

Vol. 4 nr. 12 | 2011

It's not about religion, it's about money

Bogdan Nedea*



When it is a question of money, everybody is of the same religion.
Voltaire

Throughout history men have gone to war for a variety of reasons, from patriotism to honor and even love, but the main drivers behind man's insatiable warmongering have been - and remain to this day - power and money. Nevertheless, the quest for power and wealth remains a privilege of the ruling class, as prizes gained for their ability to convince others to fight their battles for them. But to drive the masses to battle you have to place in front of them a goal far greater than political ambition or charisma. This reason can be religion, the promise of a glorious life after death, rewards beyond the means of any leader and the eternal gratitude of generations to come. In modern warfare these elements have faded and have been replaced by a, sometimes, misplaced sense of duty, thus transforming the army into a goal in itself. Nevertheless religious motivation can be found in many ongoing conflicts in the world today revealing the fact that it is still a powerful incentive.

The guerrilla war (let's call it what it is) in the North Caucasus appears to be built around the same leit-motif, with the Caucasus Emirate standing out as the main anti-government force in the region. Even so, it is worth mentioning that the religious element of the North Caucasian resistance is rather new, and so are its specific elements. The Caucasus Emirate rests upon the ashes of the former Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, the [unrecognized secessionist](#) government of [Chechnya](#) who's roots can be found in the dormant resistance against the imperialist and later soviet rule that began in the 17th century. The republic was proclaimed in late 1991 by [Dzokhar Dudayev](#). After the 1994-1996 devastating war with Russia, Aslan Mashkadov was elected president of the republic but his efforts of bringing down the crime rate and influence of local warlords were in vain. Therefore in 1998 he proclaimed the Islamic Republic of Ichkeria and the [Sharia](#) system of justice was introduced. Historically the population of Chechnya and the North Caucasus region can be identified as Sufis (followers of the Sufi religion), having

preserved structures bearing a resemblance to the military organizations of Chechen murids (disciples), individual followers of a Sufi leader or sheikh. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the members of the Sufi brotherhoods encountered for the first time active propaganda by members of the Islamic Party of Renaissance, who encouraged Chechens to reject Sufism and follow a radical interpretation of Islam, pejoratively referred to as Salafism or Wahhabism¹. President Aslan Mashkadov, having come to power as a representative of Sufism, immediately came to terms with the radicals, thereby trying to neutralize them as a possible opposition. Representatives of the so-called radical wing were appointed to a number of important posts in the government. Despite the fact that the Sufi population was not prepared for the intrusion of the radical Islam organizations, wahabism and salafism began to grow in strength and represented perfect covers for crimes committed by local warlords-controlled militias. Sufis probably make up 90 to 95 percent of the population of Chechnya, but those numbers should not lead one to underestimate the threat posed by the radicals. Radicals, even though they represent a minority of 2-3 percent, are an active minority advancing their own interests not only in Chechnya, but also throughout the whole North Caucasus region. They have rigid discipline and large financial capabilities, but most importantly they know what they want: power. One of these warlords was able to impose his authority over others and continued to use religion in order to sustain and justify his actions, thus permitting local and federal authorities - and for that matter international media focused on the region - to associate violence with Islam, creating the myth of Jihad and Islamic radicalism. This does not mean that the phenomenon has not been and still isn't real, but its reality goes as far as approximately 10% of the entire insurgency in North Caucasus.

¹ North Caucasus Analysis Volume: 6 Issue: 16, December 31, 2005, Mairbek Vatchagaev

These “opinions” would have been rejected if it hadn’t been for Dokka Umarov who, on October 31, 2007, proclaimed the [Caucasus Emirate](#), declared himself its [Emir](#) and integrated the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria as a [Vilayat](#) (Province). Within the Caucasus Emirate, Chechnya became known as the Vilayat Noxçiyçö (Ichkeria) of the Caucasus Emirate². Thus the religious foundations of a political movement were created, and grew on the grounds of the independence movement revived after the soviet era.

