

## The Chechen wars, media, and democracy in Russia

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**Keywords:** media | conflict | Chechnya | Russia | democracy | propaganda

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# THE CHECHEN WARS, MEDIA, AND DEMOCRACY IN RUSSIA

Ali Askerov<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Media, like religion, may create, escalate, or deescalate conflict. In the age of technology, parties to protracted conflicts often use the media for their propaganda purposes. In many cases, despite politically created discourses, individual media members struggle to reveal the truth of the violent confrontation that causes human casualties. This paper discusses Moscow's tough media policy during the Chechen wars, especially from 1999 to 2009 during the Second Chechen War, and argues that Kremlin's severe media policy in the course of the height of this violent conflict negatively affected the values of democracy in Russia. Nonetheless, Russia's new media policy had affected different media means differently depending on their missions and commitment. To produce this paper, data were collected through interviewing twenty-two Chechen nationals, including media experts, and randomly analyzing the contents of the Russian media and Chechen websites available online.

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## **Introduction**

When the Chechens declared independence from Russia in late 1991, a new stage of the Russo-Chechen conflict started. Multiple causes of the conflict had escalated it into a war in 1994 (Askerov, 2008; 2011; 2014). During the First Chechen War (1994-1996), both the Russian and foreign press played a significant role in covering the news in the conflict zone. At this time, the Russian law allowed sufficient freedom for journalists to report news from the war zone in the North Caucasus. Unsurprisingly, hopes for war coverage in Chechnya developed with the escalating armed operations in Chechnya in the late 1990s with the renewal of the Second Chechen War. In parallel with the escalation of the conflict, the field of propaganda and war journalism grew quickly. The field of peace journalism was correspondingly becoming more vital

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due to the need for the peaceful resolution of the conflict (Ottosen, 2006). However, the Kremlin had formulated new policies to handle the Chechen issue that reduced the possibility of using a peaceful approach to the conflict.

In the late 1990s, in Russia, as elsewhere with some established democratic institutions, the media had played an important role in every aspect of people's lives. The mass media, including daily papers, TV, and radio, contributed to the formation of mainstream culture and public opinion through providing information and interpretation of events. Despite Russian media's dynamic role in the public life, there had always been doubts whether the mass media reliably reported the entire story or introduced a slanted viewpoint from the clash areas in the North Caucasus (Steinbrink & Cook, 2003). Nonetheless, prior to the Second Chechen War that began in 1999, the role the media played in the everyday lives of people was as vital as its job in affecting overall public opinion. In addition to newspapers, television, and magazines, the electronic media also started to play an active role in describing the realities of the war in Chechnya. At this point, the Kremlin felt a necessity to redesign the role of the media to support its new aggressive policies towards Chechnya. This new approach had resulted in the new developments that affected the free press, democracy, and freedom in Russia.

### **The Press: Free or State-controlled?**

The news from Chechnya could flow through the channels of the Russian media, foreign media, and local Chechen media. With the launch of the Second Chechen War in 1999, the Russian government developed a new Chechnya policy through strengthening the state's administrative influence on the mass media. The new policy sought to significantly change the approaches used during the First Chechen War. The first official step to this end was Russia's Security Council's adoption of 'Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation' approved by President Vladimir Putin on September 9, 2000. This doctrine, which represented the official policy on ensuring information security in Russia, had increased the Kremlin's capacity to shape the role the media played in reporting from the North Caucasus that was embattled in war.

The State Duma adopted another law called 'On Counteraction of Extremist Activities' in June 2002. The new law further limited the role of the free media by prohibiting the "dissemination of extremist materials via the mass media and the conduct of extremist activities by the mass media" (Soldner, 2008:169). These legal documents that had adversely

