

2 Prospects for Peace in Chechnya?

Märta-Lisa Magnusson

What are the prospects for peace in Chechnya? Conflict dynamics suggest they are dim. While in official Russian discourse the situation in the war-torn republic is “normalizing”, realities on the ground suggest otherwise. Continued violations of human rights, well documented in reports by intergovernmental institutions such as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, respected non-governmental organizations such as Human Rights Watch, the Russian “Memorial” and others, nourish growing fear and distrust towards Russia and its proxies. The social fabric of the Chechen society is disintegrating and the economic infrastructure of the republic is in ruins. A new generation of Chechen youth, which has experienced nothing but war and devastation, has emerged. Terrorism is proliferating and evidence suggests that the conflict is spreading outside Chechnya proper.

Compared to the previous period of violent confrontation the configuration of parties today is more complex. Since the termination of the previous war in 1996, the internal coherence within the leadership of independence-seeking Chechnya, also called Ichkeriya, has eroded. Popular support for the Ichkeriya leaders is eroding as well. This has allowed the Russian side to pursue a strategy aimed at “internalizing” the conflict. While successful in terms of changing the power structures of the Chechen republic – and thereby its relationship to Russia – the “chechenization” strategy has undermined the possibilities for achieving a lasting peace. The strategy reflects an instrumentalist approach to the conflict relying on elite manipulation and co-optation as a means to establish peace. Peace in Chechnya, however, can only be obtained through negotiations involving the Russian Federation and representatives of the Chechen population endowed with political legitimacy.

2.1 The Nature of the Conflict

Fundamentally the conflict is not horizontal but vertical. It is a conflict involving the right to rule not only within but also over a contested territory. Essentially, there are two conflict parties. On the one side, there is the Chechen population claiming the right to self-determination, including in its most radical form: independence. On the other side, there is the Russian Federation, which considers itself as legitimate territorial polity and opposes groups seeking independence for territories under its jurisdiction. Dependent of the angle of approach the conflict may be termed secessionist or a national liberation conflict. The Chechen side supports its claim by referring to the internationally protected principle of peoples right to self-determination. Russia invokes the principle of territorial integrity of a state. The latter principle is supported by the international community and confirmed in most international documents related to the conflict.

Since the beginning of the 1920's Chechnya enjoyed varying degrees of autonomy within the Russian Federation (RSFSR). At the end of Gorbachev's “perestroika”, which triggered a proliferation of national movements all over the Soviet Union, Chechens claimed right to independence on the plea that their land had been colonized and subjected to foreign rule, first by the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union. References to the forced annexation into the Russian Empire and its successor, USSR, were replete in the discourse of Chechen national leaders, emerging on the political scene at this time. The speeches of Djokar Dudayev, chairman of the National Chechen Congress and, in October 1991, elected as ‘independent’ Chechnya's first president, were abundant with anti-imperial phraseology: “In the Caucasus war, tsarism set as its goal the subjugation of the Chechen people”. “Tsarism ... paved the way for an even more bloody empire –

the Soviet empire of Lenin and Stalin". "The Chechen people never recognized itself as a part neither of the Russian, nor the Soviet Empire."¹

Chechnya de facto seceded from the Russian Federation on 1 November 1991 when newly elected president Dudayev issued a decree proclaiming "state sovereignty for the Chechen Republic."²

After an abortive effort to quell the Chechen bid for independence and "re-establish the constitutional order in the Checheno-Ingush Republic,"³ the federal authorities in Moscow, entangled in internal power struggles, left Chechnya on its own until fall 1994. By then the configuration of political power in Moscow had changed, involving marginalization of liberal forces and a growing influence of "Greater Russia" nationalists, empire restorers and advocates of a reintegration of the former Soviet republics under Russian leadership.⁴ Yielding to these forces Yeltsin chose a strategy aimed at removing Dudayev by arming his opposition. As this strategy failed Russian military forces were sent on 11 December 1994 to Chechnya to effectuate President Yeltsin's decree to "re-establish Constitutional order in the Chechen Republic by all available means". Provisional organs of power were established by decree of President Yeltsin and staffed with pro-Russian Chechen opponents to Dudayev. These structures, however, remained politically weak and never managed to challenge the de facto power of the "separatist" leaders.⁵

