

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND SECURITY NETWORK
THE NORTH CAUCASUS ON THE BRINK



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SUMMARY

This case study presents an overview on the situation in Russia's troubled North Caucasus. Although there is no longer large-scale warfare in Chechnya, the situation remains tense, not only in this republic, but in the entire Muslim dominated North Caucasus region. While pursuing a policy of "Chechenization" in Chechnya, by delegating power and responsibility to local political and security structures, Moscow is exercising tighter central control in the other North Caucasus republics and deploying more troops in an attempt to keep the situation under control. Both approaches are fraught with problems and risks. In fact, we can anticipate that the situation in Chechnya and the remaining North Caucasus republics will deteriorate.



Maps reproduced with permission from the journal OSTEUROPA.

INTRODUCTION

On 31 January 2006, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared in a press conference that the “anti-terrorism operation” in Chechnya had been brought to a conclusion.¹ Yet the situation remains precarious, not just in Chechnya, but also in large areas of the predominantly Muslim North Caucasus region. The Chechen Republic, until recently an isolated outpost of instability in the eastern part of the North Caucasus, now forms the center of a larger crisis zone. Apart from Chechnya, this crisis zone comprises the republics of Dagestan, Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria. In addition, the extended North Caucasus crisis zone includes all the other national republics in the region (Karachayev-Cherkessia, Adygeya and North Ossetia). The conflict is also having an impact on the ethnic Russian provinces of Stavropol Krai and Krasnodar Krai to the north, and neighboring states to the south.

Moscow is all too aware of the dangers of the situation, but has no cohesive strategy for its troubled southern territories. After years of war and destruction, Moscow aims to stabilize the situation in Chechnya with its policy of “Chechenization,” whereby it delegates powers and authority to local structures and transfers increasing responsibility for security to Chechen forces. In contrast, as the crisis has escalated in the other North Caucasus republics, the Russian government has opted for greater direct control and increased its military presence there as part of its anti-terrorism campaign. Both approaches, however, are fraught with problems: while a Russian withdrawal from Chechnya risks triggering an internal Chechen conflict, Moscow’s role in the rest of the North Caucasus appears to be more and more that of a policing force. This could upset the balance of power in this region and also leave Islamist rebel groups in a much stronger position.

PEOPLES, TERRITORY AND LANGUAGES

The North Caucasus region includes seven national republics with non-Russian titular nations and ethnically mixed populations. These are (from west to east): Adygeya, Karachayevo-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan. According to the 2002 Russian census, the total number of people of the seven republics was 6.6 million. With the exception of North Ossetia, a majority of the non-Russian population of these republics are Muslims and adherents of the Sunni branch of Islam. The region also comprises the Russian dominated Krasnodar Krai (5.1 million), Stavropol Krai (2.7 million) and Rostov Oblast (4.4 million). All these administrative units are part of the Southern Federal District, one of seven federal districts created by Putin in September 2000. The republic of Kalmykia (292,410), as well as the regions of Astrakhan (1 million) and Volgograd (2.7 million), are also members of the Southern Federal District. If not stated otherwise, however, we refer here to the belt of the seven national republics when speaking of the crisis in the North Caucasus.

While the North Caucasus plains were an important agricultural zone already during Soviet times, some of these regions (Chechnya, Stavropol and the Kuban area) were also key industrial centers because of oil production and refining. Since the early 1990s, the strategic importance of the region as a transit area for the transportation of Caspian energy has increased. Overall, however, the region figures among those hardest hit since the end of Communism. The national republics belong to the group of the poorest regions in Russia and statistics for unemployment, criminality and the shadow economy are extremely high.

Unemployment in 2003–2004

Russian Federation	8.0%
Southern Federal District	13.2%
National republics	
Adygeya	16.7%
Karachayevo-Cherkessia	21.7%
Kabardino-Balkaria	28.7%
North Ossetia	10.9%
Ingushetia	49.1%
Chechnya	...
Dagestan	24.9%

Source: www.gks.ru/wages/tables%5Cbezrab.htm, accessed 19 June 2006

Also, most of the republics depend to a very high degree on financial transfers from Moscow to balance their budgets and keep their economies afloat. Ingushetia takes second place among Russia's 88 "federal subjects" (administrative units) for subsidies, with 88.3 per cent of its budget in 2005 covered by funds from the Federation. In other words, in 2005, the republic was virtually unable to fall back on any of its own income from taxes. In the same year, the percentage of federal aid in Dagestan was 81.3 per cent, and 79.4 per cent in Chechnya. Kabardino-Balkaria did slightly better with 73.4 per cent. In Karachayevo-Cherkessia federal aid amounted to 62.5 per cent, in North Ossetia 59.2 per cent, and in Adygeya 58.1 per cent.²

Subsidies in 2005

Republic	Share of federal budget transfer	Place in federal rating of subsidies*
Ingushetia	88.3%	2
Dagestan	81.3%	4
Chechnia	79.4%	6
Kabardino-Balkaria	73.4%	7
Karachayevo-Cherkessia	62.5%	11
North Ossetia	59.2%	14
Adygeya	58.1%	15

From: *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 6 October 2005.

* Rank out of total 89 (today: 88) federal subjects

The North Caucasus stands out as the most ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse region in Russia. Dagestan alone consists of over thirty different indigenous ethnic groups. The North Caucasus population belongs to three language families: the Indo-European, the Altaic, and the Caucasian (or: Ibero-Caucasian). The first family of languages comprises in addition to Russian, which serves as the lingua franca for all North Caucasians, Armenian and Iranian languages such as Ossetian. The second family of languages includes all Turkic languages, such as Karachai or Balkar. The third family is the most diverse and can be divided into a west-Caucasian branch of languages (the Abkhaz-Adyg group, which includes languages such as Abkhaz, Kabardian and Cherkessian) and an east-Caucasian branch (the so-called Nakh-Dagestani group including Chechen, Ingush and most of the languages spoken in Dagestan).³

Over the past, the region has experienced major changes in its population structure. The most significant in modern times occurred during Russia's military advance in the 19th century. In

ethnic Russians represented only 15 per cent of the population, and the proportion has fallen even further since that time. This trend can be seen in all the national republics, but the emigration of ethnic Russians is particularly serious in Dagestan, Ingushetia and Chechnya, where the proportion of ethnic Russians has now fallen to below five per cent.⁵

regions. For instance, in the southeastern part of Stavropol Krai, tensions run high between Cossack groups and the Nogai people, a small non-Russian local population. Conflicts over borders and territory are not confined to the Russian part of the Caucasus but involve the adjacent South Caucasus states. The already strained relations between Russia and Georgia have deteriorated further because of moves

Ethnic composition in the national republics		
Republic	Population	Ethnic composition
Adygeya	447,109	Russians (64.5%), Adygs (24.2%), Armenians (3.4%)
Karachayevo-Cherkessia	439,470	Karachais (38.5%), Russians (33.6%), Cherkess (11.3%), Abasins (7.4%), Nogai (3.4%)
Kabardino-Balkaria	901,494	Kabardians (55.3%), Russians 25.1%, Balkars (11.6%), Ossetians (1.1%), Turks (1%)
North Ossetia	710,275	Ossetians (62.7%), Russians (23.2%), Ingush (3%), Armenians (2.4%), Georgians (1.5%)
Ingushetia	467,294	Ingush (77.3%), Chechens (20.4%), Russians (1.2%)
Chechnya	1,103,686*	Chechens (93.5%), Russians (3.7%)
Dagestan	2,576,531	Avars (29.5%), Dargins (16.5%), Kumyks (14.2%), Lezgins (13.1%), Laks (5.4%), Russians (4.7%), Tabasarans (4.3%), Azeris (4.3%), Chechens (3.4%), Nogai (1.5%)

Figures are based on data from the 2002 Russian census (www.perepis2002.ru).

