

Putin's Peace Games

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Peace in Chechnya is a virtual impossibility as long as Moscow continues to make demands that no rebel leader can realistically deliver.

In Chechnya, the doves of peace are strictly for show. Now and again, the Kremlin may pull them out of its top-hat to appease the international community but the fact is that their wings are clipped and their olive branches have seen better days.

Since the military campaign was launched last September, Moscow has stuck rigidly to its guns, demanding the rebels abandon their resistance, lay down their arms and hand over the "principle terrorists".

Unfortunately, these are terms which no single Chechen leader can hope to deliver.

Fresh hopes for peace were raised on April 6 when rebel president Aslan Maskhadov told Germany's Deutsche Welle radio station, "We are ready to end the war without condition and free all Russian prisoners."

Unexpectedly, the announcement won a cautious welcome from Sergei Yastrzhembsky, the Kremlin's chief spokesman on Chechnya who said, "We cannot rule out initiating political processes in Chechnya provided the rebel leadership meets certain conditions."

Then, early last week, Russia's foreign minister, Igor Ivanov, declared in an interview with CNN, "The military operation is over and the time has come for a political solution to the Chechen crisis."

Scarcely able to conceal its jubilation, the international community glimpsed light at the end of the tunnel.

But things are not always what they seem. Yastrzhembsky's comments came just days before Russia's president elect, Vladimir Putin, paid his first official visit to London and have been dismissed as an attempt to curry favour with the West.

Meanwhile, Ivanov's words were undermined by General Gennady Troshev, acting commander-in-chief of the Russian forces in Chechnya, who said, "It is too early to say the war has ended," shortly before launching a massive airborne operation in the south of the embattled republic.

On April 20, Nikolai Koshman, Russia's top official in Chechnya, ruled out the possibility of peace talks between Putin and the rebel leader, explaining, "Maskhadov has no control over anything and there is no point in negotiating with him."

In fact, any moves towards striking a deal with Maskhadov would encounter widespread opposition in Russia. The government is still haunted by memories of the Khasavyurt agreement of 1996 when the Chechen rebels dictated their terms to a defeated federal army.

The generals have already told Putin in no uncertain terms that they will not accept any attempts at bargaining with the rebels and even warn that any further humiliations could trigger a collapse of the military hierarchy.

At the same time, recent polls show that more than 60 per cent of the Russian public supports the war which played an important role in securing Putin the presidency in March.

In real terms, it is virtually impossible for Putin to accept Maskhadov as his opposite number over the negotiating table. The rebel leader was legally elected president of Chechnya according to the terms of the Khasavyurt agreement. However, the raids on Dagestan staged by field commanders Shamil Basaev and Khattab last August directly contravened the agreement's non-aggression pact and cast real doubts over Maskhadov's legitimate claim to the presidency. The armed incursions also proved to the world at large that Chechnya's elected leader had little control over his people.

In a recent twist, Maskhadov has distanced himself from the two Wahhabi warlords, describing them as "provocateurs". But Moscow has made it very clear that any Chechen leader who wants to show good faith must hand over both Basaev and Khattab. Given the Chechen traditions of blood vengeance, this is not an option open to the rebel president.

In fact, leaders who represent the interests of the Chechen people are thin on the ground. Last week, the republic's spiritual leader, Akhmed Hadji Kadyrov, volunteered his services as a mediator. But, at the same time, Bislan Gantamirov, the former mayor of Grozny, resigned as head of the pro-Moscow Chechen militia, complaining of the brutal tactics employed by the federal army.

Attempts by Ingushetia's president, Ruslan Aushev, and the North Ossetian leader, Alexander Dzasokhov, to play the role of peace-makers have so far been inconclusive.

Given the huge diversity of opinion both in Chechnya and Russia, what future is there for the breakaway republic?

Abdul-Khakim Sultygov, of the Islamic Rifakh party, is calling for a referendum in Chechnya to decide two crucial issues - Chechnya's status in the Russian Federation and the drawing up of a new constitution.

"Why did the war start in Chechnya when we had legally elected presidents?" he asks. "Because one basic question was never decided - the question of Chechnya's status. In 1993, many Chechens were against seceding from the Federation and for that reason in June 1993 Dudaev dissolved the parliament and banned any such referendum. Maskhadov did the same. We begged him to hold this referendum but he just introduced the shariat into the republic. And look how things have turned out."

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