Violent Mobilization and Non-Mobilization in the North Caucasus

by Julie Wilhelmsen and Mark Youngman

Following the appearance of the first reports of Chechen involvement in the Syrian conflict in 2012 and the subsequent large-scale migration of foreign fighters to the Middle East—particularly after the proclamation of the Islamic State (IS) in 2014—the North Caucasus has again become popularly associated with violence and terrorism. Although official figures have been varied and inconsistent, Russian President Vladimir Putin estimated in May 2014 that 4,000 Russian citizens had travelled to fight in Syria and Iraq.[1] Interior Ministry statements indicate that residents of the North Caucasus have accounted for the majority of these, with approximately 1,500 people from Dagestan, almost 800 from Chechnya, and around 200 each from Kabardino-Balkaria and Ingushetia.[2]

These developments have, in turn, fed domestic security concerns, with the overlapping challenges posed by concerns of the potential threat posed by returning participants of the conflict in Syria and Iraq; the formal incorporation of the remnants of the North Caucasus insurgency into the 'caliphate'; and terrorist attacks carried out by individuals inspired by, and claiming to act in the name of, IS. Between September 2015 and April 2018, IS claimed responsibility for 26 attacks in Russia, with several further attacks since then. Reliable news sources like *Caucasian Knot* routinely report on violent incidents and efforts to either reintegrate or prosecute returnees.[3] At the same time, the North Caucasus itself has become increasingly difficult for researchers to access, and—for Russian researchers seeking to understand their own country—even dangerous. As understanding the region has become ever more important, so have the challenges of obtaining, verifying, and analyzing information about it increased.

This special edition of *Perspectives on Terrorism* is part of an effort to facilitate ongoing research into the causes and limits of violent mobilization, to help researchers to better understand and contextualize these complex issues. It also represents an effort to maintain a dialogue between Russian and Western research communities working in this area. The contributors are diverse: they are trained in different disciplines and academic traditions, and they rely on diverse theoretical and methodological approaches. What unites these contributions is an effort to answer the broad research question *why has violent mobilization in, and from, the North Caucasus occurred (or not)?*

The contributing authors to this Special Issue use a variety of terms to describe the phenomenon they are studying: radicalization, terrorism, insurgency, jihadism, fundamentalism, violent extremism, foreign fighting, or transnational activism. However, in this introduction, and as organizing concept of the Special Issue as a whole, we have chosen the label *violent mobilization*. We have done so because many of these terms have become fundamentally contested and politicized and often infer Islam in a problematic way.[4] Violent mobilization alludes to a wide range of collective human activities that move beyond peaceful political contestation into the realm of armed conflict. Such action can be mobilized by means of any ideology or framing (be it Communism, ethnicity, nationalism, religion, etc.). The contributors of this Special Issue contend that adopting broader sociological, context-specific, and process-oriented perspectives that recognize the antagonistic relationships which conflict entails offer the best avenues for explaining why and when violence is likely to occur—or not.

More than anything, this Special Issue aims to contribute towards filling an empirical gap in the literature. Academic work on jihadism, terrorism, radicalization, and violent extremism is vast, growing, and cross-disciplinary in nature.[5] The North Caucasus, however, remains peripheral to this scholarly endeavor—except in the work of a handful of dedicated scholars—many of whom are featured here.[6] Our hope is that, by bringing this scholarship together in an open-access publication, we can stimulate further interest for, and consideration of, the region and integrate it into broader debates.

Table 1: The North Caucasus

Regional Overview

The North Caucasus spans the northern part of the Caucasus mountain range, from the Sea of Azov and Black Sea in the west to the Caspian Sea in the east. Unlike the South Caucasus region, which consists of sovereign states, it is part of the Russian Federation. The region consists of seven republics—Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, North Ossetia-Alania, and the Republic of Adygea. Stavropol Kray and Krasnodar Kray are also considered part of the broader North Caucasus region, sharing historical and cultural ties with the republics.

