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The Republic of Dagestan: the epicenter of Islamist insurgency in Russia's North Caucasus

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Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, a number of ethnic areas were identified as potentially prone to secessionism within the Russian Federation. With the specific exception of Tatarstan, and to a considerably lesser degree Bashkortostan and Tuva, the autonomous republics of the North Caucasus possessed a range of formal and informal elites who were eager to achieve a higher degree of autonomy for their respective autonomous republics. Inhabited predominantly by non-Slavic peoples adhering to the religion of Islam[1] and having experienced a long and fierce period of resistance against the colonization of this mountainous area by Russian authorities from the end of the 18th century through the Sovietization of the area in the first quarter of the last century, Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia, along with Karachayevo-Balkaria and Kabardino-Balkaria, have been traditionally regarded with suspicion by federal authorities for their alleged lack of loyalty to the idea of unified Russian statehood. The separatist aspirations of most North Caucasians have until recently been kept at a stay by both pro-Moscow local authorities and the Kremlin, but the region has still experienced two devastating wars that took part in the breakaway territory of Chechnya (1994-1996, 1999-until now) and a more generalized Islamist insurgency that has been extant since roughly the middle of the last decade. Despite the optimistic statements of local and federal authorities, the Islamist insurgency seems to be on the rise in the region, which is especially obvious with regard to Dagestan, the easternmost autonomous republic of Russian North Caucasus. Recently, violence has increased significantly in Dagestan, which is also the most populous autonomous republic of the North Caucasus with its three million inhabitants. On 4 September 2010, the republic's Minister for National Affairs, Bekmurza Bekmurzayev, was assassinated. The following day, the Russian military base at Buynaksk was attacked by a suicide bomber, claiming the lives of four federal soldiers. On 27 September 2011, Magomed Murtuzaliyev, deputy director of the federal prison system in Dagestan, was shot dead by unknown gunmen. Indeed, since the end of the last decade, shootings, bombings and police raids against the strongholds of Islamist insurgents occur on a daily basis and have become an integral part of the Dagestani political landscape. This article explores the causes, evolution, current situation and prospects of the insurgency in Dagestan.

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Dagestan: an introduction

As mentioned, Dagestan is situated in the Northeast Caucasus, which has historically been one of the most traditionalist areas of the former USSR, along with the Fergana Valley in Central Asia. Alongside neighboring Chechnya and Ingushetia to the west, the custom of blood revenge is still quite commonplace in Dagestan, where the mosaic of ethnic groups is further broken down into myriads of competing clans based on the principle of blood kinship. Customary law (adat) still plays an important role especially in the mountainous areas to the south, center and west of the country. Accordingly, Dagestani society lives in line with the patriarchal code of honor where the main virtue of an unwed woman consists in her purity, of a wed woman in her fidelity and that of a man in his courage, ability to revenge humiliation, and to ensure dignified livelihood and protection for his family members.[2]

Importantly, Dagestan has historically been regarded as the cradle of Islam in the North Caucasus. Religiosity is widespread across all strata of Dagestani society, even though urban areas are generally less religious than rural areas, with the isolated areas in the mountains to the center and west of the country even more religious. Islam, more precisely Sufi Islam with its local Naqshbandi and Shazali tariqas (orders), has historically played an extremely important role both as a symbol of self-identification of ordinary Dagestanis, and as part of local tradition and culture in their daily lives. Another important aspect of Dagestan is its multiethnic character, as the republic is home to dozens of ethnic groups.[3] As no ethnic group forms a majority, members of various Dagestani peoples and clans are involved in constant competition over the republic's limited resources, a demographic characteristic exemplified in the complicated system of republican and local-level power-sharing mechanisms. Intriguingly, approximately 85% to 90% of the budget of this rather agricultural republic consists of direct subsidies from Moscow.[4]

Ethno-nationalist tensions exist among members of various peoples inhabiting the country, as largely mono-ethnic village communities compete for access to water resources, pastures and common estates. Notwithstanding episodic excesses that occur due to relatively apolitical reasons that have the potential to exacerbate deepening ethnic fractionalization, local authorities have so far managed to keep clashes low profile. In fact, Dagestani peoples are known for being quite prone to ethno-nationalism. Even though they have been living side by side for centuries, with the decent exception of the capital city of the republic, Makhachkala, and some other urban areas, intermarriage is rather uncommon among members of distinct ethnic groups; Dagestani peoples are highly endogamous. Finally, Dagestan's corruption, clientelism and nepotism are appalling even by regional standards,[5] with an unemployment rate reaching 80%, nearing absolute numbers among youth.

