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Dagestan de-constructed: failed multiculturalism and internal borders in a borderland region

ABSTRACT: Dagestan, a borderland republic within the Russian Federation, presents a unique case study of how ethnic diversity can create internal fragmentation rather than unified multiculturalism. This study examines how the coexistence of over 30 officially recognised ethnic groups and 14 languages has paradoxically resulted in rigid internal boundaries that divide rather than unite society. Through qualitative fieldwork involving interviews and participant observation, this research reveals how Dagestan's diversity has created what I term 'failed multiculturalism' - where diversity becomes a source of division rather than strength. The findings demonstrate that ethnic diversity does not automatically lead to successful multicultural integration, but can produce fragmented societies where internal boundaries prove as divisive as international borders.

Keywords: Borderlands; Dagestan; Failed Multiculturalism; Internal Borders; Ethnic Boundaries; Identity Fragmentation

POVZETEK: Dagestan, obmejna republika znotraj Ruske federacije, predstavlja izjemen primer, kako lahko etnična raznolikost povzroči notranjo fragmentacijo namesto povezovalnega multikulturalizma. Raziskava analizira, kako sobivanje več kot tridesetih uradno priznanih etničnih skupin in štirinajstih jezikov paradoksalno vodi v oblikovanje togih notranjih meja. Na podlagi kvalitativnega terenskega raziskovanja ugotavljamo, da je raznolikost Dagestana oblikovala »neuspešni multikulturalizem« – sistem, v katerem raznolikost postane vir razdeljenosti namesto kohezije. Rezultati kažejo, da etnična raznolikost ne zagotavlja uspešne multikulturne integracije, temveč lahko vodi v razdrobljene družbe, kjer so notranje meje enako razdruževalne kot mednarodne.

Ključne besede: obmejna območja, Dagestan, neuspešni multikulturalizem, notranje meje, etnične meje, fragmentacija identitete

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Introduction

The Republic of Dagestan, situated at Russia's southern borderland with Azerbaijan and Georgia, represents one of Europe's most complex experiments in managing ethnic diversity within a single political unit. Home to over 30 officially recognised ethnic groups including Avars, Dargins, Kumyks, Lezgins, Laks, Tabasarans, Rutuls, Aguls, Tsakhurs, Nogais, Azerbaijanis, Chechens, and Russians, among others and 14[2] state languages, this North Caucasus republic exemplifies a fundamental paradox of contemporary multiculturalism: how extreme ethnic diversity can lead to societal fragmentation rather than harmonious coexistence. Unlike successful examples of multicultural integration found in Western democratic societies, Dagestan demonstrates what I conceptualise as 'failed multiculturalism'; a condition where ethnic diversity creates internal boundaries that fragment rather than enrich society.

The significance of Dagestan as a case study extends beyond its unique demographic composition. As Anderson (1991, 6) argued, nations are 'imagined communities' where members share a sense of communion despite never meeting most of their fellow citizens. In Dagestan's case, rather than creating one unified imagined community, the republic contains multiple, competing imagined communities separated by rigid ethnic boundaries. This fragmentation challenges fundamental assumptions about how diversity can be successfully managed in contemporary political systems.

The name 'Dagestan' itself, meaning 'land of mountains' in Turkic-Persian, emerged in the 16th century as a geographic rather than ethnic designation (Halbach and Isaeva 2015, 8) – a crucial distinction that highlights how territory became the primary unifying factor in this deeply divided society. This territorial rather than ethnic foundation illuminates a central challenge: the absence of a unifying ethnic or cultural core around which a coherent regional identity might coalesce.

This borderland status operates on multiple levels simultaneously. Dagestan serves as Russia's geographic frontier with the South Caucasus, a civilisational boundary between Orthodox Christianity and Islam, and

2 Official website of the Head of the Republic of Dagestan. Source: https://president.e-dag.ru/brief-reference/.

most significantly for my analysis, an internal space where ethnic groups maintain rigid boundaries despite centuries of coexistence. The republic thus functions as a laboratory for understanding how internal borders can be as divisive as international frontiers. In this article, I use the term 'bordered multiculturalism' to describe this configuration: a system in which ethnic boundaries are not merely recognised but systematically institutionalised in political, linguistic, religious, and economic fields. In the Dagestani case, bordered multiculturalism is the institutional foundation of what I conceptualise as 'failed multiculturalism': rather than enabling everyday cross-ethnic interaction and shared civic identification, diversity-protecting arrangements stabilise separation and make it difficult for a common regional identity to emerge. By institutionalisation, we mean the embedding of ethnic divisions into formal structures (such as quota systems in government, separate religious administrations, and ethnically-coded educational policies) as well as informal practices (endogamous marriage norms, ethnic hiring networks, and residential clustering) that together maintain separation as a routine feature of social organisation.

The theoretical implications of Dagestan's experience extend far beyond the North Caucasus context. As Kolosova et al. (2016) note, Dagestan is characterised as Russia's most unstable region, with problems of ethno-political tensions and territorial disputes including competing claims over land redistribution, historical boundaries between ethnic districts, and conflicts over pasture rights between highland and lowland communities as well as economic crises and social upheavals, making the management of its extreme ethnic diversity particularly challenging for both federal authorities seeking regional stability and local elites navigating inter-ethnic power balances. This study addresses a critical gap in both border studies and multiculturalism literature by examining how ethnic diversity in borderland regions can function as a mechanism of internal fragmentation rather than integration. I argue that Dagestan's experience demonstrates how contemporary practices of boundary-making within states can be as exclusionary as international border controls, creating hierarchies of belonging that structure everyday life and prevent the emergence of shared civic identity.

