

Recent Events in Russia May Encourage Separatism

Written by Ehud Eiran, Alexander Tabachnik and Nadav Kedem

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EHUD EIRAN, ALEXANDER TABACHNIK AND NADAV KEDEM, MAR 23 2015

Much of the analysis of the recent events in Russia around the Nemtsov assassination and its aftermath, including Putin's 11-day disappearance, revolve around regime stability. However, the arrests of four Chechens with ties to the region's leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, hint at possible breakdown in the relationship between Moscow and its Muslim republic. Russia's economic crisis could further add to this trend. Indeed, the effects of the steep fall in oil prices, in the value of the ruble and in Russia's credit rating as well as the effects of Western sanctions on Russia, are bound to affect the question of Russia's control over Chechnya. Though Moscow quashed the separatists there by the end of the last decade, much of the status quo is secured there and in other regions with separatist proclivities as a result massive infusions of cash. In Chechnya- the most ambitiously separatist region – the Russians co-opted a moderate rebel leader, Ramzan Kadyrov (and before him, his late father) by funneling billions of dollars to the formerly rebellious republic. Writing in Bloomberg, Ben Judah estimated in 2013, that since 2000, Moscow transferred more than 30 Billion dollars to the north Caucasus in order to safeguard its control there.

A massive economic crisis in Russia, therefore, will challenge Moscow's ability to continue its "rule by cash" in Chechnya and possibly in other regions such as Ingushetia and Dagestan. The decline in transfers from Moscow will diminish the incentive of local elites to support Moscow's rule and is likely to force them to create new bases for political legitimacy, including separatist religious ethno-nationalism.

Even before the economic crisis, and long before the Nemtsov killing, Russia's grip over Chechnya faced numerous challenges. The region's distinct identity was on display again on 19 January, when 800,000 Chechens marched in Grozny, the Republic's capital, to protest the French weekly *Charlie Hebdo's* "vulgar" approach to Islam. Though not directed against Moscow, the massive demonstration attests to the political mobilization potential of the Islamic cause in the republic. Armed separatists are similarly active. On 4 December 2014 an attack by separatists in the region's capital, Grozny, led to the death of twenty people. Another major challenge is the steep decline in the support in Russia for transfers to the Caucasus. Indeed, a majority of Russians polled in 2013 said that they would either be glad or indifferent should Chechnya leave the Russian Federation. Yet, President Putin is unlikely to yield. Further separatism clashes with the neo-imperialist vision of Russia's President and indeed with his claim that he crashed Chechen separatism. Moreover, Moscow may be concerned that Chechen secessionism may lead to a 'domino effect' in other regions. President Putin is likely then to respond with force to a renewed wave of separatism. This will be bad for Chechnya and Russia, but also for Europe and the world. First, this will create another bleeding fault line between Europe and the Islamists, by bringing the Islamist challenge closer to Western Europe at a tense moment. Second, a conflict between Russia and Muslim separatists will open the space for direct involvement of Islamic State and other Islamist movements in the region, while providing a new rallying cry for the armed politicized Islamist goal. The Islamic State-Chechnya nexus is indeed already active. Hundreds of Chechens and other North Caucasians serve in the ranks of Islamic State, including some, such as the late Omar al-Shishani (Tarkhan Batirashvili), in senior leadership positions. In all likelihood, many of these Chechen jihadists will come back to Caucasus with military experience and a strong ideological and organizational base.

Furthermore, previous rounds of violence led to over a 100,000 Chechen refugees mostly in Russia and Western Europe. A new round of violence, coupled with the current socio-economic hardships, are likely to create a similar effect, thus leading to further tensions in Western Europe over issues of immigration.

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Even regions that do not follow the Chechen pattern of dependency are expected to face stronger pressures to separate from Russia. The industrial and resource rich Tatarstan, for example, transfers a large portion of its income to Moscow. During an economic crisis, the motivation to keep resources in Tatarstan instead of sending them to Moscow is likely to increase. This is especially the case given growing religious radicalization there, as evident with numerous attacks on Russian Orthodox churches. Demography is also on the side of potential separatists. While in 1989 ethnic Tatars comprised only 48.5% of the local population, by 2010 the percentage of the Tatar population has raised to 53.2%. Furthermore, in the North Caucasus and in Tatarstan, the local administration apparatus and local security forces are already controlled by the local non-Russian (titular) elite groups. To a large extent, ethnic Russians were driven out from the republican authorities.

This specter of internal instability in the Russian Federation has the potential to interrupt energy supply to Western Europe. Not only many of the pipes go through Tatarstan and the Caucuses, but also the supply from Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan might be affected. The grim prospect for Russia may contribute to an even more assertive Russian foreign policy, both in its immediate post-Soviet environment, as well as in arenas such as Iran.

And so, as the United States and Europeans struggle to formulate their next steps regarding the crisis in Ukraine, including new rounds of sanctions and a possible formation of a 5000 strong rapid response force, they should think about the prospects of not only the expected outcomes, such as a possible Russian capitulation, but also some of the less expected ones, such as winds of separatism within the Russian Federation and struggle for power in Moscow.

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