

Violence and the Dynamics of Political Settlements in Post-Soviet Kabardino-Balkaria

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Abstract

With the breakup of the Soviet Union, the North Caucasus became, from the perspective of the Russian federal centre, a politically unstable and at times rather violent borderland. This article examines the political settlements emerging under the broader conditions of state formation in limited-access social orders, i.e. social orders negotiated between the central state and local elites with some violent potential. Analysing the developments in Kabardino-Balkaria (KBR) since the early 1990s, the authors find three types of political settlements that vary in terms of elite figuration, key resources used for rent distribution and the role of violence as a political resource. These political settlements have differing implications for the sustainability of local social order and shed light on the variations in state rule exercised by the federal centre in its political peripheries. Against the backdrop of changing violent challenges, the centre successfully tightened vertical elite control but at the cost of reducing the inclusiveness of political settlements within Kabardino-Balkaria.

Keywords: political violence, insurgency, political settlement, limited-access social order, subnational governance, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Caucasus.

Introduction

The North Caucasus has been marked by outbreaks of violence since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Different studies elucidate time-varying reasons for this volatility: in the 1990s the upsurge in violence resulted from ethnically charged tensions, an upturn of political separatist and self-determination agendas, and grievances related to historic injustices committed by the state—repression and deportations of peoples. [1][2][3][4] After the turn of the millennium, academic scrutiny and public interest focused increasingly on violence along religious lines, caused by Islamist radicalization and the state's response.[5][6][7][8] Observers drew attention to policies of violence by terrorist groups and the state's counter-terrorist operations.[9] Other studies have explained the patterns and intensity of violence by focusing on incentive structures emerging from a specific political economy of violence.[10][11][12] Similarly, an important segment of literature has studied the violent political situation in the region with a focus on the transformation of government and state institutions.[13][14] Less attention has been paid to latent forms of violent rule as part of strategies employed by political elites for maintaining their political and economic power.[15][16] That is the perspective taken in the present article.

Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, great changes have taken place in how violence is used as a means of directly projecting state power, as well as showing resistance against the state. Drawing on the example of the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic (KBR) in the North Caucasus, this article analyzes the changing political role that violence has played in forging, keeping and transforming the local political order. Specifically, we describe the re-emergence of vertical power after the sudden disintegration of the centralised Soviet system, its transformation and the changing role violence played in sustaining as well as challenging local political settlements.

The analysis focuses on the transition from the nomenklatura-style regime of V.M. Kokov via the decade-long rule of the businessman A.B. Kanokov, followed by Yu.A. Kokov, a representative of the security establishment (*siloviki*), to K. Kokov, the incumbent head of the republic. The aim of this article is explorative rather than deductive. As explained in the next section, the article investigates political processes in a North-Caucasian republic from a specific, theory-informed perspective on the relationship between violence and political settlements in limited-access social orders.

Analytical Approach

Generally speaking, the article deals with the nexus of violence and changing socio-political order. It opens by briefly introducing the theoretical perspective taken in this article and how this has informed this explorative study of how violence and political settlements influenced each other in Kabardino-Balkaria.

Resorting to organised physical violence in socio-political conflicts entails more than a change of means or an 'escalation'; the use of violence to further one's interests or express one's position is always embedded in a broader historical and cultural setting. That framing of violence as part of the wider social order needs to be explored. Violence—the arbitrary use of physical force in particular—may impair the effectiveness and legitimacy of institutions that provide social order by means of distributional rules. Violent challenges to such institutions affect their ability to set and enforce rules (as in the case of insurgencies); the arbitrary use of force in the name of such institutions (e.g. law enforcement) may have delegitimizing effects for those institutions or even the wider political system. However, violence may be socially productive in shaping bonds and relationships, especially if specific manifestations are widely accepted or even applauded.[17][18]

Norbert Elias was the first sociologist to note that all societies, in order to sustain themselves as societies over time, need to find solutions to the problem of (physical) violence.[19] For Elias, stable social orders emerged from what he called 'nettings of interdependency' resulting in specific 'figurations' of social actors. [20] Similarly, North, Wallis and Weingast placed the universal challenge of violence at the heart of their ambitious conceptual layout of generalised social orders.[21] The authors of this article take this analytical perspective on the nexus between violence and social orders and apply it to the post-Soviet political economy of Kabardino-Balkaria as part of the Russian North Caucasus. This concept sees violence as a defining capacity or resource in elite formation and elite competition for economic rents in limited-access social orders (LASOs). Social orders are ways of organizing societies that are self-sustaining and internally consistent—but in order to have a stable order, a society must deal with the potential for organized violence. Groups with this potential may join in a (possibly fragile) coalition to rule. This coalition excludes others from key economic activities, reserving rents only for its members.[22] Satisfied by these rents, coalition members may then decide against engaging in violent competition.

To explain the consolidation of a limited-access social order that tames potentially violent elites, North returned to his earlier subject: the emergence of institutions, and how they regulate elite interaction around the control of access to rents, supporting organisational outcomes of varying complexity.[23] Institutions do not determine the choices and strategies of actors (such as preferring cooperation or non-violent competition to violent conflict), but they do inform and constrain actor choices by setting rules and norms for social interaction. These can be broken—but only at a cost. For the everyday citizens in limited-access orders these costs may be punishment, or bribes to avoid sanctions. In case of institutions regulating the relationship between equally resourceful elites, rule breaking increases the transaction costs by damaging trust, harming the reputation and limiting the ability to form coalitions to protect one's own interests.

According to North et al. the Russian Federation as a whole belongs to the majority of countries that are characterised as limited-access social orders.[24] Violence is used by elites as a means of controlling access to social structures, rents and resources. The potential for organized violence secures access to power. In LASOs, the potential to resort to violent self-help by elites limits 'the power of rules', i.e. the reliability and autonomy of institutions. However, within Russia, different federal subjects developed very different patterns and dynamics with regard to this nexus of political elites, violence and the emerging local social order.

The problem with this concept of 'social order' is that it relates to large-scale, long-term patterns of social exchange that are conceptually not well suited to account for subnational or even local dynamics of social order that change at a quicker pace.

