



Russia: Containing Trouble Down South

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Russia's annual Caucasus military exercises, which began on Monday, carry added significance this year, since Moscow last week suffered a blow to its regional strategy with the near-assassination of the President of Ingushetia, Yunus-Bek Yevkurov.

A bit of background here: Ingushetia is an ethnic republic within Russia, tucked in between Chechnya to its east and North Ossetia (where the 2004 Beslan school siege took place) to its west. To the south of all three lies Georgia, which Russia briefly invaded last August to defend South Ossetia (in Georgia). The Kremlin's policy of keeping the North Caucasus under its control has in recent years focused on regional strongmen and cash infusions. The most prominent of these 'strongmen' is arguably Ramzan Kadyrov, a former Chechen rebel who later switched to Russia's side. Yevkurov, a former paratroop commander, was another, having been appointed Ingush president in October 2008 after his predecessor was dismissed for his widespread unpopularity.

The Importance Of The Caucasus

Russia cannot afford more trouble in the Caucasus. In the two Chechen wars (1994-96, 1999-2004), Russia lost thousands of troops to subdue the territory's independence struggle and has only recently achieved peace there. Moscow sees the North Caucasus as key to retaining influence in this strategic crossroads where the interests of Russia, Turkey and Iran coincide. The Caucasus has taken added importance from its adjacency to both the oil-rich Caspian and Black Seas, and its large Muslim population, which the Kremlin fears might become radicalised. (For an excellent overview of this topic and local troubles, see the book *Russia's Islamic Threat* by Gordon Hahn.)

Ingushetia The Main Trouble-spot Lately

Even before the assassination attempt on Yevkurov, Ingushetia had seen the violent deaths of several key officials, and the US-based Center for Strategic and International Studies reported in May that the republic has been the most violent in the region over the past year. Although Yevkurov survived, he is unlikely to return to work any time soon, meaning that Russia will have to find itself a new 'strongman'. One candidate is former Ingush president Ruslan Aushev, a retired general, but appointing these military men as leaders does not necessarily solve the underlying problems in the region, namely very high rates of poverty, unemployment, and corruption. These are precisely the sort of grievances that Islamist militants have sought to exploit to radicalise the local Muslim populations.

For the Kremlin, the nightmare scenario is the spectre of ongoing insurgencies in the Caucasus. Although Chechnya has been pacified and its capital Grozny rebuilt, other republics in the region such as Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Cherkessia have seen their share of troubles. Not only that, but there have been tensions between the republics – although this can also work to Moscow's favour through 'divide and rule'.

A new crisis in the Caucasus would be particularly unfortunate this year of all years, given the severe economic challenges facing Russia. Business Monitor International (BMI) forecasts

Russia's GDP contracting by 7.2% this year and the government running a budget deficit of 9.3% of GDP. This means that the Kremlin has fewer funds to disburse to the North Caucasian republics – and therefore less ability to 'buy the peace'.