

THE NORTH CAUCASUS: A VIEW FROM TBILISI

This paper examines the causes behind the widespread and never ending violence in the North Caucasus which hinders the transformation of Russia into a modern democratic state and an inclusive nation. Furthermore, it concentrates on the trends originating in the North Caucasus due to the policies of central Russian authorities that are surpassing the regional dimension and posing a threat not only to Russian statehood, but also the security of the South Caucasus and Europe.

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The North Caucasus, a region of unimaginable beauty and ethnic diversity, became notorious because of its very acute problems. These problems pose danger not only to its inhabitants but also to the South Caucasus, Russian statehood and European security. The North Caucasus is referred to frequently as “Russia’s Gordian Knot”, “Russia’s Palestine”, “The Internal Abroad”, “Russian Roulette on Europe’s Borders”, “Russia’s most violent region”, and “Perpetual problem region”.

The inability of Moscow to stabilize the North Caucasus and never ending violence in the region hinders the transformation of Russia into a modern democratic state and an inclusive democratic nation. Further deterioration of the situation may have grave consequences even for Russia’s territorial integrity.¹ The North Caucasus remains not only the most insecure area of Russia but also a threat on Europe’s borderland. Continuing instability and violence in the region pose serious security problems to the neighboring South Caucasus states.

If violence and conflict in the North Caucasus was traditionally associated with Chechnya, today the entire region is considered as a zone of violence, instability and even jihadism. In his state-of-the-nation address to the Federal Assembly of Russia in November 2009, President Medvedev declared that the North Caucasus constitutes Russia’s primary domestic problem.

“The North Caucasus is Russia’s land bridge between the Caspian and Black Seas and thus the crossroads for trade between North and South, East and West. As such, it is of critical strategic and economic importance to Russia. It is Russia’s southern flank, the frontline military district guarding the international border with the new states of Transcaucasia – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, and Russia’s old imperial rivals– Turkey and Iran. It is Russia’s route for pipelines from oil fields in the Caspian to its ports on the Black Sea and markets in Europe and the Middle East. And it is Russia’s premier agricultural region, producing one quarter of all its annual agricultural output.”²

Since the collapse of the USSR, the North Caucasus has never been calm, with Chechnya being the primarily troubled spot of the region. The first and second Chechen wars made the region known to the whole world, “but interest faded as then – President Vladimir Putin’s public relation efforts succeeded in convincing the world that Chechnya had been calmed.”³

A low-level insurgency continued but violence and terrorist attacks escalated in 2009 and 2010. There were 1100 “incidences of violence” in 2009, up from 795 the previous year.⁴ In 2009, the number of suicide attacks was almost four times as high as in the previous year.⁵ Violence and terror were not localized in the North Caucasus and already were “exported” to Russia proper (Moscow-St. Petersburg railway line in November 2009, Moscow subway in 2010, and Moscow International airport *Domodedovo* in January 2011). So, the myth that the North Caucasus was eventually pacified was blown away.

During Vladimir Putin’s presidency, the region’s problems were addressed mainly by security measures as well as financial injections. As Prime Minister Putin declared last year, “during the

¹ Neil J. Melvin, “Building Stability in the North Caucasus: Ways Forward for Russian and the European Union”, *SIPRI Policy Paper* No. 16, May 2007, p.37

² Fiona Hill, “‘Russia’s Tinderbox’: Conflict in the North Caucasus And its Implications for The Future of the Russian Federation”, Occasional Paper from the Strengthening of the Democratic Institution Project, Harvard University, September 1995, pp. 2-3

³ Constance A. Philpot, The North Caucasus: Russian Roulette on Europe’s Borders, *Parameters*, Vol. 40, No. 2, Summer 2010, p. 87

⁴ “Violence in the North Caucasus. 2009: A Bloody Year”, *CSIS*, Washington, DC, 2010, p.4
http://csis.org/files/publication/100114_violence_NorthCaucasus-2009optimize.pdf

⁵ *Ibid*, p.4; “Violence in the North Caucasus. Spring 2010: On the Rise, Again?”, *CSIS*, <http://www.csis.org/hzs>

last ten years, the federal budget invested in the development of the North Caucasus amounted to 800 billion rubles. The volume of investments grew 12 times since 2000.”⁶ This predominantly “security approach” to the one of the poorest regions of Russia, which has been reliant on transfers from the federal budget under very high levels of unemployment, particularly among young people, failed to stabilize the region.

