Chapter - IV
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THE PERCEPTION OF THE RUSSIAN PEOPLE TOWARDS THE CHECHEN CONFLICT AND ITS RESOLUTION

Having discussed the various aspects of conflict and conflict resolution in Chechnya in the last three chapters, this chapter is geared to evaluate the opinion of Russian public towards the Chechen conflict and its resolution. The evaluation of the perception of the Russian people is imperative since their opinion becomes a crucial determinant in the policy formulation by the politicians and the bureaucrats. This opinion, however, is very subjective and shifts according to circumstances. Nonetheless, this survey represents the current situation and holds true till the time an ideological or a substantial change in the politics and society of Russia takes place.

A questionnaire having a set of questions with multiple choice answers related to the conflict in Chechnya was distributed by me to the public in Moscow and in its vicinities. Although the sample size is very small, having only 308 respondents, it is still representative of the most dominant opinion, on various aspects of Chechnya,
prevalent in Russia today. This can be said with a fair amount of certainty because when compared to similar opinion polls on this issue, we found that they also came to an analogous conclusion.

**Research Objectives, Tasks and Methods**

- **Research Objectives**: Monitoring the opinion of the Russian people to understand the conflict in Chechnya and use this information for my Ph.D. thesis.

- **Research Task**:
  - Examining the perceived causes of conflict in Chechnya among the Russian people
  - Assessing the role of military in the conflict
  - Evaluating the prospect of peace in Chechnya after the presidential election in the Republic
  - Representation of the support of Russians for Chechen independence
  - Eliciting the opinion of public on their notion of conflict resolution in Chechnya
  - Assessing public opinion on the role of USA and Europe in this conflict
• **Research Methods:**

- Between August 13 and December 8, 2004, many surveys were conducted in Moscow and its vicinities amongst the adult (18 years and older) population of Russia.

- **Method:** A questionnaire having a set of questions with multiple choice answers was given to each respondent. Respondents had the option of choosing more than one choice answer. Colleges, institutes, individual residences, market place and offices were selected for this purpose.

- **Sample:** Random, stratified and representative in terms of age, sex, educational qualification and location.

- **Sample Size:** 308 respondents

• **Qualifications:**

This survey has an urban bias with most of the respondents living in Moscow and its vicinities.

**Gender Distribution of Respondents**

As we have noted earlier there were total of 308 respondents. Since they also had the option of not revealing their identity, a very large chunk i.e. 36.4 percent (112 persons) exercised this option. This itself indicates a fear of security agencies among the people. Many of them feared that if they supported the cause of the Chechen independence or made
anti-government remarks they could be tracked down by the security agencies, while some felt that the surveyor could have links with the security agencies. As I found in interviews and discussions, most of the Chechen respondents did not want to reveal their identity. Also in the questionnaire, most of those who appeared to be pro-Chechen, supporting independence or critical of the Russian government’s policy, have hidden their whereabouts. This explains the condition of freedom of expression in Russia. In fact, this fear is overwhelming. This is an outcome of the Soviet legacy and national security considerations and, even today, the fear of security agencies is much more than what we can imagine in India.

Out of those who disclosed their identity, 36.4 percent (i.e. total 112) were female and 27.3 percent (i.e. total 84) were male. Also, as we shall see later, a higher percentage of female support the cause of Chechen independence than those of male.
Pie Chart 1: Gender percentages of total 308 respondents. Missing implies those respondents who did not reveal their identity.

