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POST-SOVIET INSECURITY AND UNREST IN RUSSIA'S NORTH CAUCASUS BORDERLANDS: SOURCES, IMPLICATIONS AND SOME POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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Introduction

North Caucasus (hereinafter, NC) has been the most troubled part of the Post-Soviet Russian Federation (RF) due to historical, ethnic, religious and socio-political reasons dating back to the even pre-Soviet times. Unfortunately, NC is mostly known for its ethno-religious and political instability rather than its rich multicultural composition and scenic beauties which, otherwise, would promote the region as a noteworthy point of the world's cultural and geographical heritage.

Achievement of stability and prosperity in the NC would be a beneficial target for all not only in the region but the rest of the world. However, despite the ostensible simplicity and desirability of this win-win objective, policies and attitudes of all interested parties ranging from the local inhabitants to Russian leaders and the West, do not necessarily end up in a coherent sum in reality. Examples of competition and cooperation exist simultaneously. Yet, there are a few examples of opportunity windows like Moscow's recent adoption of socio-political reform initiatives or Russian-Turkish rapprochement or the European Union's (EU) relatively growing interest in the region. These factors would help stabilize and further open the region to the world especially in a Western-style orientation. The responsibility of eliminating instability in the region lies foremost with the Russian leadership. Next, local inhabitants and international community bear their own responsibilities. Problems and their possible solutions in this region would also teach us some lessons that might help us explain and solve similar ethno-religious radicalization issues in other parts of the world through a longer historical perspective.

This chapter will examine the multiple historical, ethno-religious and socio-political roots of the instability in the NC and provide a discussion of its implications for the wider world in addition to a few policy recommendations for all major interested parties.

Two Politically Motivated Sources of Insurgency: Self-Determination and Jihadism

A deeply embedded, almost sub-conscious "dream" or "ideal" for being independent in the form of a secular or theocratic nationstate has been the intention driving force of almost all ethno-religious mobilization cases in the NC, most seriously in the two Russo-Chechen wars. Compared to the nearby ethno-federal republics, Chechnya has long enjoyed more ethnic homogeneity and it has the conjectural prospects of sustaining statehood. Not surprisingly, it was only the Chechens who tried to breakup from the RF in the immediate Post-Soviet period. Other NC republics or nations refrained from officially demanding something more than federal rights from Kremlin. These republics had a number of reasons not to follow the Chechen way.

A large number of ethnic groups stretching across at least two (artificially designed) republican boundaries do not necessarily facilitate the emergence or work of nation-wide organizational capacities to effectively demand self-determination. As seen in the cases of KBR and KCR - where Kabardians and the Cherkess (commonly known as the Circassians including the Adyghe of Adygheya and Shapsugh of Krasnodar Krai) are ethnically akin in contrast to the same type affiliation of the Karachai and the Balkars (commonly known as the Malkar Turks) -, artificiality of the republics' borders force the titular nations to compete against each other as much as they would challenge Kremlin. Hence, it is not uncommon to see Kabardians/Cherkesses trying to do everything to get Kremlin's support vis-à-vis the Balkars/Karachais, or simply vice versa. Secondly, tribal divisions within each national group also hinder the prospects of "national unification". Additionally, multiethnic religious jamaats/communities/tariqats are both a challenge and advantage for self-determination projects. These religious units converge different national groups under the same broad social goals but they do not necessarily produce competent ethnic

coalitions following a single agenda (Phlipot, 2010: 90-91).

