



## CHAPTER 5

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# Family, Relatives and Friendship as Channels of (Non)Radicalisation in the Narratives of the Second Urban Generation of North Caucasian Youth

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## Introduction

There is consensus in the academic literature that social connections play a key role in radicalisation, facilitating the transmission of ideological views and involvement in violent actions through mutual emotional support, the development of a common identity and encouragement to adopt new views (Sageman 2004; Bakker 2007; Asal, Fair and Shellman 2008; McCauley and Moskalenko 2010; Hafez and Mullins 2015). As Sageman (2004: 135) states, social connections 'are more important and relevant to the transformation of potential candidates into global mujahedin than postulated external factors, such as a common hatred for an outside group. ... As in all intimate relationships, this glue, in-group love, is found within the group. It may be more accurate to blame global Salafi terrorist activity on in-group love than out-group hate'. Scott Atran (2011: 49) comes to a similar conclusion, noting that 'predictors for involvement in suicide attacks are, again, small-world aspects of social networks and local group dynamics rather than large-scale social, economic, and political indicators, such as education level and economic status'.

In this chapter, based on data gathered as part of the DARE (Dialogue on Radicalisation and Equality) project, I examine the role played by family, kinship and friendship ties in the radicalisation, non-radicalisation and deradicalisation of male youth from the most Islamicised region of

the Russian Federation, the North Caucasus. More specifically, the focus of research interest is on the second urban generation of youth from the North Caucasus, the children and younger brothers of migrants who moved from the villages of the North Caucasus republics to large cities outside their home region. This group, research evidence suggests, is particularly sensitive to politicised versions of Islam, including its radical forms (Yarlykapov 2010; 'Prichiny radikalizatsii...' 2016).

### **The Historical and Social Context of Islamist Radicalisation in the North Caucasus**

The North Caucasus is a historical and cultural region in the south of the Russian Federation which includes seven republics – Adygeia, Chechnia, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachai-Cherkessia and North Ossetia. The Islamisation of the North Caucasus began with the Arab conquests in the seventh and eighth centuries, but Islam was first established on the territory (except for North Ossetia) in the sixteenth century. At the same time, in Dagestan, Chechnia and Ingushetia, the Shaf'i school of law and religion (*madhhab*) was established, while the Hanafi school was set up in Karachai-Cherkessia and Kabardino-Balkaria (Yarlykapov 2006). There were also Shi'a communities in Derbent and some villages of southern Dagestan bordering Azerbaijan (*ibid.*). Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqas*) became widespread in Dagestan, Chechnia and Ingushetia, the most influential of which were Naqshbandiyah and Qadiriyya (Matsuzato and Ibragimov 2006). In the post-Soviet period, the North Caucasian republics went through a rapid re-Islamisation process in which religion filled the ideological vacuum left by the collapse of communism and became a central vector of regional identity (Drambyan 2009; Kisriev 2009).

The North Caucasus has a long history of religious radicalism in which aspirations to build a theocratic Sharia state were combined with ideas of political independence from Russia. In the nineteenth century, the region became the stage for the Caucasian War, waged by mountain communities against the Russian Empire under the banner of *ghazavat*, a holy war against infidels (Zelkina 2002; Kurbanov 2004). In the 1930s–40s, these highlanders resisted the Soviet system, which imposed the collectivisation of agriculture, repressed political and religious elites and fought against the religion and traditional ways of the North Caucasian peoples. At the end of World War II, several North Caucasian ethnic groups (Chechens, Ingush, Karachais and Balkars) were deported to Central Asia and Siberia (Polyan 2001). The collective trauma of deportation played an important role in the escalation of the Chechen conflict of the 1990s–2000s.

The recent history of Islamist radicalisation in the North Caucasus has three stages, which differ in terms of the set of actors, ideological orientation, methods and geographical coverage involved. The first stage covers the period from 1991 to 1996. Attempts by Chechen separatists to secede from Russia led to a bloody confrontation with Russian armed forces, the so-called First Chechen War (1994–96). At that stage, the separatists' guiding ideology was ethnic nationalism. The role of the Islamic factor was secondary. It helped to consolidate the Chechen resistance and to attract financial and human resources from Muslim countries. At the same time, radical Islamic groups did not declare themselves as an independent force and were formally subordinated to the secular leadership of the self-proclaimed Ichkeria. The second phase consists of the Second Chechen War (1999–2008), the prologue to which was the invasion of Dagestan by Chechen fighters led by Shamil Basayev to assist the self-proclaimed Wahhabi enclaves in four villages in Tsumadinsky district. By the end of the Second Chechen War, the conflict had spread throughout the entire North Caucasus. Having been defeated in confrontations with the federal army and the militia, the militants turned to a form of subversive and terrorist war, waged under the slogan of building an independent Sharia state that embraced all the North Caucasian republics (Dobaev 2009; Markedonov 2010). At that time, Islamist groups (such as Caucasus Emirate, Jamia Sharia, Jamia of Kabardino-Balkaria) were institutionalised and organised according to a network principle, consisting of local cells formed along ethnic and territorial lines (Yarlykapov 2010; Polyakov 2015).

