

“THE CURRENT TREND OF THE KREMLIN IS TO RATHER FORMALLY DISTANCE ITSELF FROM THE NORTH CAUCASUS”

Interview with Dr. Emil Souleimanov*

Conducted by Jesse Tatum, Interview Editor of CRIA



Dr. Emil Souleimanov.
Source: emilsouleimanov.eu

CRIA: Can you contextualize the recent surge in violence in the North Caucasus, especially in Daghestan and Ingushetia.

Souleimanov: In my understanding, the ongoing violence in the North Caucasus can be understood as an outcome of the continuous intermingling of ethnic nationalism, religious fundamentalism (some call it “Jihadism” and militant Islam) and customary law of the mountainous Caucasus.

In other words, some North Caucasians found themselves in the resistance movement because of their ethno-separatist aspirations – their desire to free their homeland, to make it independent on Moscow, to establish nation states. This was especially the case in Chechnya in the last decade.

Then, after the interwar period in Chechnya, a new phase emerged in which religious identification started playing an increasingly crucial role – and the North Caucasus resistance began associating itself with the local (North Caucasian), to some extent also global, jihadist movement rather than with ethno-nationalist separatism. Hence the ethno-nationalist identity declined in importance as the Chechen battlefield transformed over the years into a North Caucasian or rather North-East Caucasian one; Chechens, Daghestanis, Ingush and others became increasingly aware of their common Islamic heritage, as well as local (North Caucasian, or highlander) identity, which was to cement their sense of solidarity in an attempt to gain independence from Moscow and eventually establish some sort of supranational Islamic state (thus reviving the tradition of Imam Shamil’s imamate) in the region.

Besides that, rules of traditional customary law (adat) still play a crucial role in the North-East Caucasus – in contrast to the North-West Caucasus, which is much more Russified and Westernized – as does the blood feud; and the archaic concept of honor is still intact in the

* **Dr. Emil Souleimanov** is assistant professor at the Institute of Political Studies, Charles University, in Prague. He has published widely on the Caucasus and is the author of “An Endless War: The Russian Chechen Conflict in Perspective” (Peter Lang, 2007). He has also provided numerous expert analyses to NATO, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense of the Czech Republic.

traditionalist eastern parts of the Caucasus, which explains why the level of violence is so high in Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan. To put it in other words: if you offend me or offend, kill or lethally injure a relative of mine, I shall do my best to retaliate – regardless of what my political persuasion actually is – I shall take revenge by killing the offender or, if I fail to do so, his closest male relative, be he a soldier, police officer or anyone else. So if the police kidnap a relative of mine or me on the suspicion that we are a “Wahhabi,” or just in the hope to make some ransom money, or any other reason, beats me/him or humiliates me/him, I will have to take revenge, whatever the price of such retaliation. Because I am alone and the state authorities are strong and corrupt, I need some backing, whether organizational or financial – to achieve my goal – and that is why I am very likely to join resistance fighters up in the mountains. In doing so, I will be very likely to adapt to their way of thinking, which is now dominated by some sort of Jihadism, as do youngsters from across the North Caucasus who join the resistance movement because of their strong ideological persuasion, since they blame the pro-Moscow local authorities of all deadly sins. Now we are facing a new wave of violence in Dagestan, Ingushetia and Chechnya in which a local mixture of the blood feud and regional separatism cloaked in Jihadism plays an increasingly significant role.

I have explained this process in a detailed way in my recent book, *An Endless War* (2007).

CRIA: Ingushetia's president Yunus-Bek Yevkurov blamed corruption as the main factor behind ongoing violence and banditry (RFE/RL, Nov. 23, 2009). How accurate is this claim? What is the next step for the president in tackling the issue?

Souleimanov: Corruption as such is very unlikely to force people into killing others, although it is extremely instrumental in alienating the population from local governments, not only in Ingushetia but also across the North Caucasus republics. As I have mentioned above, one of the major reasons explaining the ongoing violence in the region is the ruthless behavior of the local police and the military authorities in fighting the real or alleged “Wahhabis” or in just making some money, combined with the typical North Caucasian nepotism where all profitable businesses, offices and, in some cases, even organized crime across the region, especially in Ingushetia, have been held by the relatives and close friends of the political elite, which Moscow has quietly accepted due to its specific political interests. If Yevkurov succeeds in breaking this circle and still remains alive, it will be his – and the entire region’s – major accomplishment within the recent decade. Nevertheless, I am rather skeptical regarding whether he succeeds in his manifested endeavor.

