

# Religion and conflict.

## Radicalism and violence in the North Caucasus

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Lately, the North Caucasus has become a major attraction point due to the large number of events and to the worrisome trend in the region, with larger impact on the Russian Federation, on the one hand, and on the Wider Black Sea Region, on the other, as well as on the overall fight against terrorism. The themes surrounding this subject are various, so researchers need to pay a great deal of attention to several areas of study as well as access various bibliographical references in order to provide an in depth evaluations.

We underwent such a process and found it useful to publish both a compendium of bibliographical resources as well as the results of the research in order to reveal new directions and original perspectives for opening new angles for future research that will encompass the interpretations of further developments. Of course, the study financed through a larger on going German Marshall Fund Black Sea Trust project could not do without an extended general structure.

The final goal of the study is to supply a base of evolving information, ideas and theories to support the eval-



uation of the situation in the North Caucasus and to act as starting point for any projections regarding the area as well as larger themes defining the complexity of the region. The other goal is to foresee, based on these qualitative theories and trends, where this road is heading and in which way the current situation will evolve, to what extent it will remain a local issue or it will affect the entire region; it's also interesting to see whether the essential elements present here are to be found in other areas of the world, whether they represent grounds for much larger phenomena.

Without trying to cover the entire issue, we found it useful to bring forward our experience up to date and leave the subject open to any researchers wishing to follow this frame whose trends bring sufficient reason for us to believe that they are encompassing universally relevant value. We used diverse theories and multiple ideas to create an essence upon which we claim paternity that will give meaning and answers to the question of how the situation will evolve in the medium term of five to ten years.

## Bibliography, associated themes, ideas on how to approach the conflicts in the North Caucasus

The theme of the North Caucasus conflicts is extremely vast and interesting, especially if, out of the multiple phenomena in the region, we focus specifically on religious caused conflicts. We find the approach relevant for the current international context due to the fact that the initial ethnical and national-separatist reflexes have dimmed and acquired a different manner of existence justified by a religious context, by a project such as the Caucasus Emirate as well as by numerous religious insurgent groups dominating the region; at the same time we notice the involvement of Islam converted Slavs and moderate secular Islamic elements rediscovering radicalized identities.

Our research is separated in three essential parts: the first presents a theoretical background originating from numerous sciences, covering several realities easily identified in the North Caucasus. This ensures that subsequent evaluation will be based on consistent studies that have learned from evaluation in other regions that apparently have nothing to do with the one that is analyzed here. Furthermore, these conclusions will be useful for showing the direction in which the North Caucasus is evolving and they will be able to predict the direction and the essence of the transformations in the region and their impact on the Black Sea extended region, and maybe even create evolution models for other regions.

From this point of view, a research agenda should start by systematically approaching conflicts, the role that identities play in these conflicts as well as identity conflicts as a specific type of conflicts; there is also need to further analyse the characteristics of interethnic conflicts, with a larger view upon specific traits of religious conflicts and elements defining the relation between religion, conflict and violence.

Last but not least, it is useful to approach the original ideas of Dominique Moisi<sup>1</sup> who created the "geopolitics of emotions" by replacing Samuel Huntington's stereotypes in the *Clash of Civilizations* with a model which brings emotions to the forefront, a model that allows the connection between personal geographies regardless of where the individual is located or of the "emotional type" that they belong to, according to the proposed classification. The approach is compatible with globalisation and it underlines a fundamental characteristic of identity conflicts placing emotions, representations and individual perceptions, as well as commune emotions that have the ability to trigger collective reactions of different groups and communities in the forefront.

The second part of the study approach the socio-psychological elements that have determined the radicalisation

and the conversion, meaning the transfer from a religion to its radical forms, to accepting violence as an instrument for a personal agenda of radical groups<sup>2</sup>

; also, it will look into the mechanism that determines terrorist actions, especially those related to suicide terrorism through bomb detonations, the most often action in asymmetrical situations, which also entails the greatest emotional load and which could in its self explain the road to radicalisation or self-radicalisation (in front of the internet, as is the case of "loan wolves").

