

Rebuilding Chechnya: from conflict zone to house of cards

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The Kremlin insists to the outside world that the situation in the Republic of Chechnya is peaceful and stable. However, ongoing separatist activity in this North Caucasus republic seems to prove the opposite. In addition, similar patterns of terrorist activity, along with security forces brutality and other human rights abuses, occur in several of the remaining North Caucasus republics. The two Chechen wars in the Nineties, and their aftermath, have to a considerable extent determined the current course of the Russian Federation. The conflict in Chechnya and several terrorist attacks on Russian territory resulted in tight state controls over the media and civil society and a significant increase in xenophobia and racist attacks. Furthermore, the conflicts have to a considerable degree influenced Russia's international relations. This paper aims to describe the situation in Chechnya and current Russian policy towards the Republic. At the same time, it explores the positions of the European Union, the OSCE and the Council of Europe.

The North Caucasus¹



The conflicts and Russian policies

In 1994 Russian federal troops invaded Chechnya in order to restore Russian authority in the separatist North Caucasus republic. The Kremlin expected to retake control and seize the Chechen capital Grozny rapidly, but the invasion turned into a long drawn-out conflict and a defeat for the Russian army. The Russians employed a disproportionate level of force and were met by ruthless guerrilla resistance. The devastating first Chechen war involved grave human rights abuses on both sides and resulted in a high number of Russian and Chechen casualties. In addition, the conflict caused a demographic shift; neighbouring republics received a significant number of Chechen refugees and ethnic Russians fled Chechnya. In 1996 a ceasefire was agreed followed by a peace treaty in 1997. That same year, former Soviet Army officer and separatist

¹ The North Caucasus includes seven autonomous republics: Achechey, Karachai-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North-Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan. It also includes Krasnodar Krai and Stavropol Krai.

leader Aslan Maskhadov² was elected president, defeating his opponent Shamil Basayev.³ Russian and international observers⁴ judged that the elections were conducted in a free and fair manner. President Maskhadov faced a complicated situation. The former separatist movement was internally divided and the Republic was destroyed after almost two years of conflict. Although several treaties and agreements were signed, the status of Chechnya and its future relations with Russia remained vague. The exact conditions of the Republic's autonomy, or independence as the Chechens hoped for, were to be defined by 2001 at the latest. In retrospect, if Russia really intended to solve the conflict in Chechnya, substantial financial support from the federal government to rebuild the republic and to improve the socio-economic situation, together with an accelerated decision on the status of the Republic, might have resulted in a higher degree of stability. Instead, the situation deteriorated and organised crime increased hand over fist. The explosive interwar period resulted in a second Russian invasion in 1999, after Chechen and Dagestani Islamic fundamentalists entered the neighbouring state Dagestan⁵ and Chechen rebels were suspected of carrying out several apartment building bombings on Russian territory.

One of the main reasons Russia chose to act forcefully, with two military campaigns in its southern republic, is historical. Since the conquest of Chechnya by the Russian Empire in the 19th century, it has been considered an

integral and non-negotiable part of Russia. The Russian-Chechen relationship has always showed a tendency for mutual hatred and cruelty. Preventing Chechnya from breaking away is a matter of principle for Moscow. From an economic point of view, Russia's approach was motivated by

Russo-Chechen relations in a nutshell

The Republic of Chechnya is situated in the mountainous North Caucasus region on the southern border of the Russian Federation. This ethnically and linguistically diverse region includes seven autonomous republics. Except for North-Ossetia, the republics are predominantly Sunni Muslim. Islam reached Dagestan at an early stage. Conversion of the rest of the North Caucasus was completed in the 19th century, mainly through Sufi brotherhoods. Sufism is a mystical form of Sunni Islam.

Throughout history, the geopolitically valuable North Caucasus has had to defend itself against invading tribes and expanding empires. For Tsarist Russia the annexation of the Caucasus meant a passage to the ice-free harbours of the south. Russian colonisation of the region was finalised during the Great Caucasian Wars of the 19th century, which were accompanied by brutal Russian war crimes and fierce Islamic resistance.

