

Chechnya's Internal Fragmentation, 1996 – 1999

MIRIAM LANSKOY

When the present war subsides, all efforts to build a more cohesive, accountable, and stable government in Chechnya—whether or not it will be independent—will have to begin with an analysis of what went so terribly wrong in the period between the two wars. The Chechens achieved de facto independence after a brutal war that lasted from 1994 to 1996. But independence, the cherished dream of the Chechen resistance movement, became for most Chechens a cruel and disappointing experiment. At the same time, the manner in which Russian authorities prosecuted the two wars squandered whatever trust had remained and exceeded the abuses of even Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic in Bosnia and Kosovo. The extent of the violence in Chechnya is in fact unparalleled in Europe since World War II.

The period of quasi-independence (between 1996 and 1999) tarnished the luster on the nationalist idea. The interwar Chechen republic collapsed as a political entity, and Chechnya degenerated into a Hobbesian jungle characterized by chaos, poverty, and violence. Chechen leaders failed to provide the rudiments of social and legal protection or to avert the catastrophe of a second war with Russia, which has lasted longer and claimed more lives than the first war. Chechnya's failure to develop into a functioning state stems from five over-arching problems: the absence of resources for postwar reconstruction, profound confusion about the structure of the new state, weak political leadership in the person of President Aslan Maskhadov, the proliferation of private armies, and a failure in Moscow to undertake constructive policies for building relations with Chechnya.

Miriam Lanskoj is Program Officer for Central Asia and the Caucasus at The National Endowment for Democracy and a Ph.D. candidate in the University Professors Program at Boston University. The present article is adapted from a chapter of her dissertation, entitled, "War of the Russian Succession: Russia and Chechnya, 1996-1999." Her analysis of the Caucasus appears regularly in the NIS Observed, a biweekly publication of the Institute for the Study of Conflict, Ideology and Policy at Boston University. Ms. Lanskoj is grateful to the International Research and Exchange Board (IREX) for a fellowship which facilitated the research for this article.

SURVEY OF POST-WAR MISERY

The damage from the first war was enormous: according to a conservative estimate, 36,000 civilians lost their lives and around 4,000 Chechen combatants and 7,500 Russian soldiers were killed.¹ Food was scarce and healthcare virtually non-existent; almost all the hospitals and clinics in Grozny were destroyed. According to data collected in 1998, more than half of the population suffered from physical exhaustion: 40 percent of newborn babies had birth defects and infant mortality was twice the prewar rate. Many of the 157,000 persons disabled in the war could not obtain artificial limbs. Burning oil wells contributed to catastrophic rates of breast and lung cancer. Up to 30 percent of the arable land was unusable due to landmines. Basic infrastructure such as sewers, electric wires, roads, and water pipes were destroyed or badly damaged. The education system was in disarray, and unemployment was rampant.²

The Chechen government sought international assistance, but relief was not forthcoming, as the Kremlin viewed any international presence or aid to Chechnya as an offense against Russia's territorial integrity.

To address these enormous problems, the Chechen government sought international assistance, but relief was not forthcoming, as the Kremlin viewed any international presence or aid to Chechnya as an offense against Russia's territorial integrity. Moreover, the lawlessness that

characterized Chechnya discouraged international organizations from operating in the republic. For instance, in 1996, during the run up to the presidential elections in Chechnya, a mission of the International Committee of the Red Cross curtailed its activities after six of its staff members were murdered in their sleep.³ Saudi Arabian and other Arab sources made charitable contributions, but the funds did not help the government rebuild. Instead, the assistance bolstered the numerous Chechen militias that became a destabilizing influence.

For its part, Moscow provided only meager aid, limited to pensions and social assistance to single parent households, and even this was disbursed during 1997 and the first half of 1998 only. Of the 62 billion rubles Russian Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin had promised in November 1996, only 16 billion rubles were disbursed by April 1997, and no further funding followed.⁴ Similarly, revenue derived from Chechnya's oil pipeline, namely transport tariffs and pipeline security, was halted in August 1998.⁵ The Russian budget for 1997 and 1998 allocated a small sum of money for reconstruction. The Duma, however, conditioned this spending on Chechnya giving up its claims to independence, and hence these sums never reached the Chechens. Many experts and politicians in Moscow now claim that

tremendous sums were disbursed but stolen somewhere along the line, either in Moscow or Grozny.⁶ This assertion is not bolstered by evidence of such spending.

TRADITION, ISLAM, OR LIBERALISM: WHICH PRINCIPLE FOR STATE-BUILDING?

The lack of consensus among Chechens about the sources of legitimacy of the Chechen state exacerbated other problems. The political life of the republic featured surprising and unpredictable combinations of traditional, Soviet, Islamic, and democratic norms. If a second war had not erupted in 1999, Chechens may have found the proper balance between different ideologies and traditions in public life. As it turned out, there was only a very short hiatus between the wars.

Despite the ruinous condition of the republic, some institutions and traditions had the potential to provide greater cohesion to public life—the parliament, the elders, traditional institutions based on common law (*adat*), and Islam were chief among them. However, rather than focus on strengthening Chechen institutions, President Aslan Maskhadov had to contend with numerous pressing challenges such as renegade armed units, private armies, and criminal elements which remained from the war. These groups had no source of employment and eventually formed a political opposition to the government. Maskhadov invited members of the radical political opposition such as the ideologue Movladi Udugov and the war hero Shamil Basaev into his government and adopted elements of their program to forge an illusion of national unity. However, their political ambitions were insatiable, and each concession Maskhadov made tempted the radical elements of Chechnya's resistance movement to conduct ever more brazen acts of violence. In addition, during the interwar period criminal elements committed numerous crimes including the beheading of four foreign telecom workers, the kidnapping of a Russian general, and armed incursions into Dagestan, all of which were aimed at undermining Maskhadov's presidency. As Maskhadov and the disparate commanders vied for political power, Chechnya's traditional institutions became distorted and chaos ensued.

