

# THE ARMED INTERVENTION IN CHECHNYA

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Since December 1994 until August 1996, the Russian armed forces were involved by the political leadership into the most tragic adventure after Afghanistan. Three years after the conclusion of the Treaty of Hasaviurt, signed by General Alexandr Lebed and the present Chechen President Aslan Mashadov, which has legalized the cessation of the combats between federal troops and Chechen separatists, the Russian army goes again into military operations in the Caucasian region, first in Daghestan and now in Chechnya.

The intervention of the federal troops is officially motivated by "the destruction of the bases held there by the islamist terrorists". Three years ago, the armed intervention was justified by the need to restore the "constitutional order". No matter what the reason is now, the war which is going on in the Caucasian zone has a high stake, from the geopolitical point of view, as well as concerning Russia's prestige as a military force, as a country with integrative pretensions in the ex-soviet space. Not to speak about the effect a new defeat would have on the results of the presidential elections, which are supposed to mark the ending of the Yeltsin age in July 2000.

The Chechen problem has concerned the Russian leadership since the last years of the Soviet Union, President Boris Yeltsin

having too few available forces to react to the establishing, by a coup d'etat, of the General Dudayev's regime. He succeeded in a short period of time of time to liquidate any form of political opposition and to get away from the unional center and then from the federal power. The unique measure adopted by Yeltsin was the establishment of the state of emergency on the whole territory of the Chechnya, in November 1991. Some years later, in 1996, the Russian leader explained that that decree could not be put into operation on account of the lack of interest manifested by the majority of the members of the Supreme Soviet towards that problem and through the hesitation of Mihail Gorbachev, who, in his position as President of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and Commander in Chief of Armed Forces, did not order the troops of the Ministry of the Internal Affairs or of the Ministry of Defense to neutralize the Dudayev's Group<sup>1</sup>. Then, President Yeltsin acknowledged that the rebellious general profited from the conflict between the center and the outlying regions (USSR - Russia), this fact creating him the possibility to establish shortly his own system of government.

In 1991-1992, Dudayev's formations took possession of great amounts of armaments and combat equipments formerly belonging to the federal military

units. The retreat of the troops was chaotic, the soldiers preferring to disappear from a hostile territory as soon as possible, without thinking into whose hands the armament stores could fall. For example, only in a single day, in February 1992, from the Army's depots vanished 1050 sub-machine guns, 186 military vehicles and 46 tons of ammunition<sup>2</sup>. President Yeltsin tried subsequently to find an excuse for the way the retreating plan from Chechnya was prepared, stating that everything happened so quickly "to avoid bloodshed among the Russian military on the Chechen territory"<sup>3</sup>.

In the period before the Russian intervention in 1994, there were many attempts to make a compromise with Dudayev so that Chechnya would remain a part of the Russian Federation, in exchange for a greater autonomy, much like that obtained by the Tatarstan Republic. The Chechen problem was often on the agenda in Kremlin in that period, the Russian President letting know in his speech to the Parliament, in February 1994, that the base for the settlement of the relations between Moscow and Grozny must be the organization of free and democratic elections and the negotiations for settling the status of the Chechen Republic within the Russian Federation<sup>4</sup>. Many delegations belonging to the Legislative Body, Government and Presidency tried to meet the salutary half-way with Dudayev. Even the Defense Minister Pavel Grachev had several discussions with the rebellious general, hoping for a moment that a political solution is possible.

At the same time and parallel with the official emissaries, Moscow also sent into the region experts of the secret services, trying to overthrow by force the Dudayev regime with the help of Chechen internal opposition. In June and September 1994, bloody combats took place between the troops loyal to General Dudayev and groups

of the opposition, subsidized and armed by the federal center. In those months, military officers from the secret services were going from one military unit to another to find volunteers ready to take part in special operations in Chechnya. When the actions of neutralization of Dudayev ended by failure, all the state institutions vehemently denied that between the POWs taken on those days there were Russian soldiers. The Army stared with stupefaction how the officials from the Government and Ministry of Defense stated that the Russian soldiers seized by Dudayev were "merely deserters". The failure of the secret operations was not interpreted in Moscow as a warning to be taken into account, the commanding body of the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Internal Affairs and secret services trying to persuade President Boris Yeltsin that only a direct and massive military intervention could bring Chechnya back into the Russian Federation.

