

Russia's Gridlock in Chechnya: "Normalization" or Deterioration?

While Russian President Vladimir Putin has for several years been arguing that the war in Chechnya is an anti-terrorist operation and that the situation in the war-torn republic is normalizing, the events of spring and summer 2004 provide ample evidence that the official Russian description of the situation is increasingly at variance with reality. The killing of Chechnya's pro-Russian president in May, the subsequent attempt to assassinate his successor, the daring rebel raid on the capital of the neighbouring republic of Ingushetia, and, most recently, the taking of over 1,000 people hostage in a school in the North Ossetian town of Beslan are only the most obvious and spectacular evidence that Russia is failing to win the war in Chechnya. In fact, it is increasingly clear that Russia's strategy of trying to turn the war into an intra-Chechen confrontation is not leading to the desired results. Far from it, instability has become endemic and the war has led to Chechnya's "Afghanization" as the fabric of society has collapsed, providing fertile ground for extremism and militancy. As long as the war in Chechnya goes on and Russia seeks a solution solely via military means and repression, the security situation in the North Caucasus will continue to deteriorate.

An Anti-Terror Campaign?

Since the first Chechen war began in 1994, the Russian government has portrayed the war as one being fought against bandits and Islamic fundamentalists – increasingly referred to, especially after 11 September 2001, simply as "terrorists". Western powers long refrained from accepting the Russian position at face value, instead seeing the conflict primarily as an ethnic war. While recognizing Russia's territorial integrity, both Western and Islamic powers held the Chechen rebels to be more or less legitimate representatives of the Chechen people, considering that Chechen leader Aslan Maskhadov was elected in a ballot deemed free and fair in 1997. Moreover, the international community repeatedly condemned the Russian military's massive human rights violations in the prosecution of the war; Russia was even briefly suspended from voting in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe over its conduct in Chechnya.

During the course of the second Chechen war, which began in October 1999 and rages to this day, there has been increasing concern at the radicalization of parts of the Chechen resistance movement and its links to extremist Islamic groups in the Middle East. September 11 brought about a paradigm

shift in world politics, and Chechnya has since been one of the areas most affected by the increased global political focus on terrorism. Immediately after the terrorist attacks on the United States, the Russian leadership began drawing comparisons with the situation in Chechnya. Only hours after the collapse of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, Russian state television broadcast a statement by President Putin expressing solidarity with the American people, but also reminding the audience of Russia's earlier warnings of the common threat of "Islamic fundamentalism". This marked the beginning of a strategy that aimed to capitalize on the tragic attacks on America by highlighting the alleged parallels between them and the situation in Chechnya. "The Russian people understand the American people better than anyone else, having experienced terrorism first-hand," President Putin said the day after the attacks.¹

This turned out to be the harbinger of a diplomatic campaign targeted at Western countries, which was intended to shore up the legitimacy of, if not support for, the Russian army's violent crackdown in Chechnya.² This campaign was part and parcel of a five-step strategy to reduce the negative fallout of the war in Chechnya. The first component of that strategy had been to isolate the conflict zone and prevent both Russian and international media from reporting on the conflict independently. The kidnapping of Andrei Babitsky, a reporter for Radio Liberty, served as an early warning for journalists of the consequences of ignoring Moscow's rules. Since then, only a few journalists have actually been able to provide independent reports from Chechnya. Most prominent have been Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya and French writer Anne Nivat. The second prong in the strategy was to rename the conflict: Instead of a "war", it was an "anti-terrorist operation". Third, and stemming directly from this, Russia sought to discredit the Chechen struggle and undermine its leadership by accusing them individually and collectively of involvement with terrorism. Russia's campaign against Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov's chief negotiator, Akhmed Zakayev, is one example of this. It backfired, however, as first Denmark and then Great Britain refused to extradite Zakayev to Russia, Britain instead providing him with political asylum. Zakayev's freedom to travel nevertheless remains restricted as long as Russia's Interpol warrant on him remains in place. Fourth, Russia sought to "Chechenize" the conflict and turn it into an intra-Chechen confrontation by setting up and arming a brutal but ethnically Chechen puppet regime in Grozny under the former Mufti of the republic, Akhmad Kadyrov. It was hoped that this would reduce Russian casualties and enable the conflict to be depicted as a war between Chechen factions that Russia was helping to

