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Moscow's Policies Undermining Russia's Position in North Caucasus

By Paul Goble

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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.

Richmond, Indiana &mdash Moscow's policies in the North Caucasus are not only ineffective and violate international law, Russian human rights activists say, but they are making the situation worse from the center's point of view, with Russian support for things like "death squads" driving ever more young people "into the forests" to fight for an Islamist state.

At a press conference in Moscow last week on that trend, Alexander Cherkasov of Memorial took the lead in describing the range of such counterproductive policies including not only death squads but also "torture, kidnappings, illegal prisons and extra judicial executions" that are "characteristic of dictatorial regimes."

Indeed, Cherkasov continued, these mistaken policies are both costing the federal center any possibility of "controlling the situation in the North Caucasus" and further "criminalizing

the force structures," a development that in turn means that Moscow is losing control over these agencies in many cases as well.

The situation in Chechnya, he said, has reverted to what it was three years ago, "if one judges according to the statistics of kidnappings, murders and terrorist acts." Ingushetia is deteriorating rapidly after some progress was made after the appointment of Yunus-Bek Yevkurov as president. And Daghestan is teetering on the brink of collapse.

Each of these republics, Cherkasov acknowledged, exhibits certain unique features because "each has its own distinctive problems." But there are some common aspects," and perhaps the most important is this: "The fundamentalist underground is growing, and ever more people are going 'into the forest,'" at least in part because of the authorities' approach.

Another participant in the Moscow press conference, Svetlana Isayeva, the head of the Mothers of Dagestan for Human Rights, said "death squadrons" exist in the North Caucasus and that they seize and kill with the implicit approval of government officials who neither move against them nor investigate cases in which they are involved.

And finally, Lyudmila Alekseyeva, the president of the Moscow Helsinki Group, said on the basis of her most recent visit to the North Caucasus that the powers that be there, backed by the Moscow siloviki, are continuing to try to create or restore order through the use of extrajudicial and illegal violence against individuals.

"At first," the dean of Russia's human rights activists said, "this was done only in Chechnya. Now 'a full-blown civil war' is going on in all republics [of that region] between the siloviki and the underground, between the force structures and the population." And as a result, the population is caught "between the two struggling sides."

As a result, she said, young people in their 20s in Dagestan, Ingushetia and Chechnya now form "a group at risk" of being attacked from either side, something that disposes them to take measures into their own hands rather than relying on the government agencies that are supposed to be protecting them but in fact are doing just the reverse.

And what is especially frightening, Alekseyeva continued, is that "the atmosphere of fear" that she and other rights activists now observe has "spread to those who earlier had not been afraid." Indeed, "after the murders of Natalya Estemirova, Zarema Sadulayeva and her husband Alik Dzhabrailov, both journalists and rights activists have begun to be afraid."

To the extent that members of these two groups have become more fearful, there may be less reporting about the illegal violence that Russian government agencies are visiting upon the population there, a decline in coverage that many in Moscow and some in the West will view as evidence that such violence, however unpleasant or even illegal, is effective.

But the message of Alekseyeva, Isayeva, Cherkasov and the others is very different: The use of such extralegal means is not effective, but rather is setting the stage for even more disastrous outcomes in the future, with both the opposition gaining in strength and the increasingly poorly monitored siloviki ever more inclined to use violence against each other.

To the extent that the projections of the rights activists are correct, Moscow may find itself in the North Caucasus in the same position that many colonial powers have in the past: The central government will be able to win every battle, but the means that it is now employing to do so guarantee that in the end, it will lose the war.

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