

JANUARY 2020

# Civil Society in the North Caucasus

*Latest Trends and Challenges in Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan*

AUTHOR  
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A Report of the CSIS RUSSIA AND EURASIA PROGRAM

CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES



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Center for Strategic & International Studies  
1616 Rhode Island Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20036  
202-887-0200 | [www.csis.org](http://www.csis.org)

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# Executive Summary

In Russia, civil society is often understood as the “third sector” (the “first sector” being the state and the “second sector” being business). This distinction arose in the dissident milieu in socialist countries in the 1960s, where “civil” came to mean opposition to the totalitarian state. In the literature on sociology and political science, civil society is represented by “new social movements” or informal organizations. In a broader sense, civil society refers not only to the different actors promoting a human rights or humanitarian agenda but also to groups whose aim is to defend social interests. These groups are focused on their principal tasks (cultural, religious, and special interest objectives), as well as on exercising public oversight of the state.

For these reasons, “civil society” in the present publication represents not only non-profit organizations but also grassroots initiatives and individual activists engaged in defending human rights, finding solutions to social problems, and helping certain categories of citizens, particularly vulnerable and unprotected groups.

Not all non-profit organizations represent civil society, however; consider the GONGOs—government-organized NGOs—that have multiplied throughout Russia. In Russia, GONGOs are understood as pseudo-civic organizations, working in the interest of authorities. These organizations began to appear in the 2000s, with the purpose of monitoring elections, although de facto they worked to ensure elections were in favor of pro-government candidates. At present, GONGOs are mostly engaged in socially oriented sports projects and “soft-nationalist” initiatives, such as those devoted to the spiritual and moral education of young people and strengthening patriotism and Russian traditions. Some of these GONGOs (for example, those linked with the Cossacks) are used as vigilantes and volunteer as guards at rallies, protests, and pro-feminist and LGBT events. Others have been created to intercept the agenda of real NGOs, such as environmental and historical organizations founded to oppose democratic and human rights rhetoric and to promote the ideology of the Russian government and big business. Thus, GONGOs are not considered part of civil society and are outside the scope of this report.

What ties “real” civil society organizations and initiatives together is their independence from state bodies (and sometimes their opposition to state intervention), their grassroots horizontal formation, their non-profit character, and the altruistic nature of their activities.

This report was written using articles and reports by international organizations, articles published in the media, and materials from 20 interviews with activists, journalists, and NGO staff from Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan. For safety reasons, some quotes are published anonymously, while the rest are published with the informants' consent.

The research reveals a mixed picture of civil society in the region. While civil society has broadly suffered from the overreach of local authorities, facing legal difficulties and financial hardship, there are apparent bright spots where local organizations and initiatives have scored victories for humanitarian, civil society, and human rights objectives. If anything, this mosaic of contestation and cooperation warrants continued investigation, as well as increased support from national and international networks.

The first chapter offers a description of the historical and political context for the region. Chapter 2 discusses the general trends of civil society in the area, including the difficulties created by a changing political environment. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 explore the recent struggles and accomplishments in Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan, respectively. Chapter 6 closes with concluding thoughts and recommendations for policymakers.



# 1. General Description of the Region

The North Caucasus is a large region in southwestern Russia situated between the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea. The federal entity occupies 170,400 square kilometers (65,800 square miles) of territory and had a population of 9,428,826 in 2010, with slightly more rural residents than urban.

The long and complicated relationship between the Russian state and the North Caucasus region dates back as far as the eighteenth century (and in some respects, as far as the sixteenth century). Throughout this time, Russia's colonial relationship with the North Caucasus was quite cruel and aggressive. Starting with a series of military conflicts between 1817–1864, defined in historiography as the Caucasian War, the history of discrimination and oppression of the peoples of the North Caucasus by their great imperial neighbor persisted. The wars of the nineteenth century were followed by the repressive policies of the Soviet period. One of the most striking examples of such a policy is the deportation of Chechens, Ingush, and Balkars in 1944, the consequences of which have not been forgotten in the republics of the North Caucasus. Almost immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union (1991), the First Chechen War (1994) began, followed by the Second Chechen War (1999). These wars hit the Chechen Republic hardest but were also reflected in other regions.

The result of the current state of affairs and the painful history of relations between the Russian state and the republics of the North Caucasus is that the inhabitants of the republics are now inclined to perceive Russia as an external colonizer. This colonizer is aggressive and does not want to understand the culture and norms of the North Caucasus republics, instead seeking to impose its own norms, which are perceived by the inhabitants of the republics as alien. This determines the general reaction of the region's residents to any impact from Central Russia, whether it is the actions of state structures or NGOs and civil society organizations. Any outside influence is much more likely to be perceived negatively, as it will be associated with the spread of the external colonizer's cultural hegemony. As a result, NGOs, especially those related to donors in Central Russia and the West, face region-specific difficulties.

According to the 2010 census, the largest groups in the North Caucasus are Chechen (1,335,857), Avar (865,348), Circassian or Adyghe (718,727), Dargin (541,552), Ossetian



(481,492), Kumyk (466,769), Ingush (418,996), and Lezgin (396,408).<sup>1</sup> Only two republics—Chechnya (93.5 percent Chechen) and Ingushetia (94.1 percent Ingush)—can be called monoethnic. The North Caucasus is the only region within the Russian Federation where Russians make up a minority of the population (less than one-third). At the same time, Russia still strives to control the way of life within the republics, including their culture, religion, and social relations.

This report will discuss Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan, the three republics with the largest Muslim populations in the North Caucasus. Chechnya and Ingushetia are largely monoethnic, while Dagestan has over 30 different ethnic groups. Islam in the Northern Caucasus is a very important factor that determines identity and political and cultural processes, now more so than in Soviet times. Religious identity and local communities create the basis for civil movements and initiatives and significantly influence the development of civil society. This is why republics with a high percentage of Muslims were chosen for the present analysis.

Continuation of Moscow's colonial policy in relation to the republics of the North Caucasus can be seen in modern attempts to control the religious development of the region, suggesting the presence of a "correct" interpretation of Islam and classifying some other versions as undesirable. As a result, people professing this "wrong" Islam are persecuted and face administrative pressure.

Among other challenges, these three republics are plagued by extreme poverty, high unemployment rates, corruption, and unstable political systems.<sup>2</sup> Much of this can be related to an antagonistic relationship with the Russian Empire. In its various forms, Russia has been present in the North Caucasus for over 200 years, beginning with the Caucasian War of 1817–1864. As Denis Sokolov writes:

During this time, the Adyghe (Circassian) military aristocracy was virtually wiped out, and hundreds of thousands of Circassians were deported to the Ottoman Empire. The end of the Russian Civil War (1917–1923), in which Caucasians fought for both the Whites and the Reds, saw the start of a sweeping annihilation of the national intelligentsia, the Islamic clergy, and well-to-do families during collectivization and the repressions of 1920–1930.<sup>3</sup>

Then, an enormous number of men perished during World War II; in some villages (auls), up to half of the male population was recruited into the army, many of them never to return. In 1944, Chechens, Ingush, Balkars, and Karachay (mainly women, children, and the elderly) were deported to Central Asia; many died during the journey. The deportees were only allowed to return to their homes after Stalin's death in 1957.

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1 "Results of the 2010 All-Russian Population Census on the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of individual nationalities," Russian Federal State Statistic Service, [https://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/perepis2010/croc/results2.html](https://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/results2.html).

2 Andrew C. Kuchins, *The North Caucasus: Russia's Volatile Frontier* (Washington, DC: CSIS, March 2011), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/north-caucasus>.

3 Denis Sokolov, "North Caucasus: the future of the frontier," openDemocracy, August 24, 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ru/severniy-kavkaz-budushee-frontira/>.

All these coercive measures against the local population only served to heighten nationalist sentiment and desire for autonomy, so it was not surprising when nationalist movements and initiatives to leave the Soviet Union emerged in the late-1980s. The most audacious of these was the attempt to find the independent state of Ichkeria on the territory of the Republic of Chechnya, leading to an armed conflict between Russia and Chechnya that lasted more than 10 years.

The two military campaigns in Chechnya, the numerous armed conflicts in the region, and the longstanding militant underground have made the region notorious not just in Russia but far beyond its borders. Over the almost 30 years since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the region has become a synonym for instability and constant conflict; it was also one of the main sources of fighters for ISIS.

Attempts to part ways with the empire continue in the direct and symbolic senses. These include movements to resurrect national languages, acknowledge the genocide of the Circassian and Balkar peoples, organize against secular (Russian) holidays, and bring back national customs and traditions. According to Sokolov:

In the 25 years since the breakup of the Soviet Union, the North Caucasus has not only failed to dissolve into Russian society, it has succeeded in re-establishing its religious and ethnic identity. Modern means of communications like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Telegram have been unexpectedly helpful with this. . . . Natives of the North Caucasus have a much lower level of trust in the Russian judicial system than most other Russians and frequently try to resolve conflicts themselves, in their own environment, thereby refusing to recognize the Russian legal system's de facto monopoly on violence.

Even though all these republics have the status of constituent entities of the Russian Federation, local residents often set their lives in the republics and the North Caucasus apart from the rest of the country, even to the point of referring to everything outside their area as “in Russia.”

One of the distinctive features of civil activism in the Northern Caucasus is its focus on the revival of national culture and historical memory. At the same time, these initiatives often face hostile attitudes when they attempt to collaborate with partners “from outside” or “from Russia”; hence, some fear of the “Moscow human rights activist” and are unwilling to cooperate with them. There is a symbolic separation from Russia and the West, which leads to the necessity of maintaining an image of the Caucasus as a place without problems and where it is customary to handle matters internally. When national and religious issues come first, it constrains civil solidarity and leads to disunity. However, in some cases, the influence of history can provide a great potential for unification (for example, in Ingushetia).

