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Quagmire of convenience:
The Chechen war and
Putin's presidency

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ROBERT E. JOHNSON

“We share your pain,” declared Vladimir Putin to George Bush on 12 September 2001. Russians had indeed felt the terrible consequences of terrorism long before the 9/11 attacks. In September 1999, several hundred civilians died in a series of bombings in Moscow and several other cities. But pain and suffering were not all that the two presidents shared. For both, terrorist attacks raised fundamental questions about how their countries should be governed and what should guide their relations with the rest of the world. For both, the response was to wage war on an adversary that was not directly implicated in the terror. Both wars were accompanied by a vigorous assertion of executive power at home as well as by a go-it-alone approach on the international front.

As Bush's presidency has been defined by the war in Iraq, so too has Putin's by the Chechen campaign, which can serve as a lens for examining how he has governed Russia and where he may lead it in the years to come.

THE IMPERIAL LEGACY

The war in Chechnya has often been described as a renewal of age-old hostilities. By itself, however, the long and tortured history of Russo-Chechen relations cannot explain the most recent outburst, which is a product of specific decisions and a reflection of broader trends and problems in post-Soviet Eurasia.

Chechnya is a territory of some 15,000 square kilometres—less than three times the size of Prince Edward Island. It is located in the North Caucasus mountain range, a rugged terrain that has isolated its inhabitants from even their closest neighbours. The mountains are home to more than 30 distinct nationalities or ethnic populations, speaking languages that are in most cases mutually incomprehensible (the Chechens and their closest neighbours, the Ingush, are an exception) and unrelated to the larger families of

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languages spoken elsewhere. Archaeological evidence suggests that many of these groups have lived in the region for at least several millennia. Geography has helped them resist external powers who tried to impose their rule: Mongols, Persians, Turks, and, for the past three centuries, the Russian empire and its successors.

In common with other North Caucasians, the Chechens practise Muridism, a branch of the mystical Sufi tradition of Islam. Believers are organized in local brotherhoods, a structure that has meshed well with the clan (*teip*) organization of village life and bolstered resistance to outsiders.

The Russian conquest of these lands began in the 18th century. By the beginning of the 19th century, the Terek basin, north of the mountains, was under firm Russian control, as was Transcaucasia—the region south of the main mountain range, encompassing present-day Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. But the conquest of the mountainous territory in between was accomplished only through another half century of ferocious warfare. Resistance was led by Imam Shamil, a religious leader whose faith and military prowess united the Islamic peoples of the region and kept the Russians at bay until 1859. Shamil was not a Chechen (he was of Avar nationality), but latter-day Chechen nationalists regard him as their spiritual ancestor.

Shamil's surrender was followed by the flight or expulsion of several hundred thousand Caucasian Muslims to Turkey. Russian officials described this process as "cleansing," and its death toll was high. The deportees were the beginning of a diaspora that today includes significant numbers of Chechens in Turkey, Jordan, and Syria—populations that have been periodically replenished by new waves of refugees. Despite the deportations, uprisings against Russian rule continued on a more local and sporadic basis. The region was placed under military administration, giving considerable latitude to local elites and customs so long as the mountaineers did not offer open resistance.

By the beginning of the 20th century, the lowlands of Chechnya and Ingushetia, near the cities of Grozny and Gudermes, had become an important centre of oil production, accounting for 15 to 20 per cent of the Russian empire's output, second only to the Baku oil fields to the south in Azerbaijan.

The collapse of the Romanov dynasty in 1917 brought four years of savage civil war, a kaleidoscopic conflict in which rivalries of clan, class, nationality, and party produced shifting alliances and unspeakable brutalities. At some points in the struggle, Chechens and their North Caucasian neighbours gave limited support to the Red forces, mainly in reaction against the Great Russian chauvinism of the White Army leadership. The Bolshevik agenda, however, was no more palatable to the mountaineers,

who were particularly offended by its atheism and promotion of women's emancipation.

The new Communist regime was heir to a multinational empire, comprising more than a hundred national and ethnic populations, some of them strongly resistant to Soviet rule. To assuage them, Lenin's government adopted a federal form of government that provided at least the appearance of self-determination to its major nationalities. The Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR), proclaimed in 1918, and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (1922) were both organized in a hierarchy of national divisions: union republics, autonomous republics, autonomous regions, and national areas. These gradations had little significance for much of the Soviet era, but they took on greater importance after 1991.

The republics and national territories were usually defined by their "titular" or majority nationalities, but often they included many different peoples, some with long-standing animosities dividing them. The Chechens were initially combined with a number of other Caucasian nationalities into the Soviet Mountain Republic (1921), which was soon dissolved into separate provinces of the RSFSR. In 1934 the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Region was established, and three years later it was rechristened an autonomous republic.