	Size (in 1.000 sq km)	*Population (2010 census)[8]*	*Major ethnic groups (2010 census)*	*Religious groups (Arena 2012 survey)[9]*
Adygea	7.6	439,996	Russian 63.6% Adyghe 25.8% Armenian 3.7%	Orthodox 35.4% Non-denominational religious 29.8% Islam 12.0% Atheist 9.2%
Chechnya	17.3	1,268,989	Chechen 95.3% Russian 1.9%	Islam 95.0% Atheism 3.0% Orthodox 2.0%
Dagestan	50.3	2,910,249	Avars 29.4% Dargins 17.0% Kumyks 14.9% Lezgins 13.3% Laks 5.6% Azeris 4.5% Tabasarans 4.1% Russians 4.1%	Islam 80.6% Non-denominational religious 8.6% Orthodox 2.4% Atheist 2.2%
Ingushetia	3.6	412,529	Ingush 94.1% Chechen 4.6% Russian 0.8%	Islam 96.0% Orthodox 2.0%
Kabardino-Balkaria	12.5	859,939	Kabardin 57.2% Russian 22.5% Balkar 12.7%	Islam 54.6% Orthodox 15.6% Non-denominational religious 11.8% Atheist 6.6%
Karachayevo-Cherkessia	14.1	477,859	Karachay 41.0% Russian 31.6% Cherkess 11.9% Abazin 7.8%	Islam 47.0% Orthodox 13.6% Non-denominational religious 11.8% Atheist 6.6%
Krasnodar Kray	76.0	5,226,647	Russian 88.3% Armenian 5.5% Ukrainian 1.6%	Orthodox 52.2% Non-denominational religious 22.5% Atheist 13.2% Islam 1.4%
North Ossetia-Alania	8.0	712,980	Ossetian 65.1% Russian 20.8% Ingush 4.0% Armenian 2.3% Kumyk 2.3%	Orthodox 49.2% Folk religion 29.4% Islam 4.0% Atheist 3.0% Non-denominational religious 0.8%
Stavropol Kray	66.2	2,786,281	Russian 80.9% Armenian 5.9% Armeno-Tat 2.0% Dargin 1.8%	Orthodox 46.9% Non-denominational religious 19.3% Atheist 16.4% Islam 1.9%

Russia and the North Caucasus: Conflicting Identities

The North Caucasus is—from the perspective of ethnicity, language, religion, and culture—one of the most diverse regions on the planet (see Table 1). Nevertheless, as a result of their common Soviet heritage and their incorporation into the post-Soviet Russian state, the people of the region have shared historical, political, and social experiences. The processes of violent mobilization in the region cannot be properly understood without reference to the events surrounding the collapse of the Soviet Union. The late Soviet policies of *glasnost* (openness), *perestroika* (reform), and *demokratizatsiya* (democratization) unleashed collective and public searches for rediscovering and obtaining external recognition of distinct ethnic and religious identities. This led to a general surge in mobilization of all sorts in a region that had always been distinct within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.[7]

In many ways, developments in Chechnya and the broader North Caucasus since the collapse of the Soviet Union mirror processes of de-colonialization seen elsewhere. The difference, however, is that these processes have taken place *within*—and thus far been successfully resisted by—the 'imperial' Russian state.[10] Under the presidency of Vladimir Putin, Russia has sought to strengthen and centralize the state. Following Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 in particular, Russia's efforts to (re-)define itself have acquired a stronger ethnic Russian and Christian Orthodox component—something that has naturally conflicted with its assertion of sovereignty over non-ethnic Russian populations.[11]

For the most part, the peoples of the North Caucasus are still in the process of nurturing their own ethnic and religious identities. For five out of the seven North Caucasian republics listed above, Islam is the dominant religion, and divergent Russian and local identities have often been the source of tension. Despite being fairly isolated physically, the North Caucasus has become part of a globalizing world where the Internet serves as an effective vehicle for disseminating various ideas and identities—as the contributions of Sagramoso and Yarlykapov, Youngman, and Wilhelmsen to this Special Issue testify. The result of these complex processes is a region that is simultaneously part of, and divorced from, both the rest of Russia and the broader 'Muslim world'—socially, economically, and legally.[12]

