

The image of the terrorist threat in the official Russian press: the Moscow theatre crisis (2002)  
and the Beslan hostage crisis (2004)

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Abstract

This article explores the evolution of the official Russian discourse on Chechnya during two major recent terrorist acts: the Dubrovka Theatre crisis in Moscow (2002), and the Beslan school siege (2004). By tracing the changes in the official image of the 'threat', this article challenges the assumption that this discourse has remained constant in the last few years. Instead, it characterises the dynamic of change at times of terrorist acts and beyond as an ongoing attempt by Russian officials to remove the Chechen issue from the political agenda, which precludes a real dialogue about or solution to the ongoing Chechen crisis.

High profile terrorist acts in Russia have punctuated Russo – Chechen relations in recent years. A number of analyses of these acts have already been produced, with regards to the political and crisis management aspects of the development of the Russo – Chechen relations (Alexseev 2002; Stepanova 2004; Dolnik & Pilch 2003; Lynch 2005). However, less work has been published on the presentation of these events in the Russian official media. Since official political commentary on the subject of Chechnya has been curtailed since 1999, media analyses of such events have in themselves become important information sources and at times key turning points in Russian governmental discourse on Chechnya and terrorism in Russia.

This article explores the evolution of the official Russian discourse on Chechnya between 2002 and 2004. By tracing the changes in the official image of the 'threat', the assumption that this discourse has remained constant in recent years is challenged. Rather, it is argued, there has been an ongoing attempt by Russian officials to remove the Chechen issue from the political agenda, and to preclude a real dialogue about or solution to the ongoing Chechen crisis. Two case studies have been especially selected for comparison: the Moscow Dubrovka Theatre hostage taking during a performance of the musical Nord-Ost (2002) and the Beslan school siege (2004). These were chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, these two events were significant both for the national and political consciousness in Russia. Secondly, although coverage of Chechnya in the official media has decreased significantly in recent years, this was not the case during these two events. The occurrence of such terrorist acts meant that the authorities had to present their interpretation of events, defend their policies both in the region and in general, and explain how and why these two events could take place. Thus, a large amount of official material appeared in the Russian press, facilitating an extensive analysis of the two events and the broader official Russian discourse in this period.

The aim here is to examine the presentation of the 'threat' during these two acts of terrorism in the Russian official media and shed light on the official discourse on Chechnya between 2002 and 2004. The term 'threat' here is used to consider ways in which Russian official discourse defined the source of terrorism in Russia. Some of the key questions, which this official discourse tried to tackle, were: who had committed

such acts, and why; what this meant for Russian security; and how Russia should try to deal with the perpetrators of acts of terrorism.

Russian official discourse on Chechnya since 1999 has often been characterised in relation to the language of the war on terror. However, this approach presents a much too static image of this discourse. As will be argued below, by 2002 Russia had entered a new phase in its relations with Chechnya and had begun to advocate a policy of normalisation in the region (which argued that the situation in Chechnya was returning to normal and large-scale fighting had ceased). Simultaneously, on the discursive level the Chechen issue was being actively removed from the political agenda as the source and reason for the ongoing occurrence of terrorist acts on Russian territory. This was an important shift in the discourse, which continued in 2004. Moreover, shifts in the official discourse during these two terrorist acts also occurred as a result of an attempt to deflect repeated criticisms of the official position and official conduct during the attacks. A close analysis of the reports from Rossiiskaya gazeta suggests that the image of the 'threat' shifted from being centred on Chechnya to a diffused, less clearly defined danger emanating from international Islamic terrorists targeting the whole of the North Caucasus and threatening the very existence of the Russian Federation. However, solutions for resolving this 'threat' did not appear to have moved at the same rate as the remodelling of the discourse on this 'threat' in the official Russian media.

First, a brief background to Russo – Chechen relations will be provided, followed by an outline of the two terror attacks. I then examine the different aspects of the image of the 'threat', such as the nature of the 'threat', its location, the magnitude of this danger and the solutions offered to curtail it. The sources for this study have primarily been the main state newspaper, Rossiiskaya gazeta and official speeches reproduced in other media sources. Although Rossiiskaya gazeta is the official newspaper of the Russian government, it remains a part of the free press and may deviate from the official line; therefore I indicate whether an opinion is expressed by a commentator from Rossiiskaya gazeta or by a Russian official.

