

Vladimir Putin and the Chechen War

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The forms taken by the war in Chechnya are, due to their political implications, cause for deep-seated concern that extends well beyond the limited geographic area¹ of the small Caucasian republic. The actions perpetrated by Chechen guerrillas between May and September 2004 – from the assassination of Akhmad Kodyrov, head of the pro-Russian government, to the incursion into Ingushetia and a series of terrorist operations culminating in the tragedy in the school in Beslan, Ossetia – have given the lie to official propaganda and demonstrated the extreme gravity of a situation that risks spilling over into the entire northern Caucasus. The persistence of a centuries' old conflict between the two nations is motivated, as will be seen, by the unresolved opposition of interests and values to which both sides refer to legitimate their actions. Having developed in successive phases characterised by the multiplication of reciprocal acts of violence, the conflict has become increasingly tough, making the prospect of a negotiated solution inspired by criteria of reasonable realism extremely remote. Dragging on now for more than five years, the second Chechen war, despite Russia's massive campaign,

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¹ 16,000 sq. km, i.e. smaller than Kuwait.

remains unresolved from a military point of view and a failure from a political one – apart from having produced a humanitarian catastrophe.²

The choice of war

Although tactical considerations have led the Russian authorities to defer the question of separatism, giving priority to the terrorist threat, it has always remained in the background.³ There seems to be a deeply rooted awareness of the precarious equilibrium between the centre and the periphery – emphasised by the incongruencies of the federal experience of recent years – resulting from the country's size and the national, ethnic and religious diversity of its peoples (minority groups, of which a half are Muslim, account for almost 20 percent of the total).

The precedent set by the breakdown of the Soviet Union under the impetus of the Baltic, Ukrainian and Georgian secessionist movements added further reasons for concern, above all as regards control of the republics in the northern Caucasus. In fact, the picture offered by that area of great strategic and economic importance and characterised by widespread inter-ethnic tensions infected by the virus of Islamic fundamentalism is not comforting, especially at a time of difficulty in inter-state relations between Russia and Georgia, which lies along its southern border. The Chechens' demands for independence are seen as a potential cause of instability in that they could – through the so-called domino effect – trigger a widespread separatist trend, threatening Moscow's influence in the region.

The separatist rebel forces invoke universal values of justice in the context of national liberation movements against colonialism. The specific reference is to the right to self-determination which, under certain conditions,

² A number of studies that merit attention have appeared on the Russian-Chechen conflict: among others, M. Evangelista, *The Chechen Wars, Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2002); A. Lieven, *Chechnya, Tombstone of Russian Power* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1998); D. Trenin, A. Malascenko and A. Lieven, *Trevozhnye Rubezi Rossii, Cecenskij Faktor* (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 2003). Fundamental for an overall evaluation of the conflict is: V. Tishkov, *Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). For a dramatic testimonial, see A. Politovskaia, *Cecenia, il Disonore Russo* (Rome: Fandango, 2003) and for an exhaustive overview of post-Beslan, see the article by A. Arbatov, "Nepравital'stvennyj Doklad", *Novaja Gazeta*, 11-13 October 2004.

³ Chechnya obtained *de facto* independence after the first war with Russia (1994-96). In 1997, elections in Chechnya brought to power a moderate president in favour of independence, Aslan Mashkadov, flanked by the radical guerrilla commander Shamil Basaev, supported by the majority of the population.

legitimizes the aspirations of an ethnic community to seek independence, in direct opposition to the right of a sovereign state to defend its territorial integrity in the maintenance of international order. These objectively irreconcilable principles set down in the UN Charter, both of high legal and ethical value, give equal importance to the demands of both antagonists in case of ethnic conflict. Hence the embarrassment of the Russian authorities in a situation that gives their adversary a position if not of advantage at least as equal, impacting negatively on the legitimacy of their political and military actions. And hence the emphasis the Kremlin has put on the terrorist actions and criminal infiltrations in the separatist movement in an attempt to undermine the credibility gained by the Chechen forces in their fight for independence.

