



## Responding to Terrorism: Russia at a Crossroads

By Leon Aron

*Wars have repeatedly had a decisive influence on Russia's political development, and the present global conflict against fundamentalist Islam is no exception. With the murder of hundreds of Russians at the hands of Chechen terrorists—most notably, the massacre of schoolchildren at Beslan earlier this month—President Vladimir Putin has announced a sweeping overhaul of Russia's political system that would further consolidate power in the Kremlin and damage the country's nascent democracy. The United States and its allies now confront the dual challenge of assisting Russia in its fight against terrorism while simultaneously resisting the erosion of freedom there.*

“The French only make reforms in the course of a revolution,” General de Gaulle once told Raymond Aron.<sup>1</sup> Of the Russians it may be said that their reforms (and revolutions) are very often precipitated by wars.

The Crimean War (1854–1856) led to Alexander II's “revolution from above,” which included the emancipation of the serfs. The Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 brought about the 1905 Revolution and the beginning of democratic politics and constitutional monarchy. World War I was the key precondition for the success of the Bolshevik Revolution. The Soviet Union's war in Afghanistan (1979–1988) contributed mightily to the urgency of Mikhail Gorbachev's overhaul of domestic and foreign policies. And the defeat or, more precisely, voluntary withdrawal from the Cold War attended the breakup of the Soviet Union and the democratic revolution of 1991.

With the murder of more than six hundred men, women, and children by Chechnya-based Islamic terrorists in Russia since late June—including the simultaneous downing of two

civilian airplanes and the massacre of schoolchildren in Beslan—Russia is again at war. The historic pattern of wars' profound impact on Russian politics and society is evident in President Vladimir Putin's September 13 outline of political and bureaucratic reforms that would consolidate the Kremlin's power and damage Russia's nascent democracy. The United States now confronts the challenge of a “two-track” policy of helping Russia to combat militant Islamic fundamentalism while opposing the erosion of democracy.

### The International War

President Putin was correct to characterize the Beslan massacre as part of an all-out war against Russia by an international terrorist network. Certainly the Islamic terrorists, who in the second half of the 1990s hijacked Chechnya's struggle for independence, see it that way. For years, along with Palestine and Kashmir, Islamic fundamentalists have declared Chechnya a key battlefield in the war on “Jews,” “crusaders,” and other assorted “infidels.” As early as December 1996, Ayman al-Zawahiri, then the leader of Egyptian Islamic Jihad and today al Qaeda's second-in-command,

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tried clandestinely to enter Chechnya to find a new base for Islamic terrorist groups.<sup>2</sup>

In 1999 at least one hundred al Qaeda fighters joined hundreds of Chechens in the Pankisi Gorge on the Georgian side of the Chechen-Georgian border. When U.S.-trained Georgian Special Forces captured fifteen Arab fighters in the Pankisi Gorge in October 2002, allegedly among them was a member of the al Qaeda military committee, Saif al-Islam al-Masry.<sup>3</sup> Three of the nineteen September 11, 2001, hijackers were first approached by al Qaeda in a training camp near Kandahar, Afghanistan, where they had gone with the intention of “fighting the Russians in Chechnya.”<sup>4</sup> And in the autumn of 2002, a French judge presiding over an inquiry into connections between French Muslim extremists and the Chechen resistance concluded that “Chechnya could become the new Afghanistan. It could serve as a new laboratory for attacks as Afghanistan once did.”<sup>5</sup>

Although based in Chechnya and precipitated by the Chechen people’s determined struggle for independence, the acts of violence perpetrated by the radical wing of the Chechen resistance have less to do with the liberation of Chechnya than with endless jihad against the “infidels.” The goal of Shamil Basaev, the terrorist Islamic warlord reported to have masterminded the Beslan massacre, along with half a dozen other bloody attacks in Russia since 1995, is no longer an independent, secular, and democratic Chechnya, if indeed it ever was. Basaev, who is said to have trained in a terrorist camp in Afghanistan as early as 1994, is no more committed to that aim than Osama bin Laden was to an independent, secular, and democratic Afghanistan when he fought the Soviets in the 1980s, or than the mastermind of suicide attacks in Iraq today, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, is to seeing an independent, secular, and democratic Iraq.<sup>6</sup>