affected the free media in Russia- one of the most significant signs of democracy in the country- were supported by the implication of the war on terror, which the Kremlin considered as equivalent to the Russian war in Chechnya. Consequently, these two important documents targeted primarily Chechnya rather than any other part of the Russian Federation. One of the major problems since 1999 was the local Chechen media's inability to write about the Chechen realities freely, especially when the free Russian media had experienced serious difficulties in making its way into the republic. Local journalism in Grozny had degenerated due to Chechnya's native journalists' obedient articles uncritical of the local pro-Russian and central governments' policies. Usually, both the authors and editors have demonstrated self-censorship to avoid facing political pressure, since most of the journalists in Chechnya work for the state-controlled media that support the official federal position. The political and economic conditions in Chechnya have ruined the fertile ground necessary for independent journalism to develop in the republic. With the termination of the national Chechen government's effective power in Chechnya soon after the start of the Second Chechen war, the newspapers in Chechnya lost their independence at least because the donors financing them wanted to avoid having any problems with the federal and pro-Russian local authorities.

The Kremlin had created different problems for the journalists working for the federal Russian media and still writing about Chechnya-related issues. As the Second Chechen War began, most journalists had failed to obtain permission from the federal government agencies to enter Chechnya. This was an integral part of Moscow's new policy to block a free information flow out of the war zone. The journalists who had managed to enter Chechnya, faced detention, interrogation, and deportation from the republic (Gilligan, 2010). The official pretexts for these actions have usually been the absence of journalists' accreditation.

In a number of cases, both foreign and Russian journalists took the risk of working without accreditation that resulted in their expulsion from Chechnya. The Russian authorities considered the independent Russian journalists as untrustworthy and they had been most likely to be subject to measures taken against them by regional authorities. For example, in early 2007, President Ramzan Kadyrov of Chechnya, whom the Kremlin granted a monopoly over the legitimate use of force in Chechnya, sued *Kommersant*, a Russian newspaper, for defaming his honor and dignity in an article entitled "Commandant of Chechnya" published on June 15, 2006 (Marten, 2012).

By and large, independent Russian journalists have faced obstacles to entering Chechnya. Even during the First Chechen War, Vyacheslav Izmailov, a *Novaya Gazeta* commentator and a human rights activist, had faced difficulties in entering Chechnya because of his critical articles about the Russian and Chechen authorities. As a journalist and human rights activist, he has been active in Chechnya, and played a significant role in helping to free hostages held in the war area (Kirisenko & Shevelev, 1996). The journalists of Chechen nationality living in Moscow had found themselves subject to pressure from the pro-Moscow Chechen government in Grozny as well. The risks for the independent Chechen and non-Chechen journalists trying to report from Chechnya had been the same because the threat from government authorities and the intelligence services were based on the mode of covering the Chechen question. The only safe way of covering news from Chechnya had been to be in line with Moscow's official position.

The new official documents on media that targeted the free press had made the authentic covering the war in Chechnya more difficult since the majority of the Russian and Chechen mass media were state-sponsored. Journalists who had written about the banned topics that were off-limits always put their lives at risk. Later, with the changing nature of the war, the risk level in writing about the Chechen conflict also started to change. Unlike the relatively quiet days that came after 2007, in the initial stages of the Second Chechen War, it was potentially fatal to write about the war realities in Chechnya such as the brutality of Russian federal troops, the torture of Chechen men in the filtration centers, the massacres of civilians, and the abductions of Chechen noncombatants.

### **The Importance of Media in the Chechen Issue**

The media is of a vital importance in one's understanding of essential aspects of the long-lasting stage of the Russo-Chechen conflict. Besides, the mass media has been important to the sides to conflict in forming public opinion in their own favor. The Russian state apparatus especially used the mass media for propaganda purposes toward the rebels during the second military campaign in Chechnya to both justify its aggressive policies and gain popular support (Trenin, Malashenko, & Lieven, 2004). First, the Russian authorities sought to gain popular support prior to launching its military operations in Chechnya in 1999 to legitimize the assault. The Kremlin then used the media as a means for degrading the Chechens by denouncing them as terrorists to justify its brutal policies in Chechnya. By the same token, the Chechen rebel leadership had tried to unveil the hidden layers of Kremlin's dirty policies and use the media for its own propaganda purposes.

