A Short Introduction to the Chechen Problem

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Abstract

The problems surrounding the Chechen conflict are indeed many and difficult to tackle. This paper aims at unveiling some of the mysteries covering the issue of so-called "Islamic fundamentalism" in Chechnya. A comparison of the native Sufi branch of Islam and the imported Wahhaby ideology is made, in order to discover the contradictions and the conflicts that the spreading of the latter inflicted in the Chechen society. Furthermore, the paper investigates the main challenges President Aslan Maskhadov was facing at the beginning of his mandate, and the way he managed to cope with them. The paper does not attempt to cover all the aspects of the Chechen problem; nevertheless, a quick enumeration of other factors influencing the developments in Chechnya in the past three years is made.

Introduction

To address the issues of stability in North Caucasus in general and in Chechnya in particular is a difficult task. The factors that have contributed to the start of the first and of the second armed conflicts in Chechnya are indeed many. History, politics, economy, traditions, religion, all of them contributed to a certain extent to the launch of what began as an anti-terrorist operation and became a full scale armed conflict. The narrow framework of this presentation does not allow for an exhaustive analysis of the Russian-Chechen relations and of the permanent tensions that existed there during the known history of that part of North Caucasus.

For this reason, the analysis will focus on the results of the first conflict, on the state of the Chechen nation between the two armed conflicts, and on the situation in Chechnya shortly before the attack on Daghestan in August 1999.

A little bit of History

The Chechen struggle for independence was, during the last two centuries, mostly a battle against the Russian conquest and not an attempt to create a state of their own in a modern sense. The religious component was of fundamental importance in the open battles and the organised resistance movement. The norms of the so-called tarikat (which means Îpathâ in Arabic), a central concept in the Sufi branch of Islam, were of utmost importance for the survival of the Chechen traditions and lifestyle during the last two centuries. Sheik Mansur, Imam Shamil, Kunta-Hadji are only three examples of religious leaders who inspired resistance movements that would be remembered as long wars in North Caucasus. The Sufi tradition was the main piece of the Chechen survival tool kit.

What distinguished over the ages the Chechens from the other peoples and nationalities of North Caucasus was the lack of any form of aristocracy and vertical hierarchy. The Chechens were certainly not among the first to adopt Islam as the main religion. Still, the clan structure of the society and Islam are the key concepts for understanding the history of combined armed and non-violent resistance of the Chechens against the Russians.

The above-mentioned leaders are the best known organisers of the Chechen fight against the conquest from North. In between the great wars, and after they ended, small-scale uprisings were common, even well into the Soviet era. Again, tradition and religion made the Chechens resist at any price the imposition of an alien system.

The culminating point in the struggle of the Soviet regime for a final solution of the "Chechen problem" was the deportation of the Chechen and the Ingush, alongside other peoples of the North Caucasus (Kalmyk, Karachai and Balkar). The action was designed to uproot the Chechens from their native land, thus solving the problem for good. The cost was high: one third of their population died during the trip to Kazakhstan

and because of the harsh winter conditions there. The Sufi orders played again a leading role in the preservation of Chechen unity and in cultivating survival skills. Most Soviet specialists of anti-Islamic propaganda recognised that the attempted genocide through deportation of over a million North Caucasian Muslims had a striking, unforeseen result: far from destroying the Sufi brotherhoods the deportations actually promoted their expansion. For the deported mountaineers the Sufi orders became a symbol of their nationhood in the lands to which they were exiled.

In 1990, after more than 30 years of peaceful existence, the Chechens raised their voice for independence once again. This time, the Chechen society showed clear signs of fragmentation. Until 1994, when the first Russian-Chechen conflict started, the official government, led by General Djohar Dudaeyv, co-existed in Chechnya with several opposition groups. They disputed among themselves the title of the most legitimate expression of the peopleâs will. The clan structure of the Chechen society and the relative well being of the republic contributed to the emergence of different political currents. The independence rhetoric was used by the elites as a tool for winning the support of their electorate. Moscow tried to exploit this situation by sending troops in 1992, and later, in 1994 by arming a group of militants and sending them to conquer Grozny. The greatest mistake was committed. Now President Dudayev had the proof that Moscow was against Chechen independence, and he began to prepare the whole nation for war.

Perhaps the time has come for an attempt to find an explanation for the unity of the Chechens during the 1994-1996 armed conflict. Other examples of Chechen unity while fighting a war against a common enemy belong to history and are hardly quantifiable. On the contrary, the situation in 1994 was a first-hand example and a confirmation of the theories which had been written about the patterns of behaviour of the Chechens.