Background: a brief history of Russian – Chechen relations

Unlike some of its neighbours, Chechnya, as a Muslim region situated in the North Caucasus, has traditionally resisted assimilation into the Russian empire since the eighteenth century. In 1991, as the USSR was collapsing, Chechnya declared its independence from Russia. The current conflict began in 1994 and has continued since, with a brief respite between 1996 and 1999. Since 2001 the Russian government has argued that large-scale fighting has ceased in this region, and it has begun its policy of 'normalisation' in Chechnya, aiming to transfer administrative control to the Chechens. However, hostilities have continued since then, although some debate has emerged in the last few years as to whether or not this can still be called a war, because organised fighting has decreased to a significant degree since 2005/06.

Chechnya is a highly mythologised region in traditional Russian imagination. This stems to a large extent from the writings of nineteenth-century Russian poets and novelists, who presented Chechnya in a romanticised way, portraying the Chechen

people both as lone and noble fighters, and as 'savages' (Trenin et al. 2004, p. 65). Since 1991 the rise in racial prejudice in Russia has led to a renewal of this racialisation of the Caucasus, described as the 'other' in the official press (Roman 2002, p. 31). The re-start of the conflict in 1999 was furthermore portrayed as an anti-terrorist operation, rather than a secessionist conflict (as had been the case with the first conflict in 1994 – 96), and this added another dimension to the official Russian discourse about this region. In 2001 the blurring of Chechnya and terrorism into a single phenomenon reached a new level when President Putin aligned Russia with the American-led war on terror following the 9/11 attacks in the US on 11 September 2001. Putin noted that What happened today underlines one more time the importance of the Russian proposal to unite international forces in the fight against terrorism. That is the plague of the twenty-first century. Russia directly knows what terrorism is and for that reason we understand the feelings of the American people. (Mereu 2001)

This move merged Russia's domestic problems of Chechnya and terrorism with the worldwide phenomenon of the war on terror, thus shifting the focus by moving the nature of the threat to Russian security away from the specific context of Chechnya. From this point on, all terrorist actions in Russia were presented in the official media through the prism of the language of the war on terror.

At the same time as Chechnya was being equated more and more with problems of international terrorism, the media coverage of developments within the republic and the North Caucasus in general has been severely curtailed since 1999. This was partly due to increasing state control over the reporting of this conflict, primarily on television, but also because the region had become very dangerous for reporters.

Furthermore, as Oates and White (2003) argue, a general 'Chechen fatigue' had set in among the Russian public, whose interest in this issue had significantly dwindled since the first conflict. As a result, little information has been coming through about events on the ground in Chechnya, and the official position has come to dominate, especially on television and in certain newspapers, such as *Rossiiskaya gazeta*. Many journalists who reported on the first Chechen war have since changed focus and prefer to distance themselves from their past involvement with the region. Only a few newspapers, such as *Novaya gazeta*, and journalists like Andrei Babitsky and Anna Politkovskaya, continued to report regularly about events in Chechnya. However, these were isolated pockets of information, and print media in general have seen a significant drop in readership after 1991, with most people receiving their information from television.

The two chosen case studies have been covered in detail on Radio Liberty and a brief outline of the events will suffice here. The Moscow Dubrovka Theatre siege began on 23 October 2002, when 53 armed men and women seized the theatre during a performance of the first Russian musical *Nord-Ost*. This siege with 979 hostages lasted 58 hours and ended with the death of 128 hostages, largely during the rescue on 26 October (Dolnik & Pilch 2003, p. 581). The storming of the building by Russian special counter-terrorism forces and the controversial use of a gas, which overwhelmed both terrorists and hostages, became a contentious issue in the aftermath of the rescue. The Beslan school siege unfolded far away from Moscow in a small town in North Ossetia. The major differences between the two attacks were that Beslan was part of a

wider terrorist campaign in August and September 2004,<sup>4</sup> and that the target was a school, involving large numbers of children.<sup>5</sup> On 1 September 2004, 38 armed rebels entered School Number One during an assembly celebrating the new academic year. The militants held 1,200 hostages, including teachers, pupils, parents, siblings, relatives and friends, in a small school gymnasium, and mined the school building. On 3 September, Special Forces stormed the building after a bomb appeared to have exploded inside and hostages had begun to escape through a hole in the building. In total 300 people died, half of them children; 200 were missing, and many more were wounded. Both of these terrorist acts came to be seen as great tragedies in recent Russian history.

