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THE CAUCASUS EMIRATE, THE OTHER RUSSIAN FRONT

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The rise of Islamic State (ISIS) is having a significant impact on the Russian Caucasus. Hundreds of fighters have left the region to join the ranks of armed jihadists in Syria and Iraq. Of the approximately 23,000 foreigners fighting in the ranks of ISIS and other extremist groups, it is estimated that nearly 2,200 are citizens of the Russian Federation, most of whom are from the North Caucasus.

The departures of these jihadists have debilitated the Caucasus Emirate, a terrorist organisation that is jihadist in nature and has been operating in the region since 2007. On the one hand, a number of North Caucasian young people without military training have gone to Syria who could have been recruited by the group if they had stayed in Russia. While on the other, the Caucasus Emirate itself has fragmented and a large number of its fighters have sworn loyalty to ISIS. Some remain in the Russian Caucasus, fighting from there in the name of Islamic State, while others have abandoned Russia to join armed jihad in Syria and Iraq.

So beyond the confrontation between the Kremlin and the "West" that has grown out of the consequences of the Ukrainian conflict, the Russian Federation has another open front at its heart – the North Caucasus – which is of much lower media profile, but of no less significance to security in Russia and the wider world.

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The Caucasus Emirate – a state project based on Sharia law that would occupy various republics in the North Caucasus that form part of the Russian Federation – has carried out as many guerrilla operations against the Russian security forces as attacks on civilians.

The impunity of ineffective, corrupt institutions, allied to police brutality and the absence of the rule of law have abandoned the land sustaining the jihadist terrorism recruitment base.

The Kremlin needs to redirect its security strategy, which is based exclusively on military force and economic incentives for local elites.

Conditions in the North Caucasus are ripe for jihadist recruitment. To analyse the region, it is therefore important to understand the role played by the rise of Islamic State and to elucidate the scenarios that may arise in this convulsive part of the Russian Federation.

The military roots of the current insurgency

The origin of the armed insurgency operating in the North Caucasus today has its roots in the first Russo-Chechen war unleashed by the unilateral declaration of Chechen independence in November 1991. Taking advantage of the USSR's disintegration, when the fifteen Soviet Socialist Republics declared their independence,

Chechnya decided to take the same path. But, as an Autonomous Republic, which is to say, of an inferior political category, the USSR constitution did not grant Chechnya the right to secession enjoyed, at least formally, by the Socialist Republics.

The first Russo-Chechen war

After a period of near inaction, in December 1994 the Yeltsin government launched an offensive against Chechnya to “restore constitutional order”. The war lasted nearly two years, and was devastating for the Chechen civilian population. Though the numbers are only estimates, from a population of a million people, 40,000 to 60,000 civilian dead were reported and more than 300,000 displaced (Pape, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 1995).

Islamism had little weight in the Chechen independence movement. When, in March 1992, the Chechen parliament approved the new constitution of the independent Chechnya, it followed a standard model of secular nationalist parliamentary constitution (Hughes, 2007) in which the separation between state and religion was explicitly mentioned. Nevertheless, shortly after start of the war, the arrival of Arab jihadist fighters led by the Saudi Omar Ibn al-Khattab introduced the religious factor to the Chechen insurgency, which had until then been separate from the Islamist question.

Al-Khattab and his battalion of Arab jihadists, backed by funds from the Persian Gulf and with extensive combat experience,

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quickly won popularity with some local guerrillas like Shamil Basayev and Arbi Barayev. But the Salafist faith preached by these foreign combatants directly clashed with the Sufi Islam practised by the Chechens. The Arab jihadists came to attack prominent members of the local Sufi community, considering them heretics and intimidated women not wearing the veil. The radicalism of these Salafists led the majority of Chechens to perceive the new arrivals as a threat to their social stability.

