



From Democracy to Disorder? Comparing governing strategies in the North Caucasus by Alexey Gunya¹

Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachai-Cherkessia are two regions which can be considered twins in terms of the territorial-administrative make-up of the northern Caucasus. They offer two contrasting strategies for resolving certain growing conflicts of interests. On the one hand, Kabardino-Balkaria is characterized by the centralization of state power, by censorship of the media and an overall weakness in democratic institutions. The level of tension in Kabardino-Balkaria is, at first glance, low. However, the absence of any meaningful cadre rotation, the suppression of initiative, and criticism means that there is also a very low rate of development and a heavy dependence on Moscow. Karachai-Cherkessia, by contrast, is more democratic and liberal modes of governance appear to have brought growth in social and economic activities. However this is also accompanied by conflict and open criticism of the regional authorities.

Local level institutions act as a mirror of some of the most important but also latent processes of the region. Local governance and the institutions controlling land use offer illustrations of the very different roles for government in Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachai-Cherkessia. They also demonstrate very different impacts on both conflict and development. The three most important governing institutions at the local level are the local administration which although formal the prerogative of the official local self-government, it is in fact, controlled by the central state. The second source of local authority are the collective farms, which are forever changing their names from kolkhozes and sovkhoses to various types of joint stock companies such as the KSKhP, the AO, the OOO, and the TOO etc. The final bodies that need to be considered are the traditional institutions which can be divided according to those which are formalized by the state, for example, the council of elders, and those whose power derives from non-state, non formal sources, for example, those traditionally dealing with certain land use matters.

The boundaries between these different local institutions are blurred. Contemporary local governance comprises a cocktail of state, traditional and hybrid institutions. The withdrawal of the state from the local level and its replacement by institutions of local self-management is slowly taking place, although the local self-management or village administrations do not yet have the necessary powers. In formal terms the local self-management do have large scope of action, in practice, they are greatly dependent on state bodies. As between our two regions, the levels of central dependence is greater in Kabardino-Balkaria, while in Karachai-Cherkessia, the level of state oversight over localities is considerably lower.

In Kabardino-Balkaria, the President of the Republic vetoed proposals for land privatization, ensuring that the state and collective farms as a hybrid (state/traditional) form of institution continue to play a large role. Agricultural land remains outside the market and thus attendant conflicts between different identity groups are absent from local agenda. However, the conflicts between the local communities and the state have sharpened, something particularly evident in the infringement of long held peasants' rights over traditional land.

In Karachai-Cherkessia, the privatization of agricultural land is going ahead at full speed. By July 2006, the majority of collective farms should have found an owner. Any lands left over will be transferred to the local

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state authorities. This privatization land has pushed a new class of private owners to the fore, entrepreneurs who establish self-governments on diverse bases, predominantly kinship.

In Kabardino-Balkaria, the state continues the Soviet policy of penetrating right down to the local level. This is in spite of all the decentralizing directives passed in Russia in recent years. Municipalities remain essentially an extension of the central state. State structures control land and peasants are tied to the state through the institution of land leasing. Measures taken at the federal level to free localities from excessive state regulation remain only on paper, with the central state continuing to control local space. The spirit of federal laws is re-interpreted for the benefit of regional authorities. Any citizens' initiatives that might contradict the decisions of the regional authorities are stalled. Officially this approach is justified by the likelihood of conflicts occurring should land be privatized. In Karachai-Cherkessia, the privatization of agricultural land is proceeding rapidly, but the state still retains a strong hold at the local level and state officials have a variety of refined means to obstruct the development of private land holdings.

What is important for long-term stability? Land privatization as in Karachai-Cherkessia or state/collective control as in Kabardino-Balkaria? Should there be centralized methods of governance based solely on formal institutions as in Kabardino-Balkaria or institutional diversity on the local level consisting of formal and informal (traditional) institutions better, as in Karachai-Cherkessia?

At present, the short-term stability in Kabardino-Balkaria of formal institutions and centralised forms of governance is leading to economic and social stagnation. It is producing a polarization within different strategic groups and a rise in tension. The violent events of 13-14th October 2005 in the capital city of Kabardino-Balkaria, Nalchik, where tens of people were killed during the street clashes, demonstrated that the critical social contradictions did not remain dormant. The violence was a direct result of defects within governance strategy. In contrast, the pluralistic and the more democratic environment of Karachai-Cherkessia with a significant role of hybrid institutions (state-traditional, formal-informal) is risky but arguably more adequate for a multiethnic region on the way to the long-term stability.