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Trip to the North Caucasus, 16 - 20 November 2010

In July 2010 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe discussed a report by its Member Dick Marty on the situation in the North Caucasus. The report highlights how the tyranny entrenched in the secret services, the military and the justice system characterises the region, which is also suffering severe violence at the hands of Islamist extremists. Yunus-bek Yevkurov, President of the North Caucasus Republic of Ingushetia, attended the debate held upon publication of the report, and invited me to visit the republic.

The journey from the invitation to the trip was itself an arduous one. The German Federal Foreign Office classifies the region as too dangerous for its staff members to travel to. It was only when the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs gave its OK that Ingushetia's presidential administration was able to officially issue the invitation.

As I had travelled to the North Caucasus and visited Beslan three years before – at that time with Ella Pamfilova, the former head of the Russian Council for Civil Society Institutions and Human Rights, and Svetlana Gannushkina, a member of Memorial – it seemed to make sense to include a return visit to North Ossetia on this trip. This mainly Christian constituent republic suffers comparatively little terrorism, which made arranging that part of the journey much easier.

Summary:

- 1.) Although it is very difficult for foreign politicians to gain access to the North Caucasus, it is possible to visit certain republics in the region. North Ossetia is relatively safe, and while the security situation in Ingushetia is unstable, it is by no means as volatile as in the Afghan capital Kabul, for example.
- 2.) The current president of Ingushetia, Yunus-bek Yevkurov, who was appointed by Medvedev, is considered a trustworthy mediator, unlike his predecessor Murat Zyazikov. Yevkurov has introduced a policy of mediation and dialogue between different elements of society, an approach that is in stark contrast to the despotism of Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov, and one for which Yevkurov should receive international political support.



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- 3.) Politics in North Ossetia are very much reminiscent of the old Soviet power system – and this applies as much to its culture as to its government. Nevertheless, I would make a strong appeal for the adoption of an open and welcoming stance in our dealings with North Ossetia. The enthusiasm with which young people have taken up the North Ossetian-Ingush reconciliation efforts organised by human rights organisation Memorial, and the fact that Western guests such as ourselves are met with such unfailing fascination and gratitude should be motivation enough for implementing such a policy.
- 4.) The Russian NGOs active in the region often have to contend with very challenging conditions. Nevertheless, they are performing outstanding human rights and reconciliation work, which we should be encouraging. Support from Western governments will help these organisations expand their scope.
- 5.) Those German organisations that are facilitating academic and social exchange in a region that risks being sealed off from Europe because of violence and extremism should also receive recognition and as much support as possible. I would like to make special mention here of the German Academic Exchange Service DAAD and the Berlin-based NGO, the German-Russian Exchange.

Background

The North Caucasus, located on the southern edge of Russia, is comprised of seven constituent republics. The population, which is made up of dozens of different ethnic groups, is predominantly Muslim. The region is mostly known for the bloody conflict in Chechnya. Although the Kremlin has declared its “anti-terror operation” officially over and has begun major reconstruction efforts, there are still no real signs of sustainable peace in the region. The North Caucasus remains a hotbed of instability and violence.

The long sweep of history, not least Stalin’s despotic rule, has also left lasting traces on this part of the world. The Soviet leader’s ruthless approach to border demarcation and the resulting division of ethnic settlements created a bizarre and conflict-prone territorial system. This intervention reached its devastating peak when the regime began deporting entire ethnic groups to Siberia and Central Asia.

The two brutal, devastating wars in Chechnya and the routine violence and tyranny exercised by security forces throughout the region, which go virtually unpunished, have bolstered and continue to reinforce armed underground groups. The Russian government’s long-standing denial of the social and political problems in the North Caucasus and the Kremlin’s appointment of corrupt governors have contributed to the destabilisation.



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Source: Zeitschrift Osteuropa

Since the Chechen war broke out in the mid-1990s, however, the character of the conflict has changed. Where once an ethno-political secession movement dominated, today the fight for resources and influence prevails. Alongside this, an underground movement that feeds on religious ideologies has spread throughout the North Caucasus. This movement no longer thinks in terms of the secession of individual republics; instead it is now seeking to establish an Islamist regime and has proven itself capable of extreme violence.¹ It has created a protest ideology blending ethno-nationalistic stances with Salafi ideas that are in direct conflict with the values of a modern society.

We are witnessing a return of the archaic structures of clan-focused, Islamist thinking. Women are losing the right to freely choose their partners. Bride kidnapping and forced marriage are once again becoming common practice. The belief that women who commit adultery should be put to death is spreading. Young women seeking to escape arranged marriages attempt to remain single by working as academics, but inevitably they fail and are forced to wed. In the old system, bride kidnappings were punishable by up to ten years in jail, but it is now impossible to enforce such laws – Russian lawyers' hands are tied.

