



CHECHNYA PEACE FORUM

Russian aggression in Chechnya

By Ivar Amundsen

To understand President Putin's position on Chechnya it is important to go back to the 1999 bombings of apartment blocks in Moscow and other Russian cities that killed nearly 300 innocent people. At the time of the blasts, Vladimir Putin was the newly appointed Russian prime minister and was quick to blame the attacks on Chechen separatists and used them as a device to start the second war on Chechnya, the first being from 1994 -1996.

The Kremlin-backed invasion of the already war torn Chechen republic set the backdrop well ahead of 9/11 for Putin to use the so-called war on terror as a reason for the international community to turn a blind eye to the erosion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Russia today.

The intention was clear. This war was to help the then relatively unknown former head of the KGB to position himself to win the presidential election the following year. The Russians actually lost the first war in 1996 and had to retreat - humiliated and defeated. When Boris Yeltsin introduced his new Prime Minister in August 1999, he also stated: "This is the man who will solve the Chechen problem." Mr Putin himself followed up on this at a press conference a month later when commenting on Chechen separatists: "We will follow the terrorists everywhere. Should we catch them in the shithouse, we'll crush them in the shithouse."

Mr Putin portrayed himself to the Russian electorate as a strong man with the resolve to restore Russian national pride. After the explosions in September 1999 Russian aggression built up and the military inferno launched in Chechnya soon after was hailed as a tough response to terrorism. President Yeltsin stepped down on New Year's Eve and the new acting president Vladimir Putin brought the presidential election forward from June 2000 to March 2000, and won it.

To give this some context, it is widely reported that Putin's pre-determined plan to start a second war in Chechnya was merely a way to become President and cement total KGB control on the administration in the Kremlin. Sergei Stepashin, Interior Minister until May 1999, and Prime Minister for a few Summer months, subsequently disclosed that the plan for the second war on Chechnya was made as early as Spring of that year long before any provocation provided a reason for military action. At that time Vladimir Putin was heading the Russian Secret Police, FSB, the successor of KGB. Almost 300 innocent Russians had to pay the price for Putin's ambition. Hundreds of thousands others were to follow.

In the two Russian wars on Chechnya in excess of 200,000 Chechen citizens have been killed. The population of Grozny has halved and other towns and villages have been bombed to the ground. Before the first war in 1994, Chechnya had a large Russian population, most of whom lived in or around Grozny where they made up the majority of people living there. In a gruesome paradox

they were also the principle victims of the military onslaught when Grozny was destroyed. The official figure for the number of Russian soldiers who also lost their lives in the senseless Russian military campaign between 1999 and mid-2003 is 4,705 - though the Soldiers' Mothers of Russia organisation put the figure at 11,000. Another sacrifice seemingly worth the price in Putin's eyes.

The notion of extreme brutality is a prevalent feature in today's Russia. Corruption is widespread and the country has the highest number of personal security guards in the world. Bullying is virtually institutionalized and brutal hazing incidents are rife within the Russian army — many young soldiers are driven to suicide as a result of abuse. Against this backdrop it is little wonder that Moscow backed tactics in Chechnya are beyond the rule of law.

There is no doubt that the second Chechen war helped Putin win the 2000 election, although the allegations of election forgery, state terrorism against his own people and a war show how manipulated and false this victory was.

In 2004 Putin did not have to go to all that trouble as any credible opposition was seamlessly and miraculously sidelined. Amongst them, soldier turned politician Alexander Lebed died in a helicopter crash over Siberia in questionable circumstances. Ivan Rybkin vanished during the campaign claiming he had been kidnapped and drugged. A staunch critic of President Putin, Rybkin was the only candidate to make the criticism of the war in Chechnya a key part of his campaign.

Other opponents had their reputations publicly sabotaged, were terrorized or discouraged from running which resulted in many dropping out of the race. Indeed those who remained on the ballot paper claimed they were not really challengers at all.

By this time TV and newspapers were by now largely in the hands of the state, supporting only one candidate - Vladimir Putin. In such a situation it is practically impossible for the opposition to access the voters and obtain a place in the Parliament (Duma.) However, Putin leaves nothing to chance. His numerous changes to Russia's electoral system have increased the threshold for parties to win seats in the Duma from 5 to 7%.

The next presidential election is in March 2008 and although Putin cannot seek a third term under the current Russian constitution he has expressed his desire to remain at the heart of political power in Russia. His announcement to stand in the parliamentary elections in December is a clear signal of his intention to control the strings of his successor and shows he has no intention of relinquishing control. According to one of Russia's few remaining independent MPs Vladimir Ryzhkov the intent is: "A restoration of the traditional Russian model of the state, society and political system, and of rhetoric in Russian-Western relations." (Guardian 04.11.07)

It is time to wake up to what is happening on Europe's own doorstep. These are very dangerous times as Putin continues his aggressive move towards authoritarianism, stifling any form of democratic opposition. Threats to target missiles at Europe, disregard for international treaties in the areas of energy add to the severity of the situation. Western leaders are shamefully silent over notorious Russian human rights abuses in Chechnya and elsewhere in Russia as the reliance on Russian oil and gas means diplomatic silence prevails.

Putin enjoys high approval ratings by keeping the opposition off the air waves, shutting down NGOs and introducing draconian laws that curtail freedom of speech. A Russia playing by its own rules, inside Russia, or on the international stage will have horrific consequences. As a member of

the UN, Council of Europe, G8 and the WTO Russia is violating its international obligations. Freedom of speech, rule of law and basic democratic values must be guaranteed for the security of the world. It is our duty to voice these concerns and hope peace and justice can be restored to Chechnya.