Everchanging Demography

Throughout its history, the NC has witnessed large waves of voluntary or forced immigration and emigration. These massive population movements have shaped not only the demographics but culture, identity, economics and politics of the NC until our day. 1864 Circassian Exile, i.e. forced imperial deportation of some 500.000-2.000.000 Circassians (present day, Adyghe, Kabardians and Cherkess) and some other segments of other NC nations like the Abkhazians by the Tsarist Russia at the end of the Russo-Caucasian Wars and 1878 Ottoman-Russian war, is a good example of that phenomenon in the modern ages (Kaya, 2004; Çelikpala, 2006; Gultekin-Punsmann et al 2009). This single event can be perhaps interpreted as the first modern genocide which was first officially recognized by Georgia in 2011 (Lomsadze, 20 May 2011). Briefly speaking, the Circassian Exile created the core of the NC/Circassian diaspora and laid the earliest seeds of the present day unrest in the NWC as it disproportionately and arbitrarily increased the Slavic (mostly Cossacks) populated territories at the expense of the Circassian and Malkar (Karachai and Balkar) communities and hence brought a severe decline in the life quality and overall livelihood of these communities. This legacy helps to understand why some people in the NC diaspora almost unexpectedly protest the 2014 Sochi Olympics as they point that Sochi was a forgotten ground of genocide killings and deportation in the 19th century (King, 2010: 52-53).

Besides other wider factors specific to the Georgian and Abkhazian histories which would not be covered in detail here, the process also opened the pave for the de-Abkhazianification of Abkhazia to the (short-term) favour of the Slavs, Georgians, Mingrelians and Svans. Hence, it is not surprising to see why the Abkhazian and Georgian governments keep debating the ethnic demography of Abkhazia (e.g. “low” percentage of ethnic Abkhazians in Abkhazia; repatriation of the Abkhazian diaspora or the situation of the Internally Displaced

Persons/IDPs who currently suffer harsh living conditions in Georgia proper) as a non-changing agenda item to justify their arguments today (for a wider discussion see Baskan, 2011). The irony of these historical events is that they not merely a win-lose situation, i.e. Russians and Georgians being the winners and Circassians, Malkars and Abkhazians being the losers, but a lose-lose situation for all. Indeed, all sides of the historical forced population movements suffer the unfairness and arbitrariness in question. In the simplest sense, nobody feels ethno-territorially secure and contempt in the North or South Caucasus today because of the truly long term problematic colonial legacy of the Tsarist era and local games of inter-ethnic micro-imperialisms as would be observed in the today’s KBR for instance.

Unfortunately, above mentioned unjust demographical engineering patterns of the Tsarist era was not rejected but maintained by the Soviets to a very large extent especially in the Stalin era as seen in the deportation of the Karachai, Balkars, Chechens, Ingush and some other groups to Central Asia. The deportees could return to their native lands only after 1957. These forced population transfers have created long term problems among the returning deportees and those groups who were settled into the lands of the deportees as perfectly seen in the Ingush-Ossetian clashes. Post-Soviet era saw important transformations in the ethnic composition of the NC. Whilst overall population of the RF was in decline mainly due to the low birth rates of the non-Muslims/Slavs, Muslim/non-Slavic segments of the population grew significantly especially in the NC led by Dagestan. Besides, as more and more ethnic Russians left the NC for socio-political reasons, the NC (especially NEC) became more distinct and independent from the rest of the RF demographically (Hahn, 2007: 10-11).

The Economics of Order and Disorder

Poverty and unemployment are two interrelated long term socio-economic problems in the NC. Corruption and bribe are other accompanying factors that worsen the overall socio-economic life quality of the region. Younger segments of the society are more vulnerable to the

unemployment problem which facilitates (but does not necessarily mandate) the spread of radicalism and/or disillusionment with being a citizen of the RF. Brutal treatment at the hands of local authorities and other human-rights violations also push the youth of the region to radicalism. Some researchers note that socio-economic factors are perhaps the primary factor driving radicalism rather than religious or political ones.

Ironically this is the case considering that the NC republics are heavily dependent on financial transfers from Moscow to pay wages. Socio-economic factors undoubtedly play their part in the radicalization process in the NC, however it would be wrong to believe that ethnic and religious variables are of secondary importance. However, it is not easy to come up with a final conclusion on the matter. Results and interpretations may vary depending on the time and respondents of such fieldwork. There is simply more need for new and wider surveys in the NC.

