Preface to the Special Issue and Map Supplement

John O’Loughlin, Frank Witmer, Thomas Dickinson, Nancy Thorwardson, and Edward Holland

The papers in this special issue of Eurasian Geography and Economics are designed to illustrate key aspects of the Caucasus region 15 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. For a region that is so complex in both physiographic and human aspects, we had to be quite selective in our choice of subjects. As a result, we present an overview as well as five specialized papers on aspects of the economic, political, and population geography of the Caucasus. Originally, we intended to focus solely on the North Caucasus, the federal Russian part of the region, but because the links across the Caucasus are still intense in political and human terms, we decided to include one paper (Radvanyi and Muduyev, 2007) that considers the nature of these linkages between Transcaucasia (as the Russians call it) and the North Caucasus. Two papers offer more detail about the post-Soviet population developments in the two largest regions, Stavropol’ Kray (O’Loughlin et al., 2007) and the Republic of Dagestan (Eldarov et al., 2007); another reflects on the impacts of the Chechen wars on the neighboring regions (Vendina et al., 2007); and a fifth contrasts the perspectives from the federal center, Moscow, and those from the various stripes of political ideology in Russia with the opinions of the local populations about the causes of conflicts in the region (Kolossov and Toal, 2007).

The map supplement in this preface includes two reference maps (Figs. 1 and 2) that show the locations of all places discussed in the individual papers. We generally followed the guidelines of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names (http://geonames.usgs.gov/foreign.html) in transliteration, although we used the more common English equivalents for certain well-known locations (e.g., Grozny instead of Groznyy). Although the boundaries of the Caucasus are well defined by the Black and Caspian seas on the west and east, the north and south limits are not. The full extent of the three states of the Caucasus (Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia) are usually included on the south, but the northern boundary lies somewhere in the vast stretches of southern Russia, among “the sun-baked hills, brownish-green and violet in the distance, with their quiet shadowy tones, the plain with the misty distance and, flung

1Respectively, Professor of Geography, Research Assistant, IT Professional, Professional Research Assistant, and Research Assistant, Institute of Behavioral Science, University of Colorado, Campus Box 487, Boulder, CO 80309 (johno@colorado.edu). This research was supported by a grant from the Human and Social Dynamics Initiative of the U.S. National Science Foundation (grant number 0433927) and by a grant from the National Geographic Society’s Committee on Research and Exploration (John O’Loughlin PI on both grants). Thanks to Aleksey Grazhdankin of the Levada Center Moscow for coordinating the public opinion survey of the North Caucasus; to Alexander Panin and Vitaliy Belozerov of Stavropol’ State University for data collection assistance; to our Dagestani colleagues, Eldar Eldarov, Shakhmardan Muduyev, Sharafudin Aliyev, and Zagir Atayev for their overwhelming hospitality; to our Russian and French field partners, Olga Vendina and Jean Radvanyi, for their friendly and scholarly assistance; especially to Gearóid Ó Tuathail, Vladimir Kolossov, and Mike Ward for their collegiality and research cooperation from the beginning of the project; and to all our survey respondents and the friendly people of the North Caucasus for their generous responses and help in our research.

above them, the sky” (Anton Chekhov, *The Steppe*). In our analysis, we do not include
Krasnodar’ Kray, the republic of Adygeya, nor Kalmykia. Neither could our surveys or field
work encompass the republics of Ingushetia or Chechnya because of the ongoing military
conflicts, although all of these territories are visible on the land cover/elevation map.

In Figure 3, we overlaid a land cover map on a digital elevation model of the region to
present the dominant physical geographic character of the area. The data for the Caucasus
land cover map relies primarily on land cover data from the University of Maryland’s Global
Land Cover Facility (GLCF) (http://glcf.umd.edu/index.shtml). This land cover
dataset was created using AVHRR satellite data acquired between 1981 and 1994 using a
decision tree classifier and finer resolution Landsat imagery (Hansen et al., 1998). For the
map shown here, the data were downloaded and georeferenced to the boundary files from
ESRI (country borders) and the University of Washington Central Eurasian Atlas (oblasts
and rayons; http://geo.lib.washington.edu/website/ceir/).

To simplify the presentation of the land cover data, the original 14 categories were
reclassified into the 7 shown on the map. For the Forest category, we combined the original
Evergreen Needleleaf/Broadleaf, Deciduous Needleleaf/Broadleaf, Mixed Forest, and Wood-
land categories, because each has more than 40 percent canopy cover with trees exceeding 5
m in height (Hansen et al., 2000). Similarly, the Shrubland category combines Wooded
Grasslands and Open and Closed Shrublands that are dominated by bushes, shrubs, and the
occasional tree. The remaining categories—Grassland, Cropland, Barren, Urban or Built-up,
and Water—correspond directly to the original University of Maryland vegetation categories.

