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Chechen Spark-Caucasian Powderkeg

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The Caucasus, one of the world's most turbulent regions, is the scene of half a dozen active and many more latent conflicts. The current Russian offensive against Chechnya may reignite old conflicts and set off new ones. The war dramatically exacerbates historical injustices and ethnic tensions endemic to the area.

The Kremlin's current military operation in Chechnya differs substantially from the military campaign of 1994-96. For example, during the first war, the Russian media reported regularly on the mass civilian casualties caused by the Russian army in Chechnya. Now, however, there is virtually no reporting from the Chechen-controlled areas because the journalists are staying away. Whereas they found ways to circumvent the travel restrictions imposed by the military during the previous conflict, this time they are exercising self-censorship because they fear for their lives.

The absence of the Chechen point of view in Russian media coverage and the current support of the majority of the population for the military campaign allow the federal forces to implement mass artillery and long-range bombardments, which inevitably increase civilian casualties, without fear of a negative reaction from the Russian population. During the last war it was precisely the media criticism and public outrage that somewhat restrained the Kremlin. Considering that even in that conflict there were more civilian than military casualties, the Kremlin's new campaign is likely to bring about a calamity in Chechnya.
The introduction of Russian forces into Chechnya sharply complicates the overall situation in the Caucasus in the North Caucasus republics as well as in the independent states of the Transcaucasia. The start of the new Russian-Chechen war has added to tensions elsewhere in the region.

In addition to the social and political destabilization typical of the entire former Soviet Union, three factors specific to this area increase the probability of new violent conflicts:

- In both the states of the South Caucasus and the republics of the North Caucasus, borders were drawn arbitrarily and do not correspond to areas of compact ethnic settlements.

- The process of rehabilitating the peoples that were deported by Stalin and restoring them to their lands remains incomplete.

- Since the Russian-Chechen war of 1994-96, there has been a marked increase in the activity of radical Islamic groups.

The following account examines each of these factors in light of the renewed warfare in Chechnya and identifies areas of latent hostilities which are most at risk of escalating into violence. The final section notes the destabilizing effect of these developments for Georgia and Azerbaijan.

**Arbitrary Borders**

Most tensions in the Caucasus stem from the federal and territorial arrangements of the Soviet Union. In the 1920s and the 1930s, borders were drawn in a provocative way, frequently with the goal of dividing nations, violating historic and ethnic realities. These arrangements were aggravated further over the course of Soviet history and the subsequent conflict-ridden existence of the post-Soviet states.

Now at least four Caucasian nations are divided by international borders:
• Armenians live in three compact settlements in three different states: Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, and the Dzhavakh region of Georgia.

• Besides the Azerbaijani state, the Azeris live in a compact settlement in Georgia near the border with Azerbaijan.

• The Ossetians live in North Ossetia, which is part of the Russian Federation, and in South Ossetia, which is part of Georgia.

• The Lezgin compact settlement zone spans the Russian-Azerbaijani border.

Bloody armed conflicts have occurred in some of these regions (i.e., Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia) while the situation in others (i.e., Lezginistan, Dzhavakh) is very tense, characterized by occasional demands for independence and autonomy status, respectively.

A significant number of North Caucasian peoples are divided by internal or administrative borders. For example, the Kabardians, Cherkess and Adygeis form one ethnic community of Circassians, but live in three separate regions of the Russian Federation: Adygei, Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Kabardin-Balkaria. The Balkar and Karachai peoples form one ethnic group and speak one language but their area is divided into administratively separate regions. Although there has been discord for several years in Karachaevo-Cherkessia, tensions became particularly acute in May after a Karachai, General Semenov, won the presidential elections, which were viewed by the Cherkess candidate, Stanislav Derev, and his supporters as having been rigged. This provoked the Cherkess to demand the separation of Cherkess land from Karachaevo-Cherkessia (to be attached instead to the Stavropol region) unless the results of the election were annulled. Elsewhere, Dagestan's Khasavyurt district is home to the Akkin Chechens, who consider themselves to be citizens of the Chechen Republic and consequently participated in the 1997 Chechen presidential elections.
To date the regions mentioned above have experienced political agitation but tension has not led to violence. The fighting in Chechnya threatens to turn these latent conflicts into new hot spots.

