The Domestic Political Context of Russia’s War in Chechnya

Mark Kramer

This paper considers how the Russian political system has affected Russia’s conduct of the latest war in Chechnya (the war that began in 1999), and vice versa. The aim here is not to examine the war per se, a topic I have explored elsewhere. Instead, the paper focuses on two questions that can shed broader light on the nature of the Russian polity.

First, why has there been so little public debate in Russia about the war in Chechnya? Over the past few years, Chechen fighters have resorted to many large-scale terrorist attacks against civilians outside the North Caucasus. One might assume that these incidents, particularly the numerous suicide bombings in Moscow that have killed hundreds of civilians, as well as the massacre in Beslan in September 2004, would generate a sustained public debate about the war. The financial costs of the conflict, and the high death toll among Russian troops (comparable until recently to the number of Soviet soldiers killed each year in the 1980s in Afghanistan, a country that is forty times larger than Chechnya), would seem to provide further grounds for a vigorous public debate. Yet no meaningful debate has occurred at any point. Chechnya played no role in either the Russian parliamentary elections of December 2003 or the Russian presidential election of March 2004, and it has not been on the political agenda since then, apart from a brief flurry of concern and recriminations following the Beslan massacre. The war has not been discussed in any depth on Russian television or in the Russian parliament, and the coverage of it on the television news is sporadic and highly tendentious.

The lack of public debate about the Chechen war is a notable departure from the experience in Russia during the previous war, which lasted from December 1994 to August 1996. That earlier conflict was unpopular from the start and was sharply criticized on Russian television, particularly the independent NTV station. The issue came up repeatedly during the 1996 Russian presidential election campaign (albeit mainly as part of a general indictment of the government’s incompetence), and pressure mounted for a political settlement. During the latest war, by contrast, the Russian public has been much more ambivalent and fatalistic in its reactions. According to opinion polls, the vast majority of Russians believe that the war will drag on incessantly and will inspire further terrorist attacks, but they have not taken to the streets in


2 See, for example, Levada-Tsentr, Chechnya posle A. Maskhadova (Moscow: Analiticheskii tsentr Yuriya Levady, March 2005); Levada-Tsentr, Rossiyane o smerti Aslana Maskhadova, 18-21.03.2005 (Moscow: ATsYuL, March 2005); and Vserossiiskii tsentr izucheniya obschestvennogo mneniya (VTsIOM), Bor’ba s terrorizmom: God posle
protest or sought to form an organized movement that would press for an end to the fighting. Nor have they supported calls for much more drastic repressive measures (e.g., mass deportations) that would “end the Chechen problem once and for all.” At least for now, the Russian electorate seems content to have the government continue with its protracted counterinsurgency and counterterrorist campaign regardless of the costs.

The other question explored in this paper concerns the political-administrative makeup of the Russian Federation and its impact on the war: Specifically, how is the conflict in Chechnya affecting the governance of and links between Russia’s territorial-administrative units, particularly those in the North Caucasus and southern Russia, and how does this in turn affect the prospects for an end to the fighting? The war has served as the pretext for important changes in center-periphery relations – notably in September 2004 when Russian President Vladimir Putin cited the Beslan massacre as justification for his decision to eliminate direct elections for regional governors – but it has also had far-reaching consequences within the North Caucasus that may reduce the likelihood of a settlement. As the war has continued in recent years, it has increasingly spilled over into neighboring regions and threatened to destabilize the whole of the North Caucasus. This trend raises anew the question of whether Chechnya is a unique case. Some observers have argued that the granting of full independence to Chechnya in the late 1990s (or 2001, which was the date set in 1996 for the final determination of Chechnya’s status) would not have inspired further separatism within Russia. Persuasive though this argument may have been about the past, the regionalization of the war since 2002 raises the prospect that independence for Chechnya could in fact have adverse implications elsewhere in Russia. The odds of reaching a lasting settlement were meager even in 2000 and 2001 (prior to the start of the major Chechen terrorist attacks in 2002-2004, which eliminated any lingering chance of a settlement under Putin), but the spread of the war may well have reduced them further. Costly as it is for Russia to continue the war, the costs of ending it might be even greater. The destabilization of the North Caucasus has made it easier for Russian leaders to argue that independence for Chechnya would greatly embolden Islamic extremists and separatist movements in other parts of the North Caucasus.

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3 Prominent members of the Rodina party, notably Dmitrii Rogozin, have raised the prospect of mass deportations, but have not gained any public backing for such measures. See “Beseda s Dmitriem Rogozinym,” transcript of interview on “Apel’sinskii sok,” NTV television station, 8 February 2004, 12:15 p.m. (Moscow time). See also “Zayavlenie partii ‘Rodina,’” Moskovskie novosti (Moscow), No. 34 (10 September 2004), p. 7.

4 See, for example, the convincing argument to this effect in Matthew Evangelista, The Chechen Wars: Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union? (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2002), pp. 86-123.
Initial Consensus

Initially, it was not surprising that the latest war in Chechnya generated little public debate. The circumstances surrounding the outbreak of fighting in 1999 were completely different from those in 1994. The 1994-1996 war began with a large-scale invasion by Russian military forces into Chechnya, whereas the latest war started after Islamic extremists carried out raids from Chechnya into neighboring Dagestan. In the three years prior to those incursions, from August 1996 to August 1999, Chechnya had enjoyed a period of quasi-independence, and Russian troops had pulled out of the region. Many observers had hoped that the Chechens would take advantage of this interlude to build a cohesive and viable state. But those hopes went unfulfilled. Far from becoming a viable state, Chechnya was increasingly plagued by warlordism, rampant criminality, hostage-takings, chaotic violence, grisly attacks on foreign aid workers, and general lawlessness. Although Aslan Maskhadov was elected president of the republic by a wide margin in January 1997, his government was overshadowed from the start by more radical elements, especially those led by Shamil’ Basaev (who had lost out to Maskhadov in the presidential election). Maskhadov was unable to clamp down on Basaev’s forces, and the power of warlords, criminal gangs, and Islamic extremist groups (including foreign terrorists) increased. With support from al Qaeda, the Islamic fundamentalists in Chechnya set up terrorist training camps to provide military instruction and political/religious indoctrination for aspiring “jihadists” from Russia, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. Islamic radicals came close to assassinating Maskhadov in 1998-1999 and prevented his government from operating effectively. Under growing pressure, Maskhadov imposed strict sharia law throughout Chechnya in February 1999, a move that was widely unpopular and that emboldened the extremists. The continued Islamicization of the republic inspired Basaev and another Islamic guerrilla, Umar Ibn al-Hattab, who was of Saudi origin and affiliated with al Qaeda, to launch several raids into Dagestan in August 1999 for the ostensible purpose of forming a Wahhabist (fundamentalist Islamic) state in the Caucasus.