** In light of two costly wars and the emigration of many of its inhabitants, the real figure is likely to be considerably lower.*

Forcible resettlements, war, migration, and a questionable nationality policy in the Soviet era, which included the artificial merging of different peoples into single republics or the splitting of ethnic groups over several territories, has created ethnic grievances and unstable territorial compositions, some of which gave rise to violence after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. The first violent conflict in the North Caucasus, and indeed the first on the territory of the new Russian Federation, was the one between Ossetia and Ingushetia over the Prigorodnyi Rayon. This small piece of border land was part of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR and was inhabited mostly by Ingush until 1944, when the Ingush were deported and their republic dissolved. When Krushchev rehabilitated the deported peoples of the North Caucasus and reestablished the Chechen-Ingush ASSR in 1957, the Prigorodnyi Rayon remained part of North Ossetia and was inhabited by Ossets. Although the Ingush were not permitted to return to their homes in the Prigorodnyi Rayon, many did so without authorization. While the situation was problematic already during Soviet times, it escalated into a full-scale war only in 1992 and led to some 500 deaths and tens of thousands of refugees.⁶

to unite North and South Ossetia, which have received at least unofficial support from Moscow, or because of Abkhazia's plans to join the Russian Federation as an "associate member." The Lezgins, a people split between Dagestan and Azerbaijan, could also cause frictions between Russia and Azerbaijan should they aspire to unite.

Potential for conflict exists in virtually every national republic, but also affects the Russian dominated

A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

Asked about the root cause of the Chechen problem, a prominent Russian historian claimed that had the Soviet Union lasted about 20 years longer, the Chechen problem would not exist.⁷ This reflects a wide-spread interpretation of the current instability in Russia's North Caucasus republics that attributes these developments to largely failed or unfinished attempts at "modernization." The argument is that despite efforts on the part of the state to assimilate these peoples, first into the Russian Empire, then into the Soviet Union, pre-modern traditions and institutions have never been fully erased; in fact, once the Communist system and ideology were gone, these institutions came to fore and now pose obstacles to any further integration into the Russian socio-political and cultural space. Indeed, against the background of current conflicts in the North Caucasus, Russian observers warn that Russia is about to lose the whole region and many are even questioning whether this part of the country belongs to the Russian "civilizational space" at all.⁸

Others view current events, especially the Russo-Chechen wars, more against the background of Russia's colonial wars of the 19th century. Chechen and Western observers tend to prominently place the Russo-Chechen conflict of the 1990s into the larger context of the 200 year-old "freedom struggle" of the Chechen people.⁹ If modernization approaches stress the allegedly positive aspects of the North Caucasus' belonging to the Tsarist and Soviet empires, then the "colonial" perspective underlines the overall tragic and destructive character of this experience.

What these controversial – and certainly oversimplified – approaches have in common is a reference to history in order to explain current events. History does not determine outcomes, nor can events in the past be made accountable for current tragedies. History is, however, essential for our understanding of conflict in the North Caucasus because it is in the past that those conditions were created that would later favor (or impede) certain conflicting trends to emerge. Especially among North Caucasian mountain societies, where tradition and genealogy are very important, past events, even if they date back to the 19th century, form part of a deeply-rooted collective historical memory. And indeed, there are many events to be remembered in the turbulent and often very violent history of this region.

First contacts between the Muscovy state and the North Caucasus date back to the 16th century. In the 17th and 18th century, we see two important developments. On the one hand, this is the period of the final Islamization of mountaineer societies that largely occurred via Sufi-brotherhoods such as the Naqshbandi and Qadiri orders. (It needs to be mentioned, however, that Islam came to Dagestan already in the late 7th century, but reached some of the remote mountain tribes, such as the Chechens or Cherkess, only much later). On the other hand, this is the time of intensive colonialization of large areas by Cossacks who settled as far south as the Terek river and from this time onwards guarded the troubled Caucasus frontier on behalf of the Russian Empire. Only after Russia formally annexed the eastern part of Georgia in 1801, however, did it become strategically necessary for Russia to engage in the exhausting task to subdue all of the North Caucasus in order to remove the barrier that cut-off the Tsar's new possessions from the rest of the Empire.

In 1817, General Yermolov started what would become known as the Great Caucasian War. This war formally lasted until 1864, when the last major military resistance in the northwest part of the North Caucasus was broken by the Tsarist army. During a period of roughly 50 years, hundreds of thousands of Russian soldiers were sent to fight in the region and tens of thousands lost their lives. At the height of the war in the 1850s, Russia's Caucasus military endeavor absorbed one-sixth of the Russian Empire's total budget. The fiercest and longest resistance to Russian conquest came from the legendary Imam Shamil who led the struggle against the Russians in the eastern part of the North Caucasus from 1834-1859. Shamil was even able to unite the diverse North Caucasian people, among them the Chechens and Avars, into an Islamic state (Imamat) based on the Shariah (Islamic law), and thus managed to overcome tribal and ethnic divisions for the first time.¹⁰

After large-scale warfare ended in 1864, Russian administrators engaged on a cautious policy to co-opt sections of the rebel elite into the political structures. In addition, they took care to allow legal pluralism – the co-existence of imperial law, the Shariah and *adat* (local customs) – and also to preserve traditional institutions in order to ensure the loyalty of the population. However, this strategy

provided mixed results at best. Although parts of the North Caucasus, especially the lowlands, remained relatively peaceful after their formal incorporation into the Russian Empire, other parts, especially the mountainous areas of Chechnya and Dagestan, continued to witness anti-Russian rebellions on a frequent scale. In fact, apart from a relatively small “patriotic” class of mountaineers consisting largely of military officers, teachers, merchants or people working in the emerging oil industries around Grozny, the bulk of the North Caucasus mountaineer society remained untouched by modernity.¹¹

During the years of revolution and civil war (1917-1920) – again a particularly bloody time for the North Caucasus –, we observe an interesting period where state-building was attempted by local elites. Among the short-lived projects to unite the various North Caucasus peoples were: the Imamate of Mountaineers, the North Caucasus Federative Republic in the west, and the North Caucasus Emirate in the eastern part of the region. After Denikin’s White Army was finally defeated in 1920, thanks to a collaborative effort of Red Army troops and groups of mountaineers, the region became incorporated into the new Soviet state. In November 1920, the North Caucasus Federative Republic (*Gorskaja respublika*) was proclaimed. Only Dagestan was not included and gained its own status as a republic.¹²

At first, the Soviet leaders were careful not to alienate the North Caucasians. In the course of Lenin’s so-called *korenizatsiia*-policy (lit. “indigenization”), which aimed at promoting a “national” consciousness among the non-Russian peoples of the Soviet Union, administrative positions were increasingly filled with locals. Also during this period, efforts were made to codify local languages and teach them at newly founded schools.¹³

It soon became clear, however, that the autonomy granted to the peoples of the North Caucasus Federative Republic was not to be tolerated long by Stalin. After the formal dissolution of the republic in 1924 and the formation of a number of smaller ethnically-defined entities, Stalin tried to eradicate traditional institutions and banned Shariah and *adat* in 1927. In 1929, the North Caucasus underwent the brutal campaign of collectivization that also included the enforced resettlement of mountaineers to the plains. In response to the outbreak of mass rebellions, the Soviet Union responded with large-scale police operations in order to wipe out what was officially labeled “banditry.”¹⁴