The presentation of the threat in the official Russian media

One of the major themes of the second Chechen conflict has been the government's attempt to portray it as an anti-terrorist operation in which the federal forces were fighting the threat of international Islamic terrorism rather than secessionism. This was the overarching conceptual prism through which most of the current events in Chechnya and those relating to it, such as the terrorist attacks in 2002 and 2004, were explained.

The fusion between international Islamic terrorist movements, Russia's domestic problems in Chechnya and terrorism into a 'single phenomenon' (Trenin et al. 2004, p. 79) can be found not only in the official media but also at the highest political levels. For example in 2004, Yuri Tchaika, the Russian Justice Minister, characterised this threat as an 'invisible threat without borders' (Yamshanov 2004). The influence of this danger on the regional situation was emphasised, particularly when on 14 September 2004 Rossiiskaya gazeta reported Putin as saying that it was in the North Caucasus 'that ideologists of international terrorism are particularly active'. This suggested that the source of the terrorist threat was external and that Chechnya and the North Caucasus were used as nothing more than bases from which foreign terrorists could operate and destabilise the rest of Russia. This was also implied when Rossiiskaya gazeta wrote that terrorism in Russia 'is linked with the worldwide terrorist Islamic movement . . . and Chechen separatists are nothing more than errand boys for them' (Zakatnova 2004). Therefore, it was international terrorism and not Chechnya or the North Caucasus that was portrayed as the main source of the 'threat'.

The official discourse also highlighted the involvement of fundamentalist Muslims in terrorist acts, re-emphasising the now-familiar discourse of Islamic fundamentalism operating in Russia as elsewhere. In 2002 the specific focus on the 'black widows' (female terrorists) involved in hostage taking seemed to draw similarities between events in Chechnya and the phenomenon of Islamic suicide bombers in Palestine (Russell 2005a, p. 112). In this respect, two points are worth noting. First, the media's emphasis on the external appearance of Islam, such as long descriptions of the Islamic dress of the 'black widows' in 2002, or the beards of the male terrorists, betrayed the lack of any in-depth consideration of the nature of Islamic belief in Chechnya or the North Caucasus. Second, most of the debate on Islam focused on macro-level global developments, such as the perceived 'clash of civilisations' in the modern world,

between the progressive modernity of the 'civilised' world and the 'terrorists, slave traders, figures with medieval morals and medieval lifestyles' and 'backward' Islamic world (Tretyakov 2004). This, it was claimed, was a fundamental clash, which could only be resolved by one side winning this battle. Rossiiskaya gazeta went on to suggest that the aim of these Islamic terrorists was 'to make their own type of Islam as the one and only religion in the world' (Radzhikhovsky 2004). Whilst certain Islamic leaders in Chechnya may have seen the Russo – Chechen conflict in such religious terms, the demands of the terrorists themselves during these events in fact consistently focused on the removal of Russian troops from Chechnya.<sup>6</sup> The secular nature of the terrorist demands was often ignored in the official media. Instead, their Islamic beliefs were emphasised. For example, Kozlova and Sharov emphasised in Rossiiskaya gazeta in October 2004 that what is mainly known about these terrorists is that 'these are serious Wahhabists' (Kozlova & Sharov 2002).

The actual extent of involvement of international terrorists in Chechnya is a contentious issue, and Stuart Horsman suggests that one should not over-emphasise such links (2005, p. 203). Wilhelmson argues that the Russian authorities tried to consistently portray the Chechen conflict as part of increasing world-wide Islamisation, whereas in fact the source of instability and friction in relation to Chechnya remained domestic rather than international (Wilhelmsen 2005, p. 48). Independent newspapers continued to focus on the local sources of instability for Russia. Malashenko (2002), in *Vremya*, characterised the interaction between Chechnya and radical Islam as 'seeds [that] fell on fertile ground', and argued that the core of the instability and problems in that region were local and due to the previous Chechen war and secessionism rather than part of international Islamic movements. However, no such discussions were present in the official media. Perhaps this would have been politically problematic, and could have undermined the state's policy of Chechenisation. This policy, it was hoped in 2002 and even in 2004, would stabilise the situation in Chechnya by handing over the running of local affairs to pro-Russian Chechen groups. According to the official position, this should have reduced the 'threat' to Russia's security. However, although at the time of writing Chechnya is now under the command of the Chechen authorities, most notably Ramzan Kadyrov, the situation on the ground is still far from stable, as shown in the report by the Russian based NGO Memorial.