This is where a recent analytical approach—*political settlements, brokerage and elite bargains*—comes in. This concept is related to institutional theory but combines it with political economy analysis—with questions

of who benefits from specific institutional settings and who has the organisational power to set, ignore or challenge those settings.[25][26] Political settlement analysis focuses on the interplay between the institutional constraints on, and the organisational power of, social actors to explain emerging and changing patterns of social orders.

The *concept* of LASOs, combined with political settlement analysis, helps to structure the research into patterns and dynamics of governance in subnational settings such as the Russian North Caucasus. Basically, one needs to investigate (a) the relevant resources that (b) political elites have privileged access to, distribute as club-goods and sometimes compete for, and (c) to what extent limiting access and competing for those rents involves the application of violence or reference to the potential of resorting to violence. Finally, this article seeks to explain the organizational implications that this dynamic nexus involving rents, elites and violence has in terms of shaping political settlements within and beyond the state at the subnational level.

This article is based on three different *sources of information*. First, the authors use primary as well as secondary published sources to identify and describe the dominant political settlements that emerged under the successive heads of the republic. Second, we add to this narrative views and perspectives from original interviews conducted by the authors. Two of the interviews are expert interviews while three sets of interviews were conducted with people that were part and party to the political processes analysed here. The interviews were broad, some continuing over several days, but had a special focus on issues relating to local elite dynamics, violence as a political resource and the role of rent distribution among elites. Lastly, the article draws on the authors' own research on conflict case studies focussing on issues of sub-national governance, as well as on reports on violent incidents collected and published elsewhere.

Kabardino-Balkaria: Geographical Position, Key Resources, Administrative Framework

The Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria is a federal subject of the Russian Federation located in the North Caucasus, with a population of approximately 850.000 and an area of 12.500km². There are three major ethnic communities: Kabardins (57%), Russians (22%) and Balkars (13%). Kabardins and Balkars belong to different language families and populate different geographical zones, although they intersect in several municipalities, where discord over land is frequent.

Kabardino-Balkaria (KBR) is of considerable importance for the Russian authorities due to its geopolitical position in the North Caucasus. That is the main reason for the high attention the federal centre pays to the republic, even though KBR lacks strategic resources like oil or other minerals. The main resource for distribution between elites are subsidies from the federal budget. The republic's reliance on such federal transfers (*dotations* in the Russian terminology) does not exceed 50%—lower than in Chechnya, but still higher than in Western Caucasian regions.

There are three important further resources for privileged distribution among local elites. First, the KBR as a transit location: its roads lead to East Caucasian regions and South Caucasian countries. Checkpoints monitor the situation on the federal highway and control traffic. Rampant corruption has resulted in high charges for passing a checkpoint, especially for cargo vans. Access to this resource remains a point of contention between federal and regional law enforcement agencies.

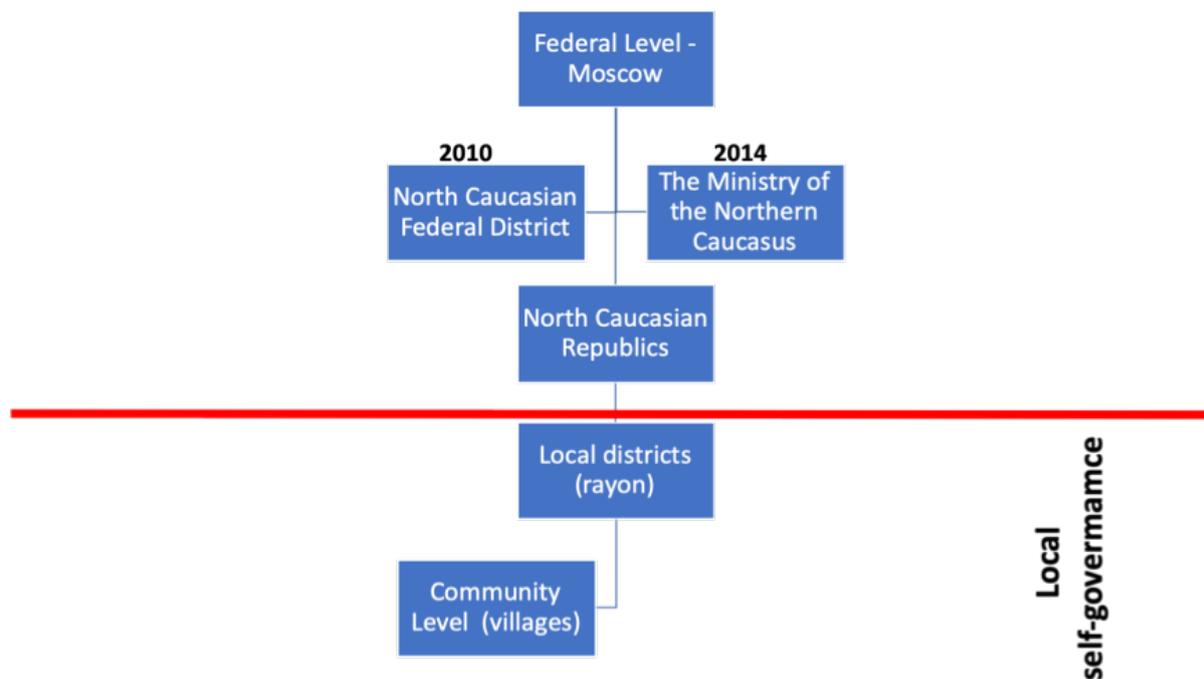
Figure 1. Main Insurgencies in the Caucasus and Region of the Present Case Study

Second, agricultural lands in the plains and in the foothills are of high value; this has led to the current situation of vetoed privatization of lands in the KBR.[27] Local elites control the fertile territory and administer access to this resource. KBR law authorizes only leasing procedures, and there are frequent complaints of illicit and corrupted auctions.[28]

A third important resource are recreational territories in mountain areas with a partly developed tourism industry (such as Prielbrusie, in the Elbrus foothills). Land tenure here is linked with the sensitive issue of inter-ethnic relations, as Balkars, who live in the highlands, consider this territory to be their historic homeland. The federal authorities had paid scant consideration to Prielbrusie in the 1990s, but this health and recreational resort, with its potential for development, has since come to attract greater attention, becoming a valued commodity.[29]

Before turning to the KBR in greater detail, we will briefly introduce the administrative framework in which federal republics are embedded and how this framework has evolved.

