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# Transformation of Nature Protection Institutions in the North Caucasus: From a State Monopoly of Governance to Multi-Actor Management

Alexey Gunya <sup>1,\*</sup> , Alexey Lysenko <sup>2</sup>, Izolda Lysenko <sup>3</sup> and Ludmila Mitrofanenko <sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Geography, Russian Academy of Sciences, 29 Staromonetnyi Ln., 119017 Moscow, Russia

<sup>2</sup> Institute of Earth Sciences, North Caucasus Federal University, 1, Pushkin Street, 355017 Stavropol, Russia; lysenkostav@yandex.ru

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Plants Protection, Stavropol State Agrarian University, 12 Zootechnicheskiy Ln., 355017 Stavropol, Russia; alex0807000@gmail.com

<sup>4</sup> Humanitarian Institute, North Caucasus Federal University, 1, Pushkin Street, 355017 Stavropol, Russia; ludmilamit@gmail.com

\* Correspondence: a.n.gunya@igras.ru



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**Abstract:** The paper analyzes the state and dynamics of key actors and institutions that regulate the use of resources within the protected areas of the North Caucasus, using the examples of the Teberda Biosphere Reserve and the Elbrus National Park. The network of protected areas created in the North Caucasus during the Soviet period relied on government support, and the participation of the local population in nature conservation was very limited. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the demonopolization of state land laws, new actors emerged, such as the local population and business. This has led to an exacerbation of the conflict between the tasks of nature conservation and the interests of business and local communities. The introduction of market mechanisms and the commercialization of the tourism sector threaten the state of protected natural areas (PAs) and require effective ways of land matters regulation. The paper analyzes the question of whether the PA system created in the Soviet era should continue to be exclusively the privilege of the state using a centralized approach to management? The contradictions in legislation and conflicts of nature management have cast doubt on the effectiveness of the system of environmental institutions inherited from the Soviet period. One of the solutions could be the actualization of environmental legislation, bringing it in line with civil and land regulations, as well as the wide involvement of the local communities and the public in the evaluation of economic and legal projects.

**Keywords:** mountains; protected natural areas; institution; North Caucasus; conflict; land; the Elbrus region; Teberda; local community

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## 1. Introduction

Sustainable development of mountainous regions is closely related to their protection, which in turn deeply affects the issues of the life of the local population as well as the regulation of emerging contradictions and conflicts [1]. At the same time, the state plays an important role, having at its disposal the institutions and resources that make it possible to place the issues of nature protection in the foreground, but in reality, often giving priority to economic development [2]. Due to the changes in societal dynamics and the transformation of institutions, new actors often appear in the field of nature conservation, and as a result, new approaches are required to modify the existing institutional environment without harming environmental activities [3].

Interaction with the local community has shown an increase in efficiency in nature conservation and benefits for the local residents. Conscious and systematic contact as well as the development of management mechanisms ensures the adaptation of the institutional environment [4–6].

Community engagement can vary in scale and depth. As a rule, in the early stages of involvement, the local population can help identify routine environmental protection measures. At higher stages, the local population can be involved in planning [7].

Another variant of development is shown by states with centralized governance, in which the organization of protected areas does not always take the local population into account. Improving governance within protected areas is an important task for states using mechanisms of power decentralization [8]. In this case, the participation of the local population is important [9]. The effectiveness of nature conservation is enhanced if there is mutual benefit [10]. However, in order to acquire the support of the local population, long preparatory work is required [11].

Most of the protected areas (PAs) in Russia were created during the Soviet era, on the basis of centralized decisions. The current local population has long lived within the PAs. As a result, the management of these territories is organized through informal ties constituting a familiar institutional environment. Examples of involving the local population in management within protected areas have shown good results [12]. However, the approaches to improving interaction with the local population for effective environmental protection in Russia are still poorly developed. The concepts of corporate social responsibility, social contract, social license, etc., widespread in the world literature, can undoubtedly be important for the instrumentalization and conceptualization of research [13,14].

It should be recognized that the direct borrowing of such concepts in regions where centralized management practices still dominate can hardly be expected to be successful; they need to be appropriately adapted to local institutional practices.

