

Russia Made Great Again

**The Chechen Wars and the North Caucasian Conflict as
Foundation of New Russian Grand Power Politics**

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Curti Covi

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Erstgutachter/in: Prof. Dr. Joachim Krause

Zweitgutachter/in: PD. Dr. habil. Jan Asmussen

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Abstract

The paramount goal of this research project is the evaluation of the significance of the recovery of Chechnya and the North Caucasus by the Russian Federation for its present and new-found grand power politics. The research hypothesis assumes that for Russia to gain back at least some of the global role and the power held by the late Soviet Union it has been essential to stabilize its internal situation first – economically, but more than that, politically. After the threatened secession of Tatarstan had been averted by Boris Yeltsin in 1994, only small and defiant Chechnya remained de facto outside the power and law of the Russian Federation. Being part of the fragile, ethnically heterogenous and sometimes religiously defiant predominantly Muslim North Caucasus, the loss of Chechnya could have triggered further secessions and in the end threatened even the very foundation of the Russian Federation – at least this has always been the Kremlin's view, as publicly testified by Russian leaders.

At the very least however, the Russian Federation could not aspire to even win back some of the power and influence at a global scale held by the late Soviet Union without being able before to subjugate tiny but rebellious Chechnya. Thus, the research hypothesis further states that the satisfactory outcome of the North Caucasian conflict between 1994 and 2013 has been the necessary foundation for the revival of grand power politics the Kremlin has been exercising since. These questions will be approached theoretically through the realist lens of Halford Mackinder's geopolitical theory and its present declination represented by Alexander Dugin's Eurasianist theory. Thus, this project will result in a study located in the field between the poles of political science and history. Byproducts of this work will result in the analysis of the interaction between Russian policy towards ethnic and religious minorities and the religious - that is Islamic - radicalization inside and outside Russia as well as the history of the genesis of the Islamic movement in the North Caucasus and its associated insurgency.

The outcome is intended to serve as a reference to assess past and present circumstances concerning the ongoing conflict in the North Caucasian region. The resulting study is also intended to represent a valuable addition to research on Islamic and jihadi movements. It shall contribute to broadening the research horizon to a more differentiated approach to this topic, which presently overemphasizes transnational terrorism through the Western-sided lens of the Global War on Terror, a fact which is misleading experts as well as public opinion, thus contributing to an undifferentiated view on radical Islam. In macro-historical terms, however, aside from the answers to the research questions will emerge, but the nature of today's Russia as well, since its soul is inextricably tied to events and the struggle in the North Caucasus – since centuries. One thing however is for sure: Being still entrenched by its own nature in the hyper-realist view of geopolitics, Russia has been employing both covert and open violent means to achieve its goals – and it will continue to do so. This is a very important outcome of this research work which should be made very clear to every Western decision-maker.

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I. Introduction: Geopolitics, *Rusky Mir* and the North Caucasus

Who rules the world island rules the world.

Sir Arthur Halford Mackinder

Very few people believed what was going to happen in the night of February 24, 2022. Amongst artillery barrages, missile and aerial attacks, the Russian army invaded Ukraine along the whole frontier. What at first glance seemed to be an unforgiving, precisely conceived decapitation attack, totally faltered in the course of one week. It literally bogged down in the quagmire of Ukrainian plains, swamps, relentless resistance and clever use of modern weaponry. One year later – although the outcome of this war is still and undeniably open – Russian grandeur seems all but lost in the face of enormous casualties in terms of manpower, equipment but especially reputation. Russia lost its face looking into the mirror of its new grand power politics. Until February 2022, an undeniable resurgence of Russian grand-power politics – intended as an organic continuation of the Tsarist and later Soviet legacy – unseen since the dissolution of the Soviet Union had been verifiable for a long time. The Russian presence in Syria, and its decisive contribution to the ongoing military campaign of the Syrian regime had been turning the tide in the Syrian Civil War. Moreover, Russian influence in the Middle East and beyond had been rising on a steady pace, to the extent that it has been recognized by many actors in the area as the decisive power broker in Syria and beyond. The effective means, as well as the ruthlessness of the Russian intervention has been surprising many observers, the majority of which had not even betted on this outcome of the Syrian Civil War, even more so that the intervention in Syria has been the first Russian military intervention outside the territory of the former Soviet Union since the Afghanistan War in the 1980s. The intervention in Syria however came not out of the blue: the annexation of Crimea, the fomentation of rebellions in the Ukraine and Georgia, its covert involvement in those conflicts and finally, going back in time, the war against Georgia in 2008 are the most visible steps of what now, in hindsight, can be seen as a gradual escalation of grand-power politics. Armed intervention has been since coupled with non-military means of covert, psychological and cyber warfare which came to be known as “hybrid warfare” to ensure a high degree of deniability and thus wage limited aggression without having to fear serious repercussions, managing at the same time to keep the new enemy, the NATO and West, off balance.

To understand the Russian point of view however we have to go back in time. The very geographical nature of Russia has been shaping the policies of its leaders over the centuries. The wide open plain on which Russia mainly develops has always been easy to force by

invaders – to conquer it entirely, however, has proved hardly possible thanks to its gigantic extension. Because of this, Russian and Soviet policy has always showed an extremely realist policy approach – hard power and geopolitical facts mattered, not lofty philosophy. Therefore, the first assumption made here is that the best theoretical approach to “read” the resurgence of Russian grand-power politics is the geopolitical theory as taught by Halford Mackinder and Nicholas J. Spykman at the time of the Great Game and during the Cold War respectively. Geopolitics was one of the major reading tools in the effort to contain the Soviet Union in those days. Ironically, today it has been adopted and adapted to the Russian point of view by leading forethinkers and policy influencers in Russia. Departing from this first assumption, the second assumption states that to gain back the status of world power, it was first and foremost imperative to get back rebellious Chechnya, which had seceded from the Russian Federation in the aftermath of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. When this failed in the course of the first Chechen War, the Russian Federation met its lowest point, militarily and economically. It was then time for a power reshuffle, bringing to power a restaurator in the person of Vladimir Putin. To fulfill what over time became a historical task, the recovery of Chechnya and the pacification of the soft underbelly of the Russian Federation – the predominantly Muslim North Caucasus – became imperative to back up the aspirations to get back to a super-power status. In other words, only through a reasonably victorious war in the North Caucasus the Kremlin could hope to get back where it had been in Soviet times.

Geopolitics has been an integral part of Russia's foreign policy and national identity for centuries. The country's vast size and strategic location have made it a critical player in global affairs, and Russian policymakers have long sought to understand how geography shapes international relations. The influence of geopolitical theories, such as those proposed by Halford Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman, can be seen in the work of Russian thinkers and officials, including Alexander Dugin. At the same time, the concept of *russky mir*, or the Russian world, has also played a crucial role in shaping Russia's perception of geopolitics.¹

Halford Mackinder's Heartland Theory, first proposed in 1904, argued that the control of the vast Eurasian landmass, known as the Heartland, would lead to global domination. Mackinder described the Heartland as a region stretching from the Volga to the Yangtze rivers, which includes many of the territories that now make up Russia. The theory suggested that whoever controlled the Heartland could control the world, and it resonated deeply with many Russian policymakers, who saw their country's strategic location as an asset that could be used to exert influence on the world stage.²

Nicholas Spykman's Rimland Theory, which he proposed in the 1940s, challenged Mackinder's Heartland Theory by arguing that controlling the regions surrounding the Heartland was the key to global dominance. The Rimland includes many of the regions that surround the Heartland, such as the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia.

¹ See Bassin, Mark, and Konstantin E. Aksenov. “Mackinder and the Heartland Theory in Post-Soviet Geopolitical Discourse.” *Geopolitics*, vol. 11, no. 1, Mar. 2006, pp. 99–118

² See Mackinder, Halford John. *The Geographical Pivot of History*. United States, Cosimo Classics, 2020.

Spykman's theory suggested that whoever controlled the Rimland would have access to both the Heartland's resources and the world's oceans, giving them an unbeatable advantage in global affairs.³

Mackinder's Heartland Theory as well as Spykman's Rimland Theory have had a significant impact on Russian geopolitical thinking. Russian policymakers have sought to expand their influence in the regions surrounding the Heartland, which they see as crucial to their national security and strategic interests. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, for example, is often seen as an attempt to expand its influence in the Black Sea region, which is part of the Rimland. Alexander Dugin, a Russian political theorist, has been one of the most prominent voices in modern Russian geopolitical thinking. Dugin's ideas are deeply influenced by the works of Mackinder and Spykman, and he has sought to apply their theories to Russia's current geopolitical situation. Dugin argues that Russia has a unique geopolitical destiny, which is to create a Eurasian empire that will unite Europe and Asia under Russian leadership. Dugin's theory is based on the idea that Russia's destiny is to create a new geopolitical order that will challenge the dominance of the West. He argues that Russia's location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, combined with its vast natural resources, make it the natural leader of a new Eurasian empire. This empire would be based on traditional values and would provide an alternative to the liberal, democratic order that currently dominates the world.⁴

Dugin's ideas have been influential in shaping Russian foreign policy, and they have been embraced by many Russian officials and policymakers. For example, Russian President Vladimir Putin has expressed support for Dugin's ideas, and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 is often seen as an example of Russia's efforts to create a new Eurasian empire. Dugin's theories have also been used to justify Russia's involvement in conflicts such as the Syrian Civil War, which Russian officials have framed as part of a larger struggle for control over the Rimland. At the same time, the concept of *russky mir*, or the Russian world, has also played a significant role in shaping Russia's perception of geopolitics. The concept of *russky mir*, or the Russian world, is based on the idea that there is a unique cultural and historical identity that unites Russians and other peoples of the former Soviet Union. It is an important part of Russia's national identity and has been used to justify Russia's involvement in conflicts in the region, such as the 2008 war with Georgia and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.⁵

The official Russian understanding of a multipolar world order sees the Russian world as one of the leading global poles. The concept of a multipolar world order suggests that power is distributed among several major powers, rather than being dominated by a single superpower. Russia has been a strong advocate for a multipolar world order, arguing that it would be more stable and equitable than a unipolar world dominated by the United States. While the concept

³ See Spykman, Nicholas J.. *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power*. United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2017, p. 42 ff.

⁴ Shekhovtsov, Anton. *Alexander Dugin and the West European New Right, 1989-1994*, in *Eurasianism and the European Far Right: Reshaping the Europe–Russia Relationship*. (2015). UK: Lexington Books. P. 35

⁵ Clover, Charles. *Black Wind, White Snow: Russia's New Nationalism*. United States, Yale University Press, p. 255f.

of the Russian world emphasizes cultural and historical ties between Russia and other former Soviet republics, the idea of a multipolar world order is based on power dynamics and global politics. The Russian government has sought to strengthen its position as a major power in the world, and a multipolar world order would give it greater influence and more opportunities to advance its interests.⁶

However, the idea of the Russian world and the concept of a multipolar world order are not mutually exclusive. In fact, Russia has used the idea of the Russian world to strengthen its position in the region and to promote the idea of a multipolar world order. By emphasizing the cultural and historical ties between Russia and other former Soviet republics, Russia has sought to build alliances and partnerships that can help it counterbalance the influence of the United States and other Western powers. In recent years, Russia has also sought to promote the idea of a multipolar world order through international organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the collaboration with emerging economies. These organizations are seen as a way for Russia to build partnerships with other major powers and to promote a more equitable distribution of power in global affairs.⁷

1. Eurasianism

According to the Eurasianist theory, Russia should acquire mostly through non-violent, but subversive means much of the rimland in order to counterbalance US power on a global level. Ironically, in so doing, Mackinder and Spykman, who were advocates of containment of Russia and the Soviet Union, have been put to use to achieve exactly the opposite goal. Since the beginning of the 1990s, Dugin has been gaining steadily influence in the upper levels of the military and seemingly also of certain sectors of the Kremlin. Vladimir Putin has been publicly embracing the idea of *Eurasianism* – however it is still not clear if this is the official label of the new-found Russian grand power politics.⁸ However it may be the direction of the Kremlin's foreign policy shows surprising resemblance to Dugin's dictum. Russia is not content anymore with playing the second fiddle, since the rise of Vladimir Putin, there has been a steady recovery of strength by the Russian state, internally and externally. Russia today is again able to project power beyond its borders. Lately Russia has been becoming the most important power broker in the Syrian crisis, smartly outmaneuvering the admittedly scarcely incisive US policy for the region. By assisting the crumbling Assad regime and cooperating with Iran and its transnational Shiite network, Russia managed to conserve and build up its influence towards its old ally in Syria. By smartly playing on different tables, it managed also to profit from the current process of estrangement between the West and Turkey, courting Ankara in a difficult moment for its president Recep Tayip Erdogan and at the same time shielding and the Syrian Kurds from Ankara's wrath while winking the Kurds, just in case they would divorce from its current US sponsor. Recent contacts and deals with

⁶ Salzman, Rachel S.. Russia, BRICS, and the Disruption of Global Order. United States, Georgetown University Press, 2019.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Interestingly, also Alexander Dugin himself is measuring Putin's politics against his own standards, see Dugin, Alexander. Putin Vs Putin: Vladimir Putin Viewed from the Right. United Kingdom, Arktos, 2015.

the Sunni regional power, Saudi Arabia, may suggest that the Kremlin tries to profit either way in what has become an increasingly real Sunni-Shia regional conflict. King Salman's – first ever - visit to Moscow in a moment where US policy in the Middle East looks increasingly blurred, adds another piece of confirmation to the puzzle.⁹

Going back to its own backyard, Russia managed to successfully contain NATO in Georgia during the war in 2008, giving Georgia a lesson from which it still did not recover. Ukraine's approach towards the EU after the Maidan revolution in 2014 has been contained and punished as well by Moscow. The annexation of Crimea and the support for Ukrainian pro-Moscow loyalists in a creeping war that is largely sponsored and instigated by the Kremlin is designed to keep Ukraine off-balance. In any case, Russia is fully playing the Eurasian card in a very skillful way. All of this would have been unimaginable just a few years ago, when Russia was in shambles, coming from the dissolution of the Soviet Union, coupled with all accompanying expressions of decay and ruin. Before exerting external power, Russia had indeed to fight its inner demons. In the post-Soviet years these were varied: economic crisis, widespread unemployment, rampant corruption and a marked demographic decline painted an increasingly bleak picture for Russia's future. Most worrisome to the security establishment, traditionally one of the pillars of power in Russia, were however separatist tendencies among some of its constituencies. While Boris Yeltsin managed to discourage the Tatars from separatist intents through the concession of a wide-ranging autonomy, troubles in the North Caucasus, traditionally the soft underbelly of Russia, got real.¹⁰

Particularly Chechnya has always been a hotspot in this for Moscow unruly region. Chechnya split off from the Russian Federation in the context of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. After lengthy and failed negotiations, Boris Yeltsin ordered an assault on Chechnya, which two and a half years later brought the defeat of the Russian army, worn out by its own shortcomings and skilled Chechen guerilla warfare tactics. Even if the reception in the West has not been the same, this was the low point of the recent Russian history, marking also Yeltsin's downfall. Yeltsin's departure was not immediate, however, as the transition had to be smooth and well thought out. Finally, an obscure functionary named Vladimir Putin had been found to ascend to Yeltsin's succession. Putin had spent most of his life working in the KGB and in the FSB, becoming its director. The years since the loss of Chechnya had been busy for the Russian power agencies, preparing its recovery to the Russian Federation. The chaos and infighting among Chechen factions and the rise of radical Islamist groups in the wake of the independency was further funneled by Russian covert actions and provided fertile ground to act soon. The final pretext for a second invasion came when a Chechen guerilla army led by the Chechen field commander Shamil Basaev and the Saudi "Che Guevara", Ibn al-Khattab attacked neighboring Dagestan to liberate it from Russian rule and erect an "Islamic Emirate".

⁹ See among others the new Publication Series edited by the Jamestown Foundation: Russia in the Middle East, <https://jamestown.org/programs/rme/about/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

¹⁰ See for example Kondrashov, S.. Nationalism and the Drive for Sovereignty in Tatarstan 1988-1992: Origins and Development. United Kingdom, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1999., p. 105

Simultaneously, a “convenient” string of terrorist attacks shook Russian cities, causing hundreds of deaths. Putin’s intransigent reaction, invading Chechnya and unleashing the Second Chechen War, fell on fertile grounds, mending the wounded Russian pride. Uncompromising and harsh conduct of the war by the Russian army and security services, coupled with a clever cooptation tactic, winning over some Chechen factions to the Russian cause, swung the fortune of war on the Russian side over time. Still, it took over ten years to truly pacify the region. In the end, the recovery of Chechnya reversed Russian political decline and marked the foundation of new-found strength. The Caucasus has always been at the heart of Russian imperial aspirations, since it is the gateway to the south, protruding like a launching pad towards the Mediterranean and the Middle East alike. At the same time, it has also always been Russia’s soft underbelly. No region had been most arduous to conquest, and no one has been more difficult to hold and maintain. The rebellious and warrior culture of the mountain people of the Caucasus has put on trial every reincarnation of the Russian state, from the old Tsars until today’s new Tsar, Vladimir Putin.¹¹

2. The North Caucasus

The Caucasus has long been a sort of land of destiny for Russia in all its incarnations. *How the North Caucasus shaped Russia*: The subtitle of a major work researching Russia’s recent conflicts in the North Caucasus written by Robert Bruce Ware and Enver Kisriev¹² beats the nail. The Caucasus and its history indeed lie at the heart of modern Russia. All great Russian poets like Pushkin, Lermontov and Tolstoi wrote about the Caucasian Wars, its horrors and the *noble savages* living there. The Great Caucasian Wars fought by the Tsars against the “savage” mountaineers in the 19th century was born out of the aspiration to become a global power, then in concurrence with Great Britain, which is why the Great Game for the control of Central Asia on the way to the Indian Ocean ensued. The Caucasus was an integral part of that game and had to be conquered on Russia’s way to the south. So, it is clear that the Caucasus has been reflecting Russian dreams of power and prestige since well before the Great Game with Great Britain in the 19th century, dating back at least to the reign of Catherine the Great.¹³

It is no case, then, that the history of conflict between Russia in its various political emanations and Islamic constituencies inside the country or in its sphere of influence dates back a long time ago. The reason for this is not difficult to discern. In its internal colonialist drive towards the east and the south, Islamic or Islamized polities were much more likely to put up fierce resistance in comparison to isolated Animist ethnicities in the Far East, because the mostly Turkic ethnicities who had embraced Islam over time in the Russian sphere of influence possessed a traditionally fierce warrior culture.¹⁴ On the other hand, the all-

¹¹ Tolstoy, Leo. Hadji Murat. United Kingdom, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012.

¹² Ware, Robert Bruce. *The Fire Below: How the Caucasus Shaped Russia*. United Kingdom, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013.

¹³ De Waal, Thomas. *The Caucasus: An Introduction*. United Kingdom, Oxford University Press, 2019., pp. 38-40

¹⁴ Khodarkovsky, Michael. “Of Christianity, Enlightenment, and Colonialism: Russia in the North Caucasus, 1550–1800.” *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 71, no. 2, June 1999, pp. 394–430

encompassing, powerful nature of Islam lent the fight against Russian colonization a much deeper ideologic entrenchment. There are more than one or two examples to support this view: Be it the fighting and submission of the Volga Tatars by Ivan the terrible; be it the wars of Catherine the Great against the Crimean Tatars and her first onslaught against the North Caucasus; be it the Great Caucasian War fought for 50 years against Circassian, Kabardian, Balkar, Chechen and Dagestani tribes; be it the bloody wars against the Central Asian Basmachi in the second half of the 1860s; be it the insurgencies experienced during soviet rule and the subsequent deportations of whole ethnicities under Stalin; and finally the ugly Chechen wars and the insurgency across the whole North Caucasus since then.¹⁵

Let's think back to Grozny in the first days of January 1995 - scores of wrecked and burnt-out Russian tanks line up on the ghostly streets of Grozny, the capital city of the then self-declared independent Chechen Republic. Pictures like these featured prominently in those days on news channels and in daily papers. President Yeltsin had ordered the invasion of the break-away Chechen republic, which had been under control of strongman Dzhokhar Dudaev since 1992. Up to September 11th, 2001, the Chechen Wars had quickly become synonym to the most brutal way of war fighting characterized by vicious fights, acts of terrorism, horrendous atrocities and human rights violations. Many authors described all of this, perhaps most prominently the Russian journalists Andrei Babitsky and Anna Politkovskaya, who managed to keep up Western attention for the problem right until 9/11. The Twin Towers attack changed the global geopolitical situation and of course also the Western perception of the Chechen war. What once used to be seen as a Chechen struggle for independence seen with more or less sympathy in Western countries, became suddenly a front on the global War on Terror, thanks to increasingly radical Islamist traits of the insurgency and opportune Russian framing. Brazen terrorist attacks in Moscow and Beslan in the following years led to broad solidarization with the Russian iron-fisted approach in the West. The conflict, however, did not simmer down; on the contrary, it evolved to an extent that transformed it – despite Russian successes in the repression of Caucasian Islamist separatism - to a dangerous cancer and a massive source of destabilization inside the Russian Federation, as well as a geopolitical factor even outside Russian borders. Caucasian *Jihadi* fighters have become a not negligible factor in today's conflict in Syria to the point that they were one side-factor for the Russian intervention in the Syrian theater.¹⁶

These are some of the reasons why the modern history of the North Caucasus cannot be discerned without considering the influence of radical Islamism on the side of the separatist and insurgent entities operating against Russia in the region. Ergo, one could say that today's

¹⁵ See Griffin, Nicholas. *Caucasus: Mountain Men and Holy Wars*. United States, St. Martin's Publishing Group, 2015. 23/2

¹⁶ See Barnard, Anne, and Eric Schmitt. "As Foreign Fighters Flood Syria, Fears of a New Extremist Haven." *The New York Times*, 9 Aug. 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/08/09/world/middleeast/as-foreign-fighters-flood-syria-fears-of-a-new-extremist-haven.html, accessed on January 18, 2023.

Russia has been shaped also, at least indirectly, by radical Islamism.¹⁷ However, the bonds between this region and the political history of Post-Soviet Russia reach even deeper. Boris Yeltsin's rule was heavily influenced by the First Chechen War, and the Second Chechen War's outbreak paved the way for Vladimir Putin to soar to power in Russia. His career is intimately connected with the events in the Caucasus since 1999. Without the war there, he probably would never have become first premier and then president of the Russian Federation. On the other side, however, the North Caucasian legacy has never stopped haunting him. Indeed, unrest and violence today persist in the region. If we consider the ongoing conflict as a part of a much bigger struggle lasting since over 200 years, it is not difficult to ascertain recurring patterns concerning the rallying and the mobilization of the mountaineers in their fight against Tsarist, Soviet and Federal rule – they came to conceive religion as a unifying bond between the various local ethnicities, which is why Islam spread ultimately across the Northern Caucasus at the end of the 18th century. The common Islamic faith of the otherwise ethnically heterogeneous people on the outskirts of the periphery of the Empire first and the Soviet Union then, was automatically identified as the main antagonist factor to colonization and assimilation and thus severely targeted by government repression.¹⁸

It is no surprise then that this tactic has been widely used until today. Since the First Chechen War, Moscow had been agitating the ghost of radical Islamism when relating to Chechnya and other separatist movements in the Northern Caucasus. There was some truth in this, but Moscow went further, labeling as religious extremists even the seculars inside the separatist wing, who were the majority before the start of the Second Chechen War. Moscow hoped thus to frame the conflict to its advantage, primarily for domestic use but also to influence the international public opinion, to justify a new invasion of Chechnya, which materialized after the incursion into Dagestan by Islamists coming from Chechnya in the summer of 1999. The heavy-handed Russian approach and the outreach of moderate separatists like Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov calling for negotiations failed to convince the public opinion outside Russia of the purported *Wahabi* threat. 9/11 changed all of that: Russia had become overnight a partner of the West in the War on Terror. Now Russia had its hands free to kill off all remaining resistance in the Caucasus without regard. Paradoxically, the biggest priority of Moscow and its local collaborationists was the capture or the killing of Maskhadov, who tried to engage in negotiations until the last hours in his life, when he was killed in March 2005. The Russian security agencies did not hesitate to use the iron fist in the Muslim republics adjacent to Chechnya, either. A mix made up of corruption, nepotism and last but not least severe repression against peaceful Salafi Jamaats provoked the spread of the conflict outside the borders of Chechnya, ultimately inflaming the whole Northern Caucasus.

¹⁷ Apart from the modalities of Vladimir Putin's rise to power, see for example Schrad, Mark Lawrence. *Vodka Politics: Alcohol, Autocracy, and the Secret History of the Russian State*. United Kingdom, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 344f.

¹⁸ Ware, Robert Bruce. *The Fire Below: How the Caucasus Shaped Russia*. United Kingdom, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013, p.97 f.

3. Hypotheses and Methodology

The primary research effort however deals with the geopolitical aspect of the North Caucasian conflict, arguing that only the successful recovery of the North Caucasus by the Russian center made Russia's new grand power politics possible. By saving the Russian state possibly from further disintegration and certainly from relegation to a secondary power through the victorious outcome of the North Caucasian conflict, Vladimir Putin truly managed to make Russia great again – or at least the perception of this fact. The road towards new imperial aspirations conversely followed a playbook originally delineated by Alexander Dugin, the gray eminence among Russian philosophers and a considered strategist in the Kremlin. The genesis of Vladimir Putin's foreign policy and great power politics will thus be measured according to Dugin's Eurasianist theory which borrows heavily from Mackinder and Spykman. By securing the foundation of internal power of the Russian state through the subjugation of the North Caucasus, Putin managed to switch to the execution of external power in the surrounding regions in Eastern Europe and the Middle East – Spykman's rimland. A combination of favorable opportunities, strategic blunders made by the West and a combination of overt and covert warfare made up by manipulation, subversion, disinformation and armed intervention – what we in the West call hybrid warfare - made Russia regain an astonishing degree of the lost influence since the collapse of the Soviet Union in a very short span of time. These questions will be answered gradually, as the present conflict will be rolled up from its origin at the end of the 18th century. This massive historical throwback to the days over 200 years ago is indispensable because of the fact that essentially unabated violence has been raging there since the first Russian forays in the region until today. A historical analysis of the Caucasian Wars of the mid-19th century under Tsarist rule which, as we will see, ignited the spread of Islam across almost the whole Northern Caucasus. In order to demonstrate a neorealist approach enmeshed in a hermeneutic perspective, it will be necessary to look back and reconstruct the circumstances that first created the groundwork for the ongoing conflict and the structures that later developed into the Caucasus Emirate of today and, more recently, into IS-affiliated structures.

The second research question will thus center on the question if Russia's Imperialist policies have been, however inadvertently, promoting the spread of Islam and of Islamism, including Salafist Jihadism inside and outside Russia. The hypothesis, which we want to prove, consists in the notion that the iron-fisted policies of the Kremlin, justified by its framing of the conflict as a counterterrorism operation against Islamic radicals contributed decisively to the development that brought the once varied separatist movement to become a truly *Salafist-Jihadist* one, culminating in the declaration of the Caucasus Emirate in 2007 and its subsequent Ideologic alignment with transnational Jihadi actors like al Qaeda. Instead of playing the carrot-and-stick-policy, combining force with political concessions, Moscow has always been employing iron-fisted policies to ensure its rule over its scattered peripheries through the centuries. It was them that pushed the last Pagan and Animist peoples, mainly Chechen and Ingush, into the arms of Islam, thus completing the Islamization of the Northern Caucasus, and radicalized pre-existing mainstream forms of Islam towards more militant

Sufist brotherhoods, which were the vehicle onto which carry out holy war against invading Russia for the better part of the 19th century. The same applies to parts of Central Asia, were equally fierce Basmachi temporarily radicalized before having to bend down before Tsarist colonial scorched-earth policies. After stormy times during the soviet and particularly the Stalinist era, which almost accomplished the extermination of a few of its fiercest Muslim populations, renewed repression during the Russian invasions and subsequent counterinsurgency campaigns from the mid-nineties until today have resulted in finally something like a sort of feeble “pax Russa” in the NC, but also in an increased re-Islamization first, and the spread of more or less militant Salafism, particularly among the youth, in the region.

The above-mentioned approach leads straight to the next research question, which is deeply connected with the above one. This question deals with the nature of the separatist opposition in the North Caucasus. The present radical Islamist orientation of this movement is out of question, which is why the analysis of the genesis and the history of the Caucasus Emirate and the more recent Islamic State’s Wilayat Qoqaz as the final products of radical Islam in the Northern Caucasus will be at the forefront of this part of the research work. There are many sub-questions arising in this context, like: How did radical Islam evolve over time? What were the factors which promoted the spread of Radical Islam? What kind of organization has the Caucasus Emirate been? How has it been operating, and which ideology has it been embracing? Which goals has it been pursuing, and finally which kind of short- to long term threats does it pose to Russia and the West? Observing all of the many causes for violence in the region, the focus centers on the actor which causes the majority of violent and hostile acts directed against the Russian state and its representatives in the region. That actor has been known as the *Caucasus Emirate*, an organization variously described as a *Salafi-Jihadist* actor with regional aims, a transnational terrorist entity or even an integral part of *al Qaeda*. Given the significant discrepancies between these categorizations as well as the hugely complicated political, ethnic and linguistic situation in the Northern Caucasus, it is no wonder that this topic has been remaining a deeply misunderstood and underreported one.

Aside from the reconstruction of the genesis of the Islamist movement and the conflict through process-tracing as well as the characterization of the Caucasus Emirate in the strict sense, the embedding of the organization into the broader *Jihadi* community will be determined, and by consequence, its stance towards the West. This step will be accompanied by an attempt to shape a more distinctive and differentiated picture of the *Jihadi* and Islamist galaxy on a global scale. Not only government officials and media are rather divided about this question, but academia as well. Some pundits tend to hit the bell of the War on Terror putting all armed organizations with more or less distinct Islamist credentials on one line without differentiating further. Others tend to paint a more nuanced picture, where grey color tones dominate compared to black and white ones. Concretely, Fawaz Gerges and Thomas Hegghammer spoke in their books of different sorts of Jihad characterized by different orientations, agendas, ideological sources and even theological and legal issues. The goal here

is to contribute to the cataloguing of *jihadi* organizations, so to be able to assign the Caucasus Emirate the place it deserves.

As for the methodology of this endeavor, a multi-pronged effort is necessary to achieve the stated goal, since there is only a limited set of sources from which to draw required information. The scarcity of resources and their nature allow therefore only certain theoretical and methodological patterns. However, in order to ensure accurate research work, a realist theoretical approach and a mainly qualitative approach will be employed. The effects of the implementation of Russian and Soviet Imperialist policies will be set the Caucasus Emirate as well as the causes and mechanisms of the conflict will thus be illustrated through the prism of political process theory and historical explanation. In this sense, particularly the processes of resource mobilization and framing will be of foremost importance, as they help to define the militant *modus operandi* and changing ideological orientations over time. Given the fact that the most useful sources are those found online on militant sites, while others will have to be collected in the field through semi-structured elite interviewing, the method to be primarily employed consists of qualitative content analysis regarding the hermeneutics and semiotics of insurgent media. This method has proven to be surprisingly effective in describing similar matters. Brinjar Lia, for example, based his excellent study on early al Qaeda¹⁹ almost entirely on militant sources, extracting the information he needed through qualitative content analysis. Further qualitative analysis can be implemented using already existing empirical data.²⁰

Some last considerations ought to better qualify the terminology adopted in this work. Whereas the connotations "Chechen" or "Chechens" are of obvious meaning in their use, the term "Caucasian" or "Caucasians" means here indistinctly Muslim North Caucasians – the term is mainly used in the context of the analysis of the Caucasus Emirate and the presence of Chechen, Dagestanis, Ingush, Kabards and Balkars in the ranks of Islamist and Salafist militias fighting in Syria. A similar understanding lies at the basis of the distinction between the Chechen Wars lasting from 1994 to 1996 and 1999 to 2007, and the North Caucasus-wide insurgency born out the proclamation of the Caucasus Emirate set in, until its defeat in 2016. Thus, it will be differentiated "Chechen Wars" and the "North Caucasus conflict/insurgency", even if the latter term can be used contextually to name the whole array of conflicts that have lasted in the area since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The terms "West" and /or "Western" both relate to the community of states represented politically in NATO.

4. Discourse Analysis

In order to check and eventually bolster the claims and hypotheses which will be presented in the course of the explicative historical analysis, a discourse analysis of 1.158 official speeches made in Russia or outside by Vladimir Putin between 2000 and 2016 in his tenure as President of the Russian Federation.

¹⁹ Lia, Brinjar. *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al-Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri*. United Kingdom, Oxford University Press, 2008.

²⁰ Ware, Robert Bruce. *The Fire Below: How the Caucasus Shaped Russia*. United Kingdom, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013, p.97 f.

The raw material has been made available by Stephen Dyson, Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of the Humanities House at the University of Connecticut, author of the paper *The operational code approach to profiling political leaders: understanding Vladimir Putin* published on *Intelligence and National Security* in April 2017²¹. The dataset has been analysed with MAXQDA 2020, a software developed specifically for computer-aided qualitative data and text analysis.²²

Thus, the following set of indicators/markers has been defined:

- Internal strengthening and securitization

This indicator stands for statements in Putin speeches which underscore the former weakness of the Eltsin-era Russian state, the need for a strong Russian state in order to persist on the world stage and the description of measures taken in order to implement these provisions, which are all directed internally. Examples for references to these measures could be statements about the strengthening of the executive, the adoption of new (repressive) laws etc.

- National integrity and backyard defense

This indicator marks the passages in the Putin speeches which put their emphasis on the need to defend and preserve not only the territorial integrity of the Russian state, but also - in Putin's perception – its own “backyard”, its area of influence to be understood as a sort of outer forward defense area, broadly coinciding with the territories of the former Soviet Union and its sphere of influence, which in turn perfectly coincides with Mackinder's geopolitics.

- Terrorism, not separatism

These passages mainly refer to the Russian description of actors and events during the Second Chechen War. The Russian narrative defines Chechen separatism systematically and automatically as “terrorism”.

- Nostalgia and revanchism

Nostalgic and revanchist passages principally refer to the Great-Power era of the Soviet Union.

- Competition and consideration

²¹ See Dyson, Stephen Benedict, and Matthew J. Parent. *The Operational Code Approach to Profiling Political Leaders: Understanding Vladimir Putin*. *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 33, no. 1, 11 Apr. 2017, pp. 84–100

²² See <https://www.maxqda.com/>. The software is used to support scientific projects and studies in which interviews, texts and media such as image, audio and video files are analyzed in terms of content. The aim is to gain insights into the data material without anticipating the content-related interpretation by the researchers.

Putin`s remarks towards the West are mainly characterized by an attitude of competition and striving for consideration.

- *Confrontation and rearmament*

Text passages which put their mark on threatening statements or declarations towards the West or declarations related to armaments or re-arming.

- *Mediation and coaxing*

At times, passages in the Putin speeches reserve also appeasing words towards Western countries. These passages intensify notably before or during summits with Western leaders in order to capitalize on these situations.

The outcome of the discourse analysis, measuring the incidence of the aforementioned, will be the benchmark for the validation of the hypotheses which lie at the basis of this work.

II. Geography and Demographics

The land is good where you were fed, but not better than the one you were born on.

Caucasian proverb

Russia is the largest country in the world, occupying a vast expanse of land across two continents, Europe and Asia. Its geography is diverse, featuring a wide range of natural landscapes, from dense forests and rugged mountains to sprawling plains and extensive coastlines. This diverse geography has helped shape Russia's history, culture, and demography, which includes a wide range of ethnic groups and major religions. Russia is home to approximately 144 million people, resulting in the world's ninth most populous country. The country's population is concentrated in urban areas, with the largest cities being Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and Novosibirsk. The population is diverse, with over 190 ethnic groups residing in the country. The majority of the population is ethnic Russian, accounting for around 81% of the total population. Other significant ethnic groups include Tatars, Ukrainians, Bashkirs, Chuvash, and Chechens. Russia has a diverse religious landscape, with the majority of the population identifying as Russian Orthodox Christians. Other major religions in the country include Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and various other Christian denominations.

The North Caucasus is only a small part of this enormous nation – the Russian Federation – and yet it is perhaps one of the most crucial ones. Perched on the foothills of the Great Caucasus Range, it is inhabited since thousands of years, and many populations found shelter and protection in its inaccessible highlands across the millennia. Before a thorough examination of the North Caucasus itself, however, it is recommendable to give a brief look at the paramount picture that is the Russian Federation as a whole. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, the already simmering decline in all areas of society since the beginning of the 1980s accelerated, bringing the country on the verge of collapse. The heir entity of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation, had lost not only nearly half the population and a third of the territory of the former Soviet Union, but its status as superpower as well. The economic and social decline caused among others serious demographic repercussions from which the Russian Federation has been partially recovering only in the last few years. The population of the Russian Federation decreased steadily from its population peak of about 148 million people in 1992 to the first decade of the 21st century, when a very slight increase since about 2009 set in.

Nevertheless, in these nearly two decades of population decline, the Russian Federation lost 5 Million people or about 3,5% of its population.²³ The reasons for the decline have been low birth rates coupled with high mortality rates, especially among ethnic Russian males, their life expectancy being only 64,3 years in 2010.²⁴ These were caused by a fall of living standards due to a sharp rise of poverty and high rates of cardiovascular diseases caused among other reasons by widespread alcohol and drug abuse among large segments of Russian society.²⁵ Although the negative trend has been reversing since 2009, the population number projection of the UN for the next decades foresee again a steady decline of Russia's population – according to it, in the year 2030, the Russian Federation would host only slightly more than about 133 Million people and only about 100 Million in 2100.²⁶ Furthermore, the population increase of the last years originated mostly from immigration and the steady increase of the non-Russian minorities inside the Russian Federation.

According to the Russian statistical service, ethnic Russian core regions continue to lose people, while non-Russian areas on the periphery show traditionally very high increase rates.²⁷ The proportion of Chechens to the total population for example doubled from 1979 to 2010, the same can be said of the Dagestani population. While ethnic Russians today make up about 80% of the total population, in 1970 their share was around 83%.²⁸ As already shown, the total population, especially ethnic Russians, will decrease, while ethnic minorities actually will increase their numbers. This finding applies especially for the Islamic minorities in the Russian Federation. Projections show a massive increase of the populations of Dagestan and Chechnya and a more moderate to stable one for all other Muslim republics in the federation. For example, projections predict that Chechens will increase from about 1,3 Million in 2011 to almost 2 million in 2030; Ingushetia will host 670.000 people (520.000 in 2011) and Dagestan will increase from 2,75 million units in 2011 to almost 3,2 million in 2030.²⁹ Tatarstan and Bashkortostan will increase their population slightly to 2030, while Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachaevo-Cherkessia will actually lose inhabitants, most likely however in

²³ See Demoskop Weekly, (n.d.). www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/census_types.php?ct=6, accessed on January 18, 2023. The figure given has been adapted in correlation to the loss of land and people following the downfall of the Soviet Union

²⁴ See Russian Federation's Census of 2010, <http://www.perepis-2010.ru/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

²⁵ See Stuckler, David, et al. "Mass Privatisation and the Post-Communist Mortality Crisis: A Cross-National Analysis." *The Lancet*, vol. 373, no. 9661, Jan. 2009, pp. 399–407,

[www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(09\)60005-2/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(09)60005-2/fulltext), accessed on January 18, 2023

²⁶ See Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, *World Population Prospects: The 2012 Revision*, <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/index.htm>, accessed on January 18, 2023. Although population projections of the UN and the Russian Federation's statistic service ROSSTAT diverge somewhat, both predict a steady population decline in the next decades for the area of the Russian Federation, see <http://www.gks.ru/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

²⁷ See ROSSTAT, *Koeffitsyenty Rozhdayemosti, Smertnosti, Yestestvennogo Prirosta*, Brakov, Razvodov, za Yanvar' - Dekabr' 2012 Goda, http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/2012/demo/t1-3.xls, accessed on January 18, 2023

²⁸ Compare the numbers of the various censuses between 1926 and 2010 at Demoskop Weekly, [demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/census_types.php?ct=6](http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/census_types.php?ct=6), accessed on January 18, 2023. The figure given has been adapted in correlation to the loss of land and people following the downfall of the Soviet Union.

²⁹ Although there surely is a strong population increase in these republics (especially Chechnya), it is not entirely clear if the official numbers are being inflated on purpose to gain more financial leverage on federal level.

large part because of a sharp fall of its ethnic Russian share of the population because of age structure, internal migration and continuing crisis state in the region.³⁰ It is clear that similar demographic changes in comparatively small areas will not only exacerbate the already existing conflict, but possibly alter, together with other factors, the structure of the Russian Federation as a whole in the long term. The conflict in the North Caucasus must therefore be seen not only as a regional phenomenon, but as an important factor among others, from which the stability of the Russian Federation depends now and even more in the future.

In geographic terms, according to the National Geographic Society, the European continent is delimited in the east by the Urals and in the southeast by the Caucasus.³¹ Therefore the area in question can be fully seen as part of Europe. Hence, the conflict raging there for many years now is a European problem. The territory of the North Caucasus distinguishes itself by the wide range of different landscapes that it does include. From the highest peaks of the Great Caucasian Range that reach almost 6.000 meters, down to its forested foothills and the semi-desert steppe in Chechnya's and Dagestan's north and the palm-ridden shores of the Black Sea, the North Caucasus includes roughly an area of 120.000 km², subdivided by various autonomous republics and other entities which are all part of the Russian Federation, as the Great Caucasian Range marks its border to the south. The climate is largely a continental one, with harsh winters and hot summers. The different entities and republics that lie in the Northern Caucasus are mostly characterized by their past and/or present affiliation to Islam. Already in Soviet times, the region was a sort of neglected peripheral area, underdeveloped and among the poorest of the whole country. This derived partly from arduous development conditions in a highland territory of difficult access, and partly from state-sponsored discrimination of the troublesome and rebellious mountaineers.³² Of course, the ongoing conflict worsened the situation, and so the North Caucasus remains an economical backwater of the Russian Federation. The unemployment rates are among the highest of the Federation, and the HDI of the different republics are at the bottom of the regional HDI list of the Russian Federation.³³

Starting from the east to the west, Dagestan is the biggest of the Muslim republics in the North Caucasus. It has a total area of slightly over 50.000 km² and a population of almost three Million people. Dagestan is an ethnically very diverse state, with dozens of different

³⁰ See a handy comparison between the different territories at Knoema, *Regiony Rossii: Predpolozhitel'naya chislennost' naseleniya, 2011-2031*, <http://knoema.de/rannbj/>, accessed on January 18, 2023. All data is based on official data of the Russian Federation's statistic service ROSSTAT, <http://www.gks.ru/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³¹ See Geographic, National, and Tait, Alex. *Atlas of the World*. United States, National Geographic Society, 2019., "Europe", pp. 68–69

³² Although the mountaineers were always seen as "savages" and the offensive term for North Caucasians widely used in Russia ("cherny" – meaning "blacks") generated many already in Tsarist Russia, some ethnicities were discriminated more than others or put against each other. See Richmond, Walter. *The Northwest Caucasus: Past, Present, Future*. N.p., Taylor & Francis, 2008., p. 120 and Zürcher, Christoph. *The Post-Soviet Wars – Rebellion, Ethnic conflict and Nationhood in the Caucasus*, New York 2009, pp. 79, 110 and 135

³³ See UNDP Rossiya, *Doklad o chelovecheskom razvitii v Rossiyskoy Federatsii 2013*, <http://www.undp.ru/documents/NHDR-2013.pdf>, accessed on January 18, 2023

ethnicities and over thirty local languages spoken, with Russian being the official language and lingua franca between the various populations. Dagestan is one of the poorest republics of the Russian Federation, with a GRP per capita of only 3469 \$ in 2011. Relatively high unemployment and other factors put the HDI value at 0,802 in 2010. Its population is, however, unlike that of peculiarly ethnic Russian provinces, growing relatively fast, with an average increase of 1,39% per year in the last decade. 83% of the population is Muslim, mainly of the Sunni sect. Other faiths include pagan and Christian beliefs, a small percentage is atheistic. Sufi Islam has a long tradition in Dagestan and is often associated with members of the ruling elite. This is one of the reasons why the Salafist brand of Islam brought by foreign preachers immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet Union has been gaining a strong foothold in the country. This topic will of course be better described in the chapters further ahead.

The Republic of Chechnya to the west of Dagestan is still a war-torn country, even years after the official end of the conflict. Although great amounts of money are being transferred from the center to Chechnya, and high-prestige reconstruction endeavors have been started and concluded, such as the reconstruction of the main boulevards and chaussees in Grozny, much of the country is still affected by the consequences of the war. Official figures put the unemployment rate at 30% in 2012, but this number is a matter of dispute since unofficial figures put that number much higher.³⁴ The HDI stood at 0,765 in 2010. In any case, a great share of employed people works in the security structures. The extraction of oil, negligible in absolute terms on Federal level, however, generates a great deal of wealth locally. Unfortunately, there are many hints that the generated revenues are not shared, but rather end up swallowed in a Moloch made up of corruption of nepotism. More elements of this topic will follow further below. Presenting a beautiful landscape, the area of the Republic of Chechnya includes approximately 17.300 km² with a population of around 1.270.000. The urbanization rate is even less than that of Dagestan, with only about 35% of the population living in cities. The Chechen population is very homogenous, with Chechens making up over 95% of the population, itself being of Islamic faith almost entirely. Traditionally, Sufi sects are very strong in Chechnya, with two main *tarikats*, the *Naqshbandiya* and the *Qadiriya*. One of its offshoots, the *Kunta-Hadzhi* sect, has a vast membership there and is politically very powerful, since many members of the republic's elite including its ruler Ramzan Kadyrov, are part of it. Not unlike the situation in Dagestan, Salafist Islam has been a growing phenomenon since the mid-1990s, attracting particularly young people. The main cities are Grozny (ca. 270.000 inhabitants), Urus-Martan (ca. 49.000 inhabitants), Shali (ca. 47.000 inhabitants), Gudermes (ca. 45.000 inhabitants) and Argun (almost 30.000 inhabitants). About one third of its territory is made up of dry, sandy steppe to the north, whereas the central lowland south of the river Terek is fertile agricultural land. The last third to the south is mountainous and forested territory made up of foothills and ridges up to the highest peaks of the Caucasus.³⁵

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ All data comes from the Chechen branch of ROSSTAT, <http://chechenstat.gks.ru/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

Further west, the Ingush republic shows a similar landscape as Chechnya. It has a population of 412.000, distributed across an area of 3.000 km², being the smallest of the republics of the North Caucasus (HDI 2010: 0,790). Similarly to Chechnya, its population is very homogenous and consequently almost totally Muslim. It is characterized by a clan structure and the traditional presence of Sufi sects. Its only really bigger city is Nazran with its satellite capital city Magas, with about 95.000 inhabitants. The rest of the population is distributed in bigger and smaller villages across the republic. Similarly to Chechnya, Ingushetia's inhabitants are almost all Ingush and Muslims. The Ingush economy is very weak, unemployment rates very high (47,7% in 2012) the GRP per capita (1.916\$ in 2011) as well as the per capita monthly income (357\$ in 2011) very low and with a HDI factor of 0,790 (2012). Ingushetia shares a tiny fraction of its borders with the federal border in the south, and westwards with the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania.³⁶

North Ossetia-Alania too is a really small republic, measuring only 8.000 km² with 712.000 inhabitants as of 2010. Its population is more heterogeneous, with a small Ingush minority in its eastern districts which makes up about 4%, and a larger share of Russians (20% of the total population). Although this republic is the least affected by the ongoing conflict, its location at the core of the North Caucasus and the inclusion of its territory in Emiratis dreams suggest nevertheless its brief description. Its capital Vladikavkaz³⁷, from where the legendary Georgian Military Road towards the south Caucasus and south Ossetia starts, vital for the Russian Federation today as it was 200 years ago, is the greatest urban center with a population of ca. 311.000 units. The second-largest settlement is Mozdok in the north on the border with the Southern Federal District, a rural town of about 38.000 inhabitants which retains however great strategic importance for the enforcement of Russian power, as it houses a very large military army and air force base from which historically as well as in more recent times almost every expedition towards the rebellious mountaineers has started.³⁸ This philo-Russian attitude derives mainly from the fact that North Ossetia is the only territory in the North Caucasus with a strong Christian tradition. Almost half the population professes itself as active followers of the Orthodox Church.³⁹ Interestingly, North Ossetia is the most developed republic of the North Caucasus, with a relatively low unemployment rate of 7,9% in 2012, a GRP per capita of 3.716\$, a per capita monthly income of 426\$ (both 2011) and by far the highest HDI indicator of the whole region (0,817 in 2011).⁴⁰

Already the name of the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria suggests the ethnic composition of this entity: It is homeland to the Kabards (57%) and Balkars (12%), with a relatively large

³⁶ Compare with data taken from the Ingush branch of ROSSTAT, <http://ingstat.gks.ru/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁷ Founded in 1784 as a fortress and an outpost in the first armed encounters with the mountaineers by the Tsarist Army, its name signifies "ruler of the Caucasus", which per se says much about the Russian Imperialist attitude at the time.

³⁸ All statistical data except that one dealing with religion was taken from the official website of the Russian Federation's Census of 2010, <http://www.perepis-2010.ru/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁹ See Atlas religii i narodowości w Rosji, Sreda Research Service, 2012, www.sreda.org, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁰ North Ossetian branch of ROSSTAT, <http://osetstat.gks.ru/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

ethnic Russian presence (22,5%). Its area of 12.500 km² hosts a population of almost 860.000. Its landscape is less varied as it goes down from the very highest peaks of the Caucasus with Mount Elbrus as its highest point (5.642m) in the south to the green lowlands of northern Kabardino-Balkaria. The Kabards were once a sub-tribe of the much larger Circassian people and form today one of the last bastions of Circassian presence in the North Caucasus. They live predominantly in the northern plains, whereas the Balkars settle primarily in the valleys leading to the high peaks of the Caucasus. Of course, Sunni Islam is the main faith in the republic, with Salafism having become very popular across large sections of the society since the mid-1990s. Kabardino-Balakria can therefore be seen as one of the main hotbeds of radical Islam in the region, despite the relatively large presence of Russians there.⁴¹

The Republic of Karachaevo-Cherkessia is structured similarly to its eastern neighbor, Kabardino-Balkaria, being home to two different indigenous ethnicities and the relatively new Russian part of the population as well. Its area covers 14.100 km² with a population of only 478.000 as of 2010. The greatest part of its territory is mountainous, and again the urbanization rate is very low there. Although its name would suggest otherwise, its ethnic composition is relatively diverse, with 41% of the population being Karachays, 31% Russians, 11% Cherkess and other smaller groups like Abazins and Nogais. The main ethnic group, the Karachay, is of Turkic descent like their Balkar neighbors, and speaks a language similar to their fellow Turkic relatives in Dagestan, the Kumyks. As their name suggests, the Cherkess are descendants of one of the circassian subtribes like the Kabards in Kabardino-Balkaria. The common religion of the indigenous people is Sunni Islam, with some Salafist inroads since the 1990s. Economically, the republic is much undeveloped, and as a result, like its North Caucasian neighbors, one of the poorest entities of the Russian Federation. The Stavropol Krai to the north of the Muslim North Caucasian republics, itself too part of the North Caucasian Federal district, is the only thoroughly Russian part of it. It is however of significance too, not only for its tiny historical Muslim Nogai population, but for the fact that many North Caucasians have been settling there in recent years as well. Some wanted to escape war, others came to work, fact is that in certain areas the indigenous Russian and Cossack population feels threatened by these newcomers, leading to frequent ethnic tensions. Westwards of the North Caucasian Federal District, what once was the Circassian heartland and today part of the Southern Federal District (Krasnodar Krai and Republic of Adighea), almost nothing reminds on the past. Despite the presence of scattered ethnic remnants, the area has been thoroughly russified since the end of the Great Caucasian War and is therefore not of much interest for this study except for its historical significance.⁴²

Finally, two republics of the Russian Federation geographically alien to the North Caucasus will be described here as well, since they are relevant for the more recent developments of the conflict since 2011: Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. In contrast to the North Caucasian republics, these two republics have a very developed structure, their HDI having been

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² All statistical data except that one dealing with religion was taken from the official website of the Russian Federation's Census of 2010, <http://www.perepis-2010.ru/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

estimated respectively at 0,864 and 0,832 in 2010. The Tatar Republic lies embedded in the middle of Russia's heartland about 800 kilometers east of Moscow. Spread across an area of 68.000 km², it hosts a population of ca. 3,8 million. The majority of it, about 53%, is of Tatar ethnicity, while the Russian population amounts to 39,7%, with 55% of the population being Muslims.⁴³ Part of Russia since the 16th century, its indigenous inhabitants are the descendents of the once powerful *Volga Bulgars*. They adopted Islam in the early 10th century and were defeated and conquered by the Mongols in the first half of the 13th century. According to one of the main theories to their ethnogenesis, they mixed with the Mongol invaders, having been known since then as *Volga Tatars*.

As one of the power centers of the Golden Horde, the Tatars established the Kazan Khanate, named after their capital, as the Horde was falling apart at the beginning of the 15th century. About 120 years later, however, the Tatars found themselves subjugated by the armies of Ivan the Terrible. Although they were disadvantaged in Tsarist Russia, the Tatars adapted and became a relatively docile minority inside the Russian empire, although they were allowed to retain their Muslim faith. In the 19th century Tatarstan became one of the focal points of the religious *Jadidist* movement, which advocated a very moderate stance of Islam, preaching brotherhood and friendliness to non-believers and others. Since then, Tatars were renowned for their religious moderation. In the last years, the spread of more radical forms of Muslim religion, however, has not stopped on Tatarstan's borders, however. This poses a great challenge to the Russian state, since Tatarstan is, by economic standards, one of the most productive and developed regions of the Federation. The republic is one of the main oil producing regions of the Russian Federation, and it hosts very important industrial assets since Soviet times, with petrochemical processing and machine building on the top. Although it is one of the richest regions of Russia, not unlike the Muslim republics in the south, it maintains a high fertility rate.

A similar situation is to be found in Bashkortostan further east, not far away from the border with Kazakhstan. With an area of 143.600 km² and a population of about 4,1 million people, it is the largest republic of the Russian Federation by population number. The main ethnicities represented there are Bashkirs (about 29%), Russians (36%) and Tatars (25%). Islam is the main faith with 38% of the population adhering to it, followed by Russian Orthodox Christians with about 25% of the population's share.⁴⁴ Ufa is the main city and at the same time capital city of Bashkortostan (1,06 million inhabitants). Like Tatarstan, Bashkortostan is one of the most developed regions of the Russian Federation, its economy being largely based on oil production, chemical processing and large-scale agriculture. The indigenous Bashkir population is not related to its western Tatar neighbors, given the fact that their ethnogenesis is not entirely clear, although it is clear that they are Turkic people. The Bashkirs adopted Islam starting in the 10th century, with the majority of them being Muslims since about the

⁴³ See Atlas religii i narodowości w Rosji, Sreda Research Service, 2012, www.sreda.org, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁴ See Atlas religii i narodowości w Rosji, Sreda Research Service, 2012, www.sreda.org, accessed on January 18, 2023

14th century. Bashkir settlement area was inglobated first in the empire of Gengis Khan and then in territory dominated by the Golden Horde, before being taken over by the Russians in the 17th century. The Bashkirs rebelled against their new masters in various occasions in the 17th and 18th centuries, before being subjugated completely. Traditionally, the Bashkirs practice a moderate form of Sunni Islam, although a spread of more radical brands of Islam has been observed in recent years and like in the other Muslim-characterized territories of the Russian Federation, chiefly among the youth.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ All statistical data except that one dealing with religion was taken from the official website of the Russian Federation's Census of 2010, <http://www.perepis-2010.ru/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

III. Tsars and Murids: Colonialism and Islam in the North Caucasus, 1730-1917

*Caucasians enjoy to unite in the face of outside aggression,
whereas they argue among themselves in peaceful times.*

Caucasian proverb

1. The Great Caucasian War 1750-1864

Intended only to be an introduction to recent and current developments in the North Caucasus, this historical section about the people who have been living there will be exceptionally short, as there are other excellent studies covering this topic, for example see the works of Moshe Gammer, Nicholas Griffin and others. As a result, this short summary will start with the status quo in the North Caucasus around 1750, shortly before the start of the Russian expansion towards the south. The reader will have to search for the earlier history of the North Caucasian people in other, more qualified works for this topic. The roots of the present conflict reach back a couple of centuries, when Cossacks began establishing a sort of militarized security belt at the southern borders of the gradually expanding Russian empire. Soon the Cossacks clashed with hostile tribes who lived in the northern lowlands of the great Caucasus range, such as the Nogais and Dagestanis in the east, the Chechens and Ingush in the center and the Balkar, Kabardian and Circassians in the West. Until the middle of the 18th Century, however, these were little more than border skirmishes or cross-border raids with the intention of stealing cattle or horses.⁴⁶ At the time, like today, the Northern Caucasus was a conundrum of many different populations, languages and religious beliefs. In the northwestern Caucasus, from the shores of the Black Sea to the central highlands further eastwards lived the Adighe people, better known as Circassians in the west.

The Adighe comprised different people: Abkhaz, Abaza, Kabards and Ubykhs. They were fractured not only by different ethnicities, though being related by common ancestry, but politically as well. Diverse principalities existed in the Western Caucasus, often fighting each other, but usually uniting when facing a common threat. Their territory was divided between West Circassia and East Circassia. Both parts were organized in different principalities. In the West, in the Kuban territory and downward on the shores of the Black Sea, resided the Shapsugs and Abazins. The Abkhaz had come under the influence of the Georgian kings and were largely Christian, in contrast to their Circassian brothers in the North, who had been brought to the Islamic faith by the Ottomans. Further east, the Kabards lived in two different

⁴⁶ Wood, Tony. Chechnya – The Case for Independence, London 2007, p. 19

states: Lesser and Greater Kabarda. Historically, the Kabards had been powerful rulers of a major part of the Northern Caucasus.⁴⁷

The Russian Tsar Ivan the Terrible had even married a Kabardian princess to strengthen Russian borders to the south. The Kabardians had even fought alongside the Russians against the once mighty Persians in the 16th and 17th centuries. Among the Kabardians, small populations of different origin were interspersed in their territory. Balkars and Karachays are Turkic peoples, possibly descending from the Bulgars.⁴⁸ These and the Circassians had been Muslims for centuries at the time. The Circassians, as their neighbors, were famous for being excellent riders and fighters. In the center of the Caucasian range Ossetians have been living for thousands of years: They claim to be descendents of the legendary Sarmatians.⁴⁹ Whereas the greater part of the Ossetian people is of Christian faith, a sizeable part of them are Muslims. Historically, however, they have been the preferred local allies of the Russian since their southward expansion, mainly because of the common Christian faith.⁵⁰

More eastwards, between Terek and the high Caucasian peaks, settled the *Vainakhs*. These were ethnically speaking far more homogenous, being subdivided into Chechens and Ingush. After the Mongol invasions, they abolished feudal structures and thus in more modern times used to live in a sort of organized anarchy in a clan-based system, where each village was self-ruled by the respective council of elders. Unwritten common law (*adat*) regulated most aspects of everyday life. Proud warriors and mountaineers, they had resisted conquest many times across the centuries, the most striking example being probably the resistance against the Mongols in the 16th century.⁵¹ The Chechens and Ingush lived in a tightly-knit society. A superstructure made up of major clans (*tukkhums*) was subdivided into smaller ones (*teips*) which originally were directly associated with certain villages and settlements. As a heavily patriarchal society, just as every Caucasian society, family and village elders decided upon important matters. Chechen males have been required to know by heart every ancestor back to the seventh generation. In the 17th and 18th centuries, many Vainakhs, and particularly the Ingush, still worshipped pagan deities.⁵²

Further east, the territory of Dagestan has been since many centuries a host to dozens of different populations and languages. The main ethnic group in Dagestan has always been the Avar people, who have been living for the most part in the eastern mountainous regions

⁴⁷ On the history of the Circassian tribes, see Richmond, Walter. *The Circassian Genocide*. United Kingdom, Rutgers University Press, 2013., p. 32-54

⁴⁸ See Saunders, Robert A. and Strukov, Vlad. *Historical dictionary of the Russian Federation*, Plymouth 2010, p. 64

⁴⁹ See Anderson, Tony. *Bread and Ashes – A Walk Through the Mountains of Georgia*, London 2004, p. 158

⁵⁰ One strong indicator for this is the fact that the Ossetians never arose against Russian conquest or occupation. Historically in search of strong, fellow Christian allies, in ancient times the preferred ally was Georgia, until it was supplanted by the much more powerful Russians. The perception of other, Muslim North Caucasian nationalities however strongly follows this guess, see Rafik Osman-Ogly Kurbanov/Erjan Rafik-Ogly Kurbanov, *Religion and Politics in the Caucasus*, in: *The Politics of Religion in Russia and the New states of Eurasia*, edited by Bourdeaux, Michael, New York 1995, S. 242

⁵¹ Souleimanov, Emil. *An Endless War: The Russian-Chechen Conflict in Perspective*, Frankfurt a. M., pp. 17-36

⁵² See Jaimoukha, Amjad. *The Chechens: A Handbook*, Routledge 2005, p. 87-93

bordering Chechnya, followed by the Dargins and Kumyks, who have been settling further westward, and the Lezgians in the south of the country, on the borders with Azerbaijan. A myriad of other smaller groups have been calling Dagestan their homeland, for example Laks, Chechens and even Mountain Jews. Historically, the Avars ruled the territory of present-day Dagestan. The Avarian Khanate managed to defeat in open battle even the mighty Persian ruler Nadir Shah and for a time exacted tribute payments even from the Georgian Kingdom. Similarly to their neighbors in the west, the Dagestani people were regarded as valiant warriors. For the most part, they were of Islamic faith, since the city of Derbent on the Caspian Sea had been reached by the conquering Arabs already in the year 654.⁵³

Islam had not been instantly accepted at all, however. Entrenched in their mountain strongholds, the highlanders resisted all invaders, including the Mongols, for centuries. As in neighboring Chechnya, pagan belief was only slowly pushed aside. It is therefore little wonder that some areas of Dagestan were reached by Islam only in the 16th and 17th century, almost 1.000 years after its first appearance in the region. Nevertheless, precisely because of this reason, Dagestan has been showing the strongest Islamic tradition throughout the Caucasus, being historically probably the most pious spot there. Not unlike the other populations in the Caucasus, an entirely similar customary law, also named *adat*, remained the local choice in matters of legislation instead of sharia, however.⁵⁴ As the young Russian state under the Tsar Ivan the Terrible liberated itself from Tatar yoke and increasingly consolidated, the Cossacks were enlisted as a sort of frontier corps and put to guard the borders of Russia. As Cossack settlements served both as living places and frontier forts, they were put right behind the border. The Russians reached the Manysh River and moved on to the Terek River in the course of the late 16th century. There, they established fortified places linking them with smaller outposts. Cossacks manned the border and watched it to avoid occasional raids by raiding highlanders who aimed at stealing horses and cattle. Although for the next 150 years the border did not move, the Russians tried to increase their influence in the region, underlining it with occasional military expedition to Dagestan and Kabardia, mainly to counterbalance Ottoman and Persian influence in the region. Once the Russian expansion in the Far East reached the Barents Sea and the whole of Siberia had been colonized, however, Russian attention again turned southwards.⁵⁵

In the middle of the 18th century, Tatar Crimea and the Circassian territory between the Kuban River and the Great Caucasus Range became a focal point of the struggle for power between Great Britain, France, the emerging Russian empire, and the declining Persian and Ottoman Empires. Russia's drive to the south aimed, through the conquest of the Caucasus, to defeat the Ottomans and reclaim the whole Black Sea, as well as to reach the Persian Gulf and India after the defeat of the Persians. Of course, not only the concerned powers resisted the Russian grand design, as an endless series of wars testimony, but the traditional great European

⁵³ See Rezvani, Babak. *Ethno-Territorial Conflict and Co-Existence in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Fereydan*, Amsterdam University Press 2013, p. 94

⁵⁴ See King, Charles. *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus*, Oxford University Press 2008, p. 56

⁵⁵ For a good overview on Russian expansion and internal colonization, see Witzenrath, Christoph. *Cossacks and the Russian empire 1598-1725: Manipulation, Rebellion and Expansion into Siberia*, Routledge 2007

powers as well, fearing Russia could become too mighty. Particularly Great Britain was concerned about Russian southward expansion, and the process occurring in the Caucasus from approximately 1750 on can be viewed as a fore step to the Great Game between Great Britain and Tsarist Russia.⁵⁶ Last but not least, the most concerned of all, namely the fiery Caucasian highlanders had no intention to surrender to Russia. The most powerful of them were the Circassians in the northwestern Caucasus, which is why they were the first in line to be attacked by the Russians. Although skirmishes and raids from both sides had occurred regularly since the regency of Peter the Great, the Russians began to put up serious pressure on the Circassians approximately from 1763 on.⁵⁷

The Russians began with the construction of a major fortress named Mozdok and connected it with the already existing fortress of Kizlyar in Dagestan by the construction of a fortified line to contain the highlanders as well as to be used as a starting point for military expeditions. This led inevitably to war with the eastern Circassians, the once mighty Kabards. Although the Russians met fierce resistance by the mountaineers, and their expedition parties occasionally were defeated by them, the Russians succeeded in mounting pressure on Circassian fighters pillaging their villages and killing indiscriminately their inhabitants. Moving on one step at the time, the Russians managed to erect more fortresses and fortified lines, successfully reducing “rebel” territory - a brute but nevertheless effective form of today’s “clear and hold” doctrine. The war dragged on with armistices in between and renewed fighting, but inexorably subduing one Circassian tribe after another.⁵⁸ Now other indigenous populations stood in Russia’s way towards the south. The Ingush, Chechens and Dagestanis were not unknown to the Tsar’s army and particularly the Russian frontier corps, the Cossacks. Cross-border raids, skirmishes and occasional Russian forays to the south, especially during the many wars with Persia had put the Russians in admittedly not very friendly contact with the fierce mountain tribes.

However, the point from which on conflict between Russians and mountaineers in the northeastern Caucasus truly began was reached in 1783, when Russia under the rule of Catherine the Great signed the treaty of Georgievsk with the eastern Georgian kingdom of Kartl-Kakheti, which established a Russian protectorate over Georgia to counter the century-old Persian supremacy south of the Caucasus and effectively put the Georgian kingdom under Russian rule.⁵⁹ With the pretext of securing the communication with Georgia, the Russians moved southwards on the shore of the Caspian Sea, soon meeting fierce resistance from the Kumyks, one of the peoples from Dagestan. These, however, were allied to the Chechens, which put them on the Kumyk’s side in the fight against the Tsarist army.⁶⁰ Meanwhile,

⁵⁶ See Khodarkovsky, Michael. *The Great Game in the North Caucasus*. Canadian-American Slavic Studies, vol. 49, no. 2-3, 2015, pp. 384–390

⁵⁷ See Natho, Kadir I.. *Circassian History*. United Kingdom, Xlibris US, 2009., p. 272

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 298

⁵⁹ See Dunlop, John B.. *Russia confronts Chechnya: roots of a separatist conflict*. United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 1998. p. 11

⁶⁰ Anč’abaže, Giorgi and Paichadze, Tsisana. *The Vainakhs: The Chechen and Ingush*. Georgia, Caucasian House, 2009., p. 32

imperial forces attacked from the west and constructed the fortress of Vladikavkaz in Ossetian territory in 1784, effectively putting down the foundation for the construction of the Georgian Military Road that was to follow a few years later. Russian troops began harassing the Vainakhs living in the lowlands between the Terek River and the Caucasian foothills in a pincer movement through Cossack raiding parties in order to put them under pressure.

2. Sheikh Mansur

The Chechens reacted fighting back and proclaiming *gazavat*⁶¹ under the leadership of Sheikh Mansur Ushurma. The new-found leader was an imam who adhered to the Sufist *Naqshbandiya tarikat* and had studied Islamic theology in neighboring Dagestan. He managed to unite the various Chechen tribes and clans by promoting Islamic law – sharia – instead of the customary law – *adat* – and generally urging all Chechens to abandon pagan traditions and fully embrace Islam.⁶² Although this goal was not immediately reached, the gathering of Chechens and generally Caucasians under the green banner of Islam turned out to be a powerful element of unity and mobilization.⁶³ Mansur, however, managed to unite not only the Vainakhs, but a great number of northern Caucasian peoples as well. The coalition of the rebelling tribes ranged from Dagestan in the east to Kabarda in the west.⁶⁴ The forces under the command of Mansur managed even to defeat a Russian expedition force in the battle of the Sunzha south of the Terek. Over time, however, the Russian superiority became to bear fruits and they managed to capture Mansur in 1791, after he tried to mobilize other tribes in the Western Caucasus with mixed results.⁶⁵

The execution of Sheikh Mansur in the fortress of Schlisselburg south of Saint Petersburg in 1794, however, did not diminish the fierce determination of the highlanders to bow to Russian power. The Russians managed to establish a tenuous control over the territory south of the Terek and into Dagestan not so much through direct occupation, as through cooptation of local dignitaries. Anyway, the successor of Sheikh Mansur was to follow soon. Starting around 1828, a preacher named Ghazi Muhammad, an Avar coming from Ghimry⁶⁶ in the Dagestani highland, started proselytizing among Dagestanis, calling for resistance against Russian and their subordinates' rule. He did so in a very inflammatory way, employing a radical religious agenda and speaking out religious anathemas if the Russians would not be thrown out of the believers' land. His superior knowledge of Islamic theology allowed him to

⁶¹ The term derives from *ghazi* (arab.), which means warrior.

⁶² The majority of the Chechens turned – in contrast to most of the Dagestani tribes, who had adopted the green banner much earlier – to Islam only at this time.

⁶³ Religious radicalization or even unification can represent a strong element of mobilization whereas there is no ethnic or linguistic homogeneity on the side of an insurgent force or coalition. Further below, the author argues that precisely this factor has been driving increasing numbers of North Caucasians to Salafist rather than Sufist forms of Islamic creed.

⁶⁴ This also is a pattern to be repeated over time in the following centuries as we will see in the course of this research, the establishment of the Caucasus Emirate was born out of the same considerations, as the reader will see in further below.

⁶⁵ John Frederick Baddeley. *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus*, London, Curzon Press 1999, p. 49.

⁶⁶ Ghimry has always been a bulwark of anti-Russian resistance in Dagestan and indeed, all of the Northern Caucasus, until our days.

defeat more moderate voices, effectively crowning him as the new leader of the resistance against tsarist rule. The Caucasian Imamate was born, and with it the Great Caucasian War began, as it was to last for many years. He succeeded in the unification of most of the Dagestani tribes under Islamic law, and once again they united with the Chechens and Ingush, even menacing Vladikavkaz in the west in 1832. Shortly after, however, the Russians managed to storm the stronghold of Ghimry, founding the Imam dead among the rubble of the town.⁶⁷

The resistance however, had not been broken, and one of the deputies of Ghazi Muhammad, the Imam Gamzat-Bek, himself also an Avar, swiftly took up the scepter. He broke the last resistance of Avar loyalists, effectively breaking Russian power in the region. However, in 1834 he fell victim to a conspiracy orchestrated by his own deputies, among others Hadji Murat, who has been rendered immortal by Leo Tolstoi with his homonymous and splendid novel.⁶⁸ Heir to the vacant position became a much more shrewd and clever leader: Imam Shamil – he was to make life hard for the Russians in the Caucasus for the next 25 years. Imam Shamil too had been born in Ghimry in 1797 and had been a deputy (*naib*⁶⁹) to Ghazi Muhammad and then to Gamzat-Bek. A learned Imam and follower of the Sufi Naqshbandiya sect as his two predecessors, he was a capable orator and managed to build upon the fore work done in the years behind. A subtle politician and a great tactician, he was nevertheless ferocious and reckless in combat, escaping death many times. Many legends, a great deal of them apocryphal, no doubt, aroused about Imam Shamil, although he appears nonetheless to have been a charismatic and courageous figure as much as a great leader. Shamil led the Caucasian Imamate for many years, from 1834 to 1859, frustrating Russian success many times, employing skillfully guerilla tactics. Although he himself was a Dagestani of Avar descent, Shamil's forces were made up also of Chechens, as well as the majority of his *naibs*.⁷⁰ One of them, named Baisangur Benoevsky, is said to have continued the fight even after he had lost an eye, an arm and a leg, tied to his horse-saddle, even after Imam Shamil had given up resistance, according to Chechen tradition.⁷¹ Even if this story can be marked as least as exaggerated, it catches the ferocity of a fight, in which quarter was not given nor asked, as well as the vivid remembrance of this epic fight in present-day Northern Caucasus.

As the hit-and-run tactics adopted by mounted raiding parties of *murids*⁷² or greater bands of fighters staging ambushes and besieging Russian forts and garrison were surprisingly often effective, inflicting huge losses on the Tsarist army, Russian response grew increasingly radical. The figure of the Russian general Aleksey Petrovich Yermolov, one of the heroes in

⁶⁷ See Gammer, Moshe. Muslim Resistance to the Tsar, Routledge 2003, p. 60

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.60-64

⁶⁹ The Arabic term *naib* is equal to that of *deputy*, although it is mostly used in the religious field, referring to the deputy of an *amir*, the leader of a religious and/or military *jamaat*, or Islamic community.

⁷⁰ Seely, Robert. Russo-Chechen Conflict, 1800-2000: A Deadly Embrace, Frank Cass Publishers 2001, p. 47

⁷¹ The story has been passed on from generation to generation in Chechen families. The author heard about it from nearly every Chechen interview partner he met.

⁷² The followers of the Sufi sects, who were the backbone of the rebel fighting force, were called *murids*, which means disciples in Sufi tradition.

the defense of Holy Mother Russia against Napoleon Bonaparte, stands as a symbol for the ruthlessness of the Russian conquest of the Caucasus even today. The present-day capital of Chechnya, Grozny, was founded as a fort by Yermolov in 1817, its name meaning “the terrible”.⁷³ To undermine the support of the population for the resistance, villages were burned, crops eradicated, and the defenseless villagers often slaughtered. The Russians even went so far to cut down entire woods to deprive the rebels of their natural cover when trying to ambush Russian columns marching through the highlands. Despite a strenuous resistance and the support of the whole population, the difficult mountain terrain and almost impregnable sanctuaries like Vedeno and Dargo in Chechnya and Ghimry in Dagestan, the greater numbers the Russians could field eventually succeeded in greatly reducing rebel-held territory.⁷⁴

Shamil did not only create a fighting machine out of the united mountain tribes. He dreamt of an authentic Islamic state, a confederation of highlanders united under the rule of Sharia. By the 1840's, through his military achievements, Shamil had managed to come very close to this ideal, putting him in a position to claim absolute sovereignty over the tribes of Northeastern Caucasia. Therefore, he put himself at the peak of the pyramid as supreme temporal and religious authority, even using the title *amir al mumineen* (commander of the faithful).⁷⁵ Since Shamil was generally very popular among the people and had the endorsement of the most important notables, religious scholars and Sufi sheikhs, he nearly accomplished to every prerequisite for the ideal Muslim ruler as postulated by the great Islamic scholars. This gave him the legitimation he needed to build the Islamic state he envisaged. Hence, he began to establish administrative structures in the territories he controlled.

In 1842, he created a privy council (*diwan*) made up of some of his closest companions and ulama to provide him with advice and support him in day-to-day ruling. His deputies (*naibs*) were appointed to lead specific communities or regions. They had a double function. They not only ruled on Shamil's behalf but had to recruit troops and lead them in battle also. Mirroring the temporarily success and expansion of Shamil's project, the number of naibs increased from four in 1833 to 33 in 1856.⁷⁶ Parallel to the governing naib, every region had one mufti (chief of religious affairs) as well as a sharia judge (*qadi*). The mufti had the responsibility over the village preachers and the mosques, while the *qadi* administered not only *Sharia*, but *nizam* as well. Conceived by Shamil, *nizam* were a set of additional laws designed to better interpret *sharia* or to handle topics not covered by it. The enforcement of *Sharia* and *Nizam* was not only an instrument of power for Shamil, but they were also supposed to educate the mountaineers to observing Muslims.⁷⁷ The interpretation of *Sharia* in particular was very

⁷³ See Griffin, Nicholas. *Caucasus: A Journey to the Land Between Christianity and Islam*, Th University of Chicago Press 2001, p. 113

⁷⁴ For a comprehensive view of the Great Caucasian War, see Baddeley, John F.. *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus*, Curzon Press 1999

⁷⁵ See Gammer, Moshe. *Muslim Resistance and the Tsar*, p. 225-226

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 226

⁷⁷ See Zelkina, Anna. *In Quest for God and Freedom – Sufi Responses to the Russian Advance in the North Caucasus*, C. Hurst Publishers, 2000, p. 217-220

strict, as the Naqshbandi creed espouses very fundamentalist views on this topic. One of the main objectives was thus to eradicate *adat* (customary law), a feat which however even Shamil did not manage to accomplish.⁷⁸

Services were also established. A messenger service enabled the swift transmission of news, messages and proclaims. An elaborated financial system allowed the sustainment of the state and war against Russia for many years. Taxes required by *Sharia*, particularly *zakat*, were collected as well as new ones introduced by Shamil to stem the cost of war.⁷⁹ Last but not least, the army, Shamil's most important instrument of power, was also thoroughly structured. The highland army consisted almost exclusively of cavalymen who fought on horse or dismounted depending on the situation. Along with regular units, the mountaineers fielded elite units as well as part-time militias. The highland fighters were even uniformed to a certain degree, were cared for in special field hospitals and possessed artillery units, which were not infrequently manned by Russian deserters. Since the production of gunpowder was customary among the mountaineers, only the shells had to be captured in combat. To speed up the movement of his artillery, Shamil even ordered the construction of new, or the improvement of existing roads.⁸⁰

Shamil's realm, however, enjoyed even an international dimension. As self-proclaimed *amir al-mumineen*, he went even so far as to compare himself with the Ottoman sultan, with whom he was in steady contact, calling for support and his entry in war against Russia. Indeed, strong bonds linked Dagestan and Chechnya to the Ottoman Empire, not to speak of the Circassians further westward, who had enjoyed even deeper historical bonds with the sultans in Constantinople. While the continuous conflicts between Russia and the Ottomans brought some relief, especially during the Crimean War, the Ottomans were too weak to come to the Caucasians' help in the end. Both the various Circassian tribes and Shamil were in contact with Western powers, especially the British.⁸¹ They saw the Caucasians as a strong thorn in the side of the Tsar, capable of curbing Russian ambition in the ensuing *Great Game*. Aside from a few arms shipments to the Circassians, however, nothing came out of this connection. At the time in Western Europe, Shamil represented the romantic incarnation of the savage but upright and brave fighting for freedom against cruel oppression. Articles and novels narrating the feats of the noble Caucasian warriors entertained a whole generation of educated upper class Europeans, particularly in the United Kingdom and France.

Meanwhile, further west the Circassians fought on. Particularly the Shapsugs proved to be unbending warriors. Shamil tried to unite with the Circassians, but never truly managed to accomplish true operational unity with them. Actually, even the Ingush tribes behaved rather peacefully after initial resistance. A brief glimpse of hope came up during the Crimean War from 1849 to 1856, which saw Russia confronted by a coalition of interest comprising Great

⁷⁸ See Gammer, Moshe. *Muslim Resistance and the Tsar*, p. 232

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 232

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 229-230

⁸¹ See Richmond, Walter. *The Northwest Caucasus – Past, Present, Future*, Routledge 2008, p. 134 and Gammer, Moshe. *Muslim Resistance and the Tsar*, p. 263

Britain, France, the Ottoman Empire as well as the Kingdom of Sardinia. After the end of the Crimean War, the Russian pursuit to the south again proceeded steadily. Imam Shamil as well as Circassian military leader Kazbek Tughuzuko among others still managed to occasionally fight back the Tsarist army. The Russians reacted with mass slaughter and particularly against the fierce Circassian resistance with forced resettlements. Now that the Russians again commanded the black Sea, they swept its shores with a series of combined arms operations. Naval guns supported land operations against Circassian strongholds and amphibious landings aimed at securing the ports.⁸²

By 1864, the last rebellious tribes among the Circassians surrendered and accepted Russian rule. There are no reliable sources, but it is esteemed that the war had dearly cost the Circassians, nearly destroying them as a population. Whole sub-tribes had been almost annihilated not so much by the fighting, but rather by Russian massacres. Russian sources speak of 300.000 dead among them; other sources put the number in the Millions, the greatest part of the losses being obviously non-combatants. The new masters did not behave magnanimously, however. In the years after the war's end, the remaining Circassian population was forcibly expelled. Official sources put up the number of 500.000 Circassians evicted out of the newly conquered territories. This was the birth hour for the Circassian diaspora which has been continuing to this day. Great numbers of the expelled died of starvation and disease in the course of the deportations. The survivors were allowed to settle primarily inside the Ottoman Empire.⁸³ There they were dispersed, however, so to not pose a threat to the Sublime Porte, to Anatolia, Cilicia, present-day Jordan and Iraq.⁸⁴ Imam Shamil gave up the fight in 1861 and went in privileged exile in Kaluga, dying in Mecca while performing Hajji in 1871. A few of Shamil's naibs and isolated bands of murids carried on the fight for a few years especially among the Chechens. Russian supremacy and colonization, however, could not be stopped anymore for the moment. The highlanders in the northeastern Caucasus were tired of fighting, not to mention the enormous loss of life they had had to endure not unlike the Circassians. Here too, enormous figures circulate, with estimations of hundreds of thousands of killed fighters and non-combatants alike among the Ingush, Chechens and Dagestanis.⁸⁵

The Great Caucasian War had cost the Tsarist a big blood tribute too, however: Up to 150.000 Russian soldiers had died over a century to plant the Tsarist double eagle across the whole

⁸² Mackie, John Milton. *Life of Schamyl: And Narrative of the Circassian War of Independence Against Russia*. United States, J. P. Jewett, 1856. p. 207

⁸³ For the history of what for some amount to a genocide, the Circassian Genocide, see Richmond Walter. *The Circassian Genocide*, Rutgers University Press 2013

⁸⁴ The slaughter and forced deportation by the Christian Russians sometimes nurtured late revenge among now Ottoman Circassians, however not against Russians, but against Armenians. Many sources describe Circassian chieftains and armed bands among the executioners of the Armenian Genocide from 1915-1919, e.g. Kevorkian, Raymond. *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History*, I.B.Tauris 2011, p. 534

⁸⁵ Given the precarious amount on sources on this topic, it is not possible to even nearly number indigenous casualties.

Caucasus.⁸⁶ The Caucasian Wars can be put in a context of 19th century colonial warfare, with the Russians seeing it as a holy right to conquer a territory inhabited by “savage” and “unfaithful Mohammedans”.⁸⁷ Russian ferocity and brutality can only thus be explained. Nevertheless, Russia had to put up considerable forces and resources to overcome the resistance of the indigenous highlanders. Generations of Russian officers and soldiers served in the Caucasian Army. Thus, the impact of the Caucasian War on the Russian culture has been lasting. Scores of Russian poets and literates wrote about it. The Caucasians did not forget about it, either. The Great Caucasian Wars produced a poisonous heritage haunting Russia until today. Moreover, the Tsarist army’s dangerous belief that the employment of the utmost brutality could quell every rebellion and uprising was also a product of the Caucasian experience.

The Caucasus campaigns, which the Russians saw in essence as counterinsurgency campaigns against rebellious highlanders were nothing other than an endless sequence of punitive raids and instances of massacre of non-combatants to erode the insurgent’s support base. Strictly militarily speaking, little tactical or operative improvements had been accomplished. Politically, however, the Russians acted in a less crude way. With time, they learned about the social structures inside and between the highland populations. In this way they were sometimes able to see discord among them or split them up to co-opt potentially worthy allies. The true history of Shamil’s naib Hadji Murat narrated by Leo Tolstoy is indicative for the sometimes Byzantine nature of this war. Nevertheless, the Russian campaign based on a policy made of brute force without concessions nor mercy, which did not much to quell the root causes of the rebellion, but rather amplified it. This attitude since then shown by all Russian/Soviet governments stands out like a red line in the history of the North Caucasus. After nearly 100 years of active warfare, even if at a high price, the Russian Tsars had reached their goal, as described by the General staff of the Caucasian Army in 1864:

*In this year of 1864 a deed has been accomplished almost without precedent in history: not one of the mountaineer inhabitants remains on their former places of residence, and measures are being taken to cleanse the region in order to prepare it for the new Russian population.*⁸⁸

There can be no doubt that the merciless slaughter perpetrated particularly against the Circassians together with the subsequent deportation of almost all the survivors represents a genocide tout-court. At present, the Circassian genocide is recognized at state level only by

⁸⁶ See Uralnis, Boris Zesarewitsch. Bilanz der Kriege: die Menschenverluste Europas vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart. Germany, VEB Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1965., p. 320-328

⁸⁷ See Khodarkovsky, Michael. Of Christianity, Enlightenment and Colonialism: Russia in the North Caucasus, 1550-1800, The Journal of Modern History, Vol. 71 Issue 2, June 1999, p. 400

⁸⁸ Cit. Jersild, Austin. Orientalism and Empire: North Caucasus Mountain Peoples and the Georgian Frontier 1845–1917, McGill-Queen's Press 2002, p. 12

Georgia, which passed a law on this question in 2011.⁸⁹ Detractors will argue that this should be viewed as a result of the political enmity between Georgia and the Russian Federation, particularly after the Russian-Georgian War of 2008. This is a fact that should not be underestimated, but even Boris Yeltsin in his tenure as president of the Russian Federation admitted in May 1994 that Circassian resistance was legitimate and crimes had been made by Tsarist forces, however not using the term “genocide”.⁹⁰ In addition, in 1997 and 1998 there have been petitions to the Russian parliament demanding apologies from the leaders of Adygea and Kabardino-Balkaria.⁹¹ In any case, the Great Caucasian War turned out to be one of the longest, most merciless and bloody COIN campaigns ever, and its sound of clanging swords and musket shots reverberates until today in the Caucasus. This tragic legacy is present especially in the minds of young people, since stories about the war are being passed down there from generation to generation.⁹²

It seems clear that the Imamate imagined and partially implemented by Imam Shamil as a sort of pan-Islamic and pan-Caucasian confederation as only means to resist Russian expansion could be adopted only putting aside ethnic differences, instead emphasizing common heritage. The thirst for freedom of these wild and freely living highlanders did much of the rest to achieve unity. The most potent weapon in Shamil’s arsenal, however, was the mountaineers’ common religion: Islam. The religion of the Prophet was the smallest common denominator between people so similar and different at the same time. Of course, for Shamil, religion was not only means for the purpose, since he was not only a capable military commander, but a sincere and stern religious scholar. Thus, Shamil tried to forge a new, supra-ethnic identity out of the different tribes he led in war against Russian oppression. We could span an interesting historical parallel to the resistance of the Old Swiss confederation against Habsburg aggression, when common interest led to unity different highland entities with common heritage and language, but rather different self-perception.⁹³ Even the religious factor played a role there as the Swiss were among the first to embrace Christian reformism under Ulrich Zwingli. This happened also out of an opposition attitude against the arch-Catholic Habsburg rulers of the Holy Roman Empire.⁹⁴ Thus, these examples seem to confirm constructivist theory, implying that not only nationality, but also ethnicity are elements which evolve over time, depending on the needs of the people. While these processes take place over wide time slots because of the range of involved variables, dramatic events can induce a much faster revision or evolution of these concepts.

⁸⁹ See Barry, Ellen. Georgia Says Russia Committed Genocide, The New York Times, May 20, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/21/world/europe/21georgia.html?emc=eta1&_r=0, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁹⁰ See Cherkesskiy kongress (Adygeya) trebuyet priznat' genotsid adygskogo naroda, Regnum, July, 5, 2005, <http://www.regnum.ru/news/480210.html>, accessed March 30, 2014

⁹¹ See Goble, Paul. Circassians Demand Russian Apology For 19th Century Genocide, Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty Caucasus Report Volume 8 Issue 23, July 15, 2005, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1341730.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁹² Topics around the Caucasian War, Imam Shamil and General Ermolov were mentioned by nearly every interviewee.

⁹³ See Im Hof, Ulrich. *Geschichte der Schweiz*, Stuttgart 1991, p. 54-57

⁹⁴ See Dawson, Christopher. *The Dividing of Christendom*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2009, p. 105

However, religion had been constituting the main vehicle of resistance in the region already before Shamil's time. Since by the end of the 17th century Islam was not at all accepted in the whole Northern Caucasus, especially among highland Chechen and Ingush, the Russian narrative which considered the highlanders as unfaithful savages became a self-fulfilling prophecy, as Islam was almost universally adopted there precisely *because* of Russian aggression. While the Circassians were for the most part Muslims and practiced a more quietist form of Sunni Islam, the eastern tribes under Shamil adopted a more fundamentalist form of Islamic Sufism. Imam Shamil was a sheikh of the *Naqshbandiya tariqa*, a very austere and orthodox Sufi order. The *Naqshabndiyya* tradition has been putting very much emphasis to conform its teachings and mystical practices to a rigid interpretation of Sharia. Missionary zeal and high religious demands on its adherents characterize the order further.⁹⁵ The fact that the Circassians framed their fight against Russian colonialism in a more nationalist manner stems from their relative homogenous ethnic composition.

On the other hand, the Islamization under a then relative orthodox and militant brand of Islam of the people in the northeastern Caucasus derived from their heterogeneous ethnic composition, thus finding in religion their common motivation to fight Russian expansionism. Since each population was too small to hope to be able to confront the mighty Russian army on their own, the only possibility was to unite. Shamil thus tried to construct a new common identity based on common religion. Ethnic boundaries between Chechens, Ingush and the multitude of Dagestani nationalities had thus not been abolished, but built over by a supra-national element, that is religion. It is true, however, that these populations shared similar traditions and customs, albeit each jealously professed glorious ancestral descent myths. Nevertheless, what Fredrik Barth calls *the rules of membership*⁹⁶ – the rules by which one outsider can be accepted into a specific ethnic group, had been outflanked through a pan-Islamic approach. By this means, for example, even a Russian deserter could be welcomed to be part of the group, as long as he embraced Islam. Hence, the resistance against Russian invasion could be framed as an attack against Muslim believers – the result was the proclamation of holy war under the command of a holy man. Both elements proved to be powerful elements of mobilization. The fact that unruly and undisciplined, because of their proclivity to freedom, people like the Chechens and the many more Dagestani tribes submitted under the command of one ethnic outsider, no matter how great his religious authority was, speaks a lot about the scale of aggression from outside.

An interesting point is the fact that Shamil's branch of Islam, Sufism, was then one of distinct militancy. Sufism, as frequently mentioned nowadays in the hope to find a more peaceful model of Islam as a counterbalance to more radical forms, does by no means possess only a peaceful face. Many Islamic uprisings in the colonial era were promoted by Sufi sheiks and sects. The most prominent examples are those of the Algerian rebellion against French rule

⁹⁵ See Weismann, Itzhak. *The Naqshbandiyya: Orthodoxy and Activism in a Worldwide Sufi Tradition*, Routledge 2007, p. 6-10

⁹⁶ See Barth, Fredrik. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*. Norway, Waveland Press, 1998.

under Abdelkader al-Djezairi between 1830 and 1847 and the Sudanese uprising under Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi against the British in the 1880s. Both anti-colonialist leaders were Sufi sheikhs, interestingly both members of the relatively quietist *Quadiryya* order. Yesterday's Osama bin Laden⁹⁷ was in fact also a Sufi sheikh: The Fakir of Ipi waged a costly insurgency against the British from 1936 until 1947 in Pakistan's North Western Frontier Province.⁹⁸ Various armed groups in the Iraqi insurgency have been referring themselves to Sufi sects, particularly the Naqshbandyya.⁹⁹

In any case, one can imagine the shock and awe experienced by Russian troops, used as they were to routine and linear tactics when they were surprised by Shamil's spirited *murids* with their *kinzhals* and their ferocious combat style. Shamil's rule could also be cruel at times. Trespassers of Sharia were severely punished, as were traitors: More than once he displayed their severed heads publicly.¹⁰⁰ The partial departure from tribal customs and beliefs under the guise of uniform Islamization and the subsequent use of religion as ideological weapon marks thus a form of radicalization as a consequence of resistance and war against Russian rule. And even if the Tsars ultimately prevailed over the highlanders and Shamil, his legacy remained.

With the disappearance of the spirited *Murid* fighters after the last pockets of resistance among the Chechens and the Avars were destroyed by the Tsarist Army in the late 1860s, new forms of resistance emerged. Mostly peaceful and of passive nature, such as the latent refusal of adopting Russian laws or the non-payments of taxes, nevertheless other forms of armed resistance followed suit. So-called *abreks*, often operating alone or in small groups, ambushed patrols, robbed banks and made life hard for Russian envoys in the mountains. The figure of the *abrek* is a common one for most of the North Caucasian people. Originally, they were daring, fearless fighters who raided Cossack settlements and ambushed Russian patrols on their own. Since the end of the Great Caucasian War and the military defeat of the indigenous, the *abreks* were seen more and more as lonely fighters against Russian oppression and bearer of national resistance against colonization. The most famous of them was *abrek* Zelimkhan, a native of the highland village of Karachoy in the Vedensky district, which had always been a bastion of anti-Russian resistance. Folk songs, poems and tales have developed since about his person and his deeds are being told even today among Chechens, as he is still seen as a sort of Robin Hood who fought the Russians and helped the Chechens, especially the poor,

⁹⁷ See Mühlmann, Sophie. Der Vorgänger Osama bin Ladens, Die Welt, May 8th, 2007, <http://www.welt.de/politik/article858765/Der-Vorgaenger-Osama-bin-Ladens.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁹⁸ See: Warren, Alan. Waziristan, the Faqir of Ipi, and the Indian Army: The North West Frontier Revolt of 1936-37, Oxford University Press 2000

⁹⁹ E.g. the Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order (Jaysh Rijal al-Tariq al-Naqshabandi), which formed at the end of 2006 and has regained operational space after some idle time in connection with the ongoing Anbar clashes since January 2014, see: Knights, Michael, The JRTN Movement and Iraq's Next Insurgency, CTC Sentinel, July 1, 2011, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-jrtm-movement-and-iraq%E2%80%99s-next-insurgency>, accessed on January 18, 2023 and Ahmed, Ali/Abdullah, Omar, Iraq Update 2014 #12: New Ba'athist Militant Group and ISIS Capture Iraqi Soldiers and Take Over the Fallujah Dam, Institute for the Study of War, February 3, 2014, <http://iswiraq.blogspot.de/2014/02/iraq-update-2014-12-new-baathist.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

¹⁰⁰ See Smith, Sebastian. Allah's Mountains, IB Tauris 2006, p. 46

becoming a sort of legendary figure. After the end of collective resistance, individual resistance was thus protracted by these means.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹See Gould, Rebecca. Transgressive Sanctity: The Abrek in Chechen Culture, in: *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, Volume 8 Issue 2, 2007, p. 271-306

III. Atheism and Allah: Islam in the Soviet Union 1917-1991

Homo Islamicus had to be eradicated in order to make room for the Homo Sovieticus.