The primary research question guiding this investigation is: How does extreme ethnic diversity in borderland regions create internal boundaries

that fragment rather than unite society, and what are the implications for regional identity formation and social cohesion? Secondary questions explore: How do individuals navigate multiple, overlapping boundary systems in their daily lives? What factors enable the emergence of transcendent identities that might bridge ethnic divisions?

Theoretical Framework: Borderlands and Failed Multiculturalism

Understanding Dagestan's fragmented society requires engaging with theoretical developments that challenge conventional assumptions about ethnic diversity and social cohesion. This study introduces the concept of 'failed multiculturalism' to describe a specific configuration of diversity management where institutional mechanisms designed to protect ethnic groups produce rigid internal boundaries that fragment rather than integrate society. Unlike 'contested multiculturalism,' where groups debate the terms of integration while sharing civic space, or 'parallel multiculturalism,' where communities coexist with minimal interaction, failed multiculturalism describes a system where diversity-protecting institutions actively prevent the emergence of shared identity and cross-ethnic solidarity. The key distinction lies not in the presence of ethnic tension – common to many diverse societies – but in the systematic institutionalisation of separation across political, linguistic, religious, and economic domains simultaneously.

This conceptualisation builds upon critiques of liberal multiculturalism theory, particularly Kymlicka's (1989, 2007) assumption that institutional frameworks protecting group rights naturally lead to harmonious integration. The Dagestani case reveals how well-intentioned diversity management can transform difference into division when institutional arrangements reward ethnic particularism rather than cross-ethnic cooperation. Where Kymlicka envisions group rights as enabling minority participation in broader society, Dagestan demonstrates how such rights can instead create parallel societies with minimal meaningful interaction.

Anderson's (1991) theory of 'imagined communities' provides crucial analytical leverage for understanding why Dagestan has failed to develop unified regional identity. Anderson argues that nations are 'imagined' not because they are false, but because members maintain mental images of

communion with fellow-members they will never personally meet. Critically, Anderson identifies specific mechanisms that enable this imagining: the development of print-languages that create unified fields of communication, the circulation of newspapers and books that allow simultaneous consumption of shared narratives, and standardised education systems that transmit common historical consciousness.

Dagestan's linguistic landscape systematically undermines each of these mechanisms. With fourteen officially recognised languages belonging to multiple language families: Northeast Caucasian (Avar, Dargin, Lezgin, Lak, Tabasaran, Rutul, Tsakhur, Agul), Turkic (Kumyk, Nogai, Azerbaijani), and Indo-European (Russian, Tat), no single Dagestani print-language has emerged to create a unified communicative field. While Russian serves as lingua franca, it functions as an externally imposed medium rather than an organically developed shared language; as informants consistently noted, 'Russian is never considered as their own.' Each ethnic group maintains separate literary traditions, newspapers, and educational materials in native languages, creating what amounts to multiple parallel 'imagined communities' rather than one unified Dagestani consciousness. The absence of shared media circulation and the fragmentation of educational content along ethnic lines mean that the very mechanisms Anderson identified as constitutive of national imagination operate in Dagestan to reinforce ethnic particularity rather than regional unity.

Barth's (1998) seminal reconceptualisation of ethnicity proves equally essential for understanding Dagestan's internal boundaries. Barth's central insight was that ethnic groups are not defined by their cultural content: shared customs, languages, or beliefs, but by the social boundaries that groups maintain between themselves and others. These boundaries persist not despite interaction but through it: ethnic identity is constituted precisely in moments of contact where differences are marked and maintained. Crucially, Barth demonstrated that boundary maintenance requires continuous social work: practices of inclusion and exclusion, markers of belonging and otherness that must be reproduced across generations.

In Dagestan, these boundary-maintaining practices have become institutionalised through both formal and informal mechanisms. Formal mechanisms include the ethnic quota system in government that ensures

positions are distributed by ethnicity rather than merit, separate religious administrations for different ethnic groups, and educational policies that maintain native-language instruction in ethnically homogeneous areas. Informal mechanisms encompass endogamous marriage preferences that discourage interethnic unions, ethnic hiring networks that channel economic opportunities to co-ethnics, and residential patterns that maintain ethnic clustering even in urban settings. This institutionalisation transforms what Barth described as fluid, situational boundary-work into rigid, structural separation, creating boundaries that individuals cannot easily cross regardless of personal disposition.

The implications become clearer when examined through Gellner's (1983) analysis of nationalism's relationship to modernisation. Gellner argued that nationalism emerges when industrialisation creates demand for standardised, literate populations sharing common culture. In typical nation-building, this process produces one dominant national culture that absorbs or marginalises local particularities. Dagestan presents an anomalous case: rather than one nationalism emerging from modernisation, multiple competing nationalisms have developed simultaneously within a single political space. Avar nationalism emphasises demographic dominance and historical leadership in anti-colonial resistance; Dargin nationalism stresses cultural distinctiveness and economic success; Lezgin nationalism includes irredentist claims to 'Lezgistan' spanning the Azerbaijan border; Kumyk nationalism invokes historical khanates and territorial claims to lowland areas; Lak nationalism emphasises cultural sophistication and educational achievement. These competing nationalisms do not simply coexist but actively contest political resources, historical narratives, and territorial claims, creating what might be termed 'polyethnic nationalism': multiple nationalist projects operating within shared political space without any achieving hegemony.

Brubaker's (1996, 2004) concept of 'groupism,' which describes the tendency to treat ethnic groups as bounded, homogeneous entities with unified interests, further illuminates how institutional structures reify these divisions. Soviet nationality policy, which Martin (2001) documented as an 'affirmative action empire,' created tens of thousands of national territories, trained ethnic cadres, and financed national-language cultural

production. This policy treated ethnicity as an immutable characteristic recorded on identity documents and transmitted across generations. Slezkine (1994) termed this arrangement the Soviet 'communal apartment' model, where each group occupied its designated space within the larger structure. In Dagestan, this legacy persists through contemporary institutions that continue to treat ethnic groups as the fundamental units of political representation, resource allocation, and social organisation.

