

## Analysis

# The North Caucasus after the Georgia-Russia Conflict

By Stacy Closson, Berlin

## Abstract

Russia's military action against Georgia and its recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia may have strengthened calls for independence by groups within some of the North Caucasus republics and further undermined the stability of an already troubled region. Most importantly, the fighting in Georgia has activated the trade flows of arms and fighters between the North and South Caucasus, increasing the potential for conflict in both places. Since the war, Russia has faced levels of violence on its own territory not seen since the last Chechen war.

## North-South Caucasus Ties

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin argued that Russia's August military action in Georgia was aimed in part at quelling instability in the Russian republics of the North Caucasus in a mid-September meeting with the Valdai Discussion Club – a collection of academics from around the world. He stated that, "certain non-governmental organizations in certain republics" had "raised the question of separation from Russia under the pretext of the lack of protection given to South Ossetia." That is, the Russian military incursion into Georgia was necessary, in part, to quell calls for independence from some of the seven North Caucasus republics. Putin did not mention from which republics these calls emanated: Adygea, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, North Ossetia-Alania, or Chechnya.

Russian officials provide different measures of the seriousness of the situation in the North Caucasus. Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, confirmed that despite the government's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia stood behind the principle of territorial integrity. He said that while there were some separatists and extremists in the North Caucasus, their activities were not significant and suggested that their calls for independence did not warrant consideration. At the same time, the commander of Russia's Interior Troops, General Nikolai Rogozin, reported that up to 500 militants were currently active in the North Caucasus and Russia had 30,000 troops stationed in the region. These forces conducted over 2,000 operations and killed 50 militants in 2007, and even more in 2008.

The aftermath of the Georgia-Russia conflict and the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states present a major challenge for ensuring stability across the Caucasus. Most important is the extent to which relations between the North and South Caucasus will affect the levels of militarization.

During the Georgian war, some North Caucasian republics sent military aid and fighters into Abkhazia and South Ossetia ultimately establishing themselves as semi-autonomous actors in the broader Caucasian theatre of conflict, posing a potential threat to Russian interests in the future.

## Fighters and Arms

A major challenge facing Russia is how the ties formed among groups in the North and South Caucasus as a result of the August conflict will affect regional stability. There is a direct historical correlation between heightened activities in the North and South Caucasus and an increase in transfers of fighters and weapons across the region. During the Chechen wars of the 1990s, there was a lucrative trade of arms across the region and Georgians played an active intermediary role between Russian and Chechen businessmen. Dmitry Butrin, Chief of the Economic Policy Desk at Kommersant, reported that the recent conflict between Russia and Georgia will once again fuel a breeding ground for lucrative sales of military weaponry by the security services that dominate North and South Ossetia. Just in the past two months, large weapons caches, as well as an anti-air missile defense system of foreign origin, have been discovered by Russian forces in Chechnya.

Prior to the August conflict, informal trade had weakened as a result of periodic disruptions to the north-south corridor across the Georgian border since 2004. The disruptions came in part because of the reform efforts of the Saakashvili government to strengthen border and customs regimes, and the closure of informal trading markets on the de facto Georgia/Ossetian-Abkhazian borders. It was also due to Russian sanctions imposed in 2005 on goods and travel from Georgia. Moreover, in spring 2008 after the Russian government officially lifted a 1996 embargo on Abkhazia and South Ossetia and provided development assistance,

including repairing a railroad connection from Russia through Abkhazia, economic relations in these regions was re-oriented north.

This south-north trade began to reverse direction in the lead up to the August conflict, when the informal arms transfers increased in proportion to the movement of “volunteers” from the north into Georgia. The Black Sea Press in May 2008 reported warnings from South Ossetia’s *de facto* President Eduard Kokoity that an alliance with the North Caucasus was needed to prevent genocide against his people. Georgian television showed that the Confederation of the Peoples of the North Caucasus was preparing to support Abkhazia in the case of a conflict with Georgia. In the first week of May, 700 soldiers were re-deployed from Khankala military base in Chechnya to Abkhazia. Units from the North Caucasus were already serving as peacekeepers in the Gali region of eastern Abkhazia. Then in June the Russian news agency Regnum reported that Russian Cossacks from Karachaevo-Cherkessia were preparing to serve on the border between Abkhazia and Georgia. There were even accusations in the Georgian press that it was the Chechens who were responsible for a series of attacks in Abkhazia during July, supposedly as part of a provocation to Georgian military action.

