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How Russia Lost Its Last War

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We have so frequently and adamantly repeated that we are “fighting Islamic terrorism in the Caucasus,” that it has become a self-fulfilled prophecy. Sort of “be careful what you wish for” story. Clearly, over the course of the past few years the ideology, and, as a consequence, the behavior of local fighters – not just Chechen, mind you, but those of other ethnic groups as well – has been changing. Changing just as rapidly and as surely as the position of the locals, for it is no secret now that the ever-growing majority of the local population, especially the youth, is throwing its silent support to these fighters and is sympathetic to their cause. And what is the cause? Where once we used to see the Chechen warlords inspired by pure separatist ideas, now we see people and forces identifying themselves with the ideology of the Islamic world-wide jihad. Welcome to the new reality of the North Caucasus, and say hello to the new enemy.

And the fact that this new enemy receives assistance from the Middle East both financially and in organizational expertise is only the tip of the iceberg, just a small fraction of the real problem. That assistance was not too significant to begin with, and the war in Iraq has further undermined the resources available for sharing. No, the real problem – much more important, much more dangerous – is the evolution of this enemy’s self-identification, the change in their high goals and ideals. It is no coincidence that the contingent of the fighters’ bands is becoming more multi-ethnic (after all the proverbial “melting pot” is not always good, it turns out!), and is swelling with the representatives of various small ethnic groups of the North Caucasus.

The Islamic “internationalists,” including the Chechen ones, do not care one single bit about the status of Chechnya nor about the fate of its people. But they are considering Chechnya as a bridgehead, if you will, for a world-wide Islamic revolution and Jihad against Russia. The social and political environment in the Caucasus today represents a perfect agar, breeding all kinds of revolution producing viruses; such viruses as poverty, total corruption of authorities at every level, demographic explosion, and mass unemployment among the young. The Russian government’s consistent refusal to negotiate with the separatists (who did not share Jihad’s ideology), the lawlessness and abuse of the local population by the federal institutions, countless human rights violations, had helped to ignite the fuse of this revolution. Slowly but surely, they say, (but maybe not so slowly anymore), methodically, and almost purposefully Russia is creating a new monster – a wide front of anti-Russian Islamic Jihad. Would you like

some examples? Consider: for years the federal government has ignored all the complaints coming from the residents of Ingushetia regarding mass kidnappings by the local FSB (former KGB) authorities until finally – surprise! – came the fighting in Nazran. But no measures were taken and no conclusions were drawn. And now the same story is unfolding in Kabardino-Balkaria, as was demonstrated by the bloodshed in Nalchik. Or another example: Six years ago, when warlord Basaev was given an opportunity to invade Dagestan, an overwhelming majority of Dagestani population rose up in arms against the first Islamist aggression on Russian soil. Compare that reaction with the situation in Dagestan today, and you'll easily see the difference.

Islamic Jihad is horizontal network, unified by a common, very contagious ideology that looks convincing to millions of people. This network compiles scores of local, fairly autonomous cells that behave similarly to cancer cells: quickly spread out into new territories and are equally lethal. And it's Russian government's very own policies that help to create the wide support base for Islamic Jihad in the Caucasus and push more and more potential recruits into the camps of Jihad.

All of these things seem quite obvious, and have been the talking points of numerous political analysts for years. But only now, after the latest assault in Nalchik have they suddenly become clear to those making the policies, and those serving them by shaping the public opinion. For the first time those in charge suddenly recognized the war in the Caucasus for what it has long become – not the separatist struggle of a small people, but the war of an evil ideology, dressed up in a religious garb. And perhaps the suggested way out of this bind – the negotiations with the separatists – is just a bit on the late side. To be precise, it is 7 months too late. As you may remember, the elimination (or bluntly, the murder) of Aslan Maskhadov (Chechen-elected separatist president) happened exactly 7 months ago. This “ritual killing” put a final nail in the coffin of the idea of negotiation with separatists about the status of Chechnya. That idea has died along with its leader. The centuries-long war for the Chechen separation is now over with, finished, done. And it may as well be forgotten. Welcome to the new reality of the North Caucasus, and say hello to the new enemy. It is a totally new war, ladies and gents, and Russia appears to have lost the whole North Caucasus region in it. There are no more people fighting for their land, for their freedom, for their independence (at least how they viewed it). There are more and more people fighting for the beautiful ideals of the Islamic revolution. As Kremlin's Deputy Chief of Staff Mr. Surkov has aptly put it “There is an underbrush fire spreading in the Caucasus, and we do not know how to handle it.” Can we stop, or at least contain this wildfire or not – that's the new “to be or not to be” question of today's world. And this chilling new reality is a direct result of the Russian government's policies and approaches, as executed under Mr. Putin's watch.