

Ingushetia as Microcosm of Putin's Reforms

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In the wake of the massacre at the Beslan schoolhouse in North Ossetia in early September 2004, President Vladimir Putin of Russia announced a major reform intended to fight terrorism. "What we are facing is direct intervention of international terror directed against Russia," he said. He promised to prepare "a range of measures designed to strengthen the unity of the country".¹

On 13 September, Putin announced his decision to replace all the elected governors and presidents of the Russian Federation's eighty-nine regions with appointed officials. According to his proposal, his appointments are subject to the approval of the regional legislatures, but if they reject his nominees twice, Putin is empowered to dissolve those legislatures. At the end of October 2004, the Duma approved Putin's proposal by a vote of 356 to 64, with four abstentions. A vast majority of the regional legislatures expressed support for Putin's reform as well, albeit with the criticism that the provision for dissolving the leg-

islatures was unconstitutional. In short, there was substantial official support for the measures that Putin took in response to Beslan. But what is the relationship between abolishing elections, fighting terrorism, and unifying the country? The case of Ingushetia sheds some light on this question.

Terrorism and Centralisation

Despite restrictions on the media, the Russian public's impression of the Beslan crisis and its implications differed from that of their president. According to polls conducted by the Levada Analytical Centre, an independent opinion-research firm in Moscow, more respondents associated the siege of the school with the ongoing conflict in Chechnya than with "international terrorism".² Putin, by contrast, told a group of Western journalists and scholars on 6 September 2004 that "there is no connection whatsoever between the policies of Russia regarding Chechnya and subsequent events". He did, however, blame the security forces for not preventing the attack, and the public agreed with him: more than half of Russians polled claimed that the Beslan events were made possible because of corruption in the police and secret services, which allowed heavily armed terrorists to cross bor-

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1. "Address by President Vladimir Putin", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russian Federation, 4 September 2004 [http://www.russiaeurope.mid.ru/beslan1_eng.html].

2. Lawrence Uzzell, "Muscovites Trust Government Less, but Want a Harder Line", *Chechnya Weekly*, Jamestown Foundation, 15 September 2004 [http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=396&iss_ue_id=3071&article_id=2368511].

ders and stockpile explosives in the school. But public-opinion researchers were hard pressed to find much understanding among Russians of how abolishing elections and centralising control in Moscow could serve to protect against terrorism.

Although the connection between Chechnya, terrorism, and centralisation of authority in the Kremlin may not be clear, it is one that Putin has long emphasised. The former KGB agent was elected president in 2000 on a campaign platform of centralising power. He criticised the so-called asymmetric federalism that characterised Boris Yeltsin's administration, in which Moscow cut separate deals with the various regions—with the notable exception of Chechnya—in order to placate (but ultimately to undermine) separatist tendencies. Putin's initial reform superimposed seven federal districts over the eighty-nine regions. He appointed mostly military, police, and secret-service officials to head them. He also sought greater influence on the choice of regional leaders.³

In some respects, Putin's new reform merely formalises a process that has been under way for several years, as the Kremlin has attempted, usually successfully, to get its preferred candidates elected in the regions. What have been the consequences of limiting the scope of regional elections? Have Russians successfully traded liberty for security and unity? Are appointed regional leaders more effective than elected ones in combating terrorism?

Post-Soviet Ingushetia

Tentative answers to these questions may be found in the case of Ingushetia, a largely

Muslim North Caucasus republic that borders on (and was once joined with) Chechnya in the east and North Ossetia in the west. In the 1990s, Ingushetia was ruled by its elected president, Ruslan Aushev, a former Soviet general and hero of the war in Afghanistan. At the time, Ingushetia faced a genuine threat of international terrorism, as unemployed young men who had attended "summer camps" in the Middle East returned to spread the radical message of militant Islam of the al-Qaeda variety. Aushev countered this threat by creatively combining patriarchal ethnic traditions, clan-based patronage, and the force of his own personality.

