

## Chechnia: The Theft of a Nation?

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### Introduction

Chechnia is a small, mountainous region in Russia's North Caucasian southern borderlands which would be of little note were it not for its two main assets: oil and organised crime. Bar the Mercedes and fax machines of its capital, it shows little sign of its reputed prosperity. Even for the predominately agrarian North Caucasian region, the population has been little urbanised. According to the 1989 census, the population of the then Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was split 59% to 41% rural/urban. This compared with levels of urbanisation of 66% across the entire USSR, 74% across all of Russia and even 57% for the North Caucasus as a whole. Indeed, the figures actually indicated a shift in the centre of gravity back into the countryside (the urbanised proportion had been 43% ten years earlier), as a result of differential growth rates and the out-migration of ethnic Russian settlers. Chechnia's capital, Grozny, has a population of merely 400,000, although the concentration of petrochemical industries in the city has ensured it some notoriety as having one of the highest levels of industrial pollution in Russia outside the Urals smokestack heavy industrial cities.

A clannish mountain people, the Chechens have a history of stubborn independence, a tradition of free-wheeling banditry and a new reputation as the Moslem mafiosi of post-Soviet Eurasia. Society is still defined by the *teip*, the clan. The 128 clans and families of Chechnia managed to dominate local politics even during the Soviet era.

According again to the 1989 census data (the last reliable source), the Chechen population amounted to 957,000, of whom over 98% considered Chechen their mother tongue. This relatively high figure is a good index of the strength of the Chechen ethno-cultural identity, especially given the fact that by 1988, no schools in the country were teaching in Chechen.

Overall, the picture is of a traditional society, still dominated by the *teip*, with a strong grip upon its

own region. Taking a mixed sample of economic sectors, for example, a survey of the proportion of managers in each region who were drawn from the titular local nationality recorded a figure of 71.5% for the then Chechen-Ingush ASSR. Although in keeping with the rest of the North Caucasian region, this quite high figure (especially given the significant local Russian population) is suggestive of the limited penetration of Muscovite control there, even pre-dating the collapse of the Soviet Union.

### The Reassertion of Chechen Nationhood

Chechnia had been incorporated into the Russian empire by conquest in the course of the Caucasian Wars of the nineteenth century. A stern critic of the tsarist's regime's pedigree as the "*prison of nations*", Lenin had always adopted an ambivalent attitude to the non-Russian minorities of the USSR. While committed to their rights and autonomy in principle, he proved prepared sometimes to overlook these when pragmatism required it. His successor, Stalin, though, had no such scruples. His reign saw a thoroughgoing revision of the boundaries within the USSR in the interests of administrative efficiency and state control. In 1934, the Chechen and Ingush Autonomous Regions, formed in 1922, were arbitrarily merged into the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Region. Uniting by decree two different peoples, with their own languages, cultures and interests, heightened local resistance, and in the late 1930s, the Chechens went so far as to rebel.

Although the uprising was put down, Stalin never forgave a slight. In 1944, the entire Chechen nation - along with others from the same region - was deported, resettled and scattered in Central Asia, Siberia and Kazakhstan. Some 200,000 died on the journey. When the Chechens were at last allowed to return to their homeland in 1956, they did so near enough en masse and at once. In 1957, the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic was reconstituted within the Russian Socialist Federal Republic.

The Chechens remained dominant within the region, and as of the 1989 census comprised 57.8% of its population, alongside 12.9% Ingushetians and 23.1% Russians. The census recorded a total Chechen population of 957,000. The freedoms of the era of *perestroika* allowed them to campaign for the autonomy they had so long been denied, and they proved vigorous in their use of the "new politics" introduced by Gorbachev. His decision to extend *demokratizatsiya* to a new parliament galvanised nationalists across the Union, not least in Chechen-Ingushetia, where the Chechen All-National Congress became especially active, led by a mercurial ex-air force general, Dzhokhar Dudaev.

Born in 1944, Dudaev experienced Stalin's resettlement first hand, his family spending 13 years in Northern Kazakhstan before returning to Chechnia in 1957. Although his decision to pursue a career in the Long Range Air Force suggested a preparedness to work within the Soviet system, and he was to rise to the rank of Major General of Aviation in 1988, his experiences of discrimination by Russians (and those of his Estonian wife) left him with no love for Moscow. In 1990, he took early retirement and in October that year was elected Chair of the Chechen All-National Congress. A month later, at its first general meeting, the Congress committed itself to establishing a sovereign Chechen republic. At this stage, this was envisaged as being within the Soviet Union. By its second meeting in June 1991, the position of the Congress had radicalised, and it redefined its goal as not sovereignty within the Union but complete independence from it.