The equation "terrorism equals separatism", instrumentally underscored by the Russians, is also meant to respond to criticism from both inside and outside the country for the ruthless way in which military operations are being conducted and the consequent widespread violations of human rights. The attacks of 11 September 2001 allowed Russia to present itself as a great power engaged alongside the West in the fight against the common enemy – international terrorism. In return, it could claim an important international role and obtain greater tolerance, especially from the US, towards the excesses registered in the war in Chechnya. To justify the widely documented brutality of the federal troops, the Russian authorities have resorted to arguments that are implicitly accepted today by many governments that use extreme forms of repression to deal with the terrorist threat.

Another factor that has added to the complexity of this war is the link between Islamic fundamentalism and the radical component of the Chechen rebel movement – more inclined towards terrorism – which is fighting to create a unified Islamic state in the Caucasus.⁴ The external contribution of volunteers, arms and financing provided by a galaxy of fundamentalist organisations poses a problem for the Kremlin, as concerns both the possible stances its Muslim community may take, and political, diplomatic and economic relations with a number of Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq.

The many factors at play – independence, terrorism, crime, Islamic fundamentalism – contribute to explaining the Kremlin's ambivalent, if not downright contradictory attitude towards the internal and external causes of the conflict. In an initial stage, coinciding with the 1994-96 war, the conflict

⁴ On the Islamisation of the Chechen conflict, see P. Brownfeld, "The Afghanistanisation of Chechnya", *The International Spectator*, vol. XXXVIII, no. 3, 2003.

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was presented as a challenge to state authorities on the part of secessionist Chechen forces, allowing the Kremlin to claim its exclusive right – as national authority – to find a solution, in opposition to calls for mediation by the international community. With the launching of the second intervention in 1999 and subsequently in reaction to the Beslan tragedy, the Kremlin decided to give more emphasis to the threat of an external enemy, alluding to an action supported by international terrorist forces.

As a result of, among other things, the rigid censure imposed by the Kremlin, the war that is bloodying the Caucasian republic is marked by a lack of transparency in the management of military operations and parallel political initiatives. The tangle of interests involved is not limited to those of Russians vs Chechens, but also involves groups and factions on both sides. Once again, this multiplicity of actors highlights the complexity of "new wars" characterised by asymmetry between the forces fielded, in this case approximately 100,000 Russian troops and security personnel against a few thousand Chechens.

With the transition to guerrilla warfare after the initial phase of direct confrontation, the level of conflict increased not so much because of renewed impetus in affirming the ideals of independence, patriotism, etc, but because of the conditions of psychological, cultural and strategic tension in which the war unfolded. Chechnya, starting with the capital Grozny, was hit by a wave of uncontrolled destruction, causing large numbers of victims among the civilian population, subjected to both the brutality of the Russian and collaborationist contingents and to pressure from the radical rebel groups linked to Islamic extremism. The ever increasing recourse by Chechens to terrorism as a means of struggle can be seen as a reaction to the extreme brutality of the repression, even if it has strengthened the Kremlin's arguments justifying intervention. The suicide bombings carried out by "women martyrs" – a manifestation of the so-called "Palestinianisation" of the conflict – reveal the deep crisis of a society devastated by violence.

In the summer of 2002, more than two years after the beginning of the intervention, the situation of stalemate between the two sides and the evident decline in popular consensus for the Russian government's actions were causing concern for the Russia executive, especially Putin. Exponents of the Russian political world, European governments and organisations such as the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) were pressing for attempts to be made to reach a negotiated solution.

Divide et impera

The Moscow hostage crisis in October of the same year, of which the management by the Russian authorities was much criticised, marked a turning point in official policy, putting an end to all hypotheses of negotiations with the rebels. A new course known as "Chechenisation" was undertaken. It called for a downsizing of direct Russian involvement in the republic, while giving the administration in Grozny more responsibility. Members of the Chechen elite willing to collaborate with the occupants were co-opted into the local power system to promote a strategy well tested during Tsarist and Soviet times, based on the principle of "divide and rule". This line was formally sanctioned in 2003 with a referendum on the new Constitution and elections for a new president tasked with re-establishing stability in Chechnya.

