

North Caucasian Consolidation: Its Probability and the Implications for Georgian Policy

Harold Chambers

Introduction

Since his rise to power, Vladimir Putin has worked on strengthening the power vertical in the Russian Federation. The key event in this policy was the 2002 establishment of federal economic districts,¹ meant to minimize the power differential between the autonomous republics and *okrugs* and the other fifty-nine federal subjects.² Of course, eighty-five federal subjects is still a large number to control. To efficiently use centralized power, it is logical to decrease the number of communicate channels through which federal orders must pass. Thus, there must be fewer federal subjects. Rumors of just this have been sparked by recent actions and declarations of current and former politicians. This continuation of Putin's trend of strengthening the power vertical will once again focus on weakening the republics' autonomy, supposedly beginning with the consolidation of the republics in the North Caucasus. To adequately prepare for future policy decisions, the probability of consolidation must be assessed and the responses to the most likely outcome considered. This article will examine the logic in the chain of events leading to the rumors of consolidation, evaluate the likelihood of this event by placing the previous evidence in the broader Russian geopolitical context, and detail the implications for Georgia's future North Caucasus policy.

Logic Behind Consolidation

The concept of a consolidation of the Northern Caucasus into fewer republics, with Chechnya acquiring Ingushetia and Dagestan, dates back to at least 2006. The Chechen Parliament Speaker at the time, Dukvakha Abdurakhmanov, called for a unification of the northeast Caucasian republics.³ Predictably, this statement was received poorly by the Ingush and treated as a joke by the Dagestanis. The idea of a merger of the republics in the Caucasus, while certainly not at the forefront of policy positions, has continued for over a decade, working its way into higher circles. In a September 2018 interview, Liberal Democrat Party of Russia (LDPR) leader Zhirinovskiy said,

¹ Teresa Wigglesworth-Baker, "Language Policy and Power Politics in Post-Soviet Tatarstan," in *Language Planning in the Post-Communist Era*, ed. Ernest Andrews (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 135-6.

² This number is based upon Chapter 3 Article 65 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, and thus includes Crimea and Sevastopol.

³ "US embassy cables: Chechnya, the once and future war," *The Guardian*, 01 December 2010, accessed 14 January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/65802>.

in Russian, that eighty-five regions are too many, and they should be combined to create forty to fifty regions.⁴ He continues, calling the Caucasus the most complex region, that Dagestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia should be combined to make a *Gorskii krai*, Mountain area, with Khasavyurt as the capital. Zhirinovskiy's use of *krai* is an important dictional nuance, as it denotes Moscow's purpose for consolidation: to strip the republics of their remaining autonomy; this would be done through the appointment of a regional governor (such as during the Russian Empire), stripping the local elite of their power, in contrast to Abdurakhmanov's statement. This interview, from the leader of the third largest party in the State Duma,⁵ can be viewed as support from Moscow of the absorption of surrounding lands by Chechnya, and an endorsement of its continuation until three republics becomes one federal subject (although, it is worth noting that Zhirinovskiy frames the merger in terms of Dagestan's control rather than of Chechnya's).

2018 saw a shifting of borders in the North Caucasus, as Chechnya conducted land grabs in Ingushetia and began discussions of at least one more, this time in Dagestan. At the beginning of September 2018, the deputy minister of internal affairs of Chechnya posted a picture on Facebook in an Ingush village, but labelled as being in the Chechen Galanchozh District, the neighboring district in Chechnya.⁶ This post followed a Chechen road-building incursion into the Sunzha District, which Ingush activists saw as a provocative action.⁷ A few weeks after these Chechen claims to Ingush lands, the very publicized Chechen-Ingush land exchange occurred. The supposedly equal land swap deal was signed on September 26 by Ramzan Kadyrov and Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, the leaders of Chechnya and Ingushetia respectively.⁸ Under the deal, Chechnya received roughly twenty-six times more land than Ingushetia.⁹ This makes the unequal nature of the deal quite obvious, with an overt bias towards Chechnya. The new land acquisitions include sections of the Sunzha District, where the aforementioned Chechen road construction had begun in the late summer.¹⁰ The Constitutional Court of Ingushetia found the deal in violation of the republic's Constitution, theoretically delegitimizing and cancelling the deal. Despite the decision of his republic's court, Yevkurov appealed to the Russian Constitutional Court, who declared the