In the discourse of Russian officials the Chechen leaders were "criminals" and political entrepreneurs using the nationalist card to promote selfish goals. In his address to the nation on the situation in Chechnya on 27 December 1994, president Yeltsin stated:

"The regime in Grozny is unlawful and it has violated the fundamental requirements of the constitution of the Russian Federation... The Grozny regime has used force to drive Chechen society down the path of crime... By deceit, by playing on patriotic and religious feelings, by bribery and by threats these forces have succeeded in drawing some of the local people into the fight...The destiny of the Chechen people must be determined not by the leaders of the criminal world, as has been the case for the past three years."⁶

The war terminated in August 1996 when an agreement "On the basis for mutual relations between the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic" was signed in Khasavjurt, Dagestan by Chechen Chief of Staff, Aslan Maskhadov and the Secretary of the Russian Security Council, General Alexander Lebed. The Khasavjurt document stipulated that "An agreement on the mutual relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Chechnya" in accordance with the universal principles of international law, shall be reached before October 31, 2001."⁷

In May 1997 an "Agreement on Peace and the Principles of Mutual Relations between the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic Ichkeria" was signed in Moscow by President Boris Yeltsin and Aslan Maskhadov, now President of Chechnya. In this document, which was written in the language of an inter-state agreement, the parties agreed to "renounce the use of and threat of using violence

¹ Ternisty put k svobode, 1992: pp. 16, 21,67; D. Dudayev & E. Shepirova, (1997), "Kontseptsiya natsionalno-gosudarstvennoy politiki Chechenskoy Respubliki Ichkeriya", Rossiya i Chechnya 1990-1997 gg. Dokumenty svidetelstvujut, Moskva, p. 223 (my transl.).

² Ternisty put k svobode 1992: 3.

³ Postanovlenie... Rossiya i Chechnya, 1997: p. 29.

⁴ Gail Lapidus, (1998), "Contested Sovereignty", International Security 23 (1).

⁵ Märta-Lisa Magnusson, (1998a), "The Negotiation Process between Russia and Chechnya – Strategies, Achievements and Future Problems", in: Ole Høiris & Martin Yürükel Sefa (eds.), Contrasts and Solutions in the Caucasus, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.

⁶ Yeltsin addresses Chechens, say there will be no deportations" (1994), SWB BBC, SU/2186 B/5, 23 December.

⁷ SWB/BBC SU/2707, 3 Sept. 96:B/2.

in solving any contested issues.”⁸While the officially declared goal of the 1994 military intervention was to “re-establish Constitutional order” in Chechnya, the military intervention launched on 1 October 1999 was cast as an “anti-terrorist operation.”⁹ Shortly before the operation was initiated, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin abrogated the Khasavjurt agreement and de-legitimated the Chechen

president Aslan Maskhadov. These moves suggested that the “anti-terror operation” had an additional goal, similar to the one in 1994: to re-establish federal control over Chechnya.¹⁰

2.2 Historic Grievances

The territory of what today is the Chechen republic was, together with other parts of the North Caucasus, conquered by Tsarist forces and forcibly incorporated into the Russian Empire in the middle of the 19th century. It took the imperial forces more than 30 years to defeat fierce resistance from Chechen tribes, fighting alone or in alliance with other North Caucasus peoples, notably Avars in neighbouring Dagestan.¹¹

The anti-colonial struggle, which started already in the late 18th century, consolidated the non-state organized Chechen clans, which were welded together by Sufi brotherhoods, combining religious devotion with military discipline.

