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## North Caucasus since the Russian-Georgian War of Summer 2008: between Endogenous Conflicts and Regional Instability

Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and the eruption of two successive wars in Chechnya, it has become a cliché to say that the North Caucasus is one of the most unstable regions of Russia. Even before both these very violent wars which wrecked Chechnya (in 1994-1996; 1999-<sup>1</sup>), the snowballing demands of sovereignty, independence and secession which followed one another since perestroika, made multiple shock waves run through the region. Has the summer 2008 eruption of the Russian-Georgian conflict (in South Ossetia, then in parts of Abkhazia and also outside these two entities – in Georgia) reactivated any of them or remained separate from the evolution which we can observe in the north of the mountain range?

More than a year after this conflict, while the rekindling of violence in Chechnya betrays the failure of the “normalisation” so highly praised by the

Chechen and Russian authorities, a cross-sectional analysis of the North Caucasus and the major stakes across the whole territory is now imperative.

The jolts following one another on both sides of the Caucasus indeed testify tensions and so-far unsettled disputes, but the stakes nevertheless remain closely connected to Moscow’s policy and to the bilateral relations which the Caucasian elites maintain with Moscow; in spite of Cassandra-like predictions, we have not witnessed what could be called a large-scale “Balkanization” of the region since the conflict of summer 2008.

If ethnic solidarities play a part on both sides of the mountain range, as shown in the cases of the Lezgins, the Ossetians and also the Circassians, we are far from the early 1990s situation when the Confederation of the Peoples of Caucasus, trained by North-Caucasian fighters, helped the Abkhazs during the Abkhaz-Georgian war of 1992-1993, when the risks of “a domino effect” were in everyone’s mind. The conflict of summer 2008 nevertheless marked a caesura; while the so-called

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### Abstract

Since the collapse of Soviet Union and the subsequent spiral of violence which has erupted in Chechnya, the North Caucasus has been regarded as one of the most unstable regions in the Eurasian area.

The traditional demands coming from the region for national sovereignty, independence and secession are progressively being superseded by the emergence of a transnational pan-Caucasian Islamist resistance.

One year after the Russian-Georgian Ossetian war, the aim of this article is to provide a cross-sectional analysis of the Northern Caucasus in the context of the “verticalization” of power launched by Putin and in the face of the regression Russia has undergone since the fragile democratic experiences of the '90s.

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<sup>1</sup> It is very difficult to date the hypothetical end of the second war. On this matter see: A. MERLIN, *Tchéchénie: la guerre est-elle finie?*, in A. MERLIN - S. SERRANO (eds.), *Etats et conflits au Caucase*, to be published.

“frozen” conflicts of the Caucasus (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno Karabakh, and also Prigorodny, even though it is referred to less frequently) were the object of a status quo since the 1994 cease-fires, Russia’s recognition of two new “independent” Abkhazian and South-Ossetian entities on 26 August 2008 changed the rules of play and put the borders stemming from the collapse of Soviet Union into jeopardy.

At the same time, the continuation and stepping up of “street wars” in Ingushetia and Dagestan, both neighbouring republics of Chechnya, have reached hitherto unknown levels; not a single week goes by without police officers being murdered, followed by repressions, thus fuelling an endless cycle of violence. Regarding Chechnya, in April 2009 the official suppression of the “anti-terror operation” regime introduced ten years previously when the war resumed, paradoxically came together with a revival of violence, while the message sent out by the authorities was that the war was over.

All in all, Moscow seems to manage the various latent or obvious conflicts affecting the whole of the Caucasus, as “one thing after another” with no general policy (taking all the problems into account) emerging. More reactive than planned, this policy remains strongly influenced by the old logic inherited from the imperial practices (*divide et impera*) and reveals the absence of a long-term vision, on the backdrop of an

authoritarian shift rolled out at the local level.

### **Tackling the Russian-Georgian Conflict of August 2008: a Consensus in the Majority of North-Caucasian Republics**

The configuration of the summer 2008 conflict brought about relatively consensual support of Moscow’s policy, for varying reasons. The phraseology spread by the Russian media on the nature and objectives of the Russian intervention, presented as aiming to avoid “genocide of the South-Ossetian people”<sup>2</sup>, has made its mark on the North-Caucasian collective consciousness rather easily, with the general exception of the Nakh, Ingush and Chechen peoples. Ethnic solidarities have worked globally, at least at the discourse level. As the Abkhazians are part of the same linguistic family as the North Caucasus Circassians (Adyghs, Cherkess and Kabardians) and the Ossetians are distributed between South and North Ossetia, news of the independence of both separatist entities delighted the populations in the main.