Contemporary border studies scholarship provides the final theoretical component for understanding how these dynamics operate spatially and temporally. Van Houtum (2005), Newman (2006), and Paasi (2005) demonstrate that borders are not merely territorial lines but social constructs continually reproduced through everyday practices that shape identity and belonging. Their concept of 'bordering,' understood as the ongoing processes through which boundaries are created, maintained, and given meaning, applies powerfully to Dagestan's internal divisions. Physical geography (mountain ranges separating ethnic territories), linguistic barriers (mutual unintelligibility between language families), religious divisions (parallel spiritual administrations), and economic disparities (ethnic networks controlling access to resources) create overlapping bordering processes that function as effectively as international frontiers. These internal borders produce experiences of exclusion and otherness typically associated with crossing national boundaries: they limit mobility, channel opportunity, and structure everyday social interaction along ethnic lines.

The theoretical synthesis offered here combines Anderson's mechanisms of national imagination, Barth's boundary-maintenance processes, Gellner's analysis of competing nationalisms, Brubaker's critique of groupism, and border studies' attention to everyday bordering practices. Together, these perspectives provide the analytical framework for examining how Dagestan's extreme diversity has produced fragmentation rather than integration. The concept of 'failed multiculturalism' thus describes not simply the absence of successful integration but a specific institutional configuration where diversity-protecting mechanisms systematically prevent the emergence of shared civic identity while maintaining stable, if separated, coexistence.

Methodology

This study employed a comprehensive qualitative research strategy conducted by a single researcher specifically designed to capture the complex ways internal boundaries shape everyday life in Dagestan's ethnically divided society. The fieldwork was conducted by a non-Dagestani researcher based outside the region. This outsider positionality simultaneously constrained and facilitated access: some interlocutors were initially cautious toward a researcher not embedded in local networks, yet the same distance often encouraged more reflective accounts of everyday boundary practices, as respondents felt they were speaking to someone outside local patronage structures. In line with standard ethical guidelines for research on sensitive topics, all participants were informed about the aims of the study, participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. Identifying details have been removed or anonymised, and pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the confidentiality of interlocutors. The research draws on established traditions of ethnographic research while adapting methodological approaches to the sensitive political context of ethnic relations in the North Caucasus. The research design followed DeWalt et al.'s (1998) guidelines for participant observation in multicultural settings, emphasising the importance of researchers sharing everyday experiences of informants while maintaining sufficient analytical distance to identify patterns invisible to participants themselves. This approach proved particularly valuable for understanding how ethnic boundaries operate through subtle social practices, unspoken assumptions, and routine interactions that structure daily life in ways that participants may take for granted or find difficult to articulate explicitly.

The methodological strategy combined three interconnected approaches: ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Russian involving participant observation and informal interaction across three sites: the capital Makhachkala, the southern city of Derbent, and the highland district centre of Khunzakh; semi-structured interviews with twenty informants designed to elicit detailed accounts of boundary experiences; and document analysis examining official policies, media representations, and existing research on ethnic relations in Dagestan. This triangulation approach aimed to capture both the institutional frameworks that structure eth-

nic boundaries and the lived experiences of individuals navigating these boundaries in daily life. The combination of methods was essential for understanding discrepancies between official multiculturalism[3] rhetoric and actual practices of ethnic separation, revealing how formal policies of ethnic accommodation can produce informal practices of ethnic avoidance and separation.

Fieldwork was conducted over two intensive months (April–May 2021) during a period of relative stability in ethnic relations. However, this timing also meant the research occurred during intensifying public debates about tourist behaviour and dress codes, discussions that had gained particular prominence in Dagestani media and reflected broader tensions over cultural boundaries and external influences on local norms[4]. Sites were strategically selected to represent different patterns of ethnic settlement and boundary-making dynamics across Dagestan's diverse geographic and social landscape. The capital Makhachkala provided insights into how ethnic boundaries manifest in urban settings, particularly through the ethnic quota system in government institutions (Hall 2015), the linguistic hierarchies (Kaymazarov 2012), and the clash between traditional and modern (Bulatov and Seferbekov 2019). Observations in urban contexts revealed how ethnic boundaries manifest through seemingly neutral practices like shopping patterns, restaurant preferences, and residential clustering that create ethnic territories within officially integrated spaces.

Derbent, Dagestan's second-largest city and a UNESCO World Heritage site, provided insight into historical patterns of multi-ethnic coexistence, with its mixed population of Lezgins, Azerbaijanis, Tabasarans, Russians, and the remnants of the historically significant Mountain Jewish community. The highland district of Khunzakh, historically the centre of the

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3 In Dagestan, the policy of preserving diversity is not called multiculturalism, but rather the 'friendship (less often – brotherhood) of peoples' that has been in place since Soviet times. Officially this term is referred as 'interethnic relations'. The Ministry of National Policy and Religious Affairs of the Republic of Dagestan is the main body responsible for managing interethnic and inter-religious relations. Source: https://minnacrd.ru/ministry/goals.

4 For instance, in the regional media of the Republic of Dagestan, the topic of 'tourist dress code' has become incredibly popular. The author of this article even participated as an invited guest on a local radio station, discussing acceptable behaviour and clothing for tourists arriving in Dagestan.

Avar Khanate and a symbolically important site for Avar identity, offered perspective on how ethnic homogeneity in mountain settlements shapes boundary maintenance differently than urban diversity.

