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## Wag or Be Wagged: The Chechen Wars and the Manipulation of the Russian Presidency

James B. Hooper

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1999 was a critical year in modern Russian history. Plagued by political and economic uncertainty after the collapse of Soviet communism, Russians seemed to long for a leader who could bring stability. Vladimir Putin's overwhelming election to the head of the young Russian democracy signified the dawn of a new era in Russian politics. Putin's brand of authoritarian pragmatism has produced an economically encouraging Russia, with relative domestic stability and increasing influence in the realm of global politics. However, Putin's stable Russia has been regularly threatened by a brutal domestic conflict that continues to claim lives and consume the resources of the Russian military. Since 1999, the renewal of a bloody war of attrition with the tiny republic of Chechnya has threatened the existence of the Chechens as a people and the Russians as a re-emerging international power. More importantly, the protracted Chechen conflict has had major implications for the role of the president in the new Russian political order, and in the first ten years of the position's existence, the manner in which the president has conducted his Caucasus policy has been the primary driver of his efficacy as chief executive.

When Boris Yeltsin was elected president of the newly founded Russian Federation in 1991, his role was largely undefined. As the first popularly elected head of state in Russian history, and with an ambigu-

ous constitution giving him the opportunity to exercise a great deal of authority, it was up to Yeltsin to set the precedent for his position. Because of a loosely defined constitutional relationship between the executive and legislative branches and a complete lack of precedents, the president and Congress continually butted heads for most of 1992 and 1993. They refused to pass Yeltsin's dramatic economic reforms, and rejected many of his executive appointments. Yeltsin attempted to clear up this constitutional relationship by submitting a referendum on presidential powers to the Congress in March 1993.<sup>1</sup> They not only refused to pass it, but the Congress attempted to impeach Yeltsin in response.<sup>2</sup>

After the unsuccessful impeachment attempt, the Congress and Yeltsin spent five months in effective stalemate, and few reforms passed. The conflict over economic reform and the untested nature of executive-legislative interaction were the main reasons why the two bodies failed to work together.<sup>3</sup> During the summer of 1993, both the Congress and President Yeltsin drafted secret plans to dissolve the other; but the president acted first.<sup>4</sup> On 12 September 1993, Yeltsin suspended the Congress and announced his plans for an elected bicameral Federal Assembly. In an emergency session, the Congress attempted to counter Yeltsin's attack, but he had the legislative building surrounded by Russian military and police forces. A standoff lasted until October 4, when Yeltsin ordered

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<sup>1</sup> "Russia,." In CountryWatch [database online], Santa Clara University 12 February 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Michael McFaul, *Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin*, (Cornell University Press, 2001), 31.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 32.

the military to force out the legislators. After a short but deadly conflict, pro-Yeltsin forces claimed control of the nation.<sup>5</sup>

The new constitution drafted primarily by Yeltsin's political aides was ratified by popular vote in December 1993.<sup>6</sup> The new constitution was designed with the express purpose of eliminating the mechanisms that had allowed the stagnant political conditions of the previous year.<sup>7</sup> It accomplished this, not surprisingly, by expanding the power of the executive branch.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Yeltsin's new constitution watered down the potency of judicial authority by increasing the number of judges in the Constitutional Court and strengthened the Federation by leaving no provisions for regional secession. In this bold move of executive bravado, Yeltsin succeeded overwhelmingly in strengthening his position, if only temporarily.<sup>9</sup> He was able to pull off this dramatic power consolidation primarily because of the favor he enjoyed with the political and economic elites of the era. In administering the transfer from a state-owned economic infrastructure to a system of increased privatization, Yeltsin had been able to create the class of elites that emerged in post-communist Russia. For that, he was rewarded with significant political capital, and a fair amount of authority in implementing his desired reforms. According to Carnegie scholar Andrei Ryabov, Yeltsin created a "feudal" system of oligarchic special inter-

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<sup>5</sup> "Russia," CountryWatch.

<sup>6</sup> McFaul, *Unfinished Revolution*, 210.

<sup>7</sup> In addition, the people elected the members of a 450 member lower house, the State Duma, and a 178 member upper house, the Federal Council.

<sup>8</sup> McFaul, *Unfinished Revolution*, 211.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 212.

ests. "Lacking solid resources to retain his power, he had to buttress it by delegating actual authority to the largest interest groups in exchange for their loyalty."<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, some of the most powerful people in Moscow were not the politicians, but those in control of the natural gas industry, the leaders of the electricity monopoly and the railways, and the young entrepreneurs dominating the Russian financial market.<sup>11</sup>

After rewriting the constitution, Yeltsin was able to implement more of his economic program. However, the collapse of the ruble in 1994 had a deleterious effect on the realization of any economic gain that may have come about as a result of his reforms. Furthermore, his authority was continually compromised by the political deterioration of Chechnya, the tiny Islamic republic in the North Caucasus that Moscow had been unable to control since the late 1980s. With the rise to power of Mikhail Gorbachev, his sweeping reforms of the Soviet state and the subsequent dissolution of the USSR, the Chechens saw an opportunity to throw off the yoke of Russian imperial dominance, which had suffocated them for centuries.<sup>12</sup> The Chechens had continu

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<sup>10</sup> Andrei Ryabov, "The Presidential Elections and the Evolution of Russia's Political System," *Russian Domestic Politics and Political Institutions*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Vol. 2 no. 2 February 2000: 3.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Rutland, "Putin and the Oligarchs," *The Dynamics of Russian Politics: Putin's Reform of Federal-Regional Relations* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 134-5.

