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International Crisis Group Controversial Among Russian North Caucasus Experts

On November 8, the International Crisis Group presented two reports—titled “The North Caucasus: The Challenges of Integration (I), Ethnicity and Conflict,” and “The North Caucasus: The Challenges of Integration (II), Islam, the Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency”—at the Sakharov Center in Moscow. Apart from the conflict in Chechnya, the ICG reports stressed potentially combustible issues in the North Caucasus, such as the Ossetian-Ingush conflict, the situation in Dagestan’s Aukhov district, land-related conflicts between Kabardins and Balkars in Kabardino-Balkaria, and Russian-North Caucasian conflicts in Stavropol region. The ICG reports provoked controversy even within the largely like-minded, mostly human rights-oriented community of Russian experts on the North Caucasus (www.kavkaz-uzel.ru, November 9).

The head of the RAMCOM Center for Regional Socio-Economic Studies, Denis

Sokolov, pointed out that the ICG reports ignored Moscow's attempts to use the economic revival of the North Caucasus as a tool for improving the security situation in the region. Sokolov also said that the reports underestimated the role of the local North Caucasian elites in the unraveling situation in the region. Some experts rejected the notion of "ethnic conflict" as such, saying that the elites' scramble for power and resources did not need to be framed as an "ethnic conflict." The head of the Memorial human rights center, Oleg Orlov, dismissed the ICG's statement about the Chechen government's drive to return to Chechen traditions. "All Chechen contemporary reality drastically contradicts the true, original Chechen traditions," he said. "The whole Chechen contemporary reality contradicts genuine, age old Chechen traditions; contradicts how disputes were resolved in traditional Chechen society and in general how life was organized. One-man management that totally suppresses any individual manifestation fundamentally contradicts Chechen customs and lifestyle" (www.kavkaz-uzel.ru, November 9).

In the very title of its reports on the North Caucasus, the ICG manifested its position regarding the protracted conflict in the region. The group practically stated that it promoted the "integration" of the North Caucasus into Russia. The reports for some reason ignored even the opinion of the larger part of Russia's own population, which increasingly sees the North Caucasus outside of the Russian Federation. In addition, there is the North Caucasus' own population, which may not see its future in greater integration with Russia, but rather in getting a greater degree of political autonomy, and perhaps even complete separation from Russia. It is unclear why the ICG adopted a closed-ended solution for the North Caucasus' problem, instead of relying on classical conflict-resolution guides that favor open-ended approaches to conflicts.

The presentation of the ICG reports at Moscow's Sakharov Center may have shed some light on why the reports were so skewed to one end. The Istanbul-based director of the ICG's Europe Program, Sabine Freizer, said at the meeting in Moscow that the organization had intended to resume its work in the North Caucasus for several years but had hesitated, and for a very good reason. One of the ICG's founding members, Frederick Cuny, was kidnapped in Chechnya in 1995 and has never been heard from again (www.kavkaz-uzel.ru, November 9). Cuny is believed to have been shot dead, but his remains have never been recovered, and sources that

reported he was murdered by Chechen intelligence commander Rizvan Elbiev are not particularly reliable. Cuny's family blamed his killing and that of several other members of his group on the Chechen side, but they also accused the Russian side of the conflict of spreading rumors about him being a Russian spy (http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cuny/kill/). Although there have been few kidnappings of international organization staffers in the North Caucasus recently, especially since most international groups have been forced to shut down their offices in the region, it is clear that the security situation in the region remains precarious.

The ICG's activities in the North Caucasus are certainly closely monitored by the Russian security services, so as soon as Moscow becomes unhappy with the organization's reports, its activities will certainly be curtailed in one way or another. So self-censorship may be a real problem for the ICG. Given the high security risks faced by the conflict-monitoring organization in the North Caucasus, it becomes a dilemma whether it is worth issuing reports that cannot be forthright about the problems of the region. At the same time, the ICG potentially might improve its work in the North Caucasus and present higher quality reports down the road. Currently, the choice appears to be simple: if the ICG's work in the North Caucasus contributes to the picture of the North Caucasus officially approved by Moscow, which does not necessarily preclude indicating some of the problems Russia faces in the region, it will be allowed to work. If, however, the ICG's work undermines the isolation of the North Caucasus from the outside world and presents the conflict in the region as it is—a separatism-driven conflict—its activities will quickly be curbed by the Russian government. Balancing between these two possibilities will be the main challenge for the ICG in the region. So far, the ICG appears to have internalized the Russian government's strategic view of the North Caucasus. The Russian government is extremely wary of viewing the conflict in the North Caucasus as separatist, because doing so would mean there are tangible goals of the insurgency that can be discussed. Instead, Moscow prefers to portray the rebels in the North Caucasus as untamed savages with unclear causes and indistinct aims. The ICG reports have so far played out in favor of Moscow's official position, and thus the organization will likely be allowed to continue operating in the region.