The current stage is characterised by a significant decline in the activity of radical groups in the North Caucasus. This is due, first, to the organisational defeat of many jihadist networks and the elimination of their leaders. The second reason is the departure of a significant number of radicalised young people to Syria and Iraq to participate in *jihad* on the side of ISIS and other Islamist groups (Youngman 2016). However, according to researchers, this lull is temporary, as the systemic factors associated with radicalisation persist, namely, the low quality of governance, corruption and privatisation of life chances by local elites and uncontrolled activities of security forces leading to extensive human rights violations (Ratelle and Souleimanov 2017; Benedek 2018).

The dynamics of small groups must also be taken into account. The North Caucasus is a region where kinship and community relations are highly valued. Relatives and fellow villagers of jihadists may not themselves share radical views. However, they provide a supportive milieu of the radical underground; they feed, treat and shelter combatants and serve as a reserve of human resource (Tekushev 2012). In the republics

of the North Caucasus, there is a fairly wide stratum of people who have lost relatives and friends in so-called counter-terrorist operations – both by the underground and by law enforcement agencies – and have reason to want revenge. In some highland areas, the institution of blood feud persists (Ratelle and Souleimanov 2017; Albogachieva and Babich 2010), sanctioning such behaviour. All these factors could become drivers of new waves of radicalisation.

## Methods and Sample

The focus of this chapter is young men with a North Caucasian regional background currently living in two Russian megacities – Saint Petersburg and Moscow. In this case study, they come mainly from Dagestan, the largest and most Islamised republic in the North Caucasus, which is also a forerunner in urbanisation processes and the main arena of confrontation between regional and federal authorities and jihadists. Respondents of other nationalities (Chechens, Ingush, Azerbaijanis) were recruited as part of networks organised by those originally from Dagestan.

I refer to this respondent set as the ‘second urban generation’ to indicate that they are second-generation city dwellers – the sons of migrants from the countryside. Thus, their family stories combine two migratory tracks: from the countryside to urban centres; and from the North Caucasus to other regions of the Russian Federation. Concerning religion, the second urban generation is the first generation born after the beginning of the post-Soviet re-Islamisation of the North Caucasus (Bobrovnikov 2007; Kisriev 2009). Unlike their parents and older relatives, who are more likely to be adherents of traditional Sufi Islam or so-called cultural Muslims, the second urban generation is more likely to opt for fundamentalist versions of Islam (Yarlykapov 2010; ‘Prichiny radikalizatsii...’ 2016). Their religious views are characterised by a high degree of protest politicisation (*ibid.*). Those from this social milieu reportedly predominate among young people who have gone to fight in Syria on the side of the Islamic State (prohibited in Russia) (*ibid.*).

The collection of empirical data lasted for a period of eleven months, from September 2018 to July 2019, and includes seventeen in-depth semi-structured interviews with men between the ages of twenty-four and thirty. All respondents profess Islam and refer to themselves as practising believers, but they self-identify with a range of Islamic traditions including Salafi, Sufi, Shi’a and ‘just Muslim’. Ten respondents were born and lived in the North Caucasus republics before they migrated, six were born outside the region, of whom two were born in the city of their cur-

rent residence. Eight respondents reside with their parents and/or siblings, five live alone or with friends, and the rest already have their own families with whom they reside. Among those who have migrated, three main migration tracks can be identified: (a) migration for higher education; (b) moving together with, or following, a migrating parent family; and (c) migration in search of work. Some family mobility trajectories include multiple moves from one Russian city to another with periodic returns to the North Caucasus. Most often, this is due to the itinerant nature of the parents' employment or business.

Two researchers, Sviatoslav Poliakov and Rasul Abdulkhalikov, conducted the interviews. Drawing on the published literature on radicalisation in Russia relating to milieus potentially receptive to radical ideas, recruitment of participants took place via two main channels and using a number of criteria relating to migration experience and religious participation. The first was an institutional channel – North Caucasian compatriots' associations in Saint Petersburg. The second channel was the social media platform VKontakte, where we recruited individuals fitting our criteria by setting a geo-filter (Saint Petersburg) and the filter 'religious beliefs' (Muslim) to select our informants. We then searched for people who participated in several religious groups and invited them to take part in the research. Additional participants were recruited using the snowball method.

The ethnicity and religiosity of the researchers were consequential in terms of positionality. Rasul is a representative of one of the ethnic groups of Dagestan and a Muslim. He did not experience difficulties while working with informants as they perceived him as 'one of them'. Sviatoslav (an ethnic Russian and Orthodox Christian) faced certain barriers. When recruiting via social media, he was always asked about his nationality and religion, and often this question turned out to be a filter, after which many potential participants stopped communicating. However, his positionality as Orthodox turned out to be advantageous in that many informants found engaging in dialogue with someone who was religious, but of a different faith, less problematic than with someone of no religion or of an atheist conviction.

