

Nationalism and Islam in Russia's North Caucasus

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Abstract

The North Caucasus has long been one of the most turbulent regions in Eurasia. Events such as the secessionist conflicts in Chechnya in the 1990s, the growing radicalization and the spread of insurgency groups across the region, and most recently discussions over the prospects for, and the security of, the hosting of the 2014 Winter Olympics alongside rising local Circassian nationalism on the ground in Sochi have grabbed the headlines both in Russia and internationally. These events are set against a background of a general rise in nationalism and ongoing anti-Caucasian sentiment in Russia. This paper investigates the roots causes of these complex developments, and the impact that this region is likely to have on Russian and regional politics in the next decade.

In the 1990s, following the break-up of the USSR, the North Caucasus region followed a similar pattern of nationalist ideologies and movements as was seen elsewhere in the former Soviet Union. This culminated in the first conflict in Chechnya (1994–96) and the participation of North Caucasus groups in the Georgian–Abkhaz War (1992–94). A less studied form of separatism however centered on nationalist movements in dual-autonomous republics across the North Caucasus, in which minority national groups made separatist demands from the larger, often more dominant, groups. This form of separatism was the driving factor in Ingushetia's successful efforts to separate itself from the Checheno-Ingushetian Republic, and likewise Adygea from Krasnodar krai; two unsuccessful separatist attempts are also notable: Cherkessia from Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Balkaria from Kabardino-Balkaria (see Table 1 on p. 4). A similar pattern and process of separatism also took place in Georgia, with Abkhazia and South Ossetia seeking independence from the Georgian state. These two cases are particularly pertinent to this study both due to their close ties and proximity to the North Caucasus region, as well as their involvement in regional politics, most recently Russia's recognition of their independence. Furthermore, a more comparative perspective that includes similar movements in other post-Soviet regions, such as Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Gagauzia, Tatarstan, and Crimea, provides a deeper understanding of the different processes underlying, and at the heart of, this particular form of separatism in the wider region.

In the 1990s, there was little diversity between the various separatist processes outlined above, with most following a similar ideological pattern. On the one hand, the region needed time to recover following the eradication of religious and ethnic institutions during the Stalinist period; on the other, nationalism represented the most easily available ideology in order to overcome the disastrous Soviet ethnic and territorial experiments carried out upon most of the Caucasian groups.

Most of the separatist movements in the 1990s were thus driven by a nationalist ideology. The conflicts that emerged in the region occurred as a result of a general political destabilization and a dramatic worsening in the socio-economic situation following the collapse of the socialist system established in the USSR. Similar processes took place not only in the former-Soviet Union, but also for example in the former-Czechoslovakia, and the former-Yugoslavia. A number of these separatist movements and organizations sought inclusion in larger international and regional organizations, with the Unrepresented Peoples and Nations Organization (UNPO) the largest of these. The UNPO has tried to position itself as an alternative to the UN. At a regional level, in 1992, a Commonwealth of Unrecognized States (CUS) was created as an alternative to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

By the 2000s, a new set of dynamics began to emerge within separatist movements in the post-Soviet space, with a number of separatist groups shifting their ideological basis from nationalism to regionalism and from ethnic to ethno-confessional identities. In this regard, separatist movements in the post-Soviet space were not unique to other groups and causes across the globe, such as the ethno-confessional conflicts between Catholic and Protestant groups (North Ireland, Quebec), Catholics and Orthodox Christians, Muslims and Orthodox Christians (Kosovo, North Cyprus), Muslims and Catholics (Bosnia and Herzegovina, South Philippines), Hindus and Muslims (Kashmir). In Russia, the development of a more ethno-confessional basis to nationalism and separatism centered on a dual set of ideological processes. Whilst nationalist sentiment grew in Russia's regions (with the center in Moscow), and in the north-western Caucasus, simultaneously the role of Islam grew in importance in the Volga region and the northeastern Caucasus.

Over the last decade, developments in the North Caucasus have highlighted once again the diversity

of processes within the region, divided along an east–west axis. Alongside the rising nationalism, three other major ideological developments have also emerged in the North Caucasus often in contradiction to each other. The most well-known of these ideological movements is the spread of radical Islam. Though followers of radical Islam are not inherently extremists, in recent times some splinter groups have developed into *jibadi* movements that conduct insurgency campaigns in the region and elsewhere. Secondly, the region has witnessed the revival of more moderate Islam, whose religious leaders oppose radical Islam and regard its followers as heretics. They openly support, and are supported by, the Russian state authorities. Indeed, state authorities regard the development of moderate Islam as one of their main measures against Islamic radicalization and the recruitment of young people into the insurgency. As regional leaders publically declare their support for moderate Islam and Imams, the insurgents react by labeling these moderates as “traitorous imams.” Moderate Islam seeks to broaden its followers by including even those groups who identify themselves as Muslims, regardless of whether or not they exercise the Five Pillars of Islam. Indeed, the leader of moderate Muslims in Kabardino-Balkaria, Anas Pshikhachev, has argued that, “everybody who acknowledges Allah, Koran, Sunna, and the Prophet is a Muslim even if he does not exercise any practices.” The third and final trend in the region is represented by many local scholars and intellectuals as those groups that see traditional Islam as an ideology that embodies both local traditions and Islamic practices. This movement is deeply embedded in the historical roots and the moral code of local customs in the North Caucasus.

