

THE CAUCASUS EMIRATE

ORIGINS, IDEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION AND RISK STATUS

Michail Logvinov

For more than a decade Moscow has been fighting an insurgency in the North Caucasus. The rebellion that started as a separatist movement has now taken on a distinctly Islamist tone and repeatedly resorts to terrorist methods. Although the large-scale “counter-terrorist operation” that began in 1999 and was declared to be over in 2009 claimed large numbers of victims on both sides of the conflict, an end to terrorism in the North Caucasus is not yet in sight. Frequent special operations by the police and the regional internal secret services, attacks by rebels, clashes with the security forces as well as the latest bombings in the heart of Russia bear witness to the further diffusion of violence in the region. In addition to the security dimension, a cultural divide between the North Caucasus and the rest of Russia is also evident: the growing Islamisation of society and the younger generation’s sympathy with the fundamentalist version of “pure” Islam (Salafism) are causing concern in Moscow. The North Caucasus is now regarded as Russia’s “internal foreign country”.

In October 2007 the Islamist resistance declared the formation of an Islamist “state” transcending the boundaries of the individual republics. Since then the Chechen Doku Umarov has been the leader of the Caucasus Emirate (CE), which also functions as a pan-Caucasian jihad front. It is behind the majority of the attacks in Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria, as well as those in core Russian territory.



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Fig. 1

Velayats claimed by Caucasus Emirate¹

The suicide bombing at Moscow's Domodedovo airport on 24 January 2011 once again drew attention to the Caucasus Emirate as a key element in reports about the Caucasus. However, in Germany one searches in vain for serious studies of the emirate called into being by Doku Umarov, otherwise known as Abu Usman. This is partly because the literature on the North Caucasus tends to resort to explanatory templates that assign blame unilaterally either to the Islamist groupings or to the Russian state secret services. In the process, other explanatory factors are often ignored.² Within the research community this has given rise to a split in the way this regional actor is handled. For example, Russian politicians and political scientists have until recently held transnational terrorist networks mainly responsible for the destabilisation of the North Caucasus. German academic research, on the other hand, has chiefly emphasised "co-terrorism" in Russia,

1 | The term velayat was used for the provinces of the Ottoman Empire during the reform period starting in 1845. Velayats claimed by the CE are Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay, the Nogai Steppe in the Stavropol Krai that is populated by the ethnic group of Nogais, and South Ossetia which belongs to Georgia.

2 | Uwe Halbach, "Russlands inneres Ausland: Der Nordkaukasus als Notstandszone am Rande Europas", SWP-Analyse, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin, 2010, 6.

rarely referring to the Islamist players and their ideology and motivation. The role of fundamentalist Islam in the Chechen independence struggle is also grossly underestimated.³ We must therefore now ask what role Islamism in general and the ideology of the CE in particular play in the North Caucasus uprising against the Russian troops, focusing on the influence of the CE on jihadist radicalisation processes and the way in which it has become an identity platform for young Islamist followers.

NORTH CAUCASUS INSURGENCY EN ROUTE TO THE CAUCASUS EMIRATE

As a defining historical force in the struggle of the North Caucasus peoples against Russian troops, Islam has long occupied a special role. In the first Chechen War it was an important mobilisation mechanism in the battle for independence. A key factor was the instrumentalisation of Islam by the main players in the conflict. The then Chechen president Dzhokhar Dudayev utilised Islam for a nationalist mobilisation campaign. One of the leaders of the rebel movement, Shamil Basayev, declared his support for the Islamist agenda. Through their actions both men succeeded in squaring the circle: nationalist propaganda and Islamist agenda were united in the battle against the Moscow army.⁴ Neither the nationalist actors nor the Islamist “wolves” got in each other’s way. In what became known as the Second Chechen War this was no longer possible: in the inter-war period rivalry had flared between the Chechen nationalists around President Aslan Maskhadov and the Salafist project of Basayev and his Arab comrades-in-arms, with both sides competing for power and authority.⁵

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- 3 | As an illustration of this: Regina Heller, “Droht ein Flächenbrand im Nordkaukasus?”, in: Christiane Fröhlich et al. (eds.), *Friedensgutachten 2010*, Munster, 2010, 249-263, here: 258.
- 4 | Dudayev was also not averse to using the mobilising power of the *ghazwat* (the holy war) for his own ends. For example, he put pressure on the mufti Muhammed Hussein Alsabekov to declare *jihad* against Russia.
- 5 | Keely M. Fahoum, *To Tame a Chechen Wolf: Shedding the Failing Frame of Salafism*, Monterey, 2008.