After the forced annexation by the Russian Empire, groups of Chechens continued the resistance for several years. Uprisings erupted regularly throughout the remainder of the 19th century and continued after Chechnya’s forced incorporation into the USSR in the early 1920’s.¹²

The memory of the conquest, fierce resistance and regularly uprisings nourished the construction of a collective identity among the Chechens, centered on ethnic survival, elaboration of strong cultural boundaries and non-adaptation to alien Soviet/Russian rule.

In late September 1992, I participated in an International Alert fact-finding mission to Chechnya. Past injustices and sufferings under Tsarist and Soviet rule featured prominently in the narratives of almost all Chechens we talked to:

“Any conversation of more than 15 minutes with a Chechen touches on the humiliation they suffered at the hands of successive Russian governments, starting with the period of Tsarist expansion into Chechen lands in the 18th century, continuing through the deportation to Central Asia in February 1944, and cumulating in the failure of the Soviet state to return property to them when they were allowed to return in the late 1950s, or compensation for losses and sufferings during their Central Asian exile.”¹³

When the new democratic leadership in Moscow, initially supporting Dudayev (against the local Soviet leaders) but alarmed by his coming to power, sent Interior Ministry troops to Grozny in November 1991, it was interpreted by Dudayev and the new Chechen parliament as an act of

⁸ Rossiya i Chechnya 1990-1997 gg. Dokumenty svidetelstvujut. Moskva, 1997.

⁹ Vladimir Putin, (1999), “Why Moscow has No Choice but to Clamp Down in Chechnya”, International Herald Tribune, 15 November.

¹⁰ Märta-Lisa Magnusson & Ib Faurby, (1999), “Endlösung i Tjetjenien?”, Udenrigs 4.

¹¹ Robert Conquest, The Nation Killers, (1970), “The Soviet Deportation of Nationalities”, Glasgow; Marie Broxup (ed.), (1992), “The North Caucasus Barrier. The Russian Advance toward the Muslim World”, London.

¹² Marie Bennigsen, (1999), “Chechnya: political developments and the strategic implications for the North Caucasus”, Central Asian Survey 18 (4).

¹³ International Alert, 1992, p.16.

imperial aggression.¹⁴ A substantial part of the Chechen population obviously shared this interpretation of events. Huge demonstrations in Grozny, including also Dudayev's opposition, rallied around him¹⁵ as was the case one year later, when Russian troops, deployed for a peace-keeping mission to the contested Prigorodny region in North Ossetia, crossed the Chechen border from neighboring Ingushetiya.¹⁶

During my second visit to Chechnya in late 1993, I found that while being highly critical of Dudayev, and in some cases even demanding his resignation, spokesmen of the opposition unambiguously supported the idea of Chechen independence. Only one opposition leader, the mayor of the Nadterechny district, Umar Avtorkhanov, advocated reintegration into Russia¹⁷.

By the time Russia launched its military intervention in December 1994 Dudayev was widely unpopular, not least because of his mismanagement of the Chechen economy.¹⁸ Still, the majority of the Chechen population, including the non-Russian financed opposition, rallied around him. This indicated that while unsympathetic to Dudayev's regime, only few Chechens were prepared to translate this aversion into support of Russian "re-conquest".

The most significant evidence for the popular attitude towards independence is the January 1997 presidential elections in Chechnya. While the legal foundation of the elections propelling Dudayev to power in October 1991 may be questioned, the legality of the January 1997 elections may not. They were organized with the assistance of the OSCE and confirmed as "free and fair" by approximately 200 international observers. 59% of those participating in the election cast their vote on Aslan Maskhadov, who had led the military resistance against the Russian attempt to restore federal power and unequivocally stood for Chechen independence.