## 2. General Trends in Human Rights and Civil Society in Russia and the North Caucasus

Over the past seven years, civil society in the North Caucasus has been subjected to strong pressure and even repression, in part due to developments affecting Russia as a whole but also due to dynamics internal to the region. With the adoption of Russia's law on foreign agents in 2012, pressure on local NGOs grew exponentially: under this law, any NGO that receives foreign financing and engages in political activities (in the broadest sense) must be registered as a "foreign agent," which requires special reporting and checks and that all materials published by the NGO must include the wording "foreign agent." No organization wanted to voluntarily obtain this stigmatizing label, so the Ministry of Justice and the Federal Tax Service conducted checks of the most active organizations. Even though the status of "foreign agent" was only forced on a handful of organizations, the checks, the requirement to submit thousands of pages worth of reports, and threats, in some cases, paralyzed the work of many organizations.

A second wave of pressure and restrictions came with the adoption of a second law on undesirable organizations, which resulted in the banning of key foreign donor organizations whose funds ensured the existence of Russian civil society. As of February 2019, the list included a total of 15 organizations, including the National Endowment for Democracy and the Open Society Foundation. Several years prior, the work of USAID, the MacArthur Foundation, and many other organizations whose grants and donations covered a major portion of the funding of the non-governmental sector was stopped. As alternatives to this funding, Russian officials have recommended applying for presidential grants, but the complicated process of receiving these funds and the highly "patriotized" nature of the competition have made it impossible for many organizations to participate in these competitions.

As noted in a Carnegie Center report, these processes have yielded three main trends:<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Saskia Brechenmacher, *Delegitimization and Division in Russia* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2017), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/05/18/delegitimization-and-division-in-russia-pub-69958>.

- A focus on discrediting foreign-funded groups, which are portrayed as undermining Russia's national sovereignty and harming the collective good;
- A reliance on bureaucratic and legal tools to weaken independent civic actors, combined with selective prosecutions aimed at intimidating civil society as a whole; and
- A related effort to fund and promote apolitical and pro-government organizations as socially useful while at the same time maintaining tight state control over the entire sector.

Civil society in the North Caucasus is quite diverse and consists of a combination of institutionalized NGOs and grassroots initiatives, religious groups, protest movements, and specific leaders, who have significant trustworthiness and authority at the local level. As with Russia overall, this region is seeing heightened pressure on civil society. However, there are additional unique challenges at the local level. Legal mechanisms for protecting human rights are much weaker, and it is almost impossible to appeal the illegal actions of the authorities in court. Because of a general feeling of disenfranchisement, injustice, and apathy, the very condition of civil society differs greatly from other Russian regions; society itself is disengaged and frustrated, there are few grassroots groups, and the influence of these groups at the local level has been negligible.

Even the very concept of “human rights” has a highly negative connotation connected with imported “Western values” foreign to the local culture and mentality. The internal problems of the North Caucasus are of little interest to the rest of Russia and are rarely reported on in the media, except in the case of exotic problems and emergency situations. Therefore, civil society is largely isolated and has very few effective mechanisms for action. Moreover, there is no solidarity between organizations and initiatives within or between republics, where alliances and divisions frequently occur on the basis of religion or ethnicity. A separate problem is posed by the numerous GONGOs in the region and formerly independent NGOs, which have become dependent on cooperation with local authorities in recent years and have started to promote the state's agenda. On the whole, there are many more threats to social initiatives than sources of support from the local population, some of which disparagingly refer to NGOs as “grant-eaters” (grantoedy) and accuse activists of selfish interests and corruptibility. The overall environment for civil activists is high risk, and the number and nature of redlines often represent terra incognita.

Since 2015, the Russian Ministry of Justice has shuttered many NGOs in the North Caucasus, even though these were not the best known or most active organizations. The most common reason given for the closures was that the organization had failed to submit an annual report on its activities to the Ministry of Justice. For example, the Association of Energy Consumers was shut down in April 2017 under a court decision. The main founder of this association was the state unitary enterprise Chechkommunenenergo, the largest seller of electrical energy in Chechnya, which is currently in the process of liquidation. In North Ossetia, the Cossack Association of Alagirsky District, the evangelical Lutheran community of Vladikavkaz, and Khadzhimurat Gatsalov's charitable foundation Bars have all been closed at the request of the Ministry of Justice. The People's Party, the Citizens' Alliance, and Motherland were dissolved in Karachay-Cherkessia. The party People Against Corruption faced the threat of closure but was able to avoid this with the help of its

attorneys and received a new deadline for submitting its reports. In the latest city council election in Cherkessk, this party faced enormous pressure from the city administration due to its hard-nosed position on municipal and republic authorities.

Thus, in the North Caucasus the Ministry of Justice has frequently been used to pressure anyone who disagrees with the position of the authorities. In February 2016, the Karachay-Cherkessia Ministry of Justice attempted to shut down the social movement Adygea House – Circassian Parliament for the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Circassian People, allegedly for violations during its congress in June 2015. Circassian activists had harshly criticized the government of Karachay-Cherkessia and, specifically, republic leader Rashid Temrezov, accusing them of nepotism, cronyism, and ethnic discrimination when making personnel appointments.

In Ingushetia, the local branch of the Ministry of Justice has made attempts to shut down the Spiritual Center of Muslims, which has been a muftiate headed exclusively by Isa Khamkhoev since 2005. Khamkhoev's already strained relationship with Ingush President Yunus-bek Yevkurov was irreparably ruined by Khamkhoev's delivery of a speech at a mejlis (council) of Sufi representatives at the Heart of Chechnya, Grozny's central mosque. His speech, immediately following Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov and the Chechen mufti Salakh Mezhiyev's speeches, called for radical measures to combat Wahhabism in the North Caucasus. After this speech, Yevkurov set about reforming the muftiate, which resulted in some of its authorities and representative functions being transferred to the Religious Affairs Office under the head of Ingushetia.

To secure the support of society, the leaders of the various North Caucasus regions have created several public councils and chambers, which, it must be admitted, are intended for people who are already loyal to the authorities. For example, in October 2016, the authorities in Ingushetia founded the Council of Teips (clans). The official purpose of the Council of Teips was to reconcile feuding parties, resolve land disputes, and provide spiritual and moral guidance to young people. However, the activities of the council were suspended in May 2019 due to its support of the Ingush protests.

These trends, which reflect the overall situation with civil society in Russia, are also exacerbated by the fact that local NGOs have little access to or information about potential donors and are often located far from capitals, with little opportunity for direct communication and dialogue with international organizations and embassies. Moreover, the poor quality of local education lowers the chances for young activists to participate in exchange programs, making it difficult for new activists to find financing to travel outside the region to learn new methods of work. As a result, many approaches remain outdated and no longer satisfy donors.

The result is a generational schism that has its roots in the local patriarchy and the cult of the elders: older NGOs, which have established contacts, are unwilling to help young people take leadership positions and gain access to resources, while young people who have the enthusiasm and desire to bring about change are forced to reinvent the wheel and can only obtain financing under the "leftover principle" or with the "blessings" of the elders. The largest grants and support usually go to the older NGOs, and young activists either have to count on whatever financing is left after the main resources have been



distributed or cooperate with these NGOs and integrate into others' agendas instead of being creative and developing their own initiatives.

Another major barrier to the development of civil society in the region is the failure of some human rights defenders to accept the concept of the universal nature of human rights, which means that many organizations and leaders that support the protection of human rights in general refuse to recognize the rights of individual groups (e.g., religious minorities, women, and LGBT people, among others).

The region's relative isolation from other parts of Russia and its continuing internal ethnic and religious conflicts make the few existing organizations and initiatives extremely vulnerable and mostly ineffective.

### 3. Chechnya: Hard Times for Civil Society and Human Rights

The Republic of Chechnya occupies a special position in the Russian Federation. Ramzan Kadyrov, head of the republic, has remained its continuous leader for over 12 years by successfully implementing an unspoken agreement with the Kremlin. The federal government supplies the republic with a steady stream of budgetary funds and does not interfere with Kadyrov's policies. In exchange, Kadyrov maintains relative peace in the republic and remains loyal to Russia. A stark example of this loyalty is Kadyrov's order to change the date of Deportation Day, a day commemorating the forced removal of nearly 500,000 Chechens and Ingush on February 23, 1944, one of the most tragic days in Chechnya's history. At Kadyrov's order, this day of remembrance was moved to February 22, since Russia celebrates Defender of the Fatherland Day on February 23. In this way, Chechnya is a type of local "khanate," where Russian laws are in effect but operate in a special context and frequently on a case-by-case basis.

Like other republics of the North Caucasus, Chechnya has several different legal systems. Along with secular Russian law, the main regulating laws are Sharia and adat (customary law). But local residents say the fundamental law here is "Ramzan said," which means that Kadyrov's spoken statements are more influential than the legal systems and may even contradict them.

On the one hand, Kadyrov has successfully fulfilled his side of the agreement with the Kremlin: the republic has recovered from war; Grozny, which was leveled by bombs, has been rebuilt and resembles a successful European city; and the illegal armed formations that remained in Chechnya after the war have been almost completely liquidated or forced out of the republic. On the other hand, this peace has been built on a system of strict control and a fairly large local "army" that answers only to Kadyrov. Therefore, the republic's main principle is "peace in exchange for complete loyalty."

Many strong NGOs in Chechnya appeared during the war, and their activists gained experience at the refugee camps run by leading international organizations such as the Red Cross, Doctors Without Borders, Caritas, the International Rescue Committee, and many others. Because of the activism and managerial experience they gained, many of these specialists went on to lead local NGOs after the war and became actively engaged in

humanitarian, charitable, and human rights activities. But the situation started to change with the appearance of the law on foreign agents and an overall heightening of repression against civil society. Many organizations underwent a series of checks by the Ministry of Justice and the Office of the Prosecutor General and were given unofficial advice to stay away from topics that were not welcomed by the Russian or Chechen authorities. Many international groups were forced to close their offices and leave. In addition, the local offices of the largest and most distinguished Russian human rights organizations, such as Memorial and the Committee Against Torture (Komitet protiv pytki, or KPP), have been subjected to intense pressure.

In January 2018, the head of the Chechen office of Memorial, Oyub Titiev, was detained in Chechnya by police who claimed to have found marijuana in his car. He and his colleagues contend that the drugs were planted and have described the case as part of an effort to push Memorial out of Chechnya.

