

## The Crisis In Chechnya

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On February 15, 1994, Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Mintimir Shaimiev, President of the Republic of Tatarstan, initialed a treaty delineating a division of powers between the Russian national government and the government of Tatarstan. The treaty afforded Tatarstan a considerable amount of autonomy, and was welcomed by Yeltsin's Nationalities Minister, Sergei Shakhray, as a "breakthrough." Similar treaties were signed in the following months with the republics of Kabardino-Balkaria and Bashkortostan. These treaties, Yeltsin argued at the time, represented a "fine-tuning" of Russia's evolving federation relations, the basic framework of which had been established by the new Russian Constitution of December 1993. Indeed, with parliamentary elections approaching in the fall of 1995 and presidential elections in June 1996, he and his advisors began confidently asserting that the main achievement of Yeltsin's tenure was the consolidation of Russia's territorial integrity.

Nevertheless, Moscow still faced some extremely difficult problems in its relations with local governments and in keeping ethnic tensions from boiling over into more conflict within Russia. Above all, there was the explosive situation in the North Caucasus. There, among other problems, the breakaway republic of Chechnya continued to refuse to consider itself a part of the Russian Federation.

Until the summer of 1994, Moscow's response to Chechnya's challenge had been very patient. After an initial effort to impose martial law after Chechnya's declaration of independence ended in failure in late 1991, Moscow adopted what amounted to a policy of benign neglect toward Chechnya and its President, Dzhokhar Dudayev. Although it refused to recognize Chechnya's independence, Moscow allowed the republic to go its own way and even attempted periodically to enter into negotiations with Dudayev. Moreover, Yeltsin, his advisors, and members of the government repeatedly asserted that under no condition would force be used to resolve their differences with the republic. And in the wake of the signing of the treaties with Tatarstan, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Bashkortostan, they also expressed the hope that these treaties would serve as a model for finding a negotiated solution with Chechnya. As Yeltsin put it in a speech in early August of last year, "Forcible intervention in Chechnya is impermissible.... we in Russia have succeeded in avoiding interethnic clashes only because we have refrained from forcible pressure. If we violate this principle with regard to Chechnya, the Caucasus will rise up. There will be so much turmoil and blood that afterwards no one will forgive us."

Even as these words were being spoken, however, Moscow began stepping up financial and military support for opposition forces in Chechnya. Fighting in the republic intensified over the summer, leading in November to a major attack on Grozny by the combined forces of the Chechen opposition in an effort to overthrow Dudayev. Despite support from helicopters and aircraft with Russian markings, as well as from "mercenaries" from the Russia military (it later turned out, despite the denials of the Ministry of Defense, that these "mercenaries" had in fact been acting under orders), the attack failed. A little more than a week later, Yeltsin issued a decree authorizing the government, including the military, to take all necessary steps to disarm "illegal armed formations" in the republic. Two days later, 40,000 Russian troops poured into Chechnya.

Yeltsin's words of warning in August proved prophetic—there was indeed great "turmoil and bloodshed" as Russian forces met fierce resistance from Chechen fighters. Despite an earlier boast by the Russian Defense Minister, Pavel Grachev, that Russian troops could take the city in a matter of hours, the initial thrusts of Russian armored columns into the capital were rebuffed with considerable loss of life and equipment. Rather than a rapid and relatively bloodless victory, the Russian military found itself pummeling Grozny with artillery, bombing it indiscriminately from the air, and fighting its way into the heart of the city house-by-house, street-by-street. Only in late January did Russian troops manage to take the Presidential Palace. Even then, Russia faced the daunting task of occupying southern Grozny and "pacifying" Chechen forces who retreated into the mountains to the south. Given the traditions of armed resistance to Moscow of the Chechen people, the mountainous terrain that is ideal for a drawn out guerrilla war, and the horror and

resentment caused by the destruction of Grozny, the best that Russia can hope for is that Chechnya will become its Northern Ireland.

The political consequences in Moscow of the Chechen invasion have also been dramatic. Democrats in Moscow almost universally condemned the decision to invade, and most have announced they will no longer support Yeltsin. Economically, the invasion threatens to break Russia's budget, fueling inflation and undermining prospects for further financial relief from the IMF and aid from Western governments. And Russia appears to be an even more unstable and threatening place to foreign investors than previously. As for foreign policy, the invasion has greatly strained the already deteriorating political relations between Moscow and the United States. But perhaps the most disturbing consequence of the invasion is that it took place just as the first signs of political and economic stabilization were beginning to appear in Russia.

The critical question, then, is why did Yeltsin make such a massive blunder? Why, after showing considerable patience with Chechnya and other republics for three years, and after promising in such blunt language not to use force to resolve Russia's federation problems, was a decision made first to overthrow Dudayev by supporting the Chechen opposition, and when that failed, to launch a full scale invasion?

Before answering these questions, an initial point is in order. It is quite clear that the policy on Chechnya after early 1994 was being made by Yeltsin and his advisors. The intervention was not the result of the scheming of some military cabal or low level conspirators. As early as August 15, while taking a vacation trip down the Volga, Yeltsin indicated that policy on Chechnya had changed. He revealed that "certain measures" were being taken in Chechnya that he could not disclose, an apparent reference to the decision to use the Chechen opposition to overthrow Dudayev. Later, the decision to invade in December was made at a Security Council meeting, which Yeltsin chairs; the November 29 ultimatum demanding that the Chechens lay down their arms in 48 hours was issued by Yeltsin himself; and the December 9 decree ordering the government to take all means necessary to bring Chechnya to heel was signed by Yeltsin. Finally, Yeltsin has himself repeatedly insisted that he has been in firm control of policy on Chechnya, despite his evident displeasure with the performance of the military.