Economic variables are perhaps the trickiest ones to manage and interpret in complex conflict situations like those in the NC. A recent ongoing study by Alexseev (2011) exemplifies the paradoxical outcomes of Moscow's transfer of funds to the region as a part of its counter insurgency strategy. Between 2000 and 2010, Moscow allocated \$30 billion to the NC and federal subsidies per capita in the region exceeded \$1000, roughly six times higher than the average in the RF. Public infrastructure (e.g. hospitals, roads, airports) were significantly renewed especially in CR where Europe's largest mosque was also recently built. Yet, insurgency related deaths reached to 1500 people between 2008-2010 in the overall region. Federal financial transfers seem to have helped reduce violence in Ingushetia and CR where they created the opposite effect in Dagestan and, especially, Kabardino-Balkar between 2006-2010.

Scope of Violence

Whereas the first Chechen war concerned nationalist self-determination, the second is commonly considered to have assumed a broader

jihadist ambition. Since then, Chechen militants have exported their operations to nearby republics. Nevertheless, jihadist Chechen insurgency lost significant power compared to its earlier times since the late 1990s when it had relatively more organized fighting command. Russian security forces and intelligence services have killed or assassinated significant leaders of the jihadist insurgency as they already did the same for the earlier non-jihadist Dudayevist line of leaders even when they were in asylum abroad in Turkey or Qatar (Cronin, 2009: 28-29).

In June 2010, however, the Russians gave further sign that they might be open to a more holistic approach to the NC problem. For the first time the Russian Duma delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe endorsed a resolution critical of their nation's policies toward the NC. Russian officials also cited the threat of mafia gangs mainly engaged in narcotics and weapons sale business as another source of widespread violence (i.e. assassination style attacks against police officers) which is not actually new to the region or Russia as a whole. In early 2010, President Medvedev announced that the criminal networks have to be a priority target for the local police forces as part of a wider vision to support economic development and decrease corruption (Phlipot, 2010: 94-96).

Recent Development as a new Milestone?

As of late 2011 and early 2012, some quite interesting developments took place in the NC politics. Even though there is no guarantee that they will have authentic long term and dramatic impact in the coming months and years, as a whole, they may be tipping that the NC is entering a new phase in 2012.

Medvedev proposed a new bill in mid January to restore the direct elections in the titular republics albeit under the supervision of the RF's President. The bill appears as a partial political concession to appease the growing dissidence not only in the NC but whole RF as well nowadays. It is not still clear whether the local presidential

candidates and/or their nominating parties will be obliged to consult with the RF's President to take his approval before the elections. Medvedev's proposal is a mix of pre-Beslan direct public elections system and Putin's post-Beslan centralized appointment mechanism. If accepted, all current federal presidents in the NC are quite likely to lose the elections due to mismanagement, corruption and insecurity in the republics. Magomedislam Magomedov, president of Dagestan, and Ramzan Kadyrov, president of Chechen Republic, might be two exceptions as the former just recently took the post and the latter does not seem to have any alternatives that would be approved by Moscow (Dzutsev, 18 January 2012).

Thirdly, a number of public and grassroots homeland Circassian organizations pledged the Kremlin in late January 2012 to allow the repatriation of a portion (estimated to be 150.000 people) of the some 148 years old Circassian diaspora (estimated between 2-7 million mostly in Turkey) from the presently quite dangerous and Russian-backed Syria to the historical homeland NWC (aka Circassia), or more precisely by today's realistic standards, republics of Adygheya and Kabardino-Balkaria only as Karachai-Cherkess was too Karachaised and other nearby areas like the tiny Shapsugh enclave in the Krasnodar Krai was socio-politically too weak to welcome the repatriates. Indeed, repatriation of the diaspora is not something new in the Circassian-Kremlin relations. Tough generally being not so eager to win the hearts and minds of the Circassians on the issue, Kremlin has been long allowing, if not actively facilitating, smaller and irregular numbers of Circassian repatriation, albeit under unfriendly socio-political and bureaucratic treatment, when it is riskless and even beneficial for itself since the late Soviet times. Considering the side of the Circassians, it would not be fair to say that every single diaspora Circassian wishes to repatriate but cannot do so because of Kremlin's feet-dragging. Many wish to stay in the diaspora (especially Turkey and Jordan) and dream to visit the homeland as cultural tourists perhaps once in a life time at all. Yet, there has always been a practically low profile but still sustained repatriation idealism and

practice among the Circassians. Being as a success story of its kind, Kremlin has accepted a good number of Circassian repatriates from former Yugoslavia during the early 2000s as it would be welcomed by the Russian-backed Serbians as well.