The Russian plan to find a way out of the Chechen impasse by means of strong economic and security concessions to the republican authorities had the fault of being strongly biased. The main shortcoming of a process that was to bring into being an administration supported by popular consensus was the exclusion of a crucial component in the Chechen equilibria, the separatists. The underlying logic was the totally unrealistic conviction that a peace agreement can be reached by choosing one's interlocutors among allies while ignoring the adversaries. The ballots cast in May and October 2003, although characterised by systematic manipulations (as denounced by Chechen and Russian NGOs, as well as Western organisations including the Council of Europe) satisfied official expectations. Putin had no doubts: "We have resolved the last serious problem relative to the restoration of Russia's territorial integrity."⁵ As for the real meaning of the vote, it was generally taken to reflect the desire for security and stability – linked to an end to Russian occupation – of a people traumatised by years of war.

The novelty of the new Constitution was that in principle it granted the formally sovereign republican authorities a certain degree of autonomy so as to strengthen their prestige in the citizens' eyes. As this commitment contradicted the official policy of centralisation pursued in the previous three years through the creation of strict control structures, it is no wonder that the division of competences between Moscow and Grozny has still not been defined. The newly elected Chechen president, Akhmad Kadyrov, designated by the Kremlin, was a leading figure in the narrow Chechen elite and had been a collaborationist from the beginning of the conflict. A religious and rising political leader with his own following, for the Russians he represented the strongman of the moment who had to be supported to

⁵ *RFE-RL*, 25 May 2003.

enable progress along the road to Chechenisation.

Significant was the policy's inherent ambiguity: it was to be pursued by a man who, aware of the irremovable ties between Russia and Chechnya, on the one hand, was willing to take a subordinate role, while on the other, driven by personal ambition, clan interests and a sincere attachment to the Chechen nation, was keen on ensuring some margin of initiative for himself. There was also the unsolved problem of the degree of autonomy that the Russian government was actually willing to concede the Chechen administration: while acting as an antidote to independentist aspirations it was not supposed to erode Russian influence in the region. Subject to contrasting pressures, this delicate position was ably managed by the new president. As head of the new government, Kadyrov aggressively pursued – also in hopes of strengthening his personal influence – the promotion of national values, the re-establishment of internal order and a relaunching of the economy.

However, the shortcomings of a policy compromised from the outset by the stigma of subordination to Russian power were accentuated by the inefficiency of Grozny's management of public, marked by widespread corruption and factiousness. As was to be expected, Maskhadov and the independentists were outlawed, sealing an insuperable rift. But even non-aligned exponents of the influential Chechen diaspora in Moscow were not brought in. In preferring not to broaden his base to seek the consensus needed to undertake a process of normalisation, Kadyrov revealed his limits: while strong tactically, he lacked a constructive political strategy open to Chechen society.

Kadyrov's assassination in May 2004, less than a year after his mandate began, brought this course to a brusque halt. It also made manifest the weakness of a strategy based on the leadership of a single person in such an unstable context, which had already seen the physical elimination of the two previous presidents. Faced with this overwhelming event, the Russian authorities opted for continuity out of fear that a power void in the republic could have destabilising repercussions on the entire Caucasus area. Chechnya, ignored by the official information system throughout this entire period, which took it for granted that – lacking terrorist acts – Russian public opinion, engrossed in its daily problems, would have little interest in such a distant area, suddenly jumped back into the spotlight and was to remain there for the following months.

The death of the strongman in Grozny hit Putin hard, as he had made the fight against Chechen separatism and terrorism one of the basic planks of his political platform. Determined to go ahead with the progressive restructuring of the state system undertaken in previous years, the Russian president found himself faced with a problem that could take on national dimensions, compromising the whole operation. Given the emergency situation, the Kremlin's

first reaction to the massive incursion of rebel forces into the neighbouring republic of Ingushetia, taken to signal a possible spread of the conflict throughout the northern Caucasus, was to persevere in its original plan. Confirmation of the Chechenisation policy meant election of a new president in the person of collaborationist general Alu Alkhanov, flanked by the son of the assassinated president, Razman, head of the feared pro-Russian militia.