In 2002 the defence committee of Ichkeria approved a constitutional amendment declaring Chechnya an Islamist state that derived its legislation from the Koran and the Sunnah.

The jihadist Salafist wing emerged victorious from the ideological leadership struggle and the national secularists around Maskhadov became increasingly isolated. The dispute between the two “brotherly” insurgency parties continued throughout the following years. In 2002 the defence committee of Ichkeria approved a constitutional amendment declaring Chechnya an Islamist state that derived its legislation from the Koran and the Sunnah. The Islamists, as they themselves admitted, harboured hopes of a peace treaty with Moscow, which was why they tolerated the president. The “Caucasus Front” set up in the spring of 2005 was then a step on the road to the CE. In the same year the insurgents managed to provisionally set aside their internal conflicts and unite in a common cause. However, it was still too soon to declare the CE an independent pan-Caucasian entity.

DECLARATION OF THE CE

In the mid-2000s the North Caucasus insurgency was facing a dilemma and the CE was battling with internal disputes. At the centre of the internal conflicts (*fitna*) was the question of whether or not the fight against Moscow constituted a holy war (*jihad*). One of the objections raised was that the struggle with Moscow lacked a religious basis. Furthermore, in the view of a number of Emirate ideologists the Chechen people were no longer at risk of being annihilated by Moscow. Either the jihad should be ended or the “true objectives” of the struggle should be revealed. The insurgents’ ideological rethinking was accompanied by a debate on theological principles which was concerned primarily with whether independence should be achieved first and sharia then introduced or vice versa. Ultimately the militant, jihadist wing had its way: it succeeded in reshaping the insurgency and attracting the younger generation of Muslims. 2007 is therefore seen as the year of the “Islamist revolution” in which the CE officially came into being.

In November 2007 an article appeared on the CE website describing the process leading up to proclamation of the Emirate. Under the title “Amir Sayfullah on the prepara-

tions for proclamation of the Caucasus Emirate⁶ the CE's greatest achievements and ideological premises were described. Its major accomplishment is considered to be the rejection of the system of government based on the sovereignty of the people that was formally enshrined in the Chechen constitution of 1992. "*Tawhid* [faith in the unity and uniqueness of God, author's note] – that is the goal of our life, for which we fight and for which we are prepared to die", this is the attitude taken. The sole source of power – it is claimed – is not the people, but Allah the omnipotent: "Human rights, international law, referendums, freedom of opinion and freedom of religion, the will of the people – all these concepts are incompatible with our religion and have nothing to do with the Caucasian *mujahedin*." It is clear from the text that Umarov was urged to proclaim the Emirate without seeking the approval of other field commanders since a vote, as a "democratic innovation", would be "impermissible". This unilateral approach was to play an important part in the renewed split of the 2010 rebellion.

In the "Official statement on the declaration of the Caucasus Emirate" of 2007, the radical orientation is made clear. In this document Umarov rejects everything connected with *taghut* (idolatry): "I reject all *kafir* laws established in the world. I reject all laws and systems established by infidels in the land of Caucasus." The task is "to expel the infidels from the Caucasus" and to make the territory "the house of peace". In addition, "we must reconquer all the historical lands of Muslims, beyond the boundaries of Caucasus". Umarov classed all non-Muslims as infidels: as "objects of destruction" it was permissible for them to be shot down. "All infidels are one nation," said the emir of the CE. In early February 2012 a video message was posted on the Internet in which Abu Usman amended the "status" of the Russian civilian population and ordered a moratorium on attacks in which Russian civilians might be injured. Umarov saw recent protests against vote rigging as a sign that the population "does not

