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CONTRACTOR: University of Wisconsin-Madison
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Anatoly M. Khazanov
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AN END OF THE CHECHEN WAR OR A PRE-ELECTION MANOEUVRE?

ANATOLY. M. KHAZANOV

Abstract

President Yeltsin’s recent decision to halt the military campaign in Chechnya and to put an emphasis on peace talks was made only under electoral pressure. There are influential forces in Moscow and in the Russian military who do not want to end the war through negotiations and compromise. A serious danger still exists that after the presidential election the war will be resumed and the Chechen resistance will assume a guerilla form characterized by increasing terrorist activity. Under this potential scenario, Western powers should exert a stronger pressure on the Russian leadership to end the conflict through negotiations and compromise.

During my recent visits to Russia, I met with and discussed at length the situation in Chechnya and its implications for the ongoing political process in Russia with many public figures, politicians and parliamentarians from the "Yabloko", "Russia’s Democratic Choice", "Russia is Our Home", and "Democratic Russia" parties, with some members of Yeltsin’s administration involved in working out Russia's policy on Chechnya, as well as with some Chechen public figures, both those who supported the secessionist leadership and who are in opposition to it (R. Khasbulatov, S. Maigov, Yu. Soslambekov, S. Khadzhiev, D. Gakkaev, I. Aliroev, M. Umalatov, Z. Khamzaev, and several others). Below are my observations and conclusions regarding the current state of the Chechen crisis.

The Chechen Crisis as a Factor in the Election Campaign

In the beginning of 1996, President Boris Yeltsin stated that his election prospects were dim, even doomed, as long as the war in Chechnya continued. These words should hardly be taken literally. Although the Chechen war remains extremely unpopular in Russia, for the majority of Russians it represented only one of several factors influencing their decision for whom to vote. In other words, Yeltsin comprehended that an end to the war, whether through military victory or negotiations, would certainly help him to win the elections. Simultaneously, he also recognized that he might be reelected even if the war continued.

This dissonance explains why Yeltsin was so reluctant to propose a realistic plan to end the war. For many months he simply paid lip-service to proposals to immediately stop military actions and to begin serious negotiations with Dudaev. Additionally, he was under strong pressure to continue the war from hard-liners in the military, secret services and his own entourage who many times assured him that a military victory was both feasible and imminent.
On February 9, 1996, at the meeting of the Presidential Council, Yeltsin announced that he possessed seven different scenarios for resolving the Chechen war and that the final one would soon be worked out. According to my information, these scenarios were as follows: (1) continuation of fighting and, therefore, new wide-scale military actions until a military victory is achieved in Chechnya; (2) "capitulation", i.e. the withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya which would inevitably result in the restoration of Dudaev's regime over the whole republic; (3) blockade, i.e. the placement of Russian troops along the length of the Chechen border to form a sanitary cordon in a hope that this would lead to "Afghanization" of the situation; (4) partition, i.e. Russian troop control over the northern plain with the southern mountain part controlled by Dudaev's forces; (5) an attempt to split Dudaev's camp; (6) freezing the situation in a hope that Russian henchman Doku Zavgaev, with Russian assistance, would be able to set up local militia units capable of wiping out Dudaev's troops; and (7) providing Chechnya a temporary special status for three or four years which would require disarmament and demilitarization of the republic, free elections and political negotiations between the warring sides. (This last plan had been suggested by the president of Tatarstan, Shaimiev.)

Despite Yeltsin's assurances of February 9, 1996, it took almost two months for the Russian president to announce his own plan. One of the reasons for this delay was the contradictory recommendations made by Yeltsin's ministers, members of the Presidential and Security Councils, and advisors involved in working out a new political strategy in Chechnya who hold quite different views on how to solve the problem. Tentatively these people can be described either as "hawks" (former Minister of Defence Grachev, Interior Minister Kulikov, former Security Chief Barsukov, former First Vice Premier Soskovets, Presidential Chief of Staff Yegorov, and others) and "moderates" (Minister of Nationalities Affairs Mikhailov, head of the working group on Chechnya Pain, and, apparently, Prime Minister Chernomyrdin).

The vague and contradictory Decree on the program for the settlement of the crisis in Chechnya issued by Yeltsin on March 31, 1996 reflected the ongoing debate in his inner circle and the President's own hesitations. Yeltsin declared the ceasing of all military operations in Chechen territory; it was soon clear, however, that military actions against the rebels would continue. It was then obvious that Yeltsin was unwilling and/or unable to control the generals involved in the highly abusive military campaign in Chechnya. The pace of war did not slow and the use of indiscriminate force against the rebels and the civilian population, including shelling and bombing, grew even worse.

