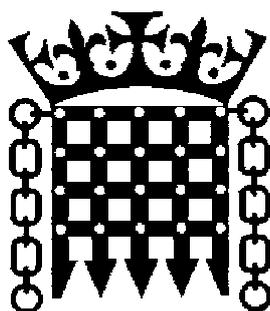


# **Russia and the Chechens**

**Research Paper 95/4**

**10 January 1995**



This paper describes the war which has broken out in the Chechen Republic and the effects which this is having on the political situation in the Russian Federation. The present Russian constitution, the background to economic reform and military issues were summarised in Research Paper 94/72 (*Developments in Russia*); the upheavals of 1993 were described in Research Paper 93/92 (*The Crisis of Democracy in Russia and some international implications*).

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**House of Commons Library**

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## Introduction

For most of 1994 Russian political life was dominated by economic questions: could tighter control of public finance together with the gradual extension of privatisation and market structures halt the economic decline? Once the 1994 budget round had clearly been seen to have failed, inflation had begun to rise again and a currency crisis had ensued in October, could a more successful attempt to stabilise the economy be made in 1995? Could the reduction in public subsidies to loss-making industries be achieved without mass unemployment? Could the public funding gap be bridged by tapping domestic savings and securing new foreign loans without resort to the printing presses?

These questions were debated against the background of a new constitution and parliament and all participants had an eye on the next parliamentary and presidential elections due in late 1995 and mid-1996 respectively, but there seemed to be grounds for hope that political conflicts could be contained within civilised limits.

Such hopes were dashed at the end of the year when a war at Russia's southern border in the North Caucasus region which had been brewing for more than three years (or, with a different perspective, for some 150 years) suddenly escalated in a way which transformed the terms of political debate in Moscow, threatening to undermine the gradual process of reform and influence the nature of the Russian political system for years to come.

## I Background

Chechnya (also known as the Chechen Republic or Chechenia) is situated in the North Caucasus mountains and is the traditional homeland of the Chechen people, one of 19 distinct ethnic/linguistic groups in the region.

The Russian Empire annexed Georgia, which lies further to the south, in 1801, and then began a long campaign to pacify and annex the intervening mountain territories where the Chechens lived. By the late 1860s this had been more or less accomplished and by the end of the nineteenth century Russia had an extensive southern empire with numerous military garrisons and a rapidly growing Russian settler population. The Russian Empire was similar to those of the Western European powers in that it linked the metropolis to exotic places, providing new opportunities for trade and service in colonial administration. However, the fact that the empire spread south and east across a continuous land mass also gave it some of the characteristics of the United States, including a "new world" settler mentality which would eventually make "decolonisation" a more difficult concept than it proved to be for most of the British Empire.



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The Russian Empire fell with the first world war and the October Revolution, but the Bolsheviks proved reluctant to concede to the "bourgeois nationalism" of the non-Russian peoples. Faced with military collapse on the eastern front they had to accept the independence of Poland and the Baltic states, but elsewhere in the former Empire they were determined to create a network of Bolshevik-run republics. Consequently, in the early 1920s Stalin (himself from Georgia) developed a nationalities policy which gave the major non-Russian nationalities of the Soviet Union, including the Georgians, nominally sovereign republics, while the smaller nationalities, such as the Chechens, were given a lesser "autonomous" status within other republics, in this case the "Russian Federal Soviet Socialist Republic". In practice the whole of the Soviet Union was firmly held together by centralised organisations which spanned all of the internal borders: the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the armed forces and the KGB. The outcome of the second world war gave Stalin the opportunity to add the three Baltic states and Moldavia to his network of Soviet republics and also to extend the system, with some modifications, to most of east-central Europe, including eastern Germany.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 the 15 sovereign republics were allowed to go their own way as independent states, but the Russian government and parliament insisted on the

integrity of what is now known as the "Russian Federation". Although the distinction between sovereign and non-sovereign republics within the old Soviet Union was somewhat arbitrary, the rest of the world accepted the break-up of the Union into its constituent parts as being in line with the Helsinki principles on the non-violability of existing borders, as well as with older principles of state succession which had been applied to post-colonial South America and Africa. This means that the international border between Georgia and the Russian Federation is universally recognised as running along the southern edge of Chechnya.

The precise status and borders of the Chechen territory had actually changed several times during the Soviet period. At first it was constituted as an Autonomous Region. Then, in 1934, it was combined with the neighbouring territory of the Ingush people to form a single Autonomous Republic. The less numerous Ingush speak a similar, but quite distinct language. The merger was badly received in Chechnya and there was widespread unrest in the later 1930s. In 1944 the Republic was abolished and both nationalities were deported to Central Asia and Siberia as a punishment for alleged collaboration with the invading German armies. Some 200,000 Chechens are believed to have died as a result of harsh conditions on the journey and in exile.<sup>1</sup> In 1957, under Khrushchev, the combined republic was restored, with somewhat different borders.

