The isolated microcosms of the Caucasus: Alisa Genieva's Dagestan

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Summary

The thesis analyses and compares the Russian and the Islamic factor's influence during the last five hundred years in the North Caucasus, more specifically in Dagestan. This work aims to describe as accurately as possible todays' Dagestan context in order to understand the causes and the mechanisms of the intrinsic instability in the region, and to do so through a literature that reconstructs its history, from the first half of the nineteenth century to the present day.

Keywords: *Dagestan, Russia, Islam, coexistence.*

INTRODUCTION

This work originates from a research carried out on two separates levels that inevitably ends up meeting, or rather, clashing. At the centre of the research, there is the Republic of Dagestan, one of the many Caucasic republics that make up the Russian Federation. The study focuses specifically on the Islamic and Russian factors in Dagestan, which have been coexisting in the Caucasus for more than two hundred years, not always peacefully. The so-called "isolated microcosms of the Caucasus" are constantly living through ideas of traditionalism, mysticism, Islamic fundamentalism and

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much more, and from the author's perspective it is worth clarifying and diving into this plurality.

Caucasus has been thoroughly described by famous authors such as Puškin, Tolstoj, Lermontov among many others. However, these authors have always described the region while looking down on it, a common European attitude which Russians have also appropriated. The Caucasus has been portrayed as wild, inferior and in the constant need of modernization. With the above-mentioned premises, it is easily understandable why Alisa Ganieva's voice must be analysed. With a neutral yet loving eye, Ganieva depicts a perfect picture of the "isolated microcosms of the Caucasus" and especially of Dagestan, her native land. Through Ganieva's works a new shiny light is shined upon Dagestan: it is described through colourful markets, abandoned mountain villages and ethnic and religious conflicts, far from the generalized idea and prejudices that surrounded the region throughout the years.

The choice to focus on Dagestan is due not only to Alisa Ganieva's works (which were the cornerstone of this work) but also to the region's love-hate relationship with Russia. This unique relationship, while never culminating in a concrete desire for separatism as in near Chechenia, is slowly getting more complicated as it is intertwining with terrorism which has never been completely eradicated in the region.

1. Caucasus as described by Russians

1.1. The *topos* of the Caucasus' lands

The Caucasus entered the already vast Russian literature from the 1820s with Aleksandr Sergeevič Puškin 's *Kavkazskij Plennik* [The Prisoner of the Caucasus]. Previous attempts to describe the region in works such as Gavriil Romanovič Deržavin's *Na vozvraščenie grafa Zubova iz Persii* [On the Return of Count Zubov from Persia] were not particularly success-

ful. This was due to the fact that, as stated by Vissarion Grigor'evič Belinskij, Russian literary critic and philosopher, and subsequently reported by Susan Layton, Deržavin had never been to the Caucasus, so he depicted the region through an image based more on his imagination rather than reality. On the other hand, Puškin great feat was depicting a precise and real picture of the Caucasus and its inhabitants[2].

He started a period in which numerous authors were writing about the Caucasus "from the inner", thus offering a more realistic depiction of the region. Among the many works of this period, in this work the novel *Bela*, taken from Michail Jur'evič Lermontov's *Geroj našego vremeni* [A Hero of Our Time] as well as Lev Nikolaevič Tolstoj's *Chadži-Murat* [Hadji Murat] will be analysed.

The above-mentioned works are all set during the conquest of the Caucasus by the Russian Empire (1817-1864) and they all thoroughly describe the dual nature of this region: on the one hand it is considered the "birthplace of man", where men corrupted by modern society can reconnect with nature; on the other hand, however, the Caucasus is also a place to conquer. The gullibility of Caucasus' natives reveals their simple nature, and this gives to the Russian Empire the right to completely subject them.

However, it is also worth to clearly distinguish the two different images that these three authors depict of the Caucasus, which could also be interpreted as two sides of the same coin. On the one hand there is Puškin and Lermontov's Caucasus, characterized by the native's violence and deception against Russians; on the other hand, there is Tolstoj's Caucasus, that is also characterized by violence and cruelty, but switching focus on the violence of the Russian army on natives.

[2] Vissarion G. Belinskij, *Sočineniia Aleksandra Puškina. Stat'ja šestaja. 1844* [Essays of Aleksandr Puškin. Sixth article. 1845], *Polnoe sobranie*, vol. VI (1953-1959), Moskva, USSR Academy of Sciences, in Susan Layton, *The Creation of an Imaginative Caucasian Geography*, in "Slavic Review", vol. XLV N.3, 1986, pp. 471-475.

Kavkazskij Plennik tells the story of a Russian soldier captured by Circassians and ultimately freed by a young Circassian woman who fell in love with him. However, this love story is overshadowed by the description of Circassian's customs and way of life, which have been thoroughly studied by the Russian soldier during its captivity. He cannot hide a hint of admiration for that "admirable people".

Любил их жизни простоту,

Гостеприимство, жажду брани,

Движений вольных быстроту,

И легкость ног, и силу длани[3];

He loved their ordinary life,

Hospitality, thirst for battle.

The promptness of free motions,

The foot's lightness, the hand's strength; (my translation)

Circassians however are still violent and ferocious wildlings who grasp every opportunity to fulfil their bloodlust. In the work, violence reaches its apex during the Ramadan's celebration in the *aul'*[4]: here slaves are beheaded to entertain the audience, among which children are seen clapping their hands as heads were flying.

