CHANGE IN THE COVERAGE OF THE CHECHEN WARS: REASONS AND CONSEQUENCES

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Abstract

A dramatic change in media coverage of the wars in Chechnya — from sharp criticism in 1995 to almost unanimous support in 1999 — has at least one consequence and several causes. Both wars were presented by TV news as a series of disconnected actions, which can be easily visualised: separate battles and cases of people's suffering. This helped to stop the first war, but the disappearing of the visualised actions in the mid-war period lead to silencing the Chechen problem. Meanwhile, politicians learned from their mistakes and formed a consistent policy towards the media (which they lacked before). Furthermore, NTV channel, the major source of alternative coverage of the first war, has found itself much more dependent on various external forces after it voluntarily supported the incumbent in the presidential elections in 1996. One of the NTV executives has formulated what can be called the major result of its struggle for independent coverage: "With our own hands we have created a monstrous system that gonna eat us."

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Introduction

Any story differs from reality it seeks to describe, but the scale of this difference and its social significance vary. A war is a case when closeness of a media narrative to reality is especially important since people's lives depend on it. At the same time, throughout the history, wars have been the periods when the media demonstrated the least ability to provide full and diverse coverage. The causes of that may be divided into two major clusters. The first cluster (of "interest causes") is obvious: a war endangers the most vital interests of many powerful groups, such as governments, the military, and business groups. Since too much is at stake, they mobilise all their resources to control the flow of information, so that no outside power could destroy their plans. Media producers accept this for different reasons: they either lack resources for resistance, or are not interested in this resistance, or just agree with the dominant ideology.

Interestingly enough, among various social actors it is the media who are usually expected to behave normatively: while a government defending its own interest is considered a natural state of things, mass media a thought to be inherently inclined to defend the public interest. This fallacy generates attempts to solve all social problems through the media: when a government has done something bad, it is often the media who are blamed and who are demanded to improve their service to the public. Meanwhile, media organisations and individuals like all other social actors have their own interests that may be very different from the values of the freedom of press.

The second cluster of causes is the structure of the media industry ("structural causes"). Most people learn about the changes in the world from TV news. The print word (as opposed to visual information) and analytical genres (as opposed to news) are much less consumed. But TV news has its limitations as a format: it favours separate events that are limited in space and time and can be easily visualised. Coverage of long-term trends that have lead to an event demands extensive analysis. It is excluded from news because (a) it involves "subjective commentary" which contradicts the value of "objective facts" as a basis of news; (b) it is too laborious; (c) it is less dramatic and less likely to attract the audience. Again, orientation of the media on the audience is often seen as a problem of the media, not of the audience. However, news is probably so anti-analytical precisely because otherwise it would not attract the largest audience among all other genres.

Anyway, news as kaleidoscopic genre is not the best format to give a big picture of a complicated situation, such as a war. Instead, news presents "an occasional series of unlinked reports about seemingly unrelated crises" (McNulty 1999, 270). This phenomenon coupled with the "interest causes" results in that the media hardly ever help to stop a war. Although sometimes they contribute to this, in other cases they deepen the conflict, depending on varying circumstances.

This article describes the actual functioning of "interest" and "structural" causes looking at the example of the two wars in Chechnya. The article analyses the mechanisms through which the actual story of the wars was transformed in what the audience in Russia could find in the mainstream media. This text is closer to expert analysis than to purely scientific one because all three categories — "the actual story," "the mechanisms" and "the coverage" — are problematic in terms of available sources. However, the conclusions presented here are not just a private opin-

ion, they are based on a long-term observation of the Russian media, mostly national TV, and on multiple secondary sources. Among all, "the coverage" component is the most available and verifiable, and it has been most widely studied. "The mechanisms" have been revealed during my own larger study of control over the media in Russia.

Finally, "the actual story" is the most problematic and is reconstructed from comparative reading of different texts (Russian, Chechen and Western), including historical works and analytical articles in the press. Thus, I do not claim my "actual story" to be the final truth; still it shows how much a narrative of a war may differ from a TV news narrative if one carefully studies and compares multiple sources. Such study has revealed that one of the main reasons of both wars is the struggle of many countries for the access to the newly found oil fields at the Caspian Sea. Here Chechnya plays a crucial role since it possesses a part of the pipeline that connects the Caspian and the Black seas. This article shows how the topic of oil was systematically silenced or at best marginalised in the media discourse and substituted with the rhetoric of "State integrity" (by the Russian officials) or "State independence" (by the Chechen leaders). It is shown how structural orientation of the media towards unlinked stories finally helped the Russian government to impose its discourse.

Russian Media System

To understand why the Russian media covered the Chechen wars the way they did, it is necessary first to have a brief look at the Russian media system and at a historical context of the Chechen-Russian[1] relations.

