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THE NORTH CAUCASUS
ANALYSIS OF CURRENT ISSUES

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1. INTRODUCTION[1]

As the decade draws to a close, the North Caucasus appears even more volatile than a few years ago when it seemed that a fragile "no war, no peace" equilibrium had been found. The year 1999 has witnessed some dramatic developments in the North Caucasus. Islamic radicalism, a second Russian military intervention in Chechnya and the increased role of the North Caucasus in Russian politics in the electoral year have given the region a high profile. A new round of destabilization across the region - a kind of "domino" effect - cannot be ruled out. The question is whether the current instability in the region and fighting in Chechnya are likely to trigger a reopening of old and an outbreak of new conflicts in the Caucasus, or whether the violence can be contained.

The current paper will provide an analysis of several crucial issues: the Dagestan situation and the rise of radical Islam; renewed war in Chechnya; tensions in other republics, notably Karachaevo-Cherkessia; repercussions in South Caucasus; and implications for the Russian political arena.[2] The war in Chechnya is an on-going and possibly lengthy process; this study deals with the situation as it is in mid-December 1999.

2. SITUATION IN DAGESTAN AND ISLAMIC RADICALISM

2.1 Chechen Attacks

The Chechen/Dagestani border has been the scene of major tension since the signing of the Khasavyurt Accords in 1996. In August 1999 Shamil Basayev, Khunkar Pasha Israpilov and Khattab, field commanders in opposition to President Maskhadov in Chechnya, led an offensive by Chechen and Dagestani militants into the highland Botlikh and Tsumada districts (*raion*) of Dagestan. Initially, there was no opposition to their incursion into Dagestan despite plenty of prior warning. Their proclaimed goal was to establish government by s*hari'a* law in Dagestani territory and to end colonial rule by Russia. However, having suffered defeat in confrontation with detachments of Dagestani fighters and Russian federal troops, the militants retreated to Chechnya. A Russian assault in September on the Islamist strongholds of Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi in the Kadar area of central Dagestan provoked a second wave of attacks from across the border. The September fighting resulted in another setback for the Chechen fighters.

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[1] Much of the data which forms the basis of the paper results from two research trips to the Caucasus undertaken by the author in July and October 1999; from participation in the November 1999 Chatham House Conference on "Russia and the Caucasus: Rethinking Conflict Resolution" and interviews with Caucasian experts attending the conference; and from regular communication by telephone and email with local experts in the Caucasus. Detailed references to this body of information have been given sparingly.

[2] For a previous analysis of some of these issues, as well as others not touched on here (e.g. the North Ossetia-Ingush conflict or the situation of the Lezgins) see Anna Matveeva, "Conflicts and Instability in the North Caucasus", WRITENET for UNHCR's CIS Local Monitoring Project, December 1998

Apart from religious zeal, there were more mundane reasons for the Chechen attacks. Unification with Dagestan, which has over two million citizens, has access to the Caspian Sea, and a much longer border with Azerbaijan, would have created a new Chechen-Dagestani state with improved chances of surviving as an independent entity. The Russians would be denied the opportunity to cut the Chechen sector of the Baku-Novorossiisk pipeline, excluding the republic from oil transit, since the bulk of it goes via Dagestan.

The Chechen tactics was to exploit three political tools: to use the Akkin Chechens, their ethnic kin across the border, to start an anti-colonial struggle against Russian domination, and to call for a holy war to create an Islamic state. Yet, the Chechens who know their Russian enemy so well were guilty of wishful thinking as far as their immediate neighbours were concerned. Chechens, who themselves fought under the nationalist banner, misjudged the power of nationalism in Dagestan. After years of cross-border violence, looting and kidnappings, Dagestani fear and animosity towards the Chechens came to the fore. Far from attracting support, the Chechen attacks provoked fury among Dagestanis, who were quick to set up self-defence units and demand weapons. The authorities reluctantly accepted this.

2.2 Ethnic Leaders

This development played into the hands of informal ethnic leaders - local strongmen, often with a shady past, many of whom have managed to get promoted into positions of formal authority. However, real power derives from their enormous wealth accumulated by controlling economic assets - often illegal ones - and their informal standing among their ethnic kin from whom they draw support in times of trouble. Such ethnic barons provide arms and ammunition to their clansmen, adding to the overwhelming militarization of the region. Recently, some of the barons fell from grace following a Moscow-initiated anti-corruption drive, which was enthusiastically supported by ordinary Dagestanis. However, investigations stopped before charges were brought. When Dagestan came under fire, these barons, both those in positions of formal authority and those in the shadows, came into the open leading their private armies to confront the invaders.

Thus, the “godfathers” turned into heroes of resistance. They led small, but decisive private forces, which fought alongside the federal troops. Having acquired a certain legitimacy and organizational structure, they are not likely to disappear, but will serve as alternative sources of power. The influence of the ethnic strongmen has been enhanced as they were seen as capable of protecting ordinary citizens. In these circumstances, it will be impossible for Moscow to press charges against them. The federal government will have to accept that they form the backbone of federal support in the region, and ignore the danger of criminal expansion.[3]

2.3 Attitudes Towards Moscow

As far as separatism goes, there is a stark choice for Dagestan: stay with Russia and belong to a more European and enlightened world, or be gradually absorbed into

[3] Anna Matveeva, “Caucasus in Flames”, *The World Today*, Vol.55, No.10 (October 1999), p. 9

radical Muslim politics. The current conflict demonstrates that the latter option does not appeal to the majority of Dagestanis.

Multiethnicity is the greatest obstacle to coherent separatism. Dagestanis are preoccupied with inward-looking schemes to improve their standing vis-à-vis other ethnic groups, rather than relations with Moscow. Although the republic has grave economic and social problems, people tend to blame their own corrupt administrators, and look to Moscow with residual hope. Given a highly conservative political culture, Moscow is still regarded as a seat of a symbolic, if not real, power.

The Russian federal government has also gone some way towards adapting itself to the needs of the constituent parts of the federation; the weakness of the state means that the centre's views are barely felt in individual republics.

