THE CHECHEN CRISIS: GENESIS, DYNAMICS, AND RECENT TRENDS

Oumar ALISSOULTANOV

Graduate of the French Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENA) and Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, Austria; works on PhD at the EHESS (Ecoles des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales) (Paris, France)

The Chechen war has been widely discussed in scholarly and media writings. However, many of these comments, too simplistic or biased toward one or the other side, help little in understanding the nature of this complex phenomenon. With this in mind, the present article has been thought as an attempt of an impartial analysis of the conflict, emphasizing its long-rooted reasons and immediate causes, and displaying its most recent developments. Referring to open sources and the author's own information, it highlights both sides' responsibility for bringing violence to Chechnia, and examines all possible scenarios and potential solutions.

The Chechen Separatism: A Reaction to Tsarist-Soviet Reprisals and Socioeconomic Problems

The origins of the confrontation between Moscow and the Chechen separatists should be traced back to the period of the tsarist conquest of the Caucasus in the 18th and 19th centuries.[1] The Russian Empire aims to strengthen its southern borders and get access to warm-water seas, essential for its security and trade. The Chechens, who live largely on trophies from military raids, constantly attack Cossack settlements and Russian garrisons and thus become a headache for the conqueror. In 1816, Russia starts the "pacification" of the region. It prohibits military raiding, confiscates firearms and takes other unpopular measures, which are interpreted by the Chechens as an assault on their dignity and traditions, and thus provoke their fierce resistance. Despite their overwhelming numerical and technical superiority and extremely brutal methods—destruction of villages and forests, burning fields of wheat, capture of livestock—the Russian military subdue the region only by 1859, after decades of a devastating war.

[1] For more information on this period, see: M. Gammer, *Muslim Resistance to the Tsar. Shamil and the Conquest of Chechnia and Daghestan,* Frank Cass, London, 1994.

Nevertheless, the Chechens do not accept the defeat, and the region remains a powder keg, which risks exploding at any time.

The Bolshevik reprisals—confiscation of farming lands, disarmament campaigns and persecution of "reactionary" Islamic rituals—also prepare a fertile ground for the future conflict. During World War II, the Chechen mountain areas are the center of an important nationalist guerrilla. This fact is used by the Stalinist regime as a pretext to accuse all the Chechens of collaboration with the Nazis and deport them to Kazakhstan.

The period of exile (1944-1956) strengthens a separate ethnic identity of the Chechens and increases their alienation and hostility vis-à-vis Russia. Until the late 1980s, despite strong modernizing impact of the Soviet rule, industrial and social progress and improvement of living conditions, the Chechens continue to live with a feeling of trauma and discrimination. Moreover, since the 1960s, Chechnia suffers from a demographic explosion, growing unemployment and increasing socioeconomic and cultural disparities between townspeople and villagers. Economic activities, particularly oil extraction and refinery, deteriorate the ecological situation in the republic, while all incomes flow into the central budget. At the same time, the Soviet authorities do not trust the Chechens and confer them only secondary roles at local ministries and law enforcement agencies, dominated by ethnic Russians.[2]

Perestroika gives birth to a multitude of political parties in Chechnia and provokes intense money- and power-based struggles between the old Soviet nomenklatura and the "newcomers." An ecological movement, initiated by local democrats, gradually transforms into a powerful separatist force, based on the thesis of constant confrontation and incompatibility of the Russian and Chechen "worlds." The separatists exalt the "uniqueness" of the Chechens, their role in the 19th century Caucasian War, their bravery and love for freedom, while at the same time skillfully speculating on the memory of tsarist-Soviet offences.[3] Explaining all existing problems by the Russian-Soviet domination, they consider the violent overthrow of the local regime and independence as the only solution. These populist and extremist statements find fertile ground in conservative Chechen mountain areas, which become the stronghold of the separatists.

The "Chechen Revolution" of 1991: Radicals Seize Power

The so-called All-National Congress of the Chechen People (ANCCP), convened by a number of political parties in November 1990, soon develops into a leading force with permanent structures opposed to the local communist leadership. In September 1991, the ANCCP succeeds a coup d'état, establishes its control over Grozny and disbands all Soviet institutions. On 27 October, following hurriedly organized elections, Djohar Dudaev, a former Soviet general, is sworn in as president of Chechnia. On 1 November, the new leader proclaims Chechnia's sovereignty and its secession from the Soviet Union.

The separatists want to build an independent and prosperous Chechen State, obtain its international recognition, and affirm its leadership in the region. Chechnia therefore refuses to sign the Federation Treaty, adopts its own Constitution, and obtains the departure of all the Russian troops stationed on its territory. At the same time, in an attempt to get access to the outside world, Grozny establishes close contacts with Gamsakhurdia's nationalist regime in Georgia and searches for other alliances in the region. Yandarbiev, Udugov and other Chechen hard-liners go even further, advocating for the "Islamization" and liberation of the entire Caucasus from the Russian "yoke."[4]

Soon it becomes clear that Dudaev has strong charisma, but little experience in politics and public affairs. His ultra-nationalistic and anti-Russian statements and actions lead to growing confrontation with

[2] See: D. Gakkaev, *Ocherki politicheskoi istorii Chechni* [http://www.Chechniafree.ru/index.php?lng=rus&section=historyrus&row=5], 14 October, 2002.

