

Prisoners of the Caucasus

Charles King and Rajan Menon

Essays Russia's Invisible Civil War

THE EMPTY gymnasium of School No. 1 in Beslan is whipped by winds from the plains of North Ossetia, a republic in Russia's North Caucasus region. On September 1, 2004, the first day of classes, masked gunmen entered the elementary school and herded hundreds of children and their teachers onto the indoor basketball court. They held their captives for three days. In the stifling late-summer heat, some children died from dehydration. Many others were killed when a series of homemade bombs exploded, collapsing the roof and igniting a massive fire. Today, photographs of the more than 300 victims, including those of smiling girls outfitted in the ornate hair ribbons traditional on the first day of classes, line the walls of a makeshift memorial.

The Beslan siege was Russia's most heart-rending episode of carnage during the last two decades. But it was by no means unique. Two years earlier, gunmen interrupted a play at a Moscow theater and took the entire audience hostage; 170 people died when security forces attempted a rescue. A series of suicide bombings in and around Moscow killed dozens in 2003 and 2004. In the days before Beslan, suicide terrorists brought down two Russian passenger airplanes. In November 2009, a bomb derailed the Nevsky Express, the high-speed train connecting Moscow and St. Petersburg, killing nearly 30 passengers. (Another bomb had derailed the same train in August 2007, although no one was killed.) And then, this past March, a pair of female suicide bombers blew themselves up in the Moscow metro during morning rush hour, killing nearly 40 people.

Even this grim tally is incomplete; it does not include the much higher level of violence that regularly occurs in the North Caucasus itself. The Russian government seems to have few creative ideas about how to deal with the turmoil in the region, which has become the epicenter of routine political violence in the country. It has tried to will the conflict into a sort of resolution, with little result. In April 2009, the Kremlin announced the end of the second Chechen war--or, in official parlance, the decadelong "counterterrorist operation"--thereby setting the stage for the withdrawal of the thousands of federal troops that had been dispatched to the republic. The following summer, however, the North Caucasus--where Chechnya is but one of seven multiethnic republics--experienced an upsurge in violence. A wave of assassinations, bombings, and suicide terrorist attacks spread well beyond the old war zone into the neighboring republics of Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria.

Federal and local officials frequently trumpet the capture and killing of the planners of these attacks. Shamil Basayev, the architect of the Beslan siege, was killed in 2006; Said Buryatsky, the alleged mastermind of the 2009 train bombing and trainer of the two female bombers who struck Moscow, was killed in Ingushetia just three weeks before the subway attack. But Russian officials also admit that the situation is getting worse. Earlier this year, Russian Interior Ministry officials announced that "terrorist crime" in the North Caucasus was up by 60 percent in 2009 compared to 2008. The chief prosecutor's office for the North Caucasus region noted last fall that 80 percent of all terrorist incidents in Russia take place in this one small slice of land.

Moscow has attempted to secure order by adding intelligence agents and beefing up the presence of federal border guards, along with redeploying police from elsewhere in Russia--but to little avail. In October 2009, President Dmitry Medvedev told Russia's Security Council that the North Caucasus remains the country's foremost internal political problem.

Confronting the threats to internal security that bubble up from the southern frontier--both real and perceived--has been a constant in Russian history and culture. "Cossack! Do not sleep," Aleksandr Pushkin wrote in the 1820s. "In the gloomy dark, the Chechen roams beyond the river." But today, unlike in Pushkin's time, the intrigues and conflicts of the North Caucasus do not stay contained in a remote and restive borderland. They affect the Russian heartland itself.

As the violence has spread, Moscow has responded by relying on the playbook of imperial Russia, buying off provincial officials and deploying the state's substantial repressive apparatus to sweep up suspected subversives. But the success of such a strategy depends on the good faith of local elites and the weakness of their rivals. It merely buys Moscow time without fixing the underlying problems of economic development and governance. Medvedev is encountering the same dilemma that has confronted past Russian rulers: What happens when payoffs and raw power are no longer enough to stop those who seek to break the bargain with the center?

