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Medvedev Seeks "Real, Not Cosmetic" Stability in North Caucasus

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

President Dmitry Medvedev said Russia must pursue "real, not cosmetic" stability in the North Caucasus, an indication of just how much the security situation has deteriorated and how disappointed the Kremlin now is in the claims by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin that the situation there has been improving. But Medvedev's five-point program, which he presented to the leaders of Russia's security services Wednesday, does not appear to promise any greater success, let alone justify his Putinesque statement that "one must not stand on ceremony with the terrorists. They must be liquidated without hesitation."

What Medvedev's proposals do appear to presage, however, is a further expansion of Russian military actions there, a greater willingness to dismiss local officials possibly with

the installation of ethnic Russians in their place and as a result, at least in the short- and medium term, an increase in the already high level of violence in the North Caucasus.

Medvedev's program includes: a call for better interagency coordination among the siloviki; a "radical reconstruction of work with cadres;" better protection for law enforcement personnel; changes in the law to ensure that terrorists are punished; and a meeting on the North Caucasus about how to improve economic conditions there.

Even as Medvedev was delivering this message, other officials and commentators were calling attention to why measures like these, however important they may be individually or collectively, are unlikely to reverse the current trends in most parts of the North Caucasus and could even make the situation worse.

In an interview published in yesterday's Rossiiskaya Gazeta, Aleksandr Torshin, the first deputy head of the Federation Council, argued that the introduction of counter-terrorism operations is "not a panacea," is extremely expensive and may prove counterproductive relative to Moscow's goals.

In a second commentary, featured in the current issue of Russky Reporter, Mikhail Solodovnikov argues that Moscow does not yet appear to understand that in many cases, "the bandit underground will exist as long as local political elites directly or indirectly continue to finance it" in pursuit of their own political aims.

According to Daghestani militia commanders, he said, "bandits" there finance their activities by carrying out murders or other acts of intimidation at the request of local officials who seek to "liquidate, frighten or discredit" their opponents or extract resources from the center by suggesting that they themselves are threatened by this "underground."

According to interior ministry sources in Makhachkala, the "bandits" are paid 100,000 to 200,000 rubles (roughly $3,000 to $6,000) for the average attack, but if more senior officials are to be the targets, they get even more &mdash 500,000 rubles for a district chief and perhaps $1.5 to $2 million for the killing of MVD chief Adilgerei Magomedtagirov.

In part as a result of this domestic financing, since the counter-terrorism operation was lifted in Chechnya on May 16, Solodovnikov continued, the number of serious attacks has increased in many parts of the North Caucasus and shows no sign of letting up anytime in the immediate future.

And in a third essay, Ruslan Kurbanov, an expert on the region, argues that what Moscow faces now is "the Talibanization of the Caucasus," the rise of the kind of religiously motivated and well-funded (from drugs, foreign allies and local officials) operation that the United States is finding so hard to defeat in Afghanistan.

In a detailed and closely argued 2900-word article, Kurbanov describes why and how this movement has arisen in the North Caucasus, the role Moscow's past policies have played in this and the likelihood that regardless of what the Russian government does now or in the future, it will face a serious challenge from the region for a long time to come.

Given this increasing pessimism, it is perhaps not surprising that some Russian analysts have suggested that Moscow may soon have to make a choice not between stability and instability, as Medvedev appears to believe, but rather among three other options, none of which is entirely acceptable to the Russian government or the Russian people.

Boris Sokolov says the deteriorating situation means that Moscow may have to choose between a massive campaign to destroy the Islamic underground, the acceptance of a set of independent countries relatively friendly to Russia or the rise of a North Caucasian Islamic state hostile to Moscow.

And the Russian government, however many steps Medvedev takes, may not have as much time to achieve its goals as he would like. Not only is the security situation in the North Caucasus deteriorating, but ethno-religious violence from the region is now spilling over into predominantly Russian regions like Stavropol.

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