Presenting terrorism as a homogeneous 'threat' allowed the official discourse to associate the previous, and now awkward, Chechen administration (which had been democratically elected by the Chechen people in 1997, but which had gone into opposition since the resumption of hostilities in 1999) with the idea of an international terrorist threat. The attempt to de-legitimise the head of that administration, Aslan Maskhadov, was obvious when Yuri Bogomolov wrote in Rossiiskaya gazeta on 16 September 2004, that 'war is ongoing for the political survival of Maskhadov and Basaev'. This quashed any suggestion that the previous administration had been fighting for higher moral or national reasons, such as the Chechen people or independence. The media also tried to use the Nord-Ost and Beslan incidents to counteract the repeated suggestion in certain domestic and international circles that Russia should negotiate with Maskhadov. As noted by Bogomolov in the same article, 'what is today happening in the Caucasus is not a national-liberation war, because its

ideals are buried under the victims of war'. This comment also fell in line with the official and consistent position of Putin's administration since 1999 not to negotiate with terrorists and refuse to accept the second Chechen conflict as a war of independence. Thus the official media not only maintained their firm line that there would be no negotiations with terrorists, but also re-enforced this position by attempting to de-legitimise Maskhadov's government, the obvious potential bloc with which the Russians could negotiate at the time.

Crucially this image of the threat as a homogeneous force did not differentiate between different motivations for opposition to Russia's policy in Chechnya or the North Caucasus. All opponents were presented as terrorists. By contrast, Lord Judd,<sup>9</sup> in his report to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), identified three distinct groups with different aims: Al Qaeda extremists committed to jihad; opportunistic criminals with vested material interests in the war; and political leaders who, although misguided, justifiably desired a secure political and cultural identity for Chechens, whom they saw as humiliated and oppressed (Blandy 2003, p. 48). Commentators in other newspapers also highlighted the importance of local issues. For example, Patrick Cockburn in *Novaya gazeta*, argued that it was 'precisely the cruelty of the Russian occupation, and not the link between the fighters and Al Qaeda which maintains this rebellion', suggesting that fighters were largely motivated by the actions of the Russian troops on the ground rather than international terrorism. Another important theme in the independent media was the extent to which instability in Chechnya, and therefore in Russia, was the result of corruption and shady business dealings on all sides. Thus, for example, Semen Novoprudsky (2004) wrote that this conflict had turned into a 'business', involving not only terrorists, but many important people. The opposition media was also more open to the possibility of negotiations with the Chechens, especially Maskhadov, as a way to resolve tensions between Russia and Chechnya. For example, Yuri Ryzhov suggested in *Novaya gazeta* that the way to prevent such tragedies from re-occurring was to 'negotiate with that legitimate part of Chechen leadership with which it is still possible to do so' (Gordienko 2002).

No discussion of the local situation in Chechnya, the effect the Russian operations had on the local populations, the problems with all-round corruption or the possibility to negotiate with the Chechen leadership were seen in the official media. Russell presents this as an 'apparent paradox' in Russia's war on terror, which enabled Russia to label its opponents as terrorists, whilst continuing its own special operations on the ground. He argues that such 'wars', against terrorism, crime, or poverty, follow different rules to normal warfare. Classifying the target as a societal problem, rather than a geographical entity, allowed the state to choose who was a terrorist, and bypass traditional rules of warfare that are obligatory on both sides in territorial conflicts (Russell 2005b, p. 240).

The spatial shift of the locus of the threat

Although the overarching presentation of the threat during Dubrovka and Beslan was international Islamic terrorism and this had remained consistent between 2002 and 2004, the specifics of what made up this 'threat' shifted considerably in this same

period. Primarily the key change was the spatial locus of this threat, shifting from Chechnya between 1999 and 2003 to the entire North Caucasus by 2004. Increasing instability in the North Caucasus, at times related to Islamic groups, has of course, been well documented in the last few years. A series of incidences and raids across the North Caucasus occurred during President Putin's second term in office, such as the Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria, raids in October 2005,<sup>11</sup> and smaller clashes between federal forces and alleged Islamic fighters even outside the North Caucasus region such as in Stavropol Krai in February 2006.<sup>12</sup> The change in rhetoric, although partly a reflection of the changing realities on the ground, was also part of the broader trend of removing Chechnya from the political agenda, especially during another terrorist attack.

