

Western Policy on Chechnya: Rationalizing Relations with Russia?

Ekaterina Stepanova
December 1999
PONARS Policy Memo 100
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Since Russia launched its "anti-terrorist campaign" in Chechnya in the fall of 1999, the West has stepped up criticism of Moscow's actions in the North Caucasus. While recognizing the lack of credible information from the conflict zone, the United States and its European allies continue to express growing concern about the level of civilian casualties and the number of refugees in Chechnya and neighboring regions. In this context, the OSCE Istanbul summit in November 1999--formally convened to sign the European Charter and the adapted CFE Treaty--provided a timely opportunity for the West to emphasize the international ramifications of Russia's operation in Chechnya. However, if Western countries hoped to pressure Russia into seriously reviewing its Chechen policy by making it the dominant theme at the Istanbul summit, the idea was doomed from the very beginning. It was clear that Russia would resist any outside interference in Chechnya, including advice from the United States. Aside from advice, the West had limited options and leverage with regard to Russia's policy in the breakaway republic.

The prospects for a full-scale internationalization of the conflict in Chechnya are drastically limited by a number of factors, with Russia's nuclear power status alone serving as a powerful deterrent. To put it bluntly, the option of outside military intervention under the pretext of averting a "humanitarian crisis" in Chechnya is in principle ruled out. As President Clinton's National Security Advisor Sandy Berger stated, "it is certainly not anybody's intention to intervene in a military way in the situation in Chechnya, which is part of the Russian Federation."

Western Policy on Chechnya

While direct military pressure is out of the question, the potential cutoff of Western credits and assistance, such as International Monetary Fund loans, remains the most powerful instrument at the disposal of the West. Following the Istanbul summit, Western threats to reassess its modest economic support for the Yeltsin government have become more substantial. The direct IMF-Chechnya link made by IMF outgoing managing director Michel Camdessus has once again highlighted the Fund's role as a political instrument of the West. At the same time, it has more than ever demonstrated that Washington and Western allies have an increasingly sparse tool chest for persuading Russia to halt its operations in Chechnya. By threatening to take financial sanctions against Russia, the West has played its main and probably last trump card. In fact, Russia

has been put in a situation where it has no choice: any concession on its part now would mean having to give in to Western financial blackmail every time there is disagreement between itself and the West. Amid increased consensus inside Russia in favor of "breaking free" from the IMF and with growing skepticism outside Russia about the IMF's enhanced role, the IMF-Chechnya link could be seen as a test of options and nerves preceding the potential scaling back of the Fund's activities in Russia and elsewhere.

The fact that the Western campaign over the "Chechen case" was a non-starter in terms of achieving any serious policy shift in Moscow was also demonstrated by an unusual "division of labor" between Western powers--both at the summit and afterwards. While in Istanbul, President Clinton sounded more conciliatory and refrained from strong criticism, and European leaders were unexpectedly hawkish. Following the summit, leaders of France and Germany continued to make strong statements about Russia's "non-compliance" with OSCE terms while US officials tied "terrorist No. 1" Osama bin Laden to a series of bombings in Russian cities. Normally, this reversal of roles (the US as "good cop" and Europe as "bad cop") occurs only when the stakes are low and it is universally believed that the problem at hand will not require serious efforts in terms of political resolve and/or military intervention. Otherwise, the United States would inevitably have to take the lead. As for Russia, its post-Kosovo view of European political resolve and security capacities was aptly demonstrated by the five minutes that Yeltsin accorded to both French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder in Istanbul.

Summit Strategies

It is logical to suggest that perhaps the United States and its European allies did not actually expect Russia to make serious concessions on Chechnya at the summit or afterwards. Attracting excessive attention to the Chechnya conflict in Istanbul gave the West more space for political maneuvering on other issues.

By focusing on Chechnya in Istanbul, those OSCE countries which are also NATO members avoided certain issues, far more unpleasant and problematic for the West, that would otherwise become the focal point of the discussions--i.e., the collapse of the peace process in Kosovo (which is rapidly turning into a semi-independent, ethnically clean mini-state). Russia, for its part, may benefit from a conspicuous lack of attention to the situation in Belarus and the prospects of Russian-Belarus Union. If, for instance, Lukashenko were not invited to Istanbul, Moscow would face far more serious problems--putting the very attendance of the Russian delegation under question.