Russian Defense Minister, General Pavel Grachev, had then presented President Yeltsin a plan of operations for the liquidation of the rebellious formations in the shortest time. The document stated precisely that the *blitzkrieg* had to take only 12-17 days, and, at the end of the last stage, "the military situation should become stable, the armed forces being replaced by the troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs"<sup>5</sup>. For the plan to be easily approved by the political leadership, the General Staff assigned completely unreal time limits for the deployment of the units and the carrying on of the military operations. All the concentration of the forces had been done in seven days, and the next two stages, the military operations, strictly speaking, having to take the same time. Within three days, a part of the federal forces were obliged to march to Grozny and to encircle the town, and another part of them to raise a blockade along the borders of the Chechen Republic, to prevent the Chechen fighters

from retreating in the neighbouring zones. Within the next four days, the Grozny town had to be cleared of rebellious formations. Such a plan seemed to be absolutely credible to a non-authorized person and particularly fascinated by the myth of the Russian Army power. In this trap had fallen President Boris Yeltsin himself, the Supreme Commander, who acknowledged later that he was deceived by the expectations of a short war, without heavy casualties: "we thought they were merely Chechen persons, but they proved to be bandits".

That triumphalistic vision cost the life of thousands of soldiers and gave the Russia tens of thousands of disabled soldiers. A month after the beginning of the military operations, there appeared in press the first descriptions of the real state of preparation of the troops and of the causes of the major failures in that stage of the war. A report sent to the General Staff showed that only a few soldiers could properly use the fighting equipment, the sergeants were not ready to replace the eventually fallen officers, the military had poor knowledge and experience in disguising on the theatre or in urban fighting. Moreover, the military officers were given inadequate maps, or not given maps at all, for the guidance during the combat<sup>6</sup>.

The leadership of the Ministry of Defense, when they analysed the beginning of the operations, wanted to declare that those military actions were minutely prepared, for the failures being to blame the commanders of some units which were decimated during the repeated assaults carried out on the Grozny town. "Another cause was the poor psychological preparation of the troops. Not all soldiers could orientate themselves rapidly and have confidence in their forces", stated an analysing document elaborated by the leadership of the Ministry of Defense<sup>7</sup>. To

make a comparison with the official point of view, we can give a description of an assault operation on the Grozny town written down by a private from the Samara 81th Regiment, which had many casualties on that occasion> "Early in the morning we were given the order to move, a long column of armoured fighting vehicles. There was no radio contact with either the neighbours in the column or with those in command. We had no maps of the place. And, roughly speaking, we did not know where we were going to and what our mission was. Only when we saw the buildings, did we understand that we were in the town"<sup>8</sup>.

The military equipment was insufficiently prepared to go into action, on an average, two out of ten tanks did not come to Grozny because of some technical shortcomings. There were even cases when columns of armoured vehicles stopped to advance because the fuel was diluted with water, the rest being stolen by the supplying teams<sup>9</sup>. Independent experts suggested that the casualties and losses of the federal forces could be much more heavier, if Dudayev attacked the columns in march and did not limit himself to defend the Chechen towns and villages.

To report the victory over the rebels, the troops attacked the Chechen capital, several times, in December 1994 - January 1995, the haviest casualties being scored in that period. According to the official data, there were about 2,000 soldiers and officers dead and more than 6,000 wounded<sup>10</sup>.

Even if they succeeded to conquer the Grozny town and other Chechen localities, the Russian forces never controlled the whole territory of the republic. The mountain regions were used by the rebels as regrouping zones, and the Chechen villages and towns were full of guerrilla warriors which were hidden in the middle of the civilian population. The war was indeed a confrontation of the whole Chechen people

with Moscow, the federal troops having no chance to liquidate all the guerrilla bands.

In nearly two years of military actions, the Army has endured 2,837 dead, 13,270 wounded, 337 men being considered as missing and 432 were registered as POWs. Similar figures were also recorded in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, to the number of those fallen dead or wounded they had to add the specialists from the secret services. The reports of the Ministry of Defense acknowledge that the Chechen separatists suffered fewer casualties than those of the federal ministries, approximately 15,000 dead and wounded<sup>11</sup>.

