



A Spreading Danger

Time for a New Policy towards Chechnya

Fiona Hill, Anatol Lieven and Thomas de Waal

Summary

The ongoing conflict in and around Chechnya is helping to feed the wider international jihadi movement, and is endangering the West as well as Russia. The next “soft target” of North Caucasian terrorism could be a Western one. Mutual recriminations over the conflict have badly damaged relations between Russia and the West. While most of the blame for this lies with Russian policies, the Western approach to the issue has often been unhelpful and irresponsible. Denunciations of Russian behaviour have not been matched by a real understanding of the Chechen conflict or a real commitment to help. In their own interest, Western countries need urgently to address the crisis in the North Caucasus. This requires them to recognize the seriousness of the threat, to open a real dialogue on cooperation with Russia rather than simply making criticisms, and to make a serious economic contribution to the region.

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Relations at an Impasse

In 2004, Western countries' dealings with Russia over the war in Chechnya reached an impasse, full of mutual suspicion and denunciation. If this situation is allowed to continue, any positive Western contribution to the improvement of conditions in the North Caucasus will remain virtually impossible, and the situation there is likely to become increasingly dangerous for Russia and the West.

The principal blame for the tension with the West over Chechnya lies with Russian policy. However, the Western approach to the conflict has too often been unhelpful and irresponsible. On the Russian side, first the Yeltsin and then the Putin administrations have grossly mismanaged Chechnya. The first Russian military intervention, of December 1994, was unnecessary, rash, and brutal. The second, of October 1999, though more justified, was premature and savagely conducted. As in the first intervention, indiscriminate force was too often used. Grozny has twice been bombarded into ruin. The fact that such action has numerous parallels in Western military campaigns does not make it any more acceptable.

On the ground, Russian servicemen have committed many well-documented atrocities against Chechnya's civilian population. As of 2005, the Russian armed forces have to a great extent won the main military campaign in Chechnya, but this has only led Chechen extremists and their allies to resort to larger-scale and more monstrous terrorist attacks on "soft targets" outside Chechnya, including the Dubrovka theatre in Moscow in October 2002 and the school in Beslan in September 2004.

A Broader Problem in the North Caucasus

The problems stemming from the Chechen conflict have broadened. It is no longer accurate simply to talk about "Chechen militants". The hostage-takers in Beslan included Ingush and individuals from other parts of the North Caucasus. Since defeating the Russian army in the war of 1994-1996, the Chechen radicals and their international allies have had an agenda of undermining Russian rule across the whole North Caucasus.

In recent years, entrenched poverty, corruption, criminality, and ethno-religious divisions in the region have strengthened their chances. While the situation in Chechnya is slowly improving, things are getting markedly worse in

neighbouring North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Daghestan, Kabardino-Balkharia, and Karachaevo-Cherkessia.

The North Caucasus has a long history of communal strife that erupted again in the 1990s. The bloodiest episode was a conflict between ethnic Ingush and Ossetians over a land dispute that took more than 600 lives in 1992. The region is also chronically underdeveloped, with high unemployment and poverty rates, and low average wages and per capita incomes.

These socioeconomic problems are breeding instability and radicalism. Radical Islamist influence has risen since the mid- 1990s, when militant groups entrenched themselves in the region. The growth of militancy has only been exacerbated by the heavy-handed reaction of the authorities, who have, for example, closed down virtually all the mosques in Kabardino-Balkharia.

The first modern Chechen war, of 1994-1996, largely stopped at the borders of Chechnya. Chechen separatists received very little support from their regional neighbours. Today, this pattern has changed, as demonstrated by direct Ingush involvement in a raid on the Ingushetian city of Nazran in June 2004 and the participation of Ingush and members of other North Caucasus ethnic groups in the terrorist attack on the school in Beslan in September 2004.

Although reliable data are also hard to come by, much of the Chechen rebel movement has clearly adopted a wider radical agenda that goes beyond only independence for Chechnya. During and after the war of 1994-1996, a small but influential group of international jihadi fighters based themselves in Chechnya under the leadership of an Arab with the nom de guerre of Khattab, while home-grown rebel leaders, such as Shamil Basayev, Arbi Barayev, and Movladi Udugov, allied themselves with this group and began to look to Middle Eastern Islamists for support.