In 1936, under Soviet rule, Ingushetia and Chechnya were united in the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR). In 1944, on Stalin's orders, the republic was disbanded and its entire population forcibly deported to Central Asia and Siberia, together with the Karachai people and the Balkars, on accusations of collaboration with the Nazis. It is estimated that around twenty five percent of the approximately 700,000 deportees perished within five years of the deportation. The Chechens refer to this dark period of history as the "Chechen Genocide". The Chechen-Ingush ASSR was re-established in 1957.

Chechnya seceded from Ingushetia in 1990, just before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Former Soviet Air Force general Dzukhar Dudaev was elected president in 1991. He refused to sign the treaty of the Russian Federation and declared independence. The Chechen Republic of Ichkeria was established; a shadow republic that still exists today and is headed by Doku Umarov, the leader of the Chechen insurgency. The Russian army retreated from the republic and Moscow attempted to resolve the situation through a boycott. When this proved to be insufficient and tensions grew, the Russian invasion took place.

² After the second invasion of Chechnya, Maschadov joined ranks of the separatists again. He was eliminated by the Russians in March 2005.

³ Shamil Basayev was one of the most important military strategists of the separatist movement and a notorious terrorist. He was responsible for several terrorist attacks and hostage takings, including the Budennovsk hospital crisis in 1995, which led to the end of first conflict in Chechnya. He also claimed responsibility for the Nord-Ost and Beslan hostage dramas. Basayev was killed in July 2006.

⁴ The 1997 annual OSCE report states: "On 27 January, presidential and parliamentary elections were held in Chechnya. The OSCE assisted in the holding and monitoring of these elections. They reflected the free will of those entitled to vote.", http://www.osce.org/publications/sg/1997/12/14116_284_en.pdf

⁵ Their goal was to join Chechnya and Dagestan in order to create an Islamic block against Russia.

energy interests in the North Caucasus. Though itself a negligible supplier, the region functions as a transit corridor for Caspian Sea oil. With a tight grip on the North Caucasus, Russia wanted to protect its oil and gas infrastructure. Another motive for Russia's invasions of Chechnya was the fear of a "domino effect". Chechnya's independence could encourage other republics of the Russian Federation to pursue the same goal. This fear mostly but not exclusively concerned the other six North Caucasus republics. The current situation in the southern region of the Russian Federation shows this fear is legitimate. In particular, Dagestan, Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria are showing a similar pattern of rebel activity and attacks on local authorities and security forces. In addition, the leader of the Chechen insurgency, Doku Umarov, speaks of a "Caucasus Front", implying a coherent network of the different militant cells, or "Jamaats", in the North Caucasus. However, this "domino effect" did not lead to an organised spill-over of the insurgency during the first conflict. The increase in rebel activity in the other North Caucasus republics seems to be a more recent development. Russia's intervention policies in Chechnya have contributed to this instead of preventing it.

Several Chechen terrorist acts and hostage takings on Russian territory during the second campaign made these factors insignificant and provided the Kremlin with a welcome and internationally accepted mantra, however: Russia is combating international terrorism. The brutality of the Chechen terrorist attacks for a time diminished criticisms from the international community, which was preoccupied with the consequences of 9/11. At the same time, the hostage takings decreased international sympathy for the Chechen population in general. Although similar large-scale attacks failed to appear, the terrorist threat in the North Caucasus remains a reality. Initially, the Chechen insurgency was mainly motivated by nationalism and the desire to establish an independent Islamic republic, but gradually the boundary between separatism and Islamic fundamentalism blurred and the struggle for independence turned into a fight against the Russian "kaffirs" (infidels) and their Chechen collaborators. The conflict in Chechnya has attracted international fundamentalists, though the actual number and influence of foreign mercenaries is disputed by both the federal as well as the separatist sides.

Chechnya: a post-conflict zone?

