

Putin's War in Chechnya: Who steers the course?

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Each time a proposition is raised to resolve the Chechen conflict through negotiation, the Russian authorities respond with a double-riposte: We do not negotiate with terrorists, and there is nobody in Chechnya with whom to negotiate. The hostage tragedy in Beslan on September 1-3, 2004 revealed the real meaning of this rhetoric: no one in Moscow was ready to take responsibility for handling the crisis. The immediate response to the emergency and the following political measures (including the presidential initiative to abandon regional elections) were clearly inadequate.

This malfunctioning decisionmaking mechanism raises serious questions about its integrity, the chain of command, and the flow of information. The authorities show little if any interest in addressing these questions and concentrate their efforts on maintaining the façade of impeccably organized executive power. This paper attempts to examine the evolution of the decisionmaking system on Chechnya, while admitting that the answers provided here are not informed by any insight and are derived from speculative secondary sources, scarce official information, and observable cadre rotation.

Style is substance

Putin's secretive style of managing state affairs has remained remarkably consistent since his arrival in the Kremlin on New Year's Eve 2000. His style reflects a general mistrust of public politics and the lack of previous leadership experience of any kind. Departing from the traditions of Yeltsin's court, Putin has sharply reduced media access to his administration and exterminated leaks altogether. Nearly everyday, state-run TV channels show footage of his meetings with key government officials, but apart from carefully scripted video, very little is known about the day-to-day work of the government. Even less is known about the preparation for strategic decisions.

Putin's reliance on a very limited number of aids and advisors was quite understandable at the start of his presidency when he had to work with the team inherited from Yeltsin. However, even after the thorough cleansing of the administration and the Kremlin arrival of a new cadre with backgrounds in special services and work experience in St. Petersburg, the pattern has remained unchanged. The contrast between the swelling state bureaucracy and the shrinking group of advisors whose opinions carry real weight for Putin is becoming only sharper. While in economic matters, visible clashes of

opinions between ministers and top advisors happen quite often (Andrei Illarionov has been particularly outspoken), nothing of this sort has been allowed in security matters.

The key word in Putin's carefully constructed decisionmaking mechanism is control, which generally reflects its orientation toward problem solving rather than strategy formulating. At the same time, a particular characteristic of this mechanism (further accentuated by Putin's September 2004 initiatives) is over concentration of authority at the top with very little delegation to the lower levels. This leads to a deliberate erosion of responsibility for the implementation of impersonal political decisions taken somewhere in the depth of the bureaucratic pyramid. One inevitable consequence is the near paralysis of the executive vertical in crisis situations, when Putin is unable to act due to an acute lack of reliable information – and nobody else volunteers to take responsibility for a decision.

Decisionmaking on Chechnya is perhaps the most guarded element in this closeted style of leadership. It is exactly there that deficiencies such as the lack of flexibility, the straightforward rejection of alternative options, the deficit of expert assessments, and the propensity to breakdown in crisis situations are particularly obvious.

Launching the Second War

Putin's mind-boggling rise to the summit of power is inextricably linked to the start of the Second Chechen War in September 1999, triggered by two terrorist attacks in Moscow. That watershed could be marked as a "Russian 9/11," and Putin assumed the lead in response to the tragedy. While he publicly took responsibility for launching the military operation to exterminate the terrorists, it is clear that the decision was not his to make. President Boris Yeltsin was still the commander in chief, and it was his team of aids, key ministers, and confidants that had prepared the order. The involvement of Boris Berezovsky is a matter of wild speculation, but it is known that Sergei Stepashin, Putin's predecessor as prime minister who had significant experience from the first war, was personally involved in preparing the plans for the second one.

The conduct of the operation was very much left to the military, primarily the General Staff. While Defense Minister Igor Sergeev (with his background in Strategic Forces) was quite unenthusiastic about the whole enterprise, the Chief of the General Staff Anatoly Kvashnin gathered a group of combat generals (Konstantin Pulikovsky, Gennady Troshev, Viktor Kazantsev, Vladimir Shamanov) driven hard by the desire to take revenge for the humiliating defeat in 1996. This military cabal demanded and obtained the *carte blanche* to proceed with victory as they saw fit. The troops moved into Chechnya rather slowly, suppressing every pocket of resistance by massive artillery fire.

Putin, therefore, was placed in the uncomfortable position of assuming full responsibility for a decision he had not made and presiding over an operation he had no possibility to control. Nevertheless, he did the best possible job in this position, making the war into his personal crusade and reassuring the suspicious generals that he was ready to go all the way for a hard-won triumph.

Taking Control Over the War

By the time of Putin's inauguration as President in May 2000, large-scale military operations in Chechnya had been completed and all major settlements were under control of the federal forces. While low-intensity guerrilla attacks and counter-insurgency operations continued, this relative stabilization provided an opportunity for the new commander in chief to assume real control over the war. His plan to achieve this takeover was to allow the Federal Security Service (FSB), led by his close ally Nikolai Patrushev, to assume the role of lead agency for Chechnya and weaken the faction of the Chechen generals.