Even though the Soviet state tried to impose its ideas of modernity and progress on the non-Russian peoples of the North Caucasus with increasing brutality, large parts of these mountainous societies, the bulk of them living on the countryside, continued to exist in a parallel world. Soviet documents show that most of the Chechens, for instance, did not understand Russian even by the late 1930s. Another indication of these people’s relatively isolated status within the USSR is demonstrated by the fact that until World War II, the North Caucasus mountaineers were not recruited into the Red Army on a mass basis.¹⁵

With the outbreak of war with Nazi-Germany, we note contradictory developments: many North Caucasians enlisted into the Red Army to fight the aggressor side-by-side with other Soviet soldiers, while others took up arms against the regime. Dozens of rebellions emerged simultaneously across the region, but again mostly on the territories of Chechnya and Dagestan.¹⁶ Following the defeat of Hitler and the subsequent abolition of local resistance, Stalin sent several groups of North Caucasian peoples into exile and abolished their republics.¹⁷ Thus, between November 1943 and February 1944, the Karachai people (71,900) were deported, followed in February 1944 by the entire Chechen (412,500) and Ingush (96,300) populations. In March 1944, the Balkars (39,400) were also exiled. It is estimated that more than one-third of the deportees (in the case of Chechnya over 50 per cent) died during the harsh journey to far away Central Asia and in the first years of exile.¹⁸

The Soviet leadership’s allegation that these people were being punished for their collaboration with the German enemy was more of a pretext than the real motive for deportation. Chechnya is a prime example: Since Nazi-Germany promised to support Chechen independence from Russia, there certainly was sympathy with Germany on the part of the Chechen resistance. As a matter of fact, however, German troops never set foot on the territory of the Chechen-Ingush republic, apart from a small number of German agents (most of them actually ethnic Chechens captured by German troops during the war) who were parachuted into Chechnya.¹⁹ Thus, the real motive behind the deportation seemed to get rid of populations that were considered not only potentially disloyal, but extremely difficult to integrate into any hierarchically organized state system.²⁰

It was only during the time of exile that the mass of these peoples came into direct contact with Soviet ways of life. North Caucasian children visited Soviet schools, North Caucasian men and women, albeit reluctantly, started working in *kolkhozes* and state-owned enterprises. Ironically, however, it was also during time in exile that traditional institutions and religious beliefs were strengthened. The experience of exile helped to overcome, to a certain extent, social divisions in these clan-based societies and contributed to the formation of a national (but not necessarily Soviet) consciousness.²¹

Apart from minor conflicts between repatriates and those who had moved into the abandoned lands after 1944, the period between 1957 and 1989 is generally regarded as peaceful. Of all the peoples, however, Moscow continued to keep the Chechens under especially tight supervision. Only from the 1970s onwards were the Chechens allowed to fill official positions in their own republic. Until the end of the 1980s, however, when compared to the Russians, the Chechens were still underrepresented in official positions relative to their size in population. Moreover, and unlike in the other ethnically defined territories of the Soviet Union, the highest position in the republic (that of the First Communist Party Secretary), was occupied by an ethnic Russian. Only in 1989 was a Chechen appointed to this post.²²

Although the Soviet state, especially under Brezhnev, did allocate resources to modernize the backward North Caucasus region, Chechnya and also a number of other republics, remained underdeveloped in comparison to other parts of the Union. Also, career opportunities, especially for Chechens, remained limited outside their own republic. There were exceptions, certain individuals such as the later first president of Chechnya, Dzhokhar Dudayev (1944–1996), who became the first general in the Soviet army with an ethnic Chechen background, or Ruslan Khasbulatov (born 1942), who was speaker of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation from 1991–1993.

THE CHECHEN FACTOR AND THE SPREAD OF WAR

All North Caucasian peoples have fought the Tsarist armies at some point in their history. All of them experienced various degrees of injustice during Soviet times. However, only one of these peoples, the Chechens, decided to seek complete independence from Russia after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Other republics where the populace had a similar fate – for example the Ingush – have not engaged on this path. In fact, in most of the national republics, especially in Dagestan, there was little solidarity with the Chechen cause even after the Russian military invasion of 1994.

Chechnya's drive for independence was, at first, not so much directed specifically against Russia, but was broadly perceived as a historic opportunity provided by the wave of sovereignization that swept through the Soviet Union and later Russia. In a time of fast-moving events, individuals played an important role. Crucial for the Chechen movement was Dzhokhar Dudayev. Dudayev stood as a symbol for a whole generation of Chechens who experienced the hardship of life in exile first hand. Dudayev was born in February 1944 during deportation and spent his childhood in Kazakhstan. After returning to Chechnya for a few years, he again spent most of the time outside his native republic following his military career. The most crucial of his experiences was as commander of the strategic air base in Tartu, Estonia, where he was a witness to the freedom struggle of the Estonians, a small people with historical experiences similar to the Chechens. After his division was withdrawn from Estonia, he quit the army in May 1990 and returned to Grozny, the Chechen capital, to devote himself to politics and the Chechen national cause.

On 1 November 1991, Dudayev, after his election to the presidency, declared Chechnya's independence. Moscow, which considered both the presidential elections and the declaration of independence illegal, tried to restore political order by sending in a small number of security troops. When this action failed, Russia withdrew its troops stationed in the republic leaving large arsenals of weapons behind that were later seized by Dudayev's national guard. The years until the full-scale Russian military invasion in December 1994 were marked on the one hand by Dudayev's growing authoritarian tendencies, and on the other by rising criminality, a growing shadow economy and inter-Chechen tensions.

At first, Russia tried to bring the Chechen regime down by supporting the anti-Dudayev opposition. When this did not lead to any tangible results, Russia decided to intervene directly in an attempt to restore order. Oblivious to the realities on the ground, the leadership in Moscow believed this intervention would yield a "small and victorious" military action. However, Moscow's intervention was soon followed by embarrassing defeats for its army. In August 1996, after the Chechen rebels managed to recapture Grozny from the Russians, it was finally clear that Moscow would not be able to get control of the situation easily, despite the fact that at the height of the war, over 100,000 Russian soldiers stood against a small force of several thousand, albeit highly-motivated, Chechen fighters. Instead of dragging the conflict on, Moscow opted for peace talks with the Chechen rebel leaders. On 12 May 1997, Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Chechen President Aslan Maskahov (the successor to Dudayev, who was killed in a bomb raid in April 1996) signed a peace treaty in the Kremlin.²³

During this entire period, the remaining republics of the North Caucasus experienced relative stability. The biggest problem were the tens of thousands of Chechen refugees who had settled for the most part in Ingushetia (and also in other parts of the North Caucasus), and were aggravating the economic situation and social and ethnic tensions; however, even these problems remained at the local level. Moscow's second invasion of Chechnya, however, was to have disastrous consequences for developments throughout the Islamic North Caucasus. The Russian invasion was triggered by an attack by Chechen Islamists, led by the Chechen rebel commander Shamil Basayev and Jordanian-born Emir Khattab, on Dagestan border villages in August 1999. The problem was not so much the Russian military intervention itself, as there was a degree of support for the move, not just in Russia, but in the West as well, in light of an increasingly chaotic situation inside Chechnya that was rapidly approaching a state of civil war. The real problem was the tactics adopted by the Russians, who behaved extremely brutally and took little account of the defenseless civilian population.²⁴

If this ruthless policy was to blame for the increased support for Islamist forces in the Chechen resistance, Moscow's decision to withdraw support from Chechnya's President, Aslan Maskhadov,

also contributed to the process of the Chechens' radicalization. Maskhadov was a politician with relatively moderate views who was elected President of the Republic in 1997 in an election that was recognized as free and fair by both Western and Russian observers. Soon afterwards, however, Moscow accused him of being unable to keep the situation in Chechnya under control. It was, indeed, true that Maskhadov, from whom Moscow had cut off both financial and military assistance, had been unable to control the various armed factions on Chechen territory. In order to stabilize the situation, Maskhadov decided to cooperate with the radicals and allow them to participate in government and on other issues, Maskhadov found himself obliged to make concessions to them. In February 1999, for example, he decided to issue a decree introducing the Shariah as the only valid law in Chechnya. Moscow viewed this and other actions as signs of Maskhadov's new fundamentalist Islamic stance, and as proof of his sympathy for Chechen "terrorists."²⁵

By not taking any action in the period of reconstruction in Chechnya from 1997 to 1999, Moscow clearly missed an opportunity to develop a relationship of trust with Maskhadov and other moderate forces that would have created the basis for constructive dialog about the future of the republic. Maskhadov was subsequently declared a terrorist, and Moscow decided to support the pro-Russian faction led by the former Mufti of Chechnya, Akhmat Kadyrov. Kadyrov was appointed head of government by Moscow in June 2000, and elected President in October 2003, in a controversial referendum that at the same time increased tensions between the various warring Chechen

clans. In May 2004, Kadyrov fell victim to an attack directed by Shamil Basayev.

