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# The Ossetian-Ingush Confrontation: Explaining a Horizontal Conflict

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## Abstract

Terrorist attacks in the North Caucasus and the eruption of many other ethnic conflicts in the post-Soviet space cause the fear that the old Ossetian-Ingush confrontation may also re-emerge. Ossetians are the only indigenous Christian ethnic group in the predominantly Sunni Muslim North Caucasus. They have fought a war with the Ingush over the Prigorodnyj district, which was part of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic inhabited mainly by the Ingush before they were deported by Stalin in the early 1940s. After their return, the punished Muslim Ingush have tried in vain to regain their territory, which has ultimately resulted in a bloody war in the early 1990s. Unlike the other wars in the former Soviet republics, this was not a vertical conflict. The present paper tries to analyse the historical background and roots of the antagonism between the two neighbouring North Caucasian peoples.

## Keywords

Ossetians, Ingush, Chechens, Ethno-territorial Conflict, Territorial Autonomy, North Caucasus, Terrorism, Separatism

## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The hostage-taking drama in Beslan (North Ossetia) was still vividly in people's mind when a suicide bomb blast shocked the North Ossetian city of Vladikavkaz (9 September 2010). This event has caused fear in the hearts of many people who see that the so-called frozen or terminated conflicts in the former Soviet Union are being revived. Many fear that also the old Ossetian-Ingush conflict may erupt.

Most of the frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space, for example, those in Southern Kyrgyzstan (Osh) (Asanbekov 1996), Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, have re-emerged respectively in 2008 and 2010. The Chechen conflict has not terminated in a real sense. The Nagorno-Karabakh case has again become a hot issue in the context of Armenian-Turkish rapprochement and the improvement of the relationship between Baku

and Moscow, and the deterioration in the relations between Baku and Ankara, while simultaneously Tehran and Ankara are closer than ever to each other. In such a geopolitical context, it is very important to pay attention to the *Prigorodnyj* conflict, the roots and causes of which have not been addressed yet.

Many countries are afflicted by ethno-territorial conflicts. Unlike the wars of independence in the (post-)colonial era, the liberationist wars of independence are looked upon with suspicion by the international community. The European colonisation of the Third World is regarded usually as a sign of Western superiority and arrogance and the exploitation of the under-developed countries. The new separatist wars, however, threaten international order and international law, which is in fact the law of the states. States are generally not very eager to see another state losing its territory, as they themselves might be the potential victims.

Ethnic minorities, in their turn, can count on the support from Human Rights organisations, public opinion, and even scholars and politicians. They are often depicted as oppressed peoples, and their liberation from the yoke of abusive states are considered a just cause. States are often seen as an instrument of the ethnic majorities (cf. Gurr 1993; idem 2000).

Needless to say, in many senses minorities are really at the mercy of abusive states dominated by ethnic majorities. However, the separatist ethnic minorities are often supported by other states, Human Rights organisations, and even international establishments only for political reasons. There is, indeed, much hypocrisy and a selective approach to the issue of separatism by many states and organisations.

On the other hand, the horizontal ethno-territorial conflicts between minorities within a given state, have not garnered as much attention as they deserve. There might be many reasons and conditions that trigger such conflicts.

This paper aims to discuss the *Prigorodnyj* conflict between the Ingush and the predominantly Christian Ossetians. As opposed to the vertical conflicts, i.e. minority-state confrontation, this is a typical horizontal one, between two subjects of the Russian Federation.

#### GENERAL

Although there exist several ethnic tensions in the North Caucasus, with an outspoken territorial dimension, the only two cases that have resulted in full-scale wars are the Chechen war of separation from the Russian Federation and the Ingush-Ossetian conflict over the *Prigorod-*

nyj district. Chechnya is the only case in the Russian Federation where a full-scale separatist war has been going on for years. Though ethno-political strife has not been rare in other territorial units of the Russian Federation (e.g. Tatarstan and Tyva republics), only the war in Chechnya meets the criteria of an ethno-territorial conflict. The other case in the North Caucasus, the Prigorodnyj, is the only one in which two ethnic groups with lower ranked autonomous status came into ethno-territorial conflict with each other. The roots of these conflicts partly lie in the nature of ethno-territorial policies in the Soviet era and, to some extent, in the late Tsarist period. Especially the punishment of many North Caucasian peoples by Stalin, in the form of systematic and organised deportations, have caused psychological traumas in the collective memories of those people, a factor that, at least partially, is responsible for the outbreak of ethno-territorial conflicts in the North Caucasus. Therefore, it is apt to briefly sketch the turbulent history of the area before the Ossetian-Ingush conflict is discussed.

The treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828) between Qajar Iran and Tsarist Russia confirmed the latter's supremacy and sovereignty in the South Caucasus at the expense of Iran. The North Caucasus, however, came to be a more difficult task for the Russians to possess. Though it was surpassed in order to reach the South Caucasus, the pacification of the North Caucasian Muslims took a longer time for Russia. The so-called Caucasian military highway, a mountain pass, which passed through the modern-day North Ossetia into Georgia, provided the Russians with a path of entry into the South Caucasus.

Ossetians are an Orthodox Christian people<sup>1</sup> and, therefore, were suspected having been sympathetic to the Russian advances. While it is not totally illogical that a people ultimately facilitates its own subjugation to a religiously similar powerful outsider, it is more logical to assume that the Russians regarded their co-religionist Ossetians as reliable and favoured them over the Muslim North Caucasian ethnic groups.

The obvious achievement of Russia in the conquest of the North Caucasus was the war against the Circassians in the 1860s, as a result of which a large number of them fled to the Ottoman Empire. The Circassians, in contrast to most other North Caucasians, lived in the lower foothills and plains to the north of the Great Caucasus ridge and, therefore, were an easier target. Their early subjugation and pacifica-

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<sup>1</sup> Ossetian Christianity is old and was introduced through Georgia (see, e.g., Kalojev/Calagova 2005: 39-43).

tion, however, meant that Circassians, in addition to Ossetians, were largely spared the hardships experienced by their mountain-dwelling neighbours and, in contrast to the Ingush, Chechens, and Karachay-Balkars, have not become subject to deportation and punishment in the 1940's, under allegations of having collaborated or sympathised with Nazi Germany.

The ethno-political situation in the mountainous Caucasus has always been turbulent, including continuous resistance, re-emerging from time to time after the periods of reconciliation and peace. Even in the 18th century, the North Caucasian mountain-dwellers were able to show resistance against Russia. A Chechen leader, Sheikh Mansour, was able to unite a number of people around him in a struggle against the Russians until he was captured in 1791. Subsequently, the Avar leader Imam Shamil was able to lead the struggle (called *Ghazawat*) against Russia until he was captured in 1859. Even after that the rebellions and opposition to the Russians did not subside. Though the Russians took a harder line with regard to the mountaineers, they were not able to pacify the mountainous Caucasus. In the words of Svante E. Cornell (2001: 29), in the mentioned period, the Russians "expected to have drastically reduced the potential for further uprisings on the southern flank. However, they were mistaken. Sufi brotherhoods... became underground Organisations, which... managed to include over the half and in some areas almost the entire male population of Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan... Thus, it seems fair to say that Russia occupied the northeast Caucasus without succeeding in truly incorporating it into its empire".

It was, therefore, very logical that the Muslim mountain dwellers of the North Caucasus tended to support the Bolsheviks over General Denikin's White Army during the Russian civil war and in the aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution (1917-1920). It should be noted that this time the Christian Ossetians also fought together with their Muslim neighbours against Denikin's White Army. The Whites were associated with Tsarist regime and its brutal policies against the mountaineers, and notably against its Muslim population. On the other hand, Lenin intended to offer the mountain peoples autonomy and supported the right to self-determination. However, the Bolshevik policies were not much different from the Tsarist treatment of the North Caucasian peoples. Naturally, following those events, the Caucasian rebellion was brutally suppressed by the Bolsheviks with a disproportionate use of military force in 1921. In that year, the Bolsheviks abolished the Mountainous Republic of the North Caucasus, the leaders of which had cooperated with them earlier, and established the Mountainous Autonomous

Soviet Socialist Republic of the North Caucasus within the Russian Federative SSR. It covered the area, which included the territories of today's Chechnya, Ingushetia, North Ossetia-Alania, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachay-Cherkessia. Dagestan, itself divided into ethno-national districts, however, was not included into this Republic. Chechens, the kinfolk of the Ingush, were separated from them, and a Chechen autonomous *Oblast'* was created, while the Ingush and North Ossetian districts remained part of the mentioned Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic until its abolition in 1924 and the establishment of separate Ingush and North Ossetian Autonomous regions.