The Chechen leaders were aware of the importance of media in their struggle against Russia. During both the Chechen wars, the Chechen rebel leadership had paid close attention to public opinion, although not always successfully. The Russian and foreign journalists figuring out how to enter Chechnya had boundless access to the Chechen leadership who granted interviews whenever possible to make the Chechen position known well (Gilligan, 2010). The rebel leadership at the most noteworthy rank constantly attempted to provide the journalists with significant and truthful data. As this was against the Russian interests, the Kremlin had developed new policies to force the journalists to get information about the situation in Chechnya from the official Russian sources or through the state-sponsored media. The new media policy helped the Kremlin curb the relative freedom the media enjoyed in the 1990s before the start of the Second Chechen War.

In the mid-1990s, the foreign, Chechen, and Russian media had had different approaches to addressing the Chechen question and the war in Chechnya. Foreign media had generally been critical of Russia's policies and operations in Chechnya. Unlike the contentious positions of the Russian media, the foreign press had typically expounded on Chechen issues with some sensitivity and this, as a rule, irritated the Russian authorities (Oliker, 2001). The Chechen media had defended different views and positions, while some of the Russian media had taken Moscow's side, with others either being impartial as much as possible, or being sympathetic to the Chechens. Due to Russian media's relative independence during the First Chechen War, the Russian government was unable to impose a total news blackout from Chechnya in 1994-96 (Benn, 1996). The media's relative freedom is seen from the headlines most popular Russian newspapers used in 1994. For example, *Izvestiya* and *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, Russian newspapers, used titles such as *The Chechen war was lost in Moscow* and *Russians may be facing a second Afghanistan in Chechnya*, respectively (Benn, 1996). The Russian media had never used similar headings during the Second Chechen War, and this reflected the severity of Moscow's new media policy (Soldner, 2008).

The time between 1996 and 1999, which is also known as the interwar period, was useful for the Russian authorities to evaluate the free media's role during the First Chechen War that was not in favor of the Kremlin. This inquiry had made the government produce new media policies that were nationwide, however indeed focused on Chechnya so as to win the information war. Shortly before 1999, the Russian Ministry for Press, Television and Radio Broadcasting discharged a notice to all



Russian radio and television companies against TV programs involving the Chechen rebel leaders (German, 2003). This policy indicated that to succeed in the news war the Kremlin wanted everybody to accept the official version of events in Chechnya (Soldner, 2008). This warning, along with those mentioned above, was one of the first steps Moscow used against the freedom of the press in Russia.

By prohibiting journalists from making contact with “terrorists” in Chechnya, the Russian authorities aimed at cutting off any alternative sources of information about the events in Chechnya (Gilligan, 2010). This policy ensured strict censorship of the Russian media, although some of the Russian media outlets and journalists did not obey the official restrictions. For example, the NTV news program did not always follow official warnings on the Chechen issue. Nevertheless, the Kremlin enforced an effective information cordon in Chechnya, in which the voices of the Chechen rebels and noncombatants were not heard (Soldner, 2008).

The major Russian newspapers never had similar positions; some of them had defended the official policy of Moscow, while others supported the Chechens or tried to report impartially. However, the number of the independent media outlets in Russia diminished sharply during the Second Chechen War due to political pressure and economic hardships. In that situation, the role of certain individual journalists had gained extra importance in gathering fresh information from the zone of war and in disseminating it to the rest of the world.

Perhaps, brave reporters and journalists are needed in wartime as never before, since in the contexts of violent conflicts, individual journalists play invaluable role in gathering and transmitting authentic information. In the Chechen case, the situation was not different. Individual journalists had played the key role in breaking state imposed censorship to the news of Chechnya. The difficult and dangerous conditions in Chechnya coupled with the legal restrictions imposed on journalists by the Russian government in the late 1990s made it extremely difficult to gather information in Chechnya, and report it from the country or publish a critical article in the Russian media. At least partially, the remarkable work of the journalists who endangered their personal lives in Chechnya made some part of the truth of the Chechen war known to the public.

