
What the North Caucasus Means to Russia



Alexey Malashenko

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Summary

The crisis in the North Caucasus has had a negative impact across all of Russia. Its immediate consequences include instability in the country's southern regions, interethnic tensions and terrorist attacks that regularly occur not only in the Caucasus region, but across Russia, including Moscow. In addition, the Russian government's inability to find a political solution to the crisis in the North Caucasus is becoming apparent, undermining the country's authority in the international arena. In particular, it raises doubt over the ability of the Russian authorities to ensure security leading up to and during the Olympic Games in Sochi.

Introduction

A latent civil war is underway in the North Caucasus region, a fact that Russia's federal government resolutely refuses to acknowledge.¹ The mere fact that an entire region of Russia has existed for many years in a chronic state of instability, burdened by two wars (1994-1996 and 2000-2002) and ethno-political and religious conflicts, must weigh upon the overall situation in the country. This article examines several "channels of influence" that the North Caucasus has on Russia.

It is important to acknowledge that in the 1990s, the region had a stronger influence on the government's political actions and the nation overall than it does today. There are several reasons why this has changed since. To begin with, the federal government under Boris Yeltsin, the first president of the Russian Federation, was relatively weak in comparison to the tandem rule of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev. During Yeltsin's era, the regional governments fiercely fought the federal authorities for more autonomy, which they proudly referred to as their "sovereignty." Secondly, Chechen separatism cast doubt on whether the federal government was at all capable of keeping the situation in the nation under control and thereby caused the Yeltsin administration to be internally destabilized. Thirdly, during the first post-Soviet decade, the mass media was independent, had significant influence on society, was free to critically examine the authorities' actions and could affect the balance of power among the political elite and its popularity with the public. The situation in the North Caucasus drew attention to the Kremlin's weaknesses and forced it to constantly readjust its tactics. The Caucasus was a favorite topic among journalists, and every TV station and newspaper prominently featured reports on the region.²

The Khasavyurt Accord, signed in 1996 by General Aleksandr Lebed, then Secretary of the Russian Security Council, and Aslan Maskhadov, then president of the separatist Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, brought ceasefire to the region and demonstrated the national influence of the Chechen question. The agreement, reached out of necessity, was a key factor that allowed Boris Yeltsin to stay in power.

In the second half of the 2000s, the influence of the North Caucasus on the nation's political landscape and public opinion diminished. When

Translated from Russian by Katherine Avgerinos.

¹ In the fall of 2010, Aleksandr Bastrykin, acting head of the Investigation Committee of Russia, admitted that the state of affairs in the North Caucasus could be described as "almost war." So far this may be the only recognition by a high-ranking official of the true situation in the region. As heard on the radio station Echo of Moscow on 9 October 2010.

² After visiting Chechnya during the First Chechen War, Anatoly Pristavkin, a well-known Russian writer and author of a novel on the 1944 Chechen deportation, wrote in his diary: "Currently, Chechnya influences the climate on Earth more than many other issues, inasmuch as it influences the climate in Russia."

Vladimir Putin took power as prime minister in 1999 and later as president in 2000, he promised to swiftly resolve the Chechen crisis and bring order to the region, announcing the start of a counterterrorist operation. This in reality was the start of the Second Chechen War. The prestige and popularity of the new president depended on the relative success of this war.

Victory was achieved by both carrots and sticks to persuade several influential clans to join Moscow's side in the conflict. Akhmad Kadyrov, formerly Chief Mufti under Dzhokhar Dudayev, became the head of the administration and, later in 2003, the President of the Chechen Republic. Although the war in Chechnya was officially over, its end did not bring stability to the region, as multiple radical and extremist groups continued to operate in Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Chechnya.

However, in comparison to the 1990s, the influence that these events had on society and politics diminished for several reasons. First of all, the federal government achieved a significant victory: Kadyrov's government was loyal to Moscow and fought its own battle against the Islamic extremists, whose goal was not only independence, but also the transformation of Chechnya into an Islamic state. Putin successfully internalized the conflict by transforming the Moscow-Chechen war into a Chechen-Chechen war, and Russians started to increasingly view the conflict as "not ours." Secondly, the population was growing tired of constant negativity in the news, including photographs of bodies torn apart by explosions, destroyed homes and the executions of hostages. The population wanted to focus on other issues, especially in light of increased economic prosperity and growing concern for personal welfare. Thirdly, the Russian people grew accustomed to the incessant negative news from the region. Even the bloody terrorist acts caused only a temporary concern. Fourth, while the media covered the events in the region less, there was an increase in the amount of "positive" news coverage on the government's promises to improve the region, visits of federal officials to the region, as well as various conferences and seminars on the North Caucasus.

Although the region played a diminished role in the political landscape of the Russian Federation in the 2000s, it continues to have influence—which may increase in the coming years. In the early 2000s, national attention was focused on Chechnya.³ Now that the nation is entering the second decade of the twenty-first century, there are sufficient grounds to reexamine the relationship between Russia and the North Caucasus. While the end of the Second Chechen War lowered the overall political tension in Russia, none of the serious issues in the region have been resolved.