In order to negotiate an end of the war, or at least a cease-fire, Yeltsin had to talk with Dudaev, a man whom he had publicly branded as a terrorist and a bandit. The Russian President considered this to be a personal humiliation. Therefore, only indirect negotiations between
Yeltsin and Dudaev were pursued, and even then, not in any serious fashion. Actually Yeltsin’s Decree of March 31 remained on paper.

By May 1996, Dudaev was removed from the political scene. In accordance with the prevailing opinion in Russian political circles and among Dudaev’s supporters in Chechnya, he was killed in a rocket attack organized by the Russian secret services with the tacit consent and approval of Yeltsin. However, the hopes that Dudaev’s assassination would demoralize his followers and result in factional infighting among the rebel’s leaders were in vain. Although several Chechen military commanders (i.e. Maskhadov and Basaev) are on bad terms with each other and are competing for influence, as long as the war continues, this struggle will not result in a serious split within the rebels’ ranks. All important decisions are made by the council of military commanders and are obeyed by the vast majority of individual leaders, even if they personally disagree with them. So far, Moscow has failed to reach accommodation even with the most flexible and pragmatic Chechen commanders. Meanwhile the war in Chechnya has begun to acquire a guerilla form without clearly defined fronts; this form is especially apparent after some mountain redoubts held by the rebels were stormed by Russian troops during the spring 1996 campaign.

The Moscow and Nazran’ Agreements of May - June 1996.

Inasmuch as a military victory had not been achieved, Yeltsin, in order to improve his prospects for reelection, had no other option but to pretend that progress was being made on the political settlement of the Chechen crisis. He had to halt, or rather, to limit military operations and put the emphasis again on peace negotiations.

On May 27, 1996, during Yandarbiev’s visit to Moscow, and then in the beginning of June, in Nazran’, the warring sides signed agreements for an unconditional cease-fire, a withdrawal of the Russian troops from Chechnya, and a disarmament of the separatists.

Still there are many doubts that Yeltsin’s decision to start negotiations is anything more than pre-election manoeuvring. The Russian military command in Chechnya is openly sabotaging the cease-fire agreement. The fact that the Chechen delegation were kept as hostages in Moscow during Yeltsin’s blitz visit to a Russian military base in Chechnya, as well as the president’s statements that Russia had achieved military victory in Chechnya and that one must negotiate peace with the Chechens only from the position of force, provide additional arguments to those separatist leaders who doubt that Yeltsin sincerely seeks a peaceful solution to the Chechen crisis. Likewise, Yeltsin’s unwillingness to grant a general amnesty to all those involved in the military conflict in Chechnya leaves people like Basaev with no choice but to continue fighting against the Russian troops. Last but not least, Russia’s continuing stake on Doku Zavgaev and attempts to
make him the third side in negotiations is also detrimental to the peace process. In spite of the Nazran' agreement and assurances of the moderate members of the Russian delegation at the peace talks, Zavgaev succeeded in carrying out the farce elections to the puppet Chechen parliament. He managed to do this only because of the support of the commander of Russian troops in Chechnya, Lieutenant General Viacheslav Tikhomirov, the former Secretary of the Russian Security Council Oleg Lobov, and of the Russian president himself. (Some high-ranking Russian officials told me that prime-minister Chernomyrdin preferred to postpone the elections.) Thus, the duplicity of Russian policy and a lack of accord amongst the Russian politicians involved in attempts to solve the Chechen conflict have been demonstrated again to the separatists.

Doku Zavgaev has completely discredited himself in Chechnya even amongst those who have tentatively supported him in the past. He is considered to be more corrupt and more collaborative than his predecessor, another Russian protege Salambek Khadzhiev. He is scornfully referred to in Chechnya as a "person without a permanent residence who lives at the station" (privokzalnyi bomzh). This is an allusion to the fact that Zavgaev prefers to spend a great deal of time in Moscow and that when he comes to Groznyi, he is afraid to leave the airport which is heavily guarded by Russian troops. Local Chechen militia organized by Zavgaev with Moscow's assistance, designed to encourage Chechen versus Chechen fighting, proved to be unreliable and unwilling to fight the separatists. It is no wonder that Zavgaev allies himself with the "hawks" in Yeltsin's leadership and insists that the Russian troops should continue to fight in Chechnya until all rebels are completely eliminated. He is dissatisfied by the very fact that Moscow began negotiations with the separatists and he has already made several attempts to derail them.

Some members of the Russian negotiating team (Mikhailov, Zorin, Pain) are certainly dissatisfied with Zavgaev; however, the Russian leadership still prefers to pretend that he is a legitimate leader of Chechnya, apparently in a hope that he may be used as a trump-card in negotiations with the separatists.