The Caucasus and, in particular, the North Caucasus within Russia are vivid examples of post-Soviet regions that are in a state of social transformation and institutional transition. This area is characterized by great heterogeneity: differences in culture, language and farming methods, as well as different climate zones, the availability of valuable raw materials, natural and cultivated landscapes. An important part of the Soviet legacy is the network of protected areas in the Caucasus that was created during the Soviet era. All the protected areas were planned and set up by state agencies without any involvement of the local people. The most attractive mountain areas have since received the status of specially protected natural areas (for example, the Teberda Nature Reserve). The Soviet elite had privileged access to natural resources and owned so-called “dachas” (i.e., holiday home) on the territory of the PAs, which encouraged a certain guarantee of compliance with the rules of nature protection. Important state issues were often resolved at such “dachas”. For example, the famous meeting of Mikhail Gorbachev and Helmut Kohl (Figure 1), at which the issue of German unification was settled, took place in a dacha in Arkhyz. The current Russian president often prefers to have important meetings in his Caucasian residence in Sochi.

The challenges that arose in the field of nature protection in the post-Soviet period are largely associated with the commercialization of tourism and an increase in the flow of tourists. In addition, the state views tourism as an important factor in the fight against terrorism and radicalism. On the eve of the Sochi Olympics in 2014, a state project for the development of tourism in the North Caucasus [15] was launched; this suited the interests of the state in reducing the severity of conflicts, creating a positive image of the region [16]. The huge inflow into the program for the creation of a tourist cluster led to a revision of some PAs’ statuses, reducing the level of restrictions on economic activities.

The aim of this paper is to examine conflicts arising at the intersection of interests of the PAs, businesses, local population and the state. These raise a broader question: should the PA system continue to be exclusively the privilege of the state using a centralized approach to governance? International experience illustrates that the involvement of the local population strengthens the effectiveness of nature protection [17–19]. However, in the context of the rapid commercialization of the tourism sector, a relatively underdeveloped civil society as well as the absence of mechanisms allowing for the local population’s participation in decision-making, the weakening of state control and monitoring can also adversely affect the state of PAs.

Research on environmental problems in the North Caucasus has limitations in terms of its interdisciplinarity. The key actors and institutions that regulate nature conservation within the PAs are especially poorly researched. Therefore, the main research questions of this paper are: What actors and institutions are involved in the settlement of emerging multilateral conflicts in the field of environmental protection in the protected natural areas of the North Caucasus? What are the opportunities for sustainable management in the context of institutional transitions within protected areas?



**Figure 1.** A holiday home on the territory of the Teberda nature reserve (the so-called “Gorbachev’s dacha”), in which in 1990 there were historical negotiations between Mikhail Gorbachev and Helmut Kohl about the reunification of Germany.

#### *Initial Conceptual Provisions*

The paper is based on the institution-oriented approach [20,21]. The concept of ‘institution’ is important for understanding the role of environmental governance [22], especially in those regions where the transformation of statehood is observed [21]. This paper uses the following formulation: institutions are the rules of the game in society; they are man-made constraints that shape human interactions and thus are important social constructs of human behavior [23]. Official (formalized) governance implies institutionalized ways of organizing society using recognized and documented (formalized) rules [24,25]. However, it should be taken into account that, especially at the stages of the transit of power, informal management, which is carried out through unwritten rules and relationships as well as through decision-making processes that operate outside the official channels, plays an important role [26,27].

The ratio of formal and informal in an institution as well as the degree of formalization and rootedness in local practices are extremely important for communities in transition. In the context of institutional transition, attention should be paid to some important features of governance. Firstly, institutions are used unequally by different groups of people—actors. Some actors strictly follow the rules, while others can break them without serious consequences. The most important actors, the relationship between which generates a range of rules, are the state and the local community. In classical theory, the state is an external entity autonomous from society, able to impose its rules on local communities [28], directly scaling their physical space in terms of jurisdictional (administrative) and ecological (natural) boundaries and characteristics [29]. In the case of the North Caucasus, the state developed complex interdependent relationships with local communities in the form of institutional mechanisms combining both formal and informal ties. These hybrid agreements between the state and various local communities actually dominated the provision of access to valuable resources and played a leading role in the formation of local elites [30]. These interdependencies remain important top-down governance channels.

Secondly, institutions extend to a specific space - a kind of arena of action bound by cultural, political or geographic boundaries. Outside this space, the strength of institutions diminishes or ceases altogether. The North Caucasus enjoyed certain privileges both in imperial Russia and in the USSR. Local customs and practices have always been widely practiced here, and to this day, the central government turns a blind eye to them.

