Understanding Spoiler Behavior Following the First Russo-Chechen War

Introduction

By disrupting settlements between parties committed to peace, spoilers in post-war situations have the ability to return war-torn countries to violent conflict. One need only be familiar with the conflicts in Sri Lanka, Angola, and between Israel and the Palestinians to understand the harmful effects that spoilers can have. Understanding who becomes a spoiler and why thus has significant policy relevance, and these actors have received much attention among academics (see Stedman 1997; Greenhill & Soloman 2006/07). While these scholars share an interest in creating knowledge that helps facilitate peace settlements between former combatants, they often disagree on the appropriate factors that they should analyze in order to understand spoiler behavior. Stedman (1997), for instance, favors an agent-centric approach, in which a spoiler’s goals and will to pursue those goals receives careful attention. Others articulate structural explanations that emphasize how social and political contexts shape both the opportunity and incentive for spoiler behavior (see Greenhill & Soloman 2006/07). These different approaches are not mutually exclusive, and finding compatibilities between them provides the most beneficial approach to understanding spoiler behavior.

This paper discusses the plausibility of both agent-centered and structural explanations for spoiler behavior with a discussion of the First Russo-Chechen War and the peace agreement that followed. Rooted in centuries of repression, the first war between Russia and Chechnya became imminent following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Officially beginning in 1994, the war devastated the lives of many Chechens and created severe instability in the Caucasus.
Parties to the conflict attempted to restore order in 1996 through the Khasavyurt Accords. The ceasefire that this agreement created was tenuous at best, however, and the war between Russia and Chechnya restarted in 1999. Numerous Chechen factions played a significant role in spoiling the peace agreement, while important members of the Russian government similarly undermined the accords by committing few resources to their implementation. This paper examines the First Chechen War and the postwar period in an attempt to understand why a ceasefire was so difficult to maintain. More specifically, it asks: who were the spoilers to the Khasavyurt agreement, what motivated them, and what factors enabled them to have such a negative impact on the peace process? It argues that, while religiously-motivated goals provide a partial explanation for understanding spoiler behavior among Chechen separatists, the anarchy and instability that was created during the war and persisted after its termination are the key for understanding why those spoilers disrupted the peace process and how they were able to do so with ease. Similarly, it discusses the Russian political context to show why Russian political leaders were not keen on implementing the accords and why the Russian military was unable to prevent spoiling behavior among Chechen militants.

The rest of the paper proceeds in the following steps. First, it reviews the history of the Russo-Chechen conflict in order to identify the underlying causes of war and the factors that motivate each side. It then outlines the Khasavyurt Accords that ended the First Chechen War in 1996. Finally, it uses the theoretical literature on spoilers in peace processes to understand why the Khasavyurt Accords failed to prevent the conflict from resuming in 1999.

**Historical Background and the First Russo-Chechen War**

The most basic cause of the Russo-Chechen conflict is the tension between Chechen aspirations to secede from Russia and Russia’s attempts to maintain its territorial integrity. While this war has received attention in the West for only the past 15 years, its roots date back to Russia’s initial incursions into the Caucasus in the sixteenth century. Russia’s motivation to maintain an influence in the Caucasus stemmed from a number of factors, among them being a desire to tame “banditry” in the area and to maintain a strategic foothold on the Caspian Sea. For centuries Russia faced an active Chechen resistance to this presence, which resulted in Russian atrocities aimed at pacifying what it perceived to be savage mountain peoples. Commenting that “the only good Chechen is a dead Chechen,” for example, Russian General Alexei Yermolov was famous for the extreme brutality with which he implemented Russia’s military policy (Lieven 1998: 306). Using rape, murder, and agricultural devastation in an attempt to frighten the Chechens into submission, Yermolov was so brutal that even fellow officers attempted to temper his tactics. Yermolov was also responsible for the first of many Chechen deportations, forcing much of the population to inhabit the harsh mountain terrain and even exiling many to Siberia. Beginning with Nicholas I, tsars continued to support Yermolov’s policies even after the general’s retirement, and Russian oppression in the region continued to incite Chechen resistance throughout the remainder of the century (Dunlop 1998: 14-18, 29-30).

The Chechen population similarly suffered under Soviet rule throughout the twentieth century. Like others, the Chechens suffered enormously from Soviet collectivization policies and revolted.

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1 Lieven (1998: 305) notes that the two populations almost certainly came into contact with one another prior to this time but that the history of these interactions has not been recorded.
numerous times in the early 1930s in response (Dunlop 1998:49-50). Most notable, however, were the deportations that occurred under Stalin during World War II. Officially, Stalin justified the deportations by referencing the few Chechens who aided the Nazis when Hitler invaded Russia, though some believe that Stalin used this as an excuse to punish the Chechens for their prior resistance to Russian imperialism (Lieven 1998: 316). Regardless of the reason, the deportation’s effect on the Chechen population was devastating. The vast majority of the half million Chechens were moved to the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, with between a quarter and a third of the total Chechen population dying in transit. Those who survived suffered from famine, disease, and insufficient housing, and work conditions upon settling in Central Asia were dire. Following the deportation the Central Committee formally dissolved the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, finally restoring it under Khrushchev in 1958 after it became impossible to control the many Chechens that attempted to return to their homes (Dunlop 1998: 62-78).

