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Chechnya Rapidly Becoming Russia's Algeria

By Paul Goble

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

Chechnya is rapidly becoming Russia's Algeria, according to a Moscow commentator, not only because most Russians see it as an inalienable part of their country that is nonetheless de facto separate but also because Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov is laying the groundwork now for the de jure independence of his republic.

In an article in Monday's Yezhednevny Zhurnal, Mark Feygin argues that those who believe that Chechnya will never seek independence because of the assistance Moscow provides to it understand neither the nature of Chechnya nor the way in which its leaders are pursuing independence.

And he suggests that the French experience in Algeria, a place many French people believed would always remain a department of France and one that divided the French elite even more than Chechnya has divided the Russian one, provides a suggestive analogy, albeit one whose outcome is something many Russians still say they oppose.

Despite the new wave of violence across the North Caucasus, many Russians in recent weeks have comforted themselves with the idea that however bad things there may be and however much that violence may spread into Russia proper, there is little or no chance that Chechnya or any of the other republics will seek to go its own way.

The North Caucasus republics cannot afford to do so, such Russians say, because Moscow provides almost all the funding for the regimes there. But Feygin argues that such a self-serving conclusion is quite possibly wrong and that given the nature of the North Caucasus, Moscow may unwittingly be financing the independence movements.

"For almost 200 years," Feygin points out, Moscow has been involved in "pacifying" that region and has been "financing it without end." But such financing has never been a means of winning over the North Caucasus but rather "has been and remains a means of freeing the central powers that be from the disturbing problems of the region."

"Today," Feygin continues, "Chechnya de facto is not a full-fledged territory of Russia: the laws of the Russian Federation do not operate there, the military units of Kadyrov are not subordinate to the federal force structures and the administrative leadership and the courts function outside of any 'power vertical.'"

And "what, then, separates Chechnya and the Chechens from independence? Their own constitution? Given how little the Russian one means. The recognition of other states? Abkhazia and South Ossetia have not been recognized by others. The general election of the president of Chechnya? Even earlier Dudayev did not have that."

But despite this, and more successfully than his predecessors, Kadyrov is "leading the republic to final legal independence, and as far as politics are concerned, he has already ensured" that outcome by promoting Islamic identity &mdash the common glue of the region &mdash and avoiding relying too heavily on his own clan, something that would alienate others.

For those in both Moscow and Chechnya itself who oppose Kadyrov, Feygin says, it is generally accepted that "the activization of terrorist attacks and individual clashes between the army and militia elsewhere in the North Caucasus ... have one and the same source &mdash the Chechen separatist resistance."

But if that is common ground, there is also a growing recognition that Moscow had only "a small number" of options after the end of the war and that "setting one group of Chechens loyal to the federal center against others ... would lead to a new test of the firmness of the clan structure of traditional society in Chechnya."

So far, Kadyrov has been able to promote Islam as a unifying factor of Chechen society and as

a means for reaching out to Middle Eastern countries who might support him and thus play down the divisions in Chechen society itself, a strategy that is likely to work until the weakening of Russian power allows him to declare independence.

Many Russians do not want to focus on or consider "the resolution of the problems of Chechnya through a 'civilized divorce.'" But because the prospects of de jure as well as de facto independence for Chechnya are increasing, Feygin suggests, it would be good to explore the experience of other countries facing analogous challenges.,

The most obvious of these, he argues, is France's experience with Algeria, a place that after 1848 the French did not view as a colony but rather as part of France. But after World War II, when other French colonies fell away, Algeria fought for independence for 17 years until at last Paris accepted its independence in July 1962.

And just as with Russia over the last two decades, France's war with Algeria played a major role in the national life of France, leading to violence in the metropolitan country and forcing various political changes. Even today, the French continue to discuss whether General de Gaulle, who returned to power to deal with Algeria, acted correctly.

According to Feygin, there are two aspects to France's experience with Algeria that are especially relevant to Russian consideration of Chechnya: the question of immigration as a result of "a liberal migration policy" and "the extreme right attitudes in the military" that shook France and could shake Russia.

"Russia, balanced on the edge of a military coup and real disintegration, will," Feygin says, have to take into consideration dissatisfaction in the military as a result of failures with 'the pacification' of the Caucasus and the consequences of an ineffective military reform."

Consequently, "despite the differences between democratic France of the 1960s and authoritarian Russia of the 2000s," Feygin says, Russians "have a chance to avoid the negative consequences of the possible separation of Chechnya and a number of other Caucasus republics, if [they] think about it in advance."

If Russia itself liberalizes before the question of such separations occur, Feygin suggests, it is possible that they can be "resolved in a more civilized fashion" than otherwise would be the case. One possibility, he says, is a Russian Federation-wide popular referendum about this outcome.

Given the enormous problems Chechnya presents and will present to Russia for the foreseeable future, Feygin argues, "how Russians would vote" in such a poll remains "a very big" and, he implies, a very open question, one whose answer could well be very different than those who continue to talk about the inviolability of borders currently assume.

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