Additional and exceptionally accurate descriptions of the "clever marauder's" night ambushes against travellers and conquerors alike at the Kuban River are used to depict a totally negative image of Circassians, which is used as an excuse to justify their subjugation as the Russian Empire is now

[3]Aleksandr S. Puškin, *Kavkazckij Plennik* [The Prisoner of the Caucasus] 1821, https://ilibrary.ru/text/441/p.1/index.html.

4 The term *aul* 'indicates a fortified village that can often be found in the Caucasus, especially in Dagestan.

elevated as the "rightful conqueror" that will bring civilization to wild and ignorant people.

The novel *Geroj našego vremeni* is a series of tales focused on Grigorij Pečorin, a Russian army officer in the Caucasus. *Bela* describes the "love story" between Pečorin and a young Circassian woman named Bela, who is actually kidnapped by the officer. The narrator describes this story after hearing it from his co-captain and temporary travel companion Maksim Masksimyč, Pečorin's superior in the fortress where the story takes place. The love story only serves as *fil rouge* which guides the reader through the Caucasus. The young Kazbič, who is in love with Bela too, represents the stereotype of the warlike and sanguinary Circassian, since he murdered Bela and her father. Bela too is labelled by Maksym Maksymič as "rebel" and revengeful when she sees Kazbič, the murderer of his father, and she starts to shake: the captain interprets it as desire for revenge, even if the girl's reaction is completely understandable in such a situation[5].

In addition, during the trip Maksym Maksymič insults and denigrates the local people. The Ossetians in particular are defined as «extremely stupid» and «incapable of any education»[6] (my translation). For instance, though tipping was widespread in Russia, when the Ossetian coachmen ask for a tip Maksym Maksymič denies it and abruptly chases them away, saying that the savages are spoiled by Russians[7].

Caucasian populations are thus divided into peaceful (like Ossetians) and warlike (like Circassians) but, despite a certain admiration for the courage of the latter, both are labelled as wild and uncivilized.

[5] Luigi Magarotto, *La conquista del Caucaso nella letteratura russa dell'Ottocento*: *Puškin, Lermontov, Tolstoj* [The Conquest of the Caucaso in the Russian literature of the 19th century], Firenze, Firenze University Press, p. 187, 2015.
[6] Michail J. Lermontov, *Geroj našego vremeni* [A Hero of Our Time], Sankt Peterburg', Iliya Glazunov & Co, 1840.
[7] Luigi Magarotto, *La conquista del Caucaso nella letteratura russa dell'Ottocento*: *Puškin, Lermontov, Tolstoj*, p. 185.

The other side of the coin is presented by Tolstoj. *Chadži-Murat*[8] takes its name from the valiant Avar general who, after disagreements with Imam Šamil, decides to surrender to the Russians and collaborate with them to obtain protection. The novel is soaked with blood and represents Tolstoj's mature condemnation of violence and war (in his youth he took part in the Conquest of the Caucasus, being a fervid supporter of imperial expansionism).

Chapter XVII (censored in the first publication in 1912) comprises one of the scenes that better illustrate the unmotivated massacre that was the conquest of these territories. Under the order of Nicholas I, Russian soldiers destroy and plunder an *aul'(*for the most part already abandoned) to leave the village without resources and force the Chechen mountaineers to surrender. The aforementioned chapter tells of the return of the Chechen to their destroyed village, and describes the gratuitous violence and inhumane treatment reserved to them by Russians:

> Sado […] saw his house destroyed: the roof was broken down, and the door and the columns of the small loggia burned, and the interior was upside down. His son, […] was taken dead to the mosque on a horse covered in a felted coat. He had been hit in the back with a bayonet. […] The apricot and cherry trees had been broken and burned […] and, above all, the hives and bees had been burned. […] The fountain had been smeared, obviously on purpose, so much so that no water could be taken from it. The mosque had also been smeared, and the mullah with his aides was cleaning it[9]. (my translation)

Russians are no longer considered men by Chechens, but pests that must be eliminated, like rats and poisonous spiders.

[8] The name consists of two Arabic words: *xadži*, the title given to a Muslim who completes the *haijj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca), thus indicating the pilgrim, and *murat,* which comes from *murad*, meaning "desire".

[9] Lev N. Tolstoj, *Chadži-Murat,* in *Posmertnye chudožestvennye proizvedenija L'va Nikolaeviča Tolstogo pod redaktsiej V.G. Čertkova* [Posthumous artistic works by Lev Nikolaevič Tolstoy by V.G. Čertkov], Berlin, Svobodnoe slovo, 1912.

What emerges from the three works is the powerlessness of the Caucasus toward the Russian Empire. Even in *Chadži-Murat*, where Tolstoj recognizes great dignity to the Chechen mountaineers who decide to rebuild the village, Russian's supremacy over Caucasians remains unchallenged. To this already tragic picture Puškin and Lermontov add, through their descriptions and judgement, the idea of "native poverty", which will bring Russian to perceive Caucasians as inferior by nature, as «creatures that are unable to take care of themselves»[10]. These stereotypes, legitimized by such an authoritative literature, haven't changed much over time and have created a significant rift between these two worlds.