The birth of the post-Soviet media system dates back to 1990, when the new law on the press abolished censorship and introduced the right of citizens to establish private media. This was followed by a rapid growth of non-state newspapers, and later TV. By approximately 1997 the majority of the numerous independent media was united in large groups known as "media empires." More precisely, they may be called "cross-institutional entities" uniting individuals, groups and structures from "the State," the business community, sometimes from the criminal world, and from the media world. The ties within these units have shown to be stronger than within traditional institutions of "the State," "the business" etc. Media groups in such units serve different goals, and the leading role belongs to TV.

By now Russia has three national TV channels: RTR, ORT and NTV. RTR, (former channel 2) since its establishment in the Soviet Union has been State-owned and is an official proponent of the government point of view. ORT, formerly State channel 1, was made a joint-stock company in 1995. Formally, 51 per cent of it belongs to the State and 49 per cent — to different private structures. But in fact most of the money comes from one of its shareholders Vladimir Berezovsky, a well-known businessman and politician. Berezovsky has regarded his media primarily as a means of gaining political capital — a vital resource in Russia, which later can be converted into other forms of capital outside the media sphere, first of all, into economical capital. That is why Berezovsky's strategy has been a permanent bargaining and negotiations with those in power (whoever it has been). In these relations the loyalty of his media is exchanged for various privileges for him and his business. That is why ORT has sometimes been more vigorous in its support of the government than the State channel RTR.

NTV, a part of the "Most" business group of Vladimir Gusinsky, is the only wholly private national channel found in 1993. Though it reaches less audience than its two major competitors, it is very influential among educated population of big cities. Gusinsky is known to be a more "Western-style" businessman: he has his primary interest within his media holding and views it first of all as a commercial enterprise. He and his allies have viewed "objectivity" and "truth" (in news) as a commodity that is exchanged for ratings, and then for advertisement revenues. However, as business in Russia is not separated from politics, the "Most" group has to rely on its political backers as well, the main one of whom is Moscow mayor Yury Luzhkov.

Historical Context

Situated in the Northern Caucasus, officially Chechnya is a "subject" of the Russian Federation, and at the same time — a self-proclaimed independent republic of Ichkeria. During the colonisation of the Caucasus in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the population of Chechnya and the neighbouring Ingushetia demonstrated the most unyielding resistance to the Russian army. Before being annexed to Russia, Chechnya did not have its own nation-state; no single clan ("*teip*") controlled the whole territory. That is why in Chechnya, unlike the Southern Caucasus, Russian colonisers could not rely on co-operation with the local political elite. This has also become one of the major problems in Russian-Chechen relations in 1990s.

During the Soviet period Checheno-Ingush Republic was never truly pacified, and with the decline of the Soviet regime its administration declared independence as early as in 1990. The separatist elite split the next year, and Ingushetia stayed within Russia. Moscow was reluctant to recognise the new state, and during the last decade Chechnya suffered two wars, the first lasting from late 1994 to early autumn 1996, and the second starting from autumn 1999. Data about the losses vary greatly, but it is clear that they amount to thousands of killed and to dozens of thousands of wounded. Many towns and villages, including Chechnya's capital Grozny were completely destroyed. The tragic irony of this story is that despite the claims of wide public support made by both conflicting elites, the opinion of the Chechen population on independence was never asked.

Towards the First War

Thus, the armed conflict in Chechnya did not start all of a sudden, but it attracted the significant attention of the media only after the failed storm of Grozny in November 1994. This section speaks of events that found their way to the media years later.

When Checheno-Ingushetia first proclaimed its independence, it was not unique among other provinces of the Russian Federation. Yeltsin's famous slogan "Take as much sovereignty as you can swallow" did not stay unheard, and Chechnya was covered in this context, if covered at all. In 1990 Yeltsin as the head of the Russian Federative republic of the USSR gained control over the Channel 2 (future RTR), while Channel 1 stayed in the arms of Gorbachov as the president of the Soviet Union. At that time Yeltsin and his channel were associated with freedom and reforms, and journalists at his channel sincerely supported his policy of "autonomisation."

Next autumn was the period of rapid disintegration of the Soviet Union; most public attention was attracted to it. Meanwhile, it was already then that the cleavages inside the Chechen elite emerged, and already then the Russian government tried to solve the problems with military methods (Kogan-Yasny 1999). Playing a central role in the self-liquidation of the USSR, Yeltsin carried out quite an opposite policy towards the regions of his own republic, which missed the attention of the media.

Dzhokhar Dudayev who headed Chechnya in 1991-1996 came to power through the elections organised by a group that was in opposition to Moscow, and later Russian authorities had to recognise him as de facto president. During 1991 Dudayev's supporters gained control over the weapons of the Federal Army (including tanks and aircrafts) located in Chechnya. The armed conflict was avoided only due to the opposition to it inside Moscow itself.

