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**THE NEW DYNAMIC OF CENTRE-PERIPHERY
RELATION: VLADIMIR PUTIN AND RAMZAN KAYDROV
IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS**

**Noua dinamică a relației centru-periferie: Vladimir Putin și
Ramzan Kadyrov în Caucazul de Nord**

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„Our state is held together by two rings. One is the USSR; the other is the Russian Federation. If the first is broken, problems for the other will follow” (Mikhail Gorbachev)¹

Abstract: *The current paper dwells on the impact Chechnya has had on Russian Federation in the following years after the dismemberment of the Soviet Union. It shows how in the light of the increasing Islam extremism in the North Caucasus a series of terrorist attacks on Russian territory, and the precedents of secessionist demands of Chechens, made Russia adopt an assertive stance towards this region starting with the late 1999. Moreover, it emphasizes Putin`s federal alterations based on Russian military, as an attempt to replicate the success of the Second Chechen War. Further, it argues that Moscow`s strategic plan of combating terrorism in Chechnya, backed by its centralizing reforms, materialized through implementing the chechenization programme. Final conclusions will be drawn based on the newly-institutionalized centre-periphery dialogue, characterized by a total dependence between Moscow and Grozny.*

Keywords: North Caucasus, federal reforms, chechenization, terrorist attacks, Soviet Union.

According to his declaration in an interview in 2009, the President Ramzan Kadyrov asserted that „*Chechnya saved Russia*”.² If analysed in the context of the reformative programme which has reframed Moscow`s political discourse starting with 2000, the statement not only pointed out the tremendous role of the region in the so-called geopolitical history of Russia, but also underlined the new political dynamic between the former imperial centre and its peripheries. In order to understand the nature of this dynamic as well as the rationale for Moscow`s new political shift in the region, one must comprehend the configuration of the USSR and, respectively, the place held by Chechnya in that system. The Soviet mechanism was highly centralized on political level and partly decentralized on its administrative structures. According to a multi-layered system, the

¹ Alex Marshall, *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule*, London, Routledge, 2010, pp. 293-294.

² Richard Sakwa, „Blowback? Chechnya and the challenges of Russian Politics”, in Robert Bruce Ware, *How the Caucasus Shaped Russia*, New York, Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 187.

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majoritarian nations enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy within a territory on which they were known as *titular nations*. This type of organization relied on a hierarchical model determined by factors such as demographics and geographical position.³ The superior status was held by the *union republics (SSR)* which formally had the right to secede. They were followed by the *autonomous republics (ASSR)*, which despite having their own constitutions and other features of partial statehood, had not enjoyed the same privileges as the union republics. The *autonomous regions (AO)* represented the smallest entities and the last ones on the Soviet ladder.⁴ Stalin's plan to forge a supranational entity: *Sovietskij narod* (the Soviet people), was implemented in 1922-24 and accordingly, some ethnic groups, or nationalities, were classified as „first class nationalities”, others as „second class”, or even „third class nationalities”, while others were not recognized at all and were incorporated within larger ethnic communities. As only fifteen out of a more than a hundred nationalities acquired the „first class status” and were entitled to form their own union republics, the rest of them were assigned either to an autonomous republic, an autonomous province (*krai*), an autonomous region (*oblast'*) within a union republic, or completely deprived of any form of autonomy. Under the new national-administrative hierarchy, in the North Caucasus there emerged the autonomous republics (*ASSR*) of Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Checheno-Ingushetia⁵ and North Ossetia.⁶ The dissolution of the hypercentralized Soviet system was accompanied by the fragmentation of political authority and statehood revision. The efforts towards building federalism were obstructed by the regions which operated through a system based on bottom-up structures. Due to the lack of an articulated strategy during Boris Yeltsin's presidency, the relations between the regions and Moscow became weaker, being affected not only by financial and governmental issues,

³ Bruno Coppieters, „War and secession: A moral analysis of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict”, in Bruno Coppieters, Richard Sakwa, *Contextualizing secession, Normative studies in a comparative perspective*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 187.