The second conflict in Chechnya was never concluded with a ceasefire or a peace treaty. After several hostage dramas staged by Chechen terrorists, foremost the 'Nord-Ost' Moscow theater siege in 2002 and the Beslan school siege in North-Ossetia in 2004, President Putin made it clear that a second "Khasavyurt", referring to the treaty that marked the end of the first conflict, was out of the question. Negotiating with terrorists, including the democratically elected President Maskhadov, was not an option. Instead, the Kremlin developed a different strategy, often referred to as "chechenisation". Initially some welcomed this policy change as Russia's non-military solution to the conflict; something the West had lobbied for. More likely, it was a matter of damage control; Russia's military tactics in Chechnya - large scale bombings, the use of excessive force, mopping up operations - proved to be too expensive and ineffective. One of the elements of this new "doctrine" was the gradual delegation of most of the security tasks in the republic to pro-Moscow Chechen forces, thereby considerably reducing the role of Federal structures.⁶

In addition, the Kremlin started with the political reconstruction of the Republic. A newly drafted constitution declared Chechnya to be an indivisible and inseparable part of the Russian Federation. The Venice Commission of the Council of Europe, in its review of the draft constitution, judged that it appeared to be "a standard text which could be used for any subject of the Federation and not a text tailored to the specific needs of a conflict situation".⁷ Independent observers

⁶ Russian Federal troops and security forces present in Chechnya belong to the following structures: Federal Security Service (FSB), Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Internal Affairs.

⁷ "Opinion on the draft constitution of the Chechen Republic", [http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2003/CDL-AD\(2003\)002-e.asp](http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2003/CDL-AD(2003)002-e.asp)

concluded that the referendum that was organised on the new constitution was characterised by large-scale fraud and intimidation. This referendum was followed by presidential elections in October 2003. Akhmad Kadyrov, a former separatist and mufti who defected to the Russian side at the beginning of the second conflict, was the Kremlin's favourite candidate. He had already been appointed head of the Chechen administration three years earlier. Not surprisingly, he won by a landslide. According to independent observers, the elections were accompanied by intimidation of voters, falsification of results and harassment of other candidates. Kadyrov held the post of president until he was killed in a bombing in 2004. His son Ramzan Kadyrov, who headed the presidential security service, became the most powerful man in the republic. Officially though, Alu Alkhanov was appointed head of the administration, as Kadyrov junior had not reached the age of thirty; a requirement to run for president. Subsequently, parliamentary elections took place. New Chechen political parties were established closely resembling their national Russian counterparts. Again, the outcome was manipulated by the Kremlin. It resulted in a pro-Kremlin and pro-Kadyrov parliament. Ramzan Kadyrov's position was formalised in April 2007, when he was appointed president by Putin.

The next stage in Russia's post-conflict reconstruction strategy was to grant amnesty to members of illegal armed groups who would surrender voluntarily. The last demobilisation campaign was announced in July 2006 after the elimination of Shamil Basayev. According to the National Counterterrorist Committee, over 500 militants complied with this offer before the January 2007 deadline. Such a high number is remarkable because the authorities had constantly stressed that the actual number of militants was negligible. Many of these defectors probably played an insignificant role within the insurgency or never belonged to the rebel side at all. Several sources claim that a high number of the rebels who actually did give themselves in were forced to do so by means of torture, threat and abduction. Both separatists and their family members became victims of these practices. The pro-Russian Chechen forces applied these methods in order to make the amnesty law appear successful. The assumption that several former rebels were incorporated into Chechen security forces makes the demobilisation picture even more blurred and unclear. Of late both Russian and Chechen officials are less confident in claiming that all resistance has ceased. They also acknowledge that the insurgency is still very much alive.

Rebuilding state institutions, conducting elections and offering former militants rehabilitation are elements of post-conflict state building. Though many signs suggest otherwise, the Kremlin holds fast to the position that peace has finally returned to the North Caucasus republic and the way is paved for democracy and the rule of law. What is left is the battle against global terrorism. This opinion is shared by the pro-Russian Chechen government, which promises to eliminate all illegal armed groups promptly. Ramzan Kadyrov has personally initiated the reconstruction of the Republic. He gives assurances that the infrastructure of Chechnya will be restored by 2009 and unemployment will be brought back to less than 15 percent. Chechen refugees who reside in neighbouring republics or abroad are being urged to return to their homeland. Kadyrov junior also tries to attract Russian and foreign businesses to invest in Chechnya's petrol and chemical industries. The federal government has promised a significant financial contribution to support the Chechen economy and the reconstruction of properties destroyed during "anti-terrorist" campaigns. The Kremlin claims to have invested generously in Chechnya over the last few years, but Kadyrov endeavours to convince the Chechen people that the reconstruction projects were largely financed with private investments and funds, such as the obscure "Akhmed Kadyrov Fund", in order to boost his popularity.