The open war between Russia and Chechnya ceased in August 1996, after Chechen guerrillas regained control of the capital, Grozny, and of the republic’s main cities. The cessation of hostilities was formalised with the signing of the **Khasavyurt Declaration** on August 31st 1996. Several months later, Aslan Maskhadov, a guerrilla leader of moderate ideology, became the president of the Chechen Republic after elections that were described as free and clean by the electoral observation mission of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

The time of Salafism

The end of the war with Russia did not, in any way, mean the end of the issues. The Maskhadov government had two large problems to face: a devastated economy and the refusal of some commanders to dismantle their militias. The greater part of the territory remained, thus, under the control of independent gue-

rilla groups and criminal gangs that funded themselves through the sale of drugs, oil and, crucially, the money earned from kidnapping ransoms. This was an enormously lucrative business – in some cases ransoms of several millions dollars were paid – and, according to the suspicions of various analysts, counted on the support of the Russian secret services, in particular the Federal Security Service (FSB in its Russian initials), as a means of undermining Maskhadov’s power.¹ Ultimately, bringing down the legitimate Chechen government was, at that time, a goal that the jihadists and the Russian government shared.

This climate of chaos and violence on a background of chronic poverty helped Islamic fundamentalism take root in Chechnya. Faced with the Russian economic blockade and international isolation, Maskhadov could not give up the financial support of the Arab world which, in the main, came via Salafist organisations. With funds from Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Salafist mosques were built, along with orphanages similar to those that appeared in Pakistan during the Afghan war in the 1980s (Williams, 2007). At the same time, military training camps taking in young people from other parts of the North Caucasus as well as the countries of Central Asia and the Middle East came into operation.

In summer 1999, a thousand North Caucasian and Arab mujahideens launched an incursion from Chechnya into neighbouring Dagestan with the aim of establishing an Islamic republic there. However, they met the resistance of the local population

who were opposed to living in an Islamic state that was independent from Russia and helped Russian federal forces expel the jihadists, who ended up withdrawing deep into Chechnya again.

Attacks on civilians and the second Russo-Chechen war

That same month of August 1999, the then-unknown Vladimir Putin was named prime minister of Russia, becoming President Yeltsin’s dauphin for the presidential elections the following year. Putin’s rise to power was the first of a series of changes that would end up proving decisive for Chechnya. A month later, in September 1999, five explosions in apartment buildings in Moscow and other Russian cities provoked 307 deaths and panic among the population. Immediately, the Russian authorities focussed their suspicions on “Chechen terrorism”, although all armed Chechen groups denied responsibility for what had happened.² Putin then promised to use a firm hand and made one of his most famous (and

1. For more on the connections between Boris Berezovsky (joint secretary for Chechnya in the Security Council from 1996-97) and the kidnaps carried out in Chechnya during the interwar period, see KLEBNIKOV, Paul. *Godfather of the Kremlin*. Orlando: Harcourt Books, 2000, pp. 259-266; or the article by SHERMATOVA, Sanobar: “Tainaya voyna spetsluzhb”. *Moskovskie Novosti*, 8th of August, 2000.

2. Many analysts saw the hand of the Russian secret services behind the explosions in the apartment buildings. The main clue was a grim incident that took place in the city of Ryazan, when a group of neighbours discovered various members of the Russian secret services planting explosives in the basement of their apartment block. The events are analysed in the book LITVINENKO, Aleksandr and FELSHTINSKI, Yuri. *Blowing Up Russia: The Secret Plot to Bring Back KGB Power*. London: Gibson Square Books Ltd., 2007; and the documentary by NEKRASOV, Andrei: *Disbelief*. <https://archive.org/details/Disbelief2004>

controversial) declarations, assuring that they were “going to corner the bandits in the toilet and wipe them out”.

On October 1st 1999 the Russian army launched a new offensive on Chechnya. What was described as an anti-terrorist operation directed only at eliminating the bases of jihadist Salafism quickly transformed into an operation to recover control of Chechen territory. The Russian armed forces massively employed artillery and aerial bombardment during the campaign, which provoked, once again, tens of thousands of civilian deaths.

From spring 2000 onwards, the position of President Maskhadov was weakened even further when, just as had already happened with the incursion into Dagestan in 1999, some groups of Chechen guerrillas disobeyed their orders. Again, the combatants subordinate to Basayev contravened Maskhadov’s orders and organised bloody terrorist attacks in Russia that caused a high number of civilian deaths, such as the Dubrovka theatre attack in Moscow in October 2002, and the siege of the school in Beslan, North Ossetia, in September 2004. In March 2005, the Russian security forces liquidated the legitimate president of Chechnya, Aslan Maskhadov. After his death, the slogans of jihadist Salafism came to quickly and completely dominate among the Chechen insurgency. Thus, the secular national liberation movement, which had given the insurgency in the Caucasus its distinctive character, gave way to a fully jihadist conflict.