The tension created by these raids and by the subsequent clashes with Russian troops was still acute when a string of five highly publicized bombings in the late summer of 1999 – at the Manezhnaya...

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6 Important aspects of these incursions are still murky, and some analysts in both Russia and the West have argued that the raids were deliberately provoked by the Russian authorities. See, for example, Charles W. Blandy, Dagestan: The Storm Part I – The “Invasion” of Avaristan (Sandhurst, UK: Conflict Studies Research Centre, March 2000); and Charles W. Blandy, Dagestan: The Storm Part 2 – The Federal Assault on the “Kadar Complex” (Sandhurst, UK: Conflict Studies Research Centre, June 2000). The evidence is suggestive but not conclusive. For an illuminating assessment of this issue, see Evangelista, The Chechen Wars, pp. 75-80.
shopping complex in central Moscow, at a military housing facility in the Dagestani town of Buinaksk, at a large apartment building in Moscow, at another apartment building in Moscow, and at an apartment building in the southern Russian city of Volgodonsk – killed nearly 300 people and wounded more than 2,000. The circumstances of these bombings were never adequately explained, but the Russian government promptly blamed them on the Chechens. The bombings and the raids into Dagestan were cited by Putin (who was then prime minister) in late September 1999 when he ordered the Russian army and internal security forces to reassert control over Chechnya using “all available means.” The fighting escalated in October-November 1999 when Russian troops moved en masse into the northern part of Chechnya and then crossed the Terek and Sunzha Rivers into the heartland around Grozny, surrounding it with major thrusts from the west, north, and east. Despite suffering heavy casualties, Russian troops gradually crushed the organized resistance and reestablished control of major towns and transport routes. By February 2000 the Russian army had taken control of Grozny, and by mid-2000 it had gained a firm presence through most of Chechnya.

The circumstances that led to the renewed fighting, and the apparent success of the first several months of Russia’s military efforts, ensured that public support for the war initially was overwhelming. The decision to resume large-scale combat operations deep inside Chechnya rather than simply rebuffing the extremists’ incursions did not mitigate this consensus. Before August 1999, a few influential Russian politicians, notably Yurii Luzhkov, had proposed granting independence to Chechnya and “walling it off” from the rest of Russia. It is questionable whether such proposals were ever realistic in light of the terrorist groups and criminal gangs that became entrenched in Chechnya in 1996-1999, but even if the proposals were worth considering prior to August 1999, they became irrelevant afterward. Following the incursions into Dagestan and the subsequent terrorist bombings in Moscow and other cities, the nearly unanimous view in Russia was that something had to be done. Putin earned public acclaim for his conduct of the war and became by far the most popular figure in the Russian government. When Boris Yeltsin suddenly resigned as president at the end of 1999, he designated Putin as his successor. Putin’s standing rose still further in February 2000 when the Chechen guerrillas were forced to abandon Grozny and take up positions further south.

7 From the time these incidents occurred, they have been the subject of immense speculation in the West and in the Russian media. A good deal of troubling evidence has emerged about the possible culpability of the Russian security forces (presumably to create a pretext for a new war), but the case is far from ironclad. A good deal of evidence has also emerged that points to the Chechens. For a summary of the main points of speculation, see Evangelista, The Chechen Wars, pp. 80-85. In hindsight it might appear that the Russian government had a lot to gain by starting a new war, but in the late summer of 1999 the possibility of suffering another fiasco (as in 1994-1996) must have weighed on the minds of policymakers. Outcomes that seem clear-cut in retrospect are often far more uncertain and ambiguous when the events are still happening.

8 See, for example, Oleg Odnokolenko, “Chechnya khochet zamenit’ Primakova El’tsinym,” Segodnya (Moscow), 15 March 1999, p. 4.
Not surprisingly, the broad consensus in Russia during the first several months of fighting precluded any discussion about the merits of the war or the expansion of Russia’s objectives. To the extent that any debate occurred during this time, it was mainly among military officers who worried that Yeltsin would not allow them to prosecute the military campaign forcefully enough to make up for the “betrayal” they believed they had suffered in 1996. By the latter half of 2000, however, the consensus about the war had begun to break down. The fighting since then has dragged on and caused further bloodshed and suffering, without any end in sight. For several years, the Russian public has been deeply skeptical about the prospects of “victory” or a lasting settlement. Nonetheless, at no point has Russia experienced a sustained public debate about the war. The reasons for this “dog that didn’t bark” will be explored in the next section.

