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Russia's 'Middle East': the escalation of religious conflicts in the Northern Caucasus

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The eastern part of the Northern Caucasus (Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia) is becoming an increasingly distinct region in cultural, civilisational and social terms when compared to the rest of the Russian Federation. The situation on the ground there bears greater resemblance to the Middle East than to Russia: Islam is the key factor organising socio-political life, and conflicts inside the Muslim community, often involving bloodshed, are the driving power of developments in the region. The conflict is between the two main branches of Islam in the Northern Caucasus: Sufism linked to the official clergy and government, and Salafism which is gaining more and more supporters among young people in the Caucasus. Tension, including clashes over mosques, attacks, mass detentions, etc. has been observed mainly in Dagestan and Ingushetia. Sufism and Salafism, and the perennial conflict between the two, are essential elements of the Northern Caucasian political puzzle, as is resorting to the use of violence. They have influenced the development of the situation and have been used in political games on many occasions. A similar situation can be seen at present – the Chechen leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, who wants to strengthen his position in the region, is trying to assume the role of protector of Sufism and suppressor of Salafism. This magnifies the destabilising potential of the conflict and may pose the risk of an escalation of violence in the Northern Caucasus.

Sufism and Salafism in the Northern Caucasus

Sufism is the mystical trend in Islam. Its external manifestation is the operation of Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqas*, such as Qadiriyya, Naqshbandiyya). It emphasises the need to learn to know God in the mystical way, beyond the mind, as well as the importance of traditional and spiritual leaders (sheikhs or ustazes) who are believed to be the intermediaries between God and man. Sufism is deeply rooted in the history of the Northern Caucasus. Various local factions of Sufi brotherhoods (*wirds*) are essential elements of the religious and social structure. They also play an important political role, and the leaders and members of Sufi communities form

local elites (they predominate among the official clergy; many Northern Caucasian politicians are members of Sufi *wirds*)¹.

Salafism can in turn be defined as a purist trend in Sunni Islam drawing upon the 'pure' Islam, which was practised in the first ages of its existence. One of its characteristics is its extreme legalism and rejection of traditions which are not justified by the Quran and the hadiths. Salafism is a very extensive movement: its nature can be apolitical and peaceful

¹ Sufism, for example, was the ideological and organisational foundation of the anti-feudal and anti-Russian uprisings of Caucasian highlanders in the 19th century. Imam Shamil, the best-known leader of insurgents, the founder of the Islamic state in Dagestan and Chechnya in the 19th century, who is viewed as a national hero by Dagestanis and Chechens, was a Sufi sheikh.

(Salafi communities focusing on religious life) as well as political and armed (the struggle, including by use of arms, to set up an Islamic state). Salafi communities are a relatively new phenomenon in the Caucasus. They emerged in connection with the crisis caused by the collapse of the USSR, the renewal of links between post-Soviet Muslims and the Islamic world, and the socio-economic changes (including identity issues) that affected this area.

Conflicts between Sufism and Salafism have been an immanent part of religious and social life in the Northern Caucasus. The situation is additionally complicated by the Russian government's policy, which contributes to the escalation of tension.

Young people, often originating from social groups which have been pushed to the margins and deprived of any hope for the future by the politico-economic system based on clan and mafia connections predominate among Salafis. The most dynamic Salafi communities operate in the cities (although Salafi villages also exist in Dagestan)². Both branches have their own leaders³ and institutions (for example, an institution known

as the Council of Scholars Ahlus-Sunnah wa al-Jamaa leads Salafis in Dagestan; in turn, Sufis control the Spiritual Boards of Muslims in individual republics). They have their own mosques, companies, Sharia courts, charities, media (including social media)⁴ and quite often also armed groups. Some of the Salafi communities have links with the armed Islamic underground and are a natural source of recruits and serve as its ideological base. However, these links are not obvious or automatic (numerous Salafi communities have dissociated themselves from armed struggle), and the decision to join the guerrilla forces is as a rule made by individuals (and not communities) very often in effect of repressions from law enforcement agencies.