Thirdly, institutions change throughout life. Most institutions are limited to two or three generations of people. In the process of adaptation to changes in the surrounding socio-political conditions, actors adapt, and institutional combinations form [23,31]. Institutional conjunctions promote temporary or transitional stability, fulfilling an important function of conflict management [32,33]. Detailed analysis of institutional dynamics and institutional combinations is often used to study transition periods [34,35]. At the same time, one can single out institutions competing with each other or mutually benefitting through cooperation. The emergence of hybrid institutional combinations often occurs in the field of interaction between democracy and dictatorship [36], state and non-state actors (for example, the local community). The formation of hybrid institutional mechanisms between the state and the local community occurs a) through the formalization and co-optation of traditional institutions, b) through the internalization of institutions and organizations imposed on communities by the state [37]. Using the terms and concepts of the institution-oriented approach, such as actors, institutions and key resources, the contemporary relations between the state and the local community in protected areas are examined below.

## 2. Materials and Methods

There are 70 protected natural areas in the North Caucasus, which amounts to about 13% of the entire territory of the region; they have different statuses and subjections. The core of the system of protected areas in the region consists of 32 protected areas of federal significance with a total area of more than 1.1 million hectares (Table 1, Figure 2). In each of the PAs, there are a number of problems associated with the division of power between local municipalities, land privatization, the balance between development and environmental protection tasks, etc. [38].

For a detailed study of the challenges that have arisen in the field of nature protection, we have selected two of the most well-known protected natural areas of federal significance—the Teberda Biosphere Reserve in the Western Caucasus and the Elbrus National Park in the Central Caucasus. During the analysis, three groups of methods were used.

1. A set of socio-geographical methods for studying the dynamics of land use, including mapping of land use during field work and comparison with the previous data, as well as the collection of statistical information. Interviews with local residents were conducted to determine the reasons for the change in use; the actors and rules responsible for the change were identified. As a result, a series of land use maps was obtained for the present and past periods. These maps have been compiled since the late 1980s and updated during field research in the 1990s as well as later on.

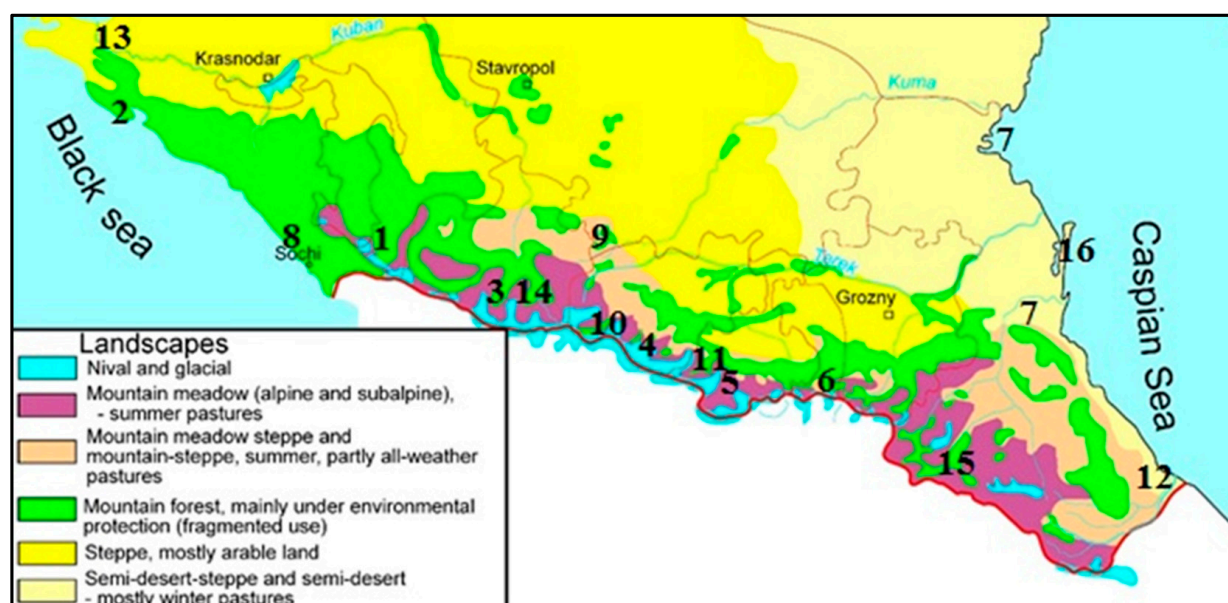
2. Interviews with local decision-makers, businessmen, representatives of religious and public organizations. The authors interviewed the leaders of the PAs (in the 1990s, in the 2000s and at present), the heads of the Elbrus and Dombaysky municipalities and the residents of the Elbrus, Teberda and Dombai villages. A total of 12 interviews were selected to address the research questions.