## II Population and culture

There has been no census in the region since 1989 when Chechen-Ingushetia was still a single unit, but it appears that there were around 700,000 Chechens living in the republic when it declared independence in 1991. Some have subsequently fled into exile, but others may have rallied to the nationalist cause. Chechen leaders have referred to their people as numbering around a million, but many of these live outside Chechnya itself. There were also around 100,000 ethnic Russians in Chechnya, many of whom have now left<sup>2</sup>, but many Russians continue to live in adjacent areas. Chechnya also has a significant population of Terek Cossacks (descendants of freed and escaped Russian serfs who, encouraged by the tsarist government, settled in the mountain regions from the sixteenth century onwards). Both the Cossacks and the Chechens have strong clan loyalties and military traditions. Most Chechens are, at least nominally, Moslems and President Dudaev swore his oath of office on the Koran, but there is as yet little indication of a significant Islamic revival in the territory.

The tension between Chechens and Russians derives more from the Chechens' historical grievance about their loss of independence and from a cultural-ethnic gulf which is particularly deeply felt on the Russian side. The collapse of the economic and social order

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<sup>1</sup> J. Ormrod, "The North Caucasus: fragmentation or federation?", in I. Bremner & R. Taras (eds), *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, 1993, 456-9; M. Galeotti, "Chechnia: The Theft of a Nation?", *IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin*, April 1994, 69. In his TV address of 27 December 1994 President Yeltsin promised that there would be no new deportation of Chechens.

<sup>2</sup> *O nekotorykh aspektakh vynuzhdennoi migratsii v Rossiyu iz blizhnego zarubezhya*, Information Technology Department of the State Duma, Informatsionnyi vypusk, 2 October 1994. By 4 January over 130,000 refugees from Chechnya were registered in other parts of the Russian Federation, of whom some 56,000 had been registered since the Russian operation began early in December 1994 - *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2193 B/4.

in the Russian Federation has created the conditions for a crime wave and for the exposure to public view of a great deal of corrupt and criminal behaviour which was previously hidden within the communist system. In the present political conditions it is very convenient for Russians to blame this on ethnic minorities and owing to the highly visible activities of Chechen traders and criminals in Russia itself (particularly in Moscow), many Russians regard the Chechen people in general as incorrigibly corrupt and criminalised. However, this factor should not be exaggerated: the Moscow Chechen criminal gangs have been estimated at only 1,500-3,000 strong and there are many more Russian criminals operating alongside them.

On the Chechen side there is less antipathy towards Russian language and culture. Many Chechens are bilingual, have adopted Russian ways and are accustomed to living and working alongside ethnic Russians, whether in Grozny or Moscow. However, memories of the wrongs done to Chechnya in the past, and especially of the deportations of the 1940s, remain strong. According to one account even the criminal plundering of Russia by Chechen gangs has a political motive: revenge for Russian conquest and oppression.<sup>3</sup>

The main city and capital of Chechnya is Grozny (known to the Chechens as Ichkeria) which has a population of around 400,000 and is dominated by petro-chemical industries. A number of colleges and institutes serve the special needs of the oil industry. Chechnya has its own relatively small oilfields, but the main oil pipeline and road connections between Azerbaijan and Russia pass close to the city and the main railway line passes slightly further north. Both Russian and western oil companies have recently signed new agreements with the government of Azerbaijan to develop that country's very large oil reserves and it has been suggested that the Russian decision to re-assert its control of Chechnya is linked to this.<sup>4</sup>

### III Unilateral Independence

After the failure of the attempted "putsch" of August 1991 and the restoration of Mikhail Gorbachev to a weakened Union presidency it became clear that the Soviet Union was heading for disintegration. The leader of the Russian resistance to the putchists, Boris Yeltsin, had committed himself to the right of the Union republics to separate independence. This commitment did not extend to autonomous units within the Russian Federal Republic such as Chechen-Ingushetia, but the Chechen All-National Congress led by General Dzakhar (or Dzhokhar) Dudaev, a former Soviet air force general, declared a sovereign republic of Chechnya outside of the Russian Federation on 6 September 1991. This was confirmed by Dudaev's victory in a presidential election in November 1991. An attempt by Russian Interior Ministry troops to arrest Dudaev was frustrated by Chechen militias and civilian crowds. Russian forces abandoned the attempt to restore Federal government, leaving substantial stockpiles of weapons and equipment behind.

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<sup>3</sup> Galeotti, 72

<sup>4</sup> M. Galeotti, "Chechnia: The Theft of a Nation?", *IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin*, April 1994, 69; G Starovoitova, "Reforms fail test in Chechnya", *Moscow News*, 23-9 December 1994.