Moreover, the region's issues have a direct influence on the rest of Russia for a variety of reasons. For instance, the republics in the North Caucasus are highly dependent on the federal budget. In Chechnya and Ingushetia, local budgets almost entirely consist of federal funding, while in Dagestan, federal funding makes up approximately 90 percent of the budget. Another issue is the high levels of unemployment in the republics (from 30 to 50 percent), which forces young people to move outside the

³ A. Malashenko, D. Trenin, *Time of the South: Chechnya in Russia, Russia in Chechnya*, Moscow, Gendalf, 2002.

region, creating interethnic tension in such places as the Stavropol Krai and other neighboring republics of the North Caucasus Federal District. Furthermore, the region remains a hotbed of religious extremism among Russia's Muslim communities. Despite these glaring problems, Russia—or rather its federal center—has so far been unable to implement an effective policy in the North Caucasus, which remains a problematic region and a cause of frustration in the Russian society.

Direct and Indirect Channels of Influence

Terrorism as the most immediate channel of influence

As previously mentioned, there are several ways in which the North Caucasus influences Russia. One of such “channel of influence” is terrorism. Terrorist acts and confrontations with extremists happen in the region itself on a weekly basis and at times are even daily occurrences.⁴ Some of the more well-known “local” terrorist acts—those that happened directly in the Caucasus region and received a strong public reaction throughout Russia—are the Budyonnovsk hospital hostage crisis (1995), the Beslan school siege (2004) and large-scale armed conflicts in Nazran, the capital of Ingushetia (2004). Russia can be compared to Pakistan and even Afghanistan in terms of frequency of terrorist acts. In these two Muslim nations, just as in Russia, people die practically every day as a result of terrorism.

Since the late 1990s, Moscow has been the main target of external terrorist acts. Explosives have been planted in apartment buildings (twice in 1999), an underpass under Pushkin Square (2000) and at the “Wings” music festival in the Tushino neighborhood (2003). Hostages were taken at the Dubrovka Theater Center (2002) and several terrorist acts took place in the Moscow metro (twice in 2004, once in 2010). In 1999, terrorists organized an explosion in Volgograd, a city in the Rostov region. In 2004, suicide bombers blew up two airplanes: a Tu-134 (along the Moscow-Volgograd route) and a Tu-154 (along the Moscow-Sochi route).

In 2010, when the terrorist acts were on the rise, Nikolai Silaev, a Russian political analyst, drew the conclusion that “terrorist acts did not cause political or any other type of destabilization.”⁵ In many ways, one could agree with this statement—this was not the first time something like this happened. In fact, in Moscow, tension usually persists for a couple days after a terrorist act, but people soon forget about it and even tell jokes on the subject.

In more remote regions, such as the Urals, Siberia and the Far East, indifference has been replaced by estrangement from the problems in the Caucasus. People who live in those regions view terrorism—specifically the Beslan tragedy—as something infinitely remote from their personal lives

⁴ See P. Baev, “The North Caucasus: a Hotbed of Terrorism in Metamorphosis,” IFRI, *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 60, June 2011.

⁵ N. Silaev, “Test by Explosion,” *Expert*, 5-11 April 2010, p. 19, <www.expert.ru/expert/2010/13/ispytanie_vzryvom/>.

and the life of their region. When asked about their assessment of the situation in the North Caucasus, the response is the stereotypical “those are Moscow’s problems.”⁶

Not only did the terrorist acts that occurred in the 2000s fail to lead to any destabilization, but they were forgotten by the public relatively quickly (albeit, the Beslan school hostage crisis stayed on the public’s mind for longer than most). It seems that the most large-scale of these acts happening in Moscow played a significant role, as is well-known the majority of Russians perceive the capital as a separate, corrupt and affluent entity, distant from the poverty of the rest of Russia.

However, the reality of the threat is not made less pressing by the nonchalant attitude of the public towards terrorism and the systematic government promises to end it. Terrorists may not be able to disrupt the life of the entire nation; however, they can certainly do on the regional level, such as in the North Caucasus Federal District. Terrorists have also increased attacks on strategic infrastructure, such as gas pipelines and railroads. For example, in the late 2000s, the Moscow-St. Petersburg railway came under attack twice, while in 2010, terrorists successfully organized an explosion at the Baksan hydroelectric power station in Kabardino-Balkaria, disrupting power supplies for a period of time. It is very likely that terrorist activity of this nature will continue to increase, especially because, according to officials, many strategic locations do not have an appropriately high level of security. Terrorists continue to attack busy public locations as well. In 2010, they attacked a market in Vladikavkaz, the capital of North Ossetia. That same year, a planned bombing near a school in the densely populated region of Stavropol was thwarted by sheer luck: the nitrate and ammonia present in the explosive were dampened by the rain.⁷

Guerilla leaders have repeatedly threatened to attack Russian nuclear sites and have even claimed responsibility for disasters that occurred due to technical issues, such as the power failures in several Moscow neighborhoods in 2004, the fire in the Ostankino Tower in the same year, and the accident at the Sayano-Shushenskaya Dam, Russia’s largest hydroelectric power plant, in 2009. Terrorists even tried to claim responsibility for the Kursk submarine accident in 2000. Under different, more favorable circumstances, the scale of terrorist activity could be much larger.

In terms of total number of terrorist acts, Russia is ahead of every European nation and the United States (US). Terrorist attacks in the US, France, Spain and Great Britain occur as isolated incidents, whereas in Russia they have become an essential element of the nation’s socio-political life. Terrorism will predictably continue during the coming decade and is likely to occur outside the North Caucasus region.

