

Rebels and Reporters

For the Kremlin, the Chechen war has two flanks.

By Alex Lupis
With reporting by
Sophia Kishkovsky



AP Photo/Musa Sadulayev

A Russian helicopter flies above the Chechen village of Benoi. Russian policies have severely restricted press coverage of the conflict, leaving the public uninformed.

Along with its bloody, six-year-old conflict with Chechen separatists, the Kremlin has waged a brutally effective information war using repressive policies, restrictive rules, subtle censorship, and outright attacks on journalists, a year-long analysis by the Committee to Protect Journalists has found. This ongoing governmental campaign, CPJ research shows, has included dozens of serious cases of harassment, threats, abduction, obstruction, and assaults against journalists since the second Chechen war began in August 1999.

The campaign has suppressed independent reporting and obscured the conflict's steadily rising death toll, which is now well into the tens of thousands. The sort of critical news coverage that weakened the Russian public's support for the first Chechen war a decade ago—including reports of civilian casualties and human rights violations by Russian forces—has been virtually erased from national television and significantly curtailed in other domestic and international media during the current conflict.

"Ask the average person on the street what they know about Chechnya and they will say there are bandits there, a water park is being built, and Ksenia Sobchak comes to visit in a miniskirt," said Oleg Panfilov, director of the Moscow-based Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations, describing pervasively superficial reporting that mixes war coverage with feel-good doses of a club-hopping socialite.

President Vladimir Putin, the former Federal Security Service (FSB) chief who took office in 1999, has been a beneficiary of this two-front war. The Kremlin has burnished

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his image as a strong leader while demonizing the Chechen rebels as terrorists. "Chechnya is the president's personal project," said Aleksei Venediktov, editor-in-chief of the independent radio station Ekho Moskvy. "He chose the model of dealing with it—the 'Chechenization' of the conflict, pitting 'good' Chechens against 'bad' Chechens."

From the onset of the second war, the Media Ministry prohibited the major Russian television networks from airing interviews or footage of the militant leaders and blocked most newspaper coverage of the rebel leadership. The ban was the first sign that the Kremlin would not tolerate a repetition of the Russian media's role in influencing public opinion in its battle with separatists. During the first campaign in 1994-96, independent broadcast media such as NTV showed graphic images of the enormous human losses, while reporters risked their lives to present the Chechen side of the story.

But in 1999, few Russian journalists successfully resisted the Media Ministry's interview rules or the Russian military's severe travel restrictions. Only approved journalists are permitted into the war zone—and only accompanied by a military escort.

"During the first war, journalists basically just got their accreditation and had complete freedom of movement throughout Chechnya," said Lyoma Turpalov, editor-in-chief of *Groznensky Rabochy*, which is based in the neighboring republic of Ingushetia. "Now you can only go with a military escort, access to interviewing civilians is totally restricted ... and journalists are very vulnerable, so they are forced to censor themselves."

Musa Muradov, a Chechen journalist working for the independent Moscow daily *Kommersant*, said many journalists are torn between their desire to report objectively on the conflict and their desire to avoid state persecution.

“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

Cold War Tactics

Drugging and Detention: Beslan cases reminiscent of Soviet practices.

By Sophia Kishkovsky

With reporting by Alex Lupis

MOSCOW

Georgian television reporter Nana Lezhava spent three brutal days covering the horrors of the Beslan school siege, interviewing grief-stricken families and trying to find some truth amid the dizzying array of official deception. Yet her own ordeal was just about to begin.

On September 4, the Federal Security Service (FSB), the successor agency to the KGB, detained Lezhava and cameraman Levan Tetvadze on a specious border viola-

tion for five days. Lezhava was interrogated, tried, subjected to an involuntary gynecological exam, and slipped a dose of a psychotropic drug.

“They asked me if I taste cognac in the coffee,” she said in a recent interview, matter-of-factly recounting details that seemed drawn from a Cold War-era spy novel. “They said they gave some to me because I was so cold. I don’t remember anything after that. When

I came to, it was 24 hours later and I was in an FSB detention cell.”

The government’s use of *spetsoperatsii*—covert, KGB-style special operations—to silence independent journalists has become a disturbing development in today’s Russia, especially when it comes to the conflict in Chechnya. Nowhere was the practice more evident than

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Nana Lezhava returns to Georgia after five days of detention in Russia, during which she was interrogated and drugged.

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, cassettes, 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



Mourners weep over the coffins of hostages killed in the Beslan school siege.

AP/Ivan Sekretarev

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.

C PJ 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 Mineralniye 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." ■

and Astamirov," Bagrov said. "What happened to them was a lesson to others that it's not worth it to do your job."

A Moscow-based Western correspondent, who said he travels covertly to Chechnya to report on the war, called security conditions appalling for everyone. "It's completely lawless. People are still disappearing at night at the hands of armed men," said the journalist, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, citing safety concerns.

Local journalists living in and around Chechnya also face intense bureaucratic harassment and obstruction. "It's a problem getting the most basic information from government officials," said Timur Aliyev, editor-in-chief of *Chechenskoye Obshchestvo*, which is based in Ingushetia for security reasons. But access to information is just one problem for the independent weekly; local officials angered by its reporting on abuses by Russian forces have waged an ongoing campaign of bureaucratic pressure and censorship against the newspaper.

