

## Avars

### Profile

According to the 2002 national census, there are 814,473 Avars in the Russian Federation. Avars are a mountain people and are numerically the largest group in Dagestan. They account for approximately 28 per cent of the population of Dagestan and are one of the republic's 14 official 'titular' nationalities. Small populations of Avars also reside in Georgia and Azerbaijan.

### Historical context

The Avar people were constituted as a singular 'official' nationality from a large variety of culturally related local groups in the 1930s. Avars in Dagestan inhabit primarily mono-ethnic districts. Traditionally Avars have played a pre-eminent role in the delicate, informal power-sharing system between the many ethnic groups in Dagestan. This system has successfully contained a number of traditional rivalries, for instance, that between Caucasian highlanders, such as the Avars, and Turkic lowlanders. An example is the repeated rejection in three post-Soviet referenda in Dagestan that would have established a presidency, an institution that would concentrate power in the hands of one ethnic group over others. Avars played a central role in blocking the introduction of a presidency, which would have diminished their numerical advantage.

Instead, Dagestan's 1993 constitution provides for a collective presidency, known as the State Council, composed of 14 members, one from each of Dagestan's 14 official titular nationalities - including Avars. Although the chairmanship of the State Council was originally intended to be a post rotating between ethnic groups, it was abolished in 1998 in recognition of the de facto control over the chairmanship of an ethnic Dargin. To balance Dargin influence, an ethnic Kumyk prime minister was appointed and an ethnic Avar as parliamentary speaker. In 2003 Dagestan's constitution was amended to allow for direct presidential elections, an amendment later rendered obsolete by President Putin's abolishment of directly elected heads of federation subjects.

In 1990 an Avar National Movement was formed to counter the influence of a parallel Kumyk organization, Tenglik. In May 1993 clashes over disputed territory in the mountains broke out between Avars, Laks, and Chechens. The Avar National Movement was disbanded in 2000.

### Current issues

Competition between Avars and Dargins for political influence continued in 2005-6. In summer 2005 the Avar mayor, Saidpasha Umukhanov, of Dagestan's second largest town Khasavyurt organized protests against the Dargin chair of the State Council. Umukhanov also headed the Northern Alliance, an Avar-dominated group opposed to the Dargin political elite. In February 2006 the State Council of Dagestan voted in favour of an Avar candidate to succeed to the chairmanship of the State Council, ending some 23 years of Dargin control over the republican leadership.

According to reports Avars are among those groups in Dagestan more influenced by Islamic religious revival and the spread of Wahhabism in Dagestan. Dagestan remains extremely vulnerable to spillover from the conflict in neighbouring Chechnya; bombings and 'anti-terrorist' operations are common. For example, in August 2007, news reports said a police convoy had been ambushed near Gimri, killing two officers and wounding twelve. Avars, along with other larger ethnic groups in Dagestan, are involved in intersecting ethnic and mafia rivalries for political and economic power in the republic. These rivalries have also fuelled a deterioration in everyday security in Dagestan, with 80 political assassinations reported in the first six months of 2005.