

# Russian policies in the North Caucasus

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## Overall Situation

The theme of this particular paper could be viewed as a challenge for anybody willing to approach it due to the lack of a formal comprehensive policy towards the North Caucasus. Ever since the second Chechen war in 1999 the Russian authorities have done their best to present a calm atmosphere in the region, something that could not be further from the realities in the field. Therefore, we can emphasize from the very beginning that Moscow still lacks a coherent policy

for the region and continues to deny its failures especially when it comes to implementing impulsively developed strategies. We could assess even that 2010 turned out to be more difficult for Russia than the previous year in terms of its problems in the North Caucasus. Nearly all top Russian officials, including Russia's president, the head of the Investigative Committee of the Prosecutor General's Office and the Interior Minister, among others, have had to acknowledge the worsening situation in the region. Even according to official data, the total number of militant actions against Russian authorities in 2010

increased one-and-a-half to four times compared to 2009.<sup>1</sup> Denial, along with lack of creative solutions and continuous failures regarding security for Russia's own citizens and for the entire region, have turned the North Caucasus, over the past two years, into one of the most unstable regions on the planet. Debate on the matter is kept on the low in Russia and other countries find it a waste of time as no cooperation from Russian authorities can ever be taken into consideration. Moreover, total lack of transparency from local and federal authorities regarding almost every aspect of the North Caucasus makes it impossible to obtain a fully fledged evaluation of the situation in the region. Even so, undeniably Moscow has an approach to the North Caucasian region that is best described as 'highly flexible'. This ironic definition refers to the frequent and sudden changes Moscow makes in its modus operandi in North Caucasus. We can also identify a series of general trends the Russian officials embrace when it comes to the region.

Firstly, there is the general influx of funds that are being injected in the region on the off chance that this could change the mood of the republics. Even though the republics' budget is subsidized as much as 70% and some of them far exceed budgets of other regions of Russia that are undoubtedly more important, the lack of jobs and poverty are the highest in the entire country. This is the result of the high level of corruption of the administrative apparatus and a "don't ask, don't tell" policy adopted by Moscow regarding funds that go into the region. The figures we are confronted with are based on releases from the Russian government but there are sources that claim that budgetary infusions are being made through "special" channels and listed as other than budget income. This part of Moscow's strategy has yet to be productive and lately, due to financial difficulties worldwide, has aroused popular unrest and tensions that threaten to rapidly transform into ethnic hatred towards the people of the region. In 2011, after multiple failures in the North

Caucasus, the Russian government took into consideration a type of economic disengagement of the republics that would imply a drastic reduction of the federal funds injected in the region. This means that at least three out of five republics in the area would go bankrupt in less than six months. Even though such a move would be to the liking of ethnic Russians across the Federation, the implications of such a gesture are hard to foresee, especially in the economic realm, as Moscow would spend the money it saves on security related issues.

A second manifestation of Moscow's lack of resolve and solutions for the North Caucasus is the "hard" component. It is a well-known fact the Russian authorities' response to most insurgent actions or popular unrest inside the six republics in the region has been and appears to remain the use of intimidation and force. The constant upgrading of police forces, federal forces and special units of the FSB and Russian army for the republics is a good indicator of the failure of the policy in question but also of the low level of preparedness and expertise that these forces have. Moreover, scenes reminiscent of the last Chechen war, which in the opinion of some analysts is not yet over, makes the presence of an ever-growing number of Russian forces in the region alienate the population from the central government.

Under the same topic we have to take into consideration the brutal and damaging methods that both the federal troops and local police forces use in order to achieve their goals. There have been numerous reports of abductions, disappearances, torture, violence, threats, and other activities not suited to be representative for the authorities of an allegedly democratic regime. These reports have intensified in the last three years ever since the beginning of the worldwide economic recession due to problems that the central government has been facing economically, not being able to sustain the financially high-set bar for the North Caucasian republics. The repercussions of such actions are the ever-growing ranks of the militant movement, lack of cooperation with the authorities and a new wave of religiously-driven groups that bring additional

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<sup>1</sup> [Medvedev initiatives remain on paper](http://www.trud.ru/article/28-09-2010/251087_5_initsiativ_medvedeva_ostavshixsja_na_bumage.html), Trud, September 28 2010.  
Issue 180, www.trud.ru/article/28-09-2010/251087\_5\_initsiativ\_medvedeva\_ostavshixsja\_na\_bumage.html

threats to local security and further prevent any federal achievements in the region.

The third general trend that Moscow appears to have adopted could be defined as a form of isolation of the autonomous republics of the North Caucasus. The correct definition is hard to find due to the fact that we are not talking about just isolation per se. Isolation is just a part of this policy; as human rights NGOs are censored or outright silenced from reaching out with comprehensive statistics or studies, the outside world is most of the time prevented from catching a glimpse of the real situation and the rest of the country is intentionally misled according to political interests.

