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**RISKS IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS:  
POTENTIAL OR REAL ESCALATION  
OF THE ETHNOPOLITICAL SITUATION<sup>1</sup>**

**Viktor A. Avksent'ev**

Federal Research Centre The Southern Scientific Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences (SSC RAS),  
Rostov-on-Don, Russian Federation

**Galina D. Gritsenko**

Federal Research Centre The Southern Scientific Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences (SSC RAS),  
Rostov-on-Don, Russian Federation

**Svetlana Yu. Ivanova**

Federal Research Centre The Southern Scientific Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences (SSC RAS),  
Rostov-on-Don, Russian Federation

**Marina M. Shulga**

Federal Research Centre The Southern Scientific Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences (SSC RAS),  
Rostov-on-Don, Russian Federation

**Abstract.** *Introduction.* Positive dynamics in the ethno-political sphere of the North Caucasus does not mean that there are no further risks of the escalation of the ethno-political tension and stabilizing processes are irreversible. The goal and objectives of the article are the identification of the current ethno-political situation in the North Caucasus and assessment of the achievements or failures of the decade-long implementation of programs of reconstruction of the region. The authors identify risk factors of the ethno-political tension in the North Caucasus as a key approach to conflict forecasting, develop a hierarchy of risk factors, and assess the optimality of management decisions. *Methods and discussion.* In the context of the discussion the most relevant is understanding risks as an inevitable product of decision-making (Luhmann). The analysis of risk generating processes in the North Caucasus is most effective from the standpoint of the conflict studies (conflict resolution) approach (Burton). Empirical data was obtained by series of expert surveys, the Delphi method, content analysis of media sources (the Internet, printed press, radio, television) and analysis of official statistical data. The conclusion was made that during the past three years positive results have been achieved mainly due to administrative resources and activities of the institutions of force ("siloviki"), but those resources are close to exhaustion. All "classical" risk factors identified by the country's leadership in 2009 remain and "new" risk factors are actualized. Among the "classical" risks, the first positions are occupied by the low level of industrial production, the critical dependence of the North Caucasus republics on federal budget subsidies, the lag in life standards in these republics from the average in Russia, the retention of a high unemployment rate. These risks are to a large extent due to such factor as the low efficiency of regional authorities. The "new" risk factors include those that were in a latent state, but now can turn into manifest conflicts. This is, above all, a land-use problem that has various modifications: ethnic, territorial, economic, historical. Further studies of the problems of the North Caucasus are related to the analysis of the effectiveness of the system of ethno-political security and centre-peripheral relations, to the new non-trivial approaches in the theory of Russian federalism, to the choice of a model of spatial development of the Russian Federation. *Analysis and results.* Despite the general improvement of the climate of ethnic relations, risk factors in the ethno-political situation in the North Caucasus can result in the return of the region to the negative conflict scenario. The modern North Caucasus can be characterized as a risk society, in which risks appear as a result of decision making more and more frequently. Some positive "shifts" in the economic and social basis of life in the region are not sufficient for irreversible

changes of the situation for the better. The specificity of current problems in the North Caucasus is that their conflict potential can be implemented “unexpectedly” through various indirect links.

**Key words:** North Caucasus, risk analysis, ethnopolitical situation, ethnopolitical conflicts, forecasting and scenario analysis.

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## **РИСКИ НА СЕВЕРНОМ КАВКАЗЕ: ПОТЕНЦИАЛЬНАЯ ИЛИ РЕАЛЬНАЯ ЭСКАЛАЦИЯ ЭТНОПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЙ СИТУАЦИИ<sup>1</sup>**

**Виктор Анатольевич Авксентьев**

Федеральный исследовательский центр Южный научный центр РАН (ЮНЦ РАН),  
г. Ростов-на-Дону, Российская Федерация

**Галина Дмитриевна Гриценко**

Федеральный исследовательский центр Южный научный центр РАН (ЮНЦ РАН),  
г. Ростов-на-Дону, Российская Федерация

**Светлана Юрьевна Иванова**

Федеральный исследовательский центр Южный научный центр РАН (ЮНЦ РАН),  
г. Ростов-на-Дону, Российская Федерация

**Марина Михайловна Шульга**

Федеральный исследовательский центр Южный научный центр РАН (ЮНЦ РАН),  
г. Ростов-на-Дону, Российская Федерация

