Analysis

The Russian-Chechen Conflict and the Putin-Kadyrov Connection

Mark Kramer, Cambridge, MA

Over the past thirteen years, the Russian government has fought two brutal wars against separatist guerrillas in Chechnya, a small, landlocked republic adjoining Dagestan, Stavropol Krai, North Ossetia, and Ingushetia in Russia's North Caucasus region. The first war lasted from December 1994 until August 1996, when the two sides signed an armistice that led to a suspension of fighting and three years of de facto independence for Chechnya. This interregnum came to an end in the latter half of 1999 when a series of events beginning with deadly incursions by Islamic extremists from Chechnya into neighboring Dagestan reignited large-scale warfare between Russian federal forces and Chechen guerrillas — a conflict that has continued ever since.

Heavy fighting occurred during the first several months of the latest Russian-Chechen war, when roughly 2,500 Russian federal troops were killed along with tens of thousands of civilians. Starting in mid-2000, the war increasingly evolved into a classic insurgency. From 2002 through 2004 the Chechen separatists embarked on a series of spectacular terrorist attacks in Moscow and other major Russian cities, including mass hostage-takings, assassinations, and suicide bombings designed to kill the maximum number of people. This campaign was supplemented by hundreds of terrorist attacks within the North Caucasus, causing widespread bloodshed, misery, and destruction. The worst of these attacks was the grisly siege in September 2004 of a school in the North Ossetian town of Beslan, an incident that killed roughly 340 hostages, more than half of whom were children. Smaller incidents have occurred since then, and preparations for much larger attacks have been narrowly averted, mainly through luck. Nonetheless, the Chechens' terrorist campaign has ebbed sharply over the past two years. More generally, the separatist conflict in Chechnya, which had remained intense and deadly through late 2005, has diminished markedly over the past two years. The Russian government has trumpeted the decline of the insurgency as a rousing success and has implied that Chechnya is returning steadily to "normal life." Although the diminution of fighting in Chechnya has clearly been welcomed by — and beneficial to — the civilian population there, the "solution" devised by the Russian federal government raises serious doubts that long-term stability can be ensured.

The Putin Dimension

Vladimir Putin, who had been appointed prime minister by Russian President Boris Yeltsin on 6 August 1999, took charge of Russia's latest war in Chechnya from the very start. Putin earned public acclaim in Russia for his conduct of the war and quickly became the most popular figure in the Russian government. When Yeltsin suddenly resigned at the end of 1999, he designated Putin as his successor. Putin's standing rose still further in February 2000 when most of the Chechen guerrillas left Grozny and shifted to positions further south. Putin's decisive, first-round victory in the Russian presidential election in late March 2000, winning 53 percent of the vote, seemed to convey public approval of his tough line in Chechnya, a sentiment borne out in most opinion polls. Putin acknowledged as much when three Russian journalists interviewed him for the quasi-autobiography published in mid-2000 under the title *Ot pervogo litsa: Razgovory s Vladimirom Putinym* (From the First Person: Conversations with Vladimir Putin). During those interviews, Putin declared that his "historic mission" as president would be to "resolve the situation in the North Caucasus" and to consolidate Chechnya as a permanent component of the Russian Federation.

To accomplish this "mission," Putin resorted to wide-scale repression and destruction in Chechnya, especially during the first few years of the war. Whenever these tactics have been criticized by Russians or by foreign observers, Putin has reacted viscerally and has reaffirmed his determination to do whatever is necessary to "wipe out the terrorist scum" in Chechnya. To ensure ample political leeway for the war, Putin also systematically took steps to keep Chechnya off the political agenda. He learned a lesson from the 1994-1996 Russian-Chechen war, which was unpopular from the start and was sharply criticized on Russian television, particularly the independent NTV station. During the 1996 Russian presidential election campaign, the Chechen war came up repeatedly (albeit mainly as part of a general indictment of the government's incompe-

