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Moscow Should Save, Not Subdue, Chechnya

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Moscow's policy in Chechnya will create two dangerous enemies for Russia: the clan surrounding Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov and the Chechen people as a whole. The Open Russia organization that I founded released a film called "Family" last week that documents daily life in Chechnya under Kadyrov. It was necessary to make this film so that the Russian people could see the real Chechnya, not the myth of a beautifully restored and flourishing republic that state-controlled television actively promotes.

Yes, Grozny has a broad avenue named in honor of President Vladimir Putin, four largely vacant skyscrapers that compose the Grozny-City Towers hotel and business center and a few other things that look good on television. But throughout the rest of the republic there is little to indicate that the war really ended 10 years ago.

Many buildings still bear the traces of wartime bullets and shells, and our camera crew even found such markings inside buildings that had freshly remodeled facades fronting the main streets of Grozny. It might seem that life in Chechnya is much like any other Russian province:

poor, full of dusty dirt roads and a population forced to bribe local officials in return for basic services. However, that is not the case.

Of course, other Russian regions also have plenty of domestic problems, human rights violations and authorities that are not accountable to society. But even among those regions, Chechnya stands out. The Chechen people continue to fear that any one of them could be kidnapped, beaten or killed without warning.

The widespread poverty and lack of rights stand in sharp contrast to the princely lifestyles of the new elite that spend huge sums of money on personal corteges of luxury automobiles, family estates rivaling the palaces of Arab sheikhs and invitations for Hollywood stars to come give personal performances at premium prices.

Pro-Kremlin political analysts offer the Russian people a false choice: either accept a rigid and authoritarian feudal system in which "subjects" must pay tribute to their local potentates, or else risk a new war in the Caucasus. In fact, a third and even less appealing scenario is likely.

In the long term, Russia's current policy will not lead to a resolution of the situation in Chechnya, but to the creation of two dangerous enemies and an inevitable conflict with at least one of them.

The first enemy is Kadyrov's clan of personal security forces that has grown accustomed to living on federal handouts. Their appetite for money will only grow with time, even while the federal budget faces increasing limitations due to the cost of Crimea, Western sanctions and the general economic downturn.

The second enemy that Russia has created through its own actions is a Chechen population that must live with fear, a vast divide between rich and poor and a lack of rights and social mobility. They see that Moscow created the ruling regime in Chechnya and blame Russia for the injustices afflicting their republic. That eliminates any chance of Chechnya voluntarily remaining part of Russia once the Kadyrov regime finally ends.

Moscow's policy of providing money and carte blanche in return for loyalty has another major drawback: it gives young Chechens the extremely harmful message that violence and thievery, not hard work and honesty, are the keys to success. As a result, they see that their only opportunity for social mobility in today's Chechnya is to first fight as armed insurgents, and then cut a deal with Moscow to stop. That is how the current generation of Chechen leaders "succeeded."

If Russia wants to avoid this scenario, it must formulate a new policy and a new agreement with Chechnya. First, Russians must recognize that the people of Chechnya are also Russian citizens. Moscow has established a system of government there that is pushing Chechnya back into the Middle Ages, when it should be bringing their norms and standards into line with those of the rest of Russia. Moscow has no right to betray the million Russian citizens of Chechnya by putting them in the hands of a medieval tsar.

Second, it is in Moscow's interest that Chechnya remain part of Russia. Otherwise, the region will become a constant threat to national security. A separate Chechnya will become

a breeding ground of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism.

Third, Russia must accept that the transition from the Middle Ages to modern times will require money, primarily funds for education.

Fourth, in its relations with the region, Moscow needs to shift its focus from the head of the republic to the municipal governments. Chechen cities should receive funding directly and spend it on social programs and job creation, not on visits from Hollywood stars. If the municipalities fail to carry out their responsibilities, Moscow should cut off their funding.

These rules would signify the equality of all before the law and a level playing field for all of Russia's regions. Russia can resolve the problems in its relationship with Chechnya only as part of a larger program for the development of local government generally. Whatever Chechnya needs, all of Russia's regions need too.

Moscow should transfer most authority to local governments, along with the sources of revenue. And of course, those functions that lie beyond the purview of local and regional authorities would remain the jurisdiction of the central government: the federal infrastructure, army, intelligence agencies, foreign policy and the investigation of serious inter-regional crimes.

The policy on Chechnya must take into account its historical, cultural and religious diversity. Moscow should give Chechnya autonomy in matters of social and cultural policy connected with the traditions of the people. However, the rules formulated by the local authorities would have one important limitation: they would have to abide by the human rights enshrined in the Constitution.

Fifth, it is important to integrate Chechnya with Russia in terms of both culture and education. In particular, Moscow should tie federal funding to the implementation of integration programs. Moscow should encourage student exchange programs that provide places for talented Chechen students in Russian universities. And these should be truly gifted students, not simply the children of those with "connections," as is the case now.

To begin making this transition, Moscow would have to dismiss Ramzan Kadyrov and hold fair elections to the regional parliament. A specially designated North Caucasus command should replace the current Chechen siloviki. In fact, that would not prove especially difficult because it is the Moscow regime and federal budget that props up the Kadyrov clan, and not the Chechen people, as Kremlin propaganda would have us believe.

Finally, and most importantly, the conditions in Chechnya can improve only after Russia itself becomes a free and open country. Only once Russia is freed from its corrupt regime can it undertake the reforms needed to improve the situation in Chechnya. At the same time, without achieving change in Chechnya, without remedying that "black hole" of Russian statehood, Russia can never become a free and open country.

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