Particularly after Vladimir Putin became president, in 2000, the Russian government began burnishing its image as the redoubtable guardian of order. The smoldering politics of the North Caucasus--and the seepage of violence north of the Terek and Kuban rivers, which form a natural and symbolic barrier between central Russia and its southern republics--could tarnish this cultivated reputation, potentially eroding the government's legitimacy. If the Kremlin cannot contain the cycle of attacks and counterattacks, then Russian nationalist groups--many of which spew chauvinistic rhetoric demonizing Russia's non-Christian minorities--could gain traction in Russian politics. Such groups have already been involved in mob attacks and killings of Muslim migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia. The possibility of street violence is very real and potentially destabilizing--Muslims make up as much as 15 percent of Russia's population, with more than two million living in Moscow alone.

A new upsurge in violence within and beyond the North Caucasus would also accelerate Russia's drift away from democracy, by providing fodder for politicians who promise to avenge the victims and hammer the disorderly south. Just as Putin did during the second Chechen war, the government may invoke public safety to justify the further restriction of civil liberties and concentration of power inside the Kremlin. Both outcomes--increased nationalism and increased authoritarianism--would, in turn, hamper progress on arms control and make cooperation with the West on issues such as energy, Iran, and North Korea even more difficult.

MOUNTAINS BEYOND MOUNTAINS

ALTHOUGH THE North Caucasus is but a sliver of land in Russia's vast landmass, it is becoming the principal security problem of a state that knows how to rule but has little experience governing. Wedged between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, the region extends some 700 miles west to east and covers an area about the size of the U.S. state of Washington. The region's republics are unfamiliar to outsiders (and, indeed, to average Russians): Adygea, Karachay-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan. Its population of six to nine million--estimates vary--is divided among a variety of ethnic and linguistic groups, including ethnic Russians, who account for a significant percentage of the population in some areas. The region's indigenous nationalities profess Islam as a cultural identity, if not a religious one (with the exception of the Ossetians, who are mostly Christian). Other than Dagestan, which boasts a dozen separate nationalities and over 30 languages, the republics are named for one or more "titular nationalities" and were created in the Soviet era as the homelands of distinct peoples: the Circassians (who encompass the Adyga, the Cherkess, and the Kabardians) and the Turkic-speaking Karachays and Balkars inhabit the three westernmost republics; the Ossetians inhabit North Ossetia; and the Ingush and the Chechens, Ingushetia and Chechnya, respectively.

Russia's complicated relationship with this multiethnic mosaic has involved a long history of border wars and imperial expansion. The indigenous peoples of the southern plains and the Caucasian foothills were in sustained contact with the grand princes of Muscovy--the predecessors of the Russian tsars--from at least as far back as the sixteenth century. Ivan the Terrible married a princess of Kabardia, a native of the hills and flatlands along the Terek River, in order to cement trade relations with the region and an alliance against nomadic raiders.

In the nineteenth century, Russia's relations with the Caucasus were defined by the explicit aim of empire building. The goal was to control the slopes of the Caucasus Mountains at the expense of the rival Ottoman and Persian empires. From 1801 to 1829, Russia replaced local monarchs and notables with a system of protectorates and provinces in the southern Caucasus, in modern-day Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. This phase of imperial conquest was relatively straightforward: with well-established political elites already in place (an ancient royal house in Georgia, for example, and a network of Muslim khans in Azerbaijan), Russia's strategy did not require the wholesale remaking of political structures but rather involved simply flipping the allegiances of individual powerbrokers.

The story was different, however, north of the mountains, where the tsars faced two core problems. First, rugged geography and extreme cultural diversity made it impossible to create overarching political institutions. Native princes or chieftains could make exaggerated claims about their hereditary lands, but in practice their rule extended over little more than whatever valley or village they could credibly secure. Second, the absence of broadly legitimate political leaders meant that there was always space for local upstarts to seek their own advantage. As a result, slave-taking, livestock raids, long-running clan feuds, and assassinations were all common.

Moscow's response to these twin problems was initially a strategy of unite and rule--pick a set of native elites, empower them with political authority, and hope that they could deliver a quiescent countryside. This approach proved difficult in practice--as challengers moved against these appointed rulers, the tsarist military was inevitably drawn into a series of civil wars. In the most famous case, the highland leader Shamil emerged from obscurity in the 1830s and, until his surrender in 1859, attacked pro-Russian rulers in Chechnya and Dagestan. With thousands of armed Muslim supporters, Shamil led the longest anti-imperial uprising in Russian history and inspired grudging respect among generations of Russian field commanders, becoming a Eurasian version of Geronimo or Sitting Bull. But Russia was a secondary enemy. Shamil's true concern was defeating the corrupt and impious Caucasian leaders whom he believed had betrayed both Islam and the interests of highland villagers by siding with the tsar. In fact, when Shamil ultimately surrendered, it was easier for him to make peace with the Russian imperialists than with his old Muslim neighbors. He took up a gilded captivity in central Russia as something of an exotic celebrity, carted around to mark the openings of sugar refineries and public buildings.