Instead of confronting the over-confident veterans, Putin opted for promoting them to political positions of secondary importance: Kaza ntsev and Pulikovskiy were appointed presidential envoys in the newly-created federal districts (Far Eastern and Southern, respectively), and Shamanov was encouraged to present himself at the gubernatorial elections in Ulyanovsk oblast. Kvashnin became suspicious of the growing isolation and dared to challenge Sergeev's priorities directly and publicly late summer 2000. Putin, however, would not have his cadre policy outplayed by such a crude attack; he retired Sergeev but appointed his most trusted lieutenant Sergei Ivanov as the new Defense Minister. Ivanov had different ideas about his career but accepted the job, making one thing clear: he would prefer not to interfere in the conduct of combat operations in Chechnya. With Ivanov's departure, the Security Council was no longer able to claim a coordinating role among the key 'power bureaucracies', since Vladimir Rushailo, its new secretary, did not have the same rapport with the President.

For the FSB, one of the key means of controlling the situation was reducing the amount of information leaving Chechnya to an absolute minimum and monopolizing presentation of the war on national TV channels. Sergei Yastrzhembskiy was brought to the Kremlin (despite his past involvement with the Primakov-Luzhkov campaign) to spearhead the propaganda offensive. He performed the task with much style and skill, coordinating the use of all information resources, including a specially created website (<http://kavkaz.strana.ru>). Official propaganda was successful to such a degree that the leadership itself, including President Putin, began to believe the sterilized version of events, falling victim to its own spin. The reality check came in October 2002 when a large unit of Chechen fighters and suicide bombers took hundreds of hostages in a Moscow theater.

Chechenization and Normalization

The Nord Ost tragedy led to significant changes in the pattern of management in the Chechen problem. The FSB was eager to transfer the main responsibility for completing the counter-terrorist operation in Chechnya to the Interior Ministry, reserving the key role in combating terrorism across the country for itself. The military was further estranged from the Kremlin and Sergei Ivanov made sure that Gennady Troshev, the most outspoken of the Chechen generals, was removed from the region, while carefully preparing the dismissal of Kvashnin.

The most significant shift, however, was the gradual increase in the amount of power delegated to the local Chechen authorities, led by confident and determined Akhmad

Kadyrov. The main architect of this plan, known as Chechenization, was Aleksandr Voloshin, the head of Putin's presidential administration. He argued that making Kadyrov the new Chechen president and channeling more resources through his government would gradually lead to a centralized consolidation of a local power and erode public support for the resistance.

The decisive factor in implementing this plan was Kadyrov's ability to convince Putin that he could grow into a real leader for Chechnya, commanding respect and relying on his own militia. While Voloshin's influence in the Kremlin declined, eventually leading to his dismissal in November 2003, Kadyrov was building his own profile and cultivating personal ties with Putin. His grasp on power steadily increased through a series of firmly managed votes, from the approval of the new republican Constitution in February 2003 and Kadyrov's election as president in October 2003, to Putin's re-election as Russian President in March 2004, when Chechnya delivered him an astounding 92 percent of total votes.

The growing self-assertiveness of the Chechen government and its direct access to Putin was becoming an irritant not only for the command of federal forces in Chechnya, but also to the FSB leadership. These tensions, however, remained hidden and the propaganda blanket over the smouldering crisis was carefully tucked in at all corners. These factors made Kadyrov's assassination in a terrorist attack on May 9, 2004 at the stadium in Grozny all the more devastating. It was a shock and an eye-opener for Putin. Flying over Grozny in a helicopter a few days later, he discovered the real scale of disaster, but few signs of reconstruction.

For a few months, the Kremlin tried to maintain business as usual, while searching for a successor and moderating the infighting between competing Chechen political clans. The main news during the summer was the performance of the Republic's football club Terek, which actually never plays in Grozny and fields only a couple of Chechen players. Putin tried to show a new determination, dismissing the commander of interior troops and a deputy director of the FSB, as well as several generals in the North Caucasus, as a punishment for the rebel attack on Nazran, Ingushetia on June 22. By the same decree, Kvashnin was fired from the General Staff, even if his fault in the episode was minimal. The search for more competent military leaders was not particularly fruitful, and in most cases the deputies were promoted to the newly vacant positions. The event that shattered these efforts to preserve a façade of normalcy was the terrorist attack in Beslan, North Ossetia, on September 1 to 3, 2004.

Lonely Leader Stays the Course

Putin has never been a natural leader in crisis situations, and this time, facing a major disaster, he discovered that there was nobody around him whose opinion on Chechnya he could trust. There was also no branch on his over-grown executive vertical where he could delegate authority to managing this failed project.

