

Chechnya's Enigma in the Geopolitical Context

Gayane Novikova

Chechens repeatedly appear as militants in numerous conflicts and terrorist attacks. Why is the so-called Chechen threat spreading beyond the borders of the Northern Caucasus?

The Chechen conflict in Russia and with Russia echoes in many areas of the world. We can trace the Chechen fighters in the Nagorniy Karabakh conflict (where for a short period of time Chechen mercenaries were fighting alongside the Afghani

and Herzegovina). Most recently, they were fighting in Ukraine in support of both the Ukrainian and pro-Russian parties to the conflict: The Chechen "Death battalion" with 300 fighters was supporting the pro-Russian rebels in Donetsk, and the

The Initial Stage of Radicalisation in the North Caucasus

Several internal and external factors have greatly contributed to the radicalisation of the North Caucasus. Like the Western Balkans, the North Caucasus is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and poly-confessional region. A combination of these factors as such creates a base for different types of conflict, especially in Chechnya and Dagestan. Moreover, these societies are divided along equally important family/clan and religion lines. In particular, being Muslims, the majority of Chechens have been followers of Sufi Islam mixed with local – the mountain people's – customs and traditions. The other part, starting in the first half of the 19th century, when Imam Shamil unified the Chechens and other nations of the North Caucasus under the banner of Islam, gradually began its journey toward radicalisation. The first Caucasus war (1826-1864) became a strong catalyst in the processes of Islamisation and further radicalisation of the indigenous people of the North Caucasus (with the exception of the Ossetians, the overwhelming majority of whom are Christians). In the course of the last two centuries, there were long and painful periods of open military confrontation between the Russian State – that is, Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation – and the indigenous people of the North Caucasus, first of all Chechens. The Caucasus Wars were different from other wars. Neither a clearly defined front line nor a single battle predetermined the outcome of any of them. Neither Russian nor Chechen parties to the conflict could claim a total victory followed by a lasting peace.

It is accurate to describe the Russia-North Caucasus interaction as an ongoing insurgency of the people of this region against the Russian State, owing to the fact that this confrontation has spread beyond Chechnya's borders and affects now also Dagestan and Ingushetia. A conflict in broader terms between the Russian state and several nations of the North Caucasus (Chechens, Ingushes, Circassians) is still in place.

From the perspective of the Russian state, it has been a long-standing desire to establish full control over the North Caucasus, in

Photo: ramzan-kadirov.ru



The current pro-Russian President of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadirov (left), at the monument dedicated to his father and former President Akhmat Kadirov, who was assassinated by jihadist Chechens. The banner behind the monument reads: "Together we will rebuild our republic without any traces of war."

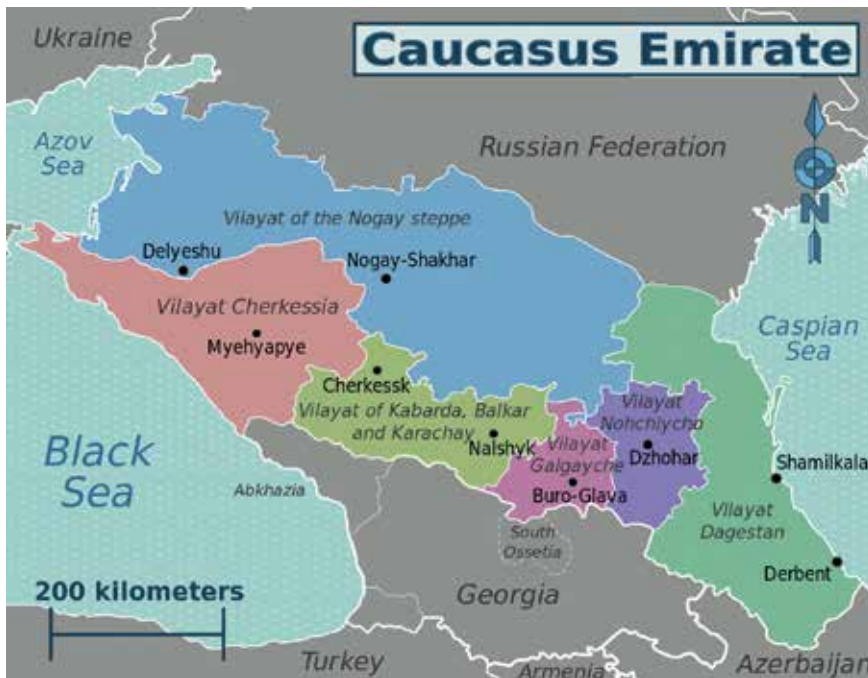
mujahideen against the local Armenians), in the Abkhazian conflict (where they supported their Abkhazian kin against the Georgian government), in Afghanistan after the US invasion in 2001, and in the Western Balkans (in Kosovo and Bosnia