<sup>12</sup> The continuity of conflict began in the eighteenth century, when cavalrymen sent by Peter the Great were soundly defeated in an attempt to suppress resistance to Russian rule. Later in the same century, a popular Sufi cleric, Sheikh Mansur, declared a holy war against impious Muslims and Russians alike who he saw as a threat to the sanctity of Islam. A more protracted engagement began in 1816, when General Alexei Yermolov was appointed as the Russian

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Commander-in-Chief in the Caucasus. He adopted an aggressive strategy toward the Chechens, viewed by most Russian policymakers as 'bandits' (a term which is still commonly used in reference to the Chechens). Yermolov's ruthless tactics aimed at stopping Chechen raids into Russian territory resulted in complete control of the regional tribes. But, they also sparked organized resistance among the Chechens and inspired the rise of Chechnya's most beloved folk hero, Imam Shamil, who controlled the resistance beginning in 1832. Shamil managed to engage the Russian forces for over 30 years, leading Chechen forces who committed their lives to the cause of the war.

During the Bolshevik Revolution, the Chechens fought on the side of the Bolshevik Red Army, taking the opportunity to punish the pro-tsarist Whites and hoping to gain independence at the end of the conflict. From 1917 to 1920, intense fighting in the North Caucasus continued to be a significant distraction for the White Army and helped contribute to their ultimate defeat. Though the Chechens rose up against the Red Army in August 1920 when they realized that they would not be granted national independence, the rebels were defeated and subsumed in the formation of the Soviet Union.

Under their new Soviet occupiers, the Chechens refused absolutely to participate in the programs of Lenin and Stalin, rejecting the affirmative action policies aimed at fostering nationalism in the ethnic republics, as well as the collectivization procedures which began to be implemented in the late 1920s. In 1929, tens of thousands of Soviet troops were sent to crush the guerrilla resistance, and the conflict continued sporadically through the late 1930s. By 1943 Stalin was ready to get rid of his Chechen problem. Accusing them, incorrectly, of collaborating with the Nazis, Stalin ordered the deportation of the Chechens, Ingush, Karachai, Balkars, Meskhetian Turks, and Crimean Tatars from the North Caucasus. 478,479 Chechens and Ingush were deported from the North Caucasus to Kazakhstan, and 78,000 died en route or in the first harsh Kazakh winter. The Chechens and Ingush were thus officially removed from existence in the Soviet records, and their lands were divided and absorbed into the boundaries of neighboring countries. Ukrainians, Belorussians, and Russians were imported to inhabit the deserted cities and villages. No mention was made of the deportation in Soviet media for two years after the event. In 1956, Stalin's successor Nikita Khrushchev officially condemned the deportation, and re-introduced the Checheno-Ingushetian republic.

ally clashed with Russians—from Peter the Great to Stalin—who sought to bring the Caucasus under their control. Armed conflict was a regular occurrence over the three centuries preceding the modern wars. The Chechens were actually deported for thirteen years under Stalin as punishment for their resistance to Soviet reforms. When Gorbachev's reforms began to reach the Chechens in 1989, the concept of *glasnost* brought about a turbulent atmosphere of political activism. By mid-1989, young Chechen activists had formed the first political organization in the republic, and activists throughout the Caucasus republics began meetings in discussion of the possibility of a “federal statehood of the peoples of the Caucasus.”<sup>13</sup> When the Russian Federation was created, the

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The displaced Chechens returned en masse, after 12 years of resilience in the inhospitable plains of Central Asia.

The lasting effect of the deportation on the psyche of the Chechens cannot be underemphasized. Their return home proved their unwavering fortitude as a people, and showed that they would never be controlled without a fight. In fact, more Chechens returned than had been deported, as a result of their “ethnic solidarity and kinship-based mutual support, sheer determination to survive and a very high birth rate.” The deportations not only strengthened the solidarity of the Chechen identity and steeled their temperament against the Russian state, but it confirmed all of their previous suspicions about the Russians, and gave them physical, historical proof of the Russians designs against them. The Chechens returned to a hostile crowd of non-Chechen squatters deeply resented the repatriation of the deportees. Intercultural violence became common, but mostly through individual skirmishes and a few mob riots. By the 1970s, most of the imported Slavs had been pushed out of their temporary homes, the violence had subsided, and the Chechens established their participation in the semi-modernized state.

<sup>13</sup> Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (Yale, 1998), 89-90.

Chechens organized behind the leadership of retired Soviet air force major general Dzhokhar Dudayev and declared themselves an independent nation. Consumed by his own battle to control the collapsing Soviet Union and preserve the new Federation, Yeltsin failed to successfully intervene, and the Chechen separatists were awarded de facto independence until he could muster up enough military and political might to renew the conflict.

Over the period from the Russian withdrawal to the invasion in December of 1994, the dysfunctional Chechen economy was not improving, unemployment hovered around forty percent, and the expansion of the criminal entrepreneurial sector provided at least adequate grounds to justify Russian intervention.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Yeltsin refused to meet with Dudayev to discuss a resolution. Viewing the Chechen leader as head of a “criminal regime” and relying too heavily on a close-knit cadre of manipulative hawks, Yeltsin neglected the importance of diplomacy in resolving the conflict. Dudayev was guilty of the same level of neglect, due primarily to his political inexperience and the lack of organization within his cabinet and parliament.<sup>15</sup>

Spurred by the conclusion of a similar standoff in

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew Evangelista, *The Chechen Wars: Will Russia go the Way of the Soviet Union?* (Brookings, 2002), 21.