Numerous public figures and human rights organizations throughout the world came out in support of Titiev. In February 2019, the European Parliament adopted a resolution about the situation in Chechnya, calling for Titiev's immediate release. Kadyrov rejected the idea that Titiev was being prosecuted for his human rights activities, and on March 18, 2019, the Shalinsky District Court of Chechnya found Titiev guilty of drug possession and sentenced him to four years of deprivation of liberty in a penal settlement. The Memorial offices in Ingushetia and Dagestan came under attack immediately following Titiev's arrest: the organization's office in Nazran, Ingushetia was burned down; in Dagestan, one of the office's official cars was set on fire, and the head of the office was severely beaten by unknown attackers. All these cases, which happened in quick succession, served as a clear sign that Memorial's activities in the North Caucasus were undesirable for the local authorities and that the persecution of human rights defenders would continue. On June 21, Oyub Titiev nonetheless obtained a conditional release by the Shali City Court.

The case of the Committee Against Torture is another example of prominent human rights defenders being squeezed out of Chechnya. In December 2015, the KPP was put under pressure after its head, Igor Kalyapin, criticized Kadyrov for saying that the families of men involved in a deadly attack on Grozny that month be expelled from Chechnya and their homes destroyed. Kadyrov claimed later that Kalyapin had been given money by Western intelligence services that was then given to the group that attacked Grozny in early December.<sup>5</sup> Several of Kadyrov's supporters subsequently threw eggs at Kalyapin in an attempt to disrupt his press conference in Moscow, where he was speaking about Kadyrov's persecution of innocent people. On December 13, the KPP office in Chechnya was set on fire by unknown assailants. The organization then decided to officially close its office in Chechnya. In March 2016, unknown people stopped a bus carrying Russian and foreign journalists and human rights defenders on a press tour organized by the KPP on the border of Chechnya and Ingushetia. Fifteen people in masks broke the bus windows with bats and beat the journalists and human rights defenders. They then proceeded to pour gas on the bus and set it on fire.

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<sup>5</sup> "Russia's Committee Against Torture To Fight 'Foreign Agent' Label," Radio Free Europe/RadioLiberty, January 20, 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-committee-torture-fight-foreign-agent-label/26803929.html>.

In 2018, there were reports of a large-scale campaign to detain, beat, and murder homosexual people in Chechnya. Authorities deny these cases, but the stories were corroborated widely in the public, resulting in monitoring of the situation and the publication of a special OSCE report on the situation of human rights in the region. According to this report, authorities in Chechnya have committed torture, forced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, and other “very serious” human rights violations and abuses.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, local NGOs and activists in Chechnya are subjected to strong pressure and significant risk, and they cannot openly oppose crimes against LGTB people and support human rights issues. Individual activists, who helped—or were suspected of helping—LGBTB people to escape were threatened and warned that they could be charged with kidnapping and helping terrorists. In a statement, the U.S. State Department welcomed the report and called on Russia to “protect the human rights of all within its borders, consistent with international law, OSCE commitments, and its own constitution.”

According to an OSCE report, “[i]t found a worsening ‘climate of intimidation’ against journalists and civil society activists and a ‘climate of impunity,’ which it said is ‘detrimental to any accountability for human rights violations.’”<sup>7</sup> Unpunished and uninvestigated gross violations of human rights and unprecedented pressure on human rights organizations have placed severe limitations on the possibilities for civil society in Chechnya. Nevertheless, many local NGOs have been able to withstand the pressure and adjust to the new rules. For example, the problem of accessing foreign funds, which previously comprised up to 90 percent of financing, has been partially resolved through hybrid forms of work, where organizations work in conjunction with local ministries and departments to find common ground to resolve pressing problems. This style of work has an indirect influence on the work of government officials. Naturally, not every problem can be exposed in this manner, and there are quite a few issues that official policies would mark as undesirable. At the same time, if these NGOs agree to forgo some of the most problematic topics, governmental officials can turn the work of such groups into something useful and or even “good” for them (i.e., cases where NGOs and local activists are working on the same problems as local officials). Besides those “good” semi-political problems, there is a certain range of issues that are marked as completely non-political in the public eye.

The popularity of charitable activities and social projects to help low-income and vulnerable groups is growing, along with the number of social initiatives for children and young people. The topic of people with disabilities is being destigmatized, and many projects are becoming inclusive in nature. Another important positive trend is that an increasing number of young people are interested in volunteer work. These active young people want to travel, gain new experiences outside of the republic, receive an education, and return with new practices. Dozens of young men and women participating in study trips and exchange programs in Europe and the United States bring home ideas for new projects, approaches, and methods to resolve local problems. In many respects, the

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<sup>6</sup> Wolfgang Benedek, *OSCE Rapporteur’s Report under the Moscow Mechanism on alleged Human Rights Violations and Impunity in the Chechen Republic of the Russian Federation* (Vienna: OSCE, December 2018), <https://www.osce.org/odihr/407402?download=true>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

practice of youth activism and volunteerism is a worldwide project that provides talented young people with the opportunity for altruistic self-realization.

The reduction in foreign financing (according to the Ministry of Justice, only 16 NGOs in the republic now receive foreign financing) is partially compensated for by the program of presidential grants, which several local NGOs receive. In particular, the Public Affairs Department and religious organizations are closely cooperating within the framework of the presidential grant program. In 2019, the organization Women for Development—one of the oldest and most respected organizations in Chechnya—opened a crisis center for women with support from this program.<sup>8</sup> There were also plans to open a women's shelter, but with familial ties so extensive across the republic, it would have been difficult to keep the facility a secret from men and their families. Officials have acknowledged the high level of divorce and domestic violence and have even created a Family Conflict Prevention Committee under the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Republic of Chechnya.<sup>9</sup>

Several NGOs that are part of the Coalition of Women's NGOs in the North Caucasus are working on the topics of domestic violence and assistance for women. However, "permitted" topics must fit into the general logic of traditional, cultural, spiritual, religious, and national customs and values.

According to one female staff member at an NGO:

Women's rights and the topic of violence against women are acute problems. This is recognized by both the muftiate and the republic's government, so there is well-established interagency cooperation because no one can solve this problem alone. They forward cases to each other. For example, the muftiate may ask various NGOs for help and send their specialists to visit the family with them to determine what is happening in the family, identify any violations, and then take control of the case. For their part, NGOs turn to the muftiate and various departments if a divorced or widowed mother needs help in a situation where the husband's family wants to take her children.

The widespread Chechen tradition where children remain with their father (or, more precisely, are raised by women in their father's family) after a divorce has been questioned for many years, since certain men have been able to blackmail their spouses and prevent them from seeing their children. The practice of court hearings for guardianship and a pool of mediators who also work with the muftiate have become successful ways of handling this problem.

Another idea that is gaining in popularity and has been greenlighted by the government is the prevention of extremism, terrorism, and religious and nationalist fundamentalism. In publicly positioning himself as a Muslim, Kadyrov rejects "non-traditional Islam," which is what Salafi Islam is called in the North Caucasus, so few people in Chechnya can call themselves Salafis (this is not the case in neighboring Dagestan and Ingushetia). Since demand for this topic is high, schools have started offering numerous training sessions

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8 Lidiya Mikhail'chenko, "In Chechnya it is unlikely they will look for you," Kavkaz.Realii Radio Free Europe/RadioLiberty, January 20, 2019, <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/29717225.html>.

9 "The Muftiate of Chechnya helped to settle more than three thousand family conflicts," REGNUM, September 19, 2013, <https://regnum.ru/news/society/1709659.html>.



and classes dedicated to tolerance that help young people become better integrated into their local community and avoid falling under the influence of groups that the state perceives as radical.

Measures to return Chechen women and children from Syria fall under this type of project, which can be grassroots in nature or initiated by the government. Under Russian law, Chechen women returning from Syria face criminal prosecution (even if their husbands took them there), but Kadyrov has personally initiated several cases of amnesty. According to one activist, return from Syria is handled personally by Kheda Saratova, a member of the Human Rights Committee under the head of Chechnya and a controversial figure who is more likely to champion the policy of the local government than to act as an independent human rights defender. At the local level, it is volunteers and activists who generally work on assisting and integrating people who return. According to the website Kavkaz realii, a total of 93 people (21 women and 72 children) have been evacuated from combat zones since the start of the campaign initiated by Kadyrov to return women and children from Iraq and Syria.<sup>10</sup>

Even though there are very few independent NGOs—or media outlets, for that matter—in Chechnya, local activists believe that the republic does have individual “islands of freedom.” Since almost no public space is safe for any political discussions, there has been a return to the dissident model, where “civil society took place in kitchens.”

Some experts see crowdfunding as having enormous potential for financing activism as it becomes increasingly popular not just with large well-known organizations in Russia but also at the local level. As Almut Rochowanski wrote:

A technically competent, dedicated, but growth-resistant class of formal NGOs clustered around human rights and democracy promotion has been built on a grants-based model (charmingly described in Russian as “grant-suckers”). But beyond the realm of grant-makers and grant-recipients, activists and social entrepreneurs are mobilizing resources, piloting innovative models, and building strongly rooted institutions—with little or no foreign funding. These ‘parallel universes’ of civil society usually don’t overlap, and it is rare for an activist to cross from one into another, because they require different talents, personalities, and views of one’s role in society.<sup>11</sup>

The Help Needed Foundation offers a crowdfunding platform for social and community projects. With the help of media reports on websites like Takie dela, for example, 3.5 million rubles (approximately \$56,000) was collected during a six month period for a hotline for women from the local organization Women for Development.<sup>12</sup>

It is also important to note that the majority of NGO directors and staff in Chechnya are women. Again, the state of affairs affected the way in which NGOs emerged in the republic

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<sup>10</sup> “Activists ask the state not to obstruct the return of Russians from Syria,” Kavkaz.Realii Radio Free Europe/RadioLiberty, November 13, 2019, <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/29598584.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Almut Rochowanski, “Despite closing space, innovative branches of Russian civil society thrive,” OpenGlobalRights, September 18, 2018, <https://www.openglobalrights.org/despite-closing-space-innovative-branches-of-russian-civil-society-thrive/>.

