

'Creeping' civil war in the North Caucasus

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Over the last year, the situation in Russia's North Caucasus has become further destabilised. Attacks and armed clashes happen daily, and destabilisation is spreading to an increasingly large area. The extent of violence in the region is so great that it can already be stated that a *de facto* civil war is taking place, the warring parties being the Islamic armed underground movement which operates under the banner of the so-called Emirate of the North Caucasus, and the secular governments of the individual republics, who are supported by local and federal branches of the Russian Federation's Interior Ministry and Federal Security Service.

Moscow has no idea how to successfully tackle the Caucasus rebellion. Force has proved to be costly and unproductive, while the attempts made since early 2010 to integrate the region with the rest of Russia by implementing development programmes have not brought the desired results, because of widespread corruption and faint interest from businessmen who are afraid to invest in such an unsafe region. A growing problem for Moscow, particularly for the prestige of the state, is attacks by militants on areas near Sochi, where the 2014 Winter Olympics is to take place.

It must be assumed that over the next 3 years before the Olympics, Moscow's priority in the region will be to ensure the safety of Olympic preparations, and then the games themselves. It cannot be ruled out that the North Caucasus Federal District with its 'troubled republics' will be surrounded by a kind of *cordon sanitaire* (Sochi is situated in the neighbouring Southern Federal District). This could in turn strengthen these republics' isolation, maintain the state of permanent instability, and postpone the prospects of solving the region's acute economic and social problems.

The region's ongoing destabilisation

The level of security in the North Caucasus has been deteriorating steadily since autumn 2007, when the Chechen national liberation movement finally changed its character and evolved into a pan-Caucasian front for global jihad. Up to late 2009, most acts of violence were carried out in Dagestan and Ingushetia, and slightly fewer in Chechnya; later the geographic

coverage of the attacks began gradually spreading to Kabardino-Balkaria¹ and North Ossetia². The militants have also intensified their activity in Chechnya itself³.

In 2010, as a result of terrorist attacks and clashes between members of the underground and law enforcement agencies in the region, nearly 750 people were killed, an average of more than 2 fatalities a day (the number of injured was several times higher)⁴. Moreover, in two terrorist attacks conducted by Caucasian terrorists on two metro stations in Moscow (29 March 2010), 40 people were killed and nearly 90 injured.

The dynamics of the deteriorating situation can be shown best by the example of Dagestan, the largest republic in the North Caucasus.

Victims of terrorist attacks and clashes with the armed underground movement in Dagestan		2009	2010
Civilians	killed	51	78
	injured	39	107
Law enforcement agencies' officers	killed	82	124
	injured	136	200
Militants	killed	130	176
	<i>detained</i>	29	41
TOTAL	killed and injured	438	685

During the first weeks of 2011, the trend observed in the previous year was maintained and even strengthened. In January 48 people were killed in the North Caucasus, and 37 more lost their lives in a terrorist attack on Moscow's Domodedovo airport on 24 January. Between 18 and 20 February the militants carried out a series of attacks in Kabardino-Balkaria, in which 4 tourists from Moscow were killed and a cable railway in Elbrus was damaged. On 25 February several groups of militants simultaneously attacked a number of buildings

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in the republic's capital, Nalchik. The destabilisation of Kabardino-Balkaria is a source of growing concern for the government, as it is located relatively close to Sochi, where the 2014 Winter Olympics are to take place (the distance from the surroundings of Elbrus to Krasnaya Polana, where most of the races will take place, is about 200 km as the crow flies). The total number of people killed in the region in February is 59.

The extent and intensity of the violence suggest that the armed conflict taking place in the North Caucasus is in fact a civil war. One side is the Islamic militants, and the other is the governments of the region's individual republics, who are supported by local and federal branches of the Russian Interior Ministry and Federal Security Service.

The armed conflict's parties

Militants

The group which has claimed responsibility for most of the attacks and other acts of terror is the so-called Emirate of the North Caucasus, a virtual Islamic 'state' established in autumn 2007 by Dokku Umarov, who appointed himself 'emir' while resigning as 'president' of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and announcing the end of its existence. This was final confir-

¹ The most notorious acts there included the demolition of the hydro-electric power plant on the Baksan river (21 July 2010) and the murder of the republic's mufti Anas Pshikhachev (15 December 2010).

² In an attack on a market in Vladikavkaz, the republic's capital, on 9 September 2010, 18 people were killed and 160 injured.

³ Members of the armed underground movement carried out an attack on Tsentoroy, the home village of the republic's head Ramzan Kadyrov (29 August 2010), and the Chechen Parliament in Grozny (19 October 2010).