1.2. The myth of the "prisoner of the Caucasus" between 1821 and 1996

Puškin's work was an inspiration not only for the subsequent literature, but also for the Soviet and post-Soviet cinema.

An interesting Soviet interpretation of *Kavkazskij Plennik* arrives in 1967 with the comedy *Kavkazskaja plennica, ili Novye priključenija Šurika*[11] , translated in English as *Kidnapping, Caucasian Style*. The prisoner, in this case, is the stereotype of the good Soviet woman, Nina, who eventually managed to free herself. The film is imbued with irony and aims to make people laugh, but it does so by making fun of stereotypes created by the Russian literature over time: Nina is kidnapped by the general governor who can't dominate his passion for the young woman, and this reminds the reader of the kidnapping of Bela by Kazbič; when the governor and Nina's uncle bargain for Nina's hand, Bela's brother comes to mind, agreeing to kidnap her and hand her over to Pečorin for a horse. On the one hand, Caucasus seems to be firmly anchored to the Soviet Union (Šurik, for example,

[10] Ewa M. Thompson, *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism,* Westport (Conn.) – London, Greenwood Press, p.15, 2000.
[11] Leonid I. Gajdaj, *Kavkazckaja plennica, ili Novye priključenija Šurika* [La Prigioniera del Caucaso, o le Nuove avventure di Šurik], USSR, Mosfil'm, 1967.

observes that the local customs he was looking for in the Caucasus do not exist anymore, since they have been replaced by Soviet elements[12]. On the other hand, Caucasian lands remain partially extraneous to the Soviet-Russian civilized world, for which the kidnapping of the bride or her sale represent something alien and absurd, at most something to laugh about.

The same *topos* returns in the post-Soviet era, in particular during the wars in Chechenia. In 1996, the year that signed the end of the First Chechen War (1994-1996), Sergej Vladimirovič Bodrov's *Kavkazskij plennik*[13] was released. The film picks up the theme of the kidnapping of the Russians by the Caucasians (in this case Chechens). However, it also manages to bring out the importance of the sense of humanity, which usually vanishes during the war.

If in the background there is war, the main theme on which the film invites to reflect is the pain of a parent when facing the loss of a child. Having experienced this suffering firsthand, the Chechen Abdul-Murat finally decides not to kill the Russian prisoner Vanja because he knows that he can spare someone else such torment (in addiction Abdul-Murat knows Vanja's mother, who has arrived in the Caucasus alarmed by the letters of her imprisoned son). This is a different story if compared with homonym works, because it focuses on personal dramas that affect both Russians and Caucasians, marginalizing prejudices and stereotypes. It is interesting to point out that the two films reflect two different eras of relations between Russia and the Caucasus. As reported by Catherine Brown, there is a huge gap between the perception of the Caucasus by the generation that lived during the years of *Kavkazckaja plennica* and that of the more recent

[12] Thomas R.M.P Keijser, *The Caucasus Revisited. Development of Semantic Opposition from Puškin and Lermontov to the present*, in Herta Schmidt and Jenny Stellman, ed, *Lermontov neu bewertet/ Lermontov revisited,* München, Verlag Otto Sagner, 2013, p. 45.
[13] Sergej V.Bodrov, *Kavkazskij plennik*, Russia – Kazakhstan, AO Karavan (Russia) – BG Prodakšn, 1996.

generation, for which the Caucasus is mainly represented by the wars of Chechnya: the first one has in mind sunny lands, good wine and food, a place for vacation, while for the second the Caucasus becomes again a dangerous and violent place[14], and the reference to those authors who described the Caucasus in this way during the war of conquest is almost immediate: Puškin, Lermontov, Tolstoj.

2. North Caucasus and Russia

2.1. Russification in the pre-Soviet era

The Conquest of the Caucasus was completed in 1864. How the local population lived the Russian domination until 1917 remains controversial. Essentially, during the second half of the 19th century the North Caucasus remained substantially hostile and distrustful of the rulers, while in the first years of the 20th century the tension gradually faded away (not considering the 1905 Revolution, that was not limited to the North Caucasus), although it is not possible to define the situation as completely stabilized because of continuous disagreements between local people and central power.

The Russian Empire attempted a mainly administrative and cultural Russification of the territory, with the aim of "domesticating" and civilizing the locals. The administrative Russification aimed at concentrating power in the hands of the Russians, leaving the lowest positions to the locals, and introducing as a code of conduct the *adat*, a series of customary rules and prohibitions that governed relations among members of Muslim communities. However, this initiative was not very successful among the Chechen and Dagestani mountain communities, where the archaic jurisprudence persisted.

[14]Catherine Brown, *How Russia's writers saw the Caucasus,* in "Financial Times", 2014, https://www.ft.com/content/b17fbef0-8cda-11e3-8b82-00144feab7de;

The cultural Russification had the purpose to spread the Russian language through the Orthodox missionary work and was relatively successful among the wealthiest locals, who understood its importance for education, work and a prestigious social position. Nonetheless, access to certain schools, as well as to higher education institutions, was restricted to a few, mainly children of powerful local families[15]. This created a clear gap between the majority of the local population, who remained in their *aul'* and did not speak Russian, and the small elite, who had made a career and conquered prestigious positions thanks to Russian education.