Since then, both sides initiated negotiations, but each time they were in vain since neither side wanted to compromise on the major question — (in)dependence of Chechnya. The new Russian Constitution adopted in late 1993 listed Chechnya as one of 89 "subjects of Federation" and contained no indication of Chechnya's special status. Furthermore, from mid-1992 Moscow blocked the banking system of Chechnya, and by 1994 nearly stopped the delivery of oil to the Chechen oil processing plants that were the basis of Chechnya's economy. Much later many Russian media would claim that this was done to prevent rapid criminalisation of the Chechnya's economy where proceeds from illegal export of Russian oil and other goods were spent for weapons (Deliagin 1999). Although even the Chechen side recognises the facts of oil thievery, the assessment of its scale is dramatically different (Abubakarov 1998), and the criminalisation might have been a result of the blockade. Still, Dudayev's team undoubtedly viewed oil as an economic basis for Chechnya's independence.

None of these events and problems was widely covered in the media before the war began; some of them, such as economic blockade of Chechnya, were actually never covered. Most probably, journalists were themselves unaware of a complex situation in Chechnya, and it stayed on the periphery of the public attention until November 26 1994. It was the day when the "Chechen opposition" secretly supported by Moscow attacked Dudayev's government in Grozny and was completely defeated (Abubakarov 1998; Kogan-Yasny 1999). The secret plan of Moscow was disclosed and aroused a public outcry.

The First Chechen War: The Media against the Military

Beginning the Chechen campaign, the Federal power (whoever it was represented by) obviously assumed that it could repeat the Afghanistan scenario. The typical practice of the Soviet political elite was first to act and then to give an official interpretation, no matter how late, implausible or contradictory it was. This practice could survive for a while because it was supplemented by an effective mechanism of control over distribution of the official messages — a mechanism that made these messages obligatory and the only available to the media. Criticism could appear in the media only when its object got powerful opponents inside the elite, as it was with Afghanistan.

By 1994 the environment changed dramatically, the elite lost its old leavers of control, but without realising this it "stuck in the previous media age" (Mickiewicz

1997, 244). But the major problem of the Russian political elite was that it did not constitute a consolidated unit ("the government," "the State" etc) and was represented by a number of competing groups and individuals[2]. As a result, it had no clear policy on any matter, including the war and the media.

The Federal power made no information preparations to the military operation at all. A special information centre was created a week into the operation, and president Yeltsin addressed the nation after two weeks. At first the very fact of the military actions was denied. Many other accounts of the Russian officials contradicted the events, and the declared intentions contradicted their actions. Similar mistakes are known from the Vietnam War and the British operation at the Falklands in 1982 (Baroody 1998).

Getting almost no information from the official sources, State media that had voluntarily supported Yeltsin "the reformer" found it very difficult to ignore the real events and their alternative coverage. All three national channels showed military actions and — inevitably — their failures. It was then that the problems of the Russian weapons in Chechnya and its criminalised economy were picked up by all media. They were discussed in the context of asking who was responsible for the situation going so far. At the same time, all three channels underscored the importance of Russia's territorial integrity and the necessity to find a solution to the problem, opposing only the *methods*, not the *goal*.

The private NTV more than others showed sufferings of the peaceful population, refugees, wounded people, destruction, and the mistakes of the military. NTV was a young growing business trying to conquer the market, and it needed ratings tremendously. Its administration made a right judgement that "truth" and "objectivity" were the most deficit goods at this market when the war started. Using general distrust of the post-Soviet public to official messages, NTV gained credibility very quickly. Commercial interest went side by side with journalists' values of the freedom of press.

The Federal power found itself totally unprepared to negative reaction of the media. The military kept all journalists, including those from the State channels, away from the areas they controlled. NTV, the private channel was the first one who did not hesitate to turn to the alternative sources — the Chechens. These were more than willing to present their version of the situation and demonstrated a much wiser information policy actively co-operating with the media. They gave many interviews, and as a result were presented as individual human beings, while the Federal army looked as an anonymous grey mass (Liberman 1999a).

The ineffectiveness of control over the flow of information was the striking difference of the first Chechen armed conflict from the Gulf war. There Saudi Arabia and the US fully controlled the access to the area and almost entirely controlled the movements of journalists. Those journalists who were not included in the pool (a privileged group) just did not get visas. No effective protest took place because the most powerful media who could lead such protest (e.g. CNN) were *in* the pool. For them, the pool was a great advantage because it effectively removed their competitors. In addition to restricted access, pool members were required to submit all reports for military review in English (Winseck 1992, 67). This rule worked because anyone who would refuse to obey could be threatened exclusion from the pool.