Several issues contributed to the further deterioration of the situation in the region, mainly concerning ethno-nationalist sentiments. Moscow decided to solve the Chechen problem through actively engaging Chechens themselves (even resistance fighters) in governing Chechnya. This so called “Chechenization” policy left Russia actually with less leverage on Chechnya, with Ramzan Kadyrov ruling Chechnya as a quasi-independent entity. Other developments that have exacerbated the region’s problems, which are elaborated in the remainder of this article, include: continuing confrontation between Ingushs and Ossetians; territorial mergers (changes in administrative borders in order to weaken the ethno-national principle); links to the South Caucasus and support to secessionist regions in Georgia; emigration of ethnic Russians and de-Russification of the region.⁷ Sergei Markedonov in 2007 argued that positive changes in the region are only on the surface and are aimed at the achievement of tactical successes.

De-Russification

More and more ethnic Russians have been leaving the North Caucasian republics and going north. This is both a result and a reason for change in the region. De-Russification under conditions of high inter-ethnic and confessional conflict potential in the region contributes to the aggravation of political and security tensions not only in the region but also in other parts of Russia.

All the North Caucasian republics include segments of ethnic Russians as well as the predominantly Russian populated Krasnodar and Stavropol *Krais* (districts) and Rostov *Oblast* also include small portions of non-Russian and non-Orthodox population. The number of ethnic Russians in the North Caucasian republics is decreasing, but in the north of the Southern Federal District, Krasnodar and Stavropol *Krais*, and in Rostov *Oblast* the share of ethnic Russians is growing.⁸

The ongoing out-migration of ethnic Russians from the republics of the North Caucasus and the resulting de-Russification adds to already existing anti-Caucasian sentiments and xenophobia in other parts of Russian Federation.⁹

Strengthening of Islamism As A Factor

The most important change in the political and security situation in the North Caucasus might have been the steadily growing Islamization of the anti-Russian resistance. Since the end of the Second Chechen war, the resistance is no longer an ethnic Chechen phenomenon. It has become more and more Islamist by its nature and has spread all over the region. The fact that the new generation that grew up in Chechnya had very few ties with Russia has contributed to the spread of radical Islamism in Chechnya and the entire region. As Ruslan Kurbanov notes, “they

⁶ Interfax.ru 07.07.2010. <http://www.interfax.ru/politics/txt.asp?id=144244>

⁷ Neil J. Melvin, “Building Stability in the North Caucasus: Ways Forward for Russian and the European Union”, *SIPRI Policy Paper* No. 16, pp. 37 - 40

⁸ Michael Savva, “The Conflict Potential of Interethnic Relations in the North Caucasus”, *Central Asia and Caucasus*, Vol. 3 No. 33, pp. 75-78

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 78

perceive everything Russian –language, culture, symbols, and laws– as absolutely hostile.”¹⁰ Hence, the ideology of armed resistance in the region has shifted more and more from nationalist struggle for independence to jihad. As Uwe Halbach argues, “radical Islamism found fertile soil in the North Caucasus. The region has had the greatest exposure to radical Islamic influence during the post-Soviet era”.¹¹ Like in the 19th century, when Islam became the main mobilizing force for the resistance against Russian conquest, radical Islamism and jihadism play today an important role in the struggle against the modern Russian state.

It is important to know that these days, ethnic nationalism and Islamic radicalism and even jihadism are interacting with each other and sometimes complementing each other. These two trends are parallel but distinct. In the 1990s Moscow understood that ethnic nationalism was dangerous to Russia’s territorial integrity and tried to portray to a Western audience the Chechen resistance and other North Caucasian nationalism movements as *Islamist*.