The Caucasus Emirate replaces the Chechen insurgency

The North Caucasus has, thus, become a peripheral cause in global jihad.

The proclamation of the Caucasus Emirate in 2007 was the definitive turning point in the jihadist drift of the Chechen insurgency. Doku Umarov, Maskhadov’s successor, formally abandoned the fight for Chechen independence to lead the self-styled Caucasus Emirate, a state project based on Sharia law that would occupy various republics in the North Caucasus that form part of the Russian Federation. One of the Caucasus Emirate’s main characteristics is, therefore, its pan-Caucasian nature and it incorporates different ethnic groups in the area (Chechens, Ingushetians, Dagestanis, Kabardians, Circassians, Karachay, as well as some Azeris and Russians converted to Islam). Under its umbrella, diverse factions are distributed into five wilayahs (provinces) that, despite having an autonomous structure, are subordinate to the emir.

Since its creation, the Caucasus Emirate has carried out as many guerrilla operations against the Russian security forces as attacks on civilians. Airports, metro and other means of transport in Russia have repeatedly been the target of jihadist terrorism, causing hundreds of fatalities. Shortly after his appointment in June 2014, the emir, Abu Muhammad, called for the immediate cessation of terrorist attacks on Russian civilians. This remains in force in October 2015.

Lack of liquidity is one of the main problems for the Caucasus Emirate. Funding from abroad has diminished considerably since the death of the Saudi combatant al-Khattab

in 2002. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have soaked up most of the international funds assigned to jihad. The North Caucasus has, thus, become a peripheral cause in global jihad and, in consequence, the North Caucasian insurgency has been obliged to seek funding from other sources. The Kremlin’s special envoy to the North Caucasus, Aleksander Khloponin, recognised as early as 2011 that only 10% of the Caucasus Emirate’s funding came from abroad. Its principle source of current funding is local – extortion of businessmen and regional officials (from high level police people to regional government ministers). The insurgency is also financed, although to a lesser degree, by the contract killing of businesspeople and/or political rivals. In this sense it works as a criminal network.

At the end of 2015, the Caucasus Emirate finds itself at its weakest point for two reasons. First, because of the impact the war in Syria and, more specifically, Islamic State has had on the region. Second, because of the positive results the state security forces have receiving in their anti-terrorist fight since the months leading up to the Sochi Olympic Games (February 2014), and which they have since kept up. The consecutive deaths in 2015 of two leaders of the Caucasus Emirate, Aliaskhab Kebekov and his successor Magomed Suleymanov, as well as other key commanders in the organisation, confirmed this.

Anti-terrorist policies in the North Caucasus

In the past decade, the Kremlin’s anti-terrorist policy in the North Caucasus has been fundamentally based on two premises: on the one hand, Moscow assigns loyal representatives to the areas with highest levels of armed violence and supports their management of the republics with millions of roubles while also applying a firm indiscriminate hand against the presumed terrorists and their allies. This strategy has managed to reduce the intensity of the armed conflict but it has also fed corruption both in the political elites and the state security forces, who act in the area with complete impunity. These ineffective, corrupt institutions, allied to police brutality and the absence of the rule of law have abandoned the land sustaining the jihadist terrorism recruitment base.

Legal framework of the anti-terrorist fight

The legal framework of the fight against terrorism in Russia was established in 2006. In February that year, Putin formed the **National Anti-Terrorism Committee** (NAK in its Russian initials), which would be led by the director of the FSB, supported by the Minister of the Interior of the Russian Federation. Since then, these two agencies have controlled the anti-terrorist fight, while the presidential administration retains the authority for general decision-making.

Shortly afterwards, in March 2006, the federal law “on counter-acting terrorism” came into force, which establishes the legal

North Caucasian Federal District



bases of the terrorist fight. One of the instruments for fighting terrorism, and one which has been applied frequently across the North Caucasus, is the Counter-Terrorist Operation (KTO in its Russian initials). According to the law, one of the fundamental principles of the fight against terrorism is to guarantee and protect people's basic rights and freedoms, while also establishing that anti-terrorist operations should always be

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conducted in accordance with the law. But, in practise, during KTOs the anti-terrorist agencies abuse their authority, exceed their functions and enjoy posterior impunity that means their representatives avoid judgement for any abuses committed.