Dzhokhar Dudayev battalion was fighting on the side of the Ukrainian government. Chechens were also among the military leadership of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Their nom de guerre, al-Shishani ("Chechen" in Arabic), identifies their ethnicity.

This article seeks to answer two main questions: Why is the so-called Chechen threat spreading beyond the borders of the North Caucasus? And does the suppressed Chechen insurgency and the return of Chechen fighters from the Middle East pose a security threat to Russia and its neighbouring states?

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Graphics: Arnold Platon

The Caucasus Emirate was a Jihadist organisation in Chechnya. Its intention was to expel the Russians from the North Caucasus and to establish an independent Islamic emirate in the region.

general, and over Chechnya, in particular, and to diminish and prevent the spread of the possible security threats into Russia's proper. Russian reforms in the North Caucasus were mainly accompanied by the use of military force.

From the perspective of the nations of the North Caucasus, it is first and foremost a continuity of their fight against the Russian State for the sake of preserving their identity, traditions, and freedom. Their religion, Islam, has gradually become a most important pillar of this battle, although its role in Muslim societies of the North Caucasus is ambivalent. It divided these societies into Islamists fighting a jihad against "infidels" to liberate a "Dar al-Harb" ("a territory of war") and to expand and protect a "Dar al-Islam" ("a territory of peace") and on the other hand into those who reject radical Islam but view religion as a refuge from daily problems. The first group poses a danger to the society itself; the second group to some degree provides a pool of recruits.

Chechnya: Quo Vadis?

Two highly important developments have made reconciliation between the Russian State and, in particular, the Chechen people almost impossible. First, in 1944 the forcible deportation of several nations of the North Caucasus to Central Asia and severe conditions of living caused the death of almost half of all deportees. In exile, their religion – Sufism – became their main identity. The Chechens and Ingushes were gradually allowed to return to their homeland after their rehabilitation in 1957. Relative stability and security in the North

Caucasus has been established. However, a new trend became visible in the last years of the Soviet Union, one marked by a growing influence of the Islamic factor in this area. Youth who studied Islam and Islamic law abroad, mainly in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, brought with them a version of Islam that was new to the North Caucasus and began to impose it aggressively at home. In the short period of Chechnya's independence (1991-1994), the division line between

the more secular and more religious parts of the population resulted in the existence of two governments almost in parallel: a nationalist and an Islamist.

An open confrontation between the Russian state and Chechnya resulted in two wars (1994–1996 and 1999–2000) on Chechnya's territory and in a number of terrorist attacks that took place not only in the North Caucasus, but also in several Russian cities, including Moscow. The terrorist tactics adopted by the Chechen rebel commanders justified the Russian Government's comprehensive military operation aimed at blocking and destroying the militants in Chechnya. The counterterrorism operation launched by the Russian State which officially lasted from mid-2000 until April 2009 contributed to further significant shifts in security. On the one hand, the horror of these two wars and the implementation of the counterterrorism operation provided fertile ground for further radicalisation of this society. On the other hand, Ramzan Kadirov, who gained President Putin's full support and became President of Chechnya in 2007, began to implement a so-called policy of Chechenisation. It was accompanied by egregious violations of human rights. Internal terror became state policy, carried out by the Kadirovtsy, members of a paramilitary organisation serving as personal guards for President Kadirov, many of whom are former fighters who fought against the Russian state.