This history provides a partial explanation for secessionist demands in Chechnya in the early 1990s. As Matthew Evangelista notes, centuries of repression have created a Chechen national identity that is explicitly anti-Russian (Evangelista 2002: 13). Imam Shamil and Sheikh Mansur—two of the most accomplished leaders of the Chechen resistance to Imperial Russia—continue to inspire the Chechen struggle against Russia today. Shamil Basayev—one of the leaders of the separatist movement throughout the 1990s—has even sought legitimacy by adopting the name of the Imam. Chechen hatred for General Yermolov still exists centuries after his death, moreover, as suggested by the multiple attempts throughout the second half of the 20th century to destroy monuments to his service (Lieven 1998: 307). For most Chechens, however, this memory is not simply the result of stories that have been passed down from previous generations; many Chechens have personally experienced the effects of Stalin’s deportations. According to Gall and de Wall, the deportations were the most important factor that shaped Chechen grievances once the Soviet Union collapsed, and separatist leaders appropriated this memory to mobilize the population against Russia. They thus note that, “as in Armenia and Israel, a common memory of attempted genocide [and the anti-Russian sentiment that this created—MM] underlay the process of the Chechens’ nation-building” (Gall & de Wall 1998: 75).

While this identity is necessary to explain Chechen resistance to Russia over the past few centuries, it is not sufficient to explain why the First Chechen War broke out specifically in the early 1990s. Nor is it sufficient to explain the Chechens’ secessionist demands. A complete understanding of the war’s causes requires that the conflict be understood more broadly as a product of the collapse of the Soviet Union. By the late 1980s, Chechens were fed up with the country’s inefficient economic policies. In Checheno-Ingushetiya, living conditions, health services, and education were among the worst in the Soviet Union, and the republic’s unemployment rate approached 40 percent (Dunlop 1998: 85-88). Local communist elites thus lost legitimacy as they failed to denounce the coup attempt against Mikhail Gorbachev, whose liberalization policies and plans for decentralization received strong support among the impoverished Chechens (Evangelista 2002: 17). Nationalist movements elsewhere in the Soviet Union also had a demonstration effect on the Chechens and inspired those who were becoming increasingly disillusioned with Soviet rule. Gorbachev’s inability and unwillingness to prevent the 15 Socialist Republics from achieving independence in 1991 demonstrated the Soviet
center’s vulnerability. Similarly, a number of laws eliminated the legal differences between the
Union Republics and the Autonomous Republics (such as Chechnya), making it easier for the
latter to claim independence from the Soviet Union (Hughes 2005: 272-273). For Chechens, the
combination of these factors made secession seem like a plausible strategy to rectify their many
historical grievances with Russia. Thus, according to Evangelista, “actions that were literally
unthinkable a year earlier became plausible, if not fully realistic by the end of 1991” (Evangelista
2002: 20).

These factors created a context ripe for a separatist movement. In November 1990, the Chechen
opposition to Soviet rule sought to wrest power from local communist authorities, organizing the
Chechen National Congress to oppose the head of the Communist Party in Chechno-Ingushetiya,
Doku Zavgaev. Rejecting a proposal by the republic’s Supreme Soviet to achieve “sovereignty”
while still continuing close ties with Russia, the renamed National Congress of the Chechen
People (NCCP) elected Dzhokhar Dudayev as its leader and pushed for complete secession
(Evangelista 2002: 16-17). Dudayev’s opportunity to achieve this vision came with the failed
August 1991 coup against President Gorbachev. Invoking the putschists’ intention to undermine
Chechen autonomy and supposedly commit genocide against the Chechen population, Dudayev
helped organize a ten-week demonstration in the Chechen capital, Grozny, which illustrated the
Supreme Soviet’s precarious grip on power. Zavgaev’s failure to denounce the coup further
undermined his legitimacy, and Dudayev’s supporters forced many members of the republican
Supreme Soviet to resign (Dunlop 1998: 100-102). Though Zavgaev himself did not resign at
that time, he received no support from Russian president Boris Yeltsin when Dudayev launched
a successful coup against him in September 1991. After ascending to the presidency on October
27 following a “chaotic and likely fraudulent election, Dudayev quickly declared Chechnya’s
independence on November 1. A botched Russian attempt to overthrow militarily elevated
Dudayev to hero status and solidified his legitimacy among Chechens (Gall & de Wall: 98-102).

Despite his tacit support for Dudayev against Zavgaev in 1991, Boris Yeltsin was no fan of the
Chechen president or his political agenda. For Russia, an independent Chechnya presented a
number of problems. First, Chechen demands for independence clashed with Russian attempts
to maintain its territorial integrity. At least rhetorically, Russian leaders feared that a successful
Chechen separatist movement would inspire similar behavior among the former autonomous
republics. Regardless of whether or not these claims were true, maintaining control over
Chechnya was essential because of the republic’s geostrategic importance. A large portion of the
Baku-Novorossiisk pipeline, which connected the oil fields in Azerbaijan to Russia, ran through
Chechnya, and losing political control over the republic would jeopardize Russian control over
this valuable resource (Lieven 1998: 84-86). However, military involvement was not originally
the preferred means for dealing with Chechnya. On the one hand, Russian politicians originally
did not believe that taming the separatist movement would require armed intervention, instead
preferring to support anti-Dudayev factions within Chechnya in their efforts against the president

