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Russia and Eurasia Programme Meeting Summary

The North Caucasus: Islam, Security and Politics

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Session 1: Islam and Security Issues

There has been a significant rise in violence in the North Caucasus region especially in Ingushetia, Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria since the mid-2000s. This contrasts with the situation in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when violence was concentrated in Chechnya. Recent trends since the mid-2000s have been towards links with the global jihadist movement and a desire for the creation of an Islamic state based on a rigorous interpretation of sharia law. Salafi communities have been prevalent in the region since the late 1980s. However, those communities espoused a peaceful interpretation of Islam with an emphasis on education; radicalism amongst minority groups existed as a localised phenomenon only in Dagestan. Since the end of the first Chechen War (December 1994 - August 1996), radical Islam became widespread across the North Caucasus.

Since 2007-8, many jama'ats (Islamic groups) have not only been radicalized, but have grown closer to the global Islamist movement. This is corroborated by an increase in international exchanges with foreign clerics and scholars. Still, most groups do not have anti-Jewish or anti-Western sentiments. Whilst events in Syria can be said to have a strong influence on certain parts of the region, Russian support for President Assad is not widely discussed.

It is no longer just the underprivileged youth who are drawn to the movements, but also those from academic backgrounds. A notable example was Yaseen (Makhach) Rasulov, author of the paper, *Jihad in the North Caucasus*¹, who was killed in the course of a security operation in Makhachkala in 2006. The youth Islamic movement is still a subculture, which is combined with western consumerism. Amongst the youth there are both hardline militia, ready to die for the jihadist cause, and others simply attracted by its romantic reputation. In Dagestan, the problem is being addressed by the establishment in 2012 of the Dagestan Commission for Adapting Rebels to Civilian Life.

The jihadist groups work as factions and are not unified, despite all having sworn allegiance to Islamist militant Doku Umarov. The culture of martyrdom is on the increase, but other than the 2011 Moscow Domodedovo bombing, few terrorist acts have been aimed at civilians. Chechnya is dominated by Sufi Islam; Ramzan Kadyrov's policies include an emphasis on Madrasa education, a dress-code for women, compulsory prayer rooms in public

¹ Rasulov, Y, '*Jihad in the North Caucasus*', the Kavkaz Center

establishments, low tolerance towards the consumption of alcohol and a specific working schedule for the period of Ramadan.

The major challenges for the region include corruption amongst the ruling elites, inequality and perception of high youth unemployment. All of this contributes to widespread demoralization. Russian and local government efforts beyond investment have been limited. However, in Dagestan, a Centre for Dialogue has been established, dominated by Sunni moderate Salafi figures. Although this represents a bilateral discussion on social and religious concerns for the first time in Dagestan, it is unlikely to have significant impact.

As concerns the press, Ingushetia is too small for critical journalism to flourish, though it is evident that a few trained in the Soviet school of journalism continue to work. However, there is more investigative journalism in Dagestan.

The Russian media reflects the public fear of Chechen suicide bombings and the xenophobia that inspired events such as the Manezhnaya Ploshchad' brawl on 13 December 2010. That was initiated by a group of Spartak football fans who rebelled against the release of detainees, originally from Kabardino-Balkaria, suspected of murdering a Russian football fan. Anti-Caucasus slogans were heard. The protesters were joined by other Moscow residents, altogether numbering between 10,000-15,000 people, demanding 'fair' application of law and protesting against pressure from ethnic communities to reduce punishments for their brethren. Some protesters clashed with OMON special police troops and over 30 people were injured.

The insurgency perseveres in most regions of the North Caucasus, with Kabardino-Balkaria and Dagestan as epicentres. Dagestan has emerged as a breeding ground for suicide bombers, mostly female, and some – ethnic Russian. In 2009, there were 16 successful suicide bombings, one of which was in Dagestan; in 2011, there were six suicide bombings with three in Dagestan, and in 2012, there have been three bombings so far, all taking place in Dagestan. The main targets for insurgent attacks are police, civilian authorities and those attending public celebrations. About 150 state civilian and security agents were killed in 2011 in Dagestan in shoot-outs and explosions. Throughout 2011 368 Islamist militants were killed and 804 detained in Dagestan. Over the last ten years, security forces have become more successful at detaining suspects, rather than killing them on the spot.

