

Analysis

The North and South Caucasus and Russia under Putin: Problems and Challenges

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Abstract

It is hard to exaggerate the significance of the Caucasus during Vladimir Putin's presidency. Both the South and North Caucasus during the last eight years have frequently been important symbols for Putin personally and for the ideology and political practice of the Russian state. The Caucasus has had a powerful impact on Russian politics, while Russia's role in both parts of the region has changed dramatically.

The Role of the Caucasus for Russia's Domestic and Foreign Policy

Putin's political star rose sharply in the Russian firmament as a result of events in the Caucasus. Before the fighters commanded by Shamil Basayev and Khattab invaded Dagestan under then Prime Minister Putin, he had a low rating and was seen as the "protégé of the Yeltsin family." However, the Islamic fundamentalists' August 1999 attack on the Botlikh and Tsumadin raions of Dagestan caused panic in Moscow. Some observers predicted the quick loss of Russia's Caspian republics to the then de facto independent Chechnya, whose field commanders supported the raid. Against this background, the readiness of the new prime minister to "drown the terrorists in an outhouse" [*mochit' terroristov v sortire*], as Putin proclaimed in crude Russian slang, drove the rapid rise of his popularity at the end of Boris Yeltsin's presidency. To a great extent, Putin's first term gained legitimacy thanks to his tough line in the North Caucasus. And although there were other causes legitimizing his second term besides the Caucasus, the fact that Chechnya stopped being a zone of active military combat helped strengthen the authority of the Russian president and facilitated (along with the use of administrative resources) his reelection in 2004. Of course, the significance of the North Caucasus for Putin was not limited to domestic policy. In 2001, viewing Chechnya within the context of the battle against international terrorism helped transform the approach of the US and several European governments toward evaluating Russian activities in the North Caucasus.

Events in the South Caucasus during the last eight years also had an influence on Russia's foreign and domestic policies. Georgia was the first country where a color revolution was successful. After that, a policy of opposing the "color threat" became the main foreign policy ideology of the Kremlin and its guiding principle in the post-Soviet space. Beginning in 2003, Georgia

led the way in the complete replacement of the post-Soviet generation of politicians. Mikheil Saakashvili's arrival in power was not simply the appearance of a new inconvenient partner for Moscow; it began a "revolution of generations," when people who had neither studied nor launched their career during the Soviet era entered their countries' highest political ranks. The Rose Revolution in Georgia (like the subsequent "Orange Revolution" in the Ukraine) significantly influenced the choice of domestic policy priorities for the Russian authorities. The danger of a "revolution from below" (especially with the support of the West) compelled the Kremlin to strengthen its isolationist and anti-Western rhetoric. In many areas after the events of 2003, the ideology of the "besieged fortress" became the dominant trend and the concept of "sovereign democracy" received official recognition (despite the personal criticism of this idea leveled by Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev).

One should note that not all of the negative tendencies in the South and North Caucasus and the new political challenges were the result of Putin's actions. Putin's Russia inherited many complicated problems from previous leaders. Among them, the "Americanization" of the Caucasus began in the middle 1990s, when "Soviet inertia" reached its limit. Many of the challenges grew out of objective factors. Georgia and Azerbaijan suffered from ethnic political conflicts (Georgian-Abkhaz, Georgian-Ossetian, and Nagorno-Karabakh), and in the absence of military or political support from Russia, sought the support of the US, European Union, and Turkey. In the North Caucasus, Putin inherited a clan-based ruling structure and a system of "soft apartheid," under which the so-called titular ethnic groups enjoyed preferences in "their republics," while representatives of "non-indigenous peoples" were subjected to discrimination. The change of discourse that took place, in which ethnic nationalism gave way to religious radicalism, also had little to do with Kremlin desires.