Ingushetia did not follow Chechnya, but remained within the political system of the Russian Federation, partly because of Ingush leaders' hopes that they might gain Russian support for the restoration of land lost to another of the North Caucasus autonomous territories - North Ossetia. The split between Chechnya and Ingushetia was formalised in December 1992, but there are disputes over the boundaries.

The Russian Federation did not recognise Chechen independence and left seats in its parliamentary bodies for the absent Chechens, but could do little to end what was regarded in Moscow as an eccentric rebellion. However, the Dudaev regime had many Chechen enemies, both at home and in exile, and it was hoped in Moscow that the unrecognised regime would soon collapse of its own accord. Another reason for restraint in 1991 was that General Dudaev had an ally in the former president of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who, until his overthrow early in 1992, might have tried to supply and support Dudaev from the south, had Russian forces attempted a crackdown.

In the mean time, another Chechen politician, Ruslan Khasbulatov, had come to occupy a very prominent position in Russian politics as the Speaker of the Russian Supreme Soviet until its dissolution by President Boris Yeltsin in September-October 1993. Khasbulatov had been a Yeltsin supporter in 1990-91 but became one of his most ferocious critics in 1992-3 and was the co-leader of the abortive armed rebellion of September-October 1993. After these events the Moscow authorities made a concerted effort to expel Chechens illegally resident in the city and it has been suggested that some "mafia-style" Chechen gangs returned to their homeland at that time to focus their attention on the potential offered by its oil wealth.<sup>5</sup>

One of the main reasons for resisting Chechen independence in 1991 was Russian fear of a chain reaction which could lead to many of the other autonomous national territories both in the North Caucasus region and on the Volga seeking full independence. This now seems less likely to happen than it did in 1991, mainly for economic reasons, but many Russians who would otherwise happily turn their backs on Chechnya, are afraid to set such a precedent.

## **IV Escalation of the conflict and Russian involvement**

The administration of Boris Yeltsin seems to have taken the decision during the early summer of 1994 to restore Russian rule in Chechnya by one means or another. Civil war between supporters and opponents of General Dudaev had now broken out inside Chechnya and Russia had been giving some opportunistic assistance to the opposition factions. In June several of these united to form an "interim council" led by Umar Avturkhanov. Ruslan Khasbulatov, the former speaker of the Russian Supreme Soviet, also returned to his native Chechnya at this time, ostensibly to mediate between the factions. The increasing disarray in Chechnya may have encouraged Russian leaders to feel that the time had come to reassert Moscow's control. A possible change of policy had been signalled in May 1994 by the

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<sup>5</sup> Jennings, "The Land the Mafia stole", *The Times*, 13 May 1993.

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replacement of Sergei Shakhrai by Nikolai Yegorov (a combative southern Russian) as the minister responsible for ethnic minorities policy.

The fighting intensified from early September 1994. While it seemed quite possible that General Dudaev could eventually be overthrown by a coalition of his opponents with covert Russian support, there was little reason to believe that any of the opposition factions would happily accept the re-imposition of Russian rule if they achieved power.<sup>6</sup> This consideration made it difficult for the Russian leadership to develop a consistent policy and there was some evidence of disagreement in Moscow as to the best way forward. There was an awareness no doubt that the Russian government and armed forces could appear impotent in the face of relatively small-scale and localised defiance and that this would provide powerful political ammunition to President Yeltsin's nationalist critics. There was also some anxiety that the conflict in Chechnya could give rise to terrorist attacks in Moscow.<sup>7</sup>

During September and October 1994 the Chechen opposition leaders suffered a series of military setbacks, possibly connected to the indecisiveness of those who were organising covert Russian support. These culminated in a disastrous failed assault on the Chechen capital on 27 November. During this operation about 100 opposition fighters were killed and several dozen captured and it came to light that many of them were Russian servicemen. From around this time Russian army helicopters and bombers also became active in the conflict over Chechnya, but the Ministry of Defence insisted on the fiction that these belonged to unidentified forces not under its control. While it seems clear that some aspects of the conflict were being orchestrated from Moscow, it was difficult to discern the underlying strategy, unless, as one commentator has suggested, there were influential people who thought it preferable "to have the Caucasus in turmoil than to have Yeltsin make peace"<sup>8</sup>.

By the end of November it had become impossible to pretend that Russian forces were not already deeply involved in the Chechen conflict. On 2 December a group of Russian parliamentarians visited Grozny with the cooperation of their government to negotiate the release of prisoners and acknowledged that the Russian armed forces were actively engaged. On the same day Russian forces began to gather quite openly at the Chechen border. On 8 December the last of the Russian prisoners were released, but on 9 December the Russian president instructed the government to use "all means available" to disarm "illegal groups" in Chechnya and also in the zone of conflict between the Ingush and North Osetian territories.<sup>9</sup> Russian forces entered Chechnya on 11 December.

