

Laura Belin (doctoral candidate, University of Oxford)  
e-mail: [laurabelin@yahoo.com](mailto:laurabelin@yahoo.com)

Paper given at the 52nd conference of the Political Studies Association  
Aberdeen, Scotland, 5-8 April 2002

## **RUSSIAN MEDIA POLICY IN THE FIRST AND SECOND CHECHEN CAMPAIGNS**

The military campaign in Chechnya from December 1994 to August 1996 became the "first real test of journalists' freedoms" since the end of the Soviet Union<sup>1</sup> and loomed large in perceptions about the Russian media for the rest of the 1990s. Though some journalists had condemned "shock therapy" in 1992 and the shelling of the parliament in 1993, the Chechen war prompted the journalistic community to desert Boris Yel'tsin en masse for the first time. Moscow-based television networks were the public's main source of information on the fighting.<sup>2</sup> The private network NTV exposed official lies about how the war was waged. Newscasts on state-owned Russian Television (RTR), which reached a nationwide audience on Channel 2, soon followed NTV's lead. Virtually all privately owned newspapers also raised their voices against the military campaign.

The predominant slant of war coverage became a source of pride for many journalists. Though damning news reports did not end the bloodshed, steadfast public opposition to the war impelled Yel'tsin to pursue a ceasefire agreement while running for reelection in 1996.<sup>3</sup> Both supporters and opponents of the military campaign believed that media coverage fostered and sustained the majority view. Yel'tsin rarely retreated from unpopular policies, but his turnaround on Chechnya arguably demonstrated that journalists had helped bring some degree of transparency and therefore accountability to

---

<sup>1</sup> Frank Ellis, *From Glasnost to the Internet: Russia's New Infosphere*, London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1999, p. 230.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen Mickiewicz, *Changing Channels: Television and the Struggle for Power in Russia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 244.

<sup>3</sup> On the steady public opposition to the war, see Michael McFaul, *Russia's Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001, p. 258. On how that sentiment influenced Yel'tsin's reelection strategy, see Michael McFaul, *Russia's 1996 Presidential Election: The End of Polarized Politics*, Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1997, p. 24; Liliya Shevtsova, *Rezhim Borisa Yel'tsina*, Moscow: Rosspen, 1999, pp. 250-3 and 269-71; and Mickiewicz, *Changing Channels*, p. 257.

Russian politics.<sup>4</sup> Equally important, threats from high-ranking officials failed to change the tone or content of war coverage, revealing that editorial autonomy was real and resilient to pressure from above. For those reasons, commentators have viewed the coverage of Chechnya as "Russian journalism's finest hour"<sup>5</sup> and a sign that "Russia had broken, however imperfectly and incompletely, with the Soviet legacy of information control."<sup>6</sup>

If the first post-Soviet war in Chechnya seemed to prove that the Russian authorities could not manipulate the media, the military campaign that began in 1999 suggested just the opposite. Many reporters for private as well as state-owned media now relied on an official information centre that one veteran war correspondent described as a "propaganda department."<sup>7</sup> Yassen Zassoursky, dean of the Moscow State University's Journalism Faculty, had hailed coverage of the first war as "a remarkable achievement of Russian democratic journalism,"<sup>8</sup> but in late 1999 he found little to praise about the "one-sided coverage" favouring the official viewpoint.<sup>9</sup> State policies during the second war gave rise to "a news blackout that benefit[ed] only the Kremlin."<sup>10</sup>

This paper will explore how Russian authorities transformed the decade's greatest fiasco of news management into an effective media policy aimed at the "creation and consolidation of a psychological environment in favour of the [military] campaign."<sup>11</sup> It will first analyse official attempts to shape news coverage of Chechnya from late 1994 until the withdrawal of Russian armed forces from the breakaway republic in the autumn of 1996. During that period, many journalists sympathized with the Chechen cause. Most Moscow-based newspapers were self-managing editorial collectives whose editors

---

<sup>4</sup> On that view, see Ivan Zasurskiy, *Mass-Media vtoroy respubliki*, Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo Univerziteta, 1999, p. 93.

<sup>5</sup> Ellis, *From Glasnost to the Internet*, p. 121.

<sup>6</sup> Mickiewicz, *Changing Channels*, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> According to Valeriy Yakov, quoted in Michael R. Gordon, "Russia Copies NATO in War to Win Minds," *New York Times*, 28 November 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Yassen Zassoursky, "Media and the Public Interest: Balancing Between the State, Business and the Public Sphere," in Kaarle Nordenstreng, Elena Vartanova and Yassen Zassoursky, eds., *Russian Media Challenge*, Helsinki: Kikumora Publications, 2001, p. 161.

<sup>9</sup> As quoted in Anna Dolgov, "Russian Press Plays Role in Chechnya," Associated Press, 14 October 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Andrei Zolotov Jr., "Kremlin Scores Strategic Victory in Chechnya--Over the Media," *Institute for War & Peace Reporting Caucasus Reporting Service*, no. 5, distributed on the fsmmedia e-mail list on 9 November 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Graeme P. Herd, "The 'Counter-Terrorist Operation' in Chechnya: 'Information Warfare' Aspects," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 13, no. 4, December 2000, pp. 57-83.

believed the media should serve as a "fourth estate." The most prominent corporate-backed outlets (NTV, the daily newspaper *Segodnya*, and Ekho Moskvy radio, all owned by Vladimir Gusinskiy's Most group) staked their reputations on balance and professionalism in war coverage.<sup>12</sup> Though annoyed by the way journalists covered the war, Yel'tsin never fully committed to the pressure campaign against unsympathetic media. In one of his usual balancing acts, the president paid lip service to the importance of press freedom even though he did not punish military personnel who trampled on journalists' rights.

The remainder of the paper examines the Kremlin's approach to managing media coverage of Chechnya in 1999 and 2000. The basic elements strongly resembled the tactics that failed during the first war: imposing restrictions on accreditation and access to the war zone; releasing daily doses of upbeat information about the fighting; appealing to journalists' sense of patriotism; seeking to discredit dissenting voices in the media; and applying criminal law selectively against journalists who strayed from acceptable topics.

What made similar policies so much more successful the second time around? Journalists' changed attitudes toward Chechen separatists, though significant, cannot fully account for the docile coverage. Some correspondents tried to emulate the reporting that was typical of the first war. But Russian officials had learned from mistakes of the mid-1990s as well as from techniques used by western governments during NATO's 1999 bombing campaign in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In Moscow, polished spin doctors supplied official information in a timely manner. In Chechnya and neighbouring regions, military and security officers proved much better at keeping the "wrong" journalists away from the fighting. The authorities could also seek to influence news coverage indirectly via the banking or industrial groups that had come to dominate the Moscow media market between the two Chechen wars. For instance, Vladimir Putin enlisted partly state-owned Gazprom in the effort to subdue NTV's Chechnya coverage. That avenue was not available to Yel'tsin when the first war broke out, since the gas monopoly had not yet invested in NTV.

---

<sup>12</sup> NTV and *Segodnya*, both owned by the Most group, received the highest praise from a group of experts who analysed Russian media coverage during the early weeks of the first war: see *Zhurnalistika i vojna*, Moscow: Russian-American Press and Information Center, 1995, available at <http://www.medialaw.ru/publications/books/war/1-1.html>.

Not only did Putin have more cards to play than did Yel'tsin five years earlier, he also appeared less inhibited about using the levers of power to keep journalists on board with the war effort. With his approval, the Media Ministry (which did not exist during the first war) applied legal pressure to deter journalists from interviewing Chechen leaders. Whereas Yel'tsin never publicly endorsed the criminal investigation of an NTV correspondent in 1995, Putin defended the unlawful detention of a Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reporter in early 2000, advising journalists to "observe the laws of your country if you are counting on those laws being observed with respect to you."<sup>13</sup>

The more skillful use of old tactics, the new tools available to state officials, and the political will to use state power to its full extent all helped the Kremlin seize and hold the news agenda during the second military campaign in Chechnya. To uncover the roots of that success, it is helpful to examine the authorities' failure to manage media coverage during the first war.

## "INFORMATION WATERLOO"

One of the firmest conclusions to emerge from comparative media studies is that the media, like most citizens, tend to rally around their country's political leaders in times of war.<sup>14</sup> In the words of an expert on U.S. coverage of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, "the press in any country at any time supports the state during times of war. This is as natural as rain or earthquakes."<sup>15</sup>

At first glance, the Russian media's behaviour during the first war in Chechnya looks like the exception that proves the rule. NTV emerged as a "particular thorn in the side" of the authorities,<sup>16</sup> airing graphic footage of decimated civilian neighbourhoods in cities where military officials had insisted that conditions were calm or that bombs had

---

<sup>13</sup> From an interview published in *Kommersant*, 10 March 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Denis McQuail reviews the literature on media bias during war in *Media Performance: Mass Communication and the Public Interest*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1992, p. 241; see also D. Morrison and H. Tumber, *Journalists at War*, London: Sage Publications, 1988.

<sup>15</sup> William A. Dorman, "Press Theory and Journalistic Practice: The Case of the Gulf War," in Shanto Iyengar and Richard Reeves, eds., *Do the Media Govern? Politicians, Voters, and Reporters in America*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997, pp. 118-125.

<sup>16</sup> Frances H. Foster, "Information and the Problem of Democracy: The Russian Experience," *American Journal of Comparative Law*, vol. 44 (1996), republished in Monroe E. Price, Andrei Richter and Peter K. Yu, *Russian Media Law & Policy in the Yeltsin Decade: Essays and Documents*, Kluwer Law International, 2002 (forthcoming).

hit only military targets.<sup>17</sup> Even more shocking, the fully state-owned television network RTR became "one of the bastions of the anti-war campaign" a few weeks into the fighting.<sup>18</sup> RTR's chairman, Oleg Poptsov, had presided over a pro-Yel'tsin editorial policy since the network's inception in 1990, but he believed that the "fourth estate" had a duty to criticize mistakes made by the authorities.<sup>19</sup> RTR's war coverage became so negative that a group of independent experts who praised NTV's "balanced" reporting chided RTR for airing overly "emotional" reports criticizing the military campaign.<sup>20</sup> Large-circulation private newspapers that had defended Yel'tsin throughout the 1990s, such as *Izvestiya*, *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, *Moskovskiy komsomolets*, and *Argumenty i fakty*, challenged official statements about events. Instead of rallying around the president, some journalists denounced his war in the strongest terms. A popular commentator on Ekho Moskvy radio, which reached a large and influential audience in the capital, accused Russian officials of employing "Hitler's tactics" and "Goebbels-type propaganda."<sup>21</sup>

The authorities could count on loyal coverage from official newspapers and Channel 1 television (still fully state-owned Ostankino when the war broke out, becoming 51 percent state-owned Russian Public Television in April 1995). However, millions of citizens preferred alternative sources for the news. Channel 1's ratings remained stagnant in the early weeks of the war, while RTR's audience increased substantially and NTV's doubled.<sup>22</sup> The government's *Rossiyskaya gazeta* did not reach nearly as many readers as did the newspapers that were denouncing the military campaign. A handful of well-known commentators for private media backed the invasion,<sup>23</sup> but such voices were few and far between.

The anti-war slant of leading Russian media was unusual but not unprecedented by international standards. The absence of an elite consensus makes the media more

---

<sup>17</sup> For comparisons of typical Chechnya coverage on major Russian television networks, see Mickiewicz, *Changing Channels*, pp. 245-54 and 260-2; *Zhurnalistika i voyna*, pp. 44-8.

<sup>18</sup> Zasurskiy, *Mass-media vtoroy respubliki*, p. 142.