3. Results of the questionnaire in the framework of the Mountain Research Initiative (MRI) initiative on management effectiveness in the mountainous regions of the world, covering the regions of the North Caucasus [39]. The analysis of questionnaires from the regions of the North Caucasus made it easier to integrate the North Caucasian management experience into the global context.



**Table 1.** Characteristics of protected areas, national parks and large reserves of federal significance in the North Caucasus (<https://www.mnr.gov.ru/activity/oopt/>, accessed on 12 September 2021, with additions by the authors).

N <sup>o</sup> on the Map (Figure 2)	PA	Year of Creation	Area, Thous. ha	Region	Key Management Problems
1	Caucasian Biosphere Reserve	1924	280	Krasnodar Krai, Republic of Adygea, Karachay-Cherkess Republic	Balancing nature conservation and development (tourism), the alienation of protected land for development needs
2	State Natural Reserve “Utrish”	2011	11,3	Krasnodar Krai	The alienation of protected land for development needs
3	Teberda Biosphere Reserve	1936	85	Karachay-Cherkess Republic	Balancing nature conservation and development (tourism), decreasing in the status of the PA
4	Kabardino-Balkaria Nature Reserve	1976	83	Kabardino-Balkar Republic	Regulation of environmental management in the buffer zone
5	North Ossetian State Nature Reserve	1967	30	Republic of North Ossetia - Alania	Regulation of environmental management in the buffer zone
6	State Nature Reserve “Erzi”	2000	35	The Republic of Ingushetia	Regulation of environmental management in the buffer zone
7	Dagestan State Nature Reserve (five sites since 2009)	1987	19	The Republic of Dagestan	multilateral conflicts over land, including ethnocultural aspects
8	“Sochinsky” National Park	1983	208,6	Krasnodar Krai	Contradictions between municipal and federal environmental legislation, balancing nature conservation and development (tourism)
9	“Kislovodsky” National Park	2016	0,9	Stavropol Krai	Contradictions between municipal and federal environmental legislation, unresolved problems with land ownership
10	Elbrus Region National Park	1986	100	Kabardino-Balkar Republic	Contradictions between municipal and federal environmental legislation, balancing nature conservation and development, the alienation of protected land for development needs
11	Alania National Park	1998	36,6	Republic of North Ossetia - Alania	Contradictions between municipal and federal environmental legislation,
12	“Samursky” National Park	1982	11,8	The Republic of Dagestan	Contradictions between municipal and federal environmental legislation,
13	“Priazovsky” State Nature Reserve	1958	42,2	Krasnodar Krai	Regulation of environmental management in the buffer zone
14	“Dautsky” State Nature Reserve of Federal Significance	1986	74,9	Karachay-Cherkess Republic	Regulation of environmental management in the buffer zone
15	“Tlyaratinsky” State Nature Reserve of Federal Significance	1986	83,5	The Republic of Dagestan	Regulation of environmental management in the buffer zone
16	“Agrakhansky” State Nature Reserve of Federal Significance	1983	39	The Republic of Dagestan	Regulation of environmental management in the buffer zone



**Figure 2.** Reserves, national parks and main reserves of federal significance in the North Caucasus (see Table 1). In the triangles—the Teberda Biosphere Reserve and the Elbrus Region National Park, selected as key areas.

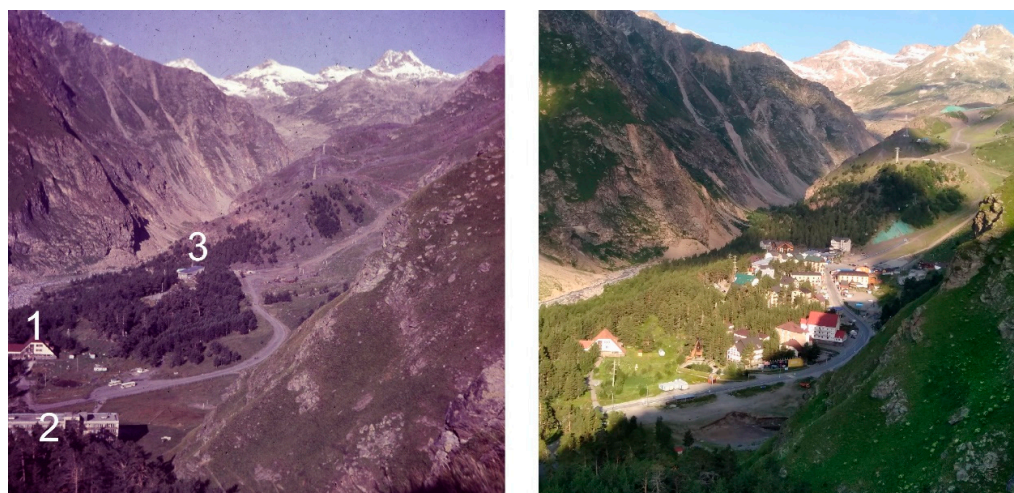
### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Elbrus Region National Park (ERNP)