[3] See: M. Gammer, "Nationalism and History: Rewriting the Chechen National Past," in: *Secession, History and the Social Sciences*, ed. by B. Coppieters, M. Huysseune, VUB Brussels University Press, 2002, pp. 117-139.

[4] *Obshchaia gazeta*, 14 November, 1996; *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 30 November, 1996.

Moscow, political isolation and militarization of Chechnia, collapse of its economy and explosion of crime. The separatists stress the superiority of the "ancient Chechen nation" and distribute key positions in the government and administrations to ethnic Chechens.[5] Meanwhile, thousands of Russians, Jews, Armenians, Ingushes and Daghestanis, confronted with systematic physical intimidation, assassination and expropriation of property, flee from Chechnia. Encouraging the population to buy weapons, which are on free sale, and professing the cult of brute force and little regard for honest work, the new regime creates a pseudo-culture, which erodes traditional Chechen values.[6]

A nationalist dictatorship succeeds to the totalitarian communist regime. All those who criticize Dudaev's ideology and refuse to stand under his banner are persecuted as "enemies of the nation."[7] The official Grozny establishes close links with criminal circles in Russia and makes fortunes on illegal financial operations and all kinds of trafficking, while at the same time the majority of the population lacks articles of prime necessity. Kidnappings, looting, illegal oil extraction and smuggling, arms and cars trafficking become major sources of revenue and shape Chechnia's reputation as a safe haven for organized crime and banditry.

Gradually, a large part of the Chechen population and influential political forces turns against Dudaev. The opposition, composed of members of the parliament, intelligentsia and businessmen, and supported by the Constitutional Court and a number of heads of districts, starts secret talks with Moscow. At the same time, it claims Dudaev's resignation, blaming him for the economic collapse, growth of crime, and authoritarian methods. In the spring-summer of 1993, inter-Chechen struggles attain their peak. In April, Dudaev accuses the opposition of being Russia's "fifth column," dissolves the parliament, and introduces direct presidential rule. When the parliament retorts by initiating an impeachment procedure against him, Dudaev resorts to force: his guards storm the office of Grozny's Mayor—the headquarters of the opposition—and brutally disperse a street demonstration of the opposition's supporters. This marks the beginning of the armed confrontation between the two camps.

Alarmed by Dudaev's radicalism, Moscow soon invalidates his election, turns toward the opposition, and imposes an economic blockade on the republic. Sporadic inter-Chechen clashes take place all throughout the summer of 1994. By August, the opposition builds a force of several hundred men, equipped with tanks,[8] and twice unsuccessfully assaults Grozny. Its last attack turns into a disaster: Dudaev destroys a large number of tanks and captures Russian mercenaries fighting on the opposition's side.

The First War: Moscow's Failed Attempt to "Restore Order"

President Yeltsin seeks ways to put an end to a dangerous separatist rebellion, regain control over the local pipeline, demonstrate his authority, and warn other Russian regional leaders. The lack of political culture and ambitiousness of both Russian and Chechen leaders finally result in an armed confrontation.

In December 1994, Yeltsin states that all peaceful initiatives have failed, and sends troops to disarm all belligerents and "restore constitutional order" in the insurgent province. However, this decision is taken without a comprehensive analysis of the situation. It neglects the history of the region, mentality of its residents, determination and strength of separatists, and warnings of some Russian generals that troops are utterly unprepared for the war.

---

[5] V. Avioutskii, *Chechnia: Towards Partition?* [http://www.amina.com/article/partition.html], 27 November, 2002.

[6] See: M. Yusupov, *Report on Chechnia (November 1998)*, Forum on Early Warning and Early Response (FEWER) [http://www.fewer.org/caucasus/chech.html], 18 December, 2002.

[7] R. Khasbulatov, "Ot nesvobody k tiranii," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 21 June, 2001.

[8] See: M. Galaev, *The Chechen Crisis: Background and Future Implications* [http://amina.com/article/cris_hist.html], 18 November, 2002.

Conversely to the Kremlin's expectations, the military operation provokes fierce Chechen resistance and strong criticism of Russian and Western human rights activists, anti-war groups and intellectuals. The situation in the entire Northern Caucasus is sharply deteriorating because of the influx of advancing troops and refugees. Demonstrating solidarity with the Chechens, the Daghestani and Ingush civilians build human shields to stop the advance of military columns. At the same time, the federal troops' poor performances and heavy casualties prove that doubts about their combat readiness have been well founded. The troops' ideological preparation also appears to be inadequate. Because of the hostile public opinion and lack of clear arguments justifying their action, young Russian conscripts show passivity and poor combat morale.