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6 | "Emir Seifulla o podgotowke k prowozglaschenii Emirata Kavkaz" (Amir Sayfullah on the preparations for proclamation of the Causus Emirate), 20 Nov 2007, <http://kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2007/11/20/54479.shtml> (accessed 15 Feb 2012).

support Putin's Chekist regime" and "is the hostage of the same regime that is brutally fighting against Islam on the territory of the Caucasus". He therefore declared security forces, regional officials and "national traitors" to be the Emirate's primary targets.⁷

RENEWED SPLITS IN THE EMIRATE: NATIONALISTS VS. TRANSNATIONALISTS?

A year-long rebellion, from early August 2010 to the end of July 2011, took place in the CE. It started with a controversial video message from Doku Umarov that was posted online on 1 August 2010: in it he announced his resignation, only to retract it the very next day. Under what conditions and for what purposes the video was made is disputed. It is also unclear what part the video played in the resolution of the internal power struggles between Umarov and his designated successor, Aslanbek Vadalov. The fact is that Umarov justified his (allegedly fabricated) resignation by

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stating that Vadalov was "younger and more energetic" and would achieve "better results". Umarov's announcement the following day that the video was a forgery and that he could not resign in the present circumstances again left the power structure uncertain. In the weeks and months that followed the Umarov "video affair" gave rise to contradictory accusations and numerous suspicions within the ranks of the Chechen field commanders and Emirate ideologues. The former fault lines between nationalists and transnationalists appeared to have opened up again.

Despite this, the CE's objective of undermining Chechnya's state structures remains unchanged, as is demonstrated by two attacks on targets of the "near enemy" – one on the home village of Ramsan Kadyrov, president of the sub-republic of Chechnya, in August 2010, and one on the Chechen parliament in October 2010. What was apparently controversial, on the other hand, was Doku Umarov's leadership style, which was agreed by a number of field

7 | Cf. Michail Logvinov, "Doka Umarov: Oberegat' i ne trogat' mirnoje naselenije!" (Doku Umarov: Spare the population and do not attack!), 3 Feb 2012, <https://caucasusjihad.wordpress.com/2012/02/03/doka-oberegat-ne-trogat> (accessed 15 Feb 2012).

commanders to be authoritarian and insufficiently consultative. Umarov's suppression of the traditional consultative bodies in Chechnya (*mejlis*) has been adduced as a further reason for the tensions in the upper leadership. However, the old guard has not as yet raised any objections to the pan-Caucasian jihad project. Apparently they in a sense mourned the old times in which any leader could speak in the *mejlis* and emirs could still be voted out of office. Members of this group did not take issue with the battle for the religion of Allah as a battle for the independence of Chechnya and of the entire Caucasus. However, they refused to submit to the Emirate while Doku Umarov was at its head as emir. The foreign Islamists and the younger generation of North Caucasian jihadists, on the other hand, largely support Umarov. They are a key force in the discussion that is carried out in part on the Internet.

IDEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION OF THE CE

In Western discussion of the CE's ideology, arguments are often put forward without critical reflection. This is not for lack of relevant information to underpin the sober search for truth. Numerous CE websites

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and forums provide evidence of the ideology on which the Caucasian jihad is based. Reports of the cross-border movements of the North Caucasian and Central Asian fighters are also well documented.⁸ For example, in transnational jihad forums one finds video speeches by the North Caucasian fighters from the Chorasani (Afghanistan/Pakistan), declaring their support for their emir in the struggle for an Islamist state in the North Caucasus. The Islamist Jihad Union, which is not unknown in Germany (it was the group behind the Sauerland bombers), has also expressed its solidarity with the CE. Press releases and war reports from the North Caucasus are regularly published in transnational jihadist Internet forums. In December 2010 the forum Ansar al-Mujahedin launched a campaign of support for the CE. Similarly there is no notable jihad ideologue whose texts are not now available online in Russian.