Sufism is the mainstay of local Islam, understood as being derived from local customs (which do not necessarily comply with the Islamic orthodoxy). It is bound to the global Ummah only on the level of declarations, and is dominated by the older and the middle generations. Its supporters call it 'traditional' Islam, while Salafis see it as a heresy contradicting the basic pillar of Islam (monotheism). In turn, Salafism is a revolutionary, anti-system trend dominated by young people, attracting active individuals, contesting the status quo (including the religious one) and it strongly identifies itself with global Islam. In the post-Soviet area, it is viewed (partly as a consequence of propaganda) as an ideology imported from outside and is identified with terrorism. Opponents of Salafism refer to it as 'Wahhabism'. This term, inaccurate from the academic point of view, is also widely used in the media and political life in post-Soviet countries (for example, by Ramzan Kadyrov) and has a pejorative meaning.

Rivalry and conflicts between the two branches (very often involving violence: armed clashes, terrorist attacks, etc.) have been an ever-present art of religious and social life in the Northern Caucasus for a quarter of a century. The situation

² At present, for example, Novosaitli, Kvanada and Gubden. A Salafi enclave, uncontrolled by the government, covering the Kadar Jamaat (the villages Kadar, Karamakhi and other) operated in the 1990s in central Dagestan. It was liquidated as a result of a military operation launched by federal troops in 1999.

³ The best-known Dagestani Salafi leaders include: Israpil Ahmednabiyev (Abu Umar Sasitlinsky, who is at present in exile, in Turkey or Lebanon), Nadir Medetov (Nadir Abu Khalid, at present he is fighting in Syria for Islamic State), and Muhammad Nabi Sildinsky. Ingushetia's most popular preachers are Khamzat Chumakov and Isa Tsechoev. The Sufi leaders include Salakh Mezhiev (mufti of Chechnya), Ahmad Abdullaev (mufti of Dagestan), Isa Khamkhoev (mufti of Ingushetia), Muhammadrasul Saaduev (imam of the central mosque in Makhachkala), and the Dagestani sheikhs Badrudin Kadyrov and Ghazi Magomed Rabadanov. Many leaders have gone missing as a consequence of mafia feuds or attacks plotted by the Islamic military underground (for example, the Dagestani sheikhs Said Chirkeysky and Sirajuddin Tabasaransky).

⁴ For example, <http://vk.com/sovetchenih>, [www.http://serdce-chechni.ru](http://www.serdce-chechni.ru), [www.ansar.ru](http://ansar.ru), <http://alansar.ru>

is additionally complicated by the Russian government's policy, which contributes to the escalation of tension. In Soviet times, the government persecuted Sufi communities, viewing them as an uncontrolled manifestation of religious life.

The outbreak of the Second Chechen War in the Russian Caucasus marked the beginning of the persecution of Salafi communities, which have continued to the present day with varying intensity.

The situation changed in the 1990s, when there was a period of revival of religious life and Sufi communities began to be treated as an ally in combating independent Islamic movements and organisations treated as a threat. Initially, one exception was Chechnya, where the independence movement was interwoven with Sufism, which is an essential element of the Chechen national identity⁵. Between the First and the Second Chechen Wars (1996–1999), when Chechnya was beyond Moscow's control, the Russian secret services would regularly use radical Salafi groupings (which were often engaged in organised crime, including kidnapping for ransom) to destabilise the situation in a republic governed by supporters of independence. The chaos in Chechnya was expected to provide the Russian government with a pretext for bringing troops there again.

The beginning of the Second Chechen War (autumn 1999) was a breakthrough moment for the further development of the political and religious situation in the Caucasus. At that time, the so-called 'anti-terrorist' operation was launched,

targeted at not only Chechen separatists but also at Caucasian Salafis. The informal co-operation between the Russian secret services and Salafi groupings was discontinued in Chechnya, and crackdowns began. The alliance with a section of separatists led by the Sufi mufti of Chechnya, Akhmad Kadyrov, became the basis of the Russian policy towards the republic. Sufism was rehabilitated and in fact became the republic's 'national religion' and one of the pillars of the Kadyrov clan's power (in 2004, Akhmad was replaced by his son, Ramzan, who has built a dictatorship based on terror in Chechnya)⁶. Brutal repressions against Salafi communities began across the Caucasus, and have continued ever since with varying intensity. One of its effects was the setting up of the Islamic military underground in the Caucasian republics which paved the way for the Caucasus Emirate, which was proclaimed in 2007⁷. The repressions took the most brutal form in Chechnya, where Salafis cannot function openly, and manifesting Salafi views (even having such external attributes as a beard without a moustache or shorter trouser legs) can be punished by death. The situation in Dagestan and Ingushetia is quite different. Repressions are also present there, but Salafi communities can still function, and the government would even open dialogue with them from time to time⁸. At those times when pressure on Salafis

