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**Магомедэмин**  
**Магомедрасулович Гаджиев**  
[Magomedemin M. Gadzhiev]

**Религиозно-политическая  
консолидация в Южном Дагестане в  
2010 – 2020гг.: включение локальных  
сообществ в общедагестанское  
мусульманское пространство**

**Religious and political consolidation in  
Southern Dagestan in 2010-2020: the  
inclusion of local communities in the  
general Dagestan Muslim space**

*Дагестанский федеральный исследовательский центр РАН, г. Махачкала, Россия,  
gadjiyev.dgu@mail.ru / Dagestan Federal Research Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences,  
Makhachkala, Russia, gadjiyev.dgu@mail.ru*

**Аннотация.** В этой статье анализируется малоизученный аспект консолидации дагестанского общества в 2010-2020гг.: как проходил процесс религиозно-политического объединения в Южном Дагестане. В работе прослеживается процесс чередования политических и административно-принудительных методов в деле объединения локальных исламских сообществ региона. Автор доказывает, что убийство шейха Сиражудина Хуриковского, который с 1990-х годов сохранял религиозную самостоятельность Южного Дагестана, стало поворотным пунктом в процессе ликвидации религиозной автономии данного суб-региона. Эти изменения совпали с приходом на пост главы Дагестана Рамазана Абдулатипова, который активно вмешивался в местную политику. Дагестанский муфтият воспользовался этой ситуацией, чтобы распространить свое влияние на Южный Дагестан. Описанные процессы привели к консолидации политической власти в республике и унификации мусульманского пространства. Прежние фрагментация и усложнение религиозно-политической жизни были остановлены. Поскольку они угрожали появлением неконтролируемых процессов, связанных с радикализацией дагестанского мусульманского социума.

**Ключевые слова:** Южный Дагестан, исламские сообщества, местная политика, консолидация, радикализм

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**Abstract.** This article analyzes a little-studied aspect of the consolidation of Dagestan society in 2010-2020: how the process of religious and political unification took place in Southern Dagestan. The paper traces the process of alternation of political and administrative-coercive methods in the unification of local Islamic communities in the region. The author proves that the murder of Sheikh Sirazhudin Khuriksky, who had maintained the religious independence of Southern Dagestan since the 1990s, was a turning point in the process of eliminating the religious autonomy of this sub-region. These changes coincided with the coming to the post of the head of Dagestan Ramazan Abdulatipov, who actively interfered in local politics. The Dagestan Muftiate took advantage of this situation to extend its influence to Southern Dagestan. The described processes led to the consolidation of political power in the republic and the unification of the Muslim space. The former fragmentation and complication of religious and political life have been stopped. Because they threatened the emergence of uncontrolled processes associated with the radicalization of Dagestan Muslim society.

**Keywords:** Southern Dagestan, Islamic communities, local politics, consolidation, radicalism

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**Introduction.** Key features of the Islamic-political life of Southern Dagestan. Dagestan is an exceptional region of the North Caucasus not only for its well-known characteristics of multinationality, but also for the difficult road of post-Soviet religious and political transformation. The latter was associated with the territorial-Muslim disintegration of the republic in the 1990s. and the subsequent efforts of the state to overcome the protracted crisis. In the first decades of the 21st century, the Dagestan community went through a difficult path of religious and political recovery and subsequent consolidation.

Another feature of the Islamic-political transformation of the republic is the conditional division of the Muslim community of the region according to the “North-South” principle: the Avar Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Dagestan (SAMD) and the relatively independent Southern Dagestan represented by twelve local communities, whose territories coincide with the boundaries of municipalities (districts).

