

Losing the Caucasus

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SUMMARY

- “Reliably unstable” is probably the best way to describe the situation in the North Caucasus. Although the “anti-terrorist operation” has been formally ended in Chechnya, armed clashes and terrorist attacks remain a daily occurrence throughout the region.
- Russia’s federal authorities are inconsistent in their policies and have failed to resolve the key issues. The emphasis on force is not working.
- An alternative policy was proposed by Ingushetia’s new president, Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, who made efforts to achieve public consensus in his republic.
- Many predict increasingly tense relations between Moscow and Chechnya’s ambitious leader, Ramzan Kadyrov.

The title of this Briefing is what first comes to mind when looking at the situation in Russia’s North Caucasus and, for all its seeming banality, it best describes the current state of affairs there. More and more, the collection of republics on the northern slope of the Caucasus Mountains looks and feels more like Russia’s neighbor than a constituent part of the state. While it accepts federal authority, the region lives by its own laws. It is a neighbor for whom dependence on Russia is convenient and advantageous and who cannot conceive of life outside Russia, but who will nevertheless

continue to stand up for its own autonomy and even independence. In Moscow and elsewhere, a strange term has arisen to describe this situation: the North Caucasus, they say, is Russia’s “internal abroad”.

To state yet another platitude, the North Caucasus is not a single entity. Its peoples have different traditions, and the roads they took to join Russia and their lives as part of Russia are similarly divergent. Even as we discuss general trends in the region, we must bear in mind that each republic, and even each district, sometimes even individual villages, have their own specific circumstances.



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The Caucasus is a very diverse mosaic, and it would be a risky business to judge what is happening in the downstream areas of the Sunzha River (which flows down from the mountaintops through three of Russia's Caucasian republics), for example, by looking at what is going on upstream.

The North Caucasus is divided into two sub-regions: the eastern sub-region, which includes Dagestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia; and the western sub-region, which includes the other republics (North Ossetia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Adygea). Kabardino-Balkaria is in the middle. Some consider it part of the western sub-region, while others place it in the east, and still others again see it as forming a third, "central" sub-region.

Various criteria have been used to categorize the republics of the North Caucasus (the degree of Islamization is one of the main ones, for example, with the east being considered more Islamized than the west). But the main criterion presently is the political situation that arose out of the collapse of the Soviet Union and continues today. The east is reliably unstable, while the west has periodic flare-ups followed by periods of relative calm. Chechnya, of course, is the champion as far as instability goes. Specialists, however, think that the situation in Dagestan is even more dangerous. This view is shared by Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, though he may be boasting to a degree about his own services in pacifying "his" republic.

Kabardino-Balkaria is somewhere in between as far as instability is concerned. The tragic events of October 2005, when Interior Ministry and Federal Security Service (FSB) units spent an entire day in battles with the Islamic opposition (a conventional designation), was more than just an isolated episode (97 rebels, 35 law enforcement of-

icers and 14 civilians were killed in these battles).¹ Rather, these events were the culmination of a cycle of conflict stretching well back into the recent past, while the consequences are still making their effects felt today and will likely remain in people's memories for a long time yet. Many analysts, as a result, increasingly see Kabardino-Balkaria as part of the more restless eastern sub-region.

To what extent is the instability in the east worsening the situation in the west? There is a real threat that conflict will indeed spread. Islamist separatism has established strong roots among Muslims in Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Adygea, and North Ossetia, and it can always be sure of finding support among fellow believers in the neighboring republics. The Ingush-Ossetian conflict, which in the 1990s erupted into outright violence, is not as acute as in past years, but continues to smolder and could spread to other parts of the Caucasus.

Much has been said about the general causes of the potential for conflict in the North Caucasus. Serious economic difficulties, growing inequality, unemployment, competition between the interests of ethnicities, clans and other groups, the divide between the local elites in power and the ordinary people, the exceptionally rampant corruption even by Russian standards, religious extremism, and border disputes between and within republics all get a share of the blame. All of these causes are interlinked, and it is impossible to put them in any clear hierarchy. There is no single thread one could pull to untangle the whole knot. It is commonly argued that success can be achieved only by strictly enforcing federal laws, but not even Moscow complies strictly with the federal laws.

The results so far

Let's take a look at what the federal authorities have managed to achieve in the decade since Vladimir Putin promised to "wipe out the terrorists in the outhouse."

