



CHECHNYA PEACE FORUM

“Russia and the Caucasus Today” – by Ivar Amundsen, Director of the CPF

Just before the meeting of the G8 in Germany in the summer of 2007, President Putin invited prominent journalists to a private dinner to air his views on international affairs. Asked by The Times of London whether he considered himself to be a true democrat, he gave the following answer:

“Of course, I am a pure and absolute democrat. But you know what the problem is – not a problem, but a real tragedy – I am alone. There are no other such pure democrats in the world. Since Mahatma Gandhi there has been no other.” (Times 4th June 2007)

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 is perhaps the greatest geopolitical miracle in history. As President, Putin later called it “the greatest geopolitical *catastrophe* in history”. Whatever your view, it was certainly the spark that lit the fuse of conflict in the Caucasus.

In April 1990, three remarkable resolutions were adopted in the Supreme Soviet which not only allowed, but actually urged, the Soviet republics to hold referendums, elections and adopt constitutions with the aim of declaring independence. One of the first to act was Russia itself, to be followed before the end of 1991 by fourteen other states, all internationally recognized.

Until November 1990 Chechnya had formally been an “autonomous republic” within the Soviet Union. At that point, and in line with the April resolutions, Chechnya declared its sovereignty. This was immediately endorsed by “The Supreme Soviet of the Chechen-Ingush Republic”, proclaiming Chechnya (and Ingushetia) a sovereign state that was going to participate in union and federation treaties on equal footing with the other Soviet republics. Chechnya should legally have exited the Soviet Union and declared its independence, but was illegally occupied and destroyed by one of the other Soviet republics; Russia.

In 1994, Russia went to war with Chechnya “to establish constitutional order.” After just two years under the rule of Boris Yeltsin, Russia was sinking into chaos and poverty. The president’s support had slipped to a minimum, and he believed he needed “a quick, victorious war” to re-establish authority and power. In fact, the Russians eventually lost the campaign and had to pull out only two years later, after an estimated 80,000-100,000 innocent people had lost their lives and the country had been bombed to gravel.

In 1999, Yeltsin’s second term was drawing to an end. By now, both he and the nation were suffering from a serious hangover; he from vodka, the country from further economic and social crisis. As he staggered from pillar to post, in May Prime Minister Primakov was sacked as he was feared to be too strong, then in August his successor Stupishin was dismissed allegedly because he was too weak. Under this dark cloud, the Russian secret police – the FSB, successor to the KGB – was determined to rebuild a strong regime, and to find a leader they could trust as loyal and dependable to ensure their absolute control. As so often in Soviet times, the secret services turned to one of their own, their leader, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin.

Putin was served to Yeltsin on a silver platter by the most powerful elite in the country, more powerful even than the recently remerged business oligarchs – the siloviki. In return for his compliance, Yeltsin was guaranteed amnesty for all the corruption with which he had been involved during the privatization of the Soviet state enterprises. When Yeltsin announced his appointment of Putin as the new prime minister, he observed that “this is also the man who will succeed me as president.” Then he added that “Putin will find the final solution to the Chechen problem.” The new prime minister followed up at a press conference in September 1999. Asked about his line of policy towards Chechen separatist, he answered: “We will chase them all and destroy them even if we have to pull them out of the shithouse.”

In September 1999, five bombs exploded in the middle of the night in a block of flats in a Moscow suburb, as well as simultaneously in several other Russian cities, that killed 294 innocent Russian civilians. Terror, fright, confusion and hate were stirred and there was effectively a state of emergency in the country. Putin instantly blamed Chechen separatists. Yet it has since been shown – not least in the recent biography of then FSB agent Alexander Litvinenko – that in fact it was the FSB itself that planned and executed these crimes, as part of its plan to bring Putin to power and create the crisis conditions in which a more authoritarian rule would be tolerated by the Russian people – not least, of course, in the troublesome republic of Chechnya.

Yeltsin resigned on Millennium Eve and Putin assumed the role of acting president, before bringing forward the presidential elections planned for June to March of 2000. With the further assistance of some quiet vote rigging the FSB had their man in place.

The second Russian war on Chechnya brought Vladimir Putin to power. It brought destruction, suffering and death to a small nation of one million people.

At the time, this was declared to be a war on Chechen separatism. After 9/11, it was conveniently redefined as “a war on international terrorism.” It was – and is – Russian state terrorism against the Chechen civil population and has all the characteristics of genocide. Indeed, in the two Russian wars on Chechnya in excess of 200,000 Chechen citizens – a huge proportion of the population – have been killed and many more displaced.

For the FSB, human lives clearly have little value – they are merely instruments that can be manipulated or killed for political purposes. If 294 innocent Russian citizens can be killed to create a better context for the FSB, then the slaughter of one or two hundred thousand people in Chechnya is an easy step for them to take.

The Russian power elite does not want democracy and civil liberties for its people – it wants control for themselves. Today, this elite may constitute a few hundred people around Putin and their strategies and tactics are coordinated by the real supreme power in Russia; the Russian Secret Police, previously KGB, now FSB, and abroad SVR. These forces control everything in Russia today; politics, media, energy, industry, military, judiciary, and civil administration. If you want to run the world’s largest country by a very small number of elite members, you cannot allow democracy. That would destroy it. So, you must suppress freedom and democracy by creating an emergency situation.

Terrorism, fear and a war within its own national borders constitute just such an emergency. That has allowed the regime to exercise press censorship, ban NGO’s, silence political opponents, and even cover the tracks of politically-motivated murderers. This emergence of an extreme nationalism in itself represents a certain destabilization of civil society – and therefore in turn facilitates a stronger, more authoritarian rule.

Many people ask why Russia is so willing to take the international criticism and the heavy financial bill of the Chechen wars. The answer is that the war in Chechnya helped bring Putin to power and it now helps him to deepen his authoritarian rule. Putin without a war in Chechnya and a state of emergency around him is very fragile and very vulnerable. After all, his political strength is best sustained by remaining synchronised with the siloviki elite in the Kremlin and the Lubyanka.

Peace in Chechnya would stabilize the Caucasus. Demands for civil liberties and democratic institutions might grow, which in turn would challenge the power of the FSB.

All of this must be seen in the context of two other on-going and worrying developments. First, the ratcheting upwards of Russian military rhetoric against the West, which now appears to be a deliberate attempt to open a new cold war. Second, the preparations to extend the term that anyone could serve as president in Russia, from the current four years to either five or even seven.

It is worth noting that unlike in the US, a president of Russia can be re-elected after two presidential terms once there has been a period out of office. So there are many ways in which Putin may himself serve again, including by supporting the election of a puppet for a while who may not serve for all that long before Putin would be eligible to stand once again. Another has been all too clearly defined by Putin himself, announcing he will stand as a possible candidate for premiership as leader of the party "United Russia."

It is to help play some part in checking these rising problems associated with Putin's Russia that the Chechnya Peace Forum was formed.

There can be no military solution to the problems of Russia and the Caucasus, only a political one. That is why I actively support the Chechen resistance movement's foreign minister Mr Akhmed Zakaev in his endeavours for peace talks aimed at establishing the rule of law and democracy in Chechnya, along with peaceful relations with all of its neighbours. The Chechens deserve it – and so do the Russians. And in consequence the world would become a far less dangerous place.