



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Security Review

Aleksandre Kvakhadze

COVID 19 in the North Caucasus Region

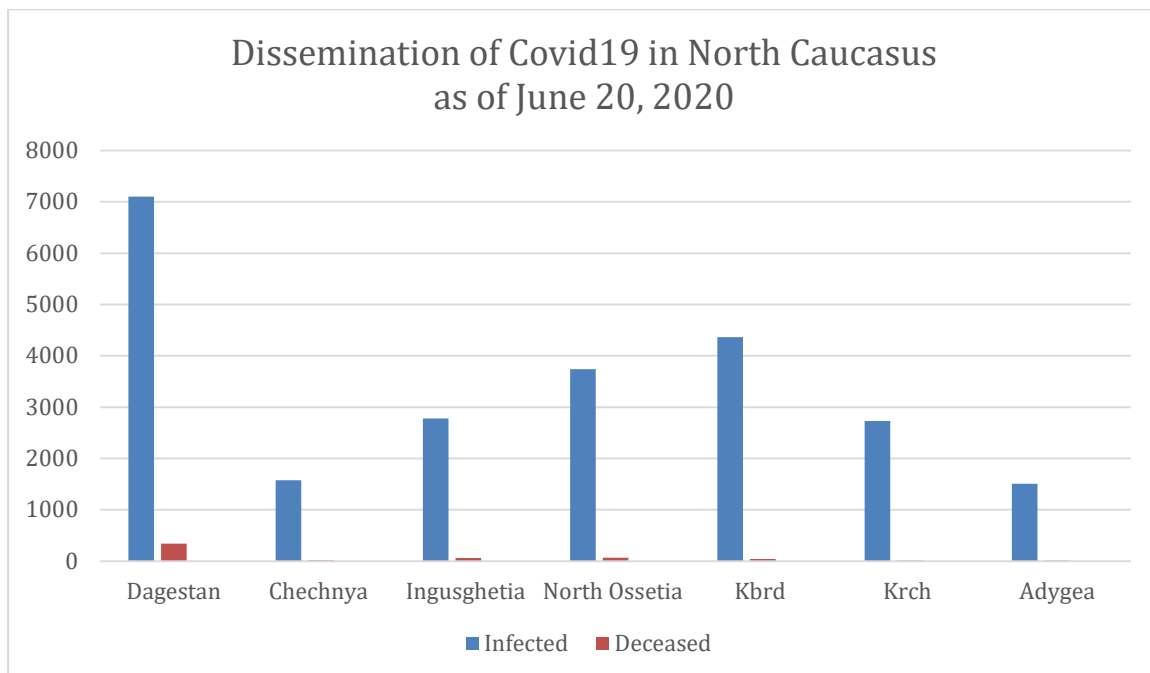
2020

All rights reserved and belong to Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form, including electronic and mechanical, without the prior written permission of the publisher. The opinions and conclusions expressed are those of the author/s and do not necessarily reflect the views of Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies.

Copyright © 2010 Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies

COVID 19 in the North Caucasus Region

According to the latest data, the Russian Federation is one of the top countries in the world in terms of the number of confirmed cases of COVID 19 infections. That said, the media is paying much less attention to the pandemic taking place in the North Caucasus region. According to June 20, 2020's data, the North Caucasus republics had the following statistics with regard to the virus: Dagestan – 7,103 infected, 344 deceased; Chechnya – 1,579 infected, 20 deceased; Ingushetia – 2,782 infected, 64 deceased; North Ossetia – 3,737 infected, 66 deceased; Kabardino-Balkaria – 4,361 infected, 43 deceased; Karachay-Cherkessia – 2,730 infected, 9 deceased and the Republic of Adygea – 1,511 infected, 12 deceased (see chart).¹



It must be pointed out that the spread of the pandemic in the North Caucasus region started a little later as compared to the other regions of Russia which means that the peak of the dissemination remains ahead. Statistics show that the Republic of Dagestan is at the top with the number of infections as well as the number of deceased patients. Here we must also point out the high rate of per capita infections and deaths in Ingushetia. If we calculate the death rate per million people and count Dagestan and Ingushetia as sovereign states, they would both overtake affected regions such as Iran and Armenia, positioning themselves firmly among the top 30 affected countries. The relatively small number of deaths in Chechnya, as compared to the neighboring republics, must also be highlighted. This could be explained by the incorrect assessment/calculation of the death rate. As in other Russian regions, the North Caucasus republics have also introduced a quarantine and a number of restrictions. Quarantines also cover mosques and other religious places of mass gathering that hold an important place in the daily life of North Caucasians. Let us look at the situations in the individual republics.