During the August conflict, the North Caucasus groups divided their sympathies based on co-ethnic ties, relations with Georgia, and degree of allegiance towards Russia. The populations also sometimes differed from their leadership. For example, the Chechens and Ingush sympathized with Georgia, but their leaders came out very publicly against Saakashvili’s “invasion” of South Ossetia. The Chechen rebel leader Umarov criticized Russia and appealed to the Caucasus peoples not to get involved in the conflict. Nevertheless, as with the war in Abkhazia in the early 1990s, several thousand Chechen troops served as border guards along the Abkhaz and Ossetian border. Chechens also helped the Abkhaz to clear out the Georgian-government-backed Abkhaz government-in-exile from the Kodori gorge in upper Abkhazia. Chechens from the Vostok battalion fought in South Ossetia, reportedly both propelling the Georgians out of Tskhinvali, as well as saving many Georgian civilians from revenge attacks by Ossetians and Russians. There were unconfirmed reports that Chechens may have fought with the Georgians, related to more unconfirmed reports that Chechen rebels were still seeking safe haven in Georgia’s northern Pankisi gorge. In an interview, Chechen President Kadyrov admitted that he was not in command of the over 17,000 volunteers eager to fight in Georgia.

Groups of fighters from the other republics, on the other hand, were united with their governments in supporting Russia and the Ossetians. The Adygea and Cherkess formed groups of fighters and, alongside Chechens, participated in removing the Abkhaz government-in-exile from the Kodori gorge. They also temporarily patrolled Georgian villages in the Gali region of Abkhazia. A unit of Cossack volunteers was present in Sukhumi during the war and pledged their solidarity with the Abkhaz should Georgia try to invade. Another Cossack unit was apparently fighting around Gori, Georgia. Likewise, the North Ossetians stood by their brethren in South Ossetia, providing shelter for refugees and even soldiers to fight alongside the Russians. North Ossetia continued to act as the *de facto* fourth actor in the South Ossetian conflict, along with Russia, Georgia, and the South Ossetians, as a member of the Joint Control Commission, responsible for conflict resolution and peacekeeping operations in the South. At the same time, the North Ossetians had trained the South’s military and provided leadership and arms in the lead up to the conflict.

The Dagestan government was the only republic to remain neutral, pre-occupied with violent clashes on its territory and border problems with Azerbaijan. For some Dagestanis, it was disturbing that the Vostok battalion fighting in and around Tskhinvali and Gori was headed by a wanted man who allegedly had killed their Dagestani kin in a Chechen village in June 2005. Dagestan is viewed as the most troubled area in the North Caucasus at the moment. It serves as a major transit route for drugs and weapons from Central Asia through the North Caucasus and westward to the Black Sea. This corridor became even more lucrative after Afghanistan increased heroin production and demand for weapons grew in the Caucasus. The Dagestani-Azeri border has been the scene of regular incursions with both sides accusing the other of inciting violence. The Lezgin Sadval movement, which aspires to its own territorial autonomy on land that is now partly in Dagestan and partly in Azerbaijan, comprises a combined population more than twice that of the Abkhaz in Abkhazia. Since August, Azeri and Russian security forces have been conducting counter insurgency operations in the border region against alleged Dagestani militants.