Today, Russia's administrative structure comprises five main levels (Figure 2): federal, federal okrugs/districts, regions or 'federal subjects' (such as republics, oblasts, krays); sub-regional districts (rayons), and local communities. Most heads of districts are appointed. The federal state relies on a mixed strategy of co-opting local leaders, fostering state presence at the district and regional levels, and monopolizing access to key resources, such as agricultural land or construction grounds.

Figure 2. Vertical State Power in the North Caucasus

The federal districts have been mediating between the federal state in Moscow and the federal subjects since 2000. The President of Russia appoints his plenipotentiary envoy—*polpred*—to govern the district and conduct presidential policies. Previously, the North Caucasus belonged to the Southern Federal District (SFD) with its centre in Rostov-on-Don. Since 2010, all Caucasian republics except Adygea and Stavropol Krai have been part of the newly established North Caucasian Federal District (NCFD). The position of envoy in the SFD (i.e. before 2010) usually passed to former representatives of law enforcement agencies. However, the first *polpred* in the NCFD became an exception. Aleksandr Khloponin (2010–2014), appointed during Dmitry Medvedevs’ presidency, was a representative of Russian business elites who prioritised economic development.

Evolution of Subnational Statecraft in Post-Soviet Kabardino-Balkaria

The senior position in Kabardino-Balkar’s administrative system is the Head of the Republic. Throughout the period under consideration here (1992–2018), there were four Heads of the KBR: Valery Kokov (1992–2005), Arsen Kanokov (2005–2013), Yury Kokov (2013–2018), and Kazbek Kokov (2018 to present). Each leader stood for a distinct approach. This relates to different challenges to state rule evolving over time; it also relates to the way politically relevant local elites were integrated or excluded and how the KBR’s relationship to the regional and, crucially, to the federal centre, was shaped.

They all had to deal with what Derlugyan et al. identified as the specific shape of anti-systemic challenges in the North Caucasus: “Social power is contested by three distinct kinds of political elite: the late Soviet era officialdom; rent-seeking political capitalists (a local variety of ‘oligarchs’) originating in the 1990s; and the Islamist underground, which emerged in the 2000s, putatively as an alternative state and society”.^[30]

1992–2005: Valery Kokov—Avoiding Civil War, Ethnopolitical Balancing and Consolidation of Basic Statehood

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Supreme Soviet of the Kabardino-Balkarian ASSR declared its sovereignty and announced the first-ever presidential elections. The elected president Valery Kokov signed the 1992 Treaty of Federation with Moscow, and Kabardino-Balkaria became a federal subject of the Russian Federation with the status of national republic. Valery Kokov was a member of Soviet nomenklatura and ex-

secretary of the republican *obkom* (regional branch of the Communist Party that was the de-facto decisionmaking centre in the republics). Kokov managed to preserve his power due mostly to the vast clientelistic network in Kabardino-Balkaria that he managed to maintain, owing not least to the support of Boris Yeltsin. Kokov's authority among other Caucasian leaders and his efforts in supporting Yeltsin resulted in his being appointed as deputy chairman in the Federation Council, the upper house of the Russian parliament.[31]

The early 1990s saw a rise in ethno-political tensions in the North Caucasus, and violent confrontations increased. However, large-scale conflicts, like the first Chechen war for independence, or the violent confrontation between Ingush and Ossetian communities in the disputed Prigorodny Rayon, were avoided.

“He [Kokov] tried, first of all, to take into account the interests of the main ethnic groups—Kabardians, Balkars and Russians. This was a priority, because the main task was to ensure peace, reduce the degree of confrontation [...]. He always tried to maintain this balance so as not to offend one or another ethnic elite group in parliament or government”.[32]

However, the post-Soviet weakening of the state resulted in rising crime rates, growing corruption and the black market replacing the licit economy as the dominant form of exchange.[33] The authorities failed to manage the increasing influence of criminal groups, a situation which led some communities to form local vigilante groups or militias to ensure security.

“Criminality was predominant, and I concentrated on guarding my village against mobsters. They had a developed business model of cattle rustling, and there was a gang in every village—in Upper Balkaria, Bezenghi etc. They stole stock in Bezenghi, brought it to Bulungu overnight and exchanged it for cows from Chechnya”.[34]

Still, Kabardino-Balkaria was considered a safe haven in comparison to other, more violent, Caucasian republics.[35]

Nevertheless, the absence of open, violent group conflicts was accompanied by rising social tensions: unemployment (youth especially), corruption and clientelism in the social and political sphere (job recruitment, university admission, medical healthcare), and widening economic inequality. The exodus of ethnic Russians here was a consequence not of political instability and insecurity (as in Chechnya), but of the economic crisis and threatened livelihoods.[36] Discontent spread among socially and economically deprived youth. Rising inequality and rampant corruption, as well as numerous violations of religious rights, further intensified the anger.[37] Extremist Islamist propaganda from the Eastern Caucasus (Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia) became an ideological platform for radically oriented adolescents. Starting in the second half of the 1990s, many of them joined *jamaats*—small Muslim communities in opposition to traditional Islamic institutions, which had been co-opted by, or integrated into, the state.[38]

Jamaat headmen (*amirs*) had close connections with radical Muslim commanders in Chechnya and Dagestan. The second Chechen insurgency (1999–2002) was met by Russia's own war on terror that swept across the North Caucasus. Young Muslims in Kabardino-Balkaria, not only radicals, but also practising believers who attended mosques and wore beards, came under intense scrutiny and pressure. Law-enforcement officers compiled ‘Wahhabi lists’—and those on the lists were subjected to obstacles to mosque attendance, arrest, illegal searches, even torture. Police shut down several houses of worship and impeded the spread of religious materials.[39]

On 13 October 2005, a large group of militants raided Nalchik, the capital of the KBR. These events marked a systemic change in local politics. Part of the economically deprived and marginalized population, represented by organized Muslim radicals, mounted the violent attack on a state they perceived as unjust and corrupt. 217 militants attacked law-enforcement agencies in Nalchik. According to official figures, 92 insurgents, 35 police officers and 14 bystanders were killed. The raid was completely unexpected by the authorities—fighting in the streets lasted for two days.

