The picture of developments in Chechnya is poor because it is difficult to talk to representatives of the other side ... and if you do it, it’s hard to present their point of view because you will be seen as helping terrorists,” Muradov said. “So most Russians are limited to reading and watching news that is coming from official sources.”

State media often exploit Russians’ historical animosity toward Chechens. “Russians think of ‘bandits,’ ‘terrorists,’ and ‘separatists’ when they think of Chechens—and the government tries to solidify this image on RTR and NTV,” Turpalov said, referring to the state-controlled national television channels. “They always emphasize when a crime suspect is Chechen.”

This antipathy, coupled with widespread war fatigue among Russians, has left little public thirst for inquisitive reporting. “The public is simply tired of this war,” said Yuri Bagrov, a journalist based in North Ossetia who has reported for The Associated Press and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). Only when violence spills into another republic, he said, is public apathy shaken.

Press officers at the Kremlin and the FSB did not respond to written questions submitted by CPJ seeking comment on their media policies. Publicly, the Kremlin justifies travel restrictions by pointing to the reporters who were kidnapped by criminal groups during Chechnya’s period of de facto independence from 1996 to 1999. Yet Russian forces have themselves targeted journalists during this second war.

Andrei Babitsky, a Russian covering Chechnya for RFE/RL, found himself in the Kremlin’s crosshairs after disobeying travel restrictions. Babitsky disappeared in mid-January 2000 while on assignment in the Chechen capital, Grozny. After two weeks of Kremlin denials—and growing international pressure—officials in Moscow admitted that Russian forces were holding the reporter in a nearby detention camp. Several more weeks of confusion and contradictory reports followed, during which Russian soldiers handed Babitsky over to a group of Chechen rebels, then planted false identity papers on him and arrested him. When Babitsky was finally released at the end of February 2000, the Kremlin called him a traitor for reporting on military operations.

In a more mysterious case in July 2003, unidentified gunmen seized Agence France-Presse correspondent Ali Astamirov just outside Nazran, the capital of Ingushetia. Before he disappeared, Astamirov had endured months of police and FSB harassment. No ransom was ever requested, and local journalists and human rights activists told CPJ they suspected that security forces loyal to the Kremlin were responsible. The government has dismissed such speculation, but has reported no progress in solving the disappearance.

“During the second war, bureaucrats and the security services became much more interested in journalists like Babitsky,” Muradov said. “They antipathy, coupled with widespread war fatigue among Russians, has left little public thirst for inquisitive reporting. “The public is simply tired of this war,” said Yuri Bagrov, a journalist based in North Ossetia who has reported for The Associated Press and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). Only when violence spills into another republic, he said, is public apathy shaken.

Press officers at the Kremlin and the FSB did not respond to written questions submitted by CPJ seeking comment on their media policies. Publicly, the Kremlin justifies travel restrictions by pointing to the reporters who were kidnapped by criminal groups during Chechnya’s period of de facto independence from 1996 to 1999. Yet Russian forces have themselves targeted journalists during this second war.

Andrei Babitsky, a Russian covering Chechnya for RFE/RL, found himself in the Kremlin’s crosshairs after disobeying travel restrictions. Babitsky disappeared in mid-January 2000 while on assignment in the Chechen capital, Grozny. After two weeks of Kremlin denials—and growing international pressure—officials in Moscow admitted that Russian forces were holding the reporter in a nearby detention camp. Several more weeks of confusion and contradictory reports followed, during which Russian soldiers handed Babitsky over to a group of Chechen rebels, then planted false identity papers on him and arrested him. When Babitsky was finally released at the end of February 2000, the Kremlin called him a traitor for reporting on military operations.

In a more mysterious case in July 2003, unidentified gunmen seized Agence France-Presse correspondent Ali Astamirov just outside Nazran, the capital of Ingushetia. Before he disappeared, Astamirov had endured months of police and FSB harassment. No ransom was ever requested, and local journalists and human rights activists told CPJ they suspected that security forces loyal to the Kremlin were responsible. The government has dismissed such speculation, but has reported no progress in solving the disappearance.

“During the second war, bureaucrats and the security services became much more interested in journalists like Babitsky,” Muradov said. “They...
in the North Ossetian town of Beslan; more than a dozen journalists reported being obstructed or detained while trying to cover the deadly hostage crisis there.

Among journalists, poisonings and bogus detentions bring to mind Soviet-era cases such as the notorious 1978 murder of exiled Bulgarian writer Georgi Markov, who was felled in London by a hit man firing a poison pellet from an umbrella. Investigators said the KGB helped Bulgarian agents carry out the assassination. Eight years later, Soviet agents planted secret documents on Nicholas Daniloff, Moscow correspondent for U.S. News & World Report, and then detained him for two weeks while they bargained for the release of a Soviet agent being held in New York.

The FSB and the Kremlin did not respond to written questions submitted by the Committee to Protect Journalists about Lezhava or other Beslan cases.

