

# Violence escalates in Russia's North Caucasus republics

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After almost two decades of conflict between separatists and the Kremlin that have resulted in two wars, years of brutal counterinsurgency operations, and the deaths of tens of thousands, Russia's North Caucasus republics continue to experience ongoing insurgent attacks and abuses by government forces.

On Friday, December 11 a Russian court sentenced a policeman from Ingushetia to two years in prison for unlawfully killing Magomed Yevloyev, the owner of a web site critical of the Russian government and the Kremlin-backed president of Ingushetia, Murat Zyazikov.

Over the past two years the Russian Muslim-majority provinces of Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia have seen almost daily reports of killings, assaults, and kidnappings carried out by police, militias—either separatist or allied to local officials—and Russian security forces.

In April, Russia's President Dmitri Medvedev announced the end of the counterinsurgency phase of the conflict in the North Caucasus region. Local governments in Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan, eager to gain greater control of the provinces' security apparatus, claimed that insurgents were on the verge of total defeat. Kremlin strategists estimated at the time that just 480 active separatist militants were still operating in the most remote areas of the Caucasus Mountains.

However, despite official claims of a relative normalization of the region's security status, killings by both sides have only intensified since Medvedev's announcement. A catalogue of atrocities shows that the region remains mired in instability and corruption, with the government committing human rights abuses while militant attacks occur with increasing frequency.

In June, President Zyazikov of Ingushetia survived an assassination attempt after a bomb struck his motorcade, leaving him severely injured. This sparked a series of reprisals against suspected insurgents carried out by Russian security forces and militias linked to the pro-Moscow regimes in the three provinces.

In late July a suicide bomber killed six people outside a theatre in the Chechen capital, Gozny. One week later two separate attacks saw gunmen murder three government workers in Ingushetia. An audacious attack on a Russian police convoy

in Chechnya killed five police officers and injured another four.

That same month witnessed the kidnapping and murder of Natalia Estemirova, a human rights activist whose organization, Memorial, worked on exposing extra-judicial killings and torture carried out by Chechen and Kremlin-backed forces. Her death was widely blamed on supporters of the Kremlin's proxy ruler in Chechnya, President Ramzam Kadyrov.

One of the worst outbreaks of violence in years occurred August 17 when a suicide bombing at a police station in Ingushetia killed 25 people and wounded another 160. A group calling itself the Riyadus Salikhin Martyrs Brigade claimed responsibility for the attack, stating that it was in response to violence by government security forces. Four days later another suicide bombing claimed the lives of four police officers and one civilian in Grozny.

In what might be one of the most deadly expressions of the conflict in the Caucasus, on December 2 a bomb exploded on a Moscow to St Petersburg train, killing 26 passengers. An Islamist separatist militant group called the Caucasus Mujahadeen claimed responsibility for the attack, which took the lives of a number of senior government officials.

The leader of the group, Doku Umarov, is described by Russian security officials as having been one of the foremost insurgents in the North Caucasus region. Moscow officials have not verified the group's claim of responsibility for the attack, which may in part be because the Kremlin had repeatedly stated that Umarov was dead and his group disbanded.

Speaking after the train blast, Alexei Malashenko, a leading Russian expert on the Caucasus, warned that the insurgency in region was now spinning out of control.

"The situation is very bad. It seems to me that the east part of the North Caucasus is in a state of civil war. Every day somebody is killed. There is a lack of stability," he said.

The scale of the attacks, many of which target government personnel, indicates that the insurgent groups continue to enjoy greater operational capabilities than Kremlin officials have stated. Even if the number of militants has been reduced by counterinsurgency operations, the brutality of this campaign has alienated much of the local population, providing the separatists with enough support to remain active.

Since the end of the Soviet Union, the conflict over the fate of

Russia's Caucasus provinces has had a horrific impact on the peoples of the region and across Russia. Separatists in Muslim-majority Chechnya declared independence during the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. They maintained a de facto independent state after repulsing an initial attempt by Russian President Boris Yeltsin to regain control of the territory.

Conflict between Moscow and Chechnya continued, with thousands of ethnic Russians and other nationalities leaving the province in fear of reprisal attacks by Chechen nationalist militias. Following an intensification of violence in late 1994, talks were held between Chechen president Dzhokhar Dudayev and a Russian general, concluding with an agreement that Moscow would refrain from further use of force. Reneging on this agreement, Yeltsin launched a full-scale invasion of Chechnya, beginning a war that saw the Russian armed forces level most of the province.

Following the withdrawal of Russian forces in 1996, a tentative deal was struck in 1997 in which Chechnya was granted de facto independence, and styled itself the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. A second war broke out in 1999, with the Kremlin using a Chechen incursion into Dagestan and bombings of apartment buildings in Moscow—allegedly carried out by Chechen terrorists but in all likelihood done with the participation of Russian security services—as casus belli for another bloody invasion of the territory.

Estimates of the number of dead from the First and Second Chechen wars indicate that over 100,000 died in Chechnya and neighboring Russian provinces of Ingushetia and Dagestan, mostly civilians. Tens of thousands of soldiers in Russia's largely conscript army have been physically maimed or psychologically damaged by the conflicts.

The official end of the Second Chechen War, when the Kremlin regained control of the province, saw the local warlord Akhmad Kadyrov, a former separatist fighter turned ally of Moscow, installed as president in Chechnya. After his assassination in 2004, his son Ramzan has ruled the province as his personal fiefdom, relying on a private militia and support from Kremlin forces to enforce his authority against rival groups.

Despite the formal end of the war and the alliance with former separatists, such as the Kadyrov clan, intense fighting has continued between Russian security forces, which maintain thousands of army and intelligence personnel in the region, and the remaining Islamist separatist groups.

There have been repeated suggestions that Russian security forces have been complicit in some of the supposed Islamist terror attacks, using them as a justification for the continuation of large-scale military and intelligence operations in the region, including direct control of the security of Chechnya by Russia's Federal Security Bureau. Many in the Kremlin do not trust Chechnya's President Kadyrov to oversee the province, seeing him as a bandit whose loyalty to Moscow cannot be assured.

The region is of vital importance to the Russian elite, as it borders the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, which hold the vast oil and natural gas reserves of the Caspian Sea basin. One of Russia's most important energy pipelines goes from Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, through Dagestan and Chechnya, en route to the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiysk. From there oil is exported to Western Europe and around the world.

Control of this energy corridor fuels the determination of the Russian elite to maintain an iron grip over the region, and also the ambitions of local warlords, whether they are currently allied to Moscow, like Kadyrov, or are fighting to form a separate state.

The powder keg of ethnic, national and religious disputes in the Caucasus region, which was brought under the heel of the tsarist Russian Empire in a series of bloody military campaigns that also sought to pit one ethnic group against another, was maintained and made even more volatile by decades of Stalinist rule.

Opposed to overcoming the historic oppression of the peoples of the region through a struggle for socialist internationalism, the Stalinists sought to bureaucratically contain ethno-national divisions in the region by awarding positions of authority in various districts and republics to loyal local officials from each minority group. In one of the cruelest acts to befall the area, Stalin exiled the entire Chechen and Ingush peoples in 1944, charging them with collaboration with Nazi Germany.

At the time of the collapse of the USSR, a layer of local ex-bureaucrats and black marketeers sought to channel opposition to years of repression into support for national separatism. Their aim was to establish their own rule over the region so as to directly profit from the energy production and export system built up under the Soviet Union.



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