Arabs based in the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia, alongside Chechen fighters, were associated with an alleged plot to launch a terrorist attack in London using the poison ricin. Members of the international jihadi movement have sought to exploit the Chechen conflict for their own wider ends, just as they have in Palestine, Kashmir, and many other places, and unfortunately, with considerable success. This strategy has been set out by Al Qaeda's second-in-command, Aiman al-Zawahiri, in his pamphlet "Knights Under the Prophet's Banner".

Although Russian claims about the importance of the international terrorist element in the Chechen conflict are often exaggerated, this factor is nonetheless a real and important one. There clearly is now an ideological and financial link between the Chechen radicals and international jihadi terrorists, and there is also a demonstration effect. Terror tactics adopted by jihadis in Chechnya have been propagated by video and the Internet and adopted elsewhere, including in Iraq. This link with international jihadi terrorism should be of direct concern to Western governments because they must face the possibility that the next soft target of North Caucasian terrorism could be a Western one.

President Putin has provided an opening for a more positive Western role in the region by informing German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder of his desire for active Western involvement in the economic development of the North Caucasus region. The West should exploit this opening by actively pursuing intensive talks with Russian officials on how such a programme can be developed in detail.

This approach should involve both Western state aid organizations and international financial institutions, like the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Western-supported programmes should include restoring transport and communications links, improving social infrastructure like housing and electricity, creating new educational institutions, and helping in the creation and growth of small businesses. Western help to the North Caucasus region will be good in itself, and will be good for the West because it will help to limit the spread of Islamist extremism and terrorism. It will also help to develop a climate of trust between Russia and the West, which should give the West greater chances of exerting a positive influence in Moscow over the conflict in Chechnya and other areas of concern.

A Flawed Foreign Response

Foreign responses to the conflict in Chechnya have too often been marked by ignorance, bad faith, and the projection of other agendas. Western politicians have repeatedly let their own political aims vis-à-vis Russia shape their reaction to events in Chechnya. In 1994–1996, for example, Western support for Boris Yeltsin in his purported struggles with the remnants of the Communist Party constantly softened Western criticism of Russian brutalities in Chechnya. More recently, two other agendas – the war on terror and a growing campaign to try to limit Russian influence in the states of the former Soviet Union – have further distorted Western thinking about Chechnya.

On the other hand, much of Western public comment on Chechnya has been uninformed or biased against Russia. Both media and policy elites disregarded the real threats to Russian security and to the stability of the North Caucasus emanating from Chechnya during its period of quasi-independence between 1997 and 1999. In those years, the

Western media largely failed to report the wave of savage kidnappings against Russian citizens, including senior Russian officials, and the establishment in Chechnya of international Islamist extremists. Casualty figures in Chechnya have often been grossly exaggerated by Western journalists and commentators (see box on page 5). These have in fact reduced markedly in recent years.

While Chechens complain justifiably of the very high level of official and unofficial criminality and violence in their republic, there are also some modest signs of improvement in everyday life in Chechnya. Running water and electricity are more readily available, checkpoints are much reduced, travel is less restricted, and mobile phone usage is now possible in the republic.

None of these improvements suggest that violence and atrocities in Chechnya are by any means over, but in portraying Chechnya as an unchanging, unmitigated horror, the West has precluded an honest discussion with Moscow about the conflict. It has also treated Chechnya in a manner very different from its treatment of similar separatist conflicts in Turkey, India, and other states aligned with the West.

In the case of Turkey, the EU took a harder line on human rights than the United States, but both were careful always to stress their support for the basic aims of the Turkish campaign and for Turkish territorial integrity. Unlike in the case of Chechnya, they were also careful to recognize and praise any progress made in terms of respect for human rights, and in the case of the EU, to offer incentives for such progress in terms of greater integration into Europe.