The 1991 August Coup finally shattered the Union. In Chechen-Ingushetia, Dudaev used the opportunity to overthrow the existing (Soviet) administration, declare *de facto* independence and call for elections in October, which he duly won. So long as the Chechens had been a thorn in Gorbachev's side, Yeltsin had tolerated them. As soon as Dudaev began advocating secession from his new Russian Federation, Yeltsin looked for ways to silence him. Yeltsin declared the election null and void and issued a warrant for Dudaev's arrest. Despite the unease of senior security officials, including former Interior Minister Barannikov and Major General Viktor Gafarov, the officer actually entrusted with the ill-fated operation, the Russian president sent a battalion of Russian Interior Troops to enforce his decrees.

This proved the true catalyst of Chechen nationhood. The more Moscow demonised Dudaev, the more he became canonised at home as a hero of national independence and of Islamic rectitude. The Interior Troops were blockaded at the airport by crowds as well as the new National Guard Dudaev had established and were forced to withdraw in ignominy. Yeltsin at once placed the republic under a blockade, which proved equally impossible to police and it became, to all intents and purposes, independent. In December 1992, Ingushetia formally broke away from Chechnia to become a republic on its own, within the Russian Federation.

### The Chechen Government(s)

From the very first, Dudaev faced opposition from the Chechen intelligentsia and various important clans. Yeltsin's attempts to depose him, though, gave Dudaev the opportunity to introduce martial law regulations and use them to isolate and silence his rivals, as well as paint them as anti-Islamic quislings of Moscow. Since the beginning of 1992, though, there have been periodic claims that Dudaev is on the verge of overthrow. While Dudaev's long-term future seems very doubtful, this is unlikely to bring democracy or stability to Chechnia. Most challenges to his regime, after all, come from clans outside his alliance of backers, eager to be brought into the cartel or replace it with a new one. In March 1993, for example, Salman Khasimikov, head of the republic's National Security Service, encouraged public protests against Dudaev. What could have been defiance against a corrupt government, though, has by many observers been seen as a bid to stake a claim to a greater share of Chechnia's oil revenues, most of which flow into private pockets. While Dudaev is involved in a running struggle with more democratic figures within the Chechen parliament, this has also too often taken the form of inter-clan rivalries. All this simply reflects the way that the new Chechen state is essentially built upon the established clans, the same clans which also form the backbone of Chechen organised crime.

Perhaps the best example is to be found in the police force. Having inherited a Soviet system, with three main services (OMON riot police, GAI traffic police and PPS criminal police) and 3,000 officers, this has mushroomed to fully 14 separate forces, accounting for some 17,000 armed officers.

The explanation for this is that clans within Dudaev's alliance have simply been given the opportunity to turn their gunmen into state law-enforcement officers, albeit still responsible to their clan elders. Dudaev himself controls the National Guard, but this private army is but 300 men strong; it is clear that ultimately he can only rule in the name of his alliance of clans.

To put it very crudely, it is very useful for criminals to have the trappings and respectability of a state. Of course in part this is because it opens up an entire economy to their plunder. Whereas once only 2 % of Chechnia's oil revenues remained within the region, this is now officially 100 %. Yet in the eighteen months after independence, not a single new school or hospital was built and industrial production fell - largely as a result of under-investment - by 60 %. It also goes beyond such internal parasitism, though. Thanks to their control of the Chechnian State Bank, one gang was able to use false *avisos* (proof of fund documents) to defraud the Russian State Bank of currency worth perhaps \$700 million. The execution of two Chechen mafiosi in London in February 1993, travelling on Chechen diplomatic passports, brought to light attempts by this nation of counterfeiters to use the good offices of the British Royal Mint to acquire the latest in currency and documentation printing technology.

### Chechnia in a North Caucasian Context

In May 1990, Chechens had led the way in the creation of the Confederation of Caucasian Mountain Peoples (CCMP), intended to span some sixteen peoples sharing the North Caucasian *gorskii* ('mountaineer') culture. In August 1992, the CCMP did send troops to assist the Abkhazians in their struggle for independence from Georgia, yet the 'mountaineers' have tended to find more to divide than unite them when it comes to turning grandiose rhetoric into practical deeds. In real terms, the role of the Confederation is still minimal. It is clear that Dudaev dreams of establishing hegemony over the 41 North Caucasian peoples; he explicitly seeks to draw parallels between himself and Imam Shamil, the nineteenth-century hero and inspiration of the Caucasian Wars against the Russians. Not only has his influence over the Confederation dwindled markedly, though, but his ambitions stand in stark contrast to the questions being raised as to whether he can even hold Chechnia together. Three of the

republic's 18 districts (*raions*), Nadterechnyi, Ust-Martanouskii and Gudermesskii, have repeatedly threatened secession.