Despite these (relatively) good results, there were also black pages written by the Russian Empire in the context of the administration of the North Caucasus. These include the forced exile (or deportation) of about five thousand Dagestani mountaineers to Novgorod, Pskov and Saratov following the revolt of 1877, which led to the death of almost half of these due to the climate they were not used to and diseases.

Overall, the relationship between the local population and the imperial power from the conquest to the fall of the empire remained somewhat tense, although there were relatively few times when dissent resulted in serious riots. To contribute to the more or less concealed hostility towards the Russians, as well as to a government of the region that was mostly unfair and discriminatory, there were certainly also the still unhealed wounds caused by the brutal conquest.

2.2. Sovietization

During the Russian civil war between Red Army and White Army, the Caucasian population mostly supported the first, blinded by the promises of the Bolsheviks, which ensured respect for nationalities and the right to self-determination for all peoples. The Red Army finally emerged victo-

[15] Jeronim Perović, *From Conquest to Deportation: The North Caucasus under Russian Rule*, New York, Oxford University Press, pp. 92-93, 2018.

rious from the clash in 1920 proclaiming the Soviet Mountain Republic, which included all the peoples of the region; exceptionally, Dagestan was established as an autonomous republic[16].

The determining factors in the relationship between the Soviet government and the local population were essentially two: cultural politics, which oscillated between "derussification" and assimilation, and collectivization.

Collectivization met strong resistance in the North Caucasus and took on anti-religious attitudes. There were several riots, whose main aim was not obtaining independence, but rather defending the traditional way of life and a certain social organization, menaced by collectivization[17]. These riots only managed to slow down the process, but at the end of the 1930s the Soviet government succeeded in reaching its objectives for the region. Collectivization caused in the Caucasus what it did in the rest of the Soviet Union, namely the suffering and starvation of many peasants forced into collective farms.

The term *korenizacija* ("put down roots") indicates the set of policies adopted by the Soviet government between the 1920s and the end of the 1930s, aimed at the political and cultural integration of non-Russian populations. The main goals were the inclusion of local representatives in the government (at lower levels) and the elimination of the Russian element brought by the Tsarist Empire in favor of the "native" one, which in short will only be reflected in the use of the local language. The last period of *korenizacija,* which coincided with Stalin's authoritarian squeeze and the Great Purges, saw a reversal of policy towards non-Russian national cultures. In 1938 the teaching of the Russian language became compulsory,

[16] Jeronim Perović, *From Conquest to Deportation: The North Caucasus under Russian Rule,* p.142.
[17] Jeronim Perović, *From Conquest to Deportation: The North Caucasus under Russian Rule*, p.250.

encouraging what Vernon Aspaturian calls "Russianization[18]". Over time, the school system was progressively oriented towards the Russian language and culture, so that, if in 1932 teaching in the primary and secondary schools of the Soviet Union was accessible in 104 different languages, depending on the mother tongue of the students, at the end of the 1970s, the languages of instruction dropped dramatically to 14[19].

During the war, the demographic engineering operations involving the North Caucasus were particularly dramatic. Operation Čečevica ("lentil") of February 1944 involved the deportation of half a million Chechens and Ingushes to Central Asia (officially due to their collusion with the Germans, but the war was probably used by Stalin to get rid of elements that already had long been disturbing due to their little inclination to submit), a fifth of whom died during the journey.

When after 13 years they obtained the permission to return to their lands, they found them occupied by Dagestani mountaineers who had been deported to the valley to cultivate the abandoned lands, and this caused territorial and ethnic conflicts to which the Soviet government could never find a satisfactory solution for all parties.

[18] «Sovietization is […] the process of modernization and industrialization within the Marxist-Leninist norms of social, economic and political behavior. Russianization is defined as the process of internationalizing Russian language and culture within the Soviet Union […]. Finally, Russification […] is defined as the process whereby non-Russians are transformed objectively and psychologically into Russians, and is more an individual process than a collective one», Vernon V.Aspaturian, *The Non-Russian Nationalities,* in "Prospects for Soviet Society", ed. Allen Kassof, London, Pall Mall Press, pp.159-160, 1968.

[19] Aleksandr A. Araf'ev, *Deti iz semej inostrannych migrantov kak novoe javlenie v rossijskich školach: socio-lingvističeskie i èkonomičeskie aspekty* [Children belonging to foreign migrant families as a new phenomenon in Russian schools: sociolinguistic and economic aspects], in "Demoskop", N.441-442, 1st-10th November 2010, http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/2010/0441/analit01.php.

2.3. The cultural identity of Dagestan

With about 40 ethnic groups and 14 official languages Dagestan is the most multiethnic Republic in the Russian Federation. Among the most numerous ethnic groups are the Avars (30% of the total population), the Dargins, the Kumyks, the Lezgins and the Laks.

It is important to distinguish three sets that define the belongingness of Dagestan's inhabitants at three different levels. The superset is what defines them *rossijane* ("Russians", understood as a citizen of the Russian Federation); within this superset there is the subset that defines them as *Dagestancy* ("Dagestani", inhabitant of the Republic of Dagestan), within which there are many subsets divided by ethnic group (these include the Caucasian groups listed above, but also the *russkie*, that is, the Russians understood as an ethnic group).