The war took on a new dimension in the spring of 2005 after the killing of Maskhadov during a raid by Russian special forces. His death further marginalized moderate opinion in the Chechen resistance movement.²⁶ Evidence of this was seen in the sweeping changes in the composition of the government ordered by the late Abdul-Khalim Sadulayev, Maskhadov's successor as Chechen rebel president: any ministers who were abroad at the time were dismissed or demoted. Sadulayev – who was killed in mid-June 2006 during a special operation in the town of Argun in eastern Chechnya – demoted Akhmed Zakayev, who lived in London and had been Deputy Prime Minister of the Chechen Republic up to this time, to Minister of Culture. Sadulayev also ordered all members of the Cabinet residing abroad to return to Chechnya.²⁷ Significantly, with Maskhadov's death, so vanished the last remains of the "old" generation of Chechens who led the 1990s struggle for national independence. These were now replaced by a much younger, radicalized group of people that neither shared their predecessors Soviet background, nor identified very strongly with traditions and customs upheld by their fathers.

The murder of Maskhadov also allowed the systematic extension of the war to all of the North Caucasus. The strategy to extend the jihad was decided at a "Great Madzhlis" (deliberative assembly) in 2002, in which both Maskhadov and Basayev took part.²⁸ Nonetheless, Maskhadov had always considered the war as primarily a national Chechen matter and wished to restrict

Dead Chechen rebels

Leaders

Dzhokhar Dudayev (1991–1996)	Ex-Soviet air force officer, killed by a missile homing in on his telephone
Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev (1996–1997)	Radical poet and ex-Chechen president, killed by Russian agents in Qatar in 2004
Aslan Maskhadov (1997–2005)	Ex-Soviet artillery officer and elected president in 1997, killed by Russian special forces
Abdul-Khalim Sadulayev (2005–2006)	Radical cleric, killed by Russian special forces

Key warlords

Salman Raduyev	Died of internal bleeding in 2002 in a Russian jail
Khattab	Killed by a poisoned letter in 2002
Ruslan Gelayev	Killed in 2004 by border guards in Dagestan
Shamil Basayev	Killed in Ingushetia in 2006 (rebel vice-president at time of death)

Source: BBC NEWS, 12 July 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/europe/5168984.stm>

it to Chechnya. Significantly, it was only after his death that the so-called “North Caucasus Front” was founded – an organisation that was set up to coordinate the actions of the various rebel groups in the whole of the North Caucasus. The North Caucasus Front – established by Sadulayev on 5 May 2005 and whose military leader was later Basayev – operates everywhere in the North Caucasus, but especially in the republics that border on Chechnya.²⁹

According to the then vice-president of the Chechen rebels, Dokku Umarov (who became president in mid-June 2006 after Sadulayev’s death), the Chechen “headquarters” coordinates closely with the different rebel groups in the North Caucasus. On 18 April 2006, the transcript of an interview given by Umarov to the Chechen-language broadcasting service of “Radio Liberty” appeared on at least three websites operated by Chechen rebels. He responded to a question on coordination between the various North Caucasus rebel groups, by saying, “We have three fronts – in Kabardino-Balkaria, Ingushetia and Dagestan. Fighters in Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria communicate with the military emir [Basayev] and then through myself. They coordinate all their actions with us. They never take any steps without consulting us.”³⁰ At any rate, it is not possible to determine the extent to which the different local armed groups cooperate with the North Caucasus Front on an operational level.

It is likewise unclear how many men the entire front consists of. According to Oleg Khottin, commander of the troops of the Russian Ministry of the Interior in Chechnya, there are a total of 780 fighters operating on North Caucasus territory, organized in 105 small military formations.³¹ It is, however, difficult to give precise figures. In a speech to the Dagestan parliament on 30 March 2006, President of Dagestan Mukha Aliev claimed that, based on information from the Dagestan security forces, there were an estimated 1,000 people in the republic who were members of a terrorist organization.³² Other sources mention between 500-2,000 fighters for Dagestan.³³

Figures for the number of Chechen fighters vary as well. In early 2006, the Chechen branch of the Russian Ministry of the Interior estimated that there were some 750 active fighters in Chechnya.³⁴ Since then, but especially after the killing of Basayev on 10 July 2006, this figure has dropped. Some 80 rebels have accepted Moscow’s offer of amnesty and laid down their weapons (as of August 2006).³⁵ At the

time of writing, there are most probably not more than between 200 and 300 armed fighters left hiding in the mountainous part of Chechnya.³⁶

However, the number of Chechens sitting at home who would be ready to take part in a new chapter of the armed resistance struggle against the Russian army and the pro-Russian Chechen government may well be considerable in light of the fact that the present government, controlled by Prime Minister Ramzan Kadyrov and his clan, is unpopular with many Chechens. According to Chechnya’s rebel president Dokku Umarov, the resistance does not lack volunteers but requires money and weapons in order to engage in large-scale war against federal and republican troops.³⁷

What remains to be seen is whether the death of Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev will have any significant impact on the military situation in Chechnya.³⁸ With Basayev’s death a key symbol of resistance to Russian rule and an important link among the various local rebel groups of the North Caucasus has been eliminated. At the same time, however, the individual cells of armed resistance, which are able to operate autonomously, have not been eradicated and thus continue to possess the ability to conduct military operations alone or in coordination with each other.

THE NORTH CAUCASUS AS A CONFLICT ZONE

Even before the extension of the war in Chechnya after Maskhadov's death, the conflict had already begun to impact the other North Caucasus republics in the form of acts of terrorism, raids by armed Chechen forces into other republics (as in August 1999), and because Chechen fighters were often forced to withdraw into regions beyond the borders of Chechnya when under military pressure from Russia.

