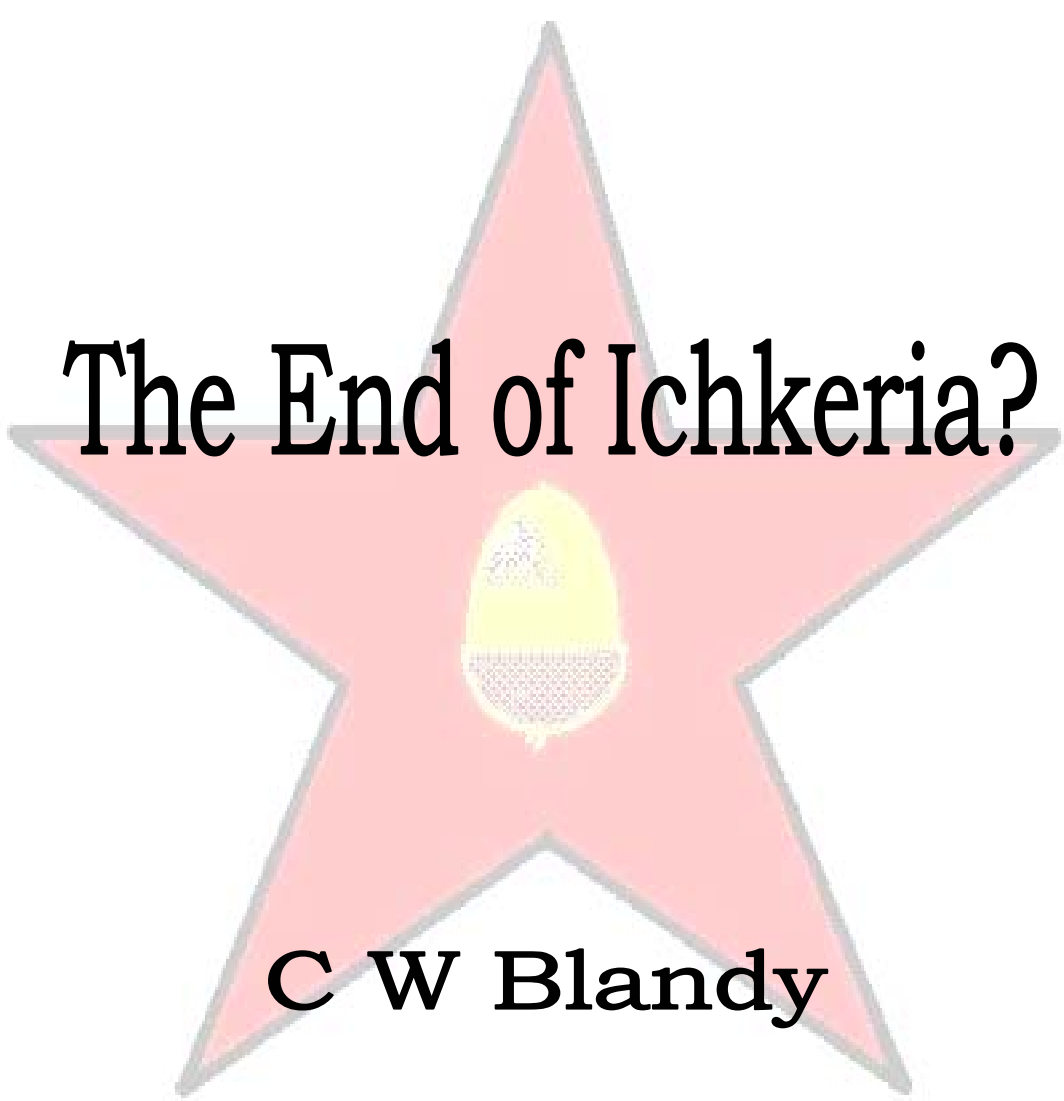


Conflict Studies Research Centre



The End of Ichkeria?

C W Blandy

April 2005

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Key Points

- * In an atmosphere of increasing public dissatisfaction within Russia and international criticism, the assassination of Aslan Maskhadov, former President of Chechnya, has redressed the balance in President Putin's favour.
- * That the 'terrorist' Basayev is still at large and Maskhadov's successor is a cleric will encourage the intensification of Federal operations and the reduction of foreign criticism.
- * There are a variety of different accounts of Maskhadov's death. With significant variations on time and place.
- * The fact that his body was not released to his relatives is an aggravating factor.
- * Increasing violence, blood revenge, and inter-clan conflict are likely in Chechnya, particularly as there are growing signs that Chechnya is not big enough for both Alu Alkhanov, the Chechen president and Ramzan Kadyrov, the First deputy Prime Minister.

