Chechen resistance

myth and reality

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From my personal experience as Foreign Minister of Chechnya – in which capacity my main duty is to explain to outsiders the nature of the Chechen conflict – I would say that the biggest obstacle to being understood is ignorance of the history of the conflict. The Russian effort to classify the war as a classic separatist conflict between a rebel territory and a colonial centre obscures the fact that in the long and tragic history of relations between Russia and Chechnya, the tiny Chechen nation has at least four times been on the brink of total annihilation. It is a mistake to represent this war as only a war for independence – independence is not a goal in itself, but a guarantee of the survival of the Chechen nation. Even a cursory look at the last five years shows that the conflict is best characterized as ethnic warfare, where Chechens are targeted because of their nationality. In one famous incident at the beginning of the war, the Russian Commander General Shamanov said that the killing of civilians is justified because, “the wife of a terrorist is a terrorist; and the child of a terrorist is a terrorist.” Similarly, recent statements by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) routinely refer to arrests of persons “suspected of being relatives of terrorists.”

The Kremlin represents the Chechen resistance as a single terrorist network spreading throughout the north Caucasus, which has its centre in Chechnya but relies on direction and financing from foreign sources. In reality, there is a wide spectrum of groups fighting against Russia in the north Caucasus that have different goals and motivations and are to different degrees involved in the war in Chechnya. The complexity and variety of armed groups throughout the north Caucasus as a whole prohibits neat classification. Describing it is complicated not only for outside experts but also for participants. For this reason the classification offered here should be seen as a schematic outline.

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Who we are

The structure of the Chechen resistance can be broken down into several groups. Without a doubt, after the demise of President Aslan Maskhadov in March 2005 the conflict will pass into a new and qualitatively different phase, which will to a certain degree alter the components of the structures I am describing. Until recently, the political leadership was headed by Maskhadov and comprised of Ministers in Chechnya, several Ministers who represent Chechnya abroad, and Members of Parliament who continue to carry out their duties. There is no Chechen ‘government in exile’; rather some members of the government remain in Chechnya whereas others represent Chechnya abroad. The President and the Parliament were elected in 1997 in elections which were certified as free and fair by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). In contrast, the pro-Russian administrator Alu Alkhanov was chosen during wartime in a process that was roundly denounced as fraudulent. Another type of political resistance consists of individuals and groups who carry out actions of civil disobedience within Chechnya: marches, protests, anti-war actions and expressions of support for the resistance. For instance, over 3,000 Chechen residents signed my peace plan calling for conditional independence under an international protectorate (30,000 people worldwide signed). By putting their names and addresses on this petition they took great personal risks to demonstrate their support for peace.

The fighting strength of the Chechen resistance consists of units formed on the basis of squads of the army of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria that transformed themselves into guerrilla units when they withdrew from the capital Grozny when it fell in February 2000.

A significant portion of these units remains constantly active and is based in the mountainous parts of the Republic. The remainder is oriented exclusively to diversionary tactics, carrying out operations against tactical targets in lowland Russian-controlled areas. The second type of armed resistance is comprised of groups who did not fall under Maskhadov’s control and who propagate the most radical methods of fighting the war. The main leader of this element is Shamil Basaev, who was responsible for both the Nord-Ost and Beslan hostage takings. The third type of armed resistance is represented by small temporary formations that unite for different purposes, usually vendetta and revenge. These are persons who come together for a particular mission and then return to civilian life. This would include some of the ‘black widow’ and suicide attacks that have been carried out over the last two years.

Finally, there are the various units that have been formed on the territories of neighbouring north Caucasus republics like Ingushetia, Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria. Some were formed in solidarity with the Chechen resistance while others were formed in response to the overall militarization of the north Caucasus. For Russia, the north Caucasus is the staging ground for the war in Chechnya, where the army, the security services, and federal law enforcement have greater authority than the local civilian officials. These various Russian forces have engaged in massive lawlessness and violence against the local civilian population, thereby inspiring local forms of resistance.

