

## THE REAL AND IMAGINED ABOUT THE CONFLICT IN CHECHNIA

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Nearly all discussions about the military confrontation between Russia and Chechnia boil down to the questions: Who is more to blame for the war, and who needs it now? To prove their point, the sides exploit not only real, but also invented arguments.

### Who is To Blame?

On the eve of the first military campaign, well-known political scientist A. Avtorkhanov tried to convince President of Chechnia Jokhar Dudaev that confrontation with Russia should be avoided, and described, in so many words, the catastrophe it would bring the Chechens.

The names of those who started the fight (both in Russia and in Chechnia) are well known; much is known about them. Their surprising political "achievements" can hardly be explained by their strong intellectual powers or other commendable personal features. In Chechnia, nearly all of them, with the exception of Dudaev, were regarded as not very likeable characters. Later, Chechens tended to think that the majority of the new leaders served the Russian special services. But all the same...

The influence of foreign political and economic participants is less perceptible, yet it can still be felt. The majority of the republic's population, and the majority of the polled, believe that it was the Russian leaders who played the decisive role in these processes and who proved unable to avoid the grave consequences for both sides in the conflict. It was Akhmad Kadyrov who, when talking in the Svoboda slova (Freedom of Speech) program (the NTV channel) on 20 February, 2004, accused the Kremlin of the tragedy. To tell the truth, those of the Chechens who sided with the Federal Center find it hard to agree with this; Kadyrov's words came as a complete surprise.

At the same time, even though various political forces are suspected, even though there are doubts about the degree of their guilt, and even though people are convinced of the aims Russia is pursuing in Chechnia, many of the Chechens are accusing the Chechens themselves of the tragic events. It is hardly possible to correctly identify the true nature of the events and the role various forces play in them without a scholarly analysis of the sociopolitical and ethnic processes unfolding on the eve of the invasion and without special studies of what the sides in the conflict (especially the Russian troops and special services) were doing.

### Is Ethnic Mentality a Conflict Factor?

Among the factors that finally led to the armed conflict, the Chechen's mentality, namely their craving for freedom, which the nation has preserved despite the many years of oppression, played a special

role. At no time were the Chechens an equal part of Russia's social structure: ethnic confrontation between the Russians and the Chechens has been going on since Russia came to the Caucasus. During different periods, this confrontation assumed different forms; for a long time it was smoldering, though the contradictions did not disappear. This was the reason for the new military conflict. Even when the Soviet Union disintegrated to liberate many nationalities, the ethnic problems in "new" Russia did not lose their urgency. Russia is still a multinational power, while the situation of the many ethnic groups which belong to it is far from ideal. For a long time, dozens of peoples and nationalities (some of them had joined Russia by force, others on their own free will) remained oppressed. The situation of the main nation, the Russians, who comprise the huge majority of the country's population, cannot be described as privileged either. It is not for nothing that in the past the country was called "a prison of nations."

Today, ethnic problems remain topical: they feed bitter disputes, ignite conflicts, and are used as arguments in seizing power and conscripting allies. This theoretical postulate of Leninism was skillfully exploited by the sides involved in the Chechen events and, regrettably, turned out to be highly tenacious. Contrary to the declared aims, it caused suffering, material losses, and worsened the situation of the freedom-loving nation. In this respect this postulate proved to be truly Leninist. I am convinced that no other civilized nation lives in such appalling conditions.

## **An Illusion of Welfare: From the Past to the Future?**

Recently, the Russian media seem to have lost interest in the Chechen issue. After the so-called referendum on the constitution, the so-called presidential elections in Chechnia, and several other noisy propaganda campaigns, there were attempts to create the illusion that today the main problems have been resolved and the rest will be resolved tomorrow. The numerous virtual victories over the grave problems cannot diminish their number; these victories do not signify that there are serious efforts to improve the situation of people still living in unbearable conditions. It is social and political causes, rather than purely ethnic problems (still in evidence), which accumulate negative social-ethnic energy. This happened in the past; this is what is going on today. During many centuries of its existence within the Russian Empire (first as subjects of the czars, then as Soviet and Russian citizens), there was no more or less protracted period when the Chechens could look at themselves as real and equal citizens of the always-unfriendly state. An analysis of their place in the former Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic (CIAR) in the post-repression period until the Soviet Union's disintegration—the most favorable in the entire history of coexistence between the Chechens and Russians on the labor market, and in education and culture—has proved that the current social-political cataclysms were preprogrammed and objectively inevitable.