1 RTR (Russian State Television), 12 September 2001, 1300 GMT (this and all subsequent translations from non-English sources by the author). See also Francesca Mereu, U.S.: Russia Says Chechen Conflict Aids "Understanding" Of U.S. Tragedy, RFE/RL, 14 September 2001.

2 Cf. Janusz Bugajski, Beware of Putin Bearing Gifts, in: *The Washington Times*, 10 October 2001.

bring under control. Fifth, after branding the war an anti-terrorist campaign, discrediting the rebel leadership, and trying to turn the war into a civil war among Chechens, Russia declared that the war was over. As will be seen below, this is increasingly difficult to argue.

Although European countries and the United States have kept up a moderate but noticeable level of criticism against Russia's massive human rights violations in Chechnya during both the first war in 1994-1996 and the present one, Russia has had a certain degree of success in convincing Western observers that it is not fighting a people, but terrorists.³ The first achievement in this campaign was the statement made by German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder during Putin's state visit to Berlin on September 25 that "Regarding Chechnya, there will be and must be a more differentiated evaluation in world opinion."⁴ This was followed by US President George W. Bush's statement in which he demanded Chechen forces sever links to terrorist forces, including Bin Laden.⁵ On the whole, the September 11 attacks have given Russia a chance to reshape its relations with Europe and the USA, as evidenced by the new climate of relations between Moscow and Brussels. In an atmosphere of increased co-operation between Russia and the West, with America needing Russian intelligence and co-operation in Afghanistan, a halt to criticism on Chechnya has become the foremost concession Russia has managed to extract from the West in return for its co-operation. As a result of the tacit acceptance of his anti-terrorist agenda, President Putin has, since 2002, moved on to claim that the war in Chechnya is over and that, with the reconstruction of Chechnya, things are in the process of returning to normal. Indeed, for a time Russia did manage to keep down the level of the conflict, which was gradually turning into a low-intensity confrontation. In the meantime, in 2003, Russia tried to physically decimate the Chechen leadership by eliminating some of its leading figures, such as field commander Ruslan Gelayev, the Islamist Mujahideen commander Abu al-Walid, and exiled Chechen former interim President Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, who was killed by Russian agents in Qatar. However, with the increase of suicide operations during 2003-2004 and the growth of armed clashes inside Chechnya in 2004, the Russian argument that the war is over does not stand up to scrutiny.

3 The record of Russian violations of laws of war is amply documented by Human Rights Watch, at: <http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/russia/chechnya/>.

4 Roland Eggleston, Germany: Schroeder Hints At Change In Opinion On Chechnya, RFE/RL, 26 September 2001.

5 Cf. Roland Wattson/Vanora Bennett, Bush Sides with Putin against Chechen Rebels, in: *The Times*, 27 September 2001.

The War's Human Toll and the Roots of Extremism

The extremist-terrorist aspect of the conflict in Chechnya is a distinctly alien phenomenon, grafted upon the Chechen struggle. It is a result of the war, and not, as Moscow argues, a cause of the conflict. Foreign Islamic radicals gained ground in Chechnya only after the first war, in the anarchy that followed the total destruction of Chechnya in 1994-96. It is the war that makes it possible for the foreign radical groups, who have no natural support in Chechen society, to thrive in Chechnya. Even during the chaotic period of *de facto* Chechen independence in 1996-99, the radicals were isolated in a small area in south-eastern Chechnya. In 1999, President Maskhadov even warned Moscow of their possible intentions and asked for help from Moscow to combat them, but received no response.⁶