Although the system was formally a confederation, effective decision making was concentrated in Moscow. In the 1920s the local units were accorded a certain degree of autonomy, but this was eroded after 1928, when the Stalin regime began its forced-march program of industrialization and agricultural collectivization. In Chechnya, as elsewhere in the USSR, collectivization took an enormous toll in human life and provoked widespread resistance. Nonetheless, the oil and gas fields of Chechnya and Ingushetia remained productive, delivering an estimated flow of 150,000 barrels per day throughout the 1930s.

The Second World War brought new trials to the Caucasus. Hitler's armies made the oil fields of the Caspian basin one of their principal objectives. German forces advanced to within 80 kilometres of the Chechen capital, Grozny, before being driven back. Stalin and his closest advisers believed—on flimsy evidence—that Chechens and other Islamic nationalities were sympathetic to the invaders and planning to collaborate with them. The Soviet leaders resolved to deport the entire Chechen and Ingush populations to Central Asia. (Similar treatment was meted out to Crimean Tatars and several other Islamic groups, as well as to Russian Mennonites and others of German descent.)

On February 23, 1944, all Chechens and Ingush were abruptly ordered to assemble at designated points along railway lines. With at most a few hours' notice, the deportees had little opportunity to gather their possessions or

prepare for the journey, which ended up lasting several weeks. In total, about half a million men, women, and children were loaded into boxcars and shipped to "special settlements" in remote areas of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where housing and other basic amenities were almost nonexistent. The lowest estimates of the death toll from exposure, illness, and malnutrition are in the range of 20 per cent, but some authors have put the mortality rate at 50 per cent or more. Meanwhile the deportees' homes and lands were redistributed to non-Muslims, including Ossetians, Cossacks, and Georgians. Religious shrines, monuments, and other traces of Chechen and Ingush settlement were removed and destroyed.

The Soviet leaders may have supposed that these tactics, similar to those employed against alleged class enemies ("kulaks") during collectivization in the 1930s, would put an end to Chechen recalcitrance. If so, they were mistaken. The ordeal seems to have produced a sense of national unity in the face of shared oppression. Through more than a decade of exile, the Chechens and Ingush continued to demand the restoration of their homeland. In 1957, as part of Nikita Khrushchev's program of de-Stalinization, the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic was reconstituted and the exiles were allowed to return. (Some formerly Ingush territory, however, remained part of the Republic of North Ossetia and has been a source of conflict since 1991.)

Incompletely assimilated to the "really existing socialism" of the Leonid Brezhnev years, a substantial proportion of Chechens and Ingush retained their religious faith and clan loyalties, both of which would assume greater prominence in the post-Soviet era. Chechnya after 1957 did, however, participate in the broader trends of Soviet society, including urbanization, industrialization, and secularization. By the 1980s the population of Grozny was approaching 400,000. The output of the oil and gas fields was lower than in earlier times, but new refineries and pipelines were built, making Chechnya an important juncture for the shipment of oil and gas from fields further south and east. The expanding industrial workforce included large numbers of migrants from European territories of the Russian Republic. Educational opportunities expanded, and a certain proportion of Chechens became assimilated to the Soviet elite. (Noteworthy examples included Air Force General Djokhar Dudaev and Red Army Colonel Aslan Maskhadov, both of whom played prominent roles in Chechnya's independence struggle after 1991.)

POST-COMMUNIST RUSSIA AND CHECHNYA

The collapse of the USSR began when, as a result of liberalized election rules, nationalist candidates won power in some of the union republics and demanded independence. Mikhail Gorbachev proposed to revise the terms

of union, and a referendum on his proposals won 78 per cent approval, but the abortive coup of August 1991 destroyed Gorbachev's credibility and prompted more republics to secede. In December of that year, the leaders of the three largest republics—the Russian Federation, Ukraine, and Belarus—signed the Belovezh Forest declaration dissolving the union in favour of the Commonwealth of Independent States.

The departure of the 14 union republics left the Russian Federation, led by President Boris Yeltsin, with approximately three-fourths of the USSR's land mass and just over half its population. With non-Russians accounting for almost 20 per cent of its citizens, the new Russian state also inherited the federal structure of the former USSR, and many of its attendant problems. Leaders of some of the formerly "autonomous" territories (now renamed "republics of the Russian Federation") began pressing for true autonomy or full independence, especially seeking control over natural resources and taxation. Chechnya was at the top of the list, followed by Tatarstan, an oil-rich, predominantly Muslim territory located barely 800 kilometres east of Moscow. Demands for local autonomy were echoed in the regional governments of other Russian territories such as Krasnoyarsk in eastern Siberia, where local elites repeatedly challenged Moscow's authority. Conflicting claims of the federal centre and the regions would remain a source of tension throughout Yeltsin's presidency.