<sup>19</sup> On Poptsov's conception of media's role, see *Khronika vremeni 'Tsarya Borisa'* (second edition). Moscow: Sovershenno sekretno, 2000, p. 481.

<sup>20</sup> See *Zhurnalistika i voyna*, p. 48.

<sup>21</sup> Andrey Cherkizov's commentaries of 11 December 1994 and 4 January 1995, republished in Cherkizov, *Khronograf 1991-1996*, Moscow: Mart, 1996, pp. 242, 268-9.

<sup>22</sup> Mickiewicz, *Changing Channels*, p. 256.

likely to question military and security policies and less likely to transmit disinformation uncritically.<sup>24</sup> Opponents of the military campaign included State Duma deputies from groups favoured by Moscow journalists, such as Russia's Democratic Choice and Yabloko. One vocal war critic was the highly respected former dissident Sergey Kovalev, who headed a presidential commission on human rights. Many journalists took their cue from Kovalev and other Duma deputies who visited Grozny in December 1994 and contradicted official statements about conditions in the Chechen capital. Opinion was divided within the Russian armed forces as well,<sup>25</sup> and even if policy-makers ignored the dissenters, NTV was "prepared to exploit open divisions within the elite for its newsgathering [...]."<sup>26</sup>

The efforts by Russian officials to control media coverage were inept and sometimes counterproductive. The Kremlin had not summoned prominent editors-in-chief before the invasion to explain the causes of the crisis and solicit their understanding.<sup>27</sup> Once the fighting began, the presidential press service was "completely cut off from information about Chechnya," according to Yel'tsin's press secretary at the time, Vyacheslav Kostikov.<sup>28</sup> That hurt prospects for winning over journalists, because the Kremlin's press service had more frequent contacts with correspondents than did the press departments of other Russian official bodies.<sup>29</sup>

Russian military commanders distrusted journalists, especially those working for privately owned or foreign media. The Temporary Information Centre formed soon after fighting began had the authority to deny accreditation to journalists working in the

---

<sup>23</sup> For instance, Mikhail Leont'ev, the first deputy editor of the daily *Segodnya* and Maksim Sokolov, a commentator for *Kommersant*.

<sup>24</sup> During the Vietnam War, mainstream U.S. media gave more credence to the claims of anti-war protesters after "authoritative" sources raised the same concerns. See Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time*, New York: Random House, 1979; Daniel Hallin, *The "Uncensored" War: the Media and Vietnam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986. A broader study of the impact of elite disagreements concerning national security or foreign policy can be found in Benjamin J. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in American Policy Preferences*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, pp. 283-4, cited by Mickiewicz in *Changing Channels*, p. 315.

<sup>25</sup> On opposition to the war strategy within military ranks, see Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War*, London: Macmillan, 1997, pp. 177-82; Shevtsova, *Rezhim Borisa Yel'tsina*, p. 183; and Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998, pp. 89, 103-7.

<sup>26</sup> Mickiewicz, *Changing Channels*, p. 245.

<sup>27</sup> Kostikov, *Roman s prezidentom: zapiski press-sekretarya*, Moscow: Vagrius, 1997, pp. 325-6.

<sup>28</sup> *Roman s prezidentom*, p. 325.

conflict zone if it deemed that they were transmitting inaccurate information or propagating ethnic or religious hatred. Refusing to accredit unfriendly journalists might keep them out of the way in most war situations. But Russian correspondents had little trouble moving around Chechnya and spoke a common language with enemy fighters and ordinary civilians. Having been declared "persona non grata" at Russian military installations, NTV's star war correspondent Yelena Masyuk was among those who reported primarily from Chechen-controlled territory.<sup>30</sup>

Journalists roaming around the breakaway republic easily found eyewitnesses who contradicted statements by Russian commanders.<sup>31</sup> That simple fact eluded Russian officials, who continued to make demonstrably false claims about the fighting (for instance, saying that Grozny had been captured when heavy bombing of the city was ongoing). The Temporary Information Centre offered little of value to journalists.<sup>32</sup> The poor quality of official press releases frustrated even those in the media world who wanted to defend the military campaign<sup>33</sup> and deepened the resolve of journalists who opposed the war.<sup>34</sup>

Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudaev and his associates outmaneuvered Russian officials on the media front. Press secretaries for various Russian agencies often had to spend hours convincing their bosses to make a statement to journalists and clearing the wording with higher-ups.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, chief Chechen spokesman Movladi Udugov was accessible and authorized to speak for Dudaev's regime. Getting his version in the public domain first helped influence how Russian journalists framed the story of the day. At key moments during the war, such as the hostage crisis in Budennovsk (Stavropol Kray) in

---

<sup>29</sup> *Novoe vremya*, no. 39, September 1996.

<sup>30</sup> See the interviews with Masyuk in *Zhurnalists*, January 1996, and in *Obshchaya gazeta*, 10-16 August 1995.

<sup>31</sup> Gall and de Waal emphasize the ease with which they were able to enter the breakaway republic; *Chechnya: A Small, Victorious War*, p. xiv. A colleague of Lieven's described Chechnya as "the great drive-in war"; *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*, pp. 119-120.

<sup>32</sup> On journalists' avoidance of the Temporary Information Centre's news releases and accreditation services, see Oleg Panfilov, "Ot VITsa k RITsu," *Sreda*, no. 11, December 1999, available at <http://www.cjes.ru/public/panfilov1.shtml>.

<sup>33</sup> The news director of Ostankino (Channel 1 television) made his frustration clear in an interview with Mickiewicz in January 1995, recounted in *Changing Channels*, p. 244.

<sup>34</sup> See Poptsov, *Khronika vremeni 'Tsarya Borisa'*, pp. 484-5.

<sup>35</sup> *Novoe vremya*, no. 39, September 1996.

June 1995,<sup>36</sup> the Chechen side released a consistent message, while Russian spokesmen representing the government, local military headquarters, the Federal Counterintelligence Service or the Interior Ministry contradicted each other.<sup>37</sup> Kostikov recognized that the authorities' "crude" efforts to counter Chechen propaganda irritated journalists,<sup>38</sup> many of whom preferred not to spend their time being lied to by Russian military commanders. Of 23 reporters who covered the early stages of the war, 15 told researchers they had attended press briefings held by Chechens, but only six had attended briefings organized by the federal armed forces.<sup>39</sup>

When faced with embarrassing early reports about the invasion, the Federal Counterintelligence Service put out the word that Dudaev had spent \$10 million on bribing Moscow journalists and had the capacity to blackmail many of them.<sup>40</sup> Although Russian officials offered no proof of those allegations,<sup>41</sup> Yel'tsin claimed in his first televised address about the invasion that "some Russian media function with the help of Chechen money."<sup>42</sup> That clumsy attempt to discredit the private media deeply offended journalists who opposed the war on principle.

Seeking to put a positive spin on the military campaign, Channel 1 altered its schedule in January 1995 in order to show an upbeat documentary about Chechnya that had been commissioned by the government.<sup>43</sup> The network also gave a desirable prime-

---

<sup>36</sup> A good account of the Budenkovsk raid, which deeply embarrassed the Russian authorities, can be found in Gall and de Waal, *Chechnya: A Small, Victorious War*, pp. 256-75.

<sup>37</sup> On the "complete failure" of Russian information policy during the Budenkovsk crisis and a similar situation in Pervomayskoe in January 1996, see Oleg Nechiporenko, "Kogda nuzhna zhestkaya samotsenzura," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 14 March 1996.

<sup>38</sup> Kostikov, *Roman s prezidentom*, p. 325.

<sup>39</sup> *Zhurnalistika i vojna*, p. 15.

<sup>40</sup> Kostikov, *Roman s prezidentom*, p. 327.

<sup>41</sup> In November 1996 NTV's Masyuk won a libel lawsuit against the newspaper *Shchit i mech'*, published by the Interior Ministry, which had accused her of taking money to file reports on Dudaev and Chechen field commander Shamil' Basaev.

<sup>42</sup> Kostikov insists that the president's speechwriters did not write that line, and that a pro-war figure in Yel'tsin's entourage inserted it shortly before the president delivered the address on 27 December 1994. See *Roman s prezidentom*, p. 327. On the bribery charge, see also Poptsov, *Khronika vremen 'Tsarya Borisa'*, p. 475, and Ellis, *From Glasnost to the Internet*, p. 114.

<sup>43</sup> Foster, "Information and the Problem of Democracy."



time slot to a new programme featuring the talented commentator Aleksandr Nevzorov,<sup>44</sup> who used shocking footage in trying to turn viewers in favour of the war.<sup>45</sup>

But persuading the public that the war was going well was difficult when rival television networks showed harrowing footage of destruction and beleaguered Russian troops. Most journalists did not believe Russian military commanders, and apparently, neither did a plurality of news consumers. Opinion polls repeatedly ranked NTV newscasts first in viewer trust, followed by the Channel 2 broadcaster RTR, which generally depicted the war in negative terms. Ostankino/Russian Public Television (which remained loyal to the authorities on Channel 1) consistently ranked last.<sup>46</sup>

Since the porous Russian checkpoints allowed journalists to reach battleground areas, military and security personnel resorted to other tactics to keep unflattering news from reaching the public. Although the chairman of the State Press Committee promised that military censorship would be imposed only "in situations envisaged by the law,"<sup>47</sup> many of the restrictions imposed on journalists collided with rights guaranteed under the 1993 constitution and the 1992 law on the mass media. Contradictions in Russia's legal landscape were partly to blame; in some respects the 1992 media law was not consistent with the law on the Interior Ministry troops or the law on state secrets.<sup>48</sup>

Inevitably, journalists face more constraints in wartime, since even mundane information about military units can become deadly if it falls into enemy hands. For that reason, Frank Ellis has found it "naïve and dangerous" for Russian media advocates to assert "the journalist's right to take whatever photos he pleases" in a war zone.<sup>49</sup> Though his point is valid, many acts of censorship in Chechnya seemed less concerned with

---

<sup>44</sup> Boris Kagarlitsky, "Propaganda Gives Military Pyrrhic Victory in Chechnya," *Moscow Times*, 22 March 2000.

<sup>45</sup> The president's Judicial Chamber on Information Disputes reprimanded Nevzorov and Russian Public Television (ORT) for engaging in the "propaganda of violence," citing programmes on 11 May 1995 and 2 July 1995 that showed, among other things, Russian soldiers carrying around the severed ears of Chechen fighters. ITAR-TASS, 11 July 1996.

<sup>46</sup> Mickiewicz reproduces and analyses some opinion poll data in *Changing Channels*, p. 255-60. Surveys published in *Zhurnalist*, no. 6, June 1995, likewise showed that viewers (especially those with higher education) had far more trust in NTV than in Russian Public Television.

<sup>47</sup> Translated excerpts from State Press Committee Chairman Sergey Gryzunov's 1 December 1994 press conference appeared in *Post-Soviet Media Law & Policy Newsletter*, no. 14, 26 January 1995.