*As Maskhadov and the
disparate commanders vied
for political power,
Chechnya's traditional
institutions became
distorted and chaos ensued.*

MASKHADOV'S ASSETS: POPULARITY AND MODERATION

Aslan Maskhadov was elected president on January 27, 1997. A Soviet-era army colonel, Maskhadov proved to be a capable military leader, but as president

he was unable to address the myriad of problems confronting post-war Chechnya. During the war, Maskhadov had the overall command of the Chechen resistance. He is most famous for leading the August 6, 1996, operation in which Chechen units retook Grozny and annihilated Russian forces trapped inside. That action was timed to coincide with the inauguration of Russian President Boris Yeltsin in Moscow. The damage inflicted on the Russian forces and the blow to the prestige of the Russian president forced an end to the war. Yeltsin sent General Aleksandr Lebed, the newly appointed secretary of the Security Council, to Grozny to negotiate a ceasefire with Maskhadov. On August 26, the two men signed the Khasavyurt Treaty which ended the war. The peace deal bolstered Maskhadov's popularity. He had tremendous support because he combined the image of martial excellence with a moderate approach to Russia. He was seen as the only leader who could manage Chechnya's postwar recovery and find a common language with Russian politicians.⁷

In the first few months after the war there were some promising developments. In November 1996, Maskhadov met with Prime Minister Chernomyrdin in Moscow to sign a set of economic agreements. In January 1997, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) certified the presidential elections in Chechnya as free and fair. Ivan Rybkin, Lebed's successor as

Maskhadov was seen as the only leader who could manage Chechnya's postwar recovery and find a common language with Russian politicians.

the secretary of the Security Council, attended Maskhadov's inauguration and brought a letter of congratulations from the Russian president. In May 1997, Rybkin and Maskhadov succeeded in drafting a peace treaty which was signed in Moscow.

The question of Chechnya's status, however, remained unresolved. Although Maskhadov never repudiated the goal of Chechen independence, he also indicated that a compromise status was negotiable. For

instance, he frequently phrased his position using the term "subject of international law" rather than "independence." This difference in terminology is significant. What Maskhadov was suggesting was for Chechnya to be part of the Russian Federation and at the same time a subject of international law.⁸ This status would be similar to that enjoyed by Ukraine and Moldova during the Soviet period—not independent, but sovereign, recognized in the United Nations and having international representation. Maskhadov never elaborated this possibility in the terms outlined here although such compromises are implicit in the language he used.

Explicitly Maskhadov maintained that Chechnya was ready to discuss integration with Russia in the economic, foreign policy, and national defense spheres—as long as Chechnya would be treated as a "subject of international

law.” In his last meeting with Boris Yeltsin on August 17, 1997, Maskhadov proposed signing three agreements simultaneously, “the first, on mutual recognition and establishment of diplomatic relations; the second, on a single economic space; and the third, on a single defense space.” Maskhadov seems to have been offering a deal whereby Russia would recognize the republic as a subject of international law, and Chechnya would enter into an economic and defense union with Russia. Maskhadov described his position in greater detail in a rare long interview with newspaper *Obschaya Gazeta*:⁹

After the war, I took every step that I could towards growing closer with Russia. I said to everyone: “Russia is nearby, and we have to find a compromise, and live together.” But the whole meaning of my life is to end the tragic page in the history of my people. So that there would be no more genocide of 1944 and no more 1994, so that this sword of Damocles would no longer hang above our heads. Yes there is interdependence. But there is also independence, when the sides agree to build their relations in accordance with principles of international law. So that tomorrow if some Zhirinovskiy or Zyuganov or some one else decides that he wants to bring “constitutional order” here, the whole world won’t shrug its shoulders and say that this is Russia’s internal affair and its territorial integrity and so forth. I have to protect my nation against the possibility of genocide. And beyond that, of course, everything else is interdependent—borders, anti-aircraft defense systems, industry, economics.

Maskhadov’s stance on Chechnya’s independence contrasted with the position of those who argued that Chechnya never had a legal relationship with the Russian Federation. Chechnya, the radicals asserted correctly, had a strong legal case for complete independence. It had declared independence before the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, whereas the Russian Federation only came into existence with the Federation Treaty in 1993. Chechnya had never participated in any governmental body of the Russian Federation, had not ratified the Russian Constitution, and in fact had never in its history accepted Russian rule. To clinch the matter, they pointed to the Peace Treaty of May 1997, which stipulated that Russia and Chechnya would craft relations in accordance with international law. Proponents of immediate recognition had strong arguments that Chechnya was independent already. Thus, the subject of negotiations with Russia should be recognition as an independent state and the establishment of diplomatic relations. As Movladi Udugov, appointed by Maskhadov to be Chechnya’s deputy prime minister and foreign minister, told Interfax news agency, the recognition of Chechnya’s independence, not the granting of it, was in question because “the independence of Chechnya was restored in 1991,” when Chechnya first separated from Russia.¹⁰

Significantly, Maskhadov did not hold a referendum on independence. Such referendums were the standard means by which secession movements in the Soviet Republics bolstered their case against Moscow. Although there is little

Maskhadov seems to have been offering a deal whereby Russia would recognize the republic as a subject of international law, and Chechnya would enter into an economic and defense union with Russia.

public opinion research in Chechnya, there is quite extensive polling of Russian citizens, who on several occasions voiced strong support for granting Chechnya independence. In December 1998, for instance, when asked, "How do you feel about the possibility of Chechnya separating from Russia?" nearly 33 percent of those polled said that, "Chechnya has in fact separated from Russia already," and almost 24 percent said, "I would only welcome this turn of events." Only six percent replied, "Everything

including armed force should be used to prevent this."¹¹ If Russian citizens were willing to accept Chechen sovereignty, then there can be little doubt that the Chechens would have voted overwhelmingly in favor of independence.

If Maskhadov had wanted to indicate that Chechnya would accept nothing short of complete independence, the logical step would have been to hold a referendum. This omission signaled that he was leaving room for maneuver in the status talks, which, according to the Khasavyurt Treaty, would be held before the year 2001. Moscow squandered an opportunity to negotiate Chechnya's status with Maskhadov which would have recognized Chechnya as a subject of international law and a republic with strong economic and defense ties with Russia.

