

Halbach, Uwe

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An Escalation of Violence in the Caucasus, Hardening in Russia

Uwe Halbach

The most frequent series of terrorist attacks in Russia until now, which took place between August 24 and September 1, 2004 and left 430 dead, represents a new dimension of violence. The hostage-taking of children in Beslan in North Ossetia taught several new lessons: terrorist violence has crossed a new line with regard to the “softness” of the attack’s targets, the overall instability in the North Caucasus and the possibility of a far-reaching hardening of Russia in reaction to the perceived threats. Even with the complexity of the conflict situation in Russia’s Caucasian periphery and notwithstanding the expansion of terrorist violence, the unresolved problem of Chechnya remains the central factor in this context.

The setting of the hostage-taking, North Ossetia, showed once more the physical and temporal proximity of the Caucasian conflicts and outbreaks of violence. Before this North Caucasian republic of the Russian Federation got into the headlines on September 1, South Ossetia, the breakaway region of Georgia, was the focus of international attention. In South Ossetia, the fear was of a rekindling of a frozen secession conflict and a Georgian-Russian confrontation. Moreover, the hostage-taking in Beslan is closely linked to the acts of violence of Ingush and Chechen terrorists on June 22, 2004, which were aimed at the police and structures of the domestic secret service FSB in the republic of Ingushetia and cost the lives of around 100 people.

The events in Beslan were also reminis-

cent of problems that have long escaped international attention. In 1992 a short, bloody conflict raged in North Ossetia between Ossetians and Ingushs about a district nearby Vladikavkaz, the republic’s capital. Hints that Ingushs were among the hostage-takers, possibly even in the leadership, resulted in a revival of this inter-ethnic conflict.

An outbreak of violence in the eastern part of the northern Caucasus surrounding Chechnya can no longer be considered as an isolated incident. However, there are also reports of violence between local authorities and diverse perpetrators of violence in areas of the central Caucasus, such as Kabardino-Balkaria, a republic of the Russian Federation. In many Russian commentaries, the high potential for con-

flict in the North Caucasus is discussed as the background for the act of terrorism in Beslan. President Putin identified the intention to sow “hatred between peoples and to blow up the whole Caucasus” as the terrorists’ main motive.

The North Caucasus in Focus

From the European perspective, with respect to Russia’s relations with its sovereign territory in the Caucasus, Russia primarily had problems with Chechnya. But beyond this key conflict, the highest aggregation of violent crises in Europe after the de-escalation of the Balkan conflicts is in the North Caucasus (*Heidelberger Konfliktbarometer*). The region’s special status for Russia is based on a number of factors:

Its importance for *security policy* is based on the fact that, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it became Russia’s most critical border region due to its porous borders, transit zones for drug and arms trafficking and trafficking in human beings. Improved border security is thus the main demand written in Russian commentaries on security measures following the events in Beslan.

From a *geopolitical and economic perspective*, the North Caucasian region is significant because of its potential to serve as a transit point for the export of Caspian energy resources over Russian territory. Russian geopolitical commentaries interpret this function as the main motive for the intervention of “external powers” which not only want to drive Russia out of its “near abroad” in the Caspian region but also out of its sovereign territory in the Caucasus.

In the analysis of the conflict, the North Caucasus stands out because of its potential for *ethno-territorial conflicts*, whose roots go back to Soviet times, one example being the period of ethnic deportations under Stalin.

In *socio-economic* terms the eastern part of the North Caucasus in particular is an area of desolation and misery within the Russian Federation. Dagestan, Ingushetia not to mention Chechnya, which has been destroyed in two wars, belong to those regions

which fundamentally depend on distributions from the federal budget. The impoverishment and unemployment (in Chechnya more than 70 per cent) form the basis for the mushrooming of criminal activities. Even if Chechnya is excluded as a special case, the region is at the top of the statistics of violent incidents in Russia.

The North Caucasus also stands out due to its *political legitimacy crisis and its weak leadership*. The leadership in Ingushetia was, under President Putin, recruited from the FSB, which has, however, neither contributed to the security in the region nor to the political legitimacy of the local government. The only local politician with standing and authority, the former Ingushetian President Ruslan Aushev, was replaced by Murat Zyazikov due to Aushev’s critical position on the Russia’s Chechnya policy and the acceptance of refugees. Zyazikov did not have even minimal political authority in the eyes of the population and miserably failed in the Beslan tragedy. The North Caucasus is the best example of how candidates of the Kremlin do not benefit the region.