<sup>15</sup> Gail Lapidus, “The War in Chechnya: Opportunities Missed, Lessons to be Learned,” in *Opportunities Missed, Opportunities Seized: Preventative Diplomacy in the Post-Cold War World*, Bruce Jentleson, ed. (Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, 2000), 45-6.

the Central Asian region of Tatarstan,<sup>16</sup> in the interest of protecting valuable oil reserves and pipelines in the Caspian region and at the behest of aggressive hawks in his cabinet, Yeltsin authorized covert operations in support of anti-Dudayev forces within Chechnya in November 1994. The operations proved to be a total failure on a number of levels. Dudayev's national army routed the opposition, taking over half of the tanks by seizure or destruction and capturing a handful of Russian officers as prisoners of war. While the Russian Defense Minister in Moscow denied any involvement in the attempted coup, the Chechen government blatantly displayed images of the POWs live on television.<sup>17</sup> Still believing that a "bloodless blitzkrieg" could shock and awe the tiny republic into submission within days,<sup>18</sup> Yeltsin organized a secret security council on November 29 to coordinate a full-scale bombardment of Grozny and the deployment of 40,000 troops to the Chechen border.<sup>19</sup> Public comments made by Moscow policymakers estimated the length of a successful invasion to be anywhere from two hours to two weeks.<sup>20</sup> The invasion and bombardment were undertaken on 11 December 1994, in order

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<sup>16</sup> Tatarstan had, since the fall of the USSR, been attempting to negotiate its independence from Moscow. Though its aim was the same, Tatarstan's "conflict" differs fundamentally from the Chechens' because it was resolved with diplomacy. Moscow managed to negotiate peace with Tatarstan and it remained part of the Russian Federation. After settling this dispute, Chechnya remained a last major piece of business carried over from the transition from USSR to RF.

<sup>17</sup> Lapidus, in "Opportunities," 47.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 48.

<sup>19</sup> Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus* (NYU, 1998), 163.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

to defend and restore “Russia’s unity.”<sup>21</sup> Yeltsin hoped to use a brief conflict and resounding victory to boost his approval rating, which had been slipping in previous months. However, the bombardment quickly became a gruesome quagmire.<sup>22</sup> For the first time, the Russian media played a critical role in debunking the spin of the Moscow political machine, who continued to report decisive tactical victories and low casualties in the wake of just the opposite.<sup>23</sup>

As the war dragged on through 1995, it became one of the most ruthless, brutal and inhumane conflicts in recent memory. The Chechen forces, only 2,000 at the onset of the war and mainly consisting of untrained civilians, were able to engage a Russian deployment that reached at least 20 times its size. The Russian forces, experiencing low morale, poor leadership and inadequate armaments, continued to be ineffective in suppressing the mainly guerrilla forces that made up the Chechen resistance.<sup>24</sup> The war’s completely

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<sup>21</sup> Lieven, *Tombstone*, 84.

<sup>22</sup> Many in the Russian army were outraged at the invasion’s poor planning, and the poor justification for it. The official justification—“defending Russia’s unity”—did not allay the claims of critics who cited the geopolitics of oil and political maneuvering as the “real” motivations for war. In fact, according to Anatol Lieven, 557 Russian military men, from all levels, were disciplined, dismissed, or deserted in protest of the invasion (Evangelista 38).

<sup>23</sup> Lapidus, in “Opportunities,” 48-9.

<sup>24</sup> The war’s particularly brutal nature was experienced both in Chechnya and in Russia proper. In June 1995 Chechen commander Shamil Basayev’s forces entered a hospital in the Russian town of Budennovsk, and took over a thousand patients and hospital workers hostage. Basayev’s raid was intended to spark peace with Moscow. Yeltsin was out of the country at a conference in Canada, and deferred responsibility for handling the crisis to his Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin. After a

devastating nature can be summarized by the fact that the Russian leaders began to view the ethnic Chechen population—not just the rebel forces—as the enemy. They used “filtration camps,” where any suspected rebels were rounded up, interrogated, tortured and often never returned. All told, the war produced over 100,000 casualties and forced over 400,000 native Chechens to flee into refugee camps in neighboring Dagestan and Georgia.<sup>25</sup>

Afraid of being held accountable for the disaster that continued to take lives within Russia’s borders, Yeltsin began to discuss the prospects for negotiated peace in hopes of winning re-election in the spring of 1996.<sup>26</sup> Yeltsin recognized the importance of appeasing his electoral constituency, and adjusted his policies accordingly. Although he did occasionally restrict media access and censor the press’s freedom, for the most part, the critical media’s voice was heard. Where previously, rulers like Stalin used state-controlled media to “erase” any threats to his authority overnight, the emergence of a critical and mostly free press meant that Yeltsin would be held accountable for his actions.

On April 22, the Russian Army successfully assassinated Dzhokhar Dudayev with a missile directed to the signal coming from his satellite telephone. The removal of Dudayev from power gave Yeltsin a more

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failed attempt to storm the hospital resulted in over a hundred deaths, Chernomyrdin agreed to grant the rebels safe passage to Chechnya in exchange for the hostages. This disaster intensified widespread criticism of Yeltsin’s handling of the entire war, and has been cited as a turning point in the first war (Evangelista 40).