In sum, we have a historical freedom-fighting movement revived after the soviet era, dominated by lawlessness and struggle for power, in which religion was introduced to serve as law in order to stop the crimes and bring order. Later, this turned into a radical-religious organization, as it came under new management.

Religion’s War or War’s Religion?

Under these circumstances it is only fair to ask ourselves what became of those who were already a part of the movement when the change occurred five years ago? There is no doubt that they were battle-hardened soldiers, thus prepared to carry out any order given, be it religiously motivated or not; but how did the transition happen, how did this fighting force perceive the religious element mixing into army life? The answer is simple: it did not, and that is because there was no major ideological change, no sudden shift from extremist/guerrilla or freedom-fighter/terrorist to religious extremist/ mujahedeen/holy warrior of the Jihad. Keep in mind that soldiers who were aged, for example, 35 when the freedom-fighting movement changed into a region-wide jihadist movement are now 40, or those who were 20 are now 25. So we are not talking about a long lasting religious organization, but a guerrilla movement that changed its name. Converting simple soldiers and educating them in the intricacies of the Quran and turning them into true believers while they’re hiding in the mountains and

fighting federal forces is a complicated process that would take more than five years.

The blame for the severed causal link between recent history and the present state of facts lies largely with the media. Western media, eager to learn more about the Russian “Achilles’ heel”, separated the freedom-fighters and adapted the new separatist format to more current global interests, such as Al-Qaeda’s Jihad, without a real interest for the actual situation. Moreover, the course of events that started before the first Chechen war was complicated, to say the least, and the frequent leadership changes, prominent characters and complicated plot, helped by the Russian seclusion, led to a lack of understanding of the real situation in the West. Hence the lack of interest. But once the situation settled and the conflict could be simplified to two sides (federal authorities and the Islamic extremists), it became easier to identify the enemy and tie it to more notorious circumstances (global terrorism related to Islam). On the other hand the Russian media, mainly controlled or censored by the government, was interested in presenting the situation in their favor. For the West, the image was depicted as Russia’s struggle against its own “Al-Qaeda”, while for the Russian population it was presented as a case of Muslim extremists that were terrorizing the nation with their atrocities.

“It’s a mistake to encourage patriotic feelings in poor societies”

Whatever the case, reality was distorted or even replaced by a story of good vs. evil (the sides are hard to assign). Nevertheless, the situation on the ground is real and it depicts a grim social picture, one that can only be seen from “ground zero”. The link between multiple social and economic factors have led up to this situation: after the second Chechen war Moscow began injecting money in the region in order to keep it pacified. Distributing funds to a region that has yet to know the rule of any other law than that of violence and corruption has proven to be risky, but Kremlin’s main goal was achieved: at least on paper the region is stable. Of course, the side effects didn’t take

² Amir of the Caucasus Emirate abolishes the Cabinet of Ministers, the Parliament of the former C.R.I., 11 December 2007, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2007/12/11/9167.shtml>

too long to surface and now we can see how astronomical sums of money are being split between local businessmen and corrupt authorities while only a small share is directed to social aid and salaries. This in turn led to a huge unemployment rate (between 50 and 70 percent according to NGO's in the region) and a lack of options for the population.

This is where the interesting social anomaly occurs: pressed by poverty and needs, men seek out the insurgency and join it. The youth, lacking proper education and sense of direction in life, find all these crucial elements within the insurgency to provide a special type of teaching while instilling a sense of duty and providing a cause, a personal project as part of a group. Of course these elements are just secondary to the main reason: money. The insurgency provides financial stability that no other state institution in the region can offer, thus opening the perspective of a "normal" life to the families of its members. The men are recruited regardless of their religion or skills. Unofficial data shows that more than 40% of the insurgency members across the North Caucasus are hired and do what they do for the money and not because of strong religious beliefs. The age range of the recruiting is 16 to 28 years old and the youth are mainly recruited through internet sites that appear safe at first glance. Considering this fact along with the ever-deteriorating economic situation in the country and especially North Caucasus it is safe to presume that the militants' ranks will continue to bolster.