Nationalists in Chechnya saw no reason why their own republic should not follow the same path as the 14 republics. To General Djokhar Dudaev (who, as commander of a Soviet air base in Estonia in the latter 1980s, had direct experience of that republic's campaign for independence) there was no difference at all between Chechnya and the states that had seceded from the USSR. Moscow, however, continued to insist that Chechnya was an integral part of the Russian Federation. It had never held Union Republic status within the USSR—it fell in the more junior category of Autonomous Republic. Disputes over its governance were therefore deemed to be domestic and not international.

Dudaev returned to Chechnya in September 1991, proclaimed independence, and was elected president in a hastily called election. He proved to be something of a warlord, an erratic leader who dealt brutally with opponents. He was accused of ordering troops to open fire on demonstrators in July 1993, and of displaying the severed heads of five of his enemies in a public square on another occasion. Under his rule the country became more lawless. Chechnya's permeable borders allowed drugs, weapons, and contraband to flow freely in and out of Russia, at great profit to criminals (many of them, it seems, Moscow-based).

Dudaev's behaviour did not endear him to Moscow's leaders, but from 1991 to 1994 they found reasons to tolerate or even support him. Much of

their attention was taken up by crises elsewhere in the region: Abkhazia and South Ossetia (both rebelling against the now independent Georgian Republic), Nagorno-Karabakh (contested by Armenia and Azerbaijan), and Tajikistan (infiltrated by Islamist guerrillas from Afghanistan). Ingushetia (which had separated from Chechnya to become a federal republic in its own right) fought a short but nasty war in 1992, seeking restoration of territories transferred to North Ossetia in 1944. Russian armed forces were sent to several of these hot spots as peacekeepers, but critics accused the Russians of stirring up conflict for their own purposes.

Meanwhile, in Moscow, Yeltsin's government was struggling to establish its legitimacy and devise a coherent program of domestic and international policy. Many politicians who had supported Yeltsin during the abortive putsch of August 1991 began to resist his leadership. After a year and a half of confrontation, Yeltsin decided in September 1993 to dissolve the parliament. When, in response to the president's decree, a number of opponents barricaded themselves inside the parliamentary building, Yeltsin ordered troops to retake the building by force. About a hundred people died in the bombardment that followed and many others were arrested.

In the aftermath of this confrontation, Yeltsin proclaimed a new constitution, conferring greater powers on the president and trimming those of the parliament (now renamed the State Duma). This was a victory for the executive branch over the legislature, but it did not resolve tensions between the centre and the periphery. The powers and prerogatives of the country's 89 regional governments (including 21 federated republics) were not clearly defined, as Yeltsin's representatives negotiated separately with leaders of each locality, offering various concessions to secure their cooperation. Within this system of "asymmetrical federalism," local officials continually tested the limits of Moscow's influence, leading Yeltsin himself to warn that Russia could disintegrate "into dozens of separate fiefdoms, all fighting among themselves."

In the end, all but Chechnya signed on to the new constitution. Dudaev had been hinting that he would be willing to come to terms, but negotiators were unable to find an acceptable formula. By early autumn of 1994, Yeltsin's advisers were actively preparing to intervene in Chechnya. Defence Minister Pavel Grachev predicted that Dudaev would be toppled in a matter of days, but his optimism rested on faulty intelligence. Russia's capacity to wage war proved far less than he imagined, and Dudaev, despite his unpopularity, was still able to rally Chechens in defence of their homeland.

In November 1994, the Chechen president easily crushed a two-day putsch, apparently organized by the Russian Federal Counterintelligence Service (FSK). A month later a Russian armed force of almost 40,000 troops advanced into Grozny. Russian tanks quickly penetrated the city but

found themselves boxed in by guerrilla fighters, who inflicted heavy losses. The Russian forces were able to regroup and take control of the city several weeks later, but at an enormous price. Much of Grozny was reduced to rubble, and civilian casualties—many of them ethnic Russians—were high. The Chechen forces managed an orderly retreat into the mountains.

For two years, under Dudaev's leadership, Chechens waged a David-and-Goliath struggle against the Russians. The Russian troops, which initially included many poorly trained conscripts, were ineffective in combat. There were persistent reports of incompetent leadership and corruption in the officer corps, and of soldiers selling their weapons on the black market. Eventually the mothers of some conscripts organized an anti-war campaign that included well-publicized visits to the war zone to liberate their sons.