<sup>48</sup> For more analysis of this point, see Ellis, *From Glasnost to the Internet*, pp. 83-4, 118-9 and 231-2; Yelena Kandybina, "Publikatsii o chechenskoy voyne v rossiyskoy presse: vzglyad yurista," prepared for the website "Conflict in Chechnya: Prague Watchdog" and republished on the website of the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations: <http://www.cjes.ru/public/kandyb5.shtml>.

saving lives than with saving the armed forces from embarrassment. Military or security personnel confiscated tapes, cameras and other materials from at least 75 journalists, many of whom had documented civilian casualties or atrocities committed by Russian troops. For example, officers confiscated two videotapes from a cameraman working for the U.S.-based television network CNN because the footage on those tapes "[did] not correspond to reality" and "discredit[ed] the actions of Russian troops."<sup>50</sup>

Even more disturbing, between November 1994 and September 1996 monitors for the Glasnost Defence Foundation documented 117 cases in which journalists were deliberately fired upon.<sup>51</sup> At least 20 journalists were killed during the first war in Chechnya and nine went missing. Some of the unfortunate victims perished in cities that were being bombed. But Natalya Alyakina, a reporter for the German magazine *Fokus*, was shot dead by a Russian soldier moments after passing through a checkpoint during the Budennovsk hostage crisis of June 1995.<sup>52</sup> (NTV's Yelena Masyuk later recalled that journalists were never afraid at Chechen checkpoints but frequently worried about being shot in the back after going through a checkpoint manned by federal troops.<sup>53</sup>) In addition, 174 journalists working in or around Chechnya were detained or arrested, and 34 received threats. The Federal Counterintelligence Service (renamed the Federal Security Service in April 1995) also pressured some reporters to serve as informants.<sup>54</sup> After analysing incidents involving hundreds of journalists, Oleg Panfilov concluded that Russian federal or military authorities were responsible for more than 90 percent of the cases of infringements on journalists' rights.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> *From Glasnost to the Internet*, pp. 119, 232.

<sup>50</sup> That incident occurred on 27 January 1995 and is described in *Zhurnalistika i voyna*, p. 21.

<sup>51</sup> The figures in this paragraph come from reports compiled by Oleg Panfilov of the Glasnost Defence Foundation. They were published in Aleksey Simonov, ed., *Informatsionnaya voyna v Chechne. Fakty, dokumenty, svidetel'stva. Noyabr' 1994-Sentyabr' 1996*, and can be found at <http://internews.ru/books/infowar/15.html>.

<sup>52</sup> More details about the Alyakina case can be found in Simonov, *Informatsionnaya voyna v Chechne*, <http://internews.ru/books/infowar/21.html>.

<sup>53</sup> See Masyuk's interview in *Zhurnalst*, January 1996.

<sup>54</sup> Many journalists believe such recruiting efforts led to the execution-style shooting of *Obshchaya gazeta* correspondent Nadezhda Chaykova (either by Chechens who suspected her of collaborating with Russian security services or by Russian operatives angry that she refused to cooperate). Her murder was never solved; excerpts of press coverage on the case can be found in Simonov, *Informatsionnaya voyna v Chechne*, <http://internews.ru/books/infowar/19.html>.

<sup>55</sup> Panfilov was quoted to that effect in *Ekspress-khronika*, 14 February 1996, *Obshchaya gazeta*, 15-21 February 1996, and *Kul'tura*, no. 10, 15 March 1997.

A few weeks into the fighting, the president's Judicial Chamber on Information Disputes denounced the "flagrant violation of journalists' rights of access to comprehensive and reliable information, impermissible pressure on journalists, instructing them how and what to write on the events in Chechnya, and other deviations from the Russian Federation Constitution's provisions on freedom of mass information and prohibition of censorship."<sup>56</sup> But the Judicial Chamber was powerless to enforce its appeal, which Russian officials and military commanders ignored.

Media advocates were likewise unable to force the authorities to defend journalists' rights in Chechnya. Commander-in-chief Yel'tsin was fond of recalling his role as the "guarantor of the constitution." Yet neither he nor his subordinates sacked or disciplined the military personnel who oversaw the routine harassment of journalists. Interfering with the work of a journalist is a crime in Russia, but prosecutors did not arrest or try anyone under that article of the Criminal Code during the Chechen war. The private who killed Natalya Alyakina was charged only with careless handling of a firearm and received a two-year suspended sentence. In one of its most significant media-related rulings of the 1990s, the Constitutional Court in July 1995 struck down part of the government directive establishing the accreditation system used by the Temporary Information Centre.<sup>57</sup> The court found that the directive violated three articles of the Russian Constitution because it contradicted the 1992 media law, which includes an exhaustive list of grounds for denying accreditation to journalists.<sup>58</sup> However, that ruling led only to cosmetic changes in accreditation policy rather than any marked improvement in journalists' freedom to gather and distribute information.

---

<sup>56</sup> The Judicial Chamber's ruling of 26 December 1994 was published in *Rossiyskaya gazeta* on 30 December 1994. An English translation of the ruling can be found in *Post-Soviet Media Law & Policy Newsletter*, no. 15, 27 February 1995.

<sup>57</sup> On the 9 December 1994 government resolution "On providing state security and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation, legality, rights and freedoms of citizens, disarming unlawful armed formations on the territory of the Chechen Republic and neighbouring regions in the North Caucasus," see Ellis, *From Glasnost to the Internet*, pp. 117-8; Panfilov, "Ot VITsa k RITsu"; Mikhail Fedotov, "SMI v otsutstvii Ariadny," in *Zakonodatel'stvo Rossiiskoi Federatsii o sredstvakh massovoi informatsii*, Moscow: Gardarika, 1996, pp. 265-6 (the book can also be found at <http://www.medialaw.ru/publications/books/medialaw/index.html>).

<sup>58</sup> The court cited article 29 (granting the right to freedom of information), article 46 (guaranteeing judicial defense of rights and freedoms), and article 55 (stating that laws may not revoke or encroach upon rights and freedoms). For more on the Constitutional Court's 31 July 1995 ruling, see W.E. Pomeranz, "Judicial review and the Russian Constitutional Court: The Chechen case," *Review of Central and East European*

In fact, as the war dragged on the authorities improved techniques for keeping journalists away from the action. During the January 1996 hostage drama in Pervomayskoe (Dagestan), some 50 journalists tried in vain to penetrate a security cordon around the area. Attack dogs and soldiers who opened fire on at least one group of journalists helped maintain the cordon.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, officials in Moscow and near Pervomayskoe fed journalists false information daily.<sup>60</sup> Managers at Russian Public Television (ORT) cut several segments from the programme "Vzglyad" that cast doubt on official claims about the hostage-taking.<sup>61</sup>

Restrictions on journalists' movements were subsequently tightened further. In March 1996, the military banned filming in Grozny, where shelling continued, and blocked journalists from travelling towards several Chechen cities and towns that were under attack.<sup>62</sup> The Glasnost Defence Foundation denounced the "total blockade" on information coming out of conflict areas,<sup>63</sup> but the Chechen capital remained virtually closed to journalists for months.<sup>64</sup> Such tactics did not do away with media criticism of the war, but they did prevent journalists from observing the worst of the carnage or documenting its toll on civilians.

It helped the military's cause that by March 1996, most Russian media outlets had decided to support Yel'tsin's reelection campaign. As a result, the media "grew more muted about the war" and "virtually ignored the heavy fighting" that raged in Chechnya.<sup>65</sup> Behind-the-scenes intimidation may have helped subdue the media coverage as well. Eduard Sagalaev, whom Yel'tsin appointed to run RTR in February 1996, later recalled that during the presidential campaign an official encouraged him to "forget about"

---

*Law*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1997, pp. 9-48; K. A. Katanyan, ed., *Konstitutsionnyi Sud Rossii. Spravochnik* (second edition), Moscow: Panorama, 1997, pp. 190-2; Fedotov, "SMI v otsutstvii Ariadny," p. 265.

<sup>59</sup> As reported by Reuters, 16 January 1996.

<sup>60</sup> On media restrictions during the Pervomayskoe events, see the Glasnost Defence Foundation's monitoring published in *Nezavisimaya gazeta* on 31 January 1996; Simonov, *Informatsionnaya voyna v Chechne*, <http://internews.ru/books/infowar/4.html> and <http://internews.ru/books/infowar/22.html>; Mikhail Gulyaev, "Media as Contested Power in Post-Glasnost Russia," conference paper delivered in February 1996, published in *Post-Soviet Media Law & Policy Newsletter*, no. 29, 30 April 1996.

<sup>61</sup> *Segodnya*, 23 January 1996. Other accounts of the censorship of "Vzglyad" are consistent with this one; see *Izvestiya*, 24 January 1996; *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 31 January 1996; *Post-Soviet Media Law & Policy Newsletter*, no. 24-25, 31 January 1996.

<sup>62</sup> See *Obshchaya gazeta*, 3 April 1996, and Oleg Panfilov's chronicle of infringements on journalists' rights in Chechnya during March 1996, published in *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 12 April 1996.

<sup>63</sup> Interfax, 20 March 1996; *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 22 March 1996.

<sup>64</sup> *Obshchaya gazeta*, no. 20, 23-29 May 1996.

Chechnya for a time, hinting that he might be framed for a crime if he did not heed that advice.<sup>66</sup> NTV and Moscow-based newspapers did not whitewash the war during the presidential campaign,<sup>67</sup> but compared to their coverage the previous year, those outlets were far less critical of actions by Russian soldiers and of the military's attempts to restrict media coverage.<sup>68</sup> Yel'tsin noted approvingly in April 1996 that "there have been significantly fewer attacks on the army in the press."<sup>69</sup>

Though Yel'tsin was relieved when journalists toned down their criticism of the war, it is worth noting that at several junctures in 1995 he refrained from asserting his power against the media outlets that embarrassed his administration. A presidential decree had in effect granted NTV its broadcast licence in late 1993, and a presidential decree could easily have taken that licence away. First Deputy Prime Minister Oleg Soskovets advocated revoking NTV's broadcast licence in December 1994, but Yel'tsin declined to do so, even though the network's Chechnya coverage was gaining international attention. Annoyed by RTR's hostile coverage in January 1995, Yel'tsin decided to fire the network's chairman, but he retreated when some of his advisers and members of the Security Council argued against the move.<sup>70</sup> (The president did replace Poptsov in February 1996, criticizing the RTR's Chechnya coverage in particular. By that time, the people who talked Yel'tsin down a year earlier no longer worked in the Kremlin.)

Yel'tsin seemed to hold out hope of regaining journalists' support despite the war, from which he tried (not very convincingly) to distance himself. He periodically criticized media coverage of Chechnya, but after his December 1994 television address never again publicly accused journalists of taking bribes from the Chechens. In late 1995

---

<sup>65</sup> Gall and de Waal, *Chechnya: A Small, Victorious War*, p. 315.

<sup>66</sup> Sagalaev first recounted that incident in *Izvestiya*, 19 July 1996, and repeated the allegation on NTV, "Geroy dnya," 10 February 1997.

<sup>67</sup> On NTV's coverage of Chechnya during the presidential campaign, see Mickiewicz, *Changing Channels*, pp. 178, 184. For extracts of press reports on the war during the first half of 1996, see Simonov, *Informatsionnaya voyna v Chechne*, <http://internews.ru/books/infowar/24.html>.

<sup>68</sup> See Anna Politkovskaya, "Krovavyi gipnoz," *Obshchaya gazeta*, no. 12, 3 April 1996.

<sup>69</sup> As quoted by ITAR-TASS, 4 April 1996.

<sup>70</sup> On the abortive dismissal of Poptsov, see Aleksandr Korzhakov, *Boris Yel'tsin: Ot rassveta do zakata*, Moscow: Interbuk, 1997, pp. 241-2, and Kostikov, *Roman s prezidentom*, pp. 304-6.

he issued awards to 20 journalists covering the military campaign, including not only staff from loyal media but also correspondents from NTV and *Komsomol'skaya pravda*.<sup>71</sup>

Yel'tsin also avoided endorsing the criminal case against NTV's Masyuk, who interviewed Shamil' Basaev shortly after he led the Budennovsk raid.<sup>72</sup> The arbitrary nature of that case provoked an outcry among Russian journalists and received substantial attention in the foreign press. Many journalists had interviewed Basaev since the war began,<sup>73</sup> but only Masyuk was investigated afterwards for not revealing his whereabouts to the Russian authorities. The 1992 law on the mass media protects journalists' right not to reveal their sources, but the Procurator-General's Office tried to finesse that issue by questioning Masyuk "as a citizen" rather than as a journalist. The criminal case appeared to have a chilling effect on RTR; the network's chairman Poptsov, who presided over an anti-war editorial policy, nonetheless shelved an episode of "Sovershenno sekretno" that included an interview with Basaev.<sup>74</sup> But Yel'tsin removed the acting procurator-general in September 1995, and the case against Masyuk was closed the following month.

