

“The Sleeping Beauty of the Caucasus”: Kavkazskii Uzel and Contemporary Views on Politics and Security in Kabardino-Balkaria

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Abstract

In the post-Soviet North Caucasus, the Kabardino-Balkar Republic, where political tensions among its constituent nationalities are never far from the surface, long sat precariously between the region’s peaceful northwest and its tumultuous northeast. Observers of the political and security situation in the North Caucasus have long viewed the multiethnic Kabardino-Balkar Republic as integral to the fate of the region as a whole. During the first fifteen years of post-Soviet history, Kabardino-Balkaria was conspicuous for its absence of violent conflict and relative inter-communal accord. Several Islamist-led attacks in 2004 and, more violently and infamously, 2005 shattered any illusions of Kabardino-Balkaria’s immunity to the violence that had plagued much of the region since in recent years. By 2010 and 2011 assassinations of high-ranking officials and public figures and attacks on police patrols reached a peak, and Kabardino-Balkaria ranked alongside Ingushetia and Dagestan as one of Russia’s most violent regions. Since late 2012, however, the scale and frequency of these attacks have diminished significantly. This article uses social media as lens to analyze the attitudes of residents of Kabardino-Balkaria toward issues of politics and security in the region. This article pays particular attention to commentators’ views on the Islamist insurgency and its ideological opponents (Circassian/Kabardian and Balkar national activists and the republic’s ruling elite). Specifically, this article analyzes the content of Kabardino-Balkaria-related discussion forums on the popular Caucasus news and analysis website Caucasian Knot (Kavkazskii Uzel). This analysis is contextualized with a brief ethnographic and historical survey of inter-communal relations, Islam, and politics in Kabardino-Balkaria.

Keywords: North Caucasus; politics; social media; Caucasus Emirate; Kabardino-Balkaria; nationalism; Islam; conflict

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On October 13, 2005, in the usually sleepy Russian city of Nalchik, the capital of the multiethnic Kabardino-Balkar Republic, about two hundred heavily-armed Islamic extremists attacked the main centers of the military and police. The attack on Nalchik went unnoticed for most outside of Russia. For those who did take in the limited media coverage, the attack was another in a string of violent acts that had come to characterize the North Caucasus since the start of the Chechen wars. However, in the North Caucasus the events of October 13 were met with surprise and confusion. While much of the North Caucasus, from Abkhazia to Dagestan, had experienced armed conflicts since the Soviet collapse, Kabardino-Balkaria, despite having what seemed to be the ingredients for intercommunal conflict, stood out as an island of relative peace in the heart of the Caucasus. In the 1990s, Dzhokhar Dudaev, the late President of the separatist Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, called the Kabardino-Balkaria “a sleeping beauty that has yet to be awoken.” Dudaev and other observers of the region predicted that if nationalist-fueled intercommunal conflict spread to Kabardino-Balkaria, Russia’s ability to maintain stability over its entire restive North Caucasus borderland would come into question. The belief then was— as it was during the nineteenth century when the Kabardian and Balkar lands formed Russia’s stronghold in the North Caucasus as it desperately tried to subdue resistance in the northwest and northeast Caucasus — as goes Kabardino-Balkaria, so goes the rest of the North Caucasus (Temirov, 2011; Kazenin, 2009: 58). “The sleeping beauty,” to quote Bakhtiar Akhmedkhanov, “rolled over in her sleep” twice: in a burst of violence on October 2005 and in a more prolonged string of attacks between 2010 and 2011 (Akhmedkhanov, 2016). Over the last two years the security situation in Kabardino-Balkaria has returned to a level of relative stability.

This article will use social media a lens —though, admittedly an imperfect one— through which to examine popular attitudes toward the current political, intercommunal, and security situation within Kabardino-Balkaria. In particular, I will explore discussion threads attached to Kabardino-Balkaria-related news articles on the popular Caucasus news website *Kavkazskii Uzel* (KU or Caucasian Knot). This site provides a relatively wide cross-section of viewpoints because, unlike most other popular Caucasus-themed discussion forums, it

does not cater to a specific ethnic, social or religious community. At the same time, most of its commentators self-identify as coming from the Caucasus region. Thus, KU creates a forum for an exchange of opinions that would be difficult to imagine outside of cyberspace.

This paper is organized into three sections. First, it offers context with a brief history of Kabardino-Balkaria and a discussion of its contemporary political and security situation. Second, I describe the website *Kavkazskii Uzel* and its online communities and cultures in greater detail. Third, I offer annotated excerpts from a data set of discussions that took place over the period of a month. I divide these excerpts according to two general themes: security and human rights, and politics. After each group of excerpts, I provide thick analysis of the discussions and draw some conclusions about the attitudes of Kabardino-Balkaria-affiliated KU commentators. Finally, I offer some broad conclusions about the value of research on online communities and avenues for expanding the scope and insightfulness of such research.

Place and People

The Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria is situated on 4,800 square miles toward the center of the central Caucasus region in the Russian Federation. Within this relatively small territory, Kabardino-Balkaria includes a diversity of ecological zones, which are a microcosm of those found in the central Caucasus generally. Moving southwest across the republic, the Terek plains of Lesser Kabarda, in the northeast corner, are hot, humid and prone to drought. The fertile and naturally well-watered plains closer to the center of the republic have a continental climate. Farther to the south and west, as the elevation begins to rise up to 5,250 feet above sea level, the foothill zone, composing sixteen percent of Kabardino-Balkaria’s territory, is covered in lush forests and has a more moderate climate. Finally, the mountain zone, in the south and west, with an extreme continental climate, makes up just over half of Kabardino-Balkaria’s territory. This mountain zone generally consists of two parts: (1) the subalpine and alpine mountain pastures and surrounding valleys and ridges, covered with tall grass on its rolling hills in the short summer season and barren and often snow-covered during the long winter season,

extends from approximately 5,250 to 10,000 feet above sea level; and (2) the arctic zone (rising beyond 10,000 feet above sea level), with its rocky ridges, is mostly snow-covered year round (Buraev and Emuzova, 1998: 13-22). Europe's highest mountain, Elbrus, with its 18,510 summit, is located in Kabardino-Balkaria's arctic zone. Kabardino-Balkaria is bordered by North Ossetia in the east, Stavropol region to North, Karachay-Cherkessia to the west, and the main Caucasus ridge and the Georgia to the south.