Here it is necessary to note another important feature of Muslim life in Southern Dagestan. Until 2011-2012 Southern Dagestan retained religious autonomy and was not subordinate to the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Dagestan (SAMD), which hereinafter we will call the muftiate. The spiritual leader of Southern Dagestan, Sheikh Sirazhudin of Khurik (Israfilov), despite his limited religious education, founded an influential Sufi order in Southern Dagestan in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Southern Dagestan is a multinational, multi-religious area. Caucasian ethnic groups such as Lezgins, Tabasarans, Rutuls and Aguls practice Sunni Islam, while local Azerbaijanis are divided between Shia and Sunni groups. There are a small number of Jews (mostly Mountain Jews) and Christians (mostly East Slavic population and Armenians). This ethno-confessional mosaic and the coexistence of small nationalities distinguishes Southern Dagestan from the central part of the republic, which is inhabited by relatively large nationalities such as Avars, Kumyks and Dargins, professing Sunni Islam.

Another important characteristic of this area is that the atheistic policies of the Soviet Union led to more destructive results in Southern Dagestan than in its central part, where historical religious continuity was preserved: Sufis transmitted traditional Islam to the post-communist era.

This article analyzes a little-studied aspect of this process: how the process of religious and political unification took place in Southern Dagestan.

**Materials and research methods.** Our research is based on the analysis of local socio-territorial units. Unfortunately, scholars often ignore the grassroots level of politics, concentrating their attention on socio-political processes and conflict resolution at the national level. Within this approach, conflict and transformation “cases” are identified with “countries”. [1]. Russian researchers Arushan Vartumyan [2] and Arbakhan Magomedov [3] have been calling for a “micropolitical turn” in the study of social and political processes in Russia for many years, shifting attention from the national level to the local level. Of the available studies on this topic, the most notable are the works of the Japanese scientist Kimitaka Matsuzato and the Dagestan sociologist Magomed-Rasul Ibragimov [4], as well as Irina Starobdubrovskaya [5].

Thus, the focus of our research is on fairly small communities, where issues of power, authority and politics in general look different than in large political entities of the state and macro-regional type.

The article is based on field research conducted in August 2014 and August 2017, that is, at the beginning and towards the end of the reign of Ramazan Abdulatipov. Of the twelve districts of Southern Dagestan, we analyze five: Derbentsky, Suleiman-Stalsky, Tabasaransky, Kaitagsky and Rutulsky. Azerbaijanis, Lezgins, Tabasarans, Dargins and Rutuls, respectively,

dominate these districts, but in Dagestan, ethnic diversity does not automatically lead to religious diversity.

Chronological scope of the study: 2010 – 2020. This choice is determined by the fact that 2010 became a year of promising hopes for the nonviolent consolidation of Dagestan society. Then a “soft” strategy was announced to overcome religious radicalism and terrorism in Dagestan society. 2018-2020 became the completion of the consolidation of the regional Muslim community through the use of government measures of control and cooperation.

**Research results and their discussion. The failure of the “soft” strategy to combat terrorism and the transition to hard politics.** By 2010, Dagestan had exhausted its previous methods of suppressing the radical extremist underground, which consisted of a combination of force and diplomatic methods aimed at creating a broad public dialogue in the region. The Republic needed a new political line. This line consisted of pursuing the so-called “soft” strategy in overcoming terrorism, which was announced in 2010.

Subsequently, in 2010-2012. In state policy, a conventionally “soft” line prevailed in relations with moderate Salafis, combined with attempts at a nationwide dialogue between various political forces. The final stage of this stage, covering 2013 – 2017. and marked by the rule of Ramazan Abdulatipov, was marked by the culmination of a new hard line.