Compared to other leaders of Republics, Kadyrov's model of governance is regarded as more effective both by the federal authorities and societies in the neighbouring republics. From Moscow's perspective, Kadyrov delivers what

he is paid for: he fights terrorism in Chechnya and prevents its export to the rest of the Federation. He also successfully combines Sharia law and secular values in the social organization of Chechnya. As proof of his effectiveness, Dagestani elites now appeal to him as a mediator and a lobbyist.

Putin's leadership responded to regional challenges through a combination of security and development policies, but these efforts were challenged by issues around political participation and elite formation. Moscow remains apprehensive of the North Caucasus after the turmoil and failures in the region in the 1990s. It is unwilling to intervene decisively in internal political developments and reluctant to act against vested interests. A vicious circle unfolds: security problems diminish socio-economic development, while diminished socio-economic development increases security problems.

The federal authorities are concerned with three main issues: security (i.e. the need to respond to growing Islamism), development, and ways of managing the multi-ethnic make-up of the Federation. The federal authorities adopted the 'Strategy of Social and Economic Development of the North Caucasus Federal District until 2025' to address issues of peace and stability, allocate funds and create a new institutional infrastructure. The objectives and responses outlined in the document are broadly oriented in the right direction. However, its priorities are numerous, loosely defined and insufficiently backed by personnel and expertise. In general, Moscow's policy towards the region changes too often; the centre bases interventions on short-term considerations and does not back its personnel when difficulties occur. Also, the Kremlin's information campaign is not visible enough.

Nationalist sentiment in Russia is on the rise due to increasing immigration and consequent calls for a consolidation of Russian federal identity. Formal political tolerance is at odds with frequent incidents of intolerance among the population. The Russian government has urged ethnic Russians to return to Ingushetia, where their current proportion is under 1%. Ethnic Russians often form the top layer of security officialdom, which helps add credibility to the institutions.

The Kremlin's plans to build tourist resorts in Kabardino-Balkaria as a way to counter terrorist activities were poorly received by the local population as the economic trickle-down is likely to be minimal. It is, however, encouraging that Putin has woken up to the need to support small- and medium-sized businesses in the region as a means of securing economic development. Approximately \$500 dollars per family per capita of investment would be desirable.

As yet, Western foreign policy is not registering the threat of militant Islamists emerging in the North Caucasus. However, despite militancy, there is also evidence of peaceful Islamic actions, including protests against the repression in November 2011 in Dagestan.

Session 2: Elite Politics, Challenges and Recommendations

Ethnic Russians comprise less than 25,000 of Chechnya's population. There has been an outflow of ethnic Russians, which had formed the political, intellectual and military elite in the past. Most of the indigenous and insurgent elites are gone too.

In this context, Kadyrov has established himself as an unchallenged leader. He knows how to use nepotistic channels for his own purposes and hold on to power and how to create an opaqueness which is inscrutable to anyone outside the system, even the Kremlin. Kadyrov's clique includes not only his immediate clan, but also former rebels. The entire system is dependent on subsidies from Moscow. However, the volume of subsidies has caused popular dissatisfaction in Moscow and St Petersburg; a recent opinion poll by Levada shows that 62% of the people are in favour of or indifferent to Chechnya's potential separation from Russia.

Two other factors prop up Kadyrov's rule. First, his policy of standing up for Chechens outside Chechnya. Second, among Chechens, tolerance is regarded as weakness. According to a growing number of people, the value of Islam stems from the fact that it never experienced a renaissance. Consequently the 'excesses' of the West (linked to secularism and science) can be avoided. This view is even held by young and educated people and they are thus less likely to challenge a leader that is supportive of Islamic values.