A third part should cast a deep and original look at Islam, from the major biblical religion described by Karen Armstrong and thoroughly presented by numerous older or contemporary researchers that analyse all the components and ramifications of this religion, to the political Islam and the politicization of Islamic concepts and the use of Islam as an instrument to generate mobilisation in conflicts. We grant an important role to the discovery made by Mihaela Matei<sup>3</sup> in her recent PhD thesis showing the versatility, the opportunistic behaviour and the adaptability of Islam to the space where it is manifested, the existence of several Islams as well as the comprehensive description of the formulas of the new Islam, the new contemporary movements from those inspired by the Iranian revolution and Al Qaeda type jihadist movements to John Esposito's "new Islamic Protestantism" formula predicted by academics, the evolution and revolution of modern Islam which is professed, with certain limits, on two fronts by present day Turkey.

The theoretical component would not be complete without the analysis of two extremely strong and useful theoretical instruments for the North Caucasus, those regarding ungoverned territories and strongly devised societies. They are conceived with a solid internal construct, theorized and applied to extended territories ranging from the Federally Administered Autonomous Territory in Pakistan (FATA) to larger areas of weak states and to societies created on antagonistic existences with a long history still remembering the conflict throughout generations. These instruments will prove useful in the region of North Caucasus and in the analysis that we wish to conduct by using these paradigms, since reality in the region validates the fact that the area is part of this type of already researched models.

Finally, such a study would not be complete if we do not attempt to radically change the point of view by giving it relevance and amplitude by also trying to approach the subject from the angle of the receptor's own deficiencies, where the receptor is made up of societies that are undergoing the effects of this reality. We are talking about the evolution trends of acceptability of these realities by modern western societies, the decrease of our resilience and the sometimes exaggerated reaction when analysing these events and raising them to catastrophic levels. This is important because terrorism is only relevant when there exists

<sup>1</sup> Dominique Moisi, *The Geopolitics of Emotion*, Anchor Books, New York, 2009

<sup>2</sup> Mary Sharpe Ed., *Suicide Bombers: The Psychological, Religious and Other Imperatives*, Cambridge, 2008, Combating Terrorism Fellowship Program ISSN 2162-6421 (online). Vol. 1, No.1 CTX 1, 8/1/2011

<sup>3</sup> Mihaela Matei, *Islamul politic și Democrația. Între Islakh, Itjihad și Jihad*, (The Political Islam and Democracy. Between Islakh, Irjihad and Jihad) PhD, Thesis, SNSPA, Bucharest, 2010

the proper environment to be terrorised and the hyper sensitivity and the lack of resilience of our society, along with the hyperbolizing of such events and our perception of these realities do nothing more but amplify the impact of terrorist actions and consequently escalate the number of attacks precisely due to the visibility and the impact that make them all the more appealing to insurgents, terrorists and whomever wishes to send a political message while lacking visibility, audience or a critical mass<sup>4</sup> that will satisfy their ego.

In a second part of the study the direct relevance of the application of these theories to the North Caucasus region will increase. After a presentation of events and particularities of the region and the manner in which they are described, we will present and apply all these theories in order to understand to what extent the fundamental hypotheses are being verified and whether conclusions are relevant to our specific case. This is where most other conclusions will derive from along with the prospective picture that will be created for the medium and long term by the current situation for the Wider Black Sea Region and for the evolution of international affairs in general in the future.