⁴ Constitution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Fundamental Law), Chapter two: „The organization of the State, Kremlin, 5 December 1936”, www.marxists.org, 11 May 2015, 22:10.

⁵ According to Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, the Chechens and Ingush belong to the same ethnic group of „Vainakh people” (lit. „ourfolk”). Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, *Getting Back Home? Towards Sustainable Returns of Ingush Forced Migrants and Lasting Peace in Prigorodny District of North Ossetia*, Report for Open Society Institute, 2005-2006, p. 5.

⁶ Galina M. Yemelianova, *Russia and Islam. A Historical Survey*, London, Palgrave, 2002, pp. 116-117.

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but also tackling aspects of sovereignty.⁷ Moreover, it was the implementation of the new Constitution adopted on 12 December 1993 which institutionalized the regional fragmentation by stipulating the administrative division of the Russian Federation in 89 regions under the term of *federal subjects*. The segmentation was based on Soviet legacy as the new organization of the regions followed the same principle of delineating ethnically-based administrative units subordinated to the central authority. Owing to this legacy of dependence, the new system set up propitious conditions for segmented regionalism, and consequently, Moscow gave way to a process of asymmetrical negotiations with the federal subjects, from which Chechnya and Tatarstan requested their independence.⁸ As prime minister, and lately president of Russian Federation, Putin's response to Chechen secessionism was relaunched with enormous human and material costs yet sent the clear message that Russia will not follow the Soviet path towards disintegration.⁹ His next strategies were determined by the fragile situation in the North Caucasus, where instabilities posed the threat of a chain reaction throughout the federation. By stating that „*a strong state, means also a strong federation*”¹⁰ Putin announced his intentions of combating the centrifugal order initiated by Yeltsin. The manner in which the latter tackled the conflict legacy in the Caucasus starting with the first Chechen War, stressed the precariousness of the Russian system and augmented the vicious circle of confrontations between the Kremlin and this troubled region. Despite Yeltsin's declaration of having contributed to state consolidation, Putin has largely equated the post-Soviet politics with „*disintegration of the statehood*”.¹¹ Well before December 1999, when he was officially assigned Yeltsin's successor, Putin had managed to build himself a name, due to his uncompromising approach to military operations in Dagestan and the series of Russian apartment bombings.¹² The military campaign in Chechnya, compared to those of NATO troops in Kosovo, marked a rapid victory on

⁷ Richard Sakwa, *Putin Russia's Choice*, London, Routledge, 2004, pp. 130-131.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p.131.

⁹ George W. Breslauer, „Regimes of Political Consolidation”, in Alex Pravda, *Leading Russia, Putin in Perspectives*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 50.

¹⁰ President Vladimir Putin's annual address to the federal assembly of the Russian Federation, Moscow, Kremlin, 3 April, 2001, www.russiaconsulmumbai.mid.ru, 17.XI.15, 8:09.

¹¹ George W. Breslauer, „Regimes of Political Consolidation”, p. 48.

¹² A series of terrorist bombings of apartment blocks in Buynaksk, Moscow, and Volgograd between 4 and 16 September 1999, unleashed panic across Russia and massively contributed to dramatic change in Russia's approach to the events in the North Caucasus.

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Aslan Maskhadov's army, „washing off Russia's humiliation at Khasavyurt”, as many voices pronounced at that time.¹³

