



## NORTH CAUCASUS

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

By Uwe Halbach, Berlin

### Abstract

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

### A Region of Divisions

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

### Interfaces between North and South Caucasus

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Conclusion

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

### *About the Author*

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## Religious Identity and Conflict in Dagestan

By Manarsha Isaeva, Berlin

### Abstract

This article examines the links between religious identity and the on-going insurgency in Dagestan. It explains why the Salafi continue to feel aggrieved and struggle against established religious leaders who are backed by the Russian state.

### Towards Understanding the Salafi Identity Construction

The spread of the Salafi movement in Dagestan began in the 1970s. Due to the restrictions imposed on religion and as a consequence of the secret nature of the Salafi group, there was no public discourse on Salafism during the Soviet period. A new page for the movement started in the early 1990s following the collapse of the communist regime. A group of Salafi preachers spoke out for peaceful means of propounding Islam and for a dialogue with the government and representatives of Sufi Islam. The most prominent individual among them was Akhmed Kadi Akhtaev, the Chairman of the Islamic Revival Party, founded in 1990. The second branch of the Islamic Revival Party, led by Bagauddin Kebedov, is known for preaching ideas that are incompatible with the Russian secular state. Later Kebedov played an active role in the incursion into Dagestan by militant groups (Jihadi-Salafists among them) from the adjacent Chechnya in 1999. After the extension of the conflict from Chechnya to Dagestan, researchers observed a positive correlation between Salafism and violent incidents. In August 1999 insurgents took control of four villages in Bujnaski District (Kadar Zone), announced a “separate Islamic territory” and enforced Sharia laws. After the visit of the Russian Minister of Internal Affairs Sergei Stepashin to the Kadar Zone in August 1998, the explosive situation promised a peaceful resolution. Both sides reached a verbal agreement not to challenge each other’s mutual authority and to adhere to nonviolence. However, upon Stepashin’s return to Moscow, the Kremlin opted for a military approach to responding to the Salafi challenge. The deployment of heavy arms drove insurgents out of the Zone in September 1999.

Salafi is interchangeable with Wahhabi in Russian public discourse. The latter has obtained a negative connotation since Wahhabism is legally forbidden and the term refers to a foreign Saudi element which is often considered extremist. According to the Norwegian researcher of violent Islamism Thomas Hegghammer, both Salafism and Wahhabism do not represent a political doctrine, but a theological tradition.

Parallel to these events in August 1999 the joint Chechen–Dagestani insurgent Islamic International Peacekeeping Brigade, led by Emir Khattab of Saudi

origin, crossed the Dagestani border from Chechnya. Fighters announced the creation of a Pan-Caucasian Islamic state as their ultimate goal denying the authority of the Russian state and the local secular institutions by doing so. The Center for Strategic International Studies reports connections between insurgents in Dagestan and the international terrorist movement during this period. Along with tactical support and funding through benevolent organizations, such external involvement included foreign militants. Ground operations and fights between the state military forces and insurgents lasted for two months until the Brigade withdrew back to Chechnya.

For the Salafi movement the peculiarities of both events in the Kadar Zone and at the Chechen–Dagestani border marked the point of no return in their battle for freedom of religious expression within Russian borders. In September 1999 the Dagestani parliament adopted a law prohibiting any Salafi activities in response to the deteriorating security situation. Secular and religious officials framed Salafists as terrorists, who were both radical and violent, while the media noted that their adherence to Sharia laws was incompatible with Russian secular laws.

During the subsequent years Salafists from Dagestan were held accountable for numerous insurgent activities in the republic and in Moscow. The war evolved from positional battles during the incursion from Chechnya in 1999 to guerilla warfare. Beyond underground activities in villages and cities, insurgents set up ammunition storage locations in the highlands and trained recruits in mobile camps. Numerous attacks were directed against civilian and military human targets in populated areas. The most famous incidents of the conflict in Dagestan killed 42 civilians during a Victory Day parade in the city Kaspiysk in 2002, and claimed the life of Dagestani Interior Minister Adilgeri Magomedtagirov in 2009. In Moscow fighters carried out suicide attacks in public spaces like a metro station in 2010 and Domodedovo airport in 2011. One of the portraits of violence is the increased number of victims among Sufi imams and Sheikhs since the escalation in 2010. The two prominent sheikhs, Sirazutdin Khurikskiy and Said Afandi Chirkeyskiy, were assassinated respectively in 2011 and 2012. In 2013 the conflict killed at least 341 persons and injured 300 in Dagestan alone.