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The National & International Context

“The situation in the North Caucasus was close to critical. Boyeviki felt themselves free in the territories bordering Chechnya. The underground network of their refuges already exists on the territory of Chechnya, Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria and... is actively being created in other republics of the region. Weekly reports about the storming of yet another house captured by terrorists – in Makhachkala, Kizlyar or Nal’chik - are with exceptions, themes which only support the overall trend.”¹

Within the Russian heartland, by the end of 2004 there was mounting criticism, unease and a sense of vulnerability amongst the population as seemingly unending acts of terrorism spilled into other regions of the North Caucasus. Despite repeated calls for them to do so, the Federal government had set its face against any form of negotiation with the separatists. The Union of Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia had met Akhmad Zakayev, the separatists' representative in London and signed a memorandum calling for a peaceful settlement.² Moreover, the critical tone of articles in the press covered a much greater diapason of condemnation than just the war in the Southern Federal District. Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Pribylovskiy noted the general decline in President Putin’s ratings amongst the general public:

“It is well known Vladimir Putin became president under the banner of uncompromising battle against terrorism, for the establishment of peace and order in Chechnya. And today despite Beslan, despite “Nord-Ost”, explosions in aircraft and the metro, the raid on Nazran’, practically every day there are armed clashes in Chechnya, to the assassination of Akhmat Kadyrov he attempts to convince that the Chechen problem is practically solved. This is a lie – not inoffensive political demagoguery. Behind it stands the inability of the government to undertake effective actions for the achievement of peace in Chechnya.”³

Two public opinion polls attributed the decline to:

“Reform of financial privileges, worn-out overstated expectations of the Russian leader against the background of real events in the country (Beslan, protests of pensioners) are leading to the fact that Vladimir Putin is losing the image of the 'President of Hope'... Among the most remembered negative factors were: the change to money benefits (in first place), relations with Ukraine, the threat to personal property and the ineffective fight against terrorism.”⁴

The continued questioning of Moscow’s policy in Chechnya by the West, in particular the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe’s calls to open negotiations with moderate Chechen separatists, had become a source of real

irritation to Moscow and the Chechen government in Groznyy. Moscow also had strong views about the refusal of the court in London to allow the extradition of Akhmed Zakayev, whom Russia regards as a terrorist. The Strasbourg 'Round Table' scheduled for 21 March threatened to become another humiliation for Russia. Moscow's sense of growing isolation from Europe on the question of Chechnya and human rights was compounded by events in Ukraine and Georgia's increasingly trenchant line over the removal of Russian military bases.

Whilst Aslan Maskhadov reportedly had little influence over the radical extremists, his power lay in his credentials as a legally elected former president, which had become the focus of a concerned following in the 'Liberal West'. It is possible to speculate that his permanent elimination would enable Russia to gain lost ground. It would also remove a figurehead with an implied legitimacy from the struggle for Ichkerian independence. For as long as Maskhadov was alive the flame of Chechen separatism remained.

The targeting of Maskhadov with his small group would be an easier task than initiating an operation against Basayev, who has a far larger band of fighters. Elimination of Maskhadov would enable the fight against terrorism to be concentrated on the much more radical Basayev. So, the permanent removal of Maskhadov would pull the rug from under Western supporters who were constantly demanding negotiations in an effort to terminate the war. It would enable an increasing emphasis on the line that Basayev and his comrades were simply 'odious manifestations of terrorism' and thus Russia should be entitled to the absolute and unwavering support of the West in the fight against global terrorism. Maskhadov's repeated refusal to surrender would entail his liquidation, and there was a need to impress on the population that strong, successful action was indeed being taken.

