



CHECHNYA PEACE FORUM

Akhmed Zakaev, Prime Minister of the resistance Government of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria's speech at the Spotlight on Russia conference

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I would like to congratulate the Chechnya Peace Forum, with the support of the Foreign Policy Centre, for organising this important event. It is obviously timely that it should happen just one week after the inauguration of Dmitry Medvedev as the new President of Russia. I would like to thank the organisers for inviting me to speak at this forum.

For more than fifteen years now I have been a direct participant in the military and political processes under way both within Chechnya itself, and – now – around Chechnya. The little information released by the press departments of the Russian ministries and agencies is intended to divert attention from objective facts.

Today our Russian colleagues have told us about the negative processes which have taken place and are still taking place in Russia. I am deeply convinced that what Putin's regime has done in Russia is the consequence and a reflection of things that happened, and continue to happen, in Chechnya. Of course the FSB's Chekism is not derived from Chechnya, but the revival of Dzerzhinsky-style Chekism was made possible by anti-Chechen hysteria whipped up by the Kremlin which enjoys the support of an absolute majority of Russian society, including the Democrats. Shameless lying, lawlessness and murderous crimes are the tools of Russian policy towards Chechnya. Inflamed by Great Power propaganda, Russian society readily acquiesced in the obvious, evil means used against the Chechens, and when those began to be used against the Russians themselves it was already too late to change anything.

A campaign of terror against a small nation cannot lead to positive results. The predictable consequences of a criminal war unleashed against Chechnya have been a restriction of democratic freedoms, including the abolition of free speech, of freedom for private business activity, and of freedom for minority religions. Politically motivated criminal prosecutions, harassment of civil rights organisations, violation of citizens' electoral rights, ever-strengthening fascism, and gross interference in the internal affairs of neighbouring states – these are all natural results of the criminal anti-Chechen war, which continues into its ninth year.

People rightly see double standards at work in the West's present attitude towards the Chechen problem, whether you compare Chechnya with Kosovo or with the post-Soviet conflicts in Georgia and Moldova. In every case except that of Chechnya international mediators have been brought in, including, where necessary, peacekeeping forces.

Applying double standards is not the best way to spread democracy. If we were to deal fairly with Chechnya we would have in the first place to categorize what is happening there in terms of the law, and in the second place to warn Russia of its inescapable responsibility for crimes against humanity committed in Chechnya by Russian troops.

Only a just solution of the Russo-Chechen conflict can bring Russian society stability, democracy and freedom.

According to the data by international and Russian human rights organisations, apart from the total devastation of the social and economic infrastructure of the republic, 250 thousand civilians, including 40 thousand children, have been killed in Chechnya in the course of the two wars. This is equivalent to one quarter of the entire Chechen population.

As a result of the dreadful crimes committed by it, including mass murders and total destruction of entire cities, Russia has achieved the opposite of what it had set out to achieve.

Its plan to disarm the Chechens has resulted in their additional rearming. The attempt to have a legal implementation of Chechnya's affiliation with Russia by means of a so-called referendum in 2003 ended in a total fiasco and once again demonstrated the untenable legal nature of Russia's territorial claims in Chechnya. The attempt to equalise the occupied Chechnya's status with those of the legitimate subjects of the Russian Federation has meant a unilateral denunciation by Russia of the 1992 Federal Agreement which formed the basis of the new Russian entity. It is highly unlikely that without a proper legal foundation Russia would have managed to preserve its current borders. Finally, the two anti-Chechen wars have resulted in a mass exodus of Russian speaking people, not just from Chechnya but from the entire North Caucasus.

It is intriguing to observe the nature of Moscow's relations in the occupied Chechnya with the so-called pro-Russian Chechens under Ramzan Kadyrov. When the Russian Union of Journalists had decided that it did not want to see Kadyrov as a member of its journalistic community, Chechnya's journalists announced that they would collectively leave the organisation. Moscow had to immediately fly out the Chairman of the Russian Union of Journalists to Grozny in order to apologise to Kadyrov and beg him not to deprive its journalistic community of the high honour. In another example of Moscow's so-called 'suppression' of Chechnya a few weeks ago Kadyrov had surrounded, disarmed and partly disbanded a battalion of the Russian Armed Forces without any reference to Moscow. Before that he had also disputed the control over the Chechen oil.

In order to resolve the situation Putin has not come up with any new solutions. Yet there is a strange air of change about. You might have noticed that since the public accusation of the Yamadaev brothers who had terrorised the Chechen population side by side with the Russian punitive agencies, high-ranking Russian military officials have started to pay frequent visits to Kadyrov. According to the official version, they go to visit his father's grave and to express their admiration of the son's achievements. Acting on a clear prompt from Moscow the Chechen Parliament has immediately asked the President of Russia to give Kadyrov Russia's highest

award – the Order of the second degree. I am convinced that they are preparing to miraculously remove Ramzan Kadyrov. There is no doubt that the 'Caucasus Emirate' declared last autumn would assume responsibility for any murder. In line with the Kremlin's plans, Kadyrov's successor Beslan Gantemirov would head the next stage in the process of 'Chechenisation' – the persecution and murder of Kadyrov's close associates as former 'Ichkeriya' supporters. The Russians can easily assassinate Kadyrov and just as easily appoint Beslan Gantemirov to his post. The only thing one would doubt would be the effectiveness of these actions by the Kremlin to bring about the desired results.

The bitter experience of the past ten years has shown that the Russian-Chechen conflict does not have a military solution. It is our deep conviction that violence in Chechnya and in the North Caucasus could be ended only by way of a political settlement.

Ladies and gentlemen, please allow me to end my presentation on this optimistic note.

After 8 years of Putin's regime, Russia now has a new president who could just possibly bring sufficient political will and real political settlement to this long-standing conflict. It would have to be based not on the personal ambitions or grudges but on Russia's real interests which, oddly enough, coincide with the interests of the Chechen people. It would be possible to find a mutually beneficial formula for the future relationship based on the principles of legality and justice.

Thank you for your attention.