The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Politics

With the internal crisis of Tsarist Russia deepening, the craving for independence of the mountaineers revived and at the first opportunity, namely immediately after the February revolution in 1917, notables¹⁰² from almost all populations living in the eastern North Caucasus from Kabardino-Balkaria to Dagestan declared the independence from Russia and instituted the Mountainous Republic of the North Caucasus. This was an attempt to reinstate the unity among North Caucasians, although rather in a nationalistic than religious way. Whereas Imam Shamil appealed to the common Islamic credo of the North Caucasians, creating unity through the enforcement of Islamic law in a pan-Islamic way, his grandson Said Shamil and the other founders of the republic appealed more on nationalistic, pan-Caucasian feelings. The mountaineers managed to conserve their independence during the Civil War, managing to repulse Denikin's White Army. They eventually allied themselves with the Bolsheviks, since they had promised autonomy. Once the Whites were defeated, however, the Bolsheviks moved in retracting all promises made and immediately persecuting dissent. Parallel to the republic and later in response to Bolshevik action, a part of the Dagestani and Chechen populations again rose in revolt, joining the so-called Fourth Imamate. The new Imamate had been declared by Najmuddin Hotso, a Dagestani preacher from the homonymous village in the mountains. Both independent entities were soon crushed by the Red Army, with sporadic insurgent action until about 1925.¹⁰³

1. Revolts in the North Caucasus

The resistance of the mountaineers went on in a passive way, while even the harsh-acting Soviet authorities found it difficult to break de facto self-rule by the mountaineers in the highlands. Thus, the plains and its inhabitants were far more exposed to Soviet power and repression. The clan-based structure and the resulting solidarity among highlanders managed to secure survival even in the harshest times. The Famines of the early 1930s, provoked by Stalin's policy of requisition and starvation in his fight against the Kulaks, which depopulated large swaths of territory in the Ukraine and southern Russia, barely affected the highlands in

¹⁰² These included, prominently, Said Shamil, one of the grandsons of the Imam. See King, Charles. *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus*. United Kingdom, Oxford University Press, USA, 2008., p. 92

¹⁰³ Dunlop, John B.. *Russia confronts Chechnya: roots of a separatist conflict*. United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 40-42

the North Caucasus. The purges of the end-1930s too did not affect the highlands as well as Russian heartlands, since they were seen and ruled as colonies. As a result, only slight numbers of locals were party members, part of the administration or part of the intelligentsia, which were the sectors most affected by Stalin's purges.¹⁰⁴ Precisely the fact, however, that the Soviets continued colonial policy like their Tsarist predecessors, discriminating locals in every aspect of daily life, preventing them from pursuing higher studies or denying them work in public bodies, enraged locals. This, coupled to general harsh Soviet rule, and the never cooled down will for independence and self-rule made sure that the next revolt against what was perceived as an oppressive occupation was not far away. At the beginning of the Second World War, even before war broke out between the Soviet Union and Germany, merely inspired by the Finnish resistance against the soviet onslaught, the Chechen nationalist and poet Khasan Israilov and a couple of like-minded started an insurgency in the Chechen and Ingush highlands. The revolt spread fast, and the Soviet authorities soon found themselves in serious difficulty. Even Mairbek Sheripov, the former chief prosecutor of the Chechen-Ingush republic, joined the insurgency on Israilov's side.¹⁰⁵

Meanwhile, war had broken out with Nazi Germany, which put all available units on the front, giving the insurgents much room to operate. In 1942, with the German summer offensive towards the Caucasus gaining momentum, the German *Abwehr* formed a special group of *Brandenburgers*, which had to execute *Operation Shamil*, an attempt to coordinate with the Chechen and Ingush insurgents in the mountains. The agents were dropped by airlift on insurgent-held territory, where they tried unsuccessfully to co-opt the Israilov and other leaders of the resistance. The German party made it back to German-held territory only with luck: The German offensive had come to an end on the outskirts of Ordzhonikidze, today Vladikavkaz. On the other hand, the Germans had reached and occupied almost the whole Western Caucasus, including Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Kabardino-Balkaria, reaching Mount Elbrus on August 21, 1942. Significant numbers of locals joined the German forces as auxiliaries in the so-called *Ostlegionen*.¹⁰⁶ After the German retreat following the defeat at Stalingrad, Soviet forces reoccupied the lost territories, already harboring vengeance. The Chechens, Ingush, Karachays and Balkars were accused of collaborationism with the Germans. The Karachays were the first to pay for the support lent to the Germans. They were deported towards the east on October 12, 1943. According to some sources, in the first months of the exile, around a third of the Karachays died of famine and disease.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Avtorkhanov, Abdurakhman. *The North Caucasus Barrier: The Russian Advance Towards the Muslim World*. United Kingdom, Hurst, 1992., p. 183

¹⁰⁵ See Burds, Jeffrey,. *The Soviet War against 'Fifth Columnists': The Case of Chechnya, 1942–4*, pp. 291-297, in: *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 42 Issue 2, 2007

¹⁰⁶ See Hoffmann, Joachim. *Die Ostlegionen 1941- 1943 - Turkotataren, Kaukasier und Wolgafinnen im deutschen Heer*, Freiburg 1986

¹⁰⁷ See Bugai, Nikolai Fedorovich. *The Deportation of Peoples in the Soviet Union*. United States, Nova Science Publishers, 1996., pp. 112-18

2. Deportations of Chechens and Balkars

On February 23, 1944, the whole Chechen and Ingush populations were deported to Siberia and Kazakhstan in cattle wagons. Of the almost 500.000 Chechens and 100.000 Ingush tens of thousands did not survive the sad journey into exile because of the exceptional harshness of the transport conditions. Occasionally, massacres accompanied the execution of *Operation Lentil*. Almost all *auls* of southwestern Chechnya were wiped off the earth because this was the most important support area of the insurgency – thus, depriving the insurgency of their support base would help to extinguish it, so the Soviet calculus. People who could not be transferred immediately such as elders or small children, or because of heavy snowfall in the highlands were shot on the spot, as happened for example in the *aul* in Khaibakh, where hundreds of civilians were machine-gunned and torched alive inside an old barn. The deportation into the Kazakh exile, which was to last until 1957, after Stalin's death, can be seen as a genocidal act, since almost half of the Vainakh populations perished there.¹⁰⁸

The same fate awaited the Balkars one month later. On March 8, 1944, they too were transferred amongst inenarrable hardships towards Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In this context, the fact that tens of thousands of Chechens, Ingush, Karachays and Balkars were fighting as part of the Red Army on the front, doing so in most cases with honor and sense of duty. It is no case that army scouts who had to act behind enemy lines were frequently recruited among Chechens, and Chechens were among the very last defenders of the citadel of Brest-Litovsk at the beginning of Operation Barbarossa in 1941. After the deportations, the soldiers serving on the front were often left in the dark about the fate of their relatives. In other cases, they were demoted and exiled, too. The insurgency in the Chechen highlands continued in the meantime. Although for the insurgents it was increasingly difficult to survive in the harsh mountainous environment without effective support of the population who had been deported, the Soviets managed to crush the insurgency decisively only in 1944-45. New, refined methods for counter-insurgency warfare were adopted along with the well-known ones already employed by Yermolov and his successors in the 19th century. Network penetration, the planting of agents and informants as well as the employment of every available weapon, including the poisoning of food destined for the insurgents, all of this was employed in a careful orchestrated effort to quell the revolt.¹⁰⁹ Khasan Israilov was killed at the end of 1944. Isolated groups fought on for decades.¹¹⁰ The very last fighter remaining through the following decades, Khasukha Magomadov, fell in a KGB ambush in 1976, more than thirty years after the onset of armed insurgency.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ See Burds, Jeffrey. The Soviet War against Fifth columnists: The Case of Chechnya, 1942-44, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 42 Issue 2, 2007, p. 267-314

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ See Gammer, Moshe. *The Lone Wolf and the Bear, Three Centuries of Chechen Defiance of Russian Rule*, C. Hurst Publishers, London 2006, p. 163

¹¹¹ See Abrek Khasuka Magomedov, <http://www.waynakh.com/eng/2008/05/abrek-khasukha-magomadov/>, accessed on January 18, 2023. The striking similarities between the counterinsurgency tactics employed by the Russians then and today will be underlined in one of the chapters ahead.

The Chechen and Ingush populations however, were not the only ones to actively fight Soviet power in those times. The Balkar and the Karachays arose against Soviet power both before and after German occupation in the summer of 1942. Although people were shot and abused under the Germans too, the locals were encouraged to form armed groups to put pressure on the eventually returning Red Army. In Kabardino-Balkaria's Balkar region, on the slopes of Mount Elbrus, already before the German occupation in the summer of 1942 there were 9 *bandgrupy* with almost 300 terrorist and counter-revolutionary elements, with 44 groups and close to 1.000 members after the German retreat in 1943. These groups consisted in large part of deserters and disgruntled people, although there were not few instances of party and administration representatives who joined the insurgent groups. As they were bound together by obvious hatred of the Soviet system and the will to survive, they seem not to have operated in a concerted way and had no political or military superstructure. Rather they constituted a small galaxy of isolated acts of resistance and survival against the Soviet Leviathan.¹¹²

This forgotten rebellion was more about surviving than overthrowing Soviet power in the Balkar homelands. The situation in Karachaevo-Cherkessia was entirely similar. Consequently, the acts of the Balkar and Karachay insurgents consisted in only very isolated attacks against the Soviet power structure and much more raids on Kolkhoz farms and the theft of cattle to sustain themselves in the breadless mountains.¹¹³ Since they had not been able to operate in a similar way like the much better organized Chechen insurgency, the Balkar insurgency found a quick end with the deportation of its social base, namely the entire Balkar population in March 1944. Of course, the insurgency, framed as "collaboration with the German enemy" was probably one of the main causes of the ensuing deportation that followed, targeting for the same reasons the rebellious Chechens and Ingush as well. It must be said, however, that the highlanders at the time did not generally reject Soviet authority: Many times, more as the insurgents operating in Chechnya and Balkaria had been enrolled in the Red Army, and they served the Soviet Union rather well.¹¹⁴

In addition to the already deported, shortly after the end of the Second World War many Balkars and Karachays who had served in Hitler's Ostlegionen and had surrendered mostly to the English and the Americans were forcibly deported back to the Soviet Union like Cossack and Ukrainian collaborators. Most ended up shot or had to serve long sentences in the GULAG. In the meantime, the deported had been resettled to the arid steppes of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan where they had to work in closed agricultural complexes which they were not allowed to leave. They tried to survive physically as well as culturally, maintaining customs and traditions from their homeland to strengthen national identity.¹¹⁵ The Vainakhs and the

¹¹² Statiev, Alexander. The Nature of Anti-Soviet Armed Resistance, 1942–44 The North Caucasus, the Kalmyk Autonomous Republic, and Crimea, in: *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* Vol. 6, Issue 2, 2005, 281–314

¹¹³ See Bougai, Nikolai. The Deportation of Peoples in the Soviet Union, New York 1996, pp. 50-52 and 74-79

¹¹⁴ See Tishkov, Valery. Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society. United Kingdom, University of California Press, 2004, p. 200

¹¹⁵ See Williams, Brian Glyn. Inferno in Chechnya: The Russian-Chechen Wars, the Al Qaeda Myth, and the Boston Marathon Bombings. Lebanon, University Press of New England, 2015.

other ejected populations were permitted to return to their country of origin in 1957 by the Khrushchev government in its internal thaw era after its denunciation of the Stalin regime in 1956. The returnees found their old homes occupied by Russians sent after the deportations to colonize the desert landscape. Often, local neighboring populations who had not been deported were forcibly resettled to deportee's homeland areas. In a few cases, the new situation provoked even border corrections. The city of Khasavyurt and the Novolaksky District, once part of Chechnya, was assigned to Dagestan after its colonization by other local ethnic groups such as Laks and Kumyks. The Ingush Prigorodny Raion had been given to the Ossetians, who actively opposed the returning Ingush – a question that was to be settled in 1992 in a short, but bloody encounter.

Similarly, soon after the return from exile in 1958, anti-Chechen riots broke out in Grozny among the Russian population. At first, the authorities did not intervene, but as government buildings were occupied and looted by the crowd, Soviet police dispersed the rioters. Although this outbreak of racial hatred was denounced later as “chauvinistic”, no one was sent to trial. The largely Russian administration of the republic however pursued discriminatory policies against the now again mainly Chechen population. Public workplaces were largely forbidden for the indigenous, as well as public housing and so on. The teaching of the Chechen language was not resumed, Chechen culture was largely outlawed, and instead the deeds of the Russian conquerors of the Caucasus such as General Ermolov were glorified.¹¹⁶ Much the same happened throughout the North Caucasus, the scheme was always the same: Local culture was to be repressed in favor of russification in the long-term. Demographics, however, spoke another language. Due to much higher birth rates among mainly rural-based locals and Russian city dwellers, this goal could not be reached. On the contrary, the returnees slowly regained their once lost homeland, although the authorities tried to enforce their settling in the plain lowlands for better control and to avoid too much identification with their rebellious highlander-forefathers.¹¹⁷

The return from exile had been harder for some Ingush, however. The Prigorodny District in the western part of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR, which was depopulated by the deportation of the Ingush to Central Asia, had been assigned to the North Ossetian ASSR by Stalin. The empty Ingush villages were so repopulated by Ossetians, who clearly felt no joy when originally local Ingush came back from exile. The Ingush were made to feel overpowering Ossetian rule from the first day of their return. Overzealous Ossetian functionaries had to be replaced by ethnic Russian ones by the soviet administration because they alienated the local Ingush with their aggressive stance against them. The Ingush felt discriminated by the new master of their former territory, and the Ossetians felt threatened in their prosperity by the Ingush returnees. Stalin's divide-and-rule policy would bear terrible fruits one day, when it would come to a reckoning, people felt. Actually, this day came nearer by the weeks. Ethnic tensions rose over time until the first clashes between Ossetians and Ingush broke out in 1982,

¹¹⁶ Dunlop, John B.. *Russia confronts Chechnya: roots of a separatist conflict*. United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 1998., p. 79-81

¹¹⁷ See Seely, Robert. *Russo-Chechen Conflict, 1800-2000: a deadly embrace*. Kiribati, Frank Cass, 2001, p. 86-88

leaving a few dead on both sides on the streets. Since Soviet power at the time was of course strong enough to put down the fight, no real solution was ever thought of by the administration. And so, the ethnic tensions did not fade out, but grew further under the nice surface of Soviet everyday life.

3. Revival, Solidarity, Independence and War 1970-1997

As the Soviet Union was flourishing since the end of the 1960s and people lived relatively well, the grand design of the creation of “Soviet people” seemed to succeed, even among Caucasians. Disadvantaging policies and repression, even if more subtle and hidden, continued, but life was not bad at that time in the North Caucasus. The always present and simmering ethnic tensions had abated over time and even religion seemed to have been successfully pushed apart in people’s daily life by the state.¹¹⁸ Russian paternalism, however, continued until the last days of the Soviet Union, with an overrepresentation of ethnic Russians in all public and party organs. The ethnic power structure of what then was the Chechen-Ingush Republic in late soviet times is a good example: The proportion in all Soviet organs had to be always in a relation of 5:4:1, meaning half the representatives being Chechens, 40% Russians and 10% Ingush. Of course, this did not reproduce the real ethnic picture to the advantage of the largely urban Russian population in Chechnya and Ingushetia.¹¹⁹ This picture went through all aspects of society at the time, with the highlanders almost always at a disadvantageous position relatively to the “titular” ethnicities inside the Soviet Union.

Although a certain amount of prosperity had been reaching the Caucasus region as well, local Russians were advantaged, so that North Caucasians often had to pursue internal migration to find work elsewhere in the Soviet Union. For example, in Chechnya, the brunt of the economy, like the oil and machine sectors, as well as health, education and social structures were dominated by the largely urbanized Russian population, although they represented only 24% of Chechnya’s 1,2 Million people in 1989. The overwhelming Chechen majority worked in the agriculture and in the construction sector, often outside of the republic.¹²⁰ Many young men were hired as workers for colossal project like the construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline in the Far-East, or of giant dams on the Siberian streams. In the last years of the Soviet Union, however, the informal sector was the fastest growing sector of the economy, particularly in poor and backward regions like the North Caucasus. This picture reproduced more or less the situation in the whole Northern Caucasus during the 1980s. Since then, many young Caucasians have been going, often only seasonally, to the big cities traditionally to sell fruit and vegetables or whatever else they could. The other side of the growing informal business, and it is no wonder, was of course the growing of criminal activity among the highlanders. The naturally fierce attitude of the mountaineers, coupled with strong clan

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 89

¹¹⁹ Zurcher, Christoph. *The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus*. United Kingdom, NYU Press, 2009, p. 110

¹²⁰ See Wood, Tony. *Chechnya – The Case for Independence*, London 2007, p.44

structures, criminal energy and irresistible occasions led to the formation of a criminal network comparable up to a point to traditional mafia-like structures in the Union's and then Federation's big cities.¹²¹

The Red Army made no exception in the discrimination of Muslim Caucasians. The highlanders, especially the Chechens, were renowned for their leadership skills and tactical intuition, so that they were often promoted to NCOs, but only very rarely they were allowed climbing the ladder higher up.¹²² For those who could not abstain from the open profession of religion, however, life was made hard by the Soviet authorities. Although the Christian Orthodox church was persecuted and hindered as well as the Islamic faith, the perception at the time was that the crackdown on Islam as a professed religion was a bit harder because of a stronger relation between religion and ethnic identity among Muslims.¹²³ Whereas common worshippers were rarely pursued harshly after the Stalin era, the religious establishment was closely watched and penetrated by the Soviet secret police. For example, those who wished to study Islam or were candidates for the position of village mullahs or mosque imams were admitted to Islamic theology seminars, mostly in Bukhara, but frequently on the condition that they were ready to act as informants throughout their career for the KGB.¹²⁴ Islamic clergymen and mosques had to be registered and approved by one of the various state-backed Spiritual Directorates.¹²⁵ These structures had the task to control and supervise the activities of the various religious substructures down to the local mosques and were under control of the MVD and the KGB.¹²⁶

Anything that had to do with religion and its profession was closely watched by the authorities, because religion and faith were seen as obsolete and vestiges of the past in the ideological struggle to accomplish true communism. In addition to it, churches and mosques were of course seen as lairs for potential opposition.¹²⁷ The repression of religion had come in various waves since the beginning of Soviet rule. After the persecutions of the early Stalin era followed the partial rehabilitation of religion during the war to maximize the fighting spirit of the people. After Stalin's death followed new persecution, this time ordered by Khrushchev. After a somewhat more tolerant period from the mid-1960s to 1970, under Brezhnev the anti-religious campaign was renewed until the onset of the Gorbachev era. That said, of the over

¹²¹ See Seely, Robert. *Russo-Chechen Conflict, 1800-2000: A Deadly Embrace*, Frank Cass Publishers, New York, 2001, p. 184-185

¹²² Tishkov, Valery. *Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society*. Germany, University of California Press, 2004, p. 25

¹²³ Even in the Gorbachev era Muslims were disadvantaged in capitalizing on the progressive opening of the regime on the religious front, see Ramet, Petra-Sabrina, *Religious policy in the era of Gorbachev*, in: *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, edited by Ramet, Petra-Sabrina, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 40

¹²⁴ See H.I., Interview July 15, 2012

¹²⁵ After the German attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, Stalin again allowed religious worship to maximize the mobilization of society. This had to happen under strict supervision by the state, however. For what concerned Muslims, four Spiritual Directorates were established; one each for Central Asia and Kazakhstan, European Russia and Siberia, North Caucasus and Dagestan and Transcaucasia.

¹²⁶ Mullojonov Parviz. *The Islamic Clergy in Tajikistan*, in: *Islam in Politics in Russia*, edited by Dudoignon, Stephane A./Hisao, Komatsu, Routledge, New York 2001, p.228

¹²⁷ See Ro'i, Yaacov. *Islam in the Soviet Union*. London, Hurst, 2000, p. 11 f.

26.000 mosques existing in Tsarist Russia before the First World War, with only 200 remaining at the end of the Brezhnev era and still only 600 officially registered mosques in the whole Soviet Union in 1987.¹²⁸ Some territories were hit harder by religious persecution than others. The different approach had much to do with the stance of the respective population. The always rebellious Chechens were virtually deprived of their religious rights for a much longer time and much more aggressively than others. Between 1943 and 1978, not one official mosque was allowed in the Chechen-Ingush Republic.¹²⁹

Most Muslims in the Soviet Union, however, had not given up their faith despite religious persecution. Since the few registered and state-controlled mosques were too few and too wide apart to give appropriate host to the Millions of Soviet Muslims, besides the official structures there was a great number of informal worshipping places. Often tarnished as “teahouses” or club rooms, these unregistered mosques were harder to control for the authorities. Since no established Islamic clergy is required at the grassroot level, it was not difficult to organize Islamic rites in the villages of the North Caucasus. Particularly in Dagestan, whose Islamic tradition was among the strongest in the Soviet Union, people had never stopped to follow Islam as they had done for many centuries. Even the Sufi *tariqats* continued to operate there, as well as in Chechnya, under the surface.¹³⁰

4. The Revival of Islam

Contrary to widespread belief, the awakening of Islam in the Soviet Union did not begin only with the onset of the Gorbachev era, but much earlier. In the North Caucasus, this process can be dated back to the 1970s.¹³¹ The Sufi *tariqats* present there, chiefly the *Naqshbandiya* and the *Qadiriya*, had never been eradicated as they continued operating in the underground. The wide network of informal mosques outside of Soviet control expanded ever more and harbored an increasing potential of followers already at the beginning of the 1980s. The political and economic liberalization brought up by Gorbachev awakened however a more political form of Islam. Religion came out in the open as it could now be professed and lived freely. In most cases, people had forgotten neither religion nor factual discrimination precisely on the grounds of religion and ethnicity in the ideally egalitarian Soviet system. The Afghan War was another catalyzing factor in the revival of Islam. News about the brutality of the war and disenchanted Muslim veterans contributed to a build-up of a sort of secret solidarity with their Afghan Muslim fellows among Soviet Muslims. The tenacity of the Afghan resistance, characterized mainly by Islamic values, and their eventual victory over the godless Soviets and their stooges, impressed many Soviet Muslim activists and emboldened their stance against the Soviet regime. In fact, carefully planned cross-border operations by

¹²⁸ Ramet, Petra-Sabrina. Religious policy in the era of Gorbachev, in: Religious Policy in the Soviet Union, edited by Ramet, Petra-Sabrina. Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 40

¹²⁹ See Broxup, Marie. Islam and Atheism in the North Caucasus, in: Religion, State and Society, Volume 9 Issue 1, 1981, p. 40-49

¹³⁰ See Bobrovnikov, Vladimir. “Islamic Revival” in Dagestan: 25 Years Later, in: Islamogy – Journal for Studies of Islam and Muslim societies, Vol. 7, Issue 1, 2017, p. 34

¹³¹ See Aybak, Tunc. Politics of the Black Sea: Dynamics of Cooperation and Conflict, Tauris Academic Studies 2001, p. 232

the Afghan mujahedeen with rocket attacks and distribution of religious literature on Soviet territory aimed precisely at the destabilization of the Soviet system among its Muslim population.¹³²

Thus, religion became a strong vehicle of opposition and socio-political transformation in the coming upheaval. During the second half of the 1980s, Islam in the North Caucasus and particularly in Dagestan transformed itself in an aggressive political factor hostile towards the system.¹³³ Mosques were erected with or without official permission and crowds of believers held rallies demanding more religious and political rights. Occasionally, armed action was undertaken to push the Islamic agenda: In 1994, the mufti of Dagestan was ousted by a popular uprising, because he was suspected to be an agent of the state security.¹³⁴ Similar situations arose also in the other North Caucasian Muslim republics. The official religious organs controlled by the state, the infamous Spiritual Directorates, suffered a breakdown following the fall of the Soviet system. Originally organized in four large regional branches, they eventually divided to national branches, and, as it was the case in Dagestan, fractured even further along ethnic cleavage lines. Although the official religious institutions retained some credibility among the elites and the educated middle class, their credibility was gone by virtue of their tight association with the state and security organs. In May 2000, for example, of 1.585 operating Dagestani mosques, only 212 recognized the authority of the local Muftiyat.¹³⁵

Other longstanding Islamic elements in the Northeastern Caucasus strived to come out from the underground at the time: The powerful Sufi brotherhoods. Since they were not associated with official power and had been the main structures which had contributed to maintain the Islamic faith alive and well in comparison to other Caucasian Muslim populations, even during exile, as it was the case for the Chechens and the Ingush. In Chechnya and in Dagestan, they were able to gradually occupy the official religious institutions with fellow *Tariqatists*. Sufi elders and sheiks soon connected fairly well with the ruling elite, particularly in Dagestan. The Sufi movements had thus evolved from an underground opposition element to a component of institutional dominance.¹³⁶ The local administration in Dagestan and Chechnya adapted to their entry of religion in politics even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, as the old political elites tried to bridge over to the new state of affairs.

Although the Sufi Brotherhoods remained the single most important vehicle of religion in the northeastern Caucasus, a new form of Islam, alien to the North Caucasus, appeared. Salafism, locally indiscriminately called Wahabism, spread out from the wealthy Gulf States to the Caucasus at the beginning of the 1990s. Influential charity organizations like al-Haramain, al-Igasa al-Islamiyya and Tayba began to operate also in the Caucasus financing humanitarian

¹³² Grau, Lester W.. *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan*. United States, National Defense University Press, 1996, p. 40

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 43

¹³⁴ See Ware, Robert B.. *Dagestan: Russian Hegemony and Islamic Resistance in the North Caucasus*, p. 90

¹³⁵ See Bobrovnikov, Vladimir. "Islamic Revival" in Dagestan: 25 Years Later, in: *Islamogy – Journal for Studies of Islam and Muslim societies*, Vol. 7, Issue 1, 2017, p. 111

¹³⁶ Ware, Robert B.. *Dagestan: Russian Hegemony and Islamic Resistance in the North Caucasus*, p. 97

aid as well as the building of new mosques and madrasas, and establishing close contacts with some of the newly formed Wahabi groups and jamaats.¹³⁷ Given the paucity of resources and welfare and the enormous scale of corruption and thievery in the last years of the Soviet Union and even more later, these usually well-funded groups of course attracted scores of alienated, disgruntled or idealistic young guys. The introduction of Wahabism/Salafism to the North Caucasus, an area in which this radical brand of Islam was alien, brought new conflicts and sometimes internecine violence inside the Muslim community. This stemmed from the fact that Salafism of course conflicted with the official clergy of the various Muftiyats which were subordinated to the state. The notion that all power stems from Islam and nothing else, however, is at the very core of Salafism.

Thus, the state administration of the Soviet Union especially, but also that of the Russian Federation later, was considered illegitimate (*taghut*) and thus rejected passively or actively. A similar conflict ensued between the Salafist notion of “pure Islam”, which insisted upon Sharia as its exclusive source of right and legitimation, and traditional customs which proposed the more flexible and democratic customary law (*adat*) as a longstanding means of jurisdiction. Even Imam Shamil had achieved the imposition of Sharia as the only source of jurisdiction only temporarily. Much more destructive potential was harbored by the Salafi rejection of Sufism. Sufi practices included among others the veneration of saints and holy places as well as mystic chants and danced prayers (*zikr*). These were deemed as practice of polytheism (*shirk*) and thus as heretic by the Salafis. Sufi customs, however, were deeply rooted in the northeastern Caucasus thanks to powerful Sufi brotherhoods strongly anchored in society. This complicated constellation of actors and ideologies would not only lead to confrontation with a state deemed as illegitimate, but to internal conflict among the Muslim communities of the North Caucasus as well over time.¹³⁸

Islamic activists planned however to bring Islam actively and permanently in the field of politics, organizing informal groups with the goal of organizing themselves union-wide. Back to the end of the 1980s, for political Islam the occasion to come out in the open and really play in the arena of politics arose when the CPSU was forced to give up its political monopoly in 1990, allowing new parties. The Islamic Revival Party (IRP), an Islamist party which advocated a return to Islamic core values and the establishment of an Islamic society was among the first being formed. The party had its origins in Central Asia, although it had the goal to reach out to all Soviet Muslims, as it was registered as “All-Soviet Union Muslim Political Organization”.¹³⁹ The IRP was founded during an all-Muslim conference in Astrakhan in 1990, largely by Tatar intellectuals, although its real power base by the numbers was to be found in Central Asia and the Caucasus.¹⁴⁰ As a matter of fact, many North

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ See Knysh, Alexander. Contextualizing the Salafi-Sufi Conflict (From the Northern Caucasus to Hadramawt), in: Middle Eastern Studies Vol. 43, No. 4, 2007, pp. 503-530

¹³⁹ See Ware, Robert B.. Dagestan: Russian Hegemony and Islamic Resistance in the North Caucasus, p.96. The IRP is still active in Tajikistan, being the only officially allowed Islamist party in the whole of Central Asia.

¹⁴⁰ See Rashid, Ahmed. Jihad – The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2002, p. 97-98

Caucasians ideologues held influential posts in the party structure. An ethnic Avar from Dagestan, Akhmed-Kadji Akhtaev was among the organizers of the conference in Astrakhan became its head. He organized the party at the union level together with other emerging Dagestani Islamist leaders, such as the Salafist brothers Ilyas and Bagautdin Kebedov, who would play a crucial role in the North Caucasian conflict a few years later.¹⁴¹ With the split of the Central Asian states, however, the unitary, all-union IRP was disbanded in favor of respective national branches of the party.¹⁴²

The IRP was not homogenously represented in the North Caucasus, however, and neither did its ideologues pursue a homogenous agenda. Whereas in the northwestern Caucasus the Islamic revival was slower and more attached to informal groups, the IRP retained stronger influence in Dagestan and Chechnya. Akhtaev himself was a pan-Islamist who believed in a common Islamic North Caucasian state and rejected Sufi belief advocating a more pure form of Islam. He sought to transform Dagestan and the North Caucasus in an Islamic society by virtue of Islam's moral and spiritual superiority. He rejected any violent forms of struggle, namely jihad, however, on the grounds that the North Caucasus would lie in a buffer zone between Islam and Christianity. As a result, Akhtaev came to be regarded as a "moderate Wahhabi" at the time, although at the time he was probably influenced also by the modus operandi of the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁴³ Akhtaev pursued his reformist views in Dagestan in vain, however. A group of young Imams he had nurtured and who had ascended in the clergy now finally independent from state control were co-opted by *Tariqatists* and split themselves from Akhtaev.

In Dagestan, Salafism met fertile ground. Already since the times of the collectivization under Stalin's rule, when thousands of Dagestanis were forced to resettle from the mountains in the plains for better control, closed and tight-knit groups practicing very strict forms of Islam formed in the lowlands among eradicated Dagestanis snatched from their respective ethnic groups and societies. When Wahabism/Salafism was brought from outside in the last years of Soviet rule, local proponents of a rigid interpretation of Islam found the in Wahabism/Salafism the proper model suiting them. Others groups shaped themselves entirely along the Salafist credo brought from outside. Among the most radical advocates of Salafism at the beginning of the 1990s in Dagestan were the Kebedov brothers. They belonged to the former group and began to spread Salafism from the lowlands into the highlands. Thus, they initially concentrated on missionary activity. Although they had been instructed in Arabic language and Islamic theology by Sufi elders, they later split from them, repudiating all Sufi teachings and rituals, labeling these practices as "polytheistic" because of the Sufi customary

¹⁴¹ See Bobrovnikov, Vladimir. Post-Socialist Forms of Islam – Caucasian Wahabis, Leiden University, ISIM Newsletter 7/01, March 2001, p. 29

https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/11963/news1_7.pdf?sequence=1, accessed on January 18, 2023, and Ware, Robert B.. Dagestan: Russian Hegemony and Islamic Resistance in the North Caucasus, p. 96

¹⁴² See Rashid, Ahmed. Jihad – The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2002, p. 97-98

¹⁴³ See Ware, Robert B.. Dagestan: Russian Hegemony and Islamic Resistance in the North Caucasus, p. 96

veneration of saints and holy places.¹⁴⁴ Soon, Bagautdin Kbedov published a book, “Namaz” (prayer) on basic Islamic principles which was reprinted many times in hundreds of thousands of copies. The base of Kbedov’s activity was a Koranic school named al-Hikma in Kizil-Yurt which comprised hundreds of pupils, thus accelerating the pace of Salafi dawaa enormously. Conversely, the Sufis had successfully taken over the official clergy which was now dominated by Avar *Tariqatists*. The main ideologue and religious figure of the Sufi movement at the time was Sayid-Efendi Cherkeyevsky, a figure which could not be ignored even by those staying on top of the state administration in Dagestan.¹⁴⁵

The Chechen branch of the IRP was shaped ideologically in a similar way, although its exponents were less moderate already from the beginning. The core group of the ideologues of today’s Caucasus Emirate among Chechens comprised all leading figures of the IRP at the time: Islam Khalimov, Isa Umarov, Supyan Abdulaev, Adam Umalatov and Movladi Udugov. Initially, they played no big role and were essentially sidelined by the much more powerful Sufi brotherhoods. The two great branches present in the Northeastern Caucasus, the *Qadiriya* and the *Naqshbandiya* had a whole variety of local offshoots. Among the most important were the Kunta-Hadji, since as an offshoot of the *Qadiriya tariqat*, it had not been at the forefront of the great Caucasian War in the 19th century. That meant that *Qadiriya* followers were willing to accept Russian rule on the façade, although opposing it internally and secretly. This meant however, that it had been possible for them to act as qadis and serve in the administration under Tsarist rule. Whereas the Qadiri Sufis perform loud and impressive rituals such as the zikr, the Naqshbandi are more secretive and quite in the execution of their rites.¹⁴⁶

Things changed for the worse during Soviet rule. In the perestroika years both *Tariqas* managed to reorganize, and as it was customary, they were reconstituted according to clan-based affiliations. At that time however, the Qadiri Sufis were the most powerful religious faction in Chechnya. There were many competing sheiks and elders who exercised real power, not only in religious matters, among their disciples. One of the younger emerging scholars was Akhmad Kadyrov. He was born in the Kazakh exile near Karaganda in 1951. He was an offshoot of the Benoy clan, which had its power base in Benoy in Chechnya’s southeast as well as in the eastern plains around Kurchaloy. After the study of Islamic theology in Bukhara and Tashkent, he returned to Chechnya at the end of the 1980s. As an ambitious Imam, he founded the Kavkaz Islamic Institute in Kurchaloy in 1990, actively promoting religion and Sufism. In addition, he organized the first pilgrimage to Mecca (hadji) from Chechnya.¹⁴⁷ After some dubious actions he seems however to have commanded little

¹⁴⁴ See Bobrovnikov, Vladimir. Post-Socialist Forms of Islam – Caucasian Wahabis, Leiden University, ISIM Newsletter 7/01, March 2001, p. 29

¹⁴⁵ See Ware, Robert B.. The Fire Below: How the Caucasus Shaped Russia. United Kingdom, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013, p. 97

¹⁴⁶ See Yemelianova, Galina M. “Sufism and Politics in the North Caucasus.” Nationalities Papers, vol. 29, no. 4, Dec. 2001, pp. 661–688, accessed 21 Apr. 2022.

¹⁴⁷ See Wood, Tony. Chechnya: The case for independence. United Kingdom, Verso Books, 2007, p.102

respect among ordinary Chechens.¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, his influence eventually grew, since he became chief mufti under Dudaev at the outbreak of the war in 1995.

With the appointment of Doku Zavgaev as secretary of the local communist party in 1987, informal organizations were allowed. Among others, Sufi brotherhoods profited most from this liberalization measure. Studies made by Russian arabists state that at the end of the 1980s, in the Chechen-Ingush republic operated more than 200 Sufi groups with more than 12.000 active members.¹⁴⁹ The official, state-controlled clergy was largely abolished with Chechnya's de-facto split from the Soviet Union after the election of Dudaev in 1991. Thus, traditional Sufism grew in importance, albeit Dudaev refused to accept religion as main state ideology, as explicitly stated in the new Chechen constitution of 1992. Dudaev resisted even more calls from the radicals to impose sharia and declare Chechnya as an Islamic state. In this phase of transition before the beginning of the first Chechen War in 1994, the radicals played no big role in the religious life of Chechnya. Although the Chechen radicals at the time did not necessarily maintain a true Salafi stance, as in Dagestan they stood however very well in opposition to Sufism. In doing so, they largely alienated themselves to the local society, which was very well linked to the sufi creed and its structures. Moreover, the radicals as usual rejected the customary law and the Chechen clan system, advocating pan-Islamist theses and universal brotherhood between all Muslims. These factors taken together prevented them from making deep inroads into society. Clearly, this would change with the impending war which devastated not only the country, but the Chechen social tissue as well, providing fertile ground for radical ideologies.¹⁵⁰

In the northwestern Caucasus, the situation was very different. There, religion had been sidelined much more efficiently during the communist period. The Balkar and Karachay, equally to the Chechens and Ingush, had been struck strongly by the deportation, and although they were successful in preserving their ethnicity, they had lost much more touch with religion. Whereas in Chechnya and Ingushetia the *Tariqats*, who had never stopped existing and operating, were both social and religious structures and thus had largely prevented the loss of religion, there were no comparable institutions among the Balkars and Karachays. Moreover, the customary law (*adat*) was of greater importance for the preservation of identity than religion; similarly to the situation in Chechnya, *adat* and *shariah* somehow stood in conflict with each other, given the flexibility of the former in contrast to the rigidity of the latter. In addition, their less tight-knit societies in comparison with the Chechen and Ingush ones were possibly more vulnerable to cultural inroads from the outside. In addition, Russian

¹⁴⁸ See Politkovskaya, Anna. *A Small corner of Hell: Dispatches from Chechnya*, Chicago 2003, p. 140. Kadyrov was accused to have embezzled funds gathered for the performance of the said Haji. In any case, he was not an undisputed figure at the time.

¹⁴⁹ See Ermakov, Igor, *Islam v Rossii i Srednei Azii. Mezhdunarodnyj fond kul'tur narodov vostoka* Moscow, 1993, Lotos, p. 25

¹⁵⁰ See Akhmadov, Ilyas, and Lanskoj, Miriam. *The Chechen Struggle: Independence Won and Lost*. United Kingdom, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 23ff.

ethnic presence has been much more pronounced in northwestern Caucasus than in its eastern counterpart.¹⁵¹

Thus, people there had to start with religion virtually from scratch. This is the reason why young Islamic theologians who had been religiously educated abroad, quickly gained considerable following. Precisely because of their education abroad, where Salafism had been gaining ground thanks to Saudi wealth, the Afghan war and upheavals in the Islamic world and because of their belief that only a new start with what they saw as the purest form of Islam would bring the lost Muslims of northwestern Caucasus on the right path, Salafism became their choice. At the beginning of the 1990s, Anzor Astemirov, Musa Mukozhev and Rasul Kudaev were the most prominent in a new generation of young Imams who sought to rebuild Islamic faith among the people of Kabardino-Balkaria. They preached a moderate form of Salafism, or “pure Islam” as it was called, with the ultimate goal of the creation of an Islamic society. Although they stood in opposition to the official clergy because of its connection with state and security organs, he never advocated violence to reach this objective, which, should be pursued by reformist means instead. This is why, given the low level of religiosity among his people to start with, the young Imams advocated collaboration with the authorities initially. Already existing informal Islamic structures were formed into one Islamic community in the second half of the 1990s. The enthusiasm of the youth for a new beginning and the sincere desire for a pure faith led to a fast growing of the *jamaat*, which already a few years later counted large numbers of followers, chiefly among the young rural population.¹⁵²

Musa Mukozhev, born 1967, had studied Islamic theology in Nalchik and Jordan in the second half of the 1980s and worked a few years for the local DUM in a leading position. In 1997, he chose to assume the position of Imam and preacher in a suburb of Nalchik, where he soon managed to gather the local youth around him. Thanks to his religious knowledge and charisma, over time his lectures at the Friday prayers became so popular that he attracted people from all over the region, even from outside. It is therefore not wondering that he was elected *amir*¹⁵³ of the Islamic *Jamaat*¹⁵⁴, the moderate Salafist community in Kabardino-Balkaria at the time, in 1998.¹⁵⁵ Anzor Astemirov was born in 1976 and was the scion of one of the noblest Kabardian families. Astemirov studied Islamic law and theology in at King Saud University in Rhyiad, Saudi-Arabia. After his comeback, he co-founded a study institute known as Islamic Center together with Mukozhev and Ruslan Nakhushhev, a mysterious former KGB official at the end of the 1990s. The precise role of Nakhushhev has remained a matter of debate. Some argue he infiltrated the Islamic movement in Kabardino-Balkaria on

¹⁵¹ See Richmond, Walter. *The Northwest Caucasus: Past, Present, Future*. N.p., Taylor & Francis, 2008, p. 104ff.

¹⁵² See Ware, Robert B.. *The Fire Below: How the Caucasus Shaped Russia*. United Kingdom, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013, p. 34

¹⁵³ An *amir* (arab.) is the political, religious and military leader of an Islamic community.

¹⁵⁴ *Jamaat*: Islamic community, also possible in a military sense (arab.).

¹⁵⁵ See Tilsova, Fatima. *Who's Who in the KBR Jamaat*, Jamestown Foundation, North Caucasus Analysis Volume 8 Issue 26, June 28, 2007,

[http://www.jamestown.org/programs/nc/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=4272&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=189&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/nc/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=4272&tx_ttnews[backPid]=189&no_cache=1), accessed on January 18, 2023

behalf of the security services as a provocateur, or alternatively, to maintain control about it. It is more likely, however, that he was sincere in his action, acting as a sort of legal adviser for the Islamic *Jamaat* of the republic.¹⁵⁶ In any case, Astemirov became deputy of Mukozhev in the *Jamaat* at the end of the 1990s. According to various sources, at the time he worked briefly as a correspondent for Al Jazeera. What is more interesting, however, is that a few sources state that he fought in both Chechen wars.¹⁵⁷

This seems highly unlikely however, since more trustworthy sources indicate that he, together with Musa Mukozhev actively discouraged Kabardian and Balkar Muslims from joining the Chechens in war.¹⁵⁸ Thus, only very limited numbers of them went there to fight against the Russians. The last in line, Rasul Kudaev, was another well-known preacher, having been educated in Islamic law at the prestigious Muhammad Ibn Saud University in Saudi-Arabia, where he graduated with a degree in Sharia law. After his return to the North Caucasus, he became a popular *qadi*¹⁵⁹ who was requested in the whole region to settle a wide range of disputes. His natural position in the *jamaat* was therefore that of the *qadi*, charged with the application of Sharia law. It can be argued that in Kabardino-Balkaria Mukozhev, Astemirov and the others focused more on large-scale *dawaa*, than on seizing power and influence, because they reputed the time was not yet ripe and the knowledge about Islam not deep enough among the population for a society based solely on Islam and sharia. Thus, the spread of what they saw as true Islam was at least initially more important than opposition to the state. Mukhozhev, Astemirov and their followers can thus be characterized as purist Salafists at the time.¹⁶⁰

Nevertheless, at the end of the 1990s, the mere existence of such a powerful community which advocated, albeit its initial moderate stance a nevertheless radical brand of Islam, being moreover outside of state control, made the authorities feel threatened by it. Consequently, they began to react against it in an increasingly harsh manner. Already at the end of the 1990s, the mosque where Musa Mukozhev preached as its imam was raided repeatedly, sometimes even in a reportedly violent manner.¹⁶¹ As a result, tension began to arise on both sides, although it still stayed underground for quite a while. Creeping radicalization set in at that time, however, as individual jamaat members joined the Taliban prior to 2001 with a few of them interned in Guantanamo by the Americans. In addition, the Chechen victory over the Russians in the First Chechen War seems to have made a tremendous impression on the jamaat, suggesting that the Russian bear could be beaten, and the creation of an Islamic state

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ E.g. The Politics of Security in Modern Russia. United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2016., p.134

¹⁵⁸ Ware, Robert B.. The Fire Below: How the Caucasus Shaped Russia. United Kingdom, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013, p. 56

¹⁵⁹ Qadi: shariah judge (arab.).

¹⁶⁰ Wiktorowicz, Quintan. Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West. United Kingdom, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005.

¹⁶¹ See See Tlisova, Fatima. Who's Who in the KBR Jamaat, Jamestown Foundation, North Caucasus Analysis Volume 8 Issue 26, June 28, 2007, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/nc/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=4272&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=189&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/nc/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=4272&tx_ttnews[backPid]=189&no_cache=1), accessed on January 18, 2023

was possible, even by force. In a later dispatch, Astemirov stated that afterwards, they secretly connected with Chechen military jamaats both in the interval between the Chechen wars as well after the beginning of the Second War.¹⁶²

In Karachaevo-Cherkessia, the religious situation was in many ways similar to that in Kabardino-Balkaria during the last decade of the Soviet Union. Quite similarly, because of the same lack of strong structures which could have preserved faith better and the lack of knowledge about Islam allowed early Salafist influence. Interestingly, through personnel links, the Salafist movement was linked tightly to the Karachay nationalist movement. In fact, the main Salafist preacher at the beginning of the 1990s in Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Muhammad Bidzhiev, proposed the creation of an entirely Karachay Islamic state. Consequently, he named the spiritual institution he founded immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, *Karachay Imamate*. In addition, Bidzhiev was the main Karachay cadre of the IRP in the republic at the time, being its chairman and treasurer at the same time. After he conveyed a convention of Karachay Muslims, the Karachay Jamaat with Bidzhiev as its *amir* was founded. The goal of the *jamaat*, which typically had its support base among young people, focused less on the gathering of large numbers of followers, but instead more on seizing power.¹⁶³

This is why it engaged even in elections as a possibility to gain more leverage, while, similarly to its neighbor jamaat in Kabardino-Balkaria, advocating peaceful means instead of violent ones. This stance had much to do with the somehow egomaniac personality of Bidzhiev, who regarded himself as the coming leader of the republic. This is why the confrontation with the official clergy arose very soon and in a harsh manner, which forced Bidzhiev to leave the country, as the official religious institutions were backed as usual by the state administration which already looked with suspicion at the activities of the jamaat. As a result, Bidzhiev was forced to flee the republic for a time. The jamaat aimed then at an improvement of the relations with state organs and the Spiritual Directorate, calculating that this move would bring more benefits over time. As a result, Bidzhiev was allowed to return and appointed as a deputy of the head of the Caucasian Spiritual Board of Muslims in 1995.¹⁶⁴ As Bidzhiev seemed to be appeased by this appointment, because it allowed him to retain a powerful position in the republic, younger Imams were elevated at the top of the Karachay Jamaat. While still rejecting violent methods, after a period of relative moderation, after the First Chechen War the new leader of the jamaat, Khizir Salpagarov, intensified contacts with exponents of the more radical and violent Chechen jamaats which at the time stood in opposition to the then Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov, thus inducing a new,

¹⁶²See Astemirov, Anzor. Amir Seifullakh - Pobeda ot Allakha, tak zhe kak i porazhenie, Kavkaz Center, May 29, 2006, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2006/05/29/44895.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023 -

¹⁶³ See Ware, Robert B.. The Fire Below: How the Caucasus Shaped Russia. United Kingdom, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013.

¹⁶⁴ See Vatchagaev, Mairbek, Karachay Jamaat: History, Reality and Perspective, Part I, Jamestown Foundation, North Caucasus Analysis Volume 8, Issue 22, May 31, 2007, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/nc/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=4203&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=189&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/nc/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=4203&tx_ttnews[backPid]=189&no_cache=1), accessed on January 18, 2023

more radical phase for the Karachay Jamaat.¹⁶⁵ The Cherkess people of Karachaevo-Cherkessia and the Republic of Adyghea are nominally Muslims, but have largely secularized themselves. This is the reason why no significant Cherkess Jamaat ever existed and virtually no Cherkess have been sighted on the battlefields of the North Caucasian insurgency. The awakening after the disintegration of the Soviet Union among the Cherkess has been largely a national one.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ See Richmond, Walter. *The Northwest Caucasus: Past, Present, Future*. N.p., Taylor & Francis, 2008.

IV. Collapse and Awakening: The Fall of the Soviet Union and the 1st Chechen War, 1991-99

The collapse of the USSR was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the last century.

Vladimir Putin

1. The Collapse of the Soviet Union

As General Secretary of the CPSU and Soviet head of state, Mikhail Gorbachev had been implementing a more liberal internal policy than his predecessors. He had been a disciple of the late Yuri Andropov, himself the former General Secretary of the CPSU and a former KGB head widely regarded as hard-line Soviet strongman. By virtue of his position in the intelligence structure, Andropov knew that the Soviet Union had to be reformed. It is a matter of debate until today, however, which way he would have gone, as he died 15 months into his ascent to power in February 1984.¹⁶⁷ Gorbachev, his chosen successor, tried the soft way of reforming the country, building on two principles: *Glasnost* and *Perestroika*. This meant a certain liberalization in many areas of society, including the economy, religion, and matters concerning the minorities inside the Soviet Union. There is much debate, however, about the cause of the following inexorable dissolution of the soviet state, whether the reforms were implemented too fast or the inherent weakness of the planned economic system. In any case, hardliners in the apparatus and the military felt that Gorbachev would bring the whole system down with his reforms and therefore planned a coup against him. The coup d'état was launched between August 19 and 21, failed because of the resistance put up by then RSFSR¹⁶⁸ president Boris Yeltsin in the defense of the White House, the seat of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR in central Moscow. The failure of the conservative conspirators effectively induced the last stage of the downfall of the Soviet Union.¹⁶⁹ All titular republics split from the Soviet Union, actually stripping it down to the only remaining RSFSR, which in turn renamed itself "Russian Federation" on December 25, 1991.

As the Soviet Armed Forces were splitting up, the resulting parts forming new, national armies, a comparatively young general of the Air force returned to his Chechen homeland. He was the only Chechen ever that reached this rank despite the army's policy to keep down non-

¹⁶⁷ See Service, Robert. *A History of Modern Russia from Nicholas II to Vladimir Putin*. United States, Harvard University Press, 2005, p. 428-432

¹⁶⁸ RSFSR: Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, essentially the core of the Soviet state, actually "original" Russia. All Muslim ASSRs were part of the titular RSFSR.

¹⁶⁹ MacKinnon, Elaine. *Glasnost*, in: *Encyclopedia of the Cold War*. United States, Taylor & Francis, 2012., p. 365

Russian officers. His name was Dzokhar Dudaev, and he would play no small role in the beginning of what today can be seen as the North Caucasian quagmire. Dzokhar Dudaev was born on April 15, 1944 in Yalkhoroi¹⁷⁰ in Chechnya's southwestern highlands, a few days before being deported along with the whole Chechen and Ingush population in the course of Operation Lentil. He spent his childhood in the Kazakh exile before being allowed to return to his homeland in 1957. He studied electronics in North Ossetia's capital city Vladikavkaz before enrolling to Tambov Higher Military aviation school for Pilots in 1962. In the same year he began his military career in the Soviet Air Force. After many further steps, Dudaev was made an Air Force major general in 1987 and appointed as commander of the 326th Heavy Bomber Aviation Division, a strategic bomber unit capable of delivering nuclear weapons, in Tartu, Estonia. He was the first Chechen who reached such a high rank, although at the time some observers could have questioned his "Checheness". He spent his life in an institution dominated by ethnic Russians, he had married a Russian woman, and he was not religious at all at the time. Moreover, he had flown bombing raids in Afghanistan, targeting nominally fellow Muslims, a fact for which he was heavily targeted by his critics later in his career.

It could have been the biography of an ordinary Russian officer, but history showed it was not. As the people of Estonia challenged Soviet rule demanding independence, he ignored the order of his superiors to shut down the local parliament as well as Estonian TV.¹⁷¹ Obviously inspired by Estonian nationalism and the cracking of the USSR, he returned to Chechnya in May 1991, where he immediately came to enjoy big popularity because of his rank and his charisma.¹⁷² Contrary to all expectations, he was very active and radicalized the discourse around independence further. He allied himself with local strongman, many of which had been active in organized crime, and with the main parties who advocated independence: the Vainakh Democratic Party (VDP), the Green Party, and the Islamic Path Party.¹⁷³ Eventually, he became the head of the Executive Committee of the Chechen National Congress, which had become the main driver for Chechen sovereignty at the time. As a further step towards the ascent to power, the committee formed an armed National Guard in May. As tension grew between the Soviet loyalists around the first ever Chechen head of the local Communist Party, Doku Zavgayev, still in charge of power, and Dudaev's separatists, the failed August coup in Moscow accelerated the pace of the confrontation. Rallies were held against the still Soviet government, until the National Guard seized the seat of the Chechen Soviet and forced

¹⁷⁰ Yalkhoroi was a tiny settlement located in Chechnya's former Galanchozh rayon. Together with other villages it was destroyed in the course of *Operation Lentil* by NKWD troops in 1944, its inhabitants deported to Kazakhstan. The massacre of Khaibakh which occurred in the homonymous *aul*, took place in the same area. It is emblematic for the depopulation of this area to these days.

¹⁷¹ Dunlop, John B.. *Russia confronts Chechnya: roots of a separatist conflict*. United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p 111

¹⁷² Wood, Tony. *Chechnya: the case for independence*. United Kingdom, Verso Books, 2007., p.48-49

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 60-61

Zavgayev to resign. The elections scheduled for October 27, 1991 bore a landslide victory for Dudaev, who quickly declared full Chechen independence on November 1, 1991.¹⁷⁴

The Ingush, which were still part of the by now breakaway Chechen-Ingush Republic, had almost not been involved in the active pursuit of independence by their Chechen brethren. Consequently, they decided to separate themselves from the Chechens in a referendum at the end of November 1991. There has been much speculation about the reasons for their collective decision. The most likely arguments say that they felt they would lose every chance to regain the lost Prigorodny District if they chose to leave Russia together with the Chechens. They had not forgotten the separation and assignment of *their* District to North Ossetia in the course of their deportation in 1944.¹⁷⁵ At the same time, the resulting Republic of Ingushetia would be so small that a territorial compensation by the central state in their sense, even more when justifiable historically, could be likely. In the meantime, the Russians tried to negotiate with Dudaev, coming to nothing, however. In this period of transition from the Soviet Union to the forming Russian Federation, however, Chechnya ranged not on top of the priorities list. To avoid bloodshed, Russian troops left Chechnya peacefully. Soon, however, verbal attacks coming from the Russian government became sharper. The hard-line Russian vice president at the time, Alexander Rutskoi, described de-facto independent Chechnya under Dudaev as “organized banditry”.¹⁷⁶ The Russian administration had withdrawn almost totally from Chechnya, although the country was still backed up economically by Moscow. It was still part of the Russian economic zone, pension and rents continued to be paid out. This happened partly because Moscow did not want to sever even the last ties and so lose Chechnya entirely, and partly because Chechnya as an informal market zone outside of official control but nevertheless easily accessible was the perfect spot to conduct every sort of business, both legal and illegal.¹⁷⁷

At the same time, the Russian government did all in its power to hinder the formation of a stable Chechnya. Following the breakdown of negotiations, and the refusal of Dudaev to submit tax revenues to the central state, the Russians put up a blockade of the Chechen National Bank, which was in turn unable to connect to the international financial system as a result. This resulted in an actual breakdown of the economy and the consequent flourishing of the informal sector and criminality. The country’s oil industry, although insignificant by absolute standards, was nevertheless the single most important industrial asset which could have potentially generated enough income to finance the chronically insolvent Dudaev government. The oil continued to flow nevertheless, but not over official canals. Given the disastrous economic situation, Chechnya transformed itself in a vast black market which

¹⁷⁴ See Hughes, James. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*. United States, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013., p. 25

¹⁷⁵ See Smith, Sebastian. *Allah's Mountains: The Battle for Chechnya*. United Kingdom, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005., p. 110

¹⁷⁶ See Dunlop, John B.. *Russia confronts Chechnya: roots of a separatist conflict*. United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 109

¹⁷⁷ See Trenin, Dmitri V., and Malashenko, Alexey. *Russia's Restless Frontier: The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia*. United States, Brookings Institution Press, 2010, p. 19

offered arms, oil and a whole range of stolen goods. These items could be smuggled in and out of the country at will thanks to the connivance of corrupt Russian border guards and custom officials.¹⁷⁸ The Chechen government under Dudaev managed to do little to get the economic situation back on track, alienating the Chechen middle class and the northerners living in the plains on the border with the Russian Stavropol Krai, who had been historically the more docile part of the Chechen society and thus had taken more advantage in Soviet times than the southern highlanders, who continued to form the backbone of Dudaev's support base. Although in principle the greatest part of the Chechen people supported independence, Dudaev's economic mismanagement deriving from his uncompromising stance on sovereignty and his sometimes-weird statements alienated many of his former allies and supporters. Thus, opposition against Dudaev began to form from even from the beginning of his government.¹⁷⁹

In the course of the fall of the Soviet Union and even before, the Ingush demands on territorial rehabilitation grew. Although they stayed largely loyal to Moscow and did not seriously pursue independence, nevertheless demands on territorial recovery towards North Ossetia arose again. The ethnically majority Ingush Prigorodny District had been assigned to North Ossetia by Stalin after the 1944 deportations. In 1992, the Prigorodny District still hosted a large Ingush population. Since the 1980s ethnic tensions had not abated in the region and the power vacuum which ensued in the course of the fall of Soviet power only worsened the already tense situation. In addition to it, two events turned the players to an uncompromising stance of the respective parties: The conflict in South Ossetia and the proclamation of the self-declared independent Republic of Ichkeria/Chechnya. The conflict in South Ossetia between Ossetian separatists and Georgian forces produced a flow of over 100.000 Ossetian refugees to North Ossetia. At the same time, the Ingush, having been sidelined by their Vainakh brothers, had decided to split from the common Chechen-Ingush Republic. They felt that the resulting territory at their disposal was too small to make a viable state on their own, so they began pushing their Prigorodny-agenda much harder. The North Ossetians felt being under attack from two sides, so they too grew more aggressive in what they saw as a state of siege.¹⁸⁰

The post-Soviet chaos had only aggravated the simmering ethnic tensions between Ossetians and Ingush, with the aggravating fact that arms, both light and heavy, were readily available on the streets. With the demise of Soviet power structures and the strengthening of local Ossetian rule, things escalated. A spark was enough to ignite the explosive situation and in fact to provoke all-out war between the two communities. In fact, the first armed clashes broke out in the last week of October, 1992. After a crescendo of incidents in various ethnically mixed towns of Prigorodny District, full-scale war broke out in the last October days. Between October 30, and November 5, heavy fighting erupted in the plains and villages

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22

¹⁷⁹ See Dunlop, John B.. *Russia confronts Chechnya: roots of a separatist conflict*. United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 121

¹⁸⁰ See Tishkov, Valery. *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and After the Soviet Union: The Mind Aflame*. India, SAGE Publications, 1997, p. 155ff.

east of Vladikavkaz. The Ossetian side, which included heavily armed MVD troops as well as irregulars, swiftly obtained victory over the poorer armed Ingush village militias. Already in the course of the fighting, the Ossetians evicted most of the Ingush, effectively cleansing the whole district of almost the whole Ingush population. Like in all civil wars, and especially the ones with an ethnical background, hostage-takings and atrocities were perpetrated by both sides, but particularly by the Ossetian village militias.¹⁸¹ Thousands of Ingush had been evicted of their homes to refugee camps in Ingushetia, which as a nation saw the irreparable loss of what was seen as a large part of Ingush ancestral territory. This fact bore the seed of one of the causes for the ongoing conflict as well as horrendous bloodshed years later in Beslan.¹⁸²

Dudaev, however, had not only supporters among Chechens, but also many detractors. His exaggerated boasting and his eccentric and frequently erratic initiatives like the support he lent to Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the first elected president of independent Georgia gone rogue, raised amazement and anger among many Chechens, since he accomplished not much when it came to improve the economy and security in Chechnya proper. Instead, Dudaev liked to play alternately the wise statesmen one day and acting like a mafia boss the next day. Soon, serious opposition arose against Dudaev. The Russians tried to figure out credible proxies against Dudaev, acting mainly covertly against the self-elected ruler of Chechnya. In March 1992, violence among Chechens had erupted for the first time since the election of Dudaev. Russian-armed opposition elements tried to storm the national broadcasting center but were repelled by Dudaev loyalists. Months later national guard units under the command of Shamil Basaev stormed Grozny's town assembly hall, where opposition cadres had been gathering. Consequently, the opposition began arming itself and sought increased Russian assistance. Obviously, the Russians tried to delegitimize Dudaev and to destabilize his regime from the beginning, so they were happy to help everyone who was against Dudaev, including their own former foes. Beslan Gantemirov was one of these. A former ally of Dudaev and mayor of Grozny, he maintained his own militia and controlled his home district of Urus-Martan in southwestern Chechnya. After differences with Dudaev he changed sides and allied himself with Umar Avthurkhanov and Ruslan Labazanov, again a former ally of Dudaev. Avthurkhanov was the head of the northern Nadterechny District and Labazanov a convicted murderer and criminal entrepreneur. Together, they formed the Provisional Council of the Chechen Republic under Russian sponsorship, who provided both light and heavy arms as well as military training.¹⁸³

The Russians however followed a dual strategy. As already mentioned, they operated covertly, hoping to topple Dudaev by sponsoring opposition militias. On the other hand, they continued to negotiate with the Chechens, sometimes even recognizing their independence *de*

¹⁸¹ See Human Right Watch, The Ingush-Ossetian Conflict in the Prigorodnyi Region, May 1996, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/Russia.htm>, accessed on January 18, 2023

¹⁸² See Parfitt, Tom. The Secret History of Beslan, Foreign Policy, March 2, 2011

¹⁸³ See Akhmadov, Ilyas and Lanskoj, Miriam. The Chechen Struggle – Independence won and Lost, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2010, pp. 5-10

jure.¹⁸⁴ It has been speculated much about the fight between doves and hawks at Yeltsin's court, the former advocating negotiations, and the latter armed intervention. It seems more probable, however, that Russia always planned to overthrow Dudaev and regain Chechnya by force. In fact, before the properly Russian invasion that was to follow, in the fall and winter of 1994, two attempts to storm Grozny by Avturkhanov and Gantamirov, encouraged and sponsored by the FSK, were made. Both were repulsed by Dudaev loyalists, although the opposition forces were equipped even with tanks and backed up by Russian attack helicopters. The scenes on Russian TV, which showed captured Russian tank crews in the basement of the presidential palace in Grozny, constituted a sort of Bay-of-the-Pigs-fiasco for the Russian state. From now on, they had to show their face.

2. War Comes to Chechnya

Real war came to Chechnya in earnest in December of 1994. After the failure of Moscow's Chechen proxies to oust Dudaev, the Russian military machine was set in motion. What looked like a mighty and terrifying colossus in reality was in many ways only the shadow of its fame. The war in Afghanistan, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the following economic crisis had hit the army heavily in terms of obsolete equipment and, what was far worse, in its fighting morale. Thus it came, that when three columns operating from Ingushetia, Stavropol Krai and Dagestan became the order by President Yeltsin to set out towards Grozny on December 11, 1994, they almost instantly became bogged down. On one side, many in the military apparatus believed the army was not ready to fight what could become a potentially long and bloody war or simply had not the stomach for it. In the days preceding the invasion, dozens of officers were court-martialed for their refusal to participate in the coming invasion of Chechnya.¹⁸⁵ Even General Boris Gromov, the last commanding General of the Russian contingent in Afghanistan, warned of a war that could bore catastrophic results.¹⁸⁶ Yeltsin and the Kremlin hawks pushed their aggressive agenda nevertheless, aiming at a swift and decisive operation to clear and take Grozny and with it the whole of Chechnya. Pavel Grachev even boasted in the first days of the Chechen operation that he expected Grozny could be taken by a paratroop regiment in the course of a few hours.¹⁸⁷

On the other side, instead of expected armed resistance, the Russian columns were confronted with more or less peaceful civilian resistance put up by Chechnya's neighbors in Ingushetia and Dagestan. Caucasian solidarity again showed up, this time however in a totally spontaneous, not organized way. These populations were sympathetic to Chechen independence sentiments and acted accordingly. They managed to block the roads through

¹⁸⁴ Dunlop, John B.. *Russia confronts Chechnya: roots of a separatist conflict*. United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 169

¹⁸⁵ Taylor, Brian D.. *Politics and the Russian Army: Civil-Military Relations, 1689-2000*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2003, p. 314

¹⁸⁶ See Moran, John P.. *From Garrison-State to Nation-State: Political Power and the Russian Military Under Gorbachev and Eltsin*, Praeger Publishers 2002, p.45

¹⁸⁷ See Shultz, Richard H., and Dew, Andrea J.. *Insurgents, Terrorists, and Militias: The Warriors of Contemporary Combat*. United Kingdom, Columbia University Press, 2009, p. 213

peaceful sit-ins, which occasionally could turn violent, like in Ingushetia. Ultimately, however, after a few days they had to let pass the seemingly unending armored columns now seriously invading Chechnya. Dudaev and his Chechen separatists, however, had gained precious time to further organize and set up defensive positions inside Grozny. After a few insignificant skirmishes on the border, armed Chechen resistance stiffened in the vicinity of their capital city. On the Terek range north of Grozny, Russian troops experienced the first serious losses as they were repeatedly ambushed there and even bombarded by Chechen Grad rocket launchers. At the end of December, Russian forces stood in sight of Grozny and readied their units to enter the city. 40,000 troops and many hundreds of tanks and artillery pieces now stood inside the Chechen country. The huge, armored columns were expected to intimidate Chechen fighters and so keep them from armed resistance. The decision to rely more or less only on armor constituted a major blunder in the planning process of the Grozny operation, as following events would show.¹⁸⁸

The Russian assault on Grozny began on December 31, 1994. Preliminary artillery bombardments set ablaze the oil refineries on the outskirts of the city. After that, three armored columns moved from West, North and East towards the city center. The Russian forces were heavily equipped with hundreds of tanks, troop carriers and self-propelled artillery pieces. However, the single units were not at full strength and lacked accompanying infantry. Worse though, they had been mixed up without previous coordination. Command and control were also very poor, as the only order was reportedly that of marching through to the presidential palace – Maskhadov's headquarters - in central Minutka square and meet up simultaneously with the other columns coming from different directions. The troops consisted of contract soldiers and conscripts, who had not enjoyed proper urban fighting training. At first, the columns went further without many problems. However, when they came near the city center, they were suddenly ambushed from multiple directions in the narrow streets of Grozny. Chechen teams, which at the time numbered only a few hundreds, had gathered at strategic points in a circle around the inner city.¹⁸⁹

They had previously mined possible escape routes through side streets before unleashing the fire power at their disposal from hand-held RPGs and automatic firearms. Shooting from higher stores in the buildings on both sides at their streets, they managed to easily crack the thin overhead armor of tanks and infantry carriers. Before they started the ambush, they waited patiently until the whole column was inside the kill zone. The lack of accompanying infantry now bore catastrophic consequences for the Russian thrust towards the presidential palace, since without it they were not able to scout and clean their flank inside the buildings on both sides of the streets. Then, the Chechens methodically hit the first and last vehicles to immobilize the whole unit. As it had happened in Afghanistan in the 1980s, since the guns of the armored vehicles could not be elevated up high enough to clean the higher stores of the buildings, Chechen militants were able to hit the Russians with impunity. These were not fighting scenes; it was a massacre. One Russian unit, the prestigious 131st Maikop motor-rifle

¹⁸⁸ See Olikier, Olga. *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994-2000*, Rand Corporation 2001, pp. 9-13

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14

brigade, which had managed to take the central station, was almost annihilated, its commanding officer, Colonel Savin, killed when he tried to evade encirclement.¹⁹⁰

When day came on the first day of the New Year hundreds of destroyed vehicles lay in the burnt-out streets of Grozny. Over thousand rotting and burnt corpses of Russian soldiers stood testimony to the biggest defeat since World War Two.¹⁹¹ Chechen militants had lost only a few dozen fighters that night since they fully exploited the element of surprise and employed extreme determination in the suppression of the Russian push to Grozny central. Moreover, the Chechens won a great deal of self-confidence – before the battle, they mostly expected to die an honorable death contrasting the onslaught of the mighty Russian army. On December 31st, there were only a few hundred organized Chechen fighters to defend Grozny. A few hundred occasional fighters added up to the “regular” units. The courage of desperation, determination and the good level of military training among Chechens made it possible for little and scattered groups to defeat the Russian attack. As a consequence, many volunteers were flocking from all over Chechnya to help further defend Grozny. In this way it was possible to greatly improve the number of defenders. In the first days of January, they numbered well over two thousand.¹⁹²

In the meantime, Russian defense minister Pavel Grachev had declared victory over rebellious Chechnya.¹⁹³ He could not have said something more blasphemous at this stage of the war. Similarly, the Russians regrouped on the outskirts of Grozny after having resisted Chechen counterattacks in the days following the New Year’s Eve. Now they launched small-unit attacks spearheaded by Spetsnaz units assisted by sniper teams, trying to take the city quarter after quarter like a checkerboard system. Armored units gave support fire, as well as tactical aviation. Rocket and heavy Artillery put down barrages on the southern half of the city, which channeled the only pathway outside Grozny still in Chechen hands. After the first week of January, the Russians concentrated upon the presidential palace, which was defended by up to 500 Chechen fighters at the time. Although Russian troops operated with several brigades against the objective and put the full weight of their firepower trying to take the building, they managed to get it only six (sic!) weeks later when Maskhadov decided to retreat on the southern bank of the Sunzha River to escape the murderous artillery barrage put down by Russian artillery at the time – close to 30.000 shells a day.¹⁹⁴ This exceeded by far the scale of

¹⁹⁰ See Gall, Carlotta and De Waal, Thomas. *Chechnya – Calamity in the Caucasus*, New York University Press 1998, p. 10

¹⁹¹ It is reasonable to assume that up to 50% of total losses in the Battle for Grozny resulted in the ill-conceived first assault. This would generate a number close to 1.000 units in the course of a few hours. In comparison, the official number of losses of the Soviet Army in the whole Afghan War from 1979 to 1989 was about 15.000 units.

¹⁹² See Interview of Dalkhan Kozhaev, www.smallwarsjournal.com, accessed on January 18, 2023

¹⁹³ See *Chechnya: 52 Years, No change*, The Moscow Times, February 23, 1995, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/chechnya-52-years-no-change/342416.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

¹⁹⁴ See Lally, Kathy. Nearly 25.000 Civilians died in Grozny, Russian Human Rights Panel Reports, The Baltimore Sun, February 22, 1995, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1995-02-22/news/1995053045_1_chechnya-russian-human-rights, accessed on January 18, 2023

the bombardment of Sarajevo as well as of any other contested city in war since World War Two. Consequently, it is reasonable to argue that Grozny was the most heavily destroyed city by means of war since then, with central Grozny virtually razed to the ground.

Grozny had not been completely sealed off until February 22. Now the Chechens were in serious trouble, as they were not able anymore to reinforce and resupply their forces adequately. Under Russian pressure, Shamil Basaev gave order to completely evacuate the city in the last days of February. Sporadic fighting went on until March 6, as Chechen mobile columns stayed on to harass Russian forces from inside the city. The battle had been one of the bloodiest urban encounters since the Great Patriotic War: Official Russian figures put the number of deaths at 1.784 as well as hundreds of wounded and missing.¹⁹⁵ The Chechen losses are not exactly known, at the time they were assumed to be in the high hundreds by Russian human rights organizations. Much worse was the number of civilian casualties. Here too it is difficult to assess exact figures, but most estimates put the number of civilian deaths at around 25.000, including nearly 4.000 children.¹⁹⁶ The tragically ironic side of this catastrophe is that most of the dead civilians were ethnic Russians, since pre-war Grozny was inhabited mostly by them. Moreover, Chechens had the chance to find shelter in the countryside thanks to their extended family networks, which urban Russians usually had not. Thus, the Russian population, protection of which from Chechen nationalism was one of the alleged reasons for Russian invasion, was the first victim of Russian indiscriminate warfare in Chechnya.¹⁹⁷

Dudaev, who had relocated to Shali in southeastern Chechnya in the first days of January, had to leave for Vedeno after the fall of Grozny, where he was joined by Aslan Maskahdov and his staff. During the last stages of the battle for Grozny, the Russians had managed to occupy the central plains. The last Chechen stronghold now was Vedeno, a traditional anti-Russian bulwark situated in the southeastern Chechen highlands and hometown to Shamil Basaev. Vedeno was taken by Russian paratroopers in a surprise move in June 1995. The remaining Chechen units had to retreat precipitously in the mountains towards Dargo and Benoi. Here they found little support from frightened villagers, who demanded them pull out. Most Chechen units relocated to the woods, although it was very difficult to sustain themselves, since virtually no bases, food and weapon caches had been set up. Many fighters got away, trying to slip through the Russian cordon to reach their hometowns. The situation now appeared truly dire for the Chechens. They stood pushed to the wall by Russian military might. They now controlled only mountainous areas in the southeast and in the southwest, since the mountain stronghold of Shatoi between the two areas had been also occupied by Russian forces. In the West, on the border to Ingushetia, one single village named Bamut

¹⁹⁵ See Dilegge, David and Van Konyenburg, Matthew. View from the Wolves Den: The Chechens and Urban Operations, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Volume 13 Issue 2, 2002, p. 171-184

¹⁹⁶ See Lally, Kathy. Nearly 25.000 Civilians died in Grozny, Russian Human Rights Panel Reports, *The Baltimore Sun*, February 22, 1995, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1995-02-22/news/1995053045_1_chechnya-russian-human-rights, accessed on January 18, 2023

¹⁹⁷ See Seely, Robert. *The Russian-Chechen Conflict 1800-2000: A Deadly Embrace*. United States, Taylor & Francis, 2012, p. 1

resisted. There, entrenched in an old Russian missile silo, Chechen militants withstood dozens of Russian attacks over months.¹⁹⁸

Although Russian losses had been appalling and their military incompetence blatant, the Chechen problem had been almost solved by the Russian army. Almost all of Chechnya – at least on daytime – was under Russian control, and the Chechens had been exhausted morally and militarily by though fighting over the previous months. Moreover, the Russian Interior Ministry had begun attacking the Chechen support base, raiding every village in search of potential militants or supporters of the Chechen cause. Frequently they took with them every male between 15 and 70 and confined them in filtration camps, where they were interrogated mostly by means of beatings and torture to make them confess. Sometimes, Interior Ministry troops liked to ravage whole villages, like Samashki in June 1995, where they killed scores of civilians. Many innocent Chechens were arrested at checkpoints which had been set up in the whole country, for the purpose of demanding ransom from their relatives. These and many other atrocities additionally dampened Chechen morale – their country stood on the brink, defeat was near, and even Dudaev's speeches over pirate radio channels could not do much against it.¹⁹⁹

Seeing this, Shamil Basaev decided to put all on one card. Until now, no terrorist actions had been taken against the Russian invasion of Chechnya. This would change – all or nothing. On June 14, 1995 hell broke loose in the center of the city of Budennovsk in the Stavropol oblast of the Russian Federation. Like a Trojan horse, a column of *Kamaz* trucks had just unloaded their deadly shipment. It consisted in over 100 Chechen fighters armed to the teeth and commanded by Shamil Basaev. They had come all the way from Chechnya passing every checkpoint with the help of generous bribes.²⁰⁰ Basaev's original intention, so he claimed later, had been to come as far as Moscow, but the money had not been enough for that, so they had to stop in Budennovsk. In reality, it is more probable that the Chechen's objective had from the start indeed been Budennovsk. Being located not too far away from Chechnya, its military airfield hosted one attack helicopter wing which *Mi-24 Hinds* so terribly exasperated insurgents and civilians alike back in Chechnya.²⁰¹ They stormed the main police station and the city hall, before retreating hours later in a neighboring hospital in face of growing Russian reinforcements. They took hostage everybody inside, together with the hostages they had brought from the city, the hostages taken numbered over 1.500. When Russian Special Forces surrounded the hospital and demanded the surrender of the Chechen hostage-takers, Basaev issued an ultimatum demanding direct negotiations between the Russian government and the Chechen leadership; otherwise, he threatened to kill all hostages. Also, he demanded the presence of journalists inside the hospital as observers. Although Boris

¹⁹⁸ See Gall, Carlotta and De Waal, Thomas. *Chechnya – Calamity in the Caucasus*, New York University Press 1998, p. 252

¹⁹⁹ See Akhmadov, Ilyas and Lansky. *Miriam, The Chechen Struggle – Independence won and Lost*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2010, pp. 41-49

²⁰⁰ See Smith, Sebastian. *Allah's Mountains: The Battle for Chechnya*. United Kingdom, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005, p. 201

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Yeltsin vowed publicly to do all in his might to ease the situation of the hostages, the demands of the militants were naturally not met.²⁰² Just to show the world how serious he was with his requests he ordered a couple of random hostages to be shot. Later, Basaev claimed these had been Soviet Air force pilots which he set equal with war criminals.²⁰³

After three days of siege, the Russian government ordered the *crème de la crème* of its special forces to storm the building, free the hostages and kill the insurgents. At dawn of the fourth day, under cover of heavy fire provided by BTRs and BMPs, groups of Alpha and Spetsnaz operators tried to storm the hospital. Heavy defensive fire put up by the occupants as well as the barricades made by piled up furniture at every entrance hindered the Russian forces, which failed to take control of the structure. The botched storming had claimed the lives of dozens of hostages, which were used as human shields by the Chechens. So did two subsequent failed attempts later in the day, which resulted, for Western standards, in heavy casualties in the ranks of the Special Forces.²⁰⁴ This was blatant disgrace for the Russian government and its security apparatus. Desperate hostages, waving white shreds of fabric from the windows of the partially burning hospital, pleaded for the suspension of armed intervention and the resume of talks. The shocked Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin phoned Basaev and negotiated personally with him. The outcome of the negotiation guaranteed an immediate cessation of combat operations and bombings in the territory of Chechnya from 05 AM, 19 June 1995 and the selection of a delegation in charge of negotiating the conditions of a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Chechnya., negotiations starting immediately on the 18th of June 1995. It is clear that these concessions extorted from the Russian government under duress would leave an indelible mark on Russian-Chechen relationship. This disgrace would be avenged with utmost harshness and would set new parameters in dealing with “terrorists” in the future. On the Chechen side, Budennovsk became something of a model for similar actions undertaken later by the insurgents; see the hostage-takings at the Dubrovka Theater in 2002 and in Beslan in 2004.²⁰⁵

The Budennovsk attack gave the Chechen rebels time to regroup and boosted their morale. Previously virtually unknown outside of the Caucasus, Shamil Basaev from now on became one of the most respected commanders of the rebels and Russia’s enemy number one.²⁰⁶ Budennovsk had moreover shown the dire technological and moral situation inside what should have been the elite of the Russian armed and security forces. Budennovsk led the Chechen conflict even more in the spotlight of global public opinion, which would obstacle future heavy-handed Russian cleansing operations. It also led to further tragedies outside

²⁰² See Akhmadov, Ilyas and Lansky, Miriam. *The Chechen Struggle – Independence won and Lost*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2010, pp. 50-52

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ See Pokalova, Elena. *Chechnya's Terrorist Network: The Evolution of Terrorism in Russia's North Caucasus*. United States, Praeger, 2015, p. 46

²⁰⁵ See Pokalova, Elena. *Chechnya's Terrorist Network: The Evolution of Terrorism in Russia's North Caucasus*. United States, ABC-CLIO, 2015, p. 44

²⁰⁶ See Smith, Sebastian. *Allah's Mountains: The Battle for Chechnya*. United Kingdom, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005, pp. 212-216

Chechnya, however. Since it is not only hearsay that every Chechen sees himself as a general, thus often being jealous of each other, soon others tried to emulate Basaev. Salman Raduev, warlord and nephew to Dudaev, raided Kizliar in neighboring Dagestan in January 1996. His aim was to destroy the airfield as well as the stationing helicopter gunships there. After having captured many hundreds of hostages and having released almost all of them the following day under promise of safe passage, Raduev's column headed back to Chechnya.²⁰⁷

Shortly before the border, however, they were caught up by a pair of hovering Russian helicopter gunships near the village of Pervomayskoye. The hostage-takers hopped up from the buses and entrenched them in the village, awaiting the Russian storm. They, however, had laid down three siege rings around the village and started a three-day bombardment in the hope to kill all – Chechen militants and hostages – to avenge the debacle of Budennovsk. The hostage-takers, however, decided to attack and somehow managed to break out – a new disgrace for the Russian government. Nevertheless, the Chechen raid had been a complete failure. Of the 150 Chechen fighters, 90 had fallen, as well as scores of hostages without having reached anything on the political level. Furthermore, relations with the Dagestanis, which until then had been benevolent to the Chechen cause, had been strained by this action, as most of the hostages had been Dagestanis and not Russians. Worse though, as if Budennovsk had not been enough, Chechens now had even more a fame of being terrorists around the world.²⁰⁸

In the course of the war, Grozny had never really been cleansed from Chechen fighters and it was known at the time that individuals and smaller groups hid in the ruined city, staging occasional attacks on Russian checkpoints. Since mid-1995, however, Grozny had been infiltrated by rebel intelligence teams charged with the reconnaissance of Russian and collaborationist checkpoints, bases and installations in the city. They operated under direct order of the Chechen general staff under Aslan Maskhadov and additionally mapped possible infiltration routes into the city from the outside. Sometimes, they were further tasked with the elimination of local spies and Russian agents. Since these small teams could work relatively unhindered thanks to insufficient Russian counterintelligence activity and double agents planted inside the collaborationist Chechen security structure, half a year later plans were ready for a reconnaissance in force of Russian and loyalist positions inside Grozny.²⁰⁹

On March 6, 1996, hundreds of Chechen fighters infiltrated Grozny for a large reconnaissance operation from various directions. A column led by Shamil Basaev even entered the city via a hijacked train dropping off in central Grozny. The attack had not the purpose of liberating Grozny, but to sow insecurity and test Russian defenses, which is why the Chechen fighters vanished two days later. They had managed, however, to effectively blockade Russian troops inside their garrisons and sustain heavy fighting inside the city. Moreover, they managed to leave as they had come, totally unhindered by Russian troops. This was an additional, huge

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 212

²⁰⁹ Interview S.I.

stroke on Russian morale after Budennovsk and helped build up confidence among Chechen militants. In addition, the Chechen raid showed serious operational deficiencies on the Russian side. Reportedly, the interoperability and collaboration between Interior Ministry troops (OMON) and regular army units was very poor as well as command and control exercised by higher ranks. These operational defects were to prove catastrophic in the months to come for the Russian side.²¹⁰

Meanwhile, guerilla war in the countryside grew in intensity since Budennovsk. The Chechen fighters in the mountains had regrouped and were launching increasingly deadly attacks and ambushes on Russian columns. After the raid on Grozny, they intensified IED-based ambushes and drive-by shootings even in the plains and in the cities. The next huge loss for the Russians came in the mountains however. On April 6, 1996, the foreign battalion under the Arab warlord Ibn al-Khattab virtually annihilated a whole motorized company in the Argun gorge. A few weeks later, Russian troops left Vedenov and the whole eastern highland because of their inability to control the situation there.²¹¹ Although president Eltsin inexplicably declared victory over rebellious Chechnya on May 28, 1996, during a visit in Grozny, and despite renewed Russian offensives in the west of the country, events at the time headed fast towards Russian defeat.²¹²

Eltsin may have been deceived by what he and the Russians saw as a decisive victory: On April 21, 1996, Russian intelligence managed to pinpoint Dudaev's satellite phone near Gheki Chu in western Chechnya. Following that, two laser-guided bombs ended Dudaev's life – but not Chechen resistance, as Russians had expected. The interim presidency was picked up by Dudaev's deputy Zelimkhan Yandarbiev, the nationalist poet who had turned radical Islamist. Chechens vowed to avenge their president's death and thus they did. On August 6, 1996, a long-planned operation – posthumously named Operation "Jihad" – began. It had been carefully planned by Chechen chief of staff Aslan Maskhadov, for whom this victory brought leadership in the elections after the war. Since days and weeks operational deception had started, as Chechen fighters moved from the mountains to their tasked deployment zones in the plains. The move was lucky, since Russian troops were caught unaware as between one and two thousand Chechen fighters again infiltrated Grozny, this time however with the intention to stay there. Chechen operational aims were simple: They would surround major Russian garrisons and block all major approach routes into the city, holding out until Russian political will to persist in Chechnya would dissolve, or alternatively, to their death. It was a gamble, albeit a well calculated one.²¹³

Russian public opinion, never too enthusiastic about the Chechen adventure, had begun to withdraw residual support since months. The huge cost of the war, both in lives and money, as

²¹⁰ See Olikar, Olga. *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994-2000*, Rand Corporation 2001, pp. 30-31

²¹¹ See Smith, Sebastian. *Allah's Mountains: The Battle for Chechnya*. United Kingdom, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005, pp. 326

²¹² Schaefer, Robert W.. *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus*, Praeger 2011, p. 140

²¹³ See Akhmadov, Ilyas and Lansky, Miriam. *The Chechen Struggle – Independence won and Lost*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2010, p. 65

well as scores of scandals about mismanagements inside the army like mobbing-to-death of junior recruits as well as embezzlements of funds and resources, did much to weaken public opinion. Last but not least, the horrible face of this terrible war did the rest. Now, with thousands of Russian soldiers blocked inside their cantonments inside Grozny and no possibility to relieve them, as column after column trying to enter Grozny had to retreat back to Khankala with huge losses. Meanwhile in Grozny, trapped Russian army and interior ministry units struggled desperately to survive. Encircled by Chechen fighters, they dared to break out from the city on their own only in a few cases. Others took civilian hostages to bargain their retreat from Grozny. The majority, however, were starving without chance to be relieved. The fighting in the city had already cost hundreds of deads, the majority of them Russian troops from the mechanized columns who tried stubbornly to enter Grozny to help their comrades but were regularly stopped from well-entrenched Chechen fighters armed with RPGs and Shmels. In addition, the flow of Chechen militants to Grozny grew as victory over the Russians delineated itself on the horizon. The Chechen side thus had time, the Russians not. This made threaten Russian Generals to raze Grozny to the ground should the rebels not retreat.²¹⁴

The capture of Grozny by Chechen mobile columns led by Shamil Basaev and the inability of Russian forces to unlock the dire situation in the city, led to the federal threat of bombing the whole city to rubble once and for all. All rescue attempts by armored columns had been stopped or shot to pieces by insurgent forces and realizing that a carpet bombing of Grozny with most of the civilian population, and most of all, the encircled Russian garrisons still in it, Russian military leadership let go of the idea. To break the stalemate in- and outside Grozny, ex General Alexander Lebed was flown into Chechnya as Russian plenipotentiary. First dialogues with the Chechen leadership brought about a first meeting between Lebed and Maskhadov in Noviye Atagi on August 22, 1996. This resulted in a ceasefire in all of Chechnya and the understanding to go further ahead with negotiations, which resulted in the Khasav-Yurt agreement on August 30, 1996. There, Maskhadov and Lebed convened about the demilitarization of Grozny and the creation of a Joint command and joint patrols to establish security in the interval time until the complete withdrawal of Russian troops that had to be completed by December 31, 1996.

3. Independence

Further negotiations were to be held in the near future. The agreement led, to the astonishment of world opinion, to the beginning of the effective withdrawal of all federal armed forces and civil institutions from Chechnya. The Chechens had won. Or so they thought.²¹⁵ Nevertheless, it was an impressive feat. The Chechens rebels, even if at times they looked so, were far from being a rag-tag militia without effective command and control or lacking combat skills. This was already demonstrated during the siege of Grozny in 1994-95. Their recapture of Grozny, the tactical and operative mastery displayed as well as the shrewd exploitation of Russian

²¹⁴ Ibid., p. 66

²¹⁵ Allegedly, Russian troops and even Generals said at their departure the Chechens should not worry, because they would come back, see interview with H.I.

public opinion on the strategic level enabled them to obtain (for the moment) an effective victory over what was then reputed to be the second-strongest army on the face of earth.

As the Russian withdrawal speeded up in the months ahead, the Chechens took over what then was a ravaged country. The capital city, Grozny, was destroyed. In the city center, no building had been left untouched by the Russian bombardment. It was said at the time that Grozny was the most destroyed urban center after the end of World War Two. Aside from Grozny, all other urban centers exhibited the scars of war, with the most touched being Gudermes and Argun. No industrial infrastructure existed anymore. Factories, oil wells and warehouses had been depredated and destroyed. The only productive activity Chechens could resume was that of agriculture, even that being a dangerous endeavor in certain spots because of mines, booby traps or unexploded ordnance.²¹⁶ The cost of the war had been immense, in terms of losses of human life and in destruction of property, resources and infrastructure. In the end, thousands of Russian soldiers had lost their lives: official figures stood at roughly 5.500 fatalities, whereas the Russian Soldiers Mother committee put the figures of dead and missing soldiers at more than 14.000. Losses on the side of Chechen separatists have never been precisely ascertained but should be similar to Russian losses. Civilian losses had been even more appalling: of the roughly one million Chechens before the war, between 30.000 and 40.000 had lost their lives in the two years of war according to ROSSTAT, human rights groups put that number at more than 80.000. More than 500.000 had been displaced from their homes.²¹⁷

Chechnya was a mess at the time and still, the separatist front began to disintegrate and split even before the last Russian troops left Chechnya. As the old saying goes, Chechens unite in front of an external aggression, otherwise every Chechen is his own general. And truly, serious disagreements came to surface inside the separatist front. The death of Dudayev now bore its venomous fruits. Dudayev, even if disliked by many, had been the incarnation of the Chechen will for independence, a moral giant to his people. Now the race to ascend to power had been opened. Chechens at the time were split between secular nationalists under Aslan Maskhadov which advocated Dudayev's legacy and the victory against Russia, since it had been Maskhadov who had led Chechen fighters in battle and had planned the operation to recapture Grozny which ended the war. Islamist forces which had been growing throughout the war, fueled by the atrocity of war and donations from the Gulf countries gathered around interim president Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev and Shamil Basayev. The third and largely minority, but still noticeable and aggressive faction comprised radical Islamist forces under Sheikh Fathi and other self-entitled "emirs" and shsheikhs but supported by powerful gray eminences which possessed strong medial presence, like Movladi Udugov. A look on the biographies of these actors will help to discern the situation back then in Chechnya, since

²¹⁶ See Wood, Tony. Chechnya: The case for independence. United Kingdom, Verso Books, 2007, pp. 82-84

²¹⁷ Cherkasov, Aleksandr. Kniga chisel. Kniga utrat. Kniga strashnogo suda. Demografiia, poteri naselenia i imigratsionnye potoki v zone vooruzhennogo konflikta v Chechenskoi Respublike'. Polit.ru 2004, https://polit.ru/article/2004/02/19/kniga_chisel/, accessed on January 18, 2023

Chechen politics at the time were largely conditioned by personalisms and particular interests despite more or less authentic ideological facades.

Aslan Maskhadov had been born in 1951 in exile, in the village of Shakai, in the Karagandi Province of the then Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic. His family originated from Alleroy and they belonged to the homonymous *teip*. After having been allowed to return to their homeland after Stalin's death in the late 1950s, the Maskhadovs settled in the village of Zebir-Yurt on the northern slopes of the Terek range in Chechnya's Nadterechny Rayon in northwestern Chechnya. As a young man, Maskhadov stayed in the army after military service. There he was trained at Tbilisi Artillery School as an artillery officer in the 1970s. After that, he graduated with honors from Leningrad Higher Artillery School in 1981. Then he was appointed as commander of a self-propelled artillery regiment before being sent to Lithuania in 1986. There he was appointed in 1990 as chief of staff of the artillery and missile forces based in Vilnius, Lithuania's SSR capital city. In Vilnius he became testimony of the January events in 1991. Following Chechnya's de-facto declaration of independence by Dzokhar Dudaev in 1991, Maskhadov had retired from the Red Army in 1992 with the rank of colonel, being together with Dudaev one of the highest-ranking Chechens having served in the Red Army.²¹⁸ He returned to Chechnya and joined the Dudaev establishment, becoming chief of Chechnya's civil defense. Starting from the summer of 1993, he took part in his role of senior officer in armed engagements against the pro-Russian Chechen opposition, led by former Communist official and former Grozny mayor Beslan Gantamirov.

Zelimkhan Yandarbiev had been appointed as interim president of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria after the death of Dzokhar Dudaev in April 1996. Yandarbiev was a charismatic, multifaceted figure. Originally a secular oriented poet and author of children's books, in the course of the conflict he became eventually a politician heavily influenced by Islamism. On the forefront of the Chechen nationalist movement during the dissolution of the Soviet Union, he cofounded the first Chechen party, the *Vainakh Democratic Party* in 1990. One of the goals of the party was to gain independence from the Soviet Union. In November 1990, he was nominated deputy chairman in the *All-National Congress of the Chechen People* headed by Dzokhar Dudaev.²¹⁹ Since 1991 he served as Vice-President of the self-proclaimed Chechen republic. After the death of Dudaev, and the withdrawal of Russian troops following the conquest of Grozny by Chechen rebels, he led the negotiations with his Russian counterparts in his function of acting president. His refusal to accept the seating arrangement during negotiations about a ceasefire in May 1996 with Russian president Boris Yeltsin, which would have him put in a subordinate position, is still legendary among Chechens. He favored the introduction of Sharia courts and

Shamil Basayev had been born in the village of Dishne-Vedeno, not far from Vedeno, the fierce mountaineer stronghold in the southeastern part of Chechnya. His name was chosen in

²¹⁸ See Gall, Carlotta and De Waal, Thomas. *Chechnya – Calamity in the Caucasus*, New York University Press 1998, p. 188-189

²¹⁹ See Evangelista, Matthew. *The Chechen Wars: Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?*, Brookings Institution Press, 2004, p. 18

honor of Imam Shamil. Members of his family had been active in the anti-Russian resistance on all major occasions throughout the 20th century, due to which they were deported to Kazakhstan where they remained until 1957. After graduation, Basaev continued his studies and worked then for a time as an IT businessman in Moscow. In October 1991, immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union when Dzhokhar Dudayev declared the independence of Chechnya, Basaev joined the separatist movement. On November 9, 1991, he gained notoriety by the hijacking of an Aeroflot flight started from Ankara, Turkey, demanding the right of self-determination of Chechnya as well as the attention of the world opinion. The seizure was resolved without incidents. At the beginning of the first Chechen War he became one of the most important guerrilla commanders fighting in the siege of Grozny. In June 1995 a Russian air raid on his home killed a great number of his family members, among them also his wife, his son and his sister.²²⁰ The following act of desperation, the hostage-taking in the hospital of Budennovsk in June 1995 gained him finally global notoriety. The action resulted in a cease-fire in Chechnya and a political crisis that led to the resignation of some cabinet members of the Russian government. In 1996 he was one of the main actors in the recapture of Grozny, which essentially determined the end of the first Chechen war and the retreat of the Russian army.²²¹

Movladi Udugov was a former journalist and communication expert, he was half-brother to the more obscure Isa Umarov, one of the main ideologues of the Islamic radicals since the 1980s. In 1991, when he worked for a local TV station, he was instrumental in the diffusion of Dudaev's independence declaration. After that, he had been Dudaev's spokesman and press secretary of the separatist Chechen government during the First War, when he easily outclassed his Russian counterparts. After the war he was candidate for the Chechen presidency presenting an Islamist agenda. After that, he was made Minister of Information by Maskhadov. This assignment allowed him to disseminate Islamic values over state-sponsored information channels thus decisively influencing further Islamization of society. Always active in the arena of politics, he sought to establish a sort of political platform for the manifold Islamic groups flourishing at the time, founding the *Islamic Umma* party. The party's weltanschauung was essentially Salafist and pan-Islamic, its aim of course the creation of an Islamic state which was not confined only to Chechnya.²²² On the contrary, in light of this ideological fixed point, Udugov supported a wide range of Islamist groups in neighboring Dagestan, setting the stage for an eventual unification under the umbrella of a common Islamic state. Thus, Udugov can be numbered among the forethinkers of the Caucasus Emirate together with the ideologues of the 1980's Islamic Revival Party. Certainly, he has been the driving force of its creation since then. Thanks to his position and his excellent communication skills, Udugov had been able to create an extensive network among wealthy

²²⁰ See Akhmadov, Ilyas and Lansky, Miriam. *The Chechen Struggle – Independence won and Lost*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2010, p. 48-49

²²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 65

²²² See Akaev, Vahit. *Islam and Politics in Chechnya and Ingushetia*, in: *Radical Islam in the Former Soviet Union*, edited by Galina M. Yemelianova, Routledge 2010, p. 70

sympathizers and donors in the Gulf region, which allowed him to count on big amounts of financial resources.²²³

Sheikh Fathi was the first of a whole line of colorful, yet dangerous personalities to appear from the outside in the Chechen arena. Born as Fathi Mohamed Habib aka Sheikh Fathi Sheeshani, he was however not of Arab origin. He was a Jordanian Chechen, his forefathers having emigrated to what then was Ottoman Amman at the end of the Caucasian Wars in the second half of the 19th century. A trained electronic engineer and self-taught Islamic scholar, his mastery of the Chechen language was far superior to that of most Chechens.²²⁴ Small, bespectacled and already in his 70s, he had a very strong charisma. A sort of a lesser-Abdullah Azzam, he had spent the time from 1982 until 1992 supporting the Afghan jihad. He came to Chechnya at the outbreak of hostilities, sometimes in late 1994 or early 1995. He was the first to proselytize among Chechens pure, which is the Salafi, form of Islam and he rejected democracy as an impure form of government. He was well connected with rich donors in Arab countries and therefore well-funded, too. A part of his funds came from the Saudi-based *Benevolence International Foundation*.²²⁵ ²²⁶ Fathi immediately set out to form Islamic militias under his command and associated with personalities engaged in the indigenous Islamic awakening movement, the Chechen offshoot of the Islamic Renaissance Party, such as Islam Khalimov, Adam Umalatov and Supyan Abdullaev.²²⁷ Although he was not in bad terms with the Chechen leadership under Dzokhar Dudaev, he refused to coordinate with them or to share funds and equipment with what he saw as a *taghut*, which is a unislamic government.