CRIA: Can you summarize Moscow's current role in this milieu? How has it changed over the last ten to fifteen years?

Souleimanov: Moscow’s main goal since 1991 has been to make sure the North Caucasus remains under its strict control. However, as we may look at it in a long-term perspective, its actions, as well as the actions of the local governments, have contributed to quite an opposite outcome: with the exception of North Ossetia, the North Caucasus, especially its eastern part, have never since the First Chechen War (1994-1996) been so alienated by Moscow and local governments. The current trend of the Kremlin is to rather formally distance itself from the region

and have its will carried out by the local governments, giving them *carte blanche* for their problematic economic activities as has been the broadly discussed case of Ingushetia.

CRIA: Will Medvedev's idea of placing a federal-level leader in charge of the entire North Caucasus improve the situation? Would Ramzan Kadyrov – reportedly the leading candidate for such a position – be suitable?

Souleimanov: No federal-level leaders will ever help improve the situation in the North Caucasus in any substantial way unless there is a clear political will in Moscow that this is to be done; however, such an initiative would mean a drastic shift in the Kremlin's policies toward the region, which is quite unlikely to happen in these days, given Russia's attitude toward the region. If put in such a position, Ramzan Kadyrov, given his character, previous position as autocratic leader of Chechnya and quite troublesome relationship with the Daghestani and current Ingushetia authorities, would only aggravate the overall situation in the North Caucasus rather than improve it.

CRIA: What are your thoughts on the potential for increased levels of inter-republic tension?

Souleimanov: Relations between the Turkic (Karachay, Balkar) and Adyge (Cherkes, Kabardey) populations of the North-West Caucasus have traditionally been uneasy, as are the relations between the various ethnic groups in the multiethnic republic of Daghestan. The tensions between the Ingush and North Ossetians are still high, albeit latent, after the bloody events of 1992 in the Prigorodniy district; a specific exception being the rather historically positive relations between the Muslim North Ossetians and the Ingush. The ongoing violence in the North Caucasus helps boost the sense of supranational (religious, regional, cultural) solidarity of North Caucasians, as ethnic identity plays a rather minor role in the resistance movement. However, it is a fact that, for instance, rural and, on average, more traditionalist Avars are more active in the resistance movement than the urban Kumyks, which then contributes to a relatively high level of mutual distrust amongst various ethnic groups in Daghestan. At the same time, as far as tensions between particular republics is concerned, the main source of instability has so far been the troublesome behavior of Ramzan Kadyrov's forces vis-à-vis Chechnya's neighbors to the west and east.

CRIA: Do unstable borders have any particular implications for Azerbaijan and Georgia, or for further north of the North Caucasus republics themselves – in Moscow, for example?

Souleimanov: Baku is traditionally suspicious of the activities of different religious and ethno-religious groups based on the country's north. These mountainous areas, inhabited mostly by Sunnis either of Azerbaijani, Avar, Lezgin or other North Caucasian populations, have historically been closely connected to Daghestan. Increased tensions in Daghestan are very likely to have a direct impact on Azerbaijan's rather traditionalist North. Islam also plays significant role, and the level of social mobilization is thus considerably higher than in some other areas of Azerbaijan. This is especially true for the country's Lezgin and Avar communities, which associate themselves with their ethnic brethren based in Daghestan as least as much as with the idea of Azerbaijani statehood.

As for Georgia, the northern areas of this South Caucasian country bordering Chechnya, inhabited by the Kists (ethnic Chechens, part of whom were evangelized and then Georgianized centuries ago), as well as by the Chechen refugees from the First and Second Chechen Wars, may be of concern to Tbilisi. Because of the smaller numbers of Kists and Chechens inhabiting Georgia's north than that of Avars, Lezgis and Sunni Azerbaijanis inhabiting Azerbaijan's north, and because of the fact that the Chechen/Kist community is rather isolated in Georgia in both political and geographic terms, the implications for Azerbaijan are more likely to be serious should the situation in Daghestan further deteriorate.