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## Countering Violent Extremism among North Caucasus Youth

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### Abstract

Armed conflict in the North Caucasus, one of the most protracted and deadly struggles in Europe, has significantly quieted in recent years. However, the root causes and underlying grievances that were feeding the violence have not been addressed, thus the threat of re-escalation is real. Being aware of this possibility, the Russian government has been developing radicalization prevention programs focusing on North Caucasus youth. This article analyzes the general approaches to countering violent extremism work that have been implemented in the North Caucasus through various government and non-governmental agencies, highlighting some of the best practices, the most serious challenges, and offering policy recommendations.

### Countering Violent Extremism in the North Caucasus: Mapping the Field

For nearly three decades since the collapse of the USSR, the North Caucasus has been riven by instability and armed conflict. The conflict has taken different forms and has passed through various degrees of intensity including two full-blown wars between the federal military and separatists in Chechnya, and then protracted armed struggle between a regional Islamist insurgency and the security services across the region. Between 2012–2017, large numbers of jihadists from Russia travelled to Syria and Iraq. These individuals were predominantly from the North Caucasus. According to Russia's FSB chief, Alexander Bortnikov, 5,500 Russian citizens travelled abroad to join international terrorist groups.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of the mass outflow of radicals to the Middle East and the decline and military defeat of the North Caucasus insurgency before the Sochi Winter Olympics, the security situation in the region has significantly quieted. However, since none of the root causes and underlying grievances of the armed conflict have been addressed, the threat of re-escalation of violence remains real. Being aware of this possibility, in recent years, the Russian government has been supplementing its traditionally heavy-handed approaches of counter-terrorism with prevention programs. This article will focus on ideological preventive work with youth in the context of the North Caucasus republics most affected by armed conflict—Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria (KBR). It is based on research and fieldwork conducted in the region in 2018–2019.

### Official CVE in the North Caucasus

Russia's country-wide system of ideological prevention of terrorism and extremism is federally led, bureaucratized and involves various government and non-gov-

ernment agencies and actors. The 2009 “Response to Terrorism Concept” defines the key principles and priorities of countering terrorism that include, inter-alia: the principle of “inevitability” of punishment for terrorism-related crimes, ideological propaganda for anti-terrorism, and an emphasis on “socially meaningful” values.

“The Comprehensive Plan for Countering the Ideology of Terrorism in the Russian Federation for 2019–2023”, designed as a supplement to the Concept, highlights the need “to carry out prevention work with individuals affected by terrorism and also implement measures aimed at forming an anti-terrorism consciousness among the population by means of information propaganda”. The “Strategy of Countering Extremism in the Russian Federation for 2015–2025” also defines ideological prevention as propaganda in education establishments, mass media, cultural institutions.

In the North Caucasus the republics develop their own programs on countering the ideologies of extremism and terrorism in compliance with federally defined priorities. Due to regional diversity, different intensities of armed conflict, and differing political climates, Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) efforts vary quite significantly. They usually involve officials from youth policy ministries and committees, ministries of education and sports, local municipalities, republican Spiritual Boards of Muslims (quasi-government religious institutions uniting government-approved imams and mosques) and pro-government NGOs. Recently some independent NGOs have also made their way into the CVE community.

Counter-narratives are the basis of youth CVE work across the North Caucasus. Counter-narratives have been defined as “an intentional and direct effort to deconstruct, discredit, and demystify violent extremist messaging through ideology, logic, fact or humor”

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4126739> (accessed 13 May 2020).

(Hemmingsen and Castro: 2017). Effective counter-narratives should be context specific, designed for a given target group, and most importantly, delivered by credible messengers. In the North Caucasus counter-narratives are usually straightforward and emotional propaganda.

The largest scale of preventive work has unfolded in Chechnya, which is understandable given its history of protracted deadly conflict. Counter-narratives in Chechnya are mainly disseminated by Chechen officials, law-enforcement, and imams. They carry out massive propaganda work through the media, internet and at face-to-face meetings, organized at universities, schools, colleges, and in village communities, including distant mountain villages. The main target is youth and teenagers, although some propaganda also reaches out to the adults.

Many of my respondents noted that the CVE propagandists often resort to threatening rhetoric in Chechnya. “When the security services come to talk to the kids, they are threatening them. The imams are also aggressive because Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov is threatening the imams. Responsible officials are afraid that they will be beaten and fired if anything happens on the territory under their control. So, they come into the classroom charged with this negative energy, which comes top-down,” a Chechen expert explained to me.

Official counter-narratives are much softer in the other republics. For example, the Ministry of Youth in Dagestan has a special prevention unit consisting of former civil society activists close to the Spiritual Board of Muslims. This unit has developed a well-designed training course called “Peaceful Dagestan,” which travels around Dagestan’s towns and villages and is presented at various events. The presentation contains colorful slides which tell the history of Dagestan, show its natural beauty, explain the geopolitical challenges the republic is facing, and introduce the notion of jihad and what it really means in Islam. This training has reached out to tens of thousands of young people aged 14–30 across the republic. The Ministry of Youth has also produced an anti-ISIS propaganda documentary, called *ISIS: An Eastern Trap*, which has received over 500,000 views on YouTube.

