

Is PACE Guilty of Double Standards?

Author: [Mikhail Ivanov](#)

Can Russia afford to ignore the Council of Europe's scathing rebukes? The answer is probably, yes.

The ultimatum which PACE has delivered to the Kremlin reeks of hypocrisy. Last week, the Parliamentary Assembly for the Council of Europe moved to strip Russia of its voting rights. It says Moscow must either end its military campaign in Chechnya and enter into peace talks with the breakaway republic's "elected" representatives or face expulsion from the council at its June session.

It is strange that PACE has only just woken up to the alarming human rights situation in Chechnya. In fact, the situation has been going from bad to worse since the early 1990s when hundreds of Russian refugees were forced by Chechen separatists to flee the republic. The same scenario was repeated in Kosovo when Serbs were ejected by the Muslim Kosovars (the Chechens' religious brethren) with the tacit approval of European human rights organisations, including PACE.

Nor did PACE make any attempt to hear the other side of the story. What of the victims of Chechen kidnappers who had made hostage-taking into a lucrative business? Violating the most basic human right - the right to life, the kidnappers have been known to behead their hostages, slice off their fingers or even shoot the weakest of them when they could walk no further -- as was the case with Itar-Tass photographer Vladimir Yatsina.

Instead of hearing the testimony of Yatsina's widow, PACE preferred to listen to the ubiquitous Radio Liberty correspondent Andrei Babitsky who, unlike Yatsina, returned safe and sound from his Chechen captivity. What measure of objectivity can one expect from Babitsky after he was provided with a personal pass signed by Shamil Basaev, a Chechen warlord wanted by the Russian prosecutor's office?

Finally, the very fact that representatives from the so-called Republic of Ichkeria were permitted to attend the PACE session made a mockery of the entire proceedings. How can PACE appeal to Russia to negotiate with the separatists when the Chechens themselves have proved incapable not only of holding any political dialogue but even of observing the most elementary norms of civilised behaviour?

At one point, Chechen representatives threatened to shoot Gadzhi Makhachev, a member of the Russian delegation, when he attempted to give the assembly his version of the Chechen incursion into Dagestan. Makhachev himself commented, "What talk can there be of human rights when [the Chechens] yell, 'We'll kill you!' in the PACE meeting hall?" And all this in the sight of European lawmakers who like to portray the said Chechens as the innocent victims of Russian abuses!

But the most pertinent issue that arose from last week's PACE session is this: the parliamentary assembly is applying double standards to Russia with relation to the Chechen campaign. Why, for example, didn't PACE condemn Latvia for harassing Russian war veterans or for letting SS veterans march through the streets of Riga?

The PACE delegates seem unable to fathom one important question: what is at stake for Russia in Chechnya? Once the West in general - and PACE in particular - can grasp the essence of Vladimir Putin's approach to the Chechen campaign, it will stop wasting its time on fruitless, one-sided discussions.

Putin provides an exhaustive answer to these questions in his recent book "In the First Person" -- and anything else he may say is little more than diplomacy. "For anyone with even a basic grasp of politics, it is absolutely clear that Chechnya won't be satisfied with its independence alone. Chechnya will be used as a springboard for future offensives against Russia. If we don't stop the extremists now, sooner or later we

will face a second Yugoslavia on Russian territory - the Balkanisation of the whole country, in fact."

He goes on to speculate what might have happened if Russia had continued to bow to the demands of Aslan Maskhadov's government. "If Dagestan had been overrun, we would have lost the whole Caucasus, that's pretty obvious. Dagestan, Ingushetia, then all the way up along the Volga river -- Bashkortostan, Tatarstan."

And, in the event of a mass exodus from these regions, Europe and America would be faced with a refugee crisis which would make the events in Yugoslavia seem like a children's picnic.

In a sense, what we are now seeing in the Caucasus is a chilling flashback to the 13-15th centuries when Russia served as a buffer between the Tatar hordes and the West. Now, instead of recognising Russia's attempts to contain the Islamic threat in the Caucasus, the Western powers blame her for using the only language the bandits understand: brute force.

Vladimir Putin's former colleagues from the German secret service, the BND, proved themselves to be rather more canny than the PACE delegates. According to reports leaked to the Russian press, BND recently sent a low-profile delegation to Russia to share intelligence on the Chechen rebels and their foreign sources of finance. It was a smart move: Islamic fundamentalism, after all, poses a threat to the whole of Europe, not just to Russia.

