system, in local branches of state enterprises, and in the most profitable branches of the economy. This system of power is underpinned by the arbitrary actions of police. Total corruption is an endemic feature of the power structures in the region. *Zavtra* quotes the new President of Dagestan, Mukhu Aliyev, until 1991 the First Secretary of the Committee of the Communist Party in the republic, as stating that the post of a republican minister “costs” \$500,000 and the post of the head of a district administration can be obtained for \$150,000 (Boikov, 2006).

Social polarization in the North Caucasus is much more pronounced than in the rest of Russia, while poverty and unemployment rates are the highest in the entire country (Chaguchiyev, 2006). The policy recommendations of national-patriots differ from the conclusions of the Communists only in their details. Both hold that the current federal policy is inadequate, that it is necessary to remove corrupt political elites as soon as possible and reform the law enforcement system, to establish a special economic policy for the region, and to create lots of new jobs. But “national-patriots” also believe it necessary to reform the country’s political-administrative divisions to create new *provinces* in place of “ethnic” republics, *krais*, and (autonomous) *oblasts*. The republics, they claim, have larger competences than “proper” Russian regions, and new territorial units should have equal rights (Boikov, 2006).

## Liberal

The third and final newspaper we examined was *Novaya Gazeta*. The liberal discourse found in this newspaper treats the situation in the North Caucasus as emblematic of the challenges facing democracy in Russia. Corruption characterizes state administrations all over Russia. In the North Caucasus and throughout Russia, officials abuse public funds while social polarization and poverty deepens. The law enforcement system defends the interests of authorities, and not those of ordinary people, and seeks to prevent possible “orange

**Table 4.** Summary of the Liberal Script

	Grammar	Discourse
A	Why is the North Caucasus so important for Russia?	The situation in the North Caucasus is about the same as everywhere in Russia: corrupt administrations are budget parasites and are “organizing” the poverty of ordinary people; aggressive law enforcement institutions are looking for the signs of populist “orange revolutions.” In the North Caucasus, the situation only has some specific attributes, first and foremost because of the “war against terrorism.”
	How is the situation changing?	The situation is rapidly deteriorating, stabilization is a propaganda myth. In the course of cruel military operations, federal authorities ignore human and material losses of a peaceful population. They do not take prisoners to avoid eyewitness accounts of human rights abuses.
	What are its international consequences and connections?	Slogans of GWOT are used to justify repressive actions of federal authorities and their inadequate policy.
B	What are its reasons?	Total corruption, misuse of federal money, poverty, unemployment, hypocrisy in official propaganda, everyday violations of elementary human rights. The archaic nature of society combining the traditional ethno-clan organization with the remnants of communist structures is not taken into account by the federal center.
	Who is responsible for the situation in North Caucasus?	The rough and inadequate policy of federal authorities is dramatically increasing anti-Russian feelings.
C	What political conclusions should be made?	Federal authorities cannot cope with the situation or even understand its nature.
	What to do?	Solidarity and self-organization of society are the means to prevent further aggravation of the situation.

A = Situation description and location specification.

B = Causality and protagonist typifications.

C = Interest enunciation.

revolutions”—as in Ukraine in 2004—mobilizations against the party of power. In the North Caucasus, the situation is painted in specific ethnic and historical colors by *Novaya Gazeta*, which devotes much more attention and newsprint to information and analytical articles on the North Caucasus than either *Sovetskaya Rossiya* and *Zavtra*. We counted 49 articles during the one-year period of our study, only two or three of which are more or less positive in their coverage of the policies of the Russian government.

In the liberal storyline on the North Caucasus, the situation in the region continues to deteriorate (see Table 4). *Novaya Gazeta* reports on persistent tensions and overt conflicts. The official storyline about stabilization and progress is considered as mere propaganda. Federal authorities routinely ignore the human and material losses of a peaceful population and violate human rights. In some of her last columns for the newspaper, the murdered

reporter Anna Politkovskaya (2006a, 2006b) wrote that very often Russian special services claimed that terrorists had found a refuge in a certain house, and then destroyed it and everything around it with heavy weapons, including women and children. It is almost impossible to get compensation for these losses from the state, according to Politkovskaya. Police bosses need evidence of their “successes” and do not want witnesses who could reveal the real situation.