## Family and City

The crucial social context for thinking about the role of social networks in the radicalisation of the second urban generation is the complex transformation of North Caucasian society, the main drivers of which are two interrelated processes. The first is the unfinished process of late urban-

isation, in which rural residents move to cities and are thus drawn into the orbit of the urban lifestyle (Starodubrovskaya et al. 2011). The second is the intensive migration of North Caucasian residents to other Russian regions (Mkrtchyan 2019). This urbanisation is associated with the breakdown of the extended traditional family and the emancipation of the individual from the authority of family and community that is characteristic of traditional society. The speed of such social change is not uniform across the different republics and localities of the North Caucasus. In relatively sparsely urbanised republics such as Chechnia and Ingushetia, where the population lives compactly in clans, the structures of extended family and traditional society continue to play an important role in people's everyday lives (Starodubrovskaya 2019). In neighbouring Dagestan, where urbanisation processes are most intense, there is a more diversified picture of family patterns, indicating a deeper erosion of the traditional family (ibid.). At the same time, the North Caucasian city is unable to 'digest' sustainable migration from the countryside, which is not of an individual but of a family and territorial-neighbourly nature, largely contributing to the preservation of rural society institutions in urban conditions (Starodubrovskaya et al. 2011; Starodubrovskaya and Kazenin 2014).

As our case study shows, the older generation, even outside the North Caucasus, tries to reproduce the matrix of the traditional North Caucasian family, demanding obedience, discipline and unconditional recognition of paternal authority from the younger members of the family. It is also evident that, even at later stages of life, the family tries to maintain control over its younger members. The second urban generation is under pressure from their elders to choose educational trajectories, professional careers and even marriage partners of which they approve:

Why did I choose to study to be a customs officer? Well, this is also a question ... Most likely, it wasn't me who chose it, it was my father. As in most cases, when you are seventeen years old, you graduate from school, you do not particularly know which education path to choose, you are simply told, and you obey. (Hamzat)

Yes, my parents are Avars too. They are from the same village. We got married traditionally, that is, my parents introduced us and we got married quickly. Everything went traditionally. It's the most standard way in Dagestan. (Khabib)

However, migration, especially outside the North Caucasus, erodes the resource and ideological foundations of parental authority. Parents cannot rely on either the resources of the extended family or the support of the neighbourhood, which is often indifferent or hostile towards

ethnic 'outsiders'. In urban contexts, control becomes rather superficial, focusing on external attributes of their sons' social well-being such as academic performance and/or success in sports:

The only thing my father wanted was for me to become a world champion in Ultimate Fighting. He told me to go to fights, judo. Told me to devote myself completely to my studies or sports. Anyway, when I got two Bs and the rest As, he'd say, 'Go into sports. You're no good at anything'. (Magomet Ali)

'Traditional' families outside the North Caucasus can only count on limited 'credit' of obedience, which is granted less as a result of the recognition of parental authority than out of conformism or pragmatic unwillingness to lose access to family resources. At the same time, parents are unable to handle even the simplest manifestations of nonconformity on the part of their children. For example, some respondents recalled that if they fought with their peers or did poorly at school as children, their parents would conclude that they could not provide the 'right' upbringing and send them off to live with relatives in a Dagestani village for a period of time.

In some cases, migration outside the North Caucasus allowed research participants to distance themselves not only from family and community but also from the institutions of control associated with parental religion. Sufi brotherhoods – *tariqas*, membership of which is inherited within the clan and multigenerational family – are widespread in Dagestan. The *tariqas* carry a significant mobilisation resource and influence, not only religious but also in economic and political life (Matsuzato and Ibragimov 2006). For instance, members of *tariqas* are well represented in government and law enforcement agencies. As shown in the interviews, in the North Caucasus context, this power resource is actively used to put pressure on 'deluded' members of the brotherhood to bring them back into line. For example, Salekh, who headed up a small Salafist group (*jamaat*) in Moscow, recounted how, whilst in Dagestan, he had been regularly subjected to pressure from relatives who accused him of apostasy and tried to force him to return to 'traditional' Islam.

Respondent: All my relatives, and my cousin, are all *tariqa* followers, they work in the state structures, so they put pressure on me.

Interviewer: Did they pressure you physically?

Respondent: No, it didn't get to that, I just left, thank God. (Salekh)

In the big city, young people with a North Caucasian background engage in identification processes of 'self-discovery', an integral part of which is a critical reflection on the legitimacy of both parental authority

and the social order. Children, often more educated than their parents, have to find their values and meanings in a culturally heterogeneous urban environment and develop their ways and methods of adaptation. In this context, the role of horizontal urban communities is increasing and beginning to overtake kinship hierarchies (Starodubrovskaya 2016).

