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The review provides a detailed analysis of main trends in Russia's economy in 2015. The paper contains 6 big sections that highlight single aspects of Russia's economic development: the socio-political context; the monetary and credit spheres; financial sphere; the real sector; social sphere; institutional challenges. The paper employs a huge mass of statistical data that forms the basis of original computation and numerous charts.

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## The North Caucasus: risks are on the rise

### 6.4.1. An aggravation of the situation around the inter-Islamic conflict in the North Caucasus<sup>1</sup>

Since mid-2015, the republics of the north-eastern Caucasus (Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia) have been experiencing a new round of escalation of the conflict, which is rather simplistically interpreted by many observers as a controversy between Sufis<sup>2</sup> and Salafis. It should be noted that the law enforcement agencies and even the authorities of the North Caucasian republics are also most heavily involved in that conflict.

It should be reminded that, beginning from the early post-Soviet era, the religious life in the North Caucasian republics has been complicated by an ongoing conflict between different Islamic religious movements: traditional Islam (represented in the north-eastern Caucasus by a variety of Sufi orders) and nontraditional Islam (represented by fundamentalist movements that call for a return to the fundamentals - the Quran and Sunnah, and rejecting any innovations, including anything that has to do with Sufism; usually they all are referred to as Salafis - a general term that is not quite correct). The conflict rather promptly flared into violent confrontations (the catalyst being the war in Chechnya), and until the late 2000s the principal method to be applied in resolving the situation was considered to be suppression by force of nontraditional Islam. However, since the late 2000s, in a number of the North Caucasian republics (most actively – in Ingushetia and Dagestan) the powers-that-be began to make attempts to find some alternative civilian methods of settling the conflict on the basis of amicable agreements. At the level of republican authorities, it was admitted that the fact of belonging to one or another Islamic movement is by no means a crime *per se*, as it complies with the right of religious belief as stated in the Constitution of the Russian Federation up until the moment when an individual becomes a proponent of violence or actually takes up arms. So, the Salafi mosques began to function relatively without constraints, and those Salafi leaders who were not calling for *jihad* were allowed to preach freely. Negotiations were launched between representatives of the conflicting Islamic movements with the purpose of separating the religious processes from politics and to elaborate some civilized forms of interaction in a social context. The commissions for the adaptation to peaceful life of the persons who have decided to discontinue their terrorist and extremist activities began to function. All these developments conducted to reestablishing a normal life in the republics and significantly brought down the scale of violent acts.

Nevertheless in early 2013, nearly all these processes were brought to a halt, and the suppression-by-force scenario once again came to the fore. Large-scale counter-terrorist operations, persecution of Salafi preachers, and pressure on the believers were on the agenda once again. The adaptation commissions were no longer active. The only republic where the process of appeasement by civilian means was more or less continued thanks to the position of its head, Yunus-bek Yevkurov, is the Republic of Ingushetia.

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<sup>1</sup> Author of this section: Starodubrovskaya I. – Gaidar Institute for Economic Policy.

<sup>2</sup> Sufism is defined as a mystical dimension of Islam; it implies commitments of the murids (believers) to the sheiks who have access to superior mystical knowledge.

The cause of strongest indignation among the believers - and first of all in Dagestan - is the so-called *prophylactic registration*, or *Wahhabi* lists. On the basis of some arbitrary superficial features (personal appearance, apparel) people are taken to police stations, photographed and made to take blood and DNA tests, and then are required to also bring their families for the same sort of testing. Thereafter, those who have been put on these lists experience difficulties in traveling freely across the territory of the North Caucasus, as well as elsewhere in Russia; besides, they are regularly called for 'prophylactic' interviews and subjected to house searches. In other words, they are unlawfully restricted in their constitutional rights, and the normal flow of their everyday life is disrupted. Quite often, even those individuals who never go to a mosque or perform salah, or even those who drink alcohol, are put on these lists. We know one case when a man who worked at the mayor office in Makhachkala was listed as a *Wahhabi* in his native village.