The "Afghanization" of Chechnya

More importantly, it is the war that is enabling the radicals to attract followers in Chechnya. However minor their following may be at present, it is clearly growing. This process can be termed the "Afghanization of Chechnya". This comparison with Afghanistan in the early 1990s is illustrative as that country provides an example of how warfare leads to the destruction of the fabric of a society. Most civil wars shake society to the core and endanger the lives of citizens as long as the fighting continues. Yet war does not necessarily destroy the possibility of restoring normality relatively rapidly after hostilities cease. The economic and psychological effects of the war may be tremendous, but a basic economy, basic education, health care, social norms of behaviour, etc. normally remain. In sum, the social capital of the society remains in place. Some conflicts, however, due to their brutality and length, do destroy the very foundations of society. Afghanistan is a prominent example. More or less the entire population of Afghanistan was directly affected by 23 years of war. Of a population of roughly 20 million, approximately 1.5 to two million were killed; a similar number wounded or maimed; six million made refugees in other countries; and several million forced into internal displacement. Over 50 per cent of the population was thus either killed, injured, or displaced. Beyond this staggering human toll, the basic infrastructure of society was demolished. Communication systems, from roads to telecommunications, were destroyed; the healthcare and educational systems wiped out. Earning a living was made dangerous or impossible by the ten million landmines that had been laid throughout the country; law and order broke down in the early 1990s, to be replaced at first by anarchy and lawlessness as the "Kalashnikov culture" spread throughout the country. Pillage, killings, and rape were no longer exceptional events. The very emergence of the Taliban

6 Cf. Brian Williams, Unravelling the Links between the Middle East and Islamic Militants in Chechnya, in: *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 12 February 2003.

also testified to the destruction of both traditional and modern social norms. The tribal structures of authority were undermined by the war; traditionally tolerant Afghan society was invaded by alien, extremist ideas that gained dominance, a process that only culminated with the Taliban – a group originating in the refugee communities in Iran and especially in Pakistan, young men that never knew peace, that grew up in war and knew nothing but war. Whatever we think of the Taliban’s policies or worldview, we cannot ignore the fact that their existence and their way of thinking was a direct product of the war that had devastated their families and their lives, and put them in exile where they were taken care of by extremist militias that inculcated in them their austere and violence-prone beliefs.

The dire picture of Afghanistan unfortunately applies to Chechnya in far too many ways. In terms of the human toll of the war, a similar share of Chechnya’s population has been killed – perhaps over 100,000 people. As in Afghanistan, over half of the population has been killed, injured, or displaced. Likewise, the extreme brutality of the Russian military’s campaign has destroyed the foundation of Chechen society. People are being killed, maimed, abducted, tortured, and raped at will by the authorities that are supposed to uphold law and order; no one is safe in Chechnya at any time. The foundations of the economy have also been destroyed. The annihilation of Chechnya’s infrastructure needs no mention – the extent of the damage becomes clear if one merely compares a satellite picture of Grozny taken in 1994 with one from 2002. In the countryside, agriculture has been ruined by a general absence of livestock and seeds; the bulk of farm animals have either died from the effects of the war or were deliberately killed by Russian forces. The oil economy that once existed has, for the most part, been physically eliminated.

The Destruction of a Generation

A generation of Chechens is growing up either in destroyed villages in Chechnya under the constant threat of mopping-up operations or *zachistkas*, or in refugee camps in Ingushetia. This generation, much like the Afghans in refugee camps outside Quetta or Peshawar, is growing up without any conceivable hope of a normal life in the future. As Anna Politkovskaya puts it, retelling her encounter with one of the hostage takers in Moscow in October 2002:

This is a certain generation of modern Chechens. Bakar is one of those who has known nothing but a machinegun and the forest for the last decade, and before that he’d only just finished school. And so, gradually, the forest became the only life that is possible.⁷

7 Anna Politkovskaya, *My Hours Inside the Moscow Theatre*, in: Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), *IWPR Caucasus Reporting Service*, No. 153, 31 October 2002.