The ERNP is located in the Central Caucasus, in Kabardino-Balkaria, at an altitude of 1450–5642 m above sea level. The ERNP territory covers a unique high elevation terrain with a wide variety of natural landscapes: from fertile mountain meadows in the Baksan river valley to glaciers and snowfields, which makes year-round skiing possible. This is the settlement area of the Balkars, whose traditional occupation is grassland farming, complemented by small-scale subsistence farming on the floor of the valley. In the 1960s, a recreational “boom” started taking place in the Elbrus region, accompanied by the construction of hotels, holiday homes and cable cars. Land has come to be evaluated in terms of its recreational potential.

Up until the collapse of the USSR, the Elbrus region was a popular tourist resort, attracting 2.5 million tourists a year [40]. Therefore, in 1986, the Elbrus Region National Park was organized on the territory of 100,000 hectares; it was designed to regulate the issues of nature protection and landscape loads. In the 1990s, the demonopolization of state land rights led to the privatization of garden plots by the Balkars, which resulted in the construction of holiday homes for tourists. The stabilization of the political situation in the North Caucasus in the 2000s led to an inflow of tourists, reaching 1.5 million visitors per year before the COVID-19 pandemic (an expert estimate, taking into account one-time visits). Most of the hotels and holiday homes built during the Soviet era have been privatized, and many more private holiday homes and hotels have been built. Currently, there are about 5,500 people living in five villages on the territory of the ERNP; roughly 85% of them are Balkars. It is the Balkars who occupy the main positions in the local government (municipalities of the rural settlements of Elbrus and Upper Baksan), the administration of the ERNP, as well as in the joint-stock companies servicing large hotels and cableways.

As illustrated by the mapped dynamics of land use (Figure 3), the area occupied by tourist sites has increased by more than 10 times (hotels, cafes, parking lots, etc.) over the last 20 years. The private sector uses old energy, water and sewage infrastructure, which has exacerbated the problems of water, air and waste pollution. The state is investing in improving the roads, including the reconstruction of cableways. The main owners are local residents – the Balkars. As shown by the interviews, the process of land allocation for private construction is not transparent, often involving corruption schemes, contradictions in legislation, ineffectiveness of court decisions, etc.



**Figure 3.** Azau—the upper part of the Baksan river valley in the Elbrus region in 1988 and 2021. The numbers show: 1—the educational-research station of MSU, 2—hotel Azau, 3—the bottom station of the cableway (2350 m).

Since the collapse of the USSR, the constellation of actors has changed dramatically (Table 2). The state has ceased to be homogeneous. In addition to the ERNP administration, the federal government, which initiated a tourism development program and created an executive organization—the North Caucasus Resorts State corporation, is very active. Furthermore, the regional government, represented by the republican authorities, has received significant powers and is also interested in receiving profits from tourism in the form of taxes. In the wake of the growth of national-ethnic consciousness in the 1990s, the local community was given broad competencies and rights for the usage of local resources. The attractiveness of the territory influenced active business development. The collapse of collective livestock farms led to a decline in interest in pasture resources. Land for the construction of recreational facilities became the key resource. A multifaceted conflict emerged around this limited resource, which is regulated by both a set of formal institutions (state nature protection legislation, federal decisions on tourism development in the North Caucasus, local self-government legislation, market mechanisms) and informal ones (e.g., corruption, patron-client relations, etc.).

**Table 2.** Key actors, resources and institutions in the Elbrus region.

Years	Actors	Resources	Institutions
1990	The State (ERNP), collective farms	Natural recreational and agricultural (pastures) resources	The system of laws of centralized state planning and regulation of environmental management, complemented by traditional informal institutions for the resource use at the local level
2018	The State (the North Caucasus Resorts State corporation, ERNP, regional authorities), local community	Land for the construction of recreational facilities	State legislation on nature protection, decrees on tourism development in the North Caucasus, legislation on local self-government, market mechanisms, informal (corruption, patron-client relations, etc.) institutions

The ERNP, which monitors nature conservation and land use, is the most important institution preserved from the Soviet era. However, the level of sanctions against violators does not correspond to modern conditions. In addition, environmental restrictions came into conflict with the rights given to the local community by the law on municipalities. Residents of villages on the territory of the ERNP found themselves in the conditions of the emerging legal pluralism [41], which, as a result of weak control and insufficient sanctions, complicated land relations. In the context of institutional transition, a whole spectrum of land access rights was formed: from private property to long-term lease and mixed-use lands of municipal and state property.