Given the high level of Islamisation among young people from the North Caucasus, it is not surprising that religion often becomes the primary language through which they articulate and defend their meanings and values. As researchers have noted (Yarlykapov 2010; Starodubrovskaya 2015, 2016), the popularity of confrontational versions of Islam among urban North Caucasian youth is, not least, due to the fact that it offers young people an ideological basis for challenging generational hierarchies. Islamic fundamentalism, which, unlike traditional *tariqa* Islam, does not assume unequivocal submission to the will of elders, legitimises their dissociation from the older generation (Starodubrovskaya 2015: 87):

In matters of religion, there are no older and younger generations. There are young people now, 16–18 years old, who know everything, they have learned everything, but an old man, who is maybe sixty years old, he has not opened a single book, he has heard something about religion from his grandmother somewhere. (Salekh)

A sense of their rightness, based on knowledge rather than tradition, negates the moral cost of disobedience in the eyes of young people. Often conformist in matters that concern the profane aspects of life, they consistently resist the pressure of parents and older relatives in matters that concern their religious beliefs:

I became a Sunni, but my relatives are all Shias. My ancestors in Derbent built a mosque and imposed Shiism in this city. I am a Sunni, and for Shias, Sunnis are enemy number one. Although for me, they [my relatives] are not enemy number one as long as I do not declare them enemies. Anyway, I had problems with my father, with my mother, with my brothers. (Mamuka)

## Inequality and Discrimination

Identity processes in Russian megacities are complicated by stigma, inequality and discrimination. Young Caucasians are regularly confronted with hate speech, Islamophobia and racist stereotypes. These circulate in everyday communication, including at work as illustrated by Khabib:

I realise that in the firm where I work, my ethnic background often plays against me. Even my supervisors ... talk about things or make



jokes in front of me that might be offensive or directed against me. But I don't want to ruin relations with them, so I can't respond to them how I would like to. (Khabib)

Such stigmatisation is encountered frequently also in public discourse, through the media or government communications, as described by Hamzat:

Our media manages to present even good news related to North Caucasians or Central Asians in such a way that people are more likely to feel a sense of disgust rather than a positive feeling [towards us]. (Hamzat)

This group of young people is often disproportionately targeted by law enforcers, among whom profiling based on xenophobic stereotypes is widespread:

Interviewer: Do you think police, law enforcement agencies in Russia, pay particular attention to North Caucasians or Muslims?

Respondent: Yes, of course. We are of particular interest to them.

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Respondent: If something happens – a murder, robbery, terrorist attack – there is already a stereotype that any North Caucasian is a potential criminal. (Jafar)

There is also extensive discrimination against people from the North Caucasus when applying for jobs and renting housing. One respondent recalled how, when looking for accommodation, he had sometimes called landlords and, when he said he was from the Caucasus, they replied, 'No, we don't want to rent to people from the Caucasus' (Jafar). Another respondent described his experience in seeking employment:

I applied for a job at the Tax Office and the offices of an energy company were right next to it. So I put in my CV to them too but got rejected. Later, talking to some people who worked in that company, when I told them I had hoped to get a job there at one time, they explained that I hadn't been taken on because I was a Dagestani. (Khabib)

Despite the state's declared freedom of religion, some employers also violate the right of observant Muslims to practise their religion:

Like some people go out for a smoke and we are not allowed to pray. In my last job I was told I was not allowed to go out (to pray). I said, 'How can't I go out?' You smoke, I say, cigarettes, I need five minutes, too, in short. No, they say, you are not allowed to go out. (Adam)

In the academic literature, horizontal inequality – the unequal social, economic or political position of groups based on ethnicity and religion –

is considered a key factor in radicalisation (Uslaner and Brown 2005; Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). Second- and third-generation migrants experience their otherness and alienation acutely – from both their host societies and the homelands with which their parents associate (Khosrokhavar 2009). Discriminatory barriers make it difficult for young people, even from relatively wealthy families, to emancipate themselves from their parents and build independent careers, leading to status frustration (Cottee 2010). The resulting sense of injustice of the existing economic and political order, which is reinforced by dissatisfaction with one's social position, generates resistance, which can take on terrorist and extremist forms (Ahmad 2017: 119). The narratives of respondents in this study about acquaintances who left, or were about to leave, for the war in Syria paint a similar social portrait of the (potential) jihadist as a young man from a wealthy family but employed in unskilled and low-paid service work (typical employment for ethnic minorities) and continuing to live with his parents:

He worked as a security guard at McDonald's, lived with his sister, his mother sort of, yeah, he was a young handsome guy, twenty years old, went there. And straight away, he was killed there [in Syria]. ... His grandfather was a banker, he came from a very wealthy family, I wouldn't say he was poor. He had a good life. (Salekh)

This suggests a situation of status tension characterised by a gap between high family status and low individual status and associated with the inability to build an independent trajectory of professional fulfilment not least due to the barriers stemming from horizontal inequalities.

