



**MEDIA ENMESHED
IN TERROR,
THREATS
AND CORRUPTION**

RUSSIAN CAUCASUS

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DAGESTAN'S MINISTER OF NATIONAL, RELIGIOUS AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS WAS INJURED BY A CAR BOMB IN THE CAPITAL, MAKHACHKALA, ON 4 SEPTEMBER 2010. - AFP



COVER PHOTO (STR/AFP): A CAR BOMB EXPLOSION IN KIZLYAR (DAGESTAN) ON 31 MARCH 2010 KILLED 12 PEOPLE.

*Report of fact-finding visit to Chechnya and Dagestan
by Johann Bihr and Tikhon Dzyadko*

Two and a half years after its last visit, Reporters Without Borders made a return visit to the North Caucasus from 9 to 13 September 2011 to assess the current state of media freedom in the troubled region.

Chechnya and Dagestan were visited this time – the first because of the gravity of the situation there during the last visit and the second because it has suffered a marked decline in security since then. Reporters Without Borders met with journalists of every kind, local officials and human rights defenders.

Reporters Without Borders presented its initial findings and recommendations for the local and federal authorities at a news conference, which it held together with the Russian human rights organization Memorial in Moscow on 14 September.

From 5 to 15 September, Reporters Without Borders also conducted a visual campaign in the media to draw attention to the impunity that the murderers of journalists enjoy in Russia.



NOVOYE DELO FRONT PAGE - DR

DAGESTAN: FRAUGHT CLIMATE AND GROWING VIOLENCE FOR MEDIA

Many of the people Reporters Without Borders met stressed the diversity of contemporary Dagestani society. It consists of a mosaic of peoples and languages with very marked local identities and dispersed centres of power. And many argue that the inability of any group to impose an absolute majority on its rivals means that a degree of pluralism of expression and governance is almost inevitable. The media are characterized by a relative diversity that is unique in the Russian Caucasus and is all the more remarkable when compared with the media deserts in Chechnya and Ingushetia.

But this pluralism is more precarious than ever and is exposed to an extremely fraught environment. The creation of Day of Unity of the Peoples, celebrated for the first time on 15 September 2011, shows that the dream of a diverse nation of harmonious cohabitation is in greater need of support than ever. As instability spreads, the republic's many centres of power seem increasingly to be escaping any form of control by the authorities in Makhachkala. The civilian population is the leading victim of the vicious circle of terrorist attacks and atrocities by the security forces,

and the divorce between society and its institutions is being consummated at a dizzying speed. This extreme polarization has turned the press into an ideological battleground and exposed independent publications to grave threats.

RELATIVE PLURALISM

Last June, President Magomedislam Magomedov hailed the fact that Dagestan has "around 180 newspapers and magazines and more than 100 broadcast media ." But most of the publications are either produced by the local authorities or specialize in religious education. The leading media company, *Assalam*, is dedicated to the promotion of moderate Islam. Its biweekly, *Assalam*, is distributed in seven languages by volunteers going from door to door throughout the republic.

After *Assalam*, the national publications with the biggest print runs are the independent Russian-language weeklies *Novoye Delo* and *Chernovik* (with 23,000 and 17,000 ➤

“The court rulings and fines represent a more serious obstacle for us than the physical threats,” Shakhbanov said.

Emblematic cases, such as Abdulmalik Akhmedilov’s murder in August 2009, nonetheless show that investigative journalism can prove fatal. Magomedov of *Chernovik* acknowledged that photographers, who are more visible, are particularly exposed to physical attacks and arbitrary arrest. “One of our photographers was arrested last week while covering a political demonstration. They eventually released him but did not return his material. Generally speaking, the police do not like journalists.”

Unlike in Chechnya, this has not led to journalists feeling particularly intimidated. They say they share the fate of their fellow citizens. This was confirmed by Svetlana Isayeva, the head of the “Dagestan Mothers” NGO: “Journalists are not particularly targeted. Anyone can get killed, regardless of who they are.” Not a day goes by without a murder in Dagestan. The republic headed the list in the breakdown of victims of violence released by *Kavkazsky Uzel* on 14 September: 315 killed (of whom at least 102 civilians) and 224 wounded since the start of the year (out of the total of 593 killed and 414 wounded throughout the North Caucasus).

Isayeva said: “The situation has in no way stabilized. On the contrary, it is getting worse and each day is harder to live than the last one.” Shakhbanov added: “The total impunity encourages the use of violence. Contract killings have become a standard way of resolving political and business problems.”