<sup>12</sup> “Women for development ‘Madina,’” Takie dela, August 17, 2017 <https://takiedela.ru/topics/madina/>.

during and following the war. The way out of the humanitarian postwar crisis lay squarely on the shoulders of women because the majority of the male population could not move about freely and was subjected to constant threats and checks. In addition, since women are considered responsible for empathy and care in Chechnya (as a consequence of the local traditional culture), they are the ones who put together most charitable and social projects, work as psychologists, volunteer with children, and study the topics of low-income families and people with disabilities. According to one activist:

Men left the social sector, they gave up. They saw that they couldn't openly have an impact on the situation, so they mainly spend their time on commercial work or leisure, they have kitchen conversations about politics. Men do not believe there is a point in undertaking social projects under the current regime. And they don't want to take even tiny steps. As soon as they graduate from university, young men go to work, to earn money. They drop their volunteering and don't see themselves at an NGO. After all, they have to be the breadwinners, and you won't even feed yourself with social work. Many go to work at a state agency or in business. The only ones who are active are bloggers, and these are most likely Chechens who live outside of Chechnya.

In this respect, the case of the Chechen video blogger Tumso Abdurakhmanov is illustrative. After a conflict with Kadyrov's relatives, whose motorcade he refused to let pass, Abdurakhmanov fled Chechnya, first for Georgia and then for Poland, where he applied for political asylum. According to a statement from Amnesty International, if Abdurakhmanov returns to Russia, he will face the threat of torture and unjust persecution.<sup>13</sup> But Abdurakhmanov's video blog has only become more popular since he left the country, because of his biting political statements. As a result, in March 2019, Magomed Daudov, the speaker of parliament, known in Chechnya by his nickname "Lord," for his unlimited authority, declared a blood feud against Abdurakhmanov. This episode led to a rash of mutual accusations and spats and finally to a phone call from Lord that lasted several hours. This conversation was later uploaded to Abdurakhmanov's blog, where it garnered over 2.5 million views and 98,000 comments, including some comments comparing the conversation to a rap battle. The next virtual dialogue took place between Abdurakhmanov and Jambular Umarov, Chechnya's minister for national policy, print, and information. Thus, a new means of political communication has appeared where opposition activists can have a public dialogue with Chechen politicians and discuss the important topics that people can only whisper about at home.

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13 Magomed Tuaeov, "Amnesty International urged Poland to cancel the extradition of Abdurakhmanov," Kavkazskii Uzel, November 4, 2019, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/329964/>.

## 4. Ingushetia: Wins and Losses for Civil Society and Recent Protests

During 2019, civil society in Ingushetia has been completely absorbed by the conflict over redefining the border with Chechnya. The protests started in August 2018, when some Ingush NGOs noticed construction being carried out by Chechen road services, accompanied by Chechen security forces, on the territory of the Republic of Ingushetia close to its administrative border with the Chechen Republic. This construction was happening without the official permission of the government of Ingushetia, which had not voiced any concern about the issue. As it turned out, the head of Ingushetia, Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, and Ramzan Kadyrov had reached an agreement to redefine the administrative border between the two republics. The negotiations about it were kept secret from the public. It was argued that in the process of changing the border there would be an equivalent exchange of land.

According to the agreement, Chechnya was to pass an agricultural piece of land in its Nadterechniy District to Ingushetia. However, independent calculations showed that, as a result of this deal, the Ingush territories that were to become part of Chechnya were 26 times larger than the ones the republic would get in return. Ingushetia was to lose almost a tenth of its territory.<sup>14</sup> Ingushetia is already the smallest constituent entity of the Russian Federation and had lost a significant part of its territory as a result of the deportation of the Ingush by Stalin in 1944 and the transfer (assignment) of part of the land to North Ossetia.

Despite very few people living on the disputed territory (part of the Sunzhensky district), it is still extremely valuable for the Ingush people for historical and environmental reasons—some elders' meetings still occur there. Much of the Ingush population is understandably incensed, having powerful emotional and even spiritual ties to their land, particularly because the graves of their ancestors are there. They also have strong family ties and can trace their ancestry back over a thousand years.

The dispute, unsurprisingly, is actually related to oil. Some 70 percent of Ingushetia's

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<sup>14</sup> "Protests in Ingushetia: Chronicle of the Redistribution of Frontiers with Chechnya," Kavkazskii Uzel, August 27, 2019, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/326282/>.

oil reserves are located on this territory. That being said, not long before signing the agreement, 49 percent of the Chechneftekhimprom oil company's shares had been passed on to leaders of Chechnya.

It seems that this land is formally not in the hands of Kadyrov personally but was transferred "to the ownership of the Chechen Republic" by agreement of the governments of the Russian Federation and Chechen Republic. That is, it is not in the control of the federal government but the authorities of the republic, where Kadyrov is in charge, making an undesirable outcome likely.

On September 26, the border agreement between Chechnya and Ingushetia was signed, leading to mass protests. On signing day, around 50 people gathered in Sunzha, as did more than 100 in Magas, the capital of the republic. During the protest, the entrances to the city were closed off by blocks of concrete, the forces of Russian National Guard (*Rosgvardiya*) entered the city, and the internet was shut down in Magas and Nazran. On October 4, a law "On approval of the Agreement on the establishment of the border between the Republic of Ingushetia and the Chechen Republic" was adopted very hastily—at the very first session (17 votes in favor and 3 votes against). Interestingly, many members of the Ingush parliament went out afterwards to personally announce to the people on the square that they had voted against the agreement and that the results of the vote were falsified.

In the immediate aftermath, a two-week-long, round-the-clock protest started in Magas, which united between 10,000 and 60,000 people, according to different calculations, and lasted until October 17. The protests were not just spontaneous—in order to organize people, more than 40 different political forces of Ingushetia united. Initially the protest was unauthorized, but after some time the Ingush government sanctioned it (though indicating that it could not start earlier than 7 a.m. and finish later than 10 p.m.). It did not end there, however, as there were several more rallies in November. The protesters demanded the abolition of the agreement and subsequently the resignation of Yevkurov.

Protests gathered momentum and united diverse cross-sections of the population that had previously been feuding. Organizers of these protests included the Backbone of Ingushetia social movement, the Council of Teips of the Ingush People, the human rights organization Mashr ("peace" in Ingush), and the regional branch of the Yabloko political party. Members of these organizations became protest leaders and played an important role not just in mobilizing the population but also in keeping the protests peaceful to avoid provocations, calm the population, and support the proper organization of the protests. They gave speeches at the meetings, recorded video appeals to the people, and sent official communications to the government. The most active social leaders and members of the local NGOs founded the Ingush National Unity Committee in October 2018, which became the coordinating body for holding rallies, submitting applications for their approval and negotiating with the authorities.

The protests were publicized by Memorial, whose office in Ingushetia continues its work

despite being the target of attempted arson January 2018 and has no plans to shut down.<sup>15</sup> Memorial also later supported the repressed activists. These protests were also publicized in detail on the regional information portal Kavazsky uzel (Caucasian Knot), the website FortangaORG, a Telegram channel, and an eponymous Facebook group created by several activists and led for several months by the journalist Izabella Yevloeva.<sup>16</sup>

However, once the protests quieted down, the pressure on activists began, including numerous detainments, administrative fines, and dismissals from workplaces for political reasons. There was even an attempt to bring a criminal case against Magomed Mutsolgov, the head of the Mashr, one of the protest's organizers.

During the protests, its most prominent leaders, including the elders Mukhazhir Nalgiyev and Akhmed Barakhoyev, co-chairmen of the Council of Teips of the Ingush people, and Akhmed Pogorov, a co-chairman of the Congress of the Ingush people, were repeatedly visited by the leaders of the Chechen Republic (e.g., by Kadyrov; the head of the Chechen parliament, Magomed Daudov; the Chechen mufti; and others). The Chechen leaders arrived in Ingushetia in several dozen cars and with armed security.

On October 30, a session of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Ingushetia took place. It was supposed to determine whether the law on the new border was constitutional. The court found the law to be inconsistent with the constitution of Ingushetia and noted that the redefinition of the border cannot take place without a referendum. At the same time, the World Congress of the Ingush People took place in Nazran. After the decision of the Ingush Constitutional Court had become known, it was decided to stop the street protests, as the case was now considered successfully resolved. However, on November 8, Yevkurov filed a request to the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation asking it to check the compliance of the agreement and the new law with the constitution of the Russian Federation. On December 6, the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation decided that the agreement was constitutional, the new border was legally defined, and that there was no need for a referendum.

There were no more mass protests immediately after that because most activists had been summoned by the law enforcement authorities early that morning, and Magas was held completely under control by the police and the National Guard of Russia. Yet, the activists were planning on insisting on a referendum and turning to international organizations, such as the Council of Europe, for help.

Thus, the spring saw a new wave of protests connected with the government's plan to amend local laws so that questions of territorial changes in Ingushetia would not need to be put up for a referendum. And even though the law was recalled from parliament in response to the protests, a new rally started on March 26. According to various estimates, anywhere from 4,000 (official estimate) to 40,000 people participated.<sup>17</sup> This rally was authorized, but only until 6pm; after this time, anyone located on the square would be

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17 Irina Gordienko, "Get over it, Caucasus," *Novaya Gazeta*, April 2, 2019, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2019/04/02/80069-smiris-kavkaz>.



charged with an administrative violation. People refused to disperse and remained on the square for the entire night. The protest was declared ongoing, and participants adopted a five-point resolution demanding: (1) Yevkurov's resignation; (2) an investigation of evidence of corruption on the part of Ingush leaders; (3) a cancellation of the border agreement with Chechnya; (4) a rejection of amendments to the referendum law; and (5) the return of direct elections.<sup>18</sup> Later, a sixth demand, to rehabilitate Ingush people affected by Stalin's repressions, was added.