The seasoned military veterans are dispersed across the political periphery (Kvashnin, for that matter, was appointed to the Siberian federal district), while neither Minister of Defense Ivanov nor the new Chief of the General Staff Yuri Baluevsky has the competence required to run the war. The tightly-knit group of former KGB colleagues in

the presidential administration, led by Igor Sechin and Viktor Ivanov, is engaged in big-stake battles involving energy giants such as YUKOS and Gazprom and has no interest in Chechnya. The Security Council, reshaped by its new secretary Igor Ivanov (former foreign minister) could be helpful in handling some delicate matters with leaders of other post-Soviet states (particularly Georgia), but has no grasp of Chechnya. The two presidential advisors with clear views on the region, Aslambek Aslakhanov and Gennady Troshev, have never had any direct access to the leader. Even Sergei Yastrzhembsky has carefully redefined his area of responsibility as Russia-EU relations. Putin has only the FSB to turn to, but they have let him down before, and the recent dismissal of Anatoly Ezhov, Deputy Director for the North Caucasus, was a sign of dissatisfaction. The new Chechen president, Alu Alkhanov, has neither the authority nor the ambition of his predecessor and cannot in any way influence Putin's opinion.

Seeking to establish at least one reliable channel, Putin has appointed his long and trusted aid Dmitry Kozak as head of the Southern Federal District, replacing hapless Vladimir Yakovlev. Kozak has received an expanded mandate for coordinating the efforts of economic and power agencies in the region and has defined the struggle against corruption as one of his top priorities. He has the reputation of a skilled bureaucrat with sound ideas on streamlining the structures of control. At the same time, it is known that most of his plans for reforming the government have been shelved or sabotaged by Mikhail Fradkov's dysfunctional cabinet. Kozak's only previous experience in conflict management was convincing the governments of Moldova and Transdniestria in autumn 2003 to accept an agreement guaranteed by Russia. In December 2003, however, the deal fell apart due to objections from the EU.

Kozak was not given much of a respite while transitioning to his new position, as the crisis in Karachaevo-Cherkessia escalated to the point of mass public unrest in early November. Patiently negotiating with the outraged opposition, Kozak managed to defuse the confrontation, which, fortunately for him, was not following ethnic lines. Two features of the system of governance in the North Caucasus have manifested themselves in this still ongoing crisis. One, the structures of regional authority have become all but dysfunctional due to endemic corruption; any of the possible flash points from Kalmykia to Krasnodar krai could connect with the war zone in Chechnya increasing the probability of spillover. Second, Kozak would have to run from one brush fire to another, seeking to rescue the sitting governors/presidents, thus failing to focus attention on the one problem that really matters: Chechnya. His access to Putin has turned out to be quite limited, and may be reduced even further by the chekisty (members of the Cheka, Soviet secret police) in the administration who control Putin's agenda.

Conclusion: Who needs a solution?

One clear consequence of the Beslan tragedy was the shift in the official rhetoric from normalization to war, which, somewhat surprisingly, has not translated into any meaningful changes in Moscow's course towards Chechnya. Persistence in a deadlocked situation inevitably brings up questions regarding forces blocking attempts to revise the course, as well as questions regarding groups or persons that benefit from the

continuation of the low-intensity guerrilla conflict and high-intensity terrorism. Three possible answers can be offered in this analysis.

Firstly, the war in Chechnya has acquired the profile of a personal crusade, a trademark of Putin's presidency, from the very start. After initially pushed into this risky enterprise, Putin has found ways and means to take control of the war, but not to distance himself from it. He has a record of excessively sharp and even rude responses to criticism on the conduct of operations, betraying deep-seated uncertainty over the impact of this protracted conflict on his leadership and reputation. Every doubt behind continuing the dysfunctional combination of the counter-terrorist operation and Chechenization is perceived as an attempt to undermine supreme authority. This unwavering attitude guarantees that inside the pyramid of executive power no initiative on drafting alternative proposals is allowed to appear.

Second, the war has gained significant inertia, involving many dissimilar elements, from deployed military structures to cultural codes and stereotypes. A key component of this inertia is the well-developed political economy of the war, which is an odd mixture of legal financial streams, shadow business (for instance, unregistered production of oil), and criminal activities (extortion, kidnapping, drug trafficking, etc.). Parties in the conflict have long since established mutually beneficial ways of cooperating, for instance, utilizing financial allocations from the federal budget meant for rebuilding infrastructure. The rebels have their guaranteed share in many semi-legal schemes, while the military are involved in as many criminal activities. It is important to emphasize, however, that the total scale of this economy cannot be compared with, for instance, the market value of YUKOS, and the stakeholders (from Alkhanov's ministers to Baranov's generals) do not have much political influence. Detailed analysis of this war zone economy could explain how hostilities could continue for such a long time, but not why they continue.

Last, the war, despite its burden and risks, continues to be useful to the Kremlin for achieving various external and internal political goals, and as such, constitutes an integral part of Putin's political project. One recent illustration of this conclusion was the "window of opportunity" (in the words of Kremlin's insiders) created by the terrorist attack in Beslan for advancing the long-discussed proposal on discontinuing the pattern of regional elections and establishing the practice of appointing governors by presidential decree. By generating deadly terrorism, the stagnant war in Chechnya also creates legitimacy for tighter central control over political processes and suppressing dissent as the fifth column. In this perspective, the straightforward question: "What would it take to achieve peace in Chechnya?" has a simple answer: "It would take a different Russia."