Chechnya 1991–2000

Executive Summary

During the final weeks of the Soviet Union's existence, on November 1, 1991, the Chechen-born former Soviet general Dzhokhar Dudayev carried out a successful coup d'état against the local Soviet government and declared the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. The republic was not recognized but existed as a de facto government during the years of the conflict and gained popular support within Chechnya by promoting Chechen nationalism and independence.[1] On December 25, 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist when its leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, stepped down, and Boris Yeltsin replaced him as the first president of the Russian Federation.[2] Facing many problems after the Soviet Union's fall, the Russian government initially responded to Dudayev's declaration of independence by imposing economic sanctions on Chechnya.[3]

By 1994, however, Yeltsin's domestic approval ratings had fallen significantly as a result of his unpopular economic program, called "shock therapy," which aimed to transition Russia from a command economy to a free market economy.[4] Due to its poor implementation, the system was not working as planned, leaving Yeltsin in need of a means to regain support and justify his leadership. With growing concerns about potential NATO expansion and diminishing popularity, Yeltsin now saw the Chechen crisis as a potential answer to his political problems.[5] He shifted Russian policy from economic sanctions to removing Dudayev's government by force and regaining control of Chechnya.[6] In February 1994, Yeltsin publicly launched his campaign to defend and strengthen Russian statehood.[7] In fall 1994, he ordered the invasion of Chechnya, deploying over 40,000 Russian troops and sparking the first Chechen war (1994–96).[8] The Russian forces initially retook the capital of Grozny at a cost of an estimated 2,000 killed in action, but the Chechens counterattacked and reclaimed the city. The first Chechen war resulted in Russian defeat, and in 1996, Yeltsin and representatives from the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria negotiated the Khasavyurt Accord and Russian troops left Chechnya. From 1996 to 1999, Chechnya was unable to capitalize on this moment and failed to establish a stable, functioning state, and criminal gangs largely controlled the territory. The peace agreement failed, and the second Chechen war broke out in 1999, lasting until 2009. By 2009, Russian security forces had regained full control over virtually all of Chechnya, and the territory was reincorporated into the Russian state.

Assessing the Five Factors

1. **Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?**

   Yes. A large majority of Russians identify themselves as such. Although Chechens themselves have a strong sense of ethnic nationalism, they make up only 1 percent of Russia's total population. In 1922, the Chechens were granted their own oblast, or autonomous province, largely to perpetuate the ethnic separation of Muslims from Russians. (Over 93 percent of the Chechen population was Muslim, which added to the strength of Chechen national identity rooted in shared religious beliefs.[9]) There was little, if any, support for an independent Chechnya outside the Chechen-speaking region.[10]

2. **Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?**

   Yes. Although this decade was characterized by political instability in Russia, the newly established Russian government was perceived as legitimate by the majority of the Russian population. Yeltsin himself had the support of a majority of Russians in replacing Gorbachev, as Yeltsin promised Russia a return to prosperity. Yeltsin's rise was largely possible due to growing discontent with Gorbachev's leadership. Chechnya and other breakaway regions undoubtedly saw the government in Moscow as illegitimate, but they made up a tiny fraction of the overall Russian population.

3. **Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?**

   Yes. During the first few years of his presidency, Yeltsin's policies were focused around strengthening security and stability in the wake of the Soviet Union's dissolution.[11] The priority given to strengthening Russia's borders and maintaining control over former Soviet Union bloc countries wherever possible created a security state that allowed the Russian government to maintain control over at least 85 percent of the overall population of Russia and isolate them from contact with the Chechen rebels.

4. **Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?**

   No. The Russian government established checkpoints and military blockades within Chechnya to control the movement of civilians and CRI supporters.[12] They maintained control over the borders between Chechnya and Russia. At the start of the second Chechen war, Russia claimed Chechen rebels were taking sanctuary in neighboring Georgia, which the Georgian government vehemently and repeatedly denied, and there is no conclusive evidence that Chechen rebels had refuge there.

5. **Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?**

   Yes. The Russian Army had been in existence for hundreds of years. Yeltsin promised its soldiers better benefits and a more unified command.[13] Yeltsin maintained the loyalty of the Russian military, which he commanded during his presidency between 1991 and 1999.[14]

CHECHNYA 1991–2000	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	YES
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	YES
POPULATION SECURITY	YES
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	NO
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

Outcome

Government victory. Although the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria had strong support within Chechnya, the Russian Federation did not consider the republic legitimate and refused to allow independence. Throughout the 1990s, the Russian Federation conducted serval military operations that eventually led to Russian forces reestablishing full governmental control in May 2000.[15] The first Chechen war resulted in more than 50,000 Chechen civilian deaths as a result of the Russian military's brutal tactics and deliberate targeting of civilians.[16] Hundreds of thousands more Chechens were displaced. The second Chechen war resulted in thousands more civilian casualties, the collapse of the Chechen separatist movement, and the reincorporation of Chechnya into the Russian state. This case study supports the Five Factors theory.

Endnotes

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11. Golubev, Malykhin, and Cherkasov, "Russian Wars," 18.

12. Human Rights Watch, *Russia: Three Months of War in Chechnya*, D706 (Geneva: Refworld, February 1995), https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/hrw/1995/en/96601.

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