The Absence of Public Debate

The lack of organized public protest against the latest war can be attributed to a number of factors, including widespread revulsion at the lawlessness and violent instability in Chechnya during most of its period of quasi-independence in 1996-1999, a general sense that the war was unavoidable after Basaev’s and Hattab’s incursions into Dagestan and the subsequent bombings of apartment buildings, and the contentment spawned by economic recovery in Russia since 1999. Important as these circumstances may be, another crucial factor has been the Russian government’s aggressive censorship of television coverage. During the 1994-1996 war, reports broadcast by the independent NTV station that were highly critical of official policy helped to focus public sentiment in Russia against the conflict. A senior official in the Federal Security Service (FSB), General Aleksandr Mikhailov, who played a key role in the 1994-1996 war, later wrote that the security forces had “failed to appreciate the significance of the mass media” in a country in which television and the press were no longer under state control. In Mikhailov’s view, the security forces would have to exert much greater “influence on the flow of information” during any future conflict – a lesson that Putin apparently took to heart. During Putin’s presidency, the government has reimposed stringent control of television (not least NTV) and has ensured that all coverage is compatible with official aims. When Russian news programs refer to Chechnya, they dwell solely on the invidious

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11 A May 2004 article in the respected German newspaper *Welt am Sonntag* notes that “Western intelligence services have reported that the Russian president issued a ‘topical instruction’ to all power ministries involved in foreign policy and communication. This instruction stipulates that the basic guidelines issued during the previous year remain valid. According to these guidelines, the developments in Chechnya should be referred to as infrequently as possible and, if mentioned at all, should be covered solely in positive terms. Setbacks should continue to be referred to as events ‘in
deeds of Chechen “bandits” and “terrorists.” Television stations also have broadcast dramatic series featuring the heroic exploits of Russian troops in Chechnya. Although the Russian press has been less subject to state interference, the large majority of Russian citizens receive all or most of their information from television.

Moreover, even print journalists in Russia who have tried to cover the Chechen conflict have often come under great pressure from the government, which in August 2004 closed down an “unacceptably hostile newspaper” in Ingushetiya that had been reporting on human rights abuses in Chechnya committed by Russian troops. The editor of Izvestiya, one of the main Russian daily newspapers, was forced to resign in September 2004 after his coverage of the Beslan crisis incurred Putin’s wrath. The government also has orchestrated the beating or intimidation of outspoken reporters like Andrei Babitskii and Anna Politkovskaya. During the standoff in Beslan, Russian officials physically prevented “undesirable” journalists (including Babitskii and Politkovskaya) from traveling to the site. Even if the government did not restrict access, reporters are aware that a visit to Chechnya would place them in constant danger from rebel forces and criminal gangs. Because the risk of being kidnapped (or worse) is ever present, many Russian journalists who filed stories from Chechnya in 1994-1996 have been wary of traveling there during the current war. As a result, newspaper coverage often has to rely mainly on information provided by Russian military commanders and representatives from the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD). The combination of these factors has allowed the Russian government to mold public perceptions of the conflict.

Another key reason for the lack of organized protest against the war is Putin’s success in undermining opposition parties and political competition in Russia. Even before Putin came to power, the party structure in Russia was largely stillborn. (It is telling, for example, that neither Yeltsin nor Putin ever deigned to join a party.) Very few of the entities in Russia that called themselves “political parties” actually deserved that appellation in any meaningful sense. Despite this constraint, some of the strongest
criticism of the first Chechen war came from opposition party leaders in the Russian parliament and from Yeltsin’s rivals in the 1996 presidential election. Over the past five years, however, Putin has brought the parliament under his de facto control and has used his high popularity ratings and leverage with the media (especially television) to eviscerate the two parties that espoused Western-style liberal democracy. He also has increasingly marginalized the Russian Communist Party (which, despite its Soviet origins, became critical of the wars in Chechnya) and all other political organizations that posed even the slightest challenge to his own power.

As a result, the continuing bloodshed in Chechnya almost never has come onto the political agenda. Only one of Putin’s rivals in the 2004 Russian presidential campaign, Ivan Rybkin (who eventually had to drop out of the race after a bizarre and unexplained disappearance for several days), dared to raise the matter at all, and he was quickly forced to drop it after coming under vehement attack from Putin’s spokesman and aides, who alleged that “the key accusation of presidential candidate Ivan Rybkin is that Putin has not finished off the war in Chechnya, that terrorism has not been subdued, and that it is necessary to consider negotiations. . . . The terrorists have responded to [Rybkin’s] proposal with the [February 2004] bombing of the Moscow subway.”

The shock of the Beslan massacre briefly elevated the Russian-Chechen conflict onto the agenda, in part because most Russians linked the incident directly with the war and implicitly rejected Putin’s claim that the attack was masterminded by “international terrorism.” Still, this fleeting period of heightened interest proved to be an aberration. Both before and after the Beslan crisis, Putin and his supporters angrily dismissed any criticism of the government’s policy in Chechnya, arguing that the president’s rivals were “cynically exploiting the deaths of innocent people” for political gain: “They may have stopped romanticizing the bandits, but they are now busy chiding our servicemen for supposedly fighting on behalf of unjust aims for ‘someone else’s money.’ This demoralizes the army and inevitably leads to further loss of life.”

By implying that any criticism of the Chechen conflict was tantamount to abetting terrorism, the government helped forestall a broader public debate about the merits of the war.

Putin’s success in controlling television news coverage and in undermining the political opposition has been reinforced by his systematic effort to prevent non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Russia

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17 Levada-Tsentr, Moskvichi o sobytiyakh v Beslane (Moscow: ATsYuL, September 2004), p. 1; Kolesnichenko, “Ustupki terroristam,” p. 3; and “Reiting Putina upal do rekordnogo urovnya za poslednie 4 goda,” p. 2.

from focusing public attention on Chechnya. When the head of the Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers, Valentina Mel’nikova, tried to meet with exiled Chechen officials in Western Europe in 2004 and early 2005 to discuss possible ways of settling the conflict, Russian leaders did their best to thwart the endeavor, urging the Belgian and British governments to deny visas to the participants. Consequently, talks that were scheduled to be held in Brussels in November 2004 had to be cancelled. When a meeting was finally arranged in London in late February 2005 between Mel’nikova and the Chechen envoy in Britain, Akhmed Zakaev, the Russian authorities dismissed it as “a purely propagandistic move devoid of content” and an “immoral and cynical ploy by supporters of terrorist groups.” Russian officials denounced the Soldiers’ Mothers as “representing no one in Russia” and accused Mel’nikova of “carrying out the orders of certain financial groups that provide backing for worldwide terrorist organizations.” The Russian Federal Tax Inspectorate promptly announced that it was launching an investigation of Soldiers’ Mothers and ordered Mel’nikova to appear before a board of inquiry to explain the sources and allotment of her organization’s funding.

