



HELSINKI COMMISSION BRIEFING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

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"Caucasian Knot"

Years 2007 and 2008 can be referred to as “Caucasus on Fire.” I apply such an alarming title because Caucasus as a whole – not just the North Caucasus, but also the South Caucasus -- really changed within the past year. Clearly, roots of the current situation go back to previous years, previous centuries even, but there are more recent trends worth noting.

Lack of Federal Control: The first trend is, that the level of federal control over regional politics has been dramatically reduced. On the ground, it is hard to find evidence that the North Caucasus is really part of the Russian Federation. Instead, the region appears to consist of informal units that are not part of the whole country. I would call this a trend because the level of federal control has decreased gradually over the years, but has changed dramatically during the past year. I do not mean that these parts of the North Caucasus have strong separatist movements. What I do mean is that, judging by the level of management, implementation of the federal laws and programs, dealing with problems and challenges of the region, North Caucasus does not appear to be controlled by the Russian Federation. And there is a tacit understanding of this unfortunate reality by the regional authorities. In order to prevent public dissent, special effort has been made to create an image of federal unity, although due to poor PR this effort has been largely unsuccessful. Examples of attempts to create this false image are celebrations of the 450 years of friendship and unity between Russia and the local nations and the Day of Russia, both of which took place recently in the North Caucasus. However, in reality, there is no real unity between Moscow and Russia’s regions and these events are not even designed to be consumed by the local population, but as a message of loyalty by the local elites to the federal center.

Under the above outlined agreement, the region is plagued by rampant corruption, much of which lines the pockets of Moscow bureaucrats, it suffers poor implementation of tax and federal laws, lack of independent judiciary, absence of political and religious freedoms and increasing number of insurgents. Essentially, through an agreement between the local elites and the federal government, the region is only nominally controlled by the federal center, while in reality it is run by the local political structures, and the local population is left without a voice. Across the North Caucasus, local population, has insignificant leverage with both the local and the federal powers as it has little or no room to choose its future through elections or other democratic means. The authorities pay particular care to suppress any opposition voices

or protests. These are the methods of the Chechen “stabilization.” Particularly problematic is the fact that the situation is maintained through the use of gross human rights violations. And with the freedom of the media significantly limited and the information about the real state of things monopolized by the very structures involved in corruption and human rights violations, the civilian population additional loses the little voice they had and becomes alienated making the situation harder to solve.

Radicalization of the Civilian Population and public support for the rebels: The second trend became a really popular topic of conversation in 2007, even among journalists. It has to do with the increasing level of radicalization of local religious groups, which contributes to active resistance, by violent means, throughout the North Caucasus. This process was clearly developing in the previous years, but in 2007 it became a real, tangible problem. Mostly, because armed resistance becomes less and less marginal as increasing number of supporters are joining such groups. As a result, there has been a reemergence of the use of terror tactics in the region.

In Ingushetia, less than 200 people can be classified as active rebels. They are not connected to groups in other republics. In other republics of the North Caucasus, excluding Chechnya and Dagestan, the number of active rebels is even smaller. Latest official data indicate that there are approximately 500-700 active rebels in all of the North Caucasus. This, of course, is only one of the many estimates of the rebel movement and the exact figures are hard to establish.

However, what we should in fact be paying attention to is not the number of active rebels, but the number of their supporters among the civilian population. These are the people who could take up arms at any moment, as they did in Kabardino-Balkaria, in 2005 during the attacks on Nalchik. In 2005, there was barely a rebel movement to speak of in Kabardino-Balkaria. Some 10-15 people made up the entire resistance. However, in spite of their seemingly small size, within two days they were able to mobilize around 200 young people for the attack. For this reason, it is the potential of mobilization that is the most important factor to consider when we discuss military threats.

Also, the rebel movement is no longer organized as an army structure. Instead it is comprised of small groups, of about 3 to 5 people, who operate on a specific territory, and do not have links to Chechnya or any larger group. Doku Umarov (leader of the self proclaimed North Caucasus Emirate) called these “tactical groups.”

He named this new structure, in his October 2007 speech, when he announced the transformation of the Chechen independence movement into a struggle for the North Caucasus Emirate. With this move he completely diminished the political role of Ahmed Zakhaev, leader of the Chechen Parliament and that way granted Kremlin a years-long wish.

Rebels’ techniques vary from region to region. In Ossetia, over the last few years, bombs were often used and targets included gambling clubs, 11 troop-carriers, and a helicopter. In Ingushetia on the other hand, rebels for years targeted homes of police officials and prosecutor’s office personnel. Recently however, they began targeting non-Ingush civilians, although we must note that official rebel sources never claimed responsibility for these acts. In

Dagestan, rebels focused on police exclusively. In Karachaevo-Cherkessia and neighboring part of the Stavropol region, official religious leaders were attacked and killed., In Kabardino-Balkaria jihad was announced by a very popular Muslim Wahhabi leader. In this republic, much like in the others, assassinations were conducted by small groups and not very many rebels were trained to conduct attacks. The level of organization in Chechnya has always been superior to what was going on in other republics and it was aimed at military convoys and troops. The executed operations sometimes take place within the capital of Grozny. For instance, in 2007 there were signs that an attack, reminiscent of the attack organized in 2004 when rebels took control of a segment of Grozny, was being prepared. In addition, number of attacks organized in Chechnya has been increasing over the past year. All of these different tactics are not changing the fact that most rebels, and especially those behind terrorist attacks, are not hiding in the forests, but are instead living among the people.

