

Global Journalist: Siege on Moscow Amid Global Terrorism Crisis

Abstract: On October 31, 2002, Chechen terrorist rebels sieged a theatre in Moscow taking hundreds of occupants hostage. Byron Scott discusses the media coverage of the Moscow theatre hostage crisis with Russian journalists and UN media correspondents. Amid the global rise of terrorism, Global Journalist raises concerns for media ethics and press freedom as tension increases between Chechnya and the Russian Federation.

Host: [Byron Scott](#)

Guests:

- [Akaki Gogichaishvili](#)
- [Betsy Pisik](#)
- [Alexander Merkushev](#)
- [Andrei Zolotov](#)

Producers: [Sarah Fajardo](#)

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Mentioned: Russia, Moscow, counterterrorism, global terrorism, press freedom, Vladimir Putin, Moscow theatre hostage crisis, 2002 Nord-Ost Siege, Georgia, Chechnya, Boris Yeltsin, United Nations, media coverage

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Byron Scott 00:08

Hello, welcome to Global Journalist. I'm Byron Scott. In this evening's show, we're going to discuss the major news event and the continuing Global War on Terrorism from this past week: the siege of the cultural theater in Moscow, held by Chechen terrorists and rebels, which began last Wednesday evening, and ended in the early mornings of Saturday, with the death of more than 100 persons. We're going to discuss the fallout for the media coverage of terrorism from this, this event and the continuing war in Chechnya. Our guests this evening are, from 60 Minutes in Tbilisi, Georgia, Republic of Georgia, Akaki Gogichaishvili, anchor and producer of that show. Hello, Akaki, and again, I apologize in advance for mispronouncing your name. Our second guest is Betsy Pisik, the United Nations correspondent for The Washington Times, talking to us I believe from New York?

Betsy Pisik 01:10

Correct, Good morning!

Byron Scott 01:12

Good Morning. Alexander Merkushev, the producer of Associated Press Television speaking to us from Moscow. Hello, Alexander!

Alexander Merkushev 01:17

Hello!

Byron Scott 01:19

And finally, Andrei Zolotov, a reporter for the Moscow Times, also in Moscow. Hello.

Andrei Zolotov 01:25

Hello, Scotty.

Byron Scott 01:26

Yes. I want to first welcome all of you to the show and apologize that the regular host, Stuart Loory, is in Lima, Peru this week at the sessions of the Inter American Press Association. However, I am delighted to be talking to all of you I've been following this story closely as it happened. I was in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, this past week. I'm still suffering badly from jet lag, but I was watching particularly the wall to wall Russian television coverage of this crisis. And Andrei, I wanted to start with you and refer to an article that you had in the in the Moscow Times two days ago, saying television coverage comes of age. And your, in your lead you've, you said how, during nine years ago, when the parliamentary crisis occurred in Moscow, and troops loyal to President Boris Yeltsin blockaded and then stormed the parliament building. Moscow TV had used CNN's coverage, but this time, CNN used, used Moscow television coverage, for the unfolding hostage crisis as you put it. I wonder if you could tell us more about that?

Andrei Zolotov 02:49

Well, this is, this is just a way to say what, what a long way Russia media has gone over the past years. And of course, now the the media effect of this crisis is one of the major topics discussed in Moscow. The there are many questions that are being asked. My personal opinion is that overall, the media has done well. And of course, there were many mistakes. And there is now tons of criticism against the media coming from political headquarters from these special services. But overall, I think the particular television and radio people, who are very, very, very much in the middle of a situation like that, because with the hostage crisis, there is this ongoing thing and the live reporting, which is seen by everybody, which is watched very, very attentively, followed by people inside this theater. These are people who are actually they can make an effect on the outcome. And I wouldn't say that People in the media were 100% ready for it, No. I've interviewed a lot of media executives in the past days and they said "no, we did not have any plans, how to cover things like this. It was very much done kind of on the spot in the development policies were developed right in the control room." But still Oh, and there were mistakes, which we can discuss later. I didn't know how much in we should go into the detail. But still, the the overall performance has been rather good.

