

Why Russia Won Nothing in Chechnya

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The events connected with the investigation into the murder of Boris Nemtsov have forced Russian society to face an issue it has long put off: the situation in Chechnya. The federal center has resorted to the large-scale use of force twice over the last quarter-century in order to suppress the separatist movement there. It claims to have succeeded in that struggle, but has it really?

In the late fall of 2014, Moscow police, with support from the special forces, attempted to detain someone in the capital who was suspected of conducting fraudulent cash transactions. However, the special forces were unable to even enter the hotel where the suspect was staying. The man's armed guards fought off the officers, almost resorting to hand-to-hand combat. As a result, the suspect fled and the police operation was cancelled.

The investigator from the Moscow criminal investigation department who planned the sting operation lost his job, although he was one of the "golden group" of Moscow police. It turned out that the man they had wanted to detain was Ramzan Tsitsulayev, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov's special envoy to Ukraine. Tsitsulayev lives openly in Chechnya, but Moscow investigators lack the resources to bring him to justice.

In February 2015, a group of Dagestani residents were charged with planning the murder of Saigidpasha Umakhanov, the mayor of the Dagestani town of Khasavyurt. Dagestani investigators had done a great deal of work, even managing to infiltrate the group that received instructions for the assassination.

Some of the results of that investigation were published. That information revealed that one of Kadyrov's advisors, the separatist Shaa Turlayev, was the mastermind behind the planned murder. Everything about him is known — his name, job, even his home and work telephone numbers. Dagestani investigators know that Turlayev is connected with the group planning to assassinate the mayor. The only problem is, they cannot bring him to justice because he is in Chechnya.

This is what's called extraterritoriality — meaning exempted from local law — and it negates all past efforts to stop Chechnya from being an extraterritorial region.

The problem that Moscow investigators face in the Tsitsulayev case and that Dagestani investigators face in the Turlayev case is no different than the difficulties that Russian prosecutors encountered when trying to obtain timely information in the search for those who had kidnapped and killed four foreign engineers whose heads were found beside a Chechen road in October 1998.

The only difference is that in 1998, Chechnya was de facto independent, whereas now, at least ostensibly, it is not. In fact, Moscow practically holds up Chechnya as an example for other Russian regions to emulate.

Of course, it is wrong to conclude that everything in Chechnya has been going badly in recent years based on the failure of a few investigations. After all, the Chechen war ended long ago and Grozny has been rebuilt and outshines every other city in the North Caucasus.

What's more, Chechnya is perhaps the only place in Russia that not only scrupulously accounts for every ruble it receives from the federal budget, but where residents can even show you every building, road and bridge that that money has purchased. Taken together, that cannot but create a very positive impression.

But who resides within those new buildings and drives over those new roads and bridges? The problem is not that part of Chechnya's current establishment consists of former separatists. That is nothing to be ashamed of — in fact, it shows that Russia not only found a positive solution to the conflict, but also has something positive to offer, if former die-hard freedom fighters have given up their struggle.

The problem is that those former rebels have never adopted Russian laws. Chechnya is a unique experiment, although the locals are usually reluctant to discuss the subject with outsiders. Of course, every Russian region has its share of legal abuses, but Chechnya has become a practically lawless society.

The stabilization of Chechnya is touted as one of, if not the main domestic victory of Putin's rule. Indeed, events in Chechnya played a significant role in Vladimir Putin's rise to power. And whereas prior to Putin Chechnya was a Somalia-like failed state in the patchwork fabric of Russia's North Caucasus, and still lay in ruins during the early years of Putin's rule,

by about the end of his second presidential term the situation in Chechnya took a turn for the better.

Apparently, the point is not whether automobile showrooms and jewelry stores now stand on the site of former ruins, but that, for example, Russian officialdom completely ignored the 15th anniversary of the heroic death of the 6th company of the Pskov Airborne Division.

In the spring of 2000, those men encountered a huge gang of insurgents on a wooded hill above the Chechen village of Ulus-Kert. Almost every soldier in the company was killed, but the survivors did not flinch or give up.

Only the surviving paratroopers, the relatives of the slain and Russian nationalists commemorated that battle, even while the Russian media suggested several times recently that a Chechen who shoots someone whom he feels has insulted Islam can be considered a patriot.

There are no grounds for asserting that some of the insurgents who killed the Pskov paratroopers at Ulus-Kert now hold official positions in Grozny, but more than a few Russian siloviki and law enforcement officers working with Chechnya are veterans of the war there.

And whenever they confront a cynical silence in response to their latest request for assistance with an arrest, for example, they must ask themselves: Was it really worth it to fight two wars to restore constitutional order here if it was never actually restored? Are the people holding power in Chechnya the same who rained heavy fire down on Russian positions in Grozny in 1996 and 2000? If so, then what victory was achieved there?

But this "victory" in Chechnya became the foundation not only for Putin's first election campaign, but for the renaissance of imperial ideology, militarization and the readiness to achieve future victories.

The entire current political system in Russia is based on the assumption that in Chechnya, after long years of struggle, numerous erred decisions and countless victims, victory is finally secure. Too much stands on that idea, on that foundation, to simply admit now that it is untrue.

And yet that is exactly the conclusion that the investigation into the murder of Boris Nemtsov will demonstrate if the authorities conduct it honestly, impartially and without fear of recrimination.

That is the type of investigation desired by tens, if not hundreds of thousands of military personnel, police, prosecutors, FSB agents and military intelligence officers who fought and now work in Chechnya for the restoration of constitutional order, and not for the creation of an odious and expensive regime that is quasi-colonial in every sense of the word.

They understand how things actually stand, and are deeply and personally offended by it. But their complaint will never be heard by a society that believes it achieved victory in Chechnya.

In a sense, it is not Chechnya that has adopted Russia's constitutional order, but Russia that has assimilated much of what has become customary in Chechnya over the last 10 years.

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