Many Western and Russian journalists travelled to Chechnya to bypass the ban on the media. Perhaps, the most famous of the Russian journalists writing about the Chechen issue was Anna Politkovskaya, a *Novaya Gazeta* investigative journalist and author of several books on

the Chechen question, who was murdered in 2007. Politkovskaya managed to supply the Russian public with knowledge of the tragic reality of Chechnya. In her articles and books, she also successfully highlighted the dangers of losing freedom of media and the growing authoritarian regime in Russia. She was extremely critical of President Putin's political and economic policies. Politkovskaya was assassinated in October 2006. Although five men have been sentenced for her murder, it is still unknown who ordered her assassination.

No journalist was immune in Chechnya including those who worked for the European media. Andrei Babitsky, for example, worked for Radio Free Europe, and he was one of the most famous journalists and war correspondents due to his coverage of the war in Chechnya (Skakunov & Ofitova, 2000). The Russian military authorities were not always happy with his reports, claiming that they often contained disinformation about the Chechen special services. Babitsky had presented the crucial distinction between the moderate and radical Chechen fighters refuting the Russian claims that all Chechen rebels were the same unapproachable terrorists (Gilligan, 2010). Babitsky had access to all of the Chechen leaders, including Shamil Basayev, whom he was able to interview. Babitsky disappeared in Chechnya on January 15, 2000. Later, Russian authorities admitted having him in their custody. The Federal Security Service (FSB) of Russia claimed that Babitsky took part in an illegal armed formation in Chechnya. Soon, to avoid international condemnations the Kremlin had to grant him amnesty. However, his detention created fear among the journalists trying to enter Chechnya in pursuit of accurate information. The Russian authorities used the case of Babitsky to successfully justify restrictions on press freedom with regards to the Chechen question.

### **The Chechen Media**

During both the Chechen wars, the Chechen media was not limited to the official state press alone, as it also included independent mass media, rebel mass media, and the Chechen media outside of the country. In the 1990s, the Chechens had numerous local newspapers such as *Groznensky Rabochi (Grozny Worker)*, *Chechenets*, *Put Johara*, *Ichkeria*, *Kavkazski Vestnik*, *Golos*, among others, in addition to the Chechen newspapers published in Dagestan, North Ossetia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. These newspapers had enjoyed some degree of independence during the national governments in the 1990s. However, by 2002, there were three republican, two city and nine districts newspapers in Chechnya that were supported or allowed by the Russian authorities (Jaimoukha, 2005). Since the early 2000s, the largest group of publishers has represented the state-sponsored mass

media published and distributed in the territory of Chechnya. Some media outlets are *Vesti Respubliki*, *Daimokhk*, *Vesti Groznogo*, and *Gums*, and a number of information agencies such as *Grozny-inform* as well as a number of local TV and radio stations (Gilligan, 2010). After the withdrawal of the Chechen forces under Maskhadov from Grozny in 2000, the general situation in Chechnya was chaotic. The Russian authorities did not wait long before starting to finance all the state newspapers. Naturally, their position on political issues firmly overlapped with the official position of the pro-Russian government in Grozny.

Several factors constrained the survival and development of the independent mass media in Chechnya after the renewal of the war in 1999. In the post-Maskhadov time, the new pro-Russian Chechen authorities had been reluctant to let a free media develop in Chechnya. The authoritarian regime that was formed in Chechnya in 2003 wanted to avoid any independent means of mass media in its domains. In the wartime conditions, no means of mass media in Chechnya could rely on its own financial potential, thus no truly independent newspaper emerged in the republic. In general, the economic power of the Chechen people and the tough rivalry of the state-run press had imposed a serious control on the development of the autonomous Chechen media. Perhaps, the only newspaper that tried to survive independently or semi-independently was the *Grozny Worker* (*Groznensky Rabochi*).