⁵ Mainly the faction (*wird*) of the Qadiriyya brotherhood set up by Kunta-haji Kishiev in the second half of the 19th century to which most Chechens belong (dozens of other *wirds* operate in the republic in addition to this one). Sufism is so strong in Chechnya and Ingushetia partly because both of these regions were Islamised in the 19th century mainly with the help of Sufi brotherhoods. Even to external observers, the Sufi religious ritual *zikr* (the ecstatic circle dance) has become a symbol of Chechnya and of the Chechen craving for independence.

⁶ Sufis have complete control of the muftiate of Chechnya; all mosques are also under their control. Membership of one of the Sufi *wirds* and participation in Sufi rituals is in fact compulsory. Sufism is also propagated by the Chechen media.

⁷ The Caucasus Emirate which was established in place of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria is, according to its members' declarations, an Islamic state extending over the Northern Caucasus under Russian occupation. In fact, it is an underground armed terrorist organisation. Since the deaths of its three subsequent leaders (Dokka Umarov, Aliaskhab Kebekov and Magomed Suleimanov) in 2013–2015, the emirate has been leaderless.

⁸ In Dagestan, dialogue of this kind was seen under the presidency of Magomedsalom Magomedov (2010–2013). It was interrupted after the death of Sheikh Said Chirkeyev (Dagestan's most influential Sufi leader) in a suicide attack plotted by the Caucasus Emirate (August 2013). A similar policy – regardless of resistance from the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Ingushetia – has been pursued for years by the president of Ingushetia, Yunus-bek Yevkurov.

is increased, the military underground becomes more active since more desperate people are ready to join the guerrilla troops (the war in Syria (where thousands of residents of the Caucasian republics of the Russian Federation have gone to fight in the jihad) has served as such a 'safety valve' over the past few years⁹). The situation usually calms down when the government tolerates peaceful Salafi communities and opens dialogue with them (this situation has been seen over the past few years in Ingushetia, one effect of which is the stabilisation of the internal situation).

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Despite the persecution, Salafism is currently the most rapidly developing branch of Islam in the Caucasus and among migrants from the Caucasus (for example, among Chechens in Europe and among emigrants from the Caucasus settling in other Russian regions). Everything seems to indicate that this trend will continue because Salafism is ideologically appealing to the younger generation.

The new wave of confrontation

Religious conflicts in the Caucasus clearly escalated in late 2015/early 2016 (mainly in Dagestan and Ingushetia). The Dagestani government (in co-operation with the Spiritual Board of Muslims) has intensified anti-Salafi measures, including arrests and mass detentions of people praying in mosques (for example, in Derbent,

Makhachkala, Khasavyurt and Kizilyurt¹⁰), forcing imams upon Salafi communities (for example, at the mosque in Makhachkala¹¹), setting fire to Salafi mosques (for example, in Derbent). What provoked the greatest outrage among Salafi communities was the campaign of closing the mosques they controlled, for example in Makhachkala and Khasavyurt. This met with organised resistance (January 2016). When the Salafi mosque (known as the 'northern' mosque) was closed, thousands of young Salafis took to the streets and demanded that the city government hand back the keys¹². The scale of the demonstration and the fact that it was organised, as well as open statements from Salafi leaders who announced they would fight for their rights, surprised the government so much that it was forced to agree to open the mosque again. On the one hand, this revealed the weakness of the republic's government, and on the other it demonstrated the strength and determination of the local Salafi community.