Byron Scott 04:34

Let me, let me move to Alexander then, Alex Merkushev. Aleksander, what, what is your assessment, and, and what about some of the mistakes that Andrei referred to?

Alexander Merkushev 04:44

Well, I agree that the Russian media, especially television, did very well in covering the hostage crisis, but there were also attempts on the part of the government and the presidential administration to guide the media; mostly television networks into the correct kind of sort of coverage of the crisis. The Kremlin issued instruction- instructions to the media executives, telling them how to cover the crisis, what to show, what not to show, and after the crisis was over, President Putin said that we need to review our information policy, in the view of how to cover the war in Chechnya and crisis situation like that. So, I think that the media did very well, but there are still restrictions and there will be attempts to try and rein in the media to be more obedient, not so much to instruct to show the facts and the situation, but also to follow the party line. So this is not a very good outcome of the crisis for the media.

Byron Scott 05:58

For our listeners, who are not as familiar perhaps with world geography as they might be: the Republic of Georgia borders Chechnya, and this is one of the reasons that we've asked Akaki to be a part of our show tonight. Akaki, what was your assessment of the of the, of the coverage from the from the Georgian point of view?

Akaki Gogichaishvili 06:22

Well, unfortunately, I have to totally disagree with my Russian colleagues about the quality and success of the Russian media covering this crisis. In and this is an and I have to underscore that this is not the fault of journalists at all, rather, the government's; because the pressure the government imposed on the media was comparable to the crisis in Chernobyl. Because, for example, Georgian media was able to report on the cases and topics and issues of this crisis. More, more than Russian media, and in fact, we've had reports from Moscow from our colleagues that they were not able to broadcast there at home. And thereby, Georgian viewers got a better perspective of what is happening there than the Russian audience. And in fact, when you mentioned in the beginning that CNN was copying, rather, or assessing, the situation based on the Russian media, that is true too, because CNN coverage was very bad, too. It didn't, it didn't, (unintelligible) the whole situation. Especially, this refers to the next day of the anti-terrorist operation, which is large. The media, Russian media, says that this this big success. And I have also to touch one, one issue, which was that the government use Russian Government used, successfully, local media to pursue its goals. For example, being in relationship to the to its dispute with Georgian government. And a first reports, were saying that Georgian flags were waving from the building of theater, and that's all the Georgian nationality viewers that were hostages were released right from the very first moment of the siege; which later found that, turned out to be complete false. So the media, Russian media, played the the game of the government which actually didn't help to, to cover the situation in an unbiased manner, which is, which media is supposed to do. This is it was my assessment, but I want to end with a final underscore once again that it is not at large fault of journalists. Russian journalists are quite professional, very successful and linked to high standards of covering but the governmental pressure perhaps was too high for them to resist.

Byron Scott 08:55

Well, the the governmental pressure and in times, in these times, in the face of terrorist acts, is great even here in the United States. And let me turn Betsy Pisik. Surely, the attention was great on this event at the United Nations, Betsy, and I wonder what, what your take is on this question?

Betsy Pisik 09:17

Well, it wasn't really a UN story, but of course, everything tends to overlap. I just wanted to say from a U.S. media perspective, what was fascinating about the story was that it was happening so far away, given the time change. Newspapers had a hard time plating, replating constantly updating information, because things were happening at night. So, by the time people woke up in the morning, the story had completely changed; we turned to radio, cable news, etc. And the other thing, at the risk of sounding cynical, that made this a very, well, it was a riveting story, one way or the other, of course, but the thing also is that we have two main stories, at least last week, here in the United States. The first of course, is the very divisive war with Iraq, that's looming. And second of all, this sniper that was terrorizing Washington DC in the suburbs that got an enormous amount of interest here. And that was one man as it happens, too, but one gun, one victim at a time. By comparison, and there was nothing to take pictures of, By comparison, the siege in Moscow was riveting. The way this overlaps at the UN were two questions: first, how would this impact on the Security Council discussions over Iraq, being that the United States and and Russia are on opposite sides of the fence on this resolution, that has nothing whatsoever to do with the siege in Moscow? And secondly, what was the chemical used and does it conform with international conventions and standards on the use of chemicals, or the use of weapons against civilians. As it happens, we've, we've pretty much saw that this, this drug is fentanyl. And it's appears to be fentanyl. And it also appears not to be on the UN schedule of prescribed chemical weapons. So that's, if that is what it is, and all it is, then that, that answers that