At the moment, it seems that permanent peace in Chechnya is not on Yeltsin's mind. In a private conversation with me, one of his advisors, who had been directly involved in organizing Yandarbiev's visit to Moscow and then accompanied Yeltsin to Groznyi, admitted that the decision to start negotiations had been made under electoral pressure and that the unstable cease-fire may be broken again after the elections. He also added that the guerilla war may well continue in Chechnya for the next ten years.

The last minute dismissals of several hard-liners from Yeltsin's retinue has weakened the "party of war" in the Russian leadership and, hopefully, makes it easier to force the Russian
generals in Chechnya to obey political decisions made in Moscow. While this creates a more favourable climate for a negotiation process, the results of these dismissals remain to be seen.

**How to End the War in Chechnya**

While Yeltsin continues to pursue a risky gamble in Chechnya, a remarkable consensus exists among many Russian and Chechen politicians and public figures of different political persuasions as to how to end the war. Despite many differences of opinion on secondary issues, all agree that any realistic plan should include a withdrawal of the federal troops from Chechnya and demilitarization of the region (it is not feasible to completely disarm the separatists until the Russian troops are withdrawn; however even in this respect a compromise can be negotiated), a stationing of neutral forces (either of the UN, of the OSCE, or less preferably, of the CIS), a general amnesty, a formation of a provisional government of national reconciliation, free elections under international supervision, and then, but only after the successful implementation of these steps, negotiations on the political status of Chechnya and its relations with Russia.

Difficulties connected with the implementation of this plan, however, should in no way be underestimated. There are many influential persons in Yeltsin's leadership and in the Russian military who, for various reasons, are not interested in a peaceful resolution to the Chechen crisis; there are also influential persons in the separatists' camp who will not be satisfied with anything short of the complete independence of Chechnya. It is clear that any serious and sincere attempt at negotiating a compromise implies that Zavgaev will have to leave the political scene in Chechnya. This brings to the fore another question: are there Chechen politicians and public figures who may become acceptable both to Moscow and to the majority of their own compatriots, at least during the intermediate period that should precede the free elections? One may assume that an intermediate Chechen leadership should consist of those people who belong to the so-called "Third Force", i.e. those who were in opposition to Dudaev's regime but at the same time are critical of the Russian military action in Chechnya. At the moment however, these individuals are not trusted either by Yeltsin's leadership, or by the separatists. As one member of the presidential administration admitted to me, the only reserve candidate is Ruslan Khasbulatov who is considered to be an overly ambitious and unpredictable politician. At present, Khasbulatov is very critical of the Russian military actions in Chechnya and of the puppet government of Zavgaev and he is trying to appeal to Dudaev's supporters. Other possible candidates for the leading political roles in post-war Chechnya are Salambek Maigov, Lecho Magomadov, Dzebrail Gakkaev, and several others. The support for these candidates in Chechnya, however, does not seem to be sufficiently strong.
Most of the responsible Chechen leaders, even from the separatists’ camp, in private conversations admit that complete independence for Chechnya is not presently attainable or desirable. They indicate that the final status of their republic vis-a-vis the Russian Federation may resemble that of Puerto Rico.

The Role of the Western Powers

Thus far Western powers have been forgiving of the Russian military actions in Chechnya and have done little to persuade Yeltsin to end the war through negotiations and compromise. A comparison of the Chechen war with the Civil war in the U.S.A. and a treatment of the pro-independence movement in Chechnya as a secessionist rather than as a national-liberation movement is not connected to any objective criteria.

In fact, Chechnya is no more part of Russia than Ireland was a part of England or Algeria was a part of France. The Chechens have a distinct culture, language, and national consciousness, and they constitute an absolute majority in their native area. Chechnya has always been held by force, and Russian claims that the country is an integral part of the Russian Federation are dubious, not only from an historical but also from a legal point of view since the republic refused to sign the Federal Treaty.

Actually a treatment of the Chechen war exclusively as an internal Russian problem only encourages Yeltsin’s leadership to seek a military solution to the conflict. In accordance with the prevailing opinion in Russia, the West has given Yeltsin a green light in Chechnya which allows him to ignore mild criticism for the brutality of Russia’s military campaign and the use of indiscriminate force against the civilian population. The attitude of the Western powers to the Chechen war, apparently dictated by considerations of realpolitik, strengthens authoritarian and neo-imperialistic tendencies in Russia which are detrimental to Western interests in the region.

It seems that in this respect one of the most urgent tasks of the Western powers is to send a clear message to Yeltsin that the war in Chechnya should not be resumed after the elections and that political negotiations and compromise with separatists should represent the only potential end to conflict.