Moreover, the *colonial background* should not be disregarded: Nowhere was the subjugation of foreign people and cultures to the Russian dominion since the 16th century as strongly marked by violence as in the Muslim part of the Caucasus. Yet, the incorrect perception is that large parts of the population prefer independence from Russia. The path of radical disengagement from Russia pursued by Chechen nationalists in the early nineties was not imitated by neighboring republics such as Dagestan. If anything, the development of the “Chechen Republic of Itchkeria” that was virtually independent from Russia between 1996 and 1999 was considered a deterrent to its neighbors.

Last but not least the particularity of the North Caucasus lies in the role that regions like Chechnya and Dagestan play in the *radicalization of “Islamic renaissance”*: the intervention of radical Islamist, externally supported “wahhabites” in this process has added a new dimension and confusion to

the conflict that exists to a lesser extent in other Muslim regions of the post-Soviet space.

Information Policies and Defining the Enemy

Beslan marks a climax of the efforts of Russian authorities to withhold information from the public and to spread disinformation regarding events that relate to the unresolved Chechnya conflict. Critical Russian journalists were kept away from the scene. The effort to deny any connection between the Kremlin's Chechnya policy and the spread of terrorism was obvious. Instead it was emphasized that the attack on Russia was carried out from abroad.

This explanation fits with the Russian information strategy which accompanied the second war in Chechnya right from the start. As early as in September 1999, for example, Putin announced that this war was a war against Russia that has been declared by international terrorists with the aim of acquiring territories rich with raw materials. In his address to the nation following the tragedy in Beslan, Putin linked it to international terrorism by stating that some foreign nations would see in Russia the nuclear power that still constitutes a threat to them and therefore these nations would like to eliminate this threat. "And terrorism is only an instrument to achieve these goals." A theory of conspiracy is being spread, according to which Western powers in cooperation with Islamist terrorists are trying everything possible to weaken Russia and to push it out of its sphere of influence. This geopolitical tableau in the past was depicted by the exaggerated image of the Caspian region rich with "immeasurable natural resources", where external actors with irreconcilable pipeline and oil interests clash.

Some commentators in Russia, including Foreign Minister Lavrov, focused on Russia's neighbor Georgia and implied a causal link between the South Ossetia crisis and the choice of North Ossetia as the scene of the

hostage crisis. Lavrov said that the crisis created by the Georgian government in South Ossetia, which was followed by the hostage-taking in North Ossetia – until then one of the calmest republics of the region – caused him to "think certain things". Such hostile thoughts against Georgia stand in contrast to the warnings from some Russian regional experts to the Kremlin, in light of its own problems in the North Caucasus, to end the controversy with Georgia over South Ossetia. South Ossetia should, in no uncertain terms, be treated as a part of Georgia and its status as an autonomous region should be recognized. With its handling of secession conflicts in the "near abroad", Russia's double standards become clear. While Moscow, in the case of its own secession conflict with Chechnya, refuses to tolerate any criticism of its actions and foreign interference, it supports separatist powers in the "near abroad" from Transnistria to South Ossetia.

The idea of an "attack from abroad" also finally caused the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, Yuri Baluyevsky, to announce that the Russian Army is preparing preemptive strikes against terrorist bases "in every region of the world". In allusion to the American rhetorical declaration of the right to preemptive strikes against foreign terrorist bases, Moscow had already in 2002 made the corresponding threats against Georgia – with a view to the uncontrolled Pankisi Gorge. Back then, aircraft from Russian airspace bombed Georgia territory multiple times, which Moscow has certainly not officially acknowledged.

"Jihadization" of Regional Conflicts

The thesis of external interference in Russia's regional conflicts in the North Caucasus is not just propaganda. It is clear that the internationally linked Jihad activists participate on the side of the Chechens in the fight against Russia and participate in the organization of acts of terror "in enemy territory". The "Jihadization" of the Chechen conflict fits into a worldwide pattern:

between the south Philippines and the Balkans, there are hardly any regional conflicts with Muslim population components and separatist or other political backgrounds to which transnational Islamic terrorism is not connected. The character and genesis of these particular conflicts have not been caused by this “Jihadization”. However, it does support the spreading of regional conflicts beyond their regional boundaries.