Being divided into clans (teips), the Chechen society retains a high degree of autonomy. The life of the teips is governed by Adat ö a collection of customary laws, which are on the one hand quite liberal for a Muslim society, and on the other hand allow the clans to enjoy the highest levels of independence.

As mentioned before, a striking feature of the Chechen society is the historical absence of any forms of aristocracy. Besides the respect for the elders, the Chechens are par excellence deeply egalitarian. The form of democracy they have developed and preserved over the centuries is unique even among the peoples of the Caucasus. The decisions concerning the fate of the entire community or society were made by a Council of the Elders (Akhsaks), where the representative of each teip had equal rights. However, common rules applied for settling the disputes. One of them, the blood feud, still affects the entire Chechen society.

Social behaviour in time of peace (that is Dudayevâs before the Russian-Chechen armed conflict and Maskhadovâs after the signing of the Khasav-Yurt agreement) was totally different from the one prevailing at a time of conflict. Russian anthropologist Sergei Ariutinov writes about the Chechens:

"Chechnya was and is a society of military democracy. Chechnya never had any kings, emirs, princes, or barons. Unlike other Caucasian nations, there was never feudalism in Chechnya. Traditionally it was governed by a council of elders, on a basis of consensus, but the Chechens retain the institution of military chief. In peacetime they recognise no sovereign authority and may be fragmented into a hundred rival clans. However, in time of danger, when faced with aggression, the rival clans unite and elect a military leader. This leader may be known to everyone as an unpleasant personality, but is elected nonetheless for being a good general. While the war is on, this leader is obeyed".

That was the case for general Dudayev. As it could have been predicted, all internal disagreements and conflicts among the actors on the Chechen political scene disappeared instantly with the emergence of a foreign threat. Dudayev won a place that he might have never hoped to achieve while continuing to be the president of a self-proclaimed country with a state system inherited from the Soviet Union and a clear opposition based on both the teip principle and personal discontent of the former political and economic

elite. As the Chechens were hardly familiar with the concept of nation-state, the foreign threat suited Dudayev perfectly in fulfilling his role of a unifying leader and defender of the fatherland. He gained weight as a politician and became a genuine national leader, with full support from an overwhelming majority of the population.

The outcome of the first Chechen-Russian conflict

By the beginning of the conflict, Dudayev had a rather big group of well-trained and well equipped followers who played the role of a regular army. It was not the only one, though. Several armed groups, usually formed of members of the same teip, were involved in criminal activities. The hardware belonging to several Russian divisions, which had to be withdrawn from North Caucasus in accordance with international agreements, provided plenty of military equipment and ammunition for those groups. As the armed confrontation began, the gangs became the most suitable instruments for guerrilla warfare. The chiefs of those gangs became field commanders and, although they had to obey the orders of General Dudayev during military operations, they never lost their independence. The field commanders, according to the Chechen traditions and especially to the teip principle, were highly critical of anything that had little to do with the defence of their fatherland.

As Aslan Maskhadov became president in 1997, he did not seem to comprehend the burden he had inherited. Although neither he nor the international community seemed to realise that at that time, he had to solve three major problems:

- The problem of economic reconstruction of the Chechen Republic, which had been heavily damaged by the armed conflict.
- The problem of compensating his allies, the so-called field commanders, who were demanding satisfaction for their behaviour during the conflict and for the economic loses inflicted on their pre-war activities.
- The problems related to the spreading of Wahhabism, a branch of Islam which was as alien to the native Sufi dogma as it was dangerous for the population and for the general development of the situation in the Caucasus.

These problems would pre-determine the evolutions within the Chechen society during the following three years. Let us analyse them one by one and discover the connections between them.

a. <u>Economic reconstruction</u>

In August 1996, when the Khasav-Yurt agreements were signed, the Chechens did not think of the times to come as a period of extreme poverty and restraint. They were negotiating all the agreements on the economic reconstruction and assistance from the position of winners, and they were demanding sometimes embarrassing amounts: 100 billion USD in war compensations and 100 USD per tone of crude transiting Chechnya.