The legacy of this arbitrary territorial delimitation (in addition to the deportation of many mountainous ethnic groups in 1940s, and the problems arising after their rehabilitation) has contributed in certain ways to the eruption of ethno-territorial conflicts in the North Caucasus.

#### THE OSSETIAN-INGUSH CONFLICT OVER PRIGORODNYJ DISTRICT

The Ossetian-Ingush conflict in the North Caucasus is the only case in the post-Soviet space in which two ethnic groups possessing territorial autonomy came into overt warfare with each other. Often it is discussed that the two ethnic groups were culturally incompatible. And, in fact, there exist differences in the languages they speak and the religions most of them confess. While the Ingush speak a Nakh language close to Chechen, Ossetians speak an East Iranian language and are believed to be the descendants of the Scythian (resp. Sarmatian and Alan) tribes. Language, however, is unlikely to serve as a potential conflict-instigating factor. A more important cultural factor has been thought to be religion. Indeed, religion and religious differences are factors that seem to affect ethnic groups' alliances and political actions. They have also played their part in the Ossetian-Ingush confrontation. However, the religious factor was by no means a determinant in the emergence of this conflict.<sup>2</sup> The dispute over the Prigorodnyj *Rayon* (district) is the main reason behind the ethno-territorial conflict, which erupted in 1990. It has manifested itself in a short period of overt warfare and was less bloody in comparison to the other conflicts in the North Caucasus (such as Chechnya, for instance).

The Prigorodnyj district is a region in the south-eastern part of modern-day North Ossetia. It belonged to the Chechen-Ingush ASSR,

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<sup>2</sup> Ossetians are also engaged in a protracted ethno-territorial conflict with the Georgians over the former South Ossetian AO in Georgia, while both peoples are Orthodox Christians.

which had emerged after the merger of the Chechen AO with the Ingush AO in 1934 and its elevation into an ASSR in 1936. In 1944, Stalin gave the order to deport the Ingush and Chechens, and their ASSR was abolished. The Prigorodnyj district was transferred to the North Ossetian ASSR. Although the Ingush and Chechens were rehabilitated, and the Chechen-Ingush ASSR was restored by Khrushchev in 1957, the Prigorodnyj district remained part of the North Ossetian ASSR. The deportation has affected the Ingush psyche and has influenced their political actions. As stated by Tishkov (1997: 166): “The deportation of peoples, including Chechens and Ingush, had a dual influence on the fate of ethnic communities. Of course, there was the enormous trauma (in terms of physical scope, and socio-cultural and moral dimensions) for hundreds of thousands of people on both the collective and personal levels. Cruel and aggressive actions aroused the desire for vengeance among the victims; first as a curse, then as a means of political survival, and finally, at present stage as a form of therapy (catharsis) from the unspeakable trauma—a means to reinstate and mend collective and individual dignity. Deportation never managed to annihilate the collective identity; indeed, it further strengthened ethnic sentiment by drawing rigid borders, around ethnic groups, in many cases borders which had not existed in the past. Deportations provoked feelings of ethnicity...”.

After the Ingush returned *en masse* from their exile, they have been seeking justice from the authorities. Armed clashes between the Ingush and Ossetians have occurred on occasions since the former had returned from exile, and as early as the 1970s, the Ingush had petitioned the Soviet government for the return of the Prigorodnyj district to them (Ormrod 1997: 107). After Perestroika and in the process of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Chechnya, under the leadership of Johar Dudaev, announced its independence, but Ingushetia preferred to remain part of the Russian Federation, hoping that it would improve its negotiating position vis-à-vis North Ossetia. In Ormrod's view (1997: 107): “Aside from the Ingush's desire to remain within the Russian Federation, their particular relations with the North Ossetians, their distinct language, and their compactly-settled territory have contributed to their willingness to split the former Republic of Checheno-Ingushetia. In 1988-1989, before Chechnya had undertaken to separate from the Russian federal structure, 60,000 Ingush citizens signed a petition calling for the formation of an autonomous Ingush Republic. On 8 January 1992, the Chechen parliament announced the restoration of the 1934 border between Chechnya and Ingushetia”.