The liberal storyline tends to hold federal and local authorities responsible for fomenting violence in the region, using slogans like GWOT to justify repressive policies. International terrorist analysts writing in the newspaper believe that Al Qaeda has a certain financial and ideological influence in the North Caucasus, but that it is not decisive (Soldatov and Borogan, 2006). Basayev and his followers attacked exclusively within Russia and were not interested in Western targets. *Novaya Gazeta* contains many articles which analyze how the official storyline works to suppress debate. One example was Konstantin Kosachev’s (head of the State Duma Commission on International Affairs and of the Russian delegation at the Council of Europe) response to Dutch deputy Eric Jurgens, who submitted a report about Russian human rights violations in the North Caucasus: “What you call civil war, as a matter of fact is the struggle against terrorism” (Khalip, 2006). Kosachev’s response was an attempt to re-frame the very situation description, to displace a storyline that questions Moscow’s role with one that views it as heroic and fully legitimate. Lilia Shevtsova, an analyst at the Moscow Carnegie Center, defines this tactic as “the use of liberal rhetoric by non-liberal power” (Shevtsova, 2005). Liberals contest official claims that even European politicians recognize the improving situation in the region, and instead look to international human rights organizations for accurate information on the violations of human rights in the region.

For all opposition newspapers—from national-patriots to liberals—the diagnosis of the situation in the North Caucasus is quite similar: corruption, misuse of federal money, poverty, unemployment, and the hypocrisy of official propaganda. As with left and national-patriotic storylines, liberal discourse emphasizes that political authorities in the North Caucasian republics ignore the needs of ordinary citizens. But *Novaya Gazeta* is more concrete and seeks to reveal what it claims are the real motives for the political decisions the government takes, documenting the absolute indifference of local republican authorities to their citizens. For instance, the newspaper covered a peaceful demonstration in the Dokuparinsky Rayon in southern Dagestan against corruption by the head of the local administration. Seeking to keep his power, he called in special police forces from Makhachkala, who surrounded the crowd, killing one protestor and wounding others. Local officials framed the protest as an attack of radical elements against legitimate authorities (Politkovskaya, 2006c). Such events undermine the legitimacy of local and federal authorities.

Articles in *Novaya Gazeta* blame a unique combination of traditional ethno-clan organization and the legacy of communist structures in Dagestan and neighboring republics for producing a self-perpetuating power structure immune to the interests of citizens across the region. Given this power structure, there are two potential paths to a solution: either strictly apply the laws of the Russian state or offer mountain peoples the opportunity to live according to their traditional laws. But arbitrary and selective instrumentalization of local state structures and the law enforcement system by competing groups leads to chaos and misinterpretations of rivalry and revenge as a struggle against international terrorism. The political conclusion of the liberal discourse is thus the same as other opposition discourses. Federal authorities cannot cope with the violence in the North Caucasus and are often unable to understand its origins. However, the policy solutions of liberals are different, seeing



solidarity among ordinary people and the development of civil society as the means to a better future.

### **PUBLIC OPINION IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS ON THE CAUSES OF CONFLICT IN THE REGION**

Thus far we have examined national discourses on the North Caucasus, concentrating mostly on the storylines of the political class centered in Moscow, whether inside or outside the governing circle of power. But what about the perspectives of ordinary citizens across the North Caucasus? As already noted, we helped to organize a large social science survey of political attitudes across the region, which was administered in November–December 2005 by the Levada Center. The survey area included Stavropol' Krai and all the main ethnic republics in the region.<sup>6</sup> We used a clustered sample method (described in detail in O'Loughlin and Ó Tuathail, 2006) to identify 82 sample survey sites. A survey questionnaire was administered in person to a random sample of adults over the age of 18 (voting-age population) in each of the selected 82 counties/cities in the North Caucasus. The distribution was roughly proportionate to the number of adults in each republic/krai and was composed as follows: Dagestan 625, Kabardino-Balkaria 246, Karachaevo-Cherkessia 121, North Ossetia 198, and Stavropol' Krai 810, for a total of 2000 persons.