Why Yel'tsin held back from using all methods available to punish or intimidate critical journalists remains unclear. Perhaps he sensed that cracking down on private media would cause a backlash in the journalistic community, and he was not prepared to run that risk with an election coming soon. Alternatively, the president may have been playing the "good tsar," so that longtime political allies would blame his "bad advisers" for policies that menaced the media.

The war in Chechnya did not doom Yel'tsin's presidency, but it was a public-relations disaster for his administration. Vyacheslav Kostikov, who lost his job as his press secretary soon after the war began, has called Chechnya an "information Waterloo" that revealed the Russian authorities' "complete incompetence and illiteracy" when it came to news management.<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> NTV, "Segodnya," 15 December 1995; ORT, "Vremya," 15 December 1995.

<sup>72</sup> This despite the fact that a letter from Yel'tsin's bodyguard and confidante Aleksandr Korzhakov to the procuracy probably inspired the criminal case against her. See Masyuk's interviews in *Zhurnal*, no. 1, January 1996, and *Obshchaya gazeta*, 10-16 August 1995.

<sup>73</sup> According to Russian Television, "Vesti," 3 August 1995, journalists who interviewed Basaev included correspondents for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Ekho Moskvy, the news agencies Reuters and Agence France Press, and the newspapers *Russkaya mysl'* and *Komsomol'skaya pravda*.

<sup>74</sup> *Novaya ezhdnevnyaya gazeta*, 21-27 September 1995.

<sup>75</sup> Kostikov, *Roman s prezidentom*, pp. 325-6.

At the same time, it would be a mistake to interpret the bold news coverage of Chechnya as a sign of journalists' power to dictate policy changes or defend their rights guaranteed by law. True, the Kremlin could not force journalists or editors to express views that violated their consciences. But journalists managed to expose official lies about the war primarily because the Russian armed forces lacked an effective checkpoint system. Media advocates failed to make military and security personnel respect journalists' rights in the war zone.

As for the impact of the Chechnya coverage, Mickiewicz has argued convincingly that public opposition to the war did not stem solely from television newscasts.<sup>76</sup> However, since only a small percentage of the population had direct exposure to the fighting, it is reasonable to assume that images of devastation and news frames contrasting miserable, poorly-trained Russian soldiers with fearless Chechen fighters shaped attitudes about the war. Yet even if the media coverage did affect public opinion, it was the rebels' stunning recapture of Grozny in early August 1996--not news reports or public opinion polls--that forced Russian officials to face reality and agree to withdraw the armed forces from the breakaway republic.<sup>77</sup> Whatever the aspirations of Russian journalists, the "fourth estate" did not end the war.

That said, supporters of the military campaign viewed public opposition to the war as proof of the media's immense power to destabilize society.<sup>78</sup> One reporter for *Rossiyskaya gazeta* compared journalists to "spiritual shepherds whom our trusting Russian people follow."<sup>79</sup> For another analyst, the prevailing slant of Chechnya coverage showed that "the fourth estate in our country is much stronger and more powerful than even the executive [branch], let alone the legislative or judicial branches."<sup>80</sup> Official newspapers accused journalists of waging a "psychological war against the Russian

---

<sup>76</sup> Mickiewicz, *Changing Channels*, pp. 254-60.

<sup>77</sup> Gall and de Waal, *Chechnya: A Small, Victorious War*, pp. 331-61; Shevtsova, *Rezhim Borisa Yel'tsina*, pp. 294-8.

<sup>78</sup> Numerous excerpts from official press reports on the war and how mainstream Russian media covered the war can be found in Simonov, *Informatsionnaya voyna v Chechne*, <http://internews.ru/books/infowar/25.html>.

<sup>79</sup> A. A. Grabel'nikov, *Sredstva massovoi informatsii postsovetsoy Rossii*, Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Rossiyskogo univerziteta druzhby narodov, 1996, as cited in Zasurskiy, *Mass-media vtoroy respubliki*, pp. 30-1.

<sup>80</sup> Vladimir Verin, "Legendy i mify vtoroy drevneyshey: s pervogo dnya operatsiy v Chechne 'chetvertaya' vlast' voyuet na storone Dudaeva," *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 19 January 1995.

soldier"<sup>81</sup> and shooting the army in the back.<sup>82</sup> A State Duma commission headed by Stanislav Govorukhin, usually a vocal critic of Yel'tsin, blasted the media's "wide-ranging and [...] unprecedented campaign of persecution of their own armed forces." The commission's report accused some newspapers of encouraging desertion from the Russian ranks<sup>83</sup> and spreading "disinformation" about atrocities in towns like Samashki,<sup>84</sup> thereby strengthening the Chechen resistance and helping western countries put pressure on Russia.<sup>85</sup> Govorukhin's commission repeated the charge that Chechens had bribed journalists, but others saw journalists as "opponents of strengthening Russian statehood" who deliberately tried to undermine Russia's standing in the international community.<sup>86</sup>

Name-calling did not shame journalists into changing their stance on the war. The bottom line was that the Russian authorities failed to control the news message. The political consultant Gleb Pavlovskiy estimated that Yel'tsin lost the support of some 20 percent of the population because of hostile media coverage of Chechnya and other topics that had been largely taboo before the war.<sup>87</sup> In a lengthy denunciation of the media's "national mechanism for suppressing alternative views," Pavlovskiy argued that by transmitting separatist propaganda as fact and by "showing contempt" for the army and the federal government, journalists had created an inaccurate, yet dominant, impression of the Chechen conflict among ordinary Russians.<sup>88</sup>

Pavlovskiy was convinced that the Khasavyurt accords signed in August 1996 would not end the Chechen conflict. By the time fighting flared up again in 1999, he had become an influential adviser to the Kremlin. The remainder of this paper will analyse

---

<sup>81</sup> Aleksandr Budnikov, "Chechenskaya voyna i rossiyskie SMI," *Vecherniy Novosibirsk*, 29 November 1996, and Budnikov, "Kto otvetit za lozh' i klevetu? Ili Chechenskiy krizis i psikhologicheskaya voyna protiv rossiyskogo soldata," *Krasnaya zvezda*, 15 March 1996.

<sup>82</sup> Verin, "Legendy i mify vtoroy drevneyshey."

<sup>83</sup> Quoted in Ellis, *From Glasnost to the Internet*, p. 116. Lieven, who interviewed many Russian soldiers in Chechnya, argues that misleading official statements were more devastating to morale than any reports in the private media; see *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*, p. 120.

<sup>84</sup> On the capture of Samashki in April 1995, the site of the most notorious atrocities during the first war in Chechnya, see Gall and de Waal, *Chechnya: A Small, Victorious War*, pp. 242-7; and Mickiewicz, *Changing Channels*, pp. 260-1.

<sup>85</sup> The report of the Govorukhin commission was quoted at length in Ellis, *From Glasnost to the Internet*, pp. 116-7.

<sup>86</sup> Gabel'nikov, as quoted in Zasurskiy, *Mass-media vtoroy respubliki*, p. 94.

<sup>87</sup> Zasurskiy, *Mass-media vtoroy respubliki*, p. 96.

<sup>88</sup> Gleb Pavlovskiy, "Ar'ergardnye boi chetvertoy vlasti: Rossiyskie SMI splachivayutsya v obshchenatsional'nyi mekhanizm glusheniya al'ternativnykh mneniy," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 10 September 1996.



how the authorities constructed their own "national mechanism for suppressing alternative views" during the second Chechen war.

### "MEGAPHONES FOR THE OFFICIAL LINE"

When Russian officials warned during the first war that an independent Chechnya would descend into anarchy and butchery, many Moscow journalists dismissed such statements as empty propaganda.<sup>89</sup> But the murder of six Red Cross workers in late 1996 and the kidnappings of at least ten journalists during the first half of 1997 disillusioned many who had once sympathized with the Chechen cause.<sup>90</sup> Even NTV's Masyuk was abducted and held hostage for 100 days. Having taken personal and professional risks to expose the brutality of the first war and to allow Chechen field commanders to address a Russian audience,<sup>91</sup> she had naively felt safe working in the breakaway republic despite the rampant banditry.<sup>92</sup> More than a thousand civilians were kidnapped in de facto independent Chechnya between 1996 and 1999,<sup>93</sup> but like foreign aid workers, journalists made especially enticing targets, because their employers could afford to pay higher ransoms. Well before the second war, mainstream Russian media frequently depicted Chechens as terrorists and criminals.<sup>94</sup>

Consequently, after Chechen-based Islamists invaded Dagestan in August 1999, launching battles that killed more than a thousand people and displaced tens of thousands more, most Russian journalists were receptive to a military response. No comparable incident presaged the first war.<sup>95</sup> An elite consensus probably reinforced the prevailing

---

<sup>89</sup> For instance, in his commentary for Ekho Moskvy on 9 February 1996, Andrey Cherkizov urged Yel'tsin to stop "trying to pull the wool over our eyes" by claiming that Chechens would slaughter each other if the federal forces left: "They'll handle it," he asserted. Republished in Cherkizov, *Khronograf*, pp. 502-4.

<sup>90</sup> See "Media Coverage of the Chechen War: Then and Now," excerpt from the weekly programme "Chetvertaya Vlast'" on REN-TV, 22 January 2000, as translated and published at <http://www.internews.ru/crisis/mediacoverage.html>.

<sup>91</sup> Masyuk was popular among ordinary Chechens and had expressed admiration for Shamil' Basaev's "bravery, professionalism, and truth to his word"; see her interview with *Zhurnalist*, January 1996.

<sup>92</sup> See *Obshchaya gazeta*, 15-21 May 1997.

<sup>93</sup> For statistics on the wave of kidnappings in Chechnya, see Robert Bruce Ware and Ira Straus, "Media Bias on Chechnya," *Christian Science Monitor*, 15 March 2000.

<sup>94</sup> See Dmitriy Furman, "Bandity natsional'nosti ne imeyut: SMI aktivno formiruyut obraz vraga," *Obshchaya gazeta*, 21-27 January 1999.

<sup>95</sup> On the long deterioration of relations between the federal authorities and the Chechen leadership prior to the December 1994 Russian invasion, see John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; Gall and de Waal, *Chechnya: A Small, Victorious War*, especially pp. 76-172.

view in the journalistic community. For instance, Yabloko leader Grigoriy Yavlinskiy defended the government's response to the incursion into Dagestan, despite having voted in May 1999 to impeach Yel'tsin for launching the first war in Chechnya. The virtually unanimous support for military action against Chechen separatists was all the more striking in light of the "information war" between rival political groups that was gaining momentum in the summer and autumn of 1999.