By the late December, Russian forces grow to 38,000 troops equipped with 230 tanks, 450 armored vehicles and 400 pieces of artillery.[9] Dudaev, according to contradictory sources, has between 3,000 and 55,000 fighters,[10] including Bassaev's experienced "Abkhaz battalion," volunteers and mercenaries from the Caucasus, Ukraine, Baltic States and some Muslim countries, and thousands of ordinary Chechens. The rebels possess a large amount of arms left by the Soviet troops in 1991: some 140 tanks and armored vehicles, more than 150 artillery and rocket systems and a large number of anti-tank and antiaircraft weapons.[11] Many Chechen commanders and fighters have either graduated from Soviet military schools or served in the Soviet Army, and therefore know Russian tactics. Unlike the Russian troops, the rebels are highly motivated and enjoy the support of a large part of the population.

The battle for the Chechen capital Grozny (December 1994-February 1995) displays the real balance of forces and the tactics used by the warring sides.[12] The federal troops encircle the town, leaving the South open for the rebels' withdrawal to the mountains, where they should be blocked and progressively eliminated. However, instead of fleeing, the rebels fight with strong resistance, using the South as the main route for getting reinforcements. The Russians lose 1,200 servicemen[13] and destroy all buildings that could serve as fighting positions, before capturing Grozny by February 1995. After the fall of the capital, the rebels adopt guerrilla "hit and run" tactics, inflicting significant losses to the Russian forces. On the opposite side, the Russian tactics—massive use of aviation, artillery and tanks—have limited effectiveness against the guerrillas, while gravely damaging the Chechen settlements and infrastructures and provoking heavy civilian casualties.

During this period, both sides commit massive human rights abuses and violate humanitarian law. A number of independent reports accuse the Russian military of systematic torture and extra-judicial executions of Chechen combatants and civilians, while the rebels are made guilty of execution of Russian POWs and brutality toward the civilian population.[14]

By the summer of 1995, the federal troops already number 80,000.[15] They control the bulk of the Chechen territory, when Bassaev's terrorist raid into Budennovsk forces Moscow to stop its advance and accept a cease-fire and the withdrawal of its troops against the rebels' disarmament. However, Russia does not want peace at this price. Soon, it resumes the fighting, using a bomb attack against a high-ranked Russian general in Grozny as a pretext. In May 1996, on the eve of Russian presidential election and after Dudaev's elimination in a missile attack, the Kremlin signs another truce with the rebels, but hostilities resume only a few days after Yeltsin's re-election. However, confronted with the inability of its military, hostile

[9] See: A. Malashenko, D. Trenin, *Vremia Iuga. Rossia v Chechne, Chechnia v Rossii*, Gendalf Publishers, Moscow, 2002, p. 143.

[10] See: M. Galaev, op. cit.; T.L. Thomas, "The Russian Armed Forces Confront Chechnia: The Battle for Grozny, 1-26 January, 1995 (Part II)," *Low Intensity Conflict and Law Enforcement*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Summer 1997, Frank Cass, London, p. 148.

[11] Ibidem.

[12] For the Russian and Chechen tactics, see: T.L. Thomas, *The Chechen Conflict and Russian Security: The Russian Armed Forces Confront Chechnia,* Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, KS [http://www.amina.com/article], 20 January, 2001; G. Troshev, *Moya voina. Chechenskii dnevnik okopnogo generala*, Vagrius Publishers, Moscow, 2001.

[13] See: M. Galaev, op. cit.

[14] See: *War Crimes in Chechnia and the Response of the West.* Testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations by Peter Bouckaert, HRW Emergencies Researcher, 1 March, 2000 [http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/russia/Chechnia/peter-testimony.html], 15 September, 2002; *Chechnia—Human Rights under Attack* [http://www.amnesty.org/russia/Chechnia.html], 4 November, 2002.

[15] See: A. Malashenko, D. Trenin, op. cit., p. 143.

public opinion and strong international pressure, the Kremlin is already searching ways out of this unpopular war. The rebels' August offensive on Grozny, where they encircle thousands of Russian troops, becomes such an opportunity. The Russian generals prepare a tough reply, but Alexander Lebed, the new Russian Security Council secretary, arrives in the region and agrees on a cease-fire. On 31 August, 1996, he signs the Khassaviurt Agreements, which imply the withdrawal of the federal troops, the dissolution of the rebels' units and the joint reconstruction of Chechnia, while postponing the decision on its political status until 2001.

