

# Southern Russia: The Heartland or Russia's Soft Underbelly?

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## **The Heartland**

Southern Russia is undoubtedly of strategic importance. Its figures are not too impressive: with about 13% of Russia's total population, the region produces 15.5% of the country's agriculture and just slightly over 5% of its industry. Looking at a map (see below), however, we see that the two southernmost oblasts--Rostov and Volgograd--shape the southern Russian "bottle neck." It is conveniently situated on the shortest possible transport route between Kazakhstan and Ukraine, which bypasses the unstable Caucasus. The Caspian Pipeline Consortium has designated that route for construction of an oil pipeline from Kazakhstan's Tengiz field.

Furthermore, all routes from Russia to the Caucasus go through these regions. So, all traffic of weapons and drugs and possibly explosives carried to or from the North Caucasus must traverse either the Rostov or the Volgograd region. Incidentally, this geographic fact supports the argument that the fall 1999 explosions are of Caucasus origin. The last of those bombings took place in Volgodonsk, a city on the border of Rostov and Volgograd oblasts, and was probably precipitated by the fact that increased vigilance of the Russian population provided an obstacle to further northward transportation of explosives.

Astrakhan, Volgograd, and Rostov also control all the waterways from the Caspian to the Black Sea, and from Caspian oilfields and Iran northward to Central Russia. Besides the oil traffic from foreign oilfields, Russia in late March 2000 started its own oil extraction at the north Caspian oil field Khvalynskoe. Representatives of LUKoil estimate the oil resources of the northern (Russian) Caspian at 300 million tons.

Krasnodar krai and Rostov oblast provide Russia with its only access to the Black and Azov Seas, which are vital for the country's future as a sea power, as well as for its trade routes. Novorossisk is at the center of several plans for new pipeline construction. At the same time, it is considered the main base of Russia's Black Sea Navy in the event of Russian-Ukrainian complications over Sevastopol. Additionally, it is worth noting that the southernmost Russian space launch site Kapustin Yar is situated there, on the border of Volgograd and Astrakhan oblasts.

The strategic importance of other southern regions for Russia is less obvious. Dagestan controls a large portion of Caspian seashore and the first part of any possible route from Caspian oil fields to Russia, and Adygeya crosses Krasnodar krai with its transportation routes to the ports of Novorossisk and Tuapse. Russian policy (and war) in the Caucasus during the 19th century demonstrates the importance of control over the highlands that mostly constitute the territories of the North Caucasian republics.

The major challenges for the new Russia's state-building have thus far arisen from this region, in part as a result of its extreme diversity.

### **The Soft Underbelly**

The regions of southern Russia fall into 3 groups: non-Russian ethnically defined regions, "frontier" regions of the Cossack tradition, and predominantly ethnic Russian regions of the Russian Federation. The first group includes the ethnically delineated republics of the Russian Federation. The proportion of the population that is Russian varies there from 9% in Dagestan to 42% in Karachaevo-Cherkessia (not to mention Chechnya and Ingushetia, where accurate figures are simply unavailable).

The republics are very different in terms of their internal stability and loyalty to federal authorities, but all are watched by the center with suspicion. Even such a loyal republic as Kabardino-Balkaria--where President Valery Kokov was allowed to run unopposed for presidential office in 1997 because of his loyalty to Moscow--is not trusted by the center. Another example is Karachaevo-Cherkessia, which was listed among the most stable North Caucasian republics until a president was elected there in May 1999. That event started animated public meetings and a series of lawsuits in the republican and Russian Supreme Courts that nearly divided the republic along ethnic lines. On the other end of the spectrum is separatist Chechnya, which claimed its independence most unequivocally and faced war with Russia in 1994-96 and then again in 1999-2000.

A specific case is the non-Caucasian Kalmykia, which is predominantly Buddhist. One of the poorest regions of Russia, Kalmykia elected President Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, who proved simultaneously able to initiate extravagant international projects (like the World Chess Championship in the republic's capital Elista) and to move his region to some kind of a medieval khanate (by replacing the constitution with "steppe law" and running unopposed for a 7-year presidency in 1995).

Wars in the Caucasus started in the late 1980s outside the Russian border--in Nagorno Karabakh (Azerbaijan), then in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgia). Later the band of instability widened to Russia's North Ossetia and Ingushetia, and most notably to Chechnya and Dagestan. Plans for creation of a "Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus" looked realistic in the early 1990s. The flow of weapons and terrorist techniques has begun to spread to the Russian south even outside the Caucasus.

Religious factors have also played a role in the alienation of peoples in the North Caucasus. The native population of Adygeya, Kabardino-Balkariya, Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Karachaevo-Cherkessia is Muslim, while in North Ossetia-Alania it is Christian. However, Chechnya accepted Islam not earlier than its first encounter with Russians in the 18th century, while Ingushetia remained heathen until the 19th century.