One of the essential elements in rebuilding a post-war society is creating a climate of safety. It is important that civilians feel safe and protected by the law again. Russia has ignored this crucial factor. Though the number of casualties has declined over the last few years, the human rights situation in Chechnya is still a cause for concern. It shows a continuing pattern of disappearances⁸ torture, and ill-treatment in detention. Ever since the first Russian invasion, the absence of the rule of law in the North Caucasus Republic has been a major problem. The current situation in Chechnya is characterised by a high degree of impunity. The federal government has always been reluctant to provide statistics on inquiries into human rights abuses committed by Russian military and security services. If an inquiry is started, cases are often declared inadmissible, due to a "lack of evidence" or the impossibility of establishing the identity of the perpetrators, notwithstanding eyewitness accounts. Medical proof of torture in detention is often disregarded during trial. Because of this impunity and a climate of fear, victims and their relatives think it wiser not to file a complaint. Often, they are discouraged to do so by threats or the high level of bureaucracy and lack of transparency of the Russian judicial system. Also ignored, but equally essential to the post-conflict process, is the excavation of the mass graves that have been discovered.⁹

With the process of "chechenisation" the identity of the human rights abusers has largely changed. Over the course of the first and in the beginning of the second campaign, the perpetrators were mainly to be found in the ranks of the Russian federal forces and services. But with the delegation of security tasks to pro-Kremlin Chechens, the habits of misconduct and excessive use of force were also transferred. Security and law enforcement units under the direct command of Ramzan Kadyrov, "kadyrovtsy" to use the vernacular, are often connected with these human rights abuses. The majority of these units originate from the personal security service of the late Chechen President Akhmad Kadyrov, which was headed by Kadyrov junior. A Human Rights Watch briefing on torture in the Chechen Republic states that "Kadyrov's units hold and torture detainees in premises that are not lawful places of detention".¹⁰ Often, the detainees are released without formal charges being made against them. Unlawful detention and torture is used to retrieve information, to intimidate detainees or their family members, and to persuade rebels or people suspected of belonging to the insurgency to join the side of the "kadyrovtsy". It should be noted that currently the vast majority of the human rights violations in Chechnya occur under the pretext of counter terrorism campaigns.

Human Rights Watch has also observed a continuing pattern of "disappearances" and found that "some of those detained by Kadyrov's forces later 'disappear' without a trace".¹¹ It is almost impossible for the victims to hold the perpetrators to account for their crimes, even if they can provide solid evidence or are able to identify them. This again underlines the serious problem of impunity and the absence of the rule of law in the republic. Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who was assassinated stepping out of the elevator inside her Moscow apartment block on 7 October 2006, continuously criticised misconduct by Russian and Chechen forces in the North Caucasus republic. On several occasions she provided evidence that linked the current president of Chechnya and his entourage directly and indirectly to grave human rights abuses. In one of her last articles in the independent newspaper Novaya Gazeta, she defined Chechnya as suffering from a "Kadyrov syndrome". Features of this syndrome include shamelessness,

⁸ The Moscow based "Legal Memorial Centre" estimates that since 1999 between 3000 and 5000 people have disappeared.

⁹ Amnesty International states that: "many thousands of people are believed to be buried in unmarked graves around the republic: there are reported to be 52 registered sites of mass graves in Chechnya". "Russian Federation – what justice for Chechnya's disappeared?" Amnesty International, May 2007, <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engneur460152007>

¹⁰ "Widespread Torture in the Chechen Republic, a Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper for the 37th Session UN Committee against Torture", Human Rights Watch, November 13, 2006, <http://hrw.org/backgrounder/eca/chechnya1106/>

¹¹ Ibid

brutality and cruelty, dressed up as bravery and masculinity.¹² In her opinion, the ruthless methods applied by the “kadyrovtsy” are no better than those of the so-called Wahhabis.¹³