Although the North Caucasus was nominally pacified in the mid-1860s, when the last resistance among the Circassians was suppressed, the prospect remained of trouble rising from the mountains and spreading throughout Russia. In the 1920s, Bolshevik security forces launched campaigns of arrests and ethnic cleansing to eradicate "bandits" in Chechnya and other parts of the upland Caucasus who were said to resist Soviet authority. In 1943 and 1944, Stalin deported nearly half a million people from the North Caucasus--Balkars, Chechens, Ingush, and Karachays--to Central Asia, for allegedly assisting the Nazis during World War II. There is little evidence that these ethnic groups collaborated with the Germans any more than did others in the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the accusations fit the timeless narrative of the disloyalty of Caucasian highlanders. The forced expulsions also produced what

would become one of the region's epic stories of oppression under Russian rule, with generations of Chechens and others eulogizing their exile as a national tragedy.

After Stalin's death, in 1953, many of the deportees were allowed to return to their homelands, but the Soviet government's past misdeeds proved to have unanticipated consequences. Jokhar Dudayev, who led the rebels in the first Chechen war, in the mid-1990s, was born just as his parents and neighbors were being crammed into cattle cars for their exile to Kazakhstan. His political motivations were largely shaped by this experience of deportation and return, as were those of other leaders from the Caucasus in his generation. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Dudayev emerged as the head of a group calling for Chechnya's independence from Russia. The result was similar to the political movements that had taken hold in the Baltic states and Ukraine prior to their independence: a secessionist cause infused with the narrative of historical oppression.

The first Chechen war was not about the Chechens suddenly deciding to rise up and slaughter their Russian neighbors because of ancient grievances. Instead, violence erupted in 1994 because then Russian President Boris Yeltsin, however justifiably, moved to prevent Chechen secession with military force. The results were ghastly. Indiscriminate Russian bombing exacted a heavy human toll, and ill-prepared Russian conscripts were mowed down as they tried to take Grozny, the Chechen capital. After nearly two years, Yeltsin negotiated a cease-fire, which gave Chechnya nominal autonomy but deferred a decision on its final status.

Three years of chaos followed. Dudayev was killed by a Russian missile, and local profiteers sought to steal whatever state resources remained. Islamist fighters, some indigenous to the Caucasus and others from the Arab world, looked to a religious revival--and not to the nationalism of the Dudayev era--as a way of attracting recruits and redefining the struggle. In 1999, Basayev, the Beslan mastermind and at the time one of these younger, more Islamist-inspired field commanders, launched a raid into neighboring Dagestan. His aim was to foment a rebellion against local authorities loyal to Moscow.

In response, Putin, who was then prime minister, launched a second war in Chechnya--this time, however, with a larger and better-trained force. Just as the motives of the Chechen fighters had changed, so, too, had the Kremlin's. Putin was concerned not with preventing secession but with stamping out terrorism, much of which was directed against local politicians and security personnel who were allied with Moscow. By 2009, when the conflict was winding to a close, it was the Chechens who were doing most of the killing and dying. Some were dressed in the green headbands of Islamist rebels, whereas others wore the uniforms of Russian security services. Still more served in the personal militia of Ramzan Kadyrov, the local strongman picked by Moscow to be Chechnya's president.

In the end, Russia's conquest of the Caucasus has been the story of a modern state being pulled into a succession of local struggles as much as it has been an epic tale of an empire driven by notions of manifest destiny. The age-old imperial bargain--with the center buying off the periphery in exchange for loyalty and calm--could hold only until a new group, intent on breaking that bargain, arrived on the scene. In turn, the fragility of this gambit made for deep Russian apprehension about the North Caucasus. Today, when Russian news reports carry stories of crimes committed by *litsa kavkazskoi natsional'nosti*--the standard Russian phrase for "persons of Caucasian nationality"--the subtext is clear. The North Caucasus may be part of Russia by dint of history, but the peoples of the highlands are seen as inherently unreliable, congenitally fanatical in their religious beliefs, and culturally predisposed to discord.