**Territorial Rehabilitation of the Exiled**

Another point of tension in the Caucasus results from the rehabilitation of persecuted peoples Chechens, Ingush, Karachai, Balkars and Meskhetian-Turks. When Stalin and Beria deported the members of these nations to Central Asia in 1944, they also abolished the corresponding autonomous republics and national regions. These territories were divided between the neighboring republics and krais. For example, the Karachai autonomous oblast was divided among Krasnodar krai, Stavropol krai and Georgia; Balkaria was given to Georgia; and Prigorodny krai, a part of Checheno-Ingushetia, was given to North Ossetia.

When the exiled peoples were allowed to return in 1957, the 1944 borders were reinstated for the most part. There were exceptions, however. A significant portion of the modern territorial conflicts in the North Caucasus stem from these exceptions. For example, the Karachai and Cherkess autonomous oblasts were united. As indicated above, the Cherkess now seek to secede. The Prigorodny region of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR remained part of the North Ossetian ASSR. Violent clashes there in 1992 were only suppressed with the use of peacekeepers, and have led to sporadic violence over the last few years. The fact that Chechen autonomy within the Dagestan ASSR was never reinstated is now seen as a serious grievance by the 70,000 Akkin Chechens.

One of the most tragic cases is the Meskhetian-Turk nation that now resides in the North Caucasus and seeks repatriation to Georgia, whence the people were deported in 1944. The Russian and regional governments are eager to see them go, but the Georgian government hesitates to facilitate their return. The Georgians fear to exacerbate relations with the restive Armenian minority that now resides in Dzhavakh
and would face displacement. Turkey has given refuge to a small number of Meskhetian Turks, but most remain stranded in a very hostile Russian environment.

The Kremlin's lack of a clear policy on resolving such tensions only worsens the situation. For example, the Ingush may cite the law "On the rehabilitation of the persecuted peoples," which provides for the restoration of territorial integrity as it existed before the deportations, to argue that Prigorodny krai is legally theirs. The Ossetians point to the Russian Federation Constitution, which states that a change in the borders between two regions can only be implemented if a majority of both regions accepts this change in a referendum. Was that article of the constitution meant to apply even to cases of post-deportation rehabilitation? No one in Moscow has formulated a cogent approach to this question.

The deportations created enduring cleavages among the nations of the North Caucasus; some persons were deported as members of a "criminal" nation, while other ethnic groups were spared. Some nations profited from the suffering of others and took over their land. The territorial changes involved in the rehabilitation created even more embittered parties. These antagonisms smolder just below the surface and may become a serious threat to stability in the region.

'Fundamentalist' Groups

Until recently, the religious factor did not play an important role in international or inter-ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus. Even during the war over Nagorno-Karabakh (1988-94) between Christian Armenians and Muslim Azeris, both sides refrained from religious rhetoric. The situation changed dramatically after the beginning of the 1994-96 Russian-Chechen war. Then the ideologues of Chechen independence began to use Islamic slogans to portray the conflict as one between the Muslims and the nonbelievers. At this point, a movement that was new to the region, Wahhabism, started to play a role in political and social life.
Since the beginning of perestroika, devout Islamic sects have increased their activity in North Caucasian republics (particularly in Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia). The CIS media have dubbed these people "Wahhabis." However, many in the North Caucasus justifiably consider this term to be offensive. The term "Wahhabis" is generally used to describe all groups of Muslims in the former Soviet Union who criticize features of Islam that incorporate local customs and even Soviet innovations which they view as corrupting influences. For instance the Chechen dance, the zikhr, which constitutes an important national ritual, would be forbidden under a strict Shariah law. The ideology of these groups is usually far removed from genuine Wahhabism, a movement within Sunni Islam which approximates the official ideology of Saudi Arabia. The disparate "fundamentalist" groups are perhaps united by one thing: They accept neither the old communist system nor the western model of development which has replaced it. As a rule, such groups attract intelligent young people from traditional, nonindustrial society (peasants and traders), who are not involved with any criminal groups.