The importance of the two Chechen Wars in the context of Soviet collapse and the threat of contagious disintegration of the entire federation shed a different light on Kadyrov's assessment of the saving role of Chechnya. The two military confrontations between Moscow and Grozny not only have reshaped the views of Russians on the conflict, but also set their country on a different political path. It was mainly the impact of the Second Chechen War which triggered certain reactions in both Russia and abroad, and thus facilitating Putin's rise to power and further leading to the series of centralizing reforms of the state. Following the immediate Soviet collapse, the first Chechen War took by surprise the already fatigued Russian society. Unsurprisingly, the Russians condemned the military actions in the North Caucasus, whereas the West, still under the shock of Soviet dismemberment and the fragile reconciliation with Moscow after the end of the Cold War, displayed a rather lenient position towards the events in the former Soviet space.¹⁴ Conversely, the invasion of Dagestan and the series of terrorist attacks on Russia as a prelude to the Second Chechen War, amplified by rapid victory over the troops led by Shamil Basaev and Ibn al-Khattab, changed the Russian spirits. Considering the retreat of separatist troops in Chechnya, eventual regrouping for more attacks could be expected at any times, which made for three thirds of Russian population to plead for decisive measures against the rebels. This repositioning was not the preserve of civil society only-parties and social-political movement became actively engaged in the armament programme initiated by the Kremlin. Similarly, the West altered its reactions too unleashing a storm of criticism against Moscow, accompanied by threats of imposing harsh sanctions on Russia. In the light of events in the Caucasus, the western reactions made for another pressure on Russian society, intensifying patriotic expression and stressing the importance of national security. The need for a strong leader facilitated Putin's advancement and also fortified his image of *Pater*

¹³ Evgheniy Anisimov, *История России [The history of Russia]*, Moscow, Piter, 2006, p. 443.

¹⁴ Antonio Rubbi, *Ельциниада. Первое десятилетие постсоветской России [Eltsiniada, The first decade of post-Soviet Russia]*, Moscow, Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya, 2004, pp. 426-428; For more details concerning US policy towards the First Chechen War, see Maria Y. Omeliceva, „Russia's Counterterror Policy: Variations on an Imperial Theme”, in *Terrorism Research Initiative*, volume 3, Number 1, 2009.

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Patriae, engaged in achieving stability and combating terrorism.¹⁵

As George Breslauer has noted, Putin's first presidential term was accompanied by a set of actions aimed at fortifying the instruments of state power and endorsing specific social groups, which had been alienated by the transformative measures of the previous regime.¹⁶ In contrast to Yeltsin, by redefining the approach to conflicts in the North Caucasus, Putin uncompromisingly rejected the idea of secession, implementing a new wave of reforms to limit the regional autonomy and strengthen state centralism. Therefore, the president has assumed the full authority to dismiss the regional governors, as well as to remove them from the Federal Council, whereas by obliging the regional legislations to comply with constitutional federal norms, he ensured the preeminence of the centre as opposed to peripheral regions.¹⁷ In addition, the militaristic manner in which the instabilities in Chechnya had been approached and marked the swift victory, served as a model for altering the bureaucratic federal structures based on Russian military model. The reforms issued in May 2000 were intended to reorganize the Russian Federation according to the seven military districts, each district being supervised by a federal plenipotentiary, personally appointed by the Russian president. Paradoxically, the implementation of these reforms transgressed the Russian legislation, as compared to all the other administrative subdivisions constitutionally accepted-the Federal Structure, articles 65-79-the new districts could not be linked with any existing federal entity. In spite of articles 66 and 67.3 allowing certain amendments concerning the frontiers or statuses of federal subjects, there was no provision permitting administrative or structural division of these subjects.¹⁸ Thus, the idea of administrative-territorial reorganization was far from being dictated and further legitimized by constitutional or federal rationales. For Putin, the project expressed a managerial stringency allowing him to put into force the dictatorship of law, and to secure the functioning of a common legal space. Broadly, the programme was conceived to monitor the regions in

¹⁵ It is well-known in this sense Vladimir Putin's heated declaration „to hit [the terrorists] even in the latrine”. See: Путин пожалобещал мочить в сортире [Putin regretted the promise to „hit in the latrine”], <https://lenta.ru/news/2011/07/15/vsortire/>, 15.XII.15, 08.35.

¹⁶ George Breslauer, „Regimes of Political Consolidation”, p. 38.

¹⁷ E. Andrew Foxall, „Russia's Canary in the North Caucasus's Mine: Stavropol'skiïkra?” in Robert Bruce Ware, *The Fire Below*, New York, Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 160.