Why, then, did Yeltsin do it? As in any such decision, a number of factors were doubtless involved, but I would point to the following as being particularly important. First, efforts to negotiate with Dudayev had reached a dead end by the early summer of 1994. Beginning in January 1994, Moscow made a concerted effort to arrive at a compromise. Shakhrai (whom the Chechens had reportedly objected to) was sacked as Minister of Nationalities; Moscow indicated it would recognize Dudayev as the legitimate leader of Chechnya (despite the highly suspect character of his "election" in November 1991), dropping demands for a new Chechen constitution and new elections; and an offer was made for a meeting between Yeltsin and Dudayev.

Unfortunately, just as it appeared that a meeting would be held, an attempt was made on Dudayev's life. On May 27, a car bomb badly damaged Dudayev's car and killed the Chechen Interior Minister and one of his deputies. Initially, Dudayev claimed that the bomb had been set by opponents of his first steps at rapprochement with Moscow, but shortly thereafter the Chechen government announced that Moscow was behind the assassination attempt. (Who actually planted the bomb is not clear—there are many potential candidates, but it seems hard to believe that Yeltsin was involved.) Predictably, talk of a meeting between Yeltsin and Dudayev and a negotiated solution came to a halt, and Dudayev retreated to his previous position that Moscow must first recognize Chechnya as an independent state before negotiations could begin. It was at that point, in late July, that Moscow began stepping up pressure on Dudayev by supporting the opposition.

Second, the decision was probably made not return to Moscow's previous policy of benign neglect in July because of a perception that Chechnya presented a genuine and mounting security threat to Russia. This threat was real—certainly much more so than had been the case with Grenada or Panama prior to the U.S. invasions of what, after all, were foreign countries. It included a constant flow of arms and drugs from the republic; frequent hijackings and robberies, particular of the train that passes through Grozny and represents Moscow's principal transportation link with Azerbaijan; the generalized arming of the Chechen population; persistent factional and clan violence in the republic; a significant out-migration of Russians;

the activities of the "Confederation of Peoples of the Caucasus," which, headquartered in Chechnya, threatened to unite the Moslem peoples of the North Caucasus in opposition to Russia; the fact that Dudaev was complicating Moscow's efforts to ameliorate ethnic tensions elsewhere in the North Caucasus (e.g., between the Ingush and Ossetians or between Chechens and local Cossacks); and the possibility that Chechen intransigence would make Moscow look weak, thereby encouraging other republics and regions to challenge Moscow's authority by, *inter alia*, refusing to meet their financial obligations to the center.

Third, there was the very important question of oil. Oil production in Chechnya itself is modest and had been declining for years, even before perestroika. By 1994, it represented only some 0.5 percent of the total output of Russia. The real issue was not oil in Chechnya but rather oil (and natural gas) passing through the republic. Unfortunately for Moscow, a major pipeline runs right through Grozny. The pipeline (actually, three separate pipelines) has been occasionally sabotaged and frequently shutdown as a result of the chaos in Chechnya (although it appears that all three were never out-of-service at the same time). Moreover, the Chechens had reportedly perfected the art of stealing oil and gas from the pipeline, resulting in the loss of tens of millions of dollars in earnings for Moscow.

The most important oil-related factor, however, was probably the consideration that Moscow was negotiating two extremely lucrative pipeline deals, both of which entail shipping oil and gas through Grozny to the Black Sea ports of Novorossiisk (Russia) and Tuapse (Georgia). The first is with the so-called "Caspian Consortium," which is planning to develop the enormous oil and gas reserves off Azerbaijan in the Caspian Sea. The second is with another consortium developing the huge Tenghiz oil field in Kazakhstan. And in both cases, building an additional pipeline by-passing Chechnya would be very expensive and would make it much more difficult to convince producers to use the Russian route. So too would a conclusion that Russia is unable to guarantee the security of its existing pipelines.

Finally, Yeltsin appears to have been told that an invasion of Chechnya could be accomplished relatively quickly and with far less bloodshed than has proven the case. Had the invasion been efficiently executed, he doubtless also assumed that the reaction of the Russian public would have been favorable. Ethnic Russians are hostile to the Muslim minorities of the North Caucasus generally and to the Chechens particularly. They believe they are deeply involved in crime, and they resent the fact that they have been very successful merchants, running many of the fruit and vegetable markets throughout Russia. Yeltsin could have expected the Russian people to welcome a "disciplining" of the rebellious republic and a restoration of "order" by a firm and decisive Russian president. He may also have felt that, like many American presidents before him, not doing anything about a security threat would undermine his own authority and his claim to having overcome Russia's crisis of statehood.

Rather than demonstrating the efficacy of a "firm hand," however, the woefully planned and executed invasion has humiliated both Yeltsin and the Russian military. It has also made the Russian state look very feeble, adding to centrifugal pressures. And it has if anything made oil and natural gas producers in the Caspian and western Kazakhstan less inclined to ship their product through Russia.

Still, while the decision to intervene was a terrible mistake, particularly given the extremely brutal and hard-handed way it was carried out, it is also important to appreciate that Dudayev had placed Yeltsin between a rock and a hard place. Indeed, the decision to invade was not made by a man intent on ruining democracy or ethnically cleansing the North Caucasus. Rather, it represented a serious political misjudgment rooted in a profound failure to appreciate the military and political consequences of an invasion.

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