Like the rest of the population, journalists are caught between an Islamist insurrection that inflicts many civilian casualties in the course of targeting government

representatives and the frequent violent raids and abductions by security forces motivated by revenge or “bojevye” (sizeable bonuses for participating in special operations) or the possibility of ransom payments. The confrontation between the insurrection and security forces is fuelled by a range of private militias and criminal gangs.

ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES



CHERNOVIK FRONT PAGE - DR

“Economic problems are our biggest headache,” said Magomedov of *Chernovik*. The newspaper is weakened by dependence on an aging readership and growing distribution difficulties. Most of its subscribers live in mountainous areas and delivering their copies to them is costing more and more. In response to the higher tariffs charged by the state monopolies Rospechat and Pochta Rossy, *Chernovik* is trying to diversify its distribution methods and use private-sector intermediaries, but they sometimes end up increasing the newspaper’s retail price, which is hurting its accessibility.

Magomedov also complains of unfair competition from government newspapers, to which state

employees are obliged to subscribe in the best Soviet tradition. “Teachers, for example, are automatically subscribed to *Dagestanskaya Pravda* and to local government publications such as *Khasavyurtskaya Druzhba*. It is already dear enough to pay for two, three or even four obligatory subscriptions. So how are they going to pay for independent newspapers as well?”

Shakhbanov of *Novoye Delo* shares the same concerns about readers. He also mentioned a lack of inde- ➤

IDEOLOGICAL ROLE?

“As soon as we start talking about the terrorists, we are accused of supporting them,” said Magomedov. “But it is our job to put questions to the Wahabis. They exist. It is a reality. We have nothing to do with them and reporting the facts is not the same as making propaganda for them. We are accused of ‘negative content’ when all we want to do is report the facts. Extremists existed long before *Chernovik* was created and our newspaper does not incite hatred.” *Chernovik*’s trial on a charge of inciting hatred highlighted the way independent coverage of Dagestan’s tensions is perceived as defending terrorism.

Journalists are under pressure to take sides. There is no room for independence in the perception of two mutually exclusive camps, a perception supported by the authorities. “There isn’t really any choice,” said former Memorial representative Zaur Gaziyev, now the editor of the pro-government newspaper *Svobodnaya Respublika*. “Either you submit to the growing influence of the clerics, or you are with the government. Islamism represents the main threat to our republic.”

Anyone referring to the security forces’ contribution to the instability, criticizing the government’s stance on the Salafi conservatives or questioning the way that the “war on terror” is being waged is liable to be accused of defending terrorism. Zubayru Zubayruev, a former *Chernovik* journalist who is now a presidential press attaché, says that his old newspaper and *Novoye Delo* “have abandoned objective and constructive criticism for systematic opposition to the government and in the past three or four years have clearly fallen under the control of the clerics and even the radicals.”

According to Zubayruev, the “system of values” of these newspapers and human rights activists has changed, possibly because it is adapting to the region’s Islamization, possibly as a result of deliberate infiltration by extremists. The press is seen as a battleground that must be captured from the enemy. “I have myself criticized the authorities a great deal for their ineffectiveness, but that is not the issue. The issue is whether or not we are going to live under the sharia. This a question of life or death (...) The media are nowadays doing ideological work. Like the ‘professional revolutionaries’ of 1917, they are doing destabilization work.”

In this civil war climate, criticism becomes suspect and the media are expected to be on a war footing. According to Zubayruev, Dagestan is cruelly lacking in media that could wage an ideological struggle against radical Islam. He deplores the mediocrity of the government media and their inability to wage this battle. “The state media are dominated by self-censorship (...) They have no authority. They are definitely not competitive. They could be reformed but it would take a long time and by then we would be already governed by the sharia. What we need instead is for other well-run newspapers to quickly compete with *Chernovik* and *Novoye Delo*. But at the moment they do not exist and our society is unaware of the mortal danger lying in wait.” Zubayruev would like to see the creation of an independent media company whose media would promote democratic and secularist values. The president’s office is working on such a project but so far no businessman seems interested, he added. ■

“IF THEY ARE TOO SCARED TO BE JOURNALISTS, THEY SHOULD CHANGE JOBS”

“We place no restriction on journalists’ work,” presidential press attaché Alvi Karimov said. “If some of them tell you they don’t dare tackle this or that topic, that’s their problem. If they are too scared to be journalists, they should change jobs and become taxi drivers. No one interferes in their editorial polices, no one spies on them. I have never had the police summon journalists for questioning. On the contrary, they know we are always available to them if they need us. They all have my phone number. The president invites all of them.

