

# Failed North Caucasus Policy

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Events of the last few months have created the strong impression that something serious is brewing in the North Caucasus. Fighting in Chechnya has intensified, as has the conflict over its border with Ingushetia. Meanwhile, militants continue to kill policemen in Dagestan, and Chechen warlord Doku Umarov has threatened to detonate a bomb during the Winter Olympics in Sochi.

The problem is not that the Kremlin has recently committed a fatal mistake of some sort. Rather, we are witnessing the cumulative effect of a series of many small past mistakes resulting from the lack of a coherent strategy. Now, the authorities must deal with the consequences.

A contributing factor is the general trend towards decentralization — a trend that promises to shape the country's development in the near future. During the boom years, the Kremlin was in a position of strength and could afford to forego the experiment of federalism. But now that the economy is struggling, the Kremlin is in a weaker position and must grant greater autonomy and political power to the regions.

The Kremlin has two basic approaches in its arsenal to counteract these trends. The first is expensive, populist policies, such as raising salaries and pensions. The second is the far less expensive, but no less populist, pandering to the masses, by playing the religion, homophobic and anti-Western cards.

At the same time, however, President Vladimir Putin will have to sacrifice strategic objectives. One area may be the North Caucasus, which many Russians feel Moscow has already "overfed" with generous budget subsidies. For a country with as many nationalities as Russia, such a course could lead to disastrous consequences, especially in the North Caucasus. At the same time, however, the idea of a separate region for the North Caucasus republics enjoys support among many Russians.

Russia's withdrawal from the North Caucasus is effectively already underway in the form of a large-scale departure from the region of ethnic Russians. Meanwhile, several republics in the region no longer subject themselves to Russian legal or political norms, although formally they remain under Moscow's authority.

In Kabardino-Balkaria and Dagestan, Moscow rejected its usual approach of buying loyalty from the ethnic clan elites, attempting instead to achieve stability through the use of siloviki. But by relying on siloviki brought in from outside the region, Moscow's presence begins to resemble more of an occupying force. That model of rule is inherently unstable, and it is unclear just what price Moscow will end up paying for it in the near future. For example, it is clear that the dismantling of strongman and former Makhachkala mayor Said Amirov in Dagestan will sharply increase the risk of serious instability there.

Even as Russians are moving out of the North Caucasus, there has been an influx of Caucasians into regions dominated by ethnic Russians — for example, Kondopoga, Sagra and Pugachyov — sparking sharp, anti-Caucasus sentiment. A seemingly ordinary local conflict was at once a disturbing symptom of a larger problem and a catalyst for still more problems.

In a recent Levada Center survey, only 10 percent of respondents said they were opposed to Chechnya seceding and that it should be prevented from doing so by any means necessary, including military intervention. Slightly more respondents said they were opposed to such a scenario but could live with it if events so transpired.

Almost exactly the same number of those questioned — 12 percent — felt that Chechnya has already seceded. Twenty-seven percent of respondents did not attach any importance to Chechnya's possible secession, while 24 percent would be only too happy if it did secede.

The collapse of Putin's Eurasian strategy will mean the collapse of his North Caucasus strategy, if such a strategy ever existed. This will be caused by foreign policy factors, primarily the sharp deterioration in Russia's relations with Georgia and the Kremlin's impossible demand that Tbilisi first recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia before Russian-Georgian relations can improve.

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