Nevertheless, the upcoming elections for the Chechen presidency were scheduled for January 27, 1997, even before the official conclusion of the peace treaty between now officially independent Chechnya and the Russian Federation. Despite fear of armed incidents and risks of bribery during the elections, these took place without any important irregularities, as observed by independent observers sent by Russia and the OSCE. The elections were won by the more moderate Aslan Maschadov with 59% of the votes, followed by Basaev with 23.5%

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Since Chechen language was banned from schools for the most part of the Soviet era, diaspora Chechens in Jordan or Turkey rallied in tight-knit communities have been speaking the most pure Chechen to this day.

²²⁵ See Government Evidentiary Proffer Supporting the Admissibility of Co-conspirator Statements - United States of America v. Enaam M. Arnout, U.S. District Court, Northern District of Illinois, Eastern Division, 02-CR-892 (N. D. Ill. filed Jan. 6, 2003), p. 26, <http://fl1.findlaw.com/news.findlaw.com/hdocs/docs/bif/usarnaout10603prof.pdf>, accessed on January 18, 2023

²²⁶ The BIF had been founded in the late 1980s by wealthy Saudi businessmen, purportedly to support menaced Muslim populations. In practice, they supported covertly the Arab mujahedeen fighting in Afghanistan and later in Bosnia and in Chechnya. Because of obvious links to al Qaeda, the BIF was banned by the UN and the US Department of Treasury.

²²⁷ See Vatchagaev, Mairbek. Strategy and Perspectives on Umarov's Rapprochement with the Radicals, May 3, 2007, North Caucasus Analysis Volume 8 Issue 18, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Bsword%5D=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx_ttnews%5Bany_of_the_words%5D=supyan&tx_ttnews%5Bpointer%5D=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4139&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=7610322a6b8751026940a81429270921, accessed on January 18, 2023

of the vote. Maskhadov therefore offered Basayev the seat of deputy prime minister at the beginning of 1997, which he accepted.²²⁸ Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev experienced a crushing defeat, getting only 10% of the vote.²²⁹ The election of Maskhadov opened the way for the stipulation of the peace treaty and the formalization of the commitments taken by both sides in the wake of the Khasv-Yurt agreement between Maskhadov and the Russian plenipotentiary Alexander Lebed the year before. The Peace Treaty and the "principles of relations between the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria" were signed a few months after, on May 12, 1997 in Moscow by Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov and Russian President Yeltsin. The treaty had the intention to provide the legal base for the peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with the principles of international law. Furthermore, an agreement on the payment of pensions, allowances, salaries, compensation, and further economic relations was reached. Boris Yeltsin stated at the time, that the treaty "ended the war and the 400-year long confrontation". In particular, the final version of the treaty recited the following:

- 1. To reject forever the use of force or threat of force in resolving all matters of dispute.*
- 2. To develop their relations on generally recognized principles and norms of international law. In doing so, the sides shall interact on the basis of specific concrete agreements.*
- 3. This treaty shall serve as the basis for concluding further agreements and accords on the full range of relations.*²³⁰

The power base of newly elected president Aslan Maskhadov consisted in the nationalist wing of the Chechen political arena. Supporters of Chechen nationalism favored the observance of Chechen traditions rather than wholesale adoption of Sharia. They still intended the Chechen nation as a conglomerate of different *tukkhums* and *teips*, with all relations among themselves regulated by tribal law rather than strictly interpreted Islamic law. Thus, they were more inclined to adopt more secular and democratic positions. Since Chechens are very conscious of tradition, Chechen society for the most part was aligned with these attitudes. Particularly the elder generation held fast at ancestral tradition. What once was Chechen middle class before the war, the educated ones, tended to Western lifestyle, however without

²²⁸ From January 1998 he held for six months the position of prime minister, before resigning in July in controversy with Maskhadov, with which the relationships deteriorated deeply, and that he accused of being reporting Chechnya under Russian domination.

²²⁹ Prague Watchdog - Crisis in Chechnya - the 1997 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections in Chechnya. www.watchdog.cz, www.watchdog.cz/?show=000000-000004-000001-000194&lang=1, accessed on January 18, 2023

²³⁰ See Khasavoyurt Joint Declaration and Principles for Mutual Relations, August 1997, http://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/RU_970512_PeaceTreatyRussiaChechenIchkeria.pdf, accessed on January 18, 2023

compromising tradition.²³¹ The younger generation which had experienced war, death and atrocities was traumatized and therefore less tied to traditional society.²³² The ones who had grown accustomed to war and the power of guns, tended far more to radical groups, as well as poor, dispossessed young people who embraced Salafist egalitarianism to overcome their low status in society. In any case, in the time between the two wars from 1996 to 1999, the political contest was dominated by figures coming from the nationalist spectrum. Aside from president Maskhadov, all his principal supporters were secular nationalists, as well as the highest religious figure in Chechnya, chief mufti Akhmad Kadyrov. Although at the time he was barely known in the West, he was a figure whose leverage and importance would emerge only later, at the beginning of the Second Chechen War. Probably, he influenced the political discourse much earlier than that behind the curtains.²³³

Akhmad Kadyrov at the time had no own private army, but he could muster nevertheless considerable political weight, a fact which he did not openly display and therefore was not recognized as such by observers at the time. As a trained religious scholar, *Qadiriya* tariqatist and fervent follower of the Kunta-Hadji sect, he was in a position to weave his network on various levels inside Chechen society, which in hindsight he obviously did, thanks also to his extended family and tribal background. He was an offshoot from one of the most influential Chechen *teips*, the Benoy clan, which had its power base in southeastern Chechnya, in the plains as well as in the highlands. Another significant nationalist faction who had its power base in eastern Chechnya was that of the Yamadaev brothers. They ruled over their hometown of Gudermes and had been reliable fighters in the course of the first war, although the rank of “brigadier general” assigned to a couple of them was more than exaggerated. The Yamadaevs had a small but good organized private army, which they employed in the racket business, the illegal oil smuggling and in the flourishing kidnapping business. Until the beginning of the Second Chechen War, they stood firmly on the side of president Maskhadov and backed him against the Islamists, of whom they were deadly enemies.²³⁴

Tensions between the Islamist and secular-nationalist factions came to a reckoning on July 14, 1998 in Gudermes. It is not exactly known which pretext provoked the initial quarrel between fighters belonging to the Islamist warlords Arbi Baraev and Abdul-Malik Mezhidov and others working for the Yamadaevs. It is probable, however, that the argument arose with regard to kidnapping activities in the area, as both groups were engaged in it. Fact is that this dispute evolved into a much bigger fight which involved hundreds of fighters from both sides. The Islamists tried to mobilize their likeminded all over Chechnya to destroy once and for all

²³¹ See Akhmadov, Ilyas and Lanskoj, Miriam. *The Chechen Struggle – Independence won and Lost*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2010, pp. 120-125

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Allegedly, Kadyrov was known as a former informant of the KGB already since the end of the First Chechen War, when his file was discovered in the abandoned FSB headquarters in central Grozny. See Schaefer, Robert W.. *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad*. United States, Praeger Security International, 2010, p. 169.

²³⁴ See Lanskoj, Miriam. *Chechnya's Internal Fragmentation 1996-99*, in: *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, Vol.27, p. 195

to “smash the muridy”, and although hundreds of Islamist fighters followed their call, the other Islamist warlords did not throw their lot on Baraev’s and Mezhidov’s side. The Islamic Jamaat under Emir Abdurrakhman, the Jundullah brigade under Adam Umalatov and Supyan Abdullaev as well as the Akhmadov brothers with their formation stood quiet in their cantonments. Even Ibn al-Khattab ordered the pupils of his training camp in Serzhen-Yurt not to move, because he did not wish “to be involved in inner-Chechen affairs”.²³⁵ Shamil Basaev, who at the time had not yet outed himself as a radical, stood in the middle between the two political camps. Although he had begun to support the radical Islamists to a certain degree, he also guaranteed for the Yamadaev’s, since Sulim Yamadaev had allegedly saved his life once during the First War.²³⁶

Violent clashes which produced close to 150 dead went on for days on the outskirts of Gudermes, until the Yamadaevs were finally able to rout the Islamists, who retreated to their power center in Urus-Martan in western Chechnya. What seems to have been a skirmish between bandits of different opinions, in fact drove the country on the verge of civil war. Only mediation by Vice-president Vakha Arsanov and the disbandment of the Sharia Guards under the command of Mezhidov by president Maskhadov avoided further bloodletting.²³⁷ Clearly, the cleavage between seculars and Islamists was deepened further by this episode and in hindsight it is probable that Russian intelligence services began to set up contact with Kadyrov and the Yamadaevs as a result of this conflict precisely at this time.²³⁸

Although civil war had been avoided, no side was happy with the actions undertaken by Maskhadov’s government. Although some Islamist outfits had been disbanded, they had also been ordered to disarm, which they did not. Maskhadov was simply too weak to enforce his own decisions or even the country’s law, so Islamists continued to ravage and terrify the areas under their control, enforcing strict Sharia law, destroying Sufi shrines and even persecuting *tariqatists*. Since the end of the First War, the radical Islamists had become a problem. There were former secular field commanders who had turned Islamist like Shamil Basaev and Ruslan Gelaev, who nonetheless were willing to be integrated in the new government and remained loyal to the administration, although they stood in political competition with Maskhadov. Long-time Islamists, like Movladi Udugov, Isa Umarov and ex-president Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev took more ambivalent positions, retaining positions close to the government at times, but dealing with subversive Islamist groups at the same time.²³⁹

Indeed, there were enough Islamist outfits that formed a truly subversive threat for the new born Chechen state. Sheykh Fathi’s Jamaat had been inherited by a young Jordanian born

²³⁵ See Lanskoj, Miriam. Chechnya’s Internal Fragmentation 1996-99, in: The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs, Vol.27, p. 194

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ See Akhmadov, Ilyas and Lanskoj, Miriam. The Chechen Struggle – Independence won and Lost, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2010, pp. 133

²³⁸ See Lanskoj, Miriam. Chechnya’s Internal Fragmentation 1996-99, in: The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs, Vol.27, p. 197

²³⁹ See Pokalova, Elena. Chechnya’s Terrorist Network: The Evolution of Terrorism in Russia’s North Caucasus, Praeger 2015, p. 79

Chechen named Abdurrahman. In his position as emir of the Jamaat, he enforced strict Sharia rule in his base area in south-western Chechnya, ignoring completely laws and norms of the central government, which he rejected as an instrument of *taghut*. Therefore, Maskhadov ordered Abdurrahman's expulsion from the country, which however could not be enforced because of the heavy armament the group disposed of. Also, he was well connected with local Islamists which backed his Jamaat. The infamous Akhmadov brothers ran their own armed Islamist outfit in the city of Urus-Martan and likewise did not accept orders from Maskhadov. Although they gave themselves as pious Muslims, they were widely regarded as ordinary criminals who heavily engaged in the kidnapping business. Arbi Baraev led a similar group in Alkhan-Yurt, on the outskirts of Grozny. They engaged in similar illegal activities as the Akhmadovs. At the time, they were heavily suspected to have kidnapped three English technicians, who were subsequently found throat-cut. Both Arbi Baraev and the Akhmadov brothers were widely suspected in Chechnya of entertaining ties with Russian intelligence services and having served as agent provocateurs for them.

Not only armed Islamist groups were spreading in abundance at the time, but Islamic scholars also. Only a few of them will be described though. Lem Bashaev (aka Abdurrahman Goytinsky) was born in 1967 in Goyti. After the fall of the Soviet Union, he allegedly studied Islamic theology in Yemen, where he became a pupil of Sheikh Zindani.²⁴⁰ After that, he fought in the First Chechen War and engaged in *dawaa* activities thereafter. He was involved with Sheikh Fathi's Chechen Jamaat and with Arbi Baraev. He was particularly active in the effort to convert Sufi *tariqatists* to what he deemed true Islam.²⁴¹ Moreover, he wrote several books over the topics of the permissibility of Jihad, Islamic law and basic Islamic principles.²⁴² He clearly advocated radical religious position, putting him in the arena of Salafism. There were, however, examples of more moderate Islamist stances among the variety of preachers active at the time. Magomed Guluev (aka Muhammad Argunskiy) was born in Argun in 1977. Perhaps less versed in Islamic knowledge than Abdurrahman Goytinsky, he enjoyed nonetheless much popularity, especially among the younger thanks to his great charisma. The lectures he gave in the mosques of Argun were attended by people from all of Chechnya. Furthermore, he was a pupil of the more prominent and respected *alim* Abdulhalim Sadulaev, the future successor of Aslan Maskhadov as rebel president of the

²⁴⁰ Sheikh Zindani is a leading Islamist and prominent Yemeni preacher and politician. He founded the al-Iman university in Sanaa and chairs the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood branch. This did not deter him from having contacts with Wahabi donors and Salafist preachers, like Anwar al-Awlaki for instance. Thus, he was designated as a "Specially Designated Global Terrorist" by the US Treasury Department in 2004, see JS1190 – United States designates bin Laden Loyalist, February 24, 2004, <http://www.treasury.gov/press/releases/js1190.htm>, accessed on January 18, 2023

²⁴¹ A video depicting Bashaev together with Arbi Baraev who are arguing with Sufi adherents about the heresy of their religious attitudes is still widely circulating on Chechen internet fora, see Lovdal Myuridsh, Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=peYJ10OUxXs>, accessed on January 18, 2023

²⁴² See Sheykh Abdurrahman Goytinskiy, Hunafa, July 8, 2012, www.hunafa.com/?p=9357, accessed April 4, 2014 and Muhammad-Idris ad-Dardani, Geroi istiny i Izhi .. prodolzheniye ... Islam Din, April 19, 2010, <http://www.islamdin.com/articles/21-heroes/727-2010-04-19-00-50-06.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

ChRI.²⁴³ Sadulaev was born in 1967 also in Argun. There he was tutored by Chechen theologians until he became the head of the Islamic Jamaat of the city after the First Chechen War. From 1996 on, he delivered sermons on Chechen television, which gave him great popularity among the population.²⁴⁴ In contrast to many other more radical preachers, Sadulaev, though also advocating the creation of an Islamic state, was a moderate Islamist. He worked together with and backed president Maskhadov, his Jamaat did not engage in armed activity before the outbreak of the Second War.²⁴⁵ In 1999, when Maskhadov stood under severe pressure from the Islamist opposition, he was appointed as a member of the newly formed State Commission on Constitutional Sharia Reform.²⁴⁶

Criminal gangs could not be stopped in their engagement in the kidnapping business as well as in the large-scale theft of raw oil. Generally, the territorial control of the Maskhadov government extended over large cities and towns, leaving vast uncontrolled spaces that were taken over by clan-based or religious, Islamist militias. Since the economy was still lying on the ground, salaries and pensions could not be paid out and people was again forced to migrate to the big Russian metropolises to find work there, ordinary people also were not happy about Maskhadov's government, although it must be said that he simply did not have the financial means to adequately rebuild and effectively rule a country whose infrastructure had been totally destroyed. Undoubtedly, Russian obstructionism on the negotiation table of negotiations for the implementation of the provisions of the peace treaty was intended by design to destabilize the country and so create prerequisites for a new invasion. At the moment, however, the greatest danger for Maskhadov came from the armed Islamist groups. Only days after the events of Gudermes and the disbandment of the Sharia guards, Maskhadov survived an attempt on his life, when a car bomb exploded as his motorcade was passing by.²⁴⁷

The most striking indicator for a failing state is perhaps the absence of the monopoly of power by the legitimate government.²⁴⁸ Since the manifold wartime militias had not laid down their arms, the emergence of warlordism was inevitable. After the retreat of the Russian forces at the end of 1996, the fight for the few available resources in the totally destroyed country began. Former field commanders and strongmen competed for areas of influence and every type of illegal activity. As head of government, Maskhadov simply did not have the monopoly

²⁴³ See Geroi russo-chechenskoy voyny: Muhammad Argunskiy (VIDEO), Chechen News, October 10, 2013, <http://chechenews.com/world-news/breaking/14222-1.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

²⁴⁴ See Prezident CHRI Sheykh Abdul-Khalim. Kto on?, Kavkaz Center, March 12, 2005, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2005/03/12/31340.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

²⁴⁵ See Vatchagaev, Mairbek. Evolution of the Chechen Jamaat, Jamestown Foundation – North Caucasus Analysis Volume 6 Issue 14, April 6, 2005, [www.jamestown.org/single?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=30223](http://www.jamestown.org/single?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=30223), accessed on January 18, 2023

²⁴⁶ See Tumelty, Paul. A Biography of Abdul-Khalim Sadulaev, Jamestown Foundation – North Caucasus Analysis Volume 6 Issue 11, March 16, 2005, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=2206&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=2206&no_cache=1), accessed on January 18, 2023

²⁴⁷ See Chechen leader survives assassination attempt, BBC, July 23, 1998, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/137943.stm>, accessed on January 18, 2023

²⁴⁸ E.g. Rotberg, Robert. Failed States, Collapsed States, and Weak States: Causes and Indicators, Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, July 7, 2011

of power in post-war Chechnya. The so-called government forces were divided into different factions responding more to their respective commander than to central authority. The 3.000 men of the National Guard, intended as the country's army, did in fact consist of contingents drawn from different warlords. It is clear that then that the National Guard acted in the interest of the state as long as their chiefs remained loyal to Maskhadov. The commander of the National Guard, Magomed Khambiyev, was himself a weak and not much respected figure, who ran smuggling activities in his free time. The presidential guard was one of the few more trustworthy units which protected the president and government officials and guarded oil pipelines. Its mere 350 troops could not turn the tide in the fight against anarchy, however. Several hundred Sharia Guards under the command of Abdul-Malik Mezhidov, a hard-line Islamist, were originally conceded by Maskhadov to the Islamists to appease them. The Sharia Guards had the task to watch over the enforcement of Sharia, which at the time, however, was not the only source of legislation. It coexisted parallel to the ordinary legislation in an uncoordinated manner, which led to a wide legislative grey zone. So it came that Sharia guards mainly enforced Sharia without regard for the ordinary laws, which led to further chaos and abuse. Instead of being a regulating factor, they added up to the mess. The so-called Anti-Terrorism Center under the command of Khunkarpasha Israpilov, one of the veterans of Budennovsk, and the National Security Service under Ibrahim Khultygov numbered each a few hundred men. At times they served Maskhadov well, but they also contributed to the infighting and factionalism in the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. The Interior Ministry Force, that is the police, as well as the border guard service, was dispersed over the land and was subject to pressure from warlords. In addition, being chronically underfunded, like most government forces it was susceptible to bribery and corruption.²⁴⁹

In addition, warlords outside of the government enjoyed their home areas as fiefdoms by virtue of the armed groups they controlled. The militia under the control of Shamil Basaev was based in Vedeno and Grozny. At one point part of what was supposed to be a regular army, it numbered 500-600 fighters. Basaev's buddy, Khattab, was running the so-called Kavkaz Islamic Institute, a training facility for foreign jihadis in Basaev's neighborhood, at Serzhen-Yurt. There were concentrated a few hundred pupils at any one time. The erratic Salman Ruduev, who seemed to have turned lunatic after he had been targeted by a road-side bomb, had only a few dozen fighters under his command. His exaggerated claims and threats against Maskhadov contributed to heat up public discourse, however. The already mentioned Yamadaevs controlled Gudermes and the roads to Dagestan thanks to 150-200 well-armed fighters. The long list of warlords could be indefinitely continued, but it is sufficient to say that other, more or less powerful warlords controlled the country in the north as well as in the

²⁴⁹ For the numerical data see Fairbanks, Charles H. Junior, *Weak States and Private armies*, in: *Beyond State Crisis? Post-Colonial Africa and Post-Soviet Eurasia in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Beissinger, Mark R./Young, Crawford, John Hopkins University Press, 2002, p. 131-134. Interviews with former high-ranking officials of the ChRI formed the base for the qualitative assessments, see Interview with H. I. and S.I.

south. It is therefore not exaggerated to claim that Maskahdov was in fact able to directly control the capital city of Grozny, and even that not in its entirety.²⁵⁰

In order of priority, after the maintenance of law and public safety, one of the most important features of a functioning state is the raising of taxes to finance the administration of the state and its services to the people. It is sufficient to look at the sources of income of the Chechen state to see that under these conditions, no state could have ever been built by Maskhadov. Since the economy was almost non-existent, no taxes could be raised from the citizens, who relied on agriculture, the help of relatives, group solidarity or emigration to survive and live on. Chechnya's main sources of income in the inter-war period came mainly from oil pipeline transit fees from Transneft, a Russian state company, pipeline guarding fees and pension payments – all of this were direct or indirect payments from the Russian state. Occasional donations from expatriate Chechens and South-East Asia based Islamists were employed by Maskhadov to bolster his personal power base, although this happened largely in service of the state.²⁵¹ But how did the many warlords and strongmen finance their sometimes-large private armies, and most of all, their luxurious lifestyle in a completely destroyed country?

Shamil Basaev relied on former investments, protection services and gifts from Chechen businessmen living in Russia or abroad as well as rich donations from the Gulf area.²⁵² The latter applies for Ibn al-Khattab. Movladi Udugov, spokesman of the government and propagandist for the radicals, had the monopoly over the mobile phone business in Chechnya and multiple sources of donations from the Gulf states and allegedly, from the wealthy and at the time mighty Russian oligarch Boris Berezhevsky. In addition, he had enjoyed additional funds from Sheykh Fathi until the latter's death in 1997. Udugov was at the time was widely regarded one of the richest men in Chechnya. In March 1999, he founded *Kavkaz Center* an online information outlet which promoted not only news from Chechnya, but international ones as well, with the main focus on news from fellow Islamic countries and subtly supporting Islamist groups and militias.²⁵³ Salman Raduyev also enjoyed funding from Berezhevsky and contributions from wealthy Gulf businessmen. He operated also the TV channel *Marsho*, which was not only Raduev's mouthpiece, but a good source of income as well. Illegal oil extraction, refining and sale brought extra money. Israpilov and Khultygov, though fairly loyal to Maskhadov, were widely suspected of bribery and corruption. Most other warlords earned their money with kidnapping and racket activity.²⁵⁴

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Fairbanks, Charles H. Junior. *Weak States and Private armies*, in: *Beyond State Crisis? Post-Colonial Africa and Post-Soviet Eurasia in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Beissinger, Mark R./Young, Crawford, John Hopkins University Press, 2002, p. 138-139

²⁵² Ware, Robert B. and Kisriev, Enver. *Dagestan – Russian Hegemony and Islamic Resistance in the North Caucasus*, M.E. Sharpe, 2010, p. 121

²⁵³ Fairbanks, Charles H. Junior. *Weak States and Private armies*, in: *Beyond State Crisis? Post-Colonial Africa and Post-Soviet Eurasia in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Beissinger, Mark R./Young, Crawford, John. Hopkins University Press, 2002, p. 138-139

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

It is clear then, that not only most hard power, but also greater financial assets lay within the power of individuals outside the government. As Charles Fairbanks notes, the situation of president Maskhadov and the government was reminiscent of those of feudal European states, where the king had less power as his great vassals taken together and was therefore their hostage whenever the need of support or to take action arose. The king had to put much more effort in the ruling of the kingdom as in the strengthening of his household – while the great men could focus only on that aspect, thus eroding central power more and more.²⁵⁵ A more contemporary comparison could be made with 1990s Somalia. After the fall of Siad Barre, Ali Mahdi Muhammad was proclaimed president. Nominally, he stayed in office from 1991 to 1997, although he was only able to control parts of the capital city Mogadishu. Various warlords, most notably General Aidid, did not recognize Muhammad's presidency and contested him up to armed confrontation. Against this background, inter-war independent Chechnya must be considered a failed state, and it was only a matter of time before internal conflict, as already had happened in 1998, would have broken out, would it not have been for the renewed Russian invasion in 1999 that was to follow soon. The Islamist militias and the still present and growing number of Islamist foreign fighters were instrumental in the further decline of the country and its plunging into renewed abyss.²⁵⁶

4. The Foreign Fighters

Foreign fighters had been flocking to Chechnya already since the beginning of the First War. Poles, Ukrainians and Baltic people volunteered to help the besieged Chechens against the common Russian enemy. There were even speculations about sniper units made up of Estonian or Lithuanian women. However, these were contributions made by individuals out of idealism or more often of spirit of adventure, no organized schemes existed. The violence of the Russian invasion, the indiscriminate shelling of Grozny under siege and the atrocities soon perpetrated by Russian forces created much commotion in the Muslim world. Solidarity with fellow coreligionists against the *kufir* Russians mobilized in active help. Relief supplies were sent to Chechnya by Islamic NGOs and sympathetic circles. Soon, however, militant Islamic circles too mobilized for armed support to their Chechen brothers.

Next in line is Ibn al-Khattab, a youthful Saudi national. He allegedly heard of the Chechen struggle when he was fighting alongside Islamists in the brutal civil war that ravaged Tajikistan in the first half of the 1990s. Having become disillusioned with his Tajik comrades in arms there and having heard of the struggle waged by Chechens against the Russians, in 1995 he decided to go to the Caucasus with his small group and fight a new Jihad there. However, what his group lacked in numbers was made up by a great deal of great experience gained on the battlefields of Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Some sources suggest that Khattab was contacted by Sheikh Fathi, though he kept his autonomy and never submitted to the

²⁵⁵ Fairbanks, Charles H. Junior. *Weak States and Private armies*, in: *Beyond State Crisis? Post-Colonial Africa and Post-Soviet Eurasia in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Beissinger, Mark R./Young, Crawford, John Hopkins University Press, 2002, p. 139

²⁵⁶ See Akhmadov, Ilyas and Lanskoj, Miriam. *The Chechen Struggle – Independence won and Lost*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2010, pp. 130-133

cleric. Ibn ul-Khattab was born in 1969 as Thamir Saleh Abdullah Al-Suwailem in Arar, on Saudi Arabia's northern border with Iraq. Having reached the age of 18 years, he travelled to Afghanistan to contribute in the *jihad* against the Red Army and its Afghan cronies. He trained at a mujahedeen training camp in the Khost region on the border with Pakistan. In Afghanistan he led a small unit in combat against Afghan loyalist troops around the time of the mujahedeen siege to Jalalabad in 1992²⁵⁷, although very little is known about his Afghan time. It is sure, however, that he became one of the famed leaders among Afghan Arabs and that he came to know Osama bin Laden.²⁵⁸

He stayed in Afghanistan until 1993, when he moved with his little militia to the Tajik civil war theatre.²⁵⁹ From there, he allegedly followed Sheikh Fathi's call to Chechnya in mid-1995. There, he swiftly connected with Chechen rebels, who though being diffident to outsiders, welcomed his group as it came at a difficult time for the Chechens who had been forced to abandon Vedeno, their last stronghold, and retreat high up the mountains where it was extremely difficult to sustain their forces because of their separation from their supportive population.²⁶⁰ Khattab's group at the time included few followers, who in turn became cadres when his militia expanded. Among them was Abu Bakr Aqeedah, a one-legged celebrity among Afghan Arabs of Egyptian origin. Experienced fighters like Hakim al-Medani, Abu Jafar al-Jemeni and Abu Walid joined soon.²⁶¹ However, soon Chechen and Arab volunteers joined his group, and even former Russian prisoners of war did.²⁶² Individuals of Western origin too came to the battlefield: The case of Aukai Collins, the American mujahedeen is widely known.²⁶³ During the second half of 1995, Khattab and his group spent their time training and recruiting. However, it did not last long for them to take action.

The first major action Khattab was involved in took place in October 1995 near Kharashoi²⁶⁴ in the upper Vedeno region. There Khattab's foreign fighters ambushed a unit of the Russian Army killing and wounding up to 47 soldiers.²⁶⁵ It was one of the most sophisticated attacks in Chechnya to this date, involving the use of improvised explosives, sophisticated anti-tank guided missiles, 82 mm mortar fire support and a light anti-aircraft gun for fending off

²⁵⁷ See Waislamah.net, The Complete Biography Commander Khattab – Sword of Islam, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXiLcX_NFjk, accessed on January 18, 2023

²⁵⁸ See Hegghammer, Thomas. *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism Since 1979*. N.p., Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 43

²⁵⁹ The Tajik civil war between Islamist factions and the postcommunist government was a little-known but ugly conflict which consequences helped fuel jihadi activity in Central Asia and still reverberate today. See Epkenhans, Tim. *The Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan: Nationalism, Islamism, and Violent Conflict in Post-Soviet Space*. United Kingdom, Lexington Books, 2018 for more information on the subject.

²⁶⁰ Interview S.I.

²⁶¹ These figures will be discussed extensively further below.

²⁶² See Azzam Publications, Ambush of Russian Army Unit at Kartashoi. October 1995, www.azzam.com/html/photokhartashoihome/htm, accessed on January 18, 2023

²⁶³ See Collins, Aukai, *My Jihad: One American's Journey Through the World of Usama bin Laden – as a covert Operative for the American Government*, Pocket Star, 2003

²⁶⁴ Kharashoi is located high in Chechnya's southeastern border mountains on the road which connects Vedeno to Bothlikh in Dagestan.

²⁶⁵ See Murphy, Paul J.. *The Wolves of Islam: Russia and the Faces of Chechen Terror*. United States, Brassey's, 2004. The mujahedeen report mentioned below however counted only 41 dead Russians.

Russian airborne ground support. At the time Khattab's group seems to have been very small, counting around 40 elements.²⁶⁶ The successful attack, however, probably contributed together with other actions to the decision of the Russian command to move out of the Vedeno district, which immediately returned to be a sanctuary and staging area for the Chechen insurgents. In fact, pictures taken at the time show Khattab being thankfully greeted by Vedeno inhabitants after the withdrawal of Russian forces.²⁶⁷ The following winter Khattab's unit engaged in hit-and-run attacks while he personally befriended Shamil Basaev and other Chechen commanders.

The greatest success for the Islamic fighters, however, had yet to come, setting the first stage of the Russian defeat. On April 23, 1996, they set up an ambush near the little hamlet of Yarishmardy in the Argun Gorge, a few Kilometers outside Shatoi in the mountainous southern part of Chechnya. The ambush positions were stretched over a mile besides the road, the whole operation involved 43 fighters according to Mirosław Kuleba, a Polish volunteer who participated in the attack.²⁶⁸ In the morning hours, the scouts signaled the passage of a Russian reconnaissance unit. Soon, the bulk of the 2nd Battalion from the 245th Motor rifle regiment, thinly stretched in a long column of over 50 vehicles, was caught up in the trap and quickly shot to pieces. Classic battle cries and previously planted IEDs initiated the attack, destroying the first vehicles at the head of the column, RPGs and heavy machine guns doing the rest. After a few hours only corpses, burnt-out tanks, *Kamaz* trucks and BTRs remained. The cheering fighters descended on the road looting whatever military equipment that was left and even Sheikh Fatih came to congratulate Khattab, as an infamous and widely distributed video of the attack shows. The ambush resulted in the loss of between 100 and 200 Russian soldiers and more than thirty tanks, IFVs and trucks.²⁶⁹ One could argue that the 2nd battalion was annihilated as a fighting force. The foreign fighters did not take part in the storming of Grozny in August of 1996, staying in their operational zone in eastern Chechnya harassing and diverting Russian forces there. As the war came to end with the Khasav-Yurt peace agreement, Khattab and his men stayed on. They quickly grabbed the chance to establish a new Jihadi hotspot in the war-ravaged country. An old *Komsomol* estate in the vicinity of Serzhen Yurt in the eastern lowland was transformed into the so-called Kavkaz Islamic Institute²⁷⁰.

Soon Islamic militants from all over the world began flocking to Chechnya joining the training courses in Serzhen-Yurt, although the majority seems to have been of Caucasian origin. Basic training with classic obstacle runs, small arms combat training alternated with

²⁶⁶ See Azzam Publications, Ambush of Russian Army Unit at Kartashoi. October 1995, www.azzam.com/html/photokhartashoihome/htm, accessed on January 18, 2023

²⁶⁷ See Waislamah.net, The Complete Biography Commander Khattab – Sword of Islam, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXiLcX_NFjk, accessed on January 18, 2023

²⁶⁸ Kuleba, Mirosław. Szamil Basajew: rycerski etos a powinność żołnierska. Poland, Fundacja Odyseum, 2007.

²⁶⁹ See Izmaylov, Viacheslav, Bez Vesti Pogibshiye, Novaya Gazeta, September 8, 2003, <http://2003.novayagazeta.ru/nomer/2003/66n/n66n-s18.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

²⁷⁰ See Billingsley, Dodge. Fangs of the Lone Wolf: Chechen Tactics in the Russian-Chechen War 1994-2009. United Kingdom, Helion Limited, 2013, p.5f.

Arabic language classes as well as Islamic education and indoctrination. Since every 3-month class could take at least 200 students²⁷¹, it is probable that hundreds of individuals obtained guerrilla training at Khattab's camp over the two and a half years of its existence. Talented individuals could join further specialized courses such as explosives handling, mortar and antitank training involving sophisticated weapons such as third-generation ATGMs. Although many of the newly graduates stayed on to fight in the pending war, many returned to their home countries, joining al Qaeda or other jihadi enterprises in Afghanistan and Iraq in the course of the following years. This does not imply that there was a direct link between Khattab's jihadis in the Caucasus and al Qaeda, which was only then developing in earnest. While the nature of the relationship between Khattab and bin Laden and their different views on Jihad have already been laid out, another event happening in 1997 has been boosting ever since conspiracy theories.

After the failed attempt to overthrow the Mubarak regime in Egypt's mid-1990s by various Islamic groups like Islamic Jihad and al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the amir of Islamic Jihad was in search for a new safe haven after having been expelled alongside bin Laden and other Islamic radicals from there. Since Khattab's fame in those days was great all over the Arab world, Zawahiri decided to reach the new jihadi Eldorado in de-facto independent Chechnya. However, he was arrested on the federal border between Azerbaijan and Dagestan because he was caught with forged documents. The Russians did not recognize him, and he had to spend six months in a Dagestani prison before being deported from the country.²⁷² In his autobiographical work *Knights under the Prophet's banner* he outlined the potential of the Chechen conflict for the jihadi cause as follows:

The liberation of the Caucasus would constitute a hotbed of jihad (or fundamentalism as the United States describes it) and that region would become the shelter of thousands of Muslim mujahideen from various parts of the Islamic world, particularly Arab parts. This poses a direct threat to the United States, represented by the growing support for the jihadist movement everywhere in the Islamic world. If the Chechens and other Caucasian mujahideen reach the shores of the oil-rich Caspian Sea, the only thing that will separate them from Afghanistan will be the neutral state of Turkmenistan. This will form a mujahid Islamic belt to the south of Russia that will be connected in the east to Pakistan, which is brimming with mujahideen movements in Kashmir. The belt will be linked to the south with Iran and Turkey that are sympathetic to the Muslims of Central Asia. This will break the cordon that is struck around the Muslim Caucasus and allow it to communicate with the Islamic world in general. Furthermore the liberation of the Muslim Caucasus will lead to the fragmentation of the Russian Federation and will help escalate

²⁷¹ See Billingsley, Dodge. *Fangs of the Lone wolf*, Helion & Company 2013, p. 6

²⁷² Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Knights under the Prophet's Banner*, excerpts in *Asharq al-Awsat* (London), Dec. 2, 2001, in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report, Near East South Asia, Jan. 10, 2002.

*the jihad movements that already exist in the republics of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, whose governments get Russian backing against those jihadist movements. The fragmentation of the Russian Federation on the rock of the fundamentalist movement and at the hands of the Muslims of the Caucasus and Central Asia will topple a basic ally of the United States in its battle against the Islamic jihadist reawakening.*²⁷³

On December 22, 1997, Khattab opened up the prelude to the Second Chechen War. With a force of approximately 100 Arabs, Chechens, Ingush and Dagestanis he attacked the base of the 136th Mechanized Infantry Brigade tank battalion equipped with T-72s situated in Buinaksk deep in Dagestani territory. While apparently the attack finalized in stealing Russian tanks, it resulted in a botched attempt. In the first stages of the fire exchange with Dagestani guards, Commanders Abu Bakr Aqeedah and Abu Ammar, both Egyptians, died. The attempt to move some of the tanks away failed, because their batteries had been removed before. The attack resulted in the destruction of several tanks and in the disruption of the base's logistical infrastructure. In the course of the withdrawal of the attacking party and the pursuit by Dagestani police and Russian Special Forces Khattab claimed to have inflicted heavy losses to the federals. The Chechen government refused to comment, having lost their face another time by not having succeeded in controlling its own territory.²⁷⁴ It is clear that the goal of this attack was not only to steal a few tanks, but as well to destabilize Dagestan and incite the already rebellious Islamist factions in the country. In the reverse conclusion, this action only stiffened the Russian will to take revenge and eradicate the Chechen threat once and for all. In the meantime, Khattab and his men joyfully continued training and began hiding weapons and building bases in the woods and in the mountains in prevision of the war they were sure to come.²⁷⁵

Meanwhile, in neighboring Dagestan, the outlook for the future seemed bleak for many people. Dagestan had been one of the most backward regions of the Soviet Union. The downfall of socialism had entailed the closure of many state factories and collective farms, which aggravated the situation of the already weak local economy. The consequence was a huge increase in the number of unemployed people. As a common fate to most other Caucasian regions, many of its inhabitants have been forced to rely on internal emigration to the big agglomeration areas inside Russia to find work and sustainment. Ethnic tensions over the distribution of power and political infighting among the elites to gain access to federal resources for personal enrichment left many people disillusioned about the future. The ideological void left by the collapse of the Soviet Union had equally severe repercussions on

²⁷³ Cit. Ibid.

²⁷⁴ See Geibel, Adam. Khattab's Audacious Raid (22 December 1997): prelude to the Second Chechen War, in: Central Asian Survey (2000), 19(3/4), p. 341-349

²⁷⁵ Interview H.I.

the moral level. Typically for such situations, people were thus in search for easy, understandable answers to big and difficult questions.²⁷⁶

Salafism, locally called Wahabism, had been imported to the North Caucasus and Dagestan since the late 1970s. One of the main promoters of the austere creed in Dagestan, Bagautdin Kebedov, over the years had come in conflict with more moderate Salafist exponents of the late Islamic Revival Party. During the First Chechen War, Kebedov forged deep ties with Salafist preachers and military commanders operating in Chechnya, among others with Sheikh Fathi and Ibn al-Khattab. Meanwhile he organized wahabi groups in Dagestan and established the *Islamic Jamaat of Dagestan*, becoming its *amir*. Being in concurrence with moderate Salafists like Akhmed-Kadji Akhtaev, the former chairman of the Islamic Revival Party, he tried to attract the approximately ten per cent of the Dagestani population who adhered to radical Islam by frontally attacking Sufism. He pointed out their “sins” hoping to discredit the Dagestani political class, who had been intertwined with Sufi tariqas since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, presenting the ideal Islamic state as an attractive alternative to the disillusioned people. Thus, he hoped to tie the corruption and incompetence of the government to “polytheist” Sufism. In particular, he accused the Sufis to put their scholars at the same level with God itself; to maintain a clergy-like religious structure, “like the Christians”; and to worship sheiks and “saints” to the point of polytheism.²⁷⁷

The first shots in Dagestan fell even before the end of the First Chechen War. In June 1996, the head of the administration of the Kadar village in the central Dagestani highland was killed. A local radical accused of the murder promptly fled to Chechnya. In the following months, tension between local Wahabis and traditional Muslims grew in the Kadar area. Gun battles were exchanged between the two groups, and there were fatalities and injured on both sides. This should have alarmed the authorities in Makhachkala, since the area is inhabited by ethnic Dargins, and at the time, the leadership of the republic was also in Darghin hands. Following Dagestani political logic, Darghins should have constituted the least threat to the government, since they were ruled by ethnic fellows at the time. Nevertheless, the influence of the Wahabis eventually grew over time, as they continued intimidating local Sufis and occasionally besieged or occupied their mosques. Ibn al-Khattab, who had reportedly married a local woman from the village of Karamakhi at the end of the First Chechen War, apparently lived in the area from time to time. In the aftermath of Khattab’s attack on the Russian base in Buinaksk in December of 1997, the authorities suspected local Wahabis to have participated in the operation.²⁷⁸

The Kadar villages were inhabited by ethnic Darghins, whereas Bagautdin was an Avar who had his stronghold in the Wahabi community in Echeda, in the Botlikh region in

²⁷⁶ Ware, Robert Bruce and Kisriev, Enver, *Dagestan – Russian Hegemony and Islamic Resistance in the North Caucasus*, M.E. Sharpe, 2010, p. 93-94

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 99

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 104

Avaristan.²⁷⁹ Yet it was under the influence of Bagautdin that the Wahabis would set up the Islamic Jamaat of Kadar. The blend made up of religious radicalism and anti-establishment opposition made it easy to overcome ethnic boundaries and forge a pan-Islamic alliance. Other, less powerful ethnic groups chose similar ways to improve their status and gain access to resources. Since the end of 1990s, two brothers, Nadirshah and Magomed Khachilayev, were at the leadership of the ethnic Lak group, the fifth largest ethnic community in Dagestan.²⁸⁰ As a Karate champion the former and a businessman the latter, they had been engaging in politics since 1990, when both co-founded the National Lak Movement *Kazi-Kumukh*, with Magomed Khachilayev soon becoming its head. Nadirshah subsequently became involved with the party Union of Muslims of Russia (UMR), eventually becoming a deputy to the state Duma. Although both were initially not very well versed in Islamic knowledge, they chose Islamism as a political mobilization factor among their fellow Lak people to oppose the more predominant ethnic communities governing the country.²⁸¹ Therefore Kebedov and the other Wahabis became natural allies to the Khachilayevs. Following a brawl with police in Makhachkala, the Khachilayev brothers and their followers occupied the main government building in Makhachkala on May 21, 1998. They eventually gave up after negotiations and for the moment remained unscathed by authorities. A few months later, however, the prosecutor issued arrest warrants for both brothers, but Nadir managed to flee to Chechnya, where he reportedly joined forces with Basaev and Khattab.²⁸²

Meanwhile, in the Kadar area, gunmen stormed the police station of Karamakhi and seized weapons and radio equipment. OMON reinforcements sent in from Buinaksk. In the vicinity of Chabanmakhi the troops were met with heavy gunfire. Outside Karamakhi, another police column was surrounded by hundreds of armed villagers. After a tense standoff the Dagestani president, Magomedali Magomedov opted for a political solution the following day. The agreement reached stipulated the removal of the police blockade of the Kadar area and a mutual prisoner exchange. Incredibly, no further efforts to wrestle back control over the rebellious villages were undertaken by the government. The Kadar area had been abandoned by the state, hence it became known as the “Islamic Jamaat”, a sort of an Islamic mini-state right in the middle of Dagestan. A few months later, in June 1998, a huge meeting, attended by over 1.000 armed Wahabis from all over Dagestan, was held in Karamakhi. The meeting was publicized variously as “Congress of the People of Ichkeria and Dagestan”, as “United Congress of the Orthodox Muslims of Dagestan” and as “Congress of the Military and Political Leadership of the Central Front for the Liberation of Dagestan”. The demands of the participants were clear. They rejected the central government and demanded the resignation of the entire Dagestani cabinet, the withdrawal of Russian troops from the country and the union

²⁷⁹ See See Blandy, Charles W.. Dagestan: The Storm. United Kingdom, Conflict Studies Research Centre, 2000, p. 37

²⁸⁰ Ware, Robert Bruce and Kisriev, Enver, Dagestan – Russian Hegemony and Islamic Resistance in the North Caucasus, M.E. Sharpe, 2010, p. 106-107

²⁸¹ See See Blandy, Charles W.. Dagestan: The Storm. United Kingdom, Conflict Studies Research Centre, 2000, p. 37-38

²⁸² See Fairbanks, Charles H., Weak States and Private Armies, in: Beyond State Crisis, edited by Beissinger, Mark R./Young, Crawford, John Hopkins University Press 2002, p. 144

of Dagestan with independent Chechnya.²⁸³ This move aimed clearly at easing Russian pressure off Chechnya by expanding anti-Russian agitation to Dagestan.²⁸⁴

Not satisfied of that, in August the Kadar Wahabis went a step further declaring that they would henceforth take control over the neighboring road connecting the capital city of Makhachkala with the Western part of the country. Now the government did not exclude forceful action against the Islamic Jamaat anymore. The already very high tension pervading the country however hit the peak when the mufti of Dagestan and the chairman of the Spiritual Directorate, both Avars, were killed by a bomb in front of the main mosque of Makhachkala. The bombing was immediately attributed to the Wahabis and action against them was imminent when a leading Avar accused the state leadership, in primis Magomedov, who was an ethnic Dargin, of the murder. This fact is indicative for the precarious political situation of multi-ethnic Dagestan. Now the situation turned completely upside down. This time Dagestan stood not before a religious conflict, but on the verge of ethnic conflict. In the following days, columns of armed Avars moved from the Western cities in the direction of the capital, also demanding the resignation of the cabinet. They could be stopped and engaged in negotiations only with great difficulty.²⁸⁵

The Wahabis were the beneficiaries of the situation. They managed not only to retain their de facto independent status, but managed to get a steady flow of supplies from the federal government after the stipulation of a new agreement in September 1998. These concessions may have been an instrument to ease the situation in the Kadar area somewhat, while dealing with the ethnic crisis. Nevertheless, the fact that the Wahabis not only were not punished, but even awarded with deliveries of medicines and construction material, increased the prestige of the Jamaat encouraging Wahabi action elsewhere in the republic and alienated traditional Muslims and Sufis who felt threatened by the Wahabis. In fact, the state-sponsored Congress of the Muslims of Dagestan who originally had come together at the end of August to commemorate the death of the mufti and their chairman issued a sharp condemnation of the appeasement policy taken by the government when dealing with the Wahabis. This meant that the government had managed by its incompetence to alienate even its closest supporters. Consequently, the authority of the government of Dagestan and connected with it, federal authority experienced a massive deterioration between the end of 1998 and the summer of 1999.

²⁸³ See Kisriev, Enver, and Ware, Robert Bruce. *Dagestan: Russian Hegemony and Islamic Resistance in the North Caucasus*. United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2014, p. 107

²⁸⁴ Ware, Robert W., in: *Chechnya – From Past to Future*, edited by Sakwa, Richard, Anthem Press 2005, p. 93. See also the video documentation of the meeting (formerly published at ImamTV.org until its shutdown, now retrievable on YouTube): *Kongress narodov Ichkerii i Dagestana (Конгресс народов Ичкерии и Дагестана)* chast' 1, 2 and 3, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7mJtdFSGQ0>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f3pLEJdpa1U> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rlyBg-7fTqI>, all accessed on January 18, 2023

²⁸⁵ See Ware, Robert Bruce, and Kisriev, Enver. *Dagestan: Russian Hegemony and Islamic Resistance in the North Caucasus*. United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2014, p. 67f.

At the beginning of August 1999, small detachments of Chechen and Dagestani fighters trained in Chechnya infiltrated the Dagestani Bothlikh and Tsumadinsky regions to carry out reconnaissance activity, thereby clashing with Russian MVD troops. A few days later, on August 7, 1999, the main contingent of the so-called International Islamic Peace-Keeping Brigade (IIPB) under the leadership of Ibn al-Khattab and Shamil Basaev crossed the border to Dagestan coming from Chechnya's south-eastern Vedenno region. The IIPB was a motley crew assembled by various primarily Chechen Islamist militias. The core was formed by Khattab's foreign contingent coming from his training camp at Serzhen-Yurt and Shamil Basaev's large private contingent. The rest amounted to almost all armed Islamist groupings present in Chechnya at the time, including the Chechen Jamaat, the Akhmadov Jamaat and Basaev's Islamic fighters.²⁸⁶ The invading militia counted up to 2,000 well equipped fighters divided in three columns attacking from the Shatoy and Vedenno areas on the Chechen side of the border.²⁸⁷

The extremely mountainous character of the region at first advantaged the invading force, which was able to capture a number of villages by surprise and penetrate the Dagestani border region over a width of approximately 30 kilometers and a depth of up to 10 kilometers. The main objective of Basaev and Khattab, however, could not be captured. The Islamist militants were stopped a short distance before Botlikh, the region's administrative center, and most of all, its airport. This facilitated the inflow of federal reinforcements in the next stage of the confrontation, albeit the airport could be shelled from the militant positions on the mountains above the airstrip. The stopping of the Islamists short of their initial main objective was probably the unexpected resistance of locals along their path to Botlikh and the equally unexpected quick reaction by the federal forces.²⁸⁸

As with many things, and particularly political events in Russia, the motives for the invasion of Dagestan by Basaev and Khattab are shrouded in mystery to this day, wrapped up by a layer of incognitos, disinformation and conspiracy theories. Some say the Dagestan invasion was, together with the apartment bombings in Moscow and Volgograd, part of a bigger plan conceived to destabilize the country and bring about a political change towards more authoritarian rule and a renewed invasion of Chechnya, with Basaev and Khattab as more or less knowingly useful instruments to realize it.²⁸⁹ According to many testimonies who were key players at the time on both ends of the Chechen political spectrum, the most likely reason for the push of the radicals towards Dagestan was the fact that they assumed – and they were right – Russian troops to come back again to Chechnya. Indeed, in prevision of renewed war,

²⁸⁶ See Al-Qoqaz' video production Russian Hell Volume I, Maaskar Al Qoqaz, 2001

²⁸⁷ See Blandy, Charles W.. Dagestan: The Storm. United Kingdom, Conflict Studies Research Centre, 2000, p. 40-42

²⁸⁸ Blandy, Charles W.. Dagestan: The Storm. United Kingdom, Conflict Studies Research Centre, 2000, p. 27

²⁸⁹ See, Na Den'gi Berzovskogo Bylo Organizovano Vtorzheniye V Dagestan, – Shitayet Viktor Ilyukhin, Delovaya Pressa, January 29, 2002, http://www.businesspress.ru/newspaper/article_mld_33_ald_99279.html, accessed on January 18, 2023

they seem to have installed weapon and supply caches and constructed dug-outs and bases in the Chechen mountains well before the summer of 1999.²⁹⁰

Since the end of the First War, Khattab's objective had been the liberation of the North Caucasus from Russian rule. This had been one of the key reasons for the establishment of his training camp in Serzhen-Yurt back in 1997. Islamist militants from all over the Caucasus and those from outside willing to take part in this endeavor had been trained for this purpose. For Khattab, the North Caucasus had to be liberated in what he saw as a defensive Jihad from infidel rule largely out of ideological and religious reasons. Over time, he had managed to enlist Basaev, with whom Khattab had built up a close personal relationship, for the cause. It is not entirely clear on which ideological ground Basaev stayed at the time. Once not exaggeratedly religious at all and at the most a sympathizer of custom Chechen Sufi practices, he had clearly evolved to a more radical religious attitude over the course of the First Chechen War and under the influence of Khattab and others in the inter-war time.²⁹¹ Despite religious rhetoric and ostentatious pan-Islamist solidarity, Basaev seem to have retained nevertheless strong nationalist feelings.²⁹²

According to people who knew Basaev personally, he planned to follow the example of Imam Shamil, who had managed to build an united front against the Tsars, to maximize the chances for resistance, albeit he did not prevail.²⁹³ Thus, the calculation of Basaev could have been that anticipating a new Russian invasion by igniting an Islamic uprising in Dagestan and hence confront Russia with a much wider war area, a fact that could have curtailed Russian military activity or forced the Russian government again on the negotiation table. The most obvious way to achieve this would be an invasion of Avaristan just across the border and an uprising fomented by the Wahabis based in Kadar, Makhachkala and elsewhere from inside Dagestan. The Dagestani region adjoining Chechnya's southeastern region of Vedeno, the home area of Basaev, is the heartland of the Avar people, which constitute the most numerous ethnic communities inside Dagestan. As one Dagestani politician vocalized the situation at the time in an apt expression, "Who rules Avaristan rules Dagestan and who rules Dagestan, rules the Caucasus".²⁹⁴

Avaristan had also been the core area of Shamil's Imamate, the area had thus a high symbolic meaning. Most importantly, the traditional power distribution among the most important nationalities in Dagestan at the time had been altered by an alliance between the Darghins and the Kumyks, respectively on place two and three after the Avars in absolute population numbers. Although together they amounted roughly at the same number of people as the Avars alone, the power distribution key among the different ethnicities gave them a much

²⁹⁰ See interview with H.I.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² See the interview of Andrei Babitsky for ABC News with Shamil Basaev in the aftermath of the horrific hostage-taking in Beslan. He said: "...For me it's first and foremost a struggle for freedom [...] I need to be a free man. That's how I see it. Sharia comes second. See *Reign of Terror: An Interview of Shamil Basayev*, aired July 28, 2005 on ABC Nightline, <http://digital.films.com/play/TBGUM8>, accessed April 11, 2014

²⁹³ See interviews with H.I.

²⁹⁴ See Blandy, Charles W.. *Dagestan: The Storm*. United Kingdom, Conflict Studies Research Centre, 2000, p.28

greater number of so-called Constitutionally Nominated People, that is, nominated members of the government according to fixed quotas.²⁹⁵ The Avars and the Laks had thus been set aside politically, a reason for both to incubate grief against the governing majority.²⁹⁶ Basaev and Khattab sought therefore to exploit the existing ethnic divide in Dagestan by enlisting the political losers there for their cause by targeting Avaristan first, and the nominally Lak rayon of Novolaksky then.

The invasion thus aimed at the liberation and the incitement of the Avar, and in a certain measure of the Lak people against the Dagestani government, seen as the direct representative of the Federal Center, the breakthrough to the ethnically Darghin Islamic Jamaat in Kadar, Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi in central Dagestan and the subsequent spread of the rebellion to the whole of Dagestan. Then, the North Caucasus would have been united again in the form of an Islamic state. The plan, however, had many faults. First of all, the plan based on the crucial assumption that the Dagestanis would join the Chechens against Russia. This proved to be a false axiom, as they did not rise up and, much worse, resisted Basaev's and Khattab's drive to Dagestan. Apparently the Dagestani Wahabi expatriates in Chechnya and Khattab had much exaggerated the number and the willingness of the people to stand up against Russian rule.²⁹⁷ Secondly, the alliance of all Islamists under the umbrella of the IIPB did not work also, as it was made up of many uncontrollable groups whose reliability proved to be poor, as many of them left the battlefield after the initial stages of combat.²⁹⁸ Furthermore, many of these groups had no good reputation among the Caucasians themselves, as they included groups dedicated to heavy criminal activity such as kidnapping for ransom and large-scale smuggle. Last, but not least, the fact of striking first gave the Russian side the pretext for heavy-handed repression in Dagestan, including the use of heavy artillery and aviation, and finally, for the invasion into Chechnya itself. In addition, the inclusion of criminals, the radical Islamic *Weltanschauung* of the coalition and most of all the firing of the first shot discredited put the blame of the world opinion on the Chechens and discredited the Maskhadov government.

Indeed, Aslan Maskhadov had been overdriven by the radicals' attack onto Dagestan. He surely must have known that something was in the coming, since members of his government testified later to have forewarned the Russians of an impending attack. Although they knew about it, the legitimate Chechen government had not been able to stop it due to its weakness. Maskhadov condemned the action undertaken by Basaev and Khattab, although he did it pretty late.²⁹⁹ Meanwhile in Dagestan, since the advance of the militants had stalled in

²⁹⁵ See Blandy, Charles W., *Dagestan: The Gathering Storm*, United Kingdom, Conflict Studies Research Centre, 1998, p. 4. The Dagestani constitution has since been amended in 2003, allowing now the direct election of the president instead of its rotation along ethnic boundaries.

²⁹⁶ See Blandy, Charles W., *Dagestan: The Storm*. United Kingdom, Conflict Studies Research Centre, 2000, p. 31

²⁹⁷ Ware, Robert Bruce and Kisriev, Enver. *Dagestan – Russian Hegemony and Islamic Resistance in the North Caucasus*, M.E. Sharpe, 2010, p. 123

²⁹⁸ See Blandy, Charles W., *Dagestan: The Storm*. United Kingdom, Conflict Studies Research Centre, 2000., p. 42

²⁹⁹ See Akhmadov, Ilyas and Lanskoj, Miriam. *The Chechen Struggle – Independence won and Lost*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2010, pp. 155

front of Botlikh, they had entrenched themselves on the mountain ranges overlooking the city and engaged the federal forces through sniping attacks and the use of ATGMs.³⁰⁰ The Federal forces on the other side made heavy use of the air force, employing both fixed-wing aircraft as well as attack helicopters. The introduction of last generation armor and advanced conventional weaponry like fuel-air bombs was testimony to the fierce resolution of the Federal government to destroy the invaders.³⁰¹ After heavy fighting which lasted more than two weeks, the IIPB retreated back into Chechnya on August 23, 2014. The federal MVD and MOD forces had to complain the loss of about 60 servicemen and a few hundred wounded, whereas the militants probably lost a few hundred fighters. Not only the quick and resolute Federal response, but also the resistance of the locals and the desertion of whole militant detachments sealed the failure of the Islamists' operation in Dagestan.³⁰² Other rebel forces did not deploy at all. Nadir Khachilayev refused to commit his forces as agreed.³⁰³

The federals lost no time and exploited the situation by gathering a large force outside the Kadar area and began the attack on the fortified villages on August 29, 1999. The OMON troops from the MVD were supported thereby by heavy artillery, tanks and aerial attacks. The villages were almost completely destroyed in the process, although the population had been evacuated in time. After almost two weeks of fighting, the surviving militants of the Islamic Jamaat retreated from the area.³⁰⁴ The federal attack on the Wahabi villages led to a renewed offensive by Basaev and Khattab towards Dagestan by September 5, this time in the Novolaksky District, threatening the city of Khasav-Yurt. The primary aim was to relieve pressure on Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi, and to play one last card in the attempt to win over Dagestan to their cause. The Novolaksky and Khasav-Yurt districts are home to the Chechen-Akkins, Chechens living in Dagestan. By attacking there, Basaev hoped to win over at least the Dagestani Chechens. This occurred with a certain measure, and the militants stood only five kilometers before Khasav-Yurt. The federal response, however, was again fast and forceful: By the time over 80.000 troops had been mobilized, and a Dagestani home guard had been formed.³⁰⁵ Thus, the militant formations had to retreat again by the middle of September.

³⁰⁰ See Al-Qoqaz' video production Russian Hell Volume I, Maaskar Al Qoqaz, 2001

³⁰¹ See Pashin, Alexander, Russian Army Operations and Weaponry During Second Military Campaign in Chechnya, Moscow Defense Brief – Issue3, 2002, <http://mdb.cast.ru/mdb/3-2002/ac/raowdsmcc/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁰² Apparently, the forces under the command of Abdul-Malik Mezhidov, formerly known as *Sharia Guards*, the Chechen Jamaat under Emir Abdurrahman and the Dagestanis led by Bagautdin Kebedov left the battlefield prematurely, which left the main forces under Basaev and Khattab exposed to the federal counteroffensive. See Blandy, Charles W.. Dagestan: The Storm. United Kingdom, Conflict Studies Research Centre, 2000., p. 42

³⁰³ This reportedly led to an outburst of anger and threats of Sharia trial by Shamil Basaev. Khachilayev was arrested in October 2000, but pardoned soon after. He was shot dead in August 2003, seriously undermining the representative capacity of the Laks in Dagestan. See Saradzhyan, Simon, *Khachilayev Shot Dead in Dagestan*, The Moscow Times, August 13, 2003, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/khachilayev-shot-dead-in-dagestan/236578.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁰⁴ Ware, Robert Bruce and Kisriev, Enver. Dagestan – Russian Hegemony and Islamic Resistance in the North Caucasus, M.E. Sharpe, 2010, p. 123-124

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

The failure of both operations made it clear that the grand design, as planned by Basaev and Khattab had not been achieved. Worse yet, the plan had backfired in igniting Dagestani enmity towards Chechnya. Particularly the Avars that were supposed to greet the Islamists as liberators, had been estranged by the religious arrogance displayed by the invaders, who pretended to teach “true Islam” to all non-Wahabis they met in the villages occupied by them. Worse yet, they had come in arms without having been invited and without asking for permission.³⁰⁶ In Caucasian mentality, this was a big offense, and it confirmed the bad image the Chechen independence had come to develop among ordinary Dagestanis due to the political infighting and the pervasive criminal activity there.³⁰⁷

The same over Chechnya’s bad image at the time was also true on a global scale. The world opinion solidarized with Moscow and unanimously condemned the invaders. What had been remaining of solidarity and even sympathy with the Chechen plight during the First War, now melted away. In addition, the invasion further undermined the already severely weakened authority of president Maskhadov in Chechnya itself. The most lasting effect of the invasion, however, took place within the Russian government itself. The ensuing political consequences would decisively re-shape Russian internal and foreign policy, inaugurating a new political era. Although the Russian government under president Eltsin had been following a policy aimed at the strengthening of the state as an answer to economical, political and military failures experienced since the fall of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the invasion of Dagestan by Islamist militants proved to be a game changer. It brought to power Vladimir Putin, a young and energetic long-time security officer, whose primary goal would be the consolidation of the state and the successive re-affirmation of Russia as a global player. In his eyes, the only way to obtain all of this, passed through Chechnya. The dogs of war would thus be awakened again.

5. The Rise of Vladimir Putin

Back in Moscow, the relatively young and intellectual Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin, born 1952, struggled with the events unfolding in Dagestan. He had been appointed only a few months before, in May 1998. As the former director of the FSK³⁰⁸, before the First Chechen War, he had been initially among the hawks advocating the invasion of Chechnya. After the debacle in the Budennovsk crisis he was forced to step down. He nevertheless was appointed as justice minister in 1997, and interior minister from March 1998 to May 1999, when he became premier, although this was intended only as a temporary situation, as president Eltsin made clear subsequently. The choice for the new premier had been between Stepashin and the more energetic and tough Vladimir Putin, then director of the FSB, but Eltsin chose to play

³⁰⁶ E.g. Souleimanov, Emil. Chechnya, Wahabism and the Invasion of Dagestan, Middle East Review of International affairs, Vol. 9 No. 4, December 2005, p. 63

³⁰⁷ Ware, Robert Bruce and Kisriev, Enver. Dagestan – Russian Hegemony and Islamic Resistance in the North Caucasus, M.E. Sharpe, 2010, p. 123

³⁰⁸ The FSK (*Federal'naya Sluzhba Kontrrazvedki – Federal Counterintelligence Service*) was the successor organization of the KGB, which had been thus reorganized by Boris Eltsin ostensibly in a democratization effort, but primarily because he did not trust the former structures. In 1995, the FSK was renamed to FSB (*Federal'naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti – Federal Security Service*).

the Putin card at a later time. Since Budennovsk, Stepashin had apparently been changing his stance towards the North Caucasus, at times exchanging presents with Chechen separatist leaders, praising the Dagestani radicals for their social work and exclaiming in public that Russia could afford to lose Dagestan, after all.³⁰⁹

Stepashin's security management of the sedition by the Islamic Jamaat in the Kadar area had been a plain PR-catastrophe for the Russian Federation. Not only had a rag-tag group of Islamic radicals been allowed to challenge the power and the authority of the state, but they had also come out unscathed from the confrontation and in top of that, they had even been rewarded with the delivery of supplies. The state thus appeared to relinquish control to armed, subversive groups. This was like an encouragement to secession to all of them who wished to. This message could not pass, and the invasion of Dagestan by the Chechen radicals constituted an intolerable affront to Russian prestige and sovereignty, as well as a big security problem, of course. All of this came not from nowhere; however it was rather a symptom for the state of decay of the Russian Federation. The Caucasian question thus added up to an already enormous number of internal problems which provoked heavy political instability. Indeed, Stepashin had been the fifth premier minister of the Russian Federation in a mere three years. The North Caucasian question was the straw that broke the camel's back, and ironically enough, it was going to bring down Stepashin a second time.

Yeltsin had been experiencing heavy political problems for some time past. The growing opposition to Yeltsin inside the Duma – the echo of the 1998 financial crisis provoked by Yeltsin's mismanagement and the second impeachment procedure against Yeltsin because of alleged unconstitutional activities, among which the first Chechen invasion.³¹⁰ Now Yeltsin needed a scapegoat, although Stepashin's reluctance to deal decisively with the Chechens is probably the reason for his dismissal.³¹¹ Stepashin and his cabinet were dismissed on August 9, 1999. Boris Yeltsin nominated Vladimir Putin as premier the same day, the ratification by the state Duma followed a week later. At the time virtually unknown to the Russian audience, Putin had been a reliable Yeltsin loyalist in his tenure as FSK director. Putin lost no time and increased the pace of operations in Dagestan sending in elite units and last generation military hardware.³¹² After he had installed the new cabinet, Putin visited the operations zone personally at the end of August, which shows how high Dagestan stood in Putin's priority list.

But who was the new premier, which had been staying behind the curtains of power until then? Many hints show today that Putin had been the ideal candidate for Yeltsin's succession

³⁰⁹ See Tishkov, Valery. *Dynamics of a Society at War: Ethnographical Aspects*, in: Chechnya, From Past to Future, edited by Sakwa, Richard, Anthem Press 2005, p. 158

³¹⁰ See Garcelon, Marc. *Revolutionary Passage: From Soviet to Post-Soviet Russia, 1985-2000*, Temple University Press 2005, p. 2

³¹¹ See Goldman, Marshall I.. *Petrostate: Putin, Power, and the New Russia*, Oxford University Press 2010, p. 94, and Szaszi, Lajos F.. *Russian Civil-Military Relations and the Origins of the Second Chechen War*, University Press of America 2008, p. 328

³¹² See Pashin, Alexander, *Russian Army Operations and Weaponry During Second Military Campaign in Chechnya*, Moscow Defense Brief – Issue3, 2002, <http://mdb.cast.ru/mdb/3-2002/ac/raowdsmcc/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

for a long time. According to some theories, he had been selected by the *siloviki*, the power structures, which were utterly humiliated and ashamed by the defeat in the First Chechen War. The country was in shambles, only the shadow of its former self. The economy was in ruins or under complete control of the so-called “oligarchs”, a small group of businessmen who acquired enormous wealth, significant political influence and often also control of the media. Boris Berezovsky was the perfect example of the Russian new-type media Moghul. The mammoth state gas monopoly had been largely privatized into the hands of whole host of oligarchs, and much of the oil industry had also been privatized under Yukos Company, which stood under control of Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Russia's regions were in the hands of governors who answered only to themselves. Chechnya had de facto independence. The Russian state was struggling, as it was at its low point, but that was soon to change.

Incompetence, corruption and the ailing and alcoholism of the Federation's president, Boris Yeltsin, had brought Russia to its lowest point in recent history. In their eyes, Yeltsin was not able anymore to lead the country. As no charismatic figure was available, and the communist card with the still powerful communist Party under Gennadi Zjuganov anachronistically not playable for obvious reasons, an ideal candidate had to be *produced*. Also, Yeltsin himself as well as his inner circle composed of family members and long-time loyalists, known as "the Family", acknowledged, mainly because of Yeltsin's bad state of health that a suitable successor had to be found. The transition of power had be smooth and be implemented in several steps, with the family giving up power gradually, so to be able to control the transition and guarantee that way that the new power structure would not go against them. The most important intent of the family at the time was to secure immunity from potential investigations and prosecutions for their role in the colossal depredation of Russian treasury perpetrated by them and their cronies in an utterly corrupt system with “the family” at its center since the collapse of the Soviet Union.³¹³

Putin, however, had served also the interests well, as he had shown loyalty to Anatoli Sobchak when the latter was prosecuted on charges of corruption and embezzlement. He continued to show loyalty and serve the interests of his mentors: In April 1999, Putin held a televised press conference in which they showed a video depicting a naked man, very similar to Russia's Attorney General, Juri Skuratov, in bed with two young women. Putin argued that the analysis by the FSB found out man on the tape was really Skuratov and that the orgy had been offered to him by wealthy Russian criminals. Skuratov had once been opponent of President Eltsin and had denounced the corruption of his government earlier, now he became totally discredited.³¹⁴ Accordingly, before ascending to the position of premier minister, Putin had been “moved” to several gradually more important and influential posts to prepare the terrain of power on which he had been selected to act in future. On May 25, 1998, Putin was

³¹³ See Satter, David. How Putin Became President, American Interest, May 19, 2016, <https://www.hudson.org/research/12507-how-putin-became-president>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³¹⁴ See Clover, Charles. Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia's New Nationalism, Yale University Press 2016, p. 249-250

appointed First Deputy Chief of Presidential Staff for regions, whereas on July 25, 1998, Yeltsin appointed Putin as Director of the FSB. One year later, he would ascend to power.³¹⁵

Barely a month after the appointment of Putin, not far away from the operations zone in the Dagestani city of Buinaksk, on September 4, 1999 at 22.00, local time, a powerful explosion occurred in front of an apartment building inhabited by Russian border guards and their families. A car bomb packed with a huge amount of explosive had been triggered, causing 64 deaths and 133 injured. Nearby, another car laden with over two tons of explosive was discovered and defused in time. Immediately, a connection with the events in Dagestan was established, but media and investigators had not the time to elaborate further, since a few days later, on September 9, again in the nighttime, a powerful explosion ripped apart the nightly silence in south-east Moscow. The cellar of a huge apartment complex had been mined with an estimated number of hundreds of kilograms of explosives. 94 fatalities and 249 casualties had been the sad harvest of this cruel attack. Four days later, the same story in southern Moscow and on September 16 in Volgodonsk in southern Russia, with a combined sum of 136 killed.³¹⁶

All attacks had been committed nightly or in the morning hours, when people were still sleeping, to maximize the number of victims. In addition, the target choice could not have been more exquisitely of civilian character, as exclusively apartment complexes had been bombed. People across the whole of Russia began to feel terrified, since everyone could have been targeted. Therefore, in many places people began organizing themselves in night watches to avert a similar fate. A few days after the Volgodonsk bombing, on September 22, a resident of an apartment block in Ryazan, south-east of Moscow, noted suspicious people in the cellar of the house. The alerted police discovered sacks full of explosive connected to a timer, which was set to go off at 05.30 AM. The explosive expert of Ryazan police allegedly determined that the substance in the sacks, which resembled sugar, was in fact RDX, a military explosive. Hundreds of police troopers blockaded the city in search of a group of three suspects. In the aftermath, the trio was apprehended, but they produced FSB identification cards, and from Moscow came the order to let them go. A few days later, the official explanation came from the new head of the FSB, Nikolai Patrushev. He told in a press conference that the FSB employees had been staging an attack in the context of a much bigger training exercise across Russian cities, and that the planted explosive consisted in sacks full of sugar rather than RDX.³¹⁷

The incident generated of course sinister deductions which were not deprived of genuine reasons. The strange exercise and the much stranger follow-up of the question have led many observers inside and outside Russia to suspect a conspiracy orchestrated by unnamed people tied to the government to strengthen the popularity of Putin and set the stage for a new war on

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ See Dunlop, John B.. *The Moscow Bombings of September 1999: Examinations of Russian Terrorist Attacks at the Onset of Vladimir Putin's Rule - Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, Ibidem 2012

³¹⁷ See Satter, David. *Darkness at Dawn: The Rise of the Russian Criminal State*, Yale University Press 2004, p. 25-27

Chechnya.³¹⁸ The most outspoken testimony for the inside job came perhaps from Alexander Litvinenko, a former FSB operative who accused the FSB to have perpetrated the bombings as a false-flag operation.³¹⁹ The FSB however quickly named suspect Islamist militants who were not Chechens, but Karachay and Ingush, claiming however that they had been trained at Khattab's camp in Serzhen-Yurt. Khattab himself was named as the mastermind and instigator of the bombings. He allegedly had paid the executors huge amounts of money to carry them out.³²⁰ In the first half of September Khattab had indeed menaced bombings inside Russia as a means of retaliation for the Russian counteroffensive and the attack on the Kadar area, only to correct his previous statement after the Moscow bombings had occurred, arguing that he would not be willing to strike innocent civilians sleeping in their beds.³²¹

In fact, scholarship is deeply divided on the question of the apartment bombings. Some, like David Satter and David Levine, argue that the probability of an inside job is very credible, since the very development of Post-Soviet Russia is marked by corruption, criminality and dark powers.³²² Others, like Robert Bruce Ware points out that pending evidence, the most likely hypothesis is the Caucasian one, which is the Islamists' retribution for the Russian engagement in Dagestan.³²³ Apart from the strange Ryazan episode, much other incongruence remains. If the bombings were intended as revenge acts for the Russian counteroffensive in Dagestan, any serious student of terrorist organizations must concede that the organization of such a complex endeavor like a bombing wave across Russia, cannot be organized and accomplished in a few weeks, this would be more a matter of months, not to mention the procurement of military explosives – or depending on the version given by the FSB – the

³¹⁸ See for example the interview of General Alexander Lebed, war hero of the Afghan War and architect of the Khasv-Yurt peace agreement with Aslan Maskhadov with *Le Figaro* in which he conceded that the apartment bombings may very well have been an inside job, although he later distanced himself somewhat from the interview, see Mandeville, Laura. Alexandre Lebed : Le pouvoir veut déstabiliser la Russie, *Le Figaro*, September 29, 1999, and Lebed Claims Misquote, *The Moscow Times*, October 1, 1999, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/lebed-claims-misquote/271802.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023. More conclusive is the sentence of Oleg Kalugin, former KGB general Oleg Kalugin, see Rentz, Andreas. Seven Questions: A Little KGB Training Goes a Long Way, *Foreign Policy*, July 25, 2007, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2007/07/24/seven_questions_a_little_kgb_training_goes_a_long_way, accessed on January 18, 2023

³¹⁹ See Litvinenko, Alexander/ Felshtinsky, Yuri. *Blowing up Russia: The Secret Terror Plot to Bring Back KGB Terror*, Encounter Books 2007. The reader must however be cautious with claims Litvinenko makes, as many of them are not believable and most important of all, not corroborated by evidence. The murder of Litvinenko and its modality puts a dark shadow on the whole affair, however.

³²⁰ See Russia hits back over blasts claims, *BBC Europe*, July 26, 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2154100.stm>, accessed on January 18, 2023. Interestingly, and ironically enough, the photograph exhibited by the FSB allegedly showing the alleged chief executioner of the bombings, Achemez Gochiyayev, in reality shows the double agent, Alauri Ibragimov, which handed out to Khattab the poisoned letter which killed him.

³²¹ See Myre, Greg. Warlord Becoming Most Feared Man In Russia, *The Seattle Times*, <http://community.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/archive/?date=19990915&slug=2983256>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³²² See Satter, David. *Darkness at Dawn: The Rise of the Russian Criminal State*, Yale University Press 2004, and Levine, Steve. *Putin's Labyrinth: Spies, Murder, and the Dark Heart of the New Russia*, Random House 2009

³²³ See Ware, Robert B.. *Mithology and Political Failure in Chechnya*, in: *Chechnya – From Past to Future*, edited by Sakwa, Richard, Anthem Press 2007, p. 91-92

production and transport of tons of explosive from the Caucasus to central Russia. The choice of the objectives was also atypical for the execution of terrorist attacks. The bombings were clearly planned in a way to maximize human losses, but not in a way to lame the country striking symbolic places in central Moscow or strategic facilities like metro stations, airports or train stations. The bombings of the apartment blocks were thus deprived of political significance, whereas the latter categories have been repeatedly attacked by Chechen and Caucasian separatist Jihadis by terrorist means thereafter. Last, but not least, no real existing Chechen group ever took responsibility.³²⁴

It will probably not be possible to ascertain the truth or even the background of the bombings. All court hearings were held at closed doors. Disinformation and political partisanship make it difficult to clear the fronts. The various possibilities and the penchant of Russians and Caucasians for conspiracy theories complicate the evaluation of the events even further.³²⁵ However, a popular quote maintains that in politics anything is possible, and little is probable, so it is possible to imagine that sectors of the government or the security services executed the bombings to induce new policies aimed at the reshaping of a decaying state. After all, the fact that Italian intelligence services did the same in the 1970s, when Italy stood at the verge of chaos, or even worse the takeover by leftists, has been proven in court. In any case, the bombings decisively benefitted Putin as new premier because the people, in a situation of fear and anguish strived for security and strength, and last but not least, retaliation. One could argue that the bombings had a similar effect on the Russian public audience, as the 9/11 attacks would have on the US two years later.³²⁶ When the apartment bombing occurred, Putin rode the public outrage egregiously, handling the collective fear promising revenge and the settling of the scores with the “Chechen terrorists”. It was in this instance that Putin spoke out the famous sentence that, if necessary, the Russian forces would “waste the terrorists even in their outhouses”.³²⁷ Putin’s rough and energetic approach appealed the frightened population, hence his popularity skyrocketed.

At this point, it is useful to look back at the popularity levels Putin enjoyed in the months before the bombings and the invasion of Chechnya. Polls put Putin’s popularity at the time of his appointment as Prime Minister in August at 2%, immediately after the apartment block bombings at the end of September, his support level had risen to 16%, to 25% at the end of October (after the invasion of Chechnya) and to phenomenal 40% at the end of November, when the Russian army stood at the gates of Grozny.³²⁸ The link between the events in the Caucasus and the meteoric rise of Vladimir Putin is all too evident. As newly appointed

³²⁴ See Kotz, David/Weir, Fred. *Russia's Path from Gorbachev to Putin: The Demise of the Soviet System and the New Russia*, Routledge 2007, p. 271

³²⁵ See Roxburgh, Angus. *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia*, I.B. Tauris 2013, p. 22

³²⁶ See Evangelista, Matthew. *The Chechen Wars: Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?*. Ukraine, Brookings Institution Press, 2004., p. 67

³²⁷ See Zürcher, Christoph. *The post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, ethnic conflict, and nationhood in the Caucasus*. United Kingdom, NYU Press, 2007, p. 93 and Akhmadov, Ilya/Lanskoy, Miriam. *The Chechen Struggle: Independence Won and Lost*, Palgrave MacMillan 2010, p. 168

³²⁸ See Sakwa, Richard. *Putin: Russia’s Choice*, Routledge 2008, p. 120

premier, he had shown the utmost determination in dealing with the Chechen invasion in Dagestan and with the Dagestani Islamists. Now his newly acquired popularity and public support for strong action against the “terrorists” gave him the possibility to widen up the so-called “counter-terrorist operation”. Since plans for a new invasion of Chechnya had been long prepared, Putin was in a position to wage a new war on Chechnya in quick succession after the clearing of Dagestan.³²⁹

Regardless of the bombings, it is clear that the hawks in the Kremlin and in the army, but most of all Yeltsin himself, had not forgotten the humiliating political and military defeat in the First Chechen War. If it was not the retreat from Afghanistan or the fall of the Soviet Union, then it was the bitter failure in Chechnya, a country comparable from the size with Montenegro or Slovenia, that made to realize Russia, a country used to regard itself as a super-power at the same level with the USA, the huge downfall it had been experiencing. The failure in war, as well as the operative and internal state of decay of the army mirrored exactly the situation of the state. Consistent with Soviet imperialist thinking and before that, Tsarist colonialism, Russian officials, militaries as well as ordinary citizens blamed the Chechens to have soiled Russian imperial pride and called for revenge.³³⁰ In fact, many Russians, particularly in the army could not tolerate that they had been beaten by people they considered racially inferior, which gave the renewed Russian invasion to Chechnya a particularly aggressive drive and led directly or indirectly to further human rights abuses.³³¹

The will to settle the scores with the Chechens, however, had other, even more pressing reasons as well. This time the Chechens would be grinded down no matter the costs, to show the world that Russia was still a respectable power, and as a signal to everyone who had strange ideas about secession inside the Russian Federation that no such thing would go unpunished. As Russian officials saw it at the time, independent Chechnya could inspire other regions to follow their examples, for example Dagestan, but in particular Tatarstan in the very heart of Russia. On the other hand, the instable situation in Chechnya marked by criminal activity and radical Islamism could destabilize further the whole North Caucasus and further up the Volga in the North and as far as the CIS satellites in the East, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.³³² Putin himself explained in a series of interviews for an official biography that

“...the essence of the situation in the North Caucasus and in Chechnya is the continuation of the collapse of the USSR. If we did not quickly do something to stop it, Russia as a state in its current form would cease to exist. I was convinced that if we did not immediately stop the extremists [in Chechnya],

³²⁹ Ware, Robert B.. A Multitude of Evils: Mythology and Political Failure in Chechnya, in: Chechnya – From Past to Future, edited by Sakwa, Richard, Anthem Press 2007, p. 86

³³⁰ See Van Herpen, Marcel H.. Putin’s Wars: The Rise of Russia’s New Imperialism, Rowman & Littlefield 2015, p.187. At the end of the First Chechen War, a retreating Russian officer told one of the Chechen key player I interviewed, with a half-smile that they would come back one day, See Interview H.I.

³³¹ See Gilligan, Emma. Terror in Chechnya: Russia and the Tragedy of Civilians in War, Princeton University Press 2010, p. 71-74

³³² See Sakwa, Richard. Putin: Russia’s Choice. United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2007, p. 228

then in no time at all we would be facing a second Yugoslavia across the entire territory of the Russian Federation - the Yugoslavization of Russia.”³³³

Before Putin, already premier Evgenii Primakov had warned in January 1999 of the serious threat of disintegration of the country. He had therefore called for the recovery of the hierarchical power structure and a renewed centralization. Separatist trends had to be halted and extirpated.³³⁴ The Russian army had been advised to draw up plans for a new invasion of Chechnya already in March 1999, after the kidnapping of General Shpigun in Chechnya, according to former Russian premier Sergey Stepashin:

*"The decision to invade Chechnya was taken in March 1999 ... I was prepared for an active intervention. We planned to arrive on the north side of the Terek River for August-September of 1999. The war would have happened regardless of the attacks in Russia ... Putin did not discover anything new. On this you can ask him. At that time, he was director of the FSB and had all the information."*³³⁵

What is interesting though, is the fact that operations were scheduled to begin in August-September, which is what exactly happened in the aftermath.³³⁶ The bombings had therefore a twofold effect: They boosted Putin as the new strongman, and thus they enabled the war policy against Chechnya, which was part of a much greater design, however. From the standpoint of the Kremlin, the very essence and the future of the Russian Federation were at stake, and this time no sacrifices, most of all the Chechen one, was too great. In the eyes of the *siloviki*, Chechnya was the clamp holding together the Russian Federation, in essence what was left of the old grandeur of the Soviet Union. Hopefully however, it could become the key for the rise of a newly powerful Russia.

In hindsight, looking at the determination of Vladimir Putin to make Russia great again, there is no need to be a conspiracy theorist to see strong hints to an involvement of the “deep state” in the construction of a case to build up a successful election campaign for the relatively unknown Vladimir Putin and the public support for a new invasion of Chechnya, which was seen as a prerequisite for the rebuilding of new Russian power, domestically and globally. A new and successful war on separatist Chechnya laid therefore at the very foundation of the plans of the “new aristocracy”³³⁷ – the security apparatus – which had taken so successfully the reins of power in the last stages of the Yeltsin administration. At a time before the authoritarian turn imposed step by step on the Russian state by Vladimir Putin, were no

³³³ Cit. Hill, Fiona. The Real Reason Putin Supports Assad – Mistaking Syria for Chechnya, Foreign Affairs, March 25, 2013, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139079/fiona-hill/the-real-reason-putin-supports-assad>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³³⁴ See Evangelista, Matthew. The Chechen Wars: Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?, Brookings Institution Press 2002, p.127

³³⁵ See Sergey Pravosudov . Bloka OVR voobshche moglo i ne byt', NG.ru, January 14, 2000, http://www.ng.ru/politics/2000-01-14/1_ovr.html, accessed on January 18, 2023

³³⁶ See Szászdi, Lajos F.. Russian Civil-military Relations and the Origins of the Second Chechen War. United States, University Press of America, 2008, p. 74-75

³³⁷ Wood, Tony. Russia Without Putin: Money, Power and the Myths of the New Cold War. United Kingdom, Verso Books, 2018, p.48

Gleichschaltung of the media had yet taken place, public opinion had to be shaped. It is therefore entirely plausible that the fall bombings in Russia, which triggered a massive public outcry and enabled public support and demand to a new war in Chechnya. Given the determination to restore Russia's position as a superpower, a few hundred dead civilians seem to be a price the "new aristocracy" was more than willing to pay.

V. Barbarism and Terrorism: The Second Chechen War 1999-2007

Should we catch them [the terrorists] in a shit-house, we'll flush them down the toilet.

Vladimir Putin

1. A New Invasion

Even before the conclusion of the fighting in Dagestan, The Russian army began attacking Chechnya proper. From the last week of September, daily air raids were flown, which caused at least 60,000 people to flee to Ingushetia and demanded the first civilian casualties. On October 1, 1999, the Russian army invaded Chechnya again to remove Aslan Maskhadov's regime, which was considered by Russia's criminal and rebel forces, to be out of power. Soon, the army conquered most of the Chechen lowlands, which had been evacuated by the Maskhadov's forces, standing to the northern outskirts of Chechnya's capital city Grozny. Mindful of the past experiences in the First Chechen War, when onrushing Russian armored columns had been destroyed in the alleys of Grozny without difficulty, the Russian troops advanced slowly, completely surrounding Grozny only by the end of November 1999. Only after two weeks of intense bombing did the Russians begin to take positions in the city. By early December, Russian forces had not been able to make substantial inroads into Grozny but had managed to seize the other largest Chechen cities, among them Argun, Gudermes and of Urus-Martan. Paratroopers and airborne troops had been landing in the foothills of the Great Caucasus range south of Grozny to cut off rebel forces from their mountain strongholds.³³⁸

After the initial airstrikes at the city at the start of the war, the majority of the civilian population had already left. However, during the siege, about 40,000 civilians—many of them of Russian ancestry—mostly elderly, poor, and ill—were imprisoned in the cellars and suffered from the bombings, hunger, and cold. Human rights organizations claim that the ongoing bombing in Grozny caused anywhere between 8,000 and 35,000 civilian casualties. While reconnaissance teams entered the city to find the rebels' positions, urban combat initially concentrated on Grozny's outskirts. The Russian plan was to draw fire from the rebels, retreat, and then launch rockets and artillery fire at the Chechen positions. Khankala, the main airport in Chechnya had been taken back by Russian forces on December 13. It was the main Russian military base during the first war, and at the start of the second, it was one of the first targets bombarded by aircraft. Progressing only slowly towards the city center, the urban combat in Grozny developed to a series of small-unit attacks and counterattacks

³³⁸ Williams, Brian Glyn. *Inferno in Chechnya: The Russian-Chechen Wars, the Al Qaeda Myth, and the Boston Marathon Bombings*. Lebanon, University Press of New England, 2015, p. 165

regularly inhabited only by heavy artillery and aerial bombardments, employing on the Russian side also internationally banned cluster ammunition and thermobaric weapons to slush Chechen fighters out from cellars and fortified positions.³³⁹

On January 10 the Chechens launched a great counter-offensive against the enemy garrison in the city, briefly recovering the cities of Shali, Gudermes and Argun and achieving the opening of a new supply corridor to the besieged capital. Soon, however, they had to withdraw again, also because forces formerly loyal to Maskhadov, like to Yamadaev brothers and the Kadyrov clan had switched sides, greatly weakening the rebel forces. This had been a pre-arranged by Russian intelligence, which thus managed to split the rebel camps and co-opt forces into the loyalist camp. With the Russian blockade around Grozny becoming increasingly pressing the Chechen leadership decided to give up Grozny at the end of January. Chechen President Aslan Mashadov had already been evacuated to a secret base in southern Chechnya. About 1,000 to 1,500 fighters loyal to rebel Commander Ruslan Gelayev withdrew without orders, exposing other rebel forces. The main Chechen force forced their way out of Grozny between January 31 and February 1. The Russian blockading forces however had been laying an ambush on its way, ambushing the Chechens while they were crossing the Sunzha River. The Chechens made their way through the minefield, where dozens of rebel fighters were killed by artillery fire and the explosion of mines.³⁴⁰

Many Senior Chechen commanders were killed and maimed, among them Basayev's old comrade from the Budennovsk days Israpilov Khunkarpasha, the mayor of Grozny Lecha Dudayev and Aslambek Ismailov, the mastermind of the Grozny defense. Shamil Basayev and Abdul-Malik Mezhidov were heavily wounded, with Basayev losing his right foot. The rebels lost hundreds of fighters in the retreat from Grozny. These were losses that would greatly hamper the effectiveness of further fighting in the months ahead. The bulk of Chechen forces managed to cross the southern Chechen plains and retreat to their mountain strongholds in the south of the country. The group under the command of Ruslan Gelayev however was cornered and nearly wiped out near Komsomolskie in March. As a result, the military phase of the Russian invasion ended in the spring of the year 2000. However, their troops remained stationed on the ground to prevent the rebels from returning and, if possible, to drive them completely out of their retreat areas. As the active phase of the war was over, and the Russian army nominally controlled all of Chechnya's inhabited areas, guerilla war started on the side of the rebels, with frequent ambushes on Russian police and army columns that were perustrating the woodlands and even urban areas. The fight for the Russians remained bloody, as throughout 2000 and 2001 dozens of ambushes cost them thousands of casualties.³⁴¹

³³⁹ Ibid, p. 163

³⁴⁰ See Schaefer, Robert W.. *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad*. United Kingdom, Praeger, 2010, p. 191

³⁴¹ Official Russian Casualties: Juggling with False Figures, Prague Watchdog, December 14, 2000, <http://www.watchdog.cz/index.php?show=000000-000005-000003-000003&lang=1>, accessed on January 18, 2023

With Maskahdov's forces weakened by the defection of core elements like the Yamadayev militia and the Kadyrov clan were reorganizing, the Islamist forces took the brunt of fighting. These were made up by local Chechen fighters, but also by hundreds of foreign fighters coming from all over the Ummah. In the course of the second War from 1999 on, the bulk of the foreign fighters fought under Khattab's and Basaev's command in the south-eastern part of the country, namely in the Vedeno and Nozhay-Yurt districts. Although in political matters their commanders tended to stay in the background, their military prowess and most of all their financial connection and capabilities meant that they were able to significantly support whomever they chose to. Given their past and ongoing connections and thanks to Basaev's shift to radical Islam, it is hardly surprising they backed him and the radicals. Their contingent never counted more than a few hundred fighters coming from all over the Islamic world.

An interesting collection of biographies of *mujahideen* fallen at various *jihadi* fronts ranging from Afghanistan in the 1980s to Kashmir in the 1990s could be found at an online eulogy platform called *caravan of martyrs*.³⁴² The Jihad in Chechnya, however, was one of the main topics with 27 biographies. Ranging from commanders to simple foot soldiers, all ranks were represented. The provenance of the fighters remembered on this site grossly coincides with the reality on the ground at the time. The bulk of the mentioned fighters came from the Arabian Peninsula and from Turkey. In the Second Chechen War, for the first time, Turks were to become major players in a jihadi endeavor.³⁴³ This came for the major part of the existing, long-standing ties between Turkey and the Northern Caucasus. Once upon a time the influence of the Ottoman Empire had reached up to the Caucasian range and beyond. In the 19th century Imam Shamil had hoped for Turkish support in his campaigns against the Russian tsars. Many Northern Caucasians fled or were forced to emigrate to Ottoman Turkey in the course or at the end of the Caucasian Wars.³⁴⁴ Even today, relatively big communities of Chechens and Cherkess exist in nowadays Turkey. The common faith and solidarity with besieged Chechens did the rest. Whole subunits of Khattab's forces consisted of Turks, and various Turkish subcommanders or *amirs* operated in various parts of Chechnya in the first years of the Second War. Amirs like Bilal, Zaurbek al-Turki, Borz al-Turki, Abu Zer and Abdullah al-Turki featured frequently in rebel propaganda. Often these tapes were produced exclusively for the Turkish audience, with the respective speaker requesting moral and material support, as well as willing recruits for the *jihad on the path of Allah*.³⁴⁵ This fact underscores the importance of the Turkish public arena for the insurgents in the North

³⁴² See <http://caravansofmartyrs.atspace.com/>, accessed on January 18, 2023. The operator of the still accessible site is unknown; the biographies however derive from *Azzam Publications*, a well-known jihadi media outlet from the late 1990s.

³⁴³ A neglectible presence in the 1980's Afghan Jihad, the closer affinity to Bosnia for the first time drove relatively many Turks to arms in what they saw as defense of Bosnian Muslims.

³⁴⁴ See Reid, James J.. *Crisis of the Ottoman Empire: Prelude to Collapse 1839-1878*, Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte des Östlichen Europa, Band 57, Franz Steiner Verlag Stuttgart, 2000, p. 144

³⁴⁵ *Jihad fi sabilillah* – Formula often used in connection with jihadi activities. See for example: *Cecenistan türkiyeli mücahidler "hani soz vermistik"*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7NR2Z2ILQo>, accessed on January 18, 2023. It features Amirs Bilal, Sener and Abdullah, in Turkish language, Summer 2003.

Caucasus up to this day. The broader connections between the North Caucasus, its insurgents and Turkey will be outlined further ahead.

Of course, Arabs too were represented in prominent numbers in the contingent of foreign fighters. This came partly because of the popularity of jihadi Ideals in the Arab world since the Afghan Jihad, and partly because of the popularity of Khattab, who thoroughly promoted himself and his militia through the distribution of propaganda media. Khattab was one of the first militant leaders to acknowledge the power of militant propaganda through multimedia.³⁴⁶ Already in the last stages of the Afghan War he established media cells among his unit with the goal of documenting armed actions and attacks. After having been cooked together in ad-hoc productions by especially dedicated production teams, these contents were disseminated among target audiences mainly in Arab countries through mosques and accomplices. This media tactic was refined during the Jihad in Tajikistan, so that as a militant leader, Khattab at the time was even better known as Osama bin Laden in the Arab world.³⁴⁷ His thus won popularity is the cause why Sheikh Fathi called him in 1995 to help out in the Chechen Jihad.

In the course of the First Chechen War and the years ahead of the Second War, Khattab refined and expanded his propaganda and media tactics. With the launch of the internet for everyone in the second half of the 1990s, he immediately adapted and began to distribute his propaganda over the net. The 1997 production advertising his training camp in Serzhen-Yurt³⁴⁸ appearing still home-cooked, his later productions since the outbreak of the Second War came to be much more elaborated and skillfully arranged. The five-part series *Russian Hell*, each in movie length, is still today a classic among jihadi media productions. Always showing exclusively the feats and actions of the foreign fighters, the first part covers the First War, whereas the forthcoming four parts cover respectively the years from 1999 onwards. Pictures from Russian atrocities and the pity of Chechen Muslims feature the introduction of each part. Then follow shura sessions and combat actions. The sacrifices of wounded and martyred mujahedeen always rounds up and ends the production.³⁴⁹ Modern design and skillfully arranged graphics along with spectacular images has been making this series very popular among youngsters and hardened jihadi supporters alike.

In June 2000, after the hardships of the retreat from Grozny, the bulk of the units of the radical coalition under the command of Shamil Basaev and Ibn al-Khattab had been regrouped and were again battle-ready. They were based mainly in difficult accessible wooded areas and gorges in the south-eastern Chechen highland, positioned in a 40 kilometers

³⁴⁶ See Khattab biography

³⁴⁷ See Hegghammer, Thomas. *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism Since 1979*. N.p., Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 243

³⁴⁸ The production was named *Maaskar al-Qoqaz* (Caucasian Institute) and was produced in 1997. It shows recruits of the camp training various "disciplines", ranging from the obstacle trail combat to RPG-shooting. Downloaded December 28, 2009 from <http://nuruddin-media.blogspot.de/>, a media front site of the Dagestani *Jamaat Shariat*, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁴⁹ *Jaheem ur-Ros* (Russian Hell) parts 1-5; perhaps produced but certainly distributed by al-Qoqaz (The Caucasus), a media offshoot of *Azzam Publications*, all parts of the series can still be found today on the net without difficulty.

wide arc stretched from the Wolf Gate in the West to Nozhay Yurt in the East, with the city of Vedenov in the middle of the array. This wide area covered by the green foothills of the great Caucasus range was made up mainly of hilly, mountainous and broken terrain, most ideal terrain to wage guerilla warfare. Other Islamist forces which responded to the most rogue warlords – the Islamic Jamaat, the Akhmadov group and others still - had retreated to the Western highlands and the southern Shatoi district. Arbi Baraev's group operated in the South-Western plains between Urus-Martan and the outskirts of Grozny.