“We obviously would not tolerate newspapers that urged the population to join the *boyeviki* [armed separatists] and we disapprove of the ones in Moscow or abroad that romanticize their fight. But fortunately we have no such media here (...) Those who claim in the international press that the media aren’t free in Chechnya are ignorant, they don’t know what they are talking about. Some of them are just motivated by hatred or malice. They cannot accept the speed with which our republic has recovered from the war.”

Karimov compared Chechnya favourably with the outer Moscow suburb of Khimki, where the proposed construction of a motorway through a forest is the subject of widespread opposition. “The situation near Moscow is no great example. Look at the attack on Beketov [a journalist left for dead in November 2008]. Look at what happened to the journalists covering the Khimki forest story.”

Asked if there was an opposition press in Chechnya, Karimov mentioned the Moscow-based newspapers *Kommersant*, *Vlast*, *Kavkazsky Uzel* and the local *Groznensky Rabochy*. The staff of *Groznensky Rabochy* confirmed to

Reporters Without Borders that they were free to criticize anything and anyone “except the president.” But Reporters Without Borders was unable to find any article critical of the authorities in the issue it found on the newsstands, with the notable exception of a scathing editorial about the federal government in Moscow. The issue had a full-page story on the cover about the Day of National Harmony and Unity headlined “Symbol of the republic’s recovery.”

The magazine *Dosh* (*The Word* in Chechen), which Reporters Without Borders was able to find only at the airport during its visit to Grozny, offers a different picture. Edited by two Chechens, this independent quarterly has been covering the entire Russian Caucasus with an extensive network of correspondents since 2003. Based in Moscow, it initially used a small office in the House of the Press in Grozny, but its rent was increased drastically after 18 months, forcing them to abandon it.

Dosh tackles subjects that are missing from the Chechen media: the continuing instability and its accompaniment of violence, human rights abuses and enforced disappearances; the ubiquitous corruption that hobbles business activity and access to essential services such as education and health; and the grave after-effects of the two Chechen wars including psychological problems and vendettas.

The latest issue has a long interview with Oleg Orlov, the head of Memorial, about the human rights situation in Chechnya. At the end of August, a Moscow court acquitted Orlov of the defamation charge that President Kadyrov brought against him for publicly saying he thought Kadyrov was responsible for the 2009 murder of Natalia Estemirova, the head of Memorial’s Grozny office. There was no mention of the outcome of the case in the Chechen media.

Karimov said he wanted “proper analysis” from journalists. “Not gratuitous criticism but the use of a true critical eye.



DOSH FRONT PAGE - DR

On the other hand, I don't think it is fair to expect our press to meet international standards immediately. Most of the experienced journalists left during the war. The journalism training system suffered. Our press lacks analytic capacity. It needs to recover and develop in order to be able to write about everything. Our journalists still need to grow, to become more mature. But it's not that I think we don't have good journalists. I like the younger generation."

When Karimov stopped and questioned three young passers-by, they said they had access to all the information they wanted. One of them said: "There is the Internet." It is true that independent websites are not blocked in Chechnya. Russian, international and independent news websites such as *Kavkazsky Uzel* (www.kavkaz-uzel.ru) are just a click away – for those that have Internet access.



"HOUSE OF THE PRESS" IN GROZNY - DR

Politkovskaya and Natalia Estemirova have reinforced the isolation and mistrust of journalists and human rights activists, by reinforcing the idea that they are themselves vulnerable.

As Orlov said in his interview for *Dosh*: "We learn, for example, that a crime of violence has been committed. But the victims no longer come to see human rights activists. Or if they come, they ask us not to publish anything about what happened, not to mention them. They tell us, and they are partly right: 'They kill you too. You are unable to defend yourselves, so how can you defend us.' In such circumstances, how can one get an objective picture of the situation? We often receive information about violations,

including disappearances, on the strict condition that we publish nothing."

CLIMATE OF FEAR

Journalists who defy the watchword of unity and "positivism" feel they are taking a big risk. "Even during the war, even when Akhmat Kadyrov was in charge, we were freer than we are now," one of these journalists said. "I take much more care with what I write now, out of concern for my family (...) The threats are so serious, especially when they are pronounced in Chechen, that there is no need to go any further. There is complete impunity. The way the president dares to speak is very frightening. We live outside the law."

