

Contested Sovereignty | Gail W. Lapidus

The Tragedy of Chechnya

The creation of the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1923 as a federation of sovereign republics, however fictitious in practice, proved to be highly consequential six decades later when Mikhail Gorbachev, then secretary-general of the Communist Party of the USSR, initiated a program of ideological and political liberalization. As the process of reform gained momentum between 1988 and 1991, it unleashed a growing tide of national self-assertion in which the tension between the formal rhetoric of republic sovereignty and the reality of a highly centralized state produced growing pressures to give substance to the claim.¹ With the dissolution of the USSR at the end of 1991, its fifteen constituent union republics were proclaimed sovereign, independent states, and their recognition by the international community bestowed upon them an acceptance, status, and legitimacy barely dreamt of even three years earlier.

Although this process of dissolution and reconstitution was remarkably peaceful and consensual, especially by comparison with Yugoslavia, it was nonetheless accompanied by a number of serious, and in some cases deadly conflicts, many of them over demands for sovereignty or independence by ethnopolitical groups within the new states. Even though the overwhelming number of potential confrontations have been managed peacefully, six conflicts escalated into regional wars involving regular armies and heavy arms: the civil

Gail W. Lapidus is Senior Fellow of the Institute for International Studies and Director of the Project on Ethnic Conflict in the Former Soviet Union at the Center for International Security and Arms Control, both at Stanford University. Recent publications include The New Russia: Troubled Transformation (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press). This article is adapted from a study prepared for the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict. A different version will be published by the Commission in Bruce Jentleson, ed., Opportunities Missed, Opportunities Seized: Preventive Diplomacy in the Post-Cold War World (Lanham, Md.: Rowan and Littlefield, forthcoming).

I would like to thank Arthur Khachikian, Flavia Pellegrini, Vadim Rubin, and Inna Sayfer for their research assistance, and Coit Blacker, George Breslauer, Alexander Dallin, Leokadia Drobizheva, John Dunlop, James Goldgeier, Fiona Hill, Bruce Jentleson, and Shashi Tharoor for their helpful criticisms and suggestions. I would also like to express particular appreciation to the Carnegie Corporation for its support of the broader study of conflict and conflict resolution strategies in the former Soviet Union.

1. For an account of this process, see Gail W. Lapidus, "Gorbachev and the 'National Question': Restructuring the Soviet Federation," *Soviet Economy*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (July–September 1989), pp. 201–250; and Gail W. Lapidus, "From Democratization to Disintegration: The Impact of Perestroika on the National Question," in Gail W. Lapidus and Victor Zaslavsky, eds., *From Union to Common-*

war in Tajikistan, and the secessionist struggles in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, Transdnier, South Ossetia, and Chechnya.²

Along with the civil war in Tajikistan, the war in Chechnya has been the most serious conflict fought since World War II on the territory of what was once the Soviet Union, with casualties and fatalities approaching 100,000,³ refugees and homeless numbering in the hundreds of thousands, and the capital city of Grozny—as well as countless smaller towns and villages—virtually destroyed. As of this writing it remains uncertain whether the peace agreement negotiated in May 1997 will bring a political resolution of the conflict or whether Chechnya—like Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transdnier—will continue to exist as a quasi state, exercising de facto control over its territory but not recognized as an independent state by Russia or by the international community.

The war in Chechnya has not only had profoundly destabilizing repercussions in the Caucasus as well as in Moscow; it has also raised broader and disturbing questions about Russian politics and policymaking, about civil-military relations, and about Russia's reliability as a partner to a whole range of international agreements. Moreover, as this article suggests, the failure of Western governments and of international institutions to respond effectively to the mounting crisis raises equally troubling questions about the possibilities and limits of preventive diplomacy when the behavior of a major power is at stake, when the issue is framed as the internal affair of a sovereign state rather than as an interstate conflict, and when other political priorities take precedence.

This article argues that the war in Chechnya was deliberately launched by the Russian leadership in the context of an ongoing struggle over Chechnya's ultimate political status and over the process by which it would be determined. The conflict turned on Chechnya's claim to "sovereignty": on the question of

wealth: Nationalism and Separatism in the Soviet Republics (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 45–70.

2. Significantly, all except Tajikistan were conflicts over demands for sovereignty or independence by former autonomous republics whose populations constitute ethnic minorities in the new independent states.

3. The precise numbers are uncertain and the subject of heated controversy, ranging from the figure of 100,000 deaths cited by liberal political leader Grigory Yavlinsky to the 18,500 used by then-Minister of Internal Affairs Anatoly Kulikov. The numbers of wounded or maimed are even more uncertain; General Aleksandr Lebed has put the figure at 240,000. The best-documented recent estimate, by Vladimir Mukomel, calculates the total number of deaths at 35,000, of which 6,500 are military and 28,500 civilians; "Vooruzhennye mezhnatsional'nye i regional'nye konflikty: liudskie poteri, ekonomicheskii usherb, i sotsional'nye posledstviia" [Armed interethnic and regional conflicts: human losses, economic destruction, and social consequences], in *Identichnost' i konflikt v postsovetikh gosudarstvakh* [Identity and conflict in post-Soviet states] (Moscow: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1997), pp. 298–324.

whether, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Chechnya was automatically to be considered part of the Russian Federation, as Moscow insisted, or whether its membership in the federation required its formal and explicit consent. The disagreement was linked to broader ambiguities surrounding the concept of sovereignty itself, the political and juridical basis of the Russian Federation, which was up for negotiation after the collapse of the USSR, and the scope and limits of power sharing between the center and the republics. By contrast with the brutal conflicts in Yugoslavia and Rwanda, the dispute initially engaged a relatively small circle of elite actors in Moscow and Grozny; although it took the form of an ethnopolitical conflict, it did not initially involve the eruption of highly mobilized masses acting on the basis of ethnicized identities or animosities, nor did it unleash “ethnic cleansing” of the Russian civilian population within Chechnya.⁴ Moreover, an analysis of the events leading up to the use of military force by the Russian government in December 1994, and interviews carried out by the author, make clear that the Russian leadership’s decision was by no means a “last resort” after all avenues for a peaceful resolution of the conflict had been exhausted. Finally, notwithstanding the fact that the conflict unfolded over an extended period of time, that a number of Russian and foreign observers and commentators considered a military confrontation a real possibility, and that in view of what was known both of the condition of Russian forces and of the requirements of an operation in Chechnya, a brief and effective “surgical strike” was highly problematic and unlikely to succeed, virtually no serious efforts were made by Western governments or international organizations to warn against military action in advance or to protest its use in the immediate aftermath.

As the growing literature on preventive diplomacy suggests, peaceful outcomes to disputes are more likely when third parties apply unequivocal pressures to negotiate before the conflicting sides mobilize politically or deploy armed force.⁵ Although the Western reaction to the escalating violence in Chechnya became increasingly anxious and outspoken over time, both the framing of the issue and the priority given to cooperation with the Yeltsin government militated against the application of serious pressure on the Yeltsin government to alter its policy until the scale of casualties, and the media attention to the wanton targeting and destruction of the civilian population of

4. The civilian casualties in the war were largely the result of Russian bombardment of Grozny and other cities and villages; there were few reports of the kind of indiscriminate violence by Chechens against the Russian civilian population that were all too common in Bosnia.

5. Michael Lund, *Preventing Violent Conflicts* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1996), p. 86.

Chechnya by Russian forces, reached a point where it became a political embarrassment.

The first section of this article examines the underlying causes and more immediate catalysts of the conflict over Chechnya, arguing that both the historical legacy of Chechen-Russian relations and the political fluidity associated with the dissolution of the USSR made this relationship an exceptionally contentious one. The second section traces the major stages and turning points in the evolution of the conflict, focusing particular attention on the role of intra-elite competition in Moscow as well as Grozny. The third section examines the failure of the two parties directly involved and of Western governments and international organizations to utilize a variety of available instruments to prevent the resort to military force or to deter its escalation, and offers an explanation of that failure. A concluding section analyzes the current stalemate, and argues that although a resumption of military actions is unlikely in the short term, both the political vulnerabilities of the two regimes and the constrained options offered by the international system limit the prospects of resolving the conflict and achieving a durable peace.

The Causes of Conflict

Although the struggle over the political status of Chechnya was triggered by the growing wave of national self-assertion throughout the region resulting from Gorbachev's reforms, it was shaped by a long history of Russian-Chechen conflict whose origins date to the Caucasian wars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A number of factors explain the particularly sharp tensions in relations between Moscow and Grozny. First and foremost was an underlying legacy of antagonistic group histories dating from the Russian conquest of the Caucasus and the particularly stubborn resistance to Russian imperial expansion. Immortalized in the literary classics of Tolstoy and Lermontov, among others, the Caucasian wars became a prominent theme in Russian culture, and the Chechens a symbol of the heroic struggles of the mountain peoples to preserve their independence. This historical experience would eventually be mobilized as a resource in the construction of a contemporary identity.

World War I occasioned new but again thwarted efforts at national liberation; indeed the struggle against Soviet rule was marked by uprisings in 1922, 1924, and 1925 and continued well into the 1930s. The harsh repressions associated with Stalinism, including the forced collectivization of agriculture and the massive resettlement of kulaks, added to the legacy of bitterness. But

Stalinist repression took particularly brutal form during World War II. Alleging that the populations of the Chechen-Ingush republic were collaborating with the Nazis (although no German forces had in fact reached the region), the republic was abolished in February 1944, and its inhabitants—roughly half-a-million people—were rounded up and forcibly deported. Over one-third of the population died during the brutal process; the survivors were resettled in Kazakhstan, in Central Asia. The collective trauma of exile was a key formative experience for many members of the present Chechen elite, including future President Dzhokhar Dudayev, who made their way back to the Caucasus only after Nikita Khrushchev denounced the deportations in 1957 as one of the crimes of the Stalin era, and allowed the “punished peoples” to return to their homeland.

A second contributing factor in the emergence of a Chechen national movement was the structural legacy of Soviet nationality policy, with its built-in contradiction between the principle of ethnoterritorial federalism and the actual repression of national aspirations.⁶ Soviet policy had created a hierarchy of ethnoterritorial units, from the union republics down to autonomous regions and districts that were endowed with a corresponding hierarchy of rights. The very existence of these “tactical nation-states” fostered, however unintentionally, the development of national elites and cultures while constraining their economic and political expression. By the late Brezhnev period, the rising aspirations of increasingly educated and capable elites of the titular nationalities had become a source of tension and competition with Russians for key positions not only in the fifteen union republics but also in a number of the autonomous republics, many of whose elites had long pressed for an elevation of their status. As political constraints were lifted by the liberalizing impact of perestroika, national loyalties and solidarities displaced communist ideology and became a potent basis for political mobilization around a combination of ethnopolitical and national demands.

Both historical experiences and the impact of Soviet policy had served to consolidate and reinforce group identity and solidarity among Chechens, a solidarity in which identification with Islam played an important role. The preservation of strong clan structures and group identity, fused with Muslim religion, was partly the result of the experience of exile itself, but was facili-

6. See Gail W. Lapidus, “Ethnonationalism and Political Stability: The Soviet Case,” *World Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (July 1984), pp. 555–580. Although a number of scholars have pointed to the way in which Soviet policy promoted national and cultural development and state formation among non-Russian minorities, the policy was highly differentiated over time and space and allowed little scope for economic or political autonomy.

tated by the relatively low level of industrialization of the republic and the correspondingly low level of Russian settlement. At the time of the 1989 census, of all the autonomous republics of the Russian Federation, the Chechen-Ingush republic had the second highest concentration of members of the titular nationality in the total population (70.7 percent),⁷ and the highest proportion of those who considered the language of their titular nationality their “native” language and the language of everyday communication.⁸ This group identity may well have been strengthened further by the escalation of conflict after 1991; a Western survey of Muslim republics of the Russian Federation carried out in 1993 reported that the highest levels of religious belief and practice were found among Chechens.⁹

Finally, geostrategic factors played an important role in raising the stakes in the conflict over Chechnya. The emergence of independent states in the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia after 1991, and the new possibilities for exploiting the rich energy resources and major transportation routes through the region, enhanced the importance of the republic and made its status a major concern to Russian as well as Chechen elites. At the same time, the fact that after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Chechnya, unlike Tatarstan, had an external border made secession a real possibility and a sovereign or independent existence appear more viable.

But the mere fact of serious tensions in the relationship between Moscow and Grozny was not in itself sufficient to account for the escalation of conflict into violence. Two decisive factors were the renegotiation of the Soviet federal system unleashed by Gorbachev’s reforms—which precipitated new claims for sovereignty or independence and contributed to the dissolution of the USSR—and the political fluidity, policy incoherence, and intra-elite conflict in both Russia and Chechnya that accompanied this massive transformation.