Kadyrov enjoys the protection of his “mentor” Vladimir Putin. There is no doubt the President of the Russian Federation is aware of every move and slip he makes. For the time being Kadyrov’s excessive lifestyle and his dictator-like behaviour, including a personality cult, is tolerated because of his accomplishments and his strong grip on society. But Putin’s support of Kadyrov could backfire. At the moment the young president appears to be loyal to the Kremlin’s policies in Chechnya. This loyalty is, to a large extent, based on his deep hatred of the separatists, however, and not on his liking for the Russians. Although Kadyrov’s capacity and influence should not be overrated, his ambition and lust for power could one day make him reconsider this loyalty. This, together with Kadyrov’s contribution to the current climate of fear and impunity, creates an unstable situation that could eventually result in the collapse of the Chechen house of cards.

The international agenda

The relationship between Russia and the West on the issue of Chechnya is troubled. Ever since the first invasion in 1994, the international community has been urging Russia to find a political rather than a military solution. It has asked for transparency and condemned human rights abuses on both sides of the conflict. In reaction to this criticism, Russia accuses the West of applying double standards and interfering in internal affairs, but it seems to forget that the international community has never questioned the territorial integrity of the Federation. In its foreign policy, Russia has made it clear that the subject of Chechnya is a “no go area”. Russia’s claim that it is fighting international terrorism in Chechnya and the North Caucasus has made international critique more complicated, as the Western world is involved in a similar battle. The argument that the fight against terrorism should not be used as an excuse for human rights abuses, often heard in international discourse on the issue of Chechnya, has unfortunately lost some of its credibility since the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, the human rights abuses in Guantánamo Bay and the discovery of secret CIA holding facilities in EU territory.

In its Country Strategy Paper 2007-2013 on the Russian Federation, the European Union (EU) evidently disagrees with Russia on the current status of the conflict and states that the situation in Chechnya “remains characterised by low-intensity armed conflict”.¹⁴ The EU is engaged in Chechnya and the North Caucasus on various levels. On a humanitarian level, the EU is the largest external donor to Chechnya and its neighbouring republics. The total amount of European Commission (EC) relief to the North Caucasus region since the beginning of the second conflict in 1999 is more than 220 million euros. This aid is primarily directed at supporting internally displaced persons (IDPs) and other vulnerable groups in Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan. EC funds are being allocated via the Directorate General for Humanitarian Aid of the European Commission (ECHO) to international organisations and NGOs in the field. In 2006, for example, 70 percent of the EC funds went to European NGOs¹⁵, 24 percent to United Nations bodies¹⁶ and 6 percent to the International Committee of the Red Cross.¹⁷ The EC indirectly supports a variety

¹² ‘Кадыровцев будут бить – пока только в Ингушетии’, *Novaya Gazeta*, 11 September 2006, <http://politkovskaya.novayagazeta.ru/pub/2006/2006-82.shtml>

¹³ Wahhabism, a religious-political movement within Sunni Islam, originates from 18th century Saudi Arabia. It preaches a strict interpretation of traditional Islam. In Russia it became a byword for Muslim terrorism. The number of Wahhabi fundamentalists within the Chechen insurgency is unclear however. Often, Wahhabism is used synonymously with Salafism. Salafism is also a current within Sunni Islam. It is traditional and puritan in its approach to Islam and is diametrically opposed to Sufism. The Chechen fundamentalists are predominantly Salafist, while the “official” Islam in the republic is Sufist.

¹⁴ *Country Strategy Paper 2007-2013: Russian Federation*. http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/russia/csp/2007-2013_en.pdf

¹⁵ For instance the Danish Refugee Council, Care, Caritas, Action contre la Faim and Médecins Sans Frontières.

¹⁶ Including the UN World Food Programme, UNHCR, UN World Health Organisation and UNICEF.