## Methodology: thesis and key findings in the North Caucasus

The preliminary analysis of theoretical and factual elements allow us to draw a number of intermediary conclusions which are to be either confirmed and strengthened or infirmed and nuanced through verification and confrontation with the interviews from the field. However, the theoretical and documentary base of the subject allows us to present these preliminary conclusions as working hypotheses:

- The Salafists / Wahabits (named specifically by different actors) are most of the time wrongfully accused of having had a certain role in the radicalisation of the population in North Caucasus, in the conversion of Slavic elements from Stavropol Krai and Krasnodar Krai or from ethnic republics in the North Caucasus. In reality, the radical Islam formulas derive from various influences, ranging from a self-radicalization of local Islamists searching for the “real Islam”, different from secular or officialised formulas accepted in the Russian Federation by the state and by republican or regional leaders, to a new and attractive type of jihadist Islamic radicalism, a radical New Islamic Movement, a new type of sect or version of Islam adapted to the space where it is developing which combines the two tendencies – the embrace of radical and even jihadist religions and the quest for the so called “new religions”. The picture would not be complete without converts, whose fall into this space can no longer be assigned to the need for group identity or for fame that would substitute a severe identity problem and is more likely a sign of the adherence to the radical “old” formula or to the new form of regional radical-jihadist Islam as a form of protest, an anti-system reaction.

- The formulas offered by the radical versions of Islam or

by the new Imams of regional Islamism entail the transformation of the state, of its organisation form and of the dependence from the authoritarian local ruler or from the Russian metropolis, along with introduction of the Sharia law as alternative to corrupt financial circuits that ensure the wealth of leaders as opposed to earnings for the population, the avoidance of taxes, the brotherly support formula in the shape of the *zakaat*, all of these perfectly fitting both an initial but reinterpreted type of Islam and the wish to brake loose from the Russian metropolis or from the revisionism of already existing state structures.

- The North Caucasus is starting to be shaped more and more like a new Pakistani FATA – a tribal region administered federally close to the Afghan border, which is not marked nor controlled, with no viable institutions, subject to all influences and exposed to trans-border pressures, under the cover of a region out of state control by effect of its tribal culture, but an excellent space for the promotion of various influences and an appropriate area from where attacks can be launched right to the heart of the system. In this context, the Caucasus resembles more the classic Arab world rather than a version of independent/autonomous financially unsustainable states and republics. Another complementary direction that could serve as a model is precisely the reaction to a form of previous “colonisation” that melted away national awakening and initial separatist protest and fell into extreme forms of protest.

- Chechnya, the Caucasus Emirate and the new jihadist-Islamic movement seem to be catching more and more shape. According to existing data, the connection to Al Qaeda is accidental, informal and is virtually limited to the training of its fighters on the field and to the casual crossing of the region by jihadist fighters; it is not a relation assumed by any of the parts. The Caucasus Emirate looks nothing like an Al Qaeda type construction, however without denying the existence of external influences from various structures and individuals connected to the organisation, but it is a specific local construction, extended onto the areas of republics with Islamic populations, with the notable exception of North Ossetia, though the footprint of conversion has been felt here as well.

- Another characteristic is the local attraction and support. There is a special ability to attract insurgent fighters which can only happen due to systemic dissatisfaction that allows the birth of sympathy as well as of institutionalised forms of protest. Furthermore, it is so attractive that it manages to create extreme phenomena such as the conversion of Slavic Christians in the region and neighbouring regions to Islam as well as the extreme radicalisation of all Muslims – original or converted – that put their own lives on the line of fire for their objective through suicide bomb attacks.

- The violence of authorities, the impunity of Army, secret services and order forces representatives in the territory abusing the local population, the complicated economic situation in the region, the increased unemployment rate, the disparities between the common people and the life and

<sup>4</sup> Mary Sharpe, Abimbola Agboluaje Ed., *Science and Society in the Face of New Security Threats*, IOS Press, Amsterdam-Berlin-Oxford-Tokyo-Washington DC, 2004.

## occasional papers.....

wealth of local authorities, along with the salaries paid to those working for Moscow have created the framework for deep discrepancies and hatred towards local and regional authorities as well as towards the metropolis which is considered guilty for both situations, especially due to the mistreatment of locals and the naming of unfit individuals in leading positions. Under these circumstances, all it takes is a personal trigger, which most of the time is made up of traumatising personal experiences, injustice, and humility to ensure that people openly support and join the insurgency, that they go to mountains or even proceed to violent acts including the supreme sacrifice for the cause.

