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Instability in Russia's North Caucasus Region

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Introduction

A series of suicide bombings ahead of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi has brought new attention to Russia's unstable North Caucasus region. The violence highlights governance and counterterrorism challenges in a geographically and ethnically distinct region of the federation that has long harbored separatist movements. Russia fought two wars against Chechen separatists in the first decade after the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, losing the first and winning the second. In the latter conflict, the resistance's Chechen nationalist identity was superseded by an Islamist one that spanned the North Caucasus region. This has fed a low-level insurgency that has enveloped the North Caucasus and targeted civilians elsewhere in Russia. Human rights monitors say that heavy-handed, security-driven counterinsurgency campaigns have diverted attention from the root causes of conflict, and analysts caution that rights abuses may radicalize a new generation of insurgents.

Who inhabits the North Caucasus?

The North Caucasus region lies in the southwestern-most corner of the Russian Federation, and was colonized by the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century. It is bounded by the Black and Caspian Seas**.** Its south borders the South Caucasian nations of Georgia and Azerbaijan.

With ten million inhabitants, the North Caucasus Federal District is the smallest of Russia's eight federal districts, and the only one in which ethnic Russians do not constitute a majority. Some forty ethnic groups reside in the region, making it one of Russia's most diverse. This area comprises six nominally autonomous, ethnically non-Russian republics—from east to west, Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachay-Cherkessia—and Stavropol Krai, which, as a historic frontier territory rather than a republic, legally has less authority devolved from Moscow. Just west of Karachay-Cherkessia lies Krasnodar Krai, where Sochi sits on the Black Sea near the border with the disputed Georgian territory of Abkhazia.

A Dagestani woman shows her house, which was damaged during a counterterrorist operation conducted by Russian security forces nearby. (Photo: Maria Turchenkova/Courtesy Reuters)

Sunni Islam is the region's dominant religion. Most Muslims there are practitioners of a local variant of Sufism, or mystical Islam, which draws on the cultural heritages of the region's ethnic groups and was first brought to the North Caucasus in the eleventh century. While the Soviets suppressed Sufis, they now collaborate with regional governments through eight spiritual boards, and are recipients of state support.

Salafism, which rejects the local customs Sufis incorporate into their religious practice, was brought to the region in the early post-Soviet years by students who studied abroad in Arab universities. In principle, Salafis reject a division between state and religious authority, calling for

the implementation of sharia. Salafism's criticisms of regional governments as corrupt and Sufism as politically compromised, as well as its promise of a more just order based on Islamic law, has attracted adherents.

For how long has the region been unstable?

Instability in the North Caucasus has its roots in centuries of imperial conquest and local resistance. Cossacks began settling the region as agents of Russian expansion in the late eighteenth century, and the Russian Empire waged the nearly half-century Caucasian War from 1817 to 1864. In Dagestan and Chechnya, the Caucasian Imamate, an Islam-based resistance movement, unsuccessfully fought the invading Russian military with guerrilla tactics. Russian forces ended the war after defeating Circassians, who hail from the western Caucasus, in a battle fought just outside present-day Sochi.

The contemporary Islamist insurgency's umbrella group is known as the Caucasus Emirate (*Imirat Kavkaz*). Its leader, Doku Umarov, referred to the Winter Games as "Satanic dancing on the **bones of our ancestors**" as he called on his followers to disrupt the Olympics with "maximum force" in a July 2013 video message.

Circassian organizations, which also opposed holding the Olympics at Sochi, have sought to use the international spotlight of the Games to call for recognition of their mistreatment by imperial Russia. But they condemned the 2013 Volgograd suicide attacks, which they feared could **discredit** their nationalist aims.

Soviet policies of the twentieth century further contributed to present-day instability. The Soviet Union established autonomous republics for ethnic groups, codifying divisions in the North Caucasus and sowing the seeds of interethnic rivalry. Some groups, forced into exile, found their land redistributed upon their return, exacerbating interethnic tensions.

In the volatile years following the Soviet Union's dissolution, Russian president Boris Yeltsin moved to rectify these Stalin-era injustices, but various ethnic groups mobilized to compete for resources and territorial control. In Chechnya, former Soviet military officer Dzokhar Dudayev declared an independent nation-state, the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, in 1991. In a bid to reassert Moscow's authority, Russian forces under Yeltsin invaded in December 1994 and bombarded the capital of Grozny. Chechens achieved de facto independence after a year and a half of fighting, but at a heavy toll in lives and physical destruction.

