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Ingushetia's insurgency, where to?

Radu Arghir



Ingushetia has long been one of the focal points of the North Caucasus insurgency. The relatively small province was very active in terms of terrorist activity, and, even if it was smaller than its neighbors and had a higher population density (therefore making it an unlikely hiding place), it served as hiding place for many leaders of the North Caucasus insurgency. The fact that the insurgency as a whole has a religious

component is well known; however this does not mean that this component has any popular support in Ingushetia. In fact there were other (secular) reasons that drove the insurgency so far, but this may change. In recent years the strength of the insurgency has waned but it still remains active and it may resurge, this time with a stronger religious component. I will explain how, but first let us focus on the insurgency itself.

The insurgency:

While the insurgency in Ingushetia was strongest in the years after the second Chechen War, for the purpose of this analysis I will focus only on the last two years. The year 2010 marked a decrease in the number of incidents mostly because the capture or elimination of a number of key figures in the insurgency. However, it was still significantly bloody compared to what happened in other provinces.

Based on figures provided by the Russian media, in 2010, Ingushetia registered the second largest number of victims of violence in the North Caucasus.¹ According to those figures 134 people were killed and 192 injured in the province while the total number casualties in the North Caucasus region was of 1,710² meaning that roughly one in six casualties occurred in the half a million large province. And all this despite the fact that the insurgency suffered a number of blows that left a visible mark on its capacity to operate. The first important loss the insurgency suffered happened on the 2nd of March when Said Buryatsky (aka Alexander Tikhomirov), one of the chief ideologues of the North Caucasus militant movement was killed in the Ingush village of Ekazhevo as a result of Russian intelligence operation. Buryatsky, an ethnic Buryat from eastern Siberia's Buryat republic, born of a mother of Buryat nationality and a Russian father, studied Islam in Egypt and joined the North Caucasus insurgency in the summer of 2008³ climbing quickly through the ranks of the insurgency. Some even considered him the insurgency's top ideologist. After this success, the Russian authorities delivered another significant blow to the insurgency when, in June, Emir Magas (aka Akhmed Taziev-Yevloev), the founders of the Ingush Jamaat, was arrested. Amir Magas was born in 1978 in Grozny and was one of

the few Ingush ethnics that joined Shamil Basaev's insurgency. He fought in both Chechen wars and after 2000 Basaev ordered him to go Ingushetia and organize the scattered band of rebels operating in Ingushetia, creating the first united Shariat Jamaat of Ingushetia⁴. His rap sheet is impressive and ranges from different minor crimes committed throughout Ingushetia to the attempted assassination of Ingushetia's president, Yunus-bek Yevkurov, and a possible implication in the assault on a school in the North Ossetian town of Beslan on September 1, 2004. Even if, most probably, he wasn't a fervent supporter of the idea of a North Caucasus Emirate he did pledged allegiance to Doku Umarov, the head of the Caucasus Emirate⁵, allegiance that remained unchanged until his capture. His arrest significantly affected the operational capacity of the Ingush Jamaat, resulting in a decreased number of attacks in the last six months of 2010 compared to the first six months of the same year and also compared to the last six months of 2009. Also officials in Ingushetia, cited by the Jamestown Foundation, said that overall in 2010 "the number of crimes related to assaults on law enforcement agents declined by 37 percent compared to 2009"⁶.

The year 2010 also marked a major change in the Ingush Jamaat's strategy. For reasons yet unknown the focus of their activities changed from attacking local authorities to attacking targets in North Ossetia and fueling the ethnic conflict between the two regions. On October 4, contrary to the rest of the North Caucasian Islamic insurgency, the Ingush Jamaat decided to focus on nationalist matters. The insurgents declared in a videotaped statement they would temporarily cease attacks against Ingushetia's law enforcement personnel and would only attack members of the Russian (federal) security apparatus. Also, insurgents repeatedly urged the Ingush people to pray for them and not to betray them to the

¹ Mairbek Vatchagaev, *Ingush in 2010: The Insurgency Remains a Potent Force*, North Caucasus Analysis Volume: 12, Issue: 2, 28.01.2011

² *The armed conflict in the North Caucasus: 1710 victims in 2010*, 18.01.2011, Kavkaz-uzel website

