

Ethnopolitical Processes in the North Caucasus: Dynamics and Stabilizing Factors



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Abstract. *The paper is based on the results of an expert survey conducted in 2016-2017 in all territories located in of the North Caucasian Federal District. A detailed analysis of the results of the study, obtained by the method of expert assessments (Delphi group) is presented. The hierarchy of risks and threats was worked out and specified. The major risk factors include: the persistency of ethno-clan structure, the deterioration of the socio-economic situation of a large part of the population and extremism, based on external factors. It is concluded that the ethnopolitical situation in the region is characterized by a combination of both positive and negative trends with a certain prevalence of stabilizing processes, but the regional situation can gain the reverse direction at any time.*

Key words: *the North Caucasus, ethnopolitical situation, expert evaluation, conflict forecasts; factors of ethnopolitical tension, Delphi method.*

I. INTRODUCTION.

For more than two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the North Caucasus was the most problematic region of the new Russia. The protracted regional crisis produced real threats to the integrity and security of the country, and was an obstacle to economic and democratic transformations.

Public interest in the events in the North Caucasus declined significantly after the end of the “Second Chechen War” (1999–2000). There is no separatism in the North Caucasus nowadays, the situation has become much more stable. There are undeniable achievements in the region: most of guerrilla detachments and field commanders were liquidated, as well as criminal groups; the number of terrorist crimes considerably reduced; the system of prevention of terrorism and ethnic and religious extremism was created.

The population strives for security, stability, legality. The systemic actions of the authorities aimed at the implementation of the state policy of the Russian Federation in the field of national security are obviously effective in the region.

The North Caucasus is not mentioned as a region requiring priority attention from the state in the new edition of the Strategy of the State National (Ethnic) Policy of the Russian Federation until 2025, approved in December 2018¹. The informational agenda has changed: the decline in interest in the North Caucasus is partially due to the fact that since 2014 the attention of politicians and the public has been switched to another conflict on Russia's southern borders – the Ukrainian crisis. The purpose of the article is to identify the main trends in ethnopolitical processes at the end of the second decade of the 21st century and make forecasts for the near future.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the scientific tradition, scenarios and forecasts in social sphere are widely used in ‘Futures studies’ that are the result of the scholarly evolution of futurology. Pirozhkova defines Futures studies as studies of a multivariate future, focused “not so much on the most accurate description of the future, but on thinking about various possibilities and a qualitative description of each of them” (Pirozhkova, 2016).

Methods of Futures studies, such as predictions, forecasts, modeling, are discussed by Resher (1998), Gonzalez (2013), Guillan (2014). A large number of works are devoted to mathematical methods of forecasting and modeling social processes (Li, 2017). Scenarios are also studied as a form of multivariate modeling of social situations, involving the extrapolation of trends in order to see what the future will look like while maintaining a number of trends. At the same time, the proposed “scenarios are not meant as actual forecasts, but they describe possible worlds upon whose threshold we may be entering, depending on how trends interweave and play out” (Mapping the Global Future, 2004).

One of the areas of scholarly research, where predictive methods are widely used, are ethnic relations and ethnopolitical conflicts.

In Russia, due to the particular relevance of the problem, ethnic and ethnopolitical conflicts are studied by many scholars (Drobizheva, 2018; Markedonov, 2017; Pain, 2017; Starodubrovskaya, 2016; Tishkov, 2016 and others). In the South Russia, ethnic conflicts are studied by sociologists, specialists in conflict studies, political scientists working in

Manuscript published on 30 September 2019

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¹ In the previous edition, approved in 2012, the main issues of the state ethnic policy of the Russian Federation, requiring special attention, include “creating additional socio-economic and political conditions to ensure lasting national and international peace and harmony in the North Caucasus”.

leading research and educational centers (regional centers of the Russian Academy of Sciences, federal universities): Baranov (2014), Volkov, Denisova, Lubskii (Volkov, 2017), Pashchenko (2018), Sampiev (2018), Chernous (2018) and others. A typical feature of those studies is the analysis of the conflicts that have already taken place, sometimes prediction of local situations. At the same time, it is forecasts and scenarios, which allow to foresee increasing threats and risks, that are most in-demand today.