Ingushetia, in turn, is the scene of the conflict between the republic's leader, Yunus-bek Yevkurov (in office since 2008) and mufti Isa Khamkhoev and the official clergy and Sufi brotherhoods who support Khamkhoev¹³. The subject of their dispute is the Ingush government's policy towards Islam: Yevkurov is trying to convince the muftiate to open dialogue and co-operation with all Muslim communities, including peaceful Salafis, whose presence he tolerated if they did not break the law. The official clergy and the Sufi circles from which the clergy originates are opposed to this because they view the independent communities and the popular Islamic leaders as competi-

⁹ For more information see: Maciej Falkowski, Józef Lang, *Homo jihadicus*, *OSW Report*, September 2015, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-report/2015-09-21/homo-jihadicus>

¹⁰ <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/277411/>

¹¹ <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/272887/>

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CF-p05lgCuo>

¹³ The role of Sufism in Ingushetia is similar to the one it plays in Chechnya. It is an essential element of the ethnic identity. Ingush people have their own *wirds* (brotherhood factions), mainly from the Qadiriyya school. The largest are the *wirds* that were established in the 19th century by the students of Kunta-haji Kishiev – Batal-haji Belkhoroev and Hussein-haji Gardanov.

tors and a threat to their own position. The republic has seen numerous conflicts between Salafis and members of Sufi brotherhoods (riots, disputes over mosques, etc.). The most serious took place in June 2015 (the conflict over the Nasir-kort mosque, where the popular Salafi preacher Khamzat Chumakov is the imam¹⁴; furthermore, an unsuccessful attack on Chumakov was staged on 11 March 2016).

The interference from the Chechen leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, who wants to be viewed as the one who protects Sufi Islam from Salafism/terrorism, is one of the factors escalating the conflicts between the various branches of Islam.

In December 2015, Yevkurov stated that the mufti had to resign, the muftiate needed to be reformed, and its competences had to be restricted¹⁵. In turn, Khamkhoev convened a congress of representatives of his own clan (*teip*) and received support from the president of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, who has tense relations with Yevkurov (Kadyrov also supported Khamkhoev financially¹⁶).

Kadyrov's play

One factor that is stoking the present phase of the conflict between the various branches of Islam in Dagestan and Ingushetia is the interference from Kadyrov, who wants to be seen as the one who protects 'real' (i.e. Sufi) Islam in the Caucasus from Salafism/terrorism. An unprecedented meeting (*majlis*) of representatives of twenty-four factions of Sufi brotherhoods (representing both Naqshbandiyya and Qadiriyya) from Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia was held on 2 February 2016 in Grozny. Its par-

ticipants passed an 'anti-Wahhabi' declaration in which they undertook to refrain from maintaining contacts with representatives of Salafism¹⁷. During the congress, Kadyrov announced he would combat 'Wahhabism' across the Caucasus and even across Russia, thus expressing his readiness to help out the governments of the neighbouring republics, which was in fact a threat that the conflict would be escalated. Both he and his milieu (including the mufti of Chechnya, Salakh Mezhiev and the parliamentary speaker, Magomed Daudov) have issued numerous threats to Salafi leaders (mainly from Ingushetia). They have also criticised the governments of Dagestan and Ingushetia for what they saw as an overly lenient policy towards Salafis.

The main motivation behind Kadyrov's engagement in religious conflicts in the neighbouring republics is his political ambition – the desire to strengthen his own position and to become the leader of the entire region (and even of all Russian Muslims). His interference in the Sufi-Salafi conflict is merely an instrument to achieve this goal. However, Kadyrov's ambitions are not only a personal issue. They correspond to the traditionally high aspirations of the Chechen public to play a more important role in the Caucasus. These aspirations are the result of the size of the population (they are the largest nation in the region), and the sense of strength, exceptionality, superiority, and pride in their own achievements (victory in the First Chechen War in 1994–1996 against Moscow without any external help, rebuilding the republic out of the rubble of war, the participation of Chechens in military conflicts outside the Caucasus, for example, in Georgia, Syria and Donbass in Ukraine, Kadyrov's exceptionally strong position in Russia¹⁸, successes of Chechen athletes, etc.).