**Аннотация.** Целью статьи является идентификация текущей этнополитической ситуации на Северном Кавказе, оценка достижений и неудач в десятилетней реализации программ реконструкции региона, рассмотрение рисков, которые обуславливают потенциальную или реальную эскалацию этнополитической ситуации на Северном Кавказе. Авторами был проведен теоретико-методологический анализ категории «риск», результатом которого стало понимание его как неизбежного продукта принятия решений. В статье было отмечено, что за последние два-три года за счет административных ресурсов и успешной деятельности «силовиков» в регионе достигнуты положительные результаты. Однако анализ статистических материалов, результатов экспертного опроса, Дельфи-метода, контент-анализа СМИ позволил констатировать, что данные ресурсы близки к исчерпанию. В северокавказском регионе сохраняются классические факторы-риски и актуализируются «новые» рискогенные факторы. Классическими рискогенами принято считать факторы, названные руководством страны в 2009 году. Установлено, что эти риски в определенной степени обусловлены таким фактором, как низкая эффективность региональных органов власти. К «новым» рискогенным факторам отнесены те, которые находились в латентном состоянии, но в настоящее время актуализировались. Это, прежде всего, земельный вопрос, имеющий разную модификацию: этническую, территориальную, экономическую, историческую. В статье сделан вывод о том, что несмотря на общее улучшение климата межэтнических отношений, в северокавказском регионе сохраняется рискогенность этнополитической ситуации, которая способна привести к возврату на негативный конфликтологический сценарий регионального развития. Дальнейшие исследования проблем Северного Кавказа связаны с анализом эффективности выстраиваемой системы этнополитической безопасности, центр-периферийных отношений. Требуются новые нетривиальные подходы в теории российского федерализма, в выборе пространственного развития Россий-

ской Федерации. Необходимы среднесрочные прогнозы развития региональной ситуации на Юге России с акцентом на прогноз развития этнополитических процессов и проблем, а также анализ позитивных практик в сфере регионального антиконфликтного менеджмента. *Вклад авторов.* Разработка концепции статьи, написание вводного раздела (анализ этнополитических тенденций), выделение «новых» рискогенных факторов и их анализ, общее редактирование и перевод статьи принадлежат В.А. Авксентьеву, Г.Д. Гриценко был проведен теоретико-методологический анализ категории «риск», разработаны методологические основы исследования, выполнен анализ результатов экспертного опроса. Исследование «классических» рискогенов, в качестве которых рассматриваются причины эскалации напряженности на Северном Кавказе, обозначенные руководством страны в 2009 г., применение Дельфи-метода осуществлено М.М. Шульга. Контент-анализ СМИ и заключительный раздел «Результаты» подготовлен С.Ю. Ивановой.

**Ключевые слова:** Северный Кавказ, анализ рисков, этнополитическая ситуация, этнополитические конфликты, сценарные прогнозы.

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**Introduction.** January 2020 marks ten years after the formation of the North Caucasian Federal District. The new federal district was created at the peak of the escalation of ethnopolitical tension and terroristic activity. What has been achieved in a decade? What problems were solved and what are the results? The North Caucasus is no longer mentioned in the adopted in 2018 new edition of the “Strategy of the State National Policy of the Russian Federation until 2025” as a region requiring priority attention of state authorities. The Ministry of the Russian Federation for North Caucasus Affairs was abolished in January 2020, its functions were transferred to the Ministry of Economic Development. The only regional ministry preserved in the new Russian Government is the Ministry of the Russian Federation for the Development of the Far East and the Arctic. At the same time a 69-year old Yu. Chaika was appointed a new Plenipotentiary Representative of the President of Russia in the North Caucasian Federal District after the end of his career as the Prosecutor General of Russia. These changes definitely manifest the shifts in regional priorities of the Russian Federation and show that the regional situation in the North Caucasus is no more perceived by Russian authorities as a threat to stability of the country.

News from the North Caucasus is rarely found among topical issues nowadays, giving way to social and political events in Ukraine [35], the fight against terrorism in Syria [19], relations with the United States and the European Union [50]. This is due not only to the severity of the latter

problems, but also to a certain stabilization of ethnic relations in the North Caucasus. Experts [4; 5], politicians [39] point to positive trends in the region, and this is confirmed by official data [19]. The population has a nationwide identity [43]. There was no aggravation of the ethnopolitical situation during election campaigns of the “large electoral cycle” of 2016–2018 [9].

Positive dynamics in the ethnopolitical sphere does not mean that there are no problems left that can develop into manifest conflicts. Moreover, we argue that the achieved results are overestimated. The goal of the article is to identify the current ethnopolitical situation in the North Caucasus and assess achievements or failures of the decade-long implementation of programs of reconstructing the region.

The latent nature of ethnopolitical problems requires their constant analysis, as well as identification of risks of their eruption into open conflicts. Identifying risk factors of ethnopolitical tension in the North Caucasus is a key approach to conflict forecasting. Social practice shows that it is the forecasts that are most in demand by the authorities. The effectiveness of early conflict warning is evaluated not only by how accurately the predictions come true, but also by how the predicted negative tendencies are stopped and the identified risks are minimized. It is relevant to create a hierarchy of risk factors, assess the optimality of management decisions, and clarify the concept of “risk” as the theoretical background of the analysis.