Some of his methods included legalising polygamy (a widely tolerated practice during the tsarist era) and endorsing a quasi-institutionalised return of the tradition of clan vendetta as a way to counter the rash of kidnappings for ransom that helped finance the Islamists' holy wars. According to Georgi Derluguian, Aushev

used his charismatic authority to plead with families of the born-again Islamic puritans to take good care of their sons, to keep them busy, to get them married. He implored their communities to help them build houses and to purchase farmland, livestock, taxicabs and trucks.⁴

Aushev's approach marked a sharp contrast to the Russian government's attempt to deal with Islamist militancy and secular separatism in neighbouring Chechnya—namely, the use of blunt, excessive, and ultimately counterproductive military force. Aushev was

3. See Matthew Evangelista, *The Chechen Wars: Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2002), chap. 5.

4. Georgi M. Derluguian, "A Soviet General and Nation Building", *Chicago Tribune*, 28 October 2001.

no fan of Chechen independence, but he was more outspokenly critical of the Russian response. This made him many enemies in the Kremlin, including Vladimir Putin when he relaunched the war in Chechnya in 1999. Putin's project of restoring central authority (the "vertical of power") targeted regional leaders such as Aushev, some of whose methods of local governance violated Russia's legal codes and constitution.

In late 2001, Aushev was faced with a Kremlin-inspired court challenge to the length of his term as president and steady pressure from Viktor Kazantsev, Russia's presidential representative to the Southern Federal District. In addition to doing Putin's bidding, Kazantsev had his own reasons for wanting to be rid of Aushev: Kazantsev had served as a leading commander in Moscow's war in Chechnya, whereas Aushev remained one of the war's severest critics.

At the end of December 2001 Aushev finally resigned. As his successor, he initially supported Ingush interior minister Khamzat Gutseriev, a representative of one of the most powerful clans in Ingushetia, who was heavily favoured to win in the forthcoming presidential elections. The Kremlin intervened, however, in several ways. Moscow objected that Gutseriev was not allowed to run for president while remaining interior minister. On 3 April 2002, armed men from Kazantsev's staff forced their way into the Ingush Supreme Court while it was considering Gutseriev's case. They argued that the Russian Supreme Court should decide the case, which it did. The court disqualified Gutseriev from the election, just two days before the first round of voting.

The Kremlin's favoured candidate was Murat Ziazikov, a general in the Federal Security Service (successor to the KGB) and

deputy to Kazantsev. Moscow's machinations were insufficient to get him elected in the first round, however. In fact, Ziazikov polled only 19 per cent of the vote, compared to 32 per cent for Alikhan Amirkhanov, a member of the Russian State Duma and Aushev ally. With Amirkhanov poised to win in the run-off, Moscow reverted to its usual repertoire of tactics to defeat him. Armed security forces raided Amirkhanov's offices following the vote, seeking evidence that he had engaged in bribery and otherwise violated electoral laws. This time, however, the Russian Supreme Court rejected the charges. Nevertheless, the final vote produced a predictable "surprise" outcome: the Kremlin's candidate Ziazikov won with 53 per cent of the vote to Amirkhanov's 43 per cent. Amirkhanov's supporters charged fraud and several national newspapers provided corroborating evidence. The headline in the daily *Izvestia* said it all: "Ingushetia's President Elected by Russia's President".

Putin's Ingushetia

Putin's new reforms will allow all the leaders of the Russian Federation's eighty-nine regions to be "elected" by Russia's president. The myriad imperfections of the previous system of regional elections, including widespread corruption and cronyism, made many voters cynical about the prospects of Russian democracy. One could imagine that a new system of Kremlin-picked leaders more responsive to local concerns and better able to provide the security that Russians crave would constitute an improvement. Using these criteria, we can ask how Ingushetia has fared under the Kremlin's chosen ruler.

In addition to the concerns over economic conditions and crime that preoccupy most Russians, the residents of Ingushetia harbour

particular grievances. In 1944, virtually the entire population was deported to the east under Stalin's orders, along with the Chechens and some other mountain peoples of the North Caucasus, and the Chechen–Ingush autonomous republic was abolished. When they were allowed to return in the mid-1950s, the Ingush found some of their lands incorporated into the so-called Prigorodnyi district of North Ossetia, and the homes of many occupied by Ossetians. With the end of the Soviet Union, and inspired by a new “Law on the Rehabilitation of Repressed People”, thousands of Ingush families sought to return to their homes, often meeting resistance from the Ossetian inhabitants. Conflict between the two groups erupted into violence in 1992, resulting in hundreds of deaths and tens of thousands of refugees—mainly Ingush who were expelled from Prigorodnyi and who are still prevented from returning by the threat of further violence. The Ingush–Ossetian conflict is complicated by an international dimension: South Ossetia is an autonomous region of post-Soviet Georgia which has witnessed considerable Russian political and military interference on behalf of the Ossetians and against the interests of the Georgian government.