Kabardino-Balkaria includes three primary cultural-linguistic communities, Kabardians and Balkars, who are the republic's titular nationalities, and Russians. Composing over 57 percent of the republic's population (490,543 people in 2010), the Kabardian majority are a sub-group of the Circassian people. Their Kabardino-Cherkess language is a dialect of Circassian, which is part of the northwest Caucasian Adyghe-Abkhaz language family. Kabardians form majorities in six of the republic's ten districts and reside mainly in the plains and foothills. Composing 12.7 percent of Kabardino-Balkaria's population (108,577 people), the Balkars speak Karachay-Balkar, a Kipchak-Turkic language also spoken by the Balkars' Karachay neighbors to the west. The Balkars reside compactly in three districts (Elbrus, Chegem, and Cherek) and the city of Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria's centrally located capital. As of the 2010 Russian census, Russians make up 22.5 percent of Kabardino-Balkaria's population, which is a nearly ten percent decline since 1989. Russians reside primarily in the republic's urban settlements and cities, and in two districts (Maiskii and Prokhladnyi) where they form absolute majorities (Federal'naia sluzhba gosudarstvennoi statistiki, 78-80). Many of the Russians of these districts are the descendants of the Cossacks who colonized the Caucasus in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Historical Background

During Russia's long struggle to conquer the peoples of the North Caucasus in the nineteenth century, Russia's control over the Kabardian lands and the loyalty of most Kabardian elites played a key role in Russia's ability to main its presence in the region and hold resistance movements at bay. To be sure, Kabardian forces fiercely

resisted Russian expansion during the initial phase of Russia’s imperial conquest in the Caucasus in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But by the 1820s, the combined effects of warfare and plague made the once-powerful princely confederation of Kabarda one of the first parts of the Caucasus to come under Russian imperial control. Indeed, unlike the Chechens, many Dagestani peoples, and the northwest Circassians, Kabardians are more noted for their alliances with and assistance to Russia —the most famous example of which is the marriage between Ivan the Terrible and the Kabardian princess Gueshchenei in 1561— than their resistance to Russian imperial rule. Russian control over Kabarda in the central Caucasus, and particularly the loyalty to the Russian state of most Kabardian elites, prevented the long-successful resistance movements in the northwest and northeast Caucasus from linking up and combining forces during the Russo-Caucasian Wars of the nineteenth century. The Kabardians’ numerically smaller Balkar mountaineer neighbors are likewise not noted for their resistance to Russia. Rather, hoping that Russian rule would end their communities’ land-based political and economic dependence on their larger Kabardian neighbors, the elders of the Balkar societies appealed to the Russian colonial administration for protection and peacefully joined the Russian Empire in 1827 (Begeulov, 2005: 52).

The ultimately peaceful relationship between Kabardians and Balkars has its roots in the symbiotic, though unequal, system of inter-communal relations that existed in the central Caucasus prior to the Russian conquest in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries and that continued in evolving and modified forms through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This symbiosis was based on each community occupying complimentary ecological niches. From the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, the Circassian princely confederation of Kabarda, controlling the vital arable farmland and seasonal pastures in the plains, was one of the most powerful states in the North Caucasus. Elites from neighboring transhumant mountaineer (*gortsy*) communities—today’s Balkars, Karachay, Ossetians and Ingush—collected tribute from their villagers and paid part of it to Kabardian princes to obtain for their community the right to graze cattle on Kabarda’s lowland fiefdoms in the autumn and

spring. Moreover, given the limitations of mountain terrace farming, mountaineers depended on grain from Kabarda for their survival. For their part, Kabardians relied on their mountaineer neighbors for animal products (regionally, Balkars historically kept the greatest amount of sheep and cattle per capita), candles, and refuge during invasions from external enemies.¹

However mutually beneficial, the relationship between Kabardians and the five mountaineer societies now known as Balkars, given the former's numerical superiority and control over the best land, has never been based on equality or parity of political and economic power. The decline of Kabarda in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries allowed Kabarda's former tributary communities of Ossetians and Ingush to break free of their land-based economic and political dependence on Kabarda. But given their location, locked in the mountains immediately south of the Greater Kabardian heartland, the Balkar mountaineer communities remained dependent upon Kabardians for access to seasonal pastures long after the establishment of Russian rule. Indeed, by establishing a system of pasturage sharing between Kabardian and Balkar communities and transferring land from relatively well-supplied Kabardian communities to landless Balkar ones for resettlement, the tsarist colonial administration further linked together the fates of the Kabardian and Balkar peoples.

The establishment of Kabardino-Balkaria dates back to 1922, when the nascent Soviet state combined Kabardians and Balkars into a common dual-titular autonomous administrative unit. Casual observers have argued that by amalgamating these two linguistically and (to a lesser extent) culturally different communities, rather than uniting them with their contiguous cultural-linguistic brethren—the Karachay and northwest Circassians respectively—to the west, Soviet policymakers hoped to keep the peoples of the northwest and central Caucasus weak and divided.² While this may have been a concern, far more important to Soviet officials was the pre-existing economic and administrative ties that bound the Kabardians and Balkars together.³ The Soviet state's ethnicization of politics in the 1920s led to a brief period of intercommunal conflict as Balkar elites led an abortive attempt to create a separate Balkar Autonomous Oblast. The central

Soviet authorities quickly intervened and brokered a resolution by meeting the Balkar peasantry’s demand for more land in the plains in exchange for remaining in a common autonomous oblast with the Kabardians and meeting the Balkar elites’ demands for political power by offering Balkars important positions in local government (Dzamikhov and Kumakhov, 2001: 261-268).

The period between 1944 and 1957 was a major rupture in Kabardino-Balkaria’s system of intercommunal relations. In March 1944, the NKVD special forces of the Soviet state deported the entire Balkar population to Central Asia on trumped-up charges of mass treason during the Nazi occupation of 1942. Although the “Thaw”-era efforts of central and local officials and local Kabardian and Russian communities largely succeeded in reintegrating Balkar communities after their return in the 1950s, the Balkars never experienced full political and cultural rehabilitation. The legacies of Stalin-era deportations of entire ethnicities from the North Caucasus, including the Balkars, fueled much of the intercommunal tension and ethno-nationalist mobilization that spread through the North Caucasus during the tumultuous early post-Soviet years (Borov, 2006).

Though not without tension, the relationship between Kabardino-Balkaria’s indigenous communities (Kabardians and Balkars) and local Cossacks and Russian communities has been less fraught than native-settler relations in other parts of the North Caucasus. This is because, after the final conquest of Kabarda in 1822-25, unlike in the Chechen, Ingush, and Ossetian lands, Cossack and Russian peasant colonization of the Kabardian lands (Cossacks and Russians did not settle the mountainous regions of the Balkar societies) did not directly lead to substantial displacement and landlessness.⁴ The history of the Kabardians is not marred by native-settler land conflict. Nevertheless, the Circassian and Cossack national/cultural revivals of the post-Soviet era have led to moments of heightened tension between Kabardians and nominally “Russian” Cossack communities.⁵

Another important difference between Kabardians and Balkars on the one hand and many other North Caucasus communities on the other is the role of Islam in their history. Kabardians and Balkars, as with other Islamic peoples of the northwest and central Caucasus, adopted Islam much later and more superficially than their Chechen

and Dagestani neighbors in the northeast Caucasus. The confessional practices of Kabardian and Balkar communities exhibited a syncretic mix of Islamic and traditional folk religious influences. Importantly, among Kabardians and Balkars, Islam never became the galvanizing and unifying force for resistance to Russia, as it did among Chechens and Dagestani peoples. Soviet rule, with its official atheism, further weakened Islamic influence among Kabardians and Balkars. By the end of the Soviet period, Kabardino-Balkaria only had two official mosques (Fagan, 2014: 30). Most Kabardians and Balkars were not practicing Muslims and Islamic influences remained only as relatively small elements of these communities' cultures: abstention from pork; celebration of the Feast of the Sacrifice (Kurban Bairam); and funeral rites.⁶