The budgets of the republics are heavily subsidized from federal funds, and financial flows increase when - as currently in Dagestan - security threats emerge. The Dagestani government capitalized on the war enhanced its standing in the republic and acquired a powerful Russian patron in the person of Prime Minister Putin. The federal government finally realized that the North Caucasus on the whole is loyal to Moscow and that Chechen separatism is a special case, not likely to be replicated in other republics.

2.4 Islamism

More significant as a new challenge to the post-Soviet order is the rise of Islamism. Islamism is an ideology and political programme aimed at gaining power to establish a system of government based on Islam.[4] With ethnic separatism in decline in the former Soviet states, the question is whether Islamism will replace it as a new force for instability. In contrast to traditional Islam, which is deeply embedded in local conventions and beliefs, Islamist movements are explicitly anti-system, reformist and determined to change the status-quo.[5] They are rooted in the insecurities and traumas of today, in social polarization and injustice. They also reflect the failures of official Islamic clergy who have effectively become extensions of the established secular leaderships. In the Caucasus, where social polarization is acute and the luxurious palaces of the new rich are rising amidst a sea of massive impoverishment, the traditional clergy kept its voice down on matters of social justice.

In the last decade, Islamism has gained momentum in Dagestan - one of the most religiously devout areas in the former Soviet Union, and in 1990 the birthplace of the Islamic Revival Party. Last year, three settlements proclaimed an independent Islamic territory ruled by *shari'a* law, where Dagestani (and Russian federal) laws were not applicable. Links with Chechen Islamist militants were established, and preparations made for a long struggle against the Russians and against secular Dagestanis. Training camps in Chechnya provided the skills for young fighters, and villagers were charged with constructing installations for a prolonged conflict. It is claimed by the Russian government that this was facilitated and financed by international agents of radical Islam, such as the notorious Saudi millionaire and radical Islamist leader Osama bin

[4] Ibrahim A. Karawan, *The Islamist Impasse*, Adelphi Paper 314 (London: IISS, 1997), p. 7

[5] Edward Walker, "Islam in Chechnya", *BPS Caucasus Newsletter*, Issue 6 (Fall 1998), pp. 10-19

Laden, based in Afghanistan and alleged to be behind acts of terror including the bomb attacks on U.S. embassies in Africa.

The Russian and Dagestani authorities tolerated the rebellious Islamic territory for a year, and probably would have continued their policy of accommodation but for the Chechen cross-border attack in August. Irrespective of whether the Dagestani Islamists supported the Chechen guerrillas militarily, their political links were well-known. The Islamists mounted a ferocious resistance against the Russian advances.

Recent events have been a serious setback for Islamism in Dagestan. Firstly, the internal chaos in Chechnya is the worst possible advertisement for the Islamist cause, and a relatively stable Dagestan wants none of it. Secondly, the Islamists in Dagestan are more feared and hated than before, with society more openly split along religious lines. Traditional believers have a genuine hatred for the radicals, whom they view as enemies of stability.

The Spiritual Board of Muslims of Dagestan (*Dukhovnoe Upravlenie Musulman* [*DUM*] in Russian), the official clerical institution, has undergone remarkable consolidation and may be emerging as an alternative source of power to the secular authorities in the republic. This also feeds into competition between the two largest ethnic groups in Dagestan - the Avars who dominate *DUM*, and the Dargins who prevail among the official republican leadership.[6]

The Islamist external links to the Middle East and to the wider radical Islamist movement are a further point of irritation. These links include a few hundred volunteers of Arab, Turkish and Afghan origin who started to arrive to Chechnya during the course of the first war and whose numbers have increased in Chechnya and Dagestan since. The authorities dubbed them “Wahhabis”, although few of them are Wahhabis in the strict sense of following the teachings of the eighteenth-century Arab preacher Mohammed Abd al-Wahhab. However, one genuine Wahhabi is definitely identifiable - the Chechen field commander Habib Abdurrahman Khattab, an Arab of Saudi origin, who came to Chechnya reportedly after fighting with the *mujaheddin* in Afghanistan. He then forged links with the Dagestani Islamists, and even married a woman from Karamakhi (Dagestan). The combined influence of Middle Eastern aid and the prestige of their disciplined and fanatic ideology has won the Islamists recruits among disaffected youths and provoked ferocious resentment among the more traditional Sovietized population.

2.5 Anti-Chechen Sentiment

As a result, when Russia’s second military intervention in Chechnya started, Dagestan did not allow ethnic Chechen refugees to enter its territory, and agreed only to receive people of Dagestani ethnic groups, such as Nogai, Kumyk and Avar, trying to leave Chechnya. The refugees are screened because of a fear of infiltration. Two saboteurs, both ethnic Russians trained in the Khattab camp, were caught in Ingushetia. According to them, Basayev and Khattab had trained sabotage teams to enter

[6] Enver Kisriev, Senior Research Fellow (Sociology) of the Dagestan Research Centre, Makhachkala. Presentation at the RIIA Conference on “Russia and the Caucasus: Rethinking Conflict Resolution”, London, 30 November 1999

Makhachkala, the capital, as Russian troops were being deployed. The saboteurs were to take hostages and demand the withdrawal of federal troops.

Reprisals have been carried out against the Akkin Chechen community of Dagestan for their collaboration with Basayev and Khattab. Laks and Avars who had been forcibly resettled in the villages of deported Chechens in 1944, were intimidated throughout the 1990s by Chechen threats to expel them from the historical Chechen homeland. They also feared that the Chechens want these lands back in order to detach them from Dagestan and join them to Chechnya. Anti-Chechen sentiment is strong in Dagestan and has led to the expulsion of all Chechens who do not hold permanent residence permits (mainly refugees from the first war) and to the disarmament of Dagestani Chechen paramilitary groups.