The ethno-confessional division of the North Caucasus reveals two main trends. The first highlights the shift from nationalism to Islam among certain groups, particularly in Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, Karachai, and Balkaria. The second, by contrast, is a rise in nationalism among the predominately Orthodox Christian or Muslim-Christian ethnicities in Kabarda, Cherkessia, Adygea, North Ossetia and among the Russian population in the Caucasus, including Cossacks, as well as in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. A specific development has taken place in Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, North Ossetia, and Ingushetia. Here the rise in nationalism amongst the Kabardian, Cherkessian, and North Ossetian communities has tempered the ideological shift from nationalism to Islamic ideology amongst the Balkar, Karachai, and Ingush communities, at the same time as the rise in radical Islam has in turn impacted on the development of Islam in North Ossetia and Kabardian areas. Thus, while in the east of the North Caucasus nationalism has now merged

with an Islamic religious identity, in the west this ideological fusion has not taken place. In places such as Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Adygea, North Ossetia, Islamist and nationalist ideologies have continued to evolve separately and often in direct competition to each other.

The structure of the Caucasus Emirate (CE) is a good example of the different ideological patterns currently at play in the North Caucasus. Many of the key figures in the CE that came from the northeastern North Caucasus, such as Doku Umarov, one of the founders of the organization, came from a more nationalistic background. By contrast, none of the leaders originally from the northwestern regions of the North Caucasus, such as Anzor Astemirov, another founder of the CE, have such a background. The ideological differences between the western and eastern parts of the North Caucasus and the creation of the Caucasus Emirate led the Kremlin to divide the region into two Federal Districts in 2010. In large part this was a move designed to guarantee the security of the 2014 Winter Olympics, set to be held in Sochi. Yet, the developments surrounding the hosting of the Olympics in Sochi have sharpened the ideological differences between the east and the west of the North Caucasus, with CE stepping up its terrorist activities, and the nationalist Circassian movement developing its own strategies in protest to the holding of the Olympics in Sochi, a historical capital of independent Circassia.

This east–west dichotomy in the North Caucasus has several causes. Firstly, deep-seated historical differences between the eastern and western regions of the North Caucasus, which have facilitated the development of very different approaches to Islam. Islam arrived first, and achieved its greatest influence, in the eastern North Caucasus, whilst the western parts have always adopted a more unique blend of national and religious identities. Furthermore, the eastern regions were dominated by the stricter Shaafi school while the western parts were home to a milder Hanafi interpretation of Islam. Indeed, during the Russian–Caucasian war in the 19th century, the Imamate under the leadership of Imam Shamil was based on an Islamic ideology (1829–1859), while the Circassian state (1861–1864) under the leadership of Geranduk Berzek, was more nationalist in origin (see Table 2 on p. 5).

Secondly, the homogeneity of religious practice plays a major role in accounting for such regional differences. Historically, the groups populating the east of the North Caucasus, such as the Chechens, Ingush, and the mixed population of Dagestan primarily practiced Islam, in contrast, the western groups such as the Circassians, Ossetians, and Abkhaz followed a mixture of both Christianity and Islam; this mixed heritage tended

to promote the development of nationalism as a unifying ideology. Somewhere in-between are Karachais and Balkars who live with the Circassians (Kabardians and Cherkess) and are influenced by their nationalism; nevertheless, they are mono-religious and therefore are more affected by Islam than their neighbors.

Thirdly, the western nationalities of the North Caucasus have large diasporas that reside outside of Russia. These diasporas have had a growing impact on local developments. Some four-fifths of ethnic Circassians and Abkhaz live outside the Caucasus; North and South Ossetia is split between Russia and Georgia. By contrast, in the eastern stretches of the North Caucasus, local politics has taken on forms more similar to that in other Muslim parts of Russia, such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, in part because they lack the large diaspora communities abroad.

Finally, these ideological trends in the North Caucasus clash with Russian nationalism. In the 1990s, state policies targeted the so-called “persons of Caucasian nationality.” Today, Russian opposition groups call for the Russian state to “stop feeding the Caucasus.” Russian society enjoys nostalgia for the lost power of the Soviet Union and views the loss of the North Caucasus as the continuing decay of Russian power and influence. At the same time, Russian nationalists also see the North Caucasus as a separate and hostile region that defies integration into the modern Russian state.