In the early months of the military campaign, most Russian media, including all major television networks, dwelled on the steady advance of the federal armed forces, the high morale among Russian soldiers, and the welcoming residents of the "liberated" areas.<sup>96</sup> NTV's coverage of the "anti-terrorist operation" (in keeping with the official lexicon, not a war) could hardly have been more different from the editorial policy that put the network on the map during the first war. Like other television networks, NTV paid little attention to the civilian death toll, relying on battlefield footage showing "heavy guns firing, not where the shells hit."<sup>97</sup>

Moscow newspapers provided a broader spectrum of viewpoints about Chechnya in 1999, but only a handful of publications, such as *Novaya gazeta* and *Obshchaya gazeta*, questioned the wisdom or morality of the Russian military strategy. Some newspapers that had been hostile toward the armed forces during the first war now concentrated on the same upbeat themes that dominated television newscasts. Destroyed Chechen towns and the wave of refugees fleeing the republic received far less column space.<sup>98</sup>

That few Russian journalists were reporting from battleground cities and villages largely explains the contrast between the early media coverage of the two wars. The hostage industry had not only alienated many journalists from the Chechen "liberation struggle,"<sup>99</sup> it had scared off even experienced correspondents who retained good

---

<sup>96</sup> For content analysis of the remarkably similar Chechnya coverage on ORT, RTR, NTV and TV-Centre during September and October 1999, see Semen Liberman, "Vtoraya Chechenskaya," *Sreda*, November 1999, pp. 6-9, also available at <http://www.internews.ru/sreda/16/2.html>.

<sup>97</sup> David Filipov, "Moscow Launches Video Offensive Seeking Support for Chechnya War," *Boston Globe*, 17 October 1999.

<sup>98</sup> See Zolotov, "Kremlin Scores Strategic Victory."

<sup>99</sup> See Nabi Abdulaev, "Moscow Tightly Controls Information on the Chechen Conflict," *Jamestown Foundation Prism*, December 1999, no. 20, part 1.

Chechen contacts.<sup>100</sup> Abductions remained an everpresent risk; employees of the state-owned ITAR-TASS news agency had been kidnapped in March and July 1999, and the second of those two victims (the photographer Vladimir Yatsina) remained in captivity when the second war broke out.

With few journalists on the ground to contradict the official version of events, the authorities mostly got the war coverage they wanted. When Russian-launched rockets killed dozens of civilians in a Grozny marketplace in October, major news agencies all reported the attack. However, Russian television networks did not show the carnage,<sup>101</sup> and the next morning, the daily *Vremya-MN* was "virtually alone among Russian newspapers" in covering the story.<sup>102</sup> Unlike most Moscow-based newspapers, *Vremya-MN* had a reporter working in Grozny, and she had been in the marketplace at the time of the attack. Other Russian media came to the story late, and when they did, many gave credence to unsubstantiated official claims that the market was an "arms bazaar"<sup>103</sup> and that the explosion was either an accident or staged deliberately by Chechens.<sup>104</sup>

As that incident illustrates, Russian journalists generally gave official pronouncements the benefit of the doubt when reporting unconfirmed information related to the second Chechen war. For example, very few media challenged statements blaming Chechen terrorists for the blasts that leveled apartment blocks in Moscow and Volgograd in September 1999, even though law enforcement agencies produced no evidence to support the allegation. *Novaya gazeta* and *Obshchaya gazeta* were among the few newspapers to question that rush to judgment.

Even more revealing, on several occasions in 1999 Russian media, including private newspapers and television networks, ignored evidence that contradicted official reports about "terrorists" eliminated with minimal Russian military losses. Stringers

---

<sup>100</sup> Valeriy Yakov's good contacts with Chechen field commanders helped him get closer to the action during the Pervomayskoe hostage crisis than any other journalist, but he was afraid to travel in Chechnya in the autumn of 1999. See Andrei Zolotov Jr., "Journalists Bemoan Chechen Coverage," *Moscow Times*, 28 October 1999.

<sup>101</sup> Thomas de Waal, "Introduction," in Anna Politkovskaya, *A Dirty War: A Russian Reporter in Chechnya*, London: The Harvill Press, 2001, p. xxx.

<sup>102</sup> The best account of Russian reports on that rocket attack is Matt Bivens, "Grozny's Blast Gets Odd TV Coverage," *Moscow Times*, 23 October 1999.

<sup>103</sup> Many journalists had visited the market and knew that most of the kiosks sold ordinary consumer goods. Some photographs released by the Russian Information Centre, purportedly proving the market was primarily for weapons dealers, were taken in a different location. See Panfilov, "Ot VITsa k RITsu."

<sup>104</sup> Bivens, "Grozny's Blast Gets Odd TV Coverage."

working for Russian television networks "didn't want anything to do with" footage filmed by a Chechen cameraman showing the civilian victims of a direct hit on two buses filled with refugees. Russian newscasts that evening reported a successful attack on two busloads of terrorists, as Russian military sources claimed.<sup>105</sup>

Why did such self-censorship flourish in coverage of the second Chechen war? Some analysts have suggested that journalists were afraid to alienate their readers and viewers, since opinion polls showed widespread antipathy toward Chechens and support for the war.<sup>106</sup> That would be an amazing reversal of the "fourth estate" notion that journalists should educate and enlighten their audience. During the first war, the chairman of state-owned RTR had defended his network's negative Chechnya coverage, saying journalists had a duty to point out the authorities' mistakes. In 1999, the RTR chairman characterized his network's coverage as being about "returning the feeling of victory to the army."<sup>107</sup> A veteran Moscow-based foreign correspondent observed in October 1999 that many of his Russian colleagues "seem content to be little more than megaphones for the official line."<sup>108</sup> The satisfaction was mutual: one Russian general commented, "This time we are getting more help and less trouble from journalists."<sup>109</sup>

The federal authorities were not passive beneficiaries of the new media climate; they cultivated favourable coverage in order to bolster public support for the military campaign.<sup>110</sup> Prime Minister Vladimir Putin appealed for the understanding of top television executives during a meeting in October 1999.<sup>111</sup> Government officials summoned lower-ranking journalists for interviews and "reminded [them] of their patriotic duty [...]."<sup>112</sup> During the first war, the Temporary Information Centre's

---

<sup>105</sup> Anne Nivat, who covered the second Chechen war for several months, describes this incident in *Chienne de Guerre: A Woman Reporter Behind the Lines of the War in Chechnya*, New York: Public Affairs, 2001, pp. 66-7.

<sup>106</sup> De Waal, "Introduction," in Politkovskaya, *A Dirty War*, p. xxvi. Andrey Kortunov, director of the Moscow Scientific Fund, made similar comments in Fred Weir, "The Story Russians Don't See in Chechnya," *Christian Science Monitor*, 26 October 1999.

<sup>107</sup> RTR chairman Mikhail Shvydkoy was quoted in Ian Traynor, "Moscow's Media War Flags on Home Front," *The Guardian*, 11 November 1999.

<sup>108</sup> Weir, "The Story Russians Don't See in Chechnya."

<sup>109</sup> General Vyacheslav Ovchinnikov was quoted in Filipov, "Moscow Launches Video Offensive."

<sup>110</sup> Russian Information Centre director Mikhail Margelov discussed the lessons learned from the first war in Chechnya in Michael R. Gordon, "Russia Copies NATO in War to Win Minds," *New York Times*, 28 November 1999.

<sup>111</sup> EJC Media News, 11 October 1999, distributed to the author by e-mail.

<sup>112</sup> De Waal, "Introduction," in Politkovskaya, *A Dirty War*, p. xxvi.

incompetence had been legendary, but the Russian Information Centre created in 1999 to handle news releases was in the skilled hands of Mikhail Margelov.<sup>113</sup> As a senior executive of the Video-International advertising agency, Margelov had worked on Yel'tsin's television commercials in 1996, gaining experience in slick image construction while selling an unpopular product to a mass audience. Under his leadership, the centre issued timely releases with a coherent message. Inspired by NATO's success in turning the media's attention to Serb atrocities during the bombing campaign in Yugoslavia, the Russian Information Centre released videos of Chechen captors torturing and killing Russian soldiers during the first war.<sup>114</sup> The centre also advised journalists to call separatists "bandits" or "international terrorists," not "field commanders," and to describe Russian casualties as "minimal," "inconsiderable," or "unavoidable".<sup>115</sup> Spokesmen regularly announced large numbers of "bandits" eliminated with minimal Russian military losses, and typically denied reports of civilian casualties.<sup>116</sup>

Eyewitnesses often contradicted the official casualty estimates,<sup>117</sup> but reaching them was much more difficult than during the first war.<sup>118</sup> Margelov said his operation imposed "no formal censorship" and merely encouraged journalists to follow "a code of political correctness."<sup>119</sup> Yet military commanders near the war zone exercised substantial control over what information journalists were able to collect and send back to their editors. The military press centre in Mozdok (North Ossetia) told cameramen not to film Russian troops with dirty faces or destroyed homes.<sup>120</sup> An officer at that press centre told one journalist, "You will show only what we allow."<sup>121</sup> Reporters deemed untrustworthy, especially foreign correspondents, were often unable to obtain

---

<sup>113</sup> Panfilov compares the two information centres in "Ot VITsa k RITsu."

<sup>114</sup> Commenting on the release of those gruesome hostage videos, Margelov said, "This is one lesson of Kosovo that we have learned." Quoted in Filipov, "Moscow Launches Video Offensive."

<sup>115</sup> Gordon, "Russia Copies NATO."

<sup>116</sup> Amelia Gentleman, "Truth Becomes First Victim in Russia's Blitz Against Grozny," *The Guardian*, 14 November 1999.

<sup>117</sup> For instance, Sophie Shihab, "Chechnya: Humanitarian Disaster and Russian Propaganda Lies," *Le Monde*, 17 October 1999, translated by the Federal Broadcast Information Service and distributed on *Johnson's Russia List*, no. 3573, 20 October 1999.

<sup>118</sup> Musa Muradov, editor-in-chief of the Chechen newspaper *Groznenskiy rabochiy*, contrasts journalists' freedom of movement during the two wars in an interview published in *Pravo znat': istoriya, teoriya, praktika*, January-February 2000, which can be found at [http://www.ksdi.ru/right/2000\\_37\\_38\(1\\_2\)/dorocheva\\_37\\_38.html](http://www.ksdi.ru/right/2000_37_38(1_2)/dorocheva_37_38.html)

<sup>119</sup> Quoted in Gordon, "Russia Copies NATO."

<sup>120</sup> Zolotov, "Kremlin Scores Strategic Victory."

accreditation.<sup>122</sup> Military commanders also threatened to revoke the accreditation of journalists who made unsanctioned trips in the war zone, although they lacked the legal authority to do so.<sup>123</sup> Meanwhile, Foreign Ministry bureaucrats lectured Moscow-based foreign correspondents about the flaws in their coverage of the war.<sup>124</sup>

Some journalists tried to report from Chechnya without going through the Russian military press centres. To deter such efforts, the Federal Security Service in October 1999 released a video (filmed by Chechen captors) of a kidnapped French photographer who complained of being beaten and treated "like a dog."<sup>125</sup> Several foreign journalists were detained trying to enter Chechnya and sent away if, as was usually the case, they had general accreditation from the Foreign Ministry in Moscow but no specific credential to cover the war. In captured territory, Russian commanders promised civilians rewards for "denouncing" journalists who took notes or filmed without permission.<sup>126</sup> Nevertheless journalists such as *Novaya gazeta* correspondent Anna Politkovskaya and the French reporter Anne Nivat managed to evade discovery while working in Chechnya for several months.<sup>127</sup>

As long as the uncooperative journalists worked primarily for foreign media, few Russian citizens received news that challenged the official perspective on the war. But several weeks after the "anti-terrorist operation" escalated into a full-scale invasion, the united front in the Russian electronic media began to break down. Outlets belonging to Vladimir Gusinskiy's Media-Most empire, such as NTV and Ekho Moskvyy radio, were among the first to give more exposure to the tragic deaths of civilians, such as the victims

---

<sup>121</sup> Aleksandra Adokhina, "Doveli," *Moskovskie novosti*, 2-9 November 1999.