Photo: ramzan-kadirov.ru



Demonstrators in Gudermes, once a hotbed of Chechen separatism, take to the streets in support of pro-Russian President Ramzan Kadirov. The banner reads: "Ramzan Kadirov, we are with you."

The Caucasus Emirate v. the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria

Chechnya was viewed by the Islamists as a “Dar al-Harb” which should be liberated from the “infidels”, first of all from Russians. A growing number of Sunni Arab fighters, many of them with direct and close links to the Taliban and al-Qaida, began to penetrate into the North Caucasus as early as the first Russian-Chechen war (1994-96). The newcomers were focused on the purification of Islam in society, which rebelled against the Russian state's reformist project. The Sufi imams were also targeted. The appearance of Arab fighters brought confusion and stimulated further shifts

in Dagestan, North Ossetia, Karachai-Cherkessia, and Kabardino-Balkaria. This organisation, whose activities were gradually spreading beyond the geographic borders of the North Caucasus toward Northern Krasnodar Krai and Stavropol Krai (the southernmost regions of the Russian Federation) and into Azerbaijan and the Muslim-populated regions of Georgia, has had strong ties with both the Taliban and al-Qaida.

The secular Chechen government-in-exile, led by Ahmed Zakayev, responded with the following statement: the Chechen state would continue as a parliamentary republic “until free elections could be held in Chechnya.”

foreign fighters, in Dagestan and Ingushetia in the North Caucasus, and in Georgia and Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus. An announcement of the establishment of a new caliphate in the territories of Iraq and historic Syria, or ISIS, on 29 June 2014 by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi opened a new opportunity for Chechen militants. In December 2014, the leaders of the Caucasus Emirate pledged their allegiance to ISIS. Several thousand of Islamist militants, who had formally pledged their allegiance to ISIS in mid-June 2015 took transit routes via Georgia and Azerbaijan to Turkey or via Eastern Europe to Turkey and ended up in Syria and Iraq, fighting for ISIS. Presumably, the Russian border control had no intention of stopping them; terrorist activities of the Caucasus Emirate and other militant organisations on Russian territory has been sharply reduced.

One of the critical factors for Russia's direct involvement in the war in Syria should be emphasised: On 25 June 2015, ISIS declared the formation of a new wilayat, or governorate, in Russia's North Caucasus, thereby establishing a territorial claim inside Russia. In this context, Russia could not remain a passive observer: It should support the Assad regime and fight ISIS on Syrian territory, securing its own interests in the Middle East and preventing the spread of the Islamic military threat beyond Syrian borders and a possible return of Chechen fighters to Russia. On 30 September 2015, Russia initiated its military operation in Syria.

According to various official and independent Russian sources, the number of Russian citizens who fought in the ranks of the Islamic state was about 4,000 in 2017. Among them were 1,200 from Dagestan, 100 from Ingushetia, and 175 from Kabardino-Balkaria. Chechens constituted the largest component: around 600 were from Chechnya and another 2,400 from the Chechen diaspora in Europe. The most famous ISIS military commander Omar al-Shishani was Kist, or Georgian Chechen, however the number of Chechen fighters from Georgia was slightly more than 50.

Owing to the long history of the Russian-Chechen confrontation, the return of Chechen fighters even in small numbers to the North Caucasus poses a serious security threat for Russia. These men and women, who have nothing to lose, can greatly contribute to sparking a new round of terrorist activity in this region, which could potentially spread to other parts of Russia. Therefore, the Russian government will fully support the Assad regime in Syria, as well as any other regime that will fight against ISIS.



Photo: ramzan-kadirov.ru

The Kadirovtsy are a paramilitary organisation which originated as a separatist militia under Akhmad Kadirov and fought against the Russians in the First Chechen War. Kadirov defected to the Russian side in the Second Chechen War in 1999, and the Kadirovtsy began fighting separatists and jihadists. The Kadirovtsy have been accused of numerous human rights violations. They also served in Ukraine and Syria in support of Russian troops.

and a struggle for power inside Chechen society: The nationalists lost ground to the Islamists, and the radicals hijacked the nationalist movement of Chechnya.