Here is one more example of how people can be placed on a *Wahhabi* list. *'My friend was stopped while driving his own car, so that his documents could be checked at the Sulak checkpoint. This was at 1 pm. It turned out that he had a prophylactic registration, he was a Wahhabi. So he, with his car, was taken to district police headquarters, and released only as late as 2 am the next morning. He, and others like him, sat there waiting for a prophylactic interview, a total of 15 people. It is a good thing that he had not taken his family with him, I cannot imagine how all this would proceed if you have your wife and children with you. They practically ate nothing, except some buns that they bought at the canteen with their own money. ... And when will a man have time to work, to earn his living, if he is taken every time to police headquarters? People have families with small children, who need to be fed.'*

However, in contrast to the developments observed over the period from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s, the new use-of-force scenario did not translate into an outburst of violence. Moreover, the scale of violence has begun to recede at a rapid pace. In 2015, the following indices declined on 2014 in the North Caucasus: the number of victims in armed conflicts dropped by half - from 525 to 258; the number of casualties dropped by 39%, that of wounded - by 73%; the number of terrorist attacks declined by 33%, that of bomb explosions - by 45%. The total number of incidents with the use of weapons in the North Caucasus went down from 141 in 2014 to 86 in 2015 - that is, by 39%<sup>1</sup>. We may point to the following main factors behind this situation.

*Firstly*, the antiterrorist policy in this case by no means targeted only the rank-and-file militants. Some representatives of the Dagestani elite, who are accused of having connections with the *armed* underground resistance movements, have also been subject to criminal prosecution. *By doing so, the authorities have undermined the support* of unlawful armed formations by the elite, and managed to disrupt their cash flows. There is no doubt that this helped to suppress the activity of the militants.

*Secondly*, we can observe an outflow, on a mass scale, of the radically-minded young people to Syria, where they join either the terrorist organization *Islamic State* (or ISIS, whose activity is banned in the territory of the Russian Federation) or the jihadist groups that oppose the ISIS. According to available information, until recently the law enforcement agencies have not been preventing their exit from Russia in any serious way. Thus, a group of popular Islamic preachers managed to leave Makhachkala and join the ISIS, although one of them had been placed under house arrest.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/277423/>

Thirdly, some serious changes have occurred in the underground resistance *movement itself*. In 2015, Aliashab Kebekov and Muhammad Suleimanov – two leaders of *Imarat Caucasus* (an organization that is also banned in the Russian Federation, because since November 2007 it had led and coordinated the activity of unlawful armed groups across the region) were killed. Since then, in all evidence, no new leader of *Imarat Kavkaz* (the Caucasus Emirate) has been elected, and the organization is experiencing a deep crisis - if it still functions at all. At the same time, it is a known fact that in 2015, these armed groups on a mass scale took an oath of allegiance to the ISIS. Their oath was accepted, and the ISIS set up its *vilayat* (branch) in the Caucasus. However, it is still unclear what the consequences of this recognition might be. In December 2015, the Federal Security Service's Director Alexander Bortnikov stated that out of the 26 leaders of groups in the North Caucasus that have taken an oath to the ISIS, 20 had been killed in 2015<sup>1</sup>.

Nevertheless, the currently receding violence can hardly be considered as a legitimate reason for conceited self-satisfaction. It is evident that under the influence of ISIS ideology, and also as a form of popular response to the wholesale resort to force by law enforcers, the hidden radicalization of the believers is an ongoing process. In 2015, armed attacks on the civilian population, with casualties, once again became a fact of life, and such incidents are most typically reported in the south of Dagestan, and particularly in Derbent, where a group of tourists came under fire, which claimed the life of one person and wounded another eleven. The information on counter-terrorist operations in Kabardino-Balkaria began to appear with increasing frequency. Besides, in response to the interference of the Russian Federation in the Syrian conflict, a number of prominent radical preachers declared *jihad* against Russia; there were calls for Muslims not to go to Syria, but to fight in the Caucasus. So far, it is difficult to make any definite conclusions as to the seriousness of this new factor (according to available evidence, radicalized young people still cherish the hope of departing to Syria. However, it is clearly not conducive to any improvement in the existing state of affairs.

It is against this background that the onset of the dramatic conflict around the so-called Salafi mosques began in Dagestan and Ingushetia.

The first manifestation of that conflict was the confrontation in the Nasyr-Kort mosque in early June 2015. Nasyr-Kort is the name of a large village that has become a suburban district of Nazran, the capital of the Republic of Ingushetia. The imam of that mosque is Khamzat Chumakov, a religious leader who has gained popularity across the entire North Caucasus. He is famous not only for his criticism of Sufi religious rites, but also because in his sermons he speaks about acute social issues and criticizes the authorities for their failure to provide proper protection to the poorer and socially vulnerable strata of the population.