In the context of globalization, increasing uncertainty and ambiguity of human existence, the

risk-related issues became more urgent [45, p. 711-712]. For the studied problems, the following Luhmann's position is of special relevance: "The question is rather what we can learn about normal processes in our society from the fact that it seeks to comprehend misfortune in the form of risk... and it is only by referring to the other side of the normal form that it can be recognized as a form" [36, p. VIII, IX]. Thus, there is no risk-free behavior in modern society [36, p. 31] and when analyzing social processes, it is suitable to start from the theoretical construction that "risk is immanent to society itself".

Modern risks, according to Beck, are consequences which relate to the threatening force of modernization and to its globalization of doubt: "To the extent to which modernization hazards generalize and thus abolish the remaining zones of non-involvement, the risk society (in contrast to class society) develops a tendency to unify the victims in global risk positions. In the limiting case, then, friend and foe, east and west, above and below, city and country, south and north are all exposed to the leveling pressure of the exponentially increasing risks of civilization" [16, p. 47]. The production of risks, according to Beck, may undermine the principles of market economy and lead to the emergence of new social and political forces. These forces are capable of swinging the political pendulum from universal danger to unpredictable political actions and distrust of existing political institutions. In a situation of political instability, the search for a point of support – a "firm hand", an authoritarian or even totalitarian – is inevitable [16, p. 23, 24, 45].

In risk studies in Russia the increasing political instability in modern society is considered as a result of decision making, because "risk is an inevitable product of the machine, which is called decision making" (Yanitsky) [55, p. 11]. Political assessment of an acceptable risk, according to Yanitsky, will play in future a greater role than presently. Disputes over the definition of what is risky, how dangerous it is, what is the level of a socially acceptable risk, will intensify and move politics into unstable space, causing frequent changes in the alignment of political forces [55, p. 12-13]. The main meaning of "risk", according to Yanitsky, is "uncertainty" ("probability") of consequences: risk is always an event with uncertain consequences [55, p. 12].

Recognizing that the modern world is structured by manufactured risks, Giddens highlighted the "new" risk-taking elements of society: the oversaturation of modern society with knowledge about risks is itself a risk. Finally, Giddens puts forward the problem of expertise. Lay knowledge of modern risk environments leads to awareness of the limits of expertise. The faith that supports trust in expert systems involves blocking off the ignorance of the lay person when faced with the claims of expertise. However, according to Giddens, "realisation of the areas of ignorance which confront the experts themselves, as individual practitioners and in terms of overall fields of knowledge, may weaken or undermine that faith on the part of lay individuals". Giddens agrees that experts often conceal the true nature of risks or even the fact that there are risks at all. But still more threatening is the situation where real dangers and risks are not realised by the experts [28, p. 129-130].

Giddens argues that the "intensity of risk" is the basic element in the circumstances in which we live today. Alongside with our attempt to minimize risks, novel risks come into being. Giddens shows the hallmarks of the risks created by man: first, globalization of risk in the sense of intensity; second, globalization of risk in the sense of the expanding number of contingent events; third, risks stemming from the created environment, or socialized nature; fourth, the development of institutionalized risk environments affecting the life-chances of millions; fifth, awareness of risk as well as awareness of the limitations of expertise [28, p. 124-125].

According to classics of risk theory, modern society is a society based on dualities [15]. It is the duality of any decision that comes to the fore, as well as combining any good with possibly even greater damage. The social project of a modern society becomes clearly defensive – not the achievement of the "good", but the prevention of the "worst" [16, p. 49; 55, p. 12-13].

Thus, in the context of modernization and globalization, any management decision contains risk as a phenomenon with uncertain dual consequences, which makes society politically unstable and limits the quality of expert assessments.

**Methods and Discussion.** The analysis of risk generating processes in the North Caucasus

is most effective from the standpoint of the conflict studies (conflict resolution) approach. According to Burton, the conflict resolution approach is a-disciplinary, it is a synthesis that goes beyond separate disciplines. It accepts no boundaries of knowledge and tries to combine behavioral, psychological, economic, sociological and other elements and is aimed at problem-solving conflict resolution [21, p. 14]. This approach makes it possible to identify risk factors and to develop forecasts of ethnopolitical processes in the North Caucasus based on the conflict resolution approach.

A solid theoretical and methodological contribution to conflict studies was also made by Russian scholars, for example, Dmitriev [24], Zdravomyslov [57] and others.

