

## What's Next in Chechnya?

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Regardless of whether Russia had a right to use force to defend its territorial integrity against Chechen secession, it is now clear even to the present administration in Moscow that the invasion was a terrible error. The war has made it inconceivable that Chechnya will become a "normal" member of the Russian Federation, even if it is granted considerable autonomy and a treaty-based relationship with Moscow like Tatarstan's. The hostility of the Chechen people toward Russia, deeply rooted even before the conflict, has been immeasurably intensified by the brutality of the war and will not be ameliorated by Moscow's promises of financial aid to reconstruct the republic, assuming that Moscow is in a position to deliver on these promises, which it is not. If Moscow continues to insist dogmatically on the "preservation of its territorial integrity" and the full application of its constitution on Chechen soil, the best it can hope for is that the republic remains a terrible burden on the Russian people, a political nightmare for whatever party is in power in Moscow, and a major and possibly decisive impediment to the preservation of Russian democracy.

This is true for many reasons. The Chechen resistance fighters are extremely well-armed and appear to have no difficulty purchasing weapons abroad, buying them from corrupt Russian soldiers, or capturing them in battle. Moscow's hope that the Chechens will disarm is a pipe dream under any circumstances. Neither is there a shortage of Chechen fighters willing to carry out acts of terrorism beyond the borders of the republic, as demonstrated by the events in Budyonovsk and Kizlyar. Chechen fighters who wish to take the war to Russian territory have the benefit of a large Chechen diaspora spread throughout the Russian Federation, now swelled by the flow of refugees from the republic, who will at least harbor them if not actively help them. Most importantly, the Chechens are a fiercely independent mountain people who have been raised on a mythology of resistance to Russian incursion and who feel honor-bound to revenge acts of violence against kin and clan. And unlike most of the other peoples of the North Caucasus, their clan-based social structure is highly decentralized and egalitarian (albeit male-dominated), with little sense of hierarchy, which makes it very difficult for anyone, including Dudaev, to engineer a peace that is not supported by the rank-and-file of the Chechen resistance.

Fortunately, Yeltsin may have finally recognized that the war in Chechnya cannot be resolved by force and that the conflict is a major, perhaps decisive, obstacle to his reelection. He is therefore appears to be searching for a face-saving way to withdraw Russian forces from the republic. However, his plans for installing a "reasonable" government in Grozny that restores order, wins the loyalty of at least a significant portion of the Chechen people, and enters into negotiations with Moscow on an autonomous status for Chechnya within the Russian Federation have come to naught. The government of Doku Zavgayev, the former Communist Party first secretary in Chechnya in the Soviet era, is supported by very few Chechens, and the elections held in December in the republic, which were arranged to legitimize Zavgayev's rule, have been exposed as a farce by both Russian journalists and outside observers.

What, then, are Moscow's options? First and foremost, Moscow must recognize that it is no longer in a position to determine Chechnya's relationship with the Russian Federation, including whether Chechnya becomes fully independent. Second, Moscow must accept that it has no one to negotiate with other than Dudaev.

The best outcome for all concerned would be for Moscow to negotiate an agreement with Dudaev that provides for a transition government that conducts a referendum on Chechnya's status and then holds elections for a new Chechen president and legislature. It is more likely, however, that Moscow will withdraw under the cover of some face-saving agreement with Dudaev (or worse, with Zavgayev), and in turn allow the deeply-divided and factionalized Chechen people to determine their new leader through armed conflict. If Moscow is lucky, a new leader, who almost certainly will lack democratic legitimacy, could then negotiate Chechnya's relationship with the Federation. An even more unfortunate scenario, and not an unlikely one, is that Chechnya, like Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal, is plunged to a seemingly interminable civil war which prevents any authority from emerging in Grozny that is capable of conducting meaningful negotiations with Moscow.

Still, at some point a stabilization of authority will occur in Chechnya. When it does, it will be important for Chechnya's leaders to appreciate that full independence for the republic is not very practical. This is true not so much because of Chechnya's small size—there are many prosperous states that are smaller in both territory and population. Rather, it is because Chechnya is strategically vulnerable both in military and economic terms. Although Chechnya has an external border with Georgia, the massive Caucasian mountain range to Grozny's south makes significant trade across that border virtually impossible. As a result, Chechnya cannot carry on normal trade relations with (or even receive significant aid from) the outside world without Moscow's indulgence. Moreover, Chechnya will need at least the cooperation of Moscow, if not direct aid and/or reparations, to begin to restore its devastated economy. Finally, Chechnya would be hard pressed to afford the cost of independence, including the cost of foreign representation, of membership in relevant international bodies, and so on.

Hopefully, then, wise leaders in Moscow and Grozny will come to appreciate the advantages of some sort of compromise status for Chechnya that falls between full independence and full incorporation in the Russian Federation. Chechnya could become a self-governing territory that is neither part of the Federation nor an internationally-recognized independent state with a seat in the UN General Assembly. The details of such a solution could vary enormously, but by way of example, the arrangement might entail the following: the Russian constitution would not be binding on Chechen territory; Russian laws would be recognized in Chechnya only to the extent that they did not contradict Chechen law; Chechnya's highest court would be the final interpreter of law on Chechen territory; Chechen citizens would not automatically be afforded Russian citizenship, although dual citizenship would be permitted; Chechnya would not send representatives to the Russian national legislature (although it might send non-voting observers); Chechen citizens would not vote in Russian national elections, including elections for the Russian president; the Russian president would have virtually no powers on Chechen territory but would be recognized as Chechnya's Head of State (much as the British Monarch is Head of State of Canada); Moscow would be allowed to appoint a governor or presidential representative (perhaps nominated by the Russian president and appointed by the Duma, with Grozny retaining a right of veto); the governor would have very limited powers—for example, a right to appeal to the Chechen parliament to declare a state of emergency, which would then permit the dispatching of federal forces to restore domestic order if that proved necessary; Moscow would be responsible for Chechnya's external security (obviously a largely symbolic power, since only Russia in practice poses, or could pose, a security threat to Chechnya); Moscow would have the right to police Chechnya's external border with Georgia; border controls could be set up between Chechnya and Russia; Chechnya would have the right to its own currency (although it could continue to use the Russian ruble); Moscow would represent Chechnya abroad and would provide consular services to Chechen citizens in foreign countries; finally, Chechnya would be afforded observer status in international delegations of particular importance to it.

Of course, all this assumes that reason will prevail, which in the short run is quite unlikely. But there is at least reason to hope that Moscow is at last committed to withdrawing its troops from Chechnya, which is a necessary but far from sufficient condition for the normalization of life in that devastated republic.

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