So, the case of the Syrian diaspora's repatriation is not a totally new topic. But, Kremlin refrains from dealing with the issue as it would make Essad's bloody regime look worse than it already is because Syria will seriously look like somewhere where people want to flee from, and, of course, this is true. Besides, local ethnic Russians and other non-Circassian nationality groups like the Balkars or local Armenians will not really be happy to have new (or "returning") neighbours for a mix of semi-selfish historical, ethnic, religious and socio-political reasons. Absorption of mass scale immigration looks like a difficult project as it would be almost elsewhere in the world. Yet, Kremlin is likely to save the appearance by accepting some, if not all, repatriate groups from Syria and market it as a case of benign humanitarianism to minimize the risks of Circassian caused troubles in the eve of the approaching Sochi Olympics and in the face of already existing instability in the region (Dzutsev, 25 January 2012).

The 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics to be held in the Krasnodar Krai adjoining the North Caucasus republics would be a source of big public relations success or disaster for Kremlin regarding its capacity to keep things under control in the region. Presently, the Olympics are being protested by some Circassian organizations as the Circassians (the Adygheys, Kabardians, Cherkess and Shapsughs combined) and, their akin ethnic cousins, the Ubykhs (who are now extinct), had suffered genocidal ethnic cleansing in the Sochi area in the last years of the Russo-Caucasian Wars in the 19th century. Even tough some Circassian diaspora and homeland non-governmental organizations have launched an anti-Kremlin Sochi Olympics protest campaign to create international awareness about those massacres, this is not necessarily a source of violent threat per se. Indeed, some other Circassian organizations tend to follow a softer line towards Kremlin in general to negotiate about its desired

blessing over the issues of repatriation of the diaspora Circassians to the NWC and fate of the other ethnic cousins of the Circassians, that is, the Abkhazians, who really seriously refrain from voicing the tragedies of the 19th century (Kafkas Federasyonu, 30 December 2010). However, the Sochi Olympics may indeed face armed danger probably from the nearby Chechen-dominated Caucasus Emirate not necessarily because of historical crimes mostly (but not only) pertaining to the Circassians, Ubykhs and the Abkhazians but political and religious matters of today focusing over Chechnya and jihadism allegedly in connection with international terrorist networks like Al-Qaeda.

Fourthly, and perhaps most interestingly, Umarov, leader of the CE, declared a partial cease fire against the Russian targets. Referring to the mass anti-Putin protests taking place recently, Umarov ordered his forces to stop attacking civilian Russian targets as the protests show that even the Russians are victims of Putin's regime. Nonetheless, he added that insurgent forces will keep attacking military and political targets in the RF (Dzutsev, 3 February 2012). Umarov's statement hints that he is open to use interesting tactical tools including his style of public diplomacy. Even though his message drew international media attention, mostly negative and indifferent attitude of the wider Russian public opinion towards the CE and, the NC in general, is unlikely to change regardless of Putin's political fate. Besides, Umarov's international image is not very bright due to the alleged connections between the jihadist wing of NC insurgency and Al Qaeda.