A serious experience has been gained in studying conflicts at micro- and meso-levels as well as in case studies of conflicts in different areas of society [2]. Many scientists from the leading scientific centres of the Russian Federation, in particular, the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, are engaged in studying ethnic and ethnopolitical conflicts [51]. Ethnic conflicts are a priority topic for researchers in the South of Russia – sociologists, specialists in conflict studies and political scientists, who work in major research and educational centres in southern Russia (regional centres of the Russian Academy of Sciences, federal universities) [3; 10; 26; 37; 55]. Most of the research done is devoted to the analysis of conflicts that have already taken place, and sometimes to forecasting local situations. The established practice of cooperation between research centres and regional authorities has shown that it is scientific forecasts that are in demand. They allow the authorities to identify in advance the growing risks, to adjust political and managerial activities in order to minimize and localize the risks [13].

The dynamics of ethnopolitical processes in the North Caucasus brings to the emergence of new risks and to changes in the intensity of the already existing ones. It is necessary to clarify the methodology and methods of studying regional risks and to developing regional conflict scenarios.

The development of conflict scenarios and forecasts of the situation in the North Caucasus

has been carried out by the scholars of the Southern Scientific Centre of the Russian Academy of Science. The proposed scenario forecasts became a conceptual basis for an adequate understanding of the changes taking place in the socio-political life of the region [11].

The first scenarios and forecasts of the regional situation in terms of risk management were proposed to the scholarly and expert community in 2005 [6]. In subsequent studies, based on identifying significant risk factors, scenarios were adjusted and forecasts of the dynamics of the regional situation were refined [9; 12]. The a-disciplinary conflict study approach (Burton) was widely used in the research work.

Thanks to the expert survey, carried out in 2016–2017, a diversity of opinions on the means of reducing the risks of manifest conflicts was obtained. The experts offered recommendations on neutralizing the negative impact of risk factors and reducing the risks of regional authorities' decision making. The personal choice of experts was based on the following criteria: research and / or media activity in the field of regional conflicts / ethnopolitics; experience in analytical, expert and / or management practices; belonging to the peoples indigenous to the region (including ethnic Russians); living in one of the territories of the North Caucasian Federal District. Such a selection of experts made it possible to obtain a unique information and analytical material to clarify the hierarchy of risk factors, determine the dynamics of the regional ethnopolitical process, and forecast changes in the existing risk profile.

To minimize the limitations of expert assessments (Giddens), the Delphi method was used in subsequent research. This method gave an opportunity to formulate a generalized conclusion that excludes the socio-psychological component and is more relevant than individual points of view of the experts. The ability of an independent expert to reflect on the forecasts of his colleagues is a kind of dialogue within the expert community and a guarantee of the quality of scientific expertise.

In order to ensure the objectivity of the analysis of different points of view, including oppositional, content analysis was used in studying media sources (the Internet, printed press, radio, television). This made it possible to obtain additional information about the regional

ethnopolitical situation; to adjust the risk hierarchy proposed by experts; to create the most comprehensive list of political actors; to determine who among them actively contributes to the realization of ethnopolitical risks of and who minimizes the risk-bearing content of the existing factors; to evaluate the effect of managerial decisions on the social behavior of various actors of the ethnopolitical process.

The analysis of statistical data from the official sites of the Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat) and the Federal Service for Labor and Employment (Rostrud) was used to identify the trends in the development of regional ethnopolitical processes. The combination of the methods, as well as the use of the methodology already tested in the first study (2006) maintaining the same goals and objectives suggest a high degree of validity and comparability of the results obtained.

The intermediate materials of the research were published earlier. The present article analyzes new static data (2018 or 2019, when available) in comparison with 2016–2017, as well as generalizes the results of several stages of the research work. This makes it possible to assess a decade of reconstruction of the region and make forecasts for the nearest future.

Further studies of the problems of the North Caucasus are associated with analyzing the effectiveness of the arranged system of ethnopolitical security, centre-periphery relations, in particular, potential inconsistency and destructiveness of relations between the federal centre and Russian regions. New non-trivial approaches are required in the theory of Russian federalism, in the analysis of the correlation of federalism and unitarianism in politics and in the further selection of a model of spatial development of the Russian Federation. Medium-term forecasts of the development of the regional situation in the South of Russia are needed, with an emphasis on the forecast of ethno-political processes and problems that determined the specificity of the regional situation and the protracted regional crisis in the South for more than two decades after the collapse of the USSR. Positive practices selection, analysis and verification in conflict management in the North Caucasus are also crucially important.

**Analysis.** At the beginning of 2020, there is no more reason to identify the situation in the North Caucasus as a protracted regional

ethnopolitical crisis, which for a quarter of a century determined the level of risks in the North Caucasus. Key factors in the de-escalation of ethnopolitical tensions in the North Caucasus region are the following: a) the decrease in terrorist activity as a result of the elimination of the leaders of the underground resistance movement and the termination of the activities of the terrorist “Caucasian Emirate”; b) the outflow of the most active part of the combatants from the North Caucasus to the Middle East at the call of the banned in Russia “Islamic State”; c) the firmness and consistency of Russia’s policy in upholding geopolitical interests in the context of the Ukrainian and Syrian crises. Thus, the de-escalation of ethnopolitical tension is the result of power based governance (“siloviki”) in the North Caucasus [4].