⁴ In this work, the author's own calculations are based on information published on the Memorial-run website <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/>, which provides the most comprehensive and reliable data on this issue.

mation that the ethnic separatist movement restricted to one republic has transformed into a separatism based on religion, and has expanded to the entire North Caucasus.

The Emirate has never been a centralised structure, but rather a banner under which groups of militants operate; they share the ideas propagated by Umarov and formally recognise his authority, but have significant autonomy⁵. The number of 'professional' fighters permanently stationed in mountain bases is probably as few as several hundred across the region⁶ (those who are killed are constantly replaced by new ones). Much more numerous – although hard to assess – is the strength of the 'support team' responsible for propaganda activities (such as running websites) and broadly understood logistics. It is even harder to assess the number of sympathisers to the Emirate, who are ready to put a militant up for the night, lend him their car⁷, or possibly take part in a single action. The Emirate is financed by global centres of jihad, and with protection money extorted from Caucasian entrepreneurs operating in the region and elsewhere.

The loose structure of the Emirate, together with its lack of rigid hierarchy and coordination between groups of militants, prevent them from organising large-scale attacks such as seizing a town; but on the other hand, these factors make it more difficult for the state to fight the in-

surgents. The elimination of several leading underground figures in 2010, such as Anzor Astemirov and Said Buryatsky, has not decreased the number of attacks. It can be assumed that even the elimination of Dokku Umarov would not significantly undermine the Emirate's military potential.

According to the 'Emir's statements, the militants' main goal is to actually separate the North Caucasus from Russia and establish a religious state governed by the principles of *sharia* law. The main enemy

of the Emirate is the Russian government and the Russian public which supports it. Umarov has also stressed that the Caucasus is part of the *ummah* (the community of all Muslims worldwide), and that the activity of the Emirate is in line with global jihad⁸. In practice, the militants' main enemy is the governments of the individual republics, who – in the militants' opinion – embody not only apostasy but also treachery, as they oppress their own nations at Moscow's behest. The victims of the terrorist attacks are principally the representatives of the republics' governments, the region's official Muslim clergy and officers of the law enforcement structures. Outside the region, the militants' spectacular attacks are primarily designed to be a demonstration of force (as has happened in Moscow).

Local governments and law enforcement agencies

The republics of the North Caucasus are governed by clan-based and mafia-type groups which are detached from their own societies but tolerated by Moscow. The latter only very rarely decides to dismiss a representative of the region's ruling elite (the exceptions were Ingushetia's president Murat Zyazikov, dismissed in autumn 2008, and Boris Ebzeyev, the head of Karachay-Cherkessia, dismissed in late February 2011). These elites blackmail Moscow by giving the impression that they are the sole guarantors of a given republic's stability and secular character. On the other hand, the federal government usually provides unconditional support for the local elites, and only sporadically engages in a dialogue with independent groups, such as NGOs. According to Akhmed Yarlykapov from the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, the local governments have been regularly appropriating the budget funds transferred to the Caucasus, as they see this money as their due payment, as well as a sign of Moscow's weakness⁹.

⁵ In 2010, at least ten Emirate commanders under the leadership of Hussein Gakayev refused obedience to Umarov. Moreover, a number of fully autonomous groups operate in the North Caucasus.

⁶ According to General Nikolai Rogozhkin, the chief of the Internal Troops of the Interior Ministry, the number of militants is about 500. Vladimir Mukhin, 'Nurgalieva usilili artilleriyeyi', *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 6 December 2010.

⁷ Such decisions may come quite easily, as solidarity with one's family clan or neighbours is deeply rooted in the Caucasian societies.

⁸ Umarov's video declarations are published by <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/>

⁹ Source: Akhmet Yarlykapov's statement during the seminar at the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) on 9 April 2010: "Should this money run out, local elites would feel exempt from any loyalty to the federal government."

The representatives of the republics' governments, the official Muslim clergy and officers of the law enforcement structures are the most common victims of terrorist attacks in the Caucasus. Outside the region, the militants' spectacular attacks are primarily designed to be a demonstration of force.

The units responsible for fighting militants include the Internal Troops of the Russian Interior Ministry¹⁰, as well as units subordinated to the individual republics' Interior Ministries and units of the Federal Security Service (some of which are directly subordinate to the FSS's leadership in Moscow, and some to its local branches). A complicated system of interrelations among the services, as well as conflicts of loyalty (officers of the local Interior Ministries usually belong to the titular nationalities, but there are exceptions to this rule among the senior management of these Ministries) reduces the efficiency of these structures' operations.