<sup>122</sup> Yelena Kandybina, an expert on media law, has argued that the Russian authorities' application of accreditation procedures clearly violated Russian legislation; see Kandybina, "Publikatsii o chechenskoy voyne v rossiyskoy presse." BBC producer Kevin Bishop described a Catch-22 situation used in Mozdok to deny accreditation in a BBC report, "Getting into Chechnya," 17 December 1999, distributed on the fsimedia e-mail list.

<sup>123</sup> Under article 47 of the 1992 law on the mass media, only a court order can revoke a journalist's accreditation. See Oleg Panfilov's interview in *Russkaya mysl'*, 8-14 June 2000.

<sup>124</sup> De Waal, "Introduction," in Politkovskaya, *A Dirty War*, p. xxvi.

<sup>125</sup> "Russian TV Shows Video of French Hostage in Chechnya," Reuters, 31 October 1999, and Zolotov, "Kremlin Scores Strategic Victory." The photographer Brice Latieu was eventually freed in June 2000, but he never recovered from his nightmarish spell in captivity and committed suicide in April 2001.

<sup>126</sup> While posing as a Chechen, Nivat witnessed a Russian officer making one such appeal to a crowd; see *Chienne de Guerre*, p. 120.

<sup>127</sup> Nivat describes how she faked her way through checkpoints in *Chienne de Guerre*, pp. vii-viii, 21, 36-7, 59-61, 88, 98-100, and 162.

of an attack on a Red Cross convoy in late October 1999.<sup>128</sup> Commentators on TV-Centre, controlled by the Moscow city authorities, also expressed growing scepticism about official casualty estimates and prospects for winning the war quickly. Monitoring of Chechnya coverage on Russian television in November and December 1999 showed that while 51 percent state-owned ORT and fully state-owned RTR continued to devote mostly favourable or neutral coverage to the military campaign, newscasts on NTV and TV-Centre increasingly diverged from the official script, with as many "negative" references to the war as "positive" ones.<sup>129</sup>

Domestic political considerations most likely explained the changing tone of Chechnya coverage on television. Support for Prime Minister Putin skyrocketed as the war escalated.<sup>130</sup> Research on "priming" suggests that politicians gain public support when an issue that plays to their strengths receives massive media coverage.<sup>131</sup> A prime minister presiding over a popular war could hardly fail to benefit from upbeat coverage of that war. Moreover, evidence suggests that those who set editorial policy at ORT and RTR deliberately crafted Chechnya coverage so as to encourage voters to connect their approval of the war with support for Putin.<sup>132</sup> Meanwhile, the opposition alliance Fatherland--All Russia had the firm backing of TV-Centre and received a sympathetic hearing on NTV. An unnamed NTV employee told one Russian journalist that the network's executives were planning to use disturbing coverage of the war's impact in order to undermine Putin's popularity.<sup>133</sup>

---

<sup>128</sup> Zolotov, "Kremlin Scores Strategic Victory in Chechnya." Zolotov notes that other Russian television networks ignored that story. For more analysis of NTV's increasing attention to the deaths of innocent civilians in Chechnya, see *Jamestown Foundation Monitor*, 1 November 1999.

<sup>129</sup> Comparisons can be found in Semen Liberman, "Vtoraya Chechenskaya--akt sleduyushchiy," *Sreda*, December 1999, pp. 13-16, also available at <http://www.internews.ru/sreda/17/5.html>.

<sup>130</sup> Support for Putin as a presidential candidate measured 4 percent in September 1999 but reached 21 percent by mid-October and 36 percent in early November. See table 11.6 in Yitzhak M. Brudny, "Continuity of Change in Russian Electoral Patterns? The December 1999-March 2000 Election Cycle," in Archie Brown, ed., *Contemporary Russian Politics: A Reader*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 173. See also Peter Rutland, "Putin's path to power," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 16, no.4, (December 2000), pp. 313-54.

<sup>131</sup> For a brief discussion of the research on priming, see Joanne M. Miller and Jon A. Krosnick, "Anatomy of News Media Priming," in Shanto Iyengar and Richard Reeves, eds., *Do the Media Govern? Politicians, Voters, and Reporters in America*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997, pp. 258-275.

<sup>132</sup> Anna Kachkaeva, "Image Factory: Television as the Key Instrument for Creation of Political Myths," published in January 2000 at <http://www.internews.ru/crisis/imagefactory.html>.

<sup>133</sup> Quoted in *Jamestown Foundation Monitor*, 21 October 1999 and 1 November 1999.

The financial problems of NTV's parent company, Media-Most, may also have inspired more "negative" references to the military campaign. NTV's general director in 1999, Oleg Dobrodeev, later accused Gusinskiy of seeking to use Chechnya coverage as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the Kremlin over the debts of his business empire.<sup>134</sup> The shifting emphasis of NTV's war reporting hinted at an internal battle over editorial policy. Andrey Zolotov, a journalist specializing in media issues, observed that NTV lacked a "coherent policy in its coverage" in late 1999, some days concentrating on the fate of civilians while dwelling on the "heroism of Russian soldiers" in other newscasts.<sup>135</sup> Dobrodeev's clash with Gusinskiy over Chechnya coverage prompted him to leave NTV in early 2000.<sup>136</sup>

Whatever its cause, the less favourable war coverage on NTV and TV-Centre was a dangerous development for the Russian authorities. Some 70 percent of Russian citizens could view NTV, and TV-Centre's broadcast reach encompassed at least a third of the population. If millions of viewers saw images that contradicted the optimistic statements issued by the Russian Information Centre, then they might become disenchanted with the "anti-terrorist operation."

Russian officials sought to discredit alternative sources of information about the war. Media Minister Mikhail Lesin alleged that refugees complaining of appalling conditions were merely putting on a show for television cameras, orchestrated by Chechen terrorists.<sup>137</sup> The first deputy chief of Russia's General Staff dismissed news of an attack on a Russian armoured column as terrorist "disinformation."<sup>138</sup> Officials also questioned the motives of some journalists.<sup>139</sup> A spokesman for the Federal Security Service denounced the "coordinated propaganda campaign" against Russia, and the Russian Information Centre accused some correspondents of working with foreign intelligence services.<sup>140</sup> The centre had particularly harsh words for Andrey Babitskiy, a

---

<sup>134</sup> Dobrodeev made that charge in an open letter published in *Izvestiya*, 9 April 2001.

<sup>135</sup> Andrei Zolotov Jr., "NTV Chief Leaves Post Without Explanation," *Moscow Times*, 21 January 2000.

<sup>136</sup> Zolotov, "NTV Chief Leaves Post Without Explanation."

<sup>137</sup> Quoted from Lesin's appearance on ORT, "Vremya," 7 November 1999.

<sup>138</sup> Reuters, "Russia Vents Wrath on Foreign News Organisations," 16 December 1999.

<sup>139</sup> See Herd, "The 'Counter-Terrorist Operation' in Chechnya."

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. Maria Eismont, who reported the October rocket attack on the Grozny bazaar for *Vremya-MN* and later covered the war for Reuters, was a particular target of official criticism.



correspondent who covered both Chechen wars for the Russian Service of U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL).<sup>141</sup>

Not only did alternative media coverage not disappear, criticism of Russian military tactics increased after the December 1999 parliamentary elections. NTV aired footage showing Russian troops looting a "liberated" village in the aftermath of an alleged massacre.<sup>142</sup> Russian units encountered stiff resistance from Chechen fighters, and during the long battle for Grozny, commentators on NTV and TV-Centre questioned whether the war was winnable. Several prominent Moscow newspapers that had supported the military campaign for months (such as *Izvestiya*, *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, and *Moskovskiy komsomolets*) also began to question military strategy and official casualty estimates in December 1999 and January 2000.<sup>143</sup>

ORT and RTR stuck to the official script, emphasizing the progress made by the federal army and juxtaposing news of Russian losses with reports of even more terrorists "eliminated." Those networks' political commentators worked hard to steer the public's sympathy away from the Chechens. "Analytical programmes" on state television continued to air harrowing videos of Chechen gunmen tormenting Russian prisoners. ORT's Sergey Dorenko blamed ordinary Chechens for allowing criminality to flourish in the republic.<sup>144</sup> News reports about the war subtly promoted Putin's presidential candidacy by emphasizing the need for strong, decisive, and active leadership.<sup>145</sup>

Still, discordant news from alternative sources threatened to undermine public trust in state television newscasts and, by extension, public support for the war. In January 2000, Putin (by then acting president) put Yel'tsin's former press secretary, Sergey Yastrzhembskiy, in charge of managing information about Chechnya.<sup>146</sup> It was a surprising choice, since Yastrzhembskiy had been a top strategist for the opposition

---

<sup>141</sup> A Russian Information Centre statement accused Babitskiy of fabricating material, according to an ITAR-TASS report from 27 December 1999, distributed on the fsumedia e-mail list.

<sup>142</sup> "Russian TV shows film of Chechen looting," Reuters, 25 December 1999, distributed on *Johnson's Russia List*, no. 3709, 25 December 1999.

<sup>143</sup> Lev Lurie, "The Russian Media Turns," *Institute for War & Peace Reporting Caucasus Reporting Service*, no. 14, January 2000, distributed on the fsumedia e-mail list and available at <http://www.soros.org/caucasus/0005.html>.

<sup>144</sup> In a commentary aired on 4 March 2000, Dorenko predicted that Russia would win the war quickly if it decided there was no civilian population in Chechnya but would be forced to fight for another 20 years if it acknowledged that a civilian population existed there.

<sup>145</sup> Laura Belin, "How State TV Aided Putin's Campaign," *RFE/RL Russian Election Report*, 7 April 2000.

<sup>146</sup> See Herd, "The 'Counter-Terrorist Operation' in Chechnya."

alliance Fatherland--All Russia during the 1999 parliamentary campaign. But he easily readjusted to speaking for the Kremlin and urged journalists to do their bit for the war effort: "When the nation mobilises its forces to solve some task, that imposes obligations on everyone, including the media."<sup>147</sup> Concrete steps to limit news-gathering in Chechnya accompanied the return of the prodigal spin doctor. Yastrzhembskiy's office brought in new accreditation rules containing "completely obvious" inconsistencies with Russian legislation, in the view of one specialist on media law.<sup>148</sup> Within a week of Yastrzhembskiy's appointment, military officials barred NTV correspondents from the press pool in Chechnya after the network broadcast an unsanctioned interview with a Russian officer.<sup>149</sup> Yastrzhembskiy also reportedly ordered military officials not to let any journalists into Grozny, except for correspondents of military press agencies.<sup>150</sup>

Foreign correspondents particularly annoyed the Russian authorities. Yastrzhembskiy demanded an apology from the French newspapers *Le Monde* and *Liberation*, which reported eyewitness accounts of alleged atrocities committed by Russian troops.<sup>151</sup> But the only way to prevent such reports from emerging was to keep suspect correspondents out of the war zone. After stumbling on the French journalist Nivat in February 2000, Federal Security Service operatives detained her, confiscated her notes, and sent her back to Moscow for lacking the proper accreditation.<sup>152</sup>

The ordeal of RFE/RL correspondent Babitskiy provided a more powerful incentive not to circumvent restrictions on journalists' movements.<sup>153</sup> Babitskiy had considerable experience reporting from Chechen-controlled territory. When he disappeared in mid-January 2000, Russian officials denied knowing his whereabouts, and Yastrzhembskiy commented that since Babitskiy lacked the proper accreditation, Russian authorities could not vouch for his safety. In fact, Russian security forces had secretly

---

<sup>147</sup> From Yastrzhembskiy's interview in *Kommersant*, 21 January 2000.

<sup>148</sup> Kandybina, "Publikatsii o chechenskoy voyne v rossiyskoy presse."

