

By Ekaterina Zatuliveter

The North Caucasus, the most troubled area in Russia, has always been taken into account by Kremlin in decision-making process. It could not have been an exception during the recent events in the South Ossetia. The Russian politicians have thought twice about the consequences of the South Ossetian conflict on the troubled areas in the North Caucasus before sending its troops as a response to the Georgian attack on the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali. The calculation of all the negatives and positives has resulted in the Russian army going to South Ossetia to protect the local population and further on into Georgia.

There is great complexity in the relations between different Caucasian ethnicities. The Ossetians are indigenous population of both Georgian South Ossetia and Russian North Ossetia (well-known because of the horrific tragedy in Beslan in 2004). They are the same ethnic group and majority of them have relatives on the other side of the border. For the South Ossetians North Ossetia is a closest and logical choice of shelter. However, there are complications resulting from the historical background.

In 1943-1944 Stalin ordered the deportation of entire ethnic groups from Caucasus to Siberia and Central Asia and redrew the regions' borders. Ingush people were among the deportees. The part of the territory of Ingushetia was given to North Ossetia. Those Ingush people who survived exile returned in 1957 and realised that the land where they lived before did not belong to them anymore. This provoked tensions in all the republics of the North Caucasus, including the territorial dispute between the Ossetians and the Ingush. Tensions rose dramatically from the 1970s onwards.

In 1991 when Georgia gained independence from the Soviet Union, South Ossetia refused to recognise itself as a part of Georgia. This sparked ethnic conflict in the region and resulted in the establishment of a de facto independent South Ossetian government. At this time many South Ossetian refugees fled north across the border, and settled in the Prigorodnyy Rayon (District) of North Ossetia. The district had been part of Ingush territory prior to Stalin's deportation of the Ingush.

The establishment of the Ingush Republic in 1992 (separated from the Checheno-Ingush ASSR) resulted in heightened tensions in the area. Attacks on Ingush in both the capital of North Ossetia, Vladikavkaz, and the villages of Prigorodnyy District, began in October 1992 and within a fortnight all Ingush had been driven from the district.

In 1992 the Ossetians and the Ingush saw and become victims of one of the most brutal conflicts in the modern history of the Caucasus, yielding only to two Chechen wars. That time the federal government supported North Ossetia in this conflict and sent troops to establish order and assist in the expulsion of Ingush from the disputed areas.

The Ossetians have always been a Russian ally in the Caucasus. Their friendly relations should not be compared to the Checheno-Russian and Ingush-Russian relations. One of the explanations of this might be in the religious background. The Ossetians, like the Russians, are Christian Orthodox, while the Ingush, the Chechens and many other ethnic groups in North Caucasus are Muslim.

There is already aggravation of situation in North Caucasus, to some extent due to the South Ossetian refugees who flow to North Ossetia following the Georgian attack on Tskhinvali. However, knowing the unstable situation between North Ossetia and Ingushetia, the main flow of refugees has been relocated further to the north to such areas as Rostov, Stavropol, Krasnodar regions. (These areas are a part of North Caucasus, however, the majority of population there is ethnically Russian). This move helps to reduce the level of violence in the area, but does not exclude it. Some South Ossetian refugees are still coming to the disputed Prigorodnyi Rayon and the concerns of the Ingush people grow.

Russia has undertaken major rebuilding in South Ossetia in the last couple of weeks, allowing many refugees to come back to their homes. However, some still stay on the territory of Russia. In addition, the South Ossetian President Eduard Kokoit has recently announced that South Ossetia will strive to merge with North Ossetia in order to become a part of Russia. (This is not quite as reported by Western media) The mood in Ingushetia is extremely hostile. People there still remember the violence of 1992 and do not want more Ossetians to come to the area. They strongly oppose the Russian government in recognising independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, fearing that it is a first step towards South Ossetia becoming part of Russia.