At this point, changes in position were seen e.g. despite a general relationship which means that Russians are perceived as a colonizing

<sup>2</sup> The use of this term by the Russian authorities has a completely offbeat connotation, particularly considering that the Chechen people were the victim of partial extermination during the two wars, but this term was never used for the Chechen people.

population in the North Caucasus (whether or not this is desired), in this precise case the various actors’ positions converged globally. For example, during a conference in Piatigorsk in autumn 2008 just after the war, V. Karataev, a member of the Union of the Slavs of the Adyghea, and Nalbi Tchozhetl, vice-president of the Adyghe Khasse national and cultural association, were heard to converge on their judgement of the situation, even though their positions were generally divergent on a number of other matters. Both said they were proud to be “Russian”, meaning “citizens of Russia”. In June 2009, an Adygh colleague told me, “We naturally supported this war because we are citizens of Russia”<sup>3</sup>.

From the solidarity point of view, the majority of the North Caucasus Republics welcomed refugees from South Ossetia, and technical aid was also allocated to the reconstruction of South Ossetia. Besides, at the political level, several leading local figures greeted the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

#### *Reception of refugees*

While a stream of Georgian refugees made its way towards Tbilisi and other regions of Georgia, the South Ossetians were running away northward as they had done in 1991-1992 during the first Ossetian-Georgian conflict. In fact the Republic of North Ossetia is contiguous to South Ossetia, and the original territory of the

<sup>3</sup> Interview, Maikop, Republic of Adyghea, 3 June 2009.

Ossetian people. Also the Republics of Adyghea, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Dagestan welcomed some hundreds of refugees. Aid actions were set up spontaneously with the collection of money and clothes<sup>4</sup>. This reception did not last long as the refugees returned to South-Ossetia<sup>5</sup> relatively rapidly.

#### *Technical assistance*

Technical aid was another form of help. Electricity specialists from Kabardino-Balkaria (Kabbalener-go) and Chechnya (Nurenergo, Chechen Electricity consortium) made their way to South Ossetia in order to take part in repair and reinstatement programmes<sup>6</sup>. The fact that Nurenergo was taking part in the reconstruction of South Ossetia was not anodyne for two reasons: at the same time it is known that within the range of Chechen "normalisation", Kadyrov has become a "favourite child" of the Kremlin, which pampers him<sup>7</sup> in exchange for Chechnya's return to federal Russia.

Beyond the immediate reactions of humanitarian aid and

technical assistance, the political question is eminently important. Some political and intellectual elites have applauded the independence project or the imminent independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

#### **Recognition of South-Ossetian and Abkhazian "Independence": Compulsory Support?**

As early as 15 August 2008 i.e. three days after the cease-fire and one week after the start of the war, the Cherkess Congress of Kabardino-Balkaria took a motion on the fact that "Russia has to recognize the independence of South-Ossetia and Abkhazia"<sup>8</sup>. Personalities like V. Khatazhukov<sup>9</sup> in Kabardino-Balkaria, for a long time known for his opposition to this Republic's government (he manages the human rights defence centre), called on the international community to recognise the independence of both entities. But Khatazhukov's argument testifies the complexity of the situation.

Not so much to express gratitude to the Russian authorities on the military intervention issue, on the contrary his position started from the observation that

Russia had clearly shown its incapacity to ensure the security of the civil population upstream, betting that only recognition by the international community would be able to make these populations safe. At another level, President A. Kanokov of the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria took the stance of an *a posteriori* justification of the legitimacy of Russia's recognition; a position which at any rate was made compulsory for the elites of the federal entities, with Moscow to obtain the support of the presidents of the independent Republics resulting from the collapse of the USSR<sup>10</sup>. Kadyrov followed closely, agreeing with the decision as well.

The Adygh-Abkhaz Diaspora has also called for the recognition of this independence, widely and positively greeted by the World Abkhaz-Abazin Congress. The Parliament of North-Ossetia is more on the offensive and has made an intervention asking for the Georgia to be disarmed and for it to pay war compensation.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the summer 2008 conflict has also had repercussions on the latent conflict underway regarding Prigorodny district, which had experienced a phase of open conflict in 1992 between Ingushs and the Ossetians, the latter being supported by

<sup>4</sup> *Inhabitants of Kabardino-Balkaria provide help to refugees from South-Ossetia*, [www.kavkaz-uzel.ru](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru), 20 August 2008; *400 refugees from South-Ossetia have arrived in Dagestan*, [www.kavkaz-uzel.ru](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru), 19 August 2008.