tence), and pressure mounted for a political settlement. Putin worked carefully to forestall any such pressure on him. Not only did he restore state control over television and other media outlets, but he also undercut rival political parties (especially those supporting liberal democratic reforms) and greatly narrowed the room for political debate and competition in Russia. As a result, despite the many thousands of Russian soldiers and police who have been killed in Chechnya since 1999 and despite the large number of highly visible terrorist attacks in Moscow in 2002, 2003, and 2004, Chechnya played no role in either the Russian parliamentary elections of December 2003 or the Russian presidential election of March 2004. Nor has it been on the political agenda since then, apart from a brief flurry of concern and recriminations following the Beslan massacre. The war has not been discussed in any depth on Russian television or in the Russian parliament, and the coverage of it on the television news is sporadic and highly tendentious.

With the precipitous decline in fighting in Chechnya since 2005, Putin now regularly boasts that he accomplished what he set out to do: to bring Chechnya permanently back under Russian control. The toll of the war — the deaths of nearly 10,000 Russian soldiers and police and of roughly 80,000 civilians (8 percent of the prewar population), the continued displacement of at least 200,000 people (ethnic Russians as well as Chechens), and the destruction of vast swaths of the republic — is never mentioned in Putin's speeches and statements. Instead, he has been intent on portraying himself as the man who "preserved Russia's territorial integrity and repulsed an aggressive challenge from foreign-backed terrorists and their supporters."

Federal Counterinsurgency Efforts

Federal counterinsurgency operations in Chechnya were initially overseen by the Russian Ministry of Defense and then, from January 2001 to July 2003, by the Federal Security Service (FSB). Since July 2003 the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) has been in charge of the Unified Grouping of Forces (OGV), which brings together armed units and intelligence resources from various federal agencies and service branches. The first deputy commander-in-chief of the MVD's Internal Forces, Colonel-General Yevgeny Baryayev, has been commander of the OGV since mid-2006, reporting directly to the Minister of Internal Affairs.

From 2000 through early 2005, Russia's counterinsurgency operations against the Chechen guerrillas were largely unsuccessful, but the OGV finally began to make significant progress in 2005. The federal authorities' success in killing Aslan Maskhadov, the then-president of the Chechen guerrilla government, in March 2005 was especially important in dealing an initial blow to the insurgency — a far more important blow than most observers expected at the time. To the extent that Chechens after the Beslan massacre in September 2004 still believed that Chechnya might eventually have a better future, they looked to Maskhadov as the only one who could bring it. Whether they were right in this perception is unclear (Maskhadov, for want of alternatives, had moved closer to the ultra-radical elements of the insurgency by mid-2004), but Chechens generally believed that Maskhadov was the only guerrilla leader with whom Putin and other leaders in Moscow might someday consider negotiating. When Maskhadov was killed by Russian forces, it removed the last hope that Chechens really had. Although many Chechens still had a sort of grudging respect for the notorious Chechen terrorist leader Shamil Basayev for his earlier exploits (he was a brilliant military commander, by any measure), they did not believe that he was capable of leading Chechnya to independence. They knew that Russia would never tolerate it and would simply rain more destruction and bloodshed down on Chechnya. The death of Maskhadov therefore cut deeply into the Chechens' morale and weakened the spirit of resistance. The federal forces' success in killing Maskhadov's successor, Abdul-Khalim Sadulayev, in June 2006 reinforced the impact of Maskhadov's death.

Moreover, the killing of Sadulayev was soon followed, on 10 July 2006, by the death of Shamil Basayev, who was killed in Ingushetia by an accidental detonation of explosives that were being gathered in trucks for a large-scale attack. This stroke of good fortune for the Russian and pro-Moscow Chechen authorities was arguably the most crucial turning point of all in the Russian-Chechen conflict since the fighting began. So long as Basayev was around, it was impossible to contemplate any sort of lasting truce in Chechnya. To be sure, guerrilla operations by Dokku Umarov (who was chosen to succeed Sadulayev as the president of the Chechen separatists) and other radical Chechen leaders have continued in the wake of Basayev's death, and bombings and ambushes still occur frequently. Very few parts of Chechnya are truly safe. Moreover, some attacks have resulted in the deaths of a substantial number of Russian federal troops and pro-Moscow Chechen forces. In late April 2007, for example, the downing of a Russian Mi-8 helicopter as it was pursuing Chechen insurgents resulted in the deaths of 20 Russian GRU (military in-

