

Russian power struggle fueling war in Chechnya

by Konstantin George

In one week, Jan. 9-16, the war in the breakaway Russian republic of Chechnya took one dramatic escalation after another. First, it spilled over into the neighboring Russian republic of Dagestan, and, then, into Turkey. Parallel to this, major leadership changes in Moscow reflected an escalation of the Russian power struggle, which will continue to grow in intensity as Russia moves toward Presidential elections scheduled for June.

Developments in the Caucasus point both to more terrorism that could hit anywhere in the Russian Federation, and a near-certain renewal of all-out warfare in Chechnya itself. The explosive situation is raising the prospect that Russia could be put under emergency rule and the Presidential elections postponed or canceled. This possibility was cited by Gen. Aleksandr Lebed, speaking to journalists on Jan. 17, during a break in that day's session of the Duma (parliament): "I think we're moving toward the declaration of a state of emergency. One more terrorist attack, for example on a chemical plant in Moscow, and we'll have a state of emergency."

The threat of a state of emergency must be seen in light of the Moscow power struggle. That took a dramatic turn on Jan. 16, when Yeltsin fired, or forced the resignation of the most prominent, hard-core pro-International Monetary Fund (IMF) member of the Chernomyrdin cabinet, First Deputy Prime Minister Anatoli Chubais. The move was a severe blow to Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, who had wanted to keep Chubais on as a counterweight to the other first deputy prime minister, Oleg Soskovyets, a member of the "national party" around Yeltsin and the man entrusted to head up Yeltsin's Presidential campaign.

The firing of Chubais indicates the probable beginning of a serious policy shift. His dismissal was accompanied by a Presidential ukase which harshly denounced financial policy shortcomings and misdeeds. Yeltsin's personal economic ad-

viser, Aleksandr Livshits, declared: "We cannot conduct eternally the policy of financial stabilization. It must come to an end, and then the policies of economic growth must begin."

Primakov named foreign minister

The ouster of Chubais came on top of other key government changes since the start of the year, which show that the long-overdue economic policy shift will unfortunately be accompanied by a geopolitically based, neo-imperial policy, taking on increasing anti-American dimensions—and thus playing into British hands. This danger can be seen in the naming as foreign minister of Yevgeni Primakov, a KGB veteran and head of Russian Foreign Intelligence who advanced his career under the aegis of the late Yuri Andropov. Primakov, in addition to his past posts as director of the Moscow IMEMO Institute and Oriental Institute, from which he conducted destabilization operations in the Islamic part of the developing sector, was a regular attendee and collaborator with British forces at assemblies of the Pugwash Conference and the pro-genocide Club of Rome.

At his first press conference as foreign minister on Jan. 12, Primakov underscored that he would focus on "strengthening the centripetal tendencies on the territory of the former U.S.S.R." He said that "the rebirth of the Soviet Union in its old form is not on the agenda," but "the processes of reintegration" of the former republics will occur because "they carry the future." In other words, a new form of empire is on the agenda.

The other change showing the emergence of a neo-imperial course, was the naming of Nikolai Yegorov as head of Yeltsin's Presidential Office, succeeding Sergei Filatov. Yegorov, as former Nationalities Minister, had been one of the most ardent promoters of the disastrous decision to invade Chechnya in December 1994. He has been a leading advocate

of Russian territorial pretensions against former Soviet republics, under the guise of "protecting" ethnic Russians residing outside Russia.

The war in Chechnya has been exploited by British interests intent on using it as a lever to get Russia into a neo-imperial, anti-western mode. By the same token, those forces in Moscow bent on a neo-imperial policy, and on circumventing elections to resolve the power struggle, have equally promoted the war.

The first bloodbath in 1996

On Jan. 15, President Yeltsin ordered Russian forces to attack the Chechen armed unit (numbering at least 250 men) led by Salman Raduyev, son-in-law of Chechen renegade "president" Dzhokhar Dudayev, holed up with about 100 hostages for seven days in the village of Pervomaiskoye along the Chechnya border with Dagestan. His decision came as no surprise (see *EIR*, Jan. 19, p. 26). For Yeltsin, especially after his loud promises to crush the group, a humiliation would cripple his chances in the ongoing power struggle, no matter what happens with the hostages or villages in Dagestan. When the smoke clears in this bloodbath, the death toll will be in the hundreds.