The Catalysts of Conflict

Although the long history of Russian-Chechen antagonism provided the underpinnings of the conflict, the ideological and political liberalization that

7. Only Dagestan reported a higher figure, with 80 percent; Tatarstan’s, by comparison, was 48.5 percent.

8. According to official census data, only 0.2 percent of the titular nationality considered Russian to be its national language; *Vsesoyuznaya perepis’ naseleniya, 1989* [All-union census of the population, 1989] (Moscow: Goskomstat SSSR, 1991).

9. Susan G. Lehmann, “Islam and Ethnicity in the Republics of Russia,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 13 (January–March 1997), pp. 78–103.

culminated in the dissolution of the USSR was its more immediate catalyst. Gorbachev's reforms, with their emphasis on glasnost and democratization, had far-reaching, though unintended, consequences in the non-Russian republics of the USSR. In the Russian republic, perestroika was associated above all with economic and political reform. In many of the non-Russian regions, however, glasnost and democratization brought issues of identity to the forefront, permitting the expression of long-simmering grievances and precipitating a growing wave of national self-assertion directed at the contradiction between the allegedly federal nature of the Soviet system and its actual unitary character. Emerging national movements in the non-Russian republics—beginning in the Baltics but spreading more broadly over time—increasingly adopted anti-imperial discourses and linked demands for political reform and democratization with calls for republic sovereignty and, in some cases, for outright independence.¹⁰ These trends were legitimized and given further impetus by Gorbachev's belated and hesitant efforts to transform the highly centralized Soviet system into a genuine federation.

Growing assertiveness was not limited to the fifteen union republics; similar trends were manifested in the autonomous republics as well, first and foremost in Nagorno-Karabakh, and were viewed with some sympathy by democratic reformers elected to the Congress of People's Deputies, among them Andrei Sakharov.¹¹ The election of Boris Yeltsin as president of Russia in June 1990, which joined the personal and political conflict between Yeltsin and Gorbachev to a struggle over the nature and future of the Soviet Union, created additional opportunities for republic elites to exert pressure for ever greater economic and political autonomy. These demands came to focus on the claim to "sovereignty," a vague and highly elastic term in Soviet usage, but one that was enthusiastically embraced by political elites in republic after republic in 1990 to express the desire for greater economic and political power over decisions affecting their own populations. This "parade of sovereignties" was given legitimacy and support by the June 1990 Declaration of Sovereignty of the

10. For a detailed account of this process, see Lapidus, "Gorbachev and the 'National Question,'" and "From Democratization to Disintegration."

11. Many of these aspirations and grievances long antedated perestroika; in 1954 the Writers' Union of Tatarstan had sent a request to the Communist Party Central Committee asking that the status of the republic be upgraded. In the North Caucasus, the political movements that emerged in the late 1980s initially also focused on achieving Union Republic status, and only later called for greater self-rule (*samostoyatel'nost'*) and sovereignty; see Ann Sheehy, "Power Struggle in Chechen-Ingushetia," *Radio Liberty Reports*, November 8, 1991. Two reformers sympathetic to these demands, Andrei Sakharov and Galina Starovoitova, proposed a new constitution that would eliminate the Soviet ethnoterritorial hierarchy altogether.

Russian Republic itself. Moreover, in his effort to win support for his struggle against Gorbachev and the USSR "center," Yeltsin encouraged local elites to "take all the sovereignty you can swallow." When the then Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic issued a declaration of state sovereignty on November 27, 1990, it appeared to be just one additional manifestation of a broader trend.¹²

The failure of the attempted coup of August 1991—by hard-line opponents of Gorbachev's reforms seeking to forestall the signing of a new union treaty—effectively undermined the prospects for reforming the Soviet Union, discredited the considerable number of regional and local elites who had supported the putsch, and contributed to the further unraveling of the Soviet system. In Grozny it accelerated the consolidation of a Chechen national movement under the leadership of Dzhokhar Dudayev, a Soviet officer who had returned to Chechnya in 1990 influenced by his military service in Estonia the previous year and had been elected head of the Executive Committee of the All-National Congress of the Chechen People (ANCCP). In the aftermath of the failed coup, Dudayev, with initial support from Moscow, used the occasion to force the dissolution of the Supreme Soviet of the Chechen-Ingush republic (led by Communist Party functionary Doku Zavgayev), which had supported the coup.¹³ But as the increasingly radical tactics of Dudayev and his supporters aroused opposition in Grozny and alarm in Moscow, the Russian government moved from negotiations to ultimatums, provoking Dudayev and the ANCCP Executive Committee to organize presidential elections. On October 27, Dudayev was declared president, notwithstanding challenges to the legitimacy of the election both in Moscow and in Grozny; and on November 1, almost two months before the dissolution of the Soviet Union and international recognition of the Russian Federation as a successor state, the Law on State Sovereignty of the Chechen Republic declared the de facto secession of Chechnya from the USSR.

12. The declaration proclaimed that the Chechen-Ingush Republic was part of neither the Soviet Union nor the Russian Federation; however, it also included provision for entering into contractual relations with other states and with a "union of states," in effect, the USSR.

13. For a more detailed discussion, see Fiona Hill, *Russia's Tinderbox: Conflict in the North Caucasus and Its Implications for the Future of the Russian Federation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Strengthening Democratic Institutions Project, Harvard University, 1995); Emil Pain and Arkady Popov, "Chechnya," in Jeremy Azrael and Emil Pain, eds., *U.S. and Russian Policymaking with Respect to the Use of Force* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 1996); and Valery Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Conflict In and After the Soviet Union: The Mind Aflame* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), chaps. 9, 10.

The rapid and unanticipated unraveling of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 was initially viewed by many as a liberating event. For the Russian Federation, however, it entailed a sudden and traumatic loss of empire, provoking exaggerated—indeed obsessive—fears of the possible disintegration of Russia itself and contributing over time to a shift within the Russian political elite from liberal democratic orientations to increasingly statist and neo-imperial ones. The growing controversy over Russia's federal structure fueled by fears of further disintegration, combined with changes in the composition and policy orientation of Russia's political elite, made issues of center-periphery relations highly contentious. As the new Russian state struggled to create novel constitutional and federal institutions, efforts to halt the centrifugal tendencies that had been unleashed during perestroika became a key priority in Moscow and a major source of conflict in center-periphery relations. This conflict would take its most extreme and intractable form in relations between Moscow and Chechnya.¹⁴

The escalation of conflict between Moscow and Grozny was in large measure the product of a broader problem: a poorly institutionalized policymaking process, exacerbated by bitter intra-elite struggles and conflicts between the executive and legislative branches, which distorted policy debate and complicated the resolution of a whole range of issues. Even the much-hailed bilateral treaty with Tatarstan, finally signed in February 1994 and later touted as a "model" for Chechnya, was the outcome of protracted and contentious negotiations between Moscow and Kazan and was bitterly criticized by influential political actors in both capitals.

The political fluidity, lack of institutionalization, and unresolved issues of governance in Moscow contributed to the crisis over Chechnya in a number of ways. The failure to create a clear, legally based federal structure, and the continuing ambiguity about the status of the 1992 Federal Treaty (which Chechnya and Tatarstan had refused to sign) and the 1993 Constitution (which a number of republics rejected in the December 1993 referendum on the grounds that it was inconsistent with the Federal Treaty) left basic issues of institutional legitimacy and power sharing between the center and the repub-

14. For a more comprehensive analysis of the struggles over Russia's federal structure, see Gail W. Lapidus and Edward Walker, "Nationalism, Regionalism, and Federalism: Center-Periphery Relations in Post-Communist Russia," in Gail W. Lapidus, ed., *The New Russia: Troubled Transformation* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995). A case study of the negotiations over Tatarstan is found in Edward W. Walker, "The Dog That Didn't Bark: Tatarstan and Asymmetrical Federalism in Russia," in Metta Spencer, ed., *The Partition of State* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, forthcoming).

lics unresolved and open to challenge.¹⁵ The mounting crisis was further exacerbated by an ad hoc, personalized, and improvisational policymaking process exhibiting little professionalism. Inadequacies in the flow of information to policymakers, including the president, led to decisions based on unreliable and distorted interpretations rather than on the assessments of knowledgeable experts on the region; a few figures around the president exercised disproportionate influence; and there was little coordination among different institutions and actors involved in nationalities and regional policy. The divergent and conflicting interests of a variety of ministers and presidential advisers, the absence of an effective working relationship between the executive and the parliament, and the corrosive conflict between government and opposition, all made policy toward Chechnya hostage to the struggles for political advantage.

The failure to develop and institutionalize clear norms of civil-military relations, particularly regarding the use of armed forces in internal conflict, and the independent role of security forces not subordinated to the Defense Ministry, created additional problems. It made the constitutionality of President Yeltsin's use of military force in Chechnya as dubious as its wisdom,¹⁶ and it contributed to the visible insubordination of military actors in the course of the war. Finally, a weakly developed civil society proved incapable of organizing constructively to shape or alter policy. Despite significant opposition to the use of force in Chechnya, reflected in public opinion polls throughout the conflict, and despite continuing criticism by parliamentary deputies, some regional leaders and, above all, the media, no broadly based movements emerged to oppose the war, nor was a bitterly divided parliament able to offer a coherent alternative.¹⁷

15. The Russian Constitution adopted in December 1993 ignores the earlier Chechen declaration of sovereignty, explicitly identifies the Chechen republic as a constituent part of the Russian Federation, and contains no provision for secession.

16. Whether President Yeltsin's action violated the constitution was controversial. Yeltsin declared neither martial law nor a state of emergency, nor did he officially notify the Federal Assembly or seek the approval of the Federation Council, as the use of regular troops would normally require. The decision was issued in the form of several executive decrees, including one in the name of the Security Council, a body whose authority had not yet been defined, and was defended on the grounds that it was the president's responsibility "to restore constitutional order" in Chechnya. See Robert Sharlet, "Transitional Constitutionalism: Politics and Law in the Second Russian Republic," *Wisconsin International Law Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1996), pp. 495-521. In July 1995 a divided Constitutional Court upheld the president's action, with several dissents and "special opinions." *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, August 11, 1995, pp. 3-7.

17. Nongovernmental organizations like Memorial and the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers deserve mention as consistent critics of the war. The most comprehensive critique of Russian policymaking by a Russian analyst, along similar lines, is found in Pain and Popov, "Chechnya."

The problems of policymaking in Moscow were compounded by political weakness and intra-elite conflict in Chechnya. Limited institutional development, leadership experience, and economic resources inhibited the ability of Chechnya to function effectively as a state, while regional cleavages and competition among rival clans drove elite politics. Weak political and economic capacity in turn created incentives and opportunities for a variety of illegal activities, including trade in drugs and weapons, whose availability had been sharply increased by the disorganized withdrawal of Soviet military units from the Transcaucasus. These problems were compounded by Dudayev's own political inexperience, mercurial temperament, provocative behavior, and poor judgment. His use of anti-Russian sentiments to consolidate his own domestic political base and weaken his opponents in turn played into the hands of hard-line political and military groups in Russia who favored "settling" all Caucasian problems by force.

In short, an erratic and weakly institutionalized political process in both capitals resulted in a highly personalized and subjective style of decision making that gave exceptional weight to the views and actions of two authoritarian presidents and their immediate entourages. The successful effort by political figures around Yeltsin to turn him against Dudayev and to delegitimize Dudayev's rule effectively blocked the prospect for high-level negotiations between the two presidents to seek a political solution.

Anatomy of Conflict

Russian policy toward Chechnya, and the developing conflict between Moscow and Chechnya, can be broadly divided into six distinct stages.¹⁸

ABORTIVE MILITARY INTERVENTION, NOVEMBER 1991

The first stage in the unfolding conflict involved the emergence and radicalization of the Chechen national movement in the late 1980s, the election of

18. There is as yet no single comprehensive study in English of the conflict. This summary draws on a large body of materials including substantial, though not always well-substantiated, accounts by Russian analysts: a series of articles by Emil Pain and Arkady Popov in *Izvestiya*, February 7, 8, and 10, 1995; Maria Eismont's reportage in *Segodnia*, as well as her article in *Prism*, "The Chechen War: How It All Began," March 8, 1996; V.A. Tishkov, E.L. Belyaeva, and G.V. Marchenko, *Chechenskii krizis* [The Chechen crisis] (Moscow: Center for Sociological Research and Marketing, 1995). The report of the Duma's Govorukhin Commission, *Svidetel'stvo, zakliucheniya i dokumenty sobranye kommissiei pod predsedatel'stvom S.S. Govorukhina* [Testimony. Resolutions and documents compiled by the commission headed by S.S. Govorukhin] (Moscow: Laventa, 1995), set up to conduct a thorough investigation of the events and assign appropriate responsibility, is highly tendentious and unreliable.