Russia launched a new war in 1999 after Chechen Islamist Shamil Basayev, a rival of Chechnya's secular leadership, led an invasion of neighboring Dagestan. Putin, seizing on alarm at the spread of the insurgency to neighboring republics, led a scorched-earth campaign to defeat the rebels. He installed "his own puppet governor, Akhmad Kadyrov, to pacify Chechnya, and gave him free rein to stamp out what remained of the insurgency," says Liz Fuller, an analyst at U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

How is it governed?

The North Caucasus republics have little political or fiscal autonomy. Putin, during his first stint as president of Russia, reversed Yeltsin's early federalist concessions to the republics. Regional officials are largely appointed by the Kremlin, which diminishes their legitimacy and accountability, critics say. Putin, in his third presidential term, reversed a reform initiated by his predecessor, Dmitri Medvedev, that provided for the direct election of republics' heads. They are once again chosen by assemblies that elect a leader from a Kremlin-approved slate of candidates.

Chechnya remains the exception. The Kremlin formally ended counterterror operations of the second Chechen war in 2009 and handed the republic's leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, whose father Akhmad previously held the position, broad latitude to stanch the insurgency. Kadyrov has since **imposed as the state religion** an idiosyncratic form of Islam that is anathema to both secular Chechens and the growing Salafi population.

Unemployment and poverty are endemic to Chechnya despite the **billions of dollars** Moscow has provided Kadyrov for reconstruction. Uneven development is also problematic: other republics have been deprived of similar investment. "The North Caucasus has no advocate, and the nature of Moscow is that you need a powerful advocate to open the purse strings," says **Mark Galeotti**, a scholar of Russian security affairs at New York University.

State institutions are widely perceived as corrupt and illegitimate, and Sufis and Salafis have developed parallel institutions to adjudicate disputes. Some courts implement adat, customary law that predates Islam's arrival to the region; others **implement sharia**. These operate legally in some republics, but underground in Chechnya and Dagestan, the International Crisis Group **reports**.

Drivers of Conflict

- **Ethnic:** Groups seek autonomy, compete for resources, or have revanchist territorial aims, which can manifest in violent conflict when political and legal channels cannot accommodate them. Police and local officials considered biased or corrupt exacerbate these problems.
- **Political:** Following foiled separatist ambitions and the state's massive, indiscriminate force, the insurgency promises an alternative to what is seen as Russian impunity for abuse.
- **Economic:** Unequal development among republics, poor development within them, and endemic corruption, unemployment, and clientelism drive residents to seek a more just order.
- **Religious:** Salafis are marginalized by Sufis, who see "Wahhabism" as foreign; regional governments codify this discrimination.

Source: **International Crisis Group**

What insurgent groups operate there?

Security experts remain focused on the Caucasus Emirate, an umbrella group comprising units (*jamaats*) spread across the North Caucasus that has taken up the extremist Islamist mantle under its outspoken leader, Umarov. A veteran of both Chechen wars, he declared CE's establishment in 2007, calling for the "expulsion of the infidels" from the "historical lands of Muslims." This marked the culmination of the insurgency's evolution from Chechen nationalism to Islamism spanning the North Caucasus. Over the following years, the insurgency's locus shifted to neighboring Dagestan.

Chechens trained with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan prior to the September 11, 2001 attacks, and Osama bin Laden's network supplied fighters and funds to them during the second Chechen war. But similarities in the groups' rhetoric or ideologies shouldn't be mistaken for common objectives or organizational linkage, analysts say.

Though Umarov **may have been killed** in late 2013, analysts doubt this will have much bearing on the insurgency's activities: he is thought to be more of a figurehead than an operational commander, and the *jamaat*s function with relative autonomy.

What attacks are North Caucasus–based groups responsible for?

Basayev, who led Islamist separatists after major combat in the second Chechen war ended, is the tactician thought responsible for massive hostage crises in the early 2000s. Demanding Russian withdrawal from Chechnya, militants took nearly one thousand hostages for three days in a Moscow theater in October 2002. At least 115 hostages were killed when Russian forces stormed the theater. Two years later, militants seized 1,100 people in a Beslan middle school. More than three hundred were killed, including many children, when Russian forces assailed the school.