⁴ REGNUM Информационное Агентство, "Жириновский предложил разделить Россию на 40 регионов и начать с Кавказа," 24 September 2018, accessed 10 January 2019, <https://regnum.ru/news/2487657.html>.

⁵ "Russian State Duma 2016," *ElectionGuide*, 18 September 2018, accessed 16 January 2019, <http://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/2694/>.

⁶ "Chechen 'invasion' sparks outrage in Ingushetia," *OC Media*, 07 September 2018, accessed 14 January 2019, <http://oc-media.org/chechen-invasion-sparks-outrage-in-ingushetia/>.

⁷ "Chechen authorities disclose details of works on Ingush border," *Caucasian Knot*, 07 September 2018, accessed 16 January 2019, <https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/44306/>.

⁸ "Russian Constitutional Court Says Controversial Chechen-Ingush Border Deal Legal," *RFE/RL*, 06 December 2018, accessed 17 January 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-constitutional-court-says-controversial-chechen-ingush-border-deal-legal/29640892.html>.

⁹ "Cartographers: Ingushetia gave Chechnya much more land than received," *Caucasian Knot*, 09 December 2018, accessed 17 January 2019, <http://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/44659/>.

¹⁰ Evgeny Berg, Viktor Davydov, and Kevin Rothrock, "Chechnya and Ingushetia trade borderlands, prompting protests from Ingush against the 'surrender' of historically contested territory," *Meduza*, 27 September 2018, accessed 16 January 2019, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2018/09/27/chechnya-and-ingushetia-trade-borderlands-prompting-protests-from-ingush-against-the-surrender-of-historically-contested-territory>.

lower court's ruling invalid, allowing the land transaction to remain.¹¹ This is a blatant sign of support for Kadyrov's expansion campaign at the expense of the other republics and indicates some overarching direction from Moscow as Yevkurov, the newly-elected Ingush president, ignored his constituents' wishes to appeal to the federal Constitutional Court. It is worth noting that, although both heads of the republics are elected by the people, it must be preceded by Putin selecting them as a candidate. This could help explain why Yevkurov's deference is to Moscow rather than to the residents of his republic. The Chechen-Ingush land swap added a significant amount of land to Chechnya's western border.

Not all of Chechnya's land claims lay to the west, though. In December, Kadyrov and the head of Dagestan, Vladimir Vasiliev, met in Grozny to arrange a discussion of changes to the Chechen-Dagestani border, which experts and journalists interpret to mean Chechen annexation of the current Novolaksky District, formerly known as the Aukhovsky District when it was a part of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.¹² Vasiliev said he would keep residents' opinions on the matter in mind, but if the proceedings in Ingushetia are any indicator, residents' sentiments will likely be neglected. Yet to some residents, the return of the Aukhovsky District is not disagreeable in the slightest. At the Congress of Dagestani Chechens, Buvaisar Saitiev, a State Duma member, noted that "unlike other titular nationalities of Dagestan, [Dagestani Chechens] 'do not have a mono-ethnic region.'"¹³ The creation of an exclusively Chechen district in Dagestan, particularly if it takes the form of a recreated Aukhovsky District, would instantly increase ethnopolitical conflict in the republic. This action would cause fears that the district would secede in order to be reunited with Chechnya. But whether the topic of Kadyrov and Vasiliev's discussion will be the Aukhovsky District is not concrete. In a conversation with *Caucasian Knot*, the editor-in-chief of RIA Derbent states that Chechnya could be trying to claim part of the Botlikh District.¹⁴ Depending on which lands do get transferred to Chechnya, the new addition will represent either further reclamation of historical lands or a foray into new acquisitions.