Republic of North Ossetia – unexpectedly for everyone, harsh quarantine measures caused protests in the relatively calm Republic of North Ossetia. On April 20, hundreds of protesters in the capital city

¹ Kavkazskiy Uzel (2020). „Koronavirus rvyotsya na kavkaz“ [„Coronavirus Making its Way to the Caucasus“]. Available at: https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/category/covid_caucasus [Accessed June 29, 2020]

of Vladikavkaz were demanding the abolition of the quarantine regime and the resignation of the leader of the Republic - Vyacheslav Bitarov. The protests turned into clashes with the law enforcement structures followed by the arrest of several protesters.² One of the organizers of the protest, an opera singer with Ossetian ethnic origins working in Saint Petersburg, Vadim Cheldiev, was arrested on the charges of disseminating false information about the pandemic for which he could face up to five years in jail. More specifically, Cheldiev publicly denied the existence of the virus, connecting the introduction of the quarantine with various conspiracy theories.³

This protest was not Vadim Cheldiev's first political activity. He was actively involved in 2018's protests as well when the demand was to close down the Eelectrozinc factory in Vladikavkaz. Cheldiev's worldview is a type of a mix of Ossetian and Indo-European nationalism, Soviet nostalgia and anti-Semitism. Cheldiev considers himself to be a "Soviet citizen" and has a robust base of supporters in North Ossetia due to the strong sense of Soviet nostalgia there.

Chechen Republic – the leader of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, instituted harsh quarantine measures in his republic. He also made a statement about using aggressive measures against those violating the quarantine regime. For example, he said the following about those who go out during the quarantine: "So, they do not want to sit at home? Let them go to the fields and work and bring profit. We will find a job for them. They can plough the fields and produce a harvest."⁴ The gravity of the epidemic in Chechnya is further revealed by the fact that it has 50 infected doctors.⁵ Ramzan Kadyrov himself got infected with coronavirus, yet he overcame it with light symptoms. It must be noted that Kadyrov's extravagance was reflected in his formulation of the post-crisis plan as well.

Kadyrov expressed his readiness to subsidize bread prices, or the kalim, from the state budget for single men impoverished by the pandemic. Apart from this, he took another extraordinary step: he shaved his head which he explained as follows: "Beauty salons are closed in our country and there are no stylists at home so I shaved my head just like our ancestors used to do." Numerous public servants and law-enforcement structure employees in Chechnya followed Kadyrov's example in this regard. That said, the media reports that some public servants are being forced to shave their heads to express their loyalty to Kadyrov.⁶

Dagestan – Dagestan distinguished itself with a federal-level scandal. Until the middle of May, the republic was not properly recording the number of infected people due to the lack of tests while critical patients were being diagnosed with pneumonia. Such an artificial modification of data even

² M. Gukemukhov (2020). "Odni protestovsali protiv karantina, drugiye yego narushali" ["Some Protested the Quarantine While Others Violated It"]. *Ekho Kavkaza*. Available at: <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/30566510.html> [Accessed June 20, 2020]

³ *Novaya Gazeta* (2020). "Biologicheskaya bomba" ["Biological Bomb"]. Available at: <https://novyagazeta.ru/articles/2020/04/21/85021-biologicheskaya-bomba> [Accessed June 20, 2020]

⁴ *RBC* (2020). "Kadyrov predlozhit otpravlyat narushiteley karantina na raboty v polye." ["Kadyrov Proposed to Take Those Violating Quarantine to Work in the Fields"]. Available at: <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5e93633b9a79474091442a02> [Accessed June 20, 2020]

⁵ *RBC* (2020). "V chechnye zaboleti koronavirusom bolee 50 medikov." ["Over 50 Doctors Infected with Coronavirus in Chechnya"] <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5ec029f29a7947337124bcf5> [Accessed June 20, 2020]

⁶ *Kavkazskiy Uzel* (2020). "Britye golov chinovnikam v Chechnye stalo sposobom dokazat loylnost Kadyrovu. ["Shaving One's Head in Chechnya Becomes a Way of Proving Loyalty to Kadyrov"]; See: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/348744> [Accessed June 20, 2020]

invited criticism from Vladimir Putin vis-à-vis the leadership of the republic. If the overall number of infections up to May 18, when a video conference was held between Putin and the leadership of Dagestan, was just 3,460 the number had already reached 4,830 by May 30.⁷

The high mortality rate in the Republic of Dagestan can be explained by many reasons. First, there are the dense settlements. Houses in mountainous Dagestan typically lean on one another because of which social distancing between neighbors is practically impossible. This is complemented with the multitude of large families where several generations of people live in the same house simultaneously. The second reason is the high share of old people in villages. Due to the high level of urbanization, the number of old people left behind in the villages is relatively high which makes them vulnerable to COVID 19. Finally, the existing culture and customs in Dagestan facilitate the spread of the virus as well as its mortality rate: Dagestan is famous for populous weddings and funeral ceremonies. In an interview with the BBC, one of the locals even said: “I would rather get infected than miss a funeral as not attending it is considered shameful in Dagestan.”⁸