Pressuring Russia on Chechnya helped the US to create a more favorable political and diplomatic climate for implementing other strategic initiatives, such as engineering the accord on a Caspian oil pipeline that Russia would not be able to control. In the aftermath of the summit, the US also hinted at what it expects in return for its restrained position on Chechnya by "leaking" that Russia itself has suggested behind the scenes it might support

a weapons inspection system for Iraq, if Washington gave Moscow a free hand in Chechnya (a trade-off publicly dismissed by Russian officials).

In the end, both sides got their own way at the summit. Russia has recognized "the need to respect the OSCE norms" with regard to what was termed as "the recent chain of events in the North Caucasus" and the need to alleviate the hardships of the civilian population by "creating appropriate conditions for international organizations to provide humanitarian aid." Moscow has also welcomed "the willingness of the OSCE to assist in the renewal of a political dialogue"--a formula far short of the West's demands. It should be noted that, except for purely humanitarian concerns, all other references to Chechnya in the text of the Istanbul summit declaration were worded in a very general manner that allowed Russia to view these demands as non-binding and the West to continue pressuring Moscow on Chechnya. In any case, whatever OSCE role is agreed, it will be, according to Norwegian Foreign Minister Knut Vollebeck, "totally dependent on Russian cooperation." Moscow did not hesitate to make this clear through its harsh reaction to the OSCE's attempts to communicate separately with the Chechen rebels and to play a mediating role. The West, for its part, had to "condemn terrorism in all its forms" while fully acknowledging the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation.

Relations between Russia and the West

Among other things, the Istanbul summit has made even clearer than the dispute over Kosovo that:

- unlike during the early and mid-1990s and in striking contrast to the previous Chechen campaign of 1994-96, Russia and the West are operating in different information environments;
- partly as an outcome of this, general domestic opinion in Russia and the Western countries significantly differs. While Moscow's tough stance on Chechnya has proven popular with the masses (at least for the time being), most Western comments on Chechnya appeared intended to persuade their own publics that they are not ignoring the matter; and
- more importantly, the value systems put forward by Russia and the West are considerably, if not fundamentally, different--and the question of whether they can or should ever be reconciled or even merged remains as rhetorical as ever.

Against this background, it comes as no surprise that in Istanbul, Russia appeared isolated in Europe (with the notable exception of Belarus), at least on the issue of Chechnya. The reality is that the only European state that experiences problems of armed separatism on a similar scale--federal Yugoslavia--was not only excluded from the OSCE, but has recently been forcefully dismembered by NATO military intervention. All other countries that could and would object happen to be non-Western and non-European. Ironically, Western leaders, by trying to refocus the summit's attention from NATO aggression in Kosovo to Russia's Chechen campaign for their own purposes, helped to

highlight that it is the growing gap between Russia and the West rather than the situation in the Balkans or elsewhere that is going to present the most critical challenge to European security in the coming years.

More generally, actions taken by Russia and the West on the international stage in the context of Chechnya (most conspicuously at the OSCE Istanbul summit) should not be viewed merely as "damage limitation" by both sides. On the one hand, it was once again demonstrated that the state of "clear disagreement" (using President Clinton's vocabulary) on most security and many political issues will continue to dominate Russia's relations with the West for the near and not-so-near future.

On the other hand, in Istanbul both sides managed to prevent the crisis in Chechnya from turning already strained relations into something more destabilizing. This type of relationship is, however, more dynamic than "stalemate," and could be better characterized as mutual pressure followed by compromise solutions ("without ill will, but without illusions," in the words of Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush). This model by no means implies open confrontation and is more realistic than the declared "partnership" and "cooperation" that never truly existed. It may even lay the ground for moderate optimism. After all, Russia is stimulated to conduct its campaign in Chechnya in a more "civilized" way, especially as far as the civilian population is concerned. The West can also expect Moscow's limited cooperation on issues unrelated to the Russian Federation itself or its "near abroad." More importantly, Russia is learning to get its own way effectively by calmly ignoring excessive demands on the part of the West rather than resorting to anti-Western hysteria. In short, disagreements are many, but manageable; the game is tough, but it will hopefully serve the goal of developing a more rational relationship between Russia and the West.

© PONARS 1999