

# Plebiscite in Chechnya held at gunpoint

By Vladimir Volkov  
5 April 2003

The success of the referendum recently held in Chechnya cannot disguise the fact that it was nothing more than a police farce from start to finish.

According to official figures, 80 percent of the population participated, with 95 percent voting in favour of the three questions to be decided on. This so-called “democratic vote” was carried out under the barrels of Russian guns. It was held on the issue of a new constitution for Chechnya and two new electoral laws. The first law regulates the election of a president and the second establishes procedures for parliamentary elections.

Among the total of 540,000 people eligible to vote were 80,000 Russian soldiers currently stationed in Chechnya, i.e., over a seventh of all voters came from outside the territory. Nearly half of this total of 80,000 actually voted.

On the day of the election, March 23, every one of the 416 polling booths was guarded by at least 20 soldiers. The military presence at polling booths was particularly pronounced in the Chechen capital city of Grosny.

The conditions surrounded this “free election” were described in the *Gazeta* newspaper (March 21) as follows: “At present, Grosny hardly resembles the capital of a republic or a formerly thriving city. Rather it resembles Stalingrad before the capitulation of [German] Field Marshal Paulus.”

Two days earlier the *Yeshenedelny Journal* commented: “The declaration of will that is supposed to take place under united military forces is, by definition, not free.”

As the vote was being counted anomalies emerged—for example, in the western province of Ingushetia. At two electoral offices set up in refugee camps in the region more people voted than those eligible according to the polling lists. A total of 5,500 voted, although officially only 2,900 were eligible to

do so.

The response from the head of the electoral commission was notable. He said the surplus numbers voting comprised those who had not registered to take part in the referendum and had only decided they wanted to vote on the day of the plebiscite itself.

Such a declaration says more about the “democratic” principles governing the vote than any propaganda: every Chechen was required to register in writing to take part in the election. Should he fail to do so, he could end up a target for retribution or fall victim to the next wave of “cleansing.”

There was barely any public debate over the key issue of the referendum—the new constitution. The text of the constitution was worked out in the Kremlin and put to a vote, although barely anyone had read the text. Correspondents for the *Izvestia* newspaper commented one day after the vote: “From around a hundred people we questioned only two were really familiar with the text. Those who had not read it declared their indifference in virtually identical terms: it is not so important to know what is in it. It is always possible to violate something which has been written down...”

This report in itself exposes the cynicism of the evaluation of the election made by Russian President Vladimir Putin, who proclaimed, “The Chechen people have made their choice in a direct and democratic manner.”

The result of the election came as a surprise even to the organisers themselves. The authority of the Russian government and its puppet local administration under Achmad Kadirov is minimal, and the political climate in the republic has been extremely tense for the past month. It is sufficient to recall that at the end of last year two huge explosions nearly demolished the Chechen parliamentary complex. Eighty died in the blast and over 300 were injured.

There were considerable fears in Moscow that the

plebiscite could backfire. For this reason an extensive campaign, involving both intimidation and paltry concessions, was set in motion. In the days leading up to the vote Putin appeared on television to appeal to the Chechen population to make the “right choice.” The consequences of an “incorrect choice” are well known to all. In the first Chechen war (1994 to 1996) 120,000 civilians died. It is anticipated that the number of victims in the second “Chechen campaign,” which has been underway since autumn 1999, will be even higher.

At the same time the Putin government has been attempting to exert moral and political pressure by promising a broad amnesty that could include all those involved in military operations against the Russian army. However, immediately after it became clear that the referendum had ended in a result acceptable to the Kremlin, the terms of the amnesty were curtailed. Only “Russian citizens” can now hope to benefit from such an amnesty.

On the eve of the vote a campaign was initiated for the “withdrawal of unnecessary troops.” The move was entirely of a cosmetic nature. It applied to an insignificant number of soldiers and has no real consequences for the strength of the Russian military contingent in the region.

Why did the inhabitants of Chechnya turn out to vote? The main reason is undoubtedly widespread weariness with the war, the desire to return to some sort of normal life and put an end, by any means possible, to the unceasing wave of daily violence. The participation of the Chechens is a gesture of desperation at a time when any change appears better than what they presently have to put up with.

An additional factor is the discrediting of Islamic separatists in the region. Their behaviour has been no better than that of the federal occupying troops. The Islamic fighters base themselves on a reactionary political programme and govern in their own interests—in identical fashion to the Kremlin itself. They regard the “independence” of Chechnya as a means of establishing their control over the Chechen economy, in particular the region’s oil reserves.

In the same manner as the Russian “federalists,” the armed Islamic separatists believe they can maintain power with naked force and methods of organised terror and intimidation.

Finally, broader geopolitical changes have played a

role in altering the mood of the masses. After the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, the Kremlin demonstrably expressed its solidarity with the US in the “struggle against international terrorism.” The parallel reaction by many Western governments was to drop any criticism of the activities of the Russian military in Chechnya. Left to their fate and confronted with Russian military might, the population of the small, war-ravaged republic was left with virtually no other choice than to accept the terms laid down by the powerful aggressor.

The Kremlin was able to realise its legal and political plans and thereby legitimise the current pro-Russian government led by Kadirov. Although Chechnya has been granted a “broad autonomy,” the first section of the constitution states: “The territory of the Republic of Chechnya is an indivisible and integral part of the territory of the Russian Federation.”

In his speech praising the outcome of the plebiscite, President Putin declared: “We have resolved the last serious problem with regard to the territorial integrity of Russia.” In fact, none of the basic problems that led to years of military aggression by Russia have been resolved.

According to Putin: “The people of Chechnya have decided in favour of peace.” In reality, the Chechen people cannot expect peace or prosperity from the government in the Kremlin. It represents the interests of a tiny oligarchy, an elite that bases its wealth on the plundering of the economy of the entire country and the ruining and humiliation of its people. The region of the northern Caucasus is a key arena for its geopolitical power struggles.

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