

A Vicious Circle: The Security Implications of Rising Anti-Americanism in the North Caucasus

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While attending a conference on combating terrorism and extremism at the state university in Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria, in April 2010, one moment in particular made me feel as if I had been placed inside a time machine. Leaving behind the fancy monitors and big screen projections, I was thrust into the Communist Party and Young Communist meetings of Soviet times. The speaker, Kabardino-Balkaria's deputy interior minister, was accusing "the West" of masterminding instability in the North Caucasus in order to weaken Russia. It was surreal to hear that the U.S. government would risk supporting Islamist radicals in the name of undefined geopolitical goals in the North Caucasus, a region peripheral, at best, to core U.S. national security interests.

Yet, the deputy's assertion was notable not so much for the way in which it characterized U.S. policy toward Russia, but for how it reflected a sense of geopolitical vulnerability and frustration by Moscow and local leaders over the persistence of Islamist insurgency in Russia's mountainous and ethnically-mixed southern borderlands.

Suspicion of the United States' destabilizing role in the region is staple discourse among local elites in the North Caucasus, official Muslim leaders, and the public. Moreover, Moscow's military involvement in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, at a time when Georgia receives support from the United States and seeks membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, adds to this sense of vulnerability. Fears of destabilizing foreign influences, in turn, help to perpetuate the continuing international isolation of the region—something that social research suggests can hamper efforts to increase tolerance and reduce social support for extremism and radical militancy.

Anti-Americanism among Local Political Elites

The strongest, most consistent, and most outlandish anti-American statements in the North Caucasus have come from two presidents: Yunus-Bek Yevkurov of Ingushetia and Chechnya's Ramzan Kadyrov. They have also been the most outspoken presidents throughout the region in expressing their loyalty to Russia's leaders. Notably, they are

in charge of the two republics in the region that have seen the most devastating violence over the past decade. Systemic violence persists in these republics despite major efforts to stamp it out by force and despite joint Chechen-Ingush counter-insurgency operations. These leaders' anti-American consensus transcends significant differences between them on how to reduce social support for militant insurgency and, by extension, on balancing security interests and human rights.¹

Both presidents do not argue their cases using evidence. They appeal to generic fears that resonate in the local context. The core underlying logic is as follows. Violent upheaval began in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet state. Therefore, Putin's successful restoration of a strong state on a quasi-Soviet model – to a large degree contingent on peace in the North Caucasus – must unnerve the Soviet Union's erstwhile Cold War adversaries. As a result, one would expect these international actors to support any forces in the region – including radical Islamists – who are willing to fight Moscow.

Symptomatically, in a June 2009 interview on the official Chechen government website, Ramzan Kadyrov claimed that “the control center” of the militant Islamist insurgency is the United States. Rather than offer any facts supporting this claim, Kadyrov argued on the basis of the general contextual logic: “It is the United States that works to breakup the sovereign Russian state. It is not terrorists or Islamists. It is the United States who thought this up, and they cause problems for Russia. They failed in Chechnya, so now they want to do it through Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Dagestan, and Ingushetia.”² Kadyrov rounded off his message by accusing the United States – again, without evidence – of training Arab nationals to fight in the North Caucasus, in part through U.S.-funded nongovernmental organizations.

In a July 2009 interview, Kadyrov made new accusations that “perfectly trained Western intelligence operatives working against Russia” supplied “some kind of pills” to young Chechen men making them follow commands like robots. Again, general assertions of the West's hostile intent stood in for factual evidence: “All foreign intelligence officers are working against Russia. And the Russian public blames us. They believe the war is still going on here because the Chechens are bandits and terrorists. Meanwhile, the Chechens are giving their lives to preserve Russia's territorial integrity. We have hundreds of thousands dead, thousands missing, thousands of police officers killed in battle. But the Russian public is not interested in that....”³

Ingushetia's Yevkurov argued in a February 2009 interview to *Novaya Gazeta* that agents of the U.S. and British “special services” were behind alleged *fatwas* by Arabs that promised residents of the North Caucasus “if one kills a policeman they will at once become holy martyrs.” Like Kadyrov, Yevkurov cited no evidence but appealed to generic fears rooted in post-Soviet turmoil. Jihadist leaders promoting the idea of an Islamist Emirate of the North Caucasus – Doku Umarov, Emir Magas, and others – had,

¹ Yevkurov has emphasized persuasion and met in person with the families of rebel suspects. Kadyrov, instead, has emphasized punitive sanctions on rebel suspects' families unless they denounce their relatives.

² <http://chechnya.gov.ru/page.php?r=126&id=5480>

³ <http://www.newsru.com/russia/08jul2009/kdr.html>

according to Yevkurov, “a clear goal assigned to them from abroad.” That goal, Yevkurov asserted, was to “break Russia apart, the same way the Soviet Union was broken apart.”⁴ This echoed Putin’s conviction, reported by Russian refugee advocate Svetlana Gannushkina in mid-2009, that there was a “clear and present danger of [an] Islamic caliphate” in the region.