The militants were members of the Kabardino-Balkaria Jamaat—a hitherto non-violent local Muslim

community that was opposed to the government-controlled Spiritual Board of Muslims. ‘Young believers’, or ‘Wahhabis’, as they were called, initially created the Jamaat to ‘purify’ Islam and make it inclusive across ethnic/tribal identities. After the 2005 raid, the authorities outlawed the Jamaat, and terrorist and counter-terrorist operations became a dominant feature in Kabardino-Balkaria from that moment onwards.[40]

It has been argued that Khachim Shogenov, political ally and Minister of Interior under V. Kokov (1992–2006), bears some responsibility for the radicalization of Muslim communities.[41] Shogenov strengthened his ministry by expanding the number of policemen from 3,000 to 6,000 over 10 years. When the police force increased pressure on ‘young believers’ Islamic activists were pushed underground. The eventual attack on Nalchik in 2005 raised a wide social debate against the Ministry’s policy towards Muslims; human rights activists across Russia and abroad demanded the investigation of police actions.[42][43]

After the 2005 raid, the ban on the official Jamaat served to increase the importance of underground communities, changing relations between the *siloviki* and the movement of ‘young believers’ in particular. Islamist networks started to challenge traditional criminal organisations and moved into racketeering and extortion. Specifically, informal taxation of shops selling or dealing in alcohol became a primary source of income, due to the development of liquor businesses in KBR.[44]

One can divide Valerij Kokov’s reign into three periods with different roles played by the use of violence. First, there was the disorder of the 1990s. Numerous criminal groups became the main social carriers of physical violence and put state structures on the defensive. Ethnic discourse and interethnic tensions ranked as a major factor of instability. The government emphasised ethnic conflict resolution but failed to oppose the criminal groups and develop the economy.

Second, regime consolidation in the late 1990s coincided with the exhaustion of the nationalist opposition. At the same time the local authorities attempted to restore order in the socio-economic sphere by combating crime, applying a mixed strategy of violently confronting lower-level criminals while co-opting influential leaders as informal brokers between the state and the people they controlled or represented.

“The second period (after the chaos of the early and mid-nineties) concerned the shooting of criminals; first, several lower-level criminal executives, while the criminal leaders from the ‘upper floors’, for example, the Balkar informal leader Kuuanch (Babaev), were left alive. The physical violence [here: common violence, criminal violence] had dropped significantly in the end”.[45]

This Kuuanch Babaev became known in the 1990s as an informal leader of the Balkar people. His standing within the Balkar community group and his prestige within the highly organised criminal world helped him to form his own group and affiliate it with some state authorities: former prime minister Georgy Cherkesov once admitted that he had used Kuuanch’s group to ensure order during protests.[46] As a traditional strongman, Kuuanch was locally considered to be able to solve any problem; he became some kind of a popular hero. Brokers like him were apparently used by the republic-level state authorities to control ethno-nationalist mobilisation and prevent possible violent expressions of discontent or more subtle forms of resistance to the Kabardinian-dominated state.

Valery Kokov himself was an experienced Soviet-educated broker who balanced the interests and priorities of local elites and represented them upwards within a centralised formal system of political power.

“He was such a heavyweight politician that he could defend his decisions in Moscow, which proves his appointment as deputy chairman of the Federation Council. He knew better what is better for the republic. He always reconciled all decisions that, according to [federal] law, had to be coordinated with Moscow. He believed that the minister of internal affairs should be a native of the republic, a person who was born and raised here, a person who will be vitally worried about security in the republic”.[47]

Kokov is said to have understood the special position that the KBR—and the North Caucasus as a whole—held in with the breakup of the Soviet Union and the departure of the three South Caucasian republics of Armenia,

Azerbaijan and Georgia. The KBR had become a borderland for Moscow—and the price to pay for relative local autonomy was to keep problems away from Moscow.

“[For Moscow, Kabardino-Balkaria is] a borderland. [...] The first president of the republic paid great attention to this. Because at the time of the collapse of the USSR there was no state border with Georgia. There were no frontier posts. This was all initiated by the president [Valery Kokov]. [...] He, as a statesman, understood [the] threats, given the geography and history ... [This] certainly gave [Kokov] dividends. The first thing he stressed to the federal centre was KBR’s contribution to the security of Russia”.[48]

For most of the late 1990s, this brokerage worked. The KBR political leadership established and maintained a fairly high level of control over the politics and economic resources of the republic. In the third phase, with the rise of Putin, things began to change.

“However, since 2000 local elites have lost control over a substantial pillar of their power – the Ministry of Internal Affairs. According to a presidential decree, republican Ministries were integrated into the federal body and changed their subordination from republican presidents to Presidential Envoy”.[49]

At this time, religious ideas and religious organizations gained wide popularity. Several studies have shown how religious leaders marginalized criminal organizations and brought financial flows under their own control. [50][51] Racketeering changed from ‘shaved heads’ to ‘bearded men’ [i.e. from criminal racketeers to Muslim believers]. Even traditional crime-related spaces such as prisons underwent ‘Islamization’.

“Around 2003 and 2004, religious bosses penetrated prisons, removed kingpins from profitable businesses such as debt dealing, car accidents and the like. To become immune to assaults in prison you had ‘to sit on the mat’ [i.e. start doing Salah – religious prayer]”.[52]

By the end of Kokov’s rule, the government had failed to establish an accord with Muslim communities, and relied on occasional acts of arbitrary force – which lacked success and even contributed to the consolidation, then radicalization, of ‘young believers’. The brutal treatment of arrested Wahhabis spread beyond Chechnya and reached Kabardino-Balkaria. The ‘files of extremists’ became an issue in local and national media, as those on the lists experienced violations of their rights.[53][54]

Subsequent developments, most importantly the 2005 raid on Nalchik, coincided with the change of government after the death of President Kokov, who had resigned one month earlier for health reasons. Kokov’s era of Soviet nomenklatura-dominated elite bargains and ethno-political balancing had come to an end.

