

RESURGENT DREAMS OF INDEPENDENCE FROM RUSSIA IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS

<https://www.2thepointnews.com/resurgent-dreams-of-independence-from-russia-in-the-north-caucasus/>

[The Caucasus

Mountains run east to west from the Caspian to Black Seas. The peoples of the North Caucasus (north of the east-west watershed) have been fighting for the freedom from Russian imperial conquest since 1800. For historical background, please consider reading about the great warrior leader of the Caucasus' struggle in the 19th century, Shamil. He remains a legendary hero to this day. The Caucasus soldiers fighting in Ukraine against Russia's occupation call themselves the Imam Shamil Battalion.]

Russia's war against Ukraine has significantly altered the geopolitical terrain of Eastern Europe, and its repercussions have extended into the North Caucasus.

One of the most notable consequences has been the reawakening of aspirations for independence among the dozens of ethnic groups that populate the region. On November 7 and 8, a major milestone was reached when the Congress of the Peoples of the North Caucasus convened in the European Parliament (Caucasusfree.com, November 9; YouTube, December 7).

Circassian, Chechen, Dagestani, and Ingush pro-independence representatives gathered to discuss their shared goal of independence from Russia. With most of Moscow's attention fixated on the war, these movements have gained traction in recent months and will likely build on that momentum as the fighting in Ukraine rages on.

Until recently, only the Chechens had publicly articulated a desire to secede from the Russian Federation. A generation after Moscow savagely quashed the breakaway Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, pro-independence sentiments are again on the rise.

In 2022, the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian parliament) passed a resolution acknowledging the Kremlin's occupation of Ichkeria and condemning Moscow's genocide against the Chechen people (see EDM, November 1, 2022)—the first-ever such formal condemnation by a European state.

Intensified international outreach by the Chechen diaspora resulted in the establishment of representative offices of the Republic of Ichkeria in Ukraine and Poland this year. As a result, unofficial support for the Chechen independence movement has grown throughout Europe (YouTube, June 9; November 6). Meanwhile, Circassian, Dagestani, and Ingush pro-independence groups registered a similar upsurge of support for secession from Russia.

The November conference represented an important moment in demonstrating the mutual support of the peoples in the North Caucasus for their respective independence movements. The congress elected Iyad Youghar, chairman of the US-based International Circassian Council, to head the newly created Committee for the Restoration of the Statehood of the Peoples of the North Caucasus (Caucasusfree.com, accessed December 10).

The delegates also tasked Akhmed Zakayev, prime minister of the Republic of Ichkeria in exile, and Akhmad Akhmedov, chairman of the All-Ukrainian Congress of the Peoples of Dagestan and deputy commander of the Imam Shamil Battalion fighting alongside the Ukrainian Armed Forces, to head the congress' Defense Commission.

The forum adopted a resolution calling for the establishment of independent polities in the North Caucasus based on the principle of self-determination.

Invoking the legacy of the short-lived Mountainous Republic of the North Caucasus, which declared its independence from the Russian Empire in the wake of the February 1917 revolution, the resolution called for the restoration of full sovereignty to the region's various ethnic groups:

"We, the representatives of the many groups and organizations of the Circassian, Chechen, Dagestani and Ingush peoples fighting for the rights and freedom to live in our historic lands [...] affirm the principles of cooperation, security, and mutual support, with the objective of advancing a political platform for the restoration of statehood to the peoples of the North Caucasus inspired by the unifying ideals of the Mountain Republic" (Caucasusfree.com, November 9)."

The North Caucasus has a long and complex history of resistance to Russian rule. The region is home to a diverse mix of ethnic groups, most of whom have preserved a strong sense of national identity. Their historical interactions with Russia are steeped in strife and misfortune, punctuated by numerous wars and mass deportations during the Soviet era.

A confluence of factors has reignited the aspiration for self-rule among the diverse ethnicities of the region. First, the Kremlin's war against Ukraine has highlighted the dangers of Russian authoritarianism and emboldened dissenting voices (see EDM, November 1, 2022; May 23). The sight of Ukrainians battling for their liberty has undeniably played a part in rekindling dreams of independence among the peoples of the Caucasus.

Second, an innate longing for autonomy within these ethnic communities has provided a strong foundation for independence. This desire largely stems from the distinct histories and cultural backgrounds of the groups in the

North Caucasus.

The drive for independence has been magnified by the perception of Russia as an occupying power, particularly in Chechnya, where Ramzan Kadyrov's government is resented as a puppet regime (see EDM, June 7, 2022; July 11). The state of human rights in Chechnya is abysmal, and many Chechens feel that they have no choice but to seek independence as a means of liberating themselves from the Kremlin-backed Kadyrov regime.

Third, the Russian government's repressive policies and failure to facilitate significant economic development in the North Caucasus have further fueled feelings of alienation.

The regional economies have been stagnating for decades (Government.ru, June 15, 2021). Subsidies provided by the Russian government have been embezzled or channeled into vanity projects that do little to alleviate widespread poverty and unemployment.

The glaring contrast between the absence of economic prospects and the extravagant lifestyles of the region's Kremlin-appointed overlords has led to increased public frustration and calls for independence. The lack of democratic institutions and the absence of realistic political avenues for change (local elections are routinely rigged in favor of Moscow's handpicked candidates) have pushed many in the region to view self-determination as the only viable path for improving their lives.

Fourth, the mandatory use of the Russian language and Moscow's disregard for traditional customs and languages have systematically eroded the cultural identity of the peoples of the North Caucasus (Kavkaz Realii, June 22, 2018). This cultural homogenization has alienated many ethnic groups from the Russian state and strengthened their desire to break free from it.

The implications for the resurgence of independence movements in the North Caucasus are far-reaching. A united front of independence-seeking groups could pose a serious threat to Russia's territorial integrity and regional stability.

The emphasis of the Congress of the Peoples of the North Caucasus on democratic principles—evident in the resolution's repeated references to the democratic aspirations of the peoples of Circassia, Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia—could resonate with pro-democracy forces elsewhere in Russia and potentially garner support from the international community.

The Russian government is likely to respond to this new challenge with a combination of repression and appeasement. Moscow may offer concessions, such as greater autonomy or economic assistance. It could also attempt to co-opt these movements or prevent them from gaining more momentum.

The future of the North Caucasus remains uncertain. The resurgence of aspirations for independence, nevertheless, is a sign of deep-seated grievances and a powerful desire for change across the region.

Aslan Doukaev was born and raised in Grozny, Chechnya. He is the Director of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's North Caucasus Service.