It is not clear precisely how many disciplined and well-equipped Chechen soldiers are loyal to General Dudaev. It has been claimed that Chechnya had around 17,000 men under arms early in 1994, but many of these owe their first loyalty to traditional Chechen clans, some of

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<sup>6</sup> *Izvestiya*, 21 October 1994, front page.

<sup>7</sup> *Izvestiya*, 6 October 1994, front page.

<sup>8</sup> James Sherr, "The Conflict in Chechnia", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, December 1994, 558.

<sup>9</sup> *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2176 B/1.

which were previously very hostile to Dudaev.<sup>10</sup> Many accounts suggest that the Chechen clan leaders have buried their differences in the face of the Russian attack, although the original leader of the Interim Council, Umar Avturkhanov, has allied himself with the Russian forces.<sup>11</sup> There have also been reports in the Russian media from government sources that the Chechens are being assisted by "well-armed attachments of Afghan mujahedin" and also by "experienced mercenaries receiving \$800-1000 per day"; General Dudaev has claimed that "many armed volunteers have arrived from Turkey, Pakistan and Afghanistan".<sup>12</sup> It is not clear whether any of these statements is true.

## V Russian forces return to Chechnya

On 11 December 1994 Russian ground forces crossed into Chechnya from three directions and began a gradual advance on Grozny. Air attacks on Chechen positions were at first only sporadic, apparently targeting ammunition dumps, the airport, the TV tower and electricity sub-stations, but gradually the intensity of the bombardment increased and there appears to have been less effort to discriminate between targets. There have been many reports of bombs hitting civilian buildings and killing civilians.<sup>13</sup> It has been suggested that the intensified air attacks were partly intended to persuade civilians to leave Grozny in order to leave the Russian army free to tackle the Chechen leadership. However, while many Chechens could flee to their native villages in the mountains, many of the ethnic Russian civilians in the town had nowhere else to go.<sup>14</sup> By late December Russian bombing had reduced much of the city to a wasteland.

During the first two weeks of the operation the Russian land forces made very slow progress, partly, it seems, because of active and passive resistance, partly because of the reluctance of commanders on the ground to cause the deaths of Chechen and Russian civilians, and partly because of hesitations and disagreements within the Russian leadership.

On 31 December Russian forces began an operation intended to seize the centre of Grozny, but ran into intense Chechen resistance in the course of the following week. The scale and success of this resistance seems to have thrown the administration in Moscow into turmoil with intense internal debates on how to proceed taking place against a background of growing domestic and international indignation.

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<sup>10</sup> Galeotti, 70

<sup>11</sup> eg Interfax reported on 3 January that the former interim council units led by Ruslan Labazanov were now fighting against the Russians - *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2193 B/3, but Avturkhanov's position is reported in SU/2194 B/3.

<sup>12</sup> *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2183 B/7, SU/2197 B/2.

<sup>13</sup> By numerous foreign journalists in Chechnya and also by a member of the Russian Federation Council, Viktor Kurochkin *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2183 B/9.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, B/9

There are no reliable estimates of the numbers of casualties since 11 December. Official figures released on 6 January put Russian dead at only 256, which seemed implausibly low. According to Russian and other journalists in Grozny around 17 Russian armoured personnel carriers were destroyed along with most of their crews in a single battle around the main railway station on 3 January. This may have been the single worst set back for the Russians, but other reports of persistent high casualties suggest that hundreds of soldiers may have been killed on each side and that, with civilian casualties from bombing and artillery, the total death toll may already run into several thousands. Some unofficial reports indicate that the military casualties alone may already be on this scale. The commander of the Russian Interior Ministry and special militia (OMON) forces in Chechnya, General Viktor Vorobyev, was killed by a mortar shell in Grozny on 7 January.<sup>15</sup>

On 9 January the Russian government announced a truce after its forces had moved closer to the presidential palace in the centre of Grozny, but this seemed little more than an opportunity for both sides to re-group and bury their dead.

The immediate aim of the renewed Russian assault on Grozny appears to be to instal a new Chechen administration which would be prepared to cooperate with the Russian authorities, although this would be unlikely to mark the end of the conflict. Salambek Khadzhiev, a former oil minister in Dudaev's government, who became head of a Russian-backed "government of national revival" in October, has been mentioned as a possible leader of such an administration.<sup>16</sup> For several days the Russian government information service has been reporting rumours that General Dudaev has already left Grozny and is preparing to continue resistance from a new base in a remoter part of Chechnya.

