

## The North and the South in the Caucasus—Separated or Interlinked?

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### Abstract

While the North and South Caucasus are often considered as separate regions, there are in fact many linkages between them. This article examines the cleavages that divide the overall Caucasus region and the many factors that transcend the north–south line.

### A Region of Divisions

In the post-Soviet period, international conferences on Caucasian affairs examined South Caucasus topics such as unresolved separatist conflicts, competition over pipeline routes or domestic political developments along a spectrum spanning from the “Rose Revolution” in Georgia to the dynastic transfer of presidential power in Azerbaijan. When they addressed the North Caucasus, the main focus for a long time was on Chechnya. Analysis followed a fault line between the northern and southern halves of the Caucasus, legitimized by considerations of geography, history, as well as by the difference of status between independent states and “federal subjects” within the larger Russian Federation. International institutions had access to the South Caucasus with its three independent states, but only very limited entrée to the North Caucasus, where developments are deemed Russia’s internal affairs. It is hard to consider the Caucasus as a consistent region, given its numerous internal cleavages, not only in terms of the North–South division, but also within its sub-regions.

### Interfaces between North and South Caucasus

Despite these multiple cleavages, there are interdependencies calling a strict separation into question. From the beginning of the post-Soviet period there have been crucial interfaces between both parts of the Caucasus. Georgia’s breakaway territories—Abkhazia and South Ossetia—belong to such interfaces. Both entities shifted away from the South Caucasus to the Russian North Caucasus in terms of self-identification, trade and traffic. Armed non-state actors like the Confederation of Caucasian Peoples intervened from the North Caucasus into Georgia and participated in the Abkhazian conflict during its war phase in 1992–1993. This connection between Abkhaz, Circassians (Adyge) and other ethnic groups of the North Caucasus against Georgia mobilized broader parts of this “region” before Chechnya’s conflict with Russia became the regional focus of ethno-political action. About ten years later Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge at the border with Chechnya emerged as another crucial interface in the context of Russia’s second Chechen war. Georgia’s temporary loss of control

over this territory was a trigger for intensified security cooperation between Georgia and the U.S. after 2002.

Other North–South interfaces are marked by state borders between the Russian Federation and a neighbor state like Azerbaijan that are dividing settlement areas of ethnicities like the Lezgins. In the early years of its independence, Azerbaijan was exposed to Dagestan in the North Caucasus with a Lezgin national movement on both sides of the border developing separatist tendencies. Later on, Azerbaijan was a main destination for Chechen refugees during the first and, even more, during the second war in Chechnya. With the expansion of jihadist networks in the eastern part of the North Caucasus, another challenge was emerging for the only Muslim country in the South Caucasus.

### The North Caucasus: Russia’s “Internal Abroad” and a Zone of Violence

For about 15 years the external perception of the North Caucasus was largely confined to Chechnya, which became the *pars pro toto* for the whole of the region. Since at least 2005, however, the diffusion of instability and violence went far beyond this one republic. Russia’s location between its own “internal abroad” in the North Caucasus and its “near abroad” in the South Caucasus is marked by a contradiction: Russia is claiming influence in its “zone of privileged interests” in the South Caucasus, but it can hardly cope with diverse challenges to security and stability in its own “internal abroad” in the Caucasus. With Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia took over two military protectorates and claimed to provide them independence and security. At the same time Russia is obviously not able to guarantee a sufficient degree of security, stability, let alone good governance to its own federal subjects in the Caucasus.

For a long time security deficits across the region were interpreted as having emanated from the conflict on Chechnya. In April 2009, Moscow lifted Chechnya’s designation as an anti-terrorism operation zone. Only a few months later, however, President Medvedev declared that the entire North Caucasus constitutes Russia’s primary domestic challenge. In a report from June 2010, the Council of Europe also characterized the situation there as the most sensitive within its

large membership zone. More or less the entire North Caucasus has emerged as Russia's precarious "internal abroad" and a zone of violence. Ramazan Abdulatipov, since 2013 Dagestan's head of republic, once posed a rhetorical question asking why post-Soviet Russia had not dedicated a day of commemoration to the end of the Caucasus War in 1864 as it had done for other events in the fatherland's history. His answer was clear: "Because the war is still going." May be not open war, but international security analyses ascribe a state of permanent low intensity conflict to the region.

