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# The North Caucasus Region as a Blind Spot in the “European Green Deal”: Energy Supply Security and Energy Superpower Russia

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**Abstract:** The “European Green Deal” has ambitious aims, such as net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. While the European Union aims to make its energies greener, Russia pursues power-goals based on its status as a geo-energy superpower. A successful “European Green Deal” would have the up-to-now underestimated geopolitical advantage of making the European Union less dependent on Russian hydrocarbons. In this article, we illustrate Russian power-politics and its geopolitical implications by analyzing the illustrative case of the North Caucasus, which has been traditionally a strategic region for Russia. The present article describes and analyses the impact of Russian intervention in the North Caucasian secessionist conflict since 1991 and its importance in terms of natural resources, especially hydrocarbons. The geopolitical power secured by Russia in the North Caucasian conflict has important implications for European Union’s energy supply security and could be regarded as a strong argument in favor of the “European Green Deal”.

**Keywords:** North Caucasus; post-soviet conflicts; Russia; oil; natural gas; global economics and cross-cultural management; energy studies; renewable energies; energy markets; clean energies



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## 1. Introduction

The “European Green Deal” has ambitious goals. Its aims include net-zero greenhouse gas emissions in the European Union by 2050, a new circular economy to ensure reuse and recycling, a renovation of buildings to reduce energy consumption, zero-pollution of the environment by 2050, an increased biodiversity, a greener and healthier agriculture, and an elimination of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by the 2030s [1]. While these well-intentioned aims satisfy the political agenda of progressive and green parties, and are supported at the voting booth and by public opinion, there remains a blind spot in the “European Green Deal” related to real-politik. Energy security must be attained during the transition process and beyond in order to enable the economy to thrive. To achieve this, the European Union must be a player, well versed in the real-politik is Russia. While the European Union aims to make its energies greener, Russia pursues power-goals based on its status as a geo-energy superpower. Russia uses its control over hydrocarbon energy supplies in order to defend its strategic interests [2] (p. 2), vis-à-vis, the European Union. The dependence of the European Union on Russian oil and gas is of vital geopolitical importance. A successful “European Green Deal” would have the up-to-now underestimated geopolitical advantage of making the European Union less dependent on Russian hydrocarbons.

In this article, we illustrate Russian power-politics and their geopolitical implications by analyzing the illustrative case of the North Caucasus, which has been traditionally a strategic region for Russia. We describe and analyze the impact of Russian intervention in the North Caucasian secessionist conflict since 1991 and its importance in terms of natural

resources, especially hydrocarbons. We argue that the geopolitical power secured and defended by Russia in the North Caucasian conflict has important implications for the European Union's energy supply security and could be regarded as a strong argument in favor of the "European Green Deal".

In the most recent studies on post-Soviet Russia's interventions outside its territory, a gap between two phenomena remains to be closed, which is the establishment of the relation between Russia's interventions in the secessionist conflicts of its neighbors, and its geo-energy interests as a superpower. Other recent works have filled this gap regarding the East Europe and South Caucasus regions [2,3], and this paper attempts to do the same with the conflicts of the most unstable region of Russia, the North Caucasus. This paper will emphasize the geo-energy benefits of the Federation from the pacification of its own secessionist conflicts (as the region formed part of the USSR and is an important region for the Russian energy strategy).

Furthermore, the European Union, which is highly dependent on Russian energy, has launched a long-term program for converting its industry and energy sectors in order to become cleaner and less dependent on resources such as coal, especially since the Coronavirus crisis of 2020. This creates another relation, which should be studied henceforth: Russian interventions and policies in post-soviet countries in order to gain recognition as a superpower, and the inherent conflict of interests that the new European program has with Russian energy interests as its most geopolitical powerful tool and income source.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Therefore, case studies will be presented for every relevant republic of the region, with general background and conclusions for the whole of them. As a consequence, this paper will not have the need to enter into theoretical debates of contemporary realism [4] (26, 27), although this paradigm has been crucial in the understanding of Russia's international attitude. This paper will focus on empirical data and connections between the aforementioned phenomena instead of trying to create or rigidly apply a theory.

After almost thirty years since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia remains an energy superpower, being the largest country in the world despite the losses of territory and power that came with the end of the Soviet regime. Even so, the 1990s were a debacle for the Russian state due to several factors, including falling oil prices, loss of state control over the energy sector, widespread violence in large cities, including Moscow, and the rise of separatism.

This situation began to reverse with the arrival of President Vladimir Putin to power in 2000, the recovery of oil prices since 1998, and the Gulf War [2] (p. 2) [3] (p. 486). Thanks to these factors, among others, Russia regained its position as a global superpower between the highly energetically dependent EU and Central Asia and, therefore, controls the important pipelines that provide hydrocarbons to many European states [4] (p. 18, 19). Thus, Russia practices an "energy nationalism" to ensure its national security, with significant interventionism in the states that it considers "under its zone of influence", whether or not they are transit states for Russian gas (38, 39).

This strategy, based on identifying Russia's "natural sphere of influence" (called, "Near Abroad") within the third generation of Euroasianism or Neo-Eurasianism [5], on the strategic position of several key transit states for Russian natural resources, and on the existence of secessionist conflicts in some post-soviet States, has caused Russia to intervene in some of the conflicts in order to ensure its own energetic interests, as has happened in the South Caucasus, post-Soviet Europe [2,3], and Central Asia.

But this recovery of power and action abroad does not imply a lack of internal conflict. During the first years of post-Soviet Russia, there were severe conflicts in the North Caucasus that have condemned the region to violence and economic misery up until today. In fact, there was even a weak and failed attempt at independence by the republic of Tatarstan, in the heart of European Russia [6].