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2 Three laws enacted in 1990 altered the legal structure of federalism in the Soviet Union: The Law “On
Procedure for Deciding Questions Concerning the Withdrawal of a Union Republic from the USSR”; The Law “On
Principles of Economic Relations of the USSR, the Union and Autonomous Republics”; and The Law “On the
Delimitation of Powers Between the USSR and Subjects of the Federation” (Hughes 2005: 271).
3 Yeltsin had been looking for an opportunity to get rid of Zavgaev since he had supported Gorbachev over Yeltsin
on a number of policies (Gall & de Wall 1998: 94).
4 These fears were legitimate, as the pipeline was consistently vandalized under Dudayev’s rule from 1991-1994.
Chechnya’s political situation remained unstable in the years immediately following Dudayev’s declaration of independence. Despite an abysmal economic situation, Dudayev focused almost exclusively on arming the Chechen population in preparation for an eventual Russian invasion. Absent a formal military, however, most of these weapons fell into the hands of criminals and gang members, who used them to advance their own economic interests (Evangelista 2002: 21-22). At this time, Chechnya also did not have the state institutions that could have allowed Dudayev to curb criminal behavior, allowing corruption and banditry to flourish. As Evangelista observes, “Dudayev neglected everything…that Chechnya would need to become a viable political and economic entity…” (Evangelista 2002: 21). Moscow worried about the economic and security implications that the chaotic environment in Chechnya could have in Russia. This instability also gave credibility to Dudayev’s opposition within Chechnya, which criticized the president’s inability—or unwillingness—to address Chechnya’s economic hardship. Moscow had attempted to arm this opposition in hopes that it would be able to unseat Dudayev without direct military involvement. Yet the opposition’s repeated failure to oust Dudayev in 1992-1993 convinced Russian authorities that its strategy of relying on internal factions alone to get rid of the president would be insufficient (Trenin & Malashenko 2004: 20).

Yeltsin and hardliners within his government became motivated to intervene in Chechnya once this banditry spilled over into Russian territory. Russia’s economy had suffered because of the black market that existed in Chechnya under Dudayev—a situation that has been described as a “mafioso’s dream” (Gall & de Wall 1998: 129). However, the catalyst for the first war seems to have been the spread of violence and kidnappings outside of Chechen territory. More specifically, a number of bus hijackings in summer 1994 resulted in military and civilian casualties and illustrated Dudayev’s inability to maintain order in Chechnya, making a Russian military intervention imminent (Lieven 1998: 86-87). The First Chechen War began on December 11, 1994, when Russian armed forces invaded Chechnya from neighboring North Ossetia, Ingushetia, and Dagestan. Not surprisingly, the effects of the war on the Chechen population were devastating. Violence toward civilians, vandalism, and looting were common, and Russian air attacks destroyed a number of towns and cities, including Grozny. In general, however, the Russian military experienced much more difficulty against the Chechens than had been expected. As separatist victories in Buddenovsk, Gudermes, and Kizliar illustrated, the Russian military was ill-equipped for the challenges that urban warfare presented (see Oliker 2001). Given that Yeltsin had counted on a quick, decisive victory, moreover, even the stalemate that occurred in 1996 could only be considered a Russian defeat (Trenin & Malashenko 2004: 27). Consequently, morale among the Russian armed forces—among both troops on the frontlines and commanding officers—was low. Many Russian soldiers cared little about Chechnya’s political status and did not understand Yeltsin’s reason for invading, while some senior officers preferred to sabotage their missions rather than risk harming civilians (Lieven 1998: 105; German 2003: 130). Popular support for the war among Russians had plummeted as well, as the majority of Russians opposed the war by 1995 (see Pain 2005).

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5 Dudayev legalized firearms in Chechnya and appropriated a large arsenal that had once belonged to Soviet troops in the republic (Dunlop 2002: 164-168).
It is important to emphasize that the Chechen separatist movement was certainly not a single, monolithic actor during the first war. As indicated by the growing opposition to Dudayev’s rule before the war began, there was hardly a consensus among Chechens regarding the appropriate political and economic policies that should guide the separatist movement. Infighting was less prominent once the war began as Chechens united against a common Russian enemy, and opposition to Dudayev became increasingly marginalized (Trenin & Malashenko 2004: 25). Yet the war provided opportunities for others within the separatist movement to rise to prominence. Shamil Basayev, for instance, gained widespread popularity and prestige because of the successful operation that he led in Buddenovsk. He and his militia captured hundreds of hostages in a hospital, demonstrating the ineptitude of the Russian political and military leadership and damaging Russian public opinion of the war. It was also Basayev, not Dudayev, who used the event to negotiate a temporary ceasefire with Russia, an achievement that “gives…[him] the right to be regarded as one of the great contemporary Chechen heroes” (Lieven 1998: 124). Additionally, Salman Raduyev gained notoriety for his military victory in Gudermes and the attack that he implemented in the Dagestani town of Kizliar. Revealing some potential cracks in the separatist movement, however, Lieven maintains that Raduyev’s attack in Kizliar was motivated partially by his concern over Basayev’s growing popularity (Lieven 1998: 138). Such fears were not irrational; these decorated separatist figures commanded personal militias and attracted large followings, and their capacity to impact political developments was magnified by the absence of functioning state institutions in Chechnya. While these different actors were united in their opposition to Russia during the war, such divisions are important for understanding why the peace process failed in the post-war period.