III. METHODOLOGY

In our study, the conceptual basis for identification the changes taking place in the political life of the North Caucasus region were scenarios and scenario forecasts, designed as a result of a comprehensive analysis of the regional situation (Avksentev, 2011; Avksentev, 2016; Avksentev, 2017).

The effectiveness of conflict prediction is determined not only by how regularly such predictions come true, but also how often the predicted negative trends have been managed and the risks have been minimized. That is why monitoring of risk factors and the analysis of the effectiveness of management decisions are an important part of a research work in the region.

For the purpose of a thorough analysis of the risks and threats of ethnopolitical stability and clarification of conflict forecasts, expert polls were conducted in the North Caucasian Federal District in 2016, which, combined with other sources, made it possible to specify the forecasts of the dynamics of the regional situation. Most of the interviewed experts predicted a slight increase of ethnopolitical tension in six out of the seven territories of the North Caucasian Federal District in 2017 compared to 2016. In a more distant future, experts rated 2018 as the most problematic. This corresponded to earlier predictions that in the second decade of the 21st century the increase of number conflicts was expected in 2018–2019 (Avksentev, 2017).

To clarify the forecasts, a study, known as the Delphi method², was conducted in May 2017. The respondents were the same experts who participated in the 2016 expert survey. Experts were asked to analyze the generalized results of the survey in which they participated, evaluate its results and adjust their own point of view, taking into account the arguments of other experts. Replies were received from nine out of seventeen personally selected for the first phase of the study.

IV. RESULTS

First of all, we were interested in the experts' assessment of the level and dynamics of ethnopolitical tensions in the region. The opinions of the Delphi study participants on the ethnopolitical situation in the North Caucasus divided: five experts identified the ethnopolitical situation as a moderately positive scenario of the development of the regional process, four – as a moderately negative. None of them noted deterioration of ethnopolitical situation. The following assessments were proposed: “There were no negative events lately”; “There were no serious deteriorations during the last year, different domestic conflicts do not transform into ethnopolitical ones”; “The

observed ethnopolitical mobilizations among some ethnic groups in the North Caucasus are not related to separatist slogans and goals.” Still, though experts pointed to some ethnopolitical stabilization in the region, they did not confirm a qualitative change: “In general, the situation has stabilized, but active work should be continued to manage conflict factors”; “The situation has stabilized due to various reasons, including external and subjective ones...”; “It has been possible to restrain negative trends thanks to the authorities and special administrative structures, media activities and propaganda”.

The difficulty in assessing the current ethnopolitical situation in the North Caucasus was manifested in the inconsistency of expert forecasts of the dynamics of tension for the two forthcoming years. Some emphasis on the moderately negative scenario can be traced: six experts predicted that the tension will evolve according to the moderately negative scenario of the regional, three believe that the trends typical for a moderately positive scenario will prevail.

Experts of the first group note: “The electoral processes and the trend to reduce the financing of the state ethnic policy may result in raising the level of ‘turbulence’ in ethnic relations”; “The deterioration of the situation is possible when incarcerated extremists and terrorists come back home”; “The aggravation of the economic situation in the country, the redistribution of financial flows and property causes an increase in opposition of ethnic and clan groups and interests”; “The exodus of ethnic Russians, the radical Islamization of the youth, the Sharia influence on the population of the ‘ethnic’ republics will continue”.

The second group of experts believes that “as a matter of fact there are no objective preconditions for increasing tension,” “there have been no particular negative events”, “I think that we will not return to a negative scenario due to strong patriotic sentiments and a high level of civil identity”. As far as the risk factors were considered, the experts showed a noticeable coincidence of positions, highlighting three main factors:

1. the persistent strength of ethnic clans;
2. the deterioration of the socio-economic situation of a significant part of the population;
3. the cross-border transfer of extremism.

According to the unanimous choice of experts, the most important risk factor was the persistency of ethnic and clan pattern of the life of the ethnic groups in the North Caucasus. The responses of experts in the 2017 survey revealed their awareness of the “vitality” of this social phenomenon (“it is impossible to fight against this”; “... nowadays non-ethnic clans, so-called interest-based clans are added to ethnic clans”; “... it will be maintained by the existing political culture in Russia”). It is important to emphasize that experts cease to look for positive moments in ethnic clans and, therefore, to justify their preservation as having some positive functions.