A direct connection between Russia's military interventions and the protection of its geo-energy interests is scarce, as is an organized presentation of the geo-energetical benefits of these interventions [2] (p. 1) [3] (p. 487). This lack is due to the fact that Russia's intervention on its main (and practically unique) secessionist conflict is regarded mainly as an internal one, which switches the focus of the analysis to the protection of Russian territorial integrity.

We investigate how Russia has benefited, apart from in the protection of its national integrity, in geo-energy terms, from its intervention in the internal conflict of the North Caucasus. Our hypothesis is that Russia has defended its sovereignty in a dangerous territory, particularly with "recently" separated republics in the south of the region (as shown in Figure 1). The energy significance of these republics is relatively low for the Russian energy superpower (mostly in export terms). The exception is Dagestan. Dagestan not only disposes of considerable energy reserves, it is also of vital importance due to its strategical and geopolitical situation on the Caspian Sea and its frontier with the South Caucasian countries.



Figure 1. North Caucasus [7].

In Figure 1, the problematic regions of the North Caucasus are presented, including, on the one hand, Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria, which are republics of the Russian Federation (a federal division with high autonomy and based on national particularities), and are, therefore, *de jure* and *de facto* parts of Russia. On the other hand, also represented are South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which are, *de jure*, part of Georgia for most of the International Community, but are, *de facto*, independent republics controlled by their own government and supported by Russia. Georgia considers Abkhazia as an autonomous republic (a federal entity similarly to the Russians), while South Ossetia is considered part of several regions (less autonomous administrative divisions).

In order to study the energetic, social, and economic situation of the country and the region, we will use, among several other secondary sources, the 69th edition of BP Statistical Review of World Energy, CIA data, and official data from the Russian Federal State Statistic Service, which, sadly, has not reported the new apportioned energy data of the North Caucasian republics since 2010, possibly, in part, to corrupt and decrease transparency.

In the following, we present the region's importance in relation to Russian energy power and territorial integrity and its political composition, as well as the federal subjects chosen to explain the conflicts in geo-energy terms.

### 3. Results

It is necessary to resort to the concept of an energy superpower in order to describe the Russian Federation. Its natural resources are its greatest geopolitical asset [2] (p. 2) [3] (p. 487), especially, vis-à-vis, the European Union, along with its military power, particularly its nuclear arsenal. Because hydrocarbons (gas and oil) are the most relevant sources in the current global mix of energy, this work will focus mainly on these two energy sources. As the European Union still depends on the importation of Russian oil and gas, the Russian geo-energetical strategy is vital for the success of the European Green Deal and the transition toward a more self-sufficient green energy.

Russia shares the first position as global oil producer with Saudi Arabia, depending on the year, while the largest reserves of shale oil is shared by Russia, and Iran [8] (pp. 16, 32). In addition to this, some sources point out that Russia may also have the ninth largest reserves of shale gas, although this is a controversial matter, as recent geological and empirical studies show [9]. This position explains why Russia provides about one-third of Europe's requirement of oil and gas, and why oil exports to East Asia are still increasing. Obviously, this has a repercussion on the Russian economy. In fact, around 50% of its revenues derive directly from energy exportation, although "the energy sector is far more than a commercial asset for Moscow; it has been one of the pillars of Russia's stabilization and increasing strength for more than a century" [10].

Besides, albeit that the "instrumentalization of power for political purposes is a well-known strategy in Russia [ . . . ] and goes back to Soviet times [ . . . ], with Putin's arrival to power, a policy was established to restore Russia's influence—increase its power—in neighboring regions but also beyond. It is also the case that this has been based on its energy capacity" [4] (p. 234).

Russia's energy policy can be described as having these two attributes. On the one hand, the state has taken control, practically, over all Russian gas sectors via its state-owned monopoly, Gazprom. In addition, since 2003, there has been a disguised re-nationalization process of the oil sector by the use of state-owned companies (Rosneft and Gazprom-neft) and state-linked private companies (Lukoil, TNK-BP, and Surgutneftegaz) [11,12]. Consequently, similarly to Algeria and Venezuela, Russia has carried out an energy nationalism [13], while it has also used highly coercive measurements concentrated on the control of pipelines, all of it supplemented with the expeditious and opaque character of Russian approaches to political power [14–16].

Regarding foreign energy policies, the Federation has modified the balance of power by using energy in nearby regions: South Caucasus [2], Central Asia, and finally, post-Soviet Europe [3]. Russia has ensured that the former European Soviet Republics were still energetically dependent after their independence of the USSR; it has also remained a hegemon in the European energy market, by exercising control over the pipeline systems that travel from post-soviet Europe to Western Europe. In like manner, Russia has managed to maintain its position as the main export route for gas and oil from Central Asia.

The geographical situation of North Caucasus (or Ciscaucasia) includes seven federal republics and two Krai (provinces), which are limited by the Caspian Sea to the east, the Black Sea to the west, the (Russian) Southern Federal District to the north, and two states to the south: Georgia and Azerbaijan. The region is crucial, both for the Russian and North American geopolitical interests, due to the proximity of the region to Iran, Turkey, and the Black Sea [17] (p. 330). This zone, which also includes the Rostov Oblast, is administratively framed, on the one hand, by the Economic Region of the North Caucasus, mixing territories with a Russian ethnic majority with republics that have diminishing Russian minorities, and on the other hand, by two Federal Districts, the South District and the North Caucasus District.

Even though the media and academia usually refer to six republics when talking about the North Caucasus, an incorporation of all six republic would go beyond the scope of this article. Thus, we will exclude from our analysis, the federal subjects that have a large Russian majority (Krasnodar and Stavropol) and the republic of Adygea, due to its

economical and energetically insignificance and because it lacks a secessionist conflict. We also exclude the Karachay-Cherkess republic and North Ossetia for similar reasons, though this last republic will be mentioned.

On the contrary, the following will be integrated: Chechnya republic, because it is an epicenter of conflict; Dagestan republic, both because of the conflict and because of natural resources; and Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria, which are of less relevance but have some impact in geo-energy terms. All the federal subjects that compose the object of the analysis are framed in the North Caucasian Federal District.

