

Ingushetia as a Microcosm of Putin's Reforms

PONARS Policy Memo 346

Matthew Evangelista

Cornell University

November 2004

In the wake of the massacre at the Beslan schoolhouse in North Ossetia in early September 2004, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a major reform intended to fight terrorism. "What we are facing is direct intervention of international terror directed against Russia," he said. He promised to prepare "a range of measures designed to strengthen the unity of the country." On September 13th, he announced his decision to replace all the elected governors and presidents of the Russian Federation's 89 regions with appointed officials. According to Putin's proposal, his appointments are subject to the approval of the regional legislatures, but if they reject his nominees twice, Putin is empowered to dissolve those legislatures. At the end of October 2004 the Duma approved Putin's proposal by a vote of 356-64, with four abstentions. A vast majority of the regional legislatures expressed support for Putin's reform as well, albeit with criticism that the provision for dissolving the legislatures was unconstitutional. In short, there was substantial official support for the measures that Putin took in response to Beslan. But what is the relationship between abolishing elections, fighting terrorism, and unifying the country? The case of Ingushetia sheds some light on the question.

Beslan, Chechnya, and International Terrorism

Despite heavy government influence on the media, the Russian public's impression of the Beslan crisis and its implications differed from that of their president. According to polls conducted by the Levada Analytical Center more respondents associated the siege of the school with the ongoing conflict in Chechnya than with "international terrorism." Putin, by contrast, had told a group of Western journalists and scholars on September 6th that "there is no connection whatsoever between the policies of Russia regarding Chechnya and subsequent events." Putin did, however, blame the security forces for not preventing the attack and the public agreed with him: more than half of Russians polled claimed that the Beslan events were made possible because of "corruption in the police and secret services," which allowed heavily armed terrorists to cross borders and stockpile explosives in the school. But public-opinion researchers were hard pressed to find much understanding in the Russian public of how abolishing elections and centralizing control in Moscow could serve to protect against terrorism.

Centralization of Power

Although the connection between Chechnya, terrorism, and centralization of authority in the Kremlin may not be clear, it is one that Putin has long emphasized. The former KGB agent was elected president in 2000 on a campaign of centralization of power. He criticized the so-called asymmetric federalism that characterized Boris Yeltsin's administration, where Moscow cut separate deals with the various regions – with the notable exception of Chechnya -- in order to placate (but ultimately to undermine) separatist tendencies. Putin's initial reform superimposed seven federal districts over the 89 regions. He appointed mostly military, police, and secret-service officials to head them. He also sought greater influence on the choice of regional leaders.

In some respects, Putin's new reform is just a formalization of a process that has been underway for several years, as the Kremlin has attempted, and usually succeeded, in getting its preferred candidates elected in the regions. What have been the consequences of limiting the scope of regional elections? Have Russians successfully traded liberty for security and unity? Are appointed regional leaders more effective in combating terrorism than elected ones?

Ingushetia in the 1990s

Tentative answers to these questions may be found in the case of Ingushetia, a largely Muslim North Caucasus republic that borders on (and was once joined with) Chechnya in the east and North Ossetia in the west. In the 1990s, Ingushetia was ruled by its elected president Ruslan Aushev, a former Soviet general and hero of the war in Afghanistan. At the time Ingushetia faced a genuine threat of international terrorism, as unemployed young men, who had attended "summer camps" in the Middle East, returned to spread the radical message of militant Islam of the al Qaeda variety. Aushev countered this threat by a creative combination of patriarchal ethnic traditions, clan-based patronage, and force of his own personality. Some of his methods included legalizing polygamy (a widely tolerated practice during the tsarist era) and endorsing a quasi-institutionalized return of the tradition of clan vendetta as a way to counter the rash of kidnappings for ransom that helped finance the Islamists' holy wars. According to Georgi Derluguian, Aushev "used his charismatic authority to plead with families of the born-again Islamic puritans to take good care of their sons, to keep them busy, to get them married. He implored their communities to help them build houses and to purchase farmland, livestock, taxicabs and trucks." Aushev's approach marked a sharp contrast to the Russian government's attempt to deal with Islamist militancy and secular separatism in neighboring Chechnya – by blunt, excessive, and ultimately counterproductive use of military force. Aushev was no fan of Chechen independence, but he was more outspokenly critical of the Russian response. This made him many enemies in the Kremlin, including Vladimir Putin, when he re-launched the war in Chechnya in 1999. Putin's project of restoring central authority (the "vertical of power") targeted regional leaders such as Aushev, some of whose methods of local governance violated Russia's legal codes and the Constitution.

In late 2001 Aushev was faced with a government-inspired court challenge to the length of his term as president and steady pressure from Viktor Kazantsev, the presidential representative to the Southern Federal District. In addition to doing Putin's

bidding, Kazantsev had his own reasons to want to be rid of Aushev. Kazantsev had served as a leading commander in Moscow's war in Chechnya, whereas Aushev remained one of the war's severest critics. At the end of December 2001 Aushev finally resigned. As his successor Aushev initially supported Ingush Minister of the Interior Khamzat Gutseriev, a representative of one of the most powerful clans in Ingushetia, who was heavily favored to win. The Kremlin intervened, however, in several ways. Moscow objected that Gutseriev was not allowed to run for president while remaining interior minister. On April 3, 2002, armed men from Kazantsev's staff forced their way into the Ingush Supreme Court while it was considering Gutseriev's case. They argued that the Russian Supreme Court should decide the case, which it did. The court disqualified Gutseriev from the election, just two days before the first round of voting.