Post-Soviet Society and Politics in Kabardino-Balkaria

During the early 1990s, the waves of ethno-nationalist mobilization that swept through the Soviet Union engulfed Kabardino-Balkaria. Kabardian ethno-national elites called for the ouster of the local Soviet *nomenklatura* and the redrawing of the borders of the North Caucasus so that the people they claimed to represent would be united in a common republic with their Circassian brethren in Karachay-Cherkessia and Adygeya. Balkar ethno-national elites called for the separation of Balkaria into its own republic within Russia and the full rehabilitation of the Balkar people as victims of genocide. During the first half of the 1990s Kabardino-Balkaria seemed to be headed toward a violent break up along ethnic lines. By the late 1990s, however, the ethno-political situation had largely stabilized. First, Valerii Kokov, the ethnically Kabardian leader of Kabardino-Balkaria and a former Soviet Communist Party apparatchik, managed to co-opt part of the Kabardian ethno-national leadership into the region's state establishment while successfully coercing and pressuring the remaining elites to abandon politics. Second, the local and central authorities disarmed the threat of Balkar separatism through a carrot-and-stick approach that mixed co-opting Balkar elites, offering the Balkars an acceptable share of power in the republic, symbolic and limited material support for the Balkar victims

of deportation, and the banned and prosecution of Balkar organizations with separatist platforms.⁷

When Dzhokhar Dudaev called Kabardino-Balkaria “a sleeping beauty that has yet to be awoken,” the general-*cum*-president had in mind the prospect that ethno-nationalist mobilization among Kabardians, Balkars, and Cossacks/Russians would boil over into separatism and intercommunal violence. In retrospect, observers were looking for the “sleeping beauty” in the wrong place. The “sleeping beauty” was actually located in contradictions within Kabardian and Balkar communities rather than between them, and between an overtly anti-nationalist Islamist stratum of these communities on the one hand and the Russian state on the other. This reality became clear October 13 2005. On this date, about 200 hundred Islamist fighters of the until-then largely inactive insurgent organization *Jamaat Yarmuk* attacked the centers of law enforcement, state security, and military in Nalchik, resulting in 147 dead and 190 wounded (“Napadenie na Nal’chik 13-14 oktiabria 2005 goda”).

Though it came as a surprise to many, this explosion of *intra*-communal violence had been long brewing. In the 1990s, with the end of official Soviet atheism and opening of international borders, the republics of the North Caucasus witnessed an Islamist revival. This revival was especially strong among the younger generation in search of a new set of values to replace the outmoded Soviet values of their parents’ generation and an alternative to the robber-baron capitalist ethos of Russia’s “wild 1990s”r After taking advantage of opportunities to study Islamic theology in the Middle East, representatives of this younger generation of Kabardians and Balkars returned to North Caucasus and challenged the traditional Islamic establishment’s syncretic and quietest version of Islam by propagating a more socially engaged, proselytic, and (so they believed) pure version of the religion based on Salafist teachings. Early on, this confrontation between the republic’s rival Islamic organizations —the official Muslim Spiritual Administration of the Kabardino-Balkar Republic (*Dukhovnoe upravlenie musul’man KBR*) the new Islamic Center, took the form of theological debates and administrative pressure, as DUMKBR used its connections to the state to deprive the

Islamic Center of its official status. With the Islamization of the fighting in Chechnya and the spread of Jihadi violence to Dagestan and Ingushetia in the early 2000s, the security services (FSB and MVD) in Kabardino-Balkaria embarked a “Wahhabi” witch-hunt, shutting down mosques affiliated with the Islamic Center, compiling lists of suspected “Wahhabis” based solely on mosque attendance, and illegally detaining and torturing young worshippers. This spate of police oppression, pushed some members of the Islamic Center, reformed as the Jamaat Yarmuk, to drift toward violent Jihad. Indeed, the leaders of the Jamaat Yarmuk, Anzor Astemirov and Musa Mukovzhev, had long been in contact with Shamil Basayev’s Islamist insurgency in Chechnya and Dagestan. Moreover, Astemirov is widely held to have been behind a string of smaller attacks in and around Kabardino-Balkaria prior to the mass assault on Nalchik in 2005.⁸

Between 2005 and 2009, attacks on security forces by United Viliyat of Kabarda Balkaria and Karachay of the Caucasus Emirate (as Jamaat Yarmuk has been known since officially joined the wider North Caucasian insurgency of the Caucasus Emirate in 2007) were relatively sporadic and the level of violence in Kabardino-Balkaria was well below that of Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia. From the middle of 2010 through 2012, Kabardino-Balkaria witnessed a sharp spike in violence —drive-by attacks and ambushes on police patrols and block-posts; assassinations of prominent intellectuals, businessmen, and moderate religious figures; and bombings. During this period the scale of violence in Kabardino-Balkaria was comparable to that of Chechnya and Ingushetia. While it is unclear why this escalation occurred, observers have pointed to several events that roughly coincided with it: Balkar ethno-political mobilization around the privatization of land in their districts; political competition surrounding the end of then-President of Kabardino-Balkaria’s first term in office; the death of the local insurgent leader Anzor Astemirov; and the general trend during preceding years of the “spill over” of violent Jihad from Chechnya to other parts of the North Caucasus (Ratelle, 2013: 144-75).

Since late 2012, Kabardino-Balkaria, as with the North Caucasus generally, has witnessed a steady though not overwhelming, decline in levels of violence (“Severnyi Kavkaz—Statistika zhertv”). Observers have pointed to a clampdown by security forces in the year before the

2014 Winter Olympics in nearby Sochi and the fact that many North Caucasians have chosen to wage violent Jihad in Syria as plausible explanations for this decline in violence (“PTs ‘Memorial’: snizhenie poter”). In Kabardino-Balkaria, the most significant drop in violent attacks on police has come since late 2013, when Iurii Kokov, the former head of the Republic’s Anti-Terrorism Department, replaced Arsen Kanokov, the business-oriented regional President who presided over Kabardino-Balkaria’s security breakdown since 2005.

Caucasus Knot/*Kavkazskii Uzel*

Since its founding as a project of the Russian human rights organization Memorial in 2001, *Kavkazskii Uzel* or Caucasian Knot [KU] has served internet users as an independent news and information source on the greater Caucasus region. KU’s particular focus has been on politics, human rights issues, and armed conflict. According to KU’s official mission statement, its goals are “to provide free access to truthful and unbiased information about events in the Caucasus; to inform the Russian and world society about incidences of human rights violations, ethnic and political discrimination, the situation in conflict zones, problems of refugees; and provide informational assistance for the development of citizens’ initiatives and independent mass media.” KU publishes reports from local journalists; official documents and legal acts; reference material on the history, peoples, and religious and cultural traditions of the region; scholarly literature; op-eds and commentaries; and data on regional non-governmental organizations, political and community leaders, and regional media outlets. In addition to textual content, KU publishes photo and video reports on local news stories from the region. KU sponsors a range of “special projects” (*spetsproekty*): for example, The North Caucasus through the Eyes of Bloggers (*Severnii Kavkaz glazami blogerov*), a collaboration with the BBC Russian Service; Map of a Peaceful Caucasus (*Karta mirnogo Kavkaza*), a joint project with the Russian search-engine Yandex; and a series of interviews of the Presidents of the region’s Republics, a joint project with the internet news site gazeta.ru. Since 2003, KU has offered an abbreviated English version of the website. The most active and

visited portion of KU is its “News” section, which offers between 70 to 100 news daily articles divided regionally and thematically (“O nas”).

In 2009, KU introduced a series of interactive functions to its programming. For the purposes of this article, the most important of these interactive aspects is its user-comments forum. Registered users are able to post comments on all material published on KU. These commentary forums have attracted a large and devoted user base, and KU reports that as of 2012 the site has over 12,000 active commentators. These commentators most actively post on news articles (“O nas”).