- Beside the direct involvement of unsatisfied people, the insurgency also benefits from a context providing it with even larger recruitment space, as do jihadist or suicide-terrorist acts and the fall into Islamic radicalisation, the conversion of Orthodox Slavs to Islam or radical jihadist forms, not necessarily connected to Salafism-Wahabism as traditional conservative and even anachronistic forms of contemporary Islam. We are talking both of personal motivation and the protest against Russian leadership determining these options. The quest for radical movements, therefore, has nothing to do with personal inclines towards the “true faith”, but it is however a movement against the officially accepted religion, a movement which is situated more on the realm of protest reactions than in that of the search for a sufficiently strict “true faith” that would ensure “afterlife”, the reproduction into eternity and would resolve the human problem of the consciousness of the fact that we will eventually die and therefore there are objective needs of some elements that will ensure a continuity in the afterlife.

- There is an entire theory talking about the support of the population for an ethnic-national tendency which, despite its reaffirmation of national and ethnic identity, that is not, at the same time, ethnically separatist (claiming for instance the independence of Chechnya) because it is at the same time pragmatic, realising that no North Caucasian states are economically sustainable. It is possible for some elements of this support to be real, as they are trustworthy; however, the inhabitants of the region unhappy of their leadership both regional and central, are more inclined towards religious forms of insurgency, an emotional area where reactions are likely to be more harsh in comparison to logics. Ethnic-national sentiments and ethnic-separatism are combined and are, at the same time, contrary to the idea of a Caucasus Emirate, a regional separatist formula religiously, not ethically funded, the model reproducing the Sharia governed Caliphate with specific national autonomies.

- Ethnic separatism has not disappeared and it is persistent and anti-Russian. It is based on elements flowing from the idea of contesting the colonist and the imperial metropolis, the imposed, not elected authority and against non-traditional imposed rules and abuses.

- It is also important to notice elements connected to sociological experiments that in time caused the rebirth of ethnic-national sentiments as a side effect after the fall of the former USSR. We are talking about the result of the ethnic construction experiments in the USSR, through the system-

atic launch of a number of sociologists, including to the Caucasus region, in order to create multiple ethnic identities. They identified ethnic groups spread out over half of one village, elements with distinctive alphabets and symbolism and they managed to collect folkloric elements which they transferred into several volumes of virtual “ethnic literatures”; the entire effort was aimed at underlining multi-ethnicity and the fact that the USSR was a heaven of Peoples living together on the background of ideological communion; it was also aimed at completely undermining distinct classic national elements with specific key traits in order to avoid nationalist and separatist tendencies, based on the existence of a multitude of other ethnic groups and peoples living happily in the Country of the Soviets. The strategy was obviously applied against big national republics as well as against North-Caucasian ethnic republics, those from the Ural-Volga area or from the Far East, elements covering and encompassing the issue of invaded territories. The version was amplified by deportments, by the distinction between good and bad ethnic groups (especially made by Stalin), which added to the complications created by the comeback from Gulags and from deportations which entailed lands and houses confiscated and redistributed to other peoples and families stabilized in the area, as well as territorial re-drawing based on the doctrine of **maximum ethnic complexity** - which was meant to bloc any subsequent attempts of a USSR formation to break lose, as well as the possible unification of republics – see the real and projected formulas for a Caucasus republic, temptations and sociological experiments with effects still being notices today.

- This time the new strategy also aimed at rejecting national separatism, the attempts of different populations in the Russian Federation to question their stay in the conglomerate, after the fall of the USSR, on the same train of thought of national pre-existence and the lack of consent for entering the Union or Federation. The CIS was an instrument for succession of the USSR through the succession of the Russian Federation to USSR treaties and through the succession of the new states to USSR borders; however, it was also an instrument aimed at creating a reverse movement of integration and unification in the Post Soviet Space at a time when, after the fall of the USSR, the Russian Federation itself was threatened by territorial collapse through separatism.