Dudayev to the presidency, and the adoption of the law on state sovereignty of November 1, 1991. Moscow's erratic response, shaped as it was by the rivalry between Yeltsin and Gorbachev, culminated in an abortive military intervention. Although Yeltsin's declaration of a state of emergency was quickly reversed by the USSR Supreme Soviet, and the standoff at Grozny airport was averted when Moscow's troops were swiftly withdrawn, the threat of Russian military intervention led to a military countermobilization in Chechnya and served to consolidate support around Dudayev. The episode also served to rekindle hostility toward Russian domination and raised the political costs of any renewed military action.¹⁹

BENIGN BUT PROFITABLE NEGLECT: JANUARY 1992–SPRING 1994

The failure of the intervention in Chechnya, and the breakup of the Soviet Union shortly afterward, brought with it other more urgent priorities. From January 1992 to the spring of 1994, a second stage in relations between Moscow and Grozny amounted to a period of benign but profitable neglect. Reflecting the broader incoherence and elite conflicts characteristic of Russian policy more generally, behavior toward Chechnya took two contradictory directions. On the one hand, as the political and economic situation in Chechnya began to deteriorate, hard-line segments of the Russian leadership sought to exploit the growing political cleavages within Chechnya to vilify the "criminal regime" in Grozny, challenge the legitimacy of Dudayev's rule, and unify opposition figures around a campaign to unseat him.²⁰ At the same time, other Russian government and parliamentary figures engaged in a variety of official dealings with Grozny throughout this period, as well as pursuing intermittent, though unsuccessful, negotiations with a range of Chechen politicians, including Dudayev's rivals. Not only did officials in the two governments work together on a range of economic and political issues; corrupt and criminal groups in Chechnya also worked in partnership with their counterparts in Russia to utilize the unstable situation to profit from trafficking in weapons, oil, and

19. A second abortive intervention occurred in November 1992 when Russian forces sought to use the conflict between Ingush and Ossetians in the Prigorodnyi district of North Ossetia to advance into Chechnya; see the account by North Ossetia's Minister of Internal Affairs G.M. Kantemirov, in *Govorit elita respublik Rossiiskoi Federatsii: 110 intervju Leokadii Drobizhevoi* [The elite of the republics of the Russian Federation speaks: 110 interviews with Leokadia Drobizheva] (Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences, 1996), p. 188.

20. Sergei Shakhrai, chairman of the Russian State Committee on Nationality Policy, was a leading advocate of a strategy of isolating Dudayev and undermining his legitimacy by insisting on the illegality and criminal nature of the Chechen regime. While the RSFSR Congress of People's Deputies had declared the October 1991 elections in Chechnya illegal, neither the executive nor the judiciary ever undertook a formal review and assessment of them.

drugs and to engage in money laundering, facilitated by a large number of unregulated international flights from Grozny's airport.²¹ Indeed, these economic ties and criminal activities constituted a crucial, though still obscure, aspect of the complex relationships between Moscow and Grozny.

FAILURE OF EFFORTS TO OVERTHROW DUDAYEV: SPRING–FALL 1994

In the summer and fall of 1994, major changes in the configuration of Yeltsin's government involving the dismissal or resignation of reformist advisers and the growing influence of a hawkish coalition prompted a shift in policy toward Chechnya. This shift coincided with a hardening of Russian policy in a number of other areas as well: toward the West, toward the "near abroad," and toward issues of internal economic reform. Although knowledgeable specialists on the region favored the continuing use of political and economic instruments to isolate Dudayev, anticipating that the deteriorating situation in Chechnya would lead to his replacement by the Chechens themselves, the Russian government turned toward a policy of actively seeking to assassinate or overthrow Dudayev by providing political, and increasingly military, support to opposition forces.²²

The shift in policy was attributable to several factors: the impact of the December 1993 elections, which persuaded Yeltsin to jettison his liberal image, supporters, and advisers in favor of a more nationalist and authoritarian strategy and greater reliance on hard-line political figures in the president's entourage and in the "power ministries"; the conclusion of the treaty with Tatarstan in February 1994, which refocused attention on Chechnya as the major remaining challenge to the authority of Moscow; and the growing strategic importance of the entire region as Western contracts to exploit the massive oil and gas reserves of the Caspian basin were portrayed as a threat to Russian influence.

21. According to informed Russian sources, substantial quantities of Russian weapons and military technology were transferred to the Chechen side in 1992 with the knowledge and approval of Defense Minister Pavel Grachev. This was by no means an isolated incident; in the general disarray following the breakup of the Soviet Union and the chaotic withdrawal of Soviet military forces, large quantities of weapons were transferred or sold by military units in the Transcaucasus as elsewhere, allegedly with the acquiescence and often the participation of corrupt high-level military officials.

22. Emil Pain has denied allegations that the president's Analytical Center recommended or supported this approach, arguing that the strategy of covertly arming the anti-Dudayev opposition was already familiar to the Russian secret services, which had employed such tactics in overthrowing Presidents Zviad Gamsakhurdia in Georgia and Abulfazl Elchibey in Azerbaijan. See Azrael and Pain, *U.S. and Russian Policymaking with Respect to the Use of Force*.

By the spring of 1994, the shift to the right in Russian elite politics, which gave additional influence to advocates of a unitary Russian state as well as alarmist warnings about Russia's imminent disintegration, not only influenced the terms of debate about Chechnya but provided support for covert efforts to assassinate Dudayev and to undermine his power. Exaggerated reports of secret plans by the Dudayev leadership to incorporate the entire Caucasian region under its control, and to expel Russia from the Caucasus and close off its access to the Caspian Sea, presumably leaked to the media by intelligence sources and figures within Moscow's "power ministries," embellished descriptions of the "criminal regime" in Grozny and served to justify the covert use of military force to overthrow Dudayev.²³ These developments contributed to an environment in which the former Communist leader Zavgayev, backed by hard-line figures in the "power ministries" and the president's entourage, succeeded in winning support for more active intervention in Chechnya whose aim was portrayed repeatedly as designed to free the Chechen people of the illegitimate and dictatorial rule exercised by Dudayev and his "bandit formations." On May 27, 1994, a sophisticated and powerful remote-control car bomb was set off in Grozny that would have killed Dudayev had he occupied his usual place in the automobile procession.

The scale of this effort escalated in the summer and fall. Using political clashes within Chechnya during the summer of 1994 as evidence that Dudayev's regime lacked real popular support, Moscow threw its backing to a Chechen Provisional Council headed by Umar Avturkhanov as the "only legitimate power structure in Chechnya," and sought to unite a variety of opposition figures around it. At the same time, under the supervision of Sergei Stepashin, head of the Federal Counterintelligence Service, successor to the KGB, a coordinating group under Nikolai Yegorov arranged the covert provision of substantial military supplies to the council, including heavy armored vehicles, aircraft, and tanks and tank crews especially recruited for the pur-

23. Internal Affairs Minister Anatoly Kulikov was a leading exponent of such views, and he remained unalterably opposed to any compromise with the Chechen "separatists" even after the debacle of August 1996 paved the way for Aleksandr Lebed's negotiation of the Khasavyurt agreement. The tenor of his views is captured in a speech to the Duma on October 2 denouncing the agreement, where he argued that misguided Russian concessions were leading to ever more radical Chechen goals, including secret plans to unite a large part of the North Caucasus so as to expel Russia from the region and lock it off from the Caspian Sea. He predicted that the separatists would build a "militaristic, totalitarian, extremist-criminal state that is absolutely anti-Russian" and would unite all anti-Russian forces from Tajikistan to Ukraine and the Baltics. The Khasavyurt agreement, Kulikov maintained, represented "a highly professional job that provides support for the process of the destruction of the Russian state as a whole." *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, October 5, 1996, p. 2.

pose. The group also began to recruit Russian officers for the covert operation, promising them an easy victory and substantial remuneration.²⁴ When a separate (and from Moscow's viewpoint, highly unwelcome) effort to storm the city of Grozny by Ruslan Khasbulatov²⁵ encountered little organized opposition, it was taken as a sign that the time was ripe for the Moscow-supported effort to extend its control from northern strongholds to the capital itself.

An armored march on Grozny launched in November 26 by a hastily assembled group of anti-Dudayev volunteers in the expectation that Dudayev's forces would be incapable of real resistance was a fiasco; the opposition forces were routed and over half the tanks were destroyed or seized.²⁶ Humiliation compounded defeat when, in the face of Defense Minister Pavel Grachev's denial of any knowledge of or involvement in the operation, the Chechen government paraded captured Russian military personnel live on television. But the humiliating defeat of Moscow-supported forces in Grozny, far from inviting a reexamination of assumptions and strategy, served to provoke still more drastic action. On November 29, 1994, a secret meeting of the Russian Security Council ratified the decision already taken by President Yeltsin to shift from covert to overt military action and to utilize Russian military forces to subdue Chechnya.²⁷

24. The leading figures in the ascendant "party of war" included Nikolai Yegorov, who had replaced Shakhrai as minister for Nationalities and Regional Affairs in mid-May and was given full control over policy toward Chechnya on November 30; Defense Minister Pavel Grachev; Minister of Security Sergei Stepashin; Minister of Internal Affairs Viktor Yerin; and Oleg Lobov, secretary of the Security Council. Two key figures in the president's apparatus were especially influential: General Aleksandr Korzhakov, a shadowy and hard-line figure who headed the president's Security Service and was a close confidant, and his associate General Mikhail Barsukov, Kremlin commandant. Korzhakov and Barsukov were closely allied with First Vice Premier Oleg Soskovets in challenging Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin and his economic policies as well. Nikolai Yegorov, according to several accounts, provided the major impetus for coercive action; of Cossack background, and an agronomist with no training in ethnic issues, he had gained a reputation as a harsh administrator with little sympathy for ethnic minorities. As a thoughtful Russian parliamentarian and analyst, Viktor Sheinis, has put it, the replacement of Shakhrai by Yegorov was not so much a change from a "dove" to a "hawk," but rather from "an educated man with an inventive mind" to a "butcher—an ignorant uneducated man who prefers exclusively coercive decisions for those complicated problems which exist in Chechnya." See John Dunlop, "The 'Party of War' and Russian Imperial Nationalism," *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (March/April 1996), pp. 29–34; and Lilia Shevtsova, "Moscow's Chechen War," unpublished manuscript, Moscow Carnegie Center, 1998.

25. Ruslan Khasbulatov was a former Yeltsin ally of Chechen descent who backed Yeltsin in August 1991 but later opposed Yeltsin's policy toward Chechnya and sought to use the situation to promote his own political ambitions.

26. The plan to set up a puppet government, which would then legitimize the introduction of Russian forces, was strikingly reminiscent of Soviet policy in Lithuania in January 1991.

27. According to an account by Justice Minister Yuri Kalmykov, who opposed the decision, participants were told to vote on the "force option" first and to discuss the issue afterward.

THE RESORT TO MILITARY FORCE: DECEMBER 1994

The failure of efforts to coerce the Dudayev government to capitulate or to compel its replacement, and the humiliation suffered by their sponsors, strengthened the determination of key figures in the Russian leadership, and of President Yeltsin himself, to demonstrate Moscow's power and resolve by crushing Chechen resistance. Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev would later explain that those like himself who supported or acquiesced in the decision were persuaded by the military participants at the Security Council meeting that it would be an almost "bloodless blitzkrieg" that would be over in a week.²⁸ The decision also reflected the belief among Yeltsin's entourage that a "small but victorious war"²⁹ that consolidated Russia's statehood would reverse the erosion in Yeltsin's popularity and increase his chances in upcoming elections.

Following a series of ultimatums by President Yeltsin, last-minute attempts to restart negotiations were aborted by the intervention of military forces on December 11.³⁰ The entry of Russian military forces at once radically altered the situation in Chechnya. It created a surge of popular support for Dudayev's government, now inseparably linked to the defense of the homeland, and undermined the opposition, which was now discredited as Russian accomplices. As the population of the republic rallied in its defense, the premises of the entire military operation dissolved; the effort to force the replacement of the Dudayev leadership turned into a war indiscriminately directed against the population and infrastructure of the Chechen republic.

In the initial days of the operation, large numbers of civilians, including women and children, sought to block the passage of troops, leading several officers to refuse to continue the operation. The heavy-handed and indiscrimi-

Alexander Gamov, "Security Council Votes Decisions prior to Discussing Them," interview with Yuri Kalmykov, *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, December 20, 1994, p. 3. Defense Minister Grachev reportedly failed to share with the Security Council the reservations of the General Staff. See Oleg Vladykin, "Genshtab preduprezhdal, Grachev prenebreg" [General Staff warned, Grachev disregarded], *Obshchaya gazeta*, December 11-17, 1997.

28. The account of the conversation comes from Sergei Kovalev, as cited in Pain and Popov, "Chechnya." Kozyrev would later assert that a successful military action required a "scalpel" rather than a hammer, but that the military proved incapable of it; conversation with the author at Stanford University, May 13, 1996.

29. The phrase is that of Security Council Secretary Oleg Lobov, as cited in Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Conflict*, p. 218.