According to the agreements signed in 1996-1997, the total amount of compensations and the mechanism for implementing the reconstruction of the economy were to be established at a later date. Those issues were never touched upon again. The only available figures on the economic assistance rendered by the Federal Government were those of the 1998 financial year. 800 million rubbles were payed to the Chechens: one third was the value of the electricity and gas supplied to Chechnya, another third pensions, salaries and compensations, and the last third was devoted to some small rehabilitation projects. For an economy ravaged by war, in which there was virtually no enterprise generating profits, this amount of money, so "generously" donated by the Russian Ministry of Finance, was nothing but salt rubbed into the wound, as they say in Russia. The demand for incomes, whatever their sources, was so huge, that those in power began resorting to the most dangerous and sometimes outrageous methods.

b. <u>Maskhadov and his opposition</u>

The news about kidnappings and the overall worsening of the security situation in Chechnya overshadowed an event that had the most dramatic consequences for the development of the situation in the republic. In August 1998, Shamil Basayev, the Chechen acting prime-minister at that time, resigned and formed his own political group, the so-called extra-parliamentary opposition. But let us turn back to 1997, when Maskhadov was elected president and formed his government. The candidates for portfolios in his government were inevitably the most famous of the field commanders. They were demanding recognition of their merits and moral and material compensations for the losses the conflict inevitably caused to their illegal economic activities. Their participation in governance should have been a major source of income out of the war compensation, which Russia was supposed to pay. By the summer of 1998, after several meetings between Maskhadov and Chernomyrdin, the Russian Prime minister at that time, it became clear that Russia was not going to pay its bills. The Chechens did not even get the royalties for oil transit paid. An estimated 10 million tons at 8 USD per ton would have meant a considerable amount of money for the penniless republic. As a result of the war, all transit through Chechnya was deviated, the oil drilling and refining stopped, agriculture was in a state of ruin. Simply put, all former sources of income had vanished. Under these circumstances, it is no wonder that many of the "independence heroes" turned to the most infamous income generating activities: kidnappings and promoting the Wahhabism in North Caucasus.

Let us not forget either the war-time and peace-time patterns of behaviour of the Chechens that Ariutunov so brilliantly defined some years ago. Although during the conflict Maskhadov was a good general and finished the war successfully, in the post-conflict period he became again one of the many. The field commanders felt he no longer had any authority, and they acted accordingly.

Basayevâs resignation followed the first open clash between the promoters of Wahhabism and the supporters of President Maskhadov, in August 1998, at Gudermes, the second largest city in Chechnya. In fact, Basayev deserted the camp of the president and became a spokesman for the ever stronger Wahhabyte followers. In time, he gathered around him many of the other field commanders and the position of the legitimate president became dangerously weak

c. <u>Wahhabism and Sufism in Chechnya</u>

The Wahhabi movement emerged during the nineteenth century in the Arabian Peninsula, although it had been founded two centuries earlier. The Wahhabi proselytes claim that they follow the purest Islam ever and stand against all the "novelties" introduced into Islam since the death of the Prophet. All Muslims who deviate from the original message of the Prophet are traitors who should be crushed by any means. The issue of religious purity came up when the founder and the namesake of the Wahhabi movement, Mohammed Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab began a public crusade against what he called heretic innovations. The greatest of these were the worship of tombs, prayers for the intercession of holy men and not directly to God himself, the worship of trees, rock formations, etc., minor pilgrimages, the belief in Mohammed as a religious power, and complex initiation rituals. Al-Wahhab declared those customs as expressions of polytheism, the greatest sin under Islam, and he began advocating a return to the Islam of the time of the Prophet Mohammed. Since those times, the pupils of Al-Wahhab have continued the line of their mentor.

Wahhabism found in Chechnya a fertile ground for spreading. Several Wahhabite followers originating from the Middle East joined the Chechen forces in their fight against Moscow and thus gained respect and prestige. The disastrous economic situation and the huge financial resources coming from abroad allowed them not only to launch a successful propaganda campaign but also to attract many followers, especially teenagers, to organise training camps for guerrilla warfare, as well as ideological schools, and at last to buy the loyalty of the otherwise non-religious field commanders.

Again, the limited space of this paper does no allow for a more comprehensive analysis of the interactions between the moderate Sufi Islam, deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the Chechens and the extremely radical Wahhabi ideology. They are highly incompatible, as the Wahhabists condemn exactly what the Chechens treasure. The Chechen Sufi variant relies on the presence of a living master; the Chechens have

their saints; they practice strange rituals and undergo initiation processes.

The danger of the Wahhabi branch of Islam, as the Chechen experience shows, is that it is very proficient in penetrating those regions which are shaken by convulsions, where the living conditions are poor and where there is no strong ideological alternative, be it religious or secular. The Wahhabists can be probably envied for the efficiency they showed in the implementation of their goals in Chechnya. Having realised the inevitable failure of a blitz-krieg against the traditions of an entire people, emissaries from the Middle East fought this war with the hands of the Chechens. Their patience finally paid off: the gradual conquest of the bastions of the Chechen social and religious identity led to the most dangerous fragmentation of the society.