Nevertheless, many negative tendencies were considerably strengthened thanks to the policies of the last eight years. In the South Caucasus, such unfortunate decisions included the introduction of a visa regime and de facto blockade of Georgia (in 2001 and 2006 respectively); the closing of the Kazbegi-Lars Customs Checkpoint, the only checkpoint controlled by Georgians on the Georgian-Russian border, in June 2006, particularly damaging the interests of Armenian businesspeople, who were forced to find new Western customers; and the increase in natural gas prices for Armenia and Azerbaijan over the course of 2006.

In the North Caucasus, the strengthening of the “vertical of power” led to the conclusion of a new pact between the federal government and the regional elites. The regional leaders no longer engage in a nationalist discourse (at least publicly) and now demonstrate loyalty and devotion to the Kremlin. In exchange, the Kremlin closes its eyes to the political activities of the regional regimes. Accordingly, it provides absolute support to the presidents of Chechnya and Ingushetia, Ramzan Kadyrov and Murad Zyazikov. Effectively, the Kremlin’s policy now amounts to supporting the republican regimes at any price (even when these regimes openly discredit themselves, as when Karachayevo-Cherkessia President Mustafa Batdyev was implicated in a criminal scandal involving his son-in-law Ali Kaitov). Even North Ossetia leader Aleksandr Dzasokhov, who lost authority after the Beslan tragedy, was removed from his post long after he fell from favor, allowing the Kremlin to avoid giving the impression that the federal authorities had made a concession to the demands of society. In response, the leaders of the North Caucasus republics demonstrate the greatest loyalty to Moscow among all Russian regions. The results of the December 2, 2007 State Duma elections were a shining example of this. Ingushetia and Chechnya made a gift to the new president in the elections. In those regions, no party other than United Russia received more than 1 percent of the votes. In Karbardino-Balkaria, with a turnout of 96.7 percent, 96.12 percent voted for the ruling party (and only 1.72 percent for the Communists). In Chechnya, 99.2 percent came to the polls and 99 percent of them supported United Russia. Chechnya produced the highest turnout in Russia even though it had lived through two anti-separatist wars. The results in other parts of the North Caucasus were similar. Today the Russian authorities are continuing all of the worst features that the region inherited from the Yeltsin era. The difference is only that Yeltsin pursued a similar policy in much more difficult conditions – when he faced the “parade of sovereignties,” the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the threat of Russian disintegration.

South Caucasus in the 2000s: Changing Russian Role in the Region

Since 2000 Moscow has significantly changed the entire complex of bilateral relations with the independent states of the region. Russian-Armenian relations have remained the most stable. There has been a sharp decline in Russian-Georgian relations; in fact, their entire history during the Putin period is a sequence of constant degradations. During the first part of Putin’s eight year term, Russian-Azerbaijani relations significantly improved, however, there was a reversal at the end of 2006.

Russia’s declaration of a blockade against Georgia in the fall of 2006 deprived Russia of any other levers of influence on Georgia than mediating the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Accordingly, the goal of the blockade was not achieved. The Georgian market has diversified away from Russia. In the political sphere, the blockade helped cement the formation of a Euro-Atlantic consensus in Georgia, which was absent in the 1990s. Today Georgia is an active participant in projects aimed at minimizing Russian domination in the post-Soviet space (such as renewing GUAM, the Community of Democratic Choice, and others).

There have been positive signs in Russian-Azerbaijani relations during the Putin presidency. The achievement of mutually beneficial bilateral relations is one of the real successes of Putin’s foreign policy. Putin was the first Russian president to make an official visit to Azerbaijan and called upon the country’s main memorial, Martyr’s Alley, where the dead from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the Soviet use of force on January 20, 1990, are buried. In 2001 Azerbaijan ended all support to representatives of the Chechen separatist movement, closing their offices in Baku. In 2003 and 2005 Moscow, in contrast to Washington and Brussels, recognized the legitimacy of the presidential and parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan. CIS Executive Secretary Vladimir Rushailo announced that the parliamentary elections of 2005 were valid even before the Azerbaijani Central Electoral Commission had done so. However, at the end of 2006, thanks to Moscow’s attempt to draw Baku into an anti-Georgian gas alliance, bilateral relations fell apart. At the beginning of 2007, Azerbaijan became much more active in GUAM and at the group’s summit in June 2007 in Baku, there were many unfriendly speeches aimed at Russia. The attempt to extend the Russian-Georgian conflict to relations with other countries hurt Russia’s position in the region.