<sup>5</sup> *All refugees from South-Ossetia have left Russia*, «Kavkazskij Uzel», 30 August 2008.

<sup>6</sup> *Specialists from Kabardino-Balkaria set up electricity in South Ossetia*, [www.kavkaz-uzel.ru](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru), 18 August 2008.

<sup>7</sup> See for example A. MALASHENKO, *Ramzan Kadyrov, a Russian politician with a Caucasian nationality*, Moscow 2009.

<sup>8</sup> L. ORAZAEVA, *Cherkess Congress of Kabardino-Balkaria: Russia has to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia*, *Kavkazskij uzel*, 15 August 2008.

<sup>9</sup> *Khatazhukov: the international community has to recognize Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence*, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/newstext/news/id/1227473.html>, 20 August 2008.

<sup>10</sup> One year on, Moscow still stands still alone for the recognition: apart from Nicaragua, no-one else has recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Even Lukashenko and the Presidents of the Central Asian Republics did not take this step.

the Russian federal Army. Therefore, we note a lesser or even non-existent solidarity toward South Ossetia in Ingushetia, as the weight of the Prigorodny conflict dominates the issue.

### **The specificity of the Ingush and Chechen cases**

Ingushetia is still marked by the as-yet unsettled dispute over Prigorodny – the short but very violent conflict which erupted in autumn 1992, soon after the proclamation of the Republic of Ingushetia by Ingush elites, and in particular after the adoption of its Constitution stipulating the return of the Prigorodny district to Ingushetia. A consequence of the 1943-1944<sup>11</sup> deportations and the way the Soviet authorities administered the territorial question, this conflict remains the major stumbling block between the two Republics; the presence in Ingushetia of several tens of thousands of Ingush refugees of Prigorodny serves as a reminder that the conflict is still “frozen”. In

<sup>11</sup> In the midst of the Second World War, Stalin had many peoples of the Soviet Union deported, including four North-Caucasian peoples: the Karachais in 1943, the Ingushs and Chechens on 23 February 1944, and the Balkars in March 1944. During this deportation, the territories occupied by these peoples, and of which they were “titular”, were dismembered and transferred to neighbouring entities. For example, the mountain districts of Balkaria and Karachaia were transferred to Georgia, while Prigorodny was transferred to North-Ossetia, with a Christian majority and moreover historically loyal to the then-Soviet imperial power.

interviews with journalists, most people state that they do not feel any particular compassion towards South Ossetia in general, and insist on the disproportionate character of the terms Moscow used to describe the situation.

When mention is made of an international court, called by the Russian authorities, to judge crimes committed by the Georgians, many wonder why Russia did not show the same willingness to having the crimes committed in Chechnya judged<sup>12</sup>.

As for Chechnya itself, as mentioned above, Kadyrov supported the recognition of South Ossetia's independence, whereas within the population the state of mind is marked by much bitterness. After the massive violations they had undergone for numerous years, the exhausted population looked at what was taking place with detachment. On the other hand, we know that the men of Yamadaev, a group of militia which have been rivals of Kadyrov even though they joined the organization chart of Moscow-controlled Chechnya, were sent to South Ossetia. Photos of tanks bearing the name Vostok (Orient, the name of the Yamadaev militia) gave evidence of the presence of this militia in South Ossetia, alongside the Russian troops.

All in all, we thus have a contrasting landscape with on the one hand a consensus on

<sup>12</sup> F. MAL'SAGOVA, *War in South Ossetia recalled to Ingushetia's inhabitants in the Prigorodny conflict*, [www.kavkaz-uzel.ru](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru), 16 August 2008.

the expression of political support by the leaders of the Republics (public opinion is increasingly difficult to measure in the North Caucasus in the absence of really independent polls), and on the other hand, the Ingush exception. A sporadic but strong movement was born in Ingushetia after Russia's recognition of both entities, by asking for American passports in order to then be able to ask for secession from the Russian Federation.

These various reactions to the conflict of summer 2008 were not able to mask or erase the heavy trends at work and which can be observed in the North Caucasus, and which show not only the absence of an in-depth resolution of the Chechen conflict but also elements of contagion and of “street wars” developing, in particular in Ingushetia and Dagestan, with both Republics bordering on Chechnya.

