

# RUSSIA'S NORTH CAUCASUS: AN ARC OF INSECURITY

Although Chechnya no longer makes international headlines, instability persists and has actually spread within the wider North Caucasus region. Degrading socio-economic conditions, an unstable political situation, and increasing religious tension have made the North Caucasus susceptible to Islamist insurgency and terrorist activity. The modernisation strategy for the North Caucasus launched by Moscow in 2008 has failed to reverse the situation so far. Turning into an arc of insecurity, the region poses a growing challenge to stability within Russia and beyond.



*Soldiers stand guard at a check point of a military camp in Dagestan, 5 September 2010* REUTERS / Ho New

For much of the last two decades, Russia's two military campaigns in Chechnya have placed insecurity in the North Caucasus, domestic terrorism, and anti-terrorist strategy at the fore front of Russian domestic politics. Russia's military actions in Chechnya were also issues that had a high-profile resonance in the international arena. International debate centred on concerns over the large-scale fighting and heavy-handed approach of Russian security forces on the ground in Chechnya, the plight and human security situation of the ordinary Chechens, as well as a series of major terrorist actions within Russia by Chechen and North Caucasian militant groups, in particular the Dubrovka theatre siege in 2002 and the Beslan school siege in 2004.

More recently, as large scale hostilities and military operations have ceased, Chechnya and the wider North Caucasus region have

received much less attention and coverage both within Russia and internationally. And yet, insecurity, terrorism, and instability not only persist, but have in fact expanded geographically to include much of the rest of the North Caucasus, most intensely within the Republics of Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria. Furthermore, extremist groups within the North Caucasus have resumed terrorist actions on high-profile targets in other regions of Russia, including the January 2011 bombing of the international arrivals lounge of Moscow's largest airport. There is increasing concern that these groups will target the 2014 Winter Olympic Games, which will be held in Sochi, a city situated near to the North Caucasus region.

The root causes for violence in the North Caucasus are manifold and multiplying. At

the present time, the Russian authorities are failing to adequately deal with this instability, which has negative repercussions for both Russian and international security.

## Spreading instability

The current insecurity in the North Caucasus can be traced back to the mid-late 1990s. Following the end of the Soviet Union, the Chechen Republic declared itself independent from the Russian Federation, leading Moscow to launch a large-scale military campaign in Chechnya, with the aim of re-imposing constitutional order. In the years following the end of this military campaign, the nature of the separatist movement inside Chechnya changed from a secessionist movement to an Islamist-inspired and more diffuse network of insurgents.

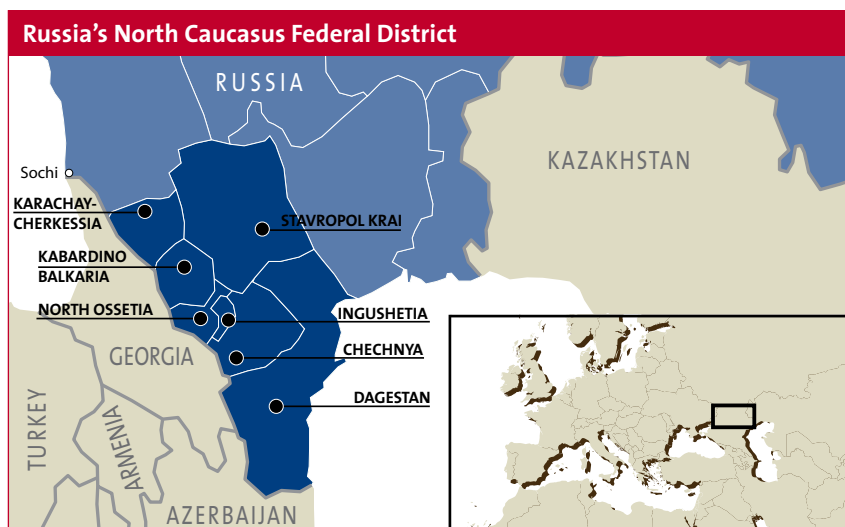
In September 1999, an incursion of a 1,500-man armed group from Chechnya into the neighbouring Republic of Dagestan, in combination with a string of apartment bombings in Buynaksk, Moscow, and Volgograd, blamed on Chechen terrorist groups, led to the launch of a second large-scale Russian military campaign in Chechnya. In contrast to the first campaign, this operation was presented as a counter-terrorist operation to eradicate domestic and international terrorists, rather than suppress separatism. Since 2000, the Russian government has argued that large-scale conflict has ceased, prompting the authorities to introduce a policy of "normalisation", aimed at the transfer of administrative control to a Chechen Republican leadership, alongside ongoing counter-terrorist operations to eradicate

the remaining insurgents operating on the ground in Chechnya.

