

## THE NORTH CAUCASUS INSURGENCY: DEAD OR ALIVE?

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Since the mid-1990s, Chechnya and the North Caucasus have attracted the attention of policymakers, scholars, and experts interested in the theory and practice of separatism, insurgency, and terrorism. As a natural laboratory of political violence in its most distinct forms, the North Caucasus, with inherent ethnic divisions, religious radicalism, an intricate sociocultural profile, and uneasy center-periphery relationships, has been a source of impressive scholarship. While a lot has been written on the causes and contexts of the North Caucasus insurgency, a consensus is still to be reached in the academic and expert community as to the structural factors leading to violent mobilization and pro-insurgent support in Russia's volatile region. Moreover, the recent trend of weakening insurgent groups operating in the North Caucasus remains largely unexplored.

This monograph builds on and expands the extant scholarship. Specifically, it contributes to the general understanding of the root causes of the regional insurgency and its recent developments. The monograph points to the necessity of comprehending both dimensions in order to evaluate the viability of the North Caucasus insurgency.

First, it sorts out the plethora of studies on the structural causes of the violent mobilization in Russia's most multi-ethnic region, categorizing them along the lines of three main approaches: Chechnya and North Caucasus as a battleground of global Salafi jihad; individual grievances; and protest to social injustice and the erosion of traditional values. This monograph refers to the most up-to-date ethnographic research in the field that points to the salience of individual and collective grievances. Due to the culture of honor, many young North Caucasians have sought to join

insurgent groups for the sake of revenge, largely irrespective of political or ideological motivations. This indicates that the North Caucasus insurgency has been, from its very beginning, a homegrown phenomenon. Subsequently, the monograph categorizes the scholarship on the causes of pro-insurgent support, a heavily under-researched field in both theoretical and empirical literature. It identifies two main competing approaches explaining pro-insurgent support: greed and sociocultural codes. This monograph also points to the crucial importance, underexplored in previous research, of the sociocultural codes of hospitality and silence. It illustrates that these codes, embedded in the local cultural tradition, have prompted part of the local population to provide support to the insurgents in spite of the risk of severe punishment at the hand of the incumbent power holder.

The second part of the monograph focuses on the recent trends in the regional insurgency. First, combining primary and secondary data, it identifies four main factors that have since the early-2010s led to the gradual decline of the North Caucasus insurgency. The first factor leading to a decline of the insurgency is the selective targeting by Russian and local counterinsurgents of the insurgents' local support base, including the insurgents' relatives. Over time, this controversial practice, well-proved in Chechnya in the early-2000s, has prompted many locals across the North Caucasus to withhold support from the insurgents. The second factor leading to a decline of the insurgency is the deployment of elite counterinsurgent forces and army units in special operations, and the withdrawal of counterinsurgency operations from local police forces known for their incompetence and corruption. The third factor leading to a decline of

the insurgency is the infiltration by counterinsurgent agents of insurgent groups, resulting in their subsequent decapitation. Since early-2010, this method has led to the substantial weakening of the locally operating jihadist groups, because the loss of experienced leaders sufficiently affected the jihadists' capability to operate effectively. The fourth factor leading to the decline of the insurgency is the volunteering of thousands of North Caucasians to fight in the Syrian Civil War away from their native region. The monograph shows that internal disputes that plagued the numerous factions of the Caucasus Emirate (CE), a loosely organized group, have prompted thousands of North Caucasians to travel to Syria. This, in turn, has reduced the share of prospective recruits to the locally operating insurgent groups.

Having explained the factors behind the unprecedented weakening of the North Caucasus insurgency in the recent years, the monograph moves on to explore the important shortcomings of these factors. First, despite severe penalization at the hand of the incumbents in compliance with the locally embedded sociocultural codes of retaliation, hospitality, and silence, a segment of the North Caucasian population has still joined insurgent groups or provided support to them. As long as the incumbent forces continue to target the local population, avengers will recruit in order to restore individual and family honor. Despite important setbacks experienced by local insurgent groups in recent years, these structural causes have remained intact. Second, with elite Russian forces, famed for their low numbers, deployed in the distant battlefields of Eastern Ukraine's Donbas and Syria, the burden of fighting the local insurgency has again largely fallen onto the shoulders of the local police and minor counterterrorist units. This has recently reduced the overall effectiveness of counterinsurgent

and counterterrorist operations in the North Caucasus. Moreover, while the current situation enables the local counterinsurgent forces to face the weakened insurgent groups, this monograph shows that in the short and medium term, the situation may reverse should the insurgency be bolstered by new waves of recruits. Fourth, many frustrated North Caucasians have recently grown disillusioned with the "Syrian Jihad" in general and the Islamic State in particular. Therefore, they have sought to stay in their native region. In the short term, this may lead to an increase in the number of North Caucasians recruited to the locally operating jihadist groups, invigorating the regional insurgency.

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