Virtual or online communities with their own cyber-cultures have developed out of KU’s commentary forums. Dating back to 1993, the baseline definition of virtual communities (now online communities is the more common term), comes from Howard Rheingold’s *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*: “social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on...public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (quoted in Kozinets, 2010: 8). The members of these online communities participate in a common cyber-culture. In other words, to take a Geertzian approach, members of online communities share a learned system of meanings of signs and symbols that is mediated through networked computing technology (Kozinets, 2010: 10-13). On KU, these communities have mainly formed around specific regional affiliations. On KU’s forums, each republic and oblast of the Caucasus has its own community of commentators whose members most frequently, if not exclusively, post comments and enter into discussions on articles related to that republic or oblast. As opposed to other Caucasus online communities, KU’s online communities are determined by regional affiliations rather than ethnic or religious ones.

A commentator’s status and cultural capital within KU’s online communities is partially reflected in her official rating and status. On March 20, 2012, KU introduced a system of ratings and statuses for its active commentators. According to KU, “the calculation of a rating is based on the voting of registered readers on each other’s comments based on the weight of each individual vote; the weight of an

individual vote, in turn, is based on the voter’s rating.” Readers can give a positive or a negative vote to a given comment. There is a hierarchy of ten positive statuses and four negative statuses based on rating number. KU awards extra points to users who submit “eye-witness news reports, unique information, and open letters and appeals.” Those with positive ratings receive a range of user privileges: the use of an avatar; the use of an html editor; the ability to post photos in their comments; participation in KU’s planning work, invitations to participate in competitions, the ability to have a permanent blog on KU, and the right to assist the moderator.” Commentators’ statuses, and their reputation and cultural capital generally, can be enhanced by winning competitions for best commentaries. KU will decrease the ratings and restrict the privileges of commentators who post spam, make personal attacks and insults, threaten other users, use explicit language, call for violence, war, ethnic, religious, and racial enmity (“O nas”).

What is relatively unique about KU—and what makes its comments forum an ideal social-media source for the study of attitudes toward contemporary social and political problems the Caucasus—is the diversity of Caucasian identities represented by its user-commentators. On the one hand, most of KU’s user-commentators present themselves as coming from the Caucasus region: they either claim to reside in the Caucasus or to be originally from the region. Yet, on the other hand, these user-commentators position themselves as coming from a diversity of ethnic, religious, and social backgrounds. Given that politics in the Caucasus region have become highly ethnicized and confessionalized, most of the other popular Caucasus discussion forums attract users who express a relatively homogenous set of views and represent or position themselves in relatively in similar ways. For example, Kavkazchat.com is the social forum for Kavkazcenter, the official site of the Caucasus Emirate, the underground Salafist-Islamist insurgent movement seeking to overthrow Russian power and establish an Islamic state in the North Caucasus. The commentators on Kavkazchat.com are generally likeminded supporters of some form of political Islam. On the opposite end of the spectrum, there are numerous ethnicized forums that are dedicated to one particular community and, with the

exception of trolls, attract users who present themselves as members of the same ethnicity.⁹ In addition to the distinctiveness of KU's online communities in comparison with most other Caucasus online communities, another factor makes KU's online communities a particularly unique tool for studying the attitudes of the region's diverse communities. Given the anonymizing effects of the online-discussion-forum medium and the canalization of social life according to ethnic boundaries in the North Caucasus, the types of open interactions among allegedly diverse people that take place within KU's online communities would be difficult to observe outside of cyberspace.

Data Analysis

My data set included comments and conversations posted by 44 active and rated commentators on 37 news articles related to Kabardino-Balkaria published on the Russian-language version of Caucasian Knot between September 20, 2014 and October 20, 2014. The news articles that yielded the greatest volume of forum comments and conversations fall within two broad thematic categories: 1) security and human rights; and 2) regional politics. The first category —security and human rights—included articles on attacks on police, prosecution of suspected fighters and their abettors, and human rights violations by local security forces. The second category —regional politics— primarily included news reports on the official selection of Iurii Kokov as Head of the Republic by the Kabardino-Balkar Parliament (after nearly a year of serving as Interim Head) and Kokov's subsequent formation of a new government.

Security and Human Right

The attitudes of commentators toward local law enforcement and security services are generally split between those who are critical of the police, security services, and courts and those who are generally supportive of them and more concerned about the spread Islamic radicalism. On the one hand, there are those who angrily blame the police for exacerbating security problems in the republic with their heavy-handed tactics, are cynical about the police's ability to reform, and distrust the impartiality courts. This group of commentators is

most concerned with questions of human rights and rule of law. On the other hand, there are those who think that the local courts are too lenient on convicted fighters and believe that the police and security services are justified in taking extra-legal measures to combat terrorism. This group of commentators is most concerned with they see as the threat of Islamic radicalism to security and stability in their republic. The following selection of three excerpts from conversations from the data set illustrates these opposing attitudes.

On September 20, KU published the article “In Kabardino-Balkaria Representatives of the Security Organs Promised Lawyers that They Will Investigate Cases of Violence toward Detainees.” This article reports on a round-table discussion on human rights violations in Kabardino-Balkaria. The participants in this discussion included human rights advocates, relatives of purported police-abuse victims, and representatives of the republic’s security organs. Magomed Miziev, Head of Prosecutorial Department for the Investigation of Crime in the Investigative Division of the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation for the Kabardino-Balkar Republic, announced that this autumn Kabardino-Balkaria’s Prosecutor will examine reports about the use of violence toward detainees who are involved in criminal investigations. Responding to the reports of police abuses during the discussion, Miziev implored the round table to participants to “not forget that there are murdered law enforcement officers — more than one hundred of them, and more than twice that many wounded— and they have mothers and children (Maratova, “V Kabardino-Balkarii siloviki”).

The relatively short but revealing discussion thread on this report begins with criticism of Miziev and the security organs. Alibeka waxes cynical about official promises to investigate abuses by law enforcement: “The wolves have promised to find out who among their flock is feeding on rabbit meat.” Dobryi, criticizing Miziev’s request to “not forget that there are murdered law enforcement officers,” writes: “Is anyone forgetting about this? And since when does the murder of police officers justify breaking the law?” From the opposing perspective, Mir444 writes: “When religious extremism stops, then the pressure from police will stop” (Maratova, “V Kabardino-Balkarii siloviki”).

On September 27, KU published the article “Court in Kabardino-Balkaria finds Claims of Biaslan Dzhaboev’s Association with Fighters Unsubstantiated.” This article explains that during court hearings over the killing of Biaslan Dzhaboev by local police in February 2012, the judge dismissed the police’s claim that Dzhaboev was involved with Caucasus Emirate fighters as unsubstantiated. Dzhaboev’s family, who insist on their deceased relative’s innocence on all counts, went to court to clear Dzhaboev’s name and make a case for wrongful death lawsuit against the police. However, the court upheld all the three other charges against Dzhaboev: endangering the lives of law enforcement officers; arms trafficking; and intentional damage to property. The Dzhaboev family and their lawyer claim that police cover-up took place, and that witnesses gave false testimony under duress (Muratova, “Sud v Kabardino-Balkarii”).

