

Why are the Suicide Bombers Returning?

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Ivan Sukhov on the CSIS report on the North Caucasus

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) published a report on the North Caucasus, which was prepared by Russian specialist on the region, Sergey Markedonov, and his colleagues at CSIS, Andrew Kuchins and Matthew Malarkey. Analyst, Ivan Sukhov, commented on the main theses of the report.

“The idea of writing the report “North Caucasus – Russia’s Volatile Frontier” appeared in the fall of last year in preparation for a conference dedicated to the situation in the North Caucasus, - said Sergey Markedonov. “The American community of experts does not always adequately understand the processes happening there. The problem is not in the insidiousness of the American experts but in the fact that the works of the Russian specialists on the Caucasus are unavailable for foreign analysts. Therefore knowledge is replaced by phobias and Cold War stereotypes abroad.

1. Terrorists revert to old methods

According to the opinion of the authors, who prepared the CSIS report, suicide bombings stopped for a while – after the Beslan hostage siege tragedy in September 2004. However, in 2008 suicide bombings have resumed. For example, nine suicide bombings occurred a month after April 17, 2009 (Nazran bombing, where 25 were killed and more than 30 were wounded). Seven more suicide bombings occurred a month after March 29, 2010 (two metro bombings, where 40 were killed and more than 80 were wounded).

On January 24, 2011 the suicide bomber at Domodedovo (37 killed, 180 wounded), in the opinion of the authors, brought back the growing instability in the North Caucasus to the center of Russian and foreign attention. This bombing became the third attack on transportation infrastructure outside of the North Caucasus in the last 15 months, if you count the “Nevsky express” bombing of November 2009 and the terrorist attack in the metro in March of last year.

2. No longer just in Chechnya

The quite obvious fact for Russian observers is breaking news for western public: for several years now, the North Caucasus problem does not reduce to the conflict in Chechnya. Chechnya, which for 10 years fought Russia for independence, looks like a more stable and safe territory in comparison to its neighbors in the region – such as Dagestan, Ingushetia or Kabardino-Balkaria.

3. Nationalism without separation

The North Caucasus has kept its ethnic nationalism dynamic but the unsuccessful example of Chechnya, which showed the example of the typical “failed state” during its de facto independence in 1997-1999, deprived nationalists of their illusion of secessionism. Nationalism is alive in the North Caucasus.

However the daily violence in the region is generally not connected to either nationalism or to the idea of separating from Russia. The idea of the ethnic rights, “self-determination until secession” yielded priority to religion. Islam is erasing ethnic borders and the extreme form of Islam is becoming the “carrying element” of ideology for Caucasian underground. The goal of the underground is the establishment of the domination of Islam and Sharia Law in the North Caucasus.

4. A real and virtual Jihad

The attempts of the self-named Emir of the North Caucasus, Doku Umarov, to appeal to the al Qaeda and to position militia attacks in the North Caucasus and in inner regions as part of the “global jihad” remain, in the authors’ opinion, unilateral. This is arguable. On one side, the influence from abroad should not be overestimated: the North Caucasus porridge is mostly cooked in the local kettle and on the local fire. However, the North Caucasus was and remains the object of attention of “global jihad.” Simply follow the internet-resources of the militants in order to understand this. The dissidence in the ranks of the militants in August 2010, when part of the Chechen commanders withdrew from Umarov’s obedience, could have weakened the “logistics” of international contacts but did not change the facts: the commander of Arab mujahidins in the Caucasus, Emir Abu Anas, remains in the “dissident” ranks.

5. The weakness of the mechanism

Moscow learned how to not only “divide and conquer” but also subsidize the North Caucasus, however, the Russian-created system of “patron-client” relations prevents real stabilization. Isolating the North Caucasus Federal District [SKFO] from the Southern Federal District, among other things, signifies Moscow’s intention to separate the unstable North Caucasus from the rest of the country, and primarily from the future Olympics in Sochi. Envoy, [the head of SKFO] Alexander Khloponin, who is responsible for modernization in the North Caucasus, is facing systematic barriers: for examples, the head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, was able to virtually eliminate his republic from the envoy’s jurisdiction. It is truly difficult to identify the SKFO project a successful one but one can assume that it is just a delayed start. Unfortunately, the speed of changes in the North Caucasus is such that this delay may be fatal.

6. Frontier management

Russia perceives the North Caucasus as a frontier that is space, which is separated from the rest of the country but nevertheless open for internal and external migration for various contacts with neighboring regions. In short term this does not threaten Russia’s territorial integrity but the problem may arise later: people in the North Caucasus are feeling increasingly alienated from the rest of the country. The international community has experience of reacting to secessionist crises – the UN peacekeepers, aid, and military intervention. However the international community does not have a mechanism for destabilized frontiers such as the North Caucasus. The authors compare the North Caucasus to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan, which is managed without international participation. The international community can only assist in solving problems that go beyond the region – such as arms smuggling, drug trafficking and Islamic terrorism. In case of unfavorable developments the situation in the frontier may spread like cancer cells. However, the report’s authors tend to see the

“light at the end of the tunnel” – to do this, Russia must solve its North Caucasus problems and not exacerbate them.