



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

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INVESTIGATION REPORT - OCTOBER 2011



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 Bihl 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.

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

copies, respectively, at peak periods), which do investigative reporting and are readily critical of the authorities. They often tackle sensitive subjects such as the extent of corruption, abuses by the security forces, the enforced disappearance of members of the civilian population and the demands of the republic's Salafi Muslims.

The print media continue to enjoy a great deal of popularity compared with the broadcast media, which are dominated by the state-owned broadcasters such as *GTRK* and by a number of influential religious TV stations. Use of the Internet is growing rapidly but Dagestan has few blogs so far and the main sources of online news continue to be two news agencies, the state-owned *RIA Dagestan* and privately-owned *Dagestan Times*.

The staff of *Chernovik* and *Novoye Delo* say they are not under any direct pressure. "Some people try to intimidate us but without going very far and without succeeding," *Novoye Delo* editor Marco Shakhbanov said. "Above all, they are businessmen who feel threatened or defamed by our investigative reporting." Referring to the Federal Security Service (FSB), the KGB's successor, and Roskomnadzor, the federal supervisory agency for communications, *Chernovik* editor Biyakay Magomedov said: "We get far fewer threats than in 2008-2009, when the FSB and Roskomnadzor were hounding us. The recognition we received outside of Dagestan, in Russia and the international community, from 2010 onwards was a turning point. The pressure was forced to take a legal form."

A legal battle between *Chernovik* and the prosecutor's office over a July 2008 article headlined "Terrorist No. 1," which quoted Rappani Khalilov, the leader of a rebel group, finally ended in May 2011. The court had no choice but to acquit the newspaper and its journalists of inciting hatred after federal forensic experts in Moscow said there were no grounds for a prosecution. The acquittal was hailed as a positive development by the media.

"The prosecutions of newspapers are more bizarre than really dangerous," *Dosh* correspondent Natalia Krainova said. "The judges know how far they can go." Former *Chernovik* editor Nadira Isayeva even said: "It's the president who fears the press rather than the reverse."

Shakhbanov of *Novoye Delo*, which is currently involved in three lawsuits, said: "The lawsuits are a nuisance and take up valuable time, but do not affect how outspoken we are. We win about one case in two, and in most cases, the damages sought are symbolic. What most plaintiffs want is the publication of a retraction that restores their honour and reputation."

Presidential press attaché Zubayru Zubayruyev acknowledged that the prosecutor's office does not work "in a professional manner." He added: "Personally, I advise the president not to prosecute newspapers. Even if they are part of the radical opposition, you should let them speak."

COLLATERAL VICTIMS OF SURGING VIOLENCE

With more than 15 journalists murdered since 2000 (at least five of them in connection with their work), Dagestan makes a significant contribution to Russia's rating as a dangerous country for the media. Journalists are often the victims of very violent attacks. *Chernovik* photographer Magomedislam Khanmagomedov was attacked on 2 May in the southern city of Derbent. Yakhya Magomedov, the editor of the Avar-language version of *Assalam*, was gunned down at the entrance to his brother's home in Kokrek, a village near the northern city of Khasavyurt, on 9 May.

Those responsible for attacking or killing journalists are never punished. None of the murders of journalists has been solved. The question would produce a smile in the newspapers visited by Reporters Without Borders. "It would be wrong to say that these murders are not solved," Shakhbanov said. "Most of them are. It's just that no one is arrested, no one is brought to justice."

Dagestani journalists play down the impact of this violence on their work. The staff at *Chernovik* and *Novoye Delo*, like the staff at *Dosh* and *Assalam*, say they do not feel particularly targeted and liken the violence against journalists to the violence against the civilian population in general.

"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 "boyeve" (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 indepen-

ence on the part of advertisers. “The economy and the government are one and the same. There are no independent entrepreneurs. Resources are monopolized by rival poles of government that defend their own interests.” The existence of real competition at least ensures that advertising market does not dry up altogether. Even if newspapers deny that there is any interference in their editorial policies, collusion between businessmen and politicians leaves a permanent suspicion hanging over the privately-owned press and spotting “commissioned articles” seems to have become a national sport among readers.

SMEARS AND INTIMIDATION

The media do not escape Dagestan’s increasingly poisonous climate and social disintegration. Journalists are very divided; they suspect each other; they tend to think that the others have been bought. Government officials and opposition members alike try to read between the lines of individual articles in an attempt to identify who or what was behind it. A “radical blogger’s style” might be perceived in one article. Another might be identified as reciprocation for the placement of an ad.

Honour is important in Dagestani society and rumours spreading like wildfire can be very effective methods of retaliation or intimidation. “Being shamed, or having one’s reputation attacked is worse than being shot,” said Svetlana Isayeva. “We are accused of being spies, agents of the west and of being mainly funded by foreign subsidies.” Her NGO, Dagestan Mothers, which supports the families of disappeared persons, like *Chernovik*, which interviewed her, have been the targets of a vast smear campaign to portray them as the accomplices of terrorists. She has always had difficulty recruiting staff and has not managed to rent an apartment to shelter the wives of people who have disappeared or who are rumoured to have joined the insurgents. Last year, her NGO’s premises were torched and all of its archives were destroyed.