Radicalisation also reinforces inequalities (Boyle and Songora 2004; see also Franc, Poli and Pavlović, this volume). The activities of extremist groups contribute to a negative image of Muslims who are stigmatised as 'terrorists' and 'extremists'. As one respondent put it, 'When people say extremist, they mean Muslim' (Idris). This means that, especially in the media but in everyday life also, Muslims appear as collectively responsible for acts of terrorist violence: 'On TV we are always bad, here even in everyday life some people say, "It's a Muslim, it's a Muslim who blew up, it's a Muslim who did it". On TV we are always bad' (Adam). Guided by the same logic of collective responsibility, in which Muslims as a whole are considered a risk group, the state deploys disproportionate violence in the fight against terrorism. The impact of this is described by the following respondent: 'A number of radical groups provoke the state but the state no longer makes a distinction, it tars everyone with the same brush. Of course, it would be better if they distinguished us, ordinary Muslims, from them' (Salekh). This situation amplifies the isolation experienced by the second urban generation and leads to a sense of being besieged in

a state that, by default, is set against Muslims. The consequences are an intensification of intra-group solidarity, in which commonalities of origin and religion are cemented by shared experiences of inequality and discrimination, and a corresponding hostility towards social and state institutions. These attitudes can serve as 'fuel' for radical sentiments.

### **Fathers and Sons, Brothers and Sisters**

Intergenerational tensions observed in families of North Caucasian origin are intertwined with a deficit of trust in relations between the older and younger members of these families. This is seen in relations between fathers and sons, in which, according to traditional North Caucasian cultural norms, communication is 'business-like' and excludes mutual displays of intimacy and affection:

Our family relations are quite traditional, as is customary in Dagestan. I call my father now and we communicated also when I was living in Dagestan. We always had a good relationship, but my father never used baby talk with me, never talked to me if it wasn't necessary. Somehow, we always talked about important things. (Khabib)

Emotional aloofness extends to relations with other older male relatives such as uncles and elder brothers. It is intended to emphasise the inviolability of the foundations of traditional patriarchy; to ensure the social distance necessary to maintain the power of the elders and underline the importance of controlling emotions for 'proper' male socialisation.

The closest, 'warmest' relationships with older family members among second-generation urban youth are with their mothers, who tend to take on all the emotional work associated with upbringing. However, this closeness often does not imply trust. Respondents understood that a son's love for his mother implies an obligation to 'protect' her from information that could be emotionally damaging to her.

In general, parents are not perceived as those with whom one can have a heart-to-heart talk or share worries and problems. The excessive hierarchy of intergenerational communication also does not encourage speaking out and asserting one's point of view. As one respondent explains, 'I could not allow myself to have a conflict with my parents because my upbringing was such that I could not object to my father, probably until I was about seventeen, I could not say anything to him' (Magomet Ali).

The dominance of relationships that are based primarily on obedience rather than trust results in the family often being unable to trace or reverse the radicalisation of its younger members:

My brother is in [the police]. When he found out about my interests, he almost killed me. At that point, I had already realised [that there was no point in communicating with radicals]. He was too late [to notice it]. I mean it's never too late. If I was already there [in Syria], it would have been too late. (Mamuka)

Parents or other older relatives often become aware of radicalisation at a fairly late stage, when, according to the respondents, it is no longer possible to influence their sons. Moreover, their arsenal of deradicalisation methods is in line with their authoritarian parenting style. For example, they may forbid contact with friends who share radical views or send their son to another city or region. It is also possible that they do not react in any way to information about perceived radicalisation, demonstrating what Sikkens (2018) calls parental uncertainty.

A finding of our study was that within the family, the second urban generation builds the closest and most trusting relationships with their sisters and cousins, with whom they were in close contact before marriage. One respondent explains that, 'Until my sister got married, she and I were very close in spirit, we shared everything. If I had something going on, I would tell her, ask her advice, if she had something going on she would do the same' (Anvar). These relations are not entirely egalitarian, as there is always an age asymmetry, which, following Caucasian traditions, is the basis of authority. However, the age gap is not significant, usually less than four years. These relationships take on a particular hue in relation to religiosity where, interviews suggest, it is not uncommon for older sisters or cousins to introduce young people to Islam and become their first religious mentors:

I started fasting while I lived in Dagestan. I have a female cousin – the situation is that our house burned down in 1997, and so we were left homeless, and our aunt, my mother's sister, took us in, she even raised us, called me her son. And so it was her daughter who brought me to Islam and showed me how to do *namaz* [Islamic prayer] and taught me everything, and from that moment to this day I am in Islam. (Idris)

There are also examples of the opposite scenario, in which the respondents themselves – as a rule in secular or ethnically Muslim families – acted as guides to Islam for their younger sisters. In one way or another, solidarity develops between brother and sister, facilitating a trusting communication on sensitive religious topics, including those touching on radicalism and extremism. The following interview excerpt illustrates how this solidarity works for non-radicalisation within family networks. It relates to a small Moscow-based Salafist group (*jamaat*) of which the

respondent was the founder. Having been born into a secular family and lived most of his life in Moscow, he converted to Salafi Islam when he was an adult. He introduced his sister (three years younger than him) to it and introduced her to a friend who later became her husband. His trusting relationship with his sister enabled him to learn that there were people with radical beliefs in her social circle, and his authority as an older brother was enough to break this bond:

My sister, before she got married, was in touch with a girl who had very scary beliefs. I took her [the girl's] phone from my sister, started talking to her, and afterwards I told my sister, 'That's it! You don't know that person anymore, basically, I don't want any trouble because of her'. (Salekh)

It is logical to assume that both trust and authority, which engender this solidarity, can also work in the opposite direction and facilitate radicalisation. Examples of this were not encountered in this study, however.