¹⁷ For more information on ECHO in the North Caucasus see: http://www.delrus.ec.europa.eu/en/p_329.htm and http://ec.europa.eu/echo/field/russia/help_en.htm

of programmes in the areas of food distribution, shelter, water and sanitation, education and mine risk awareness. Gradually, due to the relative improvement of the socio-economic situation in Chechnya, the focus of the EC's support to Chechnya and the North Caucasus is shifting from purely humanitarian to more structural and long-term assistance. The emphasis is put on recovery or development programmes. The EU sees a clear relationship between development and economic recovery and stability. Therefore it has recently introduced a new programme for the economic recovery of the North Caucasus. The budget of €20 million will be spent on health, education and economic development. The programme is implemented with support from the office of the Russian President's Special Envoy for the Southern Federal District.

Under the human rights banner, the EU is involved in Chechnya and the North Caucasus through the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). This instrument, created by the European Parliament in 1994, has been active in the Russian Federation since 1997. Together with the UN and the Council of Europe, the EIDHR supports projects of both Russian and European NGOs, along with Russian higher educational institutes in the Russian Federation. Since its launch, the EIDHR has been used to finance around 250 projects aimed at the strengthening of civil society in the different Russian regions. Several of these projects are specifically located in the North Caucasus region. In addition to financing civil society projects through the EIDHR, the EU has held biannual consultations on human rights with Russia since November 2004.

On a political level the interference of the EU is less appreciated by Russia. Every now and then the EU is critical, but it does not want the human rights issue in Chechnya to spoil its relations with its largest neighbour and energy supplier. EU-Russia relations are legally fixed in the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA). In this framework regular meetings are held on different levels, including human rights consultations. On the issue of Chechnya, the EU attaches more value to dialogue than to political pressure or economic sanctions. Whereas Brussels delayed the ratification of the PCA for several months in 1995 to show its discontent with the ongoing human rights violations in Chechnya, such a measure nowadays would be voted down because of the prevailing economic relations. Taking this into account it is not surprising that international human rights organisations and NGOs criticise the EU for not emphasising the subject strongly enough in its relations with Moscow. The European Parliament shares this view. In a January 2006 resolution the EU body expresses its concern that "the Council and Commission have failed to address the ongoing serious human rights violations in the Chechen Republic despite the fact that those violations are still occurring on a large scale on both sides of the conflict and in a climate of almost complete impunity".¹⁸ Because of Russia's strategic and economic importance, it is unlikely that the EU will impose economic sanctions or freeze agreements. At this moment, the EU's main contribution is humanitarian rather than conflict resolution.

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) played a significant role during and immediately after the first conflict in Chechnya. Russia, a member of the OSCE since its founding, agreed with the establishment of a small mission to the North Caucasus republic in 1995. The OSCE mission was involved in crisis management; mediation between the federal and separatist sides; monitoring of the 1997 presidential elections and facilitating the distribution of humanitarian aid. Initially the OSCE mission was welcomed by the rebels, but their discontent grew as it became clear that the organisation was not going to plead for the territory's independence, as they desired. This discontent and renewed armed hostilities resulted in the international staff being shifted back and forth from Chechnya to Moscow and the neighbouring republic Ingushetia, until the OSCE returned to Chechnya in 2001, where it remained until its mandate expired in 2003. During earlier negotiations on the possible

¹⁸ *European Parliament resolution on Chechnya after the elections and civil society in Russia*, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P6-TA-2006-0026&language=EN&ring=P6-RC-2006-0028>

extension of the mandate, Russia tried to narrow the mission's tasks to primarily humanitarian issues. On this subject, no consensus was reached by the member states of the OSCE. The actual reason for the mission's silent running down was Russia's changed view of the European security organisation. Moscow gradually lost interest in the OSCE as an alternative to NATO and no longer tolerated the international organisation's interference in what it saw as purely national affairs. Russia blames the OSCE of applying double standards, mainly referring to the organisation's orientation on the former Soviet space and election monitoring activities in the CIS region. The "colour revolutions", which Russia felt were stimulated by the OSCE, damaged relations even more.