The massive, violent actions of Russian troops for the repression of Chechen separatism have contributed to the fact that Chechnya has become a “solidarity” theme for Islamists. As such, it will not rank behind other well-known Jihad conflicts such as Afghanistan, Palestine, Kashmir and Iraq much longer. The effects of this Islamist overlap with a secession conflict, which originally had very little to do with Islam, affects not only Russia in the long term but also Europe and Germany. During preliminary proceedings against members of militant Islamist cells, Chechnya is appearing more frequently as a solidarity theme. It also mobilizes Mujahedeen in European countries like Germany.

It was pointed out that members of various nationalities of the post-Soviet space participated in the hostage-taking in Beslan. According to conflicting reports, in addition to Caucasian terrorists, Kazaks, Uzbeks, Tartars, Ukrainians and Koreans were involved. Tashkent denied the participation of Uzbeks, and the mention of ethnic Kazaks provoked urgent requests for information from the Kazak government to Moscow. The danger of a “post-Soviet Terrorist International” will, in principle, also be taken seriously in the capitals of the CIS-Central Asia. So far there is no proof of the participation of terrorists in Beslan who did not come from the CIS. Nothing more is known about the “9 Arabs and one Black man” that the FSB claims to have identified.

Is there still a way out of the spiral of violence?

The “political solution” to the ending of this violence became a hollow phrase a long time ago. A quick pacification of Chechnya cannot be expected under any circumstances. No one in the world possesses a patent for an effective solution to this multi-faceted, deadlocked conflict, which has been shaped by a deeply-rooted historical background and enormous amounts of violence. However, that cannot be an argument for international politics to avoid the subject of Chechnya.

Three different options for action can nonetheless be spelled out, but they are certainly subject to caveats. These caveats include the minimal flexibility of Russia’s Chechnya policy as well as the fact that, in the second Chechen war, a growing number of rebels switched over to terrorism and militant Jihad, that they cannot be integrated into a political dialogue anymore. If the Russian troops were to pull out of Chechnya, terrorist actors in the Caucasus would still be far from unmotivated. Chechnya is one of the interchangeable conflicts used by the terrorists as a recruiting ground and “which they hang as a propaganda veil over their own purposes”. The only option for a way out of the vicious circle is to remove the terrorists’ appearance of having a just cause and to isolate them, above all within Chechnya itself, in order to marginalize them. In Chechnya itself the conditions for this option are not even unfavorable: the majority of the population rejects terrorist violence and radical Islam and longs for a minimum of normalcy and security.

The Negotiation Option

Since the beginning of the second Chechen war, Russia has been called upon repeatedly by the West to undertake negotiations for a cease-fire with its armed opponents in Chechnya, more specifically, with each part of the armed underground that cannot clearly be categorized as part of the terrorist camp. No one has ever suggested to

President Putin that he should negotiate with a terrorist such as Shamil Basayev. Whether the suggested negotiation counterpart, who continually offers himself, Aslan Maskhadov and his “underground government” could implement the possible results of negotiations in the armed underground is, however, far from certain. By negotiating a cease-fire in this way, the complete exclusion of various violent actors from the Chechen side would in any event not be guaranteed.

Today, the lines of conflict are much more convoluted than in 1996. Then, Maskhadov, as commander-in-chief of the Chechen resistance troops, proved to be a pragmatic negotiation partner with Moscow and negotiated a cease-fire with General Lebed. After 1997, as the elected president, he could not deal with the political chaos in the “Chechen Republic of Itchkeria”. He was unable to contain the overwhelming criminal violence or carry out the disarmament of the field commanders from the first Chechen war, who now, as local warlords with their own selfish interests, undermined the monopoly on violence of the government. Maskhadov was overextended and the outside world left him to fend for himself. Moscow, in particular, failed to give him support of any kind, with which Russia then could have obtained halfway friendly terms with its renegade territory in the Caucasus. The name Maskhadov started to be mentioned together with “failed state”, which Chechnya became between the two wars. In the eyes of the local population today, that is not an advantageous starting point for Maskhadov in his intended role as the central partner in the negotiations for a “political solution” to the conflict.