As a result, in 2010 Dagestan and the North Caucasus Federal District were headed by new people: Magomed-Salam Magomedov and Alexander Khloponin, respectively. These were modern, educated and pragmatic leaders. Having secured their support, the Federal Security Service (FSS) and the National Anti-Terrorism Committee (NATC) used a political method of anti-terrorism war, the purpose of which was to pacify moderate Salafis in order to isolate radical Salafis called “Wahhabis”. In other words, the FSS found it possible to separate moderate Salafis, who shared the Salafi ideology but did not advocate armed struggle against the Russian authorities, from radical Salafis. As a result, in 2010, under pressure from federal security forces, a dialogue began between the pro-government Dagestani muftiate and moderate Salafis. However, faced with the threat of political isolation, radical Salafists began to pursue a policy of armed terror. In October 2011, the unquestioned Muslim authority of Southern Dagestan, Sheikh Sirazhudin Khuriksky, was killed. The assassination left local Islamic communities without a recognized religious authority. In May 2012, a police station was blown up on the highway connecting Makhachkala with Astrakhan, killing 13 people. However, in August of this year, a more significant and more resonant terrorist attack occurred: as a result of an assassination attempt, the unquestioned religious authority and leader of the Dagestan Sufis, Said-Afandi Chirkeevsky, was killed. These events immediately stopped two already difficult processes: “public dialogue” and the “soft fight” against terrorism.

These events demonstrated the ineffectiveness of the political method of anti-terrorism war, and law enforcement agencies returned to purely coercive methods. These tragedies changed the format of domestic politics in Dagestan. As part of the changed format, the initiative in implementing this policy passed to the security forces. The latter chose the following: 1) relied on a purely repressive component in the fight against terrorism; 2) The FSS began to actively work with the republican Muftiate represented by the SAMD. The need for this was explained by the fact that the SAMD was one of the few organizations capable of influencing moderate Salafis. Because it became clear that the moderate Salafis had no influence on the radical Salafis, who were held responsible for the terrorist attacks. The changed format set a new trajectory of domestic policy for the security forces and secular authorities of the republic: to cooperate with the SAMD, isolate moderate Salafis and neutralize radical Salafis (aka “Wahhabis”). The following years were marked by the destruction or pushing out of the republic of radical Salafists.

Here it is necessary to point out two external factors that had an additional influence on the strengthening of the power factor in Dagestan. The first factor: the approaching 2014 Olympics. in Sochi. Domestic security forces required the complete destruction of the radical Islamist underground. This coincided with the appointment of R. Abdulatipov to the post of head

of Dagestan at the beginning of 2013. The usual old forceful methods of persecution and suppression were used. As a result of targeted strikes, the leaders of the terrorist organization "Caucasus Emirate" banned in Russia were eliminated.

The second factor: the emergence on the world religious and political arena of such a frightening phenomenon as the "Islamic State" (ISIL), prohibited by Russian legislation and outlawed by Russian law enforcement agencies.

**Religious and political unification of Southern Dagestan: administrative politicization of Muslim life at the local level.** The return of law enforcement agencies to forceful methods of waging an anti-terrorist war coincided with the governorship of Ramazan Abdulatipov (March 2013 – October 2017).

The murder of Sheikh Sirazhudin from Khurik had fatal political consequences for the religious autonomy of Southern Dagestan. From the 1990s until his assassination in October 2011, Sheikh Sirazhudin defended the Muslim independence of Southern Dagestan from the invasion of the Republican Muftiate, which was dominated by ethnic Avars led by Sheikh Said Effendi of Chirkey [6]. In the new conditions, the previously influential Muslim order in the south of Dagestan remained defenseless in the face of double pressure: 1) the new republican government, which wanted to replace the district leaders and 2) the regional muftiate, which dreamed of extending its influence to this area. There was every reason for this, since the newly appointed leader of Dagestan, Ramazan Abdulatipov, began to actively interfere in local politics, appointing his own people to the position of heads of districts. The Dagestan Muftiate, guided by ethnic Avars and students of Sheikh Said Efendi, took advantage of this situation to extend their influence to Southern Dagestan.

Governor Abdulatipov, an ethnic Avar, rejected attempts by his predecessor Magomedsalam Magomedov (a Dargin) to maintain the government's distance from the Avar-dominated muftiate. Despite the assassination of its de facto leader, Sheikh Said Efendi, the Dagestani muftiate has established much closer cooperation with the Abdulatipov government than with any secular government in the region before it. The creation by the muftiate of sub-regional representatives and local representatives of education was aimed at promoting this cooperation at various levels of government [7].