8 | Gordon M. Hahn, *Getting the Caucasus Emirate Right*, Washington, 2011.

In the international jihad movement, Chechnya – alongside Afghanistan – rose to prominence in 2001 – if not earlier – and the years that followed, growing to become “a long-running issue of Qaida proportions”.⁹ In propaganda the jihad was declared “a central pillar of Islam”, through which the “heart of the Muslim world” would be shifted to the front-line states.¹⁰ A text by Ayman al-Zawahiri, the veteran of the Afghan jihad, can be quoted as an example: in “Knights under the Banner of the Prophet” (2001) he denounces alleged major criminals, among which he includes Russia, and urges the international jihad alliance “to gather around the fighting states and support them”:

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“Our Islamist movement and its avant-garde of the jihad fighters, together with the whole *umma*, must force the major criminals [...] into a fight [...]. They must pay, and pay dearly.”¹¹ In his view Afghanistan and Chechnya are “these days the true capital of Islam”, and it is therefore “the highest of all duties to defend both countries through word, action, and consultation”.¹² According to the Umarov interpretation too, the principal enemies of Islam are the USA, the EU and Russia. Calls for a transnational jihad are regularly posted on many Internet forums.¹³

9 | Yassin Musharbash, “Suche nach Terror-Drahtziehern. Russlands Städte im Visier”, *Spiegel Online*, 29 Mar 2010, <http://spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,686133,00.html> (accessed 15 Feb 2012).

10 | Kepel Gilles and Jean-Pierre Milelli (eds.), *Al-Qaida. Texte des Terrors*, Munich, 2005, 369.

11 | *Ibid.*, 363.

12 | Al-Zawahiri goes on to state that: “A single glance at the history of the mujahidin in Afghanistan, Palestine and Chechnya shows that the jihad movement acquired a central position at the heart of the *umma* at the moment in which it made national liberation from its foreign enemies its watchword and accorded this liberation the nature of a battle of Islam against impiety and the infidels. [...] a growing army is gathering under the banner of the jihad against the law of the new world order. Free from any servitude to the prevailing western imperialism, it harbours the promise of defeating the new crusade against the lands of Islam. It is thirsting to take revenge on the leaders of the horde of international impiety (the USA, Russia and Israel) [...]”

13 | As examples of this: the website of the velayats of Dagestan (Jamaat Shariat), Ingushetia (Hunafa) and the united velayats of Kabarda, Balkaria and Karatschai (IslamDin) and of the Caucasus Emirate itself (Kavkaz Center).

Key to successful, large-scale implementation of the ideology behind the CE is the active involvement of Muslim youth. These young people have a special part to play in the refocusing of the armed struggle: “The Muslim youth of Chechnya and the North Caucasus are our support. That is the most important priority of all in politics, because they are now our sole foundation that makes resistance possible. [...] Only Islam helps us remain on our feet. If we had played cunning political games we would have sawn off the branch on which we were sitting. [...] We need people who are prepared to fight today and now, and no chatter in Europe and sophisticated arguments about the ‘language of diplomacy’ and the need to be considerate towards the cynical world in which we live.”¹⁴

The historical predecessors of the envisaged pan-Caucasian entity are the Islamic imamates or emirates that existed in the North Caucasus under Mansur Ushurma in the 18th century, under Imam Shamil between 1832 and 1859 and under Sheikh Usun Haji in 1919 and 1920. The CE ideologues take the history of the North Caucasian jihad against the Tsarist empire and the Soviet Union as a sociocultural model, while Islam serves as the dominant mobilisation medium. The Islamist principle is: “There is no diversity of religion, but only 2 religions – Islam and heathenism. Similarly there is no diversity of state forms but only 2 types – a state based on the power of Allah and a state based on the power of the *taghut*.”¹⁵ Post-soviet youth and young adults in the North Caucasus appear to be receptive to such arguments. According to a representative survey, twelve per cent of schoolchildren and students in the cities of Dagestan consider the militant jihad legitimate, while 20 per cent of those questioned are Salafists and support sharia. In rural areas the figures are likely to be somewhat higher.