<sup>25</sup> Lapidus, in “Opportunities,” n.39, 49.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 49.

consistent leader to deal with, as Aslan Maskhadov was appointed commander of the armed forces. However, Yeltsin's commitment to peace in Chechnya seemed only to be a meaningless campaign promise; after successfully reclaiming his presidential post, he failed to withdraw the troops he vowed to relieve. After his reelection, the Russian forces resumed their ground offensives, inflicting civilian casualties in the mountain villages thought to be headquarters for key Chechen leaders.<sup>27</sup> Just as the conflict seemed to spiral out of control, a surprise attack on the eve of Yeltsin's inauguration changed the tide of the war. Maskhadov and a force of just 1,500 Chechens stormed the capital, held by no less than 12,000 Russians, and decisively defeated the unsuspecting occupiers. After subsequent bombardment, Yeltsin saw the reality of the exhausted conflict; and he authorized newly appointed secretary of the Security Council, Alexander Lebed, to negotiate peace with Maskhadov.<sup>28</sup>

The resulting Khasavyurt Peace Agreement negotiated by the two diplomats was signed on 31 August 1996. The accord required that Russia withdraw all its troops from Chechnya, and that it officially recognize Chechnya's internal government.<sup>29</sup> Subsequently, Maskhadov was elected president of a semi-autonomous Chechnya. The second set of negotiations, carried out by Maskhadov's government in May of 1997, "On Peace and the Principles of Relations between the Russian Federation and the Chechen

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<sup>27</sup> Evangelista 43.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 44.

<sup>29</sup> Anatol Lieven, "Nightmare in the Caucasus," *Washington Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (2000): 46.

Republic of Ichkeria,” deferred responsibility to draft an explicit solution until 2001. For the time, the Chechens were again given de facto independence.

Yeltsin’s popularity declined severely almost immediately following his reelection primarily due to widespread rumors of corruption in his cabinet and among his political supporters. The tools he had used to strengthen his political base through his commitment to special interests came back to haunt him. As Ryabov explains, “though fairly stable, such a system has been inefficient in terms of addressing wider national tasks and meeting new challenges.”<sup>30</sup> Although the system of exchanging rewards for political support gave Yeltsin his power in the early years of his government, it ultimately caused his demise. Faced with deep-seated economic crises and deteriorating health, he continued to defer responsibility to his ministers, and was at the beck and call of his elite supporters. Characterized by conflicts with the Federal Assembly over prime minister appointments, constant cabinet reshuffling, numerous heart attacks and other serious health issues, Yeltsin’s second term was a disaster

In Chechnya, after the departure of Russian forces in 1996, little had changed. As a leader, Maskhadov was unable to convert the energy of revolution and nationalism into organized state institutions. Although citizens in Grozny could live without fear of aerial bombardment, most of the governmental infrastructure remained debilitated, gainful employment opportunities were scarce and the most promising opportunities were in crime and banditry. Throughout the peace period, Yeltsin’s government was unable to

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<sup>30</sup> Ryabov, “Elections,” 3.

develop a strategy for dealing with the Chechens, especially since it was consumed by many of its own problems, including the August 1998 financial crisis. However, chaos within the Chechen borders as a result of Maskhadov's inability to exercise any influence over the organized bandits led to a growing recognition that another conflict was imminent. Numerous border disputes between Islamists and Russians heightened that tension, and by the summer of 1999 the situation re-ignited.<sup>31</sup>

On August 7, 1999, a force of anywhere from 300 to 2,000 radical Islamists marched across the Dagestani border. The soldiers were part of a minority resistance group comprised of Dagestanis and Chechens, along with some Arabs and other foreign Muslims, and their aim was to set up an Islamic state independent from the Russian Federation and Maskhadov's Chechnya. However, they overestimated the popularity of their strict Wahhabi sect in Dagestan, and met local resistance almost immediately. Seeing Wahhabi law as a threat to their own balance of Islam and government, local Dagestani officials appealed to the Russians for military assistance, who responded with relative quickness.<sup>32</sup> Only days after the "Quranic puritans" entered Dagestan, newly appointed Prime Minister Vladimir Putin announced that he had been appointed to restore the rule of law to the border republics and that he would resolve the continuing conflict in Dagestan within two weeks.<sup>33</sup> After two weeks of fighting, the rebels had retreated into

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<sup>31</sup> Jacob W. Kipp, "Putin and Russia's Wars in Chechnya," *Putin's Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain*, Dale R. Herspring, ed. (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 219.

<sup>32</sup> *Evangelista* 63-4.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 65.

Chechen villages, which were subsequently shelled by the Russian military.<sup>34</sup>

Even though the insurgents, led by an enigmatic rebel named Shamil Basayev, represent the views of a minority of Chechens, they have become the predominant face of the Chechen separatist movement, and have had the most potent influence on Moscow's policy. Their mobilizing, anti-Russian ideology, though it has appealed to many of the marginalized youth who see it as "the only discipline that can hold their society together," has not taken hold among the majority of Chechens.<sup>35</sup> However, the brutality of the Russians in their pursuit of complete destruction of the Chechen rebels has given Basayev's camp legitimacy in the eyes of the Chechens. The Russians have carried out their operations against the Chechens as a people and not just against the opposition forces, and have used filtration camps, aerial bombardment and torture indiscriminately in both wars.<sup>36</sup> The Chechens come from a tradition of family honor and clan loyalty, where blood feuds and grudges between two groups can last generations.<sup>37</sup> To the Chechens, the Stalinist deportations and the inhumanity of the wars of the last ten years have sufficiently justified a radical response in the name of national pride. In other words, the Russians themselves have radicalized the Chechen population.