While the outside world might be content to view them as terrorists, the men and women on the ground are fighting for survival. When they lose faith that the war will ever end – that there is any civilized solution – they turn to terrorism. To understand this conflict it is
important to note that the only demand made by the terrorists has been the withdrawal of Russian forces from Chechnya and the start of negotiations. Even the most radical wing of the Chechen resistance usually calls for an end to the war, although they question whether an end can ever be brought about through negotiations. That the international community and Russia ignore the moderate political leadership and its persistent efforts to find a political resolution contributes to the sense of futility on the ground and therefore to an enlargement of the ranks of those who see terrorism as the only way of stopping the war.

How we are perceived

Particularly since the tragedy of 11 September 2001, it is commonplace for nearly all outsiders to view the mass killing of Chechens as a natural and excusable corollary to the global war against terrorism. As a result, international involvement in regulating, observing or mitigating the consequences of the war for the civilian population has been minimal.

The first Russian-Chechen war was viewed as a typical post-Soviet conflict, like the war over Nagorny-Karabakh or Abkhazia. Although international actors emphasized Russian territorial integrity, they also condemned Russian human rights abuses and actively sought avenues to end the war through mediation. Moreover, due in large part to the relatively unrestricted Russian television and other media that reported from both sides of the front lines and gave a reasonably balanced view of events, the Chechen resistance had a certain romantic public image, particularly in Europe. But since 11 September 2001 we are viewed through the lens of anti-terrorism: pretending that the mass killing of Chechens contributes to the war against terrorism permits the West to maintain close relations with Russia and absolves its collective conscience for ignoring atrocities. Viewing this war as one of the fronts in the war against global terrorism frees the West from its obligation to uphold standards of human rights and international law.

Without a doubt one of the major obstacles to understanding this conflict is the Kremlin-imposed information blockade. The creation of this blockade is a fundamental component of the Kremlin’s propaganda strategy. It seeks to prohibit any independent observation of the conflict by international organizations such as the OSCE, by foreign or domestic independent media, or by staff of international humanitarian organizations. The monopoly on the flow of information from Chechnya permits the Russian security services to distort the picture considerably. When he first came to power, President Vladimir Putin commented that lessons had been learned from the first campaign. I believe that the most significant lesson learned was to control foreign and Russian journalists reporting from Chechnya. Parallel to the ground offensive on Chechnya there was an attack on the Russian media. A clear example of efforts to prevent independent journalism was the case of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty correspondent Andrei Babitsky, who attempted to report from both sides of the lines. He was kidnapped by Russian security services, held for roughly a month, beaten and tortured, while Russian spokesmen claimed to know nothing of his whereabouts.

Other types of independent organization have to contend with similar problems. Humanitarian agencies such as Médecins Sans Frontières, the International Committee of the Red Cross and others are systematically harassed. Some international staff have been killed during bombardments of humanitarian aid convoys, and others kidnapped under circumstances that strongly suggest the involvement of Russian security services. Currently humanitarian organizations operate in Chechnya only through Chechen staff; their international staff are not permitted to travel there. Of course, the conditions for Chechen journalists and NGOs are even more risky. The Society of Russian-Chechen Friendship, which reports daily on human rights abuses in Chechnya, has lost four of its staff in political killings by federal forces. The head of the organization has been harassed by the FSB, kidnapped, tortured and his property – including lists of correspondents in Chechnya – confiscated.