## Peer Groups

In the big cities in which respondents resided, peer communities, providing space for young people to take part in cultural activities and explore their identity, were important. The discrimination and exclusion experienced by members of the second urban generation, however, often led them to prefer to join networks of people from their 'home' region.

## *Sports Crews*

Interest in, and practice of, contact martial arts – mainly freestyle and other types of wrestling – often brought young men of shared ethnic and religious background together. In the North Caucasus, power wrestling has become a form of alternative institution for men's socialisation. In Dagestan, for example, almost all boys and adolescents participate in freestyle wrestling and other martial arts (Solonenko 2012). Our case study shows that this interest in contact martial arts persists among young people living outside the North Caucasus (Kapustina 2014). All respondents had trained actively for a number of years and around half of them were either current or former athletes with many years of experience. A pragmatic explanation for this interest is that a teenager or young person who regularly faces hostile attitudes from the local population or far-right groups has a better chance of defending themselves if they have self-defence skills and can count on the help of a close-knit group of

physically developed athlete friends. As one respondent explains, 'When I was at school, I was always having problems with all sorts of skinheads harassing me, and so I had to do sports. I did freestyle wrestling, and when you do sport, you have a lot of athlete friends, it's not so scary – you can fight back' (Ramzan).

Maintaining an interest in sport is also influenced by popular culture, which has been shaped by the success of North Caucasian wrestlers in prestigious sporting events. In the context of horizontal inequality, this culture is an important symbolic resource for the second urban generation in constructing a relevant North Caucasian male identity, which is associated with success and popularity. Key aspects of this identity are violence and religiosity. As Crone (2016) notes, radicalisation processes involve the transformation of physical abilities and the acquisition of habitus, which enables the perpetration of violence. Contact martial arts, more than other sports, aim to shape the body-as-weapon (Messner 1990), a body insensitive to pain, predisposed to violence and capable of using it. In the 2010s, sporting communities in the North Caucasus actively radicalised, as a consequence of which demonstrative Islamic piety has become an obligatory attribute of the North Caucasian wrestler (Poliakov 2021). For some respondents, born outside the North Caucasus into secular or ethnically Muslim families, a passion for religion thus became an act of 'prestige imitation' (Crone 2016) as they sought to replicate the behaviour of those who had achieved success in their sporting career. As one respondent explained, 'I became consciously interested in religion at the age of sixteen because moving through sport, I found it very interesting to look at our freemen, they tend to be all religious people' (Musa).

Dagestan's recent history is replete with examples of prominent North Caucasian fighters as initiators, mobilisers and active implementers of religiously motivated violence directed against cultural practices they considered contrary to the norms of Islamic morality. In the narratives of the second urban generation one can also find direct references to the responsibility of sports idols in spreading the 'fashion' for radical Islam among North Caucasian youth:

When I studied at university, from 2007 to 2012, it was such a terrible time in Dagestan, and it was all so openly propagandised in some mosques. All the athletes there were walking around with beards. It was transmitted to the youth, but some to a greater, some to a lesser extent. (Khabib)

Sports halls and arenas are also spaces for the formation of intense interpersonal bonds and emotional attachments, which often take on the

character of a quasi-kinhood – a sports ‘brotherhood’ (Solonenko 2012). Thus, the starting point of religious conversion can be not only the desire to imitate the practices of successful sportsmen but also the desire to be together with ‘brothers’, to share with them relevant collective experience:

One guy trained with me, he’s my best friend now, and I saw him praying, going out and praying in training, I liked it. He taught me how to pray, I got interested in religion. Then I took up the Qur’an and was reading in Russian, and I came across a *sura* [chapter] from the Qur’an that the Almighty created people and *jinn* [spirit] to worship him. And I realised that I had to dedicate my life to the worship of the Almighty. (Mamuka)

This does not imply a predisposition of sports communities to radicalisation. Rather, that they constitute one cultural and social context in which radical ideas can emerge, circulate and become part of group discourse. Sports communities may be characterised also by a system of mutual obligations and loyalties that compel members to provide support and protection to their radicalised ‘brothers’, even if they do not share their views. However, there was evidence in this study that inclusion into the ‘brotherhood’ may be more flexible than imagined. For example, Ramzan recounted how one young woman, not of North Caucasian heritage, had been radicalised after becoming integrated into a North Caucasian sports community:

I used to know a girl, her father is a colonel here in Saint Petersburg. She was involved in sports, and since the dominant groups in sports are specifically North Caucasians, they formed a close bond and through them, she converted to Islam. I think you can understand. Her father was a colonel ... His daughter converted to Islam – it could have affected his job. He threw her out of the house. She had nowhere to go. She turned to her friends, they turned to their friends and she ended up going to Dagestan and was studying there. As I have friends who work in the security service there, they let me know straight away that if you have such acquaintances, you should not communicate with them often. (Ramzan)

### ***Niche Communities***

Communities in which radical views are disseminated can emerge in structural niches that are occupied by members of the second urban generation in education, employment and residency.