¹⁴ http://kavpolit.com/articles/molitva_razdora-17260/;
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mWFc7dY-Qs>

¹⁵ <http://galgayche.org/?p=2144>

¹⁶ <http://galgayche.org/?p=4302>

¹⁷ <http://www.onkavkaz.com/news/695-kadyrov-i-hamho-ev-objavili-voinu-salafitam-ingushetii.html>

¹⁸ See, for example, the report on Kadyrov from the Russian opposition activist, Ilya Yashin A Threat to national security; https://vk.com/doc279938622_437299182?hash=44c052d71ac47f6c24&dl=c16291d3cb49537d59

The risk of an escalation of violence

Given the vast significance of Islam in the socio-political life of the present-day Caucasus and the polarisation of local societies concerning religious issues, the escalating conflict between the Salafi and the Sufi communities has a great destabilising potential. Additional risk factors include the deteriorating economic situation in Russia and the increasing pauperisation in the Caucasian republics; and this may contribute to a radicalisation of sentiments.

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However, the potential engagement of Chechens in the conflict may be of key significance, since this multiplies the risk of an escalation of violence.

Regardless of endless conflicts and tensions, the political, ethnic, religious and clan-mafia system in Dagestan, whose society is a conglomerate of various ethnic groups, local *jamats* (informal historically conditioned territorial communities), religious groups, etc., is relatively stable. Their large number and the fact that neither of them clearly predominates in society have forced them to develop compromises over the past twenty-five years based on the fragile balance of power. The situation in Ingushetia is reminiscent of that in Dagestan, although the ethnic variety factor is missing there (ethnic Ingush account for over 95% of the population). External interference with the situation in any of the republics might lead to the balance of power being upset, to internal chaos and an escalation of violence, especially if this were Chechen interference. The attitude towards Chechens is definitely negative across

the Northern Caucasus; they are viewed as regional imperialists. Tension between Chechnya and the neighbouring republics is additionally stoked by the Chechen territorial claims (Khasavyurt in Dagestan and Sunzha District in Ingushetia) and the issue of the Chechen minority in Dagestan¹⁹.

In political terms, the present situation is to some extent reminiscent of that in 1998–1999. Back then radical Chechen groupings (led by Shamil Basayev and the commander of foreign militants, Khattab) made efforts to reinforce their own political position by interfering with the situation in Dagestan (offering support to Dagestani Salafis). Two so-called Congresses of Muslims of Chechnya and Dagestan were held in Grozny (1998, 1999). During the congresses, Salafis from Chechnya and Dagestan announced they would 'liberate' Dagestan from Russia. Then a Chechen military intervention in Dagestan took place (end of summer and beginning of autumn 1999), which led to the outbreak of the Second Chechen War.

In the preceding years, Ramzan Kadyrov would make numerous attempts to interfere with the internal affairs of the neighbouring republics (for example, attempts by Chechen troops to conduct special operations in Ingushetia), but this met with a negative reaction from Moscow and convinced Kadyrov to withdraw. Nevertheless, the fact that Kadyrov is playing the 'anti-Wahhabi' card places the Kremlin in an awkward situation. It appears that a further strengthening of the Chechen leader and intensifying tension in the Northern Caucasus are not in the Kremlin's interest. On the other hand, the government would find it difficult to present any arguments negating the

¹⁹ There are around 100,000 ethnic Chechens (also known as Akkinty) in Dagestan. They live mainly in Khasavyurt (where they make up around 30% of the residents) and in Novolaksky District which borders Chechnya. Dagestanis fear that, with support from Grozny, local ethnic Chechens may in future demand that the region become part of Chechnya. See, for example, http://kavpolit.com/articles/v_dagestane_ubezhdeny_chno_vosstanovlenniy_auhovsk-4473/

need to combat 'Wahhabism'/terrorism, since it has itself employed similar rhetoric in domestic and foreign policy. Furthermore, the proven Chechen model (ensuring stability through terror), especially in the situation of aggravating deteriorating economic crisis, may appear appealing to Russian decision-makers.

The situation in the Northern Caucasus fits in with the process of the cultural and civilisational de-Sovietisation and de-Russification of the former USSR. However, this does not have to mean a weakening of Russian political influence.