Unrecognized statehood

We believe that we constitute a state in every aspect except international recognition. Therefore our strategy is to persuade outsiders that we can behave like a normal state and should be treated as such. During the first war and at the beginning of the present war we fought with the strategies and tactics of a conventional army. We tried to maintain command and control, hold a front line, hold territory and hold onto the capital for as long as possible. This strategy was almost suicidal in view of the unequal size of the forces. Guerrilla warfare would have been to our advantage but we sacrificed many of our best fighters to fight as a conventional force precisely because we wanted to demonstrate our capacity for statehood. Our constant lack of personnel, weapons and supplies was compensated only by tremendous force of will. For many observers this connoted heroism, for others fanaticism, but for us it was necessity. We had to maintain the norms that would allow outsiders to perceive us as a state. And even since the guerrilla war began, the Chechen resistance has held on tenaciously to all possible attributes of statehood. It is important to note that until summer 1995, our resistance...
was exclusively fighting conventional warfare. There was strict subordination to the President, who was the commander-in-chief and who supervised the head quarters of the armed forces, and four commanders responsible for different fronts or directions, who had responsibilities in their sectors and whose duties were carefully delineated. From December 1994 until June 1995, we held a front line and despite the huge superiority of Russian forces they moved that front line in the direction of the mountains very slowly and at the cost of high casualties. Our foreign policy is oriented toward persuading international institutions – the UN, OSCE, European Parliament, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) – to pay greater attention to the war and ultimately regulate it. Despite our status as a party to the conflict and our constant efforts to be understood, we often meet a refusal to talk to us. For instance, the PACE held a roundtable to discuss Chechnya in March 2005 that included only the Russian government, Russian NGOs and the Russian-installed government of Chechnya. This was counter-productive. If the Russian delegation cannot sit at the same table as representatives of the Chechen warring side, then PACE should organize separate meetings. But PACE should not act as if all the sides are represented or progress is being made if there is only a pretense of multilateral discussion. This is particularly disappointing for us, because the PACE is one of very few international organizations that has been even marginally involved in trying to observe and resolve the conflict.

This is indicative of a fundamental error in the Western perception of the conflict and of Russia: namely, the habit of making unilateral concessions to Russia and hoping that it will reciprocate. Typically, Western politicians focus on utterly superficial improvements – such as new internet cafes or cell phone use – in Chechnya and pretend that these are indicative of a lower level of violence, which of course they are not. Proceeding from such illusory “improvements,” the West makes small concessions to Russia and then hopes that Russia will reciprocate with substantive concessions. This approach can never work, because the Russian side is getting everything it wants without having to make any substantive improvements.

The most damaging concession that PACE and many other international actors have made is to follow the Russian line of “Chechenization.” Russia pretends that there is internal conflict between different Chechen groups and poses as the mediator. In fact, one of the Chechen “sides” comprises ethnic Chechens appointed by Russia and who should not be seen as an independent actor. Hence PACE pretends that Alu Alkhanov, a Russian appointee, is a “side” in the conflict and utterly ignores the warring side.

The representatives of Chechnya abroad try to resolve issues of state without access to any of the resources of a state, such as diplomatic immunity. My most elementary need is to be granted visas to enter different states, but every application process is a major battle. Western bureaucracies fear Russia’s hysterical responses and invent the most absurd obstacles. For instance, in November 1999, I was invited by Noel Mamer of France’s Green Party to speak to the National Assembly, but the French Foreign Ministry would not issue a visa. Eventually Pax Cristi invited me to Holland, which gave me the opportunity to go to France. Mamer secretly took me into the parliament and in front of the Prime Minister publicly demanded to know why I was denied a visa. There was a huge furor but ultimately Foreign Minister Uber Vedrin apologized on behalf of the government and the following day I was given a visa. I wish I could say that every time I applied for a visa it ended with such a success, but I have missed many important forums and events because I could not obtain the proper documents.

There was only one period in recent history when the way we were perceived corresponded to the way we perceive ourselves. This was during the negotiations of 1995-1997, which were conducted with OSCE mediation and ended the first war. The negotiations demanded that the Chechen side become unified and that the various armed units demonstrate loyalty and subordination to the political authorities. Only by so doing could we persuade the other parties of our ability to carry out the obligations we were undertaking. We felt we were being included in the sphere of inter-state or inter-government relations which stimulated us to observe the standards of that community. The ceasefire which Maskhadov announced and the Chechen fighters kept in February 2005 showed that this subordination and loyalty were still in place. What was lacking was a similar degree of international involvement. The tragic death of President Maskhadov turns a new page in this conflict and at present we can only speculate about its algorithms, its duration, and its geography. What is clear is that with his passing there seems little possibility of a civilized end to this conflict in the near future.