The attack was led by the elite "Alpha" unit of the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the elite "Vityaz" unit of the Russian Interior Ministry. Overall command was given to Gen. Mikhail Barsukov, head of the FSB and a Yeltsin confidant, backed up by Interior Minister Gen. Anatoli Kulikov. After four days of fighting, according to the Russian side, Russian forces lost 18 soldiers killed; Chechen losses were put at 60 killed, plus about another 150 killed when Russian aircraft ravaged a column of Chechen fighters trying to cross the Dagestan border to assist their surrounded brethren. From the information available, only 41 hostages had been freed. The Russians, abandoning hope of freeing any more hostages alive, began employing multi-barrel rocket launchers, obliterating what was left of housing structures in and around the village.

The resistance of the Chechens and "Islamic" volunteers is reportedly fanatical, but professional. Many of the Chechen fighters are Soviet Army combat veterans from the Afghanistan War. They are buttressed by foreign "Islamic" veterans of that war, who had fought the Russians. On Jan. 16, for the first time in the Chechen war, the Russian Foreign Ministry broke its silence on this issue, warning that if reports turn out to be true that "citizens of Iran and Pakistan" are engaged in the battle, there will be "extremely serious reactions."

On Jan. 18, Itar-Tass accounts showed that there have been two sets of battles. On Jan. 17, a force of over 300 Chechen rebels tried to relieve their besieged brethren. According to Itar-Tass, nearly all 300 were killed. In addition, some 70 Chechens from the Raduyev group who tried to break out, were "repulsed," and many killed. From the Russian side, it appears there was a conscious decision to me-

thodically use firepower, in an effort to keep their casualties to a minimum.

Three hostage crises and a 'third force'

On Jan. 16, the Chechen war took on international dimensions when a group of Chechen supporters (believed to be mostly offspring of Chechens who had fled Russia to settle in Turkey) seized the Black Sea ferry *Avrasya* in the Turkish port of Trabzon, holding some 200 passengers and crew hostage (97 are Russians). They sailed from Trabzon, proceeding toward Istanbul, which they expected to reach on Jan. 19. The group (up to 49 members), has threatened to blow up the ship in the Bosphorus, unless Russia stops military operations against Chechen rebels.

The Turkish side is trying to defuse the crisis. According to the Turkish Anadolu news agency on Jan. 17, the head of Turkish Intelligence, Koksal, had brokered a deal with the hijackers, in which they would be allowed to hold a press conference in Istanbul, if all the hostages were released there. Whether this scenario will be adhered to, nobody can predict with certainty.

In another incident, on Jan. 16, armed Chechens entered the central power plant in Grozny, the Chechen capital, abducted the 29 Russian employees on the night shift, and took them by bus to a Chechen-controlled village. Overnight, the Russian leadership was confronted with not one, but three crises in which Russian citizens were being held hostage.

The Kizlyar crisis (which has culminated in the Pervomaiskoye bloodbath), and the Grozny power plant abductions, could have been prevented. This suggests that there are forces in Moscow who are complicit in allowing Chechen terrorism to happen, in order to help their interests in the Moscow power struggle. Arkady Volsky, who has headed up negotiations in Grozny with Chechen leaders, has charged that a "third force" in Moscow is responsible for the Chechen war and terrorism. From late December to now, there have been a chain of "inexplicable" security failures.

In the Trabzon case, it is known that the ringleader, Mohamed Toncan, had fought as a "volunteer" in Abkhazia against Georgia, in a unit commanded by Shamil Bassayev, the Chechen leader of the June 1995 Budyonovsk terrorist operation. In Grozny, the power plant was supposed to have been heavily guarded, as indeed was the case during most of 1995. Why was it dropped from the list of guarded installations, especially at night, when, even before Kizlyar, there had been a big increase in Chechen night attacks and bombings?

Evidence is also mounting that something rotten in Moscow is playing its own game with Chechen rebel leader Dudayev. As noted by Ruslan Martagov, spokesman for the Russian-installed government in Chechnya, the Kizlyar case was also the indirect result of an "inexplicable" failure. On Dec. 23, the GRU, Russian military intelligence, had given advance warning that a Chechen terrorist caper targeting Kizlyar was planned. But no security measures were taken. Dur-

ing December, Chechen forces had seized Gudermes, the republic's second largest town. Russian Interior Troops surrounded the town and bombarded it to smithereens, yet, the bulk of the armed rebels were able to escape unmolested through the Russian cordon. The group that escaped is the same group that conducted the operation against Kizlyar.

As Volsky has documented, the nefarious interplay between forces in Moscow and Dudayev includes cases of top-secret letters sent to Yeltsin and Chernomyrdin, which have mysteriously ended up in the hands of Dudayev.