The evolution of insurgency in Dagestan

Looking back at the situation in Dagestan in the middle of the 1990s, there were virtually no signs of Islamist insurgency in the republic. A decade ago, however, its instances were extremely rare, yet since then it has been increasing drastically. Intriguingly, although some Dagestani communities were the first in the North Caucasus and the Muslim areas of the former USSR to embrace Jihadism[6] in the early 1990s, the failed incursion of the united Dagestani-Chechen Jihadist insurgents to Western Dagestan in August 1999 largely discredited the ideology across the republic.[7] What caused such a dramatic shift?

First, since "Islamist terrorism" was recognized as a primary threat to Russian state security in 1999-2001, thousands of (mostly young) Dagestanis, accused of terrorism and "Wahhabism", have been taken into custody by local authorities, after which they were often subjected to Soviet-style interrogations. Brutal beatings accompanied with humiliations have been carried out routinely by the members of police and security forces to force the real or alleged "terrorist" into confessions. Deep religiosity has been considered especially suspicious by the authorities, who have been waging full-scale war against real and alleged Wahhabis and their sympathizers. Yet for many undereducated, underpaid and corrupt policemen facing impunity, capturing people for ransom has provided for a source of solid income; tens of thousands of dollars have been charged by them to the relatives of arrested "terrorists" for the latter to be set free. As authorities have lacked enough evidence to put alleged Wahhabis in jail for longer periods, these detainees were eventually set free following months of torture. At prisons and detention camps, hundreds and thousands of them have been made physical and psychological cripples over the last decade; many of them never made peace with what was done to them in prison. Following their understanding of male honor embedded in local tradition, they have turned to violence to retaliate for their humiliation. In case someone was killed or seriously wounded, his or her brothers, sons or cousins have pledged to take revenge for the sake of family or clan honor. As it is difficult for individuals to combat authorities on their own, many young Dagestanis have joined the insurgent movement in the mountains where they were exposed to the basics of Jihadism, or they have received substantial support from the Islamist insurgents to carry out their own revenge attacks.

The adoption of a common ideology of resistance by individual fighters has further cemented the insurgence movement, shaping specific, now rather de-individualized goals, such as the establishment of an Islamic state independent from Moscow, as well as targets, who are

said to be the Russian "occupiers" and their Dagestani "marionettes".[8]

Accordingly, a large number of Dagestanis have joined the insurgency to protest what they see as societal sins, be it corruption, erosion of traditional values, inability to advance professionally, or barriers to a better, necessarily Islamic, future for their homeland. Most importantly, over the years, membership in Jihadist groups (jamaats) has helped individual insurgents overcome ethnic, sectarian (tariqa-based) and clan-based loyalties, forging an unprecedented sense of social solidarity based on shared religion. Thus, the ideologization of resistance has evolved side by side with the politicization of violence. Against this backdrop, a regular civil war has erupted in Dagestan in recent years. According to some estimates, at least 2.500 young Dagestanis have been involved in the insurgency, comprising at least a half of all North Caucasus Islamist combatants.[9] Moreover, their numbers grow constantly as more and more desperate and disillusioned youths join their ranks; new and often indiscriminate police reprisals bring about additional violence, creating a never-ending spiral of violence. Unlike neighboring Chechnya with its heavily "normalized" public space that has been severely controlled by authoritarian President Ramzan Kadyrov, the pro-Moscow leader of the republic, along with his associates, Dagestani insurgents rely on sympathy and support from ordinary fellow countrymen who are outraged by both corrupt local authorities and increasingly violent and indiscriminate police forces. In fact, whereas many Chechens have postponed revenge in order to avoid reprisals and the majority of the Chechen population is willing to accept peaceful life under any government, an opposite process is occurring in Dagestan, where the insurgency has expanded from areas dominated by the Avars, Dargins, and Laks to the south, dominated by the Lezgins, and to the Kumyk-dominated and ethnically mixed east, becoming widespread in urban areas. Moreover, in some areas of Dagestan local authorities as well as businesses have become targets of racketeering by insurgents. To survive, they have to pay ransom to those they are supposed to combat. Last but not least, casinos, alleged public houses, saunas and restaurants selling alcohol have become popular targets of attacks by Islamist insurgents who claim to wage a war in the name of re-establishing Islamic morality in the country.