THE INTERNAL ABROAD

IN SEEKING to confine terrorist violence to the North Caucasus, the Kremlin is calculating that failing to calm the region will be of minimal political consequence so long as most Russians are not touched by its havoc. Moscow's current strategy, then, is defined by little more than turning over affairs to local satraps and hoping that Russian voters forget about the Caucasus.

Beginning with the second Chechen war and continuing to the present, this approach has involved what has come to be known as "Chechenization," although it has analogous variants in other ethnic republics. In Chechnya, at the same time the Kremlin was pursuing military operations against insurgents, it was ceding much of the responsibility for restoring order to local officials, who were entrusted with finishing off the insurgency. These local rulers were also told to reduce unemployment and quash corruption, which Medvedev, in particular, has identified as the chief sources of the instability.

This approach has several flaws. Devolution only works if those to whom Moscow delegates power use it in ways that increase public confidence. Kadyrov, the Chechen president, has overseen a massive reconstruction effort that has revived the local economy and restored a semblance of normalcy to his war-battered republic. But the Kadyrov regime's record of arbitrary arrests, kidnappings, torture, extrajudicial killings, and destruction or confiscation of property belonging to suspected guerrillas or their relatives has created a climate of fear. Human rights workers and journalists in the republic also face constant threats and harassment. Although there is no proof directly tying Kadyrov to the crimes, three prominent critics of his methods--the celebrated journalist Anna Politkovskaya, the human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov, and Natalya Estemirova, who was the head of the Russian human rights organization Memorial in Chechnya--were assassinated between 2006 and 2009.

Since Kadyrov and his counterparts in the other republics are seen as Moscow's handpicked leaders, the Kremlin cannot shield itself from the resentment created by their lawless conduct. When they turn out to have neither competence nor legitimacy--and are crooked to boot--the federal government has little choice but to fire them. This creates even more instability. Kadyrov has managed to hang on through a combination of brutal rule and massive economic blandishments provided by Moscow--both of which have reduced security threats and bought local support. But in other republics, the changing of the guard has invariably been accompanied by violence, as local cliques and networks seek to exploit the vacuum. In Kabardino-Balkaria, the harsh and corrupt administration of President Valery Kokov yielded to that of a more liberal successor, Arsen Kanokov. But within several months of Kanokov's taking office, the republic experienced the greatest demonstration of violence it had ever seen: an October 2005 raid by armed insurgents on police and security posts in the capital, Nalchik. In Ingushetia, corruption and police brutality convinced Moscow to replace the republic's previous president, Murat Zyazikov, with the younger and more popular Yunus-Bek Yevkurov in October 2008. But rather than paving the way for good government and peace, this leadership change saw Ingushetia descend into a maelstrom of riots, car bombings, and assassinations.

Another drawback to relying on tough local leaders is that they tend to monopolize power--Chechnya's Kadyrov is an extreme example--and construct personalized polities that rest on their political or physical longevity. When Moscow, dissatisfied with their performance, moves to replace these leaders, their successors essentially have to start from scratch, cutting labyrinthine deals with powerful clans and political cliques. Given how strong and influential these opaque networks can be, it can be difficult for a newly installed leader to grasp how to govern. Ruslan Aushev, president of Ingushetia from 1993 to 2001, used his position in the republic to garner wide local support. But his public standing and independent power base made Moscow nervous; the Kremlin eased him out of office and installed the hard-line Zyazikov--resulting in a rotation of cadres that proved wildly unpopular among the Ingush.

Strongmen also inevitably end up as prized targets for assassins. In 2004, a bomb killed Ramzan Kadyrov's father, Akhmad, a former warlord who had become Chechnya's pro-Russian president and thus the insurgents' sworn enemy. At least one attempt has been made on Ramzan's life, too. Ingushetia's new president, Yevkurov, barely survived a suicide bombing in June 2009, less than a year after taking office.