One can assume that the Federal Security Service (FSB) knew a considerable amount about Maskhadov's movements in Chechnya, particularly if one accepts the remarks of a GRU (military intelligence) officer about Shamil' Basayev: the GRU "*kept a constant watch on Basayev. We know everything about him. We have our clear-cut orders. Neither seize nor eliminate him, just watch.*"⁵

Closing the Net

Maskhadov's elimination could hardly have been by accident, as in the case of Ruslan Gelayev over a year ago in Daghestan, but was the result of a complicated, multi-track, special operation.⁶ It had started in December 2004, with the abduction of a total of 8 of Maskhadov's relatives on 3 and 28 December, and the announcement on 17 January by the deputy chief of the FSB Directorate in Chechnya Aleksandr Potapov of the arrest of Vakkha Arsanov, former Vice President of Chechnya.

In one version of events it was suggested that Kadyrov, through his closest colleagues, former influential *boyeviki*, began to have talks with Maskhadov in December 2004, when Kadyrov had taken eight of Maskhadov's relatives hostage. In the negotiations, Kadyrov demanded a public statement from Maskhadov to the effect that Maskhadov had resigned from the post of 'President of Ichkeria'. Maskhadov then asked for a personal guarantee of safety for both himself and his relatives.⁷

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Two important keys in the hands of federal forces were the reward of \$10 million offered after the Beslan tragedy for the capture of either Maskhadov or Basayev and the eight relatives of Maskhadov who had allegedly been seized by Ramzan Kadyrov, First Deputy Prime Minister of Chechnya, and who had now become pawns through whom pressure could be applied to force Maskhadov's capitulation.

President Putin had found in Kadyrov, recently decorated with the award of 'Hero of Russia', the ideal instrument to bring separatist Chechens to heel, bursting with ardour, dedication and an assiduous commitment to hunting out the enemies of the Chechen pro-Russian government. Kadyrov's dedication was reinforced by the need to avenge the death of his father, President Akhmat-Khadzhi Kadyrov who had been killed in the explosion in Groznyy's Dynamo Stadium on 9 May 2004.

The capture and death of Maskhadov were part of an intensified programme of simultaneous and coordinated counter-terrorist operations from the beginning of January 2005 against specific targets, driven hard by a Russian President determined to maintain his template for the normalisation of Chechnya and his longstanding objective of the pursuit and eradication of terrorists throughout Russia. Despite Maskhadov's announcement on 27 January (the 8th anniversary of his election as president) of a ceasefire until 22 February, federal forces' and special services' activity was increased following information about the preparation of new terrorist acts to commemorate the anniversary of the mass deportations of the Chechen and Ingush nations on 23 February 1944.

In the New Year a large scale operation was conducted by 42 Guards Motor Rifle Division, which resulted in the death of 12 soldiers on 22 February caused by a bomb in a chicken factory to the south-east of Groznyy, a day before the expiry of Maskhadov's ceasefire. As a result of the deaths, the division's commander "*promised to destroy three boyeviki for one soldier killed – it is our special price*".⁸ At the same time, in a forested massif to the south east of Groznyy a large-scale special Chechen government operation was being initiated under the command of Kadyrov, which started in earnest on 24-25 February in the vicinity of Alkhan-Yurt and then developed into Nozhay-Yurt, Vedenov, Itum-Kaly and Shatoy rayony.⁹ The troops included the best subunits of the "Kadyrov Guards" – two militia regiments of special troops of the Chechen interior troops, an oil complex guard-duty regiment, mountain detachments of internal troops, and attached subunits from the federal forces together with army aviation to support the search for bandits.¹⁰

Between 40 and 100 *boyeviki* were trapped in a mountain pass in the area of the villages of Bena, Daty (Nozhay-Yurt rayon) close to the Daghestani border. Ramzan Kadyrov had hurried to report in front of TV cameras, not for the first time it might be said, that the "*band was completely blocked and its leader was Rappanani Khalilov with the head of Maskhadov's security service Akhmed Avdorkhanov*".¹¹ Even though with the help of thick fog the *boyeviki* broke out of the encirclement and into Daghestan on 28 February, the special operation, which also extended westwards to Sunzha and Achkhoy-Martan rayony¹² probably contributed to Maskhadov's capture a few days later.