Zhirinovskiy's comments promoting the combination of Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan into a single federal subject demonstrates that the concept of consolidation is in the minds of members of the Duma, while also reaffirming the sentiments expressed by the 2006 Chechen Parliament Speaker. Frequent Chechen land grabs have slowly brought historical lands back under Chechnya's control, with Moscow seemingly directing Ingush President Yevkurov to support a highly biased land swap. Discussions of the addition of current Dagestani lands to Chechnya, supported by the local Chechen population, expand Chechnya's territory to the west. These actions

¹¹ "Russian Constitutional Court Says Controversial Chechen-Ingush Border Deal Legal."

¹² "Васильев и Кадыров обсудят административные границы Дагестана и Чечни," *Kavkaz.Realii*, 06 December 2018, accessed 10 January 2019, <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/29641080.html>.

¹³ "Congress of Chechens in Dagestani Khasavyurt alarms network users," *Caucasian Knot*, 26 November 2018, accessed 16 January 2019, <https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/45287/>.

¹⁴ "Residents of Dagestan threaten to hold protests against changing border with Chechnya," *Caucasian Knot*, 10 December 2018, accessed 15 January 2019, <https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/45458/>.

illustrate a potential beginning to a consolidation of the North Caucasian republics, and its support in Moscow.

Probability of Consolidation

While the consolidation of federal subjects would further Putin's ideology regarding political structure, the centralization of power in the Russian Federation, and the North Caucasus' appeal as a multitude of republics, the most autonomous federal subjects, seems like the place to continue enacting this ideology, the North Caucasus is in fact the region where consolidation is the least viable, making any consolidation of the region unlikely for two main reasons. The first of these reasons is that ethnic tensions could easily become agitated to a point of conflict. This would come about because of contested historical land claims between ethnic groups. Perhaps the most hotly contested claims are between the Chechens and the Ingush. The Chechen-Ingush border debate is deeply contested because of the two republics' history: as a united republic under Soviet rule, until Chechnya wanted independence and Ingushetia decided to remain a subject of Russia after 1991; as well as the ethnic groups' relations to each other as members of the Vainakh people.¹⁵ Despite previous post-Soviet leaders of Chechnya and Ingushetia agreeing to the border, including Ramzan's father, Ramzan felt that the Sunzha District rightfully belonged to Chechnya and declared it repeatedly.¹⁶ To finally get what he already felt entitled to, Kadyrov struck up a land swap with Yevkurov. Greatly opposed by residents of Ingushetia, the Chechen-Ingush land exchange sparked several weeks of protests in the Ingush capital, Magas, involving around 10,000 of the republic's small population.¹⁷ While these protests remained peaceful, they showed the resistance of other ethnic groups to Chechen irredentism.

Although the peoples of Dagestan share linguistic ties to the Chechens, they lack the shared history of the Ingush and Chechens. In 1944, the Chechens, including the Akkin Chechens in Dagestan, were deported to Central Asia.¹⁸ Two Dagestanian peoples, the Avars and Laks, were brought in to reside on the now vacated lands. Following the end of their exile, Chechens begin to illegally return to their lands in the 1960s until a decree was passed in 1991 to reestablish the Aukhovsky District *de jure*. However, as the people who had been living on these lands for almost fifty years were not about to suddenly abandon their homes, the local government failed to follow through, thus depriving the Akkin Chechens of the restoration of their historical lands. This tension has carried through to today. In June 2017, a fight broke out between the Avar and Chechen youth. A couple of weeks later at the beginning of July these interethnic tensions peaked and finally

¹⁵ "Chechen 'invasion' sparks outrage in Ingushetia."

¹⁶ Berg, Davydov, and Rothrock.