Three questions from this survey provide us with insight into regional public opinion on the prevailing elite storylines on the causes of political instability in the North Caucasus. The first question asked respondents: what is the main explanation for violence and conflict in the North Caucasus? The second question asked: In your opinion, how should the Russian government respond to terrorist attacks? The third question inquired of those surveyed: What, in your opinion, will be the greatest danger facing the peoples of the North Caucasus in the next five years?

Let us examine the responses to each question in detail and discuss variations of response by declared ethnicity. Table 5 lists the eight options that respondents were given in response to the first question above. What is striking about the results is that pluralities of respondents blame the “unskillful and rough politics of the Russian Federation” for the violence and conflict in the North Caucasus. While accounting for only 27.1 percent of the total responses, this is nevertheless a striking rejection of the official storyline's explanations and blame strategies. There is no significant difference between Russian and Muslims in their attachment to this explanation. One quarter of all ethnic Russian respondents choose it, slightly more than Dargin respondents (24 percent) but slightly less than Kumyks and Laks (27 percent). This explanation is especially popular among some Dagestani peoples—Avars (31 percent) and Lezghins (38 percent), which were the groups that most favored this account.

This seeming rejection of the official storyline, however, needs to be qualified by analysis of two other explanations favored by the official storyline: “radical tendencies in Islam” and “international Islamic terrorism.” On its own, the former attracts 17.6 percent of all respondents whereas the latter, arguably the explanation the Kremlin evoked most often after 9/11, only attracts 13.2 percent. Combined, however, these explanations account for 30.8 percent of respondents. Ossetians (an Orthodox population) were the group that demonstrated most support for the “international Islamic terrorism” explanation (20 percent), followed by Armenians

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<sup>6</sup>With the exception of Chechnya and Ingushetia, where conditions made reliable surveying impossible.

**Table 5.** What Is the Main Explanation for Violence and Conflict in the North Caucasus? (in percent)

Option	All	Russian	Avars	Dargins	Kumyk	Lak	Lezghin
The will of Chechens to leave the Russian Federation	9.0	9	13	1	1	8	10
Radical tendencies in Islam (Wahabbism)	17.6	15	24	23	25	17	15
Unskillful, rough politics of Russian Federation	27.1	25	31	24	27	27	38
Caucasian peoples can search for self-determination within Russia	5.1	5	2	4	4	5	4
International Islamic terrorism	13.2	16	5	17	12	14	10
High level of organized criminality	17.7	18	18	21	23	17	15
Other—specify	1.9	2	1	5	1	2	2
Don't know/no answer	8.4	9	5	4	7	9	5

  

Option	Nogay	Kabard	Ossetian	Chechen	Armenian	Other Muslim	Other non-Muslim
The will of Chechens to leave the Russian Federation	4	17	4	21	9	6	11
Radical tendencies in Islam (Wahabbism)	3	23	21	12	21	14	9
Unskillful, rough politics of Russian Federation	26	21	28	17	25	36	34
Caucasian peoples can search for self-determination within Russia	3	7	5	5	2	9	3
International Islamic terrorism	0	9	20	9	18	8	15
High level of organized criminality	7	14	5	25	19	19	6
Other—specify	50	0	0	0	2	3	4
Don't know/no answer	6	8	18	12	5	4	17

(18), Dargins (17), and Russians (16 percent). Kumyks were the group that blamed “radical tendencies in Islam” most (25 percent) followed by Avars (24), Dargins (23), Kabards (23), Ossetians (21), and Armenians (21 percent). Interestingly, only 15 percent of Russians viewed this as the main explanation for violence and conflict in the region. Another noteworthy result is that the second most popular main explanation, just slightly ahead of “radical tendencies in Islam” (17.7 to 17.6 percent) is the high level of organized criminality in the region. This explanation is most popular among the few Chechens (in Dagestan) we managed to include within the survey (25 percent) and shows strong adherence among Kumyks (23), Dargins (21 percent). Avar and Russian support for this explanation (18 percent) is about the average