Death & Variations

It was on 8 March 2005 that reports first began to circulate in the media that Maskhadov had been killed. The bulletin issued by the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs on 9 March stated: "*The leader of terrorists Aslan Maskhadov was killed*

yesterday in the populated point of Tolstoy-Yurt, Groznyy rayon. Simultaneously federal forces were successful in preventing a massive terrorist act which the boyeviki planned to carry out in this village.”¹³

The murder of the ex-president initiated a torrent of rumours about how he came to meet his end, for the authorities had difficulty in formulating convincing answers. One of the major complicating factors was that there had to be no indication that it was Kadyrov who killed Maskhadov, to avoid blood revenge from Maskhadov’s family and the Alleroy teip. Whilst Kadyrov was involved in setting the trap, it was the FSB who actually eliminated Maskhadov.

Even within the official version there were two variants:

“On 8 March in the village of Tolstoy-Yurt of Grozzy rayon, the 54 year old separatist leader, president of the non-existent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria was killed. There are two official versions of his death. The representative of the regional operational headquarters [Major General] Il’ya Shabalkin stated that Maskhadov died at the very moment when special services blew up his underground bunker. But according to the first deputy prime minister of the Chechen government [Kadyrov], they wished to take Maskhadov alive, but his personal bodyguard could possibly have shot him accidentally.”¹⁴

The bulletin published by the Russian Interior Troops¹⁵ stated that as a result of the special counter-terrorist operation directed by the Regional Operational Headquarters (ROSh) in the southern parts of Vedenov and Nozhay-Yurt rayony the *federaly* had captured two fighters from a bandit formation belonging to Shamil’ Basayev and one from a grouping under Aslan Maskhadov. Their interrogation revealed plans to carry out a massive shooting up of the local administration building in Tolstoy-Yurt with grenade launchers on 8 March. The terrorists had instructions to open fire on the Interior Ministry rayon detachment and the military *komendatur* at the same time.

The federal forces command formed a mobile detachment which went immediately to Tolstoy-Yurt and succeeded in killing Aslan Maskhadov, who was apparently sitting tight in a well equipped underground bunker 1.5m square belonging to one of his comrades-in-arms. Spetsnaz personnel also captured four people from his close circle - Vakhit Murdashev, Viskhan Khadzhimuratov, Il’yas Iliskhanov and Sayderbek Yusopov who owned the house and land in which the bunker was situated. The following were found in the dugout: grenades, weapons, several kilogrammes of explosive, radios, two notebook computers, video cassettes, an Ichkerian flag, and Maskhadov’s personal files.

Yet since the tiny bunker was not fitted out with a ventilation system, “*Maskhadov would die of asphyxiation after 10 minutes*”.¹⁶ If he had been in the bunker when it was blown up, his body would surely have shown signs of severe damage, yet photographs showed only what appeared to be a bullet hole near one eye. Apparently Maskhadov was asked to surrender, but he refused. According to another account,¹⁷ Vakhid Murdashev, former head of Maskhadov’s cadre directorate carried out negotiations for surrender to the federal authorities on his own initiative. There was an exchange of blows between him and Maskhadov during which Maskhadov was accidentally shot. This explanation was confirmed by Kadyrov junior. After Maskhadov’s death his three associates Murdashev, Khadzhimuratov and Iliskhanov surrendered.

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Speculation began to spread with regard to the veracity of the official bulletin. One certainly questions the likelihood of Maskhadov participating in such an unlikely adventure. The general consensus of opinion came round to the view that perhaps Maskhadov had been killed somewhat earlier, and his body transferred to Tolstoy-Yurt early on the morning of 8 March. Maskhadov's 29 year old son Anzor, in Baku in the company of his mother and sister, gave no credence to the official announcement: "*According to my information, father was not killed on 8 March*".¹⁸

In an article a week later, Vladimir Rechkalov wrote that: "*...The director of the Regional Operational Headquarters for the Counter-terrorist operation, General Yedelev, after deputy premier Kadyrov ... confirmed ... that Maskhadov was never in the house. He was taken alive by cunning, interrogated, shot in a different place, and the whole special operation in Tolstoy-Yurt was a staged event.*"

Moreover, the fact that Maskhadov's body was not released by the federal authorities for burial by his relatives, a requirement under Muslim practice, is likely to resonate throughout Chechen society and harden the attitude and stance of the separatists.

The International Effect

Maskhadov's death, as the authorities had planned, resulted in a complete about turn in the approach of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) to the Chechen problem, almost to the extent of turning their round table planned for 21 March into farce. The decision to hold a round table had been taken on 7 October 2004 at a session devoted to Chechnya, which passed a resolution to the effect that the "*referendum on the constitution which took place in March 2003, and the presidential elections of October 2003 and August 2004 was evidence of the appearance of a new type of violation of the European Convention on Human Rights, connected to the freedom of choice and freedom of speech*".¹⁹ At that session PACE delegates accused the Russian Federation of other violations of Chechen people's rights.