Chechnia's Post-war Transition toward the Taliban-styled Regime

On 27 January, 1997, Aslan Maskhadov wins the OSCE-monitored presidential election. He forms the "coalition government" including a few members of the pro-Moscow opposition, and promises to reduce crime and establish neighborly relations with Russia. A Peace Treaty with the latter is signed in May 1997. However, Bassaev, Udugov, Yandarbiev, Raduev and other Chechen "hawks" soon rise against Maskhadov's allegedly "pro-Russian" policy, insisting that Chechnia must break relations with its northern neighbor and turn toward the Muslim countries. In the summer of 1998, Bassaev and his team dismiss from the government. They accuse Maskhadov of betraying the ideals of Chechen independence, and claim his resignation. The confrontation between the former allies is growing, and armed clashes become common. In December, alarmed by the degradation of the situation, Maskhadov accuses his adversaries of intending to grab power in Chechnia and orders partial mobilization. However, despite the support of thousands of his armed supporters and the approval of the parliament, Maskhadov fears civil war and soon prefers to retreat. In February 1999, he accepts the radicals' conditions, announces a Shari'a reform, and proclaims Chechnia an Islamic State. The parliament loses its legislative function. A new Shari'a-based Constitution inspired by the Iranian and Pakistani models, is also under preparation. At the same time, Shari'a tribunals replace secular courts, and the authorities start public executions of alleged criminals.

Meanwhile, Chechnia is sliding into anarchy. The security situation drastically worsens. Around 160 gangs, specialized in illegal oil extraction, car theft and hostage taking, divide Chechnia into criminal "counties."[16] Thus, only during the first six months of 1998, 130 homicides and 66 ransom kidnappings are registered in Chechnia.[17] Looting raids on neighboring territories and attacks against Russian checkpoints on the border happen on a regular basis. Hostage taking attains an unprecedented level and specifically targets Russian servicemen, international humanitarian staff, and journalists,[18] while Chechen law enforcement agencies reveal their complete ineffectiveness. Maskhadov makes kidnapping punishable by death, bans arms sales and creates a special task force for crime prevention, but hesitates to take radical measures that could worsen relations with some influential commanders benefiting from these crimes. Chechnia also becomes a safe heaven for international terrorism, with several training camps functioning on its territory.[19]

The separatist regime completely neglects the economy and the social sphere. Since 1992, Chechnia does not know what a state budget is and does not control its incomes and expenditures. Transit through the republic is paralyzed. 4/5 of its economy is destroyed, and up to 90 percent of its active population has no jobs. Poverty and social inequality are rampant. A tiny new "elite" lives in luxury, while the majority of Chechens is struggling for survival. More than 50 percent suffer from malnutrition, and more than 100,000 have been injured or handicapped at the war.[20] Few schools and hospitals still function. Salaries and pensions are not paid. Money received from Russia is systematically stolen or used to maintain armed gangs. The civilians massively flee to central Russia or abroad.

---

[16] *Priroda i evolutsia sovremennogo chechenskogo konflikta* [http://www.Chechniafree.ru/index.php?lng=rus&section=historyrus&row=3], 15 March, 2003.

[17] See: M. Yusupov, op. cit.

[18] See a detailed report at: [http://www.vif2.ru/static/569/111390.html], 22 January, 2003.

[19] See: *Priroda i evolutsia…*

[20] See: M. Yusupov, op. cit.

Moscow and Grozny both bear responsibility for this situation. They fail to comply with their commitments under the Kassaviurt Agreements and to build a constructive relationship. Thus, Russia withdraws its troops, but does nothing for the reconstruction of the ruined Chechen economy. As for the Chechen president Maskhadov, he demonstrates a lack of determination and leadership skills and, instead of focusing on economic reconstruction, institution building and fight against crime, concentrates on appeasing former warlords and Islamic militants. However, this policy only earns him the reputation of a weak personality, compromises the very idea of Chechen independence, and transforms Chechnia into an uncontrollable and heavily armed enclave—a classical example of a "failed State."[21]

Return of the War

Constant looting incursions from the Chechen territory, shootings on the border, ransom kidnappings and terrorist acts deteriorate the security situation in the region and make a new Russian military action inevitable. Bassaev's "liberation raid" on Daghestan in August-September 1999 and bomb explosions in several Russian towns in the same period, attributed to the Chechens, approach the deadlines and provoke the beginning of hostilities.

On 1 October, 1999, after a four-week artillery and aircraft bombardment of the Chechen territory, 100,000 Russian troops[22] cross the administrative border of the rebel province. Moscow first announces its intention to create a security zone around Chechnia, but declares a few weeks later that its objective is the complete destruction of "terrorists."

Confronted with a common enemy, the Chechens stop quarrelling and unite against the federal troops. Maskhadov takes over the coordination of all the resistance forces: the *national guard* and *law enforcement agencies* (15-17,000 men equipped with some 30-40 tanks, armored vehicles and artillery), *independent militias* (including Bassaev's 1,000-strong unit) and *Wahhabi forces* (3,000 fighters).[23]

The Chechen units are too small and too poorly equipped to wage a classical war against the Russian armored columns, but they enjoy superior mobility, compensating to some extent for these disadvantages. Their tactics consist in inflicting maximum losses to the enemy from ambushes and in direct clashes. However, the Russian military have learned some lessons from the first war. They try to avoid direct contact with the rebels, massively using artillery and aircraft instead. The Russian authorities also pay special attention to the positive media covering of the conflict. In parallel with military operations, the Chechen provisional administration is set up in 2000 and a police force is formed.