Kadyrov's power depends on Putin's favour, but will he be replaced? Are the Chechens going to replace him themselves? This is possible given the popular disgruntlement over Kadyrov and his clan's corruption, but it is not clear when. Possible developments include a clan war or a shift towards fundamentalism. Moreover, Vladislav Surkov's dismissal (First Deputy of the Chief of the Russian Presidential Administration) means that Putin will not be able to understand Kadyrov's system so well, as Surkov functioned as an 'interpreter' between the two.

For the North Caucasus, the challenges ahead are the same as the challenges that Russia faces in general, i.e. rule of law, governance,

organised crime and corruption. Corruption drives most problems - one can see conflict also as a function of corruption. There is also a big gap between the goals of the state and the aspirations of the *narod* more widely, i.e. keeping the North Caucasus in the Russian Federation vs. keeping *the people of the North Caucasus* out of the rest of Russia.

Russian law effectively does not apply in Chechnya. Kadyrov's power *vertikal* runs in parallel to that of Putin in Russia, and this situation underlines the weakness of the state. Misappropriation of state funds lies at the heart of the system; in return for funds from the Kremlin (\$4 billion in 2011), the Chechen problem is kept off Moscow's streets. Subsidies alone are of questionable use for calming the situation in Chechnya and are also politically damaging (concerns have arisen over the extent to which consumers in the North Caucasus actually pay for gas/electricity - '68%' reportedly in the North Caucasus - as opposed to '99%', for example, in North Western Russia).

There is no real incentive among the leadership to separate Chechnya from the Federation; Kadyrov's and Putin's systems coexist through mutually beneficial corrupt practices. The North Caucasus may become even more authoritarian. The gap between the state and the people will not be closed by injecting more money into the region. The North Caucasus was fundamental to Putin's rise and election campaigns - he called the North Caucasus the 'pearl of the Russian state'. Kadyrov has done Putin a personal service and it is likely Putin will show magnanimity to Kadyrov if the latter loses grip over Chechnya; he could, for example, be given a role of Kremlin Ambassador for Russia's Muslims. It is, however, doubtful that Kadyrov could stay in power after Putin's departure; their special relationship keeps Kadyrov in power.

There are concerns about terrorist attacks during the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games. Also, Moscow continues to look at the South Caucasus through the prism of the North Caucasus. The 2008 war and the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia have drawn the South Caucasus into a North Caucasus orbit. Units stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia belong to Russia's North Caucasus military district (now, as of 2010, renamed the Southern Military District).

More discussion is needed about the Circassian issue. There is a genuine historical problem to be considered. At the same time, the Georgian leadership is using the issue to score political points against Russia, to 'poke Russia in a soft place', as one respected analyst has put it. The Russian political elite are insensitive to the Circassian issue and to the North Caucasus in general; their inability to perceive things from the North

Caucasian point of view is a big part of the problem. This is one of the unresolved questions of Russia's colonial past; there are still elements of colonialism in Moscow's approach to the Caucasus.

Serious and nuanced consideration of regional issues, not only between Russia and Georgia, is needed, but reasoned discussion between Georgia and Russia should be encouraged; normalization of their relations is of great importance. Governance in the North Caucasus needs to be improved - more attention should be paid to the security and justice sectors, in particular. There is a pressing need for more engagement with the problems of young people - improving their prospects and also opportunities for contact across and between communities to help alleviate isolation from one another and from young people in other regions. The EU and other important institutions should encourage Moscow to adopt a preventative rather than reactionary and punitive approach towards the challenges of violent radicalism. And finally, whether internally or via external efforts, there needs to be support not only for human rights work which deals with the consequences of radicalism and the inherent problems of the prosecution system (and innocent/hapless victims caught in that); but there should also be efforts to sponsor a developmental agenda which can help to address crucially some of the root causes.