

The Caucasus in transition

Part Two - The Terrible Triad: religion, ethnicity and nationalism

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Yesterday, I introduced our three-part "Caucasus in transition" series by examining Georgia and the need for a new approach to it from both Russia and the USA.

The Georgia Factor is a symptom of a larger problem, however. The Caucasus have long been dominated by a complex web of interlinking religious, ethnic and nationalistic grudges between competing power groups. For Russia, this is not an international issue of far-flung terrorist bases, this a domestic one of Islamist militancy right on the doorstep and deeply-held national allegiances.

The March 29 bombings have brought back into international focus a problem which has been simmering for some time. These attacks are not the first (see this BBC article for a timeline), and they are unlikely to be the last. Chechen rebels led by Doku Umarov have claimed responsibility for the attack, linking it to a Russian federal 'police action' in Ingushetia in February which is believed to have left twenty rebels dead including militant leader Alexander Tikhomirov.

Since the fall of the former Soviet Union, the Russian Federation has been combating rebel groups across its North Caucasus region. Less prominent attacks which are by no means any less deadly happen with alarming frequency in the North Caucasus provinces, such as a double car bombing which killed least twelve people in Dagestan on Wednesday March 31.

However, Russia's approach has been widely criticised as haphazard and heavy-handed. In the last week Russia's media, which normally maintains a cautious distance from criticism of the state security apparatus, has openly called for Medvedev to fire the head of the FSB for incompetence in failing to properly manage federal counter-terrorist efforts. The President himself appeared to side with those critical of the FSB.

Though the internet media rarely impacts government policy in Russia, such outspoken criticism arguably highlights a need for Russia to adopt a two-pronged approach to its terrorists. In addition to another widely-promised crackdown, it is important for Russia to expand its peaceful efforts to reduce the attraction of terrorism. It seems to have failed to heed the universal lesson that violence begets violence, hard-learned by other countries across the globe which have fought recent counter-terrorist campaigns, and that only the most implacable foes cannot be brought to the table. Stark criticism from the Moskovsky Komsomolets news service also highlights the need for Moscow to foster better public awareness and police training of the risks from terrorism, and it would behove Russia to learn the same lessons we here in England learned as a result of decades of conflict in Northern Ireland and provide a comprehensive and balanced public information campaign on what to look out for.

Still, Moscow has recently put considerable effort into localising governance of Chechnya and its other Caucasus republics, fostering management by pro-Russian leaders including Chechen President and former rebel Ramzan Kadyrov and providing vast sums of money in reconstruction aid. Worth noting is that Medvedev stated in early 2009 that Russia's counter-terrorist military operations in Chechnya had come to an end and Russia was focussing its efforts upon "normalising" the local situation. Meanwhile, Putin has recently appointed a new emissary for the Northern Caucasus, Alexander Khloponin, in an effort to address some of the causes of terrorism in the region, including poverty and high youth unemployment.

Yet the successful suppression of the large-scale insurgency and the return of a measure of calm in Chechnya is not the end of the story. If anything, it serves to demonstrate the political fault lines running through the region. Mr Kadyrov's place in control of enforcing local unity and stability stems from his position as the de facto leader of Chechnya's secular nationalist movement, a sworn enemy during the first Chechen war. As academics such as Anatol Lieven from KCL and Will Hartley from Jane's have pointed out, attacks in Dagestan and Ingushetia are on the rise, and Islamist rebels, notably Umarov, are now likely to have transferred their core operations out of Chechnya. And there limits to the extent that Russia can afford to 'buy off' rebel leaders, especially ideologically-driven fighters like Umarov.

Coincidentally, last week the Centre for Strategic and International Studies published statistics which show a dramatic increase in violence in the North Caucasus region between 2008 and 2009. This study showed that Ingushetia bore the brunt of the rebels' efforts, but also showed an increase in suicide bombings in Chechnya and Dagestan. There may no longer be tanks on the streets of Grozny, but 64 incidents of lethal force (including suicide bombings and assassination attempts) during the year show that the threat of terrorism is a feature of daily life in the region.

At the heart of all this violence is a history of ethnic, nationalistic and religious tensions considered at greater length elsewhere. The horrors of the past are undeniable: waves of conquest stretching back as far as the Ottoman Empire and culminating in centuries of aggressive Russian expansion. Any acknowledgement of past atrocities remains highly controversial throughout the former Soviet Union and especially in Russia, and would risk gouging deep into a festering wound that many would prefer to leave alone.

But, today, the most important problem lies in how to untangle the mess of influences driving recent and future waves of violence. Russia has shown that it is prepared to approach former enemies, but clearly needs to better engage with a broad range of influences to find a lasting solution for the region. In particular, Moscow needs to be able to build institutions which offer an alternative to violence and widen community participation, requiring local leaders like Kadyrov to create cross-community governance. Though authoritarianism is a fact of life in the Russian Federation, where strong local leadership in other provinces has paid dividends, outright dictatorship can be counter-productive.

The risk here is that the Caucasus could see a 'domino effect' of ex-Soviet states, including Russia Federation Republics and nearby independent nations, falling into chaos as Islamist extremism spreads. It's also worth remembering that quelling the lion's share of the violence in

Chechnya has resulted in an upsurge of violence in neighbouring states and in the increasing concentration and polarisation of insurgent groups. As Islamist militants seem to have banded together and the Russian-supported Chechen leadership is based in the nationalist movement, so Russia must be prepared to look into the future and try to figure out where the next ethnic or religious fault lines will be.

The 'nightmare scenario' is that the various simmering grievances and insurgencies will explode, one after the other, into outright civil war, in the process opening up old wounds and prompting the emergence of an even greater plurality of rebel groups. There is also the possibility that the North Caucasus area could become a new haven for Islamist extremism, making it all the more important for Russia and the US to talk to each other on counter-terrorism as formal equals. Strategic planners must not be complacent about the horrors that could be unleashed by inertia.