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Summary

¶1. (C) Weddings are elaborate in Dagestan, the largest autonomy in the North Caucasus. On August 22 we attended a wedding in Makhachkala, Dagestan's capital: Duma member and Dagestan Oil Company chief Gadzhi Makhachev's son married a classmate. The lavish display and heavy drinking concealed the deadly serious North Caucasus politics of land, ethnicity, clan, and alliance. The guest list spanned the Caucasus power structure -- guest starring Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov -- and underlined just how personal the region's politics can be. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Dagestani weddings are serious business: a forum for showing respect, fealty and alliance among families; the bride and groom themselves are little more than showpieces. Weddings take place in discrete parts over three days. On the first day the groom's family and the bride's family simultaneously hold separate receptions. During the receptions the groom leads a delegation to the bride's reception and escorts her back to his own reception, at which point she formally becomes a member of the groom's family, forsaking her old family and clan. The next day, the groom's parents hold another reception, this time for the bride's family and friends, who can "inspect" the family they have given their daughter to. On the third day, the bride's family holds a reception for the groom's parents and family.
Father of the Groom

¶3. (C) On August 22, Gadzhi Makhachev married off his 19 year-old son Dalgat to Aida Sharipova. The wedding in Makhachkala, which we attended, was a microcosm of the social and political relations of the North Caucasus, beginning with Gadzhi's own biography. Gadzhi started off as an Avar clan leader. Enver Kisriyev, the leading scholar of Dagestani society, told us that as Soviet power receded from Dagestan in the late 1980s, the complex society fell back to its pre-Russian structure. The basic structural unit is the monoethnic "jamaat," in this usage best

translated as "canton" or "commune." The ethnic groups themselves are a Russian construct: faced with hundreds of jamaats, the 19th century Russian conquerors lumped cantons speaking related dialects together and called them "Avar," "Dargin," etc. to reduce the number of "nationalities" in Dagestan to 38. Ever since then, jamaats within each ethnic group have been competing with one another to lead the ethnic group. This competition is especially marked among the Avars, the largest nationality in Dagestan.

¶4. (C) As Russian power faded, each canton fielded a militia to defend its people both in the mountains and the capital Makhachkala. Gadzhi became the leader from his home canton of Burtunay, in Kazbek Rayon. He later asserted pan-Avar ambitions, founding the Imam Shamil Popular Front -- named after the great Avar leader of mountaineer resistance to the Russians -- to promote the interests of the Avars and of Burtunay's role within the ethnic group. Among his exploits was a role in the military defense of Dagestan against the 1999 invasion from Chechnya by Shamil Basayev and al-Khattab, and his political defense of Avar villages under pressure in Chechnya, Georgia and Azerbaijan.

¶5. (C) Gadzhi has cashed in the social capital he made from nationalism, translating it into financial and political capital -- as head of Dagestan's state oil company and as the single-mandate representative for Makhachkala in Russia's State Duma. His dealings in the oil business -- including close cooperation with U.S. firms -- have left him well off enough to afford luxurious houses in Makhachkala, Kaspiysk, Moscow, Paris and San Diego; and a large collection of luxury automobiles, including the Rolls Royce Silver Phantom in which Dalgat fetched Aida from her parents' reception. (Gadzhi gave us a lift in the Rolls once in Moscow, but the legroom was somewhat constricted by the presence of a Kalashnikov carbine at our feet. Gadzhi has survived numerous assassination attempts, as have most of the still-living leaders of Dagestan. In Dagestan he always travels in an armored BMW with one, sometimes two follow cars full of uniformed armed guards.)

¶6. (C) Gadzhi has gone beyond his Avar base, pursuing a multi-ethnic cadre policy to develop a network of loyalists. He has sent Dagestani youths, including his sons, to a military type high school near San Diego (we met one graduate, a Jewish boy from Derbent now studying at San Diego state. He has no plans to enter the Russian military).

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Gadzhi's multi-ethnic reach illustrates what the editor of the Dagestani paper "Chernovik" told us: that in the last few years the development of inter-ethnic business clans has eroded traditional jamaat loyalties.

¶7. (C) But the Avar symbolism is still strong. Gadzhi's brother, an artist from St. Petersburg, ordered as a wedding gift a life-sized statue of Imam Shamil. Shamil is the iconic national symbol, despite his stern and inflexible character (portrayed in Tolstoy's "Hadji-Murat" as the mountaineers' tyrannical counterpart to the absolutist Tsar). Connection with Shamil makes for nobility among Avars today. Gadzhi often mentions that he is a descendant on his mother's side of Gair-Bek, one of Shamil's deputies.