The South-Eastern highlands did not harbor only units responding to the radical wing of the Chechen insurgency, however. Particularly the Western sectors of this area, in the highlands of the Kurchaloy and Nozhay Yurt districts harbored strongholds of many allies of Maskhadov, like Magomed Khanbiev, Shaa Turlaev and others. Maskhadov's family was originary from Alleroy, in the Kurchaloevsky district. This is why Maskhadov and large units subordinated to him put up camp in a gorged wood around Gansolchu, between Alleroy and Nozhay Yurt. This choice had not been casual. Maskhadov felt that he would be safer in his ancestral homeland. Here, relatives and supporters could help and most of all, feed him and his men, since it is important to note that contrary to the radicals, Maskhadov and the government forces had not prepared bases and dugouts filled with provisions in the woods in prevision of a new war. This was also reason why the radicals recovered faster from the siege and the retreat from Grozny. Maskhadov however had arranged secret weapon caches, which were of vital significance now that guerilla warfare was the only option. The forces loyal to Maskhadov had been badly scattered after the retreat from Grozny. In addition, the forces under the command of the Yamadaev brothers, former Maskhadov loyalists, had changed sides. Maskhadov was thus deprived of important forces in the East of the country. The capture of Turpal-ali Atgireev, one of his most trusted aides was another blow to Maskhadov's striking power.³⁵⁰

Units loyal to Maskhadov could be found sparsely in the settlements in the most Eastern part of the country, around Alleroy and Kurchaloy. This area was under the control of Ahmed Avdorkhanov, the head of the presidential guard and bodyguard to Maskhadov. Areas in the vicinity of Nozhay Yurt were controlled by the already mentioned Khambiev. In Argun, the Islamic Jamaat under Abdul-Halim Sadulaev stayed neutral in the conflict between Maskhadov and the radicals but responded to him in the first instance. In Grozny, the field commander Isa Munaev commanded a good number of fighters who had stayed behind after the retreat of the bulk of the Chechen forces. In the West, forces under the command of Doku Umarov had remained leaderless after Umarov had been evacuated to Georgia to undergo a surgery. Baudi Bakuyev fought with a few dozen fighters in the Shatoi area, in the south of the country, until he also was killed in the summer of 2000. Scattered groups and squads of guerillas were active in the north of the country in the Terek region, but they did not really amount to much fighting force. The loss of loyal field commanders in the course of the retreat

³⁵⁰ See Notorious Chechen terrorist dies in Russian prison, *Gazeta*, December 15, 2002, <https://www.gazeta.ru/2002/12/15/NotoriousChe.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

from Grozny and most of all the changing of sides by militarily important forces like that of the Yamadaevs affected the authority and bargaining force of Maskhadov.³⁵¹

This is why the radicals sniffed their chance to outmaneuver Maskhadov and fight and win on their own war – an Islamic holy war, a Jihad. The reward would be the establishment of a true Islamic state without caveats and the idols of democracy, without *Taghut*. This was the late revenge against Maskhadov, who in the eyes of the radicals had done everything in his power to prevent the establishment of the Islamic state and declared Sharia equal to the constitution only under heavy political pressure. There would be no more bending to the preferences and the false promises of the West. Thus, since the retreat from Grozny, the radicals had in fact split themselves from Maskhadov and the forces loyal to him and refused obedience to the regularly elected president and commander in chief of the Chechen forces and even refused cooperation, although locally individual units continued to cooperate. The internet media outlet Kavkaz Center, the mouthpiece of Movladi Udugov, who had long been one of the leaders of the radical wing, and more important, its chief propagandist, stopped mentioning Maskhadov and field commanders loyal to him. Instead, it highlighted the actions of amirs and shahids linked to the radical wing of the insurgency. In June, 2000 Kavkaz Center mentioned for the first time the establishment of the so-called *Supreme Shura*, more or less formed by the same warlords and field commanders who had participated in the Dagestan invasion plus the Dagestani Jamaat leaders who had fled the country and were now fighting the Russians in Chechnya.³⁵²

The division of the insurgency in a moderate wing under president Maskhadov and in a radical wing around Basaev and Khattab was a serious one, because not appointments or access to resources mattered in the first instance, but ideology. Maskhadov was a moderate Muslim who believed in democracy and hoped that the horrors of renewed war in Chechnya would attract enough Western support to force the Russians on the negotiating table. To achieve this, however, the Western-style structure of the Chechen state and most of all its progressive constitution would be instrumental to secure Western backing. Remarkably though, no known armed clashes resulted from the division of the insurgency. Furthermore, contact between Basaev and Maskhadov continued throughout the split, but for a long time there was no common understanding about the political and religious orientation of the common fight against Russian rule. Whereas Maskhadov and the seculars insisted to maintain the ChRI as a structure with its parliament and its political base, the Islamists insisted on Islamic principles and most of all on sharia as the basis of the new Chechen state. As long as Khattab had influence through his armed contingent and most of all the funds he managed to gather in the Gulf region, it was not likely that both sides could come to a compromise.³⁵³

Discussions dragged on over the whole year of 2001 and into spring of 2002. Suddenly, things changed: Khattab had been assassinated. He died in March 2002 by poison. As it

³⁵¹ See Schaefer, Robert w., *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus – From Gazavat to Jihad*, Praeger 2011, p. 187

³⁵² Interview H.I.

³⁵³ Ibid.

became known later, the FSB had managed to intercept and turn one of his couriers who managed Khattab's correspondence. Khattab apparently relied on a few couriers, mostly Dagestanis, who brought back and forth letters and small parcels, sent from the Gulf States from Baku to Chechnya. The FSB then poisoned the last letter the double agent had brought in from Baku with an extremely powerful poison, possibly Sarin. In fact, soon after Khattab had got the letter, he fell ill and died a few hours later. The Russians announced the death of the Arab field commander when they got the evidence of Khattab's death in form of a videotape they got when they managed to ambush and kill Khattab's most trusted bodyguard a short time after the former's death. The Dagestani double agent, however, did not have the time to bear the fruits of his work. He was tracked down and killed on the order of Shamil Basaev soon after.³⁵⁴

Thought to be inflict a mortal blow to the insurgency, in fact the assassination of Khattab eased somewhat the division among the moderate wing under president and the radicals under Basaev and the foreigners. Khattab's death weakened the radicals and forced them to give up once and for all their plans to fight and win the war on their own. Furthermore, Khattab could have figured as an obstacle to a rapprochement between the two wings. Talks between Maskhadov and the radicals resumed, and it was agreed to summon a big meeting with all field commanders operating in Chechnya for the coming summer. Amid unabated military activity, the meeting of the *State Defense Committee (GKO) - Majlis-ul-Shura* took place in a wooded gorge between Vedenov and Nozhay-Yurt in south-eastern Chechnya between July and August 2002. All important insurgent commanders from all parts of Chechnya were present, which says much about the control of the territory exerted by Russian forces at the time. Former MPs and political exponents acting in the underground were also present. The divisions were deep and the discussion drew much time, as the meeting dragged on for 24 days.³⁵⁵ The outcome was therefore one of compromise, which was reached in large part through the mediation of Abdul-Halim Sadulaev. The proclamation of an entirely Islamic state would have to wait, as well as the full adoption of Sharia and the official use of Islamic titles and administrative structures. Sadulaev was appointed as vice-president and successor of Aslan Maskhadov as a compromise candidate. This move appeased the radicals, who appreciated the Islamic credentials of Sadulaev. Interestingly, they appear to have been represented by Abu Walid, the successor of Khattab. They saw his appointment and the adoption of the *bayat* as official instrument of allegiance and authority as a further step towards their goal, the establishment of an Islamic state in Chechnya.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁴ Who ordered Khattab's death?, Jamestown Foundation, North Caucasus Analysis Volume 3 Issue 15, May 29, 2002, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/nc/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=1361&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=184&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/nc/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=1361&tx_ttnews[backPid]=184&no_cache=1), accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁵⁵ See Prezident CHRI Sheykh Abdul-Khalim. Kto on?, Kavkaz Center, March 12, 2005, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2005/03/12/31340.shtml> accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁵⁶ Aslan Maskhadov: "We will create a full-fledged Islamic State", Kavkaz Center, March 8, 2011, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2011/03/08/13747.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

In an audioletter of Maskhadov to Movladi Udugov, the former tells in detail which topics were discussed at the meeting. In the first place, all disputes were more or less settled, putting aside „gossip, strife, intrigue and slander”.³⁵⁷ Having in this way achieved a good basis for further talks, the discussion drew around the detailed structure and postings of the new common ground. Shamil Basaev was named as a deputy to Maskhadov and in addition to that as the chief of the Military Committee, a sort of general staff. The various operational areas were re-organized in a manner to form a coherent top-down command line. Three operative fronts were thus created: the Western front under the command of Doku Umarov, the Eastern Front under the Arab Abu Walid, and the Northern Front under Amir Kamal. External subcommittees abroad were created to carry out lobby activity and fund raising in Western countries, but particularly in the Gulf States.

Media and propaganda activity was organized under the leadership of Movladi Udugov through the websites Kavkaz Center, Chechenpress and Chechenorg. Aside from organizational topics, also operative ones were discussed: Video evidence of the Shura meeting shows the presence of Movsar Baraev and one of his deputies at a session together with Maskhadov and other important commanders.³⁵⁸ Movsar Baraev was the nephew of the infamous Arbi Baraev, who had been killed back in 2001. Movsar Baraev was the one who planned and executed the hostage-taking at the Dubrovka theatre in Moscow in the following October of 2002. Since his unit, the so-called *Islamic Special Forces Regiment (IPON)* he had inherited from his uncle counted only a few dozen fighters, his presence together with much more authoritative commanders at the great shura a few months before the terror act arises suspicions. Although president Maskhadov at the time of the hostage-taking denied his knowledge about it, it is entirely possible that the shura meeting bore a two-pronged strategy at the military level. This strategy was intended to strike right into the *Schwerpunkt* of the Russian military campaign.³⁵⁹

In this occasion the order was given to finally deal once and for all with Chechen collaborationists, a thing which had been mainly avoided until then to avoid blood spill between Chechens. By this means, the Russian troops could be deprived of valuable local auxiliary forces, and the Russian intelligence agencies would have blinded and deafened without their local informers. Further, the newly found unity among the mujahedeen was expected to significantly bolster military operations on the ground through better coordination and cooperation. Renewed and expanded military every-day activity should demoralize the Russians and show them that they were fighting a war they could not win. Then a well-executed terrorist operation on the model of Shamil Basaev's Budennovsk operation would strike Russia right in the heart, demoralize its public audience and force its government to negotiations. This would again elevate morale among the Chechen population and give respite

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ See the al-Qoqaz video production *Russian Hell* vol. I

³⁵⁹ In fact, it was a desperate attempt to replicate Basaev's coup at Budennovsk, as would be the hostage-taking in Beslan, which ended in utter tragedy. See Lanskoj, Miriam, and Akhmadov, Ilyas. *The Chechen Struggle: Independence Won and Lost*. United Kingdom, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 174

to the insurgents, who, if possible, would then launch a final blow on Grozny or another big Chechen city to force the Russians out of Chechnya.³⁶⁰

All in all, this was the same playbook the Chechens had been adopting in the First War, although then more by chance than by plan. Nevertheless, this was the only option the Chechen insurgents thought viable, their one and only silver bullet in a sense. Although this was the official plan agreed upon by all commanders, Maskhadov suspected that the Russians had learned a few of the lessons since the last war in the end. He maintained that this was a very different, much harder war than the first one, as he noticed.³⁶¹ This is why he put up every effort in the course of the negotiations with the radicals to keep up, at least formally, the structures and denominations of the ChRI because he assumed that this time no military victory was possible and only negotiations with the mediation of Western countries could end the war and propose an acceptable solution to the conflict with Russia. To win support from the West, however, the ChRI could not appear as an Islamic or even worse, Jihadi entity, especially since after the Twin Towers attack on 9/11 2001 all that was Islamic raised suspicions there.

As the war dragged on, and the Russian government gave no signals of distress and the Chechen rebel formations became more and more weakened, a new and hitherto unknown form of warfare in Chechnya made its appearance. Suicide bombers, mostly female fighters known as black widows turned to terrorist attacks on Russian and loyalist targets in Chechnya and beyond. After a bombing perpetrated in 2000 by Khava Barayeva on a Russian headquarters in Grozny in June 2000, the *shahidkas*, as the black widows were locally known, became known to a wider public during the Nord-Ost hostage-taking in October 2002 in Moscow. After a prolonged series of suicide bombings, among them a bomb attack on the Chechen government building in Grozny on December 27, 2002 which claimed 72 lives, in February 2003, the US imposed sanctions on Chechen rebel groups and put them on their list of terrorist organizations, including as a result of the bombings in Moscow. In addition, bank accounts were frozen. According to an official referendum in Chechnya on March 23, 2003, 95.5% of the population voted in favor of remaining in the Russian Federation. However, observers doubted the legality of the election results. On 5 October 2003, presidential elections took place in Chechnya. Russian President Vladimir Putin, who had called these elections, succeeded in getting his candidate Achmad Kadyrov, the head of the administrative authority, to enforce his claim that all candidates in polls before Kadyrov did not stand as candidates. Aslambek Alsakhanov received a post as Putin's representative on Chechnya issues in return for his withdrawal, and Malik Saidullayev's candidacy was invalidated by the Supreme Court. The election, for which the OSCE, according to official figures, had not sent observers for security reasons, was called a farce by both Western politicians and human rights organizations. Kadyrov announced that he would be even harder against his opponents.

³⁶⁰ Interview H.I.

³⁶¹ See Aslan Maskhadov: "We will create a full-fledged Islamic State", Kavkaz Center, March 8, 2011, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2011/03/08/13747.shtml> accessed on January 18, 2023

2. The Insurgency Spreads Out

The year 2004 marks a turning point in the Second Chechen War in various ways. The Russian policy of Chechenization of the conflict was making progress. The Chechen loyalist administration under Ahmad-Kadji Kadyrov had affirmed itself as a reliable ally for Moscow, effectively controlling most of the country. The independent battalion Vostok, the unit headed by the Yamadaev clan, acted as a quite effective capture and kill unit, as well as the similar Zapad battalion, commanded by Said-Magomed Kakiev. The former was exclusively composed by former rebels and still appealed to many insurgents in the woods who were not too much compromised as a last way out. The latter recruited mainly among former Gantamirov followers and did not accept former rebels in its ranks.³⁶² As well as the Russian forces, the Chechen OMON forces and the Kadirovitsy abundantly perpetrated human rights abuses, specifically engaging in torture and extrajudicial killings. Where Barbarism did not work, especially the Kadyrovs did not hesitate to engage in mediation and offer amnesties and pardon to certain exponents of the insurgency.

This fact had been leading to high numbers of rebels deserting the insurgency, many of them subsequently joining loyalist forces. In the first months of 2004, Kadyrov landed a coup in convincing to surrender Magomed Khambiev and Shaa Turlaev. The former was formally the shadow “Defence Minister” of the Maskhadov government, whereas the latter had been acting as a personal bodyguard and facilitator to Maskhadov in the years before. Militarily, they had had no real impact since 2001 or at the latest 2002, but these were nonetheless weighty names known to have been very close to Maskhadov at some time. On order of Ramzan Kadyrov, loyalist forces had seized close relatives of Khambiev threatening him over their security, effectively forcing him into so-called “voluntary surrender”.³⁶³ This is only one prominent of many less publicized cases. Starting in 2002-2003, many former rebels had thus been forced into surrender by kidnapping and threatening of relatives. This policy wreaked havoc in the ranks of the insurgency and indeed hundreds of former rebels laid down their arms, subsequently joining forces loyal to the Kadyrovs. Another painful operative and propagandistic loss for the insurgency followed suit: Only days before the surrender of Khambiev, on February 28, 2004, Ruslan Gelaev had been killed when he tried to pass clandestinely the border to Georgia in a remote mountain zone.³⁶⁴

Feeling that the insurgency was losing resources and momentum, the field commanders had already planned in occasion of the great Shura in the summer before a stunning increase of

³⁶² See No more “Zapad” and “Vostok” battalions in Chechnya, Kavkaz Uzel, November 8, 2008, <http://eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/8656/>, accessed on January 18, 2023. Each battalion had approximately between 600 and 900 servicemen, both had been formed in 2002 as auxiliary companies to the Russian army in Chechnya. Afterwards, they were incorporated in the military intelligence structure becoming formally GRU Spetsnaz units but being incorporated into the 42nd Motor Rifle Division based in Khankala, Chechnya, until its disbandment in 2009.

³⁶³ See “Voluntary Surrender” of Magomed Khambiev”, Human Rights Center “Memorial”, March 10, 2004, <http://www.memo.ru/eng/memhrc/texts/01new404.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁶⁴ See Myers, Steven Lee. Russia: Chechen Rebel Killed, The New York Times, March 2, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/02/world/world-briefing-europe-russia-chechen-rebel-killed.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

high-profile insurgent attacks for the year 2004. As the Chechenization policy was making progress and the rebel forces slowly faded after four years of wearing guerilla warfare, the coming year had to be the year of decision. Insurgent detachments were being swept away from the plains and the large cities there and had to retreat ever deeper into the forests under the increasing pressure exercised by loyalist Chechen militias who were much more effective than Russian forces due to their incomparably better intelligence acquisition capacity. Time was thus running out for the insurgency, hence the plan was to expand the insurgency by striking outside of Chechnya, in Ingushetia and Dagestan, where conditions for an insurgency had become ripe thanks to a combination of misgovernment, corruption and overzealous Russian religious repression. Further consecutive strikes were designed to destabilize the whole region and thus force the Russians on the negotiating table.³⁶⁵

On May 9, 2004, the head of the pro-Russian Chechen administration, Akhmat Kadyrov was killed in a bombing in Grozny's football stadium, where the celebrations for Victory Day were taking place. In addition to him, a dozen people died, among them the head of the Chechen State Council. The responsibility of the attack was claimed by Basaev shortly after in a video address. The insurgents calculated that the death of Akhmat Kadyrov would get the pro-Russian administration into turmoil, reviving power struggles and creating rifts and splits. However, and remarkably, nothing of the sort happened, as Akhmat's son Ramzan, though very young at an age of 27 years at the time, managed to hold the reins of power with the active support of Vladimir Putin.³⁶⁶ Following the assassination of Akhmad Kadyrov, Ramzan Kadyrov became deputy prime minister, before succeeding Alu Alkhanov as Chechnya's president in 2007 on the direct order of Vladimir Putin.³⁶⁷

On June 21, 2004, in the evening, over 200 insurgents attacked various points in the Ingush capital city of Nazran, 40 kilometers from the Chechen border. A few groups installed roadblocks on the main crossroads of the city, many of them wearing police- and OMON-style uniforms. Other groups attacked strategic points in the city, like the Interior Ministry, police stations, the courthouse and police armories. When off-duty policemen and functionaries rushed to the city center after having been alarmed, they were stopped at the roadblocks where the insurgents checked every passport. People who were found to be policemen or functionaries of the security forces were killed on the spot. Barracks holding weapon caches were raided and sacked, with Shamil Basayev personally leading those operations. The insurgents managed thus to recover hundreds of light weapons and big amounts of explosives. This raid laid the base for the expansion of the conflict towards Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria and allowed the Chechen insurgency to move on for years

³⁶⁵ See Laub, Zachary. Instability in Russia's North Caucasus Region, Council on Foreign Relations paper, October 13, 2005, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/instability-russias-north-caucasus-region>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁶⁶ See Gurin, Charles. Akhmad Kadyrov Is Assassinated, Eurasia Daily Monitor, Volume 1 Issue 6, Jamestown Foundation, May 10, 2004, <https://jamestown.org/program/akhmad-kadyrov-is-assassinated/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁶⁷ See Peter, Laurence. Ramzan Kadyrov: Putin's key Chechen ally, BBC, March 9, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31794742>, accessed on January 18, 2023

to come. Additionally, it came as a shock to the Russian government, who felt utterly surprised by the boldness of the attack and ashamed by the losses it provoked. The tactics and the outcome of the attack were reminiscent of the First Chechen War, when Chechen forces managed to repeatedly strike and, in the end, win the war with the recapture of Grozny.³⁶⁸

Shamil Basaev's offensive action by terrorist means escalated throughout the year: In August 2004 a suicide bombing shook a subway station in Moscow producing 10 fatalities, and almost simultaneously two passenger planes were also brought down by suicide bombers with 89 dead. Basaev's next attack however struck in a totally unexpected place. The quiet town of Beslan in mainly orthodox Christian North Ossetia on the border to Ingushetia was celebrating the first school day when a group of mainly Ingush militants stormed middle school n. 1 on September 1, 2004. According to unconfirmed reports, there were about 1,500 teachers, parents and students gathered there to celebrate the beginning of the semester, as is customary in the Russian Federation. Basaev's plan saw the seizure of the school as a repetition of the hostage-takings in Budennovsk and at the Dubrovka theater. This time however a great number of children were involved: Basaev's calculus was that Putin and the Russian government could be forced to negotiations because they would not dare to act forcefully, putting in peril the life of hundreds of schoolchildren.³⁶⁹ After a shootout with the police, two dozen of masked attackers coming overnight over secondary roads from neighboring Ingushetia occupied the school building and took more than 1.000 students, teachers and parents as hostages. The school was then surrounded by a heterogenous cordon made up by police, army and OMON special forces. The Russian government initially announced that it would renounce violence and negotiate with the hostage-takers to protect the hostages. According to the Russian government, the hostage takers did not make demands, Ingushetia's former president Ruslan Aushev however later claimed that the terrorists demanded the release of captured Chechen militants, the withdrawal of all Russian troops from Chechnya and the resignation of Vladimir Putin.³⁷⁰

On the third day of the siege, suddenly explosions rocked the school building, and the storming of the school by Russian special forces began. In those stirred moments, even the tank shells were fired at the school. The building however could be brought under control of the Russian security only after several hours of fighting. In the course of the fighting, a ceiling had collapsed causing dozens of dead among the hostages, mainly children. According to official figures, the ceiling was blown up by the terrorists, according to eyewitnesses, the collapse was caused by deliberate or unintentional action by Russian special forces. According to officials, over 700 people were injured, including more than 200 children, while

³⁶⁸ See Soldatov, Andrei and Borogan, Irina. *The New Nobility: The Restoration of Russia's Security State and the enduring Legacy of the KGB*, Public Affairs New York 2010, p. 155

³⁶⁹ See Babitsky, Andrei. *Reign of Terror: An Interview with Shamil Basayev*, ABC News July 28, 2005, cached on Films On Demand, <http://digital.films.com/play/TBGUM8>, accessed on January 18, 2023. For the full transcript of the interview, see Shamil Basayev: "My only purpose is validity", <http://www.kolumbus.fi/suomi-tshetshenia-seura/shamilb.htm>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁷⁰ See Dunlop, John B.. *The 2002 Dubrovka and 2004 Beslan Hostage Crises: A Critique of Russian Counter-Terrorism*, Ibidem Stuttgart 2004, p. 21 ff.

around 330 people, mostly children, died. All hostage-takers were killed with the exception of Nur-Pashi Kulaev.³⁷¹ Aslan Maskhadov immediately denied his involvement, whereas Shamil Basaev claimed the attack at Beslan and threatened further attacks. He confirmed this in an interview by Andrei Babitsky on behalf of the US TV channel CBS in July 2005. Basaev therein fully acknowledged his responsibility, saying however that he had been compelled by Russian “genocidal” policy in Chechnya to perform the attack on the schoolchildren of Beslan.³⁷² The Beslan hostage-taking however drew wide-ranging international condemnation and turned out to be a catastrophic boomerang for Basaev and the Chechen cause. The Chechen nationalist cause and the fight for freedom and independence found their end in Beslan. What by many in the West had still been perceived as freedom fighters fighting for a legitimate cause, were now seen as cruel child-killing Islamist terrorists. Notwithstanding the high death toll among the hostages and the complete operational failure on the side of the Russian security forces, did the Beslan hostage-taking turn thus out to be a major propaganda victory for Vladimir Putin.³⁷³

Since the supposed year of decision had brought none, chances to end the conflict soon either by negotiations or even militarily, vanished for the insurgency. Now Basaev’s plan to expand the war throughout the whole North Caucasus came back to prominence. It is unclear if it was conceived together with Maskhadov and the other members of the GKO-State Defence Committee-*Majilis Shura*. For sure, some parts were, since already in the early phases of the Second Chechen War non-Chechens were an integral part of the insurgency. This plan could not have been conceived as a fixed road-map either. Some political evolutions in the neighboring republics could not be foreseen, so we can assume that the plan was not much more than a scant collection of thoughts and possibilities, which had somewhat of a wargame in progress. The extensive network of contacts throughout the whole region, however, allowed Basaev to monitor the respective situations in the different republics and by this means grasp emerging chances.

In the summer of 2003, Shamil Basaev had gone to Kabardino Balkaria, possibly to enjoy medical treatment but also to check on the local Islamist underground and organize attacks from there in the hope to expand the war outside of Chechnya to its adjoining territories. It is difficult to ascertain what exactly Basaev expected in Kabardino Balkaria. In any case, he could build on a local network which protected and hosted him. Moreover, there is evidence that the destructive suicide bombing blasting the Russian military base in Mozdok in August 2003 was organized and executed on the Basaev’s orders and under his supervision from

³⁷¹ See Klußmann, Uwe. New Papers Critical of Russian Security Forces, Der Spiegel, July 4, 2005, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/the-beslan-aftermath-new-papers-critical-of-russian-security-forces-a-363934.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁷² The broadcast of the interview led to a diplomatic upset between the US and Russia. See Babitsky, Andrei, Reign of Terror: An Interview with Shamil Basayev, ABC News July 28, 2005, cached on Films On Demand, <http://digital.films.com/play/TBGUM8>, accessed on January 18, 2023. For the full transcript of the interview, see Shamil Basayev: “My only purpose is validity”, <http://www.kolumbus.fi/suomi-tshetshenia-seura/shamilb.htm>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁷³ See Akhmadov, Ilyas and Lansky, Miriam. The Chechen Struggle – Independence won and Lost, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2010, pp. 227

Kabardino-Balkaria³⁷⁴. The bombing was executed with a truck laden with a ton of explosive and targeted a military hospital, killing 50.³⁷⁵ At the time, he had been residing clandestinely in the town of Baksan already the whole summer of 2003, when suddenly police and OMON Special Forces closed in on his residence on August 24, suspecting militants inside but not knowing who exactly. Allegedly, Basaev and his entourage managed to break through the encirclement causing losses among the security forces thanks to the self-sacrifice of his most trusted bodyguard, his nephew Hamid Basaev. In any case, Basaev managed to remain almost unscathed, having suffered a minor wound on his leg. When the authorities realized that their target had been Basaev, they launched a massive manhunt in the nearby mountains and forests, but again to no avail.³⁷⁶

The consequence of Basaev's visit and his failed apprehension was unleashed on the still peaceful Salafist community of Kabardino-Balkaria. The already ongoing repression of this young and growing movement was greatly increased by the authorities. In massive sweeps throughout the republic, private properties as well as mosques were raided with hundreds of arbitrary detentions resulting in torture and arbitrary humiliations. Crosses were cut into the hair of detainees; beatings were standard procedure. In certain districts of the republic, even mosques were closed. The legislation against radical forms of Islam had been adopted already at the end of the 1990s, when the crisis between Dagestani Islamists and the government had reached its maximum level. The other Muslim republics of the Russian Federation had adopted similar laws which greatly hampered the activity of quietist Salafists like the Jamaat of Kabardino-Balkaria. Now the power of the state became even more oppressive, threatening even the life and health of peaceful worshippers.³⁷⁷

Some Balkar and Kabardians had therefore informally joined the Chechen struggle in what they saw as a jihad to liberate themselves from Russian yoke. Muslim Atayev was a Balkar who fought in both Chechen wars and had got weapons training in Serzhen-Yurt by Khattab. He had headed a small Jamaat named *Yarmuk*, consisting of Kabardian and Balkar fighters, 20-30 people strong. After having fought in southwestern Chechnya in the first phases of the Second Chechen War, he and his unit regrouped in the Pankisi Gorge until the fall of 2002, when he crossed the border into Ingushetia with the forces of Khamzat Gelaev. After the battle of Galashki in Ingushetia, where Russian forces managed to inflict heavy losses to the group headed by Gelaev, Atayev and his Jamaat returned to Kabardino-Balkaria.^{378 379} At the

³⁷⁴ See Farniev, Zaur, *Militsiya ne zaderzhala Shamilya Basayev*, Kommersant, December 17, 2004, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/534150>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁷⁵ See 3 Arrested in Mozdok Bombings, *The Moscow Times*, September 3, 2003, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/3-arrested-in-mozdok-bombings/236149.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁷⁶ Shamil Basayev in Kabardino-Balkaria!, *Kavkaz Center*, September 7, 2003, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2003/09/07/1636.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁷⁷ Khatazhukov, Valery. *Kabardino-Balkaria Crackdown on Islamists*, IWPR CRS Issue 199, October 9, 2003, <http://iwpr.net/report-news/kabardino-balkaria-crackdown-islamists>, accessed on January 18, 2023 and Richmond, Walter. *The Northwest Caucasus: Past, Present, Future*, Taylor & Francis, 2008, p. 165

³⁷⁸ Mc Gregor, Andrew. *Military Jamaats in the North Caucasus: A continuing threat*, Jamestown Foundation Conference Paper, *The future of the North Caucasus*, Panel II: Islamic Movements in the North Caucasus,

time, the Salafist Jamaat of Kabardino-Balkaria headed by Anzor Astemirov and Musa Mukozhev was a strong, but peaceful Islamist outfit which attracted many local youths by virtue of their fresh and charismatic sermons. The group had a Salafist orientation, albeit an apolitical one.³⁸⁰

Linked to the above, and following the trend that has already been noted in the Caucasus or in other ex-Soviet republics, also in the RKB another factor that is playing a decisive role: the growing return of the population to Islam. Approximately half of the population of Kabardino-Balkaria is Muslim, but in a situation that recalls what happened in the republics of Central Asia, where different governments have faced any glimpse of political opposition wielding the excuse of the struggle against radical Islamism, the Russian administration and its autonomous counterpart have promoted a policy of frontal opposition to everything related to Islam, identifying and relating it indiscriminately with "Wahhabism". This has created a growing spiral of tension and violence difficult to stop, where unpopular measures such as the closure of mosques, the creation of lists of alleged Wahhabis, arbitrary arrests or the palpable increase in police forces and its total impunity fifteen, have caused opposite effect to the intended one. Thus, progressively, the youngest population has been adopting more rigorous interpretations of Islam that quickly permeated segments of dissatisfied youth.³⁸¹

As a result of the massive repression wave against the *Wahabi* movement, Atayev, who had adopted the *kunya* "Sayfullah", declared the founding of a military Jamaat, again named *Yarmuk* in August 2004 with the purpose of waging Jihad against Russia and its local loyalists. In the message sent to Kavkaz Center, the Jamaat declared war against local "tyrants and bloodsuckers, which enriched themselves at the "expense of the impoverished, frightened and kneeled people of Kabardino-Balkaria" and encouraged prostitution, debauchery, drug use and alcoholism. The Russian strangers who occupied Muslim land with the purpose of preventing the spread of Islam and closed down mosques, and who were "abducting, torturing and killing people" would also be targeted. Ethnic differences which also were provoked by local cronies and their Russian "masters" would be bridged by adopting Islam. The message also vowed protecting the Muslims of Kabardino-Balkaria, and indicated it would strike selectively without targeting civilians.³⁸²

A few days later *Yarmuk* launched its first attack, targeting security forces in the Chegem district. The pivotal moment for the development of the armed Islamist underground in

September 14, 2006,

http://www.jamestown.org/fileadmin/Recent_Reports/Trans_and_Speaker_NCC09142006/McGregor-14Sep06.pdf, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁷⁹ See Tilsova, Fatima. Islamist Group Destroyed in Kabardino-Balkaria, IWPR CRS Issue 272, February 3, 2005, <http://iwpr.net/report-news/islamist-group-destroyed-kabardino-balkaria>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁸⁰ Tilsova, Fatima. Who is Who in the KBR Jamaat, North Caucasus Analysis Volume 8, Issue 26, June 28, 2007, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=4272&no_cache=1#.U6QuDLE0_Kc](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=4272&no_cache=1#.U6QuDLE0_Kc), accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁸¹ See Sagramoso, Domitilla and Yemelianova, Galina. The NW Caucasus: Islam and ethno-nationalism, in Radical Islam in the former Soviet Union, edited by Yemelianova, Galina, Routledge, New York, 2010, p. 126

³⁸² See Kabardino-Balkarskiy Dzhamaat ob yavil Dzhikhad, Kavkaz Center, August 23, 2004, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2004/08/23/25043.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

Kabardino-Balkaria however came on December 14, when elements of *Yarmuk* stormed the office of the Federal Drug Control Agency (FSKN), killing four agents in the basement of the office before departing with 80 assault rifles and 182 pistols as well as thousands of rounds of ammunition.³⁸³ For the attack has since been blamed Astemirov, although it is not clear if he really planned the raid, since at the time he was still living openly, as well as Mukozhev. Only after warrants for them had been issued in the aftermath of the attack, did both disappear, going underground at the beginning of 2005. Soon after, Muslim Atayev was tracked down in Nalchik and killed alongside his wife and other accomplices in the course of an extended gunbattle with Special Forces of the FSB.³⁸⁴

After the killing of Atayev, Astemirov became the new *Amir* of the *Yarmuk* Jamaat in March 2005, suggesting a longer lasting connection with the group. He also adopted the nom-de-guerre *Sayfullah*. He announced the adoption of a war plan for 2005, centered exclusively on targeting elements of the security services. This was not an idle threat, as Astemirov declared forested and mountainous regions of the republic as war zone and prohibited locals to approach them, under the threat that every trespasser would be considered an enemy informant. Furthermore, civilians had to avoid being in the vicinity of police and security installations so to minimize the possibility of collateral damage in the case of *mujahdeen* strikes against them. The armed underground in Kabardino-Balkaria was thus about to get serious in waging war against the Russian state.³⁸⁵

In addition, after the continued publication of communiques by *Yarmuk* on Kavkaz Center since the summer of 2004, further hints about a strict coordination between *Yarmuk* and the Chechen insurgency emerged, as *Yarmuk* expressed its condolence about the death of Maskhadov and cheered at the proclamation of Abdul-Halim Sadulaev as new president just in those days.³⁸⁶ An article of an Austrian newspaper commenting an earlier statement of the Jamaat *Yarmuk* had been republished in those days by Kavkaz Center without further comment. Interestingly, however, a map of the North Caucasus with the borders of the future Caucasus Emirate with the later adopted denominations of the *Vilayahs* had been added to it. However, it is unclear if it was a case or if it was done by purpose.³⁸⁷ In any case, the war was expanding to Kabardino-Balkaria anyway, and there was no way to stop it. The decision to wage war against Russia had been taken already before the death of Atayev, as a statement from January 2005 shows: The document, which title *The door is open for Jihad* already says much, shows strong nationalist as well as Islamist elements, as it begins with a review of recent history since the outbreak of the Great Caucasian War, concluding that Russia in its

³⁸³ See Boyeviki zastavili narkopolitseyskikh gruzit' oruzhiye, a potom rasstrelyali, *Izvestia*, April 25, 2005, <http://izvestia.ru/news/301997>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁸⁴ See Sagramoso, Domitilla and Yemeljanova, Galina. The Northwest Caucasus: Islam and ethno-nationalism, in *Radical Islam in the former Soviet Union*, edited by Yemeljanova, Galina, Routledge, New York, 2010, p. 128

³⁸⁵ See Dzhamaat «Yarmuk»: «Prinyat plan boyevykh operatsii v KBR na 2005 god.», Kavkaz Center, March 12, 2005, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2005/03/12/31292.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁷ See «Dveri dzhikhada otkryty», Kavkaz Center, February 2, 2005, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2005/02/02/29838.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

various facets –Tsarist, soviet and Federal – had been bringing only death and misery to the peoples of the Northwestern Caucasus. Then the argumentation switches to religious topics, stating in the end that

1. *At the time of the occupation our people were Muslims and they were attacked by infidels; 2. Our lands were thus Muslim lands and the invaders infidels; 3. Here Sharia ruled – the Law of Allah - and it was abolished by the invaders.*³⁸⁸

The conclusion building on this assessment was that this was a defensive Jihad against the occupiers, and thus it was *fard'ayn*, an obligatory duty for all able-bodied Muslims living in the occupied territory.³⁸⁹ Not all inside the Islamist movement of Kabardino-Balkaria welcomed this move, however. Musa Mukozhev, who had headed the Jamaat of Kabardino-Balkaria together with Astemirov and was a close friend of him, initially rejected the declaration of war against the state. Instead, he still advocated peaceful resistance against the oppression of the authorities, fearing that armed reaction against it would only provoke more repression and death.³⁹⁰ Only in November 2006 he decided to throw his weight in, declaring that the indiscriminate repression of the state made it impossible to stand by and try to stay out of the frontlines as a pious Muslim, concluding that the decision to join *Jihad* had finally come as a liberation to him.³⁹¹

The initial stance of Mukozhev, however, was shared by many members of the official Kabardino-Balkaria Jamaat and out of more than 10.000 only a tiny minority did actively join armed activities over time, although it can be assumed that many more were active in auxiliary services. The continuing crackdown on Islamists by the authorities also did not facilitate the further establishment and the coordination of the Jamaat *Yarmuk*.³⁹² In a call to supporters and sympathizers who were not able to connect with the command of the group, Astemirov recommended them to organize and act autonomously if there was no other way.³⁹³ This fact also explains the extremely decentralized structure of the Jamaat it adopted initially, not so much out of own choices, but much more out of external pressure exerted by the

³⁸⁸ Cit. Dveri Dzhikhada otkryty, Kavkaz Center, January 9, 2005,

<http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2005/01/09/28663.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

³⁹⁰ See Sagramoso, Domitilla and Yemelianova, Galina. The Northwest Caucasus: Islam and ethno-nationalism, in *Radical Islam in the former soviet Union*, edited by Yemelianova, Galina, Routledge, New York, 2010, p. 128 and Tilsova, Fatima, Who is Who in the KBR Jamaat, North Caucasus Analysis Volume 8, Issue 26, June 28, 2007, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=4272&no_cache=1#.U6QuDLE0_Kc](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=4272&no_cache=1#.U6QuDLE0_Kc), accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁹¹ See Musa Mukozhev. Kavkaz Center, November 8, 2006,

<http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2006/11/08/6318.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁹² See Fagan, Geraldine. Russia: Did Kabardino-Balkaria authorities turn peaceful Muslims into terrorists?, forum 18 News Service, August 28, 2008, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1180&pdf=Y, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁹³ See Zhukov, Alexander, Kabardino-Balkariya: Na puti k katastrofe, <http://www.memo.ru/2008/10/09/0910081.htm> accessed on January 18, 2023

security services.³⁹⁴ Given the wish of the Jamaat Yarmuk to expand armed activities, they invited Basaev to Kabardino-Balkaria to discuss the possibility of joining the Chechens and the Ingush. So Basaev came back to Kabardino-Balkaria in the spring of 2005.³⁹⁵ The issue of Yarmuk joining the Chechen insurgency was hotly debated, as the condition set by Basaev for joining consisted in an oath of allegiance to be sworn to the president and Amir of insurgent forces Abdul-Halim Sadulaev by the leaders of Yarmuk. They however objected that Sadulaev representing a secular and thus unislamic structure and refused initially to pay allegiance to him. Basaev countered their arguments instructing them about the background of the 2002 agreement between Maskhadov and the Islamists, which included the creation of an Islamic state in the future.

After that, Basaev came back to Kabardino-Balkaria in the following summer.³⁹⁶ Most probably it was around August, since in July he had met with journalist Andrei Babitsky somewhere in the Chechen-Ingush border area, in the home turf of Doku Umarov.³⁹⁷ The following travel activity by Basaev is well documented by multimedia: A photo sequence released by Kavkaz Center shows the various stations of Basaev's tour around the Caucasus: In the first pictures he looks in the camera together with Abdul-Halim Sadulaev, suggesting that the following travel to Kabardino-Balkaria was agreed upon together, although Sadulaev still insisted publicly that Basaev was still a free individual without an official position after his resignation from all posts following the disaster at Beslan and that the military Jamaats also were groups operating independently from the leadership of the ChRI.³⁹⁸ Evidence however suggests that he knew and approved Basaev's operative and coordinative efforts with Caucasian Jamaats, since he himself had appointed Astemirov as Amir of the Kabardino-Balkaria sector of the new-born Caucasus Front in one of his first decrees on May 20, 2005.³⁹⁹ The next pictures show Basaev together with Anzor Astemirov in Kabardino-Balkaria, where he supervised the preparation and the execution of the following attack on Nalchik.⁴⁰⁰

On October 13, 2005, dozens of militants attacked various spots in Nalchik, the capital city of Kabardino-Balkaria. Almost all buildings belonging to the various Federal and local security services were attacked almost simultaneously. The security forces holed up in the besieged buildings, however, put up strenuous resistance and managed mostly to repel the attackers

³⁹⁴ Dzhamaat «Yarmuk»: «Prinyat plan boyevykh operatsii v KBR na 2005 god.», Kavkaz Center, March 12, 2005, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2005/03/12/31292.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁹⁵ Abdallah Shamil Abu-Idris: 'We have gained a strategic victory', Kavkaz Center, January 12, 2006, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2006/01/12/4362.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁹⁶ See Abdallah Shamil Abu-Idris: 'We have gained a strategic victory', Kavkaz Center, January 12, 2006, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2006/01/12/4362.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁹⁷ See Babitskiy rasskazal o podrobnostyakh interv'yu s Basayevym, Gorod.lv, August 5, 2005, http://www.gorod.lv/novosti/16082-babitskiy_rasskazal_o_podrobnostyah_intervyu_s_basaevym, accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁹⁸ See A.-KH. Sadulayev: «Obeshchayem russkim voynu do pobednogo kontsa!», Kavkaz Center, June 5, 2005, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2005/07/06/35833.shtml> accessed on January 18, 2023

³⁹⁹ See Caucasian Front established by decree of ChRI President Sadulayev, Kavkaz Center, May 20, 2005, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2005/05/20/3812.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁰⁰ See Kabardino-Balkaria, Ingushetia, Ichkeria, Kavkaz Center, http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/photo/sham_nov_2005/, accessed on January 18, 2023

with huge losses. Insurgent sources put the number of the attackers at 217, of which according to official Federal sources 89 were killed and 36 captured, compared to a loss of 35 servicemen and dozens of wounded.⁴⁰¹ Basaev, who was physically present just outside the city directing the attack together with Astemirov, gave other numbers, although he conceded that the raid had been a tactical failure because it had not been possible to reach the given objectives. However, according to Basaev, it had been a strategic victory, because it proved the dedication of the Muslims of Kabardino-Balkaria to the mandatory obligation to rise up in defensive Jihad, and because the attack on Nalchik was a tangible sign the war was truly expanding outside of Chechnya.⁴⁰² Anzor Astemirov also conceded that the attack had been a defeat, comparing it to the battle of Uhud lost by the Prophet against the Meccans in 625, in simple words a temporary setback before the triumphant victory. Nevertheless, the coming times would be tough, but when the republic's Muslims stood united, they could eventually win the war.⁴⁰³ In any case, the raid had not met its goal of destroying the central nodes of the Federal and local security services located in Kabardino-Balkaria, a goal which had been accomplished in the 2004 Nazran raid. There is indeed evidence that the Federal security services had been forewarned in time to prepare for the upcoming attack and even manipulate it thanks to infiltrated agents inside the local Islamist underground.⁴⁰⁴

Further, in stark difference to the similarly conceived attack on Nazran more than a year before, the vast majority of the attackers had no real combat experience.⁴⁰⁵ Opportunities to train undetected in the woods and mountains of Kabardino-Balkaria were scarce, as well as supplies of ammunitions and small arms. Since Kabardino-Balkaria has not been sharing borders with active conflict zones, weapons procurement has been a problem for the Islamist militancy from the outset. The objective of the operation targeting the FSKN building in December 2004 had been the seizure of arms to be able to effectively start an insurgency. Interestingly, the scarcity of small arms proliferation in the republic, coming also from difficulty of supplying weapons from more served regions in the area coupled with the geographic features of the area has been actively shaping the insurgency: In simple words, it is much easier to get pistols than assault rifles in Kabardino-Balkaria. The insurgency has thus

⁴⁰¹ See Update: Putin orders total blockade of Nalchik, RIA Novosti, October 13, 2005, <http://en.ria.ru/russia/20051013/41761991.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁰² See Abdallah Shamil Abu-Idris: 'We have gained a strategic victory', Kavkaz Center, January 12, 2006, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2006/01/12/4362.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁰³ Amir Seyfulla: «Yesli my proyavim terpeniye, to pobedim», Kavkaz Center, January 10, 2006, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2006/01/10/40893.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁰⁴ See Tilsova, Fatima, Astemirov Strikes Back: Background and Implications of the Kyarov Assassination in Kabardino-Balkaria, North Caucasus Analysis Volume 9 Issue 2, February 17, 2008, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=4662&no_cache=1#.U6WPmLE0_Kc](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=4662&no_cache=1#.U6WPmLE0_Kc), accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁰⁵ See Sagrmoso, Domitilla and Yemelianova, Galina. The Northwest Caucasus: Islam and ethno-nationalism, in Radical Islam in the former Soviet Union, edited by Yemelianova, Galina, Routledge, New York, 2010, p. 128

been forced from the outset rely upon urban guerilla tactics rather than extended operations in rugged terrain, like in the other theaters of the conflict in the Northern Caucasus.⁴⁰⁶

Between 2002 and 2005, also in Dagestan insurgent groups had been established by Dagestani fighters returning from Chechnya. In 2002, Rasul Makasharipov was sent by Rappani Khalilov, the amir of the Dagestani fighters in Chechnya, back to Dagestan with the task to create a subversive group tasked with diversionary actions by terrorist means. Makasharipov thus founded the Jennet Jamaat which specialized in attacks on Dagestani police, special services, and politicians employing shootings and IEDs with the aim of destabilizing the situation in Dagestan. Jennet was brought down by the Dagestani and federal security services in 2003, but Makasharipov and other leaders managed to escape into the underground. After a while, Makasharipov created a new and stronger Jamaat named Shariat, which soon performed also high-profile attacks, like the killings of the deputy interior minister of Dagestan, the head of the police the Dagestani Minister for National Policy, Information and External Relations in 2005. Finally, Makasharipov was killed in a shootout with the police on July 6, 2005. Rappani Khalilov and the remaining Dagestani fighters in Chechnya returned to Dagestan to resume and expand the fight.⁴⁰⁷

In the meantime, on March 8, 2005, a month after the ceasefire announced by Maskhadov to encourage negotiations with the Russian government, Maskhadov was located and killed in a hamlet north of Grozny. According to several trustworthy sources, he was made to believe that the Russian government was finally willing to negotiate a settlement for the end of the war in Chechnya. Instead, he was hunted down and killed by Russian special forces. The circumstances of Maskhadov's death remained unclear, the Russian media reported that his own bodyguards would have accidentally killed him in the chaos of the gunfight. Maskhadov had always seen the table of negotiation as the only hope for the Chechen cause, as another military victory over the Russian army was not conceivable, especially after the dwindling power of the Chechen rebel formations, which, as we have seen was the cause for the expansion of rebel operations into neighboring republics.⁴⁰⁸ The death of Maskhadov was also the death of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. Maskhadov was the only remaining authoritative figure of the old guard of the Chechen leadership. After him, there was none that could muster comparable reputation in Chechnya and abroad. This was also the reason for Maskhadov being the last obstacle to a full legitimization of the pro-Russian administration under Alu Alkhanov and Ramzan Kadyrov. The hostage-taking at Beslan and the increasing

⁴⁰⁶ We came to these conclusions after having visioned and thoroughly analyzed all known multimedia productions published by the official media outlet (IslamDin) of the Jamaat *Yarmuk* first, and after the proclamation of the Caucasus emirate, the Combined Wilayah KBK then. All productions still available at IslamDin.biz – they have also been saved by the author.

⁴⁰⁷ Mc Gregor, Andrew, *Military Jamaats in the North Caucasus: A continuing threat*, Jamestown Foundation Conference Paper, "The future of the North Caucasus", Panel II: "Islamic Movements in the North Caucasus", September 14, 2006, http://www.jamestown.org/fileadmin/Recent_Reports/Trans_and_Speaker_NCC09142006/McGregor-14Sep06.pdf, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁰⁸ See Akhmadov, Ilyas and Lansky, Miriam, *The Chechen Struggle – Independence won and Lost*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2010, p. 227-228

religious radicalization of the Chechen and then already pan-North- Caucasian rebel movement had lost all international credibility, particularly in the West. Thus, any chance of a brokered, peaceful solution of the conflict had vanished.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

VI. Russia Rebuilt – Vladimir Putin’s First Terms on Presidency, 2000-2008

We showed weakness, and the weak are trampled upon

Vladimir Putin

Meanwhile, Vladimir Putin had not only managed to fight back Chechen rebels in an irregular war of attrition, winning slowly but steadily the upper hand by using non-conventional tactics and by cleverly employing Chechen militias loyal to the Kremlin with great success, but he began to extend his control step by step over all branches of the state apparatus and wide parts of the public space, using the Chechen war depicted as a fight against “terrorism” as an excuse. Putin was thus adamant to win over the media and therefore to shape public opinion.⁴¹⁰ Even if this process had begun early in his tenure as prime minister and president of the Russian Federation, with a marked obsession about his appearance in the media,⁴¹¹ blatant terrorist acts like the hostage-takings at the Dubrovka and the horrific pictures of child-hostages during the terrorist attack at Beslan provided favorable moments of action to pursue his authoritarian agenda.⁴¹²

Even so, from the start of his first term in office, Putin specifically targeted the national television, since the majority of people, particularly the elderly and those who live in rural areas, prefer that outlet to print media, radio, or the internet for news, particularly outside of the two largest metropolises in Russia, Moscow and St. Petersburg. Petersburg. Given the size of the nation, it is amazing that the state-owned Rossiia and Channel One have a broadcast reach of 93% of Russian households. As a result, in Russia, having control over this medium has always meant having control over the general public's opinion. In the Yeltsin era, for instance, the president's demise was nearly brought about by the negative TV coverage of him, particularly his actions during the First Chechen War. According to some observers, the First Chechen War had been lost more on the home front than it had in Chechnya. Regular Russians believed the cost in lives and money was excessive compared to the anticipated results after being influenced by free, and thus critical, media coverage. As a result, the public

⁴¹⁰ See Satter, David. *The Less You Know, The Better You Sleep: Russia's Road to Terror and Dictatorship Under Yeltsin and Putin*. United States, Yale University Press, 2016, p. 125ff.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² See Satter, David. *The Less You Know, The Better You Sleep: Russia's Road to Terror and Dictatorship Under Yeltsin and Putin*. United States, Yale University Press, 2016, p. 372

put pressure on the government to reach a peace agreement, which was especially vulnerable during the 1996 elections.⁴¹³

Yeltsin's crisis during the first Chechen War had also been the cause for the ascension of many oligarchs to real political power. Yeltsin gave the oligarchs controlling stakes in formerly state-owned businesses like Yukos, Sibneft, and Norilsk Nickel in return for loans to help fund his campaign and favorable coverage in the oligarchs' various media outlets. This move paid off and Yeltsin narrowly won re-election; after that, Yeltsin's experience, which put him in a dependent position from the oligarchs, would be a lesson Putin would not forget. The cause for the rise to power of the oligarchs became the cause for their downfall a few years later. Putin, on the other hand, knew better than to leave himself so vulnerable. Putin thus understood that he had to restrict media work during the Second Chechen war, in order to control it and to avoid Yeltsin's mistakes. During Putin's first administration term, the oligarchs were brought down one by one by a selective use and arbitrary use of the judiciary, mirroring the semi-legal practices they themselves had employed to rise to wealth and power. The first to be targeted by the Kremlin were those oligarchs which had been striving for political power employing their TV channels they had set up or bought at some time. Thus, people like Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky were the first to lose their media empires. The oligarchs which had been interested mainly in the accumulation of personal wealth staying out of politics were spared for the moment, although they were targeted later, having to bow down before the new Tsar or face prison, loss and wealth and degradation.⁴¹⁴

Despite what happened to TV networks, Russian print media is very often mentioned as an example for the surviving freedom of opinion in the country. This is in part supported by the fact that some Russian newspapers have been continuing to publish several critical reports challenging the government's response to Beslan. However, during the crisis, various journalists experienced several distressing events, which raised concerns that soon all independent media in Russia would follow the TV networks' fate. Anna Politkovskaya, one of the most outspoken critics of the war in Chechnya, experienced a poisoning on her way to Beslan, the first tangible sign of what would happen.⁴¹⁵ Putin would indeed not stop with the Gleichschaltung of the TV networks, this was rather the beginning of an evolution of the still very young Russian democracy into the dark depths of autocracy. Putin's television address in the wake of the Beslan shooting on September 4, 2004, gave a first taste of things to come: he mentioned a corrupt judiciary, inefficient law enforcement and the difficulty of transitioning to capitalism as main reasons for Russia's lacking security and the "horrible tragedy" in

⁴¹³ See Burrett, Tina. *Television and Presidential Power in Putin's Russia*. United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2010, p. 5 and p. 190f.

⁴¹⁴ See Gessen, Masha. *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*. United Kingdom, Granta Publications, 2012, p. 219f.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 283

Beslan.⁴¹⁶ Putin even went as far as implicating Yeltsin, even though he did not mention him by name:

*“[...] On the whole, we have to admit that we have failed to recognize the complexity and dangerous nature of the processes taking place in our own country and the world in general. In any case, we have failed to respond to them appropriately. We showed weakness, and the weak are trampled upon [...].”*⁴¹⁷

Putin's words were soon followed by actions. Ambitious administrative and federal reforms were triggered which would shape the country's foreign and domestic policies for many years. The election of the 89 regional governors for the nation was abolished in his first and most divisive proposal. Instead, the president would propose a gubernatorial candidate, who would then need to be approved or rejected by the local legislature. However, the option to reject the candidate was mostly hypothetical because, in that case, the president could present a different candidate or even the same one again; if the legislature chose to reject him again, the president could dissolve the legislature. A governor could now serve an unlimited number of terms, and the proposal also gave the president the authority to remove the governor without the consent of the legislature.⁴¹⁸

In his second suggestion, Putin suggested that representatives be chosen to serve in the State Duma, the 450-member lower house of the Russian parliament. Since 1993, half of these have been chosen through proportional representation from party lists, and the other half have been chosen through direct popular vote in districts with only one mandate. This basically means that the single-mandate districts are the only way for liberal oppositionists to win a seat. By eliminating these single-mandate districts, Putin suggested electing all 450 Duma members via proportional representation. The judiciary branch underwent additional reforms as well: On September 29 of that same year, the Federation Council considered a bill that would give the president more authority over the Supreme Qualification Collegium, which selects and removes judges for the Supreme Court and Supreme Arbitration Council of Russia. This specific bill would grant Putin the authority to appoint half of the members of the collegium, who were previously elected by the All-Russian Congress of Judges, as well as the authority to employ and discharge the director of the administrative Judges Department. The latter had hitherto been appointed by the chairman of the Supreme Court. The Kremlin repeatedly stated that their goal for these reforms was the eradication of corruption. Thus, Putin managed to get total control over the judiciary.⁴¹⁹

But the Beslan counterterrorist operation had uncovered serious deficiencies in terrorism prevention and its tactical and operative counteraction. Putin had felt personally embarrassed by the government's inability to prevent and respond to the terrorist attack at Beslan. In the

⁴¹⁶ Cit. Excerpts from Putin's address, BBC Monitoring, September 4, 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3627878.stm>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

⁴¹⁸ See Power and Policy in Putin's Russia. N.p., Taylor & Francis, 2013, p. 55f.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid.

wake of the tragedy, the president announced the strengthening of state authority. In March 2006, this was codified into a new Federal Law Number 35, “On action against Terrorism”. At the time of the Beslan crisis, the responsibility for counterterrorism had lay with two governmental agencies, namely the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD). Since 2003, the MVD has been in charge of the counterterrorism operation in the North Caucasus. A special interdepartmental center was set up to help with better coordination, communication, and intelligence sharing between the FSB and MVD. However, the center was not given the necessary power or resources to carry out its duties, and as a result, its attempt to resolve the inter-agency cooperation problem was unsuccessful.⁴²⁰

Thus, Putin announced the creation of the National Counterterrorism Committee (NAK) in February 2005 in order to put all counterterrorist and counterinsurgency units under one single command point to achieve unity of command. The NAK’s main task would be the coordination of all counterterrorism policies and operations among more than a dozen federal agencies. As a result of the Beslan crisis and other terrorist incidents before that, the Russian government set out to define specific parameters for counterterrorist operations, as it had become apparent that both tactical and operative the methods of counteraction needed to be regulated. As a consequence, the utilization of military and operational-combat measures in counterterrorist maneuvers was legalized. Terrorists’ overseas bases could now also be attacked, and both inside and outside of Russian borders, international terrorist activity could be put down with the use of military force. The strict rule against making any political accommodations to terrorists was another modification brought about by the anti-terrorism legislation. At Beslan, as had happened at the Dubrovka theater in 2002, Vladimir Putin’s resolve to deny any kind of concession or even real negotiation at any cost had been very clear from the onset. After Beslan, the Russian government officially dismissed the possibility of negotiated settlements with what were considered terrorists, and this had now been codified into law.⁴²¹

These reforms of internal and security policy were a milestone in the foundation of Vladimir Putin’s power, and the causes of these reforms – like the still ongoing war in Chechnya and particularly terrorist attacks like the one at Beslan – once again came at a favorable moment for Vladimir Putin. In the course of his first presidential term between 2000 and 2004, Vladimir had managed to stop the economic and political downward spiral affecting the Russian Federation since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Although guerilla war still raged there, and occasional, but spectacular terrorist acts shook the country, Chechnya was on the way towards pacification. At the center of power, Putin had then managed to rein in the so-called oligarchs, to stabilize the economy and thus to improve the economic and social conditions of Millions of Russian citizens thanks to the increase of raw resource prices, which

⁴²⁰ See Russia’s Post-Beslan Counterterrorism Reforms. www.rusi.org, 19 November 2007, <https://rusi.org/publication/russias-post-beslan-counterterrorism-reforms>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴²¹ Ibid.

gained him enormous popularity. These are among the strongest reasons to this day for Putin's ongoing popularity among ordinary Russians.⁴²²

There had been different phases of Russian foreign policy since the fall of the Soviet Union: Between 1991 and 1992 Yeltsin and his cabinet pursued a sort of unconditional Euro-Atlantism which was rooted in the economic demise and the sudden relegation of Russia from a superpower into an ordinary power. Moreover, Western economic support was needed to stabilize the economy and the Russian state. But there was also a genuine pragmatic Russian approach at the time. The New Political Thought, which had already been developed by Gorbachev during the perestroika foresaw a political and economic opening to the West. This opening should have brought, according to the original plans, a rapid political, economic and military convergence with the West and in particular with Europe. Thus, the Kremlin devised a double-track strategy, formulating the slogans "Europeanism" and "Atlantism", which were popular at the time among the Russian political elite. This alignment should have been propedeutical to a future membership in the European Union as well as a possible membership in the NATO through the North Atlantic Cooperation Council. Through this massive political concession to the West, the Kremlin tried to convince Western powers to opt for a swift and non-bureaucratic admission of the Russian Federation into the Western sphere. However, on the other side this was seen exactly the other way round: Russia had to prove first to be a reliable and stable partner before acting into deeper integration.⁴²³

Of course, did this approach much to disillusion genuine political doves in Russia, and this proved to give more audience to the hawks there. The rightist and the leftist opposition in the Duma – and outside it, as we will see – would accept a transition that was interpreted by many as an unconditional surrender to the West. The strong response by a consistent part of Russian public opinion and the prospect of electoral defeat led to a consistent foreign policy swing at the end of 1992. Therefore, Russia would not end its cooperation with the West nor its aspirations to be integrated into the Western system, but it would do so from a stronger position, resurrecting Russia's supremacy over its own territory – confronting separatist tendencies in Chechnya and Tatarstan – and its backyard, consisting of the Ex-Soviet republics.

The main effort thereon thus was laid on the reintegration the post-Soviet space through increased bilateral economic, political and security cooperation within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the protection of Russian minorities in CIS states. The most striking episodes of this shift were the intervention in the civil war in Tajikistan in 1993 on the side of the post-Soviet regime and the invasion of Chechnya at the end of 1994.⁴²⁴

⁴²² See the interview of Susan Glasser, co-author of the praised book *Kremlin Rising, The Putin Files*, PBS Frontline, October 25, 2017, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/interview/susan-glasser/#highlight-1233-1250>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴²³ See Meier, Christian, *Rußland in der Welt: Außenpolitik und internationale Wirtschaftsbeziehungen 1991-2003*, Informationen zur politischen Bildung, Heft 281 - 4. Quartal 2003, p. 54-61

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

In 1996, the mood was changing in the Kremlin and trust in the West was waning. From the viewpoint of Moscow, the Russian Federation was seen more as an annoying leftover of the Soviet Union, than as an equal partner of the United States and Western Europe. The war in the Balkans, where the Western powers were so unilaterally supportive of the separatist Croats and Bosnians and adversed to the traditional protégés of the Kremlin, the Serbs, and the war in Chechnya, with ongoing condemnations by the West were among the most important causes for the estrangement between Moscow and the Western powers.⁴²⁵ With the appointment of Evgeni Primakov, former SVR and KGB chief, in the Kosyrev cabinet, a new dynamic began to shape Russian foreign policy. Primakov was a staunch promoter of a multilateralist policy as an alternative to the hegemony of the United States. According to the so-called Primakov doctrine, the Kremlin should seek a strategic alliance with China and India, while simultaneously expand Russian influence towards the former Soviet republics the Middle East. As a studied orientalist, Primakov emphasized the significance of Russian presence in the Middle East. Therefore, Primakov emphasized strategic coordination with Iran.⁴²⁶

With the Russian Federation slowly gaining stability and new power, also the aspirations of its president Vladimir Putin grew accordingly. Russia, in his intentions, was still a super-power thanks to its formidable nuclear arsenal, and no geopolitical development of global reach could be unwieldy without this having implications also for Russia. Thus, in the second half of his first term, Putin began to look again outside of Russia's borders – and he was not pleased to see the US tenure as the only super-power. The first occasion on which Putin showed his geopolitical bellicosity was the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The attack on Iraq had been heavily criticized by Putin, which seemed in a first moment the US to spread its power across the whole Middle East, following the regime-change and democratization rhetoric of the neoconservative Bush administration.⁴²⁷ The true turning point in the relations between Putin's Russia and the West came about in the course of the so-called *colored revolutions* in the Ukraine and Georgia. Putin has been certain to this day that the West staged what in reality have been grass-roots movements that were able to topple corrupt and nepotistic authoritarian governments. Since the former presidents of these countries had been representants of the old soviet system and thus still supporters of Russia, Putin saw these political changes as a threat to Russia and his personal power, as by consequence Georgia and Ukraine could potentially align themselves with the West, bringing the NATO and the EU on the Russian border. Thus, the second term of Putin's presidency became much more troubled from the geopolitical standpoint, particularly regarding the relations to the West.⁴²⁸

⁴²⁵ See Marantz, Paul. Russian Foreign Policy during Yeltsin's Second Term. Communist and Post-Communist Studies, vol. 30, no. 4, 1997, pp. 345–351, accessed 26 Apr. 2023.

⁴²⁶ See Tsygankov, Andrei P.. Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity. United States, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2022, p. 98

⁴²⁷ See the interview of Daniel Fried, former member of the US National Security Council between 2001 and 2005, The Putin Files, PBS Frontline, October 25, 2017 <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/interview/daniel-fried/#highlight-1635-1650>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴²⁸ Ibid.

This was the watershed moment for the definition of the future foreign policy of Putin's Russia. Putin thus rejected the idea of cooperation with the West which had been pursued by Boris Yeltsin since the fall of the Soviet Union and opted for new grand-power politics. It was then that hawks in the Kremlin, the army and the security forces gained new power and influence. Traditional Russian nationalism had never ceased to exist or to exert influence, but it had been relegated on the margins of Russian political discourse for a long time. The need to find a new ideological base to act as a driving force for the resurrection of Russian power, which at the latest since the onset of Putin's second term had been on his agenda, collimated at the time with the forceful re-emergence of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Russian Orthodox Church had been growing exponentially since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, filling the ideological-religious gap left behind by the fall of Communism. The Russian Orthodox Church had always been a hotbed of conservatism, rejecting liberal Western values and particularly its visible manifestations like homosexuality, same-sex marriages, and cosmopolitanism instead of religious values. The Orthodox Church was thus the natural base around which conservative and anti-Western groups and parties developed. It was therefore natural that the Orthodox Church became – again, as in tsarist Russia - a state-sponsored religious institution which got a free hand as long as it would legitimate the state and its actions.⁴²⁹

At the same time, one of the most prolific and famous Russian philosophers, an Orthodox Christ and practicing *old believer*, arose to notoriety. As the Orthodox Church, but on another level, and with other arguments, he also professed the return to the roots of “Russian” purity and statehood. His name was Alexander Dugin. Dugin had been a lecturer at the Russian army general staff since the beginning of the 1990s. Over time he had managed to ascend from an obscure philosopher to one of the most influential policy prompters of the Russian Federation, although his real influence has been a matter of dispute.⁴³⁰ Nevertheless, in the years since the Crimean-Ukrainian crisis Dugin's footprint has been recognizable. But who is Alexander Dugin and which sort of political thought does he advocate? Alexander Dugin was born in 1962 in a family well introduced in the military establishment. Dugin's father was a member of an undisclosed intelligence agency, probably the GRU. He went to university obtaining a degree in philosophy. He spent his youth as a bohemian, artist and intellectual and during the 1980s he worked as a journalist and became anti-communist due to his developing right-wing views. In the years of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, he first opposed Michail Gorbachev and then Boris Yeltsin, taking part in various groups opposed to the West and to the resignation of Russia as kernel of the Soviet Union as what he saw a Western diktat. After the fall of the Soviet Union he helped writing down the political program of the new Communist Party of the Russian Federation – not because he had turned Communist, but

⁴²⁹ See Pearce, James C.. The Use of History in Putin's Russia. United States, Vernon Art and Science Incorporated, 2020, p.36f.

⁴³⁰ See Hahn, Gordon M.. Ukraine Over the Edge: Russia, the West and the "New Cold War". United States, McFarland, Incorporated, Publishers, 2018, p. 11

because he opposed the unilateral “surrender” of Russia to the West.⁴³¹

In reality, in his writings, Dugin has been promoting fascist ideology since the second half of the 1980s. Already then, he had managed to meet with leading ideologues of the far-right movement in Western Europe like Alain de Benoist. Dugin argues that modern fascism is beyond the borders of the nation-state and must seek a larger space. Dugin quickly found this space which would soon become the fulcrum of his geopolitical theories: Eurasia. A student of Mackinder and Rybkin as well as of Russian Eurasianists like Gumilev, Dugin identifies Eurasia with Mackinder’s heartland. Together with the rightist intellectual Eduard Limonov in 1993 he founded the National Bolshevik Party. The party itself remained an obscure movement which brought together rightist intellectuals and hooligans alike. In the following years, he celebrated Tsarism and Stalinism, as well as the teachings of Julius Evola, an obscure post-Fascist philosopher, underlining their common denomination of authority and hierarchy as a central factor in Dugin’s thinking.⁴³² Dugin’s philosophy has also been influenced by Benoist’s and Thiriart’s New Right, the Conservative Revolution and Pan-Slavism as well as by the classic philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Haushofer and Carl Schmitt. Over time, Dugin estranged himself from Limonov and he left the party. After the break with Limonov, in 1998 he approached the Evgeni Primakov and, later, the circle of Vladimir Putin.⁴³³

In 2000 he founded a new movement, the Pan-Russian Political Party Eurasia, which in 2003 became an NGO with the name of the Eurasian International Movement. With the ascension to power of Vladimir Putin in power, Dugin ceased his own political initiatives, trying actively to become an inspirator to the new leadership of the Russian Federation. Thus, Dugin founded the Eurasian Initiative, an international organization promoting the unification of the former Soviet territory into a unique cultural space and civilization. Dugin welcomed Putin’s policies which strengthened the Russian state internally and defined a new foreign policy. Already in the early politics of Vladimir Putin Dugin saw the departure from the Western-leaning politics of Boris Yeltsin and his cabinets. Dugin has since been described as a supporter of Putin and Putinism, arguing that there is a “conservative revolution” going on in Russia, as a result of which liberalism has been extinguished and the country has been firmly led by a new Tsar, Vladimir Putin. Dugin is an opponent of liberalism and Western values.⁴³⁴ Dugin 2001 writes in his 2001 Eurasian manifesto: “The Eurasian ideal is the powerful, passionate, healthy and beautiful person, not the cocaine addict, the bastard of secular discos, the asocial criminal or the prostitute.”⁴³⁵ Geopolitically, Dugin propagates – as Primakov did before him – a multipolar world order opposed to global US hegemony. For a couple of

⁴³¹ See Dunlop, John B.. FSI | the Europe Center - Aleksandr Dugin’s Foundations of Geopolitics. Stanford.edu, 2020, tec.fsi.stanford.edu/docs/aleksandr-dugins-foundations-geopolitics, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴³² Ibid.

⁴³³ Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2009, pp. 66-67.

⁴³⁴ See Clover, Charles. *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia's New Nationalism*. United Kingdom, Yale University Press, 2016.

⁴³⁵ Cit. Dugin, Alexander. *Eurasian Mission: An Introduction to Neo-Eurasianism*. United Kingdom, Arktos, 2014

decades, he has been pushing the idea of a new "Russian Empire" by breaking up the former Soviet republics, such as Georgia and Ukraine, an idea that gradually developed into Eurasianism.⁴³⁶

In his geopolitical views, Dugin has been dazzled by the colored revolutions of 2003 and 2004 in the Ukraine and in Georgia, reinforcing his view that the "liberal" West had never ceased to undermine and encircle "holy Russia". This brought him to academically corroborate and underpin his political and philosophical theories. In 2008, Dugin was appointed professor at the Department of Sociology at the Lomonosow Moscow State Universit. Between 1999 and 2008, Dugin published numerous works, where he laid the theoretical foundation for his thinking, which he named the Fourth Political Theory. Together with the geopolitics of the Multipolar World propagated by Dugin, the Fourth Political Theory lay at the base of Eurasianism. It implies the abandonment of liberalism, as well as of all its subspecies - communism and fascism. It is true that all three ideologies have come to the dawn of modernity, and together they represent artificial ideological constructs of people. In addition, he holds that they place man instead of God, science and philosophy instead of religion and tradition, and instead of "revealing" rational, willing, and technological constructs. The Eurasian doctrine and its "multipolar" model essentially differ from Western "unipolar" globalization. In 1997, Dugin published his most important work, *The Foundation of Geopolitics*, "one of the strangest, most impressive, and scary books in the post-Soviet era," as Clover puts it.⁴³⁷ With this book Dugin left the bohemian scene and became more and more part of the establishment of hardliners. In *The Foundations of Geopolitics*, Dugin develops the thesis that the world is dominated by two superpowers, but not, as in the Cold War, by a capitalist and a communist, but a naval and a land power. The US and the UK form the core of the naval power. Dugin has a simple plan for Russian land power: the Soviet Union is to be restored, then ally with Germany and Japan, thus forming a counterbalance to the hated Anglo-Saxon liberals.⁴³⁸

Far from being an abstract philosophical exercise, Dugin's work explicitly presents the most prominent goals of Russian policy describing further steps to achieve them. In *The Foundations of Geopolitics* Dugin stresses that American supremacy could be confronted through a Russian-Islamic alliance. This alliance would lie "at the base of Russian anti-Atlanticist strategy", justified by the "traditional character of Russian and Islamic civilization". Naturally, the alliance would see Russia in the leading part. Among the Muslim states of the Middle East, Dugin sees the biggest potential with Iran, also given its strategic location on the southern end of the Caucasus. Dugin speaks here of a strategic axis between Moscow and Teheran.⁴³⁹ The consolidation of its strategically important southern frontier in

⁴³⁶ See Dunlop, John B.. Aleksandr Dugin's "Neo-Eurasian" Textbook and Dmitrii Trenin's Ambivalent Response. *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1/2, 2001, pp. 91–127, accessed 26 Apr. 2023.

⁴³⁷ See Clover, Charles. *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia's New Nationalism*. United Kingdom, Yale University Press, 2016.

⁴³⁸ Mankoff, Jeffrey. *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics*. United Kingdom, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011, p. 219f.

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

the Caucasus, which protrudes like a launching pad towards the Middle East, is of vital importance for Russia's interests. The "Greater Caucasus" is obviously considered as a Russian territory, including "the western and northern shores of the Caspian including Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan", as well as the rest of Central Asia. Armenia deserves a special role according to Dugin. It serves Moscow's purposes as a "strategic base", and it is necessary to create "a secondary Moscow-Yerevan-Tehran axis". By the way, Armenians are "an Aryan people like Iranians and Kurds". Azerbaijan on the other hand could be partitioned or offered to Iran. Of course, in Dugin's vision, Georgia would be dismembered. Abkhazia and South Ossetia would be incorporated into Russia, whereas Georgia would be reduced to a mere satellite of Russia. Turkey would be inflicted "geopolitical shocks" by covert agitation and support to Kurds, Armenians and other political and religious minorities inside the country.⁴⁴⁰

Concerning Western Europe, starting from the immediate neighboring countries of Russia in the West, which are part of the "Russia's inner influence zone", according to Dugin, Finland be incorporated to Russia, like in tsarist times. Southern Finland should be merged with the Republic of Karelia and Northern Finland should be part of the Murmansk Region. In the same way, also Ukraine should be connected to Russia because "Ukraine as an independent state poses a high risk to Eurasia, and without a solution to the problem of Ukraine it is useless to talk about the continent's politics". Ukraine should not be allowed to remain independent, unless it would remain a secluded island, which would be impossible to allow. Latvia and Lithuania should be granted a "special status" in the Eurasia-Russia area, as well as Poland. The orthodox belt in the Balkans including Romania, Macedonia, Serbia – including the Bosnian Republika Srpska - and Greece - "orthodox collectivist spell" - should be reunited under Moscow's banner in the name of the "third Rome", rejecting liberal and rational western values. A key player in Dugin's European arena of the Eurasian project would be Germany. The Moscow-Berlin axis would be Russia's best asset of control over Western Europe. Additionally, Germany should be given effective political control over most Protestant and Catholic countries in Central and Southern Europe. As a gesture of goodwill, the region of Kaliningrad could be returned to Germany and Estonia should be associated with Germany's influence. Finally, France should be encouraged to collaborate with Germany in the name of the already existing German-French block inside the European Union and their traditional "anti-Atlantic" attitude. Britain should be separated altogether from Europe.⁴⁴¹

On the Asian side of Dugin's Eurasian project, he sees China as the biggest threat to Russian ambitions and its territorial integrity. According to him, China should be broken down as far as possible. Dugin argues that Russia should create a security belt encompassing and ranging from Tibet over Xinjiang and Mongolia towards Manchuria to protect the sparsely populated Russian Far-Eastern regions. Mongolia should in any case be linked to Russia. As a compensation, Russia should provide assistance to China in its geopolitical ambitions towards the south Asian area, including the Philippines, Indonesia and Australia. Japan should be

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

drawn into the Russian sphere of influence by the offering of the Kurile Islands to Japan, provoking anti-Americanism at the same time by fostering Japanese nationalism and revanchism. The same disinformation campaigns directed at the reviving of anti-Americanism should apply in central and southern America, where Moscow has no direct interests.⁴⁴² Hence, The United States should first be isolated in the frame of the international community. At the same time, the United States should be weakened internally. The internal subversion of the US should be accomplished covertly in a continuous and slow but steady effort. This should provoke instability and break-up tendencies by fostering racial hate and social conflicts. Russia should achieve the goal of "bringing about geopolitical disorder in the internal affairs of America, strengthen all forms of internal extremism and actively support all anti-state movements - extremists, racist and sectarian groups, to cause instability in the United States' internal processes".⁴⁴³

Dugin believes in the great war between the continent of "the Atlanteans" (America) and the "Eurasianists". Military and generally violent actions and operations have only a small share in the war. Dugin indicates covert and subtle subversive activities, the fostering of instability through deception and disinformation as well as other means. These activities should be performed by fake companies and front organizations posing as legitimate think tanks, media outlets in reality being directed by special departments of the intelligence agencies. Operations should be assisted by the strong and robust use of Russian gas, oil and other natural resources as part of the pressure of the countries.⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴² See Dunlop, John B.. FSI | the Europe Center - Aleksandr Dugin's Foundations of Geopolitics. Stanford.edu, 2020, tec.fsi.stanford.edu/docs/aleksandr-dugins-foundations-geopolitics, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁴³ See Dugin, Alexander, *Osnovy geopolitiki: geopoliticheskoe budushchee Rossii, Arktogeia* 1997

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

VII. Pacification and Radicalization: The Caucasus Emirate 2007-2013

Shamil asked me: “When you become Emir, are you going to proclaim the Emirate?”

Doku Umarov

The affirmation of Ramzan Kadyrov in the years after the death of his father in 2004 – against all odds, which means internal and external enemies alike – finally got the Russian government what they really needed in place: a more or less trustworthy, but most importantly strong and assertive leader able to represent Russia and rule Chechnya in its name. The collaborationists employed until then had not proven to be really effective. Although at the beginning of the second Chechen campaign, some of the old Chechen loyalist had been employed transitionally, the Russians had already spread out their tentacles to find someone better radicated in Chechen society and not compromised with the Russian and former Soviet state apparatus. Too wary to risk another crushing defeat, Putin and the Russian security agencies bet their chips from the beginning on promising Chechen personalities that had a credible reputation in Chechnya – and thus had forcibly been on the rebel side in the first Chechen War – and had been sidelined during the Inter-War years in the power struggle between the various political and religious factions. The Kadyrov clan had been chosen early as ideal political representative for the coming new order in Chechnya under Russian flag, whereas others, like the Yamadaev brothers, had been chosen more for their military capabilities.⁴⁴⁵ That meant that after Akhmad Kadyrov’s assassination in 2004, then 28-year old Ramzan Kadyrov had to prove his qualities first, which meant that he at first did not inherit the post of his father, on the grounds that he still wasn’t eligible for it because he did not have the minimum age of 30 years for it. That meant that he was put on probation as Chechnya’s premier minister under the premises of the new president, Alu Alkhanov, an old police general and Kremlin loyalist. That didn’t bother Kadyrov in continuing his gangster-like lifestyle, taking what he wanted and reigning like a warlord over helpless subjects. Alkhanov thus was to be the first prominent political victim of Kadyrov only two years later. Now Ramzan was free to go after his most feared competitors – the other warlords.

For a long time, the various Russian security agencies had established or sponsored their own proxies in Chechnya, on one hand out of a deliberate *divide-et-impera*-strategy, not letting become anyone too strong and nurturing competition to further their own individual interests

⁴⁴⁵ See Schaefer, Robert W.. The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus, Praeger 2011, p. 140 and Uzzell, Lawrence. Will Kadyrovites rejoin rebels?, North Caucasus Weekly Briefs, Volume 5 Issue 20, Jamestown Foundation, May 19, 2004, <https://jamestown.org/brief/briefs-445/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

as well as to put potential candidates for future higher tasks on a trial. These cockfights saw the young Kadyrov grow in power and stature and at some point, it was not only minor opponents anymore, but powerful warlords that had been sponsored by one of the Russian security agencies operating in Chechnya, usually being in competition against the other. The first victim of Kadyrov's will to power was Movladi Baisarov, ostensibly a higher-ranked FSB employee.⁴⁴⁶ Baisarov had been a trustee of Akhmat Kadyrov, leading his presidential security detail until the former's death in 2004. Afterwards he founded his own unit under the flag of the regional FSB HQ which acted principally as a death squad, besides racketeering and operating oil wells illegally to finance his essentially private militia and enrich himself. In any case, it didn't last long: At the end of 2005, Kadyrov managed to have Baisarov's unit disbanded and soon after him exiled to Moscow. As Baisarov still didn't back down, confiding in help from his former masters in the Lubyanka, he was shot down in central Moscow on open street by gunmen loyal to Kadyrov in November 2006. The next big obstacles on the Kadyrov's way towards total rule in Chechnya were the two warlords on the payroll of the GRU. Said-Magomed Kakiev and Sulim Yamadaev had been operating each a battalion on behalf of the GRU, respectively in the West and the East of the country since the onset of the Second Chechen War, thus named Zapad and Vostok. These units were the only Chechen units officially integrated into the Russian Armed Forces and thus outside of the control of the Chechen government and Ramzan Kadyrov. With his power growing, Kadyrov demanded direct control of both units, which meant for both warlords to step down from their small realms. Whereas Kakiev complied, thus saving his life, Sulim Yamadaev, backed by his clan, resisted Kadyrov's pressure to step down and disband his private army.⁴⁴⁷

1. Chechenization

Given their more extended connections in and outside of Chechnya, it was more difficult for Kadyrov to get rid of the Yamadaevs. They had been on the payroll of the GRU for a long time, and they knew many things about the accession to power of the Kadyrovs. In addition, the GRU was entrenched deeper in Chechen politics than the FSB, but in the end, Kadyrov succeeded nevertheless.⁴⁴⁸ After some armed clashes in the spring of 2008, Kadyrov managed to go after the Kadyrovs. Suddenly Sulim Yamadaev was formally incriminated on pretentious grounds and put on a wanted list in August 2008. At the same time however, he was roaming through Tskhinvali with battalion Vostok on behalf of the GRU, who had cynically sent him there to fight Russia's war in Georgia before letting him fall. The final showdown, however, began in a place far from Chechnya. On September 24, 2008, Ruslan Yamadaev was shot and killed by masked gunmen on a central street in downtown Moscow.

⁴⁴⁶ See Uzzell, Lawrence. Will Kadyrovites rejoin rebels?, North Caucasus Weekly Briefs, Volume 5 Issue 20, Jamestown Foundation, May 19, 2004, <https://jamestown.org/brief/briefs-445/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁴⁷ Sulim Yamadaev Denounces Kadyrov, North Caucasus Weekly, Volume 9 Issue 16, Jamestown Foundation, May 1, 2008, <https://jamestown.org/program/sulim-yamadaev-denounces-kadyrov/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁴⁸ Yamadaev versus Kadyrov: a Sign of a Larger Battle Between the FSB and GRU?, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume 7, Issue 79, Jamestown Foundation, April 23, 2010, <https://jamestown.org/program/yamadaev-versus-kadyrov-a-sign-of-a-larger-battle-between-the-fsb-and-gru/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

The same fate awaited his brother Sulim in January 2009 in Dubai. Dubai police accused Kadyrov's cousin who was holding the post of deputy premier minister, but even more importantly that of Kadyrov's chief henchman and chief of special operations Adam Delimkhanov. The shadowy Delimkhanov has been responsible for Kadyrov's "black operations" in- and outside of Chechnya, directing attacks and assassinations of Chechen opposition figures and cadres of the insurgency in the Mid-East and Western Europe.⁴⁴⁹

The real muscle for Kadyrov's power games however came from his private army named after himself, the so-called *Kadyrovitsy*. These have been instrumental in Ramzan Kadyrov's rise to power. Virtually at the mercy of the various Yamadaevs, Kakievs and Baisarovs the Kadyrovs began early in the war to re-enlist former rebels to build up their own private army. Former Maskhadov loyalists who had surrendered because of contrasts with the stronger Islamist wing inside the insurgency or more often because of large-scale hostage-takings of relatives by Kadyrov loyalists, became the core of Kadyrov's power base. The examples of Magomed Khambiev and Shaa Turlayev are very explicative in this regard. Khambiyev was the so-called "Defence Minister" of the ChRI and one of the few remaining Maskhadov loyalists when he was forced to surrender in March 2004 because of the kidnapping of more than 40 relatives by forces loyal to Kadyrov. Had he not surrendered, the hostages would have been shot, according to Ramzan Kadyrov's threat.⁴⁵⁰ The same fate awaited Turlayev, who had been Maskhadov's personal bodyguard early in the war and then his emissary in the strategic Kurchaloi area, ancestral home of Maskhadov's clan.⁴⁵¹ Other more or less prominent people followed, mostly from Maskhadov's entourage. This policy was extremely successful for Kadyrov, because it made scorched earth around Maskhadov, isolating him inside and outside the context of the insurgency. At the same time, it fruited Kadyrov new levies to be incorporated in his private army, directing the newly turned rebels cleverly not only against their former comrades in arms, but also against the other warlords like the Yamadaevs, against which powerful grudges existed as a consequence of the atrocities perpetrated by them in their ruthless counterinsurgency campaign. The turned rebel commanders were thus also given a chance of surviving an otherwise struggle on which end stood sure death, and to be rewarded for their genuflection before Kadyrov. Khambiyev, Turlayev and others all got more or less important, though largely symbolic positions in the Kadyrov administration.

Although the tactic of the hostage-taking of relatives has not only been employed by Kadyrov, but also by the other warlords in the first phase of the Second Chechen War, Kadyrov brought

⁴⁴⁹ See Abbas, Hassan. Austrian Prosecutors Were Investigating Israilov's Charges against Kadyrov, North Caucasus Weekly, Volume 10 Issue 6, Jamestown Foundation, February 12, 2009, <https://jamestown.org/program/austrian-prosecutors-were-investigating-israilovs-charges-against-kadyrov/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁵⁰ See Uzzell, Lawrence, Khambiev Surrender Seen As Heavy Blow To Maskhadov, North Caucasus Weekly Volume 5 Issue 11, <https://jamestown.org/program/khambiev-surrender-seen-as-heavy-blow-to-maskhadov-2/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁵¹ See Maskhadov's Former Bodyguard Operated in Gudermes, Sputnik News, April 2, 2004, <https://sputniknews.com/onlinenews/2004040239912922/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

it to excellence. This tactic was particularly suited for the situation in Chechnya, where extended family networks form the core of Chechen values. However, it was a tactic imported and suggested by the Russian security services, who looked back towards a long series of non-conventional counterinsurgency tactics. In fact, the hostage-taking of relatives was already employed by the Bolsheviks during the Russian Civil War and successively refined by the Cheka and the KGB. As the Russian humanitarian organization Memorial put it, commenting Khambiyev's surrender in 2004: "Just as the use of hostages in conflicts with partisan and rebel movements are not new to the Russian Federation, nor were they new to the Soviet Union. In 1921 rebel and partisan forces acted precisely in this manner during the suppression of Antonov's uprising around Tambov. They captured and shot many residents of the village, declared them hostages, and shot someone to demonstrate that they were serious. After this episode the remaining people in the village began collaborating with the USSR to catch the "criminals." Others started acting against the rebels with no less powerful means as chemical weapons. At the end of the 1940's a hostage situation was used in the Baltic regions and in West Ukraine. In these places entire families of partisans called *lesnye braty* (forest brothers) and supporters of Stepan Bandera were arrested and sent to Siberia, and by the power of security sector of the government national partisan movements were suppressed."⁴⁵²

To increase the effectiveness of counterinsurgency operations, the Russian government under Vladimir Putin opted soon after the beginning of the second Chechen War to constitute mercenary Chechen forces that were able to operate in small groups even in mountainous terrain, knowing the geography and the people. In fact, some Chechen field commanders like the Yamadaev brothers had never disbanded their militias and operated together with Russian forces since the outset of the Second Chechen War.⁴⁵³ Later on, regular Chechen counterinsurgency units were formed under the command of the military intelligence and the FSB. With the growing power of the Kadyrov clan, it also was permitted to form its own militia, which was incorporated into battalions that were created by order of the Russian Minister of the Interior. While these troops did not formally answer the federal authorities, they nevertheless joined the 46th Interior Ministry brigade based in Chechnya. Furthermore, even though they fell under the command of the military, they were still involved in various criminal episodes. On the other hand, the *Kadyrovtsy's* reputation, on the other hand, was already decidedly unfavourable. Its personnel's involvement in several unwarranted arrests and unlawful killings and torture of both insurgents and casually exposed people, has been severely criticized by human rights activists. Putin however, persisted in turning a blind eye to these proceedings. In 2006, activists denounced serious violations of human rights by Kadyrov's subordinate forces in an official statement, which affirmed that Chechen population was even more afraid of the *Kadyrovtsy* than of federal forces. Kadyrov's

⁴⁵² Cit. "Voluntary Surrender" of Magomed Khambiev, Memorial, March 10, 2004, <http://old.memo.ru/hr/hotpoints/caucas1/msg/2004/03/m16235.htm>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁵³ Schaefer, Robert W.. *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad*. United Kingdom, Praeger, 2010, p. 270

formations consisted in fact largely of individuals that had committed criminal and economic crimes during the interwar period in Chechnya.⁴⁵⁴

Following Ramzan Kadyrov's victory in the power struggle and his accession to presidency in 2006, his irregular *Kadyrovitsy* were transformed into regular light infantry battalions named "Sever" ("North") and "Yug" and ("South"). Structurally, the battalions became part of the 46th Brigade of the Interior Ministry of the Russian Federation, practically however they have been under direct control of Kadyrov ever since. At the time, each of the battalions consisted of three light infantry companies capable and knowledgeable of the difficult Chechen terrain, an intelligence company, and support units: platoons of medical, communications, logistics. The total number of both military units was around 1200 people. Thousands of other former Kadyrovitsy were incorporated into police and OMON units as well as personal security details of dignitaries of the Kadyrov administration. After the demise of Baisarov, Kakiyev and the Yamadaeyevs, existing structures like the battalions Vostok and Zapad were also incorporated into the Chechen Interior Ministry. Since 2010, battalion "North" has been transformed into the 141st Special Motorized Regiment named Ahmad Kadyrov. According to various sources, from 5 to 18 thousand people have been serving at any one time in various Kadyrov's power structures. They have been equipped with light and also heavy weapons, and form effectively a private army at Kadyrov's disposal.

Vladimir Putin had been desirous to finally put an official end to the creeping war in Chechnya, with which to score domestically, to strengthen his already strong position even more, and abroad to show that Russia had come back among the big players. The Russian president had spoken already in 2003 and again in 2006 of an imminent "end of the counterterrorism operation in Chechnya"⁴⁵⁵ Thus, Chechenization had been the Kremlin's golden word in that period, and the disbanding of all militias and warlords independent from Kadyrov in the years before, had been instrumental to reach this goal. The implicit message was that Chechnya was pacified and safe, thus armed formations out of control of the republic's government or its sanctioned ruler had no reason to exist and operate anymore. This way Putin was able to orchestrate a PR coup announcing the end of a 10-years-long "counter-terrorism" operation in Chechnya. This did not mean however that the chronic weakening of the Chechen insurgency meant its immediate demise. Rather, it was the fig leaf to hide the fact that the metastases of the Chechen war had already reached and colonized Chechnya's neighboring places in what for a time became a unified Jihadist effort of insurgency across the North Caucasus.

On April 16, 2009, Vladimir Putin announced the official end of the "counter-terrorist operation" after nine years.⁴⁵⁶ The insurgency had been ostensibly defeated, and only a few dozen terrorists resisted, entrenched in their dugouts in the mountains of southern Chechnya.

⁴⁵⁴ State Terror, State Violence: Global Perspectives. Germany, Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2015, p. 147

⁴⁵⁵ Sakwa, Richard. Putin: Russia's Choice. United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2007, p. 234

⁴⁵⁶ See Kadyrov nazval istoricheskim den' otmeny osobogo rezhima v Chechne, Vesti.ru, April 16, 2009, <http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=275759>, accessed on January 18, 2023

Ramzan Kadyrov followed suit and announced a wide-ranging amnesty for all those who would surrender as well as generous reintegration programs.⁴⁵⁷ Indeed, dozens of fighters came out of the forest in the second big wave of defections after the death of Shamil Basaev. To be sure, Kadyrov had not only relied on his promise of fair and equal treatment for those surrendering, but had enforced his resolve to root out the insurgency by pre-emptively and randomly taking into custody hundreds of young men, which were frequently abused under custody, thus spreading terror, and to take family members of active fighters as hostages and burning down their homes as means to convince them to come out of the forest. These tactics slowly, but surely worked over time.⁴⁵⁸

For the Kremlin, this was victory in Chechnya – and in the end, it truly was, even if at the time it didn't seem like that because of the spread of the insurgency form Chechnya across the whole eastern part of the North Caucasus, embracing Kabardino-Balkaria, Ingushetia, Chechnya, Dagestan and parts of the Stavropol Krai. The export of the insurgency and the proclamation of the Caucasus Emirate back in 2007 however had been clear signs for the weakness of the insurgency – not signs of strength, which they seemed to be at the time. It meant that the Chechen wing of the insurgency was under heavy pressure, with the Chechenization strategy obviously working, which led to a deep state of crisis, and the only hope for the Chechen insurgent leaders at the time seemed to be the evasion out of Chechnya, with the goal to inflame the whole region. This, however, meant that some compromise had to be made by the still Chechen rebel commanders with respect to their neighboring counterparts. It meant first and foremost to lose the Chechen primacy status in the insurgency, although the Chechen wing retained some special place because of its insurgent history and tradition. The nationalist stance maintained until 2007, fighting under the banner of the ChRI, also had to be abandoned in favor of a much more radical religious agenda. Islam was the common bound under which banner the Caucasus emirate would fight against Russia from then on.⁴⁵⁹

Perhaps, one of the most important reasons for the backing down of the insurgency in Chechnya has been Kadyrov's ability to honor one of his most important promises – the full reconstruction of Grozny and Chechnya. When Vladimir Putin visited Chechnya in 2004, he was appalled by the sight of the still totally destroyed capital city of Grozny. Until then, no serious reconstruction efforts had been initiated and it wouldn't have made much sense, since sporadic fighting in Grozny was common still. The death of Ahmad Kadyrov in 2004 also contributed to a further standstill. However, with the inception of Ramzan Kadyrov as president in 2006, things changed quickly. One of his slogans in those years to pacify Chechnya through soft power was "Chechnya without signs of war", Ramzan Kadyrov and

⁴⁵⁷ See Kadyrov nameren vernut' ostavshikhsya boyevikov k mirnoy zhizni, Vesti.ru, April 20, 2009, <http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=277248&cid=1>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁵⁸ E.g. Analysis: Watchdogs Register Steep Rise in Abductions in Chechnya. RadioFreeEurope/Radioliberty, www.rferl.org/a/caucasus-report-chechnya-abduction-steep-rise-kadyrov/28931722.html, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁵⁹ See Pokalova, Elena. Chechnya's Terrorist Network: The Evolution of Terrorism in Russia's North Caucasus. United States, Praeger, 2015, p. 163

his people have quickly restored the ruins of the capital.⁴⁶⁰ Since then, vast numbers of rebuilt houses and new social complexes, especially in the center. New condominiums to receive people coming down from the mountainous areas to get their luck in the city have also been funded. In the city, the fiercely reputed mountaineers are easier to control. An important amount of attention has been given to new schools and kindergartens. This especially crucial sector, where according to Kadyrov's plans the new generations are being molded into glowing supporters of himself and his clan, have been administered by close relatives of Kadyrov. In these new schools, children learn from the earliest age that thanks to the genius of Kadyrov Chechnya today enjoys complete peace and harmony. For this purpose, the *Kadyrov Youth League* has been organized and spreads particularly in those rebuilt schools, on the model of the *October Youth* of Soviet memory or even the *Hitlerjugend*. Their silk suits however are green rather than red, and their slogans do not nominate Lenin and Stalin, but Kadyrov.⁴⁶¹

While Kadyrov's militias were being accused of murder and kidnapping, Chechnya's president himself enjoyed a lavish lifestyle. His 35th birthday in particular was celebrated with extreme opulence; several international stars, such as Jean-Claude Van Damme, as well as renowned violinist Vanessa Mae were invited to a party which was kicked off by the inauguration of a new building complex in the capital city Grozny. According to local media sources, Mae alone received a fee of half a million dollars for her participation. When asked by a Russian journalist about where the money for the party came from, Kadyrov claimed that Allah himself had provided it, while it had actually been Moscow who had financed the reconstruction of the Caucasus republic for billions of rubles per year.⁴⁶²

However, despite the massive changes in the urban landscape, the majority of the inhabitants continue to live in misery and despair. Even official figures speak of over forty percent unemployment, although according to unofficial estimates the number of jobless would actually be much higher. Without bribing it, it is impossible to find any job, and in many people, they live with irrelevant pensions or just as miserable unemployment benefits. Some people leave the country in search of safety in Europe, who cannot live in the terror of the squadrons charged with repressing dissent and dissatisfaction. Large portraits of the young leader, as well as those of his mother, father, brother, and other family members, cover nearly every building front in Chechnya. Newscasts begin and end with services on Ramzan Kadyrov's performance, newspaper headlines overwhelm his successes, here and there in the capital come his fan club. The streets of the reconstructed city are crossed by cars carrying their photographs, some have the standard KRA plate, Kadyrov's abbreviation. Whoever is driving these cars is a faithful one, that no soldier in Chechnya will dare to stop. By 2010, the unemployment rate has still been lying at over 43%. Today, officially it lies at around 20%,

⁴⁶⁰ Aslan Souleimanov, Emil, and Colombo, Roberto. *Counterinsurgency Warfare and Brutalisation: The Second Russian-Chechen War*. United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2021, p. 113

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶² See Schaefer, Robert W.. *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad*. United States, Praeger Security International, 2010, p. 234f.

but this data probably doesn't show the real number. Additionally, these numbers have any way been tricked by the unnatural swelling of the security apparatus, which sees tens of thousands under arms in Kadyrov's private army. Although until not long ago there have been obvious security implications to justify these numbers, these assets have also always been employed as a patronage network to accommodate regime loyalists as well as a reservoir for the artificial creation of new jobs.⁴⁶³

2. The Proclamation of the Caucasus Emirate

On October 7, 2007, Doku Umarov declared the establishment of the Caucasus Emirate. This move came suddenly and unexpected to many, but it had been in the making since a long time. In fact, as we now know, the declaration of an Islamic state had been one of the focal points of attrition between Maskhadov and the Islamists back in the days of the split between the Chechen insurgents in the years going from 2000 to the summer of 2002, when things were patched up between the seculars and the Islamists on occasion of the Great Shura. In fact the compromise had been that an Islamic entity would indeed be established on one point, but out of tactical and political considerations not immediately. In the meantime, Maskhadov, who had originally opposed the notion of an Islamic Chechen state, had to concede that this would be the final goal of the struggle against the Russians. The years passed and Maskhadov was killed in March 2005, his successor, Sadulaev, fell one year later, in June of 2006. Both died formally as presidents of the ChRI, even if both commandeered insurgent wings outside of Chechnya.