The *Grozny Worker*, previously called as the *Golos Chechenskoj Respubliki* (Voice of the Chechen Republic), was a relatively impartial newspaper. It became an independent means of media in 1995. The newspaper was also the only independent Chechen weekly during the First Chechen War that was able to avoid taking sides in this conflict (Politkovskaya, 2007). This policy helped the newspaper insure its independence in wartime conditions and it was able to receive grants from international donors such as the Soros Foundation, which was not welcomed by some Chechen warlords (Politkovskaya, 2001). The newspaper survived until the fall of 1999 and then restored itself in 2001 for a short period. The *Grozny Worker's* impartial position was very helpful in making the Chechen view known to the world, particularly when President Maskhadov had to hide to survive. However, since the newspaper did not serve anybody's interests its survival was difficult and its writers were receiving numerous threats. The newspaper's female workers undertook all responsibilities to publish the *Grozny Worker* in 2001, when the editor-in-chief and all the male reporters left Chechnya because of the threats they received. One of its former local correspondents, Natalya Estemirova, also a human rights activist, was abducted and killed in Grozny in July 2009.

The rebel mass media has been one the most important sources of reliable information about Chechnya. It has included several underground publications. Some of them have been published in Chechnya since 1996 on a weekly basis. Two newspapers, *Sign of Jihad* and *Way of Jihad*, the organs of Chechen religious radicals, have been active in inspiring the Chechen people to resist the Russian occupation and pro-Russian Chechen forces. Two others, *Mekh-khel* and *Varis*, have supported an independent Chechnya, and held anti-Russian positions. The newspaper *Ichkeria*, once the organ of Maskhadov's government, had been for a while one of the most popular papers in the region.

In general, the Chechen mass media based outside of Chechnya have had a political vision oriented toward the independence of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (now the Caucasus Emirate). They have mostly been Internet-based news agencies as well as on-line multimedia and websites, such as *Kavkaz-center*, *Chechenpress*, *chechen.org*, *Daimokh*, and *Kavkazski vestnik*. Since websites are not controlled, censored, and regulated by higher authorities, the Chechen rebels give priority to the websites as an effective media tool. Surprisingly, [www.kavkazcenter.com](http://www.kavkazcenter.com), a website of the Chechen rebels, is a well-organized media tool available in Russian, English, Ukrainian, Arabic, and Turkish. The website contains visual news in addition to printed news, and frequent interviews with the most important Chechen leaders. The website functions actively to utilize every single opportunity to justify the Chechen position for independence from Russia. For example, [www.kavkazcenter.com](http://www.kavkazcenter.com) distributed the WikiLeaks reports on the Caucasus involving Chechnya promptly in the wake of being posted on the web. The web is likewise an instrument of promulgation for Chechen radicalism that kindles contempt, in addition to psychological fighting with Russia, fundraising, recruitment, data mining, and coordination of the activities of the pro-independence Chechens.

### **The Position of the Russian Print Media and TV News Programs**

In the post-Soviet Russia, the media has tried to be a mirror of the changes occurring in the country. It had especially been crucial to covering the news during the First Chechen War when it had enjoyed a significant freedom. Prior to the Second Chechen War, however, the Russian authorities toughened the working conditions for the independent media supporting the state-sponsored ones. Bolstering the conditions for the free media to block information flow from the war region was an central part of the Kremlin's covertly framed new war policy. Since then, the portrayal of Chechens as an adversary had

become regular in the Russian official press (White, 2008). In some cases, certain Russian political forces created and exploited this depiction for their own purposes (Gilligan, 2010; White, 2008). Nonetheless, a generalization of the Russian print media would be incorrect, since the new media policy had affected different mass media differently.

To report from the war zone foreign, local, and Russian journalists had been present in Chechnya, despite the difficulties created by the political discourse. Undoubtedly, the Russian mass media have played the most important role in spreading news about the First Chechen War and thereafter, and in influencing peoples' opinions in Russia about this war. Several major Russian newspapers such as *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, *Pravda*, *Izvestia*, *Segodnya*, *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, and *Novaya Gazeta*, and TV news programs, *Vesti*, *Vremya*, and *Segodnya*, among others, have distinguished themselves in supplying news and commentaries about the Russo-Chechen war. Each of these newspapers and TV programs had had its unique approach to the crisis.