If in the 1990s, ethnic separatism prevailed in the region, these days trans-ethnic Islamism plays an even more important role in the aggravation of security environment in the North Caucasus. Nationalist ideology helps to mobilize on an ethnic basis but radical Islamism serves the mobilization of different ethnic groups on the basis of common values and against Russian state.

Radical Islam was institutionalized in the region with the creation of the so-called “Caucasian Emirate” (Имарат Кавказ), that was announced by Doku Umarov in October 2007. It marked the transition from a nationalist-separatist Chechen resistance to a diffused regional jihad. As Uwe Halbach argues, the “Emirate apparently integrates the Caucasian guerillas into a hierarchical structure, aiming at the creation of the North Caucasian Islamic State.”¹²

The rise of radical Islamism in the region for which Russian authorities blame “foreign forces” has become a serious security challenge not only to Russia but also to its neighbors and to Europe at large. It is very important to mention that on the map of this “Caucasian Emirate”, its authors designated the lands south of it (including Georgia) as the territories temporarily inhabited by “infidels!” The military capabilities of the Emirate so far do not allow for serious military actions but are sufficient for attacks on security forces and authorities as well as suicide attacks.

Resurgence of Ethnic Nationalism

Along with the spreading of Islamist radicalism one can witness the resurgence of ethnic nationalism, mostly in the western part of the region, where the “Circassian question” is becoming a serious mobilizing factor in political life. Recognition of Kosovo and strong Russian support to separatism in Abkhazia and South Ossetia with the recognition of these two Georgian provinces as independent states, made Russia itself even more prone to separatism primarily in the North Caucasus. The process of ethno-political self-determination, triggered by the collapse of the Soviet Union, has not finished yet. This process is continuing and the tendencies it revealed so far show that the North Caucasus will have to go through a turbulent period before any kind of stability is achieved there. Without the North Caucasus developing and being

¹⁰ Ruslan Kurbanov, “Spread of Jihad: the Original Factors and the Scope of Islamic Radicalization in the Northern Caucasus”, *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 30 No. 6, pp. 48; Maciej Falkowski, “North Caucasus: the Russian Gordian Knot. The key problems and conflicts in the region and the effect thereof of the future of Russia”, *CES Studies*, December 2004, p. 47

¹¹ Uwe Halbach, “Russia’s Internal Abroad: The North Caucasus as an Emergency Zone at the Edge of Europe”, *SWP Research Paper*, November 2010, p.16

¹² Uwe Halbach, “Russia’s Internal Abroad: The North Caucasus as an Emergency Zone at the Edge of Europe”, *SWP Research Paper*, November 2010, p. 17

genuinely integrated and stable, a Russian democratic nation and statehood will be out of the question.

Problems of Managing the Region

Russia's strategy in the region has been mainly the use of force and suppression. Only recently Moscow's approach to the region has started to acquire new dimensions. Moscow tries to apply a more sophisticated approach to the region's acute problems, to manage them through improving the general atmosphere in the region and through the development of business. New plans of developing infrastructure, and sectors such as tourism are trumpeted but they cannot be fulfilled without progress in establishing elementary standards of security. The 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi make addressing security concerns a primary necessity.

Economic and social conditions in the region are one of the worst in Russia. Even during the Soviet rule, Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan were the most heavily subsidized (up to 70 percent) regions of the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the USSR the region's socio-economic situation was further aggravated. The region is not attractive to investors because of very high level of corruption, mismanagement, cronyism, and low levels of legal culture of the population, lack of skilled human resources, interethnic tensions and conflicts. The region's image as an area of violence and lawlessness contributes to its unattractiveness. The region is predominantly agrarian and there are only small clusters of industry in North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Dagestan. Without improving the economic situation and social conditions of the region's population not much can be achieved politically and in the security sphere.