PRIVATE ARMIES AND MASKHADOV'S QUANDARY¹²

The biggest obstacle to normalizing conditions within Chechnya was the proliferation of "private armies," or groups of fighters that were loyal primarily to particular commanders. These units were often well organized and highly equipped, some of them possessing armored cars and satellite phones. The official units loyal to Maskhadov frequently found themselves in an inferior position as compared to many of the private armies that generated funding from illicit sources such as the drug and hostage trade. As Khunkar-Pasha Israpilov, the Chechen commander who headed the anti-terrorism center and carried out many operations to combat hostage taking, complained:

I have no special equipment, I am not able to intercept their telephone conversations, to react operationally to all the movements of bandits and

hostages. I do not even have transport to pursue the terrorists. My people are not paid and they simply work out of enthusiasm. Tell me, how is it possible to wage war against crime under such circumstances?¹³

Charles Fairbanks, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, compares Maskhadov's position to that of a medieval monarch who is at a disadvantage in his struggle with powerful lords: "The kings faced a handicap in their struggle with the great vassals: because they were kings, they had more responsibilities, which they often could discharge only by giving someone part of the royal estate."¹⁴ Similarly, Maskhadov made concessions to the commanders to bring them into the government structures.

In 1997 and 1998, the private armies were not an organized political opposition. The alliances among commanders were often based on personal relationships, shifted frequently, and did not seem to represent political agendas. Hence, efforts to categorize the armies are fraught with pitfalls because so many qualifications are needed to describe the relationships among them. Fairbanks identifies 17 private armies that existed in 1998.¹⁵ He divides them into those subordinate to the government and those operating independently. In his typology, an estimated 10,000 men were loyal to the government, while the private armies commanded about 2,000 men. However, as Fairbanks points out, Maskhadov gave official government titles to commanders who refused to disband their units. Their armies, therefore, should be seen as private formations that might under some circumstances support the president.

The biggest obstacle to normalizing conditions within Chechnya was the proliferation of "private armies," or groups of fighters that were loyal primarily to particular commanders.

Charles Blandy, a military analyst, groups the units into three factions: those supporting Maskhadov; those supporting Shamil Basaev; and those supporting Movladi Udugov.¹⁶ Overall, Blandy estimates that there were 300 separate armed formations. One problem with this reasoning is that Udugov was not a commander and did not have units at his disposal. He was a propagandist who relied on Arab sources of income to sponsor commanders. Both Fairbanks and Blandy portray a similar sense of chaos, but they understate the significance of the purely criminal elements such as Arbi Baraev, whose Islamic Special Forces Division (IPON) was responsible for most of the hostage trade and the murders of foreign aid workers.

The main conclusion that can be drawn from a survey of the commanders is that the situation in 1997 and for most of 1998 was very fluid and unpredictable. Armed units remained active since the war, but they acted in accordance

with personal and situational factors rather than forming political factions. Where a more skilled politician may have maneuvered among commanders to advance his policies and win allies, Maskhadov surrendered his positions for the sake of forming temporary, superficial alliances with opposition elements. In 1997 and 1998, before the members of the opposition united against Maskhadov's government, there was an opportunity to maneuver using one militia to disable the other. For instance, Salman Raduev and Shamil Basaev were in conflict. All through the spring of 1997, they were trading insults and accusations, but Maskhadov did not use such opportunities to play one off the other.¹⁷ He repeated the same mistake on many occasions throughout the period, making substantial compromises with unsavory characters for the sake of maintaining the illusion of national unity. This approach alienated professionals and the intelligentsia and emboldened the radicals.

Maskhadov surrendered his positions for the sake of forming temporary, superficial alliances with opposition elements.

Initially in 1997, Maskhadov sought collaboration with everyone. His first government contained not only members of the wartime pro-Russian Akhmar Zavgaev government (albeit those who had held low positions) but also Shamil Basaev and Movladi Udugov. When this policy of

including experts from among the pro-Russian factions came under attack, Maskhadov removed them. Then he was persuaded to approve the formation of the Council of Commanders, which had the power to ratify his appointments. Only later, towards the end of 1998 and 1999, when the opposition commanders had already united against him, did he try to out-manuever them. By that time it was too late. Rather than confront them openly, Maskhadov tried to steal their thunder by making anti-Semitic pronouncements and declaring an Islamic state. Far from winning over the public, his appeasement of the criminal elements only made him look foolish and weak.

This basic scenario repeated itself with slight modifications throughout 1998 and 1999.¹⁸ In response to challenges, Maskhadov organized public demonstrations and called up reservists in a show of force. Rivals such as Basaev and Raduev backed down in the face of mass public rallies, only to wait a few months or weeks to challenge him again. In an interview he gave to *Obschaya Gazeta* in February 1998, Maskhadov explained his position to Russian journalists:

There are units that have been neither disarmed nor legalized. A force stands behind each one and it's not that easy to serve them an arrest warrant. [There are groups that fought well during the war but now] someone from outside is telling them "No one helped you during the war and now

everyone has forgotten about you. Maskhadov sells the oil and he has everything. So why don't you take a well yourself?" There are units that are being led into confusion. For this reason, I am being diplomatic: I try to bring in even those who competed against me in the elections.¹⁹

In February 1998, Maskhadov thought that by bringing opposition elements into the government he could unite the nation, but a string of crises in the summer of 1998 compelled him to change his strategy. By October 1998, he sought Russian military support against the radical commanders.

CRISES IN 1998 AND MASKHADOV'S CHOICE

The tenuous progress of 1997 was undone in 1998 due to a confluence of three circumstances: the crisis in Daghestan, as a result of which ethnic and religious agitators made their way to Chechnya and preached intervention; the failure to negotiate a comprehensive treaty with Russia, which compromised efforts at peaceful regulation; and Basaev's alliance with radical anti-Maskhadov elements, which flared into open confrontation between Maskhadov and the oppositionists, driving the president to seek Russian support against his opponents.

Although there were two substantial government reshuffles in 1997, the standoff between Maskhadov and various commanders was limited to political maneuvers and rhetoric. But in the spring of 1998, when Daghestan was rocked by internal crisis, the confrontation in Chechnya became sharper as Udugov and others advocated Chechen intervention in the Daghestani crisis. At the same time, Baugaudin Kebedov (also known as Magomadov or Kizleyurtsky), Nadir Khachilaev, and several hundred supporters who had been squeezed out of Daghestan arrived in Chechnya. At this juncture, Udugov united several segments of the opposition into the Congress of Nations of Ichkeria and Daghestan. This group united malcontents from Daghestan and Chechnya and created a forum to advance their political ambitions under the banner of liberating Daghestani Muslims from the Russian yoke. Sensing the danger this posed, Maskhadov took personal control over all security and military units of the government. In May 1998, the government arrested 24 Daghestanis of Nagai nationality who were traveling to Khattab's training camp in Chechnya.