Due to the quarantine and the closed borders, there was discomfort on the border between Russia and Azerbaijan. Over 200 citizens were unable to return to Azerbaijan and the village of Kulari in Dagestan set up temporary camps to house them. A protest was held in Kulari on June 15 as a result of which a clash occurred between the citizens of Azerbaijan camped in Kulari and local law-enforcement structures. Up to 80 Azerbaijani citizens were arrested and imprisoned. The protesters were demanding an organized return to Azerbaijan; however, the process is being delayed to date.⁹

It must also be noted that the Muslim spiritual leadership and Ramzan Kadyrov himself made a decision to re-open the mosques which were closed down during the quarantine and perform Friday prayers there. This decision was made unilaterally without consulting Muslim spiritual leadership structures of the Russian Federation as a whole.¹⁰

Republic of Ingushetia – on May 11, Mufti of the Muslim Spiritual Board of the Republic of Ingushetia, Abdurahman Martazanov, died in Ingushetia. Due to the risk of infection, the ritual of cleansing took place not at the cemetery but in the hospital by individuals wearing special protective clothing.¹¹ The number of infected in Ingushetia is quite high. This is aggravated by economic problems. For example,

⁷ *Meduza* (2020). “Eti tsifry menya uzhasnuli” [“These Numbers Horrified Me”]. See: <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/05/31/eti-tsifry-menya-uzhasnuli> [Accessed June 26, 2020]

⁸ *BBC* (2020). “Nu zarazhus ya, no yesli ne poydu na pokhorony – v Dagestane eto pozor” [“Even if You Get Infected, Not Attending a Funeral in Dagestan is Shameful”]. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-52801799> [Accessed June 20, 2020]

⁹ *Kavkazskiy Uzel* (2020). “Siloviki razognali aktsiyu protesta v kullare” [“Law-enforcement Structures Disband a Protest in Kulari”]. Available at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/350852/> [Accessed June 20, 2020]

¹⁰ *Kavkazskiy Uzel* (2020). “Otkrytiye mechetey v chechnye podcherknulo otsutstviye yedinstva v muftiyatakh skfo” [“Opening up Mosques in Chechnya Reflects the Lack of Unity Among North Caucasus District Muftiates”]. Available at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/350563/> [Accessed June 20, 2020]

¹¹ *Kommersant* (2020). “Glavniy muftiy Ingushetii umer ot koronavirusa” [“Ingushetia’s Leading Mufti Dies from Coronavirus”]. Available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4320594> [Accessed June 20, 2020]

on June 15, Ingush doctors fighting against COVID 19 posted a video on the internet, complaining to the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, that they had not received their earned bonuses.¹²

Kabardino-Balkaria – much like the other North Caucasian republics, the number of infections in Kabardino-Balkaria is also quite high due to which the local healthcare system is facing logistical problems. For example, the personnel of the Lesken district hospital made a statement about the lack of protective gear.¹³ The mountainous resorts of the republic were closed due to the pandemic and the local government estimated that they will not be reopening until August 1 at the earliest.¹⁴ Numerous people living in the mountainous regions have lost their source of income because of this as their income came mostly from the tourism sector. Apart from the pandemic, other problems within the republic are also worsening the situation: hunger strikes in penitentiary facilities,¹⁵ strong winds in the Prokhladnoe district¹⁶ and picketing in support of lawyers.¹⁷

Republic of Karachay-Cherkessia – the pandemic has generated high-profile criminal cases in Karachay-Cherkessia. On June 11, a search was conducted in the houses of two representatives of an opposition-minded YouTube channel, Chorny Klub (Black Club), Murat Tokov and Vladimir Bijiev, with proceedings having begun for disseminating false information regarding COVID 19. The reason for this was a video placed on YouTube on June 9, entitled “It is Time to Declare a State of Emergency in Karachay-Cherkessia,” where the authors were stating their opinion that the epidemiological situation within the republic was graver than the government was ready to admit.¹⁸ Much like the neighboring Kabardino-Balkaria, the mountainous balneological resort Arkhyz in Karachay-Cherkessia closed down for visitors due to the quarantine.¹⁹

¹² *Kavkazskiy Uzel* (2020). “Vrachi v Ingushetii pozhalovali na neviplaty po covid-19” [“Ingush Doctors Protest About not Receiving Bonuses Designated for COVID 19”]. Available at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/350867/> [Accessed June 20, 2020]