Until September of this year, when Russian forces destroyed one of the so-called "Wahhabi" centers in the North Caucasus, the Dagestani village of Karamakhi, this settlement had seemed like a different state. Driving up to the village one saw large signs: "Attention! You are entering the territory under Shariah law." In the settlement itself, the quality of the streets and the tidiness of the houses were impressive. In the yard of almost every house of a local "Wahhabi" stood a Kamaz brand truck, many with cell phones. On the streets one rarely met a woman whose face was uncovered, and the men wore beards down to their chests since members of this sect are forbidden to shave.

"We don't smoke, don't drink, we work hard. That's the secret of our wealth. However, during the years of Soviet rule a whole generation formed that opposes people who live the life of true Muslims. They were the ones who labeled us 'Wahhabis'," declared one of the leaders of the village, Khalif Ataev, in 1998.
"The term 'Wahhabi' was introduced by the FSB specifically to sow discord among the believers. In essence, Wahhabs include all of the people who criticize the official religious structures. To be accurate, the so-called North Caucasus Wahhabis could be called 'Salafites' [the general term for Muslim religious leaders who, at different points in history, advocated following the lifestyle and belief system of the early Muslim communes], or 'fundamentalists,'" one of the greatest Muslim scholar-theologians of Russia, Akhmedkadi Akhtaev, said shortly before his death. Most likely Akhtaev's point of view is not far from the truth, in that the term "Wahhabi" is meant to serve a propagandistic, not a descriptive, function.

As a Russian historian, Robert Landa, notes, "the most important key to the success of the fundamentalists is their wager on the young. In particular, they have managed to win over the allegiance of the traditional athletic clubs popular among young men. These date back to the time of resisting the Mongol conquerors. Later they also studied the Koran and the works of Muslim leaders under the guidance of mullahs." (1) Practically all extremely devout mosques have sports halls where karate and other eastern one-on-one combat techniques are studied (it is this factor that ignites suspicion in outsiders). The mosque becomes an organization of like-minded people generally young and full of energy.

However, the problem is far more serious than one of minor religious differences. Before perestroika, Moscow managed to adapt the divergent cultures of the various peoples in the country to Communist ideology. This involved force and repression, which were possible only under a totalitarian system. Since the demise of the empire, West European democratic institutions have not taken root throughout large sections of the former USSR. The form of Islam gaining popularity is certainly anti-Russian, but it is also anti-modern. It is difficult to see in this ideology a basis for democratic, western-style development.
Alliances

The growth in the number of religious radicals throughout the CIS is also facilitated by the legal anarchy rampant in almost all Muslim regions of the former Soviet Union. In Dagestan today, for example, power is divided between the former party nomenklatura and the so-called "new Dagestanis" in other words, criminal leaders who have their own armed units. Conflict between the so-called "Wahhabis" of Dagestan and official Makhachkala, Dagestan's capital, first arose when the members of the new sects refused to make payments to the local criminal structures. The economic devastation and rampant corruption of recent years have created a breeding ground for the religious sects, and these sects are becoming increasingly assertive. Whereas at the beginning of the 1990s the number of adherents to such groups among the population of Dagestan was no more than 2 percent, today official Makhachkala estimates that it is approaching 10 percent.

A year ago, a significant number of Dagestanis who support the Chechen annexation of parts of Dagestan underwent training in the military camps of Khattab and Shamil Basaev on Chechen territory. It was therefore not surprising that an overwhelming proportion of the fighters who invaded Dagestan with Basaev in August of this year were Dagestani. After that raid was repelled, the Russian forces virtually leveled the Karamakhi settlement, even though the local "Wahhabis" did not participate in Basaev's incursion into Dagestan. Surely this convinced many more Dagestanis of the impossibility of remaining within the Russian Federation. Through the brutality of such tactics the Russian military promotes the growth of separatism in Dagestan and creates allies for the Chechen cause among the North Caucasian people.