¹⁸ Gordon M. Hahn, *Putin's Federal Reforms. Reintegrating Russia's Legal Space or Upsetting the Metastability of Russia's Asymmetrical Federalism*, <https://www.gwu.edu/>, p. 506, 21.XII.15, 11:06.

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order to comply with federal legislation and constitution, coordinate the activities of federal officials in the regions, and observe the agencies responsible for implementing the legislation at local level.¹⁹ The new reformative programme counteracted the federal structures during Yeltsin era which was characterized by a large number of representatives compared to the scarceness of resources. As each federal subject used to be bound by a plenipotentiary entirely dependent on resources provided by the regional governors, Putin decided not only to eradicate this dependence, but also to abrogate any activity between ministers and federal envoys. The programme initiated in May 2000 to consolidate the executive vertical, produced a bureaucratic layer which provided direct connection with the presidential administration.

The fight against centrifugal forces or implementing chechenization:

Following the terrorist attacks on Russian territory and the Wahhabi insurgencies led by Shamil Basaev and Ibn al Khattab, on 12 June 2000 Moscow extended the programme of combating regional fragmentation, by assigning Akhmed-hadjiKadyrov the representative of the federal administration in Chechnya. Despite all separatist sympathies displayed by the Chechen leader during the First Russo-Chechen War, Kadyrov remained loyal to the Sufi *tariqat*²⁰ and rejected the militant Salafism of Wahhabi fundamentalists. His social platform had been gained through commitment to the traditional *virids*-religious communities which formed the Sufi *tariquats* Naqşbandi and Qadiriya; the existence of the 20 active *virids* in Chechnya indicated the solid integration of the *tariquats* into traditional life of the community.²¹

Kadyrov's political profile corresponded to a set of values the platform of which could counterbalance the unpredictable forces in the region. His image as an ethno-national leader was further adjusted and optimized in order to become compatible with his mission of standing against Islamic extremism through calling upon traditional values opposing Wahhabism. Similar to the situation in Tatarstan,

¹⁹ David Cashback, „Risky Strategies? Putin's Federal Reforms and the Accommodation of Difference in Russia”, in *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, Issue 3/2003, p. 8.

²⁰ *Tariqat*-a sufi brotherhood which exerts strong influence on Muslim community.

²¹ Richard Sakwa, „Blowback? Chechnya and the challenges of Russian Politics”, p. 182.

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where measures towards invigorating the official Islam had been taken through the programme „The Russian model for Muslims”, in Chechnya Kadyrov played the role of institutionalizing the process known as *chechenization*. The programme mainly focused on retraditionalizing society and policies, through repudiating the extreme forms of Islam and instilling a more patriotic spirit towards Chechnya and Russia.²² As the official mufti of Chechnya, Kadyrov not only rebuffed Aslan Maskhadov and accused Basaev and Khattab of disseminating the extreme Islam, but also pleaded for the imposition of federal administration in the region as the only solution for achieving order.²³ This display of declarative dependence on Moscow played a crucial part in the process of implementing the chechenization. On one hand it justified Kremlin's legislative presence in combating the rebel forces, on the other, the Chechen leader was overtly expressing his readiness to secure loyalty and cooperation with Moscow. As chief federal objective in the process of federal centralization, the *chechenization* was initially conceived as a project designed to act on the territories of the least integrated federal subjects. Nevertheless, by introducing the new consolidative programme of vertical structures in Chechnya, Moscow set up a new approach to the regional conflicts. Concerning insurgencies, Putin relied on confining the task to the local regime, and gradually integrating the bureaucratic structures of the region into those of the federal centre. Considering Kadyrov's vast prerogatives and federal incentives, the programme meant the transfer of administrative power, provided that Chechnya would comply with Moscow. Up until his assassination on 9 May 2004, Akhmedhadji Kadyrov managed to develop a strategy of absorbing the converted rebels into his administrative system, consolidating his position, and implicitly, secure his unofficial independence from Moscow.