³ The Jamestown Foundation, *Said Buryatsky Reported to be Among Six Militants Killed in Ingushetia*, North Caucasus Analysis, Volume: 11, Issue: 0, 21.09.2010

⁴ Mairbek Vatchagaev, *Moscow's Biggest Victory over the North Caucasus Rebels Since Fall*, North Caucasus Analysis, Volume 11, Issue: 0, 6.07.2010

⁵ *Ibidem*

⁶ Mairbek Vatchagaev, *Ingush in 2010: The Insurgency Remains a Potent Force*, North Caucasus Analysis Volume: 12, Issue: 2, 28.01.2011

Russian authorities. The motivation behind the decision was that this will allow the local insurgency to deal with the Ossetian threat. In a nationalistic and xenophobic message the insurgents accused the neighboring Ossetian people of being the source of majority of Ingush people's problems and vowed to attack Ossetians and to reclaim any disputed Ingush land that is held by North Ossetia.⁷ And they did so before the change in tactics was even mentioned. On the 9th of September, almost a month earlier, a suicide blast in Vladikavkaz killed 17 people and injured 100 other.⁸ It's unclear whether the blast was part of the new strategy or it was an unrelated incident and the new strategy was developed as a result of the incident (the outcome made the insurgency reconsider its strategy). Either way, the strategy is somewhat different from the aims of the North Caucasus insurgency that, as a whole, is targeting Russian authorities and does not encourage ethnic divide. Ossetians are indeed a close ally of the Russian authorities (mostly as a result of common goals, especially in the light of the 2008 war, and the fact that the predominant religion in the province is Christianity) but starting an ethnic conflict is hardly an objective of the North Caucasus Jamaat since it would divert important resources from the fight against the actual federal authorities. This may indicate that since the leaders (that organized the initial Ingush insurgency) have been captured or killed new ones steer further away from the agenda of Umarov. And if the Russian claim that it captured Emir Adam, Emir Magas's successor, is true, then this effect will be amplified in the future⁹. The insurgency is yet to confirm or deny the claim, but even if Emir Adam wasn't captured, the hesitation in itself indicates that the insurgency is no longer very well organized. This theory is supported by a report issued by the insurgency itself which mentions that there were 17 casualties on both

sides in the war against authorities (11 were insurgents)¹⁰ in the first four months of 2011, a significant decrease compared to the previous year. The most recent special operation of the Russian authorities, carried out on the 27th of January 2012 in the Ingush village of Ekazhevo, ended with the death of two insurgents and an accomplice. One of the insurgents was identified as Djemaleil Mutaliev, one of leaders of the "Imarat Kavkaz" movement. A significant amount of explosives was found at the location.¹¹

Obviously, the raid also proves that the insurgency still exists and is capable of perpetrating effective attacks. In the second half of 2011 it even showed signs of recovery. It managed to assassinate Magomed Korigov, the FSB's main official in Ingushetia's Malgobek district, on the 27th of August¹² and on the 9th of December a government official, Sofa Esmurzueva, (Deputy Minister of Public Health) was attacked and injured in Ingushetia¹³. In the case of the latter incident no group has claimed responsibility yet but given the fact she is a government official there is a high possibility the attack is the work of the insurgency.

However, overall it was considerably weakened and local authorities seem to be on the right track when it comes to countering it. According to the Caucasian Knot from the 1st of January to the 1st of December 2011 some 103 people became the victims of armed attacks in Ingushetia (69 killed and 34 injured), a considerable number but a steep decline compared to the previous year when no less than 326 people (134 killed and 192 injured) were victims of similar

¹⁰ *Caucasus Emirate. Summary of combat operations by Mujahideen of Caucasus Emirate*, 6.04.2011, Kavkazcenter website

¹¹ *During the week of January 23-29, 15 persons fell victim to armed conflict in Northern Caucasus*, 02.02.2012, Caucasian Knot website

¹² Mairbek Vatchagaev, *The Revival of Ingushetia's Insurgency*, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 8, Issue: 169, 15.09.2011

¹³ *Attempt on Sofa Esmurzueva, Deputy Minister of Public Health, undertaken in Ingushetia*, 09.12.2011, Caucasian Knot website

⁷ Valery Dzutsev, *Ingushetia's Islamists Adopt Nationalist Rhetoric*, North Caucasus Analysis Volume 11, Issue 7, 7.10.2010