This scenario could not work in Chechnya for several reasons. First, Chechnya was a part of Russia with no visa regime, so journalists could come there relatively

easily. Second, the Federal power was always late and ineffective in its actions. It was similar to Vietnam where journalists could use private transportation and where the military lacked technical facilities to censor television film which was a new means to deliver news (Baroody 1998, 54). Of course, the military confiscated cassettes and cameras, threatened and arrested journalists; a discriminating system of accreditation was introduced (Panfilov 1999), still reporters found many breaches in this system of control. They would squeeze during the nights, as once two correspondents went 7 km on foot, crossing a river with their cameras on their shoulders. In many cases poorly treated soldiers let media people into restricted zones for bread, sausages, vodka, a call home from a journalist's mobile telephone, and even for an issue of the *Playboy* magazine. Sometimes soldiers co-operated with journalists just because they found it a right thing to do. All this could happen because 18-20 year old soldiers called up to the military service against their will had very little identification with the army — unlike their professional colleagues in the USA.

The military officials tried to discredit the critical media, especially NTV, publicly accusing them of being paid by the "Chechen bandits." The Federal power also looked for a legal way to close NTV, such as withdrawing its license for "giving deliberately false information." This made NTV more accurate and precise in its reports.

Later, the negative coverage of the war gave the military a reason to blame the media for the failure of the first Chechen campaign. This situation is in some respect similar to the Vietnam War: it is widely believed that it were the media who helped to stop it. This interpretation has been questioned in many studies (e.g. Hallin 1986), but it is persistent because it meets the interests of the three major actors: the journalists (who look very heroic), the military (who release themselves from the responsibility for their mistakes) and the government (who thus demonstrates democracy at work). In reality, the causes for the end of the Vietnam War were multiple and complex, and resembled those in the Chechen war. Among them were the failure of the Johnson administration to mobilise the U.S. for all-out war, the contradictions in strategy for the war, and inconsistencies in public statements.

This latest pattern of course could not have existed without the media that provide the very necessity to make public statements. However, what the media can do is only to turn public opinion against the State, but they can not make the State to take this opinion into consideration in its decisions. Of this journalists complained during the first war in Chechnya. The situation in which the State is most inclined to recollect about public opinion is the elections. In Russia, the president elections came in late spring 1996.

By early 1996 Yeltsin's rating was less than 2 per cent, while his main competitor communist Gennady Ziuganov was far ahead. Neither politico-economical elite (including Berezovsky and Gusinsky) nor the journalists were interested in communists' return to power, while sick Yeltsin was convenient for many. Whether for "democracy" or for the fear to lose jobs, all the media supported Yeltsin; one of the leaders of "oppositional" NTV even joined his election headquarters. It is not surprising that the criticism of Yeltsin and the war ceased. Yeltsin's decision to stop the military actions from April 1, 1996 made it easier for NTV to justify this change. Still, it was difficult to maintain the image of the ended war since journalists in Chechnya witnessed the bombings and the new wounded all the time brought to

hospitals (Panfilov 1999). State media had another difficulty: the former "bandit" Aslan Maskhadov, Dudayev's closest ally was recognised by Moscow as Chechnya's leader and became the main partner for negotiations. For this role Maskhadov as a fresh person was slightly better than Dudayev who was killed during the bombardment in May (coincidence?), still the official media hesitated how to present the situation. The words "bandits" and "terrorists" used before, disappeared very quickly after the end of the military actions. For a while, the media would call Maskhadov and his team cautiously: "Chechen leaders," "representatives of the Chechen side" or "the government of the self-proclaimed republic of Ichkeria." By autumn 1996, the words confirming the fully legitimate status of the former terrorists ("president," "minister") circulated widely (Koltsova 2000).

From late July the media and especially NTV returned to criticism of Yeltsin and the renewed fighting in Chechnya. But this criticism could never be as radical s before. Later the NTV journalists acknowledged that the elections gave the authorities a possibility to feel that that the media, as in the Soviet period, may be successfully manipulated. As one of the top NTV executives put it, "with our own hands we have created a monstrous system that gonna eat us."[3]

Between the Wars: Unlinked Stories about "Unrelated" Events

From late 1996 when the fighting finally stopped, Chechnya was no longer covered on a daily basis. Though it was never completely silenced, the reports were occasional and scattered; they did not provide a big picture of the situation. Most information about events between the wars appeared in the media not earlier than 1999.

Meanwhile, cleavages in the Chechen elite never disappeared: a group of Maskhadov's most radical allies lead by Shamil Basayev refused to co-operate with Moscow and insisted on the full independence of Chechnya. Gradually, Maskhadov started losing control over the situation while the opposition was seizing various economic resources; this time criminalisation of the Chechen economy was undoubtful. According to available data, opposition had two main sources of income. One was illegal processing and export of oil that went not only abroad, but also back to Russia, in particular, to the neighbouring Stavropol region. Chechen oil products were cheaper than Russian because they escaped taxes, so Russian enterprises were eager to buy them. Another significant source — money from the Federal budget transferred for the restoration of the ruined republic. While people did not get their salaries and pensions, Basayev was forming a professional army. In 1998-99 he publicly demonstrated the skills of his fighters who graduated from his newly established military school.