After thirteen years of intermittent conflict of savage brutality, Russia is plainly incapable of normalizing the Chechen state, economy, and society on its own. The only way to succeed in such a war and gradually to reduce the terrorist attacks on Russia is to “internationalize” its defense, just as the assault against Russia has been internationalized for years now. Always obvious,

but invariably dismissed by the Kremlin as an encroachment on Russia’s sovereignty, this option has become inescapable after Beslan. Left to fester, Chechnya will not only continue as the staging area for Beslan-like massacres of Russian citizens but also a reliable base for the worldwide jihad. Thus, the “internationalization” is as much in the world’s interest as it is in Russia’s.

Much as Moscow vehemently opposes such an “internationalization,” Russia’s efforts at genuine “pacification” of Chechnya utterly lack credibility after two very dirty wars, in which at least 100,000 Chechens have been killed and 35,000 “disappeared.” It cannot succeed without the world’s assistance in peacekeeping and policing, as well as in economic development and secular democratic self-governance. The U.S.-led coalition’s effort in Iraq may provide a model, but, unlike Iraq, the Chechen reconstruction is likely to receive the blessing of the United Nations and thus lead to significant, perhaps even dominant, European participation.

Yet it is clear that the sine qua non of such a partnership will be the implementation of measures that the Kremlin thus far has been unwilling (or unable) to put in place. Russia must swallow its pride and admit what its courageous human rights activists and their colleagues abroad have been saying for years: the horrific human rights abuses by Russian troops must stop. Freedom of speech and of elected office must be extended to all forces untainted by links to terrorism, and clean competitive elections held from municipal posts all the way to the Chechen presidency.

## Independence Postponed

The final resolution of the status of the Chechen state—independence or some sort of association with Russia—will have to be postponed until it is reasonably certain that steps toward it, including a referendum on the relationship with Russia, would not be tainted and subverted by threats and violence.

Those who suggest that Russia can rescue itself from the threat of terrorism by simply withdrawing its forces and granting the Chechens independence overlook the fact that such a policy has already been

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tried—and failed—from 1997 to 1999, when Russia walked away from Chechnya. Under freely elected but increasingly ineffectual President Aslan Maskhadov, warlords and their heavily armed gangs turned the country into a Somalia of the Caucasus. Kidnappings for ransom became an industry. Slavery was widespread, with some of the kidnapped sold into indentured servitude to Chechen families. For years the slaves, as they were openly called, endured starvation, beating, and often maiming and mutilation.

Islamic courts were introduced, punishing those suspected of violating Koran-based Sharia law. In April 1997, the first of several public executions was broadcast on Chechnya's state-run television, during which a man's throat was slit by a group of hooded men. Subsequent executions by firing squad took place in Grozny's Friendship of Peoples Square in the presence of thousands of spectators. In November 1997 President Maskhadov declared Chechnya an Islamic republic, which was recognized solely by the Taliban regime of Afghanistan.

In response to protests from international human rights organizations and from Moscow, which continued to uphold the fiction of Chechnya's "autonomy" inside Russia and sent Grozny billions of rubles in pensions and salaries, the Chechen presidential spokesman said: "The disapproval by Russia and the West of our actions—shooting by a firing squad and public executions—means that we're heading in the right direction. There is no doubt that only the laws of Allah and norms of Sharia will be in force in Chechnya."<sup>7</sup>

Finally, in August and September 1999, 1,200 to 2,000 fighters invaded the Russian autonomous republic of Dagestan from Chechnya with the goal of establishing an "Islamic Republic of the North Caucasus." The invasion's leader—and prime minister in Maskhadov's government—Shamil Basaev appealed to the Dagestani population "to rise up and end 140 years of occupation by the Muscovite infidels."<sup>8</sup>

With this experience in mind, the abandonment of Chechnya by Russia and the world today in the guise of "independence" would almost certainly mean the creation on Russia's border of an enclave run by blood-thirsty warlords, many connected to al Qaeda, who would repress and brutalize their own people even as they wage a jihad on Russia and, soon perhaps, on Europe as well.