¹⁷ Плуя Варабанов and Yelizaveta Fokht, "Пусть Путин полюбит нас немножко: что говорят участники протестов в Ингушетии," *BBC Russian*, 05 October 2018, accessed 17 January 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-45764266>.

¹⁸ Ekaterina Neroznikova, "The burning land of Lenin-Aul," *openDemocracy*, 11 August 2017, accessed 14 January 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/ekaterina-neroznikova/burning-lands-leninaul-dagestan>.

crossed republic lines. Dagestani Chechens were joined by those from neighboring Chechnya to support their historical claim. These included Chechen security forces escorting parliament chairmen Magomed Daudov. He was sent to help settle the dispute, but apparently only met with the local Chechens, not any of the local government officials. This was not perceived in a positive light by the officials, who viewed it as Chechen interference in lands that are not theirs, in other words, Kadyrov's continued expansionism. As mentioned earlier, Dagestani leader Vasiliev and Kadyrov have planned discussions on a change to their shared border. Consequently, after the land swap along the Ingush-Chechen border had been upheld by the Federal Constitutional Court, the Avars, the primary ethnic group in Dagestan, threatened to follow the Ingush's example if Chechnya were to acquire any of Dagestan's lands.¹⁹ Given the already tense relations between Chechens and Avars, as evidenced in Leninaul, a mono-ethnic Chechen district or, even more drastically, outright Chechen control of these lands could lead to interethnic violence in a volatile region.

The second reason consolidation is unlikely is the political relationship between Putin and Kadyrov. This relationship is marked by Putin's need for Kadyrov manage regional relations (controlling the teips and serving as an envoy to the Muslim world) and by Kadyrov's feuds with federal security services. Despite his amassing of power, Kadyrov tries to portray himself as someone who does not wish to be in charge: he has mentioned stepping down as head of Chechnya every year since 2016.²⁰ The first time coincided with the end of his term, providing Putin with an opportunity to replace him. Putin decided against replacing him, and instead again selected him as a candidate for the head of Chechnya.²¹ Alexei Malashenko, an analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center, phrased the situation quite clearly in an interview with *The Moscow Times*: "Kadyrov has destroyed the inter-clan balance in Chechnya. With him gone, a huge wave of violence would inevitably ensue."²² To maintain stability, Putin needs Kadyrov. Kadyrov has also protected his position by limiting Putin's choices for alternative heads of Chechnya to his Kadyrovtsy, his devoted followers, which will be expounded upon later. Stability in Chechnya has enabled Kadyrov to act as a Russian envoy to the Middle East. Kadyrov has established personal ties with many of the rulers of the Gulf states, sent Chechen military units to Syria, and hosted the Egyptian

¹⁹ "Residents of Dagestan threaten to hold protests against changing border with Chechnya."

²⁰ "Кадиров: 'мое время на посту главы Чечни прошло,'" *RIA Novosti*, 27 February 2016, accessed 14 January 2019, <https://ria.ru/20160227/1381183464.html>; "Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov 'ready to step down,'" *The Guardian*, 27 November 2017, accessed 14 January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/27/chechen-leader-ramzan-kadyrov-ready-to-step-down>; "Kadyrov willing to end his tenure as Chechnya's head," *TASS Russian News Agency*, 23 December 2018, accessed 14 January 2019, <http://tass.com/politics/1037507>.

²¹ "Ramzan Kadyrov," *Caucasian Knot*, 07 November 2018, accessed 21 January 2019, <http://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/45094/>.

²² Ivan Nechepurenko, "Nemtsov Probe Exposes Widening Rift Between Kadyrov, FSB," *The Moscow Times*, 11 March 2015, accessed 15 January 2019, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/nemtsov-probe-exposes-widening-rift-between-kadyrov-fsb-44671>.

soccer team.²³ These ties are important for Russian foreign policy, from oil exports to Syria, and it is Kadyrov who has cultivated personal relationships with the leaders.