## VI Danger of escalation

In 1990-91 when the Soviet Union was collapsing there were concerted efforts to create a united movement of the native peoples of the North Caucasus in order to establish a common front against what was regarded as the prolongation of Russian imperialism in the region. An "assembly of the mountain peoples of the Caucasus" had been set up in 1989 and there were hopes that this might form the basis of an eventual sovereign federation outside of the Russian Federation. Such a federation would logically take in some ethnic minority regions of Georgia (Abkhazia, South Ossetia) as well as the constellation of autonomous regions and republics currently within the Russian Federation. General Dudaev was one of the leaders who lent qualified support to this idea.

In the event it proved difficult to establish such a common front for several reasons. One was that Russia continued to wield significant military and economic power across the region and large numbers of ethnic Russians and Cossacks lived alongside the North Caucasus peoples. Another was that the Soviet policy of allocating territories to particular nationalities against

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<sup>15</sup> *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2196 B/1 and B/4.

<sup>16</sup> *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2193 B/3.

the background of great ethnic complexity tended (and still tends) to create conflicts between the various groups, preventing them from uniting. A third reason was that the federal movement could not expect any significant assistance from abroad. The Gamsakhurdia administration in Georgia had tactical reasons for allying itself with Chechnya, but took a fiercely negative attitude towards the possible secession of parts of Georgia. The Shevardnadze administration which succeeded it has found itself obliged to enter into military agreements with Russia and would be unlikely to assist the mountain peoples.

Although most of these are Moslems, Islam has not hitherto been a strong element in their national identity and the only predominantly Moslem state directly bordering the North Caucasus is the weak and divided republic of Azerbaijan. While there have been varying degrees of support from Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan for Moslem co-religionists in Central Asia, there has been much less interest in the North Caucasus.

The one factor which could forge an alliance of nationalities in the region is the aggressive policy of Russia. According to Jane Ormrod, "In the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, animosity towards Russia was a common factor among North Caucasians, and one which drew them together into alliances".<sup>17</sup> Early indications are that the Russian attempt to enforce constitutional rule in Chechnya is having this effect. In particular, the Russian moves met some early armed resistance in Ingushetia (prompting the Russian defence minister to complain on 12 December that the Ingush president had virtually declared war on Russia) and there have been messages of political support for the Chechens from many of the other territorial leaderships, including that of Abkhazia.<sup>18</sup> The fact that President Yeltsin decided to disarm illegal military formations in the Ingush-North Ossetia region as well as in Chechnya on 9 December suggested a wider confrontation. Delegates to a conference of the peoples of the Caucasus in Nalchik (Kabardo-Balkaria republic) declared on 11 December that, unless Russia abandoned the use of force, the peoples of the Caucasus would be compelled to leave the Russian Federation.<sup>19</sup> A further meeting due to take place in Dagestan on 7 January was postponed after the local authorities prevented delegates from other North Caucasian republics from travelling to Makhachkala.<sup>20</sup>

While a general uprising across the North Caucasus seems unlikely, for the reasons given earlier, the Chechen conflict does seem likely to raise tension throughout the region which could persuade the Russian authorities to commit more security forces and give the Russian presence more of the character of a colonial and military occupation.

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<sup>17</sup> J. Ormrod, "The North Caucasus: fragmentation or federation?", I. Bremner & R. Taras (eds), *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, 1993, 471.

<sup>18</sup> There were reports emanating from Georgia on 19 December that around 1,200 combatants from Abkhazia were fighting on the Chechen side - *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2184 B/5.

<sup>19</sup> *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2177 B/11-12.

<sup>20</sup> *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2197 B/7.

## VII Effects on Russian politics

Almost all prominent Russian politicians agree that Chechnya is and should remain part of the Russian Federation, but there is widespread dismay at the methods which have been used to reimpose Russian rule. In particular the Yeltsin administration stands accused of bungling its covert attempts to bring down the Dudaev regime and of reuniting the previously divided Chechens against Russia. The clumsy and callous use of force recalls the counterproductive attempts to suppress nationalism in Lithuania, Georgia and Azerbaijan in the final years of the Soviet period. The prospect of a prolonged guerilla conflict in the mountains also raises uncomfortable parallels with the failed Afghanistan campaign of 1979-1989. The long-term effect of the Afghan campaign has been to radicalise nationalist and Islamic resistance to Russian influence throughout Central Asia; the brutal treatment of Chechnya could have the same effect on the North Caucasus.

There is also a fear felt by Russian democrats that the same "old regime" attitudes which have guided President Yeltsin and his military-security advisors over Chechnya may be applied to domestic politics in coming years. It is barely a year since Russian tanks fired at the previous Russian parliament when it continued to defy the President and the resort to force in the face of political defiance could become habitual again. Similarly, the president's reliance on a small coterie of non-accountable and almost invisible advisers bodes ill for domestic politics.