The second place in the risk hierarchy of the negative impact on ethnopolitical processes is occupied, according to the experts, by the deterioration of the socio-economic situation of a significant part of the population: six out of nine experts indicated to the high conflict potential of this risk in 2017-2020.

² The Delphi method is one of the most common in futures research https://www.rand.org/pardee/pubs/futures_method/delphi.html

Delphi group participants believe that “The situation remains the same and the trend towards improvement is not yet visible. The country's economy remains tied up with the exports of raw materials”; “The wave of the crisis has reached us. Last year it wasn't as felt as it is now”; “The rise in prices and tariffs in housing and communal services will invariably lead to a further drop in household income, to discontent and increase in social tensions”; “This risk and its manifestations are already observed today. The protests of truckers that have not yet led to a mutually acceptable solution, but only to a delay in the resolution of the issues raised”. At the same time, three experts suggest that “By now, the population has adapted to the current situation. On the other hand, a large number of investment projects are being implemented in the North Caucasus”.

This risk factor, unlike the first one, has an all-Russian genesis, with some regional features. The country's leadership had indicated already in 2009 the socio-economic factor as the most risky for stability in the North Caucasus (Medvedev, 2009), and it has not lost its relevance. Most of the republics located in the North Caucasian Federal District occupy positions starting with 78th and lower in the socio-economic ranking of the territories (out of 85) (Reiting sotsialno-ekonomicheskogo polozheniia regionov, 2017).

The third place in the hierarchy of risks capable of transferring the regional process to a negative scenario, according to the assessments of the participants of the Delphi group, is extremism, “supplied from abroad”, as the former Russian president D. Medvedev had put it (Medvedev, 2009). Some experts (4 out of 9) believe that the relevance of this risk has reduced, despite its “long-term ‘residence’ in the Caucasus”, which is due, among other things, to “negative historical facts: deportation of peoples, the Caucasian war, etc.” The main reason for the downward trend of this risk is professionalism of law enforcement agencies: “... the state security bodies of Russia know how to counteract those risks”; “The activities of security forces in this regard are quite effective”; “... among the radicals, certain elements of the disappointment in the correctness of the ‘chosen path’ are fixed”. However, the majority of interviewed experts (5 out of 9) claim that “such a danger... will increase” since “... the Syrian conflict gave an impetus to the activities of recruiters in religious terrorist organizations”, all the more so “...citizens of Russia are fighting in Syria”.

V. DISCUSSION

Such a risk factor as an “increase in the corruption in the region” was assessed by experts as average, which, at first glance, contradicts corruption scandals in the Republic of Dagestan in 2018, which shocked public opinion. However, with all the urgency of the problem of corruption in the North Caucasus, it is not noticeably different from corruption in other regions of the country. The specific feature of the North Caucasus is the combination of corruption with ethnicity and clan structures, which transformed those phenomena into a kind of inseparable fusion.

Six out of nine experts forecasted a decline in the impact of religious radicalism on the regional processes. For the period of 2017-2019 the experts anticipated the reduction of the probability of the realization of this risk from high to moderate (five answers) and minimal (one answer): “In the

Stavropol Krai religious radicalization of the population is not felt. It seems to me, it is starting to cool down”; “State policy is aimed at minimizing such threats, and it is quite effective.”

At the same time, the scholars who live in the North Caucasian republics, argue that “although peace loving and tolerance towards people of other faith are offered by all world religions, the actual implementation of those principles may differ from the declared postulates” (Dzutsev, 2018; 83).

The preservation of the risks in the religious sphere in the North Caucasus indicates that there exists a ‘background tension’ in the region: “In an atmosphere of strengthening the position of the Western (Christian) civilization, the Islamic world seeks ways to an adequate response to the challenges of the time – and finds it in reviving the religious traditions of the heyday of the Islamic world, spreading Islam in Christian countries with active support and mentorship from the clergy, who, unlike Christian clergy, never opposed its state and political authorities. The high authority of Islamic spiritual leaders, the zealous observance of traditions even in foreign countries and cultures, despite the inconvenience arising from this, are contrasted to the Western European moral decline, the shattering of moral and religious principles” (Dzutsev, 2018; 84).