Boris Yeltsin (Elcin), campaigning for his presidential election (1991), expressed his support for the Ingush claim at a rally in Nazran in Ingushetia. As early as in 1990, a Russian Commission (the Belyakov Commission) that was set up to investigate the Ingush claim on the Prigorodnyj district concluded that it was well-grounded. Ingushetia was one of the most pro-Yeltsin territorial entities in Russia, while the North Ossetian leadership sympathised with the hardliner communists (Cornell 1998: 412; idem 2001: 254). In the aftermath of Ingush activism and the resulting Ingush-Ossetian tensions, the North Ossetian Supreme Soviet took a decision that suspended the right of the Ingush to live in North Ossetia. The Ingush resisted this demand and set up self-defence militias, which resulted in the escalation of tensions. It was clear that the possession of territorial autonomy did matter. Though the Ingush could arm themselves too, "the Ossetians were in a more favourable position, as they could make use of their republican administration to legitimise the existence of rogue paramilitary units as different kinds of *militia* (Cornell 2001: 256). Yeltsin's pro-Ingush attitude was also evident in the Russian federal decree "On the Rehabilitation of Repressed Peoples" (April 1991), which aimed at social and territorial rehabilitation of deported peoples, and by the official Russian declaration of a separate Ingush Republic within the Russian Federation (4 June 1992). After a time of tensions and skirmishes between the armed Ingush and Ossetians, large scale violence broke out on 30 October 1992. Although the Russian troops were there already on 31 October, the violence went on. The largest number of people (over 450 persons) was killed in a short time between 30 October and 4 November 1992. According to official sources, 644 people had been killed by June 1994 (Cornell 1998: 515; idem 2001: 258). Despite the fact that the large scale violence subsided, there have been armed clashes and tensions between the Ingush and Ossetians ever since. In this light, the hostage-taking in the Beslan School needs special attention. The motives of the hostage takers were, of course, not ethno-national in nature, being related to the Wahhabi/Salafi insurgents in the North Caucasus; moreover, the Islamist Chechen leader Shamil Bashyev took the responsibility. In addition, the hostage-takers consisted of many ethnic backgrounds from within and outside the post-Soviet space (notably of Arab origin). However, among the hostage-takers there were a number of Ingush, and the fact remains that the logical route to Beslan from the Chechen Mountains passes through Ingushetia. Also the recent bomb blast (9 September 2010) in the North Ossetian capital Vladikavkaz has been a blow to the troubled Ossetian-Ingush relationship. There is no claim that the Ingush leadership or a



large part of the Ingush population has supported the terrorist action, but, nevertheless, it has contributed to the anti-Ingush feelings among the Ossetians (and vice versa, as a result of reaction).

Despite Yeltsin's initial pro-Ingush positioning, the Russian support for the Ingush has never materialised. On the contrary, the Ingush complain about Russian support for their fellow Orthodox Christian Ossetians (Cornell 1998: 416-417; idem 2001: 258-259). The reason for the Russian "inconsistency" might be in the fact that the actions of Russian armed forces do not always reflect the policy of the Centre. In the view of the Russian military, Ossetians are loyal Orthodox Christians, while the Ingush are a disloyal people, like their ethnic kin, the Chechens. It is also argued that the Russian military pro-Ossetian attitude might be a strategic manoeuvre to get the Chechens involved in the conflict on behalf of their Ingush kin. The Chechen war itself started in 1994, and it seems logical that there were elements in the Russian military (or leadership in general) who sought a reason to invade Chechnya even before that date. According to Cornell (2001: 259), "The main evidence supporting this hypothesis is that the Russian forces, who entered the Prigorodny from the West and North, actually crossed the border to Ingushetia, pushing eastward towards the still undemarcated Chechen-Ingush border, where they were countered by the Chechen forces... An operation against Chechnya was halted by the threat of Mobilisation of the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, which could have at that point led to a full-scale regional confrontation".

As seen in the above quote, ethnic kinship has been a factor, of which the Russian leadership and military were aware in their policy making. The Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus is an Organisation, which assertively defends the North Caucasian peoples against outsiders. It has supported the Chechens against the Russian Federation and the Abkhaz against Georgia. Though this organisation still exists, it is largely inactive now.