Byron Scott 11:15

Apparently, all all but two of the civilian deaths were related to the the gas that was injected into the auditorium or into the theater just before the security troops broke in. Is that correct?

Andrei Zolotov 11:30

Yes! Yes, that's what, what we hear.

Byron Scott 11:34

Okay, let me turn now to the the potential fallout; in terms of journalism coverage, for the media. At the time of the crisis, there one radio station, Ekho Moskv, was was warned by the media ministry about broadcasting statements by the Chechnyan rebels and one television station, Moskoviya, was, according to our reports, shut down for a day because of accusations for promoting, promoting terrorism.

Andrei Zolotov 12:10

For several hours, actually!

Byron Scott 12:11

Yes, for several hours. Okay, and a newspaper, Rossiisk-

Andrei Zolotov 12:19

Rossiiskaya Gazeta (Российская газета).

Byron Scott 12:19

Gazeta- Thank you! After publishing a photograph of one of the victims, was also reprimanded. The ministry has, has just has just also stated, however, that there will be no long term penalties. What, what is going to be the, in your minds, the future of coverage of the continuing war in Chechnya as a result of all this? Let's hear first from Andrei and then Alexander.

Andrei Zolotov 12:50

From, from what I know about the way the press ministry functions during these days, was, it was, very much in the middle. It was, in a way, worked as a buffer between the media, and the Kremlin, and the parliament; where calls for censorship were much harsher than the ones that were actually implemented. I think the general conclusion from this, for the Russian journalistic community, is that there is a need to develop very strict guidelines for its own behavior, in order to be able to avoid being censored from the outside. And the funny thing is that Akaki and I were in Vienna just several days before this crisis unfolded at an international conference of the comedian radio and television policy organized, in part, by Duke University - DeWitt Wallace Center for communication and journalism, where they recommendations to journalists on how to behave at the time of crisis, how to cover were developed. And we know of many guidelines, which exist in the international journalistic practice, such as BBC guidelines and others. So now, people in the Russian media are speaking about the need to develop such guidelines within media companies, as well as maybe some people are saying that some general rules should be adopted by by the journalistic community and media organizations. I'm a little skeptical about that one. But there is an understanding that if, if such guidelines are not developed, if the situation continues when, for example, on MTV television on the first night, the the anchor, in the live coverage, asked a hostage, who was speaking to him by by mobile telephone, to pass the telephone to one of the hostage takers at the same time the ORT television show, the musical producer on the air saying that he had just been briefing the Secret Service's on the plan of the building, and he pretty much repeated what he... the thing about the building. I mean, if things like that continue, then the government will be, will be very harsh in, in censoring the media. In fact, the parliament is going to pass, is very much likely to pass very restrictive measures. Tomorrow is an amendment to the law on the media, which may have effect on the future coverage of the war in Chechnya because, because of the vagueness of the definitions which are there, and I'm not going to go into it. let's, let's come back to that Andrei.

Byron Scott 15:43

We need to take just a short break, for our listeners now and we'll be back. This is global journalist.

Andrei Zolotov 15:43

Aha.

Byron Scott 15:54

We're back discussing the, the ramifications of the terrorist acts and the media response in Moscow. Before we move on, I want to remind our listeners that you can also listen to the show on the internet at www.globaljournalist.org or at www.kbia.org. Let's, let's move on and and just before the break, Andrei, you were discussing the the law, which has passed I believe the lower house of the Duma, and but is yet to go on to the upper house or to reach its have a President Putin signature. This is...