The operations of re-establishing the constitutional order affected massively the civilian population. Nobody can give accurately the real numbers of the dead, the estimations coming near to the figure of 100 thousands. Heavy artillery cannonades, helicopter and aviation attacks destroyed villages and towns, tens of thousands of refugees left the republic under the fire of the federal troops. The refugees from Chechnya joined those from other conflict zones, which live in uncommonly severe conditions in the Caucasian space. It is very difficult to reconstitute the whole picture of the casualties suffered by the both fighting camps, as well as by the civilian population, because sometimes the military operations took place so quickly that nobody was concerned with numbering of the deceased. The Chechen guerrilla warriors stated that some of the Russian commanders ordered the cremation of the killed soldiers to report fewer casualties than the real ones<sup>12</sup>.

Moscow succeeded to impose only a puppet government, under the leadership of Doku Zavgayev, an old activist of the Communist Party of the former Soviet Union and ex-member of the presidential administration. To give legitimacy to the pro-Russian Chechen Government, the federal center organized elections in this

republic on 17 December 1995, Doku Zavgayev being the winner with an overwhelming majority. He was not able to create a strong opposition against the separatists, most of those working in the Chechen militia or in the different administrative structures deserted at the right moment to the rebels. On August, 6, 1996, when the Chechen formations reconquered nearly the whole town of Grozny, in a single day Doku Zavgayev fled to Moscow, but he was immediately sent back to take part in organizing the defense. It was a vain measure, because within few hours the pro-Russian Government, so carefully maintained by Kremlin, disappeared. The last attempt of that unsuccessful "*politruk*" (*politiceskii rukavaditel'*, that is political leader) was to sabotage the peace negotiations carried on in that period by General Alexandr Lebed with the Chief of the Chechen General Staff, Aslan Mashadov. Zavgayev was fully aware that he could not have a place in the future coalition government. At the end, after the parliamentary and presidential elections, in January-February 1997, in which only the separatist leaders, took part, Moscow had to recognize Mashadov as the new president of the republic, and Doku Zavgayev irrevocably disappeared from the scene, being given the position of Russian Federation's Ambassador in Tanzania, as a reward for the services done to Russia.

During the war, Yeltsin was gradually convinced that the military actions could not bring the initially expected success, a peaceful solution being preferable. The military and political leadership was, on the other hand, divided in two camps, the "war party" and the "peace party", each of them finding the necessary argumentation to persuade the Russian President to follow their plan and not the others' indications. For those reasons, President Yeltsin combined the both ways to settle the problems, without recording the desired

effects neither on the battle-front nor at the negotiations.

On 27 May 1996, while a Chechen delegation, headed by the resistance leader Zelimhan Iandarbiyev, who succeeded after the death of Dzhokar Dudayev, arrived in Moscow to negotiate, Boris Yeltsin made a "lightning" visit in a village near Grozny, to show that the President controls all the Russia's territory, Chechnya included. The visit was minutely prepared to give Yeltsin the most profits during the electoral campaign, before the presidential elections organized in that summer. The Chechen delegation had to accept a hostage role and to play into Yeltsin's hands, but the negotiations did not bring the peace desired by the whole population, tired to receive a long series of notices concerning the front casualties. For all contingencies, Kremlin approved some days before of a new massive attack over the Chechen positions in the village of Bamut, to gain a favourable position at the talks. The military action failed, but it cost the Army 23 dead and 57 wounded soldiers<sup>13</sup>.

