

Violence increases in Russia's Caucasus republics

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Earlier this year, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev proclaimed an end to the long-running “counterterrorism” operation in the North Caucasus. Speaking in April, Medvedev announced that Kremlin military planners would initiate the withdrawal of thousands of troops from the area. However, a recent spike in violence between Russian security forces and local militants indicates that Moscow has no plans to loosen its military grip in the region.

Moscow has maintained a large military presence in the troubled territory since separatist forces in the Russian republic of Chechnya declared independence in 1994. The Kremlin had hoped to draw down its operations in the region, which are a major drain on resources at a time of mounting economic crisis in Russia.

A suicide bomber killed six people and himself at a concert hall in the Chechen capital, Grozny, on Sunday. A further ten people were wounded. The number of violent clashes in Chechnya and other parts of Russia's North Caucasus region has increased this year, following a reduction in killings in the aftermath of the bloody Second Chechen war in 2001.

The neighboring Russian republics of Ingushetia and Dagestan have seen the bulk of the increase in violence, linked to conflicts between Islamist separatists and Russian federal forces and their local allies. In May, the interior minister of Dagestan was assassinated by gunmen. The following month, the president of Ingushetia was seriously injured by a car bomb. Nine Chechen policemen were recently killed when militants attacked their vehicle during an operation in Ingushetia.

In July, Russian human rights activist Natalia Estemirova was kidnapped in Grozny and found murdered in Ingushetia. She was a prominent critic of

the pro-Kremlin regime in Chechnya.

This week, Russian security forces killed eight suspected Islamist militants in Dagestan, following an hour-long gun battle in a forest near the capital, Makhachkala. Around the same time, another militant was killed in Chechnya. This brings the total number of alleged militants killed by Russian security forces in the three Muslim-majority Russian republics to over 20 in July alone.

Pro-Russian officials have been in talks with some Chechen separatists. Earlier this month, the BBC reported that a representative from the Chechen government of Ramzan Kadyrov, the son of a former Chechen warlord who had fought against Moscow in the 1990s, had talks with Akhmed Zakayev in the Norwegian capital Oslo.

Zakayev claims to be the head of the Chechen government-in-exile. In 2007, Zakayev split from the Chechen separatist leader Doku Umarov, president of the self-declared Republic of Ichkeria (Chechnya). Umarov had declared that Chechnya should be ruled under Shariah law and that Western countries were the enemies of Islam. Zakayev opposed this stance, favoring the building of ties with Western powers and rapprochement with more secular forces in Chechnya.

Though largely autonomous, it is very unlikely that the Kadyrov government in Grozny would enter into such talks, the first for eight years, without Moscow's benediction. The Norwegian hosts of the meeting said that the dialogue had been coordinated “with the highest leadership in the Kremlin.”

Zakayev and his followers are reported to be close to but distinct from the separatist militants still fighting in Chechnya. The Chechen government representative stated that the talks had focused on “the total political stabilization of the Chechen Republic and the final

consolidation of Chechen society.” Kadyrov has stated that Zakayev could safely return to Chechnya, where he should play a role “reviving Chechen culture.”

Asked by the BBC if he would take up this offer, Zakayev stated, “I will definitely return to the Chechen Republic and there are no conditions that I would impose on this.”

The Russian elite has strong interests in the region. The Northern Caucasus republics are transit routes for Central Asian oil and gas, and are considered vital to Moscow’s defence policy. In addition, the secession of one of these provinces would threaten the opening up of independence movements in Russia’s other ethnic and national minority republics, such as Tatarstan.

National and ethnic divisions were maintained by the Stalinist regime in the former USSR to divide the Soviet working class and peasantry. Russian chauvinism infused the bureaucracy, and national and ethnic grievances were exacerbated by brutal acts of repression, such as Stalin’s mass expulsion of the Chechen people to Central Asia after World War II.

Such separatist movements within the Russian Federation today reflect the inability of the Russian elite to meet the democratic and social aspirations of all Russians, while local ethnic and national elites, such as Kadyrov in Chechnya, see independence or autonomy merely as a means to enrich themselves and a narrow band of their cronies.

With Russia’s economy in crisis due to the fall in the price of oil and other natural resources, as well as major infrastructural problems, Moscow and its local proxies will be compelled to rely more on military and police violence to maintain their authority, as the weight of the recession is placed on the backs of working people.

Moscow is acutely conscious of the role of US foreign policy in the Caucasus region and is fearful of the threat of “color revolutions” spreading into its republics. While the current round of killings appears to be between Russian forces and Islamist groups, the means employed by the Kremlin are intended to signal to any dissenting faction the methods through which it will secure its rule.

Following on from their summit with US President Barack Obama this month, Medvedev and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin are seizing on a window of opportunity to advance the interests of the Russian elite in the region. In exchange for Moscow’s aiding of

the war in Afghanistan—prior to the summit Medvedev allowed the US Air Force to fly across Russia en route to the US-occupied country—Washington appears to have conceded, for the time being, Russian interests in the ex-Soviet republic of Georgia, which borders Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan.

In a highly provocative move, shortly after Obama left Moscow Medvedev visited South Ossetia, the breakaway Georgian province at the center of the war between Moscow and the US-backed government in Tbilisi last year. This was a statement of intent that Moscow will seek to consolidate its power in the province, and also in the other pro-Russian Georgian territory of Abkhazia.

Seeking to maximize its renewed role as a partner in Washington’s war in Afghanistan, Moscow will pursue its own “war on terror” in the North Caucasus, while seeking to expand its authority on the southern side of the Caucasus Mountains.



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