Andrei Zolotov 16:35

its gonna have, it's gonna have a third reading tomorrow.

Byron Scott 16:39

Third Reading.

Andrei Zolotov 16:40

in the Duma, Yeah.

Byron Scott 16:41

Now, our reports, and perhaps we can also ask Alexander to comment on this, is that this would prohibit the media from printing or broadcasting information that justifies, in the language that we have here, "extremist activities" when resistance to counterterrorist operation, or hinders counter terrorist operations and reveals tactics. This is according to a statement released by the Committee to Protect Journalists here in the United States.

Alexander Merkushev 17:14

Well, Scotty.

Byron Scott 17:15

Yes?

Alexander Merkushev 17:16

I think that the future coverage of any crisis, and especially in Chechnya, will be determined by two factors. Number one is that public opinion in Russia has moved away from any support for the Chechen rebels, or separatist. fight for, for whatever, and like independence, or freedom from Russia, or whatever. And secondly, the government, you know, television and journalism in general is more about access than the art of writing and producing stories. So, I think that, in the view of the crisis and the, you know, hints that the press might have given to the terrorists about the operation that was underway. The government will try and restrict, limit access to specific areas in the country, to specific territories, to specific people, so it will be more, much more difficult for journalists to cover anything; because they will just have no access to these facilities to places and so on. And I think that the government in general, especially in the light of the forthcoming presidential elections, parliamentary elections, you know, people in in power would like to keep the status quo, so they will try to control television; which is the biggest source of news and information for the Russian people. I think that smaller newspapers will be allowed to operate freely, but the major national television channels will be under strict pressure from the government, from the Kremlin.

Byron Scott 18:55

Akaki, let's go to the, back to the Georgian perspective here, of course. We've had recently the disagreement as to the presence of Chechnyan, rebels in the Pankisi Gorge area. And the, what we see, as seen from the west here is some real saber rattling between Russia and Georgia over the, over the issue of this of this Civil War. Could you expand on that for us?

Akaki Gogichaishvili 19:32

Yes, that's right. The problem that you rise, and still exists, although it's almost solved, because Chechens had already left the gorge, almost all of them, but media and local media particularly has been very successful in, in exposing, in exposing the problem. And returning back to the crisis in Moscow, I truly, I truly hope that the media coverage and the results... media was able to expose all the facts, either in Moscow, or in Pankisi Gorge, would show the government's in both countries that Soviet times have changed. And there is no way that you can really contain information flow. There's no "Iron Curtain" in place. But based on what Andre says, doesn't seem to be the case, and this looks like the governments are still pursuing their goal to hush down and hush, the local media. But eventually this won't work. Because as I told you, when Putin imposed censorship in Moscow and covering on coverage, the actual outcome of an anti-terrorist operation, then Russian generals were sending their reports to Georgia, or to other republics, I guess too. So, we were able to, to broadcast those, and eventually public was able to know and find out what was happening really there. Its no longer Chernobyl situation.

Andrei Zolotov 21:02

Can you cite some examples of, excuse me, colleagues. May I have a question to Akaki?

Byron Scott 21:06

Absolutely.

Andrei Zolotov 21:07

Yeah, I, Akaki, what, what where, for example, the stories which were reported in Georgia which which were not reported in Russia?

Akaki Gogichaishvili 21:16

Okay, I'm referring directly to the second day and third day situation after anti-terrorist operation. When Russian media at large it said the operation is success, and there was no mention about a huge number of escape associated people, about the death cases in, in hostages, and things like that.

Andrei Zolotov 21:44

So if you're thinking about Saturday and Sunday, yeah? They said up to directly in...

Akaki Gogichaishvili 21:48

Yes, of course. Directly up to the operation.

Andrei Zolotov 21:52

aha?

Akaki Gogichaishvili 21:54

Later on, but later on, situation improved because I guess it was obvious to the government that there was No way that they can actually lock the whole country into stopping information flow. I guess that was the reason why...