⁶ Based on the author’s interviews in Siberia and the Urals with representatives of various social groups (from top officials to ordinary workers) in 2005. The author heard many comments that the terrorist acts in Moscow were a form of “punishment” for the city’s extravagant wealth, moral degradation and disdain for the interests of the country. This view is similar to a widespread opinion in the Muslim world and in Russia that 9-11 was America’s punishment for its transgressions.

⁷ S. Minchenko, “Dozhd v pomoshch” [Helpful Rain], *Vremya Novostei* 179, 1 October 2010. <www.vremya.ru/2010/179/46/262112.html>.

The 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics and security

The extent of the influence of the “Caucasus factor” on the Russian nation can be readily observed when considering the preparations for and rumors surrounding the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. The Olympics are of significant political and economic importance for the nation, having already become a symbol of its success. Meanwhile, it is clear that the task of providing security for the participants and spectators will be difficult.

The first and most apparent risk to security comes from the activities of religious extremist groups, for whom an attack on the Olympics would serve as a demonstration of their power.

Secondly, some politicians in the Caucasus may use the Olympics as a pretext for making additional requests and demands of the federal government. For instance, the Chechen Ombudsman, Nurdi Nukhazhiyev already stated that the Krasnodar Krai, where Sochi is located, has the largest number of cases of ethnic discrimination against Chechens and, “if the local government does not take the appropriate precautions, the future of holding the Olympic games in the Krasnodar Krai may be uncertain.”⁸ Such statements are not necessarily made only out of a desire to protect the Chechens and other ethnicities of the North Caucasus from discrimination, but also for the purpose of bargaining with the government to allow people of the Caucasus—specifically those under the patronage of Ramzan Kadyrov—priority access and business opportunities in neighboring regions. It is likely that closer to 2014, this type of blackmail will come more often from Chechnya and some other republics as well.

The third risk factor is the so-called “Circassian issue,” which has become increasingly acute in the last two to three years. Its history goes back to the nineteenth century, when, under pressure from Russia, hundreds of thousands of Circassians (Adygs) had to migrate to Turkey and the Middle East. According to various data, the total number of the migrants’ descendants (Muhajirs) is three million. Currently, the reunification of the Circassian people has become a political lever in the hands of some forces, particularly the Circassian Congress, which was formed in 2004 and has since gained in popularity. In 2005, the Congress proposed unifying Adyghea, Kabarda, Shapsugiya and Circassia to form a single federal entity—in essence, Great Circassia (Adyghea). The impossibility of such a project was evident even to its initiators, as any attempts to change borders within the region would inevitably lead to ethnic conflicts. However, the idea received support from some Circassians, and the decision to hold the Winter Olympics in Sochi provided the impetus for integration.⁹ On the other hand, several Circassian organizations protested

⁸ “Sochinskaya Olimpiada 2014 pod ugrozoy” [2014 Sochi Olympics under Threat], 30 July 2010, <<http://r93.ru/news/1518.html>>.

⁹ Naima Neflyasheva, an expert on the Caucasus, exclaims: “Need I comment on the emotions that the Circassians in Russia and abroad felt when they heard the news of the Olympics committee vote in favor of Sochi, the city with a Circassian toponymy, which served as the political center for Adygs in the nineteenth century and is the residence for the powerful Adyghe sub-ethnos, the Shapsughis, who were practically made extinct in the Caucasian War and the Muhajir exodus?”. N. Neflyasheva, “Kogo opalit olimpojskij ogon?” [Who Will Be Burnt by the Olympic Torch?], *Natsionalny Interes*, No. 3, 2009, p. 38.

holding the Olympics in Sochi, pointing out that several sports facilities were to be constructed on the burial sites of the Muhajirs.

Circassian opposition has not taken on extreme forms so far, though we must remember that radical Muslims and those Circassians who oppose the Olympics have a common enemy in the federal center. One can expect tactical cooperation between the two, creating a potential double threat to the already questionable security situation.

In any event, the influence of the North Caucasus regarding the Olympics will increase in the coming years. Any disruptive actions, including terrorist acts, will irreparably damage Russia's prestige, especially if they happen during the Games. This in turn will lessen the authority of the federal government within Russia.

It is difficult to gauge the efforts of the federal government on Olympic security, as they largely consist of intelligence gathering. In its political decisions, Moscow will have to use both carrots and sticks, appeasing some of the more moderate protestors and putting pressure or simply getting rid of some of the more radical ones. The federal government will need to convince the Circassian community that the Olympics will stimulate economic growth in the region and increase the prestige of their people in the international arena. Incidentally, the example of the Karachai-Cherkess Republic and the gradual recovery of its tourist industry demonstrates that the local residents are interested in maintaining security.

