

*Center for Strategic and International Studies  
Russia and Eurasia Program*

**Chechnya in Russia and Russia in Chechnya: 20 Years after the "Revolution" in Grozny**

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Presentation by:

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**Event Summary**

Sergey Markedonov opened his remarks with an investigation of the history of Chechnya and the Caucasus in order to deconstruct some of the comfortable “myths” of Chechen separatism. Most observers begin their observations with the Caucasian War of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Chechens aligned themselves with the anti-Russian resistance unfolding among ethnic groups in the region. For instance, Imam Shamil, leader of the Eastern Caucasus resistance, was not an ethnic Chechen. Dagestani ethnic groups played the most important role in this fight against Russian Empire. In the 1990s, however, Dagestan was the only Caucasus republic of Russia that did not proclaim any declarations of sovereignty. Now the most popular slogan in the republic is: “Dagestan didn’t join Russia voluntarily and didn’t secede voluntarily.” Significantly, the opposition to Russia in the 19th century was not the result of ethno-nationalism, but rather religious differences. Chechnya abandoned regular resistance efforts when the Russians pacified the majority of the region in 1859 and ended fighting when Russia conquered western Chechnya in 1864. Yet, not all in the region resisted Russian rule. Georgians, for instance, promoted Russian influence in the region. Those who had rebelled against Russia, however, were forced to emigrate. Abkhazians were among them. Now Abkhazians are regarded as allies of Russia.

Markedonov also challenged the idea that historical primordialism can be applied to the North Caucasus. The modern-day Chechnya only truly became a Chechen region after a large-scale forced migration of Cossacks in October of 1920. In the beginning of the Soviet Union, the Chechens and the State power had a constructive relationship. After the deportations, however, the USSR acted as an opportunist power utilizing the Chechens and North Caucasus for strategic and tactical goals. Markedonov also noted that numerous regions have radically changed their position towards Russia over the course of the 150 years. Abkhazia, for instance, rebelled against Russia in the 1860s before becoming strongly integrated into Russia in the 1990s. Therefore, classifying the Caucasus regions into primordial groups does not serve to explain the

separatist movements. Ethnic identities and allegiances in the Caucasus region have often been fluid, and thus it is important to concentrate on ethnic movements, their leaders, and their current strategic incentives rather than focusing myopically on historical context.

Markedonov progressed from this historical analysis to a discussion of the modern conflict in Chechnya. The Chechen conflict differs from other ethno-political conflicts in the Former Soviet Union, for in those regions there was a strict opposition of two sides. In Georgia, for instance, the two sides were Abkhazia and Georgia. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss Chechnya as a question of different conflicts and rivalries that have emerged since 1989. Markedonov noted five such conflicts.

1. The first conflict is between the pro-Soviet forces who used nationalism instrumentally and romanticized separatism. Doku Zavgayev and other members of the local Communist Party bureaucracy first appealed to the idea of Chechen self-determination in 1989, using this idea instrumentally in order to maintain their own hold on power as the fall of the Soviet Union was slowly unraveling. Unlike the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, there are genuine elements within Chechnya that argue in favor of Russian territorial integrity. The conflict between these pro-Soviet and pro-separatist factions came to a fore with the emergence of Dzhokhar Dudayev, who pushed hard enough for Chechen independence to trigger a Russian military interference.
2. The second major conflict in Chechnya is that between separatists and pro-Russian forces. Some regions of Chechnya experienced periods of default independence in which the regions were not run by the Dudayev administration. The Nadterechny District, for instance, became a testing area for anti-Dudayev forces in 1991-1994 and thus an area for Russian military penetration. As a result, there are areas in Chechnya populated by people who fought against a de-facto separatist Chechen state.
3. The third major conflict in Chechnya is between secular nationalist forces and radical Islamist groups. The influence of these religious groups grew steadily after 1996, at which time Russia signed the Khasav-Yurt accord, delaying a decision on the status of Chechnya and its relation with Moscow until 2001. In 1991, Chechnya adopted a Constitution replicating that of Lithuania. Initially the role of Islam in the separatist movement was very weak; nationalism was the leading force. However, after the first military campaign of Russia against separatist Chechnya and the subsequent Khasav-Yurt Agreement, the Chechen nationalist movement shifted from being largely secular to being primarily religious as radical Islam increased its influence in the Chechen region. When Akhmad Kadyrov, who identified himself a Sufi Muslim, became the Mufti of Chechnya, he agreed to bless the jihad against the Russian state. Later, Kadyrov-senior was challenged by Salafis who tried to realize a “real and pure

Islam project”. As a result, conflict emerged between the Sufi and Salafi Muslims. As a result of this challenge, Akhmad Kadyrov eventually aligned himself with the Russian leadership, using this position instrumentally to further entrench Sufi dominance in Chechnya. Kadyrov-senior was a “pragmatic nationalist” and a “pragmatic Sufi” not committed to a romantic ideal of Chechen independence, but rather used nationalist appeals as a political instrument.