Grozny (now Dzhokhar) may find allies in other republics of the North Caucasus. For example, when the Balkars declared their intention to create their own republic in 1997, the Chechen field commanders promised to provide military support. The Balkars may aid the Chechens now. The Dagestani Chechens (Akkins) who consider the Dagestan region in which they reside to be indigenous Chechen territory may also come to Dzhokhar's aid. The Chechens may ally themselves with the Cherkess of Karachaev-
Cherkessia, who became embittered against the federal government due to Semenov's election. In fact, Mukhammad Kilba one of the closest comrades-in-arms of the losing candidate of the Karachaevo-Cherkessia presidential elections, Stanislav Derev fought together with Basaev in Abkhazia in 1992-93, and served as the deputy minister of defense of that separatist republic of Georgia. Kilba has already stated that if the results of the election in Karachaevo-Cherkessia are not nullified, he will come to Basaev's aid.

**Possible Effect**

Ingushetia is deeply imperiled by the continuing refugee crisis, since it is the destination of an overwhelming majority of fleeing Chechens. Today the number of refugees from Chechnya has topped 200,000. Those refugees, plus the 65,000 who fled the fighting in Prigorodny rayon in 1992, and the 100,000 who fled Chechnya during the last war, have brought the total refugee population to 365,000 roughly 120% of the population of local residents. (2) The tiny impoverished republic is hardly capable of accommodating such an influx of destitute, wounded and traumatized persons. As the president of Ingushetia, Ruslan Aushev, maintains, the situation in the republic is approaching a humanitarian catastrophe. If these circumstances continue, Ingushetia may face insurrections in the refugee camps.

While the introduction of Russian forces into Chechnya is described by Moscow as a domestic matter for the Kremlin, in reality this event affects the vital interests of the majority of the post-Soviet states. Naturally, the war most strongly affects the states nearest to Chechnya: Georgia and Azerbaijan.

According to Moscow's assertions, it is in these Caucasus nations that regiments of volunteers from the Muslim nations of the Far Abroad are formed to be later transferred to combat in Chechnya. The Kremlin never wearies of asserting that Chechen fighters receive arms through the territories of these nations. However, an overwhelming majority of the weapons are transferred to the Chechen separatists through Russian territory; therefore, the indignation of the Kremlin cannot be taken at face value. It
appears as though the Kremlin is using accusations that Baku and Tbilisi are assisting
Dzhokhar as a pretext to assert Russian control of the Transcaucasian republics.

Thus, on the allegation that the Chechens receive aid from these Transcaucasian
nations, Moscow attempted to force Tbilisi to transfer to Russian border guard control
the 70-kilometer Chechnya-Georgia border and may try to induce Baku to agree to the
installment of Russian military bases on the territory of Azerbaijan. When Baku and
Tbilisi did not give in to the pressure, the Kremlin threatened to introduce a new visa
regime for inhabitants of these Transcaucasian republics who travel in Russia.

For Baku, the most dangerous circumstance is that the war in Chechnya is highly likely
to "carry over" to the neighboring Dagestan region, and to areas heavily populated by
Lezgins. The Russian-Azerbaijani border runs through the Lezgin area. The new visa
regime and travel restrictions are certain to aggravate what is already a restive people.
The Lezgins, probably with some prompting from Russia, already had declared their
intention to secede from Azerbaijan in 1993. During the 1994-95 Chechen campaign,
Chechnya's late president, Dzhokhar Dudaev, had tried unsuccessfully to rouse the
Dagestani Lezgins. However, one can't completely discount the possibility that the
followers of the first Chechen president will be more successful. With any escalation of
tension in the Lezgin regions of Dagestan, discord would inevitably spread to
Azerbaijan.

Thus, the current introduction of Russian forces into Chechnya sharply complicates the
situation throughout the entire Caucasus. Having unleashed this war, the Kremlin has
created stimuli to aggravate existing conflicts and ignite new hot spots throughout the
region.

Notes:


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