Human rights defence organisations such as **Memorial** or the **Committee against Torture**, among others, have continually denounced grave breaches of human rights during KTOs: extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, torture to extract confessions, lootings, collective punishment (burning the houses of those suspected of belonging to the insurgency), and so on. As a report on the North Caucasus by the **International Crisis Group** says, these tough measures may have deterred some terrorists, but the repeated abuses of human rights undermine the legitimacy of the authorities, reduce the inclination of the communities to cooperate and contribute to the radicalisation of North Caucasian young people. Even Anatoly Safonov, the Special Representative of the President of Russia for International Cooperation in the Fight Against Terrorism, **stated** in 2011 at the Military Commanders' Club that there is no need to hide the fact that, often, young people join up with the insurgents, not under the influence of Salafism, but as a sign of social protest and because they simply can't obtain justice by legal means".

The hot spots in the Caucasus: Dagestan and Chechnya

All of the autonomous republics of the North Caucasus, which are highly subsidised by Moscow, are governed by

leaders who belong to United Russia, the party led by President Putin. None has been democratically elected by universal suffrage, rather they have been directly selected by the Russian president. Three of these leaders came from the army or Ministry of the Interior (the president of Ingushetia **Yunus-bek Yevkurov**, the president of Kabardino-Balkaria, **Yuri Kokov**, and the Chechen president, **Ramzan Kadyrov**).

In Chechnya, an iron dictatorship imposed by Ramzan Kadyrov has ruled since 2007, when Putin designated him president. Chechnya is different to the other North Caucasus republics because its security structures are exclusively formed of local citizens (mainly ex-combatants) who are directly subordinate to the Chechen president, who personally leads the anti-terrorist fight, above all through the *Sever*, *Yug* and *Terek* battalions. In Dagestan, although the violence is more marked than in Chechnya, the political regime is more open and the inhabitants enjoy greater freedom. In contrast to Chechnya, in Dagestan there is a political opposition and a degree of press freedom, albeit minimal. In terms of the terrorist fight, members of the local and federal FSB, along with agents of the Ministry of the Interior, organise **counter-terrorist operations** almost every day in different parts of the territory.

The data for 2014 shows that the **areas with the highest levels of violence** in the North Caucasus were Dagestan and Chechnya. 70% of jihadist attacks were recorded in Dagestan as well as the highest number of victims: 208 dead and 85 injured. In Chechnya, 52 dead and 65 injured were counted.

From the Caucasus to Syria, the jihadists of the North Caucasus

The first half of 2015 saw the greatest fall in the number of attacks and fatalities since the creation of the Caucasus Emirate. This drastic drop-off was due, principally, to the internal

fracturing of this terrorist organisation caused by the emergence of ISIS and the departure of hundreds of combatants towards Syria and Iraq.

The first North Caucasian jihadists arrived in Syria in 2012. They come, mainly, from Dagestan and Chechnya and, to a lesser degree, Karachevo-Cherkessia and Kabardino-Balkaria. At first, almost all joined the same group, Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, which is close to the al-Nusra Front (a branch of al-Qaeda in the area), and was led by Umar al-Shishani, an ethnic Chechen originally from the Pankisi valley in Georgia. Over time the group has suffered various schisms and, these days, the North Caucasians are basically divided among four main factions: Islamic State (ISIS), now commanded by Umar al-Shishani; Jaish al-Mujahireen wal-Ansar (JMA), integrated into the al-Nusra Front and currently led by the Saudi, Mu-tassim Billah al-Madani; the Caucasus Emirate in Syria, close to al-Nusra and led by Salauddin Al-Shishani and finally Junud al-Sham, whose emir is Muslim al-Shishani.³

According to official Russian data, in Syria and Iraq there are around 2,200 Russian fighters. Russian is the third most used language in ISIS propaganda material, behind only Arabic and English. In its efforts to recruit fighters from Russia and the former Soviet Union area, ISIS has recently launched a propaganda channel exclusively in Russian called *Furat Media*, while the most popular Russian social networks, such as *Odnoklassniki* ("Classmates") and *Vkontakte* ("In touch"), have become fertile ground for radical groups.