*Novaya Gazeta*, a newspaper well known in Russia for its critical and investigative coverage of the country's political and social affairs, had been renowned due to its publications of Anna Politkovskaya who was an unforgiving critic of Russia's violent policies in Chechnya. Politkovskaya (2005; 2007) was also critical of the Chechen warlords, as well as those Russian military and politicians who had tried to perpetuate the war due to its advantages as a business. She wrote for *Novaya Gazeta* until her assassination on October 7, 2006. The newspaper has played a tremendous role in creating public consciousness about the war in Chechnya.

*Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, an opponent of *Novaya Gazeta* and the main administrative newspaper had always supported and tried to justify Moscow's decision to use force in Chechnya. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta's* ignorant position about the predicament of tragic civilian casualties in Chechnya can be explained by its administrative identity. The newspaper had extensively highlighted Moscow's policies regarding humanitarian assistance to the Chechens.

Renowned with its judgmental approach, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, an official newspaper of the Defense Ministry of Russia, dedicated substantial consideration to the war assessing it through the military lens. Unsurprisingly, this newspaper's primary attention was paid to the casualties among the Russian troops while disregarding victims amid the

noncombatant population of Chechnya. It is almost impossible to find a report in this newspaper about the countless human rights violations by the military (Askerov, 2011). *Krasnaya Zvezda* chose to dehumanize and demonize the Chechens to justify the military cruelty in Chechnya. It had portrayed the Chechens as brutal, outrageous, untrustworthy, and unwilling to resolve the conflict by peaceful means.

*Pravda*, a communist newspaper, had assumed an oppositional stance and been critical of the Kremlin's war policy. It had drawn attention to the civilian victims of the war, and stressed the resistance of the native population to Russian troops. *Pravda's* explanations of the causes of the war were linked to the disintegration of the Soviet Union thus stressing the importance to the communist ideology for peaceful existence of the former Soviet nationalities. Moreover, *Pravda* explained the Chechen crisis with the problems of democratization and poor economic reforms (Aliyev, 2008).

The position of *Segodnya*, a daily for businesspeople, had been one of the most balanced of all the newspapers, although it had often criticized the ineffectiveness of the official policies and the army. The newspaper had argued that a bad peace was better than a good war. *Segodnya* had argued that in reaching the objectives the Chechen leadership was more successful than the Kremlin. Moreover, the newspaper claimed that the Chechen leadership had always been ready for peace negotiations especially during the First Chechen War and the Russian side had wasted that opportunity. *Segodnya* had persistently criticized totalitarianism in the country and amateurism of the Russian army arguing that the reformed professional military could avoid many problems in Chechnya (Romanov & Zamakhin, 2000).

*Izvestia*, a liberal daily newspaper and former organ of Soviet government, had criticized both the decision of the Kremlin to use troops in Chechnya, and the mode in which this choice was implemented. Moreover, *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, a daily newspaper for young Russians, had a specific opinion in its Chechen analysis. It had given priority to hostilities, civilian victims, the violation of human rights by the army, and the support of the local population to the Chechen leaders, thus revealing the untruths of the official sources. *Moskovskiy Komsomolets* had been successful in maintaining its impartiality. It had often labeled the army as the "occupants" and the Chechen rebels as "bandits." The newspaper was particularly renowned for its irony and epithets (Rechkalov, 2010).

A number of Russian TV news programs such as *Vremya*, *Vesti*, and *Segodnya* have been important in their coverage of the Chechen wars (Tretiakov, 2005). The *Vremya* program that existed during the Soviet times has taken a more formal position, whereas *Vesti* has supported the government's position. Especially during the first Chechen war, *Vesti* was quite mild in its critique of Yeltsin and the generals in the government who were influential in waging the war in Chechnya.

One of the most balanced news programs was *Segodnya* of NTV, part of Vladimir Gusinsky's media empire, which was founded in 1993. NTV was renowned for its independent and serious coverage of the events in Chechnya, revealing the darker sides of the war (Oates & Roselle, 2000). It frequently criticized the Russian government for its military campaigns in Chechnya both during the first and second wars. NTV usually delivered news and observations on the conflict that endorsed people to arrive at an independent conclusion (Benn, 1996). The news program *Segodnya* had held a similar position to the *Segodnya* newspaper. Ultimately, NTV paid a price for its live coverage and severe investigation of the events in Chechnya and elsewhere in Russia. Its ownership was transferred to the state-owned Gasprom company in April 2001.