From the district, in 2014, Dagestan was the most populated federal subject, with 30.90% of the district population (with more than three million inhabitants), followed by the Stavropol Krai, which contains 29.10% of the population. On the other hand, Chechnya has slightly more than 1.4 million people (around 14% of the District). In total, the Federal District includes 9.6 million people, which implies that 6.7% of the population of the Russian Federation live in this region [18] (p. 41).

The North Caucasus District has been relegated to a position of economic insignificance due to the conflict, which is reflected in unemployment, especially youth unemployment, and the lack of participation in the economic growth coming from the Russian energy boom in the Putin era [19] (p. 44). However, the existence of oil and gas in the eastern region of the North Caucasus, today part of Dagestan, has been known for centuries, with oil having been extracted since 1898, though the main discoveries of deposits occurred in the 1980s [20] (p. 353).

The enormous social gap that exists between an ostentatious and opulent stratum, made up of high-level officials and newly formed oligarchs, stands out, while the general context for the population is poverty, so it is not surprising that corruption is a widespread practice. In fact, “[t]he difference in income by the share of 10% of the richest and, consequently, 10% of the poor is 25 orders of magnitude, while in the whole of Russia it does not exceed 15. The middle class is also a fairly narrow segment, only around 25–30%” [21] (pp. 113–114).

In addition to poverty as a common characteristic of the population, the weight of unemployment in this territory is extremely important (it reached 52% in Ingushetia and 42% in Chechnya, but was lower in Dagestan, in 2010), especially in the rural population and the young population. By comparison, 18% of the workforce in 2010 was unemployed, as opposed to 8.2% in all of Russia [21] (p. 114).

Despite this harsh reality, attempts to create businesses in the area are even greater than in the Russian Federation as a whole, with up to 20% of the workforce expressing their desire to participate in business activities. Additionally, although there are problems to ensure employment for the population, the greater proportion of citizens that are employed in private companies (including self-employed entrepreneurs) as opposed to public entities stands out [21] (p. 116).

Regarding energy in the North Caucasus, although the energy reserves of the Russian Federation in the Caspian region are of some size (as can be seen in Figure 2), it is smaller in relation to its competing states in the region, namely Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan [22] (p. 342).

Apart from that, this strategic position has its purely geopolitical facet, as the loss of this republic would imply an easier access to the Caucasus region for Russia’s strategic competitors. A corridor from Central Asia to Europe could be opened, ignoring Russia’s territory. This hypothetical corridor is, for obvious reasons, a great threat to Russian interests, as energy is a great pillar of Russian power in Europe. Furthermore, this also applies to the South Caucasus regions as there is a very important security risk for Russia in the region’s future; the support that had been granted for the Abjasia and South Ossetia republics in Georgia under the precedent of Kosovo (a country not recognized by Russia) could mean that both territories (as precedents) would also be used against Russia in a future conflict in the region [19] (p. 39). An example of the delicate balance of power involves a very important pipeline for Azerbaijan, known as the Baku–Novorossiysk

pipeline, which transits an important part of Dagestan as well as other republics in the North Caucasus. An independence of several republics in the region would obviously make it easier for the South Caucasian country to avoid Russian influence on its own energy policies towards Europe's supply.

One of the most important geopolitical elements for Russia and its competitors in the region is the establishment of routes for oil and natural gas exports. In fact, as Gsell points out, for producing countries like Azerbaijan: "[O]il evacuation becomes a vital issue, since it has designed an economic policy based on the exploitation of its potential oil" [23] (p. 108). Linked to these supply lines are the "passage permits" (or licenses) that are needed in order to go through neighbor States territory, which Russia takes advantage of as a weapon of negotiation; this is part of the soft power it holds against its competitors in this complex and competitive region (as revealed in Figure 2).