Moscow's inaction during this period is an important element of the ensuing disaster.

From March to July 1998, Chechen government forces clashed with *Wahhabi* units²⁰ in the cities of Urus-Martan, Grozny, and Gudermes. On June 22, Salman Raduev and his supporters attacked a Grozny TV station, apparently

in retaliation for the government's closure of his private TV station "Marsho." Two days later, Maskhadov declared a state of emergency throughout Chechnya and martial law in Grozny.

A separate and much more important struggle occurred two weeks later, on July 14, in Gudermes. The origin of this conflict was mundane, but its impact was profound. One version says that there had been a dispute over who owned a particular set of hostages. Another version is that there was a drunken fight between fighters from different units. Either way, the fighting began as a squabble among thieves—Baraev's Islamic Forces and Abdul-Malik Mezhidov's Sharia Guard on one side and the Yamadaev brothers' fighters on the other side. All the units involved had been known to carry on the hostage trade, however, Mezhidov and Baraev were *Wahhabis*. What ensued was a two-day battle that left 150 dead. A call went out across Chechnya to "smash the *muridy*"²¹ and thousands of armed men came voluntarily to Gudermes. Not a single opposition field commander of note came out in support of the *Wahhabi* commanders, Baraev and Mezhidov. Significantly, even the Saudi commander Khattab ordered his men to remain in their barracks. The *Wahhabis* were definitively routed and chased out of Gudermes to Urus-Martan. Acting on Maskhadov's orders, Vakha Arsanov,

The summer 1998 crisis marked a turning point after which the private armies began transforming themselves into political alliances.

Chechnya's vice president mediated a cease-fire. On July 20, Maskhadov decreed that the Islamic Division (under Arbi Baraev) and the Sharia Guards (under Abdul Melikh Mezhidov) would be disbanded and their members forbidden to carry arms. This order, however, was not enforced.

On July 23, a car bomb exploded in an attempt to assassinate Maskhadov. The president escaped the attack, as he blamed foreign forces for the attempt on his life. However,

the following day the Sharia Court summoned *Wahhabis* Zelimkhan Yandarbiev, Arbi Baraev, and Ramzan Akhmadov for questioning. On the same day, influential field commanders of the first war Shamil Basaev, Ruslan Gelaev, and Akhmad Zakaev swore allegiance to the president. Yandarbiev appeared for questioning and was cleared of any wrongdoing. The other two suspects voiced support for the president on July 26 but never appeared before the court. Two days later the state of emergency and marshal law were lifted. The crisis was considered over.

Moscow's inaction during this period is an important element of the ensuing disaster. In the spring of 1998, after the departure of Rybkin from the Security Council and of Chernomyrdin from the government, it was not at all clear where the nucleus of decision making pertaining to Chechnya would reside. The neglect was so pervasive that no major figure among the Moscow politicians

commented on fighting in Chechnya. On July 28, the newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* published a joint letter by four prominent politicians who had participated in earlier efforts to negotiate an end to the Chechen conflict. Former Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, Kremlin insider Boris Berezovsky, President of Tatarstan Mintimer Shaimiev, and retired paratrooper general and presidential candidate Alexander Lebed called on the government to act decisively in the North Caucasus:

On 23 July there was an assassination attempt against the legally elected president of the Chechen Republic, A. Maskhadov; 24 July the military commandant of the Chechen Republic A. Izmailov issued an order on terminating the broadcasts of Russian television stations; the Plenipotentiary Representative of the President of the Russian Federation in Chechnya, Valentin Vlasov, has been held hostage in Chechnya for 88 days; wahhabis are raising their banner all over the North Caucasus. How many more arguments are needed to prove that the government can no longer afford not to react to the events in the south of the country?...Recent mistakes and failures to speak up have already cost all of us a dear price and Russia has no right to return to the mid-1990s.

The new government did not follow the advice of the four to adopt a policy on the Chechen conflict, but a two-hour meeting did take place on August 1 between Sergei Kirienko, Russia's recently appointed prime minister, Sergei Stepashin, MVD (Ministry of the Interior) minister, and Maskhadov in Ingushetia.²² Little has been revealed about the discussion, but it seems likely that the Chechen side renewed its pleas for Russia to honor the economic obligations it had assumed under Chernomyrdin and Rybkin. By this time, Stepashin emerged as Moscow's main spokesman for policymaking in the North Caucasus.

The events of the summer of 1998 had major implications for Chechnya's future. First, the public reaction against *Wahhabis* was very clear. *Wahhabi* propagandists who had been highly visible in Grozny and other parts of Chechnya were banned officially and in fact were chased out of most cities and villages with the exception of Urus-Martan and Alkhan-Kala, which remained *Wahhabi* strongholds. Second, the crisis marked a turning point after which the private armies began transforming themselves into political alliances. Third, the crisis showed that Maskhadov was not willing to crush definitively the criminal elements despite his evident capability to do so and the popularity of such measures.²³ Finally, the silence and inaction from Moscow can be explained to some degree in light of the overhaul of the government after Chernomyrdin's departure in March 1998 and the looming financial crisis of August 1998. However, Moscow's unwillingness to support Maskhadov at a critical juncture gave encouragement to the opposition commanders. In fact, the absence of support for Maskhadov, and Stepashin's inter-

vention in favor of granting greater autonomy to the Islamist Karamakhi-Chabanmakhi Dzhaamat of Daghestan, created the impression that Moscow was siding with the opposition elements in both societies.²⁴

The next crisis came on September 23, as Basaev and Raduev called on Maskhadov to resign on the grounds that he had overstepped his constitutional prerogatives by instituting a state of emergency. On September 25, there were simultaneous mass meetings in Grozny. The opposition rallied in the Dynamo soccer stadium. Fifty meters away, Maskhadov handed out medals to officers of the security services and national guard for the operations in Gudermes. A measure of the support for the president is seen in the action of the teachers union, which had planned to go on strike on October 1 to protest non-payment of salaries. In deference to Maskhadov they postponed the strike, indicating that they did not want to give indirect support to the radicals.²⁵

In October 1998, four employees of the British firm "Granger Telecom," who were working on setting up a satellite telephone network in Chechnya, were kidnapped. The public outrage in Chechnya was substantial. *Groznenskii Rabochii*, a moderate paper that usually took pains to avoid hot political topics, broke with form and carried several editorials expressing dismay at the hostage-taking business. In an editorial titled, "Kidnapping: A crime against the nation," journalist V.