Similarly, in Ingushetia, the Committee for Youth Matters designed a training course called “DISlike Extremism” for high school, college and vocational school students. It aims to discuss internet security, the dangers of terrorist ideology, and various mechanisms of recruitment.

In Dagestan the officials are reluctant to engage youth in debate. The Ministry of Youth staffers explained to me that their lectures do not include Q&A sessions in order to keep the situation from getting out of con-

trol. “Initially, we had 30 minutes for Q&A at the end, but then we decided not to do it anymore... Debates break out, tensions emerge and they forget everything they were being told for 1–1.5 hours. The effect of the lecture is gone. So, we tell them: here is a website where you can learn more, here’s your local imam who can answer questions. And we close this way.” Unlike Dagestan, the Ingush “DISlike of Extremism” program has an extensive Q&A section.

In Kabardino-Balkaria meetings in municipalities, universities and schools, youth fora, and village gatherings against extremism often feature Soviet-style engagement with children and youth. Many follow similar scenarios: municipal officials, clergy, and pro-government NGO activists make speeches and play videos condemning terrorism and extremism, while pupils and students present their essays or drawings, or recite patriotic poems. Recently however, some of the CVE officials in KBR have reportedly started reaching the understanding that direct confrontational counter-narratives are not effective and they have begun trying to offer alternatives. Being a multi-ethnic republic, Kabardino-Balkaria also organizes ethnic tolerance activities aimed at overcoming tensions and fostering dialogue.

The authorities across the region promote counter-narratives in cooperation with the military-patriotic clubs and the Russian Guard and military. Special summer camps for military trainings for members of the Youth Army (*Yunarmia*) are organized for children aged 14–16 in Dagestan. Another format is the “Search Movement” which engages young people in expeditions where they excavate the relics of the Second World War in other regions of Russia.

These activities are seen as an alternative engagement, a way to distract and channel the youth’s energy into patriotic activities. Local schools are also required to place significant emphasis on patriotic education, which often means the glorification of military victories and the heroization of war veterans.

Another channel for youth engagement is “the volunteer movement”, which is currently part of the official youth policy across Russia. Volunteers are encouraged to get involved in socially meaningful depoliticized projects, such as environmental protection, education and healthcare. The federal center distributes funds for volunteer initiatives through the regional governments and during various regional and federal fora, the most important one for the North Caucasus being the forum *Mashuk* which in 2018 was attended by Vladimir Putin. In some places, the volunteer organizations are doing highly valuable work and are genuinely attracting young people, while in many other places, they mostly exist on paper, and are mobilized administratively when needed.

## Imams and NGOs for CVE

CVE work often involves representatives of the Spiritual Board of Muslims and imams. My youth interlocutors however, were quite skeptical about their impact, as one student from Makhachkala explained: “They (the representatives of the Spiritual Board) cram us into the class, 150 people, maybe one or two students are listening to them, some are playing with their phones, others are doing homework for the next class... Every month or so they come, sometimes it is interesting, but mostly they cannot present things attractively.”

In Chechnya, imams who visit schools, colleges and universities present religious arguments asserting that Chechens have all of the necessary conditions to practice their faith in Chechnya—that Chechnya is the land of Islam, with hundreds of mosques, Islamic dress-codes and Islamic morality enforced by authorities. They always praise the Kadyrov family and explain that Islam obliges Muslims to support their ruler. Imams combine anti-extremist and political propaganda; for example, by praising President Putin or campaigning for elections. The fact that the mullahs have become the main ideological force of the regime prevents them from being seen as independent and credible messengers by many young Chechens.

Interestingly in Dagestan, which is probably the most conservative of all the North Caucasus republics with the strongest Islamic tradition, many schools had until recently managed to keep imams out of the classrooms. This can be explained by the fact that the republican education ministry and many school principals still belong to the old Soviet generation of educators who are either atheists or believe that religion and the state should be clearly separated. One school principal told me that she doesn't let religious propaganda into her school as she thinks the role of imams in preventing violent extremism is counter-productive, they impose their (Sufi) strand of Islam on others and thereby deepen intra-confessional divisions between believers.

In Ingushetia, critical imams, including moderate law-abiding Salafis, can speak in mosques and thereby produce counter-narratives from their religious positions that are much more convincing for the already radicalizing youth. One such imam is the charismatic Khamzat Chumakov who has reportedly talked almost 70 people out of going to Syria. Moderate Salafi voices speaking against ISIS used to be heard in Dagestan as well; however, in the last several years most of the Salafi mosques were closed, while moderate Salafi imams who spoke about ISIS were threatened by the security services, ISIS, or both.