The Causes of Conflict in Chechnya as Perceived by Russians

To evaluate the perceived causes of conflict, the questionnaire put the following question with multiple choice answers:

(1) **What do you think are the causes of conflict in Chechnya?**

A) Secessionism (ethnic separatism-nationalism)
B) Islamic fundamentalism
C) Russian central policy which includes military excesses and misconduct
D) Militants from outside (esp. Muslims from Georgia, Afghanistan, Arab, Iran etc.
E) Historical deportation by Stalin in the 1940s
F) Vested interests of various economic and commercial groups in Chechnya and in other parts of Russia
G) Any other cause you think (explain)

Almost all the respondents answered this question and many of them marked more than one option as the causes of conflict there. A quick glance at the pie chart below will show the importance of factors, in the eyes of Russians, responsible for the conflict in Chechnya:

Pie Chart 2: Percentage of respondents and their opinion about the causes of conflict in Chechnya
Here, we can see that most of the people, i.e. 34 percent, rightly consider a combination of factors as the reason for the crisis in Chechnya. But ironically, 31.8 percent of the respondents think that the ongoing crisis in Chechnya is an outcome of vested interests of various economic and commercial groups in both Chechnya and Russia. ¹ Here, they refer to the people who are getting benefit from the smuggling of oil, arms and drugs. Military industrial complexes in Russia are other beneficiaries. Military has its own interests in pursuing war. In war conditions, military plays a very crucial role in the decision making. The Russian military with its subdued role in the post-Soviet period does not want to forgo this opportunity. Therefore, the vested interests of various groups remain the foremost independent cause of conflict in Chechnya.

¹ This percentage will go higher if we take the share from those who think that a combination of factors is responsible. It should be noted that the percentage of each category will be proportionately higher if we take each category’s share from the combination of factor. Here, a combination of factor has been treated independently since this truly represents the causes of conflict and many of the options are overlapping. Also for anyone it is difficult to assign any one cause as the main cause of conflict. When a respondent marks only one option that means he considers that factor to be the most important rather than the sole reason.
Interestingly, the historical reality does not resurrect in the mind of Russians. Only 4.5 percent of the respondents think that the historical deportation by Stalin could be the cause of conflict there. This is in contrast to what most of the western writers assume. As we have seen in the previous chapters, most of the western and non-Russian writers consider the historical deportation of the Chechens by Stalin as one of the most important causes of conflict there. This historical animosity becomes an important factor in the
primordial formulation of the theory of conflict in Chechnya. But for the Russians, this simply does not count. The Chechens do not have the same opinion as Russians on this matter and if we see the various web-sites, journals and newsletters published by them, this historical tragedy is always mourned. The insurgent groups always mobilize the Chechens against the Russians citing this tragic incidence. Thus, the Russian perception on deportation and its impact on the present crisis in Chechnya seems to be different from the rest of the worldview.

On the role of Islamic fundamentalism and militants from outside, less than 10 percent of the respondents think that this could be the cause of conflict in Chechnya. This is in contrast to the official Russian view which invariably blames outside militants and the spread of conservative Islam as the cause of conflict in Chechnya. Our assumption, as we have seen in the earlier chapters, that the cause of conflict is deep rooted and not simply the product of outside mercenaries, has been corroborated here.

It should also be noted that less than 10 percent of the respondents think that secessionism (and ethnic nationalism) is the cause of conflict. This appears to contradict what we have argued in the previous chapters. We have deliberated
upon the ethnic factor and characterized this to be the main cause of conflict. Then why do the Russians think otherwise? It has to be understood that ethnic-secessionism is a very broad category. All the other options that we put forward can come under the category of ethnic secessionism. The option of ethnic secessionism overlaps with all other options. As a result, the respondents found it more convenient to mark the very specific category rather than an abstract theoretical formulation. Again, to understand what ethnicity and ethnic secessionism mean, a basic comprehension of the concepts of social science is needed. Since the respondents came from a variety of educational background it can not be expected from them to have an understanding of such abstract themes.