In May 2004 the chechenization campaign was inherited by Akhmed's son, Ramzan Kadyrov. The centre-periphery relations between Moscow and Chechnya remained largely the same as the new leader inclined to observe the established system. Owing to Putin's aversion to negotiate with separatist forces, considered the main flaws of the Russian politics in the 1990's, the Moscow-Grozny dialogue grew increasingly based on personal loyalty, bilateral relations and

²² *Ibidem*

²³ Richard Sakwa, „Chechnya: A just War fought unjustly?”, in Bruno Coppieters, Richard Sakwa, *Contextualizing secession, Normative studies in a comparative perspective*, p. 180.

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deinstitutionalization.²⁴ The Kremlin's approach to this issue has resulted in strong dependence on Ramzan Kadyrov's regime, and conversely, in Chechnya totally hanging on federal subsidies. Were Russia to renounce its soft-power mechanisms, targeted on eradicating the Chechen terrorism through backing up the local leaders, the latter would be deprived of all incentives to legitimize the Russian policies in the region, and also fight the opponents of these policies.

While the ruthless tactic of suppressing the rebels fortified Kadyrov's position and led Russia to cease its antiterrorist operation in Chechnya (KTO) in April 2009,²⁵ it also has increased de interdependence between Kadyrov and Putin, bogged down in a form of common captivity.²⁶ The end of operation KTO resulted in the retreat of Russian troops from Chechnya, which considerably enabled Kadyrov to run the country freely. His coercive policies and rampant corruption, harsh abuses and brutal measures against the rebels and civil society²⁷ or opponents²⁸ have brought to attention the unconstitutional situation on the territory of Chechnya as federal subject. The irony of chechenization lays in the fact that the much coveted independence the separatist and Islamist Chechens had fought for, was achieved in an unsolicited manner, accompanied by substantial funds. According to Vladimir Putin's declaration, between 2000 and 2010, the republics of North Caucasus, Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan, have been granted roughly 800 billion rubles (\$25 billion), from which approximately 87-92% benefited Chechnya.²⁹ Despite their noticeable social and economic improvements, these financial transfers could not guarantee the security and stability of the region. In 2011, the biggest unemployment rate was registered in the North Caucasian Federal

²⁴ Richard Sakwa, „Blowback? Chechnya and the challenges of Russian Politics”, p. 183.

²⁵ „Russia Ends Operations in Chechnya”, in *New York Times*, www.nytimes.com, 11.I.16, 09:12.

²⁶ Alexei Malasenko, „*Рамзан Кадыров: российский политик кавказской национальности*” [*Ramzan Kadyrov: the Russian politician of Caucasian nationality*], Carnegie Endowment, Moscow, 2009, p. 34.

²⁷ **Tanya Lokshina**, „Another Year of Ramzan Kadyrov”, in *Human Rights Watch*, 31 March, 2009, www.hrw.org, 19.VI.2015, 09:49.

²⁸ „Kadyrov and Massive Human Rights Violations”, in *European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights*, www.ecchr.eu, 19.VI.2015, 9:55.

²⁹ Anna Matveeva, „The Northeastern Caucasus: Drifting Away from Russia”, in Robert Bruce Ware, *The Fire Below. How the Caucasus shaped Russia*, New York, Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 255.