The creation of the tragedy

The Chechnya war must be viewed in the context of the international struggle over oil and oil pipeline routes. Taking advantage of the confusion during the breakup of the U.S.S.R., Dudayev, a former Soviet Air Force general and leader of one of Chechnya's clans, proclaimed Chechen "independence" in October 1991. Dudayev's clan and allied clans were engaged in smuggling, including in drugs and weapons. However, the main blame for the tragedy lies with how Moscow reacted to the Dudayev coup. From October 1991 on, policies by forces in Moscow, combined with horrendous blunders, set the stage for the protracted war.

To begin with, Moscow failed to nip the problem in the bud, before Dudayev could consolidate his rule. Moscow had come under the rule of greedy forces from the old *nomenklatura* and *nouveaux riches*, who reached an agreement with the IMF for shock therapy policies which raped the nation's physical economy and created a new comprador oligarchy who had enriched themselves without end. These forces were in a symbiotic relationship with Dudayev, who had turned Chechnya into a major crossroads for the international drug trade coming out of Central Asia and Afghanistan. This was one reason why, for three years, nothing was undertaken against Dudayev.

Moscow also blundered in accepting an alliance of convenience with Dudayev in its 1992-93 proxy war against Georgia, in which Russia backed the Abkhazia separatism. One feature of this policy, was the Dudayev-funded operation that sent thousands of Chechens and other Muslim North Caucasus tribal "volunteers" to fight alongside the Abkhazians against Georgia. Russia was fixated on two short-term goals: de facto annexing Abkhazia, and forcing Georgia to become a virtual Russian protectorate. On both counts, Russia succeeded. However, in a manner analogous to the U.S. backing of the foreign mujahideen in the Afghan War, the "success" backfired massively. Moscow had helped to arm and train a force of thousands of combat-tested Chechens and other tribesmen (on top of the reservoir of Chechen Afghan War veterans), who saw the Abkhazia war only as a "training ground" for the ultimate war against Russia.

An adjunct of this Russian blunder was the 1992 withdrawal of Russian forces from Chechnya, where their arms and munitions stocks were left behind for Dudayev.

The control over oil

The Russian government was finally forced to act in order to control the oil routes. An international consortium led by British Petroleum had reached an agreement with Azerbaijan for the exploitation of the huge Caspian Sea offshore oil fields. If Russia were to secure control over the shipment of this oil to Europe, it had to restore its rule in Chechnya, through which runs the oil pipeline from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea. All forces in Moscow basically agreed that Russian rule had to be restored to prevent a situation in which Caspian Sea oil by-passed Russia, through an alternative route, Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey.

But perhaps Moscow's worst blunder of all, was the manner in which it tried to reassert control, its decision to invade in December 1994, and the way in which the invasion was carried out. For inexplicable reasons, attempts to overthrow Dudayev by covert means were dropped, even though they had good chance of success in late 1994. At that time, before the invasion, Dudayev was very unpopular. His gang had grown quite fat, while the majority of the population had been pauperized. Discontent was rising. Wages had not been paid for many months; living standards, especially for most of the urban population, had collapsed. Dudayev, never loved anyway by the 40% of the pre-war population who were not Chechens, had become an unpopular minority president.

The invasion, the obliteration of Grozny, and an estimated 40,000 civilian deaths in six months, changed all that. Dudayev was transformed into a folk hero. The invasion was against a people who had been the victim of Soviet genocide in 1944-45, when Stalin declared the entire Chechen people guilty of collaboration with the Nazis, and had them packed into freight cars and shipped to Central Asia. About 200,000 of them did not survive the depredations. This history has not been forgotten. For Chechens who had wanted no part of Dudayev, the manner in which the invasion was carried out proved to them that there could be no alternative but to fight to the end.

Also, the war in Chechnya has not been fought on military principles, but according to the dictates of controlling oil routes. In the first intense phase of the war, from December 1994 till June 1995, Russian forces secured "control" over the northern half, or lowlands, of Chechnya, i.e., the area of the pipeline routes. This was the policy of Chernomyrdin, who, once they had (or thought they had) the lowlands, wound down the war.

The oil question has also been paramount in the second phase of fighting that began in December. Russian sources have confirmed that the international oil cartel has given Russia an ultimatum to have Chechnya cleared by April, or else the cartel will decide against a pipeline running through Chechnya. Once the Pervomaiskoye slaughter has finally ended, Russian forces will resume all-out warfare in Chechnya, and the next round of what has become Russia's "second Afghanistan" will be on.