**Institutional hierarchy as a tool for the religious and political consolidation of Dagestan.** The anti-terrorist struggle ended with the natural emergence of a hierarchy within the Muslim clergy of Dagestan. An important step towards the formation of a religious "vertical" was the establishment by the republican muftiate of an institute of subregional representatives responsible for educational work at the district level. In this case we are talking about the District (City) Council of Imams (hereinafter referred to as the DCI). This is the middle level of Muslim governance, designed to connect the Dagestan muftiate and regional Islamic communities into a single system. DCI began to emerge in the early 2000s, first as a voluntary association of rural imams with a chairman position as an informal leader. Around 2004, this body became a public law institution subordinate to the head of the local administration.

However, after Ramazan Abdulatipov came to power in Dagestan and the growing influence of the republican muftiate, the latter himself began to appoint "district imams." This is despite the fact that the DCI is not formally and legally subordinate to the muftiate. However, this process was not so simple. In practice, the relationship between the chairman of the DCI and the "district imam" depends on the balance of power in a particular area and the personality of the religious leaders. For example, in the Kaitag region, the "district imam" appointed by the muftiate heads the DCI, while in the Rutul region the "district imam" had no influence on the DCI (Interview with the former head of the administration of the Kaitag region, Ali Umarov. Majalis, April 12, 2019). In the 1990s and 2000s, the muftiate's attempts to intervene in the affairs of the districts of Southern Dagestan by delegating their imams often provoked opposition from the authorities and local communities. Learning from these failures, the muftiate began to employ administrative tactics by appointing district representatives from its education department. The representatives are called upon to play a significant role in the anti-terrorist

campaign carried out by the Abdulatipov administration. Preventive (in the sense of anti-terrorism) measures require that district representatives be trained Muslim theorists.

**Conclusion.** This policy led to the administrative and political rise of the Dagestan muftiate. From that moment on, this institution became a monopoly player in the republican Muslim space. As a result of the policy pursued, the muftiate extended its power to the entire territory of the region. The religious and political result of these processes was that in 2016 the Muftiate divided the republic into four districts: Northern, Central, Mountain and Southern, extending its jurisdiction to these territories. Personnel consolidation of the power of the muftiate over the Muslim community of the republic was that the SAMD appointed its employee Mahdi Abidov, an ethnic Avar from the Northern District, as an authorized representative in Southern Dagestan.

Processes in the field of secular politics at the local level developed in a similar way. After taking office, Ramazan Abdulatipov carried out personnel changes in municipal authorities, replacing many heads of district administrations, which led to the final elimination of the autonomy of local authorities. The measures were revolutionary in many ways. Abdulatipov's predecessors did not touch the municipal level of Dagestan politics. The fact is that district leaders in Dagestan in the 1990s and 2000s enjoyed greater autonomy from regional authorities than was the case in other subjects of the Federation. Heads of district administrations often held the position of top local leader for more than ten years, despite the fact that powerful local clans fought bitterly for this position. Now local leaders were included in a single vertical of Dagestan power.

The described processes led to the consolidation of political power in the republic and the unification of the Muslim space. The previous complication of religious and political life was stopped. Because it threatened the emergence of uncontrollable processes associated with the radicalization of the Dagestan Muslim society. The results of domestic policy and the creation of new socio-religious institutions led to the stabilization of the socio-political life of the republic.

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#### ИНФОРМАЦИЯ ОБ АВТОРЕ

**Магомедэмин Магомедрасулович Гаджиев** – доктор политических наук, главный научный сотрудник, Дагестанский федеральный исследовательский центр РАН, +79034776868, [gadjiev.dgu@mail.ru](mailto:gadjiev.dgu@mail.ru)

#### INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Magomedemin M. Gadzhiev** – Dr. Sci. (Polit.), Chief Researcher, Dagestan Federal Research Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences, +79034776868, [gadjiev.dgu@mail.ru](mailto:gadjiev.dgu@mail.ru)

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