The Russian Federation joined the Council of Europe (CoE) in 1996. The fact that Russia had not ratified the protocol of the European Convention on Human Rights on the abolition of the death penalty, obligatory for all member states, and the country's poor human rights record, proved no obstacle to Russia's chairmanship of the human rights and democracy promotion organisation a decade later. Several CoE institutions and instruments monitor the human rights situation in Chechnya. Russian citizens have the opportunity to lodge a complaint against their state at the organisation's European Court on Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg. At present, applications lodged against the Russian Federation make up around 20 percent of the total figure, the highest number of all member states. The first judgments on human rights abuses committed in Chechnya were made in July 2005. At the moment, numerous complaints are being submitted for admission and around 200 cases are pending judgement. The charges range from torture to disappearance and from indiscriminate bombing to non-return of bodies and extra-judicial executions. The growing number of judgements in favour of plaintiffs clearly makes Russia feel uncomfortable. Recently, the Russian Supreme Court proposed an amendment to the law in order to make it possible to file complaints against the state in Russia itself, supposedly to take the pressure off the ECHR. This is more likely Russia's way of decreasing these embarrassing judgments and frustrating possible applicants. It is therefore essential that the CoE not only closely monitors Russia's compliance with ECHR judgments, but also reviews possible changes to Russian law.

In March this year, the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) of the CoE issued a public statement on the situation in Chechnya, a result of several working visits to the republic. Twice before the CPT has issued similar statements, exposing cases of ill-treatment in detention and the existence of unofficial holding facilities. The statements were issued after the Russian Federation refused to meet the Committee's request to investigate cases of ill-treatment. It is important that the CPT continues to monitor the circumstances in holding facilities in Chechnya on a regular basis, because ill-treatment in detention significantly contributes to the ongoing atmosphere of impunity and fear in Chechnya. In addition, the Russian authorities should be urged to detect and eliminate all unofficial holding facilities. Since 1999, the Commissioner for Human Rights of the CoE has made several fact-finding missions to Chechnya, the last one being at the beginning of this year. In his initial conclusions, Commissioner Hammarberg questions the functioning of the judicial system and states that it is of the utmost importance to put an end to impunity. Though he reports a slight improvement in the socio-economic situation in the republic, torture and ill-treatment are still widespread. This situation is not likely to improve in the short term due to the ongoing hostilities and the increased deployment of Russian forces.

Conclusions

Though the Kremlin claims the opposite, the situation in Chechnya is still far from being peaceful and remains a threat to the stability of the North Caucasus region. The conflict in Chechnya has to a considerable degree influenced the state's internal affairs and international relations. Russia's approach has proven to be counterproductive. The state's refusal to find a political solution to the situation, together with the excessive use of force and ongoing human rights abuses, has substantially aggravated the situation. Moscow has been unable to eliminate the Chechen insurgency, which has become increasingly fundamentalistic in its Islamic ideals.

In its so-called post-conflict state building, Russia missed a few essential steps. Chechen society is still in the grips of a climate of fear and impunity. The fate of numerous disappeared, including Russian soldiers, remains unknown. The high unemployment rate and the general hopelessness of the situation make young people extremely liable to fundamentalism. The fact that Ramzan Kadyrov has the support of Putin meanwhile shows that the Kremlin is not interested in long-term conflict resolution. Although the President of Chechnya has achieved progress in the material reconstruction of the republic, his misconduct and cruel methods have contributed to the dominating climate of fear and impunity.

The situation in Chechnya should be of great concern to the international community, firstly, because Russia is constantly violating international human rights agreements to which it is a party, and secondly, because an inflamed North Caucasus region could pose a serious international security risk. Close monitoring of the situation in the region is therefore essential. All too frequently, the international community has given Russia special treatment, initially out of the hope that it would stimulate the country to follow the same democratic path as the West, and later because of Russia's growing economic importance. Due to this growing economic and strategic power, the approach of the international community has shifted from political pressure to cautious political dialogue and humanitarian assistance. Russia receives structural financial support from the West, while large amounts of money are specifically allocated to Chechnya and the Caucasus region. The Kremlin refuses to accept any conditions and on a political level declares Chechnya a "no go area", however. Perhaps the international community will reconsider its position in response to Russia's recently changed view on East-West relations. Putin's forceful politics, together with Russia's role in frozen conflicts on OSCE territory and the sabotage of the Kosovo negotiations have certainly paved the way for a more decisive international approach to the conflict in Chechnya.

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