Doku Umarov became the next president in the summer of 2006, and as the kinetic activity in the neighboring regions was rising up, the influence of the non-Chechen parts of the insurgency also did. Now the self-declaration of the insurgency as a definitely Islamist one with the goal of the establishment of an Islamic state could not postponed anymore, as Umarov noted in an interesting message from the summer 2011. There Umarov explained that preparations for the declaration of the emirate had long been made, and that the Emirate had postponed until 2007 because both Maskhadov and Sadulaev did so for political reasons – that is to not estrange the West and so preclude negotiations with the Russian government. Umarov went on saying that the main reason for the declaration was the fact that Anzor Astemirov, aka Amir Sayfullah, the leader of the Kabardino-Balkaria branch of the Caucasian Front of the ChRI, sent a letter to Umarov requesting the abolition of the ChRI and the creation of an Islamic entity instead. Otherwise, he wrote, the Emirate would be declared by himself with the Ingush and the Dagestanis, which meant without the Chechen insurgents.⁴⁶⁴

Obviously, religious consideration played a big role in Astemirov's push for the emirate. But the importance of the religious dimension was matched, if not outweighed by ethnic

⁴⁶³ Aslan Souleimanov, Emil, and Huseyn Aliyev. Evaluating the Efficacy of Indigenous Forces in Counterinsurgency: Lessons from Chechnya and Dagestan. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 27, no. 3, 25 Apr. 2016, pp. 392–416

⁴⁶⁴ See Shamil asked me: "When you become Emir, are you going to proclaim the Emirate?", Kavkaz Center, August 30, 2011, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2011/08/30/15062.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

considerations. Until now, the Ingush, Dagestanis, Kabards and Balkaris fighting alongside the Chechen Insurgents were grouped together into the structure of the Caucasian Front. But this front stood together with the fronts inside Chechnya under the banner of the ChRI. It is therefore not wondering that the non-Chechens in the North Caucasian insurgency strived for adequate representation, especially at a time where the insurgency in Chechnya proper was on the defensive, with numbers of fighters and attacks against Russian and collaborationist forces declining constantly. The territorial widening of the conflict orchestrated by Basaev had thus given respite to the insurgency, which is why the Caucasians grew gradually impatient to fight under a flag that was not theirs and thus demanded adequate representation in a new political entity that would finally mirror the ideological orientation of the most part of the insurgent movement in the North Caucasus.

However, in his statement with which he proclaimed the Emirate, Umarov justified its adoption with the necessity to adjust the reality in the Caucasus with divine law. He argued that the occupation of the Caucasus by Russia and all consequences with it came as a sort of punishment from God, because Muslims had strayed off from the right path of religion.⁴⁶⁵ To be sure, the discussion about the creation of an Imamate or even a Caliphate had been going on for years, as already mentioned. Maskhadov essentially opposed the creation of an Islamic state and his giving in on this topic came as a compromise gesture during the negotiations with the Islamists in the summer of 2002, he had sought thus to unify the insurgent forces to be able to negotiate with the Russians from a stronger position. His successor, Abdul-Halim Sadulaev, a moderate Islamist, also tried to negotiate for the end of the war, although not much is known about these attempts.⁴⁶⁶ Nevertheless, out of his background as well as military considerations, he clearly favored the creation of a pan-Caucasian, Islamic state, as he took also strong positions in the internal discussion about the topic against the more secular oriented political representatives of the ChRI based abroad.⁴⁶⁷ He postponed its creation essentially out of political reasons, not to endanger possible negotiation moments by estranging the West and give the Russians excuses not to negotiate.⁴⁶⁸

The driving force behind the creation of the Emirate, however, had been Shamil Basaev. He knew that Chechnya alone would not be able to resist the Russian onslaught indefinitely. He was convinced that the victory in the First Chechen War and the de-facto period of independence afterwards was only a brief respite before the Russian army would come again

⁴⁶⁵ See The official version of Amir Dokka's statement of declaration of the Caucasian Emirate, Kavkaz Center, November 22, 2007, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2007/11/22/9107.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁶⁶ See Shamil asked me: "When you become Emir, are you going to proclaim the Emirate?", Kavkaz Center, August 30, 2011, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2011/08/30/15062.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁶⁷ See Sheikh Abdul-Halim: 'We are moving towards the declaration of the Islamic State', Kavkaz Center, December 26, 2007, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2007/12/26/9265.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁶⁸ See The official version of Amir Dokka's statement of declaration of the Caucasian Emirate, Kavkaz Center, November 22, 2007, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2007/11/22/9107.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

to Chechnya. This conviction most probably led him into the Dagestan operation in the summer of 1999 together with Khattab and other Islamists. The invasion of Dagestan had been conceived as a sort of pre-emptive strike on Russian interests before Russia moved into Chechnya again: Many Dagestanis would join the Chechen liberators and Russia's reaction would trigger a regional war, which would stand more chances to be won, rather than fighting it alone, so Basaev's plan.⁴⁶⁹ He envisaged a new unification of all Muslims of the Caucasus to fight the Russian state together, as it had been under Imam Shamil, his prominent namesake. The Dagestani support did not materialize, however, and the Russians quickly capitalized on the Chechen invasion and invaded Chechnya as a result. Basaev, however, did not give up his endeavor: At the beginning of the Second Chechen War, large numbers of non-Chechen Caucasians were fighting in the ranks of the insurgency, mostly fighting in detachments commanded by Basaev and Khattab.⁴⁷⁰

Ingush, Dagestani, Balkar, Kabardian and Karachay fighters were gradually sent back home by Basaev to build up underground networks in their homelands. Parallel to the war raging in Chechnya, federal repression of Islamic and Islamist groups in the adjacent republics was stepped up. Arbitrary arrests, beatings and torture of until then peaceful Muslims, even if partly opposed to the federal order, generated rage and anger. Paired to an already present dissatisfaction among ordinary citizens because of rampant corruption, administrative neglect as well as poverty and unemployment, these factors provided the necessary humus on which underground networks built their structures.⁴⁷¹

Basaev, who had lost a leg in the retreat from Grozny and was thus impeded in taking part in actual combat operations, overtook more the role of a planner and coordinator of the different armed groups acting in and outside Chechnya. Trusted Dagestani subordinates since the times of the Dagestani incursion worked to build up an insurgent network there, targeting Russian forces and local collaborationists since at least 2002. The contiguity to Chechnya and the ethnic and linguistic affinity between Chechens and Ingush facilitated much the establishment of the armed underground in Ingushetia, which would enter the active scene with a loud bang in 2004, raiding the capital city of Nazran in a spectacular raid that hampered the activities of the security services for a long time afterwards. The hostage-taking in Beslan was also organized by Basaev, and there is evidence of his operational presence in the vicinity. This infamous act could be a game-changer in the best case, but it was conceived as an act of revenge for the Ingush-Ossetian war of 1992, which could have sparked a renewed war and

⁴⁶⁹ See Lav, Daniel, *Radical Islam and the Revival of Medieval Theology*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2012, p. 196. See also the eulogy produced by IslamDin and originally published on the AMEF Forum: *Kitab yahdi wa-sayf yansuru fi-sirat al-qadi al-shar' li-Imarat al-qawqaz al-Islamiyya al-amir Sayfillah taqqabalahu Allah*, IslamDin, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2keD5pzak8>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁷⁰ See Hahn, Gordon M., *Russia's Islamic Threat*. United Kingdom, Yale University Press, 2007, p. 108f.

⁴⁷¹ E.g. Khatazhukov, Valery, *Kabardino-Balkaria Crackdown on Islamists*, IWPR CRS Issue 199, October 9, 2003, <http://iwpr.net/report-news/kabardino-balkaria-crackdown-islamists>, accessed on January 18, 2023 and Richmond, Walter. *The Northwest Caucasus: Past, Present, Future*. N.p., Taylor & Francis, 2008., p. 165

push the Ingush public opinion as well as droves of new recruits into the arms of the insurgency⁴⁷².

The coordination with the Islamist underground in Kabardino-Balkaria proved to be more difficult from a geographic and possibly also from an ideological point of view. It is important to remember that Anzor Astemirov and Musa Mukozhev, the leaders of the local Jamaat Yarmuk, were both trained theologians. Basaev was not, and Khattab also had not been, they were military men, fighters. Religious scholars who until then supported the idea of the Islamic state were either Soviet-trained ones or self-thought preachers. No one of them could match the theological acumen of both Astemirov and Mukozhev, who had been trained among other places at the Islamic university in Medina, Saudi Arabia.⁴⁷³ What was conceived by Basaev and Khattab to become an “Islamic state” had until then been born out mostly out of military considerations. Theological issues had been only confusedly addressed, if at all. At the time of the first visit of Basaev in Kabardino-Balkaria in the summer of 2003, Astemirov and Mukozhev were not yet part of the armed underground, although it is probable that contacts existed through Muslim Atayev, the former subordinate of Basaev and veteran of both Chechen Wars.⁴⁷⁴ The contacts intensified at the beginning of 2005, after the going underground of Astemirov and Mukozhev, since it did take not long time until Basaev came back to Kabardino-Balkaria in the following summer. There he planned and oversaw the surprise insurgent assault on Nalchik in the October of 2005, which marked the true beginning of the Islamist insurgency in Kabardino-Balkaria.⁴⁷⁵

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It is clear then that Basaev worked from 1999 on tirelessly on his initial plan on triggering a wider war in the Caucasus to stand a chance to defeat and expel Russia out of the region. Connecting and inciting the various Islamist and armed groups proved to be his legacy when died in 2006, thus not experiencing the actual establishment of the Emirate anymore. It is therefore not exaggerated to describe Basaev as the central catalyst to the triggering of the actual conflict. As of 2007, with all non-Chechen armed groups having pledged their

⁴⁷² See the picture series on the presence of Shamil Basaev in North Ossetia in August 2004, Operational base of Mujahideen in Northern Ossetia, August 2004, Kavkaz Center, http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/photo/op_base/, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁷³ See Lav, Daniel. *Radical Islam and the Revival of Medieval Theology*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2012, p. 196. See also the eulogy produced by IslamDin and originally published on the AMEF Forum: *Kitab yahdi wa-sayf yansuru fi-sirat al-qadi al-shar' li li-imat al-qawqaz al-islamiyya al-amir Sayfillah taqqabalahu Allah*, IslamDin, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2keD5pzak8>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁷⁴ See Sagramoso, Domitilla and Yemelianova, Galina. *The Northwest Caucasus: Islam and ethno-nationalism*, in *Radical Islam in the former Soviet Union*, edited by Yemelianova, Galina, Routledge, New York, 2010, pp. 127-128

⁴⁷⁵ See Shamil Basayev: 'Nalchik attacked by 217', Kavkaz Center, October 17, 2014, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2005/10/17/4156.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023. See also the picture series on the activity of Shamil Basaev in the summer and fall of 2005 (although deceptively dated only with November 2005). In the 4th picture Astemirov is in the background of the picture: Kabardino-Balkaria, Ingushetia, Ichkeria, Kavkaz Center, http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/photo/sham_nov_2005/, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁷⁶ See Caucasian Front established by decree of ChRI President Sadulayev, Kavkaz Center, May 20, 2005, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2005/05/20/3812.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

allegiance to the president of the ChRI and the Amir of the armed forces of Ichkeria and the Caucasus front, reality had surpassed formalities. The conflict had not been limited to Chechnya alone already for a long time. The gradual rise of operations and attacks mounted by non-Chechens insurgents had conferred them rising significance. The overcoming of the status of the insurgency until then formally centered on Chechnya until then was an obligatory step, resulting in the establishment of a unifying, supra-national umbrella structure. Since the lowest common denominator between all these different Caucasian peoples, and thus between the respective armed offshoots was Islam, the result was the establishment of an Islamist structure, the Caucasus Emirate.

The proclamation of the Emirate essentially abolished the ChRI and established an Islamic state instead, in the form of the Caucasus Emirate. This entity would base its legitimacy exclusively on the Sharia, as “all governmental bodies of the Caucasus emirate as well as their activities” had to adjust to it.⁴⁷⁷ The establishment of the Caucasus Emirate was finalized on December 11, 2007, when Umarov issued a whole line of decrees, which served the purpose of converting the structures of the ChRI into new ones under the banner of the Emirate. The first point concerned the introduction of the Vilayat⁴⁷⁸ as new administrative form, whereas the second point declared that the Caucasus Emirate would be constituted by the Vilayat Dagestan, Vilayat Nohchiyo (Ichkeria), Vilayat Galgaycho (Ingushetia), Vilayat Iriston (North Ossetia), Vilayat Nogay Steppe, as well as the combined Vilayat of Kabarda, Balkaria and Karachay.⁴⁷⁹ In fact, the insurgents reclaimed almost the whole North Caucasus for them, even territory outside their republics. The Nogay steppe for example, belongs for the most part to the Stavropol Krai. Further, these territorial administration units had to be administered by shadow governors chosen by the Amir of the Emirate, in this case Umarov himself. The logical consequence of all of this was not only the abolition of the ChRI, but even of all its bodies, especially those residing abroad: The decree n.8 abolished the cabinet of ministers of the ChRI as well as the parliament.⁴⁸⁰

Consequently, the representatives of the ChRI abroad, who had been for the most part Maskhadov loyalists, were cut off from the new entity. Particularly Ahmad Zakaev, the premier minister of the ChRI, even though in exile, was thus relieved from his post, as were the other representatives of the ChRI, mostly former MPs, who now resided in various Western countries. Noteworthy examples were Ilyas Akhmadov, who had been some sort of foreign minister and representative in the US, Huseyn Iskhonov, former MP and political advisor of Maskhadov in Austria, or Umar Khambiev, the health minister, who at the time

⁴⁷⁷ Cit. *Omra of Amir Abu-Usman*: 'To establish an Islamic State – The Caucasus Emirate, Kavkaz Center, December 10, 2007, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2007/12/10/9162.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁷⁸ The term *Vilayat* (arab.) means a territorial administrative unit, like a province or a region. The early Caliphates as well as the Ottoman Empire were structured into *Vilayats*.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁰ See *Amir of the Caucasus Emirate abolishes the Cabinet of Ministers, the Parliament of the former C.R.I.*, Kavkaz Center, December 11, 2007, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2007/12/11/9167.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

resided in Italy. Umarov, however, went even further in the following weeks and months: Thus, the birth of the Caucasus Emirate was ideologically not acceptable to the political representatives of the ChRI in Europe. They all came from the more secular wing of the separatist movement originally formed around Djokhar Dudaev. They had for the most part been officials and MPs before the First Chechen War or in the brief inter-war phase and had been allies of Maskhadov. They rejected the emirate out of strong nationalist feelings, because they thought that the liberation of Chechnya should stay the paramount goal of the insurgency, and not the creation of an Islamic state. On top of that, they feared that the open orientation towards Islamism would estrange the West and abet the juxtaposing of the Chechen national liberation struggle with global Jihadism. The creation of the emirate was thus denounced as a plot of the FSB by Zakaev and his supporters⁴⁸¹. Furthermore, they probably resented also the deprivation of their political influence. The consequences took not long to manifest: In the second half of November 2007, Ahmad Zakaev proclaimed himself prime minister of the self-proclaimed exile government of the ChRI.⁴⁸²

The adopted method, however, gave Udugov and Kavkaz Center a sharp edge to attack Zakaev, because he had legitimized his appointment through phone consents by his allies in the parliament-in-exile.⁴⁸³ Supporters and theorists of the Emirate alike, like Alexander Tikhomirov (aka Said Buryatski) as well as the Finnish host of Kavkaz Center, Mikael Storsjo, also zeroed in on Zakaev because of his repudiation of the Emirate.⁴⁸⁴ Zakaev has thus not only been mocked by Kavkaz Center because of the election modus ever since, at the time he was also charged by the new organs of the Emirate with betrayal and collaboration with the enemy.⁴⁸⁵ The former political structure which represented the ChRI in Europe thus split off from the Caucasus Emirate. Umarov reacted with the creation of a sort of foreign ministry of the Caucasus Emirate, the General Vekalat (General Mission), and soon nominated Shamsuddin Batukaev, former head of Islamic courts in Chechnya in the inter-war phase, as its ambassador abroad.⁴⁸⁶

The Caucasus Emirate thus chopped off its links to Europe and from now on relied only on its links into the Islamic world, primarily towards Turkey and the Gulf region. Similarly, all media outlets connected with the secular wing of the insurgency were disowned, giving Kavkaz Center and Movladi Udugov virtually a media monopoly regarding the Caucasus

⁴⁸¹ See A. Zakaev: «The «Emirate-project» – it is a special operation by the FSB», Chechenpress, October 23, 2007, <http://thechechenpress.com/archive-2007-year/1022-а-закаев-«проект-«эмират»-это-спецоперация-фсб-рф»-23-10-2007r.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁸² See Akhmadov, Ilyas, and Lansky, Miriam. *The Chechen Struggle: Independence Won and Lost*. United Kingdom, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 243

⁴⁸³ As a result of “telephone voting”, Zakayev has declared himself a “prime minister” of Ichkeria, Kavkaz Center, November 25, 2007, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2007/11/25/9115.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁸⁴ See Storsjo, Mikael, 'Caucasus Emirate' – where is the beef?, Kavkaz Center, November 7, 2007, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2007/11/07/9050.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁸⁵ See Vekalat IK zayavil o razoblachenii Zakayeva, Kavkaz Center, December 21, 2008, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2008/12/21/62932.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁸⁶ See Amir Abu-Usman replaces the representative of the Caucasus Emirate abroad, Kavkaz Center, January, 14, 2014, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2008/01/14/9246.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

Emirate.⁴⁸⁷ This was outbalanced only partially with the gradual establishment of media outlets, one each for the principal Vilayets in the years between 2008 and 2009.⁴⁸⁸ Interestingly, the composition of the main consultative body of the Emirate, the former *GKO-State Defense Committee*, now officially nominated *Majlis al-Shura*, was determined by Umarov only in 2009. On May 12, 2009, Umarov decreed

*To form the consultative body Majlis al-Shura of the Caucasus Emirate, consisting of: Naib of Emir of the Caucasus Emirate, Military Emir of the Caucasus Emirate, Qadi of the Caucasus Emirate, Wali of Wilayah Ghalghaycho of the Caucasus Emirate, Wali of the Combined Wilayah of Kabarda, Balkaria and Karachay of the Caucasus Emirate, Wali of Wilayah Dagestan of the Caucasus Emirate, Emir of the Eastern Direction of Wilayah Nokhchicho of the Caucasus Emirate, Emir of the South-Western direction of Wilayah Nokhchicho of the Caucasus Emirate, Emir of Ansaris.*⁴⁸⁹

As Astemirov noted, the *Shura* had to be a consultative body only, and not a legislative one, as this was an innovation which came out of a compromise with democratic and secular belief, and as such contrary to Islamic law. In fact, the *GKO-State Defense committee- Majlis al-Shura* which was formed during the negotiations at the *Great Shura* in the summer of 2002, had been a compromise solution between Maskhadov and the Islamists.⁴⁹⁰ Now things had to be set right: The participants of the *Shura* from now on had no more veto right, they could only counsel the ruling Amir which in fact is the sole decision-making authority. This brought down the importance of the *Shura*, and in fact, there have not been big *Shuras* with all members present since the summer of 2006. Additionally, this innovation which curtailed the power of the high and mid-level field commanders would have serious implications in the near future, since not all, especially Chechens, were happy with the adoption of the new rules or even with the declaration of the Caucasus Emirate, preferring to fight under the banner of the ChRI.

In fact, a whole line of mid-level commanders, mainly from the South-Eastern Front, which had never been under the direct control of Umarov, refused to swear the *bayah*⁴⁹¹ to Umarov. Over time the most part of these gave in and submitted to Umarov. The most significant departure from the new line, however, was initiated by Arbi Yevmurzaev, who had been the Qadi of the ChRI until then. He rejected the idea of the Caucasus Emirate and advocated instead the continuation of a policy centered on Chechnya. It is unclear why he opposed the

⁴⁸⁷ Formal notice by press-service of Amir of CE and Wekalat of CE, Kavkaz Center, March 9, 2008, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2008/03/09/9393.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁸⁸ Respectively, the most important of these have been Hunafa.com for the Vilayet Ingushetia, VDagestan.com for Dagestan and Islam-Din.biz for Kabardino-Balkaria.

⁴⁸⁹ Cit. New decrees of Dokka Umarov on formation of a Council of the Caucasus Emirate and abolition of the Province of Iriston, Kavkaz Center, May 12, 2009, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2009/05/12/10690.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁹⁰ This question is covered in detail in National Service of Information CRI, To The Question on CRI Constitution, Kavkaz Center, March 14, 2007, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2007/03/14/7720.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁹¹ Bayah [arab.]: Oath of allegiance

Emirate so strenuously, as he had been one of the most trusted companions of Doku Umarov. Given the fact that he was a theological instructed man, it is difficult to imagine that his move came out of nationalist feelings, however, it is not impossible⁴⁹². In any case, from that moment on, Yevmurzaev vanished from insurgent media and nothing was heard of him for many months, when he resurfaced with a tiny group of fighters, acting autonomously in Chechnya's Western region between Samashki, his hometown, and the foothills around Bamut further south. He even established his own website, and was frequently cited on media outlets sponsored by the secular European Diaspora under Ahmad Zakaev until his death, which occurred in the February of 2010.⁴⁹³ Since there have never been clues about major attacks carried out by his group, it is to be assumed that he failed in the attempt to constitute a larger group with the goal of fighting again exclusively under the Chechen banner.

The delay with which matters regarding the *Shura* have been settled probably pointed out to the fact that negotiations about the representation of the non-Chechens in the framework of the *Shura*, a body until then dominated practically by Chechen field commanders, had been a lengthy issue perhaps not entirely free of contention. Additionally, it probably reflected communication difficulties between the various branches of the emirate which spun for more than 400 kilometers across the North Caucasus, as it is to be assumed that the entire process had to be carried out in written form, with these messages being relayed by couriers back and forth until a solution was found. Furthermore, a few appointments had not even been treated officially with appropriate decrees, but had been taken silently. The most sensitive one was the substitution of Arbi Yevmirzaev (aka Amir Mansur) as supreme Qadi of the ChRI with Anzor Astemirov as new Qadi of the Caucasus Emirate. Since the post of the supreme judge conferred the holder, which has to be a theological instructed one, a prerogative on interpretation of religious matters, it can be assumed that this post is the most important one after the figure of the Amir himself. Aside from that, this move ensured adequate representation of the non-Chechen wing of the insurgency in its decision-making bodies.

The proclamation of the Emirate, however, attracted also new levies to the insurgency. In late 2007, right after the announcement of Doku Umarov, Alexander Tikhomirov, a young Islamic preacher popular among young Russian Muslims because of his wide-spread online lectures, went to the Caucasus and joined the Islamist underground there. In the spring of 2008, he appeared in a video together with Umarov and his deputy Supyan Abdulaev, explaining that he had joined the insurgency in the Caucasus because after the proclamation of the Emirate no Muslim would have excuses for not joining Jihad against Russia, and exhorting Muslims from all over the Russian Federation to come to the Caucasus and fight the Russian government.⁴⁹⁴ The proclamation of the Emirate undoubtedly expanded the reach of the

⁴⁹² See Vatchagaev, Mairbek, Zakaev's Attempts to Persuade Dokka Umarov are in Vain, North Caucasus Analysis, Volume 9 Issue 24, June 19, 2008,

[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=5007&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=5007&no_cache=1), accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁹³ Yevmurzaev's website was named Djama1at.com,

<http://web.archive.org/web/20080921011913/http://www.djama1at.com/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁹⁴ Obrashcheniye Dokki Umarova i Saida Buryatskogo, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jcCDV4GbN0>, accessed on January 18, 2023

insurgency's appeal to all Russian Muslims. Now that the struggle against Russia was not anymore, or better, not exclusively, defined in nationalist terms, the Caucasus Emirate has actively begun reaching out to Russian Muslims urging them to join.⁴⁹⁵ Tikhomirov was only the first and most prominent of dozens of Russian Muslims from traditional Muslim nationalities and even ethnic Russian converts joining the Emirate in the following years. Furthermore, dissatisfied and increasingly radicalizing Muslims in Muslim republics outside the Northern Caucasus like Tatarstan and Bashkortostan would feel welcome in the arms of the Emirate in the near future.

3. The Ideology of the Caucasus Emirate

When Umarov proclaimed the Emirate, he addressed all those who from his point of view oppressed Muslims worldwide, citing expressively the wars being fought in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Palestine. He pointed out that Russia was still the main enemy, but he addressed as enemies "everyone who wages war against Islam and Muslims, and they are our enemies mainly because they are the enemies of Allah". Another statement recited

*Secondly, after expelling the kuffar⁴⁹⁶ we must reconquer all historical lands of Muslims, and these borders are beyond the boundaries of Caucasus.*⁴⁹⁷

Soon after that, Anzor Astemirov, who can be seen as some sort of chief ideologue of the Emirate, as well as one of its main proponents, expressed a very hard-line Salafist stance, however weighed down these words. He did not see the West as an enemy, nor did he embrace global Jihad. In the letter he wrote in 2007 to explain his intervention at the behest of the declaration of the Caucasus emirate, Astemirov explained that the proclamation of the Islamic state should not be seen as a disadvantage because of the relations with the West, which in any case had brought almost none support. However,

Even if we would threaten America and Europe every day, anyone who understands politics will be clear that we have no real conflicts of interest. The White House knows that we are not up to America. And if Western politicians would really be interested in the overthrow of Putin, for example, they would use all means available, including "anti-democratic" forces. The whole world is talking about the double standard, which is used by the United States and

⁴⁹⁵ E.g. Video: Amir Dokka Abu-Usman i Sheykh Said Buryatskiy obratilis' k musul'manam, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2008/06/19/58973.shtml>, Kavkaz Center, June 19, 2008, accessed on January 18, 2023 and Obrashcheniye Amira IK Dokku Abu Usmana k musul'manam Kavkaza i Rossii: «Srazhaytes' s vragami vezde, gde dostanet vasha ruka!», <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2011/03/03/79721.shtml>, Kavkaz Center, March 3, 2011, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁹⁶ Kufr [arab.], unbelievers

⁴⁹⁷ Cit. Umarov, Doku, The official version of Amir Dokka's statement of declaration of the Caucasian Emirate, Kavkaz Center, November 22, 2007, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2007/11/22/9107.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

several European countries. The U.S., for example, hardly hiding, is supporting the Mujahideen against China Eastern Turkestan.⁴⁹⁸

Although the rejection of Western values is total, as international law is titulated with the *law of Taghut* or even with that of the *Shaitan*, there is obviously no clear hostility towards the West as such.⁴⁹⁹ Similarly, in Astemirov's treatment, which encompasses all important aspects of the declaration of the Emirate, did not mention the establishment of the Caliphate and therefore the necessity to engage in global Jihad.⁵⁰⁰

In July 2005, the Russian journalist Andrei Babitsky managed to meet Basaev in the border region between Chechnya and Ingushetia and get an interview from him. It was one of the first occasions of Basaev going public since the infamous hostage-taking at Beslan, and therefore the interview focused for the most part on that. When both came to speak about the underlying reasons of the use of brutal violence, of course the topic of ideology popped up. Babitsky cornered Basaev asking what the primary goal of the struggle had hitherto been. Basaev responded that it was national liberation without hesitation, conceding that also religion played an important role, although a subordinate one:

(...)

ANDREI BABITSKY: *You call this a struggle for independence?*

SHAMIL BASAYEV: *And what would you call it?*

ANDREI BABITSKY: *Well, I think there's a religious motivation, as well.*

SHAMIL BASAYEV: *No. For me, it's first and foremost a struggle for freedom. If I'm not a free man, I can't live in my faith. I need to be a free man. Freedom is primary. That's how I see. Shari'a comes second. (...)*⁵⁰¹

In a video address from the year 2010, Supyan Abdullaev, Naib⁵⁰² of Doku Umarov explained that the struggle of the insurgent in the North Caucasus was one of freedom, even though one that stays on the path of Islam.

Thus, on November 21, 2007 Doku Umarov had announced on Kavkaz Center the proclamation of the Caucasus Emirate.⁵⁰³ This of course meant the abolition of all, though

⁴⁹⁸ Cit. Astemirov, Anzor, Amir Seyfulla o protsesse podgotovki k provozglasheniyu Kavkazskogo, Kavkaz Center, November 20, 2007, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2007/11/20/54479.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid. Taghut [arab.] means tyrant, whereas the shaitan [arab.] is equivalent with the the devil.

⁵⁰⁰ See Astemirov, Anzor, Amir Seyfulla o protsesse podgotovki k provozglasheniyu Kavkazskogo Emirata, Kavkaz Center, November 20, 2007, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2007/11/20/54479.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁰¹ See Babitsky, Andrei, Reign of Terror: An Interview with Shamil Basayev, ABC News July 28, 2005, cached on Films On Demand, <http://digital.films.com/play/TBGUM8>, accessed on January 18, 2023. For the full transcript of the interview, see Shamil Basayev: "My only purpose is validity", <http://www.kolumbus.fi/suomi-tshetshenia-seura/shamilb.htm>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁰² Naib [arab.]: deputy

mostly virtual structures and institutions of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI). The intent was to restructure the North Caucasian insurgency into one united front that was capable to embrace all ethnicities that were present in Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria, geographical entities that had been already represented in the old Caucasian Front, the extra-Chechen wing of the ChRI. The islamization of the insurgency had clearly ideological roots that will be laid out in the following, however it had also practical and pragmatistical reasons. These lay on the fact that the rising Islamist Jamaats outside of Chechnya formally combined into the Caucasus Front of the ChRI had a much more radical Islamist footprint. They also came to reclaim their part of the glory after having fought for years under the Chechen banner – thus they insisted in the abolition of the ChRI and for the inception of a new entity that would equally represent all North Caucasian peoples: the Caucasus Emirate.

Interestingly, as we will see further below, Doku Umarov seems to have only reluctantly acquiesced to the demands of the Dagestanis, Balkars and Kabards – under threat of the Emirate being declared by them without the Chechens. At the time, the Chechen part of the North Caucasian insurgency was heavily under pressure inside Chechnya, which further strengthened the case for the unification of the insurgency. Thus, the proclamation of the Caucasus Emirate for sure has also been seen as an opportunity, maybe the last in a strategically hopeless situation, at least from an insurgent Chechen perspective. Eventual backfiring with regard to the West and how the proclamation of an Islamic state would be seen from there was accepted from the military leadership of the ChRI without much ado, since there had been anyway no help coming through from there. The only hope now lay in the mobilization of the ethnically diverse North Caucasian peoples under the banner of Islam, as it had already happened under Imam Shamil in the 19th century.

Unsurprisingly, the Dagestani Jamaat Shariat and the combined Kabardian and Balkar Jamaat Yarmuk under Anzor Astemirov, the ideological architect behind the proclamation of the Caucasus Emirate were the first to rejoice, publishing congratulative communiqués on Kavkaz Center.⁵⁰⁴ Also the Ingush Jamaat followed suit, as did messages from many mid- and high-level Chechen military commanders.⁵⁰⁵ Equally unsurprisingly, however, the biggest concerns over this move came from Chechnya. Although the majority of the military field commanders were on Umarov's side and saw it as a necessary step to get the military initiative again, not all accepted it and split off from the insurgency, moving out from Chechnya into exile or founding their own splinter groups, hoping to capitalize on the traditionally strong Chechen national pride. The most prominent case of dissidence within this

⁵⁰³ See Ofitsial'nyy reliz zayavleniya Amira Dokki Umarova o provozglashenii Kavkazskogo Emirata, Kavkaz Center, November 21, 2007, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2007/11/21/54480.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁰⁴ See Vilayet Dagestan. «Sprosite u modzhakhedov...», Kavkaz Center, November 28, 2007, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2007/11/25/54561.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁰⁵ See Zayavleniye komandovaniya Ingushskogo Sektora Kavkazskogo Fronta, Kavkaz Center December 2, 2007, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2007/12/02/54726.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

frangent was the split-off of Arbi Yovmirzayev⁵⁰⁶, a former companion of Umarov and member of ChRI's State Defense Committee and qadi of the ChRI since 2006.⁵⁰⁷

Already before its inception, Chechen members of the insurgency split over the question whether to act outside of Chechnya, on behalf of the other Muslim populations of the North Caucasus. Amir Mansur, a shariah judge inside the insurgency's south-Western front and one of Umarov's most trusted friends and commanders in the first years of the Second Chechen War, chose to split away with his tiny Jamaat, already in the autumn of 2006, as it became more and more clear, since the Nalchik attack of October 2005, that a major merging between the meanwhile established different souls of the Muslim insurgency in the North Caucasus would occur. Mansur had hoped to recreate an authentic Chechen rebel movement by attracting especially young recruits. Mansur however failed in his endeavor, getting killed stepping on a landmine in the woods around Samashki, his hometown, between 2008 and 2009. The CE's proclamation emboldened also the secular wing of the Chechen opposition, albeit by then it was largely defunct on the ground. Neither Ahmed Zakaev's furious attacks against Umarov, from his London-based exile did have an effect upon Umarov's decision. The Chechen insurgency was no more – the Caucasus Emirate had taken its place. Interestingly, recalling the *bayah* videos published by Kavkaz Center over the weeks following the proclamation of the CE, the ones coming from Chechen rebel groups and Jamaats didn't suggest the same joy and spirit as the ones coming from the other wilayets – of course that's a not really measurable interpretation by the author's side.

The biggest disappointment obviously came from the secular wing of the insurgency. The military component of the secular wing had practically ceased to exist after the death of Maskhadov. Most had died in combat in the years before, having been, as moderates, often the primary target of HVT-efforts by Russian security services and special forces, in the deliberate effort to destroy everything that could have given legitimization to the insurgency. Other secular commanders had defected to Kadyrov in the wake of Maskhadov's and particularly Basaev's death, or because put under utmost pressure by Kadyrov's tactic of kidnapping their relatives.⁵⁰⁸ The insurgency had therefore long been Islamized in essence, if in many cases only superficially. The secular wing however had retained its influence outside of Chechnya, in Chechen exile communities, particularly in Western Europe. From there it was still able to collect funds and direct recruits towards the war theatre as long as Maskhadov was alive. The proclamation of the Caucasus Emirate came therefore as a shock to them.

In particular, the then Foreign Affairs Minister of the dissolved exile government of the ChRI, Ahmad Zakaev, expressed the opinion that these actions were orchestrated behind the scenes

⁵⁰⁶ See Remembering Mansur, Caucasus Report, Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, March 17, 2011, https://www.rferl.org/a/caucasus_report_remembering_mansur/2341725.html, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁸ See Uzzell, Lawrence. Khambiev Surrender Seen As Heavy Blow To Maskhadov, North Caucasus Weekly, Volume 5 Issue 11, Jamestown Foundation, March 17, 2004, accessed on January 18, 2023

by Russian intelligence services and provocateurs on their payroll. According to Zakaev, the proclamation of the Caucasus Emirate translated the “legitimate struggle of the Chechen people for their freedom and independence into the category of international terrorism, which has nothing in common with the interests of the Chechen people and Islamic values”.⁵⁰⁹ In an official statement on behalf of the Foreign Ministry of the CRI, Zakaev characterized Umarov’s proclamation of the North Caucasus Emirate and the declaration of war on behalf of the Caucasus Muslims as “a major provocation to undermine the legal basis of Chechen statehood”, carried out under the influence of “Kremlin influence agents speculating on religious rhetoric”.⁵¹⁰ Akhmed Zakayev later reported that in connection with Umarov’s self-elimination “from the performance of the duties of the president” among the current members of the “CRI parliament” elected in 1997, a “telephone vote” was held, as a result of which Zakayev was elected Prime Minister of the ChRI. The circumstances of Zakayev’s “election” was of course ridiculed on Kavkaz Center and other Islamist news outlets. The proclamation of the Caucasus Emirate definitively confined every political aspiration of the Chechen seculars outside of Chechnya and the insurgency into the Diaspora of Western Europe.⁵¹¹

The question of how the Chechen state should look like had been raised more than once since the time of Dzokhar Dudayev. In the ranks of the insurgency were supporters of the secular system of power based on democracy as well as Islamist supporters which saw Sharia as only source of law. The 2002 Great Shura, which was discussed above, was an effort to resolve the conflicts among the resistance actors. It resulted however only in a formal unification of the insurgents of Chechnya and the North Caucasus. The question about the future of Chechnya and the North Caucasus had not been convincingly answered back then. For the sake of unity and fighting efficiency, however, a compromise was reached for the duration of the war, whereas supporters of democracy and sharia came to an agreement on the recognition of the authority of the president of ChRI, Aslan Maskhadov, and on certain Islamic amendments to the republic’s constitution, putting it more into the direction of Sharia.

According to Anzor Astemirov, after the unification of the North Caucasian insurgents in 2005 and the opening of the Caucasus Front, the issue of the future power system was raised again. The most vocal in the call to proclaim an Islamic entity came from the mujahideen of the combined Kabardino-Balkaria Jamaat Yarmuk. During a *shura* in the summer of 2005 in Kabardino-Balkaria, which preceded the attack on Nalchik in the following October, the commanders of the Ingush and Kabardino-Balkaria sectors of the Caucasus Front, among them Musa Mukozhev and Ilias Gorchkanov, demanded from Shamil Basaev that an Islamic state should be raised. Basaev explained that the potential turmoil between seculars and proponents of the Islamic solution was over, since the former had practically ceased to exist in the frame of the insurgency after the death of Maskhadov. Thus, the time was ripe for the

⁵⁰⁹Cit. Zakayev declared himself “prime minister of Ichkeria” as a result of “telephone voting”, Kavkaz Center, November 24, 2007, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2007/11/24/zakaev>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵¹⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹¹ Ibid.

adoption of the sharia and the proclamation of the Islamic Emirate. Astemirov suggested implicitly that this was a precondition for the Kabardino-Balkaria Jamaat to throw in their lot together with the Chechens under the authority of Abdul-Halim Sadulaev. After the failed attack on Nalchik and the neutralization of Sadulaev and Basaev in the spring-summer of 2006, the planned proclamation of the Islamic emirate was put on hold.⁵¹² With the temporary stabilization of the situation under the new leadership of Doku Umarov, the Caucasian factions came back demanding what had been promised them by Basaev and Sadulaev. Umarov released an interesting explanation of the road towards the Caucasus emirate in a lengthy account published on *Kavkaz Center* in 2010.

According to him, Aslan Maskhadov, dealing with a difficult political and military situation from the onset of the Russian invasion in the fall of 1999, tried to reconcile with the proponents of the Islamic system and at the same time rein them in, a fact which culminated in the compromise of the great *shura* of 2002. and He still hoped that the West would indeed follow its declarations and stop the most brutal Russian actions in Chechnya, maybe helping in the brokering of a peace process. Umarov then goes on stating that Maskhadov was a true Muslim, which is why he chose Abdul-Halim as his successor. This is most likely an apocryphal interpretation of things. Sadulaev was an Islamist preacher, although he was no Salafi and he had indeed been chosen by Maskhadov as his successor. This however had happened on the occasion of the great *shura* of 2002, where the nomination of Sadulaev as Vice-President of the ChRI had been part of the compromise between the seculars and the Islamists. This does not mean that Maskhadov did not appreciate Sadulaev, since he was one of the few figures able to mediate between the two wings and one who understood the importance of unity over contrasting opinions for the sake of military efficiency. In any case, Umarov then claims that Sadulaev elevated Umarov himself as his successor, since Umarov back then, though still being a secular, was able also to work together with Islamists. Additionally, he had a privileged connection to Zakaev and the Western diaspora communities, which could be of big value in the case the European powers decided to finally act on behalf of the Chechen people.⁵¹³

With the death of Maskhadov in March of 2005, Basaev took Umarov, who at the time commanded the rebel South-Western front and had little dealings with the Caucasian allies of the Chechen insurgency, into the loop and explained the difficult situation they faced with them as well as the need to proclaim the emirate to not lose them on route. Sadulaev was more cautious, arguing that the insurgency needed respite and to replenish its ranks before waging a step that could likely cause a split in the armed ranks of the Chechen rebels. With Sadulaev's death in Argun in June of 2006, and the subsequent death of Basaev

⁵¹² Cit. Amir Seyfulla o protsesse podgotovki k provozglasheniyu Kavkazskogo Emirata, *Kavkaz Center*, November 20, 2007, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2007/11/20/54479.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵¹³ Europe as a whole never truly considered to seriously – albeit diplomatically – step in and saw the Chechen question as an internal Russian affair, see Russell, John. *Chechnya - Russia's 'War on Terror'*. United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2007, p. 156f.

in Ingushetia in July of the same year, Umarov was suddenly catapulted on top of the ChRI, inheriting a difficult situation. Especially the demise of a legendary figure like Basaev caused another wave of defections. So it came that at the time of the proclamation of the emirate, according to Umarov “there were not a few dozen Mujahideen on the southwestern front”.⁵¹⁴ He then goes further and tells the story as if he had proclaimed the Caucasus Emirate immediately after the foretold events. Instead, almost one and a half years passed by before that.⁵¹⁵

This no doubt deliberate inaccuracy is then joined by a contradiction: If before Umarov told us that he willingly and freely chose to proclaim the Emirate out of personal convictions, he then adds that he became a veiled threat from Astemirov who stated that if the Emirate wouldn't be soon proclaimed, the Caucasians would proceed on their own, calling them to give their *bayah* to Astemirov instead of Umarov. Astemirov stated that “At the first opportunity, I wrote a letter to Amir Abu Usman (Dokku Umarov), in which he urged him to renounce democracy and the law of *tagut*, to raise only the Islamic banner without the admixture of shirk”.⁵¹⁶ This is a rather big discrepancy, which has been confirmed also by Astemirov's recap of the story of the road towards the Caucasus Emirate.⁵¹⁷ The pressure put up by Astemirov and by the Dagestani Jamaat under the command of Sayfullah brought Umarov to proclaim the Caucasus emirate with all following consequences of this step. In fact, there are many hints that this was done reluctantly – at least initially – to preserve unity and grasp the last chance of catching a mobilizing element that would once again give a boost to an already declining insurgency.⁵¹⁸ Finally the Islamist ideology had taken over the secular and democratic forces in the Chechens struggle against Russian aggression. Ironically, it came not from Chechen Islamists that had been the cause for so much trouble in the inter-war years, nor from Arab Salafi preachers, but from relatively obscure Non-Chechen Caucasians that had the military strength to make bow down the proud Chechens to their will. This was a new generation of anti-Russian fighters. They had been teenagers in the last soviet period and had a much more religious-ideological approach towards the North Caucasian question.

Putting aside the secular heritage some Chechen rebel commanders still bore in 2010, the ones harboring an Islamist worldview had been ideologized in their majority in Khattab's Qoqaz Maaskar in Serzeh-Yurt in Chechnya's inter-war years. The arguments of that institution had been of course radical Islamism in its *Ikhwani* interpretation, as well as Jihadism in theory and

⁵¹⁴ Cit. interview H.I.

⁵¹⁵ See Kavkaz Center presents a new statement from the Amīr of the Caucasus Emirate Dokku Umarov: Shamil asked me: ‘When you become Emir, are you going to proclaim the Emirate?’, Kavkaz Center, August 30, 2011, <http://kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2011/08/30/84755.shtm>, accessed on January 18, 2023. 8

⁵¹⁶ Cit. Tlisova, Fatima, Exclusive Interview with Anzor Astemirov, North Caucasus Weekly, Volume 10 Issue 11, Jamestown Foundation, March 20, 2009, <https://jamestown.org/program/exclusive-interview-with-anzor-astemirov-march-2009/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵¹⁷ Ibid.

⁵¹⁸ See Kavkaz Center presents a new statement from the Amīr of the Caucasus Emirate Dokku Umarov: “Shamil asked me: ‘When you become Emir, are you going to proclaim the Emirate?’”, Kavkaz Center, August 30, 2011, <http://kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2011/08/30/84755.shtm>, accessed on January 18, 2023.

practice. But Jihadism, as we now know better, is a multi-faceted brand of radical Islamism, which harbored various points of view since its modern inception. Khattab's interpretation of Jihadism was one that focused on local issues, on the immediate defense of Muslims from infidel aggression and oppression. It was the sort of Jihad that stemmed from the teachings of Abdullah Azzam, the inventor of modern Jihad. Azzam's brand of Jihadism had to be at the service of local Muslims and had to be focused on this only issue. Azzam did not advocate revolutionary or avantgardist ideals, there was no "near enemy" for him. Muslims had to be protected exclusively from outside, "infidel" aggression.⁵¹⁹

An interview conducted by Kavkaz Center with Anzor Astemirov in 2008 sheds more light on the classic interpretation of Jihad as employed by Chechen and Caucasian rebels for a long time. The opinion of Astemirov has to be considered not one among many about this issue, but the mainstream one, since he was the architect and chief ideologue of the Caucasus Emirate. Astemirov begins his account noting that "today our [Muslim] brothers fight in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Palestine. All who attacked the Muslims, wherever they are, are our enemies, common. Our enemy is not only Rusnya, but all those who are at war against Islam and Muslims. And they are our enemies, primarily because they are the enemies of Allah."⁵²⁰ Astemirov here clearly develops the Salafi concept of *al-Walaa w'al-baraa*⁵²¹, in the explanation of the general ideology of the Caucasus emirate. On the other hand, Astemirov goes on recalling the figure of Sultan Sosnaliev, a well-known Circassian nationalist figure which can hardly be translated into a textbook Salafi: "This winter, we lost a very valuable comrade-in-arms and long-term supporter - General Sultan Sosnaliev, known in the Caucasus underground under the name of Abu Murat. Sultan - comes from the Circassian aristocratic family. Officially, he was a high-ranking Russian army officer. After his resignation, he played an important role in the organization of the Abkhazian army, and later he was appointed Minister of Defense in the government of Abkhazia. Very few people knew about his friendship with the leaders of the Mujahideen, for example, with Shamil Basayev and others. I was much younger than the Sultan, but we were close as relatives and friends. The Sultan for a long time was our brother by faith, our great adviser and strategist. He dreamed of dying on the battlefield. But by the predestination of Allah Sultan died of a

⁵¹⁹ See Hegghammer, Thomas. *The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad*. United States, Cambridge University Press, 2020, p. 288f.

⁵²⁰ Cit. Ofitsial'nyy reliz zayavleniya Amira Dokki Umarova o provozglashenii Kavkazskogo Emirata, Kavkaz Center, November 21, 2007, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2007/11/21/54480.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵²¹ See Kavkaz Center presents a new statement from the Amīr of the Caucasus Emirate Dokku Umarov: "Shamil asked me: 'When you become Emir, are you going to proclaim the Emirate?'" , Kavkaz Center, August 30, 2011, <http://kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2011/08/30/84755.shtm>, accessed on January 18, 2023. Reposted By Azelin, Aaron. Kavkaz Center presents a new statement from the Amīr of the Caucasus Emirate Dokku Umarov: Shamil asked me: 'When you become Emir, are you going to proclaim the Emirate?', Jihadology, September 4, 2011, <http://jihadology.net/2011/09/04/kavkaz-center-presents-a-new-statement-from-the-amir-of-the-caucasus-emirate-dokku-umarov-shamil-asked-me-when-you-become-emir-are-you-going-to-proclaim-the-emirate/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

serious illness. This is an irreplaceable loss for the Caucasus Emirate.”⁵²² Sosnaliev had been a Russian Army officer which enjoyed a legendary status among Caucasian nationalists. The fact that he came to inspire the formation of the Caucasus emirate might seem curious, but entirely consistent for a liberation movement that transformed itself into a jihadi outfit through the embracement of the Islamic faith as the common bond between the ethnically different North Caucasian peoples, the framing of the Russian “occupiers” as a Christian and thus infidel force and the mobilization potential of Islamic faith.

Finally, Astemirov explained the permissibility to fight a jihad under a non-Islamic – secular – banner. Answering a question of Muhannad, the Arab commander of the foreign fighters fighting in Chechnya at the time, Astemirov replied that “indeed, until now, the jihad in Chechnya was under the banner of democracy and the national liberation war. Despite this, scientists around the world recognized this war as a jihad, whose goal was to protect the Chechen people from genocide. In this issue there is an indisputable moment: indeed, during a defensive jihad you can fight under national banners and even as part of a band of robbers.”⁵²³ Nevertheless, from the moment that there was no need any more to preserve secular institutions or symbols, Astemirov stated the Islamic avowal had to be adopted fully. With the demise of Maskhadov and the seculars, there were no more obstacles for the inception of the Caucasus Emirate. The unbelieving Western state anyway had not done anything, nor was the help of unbelievers welcome anymore. Astemirov thus marks a strictly theological point in his push for the proclamation of the Caucasus Emirate and not so much a strategical one, joining the global jihadi movement for example. This did not mean however, that there was no solidarity among the diverse facets of the Jihadi movement.

It is true, however, that the Caucasus Emirate in its isolation and dependency upon external actors for funding and communication, moved ideologically further and further towards Global Jihadism. Movladi Udugov, brother of the less-well known Jihadist ideologue Isa Umarov, who has been controlling Kavkaz Center and other online official media outlets of the Caucasus Emirate, influenced the political agenda of the North Caucasian insurgency internally and affected the communication of the CE externally through the addition of propaganda which tended to an “ummatist” and global Jihadist discourse. That meant that in the years of the Iraq war, observers of Kavkaz Center could see decrees of Doku Umarov and eulogies of fallen commanders of al-Qaeda in Iraq side on side, making it difficult to discern what was posted on behalf of the Caucasus Emirate and what on behalf of Movladi Udugov. Through his media work, Udugov tried to promote a global Jihadist worldview among the ranks of the Caucasus emirate, as well as portray the organization as one part of the Global Jihadist phalanx, in one line with the Taliban and al Qaeda. Over time, his work bore some fruits, as the solidarization with global jihadism was felt by the top level of the Caucasus Emirate increasingly as the only possible way of getting external support or solidarity. Thus,

⁵²² Cit. Tlisova, Fatima. Exclusive Interview with Anzor Astemirov, North Caucasus Weekly, Volume 10 Issue 11, Jamestown Foundation, March 20, 2009, <https://jamestown.org/program/exclusive-interview-with-anzor-astemirov-march-2009/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵²³ Ibid.

declarations about Russia and the west being the “true terrorists” and the condolences to the Ummah for the death of Bin Laden in 2010 are to be seen in this light. Whether at this point a true relationship was in the plans of Doku Umarov is not known, in any case it did not materialize, nor did the Caucasus Emirate embrace global Jihadism operationally. As we will be shown, the ideological shift in the direction of global Jihadism proved to be the beginning of the end of the Caucasus emirate and the North Caucasian insurgency.

There have been diverging opinions among Western observers of the North Caucasus conflict about the involvement of the Caucasus emirate with the wider global Jihadist movement. The Russian perspective on the Chechen Wars and the North Caucasus conflict have not been included here because it is mostly biased, and not seldom mixed with anti-Caucasian resentments and even racial prejudices. Among Western scholars, Gordon Hahn and Paul Murphy have been arguing on the affiliation of the Caucasus Emirate to the wider global al-Qaeda network, without giving even only one valid piece of evidence for this conclusion. Hahn particularly stated in the conclusion of a lengthy paper from 2011 that while many Western scholars had been pronouncing themselves about the violence in the North Caucasus, only a handful were able to correctly identify and address what in his opinion were the true drivers of violence in the region: the Islamist-minded insurgents who by then were united into the Caucasus Emirate. While largely excusing Russia’s “heavy-handedness, repression, and brutality”⁵²⁴, the Caucasus Emirate has been depicted by Hahn as a radical, even “takfirist” Islamist group being responsible for the majority of human rights infringements in the region. This “one-sided perception of the causes of the North Caucasus violence as well as the misconceptions of both the Caucasus Emirate’s theo-ideological orientation”⁵²⁵ had produced severe misconceptions in the West as well as important policy consequences – for example the initial inclusion of solely Doku Umarov in the US state department list of specially designated terrorist individuals in 2011. Finally, this had a negative impact on the relations with Russia, who was acting “highly cooperative with the United States in its war with the Taliban and AQ”⁵²⁶ in Afghanistan. Here Hahn, whose field of academic activity centers on Eastern European studies – indeed he has never been known to be a scholar focusing on Islamism and Jihad before – has been entirely stepping out of academic discussion. Russia has never had an acceptable attitude towards human rights in the North Caucasus and precisely its “heavy-handedness, repression, and brutality”, exercised also outside of Chechnya and in situations where these activities were entirely counter-productive had been the primary drivers of the spread of the Caucasus Emirate onto the whole North Caucasus.

⁵²⁴ Cit. Hahn, Gordon M.. Getting the Caucasus Emirate Right, CSIS – Center for Strategic & International Studies, August 2011, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/110930_Hahn_GettingCaucasusEmirateRt_Web.pdf, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵²⁵ Cit. *ibid.*

⁵²⁶ See Hahn, Gordon M.. Getting the Caucasus Emirate Right, CSIS – Center for Strategic & International Studies, August 2011, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/110930_Hahn_GettingCaucasusEmirateRt_Web.pdf, accessed on January 18, 2023

Whereas Hahn tries to put forward valid academic arguments, other Western pro-Russian biased observers have been analyzing the situation sometimes in such a clumsy way that the suspect of being in the payroll of some intelligence agency could have some element of validity.⁵²⁷ Other Western scholars have been more lenient towards the anti-Russian insurgency as a whole. Brian Glyn Williams for example has been classifying the Chechen and North Caucasian insurgency as an anticolonial struggle directed against Russia detached from the global jihadist movement.⁵²⁸ Also a former US Special Forces Officer and praised author of a book about the Caucasian struggle against Russia over the last centuries like Robert Schaefer has been interpreting the spread of Islamism in the North Caucasus as a form of resource mobilization, as he also noted the careful targeting of enemy combatants and civilians, as well as the virtual absence of attacks against Western targets.⁵²⁹ Whereas there have been instances of Jihadist organizations that tried to hide their connections to global Jihadist networks, this doesn't seem to be the case of the Caucasus Emirate. Not just the knowledge that joining the global Jihad with its chimaeras of near and far enemies would drain away recruits from the North Caucasus – as it finally did with the outbreak of the Syrian Jihad – but it also had no serious theological consistence. It was to be, however, one that came true only many years later. There was no known organic connection between the North Caucasian insurgency – at the time still fighting under the banner of the ChRI – in 2006, as it wasn't in 2010, as the rebellion against Umarov was directed against a global, and even regional issue. Instead, the commanders on the ground had decide that it was time to go local again, to stand a chance to stem back Russian and loyalist gains in a war that had been going on since more than 15 years- and this despite their Islamist orientation. This sounds like a contradiction, which in reality it is not.

On the question about his attitude towards al-Qaeda, Shamil Basaev answered in 2006 that “my attitude is a normal one, with an element of caution, as one has with any unknown quantity. Because all my life I have only seen two 'members' of Al Qaeda. And not only were Khattab and Abu Walid not members of Al Qaeda, but they did not even know Bin Laden. They had only seen him a few times in Afghanistan, and then from a distance, in the company of people like them, who were ordinary Mujahideen during wartime. But now in Chechnya, a situation has developed where, as soon as any more or less well-known mujahid is killed, he immediately 'becomes' the organizer of all the worst subversive operations and must have been a member of Al Qaeda.” Basaev was also not averse to talks or negotiations by principle, as he underlined in diverse occasions.⁵³⁰ In fact, the hostage-takings at the Nord-Ost Theatre

⁵²⁷ E.g. Bodansky, Yossef. *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror*. United States, HarperCollins, 2009 and Murphy, Paul J.. *The Wolves of Islam: Russia and the Faces of Chechen Terror*. United States, Brassey's, 2004

⁵²⁸ See Williams, Brian Glyn. *Inferno in Chechnya: The Russian-Chechen Wars, the Al Qaeda Myth, and the Boston Marathon Bombings*. Lebanon, University Press of New England, 2015.

⁵²⁹ See Schaefer, Robert W.. *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad*. United Kingdom, Praeger, 2010.

⁵³⁰ See Shamil Basaev interviewed by Swedish TT news agency, Radical Party, <http://www.radicalparty.org/en/content/shamil-basaev-interviewed-swedish-tt-news-agency>, accessed on January 18, 2023

in 2002 and the infamous one in Beslan in 2004 had the precise goal of forcing the Russian government on the negotiating table. In an interview to the Swedish Radical Party in 2005, Basaev stated that “I have always been trying not to restrain myself from hostilities. But the victims of Nord Ost and Beslan are fully on Putin's conscience. All we were doing was holding people, demanding an end to the war and the genocide in Chechnya, and it was the *Russists* who killed their own people. It was not we who poisoned them with binary gas (banned from use by international law) at Nord Ost, nor was it us who set fire to them with flame throwers (also banned from use by international law) in Beslan. [...] Russia started this war, and all the 'keys' to peace are in the Kremlin. [...] The war, Insha'Allah, will end soon in Moscow, with the recognition of the full and unconditional independence of the CRI in exchange for Russia's security. And we will do anything to achieve this. Allah is greatest!”⁵³¹ On Babitsky's question if he would call the Beslan massacre part of the struggle for independence, or if there was rather also a religious motivation, as well, Basaev answered: “No. For me, it's first and foremost a struggle for freedom. If I'm not a free man, I can't live in my faith. I need to be a free man. Freedom is primary. That's how I see it. Shari'a comes second.”⁵³²

The Chechen Islamist discourse at the time (between 2001 and 2005) displayed some important characteristics that distanced it from conventional jihadist narratives. First, the Chechens' own violence was seemingly devoid of any exhibitionism, as was not the case in the contemporary Iraq of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi or currently in the Islamic State. On the contrary, the violence was occasionally presented as a lesser evil, as the inevitable consequence of Russian military aggression. This exceptionality could have been due to multiple factors, one of which being that, at that moment, the legitimate authority of the Chechen separatist movement was still wielded by the secular nationalist Aslan Maskhadov.⁵³³ To make it simple, however, there has always been a divide over the nature of the Chechen struggle against the Russian invader. Should it be a Chechen, nationalist one, albeit with strong religious connotations as elements of mobilizations and framing of the just struggle against an unjust invader? Or should it be a more inclusive approach, going back to Imam Shamil's *modus operandi* who tried to include all Muslim north Caucasian peoples against Russian invasion – one approach that could prove more successful, since it would mobilize vastly superior rebel numbers, inflaming the whole region? Although the new structure of the insurgency, albeit not any more focused exclusively on the Chechen needs, with the junior partners in the neighboring republics fully emancipated by now, the truth was that the Chechen rebel movement by then was that much weakened, that a merger with the Dagestanis, the Balkar, the Kabardins and the Karachay (the Ingush had been participating

⁵³¹ Cit. *ibid.*

⁵³² The transcript of Babitsky's interview with Shamil Basaev can be found online at <http://web.archive.org/web/20060131105425/http://mkazmin.com/pages/ntl50728.doc>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵³³ Cit. Sanz, Adrian Tarin. When we are the violent: The Chechen Islamist guerrillas' discourse on their own armed actions, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Volume 8 Issue 2, July 2017, p. 185-195, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1879366517300106>, accessed on January 18, 2023

from the onset with their Chechen “brother”) and the subsequent spread seemed the only thing capable of putting the insurgency back into track.⁵³⁴

It is of the utmost interest that mostly commanders from Islamist extraction like Aslambek Vadalov and Hussein Gakayev had been at the forefront of the effort to take down Umarov as emir of the Caucasus emirate with the goal of a new “Chechenization” of the Caucasus Emirate. That means that they wanted the insurgency to go back to local, instead of going global. That the commander of the Ansar, Muhannad, had also been a member of the party, or even its main instigator, is truly astonishing. Muhannad at the time was the leader of the cell inside the Caucasus emirate composed of foreign fighters, even if the high times of Khattab’s legion had long been passed away.⁵³⁵ In 2010, the Ansar fighting in the North Caucasus numbered perhaps a few dozen, they were mostly Turkish volunteers, with some elements hailing from North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. In any case, this was still the element connecting the North Caucasian insurgency to the global Jihad spearheaded by al-Qaeda in the opinion of many observers. Of course, this was the effect of many years of Russian propaganda, depicting the Chechen and then the whole North Caucasian insurgency as an integral part of the wider global Jihadist movement. To be sure, there had been some point of contact, since many veteran foreign fighters of the Chechen campaigns had been ending up in Iraq, and to a much lesser extent in Afghanistan. Seen in this perspective, the pladoyer made by Colin Powell before the UN, where he proposed supposed links between the Jihadist cells in Iraq led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and foreign fighter elements fighting in the North Caucasus based in the Pankisi Valley sounded also like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Things started to change when new and radical preachers and scholars joined the Caucasus Emirate due to its proclamation. This time they did not come from Middle Eastern countries, but rather from other places in Russia or Central Asia. The best known of these converts flocking to the north Caucasian forests had been Alexander Tikhomirov, better known under his kunya Said Buryatsky.⁵³⁶

4. New Levies, Escalation and Decline

Alexander Tikhomirov had been born in 1982 in Buryat in eastern Siberia. He was bored for his mother, Russian for his father, but from his early years he was brought up by his stepfather, a Chechen. At an early age he converted to Islam changing his real name. He soon began to study Islamic literature going also to Egypt and Kuwait to refine his religious knowledge. Since 2002, he had begun to write and videotape lectures on religious topics,

⁵³⁴ See Tilsova, Fatima, Exclusive Interview with Anzor Astemirov, North Caucasus Weekly, Volume 10 Issue 11, Jamestown Foundation, March 20, 2009, <https://jamestown.org/program/exclusive-interview-with-anzor-astemirov-march-2009/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵³⁵ See Vatchagaev, Mairbek. “Palace Coup” Reveals Split between Umarov and Rebel Commander Aslambek Vadalov. Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 7 Issue: 152, august 6, 2010, www.jamestown.org/program/palace-coup-reveals-split-between-umarov-and-rebel-commander-aslambek-vadalov-2/, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵³⁶ See Vatchagaev, Mairbek. Killing of Said Buryatsky Unlikely to Deter North Caucasus Insurgency. Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 7 Issue: 48, March 11, 2010, jamestown.org/program/killing-of-said-buryatsky-unlikely-to-deter-north-caucasus-insurgency-2/, accessed on January 18, 2023

which he spread via the internet on YouTube, finding a broad appeal among Islamic youth. It is said that in early 2008, Said Buryatsky, who had been secretly sympathizing for a long time with the Islamic insurgency in the North Caucasus, got a video message from Muhannad and decided to join the North Caucasian armed underground. A few months later, he secretly arrived in Chechnya, where he met with Dokka Umarov and swore him the bayah, proclaiming soon after in one of his first appeals on behalf of the Caucasus Emirate that "After the proclamation of the Caucasus Emirate, all doubts fell away. We have one amir and one state. And it is the direct duty of every Muslim to enter the Jihad today and help Jihad with word and goods".⁵³⁷

Alexander Tikhomirov (aka Said Buryatsky or Said Abu Saad) exposed similar views as Astemirov did. When he came to the Caucasus and moved underground, he continued his online *dawaa* as he had done openly for many years as a preacher in his home region of Buryatia. This activity had already earned him big popularity among Muslims in the Russian Federation, especially among younger ones. The accession of Tikhomirov to the armed underground caused an ambiguous reaction among Russian-speaking Muslims. In the words of the publicist and opinionist Geidar Jemal, "Tikhomirov the symbol of a new generation in the epic of the Caucasian struggle" stressing that "we have seen preachers belonging to different ethnic groups. We saw Avars, Laks, Karachais, Circassians and Arabs. But all these worthy people were either representatives of the Caucasian area, or, at least, belonged to one or another traditionally Muslim people. In this case, for the first time on behalf of the Caucasus Emirate, the Caucasus is an ideologue, as an authoritative representative of a person of Eurasian origin, in whose veins Russian and Buryat blood flows."⁵³⁸ Others depicted Tikhomirov as some sort of Islamic Che Guevara who had come from the depths of Siberia to help his fellow Muslim brothers in the North Caucasus. This romantic view of an internationalist holy warrior clashed with his virulently Salafist views that carried violent anti-Shiite characteristics. Already before his adhesion to the Caucasus emirate Tikhomirov was engaged in the translation and propagation religious documentary films denouncing Shia followers as heretics. Tikhomirov's ideology was therefore symptomatic for the increasing radicalization process the Caucasian rebels were undergoing at the time. In the following months and years, Said Buryatsky took personally part in militant sabotage operations and raids. While in the forest, he continued to record video reports, audio lectures and articles on jihad and the situation in the North Caucasus, which were published at the Kavkaz Center and other propaganda sites.⁵³⁹

As in many countries of Western Europe, since the late 1990s the number of ethnic Russian converts to Islam has been on the rise. So far, the estimates of radical converts to Islam run in

⁵³⁷ See Aron, Leon. The Coming of Russian Jihad Part I, War On The Rocks Blog, September 23, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/09/the-coming-of-the-russian-jihad-part-i/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵³⁸ See Górecki, Wojciech. "Creeping" Civil War in the North Caucasus. OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, 15 Mar. 2011, www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2011-03-15/creeping-civil-war-north-caucasus, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵³⁹ Ibid.

the upper thousands, and converts more eager to prove themselves have been supplying militants at a larger rate than into-faith-born-Muslims.⁵⁴⁰ ⁵⁴¹With the onset of the Caucasus Emirate and the influx of new recruits, mostly Russian converts who could easily disguise themselves in the Russian heartland, Doku Umarov lifted the ban on terrorist attacks on civilians outside the North Caucasus.⁵⁴² These had been banned by Aslan Maskhadov following the catastrophic result of the failed hostage-taking in Beslan. The reconstituted *Riyad-us Saliheen Battalion*, the insurgents' special unit deputed with the execution of terrorist attacks on Russian civilians resumed the planning and execution of terrorist attacks on civilian targets in Russia to increase the pressure on the Russian government and eventually force it to concessions or at the least to show its incompetence still to handle the North Caucasian question nearly ten years after the beginning of the Second Chechen War. The decision to resume terrorist attacks was taken by Doku Umarov against the opinion of a sizeable number of his own field commanders in Chechnya. The more radical Jamaats in Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria seem to have largely supported Umarov's decision. Umarov's decision to again employ terrorist tactics was the cause that in 2010 would set in motion a serious split among the Chechen division of the Caucasus Emirate, that was going to further weaken an already condemned insurgent movement.⁵⁴³

The new course made itself felt gradually with terrorist attacks against security forces in the North Caucasus without much regard on collateral civilian losses, and also suicide bombers reappeared on the scene. Bigger-scale attacks however followed only from 2009-2020 on, since underground terrorist cells inside Russian metropolises had to be re-established and terrorists had to be recruited and trained accordingly to execute more complex attacks on civilian targets like airports, metro stations and the first terrorist attack under the coat of arms of the Caucasus Emirate had already occurred in August 2007. Explosives had been laid on railway tracks, causing the derailment of the "Nevsky Express", a high-speed train travelling between Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Fortunately, the attack did not result in fatalities, leaving behind a few dozen wounded. Interestingly, it was in this occasion that an alleged Russian convert to radical Islam first made its appearance on the side of North Caucasian insurgents. Pavel Kosolapov, one of the alleged masterminds behind the attack, is an ethnic Russian who converted to Islam at the end of the 1990s and allegedly got trained by Khattab

⁵⁴⁰ See Yasmann, Victor. Russia: Slavic Converts To Radical Islam Pose New Threat, Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, August 26, 2006, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1070836.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023 and Vatchagaev, Mairbek, Growing Number of Russian Converts to Islam Joining Insurgents at Home and Abroad Publication: Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume 12 Issue 226, Jamestown Foundation, December 17, 2015, <https://jamestown.org/program/growing-number-of-russian-converts-to-islam-joining-insurgents-at-home-and-abroad-2/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁴¹ See Sokolov, Denis. Putin's Savage War against Russia's New Muslims, Newsweek, August 20, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/putin-savage-war-against-russia-new-muslims-490783>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁴² See Aron, Leon. The Coming of Russian Jihad Part I, War On The Rocks Blog, September 23, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/09/the-coming-of-the-russian-jihad-part-i/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁴³ See Analysts debate the nature of the split within Caucasus Emirate, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 7 Issue: 172 September 24, 2010, <https://jamestown.org/program/analysts-debate-the-nature-of-the-split-within-caucasus-emirate-2/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

in the infamous training camp at Serzhen-Yurt before the outbreak of the Second Chechen War.⁵⁴⁴

In November 2008 followed an attack on a minibus in North Ossetia's capital city Vladikavkaz. A female suicide bomber killed 12 people and was claimed by the shadowy *Kataib al Khoul* Jamaat, which probably was a front organization of the Ingush Jamaat. The attack was probably intended as a composed of ethnic Ingush from the Prigorodny Rayon. The same year marked a high time for the small but capable Ingush Jamaat of the Caucasus Emirate. Aside from many guerilla-style attacks and ambushes against Russian and Ingush security forces, Ingush militants escalated the level of attack towards local power structures. In June 2009, Ingush president Yunus-Bek Yevkurov was targeted by a suicide bombing, which he was able to narrowly escape. Soon after, in August 2009, the Ingush Jamaat targeted the Police Headquarters in Nazran with a suicide attack that killed 25 and wounded more than 150 people. With the Ingush and Dagestani Jamaats going on a rampage in 2009 and a steady increase of activity by the KBK Jamaat, at the end of 2009 the Chechen part of the insurgency was already in steady decline. The spy network established by Ramzan Kadyrov's loyalists in every Chechen hamlet bordering the hilly and woody southern foothills, the stronghold of the insurgency, was bearing fruits. Not being able to confront the Kadyrov regime militarily in Chechnya and being pushed to the wall by Kadyrov's successful counterinsurgency tactics, thus came the decision from Doku Umarov to bring soon death and destruction to Russian cities.⁵⁴⁵ Russian security forces would strike first, however.

The year 2010 became a year of escalating terrorism activity on the side of the insurgents, but also their "annus horribilis". On March 4, 2010, reports of Russian law enforcement agencies appeared that in the course of the counter-terrorist operation in the Nazran district of Ingushetia, Alexander Tikhomirov was killed near the village of Ekazhevo in Ingushetia. The death of Tikhomirov was certainly a significant blow to the insurgents, since he had been one of the main ideologues and propagandists of the Caucasus Emirate. His conversion to Islam and his non-Caucasian heritage made him an appealing figure to the increasing numbers of radicalized non-Caucasian converts to Islam in other parts of Russia. The targeting of Tikhomirov and other following leaders of the Caucasus Emirate was possible because the covert infiltration of insurgent structures by Russian security agencies was finally bearing fruits after a lengthy incubation period.⁵⁴⁶

Soon after, Russian security services managed to locate and tail Ansor Astemirov on March 24, 2010 in the center of Nalchik. Astemirov, as many leaders of the Islamist Jamaats in the North Caucasus had been living in the urban underground. From there, it was easier to keep

⁵⁴⁴ See Dzutsati, Valery. Deadly Crash of Nevsky Express Revives Fears of Past Bombing Campaigns, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 6 Issue: 221, December 2, 2009, <https://jamestown.org/program/deadly-crash-of-nevsky-express-revives-fears-of-past-bombing-campaigns/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁶ See Vatchagaev, Mairbek. Killing of Said Buryatsky Unlikely to Deter North Caucasus Insurgency, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 7 Issue: 48, March 11, 2010, <https://jamestown.org/program/killing-of-said-buryatsky-unlikely-to-deter-north-caucasus-insurgency-2/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

reaching out to sectors of civil society to win them over for the Islamist cause as from the forest bases of the military units of the Jamaats. When Russian agents tailed Astemirov, he opened fire on them getting killed in the ensuing gun battle. This was a big loss for the Caucasus Emirate. Astemirov had not only been one of the few true Islamic scholars of the Emirate, but he was also maybe the only true charismatic leader that had the potential to appeal to many segments of North Caucasian societies. His noble heritage as a descendant of Circassian princes and his intellectual appeal, rather than his military capacities were important assets. Astemirov at the time incorporated the political - even more than a religious one - expression of the Caucasus Emirate. Indeed, he could have been some sort of new Imam Shamil for the Caucasian Muslims, and it is not unlikely that he felt to be a new shamil to some degree. In any case, the elimination of Astemirov was a big success for the Russian security services, the second in a row, after the liquidation of Tikhomirov in Ingushetia just three weeks before.⁵⁴⁷

Retribution from the Caucasus Emirate followed suit. On March 29, 2010, two female suicide bombers detonated their deadly devices in two of Moscow's most crowded metro stations. At least 40 people were killed and over 100 wounded. Russian officials called the incident "the most lethal and sophisticated terrorist attack in the Russian capital for six years". The preliminary investigations showed that the bombings were committed by Chechen separatists who were members of the Caucasus Emirate. On March 31, 2010, Doku Umarov confirmed the suspicion when he assumed responsibility for having ordered the attack in a video on the Internet. He also added that such attacks would continue in Russia. Indeed, similar, yet smaller-scale attacks followed in the months ahead in southern Russia in the cities of Stavropol and Kizlyar. The Moscow metro bombing triggered an international outcry and subsequent condemnation of the Caucasus Emirate. Arguing with the fact that terrorist acts like the Nord-Ost and Beslan hostage-takings had been counter-productive to the Chechen cause, the new attacks would later on in 2010 trigger an internal revolt of influent Chechen field commanders against Doku Umarov division which in the end resulted in a profound split among the Chechen component of the insurgency.

In the meantime, the FSB answered the call to challenge and stroke again, announcing on June 9 to have finally captured Ahmed Yevloyev, the elusive *amir* Magas, the leader of the Ingush Jamaat and former military *amir* of the Caucasus Front. Yevloyev had been one of the most important and influent military leaders of the insurgency since the start of the Second Chechen War. As a former policeman, he left Ingushetia in the course of the First Chechen War and became an acolyte of Shamil Basayev, in whose instruction he contributed to build up, train and aggregate the Ingush Jamaat with the Chechen forces. Yevloyev's most auspicious moment came perhaps in 2004, when he contributed to plan and execute the infamous raid on Nazran, which resulted in a strong defeat and embarrassment of local and federal security agencies. Soon after, Yevloyev facilitated the hostage-taking in Beslan,

⁵⁴⁷ See Vatchagaev, Mairbek. Death of Anzor Astemirov Does not Mark the End of the Insurgency in Kabardino-Balkaria, Eurasia Daily Monitor, September 14, 2010, <https://jamestown.org/program/death-of-anzor-astemirov-does-not-mark-the-end-of-the-insurgency-in-kabardino-balkaria/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

masterminded by Shamil Basayev with a militant cell that comprised mainly ethnic Ingush militants. The capture of Yevloyev in Malgobek, close to the Russian base of Mozdok, was possible through a mole.⁵⁴⁸ The fact that the Ingush Jamaat possessed only one central level and no intermediate command levels because of its small size, effectively dismembered the militant's organization in Ingushetia.⁵⁴⁹ The capture of Yevloyev was a blow from which the Ingush Jamaat would never fully recover. After the loss of its most prominent religious propagandist at the time with Alexander Tikhomirov, of its finest political leader with Astemirov and finally with one of its prominent military leaders, the Caucasus Emirate came to suffer astonishing blows in the first half of 2010.

In early 2010, a video was posted, where Dokka Umarov surprisingly announced to step down from his position, appointing Aslambek Vadalov, then commander of the rebel Eastern Front, as the new Amir instead. Soon after, however, Umarov retracted his resignation, claiming it had been "fabricated".⁵⁵⁰ In any case, he indicted his three direct subordinates – naibs, that is deputy emirs – Tarkhan Gaziyeu, once an Umarov loyalist, Aslambek Vadalov and Hussein Gakayev. The latter came originally – in contrast to Umarov's more secular provenience – from Islamist circles in the inter-war years. Vadalov had been a minor associate of Khattab and Basayev initially, rising in the rebel ranks after the first years of the Second Chechen War, retaining a growing influence over traditionally more Islamist-oriented mid-level cadres operating on the Eastern Front, spreading from Nozhai-Yurt to Khattuni from East to West and to Vedeni in the south-east. Hussein Gakayev was a relatively young Jamaat *amir*, who had risen the ranks of Jundullah Jamaat on the side of Supyan Abdullayev, one of the founders of the IRP on the eve of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and one of the first Jamaat exponents, as well as a close ally of Shamil Basayev. Gakayev had always been an influential rebel commander on the Eastern Front, enjoying support and respect especially among younger-generation fighters.⁵⁵¹

The conflict between Umarov and his immediate subordinates escalated in the following weeks, with Vadalov resisting Umarov's command to retract his claim to the command of the Caucasus emirate. In the end, it came down to a sharia court headed by a supposedly impartial shariah judge – in that case it was the Dagestani CE's shariah judge Sayfullah Gudensky that ruled in favor of Umarov, on the grounds that under all cost the Amir's rule has to be followed, so to avoid at any cost *fitna* and division in the ranks of the mujahedeen. At this

⁵⁴⁸ See Komandovaniye ingushskikh modzhakhedov soobshchilo o razoblachenii i likvidatsii predatelya, sdavshego amira Magasa, Kavkaz Center, July 7, 2010, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2010/07/07/73638/komandovanie-ingushskikh-modzhakhedov-soobshchilo-o-razoblachenii-i-likvidatsii-predatelya-sdavshego-amira-magasa.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁴⁹ See Tekst obrashcheniya Amira IK Dokku Abu Usmana i Amira Sup'yana k modzhakhedam G1alg1ayche (Video), Kavkaz Center, July 20, 2010, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2010/07/20/73940.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁵⁰ See Hahn, Gordon M.. The Caucasus Emirate Mujahedin: Global Jihadism in Russia's North Caucasus and Beyond. United States, McFarland, Incorporated, Publishers, 2014, p. 137f.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid.

point it is highly interesting to note the reasons for the attempted deposition of Umarov by the deputy triumvirate and the subsequent, but also failed coup against Umarov led by Vadalov and Muhannad, the Saudi *amir* of the foreign fighters' *Jamaat*. It had indeed only partly generated out of common desire for power by the conspirators. A part of the Chechen division of the Caucasus Emirate had never truly digested the assimilation of the rebel-led Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, with all its mostly ideological downsides, into the Dagestani and KBK-desired and –controlled Caucasus emirate. At least, the ChRI was *Chechen*, whatever its formal and ideological flaws. Also, Umarov had been acted on the inception of the CE only after the urging and one would say, also the subtile menacing – of Sayfullah. A large part of the Chechen rank-and-file guerillas, as well as a part of their commanders, had felt uneasy about it. And indeed, the triumvirate's coup had not been the only defection since the proclamation of the Caucasus Emirate.⁵⁵²

When a real change of dynamics failed to materialize in Chechnya after some years of fighting in the new vestiges given by the Caucasus emirate, broad disillusion took place among the remaining rebel cadres. The Chechen rebel ranks had been bled white, the support coming from the population had been vaning more and more, as well as the influx of rebel recruits, in the face of growing repression in quantity and quality by the loyalist Kadyrov regime that not only seemed, but actually did grow stronger every day. That brought a significant portion of mid-level commanders of the Chechen division of the Caucasus Emirate to rebel against their *amir*, a thing until then unheard of. To further their agenda, they tried to have Umarov step down voluntarily by leaking a video intended to be broadcasted in the event that Umarov really would have been ill and not able anymore to lead the Caucasus emirate. Umarov, however, frustrated the ruse of the rebel commanders by immediately refusing to step down and denouncing the attempted coup through a long communiqué via Kavkaz Center. Various high-level commanders and all leading cadres of the Caucasus emirate outside of Chechnya rallied on Umarov's side, as also eminent radical Islamic scholars throughout the Ummah, as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, or Abu Basir al-Tartusi spoke out in favor of Umarov to strengthen his position as Amir and to avoid *fitna*. In the end, mediation between the two parts took place which officially re-instated Umarov and reined in the rebels back into the ranks. The last glimpses of the *fitna* however did not extinguish before the death of Muhannad, the commander of the “Ansar”, who allegedly had instigated the split in the Chechen rebel ranks.⁵⁵³

In any case did the dissident insurgent faction in Chechnya not waste time after the split with Umarov and the Caucasus emirate and mustered a show of force through spectacular attacks against the Kadyrov establishment. This was also a demonstration of force against Doku Umarov and a dismissal of Umarov's hitherto management against Russia and its local

⁵⁵² See Vatchagaev, Mairbek. Factional Divisions within the Chechen Separatist Movement, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 7 Issue: 190, October 21, 2010, <https://jamestown.org/program/factional-divisions-within-the-chechen-separatist-movement-2/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁵³ Amir IK Dokku Abu Usman nazval glavnogo vinovnika fitny sredi modzhakhedov, Kavkaz Center, September 27, 2010, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2010/09/27/75492.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

loyalists. On August 29, a large insurgent force of dozens of fighters attacked the village of Tsentoroi, the home village and residency of Ramzan Kadyrov in Eastern Chechnya, managing to break the external defense line of the compound, destroying checkpoints and setting on fire several homes of Kadyrov loyalists. After that, the attackers left leaving behind dozens of dead and wounded from both sides.⁵⁵⁴ The objective of the attack had been not so much Kadyrov personally, but his reputation. Attacking his home, the militants smeared Kadyrov's reputation and showed that they were able to strike wherever and whenever they wished. A little more than one month later, the dissident Chechen insurgent stroke against the Chechen Parliament. In the morning of 19 October 2010, a small suicide attack team attacked the parliament complex in Grozny.⁵⁵⁵ The attackers did not manage to target influential personalities of the Kadyrov entourage, the attack however shook the security structures and gave a firm signal of steadfastness to the public opinion. Both attacks carried a strong message to Chechen people, that not all Chechen insurgent field commanders had dismissed the idea of a "Chechen", rather than a "North Caucasian" liberation war, and were willing to act accordingly, taking into account also the ensuing *fitna*. In any case, also the *fitna* had to be overcome at some point, because the general situation of the insurgents in Chechnya was that much compromised that there was no other possibility other than to stick together.

5. Successful Russian COIN Efforts

The operational decline of the Caucasus Emirate went parallel to the ideological shift from nationalism towards pure Jihadism. This ideological shift denaturalized the true intention of the struggle, whose effect became soon visible in Chechnya. Surprisingly high level of violence and temporary success across the North Caucasus since the inception of the Caucasus Emirate seemed to justify the grand scheme of this project. However, only a minority even of the North Caucasian Salafist community embraced the Caucasus emirate as an ideal to fight and die for. The majority of North Caucasian Muslims continued to adhere to more moderate forms of Islam, which though not sympathetic to Russia saw in the rising Wahabism the larger of two evils or did not choose sides at all. This way, the project of the unification of the North Caucasus was doomed from the beginning and its failure resembled Imam Shamil's experience in the second half of the 19th century. The Kremlin also used the same old tactics: *divide et impera* was the solution. After careful selection of local elites or power bases hostile to radical Islam, these were rewarded with power and money in exchange of doubtless loyalty to Moscow and the relentless repression of the Islamist insurgency in their fiefdoms. The large powers given to loyal local satraps, however, cannot deceive from the fact that the guidance of the fight against the Caucasus Emirate has always been led and supervised by the Kremlin.

⁵⁵⁴ Napavshiye na Tsentoroy boyeviki imeli zakhvachennoye v Nazrani oruzhiye, Vzglyad, August 30, 2010, <https://vz.ru/news/2010/8/30/428793.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁵⁵ Death Toll In Grozny Parliament Attack May Have Been Far Higher, Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, October 29, 2010, accessed on January 18, 2023
http://www.rferl.org/a/Death_Toll_In_Grozny_Parliament_Attack_May_Have_Been_Far_Higher/2204693.html, accessed on January 18, 2023

The Russian security services have always put great emphasis into decapitation strikes in the context of their counterterrorism and counterinsurgency policies. Dating back into the Afghan War, the most striking example up to date were the targeted killings of Chechen presidents Dudayev in 1996 and Maskhadov in 2005. Maskhadov's death was a huge political blow to the Chechen insurgency milestone in the Second Chechen War because with him the last legitimated and moderate figure disappeared on the rebel landscape, leaving behind only real radicals and terrorists. It sealed its actual end, even if that is commonly set at the outset of the Caucasus Emirate in 2007 and the proclamation of the end of the Counterterrorism Operation in the North Caucasus by the Russian government in 2009. After Maskhadov's death, the insurgency suffered further tremendous blows. The death of Abdul-Hakim Sadulayev as successor of Maskhadov and the one of Shamil Basayev in rapid succession in the spring of 2006 crippled the insurgency militarily. After these targeted killings, the fight against Chechen and, with the spread of the conflict over the region, increasingly North Caucasian rebels as a whole, took more the shape of a general manhunt, with large-scale operations dwindling, as well as the targeting of high value targets.

In the mountains of Ingushetia, close to Verkhniy Alkun and bordering Chechnya, Russian Special Services attacked a fighter camp on March 28, 2011.⁵⁵⁶ Though in the immediate aftermath it seemed possible that North Caucasus Rebel leader Doku Umarov⁵⁵⁷, the leader of the North Caucasus Rebellion, was the target of the Russian military aviation's bombing raid, it initially appeared possible that he might have been among the dead. However, this assumption was later proven to be incorrect. Supyan Abdullaev, his deputy and closest ally in the ongoing split of the Chechen insurgent movement, perished in the bombing instead of Umarov. For the rebels in the North Caucasus region as a whole, but especially for the Chechen faction of the insurgency, the loss of this skilled field commander represented a serious setback. Paradoxically, it would have been better for the rebel movement if it had lost his commander rather than his deputy, as Emir Doku Umarov is directly to blame for the division that occurred in the rebel ranks due to factors unique to the rebel movement, which is further aggravated by his odd resignation policy.⁵⁵⁸ For the rebels in the North Caucasus region as a whole, but especially for the Chechen faction of the insurgency, the loss of this skilled field commander was a serious setback. Contrarily, it would have been better for the rebel movement if it had lost his commander rather than his deputy, as Emir Doku Umarov was directly to blame for the division that occurred within the ranks of the rebels due to reasons that are inherent to the rebel movement, which had been further aggravated by his odd resignation policy.⁵⁵⁹ Although Supyan Abdullaev was likely

⁵⁵⁶ Murphy, Paul, *FSB Briefs President Medvedev on Yesterday's Spetz-Operation*, March 29, 2011, *RETWA*, <http://www.retwa.com/home.cfm?articleId=11092>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁵⁷ Doku Umarov, aka Dokka Abu Usman, born 1964, veteran fighter in both Chechen wars, longtime commander of the Southwestern Front, 5th Chechen President from June 2006, Amir of the self-styled Caucasus Emirate since autumn 2007. Responsible for the recent Moscow subway bombings.

⁵⁵⁸ Murphy, Paul, *President Yevkurov Says Umarov's Body Not Found*, March 31, 2011, *RETWA*, <http://www.retwa.com/home.cfm?articleId=11106>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁵⁹ See Analysts debate the nature of the split within Caucasus Emirate, *September 30, 2010*, North Caucasus Analysis Volume11 Issue 6,

also responsible for the development of events leading to the current situation, his credibility and reputation in this case may have been useful in bridging the factions and helping to alleviate the *fitnah* condition that had already developed.⁵⁶⁰

Reflecting the rising pressure Russian security services were able to mount up, barely three weeks later another top cadre of the Caucasus Emirate, Israpil Velijanov, aka Amir Hasan, *amir* of the CE's Dagestan wilayat, was liquidated by special forces of the FSB on April 18, 2011 in the village of Tashkapur in Dagestan.⁵⁶¹ Velijanov had been appointed to the position after the death of Magomed Vagabov, aka Sayfullah, who had strongly sided with Dokka Umarov in the *fitna* against his immediate subordinates, on August 30, 2010. He had joined the Chechen insurgency alongside *amir* Khattab at the end of the 1990s and was like many other cadres of the Caucasus Emirate a pupil at Khattab's training camp at Serzhen-Yurt. Afterwards, he was most probably a member of Rappani Kahlilov's Jamaat, before re-entering Dagestan at the orders of Khalilov and then-president of the ChRI Abdul-Halim Sadulayev. There, Velijanov built clandestine cells in southern Dagestan around the city of Derbent, where he originated from, and remaining in the shadows until 2008, when his jamaat was able to put up a spectacular attack on the police headquarters of the city. Since then, he was regarded as one of the most experienced Dagestani military commanders. Other than his predecessor Vagabov, who had tried to style himself not so much as military commander, but rather as religious figure, aspiring to become the CE's overall *amir*, Velijanov remained a strictly military figure. This was mirrored also in the increase of insurgent attacks against security forces in Dagestan, which reached an all-time high in the first quarter of 2011 under his command. The upsurge of attacks led of course to higher fatalities on both sides – however, on the rebel side, it hit mostly experienced cadres, with the Russian HVT efforts becoming increasingly efficient and lethal. Alone in the last quarter of 2010, almost half of the rebel mid-level cadres in Dagestan had been killed.⁵⁶² And so also the death of Velijanov had been only a matter of time.⁵⁶³

http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36975, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁶⁰ See Vatchagaev, Mairbek, Death of Umarov's Successor is a Major Setback to Rebel Movement, *April 7, 2011*, North Caucasus Analysis Volume 12 Issue 7,

http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=37758, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁶¹ See Daghestan Insurgency Commander Reported Killed, Caucasus Report, Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, April 18, 2011, http://www.rferl.org/a/daghestan_rebel_leader_reported_killed/9497889.html, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁶² Ibid.

⁵⁶³ DAGESTAN. Amir Abdul Madzhid naznachen Komanduyushchim Dagestanskogo Fronta, Kavkaz Center, October 1, 2007, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2007/10/01/53405.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023, OFITSIAL'NO. Amir Imarata Kavkaz Dokka Abu-Usman naznachil komanduyushchim Dagestanskim Frontom i valiym vilayyata Dagestan Umara Sheykhulayeva (amir Muaz), Kavkaz Center, December 5, 2008, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2008/12/05/62628.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023, Glava dagestanskogo bandpodpol'ya Omar Sheykhulayev unichtozhen v Leninkente, RIA.ru, February 5, 2009, <https://ria.ru/incidents/20090205/161038370.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023, VILAYYAT DAGESTAN.

Soon after, on May 9, 2011, the Caucasus Emirate's Dagestan Front's new commander was chosen. Ibragimkhalil Daudov, also known as Amir Salih, was chosen by Dokku Umarov, the Amir of the Caucasus Emirate, to lead the Dagestani branch of the Caucasian insurgency.⁵⁶⁴ This action served as further evidence that Umarov still had operational and decision-making authority within the rebel movement at the time. But it was interesting to name Daudov as the Dagestan Front's Amir. Daudov joined the insurgency in 2007, according to rebel sources, even though he is said to have assisted it earlier as an accomplice by gathering weapons and carrying out other tasks.⁵⁶⁵ The previous Amirs of the Dagestan Front were actual Caucasian Jihad veterans, but Daudov cannot make the same claim. In Chechnya, in training camps established by Ibn-al-Khattab and Shamil Basayev during the interwar years (1996–1999), the founders of the first armed Jamaats in Dagestan received their training. The first armed Islamic underground organization in Dagestan, Jamaat Dzhennet in 2001, and Jamaat Shariat in 2002 after it was dismantled, were both founded by Rasul Makasharipov.⁵⁶⁶ After receiving guerilla training in Chechnya, he began his "career" as an interpreter and scout for the Islamic militias Khattab and Basayev as they invaded Dagestan in 1999.

When Makasharipov passed away in July 2005, Rabbani Khalilov took over as leader of the Caucasus Front, which was formed by then-Chechen Rebel President Abdul-Halim Sadulayev. When Sadulayev passed away in September 2007, Amir Abdul Majid (real name Ilgas Malachiyev) succeeded him until his own death in October 2008. Both men were skilled combatants at the time, having fought in Chechnya from 1999 until 2005, primarily in the south-eastern region of the nation. Both men had received training in rebel camps in the region..⁵⁶⁷ Omar Sheikhulayev (also known as Amir Muaz, who passed away in February 2009), Umalat Magomedov (also known as Amir Al Bara, who passed away in December 2009), Magomed Vagabov (also known as Amir Sayfullah of Gubden, who is suspected of ordering the 2010 Moscow Subway attack, died in August 2010), Israpil Velijanov (also known as Amir Hassan, died in March 2011), and then.⁵⁶⁸ Daudov would also last only about one year before being killed in February 2012. His successor, Rustam Asilderov (aka Muhammad Abu Usman), would be more smart and elusive, outliving even the Caucasus Emirate itself – a thing not surprising, with Asilderov being its gravedigger.

Komanduyushchim Dagestanskim Frontom naznachen amir Al'-Bara, Kavkaz Center, April 12, 2009, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2009/04/12/65029.shtm> accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁶⁴ See Emir of CE Dagestan Front and Governor of Province Dagestan appointed, May 10, 2011, Kavkaz Center, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2011/05/10/14278.shtml>, last accessed May 25, 2011

⁵⁶⁵ See Governor of Dagestan Emir Salih renews oath of allegiance to Emir Dokku Abu Usman and appoints deputy, May 13, 2011, *Kavkaz Center*, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2011/05/13/14297.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

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⁵⁶⁷ See Moore, Cervyn, The roots and transformation of the Dagestani insurgency, September 29, 2010, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Volume 7 Issue 175, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36961&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=484&no_cache=1, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid.

The fact that by 2008-2009 the Dagestani branch of the Caucasus emirate had become its most powerful and numerous subdivisions showed on the other hand that the fulcrum of the anti-Russian resistance in the North Caucasus in Chechnya was in stark decline. The death of Basaev and the relentless counterinsurgency campaign waged by Ramzan Kadyrov had provoked numerous defections and strong losses, and also the declaration of the Caucasus Emirate in 2007 had not been able to mobilize Chechens to a now wider cause.⁵⁶⁹ When on the contrary, the Caucasus Emirate was now able to expand its reach and temporarily mobilize hundreds and perhaps thousands of mujahids throughout the North Caucasus, this tended to be a divisive element in Chechnya. At a time when attacks against federal and local security forces considerably increased in the whole North Caucasus, with notable local and temporary spikes like in Ingushetia in 2008-2009, in Kabardino-Balkaria in 2010 and in Dagestan from 2009 to 2011, the situation remained in Chechnya did further decline. Temporary and – in hindsight – elusive success outside Chechnya could not distract from the fact that in Chechnya proper the project of the Caucasus Emirate had been a substantial failure. This delusional mobilization effort would indeed be one of the main causes of the split inside the Chechen leadership in 2010.⁵⁷⁰

Since 2010, internal divisions had been a major problem for the Chechen subdivision of the Caucasus Emirate. The split and successive PR-war between the factions had been producing a bad image for the remaining insurgents – who would put his life on the brink just to join a bunch of squabblers? The two parties had to come to terms and they managed to it through the mediation of an external sharia court which helped the mediation succeed. The compromise saw Doku Umarov retaining his place as Emir of the Caucasus Emirate, while Hussein Gakayev became emir of the Chechen vilayet. However, precious time and resources had been lost, and the lack of new recruits and also weapons and ammunition impacted severely on the ability to get back on the offensive. For the Chechen part of the insurgency, the fight had become a fight to survive the hardships of nature and the periodical sweepings of Kadyrov forces rather than a true threat to the stability of the Kadyrov regime in Chechnya. Thus, the downward spiral of the Chechen part insurgency was particularly marked between 2010 and 2013, with a constant decrease of attacks on one side and an equally constant drain of important cadres on the side of the insurgency.⁵⁷¹

Increased counterinsurgency efforts by Ramzan Kadyrov's forces, namely the sanitary cordon laid by the *Kadyrovitsy* along the Southern foothills where Chechen insurgents had been largely confined since the mid-2000s became quite effective over time. Insurgent forces

⁵⁶⁹ Interview H.I.