For international observers the situation on the ground is unclear and there are only limited possibilities to get a realistic picture of what is going on. In Chechnya Ramzan Kadyrov has

¹ Uwe Halbach provides a good overview of the most recent developments in the North Caucasus in his paper *Russia's Internal Abroad. The North Caucasus as an Emergency Zone at the Edge of Europe*. Available at: <http://www.swp-berlin.org/en/products/swp-research-paper/swp-research-paper-detail/article/russias-internal-abroad.html>.



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established a despotic, brutal regime, with the backing of the Kremlin. Russian human rights activists accuse Kadyrov of being at least politically responsible for the murders of political opponents, human rights activists and journalists critical of the government. The deaths of Anna Politkovskaya and Natalya Estemirova should be considered in this context.

In recent years this system of violence and oppression appears to have begun spreading to Chechens living abroad. The Council of Europe reports that even dissidents living in exile, and their family members, are being systematically intimidated. Kadyrov is currently faced with a trial in Vienna concerning the murder of a Chechen asylum seeker in Austria. The Viennese public prosecution office allegedly has evidence that the Chechen president was involved in the murder.

One particularly distressing aspect of the situation is that people from the Caucasus are facing brutal, arbitrary violence even in Moscow. Questionable charges of terrorist plots are being made, and in just two months twelve Caucasians in the city disappeared. Even very well educated, moderately religious Caucasian people living in Moscow were among those targeted. There currently seems to be no discernible solution to these dangerous developments.

A number of years ago, Russia coined the term “near abroad” to describe the republics that were granted autonomy after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Today we can speak of an “internal abroad” developing on the southern edge of the country, a place on the periphery of Europe.

Ingushetia

Ingushetia is the smallest republic in the North Caucasus. It borders Chechnya to the east and North Ossetia to the west. The majority of its some 500,000 inhabitants call themselves Muslim. The Ingush have close linguistic, religious and cultural ties to the Chechens. Both ethnic groups were victims of Stalin’s deportation policies.

For my stay in Ingushetia I was assigned as a companion Asamat Nalgiyev, one of President Yevkurov’s advisors. Aged almost 70, he has sharp eyes and a keen mind. When he was just three years old, he and his parents were deported to Kazakhstan, where he lived next door to “Frau Hartmann” and “Frau Müller”, two women who as “Russian Germans” were also the target of Stalin’s deportation policies.

After training to become a Russian teacher, Asamat refused to join the Communist Party, instead choosing to work in a mine in the Arctic city of Norilsk. He only returned to the North Caucasus after perestroika. He got involved in politics and became a representative of the democratic party Yabloko, serving two legislative terms as a member of Ingushetia’s regional parliament. Asamat also founded a human rights initiative, which works with our partners at Memorial. He believes that President Yevkurov, a former general, is a trustworthy mediator who can bring reconciliation to the republic.



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Dmitry Medvedev appointed Yunus-bek Yevkurov as President of Ingushetia in late 2008.² At that time, the security situation in the republic had deteriorated so far that human rights organisations were describing Ingushetia as a lawless zone. Just a few months after his appointment, Yevkurov was the target of a suicide bomb attack and only narrowly escaped with his life.

We first met President Yevkurov at his official residence in the town of Magas, Ingushetia's recently founded capital and administrative centre. He did not conform to the stereotypical image of a Russian military ruler, and spoke of his efforts to initiate dialogue with the parents of underground resistance fighters and with young widows and other family members of those who have died. He explained how he was trying to motivate men who had got involved with the underground to turn back, give themselves up and, if necessary, face trial for what they have done. The President has also set up a hotline to the human rights commissioner. We learned that the first callers complained about the security forces, and that every complaint received so far has been followed up. This has led to three police officers losing their jobs in the last two weeks alone.

This policy is clearly beginning to bear fruit. Despite nearly dying in the bomb attack, President Yevkurov appears astoundingly calm when he speaks about the situation in his republic. Ramzan Kadyrov exhibits none of this composure in neighbouring Chechnya, where kidnappings, tyranny and state-sponsored violence continue to devastate the lives of its population. Kadyrov, who openly prides himself on his brutal approach to leadership, is clearly unable to stem the extremist violence in Chechnya. We were therefore unable to visit Ingushetia's neighbouring republic.

That evening we were able to visit the brave staff of **Memorial** at their offices in **Nazran**, unhindered and without any official escort. During my last visit to Memorial three years ago, in Grozny in Chechnya, it took a great deal of effort to shake off our over-attentive chaperone. Memorial reports that the illegal methods of combating terrorism used in Chechnya slid over to Ingushetia in 2002. Since then the security situation in the formerly peaceful republic has significantly deteriorated.