The population was made particularly aware of the Chechen war by the violent acts of terrorism. Already during the First Chechen War, there had been isolated attacks carried out by Chechen fighters outside their own borders. The greatest single act of terror outside Chechnya during the First Chechen War was the June 1995 taking of around 1,400 hostages in the Budennovsk hospital in Stavropol Krai by the Chechen terrorist group led by Shamil Basayev. With the beginning of the Second Chechen War, there was a sharp escalation of violence: the number of terrorist attacks increased, especially those launched by suicide squads, and featured a greater number of targeted attacks on civilians. The tragic climax to this spiral of mass terror, which was aimed at generating the most dramatic effect possible and which made no allowance for losses of life, was the hostage drama at a school in the North Ossetian town of Beslan in September 2004. This single event cost the lives of over 300 hostages, a majority of whom were children.³⁹

Since the hostage drama in Beslan, this form of terrorism, which was closely connected with the war in Chechnya and which involved mostly ethnic Chechen perpetrators, has died down. At the same time, however, there was an increase in the number of attacks and military operations in the North Caucasus region carried out by groups that consisted mainly of other North Caucasus ethnic nationalities, rather than of Chechens. The first of this type of larger-scale military operation was the attack in June 2004, by between 200 and 300 armed men, on various official buildings in the city of Nazran, the largest city in the Republic of Ingushetia. A total of 93 people were killed, most of them Ingush government officials and security service agents. Around half of the rebels were Ingush, while the remainder comprised Chechens, Avars, and members from other North Caucasus ethnic groups. Shamil Basayev and Dokku Umarov admitted that they were the ringleaders of the

operation.⁴⁰ Since this event, Ingushetia has remained in a state of unrest. Even though the authorities will not admit it, large parts of this small republic, which has a common border with Chechnya, are controlled by rebel groups.⁴¹

The other large-scale military action occurred in October 2005 in Nalchik, the capital of the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, and involved an attack by over 200 armed rebels, organized in small military units, on various government buildings. According to Russian accounts, 92 rebels, 33 members of the security forces, and 12 civilians were killed in the attack (although rebel websites reported much higher losses for the security forces). Two-thirds of the attackers were local residents and most of them were around 20 years of age.⁴²

What the two actions have in common is not only that they targeted official buildings and followed similar military tactics – both raids were carried out by small units attacking different targets simultaneously⁴³ – but, they were both organized from a joint central command. According to Basayev, there were virtually no contacts between the Chechen resistance and local rebel groups in Kabardino-Balkaria until 2003; contacts intensified from this point onwards. Preparations for the attack on Nalchik began already in spring 2005 and were then carried out “by the Kabardino-Balkarian Section of the CF [Caucasian Front] and by other affiliated sections of the Caucasian Front.”⁴⁴

The situation in Kabardino-Balkaria, however, does not appear to be as serious as in Ingushetia. The area of unrest is largely confined to the mountainous south, i.e. to the part of the republic with a majority of ethnic Balkars. However, the situation may be expected to deteriorate in the future against the background of repressive measures against young Muslims being taken by the regime and an increase in the activities of radical Islamist groups.⁴⁵

Similar developments have been observed over the last years in the other parts of the North Caucasus. For example, stability in North Ossetia, a republic with an orthodox Christian majority and a sizeable Muslim minority, is threatened both by the continuing tensions with its neighbor Ingushetia, and also by an increase in the activities of local radical Islamist groups, who have drawn attention to themselves in recent times with a number

of brutal attacks.⁴⁶ The Karachayev-Cherkess Republic, which has been relatively peaceful up to now, has also seen an increase in the number of armed clashes between militants and the security forces.⁴⁷

Although Adygeya has so far been spared any major acts of violence, a storm could start brewing should plans for a merger with the adjoining Krasnodar Krai be pursued. The idea to merge the two into one administrative unit was raised for the first time in 2004, in the course of Putin's efforts to reduce the number of federal subjects in Russia. The driving force in the case of unification of Krasnodar Krai with Adygeya is, however, not so much the Kremlin, but the ethnic Russian majority of Adygeya. The Adyg community (who are also termed Circassians) numbers only about 100,000 and make up for just 24.2 per cent of the population of their own republic; the Russians have a share of 64.5 per cent. Even so, the Adygs were granted the status of the "titular nation." This designation gave their language not only equal status with Russian, but endowed the Adygs with certain political privileges. (According to the republican constitution, for example, the president of Adygeya has to be a member of the Adyg ethnic community.) Where representatives of the ethnic Russian population point to the discriminatory status of the Russians within the republic, the Adygs fear – with good reason – that they would be completely marginalized if the republic was merged with neighboring Krasnodar Krai and its five million inhabitants, dominated by ethnic Russians. The potential for conflict that this issue poses was illustrated by the mass demonstration of about 10,000 Adygs against the proposed merger in April 2006 in Maikop, the capital of Adygeya.⁴⁸

Instability in the North Caucasus is also affecting neighboring regions and Georgia, where repeated armed clashes have occurred. Stavropol Krai, a North Caucasus region with a Russian majority, made the headlines in February 2006 when heavy military clashes in the area bordering the Krai and Dagestan occurred between a group of armed men of Nogai ethnic background and security forces. The battle lasted several days, with Russian army squads even having to be called in from Chechnya. According to official sources, seven policemen and 11 rebels were killed.⁴⁹

THE DAGESTANI THEATER OF WAR

In the context of the North Caucasus crisis, Dagestan stands out as a unique, even if highly confusing, theater of war. It is also by far the biggest hot spot in the region with the media reporting shootings, arrests, and large-scale military operations on virtually a daily basis. During the period between January and October 2005, the Dagestan Interior Ministry recorded 70 “acts of terror,” a more than 100 per cent increase over 2004.⁵⁰ However, it is uncertain how many of these actions can be blamed on radical Islamist groups, as it is not always possible to determine whether an incident is a terrorist act by an Islamist group, or a dispute between criminal organizations or ethnic-based clans. Even though the authorities are keen to make the “terrorists” responsible for the daily violence whenever possible to distract from other problems, the distinctions between criminal activity and terrorism, particularly in Dagestan, are often extremely blurred.

One thing that is certain is that there are now a number of *jamaats* (lit. communities) in Dagestan, whose members follow the Islamic law of Shariah, which means that they live outside the official rule of law. These *jamaats* often comprise the inhabitants of individual, isolated mountain villages, who have squads of armed men primarily to secure their own territory and who are therefore mainly engaged in defending local interests. Other *jamaats* have fewer local interests and rather resemble terrorist networks. The most notorious of these is the Jamaat “Shariat,” which features on Moscow’s list of terrorist organizations.⁵¹ According to official sources, this group is responsible for the deaths of approximately 50 members of the security forces (as of February 2006).⁵² The organization gained national notoriety following its attack on 1 July 2005 on the Ministry of the Interior in Makhachkala, the capital of the Republic of Dagestan, in which ten members of a special unit were killed.⁵³

It is certain that there are ideological links between the Jamaat “Shariat” and the North Caucasian Front; both are fighting for the establishment of a theocracy in the North Caucasus region that is independent from Russia. It is also probable that there are operational links between them; many of the leading members of the organization fought in the Chechen War on the side of the rebels against the federal troops. One of these, for example, was Rasul Makasharipov, the emir (leader) of the

organization, who was killed in early July 2005. In the late 1990s, he had been a comrade-in-arms in Basayev’s rebel group and had taken part in the Chechen invasion of Dagestan in August 1999.⁵⁴

MOSCOW'S ASSESSMENT OF THE SITUATION

The situation in the North Caucasus has certain similarities to that in Chechnya between the two wars (from 1997 to 1999). Like Chechnya during that time, the current situation in the North Caucasus has distinguishing features such as unstable political power structures, a process of increasing radicalization and Islamization within certain sections of society, corruption within government bodies, rising criminality and unchecked banditry, and finally a desperate economic situation.

Moscow is fully aware of the dangers of the situation in the North Caucasus. In this context, two reports commissioned by Dmitry Kozak (the Presidential Envoy to the Southern Federal District) have caused something of a stir in Russia: one on the North Caucasus and the other specifically on the situation in Dagestan. In these secret reports drawn up for Vladimir Putin, from which extracts reached the Russian press in the summer of 2005 under mysterious circumstances, corruption, clan-based loyalties, a shadow economy, and the alienation of the population from the ruling elite are listed as the principal threats to social stability and a key factor for the continuing economic crisis. The increasing radicalism and Islamization of society are mentioned as manifestations of the situation, not as the causes for it. The situation in Dagestan, in particular, is seen as giving cause for concern. According to Kozak, seven per cent of the population in Dagestan is (in theory) prepared to resort to armed struggle if the situation demands; one-third of the population would take part in illegal protest actions.⁵⁵

Of special interest are the economic statistics: the North Caucasus report states the shadow economy in the Southern Federal District accounts for 26 per cent of the entire economy; in Dagestan it accounts for 44 per cent – a number that, if anything, is too conservative when compared to other statistics. There have been complaints about the inefficiency of federal financial assistance: although the level of assistance from the federal budget has more than tripled over the last four years, and the budget volume of the different republics and areas of the North Caucasus have more than doubled on average, the gross regional product has stayed the same. Put another way, federal finances have created no added-value for the **North Caucasus economy**, but have certainly lined the pockets of a group of local rulers.