But beyond the global problems of Islamic militancy, we are faced with the practical question of what PACE will achieve if Russia is excluded from the Council of Europe on May 31 - and what the two sides will do in the run-up to the PACE deadline.

If PACE is sincere in its intentions, then any attempt to bar Russia from its brotherhood is akin to cutting off one's nose to spite one's face. Or, as we say in Russia, "cutting off one's ear to spite the babushka."

In the event of exclusion, European human rights campaigners would lose the only representative public forum capable of exerting some influence over Russia.

The fact is that Moscow will have to end the military phase of the operation even without pressure from PACE (it seems likely that the Russian leadership will choose Victory Day to proclaim the defeat of the Chechen rebels - veterans of the war are reportedly preparing for a commemorative parade on Red Square on May 9).

And Russians are only too aware of the military blunders committed in Chechnya - most recently the scandal surrounding Colonel Yuri Budanov accused of killing a Chechen girl. They don't need the bellicose Lord Judd or the pacific Mary Robinson to remind them.

Last but not least, as Nikolai Kharitonov, Russia's delegate to Strasbourg, points out, Russia would save \$25 million on its CE membership fee, money which could be better spent on the reconstruction of Chechnya.

Following an impassioned discussion of the PACE ultimatum in the State Duma this week, deputies toned down an initially furious response to Western censure of the Chechen campaign. By 384 votes to three, the Duma denounced the PACE vote as unacceptable and a "unilateral policy of dictating to Russia".

However, their final reply omitted an earlier decision to veto further PACE debates, commenting that Russian participation could only be resumed "after [the assembly] backs down from this discriminatory position".

So, the ball is now in the European court (and I don't mean the Court of Human Rights where Russia was supposed to stand trial). Dmitri Rogozin, chairman of the State Duma's committee on international relations, told Mayak Radio last week, "The Duma's position will be resolute and constructive at the same time" - that is to say, "We will not tolerate any attempts to rap our knuckles or teach us how to solve our internal problems but we are still open to dialogue."

Most likely, a compromise will be found on a "working level" -- an agreement reached between European foreign ministers. One should not forget that the PACE resolution is just a recommendation: key decisions are taken by governments, not by law-makers.

Last week during his meeting with the European Union's "troika", Russia's president elect, Vladimir Putin, promised to put forward proposals aimed at solving the Chechen problem by political means. He added that Russia would continue to cooperate closely with Europe.

The most likely outcome is that more envoys from Europe will jet off to Chechnya under Russian supervision so that PACE can restore voting rights to Russia without losing face. In fact, on April 12, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced that Benita Ferrero-Waldner, president of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, would be visiting Russia for four days, and Chechnya was, of course, included in her itinerary.

Meanwhile Russian federal troops will be given orders to step up the final annihilation of the Chechen rebels who, tenacious and warlike as they are, seem to be gravitating towards realism - on April 12, four detachments of Chechen separatists reportedly surrendered to the Russians.

This trend was confirmed by Aslan Maskhadov who has made yet another appeal to Russia to enter into peace talks which would seem to infer that the Chechen president is seriously concerned about his own fate. This is hardly surprising in the circumstances: both Aslan Maskhadov and Shamil Basaev are wanted by Russian prosecutors and risk joining their comrade Salman Raduev who is currently cooling his heels in Moscow's Lefortovo prison.

And, in the worst case scenario, Russia has little to lose. If the European Council votes to exclude Russia from its ranks, the existing moratorium on capital punishment is likely to be revoked and Moscow will take advantage of PACE's intransigence to impose the death sentence on captured Chechen commanders found guilty of war crimes. At present, the growing number of warlords in Russian captivity face life sentences and remain as figureheads for the rebels still at large.

Postscript: as this article was going to press, the leadership of the Council of Europe held a joint session with OSCE leaders and effectively rejected the PACE ultimatum. The council stated that Russia should retain its full mandate but urged Moscow to investigate all cases of human rights abuse in Chechnya and punish any guilty parties. Representatives from international organisations, it stipulated, should be allowed to visit the region. Moscow, however, had already anticipated this appeal by staging the Ferrero-Waldner visit.

Mikhail Ivanov is executive editor of Russian Life, a bimonthly magazine published by Russian Information Services, Inc.

Location: [Caucasus](#)
[Stavropol](#)

South Ossetia
Russia

Focus: Caucasus

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/pace-guilty-double-standards>