¹³ *Kavkazskiy Uzel* (2020). “Sotrudniki Leskenskoy rayonnoy bolnitsy zayavili o nekhvatki sredstv zashiti” [“Employees of Lesken District Hospital Stated About the Deficit of Protective Gear”]. Available at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/350513/> [Accessed June 20, 2020]

¹⁴ *Vesti Kavkaza* (2020). “Vlasti Kabardino-Balkarii raskazali, kogda kurorty otkroyutsya dlya turistov” [“Government of Kabardino-Balkaria Published a Statement about Opening Up Resorts for Tourists”]. Available at: <https://vestikavkaza.ru/news/vlasti-kabardino-balkarii-rasskazali-kogda-kurorty-otkroyutsya-dla-turistov.html> [Accessed June 20, 2020]

¹⁵ *Kavkazskiy Uzel* (2020). “Gruppa zakluchennikh obyavila golodovku v sizo Nalchika” [“A Group of Prisoners has Gone on a Hunger Strike in Nalchik Pre-detention Facility”]. Available at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/350577/> [Accessed June 20, 2020]

¹⁶ *Kavkazskiy Uzel* (2020). “Zhitel Kabardino-Balkarii pogib vo vremya nepogody” [“Citizen of Kabardino-Balkaria Dies Due to Bad Weather Conditions”]. Available at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/350420/> [Accessed June 20, 2020]

¹⁷ *Kavkazskiy Uzel* (2020). “Siloviki sochli pikety v podderzhku advokatov iz Kabardino-Balkarii skrytoy formoy massovykh protestov” [“Law-enforcement Officials Consider Picketing in Support of Kabardino-Balkarian Lawyers to be a Hidden Form of Mass Protests”]. Available at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/350471/> [Accessed June 20, 2020]

¹⁸ *Kavkazskiy Uzel* (2020). “Zhurnalisty Karachaev-Cherkessii obvineny v rasprostraneni feikov o koronaviruse” [“Journalists from Karachay-Cherkessia are Being Charged with Spreading False Information About the Coronavirus”]. Available at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/350789/> [Accessed June 20, 2020]

¹⁹ *Den Respubliki* (2020). “Kurorty Karachaev-Cherkessii i drugikh regionov skfo gotovyatsya k otkrytiyu” [“Resorts in Karachay-Cherkessia and Other Places in the North Caucasus Federal District are Preparing for Reopening”] <https://denresp.ru/2020/06/11/kurorty-karachaev-cherkesii-i-drugih-regionov-skfo-gotovyatsya-k-otkrytiyu/> [Accessed June 20, 2020]

The Republic of Adygea – the COVID 19 pandemic did not cause any kind of protests or other developments in the Republic of Adygea. The share of those infected and deceased is roughly the same as in the neighboring Krasnodar Kray. That said, the June 17 hailstorm in the village of Hatukay damaged 1,200 houses which could lead to the violation of social distancing and the growth of the number of infections.²⁰

The example of Dagestan shows that a purposeful reduction of statistics could happen in other republics as well. Given this, the data put forward by the North Caucasus republics raises serious questions and trust towards it is low. It is difficult to predict the scale of the further spread of the virus. To date, there is no formula for the further dissemination and future reduction of the virus that would be compatible with every state and region. The spread of the virus and the death rate could be connected to factors such as population density and mobility, the average age of the population within the region, the existing customs, the spread of chronic diseases, climate, the period of year and so on. Furthermore, the flaws in recording the statistics of infections in the North Caucasus and the cover-up of precise data complicate these calculations even more. Here we must also point out that one can already predict the economic and social processes that could unfold in the North Caucasus republics. As we know, all North Caucasus republics are practice dotation and are at the bottom in terms of the GDP per capita as compared to other regions of the Russian Federation. Quarantines and travel restrictions will cause thousands of internal migrants, whose main income was physical work in various Russian regions, to become impoverished. This is compounded with the loss of thousands of jobs in the tourism sector in the North Caucasus. The seaside regions of Azerbaijan and North Ossetia as well will lose some income due to their reliance on international transit. The amount of remittances from Chechens living in Europe that they send to their relatives living in Chechnya will unavoidably be reduced as well. The high level of corruption in the North Caucasus region causes us to think that part of the funds allocated from the federal budget for stimulating the economy will not get to the population and will instead be lost to various corruption schemes. All this will cause the already poor population of North Caucasus to become even poorer, further complicating their social and political conditions. Were this to happen, protests and tensions should be expected.

²⁰ AIF (2020). “V aule Khatukay grad povredil bolee 1,200 domov” [“Hailstorm in the Village of Hatukay Damaged over 1,200 Houses”] Available at: https://adigea.aif.ru/politic/details/v_aule_hatukay_grad_povredil_bolee_1200_domov [Accessed June 20, 2020]