The conflict's first female suicide bombers emerged during this period. Russian and Western media dubbed them "black widows," assuming they were seeking revenge on Russian security forces for killing their militant husbands. But experts caution that the phenomenon is overstated by the press.

Basayev remained a separatist leader until his death in 2006, but by then he had **alienated** much of his Chechen base, the *Economist* reported at the time.

Beginning in 2008, the Caucasus Emirate began targeting security forces and other agents of the state within the confines of the North Caucasus. But some of its highest-profile attacks have targeted Moscow's transportation infrastructure: in 2009, a high-speed train was derailed, killing twenty-eight; in 2010, two women blew themselves up on the metro, killing forty and injuring eighty-eight; and in 2011, an Ingush man killed at least thirty-seven at the Domodedovo Airport.

A **suicide bombing** on a Volgograd bus in October 2013 and **twin bombings** of a train station and trolley in December rattled Russia as the Sochi games approached; they were the first terrorist attacks to take place in Russia outside the North Caucasus since Domodedovo. Two ethnic Russians were implicated in the December attacks.

What is Russia's approach to counterinsurgency?

Security officials maintain broad authority to declare counterterrorist operations , which allow them to operate with few restrictions. Rights groups still allege killings, disappearances, and torture by Russian security forces, as well as collective punishment of families of suspects and excessive force that often causes civilian casualties.

In Chechnya, where Kadyrov has largely unfettered power, security forces have taken a heavy-handed, security-oriented approach, aiming to eradicate not just Salafi militants **but the theology itself**, according to ICG. In "mop-up" operations that followed the combat period in

the second Chechen war, security forces detained or killed large numbers of civilians under the pretense of searching for rebel fighters, rights groups allege. Enforced disappearances, torture, and extrajudicial executions were endemic in the counterinsurgency campaign that followed combat in the second Chechen war. They have since become the subject of cases before the **European Court of Human Rights**, which has mandated compensation to victims' families. (Russia has **not effectively implemented** these judgments, Human Rights Watch says.)

Dagestani president Magomedsalam Magomedov pioneered a softer, law-enforcement-based approach to root out extremism after his **appointment** in 2010. He induced young fighters to turn themselves in for reintegration with the promise of lenient sentencing and economic incentives, liberalized policy toward Salafis, and instituted inter-confessional dialogues.

In January 2013, Putin replaced Magomedov with Ramazan Abdulatipov, who reversed this relatively tolerant approach. Salafis in Dagestan have been persecuted, and there are reports of mass arrests. The rehabilitation commission has since been shut down.

Has it been effective?

Violence in the North Caucasus has declined in recent years, according to the independent news site **Caucasian Knot**, which documented 1,710 victims of the insurgency and counterinsurgency in 2010, and 986 in 2013.

While Dagestan bore the brunt of the violence in 2013, Kabardino-Balkaria, Chechnya, and Ingushetia all saw dozens of casualties. Altogether, 127 members of the security forces and 104 civilians were killed in 2013. The hardline crackdown can likely be credited with much of the decline in violence, experts say, but abuse by the security forces likely aids the insurgency's ability to mobilize the population.

Do groups in the region pose a threat outside of Russia?

The United States designated Umarov a "**global terrorist**" in 2010, and CE a **foreign terrorist organization** the following year. Likewise, the United Nations Security Council's al-Qaeda Sanctions Committee **includes both CE and Umarov** on its sanctions list, a move that facilitates asset freezes and travel bans. Moscow has portrayed the North Caucasus as a front in the so-called "global war on terror."

Chechens are reportedly among the foreign fighters in Syria's civil war, joining Islamist militias against the Russia-backed Assad government. But the North Caucasus insurgency is rooted in local grievances and nationalist ambitions rather than the universal ideology of global jihad, Galeotti says, adding that those Chechens fighting abroad often hail from the diaspora.

The insurgency in the North Caucasus does not target foreign interests, analysts say. In the wake of the April 2013 Boston marathon bombing, in which two ethnic Chechens were responsible for a bombing that killed three people and wounded hundreds, the Caucasus Emirate's Dagestani wing **repudiated** the attack, saying it was at war with Russia alone.