Other stabilization factors, first of all the economic reconstruction of the region, considered by Russian authorities as the basis for de-escalating of tensions, played a much smaller role. It is worth noting that a decade ago, at the stage of the formation of the North Caucasus Federal District, it was the economic reconstruction of the region that was seen as a key to an irreversible change in the situation for the better.

Definite positive results were achieved in reducing unemployment (Table 1) – from 11.2% in 2017 to 9.9% in the first quarter of 2019.

All republics except North Ossetia have shown decline in the unemployment rate in the three-year perspective, and in the long-term perspective the best results are in the Chechen Republic (reducing unemployment from 76% in 2007 to 13.4% in the middle of 2019) [22; 27; 18].

There is an increase in per capita GRP in the republics of the North Caucasus. So, for the period 2014–2017, it increased in current prices from 142,400 up to 157,900 rubles [47]. The emphasis placed by the regional authorities on the development of small and family businesses has softened the unemployment situation.

Thus, the power based governance combined with some positive changes in social and economic life have led to a decrease in ethnopolitical risks, as well as in number and severity of ethnic conflicts in the North Caucasus. As a result, in 2014 it became possible to identify the transition of the regional situation from a negative conflict scenario to a moderately

**Table 1. Unemployment rate in 2017 and 2019 in federal subjects located in the North Caucasus (in %)**

Federal subjects located in the North Caucasus	Unemployment rate in the late 2016 – early 2017	Unemployment rate in the mid 2019
Republic of Ingushetia	27.9	26.2
Chechen Republic	14.2	13.4
Republic of Dagestan	11.7	10.6
Karachay-Cherkess Republic	16.7	9.6
Kabardino-Balkar Republic	11.6	9.7
Republic of North Ossetia-Alania	10.7	12.6
Stavropol Krai	5.5	4.8

negative [8, p. 35], and since 2017 in certain territories (for example, in Stavropol Krai) – to a moderately positive one [9, p. 86].

At the same time, as experts note, the positive trend in the development of the regional situation is not sustainable. Sources of ethnopolitical tensions, rooted in socio-economic and institutional spheres, remain. The existing risks of ethnopolitical stability increase the vulnerability and reversibility of positive trends [14, p. 124-125].

To ensure effective management of regional processes, those risks should be specified. The most significant risks at the present time are the so-called “classic risk factors”, which were identified by the country’s leadership in 2009 and were relevant at that time: 1) criminal activity of the bandit underground groups; 2) relative poverty of the population; 3) high unemployment; 4) huge, “just monstrous” scale of corruption; 5) systemic deformations in state administration at the regional level, extremely low efficiency of regional authorities; 6) extremism, “which is supplied from abroad”; 7) lag in the quality of life in the republics of the North Caucasus from the average Russian (“gross domestic product per capita is several times lower than the average Russian”); 8) the low level of industrial production (“several times lower than the average Russian”); 9) critical dependence of the republics of the North Caucasus on federal budget subsidies; 10) ethno-clan system [38].

The factor analysis of the reproduction of extremism and terrorism that was carried out in 2016–2019 showed the change in the hierarchy of “classic risk factors” if compared with 2009 [7].

In the first place there is a low level of industrial production. In 2018, in three of six republics in the North Caucasus there was a decrease in industrial production (Table 2).

The most significant decline took place in the Karachay-Cherkess Republic (–10.1%), the Republic of North Ossetia – Alania (–8.9%) and the Kabardino-Balkar Republic (–7.0%). These three republics showed the worst results in Russia. In other regions, there was a small increase in industrial production in 2018, with the best results in the Republic of Ingushetia, which became the leader in the North Caucasus due to the growth of production in the manufacturing sector (+38.5%) [41].

In the second place there is a critical dependence of the republics of the North Caucasus on federal budget subsidies: the leading place is occupied by the Republic of Dagestan (more than 66 billion rubles were allocated in 2019), the next is the Chechen Republic, the rest of the republics occupy positions up to the 24<sup>th</sup> [25].

Third, the lagging of the quality of life in the North Caucasian republics from the average Russian (Table 3).

The changes in the standards of living are positive only in the Republics of North Ossetia – Alania and Dagestan (moving up from the 72<sup>nd</sup> and 73<sup>rd</sup> positions in 2017 to 65<sup>th</sup> and 69<sup>th</sup> positions in 2018, respectively), while in other republics, except the Republic of Ingushetia, there was a decrease in the quality of life, for example, the Karachay-Cherkess Republic occupies the 84<sup>th</sup> place (out of 85) [32].