3. RUSSIA'S SECOND WAR IN CHECHNYA

3.1 Reasons for Intervention

In August and September 1999 Moscow was subjected to a bloody terrorist campaign which killed over three hundred people and prompted Russia to bomb Chechnya, thus triggering the beginning of a full-scale war. The bombing spelt the end of the "wait-and-see" policy pursued by Moscow over the last three years, and which had implied the peaceful reintegration of Chechnya into the Russian state. When Russia withdrew its forces from Chechnya in 1996, Russian officials had decided that General Aslan Maskhadov was a moderate figure with whom they could deal on a pragmatic basis. Elected as the Chechen President, he was expected to create a stable government in the republic and shelve the question of formal independence, while recognizing the territory's *de facto* separation from Russia.

These assumptions proved false. Maskhadov failed to create an effective state or a functioning economy. The war and lack of economic opportunities left large numbers of heavily armed and brutalized "unemployed warriors" with no occupation but further violence. A growing epidemic of kidnappings, robbery and murder of fellow Chechens and outsiders, most notably the beheading of four employees of British Granger Telecom in 1998, put an end to possibilities of outside investment. Moreover, Maskhadov proved unable to guarantee the security of the oil pipeline running across Chechnya from the Caspian Sea. Illegal oil-tapping and acts of sabotage deprived his regime of crucial revenues, and exasperated his allies in Moscow.

The second campaign against Chechnya differs substantively from the first one in its underlying causes, military tactics and political repercussions. This time, the reasons for the military intervention appear to be as follows:

- Cross-border crime has emerged as an aggravating factor. Dagestan was the most affected area, as mentioned above. In the north the Stavropol *krai* government, after fruitless attempts to put pressure on Moscow to provide protection from killings and kidnappings, resorted to unilateral closure of the border with Chechnya. Federal troops withdrawn to Stavropol *krai* from Chechnya became involved in border protection in return for material support from the *krai* authorities. An "exclusion zone" fortified by trenches and barbed wire was established, and the ethnic Chechen families who lived along the border were

deported to the territory of Chechnya. Policies providing for separation from Chechnya were supplemented by arming of the local population. When fighting erupted in Dagestan, the *krai* authorities distributed 1,000 machine guns to Cossack self-defence units to enable them to fight in Chechnya. North Ossetia and Kabardino-Balkaria were exposed to the same dangers, especially because these republics have emerged as tax-free vodka havens, and families were able to produce handsome ransoms for their kidnapped relatives.

- Bomb attacks on Russian troops and civilians in the Caucasus began in November 1996 and escalated sharply in 1999. This was followed by the massive terrorist campaign in Moscow itself. Attacks which demolished apartment blocks in Moscow and in Southern Russia were blamed on the Chechen and Islamist militants and their international sponsors. Responsibility for the bombings was claimed by the previously unknown Dagestan Liberation Army, while the Chechen field commander Shamil Basayev attributed the campaign to Dagestani Islamists angry over Russian attacks on them, and Russian intelligence saw Osama bin Laden as having had a role in the campaign.

- It is plausible to attribute the campaign to the Islamists, whose supporters in the Middle East and elsewhere are experienced in terrorism. Another, more speculative interpretation of the attacks is that they were masterminded by the Kremlin in order to weaken popular support for Moscow's mayor Yurii Luzhkov, a likely presidential candidate, and to promote Prime Minister Vladimir Putin as the saviour of the nation and heir to the President Yeltsin. Little evidence exists to support such claims, but it cannot be ruled out completely. The bombing campaign triggered popular indignation and fear, and made it compelling for the authorities to retaliate forcefully.

- Resurgence of Russian power, rehabilitation of the military and reprisals for the defeat in the first Chechen campaign. The present campaign is marked by a strongly different mood among senior military officers, who appear dominated by desire to avenge the humiliating defeat and by genuine hatred towards the enemy. Many officers saw the withdrawal from Chechnya in 1996 as having been masterminded by corrupt politicians rather than reflecting the inability of the federal troops to win a decisive victory.[7] In 1994 the Chechens were still regarded by the Russian military as fellow citizens, albeit disobedient, while now the image of the whole Chechen nation is one of bloodthirsty criminals who respond to nothing but brute force.

3.2 Current Tactics

The current military strategy is based on the commitment not to risk the lives of Russian soldiers unless unavoidable, and on bombing the enemy into submission. During September the Russian military undertook air attacks against those parts of Chechnya where Islamist guerrillas were believed to be based. The air strikes were also aimed at destroying Chechen oil pumping stations and refineries with the aim of excluding Chechnya from the Caspian oil transit route. These tactics were combined with efforts to seal off the borders between Chechnya and the rest of Russia. In

[7] Russian military officers. Personal interviews in the North Caucasus, July 1999

September additional Interior Ministry troops were introduced to control the lowland borders of Dagestan and North Ossetia jointly with local self-defence groups. Borderguard troops were deployed in the highland border areas of Tsumada and Botlikh in Dagestan and in the Jeirakh region of Ingushetia. At the same time further Army and Interior Ministry units were brought into the North Caucasus from remote Russian regions.

The decision to invade Chechen territory appears to have been taken rather suddenly. It signifies the victory of the tougher line advocated by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Defence Minister Igor Sergeev over the more cautious option to create a buffer zone around Chechnya and undertake occasional punitive air raids, which reflected the desire above all to avoid a repeat of the humiliating defeat the Russian army suffered during the Chechen campaign of 1994-1996.

This time, however, the Russian side has a number of advantages compared to the first war:

- The campaign started in October in the hope of completing military operations in the lowlands before the onset of winter, which could be expected to lock the Chechen guerrillas in the mountains and block their supply and exit routes.

- Russian propaganda emphasising Chechen terrorism and the victory in Dagestan has produced a morale-boosting effect on the troops, and especially on the officers.

- Authorities and populations in the neighbouring regions and republics are more supportive of the federal troops and more hostile to their Chechen neighbours. This affects the availability of supply routes and Chechen capacity to sustain a long campaign.

- The most important factor is that the Chechen fighters are far less united internally, and it is unclear whether a unified command exists at all. In all probability, various field commanders control the situation in their own area, while the territory controlled by others is off-limits for their operations.[8] President Maskhadov, unlike Djohar Dudayev, has failed to emerge as a charismatic figure and the role of a genuine national leader has become vacant. Caught between militants and the Russians, Maskhadov's position is desperate, and his days even as a symbolic president may be numbered. Were he to be removed, an unstable council of leading field commanders would probably replace him. Moreover, ordinary Chechens are less enthusiastic about independence. As a result of three years of lawlessness and economic devastation, the relative stability of their North Caucasian neighbours has begun to seem more attractive. The mobilization declared by Maskhadov was met with less enthusiasm than before, and the popular response seems to be rather to flee than to fight.

