

RUSSIA'S COUNTERINSURGENCY IN NORTH CAUCASUS: PERFORMANCE AND CONSEQUENCES

The Strategic Threat of Religious Extremism and Moscow's Response

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This monograph examines the issues behind the continuing low-level insurgency in the Russian North Caucasus. It begins by analyzing the history of the bloody and contentious relations between the Russian and the North Caucasus Muslim nations, focusing specifically on the process of subjugating the region by the Russian Empire; the Caucasus wars of the 19th century; and the two Chechen wars and their aftermath, beginning in 1994 until today.

In the 18th century, Russia used brutal force to expand territorially to the Caucasus, both North and South. Its relatively large and well-equipped army handily defeated local militias in open battles. After gaining control of local towns and villages, Russia did not hesitate to use force against the locals who challenged its rule. Russia also attempted to suppress local languages, cultures, and the Muslim religion.

The mistreatment of the North Caucasian peoples continued after World War I, when the Bolsheviks publicly declared the equality of all nations living in Russia, but in reality, the discrimination continued. The communists also severely persecuted the Islamic religion, offering instead atheism and extreme secularism, while also providing a means of upward social mobility.

During and after World War II, North Caucasus peoples faced additional persecution and forcible deportations to remote parts of the Soviet Union in order to create what was meant to become a monolithic Soviet nation bound together by the ideology of Marxism-Leninism. With these actions lasting for over 2 centuries, the Russians and the Soviets planted the seeds of resentment and hatred toward them that persist to the present time.

These tragic events lie at the heart of the grudges the Chechens, the Ingush, the Circassians, and other North Caucasus peoples feel against the Russians. Immediately after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the breakup of the Soviet Union, and with a weakening of the Russian state, these grudges came to the surface. Chechnya tried to break free from what many Chechens considered occupation of their lands by "infidel" Russian colonial masters. This secession attempt was suppressed in the two wars so as to prevent the disintegration of the Russian Federation.

The First Chechen War lasted from 1994 to 1996 and revealed a startling lack of combat readiness of the Russian military. In the following years, Russia tried to suppress knowledge of war crimes committed by the Russian military, and portrayed the war as the struggle to preserve the Russian territorial integrity. Its information space became inundated with stories of betrayal by Moscow decisionmakers and corrupt local military commanders in Chechnya in order to disguise the real reason the previously formidable Soviet/Russian armed forces lost a domestically-fought war to a handful of rebels: poor tactical and operational planning, incompetent command, poor leadership, and widespread corruption. However, Russia learned military lessons from the botched 1994-96 campaign and handily won the Second Chechen War of 1999-2000. Both Chechen wars resulted in tens of thousands of casualties (both military and civilians) and hundreds of thousands of refugees.

After the two wars, Moscow used huge subsidies to rebuild Chechnya, but the grudges of the people have remained. These grudges, also fueled by local cronyism, poverty, discrimination, and the short-

sighted policies of the Kremlin, prevent the region from stabilizing and becoming self-sustained. Stability in Chechnya now depends on the current Chechen president, Ramzan Kadyrov. Moscow continues to allocate significant federal funds for Chechnya and turns a blind eye to local corrupt practices that are often a direct violation of the Russian federal law.

These tensions and largely unaddressed needs of the people have important implications for the future. Due to the persistent lack of security, civil strife, and the breakdown of law-and-order, Chechnya is unlikely to attract sizeable investment, which would create jobs, will most likely continue to rely on Moscow for funds, legitimacy and support. However, the deteriorating economic situation in Russia limits the amount of subsidies.

The rest of the North Caucasus does not differ much from Chechnya in this respect. This situation has the potential to spin out of control, resulting in unrest and a more intense insurgency. As long as Kadyrov maintains this modicum of security and income for the population, the Chechens will not risk altering situation radically by combating Russia or swelling the ranks of the Islamists. They co-exist with Putin and Kadyrov for now – but as in the past, this may change quickly, especially given the inroads the Salafis are making with the young generation and the continued lack of progress in government accountability and fighting corruption.

Without immediate, thorough, and concerted international action, the challenges that the North Caucasus presents to the world will grow into major prob-

lems. The United States must engage its allies and work with Russia to strengthen its border security, reinvigorate law enforcement and counterterrorist cooperation with national and international agencies, counter Islamist propaganda, improve intelligence capabilities, and appeal for international cooperation to eliminate the financial support of terrorism that helps North-Caucasus militant groups flourish.

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