The appointment of General Alexandr Lebed as the Secretary of the Security Council opened a new stage in the negotiating process. Lebed insisted on a political solution, especially that, as a result of the attack launched on 6 August 1996, the Chechen succeeded in re-conquering the Grozny town, the federal troops being in a catastrophic situation. The Russian Army was fighting in encirclements in different points of the town and had control only on the heights at the outskirts. Lebed succeeded to conclude with the Chechen leaders a cease fire agreement and, later on, he signed the first official document with Aslan Mashadov at Hasaviurt, in Daghestan. The accord was observed by the both camps and it laid the foundations of the future Treaty between Russia and Chechnya, concluded in May 1997 by President Boris Yeltsin and the new Chechen President Aslan

Mashadov. Some Russian high officials called the actions of General Lebed treachery and stated that he ignored the Russia's interests. Although, at the beginning, no one believed in the success of Lebed's mission in Chechnya, he succeeded to put an end to the war and to prepare the necessary conditions for the retreat of the Russian Army from that zone. Even if Lebed was then dismissed by Yeltsin from all the positions, Kremlin went on the road opened by the General and carried on the negotiations for the treaty.

In November 1996, President Yeltsin signed the decree by which he ordered the retreat of all the military units from the territory of Chechnya until 27 January 1997. The evacuation calendar was observed, but for many military officers and soldiers the retreat meant the recognition of the defeat<sup>14</sup>. That reality was more obvious as the departure of the military columns was accompanied by the cheers of the Chechen people, which did not shrink from acclaiming the victory over the "occupation troops". At the psychological level, the military felt betrayed by the political class, which involved them in a conflict, without giving them the chance to win it. Many of the fighters in the Chechen war were no longer able to get accustomed to the civilian life. After the "Afghan syndrome", the Russian society had to face the "Chechen syndrome", but this time completely unprepared to meet and accept those sent to fight in a war felt as alien to them.

Russia takes too much for granted the victory in an armed conflict in Caucasian region, a very expensive war, despite the crisis which affected their national economy. Within nearly two years of war, the Russian Federal Army lost in Chechnya about 500 armored fighting vehicles, out of which 60 tanks, 8 helicopters and 5 planes, the sum of all military equipment destroyed run into 2 trillions of old roubles (approximately 334 millions US\$)<sup>15</sup>. We

mention that this sum could cover the food needs of all the Russian Army during six months<sup>16</sup>. At the same time, the maintenance cost for the troops dislocated in Chechnya run into one trillion old roubles (167 trillion US\$)<sup>17</sup>. These are official figures, but some Russian politicians expressed the view that the sums allocated for the military operations could be much more important.

The political and military leadership of the Russian Federation accepted to make use of huge sums from the budget to finance the war in the Caucasian region, while the military had to face very heavy problems on the social plan and in the process of military equipment modernization. To present a picture much closer to reality, we specify that in 1995, the year of the most extensive military operations in the Caucasian zone, the Russian Air Force received only 2 helicopters and 6 fighters, and three quarters of the tanks stock of the ground forces were technically and morally obsolete. In the same period, the strategic food stock of the Army was under 50% of the normal outfit. While the state spent considerable sums of money for the war, 126,000 of commissioned and non-commissioned officers were on the waiting lists for houses, because there was no money to build flats for the military<sup>18</sup>. Since the Russian legislation stipulates that a military officer can not be put in reserve without providing him a house, the process of reducing the armed forces has become more difficult due to the lack of money to implement the reform projects, money wasted in the Chechen conflict.

The Chechen war represented a real millstone for the fragile Russian economy, while, apart from the sums allotted to the Army, the Government permanently subsidized the pro-Russian political-administrative structures established in Grozny. Gradually, the conflict became a

profitable business for many persons. Taking advantage of Boris Yeltsin's promises, who several times declared he would help Chechnya to eliminate in a short period of time the consequences of the war, pro-Russian Chechen high officials continually demanded money, many instalments having no legal basis. According to the official figures published by the Ministry of Finance, on 17 October 1995, the sum allocated run up to 5,618.5 thousands of millions old roubles<sup>19</sup>. A report of the Court of Accounts specifies however that there was no legal basis for 4,545.1 thousands of millions from the sum mentioned by the Ministry of Finance<sup>20</sup>. That money was distributed in Chechnya through the decisions of high officials from the Government, the Ministry of Finance acting on the basis of the instructions signed by those people. The establishing of the pro-Moscow regime of Doku Zavgayev obliged the Executive to make a supplementary effort. The Court of Accounts mentions that, in November-December 1995, 12,319 thousands of millions of old roubles were allocated without a legal framework. For the reconstruction of Chechnya, the federal center distributed, until the summer of 1996, approximately 2.81 thousands of millions US\$, without this being felt in the zone of conflict. The Chechen fighters stated that frequently the buildings not yet renovated were strafed, but the authorities from Grozny reported the destruction of some completely reconstructed buildings<sup>21</sup>. Many banks and companies from Moscow took advantage of the war by contracting profitable transactions, getting considerable commissions, but without completely observing the terms and obligations from the contracts. In the period after the war, the Chechen leaders had to face a large series of social and economic problems. Industrial units were destroyed, the unemployment was at its climax, the criminality reached