telligence) special forces and pilots. Roadside bombs and improvised explosive devices also have cost many lives. Nonetheless, violent clashes and terrorist attacks in Chechnya have declined precipitously overall. Although the federal authorities have not won "hearts and minds" in Chechnya, they have managed to crush most of the insurgency through unrelenting force and through the devolution of authority to Ramzan Kadyrov's tyrannical government. With Basayev gone from the scene, most Chechens no longer have an obvious ideological rallying point. In the Weberian sense, Basayev was a "charismatic leader" for young Chechen radicals, spurring them to fight for independence. Without that kind of leader around, independence is now almost universally perceived in Chechnya as an unrealistic goal, at least in the short to medium term.

The greater stability in Chechnya — precarious though it may be — is likely to be a positive influence elsewhere in the North Caucasus by stemming the spread of instability and extremism, both directly and indirectly. Basayev had been seeking to link Islamic extremist groups across the region, and his death eliminated the main focal point for such groups. More generally, the experience of Chechnya over the past eight years has been a sobering influence for large segments of the population in the North Caucasus. Preliminary surveys by the Levada Center (a highly reputable polling organization) in Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria reveal little public support for violent Islamic extremists and other radical forces and terrorists. The widespread popular desire to avoid destabilizing violence is attributable to many factors, including the "demonstration effect" of the appalling bloodshed in Chechnya, continued revulsion at the Beslan school massacre, and a sense that neither Western nor Islamic governments will take any significant action if large-scale violent conflict breaks out and provokes a brutal crackdown by the Russian authorities.

Barring some unforeseeable disaster, the current lull in the fighting in Chechnya will persist at least until Putin leaves office in March 2008, and probably well after that. During Putin's presidency, the Russian government was able to quell the insurgency in Chechnya without in any way having "won hearts and minds." This should not be wholly surprising, despite the emphasis given to "hearts and minds" in recent writings about counterinsurgency, including the newly revised editions of the U.S. Army's and U.S. Marines' counterinsurgency manuals. Historically, governments have often been successful in using ruthless violence to crush large and determined insurgencies, at least if the rulers' time horizons are focused on the short to medium term. The Romans showed this long ago; Adolf Hitler showed it in Warsaw (both the Warsaw ghetto in 1943 and the rest of Warsaw a year later), Josif Stalin showed it in western Ukraine and the Baltic states in the 1940s and 1950s; and Saddam Hussein showed it against the Shiites and Kurds when they rebelled in Iraq in 1991. Putin has now followed in this tradition in Chechnya. Even if the outcome is precarious, Putin will be out of office by the time a new armed conflict might erupt with Chechnya. Politicians rarely operate with long time horizons. When Putin leaves office next year, he can plausibly claim to have accomplished his "historic mission." If a deluge comes later on, it will be blamed on his successors.

Chechenization, and the Ramzan Kadyrov Dimension

Whether the relative calm in Chechnya can be transformed into a lasting and stable solution under Putin's successors is far from clear. For one thing, a number of grave problems continue to afflict the North Caucasus — pervasive corruption, the brutality of the local police and security forces, perennial government malfeasance, high levels of unemployment, a harsh clampdown on moderate Islamic groups, and the exploitation of ethnic tensions and intercommunal strife. These conditions have fueled extremism and political violence in republics like Ingushetia, Dagestan, and Kabardino-Balkaria. Although Putin's chief envoy in the region, Dmitrii Kozak, has made considerable headway over the past two years in dealing with some of these problems and defusing possible flashpoints, daunting obstacles remain. The general volatility of the North Caucasus tends to militate against greater long-term stability in Chechnya itself.