30. A secret government document dated December 1 and later leaked by Russian sources, if authentic, offers a chilling glimpse of the contingency planning for the intervention. Apparently prepared for Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin's signature, it contains instructions for handling the mass evacuation of the population of Chechnya. *Plan meropriyatii po obespecheniyu evakuatsii naseleniya Chechenskoi Respubliki* (Moscow: Government of the Russian Federation, decree, December 1, 1994).

nate shelling and bombing, which led to mounting civilian casualties, Russian and Chechen alike, evoked a growing storm of criticism. Moreover, the Russian and foreign journalists covering the conflict provided daily refutations of official propaganda that sought to minimize the scale of the war and conceal casualties; the media coverage offered a vast audience graphic footage of the unfolding carnage. Notwithstanding Defense Minister Grachev's assurances, on January 2, 1995, that an operation to "mop up" Grozny would take only five or six more days, and that residents who had fled the city would be able to return home shortly, the violence continued for almost two more years and resulted in some 100,000 casualties and nearly 400,000 refugees, one-third of the republic's population.³¹

Moreover, the assumption that decisive military actions by the government would win widespread popular support proved profoundly mistaken. The intervention provoked a wave of criticism from broad circles in Russian society, with public opinion polls indicating that over 60 percent of the population opposed the use of force, and about 25 percent were prepared to recognize Chechen independence.³² The heads of a number of other republics issued harsh criticisms of the intervention; neighboring regions feared its destabilizing impact on their own territories; and Generals Aleksandr Lebed and Boris Gromov warned the conflict could turn into another Afghanistan. The brief and successful "surgical strike" promised by its advocates turned into a massive, brutal, and protracted war that devastated the republic of Chechnya, weakened Yeltsin's political standing at home and abroad, and exposed the military and political weakness of the Russian state.

PROTRACTED CONFLICT: JANUARY 1995–AUGUST 1996

As the violence escalated in the face of widespread and unanticipated resistance, ill-prepared and demoralized Russian troops found themselves con-

31. *OMRI Daily Digest*, No. 86, May 3, 1995.

32. Radio Ekho Moskvy, as reported in RFE/RL Research Institute, bulletin no. 236, December 15, 1994. Surveys conducted throughout the war by the All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion also showed the public to be highly critical of Russian policy from the very beginning. In polls conducted in 1996, some 36 percent of respondents favored the departure of Russian troops from Chechnya and acquiescence in Chechnya's independence, while 23 percent favored decisive action to liquidate the Chechen fighters and retain Chechnya within the Russian Federation by any means. Asked who was primarily responsible for the bloodshed in Chechnya, 47 percent named President Yeltsin and his circle, 7 percent the Russian military leadership, and 24 percent Dudayev and his field commanders. Over 54 percent considered Russian policy toward Chechnya totally mistaken, while 3 percent considered it totally correct. These attitudes remained highly stable throughout the duration of the conflict. I should like to express my appreciation to Lev Gudkov for making the center's survey data available to me.

fronting guerrilla warfare in which virtually the entire civilian population of Chechnya came to be seen as the enemy. Over the next two years, the war was accompanied by extreme brutality and massive violations of human rights, documented at considerable length by Russian journalists and political figures, as well as by Russian and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) on the scene. As a number of commentators pointed out, the purpose of the entire operation had become quixotic: to demonstrate that Chechnya was a part of Russia, it was treated as a foreign enemy.

The failure to achieve the capitulation of the Dudayev government, or to win legitimacy for the Moscow-supported regime of Zavgayev, combined with growing domestic and international outrage, ultimately produced a two-track approach in which intermittent and half-hearted attempts at negotiation were combined with a relentless pursuit of military victory.³³ Over the next two years, daring efforts by Chechen militants to use hostage-taking and other terrorist acts to force the Russian government into negotiations produced a succession of cease-fires and talks. Unable to achieve a military victory and unwilling to concede defeat, the Russian leadership considered a variety of measures aimed at reducing the scale and intensity of the conflict and allowing a reduction of the Russian military presence. But intermittent efforts to find a way out of the situation foundered on several obstacles, and any agreements reached were quickly undermined on the Russian side by hard-line opponents of a political settlement.

Moreover, evidence of cleavages and even insubordination within the armed forces began to surface, as a military leadership initially skeptical of the intervention became increasingly committed to victory.³⁴ When President Yeltsin's assurances that bombings or other military actions had been suspended were contradicted by journalists and television cameras on the scene, it was often unclear whether the duplicity was deliberate or whether key actors were operating quasi-independently.

The presidential election campaign in the spring of 1996, as well as the impending Group of Seven meeting scheduled to take place in Moscow in April, gave a new impetus to the search for a negotiated settlement. Recogniz-

33. A useful chronology and compilation of proposals for a settlement can be found in Diane Curran, Fiona Hill, and Elena Kostitsyna, *The Search for Peace in Chechnya: A Sourcebook, 1994–1996* (Cambridge, Mass.: Strengthening Democratic Institutions Project, Harvard University, March 1997).

34. In the spring of 1996, General Vyacheslav Tikhomirov, commander of federal forces in Chechnya, repeatedly asserted that the only subject of negotiations should be how the Chechen militants surrendered their weapons, even as Yeltsin was announcing a broad peace plan and promising the withdrawal of federal forces.

ing that the continuation of the politically unpopular war was undermining his electoral prospects, on March 31 President Yeltsin laid out a plan for resolving the crisis, committing himself to a cease-fire and even—despite opposition from his advisers—to meeting with Dudayev himself. As plans for negotiations moved forward, escalating military operations once again called into question Moscow's intentions, and when Dudayev was killed by a Russian rocket attack on April 22 the process appeared to have stalled once again. A surprise preelection visit by Yeltsin to Grozny relaunched negotiations that culminated in the Nazran agreements on a cease-fire, and provided for Russian troop withdrawals and prisoner exchanges. But the most decisive event was Yeltsin's decision to assure victory in the second round of the presidential elections by appointing third-place contender General Lebed to be secretary of the Security Council, and putting him in charge of the peace negotiations.

With Yeltsin's election victory, fighting surged once again, amid renewed claims that Russian forces had won the war. The Chechen side responded by launching an assault on Grozny on August 6, on the eve of Yeltsin's inauguration, in an effort to force Moscow back to the negotiating table and to demonstrate that the war was by no means over. The massive defeat and humiliation of Russian forces left no realistic option short of totally destroying the city to retake it. When the commander of Russian forces on the scene appeared prepared to do precisely that, calling for the evacuation of all civilians from the city, it was clear that Russian policy had reached a dead end. Amid bitter recriminations and debate in Moscow, General Lebed visited Grozny as presidential envoy to negotiate an end to the war.

NEGOTIATING PEACE: AUGUST 1996–MAY 1997

The negotiations that culminated in the Khasavyurt cease-fire agreement signed on August 31, 1996, the withdrawal of Russian forces, the election of Aslan Maskhadov as president of Chechnya in January 1997 in elections organized with the assistance of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the presence of international observers, and the signing in May 1997 of the agreement "On Peace and the Principles of Mutual Relations between the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria" were made possible by three key developments. First and foremost was the massive defeat of Russian forces in Grozny, in which their vaunted control over the city was challenged overnight by a surprise rebel offensive. Recognizing that any effort to retake the city was tantamount to its complete destruction by bombing, the Russian leadership finally acknowledged the futility of its military campaign and prevented the military from launching a new offensive.

Second, the deadlocked military situation created an opportunity for the more liberal group of advisers around Yeltsin who had reemerged during his election campaign to win control over policy toward Chechnya. The third factor was the personal role of General Lebed in ending the conflict.

The terms of Lebed's appointment gave him both a personal and a political stake in achieving a settlement. He also benefited from having had no responsibility for the war; Lebed was in the fortunate position of being able to admit others' mistakes rather than his own. Recognizing in August 1996 that the war was both unwinnable and wrong, that constitutional order could not be established by air strikes and artillery shelling, that extremists on both sides had to be neutralized, and that the Chechen leaders were responsible negotiating partners who would honor agreements they had entered into, Lebed's commitment to a negotiated settlement was unequivocal. To this task he brought a degree of personal courage, sensitivity to the psychology of the Chechen side, and decisiveness that won the respect and the confidence of his negotiating partners and made the Khasavyurt agreement possible. Although President Yeltsin initially distanced himself from the agreements, their deliberate ambiguity on key issues, and in particular, the deferral of decisions on the status of Chechnya for five years, which allowed both sides to claim victory, and the broad domestic and international acclaim that greeted them, eased his ultimate acquiescence.

Missed Opportunities for Conflict Prevention: Moscow and Grozny

Scholars and practitioners concerned with preventive diplomacy have devoted increasing attention in recent years to the need for early warning of incipient or developing crises if violent conflict is to be forestalled. More important, they have begun to focus attention on the need for, and impediments to, marshaling timely and effective responses to warning.³⁵ Analysis of the evolution of the conflict in Chechnya suggests that both the parties to the conflict and the broader international community had available to them ample early warning that the conflict was escalating, as well as a broad array of possible responses, but that for reasons explored here, timely and appropriate measures were not adopted before the intervention by Russian military forces. Once the war was

35. See Alexander L. George and Jane Holl, *The Warning-Response Problem and Missed Opportunities in Preventive Diplomacy* (New York: Report to the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, May 1997). The difficulties in identifying the potential for violent conflict are discussed in Mikhail Alexseev, "Early Warning, Ethnopolitical Conflicts, and the United Nations: Assessing the Violence in Georgia/Abkhazia," unpublished paper, Kennan Institute, Washington, D.C.

launched, actions taken by the international community necessarily shifted from conflict prevention to conflict mitigation and conflict termination, and these will be explored in the subsequent section.

The responsibility for conflict prevention rests first and foremost with the parties themselves. Without minimizing the contribution of the Chechen leadership to the process of escalation, the assertion of the Russian government that military force was used as a last resort, after all other options for a peaceful resolution of the conflict had been exhausted, is not supported by the record. A considerable repertoire of tools and strategies were available to the governments of Russia and Chechnya for dealing with the conflict by means other than military force, but as this account has argued, these options were not seriously explored or utilized. This assessment is shared by a number of responsible figures in the Russian political establishment with firsthand knowledge of policymaking in the developing conflict. Emil Pain, a leading specialist on nationality policy and presidential adviser during this period, has written: "In democratic societies, there are a number of conditions under which the use of force is the only permissible way for a state to resolve regional conflicts. This is true, above all, when peaceful means of resolving conflicts have been exhausted and society has agreed to incur casualties and material losses, as well as when society is confident of the army's ability to act not only effectively but also in a civilized manner. These conditions had not been met before the Chechen war began."³⁶ A similar view was expressed by Sergei Kovalev, the prominent human rights advocate and, until his resignation over the war in Chechnya, President Yeltsin's special adviser on human rights. In testimony before the U.S. Congressional Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, he asserted that "for quite some time both before and after the outbreak of fighting it would have been possible to solve the problem of Chechen separatism by political means. All attempts to do so were systematically and deliberately torpedoed by the military high command and by others in the government in Moscow."³⁷

Direct bilateral negotiations between officials of both governments at the highest level were never conducted. Indeed, a number of critics of Russian policy, including Tatarstan's President Mintimer Shaimiyev, have focused on the demonization of Dudayev, and President Yeltsin's refusal to meet with him, as major policy errors. Dudayev himself was willing, indeed eager, to meet

36. Emil Pain and Arkady Popov, "Russian Policy in Chechnya," *Izvestiya*, February 10, 1995, p. 4.

37. Testimony in hearing before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, U.S. Congress, May 1, 1995, p. 34.

with Yeltsin, according to all accounts; Arkadii Volsky, who headed a Russian negotiating group, reported that Dudayev told him he had ordered a new suit in anticipation of the meeting.³⁸ However, the successful efforts of hard-line advisers around President Yeltsin to convince him that Dudayev was neither a serious nor a legitimate political actor ruled out the direct negotiations for which Dudayev had repeatedly called. Other Russian officials have added that the conditions proposed by Moscow and the names of those appointed to conduct talks with the Chechen side were further proof that the negotiations were not taken seriously.

In view of the obstacles to serious direct negotiations between the two parties, the involvement of other actors as mediators or facilitators might have contributed to productive discussion and added a degree of transparency to the contacts that did take place, an important contribution of the OSCE presence during the 1996 talks. Indeed, Dudayev reportedly proposed and supported third-party mediation.³⁹ While discreet discussions of such options went on behind the scenes, the highly charged political atmosphere in Moscow blocked third-party mediation by other actors within the Russian Federation, such as regional governors or republic presidents, or by other Commonwealth of Independent States' leaders, even though several possible candidates were available and willing.⁴⁰

Moreover, there was considerable scope for negotiation of possible arrangements short of full independence but going beyond the "Tatarstan model," including agreement to postpone a final solution to the contentious issue of status. Although Russian officials have argued that the Chechen leadership was unyielding in its insistence on complete independence, there are several reasons to question this view. For one thing, the Dudayev government clearly sought, and indeed assumed, continuing economic links to Russia and continuing participation in the ruble zone; it never sought to cut economic and political ties by closing its border, or introducing its own currency in place of the ruble, as for example the secessionist leaderships in Transdniestria and Abkhazia had done in their conflicts with Moldova and Georgia.

