 profile

According to the 2002 national census, there are 422,409 Kumyks in the Russian Federation. Kumyks live in the plains and the foothills of Dagestan. Part of the Turkic branch of the Uralo-Altaic language family, Kumyk emerged as a lingua franca for the North Caucasians. Although numerically small, the cultural, linguistic, economic and political influence of Kumyks on the region has been great. Kumyks account for 12.5 per cent of Dagestan's population and are one of the republic’s 14 official ‘titular’ nationalities.

Kumyks are mainly Sunni Muslim.

**Historical context**

Well into the twentieth century, Kumyks were assimilating other Dagestani peoples (notably Dargins and Avars) and many other groups have shifted over to speak Kumyk.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, leaders of the Kumyk nationalist movement Tenglik (‘Equality’) demanded the creation of a separate Kumyk republic within Dagestan. Clashes also occurred between Dargins and Kumyks. Kumyks emerged as the third most influential ethnic group in Dagestan after the Avars and Dargins, holding the post of prime minister since 1998.

Clashes occurred between Kumyks and Avars in 1997 following the election of an Avar as mayor of Khasavyurt, Dagestan's second largest town, a post traditionally held by a Kumyk.

**Current issues**

Kumyk political influence was not diminished by the accession of an Avar to the presidency of the State Council. The new president, Mukhu Aliev, appointed an ethnic Kumyk, Shamil Zaynalov, as prime minister in February 2006.

Some Kumyks, particularly those associated with Tenglik, continue to advocate territorial autonomy as a means of securing their cultural survival, although in the context of multi-ethnic Dagestan, this proposal remains controversial.

Kumyks, along with other ethnic groups, are involved in intersecting ethnic and mafia struggles for political and economic power in Dagestan. Together with knock-on effects from the Chechen conflict, these rivalries account for a dramatic deterioration in the security environment in Dagestan.