

Yeltsin's Betrayal of Democracy

Testimony before the CSCE

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, I am honored to appear before you today to share my views on the continuing Russian military assault on Chechnya. And I want to commend this commission for holding this hearing. What is at stake is not just the lives of innocent civilians, but the whole democratic course which Russia has begun to follow since the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

All the democratic ideals Russian President Boris Yeltsin has proclaimed in the past have been betrayed by his military assault on Chechnya. With this act, President Yeltsin has crossed a rubicon that will turn Russia back into a police state.

By attempting to crush the aspirations of the Chechen people with the army and the Ministry of the Interior, President Yeltsin has revealed that brute force is his preferred method for dealing

with anyone who disagrees with central control from the Kremlin, be they the mass media, demonstrators or others in the Russian Federation who want more autonomy. The police methods we thought were buried with totalitarianism are poised to return.

The democratic hopes invested in the Russian president, it is now apparent, have been hijacked as he has fallen under the influence of the old, but still powerful, military-industrial complex as well as the new oil cartels within Russia that cannot afford to lose the rich resources of Chechnya. Also, there is a political element in the attack on Grozny: President Yeltsin has sought to shore up his flagging personal popularity among ordinary Russians by being tough on the Chechen rebels.

The bloodshed in Chechnya must lead not only to a reassessment of President Yeltsin's presidency abroad and at home in Russia but also a reassessment of the attitudes of the stable democracies of the West and the United Nations concerning self-determination. Defense of territorial integrity is the right of states; self-determination is a human right. After all the state-sponsored horrors of the twentieth century, aren't we prepared at last to agree that human rights should take priority over the rights of states? Yet both the Americans and most European states have declared that the war in Chechnya is an "internal Russian affair." Only belatedly, in recent days, has the Council of Europe found it necessary

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to express concern over the excessive brutality of the Russian assault and the massive violations of human rights.

Events in Chechnya, however, ought to make clear that according to the principle of the inviolability of state borders instead of self-determination of peoples leads to brutality and war, not to peace. Defending a state's integrity against the demand of individuals and cultures, whether in Chechnya, Karabakh, or in Kurdistan, will inevitably lead to the use of force and the violation of human rights. It will lead to upheaval.

What is thus necessary to attain peace and stability in today's world is not the use of force, but an attitude of cooperation within state borders or between recognized states and those seeking autonomy or secession that will accommodate the demands of self-determination through new forms of confederation and commonwealth. Working out the mechanism of such cooperative forms is the most acute problem not only in Russia but also in much of the world today.

If this subject is not taken up with the highest urgency by the United Nations as well as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, these organizations will become mere shadow versions of the failed League of Nations and the world will become one huge battlefield. Rather than express alarm at human rights violations after the fact, they need to act ahead of time to work out the political arrangements that will avoid such tragedies as Chechnya. As we've seen in Bosnia, once the bloodshed had begun, it is almost impossible to establish normal relations that would lead to enduring stability. Instead endless cycles of hatred and violence take hold.

In Chechnya, President Yeltsin could have taken the democratic course as he did in the spring of last year when he signed a special political accord with the president of Tatarstan that accommodated Tatar demands. Apparently calculating that the Chechens were so weak that they could be suppressed by brute force, President Yeltsin and those around him chose the military option, and launched a campaign of lies that painted Chechnya as a land of bandits and refused to conduct serious negotiations with the Chechen leaders.

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The north Caucasus, where Chechnya is located, is a special region for historical reasons and thus requires a special approach. We have to remember the bloody takeover of the Caucasus by tsarist Russia and later Josef Stalin's genocide there. The events unraveling in Chechnya at this moment—the slaughtered civilians, the burned out Russian tanks and the scattered bodies of Russian troops—are stunning proof that the present Russian government fails to understand

its own history.

The most important thing that can be done within Russia now is to mobilize public opinion pressure through the organization of a broad anti-war movement.

An important element in this mobilization that is already underway is the action of those Russian legislators who have courageously gone to Grozny despite the heavy fighting to witness the horrible truth of what is happening on the ground so they can puncture the lies of official Russian propaganda. So, too, we must admire the bravery of the Russian military commanders who have refused to follow the orders from Moscow to use military force against Chechen civilians.

A key task of the anti-war movement in this context will be to remind Russian troops of the war crimes tribunal rulings after World War II that soldiers are not obliged to carry out criminal orders to assault civilian populations.

From outside Russia, the stable democratic societies of the West must employ all the diplomatic means to pressure President Yeltsin to call off his assault and negotiate with the Chechen leaders. While some Russian democratic groups—including Russia's Choice—take a different position, I believe that, in the current circumstances, all U.S. economic aid to Russia should be frozen. The United States should also make efforts to freeze support for Russia in the international financial institutions. At the same time, support for humanitarian aid to the combat zone and support for Russia's democratic groups through the National Endowment for Democracy, United States Agency for International Development, and such groups as Freedom House, should be expanded. Prominent figures of international civil society, such as former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, should fly to Moscow immediately and seek observer status in Chechnya. I am convinced this is the only way to stop the violence from spreading in the immediate period ahead.

Our actions today in defense of Chechnya will determine whether Russia continues on the path toward democracy or slips back into a police state.