Some skepticism is further warranted because of the repeated tendency of some Russian officials to exaggerate the threat of dismemberment. Although the 1994 power-sharing treaty with Tatarstan would later be held out as a

38. Shevtsova, "Moscow's Chechen War."

39. Author's conversation with Yegor Gaidar, November 26, 1996.

40. Presidents Mintimer Shaimiyev of Tatarstan and Ruslan Aushev of Ingushetia, for example, were skillful and influential figures who were in a position to play a constructive political role.

model for compromise that the Chechens rejected, the negotiations with Kazan were themselves difficult and protracted. Even the more modest demands of the Tatarstan side were viewed with alarm, and provoked the threat of Russian military intervention in March 1992.

Further, both Russian and Western accounts often add to the confusion about the intentions of the Chechen leadership by treating the Russian terms for "sovereignty" and for "independence" as if they were interchangeable. In fact, the Chechen Constitution adopted in 1992 referred only to "state sovereignty"; the term "independence" was not used. Whether a loose form of associated status would have been acceptable remains an open question.

Clearly, the scope for compromise would have been clarified in the course of a serious negotiating process, and particularly one that utilized the good offices of foreign governments or international organizations. The Dudayev leadership, fearing imminent Russian military action, made a number of appeals (before as well as after the Russian military intervention) to the United Nations (UN), to U.S. President Bill Clinton, and to the governments of a number of other countries, outlining the escalating Russian efforts to use military force against Chechnya, and urging that they press the Russian government to refrain from further military actions and to resume serious negotiations.⁴¹ It remains unclear whether these appeals were sent through appropriate channels and reached the intended recipients.⁴² In any case, there is no indication that the Russian government was prepared to cooperate, and absent that support neither the UN nor the OSCE would have contemplated action. The attitude of the Russian leadership was curtly summed up by Foreign Minister Kozyrev in December 1994 when he commented to the Russian press that "settlement of the Chechen crisis is an internal affair of the Russian Federation. We need no foreign mediators for that."⁴³

41. Statement by Movladi Udugov to joint session of the Chechen Presidential Council and the Parliament of the Confederation of Caucasian Peoples, TASS, August 23, 1994. The request for UN or other foreign observers was repeated the following month. According to a *Segodnia* correspondent in Grozny, following a rocket attack on the airport on September 30, 1994, the Chechen leadership called an emergency meeting at which it rejected opposition demands for a transfer of power, appealed to the governments of other North Caucasian republics to "forestall the use of their resources and territory" by Russian forces, and called upon the United Nations and other foreign governments to send observers to Chechnya. See Natalia Gorodetskaya, *Segodnia*, October 1, 1994, p. 1. Sergei Filatov, head of Yeltsin's administration, responded with a statement that Russia's leaders were not contemplating an invasion of Chechnya.

42. According to a high-level UN official interviewed by the author, no formal request from the Chechen leadership through appropriate channels was ever received.

43. A similarly negative response to suggestions that OSCE mechanisms be invoked was reported in Fred Hiatt, "Moscow Warns West on Criticism over Chechnya," *Washington Post*, January 13, 1995, p. A26.

Preventive Diplomacy: The Western Failure

Why the Russian government in the fall of 1994 was unwilling to utilize available mechanisms for conflict prevention is relatively clear. It remains a puzzle why the international community failed to play a more active role in deterring or preventing the escalation of the conflict. As this section suggests, the answer goes beyond the invocation of the norms of sovereignty or the resistance of the Russian government; it involves as well both the way in which the conflict was framed and the place it occupied in a broader agenda of relations with Russia.

Even prior to the summer and fall of 1994, there was ample warning that the growing conflict between Moscow and Grozny could erupt into open violence.⁴⁴ The North Caucasus had long been viewed as the most turbulent region of the Russian Federation, and as we have seen, the dispute between Moscow and Chechnya began even before the dissolution of the USSR. Both in the fall of 1991, when Russian troops threatened Grozny and Dudayev ordered full-scale mobilization, and again in November 1992 when Russian troops massed along the Ingush border and entered Chechnya, military confrontation seemed imminent.

The lack of serious Western or international attention stemmed in part from the relative obscurity of the region, which had never elicited significant Western expertise and media attention, in part from the absence of a domestic constituency that could give it political saliency, and in part from the view that because the conflict had no interstate dimension it was unlikely to affect broader regional security. The protracted conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, for example, which had attracted considerable attention and involvement by the international community, was given high visibility in the West by the presence of a large and active Armenian diaspora, while the attention devoted to the political status of Russians in the Baltic states was fueled by the political pressures brought to bear by Moscow. By contrast, the only significant efforts by the NGO community to focus international attention on the situation in Chechnya were those of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO),⁴⁵ which was widely viewed as an organization prepared to support

44. However, it should also be noted that a project designed to monitor potential sources of ethnic conflict, by the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology in conjunction with Harvard's Conflict-Management Group, failed as late as October 1994 to identify the potential for conflict over Chechnya; Alexseev, "Early Warning, Ethnopolitical Conflicts, and the United Nations," pp. 7-8.

45. From 1992 to the outbreak of war, the UNPO sent urgent warnings to individual governments, to the Political Affairs office of the UN secretary-general, to the Foreign Ministry of Russia, and

indiscriminately virtually any minority group, and of International Alert, which undertook a fact-finding mission to Moscow and Grozny in October 1992, at the invitation of Valery Tishkov, director of the Institute of Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and at that time chairman of the Russian State Committee on Nationalities Affairs.⁴⁶ In its final report, the mission urged both sides to engage in a broad bilateral dialogue over the entire range of economic, political, and security issues, and suggested that such a dialogue could best be facilitated by an outside organization or group of individuals acceptable to both sides, but these recommendations were neither followed up nor implemented.⁴⁷

By the spring of 1994, the relationship between Moscow and Grozny displayed virtually all the signs of an "unstable peace" that pointed to the need for preventive diplomacy: high or rising potential that coercion might be used to resolve political differences; the absence or breakdown of policies and institutions at a regional or national level that could handle disagreements and maintain a process of orderly resolution; and the explicit request, on the Chechen side, for third-party involvement in mediating the conflict.⁴⁸ A broad repertoire of tools had been developed over the years that might have been brought to bear on the situation, from fact-finding missions by NGOs and efforts to involve both parties in informal or track-two dialogue to utilizing the good offices of the UN secretary-general's staff or the OSCE to create favorable conditions for direct negotiations and provide them with a degree of transparency. Indeed, precedent already existed for the use of such mechanisms in the region in the Baltic states, in response to charges by the Russian government of discrimination against the Russian populations of Estonia and Latvia.⁴⁹

to the U.S. State Department and Congress, and offered space at their Hague offices to a representative of the Chechen government.

46. International Alert, *Chechnia: Report of an International Alert Fact-Finding Mission*, September 24–October 3, 1992 (London, n.d.).

47. *Ibid.* The mission was described as a fact-finding visit, in the context of trips to several regions of potential ethnic conflict, in an effort to develop early-warning mechanisms; it explicitly disavowed any intention of contacting local NGOs involved in conflict resolution, of providing third-party involvement, or of proposing solutions, although President Dudayev indicated his willingness to discuss third-party involvement in a letter of December 14, 1992, responding to the report (p. 52). The removal of Tishkov and his replacement by Sergei Shakhrai signaled a more hard-line approach by the Russian government to nationality policy and fewer possibilities for cooperation with international organizations, but there is no evidence that International Alert itself sought to pursue the issue.

48. The definitions are drawn from Lund, *Preventing Violent Conflicts*, pp. 38–41.

49. The willingness of the Baltic governments to cooperate with such efforts stood in striking contrast to the Russian attitude at the time, and reflected their strong desire for recognition as

Nor was reliable information about the steady escalation of the conflict unavailable. The Russian media tracked this process in considerable detail and with great frankness throughout 1994; serious investigative reporting regularly challenged official accounts of events in the region, and exposed, for example, the fact that Russian conscripts and officers were being recruited for secret combat operations on the side of the so-called Chechen opposition, and that Russian aircraft and heavy weapons were being provided for its operations. A few individuals and NGOs expressed growing concern about the possibility of military escalation, and UNPO in particular appealed for international efforts to avert it.⁵⁰ In October and November 1994, explicit appeals were sent both by President Dudayev and by Foreign Minister Shamseddin Yousef to President Clinton and to UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. However, Western analysts and government officials appear not to have focused on the conflict and generally minimized the likelihood of a resort to force. To the extent that the issue received attention, it seems to have been assumed that it would be madness to attempt a military conquest of Chechnya. There seemed no reason to doubt the repeated assurances by President Yeltsin and his aides throughout the summer and fall that the conflict would be resolved by peaceful means.⁵¹ At a time when Western governments, and the United States in particular, were preoccupied with a number of serious problems in relations with Russia, and preparing for the important OSCE meeting scheduled for December 1994 in Budapest, there appears to have been an expectation that even if some elements of the Russian security or military establishment were threatening force to compel Dudayev's political capitulation, it would not actually be utilized.

genuinely democratic countries and for acceptance into European institutions. Pro-European attitudes were significantly weaker and far more controversial among Russian elites.

50. In a communiqué from December 13, 1994, the UNPO asserted that the organization had for months been warning the international community of the likelihood of a military invasion and appealing for international efforts to prevent it. The communiqué condemned the Russian invasion and called upon all governments, the UN, and the CSCE (subsequently renamed OSCE) to use all possible influence over the Russian government to prevent a "bloodbath."

51. Such public assurances were proffered by Sergei Filatov, head of the Presidential Staff, on August 4 and 9, and by President Yeltsin himself on August 11. Interviewed on television before departing on a working tour of the Volga, Yeltsin stated: "Intervention by force is impermissible and must not be done. Were we to apply pressure by force against Chechnya, this would rouse the whole Caucasus, there would be such a commotion, there would be so much blood that nobody would ever forgive us. It is absolutely not possible." Similar denials were issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defense on August 10 and 11. As late as September 30 Filatov told journalists that Russia had ruled out armed involvement in the Chechen conflict. "We have only one position—no Russian troops must be there," he asserted. Interfax News Agency, as reported by BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, October 3, 1994.

Western perceptions of the unfolding conflict over Chechnya were also significantly affected by the way in which the entire issue was framed by the Russian leadership. Lacking extensive knowledge of and direct experience in the region, some Western analysts and actors, including some in the United States government, were perhaps too willing to accept uncritically Moscow's effort to portray the struggle between Moscow and Grozny as an issue of internal law and order rather than an ethno-political conflict focused on issues of self-determination. Undeniably, allegations that Chechnya had become a center of corrupt and criminal activities had a serious basis in fact. It was equally undeniable that Dudayev was a difficult figure to deal with, and that his regime lacked a broad base of popular support. However, the mixture of information and disinformation spewed out by official Russian sources, as well as by nationalist propagandists, passed over the obvious collusion between Russian and Chechen elites that had contributed to the situation and portrayed the Dudayev leadership as nothing more than a criminal conspiracy without popular support or legitimacy, manipulating separatist political slogans to disguise its real goals. It was, moreover, permeated with ethnic stereotyping and scapegoating that came close to treating Chechens as criminals. Misleading and exaggerated characterizations of the situation in Chechnya emanating from Russian sources, which bore all the earmarks of counterintelligence service disinformation efforts, were not limited to the extremist publications or speeches of right-wing nationalists; they were all too often voiced by scholars and high-ranking officials like Minister of Defense Grachev, Foreign Minister Kozyrev, and President Yeltsin himself.⁵² This propaganda campaign may well have contributed to the tendency in Washington and elsewhere to view the Chechens, and Dudayev in particular, as the troublemakers and villains in the unfolding tragedy.⁵³

52. One example of the tenor of such allegations was a December 1994 declaration of the Central Council of Russian National Unity, a right-wing political group: "The present Chechen administration has turned Chechnya into a parasitic, thieving conglomerate, and thereby lowered its people to the level of the early Middle Ages," cited in Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Conflict*, p. 184. As Yeltsin himself described the situation, "On the territory of the Chechen republic as the result of an armed coup, there was established the most dictatorial kind of regime. The fusion of the criminal world and the regime—about which politicians and journalists spoke incessantly as the main danger for Russia—became a reality in Chechnya. This was the testing ground for the preparation and dissemination of criminal power to other Russian regions." Maxim Isayev, "Kremlin Gossip," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, February 17, 1995, p. 1. Foreign Minister Kozyrev insisted time and again that "this is neither an ethnic conflict nor a conflict between Moscow and a federation entity" . . . but an effort to eliminate criminal armed gangs and to restore order and the rights of Russian citizens. Interviews with *Novoe vremya*, Moscow, December 27, 1994, p. 52, and with Bratislava Smena, February 1, 1995, p. 1.