The Russian side has utilized the electronic means of communication as well; despite the abundant resources it possessed to sustain print and visual mass media. The Russian websites have usually portrayed the Chechens as criminals, slave owners, and bloodthirsty barbarians. The oppositional websites, [www.nazlobu.ru](http://www.nazlobu.ru) or <http://www.molgvardia.ru>, do not differ from the government-based websites in their approaches. Cyber war between the Russians and Chechens via the Internet seems to last forever. Unsurprisingly, the rebel webpages operate more cohesively because of their limited resources for print media and, more importantly, the ease of surviving online.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

During both the Chechen wars, the media has played an undeniable role in spreading Chechen news in Russia and around the world. Throughout the First Chechen War, the media had enjoyed more freedom in reporting from Chechnya than during the Second Chechen War. Prior to the renewal of the war in 1999, the Kremlin chose to reinforce its censorship strategy over the war in Chechnya, which was a premonition of its new cruel combat policies. The new policies targeted the free media only and they did not affect the state-sponsored media outlets negatively.

The Chechen wars, especially the second one, and the diminishing value of Russian democracy are positively correlated due to the Russian war strategies that included fading the free media. The change of the Russian news coverage policy in Chechnya to effectively fight the separatists while hiding civilian casualties and other atrocities in the region impacted the democratic processes in the country negatively. The Russian media was much more independent during the First Chechen War and this made the Kremlin blame the media for the military failure in Chechnya. Consequently, the Kremlin invented the ways of blocking the flow of unbiased information from the war zone through the channel of the free press. The consequences of this policy have been contentious on not only the free media, but also Russian democracy, and civil society.

The media had assumed a significant role in making reality of the war known amid the First Chechen War and at the early phase of the Second Chechen War. This had pushed the Kremlin to redefine Moscow's official media-related policies in the early 2000s to block an information flow from the alternative sources of news about the military campaign in Chechnya. Moscow's exercise of far-reaching political pressure on the Russian media targeted the free media, rather than the state-sponsored media. Consequently, new media policies had hit the free media, thus significantly affecting the development of the democratic institutions in Russia. The Russian free media, one of the major pillars of democracy, had become the victim of fulfilling its main duty that was reporting from Chechnya.

The free media had been amply impartial during both the wars. In many instances, the positions of different Russian newspapers did not overlap on the same issue. In general, however, the Russian media was successful to question why the violent events were unavoidable and why they had occurred. The free media had blamed both the rebel Chechen leadership and the Kremlin for not adopting sufficient constructive positions to maintain a strategic distance from the shocking outcomes of war. It was the free media that had addressed whether the war was legitimate. The free media's accusation of the Russian authorities, including Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin, backfired by contributing to the fortification of the official media policy that worked against the free media itself and freedom of speech in Russia.

The winners of the new media policies were the state-sponsored media outlets that had always supported the state position in the war. The new media policies sought to limit the media's role in Russia to propaganda of the official positions. This minimized the difference between the



parties to conflict in terms of their information war strategies, since the rebel leaders had also employed the media as a tool for their propaganda purposes. Although media had played an important role in affecting the dynamics of the conflict, the Kremlin's formal approach to it in the 2000s meant removing the differences between the use of the state and rebel medias.

Russia's new media policy had dramatically reduced its role in sustaining peace and democracy in the country. The Kremlin thought about the success in the war region through penalizing the free media that tried to objectively cover the Russo-Chechen war. The types of governmental punishment included buying off the media institution (for example, NTV), closing it down, or intimidating journalists through violence and abductions (for example, Politkovskaya, Estemirova, and Babitsky), among others. Nonetheless, the Chechen wars had been a test for the democratic media in Russia. Even though the reports and interpretations of the events in Chechnya varied from a medium to another, public opinion had questioned what in Chechnya was going on.