Manifold factors are used to explain this degree of instability. They include Islamist insurgency, inter-ethnic tension, border disputes, a dramatic lack of good governance, and numerous social-economic problems of poverty at Russia's periphery. Violence here is not confined to underground forces fighting under the slogan of jihad. The state organs, both federal and local, are practicing counter actions which are far away from any rule of law. In November 2011 Dagestan's capital saw its largest civil protest for many years. An estimated 2,500 people took to the streets of Makhachkala to object to growing police abuse. Organizations that monitor human rights in the North Caucasus suggest that practically all kidnappings today are connected to the authorities.

After the end of the first Chechen war in 1996, the outstanding ethno-nationalist separatist movement in the North Caucasus was more and more transformed into a Jihad using trans-ethnic Islamist appeals. When Doku Umarov, the last underground President of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, announced a "Caucasian Islamic Emirate" in October 2007, this ideological transition was completed. It is hard to discern exactly how many fighters this "Emirate" has at its disposal. But there is no question that it is a main actor of insurgency in the region. Chechnya is more and more losing its central position in this underground structure. The new emir after Doku Umarov's death last year—Ali Abu Muhammad, an Avar theologian from Dagestan—is the first non-Chechen at the top of this virtual Islamic state.

In 2010 Russia reacted to the challenge from its internal abroad in the Caucasus with a new administrative arrangement. The Kremlin announced a *North Caucasus Federal District*. Alexander Khloponin, a businessman, was appointed to lead a new North Caucasus policy which signaled a new strategy focusing on social-economic reforms instead of the one-sided approach of violent measures. The new strategy included large injections of cash into the "region" and spectacular projects like "tourism vs. terrorism" by building a cluster of ski resorts from Adygeya in the west to Dagestan in the east. These measures, however, did not change the

precarious security situation, and provoked negative reactions in the Russian public, which increasingly dislikes subsidies for the Caucasus. Recently Khloponin resigned as the Russian President's representative in the North Caucasus Federal District. His project of attracting investment and business into the region had not met the Kremlin's expectations about pacifying the region. He was replaced by the commander of the joint forces of the Russian Interior Ministry's troops in the North Caucasus, Sergei Melikov, a Tabasaran—i.e. member of an ethnic group close to the Lezghis in Dagestan. This replacement symbolizes a shift back to the *siloviki* and the central role which Dagestan is currently playing in North Caucasian affairs.

### Challenges for, and Responses from, the South

Instability and violence in the North Caucasus is challenging Russia, but it also affects the South Caucasus, where Georgia is most and Armenia least exposed to developments at Russia's Caucasian state periphery. How do neighbors in the South Caucasus react to this challenge?

Baku's foreign and regional policy is based on a pragmatic relationship with Moscow, notwithstanding Russia's close security and economic partnership with Armenia. This pragmatic approach has its impact on Azerbaijan's policy toward the North Caucasus, which is different from Georgia's approach to this arc of crisis. Dagestan is the focal point for Azerbaijan's relations to its northern neighborhood in terms of economy and security. Around 70 percent of the goods turnover between Azerbaijan and Russia comes from the cross-border co-operation with Dagestan. With the formulation of a political and developmental strategy toward its new North Caucasus Federal District Russia began to involve Azerbaijan, as the economic heavyweight in the South Caucasus, into its own troublesome Caucasian periphery. Both sides agreed upon border delimitation. A process of engaging Azerbaijan in the North Caucasus culminated in October, 2011, with Khloponin's visit to Baku with the goal of increasing the interest of Azerbaijani investors in long-term investments in the North Caucasus. This region, with its security deficit, however, is not an attractive area for foreign investors. Even if the danger of ethnic separatism and disputed border issues in its northern parts are less acute for Azerbaijan than in the beginning of the 1990s, the northern neighborhood with Dagestan in its centre has security implications. There is a growing Salafist challenge in the northern parts of Azerbaijan. The country, with its deep secularist tradition, is caught between Salafist influences on its Sunni minority from the north and Iranian influ-

ences on its Shiite majority from the south, though the challenge of militant Islamism for Azerbaijan is generally lower than in the North Caucasus or in some parts of post-Soviet Central Asia. Currently, i.e. in the context of the 2014 Ukraine crisis, political analysts do not exclude Russian pressure on Azerbaijan for membership in Putin's Eurasian integration project. Such pressure could include the revitalization of the "Lezgin card" at the border between North and South Caucasus.