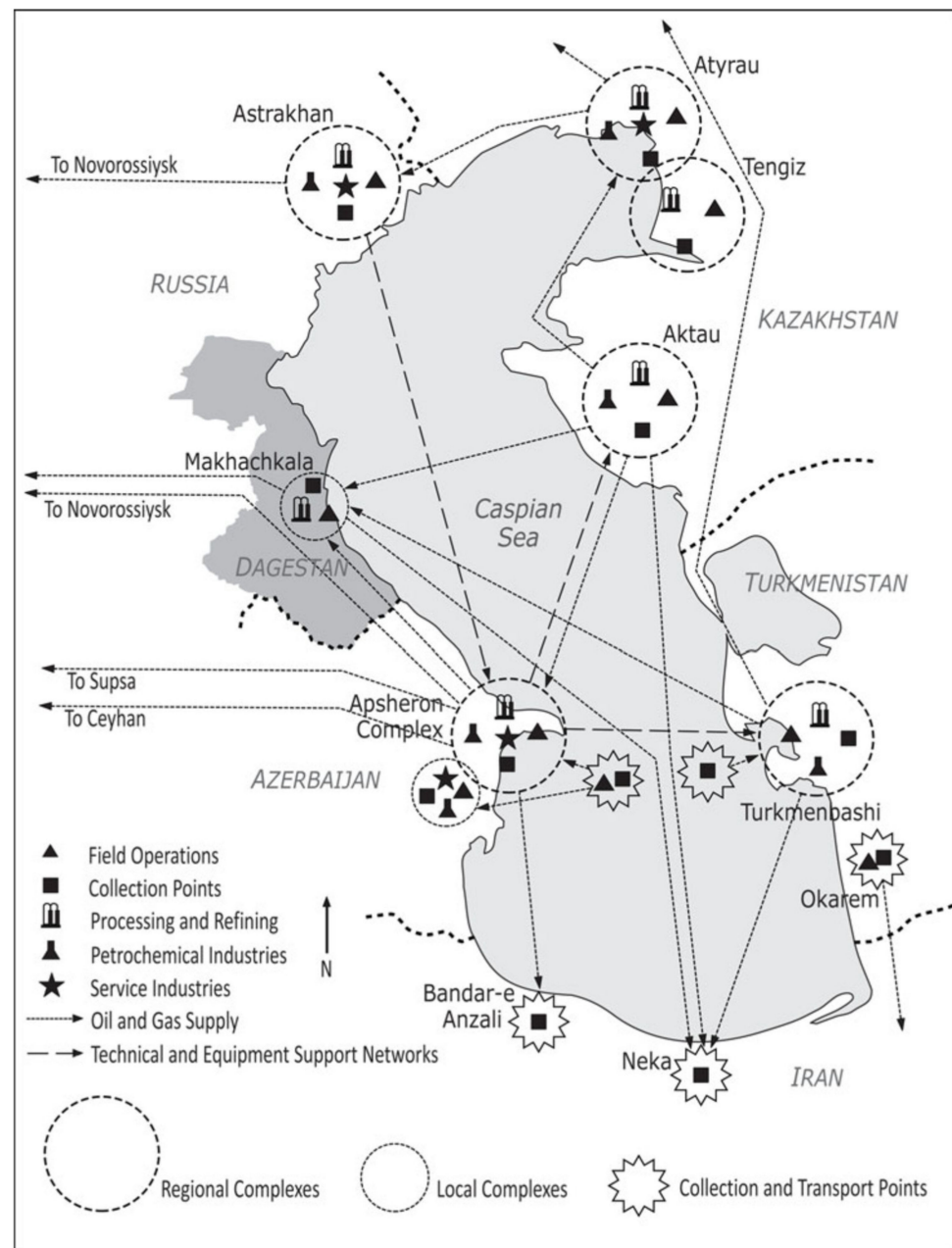


Figure 2. Diagram of the Caspian gas-oil complex [24] (p. 3).

As Gsell continues: “At the economic level, the crises and tensions in the region affect the economies of the new republics and, therefore, those based on oil production. Thus, the conflicts that take place in three key areas of this region, such as Azerbaijan (producer), Chechnya (producer and transit area for Azeri crude) and Georgia (refining and oil exit ports) have acted negatively for the obtaining and production of hydrocarbons” [23] (p. 108).

Besides all this, a tricky controversy related to public international law must be mentioned, because the region’s states are opposing each other around the use of the seabed to exploit its resources [22] (p. 343). The point is the legal consideration of the Caspian Sea as a lake, as Russia and Iran defend, or an inner Sea, as Azerbaijan, Kazajstan, and Turkmenistan defend. The first option would imply that the exploitation zones could not be limited by alluding to exclusive property rights (based on the Exclusive Economic Zones). The second option, instead, would imply a distribution of the Sea between riparian states [23] (p. 108).

“[T]he Caspian Sea can be divided into four main areas of oil and gas production: (1) the Northwest, in Russia and centered offshore proximate to the cities of Astrakhan and Makhachkala; (2) the Apsheron peninsula in Azerbaijan, near the country’s capital of Baku; (3) the Atyrau-Mangustau complex in Kazakhstan; and (4) the West Balkan province of Turkmenistan. The region’s potential oil and gas reserves play an important role in prospective development plans for the five states—Russia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan—that border the Caspian Sea” [22] (p. 343).

In energy terms, Chechnya held the 24th position in oil production (within the Russian Federation) in 2010, and 16th in gas production in 2009 [25,26].

On the other hand, Dagestan is the most important subject in energy terms, standing out because of its hydroelectric production that had an operating capacity of 4.4 billion kWh in 2004, and multiple resources including gas and oil on the coast, in addition to coal [27].

Even so, it held the 29th position in oil production in 2010, and 23rd in gas in 2009 [25,26]. Having even lower productive numbers than Chechnya, the most important republic of the region in geo-energy terms, due to its reserves and its coastal position, is Dagestan. On the Russian coast of the Caspian Sea, especially between Makhachkala and Izberbash, in Dagestan, there are hydrocarbon reserves that may reach 2 billion tons, including, as far as is known, already controlled reserves of 340 million tons of oil and 540 billion cubic meters of gas. However, production has been crumbling, yet it remains an important reserve to exploit in the future. That is why Dagestan has received, due to its technological deficiencies, \$12 billion in foreign investment [24] (pp. 2–5). In fact, as Zhantudueva says: “In 2013, the volume of investments in the main capital of the North Caucasian Federal District amounted to 414,361.6 million rubles. The largest rise in specific growth was observed in the republic of Dagestan (43.0%), Stavropol Territory (30.0%), and the smallest (below 10%) in the following republics: Ingushetia (3.2%), Karachay-Cherkessia (4.5%), North Ossetia-Alania (6.9%), and Chechnya (7.0%)” [18] (pp. 41–42).

Although Ingushetia is a republic with an economy mainly based on agriculture and livestock, 74.6% of the total industrial production corresponds to the oil sector, controlled by the Ingushneftegazprom complex [28]. Oil production was reduced in the 2000–2010 period from 200 to 50 thousand tons, due to inefficiency, maintenance of reserves, and embezzlement [29]. In 2010, it was ranked 31st among federal subjects for oil production [25,26].

Kabardino-Balkaria is a republic with a strong industrial presence; the republic is not focused on energy but on manufactured products related to mining and construction. Its energy field has been relegated to some small hydroelectric stations, with a production that does not allow more than the small energy trade. In 2010, it was ranked 33rd among federal subjects for oil production [25,26].

The Caucasus, especially its northern region, is one of the most ethnically complex and plural regions, being home to more than 100 ethnic groups, communicating in multiple

languages: Paleo-Caucasian, Indo-European, Turkic, and Semitic [30]. In addition, there is a minority of Mongolian descent (the Kalmyks). Within Dagestan alone there are more than 30 ethnic groups, a fact which has generated great internal tensions [31] (p. 104). In particular, the political struggle between the local Avars, Lezgins, Lakies, and Chechens is noteworthy [32].