Independent journalists reported widespread human rights abuses, especially by the Russian forces, including mass killings, torture, and indiscriminate attacks on the civilian population. (In January 1996, President Yeltsin's highly respected human rights commissioner, Sergei Kovalev, resigned in protest over Russian conduct in Chechnya, claiming that 25,000 civilians had been killed in Grozny alone.) But even this brutal campaign was unsuccessful in subduing the rebels, who used classic guerrilla tactics of surprise and mobility.

Among the most effective Chechen officers were Aslan Maskhadov, a former colonel of artillery in the Red Army, and Shamil Basaev, a young officer who first came to prominence in 1992, when he led a troop of Chechen volunteers to fight on the side of Russian-supported rebels in Abkhazia. In June 1995, at a moment when the Russians seemed to have gained a decisive advantage over the Chechens, Basaev led a spectacular raid on the Russian town of Budennovsk, more than 60 kilometres outside Chechnya's border. The rebels apparently bribed their way through several military checkpoints, stopping at Budennovsk only because they were running out of money. After overrunning a police station, they seized a large number of hostages whom they threatened to kill unless peace talks were resumed. Negotiations produced a short-lived armistice and gave Basaev and his followers free passage back to Chechnya. The brief peace gave Chechen forces time to regroup, and in the following months they were able to go on the offensive. In March 1996, they carried out a successful strike into the heart of Russian-occupied Grozny. Even the death of President Dudaev (from a Russian missile strike in April 1996) failed to slow the rebels' momentum.

At this point the Russian public was turning against the war and against Yeltsin, whose approval rating fell below 10 per cent. With a presidential election looming, Yeltsin agreed to a ceasefire. He appointed one of his chief electoral rivals, the retired general Alexander Lebed, as director

of national security, and dismissed a number of senior military advisers including Defence Minister Grachev. The ceasefire ended on the day of Yeltsin's re-election, and within weeks the Chechens launched a new offensive. On August 6, 1996, the day of Yeltsin's inauguration ceremony, they began an assault on Grozny, capturing the city two days later.

Although some members of Yeltsin's government wanted to go on fighting, Lebed was ready to make a change. He flew to the town of Khasavyurt in Dagestan to meet with Maskhadov, who was now commanding the Chechen forces. To the consternation of Russian nationalists and many members of Yeltsin's inner circle, the two reached a peace agreement that provided for a full withdrawal of Russian forces. Chechnya would be self-governing *de facto*, but the issue of formal independence would be deferred for a period of five years. Lebed's reward for his efforts was dismissal from his post. The flamboyant ex-general went on to win election as governor of Krasnoyarsk province in eastern Siberia, where he died in a helicopter crash in 2002.

In January 1997, Maskhadov was elected president of Chechnya, winning almost two-thirds of the vote, three times as much as his closest rival, Shamil Basaev. Maskhadov's position for the next three years could be compared to that of Yasser Arafat in Palestine. As the elected head of a less-than-independent state, he found himself unable to bridge the gap between his adversary and his own hard-line supporters. The Russians, still smarting from their defeat, had no enthusiasm for the Chechen nationalist agenda. Some favoured continuing negotiations with Maskhadov, but others in the Moscow leadership were girding their loins for a new military confrontation. At the same time the more militant of the Chechens, led by Basaev, accused their president of trading "freedom for cabbage soup." Basaev, who in earlier years had seemed a religious moderate, now urged a more confrontational course of struggle, seeking to unite the Islamic peoples of the Caucasus into a single, religiously based state.

Maskhadov also proved incapable of maintaining order in Chechnya. Like Arafat, he tried to disassociate his government from illegality and terrorism. His period of rule, however, was marked by numerous kidnappings, robberies, and other criminal acts. The line between political terrorism and banditry was hard to draw, but both flourished, along with official corruption. Moscow, which had pledged financial support for Chechnya's postwar recovery, complained that its contributions were disappearing into private pockets. (Moscow's critics questioned whether aid was ever really sent. They noted that misappropriation of funds could also occur at the donor end of the pipeline.)

In August 1999, Basaev and his followers launched an armed incursion into neighbouring Dagestan, where three fundamentalist enclaves

were defying republican authority and proclaiming sharia law. A few weeks later bombs exploded in apartment buildings in Moscow and several other cities, killing hundreds of civilians. Public opinion was quick to blame the terrorism on Chechens, though no link to the republic has ever been proven. (In 2001 five Muslim men from the neighbouring Russian republic of Karachaevo-Cherkessia were convicted of planning the bombing. The trial was held some 750 kilometres from Moscow and was closed to journalists.)