[8] *RFE/RL Caucasus Report*, "Wanted: Negotiation Partner", Vol. 2, No. 46, 19 November 1999 (electronic format)

The federal troops try not to engage into frontal attacks, but to encircle the larger towns where fighters are believed to be based.[9] The calculation is that deprived of food, heating and electricity for weeks, exhausted Chechen fighters will become easier targets for the attackers. The danger of such tactics is that the Russian troops are likely to spend the winter in trenches in the foothills of Chechnya, and the effects of cold and dire living conditions will be even worse for the Russian army than for the Chechen fighters. The federal troops need to seize at least one of the main Chechen towns, preferably Grozny, to be able to install a Moscow-backed government there and claim a victory. In such a situation, even if the military campaign in the mountains then drags on for many months, Russian control of the lowland area would provide stronger defences against Chechen attacks for Stavropol *krai* on the steppe to the north of Chechnya.

Moscow's main challenge in Chechnya is a long-term political one. The present plan is to partition the republic into the lowland part, where a Russian-controlled puppet government will be set up, and the highland area, where the guerrillas are to be exterminated. In October a Moscow-based Chechen businessman, Malik Sadullayev, was appointed to head the pro-Moscow Chechen government. His home in Chechnya was burnt down the day after the announcement. Sadullayev was later replaced by Bislan Gantemirov, a former mayor of Grozny, accused of embezzlement of Russian financial aid to Chechnya and sentenced to a six-year prison term. Gantemirov was released from prison in order to play a key role in the government being organized by Moscow, but then tried to distance himself from the role of "Moscow puppet".[10]
The likely result will be that the Moscow-backed government will have even less authority than the Maskhadov one. Two other options include negotiations with Maskhadov, with severe conditions attached, or the setting up of a Russian colonial administration and dropping all pretence that the Chechens have a degree of self-rule. The former option was put forward by Grigorii Yavlinskii and his *Yabloko* party in November 1999, while the latter idea comes from Vladimir Zhirinovskii.

3.3 Humanitarian Disaster

Meanwhile, a mass exodus of civilians from Chechnya is underway. Estimates vary, but the likely figure is that the current population of Chechnya numbers between 500,000 and 600,000, and that most of them are on the move. The Russian Minister for Emergency Situations, Sergei Shoigu, has ruled out any need for international relief aid on the grounds that Russia has the capacity to cope on its own. Since the first Chechen campaign the activities of international relief agencies in the North Caucasus have acted as an irritant on the federal security services, who suspect them of spying and interference with Russian internal affairs. The main agencies in the region are UNHCR, Médecins-sans-Frontières and ICRC.

No agency now has a presence in or within easy reach of Chechnya, following the killings and kidnappings of expatriate aid workers. Humanitarian aid is distributed to those republican authorities who appeal for help, mainly to the government of Ingushetia, which has accepted over 200,000 civilian refugees. Other areas are taking

[9] *Itogi*, Alexandr Golts and Dmitrii Pinsker, "Voina Nevyuchennykh Urokov [War of Unlearnt Lessons]", No. 42 (19 October 1999), pp. 14-18

[10] *Itogi*, Alexandr Ryklin, "Marionetki na Gnilykh Nitkakh [Puppets on Rotten Cords]", No. 47 (23 November 1999), pp. 24-6

in refugees in relatively small numbers. Stavropol *krai* accepts mainly those refugees who are ethnic Russians, who numbered between 35,000 and 40,000 in Chechnya before the war. About 10,000 refugees have managed to cross into North Ossetia, which still also hosts refugees from South Ossetia (Georgia) and tries to prevent a new influx by any possible means. Up to 3,000 went into Georgia, but the mountain paths used by the refugees became inaccessible in November when winter set in. No movement across this border is now possible before spring comes.

Russia's rationale for limiting the assistance offered to the refugees from Chechnya is that the plight of civilians is temporary and that they will soon be moved back into the Russian-controlled parts of Chechnya. Shelter, fuel, electricity and medical supplies will be provided there so as to make the prospect of return more attractive in the hope that the extremely harsh living conditions in Ingushetia will encourage the refugee population to move back into Chechnya. At the end of November the Russian government started a resettlement programme designed to move refugees wanting to leave Ingushetia into seventeen regions in central and eastern Russia where there is a labour shortage. Neighbouring North Ossetia and Kabardino-Balkaria allow only transit migrants via their territories. Refugees are moved to Prokhladnenskoye in Kabardino-Balkaria under reinforced police guard, there to be put on trains and taken to Mineral'nye Vody in Stavropol *krai*, where they are allocated to further destinations. Refugees are resettled in depopulated rural areas where they form ethnic Chechen communities. There are no formal restrictions on their return to Chechnya, but it is assumed that they will stay for good and start a new life outside Chechnya. Many, however, are met with local resentment, such as when inhabitants of the Saratov and Volgograd regions protested against the relocation of Chechens to their territories, in however small numbers.[11]

4. TENSIONS IN KARACHAEVO-CHERKESSIA

4.1 Background

The Republic of Karachaevo-Cherkessia is among the most ethnically diverse in North Caucasus, and in the early 1990s had the highest number of "sovereign" republics proclaimed on its territory. The Karachai (38 per cent of the population; 67 per cent of whom are rural) are a Turkic people, while the Cherkess (10 per cent of the population; 62 per cent of whom are rural) are Circassians, a north west Caucasian people including the Kabard, the Adyge and the Cherkess who were split into three separate groups by the nationalities policies of the Stalin era. The Abaza (7 per cent of the population) are ethnically and politically related to the Cherkess. Russians (37 per cent in 1989, since then rapidly declining) generally align themselves with non-Karachai minorities. The Karachai are traditionally highlanders, while other groups live in the foothills.