Since 2007 the insurgent movement in the Caucasus has been connected to the Caucasus Emirate—a self-proclaimed Islamic state within the North Caucasus borders. The Emirate is composed of seven territorial units, one of which is the Dagestan Vilayat. This Vilayat includes a number of smaller units—djamaats. As many as a dozen djamaats were reported to be active in Dagestan during the period 1999–2012. Unfortunately, there is little information on the exact numbers and structures because of the constant changes within these groups. Responsibility for these violent activities is attributed to one of these units, which operates across Dagestan in the highlands and plains, including areas that are inhabited by most of the ethnic groups living in the republic. It is not possible to blame the violence on one particular ethnic group to the exclusion of the others.

Clearly, the conflict in Chechnya has encouraged the spread of the Salafi doctrine in both its regular and jihadi forms in neighboring Dagestan. Experiences in Chechnya predetermined the way the state countered Salafism in the country, in general, and in Dagestan, in particular.

### Sufi–Salafi Antagonism

Probably one of the most far reaching consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union in Dagestan was the revival of Islam. As Cracow University of Economics researcher of Islam in the Caucasus Dobroslawa Wiktor-Mach has noted, the contemporary worldwide Islamic revival encompasses various processes (Wiktor-Mach 2011: 395). In Dagestan scholars have recognized two outstanding processes in this regard: the revival of traditional Sufi Islam and the proliferation of Salafi Islam. Transformation of religious identities in Dagestani society in this period should be considered along with the associated developments inside these currents. Two polar examples on this subject are the radicalization of traditional Sufi Islam, on the one hand, and the development of political Salafi Islam, on the other. The complexities of these developments within the different branches of Islam have not been fully addressed in the public discourse, which describes the conflict in a simplified manner as the sectarian division between Salafi and Sufi Islam. In the following section, I outline how tensions between the Sufi clergy and newcomers emerged. In order to do so, I first describe the conditions under which religious interaction evolved. Then, the defining ideas of the Salafi doctrine are presented, which help us to understand the nature of the alienation.

By 1998 an estimated 5–7 percent of the population practiced Salafism in Dagestan. The rapid spread of Salafism since then is associated with growing contacts made by young Dagestani students in the Middle East and various exchanges with the Muslim world. Equipped with

rich knowledge on religion in the Islamic world, Salafists were successful in promoting their ideas. Without sufficient competence in the Arabic language, Sufi religious clerics appeared incompetent in religious disputes compared to the younger generation, which had been educated in the Arab world. In the struggle for power and influence, the Sufi clergy relied on the full support of the state authorities. The republican leadership and religious officialdom created the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of Dagestan (SBMD). This institution is known for its deeply embedded hierarchy and exclusionary personnel policy. It is dependent on the state authorities and, accordingly, led the rhetorical fight against Salafism during recent decades. This factor has strongly affected the instrumental marginalization and delegitimization attempts against Salafists. Despite this persecution and the authorities' efforts to deny it the right to exist, the movement has survived. Salafi mosques appeared in cities and villages parallel to Sufi and popular Islam's places of worship; public arguments between scholars of the two schools became common. By 2010 the newly appointed Dagestani President Magomedov's more moderate approach to the Salafi issue coincided with the tolerated public appearance of the Salafi organization Ahlu-Sunna.

Despite the uniting ideal of the sharia state shared by most Sufis and Salafists, a division based on distinctive perceptions of identities between both currents is apparent. The cleavage lay in the essence of Salafi preaching, which denounces Sufism as an illegitimate way of practicing Islam. One of the basic features of Salafism is the struggle against *bid'a*—new elements of late Islamic origin. Many Sufi practices, like veneration of saints or celebration of the prophet's birthday, count, according to Salafists, as illegitimate innovations in Islam. Not only is the conflict between both currents based on differences in theological interpretations, the aggravation of the cleavage happened thanks to the close ties of Sufi Islam with the state-controlled religious institutional structure. Local elites, many of whom hold membership in a Sufi school or are related to the structures of the SBMD, made sure that one-sided anti-Salafi rhetoric and politics stayed on the agenda. Not to be forgotten is the role played in the public discourse by state-controlled media, which contributed to the aggravated perception of the division through the enforcement of an "us" and "them" dichotomy. The division between Sufism and Salafism finds expression at the local level of villages, where neighbors can attend either Sufi or Salafi mosques. Religious disputes have become a source of arguments dividing families between children and parents.