Antiterrorist Operation or Struggle against Armed Separatism? Russia's Declared and Genuine Goals in the Second War

To win the support for its Chechen campaign inside and outside the country, the Kremlin defines it as an operation against international terrorists[24] and Islamic radicals, and tries to place it in the framework of global war on terrorism. However, terrorist tactics and the presence of Islamic militants from

[21] For more information on this period, see: G. Murklinskaia, *Islam i politika v sovremennoi Chechne* [http://www.nns.ru/press-file/dagestan/expert/dag12.html], 16 November, 2002; M. Yusupov, op. cit.; F. Longuet-Marx, "La Tchétchénie et le Daghestan face à l'empire russe," *Esprit*, No. 260, January 2000, pp. 6-14.

[22] See: A. Malashenko, D. Trenin, op. cit., p. 143.

[23] See: *Moskovskii komsomolets*, 11 August, 1999.

[24] Interview with Igor Ivanov, *Le Figaro*, 12 April, 2001.

abroad have been a visible, but not the determining feature of the Chechen resistance. The latter displays more similarities with the Corsican or Basque separatist movements than with al-Qa'eda.

It is true that Islam forms part of Chechen identity, and has always been closely linked to the cause of national liberation. Even under the Soviet regime, despite anti-religious reprisals and destruction or closure of all 2,675 local mosques,[25] the Chechens continued practicing Islam clandestinely.

Since the early 1990s, hundreds of mosques are built, and the number of practicing Muslims rapidly increases. The militant trend of Islam, which claims political power, attacks the adepts of moderate Islam, and preaches violent methods of struggle, appears at the same time—as believed, "imported" by Arab and Daghestani missionaries.[26] However, it remains marginal in Chechnia. During the first and the second wars, it earns some popularity among the rebels. Some rebels' fractions, supported by Islamic fanatics from abroad, define their struggle as *jihad* against "pagan" Russia, and declare the "liberation" of Caucasian Muslims and the creation of an Islamic State as their ultimate goal. However, for the majority of the rebels, despite repeated reference to Islamic values, their cause is primarily political and not religious.[27]

Although Moscow points at terrorist and Islamic threats as causes of its struggle, in our opinion, the true reasons for the Russian operation lie elsewhere. Russia cannot accept Chechnia's independence: this would be perceived as its defeat, threaten its strategic interests in the region, probably entail the loss of the entire Northern Caucasus, and provoke the growth of crime and extremism near its southern borders.[28]

Eradication of armed separatism in Chechnia and its reintegration into all-national political space is therefore the primary Russian objective. The loss of the Chechen territory as such (around 17,000 sq. km) would not constitute a major problem for Russia. What Moscow fears most is the "chain reaction," which could lead to the disintegration of the Russian Federation, composed of 89 constituencies,[29] and the destabilization of its southern borders.

Despite its little interest from the economic point of view (even in Soviet times, it hardly produced 4 million tons of oil annually[30]), Chechnia also holds strategic geopolitical importance for Russia. It lies in the heart of the Caspian-Caucasian area, which presumably possesses up to 15 percent of world oil reserves, and is close to the oil-rich Persian Gulf. The Chechen policy makes part of Russia's overall efforts to secure its positions in this very sensitive region vis-à-vis the increasing expansion of the West.[31]

Finally, the victory in Chechnia would be for Moscow an important step toward the restoration of Russia's status of a great power, eroded by the collapse of the Soviet Union, socioeconomic decline, and the humiliation at the first Chechen war.

Lack of Optimistic Scenarios

The situation in Chechnia lets little place for optimism. Most probably, the Kremlin will continue its current hard-line policy, but it is unlikely that this will put an end to the resistance. On the contrary, it radicalizes the rebels and risks protracting guerrilla warfare for years or even decades to come.

Probability that the sides in the conflict could come to a compromise solution through negotiations is also minimal for a number of reasons, listed below.

As for the idea of granting independence to Chechnia, even if Russia accepted it, it would exacerbate the situation and have a negative impact on both Russian and European security.

---

[25] See: *Gortsy Kavkaza*, No. 8-9, Paris, 1929, p. 55.

[26] See: G. Murklinskaia, op. cit.

[27] Interview with Maskhadov, *Libération*, 2 October, 2000; for more information on Islam in Chechnia, see: F. Longuet-Marx, op. cit.; A. Koudriavtsev, *La présence de l'islam dans la guerre en Tchétchénie* [http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Senate/3313/islam.html], 18 November, 2002.

[28] See: "Regards russes sur la guerre en Tchétchénie," *Esprit*, No. 260, January 2000, pp. 170-178.

[29] See : *Le Monde*, 12 November, 2002.

[30] See: *Priroda i evolutsia…*

[31] For an analysis of Western-Russian rivalry in the Caucasus, see: N. MacFarlane, *Western Engagement in the Caucasus and Central Asia,* The Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, 1999; T.L. Thomas, J. Shull, "Russian National Interests and the Caspian Sea," *Perceptions*, Vol. IV, No. 4, December 1999-February 2000.