A second major concern of the Ingush has been the spillover from the Chechen war. Thousands of Chechen refugees have been housed in makeshift camps in Ingushetia since the renewal of fighting in 1999. When Ziazikov came into office he indicated that his priority was to do the Kremlin's bidding, to create a “vertical of power” in Ingushetia: “The federal center is the federal center,” explained the general, “and there can be no questions of contradictions or misunderstand-

ings here.”⁵ He also expressed his intention to deal with the crisis of Chechen refugees, but gave no hint of how. Some observers worried that he would use the methods expected of a former KGB officer and compel the refugees to return home, either by cutting off their food supplies or even deporting them. Others surmised that putting an intelligence officer in charge of Ingushetia would make it easier to control and expel journalists who might provide critical reports on the nearby war—a process already under way before the elections. Aushev expressed a further concern that under Ziazikov all of his efforts to avoid Ingushetia becoming “another Chechnya” would be undermined by Putin's insistence on imposing Moscow's control.

All of these dire predictions have in fact come to pass. The Russian authorities have cut off electricity to the refugee camps, barred humanitarian workers, threatened the inhabitants with expulsion, and carried out sweep operations (*zachistki*), as in Chechnya, that have led to imprisonment, torture, and executions. Ziazikov has cracked down on suspected sympathisers with the Chechens' plight, especially those with Islamist agendas, rather than trying to buy them off and settle them down as Aushev did. As a result, the new Ingush president and his followers have antagonised the locals, including those who would otherwise have been suspicious or resentful of the Chechens and their radical supporters.

The results were apparent in June 2004, when Chechen guerrillas crossed the border into Ingushetia and killed dozens of police officers and some civilians. Local residents blamed the republic's rulers. As one woman put it, “I think everything is Ziazikov's fault.

5. “Kremlin-Backed Zyazikov Scores ‘Surprise’ Win in Ingushetia”, *Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, 30 April 2002 [http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?search=1&volume_id=25&issue_id=2249&article_id=19354].

Under our former president this did not happen. Why? Because he was not a puppet. I don't support the people who attacked our republic, but I think the authorities are to blame. This shambles started under them. They allowed war into Ingushetia."⁶ Moreover, what seemed like a positive attribute of Ziazikov's "outsider" status—his willingness to share government jobs among the most prominent Ingush clans, rather than continue Aushev's favouritism of his own clan—apparently backfired. As Abdulla Istamulov reported in August 2004, Ziazikov's efforts to eliminate Islamist extremists by conducting sweep operations have led to retaliation by their fellow clan members and overall resentment among the affected populations.⁷

Finally, Ziazikov's unwillingness or inability to convince Moscow to address Ingush grievances over the Prigorodnyi district, combined with the corruption of the police and armed forces, probably contributed to the Beslan hostage-taking, in which both Ingush and Chechen militants participated. There are at least two main explanations for how the Prigorodnyi conflict relates to Beslan, one relevant to Chechnya and the other linked to Russia's policy towards post-Soviet Georgia.

The more straightforward explanation holds that the terrorists wanted to fan the flames of local ethnic conflict in an effort to destabilise the region and demonstrate to Moscow its inability to contain the war in Chechnya—precisely the opposite of Putin's goal in putting a "strong hand" in charge of Ingushetia.

A more complicated explanation, offered by Galina Khizrieva, an ethnographer from

the region, portrays the Beslan massacre as a kind of "preventive strike" by Ingush militants following the election of Mikhail Saakashvili in Georgia. On this interpretation, the Ingush fear that the South Ossetians will reject Saakashvili's attempts to bring them back into a coherent Georgian state and instead seek to unite with North Ossetia. Ossetian nationalists would then feel emboldened to launch further attacks against Ingush claimants to the Prigorodnyi district.⁸

Whichever explanation one favours, they both share a common feature: Putin's appointed leader of Ingushetia failed to deal with an issue of concern to many of his constituents, thereby giving the extremists among them a pretext to carry out atrocities against innocent schoolchildren and their relatives. One cannot say for certain that Aushev would have done better, but it is telling that the terrorists welcomed him into the schoolhouse as an interlocutor for ultimately ill-fated negotiations.