¹⁰ A year ago, there were 23,000 soldiers of the Internal Troops of the Interior Ministry deployed in the North Caucasus (Vladimir Mukhin, 'Bessilye antiterrora', *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* 31 March 2010). In 2010 this number increased (Vladimir Mukhin, 'Nurgalieva...', *op.cit.*).

No Russian government has yet succeeded in working out a coherent strategy for the region's development. The methods of force which Moscow has applied for over a decade have proved unproductive.

The units subordinated to the Russian Ministry of Defence (which is not represented at the republican level) have not participated in operations against the militants since 2002. The army occasionally lends heavy military equipment such as tanks to Interior Ministry units for individual operations, mainly in Dagestan. Therefore, the army cannot be considered a party in this conflict.

Social background

It is hard to assess the mood of the civilian population, but widespread dislike of the corrupt bureaucracy together with the region's rapid Islamisation¹¹ have led to the assumption that the militants have popular understanding, if not the sympathy. The ongoing demodernisation of the North Caucasus (the return of social institutions which existed in the region before the Russian conquest in the 19th century) and its de-Russification (Russian language and culture are being expelled from the public space) also work in favour of the militants. Another factor that aids them is the law enforcement agencies' violations of the rights of Muslims on a mass scale, by persecuting (apprehending, beating, brutally interrogating) believers, for example bearded men. Having experienced such persecution, these people often join the radicals. Also, some representatives at the lowest level of local administrations (in villages and small towns) certainly sympathise with the militants¹².

¹¹ According to assessments, up to 10% of young people in the North Caucasus republics when asked about their ethnicity declare themselves to be of 'Muslim nationality' (*ibidem*). According to the expert, a process of 'shariatisation' in the area, i.e. increasingly widespread use of Muslim law in everyday life, can be said to be ongoing.

¹² Following the attacks in Kabardino-Balkaria on 18–20 February 2011, Aleksandr Khloponin, the presidential envoy to the North Caucasus federal district, said that these governments had not reacted adequately to the existing threats (thus suggesting that they did not inform the relevant structures about the places of residence and the movement of militants which they had in fact been aware of).

The failure of the 'carrot and stick' policy

The situation as presented above has developed after years of neglect and abandonment. No ruling Russian government has yet succeeded in working out a coherent strategy for the region's development. During Boris Yeltsin's rule (1991–1999), Moscow's policy was mostly reactive – the Kremlin merely responded to the course of events in the Caucasus. When Vladimir Putin took power and the 'second Chechen war' broke out in 1999, the government chose a 'force model' for managing the region that required the constant presence of Russian armed forces. Extensive costs and lack of tangible results forced this policy to become more flexible. It is then that the concept of 'Chechenisation' was born, under which the republic's government received broad autonomy: former militants were amnestied and the role of Islam in political and social life was increased, among other measures. This stabilisation was achieved at the cost of the Chechen presidents Akhmed Kadyrov and his son Ramzan eliminating any internal opposition, but it allowed the anti-terror regime in Chechnya (which had been in force for nearly 10 years) to be lifted (on 16 April 2009). However, by that time, most of the active militants were already outside the republic.

Processes analogous to 'Chechnisation' were supposed to cover the entire region, but except for Chechnya no leader was found who – as Ramzan Kadyrov did – was able to take full control of his republic. In the face of the failure of the previously adopted policy (the armed underground movement was not eliminated), and in response to a new wave of terrorist attacks, the government decided to change its 'stick' to a 'carrot', and to foster the economic development of the region. Moscow believed that the 'economisation' of its policy towards the North Caucasus would help solve problems such as structural unemployment (which according to official statistics is 16% on average, and 50% in Chechnya), underinvestment, overpopulation (the highest birth rate in the country), land shortages, poverty, and corruption. The improvement of living standards – by extra budget allocations and investments, especially in the tourism sector – was to stabilise the situation and reduce migration to Moscow and other Russian cities.

A turning point in the Russian government's tactics was President Medvedev's decision of 19 January 2010 to separate the North Caucasus federal district from the South federal district. The new district comprises seven administrative units of the Russian Federation: Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia and the Stavropol Krai (Adygea and the Krasnodai Krai, where Sochi is located, are among the repu-

blics that remained in the South federal district). The position of the presidential envoy to the new district was entrusted to the economist Aleksandr Khloponin, a former governor of the Krasnoyarsk Krai in Siberia who had the reputation of a skilful manager. At the same time, Khloponin was nominated deputy Prime Minister in the federal government.