Finally, while Western officials and commentators have continued to press the need for a “political solution” to the Chechen conflict, with very rare exceptions they have not suggested what this political solution should or could be, beyond a call for Moscow to negotiate directly with former Chechen president and separatist leader Aslan Maskhadov. Nor have they suggested in any detail how the West might support a political solution.

In fact, hopes of long-term amelioration of the situation in Chechnya depend not on a *solution* but a *process* involving growing political participation, economic development, and the gradual creation of a modern society in Chechnya. This needs to be set in the wider context of development for the region as a whole.

Although Aslan Maskhadov maintains an important symbolic value for a segment of the Chechen people as the legitimately elected former president, simply talking to Maskhadov is no solution. He is the face most familiar to Western observers, but he does not represent the only political force in Chechnya and does not control a large part of the Chechens fighting against Russia. Maskhadov’s ability to solve the Chechen conflict and to provide peace has dramatically declined over the years. Although he retains standing in the Chechen population, he has lost the potential to unify broader groups of Chechens. Maskhadov

should be part of a future process, but he cannot be the sole element.

The Need for New Perceptions

The first step that the West needs to take is to change the nature of the conversation that its representatives have with Moscow about Chechnya and the North Caucasus. Their approach needs to be more sophisticated, more detailed, and more focused on offering practical solutions to a range of problems that affect other countries as well as Russia.

Russia should rightly be reminded of the commitments it made to defend human rights when it joined institutions like the Council of Europe. But these reminders should be accompanied by a recognition that progress has been made, and assurances that the West is not just interested in berating Russia but is genuinely ready to offer practical help in dealing with the problems in the North Caucasus.

There will be no single solution to the Chechen conflict in the sense of a “quick fix” – an agreement or treaty that would end the violence. A very large number – perhaps a majority – of the fighters in Chechnya and those carrying out terrorist attacks in Russia will continue to do so irrespective of any settlement, whether for ideological or personal reasons, just as they did after the Russian withdrawal from Chechnya in 1996.

It should be remembered that leading Chechen commanders and their Islamist allies revolted against the authority of President Aslan Maskhadov after the conclusion of the Khasavyurt Accord and the establishment of quasi-independence in 1996. They did so in the name of the creation of an Islamist republic and the continuation of jihad against Russia, and despite the fact that Maskhadov had been elected president by an overwhelming majority of Chechens in January 1997.

One of the weaknesses of the Khasavyurt documents was that they stipulated a decision on the final status of Chechnya within the relatively short period of five years. The clock was set ticking on Chechnya’s possible formal independence from the very beginning. This heightened the inevitable tensions between Grozny and Moscow in the post-war period and meant that Russian- Chechen official meetings, instead of concentrating on vital immediate issues like reconstruction, crime, and extremism, were constantly diverted into fruitless bickering over the question of formal independence.

Today, after a decade of war and devastation, and against a backdrop of similar conflicts in the international arena, it should be clear that, for a very long time to come, the development of a Chechen state and of a new Chechen political society will have to take place within the Russian Federation, and that independence for Chechnya is off the agenda for many years to come. This now seems to be accepted by the great majority of Chechens, including officials of Aslan Maskhadov’s “government” in exile.

Recovery from the physical and socioeconomic devastation of the past decade, and the struggle against Islamist extremism, are far greater priorities. Moreover, the periods of de facto independence in 1991-1994, and still more in 1997-1999, proved disastrous experiences. The wide realization of this fact marks an evolution from views on independence held both in Chechnya and in the West in 1996.

New Western Approaches

Given the inevitability of Chechnya’s medium-term development within the Russian Federation, the West should also recognize that President Putin’s current strategy of “Chechenisation”, along with the progressive restoration of the full autonomy of the Chechen republic, could provide the basis for future cooperation between Western governments and Moscow.

However, it would be a grave mistake to believe that Moscow’s current strategy in Chechnya or the North Caucasus as a whole is remotely adequate. Criminality and corruption in Chechnya and beyond are at catastrophic levels. Amongst the worst culprits are federal forces and the so-called Kadyrovtsy, fighters grouped around Ramzan Kadyrov, the son of former pro-Moscow leader Akhmad Kadyrov. The Kadyrovtsy are responsible for extrajudicial killings, abductions, and torture. Moreover, even if overall levels of violence have decreased, daunting socioeconomic, health, and psychological problems remain.