"*On 21 March 2005 Russia gained a final victory over Chechen separatists.*"²⁰ This event allowed Russian and official Chechen politicians to confirm that the "*main aim of the round table was confirmation of the fact that alternatives of normalising the situation in the Chechen Republic besides those within the framework of the constitution of the RF do not exist,*"²¹ and that there were no longer 'two sides' in Chechnya.

Present from the Chechen Republic were President Alu Alkhanov; Taus Dzhabrailov, President of the State Council; senators Akhmar Zavgayev, and Musa Ummarov; Chechen deputies to the Russian State Duma; around 30 Pro-Moscow Chechens, and Vladimir Kravchenko, Chechen Procurator. There were no representatives from the Chechen separatists. The Ichkerian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Usman Ferzauli, explained his refusal to attend on account of not having received instructions from his new President, Abdul-Khakim Saidulayev. Akhmed Zakayev had stated that after the death of Maskhadov, Ichkeria was not ready to embark on peace initiatives.

Prospects

Maskhadov may well secure a far greater place in history with the Chechen nation through the nomination of Abdul-Khalim Saidulayev as his successor, accentuated by his own careful planning some three years or so ago to achieve a smooth succession in the event of his untimely death. Maskhadov's son allegedly said that *'the new president would be a person who resembled [Maskhadov]. He would be a man of patience and restraint and he would continue the course.'*²² But in nominating a religious leader, they have provided exactly what President Putin wanted, because it provides the ammunition, however unjustifiably, for proclaiming that the terrorist extremist movement is very much alive. The shadow of Beslan is still a long one.

However, Saidulayev is unlikely to prove a more effective leader than Maskhadov. The intransigence of the fighters has only been reinforced as a result of the assassination. Increasing violence, blood revenge, and inter-clan conflict are therefore likely in Chechnya, or even the starker realities of an all-out civil war. There are indicators that relations between Kadyrov and President Alu Alkhanov are strained. The reported increase in federal military personnel²³ could possibly signal that despite Kadyrov's skills at hunting and turning wayward Chechens, the Federal Centre is not unaware of his aspirations and shortcomings. A civil war between these two conflicting factions in Chechnya may well bring it to the forefront of international attention in the future once again.

ENDNOTES

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² *NG Regiony*, No 4, 28 February 2005, p1, "Strelyat' nel'zya dogovariatsya" by Andrey Riskin. "Meanwhile last Friday [25 February] in London representatives of Union of Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia met Aslan Maskhadov's emissary Akhmed Zakayev and signed a memorandum 'The Way to Peace in Chechnya' ... The meeting took place in the presence of Deputies from the European Parliament ... added V Mel'inkova Chairwoman MKSM 'The terror in Chechnya was born through the ten year war and to liquidate it is only possible within the framework of a peaceful process'".

³ <http://2005.novayagazeta.ru/nomer/2005/10n/n10n-s00.shtml>, *Novaya Gazeta*, No 10, 10 February 2005, "Prezident prostoy i lozhnyy" by Boris Nemtsov & Vladimir Pribbylovskiy.

⁴ <http://www.politcom.ru/2005/pvz596.php>, Politcom.Ru, 1 February 2005, "Reyting prezidenta pod davleniyem" by Ta'yana Stanovaya. According to the Public Opinion Foundation on 20 Jan 05 'trust' ratings of President Putin had declined from 47% in Dec 04 to 43% in Jan 05, and according to the Levada Centre on 26 January, from 39% 32% in the same period. "As a whole those not approving the activities of the president increased from 22% to 25%, and the number of those approving the activities of the president dropped from 71% (December 2004) to 65%."

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⁶ <http://www.mk/numbers/1533/article49527.htm>, *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 10 March 2005, "Zhizn' na vzrychatke" by Irina Kuksenkova.

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- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ <http://www.mvdinform.ru/index.php?newsid=5249>, “*V rezultate spetsoperatsii v chechenskom selenii Tolstoy-Yurt unichtozhen Aslan Maskhadov.*”
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Want to Know More ...?

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