State and Sub-state Violence in the North Caucasus

The potential for broad processes of identity seeking and mobilization leading to conflict and violence was most clearly realized in Chechnya. Nationalists in the republic, led by Dzhokhar Dudayev, declared their independence from the disintegrating Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and proclaimed the existence of a sovereign Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI). This led to confrontations with the re-emerging Russian state and, after efforts to peacefully agree on a mutually acceptable framework for relations failed, the two sides fought a brutal war (1994–1996).[13] The ChRI secured a largely pyrrhic victory, but it was left to face a battery of social, economic, and political problems, including the devastation left by the war itself and the lack of post-conflict integration of the armed groups that had fought it.[14]

The instability that plagued the Chechen Republic and the failure to resolve Chechnya's legal status provided the backdrop for a return to war. Russia and Putin—first as prime minister and then as president—sought to reassert control over the secessionist republic, launching a second war (1999–2002) no less brutal than the first. This time, Russia succeeded in installing its own Chechen authorities in the republic, under the leadership of Akhmad Kadyrov. Following Kadyrov's assassination in 2004, power eventually transferred to his son, Ramzan, who to this day maintains dictatorial control over Chechen political and social life.[15] Violence, meanwhile, increasingly spread beyond Chechnya's borders to the broader region and became more radical in its orientation.[16]

As important as identity to understanding violent mobilization in the North Caucasus, then, is the heavy reliance

on the use of force by *both* the state and some of its opponents. The region has provided and experienced the starkest manifestation of the securitization of Russian politics.[17] Putin bolstered his initial authority through the use of strident rhetoric in the face of domestic security threats, and he opted to resolve the question of Chechnya's status through the use of brute force. The conduct of the Second Chechen War relied on an all-out military campaign, accompanied by crimes against humanity, but it was waged under the banner of a 'counterterrorist operation'.[18] This packaging served both to consolidate domestic support and avert criticism from external actors mired in their own 'War on Terror'.[19]

Since Putin's return to the presidency, a partial desecuritization of counterterrorism during the tenure of Dmitriy Medvedev (2008–2012) has been completely abandoned, and terrorism is once more framed as an existential question that necessitates a force-driven response.[20] More generally, the prominent role played by people with a security service background (*siloviki*) in the state apparatus, the centralization of power and the hollowing out of democracy, and the troubled relationship between the state and civil society are continuing, if not to say accelerating, features of Putin's Russia.[21] State repression has and will shape the context within which violent mobilization in, and from, the North Caucasus must be understood.

Russia's opponents, meanwhile, have demonstrated equal indifference to the human costs of their actions, which included major terrorist attacks like the 2002 Moscow theatre siege, the 2004 Beslan school siege, and several suicide bombing campaigns.[22] The Islamist faction of the insurgency that was a significant factor in the inter-war instability and provided the *casus belli* for the second war repeatedly challenged the authority of nationalist-separatists led by ChRI President Aslan Maskhadov. Over time, it emerged victorious in the internal struggle and came to dominate the entire insurgency.