The presence of a large, combat-ready underground movement in Ingushetia became particularly apparent in June 2004, when extremists managed to capture the city of Nazran and to occupy the motorway for a period of several hours. Official reports state that the raid left 79 dead and 200 injured – according to Memorial, some of the casualties were a direct result of the excessive violence of a Russian special investigation unit. All those suspected of collaborating with the extremists are said to have been taken to neighbouring North Ossetia and severely tortured. Memorial says neither lawyers nor family members were permitted to see the detainees. In the years since, the Russian secret service has reportedly intensified its actions:

² It should be briefly noted here that holding the presidency of Ingushetia means being head of a state roughly the size of the German city of Braunschweig. In Germany, therefore, Yevkurov would be the equivalent of just an ordinary mayor of a medium-sized city.



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alleged extremists have been executed or abducted and “disappeared” immediately upon arrest. This had strengthened and radicalised the underground movement. Memorial says there has been an increase in the number of suicide bombings.

In 2008 a civil opposition movement developed. One of its leading lights, Magomed Yevloyev, editor of the independent website Inguschetiya.ru, was shot dead by militia members in August 2008. This may have been a final motivating factor for the central Russian government to appoint Yunus-bek Yevkurov as president of the republic.

Memorial says that after entering office in October 2008, Yevkurov started talks with the opposition and NGOs, and staffed his administration with liberals. I was told that he has always stressed his unwillingness to accept any unlawful acts on the part of the federal security forces and that this has restored hope to the population.

The last time Memorial recorded an arrest in Ingushetia that resulted in a detainee “disappearing” was 4 November 2009. However, it seems Ingush people are still being abducted from areas outside the republic; last year Memorial documented seven such instances.

The most famous of these have to do with opposition leader Maksharip Aushev. He acquired his status rather more accidentally than by choice when he began organising protest rallies to free his son and nephew, who had been abducted in Chechnya in 2007. The young men were released and the military troops involved in the abductions were arrested. Yet criminal proceedings soon stalled. In October 2009 Aushev was shot dead in the North Caucasus republic of Kabardino-Balkaria by unknown gunmen. Members of his family sought safety in St. Petersburg, but four of them are said to have been abducted from the city.

Further abductions were reported in Ingushetia in 2010, but the people reappeared several days later – in some cases in Russian Interior Ministry detention centres. According to Memorial, extra-judicial executions and torture also remain the order of the day.

I was told that Yevkurov is clearly not powerful enough to prevent these kinds of infractions. But Memorial does acknowledge that it is to the president’s credit that armed underground activities have diminished appreciably in 2010.

Memorial also notes that the president has become involved in the smouldering border tensions with North Ossetia over the Prigorodny District. Conflict flared up there between the Ingush and Ossetians in 1992 when Ingushetia laid claim to the disputed area because of its significant Ingush population. The sitting Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, had granted Ingushetia independence, but had not clearly defined its border with North Ossetia. The fighting caused over 40,000 people to flee the district, primarily for Ingushetia. The fact that President Yevkurov made no move to claim the district for Ingushetia following his inauguration, merely demanding in exchange for his forbearance a right of return for all displaced Ingush people, has led many in Ingushetia to accuse him of adopting a policy of appeasement. I was to learn more about the problem of returning displaced persons when my journey took me to North Ossetia.

At the University of Nazran a lecture theatre full of young people were eagerly awaiting their German guests. Despite the delayed start and the fact that it was already dark, meaning that the young women in particular should have been at home, nearly all the students had stayed.



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They could speak German. They were inquisitive and hungry for knowledge. They didn't wear headscarves and seemed bewildered by the idea that they might be compulsory. They want to be part of an open, multicultural and free world, and seek contact with other countries. At this point I would like to praise the employees of the German Academic Exchange Service for their tremendous efforts that have brought about precisely this cultural proximity and openness to Germany. I just hope that violence and extremism do not cut these committed young people off from the rest of the world and prevent them from being able to participate in exchanges with other European countries.

On day two of the visit we were taken **into the mountains**. With peaks rising up to 5,000 metres above sea level, this wild and lonely landscape is breathtakingly beautiful. Medieval tower houses, typical of the region, blend organically into their surroundings. The living quarters in the towers can only be reached by ladder. People used them as retreats in a region long plagued by violent conflict. Our guides told us of ambitions to develop tourism here, but this can only be a pipe dream at present. The whole area is inaccessible because of the extremists who are seeping in over the mountains.