Another key component of his relationship with Putin is that he acts with more autonomy than some federal ministers would like, especially since only Putin has any degree of influence over him. This has led to a public feud between Kadyrov and federal security services. The most blatant example of this feud came in April 2015. Kadyrov told Chechen law enforcement officials to kill any security officials, federal or from other regions of Russia, if they did not have permission from the Chechen government to be there.²⁴ But while security services of other regions and the federal government are not allowed in Chechnya without permission, Kadyrov's forces have no such constraints on their mobility. When a legislator from Krasnoyarsk Krai lambasted Kadyrov in a Facebook post—accusing Kadyrov of killing Russian soldiers in the first Chechen War, when he has since been awarded the Hero of Russia, as well as relying on federal subsidies to enrich himself and fund the construction of ostentatious architecture in Grozny—he received an apology the following day after a mystery Chechen met with the legislator and “convinced [him] of the authority of the leader of the Chechen Republic.”²⁵ His security forces have a history of working further abroad than Krasnoyarsk, as he has used them to eliminate any potential rivals that could garner a significant amount of support from the teips. This has included assassinations in Dubai and Vienna.²⁶ Kadyrov's elimination of his rivals not only shores up his support in Chechnya, but restricts Putin's viable alternatives to Kadyrov, should he decide to remove him from power. As a result, when Kadyrov finally steps down, or Putin decides to replace him, since Moscow needs a Chechen head of Chechnya to control the teips, the replacement will have to be one of the Kadyrovtsy. Kadyrov and Putin's relationship was further strained by the 2015 murder of Boris Nemtsov in view of the Kremlin, which further exemplifies the feud between Kadyrov and federal security services. Some journalists have insinuated that Kadyrov ordered the murder, as it bore similarities to his rivals' murders and Nemtsov was an outspoken critic of his. Federal security services either agreed with this insinuation or merely wanted to further their feud with Kadyrov, as all five of the suspects they arrested were Chechen. Kadyrov called the confessed triggerman “a genuine Russian patriot” and following their conviction, criticized the decision.²⁷ This feud means that at some point in the future, Putin may have to decide between supporting his security

²³ Neil Hauer, “Princely ties: The growing Chechnya-Gulf security relationship,” *The Defense Post*, 27 December 2018, accessed 14 January 2019, https://thedefensepost.com/2018/12/27/russia-chechnya-gulf-security-relationship/amp/?__twitter_impression=true; “Full Interview: Ramzan Kadyrov the leader of Chechnya,” *BBC News*, 23 June 2018, accessed 14 January 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WKvCUGUhto>.

²⁴ “Russian Interior Ministry Slams Kadyrov's ‘Shoot-to-Kill’ Remark,” *RFE/RL*, 23 April 2015, accessed 11 January 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kadyrov-authorizes-shooting-of-security-oustide-chechnya/26974169.html>.

²⁵ Tatyana Laprad and Robert Coalsen, “Kadyrov Called a Disgrace, Then Scores Apology,” *RFE/RL*, 15 January 2016, accessed 14 January 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-chechnya-kadyrov-senchenko-tirade-apology/27490227.html>.

²⁶ Nechepurenko; Shaun Walker, “Boris Nemtsov murder: Chechen chief Kadyrov confirms link to prime suspect,” *The Guardian*, 08 March 2015, accessed 15 January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/08/boris-nemtsov-five-suspects-appear-in-court-over-opposition-leaders-killing>.

