

Was it the result of the flamethrowers held by the law enforcement agencies? Did that cause the roof to catch fire? During the trial, the authorities at first denied that the law enforcement agencies had used flamethrowers and tanks, then they argued that the flamethrowers could not have set the roof on fire. However, this discussion could not replace a detailed investigation of the bodies of all those who died in the gymnasium. Such an investigation would make it possible to determine how each of the victims died, from the explosive devices set up by the terrorists or from the fire? Without such an investigation, it was possible for the authorities to declare that the terrorists, and only they, were exclusively guilty of the deaths of all the hostages.

The Torshin commission: A missed opportunity

The parliamentary commission established in the fall of 2004 under the leadership of Aleksandr Torshin could have corrected this defect. This committee was free from conflicts of interest and could have examined a variety of accounts of what happened. Unfortunately, that did not happen. The first statements by the head of the commission focused on *About the author:*

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For further reading:

- Draft document of the North Ossetian parliamentary commission for investigating the conditions around the terrorist act in Beslan. The draft was submitted for discussion in the North Ossetian parliament on 29 November 2005, <http://pravdabeslana.ru/dokl.htm>.
- Letter from the organization "Voice of Beslan" <http://pravdabeslana.ru/golos301105.htm>.
- The preliminary Duma report prepared by the committee under Aleksandr Torshin, 28 December 2005, <http://www.rg.ru/2005/12/28/tezis.html>.

those who ordered the terrorist act and the possible participation of the republican elite among this group. Such statements made clear that he did not want to examine the Chechen war as the context or cause for the terrorism. The Torshin Commission refused to accept materials from Russian human rights defenders which could have helped in the investigation of this aspect of the tragedy. According to the account of State Duma member Yury Ivanov, who served on the commission, this investigation took place within the framework of the authorities' "general line." Two years after Beslan, the commission has still not published the final version of its report. Nevertheless, this commission has played one role, that of a lightning rod for the protests of the Beslan residents. Now such a commission could prove to be a blessing since the recently adopted law on parliamentary investigations essentially forbids investigations of significant issues.

In sum, the two years following the Beslan tragedy have exposed barriers in contemporary Russia that block the effective social monitoring of the military, intelligence, and law enforcement agencies and therefore hinder a real battle with such evils as terrorism.

Translation from the Russian: Robert Ortung

Analysis

The North Caucasus: Taking stock two years after Beslan

Jeronim Perovic, Zurich

Summary

There have been no major combat operations in Chechnya for several years now. The resistance has dwindled to the point where only a few hundred rebels are carrying on. But despite signs of normalization, the situation remains tense not only in Chechnya, but in the entire predominantly Muslim North Caucasus. Chechnya is only one part of a larger crisis region that is increasingly succumbing to chaos and violence. Two years after Beslan, Moscow still has no recipe for regaining control over the situation.

The spread of war

The North Caucasus has continuously felt the effects of the war in Chechnya, which has been raging intermittently since 1994: it has been affected by Chechen refugees, by the repeated raids of armed Chechen units into neighboring territories, and especially by bloody terrorist attacks. The worst incident of

this kind was the hostage-taking of over 1,100 people in a school in Beslan on 1 September 2004. More than 300 hostages, the majority of whom were children, lost their lives.

Since the hostage drama in Beslan, this form of terrorism, which was closely connected with the war in Chechnya and which involved mostly ethnic Chechen

perpetrators, has become less prominent. At the same time, however, there was an increase in the number of attacks and military operations in the North Caucasus region carried out by groups that consisted mainly of other North Caucasus ethnic nationalities, rather than of Chechens. The first of this type of larger-scale military operation was the attack in June 2004, by between 200 and 300 armed men, on various official buildings in Nazran, the largest city in the Republic of Ingushetia. The other large-scale military action occurred in October 2005 in Nalchik, the capital of the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, and involved an attack by over two hundred armed rebels. These two events cost the lives of around two hundred people.