In addition to corruption, the lack of separation of

powers is cited as a major obstacle to economic recovery. The report on the North Caucasus highlights the fact that one of the factors impeding economic development is that the court system is bound up with the political and commercial interests of the ruling elite, and is thus preventing the development of an entrepreneurial system. Depending on their location, between 54 and 90 per cent of businesses were certain they would have no chance of a fair court hearing if they had a legal dispute with the regional authorities. Between 44 and 88 per cent of businesses admitted they had already been the victims of outrageous practices and victimization on the part of “militia,” who generally operate on behalf of a particular party or an ethnic clan.

Regardless of their analyses, the reports have one great weakness: they do not mention Moscow's disastrous role in events to date. Kozak's report does not mention that Moscow itself is part of the same corrupt system. For a long time, Moscow was focused on Chechnya and the war against terrorism, being content just to maintain the status quo in the rest of the North Caucasus; in other words, it supported the corrupt political regimes there and helped the spread of maladministration and the entrenchment of clan structures. Among the biggest losers in this system were young people who, without jobs or hope for the future, posed a relatively easy prey for criminal organizations or militant Islamist groups. This means that Moscow's policy actually helped radical Islamist forces to become established in the North Caucasus republics.

This central imbalance in Kozak's analysis raises questions about the political objective behind the reports. Russian newspapers have speculated that the reports may not have been leaked accidentally, but were made public not simply to highlight irregularities, but also to legitimize a greater level of involvement by Russia in the region – even to the extent of direct rule. According to Kozak, tighter control from outside was justified, not only because of the level of corruption and the dire economic conditions, but also because Moscow should also have a say in how funds are allocated, since it financed a large part of the budgets of various republics. Kozak claimed this right in particular for republics whose budgets were financed up to 80 per cent or more by Moscow.⁵⁶ In fact, an overview of Russia's North Caucasus policy reinforces claims that Moscow is seeking greater direct involvement in the region.

CADRE POLICY AND TERRITORIAL REORGANIZATION

Moscow is attempting to bring the situation in the North Caucasus under control by using strategies such as a cadre policy, a redesign of the administrative and territorial structures, intensive militarization, and a reformulation of its policy on Islam. Yet it is doubtful whether this will be enough to deal with the problems. The cadre policy illustrates this: Typically, it was an event in North Caucasus, the Beslan tragedy in September 2004, that gave the Russian President an excuse to abolish the election of a regional leader by the people and to make the appointment directly from Moscow. Now the presidents of the republics of North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Dagestan are appointed by the Russian President. The others will also be appointed by the Kremlin once their period in office has expired.⁵⁷

Moscow sees a further means of exercising control through territorial and administrative restructuring of the region. The most prominently discussed projects are the unification of Adygeya with Krasnodar Krai and Chechnya with Ingushetia.⁶⁰ However, this may merely prove to be the first stage of a more comprehensive territorial restructuring of Russia. Of the many projects for territorial restructuring that are currently circulating in Russia, most discussion centers on the idea of dividing Russia into 28 major provinces, as presented by the “Council for the Analysis of Productive Resources” (*Sovet po izucheniiu proizvoditel'nykh sil – SOPS*). This project envisages making Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, and the Stavropol Krai into the “North Caucasus Province,” and the Republic of Adygeya,

National republics and their presidents	
Republic	President of the republic
Adygeya	Khazret M. Sovmen (elected 13 January 2002)
Karachayevo-Cherkessia	Mustafa A.-A. Batdyev (elected 31 August 2003)
Kabardino-Balkaria	Arsen B. Kanokov (appointed 28 September 2005)
North Ossetia	Taimuraz D. Mamsurov (appointed 7 June 2005)
Ingushetia	Murat M. Ziazikov (elected 28 April 2002)
Chechnya	Alu D. Alkhanov (elected 1 September 2004)
Dagestan	Mukha G. Aliev (appointed 20 February 2006)

However, it is not clear how far this approach will manage to break up the old tribal structures. In fact, intervention from the outside bears the danger of merely creating new constellations of conflict.⁵⁸ Furthermore, interventions of this kind may lead to power shifts within the system, rather than changing the system itself. Dagestan provides a good illustration of this: although the then-departing President of Dagestan, Magomedali Magomedov, was unable to convince the Kremlin to appoint a candidate from his own family as the next president, continuity was preserved by appointing Mukha Aliev, a close ally of Magomedov, to the post of president. Also, the influence of the Magomedov clan was secured by the fact that at the same time the Dagestani former President left office in February 2006, his son, **Magomed Salem Magomedov, was appointed President of the Parliament** – one of the most important positions in the republic.⁵⁹

Karachayevo-Cherkessia and the Krasnodar Krai into the “Prichenornomskaia Province.”⁶¹ Although the advocates of unification projects stress factors such as “cost reductions” and “enhanced efficiency,” which they believe could be achieved by combining administrative systems and budgets, the main reason for a territorial hierarchy of this kind seems to be to strengthen federal control. The fact cannot be ignored that the authors of the project to create 28 provinces are also keen to subsume republics with a non-Russian titular nations into larger regions with a Slavic-Russian majority, as a way of watering down the ethnic component inside Russia. The mass demonstrations in Adygeya gave an indication of how sensitive such projects can be in the North Caucasus region, given its strong mix of ethnic groups. Reservations about an ethnic restructuring of the North Caucasus have now been expressed by the leaders of most of the other national republics, and even in the regions of the Southern Federal District that have a Russian majority.

Against the background of rising protests, even Dmitry Kozak has recently shown more reservations towards unification projects, which became evident when Kozak spoke out against the initiative proposed by Ramzan Kadyrov to unite Chechnya with Ingushetia and Dagestan into a single republic. The motive behind this unification plan, which observers claim Kadyrov was only able to suggest with backing from Moscow, is quite clearly intended as an alternative project to the unification of North Caucasus espoused by the North Caucasian Front. Significantly, Ramzan Kadyrov is the only head of government in the North Caucasus that strongly supports a unification project.⁶²

MILITARY BUILD-UP AND A NEW POLICY ON ISLAM

The policy of militarization being followed by Russia represents a third element of its control. Despite the fact that Russia has now significantly reduced the number of its troops in Chechnya, at the same time it has also dramatically increased its military presence in the other republics. The estimated 300,000 federal troops in the North Caucasus were spread throughout the entire territory at the beginning of 2005, including the regions with a Russian majority (if we discount the concentration of between 80,000 and 100,000 soldiers in Chechnya at that time). Now, however, Moscow has consolidated its troops in much greater numbers in the national republics.⁶³ The region resembles a huge training ground for the Russian military: In the 9-month period between September 2005 and June 2006, Russia conducted over half-a-dozen military exercises involving one or more North Caucasus republics.⁶⁴