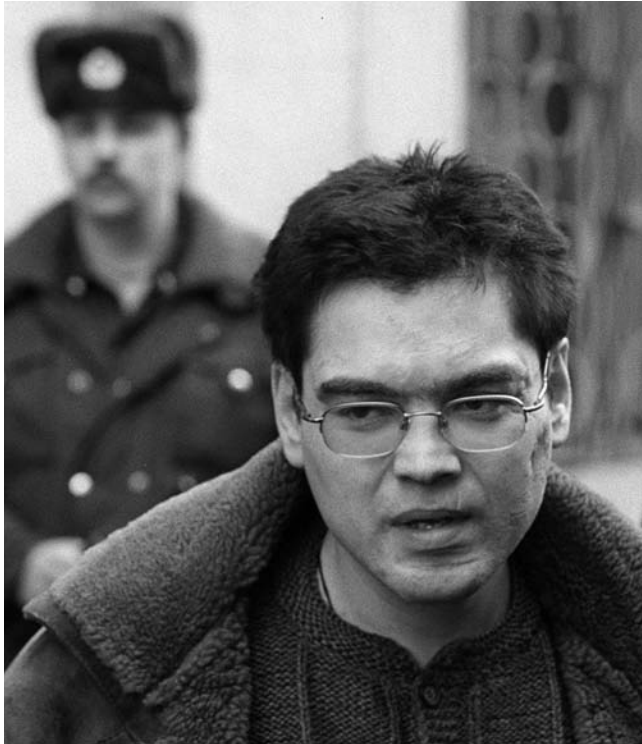
Authorities in Ingushetia, complying with a request from Chechnya's Interior Ministry, shut *Chechenskoye Obshchestvo* for the month prior to Chechnya's August 2004 presidential elections. The government newspaper distributor cancelled the newspaper's contract, making for "a very complicated situation," Aliyev said.

Journalists from other parts of Russia also face great scrutiny. In January, the FSB launched a criminal investigation of *Pravo-Zashchita*, an independent newspaper based in the Volga River city of Nizhny Novgorod, after it published remarks by rebel leader Aslan Maskhadov and his envoy, Akhmed Zakayev, that called for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Federal authorities issued an official warning to *Kommersant* for publishing an interview with Maskhadov in February. The next month, Russian forces killed Maskhadov.

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



AP/Maxim Marmur

Radio journalist Andrei Babitsky speaks to the media after being questioned by Russian investigators in 2000. Babitsky was detained by Russian forces and called a traitor while reporting in Chechnya.

closed TV-6 in 2002, and the Media Ministry pulled TV5 off the air in 2003.

“It’s because of television’s big role in ensuring (former President) Boris Yeltsin’s re-election in 1996 that the Kremlin is so concerned about what is on the television screens,” said Andrei Shylov, a reporter on NTV’s popular Sunday news program “Namedni” until it was yanked off the air in 2004 in response to Kremlin pressure. In quick succession that year, the Kremlin purged national television of virtually every substantive current affairs show and independent-minded news host.

The Kremlin has long tried to shape international news coverage by denying visas and accreditation to foreign correspondents, but in recent months it has stepped up pressure on foreign governments as well. Russian diplomats have pressed several Baltic and Central European countries to shut down the pro-Chechen news Web site *KavkazCenter*, which the Kremlin calls a “terrorist” site even though both Western and Russian journalists rely on it as one of the few sources of breaking news from the region.

In February, Russian diplomats unsuccessfully urged British authorities to censor an interview with rebel leader Shamil Basayev on the independent television station Channel 4. The next month, they criticized the Swedish government for allowing the independent news agency TT to publish an interview with Basayev.

These restrictive policies have led to widespread public ignorance about the crime, government corruption, military incompetence, and human rights abuses that plague government efforts in Chechnya. The September 2004 hostage-taking in Beslan surprised many Russians, who had been told by the country’s three state-controlled national television channels that life in the republic was returning to normal.

“The media are an important political instrument for the government ...but trust in the media is falling and I don’t think the Kremlin is paying attention to this at all,” said Olga Karabanova, director of the Moscow-based Press Development Institute.

Shylov offered a similar view. “People no longer see television as a source of information,” he said. “People who read newspapers and the Internet know that on television you get the official line.”

Putin’s tactics raise broader questions about his willingness to tackle sensitive issues such as government corruption, human rights abuses, organized crime, AIDS, and the trafficking of drugs, weapons, and humans. “The lack of accountability is a big problem,” Lipman said. “In the short run, Putin has politics, but not the country, under his control.”

For his part, Babitsky said that “these are not Soviet times” and that the press still has some latitude for criticism of the government. But he added, “We don’t know how far Putin is ready to go, and the distance he’s gone is significant.” The damage now is not measured by “closed newspapers or closed political parties,” Babitsky said, but by the number of dead in Chechnya—the terrible cost of a story that goes untold in Russia. ■

Chechnya by the Numbers

Since the second Chechen war began in 1999, CPJ has documented dozens of cases of press abuse. Many more abuses go unreported, often because journalists are fearful that publicity will draw unwanted government attention. Here is a numerical snapshot of the worst cases involving journalists, as documented by CPJ staff.

Deaths: 7

Includes deaths in crossfire and two targeted killings blamed on rebels

Censorship, legal actions: 20

Direct government actions designed to suppress reporting

Harassment: 33

Other government actions intended to hinder reporting

Abductions: 5

Kidnappings by armed groups

Imprisonments: 8

Detentions by Russian forces or government officials