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The Dilemma of the North Caucasus: Russia's Endless Conflict

By

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Introduction

Recently, the Russian Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin outlined a new strategy for the North Caucasus intended to enhance its economic development in order to curtail the cause for rising violence in the region. He was making the statement at a plenary session during the course of the inter-regional conference held by the ruling United Russia party, on the strategy for North Caucasus' social and economic development by 2020, and the programme for 2010-2012.ⁱ

Putin emphasised that the North Caucasus should be included in the system of inter-regional and international economic ties, which should encapsulate large strategic projects. North Caucasus could become a part of the international North-South transit transport corridor. He added that Makhachkala, the capital of the republic of Dagestan, could become a major Russian merchant port on the Caspian Sea. Russia was ready to support the Cherkessk-Sukhumi highway construction project in order to link the North Caucasus region with the former Georgian republic of Abkhazia.ⁱⁱ

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Putin called on the regional authorities to use all possible means to attract investments in the region. He stated that the Russian government intended to further support the development of tourism in the region. It was also immensely necessary to change the atmosphere both in the North Caucasus, as well as the surrounding lands.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the long run, whether such policies garnered towards the regeneration of the troubled area would indeed bring about peace is what remains to be witnessed for future generations of both Russians as well as North Caucasians. Russia's invisible civil war with North Caucasus has claimed more lives than healed the turbulence in the region. The volatile status of the republics scattered across the area has emerged as one of the principal security problems faced by Russia in the recent times. Although the history of the conflict can be traced back to the times of the Czars, the recent spurt of violence within the precincts of Moscow and elsewhere have made this long drawn war a force to reckon with.

The Beslan siege of 2004 was perhaps Russia's most heart-rending episode of carnage during recent times. Two years earlier, gunmen interrupted a play at a Moscow theatre and took the entire audience hostage; 170 people died when security forces attempted a rescue mission. A series of suicide bombings in and around Moscow killed dozens in 2003 and 2004. In November 2009, a bomb derailed the Nevsky Express, the high-speed train connecting Moscow and St. Petersburg, killing nearly 30 passengers. Another bomb had derailed the same train in August 2007, although no one had been killed. Finally, in March 2010, a pair of female suicide bombers blew themselves up in the Moscow metro during morning rush hour, killing nearly 40 people.^{iv}

The Dilemma of the North Caucasus

The North Caucasus is the northern part of the Caucasus region between the Black and Caspian Seas and within European Russia. Politically, the Northern Caucasus includes

the Russian Republics of the North Caucasus as well as several regions of Georgia and Azerbaijan. As part of the Russian Federation, the Northern Caucasus region is included in the North Caucasian and Southern Federal Districts and consists of Krasnodar Krai, Stavropol Krai, and the constituent republics, approximately from west to east: Adygea, Karachay-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia-Alania, Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan.^v In Georgia, the North Caucasus includes the regions of Tusheti, Khevsureti, and Khevi. In Azerbaijan, the North Caucasus includes the northeastern regions.

The population of the area is roughly six to nine million, and the region's indigenous nationalities profess Islam as a cultural identity, with the exception of the Ossetians, who are mostly Christian. Other than Dagestan, the republics are named for one or more titular nationalities, and were created in the Soviet era as the homelands of distinct peoples: the Circassians (who encompass the Adyga, the Cherkess, and the Kabardians) and the Turkic-speaking Karachays and Balkars inhabit the three westernmost republics; the Ossetians inhabit North Ossetia; and the Ingush and the Chechens, Ingushetia and Chechnya, respectively.^{vi}

The history of Russia's complicated relationship with the region goes back to events of the sixteenth century. Ivan the Terrible married a princess of Kabardia, a native of the hills and flatlands along the Terek River, in order to cement trade relations with the region and an alliance against nomadic raiders. In the nineteenth century, Russia's relation with the Caucasus was defined by the explicit aim of empire building. From 1801 to 1829, Russia replaced local monarchs and nobles with a system of protectorates and provinces in the southern Caucasus, in modern-day Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.^{vii}

However, it was different in the north of the mountains, where the czars faced two fundamental problems. In the first place, rugged geography and extreme cultural diversity made it impossible to create overarching political institutions. Secondly, the absence of legitimate political leadership meant that there was always space for local warlords to seek their own advantage. Moscow's response to these twin problems was initially a

strategy of unite and rule. Attempts to choose a set of native elites, grant them power and political authority, and hope that they would rule the countryside peacefully. This approach proved difficult in practice and the czarist military was inevitably drawn into a series of civil wars.^{viii}