terrible heights, and the civilian population did not get used to the normal life in the conditions of a deep economic crisis.

The authorities did not succeed to enforce authority over the innumerable military commanders, who controlled armed groups and made their own policy. The famous commander Salman Raduyev, who performed, in 1996, the raid over the Kizlear locality, permanently threaten Moscow with new terrorist actions, without being put under arrest by the public prosecutor, although Mashadov had solemnly promised that he will not permit anybody to ignore the legal power decisions. Kidnappings continued to blossom regularly in Chechnya and the neighbouring republics, in the former conflict zone, growing a prosperous prisoners trade. The commandos led by those for which the "holy war" continued, attacked the Russian military bases, and Aslan Mashadov did not succeed to find the culprits. Such events could only tension the Russia-Chechnya relations, the breaking out of a new conflict being taken into account by the both parts, despite the reassuring declarations made at Grozny and Moscow. They had the impression that President Mashadov did not have the control over the republic, Chechnya being more dominated by anarchy.

During the short time elapsed since the cease of the warfare, one of the priorities of the present Chechen leaders was the organization of armed structures, capable to face any possible foreign aggression. The Russian secret services have information according to which the Chechen military units seized Russian military technology, not yet having a serial production. The data from these services mention that in some zones of conflict they could see the BTR-80A armoured infantry vehicles, the last achievement of the Russian defense industry. That infantry carrier is produced in the secret enterprise

Arzamas-16, having only a very limited series. The Russian Federal Army has not yet this armoured vehicle in service, the single unit which possesses it being the Boris Yeltsin's Guard Regiment. They do not mention how that armoured vehicle was seized by the Chechen directly from the production chain of a Russian secret enterprise<sup>22</sup>.

An important factor in starting the operation to re-establish the "constitutuional order" was Chechnya's geographical position on the oil transit lines from the Caspian Sea to Black Sea. Russia is in a close competition with the United States and Turkey in establishing the future ways for the oil and gas pipelines. The transit on the Russian territory of a great amount of oil from Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan could bring the federal budget considerable sums in hard currency. The present Russian oil pipeline goes through Chechnya. That's just why, all the Russian-Chechen negotiations concerned the warranted security of the oil transit on the pipeline sector possessed by Grozny. Moscow takes into consideration alternative directions to increase the transit capacity, but also to avoid the blackmail from the part of the Chechen concerning the taxes collected for the oil conveyed in transit on their territory. Chechen authorities are interested in the fact that a part of the Caspian oil goes through the republic's territory, because the oil distilleries were destroyed during the military operations, their reconstruction being very difficult owing to huge costs. Moreover, the extraction capacity is reduced, for example, during the 1980s amounting to 7.4 million tons a year, which represents only 1.5% from the total quantity digged out in the Russian Federation.

For Moscow, Chechnya has a great importance from the strategical point of view. Its separation from the Russian Federation may create a dangerous

precedent, which can be followed by the other republics with a majority of Islamic population. For this reason, the Russian Federal Government allocates considerable sums to support financially those republics, which have a poor economy and consume more than they send to the budget.

The same reason obliged the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to adopt a trenchant position on the international scene to block even the most timid attempt to recognize the independence of Chechnya. Although for President Aslan Mashadov his republic is already independent, any member of the international community does not take the risk to deteriorate their relations with Moscow by recognizing the status desired by Grozny.

That circumstance explains the initial position of the West, which considered the Chechen war as an internal affair of the Russian Federation and reacted only from the human rights point of view, as a result of the pressure put by the world mass-media, which covered in detail the atrocities of this conflict. For many foreign politicians, Chechnya was first a geographical discovery, the ethnical problems in the Caucasian region being till now a subject of interest for a very restricted circle of specialists.