Rural and semi-rural districts dominated by specific ethnic groups revealed different dynamics, showing how territorial concentration reinforces cultural boundaries through landscape, architecture, language use, and social organisation. Fieldwork in villages of Khunzakh district, predominantly Avar, allowed observation of how ethnic boundaries intersect with traditional social structures, religious practices, and economic activities in ways that differ significantly from urban patterns. The rural sites also provided insight into how younger generations (informants aged 18–35) negotiate ethnic identity differently than their elders, particularly regarding language use, educational aspirations, and attitudes toward interethnic marriage. This geographic diversity was essential for understanding the varied ways ethnic fragmentation manifests across different spatial contexts, from urban neighbourhoods where groups live in proximity but maintain separation to rural areas where territorial concentration creates more visible boundaries.

The sampling strategy required careful attention to Dagestan's complex ethnic composition while balancing representation with research feasibility and safety considerations. Twenty informants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling designed to ensure representation of Dagestan's ethnic diversity while capturing variation in age, gender, occupation, and geographic location. The sample included 5 Avars (representing the largest ethnic group at approximately 30% of the population), 4 Dargins (the second largest at roughly 17%), 3 Kumyks (approximately 14%), 3 Lezgins (roughly 13%), 2 Laks (approximately 5%), and 3 representatives of smaller ethnic groups including Tabasarans, Rutuls, and Azeris. This distribution roughly approximated demographic proportions, though the limited number of representatives from smaller ethnic groups (three informants across Tabasarans, Rutuls, and Azeris) constitutes a recognised limitation that restricts generalisability of findings regarding minority experiences within Dagestan's ethnic hierarchy.

Informants were recruited through multiple channels: personal contacts established during preliminary visits, snowball sampling from initial

participants, and institutional assistance from Dagestan State University, which helped identify potential informants across different faculties and departments. This multi-channel recruitment strategy aimed to reduce selection bias inherent in any single approach while navigating the practical challenges of conducting research on sensitive ethnic topics.

The sampling strategy aligned with established practices in ethnographic research on the North Caucasus, particularly following the methodological approaches used in recent studies of Dagestani society (Varshaver et al. 2022). Age distribution ranged from 22 to 67 years, capturing different generational perspectives on ethnic relations shaped by Soviet experiences, post-Soviet transitions, and contemporary globalisation pressures. Gender balance included 11 women and 9 men, reflecting both practical access considerations and the importance of understanding how ethnic boundaries intersect with gender roles and expectations that vary across ethnic groups. Occupational diversity encompassed teachers, healthcare workers, entrepreneurs, religious leaders, students, and retirees, providing insight into how professional roles and economic positions shape experiences of ethnic boundaries and access to cross-ethnic interaction.

Semi-structured interviews explored several interconnected themes designed to capture both explicit attitudes and implicit boundary practices. Questions addressed how respondents identify themselves, what it means to be a representative of a particular ethnic group or political community (Dagestani), whether respondents have friends of other religions or ethnicities, how important such friendships are to them, how included or excluded they perceive people of other groups to be from public life in the republic, and whether larger cities (Makhachkala, Derbent) blur or accentuate distinctions between groups. Discussions of ethnic quotas as mechanisms of inclusion versus exclusion illuminated how formal policies of representation translate into lived experiences of opportunity and discrimination. Exploration of language use patterns as boundary maintenance strategies revealed the complex ways multilingualism functions as both bridge and barrier in interethnic communication.

Religious practices and their relationship to intergroup relations proved particularly sensitive but crucial for understanding how shared Islamic faith intersects with ethnic particularism. Questions about discrimination

or privilege based on ethnicity required careful framing to encourage honest responses while maintaining trust and safety for informants. Finally, discussions of the relationship between ethnic and Dagestani identity revealed how individuals conceptualise belonging to both particular ethnic groups and the broader regional community, often exposing tensions between these levels of identification.

The interview guide was informed by previous research on nationalism and identity formation (Eriksen et al. 1993; Smith 1988) but adapted to capture the specific dynamics of Dagestan's multiethnic context and the particular challenges of researching ethnic relations in a politically sensitive environment. Interview duration ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours, with longer conversations often providing the most valuable insights as informants became more comfortable discussing sensitive topics. All interviews were conducted in Russian, which served as lingua franca but may have influenced responses in subtle ways that reflected the linguistic hierarchies being studied.

Participant observation encompassed diverse settings over the two-month fieldwork period: religious observances including Friday prayers at mosques serving different ethnic communities; cultural events such as a prize-giving evening organised by a local radio station and charitable foundation; intellectual gatherings including a quiz club attracting educated urban youth; informal social occasions including traditional hospitality gatherings in private homes; and direct observation of tourist-local interactions at heritage sites in Derbent. The researcher also participated as an invited guest on a local radio programme discussing tourism and cultural norms, providing insight into media framings of identity debates. This range of settings enabled observation of how ethnic boundaries operate across formal and informal contexts, and how they may be reinforced or challenged through collective activities.

Data analysis followed an inductive approach influenced by grounded theory methodology, beginning with open coding to identify patterns in how informants described and experienced boundaries, followed by axial coding to explore relationships between different types of boundary practices, and finally selective coding focused on core theoretical insights about failed multiculturalism and internal bordering. Initial coding focused on

boundary-making practices across different domains (political, linguistic, religious, economic), while subsequent analysis examined how these practices connect to larger structures of power and exclusion that maintain ethnic fragmentation. The analysis was supplemented by examination of existing studies on Dagestani society, particularly recent ethnographic research (Varshaver et al. 2022; Bulatov and Seferbekov 2019), providing broader context for interpreting fieldwork findings and situating individual experiences within larger patterns of institutional boundary maintenance.