Similar developments have been observed recently in other parts of the North Caucasus. In the context of the North Caucasus crisis, Dagestan – home to over 30 ethnic groups – is by far the biggest hot spot in the region, with the media reporting killings, arrests, and military operations on virtually a daily basis. However, it is uncertain how many of these actions can be blamed on radical Islamist groups, as it is not always possible to determine whether an incident is a terrorist act by an Islamist group, or a dispute between criminal organizations or ethnic clans.

One thing that is certain is that there are now a number of *jamaats* (lit. communities) in Dagestan whose members follow the Islamic law of Shariah, which means that they live outside the official rule of

law. These *jamaats* often comprise the inhabitants of individual, isolated mountain villages, some of which have squads of armed men primarily to secure their own territory and who are therefore mainly engaged in defending local interests. Other *jamaats* have fewer local interests and resemble terrorist networks. The most notorious of these is the Jamaat “Shariat,” which features on Moscow’s list of terrorist organizations. According to official sources, this group is responsible for the deaths of approximately 50 members of the security forces (as of February 2006).

A single front?

The violence in the North Caucasus has local roots and is no longer emanating only from Chechnya. At the same time – and this has caused particular concern in Moscow – there are connections between the individual terrorist and resistance groups. For example, in May 2005, the “North Caucasian Front” was founded in order to improve coordination among the various rebel groups. Until his violent death on 10 July 2006, the military supreme commander of the Front had been Russia’s most wanted terrorist, Shamil Basaev.

Figures for the number of rebels on North Caucasus territory vary. Oleg Khottin, commander of the troops of the Russian Ministry of the Interior in Chechnya, estimated that there are currently less than 800 fighters operating in the region, organized in

The North Caucasus (physical map)



over a hundred small military formations. The figure is likely to be higher, however. President of Dagestan Mukha Aliev claimed in late March 2006 that, based on information claimed from the Dagestan security forces, there were an estimated 1,000 people in his republic who were members of a terrorist organization.

Figures for the number of Chechen fighters vary as well, but it is believed that there are now only between 200 and 300 armed fighters left hiding in the mountainous part of the republic. However, the number of Chechens sitting at home who would be ready to take part in a new chapter of the armed resistance struggle against the Russian army and the pro-Russian Chechen government may well be considerable in light of the fact that the present government, controlled by Prime Minister Ramzan Kadyrov and his clan, is unpopular with many Chechens. According to Chechnya's rebel president Dokku Umarov, the resistance does not lack volunteers but money and weapons in order to engage in large-scale war against federal and republican troops.

What remains to be seen is whether the death of Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev will have any significant impact on the military situation in Chechnya and the North Caucasus. With Basayev's death, a key symbol of resistance to Russian rule and an important link among the various local rebel groups of the North Caucasus has been eliminated. At the same time, however, the individual cells of armed resistance, which are able to operate autonomously, have not been eradicated and thus continue to possess the ability to conduct military operations alone or, perhaps, in coordination with each other.

Moscow's assessment

Moscow is fully aware of the dangers currently in the North Caucasus. In this context, two reports commissioned by Dmitry Kozak (the Presidential Envoy to the Southern Federal District) have caused something of a stir in Russia: one on the North Caucasus and the other specifically on the situation in Dagestan. In these secret reports drawn up for Vladimir Putin, from which extracts reached the Russian press in the summer of 2005 under mysterious circumstances, corruption, clan-based loyalties, a shadow economy, and the alienation of the population from the ruling elite are listed as the principal threats to social stability and a key factor for the continuing economic crisis. The increasing radicalism and Islamization of society are mentioned as manifestations of the situation, not as the causes for it. The situation in Dagestan, in particular, is seen as giving cause for concern. According to Kozak, 7 percent of Dagestan's 2.5 million population is (in theory) prepared to resort to armed struggle if the situation demands; one-third of the population would take part in illegal protest

actions.