Karachaevo-Cherkessia, which was formerly an autonomous *oblast* within Stavropol *krai*, was granted republic status in July 1991. Moscow's original intention was to recreate separate Karachai and Cherkess autonomous districts as they had existed

[11] Alexandr Dzadziev, Senior Research Fellow, Vladikavkaz Institute of Management. Presentation at the RIIA Conference on "Russia and the Caucasus: Rethinking Conflict Resolution", London, 30 November 1999

before the deportation of the Karachai in 1943, but the authorities of the republic convinced Moscow that such a policy could result in the collapse of inter-ethnic accord. Radical national movements called for further partition of the republic, without much success. This played into the hands of Vladimir Khubiev, the chief executive of the republic who ruled it for 19 years and was nicknamed "the everlasting Caucasian president". He managed to persuade Boris Yeltsin that elections in the republic would cause major disturbances and that the best option was to appoint the head of the republic (himself) by presidential decree - a temporary measure adopted in 1992 that lasted till 1999.

Throughout the 1990s the political history of the republic was turbulent but the battles were contained within the legal framework and never escalated into violence.[12] There was virtually no force in the republic able to challenge the incumbent president before Stanislav Derev, a Cherkess and head of the Merkurii enterprise which produces vodka and mineral water, was elected in October 1997 as the new mayor of Cherkessk, the capital. The presidential elections in January 1998 in North Ossetia and subsequent change of government there also had an effect. The pressure to have an elected head of the republic started to mount. In 1998 a group of deputies of the People's Assembly (the local parliament) appealed to the republic's Supreme Court, which ruled that elections must take place no later than 1 September 1998. The Supreme Court of the Russian Federation overturned the ruling. This led to open protests, demonstrations and direct appeals to Yeltsin to allow the elections to happen.

4.2 Presidential Election Contenders

The presidential elections which eventually took place in two rounds, in April and in May 1999, brought into prominence two main contenders, Vladimir Semenov (the Karachai candidate, though his mother is Russian) and Stanislav Derev. General Semenov, now in his sixties, was formerly the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Ground Troops. This is typical of the North Caucasian leaders of the 1990s (Aushev, Maskhadov, Dudayev), since a military career was one of the few opportunities for advancement in the North Caucasus in Soviet days.
Semenov is married to a Chechen woman and is believed to have enabled the Chechens to obtain weapons from the Russian troops in the early 1990s, when federal troops were withdrawn from Chechnya. Corruption allegations were brought against Semenov before the first Russian-Chechen war, but were never properly investigated. He is thought to possess substantial personal wealth and to retain strong ties with the Chechens.[13] So far, President Aushev is the only Caucasian leader to openly support Semenov, but his strong personality has started to generate respect for him in the region.

By contrast, Stanislav Derev, one of Russia's five "vodka barons", is a businessmen who made his fortune from the tax-free vodka trade and presently controls most of the vodka and mineral water production and distribution in the republic. Derev, a minority candidate, would never have been able to contest supreme power but for the backing of *Adyge Khase*, arguably the most powerful nationalist organization in the

[12] Anna Matveeva, *The North Caucasus: Russia's Fragile Borderland*, CACP Key Paper (London: RIIA, 1999), pp. 85-6

[13] Personal interviews. Stavropol krai and Kabardino-Balkaria, July 1999

North Caucasus. *Adyge Khase* was set up in 1985 as the national organization of the Circassian peoples (Adyge, Cherkess and Kabard). The organization's activities were first targeted on the promotion of the interests of the Circassians, raising awareness of their national identity, history and culture, and improving their political standing vis-à-vis other groups in the Caucasus. The Georgian/Abkhaz conflict raised the political profile of the organization. During that war it played an active role in providing military support to the Abkhaz side, and has set up a "Union of Abkhaz Volunteers of Adygeia" as the military wing of *Adyge Khase*.[14] The Union controls the distribution of weapons and maintains close ties between its constituent parts in different republics. At present, *Adyge Khase* is the only Caucasian organization not controlled by the state authorities which possesses all the essential components for a successful national struggle:

- a coherent ideology of unification of all Circassians and repossession of their historical homelands lost during Russian and Soviet rule;

- political structures active in all areas of Russia (including Moscow) and in the Caucasus wherever Circassians live;

- leaders in their thirties and forties who fought in the war in Abkhazia on a North Caucasian agenda, learning the lesson that a small, but determined ethnic group can win against a much larger, but less organized enemy;

- a military structure numbering up to 500 fighters, many of whom fought in Abkhazia, and reservists who can be called up in case of necessity.

- financial resources acquired mainly through the vodka trade and through arms smuggling.

Adyge Khase has its headquarters in Kabardino-Balkaria where the Circassians constitute a majority, though one prepared to show tolerance towards the minority Balkar (9 per cent of the population) who are not seen as serious rivals. The *Adyge Khase* nationalist agenda is potentially expansionist since they regard most of the north-west Caucasus as their traditional homelands.

4.3 Presidential Elections

When the electoral campaign started in the republic, this led to a series of intimidation attacks and terrorist bombings. Both sides sought to extend their alliances in the Caucasus. *Adyge Khase,* as a coherent organization compared to the loose Karachai groupings, was in the better position. It maintains close contacts with the Abkhaz, their former comrades in arms, and therefore tend to position themselves against the Georgians, who for their part are convinced, not without reason, that should hostilities reopen in Abkhazia, *Adyge Khase* would come to the support of their ethnic kin. Following this line of argument, the Georgian side started to support the Karachai in their contest against the Cherkess in the hope that the Abkhaz would be weakened if the main resources of *Adyge Khase* were to be diverted elsewhere. The picture was complicated even further by the role of the Chechens who fought alongside *Adyge*

[14] Zaur Borov, Chairman of the Union of Abkhaz Volunteers. Personal interview, Nalchik, July 1999.

Khase in Abkhazia, but who have since then developed strong links with the Georgians. The uncertainty over a possible Chechen role in the tense situation in Karachaevo-Cherkessia was resolved by the start of the second Russian-Chechen war, but other links are still actively maintained.