The Congress of the Chechen Nation called for forceful measures against the hostage takers and asked families to exercise their influence on sons who had taken up arms against the state.

Akaev commented that, "kidnapping discredits not only the government of Chechnya but all of us as a nation."²⁶ He recommended measures to bolster the crime fighting units and called on the hostage takers to free the hostages and ask for forgiveness. Another editorial, "When will the trade in humans end in Chechnya?" quoted unidentified sources in law enforcement that claimed that the patrons of the hostage trade are never arrested and even when individual criminals are put behind bars, they are soon released: "They are released because they fought in the resistance, were close to

famous field commanders and so forth. Sometimes criminals are freed by armed groups which are larger and better equipped than the government forces."²⁷

A mass meeting of Maskhadov's supporters, the Congress of the Chechen Nation called for forceful measures against the hostage takers and asked families to exercise their influence on sons who had taken up arms against the state.²⁸ At the rally, Maskhadov denounced the *Wahhabis* for hostage taking and terrorism. Instead of confronting specific criminals, he used the term "*Wahhabi*" as a substitute for the troublemaker of the moment, whatever that person's religious

affinities. He also reiterated his opposition to the idea of intervention in Daghestan or in the South Caucasus. Mufti Akhmad Kadyrov, a close supporter of Maskhadov, went a step further than the president, claiming that the Congress of Ichkeria and Daghestan was responsible for shielding criminal elements, although he too refrained from denouncing specific hostage takers by name.

On October 22, the Sharia Security Minister Aslanbek Arsaev issued a televised ultimatum. If all hostages held in the republic were not freed within three days, he declared, the government would begin large-scale operations to free hostages and destroy the criminals.²⁹ On October 25, the hostage-takers (probably Arbi Baraev's gang) made their position known by killing Shadid Bargishev, who headed the anti-hostage-taking directorate of the Security Ministry. A few days later, there was an attempt on the life of Akhmad Kadyrov.³⁰ *Groznenskii Rabochii* condemned the actions of the radicals and called on Maskhadov to employ force:

Criminality has assumed the character of sabotage and in the final analysis threatens the very foundations of Chechnya's statehood. The government understands this and will hardly be deterred by Bargishev's murder. On the contrary, the blood spilled in front of the building of the Anti-Kidnapping Directorate gives the authorities carte blanche to employ the most radical measures.

These were bold words. The paper was taking a principled stand in a very precarious environment, but at the same time it was never so bold as to print the names of the hostage takers.

THE STEPASHIN-ATGERIEV CONNECTION: A CHANCE FOR PEACE

Yevgeni Primakov took over as Russian prime minister after Kirienko was dismissed in September 1998 and thus had to contend with the deepening crisis in Chechnya. Primakov described Maskhadov's difficult position in his book, *Vosem Mesyatsev Plus (Eight Months Plus)*.³¹ Primakov explains that the kidnapping of the telecom workers represented a personal affront to Maskhadov who had been well received in London only a few months earlier.

Primakov was well informed of the internal crisis in Chechnya and understood that Maskhadov was Moscow's natural ally against the criminal elements. According to Primakov, Maskhadov announced that he was taking the search for the hostages and the punishment of the guilty parties under his personal control. In response, the opposition staged a mass rally in Grozny. Maskhadov held a counter rally—The Congress of the Chechen Nation—where he invoked blood vengeance (*krovnyaya mest'*) against the hostage-takers. Maskhadov also demanded that all units not under the control of the general staff be disbanded.

As violence plunged Chechnya deeper into chaos, Maskhadov thought more and more about advancing Russian-Chechen relations.³² Sensing Maskhadov's predicament, Primakov persuaded President Yeltsin to authorize a meeting in Vladikavkaz. Primakov and Maskhadov met on October 29, 1998, with Ingushetia's President Ruslan Aushev and South Ossetia's President Aleksandr Dzasokhov serving as intermediaries.

The main discussion between Maskhadov and Primakov took place behind closed doors. Here is how Primakov describes it:

Maskhadov and Basaev don't just represent different interests within Chechnya such as different *teips*, groups of field commanders—they also represent different ideologies. In response to my direct question Maskhadov said, "I think that an independent Chechnya should exist in its present boundaries, but Basaev thinks differently. He would like to try the Chechen experiment in other bordering territories, first of all in Daghestan, where he can seek access to two seas, the Black Sea and the Caspian.

Basaev's program made him Russia's irreconcilable foe, whereas Maskhadov showed a willingness to discuss many problems connected with Chechnya's independence in the context of a single economic space with Russia, single currency, and so forth.

Maskhadov was counting on us to support him with arms, money, and to help restore not so much

Grozny, as four or five main industrial plants—mainly of the petrochemical field. He wanted the reconstruction of these plants to be accomplished by Russian regions bordering Chechnya. We decided on cooperation between the law-enforcement agencies to combat hostage-taking and criminality, the restoration of several enterprises in Chechnya, paying compensation to victims of the deportations of 1944 who live in Chechnya, and the payment of pensions for Chechen retirees from the federal pension plan.³³

After the meeting, Primakov presented a detailed report to President Yeltsin and gave the appropriate directives to the ministries concerned. "The president supported the draft decrees for the MVD," writes Primakov. However, Primakov does not mention that his decrees were not carried out by the ministries. For his part, Maskhadov removed Movladi Udugov from the position of foreign minister on October 30 immediately upon his return to Grozny. In this way, the president signaled his willingness to implement the agreements reached in Vladikavkaz.

Primakov's account makes it clear that Maskhadov had warned the Russian government that Basaev could try to use force in Daghestan. It is striking that

Maskhadov sought Russian military and political support to suppress criminal elements that were in part funded and manipulated by influential figures in Moscow.

