

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
Academy for Genocide Prevention

Monitoring Roundtable: North Caucasus

2 December 2005

In a two-hour session at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, two leading experts briefed USG officials from USAID, State Department (S/CRS and EUR), and CIA, along with USHMM staff, concerning threats of atrocities in Chechnya and other republics of the North Caucasus. Since early 2005, violence committed both by government-sponsored forces and secessionist fighters has intensified in Chechnya and other republics, and resistance groups have become increasingly dominated by extremist Islamic ideology. Participants in the session explored possible strategies for enhancing the capacity of secular moderate groups in the region to support a peaceful resolution to the conflicts in the region.

This report summarizes opinions expressed by participants in the roundtable and does not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Conflict Drivers

A significant escalation of violence, committed both by rebel groups and government forces, has occurred throughout the North Caucasus since spring 2005. Rebel attacks have spread beyond Chechnya to Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria; and human rights abuses by government-sponsored security forces and paramilitary units have been documented in Chechnya, Kabardino-Balkaria, Ingushetia, and North Ossetia. The assassination of Chechnya's pro-independence president, Aslan Maskhadov, in March 2005 effectively silenced the political voice of secular moderates in Chechnya. Since then, leadership of the Chechen separatist movement has passed to the radical Islamist Shamil Basaev, who has called for an Islamic caliphate across the North Caucasus and the imposition of Sharia law. Basaev's strategy is to bring the war to the opponent's territory in order to expel the Russians from the North Caucasus. In the words of one speaker: "The Chechen war was the primary tumor, now the cancer is metastasizing."

Russian President Vladimir Putin's repeated insistence since 1999 that Russia is "fighting Islamic terrorism in the Caucasus," one presenter contended, has proven to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. The razing of Grozny and other population centers, along with the continuing lack of internal security, has so decimated the Chechen economy that the main sources of support for most inhabitants are organized crime, remittances from

relatives working elsewhere in Russia, and humanitarian assistance programs. Other North Caucasus republics are little better off: in Dagestan, the average monthly income is about \$100 US – half of the Russian average – and in Ingushetia, the unemployment rate is almost 50 percent. Pervasive corruption and the Kremlin's use of “managed” elections to install Putin's handpicked leaders in office have further demoralized moderates throughout the region who hope to influence events through peaceful means. Increasingly, resistance fighters throughout the North Caucasus identify themselves not as nationalists but as Islamic “internationalists” participating in a “worldwide Islamic revolution and Jihad against Russia.”

Road Signs

Participants in the roundtable identified several key factors that have the potential to influence developments in the North Caucasus over the coming year:

- **Kremlin policy.** Russian leaders are increasingly aware that their heavy-handed tactics have failed to suppress the Chechen separatist movement, and may indeed have exacerbated the violence there and in neighboring republics. In the words of Putin's Deputy Chief of Staff, Vladislav Yuryevich Surkov, “There is an underbrush fire spreading in the Caucasus, and we do not know how to handle it.” The Kremlin faces the choice of whether to continue its hard-line approach to the conflicts or to pursue a dialogue with moderate separatists in the North Caucasus—though this may no longer be possible for Chechnya itself. Participants noted that Maskhadov's assassination was an ominous sign that the Kremlin may have ruled out the possibility of seeking a compromise with moderates in the region.
- **Kozak's reforms.** Putin's envoy to the Southern Federal District, Dmitrii Kozak, has proposed reforms to governance in the North Caucasus that seek to establish civilian control, rein in corruption, and reduce political violence, particularly in North Ossetia and Kabardino-Balkaria. The extent of his reform program and its support within the Kremlin remain to be seen.
- **Ethnic and religious strife.** Tensions among ethnic and religious groups in the North Caucasus have been exacerbated by economic crisis and the flows of refugees and IDPs, further fueling secessionist pressures across the region.
- **Kosovo's final status.** During the 1990s, regional leaders frequently drew comparisons between the Chechen war and the wars of secession in the former Yugoslavia. If Kosovo is granted independence from Serbia, this may motivate Russia to recognize Abkhazia and Georgia to retaliate by recognizing Chechnya, which could destabilize Russian-Georgian relations and intensify secessionist movements.

- **U.S. policy in Iraq.** One presenter argued that a precipitous withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Iraq could cause an explosion of sectarian violence in the North Caucasus. Such a move could free up Islamic extremists currently fighting against American forces in Iraq, motivating them to seek another front for jihad. The perception that the jihadists had defeated the world's remaining superpower, following the defeat of Soviet forces in Afghanistan during the 1980s, could also strengthen the popular appeal of Islamic extremism.

Opportunities for Engagement

Participants in the session agreed that the international community should support secular moderate elements in the North Caucasus, as well as encourage Russian leaders to pursue a political dialogue, where feasible, with moderate groups. Although the Kremlin has long resisted international engagement in the conflict in the North Caucasus, depicting it as an internal security matter, participants perceived several potential levers for the USG and other governments to justify international action on this issue:

- The failure of Russia's existing policy to control the violence may motivate the Kremlin to seek a change of course in its policy toward the region.
- The expansion of Islamic extremism means that this conflict is no longer solely an internal matter for Russia, but also a threat to neighboring countries and potentially an emerging front in the "global war on terrorism."
- In 2006, Russia will chair both the G-8 and the Council of Europe, which may provide other member states the chance to engage Russia more directly in discussions of its policy toward the North Caucasus.

Beyond direct diplomatic engagement with Russia, the U.S. and other governments can coordinate better among themselves and with NGOs to strengthen moderate voices in the North Caucasus, help build diaspora institutions, and improve the treatment of refugees from the region in Europe and the U.S. One promising initiative, launched in Berlin in May 2005, is the international working group on conflict in the Caucasus, which has organized informal discussions among donors, human rights practitioners, and policy makers on this issue. Participants in the session raised the possibility of organizing a follow-up event at the Holocaust Museum that would seek to support and expand the reach of this international working group.