The presidential elections provoked much legal controversy and local violence. Derev, the front-runner in the first round in April, lost to Semenov in the second round in May amidst widespread electoral violations. The losing side did not accept the defeat and initiated a number of legal appeals, protest demonstrations and terrorist acts. The most serious was an initiative to split the republic into a highland Karachai part and a lowland Cherkess republic. The latter then intended to leave the dual-nationality unit and join Stavropol *krai* to which these territories originally belonged. This initiative was supported by other non-Karachai peoples, mostly Russians who started to leave the republic and head for Stavropol *krai* after the presidential elections.[15]

4.4 Moscow's Actions

The Russian government briefly introduced direct rule by Moscow over the unstable republic, but this failed to become established. Various Russian political players attempted to intervene in the conflict. For instance, the Moscow mayor Yurii Luzhkov (the leader of the "Fatherland - All Russia" movement) despatched an envoy to negotiate a deal between Semenov and Derev. The offer was to make one of them president and to allocate a seat in the Council of Federation (CF) to the other.[16] Since the CF members do not hold real power, unlike the chief executives of the republics, the deal was hardly attractive and failed to be accepted.

The media tycoon and Kremlin insider Boris Berezovskii has so far achieved greater success. The agreed deal is as follows. Semenov will be allowed to function as the republic's president, but he will have to submit to confirmation by referendum on 22 October 2000, one year after the Russian Supreme Court certified his May election victory. If the voters find his performance unacceptable, new elections will be held. The referendum will also include the question of whether to split the republic into Karachai and Cherkess parts.[17]

Berezovskii himself contested and won a seat in the State Duma (lower house of the Russian parliament) for Karachaevo-Cherkessia in the December 1999 elections. The reasons for his decision are unclear, but he has extensive business and political interests in the North Caucasus, dating back to his time as Deputy Secretary of the Security Council in 1996-1997. Since the present deal seems to have resolved nothing, apart from satisfying the personal ambitions of the two leaders, further destabilization cannot be ruled out. Moreover, local Russians have started to realize

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[15] The Stavropol *krai* authorities were confused about what they should do with these people since they were not in a strict sense refugees who had fled a war zone, but still needed to be looked after. Stavropol Migration Service and Danish Refugee Council. Personal interviews, Stavropol, July 1999

[16] Personal interview with close associate of Yurii Luzhkov at the Ditchley Park conference, Ditchley, June 1999

[17] *Russian Regional Report*, "Referendum Set for Karachaevo-Cherkesiya", Vol. 4, No. 40 (28 October 1999) (electronic format)

and articulate their own political interests more clearly and could play a prominent role in future struggles.[18]

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Georgia and Azerbaijan have been overtaken by too rapid a pace of events to be able to develop coherent policies. Moreover, the war in Chechnya began at the time of the campaign leading up to parliamentary elections in Georgia on 31 October, which required most of the government's political resources in order to win against the more pro-Russian party of Aslan Abashidze, the leader of Ajara. Both Georgia and Azerbaijan have had to state their positions on the issue of the new war in the Caucasus. This was difficult given that they each have their own separatist conflicts, but have supported the anti-Russian drive of the Chechen leadership.

There are, however, some immediate benefits stemming from the war in Chechnya. The oil transit route via Russian territory to Novorossiisk has been put out of operation by Russian air strikes on the Chechen oil transportation system and oil refineries. The Russian government intends to build a bypass via Dagestan, but this will take time and money. The present situation strengthens the claim that the Baku-Supsa route is the only viable option, which is to the immediate benefit of Georgia. Moreover, an agreement on a Baku-Ceyhan route was signed on the fringe of the OSCE Istanbul summit, in order to promote the export of Caspian oil via Turkey to Western markets, but the commercial viability of the deal is yet to be proved.

5.1 Georgia

Georgia appears the most affected. A Georgian-Chechen rapprochement had been underway since the end of the previous war, but relations were disturbed by the Chechen role in the Abkhazia war, by the kidnappings of 47 ethnic Georgians and by tension in the border areas between local Georgians and Kistin Chechens, who are an ethnic minority in Georgia. Since the start of the new war President Shevardnadze has come under pressure from the Maskhadov leadership to render assistance to the break-away republic. Maskhadov's government has opened a representative's office in Tbilisi and Vakha Arsanov, the Chechen vice-premier, spent a week in Tbilisi in October in negotiations with Georgian officials. According to Ruslan Abdurrazakov, deputy representative of the Chechen government in Tbilisi, Chechnya simply wants Georgia to keep open the road link between the countries, to provide information facilities for Chechnya in Tbilisi, and to use the good offices of President Shevardnadze to mediate in the conflict and attract Western attention to the war.[19]

According to the Russian Defence Ministry, however, Chechnya's demands are much wider and include seeking a commitment to accommodate Chechen political leaders and Chechen fighters, if and when these are forced to withdraw from Chechnya by Russian forces.[20] Russia is fearing that Georgia will sponsor a Chechen government-

[18] Svetlana Akkieva, Head of Department of Political and Social Studies, Kabardino-Balkar Institute of Humanities. Presentation at the RIIA conference on "Russia and the Caucasus: Rethinking Conflict Resolution", London, 30 November 1999

[19] Ruslan Abdurrazakov. Personal interview, Tbilisi, 7 October 1999

[20] *Jamestown Foundation Monitor*, "What Looms Behind Russia's Propaganda Campaign?", Vol. 5, No. 211(12 November 1999) (electronic format)

in-exile and provide a haven for some of the fighters loyal to the leader of the Chechen government. Given the intense Chechen diplomacy and efforts to influence public opinion in Georgia, as well as the Georgian government's agreement to accommodate some important Chechens, Russian concerns might well not be without grounds.