Figure 1. Security Service Losses in the North Caucasus, 2006-2016 [25]
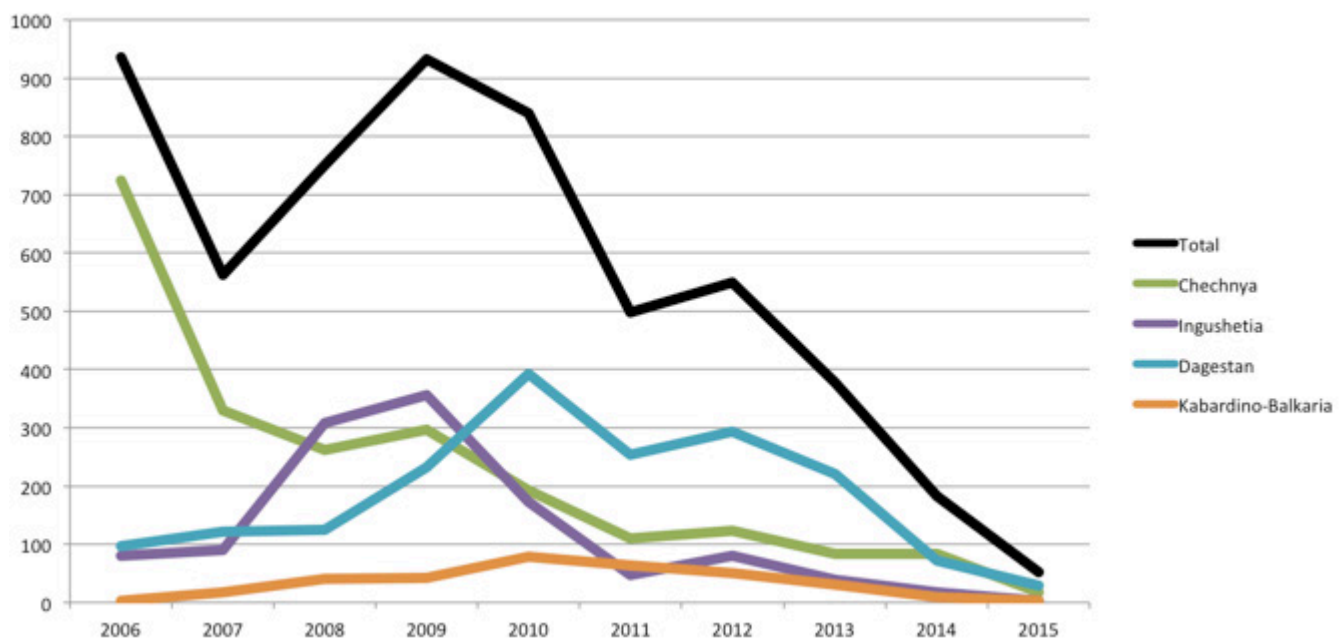
In October 2007, the gradual regionalization and Islamization of the Chechen conflict culminated in the abolition of the ChRI and its replacement with the Caucasus Emirate (*Imarat Kavkaz,* IK).[23] This was an explicitly jihadist, yet largely notional, polity that simultaneously united violent entrepreneurs in Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria and aligned itself with radical actors elsewhere in the world.[24] Although overall levels of insurgent violence have declined since the Chechen wars (see Figure 1), the profile and locus of conflict have shifted, first to Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria, and then to Dagestan. The North Caucasian region that has been the site of conflict since the collapse of the Soviet Union provides the context through which violent mobilization for Syria and Iraq must be understood.

Causes and Limits of Violent Mobilization

In seeking to understand the character of contemporary violence in the region, it is readily apparent that the more Islamized eastern republics of Dagestan and Chechnya have—with short-term exceptions—experienced more violence than the region's western territories. It is also true, as noted above, that they produced more recruits for the conflict in Syria and Iraq, although these figures need to be contextualized against the size of these two republics compared to other parts of the region. Nevertheless, we challenge the notion that the eastern parts are *inherently* more prone to violence because of the increased religiosity found there. In the ongoing debate over whether Europe is witnessing the 'radicalization of Islam,' as argued by Gilles Kepel, or the 'Islamization of radicalism,' as proposed by Oliver Roy, we side firmly with the latter.[26] Islam has served primarily as a medium for radical protest against society in the North Caucasus, rather than a source of violence in itself.