⁸ *Blast At Vladikavkaz Market Kills 17*, 09.09.2010, Free Europe Website

⁹ Mairbek Vatchagaev, *Ingush in 2010: The Insurgency Remains a Potent Force*, North Caucasus Analysis Volume: 12, Issue: 2, 28.01.2011

attacks¹⁴. Even more, Ingushetia is no longer the second deadliest province in the North Caucasus region, and now ranks number four in terms of number of people killed in attacks (after Dagestan, Chechnya and Kabardino-Balkaria)¹⁵. Moreover the work of the authorities was simplified recently when, as a result of the widespread protests that followed after the widely contested elections in Russia (December 2011), the leader of the North Caucasus insurgency, Doku Umarov, ordered his followers to halt all attacks aimed at the Russian civilian population. Umarov considered that the civilian population is no longer a valid target because it no longer supports the regime of Vladimir Putin.¹⁶

It remains to be seen whether they can stay on track, but it will most likely depend on Moscow's capability to appoint good leadership. For the moment there is growing discontent among people with the corrupt leadership of the current president Yunus-bek Yevkurov¹⁷, giving them a reason to rebel and join the insurgency. Moscow can easily remove Yevkurov from power, especially now when he's facing new corruption charges,¹⁸ but this doesn't necessarily mean that he will be replaced or that the person that will succeed him will be more popular. The legislative elections of December 2011 and the following protests put some serious pressure on the Russian authorities and as a result they may become reluctant to anything involving change. On the other hand, recent events might have the opposite effect and encourage Moscow to remove Yevkurov in order to save face and prevent further manifestations of discontent. Both scenarios are equally feasible.

¹⁴ *Ingushetia: 103 victims of armed conflict for 11 months of 2011*, 6.12.2011, Caucasian Knot website

¹⁵ *Armed conflict in Northern Caucasus: 1205 victims in 11 months of 2011*, 2.12.2011, Caucasian Knot website

¹⁶ *Caucasus Insurgency Head Backs Halt Of Terror Attacks On Russian Civilians*, 03.02.2012, Free Europe Website

¹⁷ *Is Moscow's Ingushetia Strategy Working?*, 29.04.2011, Free Europe Website

¹⁸ *Villagers Accuse Ingushetian Leader's Relative Of Extortion*, 18.11.2011, Free Europe Website

Sharia law meets secularism:

And now, regarding the religious component, there is a recent example that illustrates how poor leadership and corruption can drive the population toward rebellion and religious extremism. I mentioned earlier the 2011 Russian legislative elections were plagued by massive fraud and Ingushetia was no exception. According to opposition observers the turnout was no higher than 15% but the Central Electoral Committee (CEC) reported a presence of over 86%. There is hardly any doubt that the authorities were eager to present positive results to their leaders in Moscow, and would stop at nothing to achieve this objective.

Opposition representatives issued formal complains but the CEC didn't even accept them. Theoretically the next step would be to appeal at a local courthouse; however opposition representatives did not follow suit since they were convinced they would receive the same treatment. Instead they turned to the head of the Sharia Court (Kadi)¹⁹ for justice. The ruling itself is irrelevant since any ruling of the Kadi is advisory at best and would bare no legal implications. If anything it only offers some sort of comfort to the people that feel they have no alternative and can no longer trust the legal system. However it does show two ways in which corrupt administration can push people toward a religious based insurgency and religious extremism.

Firstly, the obvious way, is that it pushes people towards Sharia law. As long as the existing legislation is enforced in a biased way and people feel they can no longer trust in it, they will turn to alternatives. Sharia law is the most obvious alternative, and is also one of the objectives of the North Caucasus Insurgency, therefore boosting its support among the population.

Secondly, the courts decisions can be used by insurgents as moral high ground in order for them to justify their attacks and garner support.

¹⁹ *Opposition tries to sue Ingush leader and CEC Chairman at spiritual court*, 15.12.2011, Free Europe Website

The insurgents can try to enforce (in a very broad way) the rulings (and there will be many more if the local administrations continue to act with impunity), mainly by opposing the local government and attacking the local administration when the situation permits it.

In the end this proves that since the decline of the insurgency (in Ingushetia) the biggest enemy of the Russian appointed administration is the administration itself (because of the increasing corruption and decreasing popular support). The more this status quo is maintained, the better the environment becomes for a rebirth of the religious insurgency.

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