Caucasophobia and Islamophobia: reasons and origins

Caucasophobia, accompanied by Islamophobia, is another channel of direct influence. Caucasophobia exists for three reasons: first, the growing number of migrants from the Caucasus in other parts of Russia; second, their active, perhaps even aggressive advancement in the economic domain and intrusion into the business world; and third, public discontent with the lack of stability in the region, spread of radical Islam and related terrorist acts. All this contributes to a growing sentiment among the Russian public that the North Caucasus needs to be separated from Russia, with its republics gaining independence through the simultaneous creation of an impenetrable border between Russia and the Caucasus. According to various polls, approximately 60 percent of Russian citizens are in favor of abandoning the North Caucasus. This sentiment is similar to the calls in the late 1980s and early 1990s to "drop" Central Asia, which slowed down the development of the Soviet Union.¹⁰ The desire to get rid of the North Caucasus can also be interpreted as a peculiar sign that Russia is overcoming the imperial mindset.

The increasing migration from the Caucasus comes in two varieties: internal and external. The majority of the migrants from the region are from Azerbaijan (between 1.5 and 2 million people) and Georgia (about

¹⁰ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn suggested a similar idea in his essay *Rebuilding Russia*, <www.lib.ru/PROZA/SOLZHENICYN/s_kak_1990.txt>.

1 million); there are no precise data on the number of migrants from the North Caucasus, however. Specifically no data exist on the number of people from the Caucasus living in Moscow,¹¹ St. Petersburg, the cities of the Volga region, Krasnodar Krai, Stavropol Krai and the Rostov and Astrakhan regions. *People say* that over 100,000 Chechens live in Moscow alone. *People say* that two thirds of the parishioners of the mosque in Saratov are from the Caucasus. *People say* that migrants from the Caucasus are largely responsible for promoting corruption among the police and government officials. *People say* that in the southern regions of Russia, migrants from the Caucasus are buying up real estate. *People say* that migrants from the Caucasus flaunt their disregard and even contempt for the customs and behavioral norms common to the Slavic regions, where they move and try to gain a foothold. Finally, *people say* that there is a mutual dislike between the Tatars and the migrants from the Caucasus, both of whom claim to be the true faithful Muslims.¹²

In the absence of statistics and irrefutable facts, hearsay becomes the only source of information and the factor that determines public opinion towards the Caucasus and people from the region. The mass media aggravates the situation by often relying on emotions rather than objectivity. We may discuss the relative truth or falsehood of these stories, but we cannot ignore them as a source of information. This unofficial narrative has credibility in the post-Soviet territories, where, due to the lies propagated by the official sources, there has always existed a high level of trust for unofficial information.

This type of unofficial narrative does not come into being on its own and the negative, frustrating information about migrants from the Caucasus often has basis in reality. On the one hand, according to a number of Russian ethnologists, “the proposition that, supposedly, the Slavic majority and the non-Slavic minorities have a cultural incompatibility is absurd.”¹³ On the other hand, one cannot deny that majority of migrants from the region bring their ethno-cultural tradition with them, displaying it in increasingly ostentatious ways. Examples of such behavior are the nighttime lezginka dances in the central squares of Pyatigorsk, Kislovodsk and Stavropol, and the “Caucasus motorcade” blocking traffic on the Garden Ring Road in Moscow.¹⁴ In 2009, in the northern city of Kondopoga, a conflict between

¹¹ Incidentally, the reported number of Muslims residing in Moscow ranges from 600,000 to 2 million. These numbers illustrate the lack of reliable information on ethnic and religious composition of the population of the capital. The situation is no better in other Russian cities. A. Malashenko, “Budushchee moscovskikh minaretov” [Future of the Minarets in Moscow], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 22 October 2010, <www.ng.ru/politics/2010-10-22/3_kartblansh.html>.

¹² Sometimes, though not often, the mass media refute anti-Caucasus attacks. For instance, *Ekspertiza Vlasti*, a magazine published in Stavropol, reported that the rumors that Kadyrov gives one million rubles to any Chechen who wants to buy real estate in Stavropol are entirely untrue. E. Bobrov, “I mertvye s kosami stoat ... I tishina” [The Dead with the Scythes... And Silence], *Ekspertiza Vlasti*, No. 17, 2010, p. 4.

¹³ V. Malakhov, *Ponaekhali tut...Ocherki o natsionalizme, rasizme I kulturnom pruralizme*, [Here They Come... Essays on Nationalism, Racism and Cultural Pluralism], *Novoye Literaturnoye Obozreniye*, 2007, p. 101.

¹⁴ In April 2009, several Chechens and Ingush, with flags of their republics attached to twenty cars, raced each other on the streets, shooting guns in the air. See a video recording of the race here: <Zanuda.offtopic.su/viewtopic.php?id=1343>. In another instance several Chechen policemen visiting Moscow fired at the bus driver who did not give way to their car.

Chechens and the local people led to casualties. Although the initial fight was caused by a mundane disagreement, it led to a full-blown ethnic conflict. Likewise, in 2010 at a youth camp in Tuapse, a fight broke out between Chechens who came there on vacation and local youth (during the fight, the Chechens tore up a Russian flag).

In the Stavropol Krai, which is a part of the North Caucasian Federal District and where various ethnic Slav groups make up 80 percent of the total population, an initiative has started to collect signatures in support of the region's exclusion from the Federal District. The recent influx of North Caucasus natives into the region has caused heightened interethnic tension and, over the course of 2010, led to a quadrupling of the crime rate.¹⁵

In both cases, the President of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, without delving into details, defended his compatriots, accusing the other side of nationalism and ethnic hatred. He even planned to send a committee of Chechen parliamentarians to investigate the incident in Kondopoga.