**Table 6.** In Your Opinion, How Should the Russian Government Respond to Terrorist Attacks? (In percent)

Response	Percentage
With more persecution of terrorists	68.2
Negotiate with the terrorists	4.7
Ask for international assistance (peacekeepers, etc)	7.1
Give more financial means to the North Caucasus	11.3
Offer them a possibility to leave Russian Federation	3.0
Don't know	5.6
Total	100.0

among all groups surveyed. Another important conclusion is that the population of North Caucasus does not see the lack of possibility for self-determination as an explanation for conflict in the region: only 5 percent opted on average for this answer.

The largest difference in the opinions of different ethnic groups is noticed in the attitude toward the role of the Chechen conflict as the leading factor explaining the violence. The ratio of Chechens finding its main reason in the refusal of the federal authorities to offer independence to Chechnya (21 percent) is more than twice as high as the average for all groups (9 percent). Thirteen percent of the neighboring Avars and 17 percent of Kabards share this opinion. This is a worrying symptom, especially remembering that Kabards are somewhat more prone to complain about the lack of possibilities for self-determination for peoples of North Caucasus (7 percent against 5 percent in average).

The second question tests the degree to which respondents were ready to break from the official “no compromise with terrorists” line of the Kremlin. It is worth recalling that the survey was conducted only weeks after the Nal’chik attacks, which resulted in the death of over 100 militants. Despite some evidence of support for the attackers among the population of Nal’chik and a questioning of the method of response by the state authorities, little of this appears in our survey. Respondents overwhelmingly show little willingness to defect from the official hardline position, demonstrating strong support for the position that the Russian government should respond to terrorist attacks with “more persecution of terrorists” (Table 6). Some favor the provision of further financial aid to the region as an appropriate response, and only small minorities favor negotiating with terrorists or offering the possibility of secession from the Russian Federation. On the evidence of this question at least, the federal authorities have strong support for their strategy of response to violence terrorist attacks.

The third question asked respondents to identify the most serious dangers facing the peoples of the North Caucasus in the next five years, giving them a choice of five options and a “do not know” category (Table 7). The results are striking for their placement of the challenge of economic development well ahead of terrorist actions or military conflict as serious dangers: 47.5 percent of respondents considered the lack of economic development and jobs as the most serious danger facing the region. Rather than conceding to a “securitization” mentality, where dangers are conceptualized as security threats requiring a police and military response, respondents mostly choose to de-securitize danger by emphasizing the challenge of modernization and economic growth instead (Buzan et al., 1997). The response is understandable given the de-modernization that has occurred in the region since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the further marginalization of mountain regions and impoverished peoples in the uneven development model that has prevailed in post-Soviet Russia. Whereas

**Table 7.** What Is the Most Serious Danger Facing the Peoples of the North Caucasus in the Next Five Years (in percent)

Response	Percentage
Lack of economic development and jobs	47.5
Terrorist actions, military conflict	17.5
Crime	8.9
Increased separatism as a result of rising ethnic tension	3.5
Political corruption	21
Don't know	1.5
Total	100.0

outsiders see “terrorism and military conflict” when viewing the region, insiders live with the daily challenge of making ends meet and achieving steady and secure employment. This conclusion is confirmed by the fact that Dagestanians see the principal danger for peoples of North Caucasus in the lack of economic development and jobs more often than other respondents in average. This opinion is shared by 57 percent of Lezghins, more than half of Avars and Dargins, as well as by 68 percent of Ossetians. Indeed, official data on per capita income rank Dagestan toward the bottom among the subject regions of the Russian Federation.

