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Russia's unruly north Caucasus

Islam inflamed

Muslim fundamentalism is on the rise in the north Caucasus. To stop it, Russian policy must change

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THE world is fearful of Islam's rising influence in Afghanistan, Pakistan and across the newly restive Arab world. But it has barely noticed what is happening in Russia's troubled north Caucasus. After two decades of political and military failure in this violent part of the world, the government in Moscow is losing its legitimacy there, and fundamentalist Islam, which had no purchase in Soviet days, has taken hold.

The north Caucasus may take up only a small space on the map, but it looms large for Russia. The region has often decisively influenced the course of Russia's own development. Boris Yeltsin's decision to send in troops to stop Chechnya's march towards independence helped to weaken Russia's fledgling democracy in the mid-1990s. Vladimir Putin's vow to rub out Chechen rebels "in the shithouse" helped to propel him into the presidency. Eleven years on, the north Caucasus is still one of Russia's biggest headaches. Terrorist attacks, like the bombing at Domodedovo airport in January, have become almost commonplace. In its largely unreported fighting in the north Caucasus, Russia is suffering as many losses every year as Britain has lost in ten years in Afghanistan.

The Russians claim that their country is as vulnerable to Islamist terrorism and radicalism as anywhere in the West. That's true; yet the problems in the north Caucasus are largely of Russia's own making. Since the early 1990s Moscow's only policies have been brute force and money, first in Chechnya and then across the north Caucasus. Mr Putin's man in Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, treats his republic like a fief. Everywhere corruption has become entrenched. And where Mr Yeltsin once invited Russia's republics to grab all the autonomy they could handle, Mr Putin unceremoniously scrapped regional elections after the terrorist killings in a Beslan school in 2004. All governors are now appointed by Moscow.

Islamist radicals in such republics as Dagestan and Ingushetia are as dangerous and difficult to fight as anywhere else. But in Russia the greatest source of their strength is not their ideology, their numbers or their money. It is the failure of the Russian state to provide even a semblance of justice and the rule of law, or even a pretence of local democracy and accountability. As our briefing explains (see article), indiscriminate persecution of Islamist fundamentalists has only strengthened their cause, especially in Dagestan.

Both the Kremlin and the authorities in the region must know that they need to change tactics.

There is a glimmer of hope in Ingushetia, where an attempt by the governor, Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, to rule by law has produced some immediate and positive results. Meeting Mr Yevkurov this week, President Dmitry Medvedev declared that anyone who wants to come back to normal life should be given a chance. "You have to talk to all categories of people with their misconceptions, with their views on life, often disoriented and ready to commit a crime. People are what they are and we cannot change them." This is a welcome departure from Mr Putin's thuggish talk and the mindless anti-Caucasian chants often heard from nationalist youths in Moscow.

Mending starts in Moscow

A good beginning would be to restore regional elections for governors. Experience has shown that the worst way to protect Russia's territorial integrity is to impose direct rule from Moscow. As the north Caucasus illustrates, the country is just too big, too multiethnic and too diverse for centralised control not to fuel local resentment. For similar reasons, attempts at state control of religion in the region are likely to drive ordinary people into the arms of the fundamentalists. And, perhaps above all, giving the security forces, troops and local strongmen free rein to brutalise and corrupt people is not just wrong but also counter-productive.

It is impossible to fix the north Caucasus, or indeed any of the country's fissiparous regions, without dealing with Moscow's own larger defects. The corrosive mistrust of the state is a problem for Russia as a whole—it is just more extreme in the north Caucasus. And there, radicals are offering people an alternative in fundamentalist Islam.

There are new signs of competition for the top job in Russia between Mr Medvedev and Mr Putin (see article). But whoever ends up running the country after the election in 2012 must set out a more attractive vision for Russia's people—including those in the country's periphery—based on the rule of law. This might not stop the spread of radical Islam in the north Caucasus or eradicate all the rebels, but it would weaken their support. Sadly there is little sign of any such vision from the men in charge in Moscow.

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