Jean-François Ratelle, who conducted ethnographic research in Dagestan, describes how in recent decades the Salafi social world has developed. In the matter of

physical appearance, Salafis distinguish themselves by a specific clothing style. Due to the nature of the Salafi doctrine and its alienation from other groups, its followers express their identity more strongly than adherents of Sufism. In general, external actors play an important role in shaping tensions between Sufi and Salafi forms of Islam. The ideological differences have been instrumentally accumulated and exacerbated in order to legitimize state security policies in the region.

Despite the governmental repressions and frequent opposition from the civilian population, the Salafi group has been gaining more supporters. The shared Salafi identity and feelings of persecution appear to be a uniting force within this network.

### Targeted Persecution against the Salafi Movement

Many reports of human rights organizations describe how an individual's Salafi religious identity may make them a target of repeated police abuse and persecution on a daily basis. Much of the current practices of the local law enforcement forces are the legacy of the Chechen Wars. The same patterns of forced, extrajudicial killings, gruesome methods of torture at police stations and prisons have been reported and documented by local journalists and human rights advocates in Dagestan (the NGO PravoZashita and the internet Portal Kavkaz-uzel.ru are the two most prominent among them). These practices are the one key factor why insurgents are reluctant to put their arms down during the so called anti-terrorist operation, even when they face choosing between surrendering and being killed. Only in a small number of cases (total 46 since 2010) have individuals related to the insurgency been given a chance to go through a special commission of reintegration and a court trial to eventually return to civilian life.

As is the case in a civil war, the victims of the abuse extend beyond jihadi Salafists. Since the legal prohibition of Wahhabism in 1999, the fight against the movement has evolved on institutional and individual levels. Any person, who has been noticed visiting Salafi mosques, finds himself in a risk category for police repression. Physical signs, such as displaying Salafi dress styles, like men wearing beards or short pants, constitute grounds for police to interrogate individuals. In the case of women, a black abaya or veiled face are encountered with apprehension by people and suspicion by security forces. The most infamous strategies of the struggle against Salafists included efforts to eliminate physical signs of Salafi identity. As one example, local police used discriminate violence to forcefully shave the beards of approximately 150 visitors to the mosque in the village Sovetskoje in 2011. Also facing the dan-

ger of being persecuted are family members of the former and current insurgents and Salafists. Ratelle found that even persons showing strong religious devotion are exposed to becoming victims of targeted religious profiling and abuse. As a result, the repression against individuals of Salafi identity produces a highly antagonistic social context in which the continuation of the vicious cycle of violence is favored.

### Conclusion

The religious component is a key factor which cannot be overlooked when analyzing the conflict in Dagestan. This article set out to investigate the underlying conditions explaining the construction of a violent religious identity. Since the violence is attributed to one Salafi identity group, the task was to give an insight into the mechanism that allowed linking the current conflict in Dagestan and the religious identity of Salafists.

My observations suggest that since the onset of the Chechen war, religious identities in Dagestan have experienced unprecedented transformations. Some processes, such as the appearance of various currents in Islam, emerged directly after the collapse of the Soviet state. The spread of Salafism is a process that was launched by the general revival of Islam. The violent developments in Chechnya and later in Dagestan shaped the peculiarities of the movement in Dagestan. From the very start of the conflict, the moderate wing of the movement found itself with no public voice. During the later stages, the construction and the public perception of the Salafi identity group were influenced and even directed by the political elites.