On the other hand, Russian public opinion tends to blame everything on the Chechens. The stereotype of a migrant from North Caucasus that exists in the minds of the Slavic population elicits associations not with the scientists and artists from the region, but with the rudeness of the migrants and instigators of ethnic conflicts. According to popular belief, the Russian government, both regional and federal, takes bribes from the Caucasians and either cannot or does not want to defend ethnic Russians from their aggression. For instance, since 2000, such accusations were brought against the former mayor of Moscow Yuri Luzhkov.

Some oligarchs from the North Caucasus actually play a notable role in national business. Among them are well-known figures such as Umar and Hussein Dzhabrailov from Chechnya, Mikhail Gutseriyev from Ingushetia, Suleyman Kerimov and Gadji Mahachev from Dagestan, Arsen Kanokov (the President of Kabardino-Balkaria) and others. The majority of these businessmen are well integrated into Russian culture and hardly differ in their behavior from the rest of the national elite. On the other hand, they do maintain a double affiliation and are closely connected to their kin, continuing to function as clan leaders.

So far the government has been unable to develop either a responsible national policy or a sensible attitude towards migration. In 2010, some officials proposed to introduce such absurdities as "The Code of Conduct for Muscovites" or some sort of "code of conduct for the natives of Caucasus outside their homeland." These proposals both elicited scorn from the indigenous Slavic populations, specifically in Moscow, and offended people from the Caucasus.

Nationalist political leaders strongly influence the way the migrants from the North Caucasus are perceived. For instance, Andrei Savelyev, former member of the State Duma, called for putting pressure on the

They broke into the bus and wounded him severely. See NEWS.ru, 19-20 January 2009, <www.teptar.com/page,7,2501-digest.html>; *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*. 11 January 2009.

¹⁵ S. Sukhova, "Chto na vykhode?" [What is the Outcome?], *Itogi*, No. 42 (749), 18 October 2010, p. 14, <www.itogi.ru/te/2010/42/157736.html>.

people whose development “directly harms Russia and Russians.”¹⁶ Caucasians, in his opinion, move to Russia in order “to acquire wealth at the expense of the local people and go back to their native land.”¹⁷

Indeed, the Caucasus has become the main target for xenophobic sentiments. Such crime novels as *Antiterror*, *Spetsnaz*, *Officers* and many others feature natives of the Caucasus as the primary antagonists and, with a readership of millions of people, they serve as convincing evidence of widespread xenophobia.¹⁸ The author of this article has attended several patriotic events and witnessed how military men demonstrated their skills by fighting an abstract Muslim “enemy” from the Caucasus. Members of Spetsnaz (Russian Special Purpose Forces) fought men with ribbons wrapped around their heads spelling “Allah Akbar.” The war in the Caucasus is one of the favorite song themes for both professional singers and amateurs, who are often dressed in military uniform, performing near subway stations and in commuter train cars.

In December 2010, large anti-Caucasus protest rallies took place in Moscow (attracting from four to six thousand people), Vladimir, Volgograd, Nizhny Novgorod, Rostov-on-Don, Samara and St. Petersburg. The rallies were sparked by the murder of a fan of Spartak Moscow, the most popular soccer club in Russia, by a native from the North Caucasus. The federal government tried to temper the tensions, but their response was met with contradictory reactions. Vladimir Putin personally met with the soccer fans and even visited the grave of the murdered man. Liberals and the left wing interpreted this act not only as a sign that the government fears burgeoning Russian nationalism, but also as an expression of their closeted solidarity with the movement.

According to a Levada Center poll, only 6 percent of the population is concerned by the rise of nationalism and the deterioration of interethnic relations.¹⁹ This, however, does not mean that xenophobia does not exist or that the nationalist trends have subsided. Often the public, and even those who express nationalist beliefs, simply do not take notice of them. Nationalism has become the norm and it attracts less and less attention because it has become an accepted expression of civic and patriotic sentiments. According to data from the Moscow Bureau for Human Rights, 141 extremist youth groups, mostly illegal, currently operate in Russia, counting over half a million members. It is sometimes suggested that Caucasophobia is some sort of spontaneous phenomenon, a consequence of specific circumstances, and will soon subside and then completely disappear. Unfortunately this view is far from the truth. According to a poll conducted by the news agency Novy Region after the events in December, 73 percent of respondents supported separating the republics of Ingushetia, Dagestan and Chechnya from Russia.²⁰

¹⁶ A. Savelyev, *Obraz vraga. Rasologiya i politicheskaya antropologiya* [The Image of the Enemy. Race-ology and Political Anthropology], The Library of Racial Thought Series, Moscow, Belye Alvy, 2007, p. 290.

¹⁷ A. Savelyev, *Vremya rosskoy natsii* [Time of the Russian Nation], Moscow, Knizhny Mir, 2007.

¹⁸ A. Malashenko, *Islam dlya Rossii* [Islam for Russia], Moscow, Rosspen, 2008, p. 65-76.

¹⁹ 9 September 2010, <www.levada.ru/press/2010090805.html>.

²⁰ Over 70% of *Novy Region* readers support separating the Caucasus from the Russian Federation. *Novy Region*, 24 December 2010.