The ethnic topography of Chechnia is further complicated by the claims of the Terek Cossack Horde, two districts of which - the Groznenskii and Vvedenskii - lie within Chechnia (plus the Nazranovskii in Ingushetia). Cossacks had been settled in the North Caucasus in the last century by an imperial government eager to use them to control the fractious "*mountaineers*". With the revolution, the Soviet government evicted Cossack settlers in a bid to win Chechen support, given that more than 12,000 indigens were officially registered as "*landless*". The Soviet era saw the Cossack identity all but submerged, but it has returned with a vengeance in recent years, and Cossacks have begun to lay claim to lands briefly theirs. While in Chechnia this is largely little more than a rhetorical demand, the newly reconstituted Terek Horde's stated ambitions include reoccupying lands granted them by the tsar.

Nor are Chechnia's relations with Ingushetia noticeably warm, not least given that Chechnia's Sunzhenskii district remains a bone of contention between them, and their common border is still in dispute. Although Dudaev began to claim that the Chechens and Ingush are but a single people - descended from the Ichkerians - this has been derided in Ingushetia. Ingushetia may be small, even by North Caucasian standards (population around 230,000-240,000), but Ingush President Aushev has made it clear that he will resist any Chechen empire building. Like Dudaev, Aushev is also a former soldier, but as a distinguished veteran of the Afghan War, he has excellent contacts in the Russian Defence Ministry (not least with Defence Minister Grachev, another '*afganets*'), and it is clear that Russia would be delighted to be provided with the pretext to finish the job begun in November 1991.

Were it to intervene notionally in support of Ingush sovereignty, Moscow would after all be able to do so with the active support of the beleaguered Russian community of Chechnia and its self-proclaimed champions, such as the Terek Cossacks of Stavropol and North Osetia. Given that Chechnia provided a haven for his rival, Gamsakhurdia, Georgia's President Shevardnadze might also be induced to support any such operation. Nevertheless, Chechnia's potential

further to destabilise the North Caucasus should not be underestimated. This is, after all, a region full of disputed borders and riven by personal, clan, ethnic and economic rivalries.

### The "Chechen Plague"

As a result of its illicit activities, Chechnia also plays a role on a global stage. Chechen criminals have been involved in a variety of cross-border activities, including the counterfeiting of Russian roubles (many to flood the Uzbek economy), international drugs trafficking, the transport and sale of cars stolen in Western Europe and arms dealing. Has Chechnia any alternatives to organised crime? Optimists would look at the possibilities for licit economic growth. Chechnia does have a domestic oil industry, and is exploring alternative markets to Russia, such as neighbouring Georgia. A Turkish government grant has been earmarked to build a pipeline to the Black Sea port of Batumi, which would open up new markets for trade.

This is, however, to understate the allure of organised crime and the extent to which even to characterise it as 'crime' is to misunderstand Chechen culture. For 130 years, Chechnia has been under Russian control; to plunder Moscow is thus the resolution of a national vendetta. Chechen culture is also dominated by family and clan; to put other nations' concepts of legality over supporting and enriching the clan might win international approval, but would go against the grain of the Chechen identity. As it is, the Chechens are a powerful but by no means dominant force in Moscow's world of organised crime. As of 1992, estimates suggested the Chechen mafia groups were together 1,500-3,000 strong, including the powerful *Avtomobilnaya*, *Tsentrlnaya* and *Ostankinskaya* gangs.

In August 1993, Dudaev survived an assassination attempt. Even this was in classic gangster vein, a drive-by shooting from three cars with automatic weapons. That time he survived, next time he may be less fortunate. In late 1993, his relations with the powerful Chinkhoi clan (from whence hails Prime Minister Yaragi Mamodaev) soured, and as a result, Dudaev's grip upon the Chechen 'army' (not least the Shaliskii tank regiment) has been weakened. The largest *teip*, the Benoi, has also shown signs of dissatisfaction with Dudaev's erratic rule, and its head, Madin Garakaev, used

the opportunity of a clan congress to issue a mild warning to the President that:

*"historically, the outcome of all political actions in Chechnia has been determined by whose side this clan was on."*

The renamed Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus is also increasingly independent of Dudaev. In January 1994 it appointed a Chechen, Shamil Basaev, commandant of its joint "peacekeeping forces", despite the fact that a few days earlier Chechnia's Procurator-General described him as "mutineer" and "terrorist".

These developments may indicate the disintegration of Dudaev's clan alliance; in December 1993, Mamodaev predicted that:

*"Dudaev has already sawn through the branch on which he is perched and his government in Grozny will bow out with the passing year."*

The problems of Chechnia, though, and the problems it poses the rest of the world, are a long way further from any resolution.

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### References

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