One week before he was elected Maskhadov formulated his position on Chechnya's relationship to Russia in the following words: "Chechnya is an independent state. Our status we defined already in 1991. We are talking and will continue to negotiate on the mutual relation between two independent states, the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic, based on international law, as is stated in the Khasavjurt agreement."¹⁹

However, less than two years later, when Russian forces again crossed the Chechen borders, there were no "demonstrative" manifestations of support for the Chechen president comparable to those, witnessed during earlier intervention attempts. This may be explained by several factors but the main explanation can be found in internal dynamics in Chechnya in the inter-war period.

2.3 The Role of Religion

The conflict has a religious dimension. Chechens are Sunni Muslims (Sufist) and the Russians are

¹⁴ Ternistyj put k svobode, 1992, p. 22; Rossiya i Chechnya, 1997, p. 31.

¹⁵ E. Pain & A. Popov, (1995), "Chechensaya politika Rossii s 1991 po 1994 gg.. Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnykh othoshenii, No. 5.

¹⁶ Märta-Lisa Magnusson, (1998a), "The Negotiation Process between Russia and Chechnya – Strategies, Achievements and Future Problems", in: Ole Høiris & Martin Yürükel Sefa (eds.), *Contrasts and Solutions in the Caucasus*, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.

¹⁷ It was him the Russian government selected as its ally and provided with arms prior to the military intervention December 1994. See Märta-Lisa Magnusson, (1998a), "The Negotiation Process between Russia and Chechnya – Strategies, Achievements and Future Problems", in: Ole Høiris & Martin Yürükel Sefa (eds.), *Contrasts and Solutions in the Caucasus*, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.

¹⁸ Charlotta Gall & Thomas De Wall, (1997), "Chechnya. A Small Victorious War", London.

¹⁹ Nezavisimaya gazeta, 18.01.97.

(mainly) orthodox Christians. But faith is not *the* contentious issue. The main objective of Chechnya's first president, Djokar Dudayev, his successor Selimkhan Yandarbiyev and recently assassinated Aslan Maskhadov, was not to consolidate Islam on the territory of the Chechen Republic or beyond its border. The main goal was, and remains, political, not religious, control over Chechnya. The task

of the federal forces in the 1994-96 war was not to combat Islam but to restore Russian state-power in the breakaway republic. The declared aim of the 1999 military operation in Chechnya was to combat "international terrorism" (and Chechen separatism), not Islam.

In the official Russian discourse links were established between radical Chechen warlords and international terrorist leaders, such as Shamil Basayev and Osama Bin Laden, the latter also representing militant Islam.²⁰ But Putin refrained – and still does – from linking Islam as such, including the branch of Islam (Sufism) that prevails in Chechnya, to international terrorism. Shortly after he was elected president in March 2000, Putin appointed a former Chechen mufti (and leader of the Sufi *tarikat* Quadiya) as leader of Chechnya. This was Akhmad Kadyrov, later to be "elected" president of Chechnya (on 5 October 2003).

On both sides, however, political leaders have used the religious factor as a means to promote other objectives:

Appointing mufti Ahmed Kadyrov as new Chechen leader, president Putin sought to utilize the respect Kadyrov had enjoyed, both as a religious leader and as Chechen field commander in the 1994-96 war. Putin established contacts to Kadyrov already in fall 1999, utilizing an incipient dispute between the mufti and Chechen president Maskhadov. The co-optation of Kadyrov weakened the resistance capability of the Chechen side. Contrary to the pro-Russian authorities installed in the previous war, Akhmed Kadyrov was allowed to establish a military force of his own. Many of those recruited to this force reportedly were former Ichkeria fighters.²¹

While not a primary issue in the conflict, Islam accrued in significance. Firstly, radical Islam has proliferated in recent years.²² Secondly, linked to this dynamic, traditional Islam (sufism) has also obtained a new significance. The proliferation of radical Islam, however, is not a cause but an effect of the previous and the current wars.²³

In 1992 the "International Alert" mission also investigated the role of Islam at that time. Our impressions are expressed in the mission Report:

"We found little to justify Russian fears (or the threats of some Chechen leaders) that Chechnya could easily slip into the control of Islamic fundamentalists"[...]. On the whole, the Chechen approach to politics and religion impressed us as closest to the modern, moderate Turkish pattern.... Chechens are Sunnis. Islam is an important part of their identity but, only a part". Historical traditions and customs – *adaat* – are at least as important."²⁴

The opening phrase of the Chechen constitution, adopted on 17 March 1992, notes: "By the will of the Almighty the people of the Chechen Republic..." But, "There is no mention of Islam or Allah. The

²⁰ Vladimir Putin, (1999), "Why Moscow has No Choice but to Clamp Down in Chechnya", International Herald Tribune, 15 November.

²¹ Vibeke Sperling, (2004), "Åh Tjetjenien. Den uendelige krig i Europa", Copenhagen: Gyldendal.

²² V. Kh. Akayev, (1999), "Sufism i Vakhabizm na Severnom Kavkaze. Issledovaniya po prikladnoy i neotlozhnoy etnologii", No. 127, Moskva: Rossiyskaya Akademiya Nauk.

²³ Märta-Lisa Magnusson & Ib Faurby, (1999), "Endlösung i Tjetjenien?", Udenrigs 4; Vibeke Sperling, (2004), "Åh Tjetjenien. Den uendelige krig i Europa", Copenhagen: Gyldendal.

²⁴ International Alert, 1992: v, p.20.

constitution establishes a secular state and recognizes religious diversity and religious freedom for all citizens. Citizens are not ethnically or religiously differentiated.²⁵

In the amended 1997 Chechen constitution, however, Islam is state religion, but religious diversity and religious freedom is recognized.²⁶

Radical Islam, in the form of Vakhabbism (originating in Saudi Arabia), emerged as a mobilizing force in the 1994-96 war. It was mediated by Muslim fighters from abroad joining the Chechen resistance.²⁷ But it was first in the post-war period that Vakhabbism obtained a broader support,

mainly from young, then unemployed men, who fought in the war. Vakhabbism was not, however, welcomed by the majority of the Chechen population as it contradicts local Sufi and clan traditions and is considered inconsistent with national Chechen values.²⁸ The victory of the secularly oriented Aslan Maskhadov over candidates proposing Islamist programs in the 1997 presidential elections also indicates that radical Islam had no broader popular support at this time.²⁹

In the post-election period, however, Vakhabbism obtained increased significance as a tool in inter-elite power struggles. Former field commanders who obtained posts in president Maskhadov's government utilized Vakhabbism to promote their objectives. Among these were acting Prime Minister, Shamil Basayev and Foreign Minister Movladi Udugov. Both opposed Maskhadov's moderate position in relation to Russia and both agitated for the establishment of an Islamic Chechen-Dagestani State. In Spring 1998 they resigned and openly challenged Maskhadov's authority by creating parallel power structures in Chechnya. One year later Shamil Basayev led a group of Chechen religious extremists who meddled in Vakhabbist-inspired riots in south-western Dagestan. They gave Putin a pretext for renewed military operations on the territory of Chechnya.³⁰

Maskhadov dissociated himself from Basayev as well as from Vakhabbism. However, he never managed to neutralize either. With the advent of the new Russian intervention, Maskhadov again cooperated with Basayev for tactical reasons. It was after this decision that mufti Akhmed Kadyrov defected to the Russian side. As a Sufi leader he was an ardent adversary of Vakhabbism and he accused Maskhadov for being too compliant both with Vakhabbism and Basayev.³¹

The liaison of some of its leaders with Vakhabbism has been detrimental for the independence seeking Chechnya-Ichkeria. Associating themselves with Vakhabbism these leaders welled up a horizontal intra-Chechen conflict on religious grounds. It is reasonable to assume that the liaison between some Ichkeria leaders and Vakhabbism even softened the popular resistance to Russian rule. In a recently published book, Danish journalist and specialist on Chechnya, Vibeke Sperling, concludes:

²⁵ International Alert 1992, p. 19.

