

# Assessing Russian Chechenization

Former Russian president Vladimir Putin has exercised an enormous amount of agency in his country's policy toward the Chechen Republic. The election of Dmitry Medvedev as his successor could, for a number of reasons, potentially undermine the relative stability of the Republic. This newsletter questions the utility and purpose of "Chechenization," the Russian policy prior to Medvedev, and whom it serves.

It was nine years ago this August that Russia announced the start of an "anti-terrorist operation" in the Chechen Republic, which would eventually become known as the "Second Chechen War." Putin, despite being prime minister and subordinate to then-President Boris Yeltsin, was the primary architect of this operation.

Much has changed since then. The war has officially ended - although many would dispute this. Putin has held the presidency for eight years and has now ceded the position to Medvedev. So where does Chechnya stand now among these developments?

After the cessation of official operations, despite the continuation of sporadic fighting, Moscow employed a new policy in the North Caucasian Republic: "Chechenization." Despite this policy being mentioned frequently in academic works and the media, relatively little has been communicated about its intended purpose. This is but one of the reasons many in the West remain confused about the present state of affairs in Chechnya.

## 1.1 A nebulous policy

Chechenization includes a political and a security provision component. In 2007 Putin stated that he wanted to transfer "the responsibility for ensuring security [within Chechnya] almost 100 percent to the Chechen people." The transfer of political control occurred considerably earlier. Russia, possibly in a bid to legitimize its presence in the Republic, advocated self-government in 2003. Three Chechen presidents loyal to Moscow have controlled the Republic since: Ramzan Kadyrov is the incumbent.

Assessing the intent of Chechenization remains difficult primarily because of its nebulous nature. There are three purposes that the policy could serve for Russia.

- Since the Kremlin heralded its operations in Chechnya post-1999 as "anti-terrorist," Chechenization could be seen to constitute a counterterrorism strategy to win "hearts and minds."

- Chechenization could be the means to an end for the reconstruction of the Chechen Republic.
- Finally, the policy could be interpreted as an attempt at an exit strategy, designed to pull Russian troops out of their most expensive - in every sense of the word - engagement.

## 1.2 A Russian counterterrorism strategy?

A 2008 report released by the Russian Office for the Coordination of Counterterrorism highlighted a continuing decline in the incidents of terrorism in Russia as a whole. However, it is inaccurate to assume this constitutes a positive correlation between a decrease in the number of terrorist attacks and a victory in the battle for hearts and minds as other, invisible, factors may play a role.

The *Kadyrovtsy* - a band of several thousand men loyal to the current Chechen president - fought on the side of the Chechen separatists at the beginning of the Second Chechen War in 1999. The *Kadyrovtsy* now have a monopoly on security provision in the Republic in the name of pro-Moscow Kadyrov.

The formation of a patron-client relationship between Russia and the last three Chechen presidents has ensured the consequent co-option of a large part of the Chechen population, and as such, could be interpreted as a victory for hearts and minds. Kadyrov continually stresses the low number of dissidents that apparently remain in the Republic. In February 2008, however, he conceded that the stream of young Chechen men joining the resistance continues.

To the extent that Chechenization was intended as a policy to shore up the support of the Chechen people, it appears to have been successful. A large portion of the population has been co-opted and the resistance that remains is now in opposition to Grozny, the Chechen capital, and not Moscow.

## 1.3 A reconstruction program for the Chechen Republic?

The second potential intention of Chechenization is that it is the means to an end for reconstruction of the Chechen Republic. Self-governance is considered an integral part, or indeed the culmination, of an emancipatory process by most occupying forces. If not instituted too prematurely, self-government should induce stability and, in terms of self-determination, be perceived as more legitimate. Is this proposal plausible?

Relative to its situation five years ago, Chechnya has undergone enormous change. While still in a somewhat rudimentary state, a fairly comprehensive program of reconstruction has been implemented. There is political stability, although this is, problematically, inextricably tied to Kadyrov. There has also been substantial progress in the reduction of kidnappings, murders and disappearances, all of which are noted by human rights agencies.

In an absolute sense, however, many problems persist. The *Kadyrovtsy* still routinely commit abuses against other Chechens. Memorial, a human rights watchdog, recently reported on the state of the Chechen legal system and found that "unfortunately it is still the same" as during the war years. A

2008 Human Rights Watch report draws attention to problems within the Russian judicial system by documenting the need for individuals to enter the European Court of Human Rights in the pursuit of justice. The unemployment rate in Chechnya is as high as 80 percent and this period of unprecedented political stability means that many more Chechens who fled during the wars are returning home and unintentionally exacerbating the situation. Clearly, Chechenization has only led to relative, and not absolute, stability.