In September 1999 after the rebels had been pushed out of Dagestan, four explosions in Moscow and Dagestan apartment buildings claimed over 300

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Lieven, "Nightmare," 150.

<sup>36</sup> Mohammed M. Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World* (Lynne Rienner, 2003), 98-9.

<sup>37</sup> Kipp, 210.

lives. Before any evidence had even been collected, Chechens had already been convicted for these crimes in the court of public opinion and in the war rooms of the Kremlin.<sup>38</sup> No terrorists were ever found, and no group claimed responsibility.<sup>39</sup> The nature of the bombings was further called into question when local police in the city of Ryazan discovered a bomb that had been planted by Russian FSB (formerly KGB) security officials. Two days after the incident, the FSB director announced that the agents had planted the bomb as a drill to test the readiness of local police forces, and that the dismantled apparatus contained sugar, not real explosives. Just why the FSB would be engaged in such activities has never been sufficiently explained by security officials or the Kremlin.<sup>40</sup>

Following this bizarre series of events and the Kremlin's insistence on Chechen terrorists' involvement, the Russian public became significantly insecure. Shortly after the explosions, Putin appeared in front of the Duma and the Russian people, stating that his goal was "to defend the population from the bandits."<sup>41</sup> Declaring his intention to wipe out the bandits "in the shitter," Putin's aggressiveness became a source of stability for the Russian people, and his popularity skyrocketed.<sup>42</sup> Though Putin publicly stated his commitment to negotiate with Maskhadov, he almost immediately called for a full-scale invasion.

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<sup>38</sup> "New Bombs Won't End Old Conflict," *The Moscow Times*, 22 September 1999.

<sup>39</sup> Lilia Shevtsova, *Putin's Russia*, (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003), 36.

<sup>40</sup> Simon Saradzhyan, "There was no Ryazan bomb – it was a test," *The Moscow Times*, 25 September 1999.

<sup>41</sup> *qtd.* in Shevtsova, 37.

<sup>42</sup> Kipp, 220.

By October, Russian troops had entered Chechnya, and the war had reignited with renewed ruthlessness.

Maskhadov had no choice but to defend his nation. Faced with destruction, the secular separatists joined forces with the Islamists, and attempted to fend off the Russian offensives. In much the same fashion as the first war, the Russian ground forces met stiff resistance as they advanced on Grozny. Just before Christmas, the Russians began an organized attack to retake the Chechen capital, and it fell two months later.<sup>43</sup> On New Year's Eve, 1999, Boris Yeltsin made a surprise announcement: he was resigning, effective immediately. Putin was named acting president until the upcoming election. In lieu of his early resignation, the election was moved up to March. Putin's popularity would not have time to erode if victory in Chechnya proved elusive, and his competitors would not have enough time to organize effective campaigns against him. Though Putin's approval rating had been thirty-five percent when Yeltsin appointed him to Prime Minister in August, it had surpassed sixty-five percent by October, and would not drop below sixty percent for the next four years, as he was overwhelmingly elected president in March 2000.<sup>44,45</sup>

The Russian army was successful in pushing the rebels out of Chechnya's major urban areas within the first two months of 2000. They used heavy-handed tactics to trap the rebels and destroy the Chechen towns. Though they inflicted heavy casualties, they did not squash the resistance as Putin had promised.

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<sup>43</sup> Kipp, 221.

<sup>44</sup> Evangelista, 78.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Rose, <<http://www.russiavotes.org>> Centre for the Study of Public Policy, 20 February 2005.

The increasingly effective rebel forces abandoned the cities, moved into the hills, and focused their energy on insurgency and guerrilla tactics. Through 2004, the state of affairs in Chechnya had changed little. The Russian military, badly in need of dramatic reform and terribly under-funded, performed dismally. Despite their large numbers, dependence on often untrained conscripts, devastatingly low morale and a lack of adequate materials have made the Russian operation a catastrophe. In addition, the rebels became increasingly adept at frustrating the Russians' efforts to secure the region, gaining more and more experience and recruiting more support with the war's continued brutality.<sup>46</sup> Regular acts of terrorism have been carried out by Basayev's groups throughout Russia proper, taking the lives of many innocent victims. Though the death toll continues to rise, Putin announced the end of the military conflict in 2001, turning what he now called an "anti-terrorist operation" over to the FSB.<sup>47</sup> Troops have had to remain in Chechnya because of continued raids by the rebels, and no sign of a break on either side—or the imposition of order—seems likely.<sup>48</sup>

After his election to the presidency, Putin wasted no time carrying out some dramatic reforms. Capitalizing on the support garnered from his firm handling of the Chechen crisis, Putin consolidated federal power

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<sup>46</sup> Mark Kramer, Lecture, Stanford University, 11 January 2005.

<sup>47</sup> Putin has also attempted to endorse Moscow-installed local leaders that could establish some form of order in the region, but all have been largely unsuccessful. The thugs who he has appointed as puppet administrators have been more like organized criminals and executioners than politicians.

<sup>48</sup> Kipp, 221.

and authority in the Kremlin and deliberately elevated the role of the Russian executive branch. His primary reforms have weakened regional governors and local leaders in favor of more control in the center, disciplined the “oligarchs” to reassert his executive authority and muzzled the media insofar as it has been critical of his policies. These accomplishments have effectively made the Russian political system more vertical and have had a strong stabilizing effect on the nation as a whole, but have reversed many of the pluralistic reforms of the 1990s. Their success has been completely dependent on Putin’s manipulation of the conflict in Chechnya.