In 2002 President Putin still talked about the problem in Chechnya, stating that 'they [the terrorists] and those who stand behind them, are precisely scared of the future . . . stabilisation in the Chechen republic' (Ptichkin 2002). In the same vein the discourse isolating the 'bad' Chechen 'fighters' from the 'good', 'ordinary' Chechens, who were prepared to collaborate with Russia, was widely seen in Rossiiskaya gazeta in 2002 (Sharov 2002). This presented Chechnya both as a place used by foreign terrorists to destabilise both the region and the country as a whole, and as a source of danger due to those Chechens who had allied themselves with foreign fighters. This appeared to create tension in the official discourse about the nature of the 'threat'. Although overall, international terrorists were presented as the source of the threat, extensive discussions about Chechnya as the location of the threat appeared to suggest that it was, in fact, Chechnya that was the source of the danger.

However, by 2004 the focus of the official press discussion had shifted to 'the situation in the North Caucasus'<sup>13</sup> rather than Chechnya, and most of the instability in the discourse had disappeared. Whilst the image of the North Caucasus as a victim of terror and a base of terror was being created, Chechnya effectively disappeared from the discursive lexicon. Whereas after the Dubrovka siege President Putin personally took part in public and publicised meetings with Chechen representatives and delegates,<sup>14</sup> no such meetings were organised after the Beslan siege. In fact, Sergei Lavrov acknowledged this change in an interview with foreign journalists after the Beslan siege, noting that: 'as to the criminals, neither the President Vladimir Putin, nor other officials, said it was an attack by Chechens' (Lavrov 2004).

The removal of Chechnya from the official discourse during the Beslan siege could be seen in the speeches delivered by the president. In his October 2002 address to the governing parliament faction, President Putin highlighted the importance of continued stabilisation of Chechnya, stating that 'despite all the pain which we are experiencing in Chechnya, nevertheless stabilisation is taking place'.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, in his speech at the enlarged government meeting with the government and the heads of the regions in September 2004, Putin's focus was on the North Caucasus, when he stated that 'in my address to the people on 4 September, I also spoke of the necessity of increasing security in the North Caucasus. . . As you know, the socio-economic situation in the North Caucasus region is deplorable'.<sup>16</sup> Crucially, in the same speech Chechnya is referred to alongside other North Caucasus republics: 'In republics such as Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan, it [unemployment] is a truly mass phenomenon. The average

monthly income in the South Federal district is one and a half times lower than the average for Russia'.<sup>17</sup> Chechnya therefore was no longer presented as a special case in Russian politics, but just another part of the North Caucasus. No further reference was made to the 'good' or 'bad' Chechens or the specific situation in that republic. Instead, the North Caucasus became the place that was being used by international terrorists to destabilise Russia. This was not because of any politically motivated factors on the part of the local population, but because of its poor economic situation, which foreign groups were exploiting. As President Putin stressed in September 2004, such socio-economic problems have led to the North Caucasus becoming 'rich soil for extremist propaganda'.<sup>18</sup> The issue of Chechen independence, secession and political demands had in turn been resolved in the official media by simply not being mentioned in 2004.

Crucially, the opposition discourse did not witness the same shift, and generally continued to identify Chechnya as the source, and not just the location, of instability. For example, writing in *Vremya Novostei*, Semen Novoprudsky (2004) discussed the roots of the 'Chechen', not 'North Caucasian', conflict. Some opposition media in 2004 actually blamed President Putin for failing to fulfil his promise to keep Russia safe and resolve the Chechen issue. Ryzhkov, a liberal member of the Duma, was quoted in *Nezavisimaya gazeta* as arguing that 'the president was given a contract to keep order in the country and to safeguard people's security. Now we see that this contract has been violated' (Ryzhkov 2004). Ryzhkov also rejected the discourse on international terrorism suggesting that 'this is an utterly lame excuse and cannot be taken seriously' and questioned whether the president would fundamentally alter his policy on Chechnya. Thus Chechnya continued to play a key political role in the discourse of the independent media in 2004.

Although on the discursive level there was a continued referral to the problems in the North Caucasus rather than Chechnya, on the policy level the Russian response to the situation in Chechnya continued to be markedly different from that in the North Caucasus. In 2004, sweeping operations targeting insurgents, 'Islamic terrorists', and their sympathisers, as well as travel restrictions, were still primarily being deployed in Chechnya only, and not in the rest of the North Caucasus. Although the epicentre of operations on both the insurgents and the federal forces widened by 2005 and 2006, this was not yet the case in 2004. Thus this change in rhetoric is perhaps best characterised as a government attempt to remove from the political agenda Chechnya as a problem it had failed to resolve, rather than acknowledging the changing realities in the North Caucasus.