In sum, key issues motivated each side in the First Russo-Chechen War. Many Chechens believed that independence was the only way to rectify their economic and historical grievances with Russia. Russian leadership, by contrast, sought to maintain its territorial integrity and access to economic resources, as well as undermine the “banditry” that had resulted from instability in Chechnya. Any successful peace agreement would have to address these issues. With the Russian military bogged down, Yeltsin’s approval declining, and Chechens suffering daily, the political context was ripe for such an agreement by summer 1996.

**End of the War and the Khasavyurt Accords**

The Khasavyurt Accords marked the end of the First Russo-Chechen War. The agreement was certainly not the first attempt between Russians and Chechens to negotiate a peace or ceasefire after the separatist movement in Chechnya began in 1991, but it might have been the attempt with the highest chance of success. Previous negotiations had been undermined mutual suspicion and disingenuous efforts by all parties. Dunlop suggests, for example, that the Russian government’s apparent willingness to negotiate with Dudayev in spring 1994—a complete change from previous policy—was simply part of a ploy to assassinate the Chechen president after lulling him into a false sense of security (Dunlop 2002: 192-193). By summer 1996,

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6 Only fortuitous circumstances allowed Dudayev to survive his attempted assassination on May 27, 1994. Russia expressed no interest in meeting with Dudayev following the failed operation, suggesting that previous invitations to negotiate had been insincere.
however, the political context had become much more conducive to serious negotiations between the two sides. With a presidential election looming, Yeltsin could hardly afford to continue to suffer the political costs of war, and after Buddenovsk and Kizliar the Chechen military successes were much less spectacular. President Dudayev had also been assassinated earlier that spring, removing another obstacle to a settlement.  

On August 12 both Russia and Chechnya sent delegations to Khasavyurt, a town in Dagestan near the border with Chechnya, to negotiate a peace deal. General Alexander Lebed, representing Yeltsin’s administration, had recently become the head of Russia’s National Security Council and was a longtime opponent of the war. Aslan Maskhadov, who had served as Dudayev’s Chief of Staff, represented Chechnya at the negotiations. Maskhadov was an accomplished military commander during the first war, and later he became Chechnya’s prime minister following Dudayev’s death. Unlike Dudayev, Moscow perceived Maskhadov as one of the separatists’ more moderate voices and believed that he would be a more rational negotiating partner, particularly regarding economic issues (Lieven 1998: 144). In a refreshing change from past diplomatic interactions, the cordiality between Lebed and Maskhadov stood in sharp contrast with the harsh, distrustful tone that often characterized exchanges between Yeltsin and Dudayev. Both men had received training under the Soviet military, and this common experience created a mutual respect that facilitated productive dialogue (Hughes 2005: 279). The peace deal that they signed—named the Khasavyurt Accords after the town in which they were negotiated—was finalized on August 31, 1996.

The agreement contained a number of points. Among the most important of these was the cessation of hostilities between Russia and Chechnya. Grozny was calm as both Russian and Chechen troops retreated from the city, creating optimism that this latest round of negotiations might actually create a lasting peace. Reflecting this optimism, Gall and de Wall note that the immediate post-Khasavyurt period “was the only time during the whole war in Chechnya that the Russian side fully observed a ceasefire” (Gall & de Wall 1998: 354). By pledging to supply food and medical supplies to the Chechen population, moreover, the treaty also committed both sides to alleviating the economic hardship that had plagued Chechnya for decades. The Russian government similarly promised to help Chechnya rebuild its “economic infrastructure” in an effort to combat crime and terrorism. A joint commission consisting of both Russian and Chechen representatives was tasked with overseeing these latter points. Finally, regarding the key issue of Chechen independence, the signatories recognized “the generally accepted principles of the right of peoples to self-determination.” It is important to note, however, that Lebed and Maskhadov agreed to delay a final decision on Chechnya’s political status until December 31, 2001, with the Chechen Republic remaining part of the Russian Federation in the interim period.

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7 Yeltsin had been unwilling to meet with Dudayev, despite the latter’s frequent statements that he was eager to negotiate with Yeltsin as equals. Some scholars attribute Yeltsin’s position to his distaste for Dudayev’s arrogant and “undiplomatic” personality (Lieven 1998: 65-70). Despite these feelings, there seems to be consensus that the first war was not inevitable and that it could have been avoided had Yeltsin agreed to personally meet with his Chechen counterpart (see, for example, Evangelista 2002: 22-33).

8 The Khasavyurt Accords were later reaffirmed by Yeltsin and Maskhadov on May 12, 1997 in the “Treaty on Peace and the Principles of Mutual Relations between the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria.”

9 The Khasavyurt Accords are reproduced in their entirety in Sakwa (2005).
Regardless of any optimism that existed at the time, the peace that the Khasavyurt Accords created was precarious at best and hostilities between Russia and Chechnya resumed only a few years after Lebed and Maskhadov concluded the treaty. The final section explores the collapse of this peace agreement with reference to the literature on spoilers.

**Why the Khasavyurt Accords Failed**

In practice, the Khasavyurt Accords did little to alleviate suffering in Chechnya and failed to create conditions conducive to a lasting peace between the breakaway republic and its Russian neighbor. The peace agreement had promised improvements in Chechnya’s economic and security conditions, yet the status quo remained intact for the vast majority of Chechens. Organized crime continued to flourish, while kidnapping and hostage-taking became the preferred way to make a living for many. As German (2003: 150) has stated, “the lack of any legitimate means of making a living pushed many [Chechens] toward crime in order to survive in a republic awash with weapons.” Additionally, many of the Chechen personalities that had risen to prominence during the war dismissed the Khasavyurt Accords and actively challenged the resulting political order. It soon became apparent, moreover, that President Yeltsin had no interest in supporting the peace agreement. The peace process had completely collapsed by 1999, with the Second Russo-Chechen War beginning shortly thereafter.

