

Dagestan and Chechnya: Russia's Self-Defeating Wars

Matthew Evangelista
October 1999
PONARS Policy Memo 95
Cornell University

In the Russian North Caucasus history repeats itself again and again, always as tragedy. Russia's leaders seem incapable of grasping the subtle complexities of politics in Dagestan and Chechnya, despite over two centuries of contact with the region. Moscow's latest military actions promise to make a bad situation even worse.

The most recent round of violent conflict in the North Caucasus broke out in August 1999 when Russian military forces responded to attacks from across the Chechen border into Dagestan. The invasion was led by the Chechen military leader Shamil Basaev and Habib Abdel Rahman Khatab, a Saudi Arabian citizen married to a Dagestani woman. This was not the only recent military action involving Chechens in Dagestan. In May 1997 a force of Dagestani fighters associated with the radical Islamic sect of "Wahhabites" took control of several villages, including the one where Khatab's wife was born. In December 1997 a group of Chechen guerrillas joined the Wahhabite force to attack a Russian armored brigade near Buinask. The residents of the villages "liberated" by the Wahhabites and Chechens declared their independence from Dagestan and established another "little Chechnya" within the Russian Federation. The August incursion looked like another step on the path to creating a united Chechen-Dagestani Muslim state, the explicit goal of Basaev and his allies.

Is Dagestan Another Chechnya?

How realistic is the dream of a united Islamic state in the North Caucasus? The mountain republics of Dagestan and Chechnya do resemble each other a great deal, both in their histories and in their present situations. The ancestors of Chechens and Dagestanis have lived in the same region for approximately six millenia. Both peoples were converted to Islam over the course of several hundred years, starting around the eighth century. Many Muslims in Dagestan and Chechnya adhere to the mystical Sufi movement in contrast to the modernist Jadidism practiced elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, which was tolerated (and somewhat co-opted) by the communist government. The Sufi influence seems to account for why, according to survey data, religious belief and practice are far higher in Dagestan and Chechnya than in Russia's other Muslim republics, such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. The higher the level of religious practice, the more Islam can serve as a mobilizing force for resistance to Russian dominance, as it has done throughout the history of both Dagestan and Chechnya. Indeed, two of the legendary

Islamic heroes of the Chechen resistance to Tsarist rule--Imam Shamil' and Kazi Mullah--were actually ethnic Avars from Dagestan.

In addition to religion, the peoples of the two mountain republics share many customs, such as a reputation for generous hospitality, a martial tradition and widespread expertise with weapons, and the practice of the blood feud. Both societies are loosely organized--around extended clans (teips) in Chechnya and groupings of villages (djamaats) in Dagestan. Among their present-day shared characteristics the most significant is probably their extreme poverty. Of the 89 "subjects" of the Russian Federation, these two republics are the poorest. They rank 88th and 89th respectively in level of wealth, and their rates of unemployment are twice the national average. Unemployment among young men, especially in Chechnya, undoubtedly contributes to the appeal of joining armed bands and engaging in organized crime. But the two republics' poor economic prospects do not bode well for their viability as a united, independent state.

Russia's Counterproductive Interventions

The most recent similarity between Dagestan and Chechnya is no doubt the most striking: the massive air and ground attacks launched by the Russian army against both republics since last August, ostensibly to defeat armed separatist movements there. And in both cases Russia's actions have been counterproductive.

In applying the same blunt instrument of military force to both Dagestan and Chechnya, Russian leaders seem oblivious to the important differences between the two republics. Dagestan is home to some 34 different ethnic groups, making it the most ethnically and linguistically diverse of all the regions of the Russian Federation--perhaps of the world. Chechnya was always more homogeneous, especially after 1996, when most of its Russian population fled in the wake of the Russian army's destruction of Grozny, the capital city where most of them lived. Dagestan is a less coherent society than Chechnya, in part because Dagestanis did not suffer the mass deportation that Stalin inflicted on the Chechens in 1944. That action, intended to destroy the Chechen nation, instead contributed to its sense of identity, its attachment to its homeland, and its long-smoldering grievances against the Russians.

The political situations in Dagestan and Chechnya before the recent outbreak of war were also radically different. In Chechnya, Aslan Maskhadov, the president elected by a landslide in 1997, came under siege from his erstwhile allies, Shamil Basaev, Salman Raduev, Movladi Udugov, and Zelimkhan Yandarbiev. His attempts at working out a practical compromise with Russia led his opponents to question his commitment to an independent Chechnya. Russia did nothing to bolster Maskhadov's comparatively moderate position, even though the Chechen president attempted to discredit the supporters of the incursion into Dagestan. On August 29, 1999, Maskhadov issued a decree removing Udugov from Chechnya's National Security Council. Udugov, an ally of Basaev and a longtime supporter of a combined Chechen-Dagestani Islamic state, was accused of fomenting "a large-scale ideological sabotage operation against the Chechen

state" and of having "pushed the traditional friendship between the Dagestani and Chechen peoples to breaking point." Rather than give Maskhadov the benefit of the doubt, Moscow has seemingly abandoned him. Indeed, the recent Russian military action has been accompanied by declarations from Prime Minister Vladimir Putin that Moscow no longer even recognizes Maskhadov as the legitimate leader of the country. Without Maskhadov--the key figure on the Chechen side in negotiating the end to the war in 1996--Moscow has no one to talk to if its renewed efforts to bomb Chechnya into submission fail.