The North Caucasus' tourist and business potential has been promoted by President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin themselves. However, investors have been scared off by corruption and the lack of security.

After several weeks in office, Khloponin presented a new concept called 'Peak 5642' (referring to Mount Elbrus), which offered a comprehensive program for tourism and winter sports development in the North-Western Caucasus. The entire program was to cost \$12-13 billion. However, the concept was not followed up by a more detailed document.

Khloponin's achievement was the preparation of the 'Strategy for the North Caucasus's development by 2025', which Prime Minister Vladimir Putin endorsed on 6 September 2010. The strategy outlined the reduction of unemployment to 5% and a 2.5-fold increase in salaries. Private Russian and foreign capital was to carry out investment programmes in the region, which would receive extra financial support from the Development Corporation of the North Caucasus, established by the state-owned Vneshekonombank.

The adoption of this strategy coincided with an escalation of terrorist attacks. Apart from threats to personal safety (the Emirate warned it would attack people who cooperated with the government), businessmen were scared off by the dysfunctional socio-economic system that has developed in the North Caucasus, based on corrupt clan-based and mafia-type relations, which Khloponin did not succeed in combating. Moreover, not having dealt with the Caucasus before, he came into conflict with Ramzan Kadyrov, which paralysed his activity in Chechnya. Therefore, even though the North Caucasus' tourist and business potential was promoted by President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin themselves, there is a great risk that the precepts of the 'strategy' will never be implemented in reality.

A year of carrying out the 'economisation' policy in the Caucasus has not brought any tangible results. The involvement of serious investors in the North Caucasus is restricted to Olympic facilities and the accompanying infrastructure around Sochi.

The Olympic context

The establishment of the North Caucasus federal district has symbolically separated Sochi from the North Caucasus. The creation of relevant district authorities and agencies may also help to give the Games additional security. Apart from the threat of terrorist attacks by the Emirate, the likelihood of which should be deemed significant and growing steadily, it cannot be ruled out that another risk for the Olympics will come from radical Circassian groups from Russia and abroad. These groups hold that a genocide of Circassians took place on the territory of the current Krasnodar Krai in the 19th century; it is estimated that about half of the Circassian population, a total of up to 2 million people, died during the Caucasian War or were

Apart from the threat of terrorist attacks, whose likelihood should be defined as significant, it cannot be ruled out that radical Circassian groups will take different actions aimed against the Olympics.

deported to Turkey. Organising the games in the place where the Russian army massacred the Circassian population and held a victory parade (on 21 May 1864 in Krasnaya Polyana) is treated as a desecration of the victims' memory. So far, the Circassians have confined themselves to peaceful protests, but violent actions cannot be ruled out in the future.

Another adversary of the Winter Olympics in Sochi is Georgia. Tbilisi has repeatedly pointed out that Russia has been using the territory of separatist Abkhazia during preparations for the Games by fetching construction materials from there and by planning to use Abkhazian hotels to accommodate the competitors. Tbilisi has also signalled that the construction of some Olympic infrastructure is affecting the ecological balance in this part of the Caucasus, an opinion shared by Russian environmentalists. On 25 November 2010 the Georgian parliament set up a special committee to monitor the preparations for the Games. By doing so, Tbilisi will try to prove that Russia is violating the provisions of the Olympic Charter, Georgia's probable intention being to cause a boycott of the Olympics. Probably to prevent this scenario, President Medvedev suggested on 18 February 2011 that Georgia may be 'behind all sorts of provocations' aimed at destabilising the Games.

The Caucasus: essential, but increasingly alien

Russia's relations with Georgia and the entire South Caucasus are another factor that affects the situation in the North Caucasus. In the 19th century Russia conquered this region in order to be able to control Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia, which had earlier been included in the Russian Empire. Similarly, in order to maintain its current influence in the South Caucasus, it seems necessary for Moscow to fully control the North Caucasus¹³. PImportant energy and communication routes run via the North Caucasus (such as the Baku-Novorossiysk oil pipeline, and highways to Armenia and Iran). Moreover, this is a seaside area that stretches between the Black and the Caspian Seas, with important ports (Makhachkala), airports (Mineralnye Vody), health resorts (Pyatigorsk, Essentuki), and the only winter sports bases in the European part of Russia (in the regions around Sochi and Mount Elbrus).