Religiously, mainly in Chechnya, and to a lesser extent in the other republics, there is a confrontation between traditional Sunni (and sometimes also Sufi) Islam, generally in favor of coexistence within the Russian state, and Wahhabism, clearly anti-Russian. [32], which has served as an ideological framework for secessionists since the Second Chechen War.

Russian expansion in the North Caucasus can be dated back to the alliances between Russia and the Christian Georgians during the reign of Ivan IV “The terrible”. But the real spread of the Russian Empire took place between the 18th and 19th centuries, when the region, until then dominated by its own political entities, began to be invaded by Russian troops in order to gain access to the Black Sea, counteracting the Persian and Ottoman influence in the area. That is, the Russian expansion was not due so much to commercial interests as it was geopolitical, unlike other imperial powers [33] (p. 398). Noteworthy are the Russo-Circassian conflict (1763–1864), where Russia conquered the western area, now populated mostly by Russians (being the origin of the Circassian exodus from the Caucasus), and the Caucasus War (1817–1864), in which Russia finalized the conquest of the territory today composed of the non-ethnically Russian republics. Furthermore, in this second conflict, the confrontation between Islam (although the Sufi and Sunni variants also clashed with each other) and Orthodox Christianity became more acute [33] (pp. 404–414).

After the Russian Revolution and the beginning of the Civil War, the non-ethnically Russian part of the region became independent, forming the short-lived Mountainous Republic of the Northern Caucasus (1917–1920), that would become the Mountain Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (1921–1924) after its conquest by the Red Army. After Lenin’s death, the region went through various administrative phases, alternating between a Soviet republic (with high powers), to being an Oblast (a province). However, it is important to mention that the Checheno-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic would exist from 1936 to 1944, and from 1957 to 1991. Its interruption was due to the Chechen-Ingush insurrection supported by the Third Reich against the USSR, which was repressed and answered with the massive deportation subsequent to World War II.

After the fall of the USSR, Chechnya turned, under the leadership of Dzhokhar Dudayev, into the Chechen republic of Ichkeria, without international recognition, but *de facto* independent. Meanwhile, the rest of the North Caucasus remained under the control of the Russian Federation.

The table indicates that the richest Federal Subjects in energy terms are not those who are included in the study; that is, those who have suffered from a secessionist conflict. If we attend the Federal Subjects that are included in the study, the oil amount in Dagestan would be the second most important, after Chechnya, which has gathered proved and probable reserves. However, both Chechnya and Dagestan have “practically the same level of production, which indicates a different degree of depletion of fields and the quality of oil” [34] (p. 3). Besides, “[i]n the Rostov region, the republics of Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia-Alania, there are from two to seven deposits”, while “in the republic of Adygea and the Karachai-Cherkess republic, they are absent” [34] (p. 3).

As we base our analysis only on probed hydrocarbons reserves (in land), the Chechen republic will be the first in our analysis and the third in the region as a whole (43,891 million tons), while “[i]n the rest of the republics, proven reserves range from 3.3 to 9.9 million tons” [34] (p. 3).

Table 1 shows the energy relevance of the inland oil resources of the region:



**Table 1.** Reserves and operating wells in the subjects of the North Caucasus Economic Region (NCER) \* in 2008–2010 [34] (Own translation).

NCER's Federal Subject	Number of Deposits	Proven Oil Reserves, Million Tons	Probable Oil Reserves, Million Tons	Possible Oil Reserves, Million Tons	Number of Oil Wells in Operation			Number of New Production Wells Commissioned		
					2008	2009	2010	2008	2009	2010
Krasnodar Krai	74	5179	183,02	8206	1944	1698	1518	2	0	4
Rostov Oblast	2	194	11,017	22,029	23	24	21	1	1	0
Stavropol Krai	48	8361	2068	12,912	314	304	332	0	0	0
Chechen Republic	22	43,891	157	83,104	233	200	199	1	0	0
Republic of Ingushetia	7	964	804	3728	547	509	598	0	0	0
Kabardino-Balkarian Republic	5	6647	3294	13,039	43	41	46	0	0	0
Republic of Dagestan	37	9914	18,288	94,203	100	101	105	1	0	0
Republic of North Ossetia-Alania	4	3357	134	7697	66	68	71	2	1	1
<b>Total ...</b>	199	210,789	273,439	468,532	3270	2945	2890	7	2	5

\* There are no oil fields in the republic of Adygea and the Karachay-Cherkess republic.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Chechnya: Epicentre of the Conflict

The end of the USSR left Russia in a very weak position, both internally and externally. In fact, Chechnya and Tatarstan, at first, did not pretend to adhere to the Russian Federation in spite of the legal position that the international community had accepted for Russia as the successor of the USSR, with the frontiers that it had in 1991. In Chechnya, the independence movement has gained strength since the mid-1980s and, after the end of the Union, with Dzhokhar Dudayev as head of the movement, it violently took control of the republic after assassinating many members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in Grozny and unilaterally proclaiming independence. This caused Boris Yeltsin to intervene “manu militari” in the First Chechen War (1994–1996), which ended with the signing of a ceasefire and the Moscow Peace Treaty, leaving the Chechen republic of Ichkeria *de facto* independent and Dudayev dead, ultimately resulting in an apparent freezing of the conflict. The casualties of the war are difficult to count because Russian and other official sources vary widely, but there were several thousand casualties reported on both sides, along with tens of thousands of civilian casualties.

Additionally, there was an attempt by Chechnya to adhere to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline project and to the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA), but it did not change from being a project for a hypothetically independent Chechnya [32]. The *de facto* independent republic kept its economy on three pillars: illegal weapons selling, the payment of hostage ransoms (civil and military), and the sale of various goods without tax charges [35] (p. 380).

