

## The north Caucasus: politics or war?

**Thomas de Waal**

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*The horror of the Beslan siege in Russia's southern North Ossetia province highlights dangerous political instability in the immediate region, says Thomas de Waal of the Institute of War and Peace Reporting*

The North Ossetian town of Beslan will forever be associated with the horrific end to the school siege in which around 335 people, half of them children, died after being taken hostage at the start of the new school year. For those directly affected, the shock and grief will last for a very long time. But the intense reaction worldwide carries a danger that the event will be assimilated into a narrative of the “global war on terror” before its significant local dimensions are fully registered. In short, an urgent lesson of Beslan is that it is time to start paying serious attention to the north Caucasus.

One small cause for relief throughout the entire decade of the Chechnya conflict has been that the rest of this complex multi-ethnic region was not sucked into the turmoil. Even the incursion by Chechen fighter Shamil Basayev into Dagestan in 1999 failed to destabilise the region, as Basayev – and whoever else planned it – had hoped it would.

### A sombre prospect

Things have changed. The turmoil had begun to spread even before Beslan and the hostage crisis will make things much worse. This is not a happy part of the

world. It is poor, mostly Muslim and increasingly alienated from the rest of Russia. Unemployment is high, particularly among young people. Local rulers are authoritarian and corrupt. Racism by ethnic Russians towards north Caucasians is on the rise.

Over the past four years Moscow has supported the region's chosen leaders, kept the subsidies flowing and helped suppress dissent – but by doing so it is storing up hidden problems for itself. On current trends, much of the region could within a generation resemble parts of the Middle East or North Africa more than it does Russia. And, sure enough, radical Islam is finding willing recruits among young men, particularly in places like Kabardino-Balkaria that seem quiet on the surface.

North Ossetia has now been shaken to the core. It was chosen as a target by the terrorists partly because of its traditional loyalty to Moscow. The anger towards the political authorities among the Ossetian public in the aftermath of the siege is putting that loyalty under strain. It looks as though President Vladimir Putin decided not to go out and talk to ordinary people in Beslan because the public mood was too volatile.

The North Ossetian authorities – with the possible exception of President Alexander Dzasokhov himself – also acquitted themselves badly during the siege, failing to communicate properly with the relatives of those trapped inside the school. Here, as in the rest of the north Caucasus, the gap of trust between the public and its leaders is widening.

Most worrying is the threat posed to Ossetian-Ingush relations. The two neighbours have had a long-simmering conflict since the Ingush returned from Stalinist deportation in the 1950s and tried to reclaim the slice of territory, the Prigorodny region, that had formerly belonged to them and been transferred to North Ossetia. In 1992 the two sides fought a small but nasty war that resulted in 600 deaths. Since then, Ingush have been slowly returning to the Prigorodny region and the two sides have again begun living side-by-side. Now, following Ingush involvement in a siege where Ossetian children died, there is the frightening prospect of retaliation by the Ossetians.

Ingushetia itself is in a precarious state. Two years ago Moscow decided to push out President Ruslan Aushev, who had steered a skilful path between the Chechen rebels and Moscow and kept Ingushetia out of the Chechen conflict. Aushev's independence of mind was no longer acceptable in post-Boris Yeltsin Russia and he was replaced by an Ingush FSB (security service) general, Murat Zyazikov. But Zyazikov lacks Aushev's authority and Ingushetia has slowly fractured.

The bloody rebel attack on Nazran in June 2004 made Ingushetia part of the battlezone for the first time and revealed the existence of Ingush Islamic radicals. So it was significant that on 2 September it was Aushev, not Zyazikov, who was called in to negotiate the freeing of thirty hostages in Beslan.

#### A shattered country

Meanwhile, what of Chechnya itself in all this? It should be obvious now to all but the most blinkered that the Kremlin's dogged policy of "normalisation", with the Ahmed Kadyrov family as its venal agents, has failed. The appointment-by-election of Alu Alkhanov on 29 August was a cynical exercise, particularly after the exclusion of popular Chechen businessman Malik Saidullayev from the poll – more or less on the

grounds that he would have won it. The thuggish Ramzan Kadyrov is still the power behind Alkhanov's throne and corruption remains rife. Meanwhile fighting claims a few dozen lives each month.

The world looks very different from Chechnya. Most Chechens will have looked on what happened in Beslan with the same horror as everyone else, but the terrible truth is that this kind of event is not so shocking to them as it is to others. The Chechens have experienced their own Beslans over the past ten years: the bombing of Grozny in 1994-5 and 1999, the massacre at Samashki in 1995 and in Aldy in 1999, to name but a few.

It cannot be stated often enough that the Chechens are not Afghans. They are a small mountain people with a history of resistance to the Russian state, but also one of pragmatic accommodation with it. Most of them speak Russian much better than they do Chechen and almost all have relatives working in the rest of Russia. While they are Muslim, they are Sufis practicing a form of local Islam that is all but incomprehensible to Arab incomers. For years Chechens have dismissed these foreign interlopers with curses when they were told to stop visiting their local shrines or to start veiling their women.

Over the last decade the Russian state has given these ordinary Chechens nothing but contempt and violence, yet they remain the key to restoring some kind of stability to the north Caucasus. The trouble is that the Kremlin will have to make two difficult changes if it wants even to begin to enlist their support.

First, the Kremlin will, eventually, have to begin a broad-based political process that it cannot manipulate. It will have to abandon warlords like Ramzan Kadyrov in favor of authoritative figures such as Saidullayev and Ruslan Khasbulatov. Second, even more difficult, it will have to accept that most Chechens would want to see the inclusion of people from the former regime of pro-independence rebel President Aslan Maskhadov.

Despite what is said in public, contacts have never dried up. The north Caucasus is a small region and, despite appearances, there is a deep strain of pragmatism in its politics. The late pro-Moscow Chechen leader Akhmad Kadyrov talked to Maskhadov

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all the time. And it was significant that on 2 September, Aushev and Ossetian president Dzasokhov telephoned his envoy in London, Akhmed Zakayev – a man whom Russia tries to label as a terrorist. This was not the first time that Dzasokhov had been involved in such “back-channel” talks; I have it on good authority that he had talks with a Maskhadov representative in 2002 shortly before the *Nord Ost* theatre siege in Moscow.

Beslan suggests that the radicals in Chechnya have fully eclipsed the moderates amongst the rebels and that Chechen nationalism is almost dead as a political force. I also doubt that Maskhadov would win a free election in Chechnya today, as he did in 1997.

But my point is a different one: recent events show that Moscow badly needs men like Ruslan Aushev, while the north Caucasus badly needs some consensus politics and some unrigged elections. Both parties would benefit enormously from a political conversation in which ordinary north Caucasians are consulted and the men in Moscow listen to some uncomfortable truths.

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