This part of the journey concluded with a magnificent traditional dinner in the mountains. Our younger guides had to sit at a side table, as to this day it is considered inappropriate for them to join the elders at the main table. The Caucasians demonstrated their generosity and hospitality to us, their guests, with a feast of radishes, cucumber, bread, broth, garlic, onions, beetroot, shashlik and – the crowning glory of the meal – sheep's head and boiled sheep's udder, served exclusively to the guests as a particularly tempting delicacy. Since sheep's udder would probably go down much better with a drop of vodka, we experienced a twinge of regret that this is no longer on the menu in Ingushetia, as it is a Muslim republic. After this opulent banquet, we were ushered back into the car and taken to the border, where we were handed over to the North Ossetian neighbours, exactly according to protocol.

North Ossetia

The majority of the population in North Ossetia is Christian, but it also has two Muslim minorities – North Ossetian and Ingush. The country was devastated by a border war in 1992, which culminated in violent clashes over the Prigorodny District, as I mentioned earlier.

The manner of our reception in Vladikavkaz was very different to that in Nazran. It was more formal, the flow of information was a mere trickle, and there was clearly a keen interest in keeping us on a short leash. So we were not surprised to see that the local mayor had five telephones next to his desk; we couldn't help making associations with the old days of the Soviet Union.

We visited the middle school in Beslan where, on the first day of term in September 2004, gunmen took more than 1,000 people hostage in the schoolyard. The attempt to free the hostages resulted in the deaths of over 300 people, among them 155 children. The scene of the tragedy, which is situated in the middle of a residential area, has now been declared a memorial site. The photographs of the murdered children, their parents and teachers on the blackened walls of the old school gymnasium bear testament to the barely conceivable brutality and



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amorality of terrorists who do not shrink from attacking the weakest and most innocent members of society in their efforts to achieve their goals.

The Chechen leader of the extremists, Shamil Basayev, deliberately selected Ingush militants for the campaign in North Ossetia, full in the knowledge that this would open up historical wounds that had never fully healed.

The focus of my visit to Prigorodny District was the plight of the Ingush refugees. It is not easy to establish how many have been able to return home to date. The Nazran branch of Memorial believes that there are still thousands of internally displaced people. Official reports from North Ossetia state that all refugees have returned, except for 120 families whose safety allegedly cannot be guaranteed in the wake of the attack on the school in Beslan.

The North Ossetians are still smarting from the sting of accusations that they deliberately tried to obstruct the return of the displaced Ingush people. At the town hall in Prigorodny District I was presented to an assembly of village elders and citizens who had been gathered together in the conference room. They were there to tell us how the Ossetians and Ingush are coexisting in the district.

The district spokesman opened the meeting with the words “Honoured comrades” and then called on the people to tell us about the harmony and neighbourliness that now characterises their lives together. I tried to break the somewhat awkward silence that followed by suggesting that they might like to tell me about the events of 1992.

“Even 18 years after the conflict, the pain has not gone away,” an old man told me. He said there was still mistrust. Another man told me that the people had become more devout. I also heard how the people had lived together in harmony for two or three hundred years, how they had married across ethnic borders, and how they now couldn’t understand why the conflict had arisen.

But, they told me, their biggest problem is the economic situation. They said they were desperate for German investment so that things could finally start moving forwards in the region. The fact that their economic hopes were directed at a place as far away as Germany, instead of at the federal government in Moscow, astounded me.

The actual reason for our journey to North Ossetia was to visit the project *Frieden durch Unternehmertum* (Peace through Entrepreneurship), which is run by the Moscow branch of Memorial in collaboration with the Berlin NGO German-Russian Exchange and financed in Prigorodny District by the European Commission. For a long time the North Ossetian authorities were critical of the project, and it was only authorised three years ago – one day before my first visit to the region.

We learned about the project’s many different facets in a presentation on its activities. These include legal advice for business start-ups and small loans for new companies, primarily in the food and services sector. School projects give children the chance to view their surroundings through the eye of a camera and capture them on film. We watched entertaining and ingenious little movies that revealed the children’s perspective on their home and environment.



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We also met a group of young Ossetian and Ingush adults who had completed a joint seminar and then decided to celebrate the coming New Year together by organising a big party for children. These self-confident young people courageously took advantage of the presence of the local authorities to obtain a promise to provide small gifts for the party. The negotiations were led by a shrewd young woman whom one can well imagine becoming an assertive and charismatic leader in the future.

At the end of this lively and heartening meeting I was presented with a letter, beautifully handwritten in perfect German, thanking the people of Western Europe for their support and expressing their hopes that we would meet again. Just like at the University of Nazran, the friendliness, gratitude and desire to be a part of an open society will stay with me, as a lasting impression and as a call for action.