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14 | Mowladi Udugow, “Vojna idet za obraz zhizn” (It is war for a way of life), 28 Nov 2007, <http://kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2007/11/28/54654.shtml> (accessed 15 Feb 2012).

15 | Ibid.

RISK ASSESSMENT OF THE NETWORK

Somewhat unexpectedly¹⁶ the jihadists' strategy paid off, and after a relatively short period of readjustment the CE yielded proof of its power in the North Caucasus and beyond. With the blowing up of a crowded train, the Nevsky Express, on 27 November 2009, a double suicide bombing in the Moscow metro on 29 March 2010 and the suicide bombing at Moscow Airport of which mention has already been made, the terrorists struck deep at Russia. In the republics of the North Caucasus, too, the jihad against the "near enemy" has been stepped up. In August 2011 there were two suicide bombings in Chechnya. In 2010 1,710 people fell victim to the terrorist bombings and attacks on the security forces (754 dead and 956 wounded). In eleven months of 2011 there were 1,205 victims in the North Caucasus as a whole (683 dead and 522 injured).¹⁷ On average 300 fighters are killed each year in clashes with the security forces; a similar number are arrested. Meanwhile leading Russian spokesmen continue to

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reiterate that the number of people involved in the insurgency in the North Caucasus is probably between 300 and 500.¹⁸ By contrast, Alexander Bastrykin, chairman of the Investigative Committee of the Russian Prosecutor General's office, caused a media stir in 2009 when he put the number of fighters in the North Caucasus at 1,500. A few hours later he withdrew his statement without explanation.¹⁹ While the number of terrorism offences in the North Caucasus had doubled in 2010, the Russian security services recorded a significant fall in 2011. At the same time the prevention rate has also halved. In other words the decrease can scarcely be attributed to the efficiency of the intelligence services

16 | Fahoum, n. 5.

17 | Here and below according to figures from the information portal *Kavkazskij Uzel*, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/rubric/1103> (accessed 21 Dec 2011).

18 | Cf. "Na Severnom Kavkaze ubity bolee 300 bojewikow" (Over 300 fighters were killed in the North Caucasus), 2 Dec 2011, <http://dagestan.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/196869> (accessed 15 Feb 2012).

19 | Cf. "Glawnyj sledowatel Rossii nasschital na Kavkase 1500 bojewikow" (The Chairman of the Investigative Committee of the Russian Prosecutor General's office put the number of 1,500 fighters in North Caucasus), 31 Jul 2009, <http://kp.ru/daily/24296/491133/?geo=1> (accessed 15 Feb 2012).

and investigative authorities, but is more likely to be the result of inconsistencies in the statistical data provided by different security-related bodies. For example, the Deputy Prosecutor General, Ivan Sydoruk, declared that in 2011 the number of politically motivated offences had risen by 29 per cent from the preceding year.²⁰

Another development is also emerging. The victim statistics for members of the police, military and intelligence services show that the fight against the “near enemy” has shifted to Dagestan. In Chechnya, by contrast, victim numbers have fallen. Nevertheless, both republics are a long way from finding a satisfactory solution to the problem. Despite some success on the part of the security authorities, it is noticeable that the heads of the North Caucasian hydra quickly regrow. The insurgency has been noticeably rejuvenated and there are currently no signs of a lack of recruits. An indicator of the seriousness of the situation is the huge number of counter-terrorist operations, many of which result in battles between the security forces and the rebels that continue for several days. Since the Russian authorities pay little attention to the ideological basis of the insurgency, there is no prospect that the religiously motivated violence in the North Caucasus will stop.