## The armed insurgency - a key player

Although the deterioration of the situation in the North Caucasus had multifaceted manifestations - in the sense that there were various factors, including social, political, economic and religious - the dominant and defining factor overshadowing all of them was the ongoing armed resistance movement. It was exactly the intensified insurgency that compelled the Russian authorities to confess that the situation in the region in 2010 had indeed significantly worsened compared to 2009. While in 2009, the violence and unrest were concentrated mainly in Ingushetia, in 2010 the much larger Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria came to the forefront, which could have an impact on Russia's Black Sea area, where Russia hopes to host the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014<sup>2</sup>.

Against the background of the Circassian public outcry over the Russian decision to hold these games in their historical habitat, there have been news reports that are so ominously familiar to the rest of the North Caucasus region. The bombing of a train near Sochi on November 21, 2010<sup>3</sup> and the fact that caches of weapons and ammunition have

repeatedly been found in the Sochi area appear to indicate the emergence of an indigenous group of local nationalists that could establish close contact with the armed underground of the North Caucasus at the initial stage, while not even being their ideological supporters<sup>4</sup>. Trying to remain in power, the leaders of the North Caucasus republics have been adopting the tactic first used by Ramzan Kadyrov, in which priority is given to the local police (or rather its individual structures), directly subordinated to local authorities. However, a strategy to counter the militants by using paramilitary structures composed of representatives of the indigenous population of a republic would hardly lead to the result that has been purportedly achieved in Chechnya, since it ignores the many differences between the organization of Chechen society and that of the other polities in the region.

According to the authorities, more than 300 militants were killed in the North Caucasus in 2010, a majority of whom were liquidated in Dagestan during the last four months of the year<sup>5</sup>. These data include a certain percentage of those whose participation in the ranks of the armed resistance movement has not been proved; hence, they should be classified as civilians. It should be noted that siloviki losses are comparable to those inflicted on the rebel fighters. According to the Russian Prosecutor General's Office, there were 529 armed attacks on law enforcement and military personnel in 2010. In the course of their actions, militants killed 218 and wounded 536 people<sup>6</sup>. Interestingly, the figures given by Russian law enforcement agencies are little trusted by Dmitry Medvedev himself, who has literally said that all these figures for the North Caucasus are nothing but "nonsense"<sup>7</sup>. Thus, even the leadership of the Russian state has to admit what has been obvious for so many analysts working on

<sup>2</sup> Moscow's Position in the North Caucasus Worsened Dramatically in 2010, Volume: 12, [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org)

<sup>3</sup> Дело о подрыве железной дороги в Краснодарском крае возбуждено по статье "терроризм", Nov 21<sup>st</sup> 2010, <http://www.interfax.ru/politics/news.asp?id=165863>, [www.interfax.ru/politics/news.asp?id=165863](http://www.interfax.ru/politics/news.asp?id=165863)

<sup>4</sup> A weapons cache was found near Sochi, December. 29, 2010, <http://southdistrict.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/179035/>

<sup>5</sup> More than 130 militants killed in four months in Dagestan, Dec 27, 2010, [www.rian.ru/defense\\_safety/20101227/314088692.html](http://www.rian.ru/defense_safety/20101227/314088692.html)

<sup>6</sup> More than 300 militants killed this year in the North Caucasus - the data Prosecution, December 8, 2010, [www.interfax-russia.ru/South/main.asp?id=196058](http://www.interfax-russia.ru/South/main.asp?id=196058)

<sup>7</sup> North Caucasus remains unstable - Medvedev, November 19, 2010, RIA Novosti news agency,

Russia and specifically on the North Caucasus: that the figures published by Russian officialdom should be treated with great suspicion. According to independent sources basing their data on open news reports, the losses among the civilian population, including those killed by the Russian security forces, totaled 117 people in 2010<sup>8</sup>.

At the beginning of the 1990s, problems in the North Caucasus were predominantly limited to deferred payment on Soviet debts. The first stirrings in the regions were provoked not by Russian federal power, but the regional political communities. But they didn't manage to hold on to their power everywhere: in Chechnya, for instance, the local nationalist communists disturbed the 'beast' of ethnic nationalism, which then devoured them. But on the whole, the "freedom parade" was a matter for the higher echelons: the populace was given the role of the cavalry at the demonstrations. It was these elites that forced the Russian authorities to pacify the Caucasus using the method of trial and error - treaties and concessions, police operations and military campaigns, Khasavyurts (the Khasavyurt Accords at the end of the 1st Chechen War, 1996), treaties on the separation of powers and buying the favors of the regional elites. The result was the considerable reduction of the wave of interethnic conflicts (with the exception of Chechnya)<sup>9</sup>.