In the 1920s, Bolshevik security forces launched a series of campaigns in order to arrest and eradicate “bandits” in Chechnya and other parts of Caucasus who were said to resist Soviet authority. In 1943 and 1944, Stalin deported nearly half a million people from the North Caucasus to Central Asia, for allegedly assisting the Nazis during World War II.^{ix} There is little evidence that these ethnic groups collaborated with the Germans any more than did others in the Soviet Union. After Stalin's death, in 1953, many of the deportees were allowed to return to their homelands, but the Soviet government's past misdeeds proved to have unforeseen consequences.^x When the Soviet Union collapsed, Dzhokhar Musayevich Dudayev, who led the rebels in the first Chechen war,^{xi} in the mid-1990s emerged as the head of a group calling for Chechnya's independence from Russia.

The first Chechen war erupted in 1994 because then Russian President Boris Yeltsin, however justifiably, moved to prevent Chechen secession with military force. The results were appalling. Indiscriminate Russian bombing exacted a heavy human toll, and ill-prepared Russian conscripts were mowed down as they tried to take Grozny, the Chechen capital. After nearly two years, Yeltsin negotiated a cease-fire, which gave Chechnya nominal autonomy but deferred a decision on its final status.

Three years of chaos followed. Dudayev was killed by a Russian missile, and Islamist fighters, some indigenous to the Caucasus and others from the Arab world, looked to a religious revival as a way of attracting recruits and redefining the struggle. In 1999, Basayev, the Beslan mastermind and at the time one of these younger, more Islamist-inspired field commanders, launched a raid into neighboring Dagestan. In response, Putin, who was then prime minister, launched a second war in Chechnya - this time, however, with a larger and better-trained force. By 2009, when the conflict was winding to a close, it was the Chechens who were doing most of the killing and dying. In a

nutshell, Russia's conquest of the Caucasus has been the story of a modern state being pulled into a succession of local struggles as much as it has been an epic tale of an empire driven by notions of manifest destiny. The North Caucasus may be part of Russia by virtue of history, but the people of the highlands are seen as inherently unreliable, congenitally fanatical in their religious beliefs, and culturally predisposed to discord.^{xii}

Conclusion

The fundamental question for the North Caucasus is its place within the Russian Federation. The future of North Caucasus hinges on whether it can gain an equal place within the Russian polity. If Moscow continues to focus its energies on insulating the rest of Russia from the troubles of the North Caucasus, then an increasing number of the region's inhabitants will wonder whether Russians can be anything other than distant, irrelevant overlords.

The fractured nature of the region requires an in-depth understanding of options that may lead towards permanent peace. It would also require, as rightly pointed out by Prime Minister Putin, a greater involvement of Russia in the region with respect to development activities and economic regeneration. It is only when the region is fully integrated within the portals of Russia and its ethnic and cultural differences are recognised and respected, can new roads be built towards peace and mutual harmony.

ⁱ "Putin outlines new strategy for North Caucasus," *RIA Novosti*, July 6, 2010, accessed electronically at <http://en.rian.ru/russia/20100706/159712764.html>, on July 11, 2010.

ⁱⁱ The republic was recognised by Russia as independent in 2008, after a brief war with Georgia over South Ossetia.

ⁱⁱⁱ *RIA Novosti, op.cit.*

^{iv} King, Charles and Rajan Menon, “Prisoners of the Caucasus: Russia’s Invisible Civil War,” *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 4, Number 89, July/August, 2010, accessed electronically at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66446/charles-king-and-rajan-menon/prisoners-of-the-caucasus?page=show>, on July 14, 2010.

^v Peuch , Jean-Christophe, “Russia: Protesters Ransack Government Building In Karachaevo-Cherkessia,” *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty*, November 9, 2004, accessed electronically at <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1055778.html>, on July 15, 2010.

^{vi} King and Menon, *op.cit.*

^{vii} For further details refer to: Baddeley, John F. *The Russian conquest of the Caucasus*, Green and Co., London, 1908.

^{viii} King and Menon, *op.cit.*

^{ix} “Remembering Stalin’s Deportations,” *BBC News Europe*, February 23, 2004, accessed electronically at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3509933.stm>, on July 15, 2010.

^x *Ibid.*

^{xi} “First Chechnya War – 1994-1996,” *Globalsecurity.org*, accessed electronically at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/chechnya1.htm>, on July 16, 2010.

^{xii} King and Menon, *op.cit*