Some of the authors use fairly reliable statistical information which says that in their own republic the Chechens were not equal, to say nothing of the purely Russian regions.

Indeed, in 1956, having recognized that the massive repressions against the Chechens were unjust and having allowed them to return to their homeland, the authorities never compensated the moral and material damage; more than that, the Chechens never got back their houses and had to buy them from those who had settled in them after the deportation. Despite the obviously unjust treatment, the Chechens were never given the chance to rehabilitate and reintegrate into society. The authorities deliberately prevented this integration. To illustrate: the Chechens who comprised 53 percent of the republic's population had limited access to higher education, lagging behind not only Russians, but also other ethnic groups. In the 1959/60 academic year, there were 5,555 students in the CIAR, 4,002 of whom were Russians (the share of Russians in the republic's population was 29.1 percent); 483 were Chechens; and 807 students belonged to "other nations" (this group did not include the peoples of Daghestan, who were counted separately).

Later the situation somewhat improved: in the 1976/77 academic year, there were 6,425 Russians among the students (their total number being 11,735) and 3,057 Chechens. Discrimination of the autoch-

thonous ethnoses in this and many other spheres that determined the standard of living and social conditions went on until the Soviet Union's last day. Chechens were deliberately kept away from the key economic branches (oil production and refining); by the late 1980s, few Chechens were employed at the Krasny Molot, Elektropribor, and other plants with attractive working conditions and higher wages.

This policy was also reflected in the national composition of the republic's capital. According to the 1989 All-Union Census, only about 75,000 out of the total 450,000-strong population of Grozny were Chechens. This inequality created numerous marginal, politically unstable, and radical elements, nearly all of them concentrated in the countryside. It is hard to say how large this group was; yet those who study this problem say that in the 1960-1970s between 250,000 and 300,000 people left the republic for other Russian regions and Kazakhstan in search of seasonal employment. Taking into account that, according to the 1979 census, there were 755,000 Chechens in the republic, the figure of seasonal workers is eloquent enough. In fact, every year more and more people joined this group, while the local people were deliberately kept away from those economic branches that required special knowledge and where wages, for this reason, were higher. This was the doing of the regional C.P.S.U. party committee, which was headed by Russians and members of other non-autochthonous ethnic groups until 1989. Members of the small Chechen intelligentsia, especially university lecturers, had personal experience of this discrimination, which lasted until the late 1980s.

It is wrong to count all seasonal workers among the socially marginal groups, yet it was this social stratum that pushed a considerable number of socially unstable elements onto the political scene. After becoming the driving force behind these events, they introduced a great deal of chaos typical of the marginal groups, thus disorganizing society. The rhetoric of the Chechen leaders was designed to fan the "revolutionary" enthusiasm of these population groups. It should be said that the "highly placed" people from Moscow who frequented the republic at that time encouraged the radical leaders. Here is what Genady Burbulis, a man close to Boris Yeltsin, said at one of his meetings with the leaders of the United Congress of the Chechen People in the fall of 1991: "The Moscow democratic media will help you in your noble cause. When dealing with the Russian authorities you should be firm—reject any compromises. You should only accept a compromise with the Center that will give your republic complete freedom and complete independence from Moscow." There were no social forces in Chechen society which could channel events along a peaceful and evolutionary route. The recent events have demonstrated that the rulers of new, "democratic" Russia did not want this either.

The amorphous and politically immature Chechen intelligentsia had practically no influence at that time (if any, such influence was most likely negative) and has practically no influence today. Some of its members trailed behind the events, while their provocative (and far from disinterested) statements in the media pushed the already belligerent Kremlin to use force.

None of the more or less well-known members of the Chechen intellectual group offered their ideas and programs for the republic's democratic development (either independent or within the Russian state) very much needed at that time. It should be added that the repression of the Chechens, which continued throughout the 20th century, deprived the nation of any chance of raising an intellectual elite of its own. The illusion that there was an elite able to guide the nation proved as unfounded as the myth that Chechnia had become an inalienable and equal part of Russia.