Although Russian-Armenian relations in the 2000s developed well, one cannot ignore growing problems. Russia still has not learned to work with all politically active groups in Armenia, concentrating exclusively on President Robert Kocharyan and his successor Serzh

Sargsyan. A second reason for unhappiness with Russia is its “energy imperialism.” The decision to raise the natural gas price to \$110 per cubic meter at the beginning of 2006, when Russia forgave Syria’s debts, aroused considerable unhappiness in Yerevan.

Over the course of this decade, Moscow has encountered numerous problems and challenges, which were left unresolved. First, Russia has to recognize that with each passing year, the South Caucasus are edging away from their status as Russian geo-political property. This region is becoming a territory of competition and cooperation for various projects (“The Greater Middle East,” “The Greater Black Sea”). Accordingly, Russia’s policy in the South Caucasus can no longer hark back to the Soviet past, but must be competitive and prepared for setbacks. The Russian historian Sergei Solov’ev described losing as “the test of genius.” A competent and adequate response to reversals could significantly help Russia in restoring its shaken, but not lost, positions. Second, Russia should conduct a diversified policy and carry out, above all, Russian tasks (not those of Armenia and Azerbaijan). Russian diplomacy should find all possible points of cooperation with all players in the Caucasus “great game” (recognized regions and non-recognized republics, the US, EU, and regional players like Turkey and Iran). Russia must stop pursuing maximalist goals in all directions. Obviously, the possibilities for improving relations with Georgia today are not great, but with Armenia it is possible to correct annoying mistakes and optimize relations. Where Russia has a chance to succeed, it should go full out. Finally (in this count, but not in importance), Russia needs to rationalize its Caucasus policy. One of the main lessons of the 2000s, was that in the South Caucasus Russia should not “balance the US,” fight the “expansion of NATO,” or prevent “further moves by Europe,” but establish greater conditions for stability in the North Caucasus. Russian actions should be aimed at achieving this goal on the other side of the Caucasus range.

The North Caucasus in the 2000s: New Threats to Security

The tragic events in Nalchik on October 13, 2005 demonstrated that now the main terrorist opponent of the Russian state is not the “defenders of a free Ichkeria [Chechnya],” but participants in the “Caucasus Islamic terrorist international.” At the beginning of the 1990s, ethno-nationalism and the idea of ethnic self-determination dominated in the North Caucasus. In the 2000s, the slogans of a “pure Islam” replaced those of ethno-nationalism. For the first time, the ethnic diversity of the Caucasus makes radical ethno-nationalism a political utopia in practice (especially in the regions where

there is no single dominant group). Second, the battle for the superiority of one ethnic group effectively leads to the victory of an ethnic elite, which is quickly corrupted and focuses on its own egoistic desires. The popular masses are relegated to the roles of foot soldiers on the streets.

“Pure Islam” is incredibly well suited to Caucasus conditions as a protest ideology. In contrast to “traditionalism,” this system of Islam is formed from supra-ethnic universal and egalitarian values – a “green communism.” For supporters of this brand of Islam, membership in a specific tribe, clan, or ethnic group is not important. Accordingly, it is possible to form horizontal ties between activists from various Caucasus republics. In the absence of an intelligible ideology and conception of Russian national construction, Salafism became the integrating factor in the Caucasus. Although the entire Islamic national project developed as anti-Russian Federation and anti-ethnic Russian, many leaders among the “renewalists” did not support “Russophobia” and were prepared to accept Russian dominion over the North Caucasus as long as it was totally Islamicized. At the same time, the Caucasus Wahhabis rejected the secular character of the Russian state and the institutions of the Russian authorities in the region. Gradually, the radicals shifted from sermons to terrorism, and toward the beginning of the new century, ethno-nationalism was replaced (including in Chechnya) with religious Islamic radicalism. In Nalchik in October 2005 and over the course of the recent year in Dagestan, no one has posted slogans calling for the separation of Ichkeria from Russia since most are thinking about the idea of forming a special social-political reality without Russia or outside of Russia.