Similarly, the Russian government has repeatedly pressured the human rights group Memorial, one of the few NGOs still operating in Chechnya, to cease its efforts to document human rights abuses committed by Russian forces. The head of the Grozny branch of Memorial, Lidiya Yusupova, who won a prestigious human rights award from the Norwegian Rafto Foundation in September 2005 for her work in Chechnya, has, according to her associates, “come under relentless pressure from the federal authorities and the [pro-Moscow] Chechen security organs, who are intent on covering up their own unlawful actions against the civilian population.” In June 2005 the Russian government’s official human rights envoy in Chechnya, who supposedly is responsible for monitoring abuses by all sides, vowed that he would “have no contact with Memorial” and accused the organization of being “preoccupied with its goal of receiving bribes from Western organs” and of being “guided by the philosophy that ‘the worse it is in Chechnya, the better it is for Memorial.’” Soon thereafter, vandals attacked the offices of Memorial researchers who had been compiling evidence of the systematic use of torture by Russian troops and by pro-Moscow Chechen.

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22 Memorial also thoroughly tabulates human rights abuses committed by Chechen guerrillas and by the pro-Moscow Chechen government.
security forces. The attack was widely thought to have been instigated (or at least condoned) by the federal authorities.25

Subsequently, in September 2005, the Russian government forced the closure of the Russian-Chechen Friendship Society, a human rights organization that had long been targeted by the FSB and other federal agencies. Because the group had received funding from the National Endowment for Democracy and other U.S. and West European grant-making foundations, the Russian authorities accused it of using “grants from abroad” to promote “the interests of Chechen extremists” and to “foment ethnic hatred.”26 (The initial charge of “abetting terrorism” was shifted to the lesser but still serious charge of “inciting ethnic hatred.” Spurious charges of tax evasion were also filed.) The head of the Russian-Chechen Friendship Society, Stanislav Dmitrievskii, argued that the federal authorities, in suppressing his organization, were aiming “to send a message to others [who might try to find out what was going on in Chechnya]. The government started the criminal case and the tax claims to show others what can happen to them.”27

The government’s clampdown on television, on the political opposition, and on human rights NGOs has kept the Chechen war almost entirely out of the public limelight and has stymied attempts to encourage a genuine debate. Official efforts in this regard have both contributed to and been facilitated by the fatalism and ambivalence that have characterized Russian public sentiment about the war since 2000. Chechen terrorist attacks against “soft” targets in Russia, including many suicide bombings in Moscow, have had surprisingly little long-term impact on public opinion. The apartment bombings in 1999 that were blamed (rightly or wrongly) on the Chechens initially hardened public resolve and generated widespread support for the reintroduction of Russian troops into Chechnya, but public support ebbed steadily from early 2000 on. Similarly, the Dubrovka theater crisis in October 2002 led to a sharp increase in the number of Russians who opposed any “concessions to terrorists” and who wanted a tougher line vis-à-vis Chechnya, but these sentiments were coupled with deep ambivalence about the government’s conduct of the war.28


28 See the surveys from September, late October, November, and December 2002 in Vserossiiskii tsentr izucheniya obschestvennogo mneniya, Obshchestvennoe mnenie 2002 (Moscow: VTsIOM, 2003), pp. 145, 147, 153, 161. See also Igor’ Khlebnikov, “Terrorizm i kontrterroristicheskie operatsii v zerkale obschestvennogo mneniya,” Dialog-OD (Moscow), No. 7 (July 2003), p. 21.
The subsequent string of Chechen suicide bombings and other attacks against “soft” targets in Russia had mixed and sometimes contradictory effects on Russian public opinion. The deadly terrorist incidents in Moscow in 2003 and early 2004 tended to cause a significant but fugacious hardening of public sentiment, giving way to a fatalistic sense that the war in Chechnya would “drag out interminably” and that further attacks on civilians were “inevitable” regardless of what the Russian authorities did.29 Although a few polls in the first half of 2004 indicated that a majority of respondents favored “peace negotiations” – a finding contradicted by other polls – almost no one who espoused this view was able to specify the parties with whom such negotiations should be held.30 The one consistent aspect of the polls in 2003 and 2004 was that very few Russians believed that a “major escalation of Russia’s military effort” in Chechnya would either end the war or diminish the risk of terrorism.31 The spate of attacks in Moscow in August 2004 that preceded the Beslan tragedy sparked increased public hostility toward Chechens (a sentiment that was already strong) and a desire to crack down on the separatists, but the polls also revealed a continued streak of fatalism and a lack of any consensus about what, if anything, could be done to prevent further atrocities.32

Even the Beslan crisis, vivid as it was, had only an ephemeral impact on popular opinion. Public recriminations against the local and regional security forces and governments, and to some extent against the central authorities, spurred Putin to replace several high-ranking personnel in North Ossetiya and other parts of the North Caucasus, but he declined to remove top officials in the central organs of the FSB and MVD. Although opinion polls showed that most Russians wanted the president to fire the FSB chairman and the minister of internal affairs, Putin’s refusal to do so did not result in any erosion of his political standing. Indeed, he was able to use the crisis as a pretext for introducing changes in the Russian political

29 This is evident in many of the surveys conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation (Fond Obshchestvennogo mnения, or FOM) in recent years. See, for example, FOM, Situatsiya v Chechne: Opros naseleniya, 09.09.2004 (Moscow: FOM, September 2004); FOM, Na Yuzhnom fronte bez peremen: Opros naseleniya, 20.5.2004 (Moscow: FOM, May 2004); and FOM, Vzryv v moskovskom metro: Opros naseleniya, 19.2.2004 (Moscow: FOM, February 2004). See also Nikolai Popov, “Oprosy i otvety: V ozhidanii terakta,” Novoe vremya (Moscow), No. 37 (12 September 2004), p. 11.