### **Russia’s Unresolved Conflict: Prigorodniy Region**

The increase in the flow of arms and fighters across the region could increase the chances of conflict between Ossetia and Ingushetia. Up until last month, the South

Ossetian leadership had persistently stated that it wanted accession to the Russian Federation through unification with North Ossetia, the most prosperous republic in the North Caucasus. However, this desire clashed with the aspirations of the Ingush, who were displaced from their homes in North Ossetia's Prigorodniy district in 1992 during a brief but violent conflict with the Ossetians. In 1924 Vladikavkaz was divided into two by the Soviets and shared by the Ingush and Ossetians, but by 1994 Vladikavkaz and the Prigorodniy district were under the jurisdiction of North Ossetia. In spring 2006, the Russian closure to the Ingush of a historical site in Ossetia only increased their sense of injustice. Hampering the Ingush's ability to return home have been waves of South Ossetian and Chechen war refugees into North Ossetia in the early- to mid-1990s, occupying Ingush property. The latest move north of several thousand South Ossetian refugees during the Georgia-Russia conflict has reignited tensions. It is unclear if this has been a factor in *de facto* South Ossetian President Kokoity's recent change in policy from uniting with North Ossetia in the near-term.

Meanwhile, events inside Ingushetia increasingly pit society against the state. As Russia was fighting a war in Georgia, Magomet Yevloyev, the owner of the Ingushetiya.ru website, a critical news source on regional events, was murdered. He was shot dead in a police car after sharing an airplane with Ingush leader Murat Zyazikov, during which they allegedly sparred. For concerned Ingush, this was confirmation that the already highly unpopular Kremlin-appointed head of the republic, who oversaw a violent police state, was unfit to govern. Peace Human Rights Organization in Ingushetia had regularly protested against the power wielding structures and security services in the republic, whose internecine warfare had turned the republic into a low-scale conflict zone of attacks, shelling, abductions, and shootings. Another humanitarian organization, Human Rights Watch, reported in June 2008 that attacks in Ingushetia were reaching levels experienced in Chechnya over the past decade. This is doubly alarming given that there are only about 300,000 people living in Ingushetia as compared to more than a million in Chechnya.

Following Yevloyev's murder, the Ingush opposition appealed to the Secretary General of the United Nations and several western organizations to recognize their independence. In their appeal, they referenced the 1992 war and the most egregious acts of "genocide" carried out by Russian security services and "representatives of the illegal armed formations of South Ossetia".

Three months later, Putin removed Zyazikov and replaced him with Army Colonel Yunus-Bek Yevkurov. The new leader declared his two missions as suppressing armed underground opposition and curtailing the abuse unleashed on the population by the federal security units. He has also promised to help thousands of displaced Ingush from the Prigorodniy district return to their homes in what is now North Ossetia. The methods Yevkurov uses to implement his goals, combined with whether the Ingush deem their grievances addressed in relation to the Ossetians, will in a large part determine the future levels of violence. Meanwhile, Chechen President Kadyrov has hinted at a possible unification of Ingushetia and Chechnya.

### What Future for the North Caucasus?

It is clear that the Georgia-Russia conflict and the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states present challenges for ensuring stability across the Caucasus. Their recognition has spurred nascent movements for independence in Ingushetia and increased calls for the return of displaced Ingush to their lands in the Prigorodniy district, now in North Ossetia. The August conflict has also increased trafficking corridors of fighters and arms across the Russia-Georgia border and heightened levels of violence across the region not seen since the last Chechen war. Attacks on Russian military units since October have resulted in over 40 servicemen killed and equal numbers wounded. Increased trade in arms and the movement of fighters could ignite another war within the North Caucasus republics or between North Caucasus rebel groups and Georgian forces.

However, next time some of the North Caucasus rebel groups may join the Georgians. This fall Movladi Udugov, the envoy of the Chechen rebels' top field commanders referenced an April 2008 meeting in which they discussed various options in the case of a Georgia-Russia conflict. He called the Caucasus squads fighting in South Ossetia in August "puppet formations" of the North Caucasian republics' "pro-Moscow regimes." In a longer battle, the Chechen separatists have anticipated a situation in which the Georgian government would appeal to them for military support. Were this to happen, they estimate that the insurgency in the North Caucasus could gain recognition as a political force.

