



Feature Article
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The Caucasus on the Edge of Tomorrow

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The Caucasus is today a region traversing a period of escalating instability and profound transformation. Historically characterized by its fragmentation and diversity, the Caucasus remains a patchwork of overlapping identities, allegiances, and grievances. This delicate balance is being disrupted by external and internal pressures, creating a volatile environment that could reshape the region's geopolitical and social fabric in the years to come.

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Olgeti, Ingushetia

Two distinct but interconnected dynamics define the current trajectory of the Caucasus. In the South Caucasus, the aftermath of Azerbaijan's military victory in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War has upended the region's power dynamics, while Armenia's increasing divergence from Russian influence and Georgia's ambivalent tilt away from the West have introduced new strategic uncertainties.

The North Caucasus, a collection of semi-autonomous republics under Russian dominion, faces growing turbulence as internal tensions within Russia compound long-standing local grievances. This is a region often treated as Moscow's hinterland, yet it is increasingly revealing itself as a source of instability and unpredictability, especially as the federal center struggles with the repercussions of its war in Ukraine, prolonged economic sanctions, and the strains of wartime mobilization.

The war in Ukraine has served as a catalyst for many of these upheavals, exacerbating pre-existing fractures while also introducing new ones. For decades, the North Caucasus has been maintained as a relatively stable region within Russia through a combination of mass securitization, budgetary transfers, and personalistic patronage networks. These mechanisms are now fraying under wartime pressures, with federal resources stretched thin and elite infighting escalating across the federal and regional levels. This has led to a scramble for spoils among federal and regional elites, exposing the fragility of Moscow's control.

In the South Caucasus, the shifting alignments reflect broader geopolitical transformations. Azerbaijan has emerged as a dominant regional power, its victory over Armenia signaling a shift in the Russian

security system and the limitations of Western engagement to shape events. Armenia, increasingly disillusioned with its traditional ally Russia, is exploring closer ties with Western partners, albeit cautiously. Georgia, meanwhile, finds itself in an awkward middle ground, with its ruling Georgian Dream party pursuing policies perceived as increasingly accommodating to Russian interests, even as public sentiment remains broadly pro-Western.

At the heart of these dynamics is the Caucasus's unique position as a liminal or transitional geopolitical space—a bridge and a barrier between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. The region's history is marked by the ebb and flow of great powers politics, the interplay of highland and lowland cultures, and the tensions between centralized authority and local autonomy. Today, these historical patterns are undergoing rapid reconfiguration, as shifting alliances create both opportunities for conflict and avenues for transformation.

The Caucasus, north and south, is on the edge of tomorrow—poised between fragmentation and consolidation, autonomy and subjugation. As the forces unleashed by the Ukraine war and shifting geopolitical alliances continue to ripple through the region, the future of the Caucasus will not only shape its own destiny but also have

profound implications for the broader international order.

The Caucasus's Strategic Ecology

Across time, the Caucasus has been incorporated into various empires, each leaving its mark on the region's political and social structures. A complex interplay of imperial conquest, ethno-national movements, and attempts at integration has each left its mark on the region's political and social structures. Some scholars argue that these historical experiences have contributed to the Caucasus's current fragmentation and have made integration efforts particularly challenging. For example, the legacy of the Soviet Union continues to influence the political and economic development of the South Caucasus, with institutional structures inherited from the Soviet era often hindering democratic and economic reforms. Despite its apparent fragmentation, the Caucasus also has an underlying coherence, rooted in its geography, strategic importance, and shared historical experiences. To understand the challenges and opportunities facing the region today, it is necessary to view it not merely as a collection of disparate entities but

as a strategic whole, albeit one with deep internal divisions.

The conventional organization of the Caucasus into the North and South reflects the political realities imposed by Russian imperial and Soviet legacies. The North Caucasus, comprising a series of republics within the Russian Federation, remains under Moscow's dominion, though the level of actual control varies significantly. The South Caucasus, encompassing the independent states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, nominally operate outside Moscow's direct control, though its influence looms large.

Scholars Eldar Ismailov and Vladimer Papava proposed a more sophisticated understanding of the Caucasus by dividing the region into three interconnected components: Northern, Central, and Southern Caucasus regions.¹ The Northern Caucasus remains the domain of Russian republics, while the Central Caucasus—essentially referring to the independent states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—reflects the core of the region's political landscape. Critically, their framework innovatively redefines the South Caucasus to

¹ Eldar Ismailov and Vladimer Papava, *The Central Caucasus: Essays on Geopolitical Economy*, Stockholm: CA&CC Press, 2006.