During the early to mid-2000s, this normalisation process squeezed insurgents out of Chechnya and into other parts of the North Caucasus, in particular the predominantly Muslim Republics of Ingushetia, Dagestan, and Kabardino-Balkaria. The influx of these insurgent groups into areas in which societal dislocation, poverty, weak political governance, and repressive security services were already rife, led to an escalation of violence across the region, some of which is currently being expressed through terrorist activity. The root cause of current instability is not secessionism, but a fusion of general societal instability and Islamist extremism. Indeed, the geographical widening of societal dislocation across the North Caucasus has led to a proliferation of Islamist terrorist cells and groups, centered on a pan-North Caucasian network known as the “Caucasus Emirate”, which outlines its primary goal as the creation of a single Islamic state on Russian territory and beyond.

This geographical expansion of insurgents has meant that while terrorist incidents in Chechnya have declined in recent years, the overall number of casualties from terrorist actions across the wider North Caucasus region has remained high throughout the 2000s, with a sharp increase since 2009. According to the NGO Kavkaz Uzel, there were 238 terrorist actions in the North Caucasus in 2010, with at least 1,710 people victims: 754 dead and 956 injured. Whilst the overall number of attacks within the North Caucasus as a whole has remained stable over recent years, currently violence in Kabardino-Balkaria and Dagestan is on the rise, while there has been a decline in attacks not just in Chechnya but also in Ingushetia. The death of key Islamist rebel leaders – Alexander Tikhomirov (also called Said Buryatsky) in March 2010 and Ali Taziyev (also known as Magas) in June 2010 – has resulted in a lull in terrorist activity in Ingushetia.

Although insecurity has become generalised across the North Caucasus, the main factors driving the violence are different from Republic to Republic. The dramatic increase in violence in Dagestan is primarily a function of divisions on religious grounds, in particular clashes between Islamist groupings that take their inspiration from abroad and the followers of the more traditional North Caucasian forms of Islam, such as Sufism. In Ingushetia, tensions and violence are primarily centered on societal



disillusionment with the local leadership (appointed by Moscow), who are seen as acting for their own benefit and enrichment, rather than for the good of the Republic's population. This tension was more acute prior to the change of leadership in 2009. In Kabardino-Balkaria, societal dislocation is linked to a growing feud between the two main ethnic groups, the Kabardins and Balkars, over which one controls the levers of power in the Republic.

As for Chechnya, since the election of Ramzan Kadyrov as President in 2007, a more centralised “vertical of power”, akin to an autocratic fiefdom, has been created, which has led to a significant decrease in terrorist activity. This in turn has convinced Moscow to officially end the federal counter-terrorist operation in Chechnya on 17 April 2009. Whilst the terrorist threat from insurgent groups has declined, the Kadyrov regime's terrorising methods aimed at maintaining order have not resolved low-level societal insecurity within Chechnya.

**Medvedev's modernisation policy**

During the last years of the Putin presidency, Russian authorities seemed to be actively attempting to silence the issue of insecurity in the North Caucasus. By comparison, in recent years, Russia has been more forthcoming in recognising the geographical expansion and increase in magnitude of security problems in the North Caucasus. The current Russian President, Dmitri Medvedev, has called terrorism and instability in the North Caucasus, the “single biggest internal threat to Russia”. As well as ongoing counter-insurgency operations, this renewed emphasis on tackling insecurity in the North Caucasus is evident in Medvedev's premier political project “modernisation”. This modernisation programme includes

a series of measures to counteract the escalating violence in the North Caucasus, which are based on a three-pronged approach to arresting instability and violence: leadership reshuffles, federal restructuring and socio-economic development schemes. The Presidents of Ingushetia and Dagestan were replaced in 2008 and 2010 respectively. In 2010, the North Caucasus has officially separated from the larger Southern Federal District to form a new North Caucasus Federal District. This change in federal structure was accompanied by the launch of a 15-year economic and development plan for the North Caucasus Federal District, aimed at revitalising the local economy and reducing societal dislocation.

However, in spite of these new initiatives, the federal approach to the North Caucasus remains more or less the same as during the 2000s, emphasising the need for better economic conditions, muting issues of poor political governance, and relying upon counter-terrorist operations. It seems clear that if the more liberal aspects of this modernisation strategy are to be effective, a radical overhaul of Russian state and society is required. However, it is also evident that regardless of the rhetoric of modernisation, the Russian authorities are not about to undertake such a major overhaul, neither in Russia as a whole, nor specifically in the North Caucasus.

As well as failing to effectively address the poor socio-economic situation, including high levels of unemployment and corruption, and poor political governance in the North Caucasus, both Moscow and the Republican leaderships have not engaged sufficiently with the local population, either in seeking to resolve wider societal problems or in relation to the implementation

of counter-insurgency measures. In the few cases in which a dialogue between the population and the authorities has been initiated, such as by the current Ingush President Yevkurov, violence and instability appears to be dropping. However, this strategy is not being used elsewhere in the region, and this lack of consultation has created fertile ground for insurgent groups, especially in terms of recruiting disillusioned youth.