The younger generation of Chechens may already be damaged beyond repair. Psychologists have noted the difference between children coming to refugee camps in Ingushetia at the beginning of the war in 1999 and those that left Chechnya during the war. Whereas “it was possible to protect the first group from severe traumatic situations”, the second group tends “to be withdrawn, irritable, quick to take offence or aggressive”.⁸ A recent WHO study concluded that 86 per cent of Chechens studied suffered from physical or emotional distress, and 31 per cent from post-traumatic stress syndrome. Whether or not these figures are accurate, it is obvious that the psychological consequences of the war on the adult population, not to mention the children of Chechnya, have long since reached crisis proportions. As a consequence, the percentage that are attracted to radical Islamic beliefs will almost certainly be considerably higher among this generation of Chechens than among the current fighters.

Russia’s “normalization” seems to have little effect on either the war or the civilian population. In April 2004, four human rights groups issued a joint statement concluding that the situation of civilians was worsening, not improving. During the first three months of 2004, 80 people were abducted, mainly by pro-Russian Chechen groups. Russian security services began explicitly targeting the widows of killed Chechen resistance fighters, whom they have come to see as potential suicide bombers.⁹

Anything but Normal: The Resurgence of Violence

The experience of the past few months shows that the ills affecting Chechnya seem to be intensifying and spreading. Large Chechen refugee populations have been living in refugee camps in Ingushetia for several years, and they are increasingly subjected to pressure to return to Chechnya as a part of Russia’s policy of normalization. In simple terms, Russia needed refugees to return to Chechnya for its claims of normalization to be credible. However, the conditions in Chechnya mean that most refugees adamantly refuse to return. At the same time, repression in Ingushetia grew in the first half of 2004, as increasing numbers of civilians were abducted or disappeared, as in Chechnya, and media censorship intensified.¹⁰

The Murder of Akhmad Kadyrov

On 9 May 2004, pro-Russian Chechen President Akhmad Kadyrov was killed by a bomb buried in the concrete under the VIP section of the Grozny sta-

8 Asiyat Vazayeva, *The Mental Scars of Chechnya’s Children*, in: Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), *IWPR Caucasus Reporting Service*, No. 165, 6 February 2003.

9 Cf. Jamestown Foundation, *Chechnya Weekly*, No. 15, 14 April 2004.

10 Cf. Jamestown Foundation, *Chechnya Weekly*, No. 16, 21 April 2004.

dium, as Kadyrov was attending a Victory Day parade. The killing was a severe blow for President Putin, whose policy had been to eliminate all possible rivals to Kadyrov and rely on him for Russian control over Chechnya. In fact, Kadyrov's position had become so strong that Russian analysts had begun to worry about a possible future confrontation between Kadyrov and Russia.¹¹ Indeed, shortly before the assassination, Kadyrov and his son, who headed the dreaded presidential guards, had talked about the need for Russian troops to leave Chechnya. After the assassination, rebel attacks greatly intensified, leading Russian observers to state that the situation had reverted to how it had been two or three years earlier.¹² Attacks were now taking place inside the capital Grozny again.¹³ On July 13, rebels narrowly failed to assassinate the interim president of Chechnya, Sergei Abramov, in Grozny, while killing his bodyguard.¹⁴

The War Spreads: A Daring Raid in Ingushetia

Finally, on June 21, armed guerrillas attacked the headquarters of the interior ministry in Ingushetia and several other government buildings and official structures in a number of towns. This was the first large-scale rebel infantry attack in several years, and the first on a territory outside Chechnya since 1999. Sixty-two policemen and officials were killed, as well as numerous civilians. Moreover, the fact that this was a direct assault rather than a hit-and-run attack or a bombing proved that the rebel forces possessed planning and co-ordination capabilities that many observers thought they no longer had. Even worse for the Kremlin was the fact that investigations into the raid showed that the majority of those who carried it out were in all likelihood Ingush and not Chechens.¹⁵ While details remain murky, the most plausible evidence suggest that those involved were mostly Ingush that had left to fight in Chechnya – just some of a growing number of young Ingush who have turned to Islamic militancy as a result of the poverty, corruption, and increasingly harsh repression in the republic since the presidency of Ingushetia was taken over by a former Federal Security Service (FSB) officer, Murat Zyazikov. Following the raid, the Ingush authorities have been criticized for their long-term neglect of rising Islamic militancy in the republic. The critics included the Ingush Mufti Magomed-Hadji Albogachiev, who resigned shortly after the events. A Chechen website later reported that Ingush rebels had declared a *Jihad* against the republican authorities, implying that the war