The direct trigger of the conflict was the purely theological issue of the difference between Sufi and Salafi rites. After an international theological conference, where some globally acclaimed Muslim theorists sided with Chumakov, and not with the Ingush *Mufti*, the Salafi Imam took a tough standpoint, and so an attempt was made to dismiss him from his post, to be replaced by somebody who would be loyal to the *Muftiyat*. In spite of the special measures that had been planned in advance in order to prevent violence, a fight took place inside the mosque, and gunshots rang in its courtyard. Obviously, the confrontation resulted from some deeper-rooted controversies in Ingush society that go far beyond the minor theological issue that had actually triggered it, and with regard to which the Salafi imam was prepared to take a more relaxed attitude (and this is what happened later on).

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/277423/>.

This incident deeply shocked Ingush public. Various civil organizations immediately got actively involved in deescalating the conflict. On June 10, a roundtable was held at Magas by the Cultural and Educational Center *Ezdel*, the Non-governmental Organizations Coordination Council and the Ingush Regional Branch of the Russian Red Cross, its theme being 'The Role of Non-governmental Organizations in Consolidating Ingush Society'. At the end of the discussion, the roundtable participants called to each side in the conflict not to resort to the use of force and to start a dialogue in order to settle the disputed issues. Head of the Republic of Ingushetia Yunus-bek Yevkurov, who had promptly condemned the conflict at the mosque, was for some time uncertain as to which measures were actually necessary for its resolution, and he even put forth the idea that the mosque should be closed down until the situation returned to normal. However, a few days after the conflict, he himself took part in *Jummu'ah (Friday Prayer)* at the Nasyr-Kort mosque, where all had become peaceful by then. So the conflict receded for the time being. But this was the end of the matter.

In late December 2015, the head of Ingushetia called for the *mufti* to leave his post, and for the *Muftiyat* to cooperate with the representatives of all Muslim groups, to abstain from dividing the community into 'friends' and 'enemies', and to work towards consolidation of Ingush society. He also emphasized the necessity to transfer the functions associated with the organization of *hajj* (pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina) from the *Muftiyat* to a body subordinated to the government of Ingushetia in order to rule out any speculations about corruption schemes being applied in the relevant procedures. A few days later, an assistant adviser on religious issues to the head of Ingushetia was appointed, who belonged to the same *taip* as the republic's *mufti*. He was assigned the task of creating an Administration for Religious Affairs.

However, the *mufti* (who had been previously supported by Yevkurov during his second electoral campaign) refused to resign, pointing out that the *Muftiyat* was independent of the civilian government. Moreover, he effectively turned for help to the head of neighboring Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov. On 29 December, the Spiritual Directory of Muslims in the Chechen Republic held a meeting of the religious activists of Chechnya and Ingushetia, whose goal was to denounce the legitimacy of any religious current deemed to be an alternative to Sufism; the followers of such currents were dubbed 'preudo-Salafis'. In his speech at the meeting, Ramzan Kadyrov resorted to threats and personal accusations aimed against some eminent Salafi imams in Ingushetia, as well as gave a promise to fight *Wahhabism* across the entire North Caucasus, if the authorities of other North Caucasian republics are not sufficiently active and vigorous in this respect.

It should be noted that the 'wave' of transition, over period 2009–2012, from the pure use-of-force scenario to attempts at civil appeasement bypassed the territory of Chechnya. Here, the monopoly of the *Qadiriyya* (a Sufi order [tariqa]) is fully supported by the authorities, and the struggle against *Wahhabis* (the name being applied to everybody who is critical of Sufism and the Chechen authorities) is constantly being proclaimed as one of the top priorities of the republic's leaders. As a result, Chechnya has become the natural center of attraction for all those who are against religious tolerance and resort to the use of force in dealing with all theological issues.

In this particular case, the situation is further complicated by the rather chilly relationship between the leaders of Ingushetia and Chechnya, which becomes manifest now and then in connection with various issues. Because of this, the *mufti's* call to the Chechen authorities was viewed by certain groups in Ingushetia not just as the next phase in a religious conflict, but as a betrayal of their ethnic interests, Kadyrov's tough stance with regard to Salafis in the North Caucasus as his interference with the affairs of a neighboring republic.