In the fourth place is the relative poverty of the population. The per capita GRP in the region in the early 2018 was 157,900 rubles, although in Russia it was 510,300 thousand rubles. There was an annual decline in the per capita GRP in Ingushetia in 2015 and 2016 and only in 2017 it reached the level of 2014 (114,800 rubles) [47].

The fifth place belongs to the high level of unemployment: though it decreased to 9.9%, it

**Table 2. Industrial production index by federal subjects located in the North Caucasus (for 2018 in % to the previous year)**

Federal subjects located in the North Caucasus	Index in 2018
Karachay-Cherkess Republic	89.9
Republic of North Ossetia-Alania	91.1
Kabardino-Balkar Republic	93.0
Chechen Republic	100.3
Republic of Dagestan	104.2
Republic of Ingushetia	107.7
Stavropol Krai	103.5

**Table 3. The Quality of life integral rating of federal subjects located in the North Caucasus for 2018 compared with 2017**

The place in the ranking of subjects of the Russian Federation (85 positions)	2017	2018
Karachay-Cherkess Republic	83	84
Republic of North Ossetia-Alania	72	65
Kabardino-Balkar Republic	75	76
Chechen Republic	68	71
Republic of Dagestan	73	69
Republic of Ingushetia	84	82
Stavropol Krai	22	22

still almost twice the average figure for Russia (4.9%) [18]. Experts point out difficulties in assessing unemployment due to the high share of the shadow economy in the region (35–45%) [17; 31]. Sarkarova thus describes the situation in Dagestan: “In almost all cities, especially in small settlements and rural areas, a significant part of the working age population is employed in the shadow economy, or in numerous markets, in small shops, or are individual entrepreneurs <...> unemployment is supported by the existing system of teip and clan based redistribution of income, which allows a part of the population not to work at all. This is especially common among young people” [44, p. 108].

According to expert survey, corruption, low efficiency of regional authorities, ethno-clan structure of local societies are placed far down the list of risk factors, but it doesn’t mean their irrelevance. The proposed hierarchy is conditional, as all risk factors are intertwined. Thus, the reliance of regional authorities on small and family businesses reduced, according to experts, unemployment, but strengthened the ethno-clan structure of societies and hampered the necessary institutional changes and the formation of civil solidarity [14, p. 120]. Moreover, the preservation of almost all “classical” risk factors may be attributed to low efficiency of both regional and

federal authorities’ governance. This confirms the theoretical and methodological position recorded at the beginning of the article: “risk is an inevitable product of the machine, which is called decision making” (Yanitsky).

And last, but not the least, is the criminal activity of the bandit underground groups and extremism. In 2018, 894 people were detained for extremism and terrorism in Russia, among them almost 100 students from schools and universities, and over 280 were young people aged 18–24 [49]. This indicates the relevance of this risk factor despite general decline in terrorist activities.

According to the results of the study, “new” risk factors joined “classic” ones. This, first of all, is the problem of land tenure that has various dimensions: ethnic, territorial, economic, historical.

The most serious ethnopolitical conflict, rooted in land tenure, namely in the use of lands of distant-pasture cattle breeding, occurred in the Nogai steppe of the Republic of Dagestan. It is here, according to Yarlykapov, “the ill-conceived policy of the Dagestan authorities led to gradually turning of the Nogai steppe into a desert <...> the area of degraded lands has increased by 10 times over the past 40 years – up to 70%!” [40].

The tensions over land issues in the Nogai municipal district in Dagestan more than once led to local manifest conflicts, which due to widening

of their basis and growing impact on the ethnopolitical situation turned by 2017 into a republican ethnopolitical crisis. The situation gained maximum publicity in the summer of 2017 thanks to the All-Russian Congress of the Nogai people. The reason for convening the congress was the implementation of the Law of the Republic of Dagestan “On the status of lands of distant-pasture cattle breeding in the Republic of Dagestan” [56]. The participants of the congress adopted an appeal to the President of Russia, which stated: “The Nogai people are concerned about the aggravation of land issues in the Nogai district of the Republic of Dagestan and believe that land reform is being carried out in socially dangerous and illegal forms” [23].

This conflict became a protracted one. In spring 2019, a meeting of Nogai elders was held in the Nogai district with the presence of municipal authorities. The final resolution stated that the Nogai steppe was turning into a zone of ecological disaster due to its misuse, and a requirement was formulated for the Government of Dagestan to provide a complete inventory and geobotanical survey of the lands used for distant-pasture cattle breeding [34].