## Objective Prerequisites or Subjective Provocations?

While discussing the motives and objective causes of these most complex ethno-social processes typical not only of Chechnia, the Caucasus, and Russia, it should be said that the prerequisites (both objective and subjective) did not lead to social upheavals in every case. In the Chechen Republic, a social upheaval could also be avoided. Lenin, a past master of social cataclysms, said in his time that favorable

external conditions were needed to realize the revolutionary party's plans. In the case of Chechnia, these conditions completely depended on what Russian power was prepared to do.

A new (integral) approach to the Russian-Chechen war suggests the very sad thought (hardly provable, so far) that the revolution and the hostilities that followed it were provoked deliberately. With time, we shall probably acquire the evidence we need. As the eyewitnesses of and unwilling participants in these events, we are convinced that the policy of the Russian authorities, the generals, and the media (their actions and their inaction) played a decisive role in radicalizing the crisis at the very beginning and in its development into a war. Over time, this conviction grows stronger.

It was long before the tragic events, at the crest of perestroika, that the Soviet (later Russian) press and TV offered the public obviously anti-Chechen propaganda. Chechens were accused of crimes that had never been confirmed by Russian (far from fair) courts. Numerous financial and criminal offences ascribed to Chechens were never proved in court even several years later. So far, no proof of Chechens being involved in these crimes has been found.

The stream of anti-Chechen pronouncements by representatives of Russian power (the President included) clearly shows that the process was guided by a certain center. Some time later, former Minister of National Relations of Russia, now Director of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, RAS, V. Tishkov wrote quite openly that "there is racism supported by the authorities." Chechens are not the only ethnic group confronted with racism by the authorities in city streets.

Even though the Chechens are not entirely happy in Russia, there are no grounds to speak of their genetic predisposition to banditry, or their ethnic and cultural incompatibility with Russians and other ethnic groups with whom they have been living side by side for a long time. Most Chechens speak Russian, one of the important elements of Russian culture, as well as the Russians themselves. The same can be said of other spheres of spiritual culture, as well as the entire social structure of Russian society.

Chechens demonstrated tolerance and respect in their relations with other ethnic groups, smaller than the Russian. In fact, any Chechen enjoyed great respect among his friends and neighbors if he had friends among Avars, Georgians, or Kabardins. This is confirmed by the heroic folk songs, traditions, and the custom, which is still alive, to give a long-awaited child a name that sounds like the name of a nation: Arbi (an Arab); Gurzhi (a Georgian), Gumki (a Kumyk), Gebert (a Kabardin), Girman (a German). In the past the name Japon was quite popular among the Chechens.

While analyzing the influence of domestic actors on the republican processes that started in the 1990s, we can use only traditional examples. So far, if we are resolved to remain objective researchers, there is nothing to motivate a positive assessment of Russia's policies and actions. At the same time, the resistance forces that want, if their statements can be trusted, self-determination have been contradictory and clumsy. This raises the suspicion that they do not have the interests of the Chechens close at heart.

## **The Myths and the Aims: Which One will be Achieved?**

Before the first war started, Dudaev and his government scored no high points in democratizing the republic (and made no serious attempts to achieve democracy). For this reason, his power had no firm social support and remained in place only because of Russia's short-sighted policy (the military action it started increased the number of those who supported Dudaev).

While an outside observer may think Russia's actions were meaningless and chaotic, they were absolutely rational in reaching the desired aim. At all times Chechens were regarded as a hostile force in Russia; by the time the Soviet Union collapsed, the Chechens had largely overcome the results of the massive repressions and found their place in the country. The nation had produced prominent politicians, academics, and journalists; there were considerable achievements in business, too. The Russian state became apprehensive of the role the Chechen communities were playing in the economy and politics of the Rostov Region, and the Krasnodar and Stavropol territories.

When attending meetings of university lecturers and students at Moscow and St. Petersburg universities, I personally heard my Russian colleagues holding forth about the Chechen expansion and the need to stem it. It was this, rather than separatism, that started the war. From its very first day, the war was waged to deal the heaviest possible blows at the enemy. Separatism was spoken of in order to justify this cruelty. If events continue unfolding according to the Federal Center's scenario, Russian society will hardly be aware of the Chechen influence for the next 20 to 30 years. (This was about the same amount of time the Chechens needed to revive after returning from exile.)