- There are areas of analysis presuming that, in combating the Chechen phenomenon, there was even some type of support for radical insurgency, for forced ties to radical religious Arabs and the international terrorist religious Islamic movement, subsequently even to Al Qaeda, in order to demonstrate international involvement – initially western, than Arab, of Al Qaeda – and the denial of the reality that something objective is taking place in the Russian area, respectively a form of national rebirth at the level of ethnic republics comprising the Russian Federation. Therefore, national separatist movements have been combated through moving the subject on the ground of Islamic radicalism and international terrorism and the slide of the front image of separatist movements to the benefit of the



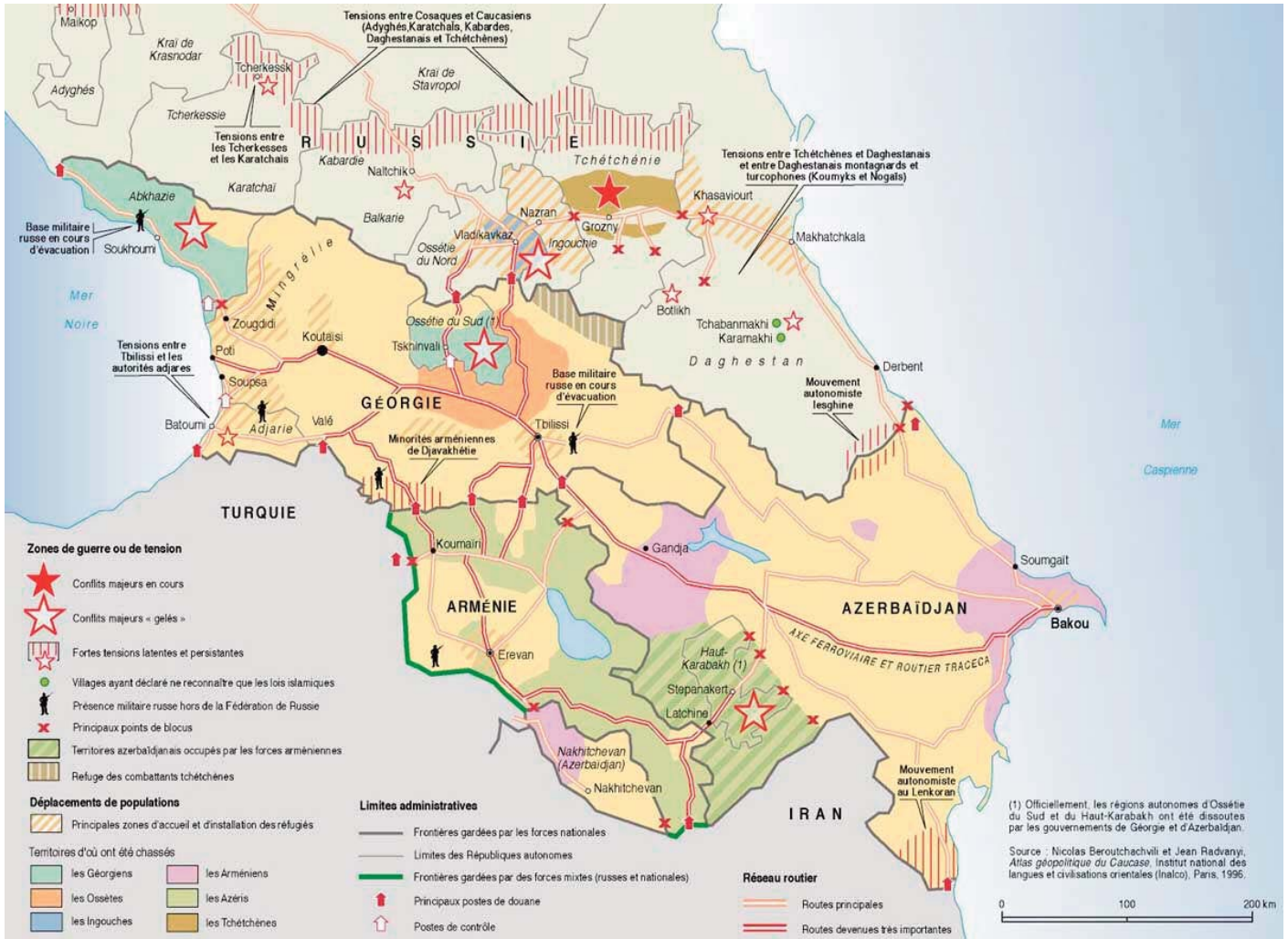
religious radicalism and violence. The result was the loss of public interest for the national and separatist elements objectively legitimised and their replacement with religiously based elements through out the Caucasus. Therefore, if jihad was embraced as an imposed formula at first, a formula proposed by the authorities themselves, it took over at one point and built itself as a solution, as a form of protest, and was therefore preferred to the ethnic-nationalistic separatist version.