31 Analiticheskii Tsentr Yuriya Levady (ATsYuL), Kak pokonchit’ s terrorizmom v Rossii?: Statistika oprosa, 10-13 sentyabrya 2004 goda (Moscow: ATsYuL, September 2004). See also the interview with Yuriy Levada in Gudkov, “Obshchestvennoe mnienie,” p. 3.

system that greatly strengthened his own power, ostensibly so that he could wage a more effective fight against “international terrorism,” which he blamed for the Beslan massacre. Even though opinion polls revealed that many Russians disagreed with Putin’s proposals, he encountered little difficulty in pushing the measures through parliament. Opinion polls also revealed that, regardless of what Putin or other officials promised to do, a large majority of Russians were “certain” that Chechen terrorists would strike again.33

The Russian public remained deeply ambivalent about Chechnya in 2005. Polls in March, June, and August 2005 showed that roughly 80 percent of Russians believed that “the war will drag out indefinitely” and that Chechnya “will continue to be an acute source of tension and violent conflict in Russia for decades to come.”34 Although the polls indicated that a substantial majority of Russians (up to 61 percent) once again favored “peace negotiations,” very few of those who supported such talks believed that a lasting settlement would actually materialize. Moreover, the majority of Russians were convinced that even if negotiations were started and Russian troops were pulled out of the region, Russia was “doomed to suffer further terrorist attacks organized by Chechen fighters.”35 Only a small number of Russians were confident that “the Russian authorities will be able to protect the population against new terrorist acts.” Even fewer believed there were “any steps citizens can take themselves to guard against the threat of terrorism.”36

The impact of Chechen terrorism on the Russian government has been much more clear-cut. Far from inducing (or compelling) the Russian authorities to embark on peace negotiations, the terrorist incidents in 2003 and 2004 reinforced Putin’s determination to “wipe out all terrorist scum, no matter where they are.” By the same token, the Chechens’ adoption of rhetoric and tactics (notably suicide bombings) that have been the hallmark of terrorists linked with al Qaeda has made it far easier for Putin to depict the war in Chechnya as an integral part of the global struggle against international terrorism. The Chechen terrorists who seized the Dubrovka theater sent a pre-recorded video to al-Jazeera (the Qatar-based television station favored by al Qaeda) showing the female captors wearing Islamic chadors in front of a banner inscribed with the Arabic words “Allahu akhbar” (God is great). Throughout the video the captors used al Qaeda-like rhetoric, including the slogan (borrowed word for word from Osama bin Laden)


34 See, for example, Levada-tsentr, Chechnya posle A. Maskhadova, pp. 1, 2; and VTsIOM, Bor’ba s terrorizmom, pp. 1, 2.

35 VTsIOM, Bor’ba s terrorizmom, p. 2.

36 Ibid., pp. 2, 3.
that “we yearn for death even more than you yearn for life.” The Dubrovka terrorists’ conspicuous emulation of al Qaeda in the video provided an enormous fillip to the Russian government’s efforts to discredit the entire armed resistance in Chechnya, and the shocking brutality of the hostage-takers in Beslan (who also used phrases redolent of al Qaeda) reinforced those efforts. Putin and other Russian leaders now regularly claim that the goals of the Chechen rebels and al Qaeda are “absolutely identical” and that the Chechens “have been receiving tens of millions of dollars from abroad for the training of suicide terrorists.” Although these assertions are self-serving and exaggerated, there is no doubt that some of the leading Chechen fighters do have links with al Qaeda and that foreign (mostly Arab) terrorists have taken part in guerrilla operations and terrorist attacks in Chechnya. The foreigners’ presence may not be crucial for the war effort, but it has deepened the Russian public’s ambivalence about the war and the prospects for peace.

The fatalism evident in opinion polls has worked to Putin’s advantage thus far, but if the war remains deadlocked, the public mood could eventually turn more restive. If, as most Russians fear, further spectacular terrorist incidents occur in Russia, the failure to achieve a long-promised “victory” could eventually erode public support for Putin. Polls in recent years, both before and after the Beslan massacre, showed that 80-85 percent of Russians believed that “developments in Chechnya” could eventually have a “negative effect” on the president’s popularity. Although Putin’s approval ratings over the past few years have remained extraordinarily high (close to 80 percent as of September 2005) despite the ongoing conflict in Chechnya, the support he enjoys has been largely attributable to Russia’s brisk economic growth, which has been driven mainly by the surge of revenues from energy exports. If world prices for oil and natural gas were to decline significantly over a prolonged period, Russia’s economic fortunes would undoubtedly suffer, and the stalemate in Chechnya could become far more of a source of recriminations and debate. The anger and resentment that many residents of Beslan continue to feel toward Putin, whom they accuse of trying to whitewash the September 2004 tragedy, portend what could await the Russian president on a larger scale if devastating terrorist incidents occur elsewhere in Russia or if the war ignites wider regional turmoil.

Up to now, the main political fallout from the Chechen conflict has been the sharp drop in public confidence in the Russian security forces and police. Opinion polls from late 2002 through 2005 revealed enormous discontent with the FSB and, even more, with the MVD. When asked “who was to blame” for


38 See, for example, ATsYuL, Moskvichi o sobytiyakh v Beslane: Rezul’taty blits-oprosa, provedennogo s 7 po 8 sentyabrya 2004 goda (Moscow: ATsYuL, September 2004); and FOM, Situatsiya v Chechnye i gibel’ Akhmad Kadyrova: Opros naseleniya (Moscow: FOM, May 2004).
specific terrorist attacks, a substantial majority of Russians were wont to lay the primary onus on the security agencies rather than on the terrorists themselves. The polls showed that the public is deeply concerned about corruption and incompetence in the MVD and FSB that have created opportunities for terrorists. Widespread dissatisfaction with the negative performance of the security forces has even begun to have broader political implications. Many Russians now doubt that the government can keep the country safe, and they also increasingly suspect that the authorities are covering up the full magnitude of the terrorist threat. These doubts could spark a political backlash if rapid economic growth in Russia cannot be sustained.