The Day Before

¶8. (C) Gadzhi's Kaspiysk summer house is an enormous structure on the shore of the Caspian, essentially a huge circular reception room -- much like a large restaurant -- attached to a 40-meter high green airport tower on columns, accessible only by elevator, with a couple of bedrooms, a reception room, and a grotto whose glass floor was the roof

of a huge fish tank. The heavily guarded compound also boasts a second house, outbuildings, a tennis court, and two piers out into the Caspian, one rigged with block and tackle for launching jet skis. The house filled up with visitors from all over the Caucasus during the afternoon of August 21. The Chair of Ingushetia's parliament drove in with two colleagues; visitors from Moscow included politicians, businessmen and an Avar football coach. Many of the visitors grew up with Gadzhi in Khasavyurt, including an Ingush Olympic wrestler named Vakha who seemed to be perpetually tipsy. Another group of Gadzhi's boyhood friends from Khasavyurt was led by a man who looked like Shamil Basayev on his day off -- flip-flops, t-shirt, baseball cap, beard -- but turned out to be the chief rabbi of Stavropol Kray. He told us he has 12,000 co-religionists in the province, 8,000 of them in its capital, Pyatigorsk. 70 percent are, like him, Persian-speaking Mountain Jews; the rest are a mixture of Europeans, Georgians and Bukharans.

¶9. (C) Also present was Chechnya's Duma member, Khalid (aka Ruslan) Yamadayev, brother of the commander of the notorious Vostok Battalion. He was reserved at the time, but in a follow-up conversation in Moscow on August 29 (please protect) he complained that Chechnya, lacking experts to develop programs for economic recovery, is simply demanding and disposing of cash from the central government. When we pressed him on disappearances, he admitted some took place, but claimed that often parents alleged their children had been abducted when in fact their sons had run off to join the fighters or -- in a case the week before -- they had murdered their daughter in an honor killing. We mentioned the abduction of a widow of Basayev, allegedly to gain access to his money. Khalid said he had not heard of the case, but knew that Basayev had had no interest in wealth; he may have been a religious fanatic, but he was a "normal" person. The fighters who remain are not a serious military force, in Khalid's view, and many would surrender under the proper terms and immunities. He himself is arranging the immunity of a senior official of the Maskhadov era, whose name he would not reveal.

¶10. (C) During lunch, Gadzhi took a congratulatory call from Dagestan's president, Mukhu Aliyev. Gadzhi told Aliyev how honored he would be if Aliyev could drop in at the wedding reception. There was a degree of tension in the conversation, which was between two figures each implicitly claiming the mantle of leadership of the Avars. In the event, Aliyev snubbed Gadzhi and did not show up for the wedding, though the rest of Dagestan's political leadership did.

¶11. (C) Though Gadzhi's house was not the venue for the main wedding reception, he ensured that all his guests were constantly plied with food and drink. The cooks seemed to keep whole sheep and whole cows boiling in a cauldron somewhere day and night, dumping disjointed fragments of the carcass on the tables whenever someone entered the room. Gadzhi's two chefs kept a wide variety of unusual dishes in circulation (in addition to the omnipresent boiled meat and fatty bouillon). The alcohol consumption before, during and after this Muslim wedding was stupendous. Amidst an alcohol shortage, Gadzhi had flown in from the Urals thousands of bottles of Beluga Export vodka ("Best consumed with caviar"). There was also entertainment, beginning even that day, with the big-name performers appearing both at the wedding hall and at Gadzhi's summer house. Gadzhi's main act, a Syrian-born singer named Avraam Russo, could not make it because he was shot a few days before the wedding, but there

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was a "gypsy" troupe from St. Petersburg, a couple of Azeri pop stars, and from Moscow, Benya the Accordion King with his family of singers. A

host of local bands, singing in Avar and Dargin, rounded out the entertainment, which was constant and extremely amplified.

¶10. (C) The main activity of the day was eating and drinking -- starting from 4 p.m., about eight hours worth, all told -- punctuated, when all were laden with food and sodden with drink, with a bout of jet skiing in the Caspian. After dinner, though, the first band started an informal performance -- drums, accordion and clarinet playing the lezginka, the universal dance of the Caucasus. To the uninitiated Westerner, the music sounds like an undifferentiated wall of sound. This was a signal for dancing: one by one, each of the dramatically paunchy men (there were no women present) would enter the arena and exhibit his personal lezginka for the limit of his duration, usually 30 seconds to a minute. Each ethnic group's lezginka was different -- the Dagestani lezginka the most energetic, the Chechen the most aggressive and belligerent, and the Ingush smoother.