### **Heavy trends in the North-East Caucasus, independently from the summer 2008 conflict: from fake “normalisation” in Chechnya to “street wars” in Ingushetia and Dagestan**

Terror and political murders in Chechnya – as evidenced by the murder of Natalia Estemirova, an officer of the *Memorial human rights defence* NGO, on 15 July 2009 – with a backdrop of reconstruction and a “return to normality” after two very deadly wars, and the spreading of violence in Ingushetia and in Dagestan; armed violence remains a central constituent of

everyday life in this part of the North Caucasus, where not a week goes by without murders taking place. Behind the “restored order” so praised by Kadyrov, civil war is still underway, at times latent and at other times open, between the resistance which has become completely Islamist and the dictatorial power in place. As for Ingushetia and Dagestan, the “street wars” continue, owing to both endogenous logics and now to the logic of contagion of the Chechen conflict.

### **Chechnya: terror and dictatorship with a backdrop of reconstruction**

As stated above, though the economic and material reconstruction of Chechnya is real, it is still impossible to claim that war has ended. The absence of negotiations between the parties in conflict, and thus of consideration of the root problems, was covered by a logic of “Chechenisation” of the conflict, without putting an end to exaction. Terror has taken the place of open warfare. Within the framework of Moscow’s transfer of political and safety privileges to Chechen elites recruited for the occasion, nowadays the violence is carried out by the Chechen forces, and the suicide attacks in Grozny at the end of August 2009 were part of a real renewal of armed resistance activities: control of the economic and political situation and of safety by a single man, the absence of room for political expression, and the extent of

corruption pushes a faction of young people towards clandestine resistance movements.

If we can live in Chechnya today without running the daily risk of dying in a bombing raid or in a *zachistka* (the “cleansing” operations led by the Russian forces against civilians), it is extremely dangerous to express the slightest dissident opinion regarding the way Chechnya is governed, and/or to have a war veteran or fighter in the family. The violence is less visible than at the time of open war but it is still very real. It also has extensions in the nearby Republics, where the logic of contagion is also at work in parallel with each Republic’s specific situations.

### **Ingushetia and Dagestan: “Street wars”**

On 5 June 2009, Dagestan’s Home Secretary was murdered. On 22 June 2009, the new Ingush President was the object of an attack. In August, the Ingush Minister of Construction was killed. An attack resulted in 25 deaths in Nazran on August 17th. These events form part of the “street wars” which have not ceased to worsen, and the cycle of repressions fuels revolts and attacks. Forced disappearances continue in Ingushetia in particular, whereas the use of torture in Dagestani jails has been acknowledged and is only increasing the urge to fight among the young Islamists recruits, who are under the control of Jamaat Shariat in Dagestan and Jamaats Magas and Shariat in Ingushetia. Repressions with

complete impunity are totally counterproductive from the power point of view. The appointment of the new Ingush President Evkourov in October 2008 took place precisely because of the great unpopularity of Ziazikov on the backdrop of ongoing forced disappearances. Though Evkourov showed a certain inclination towards dialogue, he was the object of an attack at the end of June.

### **Conclusion**

Nowadays a transnational pan-Caucasian Islamist resistance supersedes what was the Chechen national liberation movement in the 1990s. What does this resistance express, what does it claim, and how is it possible to understand the ins and outs of its actions? The band of North-Caucasian Republics which draws the border of the South of Russia between the Black and Caspian Sea remains unstable, in spite of the official abolition of the anti-terror operation regime in Chechnya on 16 April 2009. Within the structure of the “vertical power” launched by Putin when he came to power, and during the regression Russia has undergone as regards the fragile democratic experiences of the early 1990s, the authoritarian shift has experienced increasingly striking developments locally. Matched by serious corruption, it is flanked by the control of economic holdings by a small number of persons, and excludes a wide range of young people from accessing work.

In this context, the Islamist resistance movement has become a real option for an entire segment of young people, in particular those who underwent torture in detention. A vicious cycle is thus at work in the North Caucasus, which does not give rise to major changes in Moscow-led policies. It seems unreal to imagine viable stability without real consideration of the colonial legacy and democratization of the Russian State. In fact, the issues raised during perestroika are still current today: a national-democratic transition combined with contestation of the authoritarian system of one party, and national aspirations aiming at emancipation from a state which was the heir to an empire. Since Moscow has taken a tighter grip in recent years, the slightest fault can only strengthen these unsatisfied aspirations.

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