The findings of this article suggest that the established public and, in some instances, academic discourse labeling the Salafists does not reflect the actual involvement of the group members in incidences of violence. Only the minority Jihadi-Salafists participate in violent activities, while the majority Salafi group is the victim of repression and persecution. Furthermore, the labeling contributes to the maintaining of the division between Salafism and Sufism. This phenomenon, in connection with other explanations, is the facilitator in the conflict. Structural conditions exacerbated by triggering factors may motivate young men, who are not necessarily ideologically committed, to join the insurgency.

Religion was often used in the Caucasus to rally people. Sufi leaders used it to mobilize the oppressed peoples of Dagestan in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Once again religious ideology, this time Salafism, is being exploited to unite young men behind the insurgency.

*Please find information about the author and tips for further reading overleaf.*

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Manarsha Isaeva has just completed BA in Political Science at the Free University of Berlin and works at the Society for Threatened Peoples in Berlin.

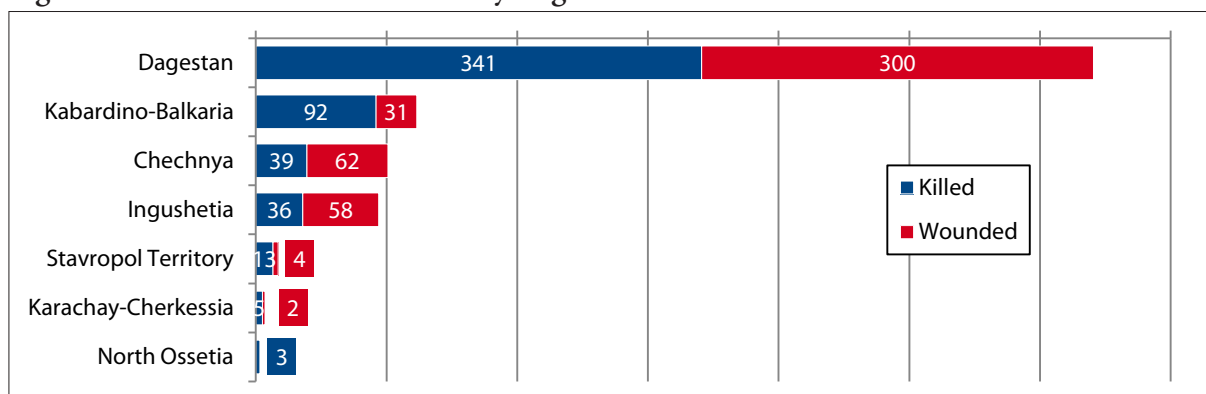
*Further Reading:*

- Ratelle, Jean-François (2013): Radical Islam and the Chechen War Spillover: a Political Ethnographic Reassessment of the Upsurge of Violence in the North Caucasus since 2009. PhD Thesis. University of Ottawa.
- Ware, Robert & Kisriev Enver (2003): Political Islam in Dagestan. In *Europe-Asia Studies* 55 (2), pp. 287–302.

## STATISTICS

## Victims of the Conflict in the North Caucasus 2013

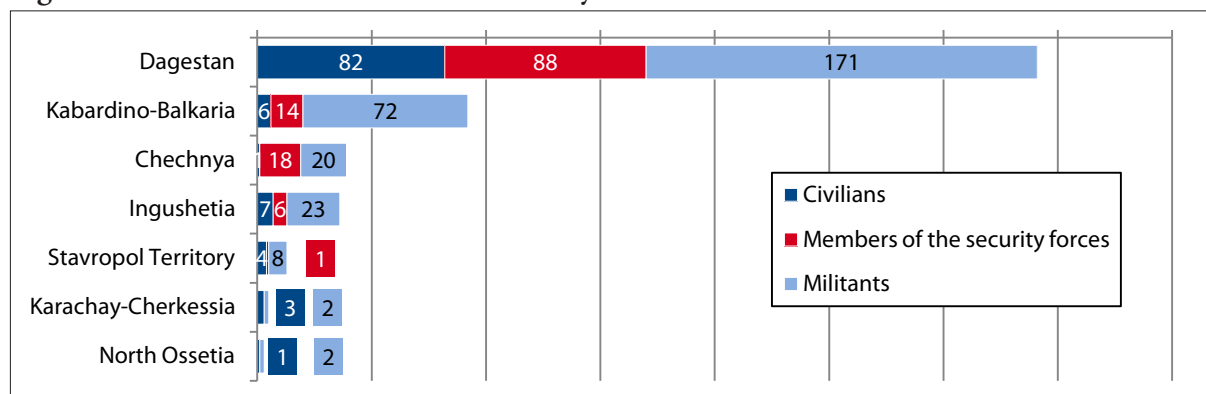
Figure 1: Total Numbers of Victims by Region



Total number of victims: 986; total number of wounded: 457; total number of killed: 529.