Regardless of their general analytical depth, the reports have one great weakness: not a word is said about the disastrous role that Moscow has played in events up to now. Kozak's report does not mention that Moscow itself is part of the corrupt system he condemns. For a long time, Moscow was fully focused on Chechnya and the war against terrorism, being content just to maintain the status quo in the rest of the North Caucasus; in other words, it supported the corrupt political regimes there and helped the spread of maladministration and the entrenchment of clan structures. Among the biggest losers in this system were young people who, without jobs or hope for the future, posed easy prey for criminal organizations or militant Islamist groups. Rather than improving the situation, Moscow's policy actually helped radical Islamist forces to become established in the North Caucasus republics.

This central imbalance in Kozak's analysis raises questions about the political objective behind the reports. Russian newspapers have speculated in this context that the reports may not have been leaked accidentally, but rather made public on purpose, not simply in order to highlight irregularities, but also to legitimize a greater level of involvement by Russia in the region – even to the extent of direct rule. In fact, an overview of Russia's North Caucasus policy supports this view.

Control through cadre policy

Moscow is attempting to bring the situation under control by using strategies such as cadre policy, redesign of administrative and territorial structures, and intensive militarization. But it is doubtful whether these efforts will be enough to deal with the problems. Cadre policy is a case in point. The Beslan tragedy in September 2004 gave the Russian president an excuse to abolish the direct, popular elections of regional leaders and make appointments directly from Moscow. Putin then replaced the presidents of the republics of North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Dagestan. The others will also be appointed by the Kremlin once their terms have expired.

However, it is not clear how far this approach will manage to break up the old clan structures. In fact, intervention from the outside bears the danger of merely creating new constellations of conflict. Furthermore, interventions of this kind may lead to power shifts within the system, rather than changing the system itself. Dagestan provides a good illustration of this: although the then-departing president of Dagestan, Magomedali Magomedov, was unable to convince the Kremlin to appoint a candidate from his own family as his successor, continuity was preserved by appointing Mukha Aliev, a close ally of Magomedov, to the post

of president. Also, the influence of the Magomedov clan was secured by the fact that at the same time Magomedov left office in February 2006, his son was appointed president of the parliament – one of the most important positions in the republic.

Territorial restructuring and militarization

Moscow sees a further means of exercising control through territorial and administrative restructuring. Plans are being discussed to merge the small Republic of Adygeya with the ethnically Russian-dominated Krasnodar Krai. Chechnya would again have to unite with Ingushetia (as was the case up until 1992), later possibly also with Dagestan. However, such discussions may merely prove to be the first stage of a more comprehensive territorial restructuring of Russia. Mass demonstrations in April this year by ethnic Adygs in Maikop, the capital of Adygeya, served as an early indication of how sensitive such projects can be in the region, with its strong mix of ethnic groups and delicate balances. Reservations about an ethnic restructuring of the North Caucasus have now been expressed by the leaders of most of the other ethnic republics, and even in the Russian-dominated regions of the Southern Federal District.

The policy of militarization being followed by Russia represents a third element of its control. Despite the fact that Russia has now significantly reduced the number of its troops in Chechnya, it has dramatically

increased its military presence in the other republics. The estimated 300,000 federal troops in the North Caucasus were spread throughout the entire territory at the beginning of 2005, including the regions with a Russian majority (if we discount the concentration of between 80,000 and 100,000 soldiers in Chechnya at that time). Now, however, Moscow has consolidated its troops in much greater numbers in the national republics. More and more, the region resembles a huge training ground for the Russian military. In the 9-month period between September 2005 and June 2006, Russia conducted over half a dozen military exercises involving one or more North Caucasus republics.

By the end of 2006, the authorities plan to set up dozens of new frontier posts in an effort to tighten control over the internal borders between the republics and the international borders to the south. More and more, Moscow is replacing its regular army with special units from the Ministry of Interior and the Federal Security Service (FSB). Unlike previous efforts, Moscow aims to engage only contract soldiers for these units. In this context, the Russian Ministry of the Interior has started to build up two “mountain brigades,” which are to be stationed in Dagestan and in Karachayevo-Cherkessia, and which are also officially designated to protect Russia’s southern borders; in practice, however, these mobile units may well be used in the fight against rebel groups on difficult ter-

The North Caucasus (administrative map)



rain in the North Caucasus interior.