²⁷ Walker, “Chechnya's Kadyrov Criticizes Convictions of Nemtsov Killers,” *RFE/RL*, 14 July 2017, accessed 15 January 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-chechnya-kadyrov-criticizes-nemtsov-convictions/28615949.html>.

services or Kadyrov. Despite all of the ways that Kadyrov causes problems, Putin rewards him. As Kadyrov has tried to reduce Chechnya's reliance on federal subsidies, while simultaneously requesting more federal funding for infrastructure projects, Putin granted Chechnya control of the oil infrastructure on its territory.²⁸ Whether this deal was completed is not yet clear, as this deal would lessen federal control in Chechnya, potentially granting it more autonomy, and is thus a contentious topic between federal and regional authorities.²⁹ Continuing on the trend of Kadyrov's rewards, during the same week that he praised Nemtsov's murderers, Putin awarded him one of the country's highest awards, the Order of Honor.³⁰ These actions by Putin add to the feud between federal government officials and Kadyrov.

A merger of Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan would assuredly lead to heightened ethnic tensions and anti-Chechen attitudes, with violence in the foreseeable future if current trends persist. This would destabilize half of the North Caucasus and would likely spill over into the western and southern parts of the Caucasus. After working for so long to create security in the region despite a continuing Islamic insurgency, Putin will hardly want to discard his previous work for naught. On the other hand, Kadyrov's complex relationship with Putin, with the latter ignoring the former's misdeeds and capitulating to his desire for federal subsidies and oil infrastructure, all while trying to maintain dominant, mean that it is possible that Kadyrov will gain control of his neighboring republics. It would also follow Putin's long-term plan of power centralization. However, the internal troubles stemming from interethnic conflict would prevent Kadyrov from fulfilling his valuable role as Russian envoy to the Middle East, which in turn sets back Russian regional relations, especially concerning Syria and counterterrorism. When factored together, these facts indicate that a merger of the North Caucasus republics is not very probable for now. While consolidation of the republics is unlikely, continued territorial and economic aggression from Kadyrov can be expected as he tries to regain all of Chechnya's former lands and develop the republic while further enriching himself.

Implications for Future Georgian Policy

Kadyrov's continued expansionist ideology will likely impact Georgian relations through the continued promotion of economic ties and a potential spillover to the south of ethnic conflict and insurgency. Kadyrov's main point of economic expansion in relation to Georgia is the completion and improvement of the road from Itum-Kale to Georgia at Shatili. Kadyrov

²⁸ "Рамзан Кадыров посетовал на нехватку средств в Чечне," *Kommersant*, 13 December 2018, accessed 11 January 2019, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3828628?tw>; Mairbek Vatchagaev, "Chechnya's Planned New Oil Refinery Marks a Victory Over Rosneft," *The Jamestown Foundation*, 10 March 2016, accessed 11 January 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/chechnyas-planned-new-oil-refinery-marks-a-victory-over-rosneft/>.

²⁹ Paul Goble, "Is Chechnya Finally Going to Control Its Own Oil Reserves – and Thus Its Destiny?" *The Jamestown Foundation*, 29 November 2018, accessed 11 January 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/is-chechnya-finally-going-to-control-its-own-oil-reserves-and-thus-its-destiny/>.

³⁰ Walker.

announced in December 2018 that the road from Itum-Kale to Shatili, which was closed in 2000,³¹ had begun to be rebuilt and the border-crossing would be reopened, to the surprise of the Georgian government.³² Using satellite imagery in Bing or Yandex maps, one can see the traces of minor roads that could be connected to link Chechnya and Georgia, but nothing near the infrastructure that would be necessary to provide a year-round route. Historically, when the road was initially constructed during Chechnya's independence in the late 1990s, the Georgian government was ambivalent to it,³³ but only as long as it was on the Chechen side of the border.³⁴ The Roads Department of Georgia's only listed project in Shatili is a road which will be a new tourist route for mountain villages, to be completed in 2020.³⁵ Since the Georgian government has taken a consistent stance of economic self-interest on this road, a continuation of this position is logical.