1. Excessive Price and Destructive Results of the Current Russian Policy

Relying on its military superiority, the Russian side currently refuses any contacts with Maskhadov and insists that "terrorists" must "die or surrender." The major part of the Russian intelligentsia and political establishment backs the Kremlin's policy arguing that the inter-war period proved that Chechnia is unable to survive alone and, therefore, should be dragged back into Russia. There have also been suggestions of dividing Chechnia into northern ("peaceful") and southern ("insurgent") parts: the former would become a sort of safe haven under Russian control, while the latter would be isolated and combated.[32]

In the aftermath of the 2003 referendum and presidential election in Chechnia, which endorse its status within Russia and drive to power the Kremlin's candidate, Akhmad Kadyrov, Moscow announces the "normalization" of the situation in this crisis-torn republic. However, despite their inability to launch large-scale operations, the rebels still number between 1,500 and 6,000 men.[33] They have proven their determination and capability of waging a prolonged guerrilla war, and their constant attacks against the Russian checkpoints and convoys disprove Moscow's optimistic reports. Moreover, the protraction of the conflict contributes to the radicalization of their tactics. Thus, since 2000, the indiscriminate suicide-bomb attacks against both the Russian military and civilian targets become a new feature of the Chechen resistance. The arbitrariness of the federal servicemen, the lack of any peaceful alternative and the increasing Russian-Chechen mutual alienation help the rebels recruit new fighters among young Chechens.

The ongoing hostilities impede the reconstruction of Chechnia and worsen the living conditions of the population. Despite considerable budgetary expenditures, the rebels' attacks, as well as mismanagement, corruption and conflicts between more than 20 Russian ministries and agencies involved in the reconstruction process prevent any serious socioeconomic improvements in the republic. Only 30 percent of the active Chechen population has a regular job; in rural areas, the rate of unemployment amounts to almost 100 percent.[34]

Russia pays a heavy price for its current policy in Chechnia. Since September 1999, according to official figures, close to 5,000 Russian military have been killed and 16,000 wounded (other sources quote the casualty toll two or even three times higher than that).[35] Financially, too, it has been a heavy burden. Apart from that, this situation damages Russia's reputation abroad and strengthens pro-Western moods in the Southern Caucasus.

2. Little Chances of Peace Talks and a Compromise Solution

Russian human rights activists and right-wing forces urge to start negotiations with the separatists.[36] The rising cost of the conflict in terms of casualties, budget expenditures and damage to Russia's security and reputation seems indeed to be a good incentive for its peaceful settlement. Apart from that, the separatist leadership constantly shows signs of its readiness to negotiate with Moscow.[37]

Despite this, there are very few chances that such negotiations will take place. The primary reason for that is the current tough position of the Russian leadership, which refuses any contacts with "terrorists" and seems to be determined to resolve the conflict militarily. The events of 11 September, 2001, the

[32] See: V. Avioutskii, op. cit.; *Rossiiskie politiki po-raznomu vidiat politicheskoe uregulirovanie v Chechne* [http://www.strana.ru/print/162993.html], 31 October, 2002.

[33] See: *Moskovskii romsomolets*, 16 August, 2001.

[34] See: *Chechniu perepisali ran'she vseh* [http://www.nns.ru/press-file/perepis/info6.html], 18 November, 2002.

[35] See: *Second Chechen Campaign Takes its Toll* [http://www.gazeta.ru/2003/02/18/SecondCheche.shtml], 2 November, 2001.

[36] See: *Le Monde*, 11 November, 2002.

[37] See: *Chechen Leader Gives up Independence Claim, Seeks Kremlin Talks* [http://www.ocha.ru/news], 20 June, 2003.

hostage taking in a Moscow theater in October 2002 and the suicide attacks by the Chechen "shahids" have radicalized this position. The Russian authorities accuse Maskhadov, previously considered as a moderate and acceptable interlocutor, of being implicated in terrorist actions, and cut off any contacts with him.

At the same time, the Kremlin increases its pressure at the international level, stating that its bilateral relations would depend on how countries respond to terrorism. At the 10th EU-Russia summit in November 2002, Putin compares the hostage taking in Moscow with the terrorist attacks in New York and Bali and urges his colleagues to join their efforts against terrorism.[38] Russia also forces Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey to close down representations of the Chechen separatists functioning in their capitals, and warns Tbilisi of possible strikes against the Chechen terrorist centers allegedly based on its territory.

It is unlikely that Moscow's policy will change in the near future. Putin's enormous popularity almost excludes the appearance in the Kremlin of a right-wing candidate, who could make a radical shift over Chechnia. The probability that Russia softens its position if threatened by large-scale terrorist attacks is also minimal: the result of such terrorist strikes would most predictably be further radicalization of the Russian public opinion and the escalation of violence in Chechnia. At the same time, any coercive measure by Western countries or international organizations against Russia would be unproductive and cannot be seriously considered because of the latter's political and military weight.[39]

Little ground for consensus between Moscow, which rejects any discussions about Chechnia's political status, and the rebels, who keep claiming independence, has been another problem. This reduces the likelihood of peace talks and the probability of a positive outcome—should such talks ever take place.