The alleged linkage with the NC insurgency and Al Qaeda has been long debated. There are generally three broad views on the issue: (1) there is no linkage; (2) there is an irregular and minimal one; and (3) there exists a strong and comprehensive relationship between Al Qaeda and all sorts of Chechen insurgency including the earlier Dudayevist non-jihadist secessionism. According to Kuchins et al. (2010: 10), similarities between the Al Qaeda and contemporary insurgency of CE are primarily almost coincidental as both share common jihadist rhetoric, jargon and symbols but they do

not have solid organizational connections and solidarity. More evidence is needed to confirm the connection theory. Chifu (2011: 126) states that the EC-Al Qaeda connection is "*accidental, informal, and is virtually limited to the training of its fighters on the field. The Caucasus Emirate looks nothing like an Al-Qaeda type construction either*". On the other hand, Hahn (2011) strongly asserts that both Dudayevist non-jihadist and Umarovist jihadist waves of Chechen insurgency have long maintained direct and significant contacts with Al Qaeda and exchanged various forms of support. Hahn stresses that there is no need to doubt the connection between Chechen insurgency and Al Qaeda.

Due to the quite secretive and manipulative nature of the topic and most information sources, it is difficult for us to reach a conclusive statement on the matter from a strictly social sciences perspective. We may at least point that neither two waves of Chechen insurgency have not attacked non-Russian Western/infidel/Dar al-Harb/Dar al-Garb targets at least for now. On the contrary, earlier non-jihadist Dudayevist wing of Chechen insurgency is known to have asked for international support especially from NATO countries against Moscow. Last surviving representative of the earlier non-jihadist insurgency wave, Akhmed Zakayev, has been long living in asylum in London under the protection of British authorities as his life remains under constant danger for he is a critic of both Moscow and Umarov. However, these facts do not readily eliminate the possibility that some elements from any wing of Chechen insurgency might have sought any sort of assistance from Al Qaeda as a part of their hopeless and/or pragmatic search for foreign support. At least, it is obvious that so called "Arab mujahedeen" led by Samir Saleh Abdullah Al-Suwailem (aka Emir Khattab), Jordan-born Afghanistan veteran of Al Qaeda, have played their semi-independent dubious roles in the First and Second Russo-Chechen Wars. Vidino (2005) argues that Emir Khattab's presence in Chechnya was good evidence of the connection between Chechen insurgency and Al Qaeda which is downplayed by Western governments that put the emphasis on the brutality of the Russian forces against North Caucasians. To conclude, one thing is clear enough;

presently Chechen-led NC insurgency has its unique roots (including the obviously secular one, that is, nationalism), dynamics and supporter base apart from Al Qaeda and both North Caucasian insurgency and Al Qaeda do not fundamentally need each other to survive or grow.

Conclusion

NC has long been a source of unrest for Russian rule since its annexation into the Tsarist Russian Empire. In many ways, it remained as a semi-alien subject to the Tsardom, USSR and present-day RF. However, Russians administrations still managed to produce a mix of coercion and consent to keep the region within the Russian political space, the former being used rather excessively than the latter. Ongoing insurgency and radicalization threats are thus a part of a larger picture. Security risks in the NC take their roots from historical, ethno-religious and socio-political causes. Hence, these risks should be addressed in a comprehensive manner reaching well beyond classical armed oppression methods. Experience shows that Moscow's short term military successes at the expense of massive human rights violations do not guarantee long term stability in the NC. Fortunately, Russian leadership seems to have learned a few lessons from the past as it has introduced a socio-political reform package recently. Yet, it is not sure whether this will be a genuine strategic change or a tactical manoeuvre for the short term. In any case, Russian leaders have the major part of burden to stabilize the NC as they are the most component actors to do so. Local inhabitants and major interested parties like the US, EU and Turkey, too, have their responsibilities, interests and resources to contribute to a peaceful transformation of the NC from a poorer, marginalized region into a more prosperous and internationalized one. Nevertheless, interests and actions of local, national and international actors barely end up in a harmonious sum in the region. Cases of cooperation and competition exist at the same time and it is not certain which will prevail in the long term. In any case, introduction of stability and prosperity to the NC would be a long term, multi-actor objective which requires Moscow's

reduction of military use of force and all sorts of ethno-religious civilian restrictions as the first step. Regarding the academic perspective on the subject, the case of the NC requires newer and multi-disciplinary studies to produce more detailed analyses and better policy recommendations in the future.

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