⁵⁷⁰ See Vatchagaev, Mairbek, Emir Muhannad: The Last of Chechnya's Arab Volunteers, The Jamestown Foundation, April 29, 2011, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁷¹ See See Infografika. Statistika zhertv na Severnom Kavkaze za 2011 god po dannym "Kavkazskogo uzla", Caucasian Knot, December 23, 2013, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/235594>, accessed on January 18, 2023, Infografika. Statistika zhertv na Severnom Kavkaze za 2012 god, Caucasian Knot, May 20, 2013, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/225256/>, accessed on January 18, 2023, 2018, Infografika. Statistika zhertv na Severnom Kavkaze za 2013 god po dannym "Kavkazskogo uzla, Caucasian Knot, January 27, 2014, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/237292/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

suggest that starting in 2004, it became increasingly dangerous to approach the settlements outside the forested and mountainous belt to get supplies – groceries, but also weapon and ammunition – from sympathizers who were not actively involved in the insurgency. Since 2004, also rural Chechen settlements had been included in the national mobile phone network, which meant that informers and snitches could inform federal and local security forces in real time about the presence of insurgents.⁵⁷² The shutting down, and later on the infiltration of these network with the aim of poisoning the food supplies for the fighters in the forests and mountains that were difficult to drive out from their strongholds became a trademark of Kadyrov's counterinsurgency efforts. Increasingly debilitated, the Chechen insurgents reacted with a propaganda offensive. The videos showing the first big gathering of Chechen insurgent commanders after the rapprochement during the 2012 shura were meant as a show of force, when in reality only a few dozen active and part-time fighters remained available in Chechnya. Soon, also these numbers would shrink even more. Ramzan Kadyrov said in an overstated representation in 2012, that only 40 to 50 militants remained active in Chechnya at the time.⁵⁷³ The deadliest blow to the remaining insurgent structure in Chechnya was dealt in January 2013, when the Gakayev brothers were cornered with their group along a mountain ridge in the Vedenno region.⁵⁷⁴ The Gakayevs refused to surrender and were killed on the spot by elite Kadyrovsky forces. With the demise of the Gakayevs, only a handful of experienced commanders remained active in the mountains of southern Chechnya. For the time being, only scattered attacks continued on loyalist forces which were largely confined to the woodlands in the Chechen foothills of the Caucasian range.⁵⁷⁵

Over time, the radical Islam had been spreading even outside the North Caucasian borders. In a policy designed to incense certain segments of Russia's large Muslim population, Umarov had occasionally stepping away from a North-Caucasian point of view, to an all-Russian, but clearly Muslim point of view. Thus, the radical Islamist discourse aimed at a liberation from the Russian yoke gained traction also in the most radical Salafist communities of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. After a long period of incubation, in July 2012, an unprecedented act astonished Kazan, the capital city of Tatarstan. Tatarstan's deputy mufti and a much-respected religious figure, Valiulla Yakupov was shot and killed by masked shooters outside his home. At the same time, a blast rocked the car Ildus Faizov, the republic's chief mufti, was driving. He managed to leave his burning car heavily wounded. Yakupov and Faizov had been initiating a campaign against "wahabism" and Salafist tendencies in the republic, which had been making themselves felt since the mid-2000s. Some radicalized Tatars had also fought together with Chechen insurgents in the course of the Chechen Wars. The immigration of radicalized North Caucasians, the feeling of repression against Islam derived from the large-

⁵⁷² Interview H.I.

⁵⁷³ See Kadyrov rasskazal o verbovke umstvenno otstalykh v ryady boyevikov, Lenta.ru, October 17, 2012, <https://lenta.ru/news/2012/10/17/mental/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁷⁴ See Gakayev Deaths Leave One Campfire Less In Chechen Mountains, Caucasus Report, Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, January 30, 2013, <http://www.rferl.org/a/chechen-insurgency-commanders-killed-gakayev/24887859.html> accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁷⁵ See Siloviki vyshli na sled brat'yev Gakayevykh blagodarya pokazaniyam ikh podel'nika, soobshchil istochnik, Caucasian Knot, January 25, 2013, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/219156/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

scale atrocities adopted in the Chechen Wars and the influx of money and Salafist ideas from Gulf countries from the 1990s onwards facilitated the rise of radical Islam in some niches of society. Tatarstan's Hanafite brand of Islamic faith had been a very moderate one since the times of Ivan the Great, and also in Soviet times there had been no religiously motivated resistance against the Soviet regime. However, religious radicalization has been rising there. A slowly forming Islamist underground had been sympathizing for a long time with the Caucasus Emirate, when small armed cells became active also in Tatarstan from 2010 on. Then, Tatar police found and destroyed a militant camp in which action three *Wahabi* militants had been killed in the ensuing shootout.

There had been some earlier indicators, to be sure, like the formation in 2007 on the orders of Doku Umarov, of the not better specified Volga and Idel-Ural fronts in the framework of the Caucasus Emirate.⁵⁷⁶ This move reflected the fact that the Caucasus Emirate had large groups of sympathizers among the North Caucasian emigrants' communities in the Muslim republics in Eastern Russia. These networks were organized in underground cells that managed the recruitment, collection of funds and other logistic work. These networks gained importance over time, since later on, maybe reflecting a perceived operative maturation inside the Caucasus emirate, in 2011 Umarov ordered the Volga and Idel-Ural fronts – until then resembling only logistical theaters – to be transformed into outright vilayets.⁵⁷⁷ Maybe this had only a propagandistic value, but in fact the level of violence had risen significantly in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan in the previous months.⁵⁷⁸ Scattered armed attacks continued until the aforementioned 2012 high-profile attacks on the most important moderate and state-sponsored religious figures. Shortly afterwards, the first video message of a man posing with a silenced pistol, who proclaimed himself to be the “Emir of the Tatar Mujahideen” and swore an oath of loyalty to Doku Umarov, appeared on the internet.⁵⁷⁹ More attacks followed in 2013, when an oil-processing plant was attacked in oil-rich Tatarstan with a grenade launcher in the intent to damage what has been perceived by some Tatars as a “siphoning off” of Tatar wealth by the Russian state. Some arson attacks on Christian churches in Tatarstan followed in the same year. The still small extent and the relative immaturity of the underground network and the subsequent infiltration by Russian security agencies however caused the “Tatarstan Jamaat” to cease its activities by 2014.⁵⁸⁰

⁵⁷⁶ See Chechni ne stalo, *Gazeta.ru*, November 1, 2007, www.gazeta.ru/politics/2007/10/31_kz_2279391.shtml, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁷⁷ See Amir Imarata Kavkaz Dokku Abu Usman: «My osvobodim Krasnodarskiy kray, Astrakhan' i Povolzhskiy zemli...», *Kavkaz Center*, March 8, 2010, <http://kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2010/03/08/71087.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁷⁸ See Ivshina, Olga, Radical Islam raises tension in Russia's Tatarstan, *BBC*, August 9, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-19179399>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁷⁹ See Vatchagaev, Mairbek, North Caucasus Conflict Spreads to Tatarstan, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 9 Issue 147, Jamestown Foundation, <https://jamestown.org/program/north-caucasus-conflict-spreads-to-tatarstan/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁸⁰ See Leon, Aron, The expansion of Russia's radical Islamism outside the North Caucasus, Testimony before The House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats, September

Things were no different in Ingushetia by 2013-2014. The Ingush Jamaat had never managed to truly recover from the detention of Ahmed Yevloyev in 2010, and subsequent Emirs like Dzhamaleyl Mutaliyev (aka Emir Adam, killed in May 2013) and Arthur Getagazhyev (aka Emir Ubaydullah, killed in May 2014) were not able to connect again the different groups and Jamaats operating in Ingushetia under one unified command for fear of further infiltration and persisting moles.⁵⁸¹ The Ingush Jamaat was thus not able anymore to stage significant attacks inside the republic, and every attempt to re-organize was quelled by the forces of president Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, the successor of the unpopular Murat Zyazykov.⁵⁸² Yevkurov, which has been enjoying the image of a down-to-earth and popular president, managed to pacify Ingushetia with a sort of carrot-and-stick approach. Like in other Muslim North Caucasian republics, huge allotment of funds from Moscow to finance local development eased the task of pacification. Because of the overall operative decline of the Ingush Jamaat, the Sunzhenskii Jamaat, its subdivision operating in the forests and southern Caucasian foothills close to the border with Chechnya, became de-facto incorporated operatively in the Chechen vilayet under its last commander, Beslan Makhauri (aka Emir Muhammad), one of the last trustees of Doku Umarov. Makhauri and the Sunzhenskii Jamaat had been closely operating with the Chechen South-Western front and had been very close to Basyev first and Umarov then, which both hid at times in the densely forested border area between Chechnya and Ingushetia. In fact, it had been the Ingush fighters who gave Umarov the needed local power base to survive the split of 2010 with the Chechen field commanders.⁵⁸³

Between 2010 and 2013, the insurgency in the republic of Kabardino-Balkaria did not develop linearly. The death of Anzor Astemirov, the KBK vilayet's leader in 2010, his deputy Emir Asker Dzhappuyev (aka Emir Abdullah) was appointed as Astemirov's successor by Doku Umarov. Dzhappuyev escalated the fight against federal and local security forces exponentially, marking the most violent turn in the insurgency in the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria since the failed attack on Nalchik in 2005. Although Dzhappuyev encouraged his subordinates to avoid civilian casualties so to avoid a popularity backlash, the killings of "unislamic" figures like fortune-tellers and faith healers as last residuals of pre-Islamic animist culture saw a marked increase.⁵⁸⁴ Dzhappuyev however was killed in a spectacular operation of the Russian security service in which they managed to decapitate almost the entire leadership of the KBK vilayet in the settlement of Progress in eastern Kabardino-

30, 2015, <http://www.aei.org/publication/the-expansion-of-russias-radical-islamism-outside-the-north-caucasus/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁸¹ See Why Is The Death Toll Tumbling In The North Caucasus?, Caucasus Report, Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, February 10, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/a/insurgency-north-caucasus-terrorism-isis/26840778.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁸² See Lekarstvo ot Bolezni, Segodnya.ru, September 25, 2012, <http://www.segodnia.ru/content/113670>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁸³ See Yevkurov: terrorism v Ingushetii pobezhden, TVC, May 17, 2015, <http://www.tvc.ru/news/show/id/68439>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁸⁴ See North Caucasus Insurgency Admits Killing Circassian Ethnographer, Caucasus Report, Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, January 10, 2011, https://www.rferl.org/a/north_caucasus_insurgents_ethnographer_murder/2272112.html, accessed on January 18, 2023

Balkaria. This was a blow from which the Caucasus Emirate structure in Kabardino-Balkaria would never recover, and indeed all successors to Dzhappuev have had a short time in power of the local Caucasus Emirate chapter. Alone between March and September 2012, three successive Emirs got killed in special operations throughout Kabardino-Balkaria: Dzhappuev's successor, Alim Zankishiyev (aka Emir Ubaidullah), got killed on March 27, 2012 while trying to reconstitute the leading ranks of the KBK vilayet, while his successors Timur Tatchaev (aka Emir Hamza) and Ruslan Batyrbekov (aka Emir Hamza), got killed respectively on June 25, 2012 and September 20, 2012. Also the following leaders of the KBK vilayet did not fare much better: Hasanbi Fakov (aka Emir Abu Hasan), got killed on 7 August 2013, Tengiz Gucketlov (aka Emir Tengiz), on March 14, 2014 and Astemir Berhamov (aka Emir Al Bara) was killed on May 23, 2014.⁵⁸⁵ Like in Ingushetia, Russian security services had managed to thoroughly infiltrate the local structures of the Caucasus Emirate, inflicting painful blows while decimating row after row of forthcoming rebel leader figures. In the end, there simply remained not enough eligible figures to feed upcoming ranks.

In the meantime, terrorist bombings had made their comeback in Russia, when on January 24th, 2011 a pair of suicide bombers targeted Domodedovo airport in Moscow, killing 40 and wounding almost 200. The attackers targeted the international arrival area, with the aim of hitting Russian economy discouraging tourists to come to Russia. The responsibility for the attack was claimed by Doku Umarov a few days after, calling Western states "hypocrites" and allies of Russia in the oppression of Muslims worldwide. According to Russian security sources, it seems that the airport attack had to be followed by other similar attacks across Moscow, including one on the Red Square in the days and weeks after. However, one attacker accidentally blew himself up in his own hotel room, while two Russian converts allegedly detonated their suicide belts in Gubden, Dagestan, because of their inability to reach the original objective.⁵⁸⁶ The attack however fired back on their organizers, since there was no capability to give these attacks continuity in time and effect to put up pressure on the Russian government. The attacks therefore played directly into the hands of the Kremlin, gaining Putin increased levels of popularity and consensus, while their futility still split the ranks of the insurgency. In fact, the next terrorist attacks in Russia's heartland occurred only more than two years after, in the wake of the Olympi Games in Sochi, when in October and December 2013 female suicide bombers detonated their explosive belts in Volgograd, targeting a bus on October 21 and the main railway station one day apart on December 29 and 30, marking a remarkable perfidy in the planning of the attack. The combined death toll of the attacks

⁵⁸⁵ See Khamzu likvidirovali povtorno Ubit lider boyevikov KBR, Kommersant, June 27, 2012, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1967783>, accessed on January 18, 2023, At least three suspected militants killed in CTO in Nalchik, Caucasian Knot, March 14, 2014, <http://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/27549/>, accessed on January 18, 2018, <http://www.islamdin.com/video/1735-baygat.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁸⁶ See Osborn, Andrew, Black Widow attempted New Year Moscow attack but blew herself up by mistake, The Telegraph, January 26, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/8284279/Black-Widow-attempted-New-Year-Moscow-attack-but-blew-herself-up-by-mistake.html> accessed on January 18, 2023

counted over fifty fatalities and dozens of wounded civilians.⁵⁸⁷ These attacks sparked fear of bigger attacks to come at Sochi, raising the ghost of Munich '72. In reality, however, things had changed by that time, even if that was to become clear only in the months and years to follow.

The structural and operative decline of the Caucasus Emirate can be traced also through numbers. In the table below are listed the losses of human life in the North Caucasus⁵⁸⁸ from 2010 to 2015. As is easily recognizable, the level of violence dropped considerably between 2010 and 2015. On the other hand, the ratio between government and militant losses has been changing considerably over time to the detriment of the latter. Civilian loss of life has been minimizing too over time.

	Killed and (wounded)	Militants killed	Police and military killed	Civilians killed
2010 ⁵⁸⁹	754 (956)	349	225	175
2011 ⁵⁹⁰	750 (628)	384	190	176
2012 ⁵⁹¹	700 (525)	404	209	87
2013 ⁵⁹²	529 (457)	298	127	104
2014 ⁵⁹³	341 (184)	249	55	37
2015 ⁵⁹⁴	209 (49)	172	18	19

⁵⁸⁷ See At Least 6 Killed in Attack by Female Suicide Bomber in Russia – Official, Sputnik, October 21, 2013, <https://sputniknews.com/russia/20131021184272242-6-Killed-in-Bus-Bomb-Attack-in-SRussia-/>, accessed on January 18, 2023 and Volgograd blasts: Second suicide bomb hits Russia city, BBC, December 30, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25546477>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁸⁸ Includes the territories of Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachayevo-cherkessia and the Stavropol Krai.

⁵⁸⁹ See Infografika. Statistika zhertv na Severnom Kavkaze za 2010 god po dannym "Kavkazskogo uzla", Caucasian Knot, December 23, 2013, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/235593>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁹⁰ See Infografika. Statistika zhertv na Severnom Kavkaze za 2011 god po dannym "Kavkazskogo uzla", Caucasian Knot, December 23, 2013, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/235594>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁹¹ See Infografika. Statistika zhertv na Severnom Kavkaze za 2012 god, Caucasian Knot, May 20, 2013, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/225256/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁹² See Infografika. Statistika zhertv na Severnom Kavkaze za 2013 god po dannym "Kavkazskogo uzla", Caucasian Knot, January 27, 2014, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/237292/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁹³ See Infografika. Statistika zhertv na Severnom Kavkaze za 2014 god po dannym Kavkazskogo Uzla, January 31, 2015, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/256537/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁹⁴ See Infografika. Statistika zhertv na Severnom Kavkaze za 2015 god po dannym Kavkazskogo uzla, Caucasian Knot, February 8, 2016, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/277271/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

Intelligence on the Caucasus Emirate has been more or less mirroring these numbers over time, even if fact and numbers have been of course part of the media war. Numbers suggested by Ramzan Kadyrov have almost never had any reliability. Since 2009, when the official “end” of the counterterrorism operation in the North Caucasus had been proclaimed by Putin, Kadyrov repeated the fairy tale of the 40 to 50 remaining *shaytans* in the mountains.⁵⁹⁵ Other, more serious representing of Russian institutions have been way more precise and reliable. Whereas Alexander Bastrykin, head of the Investigative Committee under the Prosecutor's Office of the Russian Federation told journalists in 2009 that around 1.500 active members of “illegal formations” were operating in the North Caucasus, that number had decreased by January 2013 to approximately 600 fighters distributed over 40 small groups.⁵⁹⁶ That number too would drop even more soon. At the time, the Kremlin was redoubling the efforts to eradicate once and for all the militant threat in the Northern Caucasus. To achieve that goal, it would not restrain from inventive tactics.

⁵⁹⁵ See V Chechne prokhorit spetsoperatsiya, Caucasian Knot, May 16, 2009, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/154234>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁵⁹⁶ See Bastrykin naschital na Kavkaze poltory tysyachi boyevikov, Lenta.ru, May 20, 2009, <https://lenta.ru/news/2009/05/20/boevicks/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

VIII. An Exported Conflict and Russia's Comeback, 2013-2016

Nobody should have any illusion about the possibility of gaining military superiority over Russia. We will never allow this to happen.

Vladimir Putin

After the collapse of the Soviet Union Russia shrank to its core constituencies and had to absorb the internal socioeconomic and ethnoreligious aftershocks deriving from the fall of Communism. Its former role as superpower had vanished and seemed to be a pale reminder to its former might and influence. On the contrary, with the separatist tendencies spreading into core constituencies of the Russian Federation like Chechnya and Tatarstan the very essence of Russia's territorial integrity was threatened. One of the first big successes of Yeltsin's internal policy was the peaceful settlement with Tatarstan in 1994, granting the Tatar republic wide-ranging rights and autonomy in exchange to the continued commitment to stay part of the Russian state. The pursued separatist Chechen effort had been met after lengthy back-and-forth negotiations and covert efforts to topple Dudayev with invasion and war, albeit with initially catastrophic result. The former Soviet republics that had split from the Soviet Union and from Russia proper were discovering their newly found independence and were either busy internally to grant Russia continued credit, like the Central Asian and Caucasian republics, or they repudiated everything Soviet and Russian and actively looked towards the West like the Baltic republics, and to a lesser extent Ukraine.⁵⁹⁷

The Commonwealth of Independent States was formally established on December 8, 1991, with the signing of the Belavezha Agreement, signed by the leaders of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. The agreement entered into force formally on 12 December following the ratification of the three States. The announcement of the agreement, to which the other republics born after the dissolution of the Soviet Union were also invited, sanctioned the end of the USSR. Soon, also the other ex-Soviet republics followed, minus the Baltic states, which already had turned their view to the West. The CIS had the intent to establish a common ground among the Ex Soviet republics and to be a sort of platform capable of mediation and mitigation among these states. On the other hand, it has also been the Trojan horse with which Russia as the legitimate successor entity to the Soviet Union, tried to maintain the former member states of the Soviet Union in its sphere of influence, retaining political, economic and military influence among them, and thus constituting a buffer zone with which protect itself against expansionist intents by the NATO and the EU. This is why it is no case that Russia continued

⁵⁹⁷ See Zürcher, Christoph. *The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus*. United Kingdom, NYU Press, 2009, p. 212f.

to play an important role in the region that formerly encompassed the territory of the Soviet Union even in its darkest days of decline. Russian forces decisively supported the post-communist Tajik regime in the bloody civil war that ensued the independence of Tajikistan in the first half of the 1990s and has always been the most important mediating figure in the decennial conflict around Nagorno-Karabakh. Outside of the former boundaries of the Soviet Empire, in those years Russia's opinion counted not much, however.⁵⁹⁸

The only foreign policy card to play to try to resist its definitive relegation to a second-class power and to reinvent ways to continue to play an active role on a global scale was to revive old bonds that seemed long forgotten. During the Bosnian War the first such occasion came up. Serbia and Serb entities were rightly perceived in the West as the aggressors, practicing an ethnic cleansing policy enforced with rapes and massacres, establishing concentration camps to intern innocent Bosnian civilians and hunger-blockading Bosnian enclaves as well as its capital city Sarajevo over months and years. The UN and Western countries thus put pressure on Serbia to stop these actions and find a peaceful solution to this unreality much more complicated conflict. This put Russia on the plan, which arose as the defender of Serbia, intended as a fraternal Slavic country. Boris Eltsin thus tried to revive Pan-slavism or at least its façade, actively supporting the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia – at the time already reduced to Serbia and Montenegro – which at the time was actively involved in the bloody Bosnian civil war, actively supporting Serb entities in Bosnia and in Croatia. Russia had thus returned where it had stayed one hundred years before, at least in terms of foreign policy. Russian vetos to Western-backed resolutions against Serb aggression in the UN General assembly protected Serb actions in Bosnia. When after the massacre at Srebrenica it was not possible anymore to stay put and watch the massacre unfold, Russia insisted on sending blue helmets as part of the UN force that had to monitor to enforcement of the Dayton agreement. After the end of the Bosnian civil war with the Dayton treaty in 1995, tensions remained high in the region, as an ethnic Albanian insurgency had been developing in Kosovo, an Albanian-majority province which was part of Serbia at the time.⁵⁹⁹

It is said that while the Russian Prime Minister at the time, Evgeni Primakov, was travelling to Washington on March 24, 1999, he was informed that NATO had started bombing Kosovo. Allegedly, this immediately caused him to change course. When he finally landed back in Moscow a few hours later, he found the Kremlin raging at not having been consulted or even warned of the impending event. While most Russians only had a vague idea as to where Kosovo was, they in general related to their fellow Eastern Orthodox Slavs in Serbia and felt that Yugoslavia overall was the Russia's legitimate sphere of influence. They therefore felt slighted at not having been consulted and perceived that the U.S. had thus proclaimed itself as the head of a unipolar world. President Bill Clinton had not even extended the common courtesy of waiting for Primakov to land in Washington before giving the order, which at least would have allowed him to save face. Consequently, anti-American feelings flared up in

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁹ See Friedman, Francine. *Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Polity on the Brink*. United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2004.

Russia and made it impossible for the already weakened Yeltsin administration to further justify their de-escalating stance towards the West. The nationalist opposition, who now looked favorably on Primakov, saw this as the perfect time to act and started to mobilize both politically and militarily: hundreds of men started queuing outside the Yugoslav Embassy in Moscow volunteering to defend Serbia.⁶⁰⁰

The Kosovo war and the bombing campaign on Serbia, which had been started against Russian interests, without informing even Russia has been an open wound in the eyes of Russian foreign policy in the years to come. Kosovo's proclamation of independence and its sanctioning by the west before the UN has been creating a precedent which Putin exploited afterwards in the Georgian and Ukraine crisis. Fearing the consequences for its own campaign against separatist Chechnya, Putin snapped that the independence granted to Kosovo has to be seen as a

(...) Terrible precedent that breaks the entire system of international relations, which has taken centuries to develop and can undoubtedly lead to a chain of unintended consequences in other regions around the world. This will turn and hit the West in the face. (...⁶⁰¹)

This, however, had only been the beginning of the coming new confrontation between the West and a new Russian leader determined to counteract what he saw as actions of encirclement of Russia coming from the West. The steppingstones he had the names of NATO enlargement, inclusive collaboration and partnership promoted by the EU and the promotion of democracy. Indeed, in 1999, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic joined NATO, in the middle of a great debate within the organization and the strong opposition of Russia, which claimed that the late Soviet Union's consent given by Gorbachev to the reunification of Germany had originally been given in exchange for the promise by the West to not expand eastward. As no official agreements had in reality taken place on this matter, NATO continued its eastward drive amid Russian grumbling with the integration into the organization of seven additional Central and Eastern European countries that had originally been part of the Soviet sphere of influence and part of the Warsaw pact: Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.⁶⁰²

1. Backyard Control

The next steppingstone in the new confrontation between the West and Russia were the so-called *colored revolutions*. These sociopolitical changes affected ex-soviet republics, now

⁶⁰⁰Cit. Masha Gessen.

http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2014/03/putin_s_crimea_revenge_ever_since_the_us_bombed_kosovo_in_1999_putin_has.html, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁰¹ Cit. Putin Calls Kosovo Independence "Terrible Precedent." The Sydney Morning Herald, The Sydney Morning Herald, 23 Feb. 2008, www.smh.com.au/world/putin-calls-kosovo-independence-terrible-precedent-20080223-gds2d5.html, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁰² See Sarotte, M. E.. Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate. United Kingdom, Yale University Press, 2021.

independent countries which Russia however regarded to be part of its own sphere of influence, and which constituted a sort of buffer zone towards the Western states and organizations, in particular NATO. These countries, though being independent, had been nonetheless governed by pro-Russian or at least Russian-friendly administrations until then. The colored revolutions however, breached the security belt around Russia, concerning thus its leadership and decisively shaped its foreign and power policies to this day. The first country which experienced a radical change in its internal and external policy was Georgia in 2003. The country had been governed by ex-Soviet foreign minister Edvard Shevardnadze since 1992, when he came to power through a coup d'état after a brief civil war which brought to the downfall of Zviad Gamsakhurdia. Gamsakhurdia had elected himself to Georgia's dictator in the aftermath of its independence, while his policies had been among the main causes for the breakaway of two ethnically diverse Georgian regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁶⁰³

Shevardnadze began negotiations which culminated in a ceasefire with the separatist regions. The ceasefire had been mediated by Russia, which however acted much more as a power broker than as a real mediating and neutral entity. As a result of this agreement, Abkhazia and South Ossetia came under the administration of the separatists, while a small part of South Ossetia remained under Georgian control. Russian troops, acting ostensibly as peacekeeping forces, in reality however much more as enforcers and guarantors of Russian divide-and-rule policy in the area, have been separating the contenders since. The decade-long rule of Shevardnadze however came to end in the course of 2003, when he and his policies became increasingly associated with the rampant corruption and the bad state of Georgia's economy. Abkhazia and South Ossetia had still not been regained by Shevardnadze, because of his subordinated attitude towards Russia, as large parts of the opposition meant. The political and economic crisis reached its peak shortly before the elections in November 2003. Shevardnadze's party was defeated by the popular opposition parties under Mikhail Saakashvili, which became the new Georgian president in the first days of 2004. Saakashvili decided to get rid of the Russian hegemony, so he adopted a policy of approaching the West, especially the United States, thus trying to become part of NATO.⁶⁰⁴

Georgia had hosted some US troops in 2002 as part of the "war on terror," and at the time, Putin said he saw "no tragedy" in it. Things changed however after the orange revolution in Georgia which brought to power Mikhail Saakashvili and had been suspected by Putin and his entourage to have been piloted by Western intelligence services. Saakashvili immediately put into place his strong pro-US-policy and oriented his policy strongly towards the West. The easy recovery of the secessionist region of Adjara in 2004 reinforced the Saakashvili administration in their effort to gain back the remaining secessionist entities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Since the onset of a pro-Western power in Georgia in 2004, especially South

⁶⁰³ See Mitchell, Lincoln A.. *The Color Revolutions*. United Kingdom, University of Pennsylvania Press, Incorporated, 2012 and *Coloured Revolutions and Authoritarian Reactions*. United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2014.

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid.

Ossetia had become an originally internal political issue, which however bore great consequences also for the external relations of Georgia – namely towards Russia. For its part, the Russian Federation, which officially was mediating between the parties but unofficially supported the separatists, used the South Ossetian case as a Damocles sword hanging over Georgia, to force the country into submission. When the politics of Mikhail Saakashvili oriented decisively towards the West, Russian military, had been ordered to prepare for a confrontation with Georgia, and a military war plan had been ordered in 2006 by Russian President Putin.⁶⁰⁵ Russia and Georgia - helped by Western countries and especially the United States – had been preparing for a possible war over the two Georgian separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and they had long expected the emergence of a new armed confrontation. The presence of Russian engineer troops, deployed in the spring in Abkhazia to repair the Abkhaz railway as well as the considerable increase in the military budget and the construction of two new bases near the two secessionist regions on the Georgian side indicate that. Amid smaller skirmishes periodically occurring on the line of contact, tension rose in the region. In April 2008, Vladimir Putin, as part of a blatant provocation effort signed a decree authorizing the establishment of official relations between Russia and the Georgian secessionist entities, military exercises on both sides in the weeks before the outbreak of war heightened the tension once again.⁶⁰⁶

War broke out in the night between 7 and 8 August 2008, after reciprocal sporadic artillery bombardments. Georgian forces tried to take advantage of the situation and invaded South Ossetia, attacking in particular its capital city Tskhinvali. A forceful Russian counterattack followed through the infamous Roki tunnel leading to immediate Georgian retreat. After Four days of conflict, the Russian army stood a few dozen kilometers before Tbilisi and the war ended with a ceasefire – and a Russian victory. At the end of hostilities, Russia victors recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, turning both regions effectively to vassal states of Russia. Vladimir Putin's decisive reaction had thus been able to blunder a possible membership of Georgia in the NATO, formally preserving the buffer zone around Russia, at the same time to preserve South Ossetia and Abkhazia as Russian puppets and on the long run even to correct Georgian state policy with the demise of Saakashvili in 2013. Subsequent political developments from the defeat in the 2008 war cost in the end Mikhail Saakashvili his presidency. With the victory of Giorgi Margvelashvili, a much more Russian-friendly course of action has been established, and NATO membership or cooperation with the EU has been scaled widely down the list of priorities. Even the Georgian public opinion had been persuaded by the outcome of the 2008 war that it was hardly possible to go against Russia on the long run.⁶⁰⁷

⁶⁰⁵ See Hamilton, Robert E., and Cohen, Ariel. *The Russian Military and the Georgia War: Lessons and Implications*. United States, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2011 and Toal, Gerard. *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest Over Ukraine and the Caucasus*. United Kingdom, Oxford University Press, 2017.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

Nevertheless, the West had been continuing to expand towards Eastern Europe. The sixth enlargement of the EU had taken place in 2004, incorporating Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia as well as Cyprus and Malta. In 2007 also Bulgaria and Romania had joined, transforming the EU to a living space of almost 500 million citizens and the strongest economical conglomerate on the world. The misconsideration of Russia by the West, either perceived or real, catalyzed anti-western resentments in Russia and shaped its foreign policy. Also, moderate Russian policymakers felt that the country's interests were not being taken into account when decisions and courses of action of global reach were established. The US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and the NATO enlargement initiated Russia's turning away and brought it back slowly but steadily on the track of grand power politics. Furthermore, the color revolutions, which in the eyes of Russian policymakers posed a real threat to Russia, were seen as a plot by the Americans to destabilize Russia's neighboring countries and even Russia itself. But Russia now was not as weak as in 1999 or 2000 anymore. And Vladimir Putin was not Boris Yeltsin. Oil exports were booming and some good decisions to stabilize the country's macroeconomic situation had been made. Economic growth had returned, and the first steps had been made to restore Russia's military power. Putin therefore, was eager to restore a balance of power. During the Munich Security Conference in 2007, he held a speech in which he harshly criticized the global US hegemonial attitude.⁶⁰⁸

In some ways, it was a memorable speech – a warning of things to come. Taking the podium, Vladimir Putin remarked that he was pleased to speak once without taking into account diplomatic considerations. What followed was a frontal attack on the "unipolar world order" and the leading role taken on by the United States. The speech culminated in the assessment that during the Cold War there had been a balance of power between the two great world powers that ensured peace, ending his consideration with the warning that "today, this peace is not so stable."⁶⁰⁹ The facts that enraged Putin so heavily at the time were in particular the planned eastward extension of NATO and the installation of missile shield facilities in Poland and the Czech Republic directed against Russia by the US. Calling these deeds "provocations", Putin remarked also that "guarantees" regarding the non-expansion of the NATO allegedly given to Michael Gorbachev in 1990 in exchange for the German reunification had not been respected. Not enough with that, the positioning of the missile shield system in Eastern Europe had the goal to neutralize the Russian nuclear force, which would result in the end of the end of the balance. This would cause in turn a new arms race, because it would be cheaper to invest in new weapons capable of penetrating the missile shield than to design a ballistic defense system. In the eyes of many observers at the time Putin's outburst should have had the goal of pursuing containment merely by rhetoric. As we

⁶⁰⁸ See Shanker, Thom, and Mark Landler. Putin Says U.S. Is Undermining Global Stability (Published 2007). The New York Times, 11 Feb. 2007, www.nytimes.com/2007/02/11/world/europe/11munich.html, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁰⁹ See Shanker, Thom, and Mark Landler. Putin Says U.S. Is Undermining Global Stability (Published 2007). The New York Times, 11 Feb. 2007, www.nytimes.com/2007/02/11/world/europe/11munich.html, accessed on January 18, 2023

have seen, these had not been vain threats. Putin's speech had been preceded by a similar one pronounced in 1993 by then Russian foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev to the NATO forum. At the time, when asked about the meaning of his unfavorable speech, stated: "If you do not treat Russia properly, at some point, a Russian prime minister or president will give that speech."⁶¹⁰

Soon after his speech in Munich in 2007, Putin's threat became reality. Estonia, one of the well-developed "cyber-countries" at the time, was hit by a wave of cyberattacks, which briefly threw some sectors of economy in disarray. The cyberattacks had been simple "denial-of-service"-attacks, which however had managed to cause great damage. These attacks could be traced back to Russian hacker networks later. These coordinated attacks however in reality bore all hints of a state-sponsored action and were most probably orchestrated by Russian intelligence services to test the waters and at the same time begin a creeping destabilization and intimidation of the Baltic states, which Putin still saw as part of the Russian influence zone. The Baltic states however, due to their recent history had opted to turn their back on Russia, join NATO and on top de facto marginalized consistent Russian minorities living inside their borders.⁶¹¹ The Russian cyberattacks on Estonia were surprisingly effective in the eyes of the Russian leadership. It was now possible to covertly target whole societies, which have become dependent on electronics. Thus, they had captivatedly discovered the destructive potential of cyber warfare. It became possible to deniably and covertly unleash hostile acts without declaring war and without having to take responsibility. This was the spark that brought to the conception and implementation of the new Russian military doctrine many call the "Gerasimov doctrine", which sees a mixture of conventional and unconventional means, measuring the selective use of force with covert and deniable operations. The cyberattack on Estonia however proved to be only the beginning of an intimidation campaign against quarrelsome or dissenting former satellite states of the Soviet Union. This process climaxed in the invasion of Georgia in summer 2008 and again by the invasion of Ukraine in 2015 and the growing threat against the Baltic states, which resulted in a permanent presence of NATO troops in those states.

It was in this period that Russian military intelligence began building up its cyberwar capability. It appealed the Russian military that now "silent" wars could be fought using the Internet incapacitating an enemy without a shot being fired. The Russians have been unleashing this capability quite frequently since, not targeting just military objectives but targeting the whole of society. In 2007, Estonia was, besides its geopolitical significance in

⁶¹⁰ See Lynch, Allen C. Russia and NATO: Expansion and Coexistence?, *The International Spectator*, vol. 32, no. 1, Jan. 1997, pp. 81–91, accessed 2 Dec. 2019.

⁶¹¹ In the preceding years, the strained relationship between ethnic Russians and ethnic Estonians in the country revolved around the bronze statue of a Russian soldier ("The Bronze Soldier of Tallinn"), which was meant to memorialize what Russia had done for Estonia in the wake of World War II. However, perceptions of this event differed: Russians saw it as an act of liberation, while Estonians viewed it as an occupation. The proposal was put forward to remove the statue, which was followed by mass riots by members of the local Russian minority lasting two nights, see "The Bronze Soldier Crisis of 2007: Revisiting an Early Case of Hybrid Conflict." ICDS, 21 Aug. 2020, icds.ee/en/the-bronze-soldier-crisis-of-2007/, accessed on January 18, 2023

Russian eyes, a particularly ideal target to test this new form of warfare practically. As one of the first states which had embraced the notion that transactions in all fields of society will all be made over the web in the future, building their administrative structures accordingly, Estonia showed at the same time significant vulnerabilities to expert cyberwarriors. Banks, government agencies, even hospitals and power plants were brought to a halt with a few mouse clicks. On the strategic level, the Russian military had now the possibility to renew their tactics of information warfare, which have always been integral part of Russian military operations, with modern and much more effective means. The biggest advantage of the new instrument, however, was the possibility to wage war covertly and even more importantly, deniably. In fact, in the mindset of Vladimir Putin and the Russian military, Russia has been at war in the aim to restore its superpower status. There is no need any more to launch an overt war against an enemy, the furthering of political and diplomatic goals in very aggressive ways - that traditionally might have involved direct military conflict – however is possible anyway. This has not been truly understood in the west to this day. And indeed, did Western policymakers and even intelligence agencies react slowly and disbelieving about Russian aims and capabilities for a long time. This meant also that covert signs and threats disseminated by the Russians were not perceived as such in the West.⁶¹²

Thus, even after the NATO-blunder with Georgia, the EU continued to look eastward after the 2004 and 2007 enlargements, unveiling in 2008 its Eastern Partnership Initiative and entering into negotiations with the Ukrainian government. Before that, however, also the Ukraine had been theater to one of the colored revolutions. Between the end of 2004 and the beginning of 2005, popular protests had taken place over the obvious manipulation of the previous presidential elections in November 2004. The government rigged the election between Viktor Yushchenko and Viktor Yanukovych in favor of the latter. The Supreme Court of Ukraine ordered new elections for December 26, 2004, which sparked nationwide protests after the original contest's results were declared invalid. The second competition was deemed to be "free and fair" after being closely scrutinized by both domestic and foreign observers. The final results clearly favored Yushchenko, who subsequently adopted a cautious stance toward the EU and started the first negotiations with it. When Viktor Yanukovych succeeded Yushchenko as president of Ukraine in 2010, he reversed some of his predecessor's policies and began to turn once more toward Moscow.⁶¹³

The Ukrainian crisis began to unfold at the end of November 2013, following the decision of the Ukrainian government under pro-Russian president Yanukovich to not sign the Association Agreement with the European Union. After that, large-scale demonstrations broke out in Kiev and the Western, traditionally anti-Russian and more Western-oriented half of the country. The protests soon turned into disorders and a small civil war, when

⁶¹² See Jasper, Scott. *Russian Cyber Operations: Coding the Boundaries of Conflict*. United States, Georgetown University Press, 2020, p. 27 ff. and Radin, Andrew. *Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics: Threats and Potential Responses*. United States, RAND Corporation, 2017.

⁶¹³ See Wilson, Andrew. *Ukraine Crisis: What it Means for the West*. United Kingdom, Yale University Press, 2014, p. 71f.

Yanukovich ordered riot troops to fire into the crowds which occupied the Maidan place in central Kiev. The ensuing disorders forced the resignation and the flight of President Yanukovich at the end of February 2014. After the overthrow of Yanukovich in February 2014, pro-Russian groups of the more Russophone Eastern regions of Ukraine demonstrated against the new government in Kiev, which they regarded as Russophobe. They demanded the retention of stricter towards the Russian Federation. These protests concentrated on the Crimean peninsula and in the Eastern border area between Russia and Ukraine. Several regional governments proposed separatist referendums and with the escalation of the situation a series of mutinies occurred in the weeks ahead. Moscow took immediately advantage of the situation, sensing the possibility to create a “Damocles sword” similar to the separatist territories in Georgia to try to influence events ahead. The Russian army thus began actively supporting and arming the pro-Russian opposition in the Donetsk and Luhansk areas. “Volunteers” from Russia – in reality Russian Special Forces troops operating without national insignia to ensure plausible deniability – flocked in from Russia to support the separatists, bearing the brunt of manpower needed for fighting the counterattacking Ukrainian army to this day. In Crimea, Russian troops stationed in Sevastopol initially operating in a similar “deniability modus” occupied strategic places and disarmed Ukrainian troops.⁶¹⁴

Later, the Russian authorities stated that the mobilization of troops had been aimed at guaranteeing the integrity of the Russian inhabitants of the Crimea and the Russian bases stationed there, until the socio-political situation was normalized. On the 11th of March however, Crimea declared their independence from Ukraine and voting in a second step for its annexation to the Russian Federation. Putin's perception of what had happened in previous years confirmed his view that the West and in particular the NATO intended to expand its sphere of influence. The next jump would bring first of the EU and then NATO close to the Russian borders. Russia was being besieged on all sides. Putin is persuaded that the West, and in particular the US had piloted the popular unrest that had led to the fall of pro-Russian governments in Georgia in 2003 and in Ukraine in 2004 and again in 2014. Moreover, also the popular protests against Putin himself in the winter 2011-12 in Russia were suspected of having been covertly supported by Western intelligence agencies through the covert support and financing of NGO's. The main reason however for Russia's confrontation with the US and the European Union in this area is the contrast between how Moscow perceives the international post-Cold War system and how it would wish it to be. What he sees is a system that as a result of the collapse of socialism has been increasingly dominated by the United States and has unjustifiably ignored the weight of Russia in the world. Russia instead aspires to a multipolar equilibrium, in which the only condition for the global order is a division of spheres of influence tacitly agreed between the great powers. In this optic, Russia considers the post-Soviet republics its own backyard and sphere of influence. In Putin's view, the West is not allowed to relate in this area without considering Russian strategical political-military and economic interests. In this sense, even in its specificity, the Crimean case has the same

⁶¹⁴ Ibid.

origin as the Russian reactions to the Colored Revolutions in Georgia in 2003, in Ukraine in 2004, and to the Georgian intervention in South Ossetia in 2008.⁶¹⁵

2. The Sochi Olympic Games

The Sochi Olympic Winter games of 2014 had been long in planning. It was the first time since the Soviet times with the Olympic Summer games of 1980 that Russia had the honor to host some one of the most important sport events on the globe. Universally recognized and broadcast events like the Olympic Games have always been also motive of political and economic prestige. Before the start of the games, it had been calculated that 3 billion people would follow the event in television.⁶¹⁶ For Vladimir Putin, this would be the occasion to present a new and reinvigorated Russia – *his* Russia. Swept away were the times of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the shame of the collapse of state institutions and of the defeat in the First Chechen War. Finished were also the times of Russia in the hands of a gang of oligarchs under the leadership of a debilitated and embarrassing drunkard like Boris Eltsin. Mother Russia now was back again as world power. The dangers of internal separatism and Islamist militancy had been decisively fought back and the Russian backyard had been pacified with the defeat of rebellious Georgia. The moment had come to bring back Russia to old splendor and back on the international parquet among the large powers, back on the place Holy Russia deserved. The Olympic Winter Games in Sochi were therefore the perfect spot to fulfill the newfound grandeur. Sochi 2014 was intended from the outset to be a celebration of modern Russia, its return as a superpower and of the father of this new and strong Russia, Vladimir Putin.⁶¹⁷

The hosting of high-level sports events was therefore part of a triumphalist narrative, which was supposed to show Russia as a phoenix risen from the ashes of the USSR era and the debilitating Yeltsin era, and also display its newfound right to interact with the world's leaders on an equal level. With the Olympic Games at Sochi in 2014, Russia's powerful organizational machine therefore hosted the most expensive edition ever; the project was financed by state resources (made available via a top-down process based on economic incentives managed from the center), security investments and close ties with local political leaders. In this process, Putin managed to strengthen both the vertical axis of state-driven power, as well as the horizontal, territorial-geographical axis.⁶¹⁸ Big events are therefore meant to strengthen the empire's presence in the peripheries, from Murmansk on the North Sea to Vladivostok on the Pacific Ocean, making it also easier to fortify its hold over potentially rebellious regions, such as the North Caucasus and the Muslim republics on the Volga. Sochi specifically holds an important status in Putin's eyes, as its functions

⁶¹⁵ See Schoen, Douglas E., and Smith, Evan Roth. *Putin's Master Plan: To Destroy Europe, Divide NATO, and Restore Russian Power and Global Influence*. United Kingdom, Encounter Books, 2016.

⁶¹⁶ Greene, Richard Allen. *Sochi 2014: Winter Olympics by the Numbers*. CNN, 8 Jan. 2014, edition.cnn.com/2014/01/08/world/europe/russia-sochi-numbers/index.html, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶¹⁷ See Orttung, Robert W., and Zhemukhov, Sufian N.. *Putin's Olympics: The Sochi Games and the Evolution of Twenty-First Century Russia*. United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2017, p. 21f.

⁶¹⁸ See Orttung, Robert W., Zhemukhov, Sufian, *Putin's Olympics: The Sochi Games and the Evolution of Twenty-First Century Russia*, Routledge 2017, p. 21 ff.

geopolitically as a hook to keep the Caucasus attached to Russia. Hosting the Olympic Games in Sochi therefore sent a clear message: the Kremlin had reduced local tensions and thus reaffirmed its sovereignty in the region.⁶¹⁹

Sochi has also a large geopolitical value. Being situated on the shores of the Black Sea, Sochi looks south towards the Dardanelles and the Mediterranean. The place enjoys therefore a strategic value to the Russian center as a projection pad towards the warm seas. The Black Sea, the Mediterranean and the Middle Eastern region are all ideally easily reachable from Sochi. It is then no wonder that probably no other Olympic event since the Olympic Games in 1980 with the withdrawal of Western athletes as a sign of protest against the invasion of Afghanistan had been politically colored like the winter games in Sochi. To ensure this, no resources were to be spared. An army of almost 100.000 workers belonging to hundreds of construction companies completely transformed face Sochi and its environment over the years before 2014. The Winter Olympics have become a personal issue for Putin will have to prove to the world whole that Russia is a modern nation with a spirit open, able to flawlessly manage a complex event like the Olympics. Hence the need to make the place and its sports facilities a unique event. The huge undertaking needed an enormous expenditure of treasury. The initial budget for the construction of facilities and infrastructure had been placed at almost 10 billion Dollars. Over time the budget rose to a height of over 50 billion dollars, which made the Sochi edition the most expensive Olympic Games in history.⁶²⁰

The most daunting task in the years before the inauguration of the Olympic Games in Sochi was the potential threats that could arise from the ongoing insurgency in the Northern Caucasus. When, in 2007, Putin argued publicly Sochi's bid to host the 2014 Games, the Russian president assured the IOC that it would be "a safe and memorable event". Seven years later, the situation had indeed improved, and the Caucasus Emirate was fighting for survival. The Olympic Games came therefore at a particularly convenient moment for Russia. The Sochi Olympics the showcase chosen to show the world that Russia had healed from the post-soviet trauma and had returned strong and united. For this reason, the Russian government put in place unprecedented efforts to ensure the security of the Games. Officials of the organizing committee of the Sochi Games boasted at the that the Olympic Games would be "the safest ever." And indeed, on the field, more than 30.000 soldiers and police officers were commanded to ensure the security of the event. Mobile missile defense systems as well as whole air force squadrons secured the airspace above Sochi. Surveillance on place was guaranteed by over 5.000 surveillance cameras and a fleet of drones. The safety zone with limited access extended for a hundred kilometers along the Black Sea coast and for about forty kilometers inland. The omnipresent (FSB) had had the obvious task to monitor the whole area covertly, which it did deploying thousands of officers and agents and running an

⁶¹⁹ La Russia di Sochi 2014: Giochi olimpici, Caucaso e geopolitica. N.p., iMerica, 2014.

⁶²⁰ See Orttung, Robert W., Zhemukhov, Sufian, Putin's Olympics: The Sochi Games and the Evolution of Twenty-First Century Russia, Routledge 2017, p. 63

extensive telephone and online monitoring program, with measures of sophisticated cyber-espionage.⁶²¹

Indeed, Doku Umarov had launched an anathema in the years and months before the Olympic Games in Sochi, declaring that the Games were to be staged on the place where the “the bones of our ancestors, and the bones of many, many Muslims are lying, Muslims who died and were buried in our territory along the Black Sea coast. We as mujahideen must not allow this to happen.”⁶²² Umarov here clearly played the anti-colonial topic, referring to the Russian-Circassian Wars where the Circassians as Caucasian Muslims had indeed been defeated, massacred and deported away from the Caucasus from the shoreline where today Sochi lies. To achieve its goal of assimilation and colonization, Moscow has repeatedly resorted to violence and deportation of entire communities in its history. The symbol for the anti-colonial and anti-Russian struggle was Krasnaya Polyana, less than 50 kilometers from Sochi, where the last battle of the war for the conquest of the region had raged. It is the blood spilled here that Umarov refers to in his anathema. This was a call to action against as well as a reminder of unity among the Caucasian peoples. The Sochi Games were thus the perfect stage for attacks by the Caucasus emirate.⁶²³

Russia however countered these threats with increased high-value-targeting efforts against the leadership of the Caucasus Emirate, and with a very unconventional tactic: factual amnesty to militants who wanted to grab the chance to go to fight somewhere else, outside the Russian Federation. The targeting of Umarov and his subordinates yielded soon its fruits, even if it is not known if the operation had been a lucky shot or if it was a carefully planned and executed operation directed specifically against Doku Umarov. Unbeknownst, the death knell of the Caucasus Emirate had already ringed some months before the beginning of the Olympic Games in Sochi. Although it was revealed to the public only many months after, Umarov had been killed by poisoned food on September 7, 2013, a whole three months before the beginning of the Olympic Games in Sochi. Umarov's death brought what was left of the Caucasus Emirate in complete disarray, as demonstrated by the long time that passed before the confirmation and the appointment of his successor, the qadi of the CE, the Dagestani Magomed Kebekov aka Ali Abu Muhammad, in March 2014. The death of Umarov signed the downfall of the Chechen branch of the insurgency, which in turn, through its legacy and history, had been the soul of the whole North Caucasian insurgency.⁶²⁴

⁶²¹ Ibid., p. 61 ff.

⁶²² See Amir IK Dokku Abu Usman otmenil moratoriy na operatsii v Rossii i prizval ne dopustit' olimpiady v Sochi, Kavkaz Center, July 3, 2013, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2013/07/03/98961.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶²³ See Pokalova, Elena. Chechnya's Terrorist Network: The Evolution of Terrorism in Russia's North Caucasus. United States, ABC-CLIO, 2015, p. 166f.

⁶²⁴ See Hahn, Gordon M.. The Caucasus Emirate Mujahedin: Global Jihadism in Russia's North Caucasus and Beyond. United States, McFarland, Incorporated, Publishers, 2014, p. 270

3. The Chechen/Caucasian Diaspora

With the beginning of the Second Chechen War and the much fiercer approach taken by the Russian army and security services, many Chechens chose to flee Chechnya towards neighboring Muslim republics. In the beginning, these refugees were mostly civilians, as the Chechen forces, albeit politically divided, were still intact and fighting. As more and more Chechen fighters got wounded, particularly during vicious close combat in Grozny and during the retreat from the city, they were frequently evacuated through the South of Chechnya towards relative safety in the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia.⁶²⁵ Prominent members of the Chechen forces but also ordinary fighters who had been seriously wounded were brought also further away into sympathetic countries towards the Chechen cause for treatment. One of the major hubs for the treatment of wounded fighters then were Turkey and Istanbul in particular. Given the historical relationship between Turks and the Muslim Northern Caucasians as well as the presence of robust Diaspora communities dating back from afar as the 19th century where to blend in, the country was a natural haven for Chechen evacuees.⁶²⁶

With the increasing effectiveness of Russian *Chechenization* policy and the slow dying out of the North Caucasian insurgency, the sudden emergence of the conflict in Syria seemed to many Caucasians relegated to a boring life made of poverty or petty crime in the Caucasian Diaspora in western Europe or the Middle East like a golden opportunity to again prove themselves and contrast Russian interests. After a series of rumors about the involvement of Northern Caucasians and particularly Chechens in the then developing Syrian conflict, the first serious hint pointing out the veracity of these reports was the news about the death in combat in august of 2012 of Rustam Gelayev, son of the infamous Ruslan Gelayev, one of the most renowned Chechen field commanders who had also died in combat in 2004.⁶²⁷ Rustam Gelayev, then 24 years of age, seems to have joined one of the opposition groups rather than one of the Caucasian groups which at this stage were only in the process of formation. He had grown up in Chechnya, before moving out from Russia in the late 2000s, first to Belgium and then to Egypt, ostensibly to “study Islam” there. In the summer of 2012, he flocked to Syria with a group of like-minded young Chechens before he almost immediately was killed in one of the first battles for Aleppo.⁶²⁸

Gelayev’s biography is emblematic to understand the stance of many other young Caucasians at the time which were willing to somehow continue the fight against Russia, or more generally, the “infidels” but lacked the means to. From 2007 onwards, the North Caucasian insurgency was falling apart and particularly among Chechens, the declaration of the

⁶²⁵ See Nygren, Bertil. *The Rebuilding of Greater Russia: Putin's Foreign Policy Towards the CIS Countries*. United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2007, p. 126

⁶²⁶ E.g. Chochiev, Georgi, *On the History of the North Caucasian Diaspora in Turkey*, in: *Iran & the Caucasus* Vol. 11, No. 2, 2007, pp. 213-226

⁶²⁷ See Svetlana Bocharova and Olga Spivak. *Chechenskiy sled v Sirii*, 22.08.2012, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2012/08/22_a_4734433.shtml, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶²⁸ See Joana Paraczuk, *1st Imarat Kavkaz Amir in Syria Fought Alongside Gelayev in Chechnya, Died Fighting Alongside Ahrar*, 21.07.2016, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25171>, accessed on January 18, 2023

Caucasus Emirate in late 2007 had sewn deep fractures because of political and ideological reasons. Many veteran fighters who had been wounded before or simply because they did not have the stomach to fight anymore had been evacuating outside of Chechnya all the time since the early 2000s. Important numbers of Chechens found themselves in the Diaspora in sympathetic countries like Turkey and Jordan or applied for the refugee status in safe western European countries like Austria, Belgium or Poland.⁶²⁹ Austria is an emblematic case for Western Europe what concerns the Chechen diaspora, it will serve here as an example case for other, similar realities in Europe. Starting with the beginning of the Second Chechen War in 1999 until today, thousands of Chechens have been applying for refugee status in Austria, with a large number of requests granted. Gradually a full-fledged community of Chechens who had fled their homeland in the wake of fighting and Russian indiscriminate repression developed there. Still today, Vienna is some sort of unofficial Chechen capital, with more than 16.000 people of Chechen ethnicity living there, in all of Austria the number rises to well over 30.000 units.⁶³⁰

The majority of Chechen individuals were ordinary citizens who had simply been in search for safety. Among them, however, also large numbers of former separatist fighters and separatist political figureheads found refuge there. With the years, also pro-Russian loyalist Chechens, mostly businessmen, settled in Austria, and numbers of former opponents changed their stance going over to the pro-Russian camp. Besides the obvious political split between loyalists and obviously more numerous separatists, the latter camp was gradually influenced by the evolution and the decline of the Chechen and later North Caucasian insurgency represented in later years by the Caucasus Emirate.⁶³¹ This means that also the separatist camp experienced multiple splits and fractures, as the older generations mostly stood firm in their more moderate and secular beliefs, whereas younger generations more susceptible for religious radicalization have been leaning first starkly towards the Caucasus Emirate and since it's decline, towards Caucasian groups fighting in Syria and ultimately in part towards the Islamic State.⁶³²

However, over the years Austria was not only a refuge to those escaped from Chechnya, but also a staging ground for underground activities for at times different organizations. This broadly applies also to other European countries with sizeable Chechen Diaspora communities. So, while secular separatists mainly engaged in political activities like rallies and demonstrations to shed awareness about the situation in the Northern Caucasus, loyalist underground networks developed with the years with the goal of intimidating and sometimes

⁶²⁹ Cit. Vatchagaev, Mairbek, Chechen Diaspora Suffers as West Seeks Common Ground With Moscow on Fighting Terrorism, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 13 Issue: 157, September 29, 2016 accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶³⁰ See Medienservicestelle Neue ÖsterreicherInnen, Rund 30.000 TschetschenInnen in Österreich, 21.02.2015, http://medienservicestelle.at/migration_bewegt/2015/02/26/rund-30-000-tschetscheninnen-in-oesterreich/, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶³¹ Interview H.I.

⁶³² Ibid.

also taking violent action towards opposition members.⁶³³ Notable in this regard is the assassination of Umar Israilov, a former bodyguard of Ramzan Kadyrov.⁶³⁴ Western intelligence agencies also asserted that loyalist Chechen networks at the orders of Ramzan Kadyrov have been acting as auxiliaries of Russian intelligence services.⁶³⁵ On behalf of the armed insurgency before and then of the Caucasus Emirate an extensive logistical and recruitment network emerged in the late 2000s. For years, money has been collected on behalf of the Caucasus Emirate among sympathetic Chechens, now the same thing applies for a vast multitude of Chechen and Caucasian groups fighting in Syria. From 2005 to approximately 2011-2012 dozens of Chechens returned to fight into Chechnya from Austria every year.

With the essential demise of the Caucasus Emirate from 2010-2011 onwards, this steady stream of fighters returning to armed activity in the North Caucasus ceased slowly. The sudden eruption of civil war in Syria changed the cards on the table. Bigger numbers of young Chechens organized themselves and went into the Syrian Jihad. It is not a case that the overwhelming majority of the 200 plus foreign fighters that went to Syria from Austria are of Chechen origin, albeit only a minority joined mostly in a second moment the Islamic State, with most still having been joining Caucasian or Caucasian-affiliated groups in Syria.⁶³⁶ Suddenly, a fresh wind of change blew through many parts of the socially festering Chechen community. Eagerness to ostensibly fight the “corrupt and infidel Syrian regime which abused of true fellow Muslims”, and through it the perceived Syrian’s masters in the background – the Russians - gained momentum in many Chechen circles. This went hand in hand with a long simmering religious radicalization, reproducing in the context of the Diaspora the same radicalization mechanisms in place in the macro sphere of the North Caucasian Conflict since its inception.⁶³⁷

The immediate factors for the ongoing radicalization of many youths and also more mature Chechen males, however, was more heterogeneous in the Diaspora. War traumata, abuse or even torture endured, reports about continuing indiscriminate repression by Russian forces or their local proxies at home coming from relatives as well as the hopelessness of the struggle for freedom have been still important factors that contributed to radicalization. It is however the fragmentation of these Diaspora communities that truly answers the question about the radicalization of young men which in many cases were only children at the time they

⁶³³ E.g. Andreas Wetz, Fehde unter Tschetschenen-Agenten, Die Presse, 16.10.2014, <http://diepresse.com/home/panorama/oesterreich/3892614/Fehde-unter-TschetschenenAgenten>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶³⁴ See Apa, Fall Israilov: Schuldsprüche im Tschetschenen-Mord bestätigt, Der Standard, 02.02.2012, <http://derstandard.at/1328162353761/Wien-Fall-Israilov-Schuldsprueche-im-Tschetschenen-Mord-bestaetigt>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶³⁵ See BMI/BVT, Verfassungsschutzbericht 2012, http://www.bmi.gv.at/cms/bmi_verfassungsschutz/bvt_vsb_2012_v20120608_online.pdf, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶³⁶ See BMI/BVT, Verfassungsschutzbericht 2015, http://www.bmi.gv.at/cms/BMi_Verfassungsschutz/Verfassungsschutzbericht_2015.pdf, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶³⁷ Interview H.I.

experienced war themselves. The divide between Chechens into seculars, radicals and loyalists in the Diaspora communities is not only a political or religious one, but also a generational and a social one. Caucasian societies are structured in a highly patriarchal way. For example, traditional role distribution between genders is an important component of customary and religious traditions in the Northern Caucasus. Many other points instrumental to Caucasian societies make it really hard to fully integrate into enlightened European societies. Social disintegration because of wide geographical scattering of family groups, which otherwise would live together in one place in a clannish manner resulted in widespread generational issues with lingering conflicts between the older and the younger generations.⁶³⁸

The difficulties to cope with Western European social standards, paired with aforementioned traumata experienced during war, educational deficits and a general sense of hopelessness made up for a troublesome second male generation of Chechens in Austria and elsewhere. Interestingly, Chechen women grown up in exile score far better results than their male counterparts measured through social indicators like social integration, education and work opportunities since they probably tend to exploit the vast and various possibilities given by modern Western European societies far better. Chechen males have been adapting far less effectively, in many cases cultivating the wish dream to go back into a somehow mythized home country some day, thus negating the need to adapt and integrate into present conditions. In any case, the traditional Chechen male role has been struggling to maintain its stance inside Chechen communities in the Western world. And although it goes without saying that the vast majority of Chechens have been law-abiding citizens since their arrival, the combined aforementioned social factors manifested themselves in much lower average incomes, much higher unemployment rates and a much bigger tendency to criminal actions than average inside Chechen communities. Social brutalization of young Caucasians in the Western diaspora has been breeding criminal behavior, with robberies, drug dealing and beatings, as well as signs of social dissonance with gambling or even alcoholism had long made inroads among male Chechens. In fact, these problems caused social tolerance for the Chechen's plight in Austria to considerably drop over the years.⁶³⁹ Commentators have been speaking of a sort of "lost generation" of Chechens in exile, where common problems regarding failed integration were much aggravated by ongoing conflict in the home country as well as by traumata and widespread psychological disorders caused by abuses and war traumata. Amid this desolation, for many chance- and jobless young Chechens, going or returning into the arms of the insurgency in the Caucasian forests seemed the only possible redemption. When it got increasingly difficult going back, the erupting Syrian jihad from 2012 onwards posed a much more attractive alternative. On average, new recruits for the insurgency in the North Caucasus had a lifetime of six months before being hunted down and killed by Russian and

⁶³⁸ Ibid.

⁶³⁹ See Wilhelm Theuretsbacher. Hat Österreich ein Tschetschenen-Problem?, Der Kurier, 02.03.2016, <https://kurier.at/chronik/oesterreich/kriminalitaet-hat-oesterreich-ein-tschetschenen-problem/184.308.526>, accessed on January 18, 2023

loyalist security forces, mostly due to their inexperience, the hardships of the life in the woods and the mountains and the harshness of repression.⁶⁴⁰

The Austrian example regarding the Chechen Diaspora is for sure the most representative one what concerns Western European countries, and broadly the same results apply also for the other ones. The same is mostly true for other countries which have been harboring sizeable Chechen and Caucasian communities as a result of the conflict there. Turkey and Jordan received vast inflows of North Caucasian refugees, mainly because of their historical connection with the region. Given the historical relationship between the Ottoman Turks and the Muslim Northern Caucasians as well as the presence of robust Diaspora communities dating back from afar as the 19th century where to blend in; particularly Turkey resulted as a natural haven for Chechen evacuees from 1999 onwards. With the beginning of the Second Chechen War and the much more fierce approach taken by the Russian army and security services, many Chechens chose to flee Chechnya towards neighboring Muslim republics. In the beginning, these refugees were mostly civilians, as the Chechen forces, albeit politically divided, were still intact and fighting. As more and more Chechen fighters got wounded, particularly during vicious close combat in Grozny and during the retreat from the city, they were frequently evacuated through the South of Chechnya towards relative safety in the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia. Prominent members of the Chechen forces but also ordinary fighters who had been seriously wounded were brought also further away into sympathetic countries towards the Chechen cause for treatment. One of the major hubs for the treatment of wounded fighters then were Turkey and Istanbul in particular.⁶⁴¹

Over the years, thousands of veteran fighters from the Northern Caucasus stranded in Istanbul, constituting at some point a numerous Chechen and North Caucasian community. Also, for the various separatist underground entities before and then for the Caucasus Emirate, the sanctuary they enjoyed there was invaluable. Recruitment and funding networks there also generated always big numbers. Traditionally, the Caucasus Emirate's envy was always one of the most important figures outside of the military ranks in the organization's hierarchy. Turkish authorities have been mostly turning both eyes blind over the years in this regards, seeing the North Caucasian insurgency as some sort of irredentist movement, a thing which pleased certain aspects of revanchist neo-ottoman way of thinking in modern-day Turkish politics.⁶⁴² Aside from underground work on behalf of the North Caucasian insurgency however, Caucasians engaged also heavily in criminal activity. They did so out of the lack of

⁶⁴⁰ See Clemens Neuhold. Die verlorene Generation der Tschetschenen, Wiener Zeitung, 22.11.2014, http://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/oesterreich/politik/711829_Die-verlorene-Generation-der-Tschetschenen.html, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁴¹ Interview H.I.

⁶⁴² See Hunter, Shireen. Strategic Developments in Eurasia After 11 September. Ukraine, Taylor & Francis, 2004, p. 21

perspectives, but also their clannish attitude encouraged criminal enterprises, not unlike happening in Western European Diaspora communities.⁶⁴³

“We were all bored and starving here in Istanbul before the Syrian war”, exclaimed a Chechen veteran fighter and returnee from the Syrian Jihad to a journalist before being hunted down and killed in Istanbul by professional killers.⁶⁴⁴ The biography of Abdul-Vakhid Edelgeriyev is emblematic for a whole generation of young Chechens and Caucasian since the beginning of the Second Chechen War. Born in Chechnya in 1983, at the outbreak of the war he was not involved with the insurgency, contrary to his three older brothers. However, soon Russian security services and loyalist authorities began detaining and questioning him again and again, torturing and beating him in detention. The same happened to their father. The indiscriminate repression as well as the desire for revenge for the experienced abuses led the brothers straight in the arms of the insurgency in the mountains. In the mid-2000s, the securitization approach chosen by Federal authorities to deal with the insurgency there was among the most important reasons for the continuing recruitment stream that kept alive the underground in Chechnya and other North Caucasian republics. Edelgeriyev in the meantime collected experience fighting rising through the ranks of the insurgency mainly in the Sunzha district in the southwestern part of Chechnya, partly on the side of Doku Umarov and his deputy, Emir Khamzat. Edelgeriyev was seriously wounded in the leg in 2009 and was forced to leave the battlefield evacuating to Turkey to get treatment. In the years ahead, his three brothers fell one by one in combat.⁶⁴⁵

In 2012, Edelgeriyev was fit again, trying to reach the forests of Chechnya again. The classic clandestine route to the North Caucasus since the start of the conflict led across the Georgian border and the main Caucasian mountain range into Chechnya or Dagestan. Since the Lopota Gorge incident in mid-summer 2012 however, the border was closed also from the Georgian side. Unable to reach the insurgency again, he went back to Istanbul waiting for a better opportunity. In 2013, with enthusiasm erupting amongst Caucasian for the Syrian Jihad, Edelgeriyev also returned to the battlefield, joining a Caucasian militia affiliated to the Caucasus Emirate. He returned in 2015, disillusioned: “Our struggle was always about Russia, he wasn’t interested in Isis,” said his father.⁶⁴⁶ The last chance he took to go against Russia was in the first months of 2016, when he joined a Chechen group fighting in Ukraine alongside the Ukrainian Army against pro-Russian militias. Soon, the Ukrainians asked him to leave, because his association with Doku Umarov and the Caucasian militias fighting in Syria. After that he returned again to Istanbul, where he continued to be one of the top

⁶⁴³ See Clemens Neuhold. Die verlorene Generation der Tschetschenen, Wiener Zeitung, 22.11.2014, <http://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/oesterreich/politik/711829/Die-verlorene-Generation-der-Tschetschenen.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁴⁴ See Prothero, Mitchell, U.S. training helped mold top Islamic State military commander, McClatchy DC, September 15, 2015, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/middle-east/article35322882.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁴⁵ See Walker, Shaun, Murder in Istanbul: Kremlin's hand suspected in shooting of Chechen, The Guardian, January 10, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/10/murder-istanbul-chechen-kremlin-russia-abdulvakhid-edelgireyev>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid.

representatives for the old Caucasus Emirate, still engaged in fundraising. One day in November 2015, he was shot and killed in broad daylight by masked killers.⁶⁴⁷

More are likely to follow: Chechen immigrants in Turkey are closely monitored by the Russian security service, who wants to keep an eye on the processes within the Chechen diaspora in Turkey. There are thousands of Chechens living in Turkey today, many of which are former militants who fought in Chechnya and were treated medically in the country, while others are wives or relatives of former militants. The Russian security services 'reach extends much farther than Turkey however – in 2004 for instance, the former Chechen president Zelimkhan Yandarbiev was killed in Qatar. Two Russian intelligence agents were soon arrested and then handed over to Russia, after being pressured by Moscow. The two officers were greeted with honors by the then- Russian defense minister Sergei Ivanov and immediately released.⁶⁴⁸ In November 2006, Alexander Litvinenko, a former FSB officer who was closely linked with the wars in the Caucasus, died of Polonium-210 poisoning in London, where he had been enjoying political asylum. Another Chechen national, Umar Israilov, a former bodyguard of Ramzan Kadyrov, was killed during daytime in Vienna in January 2009, while Kadyrov's former rival Sulim Yamadaev was killed in Dubai two months later. Generally, Russian security services have been employing Chechen nationals to assassinate other Chechens, while Russian diplomats almost always provided assistance to the perpetrators. Ethnic Chechens employed at Russian embassies functioned as middlemen; these were strategically placed by the Russians to infiltrate the local Chechen diasporas.⁶⁴⁹

The Russian government sees Chechen and more generally Caucasian Diaspora communities abroad as hotbeds of opposition and support of separatist tendencies and regards them because of that as a threat. Therefore, these Diaspora communities have to be neutralized, targeting the most active or outspoken elements of these communities. Of course, militants are in the crosshair of the Russian security services by default. However, also secular-minded figures, present particularly in Western European Diaspora communities and increasingly active in politics are attracting Russian attention. These people are very often targets of blackmail, threats and beatings, if not worse. These acts of intimidation are generally carried out by Chechen loyalist groups working for the Kadyrov regime and the Russian security services. They are also suspected to be working as auxiliaries for the Russian intelligence agencies collecting information about opponents, but also on other branches, being sometimes connected to criminal gangs of Caucasian origin. Chechen and Caucasian exile communities live therefore in an atmosphere of constant fear and mistrust, whereas active opponents have to fear for their safety and sometimes for their life, the silent majority in the middle however fears to be caught in the crossfire between opponents and loyalists. Given the clannish

⁶⁴⁷ See Walker, Shaun, Murder in Istanbul: Kremlin's hand suspected in shooting of Chechen, The Guardian, January 10, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/10/murder-istanbul-chechen-kremlin-russia-abdulvakhid-edelgireyev>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁴⁸ See Kovalev, Andrei A.. Russia's Dead End: An Insider's Testimony from Gorbachev to Putin. United States, Potomac Books, 2017, p. 236

⁶⁴⁹ Interview H.I.

structure of Caucasian communities, almost all exilants have still relatives living in the North Caucasus. Therefore, they fear that revenge acts could also be carried out against them.⁶⁵⁰

The loyalists' *longa manus* however, cannot reach every place. That's why especially religious young men escaped oppressing loyalist regimes in the North Caucasus by emigrating towards the *Ummah*, most often under the pretext of gaining religious education, more often however to simply flee impending persecution. These young people had been children at the time of the beginning of the Second Chechen War, but still almost a decade later faced severe repression and persecution designed to intimidate a whole generation. This led many young guys to flee the North Caucasus. The preferred destination of this last group was mainly middle-eastern countries, since the purpose of the new generation of young North Caucasian refugees was taking refuge in religion, rigorously studying it. At the outbreak of the Syrian conflict found hundreds of young north Caucasians in madrasas in Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and even Syria, with dozens of them reportedly studying at al-Azhar University. Also there, however, the exilants have not always been safe. In 2009, Egyptian police raided the dormitories housing dozens of North Caucasian students studying at al-Azhar. It soon became clear that one of the objectives of the raid was the detainment of the son of Supyan Abdullayev, at the time Doku Umarov's deputy at the head of the Caucasus Emirate. The move happened probably on the instigation of the Russian security services.⁶⁵¹ Further inquiries made by Amnesty International confirmed that dozens of north Caucasian students were detained in the same operation in Cairo alone.⁶⁵² This is an important hint about the motivations of young Caucasians to go to Syria – many felt they had no choice because they would be persecuted everywhere else.

4. Caucasians in Syria

At the same time when the first Chechen detachment in Syria experienced the first heavy battles around Aleppo in August 2012, a group consisting of ethnic Chechens and Kists tried to cross the border between Georgia and Dagestan, in the vicinity of the Lopota Gorge in the main range of the Caucasus Mountains. According to the official version given by the Georgian government, Georgian border troops discovered the group of up to 20 people dressed in camouflage fatigues in a forest on August 28, 2012. The gorge was then blocked by Georgian Special Forces who demanded the surrender of the group, which allegedly took hostage Georgian citizens. After failed negotiations the day after a heavy firefight broke out which left 11 dead on the militant's side as well as 3 on the Georgian side. An important number of weapons and equipment had also been found on the spot by Georgian forces. In the

⁶⁵⁰ See Vatchagaev, Mairbek. Murder of Chechen in Turkey Just Latest in Series of Apparent Russian Killings Abroad, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume 13, Issue 78, Jamestown Foundation, April 21, 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/murder-of-chechen-in-turkey-just-latest-in-series-of-apparent-russian-killings-abroad-2/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁵¹ Mairbek Vatchagaev. Rights Group: Chechen Students Deported from Egypt Face Torture, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume 6 Issue 118, 09.06.2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/rights-group-chechen-students-deported-from-egypt-face-torture/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁵² See Activists: Son of Chechen Rebel Leader Disappears, VOA news, November 2, 2009, <http://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-2009-06-21-voa20-68802882/362077.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

evening of August 29, the Georgian Interior Ministry declared that a Russian provocation consisting in the infiltration of the Georgian border region by an unspecified armed group had been thwarted. It soon turned out however, that the slain militants were ethnic Chechens or Kists trying to infiltrate the border the other way around with the aim to join the insurgency in the North Caucasus. The exact dynamics of this incident have been surrounded by mystery to this day. Rumors about Georgian intelligence services training these militants as well as political maneuvers to assist then Georgia's president, Mikheil Saakashvili, surfaced but were never conclusively proved. The officially only survivor on the militant's side, Akhmad Chatayev, had been a senior representative of the Caucasus Emirate in Austria before moving to Georgia. He had been asked by Georgian authorities to mediate between the security forces and the militants, what he did when suddenly a firefight broke out. Strikingly, at least three of the dead militants had been until weeks before Chechen refugees in Austria.⁶⁵³

Even more interesting is the fact that recently pictures turned out which show not only Chatayev, but also a Georgian Chechen named Feyzullah Margoshvili (aka Salakhuddin Shishani) among the group of militants right before the above-mentioned incident in the Lopota Gorge area.⁶⁵⁴ This means that the infiltrate group was way bigger than supposed, and that this was a high-priority enterprise at the time for the Caucasus Emirate. The presence of at least two high-ranking figures corroborates this fact. After the closing of the clandestine line to the North Caucasus over the Georgian border, Chatayev and Salakhuddin Shishani later re-surfaced in Syria, with Chatayev soon joining ISIL alongside Abu Umar al-Shishani and Salakhuddin al-Shiahsnai becoming the leader of the Caucasus Emirate's faction in Syria.⁶⁵⁵ The Lopota Gorge incident was the culmination of dozens if not hundreds of clandestine movements from Chechen and Caucasian fighters returning to the North Caucasus to fight Russian and loyalist rule there, starting with the beginning of the Second Chechen War. Illegal border crossings had always been a source of great concern for the Russian authorities, which feared the fueling of the insurgency from sanctuaries on the other side of the border which they could not control. Particularly the Pankisi Valley adjacent to the Lopota gorge, has been a resting and staging ground for North Caucasian fighters ever since 1999. It even got infamous publicity when it was mentioned in the infamous speech given by Colin Powell before the UNO to justify the subsequent US invasion of Iraq in 2003.⁶⁵⁶

⁶⁵³ See Emil Souleymanov/Maya Eframann, *The Armed Incident in Georgia's Lopota Valley and its Implications for the Security Situation of the South Caucasus*, PFP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, 17.10.2012, <http://connections-qj.org/article/armed-incident-georgias-lopota-valley-and-its-implications-security-situation-south-caucasus>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁵⁴ See Paraszczuk, Joana. *Photos of Salakhuddin Shishani and Akhmad Chatayev in Pankisi before Lopota Gorge incident*, July 21, 2016, *From Chechnya to Syria Blog*, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25182>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁵⁵ See Joana Paraszczuk. *Russian Citizen Linked to Lopota Gorge Incident Now Heads IS Battalion In Syria*, *Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty*, February 25, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/a/russia-lopota-gorge-incident-islamic-state-syria/26869379.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁵⁶ See Murphy, Paul J.. *The Wolves of Islam: Russia and the Faces of Chechen Terror*. United States, Brassey's, 2004, p. 218

In any case, the Lopota Gorge incident was a crucial turning point in the North Caucasian conflict, even if that did not become immediately clear. From now on recruits, financial funds and weapons could not be conveyed anymore to the already bled out fighting *Jamaats* of the Caucasus Emirate. Indeed, most senior figures from the North Caucasus in Syria expressed that their original intent was to fight Russia in the North Caucasus rather than going to Syria. The presence of important figures, later to be found in Syria, in the area of the Lopota Gorge when the incident took place also proves that. Suddenly, scores of young North Caucasians dreaming of Jihad, social redemption or of a strange mix of both found their way towards the coveted battlefield barred. To be honest, the influx of recruits from the diaspora towards the Caucasus Emirate had been seeing a steady decline from the second half of the 2000's onwards. Several reasons accounted for that. The fight against Russian and loyalist security services had become a lot tougher over the years. The Jihad in the North Caucasus was reckoned among the toughest in Jihadi circles, and indeed by 2010, a new recruit joining the Caucasus emirate had an average remaining life-span of six months.⁶⁵⁷ By 2012 also Caucasus Emirate's financial resources were drying up, mainly because of the disillusion of many donors and because a good share of the funds, which generated since the mid 2000's almost exclusively through fundraising among the Diaspora communities in the Middle East, Turkey and Western Europe were being diverted elsewhere to fund more radical projects at the instigation of divisive, but nevertheless important figures of the radical wing of the Chechen Diaspora in Turkey.⁶⁵⁸

There was however another, more ominous flow of foreign fighters coming directly from the North Caucasus. Aside from young individuals who wished to escape the oppressive Kadyrov regime in Chechnya or poverty and the endless ethnic squabbles in Dagestan, hundreds of known and sometimes condemned Islamist militants, even former and active fighters, found their way to Syria and Iraq. This phenomenon, which began in early 2012, however did not happen in spite of Russian authorities. On the contrary, it happened under the complacent sight of the FSB, which saw the outflow of militant manpower towards the Levante as a good possibility to drain the recruiting streams of the insurgency in the North Caucasus. There is plenty of evidence for this, as also the underlying reasoning for this makes sense.⁶⁵⁹ There are also solid reports however, that indicate that in many cases, Russian security services actively helped and encouraged former and active fighters to give up the fight in return for new documents and a flight ticket towards Turkey.⁶⁶⁰ That would also explain why the insurgency decreased militarily in those years, since there had been no ground-breaking Russian successes in the fight against the insurgency. It seems to have been a smoothly working process, since it contained mutual benefits. At the time, many militants, hunted by security

⁶⁵⁷ Interview H.I.

⁶⁵⁸ See *Networked Insurgencies and Foreign Fighters in Eurasia*. United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019.

⁶⁵⁹ See Weiss, Michael. Russia's Double Game with Islamic Terror, *Daily Beast*, August 23, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/08/23/russia-s-playing-a-double-game-with-islamic-terror0.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁶⁰ See Tsvetkova, Maria. How Russia allowed homegrown radicals to go and fight in Syria, *Reuters Investigates*, May 13, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/russia-militants/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

forces for many years, had recognized the impossibility of a military victory and became increasingly frustrated, as became the Russian security agencies, fighting against an elusive enemy protected by nature and landscape as well as strong bonds of solidarity and kinship.⁶⁶¹

In any case, from 2012 onwards, hundreds and in the end, thousands of Russian citizens went to Syria ending up in one of the Russian-speaking Jamaats. The number of émigrés peaked up during 2013, in the forerun to the Olympic Winter Games in Sochi. That fits with Russian policy at the time, which was ready to use all available hard and soft measures to ensure the smooth and peaceful course of events during the Olympics, as all eyes of the world were looking towards Sochi at the time. So, the Russia “opening-the-floods-policy” probably developed initially as a measure to protect the Sochi Olympics and as it became clear that the Syrian conflict would drag on, it became a very useful tool to produce scorched earth around the North Caucasian insurgency by simply buying out the more responsive elements of the insurgency as well as potential supporters. In the end, the Syrian conflict and all that resulted from it, included ISIS, became the headstone of the Caucasus Emirate, much to the delight of Russian authorities. Local government officials have been freely admitting that the departure of Dagestani radicals in large numbers significantly eased up the situation in the republic, Dagestani government officials freely admitted.⁶⁶² So it is not surprising that almost 2.900 Russian nationals have been going to Syria, for the most part before the beginning of 2014, as explained by Alexander Bortnikov, head of the FSB.⁶⁶³ The Syrian conflict as useful tool to kill off the Caucasus Emirate and the North Caucasian insurgency is one thing: There were other good reasons that became obvious over time to release Russian homegrown Jihadist waste into the Syrian dustbin. In so doing, Moscow had an even stronger excuse to interfere and finally intervene into the conflict, masking it as act of self-defense against North Caucasian legions training for and plotting terrorist acts inside Russia rather than clearly neo-imperialist aims.⁶⁶⁴

Typically, Russian émigrés would fly out of Russia from local airports in Makhachkala or Mineralnye Vody towards Istanbul or Izmir, reaching Russian-speaking guides or “signposts” already in Turkish territory. After the clandestine passing of the border overnight, sometimes with the complicity of Turkish border guards, Caucasians and generally Russian-speaking recruits were granted housing at the so-called *Kavakzi dom* run by the first Caucasian Jamaat in place. This guesthouse worked effectively as an incubator for all subsequent developments concerning Caucasian recruits and, in some cases, also more generally Russian and Ex-soviet

⁶⁶¹ This applied mostly to Dagestan as the strongest remaining insurgent bastion in the Caucasus Emirate, see Williams, Brian G.. *Inferno in Chechnya: The Russian-Chechen Wars, the Al Qaeda Myth, and the Boston Marathon Bombings*. Lebanon, University Press of New England, 2015, p. 201f.

⁶⁶² See Tsvetkova, Maria. Special Report: How Russia Allowed Homegrown Radicals to Go and Fight in Syria.” Reuters, 13 May 2016, www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-militants-specialreport-idUSKCN0Y41OP, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁴ See *Comparative Grand Strategy: A Framework and Cases*. United Kingdom, Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 59

nationals.⁶⁶⁵ In those days, a great variety of genuine Jihadists, but also adventurers, opportunist and often also agent provocateurs from the North Caucasus walked by the place. For example, in early 2013, at a time when not much was still known about organized Caucasian groups in Syria, an obscure figure named Abu Banat started marauding the area around the Syrian city of Jarablus on the Turkish border with his Jamaat consisting of several dozens of mostly Caucasian fighters. Abu Banat's group started misbehaving against the local population almost immediately since its constitution, arresting and killing arbitrarily, estranging the local Syrian population from the foreign fighters flocking in from all over the world.⁶⁶⁶ Abu Banat came finally into the headlights in June 2013, when a video surfaced in social networks where he could be seen beheading Christian priests, stirring a brief but global outcry, as one of the first widely-publicized atrocities of the Syrian conflict.⁶⁶⁷ After that, Abu Banat disappeared, as according to various sources he had been forced to leave Syria on the orders of Abu Umar al-Shishani, which became known to a wider audience only months later. What is interesting is the fact that Abu Banat, whose real name was Magomed Abdurrahmanov and that in fact he was a former employee of the Anti-Terrorism Center of Dagestan's MOI, as confirmed by the same office.⁶⁶⁸ Allegedly, after having lost his job, he travelled to Syria to engage in holy war. After an erratic stint in Raqqa, where he declared the "caliphate", he was ousted to Idlib province, which he ravaged for some time. His actions at the time disaffected many ordinary Syrians and damage the reputation of al-Nusrah, with which at the time he had been associated. Given his background, the story is thrilling and thought producing at the same time, as many stories in this conflict are.

Whereas the story of Abu Banat for the first time brought to attention of a wider audience on Caucasians fighting in Syria, it seems that the first contingents of Caucasians with a large Chechen majority at first came into Syria in the first months of 2012. They were led at first by a shadowy veteran fighter named Vakha who had fought in the Second Chechen War under the authority of Ruslan Gelayev from 2000 until 2003. Most of the participants were also veteran fighters, eager to resume fighting against a perceived Russian proxy. The Jamaat was an integral part of the Caucasus Emirate and it was very small at first, although among the 15 to 20 members most relevant Caucasian players to be in Syria were already present. These included also Sayfullah al-Shishani and Abu Umar al-Shishani, the infamous late military commander in the ranks of the Islamic State.⁶⁶⁹ Despite being a small group they immediately

⁶⁶⁵ See Koz, Alexander and Steshin, Dimitri. Dzhikhad na eksport. Chast' 1, Komsomolskaya Pravda, November 27, 2013, <http://www.kp.ru/daily/26165.4/3052032/?cp=2> and www.kp.md/daily/26165/3052520/, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁶⁶ See Paraszczuk, Joana. From Chechnya to Syria Blog, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=21732>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁶⁷ See Roggio, Bill and Lundquist, Lisa. Syrian jihadists behead Catholic priest, 2 others, Long War Journal, July 1, 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/07/syrian_jihadists_beh.php, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁶⁸ See Dagestanets vakhkhabit otrezal golovy dvukh Khristian v Sirii, MOI Dagestan, <http://moidagestan.ru/blogs/45282/30070>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁶⁹ See Joana Paraczuk, From Chechnya to Syria Blog, *1st Imarat Kavkaz Amir in Syria Fought Alongside Gelayev In Chechnya, Died Fighting Alongside Ahrar*, 21.07.2016, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25171>, accessed on January 18, 2023

got involved into heavy fighting around Aleppo, were they soon counted first casualties. Infighting however, a constant characteristic among North Caucasians, soon broke out, which led to the expulsion of Emir Vakha from the Caucasus Emirate by senior representatives from the organization in Turkey.⁶⁷⁰ This would be only the first of a long series of schisms and splits among the Caucasian community in Syria. At first, in 2012-2013 the group nevertheless grew fastly with influxes of young people from all Diaspora communities in Europe and the Middle East. Significantly, the group financed itself with money coming most likely from criminal enterprises that had been developed in the exile countries. Reportedly Sayfullah brought over one million dollars of his own into the group, financing the bulk of expenses for purchasing equipment, weapons and ammunition in the first phase of the Caucasian group in Syria.⁶⁷¹

The group then chose a new leader amongst its members and the choice fell on Abu Umar al-Shishani, a *Kist*, an ethnic Chechen of Georgian nationality, and assumed a new name, *Katibat al-Muhajireen*, the Brigade of the Emigrants. Abu Umar al-Shishani was the *nom de guerre* of Tarkhan Batirashvili. Born in 1986 in Georgia's Pankisi Valley on the border to Chechnya, he experienced the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 as a private of the Georgian Armed Forces, although he seems to have had contact with Chechen fighters who used the Pankisi Valley as a staging ground in the early 2000s, occasionally also offering them help.⁶⁷² Pictures from the time around the Russo-Georgian Conflict however still show a western-styled, beardless young man in his twenties, not yet radicalized towards Salafi-Jihadism. After the 2008 war, he was arrested on charges of gun-smuggling, which he admitted later on having been on behalf of the Caucasus Emirate. When he was released, he went to Turkey, ending up in the end in Syria with one of the first batches of Caucasian militants. He must have earned good credentials in his years as facilitator for the smuggling of weapons and funds for the Caucasus Emirate. In any case, soon after his entry into Syria, he became the man in charge of the *Kavkazii Dom*, the Caucasian house situated in XXX, where Caucasian recruits were received, screened and sorted to the emergent combat units. Soon the Caucasian Jamaat, although over time not being the only Caucasian combat unit operating in Syria, as the biographies of other more or less charismatic figures will show below, grew in size, reaching 500 to 700 recruits by the beginning of 2013. This enabled the *Katibat al-Muhajireen*, as the Caucasian Jamaat renamed itself at the end of 2012, to muscle in with bigger and more prestigious groups like Jabhat al-Nusrah. Having been observing a Jihadist-Salafist stance from the start the Caucasian brigade chose to work together only with Islamist groups. From the beginning of 2013 onwards, the Caucasian brigade participated in various attacks and seizing of former regime bases alongside JN and other groups. First battlefield honors led to a merger with two lesser-known groups composed of Syrian jihadis named *Jaish*

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁷¹ Interestingly, this seems to be a common pattern throughout the different shades of

⁶⁷² See the interview with Batirashvili's father, in Alan Cullison, Meet the Rebel Commander in Syria That Assad, Russia and the U.S. All Fear, Wall Street Journal, November 19, 2013, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303309504579181962177007316>, , accessed on January 18, 2023

Muhammad and Kataeb Khattab in March 2013, which was an attempt to put down more firm local roots, however still retaining a Caucasian majority. The new group came to be called *Jaish al-Muhajereen wal-Ansar (JMA)*.⁶⁷³

The first big battlefield success of JMA, came only months later. At the beginning of August 2013, Abu Umar al-Shishani led his group into the storming of Menagh air base.⁶⁷⁴ The base had been a strong point of regime forces ever since the outset of the civil war in Syria. Although it had been besieged for over a year by changing constellations of rebel groups, neither had been able to conquer it until then. Indeed, British journalist Richard Hall still at the beginning of 2012 saw for himself the inability of Syrian rebel groups to conquer the base, one of many isolated, but for rebel groups still dangerous regime outposts in the North of the country. “We have tried everything to take it, believe me,” one of Hall’s interviewees said. The regime base had until then been defying every possibility of effectively rebel power projection in the North.⁶⁷⁵ That’s why the regime base became an objective of Abu Umar al-Shishani’s combat-proven JMA by the Summer of 2013. With other rebel groups cordoning off the base, Abu Umar al-Shishani’s Caucasian assault groups managed to crack Menagh’s defenses by sending in one tank filled with explosives driven by a suicide bomber. Menagh’s fall to Abu Umar al-Shishani’s warriors made an enduring impression on other rebel factions and finally sanctioned the already high battlefield reputation of Chechens, and more generally, Caucasian fighters. Abu Umar al-Shishani’s reputation improved also enormously, the victory at Menagh being one of the main reasons for his alleged military prowess later in his jihadist career. Indeed, Menagh allowed Abu Umar al-Shishani to enter the higher ranks of ISIL, on which behalf, although secretly at the time, he had conquered Menagh air base. Later on, it came to light that Abu Umar al-Shishani and a small number of his closest associates inside JMA had sworn an oath of allegiance to al-Baghdadi already in the spring of 2013, that for the time being had been kept secret.⁶⁷⁶ This was a common tactic in the early days of ISIL’s expansion into Syria led by the infamous Haji Bakr, where secret allegiances and secret plots culminated into the conquest of Eastern Syria by the first half of 2014. Indeed, Abu Umar al-Shishani acknowledged his role as ISIL’s military commander for Northern Syria only in November of 2013. This caused him to split from his own group, since most

⁶⁷³ See Roggio, Bill, Chechen commander forms ‘Army of Emigrants,’ integrates Syrian groups, March 28, 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/03/chechen_jihadist_for.php, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁷⁴ Alongside Abu Umar’s faction, Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, also the Northern Storm Brigade, Tawhid Brigades and Liwa al-Fatah participated in the siege, whereas JMA carried the actual assault. See Syrian rebels capture military airport near Turkey, August 6, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-airport-idUSBRE97411J20130805>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁷⁵ See Hall Richard, If Syria's rebels can't take The Fortress, how can they take the capital?, Independent, January 24, 2013, www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/if-syrias-rebels-cant-take-the-fortress-how-can-they-take-the-capital-8465325.html, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁷⁶ See Paraszczuk, Joana, From Chechnya to Syria Blog, Umar Shishani’s man who fought at Menagh, then was killed in Dagestan, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25084>, accessed on January 18, 2023

members didn't want to break up the oath of allegiance they had sworn to Doku Umarov as Amir of the Caucasus Emirate.⁶⁷⁷

5. The Islamic State

Abu Umar al-Shishani had been recruited to ISIL by Abu Atheer al-Absi. Al-Absi had been a hardcore Salafi whose brother Firas al-Absi had been part of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's group in Afghanistan.⁶⁷⁸ Afterwards, the two brothers were instrumental in facilitating and assisting the flow of foreign fighters towards AQI via Syria, with the ostensible knowledge and tacit approval of Syrian intelligence services. In 2007, however, the brothers were arrested, serving time in the infamous Sednaya prison until 2011, when they were freed again in the course of the big amnesty promulgated by the regime.⁶⁷⁹ That one came after the eruption of popular protest that developed into the Syrian conflict. It has never been established exactly why the regime freed well-known hardcore Jihadists in that crucial moment, when it became clear that this time protesters would not give up easily. It stands however to reason that this move came as a means to criminalize, divide and radicalize the whole protest movement and later secular, moderate rebel groups by a wholesale application of the terrorist label on them.⁶⁸⁰ Indeed, this is exactly what has been happening since. In this particular situation in Syria, looking back at the development of the conflict, this tactic is reminiscent of the tactics adopted by Russian intelligence services in the North Caucasus. Indeed, also the encouragement and the "fostering" of Jihadi departure from the North Caucasus towards Syria by Russian security services is part of it. All of this reminds of the soviet-era NKWD/KGB school, where opposition elements were if not mad, then for sure "terrorist elements".⁶⁸¹

In any case, the al-Absi brothers after their release soon formed a militant group each. The one headed by Firas was named *Majlis Shura Dawlat al-Islam* (MSDI) and was active in Aleppo and the surrounding countryside from July 2012 onwards. Atheer al-Absi's group was named *Katibat Usood al-Sunna* (KUS) and operated in Homs since March 2012. Both groups reminded in its semiotics of ISI, and indeed, after Firas al-Absi's death in combat against moderate rebel factions in September 2012, Atheer merged both groups naming the new entity *Majlis Shura Mujahideen* (MSM), not coincidentally the name of one of ISI's former incarnations, as Kyle Orton correctly observed.⁶⁸² The MSM network now spanned from

⁶⁷⁷ See _Joscelyn, Thomas Chechen-led group swears allegiance to head of Islamic State of Iraq and Sham, Long War Journal, November 27, 2013,

http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/11/muhajireen_army_swea.php, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁷⁸ See Orton, Kyle, Death of a Caliphate Founder and the Role of Assad, Kyle Orton's Blog, March 10, 2016, <https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2016/03/10/obituary-the-islamic-states-amr-al-absi-abu-al-atheer/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁸¹ See Falkowski, Maciej and Lang, Józef. Homo Jihadicus - Islam In the former USSR and the phenomenon of the post-soviet militants in Syria and Iraq, Ośrodek studiów Wschodnich im. Marka Karpia/Centre for Eastern Studies, Warsaw 2015, <http://aei.pitt.edu/69197/1/homojihadicus.pdf>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁸² See Orton, Kyle, Death of a Caliphate Founder and the Role of Assad, Kyle Orton's Blog, March 10, 2016, <https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2016/03/10/obituary-the-islamic-states-amr-al-absi-abu-al-atheer/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

Aleppo to Homs. It is very likely that aside *Jabhat al-Nusra* (JN), also the MSM had been formed and acted as a secret front group of ISI at a time when doubts about al-Jolani's loyalty towards ISIS and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi arose. Among other, tensions and sporadic armed clashes arising between MSM and JN from January 2013 onwards, at a time when the internal debate between JN and ISI had been getting increasingly hot, are good hints toward this explanation. With JN disowning MSM, with whom it had collaborated as until then secret ISIS's wing in Syria, MSM responded with immediate adherence to ISI, now renamed ISIL after the split with JN in the spring of 2013.⁶⁸³ Meanwhile, tough, through its networks, MSM had been reaching out to many groups of foreign fighters, with an important number of Western European foreign fighters joining MSM in the course of 2012.⁶⁸⁴

In this context, particularly Caucasian foreign fighters, forming one of the most homogenous and organized foreign fighter groups, struck the attention of Atheer al-Absi. Starting from the beginning of 2013, al-Absi started to slowly co-opt Abu Umar al-Shishani on behalf and under the direction of Haji Bakr. The action at Menagh was one the first Abu Umar al-Shishani ostensibly performed on behalf of ISIL, although secretly. After shortly considering leaving ISIL, Abu Umar al-Shishani had to reconsider, as he was faced by assassination threats from Haji Bakr.⁶⁸⁵ The task of bringing the bulk of JMA over to ISIL, however, was a daunting one. When Abu Umar al-Shishani reached out to other respected commanders outside of his inner circle which had already secretly pledged allegiance to ISIL in his group to convince them to unite with ISIL, he encountered difficulties. One of the co-founders of JMA, Ruslan Machalikashvili, better known by his *nom-de-guerre* Sayfullah, rejected this consideration straightly, which caused his expulsion from JMA in September 2013 under charges of embezzlement and takfiri tendencies.⁶⁸⁶ In fact, the split came about the issue of joining ISIL or not. Sayfullah was contrary to that, not so much out of ideological reasons, rather organizational ones. Having already pledged allegiance to the Amir of the Caucasus emirate Doku umarov, he argued, he couldn't change allegiance.⁶⁸⁷ Sayfullah then had to break off JMA at gunpoint, taking with him a few dozen fighters with whom he formed his own group named after him. The Sayfullah Jamaat from now on operated on the northern outskirts of Aleppo, cooperating with many other Islamist rebel groups, and particularly with JN. Over the next months, Sayfullah underwent strong organizational and ideological ties to JN, though retaining a certain degree of independence.⁶⁸⁸

⁶⁸³ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁴ See Josh Halliday and Jonathan Bucks. "Paris attacks 'mastermind' Abdel-Hamid Abu Oud: what we know". The Guardian, November 16, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/16/abdelhamid-abaaoud-suspected-mastermind-of-paris-terror-attacks>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁸⁵ English Translation of @Wikibaghdady, collected by Yousef Bin Tashfin, <https://justpaste.it/e90q>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁸⁶ See Paraszczuk, Joana. From Chechnya to Syria Blog, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25233>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁸⁷ See Paraszczuk, Joana. From Chechnya to Syria Blog, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=14798/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁸⁸ Ibid.

Sayfullah, whose real name was Ruslan Machalikashvili, was also of *Kist* ethnos, having been born and living in the Pankisi Valley. He had come to Syria in the second half of 2012. In his eulogy after his death, it was revealed that he had fought in Chechnya since the start of the Second Chechen War participating in the defense of Grozny and the infamous retreat through the Russian siege ring in the first months of the year 2000.⁶⁸⁹ At the time he was wounded, so he went home trying to reach the Chechen battlefield again at a later stage. Allegedly, he then went to Afghanistan fighting ISAF Forces because of the impossibility to reach Chechnya again. After a lengthy time spent in Turkey, where he was most probably engaging in illegal activities which bore the brunt of the initial funding of the first Caucasian Jamaat under the command of Abu Umar al-Shishani, Machalikashvili went to Syria becoming immediately one of the most influential commanders. Once in Syria, he adopted the *kunya* Sayfullah Shishani fighting with his Jamaat around Aleppo and in Idlib province.⁶⁹⁰ Soon after the declaration of ISIL, al-Shishani and Sayfullah fell out. Probably Abu Umar saw Sayfullah as an obstacle to the already planned merger of Abu Umar and the fighters loyal to him personally with ISIL, since Sayfullah had made no secret about his disavowal of ISIL's declaration, which he interpreted as an act of fitna.⁶⁹¹ In any case, Sayfullah was ousted from JMA under false pretexts.⁶⁹²

Sayfullah then broke off from JMA taking with him a small portion of the group's fighters, founding his own *Jamaat* which took his name. Soon, he allied himself with Jabhat al-Nusrah, although he retained a certain degree of independence. Henceforth, he concentrated his efforts at the northern front around Aleppo. Sometime after the split with Abu Umar his Jamaat had regained a few hundred members, although by the beginning of 2014 only half of those were still Caucasians. By the end of 2013, Sayfullah had not reached notable objectives, since his small Jamaat lacked the means and logistics to persist in the heavy house-to-house fighting at the outskirts of Aleppo. So he again shifted the focus of his group, this time towards Aleppo Central Prison, which formed a Regime stronghold outside Aleppo itself. On that occasion, he officially embraced JN, making al-Julani's help in the storm on the prison the condition for swearing allegiance to him, becoming integral part of JN.⁶⁹³ Sayfullah's jamaat and allied groups nearly managed to overrun the prison, cutting it off from Regime-held territory, but ultimately did not manage to storm it. In the second attempt in February 2014, Sayfullah was hit by shrapnel from a stray mortar round, with that moment being caught on camera. Sayfullah died instantly, and almost instantly had become a hero for almost the whole Jihadist community, with the video of his demise being uploaded dozens of times on social media.

⁶⁸⁹ It is not clearly known which group he was affiliated to at the time, but comparing his biography with that of other *Kist* Jihadist, he was probably affiliated with Khattab's group.

⁶⁹⁰ See Pismo v redaktsiyu. Amir Sayfullakh Shishani, Kavkaz Center, June 20, 2014, <http://kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2014/06/20/105209.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁹¹ See Paraszczuk, Joana. From Chechnya to Syria Blog <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=22189>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁹² See Paraszczuk, Joana. From Chechnya to Syria Blog <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25233>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁹³ See Paraszczuk, Joana, From Chechnya to Syria Blog <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=16549>, accessed on January 18, 2023

Indeed, al-Julani himself praised Sayfullah in an eulogy posted on social media via official JN media channels.⁶⁹⁴ His Jamaat continued fighting with JN, although lacking a strong Caucasian successor in command of the Jamaat, many of its members seem to have split from JN leaving towards ISIS, lured by charismatic Caucasian figures and ISIS expansion into the the North Caucasus with the declaration of the Wilayah Kavkaz in June of 2015.⁶⁹⁵

After the removal of Sayfullah, JMA was called on by Abu Umar al-Shishani to join wholesale to ISIS. This caused a split of the group, since most, if not all members had given bayah to Doku Umarov as Amir of the Caucasus Emirate. Most fighters stayed true to their oath and remained loyal to Umarov, whereas Abu Umar al-Shishani broke off towards ISIS with his inner circle in fall of 2013. Instead of Abu Umar al-Shishani, Giorgi Kushtanashvili, also known as Salahuddin Shishani, became the new leader of JMA, which at the time was still of Caucasian majority. Salahuddin, also a *Kist* of Georgian nationality was born in the late 1970s in the Pankisi Valley. He fought in the Second Chechen War with Ruslan Gelayev, participating in the incursion into the Kodori Gorge and into Ingushetia in 2002. After more sporadic fighting with Gelayev's Jamaat, Sayfullah engaged in facilitating the flow of Chechen fighters into Chechnya from the Pankisi Valley.⁶⁹⁶ As in the case of Murad Margoshvili, reports link also Salahuddin to Georgian intelligence – indeed, pictures taken together with Akhmad Chatayev prove Salahuddin's presence in the Lopota Gorge shortly before the incident with Georgian security forces taking place. Indeed, he himself acknowledged his originary intention to enter Dagestan to fight Russian occupation of the North Caucasus, but being barred by "12.000 Georgian soldiers" to do so.⁶⁹⁷

Through his leadership of JMA, Salahuddin proved to be staunchly loyal to the Caucasus Emirate, claiming to represent the Caucasus Emirate contribution to the fight against Assad and Russian interests and defying any conflicts with other factions, including ISIS, although he was targeted by attacks at least a few times. In 2014, Salahuddin ordered JMA back onto the frontline in the north-western part of Aleppo, around the strategically important Artillery Academy and the neighborhood of Laramoun.⁶⁹⁸ Initially, the Caucasians achieved a breakthrough, conquering the better part of the neighborhood in murderous urban close quarter fighting, regime reinforcements however soon forced JMA's offensive to halt. Nevertheless, this was perhaps the most prominent feat achieved by Caucasian fighters in

⁶⁹⁴ See Amir «Dzhabkhat an-Nusra» Abu Mukhammad al'-Dzhavlani ob amire Seyfullakh Shishani, February 10, 2014, <http://kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2014/02/10/103115/amir-dzhabkhat-an-nusra-abu-mukhammad-al-dzhavlani-ob-amire-sejfullakh-shishani.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁹⁵ See ISIS Declares Governorate in Russia's North Caucasus Region, Institute for the Study of War, June 23, 2015, <http://understandingwar.org/background/isis-declares-governorate-russia%E2%80%99s-north-caucasus-region>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁹⁶ See Paraszczuk, Joana, From Chechnya to Syria Blog <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=23682>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁹⁷ See Paraszczuk, Joana. From Chechnya to Syria Blog Salahuddin shishani fought under Gelayev & in Abkhazia, May 27, 2015, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=23790>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁶⁹⁸ See Mudzhakhidy «Dzheysh Mukhadzhirin va Ansar» shturmom ovladeli peredovymi pozitsiyami asaditov, March 17, 2014, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2014/03/17/103594.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

Syria, rivaled only by the capture of Menagh air base. After varying battlefield luck, which reverberated into significant losses of veteran Caucasian fighters over time, at the beginning of 2015 JMA found itself profoundly changed. The need for new recruits had led to a steady influx of non-Caucasians into the group. This led to an increasing loss of cohesion, and in fact opened the door to a full-fledged *fitna* in June 2015, when Salahuddin was evicted from JMA together with his deputy Abdul-Karim Krinsky on seemingly futile grounds.⁶⁹⁹ This move only accelerated the atomization of the Caucasian Diaspora in Syria, downgrading the stature and the influence of the Caucasus Emirate in Syria significantly. Ironically, that happened hand in hand with the development in the North Caucasus. Salahuddin, however, has been continuing to stay true to his ideals, as he founded a new group called *Imarat Kavkaz ve Sham* in the summer of 2015. The group has been operating until present days, even if along with all other Caucasian groups it has no more relevancy whatsoever in the current course of the conflict.⁷⁰⁰ The once powerful and influential JMA today is not anymore, an expression of Caucasian warrior pathos as it was in its early days. It is still a multinational group with foreign fighters from many countries, but it too has lost much of its force, being also on the verge of irrelevancy.

Not all Caucasian field commanders in Syria share the same organizational genealogy, however. There have also been a few which from the outset of the conflict preferred to go their own way, forming their own groups and operating independently, though mostly in opportunistically in changing alliances with other bigger or smaller Islamist groups. The most prominent, looking also back at the most interesting biography of these is certainly Murad Margoshvili, also known through his *nom de guerre* Muslim Shishani. Like most prominent Caucasian players today in Syria, he is also an ethnic *Kist*, born in Georgia's Pankisi Valley in 1970. Allegedly, he joined a combat Jamaat in Chechnya in 1999, serving also under Ibn al-Khattab in the Kavkaz training camp in Serzhen Yurt as an instructor. It is unclear whether he also participated in Basaev's and Khattab's invasion of Dagestan. With the outbreak of the Second Chechen War he continued to fight in the subdivisions composed of foreign fighters under Khattab and after the latter's death, under Abu Walid, fighting in the Vedeno area from 2000 until 2003, where he lead strong insurgent groups. That he already at that point was an important mid-level commander is substantiated by the fact that he is depicted among the field commanders present at the Majlis-ul-Shura in the summer of 2003, after the rapprochement between the seculars and the radicals in 2002.⁷⁰¹

In 2003, he was sent by Abu Walid to Ingushetia to organize insurgent activity, participating as commander of several Ingush Jamaats in high-profile attacks against Russian security forces in Ingushetia's impervious Galashki area. In retrospective Muslim Shishani was instrumental in the first phase of the expansion of the North Caucasian insurgency, being one

⁶⁹⁹ See Paraszczuk, Joana, *Imarat Kavkaz ve Sham, From Chechnya to Syria Blog* <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=23834>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰¹ See Paraszczuk, Joana. *From Chechnya to Syria Blog*, Anna Politkovskaya on attempted kidnapping of Muslim Shishani, April 8, 2014, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=21616>, accessed on January 18, 2023

of the first insurgent commanders operating outside Chechnya.⁷⁰² In October 2003 he was arrested by Russian authorities. However, in 2006 he was acquitted managing to evade a kidnapping attempt obviously orchestrated by elements of the local security branches. After that he returned to his hometown in the Pankisi Valley. Some accounts state that he lived a peaceful life there, other accounts however draw a more likely picture of Shishani being from 2006 to 2012 an active facilitator for foreign fighters and returnees who wanted to enter Chechnya and later Dagestan via Georgia. Allegedly, he stayed in close contact particularly with Arab fighter networks through his connections dating back in the time he worked with Khattab and Abu Walid. Additionally, some sources state that Shishani had ties to the Georgian intelligence agencies, acting on their behalf. Furthermore, the same sources allege that Shishani was also present at the scene of the infamous Lopota Gorge incident in 2012.⁷⁰³ After that, like the others, he went to Syria where he immediately founded his own group, retaining independence from the start.

In Syria, he has been acting as emir of *Junud al-Sham*, a group composed of North Caucasian and Lebanese recruits. The group has been active mainly in the Latakia area. Whereas *Junud al-Sham* has been able to commandeer respectable numbers of members at times, since the second half of 2015 has seen a steady decline in numbers. Although never significant in the wider picture of the Syrian Conflict, the group has been slowly sliding into irrelevancy since. One of the main reasons for many members to quit Shishani's group was the irresistible propaganda of ISIL. Particularly Chechen recruits, and particularly after the declaration of ISIL's Wilayah Kavkaz in 2015 were prone to leave not only JMA, but also *Junud al-Sham* for ISIL.⁷⁰⁴ To counteract that, Muslim Shishani publicly denounced ISIL many times via his propaganda channel, but with mixed results.

The tendency towards factionalism and protagonism took its toll over time. Aside from the described main factions, which have been operational more or less from the first phase of the conflict in Syria, other Caucasian groups present in Syria formed afterwards and in parallel. They entail the Jamaat Ahadun Ahad⁷⁰⁵, Ajnad Sham, the so-called Tarkhan's Jamaat and several smaller entities. These groups are very small, counting each some dozens of members. These are predominantly Caucasians, but also local recruits have been accepted in their ranks. There has been observed a high fluctuation, and only core members have tended to stay loyal to the respective group for longer periods. But even they have had the tendency to shuttle

⁷⁰² During one of the Chechen field commanders Shuras in the Summer of 2002 it was decided at the urging of Shamil Basayev to expand the conflict into neighboring Ingushetia with the intent to broaden the war and ultimately the difficulties of the Russian security services. Muslim Shishani was among the operatives sent there to oversee combat operations. At the same time, two prominent exponents of the Arab foreign fighters contingent, Ahmad Nasser al-Azimi (aka abu Omar al-Kuwaiti and Abu Dzeit) and Abu Kuteiba Jammal organized the logistical and financial structure of the Ingush part of the insurgency.

⁷⁰³ <http://kavkazpress.ru/archives/90460>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷⁰⁴ See Vatchagaev, Mairbek. Chechens Fighting in Syria Increasingly Joining Forces with Islamic State, March 3, 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/chechens-fighting-in-syria-increasingly-joining-forces-with-islamic-state-2/#.Vt0Q9fI97IU>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷⁰⁵ See Paraszczuk, Joana. From Chechnya to Syria Blog, New Video: The History of Sabri's Jamaat (Uzbek group in ISIS), August 28, 2014, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=22465>, accessed on January 18, 2023

back and forth from the front. These groups in reality do not have articulated ideological or religious identities and tend to see the core of its being around a particular leader or personality. This is why they do not have had a real operational impact on the ground. The biographies of the main actors among North Caucasians in Syria tell us a lot about the reasons for a whole generation of North Caucasians to join the Syrian conflict, as well as the reasons for some of the complexities and difficulties to understand that conflict in depth, as exemplified by the Caucasian micro-cosmos in Syria. Originally almost all of the North Caucasian that have been going to Syria over time did not want to go there, but to return to the North Caucasus to fight Russia and their local proxies. A combined host of reasons however took them to Syria. The almost complete closing down of any clandestine route to the North Caucasus after the Lopota Gorge incident was probably the single most important reason for that. Russian security policies added a huge contribution regarding the external circumstances that lead to the involvement of many North Caucasians in the Syrian conflict.⁷⁰⁶

The biographical comparison of the leading Caucasian jihadist commanders coincides with the analytical scrutiny of the Caucasian groups which have been operating in Syria. They have all a similar background, having started from the same point. They all have been militarily active in the jihadist spectrum of the North Caucasian insurgency or acted as facilitators smuggling weapons and funds on behalf of the same milieu. In any case, all started as rookie insurgents, radicalizing themselves increasingly over the years involved in the dirty conflict in the North Caucasus. Whereas the initial ideal and goal of most actors in the beginning was freedom from the Russian yoke and solidarity towards fellow Chechens and North Caucasians, over time, radicalization took place, and nationalist ideals were abandoned increasingly for Islamist ones. Thus, it should not surprise the observer that the war in Syria, perceived by Sunni Islamists as one against oppressed Sunni Muslims, gained almost the same status as the one to be fought in the North Caucasus. Years and years of fighting against the Russians and a consequent gradual radicalization brought about a change in perspective: Sunni Muslims were now seen as one unit; thus ethnicity as means for identification was replaced by religion.⁷⁰⁷

Another striking feature of Caucasian groups fighting in Syria and within IS, is the fact that the majority of leaders are *Kists*, which means Chechens of Georgian nationality. Over the course of the North Caucasian conflict, the obvious importance of Kist networks not only in the facilitation of the insurgency, providing funds and weapons over the border, but also as members and sometimes leaders of armed groups had not been emerging. Another cause of the emergence of Kists as Caucasian standard bearers in Syria comes from the fact that these were obviously less affected by high loss rates experienced by Chechen and generally North Caucasian insurgent cadres in the combat against Russian and loyalist forces. Through the

⁷⁰⁶ See Falkowski, Maciej and Lang, Józef. *Homo Jihadicus - Islam In the former Ussr and the phenomenon of the post-soviet militants in Syria and Iraq*, Ośrodek studiów Wschodnich im. Marka Karpia/Centre for Eastern Studies, Warsaw 2015, <http://aei.pitt.edu/69197/1/homojihadicus.pdf>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷⁰⁷ Ibid.

possibility of slipping over the border in a much easier way, many Kist veterans managed to survive the conflict dragging on in the Northern Caucasus since 1999. In any case, also the Kists show, like their Chechen brothers, a marked tendency towards protagonism and factionalism. Indeed, today, as of end 2016, the landscape of Caucasian units operating in Syria is difficult to discern. Infighting, continued splits and personal conflicts have been seriously undermining and hampering the networks and the efficiency of these units. That means that Caucasian Jihadis no longer play an important role on the strategic level of the conflict. There may however exist tactical implications whereas Caucasian units can make the difference on the ground when fighting alongside other rebel units. The Caucasian element is therefore condemned to irrelevancy for the foreseeable future in the framework of the Syrian War. That doesn't mean however, that individuals coming from the North Caucasus and who have been training and gaining military experience over years, won't put these skills into practice once going back in the future.

6. Killing Off the Caucasus Emirate

Soon after Abu Umar al-Shishani's departure from JMA, he publicly acknowledged his until then secret allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In fact, Abu Umar al-Shishani had been acting as ISIS' military commander for Northern Syria since the days of the storm on Menagh air base. In November of 2013, he was officially appointed to that position, becoming one of the most important military commanders of ISIS. There has been much speculation about Abu Umar al-Shishani's military proves. In fact, however, he was at best a mediocre field commander, given the stubborn frontal human wave-style tactics he applied in various instances. The victory at Menagh for example, had been indeed expensive, one that had come at the cost of hundreds of fighters. ISIS units under Abu Umar al-Shishani's command experienced even worse losses in the attempt to reduce the pocket in Kobane held by Kurdish YPG fighters in the fall of 2014, which in the end resulted in the first significant defeat experienced by al-Baghdadi's fighters. As a matter of fact, Abu Umar al-Shishani has been targeted in various instances by insider critique for his lack of military skills.⁷⁰⁸ This is entirely credible, given the fact that he had only briefly been in actual combat as a private in the Georgian army for only a few weeks in the 2008 war against Russia. Since he had never been fighting in the ranks of the Caucasus, it is obvious that he had not had the possibility to build up military experience previously.

In any case, it seems clear that the real value of Abu Umar al-Shishani for ISIS resulted first in his key position of leader of a powerful group composed of battle-proven Caucasian fighters and other foreign fighters, later on as a figurehead, a Jihadist poster boy posed to attract droves of foreign fighters. This means that although Abu Umar al-Shishani still retained military command over ISIS crack units, first in Syria and then in Iraq, there are no hints that he attained real power or influence at the top level of the organization. In fact, it is much more probable that Abu Umar al-Shishani was regarded with suspect by ISIS' top level,

⁷⁰⁸ See Paraszczuk, Joana, From Chechnya to Syria Blog, Translation of statement by Khalid Shishani regarding Umar Shishani, November 6, 2014, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=22813>, accessed on January 18, 2023

as multiple sources suggest that his loyalty towards ISIS had not always been consistent.⁷⁰⁹ Aside from Atheer al-Absi, who had been instrumental in the recruitment of Abu Umar al-Shishani at first, another Caucasian seems to have been playing a key role in the recruitment, legitimization and propaganda efforts on behalf of ISIS' Caucasian wing. According to Russian sources, Said-Umarovich Atabiyev was born in 1983 in Karachay-Cherkessia, being an ethnic Karachay. As an adherent to radical Islam, he allegedly went to study Islamic theology at al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, in 2003. After 2006 he came back, acting as a sympathizer of armed underground groups in Karachay-Cherkessia. However, he was soon caught, acting as an informant for Russian security services and allowing them to break up at least one Jihadist cell in the KBK wing of the Caucasus Emirate. After one year of detention, he left the North Caucasus for Syria at a fairly early stage, where thanks to his religious knowledge he succeeded in attracting the attention of Caucasian and local Jihadists alike.⁷¹⁰

Now Atabiyev called himself Abu Jihad, and he was soon directing the media work of Katibat al-Mujahideen and then JMA, operating *fisyria.com*, the first official and structured media site dedicated to Caucasian fighters in Syria. Although Abu Jihad completely lacked military skills, through his religious knowledge he was able to influence Abu Umar al-Shishani and become a sort of spiritual advisor to him. His religious credentials were indeed instrumental to lure Caucasian fighters, primarily ethnic Karachays, but also increasing numbers of Chechen and Dagestani recruits away from the North Caucasus towards JMA and later towards ISIS. It is very likely that when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Haji Bakr and Atheer al-Absi courted Abu Umar al-Shishani in clandestine meetings early 2013, still before the split with JN and al-Qaeda, with the idea of the declaration of a new caliphate, Abu Jihad was instrumental in Abu Umar al-Shishani's decision to join – although for the moment secretly – ISI/ISIS. In any case, Abu Jihad's role in that is entirely plausible, given his own taste for radicalism and Abu Umar al-Shishani's ignorance in religious affairs.⁷¹¹ When Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the declaration of ISIL starting the *fitna* with JN and al-Qaeda in April 2013, many in his group rejoiced.⁷¹² Abu Umar al-Shishani however was worried and wavered in his loyalty towards ISIS. When al-Baghdadi and Haji Bakr threatened him with assassination, Abu Umar al-Shishani took this threat very seriously, since he allegedly was surrounded by ISIS supporters even in his inner circle at JMA, where one of the most prominent members was Abu Jihad.⁷¹³ Judging from the acrimony used by *fisyria.com*, at the time directed by Sbu Jihad, to slander Sayfullah's fame after his ousting from JMA because of his opposition

⁷⁰⁹ See english Translation of @Wikibaghdady, collected by Yousef Bin Tashfin, <https://justpaste.it/e90q>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷¹⁰ See Paraszczuk, Joana. Syria: ISIS Commander Umar Shishani's Right-Hand-Man Slams Jabhat Al-Nusra "Treachery." From Chechnya to Syria, 18 Feb. 2014, chechensinsyria.wordpress.com/2014/02/18/syria-umar-shishanis-right-hand-man-slams-jabhat-al-nusra-treachery/. Accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷¹¹ Ibid.

⁷¹² See Pismo v redaktsiyu. Amir Sayfullakh Shishani, Kavkaz Center, June 20, 2014, <http://kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2014/06/20/105209.shtml>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷¹³ See english Translation of @Wikibaghdady, collected by Yousef Bin Tashfin, <https://justpaste.it/e90q>, accessed on January 18, 2023

towards a merger with ISIS, it is also very likely that Abu Jihad had been an important driver in Sayfullah's epuration.⁷¹⁴

After Abu Umar al-Shishani's own removal from JMA and his appointment to ISIS *amir* for Northern Syria, he engaged in the consolidation of ISIS foreign fighter contingent in Syria. Through constant personal outreach, secret contacts and incessant propaganda efforts, Abu Umar al-Shishani and Abu Jihad managed to attract quite a number of foreign fighters coming from other groups, primarily from JN. Whereas Arab or European foreign fighters were tendentially distributed towards other contingents, Caucasian recruits as well as those coming from ex-Soviet republics were united under Abu Umar al-Shishani's command. Given their warrior reputation, justified or not, they were planned to act as elite crack units. Aside from a small group of loyalists who migrated towards ISIS from JMA, Abu Umar al-Shishani soon managed to get hold of a steady trickle of fresh recruits coming from other groups or from the North Caucasus and Central Asian Republics. The case of the *Sabiri Jamaat*, with ISIS' efforts to win it over until it finally pledged allegiance, is a quite interesting one. At the time, the Jamaat counted not more than a few dozen members, but ISIS still cared about it, because at the time Abu Umar al-Shishani felt isolated among other Caucasians whom had chosen to stay neutral, as Salahuddin Shishani with JMA, and others like Sayfullah Shishani merged with JN.⁷¹⁵ Soon, other groups merged with ISIS on behalf of Abu Umar al-Shishani, although mostly retaining their original composition going back on common ethnic, kinship and/or cultural ties. One of the first of these groups was the so-called *Sabiri Jamaat*, composed mostly by Dagestani and some Uzbek members.⁷¹⁶

A constant campaign of persuasion brought smaller and bigger acquisitions towards ISIS, on the grounds that chronically infighting among the multitude of factions, secular or religious, more moderate or radical, tended to switch the allegiance of foreign fighters, by nature prone to religious radicalism towards ISIS, as it seemed to offer the most clean and straight-out guarantees of organizational stability as well as a roadmap towards a true Islamic state.⁷¹⁷ This enabled Abu Umar al-Shishani to put up a new Jamaat commanded personally by him, although being ultimately loyal to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as head of ISIS. His new Jamaat, an elite ISIS unit, took the name *al-Aqsa Jamaat*, an almost entirely Russian-speaking unit.⁷¹⁸ Other Caucasian jamaats which have been active inside ISIS' structure are the Abdul Kamil Jamaat, which has been consisting mostly of Chechens, but also of other foreign fighters from other ex-Soviet republics, among them especially Azerbaijanis. *Jamaat Adama* and *Jamaat*

⁷¹⁴ See Paraszcuk, Joana. From Chechnya to Syria Blog, Khalid Shishani on why Sayfullakh Shishani & Umar fell out, August 23, 2016, www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=25233, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷¹⁵ See Paraszcuk, Joana. From Chechnya to Syria Blog, March 23, 2014, Syria: Why ISIS cares about tiny North Caucasian Jamaat pledge to Umar Shishani, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=21259>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷¹⁶ See following social network post, https://vk.com/wall-69751505_316, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷¹⁷ See Paraszcuk, Joana. From Chechnya to Syria Blog, New Video: The History of Sabri's Jamaat (Uzbek group in ISIS), August 28, 2014, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=22465>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷¹⁸ See Paraszcuk, Joana. From Chechnya to Syria Blog, Video: Umar Shishani gets his Al-aqsa Brigade to swear oath to al-Baghdadi, August 15, 2014, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=22363>, accessed on January 18, 2023

Akhmada have been predominantly Chechen units named after deceased leaders, whereas *Jamaat daoud* and *Jamaat Khattaba* have been prevalently of Kazakh and Azeri composition.⁷¹⁹ After that, Abu Umar al-Shishani was put at the command of ISIS' crack units in Northern and Eastern Syria, participating in the fighting against JN, which resulted in the conquest of Raqqa and Der ez-Zor province in the first half of 2014, as well as in the advance against YPG-held Kurdish territories in the border area towards Turkey in the second half of 2014. This advance led to the infamous siege of Kobane as the last Kurdish-held bastion of the Afrin canton. After having reduced the Afrin pocket to the city of Kobane, ISIS forces incessantly attacked the besieged city frontally for the better part of two months in September and October 2014 before being bombed into stopping by Coalition airplanes. Kobane did not fall indeed in a battle that resulted in the first big defeat experienced by ISIS.

Nevertheless, with ISIS gaining the upper hand with spectacular battlefield successes over rivals like JN and FSA units in 2014, as well as growing infighting and discord among the North Caucasian community in Syria reinforced the influx of Caucasians towards ISIS. Abu Umar al-Shishani as military commander and Abu Jihad as religious figurehead formed a critical node not only in the attraction and recruitment of Caucasian recruits in Syria and even from the North Caucasus but created also the conditions for first defections from Caucasus Emirate commanders in the North Caucasus to defect and switch allegiance to ISIS. The structures of the Caucasus Emirate, which lay in deep crisis since years, were suffering blows after blows, administered by Russian and local loyalist forces. After the virtual dismantling of the organization's underground structures in Ingushetia, in the combined area of Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Cherkessia and finally also in Chechnya's mountainous areas, the worst blow came in September of 2013, with the assassination of Doku Umarov. Although unbeknownst at the time, rumors began to circulate, and in January 2014, Ramzan Kadyrov announced the death of Umarov through social media. The Caucasus Emirate confirmed Umarov's death only in March 2014, with Aliaskhab Kebekov aka Ali Abu Muhammad taking over as Umarov's successor. Ali Abu Muhammad had been the Caucasus Emirate's top religious figure until then. Although he possessed vast religious knowledge, he lacked any charisma as well as military skills. Moreover, the final shift of the insurgency's *Schwerpunkt* from Chechnya to Dagestan discontented many Chechens who in turn grew disillusioned with the Caucasus Emirate. Also, there seem to have been also personal feuds over power inside the organization which led to estrangement of a part of the Dagestani wing towards the Caucasus emirate's leadership.⁷²⁰ In any case, the fortunes of the Caucasus emirate were rapidly vanishing, and its only remaining relatively strong pillar, the Dagestani wing, was festering from the inside as well.

⁷¹⁹ See Paraszczyk, Joana. From Chechnya to Syria Blog, What are the "Chechen brigades" in the Islamic State?, October 11, 2014, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=22687>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷²⁰ See Vatchagaev, Mairbek. Demise of Caucasus Emirate Causes Rift Among Chechen Militants, Eurasian Daily Monitor, Volume 12 Issue 197, October 30, 2015, <https://jamestown.org/program/demise-of-caucasus-emirate-causes-rift-among-chechen-militants-2/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

The lightning conquest of Mosul and of most Sunni areas in Iraq by ISIS, and the subsequent declaration of the Caliphate by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in the revered al-Nur mosque in central Mosul further boosted ISIS' standing. A dream for radical and also some moderate Muslims alike, worldwide, had come true. The agony of the Caucasus Emirate aggravated even more, as virtually no new recruits as well as funding coming from the diaspora reached the insurgency anymore. Very few continued to bet on the fortunes of the Caucasus Emirate. The first notable on-site defection from the Caucasus Emirate towards ISIS occurred at the end of 2014 was the one of Rustam Asilderov, better known as Abu Muhammad Kadarsky, whom had been at the head of the Dagestani division of the Caucasus Emirate since 2013. Abu Muhammad Kadarsky had a warrior reputation and a strong backing in the Dagestani wing of the Caucasus emirate, as well as good links to the insurgent commanders operating in Chechnya. His oath of allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the so-called Islamic state was published on December 20, 2014. Along with him, a series of Dagestani commander changed sides from the Caucasus Emirate to the so-called Islamic state.⁷²¹ Just a few days later, a row of Chechen insurgent commanders followed straight in what seemed a concerted move conceived time before. Mahran Saidov aka Yakup, commander of Caucasus Emirate's Wilayah Chechnya's Eastern Front and one of the most legendary Chechen commanders active since the first days of the Second Chechen War, also pledged his *bayah* to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, along with two other sector commanders. The exact reasons for the defection of these vital figures, given the desperate situation of the Caucasus Emirate at the end of 2014, were not explained and though concerted among the respective commanders defected to the IS, it was probably not finally agreed upon with the IS leadership itself. Most probably, this was a final attempt to save themselves, avoiding the void and maybe succeeding by jumping on the bandwagon. ISIS however, did not immediately legitimize the adhesions, likely being taken by surprise. Indeed, Abu Muhammed al-Adnani, the official spokesman for the IS, commented officially only on June 23, 2015 – full six months later - on the defection, recognizing it and declaring the creation of the *Wilayat Qawqaz* and appointing Abu Muhammad Kadarsky as its *Wali*.⁷²²

At the time of Kadarsky's defection, the Caucasus Emirate *Amir*, Ali Abu Muhammad, accused Kadarsky of outright treason, and protested against this move, but to no avail. No fights on the ground were carried out, either, given the weak shape of the insurgency's structure, even in Dagestan. Ali Abu Muhammad had simply not the means to rein in the defectors, and as time passed by, others followed in defection from the Caucasus Emirate. After a batch of sector Amirs in the Caucasus Emirate's Wilayah KBK, in mid-June 2015 the Wali of Chechnya, Aslan Byutukayev, aka Amir Khamzat, also went over to ISIS. Khamzat had been a protégé and close confidant of Doku Umarov as well as a veteran commander

⁷²¹ See Fuller, Liz. Six North Caucasus Insurgency Commanders Transfer Allegiance To Islamic State, RFE/RL Caucasus Report, January 2, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/a/islamic-state-north-caucasus-insurgency-commanders-allegiance/26773615.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷²² See ISIS Declares Governorate in Russia's North Caucasus Region, Institute for the Study of War, June 23, 2015, <http://understandingwar.org/background/isis-declares-governorate-russia%E2%80%99s-north-caucasus-region>, accessed on January 18, 2023

operating on Chechnya's southwestern front. Khamzat's allegiance to al-Baghdadi had come only a week before the declaration of ISIS' *Wilayat Qawqaz*. Khamzat's adherence could have been the fact that opened the floods. In any case did the institution of the Caucasian branch of the ISIS formalize the change of sides of the most important remaining Caucasus Emirate field commanders which amounted in effect to the swan song of the Caucasus Emirate. Together with Amir Khamzat's adherence came also the one of the biggest part of the Ingush Jamaat, consisting in the Sunzhenski Jamaat controlled by Amir Abu Muhammad, a strict accomplice of Amir Khamzat. Also the bigger part of the KBK Jamaat switched side. The Caucasus Emirate practically faded out in those days. The most important reasons driving the most prestigious military commanders of the Caucasus Emirate to leave it for ISIS was without doubt driven by the calculus of arousing more support locally and generating again recruiting streams as well as fund flows from outside the North Caucasus, assuming that these would be instrumental in revitalizing the lingering anti-Russian insurgency in the North Caucasus. Soon, these hopes vanished, as increased popular or external support did simply not materialize.

The following pace of operations has been confirming since the essential failure of these assumptions, showing the limits of ISIS ideological appeal, and underlining the inherent weakness of ISIS in the North Caucasus. The first operation after the declaration of the Caucasus Wilayat came only in September, a full three months after the establishment of the Caucasus Wilayat, when Russian police forces were targeted in a small-scale attack in southern Dagestan. Sporadic assassinations and isolated attacks, mostly on local administrators and lonely police officials followed in the months ahead, but nothing spectacular or even worth mentioning. The only bigger attack occurred in February 2016, when a suicide bomber detonated himself at a police checkpoint, again in Dagestan.⁷²³ No high-profile operations have been carried in Chechnya, Ingushetia or Kabardino-Balkaria since the declaration of the ISIS Wilayat in the North Caucasus. That says a lot about the state of the insurgency in place. Indeed, Abu Muhammad Kadarov soon encountered the same difficulties which afflicted the Caucasus Emirate in its final stage. To remedy to the obvious shortage of recruits, Kadarov recorded an audio message urging Caucasians to stay in place and join the local ISIS branch rather than to emigrate to Iraq and Syria, but obviously to no avail in the long run.⁷²⁴ One of the most interesting hints pointing towards this direction – aside from the lack of notable and frequent attacks – is the fact that one of the most important Chechen field commanders formerly adhering to the Caucasus Emirate and then to ISIS, Amir Mahran, has been secretly fleeing to Turkey, where he has allegedly been arrested by local authorities at the beginning of November 2016.⁷²⁵ The fact that important figures

⁷²³ Fuller, Liz. IS Claims Responsibility for Suicide Bombing in Daghestan. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 15 Feb. 2016, www.rferl.org/a/caucasus-report-is-daghestan-bombing/27553830.html, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷²⁴ Paraszczuk, Joanna. IS's North Caucasus Affiliate Calls for Recruits to Join It in Daghestan. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 3 Oct. 2015, www.rferl.org/a/islamic-state-north-caucasus-affiliate-call-for-recruits-daghestan/27285024.html, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷²⁵ See <http://vz.ru/society/2016/11/5/841998.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023. Ramzan Kadyrov himself publicized the arrest of Saidov adding that these terrorists should finally be extradited to Russia, finally ending

which have been in the woods for almost 20 years leave the fight is an important indicator about facts on the ground, namely the demise not only of the Caucasus Emirate, ousted by ISIs, but also of the local ISIS branch. That means however also that the cannibalization policy pursued by ISIS in the Caucasus and elsewhere is disrupting established structures, ultimately causing harm and accelerating the decline of Jihadist structures as a whole.

As in the North Caucasus, *fitna* – internal divisions and dogmatic splits prevailed also among Caucasian jihadis in Syria. On the other hand, this confirms also the trend among the Syrian opposition, going from the Islamist over to the secular oriented groups. In many cases, even the staunchest religious and ideological precepts could not cope with rampant warlordism. As the Syrian jihad is coming to its end soon, also the Caucasian Jamaats will most probably dissolve before having found a unified vision of the struggle against Russia in Syria and also the North Caucasus. However, this does not mean that the Syrian jihad is not the beginning for a new struggle to come in the future in the North Caucasus. The fact that thousands of young Russian nationals, Caucasians, Tatars, Russian converts and others coming from the former Soviet republics have been training and fighting together for years, forging lasting bonds and maybe laying the ground for a robust jihadi underground structure in Russia and in the central Asian states is already now a threat to the Russian Federation and the Central Asian post-soviet republics for the future. All the more so as this collective emigration was at least partially funded and encouraged by the Russian authorities.⁷²⁶

the Turkish policy of impunity towards North Caucasian militants. Along with Saidov, also Tarkhan Gaziyeu and Aslambek Vadalov were arrested, effectively neutralizing those who could have been engaged in the reconstruction of the Caucasus Emirate or a possible new Chechen insurgency.

⁷²⁶ See The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria: An Exported Jihad?, International Crisis Group, Europe Report N°238, March 16, 2016, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/238-the-north-caucasus-insurgency-and-syria-an-exported-jihad.pdf>, accessed on January 18, 2023

IX. New-Found Power and Geopolitics: An Outlook

The Eurasian union is a project meant to preserve the identities of nations and the historic Eurasian community in the new century, in a new world.

Vladimir Putin

From the beginning of his ascension to power, Putin's paramount goal had been the restoration of the power of the Russian state internally as well as externally. The Second Chechen War was only the first step to stop what was a dissolutive process of the country in the eyes of the *siloviki*. They could not tolerate an independent country in the midst of the Russian Federation and of other Muslim republics that could follow suit. A retreat from the North Caucasus, though frequently advocated by hardcore nationalists mainly on ethno-religious, but in the end racist motives, would have been a geopolitical catastrophe for the Russian Federation. Russia would have lost influence globally, but more lastingly in Central Asia among the post-Soviet republics as well as the Middle East. Far more dangerous, however, would have been potential internal consequences: Russia would have been threatened by the loss not only of the Muslim North Caucasian republics, but in a second step also by the loss of the other predominantly Muslim constituencies Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. Both autonomous republics, as they are located between Moscow and the Urals on the Volga, have been integral to the Russian state since the times of Ivan the Terrible. The loss of these territories would have catastrophic geopolitical, but also economic consequences. Tatarstan is among the most oil-rich territories in the Russian Federation, besides other resources like natural gas and gold. Vital industry complexes are located there, as Tatarstan has been one of the most developed territories of Russia for a long time.⁷²⁷

A second very strong motive for the recapture of Chechnya has been revenge. Revenge for the humiliation suffered on the hand of Chechen separatists when the Russian army was forced out of Chechnya after the Chechen recapture of Grozny in August 1996. In the years between the two Chechen wars, the *siloviki* patiently waited for the right moment to wash off that ignominy and prepared accordingly. Never again should Russia's banner be smeared by such shame – let alone by black North Caucasians, and especially Chechens. This brought about the absolute determination to win back not only the lost pride, but also lost power: The road to the resurrection of Russia led directly through Chechnya and the North Caucasus. Preparations for Russia's comeback did not only entail military preparations and covert subversion to destabilize independent Chechnya, but also classical *agitprop* measures to pilot public opinion to support a new war. The most important measure taken by the *siloviki* after

⁷²⁷ See George, Juli. *The Politics of Ethnic Separatism in Russia and Georgia*, Palgrave MacMillan 2009, p. 58

the defeat in the First Chechen War, however, had been the gradual conclusion of the Yeltsin era with its shortcomings, failings and even embarrassment in a mutually agreed manner with the *family*. A favorable candidate able to guarantee the pact would thus enter a smooth transition period. This candidate was Vladimir Putin. The Caucasian conflict thus bore not only the comeback of Russia as a superpower, but long before that its enabler.⁷²⁸

Today, more than 15 years later, with the demise of the Caucasus Emirate and all separatist aspirations of independence in the North Caucasus, the essence of Russian power politics has been saved and even relaunched into an unexpected renaissance. This is why the recapture of Chechnya and the pacification of the North Caucasus has been the foundation for the present new-found grand-power politics of Vladimir Putin. Without extinguishing the fire on the roof of its own house, Russia would never have been able to act outside of its borders like it is doing these days. Utilizing Halford Mackinder's terms, before acting in the *rimland*, Russia had to secure its position in the *heartland*. Now that this has been accomplished, it is possible to again expand Russia's actions and aspirations. This would never have been possible without Vladimir Putin's forceful and in the end decisive policy of total war in the North Caucasus. Putin has thus managed to resolve the more than decade-long Chechen and then the North Caucasian crisis by a combination of brute force and the cunning enlistment of local forces which made to recognize the federal center and particularly his person.⁷²⁹

1. The North Caucasus Today

It remains to be seen how long the new-found stability in the North Caucasus will last. After all, it should not be forgotten that the Chechen wars and the conflict in the North Caucasus have been only the last chapters of a conflict lasting in the region since its step-wise colonization by the Russian state in the 18th century. For now, enormous amounts of financial resources coming from the federal center have been keeping tensions down, even if these resources seldom come down to the bottom, improving everyday life of ordinary citizens of the North Caucasus republics. Horrific levels of corruption, nepotism, an inept and slow bureaucracy and the wasting of large amounts of resources to build "cathedrals in the desert" – meaning project ostensibly designed to relaunch the economy of these territories and therefore raise the living standards of the population so to smooth out discontent and poverty, which are among the most important drivers for anti-governmental and anti-establishment resentments. More often than not, however, these big projects end up as pure prestige projects designed to hit media headlines and serve the interests of local power brokers than to truly incentivize local economies. The persistent backwardness, the still present legacy of Wahabi preachers which missionized religiously uprooted locals following the Soviet atheist decades and of course traumata left behind by the brutal Russian counterinsurgency campaign is the reason for the persistence of large Salafist communities in the North Caucasus. These

⁷²⁸ See Politkovskaya, Anna. Putin's Russia, p. 239 and Ware, Robert, Has the Russian Society Been Chechenised?, in: Russian Regional Politics under Putin and Medvedev edited by Ross, Cameron, Routledge 2012, p. 134

⁷²⁹ See Jowitt, Ken. Rus United, in: Putin and Putinism, edited by Hill, Ronald J. and Cappelli, Ottorino, Routledge 2010, p. 26 f.

communities, however, are largely of pietist nature and therefore do not present immediate danger of reviving violent radicalism. Some of these communities have actually reapproached themselves with the local administrations. It is now left largely to the federal and local governments to keep smooth relations with the still unloved Salafist communities in the North Caucasus. If they won't indulge in excessive securitization measures, things are likely to stay quiet in the mid-term perspective. Vladimir Putin can therefore rightly claim victory in the Caucasus – for now.⁷³⁰

The aura and the personality of Vladimir Putin, as well as the aforementioned large upbringings of federal treasury thus have brought to the creation of local satrapies that as for now seem to work very well in the control of discontent and dissent, maintaining the *Pax Russa* in the North Caucasus for the moment. The case of Chechnya is particularly striking given the virulence of the Chechen separatism and Islamist radicalism in the first phase of the conflict. The loyalist Kadyrov clan, which Putin had managed to co-opt together with other local clans and militias, thus taking down two birds with one stone by splitting the separatist camp and winning effective local allies which knew the territory and the people, turned out to have been the right horse to bet on. After a lengthy power struggle, the Kadyrovs managed to beat one after the other competitor, enjoying Putin's support. Ramzan Kadyrov has managed to rule and pacify Chechnya with iron-fisted policies – in the eyes of the federal center an outstanding feature. This is also the reason for the extremely wide-ranging liberties Kadyrov is enjoying on behalf of Putin himself. In exchange for maintaining stability in Chechnya, Kadyrov is allowed to act like an absolute ruler, with federal laws being used as legislative fig leafs to lend Kadyrov at least a façade of legitimation. Because of these reasons, Kadyrov is personally loyal to Putin and has been exhibiting his devotion to the president of the Russian Federation in a truly excessive and at times seemingly comical way. Kadyrov's veneration for Putin shows marked traits of a personality cult, which is being rivaled only by the cult about Kadyrov's father, Akhmad Kadyrov, which had been killed by Chechen separatists in 2004. To counteract Salafist tendencies which fueled the anti-Russian insurgency and brought about the creation of the Caucasus Emirate, Kadyrov has been promoting Sufism, Chechnya's traditional Islamic creed, promoting nonetheless Islamic principles and a strict adherence to religious precepts in Chechnya. The promotion of Islam however goes along with a creative interpretation of Chechen-Russian nationalism, which also harmonizes perfectly with Putin's new Russian nationalism as a source of pride over the new Russia – his Russia.⁷³¹

As Communism and dialectic materialism in the Soviet Union had semi-religious traits and the Communist party in many ways acted like the Church intended as institutions, state-sponsored atheism and the repression or non-promotion of religion was not a problem to the vast mass of the people, since the belief in communism and the all-encompassing presence of the party was a valid alternative to religious faith. With the fall of Communism and the

⁷³⁰ See The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria: An Exported Jihad?, International Crisis Group, Europe Report N°238, March 16, 2016, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/238-the-north-caucasus-insurgency-and-syria-an-exported-jihad.pdf>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷³¹ See Bacon, Edwi. Inside Russia's Politics, Biteback Publishing London 2017, p. 156

dissolution of the Soviet Union, people found themselves disoriented and, in their majority, not ready for self-determined realization and democracy. After the first stints of freedom, the chaos and the developing kleptocracy of those days made people to call again for a “strong man”. Vladimir Putin managed to fill the void left by the fall of Communism with a new sort of Russian nationalism. The Russian people have still been very proud of the achievements of Soviet Union. Advancements in technology, the exploration of the space and the first man in space, the victory over fascism and also the nuclear power status that made the country a superpower are things that still today fill ordinary Russians with pride and patriotism for their country. Despite all shortcomings and horrors of Communism, the Communists had at least that Russia became a superpower.⁷³²

This is the reason why under Putin some uniting elements from the Soviet Union have been reinstated. Putin himself, as a former *apparatshik* of the KGB is a son of the old system. The most striking example is probably the reinstatement of the melody of the Soviet Hymn as the official hymn of the Russian federation in 2000. It is also no surprise nor a case that the old soviet power structures, especially the KGB, have never been investigated on their crimes. Also, the effort to reappraise the dark chapters of Soviet history has never truly been undertaken. Today even denouncement of Stalin’s crimes by Nikita Kruscev in 1956 is an unloved topic in Russia. Indeed, the cult about Stalin has been relativized, if not revisited under Putin. For older generations, Stalin has something to do with nostalgia, whereas young people see him as an important personality. He is currently reminded as the leader who defeated the fascist onslaught on Russia in the Great Patriotic War rather as the butcher of millions of innocent Russian citizens. Many people do not even know what everyday life looked like in the time of Stalin. Others may have an idea of how many millions in camps have disappeared or been killed. They accept that it was somehow necessary to protect the land and its people. For Putin, the Soviet history contains some darker tones like the ones existing in Germany with its national socialist past, in any case regarded as a detail of history.⁷³³

Alongside distinctive old Soviet elements, Putin has been using also social characters from Russia’s Tsarist tradition to appease those parts of Russian society in opposition to its Soviet past. The most marked is the return to a new nationalism, despite the fact that Russia remains an ethnically and religious heterogenous country. On the other spectrum of the state-sponsored Soviet nostalgia lies Russian nationalism, which Putin has also been coveting to some extent to appease the younger urban generation. Nationalism has become an element of dissent among ethnic Russian young urban dwellers which blame immigrants and other ethnicities, particularly Caucasians for the decline of Russia and high unemployment rates. In reality, the phenomenon of ultra-right and even fascist groups coming together in the Nationalist area embodies the creeping racism that has always existed in Russia. This sort of

⁷³² See Lynch, Allen. Vladimir Putin and Russian Statecraft, Potomac Books, Washington D.C. 2011, p. 14

⁷³³ See Kolesnikov, Andrei. Carnegie Moscow Center, Putin’s Politicization of Soviet History, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/73341>, accessed on January 18, 2023

racism sees Russian people as ruling ethnicity among many smaller, inferior groups of people. To appeal the nationalist wing of society as well as the Orthodox Church and the nostalgics of the Tsarist era, Putin has not hesitated to rehabilitate General Denikin, one of the leaders of the Whites during their civil war against the Bolsheviks between 1917 and 1921. The renaissance of Cossack paramilitary formations has been going on since the fall of the Soviet Union, but it has been supported particularly since the onset of Vladimir Putin. Reinforcing the Cossack movement has also been a measure to appease the right-wing- oriented sector of society and again also the Orthodox Church. Russian nationalism has always had a panslavistic orientation, marking Russian supremacy over other Slavic brother nations. This has been one historical segment on which Russian foreign policy has been orienting since the Yeltsin era.⁷³⁴

Putin's panslavism however is more markedly religiously colored. The Orthodox Church is a very important and powerful link between the new Russian nationalism and its newly found grand-power claim. Moreover, the Orthodox Church is also a link to the past, to the old Russian Empire and its Tsars. The renaissance of the Orthodox Church in Russia too has been going on since the end of Communism. Under Putin however, the Russian branch of the Orthodox Church has been assuming the features of a state church, acting on behalf, legitimizing and supporting the state and its policies in exchange for recognition and material support. The Orthodox Church is supposed to fill the spiritual vacuum left behind by the fall of the Soviet Union. Although large segments of society found back to religious faith, the atheistic legacy of the Soviet Union seems still hard to overcome. This is the reason why the dominating ideology in Russia today is not a monolith, but rather a singular grouping of different ideas and stories which not always fit together. This heterogenous ideological collection however serves the purpose of creating elements of identification with the state to its manyfold and diverse constituencies. The recognition of this fact by Putin is the driving element for his policies to make Russia great again. In contrast to Eltsin, Putin recognized that Russia can be held together only as an empire and the ideals this picture transmits to the people. Putin has thus been engaging in a clever divide-and-rule-game, appeasing sometimes one side, sometimes the other.⁷³⁵

Thus, all potential threats to the state and the current order are regarded with the utmost diffidence. Civil rights movements and social networks are being seen with suspect by the leadership, since they are hard to control and can act as magnifiers of dissent and opposition. NGO's have been curtailed in their range of action and especially on the financing from outside Russia, as the leadership sees them as potential vehicles of foreign inference, as in their eyes had happened in the course of the colored revolutions in Georgia and the Ukraine. In short, everything that has the potential to interfere with the current order is being

⁷³⁴ See Myers, Steven L.. For a New Russia, New Relics, New York Times, October 9, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/09/weekinreview/for-a-new-russia-new-relics.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷³⁵ Myers, Steven Lee. The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin. United Kingdom, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2015.

stopped with all possible means. Private media has been silenced or forced into line, state media is anyway tuned in to the Kremlin. Particularly outspoken members of the opposition or journalists have been frequently intimidated violently or even murdered. Particularly striking examples are the murders of Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya in 2006 and Boris Nemzov in 2015. These, however, are only the best known cases. Since the onset of Vladimir Putin, there have been dozens of murders of lesser-known journalists or opposition politicians. While there is no direct evidence for these crimes to have been ordered by the Kremlin, it is also striking that no true masterminds of these crimes have turned out of the investigations. Even ceremonies from the otherwise glorified past have to succumb to Putin's paranoia for everything related to unrest or even revolution: Accidentally, the 100-year anniversary of the October revolution in November 2017 has more or less been ignored from the Russian leadership. Thousands of leftists from all over the world came to Moscow to celebrate it, and with them the Russian Communist Party, still a potent force also in Putin's Russia. The celebration of a revolution could obviously not fit well into the Putinist system obsessed with order and stability.⁷³⁶

2. A New Tsar

Therefore, Putin sees himself as a sort of new Tsar invested with the task of first saving the Russian state from ruin and disrespect and bringing it then back to old glory. Putin himself has been arguing about the different features of the Russian "democracy" when confronted to their Western counterparts. Insisting on the supposed desire of the Russian people for a strong Russia led by a "strong hand", Putin draws legitimization and consent from the majority of the Russian electorate which fears nothing more than a return to chaos and instability. Putin has been stylizing himself and his leadership as guarantor of this stability. Like some of the 19th century's Tsars, Putin is building up again the Russian empire, going an alternative path with regard to the West. What he sees as an ominous state of things in the West, he wants to counter and fight back in Russia. True democracy, equal rights for homosexuals or true gender parity, care for immigrants are topics Putin sees as signs of weakness rather than social progress. Moreover, Putin has been stylizing himself and his policies as Europe's true remaining bulwark against immorality, outside influence and Islamism. Russia intended as the third Rome, in full Tsarist tradition, is a picture surely appealing to Putin and his entourage. The slogan of Tsar Nikolay I., of whom Putin conserves a large portrait in one of his offices in the Kremlin, was "orthodoxy, autocracy and nationalism". This slogan would indeed perfectly apply also in today's Russia.⁷³⁷

Like the Russian tsars in the second half of the 19th century, also Putin has come back to the geopolitical dimension to win back glory and power. To achieve that, Russian policy seems to follow the playbook laid out by Alexander Dugin almost to the letter. It is not exactly known

⁷³⁶ See Merridale, Catherine. Putin's Russia can't celebrate its revolutionary past. It has to smother it, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/nov/03/putin-russia-revolution-ignore-centenary>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷³⁷ See Coffin, Samuel. Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality, Harvard Political Review, July 24, 2013, <http://harvardpolitics.com/world/orthodoxy-autocracy-and-nationality/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

if Vladimir Putin knows Dugin personally or if he even is being advised by Putin. It is also unclear if Putin shares Dugin's ideology. Probably not, as Vladimir Putin and his policy can best be described as pragmatic and oriented exclusively to secure Russian power and aspirations, as well as his own. Putin is no ideological leader, he's rather a practitioner. All for Russia and its greatness and what is good for Russia is also for Putin – this seems to be Putin's political motivation. What however has been ascertained is that Dugin has been heavily influencing obscure but influential parts of the Russian power establishment, mainly parts of the Russian General Staff and the Kremlin administration. It is also clear that Putin and his entourage borrowed heavily from Dugin's policy recommendations. Reportedly, Dugin has a high standing in the Kremlin and the General Staff of the Russian Army. Dugin has been one of the main ideologues of the new Russia, his influence is often compared to that of Rasputin. He has been acting as advisor to the General Staff of the Russian Army and to many other key politicians of Putin's entourage, and he often appears in state television and political talk shows. Nevertheless, it is probably not appropriate to see Dugin as a sort of grey eminence behind Putin. Rather, it is the other way round: Dugin's theories in matters of foreign policy have probably been a welcomed receipt to regain power and influence for Russia. In any case, many of Dugin's prescriptions are a condensate of what a big chunk of the Russian public opinion is thinking anyway.⁷³⁸

In fact, many of Dugin's propositions in foreign policy matters have been implemented since. The reduction and submission of not conforming ex-Soviet countries in Russia's neighbourhood to regain its great power status is the single most important precept of Dugin in his programmatical manifest published in 1997 under the title *Geopolitical Basis: Russia's Geopolitical Future*. To justify and frame the new Russian imperial aspirations, Dugin developed the ideology of Eurasianism. Dugin's concept of Eurasianism relies on the assumption that Europe and Asia belong together, that is the *heartland* and the *rimland* following Mackinder's geopolitics theory. Dugin advocates therefore a Eurasian empire reaching from Ireland to the Russian Far East under the leadership of Russia. Dugin envisions a struggle between authoritarian and hierarchically organized "Eurasian" land forces led by Russia and liberal "Atlantic" maritime powers under the leadership of the United States. Europe, according to Dugin, has been occupied and economically and militarily colonized by the United States. Only Russia possesses the power to "liberate" Europe from the US yoke and therefore rule over the *rimland*. The success of the Eurasian ideology thus depends on the rebirth of the imperial Russian state and the Russian people. In Dugin's apocalyptic world view, this centuries-old opposition between land and naval powers is heading for a "final conflict".⁷³⁹

Again, as Dugin is no undisputed prophet in Putin's Russia, this does not mean that the Russian leadership is following Dugin's arguments entirely. At the same time, most steps

⁷³⁸ See for example Hill, Fiona and Gaddy, Clifford G.. Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin, Brookings Institution Press, Washington D.C., 2015, p. 372-374

⁷³⁹ See Clowes, Edith W.. Russia on the Edge: Imagined Geographies and Post-Soviet Identity Cornell University Press 2011, p. 54 ff.

undertaken by Putin internally and externally are specular to the Eurasianist theory and some are very well recognizably borrowed from it, as will be shown below. It is therefore surprising that the Eurasianist ideology is still largely unknown in the West. This could result in a serious knowledge gap, because Russia's recent actions increasingly correspond with Dugin's theory. Seen from an Eurasianist viewpoint, the Kremlin's actions make very well sense in the selection of its goals and the use of tactics and methods to achieve these goals. Today, Eurasianism is the prevailing ideological view in the Kremlin. It is however difficult to ascertain whether Eurasianism is being employed rather as an ideological fig leaf, or if it is indeed an actual and shared *Weltanschauung* among the Russian leadership. In May 2014 Putin indeed proclaimed the Economic Eurasian Union. Under the leadership of the Russian Federation, most ex-Soviet countries are represented therein, among them Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

3. Hybrid Warfare

Even the toolkit for the implementation of the new Russian foreign policy has been designed by Dugin, even if it is rather known as *Gerasimov doctrine* in the West. The *Gerasimov doctrine*, known also in the broader public as *hybrid warfare* lies at the core of Russian strategy to confront the West and expand its power over Russian borders has been called. It has been unveiled for the first time by Russian Chief of the general Staff Valery Gerasimov in 2015 as a "new way of warfare". As Gerasimov put it himself in an article written for the Russia's most renowned military magazine, "The role of non-military means in achieving political and strategic goals has grown; in some cases, their effectiveness is significantly higher than that of weapons".⁷⁴⁰ According to Gerasimov, the rules of war have changed. Political goals are no longer achievable with conventional firepower, but through the "widespread use of disinformation, political, economic, humanitarian and other non-military measures that are used in conjunction with the protest potential of the population".⁷⁴¹

He argued that covert tactics should be primarily used. To maintain deniability, military measures in particular should have a "covert character". This is especially appropriate for actors "who would have to justify using conventional methods before the international community."⁷⁴² This way, it is possible to wage an undeclared, creeping war, weakening the adversaries without exposing itself to retaliation because of the absence of a "casus belli". The new information age technologies make this possible. Cyber warfare and hacker attacks enable offensive actions with potentially devastating effects without a clear signature, resulting in deniable because of the difficulty of tracing back action like these. Deniable attacks however can not only be performed virtually, but also physically through the use of obscure and rogue front groups that occupy contested territory asking the annexation to the

⁷⁴⁰ Cit. Военно-промышленный курьер Nr. 8/2013, <https://vpk.name/sources/?news&id=54>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷⁴¹ See Seck, Hope H.. Russian Deception Delays Strategic Decisions, General Says, Military.com, October 5, 2016, <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2016/10/05/russian-deception-delays-strategic-decisions-general-says.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷⁴² Ibid.

Russian Federation, “freedom fighters” or guerillas operating for the just cause –which in reality are often disguised regular soldiers or special operation troopers of the Russian army, or through the use of private military companies that seemingly operate on their own, but in reality execute the Kremlin’s orders.⁷⁴³ All of these covert components like terrorism, misinformation, manipulation and cyber warfare, taken together with traditional conventional military and diplomatic means, playing on military deterrents and political action, shape the current Russian strategy confronting the West. The Gerasimov doctrine thus foresees the combined use of a new set of tactics that are full-spectrum tactics, that have a strong propaganda element, a strong cyber element, a strong subversive element, as well as selective use of military force. Particularly the subversive element of the Gerasimov doctrine has the goal of splitting societies through the employment of particular social techniques.⁷⁴⁴ ⁷⁴⁵All of this is not new and reaches back to agitation and propaganda (agit-prop) tactics of Chekist memory. Of course, these old tactics have been made to fit today’s technological opportunities. The diffusion of fake news is a central element to covert agitation and propaganda. Going back decades, the Soviet Union already used extensively fake news in Western countries through its local proxies, communist parties and their front organizations, by spreading rumors and by creating lies that eventually turned into received truths for certain segments of society. Going back to the ’60s, for instance, Russia circulated the rumor that the U.S. government had been involved in killing Martin Luther King.⁷⁴⁶

4. Protecting the Backyard

Getting out even a rudimentarily plausible counternarrative in contrast to established truth that will be pushed by thousands of trolls or even automated fake identities – so-called bots – over social networks it is possible to convince large segments of society that maybe it is true. This counternarrative undermines the plausibility of truthful narrative and more or less largely defuses any kind of outrage that might fuel an active and public reaction to the matter.⁷⁴⁷ These so-called *active measures* rest on the simple, yet powerful assumption that even if most people regard this spun counternarrative ridiculous or implausible, some people will still believe it, and yet other people will be confused about what to believe at all. Indeed, this is the goal of agitation and propaganda, namely the generation of chaos within the information

⁷⁴³ See Dannenberg, Rob. Russia: Deception and Deniability, The Cypher Brief, December 25, 2016, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/russia-deception-and-deniability>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷⁴⁴ See Van Puyvelde, Damien. Hybrid war – does it even exist?, NATO Review Magazine, 2015, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2015/Also-in-2015/hybrid-modern-future-warfare-russia-ukraine/EN/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷⁴⁵ See Galeotti, Mark. I’m Sorry for Creating the ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’, Foreign Policy, March 5, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/05/im-sorry-for-creating-the-gerasimov-doctrine/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷⁴⁶ See Cavanaugh, Darien. Russia Tried to Use Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Assassination to Start a Race War, War Is Boring blog, March 14, 2017, <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/russia-tried-to-use-martin-luther-king-jr-s-assassination-to-start-a-race-war-9eeab04f1b82>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷⁴⁷ See Chivvis, Christopher. Understanding Russian "Hybrid Warfare" And What Can Be Done About It, RAND Corporation 2017, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT468/RAND_CT468.pdf, accessed on January 18, 2023

culture and therefore the society of the targeted audience. In fact, these tactics, borrowed from Soviet intelligence practice have never been ceased to be employed in Russian political life. The use of disinformation and manipulation of actual facts, like the employment of blackmailing surveillance footage or wiretapped conversations has been widely used to create upsetting narratives to destroy political enemies. On a wider scale, these tactics are about into generating doubt and confusion, so to create a smokescreen behind which to act, at the same time destabilizing whole adversaries 'societies'.⁷⁴⁸

Rebellious Georgia under Saakashvili has been stopped from establishing formal and lasting bonds with the West in the course of the Russian-Georgian War in 2008. Since then, Georgia has been led by a harmless government which froze all propositions to enter in a deeper relationship with NATO. Well before 2008 Dugin indeed foresaw that Russia would act aggressively against Georgia and Ukraine. Crimea was anyway "historically a part of Russia" and would also taken back. All these operations had the trademark devised ideologically and strategically by Dugin and developed operationally by the Russian military in the aforementioned Gerasimov doctrine. Russian proxy entities like South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transnistria and now *Novorossiia* dot the border areas of the Russian Federation and function effectively as outposts of covert Russian foreign policy, keeping creeping conflicts ongoing and influencing policy on the ground of Russian interests. They fully conform to the prescriptions of the Gerasimov doctrine. Their actions in the name of the Kremlin are deniable because of their nature as blind spots on the map, being entities that have mostly not even been officially recognized by Moscow or any other state. They effectively work as covert outposts for the Kremlin. "It was our Western partners who created the precedent; they did it themselves, with their own hands, as it were, in a situation that was totally analogous to the Crimean situation, by recognizing Kosovo's secession from Serbia as legitimate," said Putin.⁷⁴⁹

Dugin prescribed further to weaken the European Union as a whole as well as to covertly support and nurture centrifugal tendencies that would bring up nationalist and anti-European sentiments in selected member countries of the Union. The suspected involvement of Russian propaganda and fake news campaign in the Brexit campaign is only the tip of the iceberg: It has been ascertained that Russian or pro-Russian organizations have been financing and supporting far-right political parties in France, Italy, Austria and Germany.⁷⁵⁰ The goal here is

⁷⁴⁸ See Keir, Giles. Russia's 'New' Tools for Confronting the West Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power, Research Paper – Russia and Eurasia Programme, Chatham House, March 2016, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/2016-03-russia-new-tools-giles.pdf>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷⁴⁹ See Gessen, Masha. Crimea Is Putin's Revenge: On March 24, 1999, the U.S. bombed Kosovo. Putin has been planning his payback ever since, Slate, March 24, 2014, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2014/03/putin_s_crimea_revenge_ever_since_t_he_u_s_bombed_kosovo_in_1999_putin_has.html, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷⁵⁰ For example, in 2014, a scandal broke out in France when it became apparent that Russia was funded by the National Front Right Party, led by Marine Le Pen, for EUR 49 million. In France, the financing arrangement was

the split of the Western countries as it is being represented chiefly by the NATO and to a lesser degree by the EU. The NATO, and more specifically the alliance between the Western and now also Eastern European countries and the USA has been seen in Russia as the single most threatening geopolitical fact regarding the interest of the Russian Federation. Spreading disinformation and fostering nationalist sentiments has the task to undermine the EU as a whole, but also to strengthen authoritarian and Americanophobe sentiments among the population. It is no case that Russian media has been spreading the message of Russia, not the US, being the bastion that is able Europe from refugees, terrorists and homosexuals in contrast to liberal US decadence, whom many of these excesses are to be ascribed.⁷⁵¹

Another important strategic prescription of Dugin becoming gradually reality is the creation of a “Russian-Islamic axis”. Despite Dugin’s racist and fascist attitude, he sees a not better specified Russian-Islamic alliance pragmatically as one very important tool to confront the West and at the same time break through to the Muslim part of the *rimland*, enabling a Russian presence or even control of the Levante and the Mediterranean. This is nothing other than a new edition of the century-old Russian strategic imperative to get to the warm seas and a sort of new *Great Game*. Through the combination of some fortunate geopolitical coincidences, but mostly thanks to the strategic blunders of the West in the Middle East, this plan has been gaining ground recently. This however is also not a new element of modern Russian foreign policy or coming exclusively from Dugin’s strategic imperatives. In post-soviet times, it was Evgeni Primakov, Foreign and Premier Minister under Boris Yeltsin between 1996 and 1999 that traced the foundations of the new Russian foreign policy. Vladimir Putin has been heavily borrowing from Primakov’s precepts, using them as a springboard to take to fruition arising opportunities. Thanks to the Syrian conflict, Primakov’s ideas and Putin’s reorientation of Russian policy came to a strong fruition. Russia has been successfully capitalizing on the flaws of Western and US Middle East policies, increasing its influence in the Levant by orders of magnitude. It does this by using military might, leverage on the energy industry, arms sales, as well as the know-how of the security services with their advancements in information warfare. This fact has been increasingly creating a new strategic balance in the Middle East, Mediterranean, and Europe.⁷⁵²

5. The Russian Intervention in Syria

That’s how Russia came to directly intervene in Syria. The reasons for the Russian support of the Assad regime are manifold. Aside from the longstanding relationship between Moscow and Damascus, the fact that Syria is harboring one of the few Russian military bases outside its own territory and its proper sphere of influence, is a very important reason. The marine

seen as an exceptional foreign state intervention in the French political life. See Shekhovtsov, Anton. *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir*. United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2017, p. 67

⁷⁵¹ McCarthy, T. (2017, October 14). How Russia used social media to divide Americans. *The Guardian*; The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/oct/14/russia-us-politics-social-media-facebook>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷⁵² Institute for the Study of War. <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/moscow-presses-mediterranean>, accessed on January 18, 2023

base in Tartous, albeit it is of a comparably small and operatively not very relevant, it has a strategic value, enabling a continued Russian presence in the Mediterranean theater, enabling Moscow to preserve one of its last allies in the region influencing political processes on the ground, and last, but not least, preserving a significant intelligence presence in this part of the world. Rebel offensives in then contested Aleppo and the capture of Palmyra and other places in May 2015 by the Islamic State prompted the Russian intervention, with the dispatch of dozens of combat planes and specialized ground forces, ostensibly to keep the Syrian regime in balance. Another important reason for going to Syria is the massed presence of Caucasian fighters which had been previously encouraged directly or indirectly to leave the North Caucasian jihad arena and seek more promising fields in Syria. Syria had thus become the repository of Russian jihadists. Indeed, at the beginning of 2016, alone from Dagestan over 900 people were fighting for IS in Syria and Iraq.⁷⁵³ At the same time, in the period going from 2014 to the end of 2016, well over 2.800 Russian citizens had been joining the ranks of IS.⁷⁵⁴

IS forces are being targeted only when the tactical or operative need arises to target them, for example as tactical support during Syrian regime offensives against ISIL or in the defensive, when IS forces are pounding regime positions. Otherwise, ISIL has not been targeted that often although these strikes have been always highly publicized. Between September 2015 and the end of 2016, IS targets have only seldom been targeted by Russian airstrikes. Contrary to that, more moderate rebel forces, particularly those which are posed to play relevant roles on the negotiating table, have been attacked disproportionately often by Russian jets. The obvious main objective in Syria is therefore the fight against Caucasian militants on foreign ground rather than at home as well as the backing of the Assad regime weakening rebel forces military on the ground – but even more so into turning military successes against them into diplomatic leverage at the negotiating table. Only since the beginning of the campaign against IS for the recapture of Eastern Syria with its oil and gas fields, did targeting dynamics change, shifting overwhelmingly towards IS targets.⁷⁵⁵

One of the most obvious examples of the Russian policy in Syria meant to weaken rebel forces on the battlefield has been the airstrike which killed Zahran Alloush, the powerful leader of the rebel militia *Jaysh al Islam*, one of the most powerful armed rebel groups operating in Syria.⁷⁵⁶ Alloush had signaled after fiercer earlier approaches his willingness to participate in the upcoming peace talks to be held at the beginning of 2016. As a major player on the side of the Sunni opposition to the Assad regime, he would have counted much on the negotiating table, since he was a figure capable of binding together into *Jaysh al Islam* a myriad of smaller groups for whom Alloush was a charismatic and capable representant. Of

⁷⁵³ Uzel, K. (n.d.). MVD: v Sirii na storone boyevikov voyuyut okolo 900 urozhentsev Dagestana. Kavkazskiy Uzel. <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/274042/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁵ Institute for the Study of War. <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russias-unrelenting-attacks-syrian-civilians>, , accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷⁵⁶ Lister, Charles R.. *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*. United Kingdom, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 360

course, did Alloush's political and military stature design him as a priority target for the regime and its Russian ally. That's why on December 25, 2015, a missile launched – according to many sources – from a Russian jet stroke into a gathering of Jaysh al Islam commanders killing instantly among others Zahran Alloush.⁷⁵⁷ In doing so – the Russians or the regime with Russian help – managed to kick out of the negotiation process one of its most important counterparts on the side of the opposition.

The Russian policies in Syria resemble those employed in Chechnya during the Second Chechen War: Dismantling and if not possible, delegitimizing the legitimate opposition or the moderate parts of the insurgency to cancel all hypothesis of a negotiated solution of the conflict, or at the least, steer it in the desired direction. Through the presence of radical and Salafist foreign fighters the Russian government under the then newcomer Vladimir Putin as prime minister managed first to delegitimize the initially mostly secular Chechen insurgency around the democratically elected Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov. Then, falsely ventilating the possibility of negotiations they lured Maskhadov into a trap, finally killing him in 2005.⁷⁵⁸ With him as the only legitimate figure of the Chechen resistance gone, also any chance of a negotiated end of the conflict waned. A similar playbook lies at the heart of the Russian involvement in Syria. In weakening the however armed, but nevertheless legitimate and more or less moderate opposition to the Assad regime and eliminating its most powerful and charismatic leaders which could represent an alternative to Bashar al-Assad, Moscow seeks to represent Assad as the only solution, obviously the lesser evil in a hell populated by demons like Jabhat al-Nusra and IS with whom no negotiations are possible nor conceivable for obvious reasons.

But the Russian tactics on the ground pursued not only strategic campaigns targeting the leadership of rebel forces but pushed also the demoralization of the population with the goal of inducing war-weariness and disaffection between the population and the rebel forces by effectuating deliberate targeting of civilian areas. The employment of non-discriminating ammunition cannot be explained otherwise. Besides that, this tactic also reminds of the Chechen conflict. Apart from highly publicized bombing strikes operated with new generation weapons meant to show the newly won Russian might to the global audience, like the cruise missiles launched from Buyan-class corvettes from the Caspian Sea or the ones launched from a submarine in the Mediterranean Sea⁷⁵⁹, the Russian Air Forces has been operating largely with cheap unguided gravity bombs in Syria. This means of course that the Russian airstrikes have been highly inaccurate as well as generally disregarding the presence of civilians in targeted areas, which has resulted in a high number of fatalities among the civilian

⁷⁵⁷ Staff, A. J. (n.d.). Russian raids kill prominent Syrian rebel commander, Al Jazeera, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/12/russian-raids-kill-prominent-syrian-rebel-commander-151225142422180.html>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷⁵⁸ Fuller, Liz. "A Year after Maskhadov's Death, Conflict Drags On." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2 Feb. 2012, www.rferl.org/a/1066453.html, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷⁵⁹ Cavas, Christopher P. "Russian Submarine Hits Targets in Syria." Defense News, 8 Dec. 2015, www.defensenews.com/story/breaking-news/2015/12/08/submarine-russia-kalibr-caliber-cruise-missile-syria-kilo/76995346/, accessed on January 18, 2023

population.⁷⁶⁰ In fact, military analysts remarked how Russian bombers were seen using even antiquated gravity bombs as well as cluster bombs.⁷⁶¹ Amnesty International singled out six air raids targeting different cities and towns in a two-month period between September and November 2015, pointing out that in these attacks “over 400 civilians were killed compared to about 12 deaths among rebel ranks”.⁷⁶² In addition to that the NGO remarked that often civilian targets seemed to be targeted by purpose by the Russian air force elements present in the Levantine country. This behavior is entirely consistent with the Russian tactic of barbarism employed in asymmetric warfare, which calls not only to destroy the armed insurgency, but also the will and the resolve of the population which in parts or in its entirety could support the insurgency.⁷⁶³

Exactly the same approach had been chosen by the Russian army in its siege and subsequent assault of the Chechen capital city of Grozny at the onset of the Second Chechen War in the year 2000. Indiscriminate bombings and the use of heavy artillery as well as banned weapons like white phosphor, fuel-air explosives and cluster bombs destroyed large parts of the city, causing thousands of civilian deaths and making it virtually the most destroyed urban center after World War Two.⁷⁶⁴ Then as now in Syria, albeit on a much lesser scale, the objective to destroy the will of the population to resist the Russian onslaught stood at the same place as the objective of destroying Chechen forces entrenched in the city itself. At the same time, the exodus of civilians from the war zone has been serving also Russia’s intent to destabilize Turkey and the countries within the European Union. The inevitable humanitarian and economical burdens and with them the political repercussions within the societies of European countries the onslaught of tens of thousands of refugees from Syria – added up to hundreds of thousands of migrants coming from Central Asia and African countries - of course exacerbated the political discourse and split whole societies over the issue. These rifts within European countries as well as between certain member countries and the European Union proved to be very appetible for covert Russian online propaganda and fake news campaign with the intent to destabilize the European Union from within.⁷⁶⁵

⁷⁶⁰ See Syria: “Civilian objects were not damaged”: Russia’s statements on its attacks in Syria unmasked. (n.d.). Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/3113/2015/en/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷⁶¹ Armstrong, Paul. “Hundreds of Civilians Killed in Russian Airstrikes in Syria -- Amnesty.” CNN, 23 Dec. 2015, edition.cnn.com/2015/12/23/middleeast/russia-airstrikes-syria-amnesty-report/, accessed on January 18, 2018

⁷⁶² Cit. Syria: “Civilian objects were not damaged”: Russia’s statements on its attacks in Syria unmasked. (n.d.). Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/3113/2015/en/>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷⁶³ Arreguín-Toft, Ivan. *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, Dr, 2008, p. 166

⁷⁶⁴ Russian embassy in DC trolls US, UK on Aleppo touting Grozny. (n.d.). Middle East Eye, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/russian-us-embassy-trolls-kerry-aleppo-touting-grozny-1803585341>, accessed on January 18, 2023

⁷⁶⁵ Nougayrède, N. (2016, March 18). Putin’s long game has been revealed, and the omens are bad for Europe. *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/18/putin-long-game-omens-europe-russia>, accessed on January 18, 2023

Russia's intervention and presence in Syria has thus very important implications for the European and the US foreign policy. Russia has set foot in the region to stay there. The axis with the Assad-regime, Iran and its transnational proxies has been the Trojan horse into which the real Russian aspirations and actions in the region hide. Russian advisership and strategic guidance has been allowing Russia to act in the Syrian theatre with a very limited number of forces and therefore also of losses. The cannon fodder has been largely provided by the Syrian regime and Iran's Shiite proxies. The continued failings and shortcomings of US policy as well as the non-existent political presence of the European Union have been allowing Putin to essentially win the game in Syria. Russia will shape the future of the greater Syrian region rather than the US. But more than that, Russia has been making clear that it has come back as a superpower and the days of a weak Russia have ended. As a result, Russia now again retains a regional, if not yet fully global status it enjoyed in the days of the Cold War, back into the days when no world issue could be decided without or against the Soviet Union, in the words of then Foreign Minister Gromyko. Syria has also been the testing ground for new military hardware. The launching of long-range cruise missile strikes into Syria against IS targets was a military nonsense – it was rather designed to be a show-off of its military might to the world. At the same time, new weapons but also tactics could be tested there in a realistic combat mode, recalling both operationally and technically the German Operation Condor in the wake of the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s.⁷⁶⁶

Thus, the Russian presence in Syria however, is clearly not the end of the game. It's rather the beginning of the game, given Russian announcements to maintain a continued military presence in Syria and to even upgrade its naval facility in Tartous for the eventual accommodation of nuclear vessels. In line with ancient Russian strategic imperatives, already before the defeat of the Islamic state in Syria, Russia has been actively trying to encroach into other areas of the region, building up a strong presence in the Mediterranean and the Middle East as a whole. Outside of Syria, Russia has been actively lobbying for new bases in Egypt and Cyprus. The same is probable in Libya in the areas controlled by General Khalifa Haftar, which has been pursuing close contacts with Russia for a long time. In accordance with the integrated *Gerasimov doctrine*, not only hard, but only soft policies have been used to strengthen Russian influence and power in the region. Major arms deals have thus been a very important part of this policy. Weapon sales in opportune moments, usually moments of need, won Moscow gratitude and respect in the region. A particularly illuminating example happened with Russian arms sales to the Iraqi state and the Iraqi Kurds with IS in the face of IS onslaught, when Western countries were still wavering over the question to pour in more

⁷⁶⁶ See Iddon, P. For Russia, "For Russia, Syria Is a Proving Ground for High-Tech Weapons." War Is Boring, 4 Jan. 2017, warisboring.com/for-russia-syria-is-a-proving-ground-for-high-tech-weapons, accessed on January 18, 2023

weapons in the already weapon-awash region – overstating a bit, one could say that it was Russian combat helicopters that saved Baghdad.⁷⁶⁷

⁷⁶⁷ See the interview of Dmitri Trenin: Koshkin, Pavel, Russia Will Get Stuck in Syria for a Long Time, Carnegie Moscow Center, February 24, 2018, <http://carnegie.ru/2018/02/24/russia-will-get-stuck-in-syria-for-long-time-pub-75640>, accessed on January 18, 2023

X. Conclusion: Russia's Foundation, its Comeback and its Future

Who rules the world island rules the world.

Sir Arthur Halford Mackinder

1. Empirical Findings

Looking upon Russia's recent history since the collapse of the Soviet Union, one cannot but wonder about at least some significant twists in the development of its internal and external policies since. From menacing autocratic dictatorship to friendly, but chaotic democracy back to menacing autocracy in a mere 20 years, this is the equivalent of life on a rollercoaster. In hindsight, the Yeltsin era between the collapse of Soviet power and the ascent of Vladimir Putin has been characterized by the frails and difficulties derived from the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The economy found its low end, the military had been dismembered and weakened.

Thus, there is enough evidence to suggest Putin's Chechen Wars and the disinformation campaign accompanying them as Putin's original sin. Without Putin's gamble in the North Caucasus, Russia would not stand as strong as it stands today. On the contrary, it would have been relegated to a mere regional power. Worse still, the permanent loss of Chechnya could have been the starting point of a disintegration process with incalculable consequences. Thus, the maintenance of the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation has been Putin's paramount goal in the initial phase of his presidency. This goal could only be achieved by the absolute and stern repression of Chechen separatism by the second invasion of the tiny North Caucasian country. Once this objective had been broadly secured, Putin set his sights for the next one: Making Russia great again. The development and onset of Russian hybrid warfare, which came to be tested first in 2007 with hacker attacks on Estonia, hard power moves like the Russian-Georgian War of 2008, the subversion in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the active, yet subtle and covert acts of disinformation across the West are all measures designed to reach the geopolitical goal of projecting Russia again as a true great power.

The analysis of Vladimir Putin's in his tenure as president of the Russian Federation fully underscores this view. Here below, the results of the discourse analysis of 1.195 public speeches made by Vladimir Putin in his tenure as a president of the Russian Federation between 2000-2008 and 2012-2016:

- Internal strengthening and securitization

This topic amounts for around 13,4% of Vladimir Putin's public discourse in the considered timeframe, getting place. However, this was indeed one of the hot topics in the early phase of Vladimir Putin's reign. Being one of his flagship slogans, the strengthening of the state and its organs, especially the security organs and the army, became one of the pretexts for the cementation of Putin's power by always new ad-hoc laws. The renewed peak visible in 2005, for example, is a direct result of the hostage-taking by Chechen and North Caucasian insurgents of School Nr. 4 in Beslan. The call for more power to the state – and, as it was suggested, thus more security for Russian citizens, became the pretext for the abolition of the election of regional governors and the inception of their direct nomination by the Russian president.⁷⁶⁸

After having secured the grip to power, the topic became more and more sidelined in phase 2 of Putin's public discourse, coming to a new peak only in 2015-2016, when large demonstrations, challenging Putin's authoritarian power, took place in many Russian cities.

- National integrity and backyard defense

This has been by far the most important topic on Vladimir Putin's political agenda, being at the top with a share of 26,8% of everything he publicly addressed in the considered timeframe. This is entirely consistent with the hypothesis of this work which is the deep geopolitical nature of Russian foreign and internal policy. This indicator marks the passages in the Putin speeches which put their emphasis on everything related to Russia's territorial integrity, but also to the actual or perceived Russian sphere of influence, which broadly corresponds with the territories formerly part of the Soviet Union. After a high time in 2000, when Putin had to defend the second Russian invasion of Chechnya in less than a decade as well as fighting back claims of connected human rights abuses, the topic stabilized, though remaining at the top of Putin's publicly addressed priorities. This happened to be in connection with the 9-11 attacks, and the ensuing recognition of Russia's struggle in Chechnya and the North Caucasus as somehow connected to the fight against global Jihadism. Also in phase 2, everything related to national integrity and the Russian sphere of influence remained constantly on top of Putin's public discourse, even reaching new peaks in 2013-2014, at the height of the conflict with Ukraine and the Russian annexation of the Crimean peninsula.

- Terrorism, not separatism

Putin's discourse about the fact that the insurgency in Chechnya was of terroristic nature, rather than a separatist struggle, was particularly strong at the beginning of the Second Chechen War, especially in the timeframe between his tenure as Prime Minister up to the presidential election that made him the successor to Boris Yeltsin. The so-called "apartment bombings" were then in fresh memory of the Russian public opinion, thus the "terrorist" threat emanating from Chechnya was the justification for the "counter-terrorist operation", as the Second Chechen War has always been called in Russia. This discourse was initially mainly made for internal consumption, in order to bolster public support for the Russian

⁷⁶⁸ See Ross, Cameron. *Local Politics and Democratization in Russia*. N.p., Taylor & Francis, 2008, p.26

invasion in Chechnya. After the peak in 2000 and 2001, the 9-11 attack on the US made by al-Qaeda changed this dynamic towards claims of global terrorism.

The slow, but constant progress made by Russian security forces in Chechnya against rebel formations made sure that there was not much anymore to justify towards global public opinion, especially after the proclamation of the end of the “counterterrorism operation” in Chechnya claimed by Vladimir Putin in 2009. Consequently, even if the insurgency there at the time was still far from being totally defeated, all public discourse about “terrorism” emanating from Chechnya disappeared. While being in line with the aforementioned “victory declaration”, the already elatious preparations for the Sochi Olympic winter games to be held in 2013 played an important role.

- Nostalgia and revanchism

Nostalgic and revanchist passages principally refer back to the Great-Power era of the Soviet Union. It is by far the less important indicator in terms of quantity (6,6% of total share), this topic has been nevertheless an important driver in Putin’s political discourse, especially internally, as it suggested that he had the will and the power to bring the country back to the old glory of the Soviet era.

- Competition and consideration

18,5% Competition with the West, and the striving for consideration from the West has always been an important component of Putin’s policy towards the west. Consequently, these points have been very frequently addressed by Putin in his public speeches, internally and externally. After a brief spike of competition with the West in Putin’s initial years, trying to stop and reverse decaying Russian influence over the former territories of the Soviet Union, which continued also afterwards, an intense strive for consideration, especially from the United States, took place in the course of the George W. Bush administration and in the contemporaneous aftermath of 9-11.

- Confrontation and rearmament

By its own nature, this is by far the most reliable indicator for the wavering state of relations between the Russian Federation and the West over time. The levels depicted in the tables match with the heights and depths of Russian-Western relations. After a somewhat revanchist discourse in Vladimir Putin’s first year in his role as president of the Russian Federation, there was a first escalation in 2001, especially in the first half of the year, due to Western protests and remarks to the Russian conduct of the war in Chechnya. 9-11 changed everything, as Putin managed to successfully “infiltrate” the debate about global Islamist terrorism, putting the conflict in Chechnya on the same level. This new-found common enemy and the challenging fight against Chechen and later also North Caucasian rebels made sure that the level of polemic and contention between Russia and the West remained low in the following years.

The end of this phase perfectly coincided with the levels of rhetoric confrontation in Putin’s public discourse towards the West got high again in 2007, as tensions with Georgia began to intensify, reaching a constant high tide from the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, over the

Ballistic Shield topic to the conflict with Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. It is remarkable that even in 2013, shortly before the Olympic Winter Games in Sochi, to which Russia invited the whole world, the level of aggressive polemic towards the West remained high. Ultimately, this indicator has a share of an overall 17% share, even though much of its output has been produced during phase 2.

- *Mediation and coaxing*

With a tiny 10% overall share on Putin's public discourse in his tenure as president between 2000 and 2016, the indicator *mediation and coaxing* clearly stood not at the top of Putin's agenda. At times, however, passages in the Putin speeches reserve also charming words towards Western countries.

The outcomes of the discourse analysis largely compound and validate the assumptions elaborated in the political-historical analysis part of the present work. Especially the marker coded as "National integrity and backyard defense" fully confirms the geopolitical nature of Russian foreign and internal policy since at least the second Russian invasion of Chechnya in 1999. As explicated exhaustively in the course of this work, this marked policy shift coincides with the takeover of power by Vladimir Putin. Thus, geopolitics lie at the base of Putin's foreign and internal policy, and as such it has to be understood and acted upon.