“Supplies flowed in via the almost entirely uncontrolled air connection (Grozny had an international air-port between 1990 and 1994). The shuttle trade economy was based on goods imported from abroad free of federal taxes and customs, which were sold across the whole of the Northern Caucasus” [35] (p. 380).

After the First Chechen War, multitudes of military personnel, members of different nationalities of the Red Cross, and political representatives of peoples of the Caucasus, as well as civilians, were killed inside and outside Chechnya, near the borders, even including five British communications engineers [32]. This meant an important security risk for any person that was close to the Chechen republic because, after Dudayev’s death, extremism increased significantly.

During the 1997–2005 period, under Aslan Maskhadov’s presidency, “Chechnya exploited the ambiguity of its position between political independence and being formally part of Russia” [35] (p. 380). While important income was generated from refining oil, and factually Chechnya acted as an independent commercial actor (attempts were made to create a Chechen state company, Grozneft), the Federation provided the Chechen republic with gas, pensions, and energy supply, so there were evident tensions between the *de facto* independent Ichkeria and Russia [35] (p. 380).

As a result of the Chechen invasion of Dagestan by several Islamic warlords in 1999 and terrorist attacks in the rest of Russia, the Federation intervened in the Chechen republic in order to finish its *de facto* independence and put a break on the Islamist threat. This conflict is known as the Second Chechen War (1999–2009), and it differed from the previous because of the Islamist factor. Actually, there was a civil war in Chechnya between, on one hand, religious extremists and anti-Russian partisans, whose leader was firstly Shamil Basayev and, later on, was Doku Umarov, with Al-Qaeda and Mujahidin support, and on the other hand, Chechen dissidents originally led by Akhmat Kadyrov (later known as Kadyrovites). This conflict had firstly a short-lived conventional war phase because, by April 2000, Russian and Kadyrovite troops took control of Grozny and abolished the republic of Ichkeria. From that moment, a high-intensity terrorist insurgency would begin throughout all Russia under the protection of a virtual Islamic State called the Emirate of the Caucasus, a terrorist group that operates to this day inside and outside Russia (among others: Moscow theatre crisis of 2002, the Beslan massacre in 2004, and bombings in the Moscow underground in 2010). In fact, there has been a diplomatic conflict ever since Russia accused Georgia of sheltering these terrorist groups on its borders, allowing them to operate against Russian forces. This served as a further precedent to the subsequent war between Russia and Georgia.

During the insurgency phase of the war (2000–2009), Russia promoted the centralization of competences and, therefore, the direct control of the territory by Moscow. A new constitution for Chechnya was created and approved by referendum on 23 March 2003. Moreover, Russia started a “chechenization” policy by installing Chechen pro-Russian elites [19] (pp. 28, 29). However, this has ultimately led to a drastic decline in the Russian population in Chechnya and to unilateral operations by Kadyrov [19] (pp. 37, 39, 40). Furthermore, Russia ensured the weakening of the secessionists by offering posts in security structures to Chechens and by controlling financial and arms flows [35] (p. 380).

Officially, the war ended in 2009 [36], transiting the conflict to a low-intensity insurgency phase. The consequences of the war were, on the one hand, the reestablishment of Russian control over the Chechen territory, although Grozny was almost destroyed and the entire republic’s economic condition became miserable, remaining under the command of the Russian federal subject Akhmat Kadyrov and, after his assassination, his son, Ramzan. On the other hand, there were multiple casualties (over 25,000, according to an international amnesty, split between civilians, military, and victims of attacks in Russia) and accusations of human rights violations on both sides against the Chechen civilian population (as well as from other terrorist attacks outside Chechnya). Furthermore, throughout this conflict, the jihadist factor would become so powerful that former members of the Ichkeria republic, until then anti-Russian, such as Akhmed Zakayev, would be declared enemies of the Emi-

rate and invited by Ramzan Kadyrov to return to Chechnya as a sample of social Chechen reintegration after the war against religious extremism.

Since then, the struggle is referred to as the insurgency in the North Caucasus (2009–2017), consisting of a low-intensity conflict between state forces and Islamist terrorists from the North Caucasus (part of ISIS), that, mainly, operated in Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia Kabardino-Balkaria, and in North Ossetia-Alania to a lesser extent. In any case, Putin's administration has proved that its attitude is mainly reactive to what happens in the region, exercising policies based almost exclusively on a military security point of view [19] (p. 46).

“Only in Chechnya did the insurgency aim at and temporarily succeed in taking over main assets of the state. This initially focused on revenues from extraction and refining of oil, sale of arms, and money embezzled from federal transfers aimed at rebuilding the struggling economy” [35] (p. 380).

The period after 2009 is characterized by a low-intensity conflict between Russia and the Islamic separatists integrated into the Caucasus Emirate, an organization that is supported by Al-Qaeda and the Mujahidin. This conflict is considered to have finished by the end of 2017, when the Federal Security Service (FSB) announced that it had beheaded almost all North Caucasian terrorism [37].

Economically, Chechnya rose upon two pillars, agriculture and the oil industry, although its oil production is not important for overall Russian protection due to its almost drained deposits and its outdated infrastructure (which, in many cases, was destroyed because of the conflict). Yet, Chechnya still has a great geo-energy relevance, as it:

“[I]s an important part of the ‘Gordian knot’ that is the oil issue in the North Caucasus: its territory is a transit area for oil that is extracted from the Caspian Sea, particularly the Azeri. The barely 150 km of the Baku-Grozny-Novorossisk pipeline that passes through Chechen territory make up one of the most complicated issues in Russian-Chechen relations” [23] (p. 109).

#### Geo-Energy and Geopolitical Benefits

Russian intervention and the Alliance with the Kadyrovites has resulted in a protection of Russian territorial integrity because, by disarticulating the republic of Ichkeria and then mitigating the later conflict in Chechnya, the threat of an epicenter of violence in North Caucasus has decreased dramatically. In addition, control is maintained with part of the Georgia border, a country that has recently proved its opposition to Russian interest in the Caucasus.