#### The level of the threat

The level of the 'threat' to Russia, as presented in the official media, also increased exponentially between 2002 and 2004, suggesting either that the official presentation of the threat continued to evolve with the changing circumstances and events on the ground, or that the official media was trying to portray this 'threat' as a new phenomenon. However, no mention was made in the official press that the Russian authorities or the presidency were in any way to blame for the occurrence of the two terrorist attacks or that the Russian state had failed to resolve the Chechen issue as



promised in 1999.

In 2002, Rossiiskaya gazeta still presented the threat as a manageable and surmountable danger, even if such terrorism was said to be 'becoming more arrogant and cruel' (Vorob'ev 2002). The aims of these terrorists were portrayed as very specific, for example to get attention for their cause among the international community. This was the view suggested by the Deputy Chair of the Council of Ministers of ChechenoIngushetia, Lema Kasaev, who was quoted in Rossiiskaya gazeta as saying that 'the terrorists are, above all, trying to create more external impact, they are not working for Russia, but mainly for the international community' (Sharov 2002). The refusal to concede to terrorist demands, unlike during the 1995 and 1996 terrorist acts,<sup>19</sup> was above all presented as a major victory for the Russian government. In October 2002 Rossiiskaya gazeta quoted Kichin as saying that the Dubrovka Theatre crisis was meant to become Russia's new Stalingrad,

when a self-confident and arrogant enemy understood for the first time its defeat and Russia could once again feel pride in itself and its people . . . Today for the first time in recent time, we felt a sense of pride for our country and our people. (Vorob'ev 2002)

This sense of triumphalism was repeated again and again in the official press for some weeks after the end of the siege. On 31 October 2002 Senator Vladimir Kulakov was quoted in an interview with Rossiiskaya gazeta in support of the actions of the special forces during the siege, noting that 'of course one of the main aims of the terrorists was to humiliate Russia. Those who were involved in the rescue operation did not let international terrorism bring Russia to its knees' (Babakin 2002). In this way the <sup>19</sup>In June 1995 Chechen insurgents took hundreds of hostages in a small town of Budennovsk in southern Russia. Over 100 people died during the rescue operation. A similar incident took place six months later in Dagestani city of Kizlyar in January 1996. This time, Chechen rebels under the command of Salman Raduyev took 3,000 people hostage in a local hospital.

A particularly important feature of the official media in 2002 was the attempt to counteract the widespread criticism in the independent media about how the state chose to deal with this threat during acts of terrorism. The main thrust of criticism concerned the actions of the officials during the rescue operation. Pankov and Vershov (2002) argued in *Vremya Novostei* that the storming was not triggered by the actions of the terrorists, as had been suggested by the authorities, but had been planned well in advance, as was the use of the gas; they characterised the rescue operation as a 'tragedy' and not a success from the point of view of the hostages.<sup>20</sup> Valeri Yakov in *Novye Izvestiya* also characterised this moment as one when the authorities took 'revenge on everyone, terrorists and hostages', and asks why the authorities did not create the necessary facilities for administering the antidote to the rescued hostages once the gas had been used (Yakov 2002).

An acknowledgment and response to such critics was given in the official media which argued that the officials had acted professionally and that the terrorist threat had been dealt with successfully during the Dubrovka crisis (Yamshanov 2002; Sel'tsovsky 2002). Rather than offering articles by its own journalists, Rossiiskaya gazeta focused instead on substantiating the official position by featuring a large

number of interviews with experts in order to justify the use of the gas. Experts, such as the assistant deputy of the Ministry of Health, Alexander Zharov, or the director of the Moscow Health service, Andrei Sel'tsovsky, presented detailed, often scientifically led explanations to justify state actions (Krasnopolskaya 2002). In Rossiiskaya gazeta, Sel'tsovsky supported the official line by noting that the authorities looked at 'every possible way to minimise casualties' and suggested that the high number of casualties was not the fault of the special services but because 'you have to take into account that by that point there were no healthy people in the hall'. The blame for the large number of victims was therefore put firmly on the terrorists, the conditions in which hostages had been held and their poor health, thus diverting attention away from the actions of the authorities and trying to neutralise criticism expressed in other media. Rossiiskaya gazeta provided far less space for interviews with hostages and their relatives than other newspapers, because, as shown by those published in Kommersant, these often contradicted the official line (Allenova et al. 2004). In this way, the official narrative, through the medium of newspapers like Rossiiskaya gazeta, became involved in a contest to assert its presentation of events against mounting criticism in the independent media.