The typical feature of the Dagestani insurgency has been its avalanche-like mobilization, provided for by the prevalence of traditional institutions in the Northeast Caucasus such as concept of honor, blood feud, and the strong role of clans. Despite the killing of some influential field commanders, the movement will not be broken down overnight, as individual fighters will continue to wage their personally motivated wars of revenge. That, in turn, will bring about more reprisals from the local authorities, which will lead to a path of Chechenization as increasing numbers of Dagestanis will become involved in blood feuds.[10]

Similarly to Chechnya and Ingushetia, the Dagestani insurgency is in its core primarily not a political or religious phenomenon, even though it is organized along the lines of Salafi Islam and this is where its main strength lies. Many Dagestanis are enthusiastic about squaring their accounts with the ones they truly resent. Yet imposing a kind of sultanistic authoritarian regime that has been established in Kadyrov's Chechnya in recent years would be a rather unfeasible task in ethnically heterogeneous Dagestan.

Additionally, particular jamaats have become increasingly ethnically mixed; they continue to be highly autonomous units, based on the principle of territorial, rather than ethnicity or kinship, tending to act on their own which makes them difficult to trace down and combat. Importantly, they accept their subordination to the leadership of the Caucasus Emirate and have shown ability and willingness to participate in large-scale operations orchestrated with Chechen insurgents both within Dagestan and outside the autonomous republic. Moreover, Dagestani jamaats share a common idea of resistance, a strong desire for personal revenge and a hated enemy, thus relying on increasing sympathies from native populations which have always had a tradition of hospitality toward anti-state outlaws. As the war goes on, Dagestani insurgents gain skills in guerilla warfare, as well as awareness of trans-ethnic solidarity with their Chechen, Ingush, Balkar, Karachay, and Cherkes brethren in arms. In the months and years to come, Dagestan is thus very likely to retain its standing as the epicenter of the North Caucasian insurgency.

1 In the North Caucasus, only the majority of North Ossetians profess Orthodox Christianity that is the predominant religion of the Russians who make up around 80% of the overall population of the country.

2 For more information on local traditions and customs, see, for instance, Emil Souleimanov, *An Endless War: The Russian-Chechen Conflict in Perspective* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007), chapter 1.

3 In fact, Dagestan belongs to the ethnically most diverse areas of the Russian Federation and one of the most diverse areas of the world. Dozens of ethnic groups and subgroups inhabiting the republic are considered native to the area; most of them speak Caucasian (Avar, Dargin, Lezgin, Lak, Tabasaran, Tsakhur, Rutul, Agul, Andian, Tsez), Turkic (Kumyk, Noghay, Azerbaijani), or Iranian languages (Tat, Mountain Jewish), etc. Importantly, none of the republic's ethnic groups makes up the majority of the population. While the demographically most populous Avars and their subgroups form as much as 800.000 people (around 30% of the entire population of the autonomous territory), there is a plethora of small ethnic and sub-ethnic groups whose population range within the bounds of thousands of people.

4 Gordon M. Hahn, *Russia's Islamic Threat* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 103.

5 In fact, the level of corruption in Dagestan is said to belong to the highest in the whole of the Russian Federation; intriguingly, according to the 2010 survey of Transparency International, Russia was placed 154th out of 172 countries occupying its position between Papua New Guinea and Tajikistan, another post-Soviet country.

6 To designate the militant forms of Islam that have been responsible for the recent upsurge of violence in some parts of Islamic world, as well as other areas, scholars have utilized various terms. Jihadism is one of them as it concentrates on the commitment of Islamist insurgents to carry out jihad – a holy war – to free what they consider *dar ul-islam* (the land of Islam), even though according to Islamic orthodoxy, the term jihad has a number of meanings, with the jihad by sword being just one – and the less important – among them. Jihadism is believed to be the practical outcome of Salafism or Wahhabism, a purification movement in Sunni Islam contested by the vast majority of Islamic *maddhabs* (schools of thought in Islam). Advocated by al-Wahhab, Salafi Islam occurred in the 18th century in what is now Saudi Arabia seeking to purify the Islamic religion from pre-Islamic and post-Islamic influences.

7 See, for instance, Emil Souleimanov, "Chechnya, Wahhabism and the Invasion of Daghestan" (*Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 4, December 2005), pp. 48-71.

8 The collective memory of Dagestani peoples draws upon the notion of age-old anti-colonial, e.g. anti-Russian, resistance. Fighting local renegades or *murtaddun* as they are called according to the Islamic tradition is an even more important task.