2005–2013: A. Kanokov – Narrowing Clientelism and Increasing Venality

The subsequent period was marked by the change from a peripheral Soviet nomenklatura-based political balance to a new model. Arsen Kanokov served as Head of Kabardino-Balkaria from 2005 to 2013. A representative of the commercial world, he had built his business empire outside KBR, successfully combining his activity as an oligarch-entrepreneur with that of a banker and politician – in 1998 he became the permanent representative of the KBR to the Russian President. In 2003 Arsen Kanokov was elected as a deputy of the State Duma and became a vice-chairman in the Russian Duma’s committee dealing with budget formulation and tax regulation. He was considered politically close to Dmitry Medvedev, the future Russian Prime Minister, and to Plenipotentiary Alexander Khloponin.

Arsen Kanokov’s term as KBR President started amidst difficult conditions related to the rise of Islamic extremism and the emergence of a new Balkar opposition. Kanokov styled himself a Kabardian nationalist. [55] In 2006, Yury Tomchak replaced Shogenov as Minister of the Interior. Tomchak had built his career in Adygea. After his arrival in the KBR, Tomchak declared the war on terror as his priority, and pursued a policy of transparency. Under his chairmanship, human rights activists and official religious leaders formed a Public Council of the Ministry to monitor police activities on addressing terrorism. He also created a Coordinating

Council for small businesses and protecting them from criminal groups and arbitrary acts of officials.

However, these measures were undercut by the political settlement sought by Kanokov, who used his power to monopolize control over the economy in the republic: he marginalized competitors by at times illegal and even violent means. The high level of violence inherited from the confrontation with the Jaamat was utilised to enforce this selective 'order' in the economy and to intimidate political rivals.[56]

One local political opponent claimed in an interview:

“Many people believe that the strengthening of the Wahhabi underground is due to the sponsorship of Kanokov, some even recall the case when some detained members of the underground proved to be employees of the Sindika-Shield organization (a private security company owned by Kanokov).”[57]

The high oil prices favoured budget subsidies, implementation of major economic projects and overall socio-economic development.[58] Kanokov had promised to reduce the republic's dependency on central budget subsidies and to increase direct investment as well as federal development programmes. This changed the kind of rents the republican leadership could distribute amongst its clients and affected the distributional regime – from providing access to public (budget-funded) positions to managing access to private as well as public investments.

Kanokov's appointment was probably connected to his entrepreneurship. The federal authorities hoped that his business acumen would facilitate stabilisation via economic development. However, Kanokov was more engaged with Moscow business and power elites there, than in regional and local business. His core business successes were achieved not in the republic but in Moscow – markets, shopping centres, real estate, as well as hotels and banking.[59]

“He survived the 1990s in Moscow, where he settled all issues with money. [...] He bought his position [as head of the republic] and arrived here as if [he was going] to a factory he owned. He did not understand that there are different ethnic groups here with their [traditional] rights, that there is some division of powers between them. [His attitude was] ‘I bought this position, so I am entitled to use it the way I want’.”[60]

Kanokov's rule became notorious for inner-circle takeovers of profitable positions and properties.[61] The land issue escalated under Kanokov, due largely to his aggressive politics on changing the institutional status of the commons. In 2005, the KBR parliament adopted a law on inter-settlement territories – mostly pastures – whereby local municipalities were granted ownership of areas lying within the communities, whereas the commons between municipalities belonged to the republic. With this, the authorities alienated mountain pastures from the local communities, which led to protests among highlanders, who were mainly Balkars. [62] To strengthen his grip on power, Kanokov distributed senior positions in KBR's management among his relatives and associates. His strategy also aimed at fostering informal leaders. Thus, he deliberately attempted to exert pressure on local self-government.[63]

Two cases are indicative of Kanokov's re-distributive approach—one relating to the land and development issue, the other relating to petrol monopolies and political competitions.[64] Eventually, Kanokov's narrow clientelistic and increasingly socially dis-embedded approach failed to satisfy the Kremlin's expectations of local stability. Armed attacks, attributed to the Islamist insurgency, increased dramatically after 2008 (see Figure 3).

Already in 2010, in the wake of a deteriorating security situation, Sergey Vasiliev was appointed by Moscow to head the KBR Ministry of Internal Affairs. He was considered an experienced expert in the fight against organised crime, and used this experience to deal with the spike in violence, aimed mostly at rank-and-file police officers, that started towards the end of Tomchak's term.[65] As a newcomer to the region, Vasiliev needed some time to implement measures that could be effective in curbing the attacks, but he eventually succeeded.

Vasiliev was among the few ministers who retained their post in the new composition of the KBR government after Arsen Kanokov's replacement in 2013. Kanokov himself had failed as broker to deliver for the federal

authorities, the *siloviki* and the local elites when he was replaced with the police general Yury Kokov.[66]

2013–2018: Yury Kokov – Security First

On 6 December 2013, Yury Kokov became the third Head of the Kabardino-Balkaria Republic. He made his career in law enforcement agencies – working in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and heading the Russian Anti-Terror Department in 2011–2012. His appointment signified a new approach to the federal government's security promotion policy in KBR, especially in the run-up to the Winter Olympics in Sochi and with regard to the civil war in Syria.[67] During preparations for the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, public security bodies took unprecedented measures to improve security. The risks of terrorist attacks increased after Russia deployed military forces in Syria and became involved in the war against the Syrian opposition; at that time several jihadi groups in the North Caucasus swore allegiance to the Islamic State.[68] This counter-terrorist agenda was initiated still under interior minister Vasiliev and continued under his successor Igor Romashkin in 2015. However, Romashkin's background was in active counter-terrorist operations rather than in countering organised crime.

Yury Kokov's time in office was characterized by a change of emphasis from civilian rule and economic development to a state security prerogative. This "securitization" of local politics changed the political settlement again. First, Yury Kokov initiated the second major change in the ruling coalition of elite representatives at the level of the republic (the first had occurred when A. Kanokov took over from V. Kokov – see above). His approach was characterised by concentrating political power in the hands of loyal representatives of the security services.[69]

“He [Yuri Kokov] made changes, removing all those connected to Kanokov. He proclaimed loudly that the republic was in a deplorable state [after Kanokov]. He invited federal officials, who stated that the socio-economic indicators were very low. [...] The [government] system became more police-state ... Former police employees were appointed even to civilian posts.... In my opinion, there was more usurpation of power by a narrow circle of elites”.[70]

Yuri Kokov used the administration to bring the previous businessmen-oligarch elite, who had dominated the economy as well as the parliament under Konokov, in line, creating his own resource base to satisfy the *siloviki*, on which he relied.