The Vladikavkaz meeting launched efforts to enlist Russian military support against the criminal elements. This is evident in the activities of Turpal-Ali Atgeriev, Chechnya's security minister and one of Maskhadov's closest allies. Atgeriev met with Sergei Stepashin in November 1998 and March 1999 to develop joint crime fighting efforts. In July 1999, Maskhadov sent Atgeriev as his envoy to Moscow to discuss such cooperation and prepare for a meeting between presidents Maskhadov and Yeltsin.³⁴ Atgeriev was arrested in the VIP lounge of Vnukovo airport as he was about to return to Chechnya after a week-long stay in Moscow. After a day in Matrosskaya Tishina prison, he was released after Stepashin's personal intervention, but the attempted cooperation had been sabotaged.³⁵

*As violence plunged
Chechnya deeper into
chaos, Maskhadov thought
more and more about
advancing Russian-
Chechen relations.*

SPRING 1999: RADICALS RAMPAGE

On November 9, the opposition staged its own Congress of the Chechen Nation and claimed that 4,700 delegates had participated. The leading speakers were Shamil Basaev, Salman Raduev, and Khunkar-Pasha Israpilov.³⁶ The Congress adopted a resolution calling for the equal division of earnings of the oil sector, implying that Maskhadov was withholding profits from the hungry populace. Other resolutions called for bringing the state closer in line with "Islam and the rules of our forefathers," and fighting corrupt officials, collaborationists, and bandits.³⁷

Significantly, Khattab, the Arab commander known for his *Wahhabi* views, did not appear at the rally. He had always kept a low profile in Chechen politics, but at this juncture especially he did not dare meddle in internal Chechen matters because the pro-Maskhadov mass meetings had called for him to be exiled from the republic. In an interview with *Groznenskii Rabochii*, he explicitly denied any pretensions to leadership in Chechnya:

It's not necessary to pass decrees about self-dissolution of my bases on Chechen territory. If I get a written order to this effect, I will have to obey it. After all, I am still an officer of the Chechen armed forces. And if I am not welcome in Chechnya, I will find bases somewhere else in Russia, it has a very large territory. . . . And in general I don't like politics. It is not my calling. I have

never criticized the present or the former leadership of your republic. This is the prerogative of Chechen citizens, which I am not.³⁸

Khattab had arrived in Chechnya in March 1995 and fought as part of the Chechen resistance, but had no pretensions to political leadership. However, he was doing little more than striking a pose when he claimed to be obedient to Chechen authorities. In fact, he was not willing to peacefully leave the republic

It is striking that Maskhadov sought Russian military and political support to suppress criminal elements that were in part funded and manipulated by influential figures in Moscow.

as they had asked. At the same time, Khattab could not afford to appear confrontational.

Meanwhile, the parliament came to life and started to take initiative. It made recommendations concerning the structure and composition of the new Cabinet of Ministers: departments would be combined into a smaller number of ministries, and ministers would be subject to substantial turnover. The vice-speaker of the parliament, Selim Beshaev, explained that it was time to select ministers on the basis of their

professional qualifications exclusively. Admitting persons whose only qualification was their participation in the resistance, Beshaev said, "has not justified itself in building a peaceful life. Education, experience in management, manners, and diplomacy...are needed."³⁹ The parliament was putting pressure on the president to take a harder line against not only the Islamist commanders, but also against the prevailing practice of appointing members of the war-time resistance to important offices.

On December 7, 1998, Arbi Baraev's gang beheaded the four foreign hostages employed by the Chechen telephone company. Their heads were found lined up in the snow on the side of the road to Ingushetia. The circumstances surrounding the crime are not clear. It seems that the phone company, Granger Telecom, had reached an agreement with Baraev to pay \$10 million for the release of the hostages. According to Chechen sources, however, a third-party outbid the company to have the hostages killed.⁴⁰

In the wake of the murders, mass meetings were again held in Grozny. The *mufiate*, members of parliament, the *Sharia* court, and the security services rallied around Maskhadov. Another congress convened on December 17 and passed a resolution mandating radical measures against insubordinate armed formations. It also appealed to parliament to grant Maskhadov extraordinary powers. Maskhadov, however, decided that it would be better to appeal to religious leaders to mediate the dispute with the opposition.⁴¹

The lack of resoluteness cost Maskhadov public support and encouraged the opposition. The opposition wanted to form an extra-constitutional body, the *shura* (religious council), that would elect a new president and parliament. The parliament roundly condemned the idea and supported the president. The deputies argued that the Chechen people had already chosen a secular government by voting in elections for president and parliament. On January 21, Maskhadov met with regional prefects to organize armed detachments in every town and village, so that the opposition would not be able to seize power locally. On the same day, Atgeriev's security services clashed with illegal units in the Urus-Martan district. Atgeriev went on television to warn of the possibility of a coup d'état.⁴²

Then, on February 3, Maskhadov, in another one of his ill-considered maneuvers, imposed *Sharia*. In so doing, he robbed the existing institutions—the *Sharia* court and the parliament—of constitutional authority. The very institutions that had supported him would now be subordinate to a new body, the *shura*, composed of commanders and clerics. This committee would write a new Islamic constitution to be presented for ratification to a Congress of the Chechen Nation. "Almost all the commentators interpreted the president's surprising steps as an attempt to preempt the demands of the radical opposition."⁴³

The lack of resoluteness cost Maskhadov public support and encouraged the opposition.

The opposition commanders refused to join the president's *shura* and on February 9, 1999, formed their own body, the *mekhkan shura*. For the first time, all of the opposition factions united into one movement, which included: Congress of Ichkeria and Daghestan (Udugov, Basaev, Khattab), Raduev, Israpilov, Yandarbiev, Arsanov (who had resigned from the government), Abumuslimov, and Gelaev. This *mekhkan shura* elected Basaev to the position of "Emir" and announced that it too would summon a congress of the Chechen nation. On March 8, 1999, the *mekhkan shura* proclaimed its willingness to fight another war against Russia, this time on Russian territory.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, the parliament declared both the presidential *shura* and the opposition *shura* equally illegal. A motion to impeach Maskhadov was considered but not adopted. The press ran editorials that condemned both sides. One commentator, Isa Madaev, a former KGB official who had fought in Basaev's unit and participated in the raid on Budennovsk, compared Chechen politics to the wars of the Lilliputans in the novel *Gulliver's Travels*. He likened the discussion of the *Sharia* to the clash between round-enders and sharp-enders, who warred over how to crack an egg.⁴⁵ Another observer, Zelimkhan Susuev, a leader of the nationalist opposition during the *perestroika* era, articulated what must have been a widely shared frustration:

“Okay, so there are no jobs, no salaries, no pensions, no education—if we could just walk around in peace... But not even that. Now they can’t decide among themselves, which of them will subject what remains of the nation to this *sharia*.”⁴⁶

The abduction of MVD General Gennadi Shpigun on March 5 triggered the next crisis. Maskhadov formed a committee to locate Shpigun, instituted patrols in Grozny, and on March 10 declared that the *mekhkan shura* acted against the interests of the nation. He also called for Khattab to be exiled from the republic. On March 15, 1999, another pro-Maskhadov rally attracted 50,000 people. Addressing the crowd, Maskhadov characterized the opposition as agents of “international Zionist centers and Saudi Arabia” whose main agents are “Isa Umarov and his brother.” Isa Umarov, and his brother, Movladi Udugov, were the most influential of the Islamist propagandists in Chechnya. Udugov was the driving force behind the formation of the Congress of Nations of Ichkeria and Daghestan, which staged incursions into Daghestan in August 1999, providing a catalyst for the start of the second war. It is striking that as late as March 1999, the president (who had dismissed Udugov from government in October) still could not bring himself to denounce him publicly by name.

On March 21, there was another attempt to assassinate Maskhadov, who again blamed foreign forces for the attack. He called for a rally of unity to be held

As late as March 1999, the president (who had dismissed Udugov from government in October) still could not bring himself to denounce him publicly by name.

in Starye Atagi on April 10. Four thousand armed supporters came. Predictably, members of the opposition did not attend, but rather attempted yet again to kill the president by placing a landmine on his route.

Stepashin articulated the Russian response to the abduction of General Shpigun on March 7. He demanded the release of the general and all other hostages and threatened economic and administrative measures, up to the use of force. On March 8, Russian planes dropped a few bombs near Serzhen-Yurt. On April 1, Russian helicopters flew at a low altitude almost as far as Grozny, and on May 27, a Chechen village came under artillery fire from Daghestan.⁴⁷

By the spring, the Chechen public was seething. A congress of district prefects met with the parliament in April to condemn all attempts to impose *Sharia*. Although the most publicized kidnappings involved foreigners, overall, the victims of the hostage-taking business were almost 90 percent Chechen. Some Chechens were forming their own units to free hostages. In April, a Committee of Relatives of the Victims of Kidnapping was formed. In June, this committee conducted an operation that freed five people.⁴⁸

Sanobar Shermatova, who has been covering Chechnya for over a decade for the newspaper *Moskovskiy Novosti*, pointed out that the radicals used every possible method to unseat Maskhadov. They tried to assassinate him on at least four occasions, held mass meetings and congresses, and formed a shadow government. The latter is a tactic that reflects a conscious mimicking of Dzhokhar Dudaev who had summoned a parallel government, Congress of the Chechen Nation, to topple the Soviet-era government in 1991.⁴⁹ But unlike the Soviet government, Maskhadov was popular and legitimate. In the final analysis, neither the president nor the opposition wanted to be the first to openly go to war against the other. Hence, the standoff lasted a year—from July 1998 to July 1999.

*In the final analysis,
neither the president nor
the opposition wanted to be
the first to openly go to war
against the other.*

The final act of the anti-Maskhadov program staged by the radicals was the August 1999 incursion into Daghestan that was carried out by the Congress of the Nations of Ichkeria and Daghestan. The aim of the united Daghestani and Chechen opposition was, first of all, to oust the Chechen government led by Maskhadov.

CONCLUSION

Chechnya's failure to become a viable state in the interwar period resulted from a confluence of factors. Maskhadov proved incapable of using Chechen institutions to solidify his power base and consolidate his rule. His major error in judgment was his expectation that the radicals could be satiated. He believed that participation in government would render them more responsible and moderate; that they would become more like him. As it turned out, by accommodating them he became more like them.

While Maskhadov squabbled with the radicals, the Chechen state slid further into disarray. No publicly funded reconstruction of city blocks in Grozny or other cities was ever attempted. Anne Nivat, a French journalist who first visited Grozny in January 1997 to observe the presidential elections, was stunned to find on her next trip in August 1999 that in the interim the only public building in Grozny restored was the headquarters of the oil company, which also housed the presidential administration.⁵⁰

The president did not address the broader questions of constructing the Chechen state because he was preoccupied with placating the leaders of the various gangs lest they provoke civil war in the republic. By doing so, Maskhadov squandered the few assets he did have, namely his popularity, his moderate stance

toward Russia, the postwar enthusiasm of the Chechen nation, and the moderate influence of traditional Chechen institutions such as the elders, mosques, and kinship ties. However, Maskhadov also sought support from Moscow. Repeatedly—at different times and for various reasons—the Kremlin decided to forego the opportunity to back Maskhadov against his opposition. In light of the immense problems facing postwar Chechnya and the opportunities for cooperation presented by Maskhadov, Moscow's policies can at best be described as negligent. ■

NOTES

1 John B. Dunlop, "How many soldiers and civilians died during the Russo-Chechen war of 1994-1996?" *Central Asian Survey* 19 (3-4) (2000): 329-339.

2 Valery Tishkov et al, eds., "Chechnya," in *Mezhetnicheskiye otnosheniya i konflikty v postsovetsskikh gosudarstvakh, ezhegodnyi doklad, 1998* (Moskva: Institut Antropologii i Etnologii, 1999), 66; and Zura Al'tamirova, "Zhizn v poslevoenoi Chechne," in *Chechnya i Rossiya: Obschestva i Gosudarstva*, ed. Dmitri Furman (Moscow: Sakharov Center, 2000), 308-333.

3 Killings of the International Committee of the Red Cross employees were probably politically motivated and sought to disrupt the elections. The Chechen government accused Adam Deniev, a pro-Russian FSB-connected resident of Moscow, of having orchestrated the murders. See Peter Beaumont, "Do Nothing, And Other People Die. Do Something, And You Might Die: The Red Cross After Chechnya," *The Observer*, December 22, 1996; and Anna Politkovskaya "Chechen Security Services Found a Serial Killer in Moscow," *Obschaya Gazeta*, January 29, 1998.