Soon after Lebed and Maskhadov signed the Khasavyurt Accords, it became apparent that various actors sought to undermine or “spoil” the peace process. This raises a number of important questions: who were these spoilers, what motivated them to challenge the peace between Russia and Chechnya, and what factors created an opportunity for them to do so? Answering these questions is essential for understanding why the Khasavyurt Accords failed, and the academic literature on spoilers provides a number of useful theoretical lenses with which to make sense of this case. Stedman (1997), for example, provides an agentive explanation for spoiling behavior. For him, spoilers are those who possess goals that are contrary to those expressed in a peace agreement. The extent to which spoilers can reconcile their goals with the peace process—as well as their level of commitment to achieving those goals—allows Stedman to distinguish between total, limited, and greedy spoilers (Stedman 1997: 9-11). A total spoiler is thus someone who “see[s] the world in all-or-nothing terms” and will pursue those goals regardless of the costs, while a limited spoiler enjoys more modest aims (Stedman 1997: 7). Understanding spoiling behavior—and, consequently, strategies for addressing such behavior—therefore requires a focus on individuals and personalities.

Structural explanations provide an alternative—though not necessarily competing—account of spoiling behavior. Summarizing this position, Greenhill and Major (2006/07: 12) note that “spoiler behavior is…more closely causally linked to strategic exigencies than to individual motivations.” Spoliers cannot disrupt peace processes solely because of their will, but they must also have the opportunity and capacity to do so. Greenhill and Major list a number of factors that shape the opportunity structure for spoilers, including the distribution of coercive capabilities, territory, money, and popular support. Actors will find it more or less difficult to spoil peace processes based on the degree to which these factors advantage them against potential adversaries, and changes in these structural factors will alter “the potential payoffs associated with cooperation versus confrontation” (Greenhill & Major 2006/07: 8). Mattes and
Savun (2009) provide a similar perspective, finding that spoiling behavior is the product of contexts that foster fear and insecurity among actors while reducing the costs of obstructing peace agreements. One’s commitment to peace processes, in other words, is based on the presence of structural factors that make such a commitment seem beneficial.

The remainder of this section articulates a structural explanation for spoiling behavior by discussing the political context in both Chechnya and Russia following the end of the war. While I believe that focusing on structure provides the most convincing approach to understanding this case, the section also discusses the role that individual motivations played in undermining the peace process.

“Stateness” Problems in Chechnya

Soon after the Khasavyurt Accords were signed it became clear that many factions of the separatist movement had no intention of adhering to the agreement, as spoiling behavior became rampant during this time. Specifically, Basayev, Raduyev, and Zelimkhan Ianderbiev—Dudayev’s former vice president—all struggled for power following the war and undermined any chances for stability in Chechnya. Raduyev’s militia, for example, kidnapped two dozen members of the Russian Interior Ministry and a North Ossetian delegation, and it murdered twelve Red Cross employees and Russian civilians soon thereafter. These and other attacks were often intended to undermine the economic cooperation between Russia and Chechnya that was essential for implementing the accords and creating stability in the region. Raduyev claimed that his war with Russia had not ended despite the peace accords, and Yeltsin’s government understandably denounced these attacks as attempts to undermine the peace process (Evangelista 2002: 48). Similarly, Shamil Basayev was responsible for the attacks that precipitated the beginning of renewed hostilities between Russia and Chechnya. As he had done with the Buddenovsk attack, Basayev raided neighboring Dagestan in an attempt to consolidate his power in the Caucasus. This time, however, Russian forces defeated Basayev, and the Second Russo-Chechen began in spring 1999.

Perhaps the most vivid illustration of spoiling behavior is the brazen defiance directed at Aslan Maskhadov following his election to the presidency in 1997. Capitalizing on the role that he played in negotiating the peace accords, Maskhadov (59 percent of the vote) comfortably won the election over Basayev (24 percent) and Ianderbiev (10 percent) (Evangelista 2002: 48). Maskhadov, one of the more moderate Chechen political voices, favored increased dialogue with Russia. The political and economic cooperation that he proposed was in agreement with the Khasavyurt Accords and could have played a positive role in stabilizing the country and ensuring a lasting peace. Despite their cooperation with him during the war, however, none of the other candidates supported Maskhadov following the election, and they all refused to recognize him as president. Ianderbiev attracted large followings at organized rallies in Grozny, in which he denounced Maskhadov and glorified Chechen resistance to Russia. At one such rally he appeared side-by-side with Raduyev, whose willingness to undermine the peace between Russia

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10 In September 1997, for example, Raduyev’s militia bombed a convoy of Russian worked en route to repair a portion of a Chechen oil pipeline (Evangelista 2002: 53).
11 For example, at one rally Ianderbiev praised those involved in the attack on Kizliar and referred to the raid as a “day of historic Chechen glory” (Evangelista 2002: 49).
and Chechnya through violence was obvious. At a previous gathering, Raduyev stated bluntly that “no-one has the right to dictate to us the conditions of our national-liberation struggle…We will never forgive Russia for what it has done to Chechnya” (German 2003: 149). Additionally, Ianderbiev and Raduyev were leaders of the Caucasus Confederation, an organization that supported nationalist movements throughout the Caucasus and criticized Maskhadov for his conciliatory position toward Russia (Evangelista 2002: 51). Like others in the opposition, Basayev also came out against Maskhadov. While Basayev originally stated that his support for the president was contingent upon his policies, he too criticized Maskhadov for his willingness to negotiate with Russia. Like Ianderbiev and Raduyev, Basayev played a leading role in the Congress of Peoples of Ichkeria and Dagestan, a group that had organized in opposition to the president. Unfortunately for Maskhadov, his inability to control the opposition in Chechnya demonstrated to Russia that he was no longer a capable partner in peace and paved the way for renewed military confrontation between the two.