By the end of 2006, the authorities plan to set up dozens of new frontier posts in an effort to tighten control of the internal borders between the republics and of international borders to the south. More and more, Moscow is replacing its regular army with special units from the Ministry of Interior and the Federal Security Service (FSB). Unlike previous efforts, Moscow aims to engage only contract soldiers for these units. In this context, the Russian Ministry of the Interior has started to build up two “mountain brigades,” which are to be stationed in Dagestan and in Karachayev-Cherkessia, and which are also officially designated to protect Russia’s southern borders; in practice, however, these mobile units may well be used in the fight against rebel groups on difficult terrain in the North Caucasus interior.⁶⁵

The new anti-terror law, which came into effect on 10 March 2006, and gives the FSB virtually unlimited powers in the fight against terrorism, will also have repercussions on the military situation in the North Caucasus. The National Anti-Terror Committee, which was created under the provisions of a decree signed by Putin on 15 February 2006 and will be headed by FSB Director Nikolai Patrushev, will in the future be responsible for combating terrorism inside Russia. Decisions made by the Anti-Terror Committee will be binding for all federal units (including the armed units of the Interior Ministry). In the various regions, orders from the Committee’s regional commissions must be followed down to the level of the local authorities. This also means

that Dmitry Kozak will be stripped of some of his powers. The Kozak Commission was established following the September 2004 hostage crisis in Beslan and will continue to concern itself with socioeconomic and political development, but will no longer have specific responsibility for anti-terrorism activities.⁶⁶

The efforts to militarize the North Caucasus and establish the National Anti-Terrorism Committee – an institution that has unavoidable associations with the State Defense Committee set up by Stalin during World War II – could be seen as an overreaction on the part of the Kremlin. After all, Putin himself announced the end of the anti-terrorism operation in Chechnya. In fact, such developments indicate that Moscow is extremely worried by the general situation in the North Caucasus and takes the threat of widespread conflict very seriously.

Finally, we need to examine Russia’s policy toward Islam as an important component in the Russia’s overall North Caucasus policy. Here, too, we can discern new developments: until very recently, the Russian leadership’s policy towards Islam was characterized by intense suspicion of any signs of fundamentalist Islam that deviated from the “official” form of Islam of the Muftis, or from the type of Sufi-influenced Islam that is traditional in the North Caucasus. But in fact, the movement towards purer forms of Islam was less an advocacy of violence than an effort to find support in a disintegrating society. The young generation in particular rejected both the traditional form of Islam practiced by their fathers and the politically loyal form of Islam tolerated already in the Soviet period. In their eyes, the latter had been discredited by its association with the corrupt local regimes. Nevertheless, supporters of the Islamist reform movement were often automatically denounced by the authorities as “Wahhabis,” and in some cases brutally persecuted in the wave of anti-terrorism hysteria. Even though this is a misleading label, since the North Caucasian “Wahhabis” really have little in common with the purist ideals of Wahhabism as preached by its founder, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who taught on the Arabian Peninsula in the eighteenth century, the epithet emphasized the “foreign” (i.e. negative) influence from the Arabic region and triggered associations with international terrorism.⁶⁷

Since the events in Nalchik in October 2005, however, the Kremlin has modified its policy toward Islam and, in particular, toned down its anti-Wahhabi rhetoric. Putin, for example, let it be known at the end of January 2006 that there was nothing wrong with Wahhabism itself, but that the problem was its manipulation by the terrorists.⁶⁸ Likewise, after the attack on Nalchik, Dmitry Kozak stressed that the government authorities had no objections to Wahhabism and did what he could to halt the repressive measures against Muslims.⁶⁹

In principle, it must be seen as a welcome development that Moscow is distancing itself from the policy of demonizing Wahhabism, and is now urging the authorities in the republics to abandon their repressive policies against supporters of fundamentalist branches of Islam; for, as the latest developments in the North Caucasus have demonstrated, such a policy succeeds only in driving young people, in particular, into the arms of militant Islamists. Chechnya, however, illustrates how challenging Moscow's new policy toward Islam will be and the problems it could give rise to.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF “CHECHENIZATION”

Chechnya is a special case within Russia’s policy vis-à-vis the Northern Caucasus. According to official announcements, there have been no major acts of war in the Chechen Republic for approximately three years. In addition to just under 50,000 federal troops that remain in the republic in the summer of 2006 (which Moscow plans to reduce by half until mid-2008), there are Chechen “battalions” supported by Moscow and the security forces of the Chechen Ministry of the Interior.⁷⁰ According to information from Chechen President Alu Alkhanov, the forces of the Ministry of the Interior currently number approximately 10,000 soldiers.⁷¹ To this figure, members of the Chechen battalions and other units must be added – the bulk of which stems from forces loyal to Prime Minister Kadyrov, the so-called “Kadyrovtsy” (lit. “Kadyrov’s men”).⁷²

On a political level, the main institutions in Chechnya have been re-established, at least formally. The republic now has a constitution, a president elected by the people, a government, and an elected parliament. In other words, to quote Putin, the “Chechen Republic has returned to the Russian constitutional sphere.”⁷³ Finally, the official ending of the war becomes more and more physically visible: the Chechen government has made efforts to rebuild Grozny and other Chechen cities, set out to repair highways, and restore electricity and water supplies.⁷⁴

In reality, the policy of Chechenization as practiced until now harbors a serious risk potential. In principle, the integration of former resistance fighters (some of them war criminals) into political life and the transformation of private armies to official armed forces, is not a bad thing: it represents only a pragmatic policy approach. However, the problem is that Moscow has, up until now, principally relied on a single faction in Chechnya – the clan of Ramzan Kadyrov, the Prime Minister appointed by Moscow. This means that the Kremlin is running multiple risks, not least of which is the danger of an internal Chechen conflict.

A situation approaching civil war developed once in the recent past, after the federal troops were withdrawn from Chechnya (during the 1997–1999 period). But today’s situation differs in that the main problem for the security of Chechnya and its citizens stems less from radical Islamist fighters and more from the official structures, particularly

from the security forces under Kadyrov’s control. For example, the new Chechen battalions “Sever” and “Yug” established in the spring of 2006 – there are also the Chechen battalions “Vostok” and “Zapad,” which are not, however, commanded by Kadyrov supporters – have been formally placed under the command of the North Caucasus Military District, and are thus at least nominally controlled by the Russian Ministry of the Interior. In the final analysis, this force of approximately 1,200 men is essentially commanded by Ramzan Kadyrov, for its members were mainly recruited from the Chechen Presidential Security Service (an institution originally set up in 2001 to ensure the protection of Akhmat Kadyrov), from Ramzan Kadyrov’s private army, and from security forces loyal to him in the Chechen Ministry of the Interior (from the so-called “Anti-Terrorism Center”). Furthermore, many members of the Vostok and Zapad battalions are members of the extended Kadyrov family, or of its *teip* (the term for the Chechen clan unit).⁷⁵

In this context, in its updated report on Chechnya published in January 2006 (*V atmosfere strakha*), the respected Russian human rights organization “Memorial” noted that the armed conflict would continue behind the façade of “regulation.” According to the authors of the report, the policy of Chechenization has merely authorized the official bodies to use “unlawful force.” A frequent method of removing or wearing down an opponent is to kidnap the person concerned or members of their family. Memorial adds that such kidnappings are often carried out in the wake of “mopping-up operations” by the Kadyrovtsy. Mopping-up operations, it says, are generally carried out in those regions of Chechnya that are home to supporters of an opposing clan.⁷⁶

Memorial mentions in his fifth annual report on Chechnya, presented to the public on 3 August 2006, that the number of killings and disappearances have dropped over the past 12 months. If there were some 310 reported killings and 418 disappearances in the last six months of 2005, the number dropped to 192 and 316 respectively for the first half of 2006. However, the report notes that stability in Chechnya is based on a climate of fear and intimidation. Many crimes committed by the Kadyrovtsy are never reported or remain unsolved, according to the report.⁷⁷