President Medvedev replaced the leaders of three republics (Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Ingushetia and Dagestan) and even appointed a new envoy minister, (he was given the rank of the Deputy Prime Minister) Alexander Khloponin to oversee the region.¹³ This new head of the region is considered by some experts as a new viceroy, by others as a manager who has to save the region from chaos.¹⁴ In order to improve the situation in the region, Moscow went further in January 2010 and separated the North Caucasian republics (except for the westernmost republic of Adygea) from the Southern Federal District and grouped them in the newly-formed North Caucasian Federal District (Dagestan, Chechnya, Kabardino-Balkaria, Ingushetia, Karachai-Cherkessia, and the predominantly Russian populated region of Stavropol with 2,7 mil residents). The city of Pyatigorsk became the new district's capital.¹⁵ These steps of Moscow reflect its concerns about the region and determination to improve the situation there.

Practically all the problems of the region are rooted in poor governance, which is a "visiting card" of the North Caucasus. Though many of these problems are present in other parts of Russia, the North Caucasus contains the whole "shopping list" of them. The region, lacking the tradition of democracy and a culture of dialogue, is a "home" for ethnic nationalism and religious radicalism, rampant corruption, cronyism, clan loyalty, parochialism, amoral familism, the tradition of reliance on the strong leader, and a predominantly negative historical memory of interethnic relations. All that in conjunction with insufficient efforts in conducting social change

¹³Kevin Daniel Leahy, "Medvedev's New King-makers in the Northern Caucasus", *CACI Analyst*, 13 May 2010

¹⁴"New Kremlin envoy to solve Caucasus problems", *Reuters*, 20 January 2010,

<http://www.reuters.com/assets/print?aid=USLDE60J0R320100120>

¹⁵Uwe Halbach, "Russia's Internal Abroad: The North Caucasus as an Emergency Zone at the Edge of Europe", *SWP Research Paper*, November 2010, pp. 25-29; "Medvedev Creates New North Caucasus Federal District", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 20 January 2010, <http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1934705.html>

as well as in fostering socio-economic development, constitutes practically unsurpassable obstacles to stability, security and progress.

The problems of the North Caucasus are the problems of Russia's transformation, its nation- and state-building, and the formation of its new identity. Moscow has to solve these extremely complicated problems. Otherwise the region hinders Russia's development more and more, and destroys the fragile security in this part of the world. The Russian leadership is determined not to lose the North Caucasus. Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin declared that the Caucasus is an inseparable part of Russia, and Russia will never abandon it. The recent revitalization of the cult of General Yermolov has symbolized Kremlin's determination to stay in the Caucasus. Yermolov was the nineteenth-century victorious but merciless conqueror of the Caucasus. In 2008, his statue was erected in Mineralnye Vodi and in 2010 in Pyatigorsk. Does this mean that Yermolov's methods will not be abandoned?

Unfortunately, Moscow still continues to blame others for its failures in the region. Whom do Moscow and local leaders in the North Caucasus blame for instability and, as Thomas de Waal calls it, "a low-intensity civil war with a strong Islamic flavor?"¹⁶ Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov declared in June 2009 that Washington was "the control center" of the Islamic insurgency in the North Caucasus. President of Ingushetia Yunus-Bek Yevkurov accused Britain and the U.S. of sponsoring unrest in the region. Another target for such accusations is Georgia. Recently first vice-speaker of Russia's Federal Assembly Alexander Torshin accused Georgia of organizing a terrorist act in the Moscow airport, declaring 'it was Georgia and its ruling regime.'¹⁷ Even President Dmitri Medvedev recently said in a TV interview that Georgia may pose a threat to the 2014 winter Olympics. Russian authorities' accusations of Georgia have become a routine.

It is obvious that Moscow does worry about losing the North Caucasus. The Russian state cannot become genuinely democratic and viable until the North Caucasus' issues are successfully addressed and the security is restored there. The situation in the region will not improve but deteriorate further, reaching critical limits, if Moscow fails to improve governance and socio-economic conditions and can not provide hope and jobs to the region's population.