Although the tent camps in Ingushetia have been closed, tens of thousands of displaced people continue to live in substandard accommodations, both in Ingushetia and in Chechnya itself. Chechens are also increasingly seeking refugee status and asylum in Europe. In a detailed survey of displaced people in Ingushetia and Chechnya in 2004, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) found that more than 90 percent of respondents had been exposed to violence, with about one sixth of those surveyed stating that they had witnessed the violent death of a member of their nuclear family in the conflict. MSF recorded extremely high levels of emotional distress and physical illness, including most notably tuberculosis.

This means that the West should present a more nuanced message. While reaffirming Russia’s territorial integrity and welcoming federal efforts to rebuild Chechnya, it must speak firmly about the alarming human rights situation and, in particular, the behaviour of the Kadyrovtsy. The message that can be delivered should be one of concern at Moscow’s failure to control its local allies rather than one blaming the Kremlin for deliberately unleashing violence on ordinary Chechens.

A central problem in Chechnya has always been that the armed forces, whether Russian, Chechens allied to Russia, or separatist, tend to become criminalized entities beholden only unto themselves. Thus, murder, theft, extortion, and kidnapping by the Russian troops and their local allies have undermined any goodwill Chechens might ever feel toward

the Russian government or the Moscow-backed authorities in Chechnya.

Western Media Accounts of Chechen Casualties

Since the renewed Russian military intervention in 1999, some elements of the Western media have routinely referred to civilian casualties from both Chechen wars in the range of 250,000. This is despite the fact that even most Russian human rights groups opposed to the Putin administration estimate around 80,000-100,000 total casualties, including Russian soldiers and Chechen fighters.

Western media and policy elites have also failed to recognize that the scale of the conflict within Chechnya has changed greatly since 2002. Nor have they acknowledged Russian official attempts – albeit limited and inadequate – to address human rights abuses by Russian forces.

According to the Russian Human Rights group, Memorial, 293 Chechen residents were killed in 2004. This number included 114 civilians, 101 security personnel, and 36 fighters, with the remainder local government officials and their families or unidentified. A further 173 people were abducted by unknown assailants and disappeared without a trace. Memorial monitors only five of Chechnya's seventeen regions, including heavily populated Grozny but excluding the mountains where much of the fighting is taking place, and reports only on cases where it has direct evidence. So the real casualty figures may be very considerably higher. But this does still mark a welcome reduction in overall levels of violence.

The figures are in stark contrast to the estimated 10,000–20,000 killed in 1999-2002. The Memorial estimate for the plains of Chechnya in 2004 is exceeded by the numbers killed in the Nazran and Beslan terrorist attacks outside Chechnya, and is considerably less than the 400-500 people estimated by the *Economist* (January 1, 2005) to have been killed by the U.S. military in the Iraqi city of Ramadi alone in the months since September 2004. It may then be more appropriate today to talk about widespread armed criminality and political violence rather than full-scale war in Chechnya.

The West must continue, therefore, to push Russia greatly to improve its overall strategy and the political process it is trying to establish in Chechnya. This relates to:

- The need to rein in the behaviour of Russian security forces and their Chechen allies toward the population and to prosecute abuses much more extensively.
- A real amnesty for all Chechen fighters (as opposed to the dubious amnesties offered in the past), including for those who have killed Russian soldiers and civilians, on the model of the British amnesty for IRA and Loyalist terrorists in Northern Ireland. The only exception should be those guilty of planning bestial atrocities like Beslan.
- The need for the Russian state to make the political process in Chechnya much more genuinely democratic and pluralist. At the very least, Moscow should allow real competition for power between Chechen leaders who accept membership in the Russian Federation.

A key test of Russian behaviour concerning this last point will be parliamentary elections in Chechnya. The Russian government has announced that these elections will be held in 2005, but has not yet set a date. The West should hold the Kremlin to this promise, and offer support, recognition, and legitimacy in return for guarantees that the elections will be free and fair. If properly conducted, the elections could be used to take the political and economic monopoly away from the Kadyrovtsy and to bring in respected Chechens both from Chechnya and from the Chechen diaspora in Russia, who thus far have been excluded from the political process.