The land-use conflict in Dagestan is also associated with the Kumyk people. An Extraordinary Congress of the Representatives of municipalities and NGOs of the Kumyk People was held in March 2017. In May 2018, another Kumyk meeting of residents of three suburban settlements of the Dagestan capital Makhachkala took place, where controversial questions about land use were again raised. Both of these events were the result of contradictions in land-tenure and municipal reforms and the reluctance of the authorities to adequately react to problems and resolve them before they become an open conflict [33]. Another example of a land-use conflict is the situation in Nartan and the Volny Aul in the Kabardino-Balkar Republic [1].

Social tensions caused by problems in land use to land are also present in other territories in the North Caucasus. Acute land-use problems are the basis for concentration of the risks of ethnopolitical stability and indicate the dependence of “new” risks on “classical” ones, that is low efficiency of regional authorities management.

In recent years, territorial claims that are related to land-use issues have been again

actualized; those claims are signs of a large number of risks to ethnopolitical stability in the region. The Ossetian-Ingush conflict remains unresolved: not all Ingush refugees who left their homes in the Prigorodny district and the city of Vladikavkaz in 1992 came back; the search and identification of the remains of the missing during the armed phase of the conflict has not been completed. According to the former leader of Ingushetia Yu.-B. Evkurov, the Ossetian side focuses on the poor state of the infrastructure and social sphere of the Prigorodny district as an obstacle to the return of all refugees, and on the poor living conditions of Ossetian refugees from Georgia and South Ossetia [29]. The absence of the post-conflict rehabilitation, the separate schooling of the Ossetians and Ingushes in the Prigorodny district impede the integration of the Ingushes into the life of North Ossetia. Debates on the status of the Prigorodny district arise periodically both at the official level [30] and on the Internet. There are calls to return the territory of a part of the district to Ingushetia.

The practice of “capping” of territorial claims and reducing the base of conflicts to a conflict among elites does not reduce potential risks. An example is the settlement of the Chechen-Ingush territorial conflict in 2012, which was limited to the two leaders of the republics: R. Kadyrov and Yu.-B. Evkurov. The conflict was settled with the mediation of the Presidential Envoy of the North Caucasian Federal Districtin A. Khloponin. But in autumn 2018, the agreement on “equal exchange of non-residential areas in the Nadtrechny municipal district in Ingushetia and in the Malgobek municipal district in Chechnya”, signed by the heads of Chechnya and Ingushetia caused “disagreement” on both sides. Many residents of Chechnya, for example, were convinced that the exchange of territories was made to the detriment of their interests: by transferring arable land to the neighbors, they received in return abandoned land in the mountains that “were already Chechen” [46].

At the same time, mass protests took place in Ingushetia, since the territories transferred to Chechnya were the lands of the Erzi federal nature reserve with important historical monuments of the Ingush people [42]. The conflict has become a protracted one with a high risk of escalation [48].

Such evolution of territorial and land-use problems revealed two important points: first, any “delayed” or “chronic” conflict contains a high risk of escalation; second, there is a real possibility of conflict de-escalation until “non-elite masses” are involved in it. Any of these conflicts can cause a chain reaction throughout the region and actualize the “inactive risks”, which happened in autumn 2018. Territorial and land-use issues have deep historical roots, are emotionally burdened and thus are always difficult to settle. Such hotbeds of conflicts in the North Caucasus need constant attention from both federal and regional authorities.

Another high-risk factor is historical memory. Throughout the post-Soviet period, it has been used as an effective tool for ethnic conflict mobilization. Historical traumas from remote and recent past are chosen contextually at a certain point of time. The historical tragedies, which are always relevant for the North Caucasian peoples, include the Caucasian war of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the deportation of the Circassians, the exile of several North Caucasian ethnic groups during World War II. In case of aggravation of the ethno-political situation in the region, or escalation of tensions by interests of definite actors, the mobilizing potential of historical memory is widely used. Such was the case on the eve of the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics.

Especially risky and psychologically difficult are situations when one and the same date is connected with different historical events. Thus, February 23<sup>rd</sup> is the Day of Memory and Grief about the Stalin’s deportation of the Chechens and Ingushes, when mourning and memorial events take place [52]. February 23<sup>rd</sup> is also celebrated as the Defender of the Fatherland Day, which is a public holiday in Russia. The issue of separating these events arises from time to time, as evidenced by speeches in the meetings in Ingushetia on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019 [53].

The appeal to historical memory as a desire to link the history of an ethnic group living nowadays with ancient peoples, who lived hundreds and thousands of years ago, the use of historical argumentation in territorial and other claims, according to experts, is in most cases counterproductive. The traditionalist orientation of the public consciousness of the North Caucasian communities, supported by regional authorities and

various public organizations, the consciousness that is turned into the past and not into the future, is also a risk factor for ethno-political stability in the region.