The agentive explanation that Stedman suggests provides a useful starting point with which to understand spoiling behavior among members of the Chechen opposition. Once the first war ended, it became clear that Maskhadov’s harshest critics held goals that were irreconcilable with the president and that Islam provided the basis for these aims. According to Stedman’s typology, actors such as Raduyev and Basayev might appropriately be labeled “total spoilers.” Raduyev, for instance, was among the opposition who sought an Islamic state that united Muslim populations from Chechnya and Dagestan and—as his persistent violent attacks throughout the post-war period demonstrated—was unwilling to compromise on this goal. He once stated that “No-one but Allah has the right [to dictate the terms of a Chechen peace with Russia]” and refused to negotiate with either Grozny or Russia on this issue (German 2003: 149). As Evangelista (2002: 50) points out, “the proponents of such a future did not seek peace with Russia—even on favorable terms, entailing unilateral withdrawal of the Russian army.” Basayev shared Raduyev’s vision for a united Islamic state in the Caucasus and hoped that provoking a military response from Russia might inspire other Muslim populations in the region to unite to expel their common Russian aggressor (Evangelista 2002: 50-51). Basayev also criticized Maskhadov for failing to rule Chechnya in accordance with Islam and pushed him to implement Shariah law throughout the republic. Cooperation between the Chechen opposition with a prominent, Jordanian-born fighter named Khattab further suggests the role that Islam played in the conflict.12 Indeed, in accordance with Stedman’s theory, the Chechen opposition’s goals were irreconcilable with Maskhadov’s policy of close economic and political cooperation with Russia. There is no doubt that this opposition provided a substantial obstacle to peace, especially given that it was willing to pursue its goals through the most violent of methods.

Despite its apparent fit with the evidence, a purely agentive explanation is unable to provide a convincing explanation for spoiler behavior in Chechnya in the mid- to late-1990s. First, it ignores the fact that key opposition figures had recently cooperated with Maskhadov against their common Russian enemy only months before his formal election to the presidency. As acting president, Ianderbiev—to whom Basayev and others had pledged loyalty following Dudayev’s assassination—had even entrusted with Maskhadov the critical task of negotiating the peace agreement with Lebed. It was only after the war, when Russian forces had withdrawn and

12 Despite public claims by the Russian government, the presence of foreign fighters in Chechnya appears to be minimal (Trenin & Malashenko 2004: 97).
individuals in the opposition had the opportunity to pursue individual political agendas, that cooperation between the various Chechen factions broke down. It thus seems that Stedman’s theory understates the propensity for spoilers—even ones with seemingly irreconcilable goals—to cooperate when the political context necessitates doing so. Second, an explanation that focuses solely on agents and their goals overlooks the crucial question of how the Chechen opposition to Maskhadov became able to disrupt the peace process. Without the means to pursue their goals, spoilers will have difficulty undermining peace agreements. Finally, the agentive explanation ignores the ways in which the post-war context in Chechnya—not only commitments to Islam—created economic motive for well-armed actors to spoil peace between Russia and Chechnya. Put simply, the problems that Raduyev, Basayev, and others posed to the peace process stemmed not from their opposition to Maskhadov and the Khasavyurt Accords, per se, but rather from their capacity, opportunity, and incentive to act on these goals.

One need not look far in order to identify the structural factors that empowered spoilers among Chechnya’s opposition and created incentives to undermine the peace agreement. Max Weber’s discussion of the state provides a useful starting point. According to Weber, “a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (Weber 1946: 78). Control over the military and policing powers, in other words, is what distinguishes the state from other political organizations. States achieve a monopoly over the use of coercive force when no other actor within a given territory possesses the means of coercion, and the state’s monopoly is legitimated to the extent that its domination is based on traditional, charismatic, or legal justifications (Weber 1946: 78-79). This combination of monopoly and legitimacy allows states to enjoy the capacity to maintain order and resist any challenges to the political status quo that might arise. Without such a capacity, however, anarchy will prevail. Without the means to contain challengers and maintain order, other actors face little risk of punishment for pursuing goals that contradict those held by a state’s leadership. When applied to a study of why peace processes succeed or fail, states that do not enjoy a monopoly over the legitimate use of force are unable to prevent spoiling behavior. The absence of the Weberian state thus creates the structural opportunity for those who seek to spoil peace agreements.