To solve the problems of the region, it is necessary to dramatically reduce corruption and cronyism. Security services must neutralize radical and terrorist networks with more sophisticated preventive methods. If after NATO leaves Afghanistan the radical Islam strengthens its positions there and spreads to other countries, first of all to Central Asia, it can have negative impact (export of radicalism and terrorism) on the North Caucasus. Thus, Russia needs to hurry before the negative trends in the North Caucasus become irreversible.

Georgia and the North Caucasus

Georgia's future greatly depends on the relations with the North Caucasian peoples. Having friendly relations with them is one of Georgia's national security priorities.

Georgians and North Caucasians interacted for centuries. With some neighbors, Georgians had good relations, with others – less. Quite close and friendly relations were established during the Soviet rule when significant number of North Caucasian intellectuals were educated in Tbilisi's higher education institutions, and cultural and academic contacts were quite intensive. Unfortunately, after the collapse of the USSR contacts between Georgia and the North Caucasus

¹⁶ Thomas de Waal, "North Caucasus of the Bizarre", *The National Interest*, 1 November 2010, <http://nationalinterest.org/print/commentary/caucasus-bizarre-4334>

¹⁷ Российская газета, 1 March 2011 (Russian Newspaper)

dramatically decreased, practically stopped. Conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia contributed to the alienation between Georgia and the North Caucasus. Hostile Russian propaganda towards Georgia and introduction by Russia of visa regime for Georgian citizens made this alienation even deeper.

For Tbilisi, peace and stability in the North Caucasus is of primary importance. Any negative development in the North Caucasus may have dramatic consequences for Georgia (spillover of conflicts, influx of refugees, spread of violence and terrorism, etc.) Georgian interests are to have normal, friendly relations with that part of Russia.

The recent abolishment of the visa regime for the inhabitants of North Caucasian republics of the Russian Federation serves, according to Georgian authorities, the reestablishment of friendly relations with Georgia's northern neighbors and improvement of Georgia's image among North Caucasians. The newly launched Russian language, Georgian TV channel *PIK*, primarily serves the same purpose.

These two steps of the Georgian authorities caused negative reaction from Russian government, whose extreme sensitivity, concerning the North Caucasus is quite understandable. They look at Georgian attempts to improve relations with their neighbors with suspicion. The portrait of Georgia created by Moscow's propaganda does not coincide with reality and the North Caucasians can discover that.

Some western experts and even politicians assess the recent Georgian initiatives as just attempts to irritate Kremlin. Oliver Bullough called these Georgian efforts "a new Georgian gamble in the Caucasus," and he is not alone.¹⁸ Others considered it as a positive step, contributing to better relations and understanding, because openness and contacts are better than alienation and isolation.

One has to stress that, as Ghia Nodia argues, "it is precisely because the North Caucasus is an explosive region that is important for Georgia that the energy of any regional violence is not directed against Georgia itself, to the extent that it was in the early 1990s."¹⁹

Georgian policy towards the North Caucasus has the long term goal of regaining sympathy and understanding of North Caucasians, restoring friendly relations with them. At the same time, Tbilisi needs to explain its policy better to its allies, friends and to its own citizens.

It is in the Georgian interest to have as a neighbor dynamic, a peaceful North Caucasus but the archaic model of governance in the region and resurgent ethnic nationalism and religious radicalism, continuous support of certain corrupt ethnic clans by Moscow, create serious obstacles to the region's genuine democratization, development, stability and security. Maybe international community has to offer Moscow certain help in solving of the North Caucasus issues through special programs, projects, NGOs. etc., until the negative development there becomes irreversible.

¹⁸ Oliver Bullough, "Letter from Tbilisi: A New Georgian Game in the Caucasus," *Foreign Affairs*, 23 December 2010

¹⁹ Ghia Nodia, "What is Georgia's Strategy in the North Caucasus?," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 2 November, 2010