#### **1.4 An exit strategy for Russian troops?**

The final possible intention of Chechenization is that it is meant as an exit strategy to facilitate withdrawal from a particularly brutal conflict. While the vast majority of fatalities in the wars were incurred by the Chechen civilian population, it is also true that a large number of Russian forces were also killed. The Second Chechen conflict was initially very popular in Russia. But in comparison to the first conflict during the time of Boris Yeltsin's presidency, as the second conflict lingered on it inevitably became less popular. Chechenization of security provision would mean Russian troops would no longer be needed in the Republic and could return home. After the implementation of Chechenization, however, Russia still retains a force of 23,000 in Chechnya and so this argument seems unlikely.

#### **1.5 Stability due to corruption and lawlessness**

Why mention Chechenization? The inauguration of Medvedev as Russian president and Putin's relegation to prime minister could potentially bring to an end the strong patron-client relationship between Putin and Kadyrov. Like Putin, Medvedev initiated his presidency with a declaration of war. Putin declared war on Chechnya while Medvedev declared war on corruption and an inefficient legal system, two factors that have paradoxically led to stability in Chechnya. Chechenization has created a system of institutionalized brutality but also, in a twist of macabre irony, relative stability.

By Fraser McArthur  
MA Student, University of St Andrews

#### **1.6 Resources on Russian Chechenization**

##### **1.6.1 Governmental and international organizations**

President of Russia

This website provides information on presidential speeches and directives as well as links to institutions.

Situation of human rights in Chechnya, by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR)

The website provides information on a statement made by the chairman to indicate the

Commission's consensus agreement in connection with the situation regarding human rights in Chechnya.

Chechnya projects focus on the human aspect, by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)

This resource details the involvement of the OSCE in Chechnya and the purpose of the projects that have been undertaken there.

### **1.6.2 Research and academia**

The Russian Military Campaign in the North Caucasus: Is a Victory in Sight?, by The Jamestown Foundation, Washington, DC, US (PDF · 107 KB)

This paper by Pavel K Baev, a researcher at the International Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), assesses the situation in the North Caucasus in the perspective of the Russian military.

North Caucasus Weekly, by The Jamestown Foundation, Washington, DC, US

This resource informs policymakers, the media and the public of developments in Chechnya. North Caucasus Weekly is researched and written by Lawrence A Uzzell, a senior Jamestown Foundation fellow who opened Jamestown's Moscow office in 1992.

### **1.6.3 Nongovernmental organizations**

Chechnya, by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, US

This resource provides a number of links to publications, events and experts at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace regarding Chechnya.

Memorial

Memorial is a human rights watchdog that does extensive work throughout the post-USSR space regarding recognition of political repression and aims to develop civil society.

Justice for Chechnya: The European Court of Human Rights Rules Against Russia, by Human Rights Watch, New York, US (PDF · 3.2 MB)

This report documents the difficulties in achieving justice through the Chechen legal system and the necessity of those seeking it to take their case to the European Court on Human Rights.

The American Committee for Peace in the Caucasus (ACPC), Washington, DC, US

The ACPC, founded by Freedom House, serves to disseminate knowledge about the peoples, culture and regions of the North Caucasus. The ACPC coordinates with an international network of human rights activists, journalists, scholars and NGOs.

Chechnya, by Islamic Relief, Birmingham, UK

Islamic Relief is a charity that responds to disasters and emergencies. The charity hosts a webpage about the situation in Chechnya.

Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia, Moscow, Russia

The Union aims to draw attention to human rights violations committed in Chechnya in the pursuit of ending the conflict.

#### **1.6.4 Media commentary on Chechnya**

Regions and Territories: Chechnya, by BBC, London, UK

This profile provides an overview, facts and information on the leaders and the media of Chechnya.

Putin's Pacification of Chechnya, by ISN Security Watch, Zurich, Switzerland

This early 2008 article by Simon Saradzhyan documents the evolution of Putin's policy toward Chechnya including the policy of Chechenization.

The Internecine Battle for Chechnya, by ISN Security Watch, Zurich, Switzerland

This article, also by Simon Saradzhyan, looks at the security dynamics internal to Chechnya caused by the policy of Chechenization. The dominance of Kadyrov and the consequent challenges to his authority are cause for concern the author argues.

What Direction for Chechnya?, by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Prague, Czech Republic

This article by Liz Fuller provides a comprehensive overview of the contemporary situation in Chechnya and extrapolates future potential developments.