## Lack of resolve, lack of results

During Dmitry Medvedev's term in office, there was an attempt to break the monopoly of "nepotism" in the region but the president did so only by imposing his own leadership in the person of Aleksandr Khloponin. When Khloponin was faced with high disobedience from the republican leaders that had the backing of the former leader of the "vertical system", Putin, who was keen on preventing Medvedev from gaining an actual

foothold in the "power nest", the North Caucasus District experiment was declared a failure. Furthermore, the high level unofficial struggle for power in the Kremlin reflected on Khloponin's highly-praised managerial skills. Known to be an excellent economist and a successful manager (due to his close ties with the Kremlin, a fact known by few), his central support ended when he attempted to go against the "many" and subdue the Putin vertical to the Medvedev vertical. So, if the simple task of appointing a capable leader that would oversee governance in the republics is met with such harshness from those who should present solutions to problems, not further aggravate them, we can safely assume that eliminating corruption and putting forward politically-capable men in executive positions is out of the question. Along with this, the idea of promoting Russian ethnicity through a righteous political segment can be overruled from the beginning.

Secondly, the ethnic solution lacks the understanding of an ever-growing element: the Islamic resistance, an organization that is based on religious beliefs and religious extremism rather than on the intricacies of politics. This movement, under the socio-economic realities created by Moscow's "ethnic policies" so far, is able to claim more young minds, more popular support than the "Russian identity" ever could. Moreover, the insurgency has so far been able to make gains against Russian authorities. We should take into consideration, following the string of events that led to the current situation and brought it to a stalemate: Russian or a lack of Russian policy towards the region led to discontent and acted as a catalyst to the Islamic radical movement which in turn led to heavy repressions of the central government that led to an increasing number of attacks from the insurgency, which in turn led to ethnic hatred of Russians towards ethnic Caucasians. So, the end result, the newest development of the situation is that ethnic Russians reject the region completely and such a thing could have serious consequences, both political (in the light of the presidential elections of 2012) and social (see the street riots in Moscow in 2010), that distinctly state the ethnicity policy

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<sup>8</sup> Claimed the year, December 29<sup>th</sup> 2010, [www.kasparov.ru/material.php?id=4D1B301B9BD2D](http://www.kasparov.ru/material.php?id=4D1B301B9BD2D)  
<sup>9</sup> Yeltsin's complicated legacy in the Caucasus, Sergei Markedonov, 19 February 2011, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/sergei-markedonov/yeltsin%E2%80%99s-complicated-legacy-in-caucasus>



is nothing more than a stall bound to end in failure.

After the second Chechen war, it took years before they realized in Moscow that the region had not been pacified and, even worse, that there could not be any pacification at all, due to the multiple processes occurring there. The situation looks so unpredictable to the Kremlin that today a significant number of analysts in the state apparatus, including the law enforcement agencies (collectively called the *siloviki* in Russian) and officialdom dedicate their time, energy and resources to working on the North Caucasus. It means that the Russian government is giving unparalleled attention to the region. Moscow is ready to invest astronomical sums, even to the detriment of all other Russian territories, in order to turn the situation around by improving the quality of life of the local population<sup>10</sup>. Despite the biggest unemployment rate in the entire country, the residents of the autonomous republics of the North Caucasus have some of the highest living standards compared to other regions. This paradox is created by high social and unemployment aid given by the local authorities in accordance with the policy dictated by Moscow. This is often a reason for discontent by ethnic Russians towards the central government and many times the root of ethnic hatred and clashes. Even so, this policy is far from being productive as the dialogue between the governments and the population in the North Caucasus is scarce, which in turn leads to mass discontent. State mechanisms are often circumvented by its people as a result of lack of faith in the administrative institutions, a phenomenon that can be accounted for mainly through the high level of corruption of the authorities and despotic leadership. Such level of rejection towards the authorities created a broad base of support for those who have chosen to pick up arms to fight against the government. Having virtually no understanding of the real situation on the ground, Moscow tries to solve the problem by building additional ski resorts, in the hope that this would miraculously deny insurgents

the support of the population. At their turn, the local authorities in the region, who are completely dependent on Moscow, act as if they are outsiders, and this reinforces the population's impulse to reject them. The local authorities even seem to realize this phenomenon, but avoid offending those in Moscow who make recommendations to them on how to act on the ground. Incidentally, it is difficult to find even one solid and reputable analyst or specialist on North Caucasus issues in the Kremlin's analytical circles. Almost all of the experts currently focusing on the North Caucasus left the region in the 1990s because they were unable to influence the situation then. Yet they are now issuing instructions from the Kremlin on how to change nearly the same situation in the region they had originally fled. The absolute majority of experts outside the Kremlin comprise those seeking to obtain grants abroad and then quickly leave the country that they were supposed to defend against those handing out the grants.