Another factor that will clearly pose long-term problems is the federal government's reliance on "Chechenization" to supplement large-scale repression as the means of combating separatism in Chechnya. Starting in early 2003, Putin claimed that the pro-Moscow Chechen government led by Ahmad-Haji Kadyrov would take over much of the responsibility for preserving order in Chechnya with the aid of the local police and security forces. The Chechen guerrillas sought to prevent the pro-Russian government from establishing a firmer hold and repeatedly targeted police officers, especially the ones who (at Kadyrov's behest) had conducted mass roundups (*zachistki*) similar to those carried out by Russian troops. Many deadly bombings, shootings, and other attacks were directed against the Chechen police in 2003 and 2004, and in May 2004 the Chechen guerrillas planted a bomb that killed Kadyrov and other

senior officials during a Victory Day celebration in the Chechen capital, Grozny. A subsequent wave of terrorist violence in Chechnya and elsewhere in the North Caucasus, combined with the federal commanders' distrust of Chechen officials, raised serious questions about whether Chechenization would remain a viable approach.

Putin, however, chose to continue moving ahead with Chechenization by giving ever greater authority to Kadyrov's son, Ramzan Kadyrov, a young and uneducated man widely known for his violent cruelty and for the egregious abuses committed by the roughly 15,000-strong security force he set up and oversaw, the so-called Kadyrovtsy. Ramzan Kadyrov was appointed a first deputy prime minister in the pro-Moscow Chechen government after his father's assassination and received a Hero of Russia medal from Putin in December 2004. In March 2006, Kadyrov became prime minister in the pro-Moscow government, and in February 2007 he was able to force Alu Alkhanov, who had succeeded Ahmad Kadyrov as Chechen president, to relinquish the presidency. A few weeks later, Ramzan Kadyrov became the new president, having reached the minimum age of 30 in October 2006. Kadyrov's consolidation of power has been strongly supported by Putin, despite the qualms of some of Putin's advisers, notably Igor Sechin.

In the short term, Kadyrov's consolidation of power has been a stabilizing factor in Chechnya. Using proceeds from a mandatory payroll tax on state-sector employees, Kadyrov has launched reconstruction projects in several urban areas, especially Grozny and his hometown, Gudermes, with impressive results. Funding for reconstruction in 2006 and 2007 was 500 percent higher than in 2004, when Kadyrov's father was assassinated. Equally important, in 2006 Kadyrov managed to convince hundreds of former guerrillas to switch sides and join the Kadyrovtsy. The federal government has had an amnesty program of its own for some time, but Kadyrov's personal assurances (and payoffs) to former rebels made a vital difference. Kadyrov has staunchly denied that the Kadyrovtsy ever engaged in kidnappings, torture, and other abuses for which they have long been known and feared, but he apparently did take steps in early 2007 to curb the worst of these excesses. In particular, the incidence of illegal abductions and "disappearances" declined significantly in the first several months of 2007. Nonetheless, although abuses and extralegal executions have been more carefully targeted against Kadyrov's perceived enemies (e.g., Movladi Baisarov) in 2007, normal legal procedures and restraints remain completely absent in Chechnya.

The future direction of Kadyrov's government in Chechnya remains highly uncertain. Soon after Kadyrov became president in early March 2007, he began bringing every significant administrative and security body in Chechnya under his de facto control and appointing close relatives to the highest positions, including Odes Baisultanov as prime minister and Adam Delimkhanov as first deputy prime minister. Kadyrov formed an Anti-Terrorist Commission in March 2007 with himself as the head of it, overseeing the Chechen Republic's branch of the FSB and other security units. Kadyrov has sought to bring all the security forces in Chechnya under his de facto control by eliminating or co-opting the Russian federal units that are still operating there (apart from the 50,000 or so federal troops that are not involved in day-to-day security, mostly in the federal Defense Ministry's 42nd Motorized Infantry Division and the federal MVD's 46th Internal Forces Brigade, both of which are to be permanently deployed in Chechnya). In particular, Kadyrov has sought to discredit the federal Operational-Investigative Bureau (OSB) No. 2, accusing it of having routinely used torture and committed atrocities in Chechnya. These accusations are well-founded but are also disingenuous. By voicing these allegations, Kadyrov not only hopes to shift blame from the Kadyrovtsy for the worst of the abuses, but also seeks to eliminate the only internal security organization in Chechnya that is not yet under his de facto control. In May 2007, Kadyrov formally asked the federal MVD to disband the OSB-2.

