

Instability in the North Caucasus and the Political Implications for the Russian-Chechen War

PONARS Policy Memo No. 380

Mark Kramer
Harvard University
December 2005

Over the past few years the various forms of warfare in Chechnya, including guerrilla operations against Russian federal forces, suicide bombings and assassinations directed against the pro-Russian Chechen government, and terrorist attacks against civilians have spread increasingly to other parts of the North Caucasus. This trend was highlighted by the attacks on October 13, 2005, in Nalchik, the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria. Dozens of local guerrillas in Nalchik laid siege to garrisons, police stations, prisons, administrative buildings, and the airport, leaving at least 140 people dead. This event, dramatic though it was, was merely the latest in a long series of incidents that are threatening to plunge the whole of the North Caucasus into violent turmoil.

The spillover from the Chechen conflict has been especially noticeable in the regions adjoining Chechnya. The neighboring republic of Dagestan has been plagued by daily guerrilla ambushes, bombings, political assassinations, and other terrorist attacks, most of which are linked in one way or another to the Chechen war. So many high-ranking Dagestani officials have been killed over the past three years that the republic government has often been unable to function properly. Chechen and local fighters also have repeatedly bombed police patrols, police stations,

and state security units in Dagestan. These attacks occurred so frequently in 2004 and 2005 that they prompted local officials to “doubt that the law enforcement organs are capable of restoring order.” Other Chechen rebel attacks have been targeted against key facilities and infrastructure in Dagestan, including state-controlled oil and gas pipelines. The bombing of pipelines near the Dagestani capital, Makhachkala, in April 2004 forced the cessation of all energy deliveries to and from Azerbaijan for several days.

Chechen guerrillas have been even more active in Ingushetia, which many Russian commentators say has been converted into a full-fledged base for Chechen guerrillas, enabling them to undertake repeated combat incursions and to plan and prepare terrorist acts. The president of Ingushetia, Murat Zyazikov, has been the target of numerous assassination attempts, the first of which occurred in September 2003, when Chechen guerrillas planted a large explosive made of mortars and artillery shells near his official residence. Russian bomb-disposal experts were able to neutralize the device before it went off. In April 2004, Zyazikov barely escaped death when a Chechen suicide bomber drove a car alongside the presidential motorcade and detonated it, causing extensive damage to vehicles in the motorcade as well as to surrounding houses. The heavy armored plating on Zyazikov’s Mercedes limousine was the only thing that saved him. Ingushetia has experienced a further surge of violence since then, most conspicuously with the large-scale ambushes in June 2004 that killed or wounded more than 200 soldiers, police, and administrative officials, and the equally well-coordinated attacks in October 2005 by more than 60 guerrillas against the homes of police and security officers. All these events bear out the misgivings of observers who had warned that the fighting in Chechnya was bound to infect other regions.

During the first few years of the latest Russian-Chechen war, many parts of the North Caucasus were largely immune to the violence that plagued Chechnya, but the situation by 2005 had become far more volatile. Suicide attacks against official targets (Russian federal forces, local police, and administrative buildings) had spread not only to Ingushetia and Dagestan, but also to North Ossetia, Karachai-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and other regions, all of which were included by Shamil Basayev in his newly-widened zones of combat operations. No matter where Russian troops and government officials were located, they were vulnerable to suicide bombings and other deadly strikes. Terrorist attacks against civilian targets also have spread through the North Caucasus, most vividly with the Beslan massacre in September 2004. According to official data, more than 600 terrorist attacks occurred annually in the region in 2003-2005.