Source: <<http://eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/27109/>>

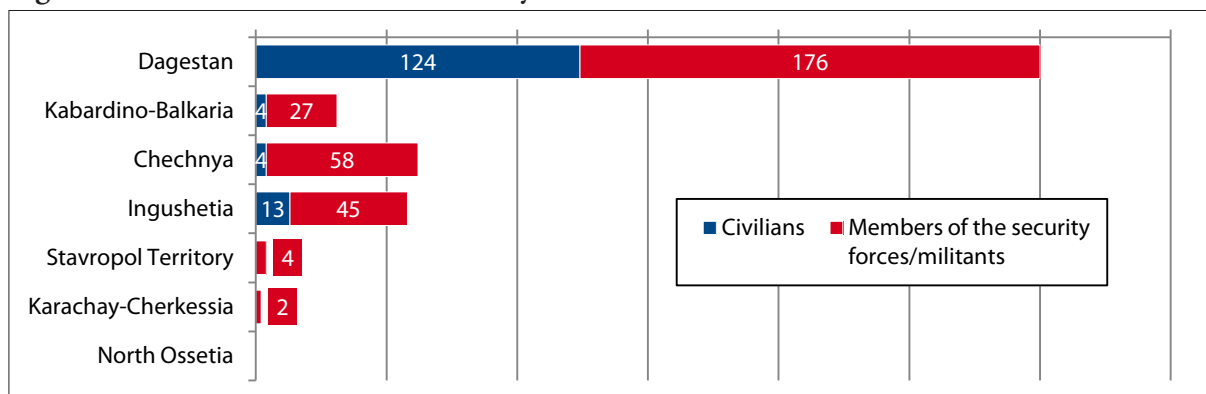
Figure 2: Total Numbers of Killed Persons by Status



Total number of killed persons: 529; total number of civilians killed: 104; total number of members of the security forces killed: 127; total numbers of militants killed: 298.

Source: <<http://eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/27109/>>



**Figure 3: Total Numbers of Wounded by Status**

Total number of wounded: 457; total number of civilians wounded: 145; total number of members of the security forces and militants wounded: 312.

Source: <<http://eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/27109/>>

## ANALYSIS

## Russian Cossacks in Service of the Kremlin: Recent Developments and Lessons from Ukraine

By Tomáš Baranec, Tbilisi

### Abstract

As a result of the February 2014 Cossack militia attack on Pussy Riot's punk singers during their protest action at the Sochi Olympics, Russian Cossacks finally attracted the attention of the Western media. Despite this exceptional coverage, the phenomenon of the Cossacks as a constantly rising and well organized government-backed group remains largely unknown to Western readers. Nevertheless, Cossacks registered for state service are starting to play an increasingly significant role in both Russian domestic and foreign policies; in fact they have already become a symbol and backbone of Putin's new traditionalist ideology. This article seeks to establish a basic understanding of this new and dynamic phenomenon. The process is the result of both spontaneous developments and a top-down Kremlin policy. Understanding how the government is using the Cossacks helps us outline the possible strategy behind the rise of the Cossacks and the potential consequences of this development.

### Cossacks as an Unbound Force and Cossacks as Servants to the Throne

Although the idea of Cossacks serving the Russian state re-emerged in 1994 under Yeltsin when the government adopted a "State Policy Concept regarding the Cossacks," it would be a mistake to assume that the reappearance of the Cossack hosts, which had largely been destroyed by Bolshevik persecutions, was a top-down process. In fact, Yeltsin's aim was not to support the rise of the Cossacks but rather to tame their sharp upsurge through legislative measures and by creating official agencies, such as the General Director-

ate of Cossack Troops under the aegis of the Russian Federation President.