In President Yeltsin's mind the problem may have presented itself in a different way: in the autumn of 1994 the Russian government appeared to be finally embarking on a serious attempt to reform the economy in ways which were bound to be painful and humiliating for Russian nationalist opinion and for democrats who reflect public opinion; only by outflanking the "patriotic" opposition on a nationalist cause such as the suppression of the Chechen revolt could the president hope to survive the economic transition.

This approach would imply that, following the weak performance by the main democratic reformist parties in the December 1993 elections, President Yeltsin has decided to manage without their support in the next parliamentary and presidential elections and make his appeal instead to the "patriotic" and authoritarian element in the Russian electorate. Local elections in the early autumn had demonstrated that the parties relying on nationalist slogans, including Zhirinovskiy's "Liberal Democrats" were winning far more votes than the reformist parties such as "Democratic Russia's Choice".

However, the events in Chechnya have also produced some new alignments in Russian politics. A few prominent figures from the reformist camp have broadly endorsed the president's Chechnya policy (eg foreign minister Kozyrev, former finance minister Fyodorov), while a growing number of prominent men associated more with the nationalist camp and with military or military-industrial backgrounds have condemned it (eg former vice-president Rutskoi, generals Gromov and Lebed, Yury Skokov).

If the war in Chechnya comes to be regarded as a total fiasco and humiliation for the Russian president and armed forces then there will be few winners in terms of Russian electoral politics, but some of the military figures who have distanced themselves from defence minister Grachev and the execution of the operation could move into positions of power by offering greater emphasis on discipline and competence.

The independent liberal newspaper *Izvestiya* has reflected the fears of the democrats in its headlines during the crisis:

**War in Chechnya could destroy Russian Democracy** (6 December)

**The War in Chechnya is a war against Russia** (9 December)

**Grozny is not worth a War** (20 December)

**The Chechen War has been lost in Moscow** (29 December)

**In such a War the Victors are put on Trial** (6 January)

A number of prominent members of the Duma have visited Chechnya and the neighbouring regions in the last two weeks and several have tried to mediate in various ways. However, the Duma has few formal powers which it can use to influence the policy of the president, government and armed forces over Chechnya. One of the deputy speakers of the Duma (the representative of the "Liberal Democrats" who support the hard line against Chechnya) said on 3 January that the parliament could have no influence on the situation and condemned the parliamentary factfinding missions.<sup>21</sup> The speaker, Ivan Rybkin, who is also a member of the Security Council, has been more cautious in dismissing any role for parliament. In an interview on 2 January he called for a general ceasefire and a political settlement. He referred to Chechnya as "a cesspool where criminal elements who have nothing to lose from all the CIS countries accumulate", but balanced this with praise for the human rights commissioner, Sergei Kovalev.<sup>22</sup>

Kovalev has been one of the most effective critics of the Russian operation against Chechnya. He returned to Moscow from Grozny on 5 January and, having reported to President Yeltsin, to foreign ambassadors and to the media, returned to the region of conflict on 8 January to make a further attempt at mediation. Kovalev was a human rights activist associated with Andrey Sakharov in the 1980s, is a deputy in the Duma and was appointed by Boris Yeltsin to the post of chairman of the human rights commission in September 1993.

Another reformist critic of the president, Grigory Yavlinsky, called on him to resign on 4 January and let the acting presidency pass, according to the constitution, to the prime minister,

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<sup>21</sup> *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2193 B/6.

<sup>22</sup> *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2192 B/4.

Viktor Chernomyrdin, who should negotiate a ceasefire.<sup>23</sup> In an article published in *The International Herald Tribune* on 10 January the leader of Democratic Russia's Choice, Yegor Gaidar argues, "If the president continues to deepen his misadventure by pursuing the policy of settling the Chechen issue by force, Grozny will certainly fall, but with unacceptably large numbers of casualties. And after that only one thing is certain: a long-term guerrilla war, or at least a terrorist conflict, all paid for with the lives of our hapless young men."<sup>24</sup>

The Russian political and military leaderships are faced with the dilemma that if, as they insist, Chechnya is "home territory" then they can be accused of firing on civilian citizens of the Russian Federation, which is *prima facie* in breach of Articles 20 and 21 of the Russian constitution and cannot be justified even by a state of emergency (Article 56-3). If they treat Chechnya as a foreign territory then the action is in breach of international law and contradicts the Russian insistence on sovereignty. Stated more generally, the dilemma is that it is impossible to impose loyalty on a cohesive community of reluctant citizens without resorting to harsh measures of a kind which are supposed to have been relinquished with the demise of the communist system. The resort to violent enforcement is bound to alienate the Chechen people still further, while threatening Russia's democratic and legal order. Russian public opinion seems to be deeply divided on these questions.<sup>25</sup>