A further difference between the situation in Chechnya now compared to 1997–1999 is that Moscow has provided vigorous support for the official structures in Chechnya, principally for Prime Minister Kadyrov. Where Maskhadov was dropped by Moscow and then driven into the arms of the extremists, Moscow runs the risk of again being burnt by its own policy in shoring up the Kadyrov clan. The republic could easily slide into a long-term conflict not only among pro-Russian Chechen units and rebel fighters, but also among pro-Russian Chechen forces struggling for political power. Thus, the forces of Premier Minister Kadyrov, who has made no secret of his ambitions to become the next Chechen president, clash frequently with troops of the Chechen Ministry of the Interior loyal to President Alkhanov.⁷⁸

Finally, it can be expected that relations between Chechnya and Moscow will not be without serious strains. One bone of contention could well be Kadyrov's demand for the complete withdrawal of all remaining federal units (apart from border troops).⁷⁹ In addition, Chechnya has made a series of further demands on Moscow: Kadyrov and the Chechen Parliament have insisted that Grozneftegaz, the company responsible for oil production around Grozny, should pass into the ownership of the Chechen Republic, and that the latter should also have control over revenues from oil operations.⁸⁰ In the current situation, this demand, while basically justified, would mean that the core of the Chechen economy would be delivered into the hands of corrupt rulers who have for a long time been engaged in the illegal selling of oil from Chechen refineries. Additionally, Kadyrov believes that Chechnya should be given free economic zone status.⁸¹ Also, Kadyrov wants to receive a lot more money for reconstruction from the federal budget. For this reason, the Chechen parliament, during its 16 March 2006 session, rejected the budget for 2006, which provides for a subsidy of some 19 billion rubles from the Federation, and demanded instead ten times this amount.⁸²

Moscow will not accede to all the demands; in particular, it is very unlikely that Moscow will withdraw the FSB's and Ministry of the Interior's anti-terrorist units from Chechnya. But all the indications are that Chechnya will receive a special status of autonomy within Russia. While Moscow has gone over to the idea of annulling the bilateral treaties with other regions of Russia, Chechnya has the prospect of concluding an agreement with Moscow, the details of which are

still being negotiated. This could lead to the highly ironic situation where Moscow, having opposed Chechnya's attempts to secede in two extremely costly wars, agrees to a model granting this republic greater autonomy than any other region of Russia. In doing so, Moscow would not only be abandoning Chechnya to a situation that, given the present conditions, could again lead the region into chaos and civil war; but, it would also fuel mistrust in the other national republics within the federation (e.g. Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, etc.), whose sovereignty has been weakened by Moscow over the last few years in the course of Putin's re-centralization measures and the establishment of the "vertical of power."⁸³

In the special case of Chechnya, the repercussions of the Kremlin's new policy towards Islam also need to be examined. Whereas particular symbols of Islam were targeted by Moscow in the past particularly in the Second Chechen War (through the destruction of mosques, widespread prohibition of the teaching of Arabic or Islam, repressive measures against men with beards and women with veils), the Russian conviction now appears to be that the only way to control Islamic fundamentalism is by integrating it more into social and religious life as a whole. In August 2005, the Kremlin still permitted the pro-Russian Mufti of Chechnya to declare a holy war on the Wahhabis, but now, as part of its new policy, Moscow has decided to create a more fundamentalist image for the government of Ramzan Kadyrov, in order to win over rebel supporters.⁸⁴ This, however, triggered a development that, almost certainly, will not be in Russia's long-term interests.

Kadyrov has now prohibited gambling machines, declared himself in favor of polygamy, banned the sale of alcohol in Chechen shops, and demanded that the female announcers on Chechen television wear head scarves. The republican television and printed media are now subject to stricter censorship. On Kadyrov's instructions, all content will, in future, be checked to ensure it conforms to the "ethical standards of the Chechen national mentality." Finally, Kadyrov advocates making the study of the Koran and the Shariah obligatory school subjects in future. The high point of Kadyrov's Islamization policy was to ban a Danish refugee aid agency in reaction to the publication of the cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed.⁸⁵

Moscow walks a dangerous path by allowing developments under its patronage that are not

only against current political practice, but also contravene provisions in the constitution that codify a division between state and religion. It is also highly uncertain whether the new policy towards Islam will meet with success in the fight against the rebels. Firstly, many Chechens doubt that Kadyrov's embrace of Islam is genuine. Secondly, the Chechens know that the rebels are fighting for independence from Russia as well as for Islamic values; by contrast, many see Kadyrov as a traitor because of his pro-Russian stance.

RUSSIA AS A MODEL FOR THE FUTURE?

It would be wrong to hold Russian policy exclusively responsible for the precarious situation in the North Caucasus, since many of the problems there are homegrown. However, because of its weight as a financial source, military power, and decisive political actor, Russia has a major role to play and its behavior can thus exacerbate or weaken existing trends. It is therefore all the more astonishing that Moscow, despite the repeated lessons of history that show that the use of brute force in the North Caucasus region only manages to exacerbate the problems, is again relying to a large degree on its military might to control the situation.

Moscow faces a potentially fateful decision in the North Caucasus with far-reaching consequences: whether to respond to the deteriorating situation by pursuing greater military involvement. However, its problem with Chechnya stems more from how the situation within this republic can be normalized after the formal end of the war. Indeed, the current situation reads almost like a chapter from the history of Chechnya at the end of the Great Caucasian War in the nineteenth century, when the victors decided to co-opt sections of the rebel elite into the political structures and allowed a certain degree of legal pluralism and the existence of traditional institutions.

There are no tailor-made solutions for the problems of the North Caucasus. On the one hand, the policy of Chechenization is basically moving in the right direction. However, the problem remains that Chechnya, if left on its own, could rapidly slide into conflict between supporters and opponents of Kadyrov. It is likewise risky to grant this republic rights and freedoms that Moscow withholds from other regions, and which, particularly in the area of religious policy, are scarcely compatible with the principles of a modern secular state. Centralism and militarization in the other national republics of the North Caucasus also carry the risk of upsetting the already complex ethnic, political and social balance, and may – as just one possible consequence – galvanize radical and militant forces from the nebulous cluster of Islamist groups.

With its efforts to militarize the North Caucasus, Moscow is certainly proving that it is prepared to go to any effort or expense in the fight against terrorism in order to defeat this evil. At the same time, it is relying on totally inefficient local authorities

and commissions to stabilize the socio-economic situation that are either unwilling or unable to control the funds promised for this purpose. But it is precisely in this area that greater Russian involvement is required to improve bureaucratic efficiency. In order to eliminate corruption and clan-based regimes, the Kremlin needs to strengthen society from the bottom up; however, this will not be achieved by inflating federal bureaucracy or by the militarization of the region. What is needed is a consolidation of civil society, the creation of an independent judiciary, support for non-governmental organizations, the stimulation of a dynamic political party system, and the promotion of a free and independent media.

In short, Russia needs to present the North Caucasus and its peoples with a model for the future, one that offers an alternative to other models, such as the current clan-based regimes held together by corrupt local rulers, the theocracy espoused by the militant Islamists, or the pseudo-Islamist version of Ramzan Kadyrov. Thanks to the present economic upturn, Russia would have both the opportunity and means to present itself as an attractive partner for these societies in many different areas, and not merely as a policing power. A model for the future would need to offer young people education opportunities and career prospects throughout all of Russia. Russia would also have to try to further relations in other areas, such as science, culture and sport. At the present time, however, there is little stimulus provided for integration in these areas. In fact, a process of alienation of the Muslim section of the North Caucasus from Russia is underway and manifests itself on the Russian side in the form of growing Islamophobia and hostility against “Caucasian natives” For all intents and purposes, it appears that Russia itself poses a major obstacle to solving the problems.

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