While other North Caucasian presidents were not reported as making such statements, the ex-president of Dagestan, Mukhu Aliyev, nevertheless opined in an interview while still in office that foreign intelligence services used funding for local NGOs to make the latter distort the state of events in the republic.

Anti-Americanism among Lower-Level Officials and Social Notables

At the conference in Nalchik that I attended in April 2010, the claim of local deputy interior minister Naurbi Zhamborov that Western governments were fostering an insurgency in the North Caucasus and were thus directly implicated in dozens of casualties among his men appeared to me more significant than the claims by Kadyrov and Yevkurov. Such statements by the presidents of Chechnya and Ingushetia, even if stated several times with conviction, could be written off as political propaganda (both to follow Putin’s lead and as an excuse for failing to completely defeat the insurgency). Zhamborov, on the other hand, bore no such level of responsibility. Moreover, Kabardino-Balkaria’s president was not reported as making anti-American statements similar to Yevkurov’s and Kadyrov’s. Yet Zhamborov felt that it would be expedient to voice allegations against the United States. Most likely, he felt obliged to repeat the claim that Kabardino-Balkaria’s minister of internal affairs, Yuri Tomchak, made in December 2008 that “external forces place their bets on the ethno-religious insurgency [in the region] whose actions could spread practically throughout the south of Russia.”⁵

Even more surprising to me was the anti-American statement at the same Nalchik conference by the imam of Nalchik, Nazir Akhmatov. He implicitly called on the local media not to try and interview insurgents in the woods, but to follow the example of Al Jazeera, which, according to the imam, effectively combats terrorism and extremism by interviewing respected Islamic scholars and showing “how the West’s intelligence services recruit people, train them to serve as rebel emirs, and place them among believers.”⁶

Suspicion of U.S. Motives in Russian Society

An opinion survey conducted by the All-Russian Center for Public Opinion Research (VTsIOM) in September 2008 suggests that these anti-American statements resonate strongly with the Russian public, particularly in the North Caucasus. Whereas it is unclear what causes what, it is plausible that Russian officials have shaped public opinion, while perceived anti-Americanism among the public gives an incentive to officials to blame their region’s problems on the West’s subversive designs. In the

⁴ <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/data/2009/013/14.html>

⁵ <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/145963>

⁶ <http://south-caucasus.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/168235/>

VTsIOM poll, when asked what U.S. goals were in the North Caucasus, about 60 percent of respondents throughout Russia (N=1,600) said “military and strategic interests, and deployment of military bases.” Forty-two percent said “global dominance.” These views were even more pronounced among government officials in the sample (65 and 50 percent, respectively) and among residents of the then Southern Federal District that embraced the North Caucasus region (66 and 46 percent).

Sources of Anti-U.S. Sentiments

The interaction of two factors is paramount – a defiantly persistent militant Islamist insurgency and Russia’s 2008 war with the U.S.-backed Georgia. The combined effect of these factors is larger than the sum of its parts. The failure to suppress insurgents from Kabardino-Balkaria to Dagestan or to compel Georgia to abandon its plans to join NATO means that any aid the United States provides to Tbilisi could be converted into assistance to the armed rebels north of the Greater Caucasus mountain range. Because Georgia has both the opportunity and motivation to do so, Moscow’s wariness is understandable.

Indeed, the violent insurgency has persisted – most notably in Chechnya, where Kadyrov has employed the harshest counter-insurgency measures. In a year since the lifting of the counter-terrorist operation in Chechnya in April 2009, the insurgents killed 97 police, FSB, and army servicemen and wounded 185 – compared to 52 killed and 150 wounded the year before. Federal and local police and security forces killed 189 alleged insurgents and arrested 186 during the year since April 2009 – compared to 136 and 90, respectively, the previous year.⁷ This data suggests that the number of armed insurgents fighting government forces has, at a minimum, not diminished despite Kadyrov’s repeated promises to eradicate the terrorists. Ingushetia and Dagestan witnessed similar trends. In Kabardino-Balkaria, levels of violence were lower until May 2010, when a large bomb blast at the hippodrome in the republican capital of Nalchik was followed by frequent attacks on police and security forces throughout the republic.

Meanwhile, suspicions that the Georgian government is instigating insurgency in the North Caucasus have been palpable on the Russian side. A Russian deputy interior minister, Colonel General Arkady Yedev, announced in January 2010 that Azerbaijan’s police killed one and detained two ethnic North Caucasians, residents of Australia and Poland, who were crossing into Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge where they were to be trained and shipped over the border into the North Caucasus.⁸ In 2009, Russian courts sentenced three ethnic Georgians and one other ethnic Caucasian serving in the Russian military to prison terms ranging from six to nine years for allegedly spying for Georgia. All stories were reported on the main national television networks. In order to prepare for repelling land and air attacks from hypothetical separatists and terrorists “based in neighboring countries,” the Russian military staged a large-scale “operational-strategic” exercise in the North Caucasus in June 2009.