These attacks, combined with the widespread corruption, governmental malfeasance, religious extremism, unemployment, and

ethnic tension in the North Caucasus, prompted Dmitri Kozak, the special presidential envoy to the region, to warn in mid-2005 that the whole region was threatened by “permanent destabilization.” In a lengthy report to President Vladimir Putin and the Russian parliament, Kozak argued that the North Caucasus and adjoining parts of southern Russia (Stavropol krai) had become a “macro-region of sociopolitical and economic instability” that could “unravel” unless the federal authorities took drastic remedial action. But Kozak’s report left little hope that the trend toward destabilization could be arrested so long as the fighting in Chechnya continued. Although the Russian-Chechen war is by no means the only source of the grave problems in the North Caucasus, it has been a catalyst for a number of recent phenomena that have greatly increased the volatility of the region: the ascendance of Islamic extremist elements in Ingushetia (notably the Majlas al-Shura group, which has declared a jihad against the Russian government), the rise of other radical groups in Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachai-Cherkessia, the growing frictions between the Ingush and the North Ossetians (frictions that were sorely tested by the Beslan crisis, which involved Ingush as well as Chechen hostage-takers), and the long-simmering ethnic and religious tensions in Dagestan. The Ingush-North Ossetian tensions have been especially worrisome, causing many observers to predict deadly battles between the two groups, as in 1992 when hundreds were killed and tens of thousands were displaced. The potential for armed strife both in this case and elsewhere in the North Caucasus has clearly been exacerbated by the surge of Islamic extremism fueled by the Chechen conflict.

Implications for the Russian-Chechen Conflict

If other parts of the North Caucasus (and possibly the South Caucasus) continue to be drawn into the Chechen conflict, attempts to end the fighting and to resolve the status of Chechnya may face even greater obstacles than before. One of the main reasons that the Russian government has always been so averse to considering independence for Chechnya is the slippery slope argument. According to this scenario, the granting of independence to Chechnya would spur other titular nationalities in Russia to follow Chechnya’s example. The resulting demands for independence, the argument goes, would cause the whole country to unravel. This same logic was cited by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev when he consistently opposed granting independence to the Baltic states. The subsequent disintegration of the USSR did not directly vindicate his concerns, but it suggests that they may not have been wholly unfounded.

After the USSR broke apart, some observers initially speculated that the Russian Federation was likely to meet a similar fate. Although this prospect seemed much less plausible after Russian President Boris Yeltsin forced a showdown with the Russian parliament in September-October

1993, which ended with the bombardment of the Russian White House, the possibility of touching off a chain reaction of demands for independence weighed on the minds of Russian policymakers in the 1990s when they were deciding what to do about Chechnya. The federal government's opposition to Chechen independence became even stronger after the rise of Putin, who displayed a visceral unwillingness to consider any steps that would reward separatists and extremists.

Although Russian leaders have feared that the granting of independence to Chechnya would embolden other separatist groups in the Russian Federation and initiate a chain reaction, many experts have questioned whether these concerns about a demonstration effect are well-founded. Analysts both inside and outside Russia have argued that in fact Chechnya is a unique case and that far-reaching autonomy or even outright independence for the republic would not spark the disintegration of the Russian state. The settlement of the war, they contend, would actually strengthen the state, not weaken it, by eliminating a pernicious source of instability. No other region of Russia, according to these analysts, shares Chechnya's single-minded determination to achieve full independence at any cost, and none would want to risk incurring the destruction and upheaval that have been inflicted on Chechnya. Although some regions might pursue a special status akin to that of Tatarstan or Sakha, they all would be inclined to remain part of the Russian Federation. This basic reasoning seems to have persuaded Yuri Luzhkov and other politicians who, prior to August 1999, argued that Russia would be more cohesive in the long term if it simply got rid of Chechnya.

These arguments seemed convincing so long as there was no palpable danger that separatist and extremist groups in Chechnya were inspiring the rise of similar groups elsewhere in Russia, either directly or indirectly. The regionalization of the Chechen conflict over the past few years raises serious doubts about the possibility of devising a political settlement for Chechnya in two respects: first, by making it all the more difficult to confine the war to Chechnya itself, and second, by heightening the risk that a settlement in Chechnya would have adverse repercussions in other parts of the North Caucasus, perhaps triggering the chain reaction that Russia's leaders have long feared (or claimed to fear). In this sense, the government's war effort has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The risk of contagion would probably have been minuscule if no war had occurred and if the final-status negotiations projected for 2001 had resulted in a political settlement. The likelihood of contagion might also have been meager if a political settlement had been achieved during the first few years of the war, before the onset of the Chechen terrorist campaign in October 2002. (With Putin's consent, discussions between Russian and Chechen representatives about the possibility of holding formal peace talks did in fact occur behind the scenes in October 2001 and September 2002.) But the spread of violence and instability throughout the North

Caucasus increases the danger that a settlement in Chechnya, especially an arrangement similar to what Luzhkov apparently had in mind, would spur radical separatist movements elsewhere in the region to demand the same status for their own republics and to step up their attacks in order to exploit the Russian government's perceived weakness and vulnerability.