Perhaps, the Russian media was not successful in foreseeing the renewal of the war in 1999 and warning against it. But experts argue that this is a common problem and media's role in the early warning of conflict emergencies is a myth because of its insignificant impact on the public (Gowing, 1997). The new developments in Russia, however, deprived the media of its capability of performing duties of broadcasting impartial news sufficiently. The extensive governmental pressure on the free media had created instability in news distribution and, in general, negatively affected reliability of reporters and their editors.

The new media policy necessitated a new official approach to independent journalists traveling to the region. The government's increasing brutality against the individual journalists trying to candidly report from Chechnya had disclosed serious problems related to malfunctioning of the rule of law and democracy in Russia. It soon became obvious that restricting the free media and freedom of speech in the country meant oppressing the Russian civil society. Likewise, the local pro-Russian Chechen authorities oppressed the human rights activists in Chechnya.

Also, the new policies had deprived the independent journalists of using their abilities to facilitate the reconciliation of the parties to the conflict through preventive journalism. Nevertheless, despite the political pressure, Russian free media did not totally disappear and Russian journalism had demonstrated the country's exceptional potential for

peace journalism. The significantly large number of journalists' deaths during the Second Chechen War was a logical consequence of Moscow's new media policy. This also was a sign of the Kremlin's preference to manage the Chechen predicament by using brute force.

Unlike the free media, the Russian state-sponsored media had not faced any problems in their work. In fact, they had received great incentives for broadcasting news in line with the Kremlin's official policies. The state-sponsored media also assumed a role in camouflaging the state brutalities against the free media through their intensified production of news from the war zone even though it did not reflect the reality. In this situation, the importance of the Chechen rebel media as a better source of the war news had amplified, since they were not under Moscow's control. Both the state-sponsored media and rebel media had contributed to the tensions by dehumanizing and demonizing 'the other.'

The Chechen rebels had made an effort to create their own media to spread news reflecting their views about the Chechen crisis. Their productive utilization of technological tools has been a key component of Chechnya's fruitful information war. In general, the Chechen media had been active in covering the war news. The local Chechen press included both independent and separatist media. The free Chechen media that functioned legally was also affected by the new media policies of Russia. Perhaps, the most distinguished Chechen newspaper was the *Grozny Worker*, which was active and tried to be impartial in its activities of highlighting news in the country. Its refusal to have Russian sponsorship created grave problems for its survival. In 2009, Natalya Estemirova, a former *Grozny Worker* journalist and human rights activist, was abducted and killed.

The analysis of the Russia newspapers that had played an influential role in informing the public or forming public opinion in the country shows that different Russian newspapers and TV news programs had been influenced by the official policies differently. *Moskovskiy Komsomolets* had exposed the propaganda of official sources, and *Izvestia's* position can be qualified as liberally oriented while *Pravda*, a communist newspaper, assumed an opposition stance. *Krasnaya Zvezda*, an official newspaper of the Defense Ministry, devoted considerable attention to the hostilities, and evaluated them from a professional military perspective. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, the main governmental newspaper, had always supported Moscow's decision to use force in Chechnya. *Novaya Gazeta*, known for its critical and investigative coverage of the country's political and social affairs, had obtained a radical position. The TV news programs were distinguished for their leadership throughout the country. *Segodnya* of NTV was the

most neutral and popular news program until it was taken over by the state.

Both sides to the Chechen war, especially the rebels, have used the electronic media effectively. A number of factors have contributed to the rise of the Internet usage by the rebels. It is practically impossible to monitor or block all the websites, which makes its usage easy and effective. Besides, websites can be managed at any location, and they are not costly. The website organizers had also tried to reach larger audiences through the Internet.

Nevertheless, Kremlin's new media policies had not been able to entirely prevent the development of the mass media in Russia. The free media has gradually gained the power as well as the right to cover all aspects of the sociopolitical life of the country. At the same time, the mass media has reacted quickly and decisively to any attempts to control their activities. Besides, Moscow's gradual but decisive gains in Chechnya have eliminated the necessities of covering war related regional news. The theme has gradually lost its value as a source of information thus diminishing the importance of the scandalous media doctrines targeting Chechnya.

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