The inter-Chechen confrontation—between the separatists and the "pro-Moscow" Chechens, on the one hand, and between the rebels' fractions, on the other hand—also constitutes an obstacle to a compromise solution, due to the multiplication of potential interlocutors. The second war has indeed deeply divided the Chechen society. The Chechens collaborating with the Russian authorities have become the rebels' favorite target.[40] At the same time, they have an uneasy relationship with the federal troops and with each other. Akhmad Kadyrov, the newly-elected president of Chechnia, has Moscow's support and his own mini-army, but his legitimacy is contested by a number of influential Moscow-based politicians and businessmen, such as Aslakhanov, Khasbulatov, Saidulaev, Maïgov and others.

Despite some optimistic reports,[41] the Chechen resistance has also broken into pieces and seems to have lost coordination because of internal struggles. Neither Maskhadov nor Bassaev has Dudaev's charisma and leadership skills, and they both have lost much of their popularity. As for the other field commanders (Arsanov, Basnukaev, Gelaev, Geliskhanov, Khambiev, etc.), no one has the necessary authority and potential to become a new leader.

The "moderates," associated with Maskhadov, struggle for an independent Chechen State, member of the international community. Considering independence as a necessary condition of the "survival [of the Chechens] as an ethnic group,"[42] they do not accept any status within Russia, but admit having common economic and political interests with the latter. The "moderates" seek negotiated peace and civilized relations with Russia, and are ready to make concessions for that,[43] although they do not make precise how far they would go.

Opposed to the "moderates," Bassaev's "radicals" and groups of foreign Islamic fanatics aim to drive Russia out of the Caucasus, create an Islamic State in Chechnia and merge it with the Muslim world.

---

[38] See: *International Herald Tribune*, 12 November, 2002.

[39] Solutions to the conflict and the role for the international community are discussed in: V. Tishkov, *Puti mira na Severnom Kavkaze*, Institute for Ethnology and Anthropology of the RAS, Moscow, 1999; *Chechnia: The International Community and Strategies for Peace and Stability,* ed. by L. Jonson and M. Esenov, The Swedish Institute of International Affairs [http://www.ca-c.org/dataeng/bk02.00.cont.shtml], 27 November, 2002.

[40] See: "Chechen Violence Turns Inward," *The Wall Street Journal Europe*, 30 December, 2002.

[41] See: "Former Maskhadov's and M. Vachagaev's Contribution to a 'Round Table' on Chechnia," IISMM, Paris, 5 June, 2003.

[42] *Full text of interview with Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov by IWPR* [http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/cau/cau_200206_aslan_eng.txt], 15 March, 2003.

[43] Interviews with Maskhadov, *Libération*, 2 October, 2000; *Le Monde*, 3 October, 2003.

Considering Chechnia as the center of the anti-Russian liberation movement in the region, they are strongly opposed to Maskhadov's "pro-Russian" course.[44] The discord between the "radicals" and the "moderates" is not only about the goals, but also about the methods of struggle: the former largely resort to suicide-attacks against the Russian military and civilian targets, while the latter condemn such actions.[45]

Support of the war by the Russian public opinion due to the reassessment of the Chechen resistance, a sharply increased censorship and propaganda, and a growing anti-Chechen resentment pose another obstacle to peace initiative. Initially perceived as freedom fighters, the Chechen separatists have discredited themselves by their involvement in terrorist acts, ransom kidnappings and all kinds of trafficking. The 1999 explosions in several Russian towns boost anti-Chechen and anti-Caucasian moods. The Russian population, tired of the permanent feeling of national humiliation resulting from worsening living conditions and Russia's geopolitical defeats, considers the second Chechen war as an occasion to take revenge. The Kremlin's affirmations that the army is now better prepared and more successful than at the first war also nourish hopes that the Chechen problem could be solved militarily. Finally, the October hostage taking in Moscow and the following suicide-attacks have radicalized the minds to the extreme and decreased the number of those who supported talks with the rebels.

The softening of Western criticism in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 2001 also serves to Russia as an additional argument legitimating its military action in Chechnia. Indeed, the above-mentioned attacks considerably diminish sympathy for the Chechen separatists in the world. Western analysts, alarmed by the threat of Islamic radicalism, almost abandon the theory of the revival of Russia's "imperial ambitions" and its struggle for oil.