Chechenization--and its equivalents in Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and elsewhere--suffers from a problem common to all empires. The center seeks to entrust power to those who hail from the peripheries; after all, these people know the lay of the land, both literally and culturally. Yet their strong ties to localities give them the power to pursue their own priorities, which may not always comport with those of the center. The Kremlin has ceded considerable leeway to Kadyrov, largely tolerating--at times even encouraging--his habits of intimidation and violence because he has weakened the insurgency and presided over the partial rebuilding of Grozny. But there are persistent worries in Moscow that he has built his own state within a state--offering a model for how savvy Chechens, Circassians, and others might one day gain the kind of de facto autonomy, perhaps even independence, that previous generations failed to win. These suspicions have only heightened since March, when Kadyrov called on Moscow to stop sending police officers to Chechnya from elsewhere in Russia and instead leave local security to Chechen forces.

Moscow is understandably concerned about losing control over the local leaders it has empowered, which explains why it has oscillated between devolution and halfhearted attempts at recentralization. In early 2010, Medvedev focused special attention on the North Caucasus by creating a new North Caucasus Federal District with jurisdiction over the region. He installed Aleksandr Khloponin, a businessman and former governor who is considered an effective and tough administrator, as its head. Part of Khloponin's daunting brief is to keep local leaders loyal. But his new assignment--part prefect, part proconsul, part chief enforcer--essentially re-creates an old imperial post that disappeared with the advent of the Bolsheviks: viceroy of the Caucasus.

The creation of the new federal district also underscores the tension between the core and the periphery and local leaders' resentment of the Kremlin's long reach. A case in point is Moscow's decision to replace many local police officers in Ingushetia following a 2009 bombing in the republic's largest city and former capital, Nazran; the Kremlin also extended supervisory power in the republic to the federal Interior Ministry. These moves exacerbated the animosity between federal and regional law enforcement officials and irritated Caucasian leaders, who want to show that they can manage their own affairs--even if they cannot.

Russia's leaders in the North Caucasus have ample means and motives to conceal entrenched problems, especially those of their own making. One of these is corruption. Moscow recognizes that it must curb graft as part of any long-term solution to instability in the North Caucasus. Government employees on the take--from high-level republican officials to traffic cops--nourish organized crime and spark violent reprisals. Many Russian leaders claim that "Wahhabis"--the state's catchall term for Islamist fighters and Muslim preachers from the Middle East--are behind the upheaval in the North Caucasus, a claim echoed by local elites. But Medvedev recognizes that corruption, unemployment, and poverty (the region leads Russia in the last two categories) will continue to produce unrest. Attempts to root out "terrorists" or "fighters"--two labels Russian officials often use for those perpetrating violence in the region--will produce few long-term gains if the sources of social instability remain intact.

The central government already lavishes subsidies on the North Caucasus republics. Some 60 to 80 percent of their budgets depend on money from Moscow. The state has provided several billion dollars in additional funds to spur economic development. But central officials have long

known that local leaders and their cronies systematically steal federal aid. The result is that the government in Moscow--no longer flush with cash after the fall in oil prices--is left with plenty of sunk costs but without any new ideas.

SINGLE-FACTOR FALLACY

EXPLANATIONS FOR the upheaval and violence in the North Caucasus tend to seize on a single root cause. The rise of radical Islam is often cited first. Islam has certainly reemerged as a powerful source of identity in the North Caucasus over the last 20 years, with the continuum of devotion running from young people studying the Koran and participating in a peaceful religious revival to armed rebels who have "gone to the forest"--the local euphemism for joining an antigovernment militant group. The North Caucasus has been opened to the Muslim world through travel, ties to diaspora communities in the Middle East and the West, and the Internet. These connections have reshaped the worldviews of younger Chechens, Circassians, Dagestanis, and Ingush by reducing their sense of isolation and increasing their ambitions and their awareness of their government's failings. Preachers and fighters from abroad have helped further the growth of Islamic religiosity and the radicalization of some parts of the population; in some cases, foreign proselytizers have encouraged suicide attacks as a measure of piety. The Riyad-us Saliheen (Gardens of the Righteous) Martyrs Brigade--formerly commanded by Basayev--claimed responsibility for the derailing of the Nevsky Express, as it had for another operation two years earlier. Similarly, the jamaats, or Islamic cells, that operate across the region see themselves as part of a movement aimed at creating an ill-defined and Utopian "emirate."