In the labour market, young people with a migrant background are pushed into low-paid and low-prestige sectors of the market. However,

this works to generate ethnic and regional solidarities as a mechanism of adaptation. This can be seen in the housing rental market also where young natives of the North Caucasus try to circumvent discrimination by renting from compatriots and practising collective accommodation. Islam is also an important factor in both labour and residential segregation. Respondents in this case study who position themselves as observant Muslims shun jobs that would involve charging interest or producing and trading alcohol or pork meat products. There is a vast market for Muslim goods and services in which religious affiliation is a key hiring criterion. The presence of a mosque or prayer room within walking distance may be a significant factor also in choosing where to live. Educational choices also focus on those fields of study considered to be prestigious higher education in the North Caucasus region – law, economics, petroleum, construction and medicine. At the same time, applicants often prefer to enrol at institutions where their relatives, acquaintances or compatriots already study, have studied or work, believing that they will be less likely to encounter bias, xenophobia and discrimination and have more opportunities to find support and understanding.

The evidence from this study on how radicalisation and non-radicalisation processes unfold in such niche communities is partial, but allows a number of tentative suggestions to be made. First, the experience of living and working together creates a space of trust in which radical views can be articulated and discussed. The communities of compatriots and fellow believers are seen by participants as a fairly safe communicative environment in which they can speak freely about their interests and sympathies:

Respondent: I dissuaded one young guy [from joining ISIS]. He said he had to join, and cut them all [non-believers]. Such were his convictions. He just started holding such views, and then he didn't...

Interviewer: You say that you convinced this guy. Is he from your circle?

Respondent: He came here, got a job. We rented him a room. He lived with his family, somehow we communicated. He strongly supported [ISIS], it was at the height of it, when they had expanded there, they had an army, and they had everything there, in short. They thought they were the coolest there. (Salekh)

Secondly, the circulation of radical beliefs in higher education institutions is hindered by a system of cross-control involving the university administration, student compatriot-based associations, often created and overseen by the rector, regional and ethnic organisations, structures of official Islam and the relevant police and security service departments re-



sponsible for preventing extremism and terrorism. One of the interviewees, at the request of senior representatives of the Dagestani community, was himself conducting outreach to Dagestani students in one of the universities in Saint Petersburg, from where more than twelve students had previously left for Syria. The director of the compatriot group, which was institutionalised as a cultural and educational centre, was regularly invited to talk to young people who had been taken off flights to Turkey on suspicion that they intended to join ISIS or other terrorist organisations. Some of them were persuaded to change their minds and some were handed over to their relatives. However, without grounds for detaining them longer, it is likely that others continued their journey to Syria after release.

### *Virtual Communities*

The scholarly literature (Yarlykapov 2016; Awan 2017; Piazza and Guler 2021) highlights the important role of modern communication technologies in recent waves of radicalisation. The compression of space due to the rapid development of such technologies contributes to the formation of virtual *jamaats*, whose members may live at significant distance from one another and be united only by a commonality of views, interests or religious authorities. Our data suggest that members of the second urban generation are critical of official religious institutions and prefer to obtain their basic knowledge of religion from the Internet and social networks. Virtual means of communication reduce the distance between ideological radicalisation and behavioural radicalisation. They provide a wide range of activities and occupations with relatively low risk and resource costs that do not require full dedication but create a sense of belonging to a common cause such as participation in the distribution of video and audio content, debate with opponents of radical ideas in public forums and fundraising for warring militants. Thanks to social media, young people have (or believe they have) the opportunity to communicate directly with recruiters and participants in terrorist organisations. Mamuka described contact he had had via the social media platform VKontakte: 'They wrote to me, "I am in Syria" and so on. I asked, "What are you doing there?" They told me they were fighting but explained their actions in a positive light' (Mamuka).

Virtual communities have the basic features of postmodern socialities: instability, fluidity, heterogeneity and the permeability of boundaries. The free nature of membership, implying no strict individual obligation to the group, allows young people to join several virtual communities at once and to be consumers of messages and cultural products, often

of competing ideological orientation. In this way, the milieu is characterised by immersion in ongoing discussions and conflicts between different movements and parties with the Islamic Ummah, a postmodern take on the centrifugal forces at work in Islam since its inception. Virtual space serves as a field of constant ideological and doctrinal struggle between schools, doctrines, sects and groups of followers of various Islamic celebrities:

There are groups on VKontakte where ordinary Muslims are members, and the Khawarijites [the respondent uses this term to denote ISIS followers] come there and propagate the views of their lecturers. We go there and start to say that these people should not listen, that they are harmful to Muslims, that they are not from Islam. A similarly harmful current is the *tariqa* – a misguided movement. They are not Khawarijites but we treat them the same way. Then their fans, followers of these media imams, start writing to us. (Salekh)

As this case study shows, members of the second urban generation are reflexive about the information they receive about Islam from the networks. The dominant view among them is that the assimilation of religion should take place not through following specific authorities or doctrines, but through individual study and reflection on religious experience in constant comparison with the Qur'an and Sunnah. In practice, this means that individual religiosity is assembled as a 'bricolage' of multiple discourses and ideologies.