We have already explained in the previous chapters that ethnic conflict in Chechnya is the combined outcome of historical deportation, Islamic fundamentalism and mercenaries, Russian policy and the vested interests of the various groups. If a respondent marks any one of these options, he is, in a way, endorsing the cause of ethnic secessionism.
Gender Difference in Responses

To examine the difference in responses according to gender, we have created a cross tabulation below. It should be kept in mind that we do not know the gender of 36.4 percent of the total 308 respondents since they chose not to disclose their identity. But we know the gender of 197 respondents and there appears to be no striking difference in the response between male and female except that only 25 percent of male respondents think the combination of most of the factors as the cause of conflict while this percentage is 38 for the female. Also, female members do not put blame on secessionism, militants from outside or historical deportation. Their main focus is on the vested interests of various groups as the single-most important cause. This stands true for male as well. The male members do not blame the Russian policy towards Chechnya as one of the causes of conflict while 6 percent of the female respondents think this to be as one of the causes and this figure is 12 percent for those who did not disclose their identity.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex of the respondent</th>
<th>The Causes of Conflict</th>
<th>Islamic fundamentalism and Militant from outside other countries</th>
<th>Combination of many</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Secessism</td>
<td>Islam Fundamentalism</td>
<td>Russian Policy</td>
<td>Outside Militants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Sex of the respondent</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Sex of the respondent</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undisclosed</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Sex of the respondent</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Sex of the respondent</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cross Tabulation 1: Chart showing the gendered responses of the causes of conflict.
The Role of Military

To evaluate the role of military the questionnaire put the following question:

(2) How do you assess the role of Russian military in this conflict?

a) Doing good work and should continue operations in Chechnya
b) Should withdraw from Chechnya immediately
c) Is corrupt and has aggravated the crisis further
d) Is hand-in-gloves with the terrorists/separatists
e) Any other suggestion (Explain)

This question brought us to an interesting conclusion that while 52 percent of the respondents think that the Russian military is doing good work in Chechnya, and therefore, should continue, almost 41 percent are not happy with the work of military in Chechnya. Rest 7 percent are not aware of any good work by the military. Thus, a positive role of military is approved by only about 50 percent of the respondents, the other 50 are very critical of military’s role in Chechnya. 18 percent of the latter feel that army should withdraw from Chechnya immediately. Another 18 percent think that military is corrupt and this has aggravated the
crisis there. 5 percent think that military is hand-in-gloves with the terrorists. On the whole Russians do not approve the current way of military functioning in Chechnya. If this is the situation in Russia, we can only imagine what impression the Chechens might have about the Russian army.

Pie Chart 3: The image and role of military in the eyes of Russians
New Government under (late) Akhmad Kadyrov and Prospects of Peace

In between the period of my survey, the election of the president in the republic of Chechnya took place in October 2004. This was in response to the referendum that took place in early 2003, and in this, according to official reports, more than 80 percent of the voters desired to remain within the Russian Federation. The western reporters, however, reported widespread rigging and contradicted this figure. This, nonetheless, had raised the hope of the international community that Chechen problem could be managed if Russia followed a constitutional and democratic path. This did not happen and with the benefit of hindsight we can safely assert that Chechen problem is far from any resolution. The assassination of the president Akhmad Kadyrov, who had the backing of Russian government, is an indication of the volatile situation prevailing there.

To gauge the opinion of the public on this issue we asked the following question:
(3) Do you think that the victory of Akhmad Kadyrov in the last election in Chechnya will solve the problem? 

a) Yes  
b) No  
c) Can not Say

The responses of the public were an overwhelming "No". 61 percent of the respondents categorically said that the new government can not resolve the problem. Almost 30 percent said they were unable to say anything at this stage. Probably they were uncertain of the future and did not want to predict. Only 7 percent of the respondents believed that the new government under Kadyrov can resolve the problem. It has been made clear in the previous chapters that Russians (people) did not have faith upon (late) Akhmad Kadyrov and considered him to be an opportunist, who being a rebel himself before 2000, became important under the patronage of Russian government. His victory in the election was also stage managed by the Russian government. Though backed by the government, Kadyrov was disliked by the people of Russia. In conclusion, the outcome of the survey that

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2 Akhmad Kadyrov was alive that time. He was assassinated in a bomb blast by the Chechen rebels on May 9, 2004. The date for new presidential election has been declared as September 5, 2004.
Akhmad Kadyrov can not solve the problem has been proved correct by the future events. In the quagmire of Chechnya, Kadyrov lost his life too.