Even if some people may identify themselves with each of these definitions, it is much more likely that one will prevail over the others, especially when a choice has to be made (for example, when one introduces himself and wants to specify the place of origin).

This problem of definitions and labels is very topical and felt in the republic itself: in January 2017 the seminar "Formation of the Russian civil-political nation, cultural and civil identity of Dagestan: trends, problems, objectives and perspectives" was held, whose purpose was to determine how correct ethnic identification could be in the republic.

It has been argued that people who live in Dagestan identify themselves more often as representatives of a certain ethnicity, rather than as Dagestanis or Russians[20]; others, however, now far from their ethnic group, tend to identify themselves as Dagestanis, therefore with their place of resi-

[20] Michail Dabydov, *Kak predstavljat'sja: dagestanec ili roccijanin?* [How to introduce yourself to others: Dagestani or Russian?], "Kavkaz Post", 18th January 2017, https://capost.media/news/obshchestvo/kto-kruche-dagestanets-ili-rossiyanin.

dence. This topic is also often addressed by Alisa Ganieva, a young Dagestani writer and literary critic belonging to the ethnic group of the Avars, who notices (with bitterness) the abandonment of culture, language and traditions of the different ethnic groups by young people, while the Russian element (perhaps because it is connected to modernity) is becoming more and more attracting for them: they only speak Russian, they watch Russian television programs, they no longer respect age-old ethical norms. However, the situation is more complex because these young people, in Ganieva's words, do not even feel themselves to be *rossijane*, because they are often discriminated against by their own compatriots, treated as foreigners belonging to a completely different world[21].

The future scenario promises to be somewhat uncertain, but the most desirable one could include a synthesis of all the components discussed: hopefully, in the future, Dagestanis will not give up their ethnicity and keep their language and traditions alive, without these provoking inter-ethnic rivalries and precluding them to also feel part of that space shared with other ethnicities, Dagestan, which was and is, moreover, the background of a common history. In the best scenario the relationship with Russia could also improve (thanks to effective inclusion policies, which do not aim to undermine the ethnic element), so that Dagestanis can feel fully part of Russian society, and above all be recognized as such from the latter.

3. Caucasian Islam

3.1. The post-Soviet Islamic revival

After its Islamization in the 7th century by the Arabs, Dagestan became over time the stronghold of Islam in the Caucasus (the *de facto* capital of the Imamate of the Caucasus, for example, was the village of Gimry, the

[21] Alisa Ganieva, *'Pervoe, čto prichodit v golovu na vopros o molodych dagestancach – èto rasščeplennoe soznanie.*' ['The first thing that comes to mind when asked about Dagestani youth is a divided conscience"], interview by Anna Stroganova, 19th February 2011.

birthplace of the first Imam Ghazi-Mulla and Imam Shamil). Due to its privileged role in everyday life, which has always pervaded every aspect of the life of the faithful (private, public, spiritual, educational, political), it is easy to understand why more than seventy years of Soviet rule and religious repression have failed to scratch its importance on the territory. Although communism opposed religions, the Soviet government decided not to try to completely eradicate Islam from the Caucasian republics (probably because it was aware that it would be a failed and counterproductive attempt), and instead to keep it under strict control, which in fact allowed it to survive, but with extreme limitations. Four spiritual directors were created by Stalin in 1942, each responsible for controlling the religious life of Muslims in a specific area (Central Asia and Kazakhstan, European Russia and Siberia, North Caucasus and Dagestan, Transcaucasia)[22]. Basically, the Soviet government authorized only religious activities under the control of the directors, i.e. those carried out in authorized mosques and by regularly registered religious officials, while all religious activities outside were prohibited and repressed[23].

In the shadow of what Anna Zelkina calls "Soviet secular version of Islam", an "underground" Islam resisted, that perpetrated Islamic traditions and managed to develop a dense network of religious schools, thanks above all to "parallel" religious leaders belonging mostly to the Sufi orders[24]. Although rites and ceremonies performed outside the control of the direc-

[22] Alexandre Bennigsen & Chantal Lemercier- Quelquejay, *'Official' Islam in the Soviet Union*, in "Religion in Communist Lands", vol. VII, N. 3, 1979, pp. 148-149.
[23] Alexandre Bennigsen & Chantal Lemercier- Quelquejay, *'Official' Islam in the Soviet Union,* p.150.
[24] Sufism is the "doctrine and discipline of spiritual perfection [of Islam]. It is presented as a set of methods and doctrines that tend to the inner deepening of religious data, to preserve the community from the risk of a stiffening of faith and an arid and legalistic literalism "(Treccani, https://www.treccani.it / encyclopedia / Sufism /, my translation). It is particularly known for its multiple expressions, which mainly concern poetry and music, and is often referred to as the mystical side of Islam.

torate (and the Soviet government) were prohibited, there was a certain degree of tolerance for those not directly attributable to religion, in which Islam was more of a substratum, and which could be justified as elements of indigenous culture (which Soviet politics admitted)[25]. How much and what was tolerated is not easy to establish, given that the religious policy of the Soviet Union was in some periods (e.g., during the 1930s and early 1960s and 1980s) more repressive than in others[26].