In the 2000s, virtually all areas potentially suitable for housing were dismantled. As one of the old residents of the Elbrus region notes, all the land has long been distributed among the local clans [42]. These are mainly areas located near roads and communication lines, while no one is interested in land on the slopes, not suitable for construction.

The threat of land seizure from the ERNP is hovering over the territory in connection with the development of a tourism cluster initiated by the federal government. The authors of the project are convinced that the tourism cluster could become a factor in the region's development. The budget funds invested in infrastructure will give an impetus to the development of more extensive territories, where the state will establish a preferential tax regime. Prices for services will be lower than abroad, which will attract tourists. Taxes from tourist businesses will reduce the subsidization of North Caucasus [43]. In addition to economic growth and a decrease in subsidies, the implementation of the idea would result in job creation, reduction of social tension and the general improvement of the image of the North Caucasus.

The tourist cluster project was developed without the participation of representatives of the local population, which was wary of initiatives described above. The implementation of the plans was delayed and accompanied by corruption scandals. Five executives have been replaced in 10 years. According to some experts, the development project did not



take local specifics and the corruption of officials into account [44]. By 2021, nine new ski slopes with cableways are planned to be built in the Elbrus region at the expense of the federal budget [45]. Contradictions with the tasks of nature protection are pointed out as an obstacle to the development of the Elbrus region resort. Land seizure from the ERNP is proposed as a solution to this problem [46]. The local community expressed solidarity with the ERNP and demanded a guarantee of preserving the unique nature of the area. In addition, the withdrawal of land from the jurisdiction of the ERNP would create conditions for attracting external actors, and local entrepreneurs would not be able to compete with them. The local community resists new plans for tourism development, appealing also to the risk of exceeding the loads on natural ecosystems. There are practically no independent examination of projects and no plans for involving the local population in the project development. The local population is anxiously awaiting the top-down government plans for the development of tourism, fearing to lose the right to recreational resources. Conservation issues are in turn becoming only an argument used by the local community to oppose government development projects.

### 3.2. The Teberda Biosphere Reserve (TBR)

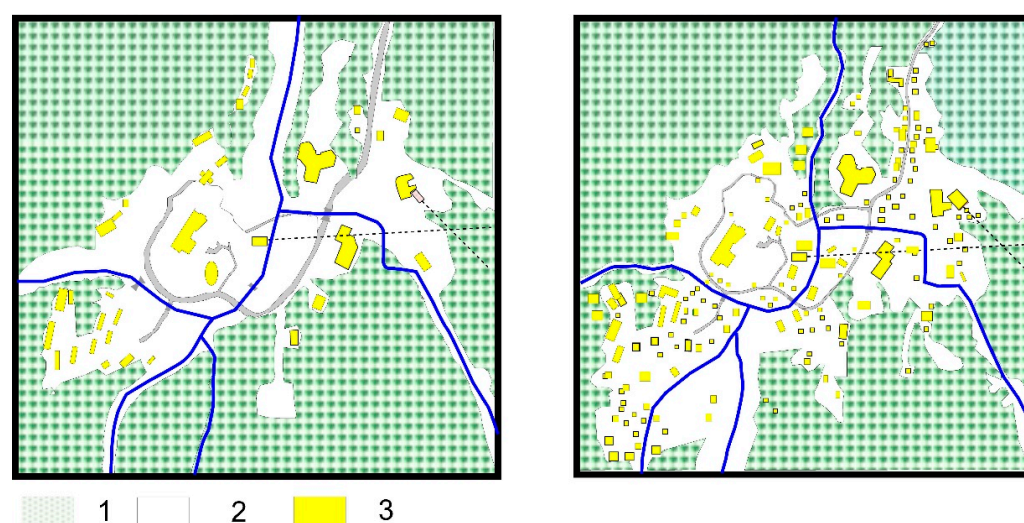
The TBR was founded in 1936 to protect the unique alpine nature of the Western Caucasus. About 500 hectares of land in the center of the reserve is allocated for tourism. However, over time, this territory also became scarce. In the 1990s, every piece of this land was sold for the construction of hotels. The number of tourists increased from 200,000 in 2000 to 700,000 today. A lot of illegally built objects (cafes, small hotels, spontaneous markets, etc.) appeared outside the 500 ha zone. The authorities tried to fight illegal building, using all possible methods, including the demolition of emerging objects. However, all efforts faded in numerous court decisions, repeated complaints, and revisions of decisions. The length of the proceedings played into the hands of the entrepreneurs, who delayed the implementations of court decisions in every possible way, and the unauthorized buildings were resold to other owners. As a result, the boundaries between the 500 ha area and the reserve have ceased to be clear. In 2018, the federal government decided to transform the reserve into a national park, which meant allowing the development of tourist infrastructure and reducing conservation. Numerous protests and appeals to the authorities by the local community have been unsuccessful.