These circumstances indicate that the stability of the region is crucial for Moscow, and in the long run this stability cannot be achieved without integrating the region with the rest of the country. Meanwhile, the opposite process is underway – the North Caucasus is becoming increasingly isolated, and its 'alienation' from Russia's civilisational, cultural and social space is progressing. The situation is beginning to resemble its status in the 19th century, when it was treated as an 'internal colony'. An illustration of this is a growing xenophobia among Russians, which manifests itself in recurring attacks in Moscow and other Russian cities on people arriving from the Caucasus and Central Asia.

¹³ Georgia understands this, and is therefore trying to loosen this control by making attempts to draw the North Caucasus nations closer. To do so, Tbilisi has lifted the visa regime for people who are registered as residents in the North Caucasus, has launched a Russian-language TV channel called First Caucasian (PIK), organised several international conferences devoted to the North Caucasus, and offered North Caucasian young people an interesting education programme (studies in Russian), etc.

More and more experts have pointed out that for a growing number of Russians, the North Caucasus is becoming a sort of 'alien body' within their country, while ever more residents of the Caucasus share the conviction that Russia is not their home country¹⁴. In 2010, Russian political journalism witnessed a resurgence in enquiries – unseen since the 1990s – concerning the possibility of Moscow abandoning the North Caucasus, and the probable consequences thereof¹⁵.

What next: isolation instead of integration?

Within the next three years, Moscow's priority will surely be to safely prepare for and carry out the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi in 2014. This is a matter of prestige for the state, and there is no doubt that Russia will do anything to hold the Games, in the first place, and secondly to reduce all sorts of risks, including terrorist attacks, as much as possible. The probable scenarios include the creation of a kind of *cordon sanitaire* around the North

The North Caucasus is becoming increasingly 'alienated' from Russia's civilisational, cultural and social space. The current situation in the region recalls its status in the 19th century, when it was treated as an 'internal colony'.

Caucasus federal district, which could be similar to a well-guarded border in the Cold War period. To guard the border, military units subordinated to the Ministry of Defence may be involved, the Russian military presence in Abkhazia may be reinforced, and the protection of the Black Sea coastline strengthened. A special operational headquarters, which is expected to start operating in January 2012, will take

care of the Olympic Games security. This may help in preventing terrorist attacks, as it is almost certain that the Emirate will attempt to do so (the sites of recent attacks have been symbolically 'approaching' Sochi).

In the long run, it seems impossible to solve the problems of the North Caucasus and to reintegrate it with the Russian legal, economic, social and cultural space without the development of a comprehensive approach to the region. While doing so, Moscow should not be guided by the 'divide and conquer' principle, as illustrated by its arbitrary delimitation of administrative boundaries of the Russian Federation's Caucasian republics (and smaller local entities)¹⁶. It is also essential for Moscow to start a dialogue with independent communities and withdraw its unconditional support for the local elites. Otherwise, it may prove to be extremely difficult to keep the North Caucasus in Russia's political space.

¹⁴ For example, see Islam Tekushev, 'Terakt. A v otvet tishina...', *Caucasus Times*, 26 January 2011 (<http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?id=20735>; accessed on 8 March 2011). Tekushev writes: "Over 15 years of confrontation, the Russian North Caucasus has become a hostile 'near abroad' for the majority of Russians. (...) On the other hand, for residents of the North Caucasus, the remaining part of Russia has also become a hostile territory, where Caucasian national dances (such as the *lezginka*) are treated almost like a demonstration of aggression or superiority."

¹⁵ For example, see Sergey Markodonov, 'Uyti nelzya', *Gazeta.ru*, 21 December 2010 (http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2010/12/21_a_3472821.shtml; accessed on 8 March 2011).

¹⁶ Yarlykapov's statement, *op.cit.*: "Moscow thinks in categories of national republics, and has been trying to find a solution which would take into account the Caucasus' ethnic divisions. However, a just and fair 'parity', ensuring that all Caucasian nations are proportionally represented in the local governments, is not possible, as it is virtually impossible to satisfy all the claims and demands. What is needed is an idea that would unite all communities. Muslim radicals have already figured that out." Another statement was made by the political scientist Geydar Jemal: "The [central] government is inciting the Caucasian nations against itself and creating ethnic tension by separating peoples into ethnic territories." G. Dzhemal, 'Vlast razvodit ludey na Kavkaze po natsionalnym terrotoryam', *Kavkazskiy Uzel*, 22 February 2011 (<http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/181372>; accessed on 8 March 2011).

MAP

North Caucasus and Georgia. Administrative division



Abbreviations: N. O. - North Ossetia; S. O. - South Ossetia; ING. - Ingushetia



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