⁷ <http://georgia.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/164059/>

⁸ <http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=336094>

Persistent International Isolation

Anti-U.S. and anti-Western discourses unfold in a region that remains one of Russia's most isolated from a global economy in which the United States and its allies play leading roles. Symptomatically, local leaders continue to see financial support from the federal center as the principal source of local economic development. The absence of local initiatives visibly upset Russia's President Dmitry Medvedev at a meeting on regional economic issues in early August 2010. It is notable, however, that federal and local officials have so far failed to discuss publicly how to square the ostensible need to protect the region from Western political influence with economic development needs—a large component of which is the development of international tourism.

While Grozny's main bazaar recently featured some of the best imitation Adidas T-shirts and Calvin Klein underwear this author has ever seen in Russian markets, the North Caucasus remains isolated on key measures of economic internationalization. Foreign investment has been small and sporadic. From 2006 to September 2010, no foreign investment was reported in Chechnya, Ingushetia, Kalmykia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachaevo-Cherkessia. Dagestan saw about \$3 million in 2007, \$13.7 million in 2008, and \$17.6 million in 2009, still relatively small amounts. No foreign investment in Dagestan was reported in the first half of 2010. North Ossetia offered the only partial exception from the trend by receiving \$52.2 million in 2007, largely from the Czech company Bohemia Torg for a timber-processing plant that created about 170 new jobs. But this level was not sustained as the amount of direct foreign investment into the republic dropped to \$4.1 million in 2008 and \$1.5 million in 2009. No portfolio investment has come to the region between 2000 and 2008 (the last year for which the data in this sub-category has been available); general data suggests this was still the case in mid-2010. This compares unfavorably with other ethno-territorial units with the same or smaller populations that are about equally removed from Moscow and St. Petersburg. For example, Mordovia received between \$25 and \$43 million and Chuvashia between \$15 million and \$94 million every year from 2004 to 2008.⁹

Bank deposits in hard currencies held by businesses and government agencies in the North Caucasian republics are negligible. In 2009, Russia's statistical agency reported no such deposits in Ingushetia, about \$400,000 in Kabardino-Balkaria, \$330,000 in North Ossetia, \$1 million in Dagestan, and about \$3,300 each in Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Chechnya. This is more the pattern of remote Siberian ethno-territorial units without large oil and gas deposits (like Tuva, Khakassia, and Chukotka) than typical central Russian provinces (\$9 million in Pskov, \$14 million in Tver, and \$18 million in Smolensk).

Barriers to travel are substantial. An international business traveler faces a shortage of hotels. One major travel planning and booking search engine (Kayak.com) lists no hotels in Grozny, Nazran, Makhachkala, Vladikavkaz, or central Nalchik (the only hotel in the vicinity is a converted eight-story apartment building). The border area

⁹ Official statistical data in *Regiony Rossii 2009*, Table 24.9; and *Regiony Rossii 2010*, Table 9, <http://www.gks.ru>.

exclusion zone prevents unimpeded access to the region's two top recreational and winter sports destinations, Karachaevo-Cherkessia's Teberda-Dombay and the area in Kabardino-Balkaria around Mt. Elbrus, a unique twin-peak volcano and the tallest mountain in Europe. To visit such areas, international travelers need to submit a request to Russia's border service 30 days prior to arrival.

It is hard to see how anti-U.S. and anti-Western political rhetoric and social sentiments may help improve access to the area for investors and travelers. While grand designs at the federal level are made, any prospective author of specific local proposals to reduce government restrictions on travel to the region would be immediately open to accusations of getting soft on security or, worse, of being an accomplice to foreign intelligence services and militant insurgents.

Intergroup Contact and Intergroup Hostility: Lessons from Scholarly Research

Isolating the North Caucasus from international contacts for security reasons, in turn, is likely to be counterproductive. Sociological research across multiple contexts strongly suggests that contact across racial, ethnic, and other social groups typically reduces pre-existing prejudices and hostility among groups (see, for instance, a 2006 study by Thomas Pettigrew and Linda Tropp in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*). One independent study from 2008 extends the implications of this research to an area particularly important in the social context of the North Caucasus – the Hajj pilgrimage to the predominantly Wahhabi Saudi Arabia, where thousands of local residents have traveled every year since the early 2000s.¹⁰ Concerns are frequently raised that this pilgrimage will nurture social bases of support for militant jihadists in the region. However, the study in question (by Harvard University scholars David Clingensmith, Asim Ijaz Khwaja, and Michael Kremer) found that the Hajj pilgrims from Pakistan returned with more tolerant views of other Muslims, other religions, and with more inclination to accept women in education and employment.

These studies suggest that precisely the kinds of contact that Russian and local authorities fear may open the doors to detrimental foreign influences are actually essential for the region if the same authorities hope to reduce extremism and promote inter-group peace and harmony over time. Breaking this conceptual and policy “vicious circle” will be hard, unless bold and imaginative decisions are taken. Low-key solutions are needed, such as the efforts to promote trade, tourism, academic exchanges, and mixed schooling undertaken by the government of Northern Ireland in the early 1990s, when that region was still in the grip of a systemic sectarian violence that fewer and fewer people remember today.

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¹⁰ <http://web.hks.harvard.edu/publications/workingpapers/citation.aspx?PubId=5725>