On March 27, Russian National Guard units were brought in from Stavropol Krai, and clashes broke out between law enforcement bodies and the protestors. The next day, even more forces arrived from other republics, along with military equipment.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the internet remained shut down throughout the city beginning on March 26. However, it could not completely block communication between the protesters. It was still possible to find connection through some internet providers, so people continued to share information through Telegram channels. Moreover, a lot of information traveled around by word-of-mouth, as a significant proportion of the population was out in the streets and could get and spread information via direct communication.

During the clashes, protestors threw clubs, chairs, and iron railings at the law enforcement officers. In the end, they were able to drive the units out of the square. Ten officers were injured in the process.<sup>20</sup> After the protest leaders declared an end to the rally and protestors started to leave the square, some people spontaneously blocked traffic on the Kavkaz federal highway to express their discontent with the lack of results. The organizers called on them to stop their action, and they finally dispersed after being admonished by Akhmed Pogorov, co-chair of the Congress of the Ingush People.<sup>21</sup> It later became known that a police battalion working at the rally in Magas on March 26 and 27 was disbanded for refusing to drive away the demonstrators and that the head of the Ingush Ministry of Internal Affairs, Dmitry Kava, left his position.

Searches, interrogations, and mass arrests of activists started in early April. Forty people were detained over the first nine days of the month, and the detentions continued thereafter.<sup>22</sup> Administrative arrests and fines were ordered for a large number of people, and then criminal cases under the article "use of force against government representatives" started to be prepared.<sup>23</sup> According to Memorial, 25 people had been criminally prosecuted by May 20.<sup>24</sup> Among those arrested was the Ingush elder Akhmed Barakhoev. This arrest caused indignation and objections on social media, where people

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18 "Protests in Ingushetia: Chronicle of the Redistribution of Frontiers with Chechnya," Kavkazskii Uzel.

19 Irina Gordienko, "Get over it, Caucasus," *Novaya Gazeta*, April 2, 2019, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2019/04/02/80069-smiris-kavkaz>.

20 "Protests in Ingushetia," Kavkazskii Uzel.

21 Ibid.

22 Anastasiya Kirilenko, "Rally in support of Ingush activists gathered in Paris 30 people," Kavkazskii Uzel, April 19, 2019, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/334521/>.

23 "Protests in Ingushetia," Kavkazskii Uzel.

24 "25 people prosecuted for using violence against security officials," Human Rights Center Memorial, May 20, 2019, [https://memohrc.org/ru/news\\_old/25-chelovek-privlecheny-k-ugolovnoy-otvetstvennosti-po-delu-o-primenenii-nasiliya-k](https://memohrc.org/ru/news_old/25-chelovek-privlecheny-k-ugolovnoy-otvetstvennosti-po-delu-o-primenenii-nasiliya-k).

asserted that these actions contradicted the Ingush tradition of respect for elders.<sup>25</sup> In the end, the solidarity of the Ingush people extended far beyond the country's borders. Repression against activists from the Ingush protests angered Ingush people living in Europe: local Ingush in Brussels, Helsinki, Hamburg, and Paris held actions of solidarity with their fellow Ingush at home, and Ingush people in Helsinki started a collection to help demonstration participants pay their fines.<sup>26</sup>

In gauging the results of the protests, on the one hand, they led to the resignation of Yevkurov, which satisfied some people. On the other, after Mahmud-Ali Kalimatov was approved as the new head of Ingushetia, it became clear that he did not plan to take the side of the opposition. The repression continued. By the first anniversary of the agreement, the period of detention for all detainees in the rally case was extended by another three months.

On August 15, 2019, the Supreme Court of the Republic of Ingushetia upheld the decision of the Magassky District Court, which recognized the results of the secret ballot on the adoption of the law of the Republic of Ingushetia "On Approving the Agreement on the Establishment of the Border between the Republic of Ingushetia and the Chechen Republic" as valid. On September 6, the same court upheld the lawsuit of the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Ingushetia on the liquidation of the Ingush Muftiate, which was in stiff opposition to Yevkurov. In May 2019, by decision of the Ministry of Justice, the activities of the Teip Council were suspended.

However, the main result of the protests was the experience of the unprecedented unification and civil mobilization of the Ingush people. This protest was not only the most significant, extended, and influential protest in Ingush history, it was also the most emotional and transformative moment in the life of the republic. The protests united Ingush people of diverse religious beliefs and backgrounds. Even the Salafis took part in the protests, although they are not welcomed in orthodox Islam. During the protests, they united with Sufis, with whom they had until recently been at odds.

Unusually, active participation of women also became very important for the protest. One of its leaders was the journalist Izabella Yevloyeva, whose Telegram channel was dedicated to the protest. Another woman, Anzhela Matyyeva, took part in negotiations. Zarifa Sautieva, deputy director of the "Memorial complex to the victims of the repression" in Nazran, actively participated in the street protests. There was a young woman in a scarf who climbed onto the stage and snatched the documents from government delegates, who had come to approve the new border, took the microphone, and gave a speech, which was met with cheers from the mostly male crowd.

These are small examples of a larger trend. During the protests, dozens of Ingush women stopped working, took their children to relatives, and went out to the streets, staying there overnight despite the pouring rain and cold weather. According to the Ingush traditions, one is not allowed to touch a woman or to assault her, so women, even the elder ones, stayed on

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25 "Social media users condemned the arrest of the Elder Akhmed Barakhoev," Kavkazskii Uzel, April 3, 2019, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/333839/>.

26 "Protests in Ingushetia," Kavkazskii Uzel.

the streets to protect the men. Most of the protesters respected women and even formed “live corridors” for them so that they would not be accidentally touched by unknown men. A special place was equipped for women where they could stand without the risk of touching men.

The protests in Ingushetia prompted support from neighboring republics. For example, activists and journalists in favor of the protests left Dagestan for Ingushetia to support the demonstrators and spotlight these events. The protests also united people from different generations, people from different movements of Islam, men and women, members of the Council of Elders, representatives of opposition political parties and human rights organizations, young journalists, and activists. They all became active participants in the protests and supported one another. Ingushetia turned out to be full of protest energy, and now the chances are high that the people will not be appeased, especially after violence was used against the protestors despite the entirely peaceful nature of the rally. According to Memorial:

The events of last fall have shown that mass protest actions may be peaceful and that they do not in and of themselves constitute the slightest threat of an escalation in violence. At the time, both the protestors and the republic’s government behaved in a responsible manner. Now, though, violence has been used against these participants in a peaceful protest and repressions have been unleashed against those who did not give in to provoking young people to commit rash acts.<sup>27</sup>

Notably, civic activity in Ingushetia was highly polarized prior to the protests and divided between grassroots activists who worked on unpopular/marginalized initiatives and fairly neutral NGOs (with the exception of Mashr and the local Memorial office, which were involved in human rights topics). However, greater cooperation and a shared agenda emerged with the start of the protests. These protests significantly altered the local population’s understanding of activism and social organizations, with the mood moving from general apathy and the certainty that “nothing depends on me” to a state of political mobilization. Repression against protest participants has only served to intensify this mood among young people and make them want to take a more active role in the social processes in the republic.

As of September 2019, 33 people are in custody, and three people—Izabella Yevloeva, Abdud-Khabib Yevloev (her husband), and Magomed Mutsolgov (the leader of Mashr)—are abroad, where they have requested political asylum. The arrest and detention of Zarifa Sautieva, who became the first arrested women for political reasons, is unprecedented for Ingush culture. In the aftermath, several new initiatives have been established to support imprisoned activists and their families in need. For example, the mothers, wives, and sisters of activists prosecuted for the protests founded the movement “Patriotic union of women of Ingushetia” in order to join the fight.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “Ingushetia: federal center provokes escalation, but repression will only exacerbate the crisis,” Human Rights Center Memorial, April 4, 2019, [https://memohrc.org/ru/news\\_old/ingushetiya-federalnyy-centr-provociruet-eskalaciyu-no-repressii-lish-usugubiyat-krizis](https://memohrc.org/ru/news_old/ingushetiya-federalnyy-centr-provociruet-eskalaciyu-no-repressii-lish-usugubiyat-krizis).

<sup>28</sup> Victoria Li, “‘A line that cannot be crossed’ women united in Ingushetia to protect persecuted activists,” MBH Media, May 22, 2019, <https://mbk-news.appspot.com/suzhet/cherta-kotoruyu-nelzy/>.

## 5. Dagestan: Successful Cooperation in Civil Society and Human Rights

Dagestan is an extremely heterogeneous and diverse region. With populations of Avars (roughly one-third of the population), Dargins, Kumyks, Lezgins, Laks, Russians, and others, it is not monoethnic like Chechnya and Ingushetia and has 14 state languages. This kind of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity distinguishes it markedly from other North Caucasian republics. Today, it is an incredibly active region where many various trends collide and complement one another.

As in other parts of Russia, political competition in Dagestan is constrained, and legislative and local government bodies have limited autonomy. But there is also a factor specific to Dagestan: its poorly developed political institutions are not capable of reacting to requests from citizens or of defusing conflicts within the elite, who are also quite diverse. Ramazan Abdulatipov, the former head of Dagestan, ran what was essentially an authoritarian government, if not a personal dictatorship, by taking personal control of all of the republic's main political, financial, economic, and social institutions. Vladimir Vasilyev, the republic's current leader, started a purge of senior staff but has kept the existing government system intact. However, the authorities in Dagestan have a milder attitude toward the press and civil society institutions, which have a higher level of protest activity than other Russian regions.<sup>29</sup>

According to the journalist Vladimir Sevrinovsky, “[t]he top two or three most-read newspapers in Dagestan are opposition publications. This is a unique situation that is not seen in Moscow or Saint Petersburg.” In addition, government and pro-government structures in Dagestan are slightly more tolerant of activists than their counterparts elsewhere in Russia. While demonstrations can be banned and dispersed, some demonstrations are tolerated. When they are not, there is robust resistance from activists, who have successfully challenged the authorities’ decisions using legal action.