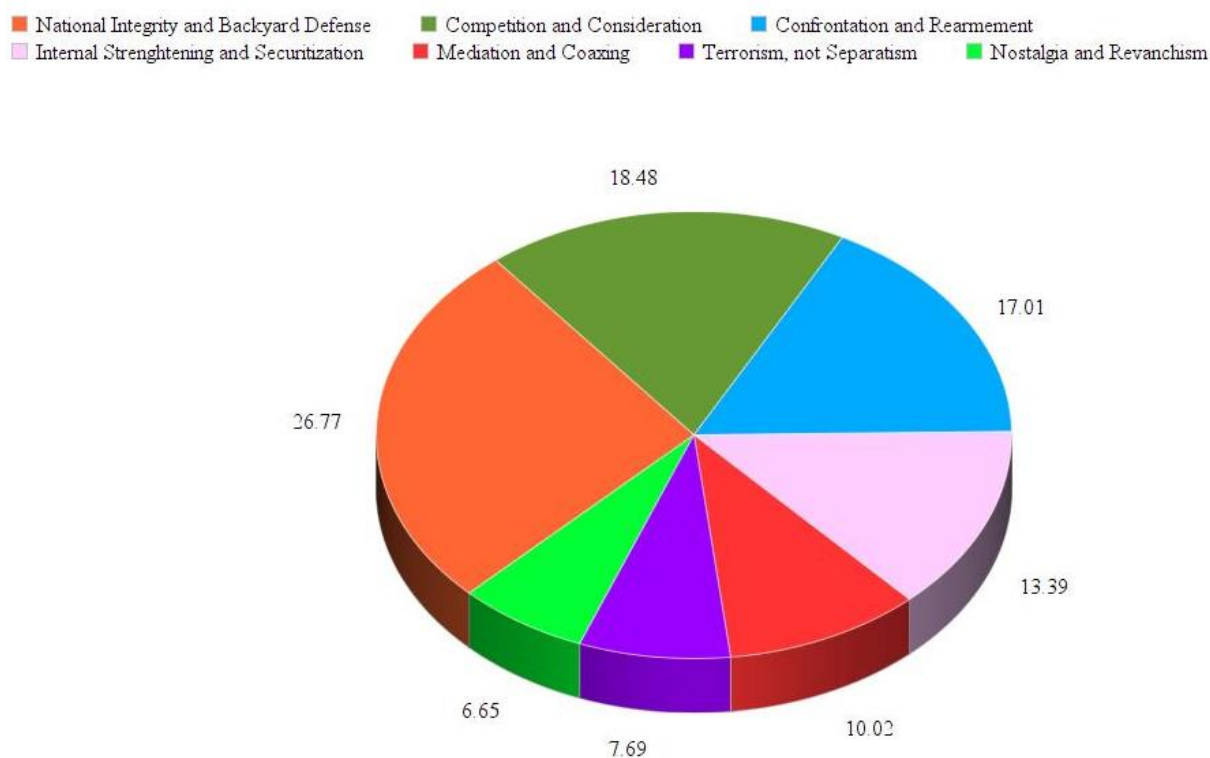


Figure 1: Complete dataset, 2000-2008, 2012-2016

■ National Integrity and Backyard Defense
 ■ Competition and Consideration
 ■ Confrontation and Rearmement
■ Internal Strengthening and Securitization
■ Mediation and Coaxing
■ Terrorism, not Separatism
■ Nostalgia and Revanchism

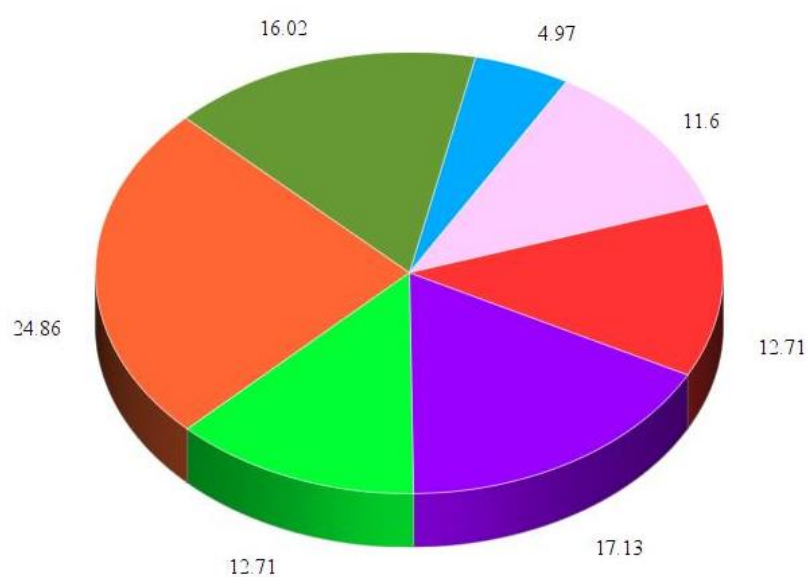


Figure 2: Dataset 2000

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 ■ Confrontation and Rearmement
■ Internal Strengthening and Securitization
■ Mediation and Coaxing
■ Terrorism, not Separatism
■ Nostalgia and Revanchism

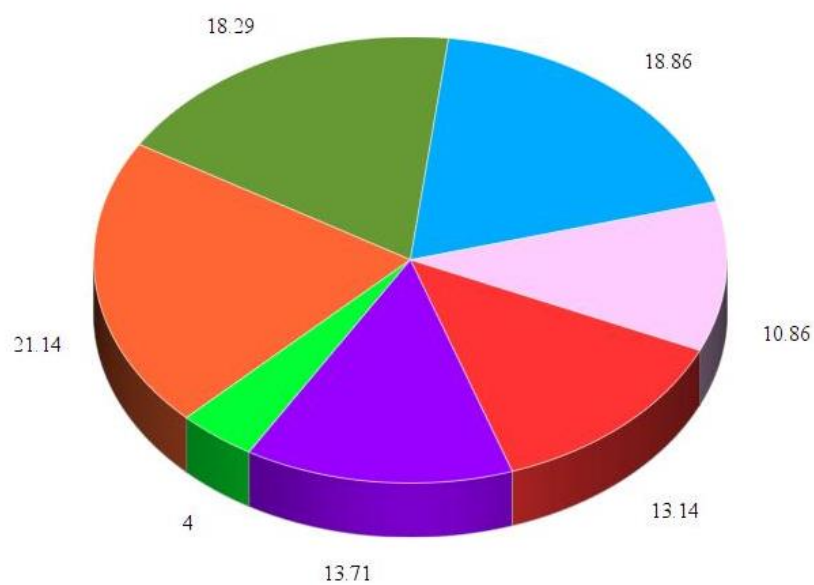


Figure 3: Dataset 2001

■ National Integrity and Backyard Defense
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 ■ Confrontation and Rearmement
 ■ Internal Strengthening and Securitization
 ■ Mediation and Coazing
 ■ Terrorism, not Separatism
 ■ Nostalgia and Revanchism

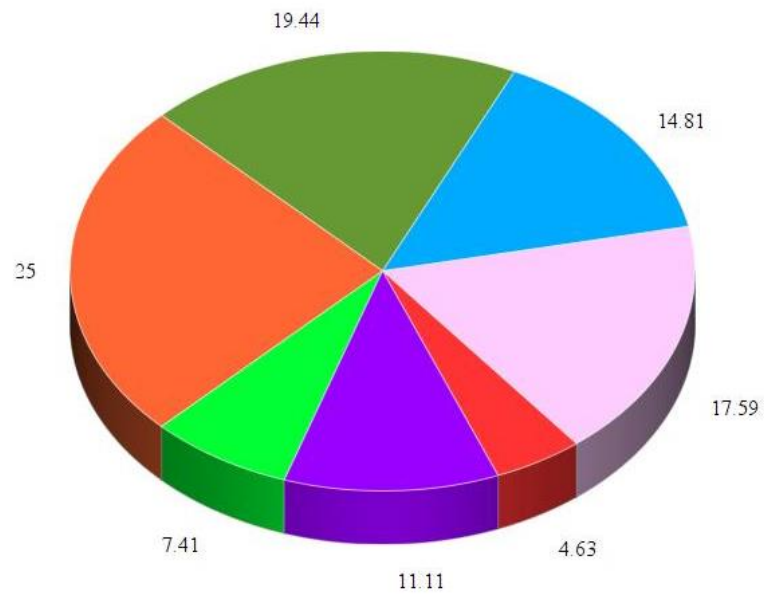


Figure 4: Dataset 2002

■ National Integrity and Backyard Defense
 ■ Competition and Consideration
 ■ Confrontation and Rearmement
 ■ Internal Strengthening and Securitization
 ■ Mediation and Coazing
 ■ Terrorism, not Separatism
 ■ Nostalgia and Revanchism

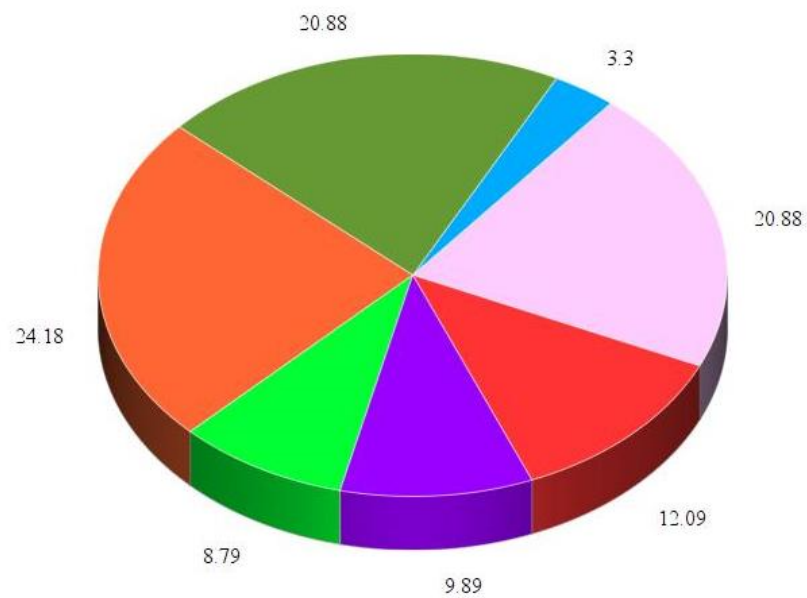


Figure 5: Dataset 2003

National Integrity and Backyard Defense Competition and Consideration Confrontation and Rearmement
 Internal Strengthening and Securitization Mediation and Coazing Terrorism, not Separatism Nostalgia and Revanchism

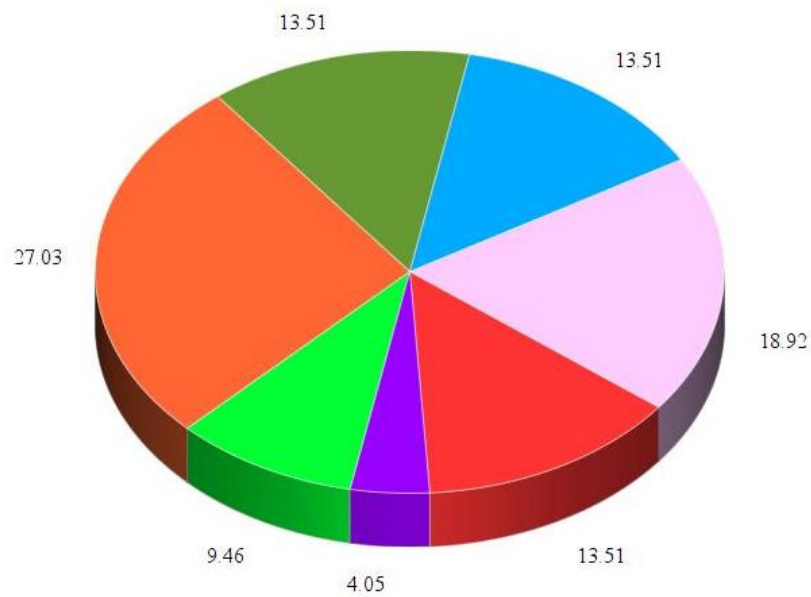


Figure 6: Dataset 2004

National Integrity and Backyard Defense Competition and Consideration Confrontation and Rearmement
 Internal Strengthening and Securitization Mediation and Coazing Terrorism, not Separatism Nostalgia and Revanchism

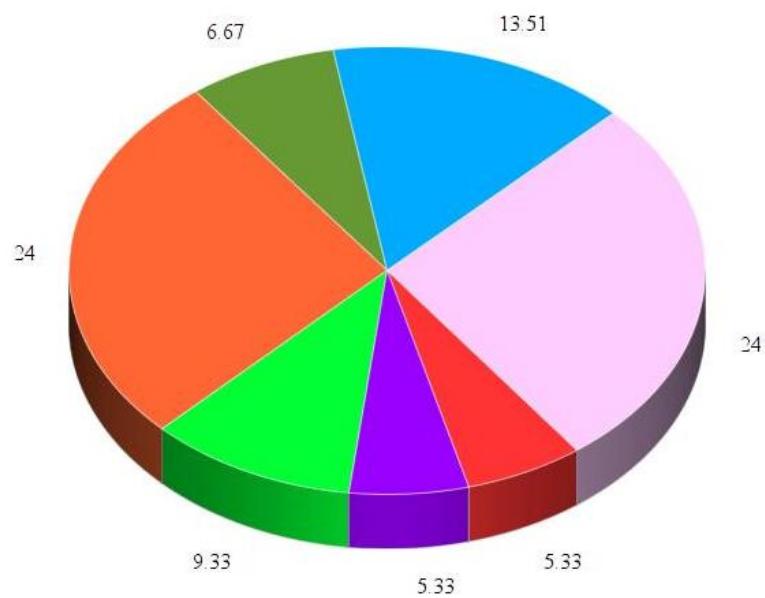


Figure 7: Dataset 2005

■ National Integrity and Backyard Defense
 ■ Competition and Consideration
 ■ Confrontation and Rearmement
■ Internal Strengthening and Securitization
■ Mediation and Coazing
■ Terrorism, not Separatism
■ Nostalgia and Revanchism

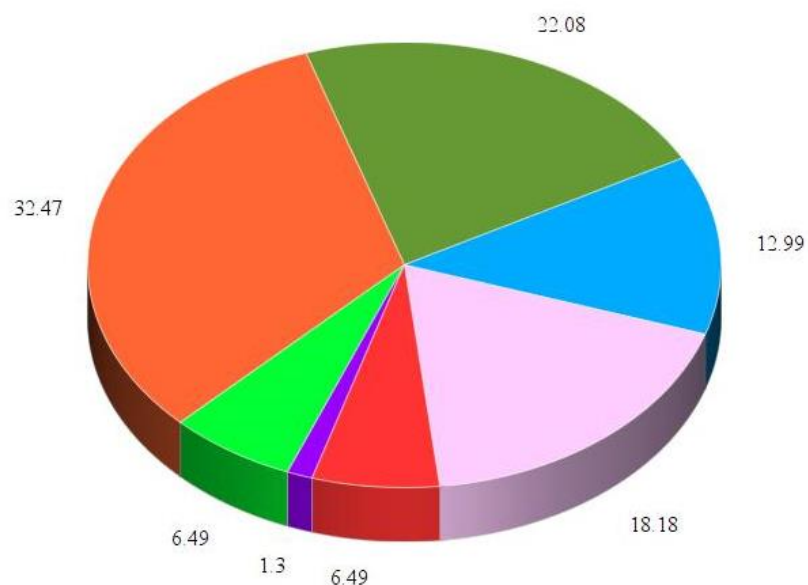


Figure 8: Datset 2006

■ National Integrity and Backyard Defense
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■ Internal Strengthening and Securitization
■ Mediation and Coazing
■ Terrorism, not Separatism
■ Nostalgia and Revanchism

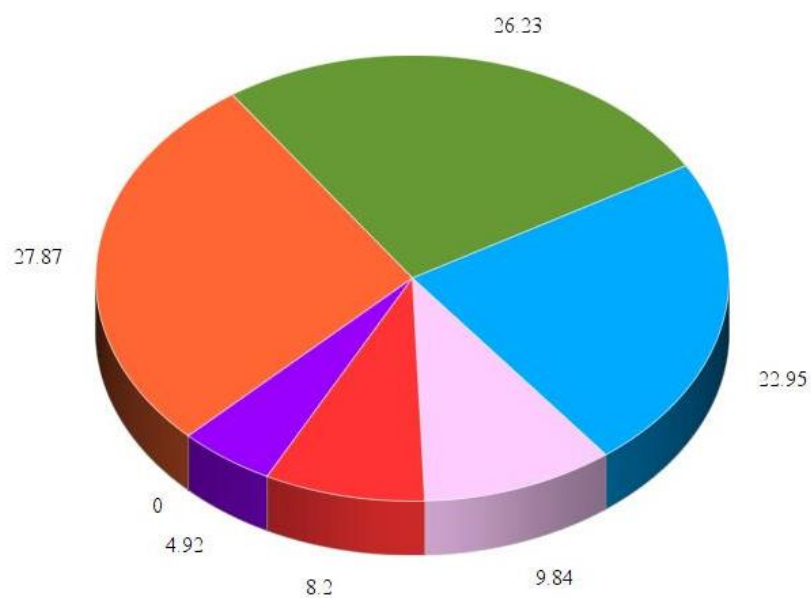


Figure 9: Datset 2007

■ National Integrity and Backyard Defense
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 ■ Mediation and Coaxing
■ Terrorism, not Separatism
■ Nostalgia and Revanchism

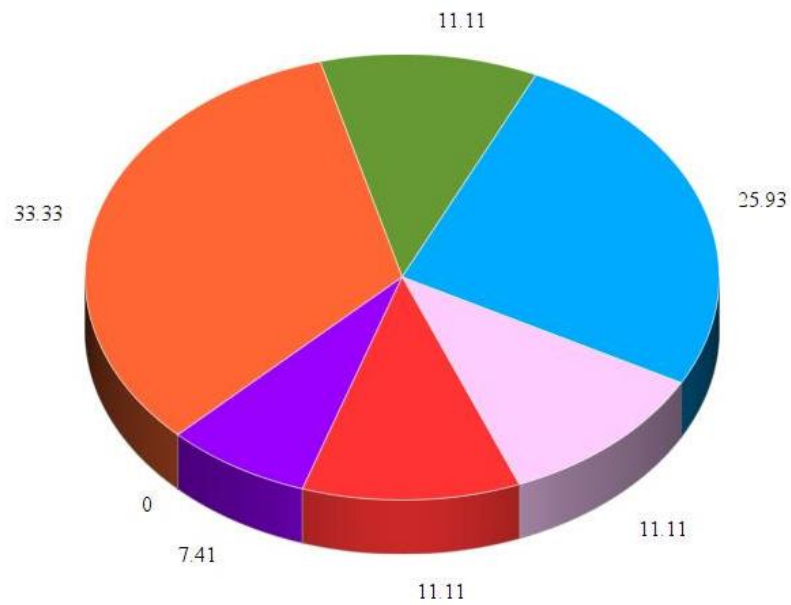


Figure 10: Dataset 2008

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■ Terrorism, not Separatism
■ Nostalgia and Revanchism

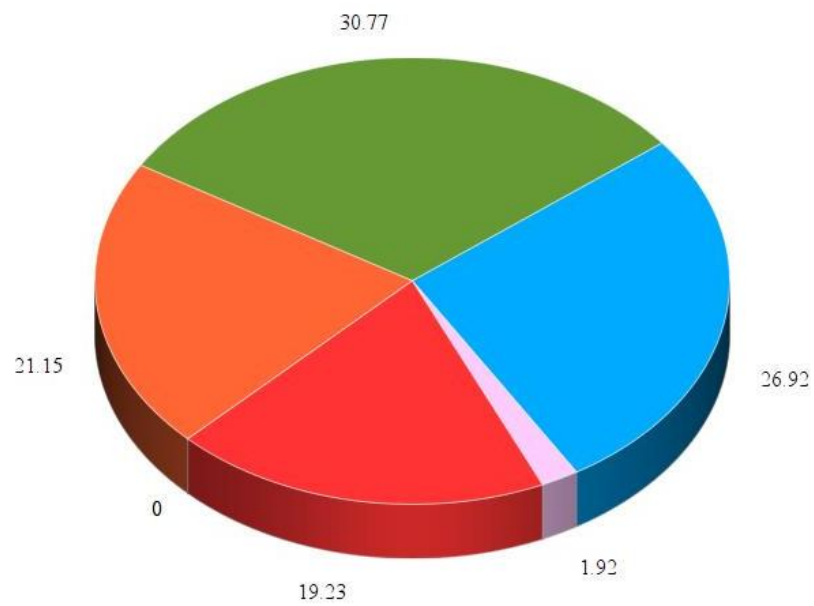


Figure 11: Dataset 2012

■ National Integrity and Backyard Defense
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■ Internal Strengthening and Securitization
■ Mediation and Coaxing
■ Terrorism, not Separatism
■ Nostalgia and Revanchism

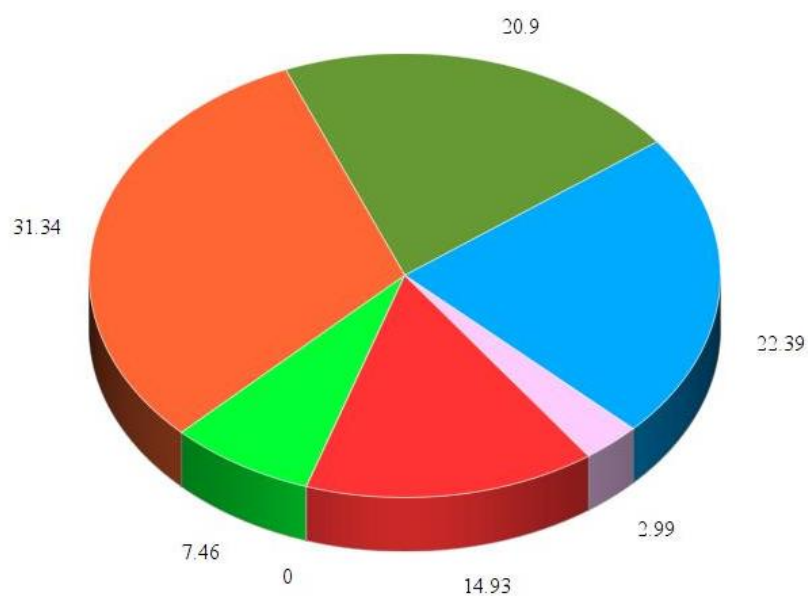


Figure 12: Dataset 2013

■ National Integrity and Backyard Defense
 ■ Competition and Consideration
 ■ Confrontation and Rearmement
■ Internal Strengthening and Securitization
■ Mediation and Coaxing
■ Terrorism, not Separatism
■ Nostalgia and Revanchism

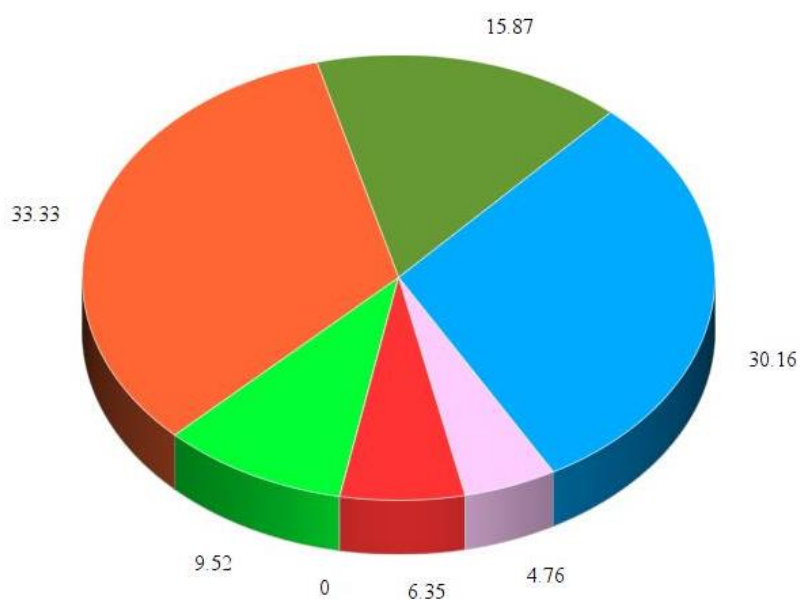


Figure 13: Dataset 2014

■ National Integrity and Backyard Defense
 ■ Competition and Consideration
 ■ Confrontation and Rearmement
■ Internal Strengthening and Securitization
■ Mediation and Coaxing
■ Terrorism, not Separatism
■ Nostalgia and Revanchism

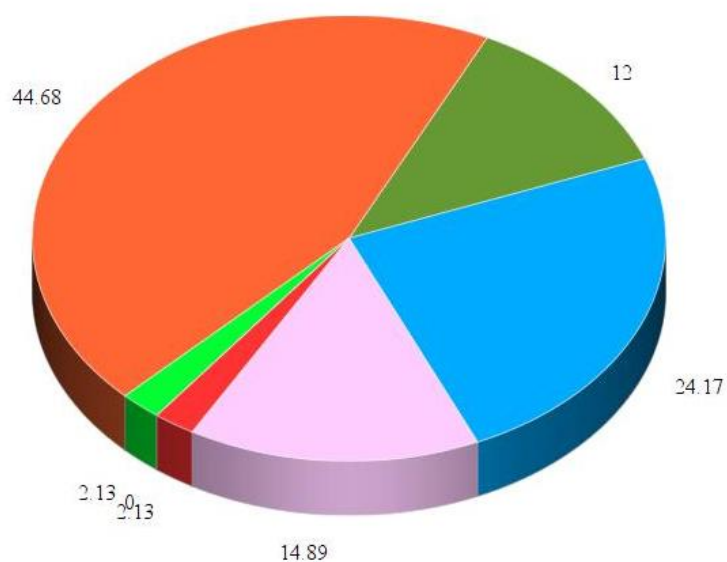


Figure 14: Dataset 2015

■ National Integrity and Backyard Defense
 ■ Competition and Consideration
 ■ Confrontation and Rearmement
■ Internal Strengthening and Securitization
■ Mediation and Coaxing
■ Terrorism, not Separatism
■ Nostalgia and Revanchism

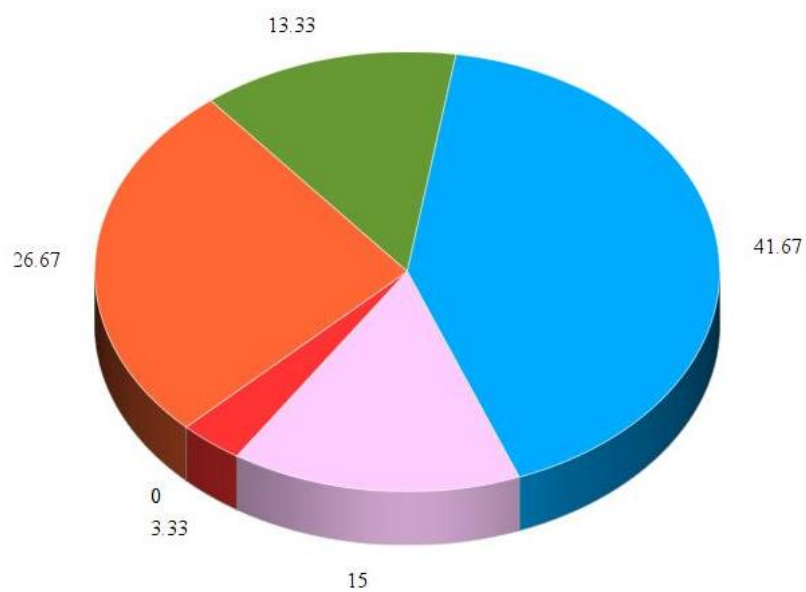


Figure 15: Dataset 2016

2. Securing the Basis

The foundation for the new-found Russian power lies in the conflicts in Chechnya and the North Caucasus. Russia would not be able to roam through the Middle East today without the sieges of Grozny, the massacres in Chechnya and the truculent counterinsurgency campaign waged in the North Caucasus. Without the war in Chechnya, most probably even Vladimir Putin would not have come to power, and maybe Russia today would be much more democratic than today – or it would even have sought integration with the west, rather than concurrence and conflict. When Vladimir Putin was appointed as prime minister back in 1999, he was an obscure figure not widely known to the Russian public. The propitious bombings occurring throughout Russia and the invasion of Dagestan by Chechen rebels gave Putin the opportunity for revanche, unleashing what in truth was a long-planned second invasion of Chechnya. Putin built up his credibility as some sort of vanquisher of the motherland, promising to chase “Chechen terrorists into their toilets”. The strict media policy pursued by the Russian army in Chechnya and by the Kremlin at the home front prevented the public outcry which had occurred during the First Chechen War, even if the Russian casualties were still high – this time however there was no one that could tell it.

Period	1945-1977	1978-1988	1989-1998	1999-2006	2007-2013	2013-2016
Military capability	Very high	High	Low	Moderately high	High	Very high
Foreign policy	Aggressive	Moderately aggressive	Peaceful	Peaceful	Moderately aggressive	Aggressive
“Backyard control”	Very high	Very high	Low	Low	Moderately high	High

Foreign policy matrix Soviet Union/Russian Federation, 1945-2016

After an uneasy battle, Grozny could finally be secured and this time Chechen rebels had no chance but to flee towards the forested hills and mountains of Southern Chechnya, since a big chunk of Chechnya was being controlled by a faction of Chechen rebels which had gone over to the Russian side in the first days of the war. The following insurgency proved to be costly for both sides, in proportion however the insurgents were bleeding out at a much faster rate than Russian units and their loyalist allies, which brought about a shift in strategy on the insurgents’ side, which tried to come to terms with the Kremlin carrying out high-profile terrorist attacks. The Dubrovka attack in 2002 and especially the Beslan attack with hundreds of underage casualties and fatalities however wholly destroyed the reputation of Chechen rebels, even if the uncompromising and cynical stance of the Kremlin bore at least as much responsibility for both dramas as the hostage-takings themselves. Beslan became also a watershed moment for the rule of Vladimir Putin. He took advantage of the moment of commotion in the country, referring to ineffective local response and thus took in a whole

range of measures which enormously increased centralized control by the Kremlin, among others through the appointment of Russian regional governors and laws limiting civil rights and the work of NGOs under the pretext of counterterrorism laws and set the way for an increasingly authoritarian rule by Vladimir Putin.

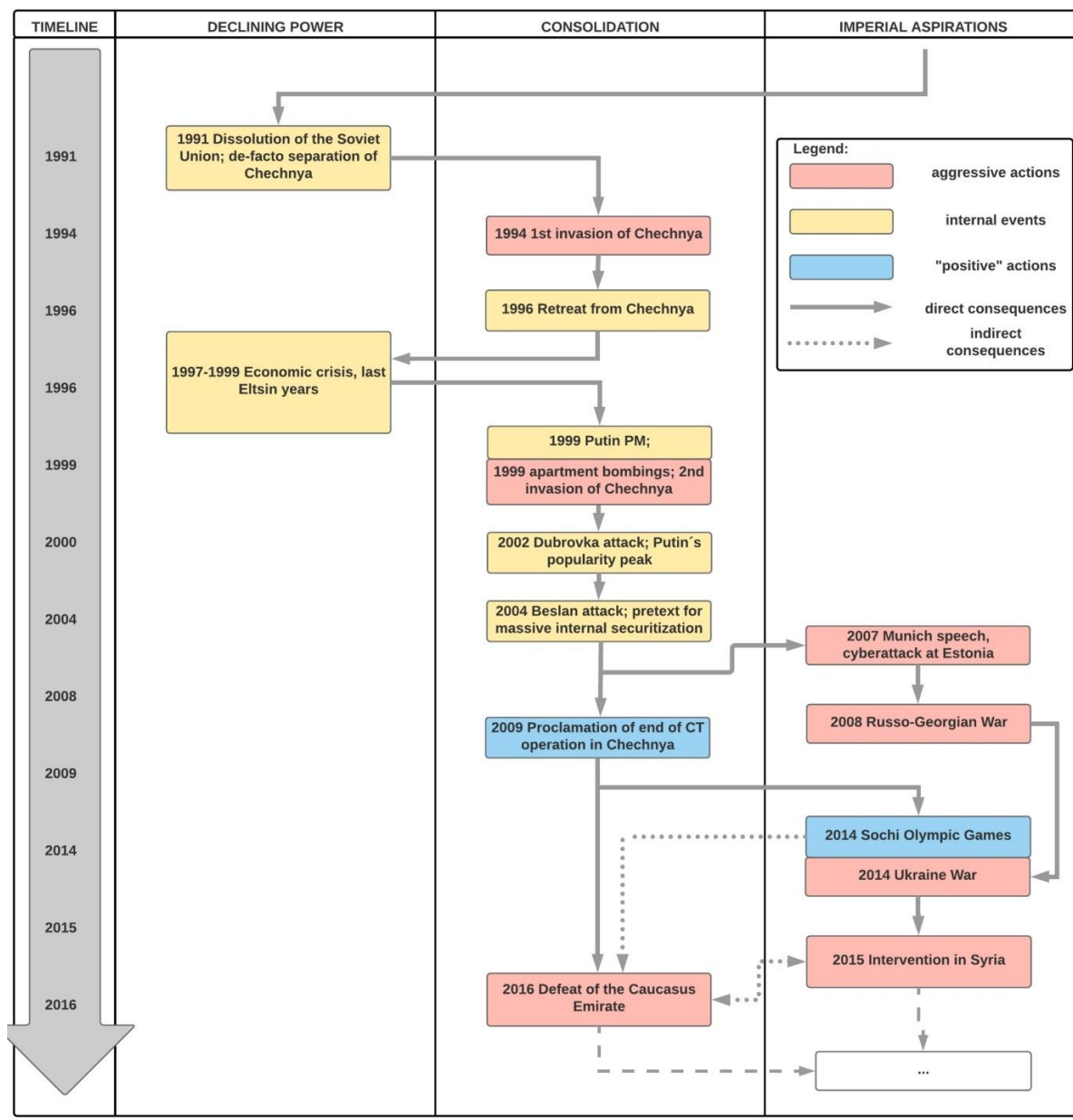


Figure 16: Russian Federation's geopolitics, 1991-2016

Finally, Russian security agencies managed to track down and kill the Chechen leadership between 2005 and 2006, de facto decapitating the Chechen rebel movement. This gave momentum to the non-Chechen rebels in Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Dagestani rebels and set the way for the Caucasus Emirate in 2007. What seemed to be a resource for the Caucasian rebels, namely the expansion of the fight throughout the North Caucasus, in reality was some sort of Pyrrhic victory, since this expansion came at the price of a further

radicalization of an already creeping Islamist ideologization of the Chechen and then Caucasian insurgency. This radicalization antagonized many observers and even supporters inside and outside the North Caucasus, finally playing into the hands of the Kremlin, which had been skillfully playing the Jihadist card already since the 9-11 attacks in 2001. Even if that was factually not the case, the Caucasus Emirate became perceived as a part of the global Jihadist movement and thus initiated a long decline, which resulted also in many internal splits and brought about the demise of the Caucasus Emirate and in the end opened the door to the “emigration” of Caucasian mujahideen towards Syria and the influence of the Islamic state into the North Caucasus.

With a move worthy of the best Machiavellian tradition, Russia managed to shift the conflict not only propagandistically, but also physically, from the North Caucasus to Syria. In the forerun to the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi – that were to be the symbol of the pacification of the North Caucasus and the end of a long internal stabilization process – Russian security agencies did everything in their might to secure the games, killing off rebels where they could – and buying them literally off and sending them abroad where they couldn't. The Olympic Games in Sochi thus became some sort of victory celebration of Russia in the North Caucasus and of Putin as father of the country. The events in the Ukraine and the Russian annexation of Crimea shortly after unmasked Putin's true face. It is the of a ruler which had been pursuing the re-foundation of the Russian state after the disintegration of the Soviet Union with unrelenting harshness, building new-found Russian power on mountains of corpses amidst heavy war crimes and atrocities in the North Caucasus, suppressing internal opposition with every possible means and showing its readiness to engage in war and armed conflict also outside its borders, thus creating a new status of conflict with the West. The decision to intervene in Syria is to be seen more in the continuation of this policy and the exploitation of propitious occasions towards this goal. The relatively large numbers of Caucasian mujahideen fighting Assad, but seemingly training there for a renewed Jihad in the North Caucasus have been a convenient fig leaf for the Kremlin's intervention into the Syrian conflict in 2015, as it has been the fight against the Islamic State. The Russian intervention in Syria has given enormous impetus to the Russian claim to global power and validity. If the Russian Federation had until then been perceived as a major power of secondary importance in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union as a predominantly self-centered global political power, the picture has since changed considerably. For the first time since the Cold War, the Middle East has become an important arena of the Russian challenge to the West. Some observers are actually talking about a "new cold war" between Russia and the West. And indeed, the current events in the Middle East should not be considered detached from the conflict, because these are fully comprehensible only in this reading.

3. Russia Quo Vadis?

Throughout its history, Russia has always had to deal with its geographical vulnerability - even more so after the demise of the Soviet Union. The country's extensive border areas are

difficult and costly to control. Confined to the northern hemisphere, its coasts lack access to the warm seas and traditional maritime trade routes. As the revival of geopolitics in Russia has demonstrated, these shortcomings are still valid. Over the centuries, they have been developing into some sort of complex, which explains the Russian striving towards the expansion of its territorial possessions out from the Eurasian landmass towards the warm seas. Of course, this attitude is a primary cause of geopolitical friction and even conflict. Another vigorous weakness of the Russian Federation is its structurally debile economy. Russian exports are almost only concentrated around natural resources like oil and natural gas. Apart from its armaments industry, Russia has virtually nothing other to offer the international markets. Again, besides its armament industry, Russian civil industry and also the manufacturing branch have not managed to successfully develop to a competitive and modern industry. On top of that, the Russian economy is being compounded not only by structural, but also institutional weakness, lack of legal certainty because of frequent state intervention and a decline of working-age population.

Since the rise to power of Vladimir Putin established a restoration of the Russian claim to power. Gone are the days under Boris Yeltsin, in which the Russian Federation saw itself as a partner of the West. Economic misery, the enrichment of less and the impoverishment of many, corruption and nepotism, as well as the unwillingness of the West to include Russia in its own circle led from a time of reforms to a new era of restoration. At the latest since his second term in 2005, Vladimir Putin's goal was to bring Russia back to where the former Soviet Union had been - as the second superpower alongside the United States. With the internal reorganization and strengthening of the Russian state, which came to a close with the pacification of the North Caucasus, a new phase of foreign policy profiling went hand in hand. Considering the Georgian-Russian War of 2008 and the increasing pressure of the Kremlin on the Baltic countries belonging to NATO as a kind of dress rehearsal, the presentation of Russia as a neo-imperial superpower during the 2013 Winter Games in Sochi became first - and initially peaceful - staged. The interventions in the wake of the Ukraine and Crimea crisis since 2014 and in Syria since 2015 had a less peaceful effect, but underpinned Moscow's claim to power in an impressive manner. In the Middle East, Vladimir Putin has successfully used the so-called Primakov Doctrine since intervening in the Syrian conflict. It plans to intensify Russian influence in the Middle East, on the one hand to counter US unilateralism and, on the other hand, to create a strategic axis in the Russian world's conservative and anti-Western Islamic world. This is intended to break through the "siege ring" of the West for Russia, which was mainly perceived as a result of the NATO enlargement to the east, and to serve as an important step towards restating Russia's global power and validity claims.

The emergence of the Syria conflict in 2011 initially worried Russia. Syria was the only remaining partner in the Middle East, the naval base in Tartous the only Russian base in the Mediterranean. At that time, the Russian government was still busy with the internal reorganization of the state. The flames of the conflict in the North Caucasus were still blazing and the reform to modernize the armed forces was still in full swing. Further geopolitical

events such as the revolution in Ukraine brought the Kremlin on a conflict course with the West. During this period, the Kremlin supported the Assad regime primarily by supplying weapons and adding intelligence support. When the reluctance of the US administration, even over set red lines such as the use of chemical warfare agents, became clear and the Assad regime came under increasing pressure, in autumn 2015 a relatively favorable time came for Russian intervention in Syria. The Russian intervention has since proved crucial. By comparatively small contingents of ground forces, but strong air force and artillery support, Moscow managed to turn the tide. Assad seems now to be victorious - thanks to the Kremlin. Syria could thus be preserved as an ally and Moscow's influence in Syria and beyond could be enormously increased. The low loss figures - also due to the circumstance of the use of allegedly private PMCs - Putin could sell the de facto victory in Syria and domestic policy well. At the same time, the conflict in Syria was also used to exert pressure on the West, as an arena for testing new weapons systems and for the further production and dissemination of disinformation.

Furthermore, the resolve of the Russian intervention - which on the outside has always been an "anti-terrorist operation" against the IS or other actual or alleged Islamist terrorist organization. In contrast to the reluctance of the United States, the recognition of Moscow as a new power and mediator in the Middle East in the region has been presented. Russia as a new world power and the success of the Russian intervention in Syria not only gives the Kremlin enormous regional power, but also on a global scale. At least since then, Russia has once again acted as a superpower comparable to the US - and is increasingly perceived by other actors in this spirit. In fact, the expansion of permanent military bases in Syria since the collapse of the Soviet Union and outside the CIS network is a first. Moscow is now trying to expand its position of power in the region and beyond. The supremacy in the coalition of the Assad allies allows Russia to directly influence the Syrian regime as well as Iran, its allies and proxies. The military demonstration of power is only one of many ways. Above all, soft-power measures, such as sales of state-of-the-art weapon systems and advantageous energy deals, which initially take place behind the scenes, attract potential partners even more. The example of the sale of modern S-400 anti-aircraft missiles to Turkey, Syria and now also Saudi Arabia shows how quickly and massively the Kremlin is able to exploit the American influence vacuum in the Middle East. The Kremlin currently has regional, if not greater, wider spread influence, as in the Cold War weddings. Especially the foreign policy retreat of the USA made this possible, even though the qualitative framework of Russian influence cannot be compared to former US influence. At the same time, Russian sensors are also being deployed to North Africa, especially to Libya and Algeria.

Before Russia's Ukraine invasion in February 2022, relations between Russia and China have become increasingly strong at least since 2010. This development is not solely due to the increasingly unfriendly attitude between Russia and China and the Western countries, but it has certainly made a significant contribution to this. The expanding and diversifying of their strategic relations are evident in all areas, but it is especially noteworthy in its economic and military implications. But the alliance between China and Russia against the West began

much earlier. In 2001, China, the Russian Federation, and the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan founded the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. At the same time, the rapprochement between China and Russia was enshrined through the 2001 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. At the time, the focus of Russian foreign policy was still on cooperation with the West. This cooperation was suddenly stopped after the annexation of Crimea: Russia intensified the "swing to Asia" proclaimed in 2012 and sought to compensate for the economic losses caused by the western sanctions.

Since the Ukraine crisis in particular, Russia's rapprochement with China has also increased significantly in the military sector. Russia has been China's most important weapon supplier since the fall of the Soviet Union. But so far Moscow had always avoided supplying Beijing with its latest weapons systems out of security concerns and fear of product piracy. The Russian government has dropped this reluctance since 2014 and at the same time held extensive military maneuvers with the Chinese. These took place not only in Central Asia, but also in the Chinese Sea. In doing so, Russia has largely given up its previous policy of neutrality in the dispute between China and Japan over islands in the South China Sea, which has put a strain on Moscow's relations with Tokyo. If there were to be a conflict between China and Japan, Russia would certainly not be on the side of Tokyo. And Moscow largely supports Beijing's position in the discussions about North Korea.

The development and diversification of commercial ties as well as other types of economic cooperation between China and Russia are influenced by a variety of variables. The most significant of these are the Western nations' imposition of sanctions against Russia in 2014, the economic stagnation that most European nations experienced over the past decade while China's economy continued to grow, the symmetry of the economies of the two nations, optimizing each other's demand and supply in a variety of sectors, which brings the two nations closer together strategically and has also generated economic growth., as well as the consolidation of the One Road One Belt initiative and the Eurasian Economic Union. The trade connection between Russia and China has rapidly increased in both imports and exports after a relatively flat phase characterized by what might be characterized as benevolent apathy and neglect. The fact that trade and other forms of economic cooperation have grown qualitatively rather than merely quantitatively is, however, at least as significant. This is because the governments of the two countries have, over an extended period of time, tried to coordinate industrial development of public and private sector investment and production in some strategic areas.

Russia and China also have common interests in Central Asia, among other things in the fight against Islamism and the goal of reducing US influence. At the same time, however, both countries are competing for power in this strategically important region. Russia is economically in the weaker position. However, Moscow benefits indirectly from the fact that many Central Asians fear Beijing will have too much influence. The Shanghai Organization, in which China, Russia, India and four Central Asian countries are united, plays an important role in the Russian-Chinese dialogue. In addition to an economic component, it also has a military component. Therefore, in the future it could be assigned the task of securing the trade

routes of the New Silk Road through Central Asia. Russia, which continues to have a military presence in Central Asian states such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, could take on a leading role.

The overall goal of the aforementioned policies however is the end of US-led unipolarism towards a globally recognized multipolarism, which sees the might and power of Russia reinstated again, as in the heyday of the Cold War. Russia has been feeling betrayed by some Western policies like Nato-enlargement towards the Eastern European states, the implementation of a missile shield on its borders and what have been perceived as “Western machinations” on its borders, with the colored revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia. These actions made Putin believe this to be a tightening of the siege ring around Russia by its Western counterparts. This has led not only to the aforementioned Russian interventions in its self-perceived sphere of influence in the former Soviet world like in Georgia and Ukraine, but also to a concerted action against Western unipolarism, starting in 2007 with the first test runs of cyber warfare on Estonia, beginning an intimidation campaign against the Western-looking Baltic states that goes on to this day. On a higher level, the new confrontation between Russia and the West has been leading to a complete disregard of international treaties that were the product of the end of the Cold War, like the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, which demands limitations in the deployment of conventional military equipment as well as the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. Particularly the conception and the implementation of “hybrid warfare” by Russia have been instrumental in its covert conflict against the West on the way back to its former might and power.

Beyond the “mission” to recover glory and power to “Holy Mother Russia”, it has not to be forgotten about the exquisitely personal cravings of Vladimir Putin. The recovery of Russia as a global player is indissolubly tied to the person of Vladimir Putin and his holding onto power. To achieve this, he secured himself the support of the since Soviet times virtually untouched security apparatus by conferring its members the most important positions in the government and the administration and he appeased the military by an enormous increase in military spending. Independent media, concurrent political parties and political leaders have been sidelined one way or the other, while the independent media has been forced into line and civil rights have been severely curtailed. Thus, Vladimir Putin has been creating a system that puts its leader – himself – at its heart, and moreover is trimmed to secure its stay in power. In fact, Putin’s attitude and his external and internal policies changed radically after the “color revolutions” of 2003 in Georgia and 2004 in Ukraine. Then, popular protest, inspired by Western liberalism, had managed to overthrow the local regimes. Putin felt these protests as having been provoked by covert Western agitation – this was the spark that brought Putin to sharpen its internal policies, with the markedly authoritarian turn taken in the context of the Beslan attack. Externally, he began to counter Western liberalism on its own ground, undermining its legitimacy, spreading anti-liberal propaganda, agitation and confusion by covert means – and continuing to do so to this day.

However, apart from Putin's geopolitical fight for multipolarism against the west, and the current cooperation with China in many areas, nevertheless Russia's hold over its far Eastern possessions is being threatened by its own demographic weakness. This self-perceived demographic weakness is one of the most important internal factors pushing Vladimir Putin's aggressive neo-imperialist policy. Thus, in the future, Russia might encounter rising difficulties in the preservation of its present boundaries, which could result in the desire to get "fresh blood", inglobating ethnically desirable former Soviet spaces like Belarus, parts of the Ukraine or of the Baltic states with their consistent Russian minorities. Thus, there is also the demographic factor on the weak side of Russia. Russia's population as a whole is shrinking. Low fertility rates deriving from missing economic perspectives for a large part of the population, the gap between poor and rich and the homogenization to a general trend in developed countries are already now sanctioning the numerical decline of the ethnically Russian population. High mortality rates deriving from widespread alcoholism, poor health and sanity – also factors deriving from the socioeconomic – have been particularly decimating the male population: The average life expectancy of Russian males today is around 67 years, compared to 78 years of their German counterparts. In fact, Russia's population could shrink to 113 million by 2050 – 20 million less than today - if this trend will not be reversed. But the Russian population is not only shrinking as a whole, it is also transforming. The demographic decline of the ethnic Russian part of the population, once almost preponderant, encounters today the demographic rise of Muslims throughout the Russian Federation. Muslims today make already up an estimated 16% of the total population of the Russian Federation, while their rise in numbers could bring them at relative percentages of 20% by 2020 and around 50% at the end of the century if this trend will persist. This demographic trend derives from different communal habits which leads to overall higher fertility and at the same time lower mortality rates among Muslims when compared to their ethnic Russian counterparts. Ironically, the highest birthrates in the Russian Federation are found among North Caucasian Muslims.

To counter the rise of Islam in Russia and to protect the state from centrifugal tendencies, the Kremlin has been abetting Russian ultranationalism during the last decade. Particularly the Chechen Wars have at times been internally framed as some sort of crusade against the savage – and Muslim – North Caucasian peoples. But today Russia's Muslim constituency numbers not only autochthonous Muslims like Chechens, Dagestanis and Tatars, but also Millions of immigrants from Muslim Central Asian republics. Today, the number of migrants present mainly as cheap labor in Russian metropolises has been estimated to be more than 10 million, almost 8 percent of the country's total population. This trend has been on a rising tendency in the last years, and even Putin acknowledged that Russia's population could grow again, but only thanks to immigrants. This demographic change, coupled with state-sponsored nationalism, has been breeding creeping xenophobia in the Russian society, which in the long run – with an increasingly numerous Muslim constituencies compared to a tendentially shrinking ethnically Russian component - could become a much more serious problem as it is today. The Kremlin could be tempted to continue and increase the securitization of more religious or more emancipated parts of the Muslim society inside Russia perceived as

troublesome or even subversive towards the central power, and in turn provoke a backlash in the form of a new radicalization spiral, as it has been already the case for the last 300 years in the North Caucasus.

The Caucasus Emirate has been defeated, and it is likely that remaining elements that had gone to Syria to fight Russian interests there and later ended in the ranks of the Islamic State will not be able to restart an insurgency that remains unlikely for the foreseeable future. Thanks to the delegation of the fight against rebels and of the pacification effort to local rulers, the resulting calm situation in the North Caucasus seems to be stable. However, the costs in terms of corruption and nepotism exerted by those local satraps at the behest of the local population could shake up the situation again in the medium term, unless the Kremlin doesn't manage it to improve the economic situation on a large basis there. The same is true for the entire Russian Federation. Putin's expansionist design and Russia's new grand-power politics have been provoking a new era of confrontation between Russia and the West. Even if the term of a "new Cold War" minted by some observers seems a little bit overstated, the new spiral of confrontation harbors nevertheless geopolitical risks and does globally little to contribute to peaceful dynamics. Ideologues and forethinkers like Alexander Dugin, whose ideas and influence certainly have not to be overrated, still retain a capacity to sway to political discourse inside the Russian Federation. Indeed, Putin's Eurasianism - contrarily to the one proposed by Dugin - is an ideologically hollow term designed to disguise the Russian supremacy aspiration as a common and multi-ethnic and -religious design directed externally towards the post-Soviet republics inside its sphere of influence, and internally towards its Muslim population. Thus, the new Russian strength-inspired attitude serves not only to underline global Russian power aspirations, but also to cement internal consensus in the face of multiple weaknesses deriving from demography, inherent regional instabilities, uncertain economic long-term perspectives and the awareness of the ruling elite about the fragility of authoritarian regimes built upon social injustice.

Russia's creeping invasion of Ukraine in 2014 already marked a significant turning point in the country's foreign policy. For Russia, this move has meant pursuing a more assertive foreign policy aimed at reestablishing its status as a major global power. This policy has been fueled by a combination of factors, including a desire to counter perceived threats to Russia's security and interests, a sense of historical grievance and resentment towards the West, and a belief in Russia's unique place in the world. The conflict in Ukraine can be seen as an outgrowth of this policy, as Russia sought to assert its dominance in the region and push back against Western encroachment. Russia's annexation of Crimea and the faked support for separatist proxies in the Donbass were part of a broader strategy aimed at maintaining strategic leverage and projecting power in the region, albeit in a creeping - and thus acceptable way for most of global public opinion.

Everything changed on February 22, 2022, when the Russian army, on the orders of Vladimir Putin tried to create a *fait accompli* by outrightly invading Ukraine, hoping in a swift decapitation strike, which did not happen. Until then, many Western observers did not understand Russia's goals and strategy. This has been the main reason for the many

misunderstandings and misinterpretations in the last years that have led to a revival of Russian power policy and in the end, the current conflict in Ukraine and the broader one with the West.

In the end, just lining up the most important political steps taken by the Kremlin internally as well as externally, it becomes clear that the foundation of the current situation lays in the North Caucasian conflict following a ruthless, strictly realist and geopolitical policy of building up political and military power as well as taking a rising confrontational course towards its perceived main adversary – the West. In other words, without the ruthless colonial campaign in and the pacification of the North Caucasus, Vladimir Putin would never have been able to put forward the annexation of Crimea, to intervene militarily in Syria or finally start an all-out invasion on Ukraine.

Instead, Russia would have been definitively relegated to be secondary power able to exert influence only in parts of the former Soviet space. Encouraged by its own rising strength, the Kremlin has gone back to policies which recognize power and strength as the only true policy elements to take care of. However, it is also clear that the aggressive Russian stance derives also from inherent internal weaknesses, like above-mentioned coming demographical challenges and the need to preserve the power of Vladimir Putin and the ruling elite, by diverting the attention of the public opinion from wide-spread corruption and nepotism towards grand-power designs and external policies that serve also to persuade the Russian population about the new-found greatness of their country.

The present reconstruction of the development of Putin's great power politics clearly shows that from the outset, in an increasingly authoritarian framework, they were aimed at aggressively regaining lost greatness in the sense of classical realism and geopolitics. Thus, it seems clear, that the destiny of today`s Russia inextricably linked to Vladimir Putin`s person will be decided on Ukraine`s battlefields. It seems equally clear that a free and democratic Russia will only succeeding through the sincere and genuine recognition, revision and compensation of the savagery and crimes done by Putinism in the North Caucasus and Chechnya in particular. This can geographically well mean the end of the Russian Federation as we know it today.

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Annex: Deutschsprachige Zusammenfassung

Russia Made Great Again

Die Tschetschenienkriege und der Nordkaukasuskonflikt als Grundlage der neuen russischen Großmachtpolitik

I. Einleitung: Forschungsinteresse und Relevanz

Die Invasion der Ukraine seit dem 24. Februar 2022 verzeichnete den bisherigen Zenit der neuen russischen Großmachtpolitik. Seit dem Fall der Sowjetunion, und dem ersten Amtsantritt Wladimir Putins war es zu einem schrittweisen, gänzlich in der zaristischen und später sowjetischen Tradition stehendem Wiederaufleben derselben gekommen. Der Invasion der Ukraine ging in den Jahren zuvor ein Crescendo an russischen Interventionen voraus. Diese zeigten aus russischer Sicht durchaus Erfolg. Zuletzt hatte die russische Präsenz in Syrien und der damit verbundene, entscheidende Beitrag zur Militärkampagne des syrischen Regimes das Blatt im syrischen Bürgerkrieg gewendet. Parallel dazu nahm der russische Einfluss im Nahen Osten und darüber hinaus stetig zu, so dass Russland erstmals seit vielen Jahren als entscheidender Machtvermittler anerkannt wurde.

Moskaus Eingriff in Syrien kam jedoch nicht aus heiterem Himmel: Beim Krieg gegen Georgien 2008 handelte es sich seit dem Zusammenbruch der Sowjetunion um den ersten militärischen Eingriff außerhalb des Territoriums der Russischen Föderation. 2014 folgte die verdeckte Anstiftung von Aufständen in der Ukraine und schließlich die Annexion der Krim. Dies waren vorerst die wichtigsten Eskalationsschritte besagter Großmachtpolitik. Bis zum Angriff auf die Ukraine wurden offene Interventionen mit nicht-militärischen Mitteln der verdeckten, psychologischen und cyberbasierten Kriegsführung kombiniert. Man sprach folgerichtig von „hybrider Kriegsführung“ im Rahmen, manchmal sogar einer so genannten „Gerasimov-Doktrin“, benannt nach dem Stabschef der russischen Streitkräfte. Es ging darum ein hohes Maß an Abstreitbarkeit zu gewährleisten und somit begrenzte Aggression zu führen, ohne ernsthafte Auswirkungen befürchten zu müssen sowie darum die NATO und den Westen aus dem Hinterhalt heraus zu destabilisieren.

Wie gestaltete sich der neuerliche russische Drang nach Großmachtpolitik? Auf welchen Grundlagen steht Wladimir Putin Russlands Rückkehr zu alter Größe? Dies ist die zentrale Fragestellung der gegenständlichen Schrift.

Die erste Hypothese zur Beantwortung dieses Fragenkomplexes besagt, dass die geographische Beschaffenheit Russlands in einem autoritären Kontext, wie es seit des Machtantritts Wladimir Putins der Fall ist, ein von politischem Realismus und Geopolitik

gekennzeichnetes Gebaren bedingt. Um die russische Sichtweise zu verstehen, muss man in Zeit und Raum zurückblicken. Die geografische Natur Russlands hat die Politik seiner Staatsgebilde im Laufe der Jahrhunderte geprägt. Die weite Ebene, auf der sich Russland hauptsächlich entwickelt, war von Invasoren seit jeher leicht zu erzwingen – sie vollständig zu erobern, hat sich jedoch aufgrund ihrer gigantischen Ausdehnung als kaum möglich erwiesen. Aus diesem Grund war die russische Führung regelmäßig von einem geopolitischen Politikansatz geprägt. Aus diesem Grund wird hier angenommen, dass der beste theoretische Ansatz zur Deutung des Wiederauflebens der russischen Großmachtpolitik die geopolitische Theorie sei, wie sie von Halford Mackinder und Nicholas J. Spykman zur Zeit des *Great Game* und während des Kalten Krieges entwickelt wurde. Geopolitik war damals das wichtigste Interpretationsinstrument zur Eindämmung der Sowjetunion. Ironischerweise wurde es heute von führenden Vordenkern und politischen Einflussnehmern in Russland übernommen und an den russischen Standpunkt angepasst.

Begleitend zu dieser ersten Annahme besagt die zweite Hypothese, dass der Beginn des Wiedererstarkens Russlands mit den Kriegen zur Wiedergewinnung Tschetscheniens ab Mitte der 1990er Jahre einsetzte. Tschetschenien hatte sich nach der Auflösung der Sowjetunion von der Russischen Föderation getrennt. Im Zuge der Niederlage im Verlauf des Ersten Tschetschenienkrieges erreichte die Russische Föderation militärisch und wirtschaftlich ihren Tiefpunkt. Dies war der Katalysator zum Machtantritt des bis dahin kaum bekannten Geheimdienstlers Vladimir Putin. Um die historische Aufgabe der Wiederauferstehung Russlands als Weltmacht zu erfüllen, war die Befriedung Tschetscheniens sowie des weichen Unterbauchs der Russischen Föderation – des überwiegend muslimischen Nordkaukasus – unerlässlich. Mit anderen Worten, der Kreml konnte nur durch die Wiederherstellung der eigenen territorialen Integrität - und damit durch Krieg im Nordkaukasus - hoffen, dorthin zurückzukehren, wo er zu Sowjetzeiten gestanden hatte.

Sekundäre Forschungsfragen beschäftigen sich mit der Beschaffenheit der separatistischen Aufstandsbewegung in Tschetschenien und dem Nordkaukasus. Wurde die Radikalisierung derselben durch die russische Aufstandsbekämpfung in Kauf genommen oder gar begünstigt? Wie entwickelte sich die letzte Ausformung der dortigen Aufstandsbewegung, das so genannte Kaukasus-Emirat im Verhältnis zur globalen dschihadistischen Bewegung?

II. Geopolitische Theorie

Der Versuch, die Natur Putinscher Großmachtpolitik zu begründen führt uns zurück zur Epoche des *Great Game* ins 19. Jahrhundert. Der damalige Wettlauf zur Kolonisation Zentralasiens zwischen dem russischen Zarenreich und dem britischen Empire wurde von Sir Halford Mackinder erstmalig theorisiert. Mackinder gilt als Begründer der geopolitischen Theorie. Er stellte seine Theorie 1904 vor, als er einen Vortrag namens *The Geographical Pivot of History* an der Royal Geographical Society in Großbritannien hielt. Im Zentrum seines Konzepts steht die Heartland-Theorie. Mackinder verbindet die Landmasse Europas

und Asiens zu einer *großen Weltinsel*. Darin liegt der größte Teil der Bevölkerung sowie der natürlichen Ressourcen. Das *Kernland* der großen Weltinsel umfasst Osteuropa und den nordöstlichen Teil Asiens, ist damit im Wesentlichen mit dem Territorium des damaligen Zarenreiches und später der Sowjetunion gleichzusetzen. Das Kernland wird vom *inneren Halbmond* umschlossen. Darin befinden sich unter anderem Deutschland, die Türkei, Indien und nicht zuletzt China. Zum *äußeren Halbmond* gehören periphere Gebiete, Inselstaaten und Seemächte, so die britische Insel, Japan, Afrika, Australien, Nord- und Südamerika. Mackinder unterscheidet zwischen See- und Landmächten nach ihrer geographischen Lage. Seemächte haben sich daher durch ihre Macht auf See und ihre Kontrolle über Handelsrouten auf See sowie ihre Zurückhaltung, tiefer in das Landesinnere einzudringen, gekennzeichnet. Zu einer Zeit, als Seehandel und Kommunikationswege günstiger und schneller waren, war dies ein großer Vorteil für Seemächte. Laut Mackinder liegt die Weltherrschaft in der kombinierten Kontrolle des *Kernlandes* sowie des *inneren Halbmondes*. Aus der Sicht eines Engländers durch die Optik des *Great Game* war dies damals eine überraschend akkurate Interpretation globaler Machtgefüge im Sinne des politischen Realismus.

Einer der bedeutendsten Schüler und Kritiker von Mackinder war Prof. Nicholas J. Spykman. 1940 veröffentlichte er einen Aufsatz, in dem er seine eigene geopolitische Theorie skizzierte. Spykman bestätigte viele von Mackinders Annahmen, während er anderen kritischer gegenüberstand. Er übernimmt Mackinders geografische Einteilungen der Welt und benennt einige um: das Kernland, das Randland, das mit Mackinders *innerem Halbmond* und den peripheren Inseln und Kontinenten - Mackinders *äußerem Halbmond* gleichkommt. Laut Spykman hat das Randland und nicht das Kernland die primäre strategische Bedeutung. Die Herrscher über das Kernland können keine Macht daraus projizieren, wenn sie keine Kontrolle über das Randland haben. So änderte Spykman Mackinders Regeln zum Ringen um die Weltmacht nach seinen neuen Erkenntnissen: Es waren einmal Mackinder und Spykman, die die Grundlage der US-Strategie des Kalten Krieges bildeten, die Sowjetunion einzudämmen und im *Kernland* einzudämmen. Unter vielen anderen zählen John Foster Dulles und Zbigniew Brzezinski zu den prominentesten Anhängern von Mackinder und Spykman.

Mit dem Ende des Kalten Krieges und der Auflösung der Sowjetunion glaubten viele im Westen, dass nun eine stabile Phase, eine Art "ewiger" Friede endlich erreicht sei. Das Manifest dieser Denkrichtung war das Buch *Ende der Geschichte* von Francis Fukuyama. Darin kolportierte er den Sieg der Demokratie und ihrer Herrschaft in ewigem Frieden unter der Hegemonie einer wohlwollenden Supermacht, der Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika. Verständlicherweise brachte das Ende des Kalten Krieges, als Sieg des Westens und seines demokratischen Systems eine gewisse Hybris mit sich, die den Nährboden für das *Ende der Geschichte* und ähnliche Theorien bildete. Seit dem Fall der Sowjetunion geriet die Geopolitik im Westen weitgehend in Vergessenheit - es gab ja nur mehr eine Supermacht. Fukuyamas Konzept des *Endes der Geschichte* ist ein Sinnbild für das Zurücksetzen des Gedächtnisses und der Lehren aus dem Kalten Krieg. Mackinder jedoch ist gerade in Russland unvergessen, im Gegenteil. Seit der Auflösung der Sowjetunion erlebte seine

Theorie ironischerweise gerade in Russland einen gewissen Aufschwung. Im Rahmen des Abschwunges der 1990er Jahre wurden Mackinder und Geopolitik, genauso wie andere politische Theorien, Teil eines theoretischen Konundrums aus welchem sich viele politische Barden in Russland bedienten. Vielen ging es um die Neuformulierung eines neuen russischen Nationalismus mehr oder minder radikaler Ausformung, bis hin zur Entwicklung des Begriffes des Nationalbolschewismus. Dieser politischen Nische entstammt ein lange Zeit obskurer Theoretiker namens Alexander Dugin. Dugin nutzte Mackinders Lehren als Grundlage für seine eigene Theorie – den *Eurasianismus*.

III. *Eurasianismus* und *Russki Mir*

Der Titel des Hauptwerkes von Aleksandr Dugin lautet *Die Grundlagen der Geopolitik: Die geopolitische Zukunft Russlands*, veröffentlicht wurde es 1997. Dugins Werk soll bis heute einen bedeutenden Einfluss auf gewisse Eliten des russischen Militärs sowie der Sicherheitsapparate ausüben. Es wird bis heute auch als Lehrbuch in der Akademie des Generalstabs des russischen Militärs verwendet. Dugin selbst lehrte darin Politikwissenschaft, und beeinflusste somit eine ganze Generation russischer Kader der Staatsapparate. Dugin selbst ist ausgebildeter Politologe und politischer Aktivist, ein ehemaliger Nationalbolschewist, der eine ultranationalistische und neofaschistische Ideologie vertritt, welche er *Eurasianismus* nennt. Ironischerweise fußt diese auf den geopolitischen Theorien von Mackinder und Spykman, welche dieselben gerade zur Eindämmung Russlands und später der Sowjetunion entwickelt hatten.

In seinem Werk fordert Dugin, dass die USA und der Westen aus Eurasien vertrieben werden sollen. Russland solle dort an ihrer statt den eigenen Einfluss durch Annexionen und Allianzen wieder ausbauen. Dugin besagt, dass "der Kampf um die Weltherrschaft der Russen" noch nicht beendet sei, Russland bleibe dabei "der Schauplatz einer neuen antibürgerlichen, antiamerikanischen Revolution". Das "Eurasische Imperium" werde "gegen den einen Feind, den Westen, aufgebaut, jegliche Ablehnung des Atlantizismus, der strategischen Kontrolle der USA sowie die Weigerung, westliche liberale Werte anzuerkennen, liegen diesem Kampf zugrunde." Der Eurasischen Theorie zufolge solle Russland überwiegend durch den Einsatz von subtilen, subversiven Mitteln das *Randland* erwerben, um die seebasierte US-Macht auf globaler Ebene auszugleichen. Wladimir Putin hat sich öffentlich im Sinne des *Eurasianismus* ausgesprochen – es ist jedoch unklar, inwieweit die Eurasische Theorie realen Anklang in den Schaltzentralen russischer Macht findet, oder ob Dugins Thesen lediglich vom Regime instrumentalisiert werden, um deren Narrativ zu bedienen.

Mit Sicherheit ist dies jedoch mit der dem *Eurasianismus* verwandten Theorie des *Russki Mir* – der "russischen Welt" – der Fall. Die fortschreitende "Befriedung" in russischem Sinne des Nordkaukasus und die wirtschaftliche Trendumkehr seit Ende der zweiten Hälfte der 2000er Jahre bildeten für Wladimir Putin die Voraussetzung für die Restauration Russlands als

Großmacht. Der Kreml suchte dabei nach einer theoretischen Grundlage zum neuerlichen Großmachtanspruch Russlands zu konstruieren. Dabei spielte eine beinahe metaphysische Überzeugung eine Rolle – ähnlich der Zarenzeit - dass Russland keine Macht wie andere sei, sondern eine besondere Verantwortung gegenüber der Menschheit trage. Der russische Exzeptionalismus hatte seine Erfüllung bereits im 19. Jahrhundert in der "Zivilisationsmission" durch Binnenkolonialismus an den Ost- und Südgrenzen des Zarenreichs und im Panslawismus an den Westgrenzen gefunden, was sich im 20. Jahrhundert in der globalen Förderung des Kommunismus durch die sowjetische Elite als deren Speerspitze steigerte.

Da sich die politischen Formeln der Vergangenheit als unbrauchbar herausstellten, identifizierte das russische Regime in der Idee des *Russki Mir* eine Neuformulierung russischer Großmachtsprüche. Im Endeffekt handelt es sich dabei um eine Neuausgabe des Panslawismus. Die wesentlichen Elemente dieses Konzepts wurden bereits 1992 von Sergej Karaganov skizziert. Damals verfügte Russland lediglich über knappe Ressourcen, es mussten alle Kräfte zur Aufrechterhaltung des Staates aufgeboten werden. Laut Karaganov, welcher als Berater Jelzins wie auch Putins fungierte, sollte Moskau die Beziehungen zur russischen Diaspora in den vierzehn nach 1991 unabhängigen Republiken als strategisches Element der eigenen Außenpolitik verwenden. Die Verteidigung der Rechte nunmehriger Auslandsrussen bezüglich der ethnischen oder sprachlichen Besonderheiten dieser Gemeinschaften bot willkommene Tarnung der wahren außenpolitischen Ambitionen, die dahintersteckten.

Während anfänglich zahlenmäßig bedeutende russischsprachige Gemeinschaften wie beispielsweise in der Ukraine oder Kasachstan zu den äußeren Kernelementen gehörten, kamen im Rahmen weiterer konzentrischer Kreise weitere Elemente dazu. Die *Russki Mir* umfasste bald auch generell orthodoxe Christen sowie generische "Landsleute", also slawische Gemeinschaften im Allgemeinen. In der Folge nahm die Idee des "Landsmanns" jedoch eine zunehmend ideologische und möglicherweise universalistische Bedeutung an, die diejenigen umfasste, die sich mit Russland geistig und kulturell verbunden fühlen. Nach einer Phase der theoretischen Ausarbeitung fand die Idee des *Russki Mir* eine offizielle Position im Rahmen der staatlichen Apparate. Die gleichnamige Stiftung wurde 2007 von den russischen Außen- und Bildungsministerien in Zusammenarbeit mit der orthodoxen Kirche gegründet. Die Organisation ist heute weltweit tätig und verfolgt offiziell das Ziel, die russische Sprache und Kultur zu verbreiten. In Wahrheit handelt es sich um viel mehr: *Russki Mir* stellt den ideologischen Unterbau einer neoimperialen russischen Außenpolitik dar. Daher wurde *Russki Mir* ab 2016 offiziell in den Kanon russischer Außenpolitik aufgenommen.

IV. Russlands Stolperstein: Der Nordkaukasus

"The Fire Below: How the North Caucasus Shaped Russia" lautet der Untertitel eines wichtigen Werkes zum Konflikt im Nordkaukasus. Der von dem Herausgeber Robert Bruce Ware gewählte Titel trifft den Nagel auf den Kopf. Der Kaukasus und seine Geschichte haben

sich in der Tat in die Seele des modernen Russland eingebrannt. Alle großen russischen Dichter wie Puschkin, Lermontow und Tolstoi erzählten von den Kaukasuskriegen, ihren Schrecken und den dort lebenden mal edlen, mal blutrünstigen "Barbaren". Die großen Kaukasischen Kriege der Zaren gegen die "wilden" Bergvölker im 19. Jahrhundert fanden im Rahmen des *Great Game*, dem Wettrennen zum Indischen Ozean in Konkurrenz mit dem britischen Empire statt. Der russische Drang nach Süden, in Richtung der warmen Weltmeere bestand jedoch bereits vorher, mindestens seit Kaiserin Katharina der Großen.

Mindestens so lange reicht die Geschichte der Konflikte zwischen Russland in seinen verschiedenen politischen Ausformungen und den islamisch geprägten Völkerschaften innerhalb des Landes oder in seinem Einflussbereich lange zurück. Im Zuge der russischen Kolonisierung des Kaukasus und Zentralasiens leisteten islamische bzw. islamisierte Gemeinwesen im Vergleich zu isolierten animistischen Ethnien im Fernen Osten weitaus heftigeren Widerstand. Die überwiegend turkstämmigen Ethnien besaßen traditionell eine ausgeprägte kriegerische Kultur. Die allumfassende, mächtige Natur des Islam verlieh dem Ethos des Kampfes gegen die russische Kolonisation zudem eine viel tiefere weltanschauliche Verankerung. Man denke hier an die Unterwerfung der Wolgatataren durch Iwan den Schrecklichen oder an die Feldzüge Katharina der Großen gegen die Krimtataren und ihre erste Expedition gegen den Nordkaukasus. Der Höhepunkt war jedoch bestimmt der Große Kaukasische Krieg von 1817 bis 1864. Russland rang hier in fünfzigjährigem Kampf gegen Tscherkessen, Kabarden, Balkaren, Tschetschenen und Dagestaner. Es folgten die blutigen Kriege gegen die zentralasiatischen *Basmachi* in der zweiten Hälfte der 1860er Jahre, die Aufstände im Nordkaukasus während der Sowjetherrschaft und die anschließenden Deportationen ganzer Ethnien unter Stalin; und schließlich die hässlichen Tschetschenienkriege und der Aufstand im gesamten Nordkaukasus seitdem.

Bevor Russland äußere Macht ausübte, musste es seine inneren Dämonen bekämpfen. In den postsowjetischen Jahren waren diese vielfältig: Wirtschaftskrise, weit verbreitete Arbeitslosigkeit, grassierende Korruption und ein deutlicher Bevölkerungsrückgang zeichneten ein zunehmend düsteres Bild für die Zukunft Russlands. Simmernde separatistische Tendenzen bereiteten den Sicherheitsorganen, traditionell eine der Säulen der Macht in Russland, große Sorgen. Während Boris Jelzin es schaffte, die Tataren der Teilrepublik Tatarstan durch das Zugeständnis einer weitreichenden Autonomie von separatistischen Absichten abzuhalten, wurden die Unruhen im weichen Unterleib Russlands, dem Nordkaukasus, real.

Besonders Tschetschenien war schon immer ein Hotspot in dieser für Moskau widerspenstigen Region. Tschetschenien spaltete sich im Zuge der Auflösung der Sowjetunion 1991 von der Russischen Föderation ab. Nach langwierigen, zuletzt gescheiterten Verhandlungen ordnete Boris Jelzin die Invasion Tschetscheniens an. Zweieinhalb Jahre später musste die russische Armee den Rückzug antreten. Ursache für die damalige Niederlage waren Unzulänglichkeiten des russischen Militärs und die geschickte Taktik der tschetschenischen Guerilla. Im Zuge der mit dem Nachgang des Zusammenbruchs der Sowjetunion einhergehenden wirtschaftlichen und gesellschaftlichen Krise markierte

diese Niederlage den Tiefpunkt der jüngeren russischen Geschichte. Dieser besiegelte gleichzeitig den Untergang Boris Jelzins. Der Abgang von Jelzin erfolgte auf geordnete Weise, erst nachdem ein Nachfolger gefunden worden war. Wie bekannt, wurde ein obskurer Geheimdienstfunktionär namens Wladimir Putin gefunden, der Nachfolger Jelzins. Putin hatte die meiste Zeit seines Lebens im KGB und im FSB gearbeitet und war 1999 dessen Direktor. In den Jahren seit dem Verlust Tschetscheniens waren die russischen Machtorgane damit beschäftigt gewesen, die Rückeroberung Tschetscheniens vorzubereiten. Das Chaos und die Machtkämpfe zwischen tschetschenischen Fraktionen und der Aufstieg radikaler islamistischer Gruppen im Zuge der Unabhängigkeit wurden durch russische verdeckte Aktionen weiter verschärft und bildeten einen fruchtbaren Boden zur Schaffung von Vorwänden einer neuerlichen Invasion. Ein Angriff des berühmten tschetschenischen Feldkommandanten Schamil Basajew sowie des saudischen "Che Guevara", Ibn al-Khattab, auf das benachbarte Dagestan, um es von der russischen Herrschaft zu befreien und ein "islamisches Emirat" zu errichten bot sich hierzu besonders gut an.

Gleichzeitig erschütterte eine ominöse, nie vollkommen geklärte Reihe von Terroranschlägen russische Städte und forderte Hunderte von Toten. Putins unnachgiebige Reaktion darauf bestand in der Entfesselung des Zweiten Tschetschenienkrieges. Diese Haltung fand in der russischen öffentlichen Meinung großen Zuspruch, welcher langfristig die Basis für den lange anwährenden mehrheitlichen Rückhalt Putins in der Bevölkerung bildete. Zudem stand der Kaukasus aufgrund seiner geographischen Lage seit jeher im Zentrum imperialer Bestrebungen Russlands. Keine Region war schwerer zu erobern, keine schwieriger zu halten - und zu erhalten. Die rebellische und kriegerrische Kultur der islamischen Bergvölker des Nordkaukasus hat bisher jegliches russisches Staatsgebilde, vom alten Zarenreich bis zur heutigen Putinschen Autokratie aufs Äußerste herausgefordert. Die russische Armee wusste jedoch Fehler aus dem Ersten Tschetschenienkrieg in der Neuauflage wettzumachen. Die kompromisslose und harte Kriegsführung der russischen Armee und der russischen Sicherheitsdienste, gepaart mit einer geschickten Kooptationstaktik, die gezielte Teile der tschetschenischen Guerilla für die russische Sache zu gewinnen wusste, brachte das Kriegsglück zunehmend auf die russische Seite.

Der Angriff auf die Twin Towers am 11.09.2001 veränderte die globale geopolitische Lage schlagartig. Davon betroffen war auch die westliche Wahrnehmung des Tschetschenienkrieges. Was einst als tschetschenischer Unabhängigkeitskampf angesehen wurde, der in westlichen Ländern mit einer gewissen Sympathie wahrgenommen wurde, wurde aufgrund zunehmend radikalislamistischer Züge der Aufstandsbewegung und dem opportunen russischen Framing derselben plötzlich zu einem Teil des globalen Feldzuges gegen islamistischen Terror. Wüste Terroranschläge in Moskau und Beslan führten für zunehmende Hinnahme des russischen Vorgehens. Der Konflikt klang jedoch nicht ab; im Gegenteil, dieser entwickelte sich zunächst zu einem Ausmaß, welchen diesen – trotz russischer Erfolge bei der Unterdrückung des kaukasischen islamistischen Separatismus – zu einer massiven Quelle der Destabilisierung innerhalb der Russischen Föderation sowie zu einem geopolitischen Faktor auch außerhalb der russischen Grenzen machte.

Dies sind einige der Gründe, warum die moderne Geschichte Russlands nicht ohne Berücksichtigung des Einflusses des radikalen Islamismus auf Seiten der separatistischen Aufstandsbewegung im Nordkaukasus betrachtet werden kann. Die Verbindung zwischen dieser Region und der politischen Geschichte des postsowjetischen Russlands reicht jedoch noch tiefer. Der Erste Tschetschenienkrieg beendete die Regierung von Boris Jelzin. Des Einen Unglück ist jedoch manchmal des Anderen Glück: Der Beginn des Zweiten Tschetschenienkrieges bereitete die Bühne für den kometenhaften Aufstieg von Wladimir Putin. Seine Karriere ist engstens mit den Ereignissen im Kaukasus seit 1999 verbunden.

Schließlich gelang es russischen Sicherheitsbehörden zwischen 2005 und 2006, den Großteil der tschetschenischen Führung aufzuspüren und zu liquidieren, wodurch die tschetschenische Rebellenbewegung de facto enthauptet wurde. Dieser Schritt verschaffte den radikaleren, entschieden islamistisch gesinnten nicht-tschetschenischen Rebellen in Inguschetien, Kabardino-Balkarien und Dagestan größeren Einfluss und führte 2007 zur Ausrufung des so genannten Kaukasus-Emirats. Aus russischer Sicht war dies durchaus eine positive Entwicklung, denn die weiter zunehmende islamistische Radikalisierung der Rebellenbewegung entfremdete nicht nur westliche Beobachter, sondern auch lokale Sympathisanten. In der Ära des globalen Krieges gegen islamistischen Terror wurde das Kaukasus-Emirat als Teil der globalen dschihadistischen Bewegung wahrgenommen, auch wenn dies faktisch nicht der Fall war und bis fast zum Schluss eine ausschließlich lokale Ausprägung fand. Trotzdem leitete in diesem Kontext der lange andauernde Niedergang der nordkaukasischen Aufstandsbewegung ein. Im Vorlauf der olympischen Winterspiele in Sochi 2014 gelang es Russland den Konflikt im Nordkaukasus nach Syrien zu verlagern. Russische Sicherheitsbehörden taten alles in ihrer Macht Stehende, um die olympischen Spiele zu sichern. Dabei galt es Rebellen entweder zu liquidieren – oder ihnen buchstäblich das Flugticket nach Syrien zu kaufen. Letztlich führte dies im Kontext der Auswanderung kaukasischer Kämpfer nach Syrien zu weiterer Radikalisierung und auch dem Beitritt vieler derselben zu *Daesh* - dem Islamischen Staat – auch im Nordkaukasus. Dies war natürlich ganz im Sinne Russlands, welches seine militärischen Operationen in Syrien somit geschickt als Kampf gegen den radikalen Islamismus darstellen konnte. Mit der Liquidierung des Rebellenführers Doku Umarov im Jahre 2013 ebte die Aufstandsbewegung im Nordkaukasus definitiv ab.

Sochi ist russischerseits als Symbol der Befriedung des Nordkaukasus, als Ende des langen internen Stabilisierungsprozesses und Anfang eines neuen imperialen Zeitalters zu verstehen. Die Olympischen Spiele in Sotschi wurden so zu einer Art Siegesfeier Russlands im Nordkaukasus und der endgültigen Proklamierung Wladimir Putins als Landesvater. Die 2014 folgenden Ereignisse in der Ukraine sowie die russische Annexion der Krim entlarvten Putins wahres Gesicht. Es ist jenes eines Herrschers, der die Neugründung des russischen Staates nach dem Zusammenbruch der Sowjetunion mit unerbittlicher Härte verfolgt hat und inmitten schwerer Kriegsverbrechen und Gräueltaten im Nordkaukasus russische Großmachtpolitik auf Leichenbergen begründete. Dennoch hatte die russische "Befriedung" der Region über zehn Jahre gedauert. Am Ende jedoch festigte die Rückholung Tschetscheniens und die

Stabilisierung des Nordkaukasus Putins zunehmend autoritäre Herrschaft und bildete die Grundlage für neuerliche Großmachtpolitik, diesmal jedoch nach außen gewandt.

V. Russlands Comeback

Wladimir Putin forciert seit seinem Regierungsantritt die Wiederherstellung des russischen Machtanspruchs. Die Zeiten in denen sich Russland als Partner des Westens zumindest versuchte sind längst verblasst. Wirtschaftliches Elend, die Bereicherung weniger und Verarmung vieler, Korruption und Vetternwirtschaft in Boris Jelzins wilden 1990er Jahren führten vom Versuch demokratischer Reformation in eine Ära imperialer Restauration. Spätestens seit seiner zweiten Amtszeit 2005 verfolgte Wladimir Putin offen das Ziel, Russland wieder dorthin zu bringen, wo die ehemalige Sowjetunion gestanden hatte - als zweite Supermacht neben den USA. Im Zuge der inneren Neuordnung und Stärkung des russischen Staates, die mit der Befriedung des Nordkaukasus um 2013 sein Ende fand, ging eine neue Phase der außenpolitischen Profilierung einher. Angesichts des Georgisch-Russischen Krieges von 2008 und des zunehmenden Drucks des Kremls auf die der NATO angehörenden baltischen Staaten wurde die Präsentation Russlands als wohlwollende neoimperiale Supermacht während der Winterspiele 2013 in Sotschi inszeniert. Der Kreml zeigte sich dort von seiner besten Seite. Die unvorhersehbaren Interventionen im Zuge der Ukraine- und Krim-Krise seit 2014 und in Syrien seit 2015 fanden weit weniger friedlich statt, untermauerten dafür Moskaus Machtanspruch umso stärker. Dafür offenbarten sie das wahre Gesicht Putins. Seit der Intervention im Syrien-Konflikt wurde im Nahen Osten die sogenannte Primakow-Doktrin erfolgreich angewandt. Diese sieht vor, den russischen Einfluss im Nahen Osten zu intensivieren, um einerseits dem US-Unilateralismus entgegenzuwirken und andererseits eine strategische Achse zwischen dem konservativen und antiwestlich ausgerichteten Teil der islamischen Welt und Russland zu schaffen. Damit soll der "Belagerungsring" des Westens um Russland, der vor allem als Folge der Nato-Osterweiterung wahrgenommen wurde, aufgebrochen werden, als wichtiger Schritt zur Wiederherstellung des globalen Macht- und Geltungsanspruchs Russlands.

Das Aufkommen des Syrien-Konflikts im Jahr 2011 beunruhigte Russland zunächst lediglich. Syrien war der einzige verbliebene Partner im Nahen Osten, der Marinestützpunkt in Tartus der einzige russische Stützpunkt im Mittelmeer. Damals war die russische Regierung noch mit der inneren Neuordnung des Staates beschäftigt. Der Konflikt im Nordkaukasus war noch nicht beendet, die Reform zur Modernisierung der Streitkräfte noch in vollem Gange. Folgende geopolitische Ereignisse, darunter in erster Linie die Maidan-Revolution in der Ukraine brachten den Kreml immer mehr auf Konfliktkurs mit dem Westen. Anfangs unterstützte der Kreml das Assad-Regime vor allem durch Waffenlieferungen. Als die Zurückhaltung der US-Administration auch gegenüber gesetzten roten Linien wie dem Einsatz chemischer Kampfstoffe deutlich wurde und das Assad-Regime zunehmend unter Druck geriet, ergab sich im Herbst 2015 ein günstiger Zeitpunkt für eine russische Intervention in Syrien.

Die russische Intervention wurde nach außen auf geschickte Weise als eine "Anti-Terror-Operation" gegen den so genannten Islamischen Staat und andere dschihadistische Gruppierungen dargestellt. Dieser Narrativ bot sich gut zur Desinformation im Sinne hybrider Kriegsführung und wurde von vielen Beobachtern im Westen positiv aufgenommen. Der Erfolg des russischen Eingriffes in Syrien verlieh dem Kreml großen Einfluss in der Region und darüber hinaus, besonders unter den BRICS-Staaten. Seither versuchte Russland wieder aktiv Machtprojektion auf globaler Ebene zu betreiben, so wie es die Sowjetunion gemacht hatte. Tatsächlich ist das Ausmaß militärischer Projektion außerhalb des GUS-Netzwerks mit dem Ausbau ständiger Militärstützpunkte in Syrien, Nordafrika und über Stellvertreterorganisationen auch in Afrika seit dem Zusammenbruch der Sowjetunion beispiellos. Dazu gehören *soft power* Maßnahmen wie z.B. der Verkauf modernster Waffensysteme bis hin zum Angebot vorteilhafter Energie-Deals. Der Verkauf modernster S-400-Flugabwehrraketen an die Türkei und Syrien im Jahre 2017 zeigte eindrucksvoll, wie schnell der Kreml in der Lage war das damalige amerikanische Einflussvakuum im Nahen Osten auszunutzen. Der Kreml genießt nach 2015 in manchen Regionen Afrikas und des Nahen Ostens einen ähnlichen Einfluss wie die Sowjetunion zum Höhepunkt des Kalten Krieges.

Im Hinblick auf seine östlichen Grenzen haben sich die Beziehungen zwischen Russland und China spätestens seit 2010 immer stärker entwickelt. Die Vertiefung und Diversifizierung der strategischen Beziehung zwischen beiden Mächten wirken sich wirtschaftlich und auf zunehmende Weise auch militärisch aus. Das Bündnis zwischen China und Russland gegen den Westen reicht jedoch weiter zurück als man denkt. Bereits 2001 gründeten China, Russland, Kasachstan, Kirgisistan und Tadschikistan die Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Gleichzeitig wurde die Annäherung zwischen China und Russland im Vertrag über Freundschaft und Zusammenarbeit von 2001 festgehalten. Die Vorgänge im Rahmen der Annexion der Krim verstärkten den 2012 ausgerufenen "Swing to Asia" nochmals. Die Priorität lag zunächst im Ausgleich der wirtschaftlichen Verluste durch die westlichen Sanktionen. Dem Ausbau und der Diversifizierung der Handelsbeziehungen und anderer Formen der wirtschaftlichen Zusammenarbeit zwischen Russland und China liegen jedoch weitere Faktoren zugrunde. Neben der Verhängung von Sanktionen gegen Russland im Jahr 2014 fallen vor allem die wirtschaftliche Stagnation des Westens zwischen 2008 und 2015, während die chinesische Wirtschaft weiterwuchs, sowie die wirtschaftliche Komplementarität zwischen Russland und China. Produktionsüberschüsse in gewissen Sektoren entsprechen Produktions- und Lieferengpässe in anderen Bereichen. Das gemeinsame Interesse an einer Abkehr vom US-Dollar fällt hier ins Gewicht, genauso wie die Konsolidierung und Integration der neuen Seidenstraße im Rahmen der Eurasischen Wirtschaftsunion andererseits.

Das gemeinsame Ziel auf strategischer Ebene ist die Bekämpfung des "amerikanischen Unipolarismus" hin zum Multipolarismus. Russland begründet diesen Anspruch mit angeblichen feindseligen Handlungen des Westens: Dazu zählt der Kreml die NATO-

Osterweiterung, die Errichtung eines Raketenschildes um seine Grenzen und die als "westliche Machenschaften" wahrgenommenen farbigen Revolutionen in der Ukraine und Georgien. Diese Ereignisse lösten im Kreml offensichtlich eine "Einschließungspsychose" im Sinne eines sich immer weiter schließenden westlichen Belagerungsrings um Russland aus. Dies führte zu den bereits erwähnten russischen Interventionen im eigenen "Vorhof", innerhalb der GUS-Staatengemeinschaft. Gleichzeitig kam es auch zu ersten verdeckten Aktionen gegen den Westen, beginnend 2007 mit einer Reihe schwerer Cyber-Attacken gegen Estland als Beginn einer bis heute andauernden Einschüchterungskampagne gegen die baltischen Staaten. Das hierzu eigens entwickelte Konzept *hybrider Kriegsführung* war lange Zeit das bevorzugte Mittel für den verdeckten Konflikt gegen den Westen auf dem Weg zurück zu alter Macht und Glorie. Abgesehen von der beinahe mystisch angehauchten Mission der "Heiligen Mutter Russland" ihr zustehenden Ruhm und Macht zurückzugewinnen, darf man den persönlichen Machtanspruch Wladimir Putins nicht außer Acht lassen. Der neoimperiale Machtanspruch Russlands ist untrennbar mit der Person Putins und seinem Machterhalt verbunden. Um dieses Ziel zu erreichen, sicherte er sich die Unterstützung des seit Sowjetzeiten faktisch unberührten Sicherheitsapparates, indem er Protégés die wichtigsten Ämter in Regierung und Verwaltung verlieh und das Militär durch eine enorme Erhöhung der Militärausgaben zufriedenstellte. Unabhängige Medien, konkurrierende politische Parteien und oppositionelle Wortführer wurden schrittweise auf die eine oder andere Weise ins Abseits gedrängt oder gar liquidiert. Alles für Mütterchen Russland – und ihren Führer, Wladimir Putin.

VI. Russland – Quo vadis?

Als Landmacht *par excellence* beschäftigte sich Russland im Laufe seiner Geschichte außenpolitisch häufig mit seiner geografischen Verwundbarkeit – dies erst recht nach dem Untergang der Sowjetunion. Die weitläufigen Grenzgebiete des Landes sind schwer und kostspielig zu kontrollieren. Auf die Nordhalbkugel beschränkt, haben Russlands Küsten keinen direkten Zugang zu den warmen Meeren und traditionellen Seehandelsrouten. Die enorme Landmasse, welche Russland zu einem der größten Länder auf der Welt macht, verleitet nach wie vor zu einer überhöhten Selbstwahrnehmung, genauso wie die immer noch lebendige Erinnerung an die Sowjetunion als globale Supermacht. Dieser Selbstwahrnehmung weiter Teile der russischen Öffentlichkeit – nicht nur des Kremls – wird die tatsächliche Stellung Russlands in der Weltordnung nicht gerecht. Der markante demographische Negativtrend Russlands verschärft die Wahrnehmung eigener Verwundbarkeit zusätzlich. Gleichsam bedeutsam ist die inhärente Schwäche der russischen Wirtschaft. Die russischen Exporte konzentrieren sich nach wie vor fast ausschließlich auf Rohstoffe sowie die fossilen Energieträger Kohle, Öl und Erdgas. Abgesehen von den Erzeugnissen ihrer Rüstungsindustrie hat Russland den internationalen Märkten kaum etwas zu bieten. Zudem ist es nicht nur der Rüstungsindustrie, sondern auch der Zivilindustrie nicht gelungen, sich erfolgreich zu einer wettbewerbsfähigen und modernen Industrie zu entwickeln. Hinzu

kommt, dass die Entwicklung der russischen Wirtschaft nicht nur durch strukturelle, sondern auch institutionelle Schwächen, mangelnde Rechtssicherheit durch häufige staatliche Eingriffe und einen Rückgang der Bevölkerung im erwerbsfähigen Alter erschwert wird. Dies sind nur einige der Faktoren, welche dem neoimperialen Machtanspruch des Kremls zugrunde liegen.

Trotz aller Probleme schien Putins Restauration bis zum 24. Februar 2022 erfolgreich zu verlaufen. Seit Herbst 2021 hatte die russische Armee ihre Präsenz an der Grenze zur Ukraine laufend ausgebaut, Drohgebärden signalisierten eine baldige Invasion des Nachbarlandes. Wenige Beobachter glaubten tatsächlich daran. Es schien eher darum zu gehen, politischen Druck aufzubauen, um damit Konzessionen vonseiten der Ukraine und des Westens zu erpressen. Dies wäre durchaus im Bereich des Möglichen gewesen. Stattdessen kam es zum Undenkbaren: In den frühen Morgenstunden des 24. Februar 2022 griffen bis zu 200.000 russische Soldaten die Ukraine von allen Seiten an. Russische Streitkräfte eroberten schnell große Gebiete, konnten Kiew jedoch nicht einkreisen. In den kommenden Monaten wurde die russische Armee unter schweren Verlusten jedoch zu einer Reihe demütigender Rückzüge gezwungen. Bis Ende 2022 haben sie mehr als die Hälfte des zu Beginn der Invasion besetzten Territoriums verloren. Das russische militärische Vorgehen war dermaßen von Stümperei und Inkompetenz gekennzeichnet, dass man annehmen muss, dass die konventionelle russische Militärmacht technologisch und doktrinär sich nach wie vor weit unter westlichen Standards befindet.

Ganz im Sinne des immanenten russischen Neoimperialismus wurde die größte militärische Operation in Europa seit dem Ende des Zweiten Weltkrieges europäische Invasion seit dem Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs als eine "militärische Spezialoperation", sozusagen im eigenen Vorhof, heruntergespielt, ganz so als ob es sich lediglich um eine innerrussische Angelegenheit handeln würde. Putin dachte offensichtlich, seine Streitkräfte könnten binnen weniger Tage Kiew nehmen und die ukrainische Regierung stürzen. Das erklärte Ziel sei die "Entmilitarisierung und Entnazifizierung der Ukraine" sowie ethnische Russen zu schützen, die von der ukrainischen Regierung, acht Jahren Unterdrückung und selbst Völkermord ausgesetzt waren. In Wahrheit ging es darum, die NATO daran zu hindern, in der Ukraine Fuß zu fassen sowie den neutralen Status der Ukraine zu garantieren. Dass "Entnazifizierung zwangsläufig auch Entukrainisierung" bedeute – so wie es die staatliche Nachrichtenagentur TASS mehrmals verlautbarte – käme im Endeffekt der Auslöschung des modernen ukrainischen Staates gleich. Völlig unbegründete und sonderbare russische Vorwürfe zur angeblichen nationalsozialistischen Einstellung der ukrainischen Regierung sowie zu angeblichem Völkermord an der russischsprachigen Bevölkerung der Ostukraine sind Teil eines Narrativs, welches Russland seit 2014 wiederholt. Inwiefern sich der Krieg in der Ukraine militärisch sowie innenpolitisch weiterentwickeln wird, steht noch in den Sternen. Dass es sich hierbei jedoch um die Überschreitung des Zenits von Putins Macht und des russischen Neoimperialismus handelt, steht wohl außer Frage.

Reiht man die wichtigsten politischen Schritte des Kremls nach innen und außen aneinander, wird deutlich, dass Vladimir Putin seit jeher den Weg zurück zu imperialem Glanze gesucht

hat. Diese Restauration wurde im Sinne eines politischen und militärischen Machtaufbaus in der Tradition des politischen Realismus und der Geopolitik durchgeführt. Diese ungeheure Anstrengung führte von der Bekämpfung perzipierter "innerer Abweichler" im Nordkaukasus, in Georgien sowie in der Ukraine hin zur unvermeidlichen Konfrontation gegenüber dem eigentlichen Feind – dem Westen. Mit anderen Worten, ohne den rücksichtslosen Feldzug und die Befriedung des Nordkaukasus hätte Putin niemals die Annexion der Krim durchsetzen oder in Syrien militärisch intervenieren können. Stattdessen wäre Russland definitiv als Sekundärmacht degradiert worden, die nur in Teilen des ehemaligen sowjetischen Raumes Einfluss geltend machen konnte. Ermutigt durch die eigene wachsende Stärke ist der Kreml zu einer Politik zurückgekehrt, die Macht und Stärke als die einzig wahren politischen Elemente anerkennt.

Gleichsam liegt es auf der Hand, dass die aggressive russische Haltung auch von inhärenten internen Schwächen herrührt. Primär handelt es sich hierbei um die Notwendigkeit, Putins Macht und der herrschenden Elite zu erhalten, indem die Aufmerksamkeit der russischen öffentlichen Meinung von den eigentlichen Themen – u.a. grassierende Korruption und Vetternwirtschaft – abgelenkt wird zugunsten außenpolitischen Phantastereien und Großmachtgehebe, die auch dazu dienen, die russische Bevölkerung zu mobilisieren und ans Regime zu binden. Bis zum 24. Februar 2022 verstanden viele, wenn nicht die meisten westlichen Beobachter und vor allem Entscheidungsträger Russlands Handeln, dessen Ziele und Strategie falsch. Dies war der Hauptgrund für die vielen Missverständnisse und Fehlinterpretationen letzten Jahren, die zu einer Wiederbelebung der russischen Großmachtpolitik und letztlich dem aktuellen Konflikt in der Ukraine und letztlich mit dem Westen geführt haben.

Wenn man alle vorliegenden Ereignisse aneinanderreicht, ist das Muster einer vorsätzlichen und schrittweisen Eskalation russischer Großmachtpolitik klar erkennbar. Entsprechend der geopolitischen Hypothese als Erklärungsmuster der diesbezüglich relevanten Ereignisse ist die schrittweise Eskalation Putinscher Großmachtpolitik anhand geographischer Schemata feststellbar. Ausgehend von den Trümmern des ehemaligen Sowjetreiches richtete sich die Konsolidierung des russischen Staates zunächst nach innen: Nach einem unglaublich brutalen, jedoch gescheiterten Versuch durch Boris Jelzin Tschetschenien zu befrieden, kam es 1999 unter Vladimir Putin zu einer neuerlichen, nicht minder brachialen Invasion. Der sich lange fortziehende Kleinkrieg weitete sich dabei auch auf die restlichen Teilrepubliken im Nordkaukasus aus, das entschlossene Vorgehen Vladimir Putins jedoch bescherte ihm weitgehende Popularität. 2009 war die Lage bei Weitem nicht befriedet, doch stabil genug, um das offizielle Ende der „Antiterroroperation“ zu verkünden. Die endgültige Befriedung des Nordkaukasus kam im Vorfeld der olympischen Winterspiele in Sochi 2014 zustande. Somit kann anhand einer dieser Arbeit zugrundeliegenden Hypothese davon ausgegangen werden, dass der Krieg in Tschetschenien und dem Nordkaukasus sehr wohl das Grundgerüst für das weitere Wirken russischer Großmachtpolitik außerhalb der eigentlichen Staatsgrenzen der Russischen Föderation darstellt. In der Zwischenzeit hatte sich die russische Staatsmacht jedoch so weit konsolidiert, dass aktive Interventionen auch außerhalb des eigenen

Staatsgebietes möglich wurden. Verdeckte Cyberangriffe auf Estland 2007, sowie die Intervention in Georgien bildeten das Vorspiel auf die Annexion der Krim die Kämpfe im Donbass 2014, auf welche der Eingriff in Syrien 2015 folgte.

Ebenso bestätigt sich die Annahme einer vom russischen Staat favorisierten und indirekt gelenkten islamistischen Radikalisierung kaukasischer Separatisten, um diese vor der Weltöffentlichkeit zu kriminalisieren und zu delegitimieren. Im Umkehrschluss legitimierte damit die russische Staatsmacht das brutale Vorgehen im Zuge der russischen Aufstandsbekämpfung. Wurden anfänglich systematisch moderate Führerfiguren aus dem Verkehr gezogen, wurde der Höhepunkt dieser Taktik mit der gezielt in Kauf genommenen Überführung kaukasischer Aufständischer nach Syrien im Vorfeld der Olympischen Winterspiele in Sochi erreicht.

Besagte russische Taktik führte zur Globalisierung eines anfänglichen lokal verorteten, mehrheitlich nationalistisch geprägten Konfliktes in islamistischem Sinne. Die Ausrufung des so genannten *Kaukasus-Emirats* folgte somit ähnlichen dschihadistischen Mustern. Es änderten sich Dialektik und Nomenklatur im Sinne einer Abkehr von als korrupt und korrumpierend empfundenen "westlichen Werten", allen voran demokratischen Elementen. Das Zielpublikum der aufständischen Propaganda ist nicht mehr so sehr die lokale Öffentlichkeit, sondern die globale islamische Öffentlichkeit – die so genannte *Ummah*.

All dies wird von einer Diskursanalyse aller öffentlicher Reden Vladimir Putins von 1999 bis 2018 bestätigt. Über die Jahre, entlang eines fortschreitenden Ausbaues russischer Staatsmacht im Inneren und dann nach außen, wird der Ton allmählich scharf, die Wortwahl aggressiv. Bevorstehende Akte der Aggression werden hierin angekündigt, oder im Nachhinein gerechtfertigt. Die Reden Vladimir Putins scheinen hier tatsächlich eine Art Drehbuch für alles, was folgte darzustellen.

Die vorliegende Rekonstruktion des Werdegangs Putinscher Großmachtpolitik zeigt somit klar auf, dass diese in einem zunehmend autoritären Rahmen von Anfang an auf ein aggressives Wiedererlangen verlorener Größe im Sinne des klassischen Realismus und der Geopolitik abzielte.