The Architecture of Internal Borders: How Diversity Creates Division

The contemporary fragmentation of Dagestani society cannot be understood without examining how Soviet nationality policies created the institutional architecture that continues to structure ethnic relations. The Soviet approach to managing diversity, which Martin (2001) termed the 'affirmative action empire,' fundamentally transformed fluid ethnic identities into fixed administrative categories with far-reaching consequences for contemporary Dagestan. The policy of korenizatsiya (indigenisation) implemented in the 1920s aimed to develop distinct ethnic national consciousness among non-Russian peoples by promoting Avar, Dargin, Lezgin, and other particular identities rather than any unified Dagestani consciousness, all while maintaining overall Soviet unity. In Dagestan, this meant creating separate cultural institutions, educational materials, and administrative structures for each recognised ethnic group. Unlike regions with one or two titular nationalities, Dagestan's extreme diversity led to a complex system where no single group could claim republican ownership, necessitating elaborate power-sharing arrangements that persist in modified form today.

The Soviet system treated ethnicity (recorded as 'nationality' [natsional'nost'] in official documents) as an immutable characteristic inscribed on birth certificates and internal passports, making ethnic identity 'an essential marker, which was, in contrast to traditional or Western models, virtually unchangeable.' This created rigid boundaries where more fluid identities might have existed. As Slezkine (1994, 414) observed, this system transformed ethnicity into the primary organising principle of the Soviet

'communal apartment.' In Dagestan, individuals inherited not just ethnic identity but also associated expectations about language use, cultural practice, and political loyalty.

Post-Soviet transformations have modified but not fundamentally altered these structures. The abolition of nationality entries in Russian passports after 1997 did not eliminate ethnic categories from social and political life in Dagestan. Instead, informal mechanisms emerged to maintain ethnic boundaries, from hiring practices that favour co-ethnics to marriage patterns that discourage interethnic unions. The formal system of ethnic quotas in government, while modified from Soviet practice, continues to ensure that political power remains distributed along ethnic lines rather than through competitive democratic processes.

Dagestan's ethnic quota system, formalised during the Soviet period in the 1920s–1930s as part of the korenizatsiya (indigenisation) policy and maintained in modified form after 1991, exemplifies how diversity management can create rigid boundaries rather than fluid integration. As documented by Hall (2015), this system ensures proportional representation of major ethnic groups in government institutions through both formal rules and informal understandings. Until 2006, the republic operated with a State Council comprising representatives of fourteen ethnic groups instead of a single president. This structure, while nominally integrative at the executive level, institutionalised ethnic categories as the primary basis for political representation rather than individual citizenship or programmatic platforms. This arrangement ensured that political competition occurred primarily along ethnic lines, with each group securing 'its' designated positions rather than competing for cross-ethnic coalitions.

The linguistic landscape of Dagestan creates profound communication barriers that reinforce ethnic boundaries. Despite official recognition of fourteen languages, Russian functions as the primary means of interethnic communication. As Kaymazarov (2012) notes, this creates a complex situation where 'Russians themselves are a minority' yet their language dominates public discourse. This linguistic hierarchy has practical consequences: native language speakers face systematic disadvantages in education and employment compared to those fluent in Russian, creating what amounts to a two-tier system of opportunity based on linguistic competence.

The educational sphere in Dagestan serves as a critical site where linguistic boundaries are institutionalised and reproduced across generations. While schools are not formally segregated by ethnicity, the geographic concentration of ethnic groups means that schools in predominantly Avar, Dargin, or Lezgin districts serve ethnically homogeneous student populations, with native-language instruction in early grades reinforcing ethnic-linguistic identity before transition to Russian-medium education. Parents face agonizing choices between preserving their children's connection to ancestral languages and ensuring access to Russian-language education that promises greater social mobility. This dilemma reflects deeper structural inequalities where educational success becomes contingent on linguistic assimilation.

The psychological toll of navigating multiple linguistic worlds manifests in what informants described as perpetual feelings of inauthenticity. Young Dagestanis report experiencing 'linguistic fragmentation,' never feeling fully comfortable in any single language space. As one informant expressed: 'When I speak Avar at home, I feel connected to my ancestors, but when I speak Russian at university, doors open, but something feels lost. I am never fully myself in either language' (female, Avar, 24 years). This constant code-switching creates cognitive and emotional burdens that extend beyond mere communication challenges. Educational institutions, rather than serving as spaces for cross-ethnic encounter and mutual understanding, often reinforce separation through informal practices. While not officially segregated, schools in ethnically homogeneous areas typically conduct instruction in local languages for early grades before transitioning to Russian, creating educational trajectories that correlate strongly with ethnic background. While the core curriculum follows federal Russian standards, supplementary materials on local history and culture vary by district, with each ethnic territory emphasising its own historical narratives, literary figures, and cultural heroes. This variation further reinforces particularistic rather than shared regional consciousness.

Religious practice in Dagestan, rather than serving as a unifying force among the 96% Muslim population, has become another site of ethnic boundary maintenance. As Matsuzato and Ibragimov (2005) document, unlike many Muslim regions where mosques are built by donors or the

state, in Dagestan, local religious communities (jaamats, traditionally corresponding to village settlements) build and manage mosques themselves through collective contributions, paying salaries to imams. This grassroots character of religious organisation has led to what Giuliano (2005) identifies as the establishment of 'parallel spiritual directorates along ethnic lines,' where each group maintains its own version of Islamic practice.

The fragmentation of religious authority became particularly evident in the post-Soviet period when leadership of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Dagestan (DUMD), the officially recognised Islamic authority established in 1944, became dominated by Avars, the republic's largest ethnic group. This perceived ethnic capture of religious authority prompted Kumyk, Dargin, and other communities to establish informal parallel structures and support alternative religious leaders, viewing the official DUMD as representing Avar rather than pan-Dagestani Islamic interests. This created a situation where Islam does not unite but rather 'makes every group enjoy their own version of Islam.' Religious leaders often combine spiritual authority with economic and judicial functions, managing local economies and resolving disputes through Sharia law, creating what amounts to parallel governance structures along ethnic lines.