Caucasophobia has become an integral element of the public consciousness, generated by the systemic crisis in the North Caucasus, which can hardly be overcome in the next decade. One cannot underestimate its influence on Russian society as a factor in stimulating nationalist tendencies.

The Chechen Syndrome

The Caucasus also influences Russian society through the so-called “Chechen Syndrome.” According to the analyst Serdar Ellyev, “On the everyday level, among military and medical personnel, psychiatrists and therapists, there is no doubt that such a term as the ‘Chechen Syndrome’ exists.” Its effects were often observed in the heightened aggression of soldiers returning from the wars in Chechnya. In the 1990s, the newspapers, especially local ones, reported many cases of violence perpetrated by Russian veterans against members of their own families and their frequent conflicts with neighbors. It was not uncommon to hear of a veteran committing murder for petty reasons in a state of rage. Yuri Aleksandrovsky, assistant director of the National Centre of Social and Forensic Psychiatry, believes that approximately 1.5 million Russian veterans of the Chechen War (including Interior Ministry troops and policemen) experience the Chechen Syndrome. Some of them manage to adapt, yet many do not; all of them are in need of professional help.²¹ According to veteran organizations, after the end of the Soviet Union, approximately 600,000 men performed their military service in war zones. Most of them have not received any professional help since, and over 25 percent of them served time in prison, enduring the traumatic experiences of both war and jail.²²

In some sense, the Chechen Syndrome is similar to the Afghan Syndrome. However, on the other hand, the War in Afghanistan was waged against an external enemy and made relative sense to the participants as a war to fulfill the so-called “international obligation.” Veterans of the war in Afghanistan had the respect of the public when they returned home. They also did not exhibit signs of hatred against their own people.

The veterans’ return from Chechnya took a different turn. In the 1990s, the Russian public, burdened by financial troubles and tired of political squabbles, did not care to welcome the “new veterans.” Those who fought in the Chechen War did not receive a hero’s welcome. Instead, the public received the news of numerous crimes committed by the military against the civilians. Finally, the war itself was interpreted by the public as a result of a political intrigue by the governing elites. The veterans were often unable to find work and military officials delayed paying them the benefits they were entitled to. Combined, these factors left many veterans wanting to seek revenge on society.

²¹ S. Ellyev, *Chechenskiy sindrom* [The Chechen Syndrome], October 2006, <http://artofwar.ru/s/starodymow_n_a/text_0170.shtml>.

²² M. Delyagin, *Novoe grazhdanskoe obshchestvo* [New Civic Society], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 20 October 2010, <www.ng.ru/politics/2010-10-20/3_kartblansh.html>.

The Chechen and, in broader terms, the “Caucasus Syndrome,” led to a change of public opinion toward the army, which was increasingly perceived not as a defender of the nation, but as a punitive tool involved in conflicts that were often not understood by the people and often unsuccessful. Service in the army, seen as a “sacred obligation to the Motherland” during the Soviet era, became a senseless, dangerous and potentially deadly burden in the eyes of the public. During the First Chechen War, 5,500 soldiers died in conflict, 62,000 officers quit the army, while 65,000 young men evaded conscription.²³ During the Second Chechen War, the military lost 6,000 men. According to the Union of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia, in reality the body count is twice the official figure.

Indirect influence on military reform

At the same time, the issues that arose during military operations in the North Caucasus and the 2008 conflict with Georgia demonstrated the need to reform the Russian army. This is an example of the indirect influence that the North Caucasus has had on Russia. Aleksandr Golts, political analyst and military expert, believes that “the connection between the war in Chechnya and the military reforms demonstrated that, unfortunately, in the realities of modern Russia, only war can show the federal government and the public the true state of the military and the need for reforms.”²⁴ Despite opposition from conservatives in the Ministry of Defense and top military ranks, pragmatic members of the armed forces are starting to believe that not only does the Russian army need a new set of reforms. The army should give up its focus on total war and develop, instead, more realistic objectives in the event of localized armed conflicts in various parts of the world. This change may be the only positive consequence of the conflicts in the Caucasus.

²³ M. Lukanin, “Chechenskij sindrom” [The Chechen Syndrome], *Trud*, 11 December 2009, <www.trud.ru/article/11-12-2009/233570_chechenskij_sindrom.html>.

²⁴ A. Golts, *Armija Rossii: odinnadtsat poteryannykh let* [Russian Army: Eleven Lost Years], Moscow, Zaharov, 2004, p. 165.

“Awakening” of Russia’s Muslim population

The crisis in the Caucasus has naturally affected the sentiment and attitudes prevalent in the broader Muslim community in Russia. The war in Chechnya evoked a sense of religious solidarity, and the Muslim community demanded that Yeltsin put an immediate end to it, warning that it would be a deciding factor in their votes for the 1996 presidential election. During the election campaign, Gennady Zyuganov, the head of the Communist Party, was Yeltsin’s main opponent and took a significant lead in the first round of elections, for instance, in Dagestan, the republic with the largest percentage of Muslims in Russia. During the First Chechen War, the Muslim population of the Volga Region (Tatarstan and Bashkortostan) often spoke in support of Muslims in the Caucasus. At least several dozen Tatars participated in the military conflict on the side of the separatists.

After Vladimir Putin came to power and oversaw counter-terrorist operations in the region, Muslim politicians and religious leaders behaved with more caution. Their main request was that human rights be respected during the military operations.