The Georgian-South Ossetian conflict in the neighbouring South Ossetia had already broken out. Russia was latently pro-Ossetian until 2008, when it openly supported the South Ossetian separatist claims. Even if Russia was an honest and neutral peacekeeper and mediator, its passive involvement with the South Ossetian-Georgian conflict gave it a strategic foothold in the South Caucasus and hence brought Russia and the Ossetians together. North Ossetia, which needs space to accommodate refugees from South Ossetia, does not want to give away the Prigorodnyj district, and Russia's interests are in preserving its internal borders between the autonomous subjects, thus preventing a chaos in

the country. In 1994, Yeltsin brokered a deal between the North Ossetian and Ingush presidents of the time Galazov and Aushev. The Russian mediation has resulted in official renouncement of the Ingush claims on the Prigorodnyj district, while North Ossetia has agreed to allow the Ingush refugees to return to their homes. Nevertheless, neither side has been committed wholeheartedly to the agreement. North Ossetian authorities have attempted to hinder resettlement of the Ingush in North Ossetia, and it is unlikely that the Ingush have given up their claims on the disputed district. Though there were threats of secessions during the Yeltsin era (Ormrod 1997: 107-116), it is unlikely that either North Ossetia or Ingushetia will undertake to separate from the Russian Federation in the post-Yeltsin period. Putin's (and Medvedev's) Russia, unlike Yeltsin's, is a stable and economically strong country. The North Ossetians, who benefit from Russia's policy in support of their ethnic kin in South Ossetia, and are *de facto* the victors of the Prigorodnyj conflict, have not much reason to do so. As for the Ingush, they are likely to regard the Russian Federation's mediating role as welcome, especially when neighbouring Chechnya is plagued by Wahhabi/Salafi militant groups. In fact, although there exists sympathy for their Chechen kinfolk, Chechnya's destiny is an example for other North Caucasians to avoid.

#### CONCLUSION

Will the Ossetian-Ingush conflict erupt again? This is a question, which cannot be answered with certainty. On one hand, the volatile situation in the Caucasus, indeed, makes the re-eruption of such a conflict possible; on the other hand, however, Russia's firm control over the political establishments in its North Caucasian republics makes it rather unlikely. In any case, it is important to look into the conditions that were responsible for the Ossetian-Ingush confrontation in the early 1990s.

Territorial autonomy is seen as a factor that enables or facilitates ethnic mobilisation, separatism, and hence conflict. Cornell (1999; 2001; 2002a; 2002b) maintains that autonomy in the context of the Soviet legacy contributes to separatism. His study (Cornell 2002) concludes that territorial autonomy is the most important factor in explaining ethnic conflicts.

The Ossetians, who possessed a better-functioning territorial autonomy, were able to mobilise armed groups, and their military actions were more organised than the Ingush who have obtained territorial autonomy only recently.

In addition, one has to agree with Toft's conclusion (2003) that a demographic dominance of the titular group inside the territorial

autonomy enhances the likelihood of separatism. Although in the Prigorodnyj conflict there was no separation from Russia at stake, both ethnic groups had the demographic majority of the population in their autonomous homelands, i.e. Ingushetia and North Ossetia, similar to the Chechens in Chechnya. The Ingush were hampered by the more demographically dominant Chechens in Chechnya who had occupied the most important political positions in the republic and had different political projects. After their separation, the Ingush came into conflict over Prigorodnyj with North Ossetia-Alania. Many truly believe that the separation of the Ingush from their kinfolk Chechens was, in fact, due to their desire to undertake more decisive action with regard to the status of the Prigorodnyj district.

Although as a legacy of the Soviet nationalities policy ethnic competition does exist in the North Caucasus (Bremmer 1997), and clashes and tensions do exist between different ethnic groups, they have not resulted in large scale conflicts and wars, because most autonomous territories in the North Caucasus are not homogeneous entities, with a clear majority of a certain ethnic group, like Chechnya, Ingushetia, and North Ossetia-Alania.<sup>3</sup> The inter-ethnic rivalries between the ethnic groups inside those autonomous territories take the upper hand, giving the central government the role of mediator and balancer, and hence mitigating the likelihood of separatism.

The real causes of the Prigorodnyj conflict are, in fact, created by the deportation of the Ingush and awarding the district to North Ossetia, by effect of which many Ingush were ethnically cleansed from the area.

The roots of this conflict, indeed, can be traced primarily to political factors, not by any means to old or modern hatreds (Kaufman 2007) between the Muslim Ingush and the Christian Ossetians.

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<sup>3</sup> Ossetians also inhabit Georgia proper. After the South Ossetian war in August 2008, however, many Ossetians left their homes and settled in North Ossetia. Incidentally, the Ossetian ethnic element in Georgia possibly contributed to the formation of the Fereydani Georgians, a separate Georgian sub-ethnic group living in Iran (see Rezvani 2008: 606-613).

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