Wedding Day 1

¶11. (C) An hour before the wedding reception was set to begin the "Marrakech" reception hall was full of guests -- men taking the air outside and women already filling a number of the tables inside, older ones with headscarves chaperoning dozens of teenaged girls. A Dagestani parliamentarian explained that weddings are a principal venue for teenagers -- and more importantly their parents-- to get a look at one another with a view to future matches. Security was tight -- police presence on the ground plus police snipers positioned on the roof of an overlooking apartment block. Gadzhi even assigned one of his guards as our personal bodyguard inside the reception. The manager told Gadzhi there were seats for over a thousand guests at a time. At the height of the reception, it was standing room only.

¶12. (C) At precisely two p.m. the male guests started filing in. They varied from pols and oligarchs of all sorts -- the slick to the Jurassic; wizened brown peasants from Burtunay; and Dagestan's sports and cultural celebrities. Khalid Yamadayev presided over a political table in the smaller of the two halls (the music was in the other) along with Vakha the drunken wrestler, the Ingush parliamentarians, a member of the Federation Council who is also a nanophysicist and has lectured in Silicon Valley, and Gadzhi's cousin Ismail Alibekov, a submariner first rank naval captain now serving at the General Staff in Moscow. The Dagestani milieu appears to be one in which the highly educated and the gun-toting can mix easily -- often in the same person.

¶13. (C) After a couple of hours Dalgat's convoy returned with Aida, horns honking. Dalgat and Aida got out of the Rolls and were serenaded into the hall, and into the Makhachev family, by a boys' chorus lining both sides of the red carpet, dressed in costumes aping medieval Dagestani armor with little shields and swords. The couple's entry was the signal for the emcee to roll into high gear, and after a few toasts the Piter "gypsies" began their performance. (The next day one of Gadzhi's houseguests sneered, "Some gypsies! The bandleader was certainly Jewish, and the rest of them were blonde." There was some truth to this, but at least the two dancing girls appeared to be Roma.)

¶14. (C) As the bands played, the marriageable girls came out to dance the lezginka in what looked like a slowly revolving conga line while the boys sat together at tables staring intently. The boys were all in white shirts and black slacks, while the girls wore a wide variety of multicolored but fashionable cocktail dresses. Every so often someone would shower the dancers with money -- there were some thousand ruble notes but the currency of choice was the U.S. hundred dollar bill. The

floor was covered with them; young children would scoop the money up to distribute among the dancers.

¶15. (C) Gadzhi was locked into his role as host. He greeted every guest personally as they entered the hall -- failure to do so would cause great insult -- and later moved constantly from table to table drinking toasts with everyone. The 120 toasts he estimated he drank would have killed anyone, hardened drinker or not, but Gadzhi had his Afghan waiter Khan following him around to pour his drinks from a special vodka bottle containing water. Still, he was much the worse for wear by evening's end. At one point we caught up with him dancing with two scantily clad Russian women who looked far from home. One, it turned out was a Moscow poet (later she recited an incomprehensible poem in Gadzhi's honor) who

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was in town with a film director to write the screenplay for a film immortalizing Gadzhi's defense of Dagestan against Shamil Basayev. By 6 p.m. most of the houseguests had returned to Gadzhi's seaside home for more swimming and more jet-skiing-under-the-influence. But by 8 the summer house's restaurant was full once more, the food and drink were flowing, the name performers were giving acoustic renditions of the songs they had sung at the reception, and some stupendously fat guests were displaying their lezginkas for the benefit of the two visiting Russian women, who had wandered over from the reception.

The Wedding -- Day 2: Enter The Man

¶16. (C) The next day's reception at the Marrakech was Gadzhi's tribute to Aida's family, after which we all returned to a dinner at Gadzhi's summer home. Most of the tables were set with the usual dishes plus whole roast sturgeons and sheep. But at 8:00 p.m. the compound was invaded by dozens of heavily armed mujahedin for the grand entrance of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, looking shorter and less muscular than in his photos, and with a somewhat cock-eyed expression on his face. After greetings from Gadzhi, Ramzan and about 20 of his retinue sat around the tables eating and listening to Benya the Accordion King. Gadzhi then announced a fireworks display in honor of the birthday of Ramzan's late father, Ahmat-Hadji Kadyrov. The fireworks started with a bang that made both Gadzhi and Ramzan flinch. Gadzhi had from the beginning requested that none of his guests, most of whom carried sidearms, fire their weapons in celebration. Throughout the wedding they complied, not even joining in the magnificent fireworks display.