Implications for the Federation

In many respects, Ingushetia is not typical of the eighty-nine regions of the Russian Federation. It and the other North Caucasus republics are much more directly affected by the spillover from the Chechen war and terrorist attacks. Yet it was President Putin himself who drew the connection between Chechnya, international terrorism, and the need to preserve Russia's territorial integrity by abolishing the election of regional leaders. So it makes sense to look at the example of the republic where linking these issues seems at least plausible.

6. Quoted in Reuters report from Nazran, 1 July 2004.

7. Abdulla Istamulov, "Chechnya Faces a Hard Choice", *Moscow News*, 11–17 August 2004.

8. Galina Khizrieva, letter to author, 8 December 2004.

Putin first articulated his concerns in his 2000 autobiography, where he claimed that if Chechen separatists had remained in power,

they would have swallowed up Dagestan, and that would have been the beginning of the end. The entire Caucasus would have followed—Dagestan, Ingushetia, and then up along the Volga River to Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, reaching deep into the country.⁹

He repeated something very similar in his remarks to Western journalists and academics on 6 September 2004, in the wake of the Beslan tragedy: “There are Muslims along the Volga, in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. Chechnya isn’t Iraq. It’s not far away. It’s a vital part of our territory. This is all about Russia’s territorial integrity.”

Putin has not specified the mechanism by which Islamist radicalism could spread hundreds of kilometres from the North Caucasus up to the middle Volga region of the country. He implies a kind of Muslim contagion carried by the Volga River. In fact, there are millions of ethnic Russians living between Chechnya and Tatarstan or Bashkortostan, and those latter two republics themselves barely even have Muslim majorities. (Not to mention that the Volga flows in the opposite direction, north to south.)

There are, however, communities of radical Islamists in the Volga region, and one could imagine circumstances under which they would resort to violence. Khizrieva has called attention to Islamist camps in Tatarstan and in the city of Durtuli and elsewhere in Bashkor-

tostan; to Chechen settlements in the Orenburg *oblast* (province); and to Azeri communities in the lower Volga city of Saratov that have been radicalised by the ongoing conflict with Armenia.¹⁰ However, local authorities apparently have the situation under control and the elected presidents of Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, in particular, seem to have worked out a *modus vivendi* with the radicals. The question is whether Putin’s reforms will contribute to or undermine the current uneasy stability. One might expect that in the absence of electoral outlets for political grievances, people would be more likely to turn to violent, extra-parliamentary measures. There were already reports of street protests in Tatarstan in response to Putin’s September announcement, although they were mainly peaceful.

The many regional leaders who supported Putin’s changes apparently perceive little risk of a popular backlash. Some have even suggested going further. In late October 2004, Murtaza Rakhimov, the president of Bashkortostan, expressed approval of Putin’s proposal to abolish the elected presidencies and governorships in favour of strengthening the ever-popular “power vertical”. Under the assumption that he would be retained as Putin’s representative, Rakhimov said he had already established his own vertical in Bashkortostan. “We appoint heads of city and district administrations. There are no questions asked,” Rakhimov said, according to the RIA-Novosti press agency. He admitted that “some people are negative about the president’s initiatives. But I, for one, am positive, because we have already tested this system and it works”.¹¹

9. Vladimir Putin, *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia’s President* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), pp. 141–2.

10. Khizrieva, letter to author.

11. Sergei Borisov, “Russia: The Governor of Governors”, *Transitions Online*, 1 November 2004.

A reasonable counterargument is that a system allowing no political expression through the ballot box can only work temporarily, if at all, particularly in the face of genuine grievances neglected or exacerbated by heavy-handed authoritarian rule. If Bashkortostan represents a success story, albeit perhaps a short-term one, Ingushetia is a clear failure, and arguably a portent of worse to come. □