Amnistiya opens the discussion thread on this report with her assessment of the results of the court proceedings: “A partial rehabilitation is a partial victory... The family of this poor guy doesn’t stand a chance of achieving a full victory...” Zalimbek07 responds angrily:

Human-Rights advocates say that ‘this poor guy doesn’t stand a chance of achieving a full victory.’ The guy shot at the police and yet they still want a full rehabilitation? I’ll go to Iraq and rehabilitate those who cut up people alive...Here, when they kill a Muslim, all of a sudden everyone starts going on about repression. Go to Europe or America, over there they have long since rooted out the types of infractions that you give out year sentences for in Russia.

This aggressive comment precipitates a long and vitriolic debate, with much redacting of explicit language by the forum moderator, over Islam (Zalimbek07 disparages Islam) and the nature of law enforcement and human rights groups in Kabardino-Balkaria (Muratova, “Sud v Kabardino-Balkarii”).

Later in the conversation thread, Vip404, who claims to have been at the court proceedings, writes: “As of now, all evidence points to the fact that Dzhaboev and the person sitting next to him couldn’t have shot at the police.” Vip404 proceeds to explain why the evidence contradicts the court’s ruling; some commentators are convinced

while others attempt to refute his reasoning. Ass, intimating that the police officers who act with impunity today will eventually become victims of the system, writes: “One thing is clear; the security services at the present time have the same status as they did during Collectivization. But then in 1937 [i.e. the peak of the Stalinist purges] many of them learned just how powerful the state machine really was. All I’m saying is that sometimes I have *Déjà vu*.” Finally, a_{tor1}, writes:

Unfortunately, the families of Dzhaboev and Kuashev [a local human rights activist who died under mysterious circumstance] will not get anywhere in their efforts to seek justice. In this state run by pygmies no one cares about the truth. Could you imagine something like this happening in Europe or the USA? Of course not. That’s why everyone is running from filthy Russia like the plague. The cost of human life here is worth about as much as the dirt under your feet” (Muratova, “Sud v Kabardino-Balkarii”).

On October 6, KU published the article “One of those Killed by Security Services in the KTO in Kabardino-Balkaria was on the Missing-Persons List,” a follow-up report on the results of a Counter-Terrorist Operation (KTO) conducted the by security forces in the village of Psykhurei in Baksan District the previous day. During the KTO, a shoot-out occurred between security forces and two suspected Caucasus Emirate fighters in an overgrown part of the village’s graveyard, where the suspects had dug a trench safe house. The security forces killed both suspects. One of the suspects had been on Russia’s Federal Wanted List in connection with a string of crimes, including the murder of a medicine woman in front of her ten-year-old son in Psykhurei in December 2013. The other suspect was on the missing-persons list (“Odin iz ubitykh”).

Alibeka opens the discussion thread on this report with the statement: “One group of guys with their lives and unborn children ahead of them are killed, but for the other group it’s just about statistics and money.” Hvost retorts cynically, “But statistics win votes!” Changing tack and raising the idea that many of the state security forces serving in Kabardino-Balkaria come from outside the republic, Alibeka declares: “As soon as outside forces are sent into

Kabarda, the killing starts. And they don't even think that you locals will stop greeting them with open arms at our health spas. Why do they have to practice their Slavic sadism on Kabardians?!" Entering the conversation, Mir444 rhetorically asks, "and are outside forces also to blame for the fact that someone just [blew himself up and] killed four and wounded twelve in Chechnya?" Alibeka angrily responds, "For once, let's remember the 250,000!!! Chechens [killed during the Chechen Wars]...or at least the hundreds of young [Kabardian] kids from Baksan whom your outside forces send to the other world everyday?! Have you at least wondered why you are destroying a small nation?" Hvosť fires back, "don't confuse shooting bandits with genocide. This 'small nation' is thankful to the FSB for taking out its trash" ("Odin iz ubitykh").

Reflecting on his own experience and challenging Alibeka's take on the situation, Basket, entering the thread, writes:

Alibeka, tell us all, why is it that I have never had any trouble with these outside forces? I don't know of a single incident since 2005 where one of my acquaintances even minutely suffered from the actions of local or outside forces. Ask yourself the question and think about why. It's because they're all working and raising their kids and not fooling around in the forests ("Odin iz ubitykh").

Exist enters the thread on "Alibeka's" side and rejects Basket's line of reasoning: "Lucky guys! They should be happy. If [arbitrary police violence] hasn't touched you, that's not a reason to categorically negate its existence." Egorka criticizes Alibeka for having an ethnocentric tone and refutes the belief that outside forces are behind the police violence, "Alibeka...outside forces don't come to Kabarda, they come to Kabardino-Balkaria (have some respect for a significant portion of the native population of our republic)...[A]s I understand it, representatives of the armed forces who take part in the these operations, for the most part, belong to the titular nationalities of KBR [i.e. the Kabardino-Balkar Republic]" ("Odin iz ubitykh").

Next, BenDzhois, commenting on Alibeka's claim that the security forces are only interested in statistics, writes "statistics are not taken into account when it is about national security and not simply policing

and competing investigative departments.” Challenging BenDzhois, Amnistiya enters the thread and asks: “Really Ben?! The elites of the law enforcement agencies are always justified as long as what they are doing is in the interests of national security?!” BenDzhois responds: “On the one hand, yes. They’re not fulfilling a plan to fine unlicensed merchants in a bazaar. Here we’re talking about months and sometimes years of investigative work without any statistics to show for it.” Amnistiya, responds: “That means that on the other hand you admit abuses of power and authority [by law enforcement]?!” BenDzhois responds, “Where would we be without them? There’s not one country in the world where the rights of the individual are placed above the national and security interests of the whole.” Amnistiya responds, “It’s a little different in our country. The highest value is the person! —his rights and freedoms. But the latter can be limited if the person threatens national security...[However], the restriction of rights and freedoms can only involve exclusively legal actions by the restrictor.” The exchange continues for several postings, with Bendzhois advocating more draconian measures of combating Islamist attacks and Amnistiya advocating more classically liberal legal measures. Finally, BenDzhois, claiming to understand the popular mood, writes: “Even if I shared your point of view, the vast majority of people in this city [Nalchik], republic, country, hold different views...They care about the result, and not about the whining of human rights advocates.” Finally, ChelovekN96323, satirizing the way some users make seemingly fantastical claims of police conspiracy, writes:

Everyone has forgotten that a year ago these outside forces brought a bomb to a graveyard in Baksan District, placed two unconscious young guys on it and detonated it! Let’s look truth in the eye: outside forces killed the medicine woman, fabricated evidence, caught two guys, at the barrel of a gun made them dig hidden trenches, brutally killed them, then left for home with medals! This is the work of the graveyard gang of the [Main Intelligence Directorate]! Don’t believe the media” (“Odin iz ubitykh”).

These three excerpts demonstrate the general attitudinal divide among KU’s diverse commentators on the interconnected problems

of security and human rights in Kabardino-Balkaria. One the one hand, commentators like Amnistiya, Ass, Dobryi, Exist and, especially, Alibeka, are highly critical of police abuses and distrustful of the law enforcement and security organs. They are also skeptical of law enforcement's ability to regulate itself and root out these endemic abuses. On the other hand, there are those like BenDzhois, Hvost, Zalimbek07, and Mir444, who support the efforts of the police to combat the local Islamist fighters and are most concerned with problems of religious extremism. While the comments of the former group of police critics generally reflect a view that the arbitrary actions of the police exacerbate security problems, the comments of the latter group of police apologists reflect an ends-justify-the-means view of combatting Islamist violence in the republic.