Regionalization of the War: The Political Implications

Over the past few years the various forms of warfare in Chechnya – guerrilla operations against Russian forces, suicide bombings and assassinations directed against the pro-Russian Chechen government, and terrorist attacks against civilians – have spread increasingly to other parts of the North Caucasus. The neighboring republic of Dagestan has been plagued by daily guerrilla ambushes, bombings, political assassinations, and other terrorist attacks, most of which are linked in one way or another to the Chechen war. So many high-ranking Dagestani officials have been killed that the republic government has often been unable to function properly. Chechen fighters also have repeatedly bombed police patrols, police stations, and state security units in Dagestan – attacks that occurred so frequently in 2004 and 2005 that they prompted local officials to “doubt that the law enforcement organs are capable of restoring order.” Other Chechen rebel attacks have been targeted against key facilities and infrastructure in Dagestan, including state-controlled oil and gas pipelines. The bombing of pipelines near the Dagestani capital, Makhachkala, in April 2004 forced the cessation of all energy deliveries to and from Azerbaijan for several days.


41 ATsYuL, Otsenka deistvii vlastei v Beslane: Statisticheskii otchet oprosa, 10-13 sentyabrya 2004 goda (Moscow: ATsYuL, September 2004); ATsYuL, Sposobna li vlast’ kontrolirovat’ situatsiyu na Kavkaze? Statisticheskii otchet oprosa, 10-13 sentyabrya 2004 goda (Moscow: ATsYuL, September 2004); and Vladimir Padein, “Rossiya posle Beslana: Grazhdane v obratnom perevode,” Moskovskie novosti (Moscow), No. 34 (19 September 2004), p. 7.


43 See “Khronika pokushenii na vidnykh gosudarstvennykh i obshchestvennykh deyatelei Dagestana,” Nezavisimaya gazeta (Moscow), 28 August 2003, p. 4.


45 Roman Kirillov, “Gazoprovod i nefteprovod v Dagestane vzorvali diversanty,” Izvestiya (Moscow), 5 April 2004, p. 5; and Sergei Rasulov, “Podryv: Masshtabnaya diversiya na dagestanskikh truboprovodakh,” Gazeta (Moscow), 5
Chechen guerrillas have been even more active in Ingushetiya, which many Russian commentators say has “been converted into a full-fledged base for Chechen guerrillas, enabling them to undertake repeated combat incursions and to plan and prepare terrorist acts.” The president of Ingushetiya, Murat Zyazikov, has been the target of numerous assassination attempts, the first of which occurred in September 2003 when Chechen guerrillas planted a large explosive made of mortars and artillery shells near his official residence. Russian bomb-disposal experts were able to neutralize the device before it went off. In April 2004, Zyazikov barely escaped death when a Chechen suicide bomber drove a car alongside the presidential motorcade and detonated it, causing extensive damage to vehicles in the motorcade as well as to surrounding houses. The heavy armored plating on Zyazikov’s Mercedes limousine was the only thing that saved him. A further surge of violence in Ingushetiya in the spring and summer of 2004 bore out the misgivings of two Russian observers who had warned in late 2003 that the fighting in Chechnya was bound to “infect” other regions:

It now seems clear that members of the illegal armed formations can move wherever they want in the North Caucasus without any special problem. One gets the impression that it is not the police who are tracking down the guerrillas, but the guerrillas who have declared open hunting season on the law enforcement organs. . . . The danger is that the federal government, having sent all its forces to hold on to Chechnya, has “lost” control over the other Caucasus regions. And the guerrillas have been quick to exploit this situation. The epidemic of terror is spreading to the whole of the North Caucasus.

During the first few years of the latest Russian-Chechen war, many parts of the North Caucasus were largely immune to the violence that plagued Chechnya, but the situation by 2005 had become far more volatile. Suicide attacks against official targets (Russian forces, local police, administrative buildings, etc.) had spread not only to Ingushetiya and Dagestan, but also to North Ossetiya, Karachaevo-Cherkessiya, Kabardino-Balkariya, and other regions, all of which were included by Shamil’ Basaev in his newly “widened zones of combat operations.” No matter where Russian troops and government officials
were located, they were vulnerable to suicide bombings and other deadly strikes. Terrorist attacks against civilian targets also have spread through the North Caucasus, most vividly with the Beslan massacre in September 2004. According to official data, more than 600 terrorist attacks occurred annually in the region in 2003-2005.50

These attacks, combined with the widespread corruption, governmental malfeasance, religious extremism, unemployment, and ethnic tension in the North Caucasus, prompted Putin’s special envoy, Dmitrii Kozak, to warn in mid-2005 that the whole region was threatened by “permanent destabilization.” In a lengthy report to Putin and the Russian parliament, Kozak argued that the North Caucasus and adjoining parts of southern Russia (Stavropol Krai) had become a “macro-region of sociopolitical and economic instability” that could “unravel” unless the federal authorities took drastic remedial action.51 But Kozak’s report left little hope that the trend toward destabilization could be arrested so long as the fighting in Chechnya continued. Although the Russian-Chechen war is by no means the only source of the grave problems in the North Caucasus, it has been a catalyst for a number of recent phenomena that have greatly increased the volatility of the region: the ascendance of Islamic extremist elements in Ingushetia (notably the Majlas al-Shura group, which has declared a “jihad” against the Russian government), the rise of other radical groups in Kabardino-Balkariya and Karachaevo-Cherkessiya, the growing frictions between the Ingush and the North Ossetiyans (frictions that were sorely tested by the Beslan crisis, which involved Ingush as well as Chechen hostage-takers), and the long-simmering ethnic and religious tensions in Dagestan.52 The Ingush-North Ossetiyans tensions have been especially worrisome, causing many observers to predict that deadly battles between the two groups, as in 1992 when hundreds were killed and tens of thousands were displaced, are apt to recur. The potential for armed strife both in this case and elsewhere in the North Caucasus, has clearly been exacerbated by the surge of Islamic extremism fueled by the Chechen conflict.