Until recently that religious division was not viewed as a threat to national stability: after all, Russia includes Muslim republics in the very center of its territory (e.g., Tatarstan and Bashkiriya), and has managed to keep religious peace for a pretty long time. However, the disruption of state control and ideological ties led in the 1990s to the penetration of more radical versions of Islam (namely, Wahhabism) to North Caucasus republics, first of all to Chechnya and Dagestan. Radical Islamic political movements emerged also in Tatarstan and other Muslim regions of Russia, which eventually led to governmental accusations against some Tatarstan religious schools of "assistance to Chechen terrorists." These developments have led Russian state authorities to take seriously the threat made by several radical Islamic politicians "to make the Volga a Muslim river from source to mouth." For centuries, however, militant highlanders have faced groups of Russians who were no less militant.

### **...Or the Hard Underbelly?**

The second group of southern Russian regions consists of two "frontier" krais: Stavropol and Krasnodar. Affected by increasing instability in the North Caucasus, these regions are considerably more nationalistic than other territories of Russia.

The population of these southern regions of Russia differs from its central areas. All of the republics, oblasts and krais in the south were historically populated by either non-Russians or Cossacks, and even in the 20th century the basic values and political culture of those ethnic and social groups prevailed there where inter-ethnic relations are concerned.

In the 16th and 17th centuries Russians' southward movement brought them to the northern seashores of the Black and Caspian Seas. This movement combined both governmental expeditions with the establishment of fortresses, and migration of thousands of free people (mostly Russian, but also of other ethnic backgrounds) that formed a special ethno-social group of Cossacks all along the southern Russian frontier. Those frontiersmen adopted a militant way of life, spending much of their time in wars with the territories' homogeneous populations (like Ossetians), or with those who had earlier settled in the region. Unlike in Central Russia, weapons were a fixture in the home and a part of everyday clothing. Later, Russian governments managed to use Cossacks for their own political purpose. Catherine the Great in the second half of the 18th century moved one of the largest Cossack groups from the lower Dnepr River (today in Ukraine) to the Kuban River (today Krasnodar krai), which neighbors the Caucasus mountains, which were increasingly important for Russia. Since then there have been Cossacks who

were charged with maintaining stability in the regions that are populated by different North Caucasian ethnic groups.

That is why the Cossack "revivalism" of the early 1990s--which took place simultaneously with the growth of ethnic tensions in the region--developed resistance to the "expansion" of North Caucasian ethnic groups into Russian regions as one of the bases of its ideology. During and after the first Chechen War of 1994-96, and especially after Shamil Basaev's attack on Buddenovsk, Cossack "ideology" in Southern Russian regions became the most popular one. The governors of Stavropol and most notably Krasnodar krai who were elected at the end of 1996 were nationalistic leaders. Krasnodar's Nikolai Kondratenko is especially famous for his anti-Caucasian and anti-Semitic speeches, which found support in militant Cossack villages.

The third group of southern Russian regions consists of Astrakhan, Rostov, and Volgograd oblasts. Predominantly Russian (the largest non-Russian group are Tatars in Astrakhan), these regions constitute an "outer crescent" of Southern Russia, and have their own importance for the stability of the whole territory. These regions also have a significant Cossack population, though less militant and nationalistic than that in Krasnodar and Stavropol (probably due to the distance between these regions and the North Caucasus). In Volgograd and Astrakhan, Cossacks seem rather like an ethnographic anomaly, while in Rostov they participate in local politics, but do not provide a strong ideology. Accordingly, these regions are among the most popular for refugees fleeing from the North Caucasus (and Central Asia, as well). Both Russian and non-Russian migrants stay there. Among the reasons for these areas' popularity are their tradition of inter-ethnic tolerance, their relatively warm climate, and the benign policy of the regional authorities. As a result, Volgograd oblast has the largest Chechen diaspora of all the Russian regions. One can say that these regions provide an example of tolerance that is most wanting for the first two groups of regions.

## **Solutions**

In the history of Russian policy toward the region, there have been several different solutions to the problem in the North Caucasus. Stalin's "solution" was the use of overwhelming state force to oppress both Cossacks and their enemies, including deporting peoples from the region to Siberia and Kazakhstan for decades. That type of solution fortunately now seems impossible.

The new authorities in Russia must first understand that the political background and political culture of the southern Russian regions differ significantly from those in central Russia. It is more likely that, in finding solutions in North Caucasus, the new president will try to rely on the traditional balance between militant highlanders and militant Cossacks.

While Boris Yeltsin in different periods of his presidency vacillated between total neglect and state support of Cossacks (including, for example, promises of special status within the Russian army), Vladimir Putin has two options in dealing with this problem.

First, he may choose the liberal idea of the equality of each person before the law that prevents, for instance, exclusive permission to bear weapons for Cossacks. It appears, however, that there is a strong belief among state authorities in Russia that remilitarization of the Cossacks is the only way to effectively direct this group's activities.

Second, it is possible that the Russian leadership will support leftist governors of southern regions (Krasnodar and Stavropol). They are the legitimate leaders of militant nationalistic forces there. It is hard to imagine liberal rulers (like Samara's Konstantin Titov or Novgorod's Mikhail Prusak) managing the anti-ethnic Caucasian feelings of the population. Even Putin, who plays on that leftist field of patriotism, may not want to associate himself with such a movement in the long run. It would be easier for him to leave all these problems to the current regional leaders.

Though somewhat abstract, the third choice is nonetheless important. The true solution to the problems in the Northern Caucasus, which affect the Russian south, consists of long-run programs based on tolerance education and inter-ethnic bridge-building.

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