Beslan and the “strong state”

This strategy had not yet been implemented when – confirming the pessimistic predictions of the risks of a spillover of the conflict – the situation precipitated with the sortie of a terrorist commando into the neighbouring republic of Ossetia. The tragedy in the school in Beslan profoundly changed the Russian authorities' and public opinion's perception of the context in which the war was taking place. The convulsive management of the crisis and its disastrous conclusion made it evident to all that the situation was out of control, the result of the devastating intersection of a lack of political acumen, incompetence on the part of the secret services, and the ferocious determination of the terrorist commando.

Assessments vary as to the meaning of the terrorist action, its organisation, the identity of those who perpetrated it and those behind it, and its motivations. The diverse possible interpretations, leading to different political choices, all derived from one basic question: does the conflict have prevalently internal or external roots? Assuming that the raid in Ossetia was not linked to the Chechen situation and had to be considered a separate act aimed at destabilising the Caucasian area, the Russian authorities stuck to their thesis, maintained throughout the years, that the action was organised with foreign support. An atmosphere of suspicion settled in on the Kremlin, inspired by the “foreign enemy” formula often used during the Soviet period. Putin declared, “... What we are facing is direct intervention of international terror directed against Russia. This is a total, cruel and full-scale war...”⁶

Thus security – found to be lacking as a result of the inefficiency of the secret services and intelligence – suddenly became the testbed of the prestige, even if not the popularity, of the Russian president, promoter of the strong Russian state, now revealed in all its weakness. The unprecedented increase in budget resources that followed, of which more than one third were allocated to the Ministries of the Interior and of Defence, reflected the effort made to bring lustre back to those sectors of the state machine that had

⁶ Address by President Vladimir Putin, 4 September 2004 <http://president.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2004/09/04/1958_type82912_76332.shtml>

traditionally guaranteed its greatness. It is symptomatic that after the Beslan tragedy, Putin expressed nostalgia for the Soviet past, when Russia was seen, in his words, as "an impressive state and a great power".⁷

Reference to the strong state returned with all the rhetorical emphasis demanded by the deliberately dramatised atmosphere in an appeal to the values of militant patriotism. The need for military opposition to what was presented as a threat to the survival of the Russian nation was used to justify a decisive step in the process of consolidating state structures. The measures proposed on election reform and reform of the system of nominating presidents of the regions and the republics – the spearhead of what the Russian press called the "September revolution" – were the final touches put on the "executive vertical" system of power. There seems to be something to the idea that the recent terrorist escalation offered Putin the opportunity to implement during his second term a plan for economic and political restructuring that he had already been considering for some time. Not unlike in autumn 1991 at the end of Yeltsin era, when a series of terrorist acts "fortuitously" coincided with a demanding moment in the regime's development which, putting the accent on security, called for the mobilisation of the people in favour of the path taken.⁸

The measures presented in the Duma revealed a trend which can rightfully be defined as authoritarian, starting with the reform of centre/periphery relations which openly questioned the functionality of the current federal system. Motivated by the dysfunctions of the republican administrations brought to the fore by the incapacity of Ingushetian and Ossetian presidents, Murat Zjazikov and Alexander Dzasoxov, respectively, to cope with the Beslan crisis, the policy of transfer of powers to the central authorities in Moscow was confirmed. The cancellation of presidential elections, replaced by direct nominations by the Kremlin, is of particular concern, especially as regards the republics in the northern Caucasus, as it will probably exclude the more representative local leaders. All of this took place in an atmosphere in which the evocation of local nationalisms – as demonstrated by the growing tensions between traditionally contrasting communities such as Ingush and Ossetians, Circassians and Karachays, Kabardians and Balkarians, and various Daghestani groups – could undermine the precarious equilibria that uphold the complex ethnic mosaic in the North Caucasus.

⁷ V. Putin, press conference in *Novosti*, 6 September 2004.

⁸ Some surveys show, on the other hand, that in contrast to official expectations, the people's concerns for terrorism and the war rank far below those of everyday hardships (survey carried out by the Institute for Social Studies of the Russian Academy of Science, published in *Novosti*, 27 October 2004).