However, the economy of the Chechen republic was destroyed, and although there are signs of recovery [38,39], Chechnya is still one of the poorest regions in the Federation. Besides, the oil in Chechnya is used by the Kadyrov-Putin complex within the framework of energy nationalism, although conflicts could appear between both partners in the future related to the benefits of these resources. As evidence, we can point out (and, to some extent, generalize) the practice of “puncturing” oil; that is, extracting and illegally selling oil on the black market [23] (p. 109).

The end of the conflict in Chechnya ensured Russian control over more than 20 crude deposits, with 43.891 million tons of oil as proven reserves, and as many tens of millions of tons yet to be tested (see Table 1).

As Marcu points out: “Chechnya is extremely important, from a strategic point of view, for Russia, since it concentrates the main routes from the core of the Federation to the Black and the Caspian Sea, being also transited by the oil and natural gas pipelines of Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan” [31] (p. 102).

The current status quo, as we have noted, is control by President Kadyrov of all oil production, both of the 44,000 barrels per day and of the oil that is suspected of being produced and sold illegally: “The illegal oil—either produced and processed in a basic

plant, or stolen from the pipeline or wells—is taken by car for sale in the neighboring republics of Ingushetia, Dagestan, and North Ossetia” [40] (p. 1). Besides, Chechnya has gas reserves, evidence of which is its greater gas production in the whole of Russia than the republic of Dagestan.

#### 4.2. Dagestan: The Region’s Energy Key

Dagestan has been considered by many Chechens as a fundamental part of their hypothetical Emirate of the Caucasus. This opinion was shared by some Sufi terrorists from Dagestan (Dagestan Shura, trained in independent Chechnya), which ended in an invasion by Islamist Chechen militiamen from the neighboring republic in 1999, led by the aforementioned Basayev. The invasion mobilized a few thousand people, resulting in a victory for the republic of Dagestan and Russia, and originally was a *casus belli* of the Second Chechen War. All in all, Dagestan is a republic badly hit by insurgency in the North Caucasus, particularly in the first years of the 2010s, where the differences between the territory controlled by the republic, on the one hand, and the small communities living according to the Sharia led to the climate of a small-scale civil war [41]. The escalation decreased significantly throughout the decade, with the end of the terrorist groups in Dagestan announced in 2017 [42], although it remains to be seen whether the many Islamists (particularly Chechens) who joined ISIS in the Syrian civil war [43] can reactivate the conflict once they return to the North Caucasus:

“In Dagestan, the insurgency never came close to capturing the state. Here, competition for limited economic resources between strategic political groups remained a main aspect influencing the insurgency. Land, fish, and caviar from the Caspian Sea, and oil in the north of Dagestan comprise its material base” [35] (p. 381).

We must remember that Dagestan is a very poor federal subject, where the majority of Dagestanis survive on a monthly income of less than US \$ 660 for the entire family, typically consisting of four to five individuals [22] (p. 345). This has provoked significant unrest and resulted in a breeding ground for Islamic fundamentalism; even though, in recent years, it has strongly diminished, a new reorganization of the *jamaats* in a new rebellion it’s not impossible.

Economically, Dagestan has several pillars, with industry oriented to the construction of cars, agriculture, and, of course, the extraction of gas and oil. Although, in the case of gas, its production is less than that of Chechnya, remaining a resource destined to local needs. Its fields “range along Dagestan’s Caspian Sea coast between Makhachkala and the southern Dagestani city of Izberbash [ . . . ]” containing “estimated oil reserves of 340 million tons and 540 billion cubic meters of natural gas” [22] (p. 345).

#### Geo-Energy Benefits

With the appeasement of the conflict in Dagestan, Russia kept control over the most important republic in geopolitical and medium-term energy terms.

We are, certainly, talking about one of the most punished republics, but also the only one with a coastline on the Caspian Sea, where Russia will be able to benefit, surely, from up to 2 billion tons of hydrocarbons [24] (p. 2), although its possible amount of resources (focusing, above all, on oil and gas extraction in the Sea) oscillates between 7 and 20 billion tons of hydrocarbons (p. 1). Specifically, the Dagestan oil and gas fields are mainly located in the area between the cities of Makhachkala and Izberbash (p. 2). However, of the 36 oil fields, most are almost exhausted or have few reserves, so that production indicators have continued to drop over the years [34] (p. 4). In addition, Dagestan ensures (from its inland resources) control of 9.914 million tons of oil, with several dozen other likely sources (see Table 1).

Furthermore, by controlling the coast, Russia can impede energy supply from Kazakhstan to Europe (similarly to the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline). By doing so, it is easier

for Russia to maintain its power over the European Union making a successful transition toward green energies. Losing control of Dagestan would allow the creation of a direct pipeline from Kazajstan to Georgia, avoiding Russian territory, without even using Azerbaijan's land and its dangerous border with Armenia, thereby weakening Russia's grip on the European Union.

#### 4.3. Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria: Extension of the Conflict

These republics have not suffered, unlike Chechnya and Dagestan, a relatively non-interrupted conflict, but have undergone several episodes of low-intensity, militia, and terrorist attacks and elective assassinations since the end of the USSR. At the beginning, in 1992, there was a very short-lived (one week) conflict in the region of East Prigorodni, a region from North Ossetia that borders Ingushetia, between local Ingushes and Ossetians. This "small" conflict resulted in hundreds of deaths and thousands of displaced people. During both Chechen wars, many Ingush participated, mainly, on the Chechen separatist side of the conflict, as there was an Ingush independence movement linked to Chechen and Islamic separatism embodied in the Caucasus Emirate spread.