(https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2220312)

include the northeastern regions of Turkey and the northwestern regions of Iran, recognizing these areas' long-standing socioeconomic and ethnocultural connections. This approach transcends the traditional Russian-centric perspective, which typically defines the region solely through its relationship to Moscow. By incorporating these additional territories, the framework acknowledges the complex historical and contemporary interactions that extend beyond formal political boundaries. The proposed division frames the Caucasus as dynamic and interconnected. It challenges narrower geopolitical views and highlights the deep cultural and economic ties historically linking these territories, regardless of modern borders.

This “trichotomy,” however, oversimplifies a far more fluid and interwoven reality. The North Caucasus republics enjoy significant degrees of autonomy, often operating as de facto semi-autonomous fiefdoms under strongman leaders like Chechnya’s Ramzan Kadyrov. These leaders maintain their positions less through institutional integration with Moscow than through personal loyalty and patronage networks that tie them directly to Russian President Vladimir Putin. The South (or “Central”) Caucasus, while outwardly independent, remains deeply entangled with Russian

interests through historical ties, security arrangements, and economic interdependencies.

Realignments and Historical Anomalies

Historically, the Caucasus has been defined by overlapping spheres of influence, most prominently those of the Ottoman, Persian, and Russian empires. This east-west division has left a lasting imprint on the region’s cultural, political, and strategic orientations. The South Caucasus, particularly Georgia and Armenia, has long oscillated between alignment with Western powers and dependency on Russia. Meanwhile, the North Caucasus has been historically more insular, its highland communities often resisting external domination.

Today, the region’s geopolitical alignments are shifting once again. Profound changes are reshaping the South Caucasus, traditionally a locus of Russia-West rivalry. Azerbaijan’s decisive military victory in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, facilitated in part by Turkish support, has elevated Baku’s regional stature but, more significantly, enabled Turkey to boost influence in the South Caucasus. Armenia, humiliated in the conflict and increasingly disillusioned with its traditional ally, has begun exploring alternative partnerships, particularly with

the United States and European Union, but also India and Iran.

Georgia's pursuit of a Western-oriented path has been a defining feature of its foreign policy since independence. This strategic choice reflects a deep-seated desire among a significant majority of Georgians to align themselves with European values and institutions, seeking security and prosperity through integration with the West. However, Georgia's Western aspirations have come at a significant cost, particularly in terms of its relationship with Russia. Moscow views Georgia's pro-Western stance as a threat to its regional influence and has repeatedly used coercive measures, including the 2008 war, to undermine Georgia's sovereignty and deter it from pursuing closer ties with the West. This precarious situation highlights the difficult balancing act Georgia faces as it seeks to navigate the complex geopolitical landscape of the Caucasus. Georgia, once a staunch Western ally, is now charting an ambiguous course, with its ruling Georgian Dream party accused of accommodating Russian interests even as the population remains largely pro-Western.

In the North Caucasus, the Kremlin's ability to enforce its will is being tested. Chechnya remains a unique case, with Kadyrov asserting quasi-independent levels of institutional autonomy from the Russian

Federation -- albeit underpinned by personal loyalty to Putin. However, even this relationship is not immutable; Kadyrov's periodic expressions of independence hint at underlying tensions. Elsewhere, longstanding disputes, such as the Ingushetia-North Ossetia border conflict and the Chechnya-Ingushetia friction, underscore the fragility of Moscow's hold on the region.

An alternative and historically enduring framework for analyzing the Caucasus is the highlands-lowlands dynamic, which has shaped the region's cultural, economic, and political development. Highland communities, often characterized by their fiercely independent identities and decentralized social structures, have historically resisted external domination. In contrast, lowland areas have been more integrated into foreign alliances or imperial systems, serving as conduits for trade, administration, and cultural exchange.

This dynamic helps explain some of the current tensions in the region. For example, the predominantly highland North Caucasus republics, largely subsist under Moscow's centralized rule, but remain apart – even so far to be considered within Russia as part of its so-called “inner abroad,” even as they rely on federal subsidies. In the South (or “Central”) Caucasus, the lowland orientation

of Georgia's core has historically enabled its elites to leverage imperial powers, whether Ottoman, Persian, Russian, or Western, to advance their own interests. This has created a pattern of external dependency that continues to shape Georgia's foreign policy decisions.