The situation with the Dombai tourism-excursion complex, located as an insular areal on 102 hectares of land, mirrors the whole tangle of problems (Figure 4). According to the re-mapping data, the building density of this enclave has increased by several times (Figure 5).



Figure 4. Dombai.





**Figure 5.** Recreational development of Dombai, 1985 (**left**) and 2020 (**right**). 1—forest, 2—forest-meadow (potential places for building), 3—building, mainly tourism objects.

The creation of a land market led to the increasing construction of private hotels and residential high-rise buildings. Purchasing apartments in these houses became popular with residents of other regions of Russia, mainly Moscow. The landscape at the bottom of the valley within the allotted 102 hectares quickly turned into a dense urban environment with all the inherent problems, primarily waste, parking spots, air pollution, etc. (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Key actors, resources and institutions in the TBR.

Years	Actors	Resources	Institutions
1990	The State (TBR)	Wildlife	State legislation on nature protection
2020	The State (TBR, the North Caucasus Resorts), local community, businesses	Wildlife, land for the construction of recreational facilities	State legislation on nature protection transformed towards lowering the status of nature protection, a decree on the development of tourism in the North Caucasus

As in the case of the ERNP, in the 1990s. the state monopoly on natural resources collapsed with the adoption of laws permitting the privatization of land and giving the local community broad powers of self-government. In Soviet times, routes and other tourist sites within the TBR were localized; there was strict control and sanctions for violations. However, the deterioration of the economic situation in the 1990s led to an unregulated growth of entrepreneurial activity; the sanction costs were significantly lower than the income received from tourism. As a result of the last three decades of unregulated tourist infrastructure construction, many objects appeared on the territory of the TBR and its borders, and something had to be carried out. The decision to transform the TBR into a national park was perceived by the local community as a tragedy. After all, in the Russian environmental legislation, the status of a reserve prohibits any other use of land except for nature conservation activities. The status of a national park allows land plots of other owners and users to be located within the boundaries of national parks without being withdrawn from economic use [47]. According to the local community, this “provides unprecedented opportunities for the gradual seizure of specially protected land plots; it is only a matter of time. Unsystematic, uncontrolled, chaotic development in the protected area will accelerate, which will cause irreparable damage to the natural reserve as well as the endemic flora and fauna of the North Caucasus” [48].

#### 4. Discussion

The protected areas of the North Caucasus have different key management problems, with the most common being the issue of balancing nature conservation and development (tourism). If we consider the consequences of these problems from the perspective of land use change, then it is easy to notice general trends expressed in the growth of urbanized recreational regions at the expense of natural landscapes. In this regard, the North Caucasus will hardly differ from other recreational regions of the world, where similar processes are observed. The application of the institutional approach and analysis of the “actors, resources, institutions” triad allows us to take a deeper look at the situation in the context of Russian specifics.

The examination of the transformation of environmental institutions using the above examples of ERNP and TBR shows a general trend away from state monopoly to a multi-actor community represented by local residents and businesses in addition to the state. During the transition period, weak institutions and control within PAs created loopholes for the illegal allocation of land for the construction of tourist facilities in protected areas. Local entrepreneurs resort to corruption schemes, protectionism (for example, using the support of high-ranking officials to exert pressure on local authorities) and the use of contradictions in legislation.

A detailed analysis of examples also demonstrates that the fate of development and decision-making is, as in Soviet times, in the hands of the federal government. It seemed that the status of the TBR (internationally recognized as a biosphere reserve) served as a powerful protection against all kinds of unexpected decisions. However, in this particular case, the local population was in the least advantageous position. They were not involved in the discussion of the status of the TBR and the development of the area as a whole. The decision to transform the TBR into a national park was unexpected; it opened new opportunities for the tourism in the region, but it also raised the problem of preserving valuable natural landscapes.