The Kremlin has long ago committed itself on this point: from the beginning of the second Chechen war onwards, Moscow was anxious to blur any distinction between separatists and terrorists and to label the forced-into-the-underground President Maskhadov and his comrades-in-arms as terrorists, with whom negotiations were

out of the question. After Beslan, this attitude has only intensified: Maskhadov was equated to Basayev, the most brutal warlord of the Caucasus, and together with him portrayed as the authors of the attack against children – in spite of evidence to the contrary and although the “underground government” had offered to act as a mediator. Moscow has placed a bounty on the heads of Maskhadov and Basayev in the amount of 10 million euros. Countries that grant asylum to members of the Chechen „underground government” were labelled as supporters of international terrorism. In the past few years, Maskhadov has sent his “Ministers” in Exile to the USA, Great Britain, France and Germany, in order to gain some diplomatic leverage. No one knows the extent to which Moscow maintains contact with the separatist camp through unofficial channels.

In spite of all the reservations to the negotiation options, we should not lose sight of the fact that a sustainable solution to the conflict, which leaves out the armed opponents, is probably not attainable. Until the hostage-taking in Moscow in October 2002, alternatives for compromise on autonomy and independence were discussed with Maskhadov’s representatives through unofficial channels. In these discussions, the „moderate separatists” no longer insisted on the unconditional independence for Chechnya, which the players in international politics would not accept. Until today, Maskhadov’s “emissaries”, such as Ilias Ahmadov in the USA and Ahmad Sakayev in Great Britain, affirm that main objective of negotiations is not the independence of Chechnya but a cease-fire.

The “Chechenisation” Alternative

Since 2002, President Putin has developed another alternative, which has been publicized as the “Chechenization” and the “political solution” to the conflict, which amounted to choosing the pro-Russian administration leader in Chechnya as president. This “Chechenization” policy, by

which the fight against the “remaining resistance” and the “normalization” of the war zone was supposed to have been handled by pro-Russian Chechens, counted on the complete delegitimization and political exclusion of the separatists. The implementation of this policy in 2003 – beginning with a referendum on the constitution in March and culminating with the presidential elections in October – was, however, accompanied by far-reaching violence and not by normalization and pacification. According to FSB statistics, the number of terror attacks in Russia in 2003 increased more than 55% in comparison with the previous year – and many of these attacks, 386 in total, were committed by Chechens. What was prematurely praised as the beginning of a “political solution” by some leaders of the West, the installation of the “Kadyrov Regime” in Chechnya led to its assertion of itself as another autonomous party to the conflict rather than as a respected authority in the conflict zone.

Are there prospects for a “real Chechenization policy”, a conflict-minimizing “political solution” which does not deal with the armed underground? Such a policy should not commit itself exclusively to Kremlin protégés for a presidential election in the conflict zone. It should permit the population to choose between reasonably prominent candidates and thus endow the elected president with a minimum of legitimacy. Then, the standing of the Chechen government should be increased through comprehensive and effective reconstruction measures, i.e. measures which are to some extent shielded from corruption. Russia will have to draw on international aid to accomplish this goal.

There are even some reservations about the “Chechenization” alternative: a “real election” can under the prevailing conditions in Chechnya produce murderous election campaigns. Prominent presidential candidates would today come from the Chechen diaspora in Moscow because Chechen intellectuals that remained in the conflict zone did not survive. The vesting of sig-

nificant power in the president is, however, considered incompatible with Chechnya’s traditional political culture, which was characterized by the decentralization of power and the need for complicated compromises among the tribal segments in Chechen society. “Chechenization” can therefore turn Chechnya into an Afghanistan and the violence will turn into an inter-Chechen “civil war”. Moreover the “real” Chechenization policy, not backed by “vassals”, is currently not under consideration. Here, too, the Kremlin committed itself by deciding to support the Kadyrovcian after Ahmad Kadyrov’s murder and organizing an electoral farce on August 29 in Chechnya to confirm its candidate Alu Alchanov. At a conference with Western journalists on September 7 Putin talked of a “more flexible” Chechnya policy, which shall become apparent in the upcoming elections to parliament.