After 2007, following an attempt to assassinate the president of Ingushetia, Murat Zyazikov, Russia deployed a powerful anti-terrorist operation in the republic due to the escalation of these actions, which were evidently connected to the Islamist Chechens. This conflict is known as the "War in Ingushetia" and, in 2015, the current President of Ingushetia, Yunus-bek Yevkurov, declared that the insurgency had been defeated in the republic [44].

In 2005, an incursion into the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria was made by Islamist troops, and although it was successfully defended by Russian troops [19] (pp. 34, 42, 43, 51), it was an example of the good organization of the *jamaats*, local communities of Muslims who, within the framework of the Islamic trend of the same name, meet to share activities of a spiritual nature. In the North Caucasus, they served as the basis for opposition to secular Soviet communism. From 2010 to 2014, there was a resurgence of terrorist violence, although since then the situation has normalized due to the decapitation of the Caucasus Emirate in the republic.

In Kabardino-Balkaria, the centralization and elite replacement policies have been a relative success as the most radical Islam in the region has now lost power. A tough attitude against radical Islam was a key factor in the 2005 insurgency [19] (p. 43).

#### Geo-Energy Benefits

Ingushetia has proven oil reserves in similar numbers to the Dagestan inland reserves (without counting the Caspian Sea's reserves): 9.64 million tons, and another 8 million tons of probable reserves, while Kabardino-Balkaria has fewer reserves: 6.65 million tons of proven reserves and 3 million tons of probable reserves (see Table 1).

However, the level of efficiency in the extraction of these resources, as well as the downward trend in its profitability in the medium term (because the fields are in a very advanced stage of exploitation), is evident. As Panaedova says: "[T]here are 598 oil wells in the republic of Ingushetia, and oil production is about 80 thousand tons of oil per year, while, nine years ago, production was at the level of 200 thousand tons per year. The reasons for the decline in production are irrational operation of existing wells and management errors. All fields are in the final stages of development due to high water cut (up to 85%), significant equipment wear (up to 77.5%) and declining production" [34] (p. 4).

Moreover, the Kabardino-Balkaria republic has five small gas fields, where large scale oil production is impossible. "[S]ince the beginning of the development of all fields, production has made up 5.133 million tonnes. In 2011, production did not exceed 0.004 million tonnes, with real oil reserves in the republic being 3.2 million tonnes" [34] (p. 4)

There are no relevant gas deposits in both republics.

## 5. Conclusions

Russia, in contrast to the European Union, which pursues, with the “European Green Deal”, ideological and environmental goals, follows a real-politik strategy. The EU’s “European Green Deal” does not take the Russian geo-political ambitions fully into account. As long as the European Union continues to depend on Russian energy supplies, the EU remains vulnerable and the success of the “European Green Deal” is in danger.

We have shown how Russia has acted to defend geopolitical interests related to energy. Of course, Russia has also defended its territorial integrity. Indeed, the end of the Soviet Union led to the reappearance of multiple ethnic and religious conflicts, both inside and outside of the current Russian Federation. In the external cases, Russia has intervened to maintain its political influence and assure its “Near Abroad”, opposing the EU and NATO expanse in post-soviet countries. Its internal conflicts have been concentrated in the historical region of the North Caucasus, where its intervention has sought to protect its national sovereignty and achieve two geo-energy objectives:

- (1) To avoid losing territory in the region, which would facilitate an energy supply line from Central Asia to Europe and the European Union in particular. This was especially relevant in the case of Dagestan.
- (2) To keep control of the North Caucasian resources; although there is no great amount of proven hydrocarbons reserves, its control assures social peace in the region. Moreover, Dagestan holds a large portion of the Caspian Sea coast. The control of Dagestan will become important when, in the future, the reserves located at the Caspian Sea are exploited, particularly if the Caspian Sea is considered finally a lake and not an internal sea.

The intervention in the rebel Chechen republic, and the region as a whole during the Islamic insurgence phase, has assured the protection of Russian sovereignty in the North Caucasus in all the republics. Yet a conflict between the current Chechen elites and the Federation cannot be ruled out if discrepancies with respect to their pact appear.

The geo-energy factor has not been especially relevant in the Kabardino-Balkaria and Ingushetia republics, and even in Chechnya it has been an instrumental tool for social peace more than a key factor for Russian intervention (yet its reserves still surpass the other republics). This means that, by seeing the republics as different units of analysis, the hypothesis by which Russian intervention had a strategic and mainly geo-energy objective is not fulfilled. Nevertheless, by integrating all the federal subjects with Dagestan, that is, analyzing the intervention as a unity, due to the powerful spill-over effect of the conflicts in the region, the hypothesis is confirmed because of the strategic and energy relevance of Dagestan, which is represented in:

- (i) The huge amount of resources, mainly natural gas (up to 2 billion tons of hydrocarbons), of the Caspian Sea that Russia can use because they control Dagestan;
- (ii) There being a frontier with southern Azerbaijan and Georgia, which have been part of the Russian challenge in the South Caucasus region, connected to the Russian energy interest in Europe’s energy supplies;
- (iii) And, finally, the position of Dagestan and Kazakhstan on the Caspian Sea, in relation to the previous point, because Dagestan could be key for the creation of a corridor from Central Asia to Europe bordering Russia.

Therefore, we argue that the Russian intervention in the North Caucasus’s secessionist conflict has significantly benefited its geo-energy interests in the following dimensions: reserves, territorial security and control, and protection of national sovereignty. The Russian interventions in the North Caucasus perfectly illustrate that Russia has a clear strategy of defending its geo-energy interests. A “European Green Deal” certainly affects Russia’s geo-energy interests. For a successful implementation of the “European Green Deal”, the role of Russia, its interests, and the question of energy security has been neglected. Further research must investigate the intricate implications of Russian interests in the “European Green Deal”. We conclude that the success of the “European Green Deal” would have

important geopolitical repercussion by making the European Union less dependent of the Russian energy superpower.

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