These events precipitated drastic changes in Moscow, where Boris Yeltsin's "family" of advisers and oligarchs were already anxiously casting about to find a successor to the ailing and unpopular president. On August 10, Vladimir Putin, head of the Federal Security Service, was appointed prime minister—the fourth to hold that post in 12 months. Putin went on TV to promise that "we will wipe out [the rebels] in their outhouse." Russian armed forces launched an offensive not just in Dagestan but into Chechnya itself. The 1996 agreement was annulled and President Maskhadov was deposed. (Maskhadov, although he condemned the raid and bombings, also opposed the Russian intervention, and he chose to go underground rather than surrender. Until his death in 2005, he continued to denounce terrorism and to call for a negotiated peace.)

As in the 1994–1996 campaign, massive force was deployed against Grozny and other towns, resulting in heavy civilian casualties. Once again the insurgents withdrew into mountainous strongholds, from which they continued a campaign of bombings, assassinations, and guerrilla resistance. Once again Russian troops were accused of human rights violations, as well as looting, extortion, bribe taking, and other forms of corruption and abuse. In contrast to the earlier campaign, however, the Russian forces in Chechnya since 2000 have imposed tighter controls on journalists and human rights observers. (This task was made easier by the Putin government's crackdown on independent television stations and other news media.) As a result the second Chechen campaign has drawn relatively little public criticism in Russia.

Since 2000 the Russians have managed to keep control of the main Chechen cities, but the rebels have continued to wage a war of attrition. Conspiratorial groups—mainly, it seems, followers of Basaev—have gone outside of Chechnya to carry out suicide bombings and spectacular terrorist acts. The seizure of the Dubrovka theatre in Moscow in 2002 and the Beslan school attack in North Ossetia in September 2004 both cost hundreds of lives. Terrorists also managed, in May 2004, to assassinate Akhmad Kadyrov, the Russian-installed president of Chechnya. The Russians, for their part, offered rewards for the killing or capture of the most prominent Chechen oppositionists, making no distinction between the militant Islamist followers of Basaev and supporters of the more moderate

Maskhadov, who regularly denounced terrorism and called for peace talks. In March 2005, the ex-president was killed in a bunker not far from Grozny. As of this writing, Basaev remains at large.

EVALUATING THE RESULTS AND PROSPECTS

As it is in all wars, the death toll of the two Chechen campaigns is a contentious subject. Russian army sources claim they lost just under 4,000 soldiers from 1994 to 1996, and almost 5,000 from 1999 to 2004. These figures, however, do not include those missing in action and are probably incomplete in other ways. Official Russian sources estimate civilian casualties in the low thousands, but independent groups such as the Moscow-based Memorial Society insist that the real death toll is much higher: 50,000 to 100,000 for 1994–1996 and as many again since 1999. If these figures are close to correct, Chechnya may have lost between 10 and 15 per cent of its entire population. To put these losses into perspective, the numbers of civilian casualties are probably higher and combat deaths several times greater than those of the American war in Iraq, even though Chechnya's population is 5 per cent as large as that of Iraq, and its territory barely 3 per cent as great.

Although the Russian forces have at least nominally re-established control over the breakaway republic, many observers have questioned whether this has really been a victory. One way to measure their accomplishments is to weigh them against the Russian leaders' professed goals and concerns.

The future of Russian federalism

Putin's government has taken a consistently hard line against Maskhadov and other relative moderates (including a former president of Ingushetia, Ruslan Aushev, who has attempted on several occasions to act as an intermediary between the Russians and his Chechen neighbours). To the president and his advisers, Chechen separatism is an issue not just of terrorism but of governance. One of their strongest arguments against Chechen independence is that it could have a domino effect, precipitating separatist movements in other republics and regions.

At issue is the very definition of "Russia," a state that came into existence over many centuries through conquest, coercion, and co-optation of neighbouring tribes and nations. With ethnic divisions all across its territory, this is a state without stable borders, and any effort to separate becomes a challenge to the integrity of the whole. The possibility—however remote it may be—of Tatarstan or any of the other federated republics following Chechnya's lead is a nightmare to Russian policy-makers. Despite abundant evidence to the contrary, Russian nationalists continue to insist that the

Chechens (and all the other affiliated peoples) joined Russia “on the basis of law and the will of the populace of these territories.” Separatist initiatives must, by this reasoning, be the work of Russia’s enemies.

Putin has aligned himself with the advocates of a powerful and centralized state (*derzhavniki*) and acted vigorously to reverse the flow of power to the regions. In the first months of his presidency, he divided the country into seven districts, each to be governed by an appointed “super-governor.” Five of his seven appointees were officers of the army or the security services. Simultaneously he asserted the power to dismiss regional governors and other locally elected officials. Those officials were also stripped of their seats in the upper chamber of the Russian parliament, the Federation Council.