Although initially regarded as a puppet to the interests of Yeltsin’s corrupt “family” of special interests, Putin quickly demonstrated that he would not be anyone’s pawn by carrying out major reforms within months of his inauguration. In May 2000, Putin presented a decree establishing seven federal administrative regions within the Russian Federation that would subsequently control the 89 individual regions. These seven “super-regions”—corresponding directly with the administrative districts within the Russian military—would be run by Putin appointees, and five out of seven came from the “power ministries”: the FSB, police forces, and the military. According to Nikolai Petrov and Darrel Slider, the main motive behind this move seems to have been Putin’s desire to “take away or circumscribe most powers exercised by regional leaders. His goal appears to be to establish a unitary state under the guise of ‘restoring effective vertical power to the country,’ to use Putin’s own

description of his intentions.”<sup>49</sup>

Under Yeltsin, a system of federalism had emerged, with each of the 89 regions gaining some authority comparable to America’s states with the creation of the Federation Council in 1993. For the first time, regions were given veto power over the congress, as a bicameral legislative system was implemented. The Federation Council members were primarily regional governors who were given immunity from criminal prosecution, could not be unilaterally removed by the president and were chosen by popular election beginning in 1996. Although intended by Yeltsin to bolster his political power for the 1996 election, these reforms effectively strengthened the regions’ sway over federal policies, undermining Yeltsin’s ability to govern.<sup>50</sup>

Putin’s establishment of the “super-regions” was just one way of reclaiming central control over the regions. Putin has also gutted the power of the Federation Council members by changing the way its members were chosen. He prohibited regional governors from serving as council members, initiated laws that gave the president the right to single-handedly dismiss regional governors and governments and composed a new tax code that shifted to Moscow greater responsibility in the distribution of tax revenues. By creating a buffer between regional executives and federal congresspersons, Putin was able to rein in the legislature and gain its cooperation. Moreover, the limitations Putin placed on regional governors allowed him to remove many of his opponents from office, subduing

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<sup>49</sup> Nikolai Petrov and Darrell Slider, “Putin and the Regions,” in *Putin’s Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain*, Dale R. Herspring, ed. (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 238.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 241-2.

those regional governors who had flourished under Yeltsin's brand of political favoritism. Once disallowed from participation in the Federation Council, the regional executives lost their immunity from criminal prosecution. Using his FSB connections to gather compromising evidence against these regional governors, Putin has prosecuted unruly governors or "dissuaded" them from seeking office again, and has also used the power ministries to sabotage political campaigns.<sup>51</sup> As a result of these strong-arm tactics, by the end of 2003 over one-third of all regional heads had been replaced under Putin.<sup>52</sup>

These strategies have been absolutely crucial in tightening Putin's grip on the Russian government and would have been completely unacceptable without the destabilizing presence of the Chechen conflict lingering within Russia's borders. Putin's primary justification for his centralizing decrees has been "to restore the preeminence of federal law" and to affirm and "define the division of powers between the center, regions, and local government."<sup>53</sup> These assertions unabashedly echo the earlier claims of Yeltsin when he entered Chechnya in 1994 to restore constitutional authority and defend Russia's unity. The regions were continually destabilized throughout the 1990s, with Chechnya being the most extreme example of this instability. Without the ability to constantly cite Chechnya as an example of Russia's failure to maintain or-

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 248-50. The authors describe situations where opposition candidates have been extra-judicially removed from ballots only days before the election, and others where political enemies are assuaged by being appointed to various "cushy" government posts (250).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 249.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* 248.

der—especially in the border regions—Putin would not have enjoyed the public’s overwhelming support throughout these first reforms.

Putin’s pursuit of the oligarchs and his chokehold on the media cannot be viewed independently. As mentioned earlier, the class of entrepreneurs known as oligarchs that emerged under the transition to privatization wielded significant sway over Yeltsin. Similar to his relationship with regional governors, Yeltsin granted favors to the oligarchs who controlled the country’s economy in exchange for political support. In many cases, the people who controlled the largest economic conglomerates additionally created media companies that gave them invaluable influence over public opinion, their lack of financial success notwithstanding. By the mid-1990s, the owners and editorial policy advisers of the burgeoning “independent” media also owned the most powerful investment firms, ran the largest oil companies and directed Russia’s largest banks.<sup>54</sup> Because of their considerable influence in the newly formed independent media, these young entrepreneurs could offer Yeltsin much in the way of political capital. These same moguls manipulated and dictated the policies of the Kremlin and funded and supported Yeltsin’s bid for reelection in 1996.<sup>55</sup>

In the first Chechen war, the new critical media, despite its electoral support for Yeltsin, played a paramount role in forcing Yeltsin to negotiate peace with Maskhadov. Journalists from around the world and within Russia itself had free reign in Chechnya,

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<sup>54</sup> Rutland, 163.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 161; see also Masha Lipman and Michael McFaul, “Putin and the Media,” in *Putin’s Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain*, Dale R. Herspring, ed. (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 50.