Unfortunately, while none of this is formally opposed to the stated goals of Russian policy in Chechnya, in practice it runs against much of the spirit of Vladimir Putin's political strategy in Russia as a whole, with its tendency toward centralization and the weakening of autonomous institutions. In Chechnya, this is reflected in a continued reliance on the Kadyrovtsy to the exclusion of all other potential allies. This, however, need not be an insuperable obstacle. In practice, Russian officials recognize that Chechnya is a very special case, and the Kremlin might be able to accept a special status for Chechnya in return for full Western support and a better chance of combating terrorism.

For a more sensible and effective approach to be accepted by the Russian government, Western interlocutors need to offer serious incentives. An opening in this regard has been provided by the Putin administration's desire for international economic help in developing the North Caucasus region. This was stated by President Putin during his meeting with Chancellor Schroeder in December 2004 and has led to preliminary discussions between Russian officials and representatives of international financial institutions.

Western incentives to Russia to change its strategy in Chechnya should include:

- Explicit and repeated support for Russian territorial integrity.
- Intensified technical assistance to Russia to help cut off funding to the Chechen separatists from the Middle East and to capture or kill extremist leaders like Shamil Basayev.
- A commitment to secure the Georgian- Russian border against infiltration by Chechen and international jihadi fighters. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) monitoring contingent on this border has been not very effective, but Russia's veto of its extension is unjustified and risks dangerous consequences. Intensive discussions should take place with Moscow on how the West can help to increase security on this frontier.
- Substantial aid to Chechnya to support a settlement and political process as part of a general package of aid from Western governments and international institutions directed at the North Caucasus.

- In particular, support for programmes aimed at helping Chechen refugees return to their homes and rebuild their lives.
- Support for genuine elections in Chechnya. In return for Russian guarantees in this regard, the West should accept President Putin's invitation to send international election monitors to cover the elections and – if they do in fact merit this – to legitimize them in the eyes of the Chechens and the world.
- The creation of an international working group that could assist with the development of a more pluralistic political process, similar to the groups set up to facilitate the peace processes in Northern Ireland and in Tajikistan (where Russia itself was directly involved).

Such a working group could be created under the auspices of the United Nations Security Council, or the G8-organizations in which Russia feels it has a major role and an important stake, and which are not likely to be seen as automatically biased against Russian views and interests. Unfortunately, the Council of Europe and the OSCE are no longer useful bodies from this point of view.

None of this will bring about an early or complete end to the violence in Chechnya. As in Palestine, Kashmir, and elsewhere, however, an internationally backed political process will however contribute to isolating the extremists and terrorists, and rallying moderate Chechens to fight against them. It will also help lay the basis for a modern Chechen society, with political parties and civic institutions, and for a developed Chechen economy.

This kind of modernization will be essential to peace and progress for the Chechen people whether or not they remain permanently within the Russian Federation, and indeed for the North Caucasus as a whole. Such development in the region is vitally important to Russia, but in the context of the threat from Islamist extremism and terrorism, it should also be of great importance to the West.

Related Resources

Visit www.CarnegieEndowment.org/pubs for these and other publications.

Chechnya: What Can Be Done?, Anatol Lieven, Thomas de Waal, and Fiona Hill, statements on Chechnya (Carnegie Endowment, October 28, 2004), available at www.CarnegieEndowment.org/events/index.cfm?fa=eventDetail&id=729.

Russia's Restless Frontier: The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia, Dmitri Trenin and Aleksei V. Malashenko with Anatol Lieven (Carnegie Endowment, 2004).

Chechnya after September 11th, Anatol Lieven, prepared statement before the CSCE of the U.S. Congress (May 9, 2002), available at www.CarnegieEndowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=978.

Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus, Thomas de Waal and Carlotta Gall (NYU Press, 1998).

Chechnya, Tombstone of Russian Power, Anatol Lieven (Yale University Press, 1998).

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