Within these two general categories of viewpoints, there are varying shades of opinion. Indeed, these excerpts demonstrate that the motivations for these critiques of the police and security can differ substantially. Alibeka's more extreme critique is fueled by at least two underlying assumptions: 1) police and security services benefit from the existence of a low-level insurgency because it provides a vehicle for promotion and monetary rewards; 2) the worst excesses are committed by outside Russian forces because they have an ethnic enmity toward the peoples of the Caucasus. Judging by her comments, Amnistiya's more liberal critique is based on a deep concern for the rule of law and human rights. Rather than accusing the police of intentionally stoking violence, she is more interested in holding law enforcement to account for violating the law that they are tasked with upholding. Within the group of police supporters, some—for example, Basket and Egorka— seem to be motivated to join the thread by a disbelief in what they perceive as the baffling claims of some law-enforcement critics and a general belief that the victims of law-enforcement actions are generally not innocent bystanders. Others within this group—for example, Zelimbek07 and Mir444— are motivated by an intense enmity toward and anxiety about militant Salafi Islamists.

On both sides of the human rights and security divide, the more aggressive commentators —Alibeka and Zalimbek07— exhibited ethnic and religious intolerance; in both cases, other commentators

rebuked them for their comments. Egorka scolded Alibeka for his ethnocentric tone, and particularly for disrespecting Balkars by referring to Kabardino-*Balkaria* as “Kabarda.” Moreover, Alibeka’s comment about “sadistic Slavs” committing genocide against his small nation also did not elicit a positive response from the other commentators. Egorka reminded him that it is not outside forces conduct the anti-terror operations but members of “the titular nationalities of KBR,” and Hvosť criticized Alibeka for what he viewed as the latter’s hyperbolic characterization of police actions against purported insurgents (“bandits” in Khvosť’s terms) as genocidal. Zalimbek07’s comments, usually aimed at disparaging human rights advocates and Islamists, were often rabidly anti-Arab and Islamophobic. Indeed, in a separate thread on an October 19 shootout report writes: “This what Muslims want to bring to the world...they decide who lives and who dies.” Zalimbek07 proceeds to challenge a commentator who blames the growth of Salafist Islamic extremist on the problems of Russian society: “It’s always Russia! But who put this Arab [obscenity removed by moderator] in their minds? Russia?!” (“Ubityi v perestrelke”). In the threads excerpted above, commentators responding to Zalimbek07’s postings do not directly challenge Zalimbek07’s Islamophobic comments, likely because they were too busy responding to his derisive personal comments. However, there is a revealing exchange between Zalimbek07 and two other commentators in a brief discussion thread for the first report on the shootout in Psykhurei, which happened to take place during the Islamic holiday of Kurban Bairam (Feast of the Sacrifice). Zalimbek07 writes: “Here’s a question for Muslims. But don’t lie, the mask has been removed from Islam for the whole world to see. According to the Quran, are Muslims required to sacrifice people on Kurban Bairam? Don’t lie, I’m just curious.” KATY responds, “Don’t make such generalizations!” AuDi2 adds: “...And, our dear ‘demystifier,’ what do you mean you’ve removed the mask from Islam!? Understand this, Muslims are not perfect, we make mistakes like everyone else, but Islam is perfect!” (“Ubityi v perestrelke”).

Among the supporters of the tactics of local law enforcement, there is wide opposition to the work of human rights advocates and skepticism of the claims of law-enforcement critics. In his/her

comments, Chelovek№6323's satirical comments about "the GRU's graveyard squad" reflect a belief, common among many commentators included in my data set, that human rights advocates and critics of law enforcement promote fantastical conspiracy theories about the nefarious actions of the police in the republic. In general, this group of commentators exhibited a belief that, while the police and security forces go outside the law at times, they do not target innocent people (see for example Basket's comments above). Moreover, this group generally supported extra-legal law-enforcement methods, provided they result in a reduction in the number of attacks by Islamist insurgents.

The data set examined for this article did not include any comments in support of the Salafist militants who have taken up arms against law enforcement personnel, representatives of the republic's traditional Islamic clergy, and other groups. In general, pro-Salafist comments are very rare in KU, and seem to have declined over the years. It cannot be inferred from this decline in pro-Salafist comments that Kabardino-Balkaria has witnessed a corresponding decline in Salafism. Rather, it is more plausible that as the KU on-line community grew, it developed a culture that was unreceptive to Salafist views. Pro-Salafist commentators likely migrated to more welcoming discussion forums with like-minded users.

Regional Politics

As in KU commentators' views on security and human rights, commentators' views on local politics in Kabardino-Balkaria also demonstrate an attitudinal bifurcation. On the one hand, there are those who see the replacement of Arsen Kanokov with Iurii Kokov as a positive development and are generally hopeful about the republic's future under its new head. On the other hand, there are those who are cynical about the state of politics in Russia, see corruption as precluding any possibility of reform, and are highly critical of the centralization of politics under Putin's authoritarian "power vertical." Three excerpts from discussion threads attached to news reports published on KU demonstrate this divide in political attitudes.

On September 26, KU published the article, "Candidates for the Position of Head of Kabardino-Balkaria Submitted their List of

Senators.” This article is part of a string of articles on the reorganization of local government and the allocation of ministerial portfolios in the weeks immediately before and after the election of Iurii Kokov as Head of the Kabardino-Balkaria on October 9, 2014. This article explains that former Head of the Republic Arsen Kanokov was among the three candidates that Kokov planned to submit to the Federation Council (the upper house of the Russian Parliament) for the selection of Kabardino-Balkaria’s Senator from the executive branch of the republican government after his assured election by the rubber-stamp local Parliament (“Kandidaty na post glavy”).

Mirr07 begins the discussion thread with a criticism of Putin’s control of local government, by answering his own rhetorical question with a folk metaphor: “Since when did Kok[ov] become friends with Kanok[ov]? Well of course, if papa [i.e. Putin] gives the order, a goose will be comrades with any pig.” Commentator ,a,tor1,, in the same ironic tone, writes: “We must be happy for our people because they have successfully freed themselves from fair elections, independent judges, modern medicine, quality education, and respect on the world arena. A heart-felt congratulations!” Standby writes with more direct and constructive criticism:

The whole problem of the INEFFECTIVENESS of senators, дума deputies, the Parliament of KBR, the government of KBR lies in the fact that these are people who have not gone through [real] elections. Therefore, they do not answer to the people of KBR. The ECE [Energy Conversion Efficiency] of these people is minimal and unnoticeable in the republic. They should be obligated to know the problems of each resident of the region, lobby the interests of KBR in Moscow and Piter [St. Petersburg] on any level. They must draw money and investors into the republic. They must solve the problems of the region’s residents individually, and each resident must have access to any official at any level. I suggest creating a scale that measures the usefulness of any given official in KBR (“Kandidaty na post glavy”).