4 Ivan Rybkin, *Consent in Chechnya, Consent in Russia* (London: Lytten Trading and Investment Ltd, 1998), 81.

5 Sanobar Shermatova, "Chechen oil: the hidden mechanism of the war," *Spravdilivost* (June 2002): 5.

6 Author's interviews with Emil Pain and Aleksei Malashenko in Moscow, July 2002.

7 Anne Nivat, "Freedom is their goal," *Transitions*, March 21, 1997.

8 In a July 2002 interview with the author, Mikhail Krasnov, President Yeltsin's legal advisor for negotiations with Chechnya, conceded this point.

9 Igor Shelev, "My fox hole was out in front: A Thursday Morning with Aslan Maskhadov," *Obschaya Gazeta*, February 18, 1998.

10 Interfax, August 5, 1998.

11 Polling data was taken from the database of the VTsIOM polling agency in Moscow.

12 Charles Fairbanks introduces the term "private armies" to describe the armed formations plaguing Chechnya during this period. See Charles H. Fairbanks Jr., "Weak States and Private Armies," in *Beyond State Crisis? Postcolonial Africa and Post-Soviet Eurasia in Comparative Perspective*, eds. Mark R. Beissinger and Crawford Young (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2002).

13 Charles W. Blandy, "Chechnya: A Beleaguered President," Conflict Studies Research Center, August 1998, <<http://www.fas.org/man/dod-101/ops/war/docs/ob61.html>> (accessed April 13, 2003).

14 Fairbanks, "Weak States," 139.

15 Ibid., 132-133.

16 Blandy, "Chechnya."

17 See Timur Muzaev, *Chechenskii Krizis*, 1999 (Moscow: Panorama, 1999), 102.

18 There is a detailed chronology of the government changes and crises from February 1997 to March 1999 in Timur Muzaev, 96-142.

19 Igor Shelev, *Obschaya Gazeta*, February 18, 1998.

20 In Chechnya, *Wahhabis* are a religious minority that propagates strict observance of Islamic law and a standardization of Islamic practice. In particular, *Wahhabis* campaign to eradicate vestiges of pre-Islamic religious tradition that remain part of most Chechen's religious practice. Whereas in Daghestan, the *Wahhabis* represented a form of social protest, in Chechnya, *Wahhabis* had become associated with criminality. See Miriam Lansky, "Daghestan and Chechnya: The Wahhabi Challenge to the State," *SAIS Review* 22 (2) (2002): 167-192.

21 This highly revealing phrase (*bir' muridov*) was employed by the Chechens who related the incident to the author. *Murids* were devout warriors of the nineteenth century who were honored by each successive generation. However, by July 1998, the word *murid* had acquired a new meaning and became a disparagement, like the word *Wahhabi*.

-
- 22 *ORT, Novosti*, August 1, 1998, and *Moscow Times*, August 4, 1998.
 - 23 There is no unanimity among Chechens about these events. While some wish that the criminal *Wahhabi* militias had been destroyed at that point, others point out that the Gudermes event could have turned into a massive pogrom claiming innocent lives and that stopping it was appropriate.
 - 24 Stepashin resolved a conflict between the Daghestani authorities and the *Wahhabi* residents of Karamakhi-Chabanmakhi by essentially granting the dzhaamat autonomy within Daghestan. See Lanskoj, "Daghestan and Chechnya," 167-192.
 - 25 Tishkov, "Chechnya," 66.
 - 26 *Groznenskii Rabochii*, October 8, 1998.
 - 27 *Groznenskii Rabochii*, October 15, 1998.
 - 28 *Groznenskii Rabochii*, October 15, 1998.
 - 29 *Groznenskii Rabochii*, October 22, 1998.
 - 30 Although a supporter of Maskhadov until 1999, Akhmad Kadyrov switched sides after the second war began and in June 2000 became the head of the pro-Russian administration of Chechnya.
 - 31 Yevgeni Primakov, *Vosem Mesyatsyev Plus* (Moscow: Vargius, 2001), 90-109.
 - 32 *Ibid.*, 100.
 - 33 *Ibid.*, 101-103.
 - 34 *Jamestown Foundation Monitor*, March 3, 1999.
 - 35 *Jamestown Foundation Monitor*, July 21, 1999; Sanobar Shermatova and Rustam Kaliyev, "Atgeriev's Secret Mission," *Moskovskiy Novosti*, July 20, 1999; and Rustam Khadikov, "Eto i est' ekstremizm," *Obschaya Gazeta*, September 9, 1999.
 - 36 Khunkar-Pasha Israpilov was the commander who led the assault on the *Wahhabis* (Baraev and Mezhdov's units) in Gudermes in July 1998. He was always the most ardent foe of the hostage takers and was also good friends with Shamil Basaev. According to some sources, Israpilov joined the opposition because Maskhadov did not support him in Gudermes, while others say that this was only a factor of his personal friendship with Basaev.
 - 37 *Groznenskii Rabochii*, November 12, 1998.
 - 38 *Ibid.*
 - 39 *Groznenskii Rabochii*, November 26, 1998.
 - 40 Since September 11, 2001, the allegation has surfaced that Osama bin Laden outbid Granger Telecom. This theory had not surfaced until then although three years had passed since their deaths. Until Russian propaganda sought to link the Chechens explicitly with Osama Bin Laden to obtain American support, the most widely held explanation was that the FSB outbid Granger Telecom. See Sanobar Shermatova and Leonid Nikitinski, "General rabotorgovli," *Moskovskiy Novosti*, March 28, 2000.
 - 41 *Groznenskii Rabochii*, December 24, 1998.
 - 42 *Groznenskii Rabochii*, January 28, 1999.
 - 43 Muzaev, *Chechenskii Krizis*, 132.
 - 44 *Ibid.*, 27.
 - 45 *Ibid.*, 136.
 - 46 *Ibid.*, 135.
 - 47 *Groznenskii Rabochii*, March 11, April 1, and June 3, 1999.
 - 48 *Groznenskii Rabochii*, June 24, 1999.
 - 49 Author's interview with Sanobar Shermatova in Moscow, September 2002.
 - 50 Author's interview with Anne Nivat in Moscow, July 2002.
-