Religious identity intersects with ethnicity in complex ways. While 96% of Dagestanis identify as Muslim, this shared faith does not translate into unified religious practice or identity. The case of religious minorities illustrates the boundaries of acceptable diversity. As documented in research on Protestantism in Dagestan by Khalidova (2018), 'in addition to the Russian Orthodox Church, which is accepted in conjunction with the Russians, other forms of Christian proselytism are informally prohibited in Dagestan, especially when it comes to the conversion of local nationalities to Christianity.'

Economic opportunities in Dagestan correlate strongly with ethnic identity, creating what Kolosova et al. (2016) describe as systematic barriers to economic mobility. Ethnicity has become 'a powerful political category determining access to administrative and economic resources,' leading to intense group competition. This economic stratification extends beyond formal employment into informal networks that provide crucial support for economic survival. The Dagestani diaspora in Moscow, for example, operates through

village-based networks that help with finding work, housing, and navigating bureaucratic challenges. These networks, while providing essential support for group members, simultaneously reinforce ethnic boundaries by limiting cross-ethnic economic cooperation and mobility (Varshaver et al. 2022).

The geographic distribution of ethnic groups across Dagestan creates territorial dimensions of economic exclusion that reinforce ethnic boundaries through spatial separation. Mountain villages remain predominantly mono-ethnic, with specific groups historically associated with particular territories and economic activities. These patterns, established over centuries and formalised during the Soviet period, continue to structure economic opportunities along ethnic-territorial lines.

Labor migration within Dagestan follows distinctly ethnic patterns, with members of mountain communities moving to lowland areas for seasonal work but maintaining strict ethnic networks that determine access to employment. Construction work in Makhachkala, for instance, often involves crews recruited entirely from specific villages, with foremen serving as ethnic brokers who control access to jobs. This system provides security and mutual support for workers while simultaneously excluding those outside the ethnic-territorial network.

The intersection of ethnicity and territory becomes particularly visible in disputes over land use and resource allocation. Traditional claims to 'ancestral lands' compete with modern development needs, creating conflicts that invariably take on ethnic dimensions. As documented in existing studies of post-Soviet Dagestan (Ware and Kisriev 2014; Kolosova et al. 2016), the redistribution of collective farm lands following the dissolution of Soviet kolkhozy became a flashpoint for ethnic competition, with various groups invoking historical precedents and traditional use rights to justify contemporary claims.

Identity Formation in a Fragmented Society: The Paradox of Unity and Division

The process of identity formation in Dagestan reveals fundamental tensions between local fragmentation and the potential for broader regional consciousness. As Shnirelman (2018) documents, 'scholars belonging to different ethnic groups were engaged in myth-making by developing

various historical theories, and at times even reverting to outright falsification of history, in order to underline the "remote past" of their ethnic community.' These competing historical narratives prevent the emergence of shared Dagestani consciousness by emphasising ethnic distinctiveness and territorial claims.

The Soviet legacy profoundly shapes contemporary identity dynamics. The USSR left a deep imprint on the formation of national consciousness among its constituent peoples; while ethnic communities linked together through language, folk culture, a common territory and religion had existed on what became the Soviet Union for centuries, it was largely thanks to Soviet nationalities policy that these ethnicities became 'coherent, articulate, and conscious nations' (Slezkine 1994, 414). This institutionalisation of ethnic difference created the 'communal apartment' model, where each group occupied its designated space within the larger political structure.

The construction of separate historical narratives by each ethnic group in Dagestan reveals how the past becomes a battlefield for contemporary political claims over territorial boundaries, resource allocation, and representation in government institutions. During the period of 'sovereignization' in the late 1980s and early 1990s, ethnic entrepreneurs engaged in what Shnirelman (2018) documents as systematic myth-making to establish historical precedence and territorial rights. These efforts went beyond academic disputes to shape popular consciousness and political mobilization.

The Lezgins, for example, promoted the concept of 'Lezgistan' as a historical entity artificially divided between Russia and Azerbaijan, demanding reunification and autonomy. This narrative drew on archaeological evidence, linguistic arguments, and selective historical interpretation to construct a vision of ancient Lezgin statehood that justified contemporary political demands. The movement gained particular momentum in the early 1990s when the Soviet collapse seemed to make border revisions possible. On the other side, Kumyk intellectuals simultaneously advanced claims to lowland territories, arguing that historical Kumyk khanates had been unjustly dissolved and their lands redistributed to mountain peoples during Soviet rule. These competing narratives created overlapping territorial claims that transformed academic debates about medieval history into contemporary political mobilisation, including public protests, peti-

tions to federal authorities, and periodic inter-ethnic tensions over land use in contested lowland areas. The Nogais, despite their small numbers, invoked their heritage as descendants of the Golden Horde to demand elevated political status and territorial recognition in the northern steppes.

The figure of Imam Shamil[5] occupies a particularly complex position in these competing narratives. While his nineteenth-century resistance to Russian conquest might serve as a unifying symbol for all Dagestanis, different groups claim particular relationships to his movement. Avars emphasise his ethnic background, while others highlight the multi-ethnic nature of his support base. The Soviet transformation of Shamil from 'reactionary feudalist' to 'anti-colonial hero' and his post-Soviet elevation to regional symbol illustrates how historical figures become contested resources in identity politics, with different groups emphasising aspects of the narrative that support their contemporary claims to prestige and political relevance.