If other parts of the North Caucasus (and possibly the southern Caucasus) continue to be drawn into the Chechen conflict, attempts to end the fighting and to resolve the status of Chechnya may face even greater obstacles than before. One of the main reasons that the Russian government has always been so averse to considering independence for Chechnya is what might be called the “slippery slope” argument.

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50 Kozak’s report, which has not been published in full, was first excerpted in Aleksandr Khinshtein, “Prodaem Kavkaz – torg umesten: Sensatsionnyi doklad Dmitriya Kozaka,” Moskovskii komsomolets (Moscow), 16 June 2005, pp. 1, 4. Many subsequent items in the press and in specialized publications have added further details about Kozak’s report.

According to this scenario, the granting of independence to Chechnya would spur other titular nationalities in Russia to follow Chechnya’s example. The resulting demands for independence, the argument goes, would cause the whole country to unravel. This same logic was cited by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev when he consistently opposed granting independence to the Baltic states. The subsequent disintegration of the USSR did not directly vindicate his concerns, but it suggests that they may not have been wholly unfounded.

After the Soviet Union broke apart, some observers initially speculated that the Russian Federation was likely to meet a similar fate. Although this prospect seemed much less plausible after Yeltsin forced a showdown with the Russian parliament in September-October 1993 that ended with the bombardment of the Russian White House, the possibility of touching off a chain reaction of demands for independence weighed on the minds of Russian policymakers in the 1990s when they were deciding what to do about Chechnya. The federal government’s opposition to Chechen independence became even stronger after the rise of Putin, who displayed a visceral unwillingness to consider any steps that would “reward separatists and extremists.”

Although Russian leaders have feared that the granting of independence to Chechnya would embolden other separatist groups in the Russian Federation and initiate a chain reaction, many experts have questioned whether these concerns about a “demonstration effect” are well-founded. Analysts both inside and outside Russia have argued that in fact Chechnya is a unique case and that far-reaching autonomy or even outright independence for the republic would not spark the disintegration of the Russian state. The settlement of the war, they contend, would actually strengthen the state, not weaken it, by eliminating a pernicious source of instability. No other region of Russia, according to these analysts, shares Chechnya’s single-minded determination to achieve full independence at any cost, and none would want to risk incurring the destruction and upheaval that had been inflicted on Chechnya. Although some regions might pursue a special status akin to that of Tatarstan or Sakha, they all would be inclined to remain part of the Russian Federation. This basic reasoning seems to have persuaded Yurii Luzhkov and other politicians who, prior to August 1999, argued that Russia would be more cohesive in the long term if it simply got rid of Chechnya.

These arguments seemed convincing so long as there was no palpable danger that separatist and extremist groups in Chechnya were inspiring the rise of similar groups elsewhere in Russia, either directly

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53 See, for example, Douglas W. Blum, ed., Russia’s Future: Consolidation or Disintegration? (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1994). Most contributors to the book believed that disintegration was likely and even imminent.

54 This is the argument made in Emil A. Payin, “Ethnic Separatism,” in Jeremy R. Azrael and Emil A. Payin, eds., Conflict and Consensus in Ethno-Political and Center-Periphery Relations in Russia, CF-139-CRES (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1998), pp. 15-44.

55 Evangelista, The Chechen Wars, pp. 86-123.
or indirectly. The regionalization of the Chechen conflict over the past few years raises serious doubts about the possibility of devising a political settlement for Chechnya in two respects: first, by making it all the more difficult to confine the war to Chechnya itself; and second, by heightening the risk that a settlement in Chechnya would have adverse repercussions in other parts of the North Caucasus, perhaps triggering the chain reaction that Russia leaders have long feared (or claimed to fear). In this sense, the government’s war effort has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The risk of “contagion” would probably have been minuscule if no war had occurred and if the final-status negotiations projected for 2001 had resulted in a political settlement. The likelihood of contagion might also have been meager if a political settlement had been achieved during the first few years of the war, before the onset of the Chechen terrorist campaign. (With Putin’s consent, discussions between Russian and Chechen representatives about the possibility of holding formal peace talks did in fact occur behind the scenes in October 2001 and September 2002.56) But the spread of violence and instability throughout the North Caucasus increases the danger that a settlement in Chechnya, especially an arrangement similar to what Luzhkov apparently had in mind, would spur radical separatist movements elsewhere in the region to demand the same status for their own republics and to step up their attacks in order to exploit the Russian government’s perceived weakness and vulnerability.

To be sure, there would have been enormous difficulty in achieving a lasting settlement either before or particularly after the latest war began. A deal that did not leave open the possibility of eventual independence would have been summarily rejected by Basaev and other extremist leaders, who are responsible for the terrorist attacks and the bulk of the guerrilla operations. But even if the Islamic radicals could not have been brought on board, a settlement with Maskhadov’s government might well have led to a sharp diminution of the conflict and, over time, to the isolation of the extremists. This is not to suggest that there was definitely a “missed opportunity” early in the war. The obstacles to achieving and enforcing a viable settlement would have been daunting, to say the least. But the point to be stressed here is that the regionalization of the war makes it all the less likely that the fighting can be ended through a political settlement. The risk that a meaningful settlement in Chechnya (i.e., a settlement that did not flatly rule out eventual independence) would embolden radical separatist groups elsewhere is far more plausible now than it was before 2003.