The Islamic revival in Dagestan originated in the mountainous areas of the northwest, less controlled by the Soviet authority, and then followed the mountaineers downstream between the Terek and the Sulak between the 1950s and 1970s. Taking advantage of the loosening of the party's grip during the Gorbačëv era, Muslims began to make their demands and to claim their religious freedom, but in a fragmented way often depending on the ethnic group.

Ultimately, it can be said that towards the end of the Soviet Union, and in particular with its fall, there is a renaissance of Islam in Dagestan, characterized by a high degree of politicization and fragmented by ethnic group; consequently, for the Muslims belonging to the various ethnic groups the resistance against the Russian infidels in the 19th century, which reunited their ancestors in the name of the holy war, became only a distant memory. More than a renaissance, moreover, it seems more correct to speak of the emergence of a new Islam that had grown underground.

3.2. Sufism and the Wahhabi fundamentalism

Alongside Sufism, and to some extent in response to it, between 1993 and 1994 "purist" groups began to emerge, supporters of a conservative and

[25] Anna Zelkina, *The 'Wahhabis' of the Northern Caucasus vis-à-vis State and Society: The Case of Daghestan*, in Moshe Gammer, ed., *The Caspian Region, Volume 2: The Caucasus*, London, Routledge, vol. II, 2004, pp. 147-149.
[26] Sergej Abašin, *A Prayer for Rain: Practicing being Soviet and Muslim,* vol. XXX, N.2, 2014, p. 179.

rigorous Islam, denouncing the local religious tradition oriented towards Sufism[27]. Their origin coincides with the opening of the USSR to the rest of the world thanks to *perestroika*, which favored exchanges with the Arab world. Although these groups did not share the same level of intransigence, «they became universally labelled as Wahhabis and perceived as an alien and hostile group by most Daghestani Muslims»[28] hence the term "Wahhabi"[29] took on a negative connotation.

Wahhabism did not have a large hold on the Dagestan population overall (in 2000 it did not exceed 3%), but to the poorest the turn towards religious rigorism seemed the only possible answer to the problems of post-Soviet society, since Sufism did not provide immediate solutions (focusing more on introspection) and official Islam, represented by the Spiritual Council of Muslims of Dagestan, increasingly lost trust among the faithful due to collaboration with the notoriously corrupt political establishment[30].

Wahhabism posed a danger as much to the political elite (as Wahhabis complied only with Qur'anic law) as to Sufism (as it represented an opponent in the region's religious leadership and blamed Sufi orders for deviating from true Islam), so they decided to join forces against the newcomers: Wahhabis were forbidden to enter mosques, teach and were banished from their villages. In 1996 the clash between Sufis and Wahhabis turned into open conflict: it culminated in the invasion of the areas of Botlich and Cumada (Dagestan) by a small group of Dagestani and Chechen jihad-

[27]Anna Zelkina, *The 'Wahhabis' of the Northern Caucasus vis-à-vis State and Society: The Case of Daghestan,* p. 156.
[28] Anna Zelkina, *The 'Wahhabis' of the Northern Caucasus vis-à-vis State and Society: The Case of Daghestan,* p. 157.
[29] The movement, born in the 17th century in the Arabian Peninsula, takes its name from its founder Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and insists on the literal interpretation of the Koran, condemning as enemies of Islam all those who do not interpret it in this way (Wikipedia, https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wahhabism).
[30] Robert B. Ware & Enver Kisriev*, The Islamic Factor in Dagestan*, in "Central Asia Survey", vol. XIX, N. 2, 2010, p.238.

ists, which started the Second Chechen War. In the meantime, there had been a change at the top of the Russian government and consequently a turnaround in Caucasian politics: the new Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, judging the work of his predecessor Boris Elcin as weak and inadequate, managed the situation with an iron fist, declaring open war on "terrorism", whose perpetrators were identified both among separatists and civilians who followed the more conservative Islam.

3.3 The 2000s

The Second Chechen War (1999-2009) marked the tightening of relations between the Russian authorities and more conservative Islam, which included not only terrorists who aspired to create an Islamic state through violence but also civilians who followed a stricter Islam.

The Russian intervention, presented primarily as a counter-terrorism operation[31], was largely supported by Dagestanis, who feared the Chechen gangs more than Russia in the period between the two wars in Chechnya[32]. The counter-terrorism operations did not end with the end of the war, but have continued up to the present day. However, the terrorists' base of operations moved from Chechnya to Dagestan, which in 2011 was labeled by the BBC as "the most dangerous place in Europe"[33]. Islamic terrorist actions also spread to the rest of Russia, with a toll of thirteen major attacks and about 1000 victims between 1999 and 2015.

According to Emil Souleimanov, the roots of the violence that unleashed in Dagestan at the end of the Second Chechen War can be traced back to the harsh treatment reserved for suspected Wahhabis by local author-

[31] Roland Dannreuther, *Islamic Radicalization in Russia: An Assessment*, in "International Affairs" (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-), vol. LXXXVI, N. 1, 2010, p. 215.
[32] Robert B. Ware, Enver Kisriev, Patzelt Werner & Ute Roericht, *Stability in the Caucasus: The Perspective from Dagestan*, in "Problems of Post-Communism", vol. 50, N.2, 2003, p.20.
[33] Lucy Ash, Dagestan – the most dangerous place in Europe, in "BBC News", 24th November 20111, https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-15824831.

ities, especially the police. This would later lead the victims or his/her family members to join the Islamist rebels in the mountains to plan their revenge, and right here they would be further exposed to the principles of Salafism[34], i.e. the new denomination of the more uncompromising and rigorous Islam that replaced the word Wahhabism. Among the Salafis there were certainly terrorists who disseminated violence and terror to establish an Islamic State based on Sharia law, but also Muslims who simply wanted to follow the precepts of Islam more strictly, who did not disdain the creation of the Islamic State, but were not ready to create it with violence and at any cost. Given the violent and not always respectful of human rights methods employed by Putin's Kremlin, repeatedly denounced by Human Rights Watch[35], this vicious circle, which in part has the effect of fueling terrorism, seems far from breaking.