and their access led to vitriolic criticism of the Kremlin and the military, often championing the cause of the resilient rebels. In response to a devastatingly low public approval rating as the 1996 election approached, Yeltsin made a number of overtures toward peace, including ceasefires and promises to bring the troops home. Although he temporarily renewed the attacks after winning the presidency, the continued criticism by the media highlighted the bankrupt campaign of the Russian military. Those television stations and print media that were most critical of the Russian campaign became ratings leaders, and developed strong commitments to professionalism, integrity, and accuracy in their reporting.<sup>56</sup>

The two most successful oligarchs-turned-media magnates were Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky, and they were the primary victims in Putin's battle for vertical control. They owned Russia's most prominent independent television and radio stations and print media. Because of their position at the front of the elite pack that controlled the media and the economy as well as their public opposition to his administration, Gusinsky and Berezovsky were targeted by Putin and deliberately taken down shortly after his election. Putin invoked obscure legal loopholes, used financial leverage possessed by state-controlled conglomerates and utilized the power ministries to threaten and coerce compliance from these media groups, either forcing stations to go off the air or taking control of the leadership in these groups and "encouraging" a softer editorial line.<sup>57</sup> Often, when the Kremlin would get control of a TV station or

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<sup>56</sup> Lipman and McFaul, 58.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 65-6.

newsmagazine, they would simply replace the content with sports coverage. Within a year of his election, Putin had succeeded. Although regional stations still maintained more objective criticism of Russian politics, on a national level there was not much dissent against the president.<sup>58</sup>

Although Putin's attacks on the free press did not go without protest,<sup>59</sup> the Russian public seemed largely unconcerned. According to nationwide surveys, only fifteen percent of Russians believed that Gusinsky was persecuted in order to prevent criticism, only seven percent saw the closure of Berezovsky's TV-6 as a direct result of Putin's intervention<sup>60</sup> and "only four percent of the public [regarded] the NTV takeover as a state attempt to limit media freedom."<sup>61</sup> In addition, in October 2003, fifty-three percent of Russians held this statement as their personal view: "The authorities are in no way threatening free speech, and are not squeezing out independent media."<sup>62</sup> The seeming lack of concern among Russians for Putin's subjugation of the media can only be explained by recognizing the high degree of instability and fear in Russian society brought on by the Chechen war. The same dedicated audience that brought NTV to the height of popularity and demanded an independent and critical media during the first war now looked on, disinterested, as that same media was crushed. The lack of public

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 63.

<sup>59</sup> Demonstrations against the closure of Gusinsky's NTV drew over 10,000 in Moscow, and both Boris Yeltsin and the Bush administration made public statements exhorting the Kremlin to keep TV-6 on the air (Lipman and McFaul 63, 65).

<sup>60</sup> Rose, <[www.russiavotes.org](http://www.russiavotes.org)>.

<sup>61</sup> qtd. in Lipman and McFaul, 63.

<sup>62</sup> Rose, <[www.russiavotes.org](http://www.russiavotes.org)>.

dialogue over the second war is a sad phenomenon, and is a testimony to the Russians' collective insecurity.

In Putin's quest for a monotone media environment, he has continually used the war in Chechnya as justification for his actions. In the early months of the war, Russian security services arrested Radio Liberty correspondent Andrei Babitsky in Chechnya and held him for over a month. When asked about the reporter's whereabouts, Putin alleged that Babitsky "worked directly for the enemy—for the bandits."<sup>63</sup> He claimed that Babitsky was supplying the Chechens with maps of Russian military checkpoints and giving them advice on how to get around them.<sup>64</sup> Putin's administration has disallowed unaccredited journalists from entering Chechnya and has only handed out accreditations to Kremlin loyalists. Those who have reported critically from Chechnya have been intimidated, poisoned, arrested or at the very least have had their accreditations revoked. Although Putin has rarely made public statements indicating that he has knowledge or complicity in these actions, he has justified the silencing of critical journalists by deeming their reports sensational and unpatriotic.<sup>65</sup>

By attacking the oligarchs through their media

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<sup>63</sup> qtd. in Lipman and McFaul, 62.

<sup>64</sup> Vladimir Putin, with Natalia Gevorkyan, Andrei Kolesnikov, and Natalya Timakova, *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait*, Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, trans. (Public Affairs, 2000), 172-3.

<sup>65</sup> Anna Politkovskaya, "Russian Journalist Anna Politkovskaya, Poisoned," 09 September 2004, <<http://penusa.org/go/home>> 25 February 2005. In 2002, Putin ridiculed NTV for its coverage of the Moscow theater hostage crisis, calling it "sensationalism" designed to boost the station's ratings (Lipman and McFaul, 67).

holdings, Putin has achieved a dual victory, and he has been able to do so as a result of the national sentiment that he stirred-up by invading Chechnya. Playing on the popularity of a renewed conflict with the Chechen separatists and using the widespread fears among the Russian people to bolster his political base, Putin rode to reform on his image as an aggressive pragmatist. Although he did suffer a ten percent popularity drop when his attacks on Gusinsky, the media and the regions were made public, his support base was so large that he even then maintained the favor of over sixty percent of the Russian electorate.<sup>66</sup>

When the Soviet Union disbanded, Russia's reformers had the power to set the precedents that would determine Russia's role in the redefined global political environment. Boris Yeltsin faced the challenge of balancing the untested principles of democracy and managing the economy and infrastructure of what was still the world's largest nation. While in 1993 he sought to strengthen the potency of the executive branch to gain more freedom to implement economic reform, he insisted on having his new constitution approved by a referendum of the Russian people. Rather than forcing it by decree, Yeltsin was committed to passing the constitution using democratic methods to give it added legitimacy.<sup>67</sup> Although he would not always abide by or fully conform to the rules of democracy, Yeltsin showed a commitment to maintaining at least the basic forms of a democratic nation.