Reporting for Rustavi-2, Lezhava and Tetvadze crossed the border on September 1 without difficulty and soon went on the air with a live feed, saying that the number of hostages was around 1,400—a figure far higher and more accurate than the official estimate of 354.

By September 4, after the crisis had exploded in violence that left hundreds dead, Lezhava and other journalists were interviewing hysterical relatives who were desperate to cut through the bureaucratic chaos and learn whether their missing children were dead or alive. An observer who identified himself as an employee of the Russian Foreign Ministry, which accredits journalists for work in Russia and keeps track of their coverage, singled out Lezhava.

"He told me, ‘You are a very active lady,’" she recalled, an observation that still surprises her. "I can’t imagine a journalist who is not active. What kind of journalist are you if you are not active and interested in what is happening?"

The ministry representative summoned the FSB. Lezhava and Tetvadze were detained—first in Beslan and then in Vladikavkaz—and their camera, phones, cassette, microphone, and other equipment were seized. They were accused of illegally crossing the border. While Georgians and Russians need visas to visit each other, Lezhava and Tetvadze are registered in Kazbegi, a Georgian border district whose residents carry passport inserts known as vkladyshi that give them the right to spend 10 days in Russia without a visa.

But in the custody of the FSB, Lezhava said, "The inserts simply disappeared. They took them and stole them." So the two were tried on the border violation and Lezhava’s medical exam was administered, she said, on the pretense that it was required before entering an FSB prison. Lezhava remembers little after being drugged, which apparently happened when seemingly solicitous security agents served her coffee and sandwiches.

By September 8, amid a growing international outcry, an FSB general came from Moscow. Apologies were made, a television camera brought in, and the two were instructed to say that they hadn’t been tortured or hurt. Lezhava and Tetvadze were allowed to pay a fine and taken to the border where Georgian officials met them.

Lezhava was examined by doctors upon her return to Tbilisi. Gela Lezhava, chairman of the supervisory board of the Narcology Research Institute, said traces of a drug
from the benzodiazepine group were found in her system, the Kavkasia-Press news agency reported. Georgia's Health and Social Security Minister Lado Chipashvili also said traces of a psychotropic substance were present.

Lezhava was hospitalized for five days and suffered from frequent headaches. When she recounted the events in a telephone interview six months later, she was working again and had just returned from an assignment in the Pankissi Gorge enclave between Chechnya and Georgia, where she reported on Chechen refugees' reactions to the killing of rebel leader Aslan Maskhadov by Russian security forces.

CPJ and others have documented additional cases of obstruction and retaliation involving Beslan. Amr Abdul Hamid, Moscow bureau chief of the Dubai-based satellite television channel Al-Arabiya, was detained while returning from Beslan; Raf Shakirov, editor-in-chief of the leading daily Izvestia, was forced out after his paper's critical coverage of the siege. But the cases of two prominent war correspondents, Andrei Babitsky and Anna Politkovskaya, have drawn particular attention.

Babitsky, the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty journalist famous for his coverage of Chechnya, was pulled off a September 2 flight that was to have taken him from the Vnukovo Airport to Mineralnye Vody. He then planned to travel on to Beslan.

But Babitsky was told traces of explosives were found on his checked luggage. By the time the luggage was reinspected and cleared, the flight had left and two young strangers had come upon the scene. The men demanded Babitsky buy them beer and followed him when he refused. When voices were raised, the airport police descended and detained Babitsky on a charge of "hooliganism."

While all three were in custody, Babitsky recalled in an interview, the men acknowledged that they worked for the airport's parking-lot security and had been instructed by a security chief to provoke a fight. Babitsky, who eventually paid a fine of about $34, never made it to Beslan. He describes the whole episode as "very Soviet in character."

The case of Anna Politkovskaya is more mysterious. The Novaya Gazeta newspaper reporter, whose searing stories about Chechnya have won her international acclaim, was also on her way to Beslan on September 2. After drinking tea on a flight to Rostov-on-Don, Politkovskaya became violently ill and lost consciousness. She, too, never made it to the school siege, although the cause of her illness has not been determined.

Politkovskaya has declined to talk about her case, but Novaya Gazeta Editor Dmitry Muratov said he is convinced she was poisoned to prevent her from getting to Beslan. "All these cases," Muratov said ruefully, "are very strange."

The tactics in Chechnya reflect the Kremlin's overall media strategy, which employs nearly a dozen government agencies at local, national, and international levels to stifle criticism. Television is a focal point.

"When Putin came to power he knew exactly what he wanted to do, and that was to control national television," said Masha Lipman, an analyst at the Carnegie Moscow Center. National television is far and away the dominant source of news for Russians. Lipman said that projecting an image of strength and stability on TV screens nationwide is central to Putin's political strategy—to the point of becoming an end in itself.

A series of political appointments to the country's influential state broadcasters, Channel One (ORT) and RTR, have ensured pro-Putin editorial policies. Independent stations have been shuttered by the government or swallowed up by pro-government businesses. The state gas monopoly Gazprom carried out a hostile takeover of national television channel NTV in 2001. A court order