Today, the highlands-lowlands divide is being reconfigured in response to new pressures. The breakdown of traditional patronage networks in the North Caucasus, combined with the effects of Russia's war in Ukraine, is fueling instability in highland communities. Meanwhile, the strategic realignments in the South Caucasus reflect a broader rethinking of traditional alliances, with lowland Georgia exploring closer ties with Moscow, much to the dismay of its Western partners.

Strategic Bargains

The region's fluidity is particularly evident in Abkhazia, the separatist region of Georgia that remains under de facto Russian domination. Abkhazia's current political crisis, centered on the rejection of a Russian investment proposal that would have granted Moscow significant economic leverage, highlights the limits of Russian influence even in territories it nominally controls, which echo successful navigation of Russian political pressures elsewhere in the

North Caucasus. In Abkhazia, in particular, those attitudes reflect local anxieties about sovereignty and self-determination, as well as fears of being subsumed into a larger geopolitical bargain.

The possibility of a Georgia-Russia accommodation regarding Abkhazia is particularly troubling for both Abkhaz and Georgian stakeholders. Both Abkhaz and Georgian analysts have increasingly articulated growing concerns of a "confederation" brokered by Moscow and Tbilisi as a means, for Moscow, of achieving the greater price of control over Georgia, while dominating the region as a whole. Such a deal would echo the early Soviet-era "treaty republic" designation for Abkhazia, which ultimately led to its demotion to an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic under Georgian control. While this might appear as a pragmatic option to some, it risks denying genuine self-determination to both Abkhaz and Georgian populations in favor of expedient geopolitical calculus.

The Caucasus today is at an inflection point, with its historical patterns of fragmentation and external dependency being challenged by new forces. In the South Caucasus, the realignment of alliances and the shifting balance of power reflect broader global transformations, including the perceived decline of Western influence and the rise of

regional powers like Turkey and Iran. In the North Caucasus, the erosion of Moscow's ability to enforce stability underscores the limitations of centralized control in a region characterized by deep-seated grievances and complex local dynamics.

The region's future is likely to be shaped by a combination of these historical and contemporary forces. On one hand, the enduring legacies of imperial domination and highlands-lowlands divisions will continue to influence local and regional politics. On the other hand, the new realities of a post-Ukraine war world order, with its shifting alliances and emerging power centers, will create opportunities for both conflict and cooperation.

The North Caucasus Tinderbox

Managed through a combination of heavy-handed securitization, massive budgetary subsidies, and intricate patronage networks, the North Caucasus is neither fully integrated into Russia nor fully independent. However, the strain of Russia's war in Ukraine, coupled with deepening elite infighting and growing local discontent, is pushing this delicate balance toward a

breaking point. The dynamics of violent mobilization and non-mobilization are heavily influenced by factors such as ethnic tensions, economic disparities, and the role of Islam. The North Caucasus is emerging as a tinderbox², with old grievances resurfacing and new dynamics exacerbating existing tensions.

One of the most striking recent indicators of instability in the North Caucasus is the scandal surrounding the Wildberries case. This episode, involving allegations of embezzlement, extortion, and violence against regional representatives of the e-commerce giant, highlights how deeply entrenched corruption and criminality are within the region's governance structures. The case also reveals the pervasive disconnect between Moscow's federal authorities and the North Caucasus elites who often act with impunity.

Wildberries employees and contractors in the region accused the company's managers of extortion and mistreatment, sparking public outrage and rare collective action in several North Caucasus republics. What began as a localized labor dispute quickly spiraled into a broader crisis, as it brought into the open

² Cecire, Michael and Laura Linderman, "Russian Elite Infighting Highlights North Caucasus Tinderbox," <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical->

[articles/item/13826-russian-elite-infighting-highlights-north-caucasus-tinderbox.html](https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13826-russian-elite-infighting-highlights-north-caucasus-tinderbox.html)

longstanding grievances about labor exploitation, poor economic conditions, and the lack of legal protections for workers. While federal authorities sought to contain the fallout, the case underscored the fragility of Moscow's control over the region. It also revealed the degree to which federal institutions are perceived as unresponsive or even complicit in the abuses perpetuated by local elites.