The result is that in the most unstable and conflict-prone Russian region, the character of the threat has changed. Now the challenge to the Russian authorities is coming from Chechnya as well as other sources. In the near future, the entire North Caucasus will be turned into a field of intense battle. It is very important to understand the essence of this threat. It is a problem when the leaders of the state do not recognize the enemy that they are fighting against and what resources this enemy has. Both Putin (most recently in his speech to the expanded collegium of the FSB in January 2008) and Sergei Ivanov have repeatedly argued that Russia faces “underground bandits [*bandpodpol’e*]” in the North Caucasus. In fact, it is not underground bandits that threaten the Russian authorities and the entire liberal-modernization project, but politically and ideologically motivated people, who have a very clear understanding of their goals. This purposefulness stands in contrast to the corruption of the Russian elite, both among the authorities and the opposition.

Most important, the Russian authorities should reject imperialist methods of managing the North Caucasus, particularly those in which the main goal is not integrating the region into a general Russian legal, social-cultural space, but external control and the appearance of loyalty to Moscow. The ideal type of such imperial management is Kadyrov's Chechnya, which has effectively achieved independent management with stable financing from the federal government. Today the main task of the federal authorities in the North Caucasus is to develop among the residents a sense that they are part of one country, the Russian Federation. Most members of the population in the region define themselves first by ethnic, religious, or clan belongings, but not by a civil Russian Federation identity. In order to overcome this situation, it is necessary to dismantle the intra-regional apartheid and optimize internal migration. Toward this end, the Russian authorities need a completely different personnel policy in the region. The facilitators of the "Russian Federation Idea" in the Caucasus should not be personally faithful bureaucrats or corrupt timeservers, but politically motivated people, whether they are representatives of Moscow or the so-called "Eurocaucasians," people who are originally from the Caucasus and are interested in modernizing the region away from its tribal-traditional past. However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian authorities have systematically strengthened informal ties in the North Caucasus region rather than instilling formal law. The result was a loss of control and influence over the situation and a new awakening in the Caucasus on the basis of radical Islam. If the Russian authorities today do not set about solving the

complex tangle of social, economic, and political problems in the Caucasus systematically, and not by rapidly changing government staff members and searching for scapegoats, then tomorrow the Caucasus will be rebuilt according to different plans.

If the new head of state continues the current Putinist strategy of "handing over everything in exchange for loyalty," the regional elite could completely privatize power in the republics. But the population, most of which has little sense of the traditions of American and European democracy, could begin to fight against the unjust privatization of power while supporting Islamic slogans. In these conditions, Putin's stability could be threatened. In any case, if Russia wants to preserve the North Caucasus within the country, there are no alternatives to a strengthened state. Or, more precisely, the only alternative is a loose federation of field commanders. Another question, of course, is what does a "strengthened state" mean to Russia? Clearly it should not be a strengthening of local ethno-nomenclatura regimes with their corrupt ties to Muscovite patrons. It is also not the handing over of regional resources and power for formal loyalty, and not the chaotic passport checks and cleansing of villages.

To realistically correct its Caucasus policy, Russia must change the entire "Putin system," which is based on bureaucratic priorities and the ideology of a "besieged fortress." In current conditions, such a correction does not seem possible and examining the "range of possibilities" for a "new perestroika" is a topic for further research.

Translated from Russian by Robert Ortung

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