Moscow, wishing to avoid the scenario of a regional struggle against radical Islam under Kadyrov's leadership, may – as a pre-emptive measure – intensify repressions against Salafis in Dagestan and Ingushetia, employing federal law enforcement agencies in the process. However, the Salafi communities there as so strong and hardened (hundreds of thousands of young people who have their own structures and leaders) that an attempt to destroy them completely (as was the case in Chechnya after 1999) might end up in a large-scale military confrontation. Furthermore, intensifying the persecution of Salafis would serve the interests of the armed Islamic underground in the Caucasus (the Caucasus Emirate and the troops who have sworn loyalty to Islamic State²⁰), which has found itself in a serious crisis partly due to the outflow of volunteer fighters to the Middle East. This might trigger it to resort to armed and terrorist activity.

A possible escalation of violence in the Northern Caucasus would also pose some threats to Europe. It might provoke an upsurge in the number of refugees fleeing from the region to the

²⁰ A schism took place in Caucasus Emirate in late 2014/early 2015 when most of the commanders and fighters in Chechnya and Dagestan swore an oath to Islamic State.

EU (at least 100,000 Chechen refugees are already resident there) that could be deliberately fomented by the Russian government.

The Russian 'Middle East'

The developments observed at present illustrate more extensive processes which have been taking place in the eastern part of the Northern Caucasus for decades. The region has been undergoing a rapid re-Islamisation and de-Russification, and has been moving away from Russia in civilisational and cultural terms. At present, Islam plays the key social and political role in Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia (and to a lesser extent also in the other republics²¹); it organises life in the republics and is the driving force of events in the region. The signs of the encroaching Islamisation include: participation in religious life on a massive scale, the existence of Sharia courts (including applying Sharia to civil issues), the vast socio-political impact of the divides between the various branches of Islam, the increasingly frequent cases of polygamy, the fact that Islam dictates what should and what should not be done in public life (for example, women working for the state administration in Chechnya are obliged to wear headscarves, restrictions on the sale of alcohol and public smoking during Ramadan, etc.), the fact that politicians participate in religious life and religious leaders in political life, treating imams and Sharia courts as *de facto* state institutions, the increasingly frequent use of the Arabic language and Arabised versions of surnames in place of Russian ones, etc. In turn, the Russian social, political, legal and cultural reality are becoming something alien to residents of the eastern part of the Caucasus. In effect, the region, with a population of almost 5 million²², is part of the Russian Fed-

²¹ Northern Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia and Adygea.

²² According to official data (census of 2010), 2.9 million people live in Dagestan, 1.26 million live in Chechnya and 400,000 live in Ingushetia.

eration but has more and more in common with the Middle East than with Russia. This is taking place with the tacit acceptance from the Russian government, who lack ideas as well as the financial and human resources to make an attempt to re-integrate the Caucasus with the rest of Russia.

The situation in the Northern Caucasus – along with the developments in Ukraine, Central Asia and Georgia – fits in with the process which is gradually taking place all over the former USSR. This is an ongoing, albeit slow, disintegration of the post-Soviet area (which is for Moscow synonymous to the ‘natural’ area of Russian influence) in the social, political and cultural-civilisational dimensions. This process is taking place in a natural way, regardless of Russia’s intense attempts to slow it down (for example, in the information and propaganda area). This undermines the civilisational efforts the Tsarist and the Soviet empires made for more than two hundred years, and is also proof of how

unattractive the modern Russian socio-cultural model is. The process of a cultural and civilisational de-Sovietisation and de-Russification of the former USSR, however, does not have to mean a weakening of the Russian political influence. For centuries, empires, including the Russian one, have successfully managed territories that are completely different from the metropolises in cultural, social, religious and other terms. The conditions which have been changing since the collapse of the Soviet Union have only forced the Russian government to make hasty adjustments and to make its policy towards such areas as the Caucasus more flexible. Moscow has done this successfully (for example, with regard to Chechnya²³, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Armenia, adopting various management strategies to these areas).

²³ For more information, see: Maciej Falkowski, Ramzani-
stan. Russia’s Chechen problem, *OSW Point of View*, Au-
gust 2015, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/point-view/2015-08-25/ramzanistan-russias-chechen-problem>

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