

# How the West Shouldn't React to Events in Chechnya

SERGEI KOVALEV

I will begin with a few sentences on what is happening in Chechnya, but I will not go into details that have been reported in the press. For the past five months, Russian government forces have been conducting brutal and bloody warfare there. Tens of thousands of civilians have died in the course of the fighting, and hundreds of thousands have been turned into refugees. Russian aircraft, artillery, and tanks have destroyed the city of Grozny which had a prewar population of four hundred thousand.

The army is carrying out punitive expeditions against other localities. I've just returned from the Chechen village of Samashky where this kind of punitive expedition killed a hundred villagers or more and burned a great number of homes to the ground.

Hundreds of persons have been arbitrarily detained in the course of police operations that are being conducted in areas of Chechnya that have come under the control of Russian government forces. The detainees are brought to special "filtration camps" used to screen Chechens for pro-Dudayev activities or sympathies. Detainees have been beaten and sometimes tortured. There are reports of executions without trials.

From the very beginning, official government information about the events in Chechnya has been based on brazen lies. At first, the Russian government disclaimed all knowledge of the tanks and aircraft that attacked Grozny 25-26 November 1994, claiming that this operation was probably the responsibility of the Chechen opposition to [Chechen President Dzhokhar] Dudayev. Soon, however, the Russian Defense Ministry had to acknowledge that the tanks were Russian tanks manned by Russian soldiers recruited by the Russian security service and the helicopters that attacked the Grozny airport were Russian helicopters.

When I was in Grozny last December, the Russian government claimed on two occasions that bombing of Grozny had been stopped by order of President Yeltsin, even as I could hear the roar of Russian planes and the explosions that were destroying the city.

A recent example of official lying is the insistently repeated tale that a group of elders from Samashky was fired upon by Dudayev's troops, a report that served as a pretext for the punitive action against Samashky. I and my colleagues had an opportunity to meet and talk with the alleged victims of this incident, and they assured us that the report was untrue.

Why was the decision made to begin the war in Chechnya? Was President Yeltsin's decision to use military force in Chechnya unavoidable? Could he have done something other than use force against the rebels? Did the proclaimed necessity of restoring law and order in the region lead inevitably to war?

---

Sergei Kovalev is a member of the State Duma of the Russian Federation. A prominent former dissident who served seven years in the gulag and three years' internal exile under the Soviet regime, he was until recently chief of the presidential human rights commission and chairman of the Duma Committee on Human Rights, until being removed for his criticism of government action in Chechnya.

I have no sympathy for Dudayev's unilateral declaration of Chechen independence. There was so much to criticize about Chechnya's human rights record during the three years it was governed by Dudayev and his administration. But for quite some time both before and after the outbreak of fighting it would have been possible to solve the problem of Chechen separatism by political means. All attempts to do so were systematically and deliberately torpedoed by the military high command and by others in the government in Moscow. With respect to the alleged aim of restoring law and order in Chechnya, I think it's sufficient to say that many actions of the federal authorities there are gross violations of the Constitution and laws of Russia.

It is important to analyze the causes of the war in Chechnya in order to avoid the occurrence of similar conflicts elsewhere, but the urgent task right now is to bring about an effective ceasefire throughout Chechnya, to end the bloodshed, and to open negotiations for a just and desirable peace.

I understand that members of the U.S. Congress are concerned most of all with the effect of the Chechen crisis on Russia's domestic and foreign policies and its implications for international stability, so I will share with you my ideas on these topics.

The Chechen war, as it has been waged and is still being waged, is the external expression of the rise of a definite political tendency. It is the tendency to assert *derzhavnost* (perhaps best translated as "quasi-totalitarian statism") as the supreme value of the new Russia instead of the liberal values proclaimed by the Russian Constitution. Such statism insists that the unconstrained force of the state takes precedence over the rights and liberties of the individual.

Such statism is not the same thing as a strong and effective system of government in a rule-of-law state. Such statism is incompatible with the rule of law, with democracy, and with human rights. Such statism is closely connected with messianic, imperialist nationalism, with anti-Western attitudes, with the militarist, authoritarian, and totalitarian traditions of our past. Such statism is in essence the restoration in Russia of the old Communist system under the flag of a new ideology.

How should democratic countries react to this? I hesitate to suggest specific positive actions, but the one thing I know for sure is how the West *shouldn't* react to events in Chechnya.

First: In no event should the West turn away from Russia and leave it to its fate. That would soon lead to Americans and the rest of the world once again having to live with a dangerous, aggressive, and unpredictable neighbor. Sooner or later this totalitarian superpower will find it cramped to share one planet with free countries. Then the West will have to step in and act, but the cost will greatly surpass the cost of attention to Russia's situation now.

Second: Involvement of the West in Russia's affairs should not be reduced to unconditional support for a particular leader. Clearly, President Yeltsin is not the same thing as President Zhirinovskiy. But I don't understand why this means it's necessary to support Yeltsin even in those cases when his actions are exactly the same as Zhirinovskiy's would be in his place. Speaking frankly, I dare say that in trying to emulate Zhirinovskiy and breaking with democracy, President Yeltsin has lost any real chance for reelection. Not that Zhirinovskiy's chances are any better. For this reason

alone, the choice “Yeltsin or Zhirinovsky” seems a false and unrealistic dichotomy.

Support should be given not to individuals but to concrete political steps that will help establish democracy in Russia—that is, strong, effective government under constant and direct public control. The emerging institutions of civil society that will be capable of exercising such control require serious and energetic support. But support for democratic reforms in Russia should be combined with equally serious and energetic opposition to any actions by government bodies in Russia that depart from the values of a democratic society.

Only a selective and targeted combination of support and pressure can assist the transformation of the Russian state from its historical role as the bane of the Russian people into a guarantee of their prosperity and security, from a continual threat to neighboring countries into their reliable and equal partner.

Third: The West must see in Russia not a weak and dependent client, not a defeated enemy of the Cold War years, but an equal and independent partner. In developing its Russian policy, the West, and in particular the United States, must not think that a weak and isolated Russia would be advantageous for them. This would be an extremely dangerous illusion. A weak and isolated Russia would be an explosive charge capable in the not-too-distant future of shattering not only Europe’s security system, but the whole world’s. Recall that the Versailles Treaty of 1919 was followed by the Munich agreement of 1938. And what followed thereafter can’t be forgotten.

I realize that it is a complex and arduous task for the United States to work out a new Russia policy, free from both euphoria and hostility, balanced and rational, distinguishing national interests from national egoism. Simple prescriptions can only harm this project. But who said that the art of politics is a simple matter?