The conversation quickly turns to criticism of the former Head of the Republic Kanokov and expression of hope for the new head. Abaz declares: “Kanokov needs to be kicked out of the republic. He didn’t

do a damn thing for the republic and never will. Kok[ov] is an ace. Hang on, we haven't felt all the results of his work yet, but I already like what he has done." Nice.konan echoes Abaz's sentiments and sounds a note of alarm about the difficulties of conducting reforms in the current political system: "You don't have to tell me!...And the others aren't any better and that dog [Kanokov]. I just hope that they don't stop Iu. A. [Kokov] from bringing order to the republic." Commentators Soslan.779 and Naina enter the thread in defense of the former President/Head Kanokov, arguing that Kanokov, as a career businessman, was able to attract investment to Kabardino-Balkaria. For example, Soslan.779 writes: "Without [Kanokov] and his connections in business circles no more- or -less decent investment will come to the republic...Business people know each other and trust each other even on an everyday level in each apartment block and in each courtyard. Therefore, a businessman with his money and connections is better than a career bureaucrat with unclear powers." Ass enters into a debate with Soslan.779 and Naina over whether Kanokov attracted any major outside investment during his tenure as republic head. Ass, in a patriarchal outburst, berates Naina (who presents herself as a woman) for putting her head where it doesn't belong. Responding to her list of Kanokov's apparently successful investment projects, he writes: "It's clear you're not a business specialist, but I hope you are a good cook and that you know your soups" ("Kandidaty na post glavny").

On October 9, KU published the article, "Iurii Kokov Elected Head of Kabardino-Balkaria." This article informs readers of the predictable results of the election of Kabardino-Balkaria's new head of the republic. Despite the formality of the local Parliament's submission to President Putin of a list of three candidates for the position, most expected that Putin would select Kokov, whom he had appointed Interim head of the republic after the early ouster Arsen Kanokov in late 2013. After Putin's selection of Kokov, the approval of Kabardino-Balkaria's rubber-stamp parliament was a given. Indeed, all 70 of the republic's MPs voted for Kokov ("Iurii Kokov izbran").

The comments on the report on Kokov's election are split between, on the one hand, sarcastic and cynical comments on the lack of democracy and the power of Putin and the central government

and, on the other hand, congratulatory messages combined with cautious optimism and hopefulness for positive change in the republic. The thread begins with a two congratulatory notes by الله=دم and Usk. الله=دم writes, “Congratulations! Come on Iura clean up and transform the republic. And repave the roads not just on Lenin Avenue, but everywhere.” A string of more sarcastic messages follow, beginning with a slightly vulgar comment from Inal: “Well I’ll be damned! It can’t be! What a surprise! Will we ever have a president whose last name doesn’t begin with the letter ‘K’? Because all we’ve had so far is Kaka.” Next, Dobryi comments on the absence of democratic politics and expresses his view on why this is the case:

There is a total of 70 parliamentary deputies. It’s interesting that even Christ’s apostles turned from him at the critical moment, but here with have unity of mind and support. I’m not against a specific person, but I’m also under no illusions. When our people free themselves from the slave inside of them, they’ll learn to have their own opinion and not ones that have been forced on them. This hand-picked circus parliament has weak popular support (“Iurii Kokov izbran”).

A-tor1, continues the conversation’s biblical comparisons: “Who is Christ compared to Vova [i.e. Putin] and what are the words of Christ in comparison with divine will. Vova is already a religion.” Nice.konan brings a more hopeful point of view to the conversation as it returns to congratulatory notes and wishes: “Best wishes to the Head of the Republic! Now we just need a worthy government and it will be possible to turn the republic into a place governed by rule of law.” A-tor1, rejects Nice.konan’s optimism: “Kabardino-Balkaria can be put on a path toward the rule of law, just like Moscow—the antithesis of everything legal.” Samosa brings another congratulatory message to the thread, only he keeps some of the pessimism of a-tor1’s previous comment: “This is a very logical decision. Congratulations to Iurii Kokov! He has more difficult problems before him than those that stood before any of our previous [post-Soviet] leaders. The economy of the country is in a difficult state, the ruble is falling, and there are many unresolved questions —like the land question for rural dwellers, education, healthcare, utilities, and many others.” In next message,

Mirr07 expresses his wishes for the new president and a belief that Kokov is already doing a better job than his predecessor:

Congratulating Kokov is fine. But I'd also like to add this: may he think a little about the common folk, steal less and not feed us empty promises. I'm sick of Kanokov's empty words...They can say that there was 1,000 percent voter turnout...the main thing is that there is peace in our home KBR and that he is busy doing his job. I hope that Iura behaves himself better than that last huckster and coward!" ("Iurii Kokov izbran").

Amnistiya questions Mirr07's hopefulness: "Mirr, you're an optimist. Our republic is so anarchic. It's difficult to govern because everyone is their own boss and GENERAL." Finally, Akimechos a-tor1's earlier sentiments about Kokov's positive initial performance and the difficult conditions under which Kokov will have to work:

I've heard that Kokov is a good man, but it is going to be difficult for him to succeed under such difficult circumstance: 1) The former market politician left us in last place in all economic indicators; 2) Russia's budgetary policies have been reformed to leave less power with the regions; 3) federal subsidies will be cut in half in 2015 ("Iurii Kokov izbran").

On October 10, KU published the article, "Head of Kabardino-Balkaria Submits Ali Musukov as Choice for Prime Minister." This article explains that the recently elected Head of the Republic Iurii Kokov has submitted Alii Musukov, the 45-year-old Balkar then serving as the Republic's Minister for Economic Development and Trade, as his choice for Prime Minister of the Republic—the second most powerful position in the republic ("Glava Kabardino-Balkarii predlozhit"). Though the article does not note this, it deserves mentioning that Musukov's appointment as Prime Minister is a break from the usual practice of appointing a Russian—the second largest nationality in Kabardino-Balkaria—as Prime Minister and a Balkar—the third largest nationality in the republic—as Speaker of Parliament. Some have argued that Musukov's appointment signals a rapprochement with the Balkars after former President Kanokov's

more antagonistic relationship with the Balkars (Fuller, 2016). The fact that Kokov is married to a Balkar may be further evidence of this (Marukhov, 2009).

The article yielded a relatively short thread of messages. The comments of those who were motivated to post on this article reflect a positive opinion of Musukov. Scholar begins the thread simply: “Well, good luck to Musukov Alii in his new position.” Next, Jeronimo writes, “Alii is an example of the self-made man [in Anglicized Russian], as they say now. A hard worker, smart, modest, and an intelligent person, who has achieved things with his head and strong work ethic, and not through family connections and bootlicking, like the majority of our “establishment” [Anglicism]. Good luck to him in this difficult time! Dotsent continues the praise for Musukov, writing: “Musukov is young, very capable, modest and intelligent. Good luck to him in his new position. But if Kokov leaves his vice-chairs — Al’tudov, Uianaev, Firov— and ministers (one of whom is a former traffic cop) in place, he will have a difficult time of it and won’t have any positive results.” Finally, Amnistiya, who self-identifies as Balkar, writes, “Judging by these comments, the Balkars are not extinct in the land of Kabardino-Balkaria. It’s nice to see (Muratova, “Glava Kabardino-Balkarii predlozhit”).