Considering that the civic sector in Dagestan is relatively young, even in comparison to Russia’s civil sector overall, it is characterized by non-institutionalization. Although there are registered NGOs and specific projects, civil society is for now represented more by

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

social movements and bold leaders and initiatives, and its activity is often manifested in spikes in protest activities and fierce online discussions. The types of protests that characterize this region relate to urban habitat, the environment, transportation, housing, utilities, law enforcement agencies, and corruption.<sup>30</sup>

On March 26, 2017, a mass protest against corruption in Dagestan was held on the heels of anti-corruption protests in other Russian cities. The authorities refused to approve this protest, and the police detained over 150 people as a result.<sup>31</sup> Marat Ismailov, an activist with Makhachkala's urban movement Our Town and one of the protest's organizers, filed a lawsuit against the local authorities for refusing to approve the rally and for detaining him. The court granted his claim in part and fined the Ministry of Internal Affairs 25,000 rubles (approximately \$390).<sup>32</sup>

Ismailov also organized another rally, Voters on Strike, which was held in Makhachkala on January 28, 2018 and was dedicated to the upcoming presidential election. The authorities initially refused to allow the rally to take place at the requested location but ended up approving it after Ismailov filed a lawsuit.<sup>33</sup> Almost 100 people attended, and none were arrested.<sup>34</sup>

Activists also successfully disputed Dagestan's law on demonstrations at the republic's supreme court. While Russia's federal law stipulates that small public actions can be held in places specially set aside for this purpose without the approval of the local administration, Dagestan's law stipulates that these kinds of actions must be approved and that the local administration is allowed to deny these actions, provided it has grounds for doing so. Ismailov filed a claim to have this article of Dagestan's law found invalid, and in the end, the People's Assembly of Dagestan revoked it.<sup>35</sup>

Other protests have included a May rally demanding Putin's resignation and objecting to the blocking of Telegram in Makhachkala, an unsanctioned protest in July against a higher retirement age, and a meeting in support of the parents of the Gasangusenov brothers, who were unduly killed by security forces, which was attended by 300-500 people.<sup>36</sup>

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30 Ibid.

31 Bariyat Idrisova, "150 people detained at anti-corruption rally in Makhachkala," *Chernovik*, March 26, 2017, <https://chernovik.net/content/lenta-novostey/bole-150-chelovek-zaderzhano-na-antikorrupcionnom-mitinge-v-mahachkale>.

32 "The organizer of the March 26 rally in Makhachkala sued the interior ministry 25 thousand rubles," *Novaya Gazeta*, October 26, 2018, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/news/2017/10/26/136467-organizator-mitinga-26-marta-v-mahachkale-otsudil-u-mvd-25-tys-rub-za-vospriyatstvovanie-aktsii>.

33 Malik Butaev, "In Makhachkala will be held a rally for fair elections despite the admonitions of the authorities," RIA Derbent, January 27, 2018, <https://riaderbent.ru/v-mahachkale-projdet-miting-za-chestnye-vybory-nesmotrya-na-zamechaniya-vlastej.html>.

34 "Rally in Makhachkala: 'We tolerate and keep silent. Why?'" BBC, January 28, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/av/media-42795162>.

35 Svetlana Anokhina, "To kill the hero," Eto Kavkaz TASS, April 9, 2018, <https://etokavkaz.ru/obshchestvo/ubit-geroya>.

36 Two brothers who worked as shepherds, aged 17 and 19, were shot dead by law enforcement authorities who claimed the two siblings were members of armed underground forces. However, the results of the investigation did not prove any illegal activities; this caused mass outrage on social networks and street rallies demanding an examination of the facts that led to their deaths. Lawyers of the Human Rights Center "Memorial" are now participating in the investigation, representing the father of the two siblings. See: Evgeny Berg, "Two Shepherds in Dagestan Mistaken for Militants and Killed," *Meduza*, August 29, 2016, <https://meduza.io/feature/2016/08/29/dvuh-chabanov-v-dagestane-prinyali-za-boevikov-i-ubili-glavnoe>.



Now the republic is seeing mass protests against price hikes and against shifting the border with Chechnya. In January, the authorities of Chechnya and Dagestan agreed to demarcate the border between the republics. In June, residents of Dagestan began to report that a traffic sign appeared in the region of the Dagestan city of Kizlyar with the inscription “Chechen Republic, Shelkovsky District.” This caused public anger. Residents of Dagestan demolished the road sign, which in their opinion was installed in the territory belonging to the Kizlyar district of Dagestan. Soon after, several vehicles arrived at the border with Chechen security officials and the speaker of the Chechen parliament, Daudov.

“The installation of the sign is a provocation, a decoy. The sign was installed on a section of the highway, literally 50 meters, which, for some ridiculous administrative accident, refers to Chechnya. There is no entrance to this site from Chechnya or any other access, it is surrounded on all sides by the territory of Dagestan,” explained Zurab Hajiyev, the chairman of the Dagestan historical-geographical society, a cartographer, and a visiting expert of the Dagestan border commission. He believes that the sign was installed in violation of the law, since this should be done by the services that serve the corresponding section of the route—in this case, Dagestan.

On October 2, a joint lawsuit between the authorities of Chechnya and Dagestan with Kizlyar over the lands began. The court found that the disputed sections belong to Dagestan and not to Chechnya, but the Chechen side still claims them and is going to appeal. The appeal to the Supreme Court of Russia is scheduled for December 11.

In general, Dagestan has major problems with corruption and fraud relating to elections, real estate development, and medicine. Social movements have started to form and develop in response to these problems as well.

The urban movements Our Town Makhachkala (#Городнаш) and Our Town Kaspiisk work on protecting urban spaces from development and preserving public areas, green zones, and parks. They conduct their work mainly through court cases and legal mechanisms but also through demonstrations, actions, and awareness raising. These movements are particularly well known for their successful cases. One of the most attention-grabbing cases was the battle for Makhachkala’s Ak-Gel Park, where there were plans to build a cathedral. Mass protests took place in May 2018 against this construction, and the police detained six people. These activists stressed that they were not protesting the construction of an Orthodox cathedral as such but that they simply did not like the place chosen for it.<sup>37</sup> Makhachkala has few areas free from development, so every new construction site that encroaches on a park or similar area draws protests from residents. What is unusual is that the activists received the support of the regional television channel, even though none of them got in touch with the station or asked for support. In the end, the square was saved. The main idea of the activists in this movement is to act within the law, bring the law over to their side, and hold officials responsible. These activists are now leading the fight against further development around Ak-Gel Lake.

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37 Dzhamilya Baisultanova, “In Makhachkala the rally against the construction of a temple in park ‘Ak- Gyol’ was held without violence,” *Caucasus Post*, May 7, 2018, <https://capost.media/news/religiya/v-makhachkale-miting-protiv-stroitelstva-khrama-v-parke-ak-gyel-proshel-bez-draki/>.

According to Arsen Magomedov, an activist with Our Town:

Multipolarity is characteristic of Dagestan: there are many forces and currents, and sometimes you can't understand which current is pulling at you. But mainly everyone supports us. There was even a demonstration against a cathedral's construction, many of us were arrested there and we spent several hours at the precinct. In the end, the police officers themselves and even people from the Counter-Extremism Center that we were talking with said that if we were actually honest and not playing some sort of game, they would support us.

Another group, the Observer Movement of Dagestan, is developing in parallel with the urban movement. Activists in this movement help prepare observers for elections, monitor elections, shed light on violations, and try to prosecute people for these violations. They work under the same principle as Our Town: force the law to work, use legal mechanisms, and draw press attention to problems and violations.

Few organizations in Dagestan work exclusively on human rights. Those who do include Memorial, which is quite active despite facing persecution. In January 2018, one of Memorial's cars, which a lawyer from the organization was using to travel to Chechnya for Oyub Titiev's case, was set on fire in Makhachkala. The next day, the office received a message containing threats and demanding a stop to its work in the republic, which Memorial promptly ignored.<sup>38</sup>

Another human rights organization—Patient Monitor—works to protect the rights of patients receiving treatment at state facilities. The main difficulties people have are receiving free medication on an outpatient basis, receiving medication and service at inpatient facilities, and undergoing analyses and diagnostic testing. Patient Monitor provides free legal assistance to people whose rights are not observed and fights corruption at medical facilities.<sup>39</sup>

The issues of gender and women's rights are addressed in the work of Malikat Jabirova's organization—Mother and Child—as well as by the independent journalist Svetlana Anokhina, with her Daptar Project and her group Fathers and Daughters, although these initiatives are not the only ones active in this area.

For example, the Daptar Project is an online information portal that analyzes the situation of women in the North Caucasus. It collects stories from women about gender inequality, domestic violence, honor killings, and early marriages, among other issues, that are rarely reported on in the regular press. It also works to dispel stereotypes of North Caucasian women as the victims of a patriarchal system and focuses on the positive experiences of these women, who have become successful academics, artists, athletes, and businesspeople.

The project Fathers and Daughters collects and publishes letters from adult daughters to

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38 Patimat Makhmudova, "'Memorial' associated (condemned) the beating of Datsiev to human rights violation," Kavkazskii Uzel, March 28, 2018, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/318409/>.

39 Magidam Abakarova, "Free medicine: how to get what you are entitled to?" Eto Kavkaz TASS, January 23, 2018, <https://etokavkaz.ru/obshchestvo/besplatnaya-meditsina-kak-poluchit-polozhennoe>.

their fathers about their feelings and experiences. According to the project's founders, the journalists Svetlana Anokhina and Aida Mirmaksumova, "[w]e want fathers to hear what their grown daughters really think. Where paternal authority and power destroyed their lives and where support saved them and gave them the strength to live on." In this way, the project problematizes traditional gender roles and calls for an understanding of the importance of emotional connection and support in the family, particularly for men.

Environmental activities have yet to coalesce into a clear movement and are instead represented by the work of individual activists, who have been quite active in recent times. For example, the new grassroots project Dust on the Lens creates eco-awareness video clips that connect trash pollution with historical, natural, and tourist sites of importance to the republic. This project garnered the attention of society and the authorities at its very earliest stages. Its authors have received invitations from various localities to visit and report on the pollution of important areas in these localities.