First, and most importantly, the war in Chechnya has ended (leaving aside discussion of the origins and conduct of the first and second Chechen wars). But the first and second Chechen wars were ended less by force than through dialogue with part of the Chechen separatists, and by capitalizing on divisions among the separatists themselves. Some of the separatists, taking Akhmat-hajji Kadyrov and his son Ramzan at their word and thus receiving the implicit guarantee of Russia's protection, came over to Moscow's side and began fighting against their erstwhile comrades. Whether by luck or calculation, the Kremlin put its finger on the most suitable candidates for carrying out its policy of "chechenizing" its renewed domination of the republic. The Kadyrovs, father and son, proved successful in becoming national leaders, establishing a stable special relationship with Moscow, and undertaking Chechnya's reconstruction. They wielded a very heavy hand in doing so, and risked their own lives; Akhmat-hajji Kadyrov was assassinated in 2004.

Second, the idea of outright separatism had exhausted itself. Were the Russian Federation to disintegrate entirely, real separatism in the Caucasus would surely emerge again. But short of that, real – as opposed to rhetorical – separatism has become a non-starter in the North Caucasus. Separatism would inevitably be accompanied by internal interethnic strife and conflicts over Islamism, which would ultimately mean the self-destruction of the local peoples. All politicians with even a modicum of responsibility realize this, as does society at large;

the latter, I hope, has not lost its instinct for self-preservation.

Third, the unpopular ex-presidents rejected by the public have been replaced by new leaders, in whom people have placed their hopes. In some cases, these hopes have been fulfilled, even if only in part. The new president of North Ossetia, Teimuraz Mamsurov, for example, has attempted to address the consequences of the Beslan tragedy of 2004. Kabardino-Balkaria's new president, Arsen Kanokov, has promised to get to the bottom of what happened in 2005. But the most energetic and efficient of all the new leaders has been Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, the army general who became president of Ingushetia in 2008 and, in trying to build bridges between the authorities and the public in order to restore stability, has "demonstrated a completely un-military, peaceful policy."²

This region increasingly looks and feels more like Russia's neighbor than a constituent part of the state, who accepts federal authority, but lives by its own laws. It is a neighbor for whom dependence on Russia is convenient and advantageous and who cannot conceive of life outside Russia, but who will nevertheless continue to stand up for its own autonomy.

As a result, the federal authorities have managed to achieve at least a fragile peace by offering the local elites an implicit agreement that can be summed up as follows: you give us your loyalty and obedience, and we will not meddle in the way you run your internal affairs.

What has not been done

The authorities' biggest failure has been in institutionalizing instability. Events over the course of 2009 have shown just how illusory the "political calm" in the region re-

ally is. Intoxicated by its successes in fighting separatism and the early results of its “chechenization” policy, the Kremlin woke up too late to what was happening in Dagestan, Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria. Reports from the first two of these republics have long since started to sound more like news from the front lines of a war zone. In Ingushetia alone, 58 armed attacks took place in the first half of 2008, leaving 37 law enforcement and security personnel dead and 79 injured.³ Militants have suffered even higher casualties. Dagestan’s interior minister, Adilgeri Magomedtagirov, was shot in May, Ingushetian president Yevkurov was seriously wounded in an attack in June, and there have been repeated attempts on Ramzan Kadyrov’s life.

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One can produce all kinds of elaborate theories on who is behind these attacks, ranging from Islamists and the beneficiaries of corruption to “elusive avengers” (in a region where the traditions of the blood feud have made a comeback). But no matter who is behind the terrorist attacks, their systematic nature, the professionalism with which they are executed, and the authorities’ powerlessness to prevent them are evidence of the permanent political crisis in the region and the federal and local authorities’ inability to exercise effective control.

The federal authorities’ next strategic mistake is that their relations with Russia’s

Caucasus regions are based on the personalization of politics, with priority placed on personal relations between regional politicians and their patrons in Moscow. Ramzan Kadyrov is the classic example, but the model also applies to a greater or lesser extent to other republics’ former presidents, Murat Zyazikov in Ingushetia, Alexander Dzasokhov in North Ossetia, Mustafa Batdiev in Karachaevo-Cherkessia, as well as to their successors, including Yevkurov. Of course, personal trust between “patrons” and “clients” has some obvious advantages, but at the same time, leaders accountable only to the authorities in Moscow lose the trust of their own people, and this eventually gives rise to mutual dissatisfaction and leads to conflicts.