The other contentious issue is the Chechen-Georgian border. Georgia shares with Chechnya 80 km of the only part of the external border of the Russian Federation which Russia cannot control, and has committed itself to building a highway across it. Agreement to build a road was reached between Djohar Dudayev and Zviad Gamsakhurdia in 1991, but the project failed to start when the latter lost office. The idea was revived in 1997 during the period of Georgian-Chechen rapprochement and the attempts to create a united front against Russia. Construction of the road on the Chechen side was completed in 1998, but 200 metres remained on the Georgian side of the border. This did not prevent weapons and hostages from Georgia to be carried into Chechnya on horseback. Kistin Chechens who live in the border area are believed to play a part in this traffic. There are also reports of growth of Islamism among the Kistins and of their ties to the Islamist guerrillas. This, however, may amount to little, since the Kistin Chechen community only numbers between 8,000 and 9,000. The most important issue is that of conflicts between Kistins and the local, predominantly Georgian police, which have led to a number of killings of policemen and increased tension between the two ethnic groups in Akhmetov *rayon*.[21]

In retaliation for Georgia's using its access to Chechnya as a bargaining counter vis-à-vis Russia, the latter has threatened to lift its blockade of Abkhazia which was imposed in 1995 under pressure from Georgia. So far, some restrictions on the movement of people have been lifted, but the border remains closed for commercial goods. If this were to change, this would mean further incorporation of the break-away republic into the economic and social space of the Russian Federation. The current policies of the Georgian leadership are risky, but may potentially bring results since they have acquired a strong card which they can play against Russia. Such policies, however, are met with misgivings by the wider Georgian public, who fear the Chechens because of the possibility of a spillover of crime, but also for their Islamic connections and for the role they played in Abkhazia. Therefore, the highway building project, for instance, was greeted with widespread apprehension.[22]

Meanwhile, the Russian military are determined to gain access to the Chechen-Georgian border and to open a second front in the highland area of Chechnya. Currently, Russia's demands include joint patrolling with the Georgian borderguards of the Chechen sector of the border, the right to use Georgian military airports for air strikes against Chechnya - a demand which Shevardnadze readily accepted during the 1994-1996 war - and the right of passage for Russian ground troops through Georgian territory in order to establish the second front.

So far, these demands have yielded no results. Relations were further aggravated by the Russian bombing of Georgian territory next to the Chechen border - most probably by mistake - which resulted in human casualties in Shatili in November

[21] Kakhaber Dzebisashvili. Personal interview, Tbilisi, 11 October 1999

[22] Vakhtang Kolbaia, Deputy Speaker of the Georgian Parliament. Personal interview, Tbilisi July 1999

1999. An alternative option, which the Russian military may pursue in the longer term, would be to seal off the border of Chechnya from the Russian side and let the destabilization of the war zone spill over into Georgia.

At present, Georgian-Russian relations are at a low point. Suspicious of the transit of weapons and fighters via Georgian territory which apparently takes place,[23] albeit the scale of it might be exaggerated by Moscow, Russia has resorted to putting economic pressure on Georgia through restrictions on the transport of goods and people. Putin ordered the abolition of visa-free travel between Russia and Georgia and Azerbaijan and enforcement of the visa regime on citizens of the two countries, who live and work in Russia. All airline flights from Baku and Tbilisi to the North Caucasus and Southern Russia are suspended, and goods imports and passenger traffic from Turkey and Iran to Russia via Azerbaijan and Georgia are temporary banned.[24]

5.2 Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan, like Georgia, has been engaged in courting the Maskhadov leadership since the beginning of the first Russian-Chechen war. Nevertheless, it plays a more cautious game than Georgia. Azerbaijan cannot afford to alienate neighbouring Dagestan where anti-Chechen sentiment is strong and where Azeri-Lezgin tensions might be rekindled. Closure of the Russian-Azerbaijani border, if it takes full effect, could potentially deal a severe blow to Azerbaijani trade, the major bulk of which goes to or via Russia. Azerbaijan could also suffer indirectly from the drive to expel Caucasians from the major Russian towns, since between 1.5 and 2 million Azerbaijani citizens are estimated to live in Russia, mainly in or in the close vicinity of large cities. The Moscow government, for instance, threatened to organize "voluntary deportation" of Caucasians to their places of permanent residence. The likelihood of mass deportation is perhaps small, given the chaotic nature of the Russian state, but many Azeris could be forced to leave by systematic harassment. In the worst case, they will join the ranks of the unemployed in the impoverished countryside of Azerbaijan. At the beginning of October 12,000 had already returned to Azerbaijan. The estimates are that the return of 100,000 could seriously destabilize the internal situation.[25]

In this situation President Heidar Aliev moved towards improving relations with Moscow and got the imposition of visa restrictions reversed. Some of the senior figures in the Azerbaijani leadership were dismissed, including Vafa Guluzade, presidential adviser on foreign policy.

Apart from the dangers of a forced exodus of ethnic Azeris from Russia, other factors can also be assumed:

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[23] *Oxford Analytica Daily Brief*, "Caucasus Chaos", 5 October 1999

[24] *Jamestown Foundation Monitor*, "Economic Arm-Twisting", Vol. 5, No. 211 (12 November 1999) quoting *ITAR-TASS*, 10 November 1999

[25] Arif Yunusov, Presentation to the Eastwest Institute & FEWER Joint Conference on "Mapping Local and International Actors in Conflict Prevention in the South Caucasus", Tbilisi, 9-10 October 1999

- Growth of Islamic sentiment in Azerbaijan, which is not only anti-Russian but also anti-Western. Russia fears that pro-Islamic Chechen fighters if driven out of Chechnya could find refuge in Azerbaijan, while more secular pro-Maskhadov troops would go to Georgia. In return, the Chechens would help Azerbaijan regain Karabakh by force on the basis of Islamic solidarity. Pronouncements to this effect have already been made by some Chechen refugees arriving in Azerbaijan.[26] President Aliev is determined to protect his country from Islamic radicalism, and may be prepared to co-operate with Russia on that issue.

- Potential gain from the cooling-off of Russian-Iranian relations. In the 1990s Iran was Russia's sole ally in the Caspian sea basin while the other Caspian littoral states favoured relations with the U.S. Azerbaijani-Iranian relations are particularly strained because of the presence of a large Azeri minority in Iran and competition around Caspian oil pipelines. Since the beginning of the Russian military intervention in Chechnya Iran has been critical of Moscow's actions and relations have deteriorated. In these circumstances Aliev took the opportunity to boost his country's position vis-à-vis Iran.