Like the rest of civil society in Dagestan, local environmental activists do not act entirely separately from pro-government structures. For example, activists of the All-Russian People's Front, a social movement created in 2011 at the initiative of President Putin, are working diligently to protect Ak-Gel Lake. This is another example of how various movements become intertwined and can complement one another, which is something that does not happen as often in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. United by protecting common interests and solving common problems, government officials temporarily move away from supporting the position of local authorities and cooperate with activists, not always in the form of direct participation in street protests and direct support but sometimes using their status to negotiate with officials and support decisions that benefit activists.

Nevertheless, charitable foundations are still the most developed part of civil society in Dagestan. These are the strongest, most stable, and most numerous NGOs in the republic and include foundations like Hope and Pure Heart. These organizations are extremely professional, have well-developed IT platforms, and use a shareable database of all people in need in Dagestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia. Their intended recipients are single mothers, orphans, and senior citizens who live alone. Since they do not work on political and civic topics, their activity fits easily into the contemporary political context and the conservative value base and does not attract scrutiny from the authorities.

The most sensitive topic in contemporary social and political life is the border with Chechnya. This issue is extremely worrying to Dagestanis because they are experiencing a crisis of trust in the republic's government, its new leader Vladimir Vasilev (who they believe is indifferent to Dagestani land), and its local officials (who have discredited themselves after decades of corrupt work). But Dagestanis are especially distrustful of the Chechen government because of its recent border conflict with Ingushetia and fear that the same thing could happen with their land. Many Dagestanis support the Ingush and their protests and admire their solidarity.

According to Arsen Magomedov, a Dagestani activist and attorney:

The people are reacting strongly to this; they're worried about who is going to stand up for our interests, about whether we even have leaders, and why society doesn't know

what's going on. They're making video appeals in the districts. And even though no one really wants to deal with the Chechen government, the people are making their voices heard loudly.<sup>40</sup>

Activists held a roundtable on this topic in Makhachkala, where they announced the formation of a public commission which later wrote an official open appeal to Vasilev and Vladimir Putin calling for transparency in the process of finalizing borders and requesting the inclusion of members of rural communities and independent experts in the committee working on the borders.<sup>41</sup> In April 2019, it was announced that Chechnya and Dagestan suspended work to define the borders between the republics, even though no explanation was given for the suspension.<sup>42</sup>

A major topic in Dagestan, as in other republics in the region, is the battle against terrorism and extremism. The fight against undesirable independent NGOs and certain individuals partially falls under this category. By connection, the practice of preventive monitoring of activists has become widespread in Dagestan. This mainly affects followers of the Salafi movement of Islam and young people. However, some also end up being monitored completely by accident.<sup>43</sup> In Dagestan, 15,000 people are listed as adherents to a radical, extremist Islamic movement on the Ministry of Internal Affairs preventive monitoring lists. There is also a Wahhabi list (the word "Wahhabi" is used as a negatively tinged synonym for Salafism in this context). Officially, these people are not suspected or accused of any illegal activity, so the legal grounds for these practices are unclear.

These lists are also used for political reasons against activists, human rights defenders, and civic journalists. According to human rights defenders, there is no single criterion that would put a person on this kind of list; instead, rationales can be extremely thin, for example, targeting a person because they have a beard or go to "the wrong mosque."<sup>44</sup> The lives of people placed on a preventive list are significantly complicated. These people are regularly stopped at highway patrol checkpoints, where they are repeatedly fingerprinted, photographed, and asked to give DNA samples and provide explanations about their private lives. They have difficulties finding work and cannot move freely within or outside of the republic. Inclusion on these lists also affects relatives.<sup>45</sup>

Lawyers, journalists, and human rights defenders who work on the cases of Salafis

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40 "The residents of Gumbetovskii district, who spoke in defense of their lands, convoked to Makhachkala," Kavkaz, Realii Radio Free Europe, February 9, 2019, <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/29760807.html>.

41 "Residents of Dagestan opposed to the revision of borders with Chechnya," Radio Free Europe/RadioLiberty, February 20, 2019, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29781015.html>.

42 "Chechnya and Dagestan suspended the clarification of the borders between the two republics," Meduza, April 16, 2019, <https://meduza.io/news/2019/04/16/chechnya-i-dagestan-priostanovili-rabotu-po-utochneniyu-granitsy-mezh-du-respublikami>.

43 "Dagestan: (незаконный профилактический учет) Illegal preventive supervision and how to fight against it," Human Rights Center Memorial, <https://memohrc.org/ru/special-projects/dagestan-nezakonnnyy-profilakticheskiy-uchet-i-borba-s-nim>.

44 Ramazan Abakarov, "The Dagestani 'Wahhabi list,'" Kavkaz.Realii Radio Free Europe/RadioLiberty, September 16, 2016, <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/27993297.html>.

45 "Dagestan: (незаконный профилактический учет) Illegal preventive supervision and how to fight against it," Human Rights Center Memorial.

face serious risks to their lives and physical safety.<sup>46</sup> These kinds of practices serve as a deterrent for the growing, often religious, civic activism of the population and of young people in particular. Other widespread practices include the kidnapping of Muslims (presumably by law enforcement bodies), the murder and removal of imams, and the shuttering of Salafi mosques.

The media and local human rights groups, particularly Memorial, have documented cases of this nature.<sup>47</sup> Relatives of people who have been kidnapped have held demonstrations demanding that law enforcement take some kind of mitigating measures.<sup>48</sup> Memorial lawyers have represented several residents of Dagestan in courts regarding their removal from the preventive monitoring list and have actually won some of these cases. The group reported on these cases on its website (for example, the cases of D. Alkhasov and M. Magomedov) and have also prepared step-by-step instructions that outline how people on these lists can protect their rights.<sup>49</sup> It also released a special project in the format of graphic audio that tells the story of Vazir Bazanaev, a resident of Dagestan who came under the close surveillance of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.<sup>50</sup>

The heterogeneity of Dagestan is also manifested within civil society itself. Part of the population is becoming increasingly “neo-traditionalist,” which results in the desire to “control morals.” This development can be seen in the scandal surrounding an anime festival, the cancellation of pop concerts, and a ban on the renting of several films. Another part of society, however, supports freedom of speech and has come out against these bans. Interestingly, this schism can also be observed among independent participants of civil society, and prominent local figures play a special role in these conflicts.<sup>51</sup>

According to the researcher Konstantin Kazenin:

Over the past two decades, a powerful element of socially active religious youth has formed in Dagestan, and particularly in its capital of Makhachkala. . . . A clear separation has appeared between religious and secular people. . . . This separation is particularly noticeable among young people who are active and are not controlled by the local government. That is, among social activists, independent journalists, and business owners who have no connection to the state budget.<sup>52</sup>

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46 “Invisible war,” Human Rights Watch, June 18, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/06/18/invisible-war/rus-sias-abusive-response-dagestan-insurgency>.

47 “The report on the results of the round table ‘Causes of radicalization of part of the young people and opposition to the ideology of ISIS in the North Caucasus,’” Human Rights Center Memorial, August 23, 2016, [https://memohrc.org/ru/news\\_old/otchet-po-itogam-kruglogo-stola-prichiny-radikalizacii-chasti-molodezhi-i-protivodeystvie](https://memohrc.org/ru/news_old/otchet-po-itogam-kruglogo-stola-prichiny-radikalizacii-chasti-molodezhi-i-protivodeystvie).

48 “‘Memorial’: in Dagestan young Muslims are secretly kidnapped,” Human Rights Center Memorial, August 2, 2008, <http://old.memo.ru/hr/hotpoints/caucas1/msg/2007/08/m100955.htm>.

49 “Dagestan: (незаконный профилактический учёт) Illegal preventive supervision of citizens in the agencies of the interior ministry in North Caucasus: how to defend your rights,” Human Rights Center Memorial, 2019, <https://legal.memohrc.org/>.

50 “How works in Dagestan the (профучет) preventive supervision, that officially doesn’t exist,” Human Rights Center Memorial, 2019, <https://bazanaev.memohrc.org/>.

51 Gor Aleksanyan, “The organizers of the concert in Dagestan turned to the police for the threats to the Sasha Project,” Kavkazskii Uzel, January 17, 2019, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/330479/>.

52 Konstantin Kazenin, “(скрепы или ислам) Moral values or Islam. How cultural prohibitions bring Dagestan and the rest of Russia near,” Carnegie Moscow Center, December 7, 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/77888>.

Over the past year, communities of “guardians of morality” have sprouted up online and are particularly active on Instagram, where leaders’ accounts have tens of thousands of subscribers. These communities had their first significant victory in September 2018, when the concert of the Russian pop star Egor Kreed was cancelled after threats and invectives appeared on social media.<sup>53</sup> These moral crusaders were supported by the world-famous mixed martial arts champion Khabib Nurmagomedov, who commands tremendous respect in Dagestan. Next, these crusaders demanded a ban on nightclubs. One of the leaders of this movement was Eldar Iraziev, an assistant to a State Duma deputy who was supported by Nurmagomedov.<sup>54</sup>

It was at Iraziev’s behest that the large anime festival AniDag was scuttled (the six previous festivals had been held in Makhachkala with the government’s support and had experienced no problems).<sup>55</sup> Its organizer, Said Tuchalov, was detained and held by the police for over three hours. According to the journalist Svetlana Anokhina, the theater management and festival organizers were bombarded with threats,<sup>56</sup> and the activist Marat Ismailov reported that at least one female participant of the festival was injured during the conflict.<sup>57</sup> A showing planned for January 2019 of the film *Love Yourself*, about the Korean pop group BTS, was cancelled. The administrators of BTS’s Russian fan club explained that the cancellation was due to threats on social media.<sup>58</sup>

As Konstantin Kazenin has observed, however, it is important to note that there are no high-profile or well-known religious figures among these moral crusaders, most of whom have little connection with religion. In fact, their public statements contain more references to the traditions of mountain dwellers and the ways of Dagestani life than to the norms of Islam. And the main message of these public defenders of tradition is not just that people should not attend “incorrect” cultural events but that these events should be banned by the state. Thus, in spite of the strengthening of Islam in this case, the events in Dagestan are similar to conflicts in other regions of Russia, where the organizers of exhibitions and film showings clash with Cossacks, for example.<sup>59</sup> Here the conflict boils down not to whether traditions are needed but to whether and to what extent the state should introduce censorship and regulate civil liberties.