Indeed, despite the association with violence that often accompanies media portrayals of the region, in many ways levels of violent mobilization remain surprisingly low in the North Caucasus. The region has the lowest level of socioeconomic development in the entire Russian Federation, and its republics draw more than 50% of their budget revenues from the federal center.[27] Regardless of the socioeconomic measure used—per capita production of services, budget dependency, unemployment, social services and infrastructure, tax collection, salaries—and even taking into account the unreliability of government figures, the North Caucasus is a poorly performing region. Individual opportunities for self-realization without leaving the region are exceptionally limited. Corruption, bureaucratic arbitrariness, and human rights abuses by state officials and security service personnel are widespread. In the case of Chechnya, repressive practices extend even beyond these regional norms and federal laws apply only to the extent that the Kadyrov regime allows them to.[28] Overall, what one finds today is a strong, at times violently repressive, state seeking to manage a plethora of social movements, only *some of which* turn to violence. As much as this Special Issue seeks to understand the violent mobilization that did occur, its contributions also seek to explain the limits of that mobilization. Here the contributions of Starodubrovskaya, Koehler, Gunya, Shogenov, and Tumov are particularly relevant.

Introducing the Articles in This Special Issue of Perspectives on Terrorism

Mark Youngman examines the *ideology* of the IK across its lifespan, from its proclamation in October 2007 through to it being overtaken by the Islamic State (IS) and suffering the loss of its last known leader in August 2015. It shows how the movement's leaders failed to elaborate in detail what they were fighting against, or to overcome doubts about the efficacy of violent resistance and its ability to deliver genuine results. By moving beyond instrumental and doctrinal understandings of ideology, it complements various contributions to this Special Issue that demonstrate that the IK was a much more locally oriented movement than its advocacy of a global jihadist ideology would suggest. As has become clear, the IK ultimately failed to establish a genuinely trans-regional, much less transnational, insurgent identity.

Julie Wilhelmsen explores this focus on ideology and identity by investigating the social and relational terrain among Chechens, which violent entrepreneurs seek to exploit. Elaborating on the *othering mechanism* in the processes of violent mobilization, she examines the Chechen experience and shows how discourses of radical exclusion from Russia combine with an emerging inclusion and identification with a broader Muslim Self. She does this by tracing these identity constructions through texts and videos of Chechen fighters who left for the Middle East, showing how they portrayed violent resistance far from home as both legitimate and urgent.

Domitilla Sagramoso and Akhmet Yarlykapov shift the focus to Chechnya's neighbor, Dagestan, exploring the mechanisms and logic behind the flow of the republic's citizens to the conflict in Syria and Iraq. Drawing on Social Movement Theory, they examine the penetration of ISIS media into the region in 2013 and argue that aggressive online propaganda framed around effective messages of Muslim victimhood, the glories of

the Islamic State, and the duty to carry out jihad played a key role. They also show how social and personal networks became powerful instruments of recruitment and mobilization of young Dagestani Muslims to IS.

Jean-François Ratelle similarly addresses the question of why individuals from Dagestan who could have fought what they considered a 'legitimate' jihad at home travelled abroad instead. He argues that we need to appreciate the role of religious commitment alongside the opportunity IS offered for people to fight without some of the social and cultural baggage found at home. In doing so, his contribution dovetails with Wilhelmsen's and Kvakhadze's article in highlighting the role played by specific *socio-cultural codes* in explaining violent mobilization (or the lack thereof). It also aligns with Yarlykapov and Sagramoso's and Wilhelmsen's by finding that showing *solidarity* with Sunni Muslims under attack in Syria was a key driver of violent mobilization in the North Caucasus.

Aleksandre Kvakhadze subsequently examines a different and relatively understudied phenomenon: Caucasian female volunteerism. The mobilization of women from the Caucasus to Syria and Iraq was unprecedented when compared to both previous violent mobilizations at the regional level and global patterns in relation to this specific conflict. Like Ratelle, he shows how religious conviction and duty played a role in this mobilization but at the same time identifies *family relationships* as the primary factor. He also demonstrates that, once mobilized, Caucasian women played a restricted role that continued to reflect the position of women in their home societies.

Irina Starodubrovskaya puts the spotlight back on the North Caucasus to theorize patterns of conflict escalation in local communities. Building on rich ethnographic material drawn from fieldwork in North Caucasian villages, she attempts to model why some communities enter the stage of *conflict-violence*, while others stay at the level of *conflict-disagreement*. Escalation to violence, she argues, was most probable in socially closed, traditional communities that attributed little value to secular education, where Islamic youth had already previously participated in armed conflict, and where either security forces or insurgents (or both) were protagonists.