Separatism has never been as acute as it is now: the Chechens are impoverished and humiliated, and the scope of social, economic, and political catastrophe is huge. Even if Russia decides, all of a sudden, to help the republic, it will not be able to do this because of the enormity of its own problems.

Foreign influence in the republic is less noticeable; it can be discussed in the context of failed hopes. My own experience and analysis of numerous public speeches and meetings with a large number of the resistance leaders convinced me that these actors believed that the international community would not allow Russia to inflict great damage on Chechnia. They expected the international mechanisms to force Russia to adhere to the norms of international law if the worst came to the worst and a war began. Jokhar Dudaev, who had served in the Baltic republics, was guided by their experience. The nation paid dearly for these widespread illusions and other errors. One of the respondents said: "It all ended with humanitarian flour and foodstuffs of inferior quality bought from Russia for exorbitant prices."

The expectations of any nation deprived of freedom for a long time are shaped, to a great extent, by myths and eschatology, which are shaped, in turn, by external factors. I cannot go into details here for want of space; I can say, however, that from the early 1990s on, most of the events closely followed the myths that said Russia would be replaced with "Ingals pachkhalk" (the English state) and that there would be unheard-of freedom. Many are still waiting.

In this context, the role of the foreign factor can be described as considerable. Even though the world community, on the whole, remained indifferent to the Chechen tragedy, Russia obviously had to look at the West and offer clumsy explanations. It can safely be said that without this many more civilians would have died in the republic and the losses among the Chechens living in other Russian regions would have been greater. (During certain periods of the war, the local authorities created unbearable conditions for them.) Their homes were searched, they were arrested; the militia planted drugs and weapons on them. According to eyewitness accounts, during the terrorist act in a Moscow theater in October 2002 over 3,000 Chechens (including women and old people) were detained in Moscow; nearly all the apartments in which they lived were searched in a very rude way.

Part of the republic's population still hopes that the conflict will be resolved by political means and pins its hopes on "Western democracy," on the international community that has helped to resolve conflicts in many hot spots, and on its declared devotion to fundamental values.

## State or "Humanitarian" Economy?

During the military campaigns, especially during the second anti-Chechen war, the domestic and foreign economic actors played opposite roles. International humanitarian organizations saved hundreds of thousands of civilians from starvation, while other actors pursued absolutely different aims.

It is very hard to establish the true volumes of humanitarian aid to Chechnia. My personal experience says that it not only saved the nation from starvation, but also, after the first stage of the war, helped to revive education and health protection. Nearly all the schools and hospitals functioning in 2003 owed this to humanitarian organizations.

In one of his public speeches, Head of the RF Building Committee Nikolai Koshman said that his organization had restored over 400 schools in the republic. To put it mildly, this does not correspond to the facts. There were this many schools functioning in Chechnia before the first war. Through the efforts of the Federal Center, few of them survived. By the time Koshman delivered his speech, none of the ru-

ined schools had been restored on federal budget money. In Grozny, the humanitarian organizations restored several schools. One of them, No. 7, restored by the Czech Humanitarian Organization, always features in TV reports.

There are real and potential forces involved in the republican economic processes. One of them, Russia (known as the Federal Center in Chechnia), formally responsible for everything that is going on in the republic and in control of the key natural resources, should take responsibility for restoring the national economy it ruined itself. Neither the past nor the present, though, give any hopes or breed any optimistic expectations.

The Chechens themselves can make a potentially great contribution to the process; there are fairly rich and active people among them who, given a chance, could address certain problems. In the current social and political situation when, even by Russia's standards, there is no efficient juridical system in the republic, their potential will remain unrealized: today, not only property the numerous law enforcement structures may notice, but even new trousers are a risk factor.

Today, the most noticeable economic actors are the groups of women sweeping the streets amid ruined houses and wasteland. There is more evidence of restoration activities: construction sites where "high technology" is represented by a bucket on a string for hauling what is needed to the upper floors. These scenes and the local people's uncharacteristic passivity in rebuilding their houses testify that, quite naturally, they are very doubtful about the political prospects.

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