“Perhaps it was a cunning police strategy – to intimidate all business-minded people to kowtow, to get control over those who have something to lose... I think that it [law enforcement pressure] affected all the big businessmen”.[71]

However, here Yuri Kokov failed where the businessmen-oligarch reign of Kanokov had been somewhat more successful: in contributing to at least some economic progress and investments in the republic. Particularly hard-hit was the alcohol industry, a main source of the KBR budget.[72]

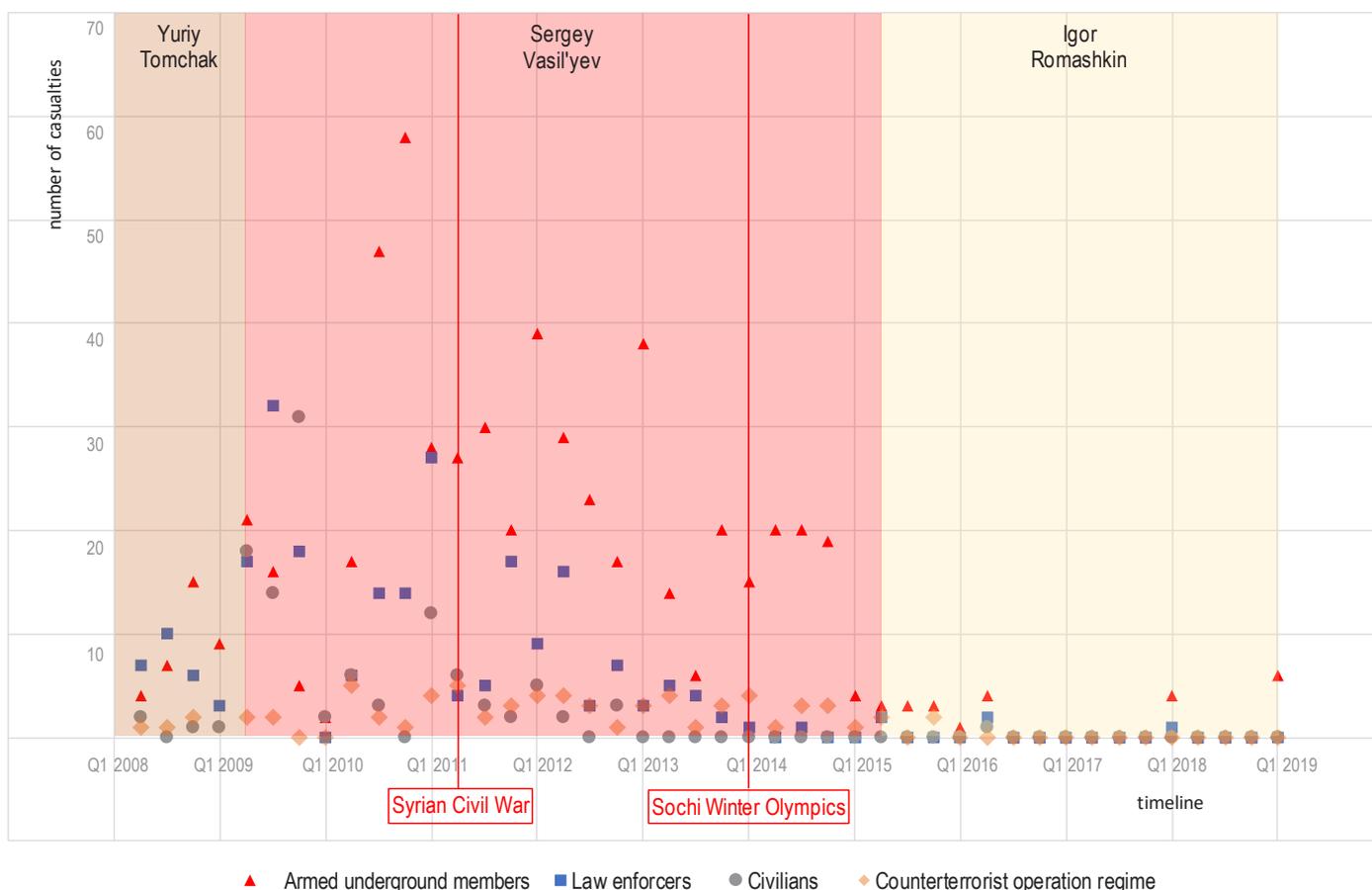
Second, according to various reports, the state security structures supported a mass exodus of extremists before the Olympic Games and helped them to get to Syria, in order to increase security in the North Caucasus.[73] Some of our informants from law enforcement agencies anonymously claimed that around 200 citizens of Kabardino-Balkaria left to join ISIS; some of them had been supplied with new identity documents, implying a degree of cooperation from official state structures.[74] At the same time, the intelligence agencies intensified their counter-terrorism operations against the various remaining insurgency networks and their leaders. Further, the Russian authorities controlled the borders and obstructed radicals seeking to return. Participation in foreign armed units was criminalised and made punishable. At the same time, a re-integration programme was introduced for those Islamists who were not accused of serious crimes and who were willing to break off their ties with illegal organisations.[75]

The armed religious underground – it must have disappeared [during the period of Yuri Kokov]. They [...] went to other fields, began to engage in legal business. [...] They penetrated into many areas of business – so, if they do business, they increase the number of employees, supporters,

business partners... As long as they don't violate the laws, they are respectable citizens. [...] They tried to [get power] through weapons, and that didn't work. Now they have changed their strategy – they are building up their capital, they want to get into politics, they want to become respected and important people in society who will have to be reckoned with. And in order to avoid confrontation and splits in society, it will be necessary to try to negotiate with them”.[76]

Although Yuri Kokov's approach to the violent Islamist opposition was successful (see Figure 3 below) – insurgency and counter-insurgency related violence remained low since 2015 – internal ethnic tensions and conflicts increased. This eventually contributed to his unexpected resignation in late September 2018.[77]

Figure 3. Dynamics of the Number of Victims of Violence, Including Members of the Armed Underground, Law Enforcement Officials and Civilians, from 2008 to the Present.