However, the recurrence of a terrorist attack on such a large scale in 2004 shattered any mood of optimism in the official Russian press about the possibility of defeating this danger in the near future. In 2004 President Putin was quoted in Rossiiskaya gazeta as saying that this danger was a war which 'do[es] not end quickly' (Yamshanov 2004). Whereas in 2002 the threat was still presented as localised and manageable, by 2004 it was perceived as much larger and all-engulfing. Rossiiskaya gazeta reported that 'those who carry out terrorist acts want the disintegration of Russia'.

However, as Coalson (2004) astutely notes, the change in rhetoric in 2004 was perhaps not only a reflection of the actual growing and widening instability on the ground (now including most of the North Caucasus), but primarily a way for the Russian government to deflect the blame for failing to prevent terrorist attacks by presenting the threat and groups organising such attacks as so dangerous, monumental and new that they could not be dealt with immediately. Indeed, by 2004 even the Russian public seemed to share this particular interpretation of the danger faced by Russia. Opinion polls in September 2004 indicated that most people expected such attacks to continue (Konygina 2004). Thus, according to official discourse, by 2004 the threat had grown both in terms of its location, its source and its size. However, such shifts cannot be seen in the policies that the Russian government proposed in order to tackle the threat.

Measures proposed to tackle this 'threat'

Bhatia (2005, p. 17) argues that the discourse of the war on terror presents terrorist attacks as 'a matter of a pure "evil", with no history or reason', which one cannot negotiate with. This was essentially the position taken by the Russian official discourse in 2002 and 2004. Any concessions to the terrorists, both during the terrorist attacks and in general, such as a withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya, would, according to Tretyakov, lead to a terrorist takeover of the entire North Caucasus, the collapse of Russia and the triumph of violence and death (Tretyakov 2002). Halbach (2002, p. 6) suggests that the treaty of Khassavjurt, ending the first Chechen war, was

regarded as treason by certain groups of the Russian elite, and should not be repeated. As noted earlier, the issue of negotiations also became contentious in the Russian and Western press, and the government used particularly emotive and defensive language to reinforce its position. For example, Yuri Ushakov (2004), the Russian Ambassador to the US, wrote in *The Washington Post* that 'child-killers come closer to Osama Bin Laden . . . It is unimaginable that any US administration would ever negotiate with Al Qaeda'.

The solutions offered to overcome this danger on the ground were both domestic and international. Whereas the image of the threat evolved between 2002 and 2004, the thinking behind how to deal with it in practice remained the same. Domestically, the focus was on finding a political solution for regional socio-economic problems, which were said to be making Chechnya and the North Caucasus fertile ground for international terrorism. In 2002, the official discourse still championed the Chechenisation programme. According to Borisov, 'if Chechens feel that they are really returning to rebuild houses, that conditions are being created for peaceful work, then the stream of those who want to go to the mountains [i.e. join the terrorists] will dry out' (Borisov 2002). The state proposed extending this programme by holding a referendum on a new Chechen constitution, fresh presidential elections, and implementing Russian laws in Chechnya. In 2004 the focus moved towards bringing in key political figures from outside. This took the form of a Special Federal Commission on the North Caucasus, led by the new plenipotentiary envoy to the Southern Federal District, Dmitri Kozak; the re-establishment of the Ministry for Regions and Ethnicity; and the launch of an integrated security system in the region under the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The aim was to improve the socio-economic situation in the whole of the North Caucasus.

Despite changes in rhetoric and emphasis, both of these measures had been tried in the past and had not succeeded. Already by 2002, Russia's reconstruction policy in Chechnya had largely failed. Chechnya continued to suffer from an unemployment rate of 80%, and 80% of housing had been destroyed during the fighting and had not been rebuilt. Halbach (2002, p. 4) argues that the Russian authorities lacked the necessary local support for policies to succeed. Nor was this achieved by 2004, as the assassinations of the Chechen President Kadyrov in 2004 and subsequent acts of terrorism in Moscow and elsewhere showed. Dov Lynch (2005, pp. 159 – 60) also notes that most of the sub-parts of the post-Beslan plan had been tried previously and failed.