The two major sources were supplemented by other criminal activities: open robbery, cattle thievery (again, from the Stavropol region), kidnapping people and either selling them back or using as slaves. It is hard to assess the scale of these activities, but officially 1094 people were registered as kidnapped between January 1997 and June 1999 (Deliagin 1999). It is very likely that a part of the impoverished and jobless common people of Chechnya participated in it.

Still, one should be cautious with these data because suddenly flooding the media in 1999 they have been actively used by the Russian government to legitimise its second military operation in Chechnya.

At the same time, what almost did not find its way to the mainstream media, is the information about the big game called "access to the Caspian oil." It started when Russia lost influence in the Caucasus, especially after the first Chechen war. Since Russia failed to restore stable functioning of the Chechen part of its pipe line (through which it had controlled the oil fields at the Caspian Sea), a struggle of many countries for the redistribution of the spheres of influence began (Separatism 1999).[4]

The interest of the United States was to prevent monopolisation of the access to the Caspian oil by either Russia or Iran. That is why the US started supporting its own project of the pipeline from Azerbaidjan to Turkey. While since mid-1997 Moscow was considering an idea to build a pipe line around Chechnya, in early 1998 Maskhadov made a contract with Britain about the partly already existing line going through Dagestan, Chechnya, Russia, Ukraine and Poland. This project got a positive reaction from Moscow under the condition of Chechnya refusing from its independence. Being cheaper than the Turkey option, it had a good chance to be adopted by the consortium of oil companies working with the Caspian oil. At that very moment "unknown bandits" made a series of terrorist acts in Chechnya; among other action, they kidnapped the representative of the Russian president in Chechnya general Vlasov and beheaded four British engineers. The Turkey variant got priority in late 1998.

The only "unknown bandits" capable of such large-scale provocation against Moscow was Basayev's armed opposition. Many groups were interested to help it (though it does not mean they did): Russia's competitors Turkey and the US; Saudi Arabia who is interested to block any access to the Caspian oil, and the famous Arab terrorist Ben Laden whose attempts to expand his influence to various Moslem countries are well-known. Finally, Basayev could play his own game struggling for the full independence of Chechnya.

This is confirmed by his policy towards the neighbouring Dagestan, a Caucasian republic within Russian Federation separating Chechnya from the Caspian Sea. After Moscow announced the idea of the pipeline around Chechnya through Dagestan in mid-1997, Chechen separatists initiated negotiations with Dagestan about "friendship and co-operation." The negotiations failed, and in five days, in December 1997 Chechen separatists held a series of terrorist acts in Dagestan. In May 1998, in the time of the provocation against the Russian-British pipeline project, they captured the building of the parliament in Dagestan's capital. In early 1999, when Basayev actually got control over the Chechen government, Chechnya was proclaimed a Moslem state (Chechenskie 2000). Its unification with other Moslem regions of the Caucasus, in the first turn with Dagestan, was announced as an official strategic goal. From this moment of the merge of the armed separatist opposition with the formerly pro-Moscow government, Chechnya was actually out of control of the Federal power.

What part of this complicated story could a common Russian viewer see in the mainstream TV news? Right after the end of the first war it were mostly optimistic reports about the restoration of Chechnya, which soon gave way to relatively disconnected stories. Moscow's announcement about the pipe line around Chechnya was reported in mid-1997 (with no accent on the importance of Dagestan); in a few months terrorist acts in Dagestan were covered (pipe line not mentioned); still in a few months there were stories about kidnapped Vlasov, beheaded British engi-

neers, and the Dagestan parliament. After a long pause, it was reported that Basayev got leading position in the Chechen parliament. These reports, neutral in tone, looked especially odd, because Basayev had been known as one of the most violent "bandit commanders" in the first war. It was he who organised the largest terrorist act in the Russian town of Budyonovsk in 1995 where he took about two thousand hostages. This incident, including the Russia's prime minister's negotiations with the rebels, was widely reported by all media. In four years, the same person was covered as one of the legitimate Chechen leaders without any reference to the past events.

In a series of disconnected reports separatists' actions in Dagestan could not be discerned as a part of a meaningful policy. Rather, they looked like just some more acts of unmotivated violence. The link of separatists' persistence in Dagestan to its access to the Caspian sea could be traced, probably, only by experts who monitored all possible sources of information (in the first war even this was impossible). Neither separatists themselves, nor the Federal authorities were interested in stressing this link because it would inevitably point at the major interest of the two political elites — the oil. The oil that meant not only more profit but also more political power. And pointing at this would in turn make clear that common people, both Russians and Chechens, were used just as instruments in this big game.