4. The fourth conflict is between Sufi Muslims and Salafi Muslims. Ramzan Kadyrov, regarded by many as a “soldier of Vladimir Putin,” considers himself a defender of the Sufi order. This has resulted in his legislation conflicting with Russian legislation on many accounts. For instance, Kadyrov can interfere with the appointing of mullahs in many mosques, which contradicts Russian law.
5. The fifth conflict arises between the Russian state and Chechnya, in which three models of the relationship can be noted.
  - a. Keeping off or escapism: From 1991 to 1994 and 1996 to 1999, Chechnya was not really a part of Russia, but maintained its own legislation.
  - b. Military suppression: in 1994 and 1999, Russia exerted unsuccessful attempts to control Chechnya, but efforts were squandered by a lack of political infrastructure. The Russian approach looked like an ‘imperial’ model of control whereby a lack of political control was exchanged for Chechnya’s loyalty towards Russia.
  - c. Model of Chechenization of power: The first attempt to realize this was during the period of first anti-separatist campaigns in 1995-1996. This experience eventually failed as a result of military and political defeat of the Russian power. The second attempt launched in 2002 has been more successful. Russia has not shown any interest in integrating hostile and problematic regions. The two important issues of controlling and ensuring of loyalty in Chechnya have not been adequately considered and the core problems of the region have not been politically resolved. As a result, privatization of power has emerged in this republic of the North Caucasus.

Following this analysis, Markedonov noted that observers are considering the Chechnya of today as the Chechnya of the 1990s, applying the same approach to predict relations and analyze the conflict. This approach, however, is incorrect. Today, the separatist agenda has declined. In contrast to the early 1990s, only marginal politicians remain truly committed to a Chechen ethno-nationalist movement. There are in reality no true attempts to create a nation state. Markedonov offers four primary reasons for this decline in the separatist agenda.

1. The practical impossibility of military victory against Russia. The Chechen leadership recognizes they can make things difficult for Russia, but they stand little chance of ever completely defeating the Russian army.
2. The increased level of political and economic integration between Chechnya and the national center of Russia. While Chechnya does remain culturally separate from Russia in many ways, it is far too integrated into the Russian political and economic apparatus for complete independence to be feasible. An increasing number of Chechens live outside of the republic, the majority of whom reside in Moscow.
3. The impressions from the separatist attempts of 1994 and 1999. The former separatist movements had produced a "Federation of Field Commanders." Rather than creating a coherent ethno-nationalist movement, Chechen separatism only served to devolve control over the region to a variety of warlords. All separatist attempts have ended in failure.
4. There is no external support for separatism. Unlike Nagorno-Karabakh, where the Armenian state provides outside support for the separatist movement and Abkhazia, where Russia ensures the political aid, "Chechen cause" was supported by no state actor in its separatist attempts. The image of "Freedom fighters" promoted in the 1990s is no longer popular, especially after the Beslan tragedy and other terrorist attacks.

The problem for Russia, therefore, is not real separatism, but built-in separatism or 'system separatism'. Ramzan Kadyrov is currently interested in keeping Chechnya a state within a state and, although "a soldier of Putin", he is no soldier of the Russian Federation. Although there are problems with Chechen leaders, Markedonov noted that the real problem rests mainly within the Russian Federation. Current Russian leadership is interested in keeping divides along ethnic and regional lines in order to control the situation. Ending his remarks, Markedonov reminded the audience that the collapse of USSR was determined to a large extent by self-determination of nuclear areas of the USSR but hoped that the current self-determination struggles of Russians would not lead the way to the collapse of the Russian Federation.

After this thought-provoking discussion, a number of questions were raised concerning the economic factors at play in the Chechen conflict. Markedonov first addressed the question of oil resources, which became the target of fighting between warlords, by arguing that the volume of oil reserves in the region has been consistently overestimated. Consequently, these resources are generally of minimal strategic value. Markedonov then commented on the importance of economic subsidies that may have pacified any separatist impulses in neighboring Dagestan, by observing that many regions in Russia besides Chechnya have very poor economies but have nevertheless not pursued secessionist goals. Thus, according to Markedonov, economic conditions alone cannot explain the emergence of Chechen separatism.

A question was raised about Markedonov's assessment that Chechen separatists lacked external support, citing the role of Emir Khatib, who brought in significant financial and military support

to back the Islamist movements in Chechnya. Markedonov first noted that Khattab had no ethnic allegiances to Chechnya and thus was fighting primarily for religious reasons and not Chechen independence. Markedonov also pointed out that violent resistance emerged in Chechnya well before Khattab's arrival and continues despite his death almost a decade ago.

Responding to a remark made about Russians leaders being the main contributors to the crisis, Markedonov rejected the idea that Yeltsin's administration was mainly responsible for the radicalization of Chechen independence. Markedonov referenced an interview that he had conducted with a member of Yeltsin's presidential administration, who informed him that Yeltsin and Dudayev had in place a tentative deal for "Tatarstanization" in Chechnya before Dudayev began openly criticizing Russia's "colonial approach." Thus, in Markedonov's view, Dudayev and the Chechen leadership is at least equally responsible for the inability to negotiate a peaceful solution. He also refuted the notion that the pre-1994 Chechen independence movement was purely symbolic, noting how the region officially declared that it would not pay taxes to the central government, rejected participation in privatization, and did not participate in the referendum on Russia's 1993 constitution.

Dr. Kuchins of the Center for Strategic and International Studies proceeded to follow up the discussion on the locus of decision making. Rather than focusing on past decisions, Dr. Kuchins concentrated on the present-day conflict and asked whether it is more important to see changes in Moscow or in Grozny. Markedonov's response to this inquiry was somewhat pessimistic. He argued that, after 2004, Moscow fundamentally lost control of Chechnya. Unfortunately, Kadyrov-junior continues to use his political position instrumentally rather than seeking a genuine resolution to the conflict. This discussion provoked a great deal of speculation about different counter-factual solutions to the conflict, but no conclusions were reached regarding how the contemporary conflict could be resolved.