But Moscow's rhetoric of simply reducing the turbulence of the North Caucasus to the actions of "Wahhabis," "terrorists," and their foreign collaborators is wrong-headed. For centuries, the Islam of the North Caucasus has been syncretic, mixing elements of Christianity and folk religion based on various mystical Sufi traditions, which means that many hard-line Muslim clerics condemn it as apostasy. A mosque in the North Caucasus is less likely to be filled with militants seething with hatred than with young men dressed in knock-off Dolce and Gabbana clothing looking for a measure of spiritual relief from their unhappy personal lives and bleak job prospects. Yet when some of these men travel to Turkey for work or to Egypt for education and then return home, they are frequently targeted by ruthless local police and heavy-handed Federal Security Service bureaucrats who assume that they have imbibed Wahhabism while abroad. More than a few such men have joined Islamist groups as a consequence; still others are drawn into the insurgency by the desire to avenge family members tortured or killed by individuals wearing the badges and uniforms of the Russian state. Some women have followed similar paths: one of the suicide bombers who attacked the Moscow subway in March was a 17-year-old woman from Dagestan who reportedly joined a terrorist cell to avenge the killing of her husband by Russian security forces.

Reducing the problems of the North Caucasus to that other common villain, nationalism, is just as simple-minded. Highland cultures are almost universally prideful, clannish, and hospitable--as well as suspicious. National identity was overlaid on these traits during the Soviet era. Nationalism among the Chechens and the Circassians, in particular, is more a product of Soviet social engineering--particularly the formation of national republics staffed by local cadres--than it is a reflection of immutable ancient ways and martial traditions. Of course, both groups have a long history of accumulated grievances against Russia. In the 1860s, the tsarist government--in a deliberate policy of depopulating a rebellious enclave--exiled as many as 400,000 Circassians, mainly to the Ottoman Empire, in overcrowded vessels, causing thousands to die en route.

But ultimately, nationalism, much like Islam, is a weak predictor of mobilization and violence in the North Caucasus. The Ingush have long been considered the pious, scholarly cousins of the more rambunctious Chechens, thought of as lacking ideological and nationalist fervor. But today, Ingushetia is the region's most dangerous republic. Even ethnic groups that have similar narratives of national grievance reacted differently to the collapse of the Soviet state: the Circassians remained largely quiescent, whereas the Chechens took up arms and sought independence. And although Circassian nationalism has grown in recent years, its objective is not secession, nor does it rely on violence. Instead, it is nourished by the legacy of alleged genocide stemming from Russian conquest that local Circassians and a much larger diaspora believe has been intentionally forgotten. Circassian nationalists hope to attract wide attention during the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, a port city on the Black Sea that was the scene of one of the final battles during the tsarist conquest of Circassian territory.

The idea that resistance to military occupation is the sole explanation for the suicide attacks is equally problematic. There were virtually no suicide attacks at the time when Chechnya was most clearly occupied by Russian forces--during the 1994-96 war--whereas suicide terrorism spiked just as the Russian state moved to devolve responsibility for counterinsurgency operations to local Chechens themselves. And when suicide bombers do strike, they tend to target local authorities who share their ethnic background and not Russian officials dispatched by Moscow. Moreover, suicide attacks have also been carried out by non-Chechens in other republics in the North Caucasus that have not seen an influx of Russian soldiers--indeed, two suicide bombings occurred in Dagestan two days after the March subway attacks.

REATTACHMENT SURGERY

THE PIVOTAL question for the North Caucasus is its place within the Russian Federation. So long as the Russian state relies on proxies, proconsuls, and raw power to ensure order, the region will revert to what it was in the tsarist era--a troublesome, exotic appendage. Today, for anyone traveling across the region, it is possible to forget that one is inside Russia--at least until one encounters the ubiquitous security checkpoints that make even driving from one republic to another something like crossing into another country. But it matters little if outsiders see the North Caucasus as a place apart from Russia; what matters is that Russians do, as well. As Aleksey Malashenko, a leading Russian specialist on the region, has observed, a common Moscow moniker for the North Caucasus is "the internal abroad."

This perception cuts both ways. Although many of the political elites whom Moscow has empowered in the North Caucasus have made their fortunes within Russia, many ordinary citizens in the region increasingly look abroad--from Amman to Cairo, from Istanbul to New Jersey--for models of success. The future of the North Caucasus hinges on whether it can gain an equal place within the Russian polity--which itself, of course, remains a work in progress. If Moscow continues to focus its energies on insulating the rest of Russia from the ills of the North Caucasus, then an increasing number of the region's inhabitants will wonder whether Russians can be anything other than distant, irrelevant overlords.

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