The Wildberries scandal is emblematic of the broader phenomenon of elite infighting in the region. As federal resources are stretched thin by the Ukraine war and economic sanctions, regional elites are increasingly competing for dwindling financial transfers and opportunities for enrichment. This competition often plays out in violent or extralegal ways, further destabilizing an already precarious environment.

The Kadyrov Dilemma

No discussion of the North Caucasus can overlook the unique position of Chechnya, governed by the controversial strongman Ramzan Kadyrov. Kadyrov has managed to carve out an extraordinary level of autonomy within the Russian Federation, wielding

near-total control over his republic while maintaining a personal loyalty to President Vladimir Putin. However, this arrangement is far from stable.

Kadyrov's rule is sustained by a combination of fear, patronage, and brutality, but cracks are beginning to appear in his carefully constructed edifice. Despite his declarations of loyalty to Moscow, Kadyrov has obliquely hinted³ that Chechen independence is a reasonable proposition. While such statements may be strategic posturing, they reflect the growing sense of unpredictability surrounding Kadyrov's leadership. His paramilitary forces, the *Kadyrovtsy*, are loudly associated (if more performatively) with Moscow's war effort in Ukraine, but their loyalty is to Kadyrov personally rather than to the Kremlin, adding an unpredictable layer to Russia's internal dynamics.

Moreover, Kadyrov's heavy-handed approach to governance, including the suppression of dissent and the imposition of conservative Islamic norms, has alienated many within Chechnya itself. While he remains firmly in control for now, his reliance on personalist networks and his

³ Shoshiashvili, T. (2023, January 31). Ramzan Kadyrov: 'where was Europe when we fought for independence?' OC Media. [https://oc-](https://oc-media.org/ramzan-kadyrov-where-was-europe-when-we-fought-for-independence/)

[media.org/ramzan-kadyrov-where-was-europe-when-we-fought-for-independence/](https://oc-media.org/ramzan-kadyrov-where-was-europe-when-we-fought-for-independence/)

perceived impunity could backfire if Moscow's ability to support him diminishes.

These factors expose critical vulnerabilities in Kadyrov's regime that could dramatically reshape the North Caucasus's political landscape. A potential Moscow-Kadyrov fracture looms large, with the possibility of Kadyrov leveraging his Ukraine war support to demand greater autonomy. Succession remains uncertain, with no clear leadership transition plan that could prevent potential internal power struggles. External pressures—including international sanctions and human rights scrutiny—compound these risks, while declining federal subsidies threaten his elaborate patronage networks. A generational shift further challenges his conservative, authoritarian model, revealing the fundamental fragility of his control and reflecting broader challenges in Russia's governance of the North Caucasus.

The Azerbaijan Factor

The evolution of Azerbaijan-Chechnya relations offers a revealing window into the complex interplay between North and South Caucasus dynamics. After Kadyrov's accession, Baku cultivated closer ties with Grozny, viewing a stable relationship with Kadyrov as crucial for securing its northern border and maintaining regional influence through religious and cultural channels.

However, this carefully managed relationship has recently shown signs of strain. Kadyrov's prominent role in Russia's Ukraine war - which has been a source of strategic uncertainty for Baku - undermines the relationship. These were dramatically exacerbated by the recent military transport plane incident, where Kadyrov's apparent protection of implicated family members in the air defense command has sparked sharp criticism from Baku. This threat to Baku-Grozny relations, introduces new uncertainties into regional stability calculations.

Ingushetia-North Ossetia: A Smoldering Dispute

The Ingushetia-North Ossetia conflict is another flashpoint that illustrates the fragility of the North Caucasus. This long-standing territorial dispute centers on the Prigorodny district, which was transferred from Ingushetia to North Ossetia during the Stalinist era. The district remains a source of tension, with Ingush activists advocating for its return and accusing North Ossetian authorities of discrimination and repression.

The issue flared up in 2018 when Chechnya and Ingushetia signed a controversial border agreement, which many Ingush saw as a betrayal by their own leadership. This border dispute echoed earlier territorial grievances,

particularly the unresolved conflict with North Ossetia over the Prigorodny District, which had been forcibly transferred from Ingush control during the 1944 deportations and remained a source of tension. Mass protests erupted, leading to a crackdown by security forces and the imprisonment of several prominent activists. The incident highlighted both the deep-seated grievances in Ingushetia and the broader trend of Moscow's reliance on force to suppress dissent.