- There is also the hypothesis that the entire radical Islamic movement, initially implanted in order to show the colours and the trend of separatist movements, was actually invented in Russia, following that after the opening of Pandora's box, the situation became real; that which was initially a scheme to be used for public perception later became an integral, radical, regional, jihadist movement very real and supported by the local population, as a sign of protest. The initial project of counterbalancing separatism got out of hand.

- Today, religious insurgency is attractive and people are joining it, Muslims and Christian Orthodox alike, the former radicalised, the later converted to Islam, with the aim of fighting the establishment (officially, pragmatically and subliminally). The real aim and target remain unknown because of the multitude of leaders and their speedy elimination, but it will eventually become clear in the process with the evolution of the situation, if the Emirate gains more self awareness, unity, coherence, organisation and if it is institutionalized – in a process similar to the OFP – and if it

assumes responsibility for the fate of the entire region, evolving towards publically winning the dispute with local republican authorities, as well as with regional and central ones, therefore also assuming the responsibility for the inhabitants of the region. This way, a formula of a proto-quasi-state can be imagined in the North Caucasus, an Islamic Caliphate-like pseudo-state, with Sharia law at the base of the executive-legislative process, with autonomous structures based on republics and ethnic groups which would, step by step, take over control and authority and would abandon the fight from the mountain heights. The state formula would be a trans-Caucasus one with autonomous structures and the Russian-Slavic element either eliminated or converted to Islam, with influence beyond the North Caucasus region.

- Most likely, North Caucasus will not undergo this process, but it will remain in the combo of failed state/weakly governed border territory, without a completely organised and responsible structure (but more likely with a network-type one that is purely contesting and asymmetrical) in order to be able to oppose the classic counteracts of Russian security structures. Endemic instability will be characteristic to the region on medium term, to which a type of export of instability to areas in the South of the Federation will be added through Russian migrants, and a direct impact through the rush of the locals Islamic elements for resources in richer areas, due to the demographic force of the North Caucasus, with a tendency towards export of models and insurgency terrorist attacks to the centre of the country and to the metropolis, maybe even to Moscow. The



version we find most likely here is more complex than that of a separatist authority becoming responsible and creating in such a way a visible enemy, because the formula of the undefined, blurry enemy, borrowing diverse identities, is nothing more than a copy of the Al Qaeda type franchise model, where the franchised brand is the Caucasus Emirate. Uncertainty is likely to become a way of life in the region and in the surrounding area, possibly extended to the whole of Russia.

- Demography is the greatest vulnerability of the Russian state as it makes possible the worst case scenario: the general destabilisation of Russia with the creation of key points for gathering and spreading radical Islamic jihadist ideology, with great dissemination energy. Socially motivated migrants looking for work and better living standards could sustain such an epidemic and could export of structural instability.

