

## **Dagestan's Ethnic Experiment**

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The Nogai become the first ethnic minority in the North Caucasus to be granted autonomous status in a bid to save their culture from extinction

Political leaders in the North Caucasus fear that a recent decision to grant autonomy to Dagestan's Nogai population could trigger separatist movements amongst minority ethnic groups across the region.

The Nogai are one of the smallest tribal groupings in Dagestan, numbering around 20,000 people. Earlier this month, they were granted national and cultural autonomy within the Dagestani republic by the justice ministry in Makhachkala.

Salikh Gusaev, minister for national policy and information, explained that the decision was aimed at preserving the cultural and historical legacy of the Nogai people, who live mainly on the lowlands to the north of Dagestan.

But he stressed that autonomy had only been granted because of the "exceptional" dangers posed to the Nogai way of life by the high concentration of other ethnic groups in the region.

Last year, Dagestan rejected a law passed in the State Duma "On Minority Peoples of the Russian Federation", which offered social, economic and cultural advantages to ethnic groups numbering less than 50,000 people.

At the time, the authorities in Makhachkala explained that it could lead to schisms among other nationalities in a region where there are over 60 individual tribes living in close proximity.

These concerns have now been echoed by other republics in the North Caucasus which claim the decision could set a dangerous precedent for would-be breakaway groups.

The threat is particularly actual in Karachaevo-Cherkessia, where the Cherkess, the Abazins and the Nogai minorities are chafing against President Vladimir Semenov's Karachai-dominated government.

Here, there has been talk of creating an independent republic of Cherkessia, which would unite all the Adygean peoples in the region and enjoy the support of ethnic cousins in Adygea and Kabardino-Balkaria.

Kabardino-Balkaria has its own ethnic rivalries - chiefly between the Kabardinians and the Balkars, who attempted to secede from the republic in 1993 under the leadership of Lieutenant-General Sufyan Beppaev.

In 1991, the Tatsky Jews, numbering just 7,000 people, declared an autonomous "cultural enclave" in the capital, Nalchik. At the time, the ruling authorities entrusted local mafia gangs with the task of driving the Tatsky Jews out of the republic.

Consequently, the "separatists" were forced to pay crippling protection to one group whilst another "rival"

cartel attacked their homes and property. The Jews left Nalchik in droves, leaving just 1,000 people in the settlement.

In the same year, Ossetian nationalists across the republic's eastern border began forming paramilitary groups to drive Ingush settlers out of the Prigorodny region. The five-day war in North Ossetia left between 30,000 and 40,000 Ingush homeless.

As yet, it remains to be seen what "national and cultural" autonomy will mean for the 20,000 Nogai in Dagestan. The success or failure of this experiment is likely to have significant implications for the security of the North Caucasus region as a whole.

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**Location:** [Caucasus](#)  
[Stavropol](#)  
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[North Ossetia](#)

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