The government’s reaction to this situation appeared inconsistent. At first, independent journalists reported on the failure of government agencies to take any action against the threats, but later, in March 2019, it was learned that Akhmed Israpilov, the administrator

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53 “You in Russia have lost your moral and ethical principles,” *Kommersant*, November 28, 2018, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3813161>.

54 “‘The active fight for morality led to a different result.’ How a KVN participant from Dagestan decided to win amorality but ended up on the list of extremists,” *Info24*, April 13, 2019, <https://info24.ru/news/iraziev.html>.

55 “In Russia you have lost your (морально-нравственные) moral and ethical principles,” *Kommersant*, November 28, 2018, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3813161>.

56 “Anime festival in Makhachkala sabotaged after threats to the organizers,” *Kavkazskii Uzel*, November 26, 2018, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/328362/>.

57 Magomed Tuaev, “Organizer of anime festival spoke about the support of the Ministry of Culture of Dagestan,” *Kavkazskii Uzel*, December 31, 2018, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/329865/>.

58 “‘Karfagen’: traditions and prohibitions in Chechnya and Dagestan,” *Kavkazskii Uzel*, December 31, 2018, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/329868/>.

59 Konstantin Kazenin, “(скрепы или ислам) Moral values or Islam. How cultural prohibitions bring Dagestan and the rest of Russia near,” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, December 7, 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/77888>.



of the Instagram account Imamat Dagestan, had been arrested for public calls to extremism. The investigation believed that he was the instigator of the harassment of Egor Kreed and that Israpilov's team was also involved in the anime festival's cancellation. A criminal case was opened against him for these public calls, and he now faces the threat of a large fine or five years of imprisonment. The showman Eldar Iraziev, who came out against the anime festival and night clubs, was in turn added to the preventive monitoring list. According to media reports, the defenders of traditional values quieted down after this.<sup>60</sup> As a result, activists who had been on different sides of the barricade made peace and reunited to fight development on Ak-Gel Lake.

Thus, even though ideological differences have divided civil society, and despite the state suppressing both sides, there are topics and agendas capable of uniting activists. For now, it appears that the energy level of civil society in Dagestan has the potential to encourage success in several cases.

As far as "moral control" is concerned, Our Town activist Arsen Magomedov believes that:

It is unlikely that this trend will gain momentum. Even within the forces that supported the anime festival's ban, not everyone was in agreement. Even within that orthodox religious group, people are inclined to believe that bans won't solve everything, and this has only been confirmed by ugly situations, like when a girl was slapped as the festival was being broken up. It became clear that these bans only lead to bigotry and don't resolve anything. We'll hope for sanity in the future, because most people understand that there's nothing wrong with these anime festivals.

It is clear that civic activism, initiatives, and protests are developing at a robust pace in Dagestan. Opportunities for civic and political participation are not always stymied, but as we have seen in the examples of Our Town and Memorial, this depends on the type of activity. In matters of development and the environment, which do not contradict ideology, activists have sufficient space for their activities and may even gain the support of pro-government structures. But if the work of activists and NGOs is connected with human rights, as in the case of Memorial, pressure and persecutions appear.

Dagestan has the most developed, diverse, and independent civil society of the three republics discussed here. It does not have the heightened government control and pressure of Chechnya or the conservatism and traditional way of life of Ingushetia. Instead, it has many varied groups that are actively involved in advocating for their civic positions. Dagestan is also the first region to actively put the environment on the public agenda. Because of regular changes in power at the republic and local levels, no single center has formed that would exercise control and repression over NGOs and grassroots initiatives. Diverse grassroots initiatives of both conservative and progressive slants thus exist in parallel. In spite of serious ideological disputes and conflicts between these groups, they have enormous potential for cooperation and unification to advocate for their common interests.

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<sup>60</sup>“The active fight for morality led to a different result’ How a KVN participant from Dagestan decided to win amorality but ended up on the list of extremists,” Info24, April 13, 2019, <https://info24.ru/news/iraziev.html>.

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Civil society in the North Caucasus and in Russia as a whole is experiencing complicated times: two federal laws have significantly limited opportunities for public and human rights activities and curbed access to financing for local NGOs and grassroots initiatives. At the same time, this region has its own unique aspects that set it apart from other Russian regions. For example, legal mechanisms for protecting human rights are much weaker, it is virtually impossible to appeal against the authorities' illegal actions in court, and legal avenues are not as strong as local regulators (customary law, Sharia, and the almost unlimited power of someone such as Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the Chechen Republic). Society itself is disengaged and frustrated, and the few public interest groups that exist have little effect at the local level. The persistent treatment of the North Caucasus as a Russian colony means that civil society in the region is isolated and mainly focuses on the local culture and agenda. Consequently the idea of the universal nature of human rights is not very popular and is generally not supported by the people who benefit from the organization of civil society. Sources of threats to social initiatives in the region are much greater, as are the number of redlines and the level of unpredictability.

All three of these republics nevertheless have their own strong characters, agendas, and processes. The Republic of Chechnya has the most limited resources for citizens to participate in decisionmaking and the protection of public interests. Public organizations and initiatives can only pursue “safe” agendas and must generally work in close contact with local government structures; dissenting views and public activity are limited to the margins. Ingushetia, which until recently had a weakly-developed civil society, has experienced a rapid upsurge in political and national self-awareness since the beginning of 2019 due to the border dispute with Chechnya. Such protests cannot be stifled with repression. Dagestan is the most diverse region of the three, and even though there is a conflict of ideologies, there is significant potential for unification around common problems.

In this regard, it is important to make some recommendations for policymakers in the region and representatives of the federal government and international organizations.

1. Civil society in the North Caucasus is in an intensive phase of transformation and is creating stable, theme-based activist groups. Many problems raised by

local activists and organizations testify to the public's considerable demand for changes and for inclusion in the decisionmaking process.

2. The case of Ingushetia shows that sore points (particularly the land question), which have been ignored for years by both local and federal authorities, still require decisions that take public interests into account. The solutions proposed by local activists appear to be carefully considered and reasoned and can serve as a basis for constructive political solutions to the border dispute between Chechnya and Ingushetia. Repression launched against popular leaders and activists risks stirring up even greater dissatisfaction among the population, which could destabilize the situation, not just in the republic but in the North Caucasus region in general (for example, neighboring republics have reacted vehemently to the situation in Ingushetia). Therefore, human rights organizations must call on the government to stop the persecution of activists, release political prisoners and close their cases, reject violent methods for suppressing protest, and start a dialogue with the population.
3. Local ministries and agencies should more actively cooperate with local NGOs and initiatives in addressing important social problems. Chechen organizations and initiatives, with their extensive experience and developed base of different instruments for social assistance and community organization, could become excellent experts, consultants, and assistants in dealing with important social problems in the region. In particular, this could be useful in solving the problem of divorces (the effectiveness of which is recognized by local authorities), establishing the custody of children, and reducing the level of domestic violence (the victims of which are women and children). Another important sphere where NGO expertise is unique and irreplaceable is in treating post-traumatic stress disorder, which, left untreated, causes a high level of violence and aggression in the republic.
4. Dagestani NGOs and initiatives are excellent examples of the public's competent self-organization around the most pressing problems and demands. The authorities in Dagestani cities should listen to the problems that are voiced, particularly those regarding the protection of urban spaces and the environment. Over the past two years, this global agenda has been actively reflected in the republic's own agenda. Now there is a need for comprehensive solutions and a review of municipal and republic policies.
5. The governments of all three republics should rely on legal mechanisms and capabilities and not the informal shadow mechanisms frequently attributed to "the special aspects of the local mentality" and customary law.
6. Representatives of civil society must cooperate and share experience, conduct an intergenerational dialogue, and create theme-based interregional coalitions. They must attract new supporters and work to increase awareness and involvement in decisionmaking among the local population.

Representatives of civil society must also recognize the universal nature of human rights and seek a path for adapting this concept to local realities.

7. Moscow must devote closer attention to human rights and human rights policy in the region and build relationships on the basis of cooperation and equal rights and not the imperial/colonial system by which Moscow still administers the region. If the federal government acknowledges the North Caucasus' equality with other regions and includes the local agenda in the federal agenda, the region's level of isolation and social tension will ebb, along with xenophobia against migrants from these republics. This step will help reduce budgetary expenses and allow the region to develop independently without subsidies.
8. International organizations, as well as the representatives of EU and U.S. authorities, should pay more attention to the region, not only in relation to blatant cases of human rights violations but also with focus on the positive potential of the civil society. Local NGOs and activists need informal training to increase their human and professional capital, to participate in exchange programs, and to conduct qualitative analysis of events and processes taking place in the region. It is important to cooperate with other international (European and American) organizations operating in the region to regularly produce research and reports on current problems and their possible solutions. It is also necessary to break the silence that surrounds the region and for the media to devote more effort to covering developments in the North Caucasus. The development of civil society in the North Caucasus will lead to a reduction of the level of social tension and a decrease of the migration burden on foreign countries, where a large number of those seeking asylum are sent. It would be worth developing and strengthening contacts with the representatives of both EU and U.S. migration services and ministries of foreign affairs, advising them on the specificities of the region. This could help make efficient decisions on granting asylum to immigrants of the North Caucasus and, if necessary, expedite the process of obtaining a visa.

## About the Author

**Dr. Irina Kosterina** was a visiting fellow with the Russia and Eurasia Program at CSIS. She is the program coordinator at the Moscow office of the Heinrich Boell Foundation. She has seventeen years of professional experience working in the fields of human rights advocacy, research, and project coordination. Her research focuses on gender order and women's rights in the North Caucasus, masculinity, sustainable activism, and community development.





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