These excerpts provide a lens into the views of KU’s diverse commentators on the current political situation in Kabardino-Balkaria and some threads serve as a microcosm of the Russian political climate more generally. Four trends are immediately apparent. First, the commentators exhibit a high overall degree of political disaffection and cynicism brought on by corruption, the decline of participatory government, and Putin’s authoritarian rule. Second, despite this prevailing cynicism there are still many who hold out hope that the recent leadership shakeup in the republic will yield positive results. The corollary of this hopefulness is a near universal negative opinion of Arsen Kanokov, under whose watch Kabardino-Balkaria witnessed its descent into confessional violence. Third, as comments by Jeronimo, Dotsent, and Akim demonstrate, even those who are hopeful believe that Kabardino-Balkaria is faced with deep problems and it will be difficult for the new leadership to conduct reforms. Fourth, there are at least as many commentators who

exhibit a sense of utter hopelessness in the current political system in Kabardino-Balkaria and in Russia generally. Some explain political servility and the decline of participatory governance and the weakness of civil society on mentalities. For example, arguing that her “republic is so anarchic” and “difficult to govern because everyone is their own boss and GENERAL,” Amnistiya indicates her belief that it is the individualistic and self-centered mentality of the people of Kabardino-Balkaria that impedes civic-mindedness and political reform. On the other hand, Dobryi expresses a different, almost opposing opinion when he writes: “When our people free themselves from the slave inside of them, they’ll learn to have their own opinion and not ones that have been forced on them.” For Dobryi it is not rampant individualism but mentalities of slavishness and servility that are plaguing Kabardino-Balkaria’s political culture.

The lack evidence of ethnicized politics in the above excerpts, which is indicative of nature of the data set, may appear conspicuous given the Caucasus region’s reputation as a hotbed of “interethnic” tensions. As with the absence of supporters of Salafist militants, the relative infrequency of ethnicized political debate may also be a product of the specific online culture of KU. As a news resource primarily concerned with issues of human rights, conflict, and politics, rather than specific ethnic or national issues per se, users with overtly ethno-political agendas are not likely to be the site’s primary users. To be sure, KU commentators bring the perspective of their cultural-linguistic communities or habitus to the KU online community. But Internet users with more ethno-politicized worldviews would be more likely to participate in discussion forums that have more ethnicized online cultures.

In the month-long data set, discussions on local politics took on an ethnicized tone only twice (and briefly at that)¹⁰: in the above comments on the appointment of Alii Musukov as Prime Minister; and on the discussion thread for a news article on the rearrangement of local government structures after the election of Iurii Kokov. First, the comments on the appointment of Alii Musukov as Prime Minister can be read in two ways. On the one hand, the positive and hopeful comments about Musukov indicate satisfaction with the Kabardian Head’s choice of a leading Balkar in local government (though, oddly,

there is no discussion of the fact that a Balkar has been appointed to a post that had previously been occupied by a Russian). On the other hand, Amnistiya’s comment that “the Balkars are not extinct in the land of Kabardino-Balkaria,” though also positive, reflects the Balkars’ general sensitivity to their historic marginalization in regional politics (Muratova, “Glava Kabardino-Balkarii predlozhiil”). Second, the discussion thread to the October 11 article “The Head of Kabardino-Balkaria Changes the Structure of Organs of State Power in the Region,” demonstrates tensions between Cossacks and the republic’s titular nationalities. Nice.konan, who self-identifies as a local Cossack from Maiskii District, writes:

Now a picture of the [republic’s] future is becoming clearer: points on the EGE [Unified State Exam] apparently will cost 1,500 rubles; a prescription for narcotics will cost 1,000 rubles; [Ruslan] Shogenov’s [a powerful Kabardian businessman] Agro Plus company will buy up the Cossack land of Red Niva in three years [i.e. privatized land that by law should be controlled by the local municipality for the use of local residents]...Cossacks will wait for Russia, and the titulars will remain with the non-titulars in KBTR (Kabardino-Balkaro-turkia, Republic?) (“Glava Kabardino-Balkarii izmenil”).

Boltna responds: “Nothing is going to happen to your Cossacks. They’ll continue sucking off the [state’s] teat.” Nice.konan responds: “Don’t confuse [Nikolai] Liubunia [the Ataman of Kabardino-Balkaria’s Terek-Malka Cossacks] with us [real] Cossacks.” Here nice.konan and Boltna express common ethnic stereotypes in Kabardino-Balkaria: the former that non-titulars in Kabardino-Balkaria are marginalized in local politics, the latter that Cossacks are lazy and their districts are economically unproductive and depend on state subsidies (“Glava Kabardino-Balkarii izmenil”).

The general sentiments of support for Iurii Kokov reflected in the data set correspond to recent observers’ assessments that Kokov enjoys widespread support in Kabardino-Balkaria and that he is a leader that both Kabardians and Balkars can accept. In her April 2014 article, Zalina Arslanova argues that Kokov has “impressed residents of the republic” by “sacking [corrupt] officials, giving strong warnings [to others], and taking a tough approach to work.” Indeed, Arslanov

agrees with analyst Aslan Beshto and Kabardino-Balkaria's main human rights advocate Valerii Khatazhukov that if Kokov were to stand for direct elections he would easily win (Arslanova, 2016).

Conclusions

Discussion forums on websites like *Kavkazskii Uzel* provide a unique lens into attitudes toward questions of politics and security in the North Caucasus. In a region where opportunities for safe, unofficial, and unmediated discussion across ethnic and religious lines are extremely rare, KU provides a valuable medium for such interactions. That said, researching attitudes on KU's online communities is by no means equal to ethnographic fieldwork. Commentators on KU's online communities cannot be considered a representative cross-section of a region's population. Rather, at best they represent a cross-section of the region's internet-savvy population with an interest in local politics and a desire to express their views and communicate with others about them. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, research on online communities provides a valuable but otherwise quite elusive source for studying attitudes toward current events and intercommunal interactions. Future research on social media and political attitudes in Kabardino-Balkaria would be well served by combining this type of data analysis found in this article with the observer participation characteristic of ethnography (in the form of online surveys and interviews with members of online communities). The resultant "netnography" could then be fruitfully combined with more traditional ethnographic work to provide a more nuanced view of society and intercommunal relations.¹¹

Notes

¹ On the Kabardino-Balkar symbiosis see Barazbiev, 2000: 5-35.

² This “divide-and-rule” view continues to prevail in both journalistic accounts of the region and in academic literature. See “Regions and territories: Karachay-Cherkessia”, Blinnikov, 2001: 81, Minahan 199, Bram, 2008: 34, Hahn, 2005: 550, Hansen, 2013: 88, and Gammer, 2014: 39.

³ I argue this in “From Princely Fiefdoms to Soviet Nations.”

⁴ On Cossack and Russian peasant colonization of Kabarda see Tkhamokova (2000).

⁵ See documents in Babich (ed.) (1994).

⁶ On the history of Islam among Kabardians and Balkars see Akkueva (2009) or Emel’ianova (1999).

⁷ For an analysis of the ethno-nationalist mobilization in Kabardino-Balkaria during the Soviet collapse and the early 1990s see, Derluguian, 2005: 185-250, Tetuev, 2006: 176-80, and Kazenin, 2009: 63-77.

⁸ On the conflict within Kabardino-Balkaria’s umma and background to the attack of October 13, 2005 see, for example, Fagan, 2014: 30-36, Ratelle, 2013: 135-43, and Zhukov (2008).

⁹ See for example, the forums section of akheku.net for a Circassian discussion forum; elbusoid.org for a Karachay-Balkar forum; mehkkhel.org for an Ingush news commentary forum; vaynah.su for a popular Vainakh (Chechno-Ingush) forum; vchechne.ru for one of the many Chechen forums; kumukia.ru for a popular Kumyk forum; and lezgi-yar.ru for a Lezgi forum.

¹⁰ Though a discussion on a news article on a local conference on the historiography of the Russo-Caucasian Wars did provoke a highly ethnicized debate over the nature of Cossack colonization of Kabarda. See “Bolee 40 uchenykh obsuzhdaut.”

¹¹ On the theory and practice of netnography see Kozinets.

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