The rigged results of Chechnya's Moscow-engineered elections aside, the public opinion surveys

conducted by Russia's independent and reliable Validata agency showed that 62 percent of the Chechens participated in the March 2003 referendum on Chechnya's status and that 91 percent of them voted for Chechnya to remain within Russia with a considerable degree of autonomy.<sup>9</sup> There is little doubt that most Chechens abhor the idea of the "Islamic Republic of the North Caucasus," just as they were undoubtedly against Maskhadov's "Islamic Republic" seven years ago.

Of course, no matter how determined and effective, strides in transparency, human rights, and self-governance are not going to stop Chechnya-based terrorism immediately. For that reason, international peacekeepers and police, including a special peacekeeping contingent of Russian troops retrained and professionalized as part of the international assistance, would have to stay in Chechnya to protect the people and the institutions from the warlords and terrorists for years to come.

Still, while not sufficient to eliminate terrorism entirely, the end of the torment of the Chechens by the Russian armed forces and security services and progress toward self-governance, transparency, and the rule of law are most certainly a necessary condition for depriving the terrorists of a great deal of support. The "internationalization" of the Chechen conflict is the best way to honor the memory of the Beslan victims and to make sure that they did not die in vain.

## Putin's "Reforms" and Russia's Democracy

Such an "international" solution—consistently opposed by the Kremlin despite its obviousness—has become even more remote in light of President Putin's speech on the evening of September 13. Addressing his cabinet of ministers and the governors of most of Russia's eighty-nine provinces, Putin offered a blueprint for what he called "a cardinal restructuring . . . of the executive power in the country . . . with the aim of strengthening the unity of the country."<sup>10</sup>

Equating the "unity of the country" with the "strengthening of state structures" and the "vertical [axis] of power," Putin has proposed a number of measures that cumulatively spell a significant centralization of power by the Kremlin. By far the most ominous feature of this plan is the election of the regional governors by local legislatures at the recommendation of the president, rather than in free and

competitive popular elections as has been the case since 1992.

Like three other giant democracies—the United States, Brazil, and India—Russia is too big and too diverse to be governed democratically from one “center.” That is why, in its 400 years as a modern state Russia had never been whole and free at the same time but, instead, was held together by brutal authoritarianism or disintegrated into murderous anarchy.

It was one of Boris Yeltsin’s truly epochal achievements to grant provinces, in his words, “as much autonomy as they can digest.” The breakup of Russia, widely predicted in the late 1980s, did not materialize. Instead, the country broke with this vicious circle of tyranny and anarchy by becoming a truly federated state in which its eighty-nine regions were largely self-governing, with their own freely elected legislatures and governors.

Throughout the 1990s and Putin’s first presidential term (2000–2004), local politics remained lively and unpredictable. Self-rule continued to solidify in the provinces, with voters reelecting or retiring governors based largely on the state of the local economy. Neither incumbency nor the support of the Kremlin proved to be guarantees against defeat at the polls. The change proposed by the Russian president thus amounts to the dismantling of the backbone of Russia’s nascent democracy and its historic achievement.

A great deal in the media hype that followed the September 13 speech can be safely discarded. Thus, the elimination of the so-called “single-mandate” electoral districts, from which half the deputies to the Duma are currently elected, in favor of the elections by party lists (which account for the other half of the deputies) is hardly a disaster. Party-list elections are the practice in many European democracies, both old and new, as well as Israel. So long as parties have free television and radio time to advertise their platforms, can freely canvass voters, and stay on the ballot, as did the twenty-three parties that ran in the December 2003 Duma elections, Russia’s democracy is hardly “crushed.”

Even with Putin’s “reform,” Russia is far from being a tyranny, dictatorship, or police state, like China. The Russian government no longer owns Russian society: over 70 percent of Russian GDP is produced outside the state sector. There is vibrant private, and privately funded, culture. Three hundred fifty thousand non-governmental organizations are registered in Russia today.<sup>11</sup> The self-reliant and increasingly confident

middle class is growing rapidly, although it has yet to become a key political force. Of the 750 television local broadcast or cable stations, 190 are privately owned—as are 7,000 of the 35,000 registered local newspapers and magazines.<sup>12</sup>

Finding oneself in front of a newspaper kiosk in Moscow, anyone with enough Russian to make out the headlines will be exposed to the entire spectrum of opinion: from *Konservator* on the right to the shrill nationalist-leftist, anti-Semitic *Zavtra*, which almost invariably carries anti-Putin cartoons of the most vulgar and scurrilous kind. The quintessential intelligentsia publications are mercilessly critical of the Kremlin: from the left-of-center *Novaya Gazeta* to the right-liberal weeklies *Novoe Vremia* and *Moskovskie Novosti* (the latter owned by the jailed tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s Open Russia nonprofit foundation).