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DANGERS FOR EUROPE

The dangers and risks for Europe and for Germany relate mainly to possible radicalisation processes in the Chechen diaspora and – from a normative point of view – to logistical and financial support for the CE. In an address to their compatriots abroad, the rebel field commanders explicitly urged their countrymen to support the Chechen struggle. German intelligence services are noticing activity in response to this call and a growth in support for the CE among Chechens living in Germany.²¹

20 | Cf. also Mairbek Vatchagaev, “What Russian Statistics On Militant Attacks In the North Caucasus Reveal”, 9 Nov 2011, [http://jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=38760&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=512](http://jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=38760&tx_ttnews[backPid]=512) (accessed 15 Feb 2012).

21 | Stefan Berg, “Präsident mit Pistole”, *Der Spiegel*, 46/2010, 15 Nov 2010, 118-120, <http://spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-75159833.html> (accessed 8 Feb 2012).

Activity by CE supporters in Europe has been reported a number of times in the past year. In November 2010 the security authorities of the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium arrested members of the Sharia4Belgium network and a "Chechen" cell. They were suspected of planning attacks in Belgium, supporting the CE financially and recruiting jihadists for the North Caucasus. Another Chechen suspect, Aslambek I., escaped the Austrian investigators at Vienna's Schwechat Airport. He is regarded as a supporter of Doku Umarov and is thought to have provided logistical support for planned attacks on NATO targets in Belgium. In addition, the Czech police reported in May 2011 on a cell that allegedly had links with the Dagestani Jamaat Shariat.²² Its members, who specialise in smuggling weapons and forging travel documents, are said to have received terrorist training at a location in Afghan-Pakistan border territory. There were politically charged reports that the cell had shifted its activities from Berlin to Prague and that some suspects had been on the move in Berlin at the time of the arrest. In Berlin, too, a man thought to have been aiding terrorists was arrested in June.²³

Another risk for Germany as a democratic constitutional state arises from the activities of Russian and/or Chechen intelligence services that track the Chechen diaspora on German soil. Critics maintain that killings of alleged terrorists or political opponents abroad have long been part of Grozny's anti-terrorist strategy. Europe (and Germany) is not immune to such attacks – as the killing of Umar Israilov in Austria demonstrates. In the Austrian media there is currently talk of 300 agents sent by Chechen President Kadyrov.²⁴ Should there be confirmation of the

22 | Chris Johnstone, "Czech Police pounce on Islamic 'terrorist' gang", *Czech Position*, 3 May 2011, <http://ceskapozice.cz/en/news/society/czech-police-pounce-islamic-'terrorist'-gang> (accessed 8 Feb 2012); "Daghestan Jamaat Support Personnel Arrested in Czech Republic", *Radio Free Europe*, 3 May 2011, http://rferl.org/content/daghestan_jamaat_czech_republic/24090349.html (accessed 8 Feb 2012).

23 | "Mutmaßlicher Terrorhelfer festgenommen", *Der Tagesspiegel*, 23 Jun 2011, <http://tagesspiegel.de/berlin/polizei-justiz/marzahl-mutmasslicher-terrorhelfer-festgenommen/4317682.html> (accessed 15 Feb 2012).

24 | Andreas Wetz, "Chefagent Tschetscheniens ausgewiesen", *Die Presse*, 3 Feb 2012, <http://diepresse.com/home/panorama/oesterreich/729518/Chefagent-Tschetscheniens-ausgewiesen> (accessed 15 Feb 2012).

media reports claiming that the murders of Rustam Altemirov, Zaurbek Amriyev and Berg-Khazh in Istanbul in September 2011 were planned by a "Berlin Group",²⁵ this would be a worrying development.

From 1999 onwards, if not earlier, the North Caucasian separatist struggles have been closely linked to Islamism. The connection between the jihadist-Salafist players, and their motivation in the 1990s, and the ideological orientation of the CE is beyond doubt. From the point of view of security policy one ignores this at ones peril. Because the CE is not only a danger to Russia: in Europe, too, radicalisation processes are already under way.

With contributions by Jakob Kullik.

25 | Stefan Berg and Matthias Schepp, "Ausweitung der Todeszone", *Der Spiegel*, 26 Sep 2011, <http://spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-80652400.html> (accessed 15 Feb 2012).