As early as 1990, representatives of spontaneously reestablished Cossack communities throughout Russia organized a Big Cossack Circle<sup>1</sup> in Moscow. This gathering resulted in the formation of the Congress of the Union of Cossacks of Russia with its own constitution and the emergence of the Council of Atamans and Ataman government as major organs of the Union, abso-

<sup>1</sup> The Cossack Circle was traditionally the highest organ of Cossack self-government.

lutely independent of the government in the Kremlin. A year later, in the environment of chaos accompanying the disintegration of the Soviet Union, several Cossack autonomous republics spontaneously proclaimed their existence in South Russia. As an addition, self-proclaimed Cossack paramilitary “police” groups appeared in some of these regions, fighting minor criminality with their fists and whips, often targeting “people of Caucasian appearance.” Under these circumstances, Yeltsin’s administration had no choice but to legislatively regulate the already existing, well-organized and, in some ways, dangerous Cossack movement rather than actually supporting its rise. And indeed, between 1996 and 1998, 17 Cossack hosts were established throughout Russia (under the terms outlined by Yeltsin’s government), to replace many heterogeneous, chaotic and often potentially threatening groups. Cossacks as a potentially rebellious independent force were effectively neutralized by this time, without any suppression, but through the application of legislative and bureaucratic tools.

However, the existing status quo was undermined during Vladimir Putin’s second term, when in 2005 he introduced the law “On the State Service of Russian Cossacks.” This legislation created the legal basis for Cossacks who were willing to enter state service to do so officially, thus dividing Russian Cossackdom into groups which were either registered under the direct control of the government or un-registered and ruled by their own independent decision-making bodies. In fact, twelve of the sixteen laws, government decrees or amendments involving Cossacks that were adopted during the past 20 years were passed after Putin’s ascent to power.

Nevertheless, the sharp rise of organised Cossackdom began during Putin’s third term in office as president, following the massive demonstrations in 2012. In the last two years, official Cossack militias started to patrol several regions, especially in turbulent Southern Russia, new cadet schools are being opened, and even a Cossack University is supposed to be established as part of Moscow State University. As the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces Nikolai Makarov stated, the Kremlin also plans to create four new, solely Cossack brigades within the Russian army. Simultaneously, voices are rising to resettle Cossacks from Kazakhstan to “problematic areas” of the North Caucasus, potentially reviving the old Tsarist policy of Cossacks conquering borderlands with sword and plough. Taking into account the fact that the Kremlin’s main policy toward the Cossacks for more than one decade had been to tame their often exploding activism, one can wonder what is the reason for such a rapid change in attitude. The only way to at least partially explain Putin’s intentions is to analyse the ways Cossack services have been used in the last two years.

## Cossack Whip

Probably the most visible role for the registered Cossacks is their assistance with suppressing mass displays of discontent with Kremlin policies and their emblematic role as symbols and guardians of Putin’s traditionalistic policies. The first signs of this role appeared in connection with the Olympic Games in Sochi. In the shadow of the terrorist threat that occupied a big part of the police and army presence, registered Cossacks were chosen to suppress expected demonstrations by autochthonous Circassians and anti-government activists in Sochi. This role was well illustrated during the scandal surrounding the Cossack patrol’s use of whips against members of Pussy Riot.

Another role for registered Cossacks is the patriotic education of youth, which is seen most vividly in the ever-growing number of Cossack cadet schools all over Russia. These institutions usually welcome children from problematic families, are equipped much better than average Russian schools, and provide their students with hours of martial arts education, military training and lessons in Russian patriotism.<sup>2</sup> Thus groups of young men are being educated in line with the official state ideology to become the future military and police elite of the state.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin is attempting to strengthen conservative tendencies among registered Cossacks, bringing them even more in line with the official ideology. Currently, the church works as the state’s ally, especially after the head of the Synodic Committee for Cooperation with the Cossacks of Stavropol and Nevinnomyssk Kirill introduced “the five commandments of Cossacks” to enhance the spiritual life of Cossacks on December 2013.