Finally, the excessively “private” nature of these relations brings the constant risk of further (or renewed) destabilization, should the local partner be forced to leave the political stage for one reason or another. This concern has been raised frequently with regard to Ramzan Kadyrov, but it was Yevkurov who was suddenly (though aren’t these things always sudden?) put out of the action in a bombing, and even just finding someone to replace him while he recovered turned out to be difficult.

Political institutions and parties in the region have seen their real role eviscerated. Both are becoming secondary players, mechanisms in the hands of the executive authorities. In some cases, during local elections, for example, political parties are still called on to play a part, camouflaging clan, ethnic and other private interests, but they are unable to guarantee stability, and no one expects them to do so.

This policy of personal power is combined with a continued emphasis on resolving problems by force. Force is always the simplest solution. There is an undoubted

need for a federal military (or para-military) presence in the region, but it only restrains the potential for violence, rather than actually eradicating it at its roots. Furthermore, as copious evidence attests, the federal presence often ends up provoking conflicts. Attempts to curtail the use of force and the lifting in April of the regime of the counter-terrorist operation in Chechnya (which was akin to martial law) have not brought results. The spontaneous flare-up in violence in several of the region's republics only confirms that military force is not a panacea. Despite official declarations, the counter-terrorist operation regime remains in place de facto, and even Ramzan Kadyrov, who had demanded its end (in order to transfer more law enforcement authority from Moscow to Grozny), has had to acquiesce. Reliance on force has left the Kremlin aware that it cannot continue to keep its troops in the region and is yet unable to withdraw them. For now, it seems, Moscow is sticking with the status quo.

What next?

Moscow's military solution is being implemented at two levels. The federal agencies are paramount, while local security forces – of which Kadyrov's appear to be most successful and ruthless – act separately and in tandem.

Kadyrov's means of action, his ruthlessness and, most of all, his desire to ensure an exclusive position for himself and his republic within the Russian political structure, were effective during his first years in power. The war had just ended, Kadyrov indeed faced exceptional circumstances and acted as he saw fit, not letting anything stop him. The situation today is different. Absolute success is no longer possible, the rebels still have considerable reserves, people are getting tired of the to-

tal monopolization of power, and far from everyone is willing to see Islamization make a return in the republic. Finally, Kadyrov's name has been mentioned in connection to four headline-making murders: those of journalist Anna Politkovskaya, the brothers Ruslan and Sulim Yamadayev and the well known human rights campaigner Natalya Estemirova. This is all gradually starting to irritate the Kremlin.

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Meanwhile, what has been done in Chechnya cannot be repeated in the rest of Russia's Caucasus. Imitating Ramzan Kadyrov's tactics in Dagestan, Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria would be not just risky, but unrealistic. That said, there is no clarity about what tactics would work better. President Dmitry Medvedev held a meeting with Russia's security and law enforcement officials at the end of July 2009 in response to the escalation of tension in the region. Such a meeting is in itself evidence that the presidents of the North Caucasus republics on their own are unable to keep their region at peace.

Time is running out.

Dagestan will hold a presidential election in 2010, the conduct of which will be a crucial test not only for the situation in Dagestan, often referred to as "the heart of the Caucasus," but in many respects for the neighboring republics, too. Moscow has not yet chosen the winner, and it will not be an

easy choice for the Kremlin. The two main blocs in the republic – one supporting current President Mukhu Aliev, and the other, dubbed “the Northern Alliance”, which has the sympathy of Kadyrov among others – each have their backers in Moscow. The rivalry in Dagestan itself will thus be compounded by differences in opinion among federal authorities.

The situation remains unclear in Ingushetia. While Yevkurov has returned to his post, it remains an open question whether he will be able (or allowed) to continue his course of bridging the gap between the authorities and public in Ingushetia and minimizing internal confrontation. But whatever happens, Ingushetia’s “experiment” offered an original new alternative that cannot be ignored.

The problem of borders and disputed territories in the North Caucasus remains unresolved. The area between North Ossetia and Ingushetia has long been fertile soil for conflict. Ingushetia has no clear borders at all. There are disputed territories between Dagestan and Chechnya. Furthermore, within the republics themselves the borders between districts are unclear, further contributing to periodic flare-ups in interethnic tension.