- Negotiations for a settlement of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. On-going negotiations throughout the 1990s have not brought much tangible result, partly owing to the fact that neither side was prepared to enter substantive bargaining, but rather conducted "negotiations-about-negotiations". Presently the situation might be changing, and there are signs that the conflicting sides are more committed to making real progress. President Aliev probably feels that Azerbaijan's position cannot be strengthened any further; on the contrary, there is a real risk of its weakening. Firstly, Azerbaijan's oil resources have proved to be much more limited than expected. Secondly, the President is ageing and in apparently poor health and might not survive much longer. In the event of his death and subsequent infighting for the leadership position the Karabakh issue could become a platform for a bid for power, and renewed fighting with potentially disastrous consequences for Azerbaijan cannot be ruled out. Therefore, a settlement of the Karabakh conflict is best concluded soon. Russian help or at least non-interference by Russia, who is fully absorbed by Chechnya, could be very useful.

In return for the relaxation of visa requirements, Aliev allowed limited Russian inspection of locations on Azerbaijani territory suspected by the military of being used for terrorist purposes. He also reinforced the Azerbaijani-Russian border, refused to allow large numbers of Chechen refugees into Azerbaijan unless they could stay with relatives, and finally promised to modify his pro-Western orientation. The dismissal of key officials who had been responsible for the pro-American stance was presented to Russia in this light, although it cannot be ruled out that this was more of a pretext to conceal internal infighting.

The results of these policies have been mixed. Russian-Azerbaijani relations have not deteriorated to the same extent as Russia's relations with Georgia. However, suspicion remains on the Russian side that Azerbaijani territory is being used as a transit route for fighters and supplies from Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Middle East into Chechnya with the tacit agreement of the authorities. Moreover, policies intended to

[26] Arif Yunusov. Personal interview, Tbilisi, 10 October 1999

drive out the Azeris from Russia, even those who are totally unrelated to terrorist activities, are very popular with the Russian public.

6. SIGNIFICANCE OF RUSSIAN POLITICS

The second Chechen war has brought huge political dividends at home in Russia, despite increasing Western criticism of the campaign and its uncertain political and security prospects. For the first time since the break up of the Soviet Union the feeling of national humiliation is starting to be replaced by a belief that Russia is still able to project power if needed. This feeling comes especially timely in an electoral year, with parliamentary elections taking place in December 1999 and presidential ones in March 2000. The war in Chechnya was perhaps not started in order to promote Prime Minister Putin to succeed Boris Yeltsin as the new Russian president, but the initial success of the campaign was used to build up his career and popular image of a "tough" politician. Since he does not seem to have other attractive qualities, such as those of a deliverer of economic miracles or a charismatic "father of the nation", the Chechen campaign is his primary launch pad. Having been selected by the Kremlin insider establishment to inherit supreme power in the country in return for his loyalty to the Kremlin Family, Putin has acquired a rapidly increasing approval rate among the wider Russian public. Whether this may lead him to attempt to play a more independent role in politics and distance himself from the Kremlin insider circles, remains to be seen.

The success of the Chechen campaign has also promoted the senior military commanders into the political arena. The army, so far seen as victorious, has reasserted itself as a legitimate player in the political process. The generals in Chechnya, like Chief of General Staff Anatolii Kvashnin and Commander of the Western Group of Russian forces in Chechnya Vladimir Shamanov, are no longer regarded as engaged in corruption and neglecting their troops in need, but as tough and responsible leaders. It was Putin's hard line towards Chechnya that created such opportunities, at the same time as it brought additional material resources into the army. If military success can be sustained, this could be the chance for the military to become the backbone of Putin's new regime. However, since the decisive battles in Chechnya still lie ahead, the war could backfire very dangerously and lead to further humiliation and defeat for the Russian military.[27]

7. CONCLUSIONS

It appears that the war in Chechnya is unlikely to destabilize the North Caucasian region and that the violence, however prolonged it might be, will be contained within the borders of the break-away republic. At the same time, the war against the Chechens is transforming Russia itself as a political entity. This is the force driving the apparent tendency towards ethnic homogeneity: Russians prefer to move out of the North Caucasus rather than fight for their rights, and Caucasians, whether they are Chechens or not, are being driven out of ethnically Russian areas. This trend leaves the North Caucasians uncertain about their place in a more reassertive Russia, and is

[27] *Kommersant-Vlast*, Ilya Bulavinov, "Novogodnii Salut Otmenyaetsya [New Year Fireworks Are Cancelled]", No. 46 (23 November 1999), pp. 12-13

especially hard on those Chechens who left Chechnya for good to establish a new life elsewhere in the Russian Federation.

In case Russia manages to solve "the Chechen problem" by force, i.e. gain control of all urban settlements and push the fighters into the highlands, the Chechen side is bound to rely on Georgia as its main ally in the South Caucasus, and to try to get as much assistance from Azerbaijan as it can.

This will inevitably result in further deterioration of Russian-Georgian relations and Russia's more overt and decisive support for its client regimes of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Ajara. Russia learnt the lesson in the 1990s that it is better to support those loyal to it in the region and to accept that "one's enemy's enemy is one's friend", rather than to seek to apply universal principles in situations which are politically inconvenient. Translated into policy, this means *de facto* incorporation of Georgia's opponents into Russia's social and economic space and reinforced political dynamics.[28]

The Karabakh conflict has developed into a separate problem far less affected by the events in the North Caucasus. The Lezgin situation also remains stable, which in many ways is owing to President Aliev's steady rule. Moreover, Azerbaijani Lezgins now consider their situation of being separated from Dagestan as fortunate, since they are protected from the spillover of instability from Chechnya by an international border.

[28] As noted by Liana Kvarchelia, UN Volunteers community facilitator from Abkhazia: "During the first war, Russia closed its border with us because of the war, this time [when the second war had started] it opened its border with us because of the war." Liana Kvarchelia, presentation at the RIIA conference on "Russia and the Caucasus: Rethinking Conflict Resolution", London, 30 November 1999

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