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Chechnya: The Russian Policymakers Tragedy

Tanya Basok

When the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991, many analysts applauded the peaceful way in which it happened. And in fact, it was peaceful. In contrast to Yugoslavia, there were no popular leaders committed to holding the Soviet Union together. Gorbachev's popularity at the time was very low and the populist leader Yeltsin, similar to other republican leaders, was only too anxious to dissolve the Soviet Union and assume presidency over the new political entity. Thus, in contrast to Milosevic of Yugoslavia, who was prepared to wage a genocidal war to prevent secession of Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and to a much lesser degree, Slovenia (for an update on the Yugoslavian crisis see Barutciski in this issue), Russian leaders who enjoyed popular support at the time were willing to let the republics become formally independent states. They did so always keeping in mind that it would be possible to establish economic, political, and military control over them at a later stage. So the partition was indeed smooth, although consequent

struggles for autonomy in Abkhazia and Transdnier, and the Armenian claim to Nagorno-Karabakh did provoke wars.

While most nationalist aspirations in the former Soviet republics were thus peacefully satisfied, this was not the case of nationalist movements within the Russian Federation. Once formed, the integrity of the Russian

sovereign state was not to be undermined by separatism in some of its semi-autonomous regions. Even mild claims for decentralization of federal power are perceived by Moscow as a threat.

Thus the multi-ethnic Russian state was to become a federation with a strong central government that would grant no right to any of its semi-

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