So far, no solution to the conflict has been achieved. The *mufti* is still in his post. Different political forces in the Republic of Ingushetia publicly voice their various opinions on this issue. Several meetings of Ingush *taips* took place, as many of their eminent representatives had been dragged into the conflict. There was even a suggestion that the leaders of the republic and the *Muftiyat* should simultaneously resign.

The situation in Dagestan has been in no way less dramatic. It all started with an isolated tragic event in the village of Novy Kurush in Khasavyurt district (the village is a big Lezgian enclave with a population of more than 7,000), where on 9 September an imam was murdered. That village can be described as a 'deeply divided community' with two functioning mosques, one of them subordinated to the Spiritual Directory of Muslims, and the other considered to be 'Salafi'. It is the imam of the former mosque that was killed. Two of the village's natives, who had joined the illegal armed groups and then were liquidated in the course of a special operation, were accused of the murder.

It is difficult to reconstruct a veritable picture of these events on the basis of available information. According to some sources, the village was the site of severe conflicts based on religious differences, and the imam who fell victim to this feud had tried to struggle against the Salafi 'heresy'. According to other sources, in spite of the community split and the two mosques, the imam was respected by the village residents, including representatives of the 'enemy camp', because he tried to rely on a well-substantiated dialogue. The imams of the two mosques interacted and joined their forces in dealing with the common issues of rural life (a situation that is not very typical of Dagestan). According to some available information, the two persons accused of the imam's murder had close ties with the village's Salafi community, while in accordance with another version they were born in the village, but at the time had no contacts with its residents.

In any event, the murder of the imam evidently made the situation even more tense. On 22 September, the Salafi mosque in the village was closed down, and its imam and 20 members of the congregation arrested. The mosque was closed down by force: its doors were welded shut, and the congregation's apparel and the mosque's property, including religious books, was burnt. In all this, the law enforcement agencies took no part.

From late autumn 2015 onwards, the struggle against those mosques that refused to be controlled by official Islamic structures began to spread across the region. In late November, one Salafi mosque (in Kotrov Street in Makhachkala) that was famous not only in Dagestan, but across the entire North Caucasus, was closed down. The process was rather chaotic. Against the background of large-scale detentions of worshipers, the Spiritual Directory of Muslims at first made an attempt to replace the imam of the mosque. This decision immediately sparked mass protests, and the Spiritual Directory backtracked, suggesting to replace the new imam with a person highly respected by both Sufis and Salafis – the Imam of the Central Mosque of Makhachkala, Magomedrasul Saaduev. When the congregation rejected his candidature, the Spiritual Directory of Muslims washed its hands of the matter and announced that the replacement of the imam had been caused not by its intention to establish control over the mosque, but by the threats of the law enforcement structures that otherwise they would close down the mosque. The law enforcers were true to their word, and in two day's time the mosque was closed down and has not been reopened since then.

The closure of the mosque in Kotrov Street has not resulted in active opposition on the part of the Muslim community of Makhachkala. It can be assumed that there were two main reasons for this. Firstly, according to a number of Islamic activists who shared their opinion of this issue with the authors, at that time the mosque's congregation was engulfed in a severe crisis. Mosque



activists had isolated themselves from the rank-and-file worshipers, and the congregation as a whole was deeply divided and fragmented. To make matters worse, the mosque had not had a permanent imam for quite a long time. Secondly, there were (and still are) plenty of other mosques in Makhachkala that could be attended by representatives of non-traditional Islam. The most well-known of them is the mosque in Hungarian Fighters Street. Although this mosque and its imam were also subjected to pressure and threats, this house of worship is still smoothly functioning.

The events in Kortov Street had their direct continuation in a new round of Salafis mosque-closures which began in early 2016. On 29 January, a mosque in the settlement of Shamkhal (a sub-municipality of Makhachkala) was forcibly closed down. On 31 January, came the turn of the so-called North Mosque in Khasavyurt, one of the Salafis mosques, whose imam had been detained in December 2015 (it is widely believed in Dagestan that charges against him were fabricated). As in the case with the Novyi Kurush mosque, the entrance door of the mosque was welded shut, under the pretext that the application for permission to hold religious services at the mosque had been improperly composed. It turned out later that all the relevant documents and applications were composed absolutely properly. According to available information, the imams of the other Salafi mosques in this area also came under pressure to stop their activities in both Khasavyurt and the nearby districts.