Moscow carefully watches the rise of the fundamentalist Islamist movement, which could cover the regions with Moslem population between the Caspian and the Black Seas. The Russian analysts are concerned with Turkey's intentions to gain its own hegemony in the zone, making use of economic and cultural elements as means of influence over the Turkish people<sup>23</sup>. At the same time, the Russian military

authorities are upset by the increasing of the Ankara's military power in the Black Sea's space, in the conditions of the diminishing of the Russian Black Sea Fleet and of the general problems that affect the Russian armed forces during this transition period<sup>24</sup>.

Such opinions are also shared by the representatives of the left and ultra-nationalistic opposition. Vladimir Jirinovski no more surprises anyone in Moscow with his statements about the Turkish danger at the south borders of Russia and the involvement of Ankara's secret services in supporting the Chechen rebels<sup>25</sup>. Professor Alexandr Dughin, close collaborator of the communist leader Ghenadi Ziuganov, spoke without reserve that "the connections of the separatist Chechnya with Daghestan and Ingushetiya must be cut at all costs, to break off their way to the Caspian Sea"<sup>26</sup>. Exploiting the divergencies between the different ethnical groups living in the Caspian zone is for Moscow a good measure to prevent the appearance of an independent Islamic confederation, under the patronage of Chechnya. Such an opinion is also shared by Serghey Baburin, one of the leaders of the left parliamentary opposition<sup>27</sup>.

It is however clear that whoever will be in Kremlin would not permit the detachment of Chechnya, because such a thing could stir to similar moves other republics and regions of Russia. This kind of situation would be equivalent to the outburst of the Russian Federation and could have an issue identical with that of the period 1990-1991, when the Soviet republics separated from Moscow, and the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Piat'deseat sem'voprosov izbiratelei Prezidentu Rossii", electoral item of President Boris Yeltsin, Moscow, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> *Pravda*, 2 December 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Boris Yeltsin, *loc cit.*

<sup>4</sup> Message (Speech) of President Yeltsin to the Parliament of Russian Federation in 1994.

<sup>5</sup> *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 2, March 1995.

<sup>6</sup> *Izvestia*, 28 January.

<sup>7</sup> *Itoghi*, Weekly, 9, July 1996.

<sup>8,9</sup> *Rossiyskiye Voorujenniye Sili v Chechenskom Konflikte*, Moscow, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Dispatch from ITAR-TASS Agency, 2, March 1995.

<sup>11</sup> *Itoghi*, Weekly, 24, september 1995.

<sup>12,21</sup> Discussion with leaders of the Chechen guerrilla warriors, carried out in Grozny, in august 1996.

<sup>13</sup> *Ogoniok*, Weekly, 4, July 1996.

<sup>14</sup> *Kommersant*, Weekly, 3, December 1996.

<sup>15,17</sup> Communiqué of the Ministry of Defense, 18, September 1996.

<sup>16</sup> Discussion with the deputy Gheorghy Argatov, vice-president of the Commission for Defense of the State Duma.

<sup>18</sup> *Segodnya*, 10, February 1996.

<sup>19</sup> Report of the Ministry of Finances to the State Duma, november 1996.

<sup>20</sup> *Itoghi*, Weekly, 21, mai 1996.

<sup>22</sup> *Nezavisimaya Voennoe Obozreniye*, no. 7, 1998.

<sup>23</sup> *Reformirovaniye Rosii – mify i realnost*. Moscow, Akademia Publishing House, 1994.

<sup>24</sup> *Voennaya Reforma – otsenka natsionalnoy bezopastnost*. Moscow, Obozrevatel Publishing House, 1998.

<sup>25</sup> From the press conferences of Vladimir Jirinovski, April-May-June 1996.

<sup>26</sup> Alexandr Dughin, *Osnovy gheopolitiki*. Moscow, Arktoghea Publishing House, 1997.

<sup>27</sup> More details in the Serghey Baburin's work *Territoriya Gosudarstva – Pravoviye i gheopoliticeskiye problemy*. Moscow, MGU Publishing House, 1997.