Focusing on these dimensions of state capacity helps explain why spoiling behavior thrived in Chechnya during the post-war period. Once the shared interest in resisting the Russian invasion had disappeared, Chechen coercive and political institutions had neither the capacity nor the legitimacy to enforce cooperation or prevent spoiling behavior among members of the Chechen opposition. This problem can be traced back to Dudayev’s initial mobilization for war in the early 1990s. Rather than creating a centralized military, Dudayev had armed the Chechen population and relied upon militias to wage his campaign against Russia (Lieven 1998: 301). While this strategy helped him win the war against Russia in 1996, the decentralization that it created posed a problem for Maskhadov’s government following the war by undermining the government’s monopoly over the use of coercive force. The balance of power was such that the Maskhadov government had no ability to impose its will on those who sought to challenge its authority; it could not even police the “commercial hostage-taking” strategy that many

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13 The state enjoys legitimacy based on tradition when its authority is based on habit and norms that have persisted through time. Charismatic legitimacy exists when the state enjoys authority based on the extraordinary qualities of individual leaders. Legal legitimacy exists when the state’s authority is based on laws and rules.
Chechens—often without political motive—adopted to make a living (German 2003: 150). The strongest Chechen spoilers exploited this strategy skillfully to advance their political goals and reap enormous financial rewards. Raduyev, for example, commanded a large ransom from Russian businessman Boris Berezovsky after releasing a British couple he had kidnapped in an effort to thwart economic cooperation between Russia and Chechnya involving British Petroleum (Evangelista 2002: 55). In fact, Maskhadov’s opposition—well-armed and well-trained—was so strong that, in addition to accruing personal power and wealth, it imposed its will on the Chechen government with ease. For example, in early 1999 Basayev forced Maskhadov to suspend the Chechen parliament and implement Shariah law throughout the country. Maskhadov capitulated, even though in doing so he directly violated the Chechen constitution, which had guaranteed religious freedoms did not grant the president the power to make such decisions. The episode demonstrates that Chechnya’s formal political institutions—the very mechanisms through which the Khasavyurt Accords should have been implemented—were unable to withstand individuals that chose to defy them, illustrating the powerlessness of Maskhadov’s legal authority. The anarchic political context in Chechnya gave Basayev—and others who broke with Maskhadov after his election—free reign to act as they chose. As German notes, “it became apparent from the beginning of 1999 that Maskhadov had lost any real authority and was hostage to the demands of powerful warlords, such as Basayev and Raduyev” (German 2003: 150).

Scholars often cite the unwillingness to address Chechnya’s political status as one of the main reasons why the Khasavyurt Accords failed (see, for example, German 2003). Indeed, many Chechens saw independence as a way to alleviate a variety of grievances, and discussing this important issue is the only way that the agreement could have fully addressed the war’s causes. Yet it is unclear that an independent Chechnya would have been better-equipped to avoid the infighting that plagued Chechnya beginning in 1996, as addressing this formal political status would have done nothing to strengthen the hand of the more moderate Maskhadov government against his rivals. Absent any serious efforts to build institutional capacity in Chechnya, spoiling behavior among Chechen factions was bound to derail the peace process.

**The Russian Political Context**

Much like in Chechnya, a number of leading political figures in Russia had seemingly little interest in upholding the Khasavyurt Accords. Indeed, President Yeltsin was hopeful that Maskhadov would be a more palatable negotiating partner than his predecessor. He even reaffirmed the Khasavyurt Accords in 1997 by signing a “Treaty on Peace and the Principles of Mutual Relations” between Russia and Chechnya. Yet Yeltsin’s government never expressed much commitment to implementing the terms of the treaty. In particular, Moscow’s unwillingness to assist Chechnya in its economic reconstruction undermined the peace agreement and further Jeffersoned stability in the Caucasus. Rather than assisting Chechnya’s economy by striking a deal to use Chechen pipelines for Russian oil transport, for example, Moscow let negotiations become tied up by arguments over the maintenance costs that Russia would pay Chechnya in order to use the pipeline. Boris Berezovsky went so far as to accuse

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German (2003: 150) also discusses how Chechnya’s opposition factions set up their own political institutions that rivaled those of Maskhadov’s government.  

This treaty is reproduced in its entirety in Sakwa (2005).
Russia’s finance ministry of sabotaging any potential deal with the Chechens, not an unfair accusation given that Russia threatened to build a new oil pipeline circumventing Chechnya all together. More generally, well-known Russian political figures such as General Lebed accused Yeltsin of failing to provide the required economic support to Chechnya and for not providing oversight for the few assistance programs that were implemented. In a time when President Maskhadov desperately needed to create personal legitimacy at home to subvert the influence of opponents to the peace agreement, moreover, Yeltsin reneged on his commitment to discuss the delegation of powers between Russia and Chechnya with his Chechen counterpart (Evangelista 2002: 53-57).

Once again, structural factors provide a convincing explanation for Yeltsin’s lack of commitment to the peace process. For Yeltsin, the incentive to wage war or negotiate (or ignore the terms of the peace agreement) was closely linked to the combination of fluctuations in popular support for military intervention in Chechnya with Russia’s electoral cycle. Yeltsin had originally believed that the war with Chechnya would be quick and easy, providing a welcomed popularity boost for his government (Evangelista 2002: 45). It soon became clear, however, that Russian popular opinion of the war had plummeted. In late 1995, nearly 70 percent of Russians believed that continued military intervention in Chechnya was not necessary maintain Russian territorial integrity, with most preferring to withdraw Russian troops from the Caucasus completely. According to one poll, a mere three percent of Russians supported military intervention to extinguish Chechen separatism (Pain 2005: 69). Similarly, almost all media outlets in the country came out in harsh opposition to the war (Lieven 1998: 107). Politicians from the left also did their part to propagate anti-war sentiment and pressured Yeltsin to withdraw Russian troops from Chechnya. This widespread disapproval threatened to undermine Yeltsin’s chances of winning re-election in 1996. Anatoly Chubais, one of the leaders of Yeltsin’s re-election campaign, pleaded with Yeltsin to end the war to salvage his popular approval (Pain 2005: 70).

