

Russia Celebrates Diplomatic Coup ^[1]

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The Bush administration's tough stance over Chechnya comes in sharp contrast to the latest developments in Strasbourg

Few doubted that the Council of Europe would eventually restore Russia's voting rights, suspended in protest against alleged human rights abuses in Chechnya. But it came as an agreeable surprise that the PACE delegates changed their minds so quickly.

Local observers are inclined to attribute this diplomatic coup to the concerted efforts of the Russian delegates who tirelessly lobbied their European colleagues in the run-up to the January session.

As a result, all PACE's political groups and committees voted by a wide majority to restore Russia's voting rights in full. And, in a follow-up interview with *Sevodnya* daily newspaper, the PACE spokeswoman on legal issues commented that it is only possible to bring peace back to Chechnya with the direct help of Russia's parliament - repeating word for word the central thesis of the Russian delegation.

Now Russia will have at least eight Duma deputies sitting on a joint working group on Chechnya which will also include representatives from a range of PACE political and legal committees.

One cannot overestimate the political significance of Russia's diplomatic victory in Strasbourg. At a press conference hosted by Moscow's Interfax agency, the delegation's chairman, Dmitri Rogozin, commented, "For the first time, it was recognised in official PACE documents that Russia is up against international terrorists in Chechnya."

Moreover, added Rogozin, the PACE members seem to have "lost interest" in the official representatives of Aslan Maskhadov's rebel Chechen government.

However, against the backdrop of improved relations with Strasbourg, a recent statement made by US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher struck a discordant note.

Speaking on January 24, when it was clear that Russia's voting rights would be restored, Boucher - echoing the tough stance adopted by the Bush administration towards Russia - urged Moscow to enter into talks with the rebels in Chechnya.

He also cast serious doubts over recent announcements by President Vladimir Putin's government that the number of troops in the breakaway republic would be dramatically reduced.

His statement flies in the face of any political or military logic. It is totally unclear why Russian should make any concessions towards the rebels now that their forces have been decimated and the number of captured warlords continues to rise.

Just last week, the field commander Isa Dukaev -- a close associate of Shamil Basaev -- was seized during a joint operation conducted by the FSB and the defence ministry. One of the high points of Dukaev's military career was taking part in the 1995 terrorist raid on the Budennovsk maternity home - a feat which earned him the Chechen government's highest award, The Honour of the Nation. Now, armed with information

obtained during Dukaev's "debrief", the FSB operatives seem confident they will soon be able to capture Basaev himself.

However, another warlord, Yakub Gizan, is still at large. According to the latest information received from Russian special operatives, Khattab's right-hand man is currently holding the US hostage, Kenny Gluck, of Medecins Sans Frontieres, who was seized from Starye Atagi on January 9.

Here perhaps, the Russian military has partially satisfied Boucher's calls for a dialogue with the rebels: representatives from Russia's Combined Army Group have reportedly entered into negotiations with the kidnapers.

According to Kommersant daily newspaper, the Russians have told Gizan's men that they are ready to exchange Gluck for captured Chechen fighters but have as yet refused to pay a ransom.

Kommersant quoted General Valery Baranov, the top army commander in Chechnya, as saying, "The bandits are now in a tough spot and may have no alternative but to kill [Gluck]."

So much for negotiations. Either the Chechens get their way or they end up killing the American aid worker - just as they killed the four British hostages in 1997. What is the Russian army to do? Perhaps Richard Boucher has some answers.

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