Nevertheless it would be wrong to deny the part religion has in all of this. We should keep in mind that we are dealing with extremely traditional societies that raise their children in the same manner, therefore transforming characters like the Imam into one of the most important authorities in a child's development. At this point we have to bring up "good and evil" once more. As it is in every religion you have good devoted men of the cloth, ignorant ones and the ones that use their influence for not-so-noble purposes. It is the same with Islam: some Imams preach peace, some, lacking knowledge and interest

preach according to their own ideas and some preach war, revenge and violence in order to gain material advantages or the sense of power. The latter are the ones who serve best to the insurgency, the ones whose radical interpretations of the Quran (one example is E.R. Kuliev one of the most renowned radical interpreters of the holy book of Islam) make them more dangerous than a man holding a loaded gun as they have the power to instill violence at a level so deep it becomes a personality trait. We can identify these elements as one of the main drives behind the unlimited public support the resistance movement has had during the last years.

If you read western media (unwilling to trust the eastern one) you will find that public support for the insurgency is mostly presented as high, but discussing with local experts and analysts I learned that this is hardly the case anymore. After a series of interviews I was able to identify two major elements that led, in time, to drastic drops of support towards the movement. First one is fear. For example in Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia a majority of the population fears a new open conflict between the Russian authorities and militants, conflict that would affect the frail balance their lives has reached. The memory of the 1999 war in Chechnya and its effects is still fresh and that has determined the public ban of the insurgency. On the other side, in Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachevo-Cherkessia people who decide to join the insurgency or are already a part of it, are regarded as heroes, freedom and human rights fighters. Fear of reprisal from the authorities is another trigger for the lack of support from the population. Any kind of display of support towards the insurgency or even a report about such an occurrence (people will do that in order to gain favor from the local authorities) immediately leads to harassment, false accusations of supporting the insurgency or even disappearances (a not so uncommon practice). Due to this second fear factor it is almost impossible to estimate the public support, or lack of it due to fear.

The second reason for the decrease in support of the population is the financial situation. One of the main income sources for many areas in the North Caucasus was balneal-tourism which decreased dramatically due to the volatility of the region affecting the population at a personal level and not statistic-wise. Also we can find entire villages that depended on a local business (factories or manufactories) that were forced to shut down as a result of insurgencies' actions. Once personal well-being (and not the state) was threatened the reaction of the population was viral and rather quick determining an abrupt drop of support for the separatist movement. Nevertheless, as religion and faith are unable to "cure" poverty and money - which the insurgency has enough of - can, we can expect that more men will take this road in order to be able to feed their families. If the very existence of your child is put in balance with social trends it is only logical which one will weight heavier. According to prof. and analyst Khassan Dzutsev, the poverty factor will determine even the educated classes (for example teachers that are out of a job) to support the cause.

So we could conclude that the recruiting process targets young boys who are easily influenced or young men striving for a chance to prove themselves. Therefore it is safe to assume that very few members would be willing to do anything "in the name of faith" alone. Moreover the financial incentive as well as the freedom/patriotic cause will continue to serve as powerful "drafting" elements.

Where does the money come from?

Another point that was rarely touched in the Western media focused on the region is the way the insurgency is being financed, which is a pertinent question especially in the context described above. Some local experts on the matter think that the budget of the insurgency is around 300 million dollars per republic per year. A part of this money comes from the so-called direct financing, which is money from the local business community, big or small, obtained by blackmail, extortion, threats, as a protection fee etc. These amounts are

collected periodically by members of the insurgency. What is really interesting is that some of these local businesses pay willingly in order to have protection from the insurgents (in Dagestan, Chechnya) where authorities claim such fees of their own or simply harass owners.