As the situation on the ground in the North Caucasus has deteriorated in recent years, the Russian state has attempted to isolate North Caucasian insecurity from the rest of Russia. However, the Russian authorities have not been very successful in this regard, as extremist groups from the North Caucasus continue to conduct regular terrorist attacks in major Russian cities. In turn, the Russian population, and to some extent the Russian leadership, have become resigned to a high-level of terrorist threat across the country.

**External implications**

While insecurity in the North Caucasus is primarily a challenge for Russian internal stability, it also has ramifications for regional and international security.

Geopolitically, instability in the North Caucasus contributes negatively to conflict transformation and stabilisation efforts in the wider Caucasus region. Firstly, the “Caucasus Emirate” group proclaims that its rebels and operatives function not only within Russia’s borders, but also further afield, including Azerbaijan. Secondly, the North Caucasus has emerged as another fault line in Russian-Georgian relations. Moscow has been angered by Georgia’s (October 2010) establishment of a visa-free regime for North Caucasus residents and a speech by Georgian President, Mikheil Saakashvili, to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2010, in which he outlined his vision of a “unified Caucasus”. These disputes over the North Caucasus have made the resolution and settlement of Georgia – South Ossetian relations, in the wake of the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia over South Ossetia, more difficult.

The North Caucasus also functions as one component in a chain of instability and terrorist activity that spans the Middle East, Eurasia, and South Asia. Both official and independent Russian sources remain concerned about the radicalisation of North Caucasian youth that travel to the Middle East for education and the

Major terrorist incidents in Russia since 2000		
Date	Incident	Casualties
January 2011	Domodedovo International Airport bombing, Moscow	37 deaths, 180 injured
March 2010	Two bomb blasts at Moscow metro stations	34 deaths, 18 injured
November 2009	Explosion on a Nevsky express train from Moscow to St Petersburg	26 deaths, 96 injured
August 2006	Bomb at a Moscow market	10 deaths
September 2004	Beslan school siege, North Ossetia	Over 300 deaths, around 800 injured
October 2002	Dubrovka Theatre Siege, Moscow	170 deaths, over 700 injured

ongoing regional links between the North Caucasus insurgency and al-Qaeda groups in the wider Middle East and Afghanistan. Indeed, the Russian authorities proclaim to have killed top al-Qaeda operatives, of Saudi and Turkish nationality, operating in the North Caucasus during spring 2011. Also, al-Qaeda-inspired cells and groups continue to express solidarity and support with North Caucasus jihadists.

The Russian authorities’ concerns about the interconnected nature of Islamist activity in the North Caucasus is linked with wider fears about the political and security situation in Afghanistan, against the background of the West’s intention to withdraw its military role in Afghanistan in upcoming years. Moscow fears that this may lead to Islamist-inspired extremist groups and illegal drug and arms traffickers in the Afghanistan/Central Asia region revitalising linkages with North Caucasian insurgents, as was the case during the 1990s. At this stage, North Caucasus extremist groups are primarily focussed on terrorist activity within Russia, however there is a possibility that these groups could seek to act outside of Russia, working either independently or in conjunction with other terrorist groups. Indeed, a terrorist cell with links to the North Caucasus insurgency was recently uncovered by the Czech authorities. However, currently the West is not a primary target for North Caucasus insurgents.

**Europe’s role**

The situation inside the North Caucasus continues to be a source of tension between Russia and its European partners, particularly in relation to asylum cases and human security. The EU is the recipient of a large influx of asylum seekers from the North Caucasus. Since 2003, asylum seekers from Russia (many of whom are from

the North Caucasus) have been the third largest nationality group claiming asylum in Europe, leading to debates within certain countries (such as Poland and Norway) about the status of these asylum seekers. Furthermore, the European Court of Human Rights is seeing a significant flow of plaintive cases from North Caucasians, asserting human rights abuses by the Russian Federation, which are being settled in favour of the North Caucasus population.

Until recently, Russia has reacted harshly to European efforts to discuss the situation in the North Caucasus and has sought to restrict the influence of external actors in this region. However, in the last couple of years, Moscow has become more conciliatory towards Europe in relation to the North Caucasus question, responding more positively towards the Council of Europe’s latest report on the situation in the region. In addition, Russia has been more active in paying the compensation awarded by the European Court of Human Rights to North Caucasians bringing cases of human rights abuses by the Russian state. Hence, there is scope for an increase in rapport and cooperation between Russia and Europe around this issue and for Europe to play a greater role in the amelioration of the security situation in the North Caucasus.

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