These unresolved disputes are symptomatic of the region's broader instability. They also underscore the limits of Moscow's approach, which relies on coercion and co-optation rather than genuine conflict resolution. As resources become scarcer and local grievances intensify, such flashpoints could easily ignite into larger crises.

Chechnya-Ingushetia Friction

The tensions between Chechnya and Ingushetia further complicate the region's dynamics. Kadyrov's assertive posture and territorial ambitions have brought him into direct conflict with neighboring Ingushetia, particularly over border demarcations. The 2018 agreement mentioned earlier, which ceded territory from Ingushetia to Chechnya, was widely viewed as a capitulation to Kadyrov's demands. This deal not only

inflamed local tensions but also exposed the weakness of Ingushetia's leadership and the fragility of Moscow's control.

The fallout from the agreement continues to reverberate, with Ingush activists and civil society groups voicing their discontent and challenging the legitimacy of the local government. Meanwhile, Kadyrov's aggressive tactics have further isolated Chechnya from its neighbors, exacerbating inter-republic animosities and undermining regional cohesion.

The North Caucasus's troubles cannot be divorced from the broader context of Russia's war in Ukraine and the economic sanctions imposed by the West. The war has diverted federal resources and attention away from the region, while the economic strain has reduced Moscow's ability to maintain its system of subsidies and patronage. This has left many North Caucasus republics, which are heavily dependent on federal transfers, in a precarious position.

Moreover, the war has intensified local grievances. Many young men from the North Caucasus have been conscripted into the Russian military, often disproportionately so compared to other regions. This has fueled resentment and anxiety among local communities, who see their youth being

sacrificed in a conflict that holds little relevance to their lives.

The erosion of Moscow's financial and political capacity has also emboldened local elites to assert greater autonomy. While some, like Kadyrov, have leveraged their loyalty to extract concessions from the Kremlin, others have sought to exploit the vacuum for their own gain, leading to increased infighting and corruption.

Uncertain Future

The North Caucasus is a region on the brink. The mechanisms that have kept it tethered to Moscow—securitization, subsidies, and patronage—are fraying under the strain of the Ukraine war and the broader challenges facing the Russian state. At the same time, local grievances, elite rivalries, and longstanding inter-republic tensions are coming to the fore, creating a volatile and unpredictable environment.

While outright secession or large-scale unrest may not be imminent, the trajectory of the North Caucasus is increasingly uncertain. The region's troubles are no longer contained within its borders; they are spilling over into the broader dynamics of Russian politics and society. As Moscow grapples with the fallout from its war in Ukraine and its declining global position, the North Caucasus may become an increasingly prominent and

problematic arena in the Kremlin's domestic and geopolitical calculus.

In the end, the North Caucasus is both a reflection and a microcosm of the challenges facing Russia as a whole: a state held together by coercion and compromise, but one that may find these tools insufficient in the face of mounting pressures and unresolved contradictions. Whether the Kremlin can adapt to these new realities, or whether the North Caucasus will emerge as a catalyst for broader systemic change, remains an open question.

This regional uncertainty is part of a broader transformation across the Caucasus, where historical patterns of fragmentation and external manipulation intersect with emerging geopolitical realities. The region's transformation is not simply a matter of shifting allegiances, but a fundamental reconfiguration of power dynamics that challenges traditional frameworks of regional understanding. The interplay between highland autonomy, lowland integration, and external influences continues to shape a complex landscape where sovereignty remains fluid and contested.

The growing friction between Baku and Grozny exemplifies how North-South Caucasus dynamics are increasingly

intertwined with broader regional transformations. As Azerbaijan's regional power grows following its victory in Karabakh, its ability to influence - or be influenced by - North Caucasus politics takes on renewed significance. The potential decoupling of previously stable relationships, such as the Azerbaijan-Chechnya alignment, could introduce new vectors of instability across the traditional North-South divide.

The Caucasus's future will likely be characterized by increasing complexity rather than resolution. The region's ability to navigate these transformations will depend not on the imposition of external control, but on developing adaptive mechanisms that can accommodate its inherent diversity and

strategic significance. Traditional divisions between North and South are increasingly porous, with religious institutions, ethnic connections, and evolving political alignments creating new patterns of regional interaction. Whether this leads to greater stability or continued fragmentation remains an open question, but the Caucasus has once again demonstrated its capacity to reshape global expectations.

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