Unlike their Dagestani colleagues, journalists are no longer the constant targets of the violence in Chechnya, where at least 81 people had been killed and 103 wounded this year by 14 September. But, paradoxically, in a society traumatized by near 10 years of civil war, the persistence of "low intensity" violence combined with complete impunity for those responsible for human rights abuses has a much more dissuasive effect. Also, the murders of Anna



PHOTOS OF CHECHEN PRESIDENT RAMZAN KADYROV ARE EVERYWHERE. THIS ONE, AT THE AIRPORT, IS EMBELLISHED WITH THE PHRASE "HAPPINESS IN THE PEOPLE'S SERVICE." - DR

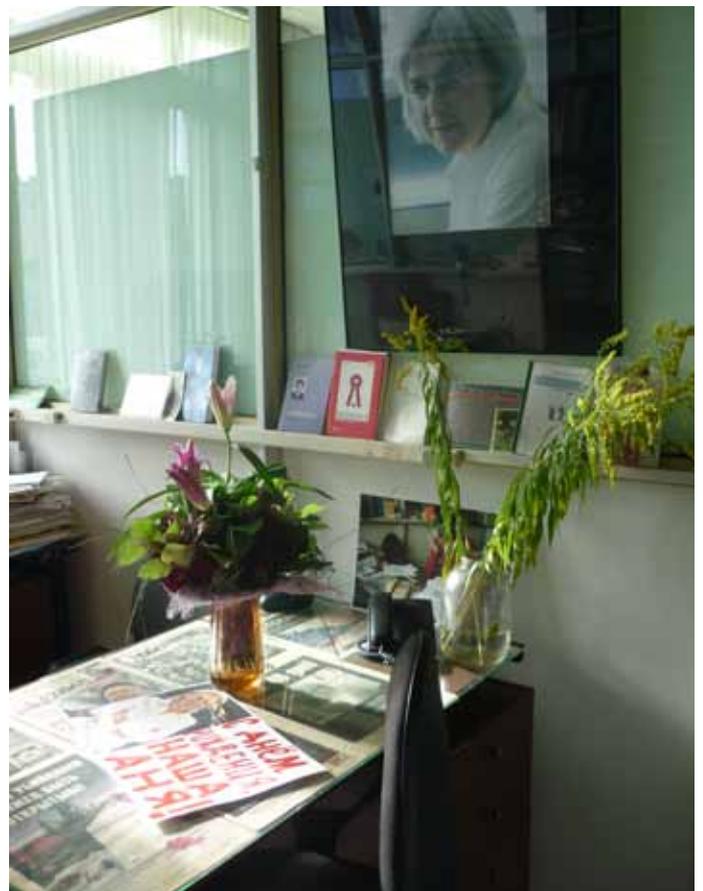
Reporters Without Borders documented several cases of intimidation of independent journalists, including anonymous threats and insults by telephones, police summonses to come and be interrogated, bringing copies of all published articles, and threats against relatives. But such cases seem to be relatively few in number. The widespread self-censorship and acceptance of conformity render them unnecessary.

Journalists are not immune to the fear of division that permeates contemporary Chechen society. When unity is held up as a virtue, straying from the general consensus is readily seen as treason. And, in official ceremonies and speeches, this unity has repeatedly been attributed to the Kadyrovs, father and son, and has come to be totally identified with them.

BEHIND “NEW” CHECHNYA’S SHINY FACADES

A controversy in the Russian press during Reporters Without Borders’ visit highlighted the difficulty of introducing nuances into the Chechen media’s unanimity. An *Izvestiya* journalist caused a storm in Russia by writing a story for the Akhmat Kadyrov anniversary that was full of positive impressions of a Chechnya that had rebuilt and restored order. “The capital of Chechnya has been reconstructed,” he wrote. “The minarets of mosques and the summits of skyscrapers reach for the sky, flowerbeds line the boulevards. You could take your shoes off and walk in white socks along the shiny tarmac and paving stones of the sidewalks.” Many Russian newspapers mocked the “Soviet-style” article for painting such a one-sided picture, but Chechen newspapers including *Groznensky Rabochy* united in defence of its author and condemned the “anti-Chechen campaign.” The new Chechen reality is a whole that you either hate or embrace in its entirety.

A Moscow-based journalist familiar with Chechnya said: “Recognizing the success of the ‘stabilization’ does not dispense with the need to ask about its corollaries and what it cost to impose. On the contrary, the lack of any criticism or mention of the Kadyrov model’s intrinsic problems raises doubts about the official discourse. This is counter-productive for the authorities.” ■



NO ONE USES ANNA POLITKOVSKAYA'S DESK AT NOVAYA GAZETA'S MOSCOW HEADQUARTERS. - DR

REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS

FOR PRESS FREEDOM

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