Anyone who criticizes the security forces or accuses them for helping to destabilize Dagestan quickly becomes the target of rumours. The rumours sometimes get quite violent. This was the case in September 2009, when a hit-list of “leading figures to be gunned down” circulated in Makhachkala. A group claiming to be the relatives of mur-

dered officials called for revenge to be taken on leading human rights activists and independent journalists regarded as the accomplices of the terrorists. An investigation into the hit-list drew a blank.

At the start of 2011, the rumour mill targeted then *Chernovik* editor Nadira Isayeva, who ended up leaving the newspaper under a cloud. Simultaneously accused of being an Islamist and a loose woman, she was the victim of an intense smear campaign. Suggestive SMS message supposedly sent by her were posted online, while her relationship with her husband, who is in prison on an “insurrection” charge, was closely scrutinized. “Over the past two years, the situation has really deteriorated, but in an insidious and invisible way,” she said. “Fear has taken hold. Those who want to silence us or intimidate us are now using ‘dirty’ methods. They spread rumours to undermine trust. The quality of journalism is tending to decline. As the same time, the interior ministry and special services are taking more and more interest in the media and are manoeuvring more and more skilfully.”

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 is do 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 Zubayruyev, 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 Zubayruyev, 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 Zubayruyev, 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 do-

minated 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.” Zubayruyev 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. ■

“EVERYTHING FINE IN CHECHNYA” UNANIMOUSLY “POSITIVE” MEDIA

On TV, in the newsstands and at the House of the Press, Reporters Without Borders found a wide range of publications and news outlets in Grozny, but also a striking similarity in their content. Examples of Chechnya's rapid recovery, the government's effective work, and praise of President Ramzan Kadyrov and his late father, Akhmat Kadyrov, were everywhere in the media. During Reporters Without Borders' visit, the newspapers were still ringing with tributes to the elder Kadyrov for the 60th anniversary of his birth on 23 August. The enthusiasm was such that a new regional newspaper called *Put' Kadyrova* (*Kadyrov's Path*) was created in the mountainous district of Itum-Kala.

The path taken by Chechnya is portrayed everywhere in a resolutely optimistic light. There is universal unanimity about the system established by President Kadyrov with the help of Moscow's petrodollars – restoration of relative order and rapid reconstruction of the republic's infrastructure in exchange for complete domination by the ruling faction. Nowhere in the Chechnya-based media could Reporters Without Borders find any trace of the concerns of human rights organizations about the corollaries of this consensus: the total absence of political competition, arbitrary behaviour by the security forces, large-scale corruption, submission to puritan Islam and a personality cult.



THE “NEW GROZNY” – THE CENTRAL MOSQUE AND A BUILDING UNDER CONSTRUCTION IN “GROZNY CITY.” - DR

“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 policies, 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 *bojeviki* [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 FRONT PAGE - DR

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.”

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."



"HOUSE OF THE PRESS" IN GROZNY - DR

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.

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

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."



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

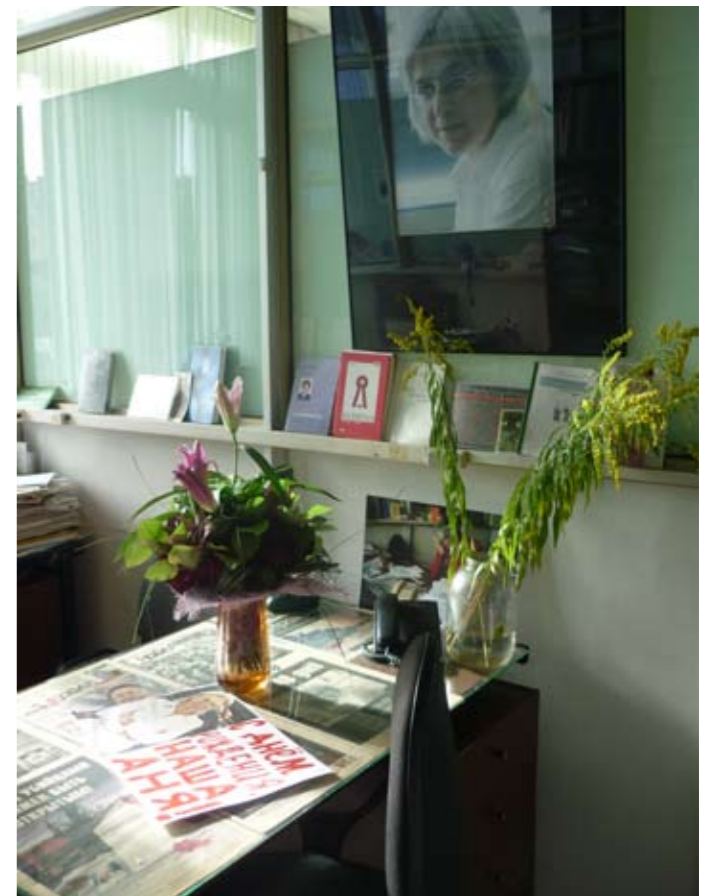
Reporters Without Borders documented several cases of intimidation of independent journalists, including anonymous threats and insults by telephones, police summonses to come and be interrogated, bringing copies of all published articles, and threats against relatives. But such cases seem to be relatively 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

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