Respondents also reveal levels of dissatisfaction with their regional (republican) authorities, with one in five viewing corruption as the most serious danger facing the peoples of the region. When combined with those who viewed criminality as the most serious danger, almost 30 percent of all respondents are concerned with rule-of-law issues. Russians (26 percent) and especially Chechens (36 percent) view corruption as the major danger more than others, the latter group possibly because of their familiarity with the widespread corruption surrounding federal subventions to Chechnya.

Another striking result is that the risk of separatism and new ethnic tensions does not preoccupy ordinary citizens. This future scenario was chosen as the most serious only by 3.5 percent of respondents, whereas it is a prevailing danger within official, left, and national patriotic storylines on the region. This result helps contextualize the previous question for, while ordinary citizens overwhelmingly back the hard line of authorities in responding to terrorist attacks, the overwhelming majority do not consider terrorist actions to be central to the future challenges faced by the region. What strategies the Kremlin has for economic development and combating corruption speak more to people’s anxieties about the future than its strategies of response to terrorism.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to examine how contemporary Russian geopolitical culture understands the North Caucasus as a region characterized by a certain drama and set of actors and explanations. Various practical geopolitical storylines vie to explain the political violence that characterizes the region, identify malevolent actors who perpetuate it, and justify strategies of response. All politicians and observers, except liberals, believe that the North Caucasus is an integral part of Russia, and its split would mean a first stage of the disintegration of the Russian state. Yet, at the same time, many of the same storylines contrast Russian-majority areas to the “ethnic” republics in the region. This tendency reflects real processes of the social-economic polarization across the region, but also the cultural otherness of Caucasian

peoples for many Russians. While declaring the need for integration, many politicians in Russia do have implicit anxieties about the region as a “fraying edge of empire.”

Official, left, and national-patriotic storylines all view the region as an integral part of the Russian Federation and justify the use of violence by the federal state in a “war on terrorism” and secessionism in the region. Liberal discourses are skeptical of this shared statist justification for the use of force against the region’s peoples, particularly against ordinary Chechens. The official Putin administration storyline is that the “war on terrorism” is being won in the region and it is being stabilized and normalized. The Kremlin’s policies are working, and Chechnya is now restored as an integral part of the Russian Federation—the economic situation is still not rosy, but is being improved. Left Communist and national-patriotic storylines are skeptical of the progress reported in the region and strongly critique the lack of economic development and the corruption that characterizes the current Kremlin-supervised vertical order of power in the region. Liberal accounts expose the human rights failings of the “war on terrorism” strategy and predict ongoing brutality, for the root causes of conflict—the war on terror itself and a structural lack of economic development and local democracy as a consequence of an institutionalized corrupt power structure fed by federal funds—are not being addressed.

Scientific public opinion results across sites in the region tend to validate aspects of the liberal storyline on the region and repudiate that of the Kremlin. First, the majority of people in the region do not share the Kremlin’s storyline regarding the explanation for violence in the North Caucasus. The region’s varied peoples blame the policies of the Kremlin and local political corruption. Second, although the vast majority of citizens support a hardline policy of response to terrorism, majorities among the region’s peoples do not consider terrorism or the threat of ethnic separatism as the main danger facing the region in the next five years. Economic development and political corruption are their overwhelming concerns. Kremlin officials argue with some justification that the Putin administration is deeply concerned with these questions also. For example, President Putin has given the need for new economic investment in the region his personal attention this past year, and a new commission is studying the structural problems of the Southern Federal District. But the Kremlin faces a dilemma for, in waging its “war against terror” in the region, it has energized political structures in Chechnya that are unlikely to provide any opportunity for legitimate and sustainable economic growth in the future. In effect, it has empowered a local predatory state under the Kadyrov regime. Furthermore, it inevitably participates in the perpetuation of a republican power structure beyond Chechnya that many Kremlin critics blame for distorting and compromising the possibilities for economic development in the region. Whether the Kremlin is right and indicators are trending in the right direction, or whether its critics are correct and failures of development and democracy guarantee future political instability will be the subject of debate as the North Caucasus continues to negotiate its difficult transition from peaceful inner Soviet region to tumultuous borderland, and fraying imperial edge *in potentia*, of the Russian Federation.

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