Moreover, in the North Caucasus terrorism is mainly linked to the youth. Among the extremists' favorite targets for recruitment, there are undoubtedly young people, as they are more exposed to propaganda via the Internet and social networks, but also because they are easier to influence and mislead. They are greatly fascinated by extremists because of the lack of prospects for the future in Dagestan, where the youth unemployment rate is very high, but also because of the sense of injustice they feel in their country.

[34] Emil Souleimanov, *The Upsurge of Islamist Violence in the North Caucasus: Exploring the Case Studies of Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria,* in "Connections", vol. XIV, N. 4, 2015, p. 120.
[35] Human Rights Watch, *'Invisible War'. Russia's Abusive Response to the Dagestan Insurgency*, 2015, https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/06/18/invisible-war/russias-abusive-response-dagestan-insurgency.

4. Dagestan told by Alisa Ganieva

4.1. *Salam, Dalgat!*

With the long story *Salam tebe, Dalgat!* [Salam, Dalgat!] Ganieva won the Debut Prize in 2009 and established herself as an author in the literary panorama, being already known as a literary critic. The young Dagestani woman of Avar ethnicity was born in Dagestan but grew up between the Caucasus and Moscow and succeeded in bringing to the attention of readers a reality, the one of the "isolated microcosms of the Caucasus" (indeed fragmented into many small realities, which are still unknown to many today), through «ordinary people and […] universal human collisions understandable to each and every one on this earth»[36].

The story is set on the streets of Machačkala, where the protagonist, Dalgat, wanders for a whole day in search of his uncle, to whom he must deliver an important letter. Following Dalgat along the road, the reader meets different characters and scenes, many "fragments" of Dagestan which, when recomposed, illustrate the local daily life. The present in Dagestan is characterized above all by the ongoing "civil war" between the state and Islamic terrorists, which also involves other figures, like Sufis and Salafis. Sufi Islam is represented by Arip, an acquaintance of Dalgat, who tries to convert the boy and to convince him to move away from secular customs. Salafi Islam degenerating into terrorism is instead represented by Murad, Dalgat's cousin. While Arip is in favor of the introduction of the sharia law and a reform of the ruling class, but he does not wish a separation from Russia, Murad praises the creation of an independent imamate and the expulsion of the Russian infidels and, although he does not speak directly of killing infidels, he tells Dalgat that he will later hide a mysterious package

[36] Alisa Ganieva, *Alisa Ganieva*, *se il Caucaso si separasse dalla Russia*, [Alisa Ganieva, if the Caucasus separated from Russia], interview by Maria Elena Murdaca, 27 dicembre 2012, https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Daghestan/Alisa-Ganieva-se-il-Caucaso-si-separasse-dalla-Russia-127531.

in his home. The story describes both the abuse of power by the authorities (cops and special departments) on suspicions of terrorism, and the violence and attacks by terrorists against the cops, who are "killed like flies".

Another important theme that is discussed are stereotypes and prejudices that Caucasians and Russians have toward each other. In the text we find the same 150 years old prejudices consecrated by Russian literature in the 19th century. These prejudices nowadays are mainly fueled by news reports spread in Russia concerning the North Caucasus, which are for the most part negative and speak of violence and terrorism, but also more superficially by certain behaviors (irrational, violent and vengeful) that are attributed to Caucasians in Russian movies or TV series.

For example, Mesedu, Dalgat's friend, tells Dalgat that she's going to move to Saint-Petersburg, but she intends to hide his ethnic identity instead of integrating it into his new life, demonstrating that, despite the Russian citizenship common to all ethnic groups, the most privileged remains the Slavic group.

In a meta-novel that Dalgat reads, the present chaos (represented by the city of Machačkala, "exhausted by the multitude of its inhabitants" is contrasted with the idyll of the past, made of memories of important villages (now in ruins), of valiant peoples who have inhabited plains and mountains and of splendid and uncontaminated landscapes. The abandonment of the villages to move to the city is the symbol of the abandonment of traditions, culture and stories, which Ganieva aims to save before they vanish completely.