While the preceding analysis has focused on how ethnic particularism fragments Dagestan internally, a striking paradox emerges when examining identity formation among Dagestanis living outside the republic. Research by Varshaver et al. (2022) reveals that Dagestanis in Moscow often experience strengthened pan-Dagestani identification when facing external discrimination. As one Moscow-based informant explained: 'Outside Dagestan, we become more "Dagestani" than we ever were at home. Our village and ethnic differences are nothing as when Russians see us all as just "Caucasians"' (male, Dargin, 31 years). This suggests that Dagestani identity emerges primarily through shared experiences of exclusion rather than internal cultural commonalities.

The diaspora experience illuminates how identity operates contextually. Within Dagestan, primary identification remains with one's ethnic group or village. As Varshaver et al. (2022, 45) observe, 'the strongest catalysts for ethno-social mobilisation in the republic is the opposition of Dagestanis

5 Imam Shamil was the leader of the Caucasian mountaineers and the North Caucasian national liberation resistance. In 1834, he was recognised as the imam of an illegitimate (from the point of view of Russia) theocratic state, the North Caucasian Imamate, in which he united the mountaineers of Western Dagestan and Eastern Chechnya.

with others (residents of Moscow, immigrants from neighbouring republics or tourists), while in normal times the identity markers are the community or village from which the respondents originate.'

Language functions as a fundamental identity marker that shapes daily social interaction by signalling ethnic belonging, educational background, and social aspirations in every conversation. Dagestanis must navigate what informants described as 'linguistic maps': knowing which language to use with whom, in what setting, and for what purpose. These maps shift according to social context: native languages signal ethnic solidarity and family intimacy; Russian marks education, professionalism, and inter-ethnic neutrality; while code-switching between them communicates complex social positioning. Fieldwork interviews revealed divergent attitudes toward Russian: some view it as an imposed colonial language that prevents mastery of native tongues, while others see it as essential for integration and mobility, describing it as 'a ticket to Moscow' for education and employment. Yet significantly, 'Russian is never considered as their own' language, maintaining its status as an external medium even while serving as the primary tool for interethnic communication.

The role of informal leaders in shaping identity reveals both possibilities and limitations for transcending ethnic boundaries. Sports figures, most notably mixed martial arts champion Khabib Nurmagomedov (an ethnic Avar with over 27 million Instagram followers), have achieved recognition that crosses ethnic lines within Dagestan. As one informant noted: 'Khabib is the pride of all Dagestan, not just Avars. His success shows the world our small Republic exist' (male, Lezgin, 28 years). Nurmagomedov's influence extends beyond sport: his public statements on social issues, meetings with political leaders, and philanthropic activities have given him informal political weight that transcends his athletic achievements, making him a rare figure capable of mobilising pan-Dagestani sentiment. Yet even such figures remain embedded within ethnic networks and expectations that limit their ability to forge truly unified regional identity.

Contemporary challenges to identity formation include conflicts over cultural boundaries, particularly visible in debates about the behaviour of Russian tourists from other regions who began visiting Dagestan in increasing numbers following the COVID-19 pandemic's restrictions on international

travel. The discourse about appropriate dress codes, with local voices demanding that female visitors cover their shoulders and knees and refrain from wearing swimwear outside designated beach areas, has become one of the most prominent public debates in recent years. Significantly, this debate functions as a rare mechanism of pan-Dagestani identity formation: diverse ethnic groups united in distinguishing 'us' (traditional, modest, respectful of local norms) from 'them' (secular Russian tourists perceived as disrespectful of local values), demonstrating how external others can catalyse collective identification that internal diversity otherwise prevents.

Challenges and Prospects

The implementation of ethnic diversity management in Dagestan reveals a fundamental paradox: mechanisms designed to protect diversity have created an archipelago of ethnic enclaves separated by invisible yet impermeable boundaries. This border paradox creates a situation where protective boundaries simultaneously preserve ethnic distinctiveness and prevent broader integration.

Returning to this study's central question of how extreme diversity creates internal boundaries that fragment society, economic inequality has emerged as perhaps the most intractable mechanism of boundary maintenance. The correlation between ethnicity and economic opportunity creates what Galtung (1969) termed 'structural violence,' referring to systematic exclusions that appear natural but result from institutional arrangements. This economic stratification transforms market relations into boundary reinforcement mechanisms, perpetuating cycles of inequality that make ethnic boundaries seem natural rather than constructed.

The Islamic revival in Dagestan, while potentially offering transcendent identity beyond ethnic divisions, instead creates new forms of boundary-making. Different ethnic groups compete to define 'authentic' Islam, creating what might be termed 'sacred borders' between interpretations and practices. This reflects what Ware and Kisriev (2014) identify as the challenge of negotiating between traditional Islamic practices and modern state requirements.

Despite these challenges, Dagestan's system has prevented large-scale ethnic conflict, as Gontscharowa (2004) notes. This suggests that separated

coexistence may be preferable to forced integration or violent assimilation, raising questions about whether stable boundaries might be more realistic than integrated multiculturalism.

The role of informal leaders, particularly religious figures and sports personalities, offers insights into alternative forms of identification. These figures sometimes transcend ethnic boundaries, suggesting possibilities for identity formation that bypass formal institutional divisions. However, as the research on Dagestani youth by Poliakov (2023) shows, even these alternatives operate within broader constraints of internal boundary maintenance.

Language policy remains one of the most complex aspects of implementing group rights in Dagestan. While Kaymazarov (2012) argues that Russian serves as a means of interethnic communication, it creates hierarchical relationships between Russian speakers who enjoy advantages in education and employment and native language speakers who face systematic disadvantages in social mobility. Many languages of the peoples of Dagestan are under threat of extinction (Agaev and Magomedov 1995). This is due to insufficient funding for language preservation programs, a lack of qualified teachers, and the dominance of the Russian language in the public sphere.