In 2004, following the hostage taking and bloodbath at the Beslan schoolhouse in North Ossetia, Putin announced that all regional governors were henceforth to be nominated by the central government. Regional legislatures would be allowed to review the president’s candidates, but if they twice rejected them, the legislators themselves could be dismissed. The president presented the new procedures as a response to “direct intervention of international terror directed against Russia.” Critics were more inclined to see this rhetoric as a smokescreen for a different agenda: a unitary and centralized system of government. From their point of view, the two Chechen wars have been an object lesson on the price of separatism, and a pretext for curtailing the autonomy of other territorial units.

The “near abroad”

Moscow’s troubles with members of the federation are paralleled in the politics of the now-independent republics of the former USSR. In 1991 the union was succeeded by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), consisting of Russia plus most of its former Soviet neighbours. Many Russians assumed that this region would remain a zone of Russian influence, bolstered by close economic and military ties among the members. But Russian efforts to promote regional co-operation were not warmly received. The old Soviet slogan of “friendship of peoples” was regarded ironically in many of the republics, and post-Soviet Russians were suspected of trying to maintain or restore hegemony over their neighbours. As a result, only five states accepted Russia’s proposal for a collective security treaty (1993), and it proved ineffectual when unrest erupted in Tajikistan. In 1997, four other CIS states—Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova—formed GUAM, a “political, economic, and strategic alliance” for regional security that bypassed Russia altogether. In 1999, at a summit held in Washington, Uzbekistan joined this alignment, which was thenceforth known as GUUAM.

The Russian attitude toward the CIS is undoubtedly influenced by nationalism and nostalgia for a lost empire, but post-Soviet Russia has many other reasons to pay close attention to developments in the neighbour states. Many of the problems that arose in Chechnya are also evident in the wider region:

- Long and permeable borders allow people and goods (including drugs, weapons, and contraband) to move easily among the republics.
- Crime and civil unrest have flourished in many parts of the region and threaten to spread from one republic into another.
- In the Caucasus and Central Asia, oppositionist movements have taken on a religious cast, shading over to Taliban-style fundamentalism.
- Ethnic and national boundaries among the republics are no clearer than those within the Russian Federation. As of 1991 an estimated 25 million Russians were living in the other 14 republics, and an even greater number of their inhabitants claimed dual citizenship.
- Trade, especially in the energy sector, is all-important.

The economic side of this story focuses mainly on oil. Russia is close to surpassing Saudi Arabia as the world's leading exporter of crude oil. Much of the oil and gas that it sells comes from former Soviet republics, especially the three that border the Caspian Sea: Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan. Chechnya has a central place in this industry, not because of its own dwindling resources but because of its location along major pipeline routes. (Chechnya's own oil fields, badly damaged by a decade of warfare, are down to a fraction of their former production.) Stability in Chechnya and the surrounding region is essential to keep the oil flowing and to discourage the oil-rich republics from developing alternative routings that bypass Russia. Putin's government has not been able to prevent construction of an alternative pipeline that links Azerbaijan to Turkey without crossing Russian territory. But Russia's Chechen policy is of a piece with its other efforts to control the petrochemical industry, including the prosecution of the oil magnate Mikhail Khodorkovsky and the dismantling of his powerful company, Yukos. (One of Khodorkovsky's sins was to begin independent negotiations for a pipeline from Kazakhstan into China.)

Moscow's quest for stability has led it to prop up authoritarian rulers in the Central Asian republics, and in this respect Putin's government has followed the policies of its predecessor. It cannot intervene as directly in these states as it can in Chechnya or other parts of the Russian Federation, but it has provided weapons and troops whenever the Central Asian states seem threatened. It also maintains bases throughout the region. These

states—all of which have predominantly Muslim populations—are ruled by military strongmen, several of whom first came to power in Soviet times. These regimes are notorious for human rights abuses and other undemocratic practices, a sour stew of brutality, corruption, and gangster capitalism. Their leaders all face opposition from religiously based groups. Their Islamic populations are diverse, including Sunnis, Shiites, and many individuals whose religious practice lapsed under Communism. So far the diverse oppositionists have shown little sign of forming a common religious front or uniting across national lines. This has not prevented their rulers from blaming all unrest on Islamic agitation or from dismissing all opponents as fundamentalists.

Nationalists in the Duma and some members of Putin's government have been suspicious of any linkages between the former Soviet republics and external powers: NATO or the European Union in the west, Turkey or Iran in the Caspian basin and Caucasus, or China in the east. From this point of view the first Chechen war was not merely a humiliation for Russia but a demonstration of weakness that made neighbouring states more susceptible to foreign entanglements. The Putin government's uncompromising line in Chechnya since 1999 is, in turn, a way of signalling to those states that Moscow is ready to defend its interests (or enforce its wishes) more forcefully than in the Yeltsin years.