Radical Islamic groups active in the North Caucasus exert influence over Muslim citizens, especially young Muslims, of Russia. They demand support for their resistance movement and believe that the war they wage should spread across the entire territory of Russia. Migrants from the Caucasus have established dozens of underground groups, distributing leaflets, brochures and books promoting radical Islam, and infiltrating religious communities in local mosques. For example, in 2010, the self-proclaimed head of the Caucasus Emirate, Doku Umarov, addressed a video message to the Muslims living in the Idel-Ural region—the Bashkirs and Tatars. Umarov compared the current Russian government to the rule of Ivan the Terrible and stated that Jihad needs to be taken outside the Caucasus and Tatarstan.

Although it would be a mistake to exaggerate the impact of such calls for action, one must also not ignore the fact that imams of certain mosques in Russia, such as in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan and the Orenburg and Tomsk regions, share the ideals of radical Islam and openly support like-minded Muslims in the Caucasus. Radical Muslims are prepared to pay any price to boost their reputation as *mujahideen* undermining the foundations of the Russian state. This boosts their sense of self-worth, earns them respect among some Muslim youth, and also allows them to ask for support from international Muslim organizations. Although somewhat scattered, a specific variety of radical Islamism has developed in Russia.

Instrumentalization of the Situation in the North Caucasus

In Russia's domestic policy

Since the 1990s, the Russian government has used the situation in the North Caucasus as a means to resolve domestic political problems. The first time this happened was in 1994 with the First Chechen War, which was unofficially promoted at the time by Yeltsin's entourage as a "small and victorious war." The government aimed to not only resolve the problems in the region, but also to boost the decreasing popularity and strength of the regime.

Next, military actions in the region were directed towards supporting the authority of Vladimir Putin, who promised in 2000 to "exterminate the bandits in the toilet" and started a counter-terrorism operation in the region. The operation did not end with the promised clean and unconditional victory, but by reaching a compromise with some of the separatists.

This time neither the public nor Putin's opposition (which existed at the time) demanded that he immediately stop military actions. He was expected to bring victory home. In either case, Putin clearly succeeded in internalizing the Chechen conflict, a success that helped to cement his authority.

However, the situation in the Caucasus remained volatile with regular terrorist acts and growing tension in the republics neighboring Chechnya, specifically in Dagestan. In the federal government, where Putin's presidency brought an increase in authoritarian tendencies, the instability was used to curtail political rights and freedoms and put pressure on the mass media. Accusations of connections to the separatists and extremists were levied against almost all opposition politicians, as well as against those oligarchs who refused to yield to Putin. The authorities made an example of Boris Berezovsky, who was accused of having connections to a radical separatist wing and financing the guerilla invasion of Dagestan in 1999. It is important to note that at the time, Berezovsky was part of Putin's entourage and could hardly have acted on his own accord. While it was true that he communicated with the separatists, so did many other Russian politicians, who unlike the oligarchs remained loyal to the Kremlin. In 2003, following a harsh confrontation with Putin, Berezovsky left Russia and sought political asylum in Britain.

Perhaps the most pompous example of using a terrorist act as a means for reaching political goals was the 2004 decision to abolish the election of governors. The decision happened immediately following the Beslan school siege and was motivated by the fight against terrorism and

the need to strengthen national security. This became the most important step towards the abolition of public control over the actions of the authorities.

Proponents of the hardening of the regime cited national security measures taken by US and some European countries as examples, where airline security was heightened and security services were given permission to tap telephone conversations. In Russia, as in the US, a list of terrorist organizations was drafted. Communication with or even a simple analysis of their activities as well as any attempts to discover the reasons for their actions or ideology could lead to a confrontation with law enforcement agencies. The accusation of “aiding and abetting” terrorists became more common, and the government interpreted it broadly to cover a variety of people, including the families of the guerilla fighters, journalists and human rights activists seeking to understand the reality of the situation.

In September 2010, the State Duma approved a bill prepared by the FSB amending the law “On State Secrets,” which prevented press from covering issues related to terrorism and significantly curbed public access to information about the region and the activities of the law enforcement agencies. Responding to the criticism of the new bill, Andrey Lugovoy, deputy of the State Duma (and former KGB member, who has been accused of poisoning Aleksandr Litvinenko, a defector to Great Britain), said that “it would be better if we go overboard... than if we calmly endure terrorist acts and everything else that happens in the North Caucasus.”²⁵

In foreign policy

The problems in the North Caucasus had negative repercussions for Russia’s foreign policy, overall. First of all, the continued lack of stability in the region demonstrated to the rest of the world that Russia was incapable of controlling its own territories.

Secondly, Chechen separatism received conflicting responses in the West, as many liberals, especially in Eastern Europe, saw it as a liberation movement. This opinion still has supporters, especially in the Baltic states, Poland and the Czech Republic. In Europe and the US, members of the Chechen Diaspora use their channels of influence to inform local politicians and the public about the situation in the North Caucasus, criticizing the Russian authorities heavily. While the separatism issue does not have as significant an effect on Russian foreign policy as it did in the 1990s, it has a residual influence. For instance, the relationship between Great Britain and Russia are negatively affected by the fact that London refuses to extradite Akhmed Zakayev, one of the most prominent fighters for the Chechen independence, to Moscow. In 2010, the Russian authorities reacted negatively to the fact that the government of Poland allowed the World Congress of the Chechen People, which was attended by several dozen members of the separatist movement, to be held near Warsaw.