The “Third Power”

In the context of unofficial contacts with Maskhadov until October 2002 some consideration was given to the need for a “third power” for the peaceful settlement of the Chechnya conflict. The ideas for who could be external and neutral conflict brokers ranged from parts of the Russian Federation such as Tatarstan to individual third countries and from the CIS to international organizations such as the UN, OSCE or the Council of Europe. Different steps were considered for internationalizing the management of the conflict: from the involvement of international organizations in the negotiations between the conflicting parties to an international protectorate in the conflict zone with implied “conditional sovereignty” for Chechnya. Any attempt at “internationalization” has thus far failed due to the Kremlin’s defensive position, which here refers to the conflict’s “domestic” character even though, at the same time, the Kremlin emphasizes the “attack from abroad” and the transnational character of Russia’s enemies in this conflict. Further-

more, no power in international politics is currently pushing to take on real responsibility in Chechnya and, for example, to send peacekeepers into the murky entanglement there, which is dominated by diverse violent actors and violent motives. Chechnya has so far been a subject that has been avoided by international politics. It remains to be seen whether the shock of Beslan is deep enough to change this.

Hardening in Russia as reaction to Beslan

For the Russian side there is still the option of the continuation of the fighting until the armed opponents are completely annihilated. But this opponent cannot be completely annihilated. Its military potential was considerably weakened, its ranks of field commanders and the number of active combatants strongly thinned out in the second Chechnya war. Thereafter, the opponent's resistance took on more and more the shape of an asymmetric fight, guerrillas mutated into terrorists and received support from abroad. The "remainder of the armed rebels", whom Moscow started to speak about after the end of the war phase, are still able to mobilize a degree of violence that would not permit calm to return to Russia. Toughness against terrorists, which President Putin called for in light of the hundreds of dead and the murdered children in Beslan, is a formula that indeed gets international support. But the major problem with "Russian toughness" in the Caucasus is its precision and effects. Instead of violence systematically directed against armed enemies, the military actions in the second Chechen war devastated the operational area of the "anti-terror operation" and destroyed a significant part of the local civilian population. The effect: the opposite of what had been announced – the creation of a habitat for terrorist violence. "Keep it up!" and an increase in violence is not possible if the world is not ready to accept the complete destruction of Chechnya and the escalation of terrorist violence in the surrounding areas.

The tendency to become harder after Beslan goes beyond the Russian Chechnya policy. President Putin now wants to curb the regions and "federation subjects" – which have undergone a continuous process of recentralization since his assumption of office four years ago – to such an extent that nothing will remain of a federation. The creation of a federal commission for the North Caucasus, chaired by Dmitri Kozak, which is supposed to take a close look at and deal with the causes of the development of violence in the region, is indeed the most plausible element of the reaction to the events in Beslan. Whether it will induce a change in the Russian Caucasus policy is questionable. So far the North Caucasus was the proof for the fact that the streamlining of Putin's vertical power structure does not contribute to an improved regional policy. A hardening after Beslan is the answer to every critical objection to Russia's Chechnya policy. This could influence Russia's behavior towards Europe and the United States with regard to foreign policy.

Consequences for the Policy of the West in Russia and the Caucasus

Minister of Defense Sergei Ivanov declared in a TV interview that, in light of the threat of terrorism, a basis for mutual understanding with the United States was easier to be found than with the many European states. That was aimed at the fact that Russia, after the standing side-by-side with President Bush in the "war on terrorism", received less criticism related to its Chechnya policy from the United States than from Europe, where the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe and smaller member states addressed the massive human rights violations in the North Caucasus.

If the actors in international politics want to have a say in the matter of the increasingly menacing and unresolved Chechnya problem they should not let Russia split them into „understanding" and "not understanding" partners. It is still possible

to influence Russia by means of criticism, for more than just the purpose of criticizing: these possibilities include some of the above mentioned options of action – given a level-headed understanding that a rapid and complete resolution of the conflict is not possible. For the option of negotiation, simultaneous pressure on Moscow and Maskhadov would be necessary. The latter needs to unmistakably distance himself from the terrorist wing of the armed underground, show the will to fight against these powers, and subordinate the option of Chechnya’s national independence to goals such as the cease-fire with Russia and the reduction of violence in Chechnya. Regarding the “Chechenization” alternative, comprehensive international support is essential for a program of reconstruction. Finally, probably nothing can be done without the assistance of a “third power”, if at some distant point peaceful conditions are supposed to prevail in Chechnya. Europe, in the form of the EU, carefully approaches a policy for the South Caucasus and must now understand that conflict zones in a country like Georgia cannot be separated from the North Caucasian dimension of regional dynamics. As long as the North Caucasus remains the outstanding zone of unrest within the Russian Federation, the international stability policy in the South Caucasus will have narrow limits.

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org