Pie Chart 4: Opinion on whether new government under (late) Akhmad Kadyrov can solve the problem

The Independence of Chechnya

The issue of the independence of Chechnya was the most important question and this is one area where the opinion of people will play a crucial role on whether Chechnya is granted independence or not. We have seen in the previous chapters that the opinion of the Russians on this issue is not
constant and it has changed with the time. Before 1996, a very high percentage of Russians supported independence but this percentage slid drastically by 1999. This was the result of antipathy generated among the Russians by the constant bombing of the civilian places by the Chechen terrorist and also due to a strict management of media by the government which vilified Chechens but remained silent on government atrocities.

In order to determine the opinion of public the questionnaire placed a straight question:

(4) **Do you support the view that Chechnya should be granted independence?**

a) Yes  
b) No  
c) Can not say

As we can see from the pie chart below an overwhelming percentage of public in Russia is against the independence of Chechnya from Russia. Seventy five percent of the respondents reject the notion of independence, while 7 percent are not sure of what to say. But again it should be noted that almost 18 percent of the respondents are in support of independence. This is a quite high percentage
given the fact that this survey was conducted in Moscow (Russia). If 18 percent of Russians are in support of secession, this percent must be very high among Chechens in Chechnya. This contradicts the figure of the government, projected on the basis of the referendum conducted by it in early 2003, according to which more than 80 percent of the Chechens agreed to remain within the constitutional framework of Russia.

**Pie Chart 5: Public opinion on whether Chechnya be granted independence**

Having seen the extent of support among Russians for the independence of Chechnya, let us examine the difference
of responses on the basis of gender. This has been shown in the Cross Tabulation Chart 2 given below. If we see this chart we come to one definite conclusion: the support for independence of Chechnya among female is more than that of male members. While only 8 percent of the male members support independence, 25 percent of the females support this. We have seen earlier how Mother’s Associations and other female organizations are very active in Russia. These associations constitute mothers whose sons are in army and are fighting in Chechnya. These associations have played a crucial role in bringing about the genuine figures of the death of army in Chechnya which is often hidden by the government. Since the main brunt of the death of an army member is borne by wives and mothers in the family, they want an immediate and lasting solution, even if that means secession of Chechnya. Many surveys have shown that females are the worst sufferer in any war. Even if the cost of consumer items or tax increases due to war, the ultimate burden of this inflation falls on females. This explains why the support for independence is more among the female members of Russia. For them protecting family is more important than preserving obsolete nation boundaries. Though appearing
narrow and parochial, this eventually translates into the welfare of the society.

**Sex of the respondent and Do you support the view that Chechnya be granted independence?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex of the respondent</th>
<th>Do you support the view that Chechnya be granted independence?</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Sex of the respondent</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Sex of the respondent</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
<td>69.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undisclosed</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Sex of the respondent</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>74.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Sex of the respondent</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cross Tabulation 2: Gendered responses on whether Chechnya be granted independence

**Proper Solution of the Crisis**

Our next question was to determine what Russians think about the solution of the crisis in Chechnya. We asked the following question:

(5) **What according to you would be the proper solution of crisis in Chechnya?**

a) More autonomy and powers to the republic

b) Full control by the centre (Moscow)

c) Peaceful negotiation which involves centre, new government in Chechnya and the various terrorist groups
d) Any other method you think

The responses were mixed. While a staggering 43 percent of the respondents wanted full control by the centre, 27 percent wanted more autonomy and 27 percent desired peaceful negotiations which include the centre, Chechen government and various terrorist groups. Since the option of peaceful negotiation and more autonomy is overlapping and not contradictory, if we combine these two options, we come to a conclusion that more than 50 percent of the respondents want an amicable solution of the crisis. This goes against the siege mentality that prevails among the ruling class.

Pie Chart 6: Public opinion on proper solution of the crisis
What would be the proper solution of the crisis?