- Demographic changes in the region are intense. The depopulation of North Caucasus by ethnic Russians is a phenomenon that has already been noticed by the leadership of the North Caucasus District as well as by the entire Russia; that is why there is need for two stable points: the comeback of religion to the area, however keeping in mind that the stabilisation of the Russian Church and the split between good and bad Islam in the area are not good solutions. On the contrary, the right version for ensuring a

moral reference and a real understanding of Islam could require the support of Turkish authorities and the direct influence of a formula of political Islam resulted from reform, as was the case of Christianity with the Protestantism.

- The demographic Slavic islands are shrinking at an accelerated pace. Things here could evolve with the planned version of repopulating with Kazaks, but this Slavic ethnic component will be interpreted more like an imposed colonist population, furthermore, it will be the first one exposed to conversion to Islam and subsequent radicalisation – as we have seen in Krasnodar Krai and Stavropol Krai. The process of forced transplantation of population, the taking refuge in the South of Russia, intolerance toward local population and therefore enclavisation is not a solution as well especially since the maintaining of this population at a local level can only be made through well paid job, created artificially and discriminatorily in relation to the local population.

- The determined conversion cycle followed by Islamisation that continues through the extending of the demographically superior Caucasus population that is free to roam Russia needs to be broken, but in a natural manner, not through the creation of artificial barriers inside the Russian State. The second could be interpreted as discrimination signals, whereas the version of sustaining jobs and a coherent religious base, a conservative, non violent, austere

form of Islam could work to the extent that authorities would not sustain it, would not try to impose it, but only tolerate it, while also taking some critical stands in regard to possible excesses of this type of practice.

- The discussion regarding the temptation to detach North Caucasus from Russia as a solution remains in the forefront, and we believe it will perpetuate, as the version of cutting the lizard's tail, but the formula would most likely bring irrelevant result at this point as it comes to attention too late, since the entire surrounding region is influenced by radical forms of Islam, whose embrace is also direct result of brutal, un-adapted policies in the region, but also a result of policies applied to the whole of Russia, with special reference to the installation of the vertical of power and the eluding of elected leaders as genuine representation forms in favour of appointed leaders of false representation formulas. Moscow is all the more exposed due to the counter reaction, the anachronistic nationalism and xenophobia of the majority population manifested through actions against foreigners and non-Russians, thus accentuating the alienation and the Islamic enclavisation right in the heart of Moscow and other Russian cities, a fact that predisposes to local metropolis radicalisation (with the already studied version from Great Britain, France, Germany and the US).

- The Georgian wars also did not help. The recognizing and militarisation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia did not bring value in the stabilisation of North Caucasus, beyond the international costs. On the contrary, we have registered waves of recrudescence of suicide bomb attacks both in the North Caucasus and in Moscow, as effect of a constant revolt not necessarily connected to events in the South Caucasus, but with a certain dependency and calendar coincidence. The recognition of the two occupied Georgian regions as independent states has fuelled nationalist impulses in the North Caucasus, while the example of Georgia which has fought, resisted and survived fuels insurgent hopes as well as national, ethnical, separatist movements melted in the meantime under the attractiveness and visibility of the religious insurgency of the North Caucasus Emirate where the jihadist and religious radicalism ideology was more attractive than the ethnic-national one – also with the help of Russian authorities. Georgia is also attempting good relations to the North Caucasus republics on the background of the former national separatism, than Russian occupation of the separatist regions, but also the perspective of good neighbourhood. Georgia is most likely following an ethnic agenda rather than a religious one, as it is the first one affected by the perspective of an Islamic wall North of the Caucasus Mountains to isolate Christian Georgia and Armenia at the Black Sea and in between distinct Islamic trends, some moderate, some politicized and radicalized amongst whose representatives sectarian type conflicts could arise at any time.

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