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District,³⁰ 14.3% compared to 6.1% on the rest of the Federation. The situation in Chechnya, 27.25% was exceeded only by Ingushetia 8.9%.³¹ Putin has never displayed an articulate attitude towards the methods in which Ramazan Kadyrov applies the local policies. In spite of being decorated several times for his services rendered to the Federation, the Kremlin kept a rather neutral tone concerning the reconstruction programme in Chechnya. Conversely, Kadyrov remained a loud and loyal supporter of the Russian President. In December 2007, when election for State Duma were held in Russia, Chechnya paid its tribute by securing 99.36% of the votes to the Kremlin's Party, United Russia. Moreover, Kadyrov expressed his regret after the end of Putin's second presidential term, which in his opinion should have been extended for life. His support for Putin's successor to power reconfirmed the loyalty and importance of Chechnya in the process of federal consolidation. On 2 March 2008, during the presidential election, Kadyrov's Chechnya backed Dmitri Medvedev by 88.7% of votes. Vladislav Surkov, seen as one of the most important ideologues of the Kremlin, stressed the tremendous role of the Chechen leader in securing order in the region: „*Currently, the stability in the Caucasus relies entirely on the shoulders of people like Ramzan Kadyrov. As long as we are surrounded by people like Kadyrov, we can be assured that in the republic will govern constitutional order and all efforts will be made to secure peace, stability, and prosperity in Chechnya*”.³² The chechenization has also materialized through positive aspects, among which the relative cessation of military operation, a quite diluted phenomenon if compared to the situation in Dagestan and Ingushetia. The criminality rate has been registered at 50% lower the national level, though the terrorist attacks in the region still remain an alarming issue. It is understandable that the stakes for the former insurgents now holding key-positions are to preserve the highest possible level of autonomy. In addition, not being able to acquire full independence, the Chechens channel the federal funds into public reconstruction of their country-part of the price for instituting „Ramzanistan” was the rebirth of a dazzling Grozny after the devastating wars with Russia.

³⁰ The North Caucasian District is one of the 9 federal districts of Russia, founded on 19 January 2010 by detaching 6 republics and 1 region from the South Federal District. It comprises the republics of Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Carachiai-Cherkessia, North Ossetia, and Stavropol *krai*.

³¹ Anna Matveeva, „The Northeastern Caucasus: Drifting Away from Russia”, p. 256.

³² Richard Sakwa, „Blowback? Chechnya and the challenges of Russian Politics”, p. 185.

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In April 2011 Kadyrov was renamed in his function for a period of other 5 years. In means that even after the introducing the governor elections in 2012, he will remain in power until 2016. Meanwhile, all estimates are for Kadyrov carrying on abuses in spheres such as legislation, the freedom of the press, and civil rights. Elements of cult personality were propagated at national level through a documentary broadcasted by NTV TV channel on 6 October 2011, in conjunction with Kadyrov's 35th birthday. Kadyrov is also among the few regional leaders enjoying a national profile. His lavish lifestyle, though notorious in the Federation, remains a poorly discussed issue, along with many other aspects of the regime.

The federal subsidies allocated to the North Caucasus maintain a vicious circle without providing any sustainable solutions in the long run. As Anna Matveeva has pointed out, Moscow's involvement in the region concerns only security issues, whereas the important aspects of domestic policies are abandoned to the local leaders. Consequently, the centre passively witnesses the unofficial disintegration of the region. In a state with such a pluricultural society, containing more than 150 autochthonous cultural groups, any attempts at formal prioritization, risks the integrity of the entire system. In the same way, even if Moscow considered the prospect of renouncing these territories, in practical terms, the situation is still hard to envisage. The chance was missed out on at the beginning of 1990's, when out of fear of giving way to a chain reaction, Russia lost the dialogue with the secular movements for independence. Currently, the region is devoid of any local, pro-national agents to articulate any separation requisition.³³ Putin remains the most unwavering partisan of supranational state, arguing that the secession of whatever region in North Caucasus would spark off a domino effect. In addition, the Russian President cites the risk of a new geopolitical reconfiguration in the region: „*They [the republics of North Caucasus] cannot exist as independent states. In fact, they would be immediately occupied, both spiritually and economically, by forces of the Far East or of neighbouring countries. Eventually, they would be used as tools to destabilize Russia*”.³⁴

At present, the experience of 1990's and bloody disintegration of Yugoslavia justify Putin's position concerning consequences of an eventual separation with Chechnya. Meanwhile, the Kremlin stresses the fact that Russia represents a multicultural and multiconfessional

³³ Anna Matveeva, „The Northeastern Caucasus: Drifting Away from Russia”, p. 277.

³⁴ Richard Sakwa, „Blowback? Chechnya and the challenges of Russian Politics”, p. 191.

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society, regardless how little attention the multiculturalism is paid to. Observing the law is the prerequisite to accomplishing the national integration, whereas in the context of current constitutional fragmentation and segmented regionalism, this still remains a challenge for Russia.