Before the election, Yeltsin attempted to save his campaign by reaching out to Maskhadov. These attempts were mere “publicity stunts,” however, as the Russian military continued to seek a violent end to the conflict despite the president’s public proclamations (Evangelista 2002: 43). Despite this apparent lack of commitment, negotiations between Russia and Chechnya did appear to yield some positive results, including a preliminary plan a cessation to military hostilities. Once Yeltsin’s re-election had been secured, however, the political incentive to negotiate with Chechen government officials—or at least give the appearance of doing so—disappeared. He backed out of promises made before the election, indicating the impact that the election cycle had had on his willingness to negotiate with Chechnya (Evangelista 2002: 42-43). Although the Khasavyurt Accords were signed a few weeks later in response to Russia’s military defeat, the absence of electoral mechanisms for holding Yeltsin accountable throughout the post-war period created few political incentives for the president to uphold Russia’s end of the bargain. Always reluctant of cooperating with “barbaric” terrorists and bandits (Evangelista 2002: 40), Yeltsin no longer had to do so.

16 Yeltsin’s re-election campaign was further jeopardized by Lebed’s decision to challenge Yeltsin for the presidency. While Lebed likely would not have won, the popularity that he enjoyed because of his opposition to the war could have won him enough votes to swing the election in favor of Yeltsin’s communist rivals (Evangelista 2002: 42).
Another structural variable that deserves attention is the capacity of the Russian coercive apparatus to defend the country against Chechnya’s armed factions. The Chechen government was not the only actor that could have used its military to thwart those members of Maskhadov’s opposition that sought to derail the peace process; the Russian military similarly could have prevented spoiling behavior. Much like the Chechen military, however, Russia’s military simply did not have the capacity to fulfill this role in the interwar period. In addition to low morale among the country’s military, “inefficiency, incompetence, and corruption” pervaded the Russian power ministries (Taylor 2007: 5). Much of the explanation for this problem stems from the political dynamics that resulted from the collapse of the Soviet Union. While a complete review of this history is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that Yeltsin sought to reduce the influence of Russia’s power ministries. Their role was less important in the post-Cold War world, and their unpopularity among Russians led to personnel cuts. Reforms aimed at decentralizing Russia’s security agencies similarly led to a reduction in capacity (Volkov 2002: 127-131). In addition, corruption and patronymic have flourished due to the instability in the Caucasus, providing many in the Russian military with opportunities for self-enrichment at the expense of Russia’s capacity to enforce security (Taylor 2007: 10-12). Given that the Chechen opposition is so well-armed, these deficiencies in Russia’s military capacity undermine its ability to prevent spoiling behavior. Upon ascending to the Russian presidency, however, Vladimir Putin has made considerable effort to revamp Russia’s power ministries, as well as Russia’s security situation more generally. The impact of such changes on stability in the Caucasus has been significant. Through personnel changes, financial support, and even the use of repression, Putin has increased the capacity of his power ministries to combat the very forces that were able to have such a destabilizing effect under Yeltsin. Thanks in large part to Putin’s efforts to build state capacity, Chechnya—and the Caucasus more generally—was more stable by 2007 than it had been in years, especially when compared with the tumultuous period from the beginning of the interwar period until a few years into the second war (Taylor 2007: 6-9).

**Conclusion**

Based on this discussion, the failure of the peace process between Russian and Chechnya seems overdetermined. No one in the Chechen opposition seemed willing to adhere to the Khasavyurt Accords, and Russia’s political leadership only promoted peace to the extent that it was politically expedient. Basayev and Raduyev, for instance, actively tried to spoil peace between Russia and Chechnya almost as soon as the peace agreement was signed, while Yeltsin never devoted the resources necessary to ensure its success. Scholars have thus commented that all parties to the Russo-Chechen conflict acted as spoilers to the Khasavyurt Accords (Shedd 2008: 95). While this statement overlooks the seemingly genuine efforts by figures such as Maskhadov and Lebed to sustain the peace process in the interwar period, it is certainly no stretch to say that those efforts were marginalized by those who either were not committed to cooperation between Russia and Chechnya.

Lieven notes that, by the time the second war had begun, “the Chechens’ wartime political unity had disintegrated, and there had been no meaningful progress towards a stable state” (Lieven 1998: 146). His observation gets to the heart of the problem with the peace process between Russia and Chechnya. Those for whom the Khasavyurt Accords were unacceptable had ample opportunity to disrupt the agreement. Without effective state militaries—either Chechen or
Russian—to maintain peace or stability, spoilers to the peace process were able to act with impunity. Russia’s domestic political context in the interwar period—and the absence of international pressure during this time—similarly allowed Yeltsin to disregard his economic commitments to Chechnya. This case thus illustrates the importance of structure for understanding when peace agreements succeed and when spoilers become most dangerous. Of course, spoiler behavior should not be understood solely as a response to structural restraints. As religion’s role in shaping the Chechen opposition’s views for the region’s future illustrates, the goals that motivate individual spoilers deserve the attention of anyone trying to understand spoiler behavior. Yet a complete understanding of that behavior requires careful study of the social structures that enable action, empower actors, and create incentives to either adhere to or undermine peace processes.

Bibliography