<sup>149</sup> Jen Tracy, "Kremlin Tells Press to Toe the Line," *Moscow Times*, 25 January 2000. On the military's power to keep journalists away from the front line, see also "Media Coverage of the Chechen War: Then and Now."

<sup>150</sup> *Moskovskiy komsomolets*, 28 January 2000.

<sup>151</sup> EJC Media News, 2 March 2000, distributed on the fsumedia e-mail list.

<sup>152</sup> Nivat describes her encounter with the Federal Security Service in *Chienne de Guerre*, pp. 223-38.

<sup>153</sup> Comprehensive coverage of Babitskiy's detention and subsequent trial on the charge of using false documents can be found at <http://www.rferl.org/nca/special/babitsky>. Archives of reports on Babitskiy are also available on the websites of the Glasnost Defense Foundation ([www.gdf.ru](http://www.gdf.ru)), the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations ([www.cjes.ru](http://www.cjes.ru)), and the Committee to Protect Journalists ([www.cpj.org](http://www.cpj.org)).

detained him, giving him no opportunity to contact his family, his colleagues, or a lawyer. After nearly three weeks in custody, Babitskiy was ostensibly "exchanged" for Russian prisoners being held by Chechens, but it later emerged that Russian officials handed him over to pro-Moscow Chechen fighters.

The treatment of Babitskiy did not just run afoul of regulations on criminal investigations--it violated fundamental constitutional rights and appeared to contradict various international treaties signed by Russia.<sup>154</sup> Nevertheless, some Russian media were reluctant to raise a fuss about the case. In mid-February, while Babitskiy's whereabouts remained unknown, the Union of Journalists and some 30 media outlets jointly sponsored a special issue of *Obshchaya gazeta* devoted entirely to his detention and "exchange." The sponsors covered a broad range of viewpoints, from Media-Most outlets NTV and *Segodnya* to *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, a pro-communist newspaper which in normal circumstances was not favourably disposed toward the U.S.-funded RFE/RL.<sup>155</sup>

Some regional branches of the Union of Journalists objected to defending an "American spy,"<sup>156</sup> but the reluctance of certain Moscow-based newspapers to denounce Babitskiy's treatment was more surprising. Those declining to co-sponsor the special issue of *Obshchaya gazeta* included *Nezavisimaya gazeta* and *Kommersant*, both controlled by Boris Berezovskiy<sup>157</sup>; *Izvestiya*, controlled by Vladimir Potanin's Interros holding company and the partly state-owned oil firm LUKoil; *Trud*, financed by the partly state-owned gas monopoly Gazprom; and *Vremya-MN*, covertly financed by the Central Bank. As mentioned above, *Vremya-MN* was among the few Russian newspapers to have a correspondent working in Chechnya in the autumn of 1999, so its absence from the list of co-sponsors was especially conspicuous.

According to Oleg Panfilov, who monitored violations of journalists' rights in the former Soviet Union throughout the 1990s, "The story of Andrey Babitskiy showed that

---

<sup>154</sup> See the European Parliament's resolution on the Babitskiy case, adopted on 17 February 2000: <http://www.memo.ru/hr/hotpoints/n-caucas/inter/prot/pr000217.htm>. See also comments by UN Human Rights chief Mary Robinson and Russian Human Rights Commissioner Oleg Mironov, reported in *RFE/RL Newslines*, 2 February 2000 and 17 February 2000.

<sup>155</sup> The special issue of *Obshchaya gazeta* came out on 16 February 2000.

<sup>156</sup> According to Oleg Panfilov, who was interviewed in *Russkaya mys'*, 8-14 June 2000.

<sup>157</sup> During the first war, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* had published the Glasnost Defence Foundation's monthly reports listing violations of journalists' rights in Chechnya.

the [Russian] special services can do whatever they want with journalists."<sup>158</sup> Perhaps even more significant, Babitskiy's story showed that certain newspapers, which had denounced restrictions on the media during the first Chechen war, now hesitated to demand that the rule of law apply to Russian journalists reporting from Chechen-held areas.

That corporate groups controlled those newspapers (which was not the case during the first war) appeared to be relevant. In early 2000, Putin's election as president was a virtual certainty. The heavyweights of the business world needed to maintain harmonious relations with high-ranking officials for various reasons: some managed partly state-owned firms, some owed huge debts to state-controlled entities, and many (if not all) thrived mainly because law enforcement agencies had never scrutinized their business practices. Evidence suggests that behind the scenes, Kremlin officials were urging leading businessmen to keep their media holdings on a tight leash when it came to Chechnya. Shortly after meeting with Putin in February 2000, Gazprom's chief executive Rem Vyakhirev criticized NTV's stance on Chechnya, adding that the network's war coverage "gives the Gazprom leadership serious cause to think about how we are investing our funds."<sup>159</sup> The gas monopoly had owned 30 percent of NTV stock since 1996, but company executives had never before publicly criticized the network's editorial policy. Although no definitive account of Putin's meeting with Vyakhirev exists, Moscow's rumour mill quoted the acting president as saying, "I don't care how they cover me on NTV, but if the network's stance on Chechnya does not change, I will crush you, Rem Ivanovich."<sup>160</sup> Whether or not Putin used those words, that message resonated in the Russian business and journalistic communities, especially after Gazprom demanded repayment of a \$211 million loan to NTV's parent company in March 2000.

Whereas Yel'tsin refrained from directly criticizing journalists like NTV's Masyuk, Putin accused Babitskiy of "working for the bandits" and committing acts "more dangerous than firing from machine guns."<sup>161</sup> Babitskiy was released after spending more

---

<sup>158</sup> Quoted in *Russkaya mysl'*, 8-14 June 2000.

<sup>159</sup> As quoted by Interfax, 15 February 2000, and cited in *RFE/RL Newslines*, 16 February 2000.

<sup>160</sup> According to an unnamed television commentator quoted in *Novye izvestiya*, 4 April 2001. A slightly different version of that rumour had Putin threatening to arrest either Vyakhirev or his son if Gazprom did not turn the screws on Media-Most. See Vladimir Gusinskiy's interview in *Kommersant*, 6 February 2001.

<sup>161</sup> As quoted in *Kommersant*, 10 March 2000.

than six weeks in custody, but even after he was allowed to return to Moscow, criminal charges prevented him from travelling abroad to testify about Chechnya before the Council of Europe.<sup>162</sup> (Law enforcement authorities eventually dropped charges linked to aiding "armed bandit formations" but successfully prosecuted Babitskiy in the autumn of 2000 for using falsified documents, which his captors had given him.)

After Babitskiy resurfaced, commentators on television networks loyal to the Kremlin sought to discredit his allegations about the treatment of Chechen prisoners. They accused media advocates and international organizations of hyping Babitskiy's case while showing no concern for the abducted ITAR-TASS photographer Vladimir Yatsina, whose corpse was found in February 2000.<sup>163</sup> Meanwhile, news reports and commentaries questioned the motives of media outlets that devoted unfavourable coverage to the military campaign. ORT's Dorenko tied NTV's reporting to an alleged pro-separatist agenda of Media-Most chairman Gusinskiy.<sup>164</sup> Another ORT correspondent asked rhetorically why NTV and the newspaper *Novaya gazeta* were "slinging mud" at the armed forces and security services, "just when the people have at last started to believe in them again."<sup>165</sup> (ORT conveniently failed to mention that its dominant shareholder, Berezovskiy, had well-documented ties to influential Chechens throughout the 1990s<sup>166</sup> and gave at least \$2 million to Chechen leaders.<sup>167</sup>)

To further discourage Russian media from presenting Chechen points of view, First Deputy Media Minister Mikhail Seslavinskiy announced in March 2000 that the ministry would consider interviews with Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov and other senior officials to be violations of the 1997 law on terrorism.<sup>168</sup> Since media outside the capital rarely interviewed Chechen officials or rebel fighters,<sup>169</sup> Seslavinskiy's threat was

---

<sup>162</sup> Michael Steen, "War Reporter Says Not Allowed to Leave Russia," Reuters, 7 March 2000.

<sup>163</sup> For instance, Sergey Dorenko, "Vremya," 4 March 2000.

<sup>164</sup> ORT, "Vremya," 4 March 2000, citing an interview Gusinskiy gave *Le Monde*.

<sup>165</sup> ORT, "Vremya," 22 March 2000.

<sup>166</sup> Berezovskiy had contacts with Chechen criminal groups in Moscow before the first war and was involved in hostage negotiations between the wars; see Paul Klebnikov, *Godfather of the Kremlin: Boris Berezovsky and the Looting of Russia*, New York: Harcourt, 2000, pp. 11-40 and 257-66.

<sup>167</sup> In an interview with a Swiss newspaper, Berezovskiy later admitted having paid Shamil' Basaev \$2 million, ostensibly for "reconstruction" of war-ravaged areas; see *Moscow Times*, 1 February 2002, and *RFE/RL Newslines*, 4 February 2002.

<sup>168</sup> Floriana Fossato, "Russia: Officials Ban Interviews With Chechen Leaders," feature for RFE/RL, 16 March 2000, available at <http://www.rferl.org/nca/features/2000/03/f.ru.000316153911.html>.

<sup>169</sup> Coverage of Chechnya in the regional media tended to focus on local angles, such as how home-town boys were doing on the front, rather than on broader political and military developments. See Sarah Karush,

clearly aimed at Moscow-based outlets such as Ekho Moskvyy, which had aired several recent interviews with Maskhadov.<sup>170</sup> His announcement came one day after the Media Ministry asked RFE/RL to provide transcripts of all its broadcasts between 15 February 2000 and 15 March 2000.<sup>171</sup> Official warnings were a potentially deadly weapon against Russian media. Warnings issued to two television networks allowed the Media Ministry to announce in February 2000 that it was putting those networks' broadcast licences up for auction rather than extending them automatically. Nor could newspapers brush aside the prospect of receiving a warning about Chechnya coverage; Media Minister Lesin favoured introducing licensing requirements for print media, in which case interviewing Chechen leaders could threaten a publication's survival.

The more aggressive efforts to restrict coverage of the "anti-terrorist operation" continued well after Putin had been elected president in March 2000. Panfilov commented in June 2000 that official disinformation, along with the Russian military's strict controls over journalists' movements, had made it "impossible to work in Chechnya."<sup>172</sup> In fact, it was possible to work there, but to avoid trouble, journalists had to stay near federal military installations and to report exclusively on the lives of Russian soldiers serving in Chechnya.<sup>173</sup> Military commanders threatened to revoke several journalists' accreditation and kicked two ORT correspondents out of a press pool because of unauthorized filming in August 2000.<sup>174</sup>

During Putin's first year as president, media outlets that received warnings after publishing or broadcasting interviews with senior Chechen officials included *Kommersant*, *Novaya gazeta*, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* and NTV.<sup>175</sup> The warnings cited article 15 of the law on terrorism (which prohibited, among other things, the dissemination of information "serving as propaganda or justification of terrorism and

---

"Chechen War Hits Home in Provinces," *Moscow Times*, 7 December 1999, and Floriana Fossato, "Russia: Press Ban Doesn't Bother Regional Media," feature for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 21 March 2000, available at <http://www.rferl.org/nca/features/2000/03/f.ru.000321141934.html>.

<sup>170</sup> EJC Media News of 16 March 2000, distributed on the fsumedia e-mail list.

<sup>171</sup> Fossato, "Russia: Officials Ban Interviews With Chechen Leaders,"; "Radio Liberty Chief Slams 'Intimidatory' Chechnya Media Law," Agence France Presse, 16 March 2000.

<sup>172</sup> Panfilov's interview in *Russkaya mysl*, 8-14 June 2000.

<sup>173</sup> According to Politkovskaya, speaking at a London event sponsored by Article 19, Amnesty International, and the Freedom Forum on 2 May 2001.