Under these circumstances, Moscow attempts different schemes in order to receive the result it looks for, without too much trouble if possible. Separate attempts to introduce specific social policies, like repopulating the area with Cossacks or launching a fully fledged religious campaign using the Orthodox Church, prove that the vision about the region's problems is highly distorted and divided.

## A New Strategy, Old Players

On 4 October 2010, the Russian Federation government website published the full text, complete with tables and appendices, of a development strategy for the North Caucasus, a document which is worth mentioning for our analysis, even though it does not bring many changes to the table, as it is the only relevant piece of official material Moscow has on the matter, so far. Publication of the *Strategy for the Socio-economic Development of the North Caucasus Federal District until 2025* has provoked a good deal of comment. Such documents are rare in Russian politics, domestic or foreign. The main diagnostic assessments are given in section two, *An analysis of the socio-economic situation in*

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<sup>10</sup> Moscow's Approach to the North Caucasus Looks Increasingly Deluded, Publication: North Caucasus Analysis Volume: 11 Issue: 10, November 17, 2010

*the North Caucasus Federal District. Strategy-2025* does not have a special section dedicated to the socio-political situation in the region, even just in relation to the economic prospects. "Since the early 90s most of the constituent members of the North Caucasus Federal District have, for a number of objective socio-economic reasons, been the most susceptible to crisis," the document states<sup>11</sup>. Strategy-2025 provides a comparative history of the situation to date. Falling production figures for the Caucasus and Russia as a whole are compared. But there is no analysis of the reasons for this decline in the Caucasus. According to Strategy-2025, "the last decade has seen a drastic reduction in the Russian population in the North Caucasus Federal District. This has been caused by the falling birth rate and an increase in the flow of migrants to other regions of the Russian Federation. At the same time, the indigenous ethnic groups in the republics of the North Caucasus Federal District are growing steadily because their birth rate is rising and the Russian nationals are leaving"<sup>12</sup>. These conclusions are incontrovertible. But the changes were not only caused by the market transformations of the 1990s. Ethnic conflict played its part, particularly in Chechnya, as did the increasing importance granted to ethnic affiliation by the local authorities and the lack of an overall coherent concept of nation building<sup>13</sup>.

Two incomplete subsections of Strategy-2025 are devoted to ethnic relations, but they are limited to generalities. There is no real information and no analysis. This document of considerable strategic importance offers no explanation for why events developed as they did. The reader is left to guess. The Strategy's analytical section does not even have a subsection dealing with the religious

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11 Strategy for the Socio-economic Development of the North Caucasus Federal District until 2025 С Т Р А Т Е Г И Я социально-экономического развития, Северо-Кавказского федерального округа до 2025 года,  
[www.government.ru/media/2010/10/435578/file/1485.doc](http://www.government.ru/media/2010/10/435578/file/1485.doc)

12 Idem

13 Strategy for the Socio-economic Development of the North Caucasus Federal District until 2025 С Т Р А Т Е Г И Я социально-экономического развития Северо-Кавказского федерального округа до 2025 года,  
[www.government.ru/media/2010/10/435578/file/1485.doc](http://www.government.ru/media/2010/10/435578/file/1485.doc)

revival, although radical Islam is the main vehicle for protests in the Caucasus.

The departure of Russian manpower from the Caucasus has undoubtedly created many problems, and this is recognized by many representatives of the Caucasian, Turkic and other peoples of the region. But it would be a huge mistake to reduce the whole picture to black and white (competent/highly qualified Russians vs. semi-literate and savage hill people). The problem is that those who are economically active and professionally well off are leaving the region, irrespective of what ethnic group they belong to. In many ways, this is because it is simply impossible to do business, have a career as a scholar or simply live as a free person in this region<sup>14</sup>. In short, the objectives of Strategy-2025 are quite clearly unachievable. It focuses on economic growth without addressing the socio-political preconditions that make the North Caucasus explosive and unstable. This document seems to isolate the economy and the social sphere from the rest of the not uncomplicated whole<sup>15</sup>. The complex problems that Moscow has in the region are not able to permit such liberties like addressing one issue in the absence of another, especially given the fact that all elements of society create the troublesome whole and their intricacies and linkage do not permit differentiated approaches. Therefore it is more than obvious that Moscow's strategy will not be implemented very soon due to its structural flaws.

Under these circumstances, the fact remains that on March 4, 2012, Vladimir Putin has once again won another presidential term, this time for the next six years. As we have proven above, he is not a leader prone to change, therefore we can safely presume that the status-quo, leadership and general situation in the North Caucasus will remain the same for a very long time.

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14 A strategy for North Caucasus: don't mention politics or religion! Sergei Markedonov, 1 November 2010, oD Russia,  
<http://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/sergei-markedonov/strategy-for-north-caucasus-don%E2%80%99t-mention-politics-or-religion>

15 Idem