Byron Scott 22:10

Let me interrupt here. We need to get Betsy Pisk in here; because I think, Betsy, I don't know whether you agree with me here in the United States. There was some confusion about the facts following the after the takeover of the theater by the security forces.

Betsy Pisk 22:32

Yeah, it was quite chaotic. And the fact that it happened halfway around the world in the you know, in the middle of the night for us was, was quite a challenge. It's, it's tough to report on unfolding events like this, and it's even harder when a lot of your people on the ground your reporters, your correspondents, etc, don't speak the language and may not even be that closely grounded in the details in the background of the conflict. In a situation like this, there probably isn't much of an excuse for that considering how long it took to unfold. Also the fact that it was a major urban center but it's it's hard to know what's going on. And, and sometimes, especially under the crush of deadline, it's very difficult to know what to go with and, and how to use it.

Byron Scott 23:18

And, Betsy, weren't there also some press restrictions on the snipers story in Washington that you referred to earlier?

Betsy Pisk 23:25

Yeah. It's interesting to me to compare those two cases because any, anytime you can slap the word terrorism on something, it instantly ratchets up the heat a little bit. And it's very tempting to do that. The U.S. government in this case got very quickly involved in the sniper in the hunt for the sniper. I mean, at one point there was a surveillance planes over the region, trying to find what was thought to be a single gunman. you know, and how to both inform readers, and don't forget too, in the area, this is also a question of public safety. Where is this man operating and what should you do, if anything at all, to protect yourself? By comparison, I think that there were not so much, so much in the way of press restrictions. There were notes that were leaked in that sort of thing. But whether that hampered the investigation, or in fact helped it, is, is something that's still being discussed; because the man who phoned in the tip about the car where the gunman were actually apprehended, was he'd seen the license plate broadcast on television, and he'd said, "Oh, well, that's the car." So in fact, media involvement in that case might have helped. But it's, it is difficult to know even in a fairly clear cut case, what you're dealing with, and so it's up to reporters, to figure out how to present the most information that they can, but to do it in an accurate context. And sometimes that's hard.

Byron Scott 25:00

I think it's a, it's the kind of pressure that is facing reporters worldwide. And, and it's has curious to add mixtures with the fact that all of us are also citizens of the countries that, that we represent. Let's get back then to the Moscow crisis. What's likely to be the the result of the call for an ethical code among among journalists in covering terrorism? Let me first ask Alexander.

Alexander Merkushev 25:37

I think that the Russian journalists have been trying to write an ethical code for a long time. But the problem is that in Russia, the press is so diverse. The press corps is so diverse. There are hundreds of

journalists working for foreign media outlets. There are you know, leftist newspapers and magazines. There are rightwing organizations and they have publications. There are rich and not so rich television networks. So all the journalists are very different. They have their own mandates. They have their own owners. They have their own affiliations. And I don't think it will be easy, if at all possible, to write an ethical code that will be acceptable to all.

Byron Scott 26:28

I mentioned earlier that I was in Ulaanbaatar during this crisis and spent a lot of time at the press Institute there. And the journalists there were, you all I'm sure will not be surprised to know, were glued to the television sets and trying to figure out "what would I do if I were in a similar situation?" And, again, I would, I would have to agree with them that in general, the Russian journalists and the international journalist deserved high marks for this, for their for their coverage. But the rules are changing and I think it's going to be increasingly difficult. I'm also afraid that we're out of time. And I have, there's a lot more that we could say. But for now, I will just thank our our panelists, Akaki, from Republic of Georgia, thank you for providing the, the mirror view of this coverage. Betsy, from the United Nations and for The Washington Times, for the American point of view. Alexander and Andrei, for the view of the international press and the Russian press in Moscow. At the Global Journalist, for Pat Akers, our director and engineer, for our producer Sarah Fajardo, and of course, Stuart Loory will be back next week. I'm Byron Scott, Good evening!