Thus, neither side talked about the oil in its official discourse. Separatists underscored the right of the Chechen nation to have its own independent state, and later — its right to unite with other Moslems. Moscow stressed the importance of the integrity of the federation. It talked about oil mostly in the context of various criminal activities in Chechnya which was impermissible (they steal our people, cattle, oil etc — they should be stopped). The decision to build a pipeline around Chechnya was presented as an inevitable reaction to the instability in this region. Thus the oil question appeared as one of the consequences of the conflict rather than one of its major causes.

In the period between the wars it was not very difficult for the authorities to voice their interpretation through the media because of the dramatic decline of the interest to Chechnya. Journalists believed that their audience was tired of the daily coverage of this ever-lasting conflict, and this might well be true.

The Second War: The Government Dominates the Media

It is widely believed that the second Chechen war started from separatists' stupid invasion into Dagestan. An alternative belief (mostly met in the West) is that this "invasion," like in the first war, was organised by the Russian secrete police. Given the chain of events preceding the war, both versions seem simplistic. Concerning the KGB-organised invasion, Russian authorities just had no need to do it. A series of terrorist acts listed in the previous section was followed in 1999 by small-scale, but regular attacks of Basayev's fighters on Dagestan. So all that the Federal authorities had to do was to present one of such attacks as "invasion," which they successfully fulfilled. One day in summer 1999 began with a sensation: the Russian prime minister announced that he had to send federal troops to repel the aggression of the Chechen bandits to Dagestan. The prime minister who took the responsibility for such an important decision looked very heroic.

What was not reported at that moment, is that the mentioned attacks of separatists were paralleled with similar acts of the Federal forces that tried to prevent the development of the growing separatist army. The actions were preceded by threats from both sides, especially after the merge of Basayev's opposition with Maskhadov's government in early 1999. Thus the second war, as well as the first one, did not have a clear-cut beginning. The "invasion" was almost wholly a media event. On the one hand, it looked probable because it fit well with the separatists' previous actions reported in the media. On the other hand, taken out of the context of separatists' oil-based policy, it also seemed odd. So it was not difficult to present it as a stupid action of a group of bandits who, gradually criminalising and never finding "an adequate reaction," finally lost their minds and decided they could fight a huge country of Russia.

Another belief about the second Chechen war is that it was designed exclusively as a major part of the election campaign for Vladimir Putin, whom president Yeltsin recommended as his successor. It is interesting that a similar accusation existed during the first war, but reversed: then the decision to *end* the war was claimed to be exclusively a part of the presidential campaign. Though in both cases the link with the elections is obvious, it is hardly so straightforward. First, given the disastrous coverage of the first war, it was very risky to count on the positive reaction of the media in the second war. Furthermore, when after the "invasion" Putin became prime minister, the media unanimously ridiculed him claiming that one could hardly invent a worse recommendation than that of Yeltsin. Second, the conflict did exist, and, as the analysis above has shown, the Federal power had many reasons to start military actions, with or without elections (saying "reasons" I do not mean "justification").

Third, it is not obvious that the government was going to start a large-scale war. At first it was announced that a "sanitary cordon" would be built around Chechnya — a kind of an in-state border protected by the military. Indeed, the Federal government seemed to make some steps in that direction: it tried to ask the neighbouring Caucasian state of Georgia to help in organising visa regime. The negotiations failed. When the Federal troops, after pausing at the Russian-Chechen border, finally entered the republic, it became clear that a war started. But this happened not until October; by that time the government might have been encouraged by the relatively positive reaction of the media.

So why this time the coverage was so different? First, of course, the "invasion" story made it much easier for the Federal power to legitimise its military actions. Second, the reports from Chechnya gave a (well-grounded) feeling that the problem was still waiting for its solution. Tired of passiveness of sick Yeltsin, the people welcomed Putin who gave an impression of an active and decisive person. His policy on Chechnya was presented and taken as an indicator of his eagerness to find answers for a whole range of Russia's urgent questions. Third, each terrorist act between the wars gave the Federal power a chance to accuse Chechnya's president Maskhadov of inability to control the situation (which was also reported). This formed an impression that any negotiations with Chechens were in vain: you make an agreement with one group, but another immediately refuses to recognise it. All this gradually pushed the public opinion towards a vision that the enforcement was the only way to solve the problem. The resemblance of the inter-war situation in Chechnya to its situation before the first war (growing criminal re-

gime, no reaction from Moscow) gave the government a possibility to declare the peaceful treaty of 1996 a mistake. To which extent the government itself believed in a problem-solving capacity of war is, of course, unknown.