53. A senior administration official described the Chechen leadership as "blackmailing, brutal, and authoritarian." See R. Jeffrey Smith, "U.S. Interests Seen Allied with Russia in Chechnya: Effect of

When Russian military actions were launched on December 11, Western governments appear to have been taken by surprise. Having given great weight to Yeltsin's private and public assurances in the summer and fall of 1994 that the use of force was unthinkable in the Caucasus, Western capitals seemed unprepared for the development. No prior notification appears to have been given by the Russian government, nor was the prospect of military action raised by Russian officials at the December OSCE meeting in Budapest.

In view of the obvious disarray of Russian military forces, Western intelligence may also have accepted too uncritically official assertions that a surgical strike was not only feasible but was assured of quick success. Even analysts who anticipated the possibility of protracted guerrilla warfare in the mountains of Chechnya appear to have assumed that Russian forces would rapidly subdue Grozny itself. Not only was the unpreparedness and disarray of Russian forces underestimated, so was the capacity and determination of Chechen militants to defend their country and unite around its leadership in response to the Russian military intervention. It was only after several weeks of clumsy and failed military operations, enormous civilian casualties, and wanton destruction that questions began to be raised about the underlying assumptions of the military operation and its goals. Before December 1994, preventive diplomacy was not even attempted.

Russian Military Action: The Western Response

Russian military actions in Chechnya constituted a serious violation of a number of international commitments. Most notably, they violated Council of Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) agreements of 1990 and 1992 involving prior notification of major military activities, and they were a direct and clear challenge to the principles enshrined in the Budapest Code of Conduct signed less than two weeks earlier.⁵⁴ But broader principles were at stake as well. Underlying the entire history of the Helsinki process was the principle that the international community had an important stake in the way governments treated their own populations, and that violations of human rights and

Independence on Nuclear Stability Feared," *Washington Post*, December 25, 1994, p. A27. Another official dealing with Russian affairs was quoted as asserting: "I don't want to say that all Chechens are crooks, but the people running the country are." *Ibid.*, p. A27.

54. The CSCE agreements obliged signatories to issue prior notice of military activities involving more than 9,000 troops or 250 tanks, and to issue invitations to outside observers when more than 13,000 troops were deployed. The Code of Conduct pledged the signatories not to use their military forces for internal security except in accordance with constitutional procedures, and to avoid injury to civilians or their property.

of other international obligations were not merely an "internal affair," but behavior for which governments could and should be held accountable. These understandings were largely ignored in the initial Western reactions to the Russian invasion of Chechnya; it took almost a month for the U.S. government to formally acknowledge that Russian actions violated these commitments.⁵⁵

The initial American reaction to the Russian invasion was a statement by President Clinton on December 11 at a press conference in Miami that "it is an internal affair, and we hope that order can be restored with a minimum amount of bloodshed and violence."⁵⁶ Secretary of State Warren Christopher went even further in conveying tacit support for Russian actions, and for President Yeltsin personally, in stating: "It's best in such matters to leave it to the judgment of President Yeltsin; it's a democratic society; it's not the old Cold War. I'm sure he thought through what he was doing before he did it, and it's best we let him run such things." Christopher went on to add: "We would not like to see the disintegration of Russia. We think that might lead to much more bloodshed. . . . I'm sure he took this action only when he felt he had no other alternative."⁵⁷

This cautious attitude, verging on outright endorsement of Russian actions, was reiterated in a succession of State Department briefings and press conferences over the next two weeks. The American government, in effect, put itself in the position of supporting a military action opposed by a majority of Russian citizens, as well as by Russia's most outspoken supporters of democracy and human rights. It also elicited a sharp response from Republican critics of the administration; as Christopher Smith, Republican chair of the congressional Subcommittee on Human Rights admonished: "The eradication of a people and its territory is not an internal matter."⁵⁸

The official commentary was notable in several respects. First, it tended to echo the framing of the issue emanating from official Russian sources, namely, that what was involved was no more than the legitimate effort of a state to restore order on its territory, and the hope that this would be accomplished

55. U.S. State Department briefing, January 11, 1995.

56. Press conference by President Bill Clinton, Miami, Florida, December 11, 1994.

57. *McNeil-Lehrer NewsHour*, December 13, 1994. Pressed by the media to explain Christopher's apparent endorsement of Russian actions, McCurry stated: "Secretary Christopher did not endorse the Russian effort to reestablish civil order in Chechnya; neither did he oppose it. In a sense, he took a neutral position on it by saying that Chechnya is an integral part of Russia. Therefore, the Russians have to handle this and address it as an internal Russian matter." McCurry went on to suggest that the Chechens seek redress of their grievances by working through the Russian parliament.

58. Quoted in "In Brussels Urgent Talks on Chechnya," *New York Times*, January 10, 1995, p. A11.

swiftly and at low cost. In none of the initial statements was there any indication that the issue was not Russia's territorial integrity—it was never questioned—but of the methods by which it would be maintained. It failed to make clear that *how* the Russian government deals with its internal problems is a matter of enormous concern to the international community. A strong case can be made that "the failure to act in a more decisive fashion had the effect of granting the Russian government before and during the first stages of the conflict a de facto license to flagrantly disregard the most basic principles of international law, including those reiterated in the Code of Conduct."⁵⁹

Second, to the extent that the issue of Chechnya's status was addressed, the press commentary emanating from Washington largely repeated apocalyptic Russian statements warning that what was at stake was the fragmentation or disintegration of Russia itself. A State Department briefing on December 14 echoed Russian statements about the threat of dismemberment: "We have no interest and the world has no interest in seeing a splintering or dismembering of the Russian Federation. That would be enormously destabilizing. It would produce the possibility of large-scale refugee flows."⁶⁰ The argument that Chechnya posed a threat not merely to the territorial integrity but to the unity and stability of the entire Russian Federation, and that it could set in motion a "domino effect" with repercussions throughout the country, appears to have been taken for granted without much consideration for the distinctive features of the Chechen context. Moreover, it appears to have heightened particular concerns in the intelligence community of the potential for loss of control over nuclear weapons and armed forces.⁶¹ The possibility that a resort to military intervention in the North Caucasus was more likely to increase rather than reduce instability was not addressed.

Yet another striking feature of the American reaction were the analogies drawn—however inept and misleading—between the Chechnya conflict and the American Civil War, with the implied or explicit parallel between Abraham

59. Michael R. Lucas, "The War in Chechnya and the OSCE Code of Conduct," *Helsinki Monitor*, No. 2, 1995.

60. U.S. Department of State briefing, December 14, 1994.

61. A high-level official reportedly stated: "I accept Yeltsin's argument" that if Chechnya is able to break away from Moscow, other republics may be tempted to do the same. "It's very important for our long-term security that Russia remain a unitary state that remains stable. We have an obvious interest in the stability of their armed forces [and] nuclear forces." Smith, "U.S. Interests Seen Allied with Russia in Chechnya." While the intelligence community assessments of the situation may well have been more nuanced, similar concerns had been voiced earlier in the year in a published article by National Security Council official Jessica Eve Stern, "Moscow Meltdown: Can Russia Survive?" *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Spring 1994), pp. 40–65.

Lincoln and Boris Yeltsin.⁶² This rationale for military action, used to particular effect by Foreign Minister Kozyrev addressing an American audience on *Meet the Press*, was an attempt to legitimate Russian actions in Chechnya while sidestepping the actual conduct of Moscow in the conflict.⁶³ Ignoring as it did the long history of antagonism, including issues of both ethnicity and conquest, the analogy was not only inappropriate; it was also strikingly reminiscent of Gorbachev's efforts in 1990–91 to evoke the Civil War as justification for Moscow's opposition to Baltic independence.

As the scale of military actions escalated over the next few weeks, administration sources continued to avoid harsh attacks on Russian conduct, confining criticisms to the humanitarian aspects of the conflict. State Department briefings focused on specific and limited concerns, such as "individual instances in which we think there has been indiscriminate use of force," or the fact that International Red Cross relief efforts were being obstructed. Or they called upon the Russian leadership to refrain from attacks on civilians, when such attacks were clearly an integral feature of the whole operation.⁶⁴

Obviously, the press commentary did not necessarily reflect the administration's actual assessment of the situation, nor did it preclude continuing private efforts to convey to Moscow that its actions were jeopardizing the bilateral relationship. A good deal of it represented an attempt at damage limitation aimed at domestic audiences, an effort to prevent opponents of administration policies toward Russia from using the war in Chechnya to promote their goals. The administration had two overriding concerns: to prevent what it viewed as a marginal problem from derailing progress on high-priority issues in Russian-American relations; and to support President Yeltsin politically, out of a conviction that his continuation in office, and friendly personal relationship with President Clinton, was indispensable both to continuing economic and political

62. See, for example, the U.S. State Department daily press briefing on January 3, 1995. More than a year later President Clinton would explicitly draw this analogy before a Russian audience. During his visit to Moscow in April 1996, in response to a question whether the United States should be more critical of the war in Chechnya, the president responded: "I would remind you that we once had a civil war in our country in which we lost on a per capita basis far more people than we lost in any of the wars of the twentieth century over the proposition that Abraham Lincoln gave his life for—that no state had a right to withdraw from our union." John F. Harris, "Clinton, Yeltsin, Gloss Over Chechen War: Russian Leader Denies Fighting Continues Despite Rising Death Toll," *Washington Post*, April 22, 1996, p. A1.

63. The Russian Constitution, Kozyrev stated, "provides for the unity of the Russian Federation, and, yes, as President Lincoln, President Yeltsin will not tolerate defection, especially defection not by popular referendum or any free and fair elections in the area, but just a military camp. . . . It is just a criminal gang."

64. Michael D. McCurry, U.S. State Department daily press briefing, January 3, 1995.

reform and to Russian-American partnership on a broad range of international issues.

High administration officials repeatedly insisted that Russian behavior in Chechnya should not be allowed to stand in the way of continuing Russian-American engagement over a whole range of urgent problems, from nuclear proliferation to Bosnia, nor detract from the achievements of the Yeltsin administration in political democratization and economic reform. Defense Secretary William Perry, for example, in responding to questions about Chechnya in connection with his meeting with General Grachev on December 16, asserted that "provided it is not destabilizing beyond the scope of that activity, I do not see it as affecting our desire to have a pragmatic partnership with Russia."⁶⁵ Indeed, State Department press spokesman Michael McCurry expressed irritation with the media's focus on Chechnya in a briefing on December 12: "We have been aware for some time, for months, of the conflict that exists in Chechnya, the efforts that the Russians have made to control violence there, to deal with what has been a very crime-ridden and corruption-ridden province. . . . We are certainly well aware of the situation and how the Russians have been responding to it. But by no means does Chechnya define the broad parameters of the U.S.-Russia partnership. . . . I caution anyone here [not] to elevate the question of Chechnya just because it happens in the headlines and in your heads today into something that is on a par with the question of NATO expansion or of the other issues in which we have a very important and focused engagement with the Russians."⁶⁶ To preserve a good working relationship with President Yeltsin, the administration apparently refrained from raising the issue in high-level bilateral discussions until the foreign secretaries' meeting in January 1995.⁶⁷

The initial response in European capitals was similarly restrained. The European Union (EU) refused to issue a strong condemnation of Russian military actions in Chechnya on the explicit grounds that support for the process of democratic reform deserved higher priority than demanding compliance with norms of human rights, and that the establishment of democratic institutions

65. Michael R. Gordon, "U.S. Stays Aloof from Russia's War Within," *New York Times*, December 25, 1994, p.10.

66. U.S. State Department daily press briefing, December 12, 1994.

67. The issue was apparently raised in diplomatic channels through the U.S. embassy in Moscow in December 1994, and privately with Kozyrev at the OSCE Budapest meeting. But it was apparently not raised in conversations between Clinton and Yeltsin, the meeting of Kozyrev and Christopher in Brussels, the Grachev-Perry meeting, or the Gore-Chernomyrdin meeting in Moscow on December 14-16, 1995. James Collins, testimony before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, U.S. Congress, January 19 and 27, 1995.

was the best guarantee that intrastate as well as interstate conflicts would be resolved peacefully.⁶⁸ The reports of Russian military actions, however, quickly gave rise to second thoughts about the ability of Russian forces to conduct a carefully targeted operation. The *London Times* gave most direct expression to the unspoken consensus: "A nation cannot accept the threat of an armed conflict within its country. Negotiations backed by a threat of force would have been the best choice. But there is no turning back now. If force is used it must be coordinated and overwhelming. Half-measures will only increase resistance and lead to bloodshed. But the current political confusion in Moscow and the unsuccessful military operations in Chechnya make a quick and effective operation increasingly unlikely."⁶⁹ When a European Parliament resolution adopted on December 15 accepted that Chechnya was part of the Russian Federation but deplored Russia's use of armed forces against "national minorities," the Russian Duma issued an angry response, denying the allegations and insisting that the issue was exclusively one of disarming illegal military formations armed with tanks and rocket launchers.