The key problem identified by all interlocutors is that many of the CVE engagements are often tedious. “It's so boring that after these sessions, radicalization only

increases,” one educator joked. Professionals who work with the youth in Chechnya emphasize that the aggressive and straightforward propaganda in this republic has the reverse of the intended preventive effect. “The more they blame ISIS, the more interest the youngsters have in it. It becomes attractive, romanticized,” a former university professor from Grozny told me.

Several NGOs across the region have also started to focus on CVE and their work is done in a more creative and professional way than the government-inspired initiatives. In Chechnya, one of the NGOs with links to the Chechen government involves widows returned from ISIS in youth trainings. This is a welcome development: the stories of these women are the most convincing counter-narratives for youth who are susceptible to radical propaganda. Ingush Genesis Fund is implementing methodologically sophisticated trainings in several North Caucasus republics, while the Chechen NGO “Women for development” tries to reach out to women and offer CVE preventive trainings and support to vulnerable women and girls.

NGO activists and independent experts note a lack of trainings in critical thinking and the absence of free and meaningful discussions of the radicalization process in the region. “There are no such authentic discussions because in the end, we will anyway come to the conclusion that we would not have such problems if we had free media, independent courts and real elections,” the leader of the Kabardino-Balkar Human Rights Center told me.

Indeed, apart from educators, the government still primarily trusts pro-government, patriotic organizations and the traditional clergy, however, these messengers miss a significant portion of the youth who do not find them credible. Still, the massive nature of CVE work in the region has brought some clearly positive results—most of the young people have internalized that the ideas promoted by extremism and terrorism are strongly condemned by their society, its dominant strand in Islam and state and are strictly punishable by law.

## CVE and Root Causes of Radicalization

One of the main problems with the current CVE approaches in the North Caucasus are that they are based on the assumption that a violent ideology can be defeated by counter-propaganda. This can partly be true, but the root causes and factors conducive to radicalization are numerous and diverse. Counter-narratives presuppose a simple causal relation between ideology and violent actions and do not address various other individual, social and political factors that are conducive to radicalization.

For years the highly resilient insurgency in the North Caucasus has been feeding on radical ideologies and some material support from abroad, but has primarily

been sustained by domestic push factors: memories of the two wars in Chechnya, heavy-handed counter-insurgency practices across the region, unresolved intra-confessional and ethnic conflicts, political repression, low quality of governance, a lack of democratic procedures, economic underdevelopment and a dearth of social lifts.

Jihadism manipulates young people's psychological problems, issues with peers, conflicts with parents, their desire for adventure, and pressures of the traditional society. The latter is particularly prominent with young women. A widow returned from ISIS recently explained to me her motives to join ISIS in an interview. She left right after turning 18 and in her own words was looking for an adventure:

"I had everything—studies, sufficient income, a job. I was studying well. But I lacked in adrenalin, it was childhood maximalism, I am crazily agile. I wasn't afraid to die and thought 'if it bombs, it bombs'."

Yet, it becomes clear from her story that her escape to Syria was also a protest, a striving for self-realization and recognition:

"Since my childhood I wanted to work for the FSB (Federal Security Service)... I wanted to wear a uniform and shoulder straps. But my father said: 'My daughter will never be a member of the security services, this is not a woman's job'. Then after school I passionately desired to become a surgeon. But my father chose another profession for me—a construction engineer. I was hysterical, but I couldn't go against his will. I had conflicts with my parents over the hijab. They didn't accept it. Back then I didn't think about

my parents, I was angry at them. Now I wouldn't have ever done it. I've reconsidered everything."

Experts claim that supportive families, exciting activities aimed at self-realization, timely management of psychological problems, quality relations with peers and parents, socialization that provides connectedness, opportunities for adventure, and a sense of purpose are conducive to the successful transition to adulthood (Harper: 2018). Much of it can be created by effective youth policy through the educational system and with civil society programs.

In the North Caucasus it would be important to consider supplementing and even replacing counter-narratives with alternative narratives and engagements. For example, creating new opportunities for self-realization for the youth outside the government-controlled military-patriotic format; facilitating modern and trendy activities; and creating more opportunities for girls and women to participate in them. Open debates about difficult subjects, where constructive, productive and feasible ways of engaging with challenging political issues can be identified, should be encouraged. Human rights volunteering and engaging in other uncontrolled social and political activism will help to positively and constructively channel frustrations within the framework of law.

It would be equally important to improve the quality of counter-narratives by making them creative and youth-friendly. Involving credible messengers from among respected public figures, educators, activists, sportsmen, and peers will significantly increase the impact of CVE work. At the same time, CVE cannot replace sustainable conflict resolution which one day will have to take place in order for new waves of radicalization to be prevented.

#### *About the Author*

Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, Ph.D., is founder and director of the Conflict Analysis and Prevention Center (CAPC), a new think-and-do tank established in 2017. CAPC's mission is to provide nuanced and accurate field-based analysis of and solutions to violent conflicts in Russia and the post-Soviet space.

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