Finally, Jan Koehler, Alexey Gunya, Murat Shogenov, and Asker Tumov situate the rise of Islamic violent mobilization as well as other potential or manifest violent challenges in Kabardino-Balkaria in the context of Moscow's attempts to project state power over the North Caucasian periphery. Working from a sociological perspective on the relationship between violence and *political settlements* in limited-access social orders, the article traces the changing role violence has played in sustaining as well as challenging local political settlements since the disintegration of the centralized Soviet system.

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Notes

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[2] 'Natives from the Caucasus in the ranks of IS (ISIL),' Caucasian Knot, 21 May 2018, available at URL: https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/251513/

[3] Mark Youngman, 'An Overview of IS-Claimed Attacks in Russia,' 11 April 2018, available at URL: https://mark-youngman.com/2018/04/11/an-overview-of-is-claimed-attacks-in-russia/. The majority of these attacks occurred in the North Caucasus, in particular in Dagestan. None of the attacks in the cited time period involved 'returnees,' some of the claims were questionable, and several demonstrated limited capacity, relying on knives and weapons obtained during the attack itself. Details of individuals attacks and claims of responsibility can be found by following Caucasian Knot <www.kavkaz-uzel.eu>.

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[6] Key works on different phases and aspects of the conflict include Julie Wilhelmsen, (2005) 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Islamisation of the Chechen Separatist Movement,' *Europe-Asia Studies*, 57:1; James Hughes, (2007) *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press; Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, (2008) 'Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment,' *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 31:5, pp. 412–433; Moshe Gammer, (2008) *Ethno-Nationalism, Islam and the State in the Caucasus: Post-Soviet Disorder*. Abingdon: Routledge; Cerwyn Moore, (2010) *Contemporary Violence: Postmodern War in Kosovo and Chechnya*. Manchester: Manchester University Press; Marat Shterin and Akhmet Yarlykapov, (2011) 'Reconsidering Radicalisation and Terrorism: The New Muslims Movement in Kabardino-Balkaria and its Path to Violence,' *Religion, State and Society*, 39:2-3, pp. 303–325; John O'Loughlin and Frank D.W. Witmer, (2011) 'The Localized Geographies of Violence in the North Caucasus of Russia, 1999-2007,' *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 101:1, pp. 178–201; Domitilla Sagramoso, (2012) 'The Radicalisation of Islamic Salafi Jamaats in the North Caucasus: Moving Closer to the Global Jihadist Movement?,' *Europe-Asia Studies*, 64:3, pp. 561–595; Aurélie Campana and Jean-François Ratelle, (2014) 'A Political Sociology Approach to the Diffusion of Conflict from Chechnya to Dagestan and Ingushetia,' *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 37:2, pp. 115–134; Anne Le Huerot, Aude Merlin, Amandine Ragamey and Elisabeth Sieca-Kozlowski (Eds.) (2014) *Chechnya at War and Beyond*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 395–415; Mark Youngman, (2016) 'Between Caucasus and Caliphate: the Splintering of the North Caucasus insurgency,' *Caucasus Survey*, 4:3, pp. 194–217; Julie Wilhelmsen, (2017) *Russia's Securitization of Chechnya: How War Became Acceptable*. Abingdon: Routledge; Edward C. Holland, Frank D.W. Witmer and John O'Loughlin, (2017) 'The Decline and Shifting Geography of Violence in the North Caucasus of Russia, 2010–2016,' *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 58:6, pp. 613–641.

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[8] Vserossiyskiy perepis naseleniya 2010, [All-Russian population census 2010]. URL: https://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm.

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[12] The concept of the 'Muslim world' is itself problematic and of colonial origins, implying a political, geographical, cultural and linguistic unity that has never existed. See Cemil Aydin, (2017) *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History*. London: Harvard University Press.

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