Georgia has reacted much more visibly to developments in the North Caucasus. This process began with ex-President Saakashvili's "United Caucasus address" to the UN-General Assembly in September 2010, in which he stated that "although we belong to different states and live on different sides of the mountains, in terms of the human and cultural environment there is no North Caucasus and Transcaucasus, there is just one Caucasus." Moscow became particularly suspicious when the Georgian government a few weeks later removed visa requirements for citizens of Russia's North Caucasus republics to stay in Georgia. Another element of this policy was establishing a Russian-language TV channel directed to a public in Georgia's northern neighborhood. "Caucasian solidarity" became a fashionable topic in Tbilisi.

In this context one historical issue was outstanding: the global Circassian movement's demand for the recognition of a 'genocide' committed against the largest ethnic group at that time in the North Caucasus by Russian colonial policies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Georgia presented itself as the most outspoken supporter of this demand. The Georgian Parliament in a resolution adopted in May 2011, recognized the "genocide of the Circassian" people by the Russian Empire, thereby setting a precedent. By supporting the "Circassian question" in confrontation with Russia's prestige project "Sochi-2014", this Georgian policy changed the constellation which emerged with the war in Abkhazia of 1992–93 when the Adyge peoples of the North Caucasus had been on the side of the Abkhaz separatist movement against Georgia. Georgia now tried to drive a wedge between Abkhazians and Circassians—ethnic relatives who both suffered from the Russian colonial advance in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With regard to its own dependence on Russia and its conflict with Georgia, Abkhazia could not afford to follow the demand for the recognition of the "genocide" and frustrated the Circassians who twenty years ago fought together with the Abkhaz armed forces against Georgian troops.

Some Caucasus experts and analysts in Georgia itself expressed reservations towards this policy and criticized

actions which appeared like a mere tit for tat answer to Russia's interference into Georgia's problems with territorial integrity. With the change of the Georgian government in 2012 and a new approach to Russia, Saakashvili's North Caucasus policy was reconsidered. A new foreign and regional policy concept declared that the relations between Georgia and the peoples of the North Caucasus should be based on a long tradition of close cultural cooperation that should not be used to increase confrontation with Moscow.

The Winter Olympic Games in Sochi gave another example for a crucial interface between the North and the South Caucasus with regard to at least two factors. At first there was the crucial historical link of the Circassian question with these games, which took place in an area where the Circassians were brutally exiled in 1864—exactly 150 years ago. A global Circassian movement was engaged to transform the Olympics into a challenge for the discussion of Russian colonial policy in the Caucasus and got the strongest support from Georgia. The other factor was the question about how far Abkhazia's territory would be involved into the logistics of the Olympic Games. There was speculation about using the airport in Sukhumi for international traffic to Sochi and including Abkhazia's tourist infrastructure into the project. This would have been a serious provocation with regard to the disputed status of this territory. None of that happened. Instead of opening the Olympic area to Abkhazia, Moscow decided to set up an 11-kilometer "border zone" south of the river Psou that divides Abkhazia from Sochi. Other strict security measures were taken in the North Caucasus republics close to the Olympic area. Sochi-2014 brought back the *siloviki's* "security first" approach at Russia's Caucasian periphery.

## Conclusion

Emanations from the arc of crisis in the North Caucasus may be directed more towards the inner parts of the Russian Federation like the Muslim areas in the Volga-Ural region than to the neighboring countries in the South Caucasus, which are involved in their own unresolved conflicts. However, it would be naïve to expect that these countries will be totally free of any impact from the sub-region of the post-Soviet space which suffers from the most precarious security situation.

### *About the Author*

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