To date, the international community has had a minimal role in affecting developments in the North Caucasus republics. The European bodies which formerly expressed regular concerns about human rights abuses in the republics in the 1990s grew more circum-

spect after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, when the previously reviled operations by Russian security services were re-categorized as part of an anti-Islamic terrorism campaign. The European Court of Human Rights has heard dozens of cases about Russian soldiers' abuses of Chechens, but it does not seem to have stemmed the violence either there or in Ingushetia and Dagestan. This past July, Prime Minister Putin terminated tax exemption benefits granted to most foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operat-

ing in Russia. As a result, western NGOs, following the example of the United Nations, are leaving Chechnya, depriving the West of its primary source of information in the region. Meanwhile, foreign journalists can not travel un-chaperoned and those local journalists who investigate the inner workings of the republics are harassed, accused of being "Islamist sympathizers," or killed, with the most famous case being the murder of Anna Politkovskaya in 2006.

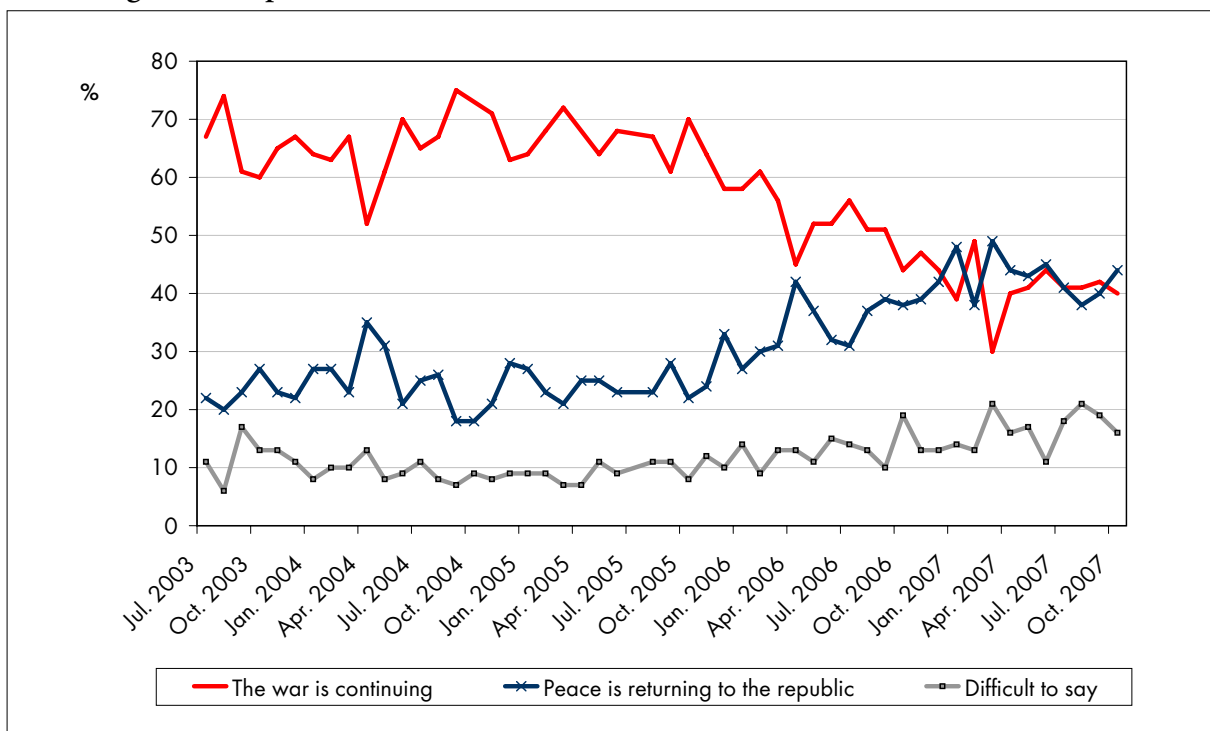
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**Opinion Poll**

**Russian Public Opinion on the Conflict in the North Caucasus**

What Do You Think Is Happening in Chechnya – Is the War Continuing Or Is Peace Returning to the Republic? (Levada, 2003 – 2007)



Source: <http://www.levada.ru/tab103.html>, October 2007