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Chechnya's Referendum: Towards Dialogue or Dead End?

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As conflict in Chechnya continues, civilian casualties have risen, rebel tactics and military abuses have escalated, and dialogue has stalled. A constitutional referendum on March 23, 2003 was timed to coincide with a limited withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya. Some observers hoped that the vote would contribute to peace and a restoration of civil society to Chechens, while others have rejected it as a disingenuous and illegitimate public relations stunt.

In the aftermath of the referendum, on March 25, 2003 a panel of experts analyzed the outcome at USIP [Current Issues Briefing](#). Moderated by Institute program officer and Russia expert Anne Henderson, the briefing featured Zaindi Choltaev with the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars' Kennan Institute, Glen Howard of the American Committee for Peace in Chechnya, and Mike Morrow with the U.S. Department of State's Office of Russian Affairs.

Building Trust on the Road to Peace

While referenda are typically thought of as populist or "bottom-up" political initiatives, according to Chechen politics expert Zaindi Choltaev, historically this has been anything but the case in Chechnya. In fact, he stated, every referendum held in Chechnya from Napoleon to the one in March has originated as a "top-down" political initiative of the controlling authority. Although Choltaev believed that the referendum stemmed from a sincere interest by Russian president Vladimir Putin to find a peaceful settlement to the conflict in Chechnya, the referendum alone, he stressed, would not be enough.

Citing the litany of human rights abuses and other atrocities committed by the Russian army in Chechnya throughout the conflict, Choltaev suggested that trust building measures were needed before any political process could take hold. Unfortunately, however, little progress has been made in this area, since Russian military officers accused of committing atrocities in Chechnya have been promoted instead of being investigated and punished. This, he said, in combination with uncertainty within the Putin government about which parties on the Chechen side should be considered legitimate negotiation partners, has created a fog of uneasiness and distrust that has engulfed both sides of the conflict.

Therefore, any peace process initiated in the wake of the referendum, he noted, would be confronted with an emotionally charged environment of mutual distrust. While Choltaev believed that many within Chechnya were optimistic about what may come out of the referendum, specific actions aimed at building trust would be a vital first step in the process. For example, Choltaev pointed out, the official recognition by Russian officials of human rights abuses committed by the Russian military in Chechnya could create an environment where post-referendum peace initiatives would be able to take root. "There can be no peace," Choltaev cautioned, "that is not based on fairness."

Making the Referendum Matter

Can the March 23 referendum be a turning point in the conflict in Chechnya? According to Mike Morrow,

deputy director of the Office of Russian Affairs at the U.S. Department of State, while the referendum is not a turning point in U.S. policy, follow-up to the referendum may provide an opportunity for increased Russian-Chechen dialogue. "Our hope," Morrow stated, "is [that] the referendum can help usher in a broad political process that will lead to the creation of self-government for Chechnya."

Discussing the conduct of the referendum, Morrow noted that it was still uncertain how legitimate the results of the referendum would be considered. In particular, he noted that the lack of U.S. and international observers on hand to monitor the process was an area of concern for many. Nevertheless, Morrow believed that the lack of substantial violence, including inaction on a death sentence issued by Chechen Islamic militants on any Muslims participating in the referendum, was a positive sign of the commitment of Chechens to finding a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

To move the peace process forward in the wake of the referendum, Morrow offered three main courses of action:

1. Russian leaders must take demonstrable steps to stop torture and other human rights atrocities—including indiscriminate killings of Chechens by the Russian military.
2. Chechen leaders must make a serious and sustained effort to stop further terrorist actions and disassociate themselves from international terrorist groups operating in the region.
3. Impartial administration of the rule of law must be a priority on both sides. This includes the prosecution of war crimes by the Russian military and putting a stop to extra-judicial killings by Chechen separatist groups and others in Chechnya.

From the Polls to Peace: Ensuring an International Commitment

Glen Howard, executive director of the American Committee for Peace in Chechnya, described the current state of political efforts to address the conflict in Chechnya as a stalemate. However, of the contributing factors to the situation, Howard said, one of the most important was the lack of serious attention the issue has received within the U.S. policy community.

While the United States has always supported Russia's right to maintain its territorial integrity, Morrow noted that attention to human rights issues and other concerns related to the conflict have received less attention from the U.S. government in the wake of 9/11. With many in the administration concerned with maintaining Russia's cooperation in the ongoing U.S. campaign against international terrorism first and foremost, the primary U.S. focus on Chechnya has been on connections between Chechen separatists and international terrorist groups such as al Qaeda. However, as Howard pointed out, this has left U.S. policymakers focused on just one of the symptoms caused by the ongoing instability in Chechnya and not focused on the underlying causes. But what concrete steps could U.S. policymakers take to further the development of a vibrant peace process in Chechnya?

Howard outlined three potential actions that the United States that could take:

1. Apply political pressure to both Russian and Chechen leadership, in a role similar to U.S. involvement in the talks leading to the Good Friday accords, to start an active dialogue on a political solution to the conflict in Chechnya.
2. Work with the international community to provide an economic incentive package for peace in Chechnya.
3. Continue to work with the Putin government and others to combat the work of international terrorist groups in Chechnya and other potential "spoilers" of a serious peace process.

In closing, Howard stressed that to date U.S. policymakers have been reluctant to expend much, if any, political capital on resolving the conflict. However, just as the United States came to appreciate in Afghanistan, allowing the conflict to fester and Chechnya to become a haven for terrorists and Islamic

extremists was a threat not only to U.S. and Russian national security, but to the international community as a whole.

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This summary reflects the presentations and comments from "[Chechnya's Referendum: Towards Dialogue or Dead End?](#)"—a Current Issues Briefing held at the U.S. Institute of Peace March 25, 2003. The views summarized above reflect the discussion at the meeting; they do not represent formal positions taken by the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

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