Technology offers both promise and peril for Dagestan's bordered society. While digital tools might preserve linguistic diversity and create new spaces for dialogue, current trajectories suggest that virtual spaces often reproduce offline divisions. A popular Dagestani blogger[6] with over 100,000 followers, attempting to be inclusive of his diverse audience, conducted a poll asking 'How many Muslims and how many Christians are among us?' While ostensibly aimed at understanding his audience to create more inclusive content, this very question reinforced religious boundaries by requiring followers to categorise themselves into distinct religious groups.

This example illustrates how even well-intentioned attempts at recognition can perpetuate the logic of separation that characterises Dagestan's 'failed multiculturalism', where diversity is managed through division rather than integration.

6 Habkins_rool. Source: Instagram.

Conclusion

This study of Dagestan reveals how extreme ethnic diversity within a borderland region can produce internal fragmentation rather than multicultural integration, demonstrating what I have termed 'failed multiculturalism' – a condition where mechanisms designed to manage diversity instead create and maintain rigid boundaries between groups. Returning to the central research question of how extreme ethnic diversity in a borderland region creates internal boundaries that fragment rather than unite society, the analysis has shown that political, linguistic, religious, and economic institutions in Dagestan consistently translate diversity into durable lines of separation. The first sub-question, concerning how individuals navigate multiple, overlapping boundary systems in their daily lives, was addressed through ethnographic evidence of code-switching, selective interaction, and context-dependent identification at home, in schools, in workplaces, and in migration settings. The second sub-question, regarding the conditions under which transcendent identities that might bridge ethnic divisions emerge, was tackled by examining diaspora experiences, the symbolic role of figures such as Khabib Nurmagomedov, and the politicisation of tourist debates, all of which suggest that pan-Dagestani identification crystallises primarily in moments of confrontation with external others rather than through positive projects of internal integration. The Dagestani case challenges fundamental assumptions about diversity management while offering crucial insights for understanding similar dynamics in other divided societies.

The research demonstrates that Dagestan's system of ethnic quotas, linguistic policies, and separate religious institutions has created what amounts to an archipelago of ethnic enclaves within a single political territory. Unlike successful multicultural societies where diversity enriches social life through cross-cultural exchange and hybrid identity formation, Dagestan's institutional arrangements have produced parallel societies that coexist without meaningful integration. The Soviet legacy of treating ethnicity as an immutable characteristic has been adapted rather than abandoned, creating contemporary structures that continue to emphasize difference over commonality.

The paradoxical emergence of pan-Dagestani identity primarily in diaspora contexts reveals that unity develops not from shared positive char-

acteristics but from shared experiences of exclusion and discrimination. Within Dagestan itself, identity remains firmly anchored to ethnic group and village affiliations, with broader regional consciousness emerging only when confronted with external others – whether Russian discrimination in Moscow, tourist intrusions, or neighboring territorial conflicts. This negative foundation for collective identity suggests fundamental limitations in building inclusive regional consciousness within existing institutional frameworks.

Language policy exemplifies the broader challenges of managing diversity in ways that protect minority rights while enabling social cohesion. The dominance of Russian as the language of interethnic communication, education, and economic opportunity creates systematic disadvantages for native language speakers while simultaneously being rejected as 'their own' language by most Dagestanis. This linguistic double bind – where neither full assimilation nor cultural preservation offers viable paths forward – reflects the broader impossibility of transcending ethnic boundaries within current structures.

The role of religion in Dagestan's fragmented society particularly challenges assumptions about the unifying potential of shared faith. Despite overwhelming Muslim majority, the ethnicization of Islamic practice through parallel religious institutions ensures that religion reinforces rather than bridges ethnic divisions. Each group's maintenance of distinct religious authorities, practices, and institutions transforms what might be a source of unity into another mechanism of boundary maintenance.

Economic stratification along ethnic lines perhaps most starkly reveals the human costs of failed multiculturalism. When access to employment, business opportunities, and economic resources depends primarily on ethnic networks rather than individual merit or market dynamics, the resulting inequality becomes both a consequence and cause of continued fragmentation. The correlation between ethnicity and economic opportunity makes ethnic boundaries appear natural and insurmountable, perpetuating cycles of exclusion that prevent both individual mobility and collective prosperity.

The implications of this research extend beyond the North Caucasus context to broader questions about diversity management in contemporary societies. Dagestan's experience warns against assuming that rec-

ognizing and protecting ethnic diversity automatically produces harmonious pluralism. Instead, it demonstrates how well-intentioned policies designed to prevent ethnic conflict through institutional accommodation can create permanent separation that may be as limiting as forced assimilation. The challenge lies not in choosing between diversity and unity but in developing mechanisms that protect cultural distinctiveness while enabling meaningful cross-ethnic cooperation and shared civic identity.

Future research should explore whether alternative models of diversity management might better serve societies like Dagestan. Rather than seeking to eliminate ethnic boundaries – which may be neither feasible nor desirable – policy innovations might focus on making boundaries more permeable and creating incentives for cooperation across ethnic lines. This might involve developing economic policies that reward cross-ethnic partnerships, educational approaches that maintain linguistic diversity while ensuring common civic competencies, and political structures that balance ethnic security with opportunities for broader coalition-building.

Ultimately, Dagestan exemplifies both the promise and peril of ethnic diversity in borderland regions. Its experience demonstrates that proximity alone does not create community, that institutional recognition of diversity can perpetuate rather than resolve fragmentation, and that the absence of violent conflict should not be mistaken for successful integration. As the world grapples with increasing diversity and the challenges of building inclusive societies, Dagestan stands as a crucial case study in understanding how internal borders can be as divisive as international frontiers, creating forms of exclusion and limitation that shape human possibilities in profound and lasting ways.

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