After the assassination in April 1996 of the first President of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, General Dzhokhar Dudaev, who fought for Chechnya to become an independent secular state, the Islamist Zelimkhan Yanderbiyev became the acting President. He declared Chechnya an Islamic state, established sharia as an official legal system, and called for a jihad against the Russian state.

The next step in the further Islamisation of power was the dissolution of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and a proclamation of the Caucasus Emirate in October 2007 by then President of Chechnya Doku Umarov. The Emirate included Chechnya, Ingushetia,

Although the proclamation of the Caucasus Emirate did not receive much support from Chechen society, it provided to the Russian State the required justification to acquire full control over Chechnya by putting in charge its own “strong man” Ramzan Kadirov. The latter is ruling by blending religious postulates with the harsh punishment of varieties of opponents.

The North Caucasus Fighters in Syria and Russia's Direct Involvement in the Syrian War

Russia's efforts to pacify Chechnya by suppressing both nationalists and Islamists through the policy of Chechenisation resulted in the killing of the regime's opponents and in a gradual relocation of the Chechen militants, together with Jihadist

Conclusion

Two major sets of factors prevent a complete resolution of the Chechnya enigma. The international political and military contexts, Islam as a religion and a political system, the political and military activity of the Islamists, growing Islamophobia in the West, the immigration per se and the differing degrees of adaptation of individuals to new and sometimes quite hostile environments – all these external factors should be considered as the background for all current discussions on radical Islam and its social base.

The North Caucasus will continue to be the most vulnerable part of the Russian Federation. The history of the Chechen insurgency, two Russian-Chechen wars, Russia's counterterrorist operation, and Kadirov's Chechenisation policy are the internal factors that greatly contribute to the radicalisation of certain segments of the North Caucasus societies.

Although the North Caucasus insurgency is suppressed by military means, it is not defeated completely. As Robert Schaefer correctly stated in his book "The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad", any insurgency is first

and foremost a political struggle aimed to win the support of the population at large through a war of ideas, or legitimacy. In the case of Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia, we are dealing with a permanent conflict between two reformist projects - the Russian State's secular reformist project and radical Islam as a religious and structural project. Neither can declare victory even in the mid-term perspective. Wide-ranging repressions in Chechnya have pushed the Chechen insurgency into the underground, therefore unavoidably contributing to its further expansion to other parts of the North Caucasus.

The internal societal conflict and the gradually increasing role of radical Islam, the frustration and human rights violations and violence, and strong family connections all stimulate a prolonged exodus of the Chechen population, including former militants, from Chechnya (and Russia) mainly to Europe. According to the different sources, their number is over 100,000. A small number of Chechens have resettled in the US.

For different reasons, these people are not well integrated; most of them live in their ethnically-based parallel societies with internal rules and laws (in particular, in Germany, Chechen gangs terrorise fellow Chechens through a so-called Sharia

police). The very low level of integration generates anger against the host countries and frustration with "unfriendly" societies, thereby turning them into easy prey for recruiters from different Jihadist organisations. The most vulnerable people can be provoked to take extreme actions. The Boston Marathon bombing in April 2011 executed by the Tsarnayev brothers is the most vivid example. The significant number of diaspora Chechens who fought and still fight in the Middle East is further evidence of the existence of an environment that breeds further radicalisation.

Another piece of the Chechnya puzzle should also be mentioned in a global terrorism context: The number of people who will carry out their protests in the form of terrorist attacks - and more and more often individually as "lone wolves" – will grow. Terrorist organisations will take responsibility for all these attacks, not least to attract more supporters. To fight against this type of protest is almost impossible.

P.S. This article was already submitted when, on August 20, 2018, there were several attacks against the Chechen military in the capital of Chechnya - Grozny - and in the Shali region. The ISIS claimed responsibility for these attacks. ■

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