While consumed by his efforts to stabilize Russia proper, Yeltsin allowed the renegade Chechen republic to become continually less stable. His refusal to

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<sup>66</sup> Rose, <[www.russiavotes.org](http://www.russiavotes.org)>.

<sup>67</sup> McFaul, *Unfinished Revolution*, 215.

negotiate with Dudayev's government, the influence of his cadre of hawks and his desire to use a quick decisive victory to bolster his public approval rating all led to the mistaken military deployment to Chechnya. Yeltsin hoped that he could benefit from engaging the Chechen military and restoring the "constitutional integrity" of the Russian Federation, but the exact opposite happened. After more than a year of devastating military defeats and unrelenting criticism from the press, the prospects for Yeltsin's wag-the-dog victory in the Caucasus were about nil. Recognizing the importance of the upcoming elections, the rising political stock of his communist opposition and his dreadfully low approval rating, Yeltsin began to make efforts to find peace with the Chechens.

On one hand, Yeltsin finally did manipulate the war to successfully augment his popularity with the public. He clearly had no intention of honoring the cease-fires negotiated under the banner of his reelection campaign, as he renewed fighting soon after his election. So, a year and a half later, Yeltsin got his public relations military victory. On the other hand, however, Yeltsin's administration truly had become a victim of his failed Chechen War. Within a month of the original invasion, only sixteen percent of Russians supported the use of force in Chechnya.<sup>68</sup> What started as a dramatic and grandiose attempt to reassert his executive authority became a domestic tragedy the likes of which had not been seen for decades and one which remains a blight on the body politic of the Russian

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<sup>68</sup> McFaul, *Unfinished Revolution*, 258.

Federation.<sup>69</sup>

Putin's experience in Chechnya would differ greatly from Yeltsin's. Whereas Yeltsin sought unsuccessfully to use an invasion to gain political support, Putin successfully used Russians' sense of insecurity to

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<sup>69</sup> From the very beginning, Yeltsin was constantly scrambling to get out from under the conflict's tremendous shadow. When the covert operations designed to take down Dudayev failed and Russian military hostages were paraded on the news, his military was left with its foot in its mouth. When his promise of a quick military campaign proved impossible, his approval rating slid even lower. Yeltsin often lied quite blatantly in public statements about the war, further eroding the Russian people's trust in him (Evangelista, 39). When his prime minister had to negotiate the Budennovsk hostage crisis, Russians grew even more doubtful that Yeltsin could manage the country or the war. Following that incident, Yeltsin's opposition in the Duma passed a vote of no confidence in the government. Only by a dramatic second vote was the decision overturned and Yeltsin's administration able to retain control. Until the Khasavyurt Peace was signed, the Chechen conflict was perhaps the biggest threat to the security and stability of Yeltsin's government (McFaul, *Unfinished Revolution*, 260-1).

Ultimately, Yeltsin's involvement in Chechnya became a thorn in his side, a burden from which he was always trying to escape. Interestingly, Yeltsin's aforementioned commitment to democratic forms can be credited with ending the First Chechen War. Throughout the entire ordeal, media presence in the region increased significantly and became increasingly critical of Yeltsin's government. Indeed, it was this conflict that gave rise to the independent media that has since been suppressed under Putin. Though the growing media presence had a strong impact on Yeltsin's low approval rating, he resorted to acts of extra-judicial sabotage. He knew the importance of supporting legitimate democratic structures, and—though he occasionally crossed the line to hush the opposition—he gave the press freedom of expression sufficient enough to make an impact on the operations of the government (Shevtsova, "Power and Leadership in Putin's Russia," *Russia After the Fall*, Andrew C. Kuchins, ed. (Carnegie, 2002), 68).

create a national diversion, jumpstart his political career and undermine regional autonomy and the strength of the independent press. Recognizing the traits of the Yeltsin-state that contributed to its weaknesses and ineffectual policies, Putin attempted to build on the Chechen engagement to centralize his regime and forestall any challenge to his authority. While Yeltsin's system of "oligarchic feudalism" had made him a pawn to those political players who had helped keep him in power, Putin engaged in a campaign of selective persecution that showed those power-brokers that he would not be manipulated against his will. Yeltsin was a slave to the interests of the oligarchs and the regional barons; Putin used his ties to the security services to make sure that political elites would be subservient to him. Yeltsin's respect for a democracy in form (if not in substance) meant that he occasionally pandered to the demands of a highly critical independent media, especially around elections. By restricting the national media, Putin has again used the environment of war for his benefit by eliminating that critical voice, and his approval rating has hardly wavered since.

For centuries, the mentality of war has been used as a fog of opportunity for despots and demagogues hoping to further repressive agendas or fill the national coffers. Though desperate times call for desperate measures, wars have often been used as an excuse to achieve unrelated political ends. Disturbingly common was the dog tactics used to distract the public from politicians' ulterior motives have historically been effective and have escaped condemnation. Citizens have been willing to allow atrocities and injustice in exchange for national security and economic stability.

Putin's formula for political stability—a prime example of this scenario—has been successful, and his regime has been the strongest Russia has seen in years. It will be interesting to see, however, how long a regime founded on manipulation and opportunism can survive, and at what cost to those who agreed to look the other way for the sake of stability.