Signs of collaboration between registered Cossacks and the government appear not only in the sphere of ideology and spirituality, but also in actual politics. Vyacheslav Pilipenko, who was an aide to Alexander Khloponin, former envoy of the President for the North Caucasus Federal District, was chosen to be the Terek Cossacks’ new ataman. At the same time, Pilipenko retained his government position as Khloponin’s aide. Through this dual appointment, the state has essentially taken over the Terek Cossacks and the Terek Cossacks boosted their influence on developments in the volatile North Caucasus. At this moment registered Cossacks present a force that can become not just a symbol of the Kremlin’s neo-conservatism, but also a tool

2 For more detailed information on Cossack Kadet schools see: Marie Jégo, “Cossack Cadets fill a gap in Russia’s sense of security and patriotism,” *Guardian weekly*, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/26/russia-cossacks-cadets-volgograd>>, (accessed: 5 June 2014)

of repression against those who openly protest against current state policies.

The rise of the registered Cossacks appears to be also tightly linked with the failure of the Kremlin's brief attempt to appease the North Caucasus by means of soft power and economic development. This short-lived policy officially ended with the recent removal of Khloponin as Putin's representative to the North Caucasus and his replacement by Sergei Alimovich Melikov, who has a strong military background.

Meanwhile the continuing outflow of the Slavic population from the region weakens the Kremlin's grasp not just on the North Caucasus republics, but also on Krasnodar and Stavropol kraia, where regions of compact settlement by Caucasus peoples have started to appear. In this respect, Krasnodar Krai Governor Alexander Tkachev outlined the role of the Cossacks in August 2012 when he claimed that the newly established Cossack patrols "would specifically harass newcomers from the North Caucasus and other non-Russians in Krasnodar in order to pressure them to leave the region."<sup>3</sup> A similar pattern was later applied in the neighbouring Stavropol Krai, where the already-existing Cossack paramilitary groups, infamous for many incidents in which they harassed Dagestani newcomers, received legal status and state funds.

Likewise, policies appeared to attract Cossacks to state service by the promise of free land, such as in the case of Kabardino-Balkaria in 2011, despite the fact that precious arable soil remains a constant issue of conflict in the North Caucasus. Following Patriarch Kirill's public support for the plans of Stavropol governor Valery Zerenkov to resettle the Semirechensk Cossacks from Kyrgyzstan to the North Caucasus beginning in December 2013, the overall set of policies started to show features of a broader strategy toward the region. It appears that Cossacks should bolster the old policy of using hard power to pacify the North Caucasus, following the failure of the effort to apply soft power in recent years.

### Cossacks and Ukraine

The most recent role for Cossacks with which Putin appears to be flirting is linked to Russia's foreign policy toward its neighbours. This strategy was foreshadowed in the early 1990s when volunteer Cossack brigades helped separatists in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria. Today Cossacks appear to be a tool to preserve and increase the Kremlin's influence over

these territories. It is hard to assess the exact number of Cossacks in Abkhazia, but during the special operation in the Georgian-settled Gali region of Abkhazia in 2004, reportedly 500 Cossack militants participated. In South Ossetia, President Eduard Kokoiti even proposed the provision of land for Cossacks in the territory of the Tskhinval(i) region. Cossacks also took an active role in the 2008 Russian–Georgian war, according to residents of various villages affected by this conflict. They could not explain what role the Cossacks played in the campaign, but several of them claimed that Russian soldiers were distinguished between regular servicemen and Cossacks while residing in these villages.

Based on the case of the on-going Ukrainian crisis, we can observe three ways (or even steps) in which the Kremlin is using Cossacks as a tool of foreign policy regarding its neighbor. First is the fabrication of a claim on Ukrainian territory voiced by the Cossacks. By late February and early March, three demonstrations driven by Cossacks demanding support for Russian speaking minorities in Ukraine were organized in Rostov, Stavropol and Krasnodar regions. They were followed by a delegation of Crimean Cossacks to their brethren asking for support.

Second, simultaneously, Cossack groups in Crimea and eastern Ukraine turned into engines of unrest. In late February, local Cossacks occupied the town hall in Feodosia and then in early March tried to block and disarm marines of the Ukrainian army sent to the city. Meanwhile in Donetsk, local Cossacks were organizing Cossack patrols and arming themselves for the anticipated arrival of Ukrainian radicals. Based on field information provided by journalists working in areas controlled by separatists, many of the local Cossacks participated actively in battles on the side of separatists, expecting to be later integrated into a Russian Cossack register and to receive all the advantages it provides. Needless to say, no such perks are provided by Kiev.