There is also bound to be a heavy economic cost associated with the war. Otto Latsis has argued in *Izvestiya* that this is already sufficient to derail the budget calculations for 1995 (which were in any case widely regarded as unrealistic) and that it is likely to be accompanied by reduced foreign investment and reduced willingness by international institutions to lend to Russia in the light of the Chechnya operation.<sup>26</sup>

## VIII Censorship and manipulation of information

Russian media coverage of the conflict has been extensive and largely defiant of crude attempts by government agencies to control it. On one hand the Government has set up a "temporary information centre" and has tried to force the media to carry its official bulletins which have been reminiscent of Soviet propaganda material, but on the other it has failed to prevent TV and some newspapers from conveying to the Russian public what correspondents have seen and heard in Chechnya, much of which contradicts the official version. Nor has it prevented the media from commenting directly on the attempts at censorship.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2193 B/7.

<sup>24</sup> Yegor Gaidar, "Russia can't enter the future by turning to the past", *International Herald Tribune*, 10 January 1995.

<sup>25</sup> *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2183 B/10. The opinion poll reported here indicated a civilian majority in favour of re-imposing Russian rule on Chechnya, but a narrow majority of Russian servicemen willing to acknowledge Chechen independence.

<sup>26</sup> *Izvestiya*, 29 December 1994, p.2.

<sup>27</sup> eg Valery Yakov in *Izvestiya* on 17 December.

On 3 January 1995 the "Russia" TV channel showed a member of the Federation Council, Viktor Kurochkin, saying that "shameless lies are being told not by the media, but by the press service of the government, because the media are being forced to broadcast its reports". Similar statements by Sergei Kovalev, the human rights commissioner, were broadcast on 5 January and he stressed his anxiety that President Yeltsin was also being seriously misinformed by his official advisers as to the true situation in Chechnya.<sup>28</sup>

The gulf between official pronouncements and media commentaries has been startling and suggests a deep crisis of credibility for the president and armed forces. On 29 December *Izvestiya* commented scathingly on the stupidity of the official allegations that the Chechens had been bombing themselves and had acquired controlling stakes in Russian newspapers. It also noted that the implausible claims about Chechen military casualties would be appalling if they were true and contrasted the giving of new year gifts to good children in Moscow with the despatch of teenage conscripts to Chechnya and the "gift" of laser-guided bombs.<sup>29</sup>

## IX International implications

### A. Human Rights

The Dudaev regime has done little to establish its democratic credentials on the international stage; indeed Chechnya and the Chechens have made little diplomatic impact on Western Europe and until recently were best known in the context of international crime.<sup>30</sup> For the reasons set out in I above, Chechnya has not been recognised by any other state as an independent unit in international law. Russian action against Chechnya is therefore not regarded as an act of aggression against another state and it seems unlikely that the international reaction will involve overt support for the secession of Chechnya.

This does not mean that Russia has a completely free hand to use force. It has accepted international agreements on human rights, including those negotiated within the context of the CSCE/OSCE ("the Helsinki process")<sup>31</sup> and is also a candidate for membership of the Council of Europe. In the latter context it will need to demonstrate the application of the European Convention on Human Rights.

The key "Helsinki process" agreements are the Final Act of 1975 and the Charter of Paris of 1990. Both are politically binding international agreements rather than legally binding treaties. The Charter of Paris includes the following declaration:

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<sup>28</sup> *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2193 B/2, SU/2195 B/10.

<sup>29</sup> front page lead and p.2 article by Otto Latsis.

<sup>30</sup> For example, two Chechens linked to the Dudaev regime, who appear to have been trading in oil, passports and weapons, were murdered in London in February 1993 - *The Independent*, 22 October 1993. See also A Jennings, "The land the mafia stole", *The Times*, 13 May 1993.

<sup>31</sup> The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe became the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe with effect from 1 January 1995.

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Democracy, with its representative and pluralist character, entails accountability to the electorate, the obligation of public authorities to comply with the law and justice administered impartially. No one will be above the law.

We affirm that, without discrimination, every individual has the right to:

freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief,  
freedom of expression,  
freedom of association and peaceful assembly,  
freedom of movement;

no one will be:

subject to arbitrary arrest or detention,  
subject to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment  
or punishment;  
everyone also has the right:  
to know and act upon his rights,  
to participate in free and fair elections.  
to fair and public trial if charged with an offence,  
to own property alone or in association and to exercise  
individual enterprise,  
to enjoy his economic, social and cultural rights.

We affirm that the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of national minorities will be protected and that persons belonging to national minorities have the right freely to express, preserve and develop that identity without any discrimination and in full equality before the law.

We will ensure that everyone will enjoy recourse to effective remedies, national or international, against any violation of his rights.