4.2. *The Mountain and the Wall*

The novel *Prazdničnaja gora* (translated in English as *The Mountain and the Wall*) picks up and enriches the framework presented by *Salam, Dalgat!*. It is a contemporary dystopia, where Russia builds a wall on the

border with the Caucasus. The perspective offered to the reader is mainly that of **Š**amil, a young Avar, an example of that new generation struggling to define its own identity, who through his wanderings in the streets of Machač**k**ala and his encounters carries on the narrative**.** The novel is made up of multiple voices and multiple perspectives, in fact Ganieva states that «the main character is the region itself... its multiplicity of perspectives»[37]. The story unfolds through three main themes: daily life, the celebration of Dagestan culture and the separation of the Caucasus from Russia. Among the themes that recur most frequently in the dialogues are corruption and nepotism: people in Dagestan must pay to get into university and pass exams, but also to get a job, or have the right connections to get some privileges. Another theme that is often presented through the eyes of **Ša**mil and the other characters is the widespread violence that reigns in the city, but is now discussed as an everyday occurrence, slipped in between speeches, as something ordinary. Religion is a constant presence throughout the novel, but take on relevance towards the end, with the fundamentalists' seizure of power. The tendency of many characters, especially the youngsters, is to maintain a certain distance from religion. However, the rivalry between Sufis and Salafis is always very much alive, with the latter wishing for a State governed by Sharia law to drive out the corrupt unfaithful. Madina, **Ša**mil's promised bride, believes in the creation of a just State too, and in a short time she decides to adhere to Salafism and to secretly marry an alleged Wahhabi. Her dream soon turns out to be a mere illusion when fundamentalists violence also turns to her family**,** and when it becomes clear that privileges of the previous ruling class have been simply transferred to the leaders of the Caucasus Emirate. Machmud Tagirovi**č**'s meta-novel, on the other hand, celebrates the traditions and culture of Dagestan before the

[37] Alisa Ganieva, *A conversation with Alisa Ganieva,* in "Music&Literature", interview by José Vergara, 22nd March 2021, https://www.musicandliterature.org/features/2021/3/20/rkt6gk276itn5d0tqjp4egdlz1hyz6.

October Revolution, and does so through fragments of daily life, steeped in customs, rituals and propitiatory superstitions, under the pretext of recounting the life of Chandulaj. Referring to the epic poems he heard from his father's friends, Machmud Tagirovič tells of a place called Rohel-Meèr, or the festive mountain, where all souls would go after death. The magical place of the festive mountain, like all the beliefs, customs and traditions that emerge from the meta-novel and the novel-container, are part of the reality that Ganieva wants to immortalize before it vanishes. To the climate of violence and corruption that now reigns, the author tries to find a counterbalance by recalling a past that, unfortunately, has less and less to do with the present, since the loss of roots, especially ethnic and linguistic ones, generates in young people a sense of loss about their identity, which does not allow them to identify with that past that Ganieva tries to save.

From the very first pages the theme of the dividing wall between Russia and the Caucasus is introduced. The news stimulates different reactions: incredulity, hope, joy, fear, but also separatist ambitions in the case of two minor ethnic groups, the Kumyks and the Lezgins. The popular reaction to the Russian separation is well summarized by the words of Arip, a friend of Šamil who lives in Moscow and crossed the border by bus to return home to Dagestan. When Šamil asks him what the situation is like in Moscow, Arip replies that «anyone with any brains is scared, Shamil, and fools are celebrating. They think that they've solved all their problems, that by stopping the subsidies they're saving money. But have we ever seen any of those subsidies here?[38]».Those who rejoice in the separation are the Russians who consider the Caucasus an unnecessary burden that only absorbs resources like a bottomless pit (it is known that 90% of Dagestan's state budget is made up of central government funds), and who over time have given rise to a protest movement under the slogan of "chvatit kormit'

[38] Alisa Ganieva, *Prazdničnaja Gora,* Moskva, Astrel', 2011 (English translation by Carol Apollonio, *The Mountain and the Wall*, Dallas, Deep Vellum Publishing, 2015).

Kavkaz" (enough to feed the Caucasus). In reality, the money arrives in the Caucasus but not to the citizens, otherwise it would not be possible to explain the high unemployment rate, especially among young people, and the general level of discontent of the population. Sitting in a café with Arip and other acquaintances, discussing who and what to blame for the turn of events (the East, the Western secret services, the Caucasians themselves or the fall of the Soviet Union), Šamil surprisingly takes the floor, after having been basically a passive character throughout the novel, blaming the *Spec-naz*[39] , who «made a nice living on our corpses, and then they abandoned us, like, 'Now you can rot in hell.'»[40], and explaining that counter-terrorism operations were made longer in order to increase their earnings. Arip also predicts that «with fascists in power, [Russians] will feel authorized to send their air force to bomb us. We are a den of thugs, aren't we? »[41]. Arip's prediction at the end comes true and Russians begin bombing the region. Šamil also falls victim, and although the chapter elusively closes with the young man fainting, it is easy to imagine that bombs have razed everything to the ground. The epilogue, however, contrasts with this tragic end: on the festive mountain the characters of the novels meet to celebrate Šamil and Asja's wedding, while war and violence are no longer in evidence. The ending that Ganieva chooses for the novel is probably dictated by the desire to let the disappearing reality (that of traditional culture) prevail over the sad reality that has taken over and proved to be unsuccessful and dreadful. The festive mountain represents, from this point of view, the last alternative, the last foothold to continue to "live" when in the earthly world it is no longer possible.

[39] It is the abbreviation of "Vojska spezial'nogo naznačenija", i.e "special forces". In this case the term indicates Russia's special forces, part of which was involved in counter-terrorism operations in the Caucasus.
[40] Alisa Ganieva, *Prazdničnaja Gora.*
[41] Alisa Ganieva, *Prazdničnaja Gora.*