In contrast with the closure of the mosque in Kortov Street, the situation in Khasavyurt was met by an active response from the worshipers. On 1 February, between 5,000 and 8,000 people (mostly young) took to the streets. They headed towards the town administration Khasavyurt, and the ensuing negotiations ended in the keys of the mosque being handed back to the community. The demonstration was not marked by any criminal incidents. Meanwhile, in Makhachkala the editorial office of the *Chernovik* Newspaper hosted a roundtable with the participation of religious activists, representatives of the public and journalists, who discussed the issue of the closed mosque. The participants urged all the sides in the conflict to settle their disagreements by way of a peaceful dialogue, and not in the form of a violent confrontation.

While this text was being prepared, the conflict around the closure of mosques refocused on Derbent, where accusations were brought against one of the local imams, and the law enforcement agencies there prevent the congregation from gathering in the mosque where he had performed *salah*.

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So, what are the *conclusions* that can be made on the basis of our analysis?

*Firstly*, attacks on Salafi mosques take place under the following conditions:

- the use-of-force scenario applied recently in the struggle against non-traditional Islam appears to be successful, because the incidence of terrorist attacks and the number of their victims plunged sharply (although it is by no means evident that this trend will persist throughout 2016);
- increasing concerns are associated with the outflow of young people to the war in Syria, including with the purpose of fighting for the terrorist group Islamic State;
- there exist mosques where the outflow of the members of their congregations and religious activists to Syria, sometimes to join the ISIS, is very intense.

It can be assumed that the closure of such mosques is an effective method of neutralizing those radicals who urge young people to go to Syria. However, in reality the effect of their closure may be quite opposite. Those religious radicals who had been attending those mosques

will not disappear into thin air, and the young people who listen to them will hardly go with the wind. But the imams, with their much more moderate attitude, will no longer be able to prevent such recruitment, because it will be taking place in private apartments or in clandestine houses of prayer. And the recruiters will be able to use stronger arguments – the closure of mosques will be relied upon as a precedent that confirms the fact of Muslims being oppressed and prevented from exercising freely their religion.

*Secondly*, such increasingly frequent conflicts evolve into open manifestations of protest, while at the same time remaining peaceful and not translating into acts of violence. Recently, protesters have become better organized and more disciplined (as noted earlier, the demonstration in Khasavyurt proceeded without a single breach of the law). The participants in the conflict are becoming more active in the mass media, and there have been attempts on the part of civil society to act as a mediator in such situations. So, how can these processes be estimated?

On the one hand, the desire to settle the disputed issues peacefully, on the basis of constitutional principles, without hooliganism and plunder is a positive development. It should be noted that the group of Dagestani religious activists who joined the ISIS (and are now responding rather eloquently from its ranks to the current events in the Caucasus) estimated very negatively the outcome of the conflict around the North Mosque: in their opinion, instead of *jihad*, the people meekly followed those who had been calling to cooperation with the ‘authority of the infidels’ in a civil rights framework.

On the other hand, it would have been much better for the authorities to resolve such conflicts in a dialogue mode, by organizing negotiations between representatives of the bodies of state authority, law enforcement agencies and civil society (including the Muslim communities acting within the framework set out by law). To fall into the habit of mass mobilization for protest actions, and moreover, when it leads to success and creates the impression that the only available method of settling any issue would be to get large crowds of no less than 5,000 people out onto the streets, is a dangerous course, and there are no guarantees that such actions will always remain so well-organized and non-violent.

And *thirdly* and lastly, the recent conflict once again demonstrates that everything that we are witnessing now has not originated solely from the controversies within the Islamic community. Religious conflicts have sometimes been taken advantage of, and sometimes have been purposefully provoked within the framework of those political processes that have been going on in the North Caucasus and elsewhere in Russia. And it should be pointed out that in this context, the forthcoming election of the head of Chechnya is no less (or probably even more) important than the controversies concerning *Jummu'ah* (*Friday Prayer*) between different Islamic movements.