Therefore, above and beyond the Chechen case, the situation in the region is one of latent instability which the Kremlin's current centralising policy does not seem to be able to tackle. Confiscating the rights of the electorate and annulling their prerogatives of representation of local interests reduces the margin of interaction between local communities and the Moscow administration, weakening the latter's base of legitimacy. The policy could even compromise the plans for support of the Caucasian economies, above all that of Chechnya, drawn up in the awareness that only an improvement in the quality of life can reduce the causes of the widespread social tensions in those republics – unemployment, poverty, crime.

This centralisation of power has been paralleled by further fragmentation of the Chechen rebel forces, who have lost even more of those original characteristics that to some extent made them a coordinated military formation. Today, they are simply armed groups sometimes intent on banditry, largely responding to the rules of the clan. The events in Beslan, claimed in a mad declaration to have been perpetrated by Basaev, and firmly condemned by the deposed president Mashkadov, alarmed by the loss in terms of image of the independentist cause, led to an apparently definitive break between the radical Islamist wing and the pragmatic lay one. Mashkadov's position was tricky: under pressure from the terrorist groups on the one hand and the Russian authorities on the other, he found it increasingly difficult to control the rebel forces' initiatives.

A direct result of the conflict, with its violence and humiliations – and this could have unexpected consequences – has been another profound change in the Chechen resistance movement. The younger generation that has grown up with the war no longer takes up arms to demand independence but is mainly driven by feelings of desperation and revenge. The rebellion – having transcended all motivations – has become an end in itself. In parallel, the catchment area for recruits has spread to other ethnic groups besides the Chechens: the Ingush, the Kabardians, the Daghestani.

Impossible negotiations

The proliferation of episodes of violence in a vicious circle of terrorist acts and retaliatory operations has exasperated relations between the two sides, making the promotion of negotiations difficult even on a procedural level. In fact, those in favour of negotiations both among the Chechen rebels and above all in the Russian hierarchy have become so marginalised that it is highly unlikely that they would be able to play an interlocutory role in seeking a solution to the conflict. A new element however was the decision last fall by moderate Chechen leader Umar Khambiev, former Minister of Health

in Mashkadov's government, to renounce independence on the condition that this would correspond to a UN-sponsored process of gradual demilitarisation and democratisation of Chechnya able to ensure an effective political role for local authorities in the framework of a regime of real autonomy.⁹

But the opening towards an agreement on the Kremlin's crucial point of the state's territorial integrity came too late. The time for negotiations had definitively passed for a number of reasons. First of all, the dubious representativeness of those proposing the negotiations, discredited by accusations against their leader, Mashkadov, of complicity in recent terrorist acts. Secondly, the vague nature of the proposal, which immediately triggered divisions as to its possible implications among some of the very members of the moderate Chechen group that supported it. Third, the Kremlin's reluctance to accept outside mediation, which it has always considered as damaging to its own prerogatives, especially at a time when affirmation of state sovereignty is one of its main policies. Finally, Mashkadov's elimination by Russian forces in March 2005, after he had announced a unilateral ceasefire, marked another step in the escalation of the conflict, inevitably increasing the weight of the more extremist factions on both sides.

Considering these negative factors, which fit perfectly into the overall picture that has characterised the Russian-Chechen conflict till now, there seems to be no possibility of a negotiated solution. In fact, only the emergence of some new elements able to change the Kremlin's intransigent stance can the way for further developments between the two antagonists – and this seems quite unlikely in the current phase of its unrelenting opposition. Therefore, the most plausible scenario is indefinite continuation of the armed conflict, punctuated – as are other asymmetric conflicts – by the constant repetition of terrorist acts and repressive actions. A conflict in which the predominant actor does not seem to be willing to make any concessions and is intent on winning at all costs while the other, inferior in capabilities, is more determined than ever not to concede defeat, is bound to drag on. This means that the "longest war in Europe since 1945"¹⁰ may end – or at least attenuate – only when Russian and collaborationist forces, combining economic inducements and military pressure, manage to subjugate an exhausted and overwhelmed society, reduced in number¹¹ and therefore unable to offer the residual rebel forces an effective base.

⁹ U. Khambiev, interview in *Il Sole-24 Ore*, 13 October 2004.

¹⁰ S. Kovalev, "Putin's War", *The New York Review of Books*, 14 May 2001.

¹¹ Only 600,000 people live in Chechnya today – just over half as many as when the conflict started.