Third, once armed conflict broke out, well-armed and trained Cossack volunteers from south Russia started to strengthen the ranks of pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine as well. One of them is Wolves' Hundred<sup>4</sup>, members of which are often registered Cossacks in Russia. These groups consist of Russian citizens fighting in eastern Ukraine for the Kremlin's interests, even though without any evincible link to the Russian state. And still, if they were there against the Kremlin's will, militias such as Wolves' Hundred could easily be

3 For more detailed account on Tkachev's speech see: "Rech' gubernatora Kubani o kazach'ei policii, migrantakh i sud'bah Rodiny (polnyj tekst i audio)," Yuga.ru, <<http://www.yuga.ru/articles/society/6390.html>>, (accessed: 9. 6. 2014).

4 For more detailed information on Wolves' Hundred see: Simon Shuster, "Meet the Cossack 'Wolves' Doing Russia's Dirty Work in Ukraine," Time, <<http://time.com/95898/wolves-hundred-ukraine-russia-cossack/>>, (accessed: 10. 6. 2014)

punished based on a legal amendment against “participating in armed formations on the territory of a foreign state” that was recently passed as a reaction to the increasing number of Russian citizens fighting in Syria on the side of the rebels.

Based on the above analysis, we can identify three main ways in which the Kremlin has been using registered Cossacks since 2012, namely: one, as a symbol and guardians of the traditionalistic policies adopted by Putin during his third term; two, as a colonizing, suppressive force to tame the restless North Caucasus; and three, as an expansionist tool toward the “near abroad.”

### **Conclusion: Double-edged Shashka<sup>5</sup>**

Registered Cossackdom provides Vladimir Putin with a multifunctional tool that may be wielded on domestic issues as well as abroad. However, Russian Cossacks present an unbridled and heterogeneous force that can turn against the Kremlin. Support for registered Cossacks, especially in South Russia, will inevitably increase the level of discontent among native Caucasian nations. Under the current design, registered Cossacks are being used as tools of harassment against the native population, which (as Krasnodar Governor Tkachev claimed) ought to be their main purpose. The feeling of powerlessness against the state-backed Cossack militias may lead to an ethnic and clan mobilization on the side of the native populations and their further alienation from the central government. These tendencies will be accelerated even more if the plans for Cossack colonization of the region are fulfilled.

#### *About the Author*

Tomáš Baranec is a graduate of Charles University in Prague. His research interests include nationalism and factors of ethnic conflicts and separatism in the Caucasus.

Meanwhile, the minds of registered Cossacks are often being poisoned against Caucasians by local politicians. One prominent example is the case of Deputy Mayor of Novochoerkassk Vladislav Zhuravlev, who was sentenced for fomenting interethnic animosity at a gathering of Cossacks in the stanitsa of Sredniaya. By unilaterally supporting the rise of the Cossacks, the Kremlin is launching a chain of ethnic mobilizations among native populations throughout the North Caucasus.

Russian Cossackdom is not limited to Cossacks who are registered for state service. Most Russian Cossacks remain out of state service, jealously guarding their independent structures and obeying their own Atamans. These Cossacks are characterized by the ability to self-organize and mobilize and by their own independent power structures. Unlike registered Cossacks, they are often less interested in state ideology, but are more active in local issues. These concerns often put them in conflict with regional governments and indirectly with the Kremlin itself. Registered Cossacks could revolt as well. Such was the case with the Novoalexandrovsk Cossacks from the Terek Army, who in reaction to what they believed was the politically motivated murder of their ataman Khanin, resigned from state service, renounced their Russian citizenship, and declared a policy of disobedience toward the government.

Although such cases remain rare, observing the steady rise of Russian Cossackdom under Putin, we should keep in mind that the history of the Cossacks is not just the history of faithful service to the throne, but also a history of massive anti-tsar uprisings.

5 The Shashka is a traditional Cossack and North Caucasian sabre, which is single-handed, guardless, and single-edged.

## FURTHER READING

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The Caucasus Analytical Digest analyzes the political, economic, and social situation in the three South Caucasus states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia within the context of international and security dimensions of this region's development.

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Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

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