In the case of the ERNP, the local community, organized on ethnic and kinship ties, was in a better position. The law on local self-governance allowed the local population to legally develop and secure the most convenient lands for private use, and control access to most of the tourist infrastructure. In both cases (ERNP and TBR), the state made no attempt to cooperate with and involve the local population in the development of joint conservation mechanisms through close collaboration. The state and its officials are not interested in a long-term dialogue with the local community; they rush in and produce radical solutions that can increase tensions in the region and lead to the aggravation of environmental problems. The root problem, therefore, is the divergence of interests between the state and the local community (Figure 6).

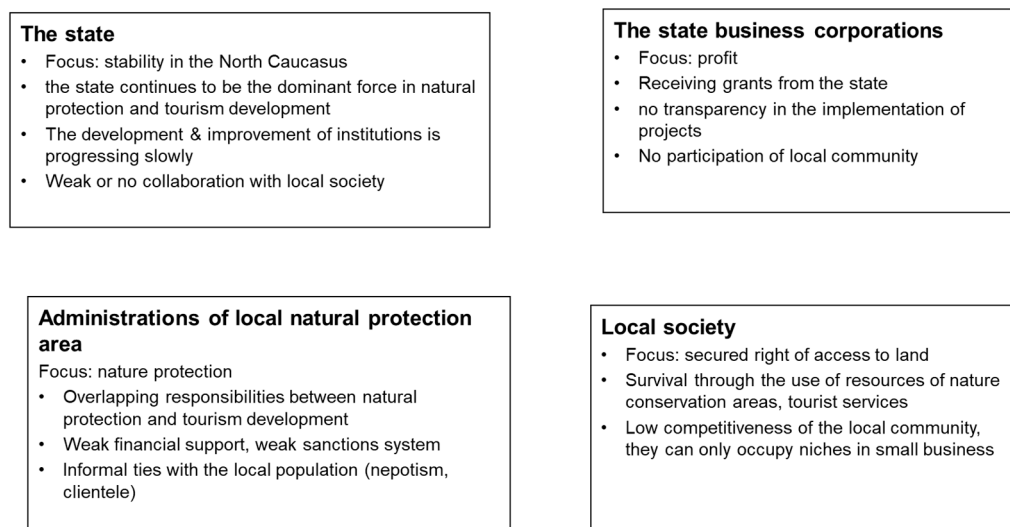


Figure 6. Diverging interests of key actors.

The current constellation of actors and the institutional environment around the PAs are represented by two main poles. One side is represented by the state and its state development corporation. In addition, the other side is represented by the local community, which to a greater or lesser extent has merged with the PAs, dealing with conservation issues on the ground. This community has wide competence and a certain autonomy, which the state cannot ignore. The state's influence on the management of PAs (1) is limited to formal institutions, while the real management and life activities involve informal relations and rules characteristic of the ethnic community (including links between the local community and PAs)—(6). The state uses the North Caucasus Resorts state corporation to push its interests (2) and subsidizes social development programs (3). Attempts to find mechanisms for relationships between the State Corporation and the local community (4), along with the management of the PAs (5), are met with distrust from the local community fearful of losing the right to access resources.

Thus, the state does not fundamentally change the policy in the field of environmental protection, which was laid down in the Soviet era and based on a centralized approach that limits the involvement of local actors. In addition, the state imposes its own vision for solving development problems. The above analysis of the tangle of contradictions in the examples of two protected areas shows that this approach is not effective; it leads to the emergence of informal institutions and relations. For a more open dialogue between the state and the local community in PAs, it is necessary to develop and implement management mechanisms and introduce the principles of benefit sharing. This will create confidence leading to the optimization of the institutional environment, primarily by reducing informal practices regulating environmental management within protected areas.

## 5. Conclusions

The study examines the main actors and institutions that regulate conservation and land matters within protected areas in the North Caucasus. The socio-political reforms of the last decades have been aimed at ensuring an institutional transition and creating laws regulating regional and local institutions of land use and relations, increasing the effectiveness of local self-governance and development. There is a multilateral conflict over land and the status of protected areas. One of the conflicting parties is represented by the state along with state business corporations. On the other side is the local community, which is closely linked to the administration of local protected areas. Reducing the status of protected areas allows the state to carry out development decisions. It is beneficial for state corporations, but it only deepens the main problems and conflicts. Instead of reducing the status of protected areas to promote tourism development projects (that are not aligned with the interests of the local community), the state should: create spaces for cooperation and participation, co-opt local actors and institutions to improve the effectiveness of the nature conservation system, create a joint vision for valorization of nature protection institutions, considering their carrying capacity (inviting all interested actors).

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