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Following the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 and Moscow’s subsequent recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, some Caucasus politicians took offense and aired cautiously frustration that Russia would solve international border disputes within a mat-

ter of hours when it sees fit, while letting internal boundary conflicts fester for years.

One of riskiest issues, as yet undecided, is that of whether to recreate the Chechen-Ingush Republic. Discussions of the idea have never completely stopped. The proposal has more backers in Chechnya than in Ingushetia, which would be the junior partner, but supporters of integration have been making their voices heard in cautious and, admittedly, confused fashion. Ramzan Kadyrov has notably spoken out against the idea, although some in his entourage support it. But it is rejected by practically all Ingush politicians, including the republic’s three presidents, past and present, Aushev, Zyazikov and Yevkurov. They all fear that restoration would see Ingushetia simply swallowed by Chechnya.

It is not entirely clear what the Kremlin’s stand is on the idea of restoring the Chechen-Ingush Republic. There has not been any clear expression of support, but at the same time, periodic calls for integration have come from members of the Chechen community attuned to the moods and preferences of the Russian establishment. But whatever the views on this issue, there is no doubt that if it comes to fruition it would radically change the situation in the region. Above all, it would mean the creation of a local “superpower”, with weightier and more dangerous border claims, including with regard to North Ossetia. This in turn could lead to consolidation between the North and South Ossetians and a rise in Ossetian nationalism. This could provide a very predictable outlet for the South Ossetians’ unspent energy, and it would put Moscow in the position of having to calm two of its “favorites”, Kadyrov and South Ossetian president Eduard Kokoity.

It is not possible to resolve the problems of the North Caucasus overnight. Moscow

can endlessly shuffle presidents, “wipe out” extremists, threaten those guilty of corruption, and pour billions of rubles of federal money into the region, but the North Caucasus will continue to reflect all of Russia’s own problems and woes, with its own power verticals that imitate, after a fashion, the power structure devised by the Kremlin.

The North Caucasus operates according to the same political model as the rest of Russia. But in the North Caucasus, this model has been grafted onto a semi-traditionalist society characterized by a retreat from modernity and increasingly archaic relationships (a similar situation is taking place in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia). Society is moving imperceptibly backwards. The revival of old traditions is producing a dual effect. On the one hand, it creates a clearer and calmer environment for the local elites, whose only task is to maintain order. On the other hand, the North Caucasus has emerged as an enclave within Russia which lives according to its own laws and seeks to limit Moscow’s intrusion in its internal affairs. Some have compared attempts to limit federal influence in Chechnya to the separatist policies implemented under Dudayev.

The economic crisis is making the North Caucasus even harder to manage. The volume of money coming from the federal budget is slowly shrinking, and local authorities are being asked to draw on internal reserves instead. Kadyrov found one such new revenue source by seeking international status for Grozny’s airport.

A recent assessment of the risk of conflict in the North Caucasus drawn up by the International Conflict and Security Consulting Center reports a minimal risk of armed conflict and of increased violence over the next five years, but a medium risk of in-

creased political violence (i.e., violence to accomplish political goals).⁴ The report is cautious, and justifiably so. But this kind of academic assessment should not lull politicians, who see murders and terrorist attacks

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happening practically every day. Systematic political violence – and in the North Caucasus, political violence is both systematic and well armed – sooner or later leads to military confrontation. This was the case in Ingushetia in 2004 and in Kabardino-Balkaria in 2005, when both republics’ capitals witnessed battles lasting hours and involving heavy military equipment.

Any act of provocation could serve as the pretext for armed conflict, which, given constant tension and public discontent, could end up drawing hundreds and even thousands of people into the fighting. And it is getting ever more difficult to prevent this eventuality from turning into an inevitability. ■

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RESOURCES

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² M. Agarkov, S. Burtin, and N. Silayev, "Udar v nervny uzel," *Ekspert*, June 29-July 5, 2009, p. 24.

³ V. Mukhin, "Boeviki nastupayut nevidimym frontom," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, July 15, 2009.

⁴ International Conflict and Security Consulting. *Strategicheskaya otsenka konfliktnosti. Severny Kavkaz* (International Conflict and Security Consulting, 2009), pp. 16-17.

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