The analysis of “new” risks makes it possible to state their dependence on the low efficiency of regional authorities, which confirms the understanding of risk as an inevitable product of the decision-making machine.

**Results.** The modern North Caucasus can be characterized as a risk society, in which risks appear as a result of decision making more and more frequently. The analysis of empirical data reveals a tendency of transition of the regional situation from a negative to a moderate conflict scenario. However, identified risks can lead to the return to a negative scenario. Despite the overall improvement in the climate of inter-ethnic relations, this area remains a significant source of risks to regional stability. Ethnosocial and ethno-political conflicts are mostly in a “frozen” or latent phase. Positive results were achieved mainly due to the administrative resource and successful activity of the institutions of force (“siloviki”). Some positive shifts in the economic and social basis of life in the region are not sufficient for irreversible changes of the situation for the better. The resource of the means of stabilizing the situation in the region used so far is close to exhaustion. At present, there is no reason to predict a reduction in the risks for ethno-political stability of both “classical” and “new” factors of instability in the North Caucasus. The specificity of current problems in the North Caucasus is that their conflict potential can be implemented “unexpectedly” through various indirect links. The significance of risk assessment of decision-making in the region increases sharply under these conditions.

Further studies of the problems of the North Caucasus are related to the analysis of the effectiveness of the arranged system of ethno-political security and centre-peripheral relations, to the new non-trivial approaches in the theory of Russian federalism, to the choice of a model of spatial development of the Russian Federation. Medium-term forecasts of the development of the regional situation in the South of Russia, an analysis of the positive practices of regional anti-conflict management are needed.

## NOTE

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### Information About the Authors

**Viktor A. Avksent'ev**, Doctor of Sciences (Philosophy), Professor, Head of the Laboratory of Conflict Studies, Federal Research Centre The Southern Scientific Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences (SSC RAS), Chekhov St., 41, 344006 Rostov-on-Don, Russian Federation, [avksentiev@rambler.ru](mailto:avksentiev@rambler.ru), <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0762-3529>

**Galina D. Gritsenko**, Doctor of Sciences (Philosophy), Professor, Chief Researcher, Laboratory of Conflict Studies, Federal Research Centre The Southern Scientific Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences (SSC RAS), Chekhov St., 41, 344006 Rostov-on-Don, Russian Federation, [dissovet@rambler.ru](mailto:dissovet@rambler.ru), <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8281-7409>

**Svetlana Yu. Ivanova**, Doctor of Sciences (Philosophy), Professor, Chief Researcher, Laboratory of Conflict Studies, Federal Research Centre The Southern Scientific Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences (SSC RAS), Chekhov St., 41, 344006 Rostov-on-Don, Russian Federation, [isu-socf@yandex.ru](mailto:isu-socf@yandex.ru), <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2375-6348>

**Marina M. Shulga**, Doctor of Sciences (Sociology), Professor, Leading Researcher, Laboratory of Conflict Studies, Federal Research Centre The Southern Scientific Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences (SSC RAS), Chekhov St., 41, 344006 Rostov-on-Don, Russian Federation, [shulgamm@mail.ru](mailto:shulgamm@mail.ru), <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4698-5197>

### Информация об авторах

**Виктор Анатольевич Авксентьев**, доктор философских наук, профессор, заведующий лабораторией конфликтологии, Федеральный исследовательский центр Южный научный центр РАН (ЮНЦ РАН), просп. Чехова, 41, 344006 г. Ростов-на-Дону, Российская Федерация, [avksentiev@rambler.ru](mailto:avksentiev@rambler.ru), <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0762-3529>

**Галина Дмитриевна Гриценко**, доктор философских наук, профессор, главный научный сотрудник лаборатории конфликтологии, Федеральный исследовательский центр Южный научный центр РАН (ЮНЦ РАН), просп. Чехова, 41, 344006 г. Ростов-на-Дону, Российская Федерация, [dissovet@rambler.ru](mailto:dissovet@rambler.ru), <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8281-7409>

**Светлана Юрьевна Иванова**, доктор философских наук, профессор, главный научный сотрудник лаборатории конфликтологии, Федеральный исследовательский центр Южный научный центр РАН (ЮНЦ РАН), просп. Чехова, 41, 344006 г. Ростов-на-Дону, Российская Федерация, [isu-socf@yandex.ru](mailto:isu-socf@yandex.ru), <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2375-6348>

**Марина Михайловна Шульга**, доктор социологических наук, профессор, ведущий научный сотрудник лаборатории конфликтологии, Федеральный исследовательский центр Южный научный центр РАН (ЮНЦ РАН), просп. Чехова, 41, 344006 г. Ростов-на-Дону, Российская Федерация, [shulgamm@mail.ru](mailto:shulgamm@mail.ru), <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4698-5197>