²⁶ Konstitutsiya Chechenskoy Respubliki (1997) p. 7.

²⁷ V. Kh. Akayev, (1999), "Sufism i Vakhabizm na Severnom Kavkaze. Issledovaniya po prikladnoy i neotlozhnoy etnologii", No. 127, Moskva: Rossiyskaya Akademiya Nauk.

²⁸ V. Kh. Akayev, (1999), "Sufism i Vakhabizm na Severnom Kavkaze. Issledovaniya po prikladnoy i neotlozhnoy etnologii", No. 127, Moskva: Rossiyskaya Akademiya Nauk; Marie Bennigsen, (1999), "Chechnya: political developments and the strategic implications for the North Caucasus", *Central Asian Survey* 18 (4).

²⁹ Vibeke Sperling, (2004), "Åh Tjetjenien. Den uendelige krig i Europa", Copenhagen: Gyldendal.

³⁰ Märta-Lisa Magnusson & Ib Faurby, (1999), "Endlösning i Tjetjenien?", *Udenrigs* 4. Vibeke Sperling, (2004), "Åh Tjetjenien. Den uendelige krig i Europa", Copenhagen: Gyldendal; Ib Faurby, (2002), "International Law, Human Rights and the Wars in Chechnya", *Baltic Defence Review* 7; Svante E. Cornell, (2001), "Small Nations and Great Powers. A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus", Curzon.

³¹ Timur Muzaev, "Perspektivy "mirnoj" okkupatsii", *Russkaya mysl*, (1999) No. 4294; V. Kh. Akayev, (1999), "Sufism i Vakhabizm na Severnom Kavkaze. Issledovaniya po prikladnoy i neotlozhnoy etnologii", No. 127, Moskva: Rossiyskaya Akademiya Nauk.

“Maskhadov could not as (he had) promised control the extremist and terrorist forces. He also did not manage to maintain his secular policy, when he came under pressure from fundamentalist warlords demanding the introduction of sharia laws... It turned out that in peace time he did not manage to be the unifying figure, he had been in the time of war. The Chechen clan society with all its internal quarrels again became the ruling factor, and the hate against the Russians lost the unifying force it had had during the war.”³²

In May 2004, half a year after he was elected president, Kadyrov was assassinated and a new president, Alu Alkhanov, nominated by Moscow and reportedly a fighter on the Russian side in the previous war,³³ was “elected” (on 29 August 2004). Kadyrov's private army, however, remained under the control of Kadyrov's son, Ramzan, currently acting Prime Minister of Chechnya. According to one of my Chechen sources, despite being widely hated for the brutality of his forces, Ramzan Kadyrov was regarded by a substantial number of ordinary Chechens to be the only force capable of curtailing the Vakhabbits.

The brutal terrorist attacks on the Dubrovka theater in Moscow in October 2002 and School Nr. 1 in Beslan, September 2003, both led by Basayev, further alienated ordinary Chechens from the “Ichkeriya” leadership. After the terrorist attack in Beslan, Maskhadov dismissed Basayev. However, after the assassination of Maskhadov at the beginning of March this year, acting president A-H Sajdullaev re-admitted Basayev into the Ichkeria government.

The growing intra-Chechen rivalries and the upwelling of horizontal conflict lines does not, however, alter the fundamental vertical character of the conflict. To understand why this is so it is necessary to include yet another factor in the analysis.