This correlates with the opinion of three participants of the Delphi group, who note the high level of this risk: “this risk has a long-term effect in the North Caucasus, although the situation is more or less predictable”; “this factor persists and, according to my observations, is increasing”. This tendency is explained by “... religious illiteracy of young people”, as well as by “the decline in living standards, growing unemployment and increasing in economic stagnation of rural settlements...”.

According to the results of the Delphi Group, the risks of destructive effects of the socio-economic and political activities of ethnic elites have increased. While in 2016, according to all experts, this risk was minimal, in 2017 it was characterized as medium (six experts). According to experts, the destructiveness of ethnic elites “is particularly visible in relation to agricultural land, small business and budgeting funds”.

Such activities of ethnic elites are discussed within ethnocracy paradigm. The essential feature of ethnocracy is recognition of ethnicity as the foundation of a state. The basic principle of ethnocracy is creating a regime facilitating the expansion, ethnicization and control of contested territory and state by a dominant ethnic nation (Yiftachel, 2004). According to Howard, in ethnocratic regimes, the heads of government are determined first by ethnic affiliation and only then by other means of appointment. (Howard, 2012). This situation is typical in post-Soviet states, when representatives of titular ethnic groups who came to power after the collapse of the USSR, practice ethnic domination and ethnic subordination.

The negative assessment of such risk factor as the ineffectiveness of the ethnic policy in the region has increased. Some experts defined as the highest the probability of actualization of this risk. The revealed tendency, according to experts, is due to the fact that “there are no positive changes in the ethnic policy in the region,

there is a lot of formalism and very little scientific grounding in the work of the authorities who implement ethnic policy"; "the real policy is too local, the work is intensified only in emergency situations, in 'quiet' periods it is formal". In such situation, according to the participants of the Delphi Group, "without reforming the general management in this field, it is impossible to qualitatively change the situation." Still, another part of the Delphi group is convinced that "the ethnic policy in the region is one of the most successful in the country. Too much attention is paid to this policy in the North Caucasus"; "It is effective compared to previous decades. There are no open ethnic conflicts in the region, the all-Russian civil identity is being strengthened. And the "average" assessment of this policy is due to the fact that there is rejection (among a part of the population) of the drafts of laws in the sphere of ethnic policy, which are based on the understanding of the ethnic Russian people as nation-forming, etc."

In our opinion, erroneous forecasts of the dynamics of ethnic relations, made by some of the scholars in the North Caucasian republics, may serve as an indicator of the risks existing in the ethnic policy in the region. The arguments that ethnicity is the major factor of stability in the North Caucasus are rather popular in scholarly community (Khunagov, 2015). This contradicts the opinion of scholars from Federal Research Sociological Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences, who argue that the acuteness and intensity of domestic and international life, its ethnopolitical and sociological analysis brought together the positions of the scholarly and expert community on ethnic and civic identity as components of the all-Russian identity. Ethnic identification with even greater clarity began to be interpreted as identification with an ethnocultural community, and a civil one – as identification with citizens of the country, with the all-Russian space and state (Gorshkov, 2018; 51).

The analysis of the world practice shows, that in modern states "mobilization policy has been used to awaken people to new ideas such as national identity, industrial capitalism, and civic society. However, it has long been debated whether mobilization in new countries or in countries under reconstruction creates an integrated identity or results in fragmentation of various ethnic groups....The analysis suggests that more rapid mobilization by governments stabilizes a greater ethnic cleavage. This result is found to be robust by changing parameters and by modifying the specifications of the model. In addition, the analysis presents two other implications. The first is that a spiraling fragmentation of identity might occur if governments fail to accommodate people. The second is that in an age of advanced communication, governments need more assimilative power than before in order to secure integration» (Yamamoto, 2015).

VI. CONCLUSION

The situation in the North Caucasus is characterized by a combination of positive and negative trends with a slight increase in stabilization processes. This can be considered a positive result of the activities of the authorities and society in stabilizing the socio-political situation in the region. The analysis of the 2017 expert survey by the Delphi-group method allows us to confirm the emerging trend of transition of the regional situation to a moderately positive scenario,

which, however, is unsustainable and may at any time take on the opposite direction.

VII. DISCLOSURE STATEMENT.

The article was prepared as part of the research project "Conflict Forecasts and Scenarios of the South of Russia" (State Assignment for 2018, registration No AAAA-A19-119011190170-5).

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