Spearheaded by newspaper editorials and independent analysts’ interviews in Russian and Western media, the outpouring of public outrage at the lies and incompetence of the authorities in Beslan has forced Putin to reverse himself and authorize a parliamentary investigation into the massacre—the first time he has agreed to a public inquiry into any of the half dozen major terror attacks and disasters in his nearly five years in office.

Yet none of these hedges against a reviving authoritarianism makes the situation less critical. As it has done so many times in its history, Russia finds itself at a crossroads created by a war. The resilience of its democratic ideals and institutions is pitted against its age-old authoritarian instincts and traditions.

Although the latter seem to be prevailing at the moment, the outcome is far from certain. The impact of wars on Russian political history has been anything but predictable. Having staked the rest of his term on success in the war on terrorism and having made this war a centerpiece of (and excuse for) his neo-authoritarian project, President Putin has embarked on what is likely to be a very dangerous and vertiginous political journey.

## Notes

1. “Les Français ne font pas de réformes qu’à l’occasion d’une révolution,” Raymond Aron, *Mémoires* (Paris: Julliard, 1983), 234.
2. Mark Franchetti, Christina Lamb, and Ben Aris, “Kremlin Probes Al-Qaeda Links,” *Ottawa Citizen*, October 27, 2002, A1.

3. Peter Baker, "15 Tied to Al Qaeda Turned Over to the U.S.," *Washington Post*, October 22, 2002, A17.

4. Anton Notz and Hugh Williamson, "Court Hears 9/11 Pilots Had Links with Chechens," *Financial Times*, October 30, 2002, 7.

5. Elaine Sciolino and Desmond Butler, "Europeans Fear That the Threat from Radical Islamists Is Increasing," *New York Times*, December 8, 2002, A32.

6. C. J. Chivers, "The Chechen's Story: From Unrivaled Guerrilla Leader to Terror of Russia," *New York Times*, September 15, 2004. Accessed at [www.nexis.com](http://www.nexis.com) on September 24, 2004.

7. Said Isaev, "Chechnya to Live by Sharia Laws Only," ITAR-TASS, September 17, 1997. Accessed at [www.nexis.com](http://www.nexis.com) on December 16, 2002.

8. Brian Glyn Williams, "The Russo-Chechen War: A Threat to Stability in the Middle East and Eurasia," *Middle East Policy*, 8 (1), March 1, 2001, 6. Accessed at [www.nexis.com](http://www.nexis.com) on December 16, 2002.

9. Validata, "Public Opinion of the Chechen Population on the Actual Issues of the Republic," March–August 2003. Accessed at [www.validata.ru/e\\_e/chechnya/eng/chechnya\\_details\\_21.html](http://www.validata.ru/e_e/chechnya/eng/chechnya_details_21.html) on September 1, 2003; and Masha Lipman, "'Palestinizing Chechnya,'" *Washington Post*, June 27, 2003, A29.

10. Vladimir Putin, "Vystuplenie na rasshirennom zasedanii Pravitel'stva s uchastiem glav sub'ektov Rossiyskoy Federatzii," (Speech at an Expanded Session of the Government with the Heads of the Subjects of the Russian Federation), September 13, 2004. Accessed at [www.kremlin.ru/appears/2004/09/13/1514](http://www.kremlin.ru/appears/2004/09/13/1514) on September 15, 2004.

11. Ludmila Alexeeva, "Putin's Definition of Democracy?" *Washington Post*, June 8, 2004. Accessed on [www.nexis.com](http://www.nexis.com) on September 16, 2004.

12. U.S. Department of State, "Russia: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2003," February 25, 2004, 2–3. Accessed at [www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2003](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2003) on September 15, 2004.