Coming back to President Maskhadov we can see now that none of the three problems he had to cope with was actually solved. On the contrary, during the 1997 ö 1999 period Chechnya sank into a condition of extreme poverty, crime and religious extremism. The internal political situation evolved from jubilation and unity to acute vulnerability to blackmail with an aim to creating the Sharia state, a development which would have been inconceivable just two years before. Maskahadov acquired the reputation of a weak personality and of a prisoner of the almighty field-commanders. The international community watched in despair the crimes committed in Chechnya and demanded from Maskhadov the punishment of the guilty. But the greatest fear Maskhadov had, that of starting an intra-Chechen conflict, prevented him from taking decisive action.

Questions for the future

This presentation deliberately focused on the analysis of the Chechen society and neglected the other aspects. Much has been said and written about the motives behind the start of the new "conquest" of Chechnya. Even more has been said about the huge number of refugees and the at least debatable way of conducting what is said to be an "anti-terrorist operation". At the end of this paper, some points that can contribute towad a better understanding of the possible outcome of the second Russian-Chechen armed conflict should be outlined

There are things that we know and things that we donât know about the conflict in Chechnya. Some of the things that we know bring hope that the conflict may soon come to an end. Other things that we know make the prospect of a quick end rather fuzzy. Those things that we donât know make the future of Chechnya even more cloudy than it is now.

We know, for instance, that during this conflict the Russian high command showed signs of a calculated policy. Instead of fighting a war against the people, which they did in the last conflict, the Russian Federal troops tried to make friends with the local population and managed to force the armed rebels out of most of the towns.

We know that the last conflict left in Chechnya a lot of arms and ammunition, and, what is more important, it enhanced the combat experience of a large number of Chechens.

We know that the designation "anti-terrorist" operation lost its meaning when President Maskhadov and his presidential guard joined Shamil Basayev, Khatab and the other promoters of Djihad in their fight against the federal troops.

We know that 200.000 refugees are kept at the borders of Chechnya. We know that most of the male population of combat age is not among them. What we donât know is how many of them have joined or will join the rebels.

We know that Chechen society is at the moment very fragmented. On the one hand we have a majority of the population which is tired with hunger, insecurity and ceaseless Wahhabi propaganda. We also know that the presence of Russian troops may be a lesser evil. We have those who understand the dangers of the Wahhabism. Akhmad-Hadji Kadyrov, Mufti of Chechnya did not join President Maskhadov in his fight against the Federal troops. On the contrary, he arranged the take-over of Gudermes, the second largest city in Chechnya. He did it out of religious conviction, and not of brotherly love towards the Russian army. On the

other hand we have the extremists. We donât know how many they are. We know that there will be no reconciliation between them and the Federal troops. The scenario of a mountain guerrilla war of indefinite duration has already been much discussed.

We know the peace-time and war-time patterns of behaviour of the Chechens. What we also know is that this time the chronic combat fatigue of many of the Chechens has already reduced very much the chances of total war.

As you see, we know a lot of things. And still, I think that nobody is able to predict exactly the results of this conflict. Still we can see that the Chechen society will have to undergo a long and painful process of self-identification, even after the war is over.

A major lesson should be learned from the last five years of the Chechen experiment. Armed conflicts are evil by themselves. They do not solve much of the existing problems, they only add to them. But the post-conflict situations need a very minute and careful examination. They call for urgent actions. Improving the living conditions of the population and re-building the economy is not only an act of generosity. It is the guarantee that such phenomena as Wahhabism, Djihad, and extreme violence will no longer take place.

Perhaps it is high time for the international community to help. If the Russian economy is too weak to sustain the rebuilding of its 89-th region, the international community, and especially the European Union, should have enough courage to confront both the kidnappers in Chechnya and the sceptical moods of the government in Moscow. Perhaps it is about time to ask why neither NGOâs nor international organisations are present even in that part of Chechnya, which is under Russian control.

The 200.000 refugees are only one part of the problem. Many of them have probably better living condition in the refugee camps than they had at home. The key for tomorrowâs stability in Chechnya and North Caucasus is to give people the understanding and the real knowledge that they have to loose something if they indulge in crime and religious extremism. Right now, they have very little to loose.

One aspect of conflict resolution and prevention that is almost always forgotten is the economy. There is a lot of talk about self-determination, human rights, extremism, ethnicity and much more. Still, there seems to be a general oblivion concerning the overwhelming role of the life conditions in the developments of a society. The Chechen society of the last three years is a sad but nevertheless worthy example of how extremism is getting the upper hand if there is no improvement in the war-damaged life of a people. Human beings may behave very strange if they are not able to see some light at the end of the tunnel. And in Chechnya the light seemed to be very remote.