## Communication Problems in Deradicalisation

Narratives that illuminate the role of friendship networks do not support the popular representation of radicalisation as a virus that spreads through social networks and small-group interactions. While these stories point to the significant influence of the social environment, respondents emphasise that radicalisation is an individual choice that is made at one's own risk. The question arises as to how the community responds to this choice, in particular the efforts it makes to deradicalise its members.

In some cases, a veil of silence is maintained; the topic of radicalisation is deliberately ignored or avoided by talking about distracting topics (see also Pilkington and Hussain 2022: 20–21). Most often, this is due to a desire to protect oneself and friends from harassment by law enforcement agencies. In other cases, the community attempts to persuade friends or acquaintances, but respondents emphasise that such efforts can only be effective at the initial stage of radicalisation when passion for

radical ideas is combined with openness to other views and perspectives. Thus, one respondent suggests:

Some people are young and dumb. They are not mature, they do not have any arguments, they simply do not have any arguments, so we can still talk to them. But, those, for example, Jahmites and Asharites, others that I have met, these are people who have knowledge, who have some kind of evidence – this is another level. For example, in a mosque, when I know that they are Kharijites, I do not even sit next to them, let alone talk to them. (Salekh)

As this respondent indicates, those whose passion has already developed into a strict conviction are seen as incapable of communication and, at the same time, as posing a danger to the community. Towards them, a strategy of distancing and exclusion is adopted:

So what would I do if I came across compatriots who were more extremist? I would first try to explain to them that it's wrong, try to make them see ... but not more than that because, for the most part, when you explain to someone, when you try to change their mind, for the most part, it doesn't work. If a person is committed to something, is convinced of something, it is very difficult to change their mind and of course, in such a situation it is easier not to engage, not to let your paths cross, so it doesn't lead to problems. (Anvar)

This communicative disjuncture – reflected in the sense that 'you can't change their mind' – is, I suggest, due to the lack of a common 'language' (understood as a system of meanings, categories and arguments) available to both partners in the dialogue. An indirect indication of this is the fact that those prepared to engage in dialogue with radicalised youth tend to be members of the Salafi *jamaats*, who do share a common 'language' with radical Islamists. Salafi Islam, as Atran (2011: 46) notes, is 'the host on which this viral Takfiri<sup>1</sup> movement rides'. This interpretation might be supported also by Wiktorowicz's (2006) finding that conservative fundamentalists (Salafis) and jihadists share the same doctrine but differ in their interpretation of how religion is connected to the actual political context.

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored the role of family and kinship networks in radicalisation processes by situating them in the context of the ongoing process of erosion of the traditional multigenerational North Caucasian family and concomitant shift towards the nuclear family under the impact

of urbanisation and modernisation. This transformation is most intense in cities outside the North Caucasus where families cannot rely on kinship or neighbourhood networks to control their members' behaviour. In megacities, identity processes of 'self-discovery' are also triggered, especially among the younger generation. The discussion in this chapter has focused on the second urban generation and identified two patterns of radicalisation. Radicalisation may arise, first, as a result of intergenerational tension within the family, caused by the younger generation's desire to emancipate themselves from parental family pressures in determining their life trajectories. At the same time, discrimination and horizontal inequalities faced by those from the North Caucasus living in Russia's megacities can channel that emancipation process into conflict, provoking their hostility towards social and state institutions. Secondly, radicalisation pathways may be influenced by relationships of affection, friendship and trust. Within the family, the second urban generation has the closest and most trusting relationships with their sisters, which can potentially both encourage and discourage radicalisation. Peer networks around martial arts activities and niche communities that emerge in universities, workplaces or communities of residence also have radicalisation potential. Inclusion in virtual communities of ideological or religious orientation can facilitate encounters with radical discourses and accelerate the transition to behavioural radicalisation by offering relatively safe forms of virtual participation. In virtual communities, young people from the North Caucasus can meet and communicate with members of jihadist organisations.

As our case study shows, a serious barrier to deradicalisation is the state's indiscriminate anti-terrorist policy, which promotes a veil of silence around 'dangerous' topics and thus hinders communication with radicalised and radicalising youth (see also Pilkington and Hussain 2022). There is also a widespread belief that friends and acquaintances who hold radical convictions are already lost to society and the only possible behaviour towards them is to break off social contacts. I have suggested that this is explained by the lack of a common 'language' – a system of concepts, categories and arguments – that is understandable to both parties. Such a language, I argue, could be formed 'from below', by the youth communities themselves, in conditions of more transparent and honest communication, not distorted by fear of a repressive state or Islamophobic society.

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#### NOTE

1. *Takfiri* is a term denoting a Muslim who excommunicates a co-religionist, that is, who accuses another Muslim of being an apostate, and is often used to refer to followers of radical Islamist organisations.

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