2.4 The Memory of the Deportations

This factor is the deportation of almost the entire Chechen population, and their ethnic twins, the Ingush (approximately 425,000 persons) to Central Asia and Siberia in 1944, allegedly for collaboration with the German invaders.³⁴

This was a full-scale ethnic cleansing operation, which almost any Chechen conceives as genocide. In 1957 the Chechens were rehabilitated and those who had survived were allowed to return to the re-established Checheno-Ingush Autonomous republic, only to find that Russians, Ukrainians and other peoples had moved in and taken over their land and homes.³⁵

Almost all elder Chechens have personal memories of the deportation. Parents and grandparents have transferred their horrible experiences to the young, and the deportation period is a central topic in the narratives of ordinary Chechens (cf. quotation from *International Alert* above). References to the deportation also abound in the political discourse of Chechen officials. Dudayev, Maskhadov and several other Chechen leaders were born or grew up in the exile.

³² Vibeke Sperling, (2004), “Åh Tjetjenien. Den uendelige krig i Europa”, Copenhagen: Gyldendal (My transl.).

³³ Vibeke Sperling, (2004), “Åh Tjetjenien. Den uendelige krig i Europa”, Copenhagen: Gyldendal.

³⁴ Robert Conquest, *The Nation Killers*, (1970), “The Soviet Deportation of Nationalities”, Glasgow.

³⁵ *International Alert*, 1992, p.11.

When federal forces crossed into Chechnya in December 1994 the collective memory of the deportation was activated and contributed to the popular resistance. Fears of a new deportation were apparently so widespread that Yeltsin found it necessary to officially assert that "the deportation of the Chechen people will never be repeated under any circumstances."³⁶

According to Marie Bennigsen, who did field work in Chechnya in 1995-1996:

"Those who advocated non-resistance to Russia were sidelined after the massacres of Samashki (May 1995) ... from then on the Chechen peoples became convinced that 'pacification' by the Russian armed forces and the offers of amnesty by Boris Yeltsin were aimed at their annihilation or a second deportation. Villages which until then had remained neutral joined the resistance."³⁷

When president Maskhadov swore his oath as president in February 1997 he invoked the memory of the deportation:

"For hundreds of years they (Russians) prevented our peoples from living in freedom and governing their country. When it pleased them they killed us, when it pleased them they burnt us out, when it pleased them they branded us bandits and exiled us."³⁸

Chechen leaders surely have used the history of Chechen resistance, instrumentalized the sufferings of this "punished people" and frequently invented external threats. But all these efforts would have been in vein had they not accorded with prevailing socio-psychological sentiments among the broad Chechen population. Chechens interpret events in the prism of historic experience. This experience is lived, not "constructed" by "ethnic entrepreneurs."

In the first war Yeltsin differentiated between "bandits" and the ordinary Chechen population. Accordingly, the Chechen people were not considered a party to the conflict, only its "criminal" leaders.

Putin too, asserted that the military operations he initiated had "the immediate aim to rid Chechnya of those who threaten the safety of Chechens and Russians."³⁹ However, by de-legitimizing president Maskhadov, Putin not only dismissed the will of the Chechen people, expressed in free and fair elections. Equalizing Maskhadov with terrorists Putin also legalized encroachments on ordinary Chechens, who had committed no other "crime" than pursuing their democratic right to be governed by consent.

The current war has added yet another layer to the Chechen martyrology created by the deportation and reinforced by the previous war. The atrocities committed by the federal forces and their local puppets in the actual war have only reinforced the vertical character of the conflict.

At the beginning of the 1999 military intervention I heard from non-independence minded Chechen friends that a new deportation was underway, disguised as evacuation of Chechen refugees to remote places in Russia, and that the purpose of Putin's "anti-terrorist" operation was to "cleanse Chechnya from Chechens".

³⁶ SWB BBC, SU/2186 B/5, 23 December 1994.

³⁷ Marie Bennigsen, (1999), "Chechnya: political developments and the strategic implications for the North Caucasus", Central Asian Survey, Vol. 18, No. 4, December.

³⁸ Quoted from Marie Bennigsen, (1999), "Chechnya: political developments and the strategic implications for the North Caucasus", Central Asian Survey, Vol. 18, No. 4, December.