To be sure, there would have been enormous difficulty in achieving a lasting settlement either before or particularly after the latest war began. A deal that did not leave open the possibility of eventual independence would have been summarily rejected by Shamil Basayev and other extremist leaders, who are responsible for the terrorist attacks and the bulk of the guerrilla operations. But even if the Islamic radicals could not have been brought on board, a settlement with Aslan Maskhadov's government might well have led to a sharp diminution of the conflict and, over time, to the isolation of the extremists. This is not to argue that there was definitely a missed opportunity early in the war. The obstacles to achieving and enforcing a viable settlement would have been daunting, to say the least. But the point to be stressed here is that the regionalization of the war makes it all the less likely that the fighting can be ended through a political settlement. The risk that a meaningful settlement in Chechnya (that is, a settlement that did not flatly rule out eventual independence) would embolden radical separatist groups elsewhere is far more plausible now than it was before 2003.

This factor is by no means the only development in recent years that has militated against the prospect of a settlement. The animosity created by the long series of Chechen terrorist attacks from October 2002 on has drastically changed the calculus in Moscow. Putin is now so adamantly opposed to having any contact with Chechen leaders other than those in the pro-Moscow government that it is inconceivable he will condone even limited diplomatic overtures like those in October 2001 and September 2002, much less agree to a far-reaching settlement. The ascendance of a more radical Chechen government-in-exile in the wake of Maskhadov's assassination in March 2005 (a government that has formally brought Basayev and another Chechen terrorist leader, Movladi Udugov, back into its ranks as deputy prime minister and minister of information, respectively) also bodes ill for any attempt the Russian government might make to establish contact with Chechen leaders. These circumstances weigh heavily against the likelihood that the Chechen conflict can be ended through negotiations. The spread of the conflict to other parts of the North Caucasus reinforces this dismal picture. Even if a meaningful settlement for Chechnya could have been achieved in earlier years without an appreciable danger of sparking demands for independence elsewhere in Russia, the situation has changed markedly for the worse. What might once have seemed a remote possibility now seems, at least from the perspective of Russian policymakers, all too plausible.

All of this suggests that the most auspicious time for settling the conflict in Chechnya may already be past. Options that might have been feasible in earlier years are now, or soon will be, foreclosed. The narrowing of policy choices has prompted one of the leading Russian experts on ethnic conflicts, Dmitri Oreshkin, to predict a dismal future for Russia's policy in the North Caucasus:

Post-Soviet Russia is afflicted by the remnants of a pseudo-imperial consciousness. There is a great desire to control territory, even though it is not clear why or how or for what purpose. Letting go of the North Caucasus is impossible because it would mean a loss of face. Holding on to it through Stalinist methods is also impossible, although the temptation is great. The government is suffering from a split personality even more than the society is.

To the extent that the regionalization of the war means that any potential settlement will entail significantly greater risks than before, the outlook may be even bleaker than Oreshkin suggests. In an interview in August 2005, the erstwhile presidential candidate and speaker of the Russian State Duma, Ivan Rybkin, still held out hope that a durable settlement could be negotiated, but he conceded that the lingering window of opportunity would close if turmoil continued to widen: "The crisis has spread like wildfire through Chechnya and beyond its borders. The conflagration has reached Dagestan and Ingushetia and is still spreading." He warned that further bloodshed would sow even more "seeds of enmity . . . that will yield evil and venomous shoots." Because it is highly unlikely that Putin will heed Rybkin's call for a large-scale commitment of diplomatic and economic resources to "resolve and untangle the knots of bleeding problems both within Chechnya and across the North Caucasus," the ongoing destabilization of the region will be an ever more onerous, and perhaps ultimately fatal, burden on the process of democratization in Russia.