Russia and the wider world

The Russian government seems to be pursuing two mutually contradictory policies in its dealings with external powers: integration and isolation. On the one hand, it wants to be recognized as a significant and active participant in organizations as diverse as the G8, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the United Nations. On the other, it seeks to exclude foreign states and international organizations from influence in the territories of the former USSR, and to promote friendly or submissive governments in the neighbouring republics.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Russia proclaimed its solidarity with the United States in a worldwide struggle against Islamic terrorism. It supported the US invasion of Afghanistan but not the war in Iraq, and it continues to sell weapons and nuclear material to Iran. It mistrusts the US-backed government of Pervez Musharraf in Pakistan, and its attitude toward American bases in Central Asia is decidedly ambivalent; these were welcomed as part of the campaign against the Taliban, but they also carry the threat of a permanent US presence within the zone of Russia's influence.

The Putin government has broadly supported the OSCE and has cited that organization's 1994 Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security as justification for Russian intervention in Chechnya. OSCE

observers helped to broker an end to the first Chechen war, and a further OSCE mission was sent there when the second round of warfare began. At the end of 2002, however, Russia refused to extend the mission's mandate, and the OSCE representatives were withdrawn. Russians accuse the OSCE of applying a double standard to human rights issues, exaggerating Russia's faults while ignoring abuses in countries that are more closely aligned with Washington—for example, anti-Russian discrimination in Latvia.

Russian nationalists argue that the west in general and Washington in particular are seeking to weaken Russia by fomenting unrest in the border states. They find evidence of this aim in Washington's enthusiastic support for Georgia's "Rose Revolution" in 2003 and Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" the following year. With respect to Chechnya, they note that the US has given political asylum to Ilyas Akhmadov, the former foreign minister of the Maskhadov government, whom the Russians regard as a terrorist. Washington is also home to the American Committee for Peace in Chechnya, a lobby group headed by prominent neo-conservatives close to the White House. (Officially the Bush administration has had little to say about the Chechen war or its critics. Its attitude toward "international interference" in its own military ventures has not been enthusiastic.)

Islamic terrorism

Although Islam has been an integral part of the Chechens' identity, their campaign for independence did not begin under a religious banner. Terrorism, in the form of bombings, hostage takings, and assassinations, was taken up by the rebels only after several years of warfare. The available evidence indicates that General Dudaev showed little enthusiasm for Islamist slogans in the early 1990s. Only after Russian troops advanced into Chechnya did he begin to cast the struggle in religious terms, establishing sharia courts and turning to clergy for advice. Dudaev's successor, Aslan Maskhadov, was a secular nationalist who resisted calls for establishing an Islamic republic. In November 1999, after hostilities with Russia were again under way, he finally acquiesced to the proclamation of a state based on sharia law, in which full citizenship was to be restricted to Muslims.

Even Shamil Basaev, the most militant of the Chechen leaders, appears to have followed a secular line in the first years of warfare. Journalists in the early 1990s described him as an opponent of religious fundamentalism, but a few years later he took up that cause with a passion. (Not coincidentally, at least 11 of his own relatives were killed in a Russian bombing strike in 1995—the point at which he began to cast the struggle in religious terms.) His change of direction may be a result rather than a cause of the fierce fighting of the past decade.

“Islamic fundamentalism” is itself an imprecise term. Basaev has called for a holy war to unite all Muslims of the Caucasus, but religious beliefs can divide the mountain peoples as well as unite them. As noted earlier, Chechen Islamic practice is focused on Sufi traditions, which are at variance with the Wahhabist fundamentalism of the Afghan Taliban or Osama bin Laden. (One important example is the veneration of local saints and shrines, over which Chechen Sufis and Wahhabists have clashed.) Basaev has aligned himself with the latter movement, and most analysts assume that he has received material support from Middle Eastern sources. As well, some number of volunteers from Arab countries, such as the guerrilla leader Ibn-ul-Khattab (killed by Russian forces in 2002), enlisted on the Chechen side. How influential these individuals have been and how many Chechens are ready to support Basaev’s religious campaign remain open questions.

One Chechen who broke ranks with the rebels was Akhmad Kadyrov, a prominent cleric who was the elected spiritual leader (mufti) of Chechnya. Although he initially supported the call for a jihad against Russia, he condemned Basaev in 1999 and went over to the Russian side. He was appointed head of the post-Maskhadov Russian administration in Chechnya, then elected president in 2003, but he was assassinated a year later.

In appointing Kadyrov, Putin’s government seemed to show an awareness of the religious complexities of the region. In other contexts, however, both domestically and internationally, it has relied on cruder stereotypes. Russian authorities including the president made no distinction between Basaev and Maskhadov, blaming the latter for every terrorist act despite his repeated condemnation of terrorism.