The Kremlin's favored candidate was Murat Ziazikov, a general in the Federal Security Service (successor to the KGB) and deputy to Kazantsev. Moscow's machinations were insufficient to get him elected in the first round, however. In fact, Ziazikov polled only 19 percent of the vote, compared to 32 percent for Alikhan Amir Khanov, a State Duma member and Aushev ally. With Amir Khanov poised to win in the run-off, Moscow reverted to its usual repertoire of tactics to defeat him. Armed security forces raided Amir Khanov's offices following the vote, seeking evidence that he had engaged in bribery and otherwise violated electoral laws. This time, however, the Supreme Court rejected the charges. The final vote produced a predictable "surprise" outcome: The Kremlin's candidate Ziazikov won with 53 percent of the vote to Amir Khanov's 43 percent. Amir Khanov's supporters charged fraud and several national newspapers provided corroborating evidence. The headline in the daily *Izvestiia* said it all: "Ingushetia's president elected by Russia's president."

Putin's Ingushetia

Putin's new reforms will allow all the leaders of the country's 89 regions to be "elected" by Russia's president. The myriad imperfections of the previous system of regional elections, including widespread corruption and cronyism, made many voters cynical about the prospects of Russian democracy. One could imagine that a new system of Kremlin-picked leaders more responsive to local concerns and better able to provide the security that Russians crave would constitute an improvement. Using these criteria we can ask then how Ingushetia has fared under the Kremlin's chosen ruler.

In addition to the concerns over economic conditions and crime that preoccupy most Russians, the residents of Ingushetia harbor particular grievances. In 1944, virtually the entire population was deported to the East under Stalin's orders, along with the Chechens and some other mountain peoples of the North Caucasus, and the Chechen-Ingush autonomous republic was abolished. When they were allowed to return in the mid-1950s, the Ingush found some of their lands incorporated into the so-called Prigorodnyi district of North Ossetia and many found their homes occupied by Ossets. With the end of the Soviet Union, and inspired by a new Law on the Rehabilitation of Repressed People, thousands of Ingush families sought to return to their homes, often against the resistance of the Osset inhabitants. Conflict between the two groups broke out into violence in 1992, resulting in hundreds of deaths and tens of thousands of refugees – mainly Ingush who

were expelled from Prigorodnyi and who are still prevented from returning by the threat of further violence. The Ingush-Osset conflict is further complicated by an international dimension: South Ossetia is an autonomous region of post-Soviet Georgia which has witnessed considerable Russian political and military interference on behalf of the Ossets and against the interests of the Georgian government.

A second major concern of the Ingush has been spillover from the Chechen war, where some hundred forty thousand refugees have been housed in makeshift camps since the renewal of warfare in 1999. When Ziazikov came into office he indicated that his priority was to do the Kremlin's bidding, to create a vertical of power in Ingushetia: "The federal center is the federal center," explained the general, "and there can be no questions of contradictions or misunderstandings here." He also expressed his intention to deal with the crisis of Chechen refugees, but gave no hint of how. Some observers worried that he would use methods suitable for a former KGB officer to compel the refugees to return home. One report suggested that "the authorities apparently plan simply to cut off their food supplies or possibly even deport them," in order to demonstrate that the situation in Chechnya had "normalized" and was now safe enough for the refugees to return. Others surmised that putting an intelligence officer in charge of the republic would make it easier to control and expel journalists who might provide critical reports on the nearby war – a process already underway before the elections. Aushev expressed a further concern that under Ziazikov all of his efforts to avoid "another Chechnya" would be undermined by Putin's insistence on imposing Moscow's control.

All of these dire predictions have in fact come to pass. Russian authorities have cut off electricity to the refugee camps, barred humanitarian workers, threatened the inhabitants with expulsion, and carried out sweep operations (*zachistki*), as in Chechnya, that led to imprisonment, torture, and executions. Ziazikov has cracked down on suspected sympathizers of the Chechens' plight, especially those with Islamist agendas, rather than trying to buy them off and settle them down as Aushev did. As a result the new Ingush president and his followers antagonized the locals, including those who would otherwise have been suspicious or resentful of the Chechens and their radical supporters.

The results were apparent in June 2004, when Chechen guerrillas crossed the border into Ingushetia and killed dozens of police officers and some civilians. Local residents blamed the republic's rulers. As one woman put it, "I think everything is Ziazikov's fault. Under our former president this did not happen. Why? Because he was not a puppet. I don't support the people who attacked our republic, but I think the authorities are to blame. This shambles started under them. They allowed war into Ingushetia." Moreover, what seemed like a positive attribute of Ziazikov's outsider status – his willingness to share government jobs among the most prominent Ingush clans, rather than continue Aushev's favoritism of his own clan – apparently backfired. As Abdulla Istamulov reported in *Moscow News* in August 2004, Ziazikov's efforts to eliminate Islamist extremists by conducting sweep operations have led to retaliation by their fellow clan members and overall resentment by the affected populations.