The entry point to Syria for most young North Caucasians is Turkey and, according to an article published recently in *Novaya Gazeta*, the Russian security services may be actively supporting this exodus of fighters, providing them with the foreign passports they need to travel there. The mayor of a village in Dagestan explained to *Novaya Gazeta*: "In our village there is a person, a negotiator. He, together with the FSB, brought several leaders out of the underground and sent them off abroad on jihad. The underground resistance has been weakened, we're well off. They want to fight – let them fight, just not here." The same was suggested to *The Economist* by Abas Makhmudov, an ex-member of the Islamic Council of Chechnya and Dagestan, whose son recently died fighting for jihad in Syria: "What baffles Mr Makhmudov is how his son, who had a criminal record, obtained the Russian passport needed to travel abroad – even after he alerted the authorities to his son's intentions." Likewise, some renowned Islamic preachers from the region have travelled to Syria to encourage their followers to join extremist groups in the Middle East. One of them, Nadir Abu Khalid, was under house arrest in Dagestan when, unexpectedly, he appeared in the Middle East swearing loyalty to ISIS.

3. The leaders of the main factions made up of North Caucasians in Syria are originally from the Pankisi valley in Georgia, where the Kist people, who are ethnic Chechens, live. "Al Shishani" means "the Chechen" in Arabic.

Last, but by no means least, the configuration and hierarchy of the Caucasus Emirate has also been substantially altered by the impact of Islamic State. In 2014, the desertions of some of its mid-level commanders to ISIS began, a tendency that continued to grow until, in June 2015, the emirs of the four main wilayas that make up the Caucasus Emirate swore loyalty to the leader of ISIS, al-Baghdadi. He accepted the oath and named a militant, Abu Mohammad al-Qadari, as the new emir in the Caucasus, at the same time establishing a new wilaya (province) of Islamic State in the Caucasus (Wilaya Kavkaz). Since then, the Caucasus Emirate and the Caucasian branch of the Islamic State have coexisted in the North Caucasus in enmity.

Given this scenario, the main challenges facing the Kremlin are threefold: avoid the subsequent return to Russia of the combatants currently in the Middle East; defuse the presence of ISIS in the North Caucasus; and, finally, completely neutralise the Caucasus Emirate.

A new security strategy?

With the aim of neutralising the jihadist insurgency in the area and avoiding the Russian Caucasus continuing to be a breeding ground for radicalisation among young people, the Kremlin needs to redirect its security strategy, as the current focus, based exclusively on military force and

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economic incentives for local elites, has proved ineffective in pacifying the region. The security services' intelligence should be fundamental when stopping the return of jihadists from the Middle East and even more so if, as has been suggested, they themselves have played a role in sending fighters out of the country. Collaboration with the agencies of other countries will be indispensable for facing this danger. It will also be necessary to sustain the effectiveness of the anti-terrorist fight demonstrated since 2014. But to keep the area peaceful in the medium term, the implementation of a new security strategy which shifts from the current hard power to another that is more integrated and persuasive is unavoidable. Among others, this should include measures to fight corruption and impunity, to establish a dialogue with the Salafi community and create aid committees to help combatants readapt to civilian life.

This is not a new road for the Caucasus. A more integrated commitment, not based solely on the firm hand, has already been carried out in Ingushetia. In 2008 and 2009, this small North Caucasian republic was top of the list in terms of violence but has now been practically pacified. The president of Ingushetia, Y. Yevkurov, decided to reverse the anti-terrorist fight after taking power in 2008. His main strategy was to reduce the corruption in the security forces in Ingushetia which, as in other parts of the Caucasus, has made the anti-

terrorist fight an end in itself because of the great profits it brings in. On the other hand, Yevkurov created **aid commissions** to demobilise and reintroduce the combatants to civilian life. These commissions, which have the support of the citizens, also monitor the human rights violations committed by the security forces during the anti-terrorist operations in Ingushetia. This is how jihadism was partially neutralised in Ingushetia.

Despite all this, Ingushetia has two particular characteristics that have made the application and subsequent success of this approach possible: it has only half a million inhabitants and is monoethnic. In this sense, Chechnya is not so different from Ingushetia but Dagestan, with nearly 3 million inhabitants and more than 30 ethnicities, is a fair bit more complex.

Only a sustained long-term multidimensional focus centring on the roots of the problem can put an end to the jihadist insurgency in the Caucasus. But the Kremlin's strategy seems decided to take a different route. There are, thus, few reasons to hope for stability and security in the turbulent North Caucasus area and, by extension, the Russian Federation as a whole.

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