Anyway, from August to October, before the Federal troops entered Chechnya, the media were unanimous in their positive coverage. The cleavages emerged in November and were still much less than in all other questions. In general, all cleavages were generated by parliamentary election campaign that was taking place in autumn 1999. It was called "a rehearsal" of the presidential campaign that was going to take place the following spring. The media divided into two major camps: one, lead by ORT and RTR, promoted the pro-Kremlin party; the other, lead by TVC, supported the oppositional group headed by Moscow major Luzhkov. NTV belonging to the second camp managed to maintain some distance from it; it was the only national TV channel that gave relatively equal floor to politicians from the whole political spectrum, including communists, right democrats, and radicals.

From the very beginning Luzhkov's group was obviously losing. TVC and NTV broadcast to a smaller share of the population, and were initially economically weaker. The pressure on them during the campaign was tremendous; suddenly there would appear creditors who demanded NTV to pay all its debts, though it is widely known that all businesses in Russia have debts. The 1999 campaign was also the first when some media were openly trying to discredit their competitors: Berezovsky, struggling for "love" of the new leader Putin, used his ORT to attack NTV (though his real goal was Luzhkov). The journalistic community split and became even more easily manipulated.

In this situation, cleavages between the media concerning Chechnya looked really modest. As before, NTV was more critical. According to Semyon Liberman's monitoring (Liberman 1999b), it was more inclined to broadcast stories of refugees leaving Chechnya, while ORT and RTR claimed the Chechens were coming back home. NTV showed frustrated Chechens dreaming of the revenge to the Russians; ORT and RTR showed Chechens expressing their wish for peace. NTV made guesses that the military were hiding the losses, ORT and RTR presented operations as successful.

Still, there were three basic things on which all the channels had consensus. First, the necessity of military actions (openly called "the war") was never questioned. At first, the government tried to exclude this word from the media discourse, but dropped the attempts, since the word turned to be not dangerous for its policy. Second, the attitude to Maskhadov-Basayev regime in Chechnya was unanimously negative; the armed separatists on all channels were mostly called "bandits" and "terrorists." Such words as "rebels" or "guerrillas" were never applied. The media suddenly became full of reports on criminal activities in Chechnya, former and present, especially of heart-breaking stories on kidnapping and other acts of violence.

A third point of consensus was predominantly negative coverage of the attitude of the West to Chechnya. It developed in the context of general growth of anti-Western mood in Russian public. The people gradually got rid of their idealistic belief in that the West was going to help weakened Russia to build democracy and develop its market economy. The war in Kosovo contributed much to the growth of the negative attitude to the West: this campaign was taken as a ruthless intrusion into domestic affairs of a sovereign (and Slavic) state. It is hard to say to

which extent this attitude was shaped by the political elite or emerged independently. Anyway, after Kosovo declarations of the West about violations of human rights in Chechnya looked hypocritical, and the Russian government did not hesitate to accuse the West of double standard. Journalists seemed to agree with this point of view. All this actually blocked any activity on human rights protection in Chechnya.

Besides some pre-existing public support, there was one more important reason for less amount of criticism in the second war. This time the government managed to organise an effective control over the flow of information. It is not by chance that I now apply the word "government": since Putin became prime minister, and then the president, a group of people surrounding him demonstrated an ability to carry out a consistent policy. Furthermore, Putin seemed to make use of his experience in the foreign investigation, as well as the lessons of the first Chechen campaign, Afghanistan, and the Gulf war.

The first and the most striking change was that instead of hiding from journalists the officials and the military regularly supplied them with information and public declarations. Putin himself was tireless voicing the official interpretation of the situation which can be summarised in the following statements: (1) we can not leave Chechnya untouched, neither inside nor outside Russia, because the bandit regime is a regime that would inevitably want to expand; (2) since no one controls the whole territory of Chechnya, negotiations have proven ineffective; (3) that is why a war is an awful, but the only available solution of the problem; (4) separatists are supported mostly from abroad, in the first turn by Arab terrorists; (5) bandits should be clearly discerned from the peaceful population who does not want to fight and welcomes Federal troops as a guarantor of stability. All this is in fact very close to Soviet doctrine on Afghanistan which also declared strategic importance of Afghanistan to the USSR, overwhelming internal support for the pro-Moscow regime, and only external support of the guerrillas (Downing 1988, 23).

Thus in autumn it seemed that the government passed from concealing unfavourable information to active imposing of favourable information. Journalists seemed to be more satisfied than in the first war saying that the military were more co-operative. But approximately in the middle of the winter 2000, it became clear that the new strategy was rather an addition to the old one that its substitution.