<sup>174</sup> *Kommersant*, 1 September 2000.

<sup>175</sup> See Floriana Fossato, "Russia: Prosecutors Probe Maskhadov's Interviews," feature for RFE/RL, 8 May 2000, available at <http://www.rferl.org/nca/features/2000/05/f.ru.000508140938.html>.

extremism") and/or article 4 of the 1992 law on the mass media (which prohibited "appeals to violence" and the "propaganda of war"). However, the legal justification for applying those statutes as the Media Ministry did was questionable.<sup>176</sup> Journalists argued that Russians were entitled to hear alternative views and that the published comments of Maskhadov and others did not contain illegal appeals to violence.<sup>177</sup>

It is hardly surprising that the federal authorities would try to limit separatists' access to the media. But journalists whose reporting strayed from acceptable topics could get into trouble without transmitting the views of Chechen leaders. Russian officers detained *Novaya gazeta* correspondent Politkovskaya in February 2001 while she was trying to cover the war's impact on the civilian population.<sup>178</sup> They accused her of using falsified accreditation documents and expelled her from Chechnya. Although some law enforcement officials promised to investigate her claims about the treatment of Chechen detainees,<sup>179</sup> other Moscow officials, along with commentators on loyal media, dismissed her reporting as lies or the "ravings" of an unstable woman.<sup>180</sup> In the summer of 2001, far more disturbing news emerged of reprisals against civilians whom Politkovskaya quoted in her dispatches for *Novaya gazeta*. Despite her efforts to conceal the identities of her sources, military or security operatives were said to be tracking down and killing people who had spoken to her about atrocities committed by Russian troops.<sup>181</sup>

## CONCLUSION

---

<sup>176</sup> See an excellent commentary produced by the Moscow Media Law and Policy Institute, published in the March 2001 issue of *Zakonodatelstvo i praktika Mass-Media* (<http://www.medialaw.ru/publications/zip/79/ch1.htm>); Kandybina, "Publikatsii o chechenskoy voyne v rossiyskoy presse"; Fossato, "Russia: Officials Ban Interviews With Chechen Leaders," citing Mikhail Fedotov, an author of the 1992 media law.

<sup>177</sup> *Nezavisimaya gazeta* published the Press Ministry's warning, along with a short rebuttal to it, on 3 March 2001.

<sup>178</sup> For more details about the Politkovskaya case, see the archives of reports on the websites of the Glasnost Defense Foundation ([www.gdf.ru](http://www.gdf.ru)) or the Committee for Journalism in Extreme Situations ([www.cjes.ru](http://www.cjes.ru)), or the Committee to Protect Journalists' annual report on "Attacks on the Press 2001", available at <http://www.cpj.org/attacks01/europe01/russia.html>.

<sup>179</sup> For example, Anna Politkovskaya, "Otchet o komandirovke v zonu," *Novaya gazeta*, 26 February 2001; translated excerpts from Politkovskaya's reports appeared in *The Guardian*, 27 February 2001.

<sup>180</sup> Mikhail Leont'ev's commentaries on ORT, "Odnako," 23 February 2001 and 26 February 2001; "G-zhu Politkovskuyu poymali na lzhi," *Smi.ru*, 27 February 2001, <http://www.smi.ru/2001/02/27/983277136.html>; Loyal media also (wrongly) accused her of never writing about the crimes of Chechens; see *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 28 February 2001.

<sup>181</sup> See Yevgenia Borisova, "Reporter: Military Killed My Sources," *Moscow Times*, 4 July 2001.

In comparative terms, both the Russian media's generally positive coverage of the second Chechen war and the wartime restrictions on journalists were entirely normal. Russian journalists had particular grounds rally behind the military campaign in 1999; Chechen kidnapers had shown not only immense cruelty toward their hostages but also amazing ingratitude toward journalists who had helped rebel fighters plead their case during the first war. Russian policies limiting journalists' access to the war zone, as well as the stream of upbeat official press releases and denials of civilian casualties, were explicit imitations of western approaches to handling the media during wars in the Persian Gulf and Yugoslavia. As for Russian attempts to deter media from presenting the viewpoints of Chechen leaders, a state cannot exist without territorial integrity,<sup>182</sup> and it is hard to imagine a country in which the government would permit journalists to move about freely, broadcasting interviews with separatists.<sup>183</sup> Indeed, the Media Ministry's policy of warning media that interviewed Chechen leaders was less restrictive than the British ban on broadcasting direct statements by representatives of Sinn Fein or the Irish Republican Army from 1988 to 1994.<sup>184</sup>

Even so, the largely successful efforts to manage media coverage during the second Chechen war reveal important changes in the power relationship between the Russian state and the media sector during the second half of the 1990s. It was not that government officials and military commanders developed new ambitions to control the media or lost a once-healthy respect for the rights of journalists. Virtually all of the restrictions on journalists covering Chechnya in 1999 and 2000 had precedents dating to the first war.<sup>185</sup> Rather, state officials enjoyed a greater capacity to shape the conduct of media outlets, as well as the context in which the media operated.

That most journalists by 1999 supported the use of force to crush Chechen separatism obscures that shift in power, in much the same way that journalists' preference

---

<sup>182</sup> Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, pp. 16-37.

<sup>183</sup> Rutland makes that argument in "Putin's path to power."

<sup>184</sup> See David Butler, *The Trouble With Reporting Northern Ireland: The British State, the Broadcast Media and Nonfictional Representation of the Conflict*, Aldershot, England; Avebury, 1995, pp. 77-91. Some broadcasters circumvented that ban by having actors recite the words of Sinn Fein leaders.

<sup>185</sup> Personal communication from Aleksey Pankin, editor of the media magazine *Sreda*, March 2000. Although Pankin argues a convincing case, the authorities' treatment of Babitskiy went well beyond any abuse of power toward journalists in the first war.



for Yel'tsin over his Communist rival makes it hard to determine whether the prevailing media coverage of the 1996 presidential campaign can be attributed to state pressure on the private media. If one considers Colin Hay's definition of "direct power" as A's capacity to induce B to do something B would not otherwise do,<sup>186</sup> it becomes clear that examining the impact of state policies on journalists and editors who were not inclined to support the war is crucial to drawing conclusions about state power over the media.

Though they were outnumbered, some Russian media deviated from the official script about how the war was progressing, especially after October 1999. But through the sophisticated and in some cases unlawful policies analysed in this paper, federal officials and military commanders managed to hinder news-gathering by correspondents working for those outlets. The absence of reporters from most battleground areas meant that some official untruths which might have been exposed in 1995 went unchallenged. Similarly, Politkovskaya's attempt to investigate conditions for civilians in Russian-controlled areas was cut short when she was detained and sent back to Moscow. Such actions did not prevent media like *Novaya gazeta* from editorializing against the war, but it made it hard for them to collect evidence supporting their views about civilian suffering or the need for a political settlement of the conflict.

A newfound reluctance to criticize restrictions on journalists' rights also points to misgivings about clashing with state officials. The accreditation rules introduced during the second war prompted little protest in the journalistic community, even though they were inconsistent with legal definitions of the right to gather and distribute information.<sup>187</sup> As mentioned above, several prominent newspapers that spoke out when journalists' rights were threatened during the first Chechen war declined to denounce the outrageous treatment of Babitskiy in 2000. Whether those inhibitions stemmed from actions by state officials (either directly or using corporate media owners as their proxies) or from the "law of anticipated reactions,"<sup>188</sup> they attest to the state's "direct power" to shape editors' conduct.

---

<sup>186</sup> See Colin Hay, "Divided by a Common Language: Political Theory and the Concept of Power," *Politics* vol. 17, no. 1, 1997, pp. 45-52.

<sup>187</sup> Kandybina, "Publikatsii o chechenskoy voyne v rossiyskoy presse."

<sup>188</sup> Jack C. Nagel, *The Descriptive Analysis of Power*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975, p. 16.

What do Russian media policies during the second war reveal about the state's "indirect power," defined by Hay as A's "capacity through intentional or strategic action to transform the context in which B finds her/himself"? Many Russian journalists had interviewed Aslan Maskhadov since he became the legally elected president of Chechnya in 1997. By applying the law on terrorism in new ways, the Media Ministry forced editors to consider whether presenting Maskhadov's views was worth the risk of receiving an official warning. In the war zone, military commanders offered Chechen civilians rewards for turning in unauthorized journalists and appear to have punished some people who cooperated with journalists. Such actions complicated the task facing correspondents who wanted to work in Chechnya without joining official military press pools.<sup>189</sup>

Corporate ownership and financing had eroded the editorial autonomy of many Moscow-based media since 1996. The self-managing journalists' collectives of the mid-1990s had little to fear from state officials, as their defiant coverage of the first Chechen war indicated. But by the time the second war broke out, partly state-owned companies and business groups that relied on good ties with state officials now owned shares in, or had loaned money to, some of the most influential print and electronic media. NTV's parent company, Media-Most, tried to resist state pressure to support the war. But Gazprom's move to call in loans it had guaranteed on behalf of Media-Most indicated that defying the Kremlin's wishes on Chechnya coverage could be costly.

This paper does not intend to suggest that Russian officials gained total control over the news agenda during the second Chechen war. Even efficient policies to restrict access could not prevent some journalists from bribing their way past underpaid Russian soldiers. Nor did pressure to support the war eradicate news coverage of its "negative" aspects (such as alleged atrocities and continuing attacks on Russian military units in ostensibly "liberated" areas). A few media outlets interviewed Chechen leaders in 2000 and 2001 despite the threat of receiving an official warning.<sup>190</sup> Yet media criticism of the

---

<sup>189</sup> After learning that some of her contacts in Chechnya had been murdered, Politkovskaya wrote, "How am I supposed to live with all this?"; Borisova, "Reporter: Military Killed My Sources."

<sup>190</sup> For instance, an interview with Maskhadov appeared in the weekly magazine *Novoe vremya*, no. 26, 1 July 2001.

military campaign remained muted, long after it became clear that there would be no quick triumph over the "bandits."

END

And the second Chechen war turned out to galvanize ordinary citizens, stung by the loss of Soviet empire and industrial might, who were looking for some evidence of Russian heft to raise their self-esteem. At times this winter polls indicated that close to three in four Russians supported Mr. Putin's conduct as prime minister and, after Mr. Yeltsin abruptly quit on New Year's Eve, as acting president. The election commission stated that some 67 percent of voters had cast ballots, slightly below the turnout in the nation's first post-Soviet presidential election in 1996. That eased one of the Kremlin's secondary concerns: that unanimous predictions of Mr. Putin's victory would depress turnout below the legally binding level of 50 percent. Electioneering in the mass media is possible only during the period of 28 days before the voting day. Taking part in the campaign will be only the registered candidates whose names feature in the ballot papers, and also the parties that nominated them. The election period will end one day before the polling date, March 17. Distribution of air time. Free time on the air is provided only on weekdays, so the first electioneering ads will begin to be broadcast on the disinterested basis by TV and radio stations on February 19. Starting from February 17 the candidates will be able to publish election ads in the mass media at the expense of their election fund. The candidates are prohibited from criticizing their opponents, the CEC warned. At first glance, the Russian media's behaviour during the first war in Chechnya looks like the exception that proves the rule. NTV emerged as a "particular thorn in the side" of the authorities,<sup>16</sup> airing graphic footage of decimated civilian neighbourhoods in cities where military officials had insisted that conditions were calm or that bombs had. <sup>13</sup> From an interview published in *Kommersant*, 10 March 2000. <sup>14</sup> Denis McQuail reviews the literature on media bias during war in *Media Performance: Mass Communication and the Public Interest*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1992,