The vast majority of contemporary analysis on the North Caucasus suggests that the main problem is terrorism, usually framed as a process resulting from the spillover effect of the two wars in Chechnya. This is,

however, a Russo-centric perspective on the region, which is often shared by western scholars and analysts. Such a viewpoint is also an example of the intermixing of policy and academic approaches with one another. This, in turn, structures the methods and solutions put forward in order to resolve the situation in the region. At the heart of Russia’s current policy in the region are two main approaches, both of which are not substantially challenged by the international community. The first approach centers on bringing peace to Chechnya, which is seen, in large part, as being realized by supporting the authoritarian regime of Ramzan Kadyrov. Whilst the international community supports the overall goal of pacifying Chechnya, they do not support the methods used by the Russian authorities, however they have failed to put forward an alternative vision for the future of the Chechen Republic. Russia’s other goal is to rid the region of insurgency groups by eradicating and killing as many of their members and supporters as possible. This approach is not succeeding in bringing stability to the region and only serves to motivate more and more young people to join the underground cells.

In contrast to this reductionist approach, the current situation in the North Caucasus should be analyzed through a variety of lenses—security, politics, economy, relations with the federal center, international affairs, religious extremism, and nationalism. As argued above, this more nuanced reading of the current trends in the region reveals a much more varied picture than the one usually presented of a region split between radical Islamists and everyone else.

About the Author

Sufian Zhemukhov is a postdoctoral fellow at the George Washington University. His research interests include theory and practice in nationalities studies and Islam in the North Caucasus. His recent academic publications have appeared in *Slavic Review*, *Nationalities Papers*, and *Anthropology & Archaeology of Eurasia*.

Table 1: Nationalist Ideology in the North Caucasus in the 1990s

Nationalistic wars	Ossetian–Ingush conflict, 1992 Georgian–Abkhaz war, 1992–1993 Russian–Chechen war, 1994–1996
Separation of regions (successful)	Adygea from Krasnodar Krai, 1991 Chechnya and Ingushetia from Checheno-Ingushetia, 1992
Separation of regions (unsuccessful)	Cherkessia from Karachaevo-Cherkessia, 1991 Balkaria from Kabardino-Balkaria, 1992

Table 2: Ideological Division in the North Caucasus in 2000s

	East	West
Geographical division	Chechnya Dagestan Ingushetia	Adygea Kabardino-Balkaria Karachaevo-Cherkessia North Ossetia
Major ideological trends	Radical Islam Moderate Islam	Nationalism Radical Islam Moderate Islam Traditionalistic Islam
Historical differences in the approach to Islam	Islamic Imamate (1829–1859)	Islamic-nationalistic Circassian state (1861–1864)
Practical differences in the approach to Islam	Shaafi school	Hanafi school
Religion	Islam	Christianity and Islam
External influence	No diasporas	Large diasporas

ANALYSIS

The Insurgency in the North Caucasus: Putting Religious Claims into Context

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Abstract

After the Boston bombings, the media has portrayed the insurgency in the North Caucasus as being part of the global Salafi jihad fighting against the West. This statement was quickly refuted by the leader of the Caucasus Emirate (CE) and the Dagestani insurgency. This report discusses the nature of the insurgent and terrorist groups in the North Caucasus in order to understand their links with global Salafi jihad, and the rationale behind their violent actions against the Russian state. It argues that the link between the CE and international jihadists has been overblown and that the insurgency is mainly driven by recurrent structural problems reinforced by a growing resurgence of radical Islam in the North Caucasus. In terms of international security, the conflict in the region remains mainly an internal Russian problem and the emphasis should not be put on the link between the Emirate and al-Qaeda, rather it should focus on events such as the upcoming Sochi Olympics.

Ideological Features of the Insurgency: The Importance of Anti-Western Sentiment and Global Salafi Jihad

In 2007, Doku Umarov proclaimed the establishment of the Caucasus Emirate, a pan-Caucasian Islamic structure, in order to replace the nationalist insurgent structure of the Chechen republic of Ichkeria. Umarov's discourse started to integrate more references to Islam, including references to the importance of jihad against non-believers that oppose Muslims and the instauration

of Sharia in the North Caucasus. Western countries and Israel were labelled as enemies of the Ummah and by the same token of the Emirate. At the same time, CE leaders always remained focused on the Russian state and its local proxies as their main targets. Therefore, the anti-western rhetoric never really materialized further than in its discursive form inspired by al-Qaeda.

At a more local level, the insurgent groups across the North Caucasus (Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria) have occasionally released state-