³⁹ Vladimir Putin, (1999), "Why Moscow has No Choice but to Clamp Down in Chechnya", International Herald Tribune, 15 November.

2.5 Conclusion

The dynamics of the Russian Chechen conflict suggests that it is now less “vertical” than it was in 1994-96. A horizontal conflict line – or more correctly lines – have emerged. This is partly due to president Putin’s attempts to “internalize” the conflict by co-opting and empowering former fighters and respected leaders on the Ichkeria side. But the “horizontalization” of the conflict is also due to the proliferation of radical Islam, a process that has alienated ordinary Chechens from the “Ichkeria” leadership, believed to be compliant and even sympathetic to Vakhabbism.

A settlement of the conflict, understood as a negotiated agreement between Russia and a “unitary”, coherent Chechen leadership is not possible today. On the other side a negotiated settlement would not be of much worth without the participation of representatives of the “Ichkeria” side. The incumbent, Russia-installed Chechen leaders, are not legitimate and lack a mandate to negotiate on the status of Chechnya on behalf of the Chechen nation.

Certainly many ordinary Chechens were tired of the proliferating disorder in the interwar period. But that does not mean that they approve the new Chechen leaders, appointed by Putin and – according to official Russian sources – widely supported in popular elections. Media reported comprehensive riggings in these elections.⁴⁰

This factor must be taken into consideration in any attempt to work out a comprehensive solution to the Russian-Chechen conflict. While President Yeltsin was reluctant to negotiate directly with Dudayev, he agreed to negotiations at least at an informal level and eventually held face-to-face talks at an official level with Maskhadov.

President Putin has hitherto rejected any proposals to negotiate with representatives of “separatist” Chechnya. This position has become even harder to soften up after the re-entry of the terrorist leader Shamil Basayev into the Ichkeria government. But representatives of this side must be included in any peace negotiations in order to be meaningful.

It is not possible to assess to what extent the current acting president of “independent” Chechnya, Sajdullaev, is supported by the Chechen population. However, it is probably safe to assume that, regardless of his anonymity and uncertainty concerning his dependence on the terrorist Basayev, he has been endowed with a symbolic meaning, representing the unbroken line of authority from the hitherto only legitimate president of “independent” Chechnya. Any political leader which can confirm a legitimate legacy from the first freely elected Chechen president, will be in possession of a political capital more valuable than that possessed by political actors who are not anchored within the legal space of “independent” Chechnya.

In any case, the assassination of President Maskhadov has the potential to become a symbol of independence around which future generation of independence minded Chechen might rally.

A “primordialist” solution to the conflict would be to separate Chechnya from Russia. This would be congruent with the aspirations of the Ichkeria leadership. However, while this solution – in my opinion – would have been realistic at the beginning of the 1990’s and possibly also immediately after the previous war, full independence (i.e. separation from Russia) would create even greater problems than those it would solve.

⁴⁰ Vibeke Sperling, (2004), “Åh Tjetjenien. Den uendelige krig i Europa”, Gyldendal. (Copenhagen).

Like his predecessors, Dudayev and Yandarbiyev, Maskhadov never withdraw from the goal of full independence. However, he was prepared to discuss a looser, con-federal union with Russia. The proposal is still valid.⁴¹ This is still far from what Russia would be prepared to even consider. But for those offering to assist in finding a peaceful solution to the conflict, it could be a point of departure for further elaborations.

A model combining “primordialist” separation and instrumentalist ‘power-sharing’ (such as confederation) is thinkable. This, however, requires that the leaders of Ichkeria as well as in the Kremlin deconstruct their view of the conflict. International mediators may assist in this process. However instruments available for international mediation in secessionist conflicts are weak – especially if one of the parties is a great power.

⁴¹ Interview with Foreign Minister of Chechnya Ichkeria, Usman Fersauli, 31 Okt. 2004 and 1. Nov. 2005.