²⁵ M. Ozerova. “Na sekret I suda net” [No Judgment for the Secrets], *Moskovski Komsomolets*, 23 September 2010, <www.mk.ru/politics/article/2010/09/22/531464-na-sekret-i-suda-net.html>.

Thirdly, the region has earned a reputation for frequent and severe human rights violations. The Council of Europe and other international organizations regularly examine reports by human rights activists. However, the Russian authorities, accustomed to such criticism, do not bother to react.

Fourth, in the 1990s, the situation in the North Caucasus had a negative effect on Russia's relations with the Muslim world. The Chechen wars and suppression of the Islamic opposition was interpreted as a sign of a broader fight against Islam and as a continuation of the violent tactics of the Soviet atheist policy. The war in Chechnya was seen by the Muslim community as legacy of the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan and "a clash of civilizations."

The Russian authorities underestimate the place that the invasion of Afghanistan has in the memories of the Muslim community and the strength of their reaction to the government's actions against the Islamic opposition in the North Caucasus.²⁶ The governments of many Muslim nations, including Iran, continue to see Russia as a potential ally in opposing Western globalization and reacted to the wars in Chechnya in a restrained fashion. However, the conflict has certainly weakened Russia's relations with the Muslim world.

Fifth, the geopolitical situation in the region makes the Russian borders in the Caucasus susceptible to external threats. For example, during the war, the Chechen guerilla fighters used the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia as a place of rest between military operations. The guerillas also used Georgian territory to launch several raids, the most famous of which was led by Ruslan Gelayev in 2003. Earlier in 2001, his unit provided support to Georgia in the confrontation with Abkhazia in the Kodori Gorge.²⁷

Finally, the Russian authorities use the situation in the North Caucasus as a pretext for cooperation with the US and Western Europe in the joint struggle against extremism and terrorism. This partnership exists in many forms and is motivated by the pre-existing, although not extremely significant, connections between local extremists and international terrorist organizations. The natives of the North Caucasus participate in the military operations in Afghanistan, where they act as part of "foreign" Taliban units, as well as in Central Asia (Tajikistan), where in 2010 they participated in the attacks on local law enforcement. There have also been sightings of Chechen fighters in Europe.

²⁶ Moroccan born Omar Nasiri recalls the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan: "I knew a lot about it. As every young person in Morocco, as well as the rest of the Muslim world, I followed the events of the Red Army invasion of Afghanistan. Like everyone else, I hated the Russians." The same author writes about his sympathy for the Chechens he met in the Afghan camps in the 2000s. O. Nasiri, *Inside Jihad. My Life with Al Qaeda. A Spy's Story*, New York, Basic Books, 2006, p. 22.

²⁷ However, one can hardly agree that Georgia currently assists terrorist acts in the North Caucasus region, an accusation often leveled against Tbilisi by politicians in Moscow. For example in 2008, Aleksandr Bortnikov, Head of the FSB, stated that according to his sources the Georgian Special Forces were preparing a number of terrorist acts in Russia. *Komsomolskaya Pravda (Ukraine)*, 20 August 2008, <<http://kp.ua/daily/200808/52118/print/>>.

Conclusion

The North Caucasus will continue to influence Russia for some time, though the relative degree of this influence will depend on the situation in the region and the overall political and economic situation in the country. Escalation of the tensions in the region, terrorist activity and unresolved social issues amplify the negative influence the region has on Russia. The formation of the new North Caucasian Federal District in 2010 did not bring about the desired effects, and the federal authorities have little chance of drastically improving the situation in 2011. As such, the Caucasus community anticipates the future with skepticism. In Dagestan, it is said “the people live in anticipation of a war following the 2014 Olympics.”²⁸ It seems that the public is especially concerned with the post-Olympics future, because they believe that afterwards, the federal government will no longer be concerned by social unrest and security issues in the region.

The danger of terrorist acts still exists outside the Caucasus, including in Moscow. Numbers of migrants from the region will continue to rise, as pointed out by Aleksandr Khloponin, the president’s representative in the region, and other Russian politicians. Demodernization and Islamization of the region will continue and cause its de facto drift away from Russia. Even today the North Caucasus is sometimes referred to as the “internal abroad.”²⁹ The Russian authorities and society have gradually developed a limited immunity to the systemic crisis in the North Caucasus. The situation in the south of Russia is not considered to be catastrophic and is viewed as relatively natural and even unavoidable. The North Caucasus suffers from the kind of social and political problems that affect the whole of Russia and that can only be solved at the national level.

²⁸ V. Mukhin, M. Fatullaev, “Dagestanskij terroristicheskiy poligon” [Dagestani Terrorist Training Ground], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 6 June 2010, <www.ng.ru/regions/2010-09-06/1_dagi.html>.

²⁹ U. Halbach, “Russia’s Internal Abroad: The North Caucasus as an Emergency Zone at the Edge of Europe,” Berlin, SWP Research Paper 2010/RP 05, November 2010, p. 34. <www.swp-berlin.org/en/products/swp-research-paper/swp-research-paper-detail/article/russias-internal-abroad-2.html>.