Then there is the external funding that according to prof. Khasan Dzutsev, political analyst on the North Caucasus, is something completely normal. This particular subject makes us think about all the allegations made by Moscow along the years saying that there is external influence in the region. According to prof. Dzutsev one of the financing countries is Turkey that historically claims right to the region and because of old quarrels with Russia. Of course we are not talking about state funding but private funding. This particular phenomenon has been going on since the early 90's and continued to grow along with the radical religious cults. After the second Chechen war Turkish entrepreneurs became main contractors for the reconstruction of Chechnya, developing their business exclusively in the area. We can see the direct connection that was being formed and in a short period of time, the Chechen community in Ankara began growing up to the point where is now known as the "Chechen neighborhood". Moreover the Turkish city became a place where members of the insurgency could attract funding, get connected with those willing to support them, with the help of local liaisons (for example Dokka Umarov's brother Vakha lives there) and even to "rest and recover" after injuries sustained in battle. The Russian authorities became aware of this quite quick but until last year there were no significant actions against it. In the fall of 2011 an unknown gunman killed three men in the Chechen neighborhood in Ankara and then vanished from the country. Two months later the episode happened again and this time four men were killed in broad daylight. All the victims were supposedly connected with the insurgency in the North Caucasus and suspected to be fund-raisers. The FSB was suspected to be behind the assassinations.

Another country that appears to support the insurgency in the North Caucasus is Saudi Arabia motivated by religion (wahhabism). In this particular case we have to notice the method because we are talking about state funding. Saudi merchants settle in the North Caucasus and open different boutiques (for example Muslim clothes) through which they launder money or directly finance the insurgents as described above.

Situation Status: Acceptable

It would be pointless to start enumerating all the options the Russian authorities have to improve the situation religiously, financially and even politically in the region. It would take many more pages and it would fall on deaf ears. Instead I will try to tell you they choose not to change it. The North Caucasus was Vladimir Putin's ticket to the Kremlin and it is still valid. Furthermore it is a good source of income for many both in Moscow and local. For example the budget of Chechnya (a republic with 1,2 million people) is around 180 million dollars. Some of it goes into unemployment (the only thing that keeps the population in check and prevents them, Muslim or not, from an outright revolution), some goes into police salaries (which are the highest in all of Russia) and the destination of the rest is unknown. The circuit I was able to identify goes as such: money from the local budget is being taken through various ways by the "preferatti" of the local leadership and then some of it is given to the "benefactor" which in turn gives some to his benefactor in Moscow. In short is a way to get rich for a large number of people in the Russian administration. We could actually say that it is a 80.000 sq km money laundry. Furthermore the region is ruled tight by the governors appointed by Moscow therefore all the elections in the region will be won by the ruling party with flying colors and with 90 to 95 percent voter's turnout (which is was a possibility only in the communist regimes). The total voters in the region make up to 10% nationwide votes. So, the region, is sealed tight, well controlled, makes a lot of people rich, gives a votes basis and all of these at the

cost of "just some lives" annually. Why would anybody change anything?

Drawing a line, we are dealing with something resembling all-out war, but which is not quite war. Why is that? Because both sides seek resources while none wants the extinction of its adversary. The local authorities are aware that if the insurgency should ever be destroyed, their immense funding, and with it, the luxurious lifestyle would vanish; that is why we have never seen definitive large-scale actions in the region since the war in 2000. Another resemblance to a war is that anything is permitted, such as abuses from the authorities, harassing young Muslims just because of their display of faith or simply killing people in the street for being suspected of connections with the rebels. It is a revenge game that either side is prepared to lose and either side is prepared to win. Victory is not the goal but the fight is a goal in itself. Also there is a vicious chain formed: authorities act on the population to prevent them from going to the insurgency, the population runs from the authorities and takes to the woods (driven also by poverty) and then strikes back along with the new-found environment, which in turn leads to more actions by the police. The situation can only end when the entire approach to the region (Moscow's, primarily) changes dramatically. A scenario that's hardly imaginable though, given the electoral, financial and power stakes. At any rate, any solution will have to look at the money first, and much less at religion.

*Bogdan Nedea is a political analyst with the Bucharest-based Center for Conflict Prevention and Early Warning. He is the co-author of Religion and Conflict, Radicalization and Violence in the Wider Black Sea Region (Iulian Chifu, Bogdan Nedea, Oana Popescu 2012) and of Energy Security Strategies in the Wider Black Sea Region (Iulian Chifu, Bogdan Nedea, Adriana Sauliuc 2010). He is also the author of a wide range of analytical articles on Georgia, Ukraine, North Caucasus, Republic of Moldova and Russia.