This factor is by no means the only development in recent years that has militated against the prospect of a settlement. The animosity created by the long series of Chechen terrorist attacks from October 2002 on has drastically changed the calculus in Moscow. Putin is now so adamantly opposed to having any contact with Chechen leaders other than those in the pro-Moscow government that it is

inconceivable he will condone even limited diplomatic overtures like those in October 2001 and September 2002, much less that he will agree to a far-reaching settlement. The ascendance of a more radical Chechen government-in-exile in the wake of Maskhadov’s assassination in March 2005 – a government that has formally brought Basaev and another Chechen terrorist leader, Movladi Udugov, back into its ranks as deputy prime minister and minister of information, respectively – also bodes ill for any attempt the Russian government might make to establish contact with Chechen leaders. These circumstances weigh heavily against the likelihood that the Chechen conflict can be ended through negotiations. The spread of the conflict to other parts of the North Caucasus reinforces this dismal picture. Even if a meaningful settlement for Chechnya could have been achieved in earlier years without an appreciable danger of sparking demands for independence elsewhere in Russia, the situation has changed markedly for the worse. What might once have seemed a remote possibility now seems – at least from the perspective of Russian policymakers – all too plausible.

Conclusions

By highlighting two key aspects of the domestic political context of the Chechen war, this paper has offered a gloomy assessment of the current state of democratization in Russia and the extent to which the Chechen conflict has impeded greater movement toward a liberal democratic polity. Four points, in particular, are worth emphasizing.

First, civil wars and separatist conflicts are, by their nature, almost always inimical to democratization. The situation in Russia in this regard is no exception. Even in India, a country that has maintained a liberal democratic system during its nearly six decades of independence (aside from the brief period of martial law under Indira Gahdhi in the 1970s), the separatist insurgencies in Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab, and Assam have been detrimental to civil liberties, to political debate, and to the control of religious and nationalist extremism. In Russia, progress toward liberal democracy under Yeltsin never advanced as far as in India, and under Putin the polity has shifted back in a more authoritarian direction. The Chechen war has been both a symptom of and a contributor to Putin’s clampdown on institutions that are essential in a genuine democracy – free media, political parties, political opposition, and NGOs. The war also was the pretext for Putin’s decision to abolish elections for regional governors and to establish a new system of allocating seats in the Russian parliament that bolsters his control at the expense of electoral accountability.

Second, the first of the two trends discussed here – the lack of public debate in Russia about the


58 Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Georgia are among other recent examples of former authoritarian states whose progress in democratization has been hindered by separatist conflicts.
latest Chechen war – has contributed to the second trend, namely, the growing regionalization of the conflict. In the absence of any sustained public discussion about the merits of the war, the Russian government has stuck with policies that have resulted in a protracted and costly stalemate and in the spread of violent instability to other parts of the North Caucasus. Admittedly, a better outcome may not have been feasible in light of the circumstances that led to the start of the war. The prolongation of the conflict has depended as much on Chechen rebel actions as on policies devised in Moscow. Nonetheless, a public debate might have yielded fruitful ideas about a different approach or generated pressure on the government to try something else. Public pressure is not a guarantee of sound policymaking, but in some instances government officials will benefit if they are compelled to take certain risks that they ordinarily would avoid.

Third, the government’s efforts to stifle any debate about the war have been facilitated by the ambivalence and fatalism of public opinion. Putin has adopted a number of important measures to control the “supply” of public discussion, but his efforts in this regard would have been vastly more difficult if he had encountered a much greater degree of public “demand.” Despite the obvious costs of the war for the average citizen – in the form of terrorist attacks (suicide bombings, mass hostage-takings, etc.) against civilians, higher taxes, the deaths of Russian soldiers and police, and infringements on civil liberties – the public has been remarkably quiescent and has rarely sought a “voice” in policymaking vis-à-vis Chechnya. If Russian voters had insisted on holding their elected leaders accountable for the war during the 2003 and 2004 elections, Putin and his advisers would have had little choice but to take part in a public debate about Chechnya, no matter how unwillingly. Unless there is sufficient “demand” from the electorate, government officials naturally are loath to justify controversial policies. Democratic accountability is a two-way street, and unless the public takes an active role, policymakers will be able to shield their actions from meaningful scrutiny.59

Fourth, if, as argued here, the spread of violent instability throughout the North Caucasus is apt to reduce the already dim prospects for a lasting settlement of the Chechen war, the most auspicious time for public input into policymaking vis-à-vis Chechnya may already be past. Options that might have been feasible in earlier years are now, or soon will be, foreclosed. The narrowing of policy choices has prompted one of the leading Russian experts on ethnic conflicts, Dmitrii Oreshkin, to predict a dismal future for Russia’s policy in the North Caucasus:

Post-Soviet Russia is afflicted by the remnants of a pseudo-imperial consciousness. There is a great desire to control territory, even though it is not clear why or how or for what purpose. Letting go of the North Caucasus is impossible because it would mean a loss of

face. Holding on to it through Stalinist methods is also impossible, although the
temptation is great. The government is suffering from a split personality even more than
the society is.\textsuperscript{60}

To the extent that the regionalization of the war means that any potential settlement will entail significantly
greater risks than before, the outlook may be even bleaker than Oreshkin suggests. In an interview in
August 2005, the erstwhile presidential candidate and speaker of the Russian State Duma, Ivan Rybkin, still
held out hope that a durable settlement could be negotiated, but he conceded that the lingering window of
opportunity would close if turmoil continued to widen: “The crisis has spread like wildfire through
Chechnya and beyond its borders. The conflagration has reached Dagestan and Ingushetiya and is still
spreading.”\textsuperscript{61} He warned that further bloodshed would sow even more “seeds of enmity . . . that will yield
evil and venomous shoots.” Because it is highly unlikely that Putin will heed Rybkin’s call for a large-

scale commitment of diplomatic and economic resources to “resolve and untangle the knots of bleeding
problems both within Chechnya and across the North Caucasus,” the ongoing destabilization of the region
will be an ever more onerous – and perhaps ultimately fatal – burden on the process of democratization in
Russia.

\textsuperscript{60} Dmitrii Oreshkin, “Poslednii boets imperii: Dmitrii Kozak predlagaet uchredit’ finansovyi kontrol’ za

\textsuperscript{61} “Russia: Ivan Rybkin Discusses Prospects for Peace in Chechnya,” RFE/RL North Caucasus Service, Interview