Kadyrov's bid to become the total and unchallenged ruler in Chechnya raises questions about what will happen in Chechnya over the longer term. Sechin and some other Russian officials have been skeptical about Kadyrov's long-term loyalty to the federal government, and they worry that over time, as he gains ever greater authority within Chechnya, he may press for independence or some other undesirable arrangement. Kadyrov's recent vigorous campaign against OSB-2, the spate of press reports in May 2007 claiming that he wants to bring Ingushetia under Chechnya's influence (and perhaps eventually merge the two republics, restoring a configuration that was abandoned after the Soviet Union broke apart), and his formal request that Chechnya be granted a special status akin to that of Tatarstan have further stoked these suspicions.

Before Putin chose Kadyrov to replace Alkhanov, Sechin and a few other officials had privately recommended replacing Kadyrov, most likely by transferring him to a federal government post elsewhere in Russia. Putin rejected this advice, but even if he had accepted

it, such a step would have posed dangers of its own. The hundreds of Chechen guerrillas who accepted Kadyrov's proposal to change sides in 2006 might decide in his absence to turn back to violent anti-government actions. Indeed, several dozen have already done precisely that, rejoining the several hundred Chechen fighters who are still operating, mostly in the southern mountains. Moreover, the Kadyrovtsy, if suddenly deprived of their long-time leader, could easily wreak havoc in Chechnya and clash with other security forces. At the very least, Kadyrov's departure would usher in a period of uncertainty in Chechnya and give an opportunity for radical elements to regroup. On the other hand, if Kadyrov remains in power indefinitely, the cruelty and intolerance of his government might eventually precipitate a backlash. Even if large-scale fighting does not recur, Chechnya will continue to be a highly volatile and dangerous component of the Russian Federation for many years to come.

About the author:
Dr. Mark Kramer directs the Project on Cold War Studies at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Harvard University. He is the editor of the peer-reviewed Journal of Cold War Studies.

Analysis

Separatism and Islamic Extremism in the Ethnic Republics of the North Caucasus

Akhmet A. Yarlykapov, Moscow

Abstract

The ethnic republics of the North Caucasus remain a headache and source of alarm for Russia's central government. Moscow's efforts to improve the political climate and the economic situation have not produced the desired results. Today Moscow must support a significant number of intelligence, military, and police personnel in this strategically important region. As the federal government cuts the number of its troops in Chechnya, the number of forces subordinate to Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov is growing. At the same time, the successful efforts to forcibly remove the separatist fighters from Chechnya during the past few years, has pushed them outside the borders of the Chechen republic. The drop in the number of separatist military operations in Chechnya has been accompanied by a growth in such operations in other North Caucasus republics, particularly Dagestan and Ingushetia, which border Chechnya.

The Separatist Underground

The suppression of the separatist rebel fighters in Chechnya has forced them to move to other republics in the North Caucasus. Today they are creating and expanding their own networks in Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachayevo-Cherkessia. The main centers of these networks are not only the mountainous regions, as one would expect, but large cities, such as Makhachkala, Khasavyurt, Kizlyar, Nalchik, Cherkessk, Karachaevsk, and others. The recent actions taken by the Russian force ministries against these separatists, including the use of heavy weapons in the mountainous parts of the region, provide evidence that these conflicts have yet to disappear.

Currently, we are witnessing a major restructuring of the separatist underground in the North Caucasus that is taking place under the pressure of changing circumstances. This restructuring includes the distribution of forces across a maximally wide territory and the creation of a network structure, in which the nodes are formally autonomous, but are able to communicate with each other to coordinate their actions using various agents and electronic means of communication. In setting up this network, the fighters are focusing on disgruntled local residents, especially those who have been abused by the local law enforcement agencies. Unfortunately, the republican police in Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria in the 1990s and early 2000s carried out