Vitally, the continuous omission of some of the aspects of this conflict from official discourse has hampered efforts to find a workable solution. First, neither in 2002 or 2004 did the government address the issue of the Russian 'sweeping' operations in Chechnya, such as Alkhan Kala in June 2001 or Semovodsk in July 2001, or the trauma associated with these for local populations (Human Rights Watch 2002, pp. 13 – 46). Secondly, governmental discourse overlooked the war's effect on the new generation in Chechnya. According to Aslambek Aslakhanov, Duma Deputy for Chechnya, the young people in Chechnya 'grew up under the rule that whoever has the greatest number of guns and armed people behind him is right. They live under their own traditions and customs' (Feifer 2002), and were now actively participating in

terrorist attacks against Russia. It was this lack of careful analysis of developments on the ground which resulted in the persistent failure of the Russian policy in Chechnya and the North Caucasus.

Internationally, after each terrorist attack the official media commended the state's measures. The Dubrovka and Beslan crises were also used in an attempt to alleviate Western criticism of Russian actions and to show to the Russian people (and possible domestic opposition) that the state's actions were supported by the West. In this way, foreign charitable collections and letters of support played a prominent role in domestic news coverage of the Beslan and Dubrovka attacks in *Rossiiskaya gazeta* (Makarichev 2002; Sorokina 2004). However, because there was no fundamental shift in the Western position towards Russia on the issue of Chechnya, this feeling of solidarity, so prominent in the initial coverage of the two terrorist attacks, petered out after that. Subsequent commentaries about Western and Russian attempts to eradicate international terrorism highlighted the negative and insufficient role played by the West in the global fight against terrorism. *Rossiiskaya gazeta* characterised Russia as a vital link in the fight against terrorism and in the protection of Western civilisation, and argued that Russia should be helped by its Western allies to prevent the spread of terrorism to other countries (Radzhikhovsky 2004). By 2004 Russian official media no longer seem to portray the West in a positive light with regard to the fight against terrorism. The West was still seen as a potential ally, who should understand the situation in Russia and do its duty by helping Russia in fighting this threat; however, *Rossiiskaya gazeta* was largely pessimistic about the prospect of this happening.

### Conclusion

The presentation of the threat to Russian security from the terrorists underwent a substantial transformation between 2002 and 2004. Whilst the links between Islamic international terrorism and Chechnya continued to dominate much of the coverage of the Beslan crisis in 2004, the focus of the official media was no longer on Chechnya, but had shifted onto the North Caucasus, and the level of this threat had also significantly risen by 2004. Evidence suggests that, whilst in 2002 the terrorist threat was still largely presented in the official press as a discreet and manageable problem, largely connected with developments within Chechnya, by 2004 it was presented as a much greater threat, possibly threatening the very existence of Russia, or even the 'civilised' world.

At this stage, one would suggest that this change in discourse was only in part due to the Russian government and the official press responding to the apparent increase in instability and growing unrest in the whole of the North Caucasus, which was no longer confined to Chechnya. Crucially, it was also an attempt to retain legitimacy in the face of ongoing terrorist attacks in the heart of Russia, and to explain away the state's failure to resolve the Chechen crisis sooner. By presenting the terrorist threat as part of a new, much larger and more endemic danger in the modern world, the official press seemed keen on supporting the government's actions both during and after the Beslan crisis in September 2004.

In the official media, the discussion of the Chechen issue was dominated by the

attempt to frame the terrorist threat in terms of 'a clash of civilisations'. This suggests a zero-sum-game approach to the Chechen issue on the part of the official press and Russian officials, and may go some way to explain their continuous refusal to establish any negotiations with the rebels. Although, since 2004, the Russian government has promoted more actively the concepts of 'Chechenisation', normalisation and economic development in Chechnya, what is continually missing in the official coverage of this issue is a frank discussion of developments in the region, such as socio-economic problems across the whole of the North Caucasus, and also the increasing attempt by the Russian authorities to clamp down on any form of unofficial Islam, be it mosques, Islamic schools or organisations. For the Russian government, or the Russian official media, to be prepared to address this issue in its fullest form is perhaps at this stage unlikely; nevertheless, the spread of instability into the previously stable regions in the North Caucasus is already happening as the clashes between militants and officials in Nalchik in October 2005 have shown. This may ultimately force the Russian government to come up with a more workable solution for the crisis than has been discussed up until now.

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