Finally, Ziazikov's unwillingness or inability to convince Moscow to address Ingush grievances regarding the Prigorodnyi district, combined with the corruption of the police

and armed forces, probably contributed to the Beslan hostage-taking. There are at least two main explanations for how the Prigorodnyi conflict relates to Beslan, one relevant to Chechnya and another linked to Russia's policy towards post-Soviet Georgia. The more straightforward explanation holds that the terrorists wanted to fan the flames of local ethnic conflict in an effort to destabilize the region and demonstrate to Moscow its inability to contain the war in Chechnya – precisely the opposite of Putin's goal in putting a "strong hand" in charge of Ingushetia. A more complicated explanation, offered by Galina Khizrieva, a scholar from the region, portrays the Beslan massacre as a kind of preventive strike by Ingush militants in response to the election of Mikheil Saakashvili in Georgia. In this interpretation, the Ingush fear that the South Ossetians would reject Saakashvili's attempts to bring them back into a coherent Georgian state and instead move to unite with North Ossetia. Osset nationalists would then feel emboldened to launch further attacks against Ingush claimants to the Prigorodnyi district, seeking to resolve the dispute in their favor. Whichever explanation one favors, they both share a common feature: Putin's appointed leader of Ingushetia failed to deal with an issue of concern to many of his constituents, thereby giving the extremists among them a pretext to carry out atrocities against innocent school children and their relatives. One cannot say for certain that Aushev would have done better, but it is telling that the terrorists welcomed him into the schoolhouse as a trusted interlocutor for ultimately ill-fated negotiations.

Implications for the Federation

In many respects Ingushetia is not typical of the 89 regions of the Russian Federation. It and the other North Caucasus republics are much more directly affected by the spillover from the Chechen war and terrorist attacks. Yet it was President Putin himself who drew the connection between Chechnya, international terrorism, and the need to preserve Russia's territorial integrity by abolishing the election of regional leaders. So it makes sense to look to the example of the republic where linking these issues seems at least plausible. Putin first articulated his concerns in his 2000 autobiography, where he claimed that if Chechen separatists had remained in power, "they would have swallowed up Dagestan, and that would have been the beginning of the end. The entire Caucasus would have followed – Dagestan, Ingushetia, and then up along the Volga river to Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, reaching deep into the country." He repeated something very similar in his remarks to Western journalists and academics on September 6, 2004, in the wake of the Beslan tragedy (and again more recently to journalists in Brazil): "There are Muslims along the Volga, in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. Chechnya isn't Iraq. It's not far away. It's a vital part of our territory. This is all about Russia's territorial integrity," he said.

Putin has not specified the mechanism by which Islamist radicalism could spread hundreds of kilometers from the North Caucasus up to the middle Volga region of the country. He implies a kind of Muslim contagion carried by the Volga River. In fact there are millions of ethnic Russians living between Chechnya and Tatarstan or Bashkortostan, and those republics themselves barely even have Muslim majorities. (Not to mention that the Volga flows in the opposite direction, north to south.) There are, however, communities of radical Islamists in the Volga region and one could imagine

circumstances under which they would resort to violence. Khizrieva has called attention to Islamist camps in Durtuli and elsewhere in Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, Chechen settlements in Orenburg oblast', and Azeri communities in Saratov, radicalized by the ongoing conflict with Armenia. Local authorities evidently have the situation under control and the elected presidents of Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, in particular, seem to have worked out a modus vivendi with the radicals. The question is whether Putin's reforms would contribute to or undermine the current uneasy stability. One might expect that in the absence of electoral outlets for political grievances, people would be more likely to turn to violent, extra-parliamentary measures. There were already reports of street protests in Tatarstan in response to Putin's September announcement, although they were mainly peaceful.

The many regional leaders who supported Putin's changes apparently perceive little risk of popular backlash. Some have even suggested going further. In late October 2004, Murtaza Rakhimov, the president of Bashkortostan, expressed approval of Putin's proposal to abolish the elected presidencies and governorships in favor of strengthening the ever-popular "power vertical." Under the assumption that he would be retained as Putin's representative, Rakhimov said he had already established his own vertical in Bashkortostan. "We appoint heads of city and district administrations. There are no questions asked," Rakhimov said, according to the RIA-Novosti press agency. He admitted, "some people are negative about the president's initiatives. But I, for one, am positive, because we have already tested this system and it works." A reasonable counterargument is that such a system that allows no political expression through the ballot box can only work temporarily, if at all, particularly in the face of genuine grievances neglected or exacerbated by heavy-handed authoritarian rule. If Bashkortostan represents a success story, albeit perhaps a short-term one, Ingushetia is a clear failure, and, arguably, a portend of worse to come.