Russian analyst Andrei Kortunov summed up the initial Western reaction in mid-January 1995: "So far, the events in the North Caucasus have not led to any even halfway serious crisis in relations between Russia and the West. If one doesn't count the symbolic gesture by Denmark, which has frozen military cooperation with Moscow, our leading Western partners have, on the whole, reacted to the 'pacification' in Chechnya with Olympian calm. Action has been limited to a modest proposal to get the mechanism of the OSCE involved in an effort to solve the problem, a few outraged editorials in the liberal press, and some caustic cartoons of Boris Yeltsin."⁷⁰

As reports accumulated of the brutality of Russian actions and the indiscriminate shelling of civilian targets, and as the blatant lies dispensed by Russian officials were exposed daily by the news reports and television coverage from Chechnya, the European response became increasingly critical. As

68. Secretary of State Christopher had offered an explicit rationale for this view—a rationale heavily influenced by the "democratic peace" literature in international relations theory—in a speech to NATO on February 26, 1993: "Europe's long-term security—like America's—requires that we actively foster the spread of democracy and market economies. Democracies tend not to make war on each other. They are more likely to protect human rights and ensure equal rights for minorities. They are more likely to be reliable partners in diplomacy, trade, arms accords, and environmental protection." Cited in Abram Chayes and Antonia Handler Chayes, eds., *Preventing Conflict in the Post-Communist World* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1996, p. 230).

69. Stanislav Kondrashov, "An Internal Affair with International Repercussions," *London Times*, December 17, 1995, p. 4.

70. Andrei Kortunov, "The Quasi-State and the West," *Moskovskiy Novosti*, January 8–15, 1995, p. 9, as cited in the *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (February 1, 1995), p. 11.

a correspondent of Moscow's daily newspaper *Segodnia* put it on January 5, Moscow has failed to justify "the hopes of Western politicians that a rapid and not too bloody elimination of the hotbed of separatism in Chechnya would allow them to keep silent. The events of the past few days have made the democratic countries radically change the tone of their comments."⁷¹ Although no major European leaders challenged the view that this was Russia's internal affair, a growing number began to criticize Russian actions as uncivilized, unacceptable, and in clear violation of international law.⁷² As criticism and demands for explanation mounted, EU Foreign Affairs Commissioner Hans van den Broek announced that the EU would delay implementing the partnership agreement with Russia pending consultations. "We don't dispute that Chechnya is part of the Russian Federation," he insisted, "but we do have serious concern—verging on indignation—at the way a political problem is being addressed by military means."⁷³

The Role of the OSCE

Ultimately, the OSCE was the institution most centrally affected by the conflict in Chechnya, and with the clearest mandate for engaging in preventive diplomacy. But the OSCE was itself constrained by Russian resistance to its involvement in what the Russian leadership insisted was an internal matter. In the face of Russian opposition, member states declined to press proposals to use the OSCE human dimension mechanism to organize a fact-finding human rights mission. Seeking to avoid open confrontation and to elicit Russian cooperation, the then chairman-in-office, Hungarian Foreign Minister Laszlo Kovacs, sent his personal representative, Istvan Gyarmati, to Moscow on January 9–10, 1995, to solicit Russian support for sending a small OSCE team of experts to Moscow and Grozny.⁷⁴ A first mission of four, accompanied by Russian officials, visited the region on January 26–29, and succeeded in securing the agreement of both sides to visits to prisoners by the International Red Cross. In its effort to avoid antagonizing the Russian leadership, it confined its statements to expressing deep concern over the tragic events in Chechnya;

71. Pavel Felgengauer, "Apocalypse Now," *Segodnia*, January 5, 1995, p. 1.

72. These included, most notably, the foreign ministers of Sweden and France, Lena Hjelm-Wallen, Alain Juppé, and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl.

73. Tyler Marshall, "EU Delays Pact over Chechnya," *Los Angeles Times*, January 6, 1995, p. A10.

74. For a more complete account, see Heather Hurlburt, "Russia, the OSCE, and European Security Architecture," *Helsinki Monitor*, No. 2, 1995; and Andrei Kortunov and Andrei Shoumikin, "Russian-European Interaction and the Chechen Crisis," unpublished paper, Russian Science Foundation, Moscow, 1995.

indeed, Gyarmati commented at a press conference that “identifying individual human rights violations was not part of my mandate.”⁷⁵ A second visit took place on February 22, and skillful negotiations combined with continuing pressure from Western governments led to an unprecedented agreement by the Russian government to allow an OSCE presence—officially titled Assistance Group, in deference to Russian sensitivities—to be established in Grozny.⁷⁶ A critical role in this process was played by the EU, which insisted on the establishment of an OSCE presence as a condition for signing the interim trade agreement with Russia.

The OSCE Assistance Group operated under extremely constraining guidelines insisted upon by Moscow, which had acquiesced in its creation to avoid further jeopardizing ties to Western countries but sought to limit and control its activity. Despite the barrage of criticism to which it was regularly subjected, and notwithstanding the extreme delicacy of its position, over the course of the following two years, and particularly under the able leadership of Tim Guldemann, the mission succeeded in gaining the trust of moderates on both sides and ultimately in brokering direct negotiations. Although it was not in a position to influence directly the political and military choices that drove the escalation of the conflict, it played a highly constructive role in facilitating the delivery of relief supplies and exchanges of prisoners, in focusing international attention on violations of human rights, in promoting dialogue between the two sides and providing an element of transparency, and in facilitating later cease-fire agreements and presidential elections in Chechnya. By offering unwavering support to the principle that a peaceful resolution of the conflict was both essential and possible, the OSCE presence strengthened the position of moderates on both sides and paved the way for the direct negotiations that ultimately produced the peace agreement.

As the war continued and the violence escalated, a variety of governments, NGOs, and individuals pressed Moscow to seek a negotiated solution to the conflict. Most significantly, the Council of Europe froze consideration of Rus-

75. *Izvestiya*, January 31, 1995. Gyarmati did, however, implicitly challenge the assertion by Kozyrev that the use of armed force against an “armed rebellion” was admissible from the standpoint of the OSCE code, stating that “the use of armed forces on such a scale and in such forms is at variance with OSCE principles.” Leonid Velekhov, “Mr. Gyarmati In Search of Compromise,” *Segodnia*, January 31, 1995, p. 1.

76. The term “OSCE mission” would have implied that Russia was suspected of violating human rights in Chechnya. Russian acquiescence in the OSCE presence, however reluctant, nonetheless represented a major step forward, given the still-powerful tendency in elite circles to view with suspicion any “outside interference” in internal affairs, particularly one involving sensitive ethnopolitical issues.

sia's admission, making settlement of the Chechen conflict a condition and establishing a special commission to monitor progress.⁷⁷ A variety of European officials and parliamentarians visited Moscow and Grozny, notwithstanding the outrage such visits provoked in nationalist circles. A decision at the foreign ministers meeting of the EU similarly delayed the signing of an interim trade agreement with Russia until a settlement was reached in Chechnya. Pressure continued to be exerted to permit humanitarian organizations like the International Committee of the Red Cross to send relief convoys to the region.

Despite the failure of these efforts to bring about a change in Russian policy toward Chechnya, the imposition of formal sanctions or indeed of more stringent forms of economic conditionality was rejected. Suggestions that International Monetary Fund (IMF) or World Bank loans be refused or delayed were turned down, as were proposals to curtail or make conditional Export-Import Bank credits, U.S. Agency for International Development programs, or private investment. The board of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development never brought up Russian behavior in Chechnya as a subject of discussion. Even symbolic sanctions were shunned; President Clinton went ahead with a controversial trip to Moscow to celebrate the anniversary of victory in World War II. Indeed, continuing Western financial support for Russia in the face of the war, and at a time when the Russian government was failing to collect over 30 percent of the tax revenues owed to it, led a number of figures inside Russia as well as in the West to accuse Western governments and the IMF of indirectly helping finance the war.⁷⁸

As in the United States, there was in European political circles a widespread and considered judgment that the political survival of Yeltsin was crucial to stability and progress in Russia, and that his fall would allow antidemocratic forces to come to power in Moscow. Moreover, a whole array of major security issues required Russian cooperation, from NATO enlargement to Bosnia; and indeed the efforts to develop a new security framework in Europe depended critically on Russia's constructive engagement. Whether or not the personal embrace of Yeltsin went as far as it did in Washington, political leaders across the continent were wrestling with the broader dilemma of how to balance political support for Yeltsin with criticism or opposition to threatening behav-

77. These provisions were not stringently enforced, however, and Russia was ultimately admitted before the war was ended.

78. See, for example, the speech by Grigory Yavlinsky delivered at the symposium "Where Is Russia Headed?" sponsored by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., September 19, 1996.

ior emanating from Moscow. The Chechen crisis further exacerbated an already difficult quandary.

Finally, for a number of governments not only was the conflict considered to be largely of local importance, without broader consequences for the geopolitical stability of the region, but they did not wish to establish precedents that would weaken their own efforts to deal with troublesome issues of minority secessionism or terrorism.

Constraints on Early Action

As this analysis suggests, several factors played a key role in constraining the use of various instruments to try to prevent the resort to military force or to deter its escalation. First, the norm of sovereignty and territorial integrity takes on particular importance where the behavior of a major power is at stake. Western governments and international organizations have been prepared to play an extremely intrusive role in the internal affairs of smaller sovereign states in recent years, most notably in seeking to influence the treatment of Russian minorities in Estonia and Latvia after independence. In the Baltic case, however, not only was the domestic issue a source of tension in interstate relations between the two capitals and Moscow, but the Baltic governments were prepared to accept the intrusion as the price of Western acceptance and support. Whether or not these institutions' mandates would have permitted such action, as a practical matter, no action by the United Nations or the OSCE could be undertaken without Russian acquiescence.

The reticence of the United Nations in the crisis deserves particular attention. As mentioned above, President Dudayev appealed directly to the international community, including the United Nations and the Security Council, but Russia's UN envoy, Ambassador Sergei Lavrov, opposed any discussion of the crisis in the Security Council, insisting that it was an internal matter. During a visit to Stockholm shortly afterward, in response to a question about UN failure to seek to restrain Russian military action, the secretary-general replied very simply: "We are bound by the UN Charter."⁷⁹ He was presumably referring to Article 2(7), which excludes from the competence of the United Nations "matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction" of any state. As the secretary-general had himself argued in another context, however,

79. Boutros Boutros-Ghali in Stockholm, January 1995, as cited in Zelim Tskhovrebov, "An Unfolding Case of a Genocide: Chechnya, World Order, and the 'Right to be Left Alone,'" *Nordic Journal of International Law*, Vol. 64 (1995), pp. 501-555.

certain kinds of internal conflict could jeopardize international order: when conflict within a state threatens to cross borders, when it creates a grave humanitarian emergency, or when it challenges fundamental principles of the international order.⁸⁰ The reluctance to adopt a more expansive definition of responsibilities in the period leading up to the Russian military intervention, and the inaction of the UN subsequently, cannot be explained purely with reference to the norms of sovereignty and the formal limits to UN jurisdiction; it reflects as well the deference to a permanent member of the Security Council, as well as a recognition of the considerable disparity between the ambitious vision of UN peacekeeping outlined by Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali in 1992 and the reality of political and resource constraints.

In addition to the deference to Moscow, the willingness to acquiesce—at least initially—in Russian actions was also influenced by a concern, however exaggerated, over the possibility that Chechnya represented not a unique situation but one of a series of possible dominoes that threatened to bring about the fragmentation and even disintegration of Russia, with all its ominous consequences. This heightened level of concern with preserving Russia's territorial integrity was joined to obvious ambivalence about the principle of national self-determination, and the lack of any consensus on the conditions under which it could legitimately be invoked. The fear of unleashing centrifugal forces throughout Europe, or of legitimizing a variety of insurgencies, contributed to an emphasis on stability and existing borders, to the neglect of emerging new norms that link respect for sovereignty with the internal conduct of governments and leaders. It is particularly striking in the case of the American response that none of the early statements conveyed any indication that the actions of states within their borders are subject to any limitation whatsoever.

The deference to Moscow was further reinforced by the extreme resistance of Russian political elites to outside involvement in the conflict. For several years, in connection with a number of conflicts on the territory of now independent states that were formerly republics of the USSR, Moscow had made it amply clear that it considered the entire region of what it called the “near abroad” to be a sphere of Russian security interests and had actively fought to exclude or limit the involvement of outside states and actors in the region. Resistance to such involvement within what was considered the territory of

80. “Secretary-General Says Outlook in Somalia Remains Uncertain Despite Tremendous Progress,” UN press release SG/SM/5153, November 9, 1993.

the Russian Federation was even greater, and the very suggestion provoked hostile reactions in conservative political circles.

