

The Search for a Chechen Arafat

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Although Vladimir Putin continues to rule out the possibility of holding peace talks with Aslan Maskhadov, there is every sign that he is keeping his options open

Vladimir Putin has dispelled any lingering illusions that the Kremlin sees Aslan Maskhadov as a serious political force in Chechnya, describing the rebel president as "politically impotent".

Speaking at a roundtable meeting with journalists, Putin admitted he had received a written proposal for peace talks in March via the Ingushetian president, Ruslan Aushev.

The Russian leader said his advisors had examined the terms of the proposal, changed some of the emphasis and sent it back via the same channel. But to no avail.

"We just replaced some words and put the comma where it belongs in the phrase, 'kaznit nelzya pomilovat'," said Putin, cracking one of his trademark macabre jokes (depending on the position of the comma, the phrase can mean "Don't punish when you can pardon" or "Don't pardon when you can punish").

He added, "If Maskhadov wants [to hand over the Chechen warlords] but is unable to do so - if he is suffering from political impotence - then we are ready to help him."

Making it clear that Russia "will not talk to people who do nothing but make a lot of noise" Putin unveiled his plans for Chechnya after the military campaign is over. He said Russian troops would remain in the breakaway republic "indefinitely" in order to provide solid guarantees of peace.

Putin also stressed that Russia still considers Maskhadov a "criminal" who should take advantage of Moscow's proposed amnesty - that is, to co-operate with the Russian authorities or face political oblivion at best.

But, in fact, Moscow's attitude to the Chechen president remains ambivalent. This was reflected in surprise remarks made on television by military commanders who revealed that they knew of Maskhadov's exact location but had received no orders to arrest him.

Then a sensational report in Wednesday's edition of *Sevodnya* claimed that Maskhadov was actually planning to give himself up to the Russian forces, rather as the legendary Chechen warlord Imam Shamil surrendered himself to Tsar Alexander II in 1859.

By now there can be no doubt that Maskhadov has very little control - if any - over the most intransigent field commanders such as Shamil Basaev and the Arab mercenary Khattab. An intercepted radio transmission made public by the Information Centre of the Russian Armed Forces revealed that Basaev had told Maskhadov to drop all talk of striking a peace deal with Moscow or risk revenge attacks against members of his immediate family.

If the *Sevodnya* report is to be believed, Maskhadov's decision to surrender - which will be billed as "a bid to avert the genocide of the Chechen people" - is simply part of a newly emerging pattern.

Such an arrangement would undoubtedly suit both sides. It is now incumbent on Maskhadov to sell his reputation as dearly as possible and to save his family from a vengeful backlash. The Kremlin, on the other hand, recognises the need to negotiate with some representative of the Chechen people but is having a hard time finding a suitable candidate.

After all, the word "surrender" -- anathema to any self-respecting Chechen fighter -- could simply be packaged by the pro-Russian media as a "belated but reasonable step in the right direction".

In a related development, the liberal Russian daily Vedomosti (financed, among others, by the Wall Street Journal) recently came up with the thought-provoking suggestion that Russia now needs its own "Yasser Arafat" to resolve the Chechen conflict.

Of course, while there is a good argument for having such a negotiator on the Chechen side, the resolution of the Caucasus crisis will require quite very a different approach to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

What is clear is that a legitimate Chechen leader has to be found. Now Russia appears to be putting its faith in the ex-mayor of Grozny and head of the Chechen militia, Beslan Gantamirov. Recently promoted to lieutenant-colonel in the Russian army, he has even had a Grozny street named in his honour.

Some local observers see Moscow's endorsement of Gantamirov as a victory for Chechen hard-liners and a blow against the billionaire tycoon, Boris Berezovsky, who has reportedly been pushing for talks with Maskhadov.

But Gantamirov, who was released from jail by the Kremlin after Grozny's ruling elite had conspired to put him there, may be little more than a temporary leader, a stop-gap to fill Chechnya's political vacuum.

Gantamirov has certainly proved his allegiance to Putin - but this doesn't necessarily make him the right choice for a national leader. Furthermore, Gantamirov is known to be at odds with Nikolai Koshman, Russia's permanent representative in Chechnya. He is also said to have threatened to dismiss 2,000 of his loyal militiamen because of a dispute with the Russian interior ministry over pay. The threat prompted the interior minister, Vladimir Rushailo, to make an urgent visit to Chechnya last week in a bid to defuse the situation.

For now, it looks as if the loyal yet rather unpredictable Gantamirov is the Kremlin's best bet. But the Kremlin is not putting all its eggs in one basket. Apparently, Putin is smart enough to realise that he may need an alternative to Gantamirov if his presidential ambitions go too far. Such an approach would give Moscow enough leeway to prepare for presidential elections in Chechnya, which are at least two years away.

Thus the Kremlin will have ample time to see how Gantamirov shapes up. Meanwhile Maskhadov - should he choose to surrender - will be able to define his own role: as Arafat the Terrorist, from his PLO days, or as Arafat the Peacemaker -- the Palestinian leader who finally chose to patch up relations with his arch-enemy across the River Jordan.

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