These primary land cover data were then enhanced visually by overlaying them onto
topographic relief data also available from the University of Maryland (http://glcf.
.umiacs.umd.edu/data/; USGS, 2004). The topographic data were collected from the Space
Shuttle *Endeavor* in February 2000, and cover most of the globe. Data used in this map were
captured at a resolution of three arc seconds (nominal 90 m pixel resolution) and projected to
UTM zone 38N for processing and display. Once projected, a hillshade was created from the
original digital elevation data using ArcGIS 9.1. The contrast between the northern and
southern slopes is evident in Figure 3. The northern slopes, from the high peaks (including
El’brus at an elevation of 18,506 feet, or 5,642 meters) to the piedmonts to the steppe, are
more gradual than the precipitous drop to the plains to the south. The narrow coastal bands
are relatively heavily populated, with numerous large cities (Baku, Derbent, Makhachkala,
Sochi, Sokhumi) visible on the land cover map. Forested slopes at high elevations (and gla-
ciers at the highest) contrast with the grassland steppes to the north, generally trending to
drier scrubland to the east along the Caspian shores. The bifurcation of the North Caucasian
republics into a mountainous south and a piedmont north is also clearly indicated in the ele-
vation/land cover map.

The final map (Fig. 4) shows the ethnic mosaic of the Caucasus region. While we man-
aged to obtain rayon-level data from the 2002 All-Russian Census (Goskomstat Rossii,
2004) for the Russian North Caucasus, information for the three south Caucasian states
(Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) is just becoming available, as results from the first post-
Soviet censuses held in those countries have trickled out during the early years of the 21st
century. In an effort to detect the more significant population shifts in the South Caucasus
due to ethnic cleansing and migration related to conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and
Nagorno-Karabakh since the last Soviet census of 1989, we have consulted a series of
recently published population studies on these countries (Rowland, 2004, 2006, 2007) based
on the most recent censuses. We have then merged the relevant data gleaned therein with the
detailed information available in Beroutchachvili and Radvanyi (1996).
Rather than mapping majority populations for the rayons, we opted for ethnic pluralities, defined as a threshold of 40 percent in one group, as defined by Russian Federation’s public administration categories of ethnicity, especially in the census. In the majority of cases, particularly in the Russian-dominated steppe regions in the north of the region, the plurality is also the majority, but in the heterogeneous cultural landscapes of lowland Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachayevo-Cherkessia, and southern and eastern Stavropol’ Kray, many rayons do not have a dominant group. By our estimation, only 9 of approximately 150 rayons in the North Caucasus do not have an ethnic plurality.

While the map indicates the locations of 20 nationalities, there are both greater complexities and more similarities not visible on that map. Smaller ethnic populations, especially in Dagestan, are not indicated, although we discuss their distribution and movement in the individual papers. On the other hand, the shared characteristics of groups, such as religion (in the North Caucasus, Russians and Ossetians are dominantly Orthodox Christian; the others are Muslim) and language (Turkic, Caucasian, Slavic, and Iranian linguistic families), are not shown. By including the “ethnic map” in this supplement, we are not equating ethnicity with a single primordialist character nor assuming that its “groupness” is always clearly bounded and evident (Brubaker, 2004). Indeed, in Dagestan, despite the oft-noted presence of dozens of nationalities, there is a widespread shared sense of “Dagestani” identity that transcends and overlays administrative, ascriptive, ethnic identities. However, inter-ethnic marriage is low (only 4 percent in Dagestan, according to our December 2005 survey) and ethnicity is the favored shorthand for both locals and outsiders in attempts to make sense of regional complexities and challenges.

We thank the editors of *Eurasian Geography and Economics* for the opportunity to present the results of our public opinion surveys, aggregate data collection and analysis, and field work in one of the most beautiful places on this planet. The maps were designed by John O’Loughlin and Frank Witmer and the final presentation graphics prepared by Tom Dickinson, Nancy Thorwardson, and Ted Holland. We hope that this project will stimulate further work on a region that unfortunately suffers from a (media-driven) perception as remote and dangerous.

REFERENCES


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Fig. 1. Country and republic/kray borders in the Caucasus regions, with selected rayons and cities discussed in the papers of the special issue.
Fig. 2. Caucasus locations near the Russian-Georgian border, with rayons and cities discussed in the papers of the special issue.
Fig. 3. Land cover map of the Caucasus with digital elevations. Data from University of Maryland’s Global Land Cover Facility (GLCF) (http://glcf.umiacs.umd.edu/index.shtml) and U.S. Geological Survey (http://glcf.umiacs.umd.edu/data/).
Fig. 4. Ethnic pluralities in the Caucasus. Sources: Compiled by authors from Berouchchvili and Radvanyi (1996), Goskomstat Rossii (2004), and Rowland (2004, 2006, 2007).