Line Chart 2: Proper solution of the crisis in the eyes of Russian

Another recent survey in Russia found Putin enjoying a high public approval rating of 70 percent. But as many as 65 percent of those responding said they were disappointed at his handling of the Chechnya problem, saying he has not been able to control the armed rebels or reach a political solution. A July 2004 survey by Russia’s most respected polling institute showed that only 29 percent support the war.

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-- a sharp decline from 70 percent in early 2000. Most Russians do not believe the Chechen conflict can be resolved by military force. Warlike rhetoric -- whether anti-Chechen, anti-Georgian or directed against international terrorism -- isn't likely to cause them to change their minds.

Still another survey of 2002 had come to the conclusion that the war is not popular, and while there is not much detailed information in the Russian media about the war, the subject evokes a variety of intense negative feelings. The same survey also found that only a few Russians are concerned about human rights abuses in Chechnya; it is not an important factor driving the war's unpopularity. The consideration about human rights and civil liberties do not shape up the assessment of Russians about war. Instead, loss of Russian troops, military failure, and economic costs are more likely to turn Russians against the war. This finding points to the importance of critical media; to the extent that the government increasingly controls media markets and, specifically, information about Russian casualties, battlefield failures, and the expenses of the war, it is able to prevent

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4 See Masha Limpa, “Saber Rattling in Russia’s No-Win War”, Washington Post, August 26, 2002

strong opposition from developing. Therefore, an important lesson for the anti-war group and media is to raise the public awareness about the virtues of civil liberties and human rights and expose the social and economic casualties of the war.

Role of USA and Europe

Finally, we wanted to ascertain the public’s opinion on the role of the United States of America (USA) and Europe in this crisis. We put a direct question:

(6) How do you see the role of America (USA) and the rest of Europe in this crisis?
   a) Positive
   b) Negative
   c) Can not say

Here, we got an unexpected result. 82 percent of the respondents think that the role of America and Europe is negative in this conflict. Only 2 percent of the respondents think that they have played any positive role. When we talked to people we found that many of the people believe that America and Europe are abetting the terrorist by not capturing them and providing them harbours and funds. They also felt that America is trying to make benefit out of this
crisis by damaging Russia's reputation in the name of human rights violation. They are critical of America's double standards: killing terrorists and civilians in Afghanistan and Iraq but criticizing Russia for the same cause. Anti-American sentiment is rampant in the Russian society. This survey clearly proves this point. (See Pie Chart 7)

Pie Chart 7: Public Opinion on the role of America and Europe in this conflict
Conclusion

The findings of our survey steer us to put forth following remarks. First, while ethno-secessionism remains the main cause of the conflict in Chechnya, the crisis has persisted because of the vested interests of various groups at both local and federal levels. Secondly, the Russians are equally divided on the role of military. Almost half of the respondents were critical and dismissive of the role of military in Chechnya. A little less than a quarter of them wanted the military to withdraw. Thirdly, few believed that the new government under (late) Akhmad Kadyrov could solve the crisis in Chechnya. This is in contrast to government’s view which placed absolute faith upon Kadyrov’s abilities. Fourthly, Russians do not want Chechnya to secede. But they neither support the ongoing war in Chechnya. They want a change in the Russia’s policy towards Chechnya. Most of them suggest an amicable solution of the conflict which will involve a dialogue among all the major parties in the conflict. Fifthly, it has also been found that Russians are more receptive to issues of economic and military costs of the war than to human rights violations and civil liberties. The opinion of public seems to have been overwhelmingly restrained and guided by the inordinate control of media by the government.
Raising the public awareness against the war in such circumstances is extremely difficult. Finally, the Russian public is highly skeptical of the role of USA and Europe in this crisis. They will never approve any third party mediation by these countries in this conflict.

To sum up, the Russians do not endorse the secession of Chechnya. They consider Chechnya to be an integral part of Russia. But they are in favour of a negotiated and an amicable solution of the crisis. A deal on autonomy, with only essential powers remaining to the centre, will solicit a general approval of the public in Russia.