Note: Periods of changes in the priorities of the work of the ministers of internal affairs of the republic are highlighted in colour (Data provided by www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/ and Ministry of Internal Affairs of KBR). The data available capture the period of escalating violence against law enforcement representatives in 2008 and 2009, until the two-pronged counter-measures started under Interior Minister Sergey Vasilyev (i.e. increasingly violent oppression) and refined with the appointment of Yuri Kokov as head of state in 2013 (of the administration and facilitating the departure of radical jihadists to Syria).

In 2018, Kazbek Kokov (a son of the first RKB President Valery Kokov; not related to Yuri Kokov) was appointed as interim head of the republic. Kazbek Kokov had built a civil career in the Presidential Administration of Russia. After his KBR nomination, Kazbek Kokov declared his priorities as supporting business, promoting an enhanced investment climate, improving upward mobility among youth and upgrading the republic's human resources policy.

The unexpected resignation of the 'silovik' Yuri Kokov, and the designation of the civilian Kazbek Kokov generated various expectations as to the future of the republic, including a return of more civilian rule to the KBR. Most experts are inclined to believe that this will go hand in hand with a re-organisation of spheres of

influence in the security services.[78] However, the authors of this article do not yet have sufficient information about the effects this latest appointment will have on the ruling coalitions in KBR – a task for future research.

In the concluding section, an explanation of the different governing arrangements and their handling of violent challenges will be offered based on political settlements between local elites and the centre.

Political Settlement Formation in the KBR against the Backdrop of Violent Challenges to Political Stability

In the introduction it was explained how the concept of *political settlements* is helpful for analysing how ruling coalitions operate in limited-access social orders (LASOs) of varying institutional maturity and proneness to violent confrontation. At the heart of this analytical approach are certain assumptions: that in LASOs elites compete for rents; political power is used to organise the distribution of rents; and access to political power requires the potential to resort to violent self-help—at least as a fallback option. Further, the political settlements emerging from elite competition and coalition building appear to be shaped by the direct power of elites to mobilise their constituents and organise (potentially violent) actions on the one hand, but also by long-standing social and short-term strategic interdependencies as well as formal and informal institutional arrangements regulating elite interaction under ‘normal’ conditions – i.e. conditions when the distributive rules themselves are not challenged by acts of power. Crucially, those political settlements are also shaped by the quality and size of rents available for distribution.

The analytical narrative presented above has indicated significant changes in political settlements that have emerged in Kabardino-Balkaria. It is a story of a political centre (“Moscow”) reacting to changing and at times violent challenges to local political stability by attempting to tighten direct central control over a succession of political leaders in the Republic and how this affected the composition and reach of the ruling coalitions within the republic.

Table 1 provides an overview over periods of rule of the main political actors at central and subnational levels since the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Table 1: Political Leaders in Post-Soviet Russia

President	Boris Yeltsin	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Vladimir Putin		
Years	1991-1999	2000-2004, 2004-2008	2008-2012	2012-2018, 2018-present		
Federal PRs	–	Siloviki (SFD)	Alexander Khloponin	Sergey Melikov	Oleg Belaventsev	Alexander Matovnikov
Years	–	2000-2010	2010-2014	2014-2016	2016-2018	2018-present
Priorities	STATE FORMATION, BASIC SERVICES, ETHNIC EXTREMISM & SEPERATISM	SECURITY, RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM, TERRORISM	ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, BUSINESS	RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM, TERRORISM	RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM, TERRORISM CORRUPTION	GOVERNANCE, STATE PERSONNEL POLICIES, CORRUPTION, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, SECURITY
Head	Valery Kokov		Arsen Kanokov		Yury Kokov	
Years	1992-2005		2005-2013		2013-2018	
Priorities	STATE BUILDING, GOVERNANCE, ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM		ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, BUSINESS, ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM, TERRORISM		OLYMPICS AND SYRIA RELATED SECURITY ISSUES, ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM, TERRORISM	
Minister	Khachim Shogenov		Yury Tomchak	Sergey Vasiliev	Igor Romashkin	
Years	1992-2006		2006-2010	2010- 2015	2015-present	
Priorities	ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM, CRIME		RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM, TERRORISM, BUSINESS	RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM, TERRORISM	RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM, POLICE CORRUPTION, CRIME	

One can differentiate between three distinct political settlements after the Soviet breakup, when the KBR became a border area of the emerging Russian nation-state.

The *first* political settlement, negotiated by the first president of the KBR, Valery Kokov, was based on redistributing the political rents received from the centre between local (here: republic-level) elite representatives. Those elites can be defined in part by the status they inherited from the system of Soviet ethnic federalism and in another part by their newly acquired potential to enforce their interests by violent means.

Soviet ethnic federalism shaped elite formation by attributing official status to titular nations (here: Karbadins and Balkars), the politically significant Russian minority and by organising socio-political institutions defining elite status within each group. In addition, informal practices, notably the ethnic quota-based balancing system in government positions as well as other public institutions (e.g. education, division of market space), played a crucial role in defining elite status, organising access to political positions and, subsequently, the distributive power over rents and other resources. The latter point – whereby violent entrepreneurs might lay claim to a seat at the ‘distributional table’ – refers to the emerging post-Soviet criminal and business elites that evolved into the oligarchy of the late 1990s.

This political settlement had a head of the republic operating as a political broker between centre and local elites, with access to substantial autonomous domestic power. During the 1990s, the relationship between Moscow and Nalchik was more similar to indirect rule than to the dependent clientelism or principle-agent relations that followed. *Dotations* (transfers from the central budget to the budget of the republic) were used as ‘proper’ rents: they were demanded, and not requested, in return for containing and controlling violence, risk and local disorder for the weak central state. V. Kokov, as an able broker, managed to fend off attempts by the centre to establish institutional oversight over the republic (most importantly via the introduction of a plenipotentiary presidential envoy). He protected his direct line to the political centre that provided rents and status, as well as the interests of the local elites that were part of the balanced and inclusive political settlement which he negotiated.