Putin’s government and the rebels are both acutely aware that the Russian Federation today has an estimated 20 million Muslims in a population just under 150 million. In addition, Muslims are a majority of the population in Azerbaijan and the five independent “stans” of Central Asia. The population of the Islamic regions is growing rapidly while Russia’s Slavic population is in demographic decline. The poverty of much of Central Asia has prompted many young people to move north and west in search of employment. (The city of Moscow alone has two million Muslims in its population.) Unfortunately many of these migrants lack the education or experience that might secure them a better life. Often living in poor conditions, they are a highly visible minority which, in present circumstances, has become the object of suspicion and sometimes mistreatment. This ranges from police “profiling” to harassment and brutality from gangs of xenophobic skinheads. Friction between Russians and their Muslim neighbours is increasing in a climate of mutual suspicion.

In its determination to isolate and destroy extremists, the Russian leadership has relied mainly on force, with little attention to the “hearts

and minds” side of the struggle. In imposing or upholding repressive regimes in Chechnya and Central Asia, Moscow runs the same risk that Washington faces in Pakistan or Egypt: resistance to unpopular rulers may coalesce around jihadist leaders, producing a backlash comparable to the Afghan Taliban or Iran’s Islamic revolution.

Basaev, on the other hand, seems to be gambling that his enemy’s behaviour—in Chechnya and throughout the Caucasus and Central Asia—will create new converts to the fundamentalist cause. If Muslim nationalities perceive themselves as targets of “Islamophobia,” racist discrimination, and abuse, and the Russians as supporters of crooked and repressive regimes, Basaev’s faction may be able to sustain itself and grow, even as the Russian forces hunt down and eliminate the present generation of rebels and terrorists.

“... and think of the Empire”

Anatol Lieven, writing in 1998, described Chechnya as the “tombstone of Russian power.” He was not suggesting that the Chechens had destroyed what was left of the Russian empire. Rather, the first Chechen war became a marker of how far post-Soviet Russia had declined. The flaws that the war exposed—corruption, incompetence, weak leadership—did not, as he read them, augur well for Russia’s future.

Seven more years have passed, five of them under Vladimir Putin’s leadership. During that time Russian forces have re-established firmer control over Chechnya, but by most accounts the flaws that Lieven underscored are still abundant. Guerrilla resistance continues, and it seems a safe assumption that the rebels enjoy at least passive support from much of the Chechen population. Economic and social life in the region is still chaotic and criminalized, and reconstruction from 10 years of warfare is barely under way.

If the war had been only about Chechnya, the outcome could hardly be called a victory. But it was also about Russia: its cohesion as a state, its relations with its neighbours and the wider world, the credibility of its leaders.

Here Putin and the Russian hard-liners have achieved at least part of their agenda. In hanging tough with Chechnya, Moscow has strengthened its authority over the provinces. With less success, it has asserted its pre-eminence over the former Soviet republics, experiencing major setbacks in Georgia and Ukraine while upholding authoritarianism (and corruption) in Central Asia. Internationally Putin has not built alliances or won many friends, but he has steadfastly upheld Russia’s right to set its own course and priorities, with Chechnya serving as a central symbol. And by imposing a military solution—however unsatisfactory it may be—upon Chechnya, Putin has secured a level of popular support among Russians far greater than his predecessor enjoyed.

On more than one occasion, the Russian president has expressed regret over the passing of the USSR. These statements have distressed foreigners but received wide approval in domestic opinion polls. Much of the Russian public, it seems, is disenchanted with democracy, troubled by economic uncertainties, and receptive to appeals to past glory. In today's constellation of values, order and stability consistently outrank democratic representation or governmental accountability. Nostalgia for the lost empire correlates closely with a desire for strong and effective leadership.

Leadership is what Putin has purportedly supplied in Chechnya, and Russia's citizens have mainly supported his agenda. They are distressed by the ongoing violence and outraged when (as in the Dubrovka and Beslan attacks) it spills beyond the borders of the Chechen Republic. But in contrast to public attitudes during the Yeltsin years, there seems little inclination to question or blame the government over its conduct of the war.

The Chechen crisis has, in effect, given Putin a blank cheque to impose his own version of order, not just in Chechnya but throughout the Russian Federation and much of its post-Soviet hinterland. He has chosen to use this political capital to recreate older patterns of authority, buttress undemocratic neighbours, and weaken the already tenuous foundations of civil society in Russia. Such pressing issues as military reform, economic modernization, and globalization have not been high on his agenda. These choices have enhanced his government's popularity and freedom of action. How well they have served Russia's longer-term interests remains to be seen.

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