¶17. (C) After the fireworks, the musicians struck up the lezginka in the courtyard and a group of two girls and three boys -- one no more than six years old -- performed gymnastic versions of the dance. First Gadzhi joined them and then Ramzan, who danced clumsily with his gold-plated automatic stuck down in the back of his jeans (a houseguest later pointed out that the gold housing eliminated any practical use of the gun, but smirked that Ramzan probably couldn't fire it anyway). Both Gadzhi and Ramzan showered the dancing children with hundred dollar bills; the dancers probably picked upwards of USD 5000 off the cobblestones. Gadzhi told us later that Ramzan had brought the happy couple "a five kilo lump of gold" as his wedding present. After the dancing and a quick tour of the premises, Ramzan and his army drove off back to Chechnya. We asked why Ramzan did not spend the night in Makhachkala, and were told, "Ramzan never spends the night anywhere."

¶18. (C) After Ramzan sped off, the dinner and drinking -- especially the latter -- continued. An Avar FSB colonel sitting next to us, dead

drunk, was highly insulted that we would not allow him to add "cognac" to our wine. "It's practically the same thing," he insisted, until a Russian FSB general sitting opposite told him to drop it. We were inclined to cut the Colonel some slack, though: he is head of the unit to combat terrorism in Dagestan, and Gadzhi told us that extremists have sooner or later assassinated everyone who has joined that unit. We were more worried when an Afghan war buddy of the Colonel's, Rector of the Dagestan University Law School and too drunk to sit, let alone stand, pulled out his automatic and asked if we needed any protection. At this point Gadzhi and his people came over, propped the rector between their shoulders, and let us get out of range.

Postscript: The Practical Uses of a Caucasus Wedding

¶19. (C) Kadyrov's attendance was a mark of respect and alliance, the result of Gadzhi's careful cultivation -- dating back to personal friendship with Ramzan's father. This is a necessary political tool in a region where difficulties can only be resolved by using personal relationships to reach ad hoc informal agreements. An example was readily to hand: on August 22 Chechnya's parliamentary speaker, Dukvakha Abdurakhmanov, gave an interview in which he made specific territorial claims to the Kizlyar, Khasavyurt and Novolak regions of Dagestan. The first two have significant Chechen-Akkin populations, and the last was part of Chechnya until the 1944 deportation, when Stalin forcibly resettled ethnic Laks (a Dagestani nationality) there. Gadzhi said he would have to answer Abdurakhmanov and work closely with Ramzan to reduce the tensions "that fool" had caused. Asked why he took such statements seriously, he told us that in the Caucasus all disputes revolve around land, and such claims can never be

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dismissed. Unresolved land claims are the "threads" the Russian center always kept in play to pull when needed. We asked why these claims are coming out now, and were told it was euphoria, pure and simple. After all they had received, the Chechen leadership's feet are miles off the ground. (A well-connected Chechen contact later told us he thought that raising nationalistic irredentism was part of Abdurakhmanov's effort to gain a political base independent from Kadyrov.)

¶20. (C) The "horizontal of power" represented by Gadzhi's relationship with Ramzan is the antithesis of the Moscow-imposed "vertical of power." Gadzhi's business partner Khalik Gindiyev, head of Rosneft-Kaspoil, complained that Moscow should let local Caucasians rather than Russians -- "Magomadovs and Aliyevs, not Ivanovs and Petrovs" -- resolve the region's conflicts. The vertical of power, he said, is inapplicable to the Caucasus, a region that Moscow bureaucrats such as PolPred Kozak would never understand. The Caucasus needs to be given the scope to resolve its own problems. But this was not a plug for democracy. Gadzhi told us democracy would always fail in the Caucasus, where the conception of the state is as an extension of the Caucasus family, in which the father's word is law. "Where is the room for democracy in that?" he asked. We paraphrased Hayek: if you run a family as you do a state, you destroy the family. Running a state as you do a family destroys the state: ties of kinship and friendship will always trump the rule of law. Gadzhi's partner agreed, shaking his head sadly. "That's a matter for generations to come," he said.

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