Second, the delicate political situation in Moscow further contributed to the extreme circumspection of Western governments and officials. Fearing that criticism of the war in Chechnya would strengthen the communist-nationalist opposition to Yeltsin, and conceivably even bring to power forces less favorable to economic reform, political democratization, and a responsible foreign policy, Western governments hesitated to bring pressure to bear on Moscow to influence policy. (It should be added that these governments were equally reluctant to provide ammunition to their domestic critics; with programs of U.S. assistance to Russia under attack by conservative Republicans, the defense of Yeltsin was inextricably linked to the defense of Clinton administration policies toward Russia more broadly.)

Third, the priority of other issues requiring the cooperation of the Yeltsin government, including nuclear dismantlement, START II ratification, joint efforts in Bosnia, and NATO enlargement served as a further constraint on the willingness of Western leaders to press Russian officials very hard over an issue they initially considered marginal. The failures of Russian policy, revealed and magnified by the powerful media coverage from Grozny, forced the issue to center stage. Only when it became clear that Yeltsin's policy in Chechnya was undermining his own political effectiveness and authority, jeopardizing his prospects of re-election, and threatening to derail the whole process of reform, could criticism of the war in Chechnya be presented as congruent with support for Russian reform.

Fourth, the emphasis on inclusionary strategies for influencing Russian domestic and foreign policy became an important factor in its own right because it militated against the use of political or economic sanctions to influence Russian behavior. Indeed, precisely because support for democratization and economic reform implied continuing political and economic engagement by the West, the imposition of sanctions was seen to be counter-productive.

Finally, the way in which the entire issue was framed played a critical role in preventing an adequate policy response. An inadequate understanding of the situation in Moscow and in Grozny, as reflected in the tendency to underestimate the growing influence of hard-line figures in Yeltsin's entourage on policy toward Chechnya; to accept uncritically tendentious and self-serving analyses of developments there by Russian analysts and officials; to view the situation through the misleading prism of the American Civil War; to exagger-

ate the possible “domino effect” of Chechnya without recognizing the specific features that distinguished the case of Chechnya from that of other regions and republics; this inadequate understanding weakened the capacity of Western governments and institutions to devise more suitable responses to the crisis.

For the Russian government, the war in Chechnya constituted a major policy failure. It was based on a serious misjudgment of the political situation in Chechnya, of Russian military capabilities, and of public opinion. It was an exceedingly costly policy that exacted an enormous toll, weakening the Yeltsin government domestically as well as internationally and projecting an image of brutality, unpredictability, and unreliability that influenced policy toward Russia throughout the region. It had destabilizing consequences throughout the Caucasus and southern Russia, where a flood of refugees severely strained the capacity of local governments across the region. Moreover, the ferocity of the war not only made a political solution to the conflict especially difficult, but profoundly embittered Chechen-Russian relations in ways that will have long-lasting consequences. At a Kremlin press conference in October 1995, President Yeltsin himself acknowledged, somewhat ambiguously, that the war was the biggest disappointment of his presidency, and that “I think we may agree with the criticism of Western states that the use of force could have been avoided.”⁸¹

For Western governments and international organizations, the critical issue was not the failure to head off the conflict but the failure to try. It is difficult to demonstrate conclusively that a more active Western role in the early stages of the conflict would have altered its course. However, it arguably might have created opportunity, space, transparency, expertise, and support for a serious negotiating process, and strengthened the inhibitions against the resort to force. The existence of important divisions within the Russian elite, and therefore of potential allies of appropriate conflict-prevention efforts, and the interest of a number of capable regional leaders eager to find a political compromise, offered opportunities to influence the policy calculus that were never utilized.

Moreover, Western governments and international institutions had a considerable degree of leverage, given Russian aspirations and vulnerabilities. Ultimately, the West and the international community as well as Moscow and Grozny paid a high price for the war—a price that was initially not anticipated—because of its adverse effect on other important interests: economic and human resources that could have gone into economic development were si-

81. Quoted in Maria Eismont, “Chechnya—‘Samoe sil’noe razocharovanie’ Prezidenta Yeltsina” [Chechnya is President Yeltsin’s “greatest disappointment”], *Segodnia*, October 20, 1995, p. 2.

phoned off in ultimately futile military efforts; Yeltsin's own stature was weakened, and with it his capacity to deliver on other important issues; the military establishment was left demoralized, impoverished, and embittered; and the dishonesty and cynicism of officialdom exposed by the war further drained the already meager residue of public trust in institutions and leaders.

Indeed, Western reactions were a source of both puzzlement and disappointment in liberal circles within Russia. As one Russian analyst put it, "One of the most surprising consequences [of the Chechen conflict] was the fairly ambivalent attitude of key Western countries . . . to massive violations of the human rights of Russian and foreign citizens during the military phase of the conflict. . . . Western ambivalence helped the Yeltsin regime considerably in pursuing the military option in Chechnya for such a long time."⁸² Adding to the disappointment, in his view, was the perception that Europeans treated Russian public opinion just as the Russian elite did: as a factor unworthy of serious attention.

Once military actions were launched in December 1994, a more forceful international response would probably not have been effective in deterring further escalation or compelling a change in policy; not until a "mutually hurting stalemate" had been reached, and a new constellation of political forces created by the presidential elections in spring 1996, was there a new opportunity for a negotiated solution. Even then it required the devastating rout of Russian forces in Grozny in August 1996, and the unique role of General Lebed in acting on the conclusion that there was no realistic alternative to serious negotiations, for a peace agreement to be signed and implemented. But a case can be made that given the real divisions within the Russian elite over the resort to military force, and the lack of public support for it, the possible costs of speaking out frankly were exaggerated and the moral and political price of restraint underestimated.

A Durable Peace?

The four-sentence Treaty on Peace and the Principles of Mutual Relations between the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, signed in May 1997, acknowledged the "centuries-long antagonism" between the two sides, and committed both to the renunciation of force "forever" in resolving disputed issues and to building relations in accordance with "generally recog-

82. Andrei Shoumikhin, "The Chechen Crisis and the Future of Russia," *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 15 (1996), p. 6.

nized principles and norms of international law," a formula that each party could interpret in its own way. The document was intended to serve as the basis for additional treaties and agreements on the whole complex of mutual relations. Two intergovernmental agreements signed at the same time sought to lay the foundation for future economic cooperation and, as the Chechen side hoped, for addressing the economic reconstruction of Chechnya. As of this writing, however, no significant progress has been made on resolving the underlying conflict, and continuing intra-elite struggles in both capitals make the prospects dim.

On the Chechen side, the Russian troop withdrawals and the peace agreement are viewed as tantamount to recognition of Chechnya's independence and internal sovereignty, *de facto* if not *de jure*, and there is a clear expectation that the postponement of the final decision on status will allow the Russian side to gradually accommodate itself to the reality of the situation. The republic's leadership has pointedly rejected any participation in Russian Federation political institutions, and has been actively seeking to expand its regional and international ties and to win international recognition. Genuine independence, and the hoped-for membership in international organizations, is, however, dependent on formal recognition by the international community, and is unlikely to be forthcoming absent Russian acquiescence.

Internally, Chechnya—now renamed the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria—faces acute, indeed devastating, problems. With wartime political cohesion dissolving, and the armed and radicalized "freedom fighters" now a powerful political force, political fragmentation and conflict within the elite limit the ability of the Maskhadov leadership to reach compromises with Moscow. Moreover, the perceived failure of the Russian side to deliver on past promises has weakened the position of Maskhadov himself, and encouraged the turn toward Islam as a basis of social order and cohesion and an instrument of state building.⁸³ With prospects for economic recovery increasingly remote, a significant part of the population has left the republic in search of employment elsewhere; for many who remain in Chechnya, criminal activities and hostage-taking have become a way of life.

The Russian leadership, for its part, continues to insist that Chechnya is part of the Russian Federation, despite its inability to exercise real control over the

83. In a recent statement announcing plans to declare Chechnya an Islamic republic, and to enforce *shariya* law, Maskhadov explained that the republic's first constitution had been liberal and secular because of Dudayev's desire to cultivate Western support. With those hopes now dashed, advocates of an alternative path have increasingly come to the fore.

region. Proposals for a loose “associated status” have been floated, most recently by Ivan Rybkin, former secretary of the Russian Security Council and Yeltsin’s special representative for Chechnya until his removal in October 1997, which would grant the republic extensive control over internal affairs while reserving foreign policy to Moscow; and although such a formula might earlier have been acceptable to moderate segments of the Chechen leadership, it is exceedingly difficult to elicit political support for it in the current environment.⁸⁴ At the same time, proposals to sidestep the issue of status and focus on concrete economic agreements that could help restore the republic’s devastated economy, create legitimate employment opportunities, and rebuild a network of economic and political ties reflecting the real interdependence of the two communities have foundered on severe budgetary constraints in Moscow and the unwillingness to divert scarce resources to an unreliable region.

Although a renewal of large-scale violence is unlikely in the foreseeable future, the obstacles to a negotiated settlement also remain considerable. President Yeltsin and his advisers are not prepared to pay the political costs of acquiescing in the independence of Chechnya, even though a significant part of the Russian population appears prepared to accept it.⁸⁵ Not only would acquiescence raise serious constitutional issues; it would open the Yeltsin leadership to charges by the nationalist-communist opposition that, having precipitated the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Yeltsin was now conspiring in the disintegration of Russia itself.

Even though the continuation of the status quo is therefore the likeliest option, Russian policy will continue to vacillate among different variants of that option, with some pressing for measures to isolate and punish the republic (including rerouting oil pipelines and transportation routes around it and creating a cordon sanitaire along its borders), while others favor efforts at political and economic engagement on issues of mutual concern.

The latter position appears to have the support of a key figure in the new Yeltsin government following the major shakeup of April 1998. Yevgeny Sapiro, the newly appointed minister for nationalities and regional policy and a specialist on regional economic issues, made the tantalizing comment in a radio address on May 18 that although Chechnya’s complete independence

84. The enormous gap separating the positions of the two sides is vividly captured in the two contrasting negotiating proposals published in *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, October 21, 1997, p. 5.

85. A survey of 1,000 respondents in each of several regions and republics of the Russian Federation carried out in late 1997 with the involvement of the author indicated that between 50 and 70 percent of respondents supported the right of secession from the federation.

from Russia was undesirable, it was “more admissible than military interference . . . a military solution of problems in Chechnya is impermissible.”⁸⁶ Attacking critics of the Khasavyurt accords for their reckless statements, he expressed his conviction that Chechnya was less intransigent than it had been two years earlier and that Moscow needed to assess the whole array of available negotiating instruments with an emphasis on economic aspects. He also announced the creation of a special agency to deal with a Chechnya settlement and indicated that Ivan Rybkin would continue to play a major role in Russian-Chechen relations.

Nor is Russian policy effectively addressing the growing instability in the broader North Caucasian region, which has become the focal point of a whole array of problems, from border disputes, refugee flows, and ethnic conflicts to drug trafficking, weapons proliferation, and violent crime. Efforts to ignore or isolate Chechnya, or to somehow insulate Russia from its effects, are futile and will contribute little to stabilizing the region as a whole. Indeed, they are more likely to provoke intensified efforts by radical groups aimed at Dagestan. However, despite urgent and repeated calls for the formulation and implementation of a broader regional strategy toward the Caucasus,⁸⁷ Russian policy currently suffers from confusion and paralysis.

Chechnya today, like Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transdnier, constitutes a quasi state, exercising de facto control over its internal affairs, but unlikely to be recognized by the international community. All these cases stand as testimony to the extraordinary and continuing power of the idea of sovereignty—defined as domestic autonomy and international recognition—as the defining characteristic of statehood in the modern world. They also demonstrate the ways in which ideas and institutions initially created with other purposes in mind can take on new meaning in a changed context and powerfully affect the aspirations of political actors.

The international community has demonstrated extraordinary creativity and ingenuity in efforts to develop institutional arrangements that allow for substantial degrees of self-determination without sacrificing the principles of territorial integrity, as demonstrated most recently in the case of Hong Kong. It is inconceivable that given a combination of creative diplomacy and underlying political will, special arrangements could not also be devised for Chechnya.

86. RIA Novosti report, Moscow, May 18, 1998; see also FBIS Central Eurasia, May 15, 1998.

87. For a recent example, see Akhsarbek Galazov, “Segodnia u Moskvyy net nikakoi kavkazskoi politiki” [Today Moscow has no Caucasus policy], *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, October 8, 1997, p. 5.

It remains the case, however, that whatever arrangements can be designed to regulate the relationship between Moscow and Grozny, they will be constrained by the underlying reality that the international community recognizes only two outcomes; the variety of intermediate and ambiguous solutions available earlier to practitioners of statecraft are no longer viable options in the current international system.