The EU makes clear, at its 10th summit with Russia in November 2002, that its relationship with its eastern neighbor is too important to let it be dominated by the Chechen question. The summit results in an agreement on cooperation against terrorism, while the Chechen question is hardly mentioned.[46] NATO Secretary-General Lord Robertson even defends the Russian action in Chechnia, stressing Russia's right to "face the violations of law and order on its own territory" and fight "terrorist elements from outside."[47] Washington also reduces its criticism vis-à-vis Moscow, adds some Chechen groups on its list of terrorist organizations, and declares that the separatist leaders completely discredited themselves and can no longer be acceptable interlocutors because of their links to terrorists.[48]

3. Impossibility of "Releasing" Chechnia

The idea of granting independence to Chechnia suggested by a number of experts as an act of repentance or the "amputation" of an alien territory,[49] seems to us a dangerous utopia. As mentioned above, Russia cannot accept this option. As for the rebels, they are no longer able to win their cause militarily. In addition, they are loosing the support of the civilian population, who deeply dislike them and make them "responsible for bringing renewed war to Chechnia."[50]

From both economic and geopolitical points of view, a sovereign Chechen State cannot seriously be considered.[51] Chechnia is a small landlocked region, surrounded by the North and South Caucasian republics suspicious of it. It has insignificant oil reserves, a ruined economy, and little prospects of attract-

[44] Interview with Shamil Bassaev, *Izvestia*, 25 April, 1996; *Moskovskii komsomolets*, 11 August, 1999; T. Muzaev, *Vnutrichechenskie protivorechia: veliko li ikh znachenie teper'?* [http://www.temadnya.ru/spravka/04mar2003], 15 March, 2003.

[45] Interview with Maskhadov, *Le Monde*, 3 October, 2003.

[46] See: *International Herald Tribune*, 12 November, 2002.

[47] *Le Monde*, 12 November, 2002.

[48] See: "Amerika meniaet otnoshenie k Rossii posle 'Nord-Osta,'" *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 4 November, 2002.

[49] See: M. Rozanova, "Kavkazskaia plennitsa," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 11 May, 2001; V. Avioutskii, "La Russie face au 3ème Jihad," *Politique Internationale*, No. 98, Winter 2002-2003, p. 202; S. Arutiunov, *Possible Consequences of the Chechnia War for the General Situation in the Caucasus* [http://www.amina.com/article/chapter1.html], 18 November, 2002.

[50] *War Crimes in Chechnia and the Response of the West.*

[51] See: S. Kazennov, V. Kumachev, *Chechnia: tselesoobrazen li razvod s Rossiei?* [http://www.nns.ru/analytdoc/sad16.html], 1 April, 2003.

ing any investments. If excluded from Russia's political and economic space, it would be paralyzed by its socioeconomic and security problems. Apart from that, growing international rivalries over the Caucasus would transform the Grozny regime into a puppet manipulated by Moscow, Washington, Ankara and other capitals.

Moreover, neither the West nor the regional powers desire Chechen independence—despite their evident objective to weaken Russia's grip on the Caucasus. They realize that an independent Chechnia, heavily armed and torn to pieces by internal conflicts, would undermine all their efforts in the region. Criminal gangs and religious extremists from Chechnia would pose a serious threat to Europe. Chechnia's independence would also encourage the separatists in Abkhazia, Corsica, the Basque Country or Kosovo, creating a dangerous precedent.

Conclusion

The Chechen secessionist rebellion was a justifiable reaction to tsarist-Soviet crimes, but nothing could justify the ensuing bloodshed, for which each side bears responsibility. The Chechen separatists, instead of discussing long-rooted problems with Moscow, preferred the way of confrontation, challenging the Kremlin by their extremist statements and actions. The Russian authorities, in turn, fully manifested their political ineptitude and reactionary character, resorting to brutal force.

The nature and goals of the Chechen resistance have gradually changed. If the 1991 "revolution" started as a national liberation movement and aimed at the creation of an independent democratic State, after Dudaev's death, the rebels turned toward the Muslim world and announced their intention to introduce Islamic rule. Propaganda of a Shari'a regime replaced initial slogans about democracy. However, despite the wide use of Islamic phraseology, for the majority of the rebels, it is Chechnia's political status which is still at stake in the conflict.

Today, the situation in Chechnia is in an impasse. The lack of consensus between the belligerents renders prospects of peace unrealistic. The Kremlin continues to qualify the Chechen guerrilla as a matter of terrorism, refusing to accept its predominantly political nature, and thus contributes to its growing radicalization and "Islamization".

The resolution of this protracted conflict could however be possible if the warring sides succeeded to:

- Make mutual concessions, the Kremlin accepting the dialog with the separatists, while the latter temporarily abandoning their claim of independence.
- Prioritize humanitarian and socioeconomic issues: return of refugees, reconstruction of economy and infrastructures, and fight against crime.
- Postpone any decision on Chechnia's political status for a period of 30 to 50 years. During this period, the separatists could be given the chance to struggle for their cause by political methods. Moscow, at the same time, could try Chechnia's peaceful re-integration through special projects targeting its youth, civil society, rural and mountain areas, and guaranteeing Chechens' equal representation at federal ministries and administrations.

Such measures could considerably reduce violence in Chechnia, while leaving the final decision on its future to generations to come, in a hope they will find a pragmatic solution.