Full respect for these precepts is the bedrock on which we will seek to construct the new Europe.

Our States will co-operate and support each other with the aim of making democratic gains irreversible.<sup>32</sup>

Nothing in these instruments prohibits the use of armed force in support of law and order within the signatory states, but they should in theory protect civilians from arbitrary arrest or violence and from such "cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment" as is necessarily inflicted by indiscriminate aerial and artillery bombardment. Any permanent denial of the opportunity to participate in free and fair elections would also infringe the agreements. The Russian human rights commissioner, Sergei Kovalev, who spent the first three weeks of the campaign in Grozny, told foreign ambassadors in Moscow on 6 January that "in accordance with

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<sup>32</sup> *Charter of Paris for a New Europe*, 1990, p.3.

internationally accepted principles, when human rights are violated on a mass scale, this is not an internal affair of an individual country but something which concerns the entire world community".<sup>33</sup>

Other states may express their concern about Chechnya in a variety of ways because Russia is currently involved in negotiating new relationships with a number of international groupings and organisations: the EU, NATO, the Council of Europe, the IMF and others.

## B. The CFE Treaty

Russia is also constrained by the obligations which it entered into under the CFE Treaty which came into force in 1992. At present these obligations relate only to the reductions in total numbers of tanks, armoured vehicles and artillery pieces under the treaty and these appear to have been complied with. From November 1995 Russia will also be obliged to observe the agreements on deployments in the so-called "flank zones" under Article V of the Treaty which include the Caucasus. Because the entire territory of Bulgaria and Romania fell within these zones, a large part of the quota allocated to the former Warsaw Pact in the flanks fell to these two countries, now no longer allied with Russia. The quota allocated to the Soviet Union was re-allocated at Tashkent in May 1992 between the successor states and Russia was left with an allocation of 700 tanks which could be in active service in its northern and southern flanks. A further 153 tanks can be deployed "temporarily" in the Russian flanks. There are similar sub-limits for armoured vehicles and artillery.<sup>34</sup>

A side effect of the Chechnya conflict has been to strengthen the determination of the Russian government to obtain a revision of these limits on force deployments in the "flank regions". Since early in 1993 the Russian defence ministry has been arguing that the sharing of CFE quotas in the southern flank with independent Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan (none of which existed as separate entities when the treaty was negotiated) leaves Russia with an unrealistically low limit in the region. Given the military build-up in Chechnya and the previous transfers of units from Eastern Europe to the North Caucasus, it seems unlikely that Russia is on track to comply with Article V. NATO states have been reluctant to re-open the treaty and Russia has until recently tried to avoid a unilateral violation by persuading the other Caucasus states to reduce their quotas voluntarily in Russia's favour. In the light of the Chechnya crisis Russian official spokesmen have begun to suggest that they may be compelled to change the limits unilaterally when they come into effect in November 1995.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2196 B/8.

<sup>34</sup> *The Arms Control Reporter*, 407.B.492-3; *SIPRI Yearbook 1994*, 571-4; *Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe*, Cm 1477.

<sup>35</sup> *The Arms Control Reporter*, 407.B.507-8 and *Izvestiya*, 29 December 1994, report of comments by G. Karasin.

### C. Longer term implications

As long as the conflict is contained within the recognised territory of the Russian Federation, the most significant international implications may arise from the precedents created and analogies suggested. Events in Chechnya, as earlier in Abkhazia, have demonstrated that the Russian "power ministries" (ie defence, interior, counter-intelligence) are prepared to deploy forces covertly for political ends and that the people in charge have a cavalier attitude towards both military and civilian casualties. They have also demonstrated that even when overtly implementing presidential policy (since 11 December) they have great difficulty in acting calmly and consistently. There are worrying questions as to the nature and quality of political control over the armed forces and a distinct lack of democratic accountability, the State Duma and Federation Council being almost completely sidelined.

The international consequences are likely to include a further weakening of confidence in the stability of the new Russian political system, increased scepticism about the ability of the Russian armed forces to carry out genuine peace-keeping missions in any part of the former Soviet Union and renewed determination on the part of the Baltic states and former member states of the Warsaw Pact to improve their own sense of security by moving towards membership or associated membership of either NATO or the WEU. It is likely also that the Russian insistence on non-military solutions to other conflicts will be met with greater scepticism in the future.

In the longer term much will depend on whether the events in Chechnya are perceived as setting a pattern for the future use of force to resolve conflicts within the former Soviet Union or whether they appear to constitute the final stand of old and discredited attitudes. If political developments in Moscow over the next eighteen months serve to legitimise what has been done in Chechnya then the long term effect may be that other European states will seek to isolate Russia and protect themselves by promoting further military, economic and political integration based on the EU and NATO.

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