The best way to deal with a potential spillover of ethnic conflict and insurgency is to strengthen relations with the peoples of the North Caucasus. Georgia instituted many such policies following the 2008 war.³⁶ These actions included visa-free travel, scholarship programs, and First Caucasian TV (PIK). However, the impetus to North Caucasian policies slowed after 2012. In order to strengthen ties, a North Caucasus policy must be given more priority. This could be done through restarting PIK TV, hosting intercultural events (perhaps something similar to the Nomad Games or a folklore festival), or strengthening language programs—this last point in particular would be helpful, as Moscow is in the process of its latest round of Russification and clamp down on ethnic minority language education. However, implementing any such policy must be a slow and careful process, so as to not appear provocative to Moscow. Of course, a new policy might be for naught as increased ethnic tensions could lead communities to focus inwards rather than outwards to regional relations. Considering any increased insurgency along the border would contribute to Russian propaganda concerning Georgia harboring terrorists, thus providing Russia with an excuse to intervene in Georgia's affairs, increasing border monitoring would also be an advisable policy to help counter any conflict becoming transnational.

³¹ Igor Rotar, "The Chechen Trail in Georgia: Report from Pankiisk Gorge," *The Jamestown Foundation*, 30 May 2000, accessed 15 January 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-chechen-trail-in-georgia-report-from-pankiisk-gorge/>.

³² "Georgia 'has not heard of' border crossing announced by Chechen state TV," *OC Media*, 5 December 2018, accessed 10 January 2019, <http://oc-media.org/georgia-has-not-heard-of-border-crossing-announced-by-chechen-state-tv/>.

³³ "On the Chechen road, to Georgia," *The Economist*, 22 October 1998, accessed 15 January 2019, <https://www.economist.com/europe/1998/10/22/on-the-chechen-road-to-georgia>.

³⁴ Maaz Bilalov, "Свяжет ли Чечню с Грузией аргунская дорога?" *Kavkaz Reali*, 14 January 2017, accessed 16 January 2019, <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/svyajet-li-chechnyu-s-gruziey-argunskaya-doroga/28231610.html>.

³⁵ "Irakli Kaseladze met with representatives of Pankisi and Tusheti population regarding mountain roads project," *Roads Department of Georgia*, 22 November 2018, accessed 15 January 2019, <http://www.georoad.ge/?lang=eng&act=news&func=menu&uid=1542883558&pid=1340628946>; "Projects 2017-2020," *Roads Department of Georgia*, accessed 15 January 2019, <http://www.georoad.ge/uploads/files/dagegmili%20proeqtebi%2028.09.2018.ENGLISH.pdf>.

³⁶ Aleksandre Kvakhadze, "Georgia in the North Caucasus: Challenges and Future Perspectives," *Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies*, 2018, accessed 5 January 2019, <https://www.gfsis.org/library/view-opinion-paper/98>.

Conclusions

Although decreasing the number of federal subjects would be in line with strengthening Putin's power vertical, it is not likely to happen in the North Caucasus. Exacerbating already aggravated ethnic tensions could potentially reignite major insurgency movements and destabilize the region that took over a decade to attain a degree of stability acceptable to Putin. The carefully maintained control-autonomy relationship between Kadyrov and Putin will likely maintain its status quo for now, with Kadyrov continuing to try to dominate the region while Putin allows him to exercise his will in return for security and relations with the Middle East. However, Putin cannot allow Kadyrov to do as he pleases forever. This means that Chechnya and Moscow will clash either when Kadyrov finally goes too far or when Putin decide to change the status quo of his own accord.

The future policy implications for Georgia are limited. Despite these rumors being merely rumors and its unfriendly relationship with Russia, Georgia should encourage Moscow not to consolidate the North Caucasus, as it could lead to decreased stability and increased insurgency along Georgia's northern border. Kadyrov's assertive promotion of opportunities for economic growth will mainly impact Georgia by his continued desire to finish the Itum-Kale-Shatili road, which Georgian officials have previously dismissed. Continued irredentism and expansionism will create ethnic conflicts that could destabilize border regions. Georgia should attempt to prevent any conflict from the north becoming transnational by forging relations between Georgia and the North Caucasian peoples and strengthening border security.