The Consequences of “Chechenization”

Chechnya is a special case within Russia’s policy vis-a-vis the North Caucasus. Besides the 50,000 federal troops that remained in the republic by August 2006 (and which Moscow wants to reduce by one half in the coming two years), Moscow funds Chechen “battalions” and the Chechen Interior Ministry forces, with an overall manpower of up to 20,000 troops. On a political level, the main institutions in Chechnya have been re-established, formally at least: The republic now has a constitution, a president elected by the people (though some say the election was rigged by Moscow), a government, and an elected parliament.

In principle, the integration of former resistance fighters, some of them war criminals and common criminals, into political life, and the transformation of private armies into official armed forces, is not a bad thing since it represents a pragmatic solution to a difficult situation with no easy answers. However, the problem is that Moscow has, up until now, relied on a single faction in Chechnya – the clan of Ramzan Kadyrov, the Moscow-appointed prime minister, and his force of several thousand armed men.

According to the respected Russian human rights organization Memorial, the policy of Chechenization has merely authorized the official bodies to use unlawful force. Today, a frequent method of removing or wearing down an opponent is to kidnap the person concerned, or members of his family. Memorial says that such kidnappings are often carried out in the wake of mopping-up operations by the “Kadyrovtsy” (literally: “Kadyrov’s men”). Mopping-up operations, it says, are generally carried out in those regions of Chechnya that are home to supporters of an opposing clan.

In its last annual report on Chechnya, published in early August 2006, Memorial notes that the number of killings and disappearances have dropped over the past twelve months. If there were some 310 reported killings and 418 disappearances in the second half of 2005, the number dropped to 192 and 316 respectively in the six-month period from January–July 2006. However, the report notes that stability in Chechnya is based on a climate of fear and intimidation: many crimes committed by the Kadyrovtsy are never report-

ed or remain unsolved.

Dire perspectives

There are no obvious solutions for the problems of the North Caucasus. Moscow must eventually allow for greater self-rule. However, the problem remains that Chechnya, if left to itself, could rapidly slide into conflict among the different Chechen clans and rebel groups, but especially between supporters and opponents of Kadyrov. At the same time, centralization and militarization in Chechnya and the other ethnic republics of the North Caucasus risks upsetting the already complex ethnic, political, and social balance, and – as just one possible consequence – galvanizing radical and militant forces from the nebulous cluster of Islamist militant groups.

With its efforts to militarize the North Caucasus, Moscow is certainly proving that it is prepared to go to any effort or expense in the fight against terrorism in order to defeat this evil. At the same time, it is relying on inefficient local authorities and commissions to stabilize the socio-economic situation. These local actors are either unwilling or unable to control the funds promised for this purpose. But it is precisely in this area that greater Russian involvement is required. In order to eliminate corruption and clan-based regimes, the Kremlin needs to strengthen society from the bottom up; however, such a goal will not be achieved by inflating federal bureaucracy or the militarization of the region. What is needed is the encouragement of civil society, the creation of an independent judiciary, support for non-governmental organizations, the stimulation of a dynamic political party system, and the promotion of free and independent media.

Russia needs to present the North Caucasus and its peoples with a model for the future which would offer young people education opportunities and career prospects throughout all of Russia. Russia would also have to try to further relations in other areas, such as science, culture and sport. At the present time, however, there is little stimulus provided for integration in these areas. In fact, a process of alienation of the Muslim part of the North Caucasus from Russia is underway and manifests itself on the Russian side in the form of growing Islamophobia and hostility against Caucasus natives.

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For further reading:

- Jeronim Perovic, The North Caucasus on the Brink, ISN Case Study No. 8 (Zurich, International Relations and Security Network, 2006), <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/pubs/ph/details.cfm?id=15316>.