Also, as a result of the high levels of migration and unemployment, a lot of young people no longer live with their parents. Instead they stay in dormitories, or rent cheap apartments, while trying to earn money working, often illegally, in markets or construction sites. These young generations, in their search for job opportunities, often move around and are not registered by the authorities. As a result neither their families nor the police are informed about their whereabouts. Therefore, these groups represent an excellent pool of recruits for the rebels, as many of them are “invisible”. With rampant corruption in the country, these individuals already living on the outskirts of the society can move around unnoticed quite efficiently. This is how a few dozen of them managed to make their way into the school in Beslan. Similarly, among those who attacked Nalchik in 2005, a significant number worked away from home. The same was true for the attackers of Nazran, Ingushetia’s biggest city. From all these examples we can tell that the terrorist organizations are successfully developing their support bases outside of the North Caucasus. The overall number of active members of the rebel groups is hard to pin point. However, the exact number is not what is important now days. What is important is the emerging support of the rebel networks among the general public and youth in particular, as they increasingly perceive the rebels as fighters for the better future of the region

Disenfranchised and desperate population: Another trend is a noticeable deterioration of the relationship between the local society and the local government. Although this is hard to quantify, it has become a serious problem in 2007. The financial and opportunities gap between those in power and the local population is so wide that the two simply function in distinct and separate realities. It is probably this gap that causes the first two trends outlined above.

It is because of the gap that those that have the opportunity to leave the region and go to “Russia” or the West, do so. Others, very often choose the religious path and many of them contribute to the wider protest movements. Those left over, hope to secure, through family ties, positions in the administration, and that way bridge the gap.

The young people understand that education is not important as there are no links between personal qualities and career opportunities. As a result, up to 70% of people on the ground do not have expectation of reaching any career goals. They are just trying to survive. This trend is

particularly challenging, because the new generations will either move out of the region or join the religious resistance groups. With this predicament, nothing positive will happen for the region.

Terror. Fourth: NC is unfortunate region for the home growth terror for the Russian Federation in general. For a long period of time, especially after the school hostage-taking in Beslan, terror was not resorted to widely by rebel formations. Clearly Chechen rebels changed their tactics and have been interested in idea of negotiations. Idea of negotiations failed due to the position of president, the most known leaders of rebels have been killed. And terrorism came back as a main solution for others. Behavior of the local authorities, especially 1 efforts to target religious Muslims as potential terrorist, 2 very weak response to the national wide growth of the racism and 3 serious social&economical, political collapse transformed actions of the most marginalized groups, both peaceful religious civilians and rebels, to the terrorism. It is not spread yet to the whole Northern Caucasus, for example surprisingly enough civilians are not targeted in Chechnya. But in few other parts of the NC it is widely used. Recently, we have witnessed explosions of buses in Ossetia and Stavropol region, explosions in Dagestan and killings of the non-Ingush civilians in Ingushetia. In other words, we see the revival of the strategic tactic of using terror and targeting civilians as opposed to officials. And the most worrying issue is, that the strategy which was used against Basaev, would not work out now. Main actors of the current attacks seems to be religious motivated youth, which sees death as a certain step in their spiritual path. Most of them is not hiding in the cave and foresters, but lives in the cities – which makes situation even more complex.

Education and the gap between government and society

Fifth and the last. The quality of education is extremely low. The literacy rate is still high and people are getting some education, but the level of professional expertise is lower than what it was several years ago. Educational degrees have taken on a symbolic rather than functional meaning. The lower quality of education makes it problematic to say that education is a way for a young person to embark on a career path in a specialized area. In general, people try to send their kids to study in other areas of South Federal District and other areas of the Russian Federation (clearly Moscow and Sankt-Petersburg are most popular destinations) because they see that the level of education in the North Caucasus is very bad. Most importantly, for most of the population of the North Caucasus, education is not considered a step towards a career. Although other regions of Russia also face unemployment problems, nowhere has this problem taken the proportions it has in the North Caucasus (more than 70-80% in some territories). When these figures are combined with the level of corruption – which is also high – education and experience alone are not enough to find a job.

For instance, you can easily buy almost any government position. With the previous president of Dagestan, positions as high up as that of a Minister were available for sale. Under the current leadership this type of corruption has been tamed a bit, but not too many things changed on the bottom. People know how much a position costs and how long payback would take – from what moment bribes would bring profits and at what level. Getting a position as a head of the department, local administration or state controlled business has nothing to do with one's skills. In other places as well, bribery is still necessary to get a position. While the

methods differ, it remains notable that in the North Caucasus education has nothing to do with getting a job. For instance, a 32 year old specialist who speaks a number of foreign languages, and has experience in humanitarian aid work would have much difficulty finding a job. Even though this person may have strong skills and connections in the region, it doesn't mean anything. Social lifts are not available in the region. This phenomenon serves as a strong indication of the gap between the society and the government.

For details please see The American Committee for Peace in the Caucasus (ACPC) in-depth interview, about the general trends and developments in the North Caucasus, with Mr. Shvedov, editor-in-chief of the Caucasian Knot - web publication focused exclusively on the Caucasus region.

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