9 Author's personal estimate based on his numerous interviews with local and international observers.

10 Chechenization is a term used to designate Moscow's policies of making use of pro-Moscow Chechen units combating anti-Moscow Chechen insurgency, whereby reducing causalties among federal troops stationed in the republic and improving pro-Moscow Chechens' dependence on the Kremlin. For more information on the issue, see Emil Souleimanov, "Russian Chechnya policy: "Chechenization" turning into "Kadyrovization"?" (*Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst*, 31 May 2006).

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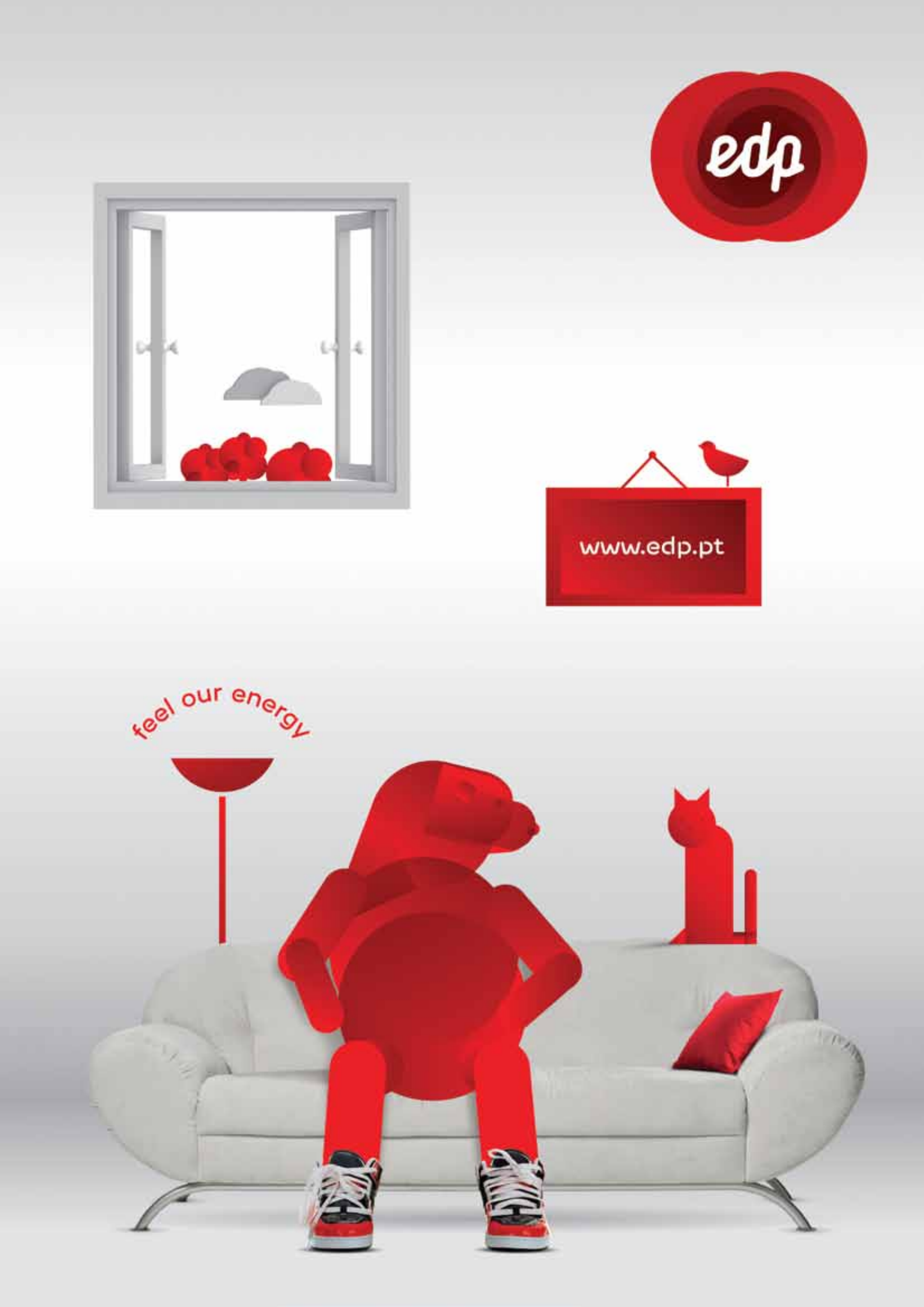
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