By that time the situation for the government changed for worse. The quick victories promised by the generals did not come true, it was clear that the war was not going to be short. The media transmitted various opinions, among which the most unpleasant for the officials were: the military are hiding the losses, the war split the Chechen population and provoked at least a part of it to support the separatists; this may lead to a partisan war and Chechnya will turn into a "Caucasian Ulster." In this situation the government needed more radical measures. Since January 2000 it actually introduced the pool system in Chechnya. Gradually, it became almost impossible to travel there without the military. The differences from the Gulf war also existed: the list of pool members was not fixed from the very beginning, and the journalists were not obliged to give their texts to the military for editing.

Despite these differences, by spring 2000 the media were unable to provide vivid pictures of fighting. Instead, they used maps and even computer-simulated

cartoons of the battles, which obviously did not contain any shooting, destroyed objects, or Chechen "bandits," alive or dead. In all their messages the media referred to official sources which stressed that nearly all separatists were foreign mercenaries. All journalists could do to question the official statements, was to try to find inconsistencies in them. They expressed doubts, but never could prove them with alternative information.

Why did the system of control of the access that failed in the first war work in the second war? There are several reasons. First, this time the military commanders attracted more professional soldiers who were paid and had a stronger identity with the army. The commanders also cared (or at least demonstrated a care) about the soldiers. This must have consolidated the army in its defence against the journalists. Second, and probably the most important: in the second war restricted access was combined with well-organised supply of the official information. These two components could work only together. In the information vacuum of the first war journalists *had* to seek for alternative sources; this time the need for that was not as strong. It were mostly foreign journalists who violated the restrictions of the military and travelled on their own. As a result, they were the most often objects of various sanctions.

A third component of the government's strategy was that the separatists were effectively cut from the media. In fact, it was a consequence of the first two.

Furthermore, the attitude of journalists to their work has changed. Some of them took the position that covering a war the media inevitably participated in it on either side, and preferred to take the side of the government. Others just did not want their lives to be endangered. In the second war no one would walk 7 km at night with a risk to be blown up by a mine. Numerous stories about killed and kidnapped journalists might also contribute to their fears.

The government also provoked journalists to refuse search for access pressuring on their media organisations. It threatened all three national channels with refusal to renew their licenses, which were to expire in May 2000. Various visits by tax authorities and police became more persistent, and all this culminated with the arrest of the head of the "Most" media holding Vladimir Gusinsky. He was released in a few days after a big public outcry, which included statements by President Bill Clinton and the US parliament. Even Berezovsky supported his enemy — actually, despite his fidelity to Putin, Berezovsky got no gratitude from the person he had helped to come to power, and now the media mogul was endangered not less than other big businessmen. Thus, though behind Gusinsky's arrest there is definitely a struggle of big "cross-institutional groups" with the State, still the story marks a new stage in the development of the Russian media. After a period of flux, the State is finally starting to consolidate and to regain the levers of control over the media.

Concluding Remarks

The "interest" and the "structural" causes functioned in the coverage of Chechnya reinforcing each other. The tendency to provide disconnected stories about seemingly unrelated events in the "peaceful" periods, and even a stronger tendency to concentrate on the details of separate battles in the war periods was a result of the structural traits of news as a specific genre. At the same time, this

tendency was reinforced by deliberate actions of the officials who just did not provide the background information that could connect the events. In both wars military actions, reported apart from their true causes, looked as the essence of the conflict rather than its indicator. In the first war, the media probably made the Russian officials to freeze the situation, but they could not make them to find a peaceful solution. Instead, the government learned to prepare military interventions more carefully, especially in the ideological sense. These preparations provided the initial support of the media, which in turn encouraged the government for larger military actions.

In general, the Russian experience is not unique and resembles many other countries, first of all, the USA. Failing to arrange an effective control of the information in Vietnam, the USA officials learned a lesson and gradually improved their policy. The pool system, first introduced in Grenada campaign in 1983, was then successfully used in the Gulf war. It has been shown above how the Russian government demonstrated its capacity to use international experience. Although the Russian government never could completely exclude journalists from Chechnya (unlike the early stages of Grenada, Falklands and the Gulf wars), it succeeded in separation of journalists from the areas of real fighting in the second war.

It is interesting that in neither case the media managed to mobilise a significant public support for their free access to information. With the USA, it is probably due to the lack of public concern about the events in the distant countries. In Russia, the causes are more profound: besides little resources of the media themselves, a cause is probably also in the public who has lost its perestroyka enthusiasm and is now troubled more with its everyday economic difficulties than with abstract ideas of the freedom of press.

Notes:

1. In this text "Russia" is referred to the Russian Federation in its contemporary boundaries, with the exception of Chechnya.

2. That is why I use words "Federal power" or "Moscow" and not "the government."

3. Anonymous interview with the former news director of NTV.

4. "Chechenskie Khroniki" and "Separatism, Islam, Neft" are the overviews of the Russian and foreign press, and of expert papers published in the library section of the web site "Independent Chechnya." This site is sponsored by the electronic newspaper *Utro*. Briefer English versions are also available.

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