Moscow missed a great opportunity to bolster Maskhadov at the expense of Basaev. In an interview with a BBC reporter, Basaev acknowledged that in Chechnya "some women curse me" because his military activities in Dagestan provoked a renewal of Russian bombing. Indeed, few Chechens support Basaev's continued military provocations, especially when they jeopardize Chechnya's hard-won independence and peace. Few are willing to support the holy war that he and his friend Khatab promote. Indeed, Basaev himself has called into question the religious motivations for their actions. When a reporter asked Basaev if his radical friend Khatab was a "Wahhabist," he said "No, he is a Khatabist." It was a revealing answer. Khatab and Basaev are less interested in religion or in fashioning an independent and viable Chechen state than they are in fighting for its own sake. It is all they know. Ordinary Chechens, by contrast, are tired of the violence. But just when the tide of public opinion was turning against him, Basaev was rescued by the Russians. As in 1994, when the unpopular leader Dzhokar Dudaev was able to silence his critics and rally support in the face of a Russian invasion, so this time too the rival Chechen leaders have come together to meet the Russian challenge. As Basaev told the BBC, "in the current situation we are united and our unity is strengthened by Russia--and for that we are very grateful."

Although the political situation in Dagestan was completely different, Moscow's behavior has been similarly inept. Before the recent conflict Dagestan was viewed as an island of relative peace in a sea of ethnic strife. Despite extreme economic deprivation, exacerbated by massive inflows of refugees from neighboring conflicts, Dagestan managed to avoid civil war. Some specialists have described the delicate ethnic balancing act of Dagestan's political system as a form of "consociationalism"--the arrangement that has preserved functioning democracies in ethnically divided countries such as Belgium. (Pessimists might note more of a resemblance to aspects of the system that prevailed in Yugoslavia from the 1974 constitution until the country tore itself apart.)

Even before the August military action Moscow's behavior threatened to undermine Dagestan's stability. The republic's political balancing act depended on a system of rotation of elites representing different ethnic groups, along with a power-sharing arrangement between a dual executive (two co-chairs of the State Council) and an ethnically stratified legislature--the People's Assembly. In 1996, Magomedali Magomedov, an ethnic Dargin serving as the first chair of the State Council, refused to give up his seat when his term expired. The Russian government did not protest this clearly illegal move. President Yeltsin chose instead to look the other way in return for

Magomedov's support of his reelection in the close presidential race of May and June 1996.

Moscow's military action in Dagestan is more obviously counterproductive than its undermining of the republic's constitutional order. The August invasion from Chechnya evidently met with little support from Dagestani villagers. They requested arms from the Russian government to defend themselves against the forces of Basaev and Khatab. Instead they got indiscriminate bombing of their villages, with heavy civilian casualties. Dagestanis wonder why Moscow is only paying attention to them now. The republic's average per capita income is a third that of the rest of the Federation. The gap between rich and poor is larger than anywhere else in the country. The federal government has done nothing to alleviate the dire economic conditions that contribute to the radicalization of some young Dagestanis. The military campaign risks driving them into the arms of the radical Wahhabite sect that advocates an anti-Russian holy war.

Moscow's Motives

As with the previous Chechen war, this one is already having a corrupting influence on Russian politics and society. Terrorist bombs have exploded in Moscow and elsewhere, killing hundreds of innocent people. Although the Chechens have denied responsibility for the explosions, Russian authorities have retaliated against anyone with a "Caucasian face," expelling some 11,000 Chechens from Moscow alone. The campaign, dubbed "Operation Foreigner" is as Orwellian as the war itself. In the interest of keeping Chechnya an integral part of Russia, the government kicks out its own Russian citizens, with their Russian passports, calling them "foreigners" because they happen to be of Chechen descent.

The Russian government's method for convincing Chechnya to remain part of the Federation is somewhat counterintuitive. Russian planes bomb Chechen cities and villages, sending tens of thousands of refugees fleeing to the "border." As they reach the border (which is not an international border, as long as Moscow does not recognize an independent Chechnya), the refugees are turned back by the Russian army and are refused entry into what is, according to Moscow, another part of their own country--Russia. In the meantime, the army tries to create a cordon sanitaire to keep Chechens out of Russia.

Given the negative political repercussions and dubious security benefits of the current Russian military campaign, some Russian analysts suspect that Moscow had other motives for launching the war. According to one view, the government may have hoped that a quick victory would boost the political prospects of Prime Minister Putin, the colorless policeman whom President Boris Yeltsin has designated his preferred successor. Others anticipate that Yeltsin might use the crisis to declare martial law and cancel the forthcoming parliamentary and presidential elections in which his candidates are expected to fare poorly. Finally, some analysts suspect that the actual target of Russia's military designs has been Chechnya all along--that Dagestan was just a pretext.

They point out that the Russian government has fulfilled none of the more than fifty agreements it signed with Chechnya in the wake of the 1996 peace accord that was supposed to provide for reconstruction of the devastated country.

Perhaps it never intended to do so. In May 1997 Presidents Yeltsin and Maskhadov signed a Treaty on Peace and the Principles of Relations between the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. The first principle on which the two sides agreed was "forever to repudiate the use and the threat to use military force to resolve whatever disputes may arise." The status of Chechnya was supposed to be decided peacefully through diplomacy by the year 2001. Evidently someone in Moscow wanted to give war another chance.

© PONARS 1999