This arrangement eventually disintegrated, for various reasons. Crucially, the central state under a new proactive government (Putin’s first term) started to take increasing central state power more seriously, and chipped away vital domains of local elite autonomy. The most important point here was taking central control of the forces of the Ministry of Interior, thereby cutting off vital access to the direct enforcement capacities of the republic-level elites. At the same time, there emerged new forces with access to violence, but with no seat at the ‘table’, i.e. not integrated into the established ‘ruling coalition’ – in the form of autonomous Islamist groups, organisations and movements. The political settlement under V. Kokov was effective in negotiating the interests of ethno-national elites as well as more or less criminal entrepreneurs, but failed to adapt to challenges posed by the new religious groups and movements. There were simply no established procedures for providing them with seats at the table. The shortcomings in meeting the changing challenges to political stability of V. Kokov’s re-distributional settlement culminated in the massive multi-day armed attack on Nalchik in 2005 by local Islamists from the ranks of a formerly non-violent Jamaat.

It had taken almost five years (in fact, the first five years of Putin’s rule) for the initial political settlement to fall apart and be replaced by a *second* type of settlement in the KBR. This new arrangement, associated with the rule of Arsen Kanokov over the KBR, appeared similar on the formal institutional outside but operated within very different parameters. Balancing the interests of a broad coalition of elites was replaced by a narrower approach to nepotism within the republic, and by dependent political clientelism in relations to Moscow. What had been a diverse elite coalition was effectively reduced to internal clan control over resources with the extended kin-group of the Moscow-appointed head in charge of the republic. For status and influence, this new business oligarchy depended more on Moscow than on domestic support and legitimacy. Key material resources to sustain the system kept coming from the centre, but rents were increasingly drawn from corruption-prone resources in the form of large-scale infrastructure development programmes.

While the Kanokov political settlement facilitated certain lasting economic innovations – in particular, technical improvements in large-scale commercial horticulture – it never really stabilised to become a sustainable

arrangement. The narrow approach of staffing key distributive political positions with relatives and clients, and the unidimensional dependence on political protection and support from Moscow, alienated the old (ethno-political) elites and was even less suited to accommodate the new leaders of highly mobilised religion-defined groups and movements into the political order. The lack of legitimacy among local elites frustrated Moscow's hopes that a loyal and dependent businessman-patriot would be able to stabilise the KBR, keeping active and mobilised parts of the population engaged. The opposite occurred: ethnic divisions re-opened and new divisions along an Islamist-secular divide violently escalated, as the state was increasingly associated with an amoral, corrupt and venal exercise of power. In the end, this settlement ceased to be a working solution for anyone. Moscow decided to pull the plug and try something different.

The *third* political settlement, roughly coinciding with the time the law enforcement officer Yuri Kokov was put in charge of the KBR, was marked by the central state penetrating much more directly the affairs of the KBR, taking over political control of the means of violence and distribution of key resources, as indicated earlier. Y. Kokov was an outsider in the KBR, and local elites were further marginalised. Access to state security forces became the decisive resource for accessing political positions of distributional consequence. Pressured by an administration dominated by federally controlled security structures, the former local business elite now had to provide for the new elite, becoming an additional resource for rent-provision.

Regarding the armed Islamist opposition, this security-focussed and more centralised political arrangement provided a new and more complex approach than the previous arrangements. It combined often lethal and extra-judiciary violent oppression with the option of leaving for jihad elsewhere, while offering pathways back into peaceful ways of life for those willing to re-integrate and cooperate with the security structures. At the same time, the strategy of the new Islamist establishment changed from violent confrontation to investment in economic entrepreneurship, seizing on opportunities that opened up while the old business elites were politically targeted, hit by sanctions and counter-sanctions in the wake of the Russian involvement in Ukraine, and hence, declining.[79] Islamic business networks could offer alternative structures of trust, information and sanctions, vital for local and international trade, while the security-focussed state became increasingly distant and detached from the needs of the local business community.

It was this absence of the state as a service provider (aside from improving the security situation for the state-affiliated part of the population) and the escalating dissatisfaction of the traditional elites that weakened this specific, Moscow-induced political settlement to the point where the head of the KBR, Yuri Kokov, found himself unceremoniously forced to resign. He was replaced by the civilian leader Kazbek Kokov, the son of the first post-Soviet president of the KBR with strong local ties.

Conclusion and Outlook

From Moscow's perspective, governing the North Caucasus has been a complex and dynamic challenge in the thirty years since the breakup of the Soviet Union. Both latent and overt violent challenges to the political status quo have been frequent and of varying intensity. From the perspective of local political elites, Moscow is both a vital source for the protection of the status quo as well as a provider of key material resources. At the same time Moscow may intervene locally in ways that threaten or change the established political settlements, causing discontent among elite factions that are losing out due to such interferences. Hence, the federal centre is a force whose needs must be satisfied and who must be contained at the same time. One key aspect in this relationship between centre and republics in the North Caucasus is convincing Moscow that the local leaders are able to provide political stability and contain violent challenges in the form of separatist claims, religious insurgencies or simply unrest.

The situation in the Kabardino-Balkar Republic never deteriorated into a full-scale internal war – as was the case in Chechnya – and the periods of protracted insurgency and counter-insurgency violence were less intense there than in Dagestan. The KBR did, however, face similar challenges as did the eastern neighbours – ethno-national separatism, violent organised crime, an Islamist insurgency, and (at times extra-constitutional) brutal

countermeasures by the security forces that damaged the legitimacy and trust in the state.

In this article, we have tried to show the various political settlements that emerged between the federal centre and the local political elites in KBR. We found three types of settlements that vary in terms of elite figuration and key resources used for rent distribution. All of them responded to potentially or manifestly violent challenges to the status quo—post-Soviet ethno-separatism and organised crime in the 1990s, a growing Islamist insurgency in the following decade and the risk of terrorist attacks in the wake of the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games. The centre successfully tightened vertical elite control but at the cost of reducing the inclusiveness of political settlements within the republic, and hence alienating established as well as some newly emerging elites.

Elite alienation caused new problems, adding to the challenge of legitimacy of state rule in the republic. The latest change of leadership in the KBR can be seen as an attempt to mitigate the problems arising from this growing disconnection between the detached political elites and the local population. However, recent developments regarding planned constitutional changes, apparently weakening local self-government even further, would seem to counteract this trend. Once again, only time will tell.

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Note: All figures and tables in this article are originals produced by the authors.

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