11 According to Anna Politkovskaya, speaking at the Silk Road Studies Forum, Uppsala University, February 2004.

12 Cf. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 27 May 2004.

13 Cf. Jamestown Foundation, *Chechnya Weekly*, No. 22, 2 June 2004.

14 Cf. Mine Attack Hits Chechen Leader's Convoy, Reuters, 13 July 2004; C.J. Chivers, Chechen Leader Escapes Separatist Bomb Attack, *New York Times*, 14 July 2004.

15 Cf. *RFE/RL Caucasus Report*, No. 29, 23 July 2004.

in Chechnya, far from normalizing, may be turning into a larger Chechen-Ingush war.¹⁶

Conclusion

The longer the war goes on, and the longer the Russian brutality continues, the more recruits the Islamic radicals will find. Russia would argue that precisely because Chechnya is becoming a hotbed of extremism, it needs to destroy the “terrorists” and restore order in Chechnya. But Russia has been fighting this war for over four years and is no closer to victory than it was at the outset. As long as Moscow does not win the war, it will continue to lose it. It is clear now, in the light of Russia’s defeat in 1996 and the current stalemate, that Russia is unable to win the war, which threatens to spread outside Chechnya as a result of the heavy-handed policies of the Russian government in the North Caucasus. The increase in fighting in 2004 and the ever more daring raids and attacks that the rebels are able to mount indicate that the war in Chechnya is no sense about to abate. As long as it goes on, the spiral of violence will continue, and the Chechen population – and perhaps other North Caucasian populations – will become increasingly radicalized.

The obvious conclusion that can be drawn from an analysis of the situation in Chechnya is that the ongoing war is not an anti-terrorist operation but a brutal war against an entire people, which generates anarchy and chaos in which the criminalization of all fighting forces can take place. In turn, the war allows for Islamic extremists from outside Chechnya to find a base there and in the North Caucasus in general, and to gradually influence a generation growing up with little or no hope for their future. Russia’s war in Chechnya cannot fail to create extremism and sow the seeds of terrorism. Russia’s portrayal of a war on “Islamic terrorism” is hence based on claims that do not stand up to scrutiny. Evidence presented by human rights organizations make it abundantly clear that Russia’s prosecution of the war in Chechnya is exacting a high toll on the local population. The indiscriminate bombings of Chechen villages, the use of non-conventional weapons such as vacuum bombs, the systematic use of concentration camps, and the brutality of the *zachistkas* all indicate that this is not an anti-terrorist operation but a war against an entire people.

Moscow’s response to the crisis in Summer 2004 indicates little acceptance of this reality. It is continuing the same policy of seeking to Chechenize the conflict and support Chechen formations that are to take over the fight against the rebels. The Kremlin simply replaced Kadyrov with the then interior minister of Chechnya, Alu Alkhanov. Credible and more neutral candidates are being taken off the ballot by a variety of administrative measures, and it was clear long before the August 29 elections that the elections would

16 Cf. Jamestown Foundation, *Chechnya Weekly*, No. 28, 14 July 2004.

be anything but free and fair, but would rather amount to no more than the appointment by Moscow of the next Chechen leader. As a result, Russia will once again have a puppet in Chechnya that may say the right things to Moscow, but it is equally clear that this leadership will not be seen as